

## Chapter CXXX: Artificial Human

“There wasn’t any other choice,” Marie said. “It had to be this way.”

“It’s fine, Director,” I said evenly.

“After all, there isn’t a method currently available to us to let you safely traverse that fog,” she went on. She sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as she was me. “It was too dangerous. The only thing it would have accomplished was to put your life at risk.”

Right then, it was just pissing me off. “It’s fine, Director.”

“Sometimes, calculated risks are necessary for the success of the Grand Order,” she continued heedlessly. “But this would have just been needless. There was no tangible gain to be achieved, so this was only the natural decision.”

I felt her eyes on my head.

“You understand, don’t you?”

I did — and I absolutely hated it. It wasn’t that any of it was wrong. The only known threat out in the fog — aside from the homunculi, automata, and Helter Skelter (that really was a terrible name) — was a singular Assassin who preferred ambush tactics and didn’t stick around after they failed. The twins had three Servants with them, one of whom was a Knight of the Round Table, and even if she was only half the Servant Lancelot and King Arthur had been, she would still be incredibly powerful. The other two were another Knight of the Round Table (even if Mash didn’t know it yet) and a guy who could replicate Noble Phantasms, which he had used last Singularity to kill Herakles thrice over.

And if things got dicey, they could summon aid from any of the several other Servants who had stayed behind at Chaldea.

They were in good hands. The best I could feasibly have given them, if I had to stay behind no matter what.

Meanwhile, I couldn’t step foot outside in the fog without exposing myself to a poison that could and would kill me in under an hour, unlike the twins, who seemed completely immune to it. If I went, I would be a liability. If I lasted long enough to make it all the way to Frankenstein’s apartment, it was a decent bet I wouldn’t last long enough to make it all the way back here, where Caster could heal me.

I’d escaped permanent damage the first time, but the second time, I might not be so fortunate. Even if the team *didn’t* get lost on the way back while they were lugging around my unconscious body, there was a very real possibility that I’d die before Caster could heal me — choking on my own

blood as the fog ate away at my lungs. Not just Marie, that would devastate the twins, too, having to carry that burden going forward.

Just so that I could be there when they did a wellness check on a guy who might have overslept or something? I'd danced on some tightropes in the past, but there was taking a risk like that because you didn't have any other choice, and then there was stubbornly charging into something you knew had a decent chance of killing you just so that you could feel useful.

And yet...

"I do."

...I hated the fact that I couldn't do anything except sit here and wait for them to come back. I couldn't even send one of my ravens with them — I'd *felt* Huginn and Muninn's interiors start to disintegrate the instant I let them out into the fog — and it burned in my gut that I was so completely useless and impotent.

Once again, I was helpless to do anything meaningful at all. This time, at least, there was a better support apparatus to help Ritsuka, and he wasn't on his own by any stretch of the imagination. Truthfully, the only thing at all comparable about the Prison Tower fiasco and the situation now was my own inability to contribute, but that didn't help my stomach twisting itself into frustrated knots or the nervous energy that was sending my swarm into a frenzy of activity — all safely out of sight, of course, so the only one who had any inkling about what was going through my head was the one who knew me best.

I looked up at Marie. Nervous fear was written into every line of her face.

*Please don't hate me*, that expression begged.

And I couldn't. I didn't like all of her decisions. Some of them even pressed buttons that I'd been trying to even out over the last few years, to apparently little success. But I knew her better than I ever had most of the superiors I'd had to work under as a Ward, and that made it all the easier to understand where those decisions came from — and harder to blame her for them.

Some of the fight drained out of me. It left behind a sour weariness, hollow and empty in my gut, and that was only made worse by the knowledge that even if I'd thrown all of those concerns out the window and gone anyway, I would have been too busy trying to stay upright and breathing to actually contribute.

"I wouldn't worry about your friends," said Caster. "Sir Mordred may be somewhat...rough around the edges, but she is a formidable warrior and surprisingly reliable, given her reputation. She will see them to Frankenstein's mansion safely."

I cast a glance his way. And then there was him. Abraham, huh. I wondered if the twins actually bought that or were just going along with it for the sake of being polite.

“The twins are competent in their own right,” I said, and the bitter taste they left behind had less to do with the words themselves and more to do with what they were: surrender. An admission of defeat. “They can handle themselves.”

“They’re Masters of Chaldea, after all,” Marie added half-heartedly.

So why did it feel so much like I was abandoning them? Or maybe like I was being left behind?

Because it wasn’t in me to sit around and let others do the fighting for me.

Fortunately, there was a very convenient distraction sitting on the table in the study, just off to the side of the parlor I’d woken up in, and it had a big, red dot slowly moving along it. I gestured down at the diorama of London, so realistic that I half-expected there to be little people moving about inside the buildings.

“Explain this to me again.”

It was probably painfully transparent, but Caster did me the favor of indulging me.

“A clever little bit of ingenuity, if I’m allowed to toot my own horn,” he said. “Regretfully, without more complete access to the city’s ley lines, I’m somewhat limited in the degree of detail I can accomplish — the buildings and general infrastructure are complete, but life signs are a bit harder to detect, and therefore it wasn’t so easy to use this map to pinpoint the perpetrators’ location.”

If only things could have been so convenient. All we would have had to do was look for where the Servants were sitting and go there, and we could have been done with this whole Singularity in a day or less.

But if it had been that easy, Caster would probably have done it himself already. At the very least, I imagine he would have pinned down the Assassin and taken care of that problem, if only he could have.

“And the red dot is Mordred and the others,” I said the obvious.

“A specially designed beacon, meant for the purposes of working with this map,” Caster confirmed with a nod. “It is not impossible for it to have been stolen or lost, I’ll grant you, but Sir Mordred is not so careless to have discarded it. If she loses it in the course of battle, well, that would be a different conversation altogether, so perhaps it would have been better to give it to one of your compatriots.”

“An oversight I’m sure you will rectify upon their return,” said Jekyll. “It would be more effective to simply fashion such a beacon for every one of them, would it not? In the case that the worst comes to pass and they were all separated, I mean to say.”

Caster stroked thoughtfully at his beard. “As you say, Doctor. I confess, when I created the thing in the first place, I didn’t anticipate needing more than the one. You Chaldeans arriving when you did was quite unexpected.”

“You didn’t think to have redundancies?” Marie asked sharply.

Caster sighed deeply. “Alas, I’m but a humble alchemist, Madam Director. Matters of strategy are for those better suited for battle than the bookshelf. Were you to ask a question regarding the intricacies of the material transmutation of one substance into another — say, the ever popular lead into gold — then I could lecture intelligently upon the subject for days. Ask me about the proper formations for a battle against an entrenched enemy in their stronghold...”

He shrugged helplessly.

“...You have a point,” Marie admitted grudgingly.

Fortunately, while it would have been useful if he were also an accomplished strategist and tactician, we already had enough of those on our team that it wasn’t crippling that he was so clueless.

“We can fix that later,” I said, because it really was something we should probably address as soon as the others got back. “For now, tell me more about this Frankenstein you’re sending them to check up on.”

Caster turned to Jekyll. “Doctor?”

“Yes, well...” Jekyll cleared his throat. “Victor is a collaborator of mine, a valued member of the information network we established in the wake of this damnable fog. He is a Swiss scholar who emigrated here some time ago, a true magus, in every sense of the word. Whether he meant to join the Mage’s Association, I fear I could not possibly speak to, although I’ve no doubt he had the talent necessary. I’m given to understand that his grandfather served as the model for some novel or another, although the facts of the matter are somewhat...muddled, shall we say.”

“Tch,” Marie scoffed, muttering under her breath. “Another fictional character who turns out to have been real, huh... Is that a distortion of this Singularity or a matter of proper history?”

Frankly, I was wondering the same thing. I didn’t know what I was going to do if one of Jekyll’s other collaborators turned out to be a couple from the countryside named Mister Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett, or worse, their great grandson. At this point, the smart bet might actually be to put money on D’Artagnan showing up in one of these Singularities.

“On matters more personal, I’m afraid I can tell you little and nothing,” Jekyll said. “Not merely as a matter of respect for his privacy, but also from the fact that I myself cannot lay much claim on it. Victor and I...our relationship is quite cordial. Before this crisis, we had little reason to interact beyond the niceties.”

“Wait,” Marie interjected, “you said this Victor Frankenstein is a proper magus, right? Even good enough to have earned a spot in the Association?”

“From my understanding, yes,” answered Jekyll. “Although I confess that I myself am a poor judge of a mage’s talent — or, indeed, the lack thereof.”

Marie chewed on her bottom lip, brow furrowing. “Which means his workshop will be properly defended, as any true magus would.”

I straightened, even as Caster’s eyebrows rose towards his hairline. “Oh,” he muttered, “yes, that is something of a concern, isn’t it?”

My lips drew tight. “And we have no way of contacting the others to let them know.”

Marie grimaced, pained. “No. Not as long as the fog is interfering with our communications.”

If they had taken Jeanne Alter with them... But the decision had been to split the teams up the way we did for balance more than anything else. With Mordred on their team, they had strong close range offense, good ranged offense in Emiya, and strong defense in Mash, which balanced well with leaving Jeanne Alter and Arash here with me and Caster. It wasn’t a perfectly even split, but it didn’t leave either side with a glaring weakness.

Except for our inability to communicate between the teams. The better option next time — and god, I hated that I knew there was going to be a next time — would be to send Arash instead of Emiya. Not only for the communications, but also to give me eyes and ears on the situation, even if I couldn’t be there to help directly.

“What’s done is done.”

I thought about sending Arash out anyway...but no, there wouldn’t be much sense in that. I wasn’t worried so much about weakening our position here, because frankly, with the sorts of firepower I could bring to bear in an emergency, it wasn’t much of a concern, but rather that I’d be sending him out blind without anything more than a vague direction to head in. With all of my swarm relegated to their sequestered indoor corners, I couldn’t even tell if the other group had left my range yet, let alone how far along they were.

We’d been here less than a day, and I already fucking hated this Singularity.

“I wouldn’t worry overmuch in any case,” said Caster. “While I’ve no doubt that Victor is a talented magus, it is a rare breed indeed that can do grievous harm to two Knight class Servants — and that peculiar girl, that Shielder, I’m certain she’s the type to never let any harm befall her Masters, isn’t she?”

Sometimes to her own detriment. “She is.”

Caster nodded. “Then I believe the worst they will have to deal with is a little scare and nothing more. I’m sure it’ll make an entertaining story when they return.”

He was probably right. Hell, Mordred being the type of person she seemed to be, she would probably just bust down the front door if she had to and completely ignore whatever tricks and traps Frankenstein had laid out. I could remember Alexandria doing something like that as well, only she’d done it as a show of power and dominance and not because she was invulnerable and just didn’t care.

In some ways, that would make Mordred easier to deal with. More straightforward. For all that the legends tended to paint her as something of a schemer, she actually seemed a lot more blunt than I might have expected.

“Are we expecting them to run into anything else?”

Both men frowned. “Aside from the Helter Skelter and the automata...”

“The only other threat whose identity we can speak of intelligently is Assassin,” said Jekyll. “That is to say, the one we suspect is this Jack the Ripper character from the newspapers. It is, I confess, not impossible — indeed, not even improbable — that the culprit behind this fog has further allies complicit in his atrocities, but as we have yet to encounter them in any capacity, we could not say with any degree of certainty who they are or whether they might be likely to attack Mordred and your comrades directly.”

A long-winded way of saying he didn’t know. I guess the people of the Victorian era really had spoken just like they did in the books. Dickens hadn’t lied to me.

Either way, the others were all beyond our reach, for now. We could brainstorm ideas for where to go after they got back, but it would be better to wait until they *had* gotten back before we started making any further plans. Especially if they brought back important information that changed our plans up on us, made them unworkable.

“Then the only thing we can do for now is wait.” I turned to the hologram of Marie. “Director —”

“We’ll keep an eye on their vitals from here,” she said, anticipating me. “If anything changes or they get into a major fight, I’ll contact you and let you know what’s happening.”

Even if I wouldn’t be able to do anything about it from here.

“Thank you.”

A moment later, the image flickered out and vanished. Caster regarded the space where her image had just been with naked interest, stroking thoughtfully at his beard.

“Mankind has come quite a ways, indeed,” he remarked. “To think, not only a method and means of inserting compatible candidates into aberrant space-times like this one, but also of communicating

with them from across eras. Even the greatest minds of my era would never have dreamed such a thing would be possible a scant few hundred years into the future. To have the capacity to summon Heroic Spirits to act as familiars in the resolution of these Singularities, as you call them, frankly, you're stacking miracles on top of miracles."

"I'm sure the Director would be quite happy to receive a compliment like that from an esteemed mage like yourself," I said slyly.

Caster laughed, self-deprecating. "Oh, I don't know about that," he demurred. "Truthfully, I don't think I'm all that remarkable. Had history forgotten me as completely as I expected it to, why, I don't believe I would have become a Heroic Spirit at all."

So he was still going to play at that game, was he? It looked like he was going to hold that secret as tightly as he could for a while longer yet. Subtlety probably wouldn't pry it out of his fingers.

"Nonsense, Abraham!" Jekyll exclaimed. "Why, the sorts of things I've seen you accomplish just in the few short days we've been working together seem all the more remarkable to me, to think that they were feats you accomplished centuries ago! Why, I am humbled, truly, to say I ever met you!"

"I think you're giving me too much credit," Caster said with an awkward smile. "But thank you for having said so, Doctor Jekyll, even if none of it is anything special."

"Master," a new voice said, and in from the kitchen walked a pale-haired woman in a maid outfit. She carried a metal tray in dainty, alabaster fingers. "I've finished preparing your tea."

"Ah," said Caster. He accepted a cup of fine china from the tray, and next to those cups, her skin looked all the more like delicate porcelain. "Thank you, Renée, that was excellently timed."

"Of course," the maid, Renée, said.

She made a circuit through the room, and Jekyll and I each took our own cup of tea from the tray in turn, offering our thanks (and receiving a completely blank look in return). Her expression was flat and lifeless all throughout, not a hint of a smile or any kind of expression at all. I couldn't even tell whether she hated being a glorified maid or not, because even her tone of voice was level, even, and completely without emotion.

It was my first time seeing an honest-to-god homunculus. I still wasn't quite sure what to make of her.

When she was done, she asked, still in that completely flat voice, "Should I set about preparing dinner next?"

"That would be lovely, thank you," said Caster.

Renée the homunculus gave him a short, respectful bow, mechanically precise, then turned and left the room. I watched her go until she left my field of view and disguised it by taking a long sip of the

tea she'd brought us. Earl Grey with bergamot and orange peels, lightly sweetened, and the flavors exploded on my tongue like a warm caress. The familiar scent of it wafted into my nostrils, echoing what I'd smelled when I woke up earlier.

It reminded me of Mom.

Jekyll smiled around his own cup. "Nothing of note, he says, as a perfectly sculpted homunculus arrives with tea brewed to absolute perfection. There is a difference, my friend, between humility and willful blindness to one's own accomplishments."

Caster coughed awkwardly into his hand. "And I suppose it would do me no favors to admit that she was my first such creation, would it?"

Jekyll shook his head disbelievingly.

Caster sighed, looking down into his cup as he swirled his tea about. "I confess, I never had much use for homunculi when I was alive. The nature of my studies was solitary," he admitted. "I never even took an apprentice. My wife was always more than capable a hand, if I ever needed any assistance, and creating a life for the sole purpose of serving as an aid seemed...excessive."

He glanced over at the threshold, through which Renée had disappeared. Vague sounds of kitchen work echoed softly over it, of pots and pans being arranged on the stove.

"Of course, I seem to have become a bit of a hypocrite," he lamented. "Perhaps I'm simply making up for a missed opportunity, seeing as I never had any children myself." As an aside, he said, "The realities of marrying a woman nearly a decade your senior. My wife was nearing fifty by the time we pledged ourselves to one another."

For a man who had already gone to such efforts to obscure his true identity, he was doing a poor job of hiding the finer details. I felt like Marie would have had him pinned down just with the few bits and pieces he'd already given me, or at least would have had enough to go on to figure out who he was with just a little bit of research.

If he was going to dangle it in front of me like that, then he really had no reason to complain if I took his bait.

"Abraham," I began calmly, "your true name isn't Abraham at all, is it?"

His hand froze, cup of tea halfway to his mouth, and he blinked at me incredulously. "Oh my."

"Is it not?" asked Jekyll, bewildered. "Abraham, is this true?"

"You're a sharp one, indeed," said Caster. He set his cup down on its saucer with a gentle *clink*. "If you would do me the favor of indulging me, what makes you so sure of that?"

My lips pursed. "Call it a hunch."

And he had just validated it.

“A hunch, you say.” He sighed. “I suppose that’s good. If it was something more substantial than that, I’m afraid I may have had to resort to silencing you.”

A beat passed in tense silence. My fingers curled tighter around the porcelain cup, and I reached down along the thread to Arash, preparing for the worst.

“I’m joking, of course,” he said. “Goodness me, but you are wound quite tightly, aren’t you? No, no, my dear, I’ve never killed a man before in my life, let alone in cold blood, and I have no intention of starting now simply because I’m technically dead. I’m quite the philanthropist, you see, as gauche as it may be to say it so frankly, and you might be able to go so far as to call me a pacifist.”

Jekyll laughed an awkward, fake laugh. “A poor jest, Abraham — ah, I suppose that isn’t truly your name, is it?”

“You may as well continue using it,” said Caster. “The question implicit in your previous statement, dear girl — I have no intention of sharing my true name at this junction. I’ll have to ask you to forgive my caution, for I know not enough of the enemy’s capabilities and would prefer they were able to confirm as few of mine as feasibly possible. That I am an alchemist is plain, and so there is little reason to hide it, but in the wake of my death, my name and my contribution to the furtherance of the field became a little *too* famous.”

A famous alchemist whose name had spread after the fact, whose name had become so attached to the field, in fact, that he had become all but synonymous with it. There were only a handful of those about, and the clothing...looked about right for that period. I wasn’t well-versed in all of the people who fit the bill, but his name had at least come up often enough during the broader spectrum of my magecraft lessons with Marie for me to recognize him in particular.

It was a bit funny, though. I would have expected Paracelsus von Hohenheim to look a little younger.

“Fine,” I said. I forced my hands to relax, loosening my grip on my teacup. “I won’t push.”

Especially since I had already figured it out. Just the confirmation that his name wasn’t really Abraham would have been more than enough of a clue.

Caster smiled gratefully. “Thank you.”

A knock came from the threshold, and Arash peeked his head in. “Hey. Things are pretty quiet outside, so I figured I’d poke my head in and see how things are going.”

He’d probably felt me take our bond in a tight grip a moment ago and come to investigate. *It’s fine*, I told him, projecting my thoughts down the thread connecting us. *Just a misunderstanding.*

And a joke in very poor taste.

“Ah,” said Caster, clicking his tongue, “forgive me. If I had known you would be joining us, I would have asked Renée to pour another cup.”

“Oh — no, don’t bother her on my account,” said Arash. He slipped into the room casually and came to join us at the diorama, subtly placing himself between me and Caster. As though nothing was wrong, he reached out with a finger to trace a path through the streets, but his finger was too big and the streets too small by scale to fit. “It looks like they’re making good progress. But...that’s dinner I smell, right? They’re going to be late for that.”

“I’m sure Rika would prefer Emiya’s cooking anyway.”

Arash laughed, smiling. “I’m sure she would!”

“A shame,” said Jekyll. “Renée is quite the excellent chef. If her tea is brewed to your liking, then her cooking will no doubt land quite comfortably on your palate.”

I had to wonder if he would be quite so confident in that if he had the chance to taste anything Emiya had made. It bore repeating that I had yet to eat better than when I ate something Emiya cooked, and when literal emperors agreed with you, it was a hard bar to pass.

“At least our friends don’t seem to be running into much trouble,” said Caster. “Their pace is consistent enough that I don’t believe they’re encountering anything more bothersome than a few automata here and there. You are right, Arash, that they won’t be returning to us in time for this evening’s repast, however. Poor Renée will be quite disappointed.”

Would she? I wondered about that. Maybe, being her creator, he could see more into her and her personality than I could, but I had yet to see much of one. Although her movements were smooth and perfectly human, not at all janky and stilted, her mannerisms were eerily robotic.

“I imagine so,” said Jekyll. “She appeared positively delighted to have company after the dreadfully stifling past few days. I’m sure, however, that there will be plenty of opportunity for her to display her prowess in the coming days. Unfortunate as it is, there does not look to be a speedy resolution to our current situation forthcoming.”

Or maybe Jekyll could see it, too. I just had to take their word for it, I guess, since I’d known her myself less than an hour.

I looked back down at the diorama, tracing the path the group had taken from here out to their current location and the mansion near Soho that was their destination.

“Abraham,” I said, “is this the most direct path they’re taking?”

Caster peered down at the diorama, looking at it from above the tip of his nose. “Why, yes, it is indeed. I suppose I didn’t pay it much attention before, considering Sir Mordred was often out on patrols instead of performing a specific errand, but that is quite the direct route to be taking through an impenetrable fog. Her intuition seems quite developed.”

As good a way of putting it as any, I guess. That might prove useful later on in navigating this place, especially since it also seemed like I wouldn't be able to use my bugs for the same purpose.

I pushed away the flash of annoyance that curdled in my gut.

Would it prove just as useful in finding the hiding places of the Servants behind this whole mess? Somehow, I thought things would already have been resolved by now if that was the case, so maybe it was a matter of not getting lost when she knew the destination. Not quite as useful, but it would still be something that could come in handy for moving through the mist that was choking the city.

A way around it would be to limit ourselves to investigating during the morning hours, when the mist cleared out, but a different sort of problem might arise from that.

“Do you think whoever is behind all of this would change their pattern if we started going out in the mornings and staying in after the fog rolled in?” I asked Caster.

“Hmm.” Caster hummed thoughtfully. “That is not so easy a question to answer. Firstly, we cannot know for certain exactly how much the enemy knows about our own movements. For example, is there some sort of sensory component attached to the fog? Are they using it to gather information? Are they aware, therefore, of where we ourselves are located?”

And if they were, was it enough for them that we — some of us, at least — weren't able to leave when the fog was out without risking our lives, and that was why they hadn't tried a direct attack, or was Assassin their attack dog, meant to distract us while the true masterminds worked?

But if they weren't, if they *couldn't* use the mist like some kind of sonar or something, then that would mean Assassin was their scout, and the automata, homunculi, and (ugh) ‘Helter Skelter’ were patrol groups. Not there merely to keep us occupied, but also to give the mastermind a way to keep track of what was going on outside his workshop.

I guess that came down to another question: if Caster could come up with this map of the city using less than ideal access to the ley lines, then were the enemy's Servants as good as he was, or were they far less capable? Could they create something similar with higher fidelity and greater resolution, able to track every living person in the city, or not?

“Secondly,” Caster went on, “would there be something stopping them from changing up their pattern, some limitation in whatever method they might be using to generate this fog, or is the fact they let it dissipate in the mornings a sign of something else? Much as I hesitate to ascribe good will to people willing to hold an entire city hostage, regardless of how many victims it creates, we should at least acknowledge the possibility that leaving the mornings free is a means of giving the populace a chance to procure supplies, provisions, or fulfill needs that can't be met indoors.”

Yeah, that was a problem, too, wasn't it? I could easily see it being a problem with their fog generator, that they couldn't leave it going indefinitely. Whether it needed time to cool off or recharge, that would still leave us with the same window every day, even if they kept it running for as long as they safely could.

I didn't think it was out of the kindness of their hearts. That one, I discounted immediately.

"So the only answer you can give is 'I don't know,' huh," Arash thought aloud.

Caster shrugged helplessly.

"It would be worth it to try anyway," I said. "Whether they do something in response will tell us just as much as what they do in response. If there's some reason why they *can't* keep the fog going constantly, then they might try and send their own forces after us — and that means we might not even have to try looking that hard to find them."

And if leaving the mornings free was a deliberate choice...I wasn't quite sure what that would mean, right now. Since Astrology was a legitimate form of magic, it was entirely possible that the time of day was important somehow in their goals, and forcing them to change up their patterns would disrupt them in some way.

"As long as you take care to limit your exposure," Caster said somewhat sternly. "Don't think that just because I'm capable of reversing the damage you don't need to worry about what it's doing to you. That sort of recklessness is just as dangerous as any action from the enemy."

My cheek twitched. So even Caster was going to be like that, was he?

"I'd worry more about Ritsuka and the others," said Arash. "They're the ones who are going to be taking the biggest risks, aren't they? With Assassin out there and everything."

Caster grimaced. "As ridiculous as it sounds, Sir Mordred should help them stay out of trouble."

Jekyll lifted his cup to his mouth to hide his smile and his quiet chuckle.

"Master," Renée's voice called softly. "Dinner is ready."

Caster glanced at the clock, and his eyebrows rose. "Dear me," he said, "six o'clock already? My, but the past few hours have flown by!"

Jekyll looked down at the diorama. "And the others shall reach Victor's mansion anon. Most excellent. Shall we adjourn for dinner, so that we might be prepared to hear from him as soon as they've sorted the whole business out?"

My stomach clenched, gurgling silently. Come to think of it, I hadn't eaten since breakfast, had I?

"A good idea."

Caster clapped his hands together, smiling broadly. "Then no need to tarry any longer, is there? Come, come. I promise you, Renée's cooking won't disappoint!"

As it turned out, he wasn't wrong. Dinner was had in a small dining room on the other side of the parlor, a room I could already tell from the first time I set foot in it would become very crowded

with Ritsuka, Rika, Mash, and presumably Mordred joining us, and once we all sat down, Renée served us up a hearty stew.

I wasn't sure I could say it was as good as anything Emiya could make, but for a homunculus who emoted about as much as a rock, it was better than I would have expected. Certainly better than anything I could make, which wasn't that high a bar to clear, I suppose, so I wasn't sure that said much of anything at all.

But I had barely finished and relaxed a little in my chair to let it settle in my belly before my communicator beeped, and knowing there weren't many reasons for Marie to contact me before the twins got back, I answered it immediately.

The instant I did — projecting her solemn face up over the dinner table — she wasted no time in telling me, “There's been an altercation at Frankenstein's.”

I straightened in my seat. The food in my belly squirmed uncomfortably. “An altercation?”

Were Frankenstein's defenses really strong enough to give Emiya, Mash, and Mordred trouble? Or was the reason Frankenstein had gone silent because the enemy had gotten to him first?

“What about Victor?” Jekyll asked urgently. “Does he still live?”

Marie grimaced. “Victor Frankenstein was already dead by the time the team arrived at his mansion,” she said with great weight. “They engaged and dispatched his killer, a Caster class Servant calling himself Mephistopheles.”

Like the demon in *Faust*? Something like *that* appeared here in London? Or... No, if they'd faced an actual demon, Marie wouldn't have been anywhere near this calm.

Jekyll let out a sound akin to a deflating balloon. “So he's dead, then.”

“I'm sorry,” Marie said, perfunctory. If he heard her at all, Jekyll gave no sign.

“And Sir Mordred and the others?” asked Caster.

“All uninjured. Mephistopheles was vanquished without issue.” Marie turned her attention back to me. “There's more. After defeating Mephistopheles, the team decided to investigate Frankenstein's mansion for clues about why he was targeted and any information he might have gathered, and they found a note, listing the conspirators behind the fog as P, B, and M. Frankenstein believed these people to all be Servants.”

P, B, and M? That was it? He couldn't have given us more to work with than that, like actual names?

“Only the initials?” murmured Caster, stroking his beard as his brow furrowed in thought. “I suppose it's more to go off of than we had before, but... Perhaps the ‘M’ referred to this Mephistopheles character?”

Maybe. We still didn't know enough to be absolutely sure, but I wasn't ready to assume that one of the perpetrators would throw himself in the line of fire and get killed less than a day after we arrived. Villains with plots grander than getting high tended to be more careful than that, unless they were confident they'd already won or could take down whoever came to stop them.

"They also found something else," Marie continued. "An inheritance left behind by the original Victor Frankenstein, his grandfather, locked away in a coffin, hidden in a backroom off of the library."

A coffin? As in, an actual, made-for-burial coffin? What, like out of some B-movie from the 1930s?

"You don't mean —"

"Yes," Marie said before I could even finish talking, "just like in the novel, a complete, functioning artificial human."

Frankenstein's monster.