

## Chapter CXLIV: Wayward Student

It would be an exaggeration to say that Paracelsus didn't move as we made our way back out of the Clock Tower's bowels, but not by much. He was unquestionably waiting for something, and the obvious answer was us, because the idea that he would be meeting one of his coconspirators out in the open like this in the middle of the morning before the mist rolled in was frankly laughable.

And if he *was* confident enough to do that, then there was something else going on that we really needed to be worried about.

No one else materialized, however. Paracelsus remained alone with his troupe of mindless underlings, watching the museum expectantly. It didn't take much thought to conclude that he knew we were down there, although I wasn't quite sure how. Had we tripped an alarm they left behind somehow? Were he and the others alerted the minute we went down into the Clock Tower? With Flamel on our side, there shouldn't have been any way we could miss something like that, but I guess if it was subtle enough, then maybe it really could fly right under our radar.

"Is he still there?" Ritsuka asked as we walked.

"Yes," I answered. "He hasn't moved."

"So the bastard really does know we're down here," Mordred concluded.

"It looks that way."

"A spy?" muttered Tohsaka.

"Don't be absurd," Andersen replied. "Every single person here is dedicated to the cause of resolving this Singularity," he slanted a meaningful look at Jackie, "or at least dedicated to the cause to which their Master is dedicated."

Jackie just gave him a queer look, like she didn't quite understand what point he was making.

"Perhaps not *that* kind of spy," Flamel said, "but we would be neglectful to continue assuming that the enemy does not have collaborators here among the London populace, much like we do." He grimaced. "Or perhaps they simply added a layer into the bounded field protecting the entrance, and were alerted when we crossed it."

"You wouldn't have noticed it?" Mash asked curiously. There wasn't a single accusation in her voice.

"Not necessarily," Flamel allowed. "And even if I had, I think I would have assumed it was a natural part of the Association's defenses. They are indeed a paranoid lot, after all."

At this point, I guess the how of it wasn't quite important. I wanted to be able to say that we could judge it based upon if or how he reacted when we left the Clock Tower, passing through the boundary again, but with the museum destroyed, he would be able to see us without any help from an alarm placed upon the entrance.

It wasn't impossible that there *was* a traitor amongst us, but most of the group, I could personally vouch for, and most of the rest, they were contracted with us, which meant they couldn't be the enemy's Servants. The only real exemptions were Flamel and Andersen, but at this point, Flamel had

passed up so many opportunities to screw us over I had trouble even mustering the desire to suspect him, and Andersen...

Well, a good spy did his best to ingratiate himself with his targets. Andersen hadn't been shy about any of his opinions at any point since we'd first met him, and he'd been perfectly willing to get on my nerves as he pleased. That really only left Tohsaka and Nursery Rhyme, but they'd been in our presence so constantly that they hadn't had a chance to make contact and report in with Paracelsus.

The most likely explanation was that we really had just tripped some kind of alarm that they'd hidden too well for us to notice. Occam's Razor.

"How do we want to handle this?" Ritsuka asked.

A good question. If the only objective was to get out while his attention was elsewhere, or even just eliminate him as quickly as possible, then there were a couple of different ways we could do that. Split up the party, send one of our Archers out to set up a nest, and have him distract or eliminate Paracelsus before we even made our way all the way to the end.

But that *wasn't* our only objective.

"You said he volunteered his name when you fought him," I began, "that he talked about his fake Jack being a failed Demi-Servant attempt."

"He did," said Ritsuka. "He didn't tell us *everything*, but he gave us more than I would have expected him to, Senpai."

"Three whole paragraphs of exposition," Rika added unhelpfully. "What was that supposed to mean, three whole paragraphs?"

Whatever. That wasn't the point.

"Then I think we should give him another chance," I went on. "See if we can't get him to talk more about his allies and their plans for Project Demonic Fog. Maybe he'll even give us their names."

Mordred snorted. "You really think he's gonna do something that stupid?"

"They *always* start monologuing, Mo-chan," said Rika. "It's, like, Villainy 101 or something. 'First thing: explain your plan to the good guys whenever you have the chance.' No one's read the Evil Overlord list!"

"There's a list?" Tohsaka asked incredulously.

Rika nodded sagely. "Of course!"

"I think we lose nothing by giving it a try," I said, getting things back on track. Nothing except the element of surprise, but Paracelsus didn't even seem to notice Huginn, so there were plenty of ways we could keep a few aces in the hole and spring them on him the instant a fight was on the verge of breaking out.

"Sounds like it's worth a shot to me," said Arash.

"We'll do whatever Mommy says," said Jackie.

Emiya huffed a short breath. “Alright. I’m not sure even this guy will be that forthcoming about his secret plans, but if it works, then I won’t have any complaints. Do we have a plan for how we’re going to do that?”

In fact, I did.

“The first thing we’re going to do,” I said, “is test exactly how accurate his information is. If he can’t actually tell how many people we had with us — Servants and Masters alike — when we came in, then that gives us plenty of opportunity to set up an ambush of our own...”

I laid out the basic principles of the plan as we walked, making sure to keep a close eye on Paracelsus all the while. Thankfully, however, it seemed he wasn’t able to hear what we were talking about, because he gave no indication he was eavesdropping on our impromptu planning session, which would hopefully mean that we could catch him by surprise from the start.

In fact, he didn’t react at any point as we kept walking back down the damp, stone hallways of the Clock Tower, not until we got to the end and started making our way back up to ground level. Whatever else he and his allies might have done when they were wiping out the Association, it seemed that they hadn’t left more than a token effort behind to keep track of anyone who came to investigate it.

That gave us something of an advantage.

So when we came up out of the stairwell that connected the British Museum to its magical underbelly, several of our Servants had turned to spirit form and Tohsaka and Nursery Rhyme stayed behind, hiding on the stairs just out of sight. If we could get the opportunity to pull attention away from the museum, the two of them could sneak out and pin Paracelsus’ group between us.

Of course, Paracelsus himself had to make that just a little bit harder by stepping closer to talk, with his platoon following in lockstep, although he at least did us the courtesy of letting us get clear of the rubble instead of forcing us to stand in it. An enemy with manners — would wonders never cease?

“It seems that it truly was your group that came here today,” he said. His voice was surprisingly deep, because his appearance made him seem soft spoken. “Perhaps that was to be expected. It was inevitable that you would come to investigate the events that took place here.”

“Paracelsus,” Ritsuka said evenly.

Paracelsus looked us over, his eyes honing in on me. “And it seems you have brought with you more allies of yours — another human, another Master? Unfortunate, and yet fortunate. Our attempt to thin your numbers has evidently failed, and yet I am glad another life was not lost unnecessarily.”

What?

“Strange talk from the man responsible for all of the death in this city,” I said, giving nothing of my thoughts away. “Aren’t you returning to the scene of the crime right now yourself?”

“Eliminating the Association was an unfortunate necessity,” he said solemnly. “Their interference would have caused too many problems. I regret that it was unavoidable, but my responsibility is only tangential. I was not involved. I’m sorry all the same.”

Then he obviously wasn't the man behind the Helter Skelter. Not that I'd really thought so to begin with, because it just didn't fit his skill set, but confirmation was always useful. Of the remaining two, the homunculi were far more likely to be creations of his than the automata.

"It was B or M, then," said Ritsuka, more a statement than a question.

"Yes."

But Paracelsus didn't give away more than that so effortlessly. Whether he realized we were trying to get information out of him and was only giving us the stuff that he thought was useless or if he really didn't know we were fishing, it could have gone either way. His expression wasn't exactly a poker face so much as he was just a bit...spacey. Like his mind wasn't all the way there in that moment.

"Forgive me for interrupting," said Flamel, stepping forward to the front of our group, "but you offer something of a conundrum, Paracelsus. Your actions in this place comport neither with your words nor with what history remembers of your character. You are, in a word, off."

Paracelsus blinked at him for a moment, and then took in a sharp breath through his nose.

"Master."

He dipped his head respectfully.

"Master?" the twins and Mash all echoed simultaneously. I had to do the swarm equivalent of biting my tongue to keep myself from joining them.

"I thought you didn't have any students," Emiya accused, eyeing Flamel suspiciously.

"I did not," said Flamel. "Moreover, I was already dead for the better part of a century before the man known as Paracelsus von Hohenheim was born. This will be the first time we have ever shared the same air, let alone words with each other."

Did he mean another kind of Master, then? It wasn't conventional, and I didn't think they had Command Spells the way we did, but we'd seen Servants serving as Masters for other Servants in previous Singularities by virtue of possessing that Singularity's Grail.

The thought fell flat. Again, Flamel might not have proven himself above suspicion, but he'd had ample opportunity to actually do something suspicious, and he hadn't taken any of them. There was a point where I was going to have to just call it paranoia to jump to the worst possibility every time something even slightly questionable popped up.

"Forgive me for my presumption," Paracelsus said. "It is true — you and I have never spoken before today, nor even met face to face. But...I know you well, through your works. It was only thanks to what I learned from you, my great master, that I was able to achieve the wonders of my lifetime." He pressed a hand to his chest, fingers splayed. "My advances in alchemy, and indeed, even the crafting of the Philosopher's Stone, they were all made possible only through extensive study of your research."

"Philosopher's Stone?" the three parroted again.

"But you said you never made one!" Rika protested, turning to Flamel.

I thought the more interesting implication was that *Paracelsus* had made one. Did that mean he was stashing it somewhere in this Singularity or on his person? Were they using it to supplement the Grail, wherever they were hiding *that*?

If we found it, could we use it to heal Team A and the rest of the injured Master candidates?

“I never said that I didn’t investigate the subject,” Flamel corrected gently. Firmer and to Paracelsus, he continued, “If that is all true, then you must have somehow found and accessed my unpublished notes. I had assumed the Association neither knew nor cared what I had studied and discovered over the course of my life. It is becoming all the more apparent to me, however, that they seem to have gone to great effort to preserve my works.”

“Yes,” was Paracelsus’ simple answer. “It was your *Treatise on the Process of Refinement through Fixation* that inspired me to devote myself to the craft of alchemy. Had I not read that, I’m not certain I would have followed the same path through life. My every success thereafter can be laid at your feet.”

Flamel, contrary to this praise, only seemed embarrassed. “I never expected that particular work to see the light of day. I never got around to cleaning up the draft or incorporating all of my notes, and, well, quite frankly, at that point, I had already decided that all of my accomplishments would die with me.”

“And yet, if your research had been more widely known, there is much good it could have done for the world,” Paracelsus argued, and the dull look gave way to incensed passion. “Imagine — every person alive with a Philosopher’s Stone, who could live for as long as they desired and for whom money was no concern. Disease — eradicated! Poverty and starvation — a thing of the past! Mankind would have all of the tools necessary to break free of their endless suffering!”

“People choose precisely the things which are worst for them,” Rika muttered.

Flamel looked at Paracelsus sadly. “My dear boy, that is exactly why the Philosopher’s Stone should not exist.”

Paracelsus came up short. “What?”

“The world you speak of may eventually have come, but it would have been a terrible, horrific struggle in the interim,” Flamel explained. “The already privileged would have hoarded the wealth and longevity for themselves and left the rest of mankind to scrounge for the scraps. Every economy the world over would have collapsed, and an all new kind of fiefdom would have arisen in the aftermath. War and famine on a scale never before seen would have erupted, and countless lives would have been lost.” He sighed. “A world where the Philosopher’s Stone could be mass-produced would have been a nightmare.”

My lips pulled to one side. How ironic that I would find someone with the same outlook on people that I had in a man who had never once in his life had to fight for it — although, I suppose, he *had* been in Paris for the majority of the Hundred Years’ War, hadn’t he? Maybe his life hadn’t been so relatively carefree after all.

“But the world that came out the other side would be a paradise!” Paracelsus seemed almost to be pleading with Flamel, begging him to see things from his point of view. “The overall state of the

human condition would be one of peace and prosperity! No more suffering, no more inequality, no longer a need to fear an inevitable end!”

“There will always be inequality,” Flamel said solemnly. “There will always be suffering and pain. All you would have done would be to increase the gap between the fortunate and the unfortunate and cause untold damage to innumerable bystanders. The end result you imagine is nothing more than fantasy.” He shook his head. “Better to ease that suffering in more realistic manners. Contribute to the overall welfare in smaller ways so that the world is not plunged into greater chaos.”

Paracelsus’ face shut down again. “I see. Then no matter what, you would have opposed us. There is no world where you and I might have joined forces for the betterment of mankind.”

Once again, I had to do the swarm equivalent of biting my tongue. Betterment of mankind? Just what was he trying to do that he thought this Singularity could accomplish anything of the sort? Was he always that delusional, or had his Master — if it was a Demon God the way we were assuming — messed with his head that badly?

“The costs are simply too great,” said Flamel. “Moreover, I cannot even begin to fathom how this Project Demonic Fog of yours could ever be for the betterment of mankind. Paracelsus — whatever path it is you walk now, it is a cruel and callous path, lined with the bodies of the dead and soaked in the blood of the innocent.”

“That is true. There is no way that this could ever result in anything except suffering,” Paracelsus acknowledged. “In that case, perhaps it is all for the better that you are here. Yes — my own mind has already been compromised. My thought processes are all in disarray. My logic is flawed. I cannot close my eyes to the obvious: the process which we have used to suborn other Servants has already been used on me.”

My eyes narrowed on him, even as he closed his own for a brief moment. So there was a process of some kind, a procedure. We’d been assuming that there had to be *something* they were doing to convince the likes of Paracelsus to obey whatever mad scheme had been cooked up to destroy this era, but did they have more than one?

After all, the Jeanne Alter of the Orléans Singularity had simply slapped Madness Enhancement on everyone and called it a day. This, whatever it was that had been done to him, seemed...not necessarily more subtle, but softer. Less brute force.

“If the Demon God is named Nazara, I’m quitting,” Rika muttered.

Her brother groaned softly.

“Master Flamel,” Paracelsus began, “you have already given me much throughout my life, and I owe you a debt that I could never hope to pay. Even still, I must beg you to do this one more thing for me, though I have no right to make such a selfish request.”

A dagger — really more of a short sword, with a broad, double-edged blade and a hilt wrapped intricately in leather — materialized in his hand, and he brandished it.

“Chastise your wayward student,” he said, eyes clearer than they had been since he started talking. “Punish me for straying from your wisdom and your teachings. You, more than anyone else, have the right to correct my sins and my transgressions, and so it must be you who does it.”

Flamel heaved a deep sigh. “And so, it falls to me to take responsibility for your deviancy, as the one who set you on the path you have walked, is that what you mean to say? Very well.”

He stepped further forward and away from the group, towards Paracelsus, almost like some strange mimicry of an Old West duel. I resisted the urge to frown. Of all the people I would have thought would engage in that sort of thing, he was pretty close to the bottom of the list. Had he forgotten what our plan was?

“Flamel?” Ritsuka asked.

Flamel paused, and over his shoulder, said, “Forgive me, my friends. I know this is a terribly selfish request in light of the circumstances, but all the same...I would like you to let me handle this myself.”

“Abe...” Rika said softly.

It wasn't like we could stop him, if he really got insistent about it. We hadn't formed a contract, so we couldn't force the issue with Command Spells, and after this was all over, I think it would be safe to say we could trust him as much as we could ever trust him. For now, however, he was entirely self-reliant.

Damn it. Fine. If it was going to happen anyway, better to present a unified front against the enemy, because there was no telling if either of the other two were watching. If it was me, I know *I* would have been.

“How sure are you that you can beat him?” I asked. I wished I could have done it silently, to maintain that image of unflappable surety.

“Absolutely,” he answered confidently. Quieter, he added, “I don't believe he intends to fight me seriously. I think, perhaps, that he *wants* to be defeated.”

Maybe he did. Paracelsus wasn't exactly incoherent, but he seemed at war with himself — espousing both an idealistic vision of saving mankind, and a sentence later, admitting that Project Demonic Fog wouldn't do anything of the sort. If there was some...internal war taking place between his natural inclinations and whatever conditioning the enemy had subjected him to in order to make him obey, then maybe all he wanted was someone to put him out of his misery.

I wasn't going to take my chances on that, but at least Flamel was *asking* us to let him handle it instead of going off without even discussing it first and forcing us to adapt around him. In that regard, he was already being better about this than Aife and Cúchulainn had been.

*Jackie*, I said, reaching down the thread connecting me to her, *wait until I give the order. Sit back and watch until then, okay?*

*Okay, Mommy!* Jackie replied. I wished I could peek through her eyes, but she was in spirit form, so she didn't have eyes to peek through just then.

Aloud, I said, “Handle this quickly. We can't waste the whole day on a single fight.”

“Of course,” Flamel said. He walked further forward, putting distance between us and him. “I have no intention of dragging this out any further than absolutely necessary. Needless suffering accomplishes nothing.”

“Tch,” said Mordred, and she let her sword drop heavily so that the tip struck the ground. “Guess that means I gotta sit this one out. Never woulda expected Gramps of all people to go for this kind of thing.”

“Senpai,” whispered Rika, “is this really okay? After all, the plan...”

“It’s fine,” I lied.

“This is something he has to do himself,” Ritsuka added.

Maybe so. But the instant the Helter Skelter decided to interfere, so were we.

When Flamel stopped, there was something like twenty feet between him and Paracelsus. Plenty of space for a human, but for a Servant, they might as well have been standing nose to nose.

“Well?” he said, his voice as hard and firm as it had been when we fought Jackie yesterday. “You were the one who wanted this, Paracelsus. I assume, then, that you wouldn’t mind if I make the first move?”

“It is only proper,” Paracelsus agreed.

That was all the more warning Flamel gave him, because he suddenly clapped his hands together, red light flowing from between his fingers, and the ground around him leapt into motion, roiling, bulging, and finally, surging up and out as the stone twisted and lengthened as though it was wet clay. Paracelsus threw himself to the side and swept his short sword upwards. I saw nothing except the glow of the jewel in his weapon’s hilt, but the thin, pointed end of Flamel’s stone pillar — aimed to pierce where Paracelsus’ head had just been — was cut off and fell to the ground with the crack of heavy stone.

“Superb!” said Paracelsus. “Material transformation with such speed and precision — but, Master, surely something so basic cannot be the best you can do!”

He spouted an incantation in a language I didn’t recognize, and the gem in the hilt of his dagger glowed again, a fraction of a second before a beam of light shot out from the tip like a laser. The ground in front of Flamel rose in a familiar way, becoming a wall, but Flamel didn’t wait behind it for the laser to strike. Instead, the ground beneath his feet moved and flowed in a wave of motion, a bulge rising up and moving to the side with Flamel atop it. He rode it like a surfer and let it carry him around his own wall, avoiding the beam that burrowed through it, and came to a stop to the left of his enemy.

The broken wall shifted and morphed, warping. A pair of arms, a solid base with a rotational mechanism, a long shaft like a runway. The stone changed color, turned a honeyed brown and became wood so that the arms could flex, and a string wound around the shaft and met at the end of either arm as a pointed arrow formed along it.

In less than a second, a ballista stood where the wall had just been.



It took aim at Paracelsus and fired in the same motion, and Paracelsus spat out a hasty incantation as he swung his sword around again. The gem glowed a third time, and a whirlwind whipped up, tugging at the grass and the Helter Skelter, strong enough I could feel it from where I was standing. The arrow was only barely knocked off course, flying up and over his shoulder instead, and one of the Helter Skelter flew back as the heavy bolt punched clean through its front chest plate and out the back.

Paracelsus just smiled. “Exquisite! Yes, *that* is more impressive! Shape transformation, material transmutation, remote locomotion — and all with such speed! As expected of a master alchemist!”

Flamel grimaced and paused. “I see. Your Azoth Sword — it is a conduit for your elemental magecraft. Combined with your own talent for reciting your incantations with such speed, you can act and react nearly instantly. Your reputation is well-earned, Paracelsus.”

So he *had* noticed it, too, the way the gem glowed every time Paracelsus cast a spell. I wasn’t quite sure how I could have told him if I had to, not without Paracelsus noticing me do it.

“I’m honored by your praise,” said Paracelsus. “It is to be expected that a magus as talented as you are would be able to see through me so quickly.”

“Not nearly so incredible as you make it sound,” said Flamel. “Merely simple logic and basic observation. There are only so many ways to get around the normal limitations of spellcasting, after all.”

“Indeed.” Paracelsus lifted his sword and pointed it at Flamel. “O’ Flame.”

A burst of fire exploded right next to Flamel’s ear, and he gasped, flinching away from it, but not fast enough to avoid the brunt of the damage as he staggered to the side. The entire left side of his face was an angry red, with his beard burned away and singed and his eye fused shut. His ear had been rendered little more than a stump, leaking red blood.

“Flamel!” Rika cried, alarmed. Her brother didn’t say anything, but his hands balled into tight fists.

But Flamel seemed entirely unconcerned, glaring out of his remaining eye, and I remembered what he’d said about how his Noble Phantasm worked. There was no way something like this would be enough to beat him.

“Yes,” Flamel grunted, “I suppose that *is* the next logical step, isn’t it?”

Red light flowed over his skin, and before our eyes, his wounds disappeared and his face returned to normal, beard and all. Even the damage done to his clothing was undone, vanishing without a trace.

The gem glowed — “O’ Wind” — and Paracelsus swung his sword. Flamel threw himself to the side, and an invisible blade sliced clean through his cloak instead of his chest. He turned the action around and pressed his hands to the ground. Red light shone from his hands again, and the stone around Paracelsus rose up again in the shape of bars like a cage. They twisted around, spiraling, and pulled tighter —

“O’ Earth.”

— but the gem glowed from between the gaps, and the bars fell away as their bases cracked and crumbled. Flamel’s lips moved, and although I couldn’t hear it from where I was standing, my brain supplied the sound of his tongue clicking.

He didn’t waste time on expletives or recriminations. Instead, one hand swept to the side, and the bars fused back to the ground as their bases became steel plates and they themselves turned into chains with spikes upon every link.

A sweep of the sword. “O’ Fire.” The chains were engulfed, heating rapidly until they were cherry red. “O’ Water.” And just as suddenly, they were doused in water, hissing as steam billowed off of them. “O’ Wind.” The chains were whipped about and torn from their anchors, then thrown away from Paracelsus, impotent.

Back and forth, they went, trading attacks almost like they were taking turns. Paracelsus wielded the elements as though they were an extra limb (or four), throwing balls of fire, blades of wind, and spears of ice with simple, one-word incantations, but Flamel didn’t seem to have the same sort of luxury. He stuck to transforming and transmuting the material around him, turning the ground into pillars that lashed out across the distance like fists, dust into gunpowder that ignited in a cloud around Paracelsus, and the melted remnants of Paracelsus’ ice into a minefield of jagged grass.

None of it worked. They each countered the other with casual indifference, blocking what they didn’t want to deal with, dismantling what they didn’t want to block, and dispelling what could be easily dispelled. It was like watching a tennis match where the ball was constantly changing form, and neither side had any trouble hitting it back to the other’s court.

And then Flamel tried something a little more complicated again, forming a cannon out of the stone at his feet that belched out flame and smoke and a cannonball that broke and shattered into hundreds of deadly fragments as they flew across the distance. Paracelsus simply waved his sword and said, “O’ Earth,” and they disintegrated into a puff of dust that peppered his robe and slid off.

A brief moment of stillness passed.

“So that’s how it is, is it?” Flamel said, grimacing. “Good grief. I’m not a young man anymore, you know. Asking me to put my all into this is just unreasonable.”

His lips pulled back into a snarl, and he pushed down on the ground as though he was trying to dig his fingers through the solid stone. Red light crackled, grew brighter, and as an enormous surge of magical energy spewed out of Flamel in such quantities that it washed over me like a wave, bolts of it jolted all across the courtyard — to no apparent effect.

For a brief second, the world held its breath.

And then the earth beneath us shook (“What’s happening?” Rika squeaked) and the museum behind us rumbled as though the echo of its collapse was only now reaching us. The twins turned around to look, but I resisted the urge to use my own eyes and instead had Huginn turn his to see what it was that was going on behind me.

The broken columns melted, the smashed brick turned to sludge, the fragments of shattered glass liquefied, and they all flowed up and towards the center like molten lava, congregating on a central point. Where they met, a shape began to form, first a pair of feet from the toes up, then ankles and

calves, then a familiar armored skirt, a cuirass shaped like a chiseled man's chest with swirling patterns swooping in lines across the pectorals and abs, a pair of bare arms and forearms protected by bracers emblazoned with the Flamel in stark relief.

"Holy shit, Gramps," said Mordred.

"He really is Old Man Ed!" Rika burst out.

In the hands, a rounded shield as large as the torso also depicted the crucified snake and a long shaft ending in a bladed point — a spear. Next, a neck, thickly corded with muscle, a face, hidden by a helmet, with a plume finely detailed to capture every strand of the horse's hair.

A Spartan.

"Incredible," breathed Paracelsus. "The level of detail for something made with such speed..."

Thirty feet tall, made entirely of whatever stone had comprised the museum, with panes of glass for eyes, and carved with such detail that Michelangelo himself would have been jealous, a fully armored warrior who would have looked right at home in ancient Greece. My mind immediately supplied the name Achilles and an image of a handsome face framed by locks of blond hair.

"Even such talented magi as you and I would require more time than this to create a homunculus of any worth!" said Flamel. "But animating mere stone is something even an amateur alchemist can do, don't you think? Sometimes, however, the very basics are more than enough!"

The stone groaned and the ground shook as the statue came to life, stepping forward with heavy, ponderous footfalls. The enormous legs, each thick enough that Herakles himself wouldn't have been able to wrap his arms all the way around them, lifted up, and even did us the courtesy of stepping over us with such care as to avoid even the chance of hitting anyone. It marched wordlessly into the courtyard and towards the fight, slow, but with so much weight behind it that even a glancing blow might have shattered all of the bones in my arm or snapped my neck. Every step vibrated up my legs and into my chest, and my glasses threatened to slip from my nose entirely.

"You wanted me to chastise you, Paracelsus!" said Flamel. "So stand still and accept your punishment!"

The living statue raised its enormous spear, more akin in size and heft to the very pillars whose remains it had been made from, and it thrust it directly towards Paracelsus, who seemed to realize only as it came hurtling towards him that this was probably something he should worry about.

"O' Earth!"

A wall of stone several feet thick rose like a shield, but at the last possible moment, the head of the spear shifted, glinting, and became what looked like solid steel. It punched through the wall without any effort at all, and Paracelsus was thrown backwards by the force of it, tumbling across the ground to the feet of one of the Helter Skelter.

Flamel pressed the attack. "And now...!"

"Sword —"

Paracelsus rolled about, wasting no time on the effort to climb to his feet, and instead remained on his side, gripping his sword with both hands and pointing the tip at the giant. Magical energy surged. Balls of light formed around the shaft of the blade, swirling until their colors bled together into a singular white ring.

And we were right in the firing line.

“Mash!” Ritsuka shouted, having already seen what I saw.

Mash threw herself in front of us as quickly as she could, leading with her shield.

“Lord —”

The energy gathered on the tip of the blade, blindingly bright.

“— of Paracelsus!”

“Chaldeas!”

The rampart of Lord Chaldeas had barely finished forming before a tornado of multicolored light slammed into it, ripping straight through the giant statue as though it was made of tissue paper. A thunderous *bong* echoed, and Mash’s grunt was lost in the furor as she strengthened her weak footing. I had to squint and turn my head away from the blast, but Huginn had no such trouble, watching everything from such safety.

*Fine*, I thought, *if you’re going to drag us into this like that, then no more sitting on the sidelines*. I pushed my mind down the thread connecting me to my newest Servant. *Jackie? Go.*

*Okay!* she replied brightly.

The light had barely faded and Paracelsus was still trying to scramble to his feet when she descended like a wrathful angel, one blade in each hand and aimed to cleave him open like a Christmas turkey. By some miracle, Paracelsus managed to stumble out of the path of her attack, then parry the follow up with his sword.

“Jack the Ripper?” he gasped. “Then, yesterday, when we lost contact with you and Robin Hood —”

A meaty squelch cut him off, and blood spurted across the courtyard, painting the gray stone in sickly red.