

## Chapter CXLIII: Grand Ritual

By the time the words left my mouth, it was already too late to stop them.

A wall of searing energy leapt from the books all at once, and I had to drag Tohsaka behind the shelter of Mash's shield as Rika squeaked and huddled there with her brother. The sound was drowned out a moment later by the thunderous roar of a hundred simultaneous blasts landing, some on the ground far behind us, some on the surface of Mash's shield, and some around us like a carpet bombing run.

Our Servants didn't have the same trouble. Mordred and Arash both had high enough Magic Resistance to mostly — if not completely — shrug the whole thing off, while Emiya leapt above the wall of energy and Nursery Rhyme batted what came her way aside with the voluminous sleeves of her kimono as though it really was that simple. Flamel himself just raised a wall of his own from the debris, and although it didn't weather the barrage as well as Mash's shield, it held enough to protect him.

Jackie? She made a game of dancing between the blasts, jumping from foot to foot with an agility that an Olympic gymnast would envy.

If I needed any more proof that there wasn't an ounce of real intelligence behind this, however, that was it. That first salvo was all they had, and they had to build up to it if they wanted to fire off another wave, leaving all of them essentially defenseless in the meantime. It wasn't even smart enough for me to compare it to an automated defense system.

I leaned out from behind the cover of Mash's shield, and as the Servants began tearing their way through whatever books they could reach, I took aim of my own and fired up my circuits.

*Gandr!*

The books all scattered like sheep before a pack of wolves, each of them trying to get out of the way of the incoming attacks, but they were predictable. My shot landed without any difficulty at all, ripping apart a book and singing its pages. They weren't particularly durable either, if that was all it took.

The twins caught on after my second shot, and they took up defensive positions, too, aiming at the mass of magical tomes.

“Gandr!” chorused out, and the three of us fired in staggered waves. Not every shot landed, but for every one that missed, one of the Servants cleaned up after us.

All told, it only took about a minute to clear out the attacking books. If Arash and Emiya had a chance to fire from a bit further out, then it probably wouldn't have taken even that long. By the time we were done, the only thing left of the entire lot was some scraps of paper, a few shreds of leather, and bits of ash.

“All of the books have been eliminated, Senpai,” Mash reported when it was over.

“Magical energy response has gone silent,” Romani reported. At some point, they’d switched over to audio only, probably to avoid getting motion sickness from the camera following my arm. “No sign of any more books.”

“Tch,” Mordred scoffed. “And I didn’t get to do much of anything. Stupid floating books.”

“I should probably chastise you, simply on principle,” said Andersen. “As an author, I absolutely should be offended, but…” Of all things, a giggle escaped his lips. “There was something incredibly cathartic about watching all those books get destroyed. This might be my favorite memory. My true self on the Throne will want to keep this one for sure.”

I wasn’t the only one who gave him a strange look, and when he realized so much attention was on him, he cleared his throat purposefully.

“Right,” he said. “Let’s get going. The pathway down is clear now, right? There should be nothing stopping us. We can continue our investigation unimpeded.”

“…Right.”

“Do we need to stage an intervention?” Rika whispered to her brother.

“You know,” he whispered back, “I’m not sure.”

And somehow, I found myself agreeing, with the sentiment if not with the course of action. There was…obviously something there that Andersen didn’t want to talk about, but it didn’t seem to be getting in the way of anything, so I didn’t want to talk about it either. We were on a tight enough schedule as it was, and none of us here was qualified to play therapist, least of all me.

But a small part of me that sounded suspiciously like Lisa wanted to point out to him that he had his own issues, too. I squashed it mercilessly.

Fortunately, the explosion of books had cleared out the path down, and by some miracle, they hadn’t damaged the stairs on their way out, so we could enter without any further trouble. To our continued good fortune, there was nothing waiting for us at any point on the staircase either, but that was counterbalanced by the fact that at the bottom was a hallway that wasn’t quite big enough to fight our entire group side by side, so we had to arrange ourselves in a column.

Unfortunately, the hallways were all cool stone and wooden torches, with walls that curved up into the ceiling instead of meeting it at right angles, casting strange shadows. When combined with the thick, moist air and the complete, dead silence, it gave off the feeling of entering a dungeon in some horror movie or something.

“Quite the dreary place, isn’t it?” Flamel commented.

“The Association’s headquarters is still largely confined to that underground complex in that era,” Marie told him. “It’s only over the course of the next hundred years or so that the facilities expanded out into campuses around London and developed into a more normal atmosphere.”

I reached out to touch one of the walls. My fingertips came away damp.

“It looks like even this place wasn’t protected from the mist.”

“If that was what brought those books to life in the first place,” Ritsuka suggested leadingly.

“Yeah.”

Then this was just confirmation. As we’d expected.

We traveled down the corridor, following it straight along as it curved and swerved, almost labyrinthine in its sameness. It never seemed to end, and it was uniform all the way through, broken up only by the occasional doorway or a branch off to another identical hallway. I think we very easily could have gotten lost down there without Marie guiding us, except for the fact that every other pathway was blocked off by more debris, as though someone had deliberately curated a path for us to follow.

After three turns and every hallway essentially funneling us only one way, there was no way I could be the only one to notice.

“Senpai,” Ritsuka began.

“Yeah. I see it, too.”

Emiya hummed. “What are the odds that every other route we could take is blocked off?”

“Slim,” Flamel agreed. “And yet...”

“We’re headed the right way,” Andersen said. “Or so it seems, at least. None of those other paths had any trace of a bounded field protecting what lay beyond them.”

I didn’t like it, the implication that we were just following the path someone else wanted us to follow, particularly since we didn’t have any idea why they might want us to follow it — except that one of those *other* paths might have what we were looking for and they didn’t want us finding it. The thin swarm I’d sent out hadn’t proven that out, but the circumstances hadn’t let me get as much coverage as I would have liked, so it was entirely possible I was missing things.

I looked back over my shoulder.

“Arash?”

“I’ll double back and poke my head in a few to check them out,” he said, predicting me.

“Go.”

He gave me a quick salute and a smile, then vanished into spirit form.

“We smell blood,” Jackie said into the quiet that followed. Her head swiveled about. “Lots of people died down here.”

“No fucking kidding,” said Mordred.

“Language!” Tohsaka snapped, and Nursery Rhyme giggled.

Mordred just sneered. “Fuck you.”

“I haven’t seen any bodies, but,” Ritsuka began, “I guess the Association really was wiped out.”

“Or else they all retreated further down into a more secure section of the Clock Tower,” Marie added. “...But at least some of them must have died in the initial assault. There’s no telling how many.”

Enough that whoever might be left had abandoned the place without any care for the damage being done. Either from callousness or desperation, and with the Association, I guess it really could have been either one.

“You never explained what it is you were looking for down here, Mister Andersen,” said Mash.

He hadn’t, except to say it might explain the mist and how the Servants who had manifested related to it. *We* were technically down here to investigate what had happened to the Association, but beyond the exceedingly obvious fact that they all seemed to have been killed, we weren’t able to do much of that because of the debris.

“Didn’t I? Information, of course,” Andersen said as though it was obvious. “Specifically, of the sort that only the Mage’s Association would keep. That is to say, on the nature of Servants and how they’re summoned.”

Marie made a noise of understanding. “Then you’re going in the right direction. There’s a library ahead, if you take the next right.” She huffed. “But if you wanted to know how Servants worked, you could have just asked! Chaldea’s library should contain all of the information you need!”

And if it wasn’t in the library, then chances were that Da Vinci had the answer.

“Even so, Madam Director, this is something I would like to read for myself, not have read to me,” said Andersen. He adjusted his glasses. “Call it a quirk of mine, if you have to. The only way I’ll retain the information properly is if I see it with my own eyes.”

Marie muttered something uncharitable under her breath, but the microphone didn’t quite pick it up, so I didn’t catch exactly what she said.

True to her word, however, when we took the next right and continued down the hallway — once again, the only pathway available to us — we eventually found the only intact door we had yet encountered since we came down here. Even someone like me could tell immediately that it was warded, and that only seemed to excite Andersen.

“Yes!” he said eagerly. “The buzz of magical energy — a warded entrance to a library! It’s entirely up to chance, of course, whether the information I’m looking for is in here, but if it’s anywhere...!”

He made for the doorway, but I held my arm out in front of him. “Hold on a second.”

Andersen looked up at me, brow furrowing, and I ignored him to cast my mind down the thread connecting me to Arash. *Anything?*

*A few workshops, he said, a dorm room, here and there, and one pathway that leads somewhere too far away for me to risk following it all the way, but no, nothing important. Whoever is trying to lead us wherever they want us to go, either they're trying to help us or they laid a lot of red herrings.*

Either one was completely possible. And if they specifically wanted us to enter the library...

*Come back, I ordered. Let's see what it is we're being led into.*

"Arash didn't find anything," I said aloud. I let my arm drop. "Sir Mordred, since you have the highest Magic Resistance among us, you're going through the door first. Mash will be right behind you."

"T'ch," Mordred scoffed. "Using me as a human shield, huh? Yeah, guess I can't blame ya. Fine."

"You said you were bored," I pointed out, "and you *are* the only one here in full plate."

"Ha!"

"Try not to break anything," Andersen said, only halfway teasing.

"Just watch me."

The doorknob squeaked as Mordred turned it, and the hinges of the heavy wooden door squealed as it opened, but as she stepped through the doorway and into the library beyond, nothing happened. No spell triggered and attempted to immolate her or anything like that. It was completely unremarkable.

Mordred grinned at us over one shoulder. "Looks like it's safe."

She stepped further in, and Rika sucked in a sudden breath — but still, nothing happened. There wasn't even the slightest flicker of magical energy in the air.

"The ward protecting the door was probably just meant to preserve the books inside," Marie explained. "It's a fairly standard measure, especially if the books are rare, old, and definitely if they're both."

Mash was next, and she gasped as she entered, head turning this way and that. "Oh wow...!"

And still, nothing happened. It looked like it was as safe as it was going to get, so the rest of us slowly filtered in through the doorway. What lay beyond was...actually the most normal looking part of the place we'd yet ventured to, a large, sprawling library that had an appearance not too dissimilar from Chaldea's, only smaller. It was lit by gas lamps, only they were the most consistent gas lamps I'd ever seen, casting a steady light across the wooden shelves and the books preserved therein.

If you had told me it was the oldest room in the Clock Tower, the only reason I wouldn't have believed it was because I knew there were older rooms and older places, because it looked like I had

just stepped into a medieval university. It was all antique wood, glowing gold in the lamplight, and geometric patterns in the floor tiling, with books that had been hand bound and pages that had been hand cut and even a few shelves that were filled entirely with scrolls. The entire place had been built long before the Industrial Revolution had brought with it the machinery necessary to ensure perfectly standardized construction, and yet was still built to the perfectly exacting measurements one would expect of a master craftsman.

With a pang, I couldn't help the thought that Mom would have loved it.

Andersen made a beeline for one of the shelves immediately, but he'd barely pulled one of the books down before he froze.

"Oh," he said. "That *will* be a problem."

"Is something wrong?" asked Ritsuka.

Andersen nodded gravely. "The ward on the door, it's preventing these books from leaving this room."

"What?" said Marie. "Of course it is! Most of those books are first editions or hand-written research journals, hundreds of years old! Did you really think the Association would let just anyone come in and walk away with them?"

Mordred groaned. "So we have to stand here and wait until he finds the book he's looking for and then reads it?"

"If you're that eager for something to do, then guard the door," Andersen told her.

"Tch," she sneered. "You're not my Master, don't tell me what to do, Pipsqueak."

Nonetheless, she turned around and went back to the doorway, then folded her arms and leaned against the wall just outside of it. She looked like nothing so much as a disgruntled security officer grudgingly settling in for overtime, only this one happened to be all of five feet tall and wearing plate armor.

"Sir Mordred has something of a point," I said, addressing Andersen. "We don't have time for you to sit here all day and go through these books one by one. We have to be back at the apartment before noon."

"See?" Mordred called. "She agrees with me!"

"It won't take anywhere near that long, I assure you," said Andersen. "In fact, I'm fairly certain I should be able to find what I need fairly quickly. We'll be out of here before the end of the hour, I promise you that."

And as though that was the final word on the subject, he went back to the book he'd picked out and flipped it open. He'd barely started reading it, however, before snapping it shut, placing it back on the shelf, and pulling down another one. This one, too, he flipped open, turning pages so quickly

that even someone like me, who read recreationally and finished books pretty fast, had trouble believing he was seeing more than a single word on each page.

Somehow, however, it seemed to be enough, because he'd gone through several pages in less than ten seconds, then decided that *this* wasn't the one he was looking for either and shut it with another muffled thump. It was replaced a second later with yet another book, and okay, if he was really getting through those that quickly — or at least finding out whether or not it was the book he was looking for that quickly — then while he wouldn't get through the entire library in a day, it might be enough to at least narrow down where he needed to search fast enough to find the right one.

“Wow,” said Rika. “I've heard of speedreading, but someone hooked this guy up on nitro or something, because I've never seen someone read *that* fast. And I've seen Onii-chan cramming for entrance exams!”

Ritsuka didn't say a word, but the look he gave her spoke volumes for how unimpressed he was by the unflattering comparison.

“Perhaps I might assist him,” Flamel said, meandering over towards another bookshelf. “I confess, I myself have something of an...academic curiosity about the subject of Servants and their summoning.”

“Feel free,” Andersen said without looking up. He went through another book, then put it back and grabbed what must have been his tenth in less than a minute. “But if you find the right one, make sure you share it with me. I need to make sure I don't miss anything relevant.”

“Of course.”

And Flamel joined him, meandering over to the opposite side of the library and picking up one of the books seemingly at random. I guess they each intended to search a side and meet somewhere in the middle by the end of it, in the hopes that they could cut down the possibilities as efficiently as possible.

Well. That was Flamel's logic, I was sure. I wasn't at all sure that Andersen had thought that far ahead.

“So...” Rika began uncertainly, “what do we do, then?”

What, indeed. Considering we didn't exactly have much else *to* do, we might as well lend them a hand.

“Pick a shelf and start reading,” I said simply.

Rika groaned. “I was afraid she was going to say that!”

“Cheer up, Master,” Emiya told her, smiling wryly, “many hands make light work, and all that.”

Rika made a rude gesture in his direction, and Tohsaka squawked indignantly, as though Nursery Rhyme really was his daughter and he was trying to keep her from learning bad habits. I wondered

how often he actually, really forgot and how much was a sort of reflex to her appearance, like being a father had gotten him used to censoring his and others' behavior when around children.

Speaking of...

"Jackie?" I said.

Jackie looked up at me. "Yes, Mommy?"

"Why don't you and Alice go explore for a little bit?" I suggested to her. "See if you can find out anything else about what happened down here. Just don't go so far that you can't make it back here fast enough when it's time to go."

Jackie smiled. "Okay!"

"Hey, don't I have a say in that?" Tohsaka demanded. "I'm a Master of Chaldea, too, aren't I? However temporarily! Shouldn't I be the one giving orders to my own Servant?"

I looked at him, resisting the impulse to arch an eyebrow. "My mistake. Do you have any objections to sending Alice out with Jackie to investigate the situation throughout the rest of the Clock Tower, Tohsaka?"

There was a moment of silence, and then he glowered, seeming as much upset about the fact he didn't have anything to say as he was about not being asked. "...No. Alice, go with Jackie. Tell me immediately if you find anything suspicious."

"Okay, Papa!" Alice said brightly. She went over to join Jackie, and then the two of them left the room, giggling to each other all the while, as though they really were exactly what they looked like. They passed a returning Arash on the way out, who stepped to the side to let them by, and Mordred, who watched them go distrustfully.

"I miss anything?" he asked.

"Nothing important," I told him. "We're trying to find the right book for Andersen now. We were all about to pitch in to see if we couldn't make this go faster."

"Under protest," Rika grumbled.

"I see," said Arash. "Well, no reason why I can't chip in and make this go faster, is there?"

"There's such a thing as being too gracious, you know," said Andersen without looking up from his book. He snapped it shut again and replaced it. "If you're always willing to help out, then it's only a matter of time until someone takes advantage of you."

Arash didn't even flinch, he just smiled. "I know. But there's never anything wrong with helping people, is there?"

Emiya was the one who startled, and then he sighed, "Damn. I should know you well enough by now to expect a line like that out of your mouth, but it still caught me by surprise."



Andersen just chuckled. “More self-awareness. It’s starting to make sense to me why it was that you were the one that girl summoned.”

Now we were officially starting in on territory that I didn’t want touched.

“Come on,” I said. I picked a bookshelf at random and walked over to it, grabbing the first book that caught my eye. “The sooner we find what we’re looking for, the sooner we can get out of here and get back to the apartment to plan our next move.”

“*That* one, I can actually agree with,” said Rika. She went to find a bookshelf of her own to explore, and her brother followed suit, and shortly thereafter, so did Mash. Arash chose one closer to me, and Emiya went over to join Rika.

With all of us on the job looking for this book, the room fell into a relative silence, broken only by the flutter of pages being turned, the soft thump of books closing, and the hiss of them being taken from or returned to their shelves. It quickly became apparent to me, however, that at least us Masters would be almost completely useless for finding the book Andersen wanted, because we just couldn’t check them and go through them anywhere nearly as quickly as he and Flamel were, and even Flamel wasn’t nearly as fast as Andersen himself.

I wasn’t sure if the twins realized it, too, and I didn’t say anything. Better that we were doing something and feeling at least somewhat useful than to have to stand around and wait the entire time with nothing to do except watch and hope it would be over quickly. At least I had other things I could do simultaneously, like sending my bugs out to explore as many of the nearby rooms as sat within my range.

Even that wasn’t particularly useful, though. What wound up hidden behind the collapsed doorways and the piles of debris was only corpses, sitting out and left to rot in the aftermath of whatever had rampaged through here. Surely not the same overlarge Helter Skelter that wrecked the British Museum, if only because it wouldn’t have fit down here in the tunnels, but whatever it was hadn’t left behind any identifying marks or clues to find, so I really wasn’t finding anything out that we hadn’t known before.

This entire Singularity seemed to exist for the sole purpose of frustrating me.

How long we stayed there looking, I wasn’t sure. Not long enough to run into the timer I’d set to let us know we needed to make our way back to Jekyll’s apartment, but the minutes felt interminable, and after the first few books, the others started to run together. It was all mostly over my head to begin with, talking about concepts that I barely understood, if I understood them at all, and written like a collegiate textbook in the best cases, and the nonsensical rambling of a lunatic in the worst.

The guy who talked about how to preserve the brain for study so that the subject could remain fully conscious throughout read like he could have been Bonesaw’s long lost uncle, and two pages of it was two pages too many.

Some of these had to be way too old to be what we were looking for, though. One of the scrolls I found was written in Ancient Greek, and it took a few seconds for Chaldea’s translation program to convert it into something intelligible for me. I had to double check when I realized it had been

written by *Pythagoras*, a treatise on the use of symbolism in formulcraft and its relation to Kabbalah, and I had to admit, it made too much sense that he was actually a mage all along.

I was starting to get desensitized to the nonsense. I wasn't sure if that said more about me or my circumstances.

"Aha!" Andersen suddenly shouted. "I found it!"

Everyone startled and turned to look at him.

"What?" asked Rika, who sounded like she had just been about to doze off.

"The relevant text — and some interesting books on other topics, as well," he said, grinning broadly. "Not only the burning question that has plagued me since my summoning, but also some more personal matters that I took the chance to read up on."

"Wait," said Marie, her voice rising with each word, "you wasted time looking up more than just what you needed?"

"Of course," Andersen answered. "Incidentally, I should thank you for giving me the time to do that. I wouldn't have ever gotten another chance at this."

"How long ago could we have been out of here?" Rika despaired.

"You're on a time limit!" Marie agreed. "This is no time for recreational reading!"

It might have been remarkable that the two of them were actually of the same mind on the issue if I wasn't thinking much the same.

"Perhaps it might be for the best to simply get directly to the point?" Flamel suggested.

"Yes, of course," said Andersen. "Brevity is the soul of wit, and all that. So. The relationship between Servants and Heroic Spirits is something of a paradox, don't you think? Heroic Spirits are beings both real and fictional, those who existed as historical fact and those whose existences cannot be confirmed after everyone who could feasibly have witnessed them is gone. Servants, however, are 'real' beings, manifested in a container called a Class, able to interact with the world and with people. Something like that, however, could not possibly be accomplished by the power of a human being alone, could it? The amount of magical energy necessary to make it possible boggles the mind."

"We know this already," Marie said, annoyed. "Yes — the FATE System is what Chaldea uses to summon Servants, based upon the Holy Grail Ritual from Fuyuki. The Classes we use are derived from that model."

"Are they?" Andersen challenged. "The ritual of summoning Heroic Spirits into containers called Classes and making them compete for the prize of the Holy Grail — doesn't that idea strike you as strange at all? To put that much effort into bringing things into this world that shouldn't properly belong, only to force them to fight each other to the death, wouldn't it simply be more efficient to use the gathered magical energy to, as they say, cut out the middleman?"

“Not necessarily,” a new voice chimed in.

“Miss Da Vinci!” Mash cried at the same time as the twins said, “Da Vinci!”

“Oh my,” said Andersen. “Do I actually have the pleasure of speaking with the one and only genius of the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci?”

“You do,” said Da Vinci, sounding amused. “Your theory isn’t necessarily wrong on its face, Mister Andersen, but it’s missing a degree of context. The system of the Fuyuki Grail isn’t designed solely for the purpose of gathering the energy of the Heroic Spirits to fuel it, but rather, when the defeated Servants return to the Throne of Heroes after a wish is made, the minute hole they leave in their wake is the intended function of the Grail in the first place. That is, by pushing through that hole and outside the world, it is possible not only to bend the rules that normally govern reality, but for a magus to reach the Akashic Records.”

“It is?” Marie asked incredulously. “But my father —”

“Wished for no such thing, no,” said Da Vinci. “The results of the Fuyuki Holy Grail War which Marisbury Animusphere participated in have been wiped from the records, but I think we can safely say that he would not have achieved the dream of all magi and then walked away empty-handed, if at all.”

“But therein lies the problem, doesn’t it?” said Andersen. “The creators of the Holy Grail War and the system that makes it possible, how was it that they stumbled onto the idea of using Servants in the first place? It’s something of a counterintuitive leap, isn’t it? And these Singularities — you’ve said that the Counter Force intervenes, summoning Servants to resolve the issue. Presumably, by using the mechanism of these Holy Grails to create a loophole of sorts. But what if that’s not it at all?”

“Of course it isn’t,” said Marie, and she definitely sounded annoyed now. “Did you think this was going to be some incredible revelation? Just how incompetent do you think we are? The Servant summoning ritual was originally a ritual for the purpose of summoning what we know of as Grand Servants, Heroic Spirits of incredible power meant to tackle the greatest of threats to human survival. The ritual used in Fuyuki — and therefore our own ritual used by the FATE System — is just a derivative, meant to call easier, cheaper Servants for the sole fact that only the Counter Force itself has the power necessary to call a Grand.”

Andersen deflated, but Rika was immediately on alert. “Wait, what? So then, why haven’t we met one of these Grand guys yet? I’ve faced enough tentacle monsters, thank you very much!”

That was a good question. And unfortunately, when I gave it any thought, I was pretty sure I had the answer.

“Because despite everything,” I said, “these Singularities still aren’t a great enough threat to warrant it.”

I thought of a golden man, firing blasts of golden light, of an army arrayed against him, fighting desperately just to survive long enough to find a way to defeat him. Of a single young woman in the middle of all of that, barely able to string any thoughts together other than whatever it took to win.

If even *that* hadn't brought a Grand Servant to the field, then something that could be handled without needing to sacrifice anywhere near that much wouldn't bring one out either.

"Unfortunately, Taylor has the right of it," said Da Vinci apologetically. "Everything you've encountered so far is something that ordinary Servants could handle, even if it required multiple at once to deal with. The sort of situation that would require a Grand Servant's intervention... At that point, Chaldea would essentially be relegated to sitting on the sidelines and watching. Any efforts you could put out would be ineffective."

"So this entire time," said Andersen, wiping a hand down his face, "I could have just asked..."

"I told you," said Marie, "Chaldea's library would have any information you needed about Servants and how they work! That wasn't just an empty boast!"

"I'm sorry, Mister Andersen," said Mash.

Andersen grunted, and Flamel sighed. "It seems that this trip of ours was just a waste of time, then."

I wouldn't go that far.

"It wasn't," I told him. "We might not have found the cause of the Association's elimination, but we've discovered several important things. Firstly, whoever came here did, in fact, come to destroy the Association, and they succeeded at least well enough to send the rest into hiding. Secondly, someone else may have come down here after them, knowing that we would eventually come to investigate, and they led us directly to this room."

"The question that we have to ask then is why," said Emiya. "What do we think they wanted us to do in here?"

It was tempting to call it a trap, but if it was one, it was a very poor trap. Nothing had happened once we got past the animated grimoires that came out of the entrance, so either the goal was to funnel us *away* from the points of interest — not impossible, but seeming increasingly less likely every minute that I explored the rooms around us — or to keep us on track for whatever it was we were supposed to find in here.

The trouble was, if there *were* two different parties involved in all of this, and one of them happened to be on our side but didn't want to make contact for whatever reason, then what exactly were we supposed to find? Was this it? The book Andersen was looking for, the one that detailed the nature of the summoning ritual? Or was there something else?

It felt like a reach, like I was looking too far into things for something that wasn't there, but on the off chance a mysterious ally *had* led us down this path, then how the hell were we supposed to know what we were meant to find?

"...I can't think of anything," Ritsuka admitted.

"Nope!" Rika agreed. "You'd think Mystery Man could've put up a neon sign or something, because I've got no idea!"

Flamel sighed. “Unfortunately...”

Yeah.

“Maybe just us realizing there *was* someone else helping from the outside was the point,” Arash suggested.

I didn’t have any better ideas.

*Jackie?* I said, reaching down the thread connecting me to her. *Bring Alice and come on back. It’s time to go.*

*Okay, Mommy!* Jackie replied.

“Whatever the case, we can’t afford to spend all day in here looking for something that we might not find,” I said. “We’ll head back to the apartment and use the afternoon to track —”

Movement outside suddenly caught my attention, and I turned my mind fully to Huginn’s senses, looking through his eyes to find out what had decided to poke around the area.

I didn’t need to look too hard. He wasn’t even trying to hide.

“Senpai?” asked Ritsuka. “Is something wrong?”

Standing outside the ruins of the museum, waiting just inside the mangled gate and staring up at the wreckage and the rubble, there was a man. Middle-aged, handsome, with long, black hair and a white robe. He was surrounded on all sides by a platoon of Helter Skelter, automata, and homunculi, but especially the homunculi, all looking larger and more grotesque than all the others we’d dealt with up until now.

He was exactly how the twins had described him, almost exactly how I’d pictured him in my mind.

“Heads up,” I said sharply, “we’ve got company.”

Paracelsus von Hohenheim.