

Chapter CXLV: On Her Majesty's Secret Service

Whatever Paracelsus had been about to say died. It was swallowed by the spurt of blood that surged out of his mouth instead, and he bent over, clutching almost reflexively at the thin shaft of stone that had pierced straight through his chest and punched out the other side.

The fact that he was still standing at all said something about the resilience of Servants and their bodies, because a normal human taking a wound like that would have collapsed from the shock. Instead, Paracelsus had the strength remaining to press his hand to the wound and feel the rock spear that had skewered him, enough presence of mind to look at the blood and stare, like he couldn't quite believe that it was his own.

"My apologies for resorting to such an underhanded tactic," said Flamel, slowly straightening. "A bit uncouth of me, perhaps, but I must admit, you are indeed an uncommon intellect. My own alchemy has been transformed to some degree by the later perception of the art, but even so, the refinement in your technique is obvious."

"You took our kill," Jackie said, pouting.

"Quite the opposite," Flamel rebuked her, "because you attempted to take *mine*. I can only assume that was your Master's doing."

He glanced at me reproachfully.

"We were dragged into the fight," I said unrepentantly. "I wasn't about to let him get in a second shot at us."

I wasn't quite sure that the first one hadn't been an accident, a matter of coincidence more than intent, but I also wasn't quite willing to take the chance that it *had* been on purpose. Not when the enemy was tossing around an A+ Noble Phantasm.

Flamel grimaced and sighed. "As much my fault as his, I'm afraid. I didn't take quite enough care to ensure that the rest of you were entirely out of the line of fire."

"You shouldn't blame them, Master," Paracelsus managed to rasp out. "Even if the manner was not as I desired...this outcome...was the only proper outcome that should have resulted."

Flamel turned back to him. "So this truly was what you intended from the beginning, then. You *wanted* to lose."

With blood flowing down his chin and spreading in an ugly stain across his white robe, Paracelsus smiled a serene smile. "It is...the correct way of things," he said. "Evil must be vanquished...and good must triumph...over it..."

I schooled my face to keep my thoughts from showing. Maybe it should have been obvious from the impassioned speech he'd given just a few minutes ago, but for the genius who had built an entire school of magecraft — if not, it seemed truly single-handedly — he was surprisingly naive.

If Flamel thought so as well, he held his tongue, too. Probably for the better. A wound like that would absolutely cause irreparable damage, and that meant we didn't have time to toss around recriminations and call our only source of information an idiot.

Andersen materialized suddenly, stepping closer to the action. "Have you returned to your senses, O Alchemist?"

"My eyes are...clearer than they have been...since my summoning," Paracelsus answered.

If that was true...

"Then we have a few questions we'd like to ask you," I said.

"Yes," Flamel agreed, jumping on my point, "such as how it was you were summoned and became a part of this...conspiracy to drown London in fog."

"I was summoned...the same as you were," said Paracelsus. "The same as...all Servants in this era were. I...came from the fog, from...the Grail."

What?

"But you're one of the three masterminds behind Project Demonic Fog," said Ritsuka, asking what I wanted to ask, "aren't you?"

Paracelsus shook his head. His body flickered, a sure sign that we didn't have much time left. "Only...tangentially. The others...came first. I was...made their conspirator, their...accomplice. They...twisted my mind towards...their goals, the same as...they have done with...every other Servant in their employ."

B and M, presumably. But if it was true that the Grail came first, then the fog, and then the Servants, in that exact order, then who had come up with Project Demonic Fog in the first place? What was their end goal? Just what part of history were they trying to destroy? Was it B or M who originally had the Grail, and which of them had summoned the other?

We were assuming that another Demon God was involved somewhere in all of this. In that case, which of the two of them was it, and what wish had the Grail been used to grant?

"Did you know their names?" I asked him.

The how and the why didn't matter so much right now as the who. Means and motive were both things we could guess with some degree of accuracy just by knowing the names of our enemies, precisely because they were Servants.

"Yes," said Paracelsus. "Project Demonic Fog is...the product of the one you...know as B, but...it is M who...you must truly watch out for. He is —"

One of the Helter Skelter suddenly burst into motion, and Jackie and Flamel both threw themselves out of the way as it lifted off the ground and rocketed across the distance using jets of... Was that steam?

Arash and Emiya both riddled it with a volley of arrows, Emiya's aimed at joints and Arash's aimed at dealing as much damage to the limbs as possible. One wave hit the shoulder, and the arm holding its cleaver went limp as the legs broke, the jets of steam cracking and bursting. It landed with a thud and slid impotently, the metal screeching as ground against the stone.

Several more moved a bare instant afterwards, angling obliquely, and they turned together to unleash another barrage of arrow after arrow that crippled them the same way. They all crashed down much like the other one had, a few of them swinging their one functional arm like a toddler throwing a tantrum, impotent.

No one but me noticed — through Huginn's eyes — the one coming up in the shadow of the first, hiding in the cloud of steam it had left behind.

“Arash!”

I wasn't fast enough. Even as his name left my mouth, the Helter Skelter was bearing down Paracelsus, its massive cleaver raised to strike.

It was Mordred who reacted first, bursting into motion and rocketing across the distance like she had a pair of jets attached to her hips herself. She swung her broadsword with brutal strength, and the raw power behind the blow took the thing's head right off in one go.

But she was already too late. By the time she reached it, it had already swung its massive cleaver-like blade. Paracelsus, still affixed to the spot by the stone spear and too wounded to have attempted an escape if he wasn't, could only let out a gasp as it slashed him viciously from shoulder to hip and finished what Flamel had started.

Mercifully, we at least didn't have to watch him get disemboweled. He had already vanished before anything more than yet more blood could be spilled, and even that vanished with him.

“Damn it!” Mordred howled. “FUCK! Sonnuva...!”

The rest of Paracelsus' mockery of an honor guard suddenly came to life, and they all turned towards us with obvious intent. Even if Paracelsus had made the homunculi, it was obvious that they, the Helter Skelter, and the automata all inevitably answered to the same person, and whoever that was very much wanted us gone and out of the way.

“Tohsaka!” I called out to him. “Get up here!”

“Mash!” said Ritsuka. “Take them out!”

“Right!” Mash answered.

“You heard him!” Rika told Emiya. “Turn that scrap into a heap!”

“That one isn't even funny!” Emiya replied.

They all leapt into action as Andersen pulled back and Flamel made a cautious retreat closer to our position. Mordred needed no order and no permission, because she lashed out furiously, smacking

the nearest Helter Skelter around with her sword and bashing it into as many pieces as she could. Conveniently for her, that happened to be the one whose head she had already taken off, and only once it was a ruined mess in too many pieces to ever function again did she move on to another one.

Jackie, I ordered silently, *focus on the homunculi. You should have an easier time of cutting into them.*

If you say so, Mommy, Jackie replied, and then she turned her attention to the hulking masses of twisted flesh interspersed between the bulky mechanical robots that the others were focused on fighting.

It was not a particularly even fight. It might have been much harder if we were limited to just one or two Servants, especially if we had only had Mash there, forced to split her focus between all of the enemies and protecting us Masters from them. We had more than enough Servants, however, with more than enough strength between them to easily handle the entire group and corral them away from us.

When a familiar winged, crowned monster burst out of the entrance to the Clock Tower and barreled into the fray, swinging its enormous fists around and turning everything it hit into pulp, it turned what had been a surety into a foregone conclusion. Any remaining sense of uselessness I had could only evaporate in the face of it, because our force was simply so overwhelming that my involvement would have been a drop in the bucket.

It was a bit of an unusual feeling. I was used to being the underdog, so carrying the metaphorical big stick was just a little bit surreal.

The whole thing was over in less than a minute, and all that was left behind of the entirety of the group Paracelsus had brought with him was a bunch of scattered parts, hunks of chalk white meat, and splatters of red bloodstains. They had all been destroyed, completely and utterly.

“Damn it!” Mordred said again, and although she was much calmer now than she had been in the immediate aftermath of Paracelsus disappearing, she was very clearly still furious. “Of all the fucking luck! That bastard — he was just about to tell us what we needed to know, and then he got his ass killed!”

“Sir Mordred,” Flamel began.

“I know, Gramps!” she snapped back at him. “Just fucking...pisses me off, that’s all. We were *so fucking close...*”

I knew the feeling. Agreed with her, even. Paracelsus had been about to hand us one of the biggest breaks imaginable in our investigation of this Singularity, and his “allies” had killed him to keep him from telling us right as he was going to say it. The answer to one of the most important questions we had — snatched right out from under our noses.

There was a reason a colony of ants was tearing each other apart in the nearest apartment.

“He confirmed a suspicion of mine, at least,” said Andersen. “As convenient as it would have been to have the most important answers here — no, at least he did me the favor of validating my

thoughts about the origin of Servants inside of this Singularity. It might not be as much as we wanted, but it's not nothing."

"Your suspicion?" asked Tohsaka as he came up out of the Clock Tower.

"That Servants arise from the fog," Andersen said. "Yes — have you not noticed? Not a single one of the Servants that were summoned inside of this Singularity can claim to have arrived during these hours of the morning, when the fog has subsided. Each and every one of us appeared inside the city when the fog was at its height. Ergo, another suspicion of ours has been confirmed, namely —"

"Whatever they're using to make the fog," Ritsuka concluded, "it's connected to this Singularity's Grail."

Mordred's face scrunched up with confusion. "I thought we knew that already."

"We suspected it — good job, Jackie," I said as Jackie returned to my side. She preened under the praise, smiling as though she wasn't covered in blood. "Because we didn't have any better explanations. This confirms it. And it means that whatever machine they decided to name Angrboða, it's likely involved somehow, too."

I guess I was going to have to introduce her to the concept of a daily bath later on. Washing off blood and guts wasn't exactly the same thing as washing off mud and dirt, but it was similar enough that I shouldn't have any trouble getting her clean.

"I'm still not entirely convinced of that," Flamel said sourly.

"We can discuss it more back at the apartment," I said. "It's about time we should be heading back."

Flamel looked like he wanted to argue for a second, but then he nodded, "Yes, I suppose we should."

"Tch." Mordred scoffed. "Already? All we did was look at a bunch of stupid books!"

"We can go out on patrol later on," Ritsuka promised, and while this didn't satisfy her completely, it at least tempered her frustration a little.

"After lunch," Rika added. "All that reading made me hungry! Mama wants food!"

"I'm sure Renée will be happy to make something for you, Senpai," said Mash pleasantly.

But she had forgotten that, at least in this one particular area, Emiya was actually fairly competitive.

"Like hell she is," he said, scowling. "I'm the one who gets to make lunch, remember? I already have to surrender to her in the mornings for breakfast and share the kitchen for dinner, I'm not going to let her get away with taking lunch, too!"

"Then we had better return to Jekyll's with all due haste, hadn't we?" said Flamel. "I'm sure dear Renée will be only too happy to assume your spot, should you be delayed by too long a time."

Emiya definitely didn't find the thought comforting. "There's no time to waste, Master. We need to get back to the apartment as fast as we can."

"Fine," Mordred said grudgingly. "Let's get out of here so that you guys don't collapse on me. The last thing I want is to listen to the earful I'm gonna get from the old nag if you guys up and croak on my watch."

We grouped up again, crossing the pitted and destroyed courtyard and all of the body parts and pieces of metal that littered it, and when we reached the gate, Flamel stopped.

"A moment, if you will," he said. "This won't take but a few seconds."

He pressed his hands together, muttering an incantation, and red light glowed from between his fingers. The corpses — both meat and mechanical — didn't disappear, but the things he'd done with his own alchemy earlier melted away and returned to their original state, to what they'd been before his fight with Paracelsus. He even went as far as to turn his statue back into rubble and fix the damage done to the courtyard before we'd ever arrived.

When he was done, he let his hands drop and sighed. "There. It isn't much, but it's the least I could do."

"Won't all of this just get corrected once this Singularity is resolved?" Tohsaka asked. "There wasn't really a need to go that far, was there?"

"Perhaps not," Flamel agreed. "But it seemed appropriate, as a matter of common courtesy. It was a trifling effort, and so it cost me little to do the people of London this kindness."

And it spoke well of his character, too. At the end of the day, it was a mostly meaningless gesture and it wouldn't stick, because the museum being destroyed would itself be corrected when this was all over, but doing the right thing for the sake of doing the right thing was something I could appreciate.

Flamel turned back around. "Now. We were returning to the apartment, yes? I appreciate your willingness to indulge me, but no more need to dawdle. Let's be on our way."

As we exited out of what was once the ruined gate — now repaired and left ajar for us to leave through — an echoing caw broke the silent streets and a crow suddenly took flight from a nearby rooftop, wings flapping. My head spun to watch it go, and I tracked its path westward in the direction of, as best I knew it, nothing important.

There was just one problem.

"Arash," I said calmly, "that's not Huginn."

Arash needed no other explanation. He materialized his bow and an arrow, drew back on the bowstring, and let it loose. In the distance, the arrow sprouted from the crow's body, and it gave one desperate flap in an attempt to maintain its altitude before falling like a stone.

Mash gasped, scandalized. "Miss Taylor!"

“It disappeared when it hit the ground, Master,” Arash reported.

As I’d thought. Some kind of familiar, then.

“Not here, Mash,” I told her. “Back at the apartment. I’ll explain there.”

Mash looked torn.

“Come on, Mash,” said Ritsuka. “I’m sure Senpai will explain everything once we get back to the apartment. There was a reason why that crow was dangerous.”

Sometimes, I really did have to marvel at the twins’ trust in me. Even the Chicago Wards had had their misgivings about some of my decisions.

Eventually, Mash sighed and gave in. “Yes, Senpai.”

So after I retrieved Huginn, we made our way back to Jekyll’s apartment, avoiding all of the patrols that were interspersed along the route. Those that already had one of Flamel’s trackers placed in their midst were left alone entirely, and those that didn’t have one, I snuck a tracker into until I ran out completely.

I had some hope that they would work the way I’d intended for them to when I asked Flamel to make more, and one or more of the patrol groups would eventually lead us right to the masterminds, to B and M, now that Paracelsus was taken care of. On the other hand, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if it all wound up being a wasted effort. This Singularity seemed like it was designed specifically to frustrate me, after all.

I did have to wonder, though, if the others had some way of manufacturing more of those grotesque homunculi or if their supply was now entirely limited since he was gone. If that was the case, they might wind up making more Helter Skelter and automata to compensate, and I…wasn’t entirely opposed to that, honestly. More places to hide more of Flamel’s trackers, and that meant that I could get a better idea of the things happening throughout the city as a whole than with my bugs and their much more limited range.

Provided the patrol groups actually had regular routes, of course. But whether or not they did would tell us some things about the enemy, too.

It took another hour, all told, for Jekyll’s apartment to come back into view, and we made excellent time, arriving with nearly half an hour to spare. Jeanne Alter and Fran were both there out front, sitting on the steps and waiting for us.

“Sup, losers,” Jeanne Alter greeted us. “Bet you had shit loads of fun.”

Mordred snorted. “Not that much. Spent most of the time either dodging around those patrols or reading fucking *books*.”

“Yeah?” said Jeanne Alter. “More fun than sitting here for the past three hours. But I guess it’s not as bad as being a nerd.”

“Illiterate bumpkin,” Andersen said, looking down his nose at her. It might have been more effective if he wasn’t half her size.

Jeanne Alter sneered. “At least I’m not stuck in the body of a *toddler*.”

Andersen’s lips pursed and his eyes narrowed.

“Now, now,” said Flamel, trying to placate the both of them, “we’re all allies here, aren’t we? No need to antagonize each other.”

“Uhn?” Fran asked.

“Not as much as we hoped,” I told her. “We should talk more inside. Jeanne Alter, you can come in and hear about what we learned while Arash stays to keep watch. Thank you for protecting the apartment.”

“Geez, you don’t need to make a big deal about it,” Jeanne Alter said. “All I did was sit around and stare at a few fu —” her eyes immediately went to Nursery Rhyme, and then to Jackie. “— fudging bricks for a couple hours.”

“You’re *still* doing that?” asked Mordred, sounding somewhere between disgusted and amazed.

“Shut up,” Jeanne Alter snapped back. “We can’t all be uncouth barbarians tossing profanities at everything that talks back. Some of us have some fu-*freaking* class.”

Mordred snorted and shook her head. “Sure. Whatever you say, Dragon Bitch.”

“Dragon *Witch*,” Jeanne Alter hissed. “Dragon *Witch*, you sack of —”

“Come on,” Ritsuka interrupted. “We should get inside before the fog comes. Senpai and Tohsaka still can’t be outside in it for more than a few minutes.”

“I know that already,” Jeanne Alter drawled. “Geez. You guys are the ones dragging this out, you know.”

But she got up from her seat and went inside without further comment, so the rest of us followed behind her the same way, leaving only Arash behind to take up sentry on the roof. The instant we were back inside the apartment, however, and the door shut behind us, Emiya broke off from the group and made for the kitchen.

“I’m going to get lunch made before that woman can use the excuse to push me out,” he announced. “Any special requests, Master?”

“As long as it tastes good!” Rika replied.

Emiya gave her a wave over his shoulder and vanished. The fact there wasn’t any commotion said that Renée was keeping to their deal, however unhappy it made her.

“It seems he truly does take his craft seriously,” Flamel commented, amused.

“He really does,” said Ritsuka. “You should see him at Chaldea. He might be an Archer, but you wouldn’t know it to see him at a stove.”

Or to look at his ridiculous aprons. He still hadn’t topped the “ladle of my soup” one, if only because I now understood the joke behind it, and it was hard to beat that one out.

Flamel hummed. “We all have our hobbies, I suppose.”

“You’ve returned,” Jekyll said as he entered the parlor. “With good tidings, one would hope? Was your venture successful?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Andersen said bitterly. “Although not in the way I’d wanted it to be.”

I was willing to blame that one on his own stubbornness. We could have saved a lot of time and energy if he’d just explained what he was looking for in the first place, and we could’ve spent more time instead on investigating the damage to the Clock Tower.

Not that I expected we would have found too much just looking at a bunch of rubble. None of us was Lisa, after all. But nothing said we couldn’t have gotten lucky and picked up another clue or two by sheer chance.

“Before that, Miss Taylor,” said Mash, “you said you’d explain why you killed that crow once we returned to the apartment.”

Naturally, that got Jeanne Alter’s attention. “Say what, now? You did what?”

“Technically, Arash was the one who killed it,” Rika pointed out, “but Senpai’s the one who gave the order, so I guess it counts.”

“No shit,” said Jeanne Alter.

“Language!” Tohsaka hissed.

Jeanne Alter rolled her eyes and flipped him the bird. Tohsaka didn’t appreciate that very much either.

“Mash,” I began, driving the conversation back on track, and instead of answering her question directly, I asked her, “when was the last time you remember seeing any native fauna since we got here?”

Mash took in a breath and opened her mouth, then had to pause and think about it for a second, her brow furrowing. After a second or two, her mouth closed again, and the furrow of her brow deepened as the cogs turned and she slowly came to the conclusion I’d intended from the beginning.

“I haven’t,” she said, and she sounded troubled. “Since we’ve arrived here, the only animal I’ve seen is Huginn...isn’t it? Um, one of Miss Taylor’s puppets, that is.”

“Huginn?” asked Flamel.

“And Muninn,” I told him, laying a hand on my bag. “Yes — I named them after Odin’s ravens. It seemed appropriate, all things considered.”

And I just wasn’t particularly good at coming up with names for stuff. Huginn and Muninn had been part of the primers on Germanic myths and legends at Chaldea, and they’d seemed like as good a set of names as I was ever going to get.

“I haven’t seen any animals either,” Ritsuka said. “Just Senpai’s puppets, like Mash said.” She reached out and gave the little gremlin a scratch and fondly added, “And Fou, of course.”

“Fou!”

“So?” said Mordred. “What’s that gotta do with killing that crow?”

“No natural fauna would mean that any we encountered would automatically have to be our enemy’s familiars,” Tohsaka said, and he glanced over at me, “was your thought process, right?”

Essentially...

“Yes.”

He grimaced and heaved out a sigh, wiping a hand down his face. “Which means they know exactly how many of us there are and what we look like, now.”

Presumably...

“Yes.”

It would be better to assume that they did. It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that they had before this, of course, because they’d known enough to send Jackie and Robin Hood to Jekyll’s apartment, but at this point, they had gotten a very clear and very good look at our entire group, with the exception of Jekyll himself, Renée, and Fran.

There was no telling how long they’d been watching us for either. I hadn’t noticed the crow until it took off — something that never would have happened if most of the more useful fliers hadn’t been wiped out in this place, frustratingly enough — so it was entirely possible that whoever was behind it had seen everything from us arriving at the museum to Flamel’s fight with Paracelsus. It might even be why Paracelsus had come to confront us in person in the first place.

“Mommy’s so smart,” said Jackie. “We didn’t even think of that.”

I reached out and gave her a gentle pat on the head, and she smiled, pleased.

Mordred scowled furiously. “Fuck.” She folded her arms across her chest. “And those fuckers stopped us from finding out anything else about them when that Paracelsus guy was spilling his guts.”

Tohsaka favored her with a sour look for her language, but Flamel just stroked at his beard.

“That *does* put us at something of a disadvantage,” he said thoughtfully. “What they intend to do with it, on the other hand, well, that one’s a bit of a trickier question, isn’t it?”

I wasn’t the only one who wondered what exactly he meant by that. Both the twins and Mash were giving him the same look I was. “How do you mean?”

He blinked at me, then looked up at the ceiling as though it had the answer written on it. “Well,” he began, “if Victor’s estimates were correct, then our two remaining masterminds would also themselves be Servants of the Caster class — a conclusion, I will add, further supported by the presence of a familiar watching over Paracelsus at the Clock Tower, if your own theory is correct.”

Ah. I could see where he was going with that now.

“And we have several Knight Class Servants, which are famed for their high levels of magic resistance.”

Although Mordred was still the only one aside from Mash who could just shrug off almost any spell thrown her way. Both Emiya and Arash’s magic resistance were much lower and much less absolute.

Flamel nodded. “Precisely. It’s entirely possible that B and M — whoever they truly are — send as many of their Helter Skelter, homunculi, and automata as they can in an attempt to overwhelm us with sheer numbers, but it’s also entirely possible they leave us be for the simple fact that they are unwilling to risk engaging so many enemies who can simply ignore anything and everything they might attempt to use against us.”

I wasn’t sure we could count on that. Putting faith in the reasonableness and logic of a pair of psychopaths trying to destroy the entire city seemed like a bit too much of a stretch. On the other hand, since we didn’t know where they were, they could essentially wait us out by staying put and working on their master plan out of sight.

I really hoped those trackers panned out.

“Uhn,” Fran muttered despondently.

Yes, that did put us basically back at square one, didn’t it? One of the masterminds was dead, but if he’d been telling the truth, then he wasn’t really the most dangerous of them, and he hadn’t contributed much of anything to Project Demonic Fog. The other two were still somewhere out there in the city, and right now, we didn’t have much of an idea where.

“Was your investigation at the museum truly so fruitless?” Jekyll asked.

“We didn’t even have to go,” Mordred said. She jerked her thumb at Andresen. “This guy just wanted to know how Servants work, and the putz didn’t even realize all he had to do was ask the Boss Lady to find out. We spent, like, an hour down there in those musty old catacombs for nothing.”

“Not nothing,” Andersen corrected her tersely. He adjusted his glasses with a finger, mouth drawn tight. “While it *is* true that some time might have been saved if I had simply asked the experts at Chaldea for the relevant information, there *was* some other information I discovered during my

reading. Namely, someone was down there before us and organized the books to save us time so that I might find the one I needed quicker and easier.”

“We already knew that,” I pointed out.

“Yes, but the specifics are the important part,” he said. “Whoever it was that went down there before us, he knew where to find the information I wanted, and he even went through the trouble of arranging the books in such a way that I would find everything else I wanted before discovering my main interest. To wit, whoever it was that went down there, they knew we would be coming, they knew why we would be there, and they arranged things to accommodate us when we did.”

That...actually was a bit of a concern. Not impossible, of course, nowhere near it, and all things considered, maybe not even all that special. I knew enough precogs — enough precogs who were powerful enough — to be as impressed and disturbed as Mash and the twins were. But precogs of that level were still rare, even among Heroic Spirits, and Servants who *did* have precognition that powerful tended to be Casters.

And when our enemies were likely to be Casters, too, I didn’t like our odds of having those two categories overlapping.

“So they were...helping us?” Ritsuka asked doubtfully.

“Sounds like an ass-backwards way of doing it,” Jeanne Alter remarked.

“So it would seem,” said Andersen. “Of course, why it is they would decide to do so obliquely instead of meeting with us directly, well, that’s a question I don’t have an answer to. Nothing I can think of satisfies all the criteria available.”

A thought occurred to me. Could it really be that convenient?

“Unless they’re a spy.”

Nearly every head turned my way again.

“A spy?” Mash asked.

“That...would explain the refusal to meet us face to face,” Andersen muttered.

Rika suddenly perked up. “Oh! Oh! Hey, we’re in England, right? London, even! This is the perfect place for British Heroic Spirits to show up, isn’t it?”

“Yes...” Ritsuka said slowly.

“That’s how it works, Senpai,” Mash agreed.

“Although not a guarantee,” Flamel added, gesturing down at himself, “as I myself demonstrate.”

Rika’s mouth drew into an enormous grin. “Then if we’re looking for a spy in Britain, I know the perfect one!” She held out her hands, shaping one hand into a gun and holding it with the other,

then swung her arm around and aimed it at each one of us in turn. “He’s got a license to kill, and a smile to die another day for! He’s the man with the golden gun, and he uses it to deliver a quantum of solace, because diamonds are forever, but the world is not enough, because you only live twice!”

Mash just looked confused, but Ritsuka slapped a hand to his face and groaned.

“What?” asked Mordred, totally lost.

“Don’t worry,” Jeanne Alter told her with a leer, “you get used to it.”

This did not, however, make Mordred feel any better or less confused. In fact, it did the opposite.

“Rika,” I began patiently, “I don’t think we should expect an appearance by James Bond.”

She gestured almost desperately at Jekyll, “But Doctor Jekyll’s right here,” and then at Fran, “and so is Frankenstein’s...!” But she seemed to realize what she’d been about to say and trailed off awkwardly. “Um...you know...”

“Uhn,” Fran grunted.

“I’m sure Senpai meant nothing by it,” Mash reassured her.

“She’s a bit airheaded like that,” Ritsuka mumbled into his palm.

“I’m sorry?” Jekyll said. “I confess, I’m not entirely certain what my presence proves or disproves about the subject.”

“Nothing concrete.”

Why figures from out of literature were appearing was something we still didn’t have an answer for, and I wasn’t sure we were ever going to get them. The thought that I didn’t want to acknowledge was that — as much as I might have said otherwise — it was actually entirely possible for Bond to show up here.

I just didn’t want him to.

“Disregarding the possibilities of *fictional* spies,” Andersen began, and he lanced Rika with a very deliberate stare, “it’s not entirely out of the question that there is a spy for us in the enemy’s camp, but that still doesn’t satisfy the problem of how they knew what we would be looking for clearly enough to lay it out for me to find.”

Some part of me wanted point out that Rika had a very good point about supposedly “fictional” characters appearing here in this Singularity, and she hadn’t even gone as far as to hit the most obvious one, Nursery Rhyme, who was an entire genre of fiction personified, but in the interest of keeping things on track, I suppressed the urge.

No matter how good it would feel to pull one over on *him* this time. I wouldn’t say I was holding a grudge, but the memory of his prodding and needling from yesterday still stung a little.

“Unless they meant it to be a hint,” Flamel pointed out, “perhaps to inform us of the nature of the fog and its relationship to the appearance of Servants.”

My lips drew into a tight line. “None of this helps us figure out what the enemy is up to and where. Whoever this spy is or isn’t, he may have helped guide us to what we were looking for in the Clock Tower, but he didn’t give us any information about where B and M are hiding and what they want to do with the fog. We shouldn’t expect him to hand us all of the answers to what we need.”

“But he *may* deliver us that information in the future, or arrange for us to receive it through some other means,” said Andersen.

And the rats in the sewers might grow wings and fly from exposure to the fog. I wasn’t about to hold my breath.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,” I said.

“Don’t you mean burn it down?” Jeanne Alter drawled.

I ignored her. “But until then, the only thing we can do is act like it won’t happen, so we need to continue our investigation like normal. Doctor Jekyll, is there any news from your network?”

Jekyll blinked at being addressed so abruptly. “Ah — that is to say, no, I’m afraid there have not been any new reports, only the standard fare regarding the patrols of Helter Skelter. If aught else has occurred outside the norm, my network has yet to hear of it.”

Not ideal, but it was about what I’d expected.

“Then we can go over other points of interest in the afternoon and watch the map to see where those patrol groups go,” I went on. “In the meantime...”

I turned around towards the tea room, and as though I’d planned it all to perfection, Emiya appeared there, holding a tray of beef sandwiches. The spices he’d used tickled my nose, sharp enough to cut.

With a grin, he announced, “Lunch, everyone!”