

Interlude RF: Once Upon a Dream

Homunculus. The term used to denote an artificial human, made through the process of growing a complete individual from a single donor. They were not born. Rather, they were created, often fully formed, and in the rare instance where they began as an infant, their aging accelerated so that they were fully grown in a short time. Days, sometimes. Weeks, maybe. Usually, it was just hours. It was almost unheard of for a homunculus to develop at a rate commensurate with an ordinary human.

Despite the term used to refer to them, however, they were not much at all like humans. They came into being possessing all of the knowledge required for their existence, and yet had souls as pure as a newborn child, completely uncontaminated by the stain known as experience.

They did not age, and they were malleable enough to take on nearly any form required. Whatever role was necessary, they could fulfill, whether that was maid, tutor, caretaker, lover, or assistant. They were, after all, created with everything necessary to fulfill those roles, including superhuman strength or magic circuits more powerful than any naturally born magus. Yes — everything, except the will, the desire, and the concept of rebelling against it.

Naturally, for something that was considered so useful, there had to be drawbacks. As incredible a being as a homunculus was, its lifespan was often measured in the single digits. Even well-made and expertly sculpted homunculi did not often live to see more than two decades of life, and making it even that far was just shy of miraculous.

Some didn't live longer than two *months*.

This was all knowledge that Nicolas Flamel possessed, and was therefore part of the reason he had never crafted a homunculus before, considering it an act of cruelty to create something so short-lived and pitiful. Naturally, it was, as a result, also something which Renée knew, as well. Her creator had gifted her with all of the knowledge necessary for her existence, including the fact that it would be a short one.

A human being who was as old as she looked might have raged, might have snarled and shouted and screamed at the injustice of it. For Renée... No, likely for any other homunculus as well, it was simply fact, and she hadn't the anger or the sadness to complain.

She had been created as a blank slate, and her creator had poured his knowledge into her, filling her with all sorts of things that were not necessary to her existence. What need did a homunculus have to know the principles of alchemy when she herself would never use it? What reason was there for her to know and understand the philosophical underpinnings of human morality? What purpose was there to the fond memories of a kindly woman preparing a delicious meal?

None. Although she acted in such a way, she had not been created to be the apartment's maid. In the first place, it wasn't necessary. Doctor Jekyll was a perfectly acceptable cook. Nicolas Flamel needed neither food nor drink to sustain himself. There was nothing so desperately in need of cleaning that she should do any of the other housework either. In the end, the Chaldeans came, and even the things she did for the occupants of that apartment became superfluous.

And yet, she did them anyway. She performed these unnecessary tasks because her life was filled with unnecessary things.

It was the only thing she could think to do to show her gratitude for the life she had been given — even if it was so incredibly short.

And it became shorter every day. With every stride the Chaldeans made in unraveling the world Renée had come to know, her time came closer to ending. Every enemy vanquished became another nail in her coffin, another of the tethers binding her to this world severed. First, Paracelsus, the ‘P’ in the note left behind by Victor Frankenstein, and then, later on in the same day, Charles Babbage, the ‘B’ in that self-same note. Jack the Ripper was suborned and Robin Hood defeated outright. The magical tome was made into an ally less than a day after it appeared.

There was now only a single mastermind left. Presumably, after he was defeated, the world would be set to rights, and as an aberrant being never meant to exist in this time and this place — yes, she too would disappear, wouldn’t she? As though it was nothing more than a passing dream, this existence of hers would vanish, leaving behind no record, but for whatever memories the Chaldeans took back with them.

Eventually, even those would fade, wouldn’t they?

Were Renée a human being, she might have attempted to delay the inevitable. She might have poisoned the Chaldeans’ food, just enough that they might be bedridden for a few days. She might have arranged an accident that would put one or more out of commission. Anything, everything which might forestall the end of her path.

She did none of those. Instead, when the day came for the Chaldeans to venture down into the Underground with her creator, she did as she had always done — always, for the scant few days she had even existed — and prepared them food for breakfast. She fed them, she watched them eat and enjoy it, and then she went an extra step and prepared snacks for them to take along with them a second time.

There was no point in getting angry. There was no point in raging against the circumstances. Yes — Renée had already known that her existence would be a short one and that her life was measured in days rather than months. Allowing herself to indulge in such things would only waste what time she *did* have.

She could only watch them leave and take what pleasure she could in the unnecessary tasks she completed every day.

After they were gone, she returned to the kitchen and continued the process of cleaning up after herself and the others. Pots and pans were washed to a spotless shine, plates scrubbed clean, silverware meticulously scoured for any remnants of the meal, all until any sign they had even been used was thoroughly and completely erased.

Like that, the time passed, and before she knew it, an hour had gone by. Setting aside the towel and other implements she used in the process, she went about arranging the kettle, filling it with water, and putting it on the stove to boil. While the water heated, she retrieved the tea leaves from where she had put them away and prepared the correct amount to accommodate the teapot.

When the water was ready and the kettle whistled, she took it from the stove and poured it over the tea leaves inside the teapot, then let it sit to steep for a few minutes. In the meantime, she procured a tray, a teacup, the sugar bowl, and a pitcher of cream.

She could have prepared the tea exactly the way he liked it, and she had done so before, but this time, she did not. Doctor Jekyll preferred to sweeten his tea on his own.

When everything was ready, she arranged it all on the tray, then lifted it by the handles and made her way out of the kitchen, through the dining room, through the parlor, then into the study, where Doctor Jekyll stood alone. He stood over the map that had been made by Nicolas Flamel, watching the progress of the others, even though he only saw them as dots moving about the streets. He was fiddling with the band of metal that now encircled his wrist, although he didn't seem to realize he was doing it.

For a moment, her own eyes roved over the map of their own accord, landing on a particular building it depicted and the pathway through the streets that connected it to the apartment, and then she put it out of her mind.

Mister Andersen must have taken up the office again, Renée thought, and filed it away. Mister Andersen did not seem to appreciate the life he had been given, even though it was just as temporary as hers. He cared little for eating meals or drinking tea, as though such things were alien and unnecessary to his existence.

She, who had so little experience and only the knowledge gifted to her, had no right to judge.

“Doctor Jekyll,” Renée said, and he startled, so deep in thought was he that he hadn't heard her coming. “I've brought you tea.”

His eyes trailed down to the tray she carried and the teapot that rested at its center. Little puffs of steam escaped the spout at the end, wafting up with an aroma that Renée believed could be called pleasant.

“Oh,” said Doctor Jekyll, and he offered her a smile. “Yes, that would be wonderful, Renée. Your thoughtfulness is much appreciated.”

“It was no trouble,” she demurred.

She set the tray down on the nearby desk, careful not to disturb the vials and flasks that already sat there, and stepped back as Doctor Jekyll turned away from the map and came over to make himself a cup. As she always did, she took careful note of the process and the preferences displayed as he added a pair of sugar cubes and then a generous helping of cream, then poured in the steaming tea.

Even if it was knowledge she might only use for another day or two, or even only a few hours, she cataloged it all the same.

She wondered, had the woman in her borrowed memories been the same? Had Perenelle Flamel found some joy in tending to her husband's needs? Had it brought her happiness to see Nicolas smile at every meal?

No answer was forthcoming. Perenelle was not there to tell her, and Renée was not yet experienced enough to divine one for herself. She did not know the shape of happiness, nor whether Perenelle had ever been happy, and she did not quite know how to ask her creator. In the first place, he had already given her so much, and she didn't think she had any right to ask for more.

"Brewed to perfection, as always, Renée," said Doctor Jekyll. He took another sip of his tea. "Mm — I confess my jealousy. Would that it were I had the talent for cooking that you do, although perhaps it is for the better that I do not. I am certain there would be a much greater demand on my time were it so."

"I'm pleased you're enjoying it," Renée said politely. "Please excuse me. I will return later to retrieve the teapot and tray."

"Put it out of your mind, my dear," Doctor Jekyll told her. "Go — see to whatever it is that you must see to, and I shall return these things to their proper places once I have sated my appetite."

Renée gave him a short bow, but didn't acknowledge his words otherwise. She would return for the teapot and tray regardless, because it was a part of her role in the apartment, a part of what gave her life whatever paltry meaning it had. She could not allow herself to lose yet more of that, not after Emiya had come and taken the evening meal away from her — and very nearly lunch, too.

Perhaps this was the thing known as pride. Renée wasn't sure, but she thought it might be.

On her way back through the house, Renée turned her head and glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece above the fireplace and blinked at the ticking hands.

"Oh," she said softly. It was that time again.

If she was human, she might have rushed to the kitchen in a hurry, but as she was not, not quite, she did not. She returned at her usual pace, and when she made it back to the kitchen, she procured a small bowl, then reached into the pantry and retrieved a wooden container from a special spot on the shelf. Emiya had been strictly forbidden from touching it, and she had threatened him with eviction if he laid so much as a single finger upon it.

Because of her creator's wishes, she had given in and allowed him to "assist" her with dinner and make lunch on his own, but even then, there was a limit to what she was willing to accept.

Inside the container was a mixture of dried meats and fruits. As an unfortunate consequence of the current circumstances, there wasn't any fish available and she couldn't go to the market to acquire some, so she'd had to make do with what could be spared from the pantry and the icebox.

Using a spoon, she scooped up some of the mixture and placed it in the bowl, and then she got out another bowl and filled it with water. The container of dried meat went back on its proper shelf, and then she picked up both bowls and made her way back through the house to the front door. As quietly as she could, she eased the door open and stepped out into the open air.

A chill clung to the city, even without the fog there to deliver it, and when she looked up into the sky, heavy clouds blocked out almost all of the light. The fog that had lifted now sat above them, choking the city in an entirely different way, and it cast a pall over the empty streets.

Renée had never seen the sun before, and she was certain she never would. She wondered, was that supposed to make her sad? Was she supposed to be angry for the missed opportunity? She wasn't sure. How could she miss something that she had never witnessed before and never would? The idea seemed ludicrous.

But...maybe it might have been nice to experience it, just the once. To know, before she disappeared, what it was like to feel the sunlight upon her cheeks and know if it was as warm as she imagined it would be.

A questioning noise interrupted her before she could think any deeper on the subject, and when she looked down and over to the right, a curious cat looked back at her, head tilted. Its striped orange fur stood out as a splash of color against the gray streets and the drab houses that surrounded them, bright even in the gloom.

What meaning there was behind its mannerisms and vocalizations, she didn't know, because it wasn't something that her creator had shared with her. She'd heard, however, that there were people who could speak to animals and communicate with them as easily as though they were humans. What was that like?

Of course, she would never know. If Nicolas Flamel possessed the knowledge of how to bestow such an ability on her, he had not done so.

"Hello, Pierre," she greeted the tomcat. She walked down the steps and knelt down so that she could place both of the bowls she carried next to the bottom stair, then took just a single step back.

The cat took a cautious step towards her, then lifted his head and sniffed the air. His green eyes zeroed in on the dried meats and fruits, knowing, as he must have, exactly what they were, and after taking another tentative sniff to confirm it, he raced over and buried his snout in the bowl. His tail stayed raised, swaying gently back and forth.

The cat she had named Pierre ate ferociously, gulping down large mouthfuls of his meal. Any reticence he'd had before was entirely gone.

"It seems you were hungry this morning," Renée commented. She held her skirt against the backs of her knees and sat down on the stairs, watching, observing. Pierre didn't seem to notice her at all, but for the slight pause when she moved, and otherwise disregarded her presence entirely.

Another unnecessary thing. There was no need for her to feed this cat every morning, nor was there any such need for her to conceal the act from the other occupants of the apartment. From what she understood of things, everything in London would be restored to its proper place once the last mastermind was vanquished and the Holy Grail was retrieved, not just her and her creator. The same force that would see her erased would undo any good she did for this stray cat. Whatever fate awaited him in the proper course of history would not be changed in the slightest by her actions now.

Why, then, did she bother feeding him? Renée...didn't have an answer for that. She didn't know how to explain it. She didn't have the words. She didn't even know where the impulse came from or why. This was not the gratitude she was showing her creator for giving her so much, and yet it was still so vitally important that she could not have brought herself to stop.

What was it about this creature that compelled her to aid him? None of the data that had been given to her on morality and ethics felt like it properly explained anything, and yet she could not find another reason inside of her.

Was she...defective?

The thought stuck in her belly like grease on a pan, refusing to be dislodged. Was the fact that she could even feel that way another sign of her flawed nature? Nicolas Flamel was a genius of unparalleled talent for his era, but there was a limit to the miracles even he could perform. Had something gone wrong in the process? Or had her exposure to the fog — miniscule as it had always been — done some irreparable damage to her functioning?

Once again, she didn't have an answer. The very idea that she might be compromised, that she could *fail* at the only things that gave her purpose, sat like a block of ice in her chest, cold and numbing and spreading slowly out to her limbs.

She was saved from those troubling thoughts when Arash appeared suddenly beside her as though he had been there all along, so subtly and so silently that Pierre didn't even seem to notice. It was only his presence, the metaphysical weight he carried that radiated off of him like heat from the stove, that told her he was there.

"Hungry this morning, isn't he?" Arash said conversationally. When Renée turned to look, an easygoing smile stretched his lips.

"Yes, it seems so," she replied.

"I guess, with all of the markets shut down and the food in them long since spoiled, he doesn't have much choice about where and what he eats," Arash went on. He crouched down, elbows on his knees, and hunched over to watch Pierre. "I'm a bit surprised that he's the only stray that comes over here every day, but...with the fog, he might be the only one who was clever enough to escape indoors when it rolled around."

"Perhaps," said Renée.

In truth, she had not considered that. In that case, he might be all alone. All of his family, all of the other strays, his offspring, if he had any, they might all have died while he survived. Renée might be the only kind face he ever saw, day in and day out, and the scraps of food she could spare might be the only food he ate.

That was...

"Well," said Arash, "I can't say my Master would be thrilled to find out some of our food supplies are being used for something like this, but I don't think she would stop you either, no matter what she says about it." He grinned at her over his shoulder. "She's a bit dishonest like that. She might seem blunt and stoic, but there's a lot under the surface that most people never realize is even there."

Finished with his food, Pierre turned next to the bowl of water and started lapping it up with his tongue, downing what he could as though he had not had a drink since the night before when she fed him last.

“...Should I tell her, then?”

Arash shook his head. “Not yet. As long as it’s not critical, there’s no need for anyone else to know, so it can just be our little secret. That work for you?”

Something in Renée’s chest eased.

“Yes.”

When he was done drinking, Pierre licked his lips and looked up. Green eyes turned and regarded Arash warily, and Arash held out a hand, palm up and fingers loose. Pierre approached with caution, taking one halting, hesitant step at a time, and when he was close enough, stuck his head out to sniff at Arash’s palm.

After a moment, he must have recognized Arash, because he leaned forward, and Arash took that as a sign of permission, reaching out with his fingers to scratch behind Pierre’s ears. It wasn’t long before Pierre was purring, a soft rumbling sound that echoed in his chest and throat, and Renée took more mental notes.

Arash only indulged Pierre for a minute or two, and then pulled his hand away and stood, ignoring Pierre’s curious look. To Renée, he said, “I think that’s a long enough break for me. The fog will be coming back in about an hour from now, so Tohsaka and Alice are on their way back while the others keep looking. Once they’re here, I’ll be heading out myself to catch up with my comrades, so you and Doctor Jekyll will be in Tohsaka and Alice’s hands.”

“I understand,” Renée replied.

With a smile and a jaunty wave, Arash disappeared again, returning to his perch on the roof. Renée’s gaze lingered where he’d been for a moment longer, and then she turned back to Pierre, who had watched without an apparent care. She did not think that was necessarily normal behavior for a cat, but animals were supposed to have superhuman senses, so perhaps, to him, Arash’s disappearance was not a matter of any concern.

Cautiously, tentatively, Renée leaned over until her body pressed up against the railing and held out her hand, palm up, exactly the way she had seen Arash do. Pierre’s eyes turned and traveled from her face down her shoulder and the entire length of her arm, and for a moment, he simply stayed where he was, his tail swaying slowly and lazily back and forth behind him. Then, however, he stepped forward, and instead of sniffing her palm, he ducked his head under her knuckles and nuzzled the back of her hand. His head rubbed back and forth, as though there was some substance just behind his ears that he was trying to smear all over her skin.

For a few seconds, Renée froze, having expected Pierre to regard her with the exact same caution as Arash, but after the surprise faded, she twisted her hand around and did as Arash had. She gently dug her nails into the thick, orange fur until she felt the surface of his skin, and then she started

scratching. She did not know exactly how much force to use, and so she took extra care to avoid pressing too hard and hurting Pierre.

As he had with Arash, Pierre began purring. The sound of it was soft and low, but the vibrations traveled up her fingers and palm, and there was something about it that was somehow soothing. Was this why humans took animals in as pets? Did this inexplicable feeling provide some kind of benefit to a person? Renée could not say for sure, and yet she thought it must be so, because whatever this feeling was, it was pleasant.

It was not until many minutes later that she realized she was smiling.

Pierre was not entirely idle as she scratched. He moved his head to and fro, presenting different areas to her fingers, and she obliged him. He seemed particularly pleased to have his chin attended to, although the hollows she could feel through the skin at the base of his ears appeared to be his favorite spots, and she paid special attention to them.

Renée must have spent another half an hour there with Pierre, enjoying giving him attention as much as he enjoyed receiving it. She could not simply sit outside on the stairs and pet a cat all day, however, no matter how pleasurable it was to simply run her fingers through his thick fur, and so she reluctantly pulled her hand away. The smile on her lips faded.

Pierre made an inquisitive sound in his throat, looking up at her.

“I’m sorry, Pierre. I simply cannot spend more time with you, right now. There are things I must do.”

Pierre backed away as she stood and retrieved the pair of bowls, one now completely empty but smeared with dried saliva and the other only half as full as it had been before. She turned back to the apartment and took the stairs up to the door, and when she looked back, she almost expected Pierre to be there at her heels, trying to follow her inside.

The feeling inside of her when he did not could only be disappointment. Sour and unpleasant, but not nearly as much so as that moment when her creator had insisted she share the burden of cooking the meals with Emiya.

“Dinner will be at five o’clock, Pierre,” she told him. “Do not be late. Miss Taylor cannot see you, do you understand?”

“Mmrow!” Pierre replied as though he truly did, and then he turned away and trotted off back down the street. It wasn’t long before any trace of him was gone, disappearing down the nearest alleyway. Where he spent his days when he was not with her, she didn’t know. Perhaps he was not nearly so lonely as she had assumed. Perhaps he enjoyed his solitude, and it was only her presence — and Arash’s — that he craved at all.

Inside the apartment, she returned to the kitchen, sparing only a single glance along the way to see that Doctor Jekyll had returned to the map, nursing his cup of tea. The bowls she carried were swiftly washed and dried and put away, and immediately, because the time was fast approaching, she began to prepare lunch.

Excitement squirmed in her belly the entire time. There was no Emiya there to take it from her. He was still out, seeing to his proper place: the battlefield. There was no one to shunt her off to the side and take over what was hers.

By the time she was finishing up lunch — she had made it far more extravagant than perhaps she should have, all things considered — the front door to the apartment had opened and Tohsaka and Alice had returned. She left the kitchen and went to the parlor to greet him, where he and his Servant had only just made it inside.

“Mister Tohsaka,” she called to him politely, “lunch has already been prepared.”

He blinked at her, brow furrowing, and glanced behind him. What or who he might have been expecting there, Renée could not have said, because the only one with him was Alice.

“I suppose I could eat,” he said at length.

“Naughty Papa,” Alice giggled behind one of her sleeves. “It’s not nice to eat without the others, you know!”

“It’s already been made,” Tohsaka reasoned. “No sense letting it go to waste, is there?”

“I shall prepare a place for you at the table,” Renée told him. “Please retrieve Doctor Jekyll and inform him that lunch is about to be served.”

“No need,” Doctor Jekyll’s voice came from the study, and a moment later, he stepped into the parlor. “I was myself about to confer with Mister Tohsaka on what he and our comrades might have found during the course of their investigation — or, as it appears, what they might not have found.”

Tohsaka grimaced. “There’s not much to say, unfortunately. Wherever this M person is hiding, we didn’t find him.”

“That truly is unfortunate,” Doctor Jekyll said. “I assume, in that case, that the others must have continued on without you...”

Renée left them to discuss the investigation as she returned to the kitchen. The French onion soup she had prepared — a recipe she had originally intended for Nicolas Flamel to sample first — was arranged and divvied up, and she placed the cups upon saucers, to catch any spillage that might flow over.

By the time she had loaded everything up on another tray and brought it out into the dining room, Doctor Jekyll, Mister Tohsaka, and Miss Alice had all found themselves seats at the table, still talking. The instant they saw her, however, they broke off, and Doctor Jekyll favored her with a smile.

“Unless my nose is deceiving me, I do believe I smell onion soup!”

“It is.”

She gave him his first.

“Thank you, Renée,” he said. “I’m certain it will be delicious.”

“It was my intention that Master Flamel would be the first to sample this dish,” she told him. “However, since he has yet to return, it seems that it will fall to you, Doctor Jekyll, Mister Tohsaka, Miss Alice. Please, enjoy.”

“I’m sure your father would be more than happy to hear you planned on making this just for him,” Tohsaka said, and halfway through setting his own saucer and cup down in front of him, she stilled as something inside of her trembled.

“Renée?” Doctor Jekyll asked, worried. It was enough to break through to her, and as though nothing was wrong, Renée finished the motion, and then turned to set Miss Alice’s meal in front of her.

“Yes,” she heard herself say, “I’m certain he would be.”

Once everything had been set out and they were already to begin eating, Renée dipped her head into a short bow and said, “Please excuse me.”

She didn’t wait to hear what they might have said. She returned to the kitchen immediately, and it was only her precise and careful nature that allowed her to set the tray back down gently, that let her keep the tremor shaking her insides from traveling out to her hands and arms.

Father. The word echoed inside of her, bouncing around her head and heart like a rubber ball. Her father would have been happy to hear that she planned on cooking a French meal solely for his sake.

She looked down at her hands, at the pale, white skin that covered her, unblemished and perfect. No scars, no flaws, and too pale by far to have come from either Nicolas himself or from his wife, Perenelle. If she were to look in the mirror, she would find red eyes and silvery hair, neither of them a match for the darker hair and blue eyes of a much younger Nicolas and Perenelle. In no way did she resemble either of them.

And yet...

Father. It sent another tremor through her. He had never used that term to describe his relationship with her and neither had she, but as her creator, was that not what he was? The process of creating a homunculus like her was not the same as the process behind normal human conception and procreation, but it was not altogether dissimilar either. From a sample of his own genetic material, he had sculpted her form, and he had filled her head with so much of his own knowledge.

Was he not her father, then?

“Renée Flamel,” she whispered, tasting the words on her tongue.

Inside of her, her heart thudded against her ribs. Something warm that she did not have the words or the experience to describe spread throughout her belly. She thought it might have been happiness.

“Renée Flamel,” she said again.

Was it...truly okay? Or was it too presumptuous of her to assume the name of her creator? Was it really, truly appropriate to consider herself his daughter and he her father? Or...

She pressed one hand against her chest and felt her beating heart.

...was she just a useful tool for —

The crack of splintering wood and the crash of shattering glass ripped her from her thoughts, the commotion so thunderous and violent that the very floor beneath her feet trembled. Shouts of alarm from the dining room answered it, Doctor Jekyll's and Mister Tohsaka's, and the sound of their footsteps was almost drowned out by the slow, heavy thud of something absolutely massive plodding along the floor.

"Sweet, little doll," Nicolas Flamel's voice lilted, "won't you please come and see me?"

Renée froze. It...couldn't be. He was with the Chaldeans...wasn't he?

Miss Alice's voice called out a reply, but Renée couldn't make out the words over the thudding of her pulse in her ears. Even as something equally as large and equally as weighty charged out of the dining room, her body began to move on its own, turning away from the countertop and walking steadily out of the kitchen and into the dining room.

The meaty sound of two bodies colliding and smacking together echoed, and Renée jolted, nearly twisting her ankle from how quickly she came to an awkward stop. As though a fog had cleared from her mind, she blinked, and there, standing in the tea room and facing the parlor, Mister Tohsaka and Doctor Jekyll stood, Miss Alice in front of them with a delighted smile on her face.

"Go on, Jabberwocky!" she said brightly. "Time to play!"

The whole house seemed to rumble, and it took Renée a second to realize it was laughter.

"Where are you, my sweet?" her father called. "Come, now. I'm waiting for you."

Once more, Renée could not stop herself, and her legs carried her through the dining room and into the tea room. Mister Tohsaka and the others didn't even seem to realize she was there until she turned the corner and began walking towards the parlor, where —

That...was *not* Nicolas Flamel.

The spell was broken the instant Renée laid eyes upon it properly, a gargantuan creature easily twice her size and five times her weight. Thick, beastly legs held aloft a massive torso rippling with muscle, and enormous arms hung down to its knees, so long they touched the floor as it hunched over, too tall to stand straight. They ended in hands the size of dinner plates with long, thick fingers, tipped with sharp, black claws. Triangular ears twitched atop a gigantic head, swiveling this way and that and large enough that they must have been able to hear a pin drop halfway across the city.

A second creature slammed into the first, a bulky thing nearly as big with skin like leather, dyed a shade of vibrant, purple-ish red, and jagged wings jutting out of its back. It punched the first

monster with enough power to shake the floorboards, but despite how much strength had to be behind each blow, the first monster remained unfazed.

The huge snout opened, revealing two rows of razor sharp teeth, each longer than Renée's fingers, and a glob of drool dripped down over its black lips. A rumbling laugh barked out of its throat, shaking the thick, dark gray fur that covered it from head to toe. It lifted its arms and dug its claws deep into the flesh of the second monster, holding what must have been Alice's Jabberwocky as though it was nothing more than a child slapping impotently at its chest.

"Come to me, my sweet," it crooned in Nicolas Flamel's voice. "Don't you love me? Don't you love..."

Slowly, the head turned, and one large, round eye found her, pinning her in place beneath its glowing, yellow gaze. The black lips pulled into a broad grin.

"...your father?"

Renée took one step back, like a jerk reflex. The compulsion to continue forward and into the monster's arms snaked around her mind, constricting, overpowering, but her eyes did not lie to her, and the simple knowledge that what stood in the parlor had never and could never have been Nicolas Flamel freed her before the hypnosis could take hold.

Instead of being angry, the monster laughed again, a deep, rumbling sound that squeezed Renée's heart in her chest.

"So be it," the monster said, and it did not bother to disguise itself this time. The voice that tumbled out of its mouth was dark and deep and terrible, a thing of malice and violence that taught Renée true and visceral fear for the first time in her short life. "If you will not take the final step yourself, then I shall simply have to snap you up with my own two hands."

The enormous arms flexed, muscles bulging, and with a horrifying wet sound akin to the crackling pop of burning firewood, the Jabberwocky was torn in two. Purple blood gushed from either half, splattering all about the furniture and the walls and the ceiling until the entire room was painted in it. The monster dropped the separate halves of the Jabberwocky onto the floor, letting them fall contemptuously where they may, and as its enormous head turned to regard Renée with both eyes, it began to stalk towards her. Every footfall was like thunder, shaking the entire house. Its grin promised a violent and horrific death.

Listen to me, Renée, the memory of Nicolas Flamel's voice echoed in her ears. This is the only direct command I will ever give you: no matter what, your safety is paramount. Whatever troubles might come our way, no matter how grim the outlook, you must prioritize your own life. Even over mine.

I understand, she replied to the words said many days ago. She was his greatest work. She was not allowed to die.

She took another step back and began to turn —

And the monster, sensing her retreat, suddenly lurched forward, arms outstretched to snatch her right up off of her feet. Doctor Jekyll shouted something in alarm, and so did Tohsaka, but Alice was silent and unperturbed.

The black claws fell short, coming close enough to tear a line through her blouse, but otherwise missing her. Behind the monster, the Jabberwocky's halves had reached out and taken hold of its legs, and even as she watched, the two halves were slowly sliding back towards each other, tendrils of purple blood reaching across the gap and forming bridges. It was literally pulling itself back together.

Renée, knowing that she only had moments before the monster ripped itself free, turned away and fled. Behind her, Tohsaka called out, "Alice! Stop messing around and kill it already!"

"We're trying, Papa!" Alice replied, and for the first time since they had started staying in the apartment, there was something like concern in her voice.

Renée did not wait. She rushed through the dining room and towards the kitchen, and from there, to the back door that led out behind the house. It seemed almost to fly open on its own when her hand fell upon the doorknob, and a moment later, she was outside, where a thick fog waited for her, suffocating and poisonous.

But she was a homunculus made by Nicolas Flamel. It was the effort of a second's concentration to pull in the magical energy inside the fog and circulate it through her own magic circuits, using basic alchemy to purify it and creating a zone around her that was clean and safe for her to breathe in.

In her head, the memory of the map bloomed, and she rushed out into the street, looking back and forth as she oriented herself. The apartment was no longer safe. Whatever monster had been unleashed was not something which would be dealt with quickly or easily, and worse, it was after her. She needed to remove herself from the situation and get to safety, and if, in the morning, this world persisted and had not yet been fixed, then she could use the band around her wrist to contact the Chaldeans for further assistance.

Right now, the most important thing was that she couldn't die. She wasn't allowed to. If she wanted to ensure that remained the case, then the only place she could go was the safe house, Nicolas Flamel's contingency for the case that everything went wrong. He had made her memorize the route, and so it was now only a matter of —

"Stay where you are, my dear," a voice commanded, and Renée froze. Had the monster moved on? Had it killed Mister Tohsaka, Miss Alice, and Doctor Jekyll that quickly and followed her?

What appeared out of the mist, however, was not the hulking beast that had smashed in through the apartment's front wall, but instead something much smaller. It began as a silhouette, a shadow against the fog, maybe half her height and a quarter her size. Something metallic jangled as it stepped closer, and slowly, it resolved into something solid and concrete. Green eyes peered out at her from underneath the broad brim of a hat —

"Pierre?"

It was an orange-furred cat, the same one she had seen just a few hours ago, dressed in the finery of a medieval aristocrat. A pair of thick, leather boots covered the entirety of its hindlegs, done up with brassy buckles that jingled with every step, and it walked upright like a man.

“Yes, that is the name by which you knew me, Mademoiselle,” said Pierre, “but I am afraid it is not the one for which I am best known. If it pleases you, you may call me Puss in Boots, or the Master Cat. Truthfully, it matters little to me.”

“You’re...”

It should have been more incredible. It should have. Logically, she knew that cats couldn’t speak, that they didn’t wear clothes, and that they most certainly didn’t wear such large, cumbersome boots, and yet the order of the world very clearly told her that this was the proper way of things. There was nothing unusual about a talking cat, as long as it was this particular talking cat.

“I’m afraid I need you to come with me, Mademoiselle,” said the cat. Puss, she corrected herself, not Pierre.

Renée took a step back. If she took off running, then maybe she could —

“This does not need to end in bloodshed,” the cat told her suddenly, “but my master is not particular about your condition.” He held out a single one of his paws, and long, sharp claws glinted in the mist as they sprang suddenly out of his flesh, long and sharp enough that Renée was certain they could carve her open with ease. “Whether I bring you or your corpse does not matter to him.”

For an instant, Renée considered simply overloading her magic circuits and letting the magical energy in the air rampage and ignite inside of her body. The resulting cascade would kill her for certain, but it might be enough to kill Puss, too.

But it was not a guarantee, and the very last thing she should do was hand over her father’s work so freely. Destroying herself was not a viable option unless she knew that it would destroy whatever part of her they were looking to use.

And also —

Prioritize your own life.

— she would be disobeying her father’s only direct command.

As though sensing her decision, Puss smiled. “Good girl. Come along, Mademoiselle. We should not keep my master waiting.”

He stepped to the side, gesturing off into the fog with his paw, a mockery of a gentleman. Renée did not miss the glint of his claws, a subtle threat and promise of what would befall her if she attempted anything which he did not approve.

There was no other option, none that would not cause her father even more distress, and so Renée walked, allowing herself to be led away.