

Chapter CXLI: Fixation

“What the fuck is *that* doing here?”

In hindsight, maybe I should have expected Mordred’s reaction to be the most extreme. She had, after all, encountered Jackie the most out of all of us, every single time as an enemy, and had spent several days dealing with guerilla tactics that would frustrate a straightforward person like her.

“Never seen a little girl before?” Jeanne Alter leered.

“You need your head examined?” Mordred asked. “*That’s* no little girl, anymore than the other one is!”

Jackie glared back, eyes narrowed, and I could almost see her imagining all the ways she would like to cut Mordred up. I laid my hand on her shoulder, both as a form of support and as a kind of leash to keep her from lashing out.

Emiya’s face was contorted into a complicated expression, and Mash stared with undisguised apprehension.

“Everyone, this is Jackie,” I said as though I was introducing an actual little girl to the group instead of an infamous serial killer. “Jackie, the foul-mouthed blonde is Mordred.” Mordred scoffed and Jeanne Alter chuckled. “The other foul-mouthed blonde is Jeanne Alter.”

“Hey!” Jeanne Alter squawked.

I started pointing the rest of them out. “That’s Mash, Emiya, and then Ritsuka and Rika.”

“Senpai,” Rika began hesitantly, “is that...?”

Ritsuka’s eyes had already narrowed and his brow had already furrowed. My stomach did a funny little twist — no doubt, he had already started looking at her with his Master’s Clairvoyance, skipping the step of asking me entirely.

And then he surprised me by stepping forward, crouching down to put himself on Jackie’s level, and offering his hand with a smile.

“It’s nice to meet you, Jackie.”

Jackie looked up at me, and when I gave her a short nod, she smiled back and took his hand in hers, so much smaller that it seemed all the more ridiculous that she could even hold those knives of hers.

“Nice to meet you, too.” And then, she added, more because she seemed to think she should than because she honestly meant it, “We’re sorry about yesterday.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ritsuka said, and Jackie’s smile brightened.

“Okay! We won’t!”

“No, seriously,” said Mordred, irritated, “what the actual fuck? We’re just going to *ignore* the serial killer in the room?”

Jackie stuck out her tongue at Mordred, which was actually a bit of a relief, since it was such a normal child thing to do. If I was going to be her designated mom for the duration of our contract, then normal little girl behaviors were probably ones I should encourage.

“Tohsaka and Andersen brought up the same thing,” I began calmly, “and I’m going to point out the same thing to you now: we’ve worked with people who have way higher body counts and who have done equally questionable things. Technically, you’re one of them, Mordred.”

“Tch.” Mordred’s lips curled. “You trying to say I’m just as bad?”

“I’m saying we can’t afford to be picky about who we decide to work with and who we don’t,” I said. My thumb ran comforting circles over Jackie’s shoulder. I wasn’t sure which of us I was comforting. Maybe both. “The fact that I could forge a contract with Jackie proves that the only reason she was working with Paracelsus and the others was because they were promising her what she wanted. She was only too happy to join when I told her I could give it to her instead.”

Emiya snorted. Mash looked appalled. Rika was morbidly curious.

“And, uh,” she started, “what, exactly, was that?”

Jackie pressed herself against my hip. “We just wanted Mommy.”

Rika blinked, nonplussed. None of the others seemed quite sure how to take that either. I rubbed along Jackie’s arm.

“Jackie?” She looked up at me. “Now that we’ve got you introduced to everyone, you can go ahead and go back to playing with Alice. Mommy’s going to handle the rest, okay?”

Jackie smiled and nodded. “Okay!”

And she raced off again, taking the stairs two or three at a time as she sped up them like a bullet. Once again, I had a sort of strange sense that I should scold her for running inside the apartment, and once again, I pushed it down and pretended it wasn’t there.

Once she was gone, I turned back to the others, who still looked confused.

“All she wants is someone to be her mother,” I told them. “How that connects to her being Jack the Ripper or any of the Ripper murders, I don’t know. I wanted to build up a little more of a rapport before asking.”

“And...*Senpai* is going to be her mother?” Rika asked, sounding like the idea was too absurd for her to believe it.

I arched an eyebrow at her. “Are you volunteering? I thought you were too young to be a mother.”

“I am, I am!” Rika rushed to say. “But, *Senpai*, you’re...”

“I’m...what?”

She didn’t finish her sentence. She seemed to have thought better of whatever it was she’d been about to say, and while I wouldn’t have blamed her for saying I wasn’t mother material — I’d have been the first to agree with her just a few hours ago, and I still would now — it looked like she’d decided not to say it. For fear of insulting me, I guess.

“A stone cold bitch,” Jeanne Alter finished, because she evidently feared no such thing.

Ritsuka sighed. I didn’t let it bother me, which ironically probably proved her point, but I’d heard worse many, many times before. It just didn’t compare.

“So that’s it?” asked Mordred. “You adopted a murderous tyke bomb, and the rest of us just hafta suck it up and work alongside it?”

“Uhn,” Fran grunted.

“It’s got nothing to do with that!” Mordred snapped.

“I’m not sure *you’re* in any position to complain about who you have to team up with either,” I pointed out. “Last I checked, you were here for the same reason we are, aren’t you? If you want to save London while there’s still a London left to save, you need all the help you can get. If Jackie can lead us to Paracelsus or one of their bases, then doesn’t that mean we need her?”

Mordred scowled thunderously, and then she let out another scoff, upper lip curling, and halfway through turning, she vanished into spirit form.

“Sir Mordred!” Mash cried, but there was no response. Mordred had left.

“Should’ve expected that,” Jeanne Alter drawled. “The English just don’t know when to admit they’ve been beaten.”

Technically, Mordred would’ve been a Briton, because the English as even Jeanne would have known them were hundreds of years after Arthur’s reign, but that was neither here nor there.

“And you?” I asked her.

“What, like I’m gonna throw a hissy fit just because you picked up a total psycho?” Jeanne Alter rolled her eyes. “Come on. You remember who you’re talking to, right? I’m no angel either.” She grinned nastily. “If anything, I should be complaining that you brought in someone who can compete with me for who’s the best murderer!”

Right, I should’ve expected as much. Because she’d been on our side and been remarkably well-behaved for something close to two months now, it was easy to forget that — however it was she’d come to exist in Chaldea — she originated as Gilles de Rais’ vengeful wet dream.

“Mordred will be back,” Ritsuka said. “She’s just going out to blow off some steam.”

“I’m not sure about that, Senpai,” Mash said worriedly. “But, if you say so, then I’ll just have to hope you’re right.”

“And you guys?” I asked them now. “Jackie isn’t exactly a normal Servant, so I’d understand if you were worried about having her on the team.”

The twins shared a look.

“I mean, it’s kinda weird,” said Rika, grimacing uncomfortably. “Like, really weird. Maybe it’s because the only thing we know about her was that she tried to kill you yesterday and she’s been fighting Mo-chan since she got here, and oh yeah, she was a serial killer when she was alive, can’t forget that part —”

“It might take some adjustment,” Ritsuka cut across her, “but most of Senpai’s decisions have worked out for the better. We’ll do our best to get along with her.”

Emiya crossed his arms and dropped his head, heaving out a heavy sigh. “You guys really are a unique bunch, I’ll give you that. Making enemies of renowned philanthropists, teaming up with both a serial killer *and* one of the most famous traitors in all of history...but I suppose there’s nothing for it.” He slanted a look over at the wall, where Arash had silently stood and watched the whole thing. “And if I’m honest, the fact that the guy over there is giving this whole situation his endorsement would make me feel just silly raising a stink about it.”

Arash offered him a crooked grin. Emiya shook his head.

“I’m going to head to the kitchen,” he announced. “That bloodthirsty maid and I have worked out something of a deal, so I’m going to make sure she makes good on it. If I have to share that kitchen, I’m at least going to have it shared fairly.”

He made to leave.

“Go, house-husband!” Rika cheered. “Justice for my stomach! Justice for my tastebuds! Never surrender! *Ganbatte!*”

Gun-what, now?

Emiya lifted a hand in a half-hearted wave, and then disappeared.

“Ufufufufufu,” Rika chuckled throatily. “If I can get them to share, that’s twice as much awesome food for me! No matter what, I win!”

“Uhn,” Fran murmured.

“Keep eating so much, and you won’t fit through the door,” Ritsuka warned.

“Worth it!”

I looked at Mash last. “And you, Mash?”

She blinked at me. “I-I don’t want to take sides, Miss Taylor. Um, both Emiya and Renée are incredible chefs, so I don’t want to say one is better than the other.”

“I’m always going to be on Team Emiya,” Rika said, nodding sagely, hands on her hips. “But even I have to admit, that crazy lady does English food better, and I think, why not have both? I shouldn’t have to choose, so I won’t!”

“I meant about Jackie,” I clarified.

“Oh...” Mash looked down. Her lips pulled tight. “W-well, it’s just... How should I put this, Miss Taylor...”

“It’s okay not to be okay with this, Mash,” Arash said, finally speaking up. “You don’t even really have to trust her. Just trust that I’m keeping an eye on her, and keep all your focus on protecting everyone from the enemies that attack from the front. Okay?”

Mash shook her head. “No, I’ll...I’ll try to trust Jackie. If Senpai, and Senpai, and Miss Taylor, and even Arash think so, then I can do at least that much!”

Sometimes, I really did have to wonder how a man as cold, callous, and absolutely calculating as Marisbury was could have had any part in creating someone like Mash. She wasn’t perfect and she had her flaws, but having a hundred of her around in the Protectorate and the PRT could have changed so many things about how my life went that I couldn’t even imagine what things might have looked like.

“And that’s why I call you Cinnabon,” Rika declared.

Even if the way she said it was a little strange, the sentiment behind it managed to be perfectly right. Mash really was the best of us.

I took a deep breath. “Alright. Now that we’ve got that covered, let’s go over what happened — on both of our ends.”

“Urk.” Rika grimaced. “I-I’m gonna leave this one up to you, Onii-chan. I dunno if I can get through it all the way without having to puke again.”

Ritsuka sighed, but the look on his face told me that he didn’t blame her for it. He didn’t seem all that eager to talk about it either.

“Like Doctor Jekyll said,” he began, “when we got to Scotland Yard, the...other Jack the Ripper and the man calling himself P — Paracelsus — were already there and most of the police and detectives were already dead...”

Ritsuka wove a tale of being far, far too late, arriving at the scene only after nearly everyone had been killed. No one had recognized either of the culprits, but both had been only too happy to introduce themselves, like it was some kind of honor duel or something and they were obligated to spout out their names.

Paracelsus, he'd already described earlier, but the other Jack was new, a man dressed to match the era with black mist seeping out of his body from every orifice, almost like some demented, Victorian era Grue. Paracelsus had reportedly lamented that the experiment was a failure, because being made a Demi-Servant with a mindless homunculus as a host had degraded both his skills and Noble Phantasms to the point of near uselessness.

Only 'near' uselessness, because after Mordred sliced off his arm in one blow, he had apparently transformed into some kind of demonic beast with more than enough strength to put up a good fight. Whether that was the result of a Shapeshift skill like Nursery Rhyme's or a Noble Phantasm, I didn't like the picture it painted of what it might have looked like at full power.

Like ours, however, the fight hadn't actually lasted that long. Between Emiya, Mordred, and Jeanne Alter, the other Jack had simply been too far outmatched and went down quickly. After Paracelsus revealed that this other Jack hadn't been anywhere near full strength, he teleported away, having apparently gotten whatever it was he wanted from Scotland Yard. Even if his goal had only been to distract part of our team, he hadn't quite failed, even if I doubted he, B, and M had planned for me to take in Jackie.

It wasn't impossible that they had, but even I had to take a step back and call it paranoid just for how many things needed to go *just right* and how many things they would have had to know about me in particular for it to even work. If they knew that much, if they had another way of knowing that much, then there wasn't any need for her to be their spy in the first place.

Once Ritsuka was done, it was my turn to explain, and I didn't really have much to say either. The fight had been short and relatively simple, although the casual use of alchemy was apparently enough to impress the twins.

"Holy cow, he's basically Old Man Ed!" Rika exclaimed, and I didn't bother to ask what she meant by that.

I skipped over the part where I hesitated to kill Jackie, although I did feel a little guilty about wording things in such a way as to imply suborning Jackie had been my plan from the beginning. Arash definitely took notice, by his frown, but didn't contradict me.

The twins didn't need to know about Aster. Not now. If I had my way, not ever.

"Once the contract was established, all I had to do was ask," I finished. "Jackie dispersed that mist all on her own, which means she made it all on her own. After that, you contacted us, and the rest, you already know."

"We weren't even sure it was going to work," Ritsuka admitted. "But Rika thought it was worth a shot once the mist started disappearing, so that's why we made the call."

"Smart of you," I praised Rika.

She smiled bashfully, cheeks pinking just the slightest. "I mean, the mist was why we had no reception in the first place, right? So it just made sense we could call again once it was gone. Like we just got out of a tunnel!"

“Still,” I said, “good job.”

Rika’s smile grew larger.

“What now, Miss Taylor?” asked Mash. “Now that Jackie is on our side, does that mean the fog will disappear for good?”

Somehow, I doubted it. The way Jackie had phrased things made me think that her mist was just a supplement, and even Caster thought that the enemy’s ‘Angrboða’ mechanism, whatever it wound up being, was somehow related to the regular fog that kept appearing every afternoon.

It would have been a lucky break if it was just as simple as getting Jackie on our side, but I wasn’t going to count on that.

“There’s not enough time for us to make it all the way to the Clock Tower and back before the fog is scheduled to roll back in,” I reasoned, “and there’s no telling when Mordred will be back, so we’ll eat lunch and see what happens afterwards. If there isn’t any fog this afternoon, then we’ll go investigate the Association and what happened there, see if we can pick up any clues, just like we originally planned. If the fog comes back again, we’ll save that for tomorrow and limit ourselves to the standard patrols we’ve been doing the past couple of days.”

And hopefully, whatever Da Vinci was making would be ready for me to use tomorrow, so that I wouldn’t have to stay behind while everyone else went out. As a happy little bonus, I wouldn’t have to put up with Andersen’s presence on the way over until then, and by that point, I think I was going to have cooled off enough not to want to drown him in bugs.

“Sounds like a solid plan to me,” said Arash. “Just so you know, though, Master, I think Abraham’s going to want to come with us when we go investigate the Clock Tower. He hasn’t said anything about it yet, but I got that feeling from him ever since our mysterious P was confirmed to be Paracelsus.”

My lips pressed into a thin line. “He wants to come along, does he?”

And yet he was *still* hiding his true name from everyone? Even though everything said that he himself couldn’t be Paracelsus, he had to realize how suspicious that was, didn’t he? Did he really think we were just going to let him get away with it the entire time we were here?

“Like I said, he hasn’t said as much or anything,” Arash hedged, “but that’s the sense I get from him. From the way he talked earlier, I think...he wants to confront Paracelsus himself.”

For someone he apparently hadn’t ever known personally, that sure sounded plenty personal to me. Or maybe it was just a matter of professional pride, from one alchemist to another, because I guess that wasn’t outside the realm of possibility either. I’d known a few people like that.

Still.

“If that’s what he wants, he’s going to need to give us more than that,” I said.

Ritsuka blinked and turned to me. “More?”

“We’re past the point where hiding his name the way he is can be called a reasonable precaution. If we’re going to continue working with him and go so far as to trust him with our backs, then I think it’s about time he told us what his true name really is.”

Arash frowned. “You sure you want to burn that bridge, Master?”

“I mean, Abe’s pretty chill, isn’t he?” Rika agreed. “Is it really that big a deal that we don’t know his real name?”

“We know Paracelsus is P,” I pointed out. “That still leaves B and M. I had more orientation courses about various Heroic Spirits than the two of you did, and even I’m not confident I could rule out every alchemist with enough fame who matches his description. If we want to be absolutely sure he isn’t leading us around by the nose, then we need to know who he really is.”

“Trust, but verify,” Ritsuka concluded.

“Exactly.”

There was still too much that didn’t make sense for him to be an actual enemy. The one glaring thing I kept coming back to was his decision to heal me, when if he was an enemy, he could have just let me die, but there was still a mountain load of other things that didn’t fit the pattern either.

If he really was on our side, though, then why was he so damn hesitant to actually share his name? It was starting to get a little ridiculous. The only place in the city more secure than this apartment currently was happened to have been reduced to rubble.

“I’m not sure I agree that it’s really as much of a problem as all of that, Senpai,” said Ritsuka, “but if you think it’s really something we need to do, then okay. How do you want to handle that?”

I slid a glance at Mash meaningfully. “Preferably, with at least one Servant who has high level Magic Resistance between us and him. If you’re right and Mordred is back before too long, then we can get her help and confront him after lunch has had some time to settle. A good meal might make him a little less confrontational.”

“You won’t need to go quite that far,” Caster said suddenly, materializing at the threshold of the tea room.

My eyes narrowed. “You were eavesdropping.”

“Not intentionally,” he said apologetically. “While this apartment is somewhat more spacious than the one I lived in during my own life, I’m afraid it’s not quite so big that your voices don’t carry quite easily. I didn’t hear the entirety of your conversation, but I came to investigate when things got heated with Sir Mordred earlier, so I believe I must have heard the majority of it.”

“Sorry, Abraham,” Ritsuka said, “but Senpai does have a bit of a point. I understand why you might want to keep your identity a secret, but everyone else has shared theirs already, so you understand why it’s a little suspicious to keep hiding it even now, right?”

Caster heaved a sigh. “Perhaps I have been somewhat overly cautious in regards to my identity. However, as embarrassing as it is to say so myself, I really did become quite a bit more famous than I ever could have wanted to be after my death. Long, long after my death, in fact. Even the popular culture of your era hasn’t let my name — or my deeds — fade into obscurity.”

“Wait a second,” Rika said suspiciously, “a famous alchemist from medieval Europe who keeps showing up in pop culture? You can’t be...”

Hold on, was Rika really going to be the one who figured this whole thing out, just because she was more clued in on pop culture than I was?

“I confess, some part of me had planned for the reveal to be a bit more dramatic than this,” said Caster, reaching down the front of his tunic. “Perhaps when we stood face to face with Paracelsus, and I castigated him for his crimes and his cruelty, I might reveal the truth then, or perhaps at the final battle, when the last enemy was before us, he might recognize me for my work and curse me and my name. Alas...”

From under his tunic, he pulled out a golden chain, and dangling from the chain —

“...it seems that simply showing this to you so unceremoniously will have to do.”

— was a crucifix. Not a simple one, like I might have imagined someone from his era would carry, because for all that the cross itself was plain with a fleur de lys on every spoke, it was what was wrapped *around* the cross that was special: a snake, coiling first around the base, almost like a caduceus, and then arcing up and over the other three, with its head resting just below the leftmost spoke. Two small, red gemstones sparkled from where its eyes would be.

Even I could recognize that.

“As much life and money as you could want!” Rika breathed. “Holy crap! Oh my god, you’re —”

“Nicolas Flamel,” I said.

He was right, he *was* incredibly famous. History hadn’t let his name die, and every now and again, people like Rowling would revive it and introduce him to another generation. The Association might have considered Paracelsus a more impactful figure, because he’d helped to standardize the form of alchemy modern alchemists practiced, but in terms of whose name resounded louder, Flamel matched him, at the very least, and it might not have been wrong to say he really was the more famous of the two.

Flamel smiled wryly and stuffed the pendant and chain back down under his tunic. “As I said, entirely too famous.”

There was just one problem.

“I thought it was all made up by some guy in the 1600s.”

That was the historical consensus, as far as I knew. That Flamel had been a real person and may actually have dabbled in alchemy, but that he was ultimately just a scribe and a bookseller with no special talent for it. Marie had never mentioned him as anything more than that.

“Functionally, the end result would still be the same,” said Flamel. “But no. My deeds and my accomplishments are very much real, and although some of them have been...embellished in the details, largely true to life.” He sighed wearily. “It was quite vexing to find out that so much of what I had attempted to keep private eventually wound up common knowledge. I suspect someone with a grudge may have acquired my research notes and attempted to discredit me.”

“Or things were arranged specifically so that you *would* gain enough fame to become a Heroic Spirit,” I said, because I didn’t put it past an entity like the Counter Force to do such a thing.

Flamel grimaced. “Perhaps,” he allowed. “I suppose it’s immaterial, in the end.”

“So you really did create the Philosopher’s Stone?” Ritsuka asked.

Flamel’s grimace pulled tighter.

“As I said, some of the finer details have received some embellishments,” he said. “Particularly in regards to the book of magic I’m said to have been given — it’s true, my studies in magecraft *did* largely come from a manuscript that found its way into my possession, but the one in particular for which I am remembered was not in fact written until many years after my death. Rather difficult for me to learn everything I knew from it, isn’t it? Nonetheless...”

He held out his hand, and upon his palm appeared a rather large, thin leather bound book. It couldn’t have been more than a few dozen pages thick, and the cover made up at least half of its bulk. A title was embossed on the front in gold lettering, although since it was written in French, it was basically gibberish to me.

“History says I had it,” Flamel continued with a note of irony, “and so I must have it. Quite recursive, really.”

“Does that really contain the secrets of the Philosopher’s Stone?” Rika asked in an almost reverent whisper.

“Once more, embellishments.” The book vanished. “The Codex does indeed possess some incredible forms of magecraft within, but it is neither as extensive nor as exceptional as it has been purported to be. That, I’m afraid, is largely down to the fact that a number of the spells inside it have already ceased to be extraordinary by the standards of even this era, let alone your own.”

“So, no Philosopher’s Stone?” Rika asked, disappointed.

Flamel smiled wryly. “I’m afraid eternal life is not something which can be handed out like candy, my dear girl. Nor, for that matter, should infinite wealth be, or else the consequences of introducing such large sums of gold into the world would destabilize entire nations.”

He wasn’t exactly wrong, and all of that gold *was* essentially worthless to us in Chaldea while the rest of the world was incinerated, but I did have to admit that it might have been convenient to be able

to forge counterfeit coins in the upcoming Singularities we would have to correct. As a bonus, they would all disappear when the deviation was corrected, so we technically wouldn't have changed anything we weren't supposed to.

I had a feeling the Elixir of Life could have been used to resuscitate the rest of Team A, too, and being functionally immortal while we were out and throwing ourselves into life-threatening situations sounded convenient, as well.

Deliberately, I avoided looking at Mash.

It might even have been able to stop the inevitable and let Mash live more than another year.

"But you healed me, a few days ago," I pointed out to him. "Is there some kind of limit to what kind of damage you can heal? Like broken arms, concussions, organ damage? Neurological disorders?"

Everyone looked at me, bewildered by the sudden line of questioning, everyone except Arash, who I had no doubt knew exactly what sort of fate was awaiting Mash in a year's time and understood what I was trying to ask without saying it directly.

"I'm afraid what happened to you was just about the limit of my ability to heal," Flamel admitted. "I could say I understand the theoretical process of mending flesh, but truth be told, I am not and never was a physician. My understanding of the human body is woefully incomplete, and so I would not be up to the task of more generalized healing." He gestured to his chest, where the Flamel which bore his name no doubt rested. "What I did to you was an extension of the process known as fixation, that is, rendering a substance to an inert, nonreactive state. Removing the interaction with the fog made it a simple matter of restoring the damaged tissue to its previous condition."

Arash made a sound of understanding. "So it wasn't actually healing, it was more like you were just turning back the clock a little."

Flamel nodded. "Just so. Burns from fire or acid, neurological damage from a lightning strike, transformations of the flesh caused by curses, those are the sorts of things my Noble Phantasm would allow me to reverse, so long as the person is still living. Surgical removal of an organ, however, cuts from a blade, or contusions to the flesh caused by blunt force..." He frowned. "Truthfully, I have not attempted such a thing, but I have a sense that it would all fail. They are not *reactions* as alchemy understands them."

And without knowing exactly what Marisbury did to Mash, there was no way for me to even posit a hypothetical for what I might need him to fix. Damn it.

"It was worth a try, Senpai," Ritsuka tried to reassure me. "We'll just have to hope we find someone else who can heal the other Masters."

The twins didn't yet know about what was going to happen to Mash, so I did my best to keep that off of my face.

"Uhn," said Fran.

"It doesn't seem like it, no," Mash said. "I'm sorry, Fran. If, u-um, Mister Flamel...?"

“It might perhaps to be better to stick with Abraham, my dear, or failing that, simply Caster,” said Flamel. “No need to worry about accidentally revealing my name to the enemy if you never use it, is there?”

No, I guess not, and that felt both familiar and nostalgic at the same time.

“If Caster didn’t offer before, I don’t think it’s possible,” Mash continued. “Miss Da Vinci might be able to help you, but, well...”

Yeah. Add giving Fran a functioning voice box to the list of projects Da Vinci had on her plate. It wasn’t going to happen anytime soon, so as sad as it was, there wasn’t much point in even asking. Plus —

“She’d have to come here to perform the surgery,” I added. “Without a Master here to provide her energy, I don’t think that’s possible. I’m sorry.”

“Seriously,” Rika muttered petulantly. “Is no one ever going to explain that? It’s not fair!”

“Does this change our plans at all?” Arash asked.

“No,” I answered immediately. “Unless Caster changed his mind about coming with us?”

I slanted a look his way. Flamel sighed.

“Loath as I am to commit violence of any kind,” he said, “it would perhaps be for the best if I did, in fact, join you in your investigation. If, as I suspect, Paracelsus makes an appearance...”

His lips pulled down into a scowl. His brow furrowed, eyes narrowing beneath the lines of silver that were his eyebrows.

“I should like to hear it from his own lips, why it is he has chosen this despicable course of action. If nothing else, so that I might have peace of mind when we cast him from this era and back to the Throne from whence he came.”