

## Chapter CXV: A Sleep Like Death

The next morning brought with it a headache. I woke up groggy with a dull pain lancing at the inside of my skull in between my eyebrows, just above the bridge of my nose. I was tempted to groan, roll over, and try to go back to sleep, but I'd pushed through worse plenty of times before, so I allowed myself to do the former, but forced myself to forget about the latter two.

It took an extra minute or two longer than usual, but eventually, I managed to convince myself to roll out of bed and start my day. The shock of the cold floor on my feet did nothing to help my headache — in fact, it only seemed to make it worse — but I was already up and standing by the time it registered, so I soldiered through and kept going.

If this headache didn't ease up by the time I finished my morning routine, I decided I was going to go and bully Romani for some painkillers. He had to have some aspirin hanging around somewhere, right? Right. If only for Marie's sake, there was no way he didn't have a stash of it in his office or a bottle he carried around.

Sorry, Romani, I was going to have to abuse your kindness.

Getting ready was a slog, and I went through the motions slower than I had since my six month stint of physical therapy. More than once, I was tempted to just crawl back into my bed and stay there until I felt more like an actual human being again. It wasn't like it would have been the first time I skipped out on my daily workout, and there were going to be more mornings where I wouldn't be able to for one reason or another — particularly out on deployments, like Okeanos, where the space necessary didn't exist.

I didn't let myself fall for it. It was easier to lose a habit than keep it, and I had no intention of falling out of shape.

Right as I was slipping on my track shoes, however, an urgent knock came at my door, and I had to pause, bent over, in the middle of tying my shoelaces.

“Yes?”

“Miss Taylor!” came Mash's voice, muffled but clearly stressed. “There's an emergency! It's Senpai!”

My stomach dropped, and I went back to my shoelaces with double the speed and effort. If the knot came out a bit sloppy and haphazard, oh well, because it just wasn't that fucking important.

Half an eternity later, I crossed my room in three long strides and reached the door. It whooshed open to reveal a pale-faced Mash, brow furrowed and bottom lip swollen from how hard she must have been biting it.

“Explain on the way,” I told her briskly, and she nodded, then turned away and began the relatively short trek to where the twins' rooms had been set up, about sixty feet down the hallway. Just then, it felt like a mile.

“I-I was going to wake Senpai and Senpai up for their morning workout with Queen Aífe,” Mash explained hurriedly, talking at about twice her normal speed. The rapid clip of our footsteps almost seemed to set her pace. “Normally, I wake Senpai up first, since he doesn’t take that much effort to get up, but this morning, I went to wake Senpai up first instead. I-it took a few extra tries to get her to commit to getting out of bed than usual, but once she was, I left to go wake Senpai up so she could get dressed and ready, except, when I knocked on his door, S-Senpai didn’t respond.”

I took an extra second to parse that out, replacing names where I needed to in order to make sense of it. Right then, I really hated Mash’s tendency to address both of the twins using the same moniker, or even collectively, because it muddled the message and slowed down communication.

“At all?” I asked.

Mash shook her head, biting her bottom lip again nervously. “I-I knocked three times, which is usually more than enough to wake him up, but there was no response even after the third time, so I opened his door to make sure he was okay. H-he...looked like he was just sleeping, a-and when I checked his vitals, I couldn’t find anything wrong with him, but no matter what I tried, he just wouldn’t wake up! I-I even, um, tried splashing some w-water on his face, but it didn’t have any effect.”

He wouldn’t wake up? Ritsuka wasn’t a particularly light sleeper, but I’d never had particular difficulty getting him up during deployment. Usually, all it took was a little shake of his shoulder and a whisper, and he was awake.

If he wasn’t waking up now...

“Have you contacted Romani yet?” I demanded.

Mash gasped. “Oh!”

That was a no. Just this once, I was willing to let that slide, even though she should have known better.

“Call him, get him up here,” I ordered. “Tell him to bring Da Vinci with him when he comes, and make sure he knows what’s going on. I’ll contact the Director.”

Mash nodded. “Right!”

She lifted her arm and activated her communicator, and I turned away from her to do the same. A few button presses later, and Marie’s voice came through it with a stern, impatient, “What?”

Considering how early it was, I may just have been waking her up. Or I might have caught her before she could grab a cup of coffee, because knowing her, she was probably up around the same time I usually woke up.

“There’s an emergency down in the Masters’ dorms,” I reported crisply. “Ritsuka is unconscious and unresponsive. Mash is contacting Romani right now to apprise him of the situation, but according to her, his vitals are normal and there doesn’t seem to be any sign of what might have caused this. I’m en route to his room as we speak.”

There was a moment of pause, barely more than an extra second or two.

“I’ll be right there,” Marie promised.

The connection cut. At the same time, Mash finished whatever she was saying to Romani, and she told me, “Doctor Roman is on his way.”

“So is the Director,” I replied.

“He’s contacting Miss Da Vinci,” Mash went on. “She’ll be there, too.”

Good. Whatever this was, between Romani and Da Vinci, Ritsuka would be in the best possible hands.

I silenced the niggling doubt that tried to tell me that it might not be enough, if this was what I was afraid it was.

When we finally reached Ritsuka’s room, the door was already wide open, and inside, Rika sat at her brother’s bedside, clutching desperately at one of his hands. She was even paler than Mash, and she didn’t even bother to look in our direction as we entered, so single-minded was her focus. She barely gave me a glance even as I stepped closer.

There was nothing in the air, and that worried me. I wasn’t the best at sniffing out magical phenomena — I hadn’t quite fully developed that sixth sense for it a more experienced mage with more years of training might have had — but I was good enough that I probably should have been able to detect *something*.

Nothing. Just the same ambient energy Chaldea always had, so constant that I had learned to tune it out. Whatever was affecting Ritsuka, it was either so subtle or so far removed from normal magic that it was essentially undetectable to me.

The number of things that I knew of that could do that was frighteningly small.

Rika stiffened a little as I leaned over the bed, but relaxed when she saw I was just checking Ritsuka’s vitals. His pulse was normal. It was hard to tell without a thermometer, but his temperature seemed normal, too. His breathing was deep and untroubled, like he really was just asleep. If I didn’t know any better, I might have thought that was all there was to it and tried to shake him awake myself.

But his eyes were half-open. Glassy and unseeing, they stared off into the distance at something only he could see. When I lifted a finger and bounced it back and forth between the tip of his nose and three feet from his face, his eyes ignored it completely, remaining focused on whatever it was he was seeing. When I used the flashlight function on my communicator and shined the light in his eyes, his pupils didn’t contract or dilate at all.

The metaphorical lights were on, but nobody was home. My gut twisted. We’d been operating mostly under the assumption that Flauros and his compatriots couldn’t touch us in Chaldea, because if they could, then there was nothing stopping them from killing us all in our sleep before we knew what was happening, but if that assumption was wrong from the start...

The question that I suppose naturally had to follow was why Ritsuka first, instead of going after Marie. She was the Director, after all, and they'd already targeted her once before during the sabotage. Or was this them testing exactly how far into our base they could reach?

Too many questions, not enough answers. It rankled, but there was nothing I could do right now after confirming what Mash had already told me. His vitals were normal, but he was completely unresponsive.

This wasn't something I could beat by throwing a wall of bugs at it or having Arash plug it full of holes. Whatever was happening was something I just couldn't deal with. All I could do was step back and stand watch, waiting for the experts to make their way here and give a proper diagnosis.

Fuck, if that didn't make me feel useless.

I stepped back and folded my arms so that I wouldn't be tempted to fidget. Okay. Say this wasn't Flauros and his ilk. Who or what else would have the reach and the power to get us in the middle of the most secure facility left on the planet? So secure it had survived the purging of the rest of mankind?

The trouble was, I didn't have any better answers. Scáthach had managed to break in via Aífe's dreams, dragging us Masters into things — presumably through any number of bullshit abilities I knew she had just by interacting with her sister — but the number of Heroic Spirits on that level had to be just as small a number.

That didn't mean that there weren't other ways. Using a supposedly weak set of powers to great effect was something I myself had to master as a cape, so there were probably several Heroic Spirits who weren't great at combat or at direct conflict, but who had methods and means available to them to attack from oblique angles.

We had at least one of those ourselves, and he'd spent his entire time since his summoning locked up in his room.

The trouble was...what motive did any of those theoretical Heroic Spirits have? Sure, several Servants had been on the opposing side of our mission to restore proper history, but none of the ones I could think of off the top of my head really fit the bill for this particular kind of attack. Most of them had been frontline fighters more than willing to face us head on in pitched combat.

Fuck. That just brought us back to these Demon Gods, didn't it? So was this their first salvo in a longer campaign, or was this a test for a larger attack?

The only one who might be able to tell us that was currently laid out in his bed, unresponsive.

A panting Romani burst through the doorway, calling out, "We're here! What's the situation?"

A moment later, Marie and Da Vinci joined him, the former equally out of breath and the latter for once frowning thunderously.

"Doctor Roman!" Mash exclaimed.

Rika, at last, turned away from her brother, and in a hoarse, broken voice, told him, “He won’t wake up.”

Romani frowned, and his brows drew together, furrowing, as he strode across the room. Without preamble, he took out his stethoscope, plugged the two prongs into his ears, and pressed the metal knob on the other end to Ritsuka’s chest. Calmly, professionally, he went through the motions of checking each and every one of Ritsuka’s vitals.

Marie, meanwhile, came up to me and demanded, “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” I told her. “I was getting ready for the morning when Mash knocked on my door and said Ritsuka wouldn’t wake up. She said all of his vital signs seemed normal, but that she couldn’t get him to wake up no matter what she tried. According to her, she even splashed some water on his face.”

Marie grunted. Her thumbnail made its way into her mouth. “We don’t know what the cause is?”

“No.”

“Strange,” said Da Vinci. She looked around the room. “I’m not detecting any unusual signs of magical energy. This bears all the most obvious hallmarks of a curse, but there’s no apparent method of delivery, nor even a culprit. No sign of external magical energy entering the room, no source of the curse inside.”

“Could it be,” I suggested, “the Demon Gods?”

Marie stiffened, and all of the color drained from her face as her eyes slowly went wide. Her teeth bit down on her nail so hard I was surprised it didn’t crack immediately.

Da Vinci hummed and grimaced. “I’m afraid there isn’t really a way to be sure. It’s not impossible, for certain, but it does raise a few questions, doesn’t it? Such as, why now? Why not sooner? Why Ritsuka, one of our two rookie Masters, instead of you, Taylor, or the Director, or perhaps even Romani himself?”

Marie’s chest heaved, and her breaths came in great, gulping gasps as her entire body started to shake. Mash, the first aside from me to notice anything wrong, turned to her with concern, and looked ready to ask if something was wrong.

“Excuse us a moment, Da Vinci,” I said abruptly, and I seized Marie about her shoulders and swiftly steered her out of the room.

We made it about five feet down the hallway before she nearly collapsed. If I wasn’t there to hold her up, they would have found her on the floor, hyperventilating. I had to prop her up against the wall just to keep her standing.

“Breathe, Marie,” I said quietly. “Slowly, now. In for seven, out for eleven. With me.”

I took a long, deep breath, demonstrating, and then another, and another, one after the other, and finally, Marie started copying me, taking stuttered, abortive deep breaths that slowly got longer and deeper.

“That’s it,” I told her soothingly. “In. Slowly. Out.”

Steadily, she started getting better and stopped hyperventilating, and the shaking and shivering of her body calmed beneath my hands. Color slowly returned to her face, although she remained paler than usual. It was at least better than being able to compare her complexion to the color of her hair.

A choked, strangled sound came out of her throat, and she squeezed her eyes shut. It might have been a sob, if she had let it make it any further.

“We’re supposed to be safe from them here,” she whispered. “Aren’t we?”

I could have told her a comforting lie, but she would have seen right through it, so all I could do was tell her, truthfully, “I don’t know.”

She shuddered, and I knew I couldn’t leave it at that.

“But if it was that easy for them, then we would never have made it as far as we did,” I went on. “Whatever this is? We have no idea what it cost them just to manage this much. How much time and effort they had to expend.”

Because all magecraft lived off of that same principle. Equivalent exchange. It was entirely possible that the reason they hadn’t tried before now — and maybe wouldn’t try again — was because the cost was just too high. For all we knew, if this was indeed Flauros and Forneus’ allies, this was the only shot they had.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to bank on that, but it didn’t mean that I was automatically wrong. Right now, we just knew far too little.

What I’d said, at least, managed to penetrate Marie’s depressive spiral, although it wasn’t as successful as I would have liked. Indecision warred across her face, like she wanted to believe I was right but wasn’t sure if she dared. As though she was afraid to hope that there wouldn’t be another instance of something like this happening again.

I had to admit, I was scared of what might happen to her if I was wrong. If she couldn’t even believe *me* when her demons started ganging up on her, then there weren’t any outcomes to that which I really wanted to think about.

Romani suddenly appeared from out of Ritsuka’s door, sighing and running a hand through his hair. Hand still raised, he looked like he was going to throw his fist at the wall for a second, and then thought better of it, if only to spare himself the pain of busting up his knuckles.

Carefully, I stepped back from Marie, watching out of the corner of my eye for instability, but even without me there to hold her up, she managed to stay standing. She wasn’t okay, and maybe she wouldn’t be until this whole situation was resolved, but she’d calmed down enough that she wasn’t about to collapse on us.

“Romani,” I said, and he turned to look at me, grimacing. “Anything you can tell us?”

“Not much of anything new, I’m sorry to say,” he replied. “His vitals all register as normal. No signs of trauma, no injuries that I could find. Even his magic circuits are well within the margin of error for his baseline — except for some minor activity here and there, but what that could mean, I can’t begin to tell you.”

“There’s activity in his magic circuits?” Marie asked, her voice shaking a little.

Romani nodded. “It’s nothing at all like the strain we’ve recorded for even the lightest of combat situations inside the Singularities, but there is some faintly elevated level of activity beyond the norm. Something we can’t account for with day to day activity.” He sighed again. “Like I said, though, I have no idea what that might mean. Da Vinci is currently doing her best to get a better look, but I don’t know if she’ll be able to figure out what’s going on either.”

“I-if this is some kind of spell or curse,” Marie began, “could it be his body’s instinctive attempts at defense?”

Romani grimaced and held a hand up to his mouth thoughtfully. “It’s...not impossible,” he said after a moment. “The human body *does* have a sort of magical immune system — and of course, you already know that, Director. But if he’s instinctively circulating magical energy through his circuits to fight off whatever this is, then it’s a frankly miniscule amount.”

“That might be because whatever this is functions as an attack on the mind and spirit instead of the body,” Da Vinci said as she, too, stepped out of Ritsuka’s room. Mash was right behind her.

“Rika?” I asked.

Mash shook her head. “She refused to leave Senpai’s side.”

As I probably should have expected. A glance back through the door saw her still in the same position, clutching at Ritsuka’s motionless hand as though he would float away if she let go.

“So we’ve got confirmation this is some kind of attack, then?” Romani asked.

“One designed specifically to affect his mind and his soul,” Da Vinci confirmed. “It’s why he’s unresponsive. Whatever has done this to him has trapped him in a kind of prison. As long as he’s there, he can’t interact with us and we can’t interact with him. For all intents and purposes, it’s as though he’s in a coma.”

Romani grimaced again. “That kind of curse is...”

“Uncommon,” Marie finished for him, still sounding a bit unsteady. “This is league’s beyond something as simple as a Gandr. Something like that is what I might expect from an expert from the Association.”

“It couldn’t be,” Mash said softly, “d-demonic possession, could it? Like P-Professor Lev?”

Any color Marie had managed to regain abruptly left her face again.

“No sign of that, thank goodness,” said Da Vinci. The entire group seemed to let out a metaphorical sigh of relief. “In fact, all things considered, this may not be an external attack at all.”

The air stilled.

“It can’t be,” Marie breathed. “You’re not suggesting...someone inside the facility!”

*Another traitor*, she didn’t say, but I heard it loud and clear. But who? And why attack Ritsuka instead of simply finishing the job Flauros had started? Or even just sabotaging our Rayshift system so that we couldn’t fix the Singularities in the first place? Hell, if Ritsuka himself was the target, then why bother with something as convoluted as this curse instead of just walking into his room while he was asleep and slitting his throat?

I stilled as a thought occurred to me. Unless...

“That’s not what I meant, no,” said Da Vinci, shaking her head. “I mean that this may be a final act of revenge by Forneus, a sort of delayed curse on the ones who killed him. Although I do have to admit that reasoning might be a little flimsy, since Ritsuka himself is the only one who was affected.”

...the mental attack *was* the point, because this wasn’t about hurting us or doing damage to the team, but something done solely for *entertainment*. A game played by a man who had been famous for his satire, all for the sake of his own amusement.

He’d been quiet all this time. Alone, bothering no one for months and showing up with the rest of the group only so he could grab some of Emiya’s food on the designated Servant meal days. Was all that time spent planning, preparing for the right moment to have his fun?

I was walking down the hallway before I even realized my feet had started moving.

“Taylor?” Romani called out to me. “Where are you going?”

“To check on a hunch,” I replied shortly. “Keep an eye on Ritsuka and let me know if his condition changes.”

I didn’t wait for a reply. Instead, I kept going at a fast walk, and I tugged on the thread connecting me to Arash, *Arash?*

*Here*, he replied, and an instant later, he shimmered into existence next to me. “I was there for the whole thing. Do you have an idea?”

“I might know who’s behind this,” I told him. “We might need to eliminate him, if he isn’t willing to stop this on his own.”

“I understand,” said Arash, solemn. “In that case, I’ll handle it.”

Without my bugs and with my knife still in my room? “Good.”



Although the lack of my knife might be better, in this situation. Easier to underestimate me when I didn't have a weapon on me, so Arash could get in a surprise attack before any traps or countermeasures were triggered.

It took only a few minutes to arrive at the room Shakespeare had picked out for himself, and the door, unlocked, whooshed open to show what looked like a writer's office from about six hundred years ago. Shakespeare sat at his desk, feather quill twitching as he wrote, bent over whatever he was in the middle of penning.

It might just have been whatever he was putting Ritsuka through at that very moment.

“Shakespeare.”

“Hm?” He looked up from his work, and his face lit up when he saw it was me. “Oh! My dear, what a pleasant surprise! I admit, I wasn't sure when I would see you again, after I gave you that dagger of yours! Tell me, has it worked to your standards?”

“Well enough.” I wasn't sure if his attitude spoke of guilt, a lack thereof, or just general sociopathy. I stepped into his room, confident and sure. “You can drop the act. I know what you've been up to.”

A classic interrogation technique: insinuate knowledge of the target's guilt without ever specifying exactly what you did or didn't know. They filled it in on their own and often wound up admitting to things because they thought you already knew about it all.

“Ah.” Shakespeare smiled awkwardly. “You do, do you? I-I *had* wondered, but, well, you gave no indication before, my dear, so I had assumed...”

“That I'd let you get away with it?”

“P-perhaps a tad foolish of me,” he allowed, “but can you blame me? So much potential, so much to explore, all of it just waiting for me to tap into — how could I possibly resist? How could anyone have resisted, in my position?”

I wanted to be surprised. I wanted to have been wrong. But the pieces had just fit together too neatly, and there really weren't that many people who could have done it.

“Because you should have known better.”

“Come, now, is it truly so bad?” he tried, spreading his arms. “Yes, I suppose I should have gotten permission first, but no one has been hurt by it, have they? What harm does it do?”

*What harm does it do?* Did he really just ask that?

“Your Master's in a coma and we don't know when or if he'll wake up,” I said furiously, “and you're asking what *harm* it does to play around with his mind like that?”

“Wait,” said Shakespeare, sounding confused and alarmed, “Master's in a coma?”

He didn't know? But if he was the one who did it, wouldn't he have to? He'd just admitted to it, hadn't he?

My anger shorted out. Now *I* was confused, too. "Yes. Someone has trapped him in some sort of spiritual prison that we don't know how to get him out of. Your Noble Phantasm —"

"Ah," said Shakespeare, calming down. "I see why you may have thought it was me, but I'm afraid that whatever it is that has happened to Master, I played no part in it. Truthfully, I have not spoken with him in several days, as I was occupied with other matters. It seems that we both may have made assumptions about what the other was speaking of, and we both allowed ourselves to get, er, a little carried away."

And that did nothing to explain anything about what he'd just said.

"If you weren't talking about what's happening to Ritsuka," I said, "then what *were* you talking about?"

"Oh. Yes, well..." His eyes flickered over to his bookshelf, to a section containing what looked like a multi-volume set. The images on the spines combined together to form the outline for a vaguely whale-like creature, leaving a trail of water droplets in its wake. "It was...nothing of true consequence. As I said! No matter worth speaking of, truly!"

I opened my mouth —

"In any case!" he said loudly and with obvious intent. "You said my Master was comatose? Cursed, oh so tragically, by some fiend mimicking my Noble Phantasm? Then we must make all due haste to his side!"

— and he bulldozed over anything I might have said, then disappeared into spirit form. My right arm tingled as though something intangible passed by me and through the door.

*He left, Master, Arash reported unnecessarily. Do we believe him?*

My lips pursed. "For now. Let's see how he handles things with Ritsuka before we make any more judgments."

Arash didn't disagree, and I spun on my heel and left, pausing only long enough to glance back at the multi-volume set he obviously didn't want me to see, but my curiosity could be sated later. Whatever it was, it wasn't more important than Ritsuka, so as long as no one was currently being hurt by it, I could leave it be until another time.

When I got back to Ritsuka's room, everyone had piled back inside, and it had consequently become somewhat cramped. Rika maintained her vigil, and I suspected she would until this whole situation was resolved, while Romani stood off to the side and Marie in the nearest corner, chewing on her thumbnail again. Shakespeare had evidently pushed his way to the forefront, because he leaned over Ritsuka, examining him, while Da Vinci watched closely.

"Hm," Shakespeare hummed. "The effects are quite similar. A copycat! An imitator! The fondest form of flattery! However... Although the effect bears more than a passing resemblance to my

Noble Phantasm, I'm afraid that the mechanism is pure magecraft, and I, as a humble bard, can do little and nothing to unravel it."

Romani sighed. "I was afraid of that."

"At least we can cross something off of the list," said Da Vinci. "There isn't anything else you can tell us, Shakespeare?"

Shakespeare shook his head. "Only that, if it does indeed so resemble my Noble Phantasm, there is likely nothing we can do from the outside. The curse must run its course before he will awaken. Whatever challenge awaits him in his dream, he must surmount it through his own efforts and will. A test of character! Of wits, virtue, and determination!"

"A test?" asked Mash. "What do you mean, Mister Shakespeare?"

"Is it not obvious?" Shakespeare retorted. "Something like this — it is not designed to destroy outright, but to crush the spirit! To erode the mind and soul with the weight of one's failures, inadequacies, and sins! A prison of despair!"

Mash gasped, but it was nearly drowned out when Rika shouted, "But Onii-chan hasn't done anything to deserve that!"

"A curse like this is rarely about what the victim *deserves*, Rika," Da Vinci said patiently. "No human being is without flaws or regrets, things about themselves or their pasts that they despise. Curses that attack their target based upon things like karma are specifically designed in such a way that no one can escape them fully, although their nature means that those who are relatively innocent can fight them off much more easily than, say, a mass murderer."

"Or a politician," Romani added with a kind of grim humor. No one laughed.

"There's really nothing we can do?" Marie demanded. "We just have to sit here helplessly and hope the whole thing resolves itself?"

She was shaking again, but it was slight enough that I think I was the only one who really noticed. If anyone else did, they didn't comment on it.

"Unfortunately," Da Vinci said regretfully. She sighed. "To fully examine this curse and come up with a method of countering it, I would probably have to use my Noble Phantasm, and right now, that's..."

"Being used to keep this place running," I murmured.

"Twenty people really isn't enough to maintain a facility of this size on the day to day," she said by way of agreement. "And any specialists we might have had on the subject of curses, well..."

"We...*lost* them in the sabotage," Romani finished for her. She nodded.

"So we're just going to sit around and wait for him to die?" Rika spat, tears glittering in her eyes. "We're *that* fucking *incompetent*?"

Romani looked away awkwardly, and Marie bit down on her thumbnail so hard that her lips pulled away from her teeth.

“Senpai,” Mash said softly, “I have faith in...Senpai. He’ll make it through this. I know it.”

But it didn’t help at all.

“*Faith* won’t bring him back!” Rika snarled.

“It will not,” Shakespeare said. “But...perhaps there *is* something we can do.”

Her head whipped around towards him so fast I thought I might have heard her neck crack.

“You said there isn’t anything we can do from the outside,” she accused him.

He nodded. “Indeed, there is not. Woe! Nothing we might attempt to break the curse will have any effect upon it! That does not mean, however, that there is nothing at all we can do — if, that is, one were willing to brave the curse themselves and help him to break it from the *inside*.”

At once, I made the connection — if the curse was similar to his Noble Phantasm, then theoretically, wouldn’t it be possible to use his Noble Phantasm to send someone in to rescue Ritsuka?

“Whoa, no, hang on, back up a second!” Romani jumped on it immediately. “There’s no way I’d approve of something like that! We already have one Master in danger here, there’s no way we’re going to risk a second one’s life, too!”

“I’ll do it,” said Rika without any hesitation whatsoever. “Whatever it takes.”

“It’s too dangerous!” Romani insisted. “Not to mention reckless!”

“We may not have much of a choice,” Marie said gravely. Her face was still ashen and her hands still trembled, but her brow was set and firm. “W-we’ve already lost so many people and most of the Master candidates. We... We can’t afford to lose even one more. Not when we still have so far to go.”

“All the more reason not to risk two!” said Romani.

“Fuck you!” Rika screeched, and by the widening of Mash’s eyes, I wasn’t the only one surprised by the sheer vehemence in her voice. “We’re a package deal! I’m not gonna just sit here and twiddle my goddamn thumbs when he needs my help!”

“Rika,” Romani began.

“I’m afraid it can’t be you, regardless,” said Da Vinci. “If something goes wrong and we lose both of you, then Mash’s contract will be voided and we could quite frankly lose access to a number of essential functions for future operations. We can’t send Mash for exactly that reason, too, although, as a Demi-Servant, she’s at lower risk than you are.” She turned to Shakespeare. “Does it matter if it’s a Master or a Servant we send?”

Shakespeare shrugged and shook his head theatrically. “Who could say for sure? Although, as an entirely spiritual existence, it could be that a Servant would be more susceptible to such a curse. A mere bard could not say!”

“No,” said Marie, “you’re right. A Servant would be more vulnerable to the effects of a curse like this, and the act of willingly subjecting himself to it would likely allow it to bypass any mitigating effects of a skill like Magic Resistance. Even if we sent one of our Knight Class Servants, we have to assume they’d run into the same problems as a human would — or worse.”

Da Vinci sighed. “You have a very valid point there, Director.”

There was a very deliberate knock on the door, and Arash leaned in through the doorway. “Would my Robust Health help with that?”

“No,” both Da Vinci and Marie said simultaneously. Da Vinci went on, “Since the curse directly attacks the mind and spirit instead of the body, skills which are meant to protect the sanctity of the body won’t have any effect either. It was a nice try, Arash, but I’m sorry.”

It wasn’t the worst idea, though. As callous as it sounded, we could afford to lose a Servant, as long as it wasn’t Mash and as long as it was someone we could bring back later on, like we had Emiya. It might be safer to send one in to test the waters, but...

I turned to Shakespeare. “How many shots do we have at this?”

Grinning, he held up a single finger. Only one. “Once my Noble Phantasm takes effect, it won’t end until it has run its course. Success or failure, the first person to enter to rescue Master will be the only person to enter. I will be able to provide a modicum of protection against the curse’s worst effects, but only that, I’m afraid!”

So it was the worst case scenario, then. We only had one chance to make it work.

“We can’t send any of the Servants,” Romani said, brow furrowing, “and needless to say, we can’t send the Director, either, or any of the technicians, since they’re not trained for this. That only leaves...”

“The remaining Masters,” Marie concluded.

Me and Rika.

“There! See?” Rika said. “You don’t have a choice! If it has to be one of the Masters, then —”

“I’ll go,” I said before she could.

She whirled around towards me, but I didn’t give her the chance to protest.

“It has to be one of the remaining Masters, and it can’t be Rika, because we need Mash too much,” I went on. “So I’ll go.”

“No one is going!” Romani said insistently. “I’m sorry, Rika, but it’s just too dangerous, and I refuse to risk either you or Taylor on something that might just make this whole situation even worse! No, even if we can only send one of the Masters, that’s all the more reason why we shouldn’t!”

Marie opened her mouth to say something —

Aífe suddenly appeared without any warning whatsoever, startling everyone in the room. She ignored the indignant squawks as I tried surreptitiously to calm the sudden jump in my heart rate, and without any preamble at all, she announced even more bad news:

“Jeanne Alter is missing.”