

Chapter CXVIII: Château d'If

Some part of me halfway hoped that I would be pulled out of my bed in the middle of the night by an impatient Romani or a grim-faced Da Vinci. That they would tell me there was no time for me to get dressed and ready, that we had to get moving as quickly as possible, and that they would hustle me down the hallway to Ritsuka's room, where a sleepy Mash, a frantic Rika, a nervous Marie, and a grinning Shakespeare would be waiting for me. That I would be ushered into a hastily erected cot in the already crowded room and told to bring Ritsuka back, whatever it took.

Some part of me felt guilty for wanting that at all. For wanting to put Marie through that when she was already trying so hard to keep it together in the face of all of the hardships she'd been through. For wanting Ritsuka to be in enough danger that we had to throw caution out the window. It wasn't quite enough to drown out the other part.

That night, I slept uninterrupted. No one came to drag me out of my bed and into an emergency rescue operation. I was free to dream, and so I dreamt, about an innocent blue-eyed boy who had been locked away in a prison that was impossible to escape with inmates who had all committed the most terrible, most heinous of crimes. A victim of circumstance locked away with murderers and rapists, gang lords and kingpins, terrorists and twisted psychopaths with delusions of grandeur, all the sorts of scum who probably deserved an unmarked grave as much as a cell.

A lamb among wolves.

I dreamt that I had to go in and save that boy. That I had to go into that hell alone, no backup and no assistance aside from Da Vinci's voice in my ear, because she was the warden of that cesspit. That I had only a short window to get in and get out before I was locked up in there with all of those irredeemable villains, just as trapped as that boy was and probably infinitely more deserving of a place there.

In the dream, I wore armor. A black bodysuit with sturdy white panels covering my vital parts, but only my glasses on my face. A band of metal around my wrist — my communicator — and my Last Resort strapped to my lower back, just below a compartment with all of my emergency supplies. A pair of ravens circled above my head and a buzzing swarm trailed behind me like a cloak as I navigated my way through, forced to face a gauntlet of my past foes.

A blinded Fafnir, scales silver instead of black, weeping blood from the ruined sockets of his eyes, just as large as I remembered and yet somehow still fitting into the comparatively tiny cell with room to spare.

A maddened Jeanne Alter in a gas mask, lobbing balls of fire that did strange things when they exploded, like twisting space and freezing the air and turning everything in range into glass.

A portly Julius Caesar with a goatee and graying hair, cutting things with his sword from a distance as though every swing threw out invisible blades.

On and on, I went, dispatching them one by one as I ran into them, searching for the lost boy, but I never seemed to find him. Every time I thought I caught a glimpse and chased after it, I found another enemy instead, someone or something else I'd had to face down at one point or another,

often some Frankenstein amalgam of one or more completely unrelated enemies. Every time, I had to put them down — to kill them — before I could move on.

Doctor Yamada, I thought later, would have had a field day.

As dreams often did, it seemed to last forever. I never seemed to run out of enemies, and they were never quite exactly the same ones, even when there were variations on a theme. Lung with a familiar glowing tattoo stretching across his chest and impenetrable skin. Bakuda cackling as she waved a blackened sword and flung fire all about. Jack Slash with a splendid golden sword that he swung with expert grace.

But eventually, the faces changed, and it stopped being my enemies — those old, from another life, and those more recent — that stood in my way. It started being more familiar faces, more friendly faces, people I'd never thought would really, truly turn against me.

Somewhere along the way, it stopped being about finding that lost boy and became about getting out, about escaping this hell.

The first to appear was Ritsuka in motorcycle leathers, smoke billowing from between his teeth and out of the seams in his clothing. My hands trembled as I found the weakness in the undersuit — the one I'd made with my own spiders — and slid my knife into his flesh.

Then it was Rika in all black, wearing a mask depicting a grinning demon. I turned her daggers against her, and my only saving grace was not having to see her face when I pushed one up through her chin, in the soft spot behind her jawbone.

Romani carrying a spear, decked out in a sleek, stylized set of power armor. I had to leverage decoys until I could get behind him and slip Last Resort through his jugular, grinding through his armor with nanothorns. Da Vinci, her body unfolding to reveal mechanical parts inside and weapons of all kinds wedged between them. They jammed, backfired, and exploded when I took advantage of a lapse in her attention to secret my swarm away in the vital mechanisms.

A toddler wearing Mash's face, with Mash's eyes and hair, looking up at me, innocent and confused. But she was in the way, so my hand rose of its own accord, and a handgun that hadn't been there before was suddenly in my grip.

I watched myself put a bullet between her eyes. I wanted to scream.

The last — and I knew it was the last, even if I had no idea how — was Marie, dressed in a skintight catsuit and a plain domino mask. She raised a pistol against me and grinned a wide, Cheshire grin, tinged with some kind of desperate mania.

Oh, I thought as my bugs moved without my input, swarming her, drowning her, biting and chewing and killing her even as she choked and screamed and clawed at her face. This was what Marie meant before. About why I shouldn't subject myself to that curse. What it would do to me. How it would hurt me.

But it was too late, because it had snared me anyway.

The realization jolted through me like a bolt of lightning, and I snapped — suddenly, vividly awake, chest heaving, breath coming in pants, my forehead plastered with cold sweat, in my bed back at Chaldea. The alarm beside me continued to blare, blasting out an annoying, discordant bleep that drilled into my head over and over.

I groped for it blindly, slapping my hand around until I managed to hit the off button and silence the damn thing. The dark ceiling overhead stared down at me, illuminated only by the faint blue glow of the digital alarm clock, and no terrors arose from it to torment me with visions of the people I cared about dying by my own hands.

For a long moment, I laid there and let my breathing calm and my heartbeat slow. The minutes passed me by like hours, and when I finally mustered the desire to look over at my clock for the time, it was to discover only about ten minutes had gone by, even though it felt more like fifty.

A hand to my forehead came away damp and slimy, and my mattress pressed against my back with uncomfortable heat, like a humid summer day in Brockton, the kind right before a storm. A grunt tore itself from my mouth, and I convinced myself to climb out of bed and to my feet.

The headache I'd had yesterday was gone, at least, but the images of my dream — my nightmare — still played out behind my eyelids whenever I closed my eyes. Marie's screams and gags still echoed in my ears, and the gunshot that killed Mash resounded deep in my bones.

Fuck. Was that really just a nightmare?

I stripped off my soaked pajamas and pulled on my usual workout gear, leaving my discarded night clothes on the floor — I could care about them later, when my head was on straighter and I wasn't having images of murdering my friends and coworkers playing out like a highlight reel on repeat.

My door whooshed open, and I had to squint against the glaringly bright lights of the hallway as I turned and started towards the gym. No one had strictly told me I should avoid going about my daily routine, only that it would be better to be ready to go the instant something went wrong, so as my feet carried me along the memorized path, I pushed my attention down the thread connecting me to Muninn for a brief moment.

Nothing had changed. Ritsuka still lay in his bed, unconscious but still breathing, and Rika remained at his side, hand still clutching his and her head pillowed on her other arm, bent over in her chair. Romani was nowhere to be seen, but Da Vinci was still monitoring him, frowning down at his body as she scrolled through something on one of Chaldea's standard issue tablets.

It seemed almost like she'd given up on trying to figure out what was going on, seated as she was in another chair. What she was doing on that tablet, I could only guess, but considering how integral she was to the functioning of this whole place, I had to imagine she was trying to handle at least some of her other responsibilities remotely.

I pulled my attention back from Muninn, let her senses fade into the back of my mind. The urge to go there and bully Shakespeare into letting me into Ritsuka's mental prison hadn't disappeared, but some hesitation tempered it, an almost instinctual fear of what I would have to face if I did, like a child shying away from fire after getting burned.

Fucking... Was the dream really affecting me that badly?

A sound of disgust snarled out of my throat, and I redoubled my pace, heading towards the gym at a fast walk now instead of more sedately the way I had been. I needed to work out, to distract myself, to feel the burn in my muscles and a different kind of sweat on my brow. Maybe practice a few of the martial arts forms I'd learned on a wooden dummy so there was something I could safely hit or punch a punching bag.

Maybe I would find Aífe there, and get some practice in with her own brand of martial arts. I had no illusions I would ever be throwing punches that obliterated whatever was in front of me or leaping twenty feet straight up into the air or anything, but picking up new techniques to use and new skills would always be useful to one degree or another, especially in this line of work.

But when I made it to the gym, there was no sign of her, and she just wasn't there. No twins to train, I realized, so she must have heard about what was going on with Ritsuka and figured there was no point in showing up to teach students who weren't going to be there. I thought, for a moment, about reaching out to her across our bond and asking her to show up and spar with me, but I discarded it just as quickly as it came.

I really wasn't in the mood for picking up new techniques anyway. I wasn't sure I'd retain any of it if she *did* show up and teach me some, so there was no point in wasting anyone's time on it. May as well just get through my usual routine and see how I felt after that, and if I was just as miserable, then I'd beat up on the nearest acceptable target until I felt better.

Not the healthiest way of doing things, maybe. But it was one I knew well and knew how to handle. How to make it work.

So after warming up with a few stretches, I went over to the indoor track, set myself a mental distance of two miles, and let the pounding of my feet on the floor and the rhythm of my breath pull my mind away from the grisly images that were still lingering there like cobwebs.

Two miles later, my mood wasn't much improved. I felt a little bit better about everything, and the run had managed to distract me for the duration, but it hadn't driven the memories of the nightmare from my head completely. They were still there, bubbling up, waiting to ambush me until after I'd finished, only slightly dulled from the sharp edges they'd had when I first woke up.

A quiet snarl of frustration was all I let past my lips to show how it was affecting me, and I had just resolved to go another mile or two and then hit one or two of the weight machines when the band of metal around my wrist beeped to let me know I had a message.

It was from Romani. Short, simple, and cryptic:

There's been a development. Come as soon as you're able.

I didn't run as I made my way towards the door, forgoing the rest of my workout, but it was a close thing, and instead of waiting until I could make it all the way to Ritsuka's room, I pushed my mind back down the thread connecting me to Muninn — to discover that, while I'd been working out, the room had filled up again. Romani, Marie, and even Aífe and Emiya had all at some point joined the crowd. Rika was now wide awake and anxious, and Mash was biting her lip, fidgeting lightly.

Muninn's beak opened. "I'm here, and on my way. What happened?"

Several people startled, looking wildly around before they realized exactly where my voice had come from, and Romani fumbled with his words as he tried to explain, "Ah, well, you see..."

Marie cut across him and said simply, "During the night, both Aífe and Emiya were affected by the curse and made contact with Ritsuka."

Emiya coughed into his hand. "'Contact' is one way of putting it."

"We fought him," Aífe said bluntly.

In my real body, I stopped for a second as I processed what exactly she had just admitted to, and then redoubled my walking speed.

"What?"

"As I said," Aífe replied. "Last night, as I slept, I found myself in a prison and was forced to fight Ritsuka and Jeanne Alter. Emiya appears to have experienced something similar."

Emiya nodded. "It was the same for me. Whatever happened, I didn't have much choice. I was forced to fight him and the Servants he had with him, for reasons I can't quite explain."

"Forced?" I asked, latching onto that particular part of it.

Emiya and Aífe both grimaced and said nothing, appearing reluctant to add anything more than that, which meant that there was something that they didn't want to say. Something about whatever had forced them to fight Ritsuka and Jeanne Alter had touched a nerve, and neither of them seemed comfortable talking about what exactly that was.

So it was probably really bad.

"Coerced might be the better term," Emiya admitted reluctantly. "Although even that doesn't really do it justice."

That didn't make it any better. What type of coercion would be strong enough to make a Servant fight against their own Master? Especially one they didn't have any real problems with? Emiya might have been Rika's Servant instead of her brother's, but what could compel the both of them to actually fight Ritsuka?

Then again, if it could put them into a suggestive state somehow, then it wouldn't be all that different from my nightmare, would it? That feeling of having something else take control of my arm and pull the trigger — was that why they were so reluctant to talk about it? Because they hadn't been able to fight against it anymore than I had?

"The curse appears to work as we first surmised," said Da Vinci, taking over the explanation. "According to Emiya and Aífe, they were made to play the part of antagonists, forced into a role best fitting their own karma — not unlike, as you originally guessed, Taylor, Shakespeare's Noble Phantasm. It's a mental and spiritual trap designed to prey on the vices and worst impulses of its

victims, reflecting their sins back upon them, with the aim of grinding them down through some combination of attrition and overload.”

If it was anything like that dream I’d had last night, I worried what that meant Ritsuka was being put through.

She went on, “The strange thing, however, is that when I went over the logs for their locations last night, neither of them ever actually disappeared from Chaldea itself, even though Jeanne Alter *has*.”

Romani blinked at her. “They didn’t?”

Da Vinci shook her head. “No. They didn’t even flicker.”

What did that mean, exactly? That they hadn’t been affected by the curse in quite the same way? Or was something else going on here?

“That would mean that Emiya and Aífe’s involvement was ancillary, wouldn’t it?” Marie said, brow furrowed in thought. “Instead of being affected by the curse directly, it was more like...their Spirit Origins were copied and used to fill out something that the curse itself couldn’t provide on its own.”

“Rather like my Shadow Servant system, yes,” Da Vinci agreed. “Which gives us a kind of confirmation that Jeanne Alter and Ritsuka were the intended targets of this curse and that’s why they’re the ones currently trapped.”

“But if Queen Aífe and Emiya were affected by it last night, even though the curse has already taken effect against Senpai and Jeanne Alter,” said Mash, “doesn’t that mean any one of us could be drawn in, too? Including Senpai and Miss Taylor?”

I stopped for a step or two again as the possibility percolated in my brain, a gnawing dread eating away at my belly. Last night, in that nightmare, when I’d felt like I was watching someone else pilot my body and hack away through strange combinations of all my friends and colleagues, past and present, could that instead have been exactly what Mash was talking about now?

If it was, what did that mean for Ritsuka now? Had he come out of that okay, or had I unwittingly, unwillingly done him irreparable harm?

“...not entirely impossible,” Da Vinci was saying. “However, all things considered, I think it’s more likely the Servants will be the ones drawn in, because, as spiritual existences instead of living, physical bodies, they’re more susceptible to such a thing. I think I would expect Bradamante, Hippolyta, or Bellamy to be drawn in before anyone else, and even then, only in the same very temporary sense as Emiya and Aífe were.”

She turned to Emiya and Aífe. “Were you still able to use your Noble Phantasms?”

Aífe grimaced. “Not as effectively as normal. As a result of the...role I was made to play, much of my skill with it was robbed. It was part of why they were able to defeat me without casualties.”

“Then they’re both okay?” Rika asked with a desperate kind of hope.

“Not entirely unscathed,” Aife allowed, “but the last thing I remember of it, they were none the worse for wear.”

“Same,” Emiya agreed. “Knowing as much as I do about how Servants work, it was almost like I’d been put under some kind of Madness Enhancement. Looking back on it, the logic behind my actions didn’t make sense at all.”

I bit my tongue to hold back from agreeing, even though it was essentially meaningless and had nothing to do with whether or not Muninn spoke.

Da Vinci nodded. “Then one way or another, we can probably expect anyone else who gets drawn in to be similarly affected. For however small a comfort it might be, at least it should make things a little bit easier on Ritsuka and Jeanne Alter.”

That reminded me —

“Wait,” I interrupted. “Earlier, you said Ritsuka had *Servants* with him — plural — right?”

Emiya nodded, too. “Yeah. Jeanne Alter, and then someone else, a man in a hat and Victorian era clothes. Cravat, cloak, and everything. He called himself ‘Avenger,’ so he must have been another Extra Class Servant, but he didn’t use his Noble Phantasm or make any references to his living self, so I can’t say who it might have been.”

So I’d heard him right after all. A second Servant, and another Avenger, at that.

“An Extra Class Servant?” Marie asked sharply. “How is that possible? Jeanne d’Arc is already irregular as a Ruler, and Jeanne Alter doesn’t make sense no matter how you look at it, so another Avenger shouldn’t be something that can happen!”

“That, unfortunately, isn’t necessarily true,” Da Vinci corrected her.

Marie’s head swung around towards her. “What?”

“It’s true, the original FATE System was built only to handle the standard seven classes,” Da Vinci said apologetically, “but the mere existence of Jeanne Alter herself opens the door to the possibility of other Extra Class Servants. Whether it will stop at just Ruler and Avenger, well, I’m afraid I couldn’t say confidently right now, but by this point, we’ve already encountered two Extra Class Servants, and now Ritsuka has apparently met a third.”

Romani sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “That makes things a lot more complicated, doesn’t it?”

“For now, no,” Da Vinci replied, “but only as long as this new Avenger’s class doesn’t have some significance to what’s going on inside that curse.”

In my real body, my brow furrowed.

Was I the only one who realized it? If this Avenger was appearing inside of a spiritual prison built from a karmic curse, then obviously he was related to it somehow, even if only tangentially. Did no

one else think it was suspicious that Ritsuka would encounter a Servant like that in there at all? One none of us had ever seen before and one we hadn't summoned ourselves?

"Is there anything else you can tell us about this Avenger Servant?" I asked. "Or about the prison you were in while this was all happening?"

Emiya frowned. "Now that you mention it... He didn't give away anything else about his identity, but I *do* remember him calling me a Lord of the Hall of Judgment, whatever that meant. He seemed to know a lot more about what was going on than the rest of us did. More than Ritsuka did, too."

"The Prison Tower on the Isle of Despair," Aífe added.

"That sounds like a Noble Phantasm," Mash said before I could.

It kind of did. And that made this Avenger immediately suspect — although, again, there was that pesky problem of motive and opportunity. Scáthach had proven it wasn't *impossible* for Servants and Heroic Spirits to reach us here from beyond time and space, but it would have to be an extraordinary Heroic Spirit in order to do it. One with an especially powerful legend or an exceptionally strong Noble Phantasm.

"Maybe we've been looking at this all wrong," murmured Marie, brow furrowed as she chewed on her thumbnail. "Maybe the curse isn't a literal curse, but a conceptual curse created through a Servant's Noble Phantasm. Prison Tower on the Isle of Despair — what Heroic Spirit is related to a prison on an island famous for how horrible a place it was?"

"It couldn't be Alcatraz, could it?" Romani suggested.

"Too late," said Da Vinci with a shake of her head. "Alcatraz only started operation as a prison about a century ago, and all of its most famous prisoners were there in the 1930s and 1940s, not the Victorian Era. If it was Al Capone, I expect this Avenger would have been in a suit and a tie with a gun, not... How did he attack, exactly?"

"Blasts of energy," Emiya said. "Fired from his hands. The only thing I can think to compare them to is the Gandr curse, only this was on a completely different scale."

"Like a materialized grudge," Aífe agreed.

An Avenger class Servant who fought by flinging around such potent curses that they could hit with physical force? How appropriate.

Da Vinci's brow furrowed. "That's... Actually, that makes a lot of sense, doesn't it, if he's an Avenger class Servant?"

"Which would mean there was something he was avenging, wouldn't it?" Mash said softly.

"On Onii-chan?" Rika asked a little hysterically.

"No," Marie snapped, in a voice that said, *don't be stupid*, "in general! An event or circumstance in his myth, specifically! And that would mean...we'd be looking for a Heroic Spirit who might have been

falsely imprisoned as part of his legend. One who would have reason to carry a grudge against the people who put him there, strong enough that he could naturally manifest as an Avenger, an Extra Class Servant!”

Realization hit me like a bolt of lightning, and I actually stumbled a step in the hallway, although thankfully, there was no one around and it didn’t show through Muninn.

There was no way, was there?

“That’s not exactly a small list,” said Da Vinci. “Even if we limited ourselves to the nineteenth century, there are plenty of famous people in Europe who would have fit the bill. If we expand that out ten or twenty years in either direction, we’d necessarily have to include people like Marie Antoinette and King Louis XVI.”

“On an island prison specifically, though?” Romani asked skeptically. “Maybe Napoleon... Although, was he ever imprisoned, or was he just exiled?”

“Technically, no, it wasn’t a prison,” said Da Vinci. “But since he was exiled to an island and forbidden from leaving, in a sense, that would count as a form of imprisonment, wouldn’t it? It’s certainly a well-known enough part of his history to form a Noble Phantasm upon, I would say.”

A Heroic Spirit famous for his acts of vengeance, one who had been falsely, unjustly imprisoned in an island prison somewhere during the Victorian Era in Europe, and it was so integral to his history that it had become a conceptual Noble Phantasm — which meant the prison itself was probably famous for how terrible and awful it was to be there. His grudges were powerful enough he could manifest them as a physical attack, and they hit like curses, like he was cursing the world that had created his horrific circumstances.

Maybe it was a little bit vague, not much to go on at all, but...

“Did he have a discernible accent?” Romani asked Emiya. “If we could at least narrow down the region, that would make this a lot easier.”

Emiya shrugged. “None that I could tell. Since we’re Servants, I’m not sure that even means anything.”

As much as I hated to say it, Orléans had already proven it wasn’t impossible.

The door to Ritsuka’s room whooshed open as I finally reached it, and I stepped inside as though I wasn’t still in my workout gear with my sweaty hair plastered to my forehead and neck. Everyone turned to look, so there was no better time for me to confidently announce, “I know who the Heroic Spirit is.”

Eyebrows rose and eyes went wide. Everyone seemed surprised to hear it.

“You do?” Marie asked incredulously.

“From just those few clues?” Da Vinci asked next, just as incredulous.

“Yes.”

Although some part of me really wanted to be wrong. The rules had been stretching enough lately, and some part of me just wanted for things to go back to matching the lessons Marie had given me about how it was all supposed to work. For things to be simpler, less complicated, so that I didn't have to constantly readjust my conception of what was possible and what wasn't.

But that had all gone out the door quite a while ago. It seemed like we found another exception every time we turned around.

“Who?” Rika demanded with a furious hunger. “Who's doing this to Onii-chan?”

I turned briefly to Emiya and Aífe. “The prison you were in, it was made of stone, right? Old, like the fort from Captain Morgan's Port Royal.”

Emiya shrugged. “Seeing as I wasn't there with you guys at the time...”

Right, because he'd already been killed by Herakles by then.

“Yes,” Aífe answered. “The walls and floor were made of stone, with crude iron bars to block any windows. The only light was provided via torches on the walls.”

Just like Port Royal's forts, then, and that made sense, because prisons back then were often either just dungeons inside a castle or stone fort or else were repurposed forts stripped bare of any comforts. Alcatraz had started that way, too.

“Definitely pre-industrial, then,” Da Vinci murmured.

“Who?” demanded Rika again, more urgently this time.

It only made me more sure of my conclusion. Because there *was* a prison in Victorian Europe set on an island. An isolated prison guarded by treacherous offshore currents that had been repurposed from a fort used by the French. Many political prisoners had found themselves trapped there in the wake of Napoleon's exile, and it had become famous for how many people had been locked inside its walls with no hope of ever leaving — and famous even more so for one particular prisoner who had found himself there and later escaped to go on a rampage of revenge.

This was one time where I hated being right.

“The Prison Tower on the Isle of Despair,” I said. “The name of that Noble Phantasm is Château d'If.”

Marie's eyes went wide and her mouth fell open as Mash gasped and Da Vinci burst out, “You can't be serious!”

“And the Heroic Spirit it belongs to,” I plowed on, ignoring the outbursts and the surprise, “is Edmond Dantès. The identity of the Avenger class Servant with Ritsuka is the Count of Monte Cristo.”

Because if the Phantom of the Opera could be real, why not him, too?