

Interlude R(M) I: Prison of Dreams

By the time the movie was over and the room emptied out, it was nearly midnight, and many an eye were wet. Those who had already seen the movie were much less affected, of course, but most of those who hadn't had been moved by the film's final few scenes, by Jack's death, and naturally, by what the movie had all but stated was their reunion in the afterlife.

Ritsuka was glad he'd had the foresight to bring along several boxes of tissues, because as they walked the halls back towards the dorms, Bradamante blew her nose loudly into a wad of them. Tears still streamed down her cheeks.

"It was so beautiful," she sobbed. "The way...at the end... And then they were together again!"

"I told you!" Rika said triumphantly, although she, too, had teared up at those scenes, despite having seen the movie at least twice before.

Ritsuka wondered if her own life and legend had anything to do with Bradamante's reaction. Her and her lover chasing after each other had been a huge part of it, right? So much had been happening the last several months that he'd lost track of some of the details, so he was going to have to make sure to look them up to avoid upsetting her and saying the wrong thing.

Even Aífe wasn't immune to the emotion of the music and the cinematography, because she might have managed to hide it from everyone else, but Ritsuka had spied her wiping her own eyes a few times, and he was pretty sure he'd heard a sniffle or two coming from her direction. Especially during the sequence when the Irish mother was telling her children about Tír na nÓg as the ship sank. Although...

"But I don't understand," Aífe insisted. "There should have been more than enough room for the two of them on that door. And if they had huddled together atop it, they might have managed to stay warm long enough to be rescued!"

Now that the movie was over, there were some parts of it that she didn't seem so willing to let slide. Ritsuka decided not to mention that several people over the years had proven, in one way or another, that Aífe wasn't entirely wrong about her complaints. He thought it was better for his sanity not to validate her, at least in this case.

"Right?" Rika agreed.

"Welcome to the debate that has centered around this movie ever since its release almost two decades ago," Emiya drawled. "To my knowledge, people are *still* arguing about it."

Rika flinched, and her smile turned fragile. "A-ah. Y-yeah, they kinda are."

Ritsuka glanced at her, worried, because he wasn't blind to what had been happening between his sister and her Servant, but there wasn't much he could do about it. If he tried to stick his nose in, she would dig in her heels, and then they'd get nowhere for who knew how long.

In the background, Bradamante blew her nose again loudly.

“I’m wondering about the Heart of the Ocean,” Mash said thoughtfully. “I think, a diamond that big, it would have incredible historic value, wouldn’t it? But until the movie, I’d never heard about it sinking with the Titanic.”

“That’s because it was made up for the movie,” said Ritsuka. “It was never real, it was just a plot device. Um, costume jewelry, I think is the right term.”

“Oh,” said Mash. “I see. That makes sense.”

“If that had been me at the end there, I would’ve taken that thing and shoved it down that asshole’s throat,” said Jeanne Alter. “For using that hunk of rock to frame the man I love and getting him killed!”

“I never took you for a romantic,” Emiya remarked.

Jeanne Alter’s cheeks pinked. “Y-you know, hypothetically. If I were ever sappy enough to f-fall in l-love, I mean!”

“So then,” Mash began, “does that mean... Were Jack and Rose fake, too?”

Aífe gave her an incredulous look. “You didn’t realize it?”

Mash sighed and shook her head. “No. I just feel silly now.”

“It’s the reason Jack dies at the end,” said Senpai, sounding a little distracted. “Because it fits the narrative James Cameron was trying to tell. It defeats the point of the story if they get to have a happily ever after.”

She really was incredibly knowledgeable, wasn’t she? Maybe it had something to do with how much time she spent reading, because she might not always have an answer to everything, but she seemed to have a lot of answers to a lot of things, and as useful as it had been to get them all out of tough spots the last several months, it was also a little frustrating.

Were all of Team A’s Masters just that good? It made Ritsuka feel a little inadequate, sometimes.

— *Have you ever envied someone?*

The world tilted. Chaldea’s walls flickered and were, for a single instant, replaced with stone bricks. Ritsuka, startled, stumbled a step, but before he could even wonder what was happening, he was back amongst his friends and comrades, walking through Chaldea’s halls and back towards their dorms.

What?

“— annoying,” Aífe was saying. “So he died because the writer decided he had to?”

“It’s not an uncommon thing, in fiction,” said Senpai. “Characters live or die based upon what the author has decided their role should be. Sometimes, they die to represent something instead, so even if they’re in a situation where it might be possible to survive, they die anyway. To highlight whatever the author wants to highlight.”

Weird, Ritsuka thought. He must have been more tired than he thought he was if he was starting to hallucinate.

“It was still sad that Jack died!” Bradamante said passionately as she clutched at another wad of tissue. “The life they could have had together! The love they shared, despite only knowing each other for so short a time! E-even, u-um, th-the intimacy between them w-was...quite lovely!”

Oh, *that* scene. Yeah, that was... Well, the film had been rated PG-13 in America, so there wasn't technically anything wrong with a couple of seventeen-year-old kids watching it, was there? Although it had been funny when Bradamante squeaked and tried to cover his eyes.

At least Rika hadn't decided to make any quips about how it “wasn't anything he hadn't seen before,” especially since he didn't think the others had realized — as much as he'd tried to avoid looking — that the steam and rose petals in Emperor Nero's bath hadn't been nearly as concealing as they must have assumed. And, well, Aífe hadn't exactly been all that shy about showing off what she had.

“What's the matter?” Jeanne Alter sneered. “Was a little skin too much for your sensibilities? Don't tell me you and your, what's his name —”

“Ruggiero,” Ritsuka supplied helpfully.

“— never got up to a little hanky panky?”

Bradamante's cheeks turned pink, and even the tips of her ears weren't spared. “W-what my husband and I did together in the privacy of our own chambers is of no concern to anyone but ourselves!”

“The fact that there was so much cut short was kind of the point, though, wasn't it?” Arash put in. “What Master was saying, then, is that Jack's death was meant to symbolize all of the lives that got cut short and all of the plans that ended early. Him living would have undermined all of that.”

“Even so!” Bradamante insisted stubbornly.

The conversation continued all the way back to the dorms, and it never really went anywhere. Bradamante — a hopeless romantic at heart — refused to entertain the idea that Jack *had* to die, even if it was for the story, and Aífe agreed with her that it was a dumb reason for anyone to die, even if it was just a story. Eventually, it meandered onto other things that had happened which one person or another disagreed with for whatever reason, and Senpai and Arash just kept reasonably explaining the narrative choices made by the script writer and the director, providing context that made those choices make sense.

Arash was the one doing most of the talking of the two of them, though. Senpai wasn't silent, but she'd been distracted the entire night, and whatever it was that bothered her, she hadn't said. She bore it without complaint and without comment, pretending as though nothing was wrong, and if Ritsuka hadn't spent the last several months working and fighting and training alongside her, even he might have been fooled.

Senpai was like that. Too good at keeping things to herself, and too ready with excuses or distractions to deflect away whenever something hit too close to home for her. Just what kind of life had she really lived to make her so secretive and private? Just how much would they have to go

through together before she finally let them see more than a few tiny, carefully selected parts of herself?

— *Have you ever faced someone with the talent, opportunity, or riches that you lacked, and grit your teeth at their good fortune?*

The world flickered again, and once more, Ritsuka stood in an unfamiliar place. Dank and depressing, cramped and miserable, a tiny room with walls of hewn stone stretched out on every side, but for a single, heavy iron door. Dim light filtered in, barely enough to fill the room, and a humid chill clung to his ankles.

But once again, it disappeared, and Ritsuka found himself back in Chaldea, with its sterile lighting, its smooth walls and floors, and its spacious, expansive hallways. Blinking, he rubbed his eyes with one hand, but when he opened them again, nothing had changed. He was still in Chaldea.

So maybe he was *really* tired then.

Ritsuka half expected Senpai to glance at him, like she'd noticed something was wrong, because she was really perceptive like that, but it never happened. Whatever was going on in her head must have been really serious.

Along the way to the dorms, a couple of the Servants peeled off and went to do their own things for the night, like Aífe and Bradamante. Emiya, too, left them, heading back towards the cafeteria, although not without glancing Rika's way with a frown and a furrow of his brow. If he'd meant to talk to Rika at some point in the night, Ritsuka thought that he'd missed his chance. She'd started yawning halfway to the dorms, and that was as sure a sign as any that even her seemingly bottomless stores of energy were starting to run low.

He hoped the two of them figured things out pretty soon. He hated seeing his sister so upset.

Finally, down to just the Masters, Mash, Jeanne Alter, and Arash, they reached the section of the dorms set aside for the Masters, and Senpai, as one of the earlier candidates to be recruited, naturally had a room closer to the start of it. She bade them a quiet goodnight without ever letting on what thoughts were swirling around inside her head and went into her room. Her door whooshed shut behind her.

Arash gave them a smile, a jaunty wave, and a quiet, "Goodnight, you guys. See you tomorrow." Then, he vanished from view, probably to keep an eye on Senpai during the night. As far as Ritsuka knew, he was one of the Servants that didn't bother sleeping, although what he did with his time at night aside from keeping watch on Senpai, Ritsuka didn't know.

Maybe he played solitaire. Ah, but that required a deck of cards, didn't it? Senpai didn't look like the kind of person to keep that sort of thing in her room, so... Maybe he borrowed one of her novels? Now that he thought of it, Ritsuka couldn't help but wonder. Just what *did* Arash do in his spare time?

A mystery for another time.

"I'm the last one to leave? How lame," Jeanne Alter lamented. "Whatever. I'll catch you dorks tomorrow. Or maybe not, who knows? I might have better stuff to do."

“G-goodnight!” Mash tried valiantly, putting on a bright and fragile smile.

“Goodnight, Jeanne Alter,” Ritsuka said more earnestly.

“Yeah, yeah.” Jeanne Alter waved them off, and as she walked away, over her shoulder, she said, “Sleep tight and all of that shit. Watch out for bed bugs and stuff.”

Ritsuka couldn't help a lopsided little smile. She was prickly, and it wasn't easy to see past the surface when it so eerily resembled one of their enemies who had tried to kill them, but even if she tried to hide it, she really was warming up to them.

If she had been with them from the beginning... But the only reason she existed now was because the very act of fighting her in Orléans had made it possible for her to exist outside of it. Or something like that. It really was kind of sad that she would have just disappeared and stayed gone in a world where they never summoned her.

— *The world is rife with inequality and evil, and so we weep as we mourn the dearth of justice and fairness. Have you not experienced it for yourself, o survivor? The cruelty of blind chance and fate?*

There was a flash of fire and heat, and this time, as the world skewed and sleek metal became coarse stone, Ritsuka couldn't stop himself from flinching. A scream came from somewhere off in the distance, somewhere far away, but it echoed through the stone and the iron slab that was the door. Flickering torchlight danced, and the shadows created macabre scenes along the wall, visions of suffering and torment.

“There is no need for you to answer,” an unfamiliar voice hissed next to his ear. “Peer inside your heart and behold that which makes you human, the pus of man known as envy and avarice. It is the source of all sin, that which causes us to covet and begrudge, and even you cannot escape it. Do not turn your eyes from it, for denial will not save you.”

Ritsuka gasped, spinning about —

And Chaldea slid back into place as he jerked around.

“Senpai?” asked Mash, concerned.

“You okay there, Onii-chan?” Rika asked, eyeing him skeptically.

Ritsuka blinked. He looked back behind him, down the long hallway, then behind Mash and Rika, where Jalter's retreating back had vanished from view. There was no sign of anyone else with them, no owner of any mysterious voice, just an empty hallway.

Really, *really* tired, then.

“It's nothing,” he told them both, trying for a smile. It might have come out warped, though, and neither of them looked particularly convinced. “Just...need to get some sleep. It's been a long day.”

Rika snorted. “I hear that.”

“Are you sure, Senpai?” Mash asked.

“I’m fine, Mash,” he insisted. “I’m just a little tired. That’s all. I’ll be good as new tomorrow morning.”

“Just in time for our next torture session,” Rika added sarcastically. Privately, Ritsuka agreed, but if it meant he could do better and worry less in the future, he was willing to stick it out until the end.

Mash still didn’t look like she fully believed him, but she let it drop, and their group of three split off not much later. Mash went back to her own room, and Ritsuka and Rika went to theirs, throwing out a half-hearted “goodnight” to each other before the doors whooshed shut behind them.

Scrubbing at his eyes, Ritsuka somehow managed to shuck off his regular uniform — not the mystic code version Da Vinci had made for missions, because it felt too weird to wear that around so casually — and slip into a pair of pajamas. With a sigh, he flopped down onto his bed, landing face first on his pillow, and just enjoyed the cool sensation of his sheets against his skin.

Before he realized it, he was drifting off to sleep.

— *Even the greatest of heroes are guilty of the sin of envy.*

Ritsuka snapped awake. The mattress beneath him was no longer the pristine, comfortable one he had fallen asleep on, but a ratty, threadbare cot that could barely claim the name. The musty smell of dust and mold and mildew slithered into his nostrils, and he had to wrinkle his nose against it just to keep from sneezing.

He opened his eyes, blinking, but the darkened room of his Chaldea dorm where he had laid down was gone, and he instead found himself in a dank, dirty cell that vaguely resembled it, constructed with stone walls and wood and lit only by the flickering light of a handful of candles. Shadows danced across the surface of the rock, and somewhere nearby, water dripped down onto the floor in a steady rhythm.

What?

Slowly, Ritsuka pushed himself up off of the cot, and a tattered blanket made of what looked like canvas slid down from his shoulders. A glance showed him dressed in his official Chaldea uniform instead of the pajamas he’d just put on what felt like mere minutes ago.

Is this a dream?

“Are you finally awake, o Master of Chaldea?”

Ritsuka squawked — it most certainly wasn’t a girlish squeak, thank you very much — and tried to both throw himself backwards and spin around at the same time. All he managed to accomplish was to tumble off of the cot and onto the hard, cold stone floor, with that tattered blanket wrapped around his legs.

He groaned and rubbed at his smarting elbow. It hurt, so...did that mean this wasn’t a dream?

An unfamiliar voice — the one that had startled him — chuckled, and footsteps clacked against the floor as a man stepped around the cot and loomed over Ritsuka with a nasty grin beneath the brim of a round hat. His flyaway hair seemed to flow in a nonexistent breeze, and his form flickered around the edges, like bursts of static were constantly leaping off of his body.

The stranger knelt down, and his heavy cloak parted to show a suit that looked like it had come straight out of Victorian England. The first person Ritsuka thought of was Sherlock Holmes.

“Welcome, sinner, to the prison tower on the Isle of Despair,” he said with something like relish. “This hell exists beyond love and hate, beyond justice and mercy, and therefore, anyone might find themselves imprisoned here — including *you*.”

“...This isn’t Chaldea,” said Ritsuka numbly, “and I’m not dreaming.”

In the distance, something let out a horrible shriek, tortured and agonized.

The stranger grinned and chuckled again. “Indeed not. You will find none of your usual allies here to aid you, not your precious friend, not your beloved sister, not your frighteningly competent senior, and most certainly not your director, that bumbling doctor, or that genius who never knew when to leave well enough alone. You are the only one here.”

“Except for you,” Ritsuka pointed out.

The stranger’s mouth opened wide and he belted out a laugh. “Indeed! Indeed, I am here, as well! And I, who have lived this hell before, who have experienced all its terrible wonder and horrific glory, why, I...would be your Abbé Faria, wouldn’t I? Well, not that I intend to be quite so generous to you.”

Who? That wasn’t a Sherlock Holmes character Ritsuka had ever heard of before, which... Yeah, that probably meant that —

“You’re not Sherlock Holmes, are you.”

“Indeed, I am not!” The stranger stood. “Though, much like I imagine he must be, I, too, am a Heroic Spirit that does not belong in this world. Not too dissimilar from a certain friend of yours — and yet, far from the same at all.”

Certain friend who didn’t belong in the world — was he talking about Jeanne Alter?

Another screech echoed, and it sounded closer than before. Ritsuka reached for the edge of the cot to adjust his position into something a little more comfortable and used that as a chance to glance over at the iron-barred door, but the stupid cot was too high up for him to see much of anything over it.

The stranger tilted his head curiously. “I see you may indeed have some inkling what it is I mean, but — have you truly not figured it out? Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter at this stage, although you might find it far more important in the times to come.”

Ritsuka’s gaze swung back over to the stranger and met his wild eyes. It was like staring directly into a maelstrom of controlled chaos.

“Does that mean you know what’s going on here, then?” Ritsuka asked the stranger.

Something clanged, like claws on metal, and the sound of it echoed throughout the room, bouncing off the stone walls and reverberating like a plucked guitar string. The stranger ignored it entirely, like it was of no concern to him at all.

“Better than you, it would seem,” said the stranger. “Far, far better! After all, you walked through the First Tower without even realizing it — did you enjoy it, by the way?” Ritsuka opened his mouth, more to ask what he was talking about than anything else, but the stranger shook his head. “No, no, don’t bother answering, I don’t truly care either way. It was a reflex, you see, an involuntary impulse born of the dregs that remain of my sense of hospitality.”

The stranger grinned and spread his arms. “The Second Tower welcomes you! I do so hope this one is more to your liking!”

BANG — the door to the room slammed open, bouncing off of the stone wall, and Ritsuka jumped, startled. When his head whipped around to see what had made the noise, a skeletal, indistinct figure stood in the doorway, hunched over and shambling. Glowing red eyes set in a translucent skull swiveled and immediately locked onto him, and something cold and harsh squeezed around Ritsuka’s heart.

The stranger turned, too, but his grin remained firmly in place, and he didn’t seem at all bothered by the specter that looked mere moments away from lunging at Ritsuka, not even when it let out an ear-splitting shriek.

In fact, he seemed *pleased*.

“And here they come now, the first of many!” the stranger crowed. “Perhaps they envy the warmth of your soul! Perhaps they begrudge you the heart that still beats in your chest! You see, a number of the restless dead have gathered here, and the one thing they despise above all else, the one thing they covet above all else — it is the *life* that still burns within your breast!”

The specter took a step forward, and it lifted ghastly arms as though to wrap its long, bony fingers around Ritsuka’s neck. Ritsuka scrambled backwards, trying to put more distance between himself and the ghost — because if the stranger was right, then that was the only thing it could be — but the room wasn’t all that large, and it didn’t take long for him to hit the back wall.

“So it’s just going to attack me? K-kill me?” Ritsuka demanded. “It’s not like I’m here on purpose!”

Honed instinct settled in, hard won from four Singularities and many days spent training. It washed away the surge of panic, leaving a cold, almost unnatural calm in its wake, and he did the only thing he could do and took aim with his hand, preparing a Gandr. One shot should be enough to take out a simple ghost, right? Center mass, just like Senpai had taught him, and that should do it, and if it didn’t, be prepared to follow up with a second and a third.

But... If this was just the first ghost of many...

How many Gandr shots could Ritsuka handle before he got overwhelmed? Would he be able to survive all of them until Chaldea figured out what had happened to him and mounted a rescue? Or would they hound him until he ran out of energy and couldn’t fight back?

The stranger laughed. “Calm yourself, Master! This is only the beginning of things! There is still much more for you to discover — much of it quite trivial, in the grand scheme of the world. So trivial that they hardly bear mentioning! Right now, however, the one thing it is you must know —”

The ghost stumbled forward, but the stranger leapt towards it faster than lightning, and with a single hand aglow with a light that seemed to suck in light, he struck the ghost — and instantly, it vanished.

Whatever it had that passed for flesh was ripped apart by the stranger's attack, and everything else followed swiftly. It didn't even dissolve into motes like a Servant, it just evaporated like a mirage in the desert, erased.

Ritsuka looked back over at the stranger with new eyes. To move that fast and take out that ghost so easily... Yeah, this guy had already said he was a Heroic Spirit, didn't he? That meant that he had to be a Servant.

And if he was a Servant that Ritsuka hadn't summoned and didn't recognize, that meant he had some sort of relationship to this place, didn't he? Whoever he was, he'd been summoned here because this was some place he had a connection to, either in his life or his legend. Did that make him friend or foe? Was he an ally for saving Ritsuka's life just now? An enemy who needed Ritsuka for some nefarious plot or something?

There were so many questions Ritsuka had, and none of them seemed to have answers.

"This," said the stranger, "is Hell. In the annals of your Chaldea's proper history, it was called Château d'If, the prison tower where a certain young man was left to rot after being betrayed and falsely imprisoned. And I..."

The stranger turned back to Ritsuka, and the large grin that Ritsuka was beginning to think was almost permanently affixed to his face stretched his lips once more.

"I am a Heroic Spirit, one you might perhaps have heard of, although it is of little consequence if you haven't. Shaped by rage, resentment, and hatred, given form by my bottomless fury and undying grudges, I have taken this form of an Extra Class Servant, and so, for now, you may refer to me as Avenger."

"Like Jeanne Alter," Ritsuka murmured. He narrowed his gaze on Avenger, but nothing appeared in his mind's eye. His Master's Clairvoyance didn't work, not even to reveal his Servant Class or physical abilities. It was as though it wasn't there at all.

I guess I'm really not in Kansas anymore, Ritsuka thought. If Chaldea's systems couldn't reach him here to provide even that most basic of functions...

It looked like Ritsuka was going to have to rescue himself.

Avenger's grin grew broader. "So you have already encountered an Extra Class Servant like myself, have you? Haha! How twisted your experiences must be! But, that is also convenient. If you already understand that much, then perhaps you are better prepared to take on this challenge than I expected. You may yet manage to escape this place."

"What does that mean?" asked Ritsuka. "You said this is a prison tower. Château d'If, right? But what exactly does that mean? How am I here when I fell asleep in Chaldea?"

Avenger frowned. "I already told you that I have no intention of being your Abbé Faria. However...I suppose I should at least tell you the barest of the essentials, shouldn't I? Very well, then. Ritsuka Fujimaru, your soul has been imprisoned here. If you wish to escape, you will have to pass through the seven Halls of Judgment and defeat their Lords. If you are defeated and killed, you die — yes, both here and your body in Chaldea. If you do nothing and seven days pass, then you die all the same."

Of course, Ritsuka thought. Because it wasn't ever going to be as easy as barricading himself inside this room and holding out for as long as he could. He really was going to have to rescue himself.

“And Chaldea?”

“Their voices shall not reach you here,” said Avenger, “and yours shall never reach them either. As for whether they could ever send you aid... Heh! Perhaps they might! But can you risk that they will reach you in time, when time itself flows so aberrantly in this place? After all, this is not the Château d'If of proper history, even if it bears some resemblance to it. It could be that the seven days that pass here are mere hours to them, or it could be that these seven days last seven years!”

Time was going to pass weirdly, out of sync with Chaldea... Did that mean...?

“Is this... a Singularity?”

Avenger grinned. “Of a sort! It is a trap for the soul, meant to punish the sinful and grind them down to dust! A curse, concocted by your ultimate enemy, the master of those so-called Demon Gods, to drown his foe in the weight of their own regrets! Oh, but how did you get caught up in it like this, hm? Perhaps this was meant for someone else, and you were simply unfortunate enough to have been caught in the crossfire. Innocently imprisoned as a victim of circumstance! Now, doesn't that sound familiar?”

A trap meant for someone else? Who could —

Oh. Maybe it was a good thing this had happened to him, then. After all, Professor Lev — or Flauros was maybe the better way to say it — had already targeted Director Marie once, hadn't he? They had only just gotten her back. It would've crushed Senpai to lose her again, Ritsuka was sure of it. After all, even if they tried to pretend their relationship was strictly professional, it was easy to see what good friends they were.

Carefully, Ritsuka pulled himself to his feet, and under the guise of adjusting his clothes, he checked his communicator, only to discover that it was little more than a hunk of metal. It might have looked right and felt right, it had the same weight as the real thing and everything, but pushing any of the buttons did nothing. It didn't even turn on.

The function to summon Shadow Servants wasn't working either, when he tested it. If it really was his soul imprisoned in this place and his body was back in Chaldea, then the clothes he was wearing weren't even really his mystic code, were they? So naturally, they couldn't do anything it could do, and he couldn't call on any emergency backup.

Next, he focused on the threads that connected him to his Servants — but, although the tethers that bound them together still existed, it felt like there was nothing on the other end of them. Like they all just stretched out into a blank void, and there was no one to receive his messages. A phone that just kept ringing and no one ever answered.

Mash? Ritsuka attempted half-heartedly. No response came. All of the things Senpai had drilled into him to do in case he was stranded somewhere without the rest of the team had failed.

“You said that the only way out of here was to defeat these seven Lords in each of the seven Halls of Judgment, right?” Ritsuka asked Avenger.

“Correct!” Avenger replied.

“Does that mean you know where to go and how to find them?”

Avenger laughed. “Also correct! I do indeed know where to go to face down the seven Lords of this wretched pit.”

Ritsuka’s mouth drew into a tight line. He was alone. He couldn’t contact his Servants, he couldn’t contact Chaldea, and he couldn’t expect anyone else to find him and come to his aid. There was nothing and no one else for him to rely on, except for this suspicious Servant who had, admittedly, at least done him the kindness of explaining the situation and even saved his life once. It seemed, then, that what he had to do now was crystal clear.

“Then I’ll trust you to lead the way.”

Avenger laughed again and clapped his hands together. “Good! In that case, for the duration of our stay in Hell, I shall temporarily serve as your Servant. Now, come, Master! The first Lord in his Hall of Judgment awaits!”

Avenger spun on his heel and towards the door, and he walked to and through it with purpose. Ritsuka edged around the bed, taking a quick glance at the spartan room — it really was more like a cell — and followed him.

Outside the cell was a hallway. Old-fashioned wooden torches lined it, held in rudimentary iron brackets, and cast flickering firelight across the floor. The walls were more stone brick, although there was some kind of plaster or clay that had once covered it, now cracking and falling away. More doors, no doubt leading to more cells, sat along the corridor at uneven intervals, made of rusted, pitted iron. They glittered dully with dark promise.

Avenger led him down the hallway and its cobblestone floor, and as they passed each door, a low, tortured moan echoed from inside. Chains rattled threateningly, but when Ritsuka glanced cautiously through the bars, there was no visible occupant in any of them, only shadows and darkness and the vague threat of something lurking within them.

“Pay those poor wretches no mind, Master,” said Avenger. “They, too, are trapped here, but unlike you, they are all long dead. There is no hope for them. They shall not be given salvation, no matter whether you attempt to offer it or not. All that is afforded to them now is despair and the voice to speak it — if you can call their inarticulate groaning speaking, that is!”

Ritsuka grimaced.

Avenger didn’t actually say it, but Ritsuka heard the implication loud and clear: if he failed and died to these Lords, then he would just become another one of the restless phantoms bemoaning their fate, trapped in this prison for the rest of time. His body outside in Chaldea would wither and rot, leaving the others to carry on without him.

Then he just wouldn’t fail. It was that simple.

They kept going, chased the whole way by a chorus of tortured moaning, but for how long, it was impossible to say. Time flowed weirdly, as though to show Ritsuka that Avenger was right when he’d explained the way this place worked, and Ritsuka was never sure between one moment and the

next whether mere minutes had passed or hours. For all he knew, they spent the better part of a day walking, and in the constant, flickering light of the torches, without any sun or moon or even a clock to mark the passing of time, he wouldn't have known one way or the other.

"We approach the first Hall, Master," Avenger said suddenly, and Ritsuka looked forward to find they had reached a heavy iron door, a slab of metal with a tiny, barred slit for a window. When Avenger reached for a handle and twisted it, the whole door seemed to squeal and groan from the strain. "Behold!"

Without warning, Avenger threw the door open wide, revealing a large, circular room akin to an arena beyond it. He took a step inside, as though there was indeed something waiting for them, but to Ritsuka it looked completely empty. Just a big room with more stone brick and not a single sign of life within.

"The first challenge you must face!"

A blackened sword slid out behind Avenger's head, and the blade twisted to aim the edge at his neck. Ritsuka stumbled back, heart skipping a beat, but he had enough presence of mind to shout, "Look out!"

The black sword swung, but Avenger heard Ritsuka quickly enough to duck under it and throw himself further into the room, spinning about. An ugly snarl curled his lips and contorted his face, and his eyes swiveled to land on something out of Ritsuka's sight.

"What's this?" Avenger demanded. "The Lord of the first Hall of Judgment is Phantom of the Opera! You are not him, woman!"

"That loser?"

Ritsuka's heart skipped a beat again, but this time, for an entirely different reason.

"I don't know what my other self ever saw in him. He went down so fast, I hardly even had to try!"

From the wall next to the door, hidden as she was just out of sight like an ambush predator, a petite woman in blackened armor and clothes stepped out and into view. In one hand, she held a flag like it was a spear, the banner bound tightly against the shaft, and in the other, she had an elegant sword that almost looked like it had been burned. Her pale blonde hair was cropped short, ending just above her shoulders.

"Jeanne Alter!" Ritsuka couldn't stop himself from shouting.

Jeanne Alter looked back at him over her shoulder and sneered. "Oh, it's you. Even in a shitty place like this, it looks like I can't escape you, can I, Master?"