

## Chapter CXVI: Missing and In Action

“What do you mean, she’s missing?” Marie demanded immediately.

“Just as I said,” Aífe replied. “I’ve searched her usual hiding spots and even tried using a rune to track her down, to no avail. It’s as though she simply disappeared.”

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Da Vinci said. “I have a system set up to notify me in case a Servant’s contract is terminated. I double-checked it after we found out Medea’s Noble Phantasm could cancel them, and added provisions specifically for the circumstances where they might forcibly change hands. If something happened to her, I would have known about it the second it happened!”

Romani was already flicking through his tablet, bent over the screen as he went through the menus faster than I’d ever seen him go. Checking on the status of Jeanne Alter’s contract, I realized — good.

I did some checking of my own, reaching for the thread that connected me to her, because no matter what the result, it would tell me *something* that would be at least somewhat useful. Even no response was a response in its own way.

Aífe folded her arms. “I’m not lying.”

“But what you’re saying doesn’t make any sense at all!” Da Vinci insisted.

But when I pushed along that thread, there was nothing there. A prod got me no reaction from Jeanne Alter, neither did the mental equivalent of a sharp tug, and when I tried to push my mind down along it so that I could peer through her eyes, my senses remained completely my own. Nothing happened.

“I just tried contacting her,” I announced.

“And?” asked Da Vinci.

“Nothing. I couldn’t even borrow her eyes to see where she is or what she’s doing.”

If I compared it to a phone line, it was like it just kept ringing and no one ever answered. That the thread existed at all said that she was definitely on the other end of it, and there was no sense of anything blocking me off from her, but I wasn’t getting through no matter what I tried.

Aífe arched an eyebrow, as though to say, “See?”

Da Vinci’s brow furrowed. “She could be deliberately blocking you —”

“She’s not,” I cut across her. “I’m not sure that Jeanne Alter even knows *how* to stop me from borrowing her senses.”

And if she did, she would probably be a lot more aggressive about it. The mental equivalent of slapping my hand away, as it were.

“It might be that you’re *both* right,” said Romani. He held out the tablet. “Look.”

Da Vinci leaned over, peering down at the screen, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Marie shift, as though she wanted to step over and look and then reconsidered because of how crowded it would be. Da Vinci’s eyes went wide.

“What?” Marie asked impatiently. “What is it?”

“The contract *is* still there,” said Da Vinci. “I was right, there’s been no changes made to its status. But she’s drawing elevated levels of magical energy from the reactor, almost like —”

“She’s in combat,” I concluded.

It sounded ridiculous to even suggest it, and yet it felt like the most obvious answer.

Romani nodded. “And I bet you, if we compared the bursts of increased energy expenditure with the fluctuations in Ritsuka’s Magic Circuits...”

“They’d match,” Da Vinci breathed.

“That’s ridiculous!” Marie sputtered. “You’re not trying to insinuate that she’s been caught up in this curse, too, are you?”

“She’s in there with him?” Rika yelped.

“Ohohoho!” Shakespeare chortled. “The plot thickens! Not only Master was snared, but also a Servant who can herself be said to be made of curses and grudges! My, my, I wonder how this will play out!”

“Not helping!” Marie seethed at him. “We’re supposed to be s-safe here, aren’t we? The enemy isn’t supposed to be able to reach one of us, let alone two!”

I looked over at Ritsuka’s motionless body. Could Jeanne Alter really be stuck in that prison curse with him? But how? And why the two of them instead of anyone else in the facility? What did they

—

She delivered the final blow on Forneus, and Ritsuka was the one who summoned her Shadow self into Okeanos.

That was it. That was the one thing I could think of that connected them and might be related to this curse. Nothing else leapt to mind, at least not at that moment.

But could it really be that simple? And if it was, why had he been cursed by Forneus, but the rest of us had remained untouched after killing Flauros? A matter of preparation by the enemy? Because they had a better idea what we were capable of now, and therefore had more contingencies for if and when they were defeated? Or had Forneus’ larger size meant more power for him to throw around, and that was why he had been able to throw a curse out as he died?

No, wait. Maybe Flauros *had* thrown out a curse at his killer, but Altera was the one who technically finished him off, so it hadn't hit any of us. It would have simply run face-first into her Magic Resistance and slid right off.

A stab of pain lanced between my eyes, as though to remind me that my headache hadn't actually gone anywhere, even if I'd had other things to focus on.

"It would seem the only conclusion we can draw from the facts we have," Da Vinci said. Marie flinched, biting hard at her lower lip. "It is, technically, possible that she might have broken into one of our more secure areas, the ones that are warded against outside interference, and that *could* explain why Aífe is unable to find her, as well..."

"But that's not part of her skill set," I finished for her.

Jeanne Alter was fire, brimstone, and violence. If she was capable of breaking into one of the secure areas on her own, then she wouldn't have done it without alerting everyone in the whole building when she did it. If she was trying to sneak into anywhere, then ironically, the only way she could do it was by announcing to everyone where she was.

Da Vinci nodded. "Exactly."

And if, despite all of that, she could still break into one of those areas without being detected, well, then we had an entirely different set of problems, didn't we?

"I think we can apply Occam's Razor on this one," Romani said. "As crazy as it sounds that we're calling it the simplest option, the most likely answer is that she is in there with Ritsuka, and that's why we can't find her."

"It's also possible that the reason she's in there with him is because she's the one behind the curse," Da Vinci reasoned, "but she's really more of a...blunt instrument, shall we say. This has a little too much...finesse to be her handiwork."

In other words, if Jeanne Alter wanted to curse someone, she'd do it loudly, publicly, and without hiding exactly what she was doing and why she was doing it. If she was going to make you suffer, she wanted to make sure you *knew* it was her.

"What does this mean?" Mash asked.

"It means that we're not sending anyone in after them just yet," Marie said.

"Director!" Rika began, shouting. She rose halfway out of her chair, and the only reason she didn't stand all the way up was probably because it would have meant either letting go of her brother's hand or yanking him up off the mattress.

"As long as we don't have to, we're not taking any unnecessary risks with anyone else's life!" Marie hissed back at her. That didn't satisfy Rika at all. "Listen! We might not be able to tell what's going on by monitoring Ritsuka's vital signs, since his condition inside the prison isn't registering the way it would even during a Rayshift, but we can still monitor *Jeanne Alter's* condition — right, Romani?"

Ah. That was a clever idea. A smart method of getting around our limitations.

Romani grimaced. “We’ve...never been able to keep track of Servants’ health the same way we do the Masters’, since most of their organs aren’t quite as important as a living human’s are, but...we *can* keep track of her Spirit Origin’s integrity and the level of magical energy she’s using.”

Mash gasped. “So as long as she’s okay, Master should be, too!”

Provided the curse didn’t keep them separate and Jeanne Alter wasn’t corrupted by it — further, at least, considering her origins — then yeah, that should hold.

“Without knowing the structure of the curse and how it interacts with the human mind, it’s not quite so simple,” Da Vinci hedged, “but right now, it seems like the best option we have available. If things start to deteriorate, we can reconsider our other options, but without a better idea of what exactly is going on inside of that curse, we shouldn’t rush to send in anyone else and risk losing either them or our only chance to mount a rescue operation. Right, Director?”

“That’s right,” Marie agreed. “If we rush into things, then we might just make them worse. We need to know more about what we’re getting into before doing anything else.”

“But Onii-chan...!” Rika protested.

“Right now, Rika, it’s the best of a lot of bad options,” Romani said, grimacing. “If things take a turn for the worse, we’ll throw caution to the wind and do whatever it takes, but for now, give us some time to figure out what we’d even be dropping you or Taylor into, okay?”

Rika didn’t reply, but the look on her face spoke volumes about her displeasure — she could have been screaming and shouting and come across tamer and less adamant. I didn’t disagree with her position.

Romani, Marie, and Da Vinci all had a good point. No intel was just as dangerous as bad intel, and working off of faulty assumptions built on a castle made of sand was just asking for something to go awry. The problem was, if things started to deteriorate, it was far too likely it would happen quickly, too quickly for us to intervene, and then we’d lose Ritsuka for sure.

I wasn’t sure Rika would survive it if we did.

“Is this the official decision on the matter then?” I asked neutrally.

Marie looked at me, grimaced at whatever expression was on my face, and then looked away, like she couldn’t meet my eye as she said, “Yes. For now, we don’t know enough to attempt anything so extreme. Romani, you’re in charge of monitoring him. If anything changes, let me know immediately. Da Vinci, obviously, you need to try and get us as much information about what’s happening as possible. The more we know about this curse, the better prepared we’ll be to unravel it when the time comes.”

“Of course,” said Da Vinci.

“Everyone else should return to their dorms,” Marie went on. “Eat breakfast, while you have the chance, and stay nearby. Be ready for if things start to go bad so that we can respond as quickly as possible.”

Shakespeare pressed a hand to his chest. “And me, my good lady?”

“Of course you need to stay nearby,” Marie said like he was stupid for asking. “Right now, you’re our only method of interacting with this curse, so if the worst case scenario occurs, you need to be close enough that we can respond as rapidly as possible!”

“Of course!” Shakespeare bowed. “Then I, too, shall stay here to look over my Master, so that I might observe — in exacting detail — any change in his condition! Why, it is my duty as his Servant!”

“Thank you, Shakespeare,” Mash said gratefully.

“Then you’re all dismissed!” Marie said imperiously.

It wouldn’t be accurate to say that the room emptied out. Romani and Da Vinci were already slated to stay behind, and so was Shakespeare, but Marie left immediately, and Mash hesitated a moment, then she left, too, probably to go and eat some breakfast. I had little doubt she wouldn’t be gone much longer than it took to do just that. I followed behind, shadowing Marie, because what I had to say to her wasn’t for prying ears.

Rika, surprising absolutely no one at all, stayed behind in Ritsuka’s room. Eventually, depending on how long this lasted for, we were going to have to force her out of there and make her eat, just as a matter of her health. Hopefully, Ritsuka would wake up in a few hours and this would all blow over, but if he wound up in that coma for days, then we were going to have to get food into her one way or another.

The instant Mash split off from us, I quickened my pace so that I could catch up to Marie, and lowly, so that only she could hear, I said, “Director, can we talk?”

She glanced at me, grimaced, but nodded and said, “My office.”

She led the way at a quick, clipped pace, walking fast but not so fast that she would look like she was rushing, and when we made it to her office, she opened the door without delay or preamble. I knew she was dreading this conversation — the fact that she had been studiously ignoring looking me in the eye said that loud and clear — but for one reason or another, she wasn’t going out of her way to avoid it.

I liked to think it was because we trusted each other that much. That she might not always like what I had to say, but she respected me enough to listen when I said it.

That mutual trust and respect made it all the harder to round on her the instant the door whooshed shut behind me. “You know this is a bad call.”

“It isn’t,” she said, sticking to her guns. “One Master’s life is already at risk, and we can’t afford to lose a second one! Not Rika’s, for how it might affect her contract with Mash and how easily it could cripple so much of our infrastructure, and especially not *yours!*”

On the one hand, I did get it. I was the ace Master on the team. The most experienced member left, the only remaining Master of Team A, and Marie had invested a significant amount of time, effort, and money in bringing me back from the brink the last time I'd actually paid for my willingness to put everything on the line.

I was also probably the only real friend she had in this place. The degree to which she leaned on me for emotional support was obvious, and I didn't need to be Tattletale to see it. The whole facility — what was left of it — could probably see it.

On the other hand —

“Isn't it my decision whether or not I'm willing to risk my life to save him?”

“As a human being, maybe!” she replied sternly, jabbing a finger at me. “As the expert during deployment, even! But as a Master of Chaldea, inside this facility, under my employ? No! The one who makes these decisions is me, the Director, and I don't make them lightly!”

And, normally, I could accept that. Marie had more than earned that much trust from me. But this wasn't a normal situation, nothing like anything we'd trained for, and as much as I respected Marie, I knew her well enough to know that she didn't always make the best decisions when she was thrown into the deep end.

“Lightly or not, you're still making the decision to abandon him!” I shot back. “We have the means to effect *some* kind of rescue, but you're refusing to use it!”

“I'm not *abandoning* him!” Marie snarled. A brief flash of guilt jolted through my stomach, sour and curdling, but it wasn't enough to keep the next sentence out of my mouth.

“It sure looks like it!”

“Because I'm not letting you try something that would be the equivalent of dangling you over a flaming pit on the off chance it even worked?”

Yes, it was risky, and I knew that, I'd known that from the instant the suggestion was even raised, but that didn't change one fundamental fact:

“It's the best option we've got, isn't it?”

“Because it's the only option, that also means it's the worst!”

“The only other thing I'm hearing is ‘wait and hope,’ and that's the same as leaving him to die!”

“We don't know that!” Marie insisted, but it sounded flimsy to my ears.

“And *you* don't know that I'm wrong!” was my retort. “Ritsuka might not be a bumbling idiot, but he's still new to this, and he's an amateur mage at best! He's stuck in there fighting against a curse that *Da Vinci* is stumped by, and our newest and most volatile Servant is apparently stuck in there with him! We can't even be sure the curse will *let* them work together instead of pitting them against each other!”

Marie's eyes flashed. "Which means that the same thing could happen if *you* went in! It's one thing when he could probably just use a Command Spell to force Jeanne Alter to commit suicide if it comes down to it, but if you two are forced to fight each other and only one person can leave alive, then one of you is guaranteed to die!"

"I wouldn't do that," I said. "And neither would Ritsuka."

She scoffed. "As if you would have a choice! If the only way to break it is to let it run its course, then the only option would be one of you dying so the other could leave, or else you both might be stuck until you *both* die!"

"Do you think I'd let it get to that point? I've been in tough spots like that before. I've always found a way out."

"And that's *exactly* why it can't be you!" she said. "Ritsuka has the best shot alone against a karmic curse. He's an innocent kid who never did anything important before he came to work for Chaldea. All of the good and bad he's done before coming here was tiny, little stuff that doesn't mean anything. You... You have too much *history*. Too many things you've done that had too big an impact."

Quieter, as though to say the words would somehow make them more real, "A karmic curse would *destroy* you. And even if it didn't, whatever was left behind might as well have been."

A cacophony of images flashed through my mind's eye, a highlight reel of all of the things I regretted, all of the deeds that had stuck to me like tar. I'd managed to escape that baggage for so long just by refusing to stop moving forward, by pushing on stubbornly and refusing to lose sight of what I was striving towards. It wasn't the healthiest way of doing things, and I think some part of me had always known that on some level, but there just hadn't ever been *time* to really slow down and let myself deal with everything.

Until it all caught up to me at the end. Until it was all suddenly over and there was nothing left for me to chase, nowhere left for me to run to. I'd had to face it all and stare down my mistakes, realize that I couldn't really regret the end result, but the way I'd gone about some of the things I'd done wasn't how I wished I could have done it.

Marie hugged herself, biting her bottom lip. "Even if Shakespeare really could insulate you from the worst of it, that might not be enough. The karmic weight of that final battle alone..."

"You think I couldn't handle it?"

That I hadn't already known exactly how heavy a sin I was going to be picking up with every decision I made in that fight?

She hunched in on herself. "I think that whatever came out the other side might not be you anymore." She looked up at me. "Or it might be a version of you that you tried to leave behind."

I...didn't quite know how to respond to that. A version of myself I had tried to leave behind? In what way? The young, frightened girl trying to tough her way through daily emotional torment by her former best friend and her tagalongs? The awkward newbie navigating her way through the

minefield of what it meant to be a cape? The callous warlord doing whatever it took to look after her people? The driven leader too focused on the end goal to be a proper friend to her colleagues?

The woman who sacrificed everything in order to save everything?

Those were all parts of myself I'd shed — or at least tried to — and I couldn't imagine a curse that targeted my worst regrets as doing anything else other than driving me further away from them. Throwing all of my mistakes in my face wouldn't do anything except reaffirm that I was right to turn away from being the person who made them.

"I wouldn't let that happen."

The look she gave me now was some Frankenstein mix between pity, understanding, and frustration. "Sometimes, I forget that you're fairly new to all of this, too," she said. "Sixteen months of study — as though that's enough to cover fields of research with centuries of history and depth! Even the most gifted lecturer in the Clock Tower would have struggled to bring you halfway up to speed on everything you needed to know, so I guess it says something about my own abilities as a tutor that you came as far as you did."

My lips pressed into a tight line, annoyed.

"It's impossible to come out of a curse like that unchanged," she went on. "All the more so if it's one powerful enough to stump someone like that Da Vinci, it isn't enough to simply have an indomitable will. The more it has to work on, the more damage it does. If you subject yourself to that curse, Taylor, it *will* change you, if you even survive it. Adding you in as a variable might even affect Ritsuka's chances of surviving it."

It occurred to me, suddenly, what this argument was reminding me of. The difference was, Ritsuka wasn't a tiny little precog being drugged in a basement, and Olga's unwillingness to act seemed to have more to do with concern for me than a refusal to risk her own interests.

"So it's better to risk his life than it is mine?"

"When it's all but guaranteed to go wrong in some incredibly catastrophic way?" she said. "Yes. I'm not going to repeat myself again, so listen to me when I say that circumstances as they are now are actually the best for getting him out of this alive. Just about anything we try to do will only make things worse."

I didn't *want* to listen. I'd spent the last several months having to sit in the back, take potshots whenever the opportunity arose, and let the Servants handle everything else, and I was *tired* of it. Tired of not being able to contribute as much as I wanted to, tired of not being able to do as much as I liked to affect the outcome of things. Tired of sitting on the sidelines.

I wanted to plunge headfirst into this. To feel like I could actually make a difference by myself again, like not just my decisions, but my actions actually mattered and could accomplish something.

But a niggling doubt remained. Something a dear friend had told me, the last time I'd really felt like this and acted on it. About how I never really asked for help, just put people in positions where they had no choice but to go along with me.

And I was...trying to be better than the girl who'd done that.

The fire guttered out in my belly. It left behind a kind of dreadful queasiness, a general sense of weighty unease that settled low in my gut and refused to budge.

"There has to be *something* we can do," I said.

"Wait and hope," Marie said wearily, "that either Ritsuka has become strong enough to make it through this or Da Vinci will figure out how to break it herself."

My stomach churned. Was that really it? Sit around and just hope for the best? It felt so hilariously inadequate. My entire career as a cape, all of that training I went through, all of that tutoring, and now four Singularities resolved, and despite all of the stuff I'd been through and everything I'd ever done, the only thing I could do now was wait.

If only Medea had been able to come back with us. Her Rule Breaker would have undoubtedly made short work of this curse.

"For now," she went on, "you should eat breakfast, if you haven't already, and then go back to your dorm. I can't stop you if you decide to take some time in the simulator or go stay with Ritsuka. I don't even need to remind you to stay out of Da Vinci's way, but she might need you to distract Rika so she can work without being interrupted."

"And you?"

She flinched. Yeah, she didn't actually think I hadn't been paying attention to her during this whole debacle, had she? This had hit a lot closer to home than she wanted anyone to realize, and it was frankly a miracle that she hadn't had a flashback to the sabotage.

Without me to argue with about the merits of intervening in the curse, would she sink back into a mental spiral?

"I...have some paperwork to handle," she said heavily. "I still need to go over your after action reports for Okeanos and get them properly filed and finish up the forms for Emiya's second summoning. I'll...also need to prepare a report for this incident too, won't I?"

If there was nothing else I could do to be of use...

"Do you want me to stay with you?"

The sheer *relief* that radiated off of her was almost palpable. "If...it's not too much trouble, I-I wouldn't mind that."

I nodded. "I'll go and get some breakfast, then grab a novel or something and come back here. Have you eaten yet?"

"No," she said, shaking her head, "but..."

Yeah. I didn't really feel all that much like eating just then either, but I would no doubt regret it later if I didn't have at least something small for breakfast, even if it wasn't anything more than some applesauce and a glass of orange juice.

"I'll bring something back for you," I promised. Some of the tension eased out of her body.

"Thank you."

As I left, she turned and trudged over to her desk with the air of a condemned woman marching to her execution. The mounting pile, it seemed, would only ever grow larger, no matter how much of it she got through, because I was pretty sure it was actually much smaller the last time I was in her office.

The instant the door whooshed shut behind me, I was tempted to rush off and disobey, to grab Shakespeare and force him — although I wasn't sure I would even need to try very hard — to send me in to help Ritsuka. The urge was almost a tangible force tugging on the inside of my gut, like a fishhook wedged in my stomach as someone reeled in on the line.

But I wouldn't get that far, even if I did try. I didn't have enough leverage, and I couldn't appeal to anyone's emotions or sense of pragmatism to go behind Marie's back, because unlike that cadre of PRT Directors who had been perfectly willing to throw me into a dark hole the instant I did something they didn't like or the various and sundry "heroes" who had seemed determined to ignore everything I said and every suggestion I made, all of these people actually cared about me — and not, like the people at Arcadia once upon a time, because of who I knew and how. Romani, Da Vinci, and Marie had vetoed that option because it put *me* at risk, and while that wasn't the only reason, it had enough weight that I doubted I'd be able to change their minds.

How ironic. The one time where I might actually have wanted a transactional relationship with the people above me on the totem pole, and I had instead friendship and camaraderie. My younger self might have pinched herself a couple of times just to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

I ran a hand through my hair, and my headache returned with a vengeance, as though to remind me of its presence again. I'd forgotten to grab a few aspirin off of Romani while I had the chance.

As much as I hated it, it really didn't look like I had too many options. It rankled, but there weren't any obvious avenues open to getting around all of the obstacles, and the stabbing pain between my eyes was making it hard to think too much about it. It seemed like the only thing I could do was wait around and hope that things worked out for the best, and when they took a turn for the worst, that the others would finally let me actually *do* something.

I wasn't holding my breath.

For now, it looked like the only thing I could really do was be prepared and get some food in my belly, so I set off down the hall to do just that. Maybe having one of Emiya's gourmet meals would help to improve my mood, because as it was, I had no idea how I was going to spend the next several hours while I sat around and waited.

Although if this headache got any worse, the answer to that might be "unconscious."