

Chapter CXIX: Demons of Despair

An outburst of sound greeted my statement as everyone tried to talk over each other at once.

“— completely absurd —”

“— the fuck is that?”

“— thought he was just a character —”

“— fictional entity can’t possibly —”

Around and around they went in a cacophony of sound, each of them trying to be heard, until Aife got fed up, and with a scowl, stuck her fingers in her mouth and blew out a shrill, piercing whistle. Everyone fell silent immediately.

“One at a time,” she said sternly, irritable, “unless you’d like to go back to being squabbling children?”

Many a grimace and chagrined look was passed around, and in the wake of that scolding, for a moment, no one seemed to have the courage to speak up, until Rika asked, “Who’s this Count guy anyway?”

Romani and Da Vinci traded more looks, like they were silently debating which of them should tell her, but was Marie who answered her. “The Count of Monte Cristo, otherwise known as Edmond Dantès. He was a sailor who got caught up in political intrigue during a tumultuous time in nineteenth century France, and after a pair of his rivals conspired to ruin him, he was unjustly thrown into Château d’If on trumped up charges without so much as a trial. After spending fourteen years locked up, he managed to escape, found a great treasure, and went on to get revenge against the people who ruined his life. He is essentially the archetypical avenger.”

The literature buff in me wanted to say something about how reductionist that summary was, but that debate wasn’t one worth having just now. If Rika wanted more details, we could cover the nitty gritty parts later on.

“He’s also completely fictional!” Da Vinci protested.

Rika’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“Edmond Dantès is a character in a novel, Senpai,” Mash explained patiently. “*The Count of Monte Cristo*, by Alexandre Dumas. He also wrote another famous novel, *The Three Musketeers*.”

Fuck. This meant that D’Artagnan and the others might just qualify, too, didn’t it? I didn’t know how I was going to handle that if we ever ran into them.

“Then if he’s not real, how is he doing any of this?” Rika demanded furiously, and she waved her free hand in the direction of Ritsuka’s body.

“We don’t know,” Romani said honestly.

“Does it even matter if he’s fictional?” I asked pointedly. “The Phantom of the Opera was supposed to be a fictional character, too, but he felt pretty real when he was trying to gut me like a fish. Why would Dantès be any different?”

Marie and Da Vinci both looked as though they had swallowed something particularly sour, and Romani opened his mouth to reply, paused for a second as what I said made its way through his brain, and then scrubbed frustratedly at his head as he let out a gusty sigh. I could relate.

“That’s actually a really good point,” he admitted. “Da Vinci, is there any reason why Dantès couldn’t be a Heroic Spirit, when we already know the Phantom of the Opera qualifies? If it’s a matter of fame, I’m not sure there’s much difference between them, and if it’s a matter of age, aren’t they from around roughly the same time period?”

“Given what we know, I suppose it’s not *entirely* impossible,” Da Vinci said grudgingly. She looked like she would have been more comfortable if we’d actually been pulling teeth. She sighed and plastered on a blatantly fake smile, it was so strained. “Well. In the face of the facts we have, and in lieu of a better option, I suppose we don’t really have a choice but to assume that this really is the Count of Monte Cristo at work.”

“Next thing you know, we’ll be summoning Sherlock Holmes,” Marie grumbled.

And now that she’d said it, I was afraid she might be right. Would we find ourselves facing off against Professor Moriarty, too? It felt so ridiculous a part of me just wanted to stuff my fist into my mouth and scream. When I’d first read those books, I’d never for a second entertained the idea that I might have to actually *meet* the people in them.

“So?” asked Rika. “What does it mean if it’s this Count Dantès guy?”

Da Vinci’s mouth pulled into a tight line. “Unfortunately, not much at all. Knowing who the likely candidate for our mysterious Avenger class Servant happens to be doesn’t actually change our position, it just gives us a little bit of a better idea what we’re working with.”

“There’s also the question of motive,” Marie pointed out. “Things made a lot more sense when we were assuming this was a curse put on Ritsuka and Jeanne Alter by Forneus just because they happened to be the ones responsible for delivering the killing blow. Edmond Dantès has no reason to want to hurt him or us at all, at least as far as we know, and this is our first time encountering him as a Servant instead of ink on a page.”

A frustrating point. Why *would* Edmond Dantès care enough about us one way or the other enough to trap Ritsuka in his Noble Phantasm? It wasn’t like he was an enemy Servant we’d vanquished inside of one of the Singularities, so we hadn’t denied him his chance to wish upon the Holy Grail.

In the first place, Edmond Dantès had discovered the Monte Cristo treasure, and his story ended on what was essentially a happily ever after. What would he have to wish for?

“Flauros proved that these Demon Gods have the ability to summon Servants on their own,” I began slowly, piecing the thoughts together as I went, “or at least with the aid of a Grail, which they

apparently have the ability to acquire whenever they like.” Or manufacture. One Grail was already a miracle, but eight seemed too much to just find lying about. “Could Dantès have been summoned by Forneus at the last second for the purposes of trapping Ritsuka with his Noble Phantasm?”

It was the only reason I could think of for Dantès to come after us in the first place.

Marie, Da Vinci, and Romani traded looks again, glancing back and forth at each other dubiously, skeptically, like they didn’t have a better theory but didn’t happen to like that one either.

“It’s not impossible,” Marie allowed. “It’s even possible that he can’t manifest normally as a result of his Noble Phantasm, which might explain why we didn’t detect his Saint Graph at any point — and still can’t.”

“Chaldea has yet to register it with any of our systems,” Da Vinci agreed.

“It’s as good a theory as we have, right now,” said Romani. “But it still doesn’t really matter one way or the other, does it? I mean, it’s not like it really makes that much of a difference whether it was a curse from Forneus or Dantès and his Noble Phantasm. The end result is still basically the same.”

Namely, that either way, we were equally unable to do anything about it. The only thing the curse being a Noble Phantasm changed was that it would be all the more impenetrable to the methods and means available to us. As far as we knew, the only way we had in was still Shakespeare’s Noble Phantasm, only now, he might be even less capable of shielding the person sent in from the effects of the prison curse.

Damn it. I’d just all but guaranteed they wouldn’t send me in, hadn’t I?

The cock of a hammer sounded in my ears, and the face of a toddler Mash flashed across my mind’s eye, and I had to blink and draw my lips tight to keep myself from reacting more obviously to it.

“This is all the more reason we can’t afford to try sending someone else in on a rescue mission,” said Marie. “Especially when we know that it can ensnare others who weren’t even affected by the curse originally.”

“What?” Rika shrieked. “But we know who the bad guy is now! There has to be *something* we can do! Right?”

“If Dantès was in front of us, yes,” Da Vinci said, not unkindly. “But if he can’t manifest normally outside of Château d’If, then we can no more reach him than we can Ritsuka. I’m sorry, Rika, but nothing has actually changed now that we have another idea of who might be behind all of this.”

Rika didn’t look at all happy to hear this, and I wouldn’t have been surprised to hear Ritsuka’s bones creaking in protest from how hard she squeezed his hand, but she didn’t seem like she had any new ideas either, so she couldn’t do anything except stew in her own helplessness. I think that was the most relatable she’d ever been to me.

“Would it be possible to Rayshift into Château d’If?” Mash asked calmly.

“Where?” asked Marie. “When? That’s half of our problem right now. We don’t have coordinates to even begin the calculations necessary to do something like that!”

“Guess we can’t just treat this like an ordinary Singularity, then,” Emiya mumbled.

“Unfortunately not,” Da Vinci agreed. “For now, we’re in essentially the same position we were in yesterday, just with a slightly better idea of what the situation looks like for Ritsuka. We’ll have to spread the information among the other Servants and staff so that they know to report it if they happen to be swept up in things while they’re asleep.”

And maybe, for someone like Bradamante, who didn’t have quite so many demons waiting in the dark, it might be possible for them to resist whatever compulsions Château d’If used to force the victims to play whatever sick and twisted role they’d been sized for. Maybe knowing what was happening would let them better fight against it, and they could break free to help Ritsuka solve whatever problem he needed to solve in order to make it out.

I wasn’t sure it would be anywhere near that simple, though.

“You said Dantès called you a Lord of the Hall of Judgment,” I said to Emiya. “Is there more than one of those? Did he give any indication that there was some sort of number of them Ritsuka had to overcome?”

Emiya frowned and shook his head. “I’m sorry. I don’t recall anything like that. If he ever said anything about a specific number of Lords, then it wasn’t within earshot of me.” He held up a pair of fingers. “But I think we can say that Ritsuka has already faced down at least two.”

Him and Aífe. Yeah, that made some degree of sense, didn’t it? Unfortunately, that didn’t help us too much. If this place was built around the prisoner conquering a specific number of challenges, knowing he’d already defeated two didn’t help us much when we didn’t know if there were a total of five or five hundred.

I was going to have to go back and see if I could find any clues in the original novel. I didn’t recall there being a specific number of tasks Dantès had to do before he escaped, but... Fourteen, one for each year he’d been imprisoned? It made as much sense to me as anything else, just then.

It also sounded like a tall order — for anyone, really, but especially for someone like Ritsuka, who hadn’t had an entire career to prepare him to face down a gauntlet of powerful foes.

“That doesn’t do us much good without knowing how many there are in the first place,” Marie grumbled, echoing my thoughts.

“If the same thing happens tonight with a different set of Servants, then it may be we know more of what’s going on tomorrow,” Da Vinci reasoned. “Until then, however, I don’t think there’s much else we can do except prepare for the inevitable.”

Rika stiffened, eyes going wide and mouth dropping open with horror. I realized then that what she probably thought they meant by “the inevitable” was entirely different from what Romani had said to me yesterday about if and when we would have to finally take a risk and send someone into the curse with Ritsuka.

“Yeah,” Romani sighed. “As terrible as it is, we really can’t afford to put off more extreme solutions more than another day. If we don’t learn anything else by tomorrow, we may just have to resort to sending someone in on a rescue operation.”

The relief hit Rika like a sledgehammer to the gut, and I watched it ripple through her, apparently unnoticed by anyone else.

“What?” Marie demanded. “Romani, I didn’t authorize any such thing!”

“Sorry, Director, I meant to talk with you about it earlier, but I just never got around to it,” he replied apologetically. “Da Vinci and I discussed it, and it was the only thing we could come up with that wouldn’t mean automatically crippling our infrastructure.”

Marie’s expression turned thunderous, and she looked mere seconds away from descending into a furious tirade.

So naturally, Da Vinci swooped in to defuse her. “It’s my fault, Director. I monopolized his time yesterday while I was trying to find out more about what the curse was doing to Ritsuka, so he never had the chance to speak with you about it. I’m sorry.”

Marie almost literally bit her tongue, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath to calm down, and tersely, she said, “We’ll discuss the issue in more detail later.” The words seemed to physically pain her. “For now, is there anything else we need to bring up about the issue, or have we covered all of the relevant ground we can?”

A long moment of silence passed. Rika looked back and forth between everyone, and her expression grew stormier with each second that went by.

“So we’re just going to sit around and wait?” she demanded. “Again? We can’t do anything at all?”

More guilty looks were traded between Romani and Da Vinci. It was Marie who stepped up and said, “We only have one chance to do anything to help bring Ritsuka back, so we absolutely have to make sure that we’re doing it right. The very last thing we want to do is to make anything worse. Especially when *two* Masters might be on the line instead of one!”

Romani’s relief was palpable. “Exactly,” he agreed. “We haven’t given up on Ritsuka, Rika. It’s just that we have to be extra careful when we don’t really know all that much about what we’re doing and how bad things might go if we cut the wrong wire... Um, if you know what I mean.”

Marie’s face twisted into a grimace, and Da Vinci sighed and shook her head, exasperated.

“For now,” she said, “I think it would be best if we took some time to breathe and gather our thoughts. Most of us haven’t even had the chance to eat breakfast yet, yes?”

As though on cue, Romani’s stomach let out an audible growl, and my own clenched and rumbled a quiet agreement. From the dusting of red on Marie’s cheeks, she was in the same boat, even if no one had heard it. She lifted a hand to her mouth and cleared her throat conspicuously.

“An excellent suggestion!” she said a little more loudly than necessary. “None of us is any good to anyone if we starve to death, let alone Ritsuka, so if there’s nothing else we can do for now, we should eat and prepare for the moment when we can!”

Romani smiled weakly. “Yeah, I think I can get behind that. Unless there’s anything anyone forgot to add?”

Everyone looked around the room, but no one spoke up. Rika’s expression fell first, and then her head followed, leaving her hair to dangle over her face.

“Then those of us who need to should eat while we have the chance,” said Marie. “Da Vinci, I’m assuming you’re going to remain here and continue to monitor him? Can you do that without neglecting any of your duties?”

“It’s a bit inconvenient, but I won’t have any problems,” said Da Vinci. She held up her tablet and gave it a little wave. “There are some projects that were interrupted by this...situation, but none of them were time sensitive or vital. Everything else, I can handle from here as well as I would my workshop.”

I wondered, briefly, if one of those projects that had been put on hold was my spider puppet, but right then wasn’t the time to bring it up. Ritsuka’s continued well-being was just plainly more important than the convenience of another tool in my kit.

Marie nodded. “We’ll adjourn for now. Of course, the instant anything changes, Da Vinci, I expect you to inform us, but until then, there’re still jobs that need doing, and they’re not going to wait for us to decide we’re ready to get back to them.”

Emiya sighed. “I guess that’s my cue to head back to the cafeteria, isn’t it? I didn’t give Marcus much of an explanation before I came here, so he’s probably wondering where I went off to and why.”

“Great,” Romani grunted. “I guess that means a cup of coffee is the first thing on my list. No offense to Marcus, but even as your assistant, Emiya, he really doesn’t measure up.”

“Somehow, I don’t think it’s appropriate for me to respond on his behalf,” Emiya drawled.

“That’s it?” Rika asked, deathly quiet. “We’re... We’re just supposed to sit on our asses for another day and hope nothing goes wrong? No... No plan, no nothing?”

“Hey, do you think any of us like this any better?” Marie spat. “It’s not like this is easy for any of the rest of us either, you know! You’re not the only one frustrated by how little we can do!”

Rika’s head shot up, a thunderous scowl tearing across her face.

“It’s *because* we have a plan that we’re not doing anything else, Rika,” Romani said more patiently. “Because the plan is dangerous and risky and might cause more problems than it solves, so we have to be extra careful that we don’t mess up. Ritsuka may be your brother, but that doesn’t mean the rest of us don’t care about bringing him back in one piece, okay?”

Rika looked away again. She didn't say anything else, but the tremble in her limbs and the lines of tension threaded through her body told the tale of the storm that had to be raging in her gut. If she had my powers, with a full swarm gathered, the whole room would have been literally abuzz as a curtain of black chitin ripped itself apart.

Romani sighed wearily. "Just...take breaks while you wait, okay? I know you might not feel like eating, but your body still needs food to survive, so it won't do you any good to starve yourself, and it won't do Ritsuka any good if you're too weak to do anything when the time comes we have to send you in to help him."

Rika didn't reply to that either, but he seemed to take the fact that she wasn't yelling or screaming or spitting metaphorical venom his way as an agreement. Marie, on the other side, scowled and crossed her arms, glaring, but didn't rip into Rika either, and eventually, the tension got more awkward than anything else.

Aífe's lips pressed tightly together, but rather than offer some sort of criticism or threaten some kind of punishment, she turned away from the group and vanished into spirit form. Marie's glare shifted to the spot Aífe had just vacated, and she looked very much like she wanted to lambast Aífe for breaking the rule about materializing and dematerializing so casually, but didn't want to feel stupid for yelling at what was now empty air.

Emiya, for his part, grimaced and turned away, but he paused a second and glanced back over his shoulder — and then he, too, disappeared. I felt the prickle of the fine hairs on my prosthetic, as sure a sign as any that he had brushed past me. Marie's glare swiveled to his now open spot, but she didn't comment on it again for likely the same reason.

Romani, who looked utterly exhausted, fidgeted uncomfortably for a few moments, and then awkwardly edged his way through the room and towards the door. He mumbled something about being back later, then ducked out unceremoniously.

I followed after him, because if I was going to discuss my own little jaunt the night before, it wasn't going to be in front of the whole group, and before I left, I sent Marie a meaningful look — a sort of nonverbal "we need to talk." She seemed to understand what I was trying to convey, because as I went through the door, I saw her jolt into motion and follow after me through Muninn's eyes.

When we'd made it far enough from Ritsuka's room that no one would notice us talking, I sped up a little until I was even with him, and he was so tired-looking that I almost regretted having to open my mouth and say, "Romani, there's something we need to talk about."

He blinked and turned to me, confused, then glanced up and down the hallway. "Here?" he asked a little dumbly.

I shook my head once. "In the Director's office. It...might reveal some classified information."

He blinked again, and then his brow furrowed as he looked behind me, where Marie was no doubt trailing and wearing an expression equally as solemn.

"...This is going to be a 'drink the whole pot' kind of day, isn't it?"

My brow twitched. At least that was better than dosing up on potentially illegal or illicit stimulants with who-even-knew what kind of side effects.

Romani sighed. “Alright. I guess breakfast can wait a little bit longer.” Wistfully, he added, “Emiya kind of needs some time to start cooking it anyway, doesn’t he?”

We made our way together to Marie’s office, a bedraggled Romani, a solemn Director, and me with a carefully stoic affect. If the original two-hundred people were still around, we probably would have been turning some heads.

As it was, the silence felt all the more conspicuous. The only thing in the hallway with us was our footsteps. We encountered no one else, although I wouldn’t have been surprised if Arash was still hovering about, watching over me.

I thought about ordering him to leave...but I had no way of knowing how much of my past he’d already seen. The dream cycle was supposed to go both ways, but aside from a few small scenes, I had been mostly insulated from my Servants’ pasts — it might have been a consequence of splitting the contracts the way we did, although how that worked, I couldn’t have said.

As my personal Servant, however, with me as his sole contractor, it was more than likely he knew more about my history than Romani did. Trying to hide more of it from him might have been moot. An exercise in futility.

When we arrived at Marie’s office, she stepped up and opened the door for us, and we all walked inside. The instant the door was closed and we were as secure as we possibly could be, the both of them turned to me expectantly.

“Alright,” said Romani. “What’s this all about, then?”

I pursed my lips and chose my words carefully. “I...may have already experienced the curse, much like Aífe and Emiya did.”

Both of them reacted about the way I expected them to: their eyes went wide and their mouths dropped open as their eyebrows rose towards their hairlines.

“What?” Marie managed to strangle out.

“You...already experienced it?” Romani said, voice rising with panic. “When? How?”

I thought about how best to cover this, but there really weren’t that many good options. Straightforward and honest was probably the best, if only because this was sort of like lying to your doctor — covering up symptoms only caused you more problems in the long run.

“I thought it was probably just a dream, at first,” was how I prefaced it. “But the way Aífe and Emiya described their experiences in Château d’If made me reconsider. The patterns lined up too neatly. The structure of the dream, the part about being forced to play a role, all of it.”

The more I thought about it, the more the similarities jumped out at me. It explained everything so *neatly*.

“You encountered Ritsuka?” Romani asked.

For a moment, I hesitated. But there really wasn't a nice or pretty way of saying this, and there wasn't a way of sugarcoating it without lying outright. And if it was at all relevant to our rescue efforts, then I had to say it.

“I killed him.”

“What?” Marie shrieked, drowning out Romani's equally startled yelp. She turned to him. “Romani!”

“Th-there were no abnormalities in his readings when I checked this morning!” Romani replied, just as panicked. “Everything was the same as it was yesterday when we first checked up on him! If she really did —” He turned to me almost desperately. “Taylor, are you sure?”

My lips pressed together. “Do you remember the part about my world having superheroes and supervillains?”

He shook his head frantically.

“That doesn't have anything to do with —”

“It's relevant,” I cut across him.

He scowled. “Fine. Yes. Now what did you mean, you killed Ritsuka?”

“We had a prison,” I began. “An inescapable supermax prison, where we sent the worst of the worst, the lowest of the low, the scum who were too dangerous to leave free but not so horrible that they got kill orders.”

“Kill orders?” Romani choked out.

For some reason, his disbelief annoyed me. The Mage's Association had hit squads they sent out to cleanse entire towns when some rogue mage threatened the secrecy of magecraft, and yet the idea of the government sanctioning the execution of people too dangerous to live was so hard for him to accept?

“The Birdcage,” Marie mumbled. I guess she really had seen everything, if she recognized it that easily.

“Ritsuka was in there,” I went on without addressing either of their words, “and I was going in to rescue him, having to fight figments of my past enemies along the way, only the deeper I went, the less it became about that. Eventually, it became about escaping. The figments of my enemies became twisted combinations of my friends and allies — past and present. I...had to fight him, only...it was like someone else was controlling my body.”

Marie's face paled. Yeah. She knew the most out of everyone in this place about what I'd done. It figured she would catch onto that irony, too.

“And...that's when...” Romani trailed off, making an abortive gesture with his hand.

“Yeah.”

“And after that,” he asked, “you woke up?”

I shook my head. “Not immediately. Château d’If wasn’t done with me yet.”

“There was more?” Marie asked, her voice an octave higher than normal.

“Yes. I also...encountered each of you, only...changed the same way Ritsuka was. Merged with people from my past. You, Romani, you, Director, along with Da Vinci, Rika, and Mash. And I...”

The cocking of a hammer clicked in my ears. I swallowed against it.

“I was forced to kill each and every one of you. One after the other. All of you, inhabiting the bodies of my friends and colleagues from...before. Before Chaldea. Whatever was controlling me moved my hands on its own.”

And in its own way, that made sense. It wasn’t just ironic, it was poetic. Karmic. Like I was being punished for what I’d done as Khepri. If this curse — even if it was enacted by a Noble Phantasm — was supposed to work based upon our accumulated sins, well, what had happened was fittingly horrific.

Paradoxically, however, Romani seemed to become less and less concerned with every word.

“You said you started off in this inescapable supermax prison?” he asked, calmer than I thought this warranted. “That you were there to rescue Ritsuka?”

“Yes,” I answered. “But every time I thought I reached him, he disappeared before I could rescue him.”

He nodded. “Right. And when you reached the bottom and had nowhere else to chase him down, suddenly, you had to fight your way back out? Against everyone you knew and cared about?”

“Yes.”

Punishment for abandoning them, no doubt. For going off to do everything my own way instead of trusting them to help me.

“It can reach any of us it wants to,” Marie muttered with an undercurrent of terror. “None of us are safe. Is... Is it memetic, contagious, proximity based, or...?”

Romani sighed. “I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that, Director.”

“What?” Marie snapped at him.

“Taylor,” said Romani, addressing me, “that wasn’t the curse. That was just a normal nightmare.”

My first reaction was to dig my heels in. To insist that I was right, he was wrong, and that he wasn’t taking this situation as seriously as he should be. After all, we didn’t really know the limits of this curse and how it could affect us, what vectors it might use to transmit itself from person to person.

At the very least, Emiya and Aife proved that direct contact wasn't necessary, because neither of them had visited Ritsuka yesterday, and Emiya didn't even have a contract with him.

But another part of me was just relieved. More than happy to accept the idea that it was my own psyche tormenting me and not some unreachable, untouchable enemy I couldn't fight back against. Because that made it something I could weather and move on from instead of a problem I couldn't solve.

And it wasn't like I hadn't assumed it was a dream in the first place. It had just been visceral enough that I'd also been more than willing to believe it was more than that, especially when the details lined up with Aife and Emiya's accounts of their time in Château d'If.

I still had to ask, "Are you sure?"

He heaved another sigh and ran a hand through his hair. "Obviously, with something like this, I can't offer you any guarantees. But it makes the most sense, doesn't it? Ritsuka is trapped in a place none of us can go to rescue him, fighting a battle none of us can help him with, and this will be the first time since you took over as leader of the team where he's completely out of reach for you. I'm no expert on interpreting dreams, but... Doesn't that sound like what your dream was about?"

It did. The entire dream, I'd been chasing after Ritsuka, and every time I thought I was getting close, he was suddenly out of reach. And when I'd reached the bottom and had nowhere else to go, it had switched, and I was forced to face the sorts of things I might have thought would await me inside that prison of dreams. The punishments that my mind concocted to fit the theme.

So maybe it really was nothing more than a dream and I'd just blown it out of proportion. I'd overreacted, as it were.

This would have been a great time for Chaldea to have Master-Stranger Protocols, though. Just to be absolutely sure. Because while I didn't think I'd been influenced — beyond the obvious ways that nightmare had affected me afterwards — the reason those protocols existed was because you, the victim, could never really know for sure yourself.

"Is there any way we can check?" Marie asked. "Just so we can be certain she hasn't been affected?"

"Not...immediately?" Romani said uncertainly. "I can give her a checkup to look for any of the obvious signs, but if we're looking for the effects of this curse in particular, it's probably something Da Vinci can be more thorough about. It's not something I can just do right here, anyway."

Marie nodded. "Your office, then?"

"Ah...I...guess?" he answered. "I...don't suppose I could go and get some breakfast first? None of us have eaten yet, after all."

Marie's reply was a withering glare, eyes narrowed and brow furrowed deep. Romani sighed for a third time.

"That's a no, then," he lamented. "Okay. I should have some data from when we Rayshifted them into Okeanos to serve as a baseline, so let's go and get this over with."

“Yes,” Marie said sternly. “The sooner, the better.”

And when he didn't instantly turn around and make for his office, she all but pushed him out of the door. Quite the feat, considering he was so much taller than her, so maybe he was even more tired than he looked.

“Alright, alright, I get it!” he whined. “I'm going already! Geez! She's been fine for the last three hours, I don't think she's going to keel over in the next five minutes!”

“That's no excuse to drag your feet!” was Marie's response.

I followed after them, a small, lopsided smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. A little bit of humor in this bleak moment, where we really were missing it.

There wasn't much else I could do, right then, so I could at least hope that the demons haunting my dreams were my own and not the machinations of some distant foe. I could handle a few bad dreams.