

Chapter CXXXIII: Fairy Tale Ending

I didn't really like the idea of just letting Mordred whale on Mash until she was satisfied that she'd accomplished whatever her actual goal was. Forgetting the matter of trust — and it wasn't an insignificant issue, even if Mordred hadn't really given us a reason to mistrust her before this — it felt a little too much like bullying. Like I was standing back and letting Mordred pick on Mash because Mash didn't measure up to the Heroic Spirit living rent free inside her body, and sitting on the sidelines refusing to do something was a thousand times worse than sitting on the sidelines unable to do anything.

There were a few things that made it easier, though. Bearable. One, the fact that we were halfway through clearing these Singularities and Mash *still* didn't have much more than a basic grasp of the Heroic Spirit inside of her. From her words, Mordred seemed intent on addressing that. Two, neither one of them was taking this one-hundred percent seriously. The fact that I could still follow the action spoke to that more than anything else.

It wasn't to say that Mash wasn't trying her best and Mordred wasn't pushing her. Both of those things were happening. But they weren't moving as fast as I knew Mordred at least could and no one was going for killing blows with any real intent to harm.

If I forgot about how this had started and what Mordred had said beforehand, then it would have looked like a sparring match. Or maybe a lesson.

The only trouble with that was that I didn't know what would mean the lesson was over. Was Mordred just waiting for something only she could see, or was she waiting for Mash to land a clean hit? First blood, as it were?

Beside me, Arash remained calm and stoic. He hadn't yet seen anything that would require him to jump into the fight. In the back, watching just as intently, Emiya clutched to his twin swords, eyes wide open and unblinking. I didn't know if he had come to the same conclusion on his own, or if Rika had given him silent orders not to intervene, but the fact that she wasn't screaming at him to get off his ass and do something said that, at the very least, he'd given her a speech about why this needed to happen.

They broke apart, and the fight entered a brief lull. Mordred grinned, still raring to go, and Mash stood opposite her, chest heaving.

“Come on!” Mordred jeered. “You can do better than that! That asshole has just been sitting around doing nothing, hasn't he? Get him up and put him to work already!”

Mash said nothing, staring back with brow furrowed and mouth drawn into a tight line.

“Or maybe...” Mordred's eyes wandered over to Ritsuka. “Ya need a bit of motivation, huh?”

Red lightning crackled over her limbs, and beside me, Arash tensed, getting ready to intervene — Mordred appeared to teleport, crossing the distance in what looked like a single step, sword raised to deliver an overhand chop. Ritsuka gasped, throwing himself out of the way just a fraction of a second too slow.

“What —” Emiya barked, jerking into motion himself.

“Master!”

But Mash beat everyone there, body aglow with power as she put everything she had into a tackle that slammed into Mordred head on. Mordred was thrown away, tumbling down the road with a clatter and bending the post of the streetlight that stopped her almost a full ninety degrees.

Emiya descended on her immediately.

“— the hell are you doing?”

He pinned her, foot pressing down on her breastplate, and he rested the edges of his blades threateningly against her throat.

“You lunatic!”

Rika and I were the only ones who didn't panic. Maybe because we'd both seen this tactic before, way back when, when Cúchulainn used his Noble Phantasm to force Mash into using hers, as incomplete as it was. Targeting Ritsuka was the only thing that had worked back then — and frustratingly, it seemed to be the only thing that still worked now.

“Master!”

The instant Mordred was out of the way, Mash turned back to Ritsuka, worried, doing her best to keep both him and Mordred within her field of view.

“Are you okay, Senpai?”

“That,” Ritsuka grouched as he picked himself back up, “wasn't any more fun the second time than it was the first.”

“Second?” Arash and Emiya echoed simultaneously.

Over on the ground, Mordred burst out laughing. “Knew that would do the trick! Geez, Mash, you sure made me work for that one, didn't you?”

Emiya's brow furrowed, and he looked between the two of them for a second or two as he put the pieces together. Then he shook his head, heaved out a disgusted sigh, and pushed himself back and off of Mordred's body. Mordred climbed to her feet as though nothing had happened. She rolled her shoulders.

“Back in Fuyuki, the Caster we teamed up with, Cúchulainn, he tried something similar, to similar effect,” I explained for the benefit of Emiya and Arash.

“Fuck,” Mordred said sourly. “You mean I wasn't the first to have an idea like that? Man, that blows. Some other fucker stole my idea!”

“At least you didn’t use your Noble Phantasm,” Rika said blithely. “I still have flashbacks to Cu’s giant, burning manwood.”

I grimaced and Ritsuka groaned. “If you were going to try and help, couldn’t you have done it during the fight, in an actually helpful way?” he asked her.

“I mean, this was a shounen power up sequence,” Rika reasoned. Like it was obvious. “I didn’t want to distract anyone and interrupt the power of narrative mumbo-jumbo. And hey!” She gestured at Mash. “It worked, didn’t it?”

Putting aside the questionable phrasing, it actually had. Not just as some internal thing, like Mash had unlocked a font of knowledge and skill she hadn’t had before, but externally, because she actually had more armor on, now. At her wrists and knees, and her chestplate actually covered her stomach now instead of leaving a glaring spot open. Some of the holes had been filled in.

It still wasn’t a full set, not like Mordred’s. It didn’t cover anywhere near as much of her body as I thought it should. But it was more than she’d had five minutes ago, and that was... something.

Had Mordred known this was going to happen?

“Oh.” Mash looked down at herself, twisting and turning so she could check her back, too. “I...suppose it did, didn’t it?”

Beep-beep!

“What the hell is going on?” Marie demanded immediately. “Mordred! Just what did you think you were doing to Mash!”

“Oof! Don’t glare at me like that!” Mordred said, head ducked and grinning sheepishly. “Yeah, I know, I went a little overboard! Geez! I’m sorry, okay? I just didn’t have any better ideas!”

“Not attacking Mash would have been a better one!” Marie rebuked her. “Or targeting Ritsuka either!”

“Hey, hey, it was a mock fight!” Mordred said defensively. “No one was ever in any real danger, and Mash knew it, too! Right, Mash?”

Mash sighed. “For the most part.” And then, she added sternly, “B-but going after Senpai, I really thought you meant it! You scared me!”

“Ah, geez,” said Mordred. “I wasn’t gonna actually hurt him that bad. Just a broken bone or two, you know?”

“That’s not good either!” Marie and Mash said together in stereo.

“Alright!” said Mordred. “Alright! I’m sorry! Stop yelling at me, will you?”

“Director,” I said diplomatically, and Marie’s attention turned my way. “Considering the circumstances, I think we can overlook this incident.” I turned to Mordred and pinned her with a hard stare. “On the understanding that it doesn’t happen a second time.”

Mordred scoffed. “What, like I’m gonna make a promise like that? As long as Shiedly here doesn’t backslide or start moping, I won’t need to kick her ass into gear again. Got that, Mash?” she added in Mash’s direction.

“O-of course!” Mash agreed immediately.

Marie scowled thunderously, but since it was me who said so, she deferred to my judgment. “Fine. Just this once, I’m going to overlook it.” Her glare could have frozen a steak. “But if it happens again, don’t hesitate to reprimand her however you have to! We’re not so desperate for allies that we can afford to make allowances for an unreliable one!”

“Oof!” Mordred said, clutching her gut with one hand. “Man, you sure don’t pull your punches, do you, Director Lady? If you were here in person, I might have to actually challenge you to a duel!”

“L-let’s avoid those!” Romani said from behind Marie. He leaned over her so he could get his face into view, something that Marie didn’t look particularly happy about. “After all, we’re all allies here, aren’t we? A-and it’s not like that, uh, mock fight didn’t have any results! It’s actually pretty incredible, when you look at it!”

“It is?” Mash and Ritsuka both said.

“What kinda gains are we looking at here, Doc?” asked Rika.

“For starters, the quality of her Saint Graph has doubled,” Romani answered, and everyone with the exception of Mordred looked at him with surprise. That little mock fight had done *that* much for her?

“Really?” asked Mash. “I suppose I do feel a lot stronger than I did before.”

“Mash went Super Saiyan!” Rika announced — to groans from Emiya and her brother and a curious look from Arash, who was just as clueless as I was.

Mash tilted her head quizzically. “Super Saiyan?”

“Yeah.” Romani nodded. “Her magical energy output has increased, too, and her parameters have all been adjusted upwards. Not a full rank-up across the board, but pretty close, and two of her skills have increased in potency as well. Man, Da Vinci is going to have a total field day with this data!”

If we could expect increases like that with any consistency, then I would have been happy to have everyone go around having mock fights all over the place. That was a big change for such a little fight.

“Wow,” said Ritsuka. “So it actually did work that well, huh? I guess Mordred knows what she’s doing, after all.”

Mordred huffed. “Of course I do! I’m a Knight of the Round Table, you know!”

“But I still don’t know the true name or real Noble Phantasm of the Heroic Spirit inside of me,” said Mash.

“Course not,” said Mordred as though it should have been obvious. “And even if you did, that bastard isn’t one to just hand his full power over. You’ve still got a long way to go before he’ll be convinced you earned it, you’re just a lot closer now than you were before.”

Because she stood up to Mordred and protected Ritsuka? I...wasn’t sure how any of that connected to Mash proving herself to the guy riding around in her head, but then, I didn’t know what sort of metric he was judging her by to begin with.

“I...suppose this fiasco wasn’t a total waste of everyone’s time and energy,” Marie admitted grudgingly. She might have been more comfortable getting her teeth pulled. “Still!”

“I got it the first time,” Mordred said, sounding more annoyed now. “You keep harping on it, and you’re gonna piss me off.”

Unfortunately, this seemed like a situation unique to Mash, and a one-off at that. And the more time we spent doing that, the less time we had to get to Soho, investigate the magical book, and get back to Jekyll’s apartment.

“Was there anything else you needed, Director?” I asked her.

She frowned, but seemed to take the hint. “Not at this time. Continue your investigation. And remember, even if we can’t contact you through the fog, we can still monitor your movements and your condition without any trouble. We’ll know if anything happens!”

“Right!” Mash and Ritsuka nodded.

Rika snapped off a salute. “Roger that, Boss Lady!”

The connection cut and the hologram winked out.

“So?” said Mordred as soon as Marie was gone. “How are you feeling, Mash? That little tiff knock something loose, or is that asshole still being stingy? That’s what all of that shit they were just peddling means, right?”

Mash sighed. “Yes, it did help. It’s...hard to describe, but... It’s almost like...” She smiled. “A shackle on my heart was removed. Thank you, Sir Mordred.”

“Ah, shut up!” said Mordred. “It was just pissing me right the fuck off, that was all, you calling yourself a Demi-Servant and going around like that! ‘S long as you’re good now, let’s just move on, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said before anyone else could cut in and drag things out longer. Emiya in particular looked like there was something on his tongue that he was trying his hardest not to say. “We have a little

over three hours to reach Soho, find out what's going on with this magic book, and get back to Jekyll's apartment. Sir Mordred, since you know the way best..."

She waved it off. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Let's go see what all of the hubbub about this magical book is about, so we can get back to fixing this whole mess."

And so we did. With Mordred in front, we made our way towards Soho, walking through the streets of London.

It was tempting to pull what we had in Orléans and have our Servants pick us up and carry us, or maybe call up Aífe and have her take us there in her chariot, but the latter was out immediately because of the lack of room. It might have been possible with Mordred in spirit form, but she couldn't exactly give us directions like that without a contract, and fitting five of us into that one chariot would be a tight squeeze.

The instant this whole magic book thing was resolved and we had a minute to relax a little bit, I was going to push the issue of at least a temporary contract with Mordred and Caster. It had screwed us over one too many times before.

As for the former, that had its own problems. For one, it didn't seem anywhere near as straight a shot here as it did there. City streets could follow some fairly neat lines, but they could also be labyrinthine when you weren't familiar with them, and the only one here who had any real idea where we were going was Mordred. For another, those twisty turns would also make it supremely uncomfortable to take them at speed, and no one wanted us Masters losing our breakfast from the turbulence.

At least this wasn't like Orléans or Septem. Walking was still "the long way," but it wasn't hours, days, or weeks of walking, and that made it easier and less of a problem.

We *did* run into another patrol group on our way there, but they were taken care of just as easily as we did the first group and dispatched quickly. They weren't even all that much of a speed bump on the metaphorical road, and they were more annoying to have to step over their remains than they were actually fighting them.

There was the question of if they reported in or if the enemy would notice their absence, but I wasn't sure they had the intelligence for the former or that they were important enough for the latter. To have made this many in just a few days — provided they hadn't had weeks or months to set up the preparations and only set them in motion recently — they had to have some method of mass production, whatever it was.

I suppose that was fitting for the Industrial Revolution. Annoying, but fitting.

Our arrival in the Soho area happened without any fanfare to a section of the city that looked much like the rest of it. If it wasn't for the people I could see huddled in their apartments with my bugs, the whole place would have seemed abandoned, like a ghost town.

"Well, here we are," said Mordred. "This is Soho. Where do we wanna look first?"

A good question.

“Did you find anything strange on your way to Frankenstein’s mansion yesterday?” I asked.

Emiya huffed. “If only it were that easy.”

“We took a different route to the mansion, and there wasn’t anything strange until we got there and fought Mephistopheles,” Ritsuka answered. “Plus, we don’t know when exactly this magical tome appeared, right? So we might have been on our way back when it started attacking people.”

Both of those were good points. It would have been only too convenient if we could have crossed out the route they took to Frankenstein’s mansion as already having been investigated, but without knowing the exact time and place of the first case — or even the first reported case — that was unfortunately too much to ask for.

My bugs would make looking around a little easier, but if this magical book returned to being an ordinary book when it wasn’t attacking people, then I probably wouldn’t be able to tell it apart from any other book. The only thing that might give it away would be its size.

A small child? Most books weren’t anywhere near that big. But “most” wasn’t “none.” I’d keep an eye out as best I could as we went forward.

“Well, Doctor Jekyll said that he heard about this thing from one of his collaborators, right?” Rika suggested. “Maybe we should check in with him, then. Or her. They’re supposed to be in an antique bookstore somewhere around here, aren’t they?”

“No nickname for Jekyll?” Emiya teased.

“It’s so hard!” she complained melodramatically. “I can’t come up with any good ones! Two-Face is just mean, and Glasses is too generic! It needs to be zippy and witty and nothing I think of works!”

“A whole new take on first world problems,” Ritsuka joked. Rika stuck her tongue out at him.

It was as good a suggestion as any. Without a “scene of the crime” to check out and a trail to otherwise follow, the next best thing, as my investigative training with the Wards told me, was to talk to the witnesses or informants who originally reached out. In this case, Jekyll’s collaborator. I wasn’t going to hold my breath, but he should at least be able to tell us a little more about what was going on.

“A good idea, Rika,” I said, and Rika’s face broke out into a smile at the compliment. “Let’s talk to this collaborator and see what he has to say about this magical book.”

So we set off to find this antique bookstore, and as we walked, I explored as much of the surrounding buildings as I could without spooking anyone inside them. A lot of them were mostly vacant, it turned out, because they were apartments sat atop businesses, so the bottom floor was a bakery or a tailor or a restaurant or a bar — a pub, as the British called it.

These people, I think, were the best off out of everyone in the city. They had better access to food, and although it would hurt their business in the long run, the long run shouldn’t matter with us there to fix the Singularity.

I came across several victims in the area, or what I assumed were victims. They were still and unresponsive, but when I had a few bugs cautiously investigate, I couldn't find any obvious wounds or injuries. It was like they'd simply fallen asleep and wouldn't wake up. Like something out of a fairy tale.

She will prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and fall into a sleep like death. Only it wasn't Sleeping Beauty, but something else entirely.

A thought occurred to me, and I paused in my stride only a moment before continuing on. Arash glanced at me, but no one else seemed to notice.

Charles Perrault wrote the original fairy tale we knew as *Sleeping Beauty*, one of many he penned. He didn't come up with it, because it was originally two separate stories recorded by the Brothers Grimm, but the combined version — much like Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* — was the one best remembered and the version Disney based the movie on. I wasn't sure that was enough on its own, but...

P, B, and M. And I'd said before that one of our mystery culprits could very well be an author famous for writing fantasy. Charles Perrault would definitely qualify. A Noble Phantasm that enacted scenes from the fairy tales he wrote would be all too fitting for this situation.

Something wrong? Arash asked me suddenly.

My lips drew tight. *A hunch. I might know who the Heroic Spirit behind this magic book is.*

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye again. *Oh?*

Keep your eyes peeled for fairy tale creatures, I told him. *If I'm right, then the book is just a tool for summoning them, and the man controlling it might not be anywhere near here.*

The question then would be whether he was actually controlling it at all or if his Noble Phantasm's whimsical nature would give it some degree of independence. One way or the other, it was likely we'd have to find out firsthand.

And the others? Arash asked.

If he knows we're onto him, we might spook him, I reasoned. *If we can secure the bookstore, then we can discuss it there.*

He gave a small, almost imperceptible nod.

Our second day, and we might already be confronting one of the three masterminds behind this thing. Ever since we met Aífe in Septem, things had started moving much faster than they had in Orléans, but this would be even faster than usual.

It didn't take too long to reach the bookstore, and from the outside, it looked about as abandoned as the rest of the city did. The windows were shuttered and the door was shut, but that didn't stop me from seeing into the rooms within using my swarm. Also like much of Soho, the place was mostly

vacant, and there were only two people inside. One was an elderly man sleeping peacefully in the apartment on the second floor, and down on the ground floor —

My brow furrowed. A kid? Locked up in a bookstore?

As Huginn alighted along the rooftop across the street, Mordred wasted no time in pushing the door open and charging inside like she owned the place.

“Yo!” she shouted into the dark building. “We’re looking for someone working with a guy named Doc Jekyll! Anyone in here know anything about that?”

“*Finally.*”

The kid I’d noticed a minute ago hopped down off of a chair that was too tall for him, tucking a book that must have been half his size under one scrawny arm. He looked maybe ten years old, if that.

“You idiots sure took your time getting here, didn’t you? I was getting sick of waiting around for you to show up. I was so bored I even read an absolutely atrocious novel series, and let me tell you, the author deserved to be tarred and feathered. That plot was a crime against humanity.”

But the voice that came out of his mouth was the smoothest baritone I’d ever heard. He could have read the phonebook and had women swooning.

“Holy cow,” said Rika, eyes wide. “He’s pouring honey in my ears, but all my eyes see is jailbait!”

“What?” said Mordred, confused. “Hey, brat, you’re not the only one here, are you? Don’t tell me that you’re the collaborator!”

“In point of fact, I am not,” said the boy. This was one of the rare times I was going to agree with Rika, because the incongruity of such a deep voice coming out of an actual child was off-putting. “The only one here, that is. The elderly shopowner is asleep in the apartment above us — one of the victims of the magical tome that I’m sure Jekyll must have told you about.”

“Oh,” said Mash kindly. “Is he your grandfather? Don’t worry, we’ll find out how to save him.”

“There’s no relation,” the boy denied immediately. “He was just kind enough to give me a place to stay while I worked. I’ve no more attachment to him than that debt of gratitude. That’s all.”

“Don’t tell me,” Emiya said. “You’re the collaborator, aren’t you?”

“That’s right,” said the boy. “I’m one of Jekyll’s collaborators, and I was the one who alerted him to the situation occurring here in Soho. Considering the circumstances, you sorry lot must be the rescue squad he sent. What a motley crew you are.”

He adjusted his thickly rimmed glasses with one tiny finger, and it only served to make him look even younger.

“Although I suppose four Knight classes make for quite the cavalry,” he allowed, and it took some effort to keep the grimace off of my face. Was that pun intentional? “I was expecting that Caster to come along, though. Someone like him would have an easier time seeing through the circumstances, such as they are.”

He didn’t really have the presence of one, but...

“You’re a Servant, too.”

A ripple of surprise washed over the rest of the group. The only one who didn’t look at all surprised was Arash.

“Wait, really?” said Rika.

“That’s right,” the boy said again. He smirked at me. “You have a sharp intuition, don’t you, Miss?”

“But I can’t sense him at all!” Mash protested. “Even though he’s right in front of me, I can’t tell that he’s a Servant!”

“Hey,” Mordred said, eyeing him suspiciously. “You’re not another Assassin, are you?”

An Assassin that revealed himself to us when I was the only one who even knew he was there?

“Don’t be absurd,” said the boy. “Technically, I’m a Caster, but I’m not one of those mage types that throws around magic spells. The reason why you can’t sense my presence is because I have no combat aptitude at all. I’m just an author. The only thing I’m good for is writing a book.”

So I was right. Shakespeare set the precedent, but there was nothing to say that other authors couldn’t be Caster class Servants, too. I wasn’t sure it really fit, considering they didn’t seem to have much if any magical aptitude, but I wasn’t sure what other class they would fit into either. Shakespeare had been quite clear that the last place he wanted to be was the battlefield.

“Just like Shakespeare,” Ritsuka murmured.

“So there *are* other authors summoned in the Caster class,” Mash said thoughtfully. “Um, if it’s not too rude of me to ask, could you tell us your true name?”

“It’s not like it puts me at a disadvantage to tell you,” the boy said sensibly. “If you got it in your head to kill me, the only thing I could do is run away. It’s the same reason why I haven’t tried to deal with this magical tome myself. So — yes. My name is Andersen. Hans Christian Andersen. If you want to know anything else, I suggest reading one of my books.”

Mash gasped. “Oh! H-Hans Christian Andersen, one of the most famous fairy tale authors in the world! You wrote stories like *The Little Mermaid* and *The Little Match Girl*!”

“So you’ve heard of me, after all,” the boy — Andersen — said with a nod. “If you’re going to ask for an autograph, I’ll save you the time and tell you to come back later.”

“Oh,” said Mash, “um, n-no, I wasn’t... I mean, I’ve read a fair few fairy tales, yes, b-but I wouldn’t say they were my favorite thing to read...”

Andersen didn’t seem particularly bothered by this. “Just as well. We have business to deal with, don’t we?”

We did.

“The magical tome?” I suggested.

“Right,” said Ritsuka. “We were hoping you could tell us more about what’s going on?”

“What more is there to say?” said Andersen. “It’s a magical tome that has taken to attacking the people of Soho and putting them into an enchanted sleep. Already, a large portion of Soho’s citizenry has fallen victim, and it’s only been active since late yesterday. It moved fast.”

“Half the people of Soho in only a single night?” said Arash. “That *is* fast. Although...you said it hasn’t killed anyone yet, right?”

“No,” the boy answered. “That would defeat the purpose, wouldn’t it? Of course it hasn’t killed anyone yet. That might change if those people don’t wake up in time, but the goal isn’t murder in the first place, although, in a way, it wouldn’t be wrong to say it’s seeking out sustenance.”

“Sustenance?” Rika parroted, looking grossed out. “What, like it feeds on dreams?”

“El-Melloi II said that eating people’s souls is a way for Servants and other spiritual beings to gain energy,” Ritsuka said. “Is it trying to build up energy for something?”

“You’re on the right track, but you’ve stopped at the wrong station,” said Andersen. “Tell me, why do you think it’s a book in the first place? What reason would it have for appearing like that?”

My brow furrowed. “You’re saying that it’s hiding its true form.”

As a matter of conserving power, or so that it could better blend in? As much as a magical book could blend in, at any rate.

“I’m saying that it doesn’t *have* a true form,” Andersen countered. “Of course not. The book itself is a Reality Marble. That’s why, even if that book was right here in front of you, nothing you did would affect it at all.”

“A Reality Marble?” Mash gasped.

Was that even possible?

“Wait, aren’t those supposed to be, like, super rare?” said Rika. “As in, there’s only a handful of mages who ever figured it out?”

I looked at Emiya. He grimaced and shook his head. “I can’t speak about any but my own. I only know the basics of how they work in general and how Unlimited Blade Works functions in specific.”

“You’re still thinking of it the wrong way,” said Andersen. “I didn’t say that the book *has* a Reality Marble, I said that it *is* one. Its entire existence is predicated upon the world that exists inside of it.”

“Stop dicking around!” Mordred finally snapped. “What the fuck does this all mean and why does it matter?”

“You mean you can’t figure it out on your own?” Andersen jeered. “Come, now. I’ve given you all the clues you need, you troglodyte. Surely you can at least put them all together by yourself, can’t you?”

“Why, you...!” Mordred snarled, and she made to lunge at Andersen, but Mash put herself between them and held her back.

“Out of the way, Shieldy!” said Mordred. “Forget about that stupid book, I’m gonna wring his little neck, first!”

“W-wait!” Mash said. “Sir Mordred, please, stop! I-I know it might be frustrating, but he’s our ally!”

A frustrating one, but an ally nonetheless. I couldn’t say I appreciated his being so roundabout with this stuff, but...

“I don’t care!” said Mordred.

A book that was a Reality Marble. A Reality Marble was an inner world based upon the owner’s world view. This book appeared seemingly at random, and it had gone around putting people to sleep because it needed them for some reason. Something related to magical energy, but not, specifically, for the purposes of eating their souls. It wasn’t trying to murder anyone.

The part I kept getting stuck on was the fact it was a Reality Marble. How? Why? Normally — inasmuch as you could apply that term to them — a Reality Marble was a reflection of the wielder. Their inner self, taken to its furthest extremes, to the point where they built an entire world around it. The manifestation of the core of their being, supplanting reality itself.

Reflection. Inner self. Supplanting. A Reality Marble that was an existence unto itself, invulnerable because it was choosing the form of a book.

Was...that even possible?

“It’s a Servant,” I said.

Everyone stopped and turned to look at me. Andersen grinned.

“Like I said,” he replied. “You have a sharp intuition, don’t you, Miss?”

“Hold on,” said Rika, “I feel like you just said something really ridiculous! Hot Pops would probably be losing his shit right now!”

“Because these circumstances *are* ridiculous,” said Anderson. “But — you’re only half right. The reason it appears as a book, the reason it’s invulnerable in that state, the reason why it’s putting the

people to sleep — they're all the same. The book, as it is, is just a clump of magical energy. It cannot manifest a physical form — a body — without a Master to serve as its reflection. Once it has found someone to be its Master, it will become a fully fledged Servant, and it will be vulnerable.”

It was a good thing Marie wasn't on the line right now. This was already trying my patience and stretching my disbelief, and I didn't need her here right now sputtering about how impossible that was.

“Why didn't you just say all that in the first place?” Mordred complained.

“Do you start reading a book at the end?” Andersen shot back. “Beginning with the conclusion is the work of an amateur!”

“Fuck you!” Mordred snapped back.

Arash, thankfully, got things back on track. “Do you have any idea where this book is now?”

“None,” said Andersen. “It *was* here, in this very bookstore, for a time, but it slipped away in the middle of the night. If you'd gotten here sooner, you could have dealt with it then.”

“Maybe,” Ritsuka allowed, “but maybe not, too. If we *had* come last night, we might have been too tired to fight it at our best.”

“Tch.” Mordred scoffed and looked away.

“I would suggest, however, checking further east,” said Andersen. “No doubt, by now, it's already exhausted all of its options in this area of Soho and moved on. If you're lucky, you might catch it in the act.”

As much as he could, as small and young-looking as he was, he looked down his nose at us.

“Do try not to miss it, this time. It would be a waste for you to come all the way here for nothing.”