

Chapter XXVII: Kyrie, Eleison

Mozart raised his baton, and a familiar, powerful melody whose name I had never known before echoed out as though an entire orchestra stood behind him, playing at full volume. Voices sang Latin verses in somber, reverent tones, violins strummed, and drums thundered, filling up the entire room.

I wasn't much of a music girl, but even I couldn't stop myself from feeling moved by the majesty and emotion of it all.

Jeanne Alter took it like a physical blow, staggering backwards, and she pressed her hands to her ears as though she could block out Mozart's Noble Phantasm just that easily. A ragged scream tore itself out of her mouth, her eyes squeezed shut, and she thrashed about like she was in the throes of some kind of psychotic break, tossing her head from side to side.

Jeanne and Mash weren't stupid. They saw the opportunity the same as I did, and they rushed towards her to finish the battle while she was distracted and weakened, taking advantage of the opening Mozart made for them.

Jeanne Alter, however, was determined not to go down that easily, and whatever Mozart's Noble Phantasm had done to her, she made up for it by being twice as tenacious. As Mash and Jeanne drew close, she lashed out with her sword, and a tongue of flame whipped out from the arc of her blade, forcing the other two to back away. Mash blocked it with her shield, but Jeanne had to retreat further back, because she had no defense like that aside from her own Noble Phantasm.

Mash tried to push further forward behind the cover of her shield, but Jeanne Alter kept swinging, and the air crackled with the gout of flame that washed over the surface of the shield and kept the two of them at a distance. Eventually, even Mash was forced to step back and retreat from the sweltering heat that the rest of us could feel even from all the way across the room.

It looked like a massive effort of will, but panting for breath, Jeanne Alter forced herself to calm and stand straight, or at least as straight as she seemed able, right then. Her yellow eyes seemed almost to glow, and her lips curled as she pinned Mozart with a glare that seethed brimstone and hellfire. The floor around her ignited, and so did her sword as she lifted it up over her head.

"Oh dear," said Mozart.

And then a truck hit me and the twins, sending us back into the hallway and skidding along the carpet. My lungs seized in my chest as I gasped, struggling to stand as every survival instinct in my head screamed at me to get up before I was struck down.

For an instant, I was back in Brockton Bay, fighting against the current as Leviathan tried to scour both me and the city away beneath his waves and his water. I felt as I did then, desperately trying to gulp down enough air to stay alive and climb back to my feet.

Back inside the room, Jeanne Alter's sword came down.

"La Grondement du Haine!"

“Mozart!” Ritsuka choked out breathlessly.

Through the few bugs still inside the room that could stand the heat, I saw a wave of fire sweep across the floor, and when it reached Mozart, it split, encircling him in blazing red flames. Stakes rose out of the ground, and with nowhere to go and no place to dodge, Mozart wasn’t able to avoid them.

My heart clenched in my chest as I watched, helpless to do anything else. One stake first, punching straight through his chest, then another from behind, skewering his thigh, then another, and another, and another. One, five, ten, an even dozen in total, they pierced through him one after the other, and then, as though to make extra sure to kill him if a dozen fatal blows wasn’t enough, the circle of fire surged inwards and collapsed on his body, igniting him and the stakes both.

For a long handful of seconds, the moment hung, and his twisted mockery of a funeral pyre continued to burn. The heat of the flames washed over the twins and me. I felt it on my cheeks and my lips.

And then, with a heavy woosh, they vanished, leaving behind a few glowing embers and a sunburst scorch mark on the floor. There was no more sign of Mozart.

“He’s...gone,” Rika croaked.

On the far side of the room, Jeanne Alter stood, and she breathed heavily through clenched teeth. Her arms trembled and twitched. There was no triumph in her expression, only more inconsolable hatred and rage.

“You monster!” Ritsuka shouted hoarsely. “Orléans! La Charité! Lyon! Périgueux and Marie! Now Mozart! How many people are you going to hurt before you realize that this is all wrong?”

There’s never enough, Ritsuka, I thought, trying to even out my breathing. Weakly, I managed to pull myself to my knees. *Even if she killed the whole country, that still wouldn’t quench her thirst for violence.*

Because it was the entire reason she existed. I got it, now. Jeanne was right, back then. The Dragon Witch wasn’t simply Jeanne’s worst parts, magnified and brought to the surface. She was a dark reflection, all of the ugliness Jeanne had cast away so that she could save a country on the brink.

She couldn’t be anything else, with a Noble Phantasm like that.

“Shut up!” Jeanne Alter spat back at him. “I’m getting sick and tired of you and that useless fake yapping at me about the poor, innocent people of France, and I’ve had it up *to here* with your little team of nuisances constantly getting in my way! You care about these traitorous swine so much? Then you can die with all of the rest of them!”

She lifted up her flag, banner fluttering, and smashed the butt of the staff down against the floor. The shaft glowed brightly for a brief moment, and then it raced down the length of it like a meter depleting. From the bottom, amorphous black shapes crawled along the ground, forming into pools of shadow.

And from these pools of shadow, four figures slowly rose, woven together from black ink like silhouettes cast in obsidian. One was the Assassin Arash had killed back in La Charité, one the unmistakable Saint Martha who had been defeated at Lyon, one was the Saber who had fought Arash just earlier today, and the last...

My heart skipped a beat.

“Dracul,” I rasped.

None of them spoke. They didn’t even seem properly there, like they were smoke bound together in the shape of Servants, familiar but also distorted. Their bodies were so hazy that I wasn’t sure I couldn’t see through them or if it was just a trick of the light.

“I don’t have time for a proper summoning right now,” Jeanne Alter said furiously, “so why don’t you play with these shades while I get the real deal ready?”

She gestured with her sword. “Attack!”

The shades leapt into motion, and Jeanne and Mash moved to intercept them. The smokey simulacrum of Martha’s staff slammed down on the shaft of Jeanne’s flag, and Dracul’s lance made a strange, weirdly off clang as it smacked against Mash’s shield, but they were both stopped cold.

Assassin and Saber, on the other hand, ignored our two Servants entirely. They made their way towards us Masters instead, slipping around Mash and Jeanne while they were preoccupied with the other shades.

“Shit!”

I scrambled the rest of the way to my feet, trying to ignore the twinge of my diaphragm that was still getting over Mozart’s desperate push to get us out of the way. One arm came up as my meager swarm poured out of the nooks and crannies of the room, seething through the cracks and the breaks and the gaps, and I braced with my other hand as my circuits churned and burned.

There wasn’t time for anything special or clever, no rapidfire pulse of my measly Gandr, so instead, I supercharged it with double, triple, quadruple the energy I usually put into it, until an orb of crackling dark energy the size of a large softball clung to my fingertips. My swarm, I set about the shade of Saber, distracting him — her? I didn’t fucking know — as a buzzing cloud while I took aim at Assassin.

“Gandr!”

My Gandr shot leapt from my hand with a sizzling *fwoomp*, and it impacted Assassin in the blink of an eye. I didn’t expect it to do much more than buy me a few seconds to back up and use my final Command Spell to summon Siegfried, but against all odds, it sent her staggering and stumbling, like she had actually just taken a solid hit.

Had I...really just hurt her?

Beep-beep!

“Not the time, Romani!” I spat out.

“I’ll be quick,” he said hurriedly. “Whatever those shades are, they’re not real Servants. They’re not as fast, they’re not as strong, and they *can’t use Noble Phantasms.*”

Oh.

A savage grin curled on my lips.

Well, that changed a lot, didn’t it?

“Mash!” I shouted over at her. “They can’t use Noble Phantasms! One good hit — use the knife!”

I pulled back my swarm and created a thin wall of chitin between us and Saber and Assassin, and then I turned to the twins, who were climbing to their own unsteady feet.

“Do you two know how to use the spells preloaded into those uniforms of yours?”

Rika nodded, wincing, one arm curled protectively around her gut, and Ritsuka added, “Da Vinci gave us a crash course when she had the time.”

It would have to be good enough.

“Pace your shots,” I told them. “We just need to keep those two shadow Servants distracted and busy long enough for Jeanne and Mash to take care of theirs. Got it?”

They both gave me a nod.

“Here they come.”

Assassin had recovered enough, and she charged through my swarm, only to meet a pair of Gandr shots from the twins directly to the face (although one actually went wide). My swarm, meanwhile, dispersed out and honed back in on Saber heckling her to keep her from coming to Assassin’s aid. She lashed out with her rapier and cut down thin swathes of bugs with every swing, and it was only a matter of time until she beat me with sheer attrition.

The twins kept up their fire, smacking Assassin over and over again with staggered Gandr shots that splashed almost ineffectually against her body. After the first to hit her face, they’d switched to center mass, and Assassin hunched over the blows as though they were punches.

Eventually, the twins exhausted themselves, and they had to back up, panting for breath from the exertion of firing so many Gandr shots off so rapidly. They had bought us a measly twenty seconds.

Good job, you two.

Because those twenty extra seconds was all it took for Jeanne and Mash to finish off the two shades of Dracul and Martha — who disappeared without even the slightest splatter of blood from their wounds — and turn to engage the remaining two. Mash charged forward, shield in front of her, and as my swarm suddenly dispersed from Saber, she smashed into him like a freight train with a shout.

Saber tumbled away and rolled across the floor to land in a heap against the wall, and Mash kept going, jumping up and slamming the bottom edge of her shield against Saber's neck in an absolutely brutal blow.

The shade of Saber vanished instantly. His head wasn't even severed; he just disappeared the instant Mash's shield hit his neck.

Jeanne targeted the shade of Assassin, leaping up, and gripping her flag with both hands, she brought the shaft down on Assassin with the full force of her strength. Assassin crumpled to her knees, unable to withstand the attack, and Jeanne followed up with a stab from the pointed head of her flag like she was wielding a spear.

Assassin couldn't recover in time to avoid it, and just like that, her shade was defeated as well. As the others had, she disappeared instantly, no blood or viscera from her wounds. Like she was nothing more than a shadow to begin with.

With all of the shades defeated, Mash and Jeanne turned back around to face the Dragon Witch, and she was absolutely livid.

"You!" Jeanne Alter seethed. "You, you, you, you, you! Why won't you just die, already!"

She lifted her sword up above her head again, and flames swirled around her feet. The heat became sweltering again, filling the room with an uncomfortable haze.

She was going to use her Noble Phantasm again.

"Mash!" I shouted.

But Mash was one step ahead of me, and she positioned herself between Jeanne and her counterpart, hefting that massive shield of hers.

"La Grondement —"

"Lord —"

"— du Haine!"

"Chaldeas!"

The wall of light formed in front of Mash, and the tongue of flame arced from Jeanne Alter, racing towards Mash. It collided with the wall of ephemeral bricks and broke into a line of fire, and from the flames came more stakes that crashed into Lord Chaldeas one after the other. Mash grunted and flinched with each blow, but the stakes broke against the ramparts and shattered, and with nothing to feed the fire, the flames guttered and died, ineffectual.

When Lord Chaldeas dissipated, both Mash and Jeanne were fine, and Jeanne Alter growled.

"Stop getting in my way!"

She lashed out with a tongue of flame, and Mash weathered the blow with her shield, then took a step forward. Jeanne Alter lashed out again, and again, and again, and Mash withstood them one after the other, steadily advancing through the fire with gritted teeth and sheer determination.

Finally, Jeanne Alter lost what little patience she'd had left.

“RAAAH!”

She leapt at Mash, abandoning her flag to grip her sword with two hands, and she brought it down in a single, powerful blow that crashed against Mash's shield with a thunderous clang that set my teeth on edge.

“Mash!” Jeanne shouted, worried.

But Mash discarded her shield, using its bulk to push Jeanne Alter's sword down and out of the way, and I saw the glint of something metallic in her hand as she stepped close in, too close for that sword to be of any use at all. Her arm wound back for a swing.

The nano-thorn dagger, I realized.

And then she thrust forward and buried it in Jeanne Alter's chest, right in the middle, where her armor didn't cover. Jeanne Alter stumbled back a step, a startled gasp tearing out of her mouth, but Mash pressed forward and took hold of the knife with both hands to push it deeper. A desperate shout ripped past her lips, like she was putting everything she had into one final attack.

Because she had to, just to keep going. She had to force herself forward, or else she would have pulled back and given the Dragon Witch time to recover.

So Mash kept going, kept pushing, just so she could hold onto the momentum and resolve to finish the job, and Jeanne Alter staggered back until she slammed back against the far wall. The sword she'd been holding clattered to the floor, and one arm scrambled for purchase on Mash's shoulder as the other reached reflexively for the handle of the knife buried in her chest.

For several long seconds, they stayed there, Mash's shoulders heaving from the adrenaline that was no doubt starting to drain from her limbs. Jeanne Alter gasped and grunted weakly, but was still clinging onto her life, whatever that was worth to a Servant.

“Mash,” the real Jeanne mumbled worriedly.

As though some spell had been broken, Mash stumbled backwards, and with her iron grip on my dagger, the blade was torn out of Jeanne Alter's chest. She let out a ragged gasp and sagged, pressing both hands to the bleeding gash carved into her chest just to the right of her sternum. At that position and with that angle, it had to have hit what should have been her heart.

Mash, panting, took several more steps backwards until she was standing next to her shield. Her trembling fingers remained clutched around the hilt of my knife, and her gaze remained locked on Jeanne Alter's body, wary and ready for the fight to continue.

But Jeanne Alter didn't straighten and spit fire. Instead, she slid to the ground, and her form started to waver, becoming fuzzy around the edges like a blurry photo.

"You..." she seethed weakly. She managed to lift her head and glare, but it didn't seem aimed at any particular one of us so much as the whole group. "You worthless...scheming rats. You stupid...annoying...vermin. I have...the Holy Grail. How could I be beaten...by you motley rejects?"

Cautiously, I stepped back into the room and closer to Jeanne Alter, watching as she slowly became more and more incoherent, like she was struggling just to keep herself together and fighting a losing battle. The twins followed behind me, hesitant but hopeful.

"Did we beat her?" asked Rika. "Please tell me we beat her. The suspense is killing me."

"Yeah," I said quietly. "We beat her."

More confident now, I made my way over to Mash, and I dispersed what was left of my swarm to scope out the situation both with Emiya's fight and with the wyverns outside. When I got closer, I could see a stream of silent tears glittering on Mash's cheeks. She didn't even seem to notice them, or if she did, she was still going in spite of them.

"Jeanne Alter defeated," she said barely above a whisper.

Gently, I moved up beside her and reached down to the hand gripping my knife. It was slick with Jeanne Alter's blood.

"You can let go now, Mash," I murmured, carefully prying at her fingers. If they weren't covered with gloves, I was willing to bet her knuckles would have been stark white.

Mash gasped and suddenly let go, and I fumbled about to catch the dagger before it could fall and hurt one of us as she stumbled back as though the weight of what she'd just done had finally hit her. A glance showed her wide, horrified eyes and her gaping mouth as she gulped down breath after panicked breath.

The dagger made its way back to its sheath — that nifty function Da Vinci had added would hopefully get it clean without any further effort — and I stepped closer to Mash as the twins huddled around her, concern written across their faces.

"What's wrong with her?" Rika asked, wringing her hands.

"Senpai?" Ritsuka turned to me. "Is Mash going to be okay?"

"It affects everyone differently," I told them. "Their first kill." To Mash, I said. "Just breathe, Mash. Calm down. Pace yourself. Just breathe."

I tried to remember the training I'd been given. Dealing with trauma in the field was supposed to be something you didn't learn until you officially graduated into the Protectorate, but I'd had a couple crash courses during my time as a Ward, and I tried to remember what I'd been told back then.

Unfortunately, I was largely drawing a blank. All I could remember was breathing exercises and soothing words. My own experience killing Coil was largely useless, since I'd had a long time to come to terms with the inevitability.

“Deep breaths, Mash,” I mumbled. “In through the nose, hold it for a few seconds, then out through the mouth.”

Mash did as I told her, sucking in breaths through her nose, holding them as long as she could, and letting them out through her mouth. Slowly, her breathing started to calm and even out.

“That’s it. Just like that.”

Ritsuka, of his own initiative, reached out with one hand and started to rub circles around her upper back.

“Easy does it, Mash,” he said soothingly.

Jeanne Alter chuckled bitterly. “Done in...by an amateur. At least the English...were professionals.”

I pointedly ignored her, although Rika and Ritsuka spared her enough attention to give her silent glares.

Eventually, Mash’s breathing evened out completely and she calmed down enough to steady herself.

“I’m... I’m okay,” she said, sucking in one more deep breath through her nose. She nodded as though to convince herself. “I’m okay, Senpai.”

“Are you sure?” said Ritsuka.

Mash nodded again, and in a stronger voice, said, “I’m okay, Master.”

We all stepped back to give her some room. Ritsuka stayed close enough to keep a comforting hand on her back.

“You have good friends, Mash,” said Jeanne kindly.

Mash smiled wanly. She wasn’t okay, but she couldn’t afford to fall apart right now, and I knew that so well that it almost hurt to look at. Hopefully, Romani would be able to help her more once this was all over with and we were back at Chaldea.

I stopped cold, my brow furrowing, and my swarm shifted and condensed as something moved through my net. It was small and fast and making a beeline through the hallways —

Emiya was chasing after it.

Wait, then that meant —

“Eh? Emiya?” Rika asked, befuddled. “Get out of the way —”

“Shit!”

I took one step, wrapping my arms as best I could around our entire group, and then I threw myself bodily with all my strength towards the side, as far away from Jeanne Alter as I could. Rika and Mash both squeaked and Ritsuka let out a yelp, and we all went down in a tumble of limbs, just in time for a blur to race in from the hallway and through the open doors like a whirlwind. Jeanne shrieked in surprise and dove out of the way, but it ignored her and went straight for Jeanne Alter.

“Jeanne!” the Servant Emiya had been fighting wailed. “Oh, Jeanne! Jeanne! Look at what’s become of you! Look at what these horrible people did to you! Oh, Jeanne! Jeanne!”

“Gilles,” the Dragon Witch mumbled.

“Gilles?” It was Jeanne who said it, not me, as she slowly pulled herself to her feet. Her brow knitted together, and a look of befuddled confusion drew her face tight.

“I couldn’t do it, Gilles,” Jeanne Alter said quietly. “They...stopped me. They wouldn’t...wouldn’t let me...destroy France. I couldn’t get...revenge.”

“Hush, Jeanne,” Gilles told her gently as he stroked her cheek. “Hush, now. Sleep. Rest, and I’ll take care of everything. I promise. I’ll take revenge for you. When you wake, I’ll have finished everything.”

“Rest...” The Dragon Witch rolled it over weakly. “Yes... Yes, I...think I will. You’re right. I can...leave everything...to you...”

And with a final sigh, she broke apart into particles of light and vanished, leaving behind —

Wait. Wait, wait, wait. No, hold the fucking phone. Are you telling me...

“So, that’s how it is, then,” said Jeanne. “Yes, that’s about as I expected.”

This whole time...

“And you... You are Gilles, but not the one I knew,” Jeanne continued. There was something in her voice, some mix of sadness and anger. Disappointment, maybe.

“She had the Grail?” I demanded, trying to control my voice. “The entire time, Jeanne Alter was carrying the Grail around with her?”

We could have ended this entire fucking debacle back in La Charité? Almost as soon as we got here?

“No,” Jeanne said as Gilles picked the Grail up gingerly. I was so focused on it and how utterly *livid* I was that I almost didn’t notice Emiya arrive, hanging back in the hallway. “It’s even simpler than that. You see, I began to suspect something was amiss earlier. It isn’t to say I never harbored darkness in my heart, but I was not vengeful and I was not at any point consumed by my wrath. For that reason, the Heroic Spirit ‘Jeanne d’Arc Alter’ shouldn’t exist, not in accordance with proper history.”

“Your intuition is as formidable as ever it was,” said Gilles. “Yes, it’s true. The Dragon Witch is not an aspect of the Jeanne I loved in her life. She was instead the wish I made upon the Grail.”

The walls hummed with the buzzing of my depleted swarm.

“We could have finished this entire thing a month ago?” I asked tightly.

“All those people who could have been saved...” Ritsuka whispered shakily.

“My feet want revenge,” Rika muttered, sounding angry herself.

“She was never me at all, was she?” Jeanne asked Gilles. “She was nothing more than a fantasy you concocted.”

Gilles whirled around to face her. “I wanted you! You, you, you, Jeanne! From the bottom of my heart, I wished that you would come back to us! To France! To *me*! But the Grail...” He sobbed, of all things. “The Grail, the Grail! It refused me! It refused to grant my wish! It refused to bring you back to life!”

His hands shook, and his voice swelled with fury. “So if I couldn’t have the genuine article, I would have my own Jeanne! The Jeanne I carried in my heart, the Saint I followed throughout those battles — even if it was a fake, as long as I had you, then that was all that mattered!”

“All of this,” I said lowly, “because you didn’t know how to deal with your grief?”

That... That hit closer to home than I was really comfortable with.

“Who are you to judge me, girl?” Gilles snarled at me. “How could you understand my sorrow? My anguish? How could you understand the pain of losing your whole world so cruelly?”

“And that somehow justifies all of this?” I retorted. “You’re going to take out your pain on the whole country, tear down everything she gave her life to build, and you think that’s going to make it better somehow? Like it’ll hurt any less when you’re standing on the ashes of everything she loved?”

The buzzing of my swarm vibrated in the walls to punctuate my words. The twins glanced around a little nervously, like they were afraid they might get drawn into the crossfire when this devolved into a fight.

Fuck. Maybe that was just one of my hot buttons. I’d been there so many times before that grief and I were old friends, and having it shoved in my face like that just rubbed me raw.

“They don’t deserve it!” he thundered. “They don’t deserve the world she built! They don’t deserve the happiness that they robbed from her! I won’t allow them to have it!”

“Gilles,” Jeanne broke in firmly. “Whatever you intended, you must have known I wouldn’t abide your plans. No matter how tragic my ending, I would never have turned on the country and the people I loved so much.”

Gilles took in a deep breath through his nose and reigned in his anger. I scowled and tried to ease mine, and in the walls, the buzzing lowered to a quiet hum.

“Yes,” said Gilles. “Yes, of course. Of course you would forgive them. Of course you would never turn your back on this country. Of course you would keep loving it, even as it betrayed you. Your kindness, your compassion, those are the things I loved most about you. That’s why... my wish... It was never for your sake, Jeanne. The revenge to be taken on this wretched country... IT WAS MY OWN!”

He threw his hands out. “I WILL DESTROY THIS GODFORSAKEN LAND!” he raved. “I WILL SLAUGHTER THESE GODFORSAKEN PEOPLE! THESE PEOPLE THAT TOOK YOU FROM ME, THE GOD THAT ABANDONED YOU, THE KING THAT LEFT YOU TO DIE! I’LL NEVER FORGIVE ANY OF THEM! EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM HAS TO BE WIPED FROM THIS EARTH!”

He pointed one bony, long-nailed finger at her. “AND IF YOU STAND IN MY WAY, THEN YOU’RE MY ENEMY AS WELL!”

Jeanne’s face fell, and for a brief moment, she closed her eyes and grimaced, like she was in great pain. But when she opened them again, they were strong and resolute, and her face was etched with determination.

“If that is how it has to be...” Jeanne brandished her flag. “Then I will stop you myself!”

Gilles lifted up the arm holding the Grail. “HOLY GRAIL! GRANT ME THIS WISH! GIVE ME MY HEART’S DESIRE! I CALL FORTH —”

A meaty squelch cut him off, and he stumbled backwards. The Grail tumbled from his hands and clattered to the ground as he clutched at the long, twisted arrow that was burrowed in his chest, and even Jeanne gasped as his red blood splattered over the floor.

“No,” he rasped. His knees gave out and he slumped against the wall, much the way Jeanne Alter had. “No, no...”

Feebly, he reached out for the Grail where it had fallen, but it was too far away and he didn’t have the strength anymore.

“I was so close,” he said. “So close. I... I could have done it... I could have had my...”

Jeanne stepped towards him, expression unreadable, and as she came upon his pitiful form, she knelt down next to him and gently placed her hands on his.

“It’s over, Gilles,” she told him softly. “This is enough, don’t you think? It’s time for you to get some rest.”

“Jeanne,” Gilles gasped.

“You believed in a simple farm girl, once,” she said. “You were there by her side when she liberated this city. Even if this is what has become of you now, the man from that time was someone I cherished. That’s why... I can’t bear to see you in such pain.”

She lifted her hand and gently cupped his cheek. Trembling, he reached up and cupped her hand with his.

“So rest, Gilles. You’ve done enough. It’s time to lay down your sword and rest.”

“Jeanne...” He sighed and leaned into her hand. “Ah, Jeanne. Even now, you look at me with such tenderness? After everything I’ve done... After everything... You really are...the Saint we never deserved...”

And in a flash of light, he burst apart into tiny motes that flickered and fluttered like fireflies. Gone.

I watched him disappear, even as Emiya slowly walked towards us. The scene of his goodbye was tender and heartfelt, but I was stuck on the rage and the despair and what a broken mirror I’d just been looking into.

Is that what I would have looked like, if Alexandria really had killed my friends? I couldn’t imagine ever falling that far, not when I’d weathered losing my mother, my best friend, the man I might have loved, once upon a time, even my whole life and my entire world. Fate had thrown her entire hand at me, and I’d managed to wade through it and come out the other side.

But what if I hadn’t?

“You,” Jeanne addressed Emiya sternly.

Emiya shrugged. “If I didn’t need to worry about all of you, I would have killed him before he even caught up with you. Do you want me to apologize for stopping whatever mad scheme he was cooking up in his head?”

Jeanne sighed. “No. As much as I might dislike it, you likely saved us a great deal of grief. Just because I agree with their necessity does not mean I have to approve, though!”

Emiya chuckled, scratching at the back of his head. A smirk curled his lips.

“Somehow, that sort of scolding feels familiar.”

Beep-beep!

“Servant responses confirmed eliminated!” Romani said brightly. “All I’m seeing on the sensors now are the guys on our team and a whole bunch of wyverns! W-well, the wyverns will probably sort themselves out, won’t they? So we can leave that to the native Servants and get you guys out of there. Do you have the Grail?”

Mash bent down and picked it up. “Holy Grail acquisition confirmed, Doctor Roman.”

“That’s another one taken care of,” said Romani as he looked away to type something on his keyboard. “Confirming... And it looks like the proper timeline is starting to restore itself. Are you guys ready to get out of there and come home?”

“Boy, am I ever!” Rika said. She heaved a great sigh. “If I have to eat one more ration bar, I think I might just mutiny!”

Emiya chuckled.

“It’ll be nice to be back at Chaldea again,” Ritsuka agreed.

“You’re leaving?” Jeanne asked.

“There are still six more Singularities,” I told her. “It’s our job to fix them.”

She smiled. “I suppose I can’t argue with that, can I? My own selfishness isn’t worth all the lives you have resting upon your shoulders.”

“I’ve prepared the settings to account for Arash and Siegfried,” said Romani. At the mention of them, I checked in on them briefly to find them unhurt and still going strong. “When you Rayshift, they’ll be brought along, too. I’m sorry, Mademoiselle Jeanne, but there’s no time to alter the settings to bring you back, too.”

Jeanne shook her head. “That’s okay. Even if I can’t join you in person, I’ll be there with you in spirit. Just know that I’m cheering for you all the way.”

“We won’t let you down, Miss Jeanne,” said Mash.

“I know you won’t.”

I turned back to Romani. “It looks like we’re ready to go.”

He nodded. “Okay,” he said, “just give me a minute to make a few final adjustments... And get ready to Rayshift in five, four, three...”

“WAIT!” a familiar voice shouted. “WAIT, WAIT, WAIT! YOU CAN’T LEAVE YET!”

“Bwah?” said Romani, bewildered.

And through the hallway raced the familiar figure of Bradamante. She was soaked head to toe in splatters of red wyvern blood, panting like she’d just run a marathon, and she raced towards us like a bullet, skidding to a stop five feet away.

“Not without me!” she said.

“Bwah?” Romani sputtered again.

“Bradamante!” said Ritsuka. “You came after all!”

“I’ve been...thinking about it...ever since you left!” she huffed. “And I just knew...I was going to regret it...if I left things...like that!”

She let out a gusty sigh — “Phew!” — and then she straightened, showing off her best heroic pose. Droplets of blood flew off her spear and splashed the ceiling. “So I raced here as fast as I could,

only everyone already beat the bad guys before I could do anything except kill some wyverns! There's no way I can let it go like that, so you guys have to take me with you and I can dazzle you next time!"

My brow furrowed. "Uh..."

Ritsuka turned to Romani. "Doctor Roman?"

"H-heh, it's not up to me!" said Romani, waving his hands about. "We're cutting it razor close right now to begin with, and it would take way too long for me to readjust the parameters of the Rayshift —"

"Oh, budge over, Romani!" said Da Vinci's voice, and Romani squawked as he was pushed out of his chair. Da Vinci smiled into the camera as she sat down at his monitor. "Don't worry, everyone! A genius like me can recalibrate the Rayshift in no time flat!"

Her fingers flew across the keyboard. Bradamante grinned, her teeth a sparkling white against the splash of maroon that coated one cheek.

"As long as I'm adjusting for one extra passenger, should I make it two, Jeanne?"

Jeanne blinked, thought about it for a moment, and then gently shook her head, smiling.

"No, it's fine," she said serenely. "I appreciate your offer, Miss Da Vinci, but France is my home. If you don't mind, I'd like to stay here and make sure everything gets back on track."

"Jeanne..." Ritsuka murmured.

"No need to look so sad!" Jeanne said brightly. "I told you, I'll be there with you in spirit! And who knows? The world called me back to help you correct one Singularity, so perhaps we'll meet again in another, and you can tell me all about the adventures you're sure to have in the meantime!"

Ritsuka's lips curled into a smile, and even I couldn't stop myself from smiling a little at her enthusiasm and cheer. It was almost infectious.

Yeah. The Maid of Orléans who inspired a nation... I could see that.

"If you're sure..." said Da Vinci.

Jeanne nodded. "I'm certain. We'll see each other again, I know it. So this isn't goodbye, it's just 'see you later.'"

"Yeah!" Rika agreed.

"Parameters set, calculations complete, calibrations all green. Rayshift in five..."

"Here we go!" Bradamante cheered with a pump of her fist. "Ah, I splashed myself in the eye!"

"Four... three... two..."

“Thank you,” Jeanne said last. “All of you, for everything.”

“One!”

And as a canal of stars opened beneath our feet, the last thing I saw was her smile.