

## Chapter XXVI: A Desperate Wish

When the light of Balmung's final slash faded, I opened my eyes to Fafnir's death.

The great dragon's enormous head and serpentine neck had fallen to the ground, still and lifeless, his jaw dropped open to show the teeth as large as me, and it remained only half attached to the mangled torso. Scales had been peeled away, revealing raw flesh and the white of massive bone. The exposed meat was charred black where it hadn't disintegrated outright.

The chest itself had been carved open. The glowing symbol in the center was split, and I could see into the viscera to where the heart should have been but wasn't any longer, because it had been cleaved away by Balmung.

The greatest dragon to ever live was dead once more.

For an instant, I was tempted by the mad thought of stripping off and doing as Siegfried had done, coating myself in the blood of that dead dragon to make myself invincible, or perhaps digging into the flesh for some scrap, some meager heart string that might endow me with Sigurd's great wisdom. What an incredible resource that would be. How amazing to be so secure in my safety.

But the thought had no sooner entered my head than it was discarded. The risks were too great. Killing Fafnir once wouldn't have been possible at all without Siegfried. If I intertwined myself with the dragon as well, tied so much of myself to him the way Siegfried was, what would we do if the very act of me Rayshifting would bring Fafnir down on our heads again?

The decision was taken out of my hands. Even before my eyes, the great dragon's corpse began to dissolve, evaporating into the air in much the same way Saber Alter and the other Servants had, like he was decomposing in fast forward. Had he simply been another spirit, summoned to this time and place like Siegfried and the others, or was the world's corrective force removing him from this Singularity as something that didn't belong here and now, now that he was dead?

Another thought for later.

A burst of static announced Romani's reconnection.

"— eliminated!" he crowed. "Good job, everyone!"

"Romani," I said before he could go any further, "what happened to Jeanne Alter?"

Even as I spoke, I started moving my bugs to search for her, mentally noting the three Servants who were making their way back towards us. Arash had beaten Berserk Saber, the musketeer-looking Servant who had been with Jeanne Alter at La Charité, and Emiya had handily dispatched Mister Trench Coat, a Servant I hadn't seen before who had been wielding a broadsword that had well earned the "broad" part of the name. Georgios had been handling any wyverns that came within range.

But, when I looked up, the wyverns were retreating straight back the way they'd left. Maybe Fafnir's death had spooked them. It seemed even creatures so intensely magical had the mundane instinct to run away when the head honcho was beaten.

"She's retreating!" said Romani. "At speed! Her heading — she's going straight back to Orléans!"

Without disturbing my bugs? Was she — no, that made some sense. If she had any idea that I could sense her through them, then she had to avoid them as much as possible. The key to escaping pursuit was to break line of sight and get as much distance as possible as discreetly as possible, and for her, the easiest way to do that was to follow the road back to Orléans rather than cutting through the forest. Faster, too, if she didn't have to worry about tripping or dodging branches.

My feet made it three steps before my brain caught up with my instincts. Like the fact that I couldn't go anywhere on my own until Fafnir had finished disappearing and wasn't blocking off the whole damn road.

"Is there a castle in Orléans?" I demanded, and then immediately felt stupid. This place had withstood a protracted siege by the English up until Jeanne liberated it. "One that's better fortified than the rest of the city?"

At that moment, one after the other like they'd timed it that way, Arash, Georgios, and Emiya all came out of the trees and leapt up over Fafnir's dissolving corpse.

"Master," Arash reported, "enemy Servant —"

"I know, I saw," I cut across him.

Emiya huffed, smirking. "Well, that just takes the fun out of everything, doesn't it?"

"It takes some getting used to, for certain," Georgios agreed.

I pretended they hadn't said anything. "Romani?"

"H-hang on a second, I'm checking!"

"No need!" Jeanne took off at a run. She jumped over Fafnir's massive forelimb and called back to us, "I know exactly where she's going!"

Damn it, did she forget we all couldn't do stuff like that?

"Jeanne!" Ritsuka shouted. She didn't seem to hear him, because she definitely didn't stop.

I turned to the other Servants and swiftly started to deliver orders.

"Arash —"

"If it's okay with you, Master," he interrupted me before I could even begin, "I'm going to stay out here and handle the wyverns." He looked significantly towards the city and the mass of wyverns that

was steadily streaming in that general direction. “It’s only a matter of time before they get bold again and decide to head off on their own.”

Fine, I could handle that. It wasn’t a bad idea, even. Someone needed to handle the wyverns, it might as well be the guy who could let off ten-thousand arrows at once.

“I as well, Master,” Siegfried chimed in.

Damn it, *that* one stung a bit more, and there wasn’t any time to waste arguing about it.

“If it’s alright with you,” said Georgios, “I would prefer to fight the wyverns, as well. It seems appropriate to my particular talents.”

Was *everyone* going to stay here and focus on the wyverns?

I turned to Emiya. “You staying back, too?” I snapped impatiently.

He shrugged. “I’m Rika’s Servant. I go where she needs me.”

Ritsuka snorted. “Is it bad to say he kind of has a point?”

“He does! And your place is in the kitchen, my dear house-husband!” Rika cut in.

Emiya grimaced, but this definitely wasn’t the time for that, so I bit my tongue around the reprimand and turned to the last member of our group. Mozart smiled at me placidly.

“You?”

He shrugged, a fluid motion that looked more graceful than it had any right to. “I can’t say I’ll be much use against a swarm of dragons, so it seems you’ll have to suffer my presence.”

I gave him a short nod and finally got around to delivering my orders.

“Emiya, follow Jeanne. Make sure she keeps herself out of trouble, but try not to get so far ahead that we can’t call you back if we need you.”

Emiya slid a glance to Rika, but Rika just said, “Go forth, my house-husband of justice!”

He gave an exasperated sigh, but shrugged — like “what can you do?” — and burst into motion, leaping over the still dissolving corpse of Fafnir as he raced to catch up with Jeanne.

“Georgios, Arash, Siegfried, we’ll leave the wyverns to you.”

Nods answered me. “We can at least get you closer before we go,” Arash added.

Good. Not as good as having one or more of them helping out with what was probably going to be the final battle, but I would take what I could get with one Command Spell left to me, right now.

I turned to what was left of my team. Mash, Ritsuka, Rika, the core we’d started this whole thing with. They looked a little frazzled from the experience of facing down Fafnir, but none of them

looked ready to bolt or cower, so I counted that in my favor and gave an abbreviated motivational speech.

“This is probably it. We might not find the Grail immediately, but with Jeanne Alter out of the picture, that shouldn’t be more than a matter of time. This is likely the final battle.”

I didn’t bother asking if they were ready. They didn’t have the luxury to not be.

“Let’s go.”

“Right!” the three of them chorused.

I turned to the Servants, the ones we’d picked up along the way or called on ourselves. “Siegfried, with me. Arash, take Rika. Georgios, Ritsuka.”

They gave varying one to two word assents, and then we all set into motion. Once more, I climbed into Siegfried’s arms, and Arash and Georgios took one of the twins each. Mash and Mozart handled themselves, and with a burst of strength, we were carried up and over the half-gone corpse, clearing the entire thing in one go, to land on the other side.

The instant his feet touched down again, Siegfried took off, racing down the road much as we had been before we’d stopped to slow our approach. I shut my eyes against the wind and used my one free hand to keep my glasses pinned to my nose so that they didn’t fall off. I heard Rika shriek behind us, but only the once, so I put it out of my mind and focused on other things.

At that speed, my range kept moving, and on the outer edges, I felt Emiya as he followed along the road that led to Orléans. Every second or two, he disappeared out of my range, but Siegfried was keeping pace well enough that I never lost track for more than a moment.

At length, we came to a small, narrow river and crossed over a wooden bridge, but Jeanne hadn’t slowed down, and so Emiya didn’t slow down and neither did we. Now, however, we started to see the burnt out husks of buildings, or at least *I* could see them through the brief glimpses of the surrounding bugs that remained living. The further we went, the more and more I saw, and the more and more parallels I could draw between what the Dragon Witch had done to Lyon and what she had done to Orléans.

There wasn’t an Orléans.

All of the people inside of the city had been killed, slaughtered to a man, just like Lyon, and just like Lyon, the entire city had been razed to the ground. Orléans didn’t seem to be a city so much anymore as it was a giant, blackened soot mark on the face of France, a burnt out divot that was too completely eviscerated to properly be called even a husk. More and more, I saw no remaining buildings, no signs of habitation, just smoldering dust and charred splinters too tiny to host a flea convention, let alone a family’s home.

My swarm was rapidly thinning as the population dwindled in the harsh, inhospitable wasteland left behind from Jeanne Alter’s wrath, so I pulled as many as I could from the back ends of my range and sent them off to follow us. Unfortunately, I didn’t have enough time to grab anything particularly nasty, so I had to settle for the meager fliers that could make the trip before they fell

from my grasp. Mostly, that meant varying assortments of flies — nuisances without much bite, of little use but as a distraction.

A good thing that was probably all I would have been able to do with them to begin with.

Eventually, we came across another river, or maybe the main body of the same river, because it was much broader and much larger than the previous one. On our side, the remains of some kind of stone structure stood, barely more than a few blackened bricks that really could have been almost anything. A much sturdier stone bridge stretched across, big enough for a carriage or a caravan, the main route into the city from this side.

Up above us, the army of wyverns circled, confused and in disarray. I didn't have any idea how long that would last, but unless they were much smarter and cleverer than I really thought they were, it wouldn't be all that long.

Here, Siegfried set me down, and a moment later, Arash and Georgios set the twins down, too. Mash jogged up to join us, panting a little from the effort of running the entire way.

"I'm sorry, Master," said Siegfried. "I'm afraid this is as far as I can take you."

Arash's bow materialized in his hands, and like it was some kind of signal, Balmung formed in Siegfried's. Georgios unsheathed the sword at his hip with a metallic rasp.

"We'll handle the wyverns out here," said Arash. "Master, taking out Jeanne Alter will be up to you. If the worst happens, however, don't be afraid to call for me."

"Or me," said Siegfried.

"Right."

There wasn't anything else to be said to that.

The five of us took off again, with me in front, the twins behind me, Mash behind the twins, and Mozart bringing up the rear. As we ran, behind us, Arash pulled back on his bowstring and loosed a barrage of arrows into the swarm of wyverns above us, catching several in vulnerable spots like the neck or wings and striking them from the sky.

It got the attention of the others, and just as they had in La Charité, they started to converge on the source of danger. A few stragglers saw our group and peeled off to follow us, but Arash discouraged that with some more well-placed shots, and the rest learned better than to pursue us very quickly indeed.

"We need to find Jeanne," Ritsuka said between breaths.

"And Emiya!" Rika added.

"And Emiya, too."

“There can’t be too many places they could be,” Mash said. “But if they went after the Dragon Witch, they might already be fighting her.”

“They are,” I told them. “But I know exactly where they went. It’s the big building with the — well, you’ll see.”

“That’s still weird,” said Rika.

“Miss Taylor never did explain,” Mash muttered.

I bit my tongue — metaphorically, because ow — and cut off the snappish retort I was ready to deliver. Again, omnipotent wish-granting device, perpetual motion engine, spirits of dead heroes brought back to life. Why was me controlling bugs the strangest part? For god’s sake, we were running through a burnt out city in fifteenth century France. What part of this was supposed to be normal?

The run was longer than I would have liked, and the ground became even more uneven when we left the road and crossed where buildings used to stand so that we could make the trip faster. But where Emiya and Jeanne had made off to became very obvious in short order, because it was the only building still standing amidst the sea of ash and charcoal. There wasn’t any simpler process of elimination than that.

It couldn’t be called a castle, at least not by the medieval fantasy sense of the word, maybe not even technically speaking, either. It was actually much more like a palace or a mansion, a Gothic thing that looked like it had been carved out of marble, with sloped, tiled roofing and tall, looming windows cut into the sides. It loomed above us, overlooking the heap of burnt ashes that was the rest of Orléans, and even if it wasn’t the fortified stronghold I’d been imagining for Jeanne Alter, it seemed appropriate thematically for her to choose a towering monolith at the center of town for her base.

We could see it in the distance from a long way off, and that meant we had to keep running for several minutes after we first sighted it. Eventually, however, panting a little, we did make it to the front door. We couldn’t hear the fighting that must have been happening through the heavy front doors, but a diminished insect population had managed to escape the massacre that destroyed the rest of the town, so through the various creepy crawlies that lived in the walls, I could feel the vibrations and hear the squelches of the battle raging inside.

“This way!” I called to the group as I ripped the doors open, and they fell into step behind me as we entered, racing through the extravagant hallways.

I led them down the corridors, making a beeline for where Emiya was fighting an unknown Servant that summoned some form of biological construct. As we came closer, I could hear the noises with my human ears instead of just with my bugs, and when we rounded the final corner to stand in the open doors of the enormous room —

“What the hell is that?” Rika asked incredulously.

— it was to see Emiya fighting off a horde of starfish monsters roughly the size of human children. They were about four feet tall, a deep blue with green spots and lumps, and on their undersides,

there were flesh red feelers that lined every limb and led to a sharp-toothed mouth. They bled green blood and filled up the hall from side to side, forming a grotesque mockery of a battle line like the English used to do during the American Revolution. Twenty wide and five deep, there had to be almost a hundred of the things packed together across from Emiya.

And standing in the center of the formation, carrying a book that I was fairly sure had been bound in human skin, there was a mockery of a man equally as grotesque as his minions. With pallid, grayish skin, greasy black hair slicked back over his skull, and eyes that seemed two sizes too big for his skull, he cast a sickly image, and although his arms were strong and muscular, his body seemed far too small for the robes he wore.

“More interlopers, more interlopers, more interlopers!” he chanted in a rolling voice that just sounded *off*.

He shrieked something, and it might have been a command in some strange, incomprehensible tongue, because the line of starfish suddenly surged and rushed towards us with surprising grace, considering what they were. Mash pushed out in front of us and planted her shield.

“Master, stay back!”

“I won’t let you hurt Jeanne!” the Servant shouted.

“Trace on.”

A wall of swords formed in the air around Emiya, and they shot forth like bullets, ripping through the starfish with startling ease and meaty squelches that would have had a younger me losing my lunch. Green blood splattered over the floor and the walls, and the ruined chunks of flesh that fell to the ground stayed there only for a moment before swiftly dissolving into the air.

“Urkl!”

Next to me, Rika turned away, and vomit splattered over the floor as she heaved up the remnants of the ration bar she’d eaten earlier. Her brother looked as nauseous as she was, but he managed to keep his food down as he rubbed soothing circles across her back.

Emiya landed next to Mash with catlike grace. “Sorry about that, Master.”

“Damn you! Damn you! Damn you!” the strange Servant howled. His book glowed, and more of the starfish monsters clawed their way into reality, refilling the ranks that Emiya had thinned.

“W-what are those things?” Rika asked hoarsely. She gagged, but there wasn’t anything else for her to throw up, so it was only a single dry heave.

“S-some kind of familiar,” said Mash. “It seems as though he’s using that book as a medium to summon them.”

“Just so,” Emiya agreed. His bow appeared in his hands, and he loosed a volley of arrows to strike down the wave of starfish that charged us. “In fact, I’d be willing to bet it’s his Noble Phantasm. I’m not sure whether he’s summoning those monsters or making them up as he goes, but either way, it

seems like there isn't a limit on how many he can call upon, just a limit on how many he can feasibly fit in this room."

More monsters bubbled up from the aether.

I nodded. "And you sent Jeanne on ahead?"

My meager swarm gave me a disjointed view of their battle, and so far, it was looking pretty evenly matched. I didn't have any intention of letting it swing in the Dragon Witch's favor.

Emiya smirked. "Well, it seemed like the appropriate thing to do. This guy and I both operate on a similar principle, so I'm naturally the one best suited to handling him."

"Summoning?" Ritsuka asked.

"Raw numbers."

More swords appeared, and they shot off, mowing down the advancing starfish. More green blood splattered across the floor, and Rika and Ritsuka both looked queasy, but neither of them puked again.

The strange Servant shrieked again, and his ranks were restored instantly as more starfish clawed their way through the veil and took form.

"There's a slight delay before he can replenish his lost forces," said Emiya. He swung his arm out and cut down this wave of enemies, too. "I'm going to make an opening for all of you. Before he can summon more of those things, you need to make it past him and go help Jeanne. She needs it far more than I do."

"You'll catch up?" Rika asked.

"When I can." Emiya smirked. "It's surprisingly hard to kill this guy without risking the building's structural integrity."

"We'll leave this guy to you, then," I said.

He nodded. More starfish formed across from our group.

"After this next wave, make a run for it. I'll cover you and clear the way."

He raised a hand, and another wall of swords formed in the air. His arm dropped. "Go!"

And as those swords mowed down even more of the giant starfish, our group took off at a sprint with Mash out front to push through anything that survived to attack us.

"I won't let you!" the strange Servant howled, and with another shriek, he summoned yet more of those monsters to stand in our way. They surged forward to meet us, to drown us in their numbers and do whatever it was they were designed to do. My imagination didn't come up with anything pretty.



More swords formed, pointing not forwards but down, and they dropped like a thousand guillotines, killing the freshly summoned creatures gruesomely. The instant their job was done, the swords vanished into motes of golden light, and our way forward was clear.

“No!”

Sprouting from the remains of their fallen brethren, more starfish suddenly grew to block our way. Their teeth gnashed and their stubby feelers wiggled, and they made wet, gurgling sounds as they leapt at us like starving lions.

I lifted my arm, preparing to fire my measly six-shot Gandr to put them down.

But a pair of spinning blades — one black, one white — curved around our group and scythed through the starfish, cutting them all apart like so much wheat. Ritsuka and Rika were white-faced, but the both of them deliberately focused their eyes on the door we were headed towards and didn't let their eyes turn towards the carnage, even as green blood splattered over our feet.

The strange Servant shrieked again, but we crossed the threshold and left the room, racing down the empty hallway as he screamed after us. No more starfish abominations formed to attack us, so I had to trust that Emiya did indeed know what he was doing and could handle the issue himself.

Considering how easily he carved apart the things, once he managed to get close enough to attack that nutjob directly, I had to think it would all be over.

“Up the stairs, then left,” I told everyone. “They're in the master suite.”

We didn't slow down except to climb the stairs, and even then only because we had to, taking them as fast as we could. At the top of the stairwell, we made a sharp left and continued down the hall, and here and now, the metallic clang of Jeanne and her evil half fighting echoed out along the corridor.

“What an awful racket,” Mozart mumbled.

“Is she...?” Ritsuka asked.

“They're both still alive,” I confirmed for him.

“Then let's go help Jeanne!” said Rika.

The doors to the grand hall or master suite or whatever the proper term was were half ajar, and we burst through them so forcefully that they banged off the wall, dragging the attention of both women inside towards us.

“Jeanne!” shouted Ritsuka.

“Oh look,” the Dragon Witch sneered. “Your little friends are here.”

Jeanne looked back at us. “Ritsuka, Rika, Mash, Taylor.” She sighed. “I'm sorry. I got selfish and ran on ahead without you.”

“And we’re very angry about that!” Rika said.

“But it doesn’t matter!” Ritsuka added. “We’re here now!”

The Dragon Witch laughed. “How quaint! They’ve come to throw themselves on the fire with you, you fake saint!”

“I never claimed to be a saint!” said Jeanne. “That was always a label other people put on me, of their own wishes. I am nothing more than a simple country girl who set out to protect the nation she loved with all her heart!”

Jeanne Alter snarled and swung her thin-bladed sword at her counterpart. Jeanne blocked it with the shaft of her flag, grunting.

“And the very people you saved threw you away the instant it inconvenienced them!”

“It’s true that they let me die,” said Jeanne. “The very thought of the Englishmen who treated me so poorly makes my blood boil even now! But simple anger and hatred are different things! No matter what, I never once carried hatred in my heart, because it was too full of all the memories I cherished that kept me going throughout every battle!”

She threw Jeanne Alter back, and Jeanne Alter grunted. “What are you nattering about now, you country bumpkin?”

“My family,” Jeanne said simply. “My mother and father, my brothers, the farm we tended to every day. No matter how vividly I can recall the blood and suffering of the battlefield, the memories of those I loved were all the more precious and all the more vibrant. They were my shield against the cruelties of the world, and they helped me to keep going, even when I wanted nothing more than to give up.”

She held out her hand as though offering it to her evil half.

“Isn’t that why you’re so furious? Because you long so desperately for those simpler, kinder days?”

And Jeanne Alter...flinched.

Jeanne’s fingers curled and she pulled her hand back. “Or is it the very fact you don’t have those memories that makes your rage so potent? Because you have nothing to shield yourself from the grief and the anger.”

Jeanne Alter regained her bearings. “What does it matter?” But she was still off kilter. “Who needs those wretched memories? I’m still Jeanne d’Arc! The Maid of Orléans! The Dragon Witch! Memories or not, I’ll kill you and this abominable country just the same!”

“Yes, you are,” Jeanne said sadly. “And that’s why...even if I have to kill you, I can’t help but pity you, the me who never knew kindness.”

“RAAH!” Jeanne Alter let out an inarticulate scream as she charged her counterpart, and Jeanne met her calmly, blocking the wild swings of her sword with the shaft of her flag — not easily, not effortlessly, but successfully all the same.

“Miss Jeanne!” said Mash.

She made to go and help, but my hand on her shoulder stopped her. “Miss Taylor! We can’t just sit here and watch!”

“We aren’t,” I said hurriedly.

Rika grinned like a shark. “Senpai’s got a plan.”

Still getting used to being referred to that way, but whatever.

“We don’t know how quickly the Dragon Witch can summon another Servant,” I said, rushing through the logic. “She hasn’t yet, but she still might. Mash, I need you to help Jeanne and keep her distracted. Mozart, your Noble Phantasm — the instant you see a good opening, use it to slow her down, make her weak. While she’s vulnerable, Mash, hit her as hard as you can, and don’t stop until she’s defeated.”

“Right!” said Mash. She turned to put our plan into action, but I stopped her again. “Miss Taylor?”

In one smooth motion, I yanked my dagger out of its sheath and handed it off to her. She took it, stricken.

“Don’t worry about any of the other functions,” I told her. “Just put the pointy end where it’ll hurt when you need to finish her off.”

She looked down at the dagger, uncertain, and I remembered then that Mash technically hadn’t ever killed someone before, not even another Servant. For all that she’d fought several, it was always someone else who delivered the final blow, and everything else she’d killed was always a familiar or an undead or a wyvern, a relatively dumb beast that was too dangerous to leave be. Jeanne Alter was the first thing with self and agency that she was going to have to personally end.

Maybe it was too much for her. She was older than I was when I killed Calvert, but she was more sheltered, less worldly, and when I’d pulled that trigger, I was backed into a corner without that many other options.

“If it’s too much,” I started.

“No.” She tightened her grip on the nano-thorn dagger. “I’ll do what I have to.”

She tucked it away inside a compartment in her shield, and then she turned away and leapt towards the fight. Jeanne Alter shrieked as she was forced to turn away from her counterpart and slash at Mash to avoid a crushing blow.

“You’re in the way, you pest!”

“I won’t let you hurt anyone else!” was Mash’s retort.

Jeanne Alter’s retort was swallowed by the resounding clang of her sword on Mash’s shield, and now forced to face two opponents, she pulled out the flag she’d been carrying and used it in her off hand like a bo staff. With surprising skill, she wielded them both to fight Jeanne and Mash together, blocking one with the flag staff and attacking the other in the same breath with her sword.

“Go, Mash!” Rika cheered. “Kick her ass!”

It didn’t feel any better now than it had every time before to have to stand in the back and watch the fight, knowing that there wasn’t a way for me to meaningfully contribute. The swarm I had was tiny, miniscule compared to the vast clouds of bugs, the galaxy of insects I’d had access to over the past month during our trek through the countryside, and most of them were ordinary house flies to boot.

And now Mash had my only real offense. Well, there wasn’t anything to be done about that, was there? As a Servant, anything she wielded instantly became a weapon for use against another Servant, and while Jeanne Alter wasn’t as fast or as strong as Saber Alter had been in Fuyuki, she was still blindingly fast compared to an ordinary human like me, so trying to finish her off myself was just stupid.

It quickly became obvious that Jeanne Alter being slower and weaker than Saber Alter also didn’t mean she was weak or slow, either. She was fast enough to keep up with both Jeanne and Mash simultaneously, no doubt in no small part due to the fact that Jeanne wasn’t at her best to begin with and Mash was still learning how to use whichever hero was fused to her to its fullest potential. She blocked Jeanne with the staff of her flag, and with the other hand, she fended off Mash with punishing strikes of her sword that let off eardrum-shattering shrieks as they collided with the flat of Mash’s shield.

But she was getting sloppier, because she was getting angrier. The angrier she got, the less precise her blows became and the less careful her steps were, the more energy wasted when she swung or turned or blocked. It wasn’t enough to do her in, to make her miss a step or leave herself open.

It *would* be enough that just one more distraction would give Mozart the opening he needed.

“Mozart, are you ready?” I asked him.

“Whenever my chance materializes, I will take it,” he promised.

I waited for a chance of my own, refusing to blink as I watched the fight. My right palm itched and tingled with phantom sensation. My skittering swarm in the walls stilled, peeking through the cracks to watch from myriad angles.

And then Jeanne Alter lashed out with a particularly strong blow, and Mash stumbled back a step from the force behind it, and as Jeanne Alter lifted her flag to bring it down on Jeanne like an ax, I saw my opportunity and took it. My phantom limb lashed out, found my target, and *pulled*.

Jeanne Alter staggered, dumbfounded, as the thread tying her flag to its shaft came undone, and the fabric unraveled to flap over her face.

I'd been trying to yank on the whole thing, startle her by pulling on it in an unexpected direction, but it seemed she was just too strong, because undoing the knot holding it all bound was the only thing I'd managed.

"Who did that?" she snarled, whipping her flag out of her face.

As her eyes found me, I palmed one of my final two runestones and smiled at her. Her rumbling growl was so loud I could almost feel it from across the room.

"You bitch!"

She lifted her sword as though she was going to strike me down from where she stood, but whatever she was about to do, I wasn't about to give her the chance.

"Jeanne, Mash, eyes!"

I threw my runestone as hard as I could, and Jeanne and Mash turned their heads away, squeezing their eyes shut. I shut my own, hiding in the corner of my elbow, watching the runestone soar through my bugs, and shouted, "Anfang!"

Jeanne Alter let out a blood-curdling screech as the runestone exploded and a bright light flashed, searing against my eyelids. I heard the whooping of her sword as she lashed out blindly around her, like she was trying to feel out where everyone was or cover for her weakness by forcing Jeanne and Mash to stay away.

Neither of them could get close. When I squinted my eyes back open, the two of them had backed away, safely out of range of Jeanne Alter's sword, watching her warily as they waited for her to wind down.

And Mozart stepped forward from the back of the group, breezing past us like a gentle wind, and raised his arms.

"Requiem for Death!"