

## Chapter XVIII: Dragonslayer

As the town of La Charité disappeared in the distance, no longer visible through the foliage, we kept running. Our panting breaths and the pounding of our feet on the ground formed a soundtrack to our sprint, as though to keep driving us forward towards the city of Lyon that lay in the far distance. Like we could reach it over the crest of the next hill or beyond the next copse of trees, forever just out of reach.

We didn't stop. Long after even the field we'd crossed to reach the forest had disappeared from the range of my control, we were still going, racing as far away as we could as fast as our legs would carry us. My legs burned, my lungs ached, sweat dripped down my head and my shirt, but none of us dared to stop for even a second.

The twins, to my surprise, didn't complain or even really slow down as we went. Whether they'd been trying to build up endurance in Chaldea's gym while I wasn't looking, I didn't know. Maybe I was just giving them too much credit, though. When it came to pushing past your limits and going farther than you'd ever thought you could, adrenaline was a hell of a drug.

Eventually, something had to give. Half our party was still human, and two thirds of it was still living and breathing instead of a materialized ghost. Perhaps somewhat expectedly, the twins burnt out first and stumbled to a stop, their legs trembling and their chests heaving as they gulped down air.

I wasn't all that much better. Less winded, because I was more used to this sort of thing, but it wasn't like I could sprint all out and not even break a sweat. Even Mash was huffing and puffing a little.

"Did we lose them?" Ritsuka asked breathlessly.

"No enemy Servants detected, Sen-Senpai," Mash answered.

"It doesn't look like they're chasing us," I said.

Why, I couldn't have said. After all, we'd killed one of Jeanne Alter's Servants. That was one more Servant she didn't have to fight for her, to help her burn down the country. Shouldn't that have put us higher up on her shitlist? More of a threat? If it had been me in her place, losing one of what was for all intents and purposes my generals would definitely have had me focus on the one who had done it.

Then again, even at my worst, I couldn't imagine burning down an entire fucking *country* on some roaring rampage of revenge, so maybe wondering why a pyromaniac nutjob wasn't making a rational decision wasn't a good question to ask.

Or maybe...

The thought sent a shiver of dread down my spine.

Maybe the reason why Jeanne Alter wasn't concerned about the loss of a single Servant was because she could just keep summoning more. She'd had four with her, after all. Four Servants that she took

out to burn down a relatively minor town, backed up by an army of wyverns, and just by the way she'd reacted to us, she hadn't expected us to be there when she did it, either.

When the enemy could throw around that much force that casually... What did that say about what she could bring to bear if she seriously wanted to destroy us?

"What about the townsfolk?" Ritsuka asked.

"Ah..." Mash's face fell. "Senpai...I don't think..."

"Most of them managed to evacuate," I told him.

His expression lifted hopefully.

"Most?" Rika asked, voice somber.

Her brother's hopeful expression faltered.

There was no way to break this news delicately. Romani might have preferred if I told them a pretty little lie and said that everyone made it out unscathed and it would all be sunshine and rainbows, but even if I agreed not to burden them too much too quickly, hiding the truth like that wouldn't help out anyone, and eventually, they'd realize I'd lied, anyway.

"We did what we could, but some people died before we could do anything," I told them. "Some people died from the wyverns. Some people were crushed by the wyverns' bodies when Arash shot them down."

"I did my best to put them out of the path of any bystanders," Arash added.

"Some people never made it out of their houses," I went on. "And some people got trampled on the way out of town or fell into the river."

And now for the part that none of them wanted to hear.

"Most of them... are probably going to die anyway."

The twins sucked in a sharp breath.

"Miss Taylor!" said Mash.

"No, she's right," Jeanne said miserably. "My other self... If she truly desires the destruction of France and all of its people, then she won't let them go."

"The smart ones will leave and go to another town nearby," I said. "Most of them... When Jeanne Alter leaves, they'll return to town, try to pick up and rebuild, and when she brings another army of wyverns to finish the job..."

They would all die just the same, as if we hadn't saved them in the first place.

"We have to go back!" Rika shouted. "We can't just leave them all to —"

“And do what?” I demanded. “Fight off five Servants and an army of wyverns with one Demi-Servant, one malfunctioning Ruler, and one Archer?”

Jeanne winced, but didn’t protest the point.

“Four Servants,” Ritsuka corrected, staring me straight in the eye with a determined look on his face. “Arash killed their Assassin.”

“Five, minimum,” I rebuked. I didn’t back down. “If she doesn’t already have more she can call on, then she can just summon another at her earliest convenience. Holy Grail, remember?”

“It can’t be that easy.” Ritsuka didn’t back down, either. “Doctor Roman said that hooking the Grail we got from Fuyuki up to the power grid would let us support three more Servants. Jeanne Alter can’t just summon as many as she wants.”

Except that all appearances said that she *could*.

“You don’t think,” I began, trying not to sound like a condescending asshole, “that a Holy Grail, a legend born in France and connected to the Middle East, might be more powerful here, closer both geographically and culturally to the place it originated, than it was in the middle of a city in Japan?”

I gestured back the way we came and squashed the burgeoning guilt in my belly. I had to get through to these two, because as much as I hated it myself, there wasn’t anything we could do for those people that wouldn’t get us all killed ourselves.

“How many wyverns do you think she had, for that matter? Ten? Twenty? A hundred? More?”

“At least a thousand,” Arash confirmed grimly.

“Four Servants as backup and an army of a thousand wyverns to burn down one little town when she didn’t even know we were going to be there. How many would she have brought if she *did* know? How many *can* she bring?”

“We don’t know,” Mash mumbled.

“And worst of all,” I finished off, “none of us can kill Dracul.”

“I saw that,” said Arash. “He shrugged off six fatal wounds like they were nothing.”

“Battle Continuation, A-Rank,” I said. “Vampirism, A-Rank. And if he gets close, Kazikli Bey, which turns his whole body into a weapon.”

Hookwolf might actually have been a pretty good comparison, there, now that I thought about it.

“Kazikli Bey?” Ritsuka muttered, brow drawing together.

“His Noble Phantasm,” I answered. “It weaponizes everything from his hair to his bones to his blood and turns them into ‘stakes’ that can pierce anyone in his range. He has to get pretty close to

use it, but if he does, he can rip any one of us apart in an instant, and it would definitely kill each and every one of us.”

The twins turned a little green. My lips pulled tight.

“The only way to kill him is to deal so much damage all at once that he dies immediately. None of us can do that.”

I looked meaningfully at Arash. “*None* of us.”

He nodded. Message received. No using his Noble Phantasm on Dracul. Good.

“We can’t just leave them all to die, though!” Rika burst out. “S-Senpai! Why did we even save them if we’re just going to let them all get killed! A-Aren’t you the ultimate badass? You killed a dragon! You can do something, can’t you?”

“No.”

Her face fell. She must have been expecting me to pull some crazy plan out of my ass, but the simple fact of the matter was, there wasn’t anything we could do about it. Not as we were.

“That’s why we’re headed to Lyon,” I said. “If Jeanne Alter can just keep summoning wyverns and Servants willy-nilly, then we need more firepower. We need to see if there’s any truth to the rumors about a great warrior down south. Lyon will give us a more solid heading.”

I hoped. But I couldn’t exactly seem so uncertain about it right then, could I? Rule one of being a leader: always look like you knew what you were doing, even when you were completely lost. There were a lot of things you could bullshit your way through just by being confident as you were doing it.

*Beep-beep!*

“Thank God, you’re all okay,” Romani breathed as he appeared. “I was a little worried... I-I mean, I knew you guys were going to make it through! After all, Taylor’s the one leading you!”

My lip twitched. Yeah, really strong vote of confidence, Romani.

“I-I managed to confirm the disappearance of one of the enemy Servants’ Spirit Origins,” he went on. “Good job, everyone. That’s one enemy down.”

“With no guarantee they can’t just summon more,” I said.

“Urk.” Romani blanched. “B-be that as it may, at least you guys managed to take out one of them! A-and anyway, I’m detecting a ley line nearby. You should be able to set up camp there while we plan out your next move.”

“It’s already been decided, Doctor Roman,” said Mash. “We’ll be heading to the city of Lyon, next.”

Romani’s brow furrowed. “Lyon?”

“There are rumors of a great warrior somewhere in southern France,” Jeanne said. “Lyon would be a good place to look for more information.”

“A great warrior...” he mumbled. “You think it might be a Servant?”

“We think so, yes,” I said.

And hopefully, it was one of the dragonslayers who didn’t show up for *my* summoning.

“Hang on, let me take a look.”

“Wait, isn’t that, like, super far away?” said Rika. “I thought you couldn’t read Servants from that distance!”

“You guys are our main observation point, so we can get clearer readings the closer to you we look,” Romani explained absently, looking at something away from the camera. “Within a mile, we can get details like Class, Alignment, and as you observe details with your Master’s Clairvoyance, even things like True Names, Skills, and Noble Phantasms. But if we go further out than that, things start to get blurrier. If we can get a good enough look to detect a Servant at all, the only thing we’ll be able to tell is whether there’s a Servant in that general area. Well, unless it’s a really powerful Servant, like a Grand, but there’s no way you’re going to run into one of those.”

A minute of silence later, he blinked.

“Well, would you look at that,” he said. “It’s faint, but I’m definitely detecting the presence of a Servant in Lyon. I should be able to pin it down better once you’re inside the city itself, but it’s definitely worth checking out.”

“Doctor Roman,” said Ritsuka, “can you detect whether or not there are any Servants remaining at La Charité?”

Mash glanced at him sadly. “Senpai...”

“You’re not that far away, so...” Romani trailed off for a moment, hands moving across his keyboard. “Yes. I’m still detecting a fairly strong Servant presence in La Charité. It’s a bit difficult even from here, but given the data, it looks like multiple Servants are still there.”

“And the townsfolk?” Ritsuka asked. “Can Chaldea detect vital signs from living humans in that range?”

Romani’s hands stopped moving. “Don’t do this to yourself, Ritsuka. It won’t bring you any peace.”

“We’re leaving them behind!” Ritsuka barked. “The least we can do is acknowledge...!”

He looked down, angry, his fists clenched and trembling.

“If we couldn’t even save them,” he said roughly, “then the least we can do is acknowledge their loss.”

Romani sighed. “On average,” he said solemnly, “one-hundred-sixty-four-thousand people die every day.”

Ritsuka’s head jerked up, stricken.

“That’s not how people work,” I cut in. “Things like ‘the whole world’ or ‘the entire country’ are just too big. People deal better with the stuff right in front of them. It’s more real. Solid.”

“That’s the point I’m trying to make,” said Romani.

“What, that there are seven billion lives on the line?” I retorted. “People don’t fight for seven billion. They fight for seven. For seventeen. Their friends, their family, the people they care about and the people in arm’s reach. You fight for the guy next to you, and the guy next to you fights for the guy next to him, and eventually, everyone is fighting for everyone.”

I looked Ritsuka straight in the eye. “I get it, Ritsuka. You feel that weight, don’t you? You may not have known anyone in that town, and you probably couldn’t name more than three of them, but for just that little while, they were your arm’s reach.”

And sometimes, that was all it took for it to matter. Like Dinah. I’d seen her all of a few minutes, and just like that, she’d become someone I couldn’t leave alone and let suffer.

“And the worst feeling of all is when the only thing you can do is walk away from them.”

“Taylor...” Romani muttered.

“So don’t let it be meaningless,” I finished. “You have to walk away now, but this isn’t how proper human history says they all died.”

Something sparked in his eyes, and Ritsuka’s shoulders squared. “So if we correct this Singularity, none of them will have died at all!”

His twin sister gave a triumphant whoop.

“Let’s go! The faster we fix this stupid Singularity, the faster everyone will be saved!” Rika shouted, and then she took off running. “To Lyon!”

“W-wait!” Mash scrambled after her. “S-Senpai! Master, Lyon is the other way!”

“Rika!” Ritsuka shouted as he chased them.

It left me alone with Arash, Jeanne, and Romani.

“Do you really think it’s going to be that simple, Master?” Arash asked solemnly.

“I don’t know.” The metaphysics made my head spin, and so did the regular physics. We were in aberrant space-time, as I understood it. Did anything we did here change anything at all? Or would things just snap back the way they were supposed to be the instant we took the Grail and left? “But it’s the only way I can accept leaving them to die myself.”

“Theoretically, as an otherwise unobserved moment outside of proper time and space...” Romani began.

“I don’t want to hear any guesses, Romani,” I told him bluntly. “If you don’t know for sure, just leave it alone.”

He shut up immediately.

“As much as I hate to admit it, there was nothing we could have done as we are,” Jeanne said quietly. “My evil self... Her forces simply outmatched us.”

“And that’s the only reason we didn’t stay and fight,” I said.

She smiled a tight smile and then raced off after the others.

“Rika, Ritsuka, Mash, it’s this way!”

A moment later, Arash and I followed.

— o.O.O.O.o —

It was the better part of another week and a half of walking, trekking through the French countryside, before we finally made it close enough to see Lyon in the distance. What we saw as we looked down on it from atop a hill, however...

“Oh no...” Mash whispered.

...was a smoldering ruin. The smell of the smoke reached us even from so far away.

Not the entire city had been reduced to rubble, but enough of it was gone, scorched down to the foundation, that there was little need to ask what had happened to the city and most, if not all, of its inhabitants. Because of course, the one thing we hadn’t considered as we rushed to make it to Lyon was that Jeanne Alter would have gotten to it, first.

How much sooner? Who knew? She could have ransacked it before we ever even made it to La Charité, just burned it down while we were making our trek through the forest from Vaucouleurs, or maybe she’d anticipated where we were heading next, flew on ahead of us on a more direct path that we’d never seen, and wiped it out before we could come to find our reinforcements.

Had she killed the Servant we’d been hearing rumors about, the one whose presence Romani had confirmed, or had our possible ally managed to escape her and her squad of murderers?

My hand snapped up and I barked into my communicator, “Romani!”

There was no response. Damn it. Was there something interfering with our communications somehow, or were we just too far away from the nearest ley line terminal to get a secure connection? The only thing I could do was hope it was the latter and plan for the former.

“We need to get down there and find the ley line,” I said.

Rika jolted. “Survivors!” she burst out.

“That’s right!” her brother startled. “Senpai, with your bugs, can you —”

“It’s out of range, right now,” I cut across him quickly. “Once we get within about eighteen-hundred...” I did a quick bit of mental math. “About half a kilometer, I’ll be able to start looking. But Ritsuka, Rika...”

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up,” Arash finished for me, face grim.

“Wait,” said Ritsuka. “Arash, you can see that far, can’t you?”

“That’s why I’m telling you,” said Arash. “If there’s anyone down there still alive in all that destruction... I’m not seeing them.”

And the twins just sort of crumpled. My gut twisted, but none of my own turmoil showed on my face. As awful as this was, when it came down to it, nothing could beat out the carnage left behind by the Slaughterhouse Nine, the casual, malicious cruelty with which they’d tortured their victims. Even by the numbers, Jack Slash had Jeanne Alter beat.

“This is horrible,” Jeanne anguished, her face twisted with pain. “No matter how wrathful she is, how could she do something so terrible to all of those innocent people?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Jeanne,” Mash said quietly.

Jeanne shook her head, blonde hair whipping at her cheeks. “There’s nothing you need to apologize for, Mash. This... This is...”

She trailed off, because she couldn’t seem to find the words to describe the atrocity before us. No one else suggested anything to fill her hanging sentence.

“We need to get down there,” I said into the uneasy silence. “Find the ley line, connect with Romani. If we can figure out if the Servant he detected is still here or where he might have gone, then that’ll give us our next move.”

“This... Doesn’t this mean *anything* to you?” Ritsuka snarled at me. “People are dead! Hundreds! Thousands! The whole city is —”

“As callous as it is for me to say it, Ritsuka,” I interrupted, staring straight into his eyes, “I’ve seen a lot worse than this. And crying over all of the people who died won’t bring them back. Only fixing this Singularity will.”

Ritsuka flinched, and I turned back towards the city, or the husk that remained where it had once stood. In the quiet after my rebuke, the background buzz of my bugs seemed almost thunderous.

*Stupid.* I forced my swarm to thin out, so that the agitated droning didn’t give me away. Eventually, if the local insect population started acting out whenever they expected *me* to be reacting more extremely, they were going to figure out that my swarm expressed all of the emotions they never saw on my face.



It had been so long since I'd last had my powers that I'd forgotten I used to do that. I'd gotten so accustomed to having to bottle up and push down my frustrations that having that outlet had let me slip back into old habits without even realizing it.

“Whatever we feel about these circumstances,” Jeanne began, “it’s true that there isn’t much we can do about it, now. The best we can do at the moment is as Taylor says: find out whether or not the Servant we were looking for is still around. Especially if he managed to survive this attack, that would be a good sign.”

Ritsuka scowled.

“And if we find any survivors —”

“Then we’ll do what we can for them,” I said.

The twins didn’t seem to like that, exactly, especially Ritsuka, but they accepted it as the best they were going to get, because it really was the best we could do, in the circumstances.

We resumed our trek towards the city, a little slower and a little more cautiously, in case there were any stray wyverns still hanging around. As we came closer, the sharp, acrid tang of smoke became stronger and stronger, and the true tale of the city’s destruction became ever clearer. Even now what must have been at least a day after the fact, a haze still hung in the air like mist, drifting upwards.

It reminded me of the aftermath of an Independence Day party, after all of the fireworks had been set off. The smoke from the fires had spread out and thinned, and the sulfur from the flames lingered, clinging to the area even long after it was all over.

As more and more of the city came into range of my powers, more and more was my original estimate borne out. Flies and maggots clung to corpses, and the other carrions flitted about from meal to meal, but aside from us, there didn’t seem to be a single living person left in Lyon. By all accounts, everyone else had been killed.

“Senpai,” Ritsuka whispered. “Is there anyone...?”

Even if he’d wanted it, I wasn’t going to give him a pleasant lie.

“I’m sorry, Ritsuka.”

He took in a deep, shuddering breath.

“Maybe,” Rika said hopefully, “maybe it’s just because we’re out here, and as we get further in, we’ll find...”

Even she didn’t sound like she really believed it.

“I don’t think we’re going to find anyone alive in Lyon, Master,” Mash told her somberly.

We kept going and went deeper into town, through the outskirts and over the river that split the city in two near the northeastern edge, where we’d come down from. The deeper we went, the further

into the city my range stretched, although the fewer bugs their wound up being, on account of the burnt out husks of homes. Not only was the number dropping, but the variety was slimming down, as well, leaving me with mostly flies, maggots, and a few other creepies of the crawling kind.

“This was such a beautiful town,” Jeanne said quietly. Her head swiveled as she looked around at the destruction. “Why would she do something like this? Lyon had no connection to me, at all.”

“Didn’t she already say it was revenge?” I said. “Against the whole of France?”

“It’s not that simple,” Jeanne declared with such confidence that she sounded absolutely certain. “It *can’t* be that simple. Can it?”

I thought about the villains I’d known. About Lung. About Coil. About the Travelers and Echidna. About the Teeth and the Fallen. Mostly, I thought about Jack Slash, and how twisted and *wrong* he’d been, not only in how he acted but in his entire way of thinking. Cruelty for the sake of cruelty, theater for the sake of theater, sadism for the sake of sadism, and all of it backed by the desire to be the biggest monster out there. The boogeyman that everyone feared.

In other words, fame.

“Yeah,” was the only answer I could give. “It really can.”

Jeanne’s brow furrowed, troubled.

I didn’t really blame her for wanting to think there must have been something more to it than that. It was tempting to grasp for a reason behind the evils of others, some greater purpose or narrative that explained their actions in a larger context, but all too often, the enemies I’d faced had been driven by the pettiest of shit.

Most people, it turned out, really weren’t all that complicated.

“Miss Taylor,” said Mash, “have you found any clues as to the whereabouts of the Servant that Doctor Roman detected here?”

“No sign of them, no,” I said. “And there aren’t as many bugs here as there were in La Charité, either. Do we know where the ley line is?”

Mash lifted her wrist and brought up her map. Da Vinci had even included ley line terminals on that thing? I shouldn’t have been surprised that she went that far, but somehow, she kept catching me off guard.

“There’s one back on the other side of the river,” Mash said, pointing back the way we came. Her arm swung around to the left. “One north of our current position.” She swung her arm around again and to the right. “There should be one more to the south. According to the map, it should currently be the site of a castle.”

“Whoa,” said Rika. “Like, an actual castle? Battlements, ramparts, have at the foul knave! The whole thing?”

“Many towns started that way, Senpai,” Mash explained. “The oldest ones were settlements along sources of water, like the rivers that run through Lyon. Those also made ideal places for fortifications, so some towns and cities in Europe started off as Roman forts and military emplacements. Those evolved into medieval castles, and then towns and cities grew around them. Or sometimes the other way around.”

“You sure know a lot of stuff, Mash,” Ritsuka commented, although his heart didn’t really seem in his smile.

Mash flushed. “O-oh, well... I read a lot, growing up.”

I looked in the directions Mash had pointed out. Back behind us, to the north of us, to the south of us, it was all destroyed, razed to the ground like it had been stomped on by a giant boot. I didn’t like our odds of finding anything good no matter which direction we took, but...

“I think the castle is our best bet,” I said.

Jeanne nodded. “I agree. With the city in...the state it’s in, the castle is the building most likely to be intact.”

Because larger structures made of brick and stone were harder to tear down than smaller residences made of wood and plaster, or whatever people built their houses of in this time period. Yeah, that was my reasoning, too.

“Senpai,” Ritsuka began.

“Still nothing.”

He didn’t press.

We picked through the rubble to find the most intact street we could and made our way south, towards where the castle was supposed to be standing. Eventually, we had to make a detour back north to reach the bridge that took us across the other river — the Rhône, Jeanne called it, to the Saône that we’d already crossed — and then make our way back south, again.

No matter how much we walked or how deep into the city we went, I found no signs of life. The whole place was as silent as the grave, an expression all the more appropriate now, it seemed to me, even if it was equally morbid.

At last, in the distance, situated atop a hill and surrounded by foliage, a towering castle came into view, standing above the rest of the destroyed city. A thing of brick and stone with solid, strong walls, it was...

“That’s it?” Rika asked. “That doesn’t look like a castle at all!”

Disappointingly small. In terms of its size, it was definitely bigger than any of the residences around here would have been when they were intact by an order of magnitude, but I’d been expecting something epic and enormous, like it had come straight out of *The Lord of the Rings*, or at least something on the scale of the Tower of London or Buckingham Palace.

The castle we saw was definitely a castle, but it was like the whole thing had been built on a tight budget, so all of the features you normally expected of one were compacted down as much as possible. The thing didn't even have a moat and a drawbridge.

"Not everyone can be the King of England," Jeanne said with an awkward smile and laugh.

"Well, you know what they say," I commented idly. "Men who carry big swords or build huge castles are making up for being... *undersized* elsewhere."

"M-Miss Taylor!" Mash squeaked, scandalized, as Ritsuka squeaked and Rika gaped at me. Even Jeanne's face had turned bright red.

Arash, at least, found it funny, if the laugh was anything to go by.

"On the bright side," I said like nothing had happened, "the fact it's not that big means it'll be pretty easy to search."

"The tower makes for a good vantage point, too, if we decide to stay the night," Arash added.

"We'll make those kinds of plans after we hash out our next move with Romani."

"R-right," Mash said, still a little flustered.

*Beep-beep!*

"Romani?" I blurted out, surprised.

A burst of static ate his first few words, but there was no mistaking the rest of his shout: "— Servant incoming!"

I whirled around. "Mash!"

"Master!" Arash yelled at the same time as Mash called, "Senpai!"

An arm wrapped around my middle like a steel bar, and my gut lurched as I was yanked off my feet and through the air, just in time for a meteor to fall out of the sky towards where I'd just been standing.

"LORD CHALDEAS!"

A pane of thin, blue light resolved itself into a castle wall, and the meteor slammed into it with a thunderous clang, forcing Mash to brace her back foot against the ground. A bare second later, my feet found the ground again as we landed and Arash set me down. His arm didn't leave my stomach. In case he had to pick me up and dodge again.

Thankfully, Mash's Noble Phantasm held, protecting her, Jeanne, and the twins completely, and the meteor bounced off of it and spun back in the opposite direction to land in the destroyed street. The weight behind it cratered the already cracked road, and as it bled off its momentum, it slowly came to a stop.

A tortoise shell. Lined with spikes and ridges, it was a gigantic shell the color of dried blood, and tucked inside were a horned, bearded head, six clawed legs, and a long, serpentine tail that emerged before our eyes. It glared at us with baleful yellow eyes over a leonine maw filled with sharp fangs.

It didn't attack. It stood there, tail lashing out behind it, utterly massive and easily big enough to swallow each of us whole.

And then another meteor fell out of the sky, a blur of white, red, and black that landed atop the beast's shell with inhuman grace. When she stood back up, staring down from her mount's back, it was the woman in the fetish tabard.

"Originally, I was tasked merely with observing your path forward," she announced in a strong, clear voice. "However, the Servant you're searching for here in Lyon is the greatest threat to my Master in this era, and as her Servant, I should absolutely prevent you from reaching him."

She brandished her staff.

"And as a servant of Our Lord, I must also do whatever I can to aid you, so long as even a fraction of my sanity remains. That's why...if you cannot make it past this Saint Martha, then you have no hope of facing my Master and her personal mount!"

"S-Saint Martha!" Romani stuttered, voice broken by a burst of static. "Then that means... Her mount is the dragon, Tarasque! N-not a wyvern, but a dragon! A real dragon!"

In what world was *that* a dragon, I wanted to ask, but it was a useless question.

"Romani," I said instead, "the Servant we came here for, is he in the castle?"

"W-what?"

"The Servant, Romani! Is he in the castle?"

"Oh!" Romani scrambled. "C-checking... You're much closer, so my readings should be much more accurate! Yes! I'm detecting the presence of a Servant inside the castle! The bottom floor, in the basement! W-wait, that would be the dungeons, wouldn't it?"

The dungeons? Why...? No time to worry about that. I could ask him myself when we found him.

Except there was a problem: five and a half feet of a reincarnated ghost of a great hero from the past and her twenty-something foot tall dragon, neither of whom would just let us run inside the castle and find that Servant. If we turned our backs and made a run for it, that dragon would squash us flat in an instant.

I had to make a decision.

We didn't have the firepower to take out Martha, not as long as she had her Tarasque by her side, which meant someone had to go into the castle to search for the other Servant there. The fact that we didn't have the firepower meant that we needed the defensive power instead to hold our ground while someone split off to go look. That meant Mash had to stay behind and keep Martha busy.

She held off Excalibur. It wouldn't be easy, but she should be able to do it.

The trouble was, the person who should go search for the Servant hidden in the castle was also obvious, because not only was Mash better off with the support of her Masters, but the person best suited to go was the person who could find the other Servant fastest. In other words, me.

And that meant I was going to have to let the twins handle this on their own for the first time since we met up in Fuyuki.

I hated it. I hated it. My job was to be their leader, to look out for them and make sure they made it back from all of this as alive and intact as I could possibly manage. As their leader, it fell to me to make the sacrifice play if and when the situation ever arose, because they were my responsibility and I wasn't going to throw their lives away. The people, it had to be about the people, or else what was the point of this second chance I'd been given?

But the person who went into the castle had to be me. The Servant who stayed to hold off Martha had to be Mash. I could bring the twins with me, but if something happened to Mash because they weren't there to help with a well-timed Command Spell, none of us would forgive ourselves.

Damn it. Damn it. Damn it all. Why did this feel so much like running away?

My mouth had already made the decision my heart still fought against. "Ritsuka, Rika, Mash! Hold her off! Arash, give them support! Jeanne, I need you with me!"

"Yes!" Mash and the twins shouted back.

Arash let out a short chuckle and leapt away from my side and up onto the roof of the nearest tower. He drew back his bow and took aim, waiting for the right moment. Ritsuka and Rika retreated to a safe distance, even as Mash planted herself like a tree between them and Martha.

Jeanne was the only one who hesitated, glancing back at the woman on her dragon, like she thought her place was on the front lines.

I understood the feeling, but I wasn't so stupid as to risk my own life needlessly by running to face an unknown Servant by myself. Not when I didn't know his alignment, his temperament, or anything else about him except that Jeanne Alter apparently had reason to fear him.

"Jeanne!"

Finally, she turned away and came towards me, and once she was beside me, I turned towards the castle and we made our way inside.

"We shouldn't leave them by themselves," she told me as we sprinted across the courtyard.

"We don't have the firepower to beat her ourselves," I retorted shortly, "but the Servant inside this castle is apparently a big enough deal that your evil self doesn't want us recruiting him, because he's a threat to her super special personal dragon. Which means..."

"He's probably one of the dragonslayers you wanted to summon," Jeanne realized.

“Yeah.”

I hoped.