

## Chapter LXXX: Manifest Fantasy

*That's not possible.*

Heroic Spirits had some degree of mystery. The primer courses had delivered that like a big, glowing neon sign that said “Take with a grain of salt.” The degree of mythologizing that went into most of the older heroes made it impossible to tell fact from fiction with most of them, or even whether some of them had existed at all.

But Heroic Spirits by their nature had to be someone that people had genuinely believed in at some point or another. Someone whose existence a culture had accepted as *fact*.

By definition, that didn't include someone who only existed in a single man's addled, grief-stricken mind.

“Well?” Jeanne Alter asked, impatient. “Are you my Master or not? Stop standing around looking like idiots and say something already!”

“That's...definitely not Jeanne,” said Rika, sounding faint. Shocked. For once, I couldn't blame her.

Jeanne Alter wasn't a legitimate existence. There was no facet of the Heroic Spirit “Jeanne d'Arc” that could be said to hold her wrathful vengeance — Jeanne herself had said as much.

“W-wait,” said Marie. “Jeanne Alter? A-as in the enemy Servant you fought at the end of the Orléans Singularity?”

“What?” Jeanne Alter asked. “What are you talking about? Orléans Singularity? Stop talking nonsense now! Are you my Master or not?”

My fists clenched. My Command Spells stood out on the back of my hand, a stark red against the white skin stretched tight over my bones.

Unlike the real Jeanne, she had no Magic Resistance. A single Command Spell was all it would take to force her to commit suicide, as gruesome a thing as that would be for the twins to witness. Against Jeanne Alter, in a space this tiny, right on top of equipment this delicate, however? It was really our only option.

So why hadn't I done it already?

My lips pressed tight.

Because she hadn't given me a reason to.

“Th-this shouldn't be possible,” Da Vinci said from the side. I didn't take my eyes off of Jeanne Alter. “This isn't a Heroic Spirit that exists — her Spirit Origin shouldn't be cohesive enough to manifest, let alone sustain itself. She should be self-destructing in front of our eyes!”

“Self-destructing?” Jeanne Alter’s hand went to the sword sheathed at her hip. “Damn it! If none of you are going to flap your gobs enough to tell me anything useful, then I’ll show *you* self-destructing, you —”

A wind rushed past me, and before I could even blink, Aífe stood on the plinth with Jeanne Alter, one hand on the pommel of the sword to keep it from being drawn and the other pressing two fingers with threatening intent against Jeanne Alter’s throat. Jeanne Alter looked back at her with wide, yellow eyes.

“You!” she snarled. “Get your hands off of me, you thug!”

“Master,” said Aífe, ignoring her, “give me an order. Are we keeping this one, or should I dispose of her?”

“D-dispose!” Mash choked, and yeah, there was that, too, wasn’t there? Romani was going to have a field day helping her through this one.

“W-what?” Marie demanded. “After we went through all of this effort and spent all of these resources on summoning her?”

“I’m afraid this one might be a lost cause,” Da Vinci said.

“Lost cause?” Jeanne Alter sneered, and magical energy began to gather inside of her, licking the edges of her body like black flames. “Lost cause this —”

“Jeanne!” I said sharply.

Yellow eyes flitted to me, waiting. Her lip remained curled, but the mana she’d been gathering stayed where it was, ready to be used but not yet used.

I hoped I wasn’t going to regret this, but this wouldn’t be the first time and probably wouldn’t be the last that I’d teamed up with someone who had once been my enemy.

“Yeah?” she said.

“You should have received a packet of information when you were summoned,” I told her, “detailing the mission statement of our organization, Chaldea, and the general state of things. Right?”

“What are you asking questions with obvious answers for?” she said, annoyed.

To establish the baseline we’d be building off of.

“And you still answered the summoning?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Jeanne Alter countered.

*Because you’re not real, so there was no Throne for you to wait at.* I didn’t say that, though. Whatever had happened, however it had happened, she was real enough to stand in front of us right now, so I had to treat her as though she was a real Heroic Spirit.

“Do you have any problems following our orders to fulfill the mission?”

“If you think I’m going to let you boss me around like your toy soldier, think again,” she answered. She looked disdainfully down at Aífe. “I’m no one’s pet dog.”

That...was about as much as I was expecting, if I was honest. Even if I hadn’t known the version of her from Orléans — the memories of which she didn’t seem to have — I could’ve figured that out in the first five seconds of her opening her mouth.

“Jeanne,” Ritsuka said suddenly, “if we’re your Masters, are you going to betray us?”

Jeanne Alter craned her head, but the position she was in with Aífe made it impossible for her to turn towards him fully.

“As long as you don’t betray me,” she said, “I won’t burn you all to a crisp.”

It wasn’t the most reassuring answer, but I got the sense it was the best one we were going to get.

“W-wait,” said Mash, “Master! A-are you really going to...to...”

“I’m...not so sure about this, Onii-chan,” said Rika. “Senpai usually knows what she’s doing, but this feels...too out there.”

“Ugh,” Jeanne Alter huffed. “Would you idiots stop waffling already and make up your mind? If we’re going to fight to the death, just get on with it!”

I looked behind me, towards Marie. She was the closest thing we had to an impartial third party. “Director?”

Marie bit her lip so hard it turned white. “I...” There was something she thought about saying, but at the last second, she reined it in. “I trust your judgment on this.”

“Hang on,” said Da Vinci, “you can’t really mean to establish a contract with her! Not only is she an Avenger class Servant, she tried to burn down France!”

“This doesn’t look like France to me,” Jeanne Alter commented sardonically.

“Because it isn’t.”

“Taylor!” cried Da Vinci.

It wasn’t like I didn’t understand her perspective. It went against some of my own instincts as well, hardened as they were by my career as a cape. Some part of me wanted to eliminate her now, while we could, because she was just that dangerous and she’d never shown any remorse for what she’d done or any attempt to change.

But we’d accepted Emiya into the team, in spite of what his other self had tried to do to us in Fuyuki. Maybe it wasn’t quite the same here as it was then, but it was similar enough, I thought.

“I know who she is, Da Vinci,” I said to her. “I know what her other self did. I haven’t forgotten all of that.”

“And you’re still willing to trust her?” Da Vinci demanded.

“No.” I met Jeanne Alter’s eyes as she looked back to me, one eyebrow arched, like she was questioning me. “But I’m willing to let her earn it.”

Slowly, Jeanne Alter’s lips curled into a smile, really more of a grin, tinged with malice. “You sure you’re not going to regret that, *Master?*”

“As long as you don’t betray us,” Ritsuka said before I could, “then we won’t have a reason to.”

Da Vinci’s console chimed, and she looked down at it.

“Con...Contract established,” said Da Vinci. “It wasn’t...the most conventional of ways to do it, but it’s been registered here, clear as day.”

Jeanne Alter sneered at Aífe. “You gonna put those fingers of yours away, attack dog?”

Aífe’s fingers slowly curled back towards her palm, and then suddenly, she grabbed Jeanne Alter by the throat.

“Aífe!” said Ritsuka. She ignored him.

“I don’t do threats,” said Aífe, completely calm. “This is a promise, and I never break those: the instant you betray us, this second chance of yours *ends.*”

Abruptly, she let go and stepped back, turning away to walk back over to my side. Jeanne Alter touched her throat, rubbing faintly at the spot where Aífe’s hand had held her, and arched an eyebrow at me.

“You just going to let her get away with that, *Master?*”

I glanced back at Aífe over my shoulder. She was unmoved.

“I said I would give you a chance to earn our trust,” I told Jeanne Alter. “I didn’t say you’d get more than one.”

Although the blatant threat wasn’t the most helpful way of driving that point home. I’d done stuff like that in the past, but I was trying to be a better person than I was then.

Paradoxically, Jeanne Alter grinned. “Maybe you’re smarter than I gave you credit for.”

Da Vinci stared at me intensely. I could practically feel her demanding, ‘are you sure that this is a good idea?’ I wasn’t. But it still didn’t quite sit right with me to condemn her when the only thing she’d thrown at us so far was words.

I could deal with words. Words wouldn’t kill me. And I’d dealt with far harsher and more cutting verbal attacks than Jeanne Alter’s attempts at menacing.

“I-if everyone’s done posturing!” Marie interjected suddenly. “We have other things we need to be doing today, and we’re all wasting time standing here in the summoning chamber!”

Rika’s face twisted with horror. “Crap! Hot Pops’ lessons!”

“Oh,” said Ritsuka wearily, “right, we still have that to go to. I forgot all about it.”

“Hot Pops?” asked Jeanne Alter, looking like she wanted to laugh.

“Rika has a tendency to hand out nicknames to people,” I explained patiently. “She calls Aífe ‘Super Action Mom,’ and one of our Casters, El-Melloi II, she calls ‘Hot Pops.’ Only a few of us have escaped getting labeled with one.”

“Oh?” Jeanne Alter leered at Rika. “And does she already have one for me?”

“She does,” Ritsuka confirmed, “although it’s a lot tamer than the other ones she came up with.”

“Hey!” Rika protested. “Jalter is a perfectly serviceable nickname! There’s elegance in its simplicity or whatever!”

“Jalter?” Jeanne Alter asked.

“From ‘Jeanne Alter,’” I said, watching her face closely. “A way to differentiate you from the original.”

The change was immediate, because any trace of levity was gone from her face in an instant, and a chill radiated off of her, as though she was sucking in all the heat in the room.

“Tch. That’s only natural,” she said. “If you had given me a nickname that was supposed to belong to *her*, then I would have set you on fire where you stand.”

Once more, Da Vinci tried to bore a hole in my head with her eyes, as though asking, ‘are you *absolutely* sure it’s worth keeping her around?’ And my answer hadn’t really changed.

Even though Jeanne Alter seemed to be doing her best to convince me that it should.

“N-noted,” Rika managed to say.

“In any case, Ritsuka, Rika, the Director has a point,” I said. “The two of you have lessons to get to. You might as well go and get ready for that.”

“R-right,” said Rika. “Y-yeah. Let’s...go and do that, Onii-chan.”

“Right.” Even Ritsuka looked spooked. “Sure. Come on, Mash.”

Mash, pale and drawn, didn’t say anything. She all but scurried out of the room after the twins when they left, like she couldn’t wait to get out of here, and with them gone, it was just me, Aífe, Da Vinci, Marie, and our resident problem child.

“Aífe,” I began carefully, “I’d like you to give Jeanne Alter a tour of the facility. Show her where the cafeteria is, the library, the Rayshift Chamber, things like that. Maybe pick out a room for her from one of the empty ones.”

Jeanne Alter sneered. “A tour, huh.”

I could feel Aífe’s eyes on the back of my head.

*Keep an eye on her and keep her distracted,* I added mentally. *I need to have a discussion with Da Vinci and the Director.*

*Fine,* Aífe answered. *I’ll keep her occupied and out of the way.*

“There’s nothing else for me to do, so I might as well,” she said aloud.

“And who says I want to go on a stupid tour with you?” Jeanne Alter said.

“The simulator isn’t fully fixed yet, so you can’t spar with another Servant,” I said pointedly. “Do you have something better to do?”

Her face twisted, and she looked away, planting one hand on her hip. “Tch. Fine, I’ll go on this stupid tour. Might as well see what this super advanced place is like for myself.”

“Then let’s go,” said Aífe. “Unlike you, I *do* happen to have other things I could be doing today.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jeanne Alter stepped down from the plinth, her armor clinking against the floor as she walked and tinkling as she moved. “Don’t get your panties in a bunch, *Super Action Mom*.”

The instant Jeanne Alter was within arm’s reach, Aífe’s hand snaked out and she gave Jeanne Alter a flick to the temple.

“Ow!” Jeanne Alter snarled. “What the fuck was that for?”

“I let Rika get away with it because it’s part of her personality. It’s how she shows respect and affection,” Aífe answered. “I’m not going to afford you the same courtesy, because you aren’t showing either.”

“Fuck you!”

“Keep up the attitude, and it won’t be anytime soon.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

They left, bickering all the while, and Marie meandered closer as she watched them go. At least it didn’t look like they were in danger of starting a fight that would bring the whole place down around our ears.

The instant they were out of earshot, Marie turned around and hissed, “What was that?”

I frowned. “As long as she hasn’t given us an actual reason to terminate the contract —”

“Not that!” Marie waved her hand impatiently. “Da Vinci! What happened? I thought we were supposed to be summoning Jeanne d’Arc!”

“That was the goal,” Da Vinci agreed. “Frankly, Director, this shouldn’t have been possible. There *is* no basis in the Heroic Spirit of Jeanne d’Arc for a Jeanne Alter, as an Avenger class Servant or otherwise. She’s an entirely fictitious being created by Gilles de Rais’ wish on the Orléans Holy Grail.”

“Then how did this happen?” Marie demanded. “If it’s not possible in the first place?”

Da Vinci shrugged and shook her head. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I don’t have the faintest idea.”

It was no less scary hearing her say it a second time than it had been the first. Logically, of course, Da Vinci was fallible, because even if she was a Heroic Spirit, she was still a human being. But it was easy to get used to her having an answer for everything, even if it was just a haphazard guess.

“What *did* happen?” I asked, because this was supposed to be simple. The only way for things to go wrong was supposed to be for the Saint Quartz to not work at all, not for it to summon someone who shouldn’t exist.

“The Saint Graph inverted halfway through the summoning,” said Da Vinci. “It would be fascinating, if the implications weren’t so dire. It simply...started changing on its own, almost like it was being infected.”

I didn’t like the way that was phrased. “Infected” was far too similar a word to “invaded,” and that implied a much, much deeper and more pressing problem than just a simple miscalculation or a fluke.

“Can...can they reach us even here and manipulate our systems?” Marie asked, horrified.

Da Vinci frowned and shook her head. “We’re not perfectly isolated, but if they could affect our summonings to such a degree, then why wouldn’t they have done it sooner?”

“Because they didn’t consider us a serious enough threat sooner,” I answered immediately. “Not until we fixed three of their Singularities and beat one of them head to head.”

“That doesn’t track, I’m afraid,” said Da Vinci. “After all, if Flauros and his allies didn’t consider us a valid threat prior to Septem, then why ever would they have attempted to destroy us before we even set foot in Fuyuki?”

A...valid point. They *had* tried to kill us all before, and they’d come dangerously close to succeeding. If they had the capability to hijack our summoning system, then why not just use it as a backdoor into the facility and come down on us all at once? One Demon God had been hard enough for us to handle. Seventy-one all at the same time would crush us, no matter what Aífe or Emiya did.

Hell, even just five might be too much for us to survive.

“Then what happened?” Marie demanded again. “Da Vinci, you must have some idea! Something like this doesn’t just happen out of nowhere!”

Da Vinci tapped her fingers thoughtfully against the surface of the monitor, brow furrowed, and didn’t say anything for a long moment. At length, she said, “It...may be...”

Her mouth twisted as she worked her jaw, like she was chewing on her thoughts.

“Saint Quartz is essentially crystallized possibility,” she continued slowly. “It helps give form to the ephemeral, solidifying that which by definition has no structure. Chaldea itself holds the only record of the existence of a being called ‘Jeanne d’Arc Alter,’ recorded in our systems as a concrete existence with a completed Saint Graph.”

My brow furrowed. Was that...possible?

“You... Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” Marie asked incredulously. “Even in our wildest dreams, no one ever believed the FATE System could be used in such an...obtuse manner!”

Da Vinci shook her head. “It’s the only explanation I can give you right now, Director. Without a thorough examination of the data, I can only make guesses based upon the information I currently have. Frankly, it still sounds far fetched, even for me.”

It made sense, after a fashion. The logic fit together in my head. The combination of Jeanne Alter’s Saint Graph recorded during the Orléans Singularity with the determinative effects of using Saint Quartz had given form to something that wasn’t ordinarily supposed to possess one.

Of course, even with a Saint Graph acting as a framework to give her structure, she still needed a spiritual core, didn’t she? That was where things hit a stumbling block — only Heroic Spirits that actually existed could have a spiritual core, formed from the original’s existence in the Throne of Heroes. A sort of pale imitation of the original’s soul.

Unless...

“What did the Saint Graph read as before it inverted?” I asked.

“Ruler,” Da Vinci answered immediately and without hesitation. “That was why I thought our little test was going to be a success, at first. While I don’t doubt that there are other Heroic Spirits that qualify for the Ruler class, the only one that we have directly encountered so far is Jeanne d’Arc herself.” Da Vinci’s eyes widened. “Hang on a minute. You don’t think...”

“Do you have a better explanation?” I countered.

“Well, no, but...”

“Wait, wait.” Marie’s nose scrunched up, like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “How would that even be possible? Something like that would require a...a *conscious effort* from Jeanne Alter, wouldn’t it? How would she even hijack the original’s Saint Graph like that?”



“We’re speaking of Heroic Spirits now, Director,” Da Vinci reminded her patiently. “The bounds of possibility ceased to matter a long time ago, I’m afraid.”

Marie didn’t look happy with that answer either. Honestly, neither was I. It felt too much like tossing up our hands and calling it a miracle, and while there were a lot of things I’d gotten used to writing off as “fucking Tinkers” during my career, that didn’t make it something I was any more excited to accept as inexplicable.

In large part, that was because I knew there *was* an answer now. It may have been “because passengers did it,” but that was just an admission that it was too far beyond my understanding, not that it didn’t have an explanation at all.

“I can’t accept that,” Marie said sternly. “Da Vinci, I want you to double check the data, then triple check it, then check it another dozen times, if you have to. I refuse to accept that there isn’t a better explanation for what just happened! Especially not with the sort of odds we’re facing!”

“It may be that I simply can’t give you a better explanation, Director,” Da Vinci warned her. “I may be a genius, but if the information doesn’t exist, then I can’t magically make it appear just because I want it to.”

Marie huffed. “If that’s how it is, then I’ll accept that when we get to it, but only after all other avenues have been explored! The mere *possibility* that an outside force interfered with our FATE System and can alter the outcomes of our summonings is too important to simply write it off as bad luck or a fluke!”

Da Vinci sighed. “I understand, Director,” she said. “And you’re right, of course. Even if it turns out that it really was just a fluke or a weird interaction between FATE and the data recorded from Orléans, the possibility of foul play is one that definitely needs to be investigated.”

I wasn’t sure which one I was rooting for. On the one hand, sabotage really was a big problem, and we’d dealt with it enough and had more than enough stacked against us that we didn’t need to be borrowing trouble like that. On the other hand, the idea that unexpected and unintended interactions between FATE and the Saint Graphs of enemies we fought inside of these Singularities could randomly affect the results of our summonings wasn’t a very appetizing thought either.

Jeanne Alter straddled the line as it was. If we fought someone even worse later on down the line, there was no way I wanted to see them “accidentally” show up in Chaldea.

“Good!” Marie nodded. “Taylor, with me. Da Vinci, send Romani to meet us in my office. If he’s going to be my Vice Director, then he needs to know about this before he sees her with his own eyes.”

“Of course, Director.”

Marie spun on her heel and strode out of the room with purpose. I gave a nod to Da Vinci and then followed her, falling into step next to her. The click of her heels was steady and sure.

We were barely fifteen feet down the hall before Marie gasped and fell in on herself. She barely caught herself on the wall, or else she would have pitched sideways and landed on the floor.

“D-damn it!” she cursed. “Damn it, why? Why does everything I touch wind up such a mess?”

What was I supposed to do here? Reach out and give her a hug? That felt like too much. Put my hand on her shoulder? That just felt awkward and useless.

What I wouldn't have given for some sage wisdom from Doctor Yamada, just then.

“None of what happened back there is your fault,” I told Marie.

“Isn't it?” she demanded. “I was the one who insisted on a summoning! Who insisted on using Saint Quartz! It was me who decided to attempt to summon Jeanne d'Arc!”

“So?” I replied. “Do you think we wouldn't have tried to summon her ourselves eventually? Or that we wouldn't ever decide to try using Saint Quartz? For all we know, this might have been inevitable, and it was just a matter of time.”

“But it was still me who...!”

I stepped in front of her and placed my hands on her shoulders. Her head swung up, and she looked at me with red-rimmed eyes — not crying, but closer to it than she would ever have liked to admit.

“Sometimes, bad things happen to good people,” I told her, “for no goddamn reason. You've seen enough of my past that you should know this by now, Marie. Was Leviathan my fault?”

“What?” she squawked. “No! Of course not!”

“Then Jeanne Alter deciding to hijack our attempted summoning isn't yours.”

“But what if it was?” she whispered, like the mere act of saying it out loud would make it true.

“None of us believe that,” I said, “so neither should you.”

She shuddered. “You're right.” Then, louder, she repeated, “You're right. No one could have predicted things would turn out the way they did, not if even Da Vinci is stumped.”

“Exactly.”

I stepped back as she straightened and let my hands fall from her shoulders. Confidence firmly back in place, she said, “Come on. We have to go tell Romani about this mess, before he catches sight of her in the halls and has a heart attack.”

“Of course, Director.”

We set back off and made our way towards her office. It occurred to me, as we walked, that I hadn't seen Arash since breakfast, and it was entirely possible that he was following us around in spirit form, watching silently for an emergency he might need to get involved in or a moment where he might be needed.

Should I be happy if he was there and had decided not to inject himself into Marie's moment of crisis? Either of them? Or was I supposed to be annoyed that he just stood by and watched without doing anything?

I wasn't sure just the, not in the least because I didn't know if he'd been there and I wasn't going to try and hash that out with him in front of Marie — silently or aloud.

Fittingly, when we arrived at her office, Marie had to press her palm against the scanner set into the wall and type in an access code before the door whooshed open and the lights flickered on automatically.

Somewhat unfairly, Marie's office was much cozier than the standard issue dormitory rooms we Masters had to stay in. A perk, I supposed, of being Director. For one, it had actual carpeting across the floor, and a large, wooden desk that sat where the bed was in my room (with papers strewn across it, of course, and a large pile of folders and forms), and to complete the comfortable atmosphere, the lighting was softer and warmer instead of the harsh, white overhead lights that were so standard.

It was also twice the size of a regular room. There was even enough space for a coffee table and a handful of plush, leather armchairs that looked like they would swallow me up if I sat down in one.

Marie looked at first like she was going to go over to her desk and sit down there, but she hadn't made it more than a single step before her face twisted with disgusted frustration and she spun about towards the chairs.

“Ugh!”

Unceremoniously, she threw herself into one, crossing her legs and then her arms with a sour expression on her face. I could only guess that she didn't want to try and have a conversation with Romani with her desk drowning in paperwork.

So, instead of standing there like a gargoyle, I followed her and picked my own seat. The chair turned out just as soft and just as squishy as I'd expected it was going to be, squeaking as I eased myself into it.

More perks of being the Director, I had to guess.

A few minutes later, the door whooshed open again, and Romani stood on the other side of it. “I'm here!” he announced as he stepped inside. “I came as soon as Da Vinci sent the word!”

He blinked, bemused, and looked towards the empty desk. “Director?”

“Over here, Romani!” said Marie.

Romani's head swiveled around. “Oh!”

He ambled over, and for a moment, stood awkwardly next to a chair, like he was waiting for permission or a rebuke. When neither came, he hesitantly sat down.

“So,” he began, “Da Vinci didn’t really say what this was about. I’m guessing it has something to do with the summoning? Did it fail?”

“Yes and no,” Marie replied.

Romani blinked again, confused. “What?”

“It’s complicated,” she said, frustrated. “The summoning succeeded, and we even got the Heroic Spirit we were intending to summon, but it also failed, because we didn’t.”

“What?” Romani repeated.

“We got Jeanne Alter,” I clarified for him.

“What?” he said for the third time, sputtering. “But...that’s not possible! There *is* no Jeanne Alter! Not on the Throne of Heroes! She wasn’t anything more than Gilles de Rais’ twisted revenge fantasy!”

“We know,” said Marie, annoyed.

“She showed up anyway,” I said.

“*How?*” Romani asked.

Marie huffed. “Da Vinci is going to investigate that. Needless to say, I won’t be authorizing any more summonings until she can complete her investigation and determine what, if anything, caused *her* to be summoned instead of the original, like we intended.”

“I...” Romani pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yeah, I guess that’s the reasonable response, isn’t it? I’m surprised, though, that we didn’t hear the fight even from as far away as the Command Room. She didn’t exactly go down easy the first time.”

Marie and I shared a look.

“There wasn’t a fight,” she said.

Once more, Romani blinked at her, nonplussed. “...What?”

“You should have seen the updated contracts list on your console,” she told him sternly. “Jeanne Alter has been registered as a Servant of Chaldea.”

“I...feel like I’m missing something here,” Romani said. “*How?* More importantly, *why?* She was an enemy Servant! She was responsible for the Orléans Singularity!”

Marie looked to me, as though telling me that I was the one who had to answer this one. I didn’t think she was really wrong about that.

“Because she didn’t give me a reason to kill her.”

Romani nearly leapt out of his seat. “Tens of thousands of dead civilians would beg to differ about —”

“Then why did we let Emiya stay?” I countered.

Romani took a breath to keep going, mouth opening to offer a rebuttal, but once my words made it from his ears to his brain, he lost steam and sank back against his chair.

“The Emiya we met in Fuyuki tried to kill us,” I pressed. Marie’s expression twisted, because no, she didn’t like being reminded about that. “And yet we still let him into Chaldea, and now, he cooks our meals. Everyone’s meals. He’s an integral part of the organization.”

“That’s not the same thing at all!” Romani protested. “For one thing, the Emiya in Fuyuki was corrupted, and the one Rika summoned is the normal version! Jeanne Alter is the corrupted version to begin with!”

“And yet,” I said, “she answered our summoning and hasn’t seriously tried to kill any one of us yet.”

“You used the words ‘seriously’ and ‘yet’ in that sentence,” said Romani. “Both of those are *very important words* when it comes to someone as dangerous as her!”

“Obviously, I don’t trust her,” I told him. I’d be a fool if I did. “But I’m not willing to condemn her for something she technically hasn’t done.”

“And if she *does* try to kill us all?” Romani asked pointedly.

“We have nine Command Spells,” I answered immediately, “and at least four Servants willing and able to put her down the instant she tries anything.”

“What happens when you Rayshift into a Singularity, then?” Romani asked. “Are you just going to keep her here the entire time and lock her in a room? What’s the point in even keeping her around in that case?”

“Obviously, we’ll be keeping her under observation for the time being,” Marie answered. “We’ll have to keep at least one Servant dedicated to watching her, just in case, even if that means having to keep back someone who was originally supposed to Rayshift.” She huffed. “But it would be a waste of our resources to just kill her outright! We don’t have an infinite amount of Quasi-Spiritron Crystals, you know!”

Romani sighed and carded a hand through his hair. To me, he asked, “Are you sure about this? For someone like you, I’m sure I don’t need to list all of the ways this could blow up in our faces.”

I wasn’t. My first instinct was still to remove her from the equation while we still had the chance, before she tried something.

But I kept coming back to that one thing that had stayed my hand in the first place: she hadn’t given me a reason, despite everything she’d said. And while I was more than fine with planning a preemptive strike against someone I knew was going to screw me, frankly, I wasn’t anywhere near sure that she was.

For now, at least, I could treat her like we had Bonesaw: give her enough slack to tie her own noose, but let her make sutures with it until she did.

“It’s *because* I am who I am,” I told him. “My hands haven’t been lily white in a long time, but people still took chances on me. That’s the only reason I’m here at all.”

Brian and Lisa, for one, even though Lisa knew who and what I was planning from day one. Parian and Flechette, despite the Undersiders being villains in every sense of the word. The Chicago Wards, after a fashion, even if they hadn’t really liked me.

And two years ago, Marie picked up a shambling wreck and nursed her back to health. There was no way I could forget that.

“Chaldea doesn’t care about your past, only what you can do in the future,” Marie chimed in. “You should understand that better than anyone, Romani. This organization was built on promises and fragile hopes. Even the Rayshift technology was only a theory until we did it successfully.” She huffed. “Did you think that only applied to our machines and our magecraft? Potential is the most important attribute here!”

“I think the potential of setting us all on fire is *very* important!” Romani insisted.

“But that’s not the only thing she has the potential to do, is it?” Marie shot back. “After all, how close was Taylor to dying when she came here, and now she’s the only Master left from Team A, because I chose to trust in what she could accomplish if she was given the chance! The potential that matters is the one that’s realized!”

A faint warmth kindled in my chest, and I was tempted to smile.

“We’re going to give Jeanne Alter a chance, Romani,” I told him. “That’s it. If she lives up to it, then we’ll trust her. And if she doesn’t, then we’ll put her down.”

“I…” He sighed, raking his hand through his hair again. “I’m not going to convince you otherwise, am I?” He sagged back into his chair, letting his head tilt back so he could look up at the ceiling. “Somehow, I’m not as surprised as I think I should be.”

“Look on the bright side,” I said. “If I’m wrong, you get to tell me you told me so.”

Romani squawked indignantly. “That’s not a bright side at all!”