

Chapter LXXIV: Lingerin^g Shadows

Someone once said that there was freedom in having nothing left to lose. What they did not add was that such a freedom was a terrible, awful freedom, an aimless freedom, like a sword in the hand of a battle-drunk berserker, like as not to cut the wielder as it was to cleave a path open in front of him.

Rapidly leaving the prime of her life, it was this very sort of freedom that Aife found herself cursed with.

Seven years had passed since the day when Aife's fate had been irrevocably changed. Seven long years since her record as an indomitable warrior, her streak of flawless victories, had been broken by a callow upstart too clever for his own good. Seven years of raising a young boy who was too perfect a combination of her and his father for her to do anything less than love him.

Much had languished in that time. Although the sisters now could train with each other and sharpen their skills against one another with impunity, it was hollow and unsatisfying, because the geis which bound her prevented her from giving her all against Scathach, and therefore from pushing their limits together. Their schools had undergone a sort of merging. Their students had become foster brothers instead of rivals. In the aftermath of that battle, the sisters shared their teachings together, and the shadow of the great Scathach loomed over her sibling once more.

Slowly, the legend of Aife, the strongest warrior woman in the world, faded away. The great warrior whose name had inspired awe and dread had become instead a mother, and she did as she promised, imparting as many of her skills as she possibly could onto her son. She turned a young boy of seven into a warrior without peer, without equal, the pinnacle of Irish martial prowess that could stand even with the greatest names in all of Eire.

Already, that young boy was dead. Aife knew it in her bones.

What was left, then? Her school had been subsumed. Her legend had been overshadowed. Her son had met his fate on the end of his father's cursed spear, as she knew he would before she even sent him off with that accursed thumb ring.

Damn him for binding her to that oath. Damn her for thinking how satisfying a revenge it would be to make father and son fight one another, without realizing that she could ever come to care about either, let alone both.

There was nothing more for her now. Not in Eire. Maybe not even in all of Alba, in all of Gaul. Not when her only son was dead, not when her sister's shadow consumed her, and not when no student she trained could ever hope to match the Hound that brought such glory to Ulster and to Scathach that his name would surely echo on for centuries.

"You're leaving, then."

The voice was calm and even. Aife turned to face her sister for the last time. Her ever-youthful sister, who had not changed in the slightest in almost ten years.

She, the undefeated Scathach, had already reached her zenith, and in doing so, she had left humanity behind. Aife was jealous — envious of the chance that had been stolen from her, the possibility that, if not for that one, humiliating moment, they could have spent eternity together, constantly battling, constantly growing, constantly exceeding their limits. How amazing that would have been. How incredible. What new heights might they have reached, if only that future hadn't been robbed from them?

Instead, there they stood, one sister aging and the other eternally young, one forever in her prime and the other inching away from it.

“There is nothing left here for me,” Aife answered.

Scathach nodded and accepted it as it was. “If you leave, then you won't be able to return.”

“You're closing the gate.” It wasn't a question, merely a statement of fact. “Even if I stayed, what would become of me? In this one way, you have surpassed me, sister. You have stepped beyond the realm of mere men and cannot die. Were the gate to close with me inside, then I would become nothing more than another one of its restless ghosts.”

Aife had lost much, but she was not willing to become such a thing. To stay with Scathach and debase herself, the only result would be endless regret and an ignoble death. An eternity by her sister's side, howling her grief and her envy with every moment.

“I wish you well,” were the last words Scathach ever said to her beloved sister.

“I hope one day you find someone who can kill you,” were the last words Aife ever said to her beloved sister.

That was how the sisters parted ways, and that was how Aife left the Land of Shadows to continue the journey that had ended when she came back to test herself against Scathach. Many great battles awaited her, many challenges, but the legend of the greatest woman warrior in the world had already ended.

“Master?”

A hand on my shoulder jolted me awake, and my book clattered to the floor as I startled in my seat. Arash — or a blur that looked like him — stepped back, and he came into clearer focus when I pushed my glasses back up my nose from where they had slid down.

“Arash?” The evidence clicked in my head and I came to the only conclusion I could have. “I fell asleep?”

And had another dream about Aife's life. This time, what she'd done with it after Connla left. How many more was I going to have?

“Yeah,” Arash said softly. “My shift is almost over, so I thought I'd wake you up and let you know.”

He reached down and scooped up my book, then handed it back to me. I accepted it with a quiet “thanks,” and gave up for the moment figuring out where I’d left off. I didn’t even remember nodding off.

Marie, when I looked over, was still out like a light, Muninn perched over her bed like a silent guardian. The room lighting had been dimmed so that she didn’t wake up to the bright, sterile glare of the overhead lights, casting her in a soft glow that smoothed down the more haggard edges of her face. It made her look more her age than she had in almost all the time I’d known her.

“No change?”

“None,” Arash confirmed. “She’s been like that the whole time. Hasn’t moved except to breathe.”

That was worrying, but also a little reassuring. It meant that she probably hadn’t fallen into any more nightmares, a minor blessing amidst this fucked up mess she was in. At least we could say that much.

“Any word from Da Vinci or Romani?”

He shook his head a little. “No, but it’s been less than half a day, Master. I know Da Vinci’s incredible, but even she isn’t a miracle worker.”

Right. Of course. Expecting Da Vinci to have put together that spider puppet or that dreamcatcher in less than twelve hours was maybe a little bit unreasonable. My impatience was not going to make it go any faster.

I sighed and rolled my shoulders, wincing slightly at the hitch where the right met my neck. That was what I got for falling asleep in a chair like this.

“Who’s next in the rotation?”

Arash hummed thoughtfully. “Well, it’s still technically the dinner hours, so Emiya’s still busy in the cafeteria. I think...it should be Bradamante who’s coming down to relieve me. Speaking of dinner, Master, I think this is a good time for you to step away and eat some of your own.”

As though to agree with him, my stomach gurgled its dissatisfaction before I could rebut his suggestion, punctuated by a sharp, empty pang in my gut. My lips pulled tight into a grimace — I’d eaten a small, modest lunch so that I didn’t have to be away from the infirmary for longer than was strictly necessary, and I think I was feeling that now.

My eyes moved of their own accord to Marie and lingered on her still body, her placid face and the mess of her hair, tousled by the pillows and her earlier thrashing. She showed no sign of waking up again anytime soon, but that could change at any moment, including while I was off eating dinner.

My attention, of course, didn’t go unnoticed. Arash’s eyes were too sharp for that.

“Director Animosphere isn’t going anywhere now,” he told me. “What would she say if she knew you were starving yourself for her sake?”

An image popped into my head as though summoned, of Marie scolding me for not taking better care of myself, lecturing me about how my health was the most important thing for my duties as a Master of Chaldea. Against my will, my mouth threatened to curl into a smile.

Even still, I didn't want to leave. Romani and Da Vinci were perfectly amicable colleagues, but Marie was the closest friend I'd had in the last two years, and I owed her a lot. My life, for one. My position in Chaldea, for another. The dedication she'd shown in making sure I was ready for the challenges I would face here, and that itself was a huge debt.

But that also meant I owed it to her to take care of myself, because she would and had chastised me before for endangering my health. One skipped meal might not kill me, but she wouldn't accept that as an excuse for missing it.

In the end, that was what wound up convincing me. I sighed.

"Fine, I'll go."

Because I really wouldn't do anyone any good if I collapsed from hunger.

I reached for my book and frowned down at the cover. I couldn't remember where I'd left off last, so there probably wasn't any point in trying to find my place right now. The bookmark slid into the protection of the front cover smoothly, left for later use.

With a soft grunt, I stood, trying to ignore the dull ache that felt like someone had superglued the muscles in my neck together. Might have to see about going to Da Vinci or Romani and asking them if they could fix that for me, because it was really annoying.

"The twins probably want a status update, too," I said.

"Probably," Arash agreed. "They're good kids like that, worrying over someone they barely know."

They really were, weren't they? I didn't know that it was necessarily the best trait to have when you were trying to save the world, though. Trying to save absolutely everyone was a recipe for either failure or burnout, neither of which would serve them well for obvious reasons. It was like I'd told them before: sometimes, you had to make the hard choices.

Maybe I should have added the caveat that you should start to worry when those choices became easier. Down that road led to the likes of Alexandria and Cauldron.

"Right," I said. "I'll leave you to the rest of your shift. I'll go get something to eat before I come back here."

"Not a big fan of Bradamante?"

I shook my head. "It's more that she gets along better with the twins than she does with me."

Probably because she was a romantic hero — in the classical literature sense of the term — rather than an antiquity hero. Those sorts were all about rescuing the princess and love conquering all, the kind of do-gooders that had inspired modern views of what heroes *were*. The type of hero, in other

words, whose deeds were good rather than grand, because grand got you remembered forever, but good got you remembered fondly.

It said something about Earth Bet that we'd had several "grand" heroes, but so very few "good" ones.

"Well, you can't force people to be friends," said Arash. "Some people just naturally don't get along."

Wasn't that the truth?

I made my way to the door, but stopped before I could leave and looked back one last time at Marie. Nothing had changed in the few seconds between leaving my seat and reaching the door.

"I'm going to leave Muninn here to keep an eye out, but... Let me know if she starts to wake up?"

I meant it as more of an imperative statement, not quite an order, but somewhere between my brain and my mouth, it became a question.

Arash smiled. "Of course."

The door whirred shut behind me. Some part of me wanted to turn around and go back inside, but as though it was deliberately presenting a counterargument, my stomach chose that moment to gurgle again and beg me for food. Like it was saying, "you promised you'd feed me!" and it turned out that was a very convincing viewpoint.

The cafeteria was my next destination, and I made my way there, wishing, not for the first time, that Chaldea wasn't quite so big. It was convenient, at times, when I just wanted some solitude, because it was basically a gigantic college campus smushed together into a single, large building, but it made for quite the journey getting from one part of it to another. If something happened with Marie, it would be over before I could get from the cafeteria back to the infirmary.

On the other hand, it meant we had a sizable gymnasium and a library to rival the legendary Alexandrian one, and both of those were very much appreciated. Especially since we couldn't have safely gone outside even before this whole mess started.

The cafeteria door swung open in front of me as I approached, and I went inside to find that about a quarter of the remaining staff were having their dinner break. That made it sound like more than it was — only about five people, plus the twins and Mash. I spared a brief thought about whether the staggered shifts Romani had set up to keep everyone on a healthy sleep schedule meant that Emiya technically spent all day every day cooking, but he didn't seem put out by it, so I guess it wasn't that important.

"Senpai!"

Naturally, of course, Ritsuka and Rika spotted me immediately. The place was designed to fit over a hundred people and there were less than ten inside, so it wasn't all that hard.

“Be with you in a minute, Rika,” I told her. My stomach gurgled again as the smell of Emiya’s cooking reached my nose. Something fruity and spicy — lemon? Had he brought some back with him from Rome?

If he did, he didn’t say so as he set a large piece of chicken on a plate for me and drizzled a sweet and sour honey lemon sauce over it, then added some rice — of course, because he had to be a stereotype, too — and some steamed vegetables. It looked and smelled heavenly.

“Something a little more Western this time,” he told me with a cryptic smile. “Change things up a little, you know?”

“Of course.”

“Master seems to like it,” he said, shrugging. “So did the others who have already eaten. You’ll have to let me know if you enjoy it as much as they do.”

“I don’t think anyone enjoys your food as much as Rika does,” I told him wryly.

He smiled cryptically again. “Oh, there’s someone. She ate like a lion.”

“That’s all you’re going to tell me, isn’t it.”

“I wonder.”

I had a sneaking suspicion I knew who it was anyway. I could always be wrong, because he hadn’t told us much about his past, but what little we did know gave a likely enough answer.

Tray in hand, I left Emiya and went over to where the twins and Mash were sitting, already done with their own dinners. I knew better than to think that I could get out of giving them what they wanted, so rather than beat around the bush, I just picked a chair at their table and sat down.

Not for the first time, I lamented the hard plastic of the standard issue cafeteria chairs that some paper-pusher years ago had decided were the right choice to match the tables, designed as they were to be easily fixed and replaceable in the case they were damaged. At least the visitors’ chairs down in the infirmary were padded and more comfortable. My neck wouldn’t be the only thing that was sore if I’d fallen asleep in one of *these* instead.

“So?” Rika asked immediately.

“No change,” I answered, and then I started to dig into my food. I deliberately ignored the little white monster perched on Mash’s shoulder like it was his nest.

Rika groaned.

“I-it’s not like she’s doing this on purpose, Senpai!” Mash told her. “Director Animosphere won’t wake up faster just because we want her to!”

“I know,” Rika said sourly. “But still! We’ve been worried about her for months! I’m gonna get an ulcer at this rate!”

“Fou, fou!”

Ritsuka sighed, then turned back to me. “At least that means she’s resting peacefully, right?”

“It looks that way.”

And I hoped so. The lack of fitful sleep didn’t mean she wasn’t having nightmares, but if she was, at least they weren’t violent and disruptive enough to wake her up.

Da Vinci couldn’t make that dreamcatcher fast enough.

Until then, the only thing I could really do was hope that Marie’s motionless sleep meant that she *wasn’t* dealing with nightmares. She’d been through enough that she didn’t need to relive it every time she closed her eyelids. She deserved to dream happy dreams, and if she couldn’t have that, then to sleep dreamlessly.

Unfortunately, trauma didn’t work that way, and everyone responded to it differently.

“Ugh,” Rika grunted. “This is all that asshole’s fault. And he seemed like such a cool guy when we first met him, too!”

I stopped long enough to swallow and ask, “Lev, you mean?”

The twins both nodded. “We met him shortly before the whole...sabotage,” he said. “Right before Director Marie’s orientation —”

“That she kicked us out of,” Rika supplied helpfully. “Which is probably the only reason we’re still kicking instead of Master-cicles, so that worked out, I guess.”

“— and he was actually really helpful,” Ritsuka finished, as though his sister hadn’t spoken. “Nice, too. He seemed very kind.”

“Turns out, that was all an act,” said Rika. “Who knew, right? Guess he pulled the wool over everyone’s eyes, though, because no one saw it coming in Fuyuki.”

Mash sighed. “It still feels unbelievable, sometimes. Professor Lev was one of the founding members of Chaldea as we know it today. The SHEBA Lens was even his own personal invention. Our mission wouldn’t be possible without him, and yet...”

And yet, he’d still betrayed us, killed about a hundred and eighty people on our staff alone, and had tried to condemn Marie to a miserable death. For all that the Lev most of us had known was a fairly congenial person with a mild personality, when the mask came off, the thing underneath was a monster.

I wish I could say I knew better. That I’d cottoned on to his duplicitous nature and realized early that there was something about him that wasn’t right. That I’d never trusted him at all. But the truth was that he’d fooled me, too, and it was only the nature of what had happened in Fuyuki that had clued me in that there was something wrong at all.

It didn't stop me from being satisfied at the way he'd eventually died. For the sake of Marie's peace of mind, if nothing else.

I went back to my food and continued eating. The sweet and sour tang exploded on my tongue with every bite — delicious, just like everything else Emiya had ever cooked. Fugly Bob's just couldn't compare, and while the regular cafeteria staff had tried their best, even their best was woefully inadequate when put up against Emiya's regular fare.

“Well, I guess we came out ahead, in the end,” Rika said wryly. “Sure, we lost a lot of people, but we saved Director Marie and he's kinda dead now.”

“Senpai!” Mash sputtered.

“That's a...unique way of putting it,” Ritsuka said diplomatically.

“I mean, it sucks,” Rika said. “Even if we never knew them, all of those people died, and they didn't deserve to die, and even if we save the rest of the world, they'll still be gone. At least he bit it, too, though, right? I think we can call that one karmic justice.”

How uncharacteristically serious of her, I thought, looking at Rika out of the corner of my eye. I guess there were things even she could be solemn about.

Mash sighed again. “Still. I would have liked to know...why it was he did what he did. I-I imagine Director Animosphere would, too.”

“Fou...”

I did, too, but I wasn't going to lose sleep over it. Flauros, he'd called himself, both in Fuyuki and in Septem. If we were right about the meaning behind that name, then it seemed like a pretty clear cut case of demonic possession — as clear cut as something like that ever was. Whatever the endgame was behind these Singularities, I was sure we would find more evidence over the course of the next ones, and even if we never found out the why, that didn't really matter as long as we stopped their plans.

But I was willing to bet we were going to find out more as we went. I had serious doubts that this “king” Flauros had gone on and on about had just the one subordinate flitting about to muck things up. In fact, I was willing to bet he probably had something like seventy-one more underlings involved one way or the other.

So that probably meant more giant tentacle monsters in the future. I was going to have to work strategies for dealing with that into our training program, wasn't I?

“Ah, geez!” Rika suddenly burst out. “That got way too heavy! Senpai, say something ridiculous so I can make a joke about how much of a badass you are!”

I swallowed before asking, “Like what?”

“You said you made that dragon you fought shrivel up in a not-so-fun way, right? Did you, like, mount any of it on your wall or something? Because I’m wondering how big a trophy you walked away with!”

A surprised snort ripped through my nostrils, and if I’d still had food in my mouth, I would have been choking on it.

“S-Senpai!” Mash sputtered again.

“Fou, fou-kyu!”

Ritsuka buried his face in his hands, shoulders hunched, and groaned.

Well, of all the questions I thought I would be asked about my fights with Lung, whether or not I kept his manhood as a trophy wasn’t one I’d ever considered before. That was probably why I should have expected it to come out of Rika’s mouth eventually.

“No,” I got out once I was sure my voice wouldn’t crack. I wasn’t sure how calm I managed to sound. “Necrotizing flesh doesn’t work like that. It would have been more like it just kind of...melted off of his body.”

Don’t make me go into more detail, I asked her silently. I was trying to eat, after all.

Rika looked both disgusted and fascinated at the same time. “So does that mean —”

Ritsuka’s hand slapped over her mouth, cutting her off before she could ask me to explain how Lung’s crotch rotting off worked. I sent him a grateful look, and he met it with a pained grimace, his face red from ear to ear.

And then his expression twisted, and he pulled his hand away from Rika’s mouth so he could wipe it on his trousers. “Rika!”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

“I never kept souvenirs or trophies of my enemies after I beat them,” I went on, hoping this would crush any followup question, “because that’s the sort of thing psychopaths and serial killers do.”

I’d had a front row seat to exactly that kind of person, after all. One had almost cut my head open so she could play around with my brain.

Rika opened her mouth, and for one of the only times since I’d known her, thought better of what she’d been about to say, and closed it again.

An awkward silence descended, and I focused back on my food. Thinking about that sort of thing hadn’t done my appetite any favors, but my stomach still needed food and my body still needed sustenance, so even if I’d been put off what was still an excellent meal, I kept eating.

“Senpai,” Mash eventually picked up, “how was your lesson with El-Melloi II today?”

Ritsuka looked relieved at the change in subject.

“We’re still going over the basics,” he said. “We might know how to use our magic circuits, but there’s still so much that we need to get caught up on. It’s kind of overwhelming.”

“He called us amateurs.” Rika huffed. “Which, I mean, yeah, we are, but still! It’s the principle of the thing! Hot Pops might be cool, but that doesn’t mean he has to be mean about it!”

“I think he’d be a lot nicer if you stopped calling him Hot Pops...”

“Too bad! No one escapes the Rika branded nickname! It’s my trademark!”

Between the two of them, they somehow managed to tell the story of their lessons with El-Melloi II. To listen to them, it sounded an awful lot like my early magecraft lessons, back when I first joined Chaldea, only missing a stern tutor with a strict standard, and El-Melloi II sure sounded like he was trying his best to fill that role.

They were still years behind. One week wasn’t anywhere near enough time to get them even close to where most of the Master candidates had been when they signed up, let alone at the level of someone like Wodime.

Fortunately, that left them sufficiently distracted for me to finish my meal without any further interruptions, and when I was done, I left them to go and deliver my tray and my used plate to Emiya.

I was halfway back to my seat when a foreign presence pressed up against my mind.

Master, come quick! Bradamante shouted across our link. From the way Ritsuka and Rika staggered, I wasn’t the only one she was contacting. *The Madam Director has woken up!*

Shit.

I clambered for the door, changing direction abruptly. My heart pounded anxiously in my chest, and it was all I could do to navigate my way through the cafeteria instead of just running out without a care for what was in my way.

“We’re on our way, Tii-chan!” Rika shouted back, because she’d apparently forgotten in all the excitement that she could respond mentally.

The instant I was out of the cafeteria, I took off at a run. The twins and Mash were a bit slower on the uptake, but they weren’t far behind me, and as my feet carried me towards the infirmary, I cast my attention towards Muninn, who was already there.

“— going to ask you again!” Marie was shouting. Her arm was raised, her fingers pointing at Bradamante, ready and willing to cast a Gandr the instant she was provoked. She was leaned against the wall behind her bed, her sheets tangled around her legs. She must have panicked when she woke up and scrambled to get back from Bradamante until she found herself pressed up against the wall — quite literally.

“Madam Director, please calm down!” Bradamante shouted back from across the room, as far from Marie’s bed as she could get. Her hands were raised so as to present herself as non-threatening.

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” Marie bit back. “Chaldea is one of the most secure facilities on the planet, second only to the Clock Tower! Now tell me who you are and how you got here! I’m not going to ask you again!”

“Madam Director —”

“Marie!” I cut in, projecting my voice from Muninn.

Marie squeaked and jumped, conking her head back against the wall, and then she slumped, groaning, and pressed her hand to what was no doubt going to be a painful lump.

Muninn took off from her perch and landed softly on Marie’s bed, looking up at her from the tangled sheets just below her feet. Muninn’s beak opened, and I spoke through her some more.

“Director,” I began more formally, “this is Bradamante, Lancer class Servant. She’s been contracted with Chaldea. You can consider her an ally.”

“Hebert...?” Marie squinted one eye open, looking down at Muninn. “You... That’s right, Da Vinci made you those puppets, didn’t she? Wait.” Both eyes went wide. “Lancer class Servant? Contracted with Chaldea? When did *that* happen?”

“In France!” Bradamante chimed in, unhelpfully.

“France?” Marie sputtered.

“You’re in the infirmary, Director,” I went on calmly as though Bradamante hadn’t spoken. “I’m on my way there now. I’ll explain everything I can when I get there. I’ve also —”

In my real body, I turned on my communicator and connected to Romani. Before he could even get any words out, I told him, “Marie’s awake! I’m heading to the infirmary right now with the twins!”

“I’ll be right there!” he promised. “Whatever happens, try to keep her calm!”

“Right!”

“— informed Romani that you’ve woken up. He’ll be there soon, too.”

“Romani?” Marie parroted.

“See?” Bradamante started to lower her hands. “There’s nothing to worry about, Madam Director!”

The instant she saw movement, Marie’s arm snapped back up. Bradamante squeaked and threw her hands back up. I wanted to sigh.

“Director,” Muninn said patiently, “she has high ranking Magic Resistance. A Gandr wouldn’t even tickle her.”

Marie's cheek twitched, but she didn't drop her arm again. "I-it's the principle of the thing!"

"I don't mind!" Bradamante insisted. "If it keeps the Madam Director at ease, I can stay right here!"

This was the wrong thing to say. If there was one thing Marie hated above all else, it was being looked down upon or pitied.

"What do I look like, a child?" Marie spat. "I don't need you to patronize me! Put your arms down!"

Bradamante, looking a little confused, slowly did just that, and Marie did the same, refusing to look away from Bradamante for even a second. After what had happened to her, I guess it only made sense that she wasn't willing to trust just anyone, no matter what they said or who vouched for them.

I wanted to explain the whole situation to her, to let her know that we'd picked up Bradamante's contract in Orléans and that she'd been a huge help there, but Marie still didn't know that she'd been gone for the better part of three months. Trying to tell her that while no one but Bradamante was there to help her if and when she had a breakdown over that was a bad idea.

"Director," I tried instead, "Bradamante was stationed in the infirmary with you for your own safety. You can trust her."

Marie's brow furrowed. "My safety?"

"Yes. The situation being what it is, it was decided that it was critical for your health and safety to keep a Servant stationed in your room at all times until you were awake. It just so happened to be Bradamante's turn when you woke up."

"Until I was awake?" Marie repeated, catching onto that in particular. "Just how long are you saying I was out?"

"You've been in the infirmary for less than a day." It wasn't exactly a lie so much as me being deliberately misleading. "A lot has happened in a relatively short time. Like I said, I'll explain it to you in person as soon as I get there."

Marie turned narrowed eyes onto Muninn.

"There's something you're not telling me," she said suspiciously.

"There is," I confirmed shamelessly, "but it's something we should talk about face to face, with Romani there to help explain."

In my real body, I came to a stop in the hallway in front of the infirmary and took a moment to calm my racing heart and my heaving breaths. The twins and Mash stumbled up behind me a few seconds later, confused about why I had stopped.

"Senpai?" Ritsuka asked breathlessly.

I breathed deep once, twice, three times, forcing myself to go through the calming exercises I'd learned a lifetime ago, and then I stepped forward and the door whooshed open in front of me.

“He can give you some more perspective on what’s been happening,” I said, continuing my thought smoothly as Marie’s head swiveled towards the door.

“Master!” said Bradamante, sounding relieved.

“Director Marie!” the twins said from behind me. Marie’s eyes turned to them.

“You!” she sputtered out.

“Director Animosphere!” said Mash

“Fou, fou-kyu-fou!”

“You two are still here?” Marie squawked.

The twins faltered. Incredulously, Rika asked, “Were we supposed to go somewhere else in the middle of Antarctica?”

“Like I said, Director,” I interjected, dragging the conversation back my way as I stepped into the room so that we didn’t have to shout across it, “a lot has happened in a relatively short time, and we need to get you up to speed.”

Irritation flickered across Marie’s face. “Well, you’re here, now, so feel free to explain it all to me!”

“As soon as Romani —”

“I’m here, I’m here!” Romani panted as he stumbled to a stop behind the twins and Mash. “Nobody panic, everyone calm down!”

“Who’s panicking?” Marie demanded. “Romani! What are you talking about? Why is everyone acting like I’m a time bomb waiting to go off? Someone give me some answers!”

Mash let out a relieved sigh, smiling serenely. “That’s the Director, all right,” she said fondly. “You’d never believe she just spent two months stuck inside the FATE System.”

A pregnant silence filled the room. I squeezed my eyes shut, resisting the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose, but Romani was far less reserved and dragged a hand down his face, exasperated. The twins both looked at Mash, mouths dropping open.

And then the inevitable happened.

“WHAT?”