

## Interlude OMA(II): Fighting Demons

It took two and a half weeks of painstaking effort for Olga Marie Animosphere to regain full use of all her limbs. Two and a half weeks of putting herself through the ringer every afternoon and making a fool out of herself to an audience of her ace Master before she could stand up on her own two legs without having to worry about whether she might topple over or her knees might give out.

Two and a half weeks. Three days longer than Romani's original estimate. The humiliation of it *burned*.

Bad enough that a full four-fifths of her father's organization — her *family's* organization — had been gutted by the single most heinous act of sabotage that the history books *were* going to remember, if Olga Marie had anything to say about it, but she'd also had to suffer the indignity of knowing that everyone who was left had seen her so low that she had struggled to even *stand*. That she had taken three whole days longer to get herself back under control than she was supposed to.

How were any of them going to respect her after that? She should have told Romani to shut up and locked herself in her room until she could walk again. Better they think she was a recluse than so *incompetent*.

The worst part was the way they treated her. Like she was fragile. Like she would break if they said too harsh a word. The patience that they had when her own frayed a little too thin and she said something harsh of her own — she *knew* they were calling her a bitch as soon as she was out of earshot, but it was the fact that they waited until she was out of earshot to say it.

They'd never waited until they were sure she was gone *before* the sabotage that nearly killed her. How weak did they think she was that they didn't think she could weather their muttered insults anymore? Lev... *Flauros* had tried to condemn her to a fate worse than death, but he'd failed. She'd come back. She'd survived. She was *fine*.

Even if she couldn't sleep without that stupid dreamcatcher Da Vinci had made. Even if her first few nights back had been haunted by his laughter and by the weight of Chaldeas pressing down on her chest. Even if she still had trouble even saying his name out loud.

Damn it. Damn it all, and damn *him* most of all. She wished she'd been there that day to see him get cut down like the worm he was. She wished she'd had the chance to see him understand what it was like to be betrayed like that.

She wished she understood why he'd betrayed her in the first place. Was it something she did? Was she the one who had driven Lev away, who had opened his heart to the predations of a Demon? Was Chaldea's sorry state all her fault, in the end?

Was her incompetence the thing that had almost destroyed her father's legacy?

Olga Marie squeezed her eyes shut and bit her bottom lip so hard she almost drew blood. *Don't cry*, she ordered herself sternly. *Don't you dare cry. Don't you dare show that kind of spineless weakness here.*

She was strong. She was *strong*. She had to be. The fate of humanity, of the entire *world*, rested on the shoulders of her Chaldea and the people in it, and they were all counting on her to lead them through to the end.

She couldn't do that if she fell apart because her feelings got hurt.

"Everything alright, Director?"

Olga Marie took in a sharp breath through her nose and forced her eyes open. They watered threateningly, but no tears escaped her.

Her father would be ashamed that she even came that close.

Da Vinci watched her, unblinking. There was almost no way she didn't know what had been going through Olga Marie's head, but she was treating her the same way everyone else was: as though a single indelicate touch would cause her to topple like a house of cards. Olga Marie refused to blink, because if she did, she was sure those tears would start falling, and she couldn't bear to be humiliated like that right now.

"If they're not to your satisfaction," Da Vinci said, "then I can always keep iterating and revisit issuing them before the next Singularity."

"I-it's fine!" If Da Vinci noticed Olga Marie's voice crack a little, she didn't mention it. Olga Marie both appreciated that and hated it simultaneously. "I-it just doesn't look all that different from the previous version!"

The deflection was obvious and glaring and Olga Marie was embarrassed that it even came out of her mouth, but Da Vinci still didn't bring it up and just rolled with it as though she hadn't said anything unusual or unexpected.

"Keeping the frame identical was part of its proof of concept," Da Vinci explained. "It might appear the same to the naked eye, but I assure you, Director, anyone who has worn the previous version would be able to tell the difference right away." She lifted the fabric off of her workbench and offered the mystic code to Olga Marie. "Would you like to try it for yourself?"

"What?"

Olga Marie's brain stuttered for a second, and then the offer registered for what it was, and the burn of shame, frustration, and resentment boiled in her belly. *You... Da Vinci, are you trying to humiliate me right now?*

"Hmph! There's no point, since I'm not a Master and can't Rayshift! It won't mean anything to me!" And having to say that all out loud again is just another kick in the teeth. "Besides, I never had a chance to use the previous version, did I? How am I supposed to tell the difference?"

"Ah..." Da Vinci laughed awkwardly. "I suppose I hadn't considered that. My apologies. However, even so, Director, you would be able to tell exactly how special these new model mystic codes are. The difference is simply that remarkable."

Was she just trying to rub it in, now?

“How remarkable can they be?” Olga Marie asked. “Besides, didn’t you design the original version? How can this one be that much better?”

“Ah, but the original was an improvement upon Chaldea’s base design already,” said Da Vinci. “I made that one not long after my original summoning, remember? *This* one, however... Well, you’re not the only one who came into an incredible windfall two years ago. We even have the same source.”

Olga Marie’s brow furrowed. “What?” After a moment, she realized what it was Da Vinci was hinting at. “You mean that costume? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Oh my, Director, you’re underestimating the number of things I managed to glean from that ‘costume,’ as you call it,” said Da Vinci, smiling secretively. “For example, it let me come up with quite a few functions for this new mystic code...”

And so, she explained all the new features her new model of mystic code would have, from its durability to its adaptability to its life support. Against her will, Olga Marie found herself being impressed, and somewhere along the way, listening and thinking about the implications of all of these things that had been added to what was originally just a basic Rayshift platform with a few handy spells preloaded made her forget about the dark thoughts that had been plaguing her earlier.

“...really quite an impressive update, don’t you think?” Da Vinci finished. “The old model isn’t just obsolete, it’s practically fossilized by comparison!”

It really was. If the new version could do even half of the things that Da Vinci was claiming it could do, then the old version was shamefully inadequate and pathetic. It was like comparing a clay tablet to a modern computer.

The old version, which had been specifically calibrated with Rayshifting in mind, developed and produced back before Olga Marie had become Director. Back when her father was still alive.

And she was about to let it be desecrated, to have his legacy altered and erased. Bit by bit, she was slowly letting Marisbury Animosphere’s memory and contributions to the Chaldea he built be eroded. She was destroying everything of him that was left, no matter how small and insignificant it was.

How cruel and unfaithful a daughter could she be?

Olga Marie bit her bottom lip so hard she almost drew blood again.

No. That was nonsensical talk. What was she, an idiot? The goal of magi was to prepare and contribute to their family’s legacy, to give their heirs and their descendents the best possible base upon which to build their craft. It was *expected* for a long lineage of magi to develop, evolve, and advance the family’s field of magecraft, for the future generations to hone and refine what their ancestors had begun, all with the final goal at the end of perfecting it into something so unique that they could reach the Swirl of the Root.

Chaldea was no different. Her father had taken a simple observatory and turned it into a bastion against any threat that might attempt to destroy mankind's future. Through effort and collaboration, he and his team of researchers had successfully built SHEBA, LAPLACE, CHALDEAS itself, and negotiated the rights to construct TRISMEGISTUS from the Wandering Sea's own blueprints. He had gathered a team of varied talents who would protect his vision and carry out his Chaldea's purpose, his Grand Order.

And when he was gone, she had built on top of it. Expanding the roster of Masters, seeing to their training, managing the organization in its day to day functions so that they could be ready when the time came.

One of her additions happened to be the last remaining member of Team A who wasn't in cryonic suspension. The same Master who was now essential to carrying out their mission.

As Marisbury Animusphere's daughter and heir, her job wasn't to preserve her father's legacy. It was to take it and expand upon it, make it grander.

"Director?" said Da Vinci, and Olga Marie realized she'd lapsed into another spiral. "I assure you, I've tested my new changes rigorously. Barring any unforeseen circumstances, they should hold up to the sorts of stresses the Masters are expected to encounter in future Singularities."

"I-it's nothing," Olga Marie insisted. "I'm simply...marveling at the number of advancements you've managed to put into these!"

Internally, she winced. Ugh, that made her sound stupid, didn't it? Couldn't she have come up with a better cover for what she'd been thinking about? Something that didn't make her look like an easily impressed idiot?

Da Vinci smiled and shook her head. "Frankly, even I am a little surprised. The technology packed into the equipment Taylor came here with was decades or even centuries ahead of its time. I can't even be embarrassed that it took me two years to figure out how they worked, because they were just that advanced."

And probably made by aliens, Olga Marie didn't say.

"Well, at least you figured it out eventually," she said instead. She reached down and ran her fingers over the material. It didn't feel any different from the previous version at all. "And these are ready for deployment in the next Singularity?"

"I've done everything I can here in Chaldea to bring them up to snuff," said Da Vinci. "The only way to improve them now is to give them a field test and look for where their performance drops off."

Marie nodded. "Then prepare them to distribute to the Masters. There's no better time to put these new designs to the test than in the field!"

"Well said," Da Vinci agreed, "although I...do foresee Rika being less than pleased with the design."

“If she doesn’t want to wear the uniform, then she can resign as a Master and stay in her room!” Olga Marie said.

When her meeting with Da Vinci was over with, Olga Marie left the workshop and made her way to her next matter of business. As she walked, she fiddled with her tablet — her virtual clipboard — and rewatched the recording of Taylor’s “Caster simulation” session in the simulator for what must have been the dozenth time.

It brought her a pleased warmth in her belly every time. Pride. *This* was the Master she chose, the one she’d handpicked to stand with a genius prodigy like Kirschtaria Wodime. She could readily admit that Taylor wasn’t that impressive as a magus, was downright average at best in many of the fields that her peers took for granted. She would never be a first rate mage that the Association praised for her talent and skill.

But as a Master, she was first rate. As a tactician, she was surely the most experienced and most competent of the group. Even if the Association scoffed at her magecraft when the time came that this whole situation was resolved, they would be forced to acknowledge that she was the only reason Chaldea managed to succeed.

In spite of her incompetent screwup of a director.

Olga Marie stopped for a moment, snarling at nothing, and came within inches of smashing her tablet against the nearest wall.

*Stop that!* she ordered herself silently. *Stop thinking like that!*

Even if it was true, she wasn’t allowed to fall into that sort of pit again. Chaldea was counting on her. The *world* was counting on her. *Taylor* was counting on her, and she had already saved Olga Marie from her own stupidity and incompetence twice. Olga Marie didn’t want her to have to do it a third time.

Because what if Taylor decided it wasn’t worth it?

She wouldn’t, Olga Marie tried to tell herself. Taylor had held onto her even as she was being sucked into Chaldea’s, had traveled through time and personally gathered the resources Da Vinci needed to craft the replacement body for her. Taylor’s selflessness and determination to save her was the only reason Olga was still alive, in spite of being killed.

But everyone had their limits, didn’t they? How many times would Taylor have to save her before giving up and letting her die?

That was why... That was why Olga Marie had to be strong. She couldn’t let herself fall apart. She couldn’t let herself fall into the same traps she’d fallen into when she found out what her father had done to Mash. How he had created her.

Olga Marie took a deep, steadying breath. It didn’t help. She forced herself to pretend it did.

With her composure reestablished (paper thin as it was), Olga Marie started walking again and continued on her way to her next destination. A few minutes later, the doors to the Command Room whooshed open with a hydraulic whir, and she stepped inside.

Something in her gut squirmed as she looked over the anemic staff. Barely half a dozen people doing jobs that were originally meant to be spread out over twice as many technicians. This, too, was the result of her incompetence, her willingness to trust a man who turned out to have been a traitor and a murderer.

If only she hadn't depended on him so much. He may have been her father's associate, but it was only her own cowardice and weakness that had convinced her to keep him as close as she had. If she had just been stronger, more confident, *better* as a director, then he would never have had the access he'd used to sabotage them.

So really, the entire thing was her fault. She got a hundred-and-eighty people killed because she just wasn't good enough.

*Stop it!*

"Romani!" she barked to cover up her twisting feelings.

Romani, standing at the director's console in the middle of the room, startled and nearly spilled his coffee all over it. Really, he should know better by now than to be that careless. How had he managed to keep things running if he didn't even take better precautions with the equipment that they needed to run the facility?

"D-Director Animosphere!" Romani said as he turned to face her. "I-I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting you to —"

"Save it!" she told him. "Just where do you think you're standing, anyway?"

He stared at her for a second, and then realization spread across his face.

"S-sorry, Director!" he said again. He moved to leave. "I'll just leave it to you, then —"

Olga Marie walked over to him with quick strides, and he flinched back from her as though expecting a scolding as she leaned in close.

"Grow a spine, Romani!" she hissed at him, low enough that the others wouldn't hear her. "You're the Vice Director now, so act like it!"

"R-right!" He cleared his throat when she kept glaring at him. "I mean, yes, of course, Director."

"Good!" She stepped back out of his personal space. "Then give me a status report! What are we looking at, right now?"

Romani cleared his throat again. "All systems are operating within acceptable tolerances, Director. With the Septem Grail connected to our power grid, we're finally back up to full capacity, and we

even have enough surplus energy generation that we could contract three more Servants without any expected drop in performance.”

“Good!”

Excellent, even. She’d gone over the stats while she was laid up as part of getting caught back up on everything that had happened while she was...indisposed, and while they’d had things well in hand before, there was always a compromise between fueling certain less vital functions (that Da Vinci made up for using her Noble Phantasm — like she thought Olga Marie wouldn’t have realized it) and giving full support to their Servants.

It was part of why the battle simulator was still only half functioning. Beyond the repairs it currently needed to accommodate Servants again, there was also the problem that simulations involving Servants were much more energy intensive than the ones Taylor had been using to drill the Fujimaru twins. The Servants themselves might not use actual magical energy in the process, but the calculations needed for the simulator to simulate those Noble Phantasms with complete accuracy *did*.

“And the readout on the next Singularity?” she asked.

“Still vague, I’m afraid,” Romani answered. He sighed. “Unfortunately, whatever is happening in that Singularity, it’s preventing us from pinning down an exact location, no matter how we tweak the scanners. Da Vinci thinks that even the geography itself might be twisted out of order in this case as part of the deviation.”

Deviant geography?

“That shouldn’t be possible, even *with* a Holy Grail.”

Romani shrugged helplessly. “If I had a better explanation, Director, I would tell you. I’m just the messenger here.”

“Tch.”

There was no use getting angry at Romani over something like this, but...

Really, Da Vinci ought to know better, too. A deviation that could change the structure of an area on a geological scale would have required a lot more power than a single Holy Grail and would have had to occur so deep into the Age of Gods that mankind might not even exist yet.

“Then it looks like further scanning is pointless,” she allowed sourly. “The only way to confirm the structure of the Singularity will be to explore it firsthand.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that,” Romani lamented. “I really don’t like the idea of sending the team in completely blind like this.”

“And you think I do?” she snapped at him. “The entirety of mankind is hinging on our success! If something happens to the Rayshift team because we weren’t good enough, then the extinction of the human race will be on our heads!”

“Like I needed *that* reminder...” he grumbled.

Did he think that she wasn’t living with that knowledge every second of every day, now?

“The — point — is!” she said. “There’s too much at stake here to make simple mistakes! But if there’s nothing else we can do, then it’s our job to reduce the risks involved as much as we possibly can!”

“Yeah, I know.” Romani sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “Okay. We’ve already spent almost three weeks trying to get a better read on this Singularity, and it hasn’t changed at all. Are we going to send the team in like this?”

Olga Marie resisted the urge to bite down on her thumbnail and chew on it nervously. “We don’t have much of a choice. We’ll continue attempting to scan it up until the very last possible second, but we can’t afford to sit here until time runs out and fiddle with this in the vain hope we might find *something* of use.”

“No, I guess not,” said Romani. “Not when we still have another four Singularities to tackle after this one. Okay. When should we conduct the Rayshift?”

Olga Marie thought about it for a few seconds. As much as she felt the urge to get it done as soon as possible, that just wasn’t feasible as a plan. They all needed time to prepare themselves, both mentally and in terms of supplies. Rushing it wouldn’t help anyone.

“We’ll brief the Masters and Mash tomorrow,” she decided. “After that, we’ll give them three days to prepare, and the Rayshift will be four days from today.”

That should be ample time to get everything ready. For all of them.

And maybe when the Rayshift went according to plan, she might actually feel like she belonged in the director’s chair, because she’ll finally have done something right.

“In the meantime,” she went on, “send for Da Vinci and the Masters, tell them to head to the summoning chamber.”

Romani blinked at her. “You want to attempt another summoning?”

“Why else would I have them go to the summoning chamber?” she snapped at him. “With three Holy Grails powering the facility, we have more than enough power to host more Servants, and I intend to take advantage of that!”

And finally, finally see a Servant summoned to *her* Chhaldea, instead of her father’s or Romani’s. Proof, at last, that she was a worthy successor to Marisbury Animusphere.

“R-right,” said Romani. “And I take it you’re going to go there yourself?”

“Of course!”



So she could watch it happen with her own eyes. She wasn't sure she'd be able to believe it if she didn't.

"Just make sure none of them are late!" she ordered. "I won't accept tardiness for something this important!"

With everything important seen to, she turned around and left the Command Room. The doors whooshed open for her, and the clip of her footsteps followed her as she turned and started for the summoning chamber.

She made it halfway there before her composure disappeared, and she was left gasping and leaning up against the wall for support.

She could still feel their eyes on her. Judging her. Watching, while they thought she was too busy talking to Romani to notice. Like bees stinging her skin, over and over.

*'Is she even cleared to be back here?'* she could hear them ask. *'I thought she was still confined to her room. Last I heard, she was still freaking out.'*

Or worse, *'Ugh. Of all the people to survive, why did it have to be someone so useless?'*

"Shut up," she rasped. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

But of course, they didn't, because they weren't there, were they? They were back in the Command Room, whispering to each other now that she wasn't there, and Romani had no idea what they were saying right underneath his nose. How they were mocking her.

*'I'm not useless!'* she wanted to scream. All that would do was give those whispers strength and validity. If anyone saw and heard her yelling at nothing then they really would say she had no business being Director of Chaldea, and then what? Where would she be without that?

She'd just be Olga Marie, the girl without any talent as a Master, without any aptitude for Rayshifting, and without any place in her father's legacy.

"Get yourself together, you stupid girl," she whispered to herself harshly. "Who's going to follow a Director that's falling apart at the seams?"

"I would."

Olga Marie whirled about, sucking down a gasp, and turned to face her ace Master.

"Hebert! H-how long have you been there?"

"Long enough," she said simply.

Long enough? To what? To see her stumble? To see her grasp weakly at the wall? To hear her hissing at her own spiraling thoughts like some sort of mental case?

“And you just stood there?” Olga Marie’s eyes felt hot. Her vision turned watery, but she refused, through sheer force of will, to let herself actually cry. “Watching me? Listening to me make a fool of myself?”

“That wasn’t what I saw,” Taylor said quietly.

“No? Because that’s what happened!” Olga Marie clutched her tablet to her chest, hunching in on herself. “I can’t even...stay in the same room with my subordinates for five minutes without...”

Taylor came over, stepping close, and for one second, Olga Marie thought she was going to hug her.

But no, that was a little too much for either of them, wasn’t it? Neither of them was built for that sort of...physical intimacy. Instead, Taylor reached out and laid her hands over Marie’s and gently pulled them down.

“You’ve seen me at my lowest,” Taylor reminded her. “When my brains were a scrambled mess and I struggled to string a sentence together. You spent six months helping me get back on my feet, and then another eighteen tutoring me in all the things I needed to know to be a Master in this place. Not even once did you tell me I should give up and leave, even when I struggled.”

“But I...” Olga Marie ducked her head, unable to meet Taylor’s eyes. “You... You’ve already done so much, and I’m just a...a screw-up. Recruiting you is the only thing I’ve ever done right!”

“I don’t believe that.”

Olga Marie’s head jerked up. “W-what?”

“You ran Chaldea for two years,” said Taylor. “Everything worked fine — until a literal demon tried to kill us all. If you managed to keep the whole organization running smoothly for two whole years, then obviously, you were doing something right.”

“That’s...That’s different!” Olga Marie insisted. Mundane, day-to-day decisions couldn’t *possibly* hold a candle to some of the things Taylor had done.

“Is it?” asked Taylor. “Marie, doing things right isn’t about a single, big decision. It’s about smaller decisions you make along the way. The things you choose to focus on, the people you give power to — *those* are the important things. The way I see it, the only screw-up you made there was giving Lev so much power over you, but that’s a mistake we all made, isn’t it?”

“That’s...still...!”

Maybe she was right, maybe it *was* a mistake they’d all made together, trusting Lev. But it was Olga Marie making that mistake that led to so many people dying.

“You’ve seen enough of my past,” Taylor said lowly. “You *know* I didn’t always do the right thing, even when it felt like the right thing at the time. Do *I* deserve to be mocked, ridiculed, and thrown out, just because I wasn’t perfect?”

“Of course not!” Olga Marie gasped.

“Then why do you?”

And Olga Marie...didn't really have an answer to that. It was no less true than before that her mistake had gotten almost two-hundred people killed, and the weight of that clung to her, but the instant she tried to give voice to it, she remembered the scenes of that final battle. She remembered watching through LAPLACE as Taylor fumbled and stumbled her way from battlefield to battlefield, throwing scores of her allies at a pitiless god one after the other in a desperate bid to buy enough time and space to figure out how to beat *him*.

She was pretty sure a lot more than two-hundred people had died in that battle.

“You supported me in my lowest moment, Marie,” Taylor murmured, so quiet that even someone standing right next to them might have struggled to hear it. “Let me support you in yours.”

“Taylor...” Olga Marie closed her eyes and swallowed thickly. “Th-thank you.”

Even if she didn't deserve it, right then, Olga Marie needed it. She needed it more than air.

Taylor flashed her a brief smile, and then stepped back, letting her hands fall back down to her sides. “Now,” she said in a normal voice, as though nothing at all had happened, “we were heading towards the summoning chamber, right?”

Olga Marie envied her level head.

“R-right!”

She drew herself up, turned back around, and walked with purpose towards the summoning chamber. Taylor fell into step next to her, as though to declare that she would always be there, ready to catch her if she fell.

They were not the first to arrive. Perhaps unsurprisingly, that honor went to Da Vinci, who was already there and getting ready. She barely looked up from the console to give them a short greeting before going back to work.

It was only a few minutes later when the Fujimaru twins and Mash walked in through the door.

“Director Marie!” the twins cried when they saw her, overshadowing Mash's quieter, “Director!”

“You're —”

And then a fourth person came in from behind them, and the words twisted around in Olga Marie's mouth.

“Aife?”

Eyes like gemstones cut her way and looked her up and down. Inspecting her. Judging her. Olga Marie felt suddenly like a little girl again.

“I am,” said the new, unfamiliar woman. “And you must be the illustrious Director Animosphere.”

Olga Marie cleared her throat and drew herself up as much as possible. “I am!”

“Is she here to provide security?” Taylor asked Da Vinci.

“Not quite,” Da Vinci answered without looking up from her work. “You see, when the Director mentioned performing another summoning to me a few hours ago, we had a discussion about how we were going to go about it and what we intended to accomplish with it. Director?”

“R-right!”

Olga Marie walked over to the box set to the side — Da Vinci had brought it with her, as Olga Marie had asked — and lifted the lid, and from inside, she produced a multi-colored, multifaceted crystal. Every time it shifted, the light shining through it shifted hue, giving it a rainbow-like quality.

“This,” she said as she held it up for the Masters to see, “is what’s known as a Quasi-Spiritron Crystal.”

“Saint Quartz!” Mash gasped.

Olga Marie’s eyebrow twitched, but she kept any reprimands off of her tongue. “As Mash has just said, the staff at Chaldea have nicknamed it Saint Quartz, because of its function.”

“Sorry, Director,” Mash mumbled.

Olga Marie pretended she hadn’t said anything.

“Taylor and Mash already know this, but the summoning system that we use to call upon Heroic Spirits was built with these at its core,” she went on. “In this form, however, it can function as a single-use mystic code, of a sort. It allows you to cut away some of the randomness and attempt to summon a specific Servant by bypassing the necessity of a catalyst and using your own intent and willpower instead.”

“Whoa,” said Rika. “Why weren’t we using this before? This sounds super useful!”

Olga Marie’s eyebrow twitched again.

“Before the Fuyuki Singularity, the FATE System was unreliable at best, useless at worst,” Da Vinci took over before Olga Marie could say something harsh. “Remember, most of our summonings have been tests to calibrate the system itself now that it’s actually performing its intended function. Wasting a rare resource like that is just silly, don’t you think?”

“Oh,” said Rika.

“Why are we using them now, then?” her brother asked.

“Because we’re performing another test!” Da Vinci answered brightly.

Olga Marie cleared her throat. “Since its intended function has been almost entirely theoretical up to this point, we’re going to use Saint Quartz to see if we can intentionally summon a specific Heroic Spirit. Namely, the Jeanne d’Arc you met in the Orléans Singularity.”

“I want to see if the Master already possessing a bond with a given Heroic Spirit can increase the likelihood of success,” Da Vinci added. “Director Animusphere agreed.”

“So that’s the goal today,” said Olga Marie. “Masters of Chaldea, you’re going to summon Jeanne d’Arc!”

“Not Best Buddy?” Rika asked, sounding heartbroken.

Ugh. This was why Olga Marie preferred to work with professionals. It wasn’t that forming bonds with Servants was a bad thing, but getting too attached to them was just silly.

“That’s why we have her sword as a catalyst, Rika,” said Da Vinci reasonably. “We can attempt to summon Emperor Nero at a later date. If this test goes well, I’ll even see about requisitioning the use of Saint Quartz to up the odds!”

Olga Marie bit her tongue. Not likely.

“Are we all going to be doing it together?” Taylor asked. A sensible question, finally.

“While having Servants contracted to individual Masters has worked out okay,” said Da Vinci, “things work out better when the contract is shared between the three of you. It makes it easier to support the Servants in question when the burden is split.”

“That’s why all future contracts should ideally be shared,” Olga Marie concluded.

“Any more questions?” asked Da Vinci.

There were none.

“Okay, then!” Da Vinci said brightly. “Everything’s calibrated, so it’s just a matter of everyone getting into position! Mash, if you would?”

“Right!”

Mash manifested her shield, and Olga Marie stepped out of the way so she could set it upon the altar that formed the summoning circle.

“Very good,” said Da Vinci once the shield was in place. “Now, Rika, Ritsuka, Taylor, if you would each take a position around the circle? A triangular formation would work best.”

They did so, with Taylor standing upon the main dais in front and the other two taking “leg” positions opposite her. Olga Marie went over and set the Saint Quartz in the center of the array, and then she stepped back. Her heart thudded in her chest, eager to see the impossible become possible before her very eyes.

“All together,” said Da Vinci, “recite the incantation. And remember to focus on summoning Jeanne d’Arc specifically!”

“Heed my words,” Taylor said solemnly. The twins picked up after her immediately. “My will creates your body, and your sword creates my destiny.”

The array in the center lit up and began to glow. The light refracted through the Saint Quartz and cast a rainbow over the walls, constantly shifting and changing colors.

“If thou accedes to my will and reason, then answer me.”

The console Da Vinci was manning beeped and chimed. Da Vinci’s face split into a smile. “Spirit Origin detected! Keep going, everyone!”

“I hereby swear —”

The magic circle at the center lifted off of the floor and came to hover above Mash’s shield, flashing and spinning. A noise like the grinding of a set of enormous gears whined.

“— that I will embody all the good in this world and punish all evils!”

The console chimed again, and Da Vinci’s smile evaporated. “Wait...”

“Thou the Seventh Heaven —”

An unseen wind picked up, rushing out from the center of the room, and the glow of the magic circle turned briefly gold, then flickered into a kaleidoscope of bright, vivid colors.

“The Saint Graph is inverting?” Da Vinci squawked, bewildered. “Ruler... No, not Ruler anymore!”

“— clad in the three great words of power!”

A vague silhouette formed in the center, like a shadow cast in three dimensions. It had a somewhat feminine shape.

“Come forth from the Ring of Deterrence —”

“Wait!” Da Vinci shouted, barely audible over the noise. “Stop!”

“— Guardian of the Heavenly Scales!”

But it was too late to stop anything. The sparks of rainbow light collapsed inwards, sucking into the shadow at the center as the wind suddenly rushed outwards and whipped Olga Marie’s hair about. The silhouette gained color and substance, filling in and becoming a woman in blackened armor with pale skin and platinum blonde hair.

Yellow eyes opened and regarded them all. “Servant, Avenger. I came in response to your summons.”

“Jeanne!” Rika gasped.

“That’s not Jeanne,” Taylor said immediately.

Mash drew in a sharp breath and stumbled backwards, and when Olga Marie turned to look, the girl’s face had drained of color as she stared, wide-eyed, at the new Servant.

The woman in her blackened armor canted her hip to one side, her upper lip curling into a sneer.

“What?” she asked, voice dripping with annoyance. “What’s with that look? You’re my Master, aren’t you?”

“That’s Jeanne Alter.”