

The Future of the Maid



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Around her, fire, burning red-yellow-orange.

Around her, pressing closer, pressing down upon her, choking her.

“*Jeanne*,” a thousand voices chorused.

The wavering flames twisted and turned, coiling around each other, and formed a tapestry of indistinct faces.

“*Jeanne!*” they all moaned.

“*Jeanne! Jeanne!*”

The blank faces, grotesque mockeries of the men and women who had chanted her name across the French countryside, pushed down upon her, begging, pleading.

“Stop!” she wanted to cry out, but her throat closed around the word.

From within the flames appeared a new face, larger and more hideous than the others and twisted into an ugly scowl.

“*Recant!*” the new face hissed.

“*Recant!*” the others joined in.

“*Recant! Recant! Recant!*”

“No!” Jeanne screamed back. “I won’t! I —”

“*Heathen!*”

“*Heretic!*”

“*Witch!*”

“*Recant! Recant!*”

She tried to scream again, to deny the accusations, but the heat and the fire stifled her voice and choked the breath from her lungs. She opened her mouth, gasping in a deep breath, and —

Rocketed up off of the mattress, heart hammering in her chest, lungs heaving, and the orange flames still flickering in front of her eyes. A dozen different emotions swirled and coiled inside her until she couldn’t distinguish one from the other, and for a few short seconds, Jeanne felt as though some unnamable horror would descend upon her and swallow her whole.

After a long moment of stillness, however, as she blinked away the pyre and the terror began to fade, the dancing orange flames left her, but the shards of the dream still seared into her hands and legs and painted heat across her cheeks. Deeper and deeper, they dug, until they had erupted into a painful tingle that shot up her limbs and across her face, like an army of ants marching along her skin — muted, less intense than the blaze that had tried to burn her away, but painful nonetheless.

When she looked down, she saw the fabric, then, the strips of cloth that had been wrapped around her hands and arms — bandages. When she reached up to her tingling cheeks, she felt more of them, protecting, she realized, the burns she had sustained from the fire. Gripping the pale white sheet that had been draped over her, ignoring the agonizing shoots that ripped through her fingers, she tore away the blanket and found that her legs, too, had been wrapped up snugly, down to each individual toe.

Someone had dressed her wounds.

But that...

Jeanne's brain struggled with the implications.

Hadn't she died?

She remembered it clearly, how the English had marched her out through the streets of Rouen, chained her to a stake, and then set a fire at her feet. They'd burned her as a heretic — she distinctly remembered the agony of having her flesh set alight and smoke searing her lungs, the almost indescribable pain of seeing and feeling her skin crackle, blister, and blacken.

She had known and accepted that she was going to die the moment she realized they were parading her about like a trophy. That was fine — a few terrible moments of suffering before the deliverance she had been promised. The inevitability of her impending death had bothered her only the slightest, and she had regretted only that she hadn't been able to serve God better.

And yet, she was alive. Why? How had she survived?

How —

“Oh, you're awake.”

Jeanne startled and jerked her gaze over to the doorway, where a young woman stood looking back at her. She was dressed in a simple but elegant white gown, and her long, dark hair flowed down over her shoulders. In her peripheral vision, Jeanne finally noticed the rest of the room, colored in alternating patterns of cream white and cozy honey brown, arranged, no doubt, to feel comfortable and welcoming.

“We weren't exactly sure how long you would remain unconscious,” the woman continued speaking as she crossed the room, shoes clacking on the tiles. She took a seat in a bedside chair that Jeanne hadn't paid any attention to, before. “Once your burns were treated and dressed, the only thing we could really do was wait for you to wake up. Well, I suppose we could have woken you up by force, but I've heard that's very uncomfortable —”

“Where am I?” Jeanne demanded bluntly and without preamble.

The woman blinked, probably off-put by being interrupted, then frowned and shook her head lightly. “That's a difficult question to answer, I'm afraid.”

An uncomfortable itch gnawed at the back of Jeanne's head, a feeling that there was something...*off*, not right, about the woman in front of her. It wasn't any particular thing she could name, just a pervading feeling of *wrongness*.

“Then,” Jeanne asked instead, “how did I get here? Who saved me? How?”

But the woman only shook her head.

“Those questions,” she said, “are even harder to answer. I wouldn't know where to begin, even if I *could* answer them. I'm sorry.”

They lapsed back into silence for a long moment, and the woman sat there patiently, with her hands folded in her lap and a very slight, very mild smile on her lips. She had a kind of matronly air about her that reminded Jeanne of her own mother, and she only then noticed that the woman's eyes were a clear, olive green.

After several seconds of silence, however, Jeanne's discomfort remained vague and uncertain. The voices she had long gotten used to whispering in her ear, offering her advice, and bidding her to

act this way or that were silent; for the first time in seven years, seven years of nudges and prods and commands from God, Jeanne was completely and utterly alone inside her own head.

It was unnerving and not a little scary. A not insignificant part of Jeanne's confidence and surety had come from the knowledge that she was doing as God commanded and that everything she did was in His name. Whether she did well or whether He was pleased with her were things she could never know, but if His angels still delivered His words to her, then surely she was at least adequate, wasn't she?

Unlike that day in Chinon, however, when she had been shown visions of the Dauphin, allowing her to recognize him while he was disguised, no truth was revealed to her, now. The inkling of wrongness was only an inkling, and no whispers in her ear appeared to give it a name or distinct form.

Finally, Jeanne was forced to ask, "If you can't answer me, who can?"

As though that question was what the woman had been waiting for, her mild smile erupted and stretched across her face. "I'm glad you asked!" she said brightly. "If you think you're well enough to walk, then there's someone who would very much like to speak with you!"

"Who?" Jeanne asked suspiciously.

"My...employer, I suppose you could call him," was the vague answer. The woman's smile slipped into a frown. "Or maybe...boss? No, no... Director? Chief? Leader?"

She gave Jeanne a little smile and a helpless shrug.

"Either way, if you're feeling well enough, my lord Siegfried would like to speak with you. *He* can answer all of your questions."

"Siegfried?"

That was *not* a French name.

A small look of surprise flitted across the woman's face, a widening of her eyes as her mouth dropped open, then she grimaced and chewed at her bottom lip.

"Oh, damn it," she muttered. "I wasn't supposed to mention names, yet..."

It took quite a lot of effort for Jeanne to bite her tongue instead of rebuking the woman for swearing, but starting a confrontation in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people was probably a bad idea. Finding out where she was and with whom was likely a better one.

"Siegfried?" Jeanne repeated.

The woman only sighed.

"Yes," she said at length. "My lord Siegfried, First Knight of the Round Table. Which means nothing to you, of course."

First Knight? Round Table? What nonsense is...?

She vaguely remembered something about some British hero and his round table, a few scatterings of stories that she'd never paid much mind to, but what did that have to do with these people?

“I’m really not any good at this,” the woman lamented, more to herself, it seemed, than to Jeanne. “I *told* Sir Walter, I *told* him... Well. Are you up to it, then? Before I do anything *else* I’m not supposed to do.”

The smile and the cheer from before were both gone. They were likely an act, put on for Jeanne’s benefit — either to put her at ease or to make her drop her guard.

Could it be that she was still a captive of the English? Why, then, would they have dressed her wounds, taken such care for her comfort and wellbeing? They wouldn’t have, of course. If she had miraculously survived their pyre, they would likely have tried hanging, next, or else let her die of her burns. Saving her was the very last thing they would have done.

It was equally obvious, however, that she wasn’t back with the French, with King Charles VII and his army, either. A name like Siegfried...

“Fine,” Jeanne said bluntly. “Then, take me to see this leader of yours.”

“Oh, good.” A relieved smile broke out across the woman’s face. “That makes this much easier.”

The woman stood up from her chair, taking a moment to smooth out her skirt, then smiled again and offered her hand to Jeanne.

Maybe if she knew where she was and who she was with, Jeanne might have taken it, but instead, she just scowled and waved the woman’s hand away. Then, she swung her legs over and off the edge of the bed — her bandaged toes just barely brushed the floor — and slid forward so that she could stand up properly.

BURN

The moment she tried to support all of her own weight, an almost agonizing pain leapt up her legs like a bolt of lightning and seared itself into her brain; it was as though she had tried to tread on hot coals, still glowing from the fire, and the skin on her feet was being peeled away by a blazing red blade, fresh from the forge.

Like a puppet with its strings cut, Jeanne collapsed face-first towards to floor — and into the woman’s waiting arms. A strangled groan slipped past her lips entirely against her will, and as another insistent pain flared up along the arms she had flung over the woman’s shoulders to brace herself, Jeanne felt like all of the air had been sucked from her lungs and something tight had constricted around her chest.

“You don’t have to do this today,” the woman said softly. “It can wait until you’re feeling better.”

It took a long, long moment for Jeanne to regain control of herself and breathe, and it took a few moments longer, halfway lying there in a complete stranger’s arms, to do more than pant and offer a few feeble moans. When she could finally muster the strength, however, she said, quite simply, “No.”

It came out shaky and weak and not at all convincing, and if she’d been with the French army under the care of one of its physicians, she would have been put back into bed immediately. The woman simply held her, silent and patient, until the pain had dulled enough that Jeanne could more strongly say, “No.”

It felt like hours had passed, but it was probably more like a few minutes. The searing agony that had jolted up her legs and arms had become an insistent tingle — still very much painful, but manageable enough that it no longer felt crippling. Each of her limbs throbbed with heat in time with her heartbeat.

“No,” Jeanne said for the third time, and it came out sure and determined. “Let’s do this now. Just...I might...need a little help.”

For a single moment, barely more than a second or two, the woman seemed to hesitate. Then, at length, she said, “Of course.”

The woman repositioned herself, carefully moving around without ever fully letting go of Jeanne. Jeanne winced and let out a low hiss as her arm was lifted and slung over the woman’s shoulders, but very willfully forced herself not to flinch, not even when a new pain erupted along her back and hips as the woman’s arm wrapped itself around her to support her weight.

After a few more adjustments — wherein Jeanne discovered that no, her whole body *wasn’t* covered in burns, just most of it — the woman had finally managed a position approaching comfortable, although not completely painless. For a short, fleeting instant, Jeanne regretted the decision not to let herself be led back into bed.

“Okay,” the woman mumbled. “Yeah. Let’s get going. Slowly.”

“Yes.”

Hobbling, wincing every other step, Jeanne let herself be half-carried towards the door. Fresh waves of pain jolted through her body every time they moved, but she forced herself to keep going, to see it through. She had charged back onto the battlefield after having an arrow removed from her shoulder, and by the stars, she was *going* to do this, pain or no.

“My name is Marion, by the way. Pleased to meet you.”

“Jeanne,” she grunted shortly.

The journey seemed to take forever. Between the awkwardness of the position they were in and the snail’s pace they were going at — necessary, because Jeanne had to pause every few steps to catch her breath and try to ignore the stinging pain in her feet and in her arms and basically everywhere — it took probably half an hour just to get to the end of the first corridor, and as Marion had explained during one of their short stops, Siegfried’s office was several corridors away from the room Jeanne had been kept in.

“Lord, have mercy,” Jeanne had whispered.

It was nowhere near soon enough when they arrived at a sturdy wooden door Marion claimed belonged to Siegfried. It had been a trial in and of itself just to keep herself from collapsing to the floor in a moaning, agonized mess, and it was only sheer determination and stubborn bullheadedness that kept her going the entire way.

Someone who knew her well might say that was Jeanne in a nutshell.

At last, however, they arrived, and Marion lifted one hand to knock — once, twice, three times, she rapped with her knuckles.

Immediately, a muffled voice called, “Yes?”

“It’s Marion, sir,” Marion replied somewhat loudly.

“Come in!”

Marion shifted — Jeanne let slip a grunt as it jostled her burns — and twisted open the knob, then gave the door a deceptively easy-looking push, and it swung open as though it weighed nothing.

“Lavish” was the first word Jeanne could think of to describe the office. Everything looked as though it had been carved or designed by one of the famous sculptors from Renaissance Italy, from the heavy oak desk with patterns of knots and swirls to the gilded clock on the bookshelf which seemed to be made of silver and gold. At the very back, there was a raised platform that stood maybe seven feet tall, broad enough for a grown man to lie down comfortably, and it was accessible by a pair of small stairways, one on each side. Overlooking this platform was a large, arched window with an expertly crafted frame, through which one could look out and see for miles.

And in the middle of all of this, seated behind the large desk and halfway through a sheaf of some kind of parchment, was a man, well-dressed and meticulously groomed. He had smooth blonde hair styled fashionably in the way of the nobility, and when he looked up as Marion half-carried Jeanne into the room, she was caught almost breathless by his clear blue eyes, intense and focused like the edge of a freshly sharpened blade.

“Marion,” the man greeted in a smooth baritone. His eyes glanced briefly over to Jeanne. “And Jeanne. I thought she’d need another few days to recover.”

“She really does,” Marion agreed. “I tried to tell her that, but, well, when I told her that you could answer her questions...”

“You should have kept her in bed,” came the sharp reprimand.

“She was very insistent.” Marion’s voice was almost painfully dry. “If I hadn’t brought her here myself, I think she might have tried to crawl over.”

Jeanne tried to come up some kind of indignant retort, but found that she couldn’t think of anything to say. There was only so much she could protest when it was basically true, after a fashion.

The man, who could only be the Siegfried Marion had mentioned, looked back over at Jeanne, then frowned. “So I see.”

He sighed, then gestured with some strange contraption in his hand at the chair seated on the opposite side of the desk.

“Get her settled in, then. Since she’s already here, there’s no point in putting it off.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jeanne let Marion steer her towards the chair, and biting the inside of her cheek, bore with the discomfort as she was lowered into the seat. The cushion — thank the *heavens* it was cushioned — let out a low *whoosh* as she sank into it, and despite her lingering pain, Jeanne thought, for one wild moment, that she wouldn’t mind sitting there for the rest of her life.

“Thank you, Marion,” said Siegfried.

“Sir.”

“I’ll send for you when we’re done, here. Please close the door on your way out.”

“Yes, sir.”

Marion sketched a shallow bow, then offered Jeanne a quick smile and fled. The door clicked shut behind her.

“So.” The device in his hand was set down with a distinct *clack*. “You have questions, then?”

Jeanne had to stop herself from offering a nod. “I do.”

“I would think so.” Siegfried folded his hands on his desk. “Then, let’s start with the obvious, shall we? Where are you? Broadly speaking, Avalon, the island paradise where King Arthur was said to have gone to rest after his final battle. Incidentally, no, it’s not paradise, but it comes closer than most — it depends upon how realistic your definition of ‘paradise’ is.”

Jeanne blinked, thrown. *Paradise? King Arthur?*

Heedless of her confusion, Siegfried continued on.

“More specifically, we’re in New Camelot, the current largest settlement on Avalon, where about thirty-thousand people live peacefully. The two of us, we’re sitting in my office in Caerleon, what you might call the administrative center of New Camelot. It’s the seat of the Round Table’s power, the place where my colleagues and I meet and discuss the running of this little island.”

Round Table? Marion had used that term, too. Something about a First Knight? What did that mean?

“As for the when, it’s June the third, three days since you were burned in Rouen. We found you and brought you here to recover, and you’ve been asleep ever since.”

“What’s the Round Table?” Jeanne asked.

“An organization founded upon the ideals of its predecessor.”

An answer without an answer.

“And New Camelot?”

“A city built on the same.”

“What’s this ‘First Knight’ stuff about?”

“It’s something to do with our internal hierarchy; it would take too long to explain, right now.”

Jeanne’s brow furrowed. Was he trying to...?

“Did you rescue me?” she finally demanded.

Siegfried gave a brief shake of his head. “That’s a difficult question,” he said. “Yes and no.”

“What’s so difficult about it? Did you rescue me, or didn’t you?”

“And I’m telling you that it isn’t as simple as that. Yes, we saved your life, but no, we didn’t rescue you.”

Jeanne started to rise, frustration bubbling in her belly. “Could you just give me a straight —”

But rest of her sentence caught in her throat, because her sudden movement had irritated her back, and the pangs of agony that jolted up her spine and sent waves of burning pain from her shoulders on down strangled her voice. What escaped from her throat was a keening groan, and she couldn’t stop herself from tensing up — that only made it worse.

Across from her, Siegfried grimaced and leaned forward. “Are you...?”

Jeanne couldn’t answer, blinking tears out of her eyes. For a long moment, she just sat there rigidly, unable to even breathe, until her strength gave out and she sagged back into the cushion,

trembling. Her breath came in pants, and she felt like she'd just run the entire trip from Reims to Paris and back again.

Siegfried's grimace turned into a scowl and he shook his head. "Of course you're not."

His chair creaked as he stood and his boots clacked against the floor as he walked around the desk, then he crouched down next to her and took one of her hands in his, mumbling something. Jeanne didn't have the strength to ask him what he was doing.

It began a moment later, a feeling of coolness that spread from her fingertips and up her arm, then through her chest and back, up to the crown of her head, and down to her toes. Wherever it went, it soothed away the pain of her burns, and when it had finally spread through her entire body, it left behind a strangely pleasant tingle. Jeanne almost felt like smiling.

What on Earth?

"Ideally, we would have let the salve do the work, but you had to be stubborn and come here before you'd fully recovered." He started unraveling the bandages around the hand he was holding. "I'm not an expert at this sort of thing, but since the bulk of it was already taken care of, that should have... Good."

Perfect.

That was the only way to describe the skin she could now see. There was not a blemish or a scar, nothing to mark the burns she was sure should have marred her for the rest of her life. There was just skin, as fresh and soft as a newborn babe's.

That was impossible.

She looked up at Siegfried, who had moved back to his chair.

"What did you...? How...?"

"Magic."

His answer was simple and unambiguous, and even so, Jeanne's mind struggled to understand it. She thought she must have misheard him. "W-what?"

"Just as I said: magic. Why are you so surprised? Magic has been in use before you even got here. Magic is how you were brought to this island. A magic potion was used to treat your burns. A magical spell is the reason why I can talk to you in your native tongue, down to the nuances of Domremy's local dialect, despite the fact that I don't know how to speak it. Magic is what was just used to finish healing your burns."

Jeanne's first instinct was to recoil, even as she absently realized what had bothered her so about Marion, and she tried to scramble backwards, away from the *warlock* that sat before her. Even though her burns had been healed, however, she was still weak, so when she tried to stand and back away, she succeeded in raising herself only a few inches before she collapsed back into the chair.

"*Witch!*" she settled for hissing instead. Her hand clambered for a crucifix that was no longer around her neck. "*Heretic! Devil-worshipper!*"

And yet, Siegfried did not immediately react, nor did he seem particularly offended. The mild expression on his face was entirely unmoved.

"Your reticence is understandable, but somewhat hypocritical," Siegfried said reasonably. "After all, you've used magic yourself, haven't you?"

The echo of her accusers in Rouen came rushing back, needling her and claiming her banner was enchanted with some devilry or witchcraft, telling her that it was the work of a demon that had allowed her to turn back the English at Orleans. Something hot and ugly twisted inside of Jeanne's belly, and the heat that flooded her cheeks burned a thousand times hotter than the ache of her wounds had.

"I," she spat scathingly, "have *never* —"

"Then you would not be sitting here."

The simplicity and matter-of-factness of the statement took the wind out of Jeanne's sails, and she could only stupidly ask, "What?"

"The execution of Jeanne the Maid was already three hours over by the time our rescue squad found you, huddled in an abandoned building in Rouen, covered head to toe in burns and half-dead," Siegfried explained calmly, as though he were discussing something as mundane as the weather. "We brought you back here, treated your burns with a salve, and you've spent the past three days in a healing coma as your body repaired your lungs. But we didn't rescue you from the pyre."

Jeanne could not think of a proper response to that. She was still trying to work through the implications of it.

"But...that's..."

"Someone else might have, of course," he conceded. "In that case, however, they rescued you from the pyre, then abandoned you in an empty building to die. Not much point to a rescue that only spares you for a few hours. More likely, in the last few moments of consciousness you had, you wished desperately to survive and be delivered, and without even meaning to, you used magic to transport yourself to the nearest safe place — an empty, abandoned building, where no one would think to look for you."

Doubts wiggled their way into Jeanne's head, chasing each other around and around through her thoughts. If she hadn't already been sitting down, the sudden bout of dizziness would have forced her to the nearest seat — chair or floor, it didn't matter. If she tried to stand, her knees would probably have given out from under her, even if she hadn't still been so weak.

"I..." she tried to say. "That can't be..."

"There is, on the other hand, the third possibility," Siegfried continued slowly, "but I don't think you'll like that one any better."

"What?"

"You're not Jeanne the Maid."

The words came like a hammer blow, and though embers of anger and indignation started to smolder inside of her, they were smothered by the dread. It sounded fantastical and impossible, and it should have been something ludicrously easy to shrug off — after all, she was Jeanne, she remembered being Jeanne, and if she reached for it, the memory of her parents' faces, their smiles, the familiar smells that belonged solely to them came to her as easily as breathing. Even so, it was all overshadowed by the question she whose answer she feared, the doubt that lingered like the specter of death: *Is that the reason I can't hear my voices anymore?*

Jeanne tried to speak, but found her mouth wouldn't cooperate, and even if it had, she wasn't sure what she could say, anyway. A denial? How could she deny it and claim that she was, indeed, Jeanne the Maid when she wasn't completely sure it would be true?

"You, like myself and others like us, have a special attribute, an ability that no one else has. Yours, in particular, is mimicry," Siegfried explained. "By touching someone, by laying your hand upon him, skin to skin, you can absorb memories. Memories of events, such as a great battle you never witnessed, or memories of feelings, such as an overwhelming love that you have never felt, or memories of the body, such as skills and talents practiced and honed over months or years, or even memories of personality, such as how to react to this thing or that thing — you can absorb them all with a touch."

He gestured with his hand, as though to offer it to her to let her try.

"Then, what if you were a young girl," Siegfried said reasonably. "What if you believed strongly in Jeanne the Maid, praised her, wanted to be like her, even though you knew you never could? Maybe you were even at Orleans when she lifted the siege, or Auxerre, or Troyes, or Reims when she marched through like a triumphant goddess of victory. When she was captured, you followed her to Rouen, hoping, maybe, that you might rescue her, or at least glimpse her in person before she died."

"No," Jeanne tried to protest. "No, I..."

"Then, the day came," Siegfried went on, ignoring her. "Jeanne the Maid was sentenced to burn at the stake for heresy, and you were among the crowd, watching."

"N-no, I...was marched through Rouen, and an English soldier was kind enough to fashion me a crucifix..."

"After following your hero that far, you finally saw her with your own eyes, strong and resolute, unafraid even in the face of death. This person you admired so much, if only you could reach out to her, if only you could touch her, prove to yourself that she was a real human being... When she burned, when she screamed as she died, you couldn't stop yourself from jumping into the flames, such was your adoration. You couldn't let her die, not the hero you admired so deeply."

Jeanne said nothing, could say nothing. He made it sound so reasonable, so real, that she could almost imagine it was true. Maybe she had been that girl. Maybe he was right, and she was nothing more than a bit of coal that fancied itself a diamond. Maybe...

"The others tried to pull you out. Perhaps they succeeded, but not before you laid your hands upon your dying hero, thinking, praying, that she had to survive, somehow, no matter what happened to you. There was nothing else within your power to do, so your innate ability awoke in that moment and took everything that was Jeanne into you — and so Jeanne the Maid lived, even though she died."

A strange feeling coiled tightly around Jeanne's heart, and the lightheadedness forced her to close her eyes as the bottom of her world dropped away. If she opened her mouth, it would probably be to vomit, so she clenched her teeth and breathed in through her nose, trying to ignore the way her heart had started to pound.

She could see it. That was the worst part. For so long, she had charged forward without doubt — but what if that, too, was only an illusion? Jeanne the Maid had been determined and unwavering, confident in everything she did; did the very fact she could doubt herself like this mean that she wasn't Jeanne?

“It doesn’t matter.”

The words were strong and certain and cut through her like a knife, and Jeanne opened her eyes to see the utter confidence writ into Siegfried’s face. What he’d been saying before was reasonable and believable, and it was easy to imagine it happening, but his voice and his face now were filled with such firm surety that what he was saying could be nothing less than the truth.

Something like hope burgeoned in Jeanne’s chest.

“It doesn’t matter who you were before,” Siegfried went on, still talking as though it were fact. “Whether you were Jeanne the Maid or that peasant girl who followed her to Rouen, it doesn’t matter, because you cannot be either one anymore, regardless.”

The burgeoning hope faltered.

“Your memories, whether they are yours or stolen, are too deeply entrenched. The most we could do is find out whether or not they truly belong to you, but even if we did, it wouldn’t do much for you, because trying to remove them would irrevocably damage you. You are Jeanne — whether you really are or not makes no difference, because you can’t be anyone else, anymore.”

“I...I am Jeanne,” she said, testing it on her tongue. It felt right. To say it and mean it felt like some inviolable truth that gave her strength.

But Siegfried was not finished.

“However, you cannot be Jeanne the Maid. Jeanne the Maid was burned at the stake in Rouen. She died, and by now, all of England and France will know that she died.”

Jeanne roused, indignant. What did that matter? She had survived, hadn’t she? It was that simple; she had survived, so she would return to serve God and France.

“I can —”

“And what happens if you do go back to France?” Siegfried cut across her. Irritated, Jeanne gritted her teeth. “What happens when they ask you where you’ve been or how you survived? Do you tell the truth, that it was magic? Everything Jeanne the Maid has accomplished would be undone. King Charles would be deposed and tried under suspicion of witchcraft and devilry. The English would claim vindication, and every miracle the Maid delivered would be reevaluated as being the work of the devil rather than God. The Pope himself might even get involved, and at the end of the day, you would be back in chains, and you would die a villain rather than a martyr.”

Jeanne settled back, chastised. Again, he made it sound so possible, so real. And so what if she did go back to France, tell people the truth about how she had survived? It would be exactly as he said it would.

Why did he have to be so *right*?

“Or you could lie and say it was God who saved you,” he suggested. “How long would you be able to live with that? How long could you shoulder the burden of that falsehood before it crushed you? For that matter, what if your visions never come back? What if you *aren’t* the real Jeanne, and so the voices that guided her never return to you? Would you lie about those things, as well? How long do you think you could keep up that charade?”

Not long, Jeanne admitted, if only to herself. A lie like that went against everything she believed, everything she’d been raised to believe. It would press at her insides every hour of every day, and

every moment would be spent knowing that she was deceiving people, that she was falsely claiming God had saved her.

She would last a week, a month at the most, before she burst out and told someone.

“The fact is that there is nothing more you can do for France, except to leave it behind.”

She couldn't go back to France. Siegfried was right: she couldn't go back to France. If she told the truth, if she lied, it didn't matter, because neither option would work out well, and if he was right about the other thing, if he was right that she might not be the real Jeanne the Maid...

Could she bear to find out?

No, she couldn't. As the realization settled in, something like hopelessness came with it, a great, gaping chasm that gnawed at her stomach and chest. Even if the lie worked, even if she told the truth only to King Charles and he miraculously decided to keep it a secret, the one thing she could not bear would be to return to France and discover that she was not the real Jeanne.

It would break her, she was sure of it.

“What do I do?” she asked herself quietly. She blinked away the beginnings of tears. “What do I... Where do I go?”

Who am I, if I am not Jeanne?

Siegfried looked at her and let out a long breath through his nose.

“I can't answer that,” he said with a shake of his head. “There was an offer... No, this really was too much too soon, I shouldn't have...”

He cut himself off and heaved out a sigh, his broad shoulders sagging.

“Where you go from here, what you do with your life from now on, no one can make that decision for you,” he told her. “There was an offer I was going to give you, an... opportunity, you could call it. For now, however, I think it would be best if I gave you some time to think about everything. Marion!”

He raised his voice slightly at the end, adding an inflection that Jeanne didn't understand, then addressed her again.

“I know I didn't give you much chance to ask any actual questions, so if you have anything else you'd like to ask me later on, please feel free to come by and ask me. My door is always open. And when you're ready to hear my offer, I'll be waiting. All you have to do is say so.”

At that moment, as though to punctuate his words, the door swung open and Marion walked back in.

“You called, sir?”

“Yes. Please see our guest back to her room. She's had a rather difficult day.”

“Of course.”

Jeanne let Marion heft her up, although it was much easier without the pain of her burns to make things more difficult, and with a final, “Sir,” to Siegfried, Marion marched her into the corridors and back the way they'd come what seemed like hours ago.

His words stayed with her as Marion helped her back to the room where she'd woken up. They stayed with her as she lay awake, that night, stomach rumbling because she'd refused the offer of

food (the idea of eating hadn't appealed, in the face of everything). They stayed with her for the next day, and the next, and the next, and finally, Jeanne decided to heed them.

She could not go back to France, either to be a farm girl or Jeanne the Maid, and however bitterly, however grudgingly, after however many tears had been shed in the privacy of her borrowed bed, she had accepted that, so she had to find some other place to go and live, some other way to spend her life. Avalon seemed like as good a place as any to start looking.

Everything Siegfried had told her remained at the forefront of her mind as she went out into the city of New Camelot, and as she descended into the streets, dressed in a plain gown that had been left for her to wear, she saw magic *everywhere*.

It took an effort to keep herself calm, to remove the religious teachings that had filled her head since before she could remember and look at everything with an objective, dispassionate eye. When she did, however, what she saw was *amazing*.

Vendors in the market sold things like dragon liver the way people in Reims or Paris sold beef or chicken. Jewelry of the normal sort was on display, only crafted in designs and patterns too complex to have been done without magic, and some merchants proclaimed their wares had protective charms to guard against curses or bad luck. Potions that did things like regrow hair or cure acne sold by the gallon, and Jeanne even saw a man toting around a large cauldron without anyone he passed batting an eye.

Everyone had long, wooden staves or narrow sticks that could only be magic wands. Some men, dressed in what must have been some kind of uniform, carried swords at their hips like knights, but had no armor, as if the simple cloth they wore could protect them better than steel.

It was not only in the streets, either. Once, Jeanne glanced into a window to find a woman cooking, only she was waving about her wand as though she were conducting an orchestra, and her knives chopped and her spoons stirred on their own, like there were invisible men holding them. Children raced about in small lots and parks scattered throughout the city, passing around balls that changed color every time they were touched.

By far the most astounding thing she witnessed, however, was in the hospital, where she saw surgeons and physicians do the impossible and regrow limbs or instantly fix broken bones. Gashes and cuts that might have killed a man were sealed up as though they'd never happened in the first place, and even the most grievous of injuries was taken care of with an almost contemptuous ease.

There were no benedictions. No prayers to God or deals made with the Devil. People were not making sacrifices or offering their firstborns to demons. The power to do these remarkable and miraculous things seemed to come not from an outside force or entity, but from inside each person.

It was hard to describe how she knew that. It was just a...presence, for lack of a better term, that exuded from everyone she passed. It was a feeling, an electric charge that she reached out to her whenever someone came close, and which got stronger whenever they performed some manner of small miracle — some magic.

There were things Jeanne still didn't understand. Magic came from God or the Devil, that was what the Church taught, and God didn't share as freely as the Devil did. Magic, therefore, came from the Devil, and witches were those who had entered a pact with the Devil for power. But none of the people in New Camelot seemed to rely on any such thing, and for that matter, was she supposed to believe that the child she'd seen floating his toys about, too young to even know how to talk, had sold his soul?

There were answers that still fit with what she'd been taught growing up, but increasingly, they seemed unlikely or unsatisfying. New Camelot was a place of magic — it hung in the air, a tangible weight that seemed to promise protection and peace — how could any such thing be the work of an entity dedicated to human self-destruction?

There was only one place she could think of where she might find the help she needed, so on Wednesday, five days since she'd woken up in New Camelot, she headed to the Saint John Church a few blocks from the large building Siegfried had called Caerleon.

It was empty as she stepped inside, but for a single man sitting in the front pew who stood when she entered. He was a middle-aged, dressed in priestly robes with a purple stole, and he had short black hair that had turned silver at the temples. As he turned to look at her, he offered her a warm smile framed by his neatly trimmed beard and waved her over.

Jeanne hesitated only a moment, then walked over to join him. He was much taller up close — head and shoulders above her.

“Father...” she began, trying to think of where to start.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Huh?”

He made a long, sweeping motion with one arm, as though to encompass the entire city. All the lives he must have welcomed into these very halls with those arms — it was staggering.

“New Camelot, I mean. It really is a beautiful place, don’t you think?”

“I...yes, but... Father, I —”

He nodded sagely, like he'd been expecting her.

“You have some questions.”

“I do.”

“I was told you might come to me. Please, sit.”

He gestured to the pew where he'd been seated, and after she lowered herself onto it, he joined her, folding his hands in his lap. No doubt, Siegfried had been the one to tell him she might seek him out.

“So.”

“How do you...” Jeanne tried to find words for what she wanted to ask. “I’ve been taught all my life that magic is evil.”

He gave her a sympathetic hum.

“Because it comes from the Devil, yes?”

“Yes.”

“I won’t lie to you and tell you that such magic doesn’t exist, but it would be remiss of me not to also explain that magic of that kind is outlawed even here.”

“I... So...this magic, all of it, comes from...the people?”

He gave a small shake of his head, and the patches of silver seemed to expand and contract with the movement.

“I won’t pretend to understand all of it, but part of becoming a priest in this place necessitates learning how it works, so that I can reconcile the teachings of the Church and the Bible with the fact of our lives here. Tell me, what do you know of the soul?”

“Just...what I’ve been taught, I suppose,” Jeanne hedged.

“I suppose I should have expected that.” He chuckled. “Very well. Think of the soul like a bonfire.”

Visions of the pyre flashed briefly before Jeanne’s eyes, but she forced herself not to flinch.

“Some bonfires are bigger, some are smaller. Some burn brighter, and some smolder. It is raw power, raw energy. Magic is using that power to enforce your will onto the world.”

He held out a hand, and after a moment, a small candle flame sputtered to life above his palm.

“You can use it to create or change or destroy,” he said. A shake of his hand extinguished the fire. “But it is *your* power, not the Devil’s and not a demon’s. You can wield it for yourself or for God, or you can never wield it at all. Like with any gift, what you do with it is entirely your own decision.”

Everything she knew said that it couldn’t be true. The things she had been taught growing up, the things she had learned at her mother’s hip, they all told her that it was a deception, a lie, a working of evil.

The more she thought about it, however, the more it made sense to her. The magic she had seen, and so the magic that had saved her, had come from within — a light shining forth from the dark. It could be directed, focused, but it was ultimately a power that came from the self, not one borrowed from the Devil. Then, that feeling, that presence that radiated out from the people she passed on the streets, that was the light of their souls, too bright to be contained.

It felt like all of the pieces had come together, and a sense of calm soothed away the troubles that had plagued her. She knew, now, what she had to do.

“...Thank you,” Jeanne said at length.

“I’m glad to have been of help.” He smiled, fatherly and warm.

She stood, turned to the statue of Jesus hanging from the back wall, bowed, and touched her head and chest in the sign of the cross. Then, after offering another thanks, she went to leave.

“May God be with you!” the priest called after her.

At the door, Jeanne paused and felt a small smile curl on her lips.

“Yes,” she said to herself, “I think He has been this entire time.”

The next day, Jeanne made her way to Siegfried’s office, strode in confidently, and looked him straight in the eye.

“I’m ready.”