

The Maid and the Horseman



James D. Fawkes

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By James D. Fawkes

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To David, my best friend and sounding board,
for his patience and support
while Jeanne found her voice.

Act One: Starlight

The world burned.

All around her, there was fire. The flames crackled and roared, shimmering. The wood groaned and split. The air was thick with the heat of it, suffocating and oppressive, and clouds of smoke curled and leapt into the sky.

She was dying.

Scorching, red-hot, the flames licked at her heels and lashed at her calves like whips. They cracked against her skin and left behind blackened burn marks in their wake. They lapped at the edges of her leggings, searing away the fabric to feast on the vulnerable flesh beneath.

Agony erupted wherever they touched, and every nerve in her spine lit up with pain so that the only thought in her head was *burnburn***BURN**. Her entire brain was consumed only with the fire, with the choking smoke and the terrible blaze, and with the searing torment that was burning alive.

Distantly, she recalled the arrow that had pierced her shoulder and the crossbow bolt that had lodged itself in her thigh, and through the haze that swaddled her head, she thought that she would have preferred a hundred arrows to her shoulder or a thousand bolts to her leg than the suffering she was enduring.

She wanted to scream. While she still possessed the presence of mind for words, she wanted offer her final oath unto God, to cry out with all her remaining strength, *“Into thy hands, I commend my spirit!”*

But when she opened her mouth and tried to gasp in the air she needed, it was not vital oxygen that filled her lungs, it was the heady smoke and the burning ash that charred the sensitive flesh of her tongue and mouth and stained her teeth

black. What passed her lips was not that final declaration of faith, but a hacking cough as her heart pumped the fire's poisonous fumes throughout the rest of her body.

The pyre blazed ever closer, blurring as Jeanne's eyes became heavy and her head became light, and her chest burned from the inside out. It was as though there was another fire inside of her, consuming her from the lungs out and burning away everything that she was.

What little strength remained in Jeanne's legs gave out then, and if it had not been for the chains that bound her so very tightly to the creaking wooden pillar that pressed against her spine, she would have fallen to the ground. They dug instead into her hips and stomach, hard and unyielding even through her tunic, and the heavy steel manacles that bound her hands, white-hot from the fire around her, seared the thin skin of her wrists down to the bone.

The edges of the blurry flames started to darken, and Jeanne's light head began to throb, as though someone had driven spikes into her temples or crowned her with a wreath of thorns. Every nerve in her body was alight, like someone had taken a branding iron and burned away all of the ends.

"Jeanne!" a distant voice called.

She took in another heaving breath, but the sweet, sweet taste of oxygen was still denied to her. She could only smell the smoke from the fire. She could only taste the hot ashes that coated her tongue.

"Jeanne!" the voice called again.

She wondered, with what little conscious thought remained to her, was this the voice of God? Had He sent one

of His angels down to lift up her weary soul and carry her to the gates of Saint Peter? Was this the promised deliverance?

“Jeanne!”

Something slammed into her cheek, fast and hard, and she jerked, forward and out and —

Up, off of her mattress, chest heaving for air and heart racing.

Looming over her in the dark, fast cast in shadows by the candlelight, was Jeremiah Stark, her new second-in-command, who had woken her from her dream. He leaned away and sat back down on his bed, frowning as though she was made of glass and he was afraid she would break.

“Are you alright, Milady?” he asked her gravely.

“Fine, I’m fine,” she gasped out in Middle French, but she realized her mistake an instant later when his brow furrowed, and the look on his face said quite clearly that he didn’t believe her — of course, because Jeremiah didn’t speak Middle French. Forgetting what era she was in couldn’t have possibly made her sound more sincere.

She could still feel the heat of the flames on her cheeks.

Jeanne raked a hand through her short brown hair; her fingertips came away slick and slimy with cold sweat, and she frowned down at her bedclothes, which were damp and clung to her chest, arms, and legs.

“I’m fine,” she repeated in English once her heart had slowed and her breathing had calmed somewhat. “It was just a bad dream.”

Jeremiah remained unconvinced, and his expression said it so plainly that he might as well have shouted.

“If I may, that did *not* seem like an ordinary dream. Milady, you were thrashing and raising a commotion fit to wake the dead —”

“The anniversary is coming up, Jeremiah,” she interrupted. “It’s just the memories coming back.”

He stopped suddenly, gears turning in his head, and understanding dawned across his face in the flickering candlelight. He might be stubborn and a bit overprotective, but Jeanne was never more grateful than she was at that moment that Jeremiah wasn’t thickheaded.

“How soon?” he asked solemnly.

“About two weeks.”

May 30th, the anniversary of her death, was only seventeen days from now.

Every year, for about two weeks before and after that day, she had vivid nightmares — memories of what she had suffered at the pyre. She relived those final moments with crisp detail, as though her dreams had actually transported her back through time to that day, that moment, when her body had been set alight and left to die.

There were ways to stop them, of course — talismans and wards that protected a person from bad dreams — but Jeanne had never wanted to stop them. The life of Jehanne la Pucelle had ended that day, had ended in fire, so those nightmares were a reminder that she could never go back, that she could never claim that name for herself ever again. That little peasant girl from Domrémy and the heroine who

had lifted the Siege of Orléans no longer had a place in this world.

“I see.”

And that was all the more Jeremiah said on the matter. There were some lines, after all, that a subordinate didn't, *shouldn't*, cross.

But there were other things to consider aside from her nightmares. There was a reason they were rooming together in a gracious host's spare room for the night instead of sleeping in their own beds back home.

“Regardless,” she changed the subject, “what time is it?”

Jeremiah leaned forward and reached into his coat pocket from where it hung with the rest of his clothes on a rickety wooden chair. With a single deft movement, he yanked a golden pocketwatch out and flipped it over, face-up.

“A quarter past two.”

He tilted his hand towards the candle so that Jeanne could see it for herself. The watch, enchanted to retain accuracy and never need winding up, had the hour hand pointed at the two and the minute hand pointed just below the three, which were inscribed on the white face as Roman numerals — a quarter past two, as Jeremiah had said.

Jeanne gave a little nod to show she'd seen, and Jeremiah's hand retracted, dropping the pocketwatch back into the pocket of his coat on its way back to his knee.

“It's nearly time for us to meet the others,” Jeremiah informed her unnecessarily.

“I know.”

Jeanne flung her covers away and swung her legs off of her bed; the bottoms of her feet stung and tingled unpleasantly when they hit the cold, hard wood of the floor, but other than a slight wince, she didn't let it bother her as she pushed off her mattress and stood up. The ropes and the frame they held together let out a low, drawn out creak with the sudden shift in weight.

“They should be done, soon,” she announced. She frowned and stretched her back a little — the beds back home, spelled for optimal comfort, where much, much nicer to sleep on. “They wanted to have a moment of prayer before we began.”

Out of courtesy, Jeanne turned around and started to remake the bed, and across from her, Jeremiah stood, too. She caught his curious look out of the corner of her eye.

“You don't want to join them, Milady? I was told that you were quite devout.”

“They're praying for success,” was her answer. “But if we're gathered here, together, for a unified purpose, then God has already determined whether we'll succeed or fail. All that's left is to trust in His will.”

In truth, she *had* wanted to offer up prayer before they began, but in the time since the pyre, she had grown so very used to praying alone, with only God and His angels to hear her. Though she would not admit as much to Jeremiah, the thought of praying with the others, with complete strangers, was simply too uncomfortable. To her, it had become like walking into church in the nude.

Once she'd rearranged the bed to her satisfaction, Jeanne reached up and pulled off her nightclothes, shivering as the

cold air sank into her sweaty skin. Gooseflesh prickled up her arms and across her chest and back, and a chill swept down her spine and straight to her feet.

Heedless of Jeremiah, who could only have been changing into his own clothes, Jeanne pulled on her underclothes, then her breeches, socks, shirt, vest, and jacket. Once she had it all on, she busied herself with making sure every button had been buttoned properly and that everything was in place, trying to distract herself from how cold the fabric had gotten while she'd been asleep.

She had a brief, fleeting thought about how out of place she would look, on account of her red jacket — red was the color of her station, the Seventh Seat, but had also been worn by the British army during the recent American Revolution — but decided that it was a rather silly thing to be concerned about when there was no one awake to see it.

Jeanne reached under her borrowed bed and pulled out her boots and a long, thin package wrapped in a cotton bag. She dropped the package back onto the mattress, then she tugged each boot on one at a time, wobbling a little bit as she balanced first on one foot, then the other.

Once she had both of her boots on — she tapped the floor thrice solidly with each heel to make sure they were snug and wouldn't slip — she picked up the package again and withdrew a sword from within the bag, sheathed in worn brown leather. As she unwound the baldric from around the scabbard and slipped it over one shoulder, she spied Jeremiah doing the same across from her.

When they were suitably equipped, they crept cautiously down the stairs, leaving the rest of their luggage — their traveling supplies — behind in their borrowed rooms. It

would be discourteous of them, after all, to leave town in the middle of the night without informing their hosts.

They took care not to make too much noise on their way out the door, so as not to wake the family that had kindly offered them room. The smoky smell of the ashes, still smoldering and glowing faintly in the fireplace, followed them out into the night.

The cold air, strangely chilly for the middle of May, assaulted them the moment they left the house — Jeanne pulled her coat tighter around her chest and shivered a little — and a heavy mist hovered over the ground and clung to their ankles. The new moon left the sky above empty and black, and the stars were blotted out by the thick clouds that hung overhead.

A perfect night for a specter to come out and haunt.

Jeremiah procured and lit a lantern from somewhere nearby, but it was so dark out that its light couldn't pierce the gloom more than maybe five feet. Jeanne's hand itched to reach for her sword, for the familiar comfort of steel beneath her fingertips, but she reigned in the impulse and curled her fingers tighter into the fabric of her jacket.

"We're to meet the others in front of the church," she informed Jeremiah, more to fill the empty night than anything else.

"Of course."

They trudged along down the wide dirt road, huddled together both to ward off the cold and to keep from being separated. One of them getting lost would waste more time than they could spare.

It took them about ten minutes to finally reach the church, using landmarks that loomed out of the night as they passed in order to find their way, where several burning lamps shone through the windows and illuminated the inside. The two of them stopped at the front gate, which had been left open, and settled in to wait — all Jeanne could see at her angle was the large wooden crucifix affixed to the church's back wall.

It was only about five minutes later when the lamps flickered out and the front door of the church opened, releasing four men, one of whom carried a lantern of his own. Each but the lantern holder touched his head and chest in the sign of the cross as he exited the church, and though Jeanne could vaguely make out their lips moving, they spoke too softly for her to hear what they were saying.

Once they came closer, Jeanne realized that three of them wore priestly shirts and Roman Collars and had golden crosses hanging from their necks by thick leather cords — the three Templars who had requested assistance from the Round in the first place. By the faint jingle that followed their footsteps, she estimated there was a coat of chainmail woven between the layers of their shirts to provide extra protection. Their graceful gait, almost feline in its quality, and the swords jangling at their hips belied their true nature as warrior priests. One of them even had a rifle slung over his shoulder

The fourth man, by contrast, was dressed as an English gentleman, down to the fashionable state of his clothes and the golden signet ring glinting on his right hand. He carried himself with poise as he walked and exuded an air of knowledgeability, more appropriate for a teacher or schoolmaster than a fighter or soldier. Unlike the others, he carried no obvious weapon on his person.

It was only once they had reached that gate that Jeanne had enough light to see their faces — the lantern holder was definitely English or directly descended, with a sort of understated handsomeness. One of the Templars, standing right behind him and leering at Jeanne and Jeremiah, had plain brown hair and fair skin and eyes the color of fresh honey, and Jeanne placed him as a fellow Frenchman immediately. Trailing behind him were the other two; one had wavy black hair, a neatly trimmed mustache and beard, olive skin, and dark, earthy brown eyes that glimmered with a fierce dignity — he was Italian, she was sure of it — and the other was a blonde-haired green-eyed German with a strong, clean shaven jaw.

The Frenchman sneered and spoke with a slight but noticeable accent. “*You* are the team we requested?”

“Yes,” Jeremiah answered. “Your request for support was relayed to us, because we were the closest available team that wasn’t in the middle of another mission.”

“And you decided to bring your *squire* to a mission like *this*?”

Jeanne, who had been subject to all manner of insults and had long learned to curb her volatile temper, simply allowed it to roll off of her like water off a duck’s back, but Jeremiah took great offense on her behalf — she could even hear the lantern’s steel handle begin to screech under his tightening grip.

“My Lady is *not* a squire, you —”

But this was evidently not the thing to say, because the Frenchman’s lips pulled even further into a condescending sneer.

“You brought a *woman*?”

“Has your tutelage in Rome addled your *brain*?” Jeremiah spat back. “To think that a Frenchman can’t recognize —”

“Jeremiah!” Jeanne cut in at the same time as the Italian said, “Jacques!”

Instantly, both men fell silent.

“Whether she is a man or a woman does not matter,” the Italian said with rolling a Roman accent. “If the Round has sent her to aid us tonight, then she is beyond reproach, and we should thank the Lord for His mercy and generosity.”

The Frenchman, Jacques, hung his head. “Forgive me, Brother Julius.”

“Forgiveness is not mine to give,” Julius the Italian said. “Only *Signorina*...”

“Jeanne.”

“Only *Signorina* Jeanne can grant you that.”

The Frenchman recoiled as though he had been slapped and turned swiftly to Jeanne, eyes roving over her face. They searched her, looking for something — for what, only Jacques knew — and then, like he’d seen a ghost come back to life, he went very, very pale.

“La Pucelle,” Jacques whispered, and with a faint curl of annoyance in her belly, Jeanne realized what it was he’d been looking for and remembered the portrait for which she had sat in Rome when she received her sword. His hand swiftly touched his head and chest in the sign of the cross. “*Mon Dieu dans le ciel*... You are —”

“I am Jeanne,” Jeanne said flatly. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

Jacques startled again.

“O-of course,” he stammered out. “Yes, forgive me, my Lady. If I had known —”

“Are we done, then?” the Englishman holding the lantern interrupted. “I only ask because we’re fast approaching the hour, and I’d like to be sure we all know what we’re supposed to be doing before we have to put it into action.”

“Quite right,” the Italian agreed. “But where are my manners? I am Julius,” he introduced himself, then pointed out the other three, “and my comrades are Jacques, Alphonse, and —”

“Ichabod Crane,” the Englishman said a little stiffly. “Professor of History up at Yale College.”

“— who has graciously offered his assistance in this matter.”

A professor, of all things — as Jeanne had thought, this Englishman, Ichabod, wasn’t a warrior at all.

“What’s a professor doing fighting ghosts in a small village miles and miles from home?”

“Ordinarily, I wouldn’t be,” Ichabod admitted. “This should actually be a concern handled by the local chapter of the Night Watch, but relations between Britain and the Colonies — the United States, that is — have been understandably sour for the past twenty years, so a local chapter has yet to be established. As a result, when the townsfolk here asked for assistance with their ghost problem,

the nearest Watchman — that would be me — was dispatched with all due haste.”

Jeanne didn’t know much about the Night Watch, but she had a very vague, general idea of it. Supposedly, they were a relatively new organization that had formed during the Hundred Years War — the war in which Jeanne had lifted the Siege of Orléans — with the purpose of exorcising ghosts and malevolent spirits that didn’t require the more extreme skills of a group like the Templars.

It made sense, then, that a Watchman would be the first to respond to a ghost problem.

Ichabod offered a chagrined little smile. “Of course, it wasn’t until later that I realized exactly how out of my depth I am, here.”

“Fortunately,” Julius took over, “my team and I had already been dispatched to render assistance. Though we have been unable to defeat the monster, we have at least prevented it from taking another life.”

“Fortunately,” Jeanne agreed. The report she and Jeremiah had been given said that forty-nine people had already been killed. In a small town like this, that may as well have been half the population. “But the report was somewhat sparse on the other details. What is it that’s been running amuck, exactly?”

Ichabod grimaced.

“Yes, well,” one finger unfurled from the lantern and pointed up the road, towards the forest. “Perhaps we might discuss it on the way? I’m certain we can all agree that it would be better served if our confrontation with the creature didn’t happen in the middle of town.”

“Of course.”

Jeanne and Jeremiah stepped back out of the way, making room for Ichabod and the others. Julius actually strode out first, taking a few extra steps more than necessary to put himself at the head of the group, and then came Ichabod, Alphonse, and Jacques, whose eyes had not quite yet returned to their normal size. Once the gate had creaked closed behind them, Ichabod pointed back up the road and quietly said, “it usually appears further on.”

Coming to silent agreement, their group started walking, trudging somewhat slowly through the mist and darkness out towards the thick forest that caged the little town in around the river. With each step, the air got colder and colder, and an impending sense of doom started to creep in their direction. The swords rattled in their sheaths, and every footfall was followed by the jingle of the Templars’ armored vests.

“So,” Jeanne began once the last of Sleepy Hollow’s buildings was behind them, “the beast?”

“Yes, of course,” said Julius. “*Signor Crane*, if you would?”

“Ah,” said Ichabod. “Yes, well... I’ve spent the last two weeks here, comparing the villagers’ accounts of the murders — no one has witnessed them for himself, of course, or actually seen the apparition — and the general consensus between them all is that this ghost is the lingering spirit of a Hessian cavalryman that lost his head to a wayward cannon shot during the war.”

It took a moment for the implication to sink into Jeanne’s brain. “Wait. It’s the ghost of a soldier that died during the American Revolution?”

“According to the stories, yes.”

“But that was less than twenty years ago!” Jeremiah interjected incredulously. “How could a simple specter manage to accumulate enough power to materialize so quickly?”

“It’s uncommon, but not unheard of. Ghosts form from dead soldiers more than anyone else, so it would actually have been rather easy for it to consume the ghosts of other soldiers only minutes or hours after forming itself. The normal progression from ghost to ghoul could have been reduced from decades or centuries to months or a handful of years.”

That matched with what Jeanne knew. As Nicolas had explained it to her, ghosts were only the lingering sentiments of the dead, so they had no soul and no real lifeforce of their own. The only way for them to gain power and materialize was by consuming energy wherever they could, whether by taking it as heat from the atmosphere or consuming the lifeforce of others — other ghosts, which were paltry meals, or living people.

“And the murders?” Jeremiah asked.

“Searching for its missing head — or so the townsfolk say,” responded Ichabod.

“It probably gets some measure of nourishment from its victims, too,” Jeanne added. “After all, living people have a lot more lifeforce than ghosts do. This...headless horseman, let’s call it, could feed on nearly all of a person’s lifeforce as the soul leaves the body at the moment of death, which makes decapitation not only the quickest way of getting its

meal, but also lets it satisfy its original obsession. And in between meals, it can snack on the warm Spring air.”

However, the average ghost could only drop the temperature a degree or two over an area roughly twice the size of a human being, and poltergeists, maybe double that. If, as she was beginning to suspect, this headless horseman was affecting the temperature of the whole valley...

Well, Jeanne could understand why the Templars, normally able to subdue and destroy Ancestor class vampires, would ask for help in this case.

“And its supposed horse?”

Ichabod hummed.

“Likely the result of a split consciousness. Normal poltergeists, as I’m sure you know, are disjointed because of the conflicting personalities of all the ghosts that have been consumed and merged together. Perhaps this headless horseman of ours avoided that by converting the other personalities into a subordinate spirit, whether intentionally or accidentally. That could probably allow it to maintain its integrity.”

“So,” Jeanne asked, “the original personality is likely intact?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense. In each of the murders, the body was left behind, but the decapitated head was never found. If our headless horseman is a Hessian soldier from the war who lost his head when he died, then his obsession is to become whole again by finding his head — or, perhaps, a replacement.”

“And so he terrorizes Sleepy Hollow, beheading whoever is foolish enough to wander at night and taking their heads as his prize.”

At that moment, Julius the Italian stopped walking and held out a hand; the rest of the group came to a halt.

“We’re here,” he said simply.

In front of them, the road to Tarrytown stretched on into the dark. Behind them, the pathway to Sleepy Hollow swerved through the forest, blocking sight of the little town in the distance. Nothing, not even the wind, so much as whispered around them.

“Time?”

Jeremiah’s watch was back out momentarily, ticking impossibly loudly in the quiet.

“Nine minutes from the hour.”

“The Horseman will be here shortly,” Julius told them. He looked to his companions. “Alphonse.”

“Ja.”

Alphonse the German swung the rifle off of his shoulder and set the butt on the ground, then reached into a pouch slung from his belt and pulled out a little round ball. In the light of the lanterns, Jeanne could faintly make out what looked to be holy markings and sigils etched into its surface — the sign of the cross, angelic names, and even miniature Hebrew letterings that must have been biblical verses.

“Our first task must be to separate the Horseman from his horse,” Julius explained as Alphonse loaded the metal ball into his rifle. “Brother Alphonse should be able to knock him

off with one shot — he is an incredible marksman. Once he has been unseated, I will entrust the Horseman to you, *Signorina* Jeanne, while Brother Alphonse and Brother Jacques detain the horse. In the meantime, I will prepare the seal.”

Julius pulled from his pocket a trinket, a square box made of bronze with slats and tiles — it was a puzzle box from Ancient Greece, a mechanical device with an inner structure like clockwork that could be unlocked only by moving the pieces into the correct position; Jeanne had heard of them, but never seen one for herself. They were rare artifacts said to have come from the Greek god, Hephaestus, passed down into the hands of men after the terrible battle that had killed the Olympians.

“Are you sure that will hold it?”

Julius’ lips quirked up in something like pride. “*Signorina*, I have the utmost faith in the Templars’ artificers. If there is any device in this world capable of holding a ghoul such as this, then it was surely made in Rome.”

Alphonse, apparently done loading his rifle, lifted it up and leaned it against his shoulder. “Ich bin bereit,” he declared.

Julius turned to look at Jacques, who had drawn his sword — a French estoc also adorned with holy symbols — and was holding it loosely in one hand. “Moi aussi.”

Just within sight, the mist on the road ahead was beginning to thicken and condense, swirling as though some great, invisible hand was reaching down and molding it into a shape. When Julius saw this, the lines of his face became deeper and darker, and the skin around his mouth and eyes drew taut.

“Then,” he said solemnly, “let us pray.”

As the three Templars bowed their heads and closed their eyes, Jeanne saw Ichabod grimace out of the corner of her eye — he was not, it seemed, the overly religious sort. She found herself somewhat disappointed in him, but if there was anything she had learned over the years, it was that a man did not have to be a devout Christian to be a good person.

“The Lord is my shepherd,” Julius, Jacques, and Alphonse intoned as one. “I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Psalm 23 — Jeanne’s hand rose of its own accord to touch the place where her own crucifix hung, hidden beneath her clothing. “Amen,” she whispered.

The phantom cry of a horse echoed into the quiet, and the swirling mist just in sight grew denser and denser until it was almost solid. Two yellow orbs, small but glowing brightly, appeared suddenly amongst it, brilliant and menacing — eyes, Jeanne realized, she was looking at a pair of eyes. The chilly air and wisps of murderous intent pressed down upon her and the others.

“The Horseman approaches!” Julius cried. “*Signor Crane*, it would be best if you were not here when the fight starts!”

“No need to tell me a second time!” Ichabod replied. Jeanne turned her head just long enough to watch him start off back down the road to the town, moving at something between a brisk walk and a slow run. His lantern bobbed up and down as he went.

“Alphonse!”

“Jawohl!” Julius didn’t need to say anything more, because Alphonse was already in motion and stepping swiftly to the front of the group. He brought his rifle up, wedged the butt of the stock against his shoulder, and tilted his head to look down the sights, pulling the lock back with one thumb. He was poised so perfectly that Jeanne didn’t even see the barrel so much as twitch.

The horse let out a great call again, louder and fiercer than before, and the condensing mist began to form itself into a terrible black beast at least twice the size of an ordinary steed. From what would have been its snout came a gout of red fire, and then, *then*, Jeanne saw the silhouette of a rider upon its back, hazy and not yet fully formed.

“*Signorina!* After the Horseman is unseated, I will need at least five minutes to prepare the seal!”

“Understood!” Jeanne said. She drew her sword, Lunestoile, with a ring of steel, and in anticipation of the fight to come, her heart began to speed up in her chest. “Jeremiah!”

“Yes, my Lady?”

“Leave the rider to me,” she ordered. “Stay back and protect Sir Julius. Only get involved if one group looks like they need help.”

“As you command.”

The horse reared back, crying out again loudly, and snorted out another burst of flame. The rider on back, headless and brutish, shadowy and insubstantial, gained definition around the edges and drew a wicked-looking officer’s saber with one hand. The blue of its coat was stained the brackish black of long-dried blood, the white sash had been ripped and torn away, and its pants and rider’s boots were a mottled, dirty maroon.

In short, it looked like a corpse that had dragged itself out of a shallow grave.

The horse reared back again and let out one more braying shriek, revealing a ghastly, glowing blue maw. The horseman atop its back raised his sword and swung it around menacingly, silent but for the whooping sound of his blade cutting the air, and tugged viciously on the reins with his other hand.

As soon as its front feet hit the ground, the horse rocketed into a gallop, eating up the road with blinding speed. Its hoofbeats echoed like thunder in the stillness of the night, and pale golden flames ignited in its wake. Blue light shone from between its teeth and out of its sneering, lipless mouth, and its gleaming yellow eyes glittered with the terrible madness of the damned.

But Jeanne did not quake in fear. Instead, she reached calmly into herself and grasped at the frothing sea of life force inside of her, the energy which fueled magic, leashing it to her will. As the beast came closer, the ground shaking beneath her feet with its weight and power, she thrust that energy down her arm and into her sword.

“Kýrie eléison.”

With a flash like lightning, Lunestoile’s blade lit up with a brilliant white light, eclipsing the lantern Jeremiah still held in his hand.

The Horseman bore down on them, leaning forward over the neck of the beast and raising his sword aloft to take one of their heads. Jeanne’s heart thudded as it came closer, and she tightened her grip on her sword, her entire body tensed up like a bowstring pulled taut. Not yet, she told herself. Wait for Alphonse.

The horse shrieked again, and the Horseman drew back his arm, taking aim. It was so close that Jeanne could feel each individual hoofbeat in her toes and in her clenched teeth, and the jarring vibrations sent her sword rattling.

“Now!”

CRACK.

But with an ear-splitting, thunderous roar, the black powder in Alphonse’s rifle ignited and spat fire out of the barrel, shooting the specially made musket ball so quickly that Jeanne’s eyes completely lost track of it in the darkness. In less than a second, that musket ball traveled the distance to the horseman, pierced straight through the horse’s neck with incredible power, and then landed solidly in the horseman’s chest.

Blue light gushed out of the wound like blood. The beast let out a distressed cry and stumbled over its own legs, crashing to the ground and sliding forwards with a monstrous thud that sent even the trees aquiver, and the Horseman was thrust backwards and off his steed as though some giant hand had slapped him away. He landed on his back with a much

softer thud, maintaining a miraculous grip on his saber, and lay there for a moment as if stunned.

“Go!” said Julius urgently. “That will not distract a ghoul of his strength for long!”

Alphonse discarded his rifle at once, throwing it away as if it was on fire, and he and Jacques were in motion the next moment. They crossed the distance as swiftly as their legs would carry them and descended upon the wounded beast like a pack of wolves on vulnerable prey, sinking their holy swords into its flesh and pinning it to the ground. More blue energy spurted from its injuries like blood as it gave out agonized cries.

But Jeanne did not start running immediately. She took several slow steps forward — just to put enough distance between her and Julius to diminish the backlash — waiting as the Horseman slowly and gingerly rose to his feet, stumbling and struggling to regain his bearing, and she gave him just enough time to get a solid standing.

Then, as the Horseman across from her began to walk forward, too, advancing as though they had crossed each other on some great battlefield and were answering an unspoken challenge, she moved.

She kicked off the ground. The road beneath her feet shattered, the wind around her roared, and the world blurred for a single instant.

Jeanne was an Aurelian, one of the “Noble Half-bloods.” Like the fabled Demigods, they were different from ordinary people and were not bound by the frailties of humanity. They were more like the old heroes of legend, gilded men and women who had slain dragons and defeated armies

singlehandedly — such enduring figures as Scáthach the Shadow, Sir Gawain, Siegfried the Dragon Slayer, and Alexander the Great — and whose names and deeds were still remembered centuries later. Robust bodies, long lives, enormous strength and speed — those were the gifts they all received as part of their heritage.

In that case, it was only natural that the ground beneath Jeanne's feet buckled and cracked. It was only natural that a deafening boom heralded her departure. It was only natural that, for a single instant, she disappeared from view, that she moved so swiftly the world around her turned into a blur, and that she slammed into the Horseman with meteoric force.

The Horseman, however, was not to be trifled with, either. He was a ghoul of incredible strength that went far beyond what a human should naturally be able to match, so when Jeanne raced in his direction, he lifted his saber, planted one foot back, and braced himself. When Jeanne collided with him, sword flashing like a streak of lightning, he blocked and took all the force of the blow at once. The ground beneath his feet cracked and buckled, and he was pushed back, dragging two long trenches with his heels, but he was unharmed.

Jeanne frowned, but was not surprised.

If it was that easy, she wouldn't have been called to deal with him.

She stepped forward again, and across from her, the Horseman did, too. They met in the middle, and both swung around with all their strength. The air cracked with the sound of the collision, and Jeanne felt the wind swept aside by his sword wash over her cheeks.

It was then that Jeanne got her first good look at the Horseman's wound — red and inflamed and standing out against his pale, ghastly flesh, it was comprised of severed rings of skin, muscle, and sinew, and the place where the head had been shorn away was jagged and putrid, festering with raw need and oozing self-righteous anger and resentment. It was as though she was seeing a wound freshly made, not a years-old mass of scars and badly healed skin and muscle.

Jeanne's stomach roiled at the sight of it, and the oppressive emotions bleeding into the air were twice as nauseating, but she forced herself not to react, not to keel over and revisit her dinner, because she was made of tougher stuff than that.

Neither Jehanette, the simple peasant girl from Domrémy, nor Jehanne la Pucelle, the young woman who had led France to victory, was a warrior, but the girl who had owned those names and walked those paths had died, burned away in a pyre. This path, the path of God's sword against the evils ordinary men could not fight, was the path of the woman that remained, simply Jeanne, neither peasant nor savior, but something that both of those could never be.

So Jeanne exhaled a wordless growl and pushed the Horseman away, sending him stumbling backwards several feet, and then she stepped through his broken guard and brought her sword around in a horizontal slash that cut deep into his chest.

The Horseman stumbled even further back, pressing his free hand to the wound as it spurted out blue fire, the same as his horse's wounds did. But before Jeanne's eyes, the wound rapidly closed and sealed itself shut, and even the rip in his uniform knitted back together and disappeared as though it had never existed.

“Of course,” she mumbled to herself. “It’s not real flesh, so it can be healed that easily without magic. But...fixing that break in your form requires you use up some energy, doesn’t it?”

In that case, she could weaken it by doing more damage.

The Horseman charged at her, but Jeanne caught his blade with hers and parried it, spinning it to the side and trapping it on Lunestoile’s guard. She stepped forward again, sliding her sword inwards until Lunestoile’s guard touched his saber’s guard, then *thrust* through the simulated cloth and flesh with ease, slipped through what would have been the Horseman’s diaphragm if he’d been a living human, severed what should have been the spine, and then pushed out the other side.

The Horseman hunched over the wound, his free hand grasping weakly at Jeanne’s arm, and Jeanne brought up one booted heel and kicked him away. Lunestoile was wrenched out of his body as he went flying, and he landed harshly on the ground, the wound spewing blue fire into the air like a fountain.

For a long moment, the Horseman was motionless, and it took much, much longer for the stab wound to heal than the simple gash had, but once it had sealed over and stopped bleeding energy into the air, he slowly climbed back to his feet. His left leg gave a little wobble beneath him.

So, the worse the wound was, the more it weakened him.

The Horseman charged her again, aiming a swing for her head, but Jeanne blocked it and noticed immediately that it was much weaker than the last one had been. She pushed it aside and carved another gash into the Horseman’s chest, but

the Horseman ignored it, ignored the blue fire that gushed from the wound, and came at her again. Jeanne parried again, knocking his sword aside and going instead for his arm. She swung up and hacked it off at the elbow, and it vanished into the dark, still gripping his saber and spewing blue as it went.

The Horseman stumbled back again, but Jeanne didn't give him a moment to recover and reform his arm and sword. She pressed her advantage and took off the other arm, then spun, swept low, and severed both legs at the knee simultaneously. Without any feet to stand on, the Horseman fell back and landed once more on the ground, limbless and defeated, spilling a torrent of blue energy from each stump but his neck. By the time he recovered, Julius should be finished with the seal.

Done, Jeanne stepped away and deactivated her sword. Lunestoile's blade shimmered back to its ordinary, polished steel, and the white light disappeared, job finished.

"Sir Julius," Jeanne began, turning around.

"Scheiße!"

"Merdel!"

Something blue swept past Jeanne, moving so fast that she only saw it as a blur, and by the time she had spun back around, the Horseman was standing again, limbs fully healed and sword back in hand and at least a foot taller than when he'd fallen. He charged at her again, so swift that it took Jeanne by surprise, and brought his sword down to cut her in half. Jeanne lifted her own sword up to block, holding the hilt with both hands.

The collision shook every bone in Jeanne's arms, and her muscles immediately protested the sudden effort. She grunted

and snarled and pushed with all her might, but the saber didn't budge, and the Horseman pressed down on her, still using only the one hand.

Before, the Horseman had always been powerful, but not quite as strong as Jeanne. Now, his strength was at least twice what it had been before, and it took every bit of effort for her not to be crushed beneath it.

Two men's voices cried out into the night, and Jacques and Alphonse appeared on either side of the Horseman in mid-swing. The Horseman didn't so much as flinch; he knocked Alphonse away with a backhand, and pulled his sword away from Jeanne's only long enough to slam it into Jacques's with enough power to send him flying. Then, he hammered it back down against Lunestoile, and Jeanne was forced to her knees to keep it from splitting her head open.

"Guh!" she gasped.

The Horseman pressed even further down, and Jeanne bent backwards under his enormous strength. Her arms began to shake under the strain, the sound of her own heartbeat pounded in her ears like thunder, and her mind raced for a way out as his saber started slowly and steadily inching towards her face. She glanced at where the others had fallen — if he just turned his attention away again for a moment, she could escape long enough to recover — but both Alphonse and Jacques were unconscious.

"Jeremiah," she thought desperately, *"please..."*

A leonine roar boomed through the darkness, and a blur *slammed* into the Horseman like a shot from a cannon, forcing the ghoul back several steps. As the blur materialized into Jeremiah, he swung his sword around to the Horseman's

sword arm, but the Horseman, already more than a match for a powerful Aurelian like Jeanne, was simply too fast and too strong. His parried Jeremiah's sword with a blow like a hammer, forcing Jeremiah back now instead and opening up his guard wide like an oyster, then took aim for Jeremiah's neck.

Jeremiah wouldn't recover in time.

Jeanne surged to her feet, Lunestoile already in motion, and struck out again at the Horseman's arm. As she expected, the Horseman broke off his attack and poised his saber instead to guard. The air cracked like thunder once more, and as her sword met the Horseman's, the collision jarred her wrists and elbows, such was the power she'd put behind it.

But by then, Jeremiah had regained his footing and came around, sword diving down towards the Horseman's wrist, and Jeanne thought, triumphantly, that the moment the Horseman tried to parry Jeremiah, he'd open itself up for Jeanne to land a decisive blow. The Horseman might be enough to fight *one* high class Aurelian, but taking two on simultaneously was something only one of the gods of the old world, those great Eidolons, could ever boast.

The Horseman, however, did not do either of the things Jeanne thought he would. Instead of parrying with his sword or simply accepting Jeremiah's attack, he reached out with his other hand, curling his fingers around thin air, and suddenly, with a flash of the same eerie blue light that had set the horse's maw aglow, he held a second saber.

Jeremiah's sword slammed into the Horseman's second saber with a loud clang not unlike the ringing of a gong, and Jeanne felt the force of it resonating in her teeth as the screeching steel echoed painfully in her right ear. The

Horseman, with the same ludicrous strength that had pinned Jeanne before, flung them both back simultaneously, knocking both her and Jeremiah off guard and stumbling. Both sabers came soaring around, cutting through the air in opposite directions with a low *whoop* and aimed straight for Jeanne.

There was no way she could avoid them entirely — her footing was all wrong to throw herself out of the way, and with only one sword herself, blocking wasn't an option. If she didn't avoid at least part of it, though, then she was sure it would be enough to knock her out of the fight, if it didn't kill her outright.

Jeanne parried the first saber up and away, twisting with the motion as the other one homed in on her midsection. From the corner of her eye, she caught the Horseman's backstep — regaining his balance from her parry — and continued moving, spinning and contorting as best she could, even as the second saber made contact, sliding along her side just above her right hip but missing anything important.

Despite the glancing blow, the strength behind it still sent Jeanne careening and stumbling to regain her footing. If she had been fighting alone, that might have been the end of it — that single second off guard was more than enough time for a second, fatal strike — but Jeremiah was across from her, slamming into the Horseman again with his sword and reaching out with one hand to grab the Horseman's other wrist.

Jeanne pressed her palm against the wound quickly and gave it a gentle prod — only a dull ache, not a sharp, searing throb. She'd managed to avoid enough of the blow that her armor had protected her; it would bruise, but it wasn't as serious as if she'd taken a direct hit.

Lunestoile's blade ignited again as Jeanne thrust some more of her lifeforce down her arm and into the sword, and then she threw herself forward, aiming Lunestoile's tip at the Horseman's unprotected side while he grappled with Jeremiah. That singular opening, she thought, that would be enough; if she could land a single major wound, it should be enough to weaken him, enough to distract him for the few vital moments they needed to gain the upper hand.

But the Horseman was no pushover. In hindsight, Jeanne should have realized it much earlier — with so many ghosts, most of them soldiers, roiling around inside of him, he had to have the equivalent of a century or two of combat experience — but right then, when the Horseman lifted one boot, planted it squarely in Jeremiah's stomach, and then pushed him away with a kick worthy of the most foul-tempered mule, Jeanne only just began to consider that perhaps he had acquired more experience through his consumption than she had through three hundred years of battle and the tutelage of masters.

With Jeremiah out of the way for the moment, the Horseman turned around to face her and parried her thrust with his sabers crossed, pushing up so that Lunestoile passed through the empty space that should have contained his head. The blazing light illuminated the grotesque, festering wound of his neck, the severed rings of flesh that had nearly turned her stomach before, and cast flickering shadows on the ugly, jagged lines of muscle and sinew.

Then, with one leg, he stepped forward and past her guard, and with the other, he brought his knee up towards her stomach — but Jeanne was no pushover herself and blocked his knee with hers. They met with a loud *crack*, and Jeanne winced and blinked back reflexive tears as a fresh

wave of pain lanced up and down her thigh and calf; if she had been an ordinary human, or for that matter, any less strong than she was, then her knee would have been shattered by that blow, and if she hadn't blocked it, she was certain it would have cracked or broken a few of her ribs.

But distractions were fatal in a fight, so Jeanne focused past the pain and dropped her foot back to the ground, then snapped her other knee up and into the Horseman's chest — what would have been the diaphragm on a living human — with as much strength and viciousness as she could manage. She could feel the simulated flesh and bone compress and cave, and then, with series of loud, sickening cracks, several of the imitation ribs fractured and broke, and the Horseman stumbled back, hunched over.

That was what she'd been waiting for — that moment of vulnerability, that instant where he dropped his guard, that *flinch* — and she pressed her advantage, dragging Lunestoile back over his crossed sabers with a grating, metallic *screech*, then thrusting forward into his belly, her blazing blade sliding in like a hot knife through butter. She pushed, pushed, *pushed*, until the simulated cloth of his jacket tickled her knuckles and glowing blue energy spilled out over her hands, and against a living human, against something that breathed and bled and died, that would have been the end of the fight.

However, the Horseman did not breathe, did not bleed, and could not die, because he was already dead. His organs were not organs, they were clumps of ether pretending to be organs. His veins and arteries did not pump blood, but instead surged with lifeforce, with magical energy. His body was not living tissue, not flesh and bone, but a shell, an imaginary structure built through sheer will and overwhelming power. Any reaction, any moment of

vulnerability, was not because of real pain, but a reflexive response to what would have been pain when he was alive, nothing more than a leftover piece of logic in a creature that defied logic.

It was easy, then, for him to ignore the wound and parry Jeremiah's follow up attack with one hand, and at the same time, drop one saber — which vanished as if it had never even existed — and reach down to clasp the other hand over Jeanne's, holding her in place so that she couldn't pull back. Even when she planted her feet and pushed away with all of her strength, pushed away until her soles began to dig into the dirt, she couldn't escape. She couldn't even let go of her sword.

His other hand, the hand still holding his sword, pulled back and back further, hefting up and up for maximum distance. The blade glittered malevolently in Lunestoile's flickering light, curved and splattered, Jeanne saw then, with what could only be dried blood. Jeanne knew his intent immediately — knew that he was going to take her head, like he had all of his other victims — and yanked as hard as she could on her sword, even as her fingers began to ache under the strength of his steel-like grip, but it was useless. He held her fast like a vice, and for all that he was only a ghost, he was the most powerful ghost Jeanne had ever encountered.

She was going to die.

The certainty of it hit her then, and she glanced over at Jeremiah, who was still climbing back to his feet from where he'd been thrown by the Horseman's parry, and knew that he wouldn't make it in time. She glanced over at Jacques and then at Alphonse, but they were both still out of it and splayed over the ground — they couldn't help her. With a pit forming in the bottom of her stomach and her heart

pounding in her ears, Jeanne realized that she was alone and there was no one to aid her.

Time condensed until it seemed that everything was moving in slow motion. The sword inched across the distance at the pace of a snail, the muscles in the Horseman's arm tensed and bulged, and the tattered uniform swayed and stretched so sluggishly that it was like watching a wave build up across a calm bay during high tide. Every thud of Jeanne's racing heart was like a peal of thunder, and in a moment of absurdity, she thought she might be able to time how close the Horseman's saber was by the count between each beat. When the beats got so close together she couldn't tell them apart, that was it, the end. Farewell, Maid of Orléans.

For a single instant, the image of the pyre flashed before her eyes, and she was watching not the Horseman's descending sword, but the hand of the executioner as it dipped down to light the fire, to end the life of *Jehanne la Pucelle*, heroine of France, who could neither escape nor prevent her own death —

No.

No. She was *not* a helpless little girl anymore, learning household tasks at her mother's hip. She was *not* an unblooded neophyte relying on something she couldn't begin to understand in order to succeed. She was *not* a simple mascot, a morale booster waving a flag and bidding a weary, worn-down army to follow her to victory. *Jehanette* had had her time. *Jehanne la Pucelle* had had her time. This was *Jeanne's* time. This was *Jeanne's* life.

And she *refused* to die.

The wicked saber came around, whooping as it parted the air in its way, but by the time it cut through the place where her neck should have been, she had already ducked, already summoned up the incredibly deep well of her lifeforce, already immersed her entire body in it, and she was already feeling the rush of *power* and *energy* and *invincibility* that came with it. By the time the Horseman realized he had missed and she had dodged, Jeanne was already moving again.

The Immersion technique was a difficult one. The basic principle was almost ludicrously simple — infusing one's body with lifeforce to increase strength and speed — but the actual use required such fine control and efficiency that only masters, who wasted only the slightest energy and could catapult themselves far beyond their bodies' natural limitations, really benefitted from it.

The moment the saber had passed safely over her head, Jeanne unbent her knees and stood back up, then lifted one foot and *slammed* it down on one of the Horseman's legs. With a thunderous *crack*, the imitation bones in the Horseman's right shin shattered, and the great ghoul wobbled and threatened to fall. It would heal in just a few short seconds, she knew, but Jeanne wasn't done, and the point of it had never been to deal a debilitating wound.

She set her foot back on the ground, and then she threw her shoulder into the Horseman's chest — the ribs she had snapped earlier were already fixed — trapping his sword arm and forcing him back a step on his weak leg. Then, with all of her strength, she yanked Lunestoile back viciously, severing several of his fingers with a flash of blue as she pulled herself out of his grip.

Before he could recover, Jeanne raced on the offensive with an overhead slash that would bisect him — but the

Horseman managed, at the last moment, to bring his saber up and guard. Lunestoile crashed into it with all the force of a cannonball, so powerful that it was knocked down and away and the deafening *boom* that followed sent tremors through Jeanne's clenched teeth, but it was enough keep her from getting in more than a shallow cut along his torso that spewed blue fire.

The Horseman stumbled back a few steps, already healing and repairing the damage, and Jeanne pressed her advantage, coming around again with her blazing sword streaking through the air like lightning. Again, the Horseman threw up a block at the last second, and again, Jeanne's strength hammered it, blew it aside, and sent the Horseman stumbling back, but again, it was enough to avoid a wound that would end the fight.

By the third strike, diminished yet again by another hasty block, Jeanne was beginning to feel the drain. Immersion was a difficult technique, and Jeanne may not have been a novice, but she was not a master, either. The increase in strength and speed she received was more than enough to match the Horseman, but the amount of energy she burned through within the first few seconds was enough to send a normal human into a coma, and even an Aurelian's lifeforce was not infinite.

By the fifth swing, the muscles in her arms were beginning to burn and ache with the effort of maintaining such tremendous strength, and her lungs, alight with fire as she panted for breath, seized every scrap of air she could fill them with. She was fast approaching her limit; soon, every bit of her lifeforce that she could safely spare would be gone, and the resulting exhaustion would leave her dangerously vulnerable.

By the seventh swing, nothing had changed. The Horseman weakened and slowed from every minor wound she inflicted, but so marginally that Jeanne would run out of energy long before she landed a decisive blow. She just wasn't doing enough damage, and the Horseman was just too powerful; even with her augmented strength and speed, he was still fast enough to avoid the worst of her attacks.

Another swing, another block — the Horseman took a step back, but did not stumble, and Jeanne realized it was because she was beginning to wear down. The enormous strength that had forced him back several times was now starting to flag, and she had one, maybe two more swings in her before she ran dry. After that, she would be easy prey for the Horseman, and the tables would turn against her. It would be *her* on the defensive, hastily blocking every swing and allowing herself to be slowly cut up just to avoid instant death.

If only, she thought ruefully, if only she had been at her peak. If only —

A blur slammed into the Horseman again, and it was Jeremiah, Jeanne realized, with his sword thrust deep into the Horseman's side and a mad determination gleaming in his brown eyes. His white, white teeth were bared and his lips were pulled up into a snarl so vicious that it looked like something more animal than human. It was the most savage expression she had ever seen on his face.

The Horseman flinched from the blow, opening himself up wide, and then turned his attention away from Jeanne — just for an instant, just for a second — to *smack* Jeremiah away with a terrible backhand that she was sure would have pulped an ordinary man's head, and then jerked Jeremiah's sword free and out his belly with a flash of blue fire and

angrily tossed it away. It clattered to the ground somewhere in the dark. Only then did the Horseman refocus on Jeanne.

But it was too late. By the time the Horseman turned back to her, she had already made her move, diving in with Lunestoile and thrusting home into his chest — exactly as she had twice before, now. The Horseman stumbled back a step and blue spurting from the wound, but Jeanne was not done, yet. She yanked her sword back out, vivid flames the color of the sky splattering about her face, then lifted it up above her head, and with the last of her strength, with every last bit of her remaining energy, she slashed down.

The Horseman raised his saber to block, as he had before, but it seemed that her final blow was too much, because it snapped in half like a cheap twig, and Lunestoile's blazing blade continued unhindered to bite deeply into his torso and carve a terrible gash through the simulated flesh and bone. As the Horseman took three stumbling steps backward, Lunestoile kept going and scythed into the ground like a hot knife through butter until the last quarter of the blade was embedded in the soil. Panting, exhausted, Jeanne did not have the energy at that moment to jerk it free.

In the end, it still wasn't enough. The Horseman's block and Jeanne's fatigue had been enough to save him from being cut in half, though it must have been close, because it took several seconds before the wound sealed itself back up. The broken saber was dropped and discarded and vanished, but a new one appeared in his hand instantly, and he advanced menacingly on Jeanne, who couldn't even think of moving.

The Horseman raised his saber high again, and Jeanne tried to lift Lunestoile — whose blade had flickered out without the energy needed to fuel it — but her arms only wobbled and protested the effort. She grunted and panted,

but it was no use. There was no way she could fight, now, no way she could defend herself except to glare at him with all her might from under the sweaty mess of her brown hair —

A beam of golden light lanced suddenly past Jeanne's face and through the Horseman's chest, sending him stumbling back and away. Another beam pierced through his sword arm, then another through his other arm, and two more through his legs, and as Jeanne took several shaky steps backwards, she realized, no, they weren't beams of light, they were glowing golden chains with sharp spikes on the end.

“— *in Nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti!*” Julius' voice rang out.

The golden chains dragged the Horseman forwards, struggling with all of his strength, and towards the puzzle box that Julius held, opening faced out, in his hands. The Horseman dug his heels into the ground and yanked each limb to loosen his bonds, but they held fast and drew him inexorably closer to his prison.

It was only then, with her life no longer in danger, that Jeanne had a moment to look back at the place where Alphonse and Jacques had trapped the Horseman's black steed and where now there was only empty air. The blue blur that had gone to the Horseman and given him renewed strength, she thought, that must have been the horse rescuing its master.

The Horseman resisted for nearly five minutes as he was pulled down the road, leaving two long trenches stretching out behind him, but he was too focused on the chains to pay attention to the ground, because he tripped over the shattered patch of land where Jeanne had first kicked off and lost his balance. That small moment was all it took — the chains

yanked him off his feet, and he vanished with a brief flash of light into the puzzle box, which clicked and whirred and shut.

“Amen,” Julius finished solemnly.

“Amen,” Jeanne echoed.

A pair of low groans sounded from the ground, and Jacques and Alphonse stirred from where they’d fallen. Jeanne, with her arms still shaking, sheathed Lunestoile and allowed herself a sigh as they pulled themselves to their feet, Jacques cradling his sword arm and Alphonse rubbing tenderly at his ribs.

Jeremiah came up to her, then, his brow furrowed and his mouth set into a look of concern. “Milady —”

“I’m fine, Jeremiah,” she said, a little more impatiently than she really meant to. “Go check on the others.”

He hesitated a moment, glancing at her side, then he nodded and went to see to Jacques and Alphonse. With him gone, Jeanne took that moment to check herself over, especially her throbbing right side, and as her fingers carefully probed the place where the Horseman’s saber had clipped her, she stopped, and then she looked down.

The red jacket and the golden vest beneath it were both split open, cut cleanly in the exact spot where the Horseman had grazed her without a single sign of a frayed strand. The gash was long and almost terrifying in how devastating it could have been, and even more so in how devastating it actually was — that simple skim along her side had sliced through two layers of some of the Round’s best armor as easily and as neatly as ordinary cloth. If it had been a direct hit instead of a glancing one or if it had otherwise cleaved through the last layer, her shirt, and then bitten into the

vulnerable flesh beneath, she likely would have been eviscerated — goodbye Jeanne.

Even Aurelians — hardier, more durable, and faster to heal than ordinary men — could only survive so much. Hit something vital, and they died just the same. Do too much damage, and even their legendary vitality couldn't save them. If Jeanne had taken that hit directly, then that would have been the end of things, one way or another.

That was closer than she would have liked.

Jeanne moved her hands away from the cut and checked over the rest of her body, patting herself down with only enough force to check for soreness and aches, but aside from the bruise on her side — which twinged whenever she turned and throbbed with a vengeance now that the adrenaline was beginning to wear off — she hadn't sustained any other injuries. Thankfully, she'd be right as rain after a good night's sleep.

With herself taken care of, Jeanne turned her attention to the others and walked over to join them. Jacques and Alphonse were still grimacing and rubbing tenderly at the places where the Horseman had hit them, Jacques his arm and Alphonse his ribs, but Jeremiah's posture was not tense or concerned, so she took it to mean that neither of them was seriously hurt (although there were the beginnings of a nasty bruise along Jeremiah's jawline).

“Anyone hurt?” she asked politely.

Alphonse only grunted and stared out into empty space with a particularly sour expression marring his lips and pulling his brow together, and Jacques glanced at her, flushed, then turned his head as though to hide his face from her.

“Only my pride,” he muttered under his breath.

Jeanne pretended not to hear, because she probably wasn't meant to. “Jeremiah?”

“Scrapes and bruises — minor things,” Jeremiah reported. “Nothing serious or life-threatening. They'll be fine after a few days of recuperation.”

She nodded — about what she'd expected — then looked pointedly at his jawline. “And you?”

Jeremiah's hand lifted of what seemed to be its own accord, fingers unfurling to trace over the injury, but stopped halfway to his face and dropped back down to his side. The bruise was already beginning to purple and swell, and it looked painful to Jeanne, but Jeremiah, as was his way, gave no indication that he was at all troubled by it.

“Minor things,” Jeremiah repeated. “It's nothing that bears medical attention, Milady.”

“It is good to see that everyone is well, then,” Julius said as he came upon their group. In one hand, he held the puzzle box, now closed, and in the other, the lantern that Jeremiah had been carrying. “It was hard, watching from the back, and it took no small amount of self-control to stop myself from intervening at certain points.”

Jeanne's focus went immediately to the unassuming little box in his hand. “Is that...?”

Julius gave a nod and held it up for her to see. “The seal is working as intended,” he reassured her. “Now that he is captured, it would take a deliberate act of sabotage to release the Horseman from his prison.”

The box did not look very much changed from how it had when she first looked at it, save that the bronze slats and tiles had been reconfigured into an entirely different pattern that Jeanne could not readily discern in the scarce light. On the very center tile, an intricate chain-link design with neither a beginning nor an ending the size and shape of a coin had imprinted itself as though some invisible hand had etched it in, and in its center was a thick cross that glowed with the same eerie blue light as the maw of the Horseman's steed. In the empty space on either side was the Hebrew word for "seal."

"This seal will feed upon his stolen lifeforce to sustain itself, weakening him day by day, and it will be a thousand years before it starts to fail. By the time he is free again, there will be either a method of exorcising him permanently or else a seal capable of holding him until Judgement Day. In either case, this will be the last time the Headless Horseman troubles the world."

"What will you do with him?" Jeanne asked, although she thought she might already have some idea.

"He will be locked away in our vault," Julius answered, "where the Templars keep other beasts of his nature alongside the dangerous relics that mankind is better off forgetting."

"I see." The Round had something like that, too, a vault that housed all of the artifacts cursed to bring ruin and destruction. Jeanne had never dared to look inside — the stories the others told were terrible enough as it was. "Then we'll leave him in your care."

Julius' lips quirked into something like a smile. "Of course." He turned his body to the side and gestured back

down the road. “Now, perhaps we should see to *Signor* Crane? I am sure he must be frantic with worry.”

An image of Ichabod pacing back and forth and biting his fingernails popped suddenly into her head, and Jeanne felt her lips pull up into a little grin. “I imagine so. We should go back before he assumes the worst.” She gestured for him to go first. “And since you have the lantern...”

“Then I will take the lead, yes.”

Julius looked to the other two Templars. “Alphonse, Jacques — do you need any assistance?”

Alphonse only grunted again, still rubbing at his ribs, and Jacques shook his head. “It is nothing so bad as that, Brother Julius,” he said lowly. “A little walk will not be the end of me.”

Julius only nodded to show his understanding, and then he turned around, but before he started walking, he spoke over his shoulder, “If you need help at any moment, you have but to ask. We are only men, Jacques, Alphonse, and we bleed and die as men do. There is no shame in asking for assistance after being wounded by such a monster.”

Then, he started down the road to Sleepy Hollow, the ground beneath his boots crunching with every step, and after a moment, the other two followed after him, grimacing and wincing. As they passed her, Jeanne heard Jacques mumble in French, “Show weakness in front of La Pucelle? Pah! My ancestors would be ashamed of me!”

Jeanne and Jeremiah waited for a minute until the three Templars had pulled far enough ahead before they started walking, too. It was much harder to keep track of where her feet were going, but the light of the lantern was still within

view, and with the Horseman gone, warmth was beginning to return to the valley. Already, the temperature had risen a few degrees, and the mist that had clung to their legs since leaving the house was clearing away and settling onto the grass and tree leaves as dew.

“Are you sure we should allow them to handle the specter, Milady?” Jeremiah asked lowly, as she had suspected he would. “Are not our own vaults safer and more secure?”

“Maybe so,” Jeanne answered just as quietly, “but there’s more to consider than just that. You have to think about this politically, too. Our vaults may be better — and there’s no way to know that for sure — but this is a sign of trust. If the Templars feel as though we trust them to handle such a troublesome ghost, then they’ll be more likely to return that trust later on.”

“But the Round has worked with the Templars before, haven’t we?”

Jeanne opened her mouth to say something again, but then she remembered that this was only Jeremiah’s third mission and he was still incredibly *young*, despite how talented he was. It was easy to forget, sometimes, that he had been her adjutant for a mere five months and hadn’t yet learned all of the things that went with it.

“Yes,” she said instead, “but never as we have here.” She pointed to Julius, at the front of the group. “Did you see the ring on his finger?”

“Ring?”

“The wedding ring on his finger means he’s married, but in the Holy Order of the Templars, only those who reach Grandmaster are allowed to marry, and he doesn’t have the

stole that a Grandmaster wears to signify his rank, so he isn't one, yet."

"But he's married regardless?"

"Yes, which means he's favored to *become* a Grandmaster, likely within a year or two. We've never worked with a Templar like that before, and just as importantly, we've never sent one of the Twelve Seats to do it."

Jeremiah nodded his understanding. "Then, two highly placed members of each organization, cooperating with each other and showing trust. I see. By allowing them to take the specter and showing that we trust them to handle it, we establish a stronger relationship for the future."

"Exactly." Jeanne picked up her pace a little so that they could catch up to the others, and beside her, Jeremiah did, too. "No doubt, that was one of the reasons behind sending *us* in the first place."

The First was like that, thinking and planning on six different levels with everything he did.

When their group arrived at the entrance to the cozy little town of Sleepy Hollow, it was to find Ichabod Crane pacing anxiously back and forth across the road and clutching perhaps a little too tightly at the handle of his lantern. The only thing needed to complete the scene Jeanne had imagined earlier was the poor man biting at his fingernails.

The moment he laid eyes on them, he stopped at once and immediately asked, "Is it done?"

Julius nodded and held out the sealed puzzle box with one hand so that Ichabod could see the blue cross-and-chains

design glowing on the center slat. “The Horseman will trouble Sleepy Hollow no more.”

“I see.” Ichabod sighed, and his shoulders sagged as though a great weight had been lifted from them. “Miss Van Tassel will be quite relieved,” he said, “that she no longer has to worry about taking walks at night.” Belatedly, he added, “And, of course, the rest of the town, as well.”

Julius’ lips curled upwards at the corners, and Jeanne found herself smiling a little smile, as well. “Quite.”

“Yes, well...” Ichabod cleared his throat. “I’m sure we will all of us sleep better tonight knowing that such a monster has been defeated and can no longer take another life. I’m also sure, gentleman, and milady,” he added with a nod to Jeanne, “that I may speak for all of Sleepy Hollow when I say, thank you. You have done these people a great service, tonight.”

“We were only too happy to help, *Signor Crane*,” Julius replied.

“It’s what we do,” Jeanne agreed.

“Thank you, nonetheless,” Ichabod insisted. He took a deep breath and glanced between them. “Well, with that said, it’s very late, it’s been a long night, and I’m certain we’re all very tired.” He inclined his head respectfully. “Gentlemen, milady, I bid you all farewell, and goodnight.”

“*Buonanotte*,” said Julius politely.

“*Bonne nuit*,” Jacques bade at the same time as Alphonse said, “*Gute nacht*.”

“Good night,” Jeanne and Jeremiah both said in turn, and then, with one last nod to each of them, Ichabod spun on his heel and walked away into town, lantern bobbing lightly with each step. He made a sharp turn down the main road and vanished out of sight behind a building.

Julius stuffed the puzzle box back into a pocket, and then looked to Jeanne and respectfully inclined his head, as Ichabod had done. “*Signorina*.”

“Sir Julius,” Jeanne replied politely.

“Though *Signor* Crane does not likely understand the intricacies of what occurred tonight, we do, and we are only too aware that it is you who deserves the most praise. The Templars will never forget your assistance in this matter. We are in your debt.”

“Always,” Jacques added reverently.

But even though Jeanne understood that some of her colleagues had perhaps intended that kind of result, she herself hadn’t gone into this because she wanted their gratitude, so she gave them a tired shake of her head. “It wasn’t any trouble,” she promised. “I hold the Seventh Seat of the Round. I swore an oath before God to uphold its tenets and protect those who cannot protect themselves.”

Don’t thank me, she said without saying, *for doing what I thought was right*.

“Nonetheless,” Julius insisted, “we could not have defeated the Horseman without you.”

“And neither could I,” Jeanne countered. “Since I’m not trained as an exorcist, the best I could’ve done is temporarily

weaken it. Without your seal, it would have just come back, no matter how many times I killed it.”

“No, I —” Julius began, then he stopped and shook his head ruefully. A wry smile curled on his lips. “It occurs to me that we might spend the entire night arguing this point, so perhaps we should only say, despite our rough start, it has been a pleasure working with you, *Signorina*.”

He held out his hand, and Jeanne, after a moment, took it with hers.

“And you as well, Sir Julius.”

They shared a firm, courteous shake, as of two people who had come to respect one another, and then Jeanne let go and let her arm drop back down to her side as Julius did the same. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the somewhat envious look Jacques was directing at the back of Julius’ head.

“Now,” he said, changing the subject, “*Signor* Crane was right. It is late, and we are all tired and sore, and I am sure we would all like nothing better than to return to our beds.”

“Yes, of course,” Jeanne agreed.

Her side in particular was very much unhappy with her, and though she’d gotten some of her strength back, her arms still felt somewhat like jelly.

“Then, as the church is right here,” Julius nodded towards the church, which wasn’t that far away at all; she could see the entrance to the gate from where she was standing, “I think this would better serve you than it would us.”

He held out the lantern in offering, the flame inside still dancing and burning strong, and Jeanne took it gratefully. Some of the oppressive cold and the unnatural darkness had been banished with the Horseman's defeat, but there was no way she and Jeremiah would be able to find their way back on their own.

The five of them made the short journey back to the Old Dutch Church, and Jeanne could not have missed the open relief on the Templars' faces when they reached the front gate, which remained closed but unlocked as it had been when they'd left what seemed now like days ago. As Jacques and Alphonse pushed it open and strode inside, Julius stopped a moment, looked back at Jeanne with his solemn brown eyes, and gave her a small smile.

"Buonanotte, Signorina."

"Good night, Sir Julius."

He turned back around and followed his companions to the church, and Jeanne and Jeremiah waited just until the doors clicked shut behind the three Templars before they turned away and down the road. They walked together in silence, and as they made their way through the dark as they had less than an hour earlier, the only sounds that accompanied them were the soft crunch of the dirt beneath their boots and the creak of the lantern as it swung lazily in Jeanne's hand.

They arrived back at their host's house without fanfare and blew the lantern out before opening the front door and creeping quietly back up the stairs. The embers in the fireplace still smoldered, glowing faintly in the dark, and as they returned to their room, the smoky smell followed them back and clung to their clothes.

Jeremiah relit the candle by which they'd seen earlier in the night, giving them just enough light to see what they were doing. As mirror images of each other, they quietly removed their swords from their belts and put them back into the drawstring bags in which they'd carried them into town, then stowed them beneath their beds with the rest of their luggage.

Exactly as she had before, only in reverse, Jeanne stripped out of her armor — fortunately, it was enchanted to repair itself, so it should be as good as new by morning — and, mindful of the bruise on her side, slipped back into her bed clothes. She set her boots down near the bottom end of the bedframe, toeing the heels until they were pressed neatly together so that she didn't have to bend over, and then she pulled back the covers and slipped between them.

The candle was blown out, casting the room back into darkness, and Jeanne heard Jeremiah as he crawled into his own bed. She blinked, her head already starting to fog with the exhaustion of her intense fight, and saw the vague outline of his torso as he pulled the covers up to his shoulders, and she pulled her own covers up, too, snuggling into the sheets that were still warm from when she'd slept in them earlier.

“Good night, Milady,” Jeremiah's voice murmured from across the room.

“Good night, Jeremiah.”

As she laid her head down and drifted into sleep, Jeanne dreamed not of the pyre, but the soft sound of her mother's voice, congratulating her on a job well done.