

Chapter I: Cosmic Joke

Alarm klaxons blared. Red warning lights flared, on, off, on, then off, over and over again. The heat of the flames washed over me and tried to smother me into the sweet embrace of death.

I wish I could have said it was an unfamiliar situation.

Maybe not the specifics. For all that some form of pyromancy had been a common enough power, I hadn't actually encountered more than a handful during my career, and Lung was at the top of that list. But looking down the barrel of a metaphorical gun? Staring death in the face? I probably had more experience with that than all of my teammates combined.

Team A, they called them. The Chaldea Security Organization's crack squad of badasses, the vanguard of their operations throughout time and space, each and every one of them with a rare and exceptional ability or some storied bloodline going back hundreds of years. Calling them the best of the best probably wasn't an all that inaccurate estimation of their capabilities.

On paper, they were a lot more impressive than I was. Kischtria with his overwhelming skill, Ophelia with whatever was under that eyepatch of hers, even that flamboyant drag queen with the name so fake I refused to even think it. The tall girl with the magical prosthetic arm and not a drop of magic in her lineage must have seemed utterly and completely lackluster, by comparison.

On paper.

I doubted they'd been through even a quarter of the shit I'd had to put up with. Hell, sometimes *I* didn't quite believe everything that I'd somehow managed to live through, let alone come out intact.

Mostly. Mostly intact.

I hadn't gotten the impression that any of them had anything like that under their belts. My perspective on that was probably skewed, though. Even in a world of magic and mystery, unearthing secretive world-spanning conspiracies, fighting off city-killing monsters, and struggling through the end of the world, all before your twentieth birthday, wasn't a particularly common experience.

Small wonder that I'd felt so out of place among them.

Were they too shocked to do anything, here? I didn't know. I think I must have been fairly lucky not to have been killed immediately; they were all likely either dead or unconscious, maybe mortally wounded. Not that it meant much of anything when the roar of the flames was drowning out all of the rest of the sound, but I couldn't hear any of them moving, and my limited view, obscured by the heat haze that made everything blurry and unclear, showed none of them up and trying to escape.

I guess it didn't really matter, since we were all already dead. Our bodies simply hadn't figured it out, yet.

A chuckle vibrated past my lips, low and unheard.

How ironic. I survived fights with eldritch monstrosities, went toe to toe with a man who could transform into a dragon and came out the other side unhurt, squared off against a group of psychos who routinely slaughtered entire towns, pulled myself through getting sheared in half, lost my arm — twice in about as many days — and bounced back, made it through the apocalypse *mostly* intact, and when the *next* world-ending event kicked off, I was going to die before we could even get past the starting line.

A two-year extension, Contessa? Was that all that she could give me, after everything? At least if I was going to die so soon, couldn't I have gone with dignity, in those final moments of slipping sanity, or else obliviously with the rest of mankind, never seeing the end coming?

Instead, I was going to end as I began: in the fire, unable to do anything about it.

Lung's grin would have been a sight to behold.

A brief surge of defiance sputtered in my chest at the thought, a burst of emotion that echoed what I'd felt when I'd goaded him into burning my mangled arm off during that final battle, but a look down at the floor I was sitting on reminded me that my right leg was trapped under rubble. Not broken, for whatever that was worth just then, at least as far as I could tell, but I wasn't getting it free anytime soon. I'd already spent too much of my dwindling strength trying and failing.

Maybe I could've sawed it off with my knife, if I'd been so single-mindedly determined to live, but I doubted it would have done more than make me die faster, and besides that, my left shoulder was pinned beneath a deceptively heavy ceiling tile. It didn't feel crushed, but that could just have been because the pressure on my shoulder had left that entire side of my chest basically numb.

I wasn't getting out of there. Not unless I spontaneously became Alexandria and developed the strength to lift massively heavy objects.

My sigh jerked into a coughing fit as my lungs tried to expel the acrid smoke that choked the air, and the edge of the ceiling tile pinning me ground painfully against my collarbone.

Maybe I should have just retired, instead of letting myself get drawn into this whole "save the world" thing again. Just found a plot of land somewhere and settled down, or chosen a random city in America to plant my flag and move on with my life. Even if the end result was the same, two years of peace after two years of preparing for the end of the world, sprinting towards every possible way of stopping it and grasping every imaginable straw, just those two years would have been worth it, wouldn't they?

"Heh. Like I have it in me to just sit around and do nothing."

Who was I kidding? The instant Professor Lev and Olga Marie told me their organization's mission statement, they'd had me hooked. In the end, leaving the important things up to everyone else had never been something I'd figured out how to do. Maybe, if I'd been dropped anywhere else, I could've figured it out, but being set on Chaldea's doorstep had made the decision for me before I'd even woken up.

RAYSHIFT SYSTEM TRANSFERRING TO FINAL STAGE, the announcement echoed.
COORDINATES: JANUARY 30TH, 2004 CE. FUYUKI, JAPAN.

“Mash!” I heard a voice calling distantly. “Mash!”

I looked around, blinking heavy eyelids, my head shrouded in fog. I still couldn’t see anyone through the red flames and the haze of heat. As far as I could tell, I was still the only living thing in that room, and even then, it wouldn’t be for long.

Maybe I’d just been hearing things, then. Hallucinating as I died. Funny. This would be the second time, and I wasn’t having my life flash before my eyes this time, either.

**LAPLACE CONVERSION PROTECTION ESTABLISHED. ADDITIONAL FACTOR
FRAME TOWARDS THE SINGULARITY SECURED.**

“Geez,” I mumbled, “you’d think when they built this thing, they would’ve programmed it to realize when all of the Master candidates were dead or dying. What’s it going to do, send our corpses back in time?”

I set my hand against the block pinning me down, and I tried again to slip out from under it — I couldn’t bite back a cry as my bones ground together under its weight and a sharp pain lanced up my whole left side. Even when I pushed past that to pull myself out, because pain and I were old friends, there just wasn’t enough wiggle room for me to manage it.

“Guh... Ha... Ha...”

My whole body sagged, and I gulped down breaths of suffocating air that choked me even as I breathed it in. My vision itself was starting to blur, now, and my eyelids that had struggled to stay open struggled even more. Everything felt weak and tired, and it was so very tempting to just close my eyes and let it go.

I’d been ready for the end, last time. After everything, I wasn’t just prepared for it, hadn’t just accepted it, I’d known it was coming, known it *would* come. For the things I’d done, there hadn’t been any forgiveness, and those violations would damn me just as surely as those final two bullets had. What I’d been given instead was mercy.

Maybe this was just my sins catching up with me.

But now... Now... I wasn’t ready to give up. I wasn’t ready to just lay down and die. I wanted to get up and fight it, face down the end and bloody its nose, at the very least. It was so very ironic, then, that this time, there was nothing I could do *but* to give up and let go.

Scion, so close to a god that there hadn’t been a meaningful difference, and I’d managed to do *something*. This time, a bit of falling rubble was what would do me in, and I couldn’t even budge it.

**UNSUMMON PROGRAM SET. MASTERS, PLEASE ENTER THE FINAL
ADJUSTMENTS.**

The faint blue glow of the globe set in the center of the room vanished and turned red. The shining dots that represented human civilization had all winked out and disappeared. The globe itself roiled with an ominous orange light, like magma bubbling up at the center of a volcanic basin, or the flaring of the sun as spots of darker color splotched its surface.

This was it, then. The end of the world. Mankind, wiped out in one, fell swoop.

And here I was, watching it happen helplessly.

It burned in my gut, thinking about it like that. Being unable to do anything rankled, far, far worse than it ever had at Winslow. I didn't think I was the kind of person to let my own hype swell my head, but it felt like I should have been able to do *something*. I'd already saved the world once before — numerous, uncountable worlds, more than all the stars in the skies — shouldn't I have been able to save it again?

No. Because this time, everyone who could have helped me was already dead, and I had no powers anymore, no bugs to weave lines of silk and lift this block off of me just enough to escape. No Bitch to get one of her dogs to lever it up, no Atlas to do the same, no Golem, no Defiant to saw through it with nano-thorns.

I was *helpless*.

WARNING TO OBSERVATION STAFF. CHALDEAS' CONDITION HAS CHANGED.

NOW REWRITING SHEBA'S NEAR-FUTURE OBSERVATIONAL DATA.

**UNABLE TO DETECT THE EXISTENCE OF MANKIND ON EARTH FOR THE
NEXT ONE-HUNDRED YEARS.**

**UNABLE TO CONFIRM HUMAN SURVIVORS. UNABLE TO GUARANTEE
HUMANITY'S FUTURE.**

Another sigh hissed out of my mouth.

That was it, wasn't it? The coffin nail. The device designed to read the presence of people on the planet's surface for the next century had just said there weren't any. Shy of seeing it for myself, that was probably the best confirmation I was going to get.

CENTRAL BULKHEAD WILL NOW BE SEALED, a different voice announced. *ONE-HUNDRED-EIGHTY SECONDS UNTIL INTERNAL CONTAINMENT PROCEDURE.*

Something in the distance rumbled, and it vibrated the floor beneath me. The only thing I could think of it being was the big, thick, emergency steel doors, sealing off the fire and the room to keep things from spreading and getting worse. Not that it really mattered, if the world really had ended.

But it meant that I officially had no way out. No rescue was coming. No one was going to show up and pull me out. I and everyone else in here had been written off for dead.

“Wish I could've seen you guys one more time,” I murmured.

Lisa...

We'd only really spent a few months together, and then the few short days that were Gold Morning. If you counted it towards the last time she and I had just been able to hang out, without any of the

pressures of all of the shit happening getting in the way, it really had been more like four years since we'd spoken.

I'd known going into it that I would never get the chance to see them again in this new world, but even so, I wished I could have seen her and Rachel and all the others one last time.

BASELINE FOR MASTER VITALS COULD NOT BE ESTABLISHED. RAYSHIFT REQUIREMENTS NOT MET.

A morbid chuckle vibrated out of my mouth. "That's because we're all dead."

Confirmation, at least. Guess none of the others managed to make it out, either. So much for the crack squad of badasses — none of us had even managed to last long enough to make it to the first mission, let alone all the way through it. At least they'd all died fairly quickly, then, instead of this long, drawn out agony.

What about the rest of the world? Was it even just this one, or was this whatever-it-was that killed us widespread enough to touch other worlds, too? Lisa, Rachel, Aisha, Dinah, Theo, everyone I'd ever known or cared about, had it been as quick and painless for them, too? Or were they still alive on some alternate world, unaware that this one was even now falling apart? Unaware that I'd even lived past the end of everything before, too, and wasn't going to make it that far, this time?

I didn't do hope all that well. Hoping had never gotten me much of anywhere. But I didn't have anything else, just then. There was nothing for me to do, sitting there helplessly like I was, except to hope that my friends were living and smiling, completely oblivious to this new mess I'd found myself in, or that if they had gone, they'd gone swiftly and without suffering.

**SEARCHING FOR QUALIFYING MASTER CANDIDATES... SEARCHING...
SEARCHING...**

FOUND.

I blinked. "You can't mean *me*."

I was pinned beneath a giant piece of rubble, my entire left side was numb, I had no idea if my leg was even still intact, let alone unbroken, and we shouldn't forget that I wasn't even in one of the coffins that they'd spent months drilling into our heads were essential for the process. In what way did I qualify as a Master candidate at that moment?

**RESETTING CONTACT WITH MASTER CANDIDATES NUMBERS SEVEN,
FORTY-EIGHT, AND FORTY-NINE.**

Seven, forty-eight, and forty-nine?

I tried to hone my mind, to focus on those numbers and put a name, or at least a face, to them. Seven was mine, so I guess the system's standards for "qualifying Master candidates" had a couple of glaring loopholes, but I couldn't remember anything about forty-eight and forty-nine. Newbies, they had to be, because the numbers went in order of recruitment and there were only forty-nine Master candidates that had been brought into the orientation meeting, but beyond that...

Recalling anything else was a struggle. My head was stuffy and my thoughts were getting ever more sluggish. I thought... maybe one of them had red hair? I... I remembered thinking how strange it was, because she was apparently as Japanese as they came and there hadn't been a trace of hair dye. Red roots and everything.

Nothing else was coming to me. The color blue, but what it was connected to was beyond me.

BEGINNING UNSUMMON PROGRAM.

Whoever it was, it meant I would at least not die alone. For whatever that might have been worth, when the only thing I had to let me know that was a monotone voice announcing another's presence over a loudspeaker.

I wasn't a stranger to the idea. My memories of those final moments weren't entirely clear, but I remembered being utterly alone, having run away from everyone and everything I cared about so that I didn't hurt them by accident. I remembered dying there, kneeling in the dirt, hardly able to even think about standing, let alone doing it. I remembered Contessa, the cold comfort of the single human being who would be there, when it was all over.

I remembered two bullets. The stars, so vast and distant. The universe, so impossibly big.

As I gazed hazily up at the globe of Chaldeas, the rotating panels reflecting its red glow, I found it this moment not all that different from that one.

BEGINNING SPIRITRON CONVERSION.

What would happen to us? I could only wonder about it morbidly. Without the supposedly vital coffins, would we be strewn across all of spacetime, decohering into scattered strings of molecules that were dumped into random times and places? Would we simply evaporate as whatever mechanism was supposed to affirm our existence in the past failed? Or would we simply arrive dead, corpses thrown to the ground, hearts stopped and brains stilled?

Or would we wind up stranded in the past, wandering ghosts clinging to whatever semblance of life we could manage, because while our souls — and hadn't learning *those* existed been a kick in the teeth — had been sent back, our bodies had been left behind to burn in the fire?

RAYSHIFT IN 3... 2... 1...

I couldn't say. I'd read through the manuals they'd given us way back when on how this was all supposed to work at least a dozen times, and every time, I'd found something else that went completely over my head. Technical specifications that required a degree in mechanical engineering that I just didn't have, or else magecraft that "just worked, don't question it," brought in by one of the magicians on loan from the mysterious Mage's Association.

Even the coffins worked on some Tinker-esque bullshit thing about being both alive and dead simultaneously until they were opened. Something about quantum uncertainty and Schrodinger's cat? It was a whole lot of stuff that I didn't know anything about, because at the end of the day, I wasn't a physicist who had spent her entire life studying high concept math and theoretical quantum interactions or a mage with a pedigree in spacetime manipulation.

It was a bunch of stuff I just had to take on faith — which, being fair, was basically what passengers and powers had been like, in another life — and trust that others knew the things I didn't.

There was only one thing I knew for sure, and it didn't require a PhD in astrology or a research grant from some blueblood with a thousand year lineage.

ALL PROCEDURES CLEARED.

We were already dead. Our bodies just hadn't figured it out, yet.

BEGINNING FIRST ORDER VERIFICATION.