

## Chapter XXV: Felling the Sky Demon

Our whole group came to a screaming halt, and my stomach jarred in my gut as Siegfried dug in his feet to bleed off his momentum so that we didn't come to an even more sudden and painful stop. My body still jerked in his grasp, and I scrambled to grab onto something as my whole body threatened to be violently thrown out of his arms.

Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow —

“What?” I gasped.

Romani was going to have to check us over, because I was pretty sure I had whiplash — fuck, my arms and legs were going to be mottled with bruises in the shape of Siegfried's fingers — don't throw up, don't throw up, don't throw up —

*Focus.*

*Arash, I tried instead. What happened?*

*Enemy Archer class Servant, Arash replied. A really good one, too, to have seen us from this far away through the trees.*

I blinked and craned my neck, fighting the swimming sense of almost vertigo. Whatever had struck Emiya's flower wall — an arrow, almost certainly, and what a powerful Archer our enemy must be to hit that hard with just an arrow — had made a mess of the ground beyond it, but it failed to penetrate past it. Rika clung desperately to Emiya's body, sideways somehow so that I could see her face from over his arm, and she looked completely and utterly terrified.

“Senpai!” Mash called as she slowed to a halt, brow wrinkled with concern.

Rika opened her mouth as though to speak, and then hastily slapped her hand over it, looking as nauseous as I felt.

“Mash,” Emiya said sternly, looking at her from over his shoulder. “You're going to have to be faster on that. As our main line of defense, you can't let any attack escape your eyes, no matter how sudden or surprising.”

“Y-yes!” Mash squeaked breathlessly.

Emiya's lips quirked. “Well, not that I can blame you. Even I almost missed that shot.”

*Arash, I began.*

“Here, Master,” Arash said, landing next to Siegfried and I.

“Wh-what just happened?” Ritsuka asked shakily.

“Let me down,” I mumbled to Siegfried.

Obligingly, Siegfried knelt down and carefully lowered my legs to the ground until I could stand on my own. I turned immediately to Arash, trying to ignore the throbbing ache that was searing across my neck.

“What are we looking at?” I demanded without preamble.

My bugs were spread out, but whoever was shooting at us was too far away and out of my range.

Arash shook his head. “I didn’t get a good look at her. I managed to get a quick glimpse when I tracked her shot back to its origin, but I can’t tell you much other than the fact it’s definitely a woman.”

*CRACK*

Another arrow impacted Emiya’s wall to mostly the same effect. Emiya grunted, but didn’t show any other signs of stress.

Rho Aias, he’d called it. I didn’t understand the significance of the “Rho” part, but Aias was the original Greek version of Ajax. Ajax the Great was said to have spawned a flower when he died, which probably had something to do with the flower motif of that barrier, but the exact connection escaped me. Seven petals? Maybe something to do with seven-leaf lucky clovers?

A thought for later.

“A female Archer...”

No one was coming to mind. The immediate answer was Artemis, but that was a goddess, and this far out from what Marie had called the Age of Gods, summoning a literal, actual goddess was supposed to be impossible, even *with* a Holy Grail.

But this whole situation was literally impossibility stacked on impossibility. It was probably a better idea to take absolutes like that with a grain of salt.

“She’s powerful, Master,” Arash warned me. Like I hadn’t already figured that out for myself. “Skilled. I didn’t have enough time to counter her first shot. I wouldn’t want to go head to head with her if she got the jump on me.”

*Only* if she got the jump on him? Probably not actually Artemis, then.

*CRACK* went the blow of another arrow crashing against Emiya’s barrier. *CRACK* — *CRACK* went two more.

“She’s getting impatient,” Emiya warned. “I’m fine as long as it’s regular arrows, but I don’t want to be here when she decides to use her Noble Phantasm.”

“What do we do?” asked Ritsuka.

“Fire back!” Rika snapped irritably. She still seemed upset about the sudden stop.

“I could draw her fire long enough for Sir Arash to counterattack,” Georgios offered.

Mozart shrugged. “I’m afraid I won’t be of much use here. If I go out, I’ll just become a pin cushion.”

I looked back to Georgios. “How long can you keep her distracted for?”

“As long as you need me,” he replied confidently. “Defense is where I’m strongest.”

My mind raced as my eyes swept to each of the Servants in our group, and the makings of a plan began to form in my head. It wasn’t a great plan, not even a particularly good one, but for all that it was relatively simple, it was solid. Maybe the fact that it was so simple and uncomplicated was what made it a better plan in the face of an unknown Archer whose Noble Phantasm and skills were a complete mystery.

“Georgios, you’re our distraction,” I said hurriedly. “Go towards her, wait for the first shot, then break off in a different direction.” I turned to Emiya and Siegfried one after the other. “Emiya, Siegfried, while she’s distracted with Georgios, rush her. Straight on. Siegfried in front, block those shots when they come.”

“Leave it to me,” Siegfried said.

*CRACK — CRACK — CRACK* went the staccato of more arrows impacting the barrier. It still held strong.

“Sending an Archer into melee range?” Emiya smirked. “Are you sure that’s the best idea?”

“Fuyuki,” I retorted shortly, and his smirk faltered. “I’ve seen what you can do at close range.” I turned next to Arash. “While she’s focused on them, circle around and wait for an opening. Don’t take the shot unless you’re sure you can guarantee it’ll kill her.”

He nodded. “Understood.”

At last, I turned to Mash and Jeanne. “You two will be our defense. If she decides to ignore everyone else, you need to block her shots.”

Mash glanced at Ritsuka, and he gave her a firm nod. “We’ll be counting on you, Mash.”

Mash’s face drew into a mask of determination. “I won’t let you down!”

“I’m afraid I have to ask you to take point, Mash,” said Jeanne. “My only defense is my Noble Phantasm, and in my condition, it must be my last resort.”

“Right!”

“Everyone good?” I asked quickly, sweeping my gaze around them. Various assents were given, verbal and not, and I took that for what it was. “Right. Then after her next volley —”

A ghastly howl echoed off in the distance, and something much, much larger than an arrow raced through the foliage and into my range. It ping-ponged off of trees and branches without slowing or stopping, avoiding every obstacle and clearing every hurdle with effortless ease, and it moved so fast that I caught nothing more than a vague, black blur.

“She’s coming!” I said urgently. “Go, go!”

The Servants took off instantly, with Emiya trailing behind as Rika scrambled to get out of the way. Mash dropped the bags she was carrying and strode forward, her shield manifesting in her hands between one step and the next. Jeanne fell into place slightly behind and to her right, and us three Masters huddled behind the two of them. Mozart positioned himself at the very back, his baton held at the ready.

The blur continued to move, eating up the distance with alarming speed. Some of that had to be down to her being able to keep going through the forest without slowing, because as I watched, Georgios, Siegfried, Emiya, and Arash all ran, bleeding off momentum every time they had to swerve around a tree or duck under a branch, and that limited how fast they could run.

Georgios broke off, moving the opposite direction of Arash, and the blur ignored him completely. She continued her rapid beeline for Siegfried and Emiya, like she had a personal grudge to settle with the one who had blocked her shots.

“Senpai,” Ritsuka began.

“I see her,” I told him. “She’s ignoring Georgios completely.”

“Did she see through our plan?” Jeanne asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. Maybe? Or maybe it’s just the influence of the Mad Enhancement she’s under, gave her tunnel vision.”

Like a rocket, she collided with Siegfried and Emiya, and the ringing of Balmung echoed even back to us with how much force she put behind — her claws? What?

As Siegfried braced himself with one leg, I closed my eyes and cast my vision through his, giving me an up close and personal look at our enemy. A curtain of grayish hair fluttered behind her, and her body was covered in patches of black fur instead of clothing. Her fingers ended in catlike claws that must have been harder than steel to not have broken against Balmung’s flat. Almost comically, a pair of feline ears sat atop her head.

But the most striking thing — and most bewildering, too — was the massive head attached to her one arm at the shoulder, a flat-snouted thing with large, black tusks and beady yellow eyes that seemed to look straight at me even now.

An archer associated with a boar? Why did that sound familiar?

“Kill you,” she seethed in a rough, hoarse voice. “Kill you! Kill you! Kill all of you!”

Emiya moved to the side, coming in to attack her from behind, but she leapt away to avoid the blow, and before my — Siegfried's — eyes, her left arm sprouted a black bow. She fired a lightning fast volley of at least two dozen arrows that were so black and so insubstantial that they seemed to suck in the light. Several of them hit Siegfried and were powerful enough to carve shallow cuts into his skin, but Emiya twisted out of the way to dodge all of the ones that sprayed in his general direction.

“Kill you!”

She landed with catlike grace on all fours and kicked off the ground towards Siegfried, but right as he moved to block her again, she suddenly swerved off course and made for Emiya.

“Shit!”

Emiya blocked her with the twin swords I'd seen his alternate use in Fuyuki, but they shattered under her strength and he was thrown backwards. Amazingly, it seemed like he'd planned for that, because his swords had barely been dropped before a more familiar black bow materialized in his own hands as much more mundane arrows formed in his grasp.

The unknown Archer threw herself out of the way of Emiya's own barrage, right into the path of Siegfried, who swung at her with Balmung. Metal screeched as she reached out with both hands and grabbed the blade, her claws scraping against the flat even as the edge bit into her palms. She didn't seem to care or even feel the pain of her wounds that leaked dark, brackish blood, her face still pulled into the same, perpetual snarl.

“Kill you! Kill you!”

Emiya fired another salvo. Even as I watched, the Archer's body shifted and morphed, and a large, wing-like shape burst from her back, interposing itself and absorbing every shot.

“What?” I said.

The expression on Emiya's face mirrored my own.

Another Servant with a Shapeshift skill? What, were they giving it away when Jeanne Alter summoned her Servants? “Here, come get your free Shapeshift skill for being summoned as Jeanne Alter's Servant!” Had Saint Martha and Phantom had it too and just never got the chance to use it?

I didn't have a connection to Emiya, so —

*Arash!*

*I'm moving into position, Master, he reported. I don't have a good line of sight on her, though.*

Damn it. The cover of the trees I'd been counting on to keep the Dragon Witch from seeing us until it was too close to matter was also keeping Arash from reinforcing Emiya and Siegfried.

*Get as close as you need to.*

And as he did, the fight continued. The Archer's new wing shifted and retracted, and Emiya's arrows dropped from it like discarded shreds of paper; they vanished before they even had the chance to hit the ground. She leapt back, and Balmung swept through the place she'd been with hurricane force. Emiya had to dodge out of the way to avoid the backlash, which gave the Archer more than enough time to throw herself at them again. She made for Emiya, forcing him to retreat even further, but rather than pursue, she planted one foot against the trunk of a nearby tree and bounced off of it towards Siegfried.

Siegfried wasn't prepared for it, but her claws scraped ineffectually across his stomach, dealing no damage whatsoever, and he brought Balmung back around to take off her head. She ducked under the blow with catlike agility, hair whipping about, and as she rose, her hand lashed out like a snake, aiming for his eyes.

He wasn't too slow, this time. Her claws stopped several inches from his face, her wrist held securely in the grip of one of his hands. From the vantage point of my bugs, I could see the cold, solemn expression on his face as he pulled on her trapped arm and brought Balmung across her torso with the other.

Brackish blood splattered across the forest floor, and when he let go of her wrist, the Archer collapsed to the ground, gasping for breath, but still somehow alive.

"Kill... you..." she rasped.

Slowly, she tried to climb to her feet, the black fur that served as her clothing shivering with each breath. A nasty cut was carved across her chest, and if she wasn't a Servant, it probably would have disemboweled her.

"I see," said Siegfried. "The only way the Dragon Witch could control you was to destroy you, leaving behind only a maddened beast."

He hefted Balmung and took hold of it with both hands.

"I'm sorry. The only thing I can do for you is to end your misery."

The meaty squelch of an arrow landing was quiet and almost unheard over the Archer's gasp, and then with a sigh, she sagged and fell to her knees, the metallic glint of an arrowhead sprouting from her chest. Behind her, Emiya let out his breath and his arms dropped, his black bow disappearing in motes of light.

"Ah," the Archer whispered. "Finally."

Her head tilted back and she looked up at the canopy of the forest above her.

"My eyes...are clear again..."

And with her next breath, her form dissolved and she disappeared.

"She's gone," I told the others, and they all relaxed as Mash let out a long sigh of her own.

“The others?” asked Jeanne.

“No injuries,” I reported. “She attacked Siegfried, but she wasn’t strong enough to hurt him. Emiya dealt the final blow.”

“That’s a relief,” said Ritsuka.

*Arash*, I projected, connecting to both of my Servants, *Siegfried, return. We need to regroup before we move on Orléans itself.*

*Understood*, said Siegfried even as Arash responded with, *I’m on my way.*

“Rika,” I turned to her, “are you good to keep going?”

I wasn’t noticing any real strain from that short battle, and she was only supporting one Servant on her own compared to my two, so I doubted she was, either. Still better to make sure, though.

“Tip-top, firing on all cylinders!” she chirped, a bare second before her stomach let out a growl. Her cheeks flushed pink. “Although I definitely wouldn’t say no to some of Emiya’s cooking for lunch, first!”

My stomach was inclined to agree with her, I realized. Unfortunately, this wasn’t the time or the place to stop for lunch. Not for a cooked one, at any rate. Not with Orléans right over the proverbial hill.

“We’re too close to the city, they’d see the fire,” I told her. Her face fell. “Get Emiya back here and grab a ration bar, if you’re that hungry. He can cook you a full three course meal when we get back to Chaldea.”

“Yeah, I got it,” she said sourly. Underneath her breath, low enough that I probably wasn’t meant to hear it, she added, “I wanted his cooking *now*...”

I pretended I hadn’t heard it anyway. “Mash, grab a couple of ration bars.”

“R-right!”

She went back over to the bags she’d discarded and started to rummage through them as I turned to address the rest of the group, the ones who needed to actually eat, at least, so really just the twins and maybe Jeanne.

“Anyone who’s hungry, eat now, while we have a moment. There’s no telling if the Dragon Witch noticed our fight with her pet Archer, so she could be —”

*Beep-beep!*

“*En*-emy movement detected!” Romani interrupted me. Static distorted the first word, but it was clear enough what he was saying. “I know you guys just got done fighting an enemy Servant, but the sensors are showing a massive magical energy response in motion!”

My heart skipped a beat. Immediately, my mind's eye conjured a massive beast taking off, each beat of its wings crushing everything beneath it with hurricane winds, so large that it cast the entire city in shadow.

“Fafnir's leaving Orléans, and he's headed straight for you!”

The twins gasped, and Mash dropped the bottle of water in her hands to the ground with a thud.

“Shit!”

I turned in the direction of Orléans, and my swarm began to contract and gather, pulling the stingers and the venomous creepy crawlies from their hiding places in preparation for a battle I knew they wouldn't be able to do anything about. Tarasque had eaten through a swarm just like this one with relatively little effort, and Fafnir was a beast at least ten times bigger and a thousand times more terrifying. I might as well throw water balloons at him, because those at least might be useful fighting his firebreath.

*Siegfried, I sent his way, double time it! Jeanne Alter is on her way here, and she's bringing Fafnir with her!*

I didn't wait for his confirmation.

“Mash, Jeanne, defense!” I barked out orders. “Ritsuka, Rika, get back! Can anyone get in contact with —”

Even as the words were leaving my mouth, I was reaching out with my swarm, and I noticed a familiar figure in coppery armor making his way back towards us. He must have turned back when he realized he was no longer being shot at. Whether to help or because he figured the fight was over, it didn't matter.

“Nevermind, he's on his way.”

“Who's on his way?” asked Rika.

“Georgios!” said Ritsuka, having apparently realized what I was talking about.

“He's okay?”

“Like I said,” I told them distractedly, “the enemy Archer ignored him.”

I eyed the foliage to either side of the dirt road we were on. Should we take cover? No, probably not. We wouldn't fool Jeanne Alter for long, and the worst kind of cover to take shelter behind when a giant, fire-breathing dragon showed up was the very flammable trees. Staying out in the open went against every tactical bone in my body, but ironically, it was probably the safer option of the two.

“Master!”

Siegfried burst out of the forest like a rocket and came to a skidding halt in front of our group, kicking up clouds of dust. He held Balmung in one hand.



“You’re our frontline,” I said without preamble.

He inclined his head. “Of course.”

I turned back to the communicator. “Romani, how soon?”

The crackle of static was my only answer, and then the connection cut. My heart skipped another beat as a sense of foreboding settled in my gut.

A sound like thunder rumbled and shook the ground, vibrating my bones and organs, and a gust of wind buffeted my swarm in the forest. A second later, another echoing blast of thunder reverberated through us and the ground beneath our feet, and a hurricane swept through the trees ahead, displacing every bug in its path.

“It’s here!” Rika gasped.

I looked up just in time for the entire sky to be cast in shadow as a massive form blotted out the sun with its bulk, and overhead, the truly enormous form of Fafnir flew. A jolt of unfamiliar fear wormed in my belly as he passed, and the mere wind from his wingbeats nearly tore me off of my feet. Rika and Ritsuka both screamed, protecting their heads with their arms, and I had to throw one of my own up to shield my eyes.

Above, Fafnir made one gigantic circle, and then he turned and swooped back down. Even no longer directly beneath his wake, the force of being anywhere near his flight was still almost enough to bowl me over, and I had to brace myself just to stay upright.

For an instant, I remembered that fateful fight against Leviathan, struggling against the waves and having to find cover just to keep from being swept away. My bugs drowning, my body being battered and bandied about. A cape being washed away, just a few bare inches from me as I reached to pull her to safety.

Fafnir was on an entirely different scale than Leviathan, at least in terms of size. He was several times larger with a wingspan that put the Simurgh to shame, a rough, scaly body that looked hardier than Leviathan’s had, and horns and fangs that would have made Behemoth jealous. His massive maw could have swallowed our entire group whole and still had room, and his tail was long enough that I wouldn’t have been surprised if it reached all the way back to the city.

And emblazoned across his chest was the exact same symbol as the one on Siegfried’s.

The whole world seemed to shake when he landed, and for the third time in less than a minute, I was almost thrown off my feet. Next to me, the twins clutched to each other like that was the only way they could keep themselves from fainting.

For once, I didn’t blame them. I’d come up against a lot of different things in my career as a cape, many of them horrible or horrifying, but there was something visceral and instinctual to looking up at Fafnir and wanting to run. An ingrained response to flee in the presence of a larger, more powerful predator and hope you were fast enough to escape, or at least so insignificant as to be ignored.

Entire trees were crushed underfoot as the monster shifted and moved his forelegs, and he dipped his head to reveal a woman standing atop it, utterly tiny compared to him.

Jeanne Alter, the Dragon Witch.

“So,” said Siegfried lowly, clutching his sword with both hands. “We meet again, my old enemy.”

“Well, would you look at that!” Jeanne Alter crowed. “You’re still alive, my old leftovers? What a cockroach you are, that you keep surviving while everyone else dies around you!”

“I live and die for the sake of France!” Jeanne said boldly, like she wasn’t facing down a massive dragon that could easily kill us all. “So long as France is in peril, I won’t allow myself to be killed, especially by the likes of you!”

Jeanne Alter laughed. “I *am* you, you country bumpkin!”

“No,” Jeanne said with utter certainty, “you’re not. I can’t say for certain who or what you are, Dragon Witch, but I can say with absolute surety that you are not Jeanne d’Arc.”

The laughter cut off abruptly, and Jeanne Alter’s expression turned murderous.

“I’m tired of looking at you, you eyesore,” she sneered.

She lifted her flag, and behind Fafnir, a veritable swarm of wyverns rose into the sky from the direction of Orléans. They ignored us and took off in various directions, headed out into the countryside. No doubt, they were on a mission to kill and destroy as much of the remaining citizens of France as they could.

*Arash!* I sent urgently.

*Already on it, Master,* he replied.

From the forest behind the great dragon, arrows whistled out one after the other and shot down wyvern after wyvern. He wouldn’t be able to get them all, but he’d hopefully get enough that we could end this whole thing before they had the chance to cause too much damage.

“Tch,” Jeanne Alter snarled. “That Archer, again! Berserk Saber, get over there and crush him! Fafnir! That saint, those meddlesome wretches she’s gathered around her, this entire nauseating country — burn it all down!”

Fafnir reared back, neck snaking, and he looked down at us with malintent in his serpentine eyes as an orange glow gathered in the back of his maw. A guttural growl rumbled in his chest as it expanded, and the sound of it vibrated the earth beneath us.

If that hit us, we were dead.

“Mash!” Ritsuka shouted.

I had a different idea.

“Siegfried!” I called to him.

Siegfried gave no sign he heard me, but he set his stance and planted his feet, and then he lifted Balmung above his head.

“FAFNIR!” he bellowed over the rumbling growl. “DO YOU SEE ME, WICKED DRAGON? I STAND BEFORE YOU ONCE AGAIN, AND I’M UNAFRAID! AS I SLEW YOU BEFORE, NOW I’LL SLAY YOU AGAIN!”

He twisted his grip on his sword’s hilt, and blue light erupted from the blade into a towering pillar.

“SIEGFRIED!” Jeanne Alter howled.

“FALL TO THE EARTH!”

The dragon breathed. The sword swung.

“BALMUNG!”

A bomb detonated, that was what it felt like. Ritsuka and Rika both screamed, and even I let out a startled shout as the force of the two attacks meeting nearly tossed me off my feet yet again. I had to squeeze my eyes shut to keep from being blinded, and even looking through the eyes of my bugs showed me only a bright white nova that drowned out everything else. Even from behind, the swarm that was at our backs only showed me our vague outlines against the backdrop of an overwhelming light.

When I could see again, both still stood, and Lord Chaldea faded into nothingness as Mash gasped from the effort of protecting us. Siegfried’s bodysuit had been ripped and torn at the sleeves, disintegrated all the way up to his elbows, but he was otherwise unharmed, and Fafnir was equally unscathed, glaring down at his nemesis. Jeanne Alter remained standing atop his enormous head, utterly livid.

My mind whirled as the realization sunk in, and I had to discard an assumption I’d been making thus far: killing Fafnir would not be as simple or as easy as having Siegfried use his Noble Phantasm. It was going to take more than just one, good blow from Balmung to finish off that dragon.

Or at least, if it was one blow, it had to be one uninterrupted blow while Fafnir was defenseless. As long as he could defend himself with his breath attack, Siegfried couldn’t kill him.

I was hoping Siegfried would be our trump card to beat the Dragon Witch and her army of dragons, and he was, he just wasn’t an instant win button like I had wanted him to be.

“You!” Jeanne Alter snarled. “Fafnir, crush him!”

The great dragon let out a thunderous roar as he lifted on meaty, bulky arm, wings spread wide in what might have been a threat display on a mundane animal.

“Siegfried!” I shouted.

“Don’t worry, Master!” he shouted back. “This enemy is one I know how to defeat!”

The claws came down, and Siegfried moved between them, holding it off with the blade of his sword against the flat of what passed for the palm.

“You’re weaker than I remember, Fafnir!”

Balmung lit up with blue light, and when Siegfried sliced its blade along Fafnir’s hand, it cut through the scales effortlessly. Red blood splattered over the ground, and Fafnir reared back, roaring his pain as his head tossed to and fro.

“Have the Dragon Witch’s shackles reduced you so?”

He kicked off the ground, racing towards the dragon’s underbelly. Fafnir swatted at him with his other hand, but Siegfried leapt over the sword-like claws, and with Balmung glowing blue again, sliced into the scaly wrist like it was made of paper.

Small uses of his Noble Phantasm, I realized. Charging up the full thing took too much time and energy, so instead, he was enhancing his normal attacks with miniature charges, using his Noble Phantasm without actually using his Noble Phantasm.

“I’m not the cowering fool I was when I first slew you!” Siegfried yelled.

He landed, and his feet had barely touched the ground before he took off again, leaping like a rocket as yet more blue light trailed in the wake of his blade. He carved a line across Fafnir’s chest, splitting the glowing symbol in half with a spurt of red blood.

“The reason why I don’t remember our first battle — it’s because I wasn’t enough! My dreams were too feeble and selfish, born of the same greed that made you! I was nothing more than your pale shadow!”

One of Fafnir’s massive paws came down, and with a reverberating clang that set my teeth vibrating, Siegfried cleaved away one of the sword-like claws. It flew through the air, tumbling and turning and spinning, and it carved a trench in the road until it came to a stop, buried halfway into the dirt.

“And so it was the wish of the people that brought you low, not my own strength! Their faith, their will, their hopes and fears — when my own strength failed, they led my blade into your heart!”

Blue light gathered around his sword.

“Now, of my own will, with my own strength, for the sake of my own justice, I will bring you down once more!”

And when he swept it up, a thin, blue beam arced out towards the dragon’s head. Jeanne Alter screamed as one of the horns near her was severed, tumbling to the ground. Fafnir tossed his massive head, an angry roar bellowing out of his fanged maw that rumbled and shook the earth with his pain and fury.

“What are you doing, Fafnir?” Jeanne Alter screeched. “Kill him, you useless dragon! Kill him, now!”

Fafnir reared back onto its hind legs, and fire built up in its maw again as it prepared to breathe flames on us a second time. Siegfried planted his feet and lifted Balmung above his head in answer, and blue light spilled forth again, forming another massive pillar that reached up into the sky.

“Back!” I shouted at the others. “Get back!”

They didn’t argue, and we made a break for it as quickly as we could. There was only enough time to get maybe thirty or so feet from the action, and even that might not be enough to completely escape the spillover from those two attacks meeting again.

“FALL, EVIL DRAGON!”

The world shook as the dragon breathed. Siegfried swung his sword.

“BALMUNG!”

“Lord Chaldeas!” Mash screamed, and as the two attacks met, her rampart formed a protective barrier in front of us.

I shut my eyes against the blast of light as the clashing blows exploded outwards again, casting my vision through Siegfried’s eyes to watch for the right moment. Even he couldn’t see quite properly, not so close to the epicenter of the explosion, but he could see well enough that the contest between him and Fafnir was less a single, instant eruption and more a brief push and pull as they tried to overpower each other.

But they were equal, or close enough to equal that the difference didn’t matter. The potent magical energy between the two attacks mingled and ignited, and my magic circuits throbbed from the expenditure of so much power in such quick succession.

It wasn’t over yet. Right here, right now, as the backlash washed over them both, that was when they were vulnerable, both of them, and that meant —

“By the power of my Command Spell!” I shouted against the howling winds. “Siegfried! Kill Fafnir with your Noble Phantasm!”

The second of the red marks on the back of my hand flared and faded, and no sooner had the words left my mouth than did another pillar of blue light scythe through the glare.

“Yes, Master!”

And like a guillotine, it came down on the evil dragon it had slain once before.

“BALMUNG!”