

Chapter XVII: Dragon Witch

“Y-you!” Jeanne gasped, and for the first time since we’d met, she seemed not determined or merely angry, but utterly and completely furious. “How dare you! To claim that this...this barbarism, this cruelty...that *this* is the will of God!”

“Is it not?” Jeanne Alter smirked. “I no longer hear the voice of the Lord. To have been called back from beyond death and set upon this country, and yet God no longer speaks to me, is that not evidence itself that He no longer blesses this country?”

“What madness has possessed you to think such lunacy!” Jeanne snarled at her doppelganger.

“Madness?” Jeanne Alter sneered. “It’s this country that has gone mad, not me! It’s *you* who has gone mad! They betrayed me, they turned their backs on me, they spat upon me! I delivered them salvation in accordance with the Lord’s will, and now that they have fallen from His grace, I’ll destroy them in accordance with His wrath and His grief!”

Jeanne’s fist trembled, clenched so tight that her gauntlet creaked.

“I wasn’t certain before, but now I’m sure,” she said lowly. “You... There’s no way you’re me.”

Jeanne Alter laughed. “Shouldn’t that be my line, you country bumpkin? Any human should understand exactly what I’m saying! Any human being would feel the way I feel and come to the conclusions I have! If you can’t understand why I am the way I am, then you’re not a human, you’re just a phantom! A ghost, a fragment, an image of me cast in the ideal of a *saint* who piously protects France!”

She drew her sword with a long, metallic rasp.

“Yes, I know what you are, now! You’re the scum I scraped off the bottom of my boot! You’re nothing more than the residue of my discarded leftovers! You’re neither a Ruler Servant nor Jeanne d’Arc, you’re just the unnecessary bits of myself I got rid of!”

Jeanne’s shoulders shook. At first, I wasn’t sure if it was despair or anger, because just based on my experience with people, it was more tempting to agree with her other self. We were all ugly and horrible, deep down, selfish creatures that lashed out when hurt and jealously guarded the things we cared about, even at the expense of everyone else.

And then she opened her mouth. “No, it’s exactly the opposite! The woman known as Jeanne d’Arc... *I* had all of those feelings! I was angry, I was wrathful, I was spiteful and opinionated! That’s why...those were the things I had to cast away in order to save France!”

She brandished her flag.

“I had to be better than my human frailties!” she said, with such conviction in her voice that I thought I must at last be seeing the woman who had led the battle against the English. “I had to be pious and upright, that the people of France could take heart and know that we were not beaten! I had to become more than a simple farm girl who had never held a sword in her life and knew

nothing of the arts of war! I couldn't be moved by such petty things as my baser instincts and emotions!"

I'm ready, Master, Arash reported.

I made sure not to show it on my face. Not the slightest smile or the smallest smirk. *Wait until I say.*

Jeanne pointed the spiked tip at her counterpart. "You are all those things that I had to give up! You're nothing more than my lingering regrets and grudges, given form!"

Jeanne Alter snarled. "I'll show you who's real, you bitch! Berserk Lancer, Berserk Assassin!" The aristocrat and the dominatrix shifted, so that must've been them. "Rip her to pieces! Remove this ugly eyesore from my sight!"

The aristocrat's face broke out into a pearly grin, and the dominatrix's lips curled with a sadistic smirk. The one lifted his lance, and the other materialized a heavy, metal staff topped with a winged figure that might vaguely be called draconic.

There wasn't going to be a better moment than this.

Now! I commanded, and something *shifted* as Arash let loose his ten-thousand arrows. The air howled. The sky opened up and dropped down upon the world. All at once, they came, an endless torrent as inevitable and inexorable as the tide.

At one point, way back in my Skitter days, Alec had dragged the whole team into movie night and sat us all down to watch a cheesy action flick from Aleph, called *300*. As a dramatized recreation of the Battle of Thermopylae, I'd rated it a 4 for historical accuracy and privately rated it a 6 for all of the shirtless hunks in loincloths. There were some things that hot men in revealing clothes just couldn't fix.

As Arash's arrows rained down from above, at that moment, a line from that cheesy movie came back to me:

Our arrows will blot out the sun.

The special effects from the movie...actually looked a lot like what I was seeing, now. Ten-thousand arrows — that number seemed enormous, but you couldn't appreciate the scale of something like that until you saw it yourself. Until you saw them rise into the sky and come back down, black dots growing larger and larger as their sheer number cast a long shadow over everything beneath them.

Watching it, I was certain that even Cúchulainn wouldn't have been able to dodge them all, even with his *Protection from Arrows* skill. At a certain point, the utterly ridiculous quantity had to overwhelm even as celebrated a hero as that.

Even a towering monolith could be brought low if you swarmed her with enough numbers.

Jeanne Alter screamed, lifting a hand up as though to shield herself from the incoming barrage. Like that would have been enough. No, we didn't even need Arash's Noble Phantasm if he could just fire

off this many arrows like this. What enemy could muster a defense against what might as well have been an Anti-Army Noble Phantasm all on its own?

The woman in the fetish tabard, apparently.

She raised her staff towards the sky and the falling arrows, she opened her mouth, and she shouted one word towards the heavens.

“Tarasque!”

And above their heads, large enough to cover all of them at once, an enormous tortoise-like shell shimmered into existence, covered across the back with huge, wicked spikes that jutted out in every direction.

“Then we will fight in the shade,” Rika mumbled, and my face twisted into a complicated expression.

For once, I was glad I didn’t have time to unpack that, right then.

I knew before the arrows even hit that they wouldn’t break through. Not against the deployment of an *actual* Noble Phantasm. We’d just missed our best chance to end this whole thing in one swoop, and now we were on the backfoot. We’d lost the element of surprise.

And sure enough, even against so many coming down, the woman’s defense held, and Arash’s arrows bent, bounced, and broke against the hardened surface, skidded off the spikes, and sometimes just plain shattered into sparks of light.

On the bright side, that shell might have been big, but it was barely big enough to cover the enemy Servants, and it most certainly wasn’t big enough to protect the army of wyverns that hovered behind them, neatly lined up and waiting for orders. They had no Noble Phantasm defending them as Arash’s barrage came down, nothing but their scales, and that proved not enough. The arrows tore through wings, sank through flesh, pierced eye and scale alike, and under that rain, they fell, crashing to the ground with thunderous thuds drowned out only by the staccato of the arrows landing.

When it was over and the last arrow landed, Jeanne Alter turned a furious gaze towards the church and the bell tower, snarling out, “You!”

She lifted her sword as though to race forward and run him through, but I didn’t waste any time; just as the barrage petered out and ended, I lifted up my arms and my swarm arose, a single, droning mass of black and brown easily enough to outnumber Arashes’ arrows a thousand times over. They came up as a wall of chitin and wings, interposing themselves between our enemies and us, and I turned immediately and grabbed the twins by one wrist each.

“Come on!” I urged them.

“Wha — Senpai!” said Ritsuka.

“Wait!” Rika cried.

“Miss Taylor!”

“There’s no time!”

Arash, I thought at him, *retreat!*

A blur leapt out of the bell tower, and even as he did, a wash of flame cut into my swarm, frying some of my bugs, but it was no use, because my swarm was almost twice as large as it would have been in modern France. Just the complete lack of pesticides had swollen their ranks past even my best from back in my days as a cape.

The twins, once I got them started, picked up the idea and ran on their own, so I let them go and ordered, “To the forest! Go, go!”

Mash followed behind them, sparing me a worried glance as she passed, and I made to bring up the rear — but there was one person still left behind, and when I turned to look, she was standing there, staring up at the swarm and the gout of flame that were making quick work of it.

Fucking pyrokinetics. They’d been screwing with me ever since my first night out.

“Jeanne!” I shouted at her. “We need to get out of here!”

She looked at me, hesitated, looked back at her evil self, and then turned away and started to run.

Turning her back on her dark reflection, it must have tasted like the bitterest of defeats.

We raced towards the treeline in the distance, and between my pace and Jeanne keeping slightly behind me, we caught up with the twins and Mash in short order. We’d made it halfway there when something suddenly bulldozed its way through my swarm, swiftly making it towards us at a speed that could only make it one thing.

“Shit!”

Jeanne and I both spun around, and the sheer force of the collision as a black blur slammed into her sent me flying back and tumbling ass over teakettle. Through the sparser collection of bugs I’d kept closer by, I made out one of the enemy Servants, the aristocrat with the spear, even as I righted myself and pulled myself to my feet. Jeanne had managed to block him with the shaft of her flag.

Back in town, Jeanne Alter was quickly whittling down the swarm, and it was only a matter of time until she’d thinned it out enough to give pursuit. We couldn’t afford to sit here and fuck around with the aristocrat, not unless we could guarantee a kill.

Arash!

As though he’d predicted my thoughts, an arrow whistled over my head and towards the aristocrat, but he dodged it, leaning out of the way. Jeanne gave a shout and swung her flag, flinging him back a paltry dozen feet or so.

It was enough room for Arash to fire another arrow, and then another and another, not a barrage like before but a series of consecutive shots that forced the aristocrat to deflect them with the shaft of his own spear. I didn't know how long either of them could keep it up, but I had the nasty suspicion that Arash would run out of arrows and have to restock before the aristocrat slipped up and took one some place inconvenient.

So I told him, *Wait for an opening, a guaranteed hit. We don't need to kill him, we just need him injured enough for long enough for us to escape.*

Abruptly, the arrows stopped, and the aristocrat — Berserk Lancer, apparently — rushed forward to fill the space they'd opened and attacked Jeanne, jabbing at her with the business end of his lance. She scrambled to defend herself, and if it hadn't been obvious before, it was now, as I watched them, that whatever the reason behind her decreased performance, it was severely impacting her ability to fight. He was going to overwhelm her eventually, one way or another.

I palmed one of the runestones Cúchulainn had left us in Fuyuki and eyed the aristocrat, squinting at his stats and skills with the Master's Clairvoyance provided by Chaldea. *Magic Resistance B*. My lips twitched. It wasn't even worth trying.

“Miss Jeanne!” Mash's voice called out, and moving so fast that the bugs I had attached to her were ripped off completely, she leapt over my head, hefted her massive shield, and with a warcry, brought it down on the aristocrat.

The aristocrat — *Lancer*, because that was honestly easier to keep track of in my head — dodged out of the way, and the bottom of Mash's shield crashed into the spot he'd just occupied. Mash didn't wait for him to come back around. She lifted her shield back up and kicked off the ground, eating up the distance between them effortlessly.

She was moving better now than she had in Fuyuki, I noted as I watched her engage Lancer. A little more graceful, a little less clumsy, not as much in the way of wasted movement or overextending her attacks. Was it just a matter of her attuning to the Heroic Spirit that slumbered inside her, or was she actually learning how to fight that quickly?

Lancer struck back with his spear, equally as quick and twice as elegant. There was a smoothness to his attacks that Mash still lacked, although even so, he couldn't land a clean hit. Like Medusa before him, Mash's shield was just too sturdy a defense and too large to operate around.

I recognized the distraction for what it was. I didn't know if the twins planned to summon Mash back with a Command Spell, but if that was their plan, then it was actually fairly decent, since they had six Command Spells between them.

I seized the moment and ran back to Jeanne, wrapping one hand around the cold steel of her gauntlet. She turned to me, blonde hair whipping against her cheeks.

“Come on,” I said. “We need to get out of here.”

She looked back towards the fight.

“But Mash...”

“Will be fine,” I cut across her. “She’s buying time for us to escape. The twins can get her after we’ve left.”

She hesitated for a moment longer, and then nodded, and we raced off again, heading for the treeline. In the distance, the bugs I’d left on the twins hovered just out of plain sight, waiting for us in the forest.

“Have you gone soft, Dracul?”

Jeanne gasped, and she wrenched me backwards so suddenly that she almost pulled my arm out of its socket. A bare instant later, faster than I could blink, the dominatrix, Berserk Assassin, appeared in front of her. Jeanne’s flag and Assassin’s staff collided so swiftly and with such force it was as though they were magnetized.

“It’s not befitting such a monster,” Assassin purred, yellow eyes gleaming, “to go so easy on such a tiny waif of a girl like that.”

My brain skidded over the word like a record scratch.

Dracul.

Several bugs sought him out, tried to land, but he was moving too fast and his swings were too strong. Those that got close enough were either blown away by the force behind his blows or else died outright.

Was he...? If I squinted, maybe it fit. He certainly looked the part of the legend, rather than the man. I could imagine him stalking through the streets of London or welcoming Jonathon Harker into his home with an unsettling smile, gracious and yet so subtly wrong.

Dracul. Dracula. There weren’t many other Heroic Spirits, if any at all, who had such a connection to that name. Vlad the Impaler had planted the seed, and Bram Stoker had made it grow. There was no one else I could think of that would be referred to that way.

But for someone like that to have been summoned here, in the service of Jeanne Alter... No, I suppose that actually made a whole lot of sense, didn’t it? Who else would be so appropriate an attack dog than one of the most vicious warlords in history, so much so to have spawned the legend of bloodsucking monsters in popular media even hundreds of years later?

“Well, no matter,” said Assassin. “It means I have the two of you all to myself. Your blood, so young and virile, will only make me all the more beautiful.”

“You sicken me,” Jeanne spat.

Assassin leaned forward, chuckling low beneath her breath. “My dear, you say that as though I haven’t been hearing it all my life.”

Right. This nutjob needed to be handled, too.

I squinted at her with my Master’s Clairvoyance, and a surge of triumph jolted through my gut.

No Magic Resistance for you, bitch, I thought viciously.

One of Cúchulainn's runestones found its way into my hand. In my head, the image of a silk thread snapping resounded, and my magic circuits whirred into activity.

"Jeanne," I shouted as I wound back my arm, "close your eyes!"

It said something about her that she trusted me enough to listen, turning her face away from Assassin, as I flung the runestone between them like a grenade. I squeezed my eyes shut and threw my arm over them to protect them.

"Anfang!"

Assassin screeched as the runestone flashed with light that was, for a short moment, brighter than the sun, reeling back as she clawed at her face.

Another Master might have let her go. An inexperienced Master might have prioritized escaping over the elimination of an enemy combatant. They weren't necessarily the wrong choices, and if we'd just had Mash and Jeanne, I would've run for all I was worth while I had the chance.

Not here. Not now.

Arash, take her down!

A bevy of arrows loosed from the treeline, and Assassin gasped as they sank into her back with several, meaty thuds. One, two, three, four — an even dozen in total, all of them center mass, all of them targeting something vital and vitally important.

I didn't need the spurt of blood that gushed from her mouth to know that at least one of those was a killshot.

"Y-you..." Assassin rasped breathlessly as red trickled down her lips.

Whatever she'd been about to say was lost. One, final arrow came from the trees, and it scythed through Assassin's neck, bursting through her throat just under her chin. The metal tip glinted.

It was becoming more and more obvious that I'd underestimated Arash pretty badly. He wasn't a dragonslayer, that was true. He wasn't a frontline fighter who could take on the enemy Servants while Mash defended his flanks. He couldn't effortlessly mow down every dragon, every wyvern, that we came across.

But thinking that any of those things made him useless was absolutely wrong, and as someone who had wielded something as weak as bugs effectively enough to kill the woman everyone thought was unkillable, I should have known better.

Assassin collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, and her body vanished before she even hit the ground, disappearing into motes of blue light. It felt a little anticlimactic to have defeated one of the enemy's Servants that quickly in the first encounter, but I wasn't going to complain that we'd eliminated one of the threats arrayed against us.

I rolled back to my feet and took off again for the trees. “Go!”

Jeanne startled, but she followed my lead without hesitation. “Y-yes!”

Back in town, my swarm was starting to thin. Jeanne Alter was really the only one who could kill them with any speed, but that just meant she was killing them too quickly. My swarm was massive, bigger than it had ever been, yes, but that didn’t make the bugs in it any less vulnerable to fire or extreme heat.

As the treeline loomed ahead, I turned my attention back towards Mash and Lancer to find nothing had really changed. We were running out of time for her to disengage, and Lancer didn’t look like he had any intention of letting her take a breath long enough to escape.

There were a couple of different ways... But if we could avoid spending any Command Spells if we didn’t have to, that would be better. And the way Assassin had been killed gave me a few ideas.

Arash, I sent his way, are you ready?

What did you have in mind, Master? Arash asked back.

That tight spacing you did against Assassin — if you had a clean shot, could you do the same thing to Lancer?

I could almost imagine the smirk curling at the corner of his mouth. *If you can get me that clean shot, Master, I can handle the rest.*

Feet pounding the ground, I pivoted on my heel, turned around, and as I gathered as big a swarm as I could from the surrounding grass, I opened my mouth and shouted, “Mash, get out of the way!”

Mash blocked Lancer’s next blow, and then she kicked off the ground and threw herself to the side. Lancer made to follow and chase after her, but at the same moment, a cloud of harmless bugs buzzed up and in his face, and he let out a startled yell, jerking back.

Another dozen arrows flew out of the trees, and Dracul was in no shape to avoid them. They each landed, twelve perfect shots that hit center mass on his chest, just like they had Assassin. Killshots, a number of them. Debilitating even for those that weren’t.

And without even pausing, Lancer reached down and yanked them all out, one by one, brackish blood spurting out from each wound. My eyebrows rose towards my hairline and my mouth dropped open.

Furiously, I checked his stats again, and something dreadful squirmed in my gut as my mind landed on one of his skills, one that made fighting him a lot more problematic than I’d been expecting.

Battle Continuation A. The ability to take even terrible wounds and keep fighting. To take an arrow to the heart, to the stomach, to the lung, and still advance like nothing had happened.

Then, before my eyes, the blood leaking from Dracul’s wounds rose into the air and lashed out in tendrils, like tentacles, spearing through my bugs with unerring accuracy until I felt every single one of them slip from my control. Dead.

I could only watch as the bugs he'd speared melted into slurry and got absorbed into the tendrils of blood, and as they sank back inside of his body, disappearing into his wounds that sealed up behind them, two more unknowns cleared up in the mind's eye of my Master's Clairvoyance.

Vampirism A. Kazikli Bey.

The ability to recover vitality and energy by sucking others' blood, and the Noble Phantasm of Vlad III, twisted by the legend of Dracula. Combined with his Battle Continuation, the only way to kill him would be to obliterate him all at once, to deal so much damage in a single attack that there was no way for him to recover.

"Mash, get out of there!" I screamed.

It was like facing an Endbringer. The sheer, destructive power wasn't on the same level, and the raw durability wasn't anywhere close. But every wound he inflicted and every kill he made would rejuvenate him, and he could survive and recover from just about anything that didn't kill him outright. And if he came in range, he could pierce through our defenses with a Noble Phantasm that turned his entire body into a weapon, from his hair to his bones to the meanest drop of blood.

It wasn't the best comparison. Maybe Alabaster was a better one, in some ways, and Crawler in others, but it was the one my brain made.

Mash hesitated for the barest fraction of a second, and then she started to make her retreat. I didn't give Dracul any chance to follow her — I pulled every bug I could from the surrounding area, not just from the grass this time, but from the trees and the bushes and their boltholes in the ground, regardless of what they were or what use they could be, regardless of how few there were, and I set them upon him, knowing already that it was pointless at best and feeding him at worst.

There wasn't anything else to do. Something like that, we couldn't hope to beat him, right now.

"Arash, covering fire!"

Arrows shot forth from the treeline with perfect accuracy, but Dracul wasn't bothered by them in the least. With lazy swings, he knocked them from the air, or else he stepped to the side or back, avoiding them entirely. I watched him, unblinking, the whole way, until Mash made it past the treeline and into the cover of the foliage. Only then did I turn away and follow.

The instant we'd all made it, I pulled the tattered remnants of the swarm occupying Jeanne Alter and her other three Servants away from distraction duty and spread them out, blanketing the entire field we'd just crossed and as much of the town that was still within reach in a writhing, droning mass of chitin. It wasn't as thick a cloud as I would have liked it to be, but it was still thick enough that those in the group without some sort of extrasensory ability wouldn't be able to track us as we fled.

The twins and Jeanne were waiting for us, pale-faced and nervous.

"Senpai," Rika greeted me.

"We need to get out of here," I said without preamble. Arash landed beside me almost as though to punctuate that statement.

“That wave of bugs, I assume that was your doing?” Jeanne asked. It sounded more like an accusation.

I still hadn’t figured out how I was going to explain that. A part of me wondered why I even *had* to, like being able to control bugs was somehow a strange and unusual magic that defied all orthodoxy. I’d seen some pretty ridiculous powers in my career as a cape, but just what little I knew of magecraft was enough that I was perfectly aware of exactly how bullshit *that* could get, too.

They could build a wish-granting perpetual motion engine. I controlled *bugs*, why was *I* the weird one?

“Not now,” I said instead. “That won’t keep them busy for too long, and we need to be *gone* when they get past it. Jeanne, you said Lyon was the next place we should go?”

“Yes,” she answered immediately, although the set of her brow told me we weren’t done with my bugs, just yet. “There are other villages between here and there that we could stop at, if we don’t take a straight route there, but it should be our next destination.”

I remembered that we’d originally been discussing it in terms of investigating her evil self and figuring out motives for this destruction, but that wasn’t exactly necessary anymore, was it? Jeanne Alter had told us exactly what she was doing and why. Putting more into investigating the rhymes and reasons was pointless.

But our best lead on our potential dragonslayer was simply “down south.” A major population center like Lyon was as good a place to start looking for that as any other. Better, even, because it should get travelers from across the region instead of just localized tradesmen.

I nodded. “Then we’ll go there. Mash,” I turned to her, “lead the way.”

She hesitated and turned to the twins, but Ritsuka gave her a nod, and her expression firmed.

“Please follow me, everyone,” she said, and then she turned and started off deeper into the woods, fast enough to be called a speedy retreat but still slow enough for us mere humans to keep up.

Behind us, as we put distance between us and La Charité, my swarm spread out and dispersed, forming vague blobs big enough to contain all of us that made off in every other direction but ours. Whether that worked or not, either way, it didn’t look like Jeanne Alter and her Servants intended to chase us down.

The smirk on Dracul’s face as he watched us run away was going to stay with me the whole night through.