

Chapter XIX: Der Dracheblutighet

Our footsteps echoed through the hallways as we raced through the castle. We didn't waste time on talking and debating, on worrying about our friends and comrades as they faced off against Saint Martha and her Tarasque, we just focused entirely on the objective in front of us. Single-minded.

For a wild second, I wondered if the only reason why Jeanne herself hadn't been the one I summoned was because she was already there.

But that sort of speculation was a pointless distraction. I didn't have time to deal with what-ifs and maybes, so I let that thought be swept away, an idle curiosity.

And while I ran, my swarm surged out ahead of us, beneath us, behind us, part of it crawling through the castle in search of our mystery Servant while the other half rose up to distract Saint Martha. Any support I could give Mash and the twins had to be worth something.

No. Saint Martha didn't even flinch as a veritable biblical plague closed in upon her — if she would even have had to worry to begin with, because my utterly mundane “familiar” wouldn't even be able to bite her — she just tapped the shell of her dragon with the butt of her staff. The Tarasque reared its head back, throat bulging, and spat out a gout of flame like some sort of biological flamethrower, swinging its neck back and forth wildly.

Instantly, large swaths of my swarm disappeared as the dragon's breath flash-fried them. My initial attack run had failed, but I hadn't really expected it to succeed to begin with. If a wyvern's breath was so densely magical that my bugs popped just from proximity to its maw, then it stood to reason that the real deal, an “actual” dragon like the Tarasque, would kill them just as easily and just as effortlessly.

But the fact it went through the effort to kill them more expediently told me that Martha didn't have the patience to play around and didn't have some sort of extrasensory skill that would let her fight around my swarm.

I couldn't sting her, I couldn't bite her, and if I tried to weave ropes of silk thread, chances were she wouldn't even be inconvenienced by them. But I *could* throw her off course for at least a little while, and every second I bought with my bugs was a second Mash didn't have to fight and an extra second I had to find and reach the Servant in the dungeons.

“This way!” I called to Jeanne, and I made a sharp turn as I found the quickest route to the basement.

Outside, my swarm pulled back, and instead of swooping in to attack, they formed as dense, tall, and wide a wall as I could manage between Saint Martha and Mash, a screen of chitin that hid Mash from view. I knew it wouldn't last long.

Saint Martha proved me right. She tapped the butt of her staff against her dragon's shell again, and the Tarasque reared its head back again and let loose another stream of fire. It burned a hole through my swarm, and those that weren't immediately fried by the flames dropped as the heat cooked them inside their carapaces.

Saint Martha wasted no time; she leapt off of her dragon and through the gap it had made. I collapsed my swarm in on her, but she bulldozed right through it like it wasn't there, disrupting it in her wake with the speed of her dash.

As Jeanne and I raced down the stairs, Mash took Saint Martha's blow head on with her shield, grunting and bracing herself with her back foot. Saint Martha wasn't deterred, and she attacked again with a blazing fast series of blows from her staff that rang as they smashed against Mash's shield. She moved so quickly that I'd already lost count of them by the time my swarm had recovered enough to chase after her.

Saint Martha stayed a step ahead of me and flung herself backwards in a leap that took her over the bulk of my bugs, and she landed back on the shell of her dragon. A tap from her staff had it spitting out another burst of flame that consumed yet more of my swarm.

I was already down to about a third of what I'd started with.

But up ahead, the rest of my swarm finally found something, a figure in the shape of a tall, broad-shouldered man who was lying in a cell. He was propped up against a wall, and in one hand, he clutched the hilt of a sword that seemed, at least to my bugs, absolutely massive.

"I found him!" I told Jeanne.

She smiled radiantly and opened her mouth.

"Have you?"

"Taylor!" Jeanne shouted, and she pushed me to the side so hard that when I slammed into the brick wall, I blacked out.

I came to on the floor, sprawled out where I'd fallen with my glasses askew. Through the lenses, I saw a tall, spindly figure with long, dark hair dressed in a ragged, black cape. His hands ended in claws like knives, and what little I saw of his skin was pale and sallow, because the half of his face I could see clearly was covered in a bone white mask.

Jeanne struggled to hold him off, keeping him at bay with the shaft of her flag. Slowly, the tips of his claws inched closer to her face.

"How naive, how naive," the new Servant rasped, because he couldn't be anything else. "To think you would come here, and not realize that the dragonslayer you seek would be guarded by another Servant."

"Taylor!" Jeanne shouted at me. "Go! Find the other Servant! I'll — urk! I'll hold him off!"

"That simply won't do," said the new Servant. "The Dragon Witch has left me in charge of this town and the hero who once protected it. You won't reach him. You mustn't be allowed to reach him."

I stumbled to my feet, the world swaying around me for a moment, and I spared only a single glance back at Jeanne.

But there was simply nothing I could do for her, just then, and the dragonslayer was only down the hall. Even if it left a bad taste in my mouth to turn my back on another comrade again, the best thing I could do just then was to make contact with the reinforcements who could turn the tide of this battle.

After all, he might have been lying, but if he wasn't? This new Servant had just confirmed that the other one down here was exactly who we were looking for. Sigurd, Siegfried, Saint George — right then, I wasn't picky. Any one of them would be useful.

I took off into a dead sprint. Behind me, I heard Jeanne grunt and then shout out, "I won't let you past!"

Alone now, I raced towards my target, even as I tried to keep track of two other battles at the same time. It was getting harder up above, because Saint Martha and Tarasque kept thinning out my swarm, but Mash was holding on, so if she could just keep it up for a little bit longer, then it would all be worth it.

I made a sharp turn, and my boots slid along the floor as I threw myself into it without slowing down. The dragonslayer was being kept in —

I came to a stop in front of the fifth cell down, and there, lying against the wall just as I'd seen him with my bugs, was a tall, broad-shouldered man. He was sparsely armored with long, shaggy gray hair, but the most striking thing about him was the luminescent green marking splashed across his chest that curved up his neck and over one of his cheeks.

And just like I'd seen, he held tight to a massive greatsword with one hand.

In different circumstances, I might have taken a moment to admire the sharply chiseled muscles shown off by the open front of his bodysuit, but right then and there, I wasted no time and ripped my knife out of its holster. A flick of a switch turned it on, and with a savage jab, I cut right through the lock on the cell door.

It was so pathetically weak that I was surprised it managed to hold him.

Finally, as I stood in the doorway, he looked up and blinked at me. "You're not the Dragon Witch."

"No," I confirmed. "I'm with an organization called Chaldea. We're here to stop her."

"I see. So there are still people who would fight back against her."

"It's a little more complicated than that." The cell door swung open with a metallic squeal. "We came here to get you. We need your help to beat her."

"Ah," he mumbled. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I won't be of much use to you like this. You've come to rescue me for nothing."

My brow furrowed. Was he speaking generally, or was there something in specific wrong?

Time, time, not enough time to sit here and think about it. Jeanne was still holding off the other Servant, the man in the tattered cloak, and my thinning swarm was providing all the sparser a cover for the twins and Mash up above. Noble Phantasms hadn't been pulled out again, yet, but Saint Martha didn't seem to be pulling any punches otherwise.

Or maybe she was. Maybe this was her fighting her orders from Jeanne Alter as much as she could. Without a reference point, I had no way of telling exactly how strong, fast, and brutal she was normally, so for all I knew, she was holding back to give us the chance to beat her before she did anything else she couldn't stomach.

"You don't have a Master, right?" I thrust my hand forward, showing off the bright red of my Command Spells. "If you need magical energy, I can help you with that. Forge a contract."

He blinked up at me again, nonplussed, and then his lips curled into a rueful smile.

"I'm afraid that's not it at all."

He reached down with one gauntleted hand and pulled the fabric of his bodysuit to one side, revealing —

"Holy fuck."

It wasn't the worst wound I'd ever seen. It wasn't even the worst wound I'd ever suffered myself. I'd been cut in half before, after all. Had my entire lower body disintegrated and my entrails flopping all over the ocean. As far as "things that happened to me, and I survived" went, that one in particular was hard to top.

But the ugly, ragged wound ripped into his chest just under the line of his ribs was raw and discolored, sickly and infected. I'd never realized Servants even *could* get infected wounds. The assumption had always been that they were completely impervious to mundane afflictions like gangrene and bacterial infections.

That was part of the point. Only Mystery could defeat Mystery. Regular germs didn't have the *oomph* to so much as inconvenience a Servant.

"My last encounter with the Dragon Witch's minions left me with this injury," the swordsman explained. "Normally, a wound like this would have been healed already. My constitution being what it is, it would've been gone in a matter of minutes. The blessing bestowed upon me by the evil dragon's blood is simply too potent."

He tucked the injury away behind the fabric of his bodysuit. Now that I knew it was there, I couldn't believe I had somehow missed the gigantic splotch of blood that soaked through the cloth.

"This curse, however, persists stubbornly," he said. "I'm sorry. I would like nothing more than to help you, but in this state, I'm of no use to you at all."

My mind raced.

If he had Battle Continuation... But if he had Battle Continuation, even a wound like that shouldn't have held him back. He would be able to stand up and keep fighting until someone managed a killing blow.

That was the question, though. Did I need him to fight? Or did I need him to take advantage of a single weak spot, a fleeting moment of vulnerability? As a dragonslayer wielding a weapon for slaying dragons, did anything else matter as long as he could kill the dragon in a single blow?

Without Tarasque, Saint Martha could be hemmed in, trapped, and taken out by Arash, Mash, and Jeanne. As long as she had Tarasque, though, she could hide behind its shell and be protected from any attack that might otherwise kill her. Just like she had in La Charité, where her Tarasque had stopped us from killing Jeanne Alter's whole retinue in one go.

"Can you at least use your Noble Phantasm?" I asked. "If you had the magical energy?"

He was silent for a long moment, considering me. I had to keep myself from fidgeting and demanding an answer immediately.

"Yes," he said at last. "I should be able to use my Noble Phantasm at least once. I'm sorry, I can't guarantee consecutive uses."

I nodded. Nothing about this was ideal, but as long as we hit the right target at the right time, I didn't need him to fire it off more than once.

"Then, there's just one last thing I want to confirm. Your True Name, it's —"

"Saber class Servant, Siegfried," he answered.

A thrill of triumph jolted through my belly. So, I was right. The Servant in Lyon was a dragonslayer, and his identity was Siegfried. That must have been the reason my catalyst failed when I summoned Arash, because Siegfried was already here, and therefore he wasn't available to be summoned a second time.

Just as importantly, this would mean we now had the dragon-slaying hero we had been in desperate need of since we got here. For once, for *once*, things weren't going to hell in a handbasket while I struggled to find whatever I could to pull out a win, and we'd been handed a secret weapon long before things had spiraled too far.

I thrust my hand down, as though to help him to his feet.

"Then, let this be our oath," I told him. "Thy body shall rest under my dominion —"

He reached out, letting go of his enormous sword long enough to wrap his massive, gauntlet-covered hand around mine. The metal was cool to the touch, and he was shockingly gentle. "And thy fate shall rest in my blade, Master."

A brief flash of light. Pain lanced up my arm like fire, surging through my Magic Circuits, and my Command Spells throbbed as another contract was established. Siegfried, Servant Saber, was now

my Servant, just like Arash. When I looked at him through my Master's Clairvoyance, his True Name, his class, and his Noble Phantasm all stood out, proud and prominent.

Romani was probably going to be mad that I did this without consulting him, first, but there wasn't any time to get into an argument with him about this.

Slowly, Siegfried leveraged himself up and stood, stooped over his wound. He took one step and stumbled, his free hand twitching as though to grab at the injury, but righted himself without me having to swoop in and help him. A good thing, too, because I wasn't sure he wouldn't drag us both to the floor decked out in as many metal plates as he was. Even without a full suit, they were big enough and thick enough that they couldn't be light to a normal human.

"There's another Servant out in the hallway," I began.

"The Phantom," Siegfried mumbled. "Yes, he's been guarding me since the city was ransacked."

Phantom? Was that a name or some kind of title? A discussion for later, when we weren't pressed for time.

"The real Jeanne d'Arc was summoned to fight her evil counterpart," I summarized. "She's holding him off as best she can, right now. I don't need you to fight him, but if I give you an opening, can you kill him?"

Siegfried eyed me shrewdly.

"An opening?"

I palmed one of Cúchulainn's runestones. I was down to a meager three, and if and until we managed to summon him back to Chaldea, that was it. My rune magecraft wasn't anywhere near good enough to make replacements.

"I'm going to distract him," I said simply. "You'll have only a second or two at most. Are you up for it?"

He inclined his head. "I'll have to be."

We made our way back down the hallway at a brisk walk. Even as tall as I was, Siegfried still had what had to be almost half a foot on me, with a stride to match, so despite his pace being stiff and slow for a Servant, he was still keeping up effortlessly.

I wanted to run. My blood was thundering in my veins, and the impulse to take off at full speed was almost unbearable, but with my new Servant as injured as he was, we had to go at his speed. Instead, I used the time it was taking us to lay out the plan to as many people as I could.

Arash, I projected my thoughts his way, I've found the Servant we were looking for. True Name: Siegfried, from the Nibelungenlied. He's injured badly enough that he won't be able to fight, but he'll be able to at least take out Saint Martha and the Tarasque with his Noble Phantasm.

Got it, Arash answered. I'll keep things in hand while you guys make your way out of the castle. Hurry, though, Master. I'm not sure how much longer Martha is going to "test" us.

As fast as we can, I confirmed, and then I pushed down the thread to Siegfried. I have a runestone that I'm going to throw at Phantom. It'll let off a bright flash of light, so when I tell Jeanne to shield her eyes, that's your cue.

Understood, Master.

As we came to the corner, I reached out with my bugs to get a sense of the fighting I could hear down the hall. Even diminished as she was, Jeanne was still moving fast enough that it was hard to keep anything on her at all, and Phantom was just as bad. It was still enough that I could grasp the basic layout of the action and the area around it.

Nothing much had changed in the brief couple of minutes it had taken me to get Siegfried. Jeanne still held on, but that was likely only because the corridor was straight and narrow, which limited angles of attack, and Phantom liked to come at her with quick, obvious strikes before backing away to try again.

Those were probably the only things saving her. I wasn't sure what Heroic Spirit Phantom was supposed to be, because I couldn't recall any legends about great figures who wore half a face mask, but even I could tell that he wasn't really the fighting type. The way he attacked was befitting of his class — like an ambush predator, a stalker, an assassin, used to finishing the target off before they could fight back, and as a result, not that good in a straight fight.

Wait.

An assassin, an ambush predator, a *stalker*, called *Phantom*, who wore a white mask over half of his face and dressed in the tattered finery of an aristocrat. Could it really be the *Phantom of the Opera*? Really? A character from a book qualified as a Heroic Spirit?

Later. No time to give that too much thought.

Leaping out from the corner, I sprinted down the hallway as Siegfried hobbled after me. The runestone grew hot in my hand as magical energy ran through it.

My arm cocked back. "Jeanne, eyes!"

And I threw the runestone unerringly towards Phantom, or more accurately, towards the fly that was buzzing in circles directly behind him.

Jeanne glanced over her shoulder at me, but she didn't hesitate to follow my command and squeezed her eyes shut as she flung herself to the side. Phantom leapt back warily, but it didn't matter, because the point hadn't been to hit him at all in the first place.

I squeezed my own eyes shut.

"Anfang!"

Phantom gave a startled shout as a bright light flashed, bright enough I could see it through my eyelids again, and a swift wind rushed past me, whipping my hair about. The bug I'd attached to Siegfried's back was ripped off from the speed.

The squelch of metal sinking into flesh was quiet, but the way it pierced the hallway, it might as well have been thunder. Phantom gasped, and there was an unholy shriek as metal ground against metal, and another squelch as Siegfried's massive sword was drawn from out of Phantom's body. Then, I heard the thump of someone hitting the floor.

My eyes squinted open just in time for me to see Phantom disappear into motes of light that flickered out like fireflies, and Siegfried panted, using the wall to prop himself up as Balmung drooped in his grip.

Jeanne pulled herself to her feet as I came up to join them, her brow furrowed, and Siegfried turned just far enough to see me out of the corner of his eyes.

"Enemy Servant eliminated, Master," he reported, labored.

I nodded. "Good job."

"You're hurt," Jeanne noted.

"A cursed wound," Siegfried explained shortly. "There's nothing to be done. I'll deal with it."

Jeanne reached for his side, where the wound was, and hesitated for a moment.

"May I?"

Siegfried looked at her curiously, but shifted to provide her better access. Immediately, Jeanne pulled his bodysuit to the side, and she hissed when her hand found the nasty wound. Siegfried barely even flinched as she probed it.

"My evil self did this," she muttered, somewhere between disgust and scorn. A gusty sigh left her mouth. "I'm sorry, but I can't heal it completely. In my current state, she's just too strong. I can at least ease it a little."

"A little will be more than enough," Siegfried said.

Jeanne nodded, and she pressed her hand to the mauled flesh, muttering something under her breath. It sounded like a prayer. Her hands glowed, and before my eyes, the nasty wound started to close and fill in, some of the discoloration fading.

But only some. When she was done and pulled away, it looked better than before, but it was still bad enough that a human being would be dead or dying, not standing straighter the way Siegfried did.

"Thank you," he said.

Jeanne returned it with a wan smile. "I only wish I could have done more."

“Are you still good to use your Noble Phantasm?” I asked Siegfried.

He nodded, sure and confident. “At least once, Master.”

“Then we need to get back,” said Jeanne, taking the words out of my mouth. “Mash and the others need our help.”

Jeanne and I started back the way we came, with Siegfried bringing up the rear at a brisk walk. His gait was smoother and easier than before, but he still wasn’t back up to full health. His wound still bothered him, made him flinch every few steps.

I didn’t know how we were going to do it, but we were going to have to find a way to break that curse.

As we made our way back out of the castle, I kept track of the fight happening above with my bugs, as much as I could with my swarm getting cut down with every breath Tarasque took. Mash was still holding her own, but she was visibly starting to struggle, and Saint Martha was still going strong. The twins, having some sense, had backed further away from the line of fire, and from his perch, Arash forced Saint Martha to ease up by peppering her with arrows that forced her to disengage or else become a pin cushion.

It was a stalemate, but only because no one had pulled out a Noble Phantasm yet.

If Saint Martha knew who had been locked in this dungeon, and I had plenty of reason to believe that she did, given what she’d said at the start of the fight, then it was entirely possible that would change the instant she saw Siegfried. No, it was even likely. Siegfried was the only Servant on our side who could definitely defeat her in one blow.

That would be our opening, then. A moment where both Tarasque and Saint Martha would be vulnerable. The perfect moment to finish them off.

When we stepped out into the sunlight, it felt like we had been down in the dungeon for days, and we rushed for the gate as quickly as we were able. On the other side was devastation, the husks of the buildings that had been there before now flattened by the fighting. From the hill the castle sat on, I had a clear view of everything that had been crushed.

I took in a deep breath.

Get ready, I told Siegfried as he came up behind me. He jolted to a stop, like he’d been about to jump into the fray until I’d said something.

“Mash!” I shouted at the top of my lungs. “Pull back! Ritsuka, Rika, get to the castle! Arash, cover them!”

To Arash, I added silently, *Force her back, but give her just enough room to breathe.*

Understood.

The twins and Mash hesitated for only a second or two, then moved to follow my orders. Mash never turned her back to Saint Martha, holding her shield up as she tried to gain distance. The twins just turned and ran towards me as fast as their legs would carry them.

Saint Martha herself looked up at my voice, and even from that distance, I could see her eyes widen as she caught sight of Siegfried beside me — and then a series of arrows from Arash forced her to retreat behind her dragon, where they broke upon its shell.

I knew my plan was working when the dragon curled up into its shell like a turtle, pulling all of its limbs in. The instant Arash's arrows stopped coming, Saint Martha leapt up behind it and swung the cross-shaped section of her staff like a hockey stick, with the Tarasque as the puck.

“TARASQUE!”

The dragon flew off of the ground with way more speed and force than she could possibly have imparted on her own, spinning as lightning crackled along its shell and goutts of flame burst out from the openings. With that much weight and speed behind it, it would hit like a rocket fired from a jet plane.

But even before her staff had hit the beast, I was already giving another set of orders.

“Mash!”

“Use your Noble Phantasm!” Ritsuka shouted, picking up on my plan.

Mash, halfway to us, planted her shield, and like she was issuing a challenge to the world, cried out, “LORD CHALDEAS!”

The barrier formed in front of her, morphing and twisting into a bricked, castle wall, translucent but solid. Tarasque slammed into it like a ballistic missile, and its spinning shell ground against the brickwork like a drill, trying to bore its way through to reach her, to smite her, to kill all of us in one go.

But the castle wall held. The Tarasque hung, suspended in the air by its own momentum for a handful of seconds, and then rebounded, bouncing back and sliding on the bottom of its shell in the direction it had come from as its spin slowed down. The castle wall faded out of existence.

There wasn't going to be a better opening.

Saber —

“Now!”

Siegfried leapt into the air with a grunt, crossing the distance in an instant to land roughly in front of Mash. The wind of his passing whipped my hair about, and Rika let out a startled yelp as her own hair fluttered.

He stood and took grip of his sword with both hands, lifting the blade above his head. The jewel in the hilt glowed, and suddenly, a burst of energy surged up the blade, extending into a massive pillar of pale, blue light that reached up to the clouds above.

My stomach flip-flopped. For an instant, I was reminded of King Arthur and her Excalibur, the terrible beam of energy that had almost killed us all.

Siegfried stepped back on one foot, bracing himself. The pillar of light moved like it was nothing more than an extension of his blade.

“TARASQUE!” Marth screamed.

The sword came down.

“BALMUNG!”

The pillar of light descended like a guillotine, carving a path of destruction through everything in its way. It slammed into the ground and detonated, surging out in a wave and scouring the already destroyed city clean. Everything it touched was seared away and disappeared beneath the torrent of its might, and even Saint Martha and her Tarasque were swallowed up the same as everything else.

The blast lasted an eternity, but also only an instant. Steam and smoke billowed out in its wake, and Siegfried stumbled back, clutching at his wounded side and panting as though he’d run a marathon. My Magic Circuits throbbed from the sheer amount of magical energy that had been channeled through them to support that single blow.

The billowing smoke eventually spread out and dissipated, curling in tufts up into the sky, and when it was gone, there was no sign anymore of the great dragon that we had struggled against. The Tarasque was no more.

But Saint Martha remained, if only just. She was still alive, for whatever that word meant to a Servant, but she hadn’t come out of Balmung’s attack unscathed.

Both of her arms were burned almost entirely black, along with a large portion of the left side of her face, like she had turned her head away and tried to shield herself with her arms. Her white tabard was ripped and torn and barely covered her modesty, not that it had been particularly conservative before, and her staff had disappeared somewhere, gone. Various other wounds mottled the front of her body, and any normal human would have been writhing on the ground in agony.

Saint Martha didn’t. She dropped her arms, scowled at us, and settled into a stance reminiscent of a boxer, leading with one of her mangled hands. Her legs bunched, tensed, as Mash and Siegfried both prepared to meet her, and —

She stopped, face slack, as an arrow sprouted from the left side of her chest, buried in her flesh almost up to the fletching. A spurt of blood splattered across the ground behind her, and more leaked from the wound down her front.

I didn't need to be Panacea to know that was a killshot.

Saint Martha collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, falling to her knees as her arms dropped down, an expression of surprise on her face. For a moment, she swayed like that, her outline growing fuzzy and indistinct, like static on an old tv, and then she fell forward. The instant her face hit the ground, her entire body vanished in a cloud of golden sparks that flickered and died.

But as she fell, I could have sworn I saw her smile.