

## Chapter XVI: Crest of Blood

Chaldea's beds were fairly basic and simple, but modern mattresses had spoiled me for bedding, because when I woke up in the attached quarters of La Charité's Notre Dame, it was on a far less comfortable cot that could barely own the name. My lower back and neck were both sore as I rolled off of it, and my shoulder throbbed whenever I moved it the wrong way.

It was the worst sleep I'd ever had, and I wasn't sure we hadn't been better off camping in the woods. Maybe I shouldn't have expected much from what amounted to the guest quarters in a church run by a small group of monks in a tiny garrison in Medieval France, but I'd made too many comparisons to the cots we'd slept on in that summer camp what seemed now like an eternity ago.

The twins didn't look any better off when I found them. In fact, they didn't look like they'd gotten any sleep at all.

"I'm guessing your beds weren't very comfortable, either."

They glanced at me from their seats at the table, bleary-eyed and miserable, and mumbled a greeting my way. Mash, next to them, seemed a little better off, but not by much. Arash, of course, as a Servant, didn't need to sleep at all, and so he looked no worse than he had at the moment of his summoning.

I envied him for that. Times like this made being a Noctis cape sound absolutely wonderful.

"Good morning!" Jeanne said brightly as she came over. Her arms were laden with a large, wooden tray piled with what might generously be called food. She set it on the table with a hefty thud.

I raised one eyebrow. "Morning."

Jeanne, on the other hand, looked positively at home. Which made some sense, I supposed, because she must have spent a not insignificant amount of time under the care of one monastic order or another both before and during her campaign.

"The monks didn't think it was appropriate to mingle, so we've been left to our own devices, I'm afraid," she reported apologetically.

"That's fine."

I glanced down at the platter she'd prepared. Unsurprisingly, it didn't look like anything special or well-prepared, and it wasn't a restaurant quality spread, but the scrambled eggs were familiar and the porridge, although I hadn't ever had any myself, wasn't all that out there, either. But I could already tell, just from the smell, that they were going to be bland and kind of tasteless.

That was probably about what I should have expected on a pauper's penny. Spices would have been luxuries in this time period, a commodity whose trade would easily make you rich. I wasn't sure trade with India and China, where a lot of them had originally come from, was even all that common, yet. Either way, cinnamon and salt were not something you'd find in a monk's kitchen.

There was nothing to be done, and it would at least be more flavorful than ration bars, so I sat down, took one of the heavy, wooden bowls, and started to eat. Fortunately, at least, we had modern steel utensils, because my other options weren't particularly exciting.

The others, like they'd been waiting for me to give the okay, grabbed their own breakfast and dug in. Rika and Ritsuka were still sluggish, but weren't missing their mouths or anything, at least.

Between bites, I turned back to Jeanne. "Were you recognized?"

Nervously, she patted her black hair, cropped short just below her shoulders. As much as she might have liked it, that ridiculous braid was just too distinctive, so it was the first thing we'd had to change to disguise her.

"No, it seems like your disguise did the trick," she admitted. "I'm not sure we even had to worry. I don't think Perrinet-Gressard ever even saw my face, certainly not close enough to recognize me at a glance."

For context: Perrinet-Gressard was the man who had held La Charité when Jeanne had put it under siege in 1429 on the orders of King Charles VII. Owing to a number of factors, including some apparently very persistent inclement weather, he'd managed to outlast Jeanne and her forces until they had no choice but to lift the siege and retreat.

Naturally, it was something of a sore point for her, but the last thing we needed was him realizing she was right there under his nose and raising a stink.

"He's only one man, and it doesn't have to be him to make things difficult. As long as one person can point you out from the Siege, we could get in a lot of trouble," I told her. "Besides. Would you have preferred skulking around or staying behind while we came here on our own?"

She sighed. Her shoulders sagged. "No. You're right. Maybe I'm just being overly sensitive about it."

It wasn't that I didn't sympathize, I really did. Waking up in Chaldea's infirmary with most of my hair shorn off had been the topping on a shit sundae. But sometimes, sacrifices had to be made, and cutting your hair and dyeing it was a really minor one in the grand scheme.

"If it helps, you're just as beautiful with black hair as you were with blonde," Arash added in with a charming smile.

Damn, he was pretty smooth, wasn't he?

Jeanne's cheeks flushed pink.

"N-not that it was a concern for me!" she said, her voice a little higher than before. "But... I guess it's really convenient, this hair dye thing you have in the future. In this time, something like this would have been much more work."

"We're just lucky that one of Chaldea's staff members happened to use black hair dye," Mash muttered somberly.

One of the deceased staff, she meant. There had to be some kind of irony in the fact that this whole plan only worked because the original owner of the dye was dead and didn't need it anymore.

"If you think this is incredible, you should see some of the colors people dye their hair in our time," I said wryly. "Red, blue, green, purple, pink..."

"Like Mash's?" Jeanne asked.

Mash flushed and patted self-consciously at her own hair. "Ah, no, Miss Jeanne. This is my natural color."

"Really? Rika, too?"

"Carpet matches the drapes," Rika reported with a kind of smug humor.

Arash choked on a laugh that he smothered, while Mash flushed again and Ritsuka gave his sister a completely unimpressed look. Jeanne, on the other hand, didn't seem to get what that meant, and I didn't have any intention of explaining it. Was there a thing for corrupting a saint? Something like "delinquency of a minor?"

I shrugged. "It's not common, but there are different kinds of mutations that can result in unusual colors."

Or magecraft. I hadn't seen anyone else like that for myself, but if magic could change your hair color as a side effect, then whatever they'd done to make Mash must have been responsible for that particular shade of lavender.

"You're looking at the prime mutation herself," Ritsuka said, looking pointedly at his sister. She stuck her tongue out at him childishly, and fuck, if that didn't tell me they were siblings, nothing would have.

"In any case," I steered the conversation back around, "Arash, did you have any luck?"

Arash shook his head ruefully.

"Sorry, Master. No luck finding any dragon-slaying heroes. There were rumors of a powerful warrior further down south, but no one gave me anything more solid than that."

"That certainly narrows it down," I grumbled.

Southern France... There was no way we had the time or the resources to spend searching the entire southern half of the country on a *rumor*, especially one that vague. With the speed of travel in this era — in terms of both the physical and the information — that was the work of months or *years*.

"What about my evil self?" Jeanne asked. "Was there anything else you learned about her?"

Arash shrugged. "Nothing that we didn't already know. Sorry to say, your other half is just as bad as you feared. The folks around here had much more vivid stories about what she did to Orleans, none of it good."

Jeanne let out a heavy, explosive sigh.

I didn't have anything to say to comfort her, so I didn't even try. "It's a dead end here, then."

"Seems that way, Master," said Arash.

Frustrating, but there wasn't anything we could do about it. Lisa would probably have told me that sometimes, when you followed a lead, it didn't take you anywhere useful. Sometimes, there just wasn't anything there for you to find.

That didn't stop it from feeling like a waste of time, though.

"Should we travel south next, Miss Taylor?" Mash asked.

I chewed on a mouthful of eggs to give myself a moment to think. As expected, they were bland and kind of tasteless, although they weren't anywhere near as bad as the ration bars, so they had that going for them.

We didn't really have a lot of options, did we? There were rumors we could chase down south, and we might find out more as we went, but that wasn't a guarantee. It sucked that we didn't have anything more actionable than that, but there also wasn't any guarantee that we'd find anything of use if we circled through the cities and towns around Orleans, either.

As for our group, particularly when it came to combat...

I glanced over at Arash.

His skills were mostly decent and worked well both to keep him alive and support his archery, and I had to assume he was good with his bow, if he'd been summoned as an Archer instead of one of the other classes. In hindsight, an Archer was probably the better option for fighting wyverns, since attacking something that could fly would be easier if you had ranged options yourself.

But his Noble Phantasm was a nonstarter. It was the last resort of last resorts, because it would immediately leave us down a fighter, and that put a limitation on him that instantly undercut everything else. He'd be useful, but at this point, we *needed* more than just him, and if Siegfried or Sigurd really was here, then there was no way we could pass them up.

Once I'd swallowed, I asked, "What's the next major settlement south of here?"

Mash turned to bring up the map, but Jeanne answered me immediately. "Lyon."

"That's...another 250 kilometers," Mash added, brow furrowing.

"Another week of walking," I muttered, doing the math in my head.

Rika's head hit the sturdy, wooden table with a solid thunk, and she groaned at the floor at the mere thought of it. Her brother's face had paled to match his porridge.

I wasn't exactly enthused with the idea, either. The travel time was fucking with us really badly, and I'd never wished for a car and modern roads more than I had during the days we'd spent trekking from Vaucouleurs to here.

The problem remained that there still wasn't anything we could do about it. Horses would definitely cut down on some of it — not as much as I would have liked, but definitely some of it — but the entire reason we were bunking in the living quarters adjacent to La Charite's Notre Dame instead of an inn or something was because we still didn't have any money to spend on anything else and we didn't much have a way of acquiring any in a reasonable timeframe.

"There's nowhere else closer by?" I asked Jeanne. "No other major towns or cities in that direction?"

"There are, but none of them are as big," she answered. "If we assume that my evil self wants revenge, then she'll start with the places that were most important to me, and then attack the largest cities."

"And she's already massacred everyone at Orleans, the sight of your iconic victory..."

Jeanne grimaced.

So if her evil self, this Jeanne Alter, wanted to destroy everything Jeanne had built and kill all of the people Jeanne had saved until, assumedly, all of France was a smoldering ruin, where would she go next? Working under that idea, it would be the sight of Jeanne's next biggest victory, and I would have thought that meant Reims, where Charles VII was crowned.

Except Charles VII was already dead, along with the entirety of his court. Would there even have been any point in going after Reims, except as and when it became "convenient?"

Ugh. There was still just too much we didn't know and too large an area to cover without a good way of getting there in anything resembling a timely manner.

"Do you have any idea —"

*Beep-beep!*

Romani's image appeared atop the table.

"Romani," I began.

"There's no time!" he cut across me urgently. "Everyone, I'm detecting the presence of a Servant, approaching fast! It's headed right for you!"

The whole group froze, turning to look at him, and Rika's spoon fell from her fingers with a clatter. I was the first one to move, and my stool toppled over, I stood from my seat so fast.

"If you left anything in your rooms, get it now!" I ordered the twins, and they jolted, scrambling out of their seats. "Jeanne, Arash, you two are going to be our frontline, I need you to —"

“Wait!” Romani shouted. “I’m getting a better scan now, it’s separating! I-it’s not one Servant, I’m reading at least five!”

“F-five?” Ritsuka choked out.

That many? How? Why? Did they know we were here, somehow? Had they detected us through some manner of Clairvoyance or magecraft and were even now coming to eliminate the threat to their plans?

I didn’t even entertain the idea that it could be a coincidence. The mere thought was ludicrous. Why else would Jeanne’s evil self bring four or more other Servants to the fight if not to crush us with overwhelming force?

“You need to get out of there!” Romani said. “There’s no way you can take on that many enemy Servants by yourselves!”

And for once, I agreed with him. Five on three wasn’t the worst odds, but between not having any idea who the other Servants were and the simple fact that Arash was the only one with an offensive Noble Phantasm among our group, even I had to acknowledge that we were massively outmatched. If any of them had an Anti-Army Noble Phantasm? Or worse, if more than one of them did? We were fucked, completely and utterly.

Even if they didn’t, none of *our* Servants was suited for close range combat, let alone against multiple opponents at once. If they had enough frontline fighters to our ranged fighter and two supports, they wouldn’t even need Anti-Army Noble Phantasms, they could just close in and pick us off with sheer numbers.

That wasn’t even considering if they brought an army of wyverns with them.

If, if, *if*. Too many fucking ifs, not enough solid answers.

“Ritsuka, Rika, go!” I told them. “Get your stuff, get moving!”

“B-but the town!” Ritsuka protested.

They were going to burn it down, too, I realized. Massacre everyone here, like they had at Orleans. No, of course. Even if they were here for us, there was no way Jeanne Alter would pass up the chance to get yet more revenge against France.

And there was nothing we could do about it, was there? Unless...

I glanced to Arash, brow furrowing.

We had just summoned him. *I* had just summoned him. He’d been with us barely a week, and I hadn’t seen him fight anything more dangerous than the animals he hunted for us on the road here.

But if we could get the group to clump together, if the enemy Servants grouped up close enough to hit them all at once, then... That would be it, wouldn’t it? Threat beaten, Singularity corrected, everything was said and done with a single Noble Phantasm.

All it would cost us was one good man who was technically already dead.

My right hand ached. My Command Spells throbbed, as though to remind me how easy it would be to force him, even if he resisted, and if I gave the order, I wasn't sure that he even would. Not when his Noble Phantasm itself was a crystallization of a moment of self-sacrifice.

It was the pragmatic thing. It was the correct choice, as a matter of ending this whole thing as quickly and efficiently as possible. Three years ago, I didn't think I would have flinched to make it.

But did that make it the *right* choice?

"I know how you feel, but there's nothing you can do for them!" Romani replied.

"We'll do what we can for them, but this is already going to be a fighting retreat," I said. "Ritsuka, Rika, Mash, Arash, Jeanne — our job will be to occupy the enemy Servants long enough for as many people as possible to evacuate. We'll draw their attention away from the town and disappear into the forest."

And if the opportunity to finish them all off with Arash's Noble Phantasm presented itself... I'd make the decision on what to do about it then.

"S-Senpai!" Ritsuka gasped.

"It's the best we can do!" I snapped at him. "If we had more Servants —"

I shut my mouth before I could say something I regretted, like implying Arash was useless. It wouldn't help anything, and especially not unit cohesion.

"Go, get your stuff," I ordered instead. "Romani, how long do we have?"

"Not long!" he replied. "M-maybe...thirty seconds? They're approaching fast, but it's more like a speeding car than a jet plane!"

Finally, *finally*, the twins jolted into action, almost stumbling over themselves as they raced off to the rooms they'd been let borrow to retrieve whatever bits or bobs they'd left in there. With them out of the way, I turned to Mash.

"Mash —"

But she'd predicted me; in a flash, she had transformed, clad in armor once more, although I still thought it looked skimpy and pretty useless. At least it protected her chest.

"I'm ready, Miss Taylor."

Arash, next.

"Arash —"

"I'll set up in the bell tower," he said, "and keep an eye out for our uninvited guests."

“Jeanne,” I finished, turning to her last, “keep that disguise as long as you can.”

“I won’t shy away from my evil self,” she told me firmly.

There was no time to argue, no matter how stupid or misguided I thought it was.

“Just don’t rush in to face her!”

With that last bit taken care of, I raced back to my own room to pick up the pack of supplies we’d been carrying on our journey here. Or one of them, at least. It was much lighter than it had been when we’d set off, but that didn’t mean it was useless enough to leave behind.

Ritsuka and Rika had made it back by the time I did, pale and a little shaky, but they seemed wide awake, now. The adrenaline of the moment had woken them up the rest of the way the same as it had me, but the crash later was definitely not going to be pretty for anyone.

I turned to my communicator. “Romani —”

*Master!* Arash’s voice interrupted.

A piercing scream from outside rang out before he could go any further, and Jeanne’s face contorted with surprise. She didn’t wait a second longer — before my eyes, she vanished, a gust of wind chasing after her.

Shit.

“There’s no time,” I told the twins. “Go!”

They didn’t fight me or protest. Together, we raced out of the living quarters and from the Notre Dame into the street, and as we went, I reached out into my swarm to try and get an idea of the situation. To the east, there was nothing unusual, except the people now running that way to escape, but to the west, across the Loire river —

A dragon, a *wyvern*, fell from the sky maybe thirty feet from us, startling both the twins and Mash, who jumped to put herself between it and us. She needn’t have bothered. Two arrows jutted out of one of its eyes, buried almost up to the fletching, and six more were embedded much shallower into its neck. If it wasn’t already dead, it would be very shortly.

“Th-that’s...!” Rika stuttered.

*Good job*, I sent back to Arash.

He didn’t reply, but I saw another volley of arrows shoot across the sky towards another wyvern that my bugs were tracking. Several of them lodged themselves into its scales without even drawing blood, but several more sank into the crevices between them and found vulnerable flesh as the beast reared back in pain.

Against my will, I was impressed. At closer range, *I* probably could have managed a shot like that, using some of my old tricks. But to manage such pinpoint precision from so far away, with a bow



and arrows instead of a bullet? I was beginning to understand that Servants weren't just massively superhuman in terms of speed or strength, but that they were utterly superhuman in terms of their skills, as well.

"Where did Jeanne go?" Ritsuka asked loudly.

"I don't think we can afford to wait for her, Master," Mash said.

I didn't say anything as I searched for her myself, spreading out my swarm to find the telltale scent of the chemical dye in her hair. As the only person in the whole country right now who had that modern hair dye, she should have been relatively easy to find.

"Ha!"

Of course, it turned out to be completely unnecessary, because it wasn't at all easy to miss the blonde-haired woman in armor jumping *fifty feet into the air* to slam the haft of a rolled banner into one wyvern's head. It was even harder to miss her riding it down to the ground until its neck snapped under her and then standing up as though nothing was amiss.

"Whoa," said Rika.

But as though they were white blood cells detecting an infection, the other wyverns turned from what they were doing — from setting buildings on fire, from crashing through brick and wood, from swooping down to claw at whichever unfortunate soul happened to capture their attention — and started to converge on Jeanne's position. They made directly for her like they were being drawn in by some kind of magnet.

Arash predicted me before I could even make the order, and he shot salvos of lightning fast arrows towards every wyvern that he could see from his perch. One after the other, his targets dropped from the sky, crashing through buildings and blocking the roads. A few of them disappeared beneath the surface of the river with a titanic splash.

It was a drop of water in a bucket. Even as he killed them, there were so many more that it didn't seem to make a difference at all.

Jeanne took a deep breath —

"I am Jeanne d'Arc!" she shouted, and her voice carried over the screams of the fleeing townsfolk. "I am the woman they named the Maid of Orleans! I am she who saw King Charles crowned! I am the one they burned at Rouen! As a servant of God, I have returned from beyond death itself to protect the good people of France!"

What the fuck was she *doing*?

"You, foul devil who claims to seek revenge and wears my name, present yourself before me, for I name you a charlatan and a deceiver!"

The crowd of wyverns *shuddered*, stuttered, and then, slowly, they began retreating, pulling away from the beeline they'd been making towards her as Jeanne stood strong, triumphant over the body of the

one she'd killed. From above, five more descended, and I knew immediately who and what they carried without even having to look.

The five enemy Servants.

I got a better look as they came closer. The two on the left were both pale and white-haired, almost sickly looking. One was a man, dressed in fine, black clothing of rich make that gave him the air of a prince or a lord. He carried a spear. The woman next to him was full-bodied and looked like someone had crossed a noblewoman with a dominatrix, although the stark red of her gown contrasted her pasty white skin.

The other two on the right — my right, that was — were in complete contrast. The first was a woman, long, dark-haired, dressed in a fetishized version of a knightly tabard and carrying a heavy staff whose end was fashioned into a crucifix. Her companion was...effeminate, but androgynous, with a slender frame and clothing that looked like it came right out of *The Three Musketeers*, complete with a fluffy feather stuck in a wide-brimmed hat.

And in the center of this line was, incredibly...

"Two Jeanes?" Ritsuka muttered.

Yes, another Jeanne d'Arc. Identical from the shape of her face to her hair to the armor that looked as though it had been stained black by soot. She looked as though she could have stepped right out of the pyre that had killed her.

The important difference was in their demeanors, the way they held themselves. Our Jeanne, standing on the ground, was a gallant figure, upright and righteous. The Jeanne riding the wyvern was the exact opposite, because her expression was cruel and twisted, and the air she gave off that I felt even from that distance was dark and malevolent.

For an instant, she reminded me of Jack Slash.

"W-whoa," Rika gasped, "that's so freaky! She really is Jeanne Alter!"

"Don't be silly!" her brother chided her.

The Jeanne atop the wyvern, Jeanne Alter, looked down at us from her mount, and the instant she saw her counterpart, she broke out into laughter. Cackling peals rained down upon the stillness of the town, high pitched and almost stereotypically evil.

"What," she rasped out between laughs, "what nonsense is this?"

"So," our Jeanne said stoically, "it's true, then."

"This, this is too much!" Jeanne Alter guffawed. She turned around to look behind her. "Gilles! Gilles, look! Where is Gilles? He just has to see this!"

Jeanne hesitated. "Gilles?"

“Oh. Yes, that’s right. Gilles stayed behind.” Jeanne Alter giggled, still grinning. “What a farce this is. What lunacy. This joke is so poor that I might just die laughing. To think, France is so pathetic that it still clings to me like a child at her mother’s skirts, even after they betrayed me!”

As they talked, I turned narrowed eyes on the assembled group and tried to measure the distance between each of them. Just from looking, it was already larger than I would have hoped, which meant it was far too likely that Arash would miss, if he tried to get them all at once. At least one of them would escape, which was a problem when we had no idea where the Grail pinning this Singularity in place was or who held it.

I looked at Jeanne Alter suspiciously.

In Fuyuki, the Grail had been held by Saber, who had been corrupted by whatever had originally formed the Singularity. A “Saber Alter,” as it were. Now, a Jeanne who had been somehow corrupted was standing — flying, whatever — above us. A “Jeanne Alter,” as we had taken to calling her.

Would the enemy really be that confident, that brazen, that *stupid* that they would deliver it right to us?

“Who are you?” Jeanne demanded. “Why do you have my face and my name?”

*Arash, I sent his way, if you used your Noble Phantasm, could you take out all of them at once?*

He hesitated a moment. He must have, because it took a few seconds for him to reply.

*Maybe, Master, but I can’t guarantee it. Not without knowing what to expect of the enemies’ Noble Phantasms.*

“What a useless question!” Jeanne Alter snickered. “I’m Jeanne d’Arc, of course! The saint who raised France from defeat and lifted the siege at Orleans!”

“Saint?” Jeanne repeated, disgusted. “What nonsense are you spouting? You’re no more saint than I am!”

If we couldn’t risk his Noble Phantasm without knowing what their defenses looked like...

*What about a volley of regular arrows? How many could you fire at once?*

His response was immediate and matter-of-fact. *Ten-thousand.*

My mouth twitched and my eyebrows rose just the slightest, the only signs of my surprise.

*But it would take me a moment to prepare, Master.*

“That’s not important, though!” Jeanne shouted. “No... No, more importantly... At Orleans, you slaughtered the whole city! You killed King Charles and all the members of his court! And now, you’ve come here to do the same! Why? Why are you attacking the very people I fought to save?”

*I think you might have that moment, I told him. Get ready. Try and focus down. Jeanne Alter is the most important target.*

*Understood, Master.*

“Shouldn’t it be obvious?” Jeanne Alter asked with a malicious grin. “I’m going to carve a crest of blood across all of France, until the streets run red and not a single living soul remains!”

She cackled.

“Such is the will of God!”