

*"La Pucelle carried with her heart kindness and humility,
integrity and naiveté, and above all else, her faith.
That was all she had."*

–Words of a Certain Theologian



Rouen, Place du Vieux-Marché

Like a dirge carried by the wind from lands far away, insulting words came into earshot, but she paid them little mind. It would be lying to say they caused her no grief, but to say they were agonizing would be an exaggeration.

Fear, on the other hand, was of a similar consideration. She let feelings of shame and regret fall to the wayside when she decided she would fight, and even now they did not return.

Being dragged around was beneath her. She walked straight and true, constantly and unconsciously clawing at her breast, only to find her cross had been stolen. The very foundation of her heart was gone, and sadness slowly crept in. An Englishman rushed up to her in her moment of temporary mourning, making an effort to be as respectful as possible, handing her a hastily-made wooden cross.

"Thank you," she whispered gratefully, gazing down upon him as he kneeled now before her, tears streaming down his face. While some disparaged her, others cried openly for her sake.

If insulting words were like foreign songs from distant lands, then grief, perhaps, was a motherly lullaby.

Her keepers tied her hands behind both her back and a towering wooden stake. No man could ever claim that she escaped. The bonds were tightened such that they could not slacken, perhaps fruitlessly. *I can't escape, especially after coming this far*, she thought.

Immediately upon the cardinal reading her last rites, the torches were thrown in. The flames slowly licked at her feet. To those around her, losing one's physical body in such a way must have been the most frightening means of execution imaginable. The skin was scorched, the flesh was broiled, the bones were charred. The words were chanted over and over, the names of God and the Holy Mother invoked.

"Your prayers are a lie."

Many times she was accused, and many times she was insulted so. It was a mystery she was helpless to solve. Prayer held no inherent truth and no inherent untruth; they should remain unchanging regardless of whom one prays to.

She wanted to warn them of their error, but no voice came. Instead, she saw her life laid out before her in an instant: A homely village, an ordinary family, and the fool who ran away from it all. But was she really a fool? She certainly may have been. After all, she knew this would happen from the very beginning. No one knew her end more than she.

If only she had looked away, perhaps she could have met a different end.

If only she had ignored the voices; if only she had abandoned the lamentations of the soldiers on their death beds. Perhaps she could have led a life like any other woman, perhaps she could have gotten married, living happily ever after as a wife and mother.

That future could have been hers. That was certain.

Regardless, she threw aside the happily ever after and sprinted off towards a different end. She chose instead to take up the sword, don her armor, bear the flag of her country, and lead the front lines from the back of a horse.

You knew it would end this way, didn't you?

She knew, she understood. Her continued struggle meant only that she would meet her end one day. While others may have called her a fool, mocking herself was something she never allowed.

Lives were saved. The path that I chose was the right path.

The visions of her past, the future that never came, and the ever-so-cruel present burnt out like the embers surrounding her, vanishing into little more than ash as she prayed.

This was her prayer, this was her sacrifice. Even if every other person on Earth berated and betrayed her, she died knowing that she never once betrayed herself. There were no regrets, there was no future wanting. There would only be rest at last.

Despite being at the center of such brutality, long after her life had ceased and the fires died down, all that remained burning within her heart was selfless prayer, free of regret to the end.

Dear Lord, I give my body unto Thee...

Her final thoughts faded, and in her last wake of consciousness she was released from her suffering. Her dreamless sleep was over, and only reality remained. But it was not over just yet. Where one girl's dream had ended, the legend of La Pucelle had begun.

This was a battlefield in the truest sense of the word.

Molded by alchemists, constructed with intricate magic formulas, homunculi were creatures made purely for battle; created to destroy, created to die. They were brought into the world as adults, born outside natural reproduction. Their physical defects were many, shortening their lifespan to a mere two months. Though given their even further shorter life on the battlefield, it wouldn't have mattered if it was two months or two weeks.

They wielded gigantic halberds, carrying with them massive destruction to the land around them.

Golems, on the other hand, were Doll Servants, constructed by kabbalah magic in order to carry out the will of their master. Where homunculi were human-shaped in appearance, golems were figures of stone and bronze, not resembling a person at all.

Fewer in number, they could withstand any attack, crush enemies beneath their massive frames, and pulverize their foes beneath massive fists of stone.

Both homunculi and golems were endowed with such strength that most average magi posed them no threat. However, in terms of sheer numbers, the opposing side held an overwhelming advantage against both.

Dragon Tooth Warriors were created by the Red Servants for their own amusement, seeming to have no limit to their numbers. They were born from the fangs of dragons, teeth sowed like seeds into soil. The Prana contained within those seeds, combined with the earth's knowledge, gave rise to a crude, rank-and-file army.

Their strength was no match for the homunculi or golems, both made purely for war, but they numbered many, seemingly without limits. They poured forth like a fog with no end in sight. They would not cease till they were smashed into dust. They carried with them swords and axes of bone harder than steel, and with them they swarmed and smashed through the golems and cut down the homunculi to pieces.

Calling it gruesome would be inadequate. Golems, Dragon Tooth Warriors, and homunculi were never endowed with more than the simplest of thoughts or the slightest of emotions. Their assaults continued until they perished, not once laying down their arms so long as their enemies still lived.

Once the flames spread, the soil became their ammunition. The injured were tended to with healing magic, once more able to return to the battlefield.

They went, they fought. They went, they perished. Expenditure was their sole purpose. They were simply pawns, never more than statistics. Indeed, the direction of the war was not in their hands.

Occasionally, explosions would occur on the field. Peerless warriors, stronger than a thousand men, decimated hordes of soldiers with a single wave of their weapon. These were not pawns, but perhaps queens. It was they who decided the war's outcome. Tenacious yet quick of wit, these heroic incarnations shone through like flashes of light.

One such violent tremor tore through the air, mowing down the surrounding Dragon Tooth Warriors and golems. They were so smashed to bits that nothing was left but trash.

This left a strange void in the midst of the battlefield that no one would dare fill. The homunculi, golems, and even the mindless Dragon Tooth Warriors alike understood. That void was an inescapable death trap. And if they drew close, they would die a brutal, needless death.

Only those called Servants, the chosen ones, possessed the right to fill that void.

And now, two Sabers sought to fill it.

On one side, a silver Saber, short in build, clad in thick body armor like a mass of metal stood. This warrior wielded a magnificently ornate silver sword, yet their face was completely obscured by a helmet, making it impossible to determine their gender or race.

The other was a tall young man who had an unusual air about him. While he held his sword much like his opponent, it boasted such splendor and enormity that any observer would not believe it to be made by human hands. A blue gem encrusted on the hilt stood out the most.

The colors of the swords were silver and gold respectively, and despite varying in shape and material, they both boasted the same radiant mettle befit of a hero's hands. Regardless, this battle was absurd at its very core. The age of swords had long since passed. Firearms ruled now as the weapons of war.

Should they not be complete laughing stocks in the eyes of a gunner, if not as savages, then as walking anachronisms?

No, perhaps that would be even more absurd.

"En garde, Black Saber."

At the silver one's call, the gold one responded,

"Come, Red Saber."

In the next instant, the Red Saber leapt forward with a roar like that of a lion's. The leap shook the earth, its speed breaking the sound barrier. This was an effect of Red Saber's Prana Burst; by expelling the Prana stored within their weapon and body, the Saber can

shoot forth like a bullet. Such power enabled Red Saber to swing a sword so unfitting of their physique.

The leap itself caused a sonic boom, blowing away the remains of the golems and Dragon Tooth Warriors. Even the strongest land weapon of the modern era, the battle tank, would be demolished in the wake of its sheer speed and destructive power.

In some ways, it could be said that both Sabers had strength on par with demons.

With a war cry as ferocious as a dragon's, the Black Saber stepped forward, golden sword in hand. He charged at the enemy with an awesome speed, bringing his broadsword down without a moment's hesitation.

If the silver Saber's suicidal charge could be compared to a bullet, then the golden Saber's was like a high-speed guillotine. Metal clashed with metal, bringing with it incredible amounts of destruction to their surroundings.

"Heh. Your strike is too simple, Black Saber!"

"Ugh!"

Sparks flew as both steel and spirit clashed. They bore neither sympathy nor hatred; only powerful wills that rejected each other's existence, and the rapture that came with battling a powerful opponent. Their blades had already crossed ten times. Ever since this war had begun, the thrill of battle crossed Red Saber's face in the form of a grin many times.

The two of them didn't quite exist in the world in the usual sense. They were incarnations of legendary, superhuman figures whose names were carved in history. These heroes lived on in the hearts of man, their names kept alive long beyond their deaths. They were known as the Heroic Spirits, Servants, bound to the present world, and these two were the shadows of those heroes.

Their swords clashed for the thirteenth time, and the world stood still. Their weapons were not destroyed and their bodies were not blown away. Instead they struck an artistic balance, swords locked together. They drew close to each other. At first glance, Black Saber might have had the advantage in physique. The difference between the two was like that of a child and an adult.

But it was the golden Saber yielding to the silver's force.

This was an effect of Red Saber's Prana Burst once more. This time though, it was not expelled to charge forward, but instead it coursed through their veins, strengthening their muscles. At that moment, the Red Saber was a cannon with a lit fuse, ready to fire at any moment.

"Graaaagh!"

The silver Saber let out a spirited roar, whose encroaching foot sunk deeper into the earth. This was the power of the Red Saber.

The Black Saber was unable to endure, blown away. But a hero is a hero. He leaped backwards instead of tumbling clumsily. He did not fall to his knees or even bat an eye.

The Red Saber poised the blade at their enemy, stifling a sneer, oozing so much arrogance it could be seen through the silver helmet.

"And you call yourself a Saber, the strongest of all classes? How disappointing. I guess that's all an imitation can manage."

The Black Saber fell silent. It was as the Red Saber said. He was only the imitation of a heroic spirit. He would prove no match for the Red Saber, a true Heroic Spirit.

Even then, backing down was not an option. In order to save his friends who had fallen before him, he needed to fight regardless of his feelings on the matter.

"Sword..." Black Saber decided to choose the best method for the enemy at hand, "be filled!"

Without even the slightest change in his indifferent facial expression, despite the fear for approaching death, Black Saber beckoned. From the large sword carried above the top of his head, orange light began to encase the blade, then expel outward.

"Releasing Noble Phantasm..." Red Saber murmured, as if to growl, "ha, all right!"

There was no impatience in their voice. Noble Phantasms were the Servants' ultimate weapons, activated by chanting its True Name.

Some Noble Phantasms simply have devastating, destructive force. One has a property that will always pierce through enemies if thrown, and although not a weapon itself, one is the hardest shield, protecting against projectile weapons. The number of Noble Phantasms is equal only to the number of legends there are.

Much like Black Saber, Red must also have their own.

"Well, I have my master's permission. I'll use my own Noble Phantasm against you!"

As the Red Saber took their stance, silver sword in hand, the heavy helmet obscuring their face broke in two, fusing onto the armor into one piece.

Their eyes met. The Black Saber's eyebrows rose slightly in a bit of surprise. Most surprising was that the Red Saber's face was that of a girl. Normally, Servants were summoned in the state of their heyday, so most would take the form of the age where they were most active such as the twenties or thirties. This Red Saber, however, could not have been past twenty, very evidently too young.

Despite having the face of a beautiful girl, her atrocities could not be concealed, or at the very least she wasn't trying to hide it. Deep down in her gaze towards the Black Saber, her eyes reflected a mixture of pleasure and cruelty.

"Why did you take your helmet off?"

She answered back in an irritated voice to Black Saber's question:

"I can't activate my Noble Phantasm without taking my helmet off, that's all. Do you really have the strength to be caught up in such a trivial matter?"

In that instant, blood covered the area centered around Red Saber. Even the blade of the sword was coated in a blood-like aura, and it started to transform with a strange noise.

This was, of course, not the original shape of the Noble Phantasm. With its overflowing hatred, the once pure and renowned sword was transformed into a sinister, wicked sword better suited to a warlock.

"The time has come for you to be punished. You'll meet an end suited for an imitation, Black Saber!"

The Red Saber raised her deformed sword. To anyone watching, it would be apparent that this was a deathblow.

"Here I come," Black Saber, much like before, tried to face her head-on without hesitation. Whether his chances of success were high or not, he couldn't have cared less.

This is something I must do.

Black Saber understood it as such. He wasn't risking his life, since he didn't have a life to risk in the first place.

The orange light and the blood aura swelled up instantaneously. The atmosphere around them swirled and screamed, letting the surrounding area know that two Noble Phantasms were fully released.

The renowned, legendary swords roared, living out their fantastical dreams to be owned by such heroes, killing their enemies, and piercing through evil.

They clutched their swords in their hands, defining themselves as Servant, Saber, and by the enemy before them who was to be defeated.

"Clarent..." The Red Saber grew fierce.

"Bal—" The Black Saber roared.

"...Blood Arthur!"

"—mung!"

Red lightning rushed in and collided with the twilight. These were two torrent-like sparks, aimed purely to destroy, and here they were trying to devour one another.

This scene would normally be impossible in the history that humans had created. Here were the deadly Noble Phantasms of two heroes, born of different periods, active in different lands. And they were clashing with each other.

Light filled the atmosphere, annihilating everything it touched. The golems and Dragon Tooth Warriors immediately surrounding the two were caught up within, vanishing into dust.

A gasp was let out by those watching the solemn scene. The space filled with red and orange, as if foretelling the end of days.

But with all things, there is an end. The previously overbearing light slowly softened, fading out like dust from before a windowpane.

The land that surrounded them was in a terrible state.

If you were to imagine a butterfly with its wings spread outward, a similar shape would be seen here, now engraved on the ground. The explosion's mark could nearly be seen from space.

But who would believe that this explosive marking was made from the slash of a sword? On this day for certain, a new legend was born.

The nigh-impossible collision of the legendary holy sword and unbelievably wicked sword has salted the earth.

The determining factor in such a match was neither skills nor power nor which Noble Phantasm was superior. The Black Saber's Noble Phantasm was the one that shot out a twilight wave; it formed a semi-circle shape emanating from where he stood.

On the other hand, the Red Saber had shot out the red lightning from the tip of her blade. The match would be decided by the characteristics of their Noble Phantasms, and the distance between the two of them. If Black Saber was only a few meters closer, the end results would have been much different.

The match had been decided. One Servant was lying on the ground, the other down on one knee. The kneeled Red Saber stood, shaking with shame.

"You! How can you be alive?!" She glared down at him, fierce killing intent in her eyes.

A Servant's Noble Phantasm was not only their ultimate weapon, but also a manifestation of their pride itself. Because one must release their True Name, not killing the opponent is considered a disgrace to their honor. To Red Saber, her Noble Phantasm bore the name of the King of Knights, her father; more than pride, this was also some kind of grudge for her.

Thus, to her, the fact that Black Saber still lived was unacceptable. So long as he held his sword in his hand, he was a target of her loathing. If he were to raise his head and attempt to stand, not even a hundred slashes of her blade would be enough to make up for such a slight.

Even as the pain racked his body, it did not hinder his desire to fight. Knowing that she had just used such a powerful Noble Phantasm, an enormous amount of Prana must have been spent. However, her master was quite distinguished, so it made sense that she still had the strength to move after using such a powerful Noble Phantasm.

"Don't you dare move, Black Saber. I'm going to kill you. No one but me can kill you!"

I'll cut off his head and stab him right in his heart. This is the right granted only to me.

Red Saber took the first step forward.

At least I'm still alive. Though perhaps life is all I have at this point.

His heart beat a strong rhythm. The magic circuits in his body grew excited, desperately clinging to remaining a Saber. However, all the Prana he had stored in his body dissipated with the strike earlier. He no longer had what it took if he wanted to continue being a Saber.

The armor covering his body began to disappear, as if it was becoming frayed. Simultaneously, the golden broadsword he carried, the Saber's symbol, dematerialized.

In this instant, the Black Saber vanished from the world.

Just then, the overwhelming amount of pain caught up to his consciousness and the man who once was a Saber jumped up. He threw up blood, shedding tears due to the pain of getting his nerves cut and the pressure of his flesh being torn apart, the impact of getting his bones crushed. Try as he might, he could not suppress his screams any longer, letting out a groan.

After a time, the pain began to fade, but no longer could he even swing a sword. Given that he lost his power as a Saber, it would be impossible for him to break through. He still had two Command Seals at his disposal, but he could not find his voice. It's not that he lacked the courage, but the physical pain instinctively sounded the alarm. A certain interval of time needed to pass before he could transform, and his body would not endure a consecutive transformation.

The Red Saber, meanwhile, had taken up a murderous desire and approached him. At this point, he had no options. Miracles would not happen. No, perhaps even with a miracle, this was the furthest he could come.

He accepted his fate with regret.

There wasn't much of a reason to fear death. In his case, it was merely dissipating. He could find no attachment or regret either. If he could find one, perhaps it would be the fact he could not protect what he was trying to.

Even then, it wasn't much regret.

It's not that he desired it, or that he would have asked for help. It's just that it was the first time the thought crossed his mind, the first time he made such a decision. He thought: *I should cherish it.*

There was no regret for the outcome itself. The only thing left was to await death. As it approached, time was stretched out like melted candy. Unconsciously, he wished for it to hurry up and be done with. The slower time passed, the more he pondered the answer to the forbidden question:

Ah... For what, exactly, was I alive?

There was no answer. Rather, he wished there wasn't one. He absolutely did not want to accept the answer that he was created to be used.

Yes, it was his destiny to die idly here. There was nothing left to do, nothing left to achieve.

"It's shameful to me that I couldn't finish you off with that strike. Even so, I can't let you go."

The eyes of the impassive warrior, the Red Saber, glare at me. Even as an amateur, I understand well that the sword she holds is aimed at my neck.

"Now, Black Saber. Die."

Her words were indifferent, her sword swing was swift. My vision was starting to be painted in white...

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