

## Chapter LXII: With a Vengeance

The blow knocked Caligula ass over teakettle, and he tumbled across the sand, skipping like a stone cast in a pond again. Light flashed briefly, like sparks, and Aífe chased him, somehow even faster than she'd been before.

Caligula was up and ready by the time she reached him, braced for the incoming blow, but her next punch still sent him sliding backwards through the sand as the air cracked and his gauntlets shrieked. When she came in again, he was ready for her, and he met her punch with one of his own.

Two days ago, when we'd first encountered him, I was pretty sure that even Aífe's arm would have been crushed by the differences in their strength. Emiya, after all, had his shoulder wrecked from a blow that had been blunted by the flats of his swords, and even Spartacus had been more messed up than usual just trying to block his punches.

Now, Aífe matched him without flinching, with nothing to show the strain but for the flickers of light — magical energy igniting? I didn't recall that being a thing that happened in fights between Servants, not normally, but this was a lot of uncharted territory I was in these days.

Caligula staggered back as though stunned that his attack had been blocked, and then he whipped his fist back around in another thunderous blow. Aífe didn't even try to dodge, she just crossed her arms in front of herself and took his punch as yet more sparks lanced up and down her forearms.

“Heh.” Aífe grinned. “Even after all this time, I'm still using the tricks that you yourself came up with, dearest sister.”

Tricks?

One foot slid forward, her torso twisted, and as even more sparks raced up and down her arm, she landed a heavy blow right into the wound that Arash had carved through Caligula's armor.

“Nnnng!” Caligula groaned and stumbled back a step.

Aífe pressed her advantage, launching a series of jabs into his torso with the dull, metallic thunk of her knuckles on steel — or whatever his golden armor was made of, because I doubted it was actual gold — and Caligula staggered with each one. He grunted and took them, reeling too much from that hit to his wounded side to mount a counterattack.

And before every punch, her body lit up with more sparks. It was like she was channeling —

It struck me like a bolt of lightning.

No, I realized. They weren't sparks. They were *runes*. That was how she was taking hits that had laid her out before and dishing back hits that were stronger than she was managing just a minute ago. Those thirty seconds she had asked for, she used them to engrave patterns of runes into her clothing — runes of protection, runes of power, runes of speed and safe travel, and they all combined together to make her faster, stronger, and hardier so that she could compete with Caligula's own increased strength and speed.

Over and over again, she struck him like a machine gun. Her arms had blurred until it seemed like she had a dozen, and the sound of her hits was a rapidfire staccato that echoed across the whole beach. In the brief, two second window she had bought herself, she had to have launched over a hundred punches, each one strong enough to have killed any of us Masters outright, no matter where it landed.

But no matter how many times she hit him, his armor didn't bend, didn't break.

The window closed. Caligula planted one leg for stability, and in a move that my brain struggled to keep up with, he dodged one of her punches and trapped one of her hands between his arm and his armor.

Aífe didn't even slow down. She launched a hard cross towards his face, and he caught it with a meaty smack in his other hand and slammed his forehead down into her nose. Blood fountained from her nostrils, and she retreated back one step.

But even if he didn't still have her arms occupied, I knew her well enough by now to know she wouldn't have retreated any further than that.

I also knew her well enough by now to see her retaliation coming a mile away.

My arm rose, my fingers splayed out as I took aim at her.

"Momentary Reinforcement!" I chanted, and Aífe lit up in the glow of both my spell and her runes.

Just in time for her to slam her own forehead into *Caligula's* nose.

*CRACK*

"GRAH!"

Caligula let her go, stumbling back again as his hands flew to his own nose reflexively. With her arms free again, she took a brief moment to wind her fist back for another punch, gathering strength like a spring coiling tightly, and then she delivered it straight into his chest again. Caligula flew back, tumbling across the beach as splotches of red splattered over the sand from his wounds.

Aífe took that moment to reach for her nose and twist it back into position with a squelch that turned Rika's face green.

"That armor of yours is far more durable than it has any right to be," Aífe said to Caligula. "It's far and away past the point where it should have shattered."

"You..." Caligula's growl rumbled in his chest like thunder. As the waves crashed behind him, he pulled himself to his feet, his lips curled in a snarl. "You...annoying wretch...irksome...bitch! You're...in my way!"

Aífe's mouth twitched at one corner, and she bent her knees, winding her fist back again. "Try not to die to this one, would you?"

The world drew down into her palm. Like yesterday, it felt like everything, even my own thoughts, were being sucked into some unknowable point clenched tight between her fingers, and I realized at once what she intended to use against Caligula now.

A plume of sand rose behind her as she kicked off of the ground, and across from her, Caligula tried to dodge — even in his maddened state, he seemed to understand that there was no way he could afford to get hit by that attack.

“You’re going nowhere!”

But El-Melloi II, who had been watching the entire fight from the back, spat those words out, and with a terse gesture of his hand, stone walls rose up out of the ground, boxing Caligula in before he could go anywhere. He was trapped.

Aífe hit him like a missile, and the world itself howled as her fist swung forward.

“*Torannchless.*”

The terrible sound of rending metal was almost drowned out by the thunderous clap of her fist making contact, and it all happened so fast that it looked like Aífe hit him, his armor ripped and tore, and he smashed into the stone pillar behind him hard enough to crack it all at once. The rock cratered around his body, fissures spider-webbing from the point of impact, interspersed with roping tendrils of wet, red blood.

El-Melloi II grunted. “You hit him hard enough to crack that? You absolute madwoman.”

He gestured, and the slabs of stone disappeared into thin air, leaving Caligula to fall to the ground limply. His golden armor was in ruins, absolutely destroyed by Aífe’s Thunder Feat, and the damage that had done left a growing stain spreading out under his body. The shrapnel alone must have ripped apart his internal organs like shredded tissue paper. It almost certainly would have killed anyone on our team, with the exception of maybe Spartacus or Boudica.

And somehow, Caligula had survived it. He had Imperial Privilege as a skill; was it possible he’d used it to gain something like Battle Continuation?

“Bitch!” he rasped as he dragged himself to his feet. “Bitch, bitch, bitch! You...complete bitch! Celtic...sow!”

He staggered under the weight of his wounds. His chest, now that I could see it clearly, was completely shredded. It was more ripped flesh and bleeding wounds than it was intact skin, and it wasn’t helped by the wounds Emiya had dealt earlier or the gouge Arash had carved with my knife.

“Holy shit, this guy,” Rika said. “All of that, and he *still* won’t go down?”

“No,” said Aífe. “That fractured his spirit core beyond repair. He’s leaking magical energy like a sieve now. These are just his death throes.”

She held out her hand, and Gae Bolg zoomed back into her palm, but instead of finishing him off, she turned away and started walking towards camp.

“Boudica, Spartacus,” she called out. “If either of you has any unfinished business you want to take out on him, this is your chance. No matter how desperately he tries to hold that Saint Graph of his together, it’s falling to pieces as we speak.”

Boudica hesitated and looked at Spartacus.

“My love is boundless,” said Spartacus solemnly. “My love is merciful. Oppression is the choice of the oppressors. Love flourishes only in freedom.”

“Yes.” Boudica grimaced. “That’s what I thought, too.”

Emiya sighed. “So that’s how it is, huh? I guess it falls to me to do the job no one wants again.”

“Empire…” Caligula grunted. “My…Empire!”

With whatever final reserves of strength he had left, he kicked off the ground into a stumbling run, aiming at Aífe’s retreating back. It was a last, desperate grasp at a hopeless victory, and you didn’t have to be a master martial artist or a mythical hero back from the dead to see it.

Emiya stepped back with one foot and squared his shoulders as his bow formed, an arrow shimmering into existence between the fingers of his other hand. Aífe clicked her tongue, scowling, and spun on her heel, winding up for a more decisive death blow. Arash flipped his grip on my Last Resort and thumbed the switch, ready to jump in if he needed to.

None of them got the chance.

A red blur raced out from behind us, dashing across the ground and the sand — and making straight for an intercept course with Caligula.

“Nero!” Mash gasped.

“Best Buddy!” cried Rika.

What did she think she was *doing*?

I gritted my teeth, because I couldn’t stop her, not with this little prep, such a thin swarm, and almost no time to act.

I flung out my hand again, taking aim a second time. Up above, my ravens pelted Caligula with a pair of staggered shots and made him stumble, slowing him down almost by half.

The only thing I *could* do was make sure she didn’t get herself killed.

“Momentary Reinforcement!”

Nero’s speed almost doubled, and she soared like a rocket across the beach towards Caligula. Caligula himself didn’t even seem to see her or notice her, because he didn’t change course or otherwise react at all.

A volley of arrows zipped faster than either of them, and with a series of meaty thunks, they found Caligula's shoulders, right in the joints. A crippling blow, if he was a living human. Unlike how easily he had shrugged off similar attacks earlier, now, he jerked back, stumbling, and gasped as though he'd just taken a devastating hit.

If everything else hadn't been enough, Emiya's arrows had opened up his guard, and with a meaty squelch and a fierce shout, Nero's black and red sword sunk into his gut and burst out of his back in a spray of gore. On top of all of the other damage he'd taken, there was no way he would survive it, no matter whether or not he'd stolen Battle Continuation with his Imperial Privilege.

And Caligula...deflated, for lack of a better word. He sagged and fell to his knees, his body already flickering and fading around the edges as his flesh peeled away into glittering motes of light.

"I'm sorry, Uncle," Nero said, and in the silence that followed her running him through, she might as well have shouted. "Your niece was a coward who couldn't bear to see you reduced to this state, and so she hid in her tent, ashamed of her own fear and indecision."

Her hands shook. The hilt of her sword clattered loudly in her gauntlets.

"The Divine Ancestor stands as the enemy of my Rome," she said wetly. "And he called to his side my own uncle, the man whose Rome I inherited, to fight against me. I am ashamed to say...I, Emperor Nero, doubted myself and my rule."

"Oh, Best Buddy," Rika murmured.

"But." Nero took a deep breath. "Whatever happens to my Rome, whether I truly deserve to rule it or not, whether the Divine Ancestor is right to take it from me, the future my new friends live in is so very bright. All things one day die, even empires. If my beloved Rome is destined to one day fall, then I shall ensure that its splendor is remembered forever! That its glory shall serve as a beacon for other empires to follow! That their shining future can learn from its successes as well as its failures! Mm-mm! Mine will be the story of Rome's greatest hour! As Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, that will be the legacy of my empire!"

Emiya snorted, and under his breath, so quiet I almost didn't hear him, he said, "No one tell her how she dies."

"Ah..." Caligula sighed. "Nero. My beloved niece. My sister's daughter. Heir to my empire."

With surprising tenderness, he reached out and cupped her cheek, a wistful smile on his face.

"You have grown so beautiful," he told her. "The seed that sprouted twenty years ago has blossomed into a beautiful rose, and the Rome she has built makes even mine pale in comparison. There is no one more worthy to rule it, not on Earth or in the heavens. My niece, I...proudly call you Emperor."

And then, like an artist taking an eraser to an errant line, his body disappeared from the feet up, leaving behind only glowing ash that fluttered and vanished on the wind.

"Servant response dissipating," Mash said quietly. "Master...Caligula is..."

Nero sank to her knees as her sword fell into the sand now that it was no longer lodged in Caligula's stomach. She reached out with one hand, grasping at the dust that was the remains of his body, but it slipped through her fingers like water.

"I see," she murmured. "Then, this is what it means for a Servant to be killed, is it? For something that is already dead to die again, then it will leave behind no trace of itself. My uncle...truly was one of these Servants from the beginning."

Her hand dropped back down to her side.

"What happens to him now?" Nero asked. "Lord El-Melloi II, will my uncle remember me as I am today, or will I always be the sputtering babe I was when he first died?"

El-Melloi II hesitated, frowning. "When a Servant disappears from the world, their record — their memories — returns to the main body on the Throne of Heroes. Strictly speaking, since the Throne is atemporal, Caligula has always possessed memories of this moment and what occurred in this Singularity, although they were removed upon his summoning here to prevent a paradox."

"I see." She was quiet for a moment. "Then...those words he said to me, the feelings behind them... My uncle has always had them?"

El-Melloi II opened his mouth, and then slowly closed it again, apparently unsure of how to answer that. I didn't have one to give her either, because my knowledge was purely technical and wouldn't really tell her what she wanted to know anyway.

"Yes," Boudica said, stepping closer, although she never got close enough to actually touch Nero. "Although I myself never knew Caligula, as a Heroic Spirit, I can say with certainty that those feelings of pride were not fleeting, but enduring sentiments carved into his very being. They were a message carried across time and space from 'Heroic Spirit Caligula' to his niece."

"Uncle... You really did..."

Nero leapt to her feet suddenly, shaking her head about as though to clear it of any melancholy thoughts.

"Enough!" she proclaimed boisterously. "The Nero that my uncle took pride in was not a weeping willow but a blossoming summer rose! The tragedy of his second death is but one more crime I must lay at the feet of the United Empire, and I shall exact my justice from them in due time! For now, this is no time for tears and moping! Mm-mm!"

Boudica sighed fondly. "There we go. That's more like the Nero we all know."

"Nothing seems to keep her down for long," Ritsuka agreed.

Nero whirled about. "Forgive me, my friends, for I owe you an apology as well!" she said. "I awoke to the fighting, and I hid in our tent because I could not bring myself to face my uncle! Mm-mm! My own conflicted feelings and hesitation put each of you at risk! For that, I am deeply sorry!"

“That’s probably where you should have been,” Emiya said wryly. “After all, you’re technically one of the VIPs in this group, aren’t you?”

“VIP?” Nero tilted her head, confused.

“Very Important Person,” I told her.

“Ah!” Nero nodded sagely. “Well, yes! I am Emperor Nero! I am a very important person indeed! Mm-mm!”

*That’s not technically what that means*, I didn’t say. Explaining modern slang and lingo to Nero was Rika’s job, not mine.

“Well, it all worked out in the end,” said Arash. “Even if things *did* get a little bumpy here and there.”

“A *little* bumpy?” Rika asked incredulously. “What’s your definition of actual danger then?”

“Fafnir.”

Rika opened her mouth, thought about it for a second, and then nodded. “You know what, Arash? I’m gonna give that one to you. Godzilla was pretty scary.”

Ritsuka groaned. “Really? The *actual* name is shorter and easier to say.”

“Says *you*.”

Although I didn’t say so, I was actually on Rika’s side, this time. Maybe it was because it was such a prominent cultural icon, but “Godzilla” rolled off the tongue much easier than “Fafnir” did. It was even an appropriately apt cultural reference to make, considering Fafnir’s size and power.

“*Another* dragon you lot encountered?” asked Aife. “Exactly how many have you seen and fought?”

“Technically, most of the enemies in the Orléans Singularity were dragons,” I said, “so quite a few, actually.”

“Ah.” Aife nodded. “Right. Yes, I remember you talking about that before, now.”

“Yeah, but none of the rest of us Masters were hardcore enough to *stab them in the eye*,” said Rika, looking pointedly in my direction. I pretended not to notice.

“In this particular case, we didn’t really fight Fafnir ourselves,” said Arash. “Siegfried was the one who killed him, and we just stayed back and kept safe while he handled it.”

“Wait, back up,” said El-Melloi II. “What’s this about stabbing a dragon in the eye?”

Rika’s face lit up with delight, and she grinned. “Oh yeah! Hey, Hot Pops, you weren’t around when we told that story, were you?”

“Technically, neither was I,” Emiya said.

“We can trade war stories another time,” I cut off the discussion. “For now, does anyone need First Aid?”

It should’ve been the first thing we took care of after Caligula died, but out of respect for Nero, we’d let her have her moment. Even I understood the importance of closure.

A sheepish smile curled Boudica’s lips. “Now that you mention it…”

She and Emiya were both the worst off of our group. Boudica from being tossed around and manhandled and Emiya as backlash from the Rho Aias he’d used to block Gae Bolg when Caligula had caught it and thrown it back. Neither of them was anywhere near as badly hurt as Boudica had been from the fight that lost her an arm, but it behooved us to heal them anyway.

Everyone else was fine. Aífe had already healed herself using runes, Mash hadn’t been hurt at all, Arash hadn’t either, and Spartacus had already healed as well.

“First Aid!” Rika chanted, and Emiya’s wounds began to close. “First Aid!”

“How convenient it is to have a Master that can actually heal me properly,” Emiya grumbled. He inspected himself, like he was checking for missed spots. “At least this time, I don’t have to go around for a whole day with one of my arms almost ripped off.”

“I thought Servants didn’t remember other times they were summoned,” Mash said curiously. “Emiya, do you?”

“I wonder,” Emiya said cryptically.

Rika poked him. “One of these days, people are going to get tired of your mysterious bullshit.”

“I have to keep some secrets, don’t I?” He slid a sly glance her way. “Otherwise, how will I get married?”

Rika’s face turned as red as her hair. “Y-you…! Ugh!”

“This sounds like another story,” Aífe commented idly.

“Not one we’re going to tell,” Rika muttered darkly.

“Um, was it really something that bad, Senpai?” Mash asked. “It was just Shakespeare —”

“*Not one we’re going to tell,*” Rika repeated, shooting Mash the stink eye.

Mash, wisely, chose to let it drop. Rika was enough of a handful when she *wasn’t* on the warpath.

“First Aid!” her brother chanted, aiming for Boudica.

Unlike with Emiya, Boudica’s wounds weren’t quite so severe, so their fixing wasn’t as immediately obvious as his. The purpling bruise on her neck, however, where Caligula had grabbed her and thrown her into the ground, slowly faded into healthy skin.



Boudica sighed, rubbing at where the bruise was. “Well, I was mostly fine, but it’s still a relief to get that taken care of. Thank you.”

Rika gave her a thumbs up. “No problem, Queen Booty!”

Emiya rolled one shoulder. “I think I’m finally over that hit I took from Caligula a few days ago.”

“Just now?” Rika asked. “But I healed you back then, too!”

“He hits hard,” was the only answer Emiya gave.

“As hard as Herakles, you said,” Aífe mused. Emiya slanted her a look, like he knew exactly what was going through her head.

Of course, I was pretty sure I did, too.

“Caligula also didn’t have a stock of eleven extra lives,” said Emiya. “Or skin that negated any attack below Rank A. So he was a lot easier to put down.”

Aífe smiled, wolfish. “Exactly what I wanted to hear.”

Emiya shook his head, but didn’t comment on it.

“Are you done yet?”

Everyone else startled and whirled to look at Stheno, and the only reason I didn’t was because I’d already known she was coming. I’d tagged her in the middle of the fight almost absentmindedly; she’d apparently come to investigate the commotion, and predictably, decided not to get involved.

On the off chance Caligula had defeated us, what would she have done? Would she have let him rampage about unchecked, doing whatever he wanted, or would she have ensnared him herself and made him commit suicide?

She wasn’t a complicated personality, she was actually pretty transparent, but she was also the kind of whimsical that was just a pain in the ass to deal with. Like the Fairy Queen had been, back before things really got bad on Gold Morning, only twice as capricious and dangerous in a completely different way.

“Holy cow, where’d she come from?” Rika asked, clutching her chest.

“Presence Concealment,” El-Melloi II muttered.

“You’ve done nothing but cause problems for me since you got here,” said Stheno. “So if you’re done making a mess, then I’d prefer if you left.”

“Ah!” said Nero. “Does this mean you’re taking me up on my offer then?”

“No,” was Stheno’s simple reply.

“Good riddance,” Rika mumbled under her breath. Someone should check for the sky falling, because that was twice in less than twenty minutes where I actually agreed with Rika.

“That eager to see us leave, huh?” said Emiya.

Stheno’s red eyes flicked towards him. “Like I said. You being here has just made things more annoying for me, and I don’t care about Rome or the United Empire, and I certainly don’t care about the proper course of human history. There’s no reason for you to stay, so leave.”

“And if we don’t?” Aife asked coolly. “Do you think your attempts at controlling us will go any better than they did last time? My Master has already given me permission to handle that the way I’d prefer to.”

Me, she meant. That order I’d given her yesterday when we had Stheno pinned and at our mercy.

Stheno scowled and looked down at her feet, where the glowing line of runes stood out to mark the boundary of our camp. Aife had set it up specifically to prevent yesterday’s near catastrophe from happening again, which meant that even if Stheno tried her best, her Alluring Euphony was useless.

“I don’t think there will be any need for that,” Arash said diplomatically.

“There isn’t,” I agreed, although probably not for the same reasons that were on the tip of his tongue. “We stayed here last night for no other reason than it was too late in the day to travel anywhere within a reasonable distance.”

“Ugh,” Rika groaned softly. “What I wouldn’t have done for another bath last night.”

“After we’ve got everything in order, we’ll pack up and go,” I went on. “And you can go back to sitting around and twiddling your thumbs.”

Stheno huffed. “Fine,” she said shortly. “Just make sure you don’t leave any of your junk behind. You’ve all polluted my island enough with your presence, and I don’t want even a single trace of it left when you’re gone.”

“Are you certain you won’t accept my offer?” Nero asked. “Mm-mm! The people of Rome would gladly accept you into our pantheon! As chief god, even!”

There was no way it was really that simple, but I could at least give Nero credit for trying.

“Not interested,” Stheno said. “I don’t care about you Romans or your worship. I just want you all off my island.”

Nero frowned, lips pursing and brow furrowing, like she was about to dig in her heels and refuse to take no for an answer, but before she could start throwing out more counteroffers, Stheno turned on her heel and disappeared.

Guess that answered whether or not she was a full-fledged Servant.

“Well, *that* could have gone better,” said Ritsuka.

“We had a critical breakdown in negotiations,” Rika added, and this time, even I didn’t have the slightest clue what she was referencing there. She turned to Nero. “Better luck next time, Best Buddy!”

“Hmph!” Nero huffed. “It was quite the generous offer! Mm-mm. Any other god would be glad to accept it!”

“It’s too bad it really wasn’t Hephaestus here,” said Mash.

“Except we don’t really need him anymore, do we?” Aífe pointed out. “If we’re avoiding the wall by going around it, then the whole reason we were hoping to gain his assistance is no longer relevant.”

“A weapon forged by the god of smithing is convenient to have, whether or not you need it at that moment,” Emiya chimed in. “Even if we’re going around the wall instead of through it, I still wouldn’t have said no to having Hephaestus make us a weapon.”

Neither would I. It would have been like having something made by Hero, only jacked up by an order of magnitude or two. My Last Resort was useful and versatile, but more firepower was never a bad thing.

“True,” Arash agreed, “but there’s no use thinking about the what-ifs with that sort of thing. More importantly, what now? Our next stop is the United Empire, isn’t it?”

Right.

“We’ll eat breakfast first,” I said. “Give that maybe an hour to digest. Then, we’ll make our way northwest so we can find an appropriate jump-off point to use for our route into the United Empire. There should be another few islands in that direction, one of those might be good —”

*Beep-beep!*

My communicator chimed, and when I lifted it up, Da Vinci’s image appeared, flickering and fuzzy around the edges from this era’s interference.

“Da Vinci?”

“I...gent news,” she said. The static ate most of it. “You...hear th-s.”

“Hold that thought, Da Vinci.”

I turned to Aífe. “We need to clear this up.”

She frowned. “I can stabilize the connection, but it’s not going to be as good as it is when we prepare everything beforehand.”

“It’s better than missing every other word she says.”

Aífe accepted this for what it was and dropped to her knees without another word, carving out the familiar sets of runes she'd used every other time before that we needed a stable connection to Chaldea. This time, of course, she drew them in a circle around *me* instead of Mash's shield.

About twenty seconds later, she finished, and with a burst of magical energy, they flared to life. Instantly, Da Vinci's blurry, static-ridden image cleared up, although it was still a little fuzzy in some places.

"Da Vinci?" I tried again.

She smiled. "There we go! Much better, yes? You're receiving me much more clearly?"

"We are."

"Hey, Da Vinci-chan!" Rika waved.

"Good to see you in *good* health, Rika! You too, Ritsuka, Mash, and everyone else as well!"

"Good morning again, Miss Da Vinci," said Mash politely.

Da Vinci grinned wryly. "Still nighttime here, Mash."

"Oh." Mash blinked. "I'm sorry, I forgot."

Arash chuckled. "Yeah, that can get a bit confusing, can't it?"

Off to the side, El-Melloi II stared, a complicated expression on his face. I wasn't sure what he was thinking, I wasn't sure if he even knew what *to* think about her, but I could at least sympathize with his confusion. I'd given up within a month of meeting her, way back when. It was easier just to think of her as transgender and go with the flow, and she had never corrected me about it.

"First of all," said Da Vinci, "Caligula's *Spirit* Origin is confirmed to have vanished, so *good* job handling that. If the *readings* we got from your Master's Clairvoyance were at all *accurate*, he couldn't have been an easy foe to *vanquish*."

"It could have been a lot worse," Emiya told her.

"That goes without *saying*," Da Vinci agreed, "but he was still the most imposing enemy *Servant* you have all faced since Saber Alter in Fuyuki. It's no less an *accomplishment* that you managed to defeat him without suffering any casualties in the *process*."

"Not for his lack of trying," Rika muttered.

"Second of all, I owe you all an *apology*."

"An apology?" the twins and Mash all asked simultaneously.

My brow furrowed. "For?"

“I *miscalculated*,” Da Vinci admitted. “It’s true, your trip to Etna’s ley lines made it *possible* to scan the entire empire, and that let us pin down what to expect from the *enemy* Servants. Unfortunately, I also forgot that a Singularity is technically an unobserved gnarl of *space-time*, so observing it with such completion is actually *counterproductive*.”

Counterproductive?

“How so?” I asked carefully.

I didn’t like the sound of that.

“I could go into a whole lecture about *quantum mechanics* and how observation through precise enough instruments can solidify something’s existence, but that’s not *important*.” She sighed. “The important thing is, because Chaldea observed the *Singularity* almost in its entirety, the Singularity itself is being reinforced. That means that the time *differential* between Chaldea and the Singularity is rapidly decreasing.”

“W-wait,” said Rika, “that sounds bad!”

“It *is* bad,” Da Vinci replied grimly. “Ordinarily, the differential doesn’t *matter* that much aside from how much extra time it gives you to *resolve* the Singularity. Here? The closer it gets to a one-to-one ratio, the harder that Singularity will be to *unpin*. It will become what mages call a *Universe of Record*.”

In other words, the Singularity would become self-sustaining, and even if we resolved everything else eventually, the proper course of events would still be thrown off. All of the people who died and all of the events that occurred would become set in stone.

“How long?” I asked gravely.

“No more than *two* days,” she answered. “At the rate it’s decreasing, the differential will be down to five-to-one by *dinnertime* tonight. If you don’t resolve things by tomorrow night, then the events of that Singularity will become true *history*, and the projected course from there leads to the *collapse* of Rome — almost four-hundred years early.”

And our mission will have failed.

Two days. That wasn’t much time at all. It was enough, however, that what we were being asked to do wasn’t outright impossible.

“Holy shit,” someone whispered. I was pretty sure it was Rika.

“Hold on!” Nero interjected. “What does that mean, exactly? Mm-mm! Rome has survived many rebellions in its time! Magical mirage lady, this time is no different!”

“Magical mirage lady?” El-Melloi II mouthed those words to himself.

“Again, I could go into a *lecture* about the geopolitical landscape of Rome, especially in that era, but it would take days and it’s *beside* the point,” said Da Vinci. “The *important* part is that this *is*

different from Rome's other civil wars and rebellions. I'm sorry, Emperor Nero, but no matter what you might want to believe, if this becomes solidified, then there is no recovering from it. Rome will be destroyed."

"I won't allow it!" Nero proclaimed loudly. "No, not the empire my uncle entrusted to me! Mm-mm! Rome won't fall!"

"Then you'll just have to retrieve the Grail and defeat Romulus before tomorrow night," Da Vinci said simply. She grinned, sharklike and triumphant, something that looked more at home on Aífe's face than hers. "Fortunately, there's been a development that should make things a lot easier on you."

She tapped something on her keyboard, and her image minimized over to the corner as the map of Rome took over the hologram. The United Empire's territory was highlighted in yellow.

"I don't know how, but Jing Ke's done it," said Da Vinci. "As far as our sensors can tell, Pax Romana is gone. Constantine the Great is dead."

A tremor of something shot through my belly. It felt like excitement. "Oh."

"Well now," said Aífe, grinning a grin to mirror Da Vinci's. "That changes everything, doesn't it?"