

Chapter LXVII: Engine of Destruction

“Impossible,” Lev spat venomously. “Am I actually being forced to retreat...by a gaggle of mere Heroic Spirits?”

“*Mere* Heroic Spirits?” Aífe asked, like the very thought was so absurd it threatened to make her laugh.

“Gotta say, I don’t feel like a ‘mere’ anything,” Arash chimed in, still holding onto his bow. “I may be a simple bowman, but even someone like me knows it takes something special to become a Heroic Spirit.”

“I’m not sure you can count this as retreating, either,” Emiya added. “It looks much more to me like we’ve got you backed into a corner, ‘Demon God.’”

“No.” Lev sneered as he slowly climbed to his feet. “No, no. This is nothing more than a miscalculation. A simple underestimation of the effect of being away from the Temple for so long.”

Aífe looked ready to deliver a final blow right then — although whether it would even stick, we had no way of knowing — and I held her back with a jolt of mental warning.

We still don’t know where he has the Grail, I reminded her.

Aífe’s eyes flickered over to me, a brief glance that didn’t even move her head. *If we give him too much time to recover, he might transform again. It’ll be harder to kill that thing a second time.*

My cheek twitched. A part of me wanted to just let her do it, cut his head from his body and sort the rest out after. Give him no time to screw us over and remove the traitor that had killed Marie with one swipe of that spear. She would never have to worry about him again and we could search his body for the Grail at our leisure.

Provided it actually worked, at least. Lev had already shrugged off what should have been several fatal wounds, and I wasn’t entirely sure it had anything at all to do with that giant tentacle thing he transformed into.

The smarter part of me knew that it would be better to take him alive, if we could. He had information about what he called the “Incineration” and his “king’s” plans that we could extract, if we could figure out a way of holding him that he couldn’t slip out of — very likely a tall order to manage on the fly, admittedly.

How convenient it would have been if I could do a high class binding spell using nothing but some silk threads.

“Enough!” Nero barked, and she stepped past Mash and towards Lev. She marched over and stared him down, hands on her hips and shoulders squared imperiously, and it was almost comical because she also happened to be almost a foot and half shorter than him. “You are beaten, ‘Demon God’ whatever you are! Mm-mm! Surrender your Grail to my Chaldean comrades at once!”

“Beaten?” Lev chuckled lowly, leering at her with that crocodile grin of his. “On the contrary. This embarrassing display was but a minor setback. I still have yet more cards to play — and you, yourselves, have done me the favor of delivering an ace directly to my hands!”

“Magical energy reaction detected!” Mash reported — unnecessarily, because I could feel the mounting power as he gathered it inside himself. “He’s utilizing the Holy Grail!”

The decision had been taken out of my hands. “Aífe!”

She jabbed at Lev with her spear, aiming to take him in the throat as she had Tiberius, but Lev caught it with his bare hands, seemingly unbothered as the razor sharp blade cut deep into his palms and fingers. He still grinned that manic, mad grin.

Arash and Emiya both shot him with more arrows to similar effect. He ignored it all like they were gnats buzzing around his head.

“You’re too late!” he crowed. “By sacrificing Rome — by utilizing the destruction of this ‘Rome’ you have done me the service of destroying — I can call forth the greatest Heroic Spirit, one truly suited to destroying your beloved empire, Nero!”

“I won’t allow it!” Nero proclaimed. “Rome is the world, and the world is eternal! The future the Divine Ancestor entrusted to me shall never be destroyed by the likes of you!”

“Ignorant bumpkin!” Lev said gleefully. “Your bravado will make it all the sweeter to watch that confidence be crushed! See with your own eyes the form of your destruction!”

A glowing magic circle bloomed out under his feet, and Aífe leapt back warily, keeping herself well out of its range. It lit up the room, so bright that it even outshone the sunlight streaming in through the broken roof and walls.

“W-wait!” said Ritsuka. “That looks like...!”

“A summoning!” Mash concluded.

“Now, come forth!” Lev boomed. “Arrive from the distant Throne of Heroes and annihilate this foundation of human history! With this destroyed Rome strewn about my feet, I call upon you now, great hero of destruction, Altera!”

Although the magic circle beneath his feet was the same, the words tumbling out of Lev’s mouth bore only a passing resemblance to the incantation we’d used to summon Servants before. That didn’t seem to matter at all, because the passageway to the Throne of Heroes opened up before our eyes, and a shadow cast in three dimensions rose up from the glowing array, taking the form of a slender figure with long hair and a sword.

Altera? I’d never heard of a Heroic Spirit by that name before.

Rapidly, the svelte form filled in, gaining brown skin, white hair, and a strange sword that seemed to be little more than a pole of multi-colored glass with a pointed tip. Eyes like garnets gazed at each of us dispassionately, and strange white lines raced up and down her torso and limbs. What they were

meant to signify, I hadn't the slightest idea, but they didn't have the look of tattoos. They were almost like birthmarks.

She was also almost naked. For some reason. There wasn't a single piece of visible armor anywhere on her body.

Despite that, I discovered when I examined her with my Master's Clairvoyance, she had high stats across the board. B's and A's everywhere and nothing lower. Not as high as Caligula's, but Caligula had set a high bar in that area. And of course, she was a Saber, which meant high Magic Resistance, so she'd shrug off anything I threw at her if it came to that.

Fou suddenly leapt out of his hiding place to take a spot on Mash's shoulder, hissing at the new Servant with his hackles raised. Strangely, that was the part that worried me the most.

"It's over now!" Lev cackled. "This Heroic Spirit is not some trifling founder of a third rate empire, nor is she a fake saint born of some madman's delusions! This is the ultimate destroyer, an unmatched killing machine that razes even the mightiest of civilizations to the ground! Rome will be —"

"Silence."

Lev's voice choked off as the new Servant's — Altera's — hand sunk into his chest with a sickening squelch. He looked down at the offending limb, uncomprehending, and then jerked when she ripped it free of his flesh, holding in her grasp —

"The Grail!" Mash shouted.

A golden chalice that glimmered in the sunlight.

"But..." Lev gasped. "You..."

With an effortless, contemptuous swing of her sword, Altera split him in half from shoulder to hip, and the two pieces of his body fell to the floor with meaty thumps.

No one moved. I think we were all just that surprised that the "perfect Servant" Lev had said he would summon had just summarily executed him without a second thought. Did she want the Grail that badly?

"Did..." Rika began at length. "Did she just..."

"She cut Professor Lev in half," Mash confirmed. "He's not... I think she really killed him, this time."

And then the Grail began to glimmer and glow, fading away at the edges like an artist erasing an errant line, and the light sank into Altera's flesh, surging up her arm. Before I could realize what was happening, it was already over: the Grail was gone. She had absorbed it.

Because of course she had. It couldn't be as easy as her handing it over to us, could it?

“Hey!” Nero cried indignantly. She marched over to the lean figure of the newest Servant. “Just what did you do with that? My friends have need of it! Mm-mm! Return it at once and I shall forgive your impertinence!”

“Return,” Altera mumbled softly. “Yes. I have returned here, to finish what I began.”

The air grew thick.

“Magical energy response rising!” Mash reported urgently. “She’s using the power of the Grail! Master, this is —”

“I am a warrior of the Hun,” Altera said, “and its king. The King of Destruction who laid waste to everything in front of me.”

She lifted her sword, pointing the pommel towards the sky.

Noble Phantasm.

“Everyone!” I ordered. “Get to cover! Now!”

“Mash!” Ritsuka said a bare second behind me. “Use your Noble Phantasm!”

The magical energy surged.

“What?” Nero asked. “What’s going on? What is she doing?”

Aífe landed next to me, dropping El-Melloi II unceremoniously to the ground at the same time Mash planted her shield. Emiya arrived a short moment later, eyes wide and lips drawn tight as he stared at the gathering storm of power that swept out from Altera’s raised sword, and then Arash, grim-faced and solemn.

But Spartacus had a different plan. He abandoned his sword and leapt through the tempest to latch onto Altera’s body, enveloping her in an enormous bear hug. Boudica, knowing what he was about to do before anyone else, pulled Nero back and out of the way, threw herself on top of Nero, and raised her shield defensively.

“The rebellion lives on in the hearts of all those who oppose tyranny!” Spartacus bellowed. His flesh bulged grotesquely, muscles inflating as spots of pink light danced beneath his skin, until he had grown to twice his size and three times his girth. “This is not the end of my rebellion! My love transcends all boundaries!”

He was going to try and stop Altera before she could use her Noble Phantasm.

“Spartacus!” Ritsuka shouted.

But Spartacus didn’t listen. He merely smiled, held Altera tighter, and said a final two words.

“CRYING WARMONGER!”

And then he exploded.

A flash of blinding light made me close my eyes, and a deep, resonant *BOOM* shook the tortured palace again as all of the power Spartacus had gathered rushed out all at once. A wave of hot air blew past me, whipping my hair about, and then, just like that, it was over.

When I blinked my eyes open again, there was no more Spartacus, just another divot gouged into the floor to mark his passing and the destruction caused by his Noble Phantasm. And Altera...

“She’s not even singed?” Rika choked.

...was completely unharmed. Any damage that Spartacus might have done had already been healed, probably by the Holy Grail she was currently feeding off of like a leech.

“They called me divine punishment,” she said flatly, like she was reporting on the weather. The raw power in her sword continued to build, flowing into the pommel until it glowed red. “Heaven’s judgment.”

Shit. Anything that took that long to charge had to be strong. There was no more time to try and figure out a way of bringing her down before she could unleash it. We just had to bunker down and hope that this thing wasn’t powerful enough to match Excalibur.

“She’s still going to use her Noble Phantasm!” Mash said urgently. “Master, I can’t wait any longer!”

Rika whirled about towards Nero, face stricken.

“Best Buddy!” she cried.

My head turned. My thoughts seemed to occur in slow motion. Halfway across the room, Boudica looked between us and Altera, and she reached the same conclusion I did.

They weren’t going to make it.

I saw the decision she came to the instant she came to it, the determined, resigned set of her mouth and brow. Something passed between us as her eyes met mine — an agreement on what needed to be done and what could be done about it.

She reached down to grab Nero’s dress and lifted her up with one hand as one of my own rose, pointing her direction.

Momentary Reinforcement.

“LORD!” Mash began.

“Chariot of,” Boudica chanted as she used the temporary boost to throw Nero bodily in our direction.

“CHALDEAS!”

Nero landed and tumbled to a stop at Rika’s feet, nearly bowling her over.

“Boudica!”

The chariot raced to encircle us as the rampart of Mash's shield built itself up, and Aífe reached over, hastily scribbling more runes to pull off the same upgrade she had earlier. Even Emiya lifted his hand and added to our defenses.

“Rho Aias!”

“The Scourge,” Altera continued as though none of us had spoken, “of God.”

A tiny ray of light shot up from the pommel of her sword and through the destroyed section of the roof, disappearing somewhere above us. For a fraction of a second, my first thought was, *That's it?*

And then the weight of the sky fell on us and I realized that no, that had just been the beginning.

It was hard to describe what happened next. Calling the massive pillar of raw power that dropped down on our heads a simple beam of light didn't quite capture what it was like to be hit by it, what it was like to have it come down on you like the hammer of an angry god. More than any of the other times before, it felt like the whole world trembled and shook beneath our feet, and the thunderous **BOOM** of it making contact with our layers of defensive barriers vibrated the very marrow in my bones with its intensity.

I held my hands over my ears, but it still deafened me. I squeezed my eyes against the bright flash of light, but it still blinded me. For an instant, as every bug in my range was vaporized and disappeared from my power, I feared that it would be too much, that we had survived the sabotage at Chaldea, Saber Alter's Excalibur in Fuyuki, Fafnir and Jeanne Alter in Orléans, and even Caligula, Romulus, and Flauros here in the Roman Singularity, only to die here. Someone was screaming, and I wasn't sure that it wasn't me.

The moment eventually passed. The great cacophony of sound died away, and it was replaced with a dead, eerie silence, like the entire world was holding its breath to see if we had made it out alive.

When I peeled my eyelids open, I found only destruction. Our party was untouched and unscathed, a safe haven in the eye of a tempest, and outside of that, there was nothing. The tortured palace had finally been destroyed and destroyed utterly, annihilated down to the last brick, and the city outside of it, the city that had surrounded us and which had housed every single one of the men, women, and children who had decided to follow Romulus...

“Oh my god,” Rika whispered.

...had been scoured down to the foundations.

“All of those people,” Ritsuka mumbled. “They're...”

Gone. Some parts of the outskirts had survived the initial blast, but the aftermath had killed even more people, and the fallout from the beam of light — the heat and force that spread from the center of the Noble Phantasm's attack — had spread even further. If I had to give it an estimate, then if the city had a population of about two-hundred-thousand, something like ninety percent of them had just been...erased, for lack of a better word.

It was like looking at the aftermath of Scion's opening attacks during Gold Morning. Indiscriminate devastation, senseless destruction, wiping out everything in range simply because it was possible.

All of that from a single Noble Phantasm.

My head jerked around, looking towards where Altera had been standing, but she was gone. Had she blown herself up along with the rest of the city? But why would she steal the Grail just to use a suicide attack?

"Queen Booty!" Rika suddenly burst out. She took a handful of steps out of the unscathed circle we stood in and then stopped, looking around.

It was useless. That Noble Phantasm was indeed on the level of Excalibur — I'd seen it at the last second, A-plus-plus, Anti-Fortress. Trapped outside of the defenses we'd raised to survive it, there was no way Boudica had managed to make it out. Not even her Battle Continuation could let her survive something like that.

"There's no sign of Queen Boudica's Spirit Origin," Mash said sadly. "I'm...sorry, Senpai, but Queen Boudica is gone. Altera's Noble Phantasm killed her."

"For me," Nero mumbled. "She died...for me."

"She saved your life," Arash said softly. "At the last moment, she had the chance to save herself or you, and she chose to save you."

Nero's face twisted into a snarl. "I didn't ask her to!"

"No," I agreed quietly. "But she did it anyway. Because she decided that your life was more important."

And Nero...deflated. "I didn't..." she murmured, heartbroken. "I didn't even get the chance to...for everything that happened..."

I grimaced and looked away, uncomfortable, and tried not to think too much about Dad and how I'd never gotten the chance to say anything, to clear the air and try to mend bridges before Gold Morning ripped the world apart.

Thankfully, there were more important things for me to worry about, so I didn't have to let myself fall down that rabbit hole.

"Mash," I said instead, "can you detect the Grail anywhere nearby?"

Mash frowned and squinted in concentration for a few seconds, then shook her head. "There's no sign of the Grail, Miss Taylor, or Altera."

Had it been vaporized as well? Could the Grail even *be* vaporized? Presumably, it could be destroyed *somehow*, and if anything could do it, I had to guess that a Noble Phantasm that strong could do the job, but...

“And Spartacus, too!” Rika growled. She stomped her foot. “Damn it! She took out two of us just like that!”

“It’s not over,” El-Melloi II said suddenly.

Rika whirled about. “Whaddya mean, it’s not over? It looks pretty over to me!”

I turned to him. “You’re saying she survived that?”

“You don’t think she did?” El-Melloi II retorted. “If all she wanted to do was commit suicide, there are far easier ways of doing it than trying to take us out with her.”

“And the Grail isn’t here, either,” Emiya added.

Beep-beep!

When I answered my communicator, Da Vinci’s panicked face appeared, hovering in midair.

“What the heck is going on over there?” she demanded frantically. “First, there was that utterly ridiculous Spirit Origin, and then another Servant got summoned? And then that enormous magical energy reaction that almost shorted out your vital readings!”

“Later,” I said. “We can talk about that later. First things first, Da Vinci. Can you still detect that Servant or the Holy Grail?”

Da Vinci looked like she didn’t want to accept that as an answer, then visibly reined herself in. “Yes,” she said, “which is another thing! Who on Earth was that Servant and why is she heading east?”

“East?” I asked.

“East!” Da Vinci insisted impatiently. “I can’t even imagine where she’s going at that speed, but she’s not stopping for anything and it looks like she’s mowing down everything that gets in her way!”

Arash turned to me, his brow furrowing. “You don’t think...”

“Rome,” I concluded.

After all, that was why Lev had summoned her, wasn’t it? He’d wanted her to destroy Rome, to put the final nail in this era’s coffin and disrupt history irrevocably. It looked like she was perfectly willing to do that, she just didn’t feel like listening to Lev’s orders as she did it.

I turned back to Da Vinci. “How long will it take her to get there?”

“At her current pace, at least a day,” Da Vinci answered. “I already told you, didn’t I? She’s not going very fast. Compared to the speeds a Servant is capable of reaching when they put their mind to it, she’s essentially walking there. Now can you tell me more about her? That wasn’t *her* Noble Phantasm the sensors just detected, was it?”

“Compared to the speeds a Servant is capable of reaching” wasn’t all that slow. A day? To get from here to there, that was still as fast as a car on the highway. Even if it wasn’t anywhere near as fast as Aífe’s chariot, it was still far and away too fast for us Masters to catch up with her on foot.

A day. That wasn’t as much time as it sounded like.

“Later,” I promised Da Vinci a second time.

“Hey,” she said indignantly, “don’t just blow this off! You have to know that the sensors detected Spartacus and Boudica’s Spirit Origins disappearing. Even Jing Ke is —”

“I need you to send us Bradamante,” I cut across her, and her mouth snapped shut with a click. “Quick.”

I was a bit ashamed to admit that I’d forgotten all about Jing Ke in the midst of the fighting.

“Not Siegfried?” Da Vinci asked.

It was tempting, but no. Aífe’s earlier full power Thunder Feat had been spread out among the three of us, but it was still enough of a drain that having to support both Siegfried and Arash on top of what I’d already lost from that would be difficult. As it was, pushing it on Aífe’s chariot to catch up to Altera was going to take even more, and supplying energy to a high maintenance Servant like Siegfried would leave me dangerously low, even if he never used his Noble Phantasm.

And even with Balmung, we weren’t going to be winning a contest of raw power with Altera.

Bradamante was not only split between the three of us, easing the individual burden, but her Noble Phantasm was relatively cheap and made up for in utility what it lacked in power. She was not only the safe choice, but the tactical one.

“No. Not for this.”

Rather than question my decision more, Da Vinci just nodded. “I’ll be expecting more detail in your after action report,” she said sternly as she typed away at the keyboard, “so you’d better make it up to me then!”

“Bradamante,” a cool, feminine voice said in the background, “please report to the Raysbift Chamber for immediate deployment. Bradamante, please report to the Raysbift Chamber for immediate deployment.”

“Reinforcements?” El-Melloi II muttered behind me.

“She’s a Servant we met and befriended in the last Singularity,” Ritsuka told him quietly. “She helped us out a lot, and when we left, she decided to come back with us.”

“You can do that?” he asked, surprised.

“I mean, we can bring Servants here with us, so why wouldn’t we be able to take any back to Chaldea when we leave?”

“Why not, indeed.”

“Parameters set,” said Da Vinci. “Target aligned. Array prepared. Mash, if you could set your shield down...”

It took Mash an extra second to catch up with what Da Vinci had said, and when she did, she took a few hurried steps back and set her shield down on the clearest spot of floor still left after Altera’s Noble Phantasm. A moment later, a familiar summoning circle bloomed atop it, glowing.

“Connection to summoning circle established,” Da Vinci reported with a nod. “Rayshifting in three, two, one...”

The circle grew brighter and brighter, and a swift wind picked up, whipping at my hair, and at the center, a familiar silhouette appeared. A moment later, it filled out, gaining color, definition, and detail, until, with a flash, Bradamante stood in front of us.

“Ah, hello?” she said awkwardly. “Lady Da Vinci didn’t tell me much about what’s going on, but whatever you need, I’m here to help!”

“Tii-chan!” Rika greeted her.

Tii-chan? El-Melloi II mouthed to himself.

“We’ll fill you in as we go,” I told Bradamante. “Da Vinci —”

“She’s still heading due east,” Da Vinci answered my question before I could ask it. “I’m losing resolution the further she goes, but it doesn’t seem like she’s making any detours. It looks like she’s taking the fastest route she can.”

“Thank you.”

I closed the connection with a press of a button, then turned back to the team. “Aife.”

Aife nodded. “It’ll be a tight squeeze,” she warned, “but if we all huddle together, it should be manageable.”

Considering how many of us were going to have to stand in that chariot together? That we could fit at all wasn’t something I was going to complain about.

“We can’t leave anyone behind,” I said, “and without Boudica, your chariot is our best option.”

Our only option, really. Even if we did like we had in Orléans and had the Servants carry us, Altera was already moving at that kind of speed, so it would take us that much longer to catch up to her. It would be much easier in a chariot that was moving four times as fast.

“Queen Boudica?” Bradamante asked, perking up. Her head swiveled as she looked around. “She’s here? Where?”

“Ah...” Ritsuka breathed, frowning. His brow furrowed.

“She’s gone, Tii-chan,” Rika said quietly. “Altera killed her.”

“She died protecting me,” Nero chimed in solemnly. “Even though...my Rome was the cause of her suffering.”

“I’m...sorry, but,” Bradamante began, “who are you?”

Aífe’s chariot thundered into existence, summoned by her call, and the pair of divine horses reared up and tossed their heads as though to announce their presence.

“Explain on the way,” I told the twins. “You should have enough experience by now to do it without speaking.”

“Right,” the twins chorused.

Aífe stepped into her chariot, taking the reins, and our group of Masters climbed in after her. Mash and Ritsuka wound up to one side with Nero and Rika on the other, which left me in the rear, in the awkward position of having to hold onto Aífe herself instead of the support rail on the lip of the chariot’s facade. Already uncomfortable because I had almost six inches on her, it was made all the worse by the simple fact that I was going to be clinging to another person instead of something more stable and solid.

It couldn’t be helped. We were already pushing the limits of what could fit in that carriage as it was.

One by one, the other Servants turned to spirit form until the only people who were actually physically present were the ones who had to be. Aífe waited only for me to say, “Go,” in her ear before she snapped the reins and we took off.

The scenery passed by in a blur, and this time, there was no excited whooping as we raced through the devastated remnants of what had once been the United Empire’s capital city. Ritsuka and Rika, grim-faced, kept their eyes forward, and Nero maintained a stiff upper lip, although I wasn’t sure I didn’t see her hands trembling in the white-knuckled grip she kept on the chariot.

The fact that it had been a nearly identical recreation of Rome couldn’t have made seeing that sort of thing any easier.

Unlike the last few times we had traveled by chariot, this time, the ride took only a few minutes. The difference in speed was simply that great, because although Altera had managed to make it over ten miles from the city in the time we’d spent gathering our wits in the aftermath of her Noble Phantasm, she couldn’t make it far enough to outpace Aífe’s chariot.

“There!” Ritsuka shouted against the wind, pointing towards the rapidly growing white dot speeding away from us.

Aífe tightened her grip on the reins.

Hang on tightly, she projected — at all three of us — right before she started dipping into our magical energy again.

Another Noble Phantasm, I realized, and I clung tighter to her waist. To the sides, the twins did, too, instructing Mash and Nero to do the same. When we were all as ready as we could be, the chariot picked up even more speed, and Altera continued to get larger and larger in front of us. The horses let out loud neighs, the thunder of their hooves gaining a deeper, otherworldly quality as sparks of blue fire kicked up from beneath them like water droplets.

Dominion Over Beasts

“Rígan Bíastae!”

The sparks became a cone, and the cone became a vortex of power, swirling around the entire chariot. Tails of energy whipped off at the back end, and like a comet, we bore down on our target, cloaked in divine might.

The thump of the chariot running Altera over was almost anticlimactic by comparison.

Even at that speed, the bump was barely noticeable, and we kept on going as Aífe steered us around in a physics defying turn that bled off more momentum than should have been possible. We came to a complete stop with nothing more than a slight jerk almost sixty feet from where we’d run over Altera, facing the opposite direction.

And the lump of bronze flesh that lay where she had been trampled slowly pulled itself to its feet, sparking electricity crackling over her skin as the wounds left behind filled in.

“Even that wasn’t enough to finish her off, was it?” Aífe muttered.

The chariot vanished beneath our feet, and I managed to stick the landing despite how unexpected it was and the sudden jolt of my stomach dropping into my knees. The twins didn’t do quite so well, although they both managed to keep from falling on their faces, and Mash squeaked but didn’t so much as stumble.

“A little more warning next time!” Rika snapped.

“There’s no time,” Aífe said. “Mash, get ready!”

Mash blinked. “W-what —”

Across from us, Altera lifted her sword and pointed it directly at us, and from as far away as we were, even still, I could feel the sudden rush of magical energy gathering. My eyes went wide — *another* Noble Phantasm?

Arash suddenly materialized in front of me, bow drawn and arrow nocked, and he let it fly at Altera’s head with the crack of the sound barrier shattering, but he might as well not have wasted the time and energy, because a swirling vortex of rainbow light formed a cone around Altera’s sword and Arash’s arrow disintegrated against it.

“Shit,” he mumbled.

“Mash!” Ritsuka shouted. “Use your Noble Phantasm!”

“Right!”

Mash lifted her hands, and halfway through the motion, her shield rematerialized. Aífe was already starting to draw a pattern of runes in the air as she slammed it down.

“Lord —”

Altera raced towards us, the swirling cone of light gouging a line in the ground as she flew across the distance like a fish being reeled in on a high speed line.

“CHALDEAS!”

The familiar brickwork formed, and the rampart materialized in front of our group just in time for Altera to reach us. She collided with a shockingly gentle crash, compared to everything else that had hit Mash’s shield, but then the vortex of light ground against the wall like a drill on stone and the high pitched whine stabbed into my eardrums and set my teeth on edge.

Some monkey brain instinct compelled me to squeeze my eyes shut and slap my hands over my ears, and the twins did just that, staggering under the nails-on-a-chalkboard screech. I had to grit my teeth and do the latter, but through some force of will, I managed to keep my eyes open so that I could be ready when the moment showed itself.

The vortex wound down just as cracks were starting to form in Lord Chaldeas, and the multicolored blade of Altera’s sword stopped spinning, leaving the pointed tip pressed against the small divot it had managed to carve into the rampart. I met her cold, dead eyes through the translucent barrier.

Just as Lord Chaldeas flickered and disappeared, Emiya dropped down from the sky, twin blades in hand, aiming for a debilitating blow. Altera leapt back, swiping at him with her sword, and all I could feel as it lengthened and bent like a whip to fend off his attack was exasperation.

Seriously? Just how much bullshit did she have hiding up her nonexistent sleeves?

Emiya aborted at the last second and took her sword on his two, letting himself be thrown away a few feet, and he landed next to Rika, grimacing.

“Damn,” he muttered. “She’s got pretty good fighting instincts.”

The rest of our team materialized around us, tensed and ready for battle. Bradamante took to the front, next to Aífe, and stared down Altera with an unwavering gaze.

“So,” she said, “this is the terrible enemy my friends were telling me about, Queen Aífe?”

“She calls herself Altera,” Aífe answered. “So far, we’ve seen two Noble Phantasms. One, you just saw, and the other resulted in the aftermath you were summoned into.”

“I see.” Bradamante’s grip on her tiny lance tightened. “So all that destruction...all those lives lost... It’s all on her hands, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Mash. “That’s why, Miss Bradamante, we need your help to beat her.”

Bradamante squared her shoulders.

“For this...you didn’t even need to ask, Mash.”

“I see,” Altera said in the same soft monotone she’d been using since she was summoned. “Then you’re all...still going to stand in my way?”

“Stand in your way?” Nero asked, voice trembling. “Yes, of course we are! Mm! For the comrades you killed and for the sake of the Rome you intend to destroy, I... All of us refuse to let you advance one step further!”

“I see.”

Instantly, she was in front of us, sword already in motion, and Aífe took point, blocking the rainbow smear with her red spear. Aífe grunted at the strength behind the blow, but held her ground without giving any away. Arash, from the side, let loose a barrage of arrows, but Altera retreated, swiping them out of the air with her impossible sword as she stepped back.

“There!” El-Melloi II called as he flung a fireball. Altera batted it aside with her free hand, unaffected. “Tch. Figures that her Magic Resistance would be that high.”

Emiya threw out his signature twin blades, and even as they flew at Altera, he prepared his second set and rushed forward to do that same finishing move he’d tried against Caligula — and then flailed before he could even get started when Altera smashed that first set with a single swing.

“What?” he sputtered. “That’s not fair!”

“Keep your head in the game!” Aífe barked at him, and then she took off, racing to meet Altera halfway.

Her opening attack was deflected with ease that was quickly becoming familiar, and she went through a series of stabs and slashes with her spear that even to my eyes seemed much, much slower than usual. Altera blocked, dodged, or just outright batted them all aside without any sign of struggle, which probably wasn’t saying much when her face hadn’t changed since the moment she’d been summoned.

And then Aífe kicked it up a notch and the slow, testing strikes vanished into the blur of motion and force that I had come to expect of her at her best. She swung and jabbed with such speed that her arms disappeared and her spear became nothing more than momentary flashes of red in between strikes.

Altera kept up with them all, expression never changing. Any injury she took was minor — scratches at best — and healed almost as quickly as it appeared, thanks to the Grail she had absorbed. Neither side seemed to be giving an inch, but neither side was taking one, either.

Bradamante looked ready to go and join in.

“Don’t,” I told her shortly.

She looked back at me, brow furrowing. “Why not?”

“This isn’t going to do it,” I said. “The instant you see an opening, I need you to make it wider so that we can take advantage of it.”

“If you want an opening,” El-Melloi II said, “then I can give you one.”

He gathered magical energy swiftly, and I realized his intent a bare second before he swung that feather fan he’d taken to using whenever we got into combat.

“Unreturning Formation!”

My head jerked back around.

“Aífe, back up!” I shouted at her.

Aífe broke off in just enough time to avoid the pillars of stone that fell from the sky, landing one after the other in a circle around Altera. Fiery Chinese symbols lit up between them, aglow with power. From above, a final stone ceiling dropped, octagonal in shape, landing so that each pillar stood at one of its corners.

“No.”

And then Altera swung her sword about, its blade shining with light from each section, and those pillars were cut in half like so much wheat. El-Melloi II’s Noble Phantasm fractured, broke, and disappeared.

His mouth dropped open. “What?” he choked out.

“She just...destroyed El-Melloi II’s Noble Phantasm?” Mash breathed.

Altera kept going like she hadn’t done anything out of the ordinary and chased Aífe down to reengage in melee, only this time, she was on the offensive and Aífe was forced on the defense. That ridiculous sword lengthened, bent, and contracted, and it met Gáe Bolg with a sound not unlike crackling glass.

Light surged as the prongs at the base of Altera’s sword began to spin, and the blade of her sword erupted in red fire. When she swung, sparks leapt from every smash of the blade against Aífe’s spear, and Aífe was suddenly on the retreat, dodging, blocking, and parrying each blow, even as Gáe Bolg was nearly ripped out of her hands each time.

She was doing the same thing Siegfried had done against Fafnir, I realized with a nasty jolt. Altera was using miniature charges of her Noble Phantasm to increase the striking power of her sword. It was giving her a very literal edge over Aífe, who had to do everything she could to avoid a direct hit just so that she wouldn’t be killed instantly.

Shit.

“Emiya, go!” I ordered.

Emiya glanced at Rika.

“Go help Super Action Mom!” Rika echoed me without hesitation.

He didn’t waste anymore time and leapt towards the fight. He went on the attack with his twin swords, needling Altera with strikes of opportunity.

It didn’t help as much as I’d hoped. Emiya’s mere presence forced things into a more even equilibrium, because his hit-and-run tactics kept Altera from focusing exclusively on Aífe, but all that wound up doing was giving her enough breathing room to counterattack on the margins. There was no chance for her to disengage and do something like use her own Noble Phantasm, not when she must have seen — as I could — that Emiya would be crushed instantly if he was on his own.

Damn it. She’d survived being run over by Aífe’s chariot at full charge, she’d busted straight through El-Melloi II’s Noble Phantasm without breaking a sweat, and even if she wouldn’t survive Emiya’s Caladbolg to the face, there was no room for him to prepare that safely.

As a test, I split off a section of my swarm and had them beeline for her face, but she didn’t even break stride as she seared through all of them with a swing of her blazing sword.

It was like watching our team fight a machine. She never made a wrong move, never made a mistake, never slipped up. She wasn’t even that good a martial artist — Aífe was obviously far and away much more skilled — but she didn’t have to be when she never showed a single opening.

“Arash,” I began, “can you...?”

“Not without hitting Emiya or Aífe,” said Arash, like I’d expected him to. “They’re moving too fast for me to land a sure hit.”

“What even *is* she?” Rika murmured.

“I can help,” Bradamante said. She turned to me, entreating. “Master. I can help them!”

For a heartbeat, I considered telling her no. But we really were running low on options, and I could feel Aífe being forced to dip into our reserves again to bolster her own strength. I was already coming dangerously close to half empty; it was half the reason I hadn’t cast any spells to lend a hand.

“Do it.”

Her smile lit up her face.

“Yes!”

She kicked off the ground, rocketing towards the battle that was still raging, and this, *this* was enough to tip the scales more in our favor. They had already surpassed my eyes’ ability to keep track of the individual moves, but the flow of things very obviously turned against Altera. Even with that trick she was using adding strength to her strikes, a third opponent put her squarely on the defense, and when one of our team was forced back, the other two were enough to buy the fraction of a second needed to recover.

I had barely dared to hope when it all went wrong again.

The fiery blaze around Altera's sword exploded, and the force of it threw Emiya, Bradamante, and Aífe back dozens of feet. She bought herself a few seconds — but those few seconds were all she needed, because the prongs of her sword spun up again, and she pointed it straight forward. At us.

Mash's shield was strong enough to defend us, but that wouldn't matter. The vortex of Altera's second Noble Phantasm was large, large enough that it would sweep up all three of our Servants, even if they tried to dodge.

The blade of the sword ignited. Magical energy swirled. Light spun off of the multicolored blade.

I made a choice. The only one I had.

“Photon —”

“Everyone,” I shouted, “come back!”

Instantly, two of my Command Spells burned away. Aífe and Bradamante teleported next to me as Mash planted her shield.

“Lord —”

“Emiya,” Rika called as one of her own Command Spells blazed, “come!”

“Ray!”

“CHALDEAS!”

Altera was already charging when Emiya appeared behind the safety of the rampart that was Lord Chaldeas, and he had just barely made it in before the vortex of light swallowed up the place where he'd just been standing.

An instant later, the point of Altera's Noble Phantasm smashed into the wall, grinding and drilling away at the translucent stone. This time, without enough time for Aífe to strengthen it, the wall started to chip beneath the raw power of what Altera called “Photon Ray.” The brickwork shuddered and groaned, losing small chunks at a time, but still held as the swirling light died down.

And then Altera pulled back her sword, the blade blazed again, and she stabbed — directly into the divot her Noble Phantasm had carved into the barrier.

Lord Chaldeas *shattered*, and the tip of the sword screeched as it made contact with the shield behind the wall. More magical energy gathered, the prongs spun up once more, the blade shone with light, and I realized with horror that she was going to use her Noble Phantasm *again*, before we could even hope to muster a defense.

Mash gasped, Rika shrieked, and Ritsuka yelled, because none of us had expected her to make it through a defense that had stood up to *Excalibur*.

“Arash!” I scrambled desperately. I didn’t even have an order in mind, I just hoped that there was no way he could miss with her this close.

“Arondight...”

It was not Arash who answered me.

“Overload!”

Instead, a gleaming blue blade descended to take Altera’s head.