

Chapter LXI: Die Hard

As usual, I was the first of us Masters to wake up the next morning, and I carefully extricated myself from the snug pile of bodies and bedrolls that made up our little group. When I nudged open the tent flap, behind me, Mash murmured something and curled tighter into Ritsuka's side.

"It's just a length of canvas and some wooden poles," Emiya had said when he made it.

I was beginning to suspect that he was much less honest about his full capabilities back when he first explained them than he'd seemed. The helmets, I could accept, given the reasoning he provided. Even pots and pans, I could give a pass, since they were essentially just shaped metal and that wasn't all that different from a sword.

There was a limit to how far I was willing to accept those kinds of stretches, though.

Those were thoughts for later, so I put them out of my mind as I rolled my shoulders and worked out the kinks in my back from the awkwardness of our sleeping positions. The morning sun shone down on me from above, still climbing into the eastward sky, and I squinted, estimating the time to be around eight o'clock, maybe eight-thirty.

Aífe stood from where she'd been keeping watch as I stepped closer to the center of our little "camp" and the remains of last night's fire.

"Sleep well?" she asked.

"Well enough," I told her, noncommittal. My anemic swarm checked the perimeter, but there was no sign of any disturbances since the night before, so it looked like Stheno had indeed left us alone. "Anything interesting happen last night?"

"Nothing. Either that goddess isn't the vengeful sort," and I could hear the doubt in Aífe's voice, "or she realized how outmatched she was and decided not to throw her life away on a petty attempt at revenge."

The second, it seemed we both thought, was more likely. After all, our team had utterly manhandled the two Servants she had serving her yesterday, and while there was no telling how the tables might turn once Noble Phantasms came out, I was fairly confident that we could weather whatever they might have. Between Emiya and Mash, after all, we had a pair of fairly incredible defensive Noble Phantasms ourselves, and with us Masters around plus Chaldea's generators as backup, we could hold out for longer, too.

"Do you think she might actually take you up on the offer you made yesterday?" Aífe asked.

Offer? Ah. About her coming with us. Well, it really was Nero's offer more than it was mine, wasn't it?

"No," I said. "My bet is that she stays here with those two bodyguards of hers and enjoys whatever time she has left while we go and fix this Singularity."

“Sounds about right,” Arash agreed as he joined us. “Calling her hedonistic isn’t quite right, but she isn’t the type to fight for anything.”

“She bewitches others to do that for her,” Aífe added dryly.

A Master, the kind cautionary tales were told about on Earth Bet. The kind like Regent, who took away your autonomy and subverted your body or your mind.

“As useful as she could be, I think this works out better,” I said. “If she doesn’t have the desire or the motivation to help us, then even if her Alluring Euphony worked on some of the United Empire’s Servants, she’d just be a liability.”

She would’ve been incredibly useful during Gold Morning as a sort of “backup singer” for Canary, but here and now, if she didn’t want to fight and help us, then she was nothing more than dead weight. Better to let her sit here and twiddle her thumbs than lug her around with us in the vague hopes that she might be useful later.

It went without saying that I could probably force her to help if her life was directly in danger while she was with us, but when she had the ability to subvert all but two of our team, that wasn’t a tightrope I was all that interested in walking.

“If only it really had been Hephaestus, huh?” Arash mused, smiling.

Yes, that really would have been convenient. And if he was anything like his mythological self, he would have been a lot more personable than Stheno, too.

“We were never going to be that lucky.”

My career had driven that point home for me often enough.

“Foouu.”

The little gremlin strutted out of the tent, took a moment to open its mouth and let loose a jaw-cracking yawn, and then started to stretch out like a cat. While it was doing that, the tent flap was pushed aside and Mash came out. She stopped to crouch down and scratch Fou, and it leaned into her touch and crooned happily.

It never ceased to amaze me just how well she got along with that thing.

When she stood back up, she turned to us with a smile. “Good morning, Miss Taylor, Miss Aífe, Arash.”

“Morning,” I returned.

“Sleep well, Mash?” Arash asked.

Mash nodded. “Yes, thank you.”

“The twins?”

“Still asleep, for now.”

“And Nero?”

“Her, too, Miss Taylor.”

Emiya faded into existence nearby, smirking. “How much do you want to bet that Rika would be out of bed in an instant if I said ‘breakfast’ loud enough?”

No bet, I thought, although it would definitely be funny to watch her scramble out of the tent like it was on fire. Aloud, I said, “And if you did it without breakfast actually being ready? Are you willing to bet Rika wouldn’t use a Command Spell to forbid you from doing something like that again?”

Emiya raised his hands in surrender, chuckling as he shook his head.

“Message received,” he said. “I’ll see what we still have from what we brought when we left Rome and the rations we got sent earlier. We might just have to see if Da Vinci can send more supplies over, though.”

“Speaking of Da Vinci,” said Arash, “shouldn’t we have contacted her yesterday after everything was over with? She’s probably been worried about what happened.”

My mouth pulled into a grimace as Mash gasped. “Oh! I forgot about that completely!”

So had I. I could only blame that on just how much Stheno and her playing with our heads had put me off kilter — it was different from Imp or that time with Nice Guy. Their powers messed with my perceptions, too, but neither of them had twisted me around their fingers the way Stheno had. The only comparisons I could think to make were Cherish and Heartbreaker, but I’d been exposed to one comparatively little and the other not at all, so it was all intellectual. Academic.

No, wait, I’d forgotten that faceoff with Valefor back when everyone and their grandmother wanted a piece of the Bay after Leviathan’s attack. But again, while I’d seen the effects of his power, I hadn’t experienced them firsthand.

Stheno...really was the first time I’d truly experienced a power like that for myself, wasn’t she?

“Get breakfast started, Emiya,” I ordered. He arched an eyebrow at me, but didn’t protest. “Mash, Aífe, and I will get into contact with Da Vinci and update her on everything that’s happened since Etna.”

Boudica materialized then, too. “I’ll help him,” she said.

I didn’t have any reason to tell her otherwise, so I just nodded. As the two of them split off to start making food, I turned back to Mash and Aífe.

“We’ll probably need to stabilize the connection even more on this island.”

“Right!”

“Understood.”

“I’ll stick around back here and keep an eye on the other three,” said Arash, nodding towards the tent.

“I’ll leave that to you, then.”

Mash, Aífe, and I split off and went to find a good spot outside of camp to set up the magic circle we needed to get into contact with Chaldea. I was careful along the way to step over and not on the faintly glowing line of runes that marked the edge of the bounded field Aífe had helped to erect the night before, although even if I’d tried my hardest, I probably wouldn’t have been able to so much as smudge them. The difference in our respective power was simply that vast.

We had to go a little deeper inland to find a good spot, mostly because the beach was either rocky and uneven or soft sand, neither of which was conducive to a sturdy, stable magic circle or the carving of runes. As long as we had the camp in sight, though, I wasn’t too worried.

With our spot found, Aífe crouched down and scrawled a familiar set of runes into the hard-packed dirt, meticulously forming a circle as she had several times before. When she was done, Mash placed her shield face-up in the center and stepped back so that I could step forward.

“Anfang!”

The familiar hologram sprang to life in the air above Mash’s shield, and after a brief moment of blank static, it resolved into the main station of the Command Room. Da Vinci’s face blinked back at me.

“Ah, hello?” she said tentatively. “I wasn’t expecting you guys to contact me right now. Your vitals evened out about half an hour ago, so I thought you would be sleeping.”

“Good morning, Miss Da Vinci,” Mash said politely.

“Buona serata, Mash,” Da Vinci said wryly. “It’s closer to midnight here.”

Mash blinked. “Oh.”

Da Vinci smiled. “It must feel incredible, but even though it’s been almost a week and a half for you guys, for us here at Chaldea, it’s only been about twelve hours since you left.” She cleared her throat. “Now, I have my suspicions already, but what did you need?”

“After everything that happened, we forgot to report in last night,” I said. “I thought it would be a good idea to tell you what went on sooner instead of later.”

“Yes, there *were* a few irregularities we observed in your readings last night, and some brief spikes in energy consumption that match Servant combat.” Da Vinci leaned towards the screen. “Tell me everything.”

“We met the goddess hiding out on this island,” I told her, and silently, I added, *And she was a massive bitch*. “Unfortunately, it wasn’t Hephaestus or any other god that we might have thought it was...”

So I told her about Stheno. About how and when we'd first spotted her, our decision to make contact, Stheno's immediate reaction, and the details of her Alluring Euphony skill. How we'd had to fight Arash and Emiya, how we'd knocked them out of her control, and then how we'd chased her down into the depths of her temple.

"That was a terrible decision," Da Vinci scolded me. "Facing a goddess inside her own temple? There are so many reasons that's a bad idea and I shouldn't need to tell you any of them, Taylor."

"We didn't know who she was," I said bluntly. "I wasn't willing to take the chances that she was going down there to activate a trump card."

"...I guess I can give you that one," Da Vinci said reluctantly. "It still shouldn't have been done, and it could have gone a lot worse for you, but under the circumstances, a living goddess on an island that was probably pulled straight from the Reverse Side is the sort of threat you really don't give any chances."

"So I didn't."

I went on, explaining what we'd found down at the end of the tunnel, as well as the two Servants Stheno had in her employ and how easily we'd defeated them. Last, I relayed what we learned from Stheno about the likely circumstances of her summoning and what little she'd known about Romulus.

"Hmm," Da Vinci hummed thoughtfully. "A Lancer with horns and a tail and a Berserker in a kimono with horns... I can't say that rings any bells. Shapeshifting isn't a common skill, but it isn't uncommon either, and there are numerous heroes who were born with inhuman blood as part of their background."

She shook her head.

"If they were summoned by Stheno attempting to summon her sisters, then it's possible the connection is something about 'transforming into a monster,' which doesn't narrow the list down as much as you might think. Well. As long as you don't think they'll bother you, I suppose their identities don't matter."

"They obey Stheno," I said simply. "Neither of them seemed to particularly care about us until she ordered them to fight."

"They're not much of a threat in either case," Aífe added. "Those two weren't very impressive from the beginning."

"Not every Heroic Spirit earns a place on the Throne for being a peerless warrior," Da Vinci told her cheekily. "Why, some of us never so much as threw a punch before ascending!"

Aífe huffed a snort, but didn't rebut the point.

"As for the rest of it..." Da Vinci trailed off for a moment. "Romulus denying his Divinity isn't something I can say is in character or not. It could have been a tactical decision instead, a way of

limiting the effectiveness of the Counter Force's response. I suppose the difference really is academic at this point, isn't it? It's not like we'll find out with enough time to plan around it."

"Without armaments specifically meant for killing gods, I'm not sure it would matter either way."

If Emiya had anything designed solely for godslaying instead of just "anything with a healing factor," then he had yet to say so.

"Quite." Da Vinci sighed. "Well, it didn't turn out the way we were hoping, but at least we know now which god was squatting on this island and why. Now that you've solved that mystery, your next step is to make your way into the heart of the United Empire's territory, yes?"

I nodded. "Right. Up through Spain and into their capital. We might not be able to approach it from behind, so they might see us coming, but we should at least be able to get fairly close undetected. It'll be dangerous, but we'll be far enough away from Hadrian's Wall to avoid the army of magical beasts, and the instant Jing Ke takes out Constantine the Great, we can rush in and take the fight to Romulus."

"A bit basic as far as plans go, but simple is often the best. Less that can go wrong." Da Vinci smiled. "I suppose the only thing left for me to do is wish you good luck —"

Beep-beep! chimed an alarm from Da Vinci's monitor. She turned briefly to look at it, and her eyes went wide.

"Enemy Servant incoming!" She whirled back towards us. "ETA — thirty... No, twenty seconds!" Gravely, she said, "It's Caligula!"

My eyebrows rose even as Mash gasped. Twenty seconds? Caligula? I wasn't sure whether I should be grateful he was coming to us mostly on our terms or furious that he'd caught us during a moment like this.

"No time!" I spun about, back in the direction of camp. "Mash — go! Protect Ritsuka and Rika! Aífe!" I gestured vaguely at myself. "Pick me up and let's go!"

"Right!"

Mash planted one foot and reached down to scoop up her shield.

"Be careful —" was all Da Vinci got to say before her image flickered and vanished.

Even as Mash kicked off the ground and raced back towards camp, Aífe appeared next to me and swept me off my feet — literally — and into her arms. It must have looked comical considering she was almost five inches shorter than me.

An instant later, we were moving, and in just a few seconds, we were back at camp, because we really hadn't gone that far to begin with, maybe thirty yards. Aífe set me down almost roughly, and I stumbled as I got my feet back under me. I didn't waste any time pulling out my puppets, for as useless as they'd been in our last fight with him, and she had barely dropped me off before her spear appeared in her hands.

Ritsuka and Rika, who had been loitering about the campsite, blinked at me. “Senpai?”

“Ritsuka, Rika —”

“Master!” Arash materialized, bow in hand. “Incoming Servant! It’s —”

“Caligula!” Mash shouted.

BONG

Mash’s shield reverberated like a gong as Caligula appeared, his fist planted on its surface, and she grunted as the blow pushed her back several feet, her heels digging trenches in the dirt. Maddened red eyes turned and looked past her, searching.

For Nero, who still seemed to be in our shared tent, sleeping.

“There you are!”

Aífe’s fist slammed into Caligula’s cheek with the force of a detonating bomb, and he went flying backwards, tumbling across the ground to land in the sand of the beach. She gave chase, but Caligula was back up and standing long before she reached him, and the second time, her punch was caught with the palm of one hand.

“I hope you don’t run away this time,” said Aífe. “I didn’t get to test your strength the last time you showed up.”

“Nero...” Caligula rasped. “My niece... My beloved niece... Where is Nero?”

“Shit!” Rika cursed from nearby. “This guy is back again? I wasn’t interested in a sequel!”

“You’ll regret it if you take your eyes off of me,” Aífe told Caligula. “It’s going to take everything you have just to keep up!”

Her other fist came around, planting itself in his stomach, and Caligula grunted as his armor shrieked in protest from the force behind the blow.

“Insolent...pest!”

He pulled back one hand and punched with the same impossible strength that Emiya had compared to Herakles, but Aífe twisted around the blow, let his momentum carry him forward into an overextension, and used his arm as a lever to throw him into the sand. He was back on his feet in an instant, the beach exploding as he threw himself back at Aífe, but Aífe calmly redirected his momentum again, swung him around her hip, and flung him back the way he’d originally come. Caligula skidded along the beach like a stone skipped in a pond and landed with a splash in the shallows just off shore.

There was a moment of silence, a brief second of calm, and then water sprayed everywhere and Caligula seemed to teleport across the distance. Aífe braced herself, and their fists met with a

thunderous crack that seemed to rattle my teeth. Sand flew about, kicked up from the sheer strength behind their blows.

And then they accelerated, speeding past what my eyes could follow as I lost track of individual moves and had to settle for a general flow of the action. The meaty staccato of their fists striking each other's bodies formed a drumbeat to match their pace. The spray of sand going everywhere formed a haze that further blurred their bodies.

That was the moment when the other Servants decided to join us. Emiya and Boudica landed nearby, eyes already on the action, and El-Melloi II materialized like a mirage, brow furrowed.

"He's back again," Emiya sneered.

"I can help this time," Boudica said.

"You've encountered him before?" El-Melloi II asked.

Mash nodded. "Yes. Berserker class Servant, Caligula. According to Emiya, he has strength equal to Herakles."

El-Melloi II's cheek twitched. "Putting aside how you know that..."

The action slowed for a brief moment as Caligula's fist sailed over Aífe's shoulder, and Aífe's counterblow struck him square in the face, hard enough to knock him down onto his back. She did the same maneuver I'd seen her do against Tiberius, jumping up, flipping for the momentum, and bringing her heel down on his body. Unlike Tiberius, Caligula caught her foot and flung her away. They were both up an instant later and back at it, their whole bodies nothing but vague blurs as they raced across the beach.

"What do we do, Master?" asked Mash.

Rika turned to Emiya. "Emiya, can you hit him without hurting Super Action Mom?"

Emiya grimaced. "No. Most of the stuff I have that would hurt Caligula enough to matter has a 'minimum safe distance.'"

If it could hurt Caligula, then that also meant that it would hurt Aífe, too, which would defeat the point of helping her in the first place.

"Arash?" I asked without looking his way.

"Maybe," he said. "If they separate for long enough. With how close they are right now, decent odds I'll hit her instead."

And we didn't have anyone else on Aífe's level who could insert themselves into the melee. My mind raced. What were our options? We didn't have many. Siegfried would have been helpful to have here, but without him, we had to work around our range limitations against an enemy who just got stronger and faster the longer he fought.

That was the biggest hurdle we were going to have to surmount. Time.

“Spread out!” I ordered. My ravens took off and flapped their wings, climbing high enough that Caligula would have to jump quite a bit to reach them. “Look for an opening! If you get a shot, take it!”

“Right!”

We fanned out, thinning our line across the outer edges of the battlefield, far enough away that none of us was in danger of being directly drawn into the fight. Huginn and Muninn circled up above, struggling just as much as I was to keep track of the battle raging down below, while Emiya and Arash watched, eagle-eyed, for their chance to jump in with a well-placed shot.

There just wasn't enough *room*. With every second, Aífe and Caligula got faster and faster, bouncing around with such speed that the only reason I could follow them was because I had a literal bird's eye view. Even still, they were disappearing, and increasingly, they looked more like they were teleporting around than actually physically crossing the distance.

“Boudica,” I muttered to the woman who had come with me to act as a kind of bodyguard. “Can you get in there?”

She frowned and shook her head. “No,” she told me ruefully. “They're starting to move too fast even for me. If I tried to push my way into it, I think I would probably just be killed.”

“I might be able to,” Arash chimed in, “but it would be dangerous even for me.”

CRACK was the sound of another heavy blow landing, and this time, it was Aífe who was thrown back, tumbling along the sand and into the dirt. Caligula, standing strong, chased after her.

“Now!” I shouted.

Emiya and Arash didn't hesitate, and each shot a volley of arrows at Caligula to try and pin him down, but Caligula powered through them, lifting his arms to protect his head as he charged. The arrows pinged off of his armor, glancing off of the gleaming golden metal, and the handful that found the chinks went ignored like they were little more than annoyances.

Considering his Constitution, which was the measure of how much damage he could take before his spiritual core started fracturing, they probably were.

“Gandr!” the twins shouted, firing off black balls of light. I joined them and pelted him with shots from my ravens, but just like the arrows, our attacks didn't even make him flinch.

“You'll have to go through me, first!” Boudica cried, and she charged to meet him, sword drawn and shield brandished.

This, Caligula *did* stop for, but only so he could knock her sword to the side and take hold of her neck with his other hand. He lifted her off the ground as she struggled, but her sword glanced off the plates of his armor just the same as Arash and Emiya's arrows had.

“Queen Booty!” Rika screamed.

The ground shook when he slammed her down, and Boudica hit the beach in a plume of white sand as the entire island seemed to vibrate beneath my feet.

“Son of a bitch!” Rika snarled. “Gandr! Gandr! Gandr!”

Her shots splashed uselessly against Caligula’s armor. He didn’t even glance her way; he just lifted his arm, like he was about to deliver the final blow against Boudica.

“Hahaha!”

Except Spartacus appeared as if from nowhere, dropping out of the sky the same way he had in their last fight, his sword aimed to split Caligula’s head in half. Metal screeched as Caligula blocked the attack with one gauntlet and the blade of Spartacus’ sword skittered across the surface, and then Spartacus went flying back from a devastating punch that shattered his ribs again.

“More!” Spartacus was back up in an instant. “Give me more! Let me show you my love more!”

And as he reengaged Caligula, Boudica sprang back to her feet as well, and together, they tag-teamed him. Paradoxically, with those two holding him off, Emiya and Arash had an easier time getting shots in, and with four Servants focused on him like that, even Caligula was slowly driven back as those tiny, minor wounds accumulated.

With him so distracted, I turned my own focus to our currently injured member. “Ritsuka!” I barked at the one closest to her. “Check on Aife! Give her First Aid if she needs it!”

“Roger!” Ritsuka acknowledged. He hadn’t made it three steps before Aife’s voice stopped him.

“Don’t bother,” she said as she stood from where she’d landed. Even as we watched, the wounds Caligula had inflicted sealed up and healed over until it was like they’d never been there. A cold grin showed her teeth. “A useful trick I learned from my sister.”

She held out her hand, and Gáe Bolg leapt to her palm as though magnetized.

“Let’s show this lumbering brute another one, shall we?”

She settled into a stance I had only seen of her once before, but which was all the more familiar for it, with bent knees, one arm held out as though to counterbalance the other, and the other reared back. The shaft Gáe Bolg ran parallel to her outstretched arm. A javelin throwing stance.

My head whipped around to the fight. “Spartacus! Boudica! Disengage!”

They split off from Caligula immediately, and Arash and Emiya increased their own focus on him to keep him from pursuing. Caligula grunted and blocked them with his arms, protecting his head with his gauntlets much as he had before.

It wouldn’t hold him there. Not for long.

It didn't have to.

“Gáe Bolg —”

The air froze. Dripping bloodlust radiated from the glowing blade of the spear. My own heart thudded in my chest as the feeling of impending doom pressed down like a knife against my throat.

“Prototype!”

The red spear flew. Like a missile, like a streak of light, it crossed the distance in less time than it took to blink, the world howling in its wake. It shot unerringly towards Caligula's chest, and this time, there was no Pax Romana here to keep it from punching straight through and dealing a fatal blow. Caligula's red eyes had only enough time to see it coming.

And he snatched it right out of the air, the shaft held tight in his fist right below the mounting. The tip of the wicked, undulating blade hovered a scant inch from his chest, vibrating violently.

Mash gasped.

“No way!”

Caligula caught Gáe Bolg.

A moment of stunned silence hung, a brief second as we all processed the impossible act we'd just witnessed, but Caligula gave us no time to come to terms with it. He flipped his grip on Gáe Bolg, and then he twisted and threw it — not back at Aífe, but towards Emiya.

“Rho Aias!” Emiya shouted, and a four-petaled flower bloomed in front of him just in time to catch the red blur that was Aífe's spear. Two of the petals shattered just from the strength behind the throw, but his hastily formed barrier was strong enough not to break completely.

Caligula was already in motion before his stolen weapon even reached his target, spinning around and kicking off the ground. I didn't even have time to think about who he was going after before his fists slammed into the dirt where Arash had just been standing as Arash leapt up into the air to avoid him.

Arash took aim, but by the time he loosed another volley of arrows, Caligula had already moved again, so fast it was almost like he was teleporting. The crack of flesh meeting flesh echoed as Aífe was driven straight into the ground with such force that she left a crater behind two feet deep.

“Super Action Mom!” said Rika.

I could barely keep up.

“Rah!” Mash cried. She came to Aífe's defense, swinging her shield around like it was a cudgel. Caligula stepped back and out of the way, and then stepped back in and swung his fist towards her. Her shield rang again, and this time, the hit was so hard that she was actually lifted off her feet when she was thrown back.

Huginn and Muninn swerved up above, firing more shots down at him, but just like before, he ignored them, letting them splash against his armor and even his skin like they were just raindrops. The blood from his wounds sizzled as my ravens' burned it away.

Just what was it going to take to put this guy down?

“Hahahaha!” Spartacus laughed and rushed back into the action, swiping at Caligula with his sword. Caligula knocked each swing away with the metal of his bracers, and between them, he launched fast, harsh jabs into Spartacus' chest, breaking something every time.

Spartacus ignored them the same way Caligula did his own wounds, except Spartacus healed after each one. Spots of pink light glowing from under his skin betrayed the work of his Noble Phantasm.

“Tch.” Aífe scoffed, snarling, and pulled herself to her feet. Even from where I stood, I could hear the crackling of broken bones snapping back into place as her runes healed her. “No style and no technique, but this guy definitely hits hard and moves fast, doesn't he?”

Can you still fight? I asked her.

Don't insult me, she replied. *He might be fast and strong, but technique is more important than raw physicality. I'm not out of tricks yet.*

Aloud, she shouted, “Thirty seconds!”

Emiya seemed to catch on first. “You don't ask for much, do you?” he called back at her sarcastically. “Keh... Master!”

“Do it, Emiya!” Rika answered.

Arash, I began, but he already knew what I was going to order.

Understood, Master, he replied. *Reinforcing Emiya.*

Emiya's bow disappeared. “Trace, on!”

A dozen normal blades appeared in the air above him, and they fired, forcing Caligula to separate from Spartacus to avoid them as they speared the ground. Emiya was already moving as it happened, his trademark twin swords forming in his hands, and then he flung them out like a pair of boomerangs that spun like buzzsaws.

“Spirit and technique, flawless and firm.”

They bounced off of Caligula's bracers and ricocheted up into the air, still spinning.

“Our strength rips the mountains.”

Another pair formed in Emiya's hands, and he leapt into the air.

“Our swords split the river.”

Caligula lifted his arms to block, and his gauntlets screeched and split as Emiya's swords carved deep gouges into them.

Emiya dropped the second pair of swords and let them bite into the sand, even as his arms swung back and a third pair formed in his hands.

And up above, the deflected pair curved back around, honing in on Caligula like heat-seeking missiles. I could see the plan even as it came together.

"Our names reach the imperial villa."

The third pair of swords grew and splintered, spines shaped like feathers jutting out along the spines so that they almost looked like a pair of wings.

"The two of us cannot hold the heavens together!"

Metal screamed. Blood splattered. Emiya's swords carved through Caligula's armor and cut into the vulnerable flesh beneath even as the first pair came down and sliced lines through his bare biceps. The first and second pair of swords disappeared like mirages, but the third, altered pair shattered and split like glass.

"Guh...eh," Caligula grunted. The tattered remains of the sashes that crossed his chest hung limply from their mountings.

But he was still alive.

"You...nuisance," Caligula rasped. "You...pest!"

He lifted his arm to deal another heavy blow, and before he could, a volley of arrows from Arash forced him to defend himself, giving Emiya a critical moment to back away.

"Damn," he muttered, clicking his tongue. "Even that wasn't enough for a final blow, huh? Guess a famous Servant summoned on their home turf really is that incredible."

Caligula, still being peppered by arrows, brought one foot up and stomped it into the ground, sending the whole island shaking. A plume of sand shot up, obscuring him from view, and in that brief fraction of a second of reprieve, he moved, racing through it and straight towards Emiya.

"Haha!" Spartacus put himself in the way, but his injuries only seemed to make Caligula more furious, because he reached in past Spartacus' sword and took hold of his meaty neck, and just like he had earlier with Boudica, he slammed Spartacus into the ground. As though to make sure Spartacus stayed down, he stomped one, two, three times, and each time, the *CRACK* of snapping bones echoed.

Boudica herself came to reinforce Spartacus, but Caligula spun around, and with his ludicrous strength, he batted her sword to the side so hard that it was actually ripped right out of her hand. Then, he backhanded her across the face, and I heard her jaw and cheek *shatter*.

Shit.

“Queen Booty!” Rika cried again.

“MASH!” Ritsuka roared. “GO!”

“Yes!”

I took off running, even as Mash rushed to put herself between Caligula and everyone else. Caligula had no patience for her either, and reared his fist back for another bone-shaking punch.

“Momentary Reinforcement!” shouted Ritsuka, and Mash’s body glowed briefly as the spell settled on her.

BONG was the sound of the collision, and Mash grunted, knees bending, but stayed in place, unmoved.

“Hiyah!”

Her return blow wasn’t anything more complicated than bashing him with the front of her shield, but it was enough to force him back a step, even if it didn’t do any appreciable damage.

It didn’t stop him for long.

My hand reached for my knife, but I wasn’t stupid enough to think I could do anything to him on my own. No, not like my desperate strike against Leviathan with Armsmaster’s halberd. Here, there was no Panacea to fix my back if he snapped it, and I was a vital member of the team, not another body thrown into the grinder in the hopes of buying just one more minute.

Arash! I called out to him. *Catch!*

Ahead, Emiya was already in the air, bowstring drawn and arrow notched, one of those undulating things that used to be a sword. At the same moment, I threw my Last Resort, Arash leapt towards the fray, and Emiya let go.

“Hu!”

But Caligula was just too fast. Emiya’s arrow streaked past him, impacting the sand and throwing up another plume of it, and all he had to show for that effort was a thin line of red across Caligula’s cheek and half an ear torn away.

Eyes wide with fury, lips curled into a snarl, Caligula whipped his fist around, and without the burst of temporary strength from Ritsuka’s spell, Mash was thrown backwards again with a yelp.

Arash came down before he could follow her, and he stabbed down with my dagger. Caligula lifted one arm to block, catching Arash’s wrist with his forearm, and instead of trying to force it down, Arash let my dagger drop into his other hand, aiming to gouge out Caligula’s throat.

“Grah!”

Blood spurted, but the cut wasn't deep enough, and Caligula threw Arash away with the arm he already had up. Arash landed with the grace of a cat, knees bent, and switched my knife back to his other hand, then rushed back in.

"Momentary Reinforcement!" I snapped, taking a page from Ritsuka's book.

Arash's speed doubled, and fast as lightning, he was in Caligula's guard, my Last Resort skittering across the golden armor that protected Caligula's torso.

And then Arash thumbed the switch, and as a gray cloud erupted from the blade, he dragged it back over, and the durable metal that had managed to blunt even Emiya's special technique parted like tissue paper.

Caligula's reflexes were once again the only thing that saved him from being killed. The instant Last Resort started carving so effortlessly through his armor, he threw himself back and away, putting as much distance in a single hop as he could. He managed to buy himself about twenty feet.

Blood coated the front of his body, and the part of his stomach that had suffered the attentions of my Last Resort — however briefly — looked like someone had taken a metal grinder to his skin, that was how badly just that short touch had managed to hurt him.

And still, he stood there, ready to keep fighting.

But he was *not* Leviathan. Under that armor, he bled real blood, and if we hit him hard enough, he would die. There was no special core that needed an unfathomable amount of strength to crack, just organs that would fail the same as any human being's did.

"How...dare you," Caligula growled. "Impudent...scum. Worthless...wretch." He bared his teeth and hunched over, muscles tensing. "Just...die!"

And a red comet intercepted him before he could move, Aífe's fist planted in his cheek.

"You first!"