

Chapter LXVIII: Sagum Vocationis

There was an instant where I thought it was over, a fraction of a second where I believed that Altera wouldn't be fast enough, or that she might try and just take the hit on the faith that the Grail would keep her alive.

But she didn't. The glowing blue sword swung down, and Altera broke off her attack, retreating. I didn't know one way or the other whether her instincts were just too strong or if she calculated the risk out that quickly, and her placid, dead expression gave nothing away.

Arondight bit into the ground where she'd just been standing instead of her neck, and as the blue glow began to fade and the sword returned to its normal white, Lancelot pulled it free of the hard earth with a gentle yank.

I took a deep breath to calm my racing heart. How close to death — to failure — we had just come.

"Another one," Altera said softly. "Another has come to stand in my way."

"Please forgive me for my tardiness," said Lancelot. He didn't take his eyes off of Altera for a second. "However, it is only because Connla sensed something amiss with the wall that I knew to come find you in the first place."

"I'd say you showed up just in time," Rika said shakily. "A hero *always* arrives right on time!"

"He does?" Nero asked.

Rika nodded enthusiastically. "Yes! Always!"

"You flatter me," Lancelot demurred.

"And where did that troublemaking son of mine get off to, then?" Aífe asked as she stepped forward to stand next to him.

"He stayed behind to handle Tiberius."

There was a pause. By the looks on the others' faces, I wasn't the only one who was confused.

"Did he, now?" Aífe hummed thoughtfully.

"Wasn't...that guy already dead?" Rika whispered to her brother. "Super Action Mom used a fatality on him, right?"

"That's what I remember," Ritsuka confirmed.

Questionable wording aside, we'd *seen* Tiberius take Gáe Bolg to the throat and vanish. So how had he survived that?

“His form was twisted and distorted,” said Lancelot. “His Spirit Origin had been grafted onto the body of a giant, and it was ill-suited to act as a vessel. I don’t believe Connla will have any difficulty dispatching him with all due haste. Now...”

He brandished his sword.

“I realize that we never formally established a contract, but... Your orders, Master.”

It took me an extra second to realize that he was talking to me.

“Her sword is her Noble Phantasm,” I said briskly. “Two forms — the first is a sweeping charge with a wide range, Anti-Army, Rank A. The second is an Anti-Fortress attack that rivals Excalibur, and she used it to wipe out almost the whole of the United Empire’s capital city. If she points the handle of her sword towards the sky, retreat, and we’ll bunker down behind Mash’s shield.”

It wasn’t worth the risk to try and interrupt her. I was making a few assumptions, but she probably didn’t *need* to stand still to charge it, and her fighting instincts had let her do things like swat Arash’s arrows out of the air, so it was more likely that she’d just dodge around until she was ready and all we’d accomplish would be to have our best fighters out of position when she let it off.

Lancelot stilled a moment, and he glanced back at me over his shoulder. “The whole city?”

“Almost.”

His grip on his sword tightened. “I see.”

I didn’t know him well enough to be sure, but if he needed motivation to fight her before, he probably didn’t anymore.

“Everything we’ve thrown at her so far has failed. She has the Holy Grail from this era, and as long as she does, she can heal from anything that isn’t instantly fatal. Her head or her heart. Destroy either one of those and her Saint Graph should fracture.”

“Understood.”

I took another breath and looked at Altera, who stared back impassively, like she was waiting. How polite of her to let us confer on strategy like this without interrupting.

“It’ll be down to you or Aífe,” I finished. “Whichever of you finds an opening to use your Noble Phantasm, that’s who’s going to have to take her out.”

“So, you know,” Rika quipped. “No pressure or anything!”

“Then I shall endeavor to present just such an opening for Queen Aífe to take advantage of,” Lancelot said solemnly.

“My, how kind of you.” Aífe grinned and shifted her grip on her spear. “Shall we make a competition of it, then?”

“No need. This time, my role is merely to support you, so the only one who you are competing with is yourself.”

“Are you two forgetting someone?” asked Emiya. He, too, stepped forward, twin swords in hand. “Don’t tell me you’re going to leave me out.”

“Or me!” Bradamante chimed in, thrusting her chest out in what was probably supposed to be a heroic pose. Mostly, all it did was draw my eyes to the, ah, *bounce* in her step.

“Heh. Four Servants on one,” said Aífe. “Normally, this sort of thing would just be overkill.”

“But this isn’t a normal enemy,” Emiya agreed. “Not when she’s got the Holy Grail.”

“Even so, she doesn’t stand a chance!” said Bradamante. “All we need to do is create an opening! With the four of us, there’s no way we’ll lose!”

Arash, I said without looking in his direction, *if you see a shot...*

I’ll put everything I’ve got behind it, he promised. *Without, you know, using my Noble Phantasm.*

My lips pursed. At the end of the day, it didn’t matter who got the kill. An opening was an opening, and any attack that could destroy her heart or her brain would be enough. I hadn’t forgotten how Arash had killed Saint Martha, after all. A single shot like that should be enough to take out Altera, too, if he could land it.

Even though Altera was just happily letting us discuss strategy for killing her out in the open, however, that didn’t mean she wasn’t paying attention. No, of course she was. That was why we needed an ace in the hole that we didn’t even talk about.

“I see,” said Altera, sounding just as unaffected as before, “so you still intend to stand in my way.” Her sword blazed with light, glowing brightly even in the midday sun. “Then I will destroy you as well.”

“We’ll see about that.”

A brief, tense moment of silence passed, and then they all exploded into motion. The shock of the collision between them was strong enough to throw my hair back, Aífe’s spear reverberating as Altera’s sword crashed against it. Lancelot came in from the side, but Altera disengaged swiftly to parry his sword with hers, and then in the same breath, she turned and deflected Emiya and Bradamante one after the other.

The wind settled. My hair fell back into place. I hadn’t even had the chance to blink yet.

They rushed back in, darting back and forth, and my eyes struggled to follow the action as our four Servants — three contracted, plus Lancelot — ganged up on Altera. They had moved back into the realm of the superhuman, too fast for a mere human to keep up with, and all I could make out were brief moments where they slowed just enough for me to catch up.

Here, Aífe's spear carved a shallow cut into Altera's cheek, but failed to do anything meaningful. The cut was gone almost as soon as it was made, with only a thin trail of blood to show for it. There, Lancelot snuck in a stab that almost disemboweled her, and she avoided the worst of it by a hair's breadth. There, Emiya's swords shattered as Altera channeled power into her sword and parried his attempt to cut off her head. Bradamante covered for him so he had a chance to step back and make a new pair.

I didn't dare to blink, but even so, I didn't see much more than that, than the flash of that rainbow sword as bright red light surged through it or the streak of Aífe's spear as it sought out vulnerable spots. The crash and crack and metallic clang of their weapons formed a discordant soundtrack that blended together because of the sheer speed behind their movements.

I'd had the thought earlier, that Altera was like a machine with how efficient, how *economical* her fighting was, how she could keep herself alive against such powerful legends despite her actual swordplay being so mediocre by comparison. It seemed all the more incredible now, because even with the addition of Lancelot, she was holding her own well enough that her wounds were all minor enough for the Grail she had inside of her to heal them before they could accumulate.

"This is unreal," Rika murmured from next to me.

"How is she doing that?" Ritsuka agreed. "She's fighting four Servants at once...and she's not *losing*."

"She's not winning, either," I told them.

And that was an accomplishment of its own, especially considering the weight of the heroes she was fighting. Whatever you could say about Emiya and Bradamante, neither of them were pushovers, even if they might not compare to the highest extremes, and Aífe and Lancelot were both warriors without peer. It was already amazing that she could fight Aífe, and that she could fight Aífe *and* Lancelot *and* two other Servants who weren't unfamiliar with direct combat was...actually kind of frightening.

What had she called herself? A warrior of the Huns and its king. Except I didn't recognize the name Altera from any legend about them at all. Not one that could have a Noble Phantasm that powerful, at least. In fact, the Huns didn't have many legends worthy of remembering to begin with, with the exception of a single "hero" that was still famous even to the modern era. Famous for the destruction he caused across large swathes of Eastern and Central Europe.

"It's incredible," said Mash. "Her Noble Phantasm earlier was so strong, strong enough that it even managed to pierce Lord Chaldea, and she's managing to fight like this while avoiding instantly fatal blows... Is this what the Holy Grail can do to a Servant?"

"She's like the Energizer Bunny," said Rika.

"Energizer Bunny?" asked Nero.

"She just keeps coming back for more."

Unless...

My face twisted into a complicated expression.

I wanted to say it was impossible. To deny that it could ever be true. There was no way, surely. It was just too out there. But...

“So she does! Mm-mm!”

Deliberately, I didn't look at Nero.

It wouldn't be the first time, would it? We had already encountered more than one historical figure who wasn't what they were supposed to be — who had been recorded as men even though they were women — so it wasn't like it was unprecedented. If even someone like King Arthur could be remembered incorrectly, if Emperor Nero, whose existence was accepted *fact* instead of debated *legend*, could be recorded wrongly, then why would it stop with just them?

It was just... It was starting to seem silly.

“Damn it,” I breathed so quietly no one else could hear me.

Okay. Put aside the absurdity of *yet another* Heroic Spirit who was a woman instead of a man. Accept the probability that this *was* Attila the Hun. What did that mean for the team who was still fighting her?

Unfortunately, nothing much. Attila didn't have any obvious or significant weaknesses an enemy could exploit, not like Siegfried did. There was no magical spot that would kill him — *her* instantly, no hidden trait that could be exploited. A psychological weakness? Nothing obvious. Even if I tried to think of something in her history, the woman I was watching patiently and placidly combat four other Servants seemed entirely too calm and too centered to fall for something like that.

My eyes tracked Bradamante for the brief second she became clearly visible. She was off again a heartbeat later.

That was why Bradamante was supposed to be here. To force an opening where one didn't properly exist. The only trouble was making that work against an enemy who was very good at making that difficult.

I glanced briefly down at my Command Spells. Two of them were little more than faded smudges. I only had one left. Rika had used one of her own.

I didn't have a plethora of ideas. With both Bradamante and Aífe fighting in front of us, they were steadily draining magical energy from us three Masters, and when you combined the earlier fight against Caligula this morning, plus the fights against Romulus and Flauros, we were all rapidly approaching the limits of what we could safely give. There wasn't room to be throwing around Momentary Reinforcement casts to buff our Servants.

One might be a safe enough thing, if it gave Aífe and the others space to finish her off. Two would be okay. Even three would be fine. But too much more and we were going to be in serious trouble.

Outside of using the sudden boost to surprise Altera, the only thing I could think of... Well, it was tenuous and maybe nothing, but Flauros had called her *Altera* when he summoned her, hadn't he? Not Attila. Was there a reason for that, or was that just him knowing better than the rest of us and not realizing we didn't know?

But... At no point had Saber Alter back in Fuyuki tried to correct us calling her King Arthur.

Was there anything to lose by trying?

An image of Rachel, snarling, growling, demanding to be called "Bitch," flashed into my mind.

No, there really wasn't, was there?

"Ritsuka, Rika," I addressed the two of them. They turned to look at me. "Get ready to use a Command Spell to strengthen Bradamante."

"Senpai has a plan?" Ritsuka asked.

"I like plans," Rika added. "Plans are good."

"Plan" is a strong word, I didn't tell them. "It might not work," I said instead, warning them. "But if it does, it should leave her open for a short moment. Don't waste it."

"Right," the two of them agreed.

Is this dangerous? Arash asked me privately.

A good question. There was no way to tell, really. Exactly how much feeling was bundled up in a name that it could affect even someone as stoic as Altera? With a different kind of person, I could almost guarantee "a lot" was the answer, but with the quiet, solemn ones, you could never be completely sure whether or not they had a serene calm to the core or if that peaceful surface hid a volcano underneath.

So it was entirely possible that she'd flip out, and it was also entirely possible that she wouldn't even flinch.

It shouldn't be, I told him the only thing I could. *Not to us Masters, at any rate.*

He didn't nod, but I still got the sense of acceptance from him.

I'll intervene if I have to, he promised, which was what I expected of him.

Now for the tricky part. A lot of bugs had died from the Noble Phantasms she'd thrown around earlier, but we'd been sitting in this same stretch of land for long enough for me to gather a decently sized swarm in the background. It was nothing on some of my biggest, and compared to what I'd pulled together in La Charité back in Orléans, it was tiny. It was, however, big enough for my purposes, and so I set about my plan.

First, I pulled the swarm together into clumps, large clumps that wouldn't have gone unnoticed if Altera and the others weren't so busy fighting each other that they couldn't spare the attention.

"Uh, Senpai," Rika said nervously. "That's you, right? Please say that's you."

"It's me, Rika," I told her. "Now get ready."

One, two, three... I managed six in total. It was all I could do in that time with that many bugs. The plains were just too sparse on anything more ambitious, owing to the relatively fewer fliers hanging about.

Slowly at first, and then gaining speed, the clumps pulled themselves together with a low, almost unnoticeable hum, building up their shapes until they resembled something tall and gangly. Something human.

I took a deep breath. It was as much to calm my nerves as it was to get the air I needed for this next part.

Here went nothing.

"ATTILA THE HUN!" I screamed.

I felt kind of stupid doing it, but that didn't stop my bug clones from echoing me with an ominous, rumbling, "ATTILA THE HUN."

And against all of my expectations, Altera...stumbled.

It wasn't much. It was barely a second where she faltered and flinched, like the name itself caused her physical pain, and her brow crinkled as her nose wrinkled in the first sign of distress I'd yet seen from her, but it was there.

That was all we needed.

"Lancelot, press!" I ordered, trying to keep my excitement contained. "Aífe, Bradamante, pull back!"

And just for good measure, I aimed at Lancelot and incanted, "Momentary Reinforcement!"

Lancelot's next blow *hammered* Altera, who was just put off enough that she wasn't as prepared as she should have been to take it. She stumbled again, her guard clumsy and weak, and in the same moment, both Aífe and Bradamante stepped away from the melee.

I tugged on the threads connecting me to the two of them. *Get ready!*

"Momentary Reinforcement!" I incanted again, and again, Lancelot's blow hammered Altera harder than before, hard enough to push her even further off balance. I gave him one more order.

"Lancelot, your Noble Phantasm!"

Altera's eyes narrowed, and her sword ignited as she brought it around to stop him — except Emiya threw himself in the way, taking her strike on his twin blades, and even though they cracked and

shattered and her sword bit into him with enough strength to throw him several meters back, it was enough room for Lancelot to finish preparing his Noble Phantasm.

“Arondight —”

The glowing blue blade came down.

“Overload!”

Altera, too overextended to dodge, could only throw up her sword in the best block she could manage, but Arondight had too much power behind it, and that ridiculous sword of hers was thrown down and away. Arondight carved through her flesh, and blood spurted from the slash that looked like it had come within mere inches of cutting her in half.

Altera stumbled back, but the wound was already healing before our eyes. Lancelot had dealt a massive blow, but he hadn’t hit anything critical enough to do irreversible damage to her spirit core.

There wasn’t going to be a better moment.

“Now!” I shouted.

“Bradamante!” Ritsuka shouted, picking up the initiative first. “Use your Noble Phantasm!”

A flash of red light flickered on his hand and died, and the words had barely left his mouth before a beam of green light leapt from Bradamante’s tiny lance, piercing straight through Altera’s gut. Lancelot retreated and left the way clear just in time for Bradamante herself to throw her bright, shining shield in front of her body and brace herself against the ground.

“Bouclier —”

She flew across the distance, carried along by an unseen force as the energy around her shield formed a shell around her like a comet.

“d’Atlante!”

She ran over Altera like a runaway train, her shield bashing the already stunned Altera, and she kept going, charging off until she was far clear of her target. Altera was thrown several meters, kicking up dirt and spurting blood from her wounds in every direction until she came to a halt. She wasn’t still for long, but she struggled to pull herself to her feet, and she appeared dazed, confused.

Rika picked up the opportunity before I could tell her to.

“Aífe!” Another Command Spell was spent. “Use your Noble Phantasm!”

Beneath the hot sun, a stark chill descended, and the sense of impending doom settled over the whole group. Red light like blood radiated off of Gáe Bolg as Aífe planted her feet, cocked back her arm, and took aim.

“Gáe Bolg Prototype!”

The red spear flew. It soared across the distance as a streak of crimson light, moving so fast that I only saw its passing, not its motion, and Altera simply didn't have enough time to gather her wits and escape.

Gáe Bolg struck its target in another spurt of red blood, and Altera stumbled again as it pierced straight through her left breast and lodged itself in her heart.

She looked down at herself. Her fingers pressed to the wound, then came away, slick with her blood, and she stared down at them, transfixed. Her lips moved, but we were too far away to make out any words.

"What's she saying?" Ritsuka asked.

"I can't hear her!" Rika agreed.

"I see," Arash said, and it took me a second to realize he was reading Altera's lips. "So, there truly does exist in this world...things that my sword can't destroy."

Across from us, Altera...actually smiled. It wasn't much. It wasn't huge. But her mouth curled upwards into something gentle and genuine that seemed all the larger for how silent and stoic she'd been the entire fight. Her head tilted back and her eyes closed, and her body began to fade around the edges, flaking away into glowing golden motes.

"Even this War God's sword," Arash went on when she continued speaking, "couldn't destroy them. Yes... That...makes me happy."

She disappeared. In her place, the red spear and a golden chalice fell and clattered to the ground.

I let out a breath, a short sigh of relief. My hands shook from all of the adrenaline as it started to drain from my limbs. It was over.

"She's gone!" Nero said, stating the obvious. "Mm-mm! Just like the Divine Ancestor! Does that mean it's over?"

"It should, yes," I answered. "The fighting, at least."

"Right." Mash nodded. "We still have to retrieve the Grail. Senpai, please stay beside me."

She hefted her shield, and then we as a group went over towards where the Grail had fallen. The rest of our team slowly congregated around it, too, and Gáe Bolg leapt back into Aífe's palm when she held out her hand for it.

When we reached it, Mash bent down and picked up the chalice. Dutifully, she reported, "Holy Grail retrieved, Master."

"We did it!" Rika cheered.

"I know I was only here for the end," said Bradamante, "but it was an honor to fight alongside you, everyone!"

“For me, as well,” said Lancelot, bowing his head respectfully.

“Can I get a little help, here?” asked Emiya, who was still bleeding.

Rika gasped. “Right! I completely forgot!” She pointed at him. “First Aid!”

His wounds sealed over, and he sighed. “Thank you, Master. Even if you made me wait.”

Rika stuck her tongue out at him.

“It’s just a shame,” Bradamante said sadly. “I would like to have met Queen Boudica and Sir Spartacus.”

A huff of air puffed out of Aífe’s nostrils, not quite a snort. “I don’t think you can call him a ‘sir’ at all.”

“Well, it’s only respectful!” Bradamante argued.

“I wish you’d had the chance to meet him, too,” Emiya added, smirking. “If only to see just how badly that title fit him.”

“I, too, wish our comrades had made it to the end with us,” Nero said, quieter and more solemn. Morose was a good word for it. “So that I could have told Queen Boudica…”

An awkward silence descended. Rika and Ritsuka traded worried looks, and Rika looked like she wanted very much to reach out and offer Nero a hug.

“Ah, screw it!” she said, and then she pulled Nero into her arms.

Nero squeaked at first, surprised by the suddenness of it, and then when she’d gotten over the shock, she returned the hug — perhaps a little too strongly, because Rika choked.

“Ack!” she wheezed. “Too tight, Best Buddy! Too tight!”

“Ah!” Nero hastily let go and stepped back. “Forgive me, my friend! It was not my intention to hurt you! Mm!”

“N-no problem,” said Rika breathlessly. “J-just remember that us modern girls are a little more squishy next time, okay?”

“Of course!”

Nero turned to me, and her somber expression had been replaced with a broad smile.

“I’m not hugging you,” I told her flatly.

“Don’t look at me,” El-Melloi II added immediately. “I might be your teacher, but that doesn’t make me your best friend.”

Aífe arched an eyebrow, like the idea amused her, and crossed her arms. Emiya did similar, smirking, and Lancelot smiled awkwardly. So did Bradamante.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Bradamante said, “but, well, we aren’t... I don’t know you that well, Emperor Nero. It doesn’t seem appropriate.”

“We fought together against the greatest enemy Rome has ever faced and prevailed!” Nero proclaimed. “I should think that is a greater bond than many could lay claim to! Mm-mm!”

“Ah...” Bradamante forced a chuckle. “If you say so...”

Beep-beep!

Da Vinci’s face appeared as my communicator turned on.

“Servant responses confirmed eliminated,” she said brightly. “That Servant you were fighting finally went down, did she?”

“She did,” I agreed.

She nodded. “I see you’ve also retrieved the Grail from that Singularity.”

“We have, Miss Da Vinci,” said Mash. “Altera dropped it when she was defeated.”

“And the five Command Spells you had to use between the three of you?” Da Vinci asked, still smiling.

“Ah...” Ritsuka stuttered. He and Rika shared a nervous look. “About that...”

“It was a hard fight,” I answered simply.

“So it seems.” Da Vinci hummed mysteriously. “I’ll be expecting to read all about it in your after action report. Don’t spare any details, okay?”

If I was younger and less experienced, the fact that she was still smiling and said that so cheerily might actually have frightened me. It certainly seemed to spook the twins.

“I won’t.”

“Well,” said Da Vinci, looking at something on her monitor. “With Romulus defeated and the Holy Grail secured, it looks like that era is starting to reorient itself properly. To think, Romani actually missed the entire operation, this time! My, I wonder what Director Animosphere is going to have to say to that?”

I couldn’t stop the snort that ripped out of my nostrils.

“So long, Doctor Roman,” said Rika as she pressed a hand to her chest. “It was nice knowing you.”

“It won’t be that bad!” Mash insisted. “Really! Director Animosphere might be strict, but she’s not cruel!”

“Well,” Ritsuka said awkwardly, “she *did* kick us out of the orientation meeting for falling asleep partway through...”

“Senpai!”

“At any rate,” Da Vinci steered the conversation back around, “it’s time for all of you to return. I’ve arranged the settings so far to account for Taylor, Mash, Ritsuka, Rika, Bradamante, Emiya, and Arash. There’s still time if anyone else wants to come along.”

“As though I’d miss out on the chance for more fights like that,” said Aífe. She looked toward Lancelot. “You?”

Lancelot hesitated, sliding a glance Mash’s way that none of us missed, and then he shook his head. “It is not my place,” he said. “Although I have no doubt that I could be of great assistance in your mission, I have not yet earned the right to pledge my loyalty to you Chaldeans. Furthermore... Were I to come along, I fear I would stunt your growth, Mash Kyrielight.”

Mash blinked, and then her face twisted into a snarl. “Good riddance, you shitty old man!”

A moment later, a look of horror replaced it, and an obvious apology sat on the tip of her tongue. Lancelot only chuckled and smiled.

“Yes,” he said warmly, “that’s the sort of response I expected from him.”

If that’s what kind of response he was expecting, then I had to wonder what kind of man the Heroic Spirit inside of Mash was, or at least exactly how dysfunctional their relationship must be for *that* to be the expected response. Even at its worst, my teammates’ relationship with Rachel had never been that bad.

“A shame,” said Aífe. “I was looking forward to sparring with you on occasion.” She turned to El-Melloi II now. “And you, Court Mage?”

El-Melloi II’s mouth contorted back and forth, like he was chewing on the thought. “Well,” he began eventually, “I suppose it can’t be helped. If Chaldea is so short-staffed that they’re sending kids this inexperienced into the field, then they could use someone like me to make things easier.” His lips quirked into something resembling a bitter smile. “He’d probably have words for me if I turned something like this down, too.”

There was something there that he wasn’t explaining, so I put that down in my mental notebook as a subject to broach later.

“Alright.” El-Melloi II held out a hand. “Let’s get this over with. My body shall rest under thy dominion —”

Ritsuka, Rika, and I all reached out to put our hands over his, like a team cheer, and together, we said, “And our fate shall rest in thy sword.”

Beep-beep!

Da Vinci looked over at something else on her monitor. “Contract established,” she reported. “If no one else is coming along, then let’s get the Rayshift scheduled and bring you home.”

“You’re leaving now?” Nero asked.

We all turned to her. Rika grimaced. “Yeah...”

“It’s time for us to go,” I told her. “Before everything gets corrected.”

“I see.” She closed her eyes, then nodded. “Mm! Then this is goodbye!” She held out her fist. “Best Buddy, I’ll cherish the memory of our friendship until the end of my days!”

For the first time, Rika didn’t bump fists with her. Instead, her face fell entirely. “Nero... You won’t...”

“Won’t?” Nero tilted her head.

“Everything is corrected, Emperor Nero,” Mash reminded her softly. “Including your memories.”

“Oh.” Nero’s own face fell. “Then...I won’t remember any of this.”

“Nothing concrete,” Da Vinci told her. “Perhaps you might recall some small sentiment, or a name, but nothing else. For you, it will be as though you woke from some vague nightmare you can’t recall the details of.”

“So I’ll forget you,” said Nero. “All of you. And everything you taught me, all of the fun we’ve had, all of the joy and laughter...”

“I’m sorry,” Arash said regretfully. “We’re the only ones who will remember all of this.”

“It’s the way it has to be,” Da Vinci added. “The proper course of history does not feature time travelers from the future come to correct an inaccuracy. Even if we wanted to leave some memento, the Counter Force would remove it because it doesn’t belong.”

Nero’s eyes fell. “I see.”

Whether she really did or not, I couldn’t tell. I think she at least understood it well enough to know that there wasn’t anything to be done about it.

Rika gave Nero a sad smile. “Even if you have to forget me, I won’t forget you.” She held out her fist. “Okay, Best Buddy?”

Nero stared at her fist for a moment, and then looked down at the sword she still clutched in one hand.

“Heroic Spirits exist outside of time and space, is that correct?” she asked.

Mash blinked. “Yes...?”

“Then, as a famous emperor, my glorious self will one day be carried off to this Throne of Heroes, won’t it?”

“Best Buddy?” Rika asked uncertainly.

“It stands to reason,” Da Vinci hedged. “At the very least, if someone like Caligula made it there, then you should have, too, yes.”

“And when they return to the Throne of Heroes,” Nero went on, “the memories of their adventures and the friends they made return with them, do they not?”

“They were always there, Boudica said,” Ritsuka agreed. “Um, right, Da Vinci?”

“It’s higher dimensional science that those bound to linear time can’t properly understand,” said Da Vinci. “But the simple answer is yes.”

Nero lifted her sword. “I...was not sure whence this sword appeared,” she told us. “I thought, perhaps, it was a gift from the gods. A blessing to aid me in my fight against the United Empire. Mm. It seemed only fitting!”

She laid the blade across her hands, looking down at it. “I think now... This must be my own Heroic Spirit, aiding me in my time of need.”

My brow furrowed. I turned to Da Vinci. “Is that...possible?”

“It’s...not *impossible*,” Da Vinci hedged. “Heroic Spirits *can* be summoned into a time period technically before their own legend occurs. Tiberius, for example, or either Constantine. It may be that the summoning didn’t happen properly because Nero is already alive, so whatever fraction of her Saint Graph made it there instead found Nero as a host.”

That... Could summonings fail like that? I was under the impression that they either worked or didn’t work. Some Servants had unique circumstances or manifested in strange and unusual ways — El-Melloi II was a good example of that — but they were still Servants, fully formed and complete.

Then again, this was a Singularity, so expecting things to be weird was maybe what I should always default to when I found something unexpected.

“So,” said Nero, “even if my living self must forget these events ever occurred, my Heroic Spirit on the Throne shall remember them always! I won’t forget you, Chaldean Stargazers! Mash, Ritsuka, Taylor, and especially not you, Rika!”

She thrust her sword into Rika’s arms, and Rika nearly stumbled backwards at the unexpected weight.

“Take this as a gift!” Nero proclaimed. “And a promise! Even if we part here and now, one day, we shall meet again! And on that day, Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus will greet you all as beloved comrades! As *friends!*”

Rika's bottom lip wobbled as her eyes shone wetly. Even Ritsuka looked moved, struggling to smother a smile.

Arash chuckled. "Trust Emperor Nero to cut the knot."

"I don't know what that means!" Nero replied. "But I shall take that as a compliment!"

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but we really do have to be hurrying this along," said Da Vinci. "I've put it off as long as I can, but the correction is spreading and we can't afford to wait any longer."

"Right!" Rika hugged the sword to her chest, and smiling so broadly her cheeks must have hurt, she thrust her fist out again. "See you later, Best Buddy!"

Nero pressed her knuckles against Rika's. "It's a certainty!"

"Parameters set, calculations complete, calibrations all green. Everything's ready," said Da Vinci.

"Rayshifting in three...two..."

"Ah, damn," said a new voice. "Guess I really was too late after all, huh?"

"One..."

The last thing I saw before the world fell away was Connla's rueful grin.