

Chapter CLVIII: The Lightning and the Storm

It was a chilling realization, that all of that power and all of that destruction, all of it so powerful that it had taken reinforcement from a Command Spell for Mash to block it, and it hadn't even really been aimed in our direction, not really. We'd just happened to be in the line of fire when this new version of King Arthur decided she didn't feel like taking the long way back up to the surface. Collateral damage, as it were.

Then again, King Arthur had managed to carve out something like a decade of relative peace amongst the chaos of Dark Ages Britain. You didn't do that without learning how to kill two birds with one stone whenever the opportunity presented itself.

"I'm...not the only one getting Fuyuki flashbacks, right?" Rika said, and there was a jitter to her voice that betrayed her nervousness. "Because I remember what we had to go through with Salter, and this is giving me serious Salter vibes!"

I shook my head, and it was jarring enough to help me center my thoughts back on the moment instead of the shock of just how powerful that lance really was. "There's no time. We have to —"

Beep-beep!

A surge of annoyance squirmed in my belly, but I answered my communicator anyway, because —

"...hear me?"

"Director."

"We got through!" Romani's voice cheered, crackling with an undercurrent of static.

"You're doing that shit *now*?" Mordred demanded furiously.

— Marie wouldn't contact us at a time like this unless it was urgent.

"Listen!" Marie said urgently. "We've got a heading for that Lancer Servant who just destroyed half of Soho!" Ritsuka choked at the implication of how many people must have died. It might not have held a candle on Gold Morning, but I couldn't blame him for it. "She's en route to Buckingham Palace, where there's an abnormally large concentration of steam!"

"If she activates Rhongomyniad there, it'll cause a cascading chain reaction!" Romani rushed to add. "The fog will eat up all of the magical energy she unleashes and multiply like a virus! All of Britain will be covered in a matter of hours!"

"Then what are we fucking waiting for?" Mordred roared.

"Director," I began hurriedly.

"Go!" Marie preempted me. "We'll stay on the line for as long as the connection holds and update you if anything —"

She didn't even get to finish.

"Magical energy reaction in the giant steam engine, Angrboða!" Romani reported suddenly.
"Director, it's —"

The boom of thunder and the crackle of lightning echoed throughout the remains of the cavern, and above us, bolts of vivid blue electricity jolted out of the holes in Angrboða's shell. Some of them leapt upwards, bouncing from puff of steam to puff of steam until they reached the ceiling, and some of them arced around and danced across the surface of the metal shell. Magical energy swelled so steeply that *I* could feel it completely unaided.

Mash gasped. "Servant detected!"

"— a chain summoning!"

"Get back!" Mordred barked, just in time for a bolt of lightning to stretch down from above and strike the ground close enough that the charge in the air made the hairs on my neck and hands stand on end. The accompanying flash was so bright that I flinched away from it reflexively, even as our Servants moved to place themselves between us Masters and the newcomer.

And as though he had been carried down from the heavens by that bolt of lightning, another Servant stood there, a man in a double-breasted purple suit who wore a long coat over his shoulders like a cape.

"Hahahaha!" his voice boomed. He threw back the coat dramatically, revealing a strange gauntlet on his right hand that looked like a cross between medieval armor and a power transformer. "You called upon me, did you not? You called upon I, lightning itself, who surpassed Indra and Zeus! I, the man who harnessed the power of the gods and forged a new myth for mankind! I, Nikola Tesla, have appeared before you in answer!"

...*What?* Nikola Tesla? That inventor that everyone said had secretly invented free energy and was killed to prevent it from getting out and sabotaging corporate profits or whatever?

"We don't have fucking *time* for this!" Mordred snarled. She pointed the tip of her sword at Tesla. "Sparky! Quick fucking question, and if you get it wrong, I'm chopping your goddamn head off! You here to destroy Britain and spread the fog or not?"

"Destroy Britain? Spread the fog? What madness has gone unchecked before my arrival?" said Tesla. He turned, head jerking around to stare up at Angrboða, and he scowled. "Hmph! I see! Then this machine is the device intended to see that to fruition, is it? How unsightly! How craven that a fellow inventor would allow his technology to be used for something like this!"

He held up his hand, and bolts of electricity danced up and down the bronze-colored gauntlet on his right arm as he gathered magical energy. "In that case, the only appropriate response would be —"

"Are you mad?" Flamel demanded furiously, and he stomped the ground with one foot as red light flashed along the soil.

Several things happened at once. An enormous slab of rock lifted off of the cavern floor and jerked several dozen yards away from Angrboða, carrying with it all of us. Arash had to wrap an arm around me to keep me from falling flat on my face, and Mash squeaked as she did the same for Ritsuka, Emiya did the same for Rika, and the Jabberwocky and Bandersnatch held Jekyll and Tohsaka in place.

Jackie, fortunately, clung to me like a limpet, so there was no need to fear she'd been left behind.

At the same time —

“System Keraunos!”

— the whine of a spinning turbine, the crack of thunder, and a bright flash of light filled the entire cavern. Less than a heartbeat later, the sound of rending steel and shattering glass drowned out everything else, and my polarized lenses dimmed the light just enough that I could barely see the forks of electricity that lashed out, packed so tightly that they looked almost like a beam of plasma, and struck Angrboða with enough power to rip the giant shell surrounding the main machine apart.

“Holy...” Rika whispered. “That guy almost killed us! On accident, even!”

“Of all the reckless...!” Flamel agreed.

Tesla had not, it turned out, completely destroyed the steam engine, though not for lack of trying. The giant shelled had been peeled away like some kind of mockery of an orange, revealing the main body of the machine beneath, and the pipes and vents reaching up to connect to the network that pumped the fog out into London had all blown apart similarly, ripping along invisible faultlines and curling backwards like something out of a cartoon. The parts of the shell still intact enough to count for it were riddled with deep fissures where the energy had torn through it, just not with enough power to do more than crack it.

Angrboða itself was...not entirely nonfunctional, but two of its three chambers had ruptured, spewing hissing steam out into the air, and leaving only a single chamber to focus the steam into the deadly fog that coated the city. Without the network it used to pump that steam out into London proper, it would take much longer to spread.

Just as importantly, seeing him use it up close like this had let me examine it with my Master's Clairvoyance, and that gave me a very good look at System Keraunos, Tesla's Noble Phantasm, the representation both of all his deeds in life and all of the mythologizing that had sprung up around him after his death.

The first EX rank Noble Phantasm we had ever encountered.

Not all EX rank Noble Phantasms are equal, I could remember Marie explaining to me. Some of them, she said, were only marked the way they were because the concept underpinning them was too esoteric to rank so cleanly. That was why things like Reality Marbles got automatic EX rankings in Chaldea's system, just because their limits were so impossible to measure that they didn't fit on the scale.

And then there were the ones that earned that ranking honestly, the ones whose underlying mystery was so powerful that it *broke* the scale. Things that didn't just rewrite the rules of reality, but ripped them apart. Things that had been built from the remains of an ancient god or channeled their Authority to lay waste to entire countries at once. Things that were so inviolate that they made the Siberian look weak and vulnerable.

The idea that *Nikola fucking Tesla* had one of those was so profoundly mind-boggling that it made me want to scream about the ridiculousness of it all.

“Bastard!” Mordred shouted over at Tesla. “What’s the fucking idea? You almost got *us* with that!”

“My apologies!” Tesla boomed. “I allowed my distemper and my pride as an inventor to get the better of me! Next time, I shall endeavor to inform you before making use of my Noble Phantasm!”

“Next time...!” Mordred snarled.

“Can it, British!” Jeanne Alter snapped at her. “We’ve got somewhere we need to be, don’t we? Boss Lady, that psycho bitch is still heading towards the palace, isn’t she?”

“Y-yes!” Marie ground out. She sounded like she wanted to start yelling at Tesla, too.

“There’s...another Saint Graph reading that we don’t have any record for that looks like it’s intercepted her, but her overall direction hasn’t changed. She’s already made it nearly halfway there as it is!”

Another Saint Graph? So another Servant had been summoned? What, another chain summoning, piggybacking off of both King Arthur *and* Tesla? Was Project Demonic Fog really that close to being finished, or was the situation really that close to catastrophe that the Counter Force was throwing everything it could at the situation to stop it from ending badly?

Neither possibility was good news, not for us, not for what it meant for how bad things were. But the addition of two more Servants to fight an enemy like that wasn’t an unwelcome one.

“Then we need to get moving,” Ritsuka said determinedly.

“Yes, we do.” I turned to Tesla. “If you can work with us without almost killing us again, then stay with us and help us stop the last Servant who was summoned to destroy this era. If you don’t think you can manage it, then run your energy down and disappear to save us the trouble.”

“Ouch,” Emiya said with a wince.

It was blunt, but we didn’t have time to observe all of the niceties and sweet talk him into helping. Either he joined up now and lent a hand or he stayed out of trouble until it was all over, and if he made it to the end, I could apologize for being so brisk later.

“Hmph!” said Tesla. “My understanding of things is that you and your group are here on the side of proper history, yes? You are here to protect London and Britain from the dastardly plans of whoever it was that built this monstrosity? In that case, it would make us allies in a common cause, and I would be remiss to ignore the wisdom of those who have been fighting this battle from the start!”

I was going to take that as a yes and assume he was going to help us fight King Arthur, and I turned to address our own group. “We don’t have time to do this the long way. Arash, Emiya, Mash, just like back in Orléans.”

Rika grimaced. “Oh man. This is gonna suck.”

“Orléans?” Jekyll asked curiously.

Instead of answering his question directly, I addressed Nursery Rhyme, “Can you carry Tohsaka with the Jabberwocky?”

She smiled broadly. “Like a princess?”

If she wanted to think of it that way, then, “Yes.”

“Hold on!” Tohsaka began.

But this wasn’t a debate, this was logistics, and I wasn’t going to turn it into an argument.

“Us Masters are always going to slow the Servants down if we try to get there on our own,” I told him. “The only way we can keep up is if they carry us, and Flamel has to carry Renée, Sir Mordred —”

“I’ve got Fran,” she volunteered.

“Uhn,” Fran grunted gratefully.

“Andersen —”

“I’m too short in this body to carry an adult like you or Jekyll,” Andersen said bluntly, before I could even explain exactly that.

“Although it would be really funny to watch you try,” Rika added.

“Jackie can’t carry you for the same reason.”

“We could,” said Jackie, “but we couldn’t promise it would be comfortable, Mister Tohsaka.”

“Queen Hippolyta —”

“I’m afraid I don’t have much magical energy left,” the woman in question admitted. “In fact, I may disappear before we even arrive at the site of the battle.”

Her Noble Phantasm must have taken a lot out of her.

“Wait,” said Jeanne Alter, aggrieved, “that means I have to carry the Doc, don’t it? Fucking...damn it.”

“I shall ferry the good doctor there myself, if need be,” Tesla said as he came to join us. “It is no trouble at all!”

“It...seems I shall be in your care, then,” Jekyll said hesitantly.

Tohsaka eyed Jeanne Alter for a moment, and then scowled. “Fine.”

“Yay!” Nursery Rhyme cheered, giggling. “Jabberwocky, let’s go! Papa gets to be a princess!”

“Then if there are no objections...”

There weren’t any. Half of us had faced this sort of problem before and knew the score and the other half didn’t have any better ideas, so no one could argue the plan.

“Let’s go.”

We grouped up, and the Servants picked up their assigned passenger with varying levels of ease. Mash, Emiya, and Arash, of course, had no problems, since we’d done this back in the Orléans Singularity to travel over a much greater distance, but Tohsaka wasn’t very excited to have the Jabberwocky pick him up, Fran and Mordred had to figure out how to work around Mordred’s armor, and Jekyll was very obviously not all that comfortable being carried around by another man like that.

Once we were all settled, however, the group took off, with Mash, Arash, and Emiya setting the pace as they raced up the bottom of the hole that King Arthur’s lance had gouged out of the earth. We rose steadily on the incline, and the true extent of the damage started to become obvious the further up we went.

The tunnel we had originally entered on the Central Line had gone south towards Westminster a short ways before spiraling directly downwards and into the evil fairy’s castle, and the front doors of the castle itself had opened out into a northwards tunnel that led into the giant cavern. All told, by the end of it, Angrboða itself was only fifty yards or so northwest of being directly under Holborn Station and something like two-hundred meters below the city streets.

And the tunnel carved by Rhongomyniad went all the way up those two-hundred meters, erasing everything in its path with callous indifference. The hole in the ground that we came out of was large enough to have fit Lancelot’s Joyeuse Garde comfortably and then some, including everything from the curtain wall to the keep.

The last time we had seen devastation on a scale anything like this, Altera had erased almost the entirety of Romulus’s fake Rome.

When we came out of that tunnel, it was onto the remains of a devastated street that sat on the edge of the gaping maw in the ground. Looking over Arash’s shoulder, I had a perfect view of the enormous hole that had been gouged out of the city, including the halfway collapsed buildings that sat along the outer edges and hinted at exactly how much damage had been done.

“All of those people...” I heard Ritsuka whisper, horrified.

“Director,” I began into my communicator.

“There!” Rika cried, pointing into the distance, and when I turned to follow her finger, I saw what she must have seen — flashes of golden light in the distance, heralding jolts of electricity that leapt up into the sky. They were too far away still to really hear the fighting itself, but the crack and sizzle of each bolt as it made its journey upwards was still loud enough to echo like buzzing static.

“Well, what are we fucking waiting for?” Jeanne Alter said, and she took off before anyone could even think to try and stop her.

“Go!” I ordered. The word hadn’t even finished leaving my mouth before the rest of our group leapt after her, following her lead as she jumped from rooftop to rooftop, bypassing the streets entirely. Beneath us, the jarring and sudden drop in insect life told even more of the tale of what had happened when Rhongomyniad ripped through the city streets. How many had died, huddling in their homes to escape the fog, starving and completely unaware of what was coming.

The only way for us to help them now was to fix this Singularity and get history back on track, and there was only one more enemy standing in the way of that.

As we got closer to the fight, the metallic ring of clashing steel rang out like bells, growing louder and harsher every second. The bursts of magical energy became just as obvious not a second later, sharp and sudden surges as the two Servants attacked each other with what had to be everything shy of their Noble Phantasms.

That, at least, was a small mercy. This Lancer version of King Arthur wasn’t hooked up to a Grail, not directly, and that meant that she couldn’t just throw around her Noble Phantasm whenever she wanted to. She had to build up to it, ration her magical energy, so we didn’t have to worry about her spamming it at us until she wore away at our defenses enough to score a killing blow. And if she had to save enough to make sure she could set off the fog above Buckingham Palace, then that was even better.

We just had to make sure we were ready for when she *did* fire off her Noble Phantasm again.

Arash and all the others brought us to an abrupt halt as the rooftops ahead of us stretched behind a yawning gap, and down below, instead of more buildings, there was —

St. James’ Square, I realized. This was where we’d fought Nursery Rhyme, only it looked like a tornado had ripped through it, tearing up trees and twisting the wrought iron fencing into knots. And there, now, an entirely new fight was taking place, with King Arthur on one side, still mounted upon her horse, and on the other, a...blond man in slacks, a button-up shirt, and dress shoes, wielding a giant, golden ax? What?

“GOLDEN!” the blond man shouted, and with the crackle of more electricity, he swung his ax down heavily. King Arthur was forced to dodge, to the indignant protest of her horse, which twisted out of the way and contorted in a way that couldn’t have been comfortable for a horse.

“The hell is that guy?” Mordred demanded.

I wished I had any idea. A quick look said Berserker, but the way he dressed was way, *way* too modern for a Heroic Spirit with stats as strong as his were. He could have had an arm-wrestling match with *Herakles*.

“Who the fuck cares?” Jeanne Alter shot back, and then she leapt towards the fray. “HEY, YOU ENGLISH BITCH, TIME FOR SOME GOOD, OLD-FASHIONED REVENGE!”

“Shit!” Mordred waffled for a second, looking back and forth between Fran in her arms and Jeanne Alter jumping into the fight, and eventually settled on setting Fran down so she could follow. “Wait for me! That’s *my* revenge you’re getting in the middle of!”

Seriously? *Now*, of all times?

Hippolyta gave me a look, grimacing, and all I could do was nod and watch her follow after the other two. If she was that low on energy, then she would have seconds at best before she faded away and we had to resummon her. There was no point in splitting hairs about her running on ahead.

“Mash,” said Arash, “it’s going to be dangerous down there, so I’m relying on you to keep the Masters safe.”

Mash nodded. “Right!”

“Heh!” Emiya chuckled. “You know, for a pair of Archers, we sure seem to get into a lot of close range fights!”

“It can’t be helped!” Arash replied.

And then we were down on the street below, looking into the ruined mess of what had once been a small park, with Mash hurriedly setting Ritsuka down so she could place herself at the front of the group.

“So what’s the plan?” Rika asked as soon as we had all climbed down from our “rides.”

“We wear her down until someone can make the killing blow.”

“Simple,” Rika remarked. “I like simple! Simple is hard to screw up!”

“You don’t have any better ideas?” Tohsaka asked grumpily.

Several. They required a lot more coordination than we’d had time to plan for, though, so there was no point in trying any of them, not when it didn’t need to be any more complicated than just waiting for the opportunity to show itself and take her out.

“Keep it simple, stupid,” Ritsuka summarized for me.

Tohsaka looked vaguely insulted. So I clarified: “It’s a modern saying about the importance of avoiding overly complicated plans when something easy and simple will work and work better.”

It didn’t exactly mollify him, but at least he didn’t look like we’d just cursed at him or something.

Apprised of our plan, basic as it was, Emiya and Arash both leapt away in opposite directions to seek out vantage points on the buildings that surrounded the park, although Tesla — who was also

an Archer for some reason instead of a Caster like Babbage — stayed closer to us. He watched the fight with narrowed eyes and a thin-lipped frown.

It wasn't like there was much room for him to do anything. The fighters were dancing around each other so tightly that he risked hitting one of ours as much as he might have been able to hurt King Arthur, and although Arthur wasn't managing to hold Mordred, Jeanne Alter, Hippolyta, and the new Berserker off with quite as much ease as Altera had, her fighting style was more refined and her lance had more reach than Altera's sword, as long as Altera's sword stayed the length and shape it was supposed to.

Her horse was also ludicrously agile. I would have thought that riding it would have limited her mobility some, forced her to engage in frontal, direct assaults the way cavalry had traditionally been used, but that thing had to be breaking several laws of physics with how quickly and nimbly it could change directions without snapping its knees or tumbling over.

How jealous Dragon would have been to see something like that. Or maybe inspired to tinker up some new, more ridiculous piece of tech for her Dragoncraft.

Worse, King Arthur's armor was incredibly sturdy, and for how ornamented it looked, it had apparently been exquisitely designed. Emiya's arrows just disintegrated outright, and Arash's were bouncing off, deflecting off the surface of her chestplate without doing any damage at all. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought that her armor was also a Noble Phantasm, and it would have fit —

No, wait. Something like this had happened back in Fuyuki, too, hadn't it?

Arash, I asked him, are your arrows actually hitting her armor at all?

There was a moment of silence from his end, and another brace of arrows flew from his bow. King Arthur barely paid them any mind as she dodged around another swing from Mordred and out of the path of a gout of flame from Jeanne Alter, and they all bounced off of her armor again as though each one wasn't powerful enough to shatter stone.

No, Arash answered. They're being deflected before they even make contact.

I was afraid of that.

“She's using her Mana Burst skill to blunt any attacks that come her way.”

“What?” Rika complained. “That's cheating!”

“Wait,” he brother said, “didn't Saber Alter do that against Cúchulainn's Noble Phantasm back in Fuyuki?”

“She did.”

And she'd managed to offset enough of the damage to buy herself the time to heal and use Excalibur against us. Only the Lancer version's skill was twice as effective as Saber Alter's had been,

and that must have been more than enough for her to match Berserker's equally ridiculous raw strength.

I might have miscalculated. With her Mana Burst skill that high and her magical energy capacity nearly as high as Saber Alter's had been, it was entirely possible that she could use her Noble Phantasm in rapid succession. Not constantly, maybe not even consecutively, but quickly enough that she could overwhelm us if we weren't prepared for it.

"It's incredible," Mash said quietly. "Saber Alter had so much magical energy because she was drawing power from the Holy Grail that Professor Lev left behind inside the Singularity, and yet, even without that, she still has so much power."

"Goddammit, stay still!" Mordred shouted.

King Arthur remained completely silent as she dodged Mordred's blow into what should have been the path of Berserker's ax, but that lance came back around and deflected the ax into the ground, kicking up a plume of dirt and carving another crater into the already ruined park. Jeanne Alter coming up behind her was sent flying backwards by a kick to the gut by the horse, like it was so in tune with its rider that it knew exactly what to do.

Maybe it did. I'd never asked Aífe or Hippolyta — and there she went, vanishing halfway into her next attack — but at high enough levels of that Riding skill, did the steed become like an extension of the rider? Considering how much conceptual nonsense Servants had going for them, it wouldn't have surprised me.

"Hmph," Tesla harrumphed. "Heroic Spirits of the Earth and Heaven are indeed quite powerful, but this era is an era of mankind. The only Heroic Spirits that belong in this era are those who embody the brilliance of man!"

Bursts of static leapt between the fingers of his metal gauntlet as though to punctuate his statement.

Fran grunted, "Uhn. Uh-ah-uh-uhn. Uh-uhn?"

"Now that you mention it," said Ritsuka, "the fog *is* starting to thin a little bit, isn't it? Maybe Mister Tesla broke something important in Angrboða earlier."

Tohsaka twitched, but I barely paid it any mind, because it...was, actually. Along the outer edges and closer to us, the fog was starting to thin out, and the shapes of the buildings around us were becoming clearer, until it was actually possible to distinguish the edges of the rooftops and even make out the brickwork on some of the closer ones. Strangely, though, the fight itself was only getting harder to see. The lines were becoming fuzzier, the colors more muted, almost like...

"Thank god," said Rika. "That smell sucks so much."

No. Son of a bitch, she didn't fucking *need* the Grail, did she?

"Back up!" I ordered. "Mash, get ready!"

"Miss Taylor?" she asked, confused.

“Senpai?” asked Ritsuka.

“She’s absorbing the fog!” I told them. “That means she can use it to —”

Across the park, each of the red spikes jutting out of King Arthur’s lance suddenly shattered, and the shaft of the lance began to spin. A swirling vortex of black light started to form, growing larger, brighter, and more violent as it picked up steam — both figuratively and, as I had just realized, literally.

And she pointed it not at any of our Servants, not at Mordred or Jeanne Alter or even the Berserker that were harrying her, not even at Arash or Emiya, but instead, she pointed it at us, at their Masters, the ones holding their metaphorical strings and keeping them in this world. Whatever Madness Enhancement had done to her, it hadn’t been enough to rob her of her tactical and strategic acumen, that much was for sure.

Mash hurried to plant her shield in front of the group. “Lord —”

“Mash!” Ritsuka shouted, holding out his hand again. His Command Spells glowed bright red. “Protect us with your Noble Phantasm!”

“Chaldeas!”

And the familiar rampart formed, creating a protective barrier that would shield us from the incoming blast. It covered me, the twins, Fran, Tohsaka, and even the Jabberwocky and Bandersnatch that had been standing silent guard over Nursery Rhyme, who had kept them in reserve the entire fight.

All except for Tesla, who walked out in front of it like it wouldn’t get him killed.

“Mister Tesla!” Mash cried.

“What are you doing, Sparky?” Rika squawked. “You’re gonna get yourself killed!”

But Tesla just laughed. “Killed? By something like this? Don’t be absurd!”

Jolts of electricity crackled along his body, bouncing up and down between him and the ground before focusing on his gauntleted right arm. A ring of bright, purple plasma spun above his palm as he lifted up his arm and aimed for King Arthur, pulling into a tighter, smaller ball as it got faster and faster. The high-pitched whine of a Tesla coil grew louder and louder.

“O ancient hero,” he said, shouting over both the sound of his own Noble Phantasm charging and the whirlwind of Rhongomyniad doing the same, “fall back into slumber! Now is the time we humans weave our own mythos!”

“Rhongo —”

“System —”

“— myniad.”

“Keraunos!”

Mordred, Jeanne Alter, and Berserker all got clear just in time as the beam of plasma lashed out and met the vortex of black light in the middle. Bolts of lightning leapt out from the point of collision, and the two blasts seemed to hang in the air for a moment, a single heartbeat where they were perfectly equal and perfectly matched, unstoppable force against unstoppable force.

But that much raw power being tossed around couldn't simply fizzle out when they met. The moment ended, and both blasts detonated with the force of a bomb, and an earth-shaking *BOOM* echoed across the park, loud enough and forceful enough to shatter the windows of every house within what had to be a mile in every direction. The backlash swept over us, nowhere near enough to do much of anything to Lord Chaldeas but more than enough to toss our hair about in the wind.

When the light faded and the dust started to settle, Lord Chaldeas fading away from in front of us, what was left behind was an enormous crater that took up most of the space where the park had been, a divot in the ground where once there had been grass and trees and pavement. Even the remnants of the gateway and the iron fence had been utterly destroyed, leaving nothing behind at all.

Tesla was unharmed. Drained and panting from the effort of using such a powerful Noble Phantasm, but he hadn't been injured in the exchange of blows. Unfortunately, neither had King Arthur, whose face remained impassive. Whether she was shocked at having been countered or if it had all been some kind of tactical ploy to remove Tesla from play, at least for the moment, there was no way to tell. Her face could have been carved from stone.

“You're open, Father!” shouted Mordred as she leapt at King Arthur, sword raised. The prongs on the bottom flared out again, and red light flowed up the blade. “Clarent —”

King Arthur didn't dodge. Instead, she closed the distance in a flash, moving so fast that she seemed to teleport to Mordred, and her lance lashed out —

“MO-CHAN!” Rika cried even as Fran let out a shout.

— stabbing straight through Mordred's armor and into her gut. The rest of what Mordred had to say was cut off by the blood that spurted out of her mouth instead, and as she reached for the shaft of the lance impaling her, the light surging up her sword flickered and died.

“Guh!”

King Arthur lifted Mordred up with her lance, gazing pitilessly at the girl who had attempted to overthrow her in life, and didn't seem to have any feelings at all about it. She might have been looking at a fly she was about to swat for all of the emotion she showed. Mordred made an attempt to swing her sword, but she didn't have enough reach; the tip swiped impotently at thin air, missing King Arthur's face by at least six inches.

I made a judgment call. “Mordred, come here!”

One of my Command Spells flashed and faded, and Mordred suddenly vanished from the tip of Rhongomyniad and reappeared in the middle of our group. She fell to the ground with a gasp, landing with a clatter on her back instead of upright on her feet.

“You bitch!” Jeanne Alter snarled, leaping back into the fight herself.

“Not golden!” Berserker agreed as he, too, rejoined the melee.

The cadence of the earlier battle returned, only one short from how it had been. Of course, King Arthur seemed to have an even easier time without Mordred there to split her focus with. One less enemy for her to worry about.

Maybe not for long, it turned out, because Mordred climbed to her feet without too much difficulty. Blood poured from her wound, but she didn’t seem to be in any danger of disappearing anytime soon. With her Battle Continuation, I guess it was going to take a whole lot more than that to take her out.

“Damn it, that smarts!” Mordred ground out through gritted teeth. “That bitch — she knew exactly what she was doing when she aimed for that spot!”

“Mo-chan!” Rika said. “U-um, shouldn’t you be, you know, taking it easy?”

“Heh!” Mordred spat out a glob of blood. “I’m not going down that easy! Father’s going to have to work for it if she wants to kill me a second time! It ain’t gonna be as simple as stabbing me in the same spot with that fucking spear!” She winced. “Though, yeah, this is gonna bite me in the ass later on. Damn it. I left myself open.”

“With a wound like that…” Flamel said grimly.

“She has Battle Continuation,” Ritsuka explained simply. And then he pointed a hand at her and incanted, “First Aid!”

I wasn’t sure how much good it would do for such a severe wound, but, “First Aid!”

Belatedly, Rika joined in with a late, “First Aid!”

As the healing effects washed over her, Mordred breathed a little easier. They did not, it needed to be said, heal the wound completely, but it shrunk a little and the edges softened, and I think that was about as much as I could have expected with what we had on hand. Just then, Medea would have been incredibly useful to have with us, or failing that, knowing the runic spell Aífe used to heal herself.

That was going to have to be the first set I mastered. As useful as the flashbangs could be, being able to heal more severe wounds was going to be more important going forward.

“Thanks, guys,” Mordred said tightly, grinning ruefully. “That oughta be enough…for me to at least finish out this fight!”

“So hasty,” Flamel said with a deep sigh. “The others have things handled for the moment, so the least you could do is let me fix you up before you go running off to get yourself killed.”

He shifted his grip on Renée just enough to let him reach out and place his hand on Mordred’s armored shoulder. She looked back at him, surprised. “Gramps?”

“Human flesh is rather more complicated to deal with,” Flamel said, brow furrowed in concentration. A red light began to glow beneath his fingers. “Servants, however, are shells of magical energy given form by the structure of their Saint Graphs, and so it should be a simple enough thing to repair the damage to that shell by reconnecting the severed ends...”

Whether it was as simple as he said or not, the difference didn’t turn out to matter all that much, because Mordred’s wound slowly closed, and the bloody hole in her gut disappeared, replaced with smooth, healthy skin. She took in a sharp breath almost like a gasp, and when he was done and pulled his hand away, she patted the spot with hers, amazed.

“Fucking *nice*,” she said with a toothy grin. “You’re something else, Gramps!”

He gave her a wry smile. “I try.”

A moment later, her shattered armor filled back in, too, because of course, it was also made of magical energy, so it was as simple as filling in the gaps to repair it. She was as good as new.

Mordred straightened, at ease, and hefted her sword. “Alright! Time to get back out there and kick Father’s teeth in!”

“Wait.”

She jerked to a halt before she could even really get moving. “Yeah?”

“I’ve got a plan.”

Her brow furrowed. “Thought you already had one of those. It weren’t going super great, was it?”

I buried the flash of annoyance. “A *new* plan, then. Arthur seems to have it in for you in particular, so I want you to get her attention as much as you can.”

Granted, that stab to the gut wasn’t much to go on, not when Arthur hadn’t paid any special attention to Mordred aside from that, but it could very easily have been a stab to the throat, and that would have been a whole lot more dangerous and a whole lot more instantly fatal. That she had recreated the wound that had originally killed Mordred instead couldn’t have been a coincidence.

“Yeah?” said Mordred, unconvinced. “And what am I doing that for, exactly?”

I reached out and laid a hand atop Jackie’s head, and she looked up at me curiously.

“So that Jackie can sneak up behind her and kill her while she’s distracted.”

Understanding dawn in Mordred’s eyes, and slowly, that toothy grin of hers stretched across her face.

“Alright,” she said. “Can’t say I’m all that fond of the idea of someone else getting my kill, but if Father wants to play dirty, I say, fuck it, let’s play fucking dirty. Right, Master?”

Against the greatest king Britain had ever known, wielding a Noble Phantasm easily capable of wiping the whole damn city off of the map? One she was perfectly willing to use strategically and tactically to achieve multiple objectives at once, and one she wasn't afraid to use to take out us Masters instead of targeting the Servants?

Yes, absolutely, I was willing to fight dirty. Forget about all of that — the fate of the world was at stake, and the future of all of mankind hung in the balance. We couldn't afford to pass up a chance to end this, however we wound up doing it.

“Right.”

“Just be careful, Mo-chan,” Rika said. “Command Spells don't grow on trees, you know! We can only rescue you like that a few more times.”

“Uhn,” Fran grunted. “Uh-uhn-uhn.”

“Ha!” Mordred turned back towards the fighting. “Just make sure that murder tyke is ready to go, yeah? I'll keep Father distracted, but she can't halfass it if you really want this to work!” She glanced back at Jackie. “Got that?”

Jackie tilted her head. “It's misty. It's night. We'll be attacking from her blindspot. We won't miss.”

“See that you don't!”

And with that parting line, she raced back off into the action, blazing a trail through the fog as a streak of red light. King Arthur, as though she had been waiting, met her furious charge with a swipe of her lance, and the cadence of the fight shifted once more.

A moment later, Jackie disappeared from my side.

This was it. We had a plan. We knew what the enemy was capable of. Now all we had to do was execute it.

Hopefully, it really would be that simple.