

Chapter LX: Sacking the Temple

“Go!”

Spartacus and Aife took off like rockets, racing towards the goddess and her two thralls, and Emiya and Arash stepped forward to meet them head on. Aife made immediately for Emiya, like she had a grudge to settle, and Spartacus in turn intercepted Arash before he could dogpile on her, laughing as he swung his sword.

The difference in skill level was obvious from that first clash. Spartacus was strong and his history as a gladiator showed, but Arash was simply on a completely different level, because he maneuvered Spartacus’ swordarm about using nothing more than an arrow he conjured out of thin air.

I didn’t think it would ever stop amazing me. That Arash was a skillful archer was obvious, given it was the class he’d been summoned in and probably the only one he was really qualified for, but his ability to use an arrow like a dagger and the associated skill with knife fighting were as unexpected as they were incredible.

It wouldn’t be accurate to say that he toyed with Spartacus. Spartacus wasn’t *that* unskilled, even if he’d likely never gotten formal training in his life. But he got in several shots that he wouldn’t have if he was fighting Aife instead, jabs at the arms, legs, and gut that nonetheless healed over almost the instant Arash’s arrowhead left Spartacus’ body.

Aife’s fight with Emiya was going the opposite direction. She was a whirlwind of blows, raining punches and jabs with her fists that Emiya struggled to try and block with his swords — she had abandoned Gáe Bolg, probably to avoid the risk of dealing any serious damage with her cursed spear.

Like Arash, he was mostly holding his ground, refusing to let himself be pushed too far away from the goddess he was protecting. He was having a harder time making it work, but somehow or another, he *was* making it work, dodging and weaving and taking small hits to avoid larger, more devastating ones.

And as she watched, the goddess smiled a cruel smile. She opened her mouth to talk, no doubt to try and snare Spartacus under her thrall, too. A fly zooming down her throat stopped her before she could even start, and she bent over, hacking and spitting and dry heaving. I wasn’t proud to admit that I got some pleasure out of how miserable she looked.

So my bugs couldn’t hurt her, but they could definitely be used to distract her. A lesson to take into future fights with Servants with high Magic Resistance who would be immune to the rest of my current kit.

“Go for the head!” Rika shouted at the melee. “That always works in the movies!”

I bit my tongue against an admonishment, because in this case, she might not actually be wrong. Would it be that simple? My experience wanted to say no, but in a lot of ways, magic wasn’t as absolute as powers were. None of the Masters and Strangers I’d known could be resisted by sheer willpower, after all.

It was a better idea than nothing, and it wasn't like we lost anything in the trying. Probably better not to make it the *only* thing we tried, though.

Try and split them off, I ordered Aífe. *Give me a clear shot at the goddess.*

Understood, was the short response I got.

She forced Emiya back, made him stumble, just to give herself a little room, and then she planted her feet and cocked back her arm. The air suddenly trembled. Reality itself wavered and flexed, and then rushed towards her fist, dragging the world along with it. Everything, even my own focus, condensed down, sucked into a point clutched between her fingers as though she held a naked singularity in the palm of her hand.

My instincts screamed at me that something big was about to happen, that this wasn't an ordinary punch, and Emiya evidently felt the same, because he scrambled to dodge out of the way as she swung her arm forward.

“Toranchless.”

BOOM

Thunder echoed across the valley. *Power* leapt from Aífe's knuckles, exploding outwards like a detonating bomb, and the world in front of her cracked and shattered. Stone, dirt, and grass alike disintegrated. The goddess' scream as she was thrown aside like a ragdoll was swallowed by the torrent of sound.

The moment passed. The world returned to normal, and I sucked down a sharp breath as my ears rang in the relative silence left behind by Aífe's attack.

“Holy cow, Super Action Mom!” Rika squeaked.

“W-what was that?” Ritsuka asked incredulously.

“T-toranchless,” Mash answered. *“Thunder Feat. A-a technique of the ancient Celtic martial arts that Cúchulainn was said to have used to kill over a thousand men. I never thought I'd actually get to see it...”*

The fight didn't stop just to sit and marvel at the raw power behind that attack, nor to gape at the divot gouged out of the earth in its wake, because Emiya had rolled back to his feet right away, bow forming in his hands and arrow already notched along the string.

But he didn't aim at Aífe. No, just like his alternate self had during his fight with Cúchulainn back in Fuyuki, his sights were set instead on us Masters, and I met his cool, steely gaze from across the battlefield.

CLANG

The arrow shattered the sound barrier, and before my eyes could even register him releasing it, Mash had intercepted it with her shield. The twisted metal thing bounced off and up into the air, spinning, to land point-first in the ground off to the side.

“Emiya, you jerk!” Rika shouted at him. “You’re gonna owe me big time for that one, Mister!”

“I’m not sure that’s what you should be focusing on,” Ritsuka told her.

“Let me deal with the fact that my chef just tried to kill us in my own way, Onii-chan!”

Emiya didn’t get a second chance to shoot, because Aife was on him instantly, redoubling her assault with her fists. He backpedaled for all he was worth, struggling to keep up with her lightning fast strikes, but always protecting his head, like even under the goddess’ control, he could tell what his most vulnerable spot was.

Arash, meanwhile, was being forced back by Spartacus, who made up for the skill deficit by simply being so dogged and so impossible to put down that Arash had to give ground just to make enough space to move his arms. Blood poured down Spartacus’ body from wounds that no longer existed, and spots of pink light roiled beneath his skin like magma. He laughed all the while, hacking with his sword and seeming not to care at all about the injuries inflicted on him.

Of course he didn’t. Spartacus seemed to only get happier the more he was hurt. That EX rank Madness Enhancement wasn’t there for nothing.

And with both of our captured Servants distracted and being forced back and away, that left the goddess herself wide open for attack.

“Rika, Ritsuka!” I called out to them as I lifted my own arm and took aim. “Now, while the goddess is vulnerable!”

“Got it!”

“Roger that, Shushou!”

The goddess, who had only just picked herself up from where she’d been thrown, snapped her head up, looking stricken.

You brought this on yourself, I thought viciously. If she was expecting mercy, then I was all out of it.

Magical energy gathered into my finger, forming a black ball. “Gandr!”

“Gandr!” the twins echoed a bare instant after me.

Three Gandr shots zipped through the air. The goddess didn’t move, like she was frozen in place and couldn’t dodge, even as they closed in on her. Was that confidence, because she knew they were useless and wouldn’t do anything to her? Or was she so shocked that she was actually rooted to her spot?

By the look on her face, I was inclined towards the latter.

A red blur broke away from the fight with Aífe, and Emiya landed in front of the goddess to block all three shots with the broad side of his twin swords, but that in turn left him open as Aífe appeared behind him as though she had teleported, fist cocked back, and slammed a punch into the back of his head so hard that his face was driven down into the dirt.

I felt the impact from over *here*.

“*That* looked like it hurt!” said Rika.

Emiya groaned and slowly picked himself up from the ground. He was actually a little unsteady as he pulled himself to his feet, and a trickle of blood ran down his face, staining several strands of his hair red. “That’s because it did.”

It worked. Blunt force trauma to the head was enough to knock Emiya out of the goddess’ spell.

“I-I’m not sure you needed to hit him that hard!” Mash called over to Aífe.

“Better to err on the side of caution,” was her flippant response.

“There’s such a thing as being *too* cautious,” Emiya grumbled.

“You’re still alive, aren’t you?”

“There’s no way that would have worked if it was an Authority,” El-Melloi II said.

Definitely not. So whatever power she had that let her take control of us with just her voice, it wasn’t derived from some kind of Authority. That meant that part, at least, would be something we could resist and overcome, but it also meant that she still had something up her sleeve that she hadn’t used yet. Maybe she needed a specific kind of setup, or a certain time of day. Maybe it only worked on men.

I tagged her with a fly as she picked herself up off the ground, even while my eyes watched Emiya and Aífe turn to help Spartacus knock Arash out of it. I pretended not to notice as she slowly crept away from the fighting.

“She’s getting away!” Rika shouted, jabbing her finger towards the fleeing goddess.

Thank you, Rika, I thought, annoyed, *for letting her know we know she’s escaping. It’s not like I was tracking her with my bugs or anything.*

“After her!” I ordered aloud.

“Don’t let her escape!” Nero echoed. “She has much to answer for!”

The sneaking goddess instead broke out into a run, racing towards the marble archway of her temple, and Arash in turn broke off his fight with the others to cover her retreat. He materialized his bow between one step and the next, and a volley of arrows found Spartacus’ legs, pinning his feet to the ground. Spartacus didn’t even slow down — he ripped himself free in a spray of gore, blood, and joyous laughter.

“More!” he crowed. “More! Let me show you my love even more!”

Or maybe the only place the goddess could use her Authority was inside her temple. I didn’t want to find that out the hard way.

Arash scooped the goddess up in one arm, leaping across the distance, and set her down at the foot of the stairs leading up and into her temple, and as she stumbled and hurried to make her way inside, he turned back around and barred our way. Another volley of arrows sank into the flesh of the pursuing Spartacus, but Spartacus just laughed them off again as though they weren’t even enough of a nuisance to care.

I saved my Gandr for later and made sure to keep Mash between myself and Arash, in case he pulled a tactic from Emiya’s playbook and decided to target us Masters, but the odds were stacked too far against him. Against Spartacus alone, he might have managed. Against two Servants, he was good enough that he might actually have held his own for a while.

But not against three, especially when one of them was an expert martial artist whose skill had long surpassed human limits.

Using the arrow he was wielding as a makeshift dagger, he was good enough to both parry Spartacus sword and deflect Emiya’s arrows, a display of ability that frankly made my understanding of physics want to go cry in a corner. Then Aife came in, rushing into his guard like a runaway train, and Arash, caught between handling Spartacus and Emiya attacking him at the same time too, just didn’t have enough arms and enough space to avoid the fist that homed in on his left temple as though it was magnetized.

He didn’t go down like Emiya. Instead, he was thrown backwards as though he had been shot from a cannon and smashed into the temple stairs with enough force to crack the marble he landed on.

This time, the fighting did stop. We all held our breaths, waiting, tensed and prepared for if he got back up and kept fighting. Aife’s fist was still clenched, Spartacus leered over him, unblinking, and Emiya’s fingers were curled around the string of his bow.

Then Arash groaned and levered himself up, grimacing and rubbing at where he’d been punched. “Did you really have to hit me that hard?”

“Had to be sure,” Aife told him unapologetically.

“Hits like a truck, doesn’t she?” Emiya said wryly.

“Or an elephant.”

With their fighting over and everyone back to normal, the rest of us raced over towards them. Arash turned to me, smiling ruefully. “Master —”

“No time,” I cut across him. “The goddess has made it into her temple and down the secret passageway at the back —”

“Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me!” Rika exclaimed. “Really?”

“— and I don’t want to find out the hard way what she can pull off if she has enough time and prep while she’s down there.”

“Nothing good,” El-Melloi II added darkly.

“Couldn’t we just leave?” Ritsuka asked.

“You want *that* at our backs while we’re fighting Romulus?” Aífe asked him. He didn’t have an answer to that.

“No arguments,” I said firmly. “We go, now, while we’re still *able* to put her down, before she has the chance to reach whatever she’s trying to reach down there.”

And while the fly I had stuck to her was still both alive and within my range. My swarm just didn’t have the density right then to do something like search the entire network of tunnels down there.

No one seemed any more eager than I was to let the goddess dig in and start pulling out the *real* divine stuff — whatever that wound up being for her — so we gathered together, cast a few First Aid spells on Arash and Emiya to fix their wounds, and immediately followed the goddess into her temple.

Marie probably would have been shouting at me about how this was just like fighting a magus in his workshop only a thousand times as dangerous, but our options were just too limited.

The temple itself wasn’t overly large, and it was mostly just a singular room filled with the usual rows of columns holding up the ceiling, with a smoothly hewn floor and walls with etched murals depicting what, at a quick glance, might have been the story of Medusa and her two sisters. We made a beeline instead for the door behind the altar, a boxy shape cut into the wall where the murals on either side met, and in that empty space was supposed to be the fearsome figure of Medusa in all her terrible glory.

But the secret passage had been opened, leaving that doorway for us to enter, and down into the passageway we went.

Immediately obvious was a difference in the build. I couldn’t help noting how the temple itself was well-kept and new-looking, with the only damage being what we had done to it with our fighting, while the passageway that led down into the earth was much worse cared for. Loose marble bricks lined the ceiling and walls, with cracks through some of them, and whereas the pillars in the temple looked as much decorative as functional, the ones here were much more obviously supporting the structure.

“I hate this, I hate this, I hate this,” Rika huffed as we descended the stairs. “That Indiana Jones thing was supposed to be a joke!”

So did I. The thing about Indiana Jones movies was that they tended to have a lot of collapsing temples and secret traps that released venomous snakes, and I could very much do without any of that, thank you.

We came to a split in the tunnel, a fork with three offshoots.

“This way!” I told everyone, and I turned right on the path the goddess had taken.

My anemic swarm wasn’t the best, but as I pulled them in to map the rest of the place as best I could, the other paths opened up to me more. The one on the left seemed to be a deadend, coming to a stop at a secret chamber that had...something in it, but what, I couldn’t tell. My swarm wasn’t dense enough to give me a clearer picture.

The middle path, I couldn’t see the end of it. I was willing to bet it either went to a separate chamber or led back outside somewhere. For whatever reason, the goddess hadn’t taken it either, so we had to avoid it.

“Miss Taylor,” Mash asked, “what are we going to do when we catch the goddess?”

I didn’t have a good answer. Some part of me wanted to end the threat immediately, but the dangers in that hadn’t just disappeared because I was angry about what she’d done to us — to *me*. Killing her summarily probably wasn’t the best idea, I just didn’t have a better one.

“Whatever we have to,” I eventually decided on.

“Are we going to have to kill her?” Mash asked quietly.

“Maybe.”

Mash’s hair fell over her eyes as she hung her head. “I see.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” said El-Melloi II. “If the goddess pulled this island from the Reverse Side, then there’s a distinct possibility that it would slip right back when she disappears. Killing her might not be an option.”

So I wasn’t the only one worried about something like that.

“Oh great,” said Rika, “*more* Indiana Jones shit. Will the whole place collapse if we step on the wrong tile, too?”

“This isn’t a movie, Rika,” her brother chided.

“It should be! Because it definitely feels like one!”

“A movie?” Nero asked bemusedly.

“It’s like a painting with sound —”

“Not the time, Rika!”

“There’s no better time than when you’re starring in one, Onii-chan!”

“We’ll figure something out,” I said. I hated how vague and unhelpful that was.

Deeper into the island’s belly we went, and the further we went, the worse the state of disrepair. The cracks had evolved into missing chunks, and then into whole sections of brick gone entirely. Hunks

were torn out of the columns supporting the ceiling, like someone had taken a shovel or a pickaxe and scraped away at them. Some of them were so dilapidated that it was a miracle they were still standing.

The floor didn't escape unscathed. Loose bricks jutted up, and it was a minor miracle that none of us Masters tripped over them. In some places, the marble had been worn away, leaving patches of bare earth and rubble, and more and more, we had to watch our steps so that we didn't go tumbling to the ground and land in a gigantic pile of bodies.

The one saving grace was that this wasn't like Mount Etna. Things were getting steadily warmer as we went, but nowhere near the stifling heat that we'd experienced going down that lava tube and towards the nexus of ley lines that lied at its end.

Eventually, the goddess' path changed, and after a moment, I realized that it was impossible for her to move the way she was in the passageway we were all traveling in. Further on still, the sound of raised voices echoed off the marble, distorted by the distance and by how much they had to be bouncing around.

"Voices?" Ritsuka huffed, panting.

"Is there someone else here?" Boudica asked worriedly. "Da Vinci didn't say anything about there being another presence on this island."

"It could be that the temple hid them from her scan," said Mash.

"But not the goddess herself?" El-Melloi II countered.

"Or the goddess was the one hiding them," suggested Aífe.

"The better question is who it is, not how or why they're here," Emiya said gravely. "On this island, in a temple dedicated to one of the Gorgons —"

"Make sure you all have the protective charms Aífe made," I ordered, having already reached the same conclusion.

The worst and most likely possibility was that the other two were up ahead and the goddess had gone instead for reinforcements. We were about to have a rematch with Medusa.

"— talking to me, you jumped-up iguana!" came as we got closer to the end of the tunnel.

"Who are you calling an iguana, you overgrown garden snake?"

"Garden snake? How presumptuous of you to address a *true* dragon so rudely!"

"True dragon, my tail! I'm more of a dragon than you could ever hope to be, you oriental bumpkin!"

"Bumpkin? How dare you! I'm a refined lady!"

"Please! I have more refinement in my left pinkie than you do in your whole body!"

“Enough!” the goddess’ voice thundered. “We don’t have time for your antics!”

We came out of the passageway and into a hallway, something that resembled the temple we’d started in, only if it had been left out to the elements for a thousand years. There were no walls, only a floor, a roof, and more of those famous Grecian pillars that held it up. We raced through it and down the stairs at the end, and at the bottom, we exited out into...

“Whoa...”

...a massive cavern, filled to the brim with even older architecture. To either side was a raised platform made of what looked more like sandstone than marble, and twin streams of water flowed down shallow canals and into the basin that sat across from us. The basin itself formed a kind of pool, or perhaps a bath, and steam wafted off of the surface to let us know exactly why it had gotten hotter as we came closer.

And standing in that basin, submerged up to their hips —

“There’s intruders on the island, and they’re —”

“Eek! Right behind you!”

— was a pair of naked young women.

“Kyaaa!” screamed the second of them, dropping down into the water to hide herself. “Don’t look!”

She had horns, of all things. A pair of them, the white of exposed bone, jutting out from her hair and curling around her head like one of the Romans’ laurel crowns.

“A bit late for that, bumpkin!” the first shouted, and in a flash, she was dressed in a gothic pink and black dress. “Besides, did you already forget what you are? How pathetic!”

She also had a pair of horns, although they looked much more diabolic than the other’s, and of all things, she even had a large, serpentine tail swaying behind her. Connected, somehow, to the base of her spine, and thick enough that my head spun trying to imagine how that anatomy was supposed to work.

Then again, I’d known a guy who was literally made of metal. I wasn’t sure I really had room to talk.

“Those two are...”

“Servants detected,” Mash reported crisply. “Master, it looks like those two are Servants summoned by the goddess somehow.”

“That’s not Medusa,” Emiya blurted out.

The goddess whirled around, eyes wide and expression now without any hint of mirth or smugness.

“Oh, right,” the second woman said, and as she stood, she too was dressed in a flash of light, donning what looked to my inexpert eyes like a formal kimono. “I’m a Servant, too.”

I narrowed my eyes on first one, then the other. Two unknowns. Lancer and Berserker, but I couldn't see anything beyond that. Of course, neither of them had revealed anything else, had they?

So what did they have to do with the goddess and why were they here on her island? More Strays, or had they been specifically summoned?

“Senpai,” said Rika, sounding uncertain, “am I supposed to be able to see *her* skills and stuff with my super special Master vision?”

“Her?”

Rika pointed — not at either of the new Servants, but straight at the goddess.

What?

“I see it, too,” Ritsuka confirmed. “Class — Assassin. Presence Concealment, A-plus. Divine Core of the Goddess, EX. Magic Resistance, A. Alluring Ee-you —”

“Alluring Euphony,” I read out myself as I turned to see it with my own eyes. So that was what she'd used to snare us with just her voice.

“That shouldn't be possible,” El-Melloi II said. “Servant containers aren't built to handle a Divine Spirit. Her Saint Graph should be too high quality to fit.” He grimaced, and then added, “Normally.”

It worried me that he had to add that caveat at the end. Just what had he been through in his life that he could so confidently imply that there were *exceptions* to gods being impossible to summon as Servants?

Not that I really had room to talk there, did I? Again. He would probably think my life sounded like a fever dream if he ever heard about it.

“How rude,” the Berserker in the kimono huffed. She produced an intricate paper fan from thin air and used it to hide her mouth like she was some kind of noblewoman. “Don't you know it's impolite to peek at a lady while she's bathing?”

“Of course it is,” the Lancer said. “So you don't have anything to be concerned about, do you?”

The Berserker snarled. “Why, you — !”

“Enough!” the goddess bellowed. “The both of you! Stop fighting each other and fight *them!*”

Both of the other Servants grimaced, cowed. The Lancer summoned up a wicked looking spear, twirling it about like it was a baton, and then brandished its wicked point our way. The Berserker lifted her fan as though it was her weapon, too.

There were stranger weapons out there, I guess.

“Looks like we'll have to settle this later, Snaky,” the Lancer said.

“Hell itself must have frozen over,” the Berserker said, “because it looks like I have to fight beside you, Iguana.”

“Master...” Mash muttered. “It looks as though we can’t avoid a fight.”

“No,” Ritsuka agreed. “And it doesn’t look like they’re under the goddess’ spell, either.”

They were coherent and talking, so no, it seemed like they were just working for her on their own account. Had she summoned them herself, then? Maybe. Or maybe they’d been assigned to guard her by Romulus.

My eyes flicked between the three of them.

We had the numerical advantage and probably the strength advantage. However, as long as the goddess could open her mouth and turn almost any one of us against the others, that meant not much of anything at all. Lancer and Berserker wouldn’t let us just swoop in and take her out, not if they were following her orders to begin with, but if they were otherwise distracted, then taking the goddess out would be simple.

We just had to be careful, because I didn’t think the swarm I was pulling in from their exploration of the other tunnels would get her fast enough to be of use gagging that goddess.

“Aífe,” I began quietly, doling out orders, “subdue the goddess, using whatever means necessary. Nonlethally, if you can.” Still didn’t want to find out what happened to us if this island slipped back into the Reverse Side while we were still on it. “Emiya, Spartacus, that Berserker and Lancer will be up to you. You just need to keep them distracted long enough for Aífe to get the goddess. Arash is overwatch.”

Emiya glanced at Rika. “Master...”

“We’ll go with Senpai’s plan, Emiya,” Rika told him, uncharacteristically quiet and serious. “Dunno about you, but I don’t want Miss Pied Piper over there to turn me into her stooge again.”

“Which leaves Mash and I on the defense,” said Boudica.

“And me on support duty,” added El-Melloi II.

“Right.”

The tension hung in the air. Both sides seemed to be waiting for the other to make the first move. None of the Servants even seemed to be blinking, and since I didn’t think they even had to, it was entirely possible they weren’t.

Then, it happened, so quickly that it took my brain a few moments to catch up with everything, and by then, it was already over.

Who moved first or who reacted first, I still wasn’t sure. But between one blink and the next, Emiya, Spartacus, and Aífe all launched themselves across the gap as Lancer came in to meet them.

Berserker didn't jump forward into the fray herself — instead, she swung her fan and flung a fireball in Emiya's direction.

“Futile!” El-Melloi II shouted, and he swung a feather fan that sent a gust of intense wind to intercept the fireball. It exploded halfway to its target.

“Trace, on!” Emiya incanted.

A volley of ordinary swords shot out, and Berserker screamed as they snagged on her kimono and yanked her back into the water, pinning her to the basin floor.

“Hahaha!” Spartacus laughed. “Let me show you my love!”

“Get away from me, you freak!” Lancer squealed.

Spartacus came down on her like a sack of bricks, and she scrambled to keep him from gutting her with his sword.

Aífe was the fastest, and she was on the goddess almost before the other two had reached their own targets, and the goddess, clumsy and physically unimposing, was swiftly and effortlessly trapped in a submission hold.

And it all happened in just a second or two.

“Okay, okay!” Lancer cried. “I surrender, I surrender!”

I took in a breath. That was...unusually easy, after how much trouble the goddess had given us up above.

“Mmph!” the goddess in question grunted, unable to get a word out because of how Aífe was holding her jaw.

Since the danger seemed to otherwise be over, I walked closer to the goddess, who glared at me with baleful red eyes.

“Do you?” I asked, turning briefly towards where Spartacus was battering on Lancer, hacking away at the shaft of her spear like he was chopping down a tree.

“I do, I do!” Lancer squeaked. “Just get this big, ugly brute away from me!”

I glanced at Boudica, and she nodded back. “Spartacus?” she said calmly. “I think that's enough. Let poor Lancer catch her breath, will you?”

“Hahahaha!”

But he did as Boudica asked and stopped hammering away with his sword. His mouth was still pulled into that unsettling rictus grin. I didn't think I'd ever seen him without it. No, maybe once, but that was it.

Lancer, no longer under assault, sank into the basin as though she was dissolving into a puddle, apparently unbothered by her dress soaking right through. A long, weary sigh heaved out of her lips.

As for Berserker, she was still trapped, and Emiya stood over her with his bow out and an arrow half-drawn. If she tried to get out or attack, he could end her instantly. I was inclined to leave her down there for now, since Servants didn't need to breathe.

That just left...

"Goddess," I began, staring down at her without blinking. She glared back up at me. "Aífe," I said without looking away, "if she tries to bewitch any of us with her voice again, feel free to snap her neck."

Mash gasped behind me, and the goddess' eyes went wide, but Aífe just grinned that savage grin, apparently on the same wavelength as me. "Of course."

I took another breath, deliberately slow this time, and let it cool the remnants of the anger I'd carried with me from outside. I needed a level head for this. Letting what happened outside color my actions would be counterproductive.

"Let her talk," I ordered.

Aífe's hand shifted to rest gently but threateningly along the throat, and the goddess grunted, working her jaw as though to test for soreness or soothe out the kinks.

"So?" the goddess said eventually. "What is it you want from me, human?"

"There's a lot I could want," I acknowledged, because revenge was definitely one of them, "but first and foremost, there's a few questions I need answered."

"Like what?" the goddess asked frankly.

"Are you on the side of the United Empire?"

I expected a couple of different reactions. Maybe an immediate denial, maybe a smug confirmation followed by a threat of what Romulus would do when he found out about this. A derisive snort wasn't one of them.

"Of course not," she said, like the very thought was ridiculous. "Although they are, in a way, why I was summoned here."

"Romulus summoned you?"

"No. My summoning was a response to his. No doubt, the World intended for something of equal magnitude to show up, but that man willfully suppressed his divinity, so I showed up instead."

How did that make sense? "Why you?"

“I am *Stheno*,” she replied as though that was self-evident. At least we finally had a name to give her. “I am a goddess formed from men’s ideals, to be worshiped, pampered, and lusted after, not to conduct matters of war or conflict. I may be a full goddess, but in many ways, this Servant’s body is an upgrade from what I was before.”

“Ah,” said El-Melloi II. I turned to him for a moment.

“Ah?”

“The Counter Force tends to act by matching a threat with a kind of equal but opposite response,” he explained. “Since he’s considered Rome’s Divine Ancestor, Romulus would no doubt possess a high level of Divinity under normal circumstances, especially when he’s summoned inside Rome itself. The response to that might be another Servant with a high level of Divinity, or else one specifically built for the act of godslaying. Because he suppressed his Divinity, however —”

Emiya chuckled. “The response went awry and accidentally snagged this useless goddess instead.”

Useless? I wasn’t sure that was true. Sure, she didn’t have the raw combat potential of Aífe or the sheer physicality of Spartacus, but with her voice, there was a lot of havoc she could wreak — had wreaked just on us a short while ago. Masters and Strangers might not be as obviously impressive as Brutes, but they were no less dangerous for it, as so many of us had proven over the course of the last twenty years.

“The Divine Ancestor denied his godhood?” Nero asked, confused. “Why?”

“Who knows?” Emiya shrugged. “It’s not like any of us have met the guy.”

“I should hope you would have told me if you had! Mm!”

I turned back to Stheno. “And these other two? Were they summoned with you?”

“In a way,” Stheno replied. Her eyes lanced a glare Lancer’s way. “These two useless lumps were my own botched summoning attempt. I tried to chain summon my sisters off of my own summoning, and these two are what showed up instead. I might as well have not bothered and saved myself some time and energy.”

Thank god it failed, I thought. Facing all three Gorgons at once would have been a nightmare. Facing *one* had come closer to defeating us than I was frankly comfortable admitting.

I had to wonder, though, how Lancer and Berserker connected to Stheno, if they connected at all. Had the Counter Force interfered with Stheno’s attempted chain summoning and they were here because *we* would need them later on? Or was it all just a coincidence and there was some unknown thread tying the three of them together?

“Then does that put you on our side?” I asked. “That is, the side of Proper Human History?”

“Your side?” Stheno laughed derisively. “Why should I care either way? Whether human history continues or is snuffed out doesn’t matter to me at all.”

Aífe snorted. “Spoken like a true Greek goddess. Zeus must be proud.”

“Considering I’m more of a true goddess than he is?” Stheno said smugly. “He’d be jealous, not proud.”

I was just going to put that one aside, for now. Whatever she meant by that wasn’t relevant to the situation at hand.

“So you’re just going to sit here while the world burns?”

Stheno stared back up at me defiantly, unbowed. “And what if I am? As I said, I’m no use to you in combat, and I have no interest in your petty squabble with Romulus. What do you intend to do about that? Kill me?”

A part of me was tempted, if only to remove the threat she could pose because of how easily she could undermine us. As long as we could be sure she wouldn’t come back to get us later, however, then I was fine with leaving her be.

Even if it would be really convenient to have her around to bewitch the enemy Servants. On the other hand, high levels of Magic Resistance were apparently enough to shrug off her Alluring Euphony, and Romulus would almost certainly have it at a similar level.

“Hold it!” Nero interrupted before I could say anything. “As your beloved emperor, I would have a say in these negotiations!”

I looked back at her, and she strutted across the aging stone with her head held high and her shoulders squared proudly. When she reached us, she jabbed a finger at Stheno.

“I have an offer for you, Goddess Stheno!” Nero proclaimed. “Become Roman!”

“Huh?” Stheno sneered, tilting her head. Although she didn’t say it aloud, I heard her silent, “what are you? Stupid?” that was tacked onto that.

“Pledge yourself to Rome!” Nero elaborated. “Become Rome’s patron goddess! Bless Rome, and I shall erect monuments to your glory and make you Rome’s beloved goddess! Mm-mm!”

“Well, that’s one way to get her on our side,” Ritsuka said wryly.

“Shush.” Rika hushed her brother. “Let Best Buddy work her magic!”

“Become a Roman goddess?” Stheno mused. “I refuse.”

“Your refusal is refused!” Nero said stubbornly. “I am emperor!”

“And I am a goddess,” said Stheno, like that was the end of it.

To be fair, when you actually *were*, it wasn’t like that was a bad claim to authority.

“There’s no need to hesitate!” Nero insisted. “I am emperor! If I say it will be so, then it will be so! If I proclaim that you shall be as a radiant goddess of the dawn, then the people of Rome shall

praise you as such! If I say you are the protector of our great empire, then they will give thanks in your name! The goddess Stheno shall become as glorious as August Jupiter!”

“Not interested,” Stheno said immediately.

Nero opened her mouth to continue, but she stopped when I set my hand on her arm and gently pushed hers back down.

“Perhaps the goddess Stheno will reconsider after she’s had some time to think about your generous offer,” I said diplomatically. “After all, it’s been an...eventful afternoon, and we *did* invade her temple.”

After she ensnared us with a Master effect and made us fight each other, but it wouldn’t help the situation to inflame tempers again, least of all mine.

“We’ll stay the night on the island, near the beach,” I went on, and I glanced meaningfully at Aífe, who would be key in protecting us if Stheno decided to get revenge in the middle of the night. Aífe gave me a small nod. “We’ll head back out tomorrow, after breakfast. If she’s changed her mind by then, we can take her with us.”

Nero’s brow furrowed, and for a moment, she considered my suggestion. Then, she nodded, and in the same boisterous voice, she declared, “I shall allow it! Mm-mm! Your emperor is as gracious as she is generous, after all!”

Ritsuka turned to his sister, and in a whisper that everyone heard:

“Are you sure I wasn’t supposed to let *Senpai* work her magic?”