

Chapter LXVI: Flauros

“Enemy Servant response dissipating,” Mash reported. “Romulus is defeated, Senpai.”

“It is done.” Nero sighed and sagged a little, as though a great burden had been lifted off of her shoulders. “The Divine Ancestor is no more, and his United Empire dies with him. Mm-mm. Although...”

She looked around, frowning, at the palace that still stood, despite the many holes that had been torn into it during the fighting. The ridiculous tree branches, at least, had also disappeared, but that just made it even more incredible that the building hadn’t fallen down around our ears.

“The fake Rome remains standing! Mm-mm!” Nero complained. “Wasn’t it supposed to disappear as well?”

“Um, it may be that the city itself has become self-sustaining,” Mash offered. “O-or even that it doesn’t need Romulus to be here after it finished forming? It will likely... No, it *should* be corrected with the rest of this Singularity.”

“So it’ll go when everything gets put back to normal,” Arash summarized. “That makes sense. Gotta hand it to the guy, though, this place really was built to last.”

“Something we should probably be thankful for,” I commented, “because it means the roof didn’t come down on top of us.”

The twins looked up at the ceiling — and the gaping holes that showed the blue sky outside — and Rika lifted her arms in mock cheer. “Yay for the power of bullshit Roman engineering?”

“Well, of course!” said Nero. “Roman architects built to last! Mm!”

I was decently sure it didn’t work like that when the buildings in question had been constructed from the function of a Noble Phantasm, but that wasn’t a hill that I wanted to die on, so I decided to leave it be. There were more important things to worry about than talking that sort of semantics anyway.

“More importantly,” I said, steering us back to more relevant topics, “this isn’t over yet. It isn’t time to celebrate right now.”

Mash, Arash, and Ritsuka all straightened up, faces drawing together solemnly. “Right,” said Mash.

“It’s not?” Nero asked. “Mm-mm! The Divine Ancestor is defeated! The United Empire is no more! Is that not a thing to celebrate?”

“Romulus might be gone, but that doesn’t mean the United Empire goes, too,” said Ritsuka. He looked to me. “Right, Senpai? As long as the Holy Grail is out there...”

Rika groaned. “Damn it. Right, we still have to find that, don’t we?”

“The Holy Grail?” Nero asked.

“It’s the thing that let Romulus and his other Servants come back to life, remember?” Arash reminded her. “Master’s right that this isn’t over until we have it. The Court Mage can just keep summoning more Servants to take over the fight until we do.”

I nodded. “We need to meet back up with the others and start scouring the city. Whoever he is, the Court Mage shouldn’t be a Servant, so there’s a limit to how quickly he can move. If Arash can spot him from the palace roof, then we can take him out just like that, but if he’s hiding somewhere, then we’re going to need to search before he escapes.”

“Let me save you the trouble.”

Startled, I whirled about, eyes wide, towards the entrance to Romulus’ throne room, where a familiar man in green stood. A crocodile grin split his face.

How did he...?

“Allow me to offer you my congratulations,” said Lev Lainur. “As much as he frustrated me, I was quite sure that Romulus would prove a much more difficult challenge for you Chaldean rats than he did. It was especially surprising that a mere Demi-Servant was able to so effectively block his Noble Phantasm, so it seems you’ve become stronger since Fuyuki. Haven’t you, Mash Kyrielight?”

And held delicately in one hand like a goblet of wine...

“That’s...!” Ritsuka gasped.

...was a golden chalice, the Holy Grail.

“The Holy Grail,” Mash breathed. “It’s...just like the ones we recovered from Fuyuki and Orléans.”

And just as powerful. Even as far away from him as we were, I could feel the magical energy pouring off of it, overflowing. How much he must have used to summon so many Servants, and yet the damn thing still had so much left.

“You!” shouted Nero. She brandished her sword. “You are the Divine Ancestor’s court mage, yes? Mm-mm! Then you are the man behind all of this!”

“I merely provided the players,” Lev said, frowning. “Unfortunately, Romulus was less than cooperative. The plan, as I imagine you must have surmised, was to find a suitable candidate who would destabilize this era and seek the destruction of Rome, much like that poor fool in France.”

He scowled at us. “Which has also been undone, I hear. I understand I have you to thank for my current predicament — that failure is the entire reason I was sent to oversee this era instead of returning to my king’s Temple.”

“You bet your ass!” Rika told him. “Yeah, we did that! We beat Jalter like a drum!”

Lev grinned a wide, manic grin. “I got quite the scolding for that! I’m still feeling that punishment, even weeks later!”

“So you gave the Grail to Romulus, only he didn’t want to play ball,” I concluded. “So you had to stick around and try to think of something else to throw a spanner in the works.”

Something was strange about all of this. Not Lev’s apparent plans — knowing only what he’d told us about his and his king’s goals, I could see how they were supposed to work — but the way he was explaining them. Monologuing. By himself, without any apparent backup, in a room with two Servants and a Demi-Servant, plus whatever was going on with Nero that let her fight like one. Carrying the Holy Grail we needed to set this era to right, on top of it all.

And then there was the issue of how he managed to sneak up on me without me detecting him at all with my swarm.

Arash, I began across our bond, *something’s fishy. Be ready.*

Yeah, he agreed. *I feel it, too. There’s something we’re not seeing here.*

“Yes,” said Lev. “As I said, Romulus was less than cooperative. You can’t imagine my frustration when he refused to destroy this era and chose instead to try and find a way around the Incineration. That was, it seems, my mistake. The Heroic Spirit I summoned was far too noble, unlike the one in Orléans.”

“Of course he was!” Nero shouted, indignant. “The Divine Ancestor is the one who *created* Rome! Mm-mm! He gave birth to the empire, to the culture, to Rome itself! Even now, he wanted only to see it grow, brighter and more brilliant than before!”

“You’re annoying,” Lev growled. “It’s precisely that sort of drivel that I hate the most about you humans.”

“A strange perspective to have.” Aífe climbed to her feet. Her wounds had finally finished healing. “For a human, that is.”

My head shifted minutely as I detected something moving fast through my swarm. Was that...?

Nearby, Rika muttered, “Not now, Emiya, he’s monologuing.”

“You dare!” snarled Lev. “Lump me in with those fetid, pathetic *worms*? Lower lifeforms, better off wiped away? That *trash*!”

Mash jolted. “Master! Incoming Servant!”

Lev sneered. “More trash!”

A moment later, a new figure burst into the room, haggard and injured. Once, his red armor would have looked regal and sturdy, but now it was scuffed and scratched, scored with deep cuts that had mostly protected his body beneath but hadn’t been enough to completely avoid getting wounded. His black hair was matted with sweat and blood, and one ear bled freely from the shredded lobe.

“Great Founder!” he cried as he entered. “Great Founder, are you —”

He stopped halfway between us and Lev, his wide eyes landing on our group as took in the scene and his brain put two and two together to reach four.

The sword in his hand drooped. “No,” he breathed despairingly. “No, it can’t be...”

“Who’s this guy?” Rika asked.

“By process of elimination?” Arash suggested. “Constantine XI.”

That was when Emiya, Boudica, and Spartacus arrived, hovering near the entrance. Constantine XI immediately went back on guard, lifting his sword warily as he looked back and forth between our groups.

“You could have said something!” Rika called over.

Emiya’s face twisted, and exasperated, he said, “I tried to warn you!”

“Try harder, next time!”

“Lev Lainur,” said Constantine XI, solemn. “I’ll hold them off for as long as I can. Please use that time to summon the Great Founder back.”

Immediately, the rest of us were on guard and ready to fight, because fuck no, we weren’t about to let that happen. If either of them thought we were going to give them the time to summon more Servants to prop up this United Empire, then they were about to be shown exactly how poorly mistaken they were.

Except Lev and Constantine XI apparently weren’t on the same page.

“You couldn’t even kill one of those weaklings?” Lev demanded, condescending. “Just like your beloved Romulus, you’re an incompetent fool. Your failure is complete, Constantine XI. You Heroic Spirits truly are a pathetic, useless lot.”

Constantine XI’s head turned, bewildered. “What —”

Lev lashed out — with what, I couldn’t see — and Constantine XI let out a cry of surprise as his back split open as though he had been sliced with a sword. Blood fountained from the wound as he fell to the ground, unmoving, only to disappear into glittering dust a second or two later.

Just like that, he’d been dispatched. By a man he’d thought his ally, at that.

“How could you?” Boudica demanded. “Your own ally!”

“Cruelty is ever the resort of the oppressors!” Spartacus agreed.

“I have no allies in this era,” Lev said disdainfully. He flicked drops of blood from his fingers, because it looked like he’d actually killed Constantine XI using his own hand like a blade. “Only pawns, and this one was a waste of time and magical energy. Besides, I already said, didn’t I?”

Romulus and his ilk had no interest in destroying mankind. If they can't even remove one of Chaldea's allies from the board, that makes them useless to me."

He lifted the Grail up above his head. "Which means it falls to me to see this work done!"

Arash, I said, "Stop him!"

"Emiya, go!" shouted Rika.

Bowstrings were drawn and released, and from two different directions, arrows sank into Lev's flesh, into his chest, his arm, his legs, all of them either debilitating or fatal to some degree or another.

Lev ignored them all...and swallowed the Holy Grail.

My eyes watered watching it fit in his mouth, let alone down his throat, but somehow, without either of those having to actually make room, he did it, and the Grail disappeared into his body. His stomach, presumably, although at that point, I was beginning to think he might not have one as we understood it.

"Recover the Holy Grail?" he mocked, as though he didn't even notice the arrows protruding from his body. "Repair the Singularity? Undo the Incineration? You're laboring under a delusion, Chaldeans." He spread his arms out, grinning that crocodile grin. "There's nothing you can do to change things. You've already lost. These are merely the death throes of mankind! And...if you want to try and fix this era..."

His flesh began to bubble and bulge, his arms and legs and torso swelling like balloons being filled with air at different speeds. His face twisted and distorted, stretching out, expanding until his eyes were on separate sides of his head — and then, like the farmer in that alien movie from the early aughts, he split open in a shower of viscera as his body was ripped apart.

"Oh god," Ritsuka whispered.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Rika agreed.

Something black and red pulled itself from the remains, growing larger with every second. It was completely drenched with Lev's blood, and orbs like rubies pushed themselves to the surface in columns and rows as the thing continued to swell to an ever larger size. Eventually, whatever was inside of it grew too large for its own shell, because the black flesh split open, too, revealing rents of something raw and red and sickening that stretched up and down the thing from orb to orb — from eye to eye, I realized with a sharp jolt as the cruciform pupils at the center of each one turned to focus on each of us.

It grew so large that it burst through the already tortured ceiling, punching another hole through it, and we actually had to back up as it swelled to take up nearly half the room with its bulk.

"**THEN,**" it rumbled in a voice that shook the whole palace and seemed to come from everywhere at once, "**YOU WILL HAVE TO DEFEAT ME, FIRST.**"

What...the hell...

“Magical energy response rising!” Mash reported frantically. “That thing...it’s not a Servant, not a Phantasmal Beast! M-Master, whatever it is, it’s...”

“By the gods,” Nero breathed.

“IT HAS BEEN SOME TIME,” the monster thundered. **“ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE MYSELF AGAIN. I AM THE DEMON GOD, FLAUROS, ONE OF SEVENTY-TWO PILLARS WHICH UPHOLDS THE INCINERATION. THIS IS THE FORM OF MY GLORY, UNBOUND BY THE WEAKNESS OF HUMANITY. THIS IS THE FAVOR OF MY KING!”**

“How the hell are we supposed to fight that?” Rika blurted out. “He’s huge! A-and...a tentacle? Why is he a tentacle? I didn’t sign up for anything Adults Only! I’m not *that* homesick!”

“Focus, Master!” Emiya barked at her. “We need to come up with a plan to fight this thing!”

“The same way you fight anything!” Aífe cackled. “With overwhelming force!”

“COME, MEAGRE HEROIC SPIRITS,” said the monster. **“I SHALL CRUSH YOU AND YOUR PATHETIC MASTERS ALIKE. THAT IS THE WILL OF MY KING!”**

“With pleasure!”

Aífe sprang up and back, landing feet first against the wall next to where Gáe Bolg had been lodged, and as she took hold of it, she pushed off and pulled it free. Like a bolt of lightning, she zipped past us, landed with a skid that tore up the already tortured floor, and cocked her arm back in a familiar pose.

“Let’s see if you even have any internal organs, monster!” Cold bloodlust radiated off of the red spear, matching Aífe’s grin. “Gáe Bolg Prototype!”

The streak of crimson light rocketed through the short gap and landed, sinking through the mottled black flesh the same as it would have a normal human’s. Thorns the color of freshly spilt blood burst out of Flauros body around the wound, spreading out to the surrounding tissue, and two of the massive eyes popped as they were skewered. Black ichor spurted from the wounds and spilled all over the floor as Flauros let out a high-pitched squeal.

The sight of it made even my stomach threaten rebellion.

But after a moment, the remaining eyes focused on Aífe, and the rumbling voice was smug when it spoke again: **“DID YOU TRULY BELIEVE IT WOULD BE THAT EASY? ALLOW ME TO SHOW YOU THE GULF BETWEEN YOU AND I.”**

The red eyes gleamed, and the magical energy in the air surged, too much and too fast for me to even think about how to defend myself.

“Master!” many voices called out at once.

“PERISH!”

Light flashed. Something slammed into me and carried me to ground, just in time for a wave of heat and force to pass by overhead as roiling darkness blanketed the room.

My senses came back to me a second — an eternity — later, and Arash's pained face was over mine as red blood dripped down his forehead and landed on my cheek. The reality set in a fraction of a second later, and I realized that he had just saved my life.

“Arash!”

“Damn it,” he cursed. “This thing really is on a different level! A wide-area attack of that scale that quickly?”

This close, there was no way I could miss. “First Aid!”

His wounds sealed over, and even though he couldn't stop the sigh of relief that hissed out of his mouth, he grimaced down at me. “Not sure you really needed to do that, but thanks, Master.”

“The others?”

He jerked his head to the side, and with a jolt, I realized that whatever had been left of my swarm and whatever I'd managed to bring in since Ocho Deug Odin had been wiped out, so I actually had to turn my head. Fortunately, while Arash had shielded me with his body, Mash had been able to protect the twins and Nero on her own, and Emiya had brought out Rho Aias again to protect himself, Boudica, and Spartacus.

“COCKROACHES!” Flauros spat. **“ALL OF YOU! COCKROACHES! YOU SIMPLY DON'T KNOW WHEN TO DIE, DO YOU?”**

To the other side of us, Aífe stumbled back to her feet, blood pouring down one dangling arm and her teeth gritted against the pain she must have been in.

“Don't make me laugh,” she growled. “My sister put me through worse as a child!”

Arash got off of me and stood up, and then he helped me to my feet, face set into a deep scowl.

“This is bad,” he murmured to me. “This thing, if it can shrug off even something like Gáe Bolg...”

Then how on Earth were we supposed to kill it, right? Even as I watched, Aífe's spear was pushed out of Flauros' body, and the flesh that had been ripped and torn bubbled and reformed as the red eyes that had been destroyed were restored like new. Gáe Bolg clattered to the floor, and it was like nothing had happened to him at all.

Deviant biology. Mash was right to say that this couldn't compare to a mere Phantasmal like a wyvern, because if we tried to find some singular vital point to attack, we'd fail. This wasn't a creature that relied on blood and bones and organs, but something that existed beyond the limits of biology as humans understood it. Something that shrugged off wounds and just restored the damage like it was simply filling in a pothole.

Like it was reaching into a nearly bottomless well.

My heart picked up in my chest.

I'd faced something like this before, hadn't I? Several somethings, technically, but only one that so casually shrugged off its injuries, that filled them in like this, that tossed around so much power with such ease. Like Flauros, it had stood apart, a pinnacle that existed beyond every other enemy I'd fought. Something that had no weak points, that couldn't simply be destroyed by dealing physical damage.

The difference was, I had no leverage over Flauros, nothing to chip away at, and I doubted he'd turn his attention away from me long enough to accidentally reveal some emotional vulnerability I could capitalize on.

"Master?"

Arash's voice cut through the spiral of my thoughts, and I forced myself to calm, to steady my pounding heart. No, this wasn't like that at all. I'd just let myself get a little rattled. The situation wasn't so hopeless that I could start comparing it to the hardest fight of my life just yet.

"It's gotta be the Grail," I said quietly. "If we can find that and pull it out of him, that should be enough to make him vulnerable."

It wasn't the exact same, but it reminded me of a different fight, one much smaller in scale that had spanned just one city instead of entire worlds. Yeah, that was a closer comparison, wasn't it? Just like then, what made Flauros such a threat was what he had inside of him. In this case, an almost limitless source of magical energy that he could use to fill in the gaps of his own strength, instead of turning others' strength against their friends and allies. Without that, there was no way he would be anywhere near this powerful.

"Any ideas about that?" Arash asked.

"Blast him," I said simply. "Rip him apart faster than he can regenerate until we find the Grail."

Arash snorted softly, and a wry smile curled his lips. "I guess it really is that simple, isn't it? Easier said than done, though."

And there was nothing I could do except give orders and watch. I hated how familiar that feeling was becoming.

"VERY WELL," Flauros thundered. **"I COMMEND YOU, HEROIC SPIRITS, FOR SURVIVING THAT FIRST ATTACK. IF I MUST GRIND YOU DOWN TO DUST ONE MOLECULE AT A TIME, THEN I SHALL!"**

The magical energy began to surge again, and I scrambled to throw myself behind Mash as Flauros' red eyes gleamed again. Arash half lifted me to carry us the rest of the way, just in time for that voice to rumble again.

"DISAPPEAR!"

A wave of roiling darkness rolled out from Flauros, and Mash's shield screeched as it washed over us to no effect. This time, I could see enough to notice the flash of runes as Aífe raised her own defenses to protect herself. My Command Spells still throbbed to let me know that she had been injured — the first time I'd been paying enough attention to them in a fight to even notice that, come to think of it — but not enough to tell me her life was in danger.

This time, when the darkness passed, one of the petals on Emiya's barrier had been ripped apart, which wasn't a good sign at all.

"Is that all you know how to do?" Aífe spat. "The same thing over and over?"

All of the eyes immediately focused on her.

"PEST."

An explosion ripped apart the air right in front of her, and Aífe gave a startled shout as she was thrown bodily backwards hard enough to tumble into the wall.

"Arash."

"Got it," he acknowledged, and then he raced out from behind cover, firing off arrows with such speed it was like a machine gun. They hit Flauros hard, tearing into him, ripping his flesh apart, popping his eyes, but never going much deeper than a few inches. Flauros' flesh simply restored itself too quickly.

Emiya joined in shortly thereafter, and Spartacus leapt into the fray with his characteristic laugh, hacking away over and over even as the wounds inflicted by his slashes filled back in. Flauros blasted him with the same explosion he'd used to hurt Aífe, but Spartacus just got back up, injuries healing lightning fast, and threw himself back in.

It made a decent distraction, though.

Aífe, I said, reaching down the thread connecting us, it's not going to be enough to do precision damage against something like this.

"First Aid!" I incanted, healing the worst of her wounds as she pulled herself up gingerly.

Yes, that seems to be the case, isn't it? She replied sourly. *Any suggestions?*

The Grail is what we need to focus on, I told her. If we can get that away from him, he should be much weaker.

Aífe grimaced up at the tower of flesh. *Not an easy task to fulfill.*

No, I agreed. The only way we're going to get it is by blasting him apart faster than he can recover until we find it.

The grimace turned up into a smile. *I might have a few ideas about that.*

Whatever it takes, was what I left her with.

“Damn, this guy is beefy,” Rika mumbled. “Geez! What’s with this secret boss shit? Romulus was supposed to be the final boss of this Singularity!”

“Secret boss?” Nero asked. “I suppose... Yes, he *was* secretly the one in charge of everything, wasn’t he?”

“Not what that means,” Ritsuka told her. “But later.”

“I-I’m sorry, Master,” said Mash. “I-I can’t... If I join up with the others, then you’ll be defenseless!”

“Then you’re where you need to be,” I told her.

“What Senpai said,” Ritsuka agreed. “Mash, you just need to focus on keeping us safe, okay?”

Mash’s shoulders firmed up. “Th-then I won’t let you down! Any of you!”

“Is there a plan, Senpai?” Rika asked. “I didn’t think to bring my strategy guide, so I’m all ears for whatever you got.”

“He transformed after swallowing the Grail,” I laid out simply. “If he can throw around this much power so casually —” another explosion knocked Spartacus back again — “then the Grail is almost certainly why. We just need to get it out of him.”

Rika’s brow furrowed. “Uh...” She looked at me, then at Flauros, from top to bottom, then back to me. “I have...concerns about this plan, Senpai.”

“It’s not going to be easy,” I acknowledged. “He heals fast. What we need to do is hit him hard enough with a bunch of big, powerful attacks faster than he can heal until we find the Grail.”

“Still have some concerns,” Rika said, “but a lot less than before. *How*, exactly, are we gonna do that?”

“This is going to be rough on you,” I told her especially, “but we need Emiya to start pulling out the big guns.”

Rika grimaced and groaned. “This is gonna suck so bad, but it’s not like I’ve got any better ideas, so... I guess I gotta just deal with it, huh?”

“Good girl.”

“If you’re going to say that, the least you could do is bribe me with a Scooby Snack,” she muttered.

I pretended she hadn’t said anything.

“I don’t like it,” said Nero. “Mm. What are the rest of us supposed to do while we rely on Emiya?”

“Provide cover, of those of us who can.” Aife, Arash, Boudica, Spartacus. “They’re already doing it. The four of us? We need to stay back. If we get hit by that wave, it’s going to hurt us a lot more than it does them.”

Nero grimaced, unhappy with that idea.

I sympathized. If only it could be as simple and as easy as pulling in my bugs, weaving lines of silk, and strangling Flauros with them, but he didn't even have an obvious mouth, and like I'd observed before, deviant biology. If my silk threads could even do anything to him at all, it didn't even look like he needed to breathe.

"Done," Rika said suddenly. "I let Emiya know the plan."

Across the room, Emiya pulled back and stopped firing regular arrows. It was hard to see clearly, but he held out one hand, and in a flare of fiery power, a sword took shape above his palm — a familiar sword, a spiral shape that spun up from the hilt to the tip like a drill or a screw.

"Boudica, Mash!" he shouted as he took the sword and set it upon his bow as though it was an arrow. "Noble Phantasms, now!"

"Wait," said Ritsuka, having seen the same thing I did, "is that —"

Emiya pulled back, and bolts of lightning traveled up and down the sword as it streamlined into an undulating, swirling shape that could only generously be called an arrow. Mash, realizing his plan, set her feet, squared her shoulders, and planted her shield in front of us. Across the way, trusting him not to lead her astray, Boudica did similar, and her chariot galloped around her in a circle.

"My core is twisted in madness."

The words echoed throughout the room like a spell, even over the din of fleshy thuds as Arash kept up his fire.

"Chariot of —"

"Lord —"

"Boudica!"

"Chaldeas!"

The familiar rampart rose in front of us, shining, glimmering blue at the same time as light arose from Boudica's chariot. With Arash already at a distance and Aife having stayed back to finish healing her wounds, the only one left in the line of fire was Spartacus, who was hit by one more explosion and let it carry him back with a laugh.

Even from this distance, I could see one side of Emiya's mouth tick upwards.

"Caladbolg."

The sword that had been transformed into an arrow left Emiya's bow at such speed that it shattered the sound barrier with a thunderous *CRACK*. It was so fast that I didn't even see it, only the spiraling trail it left in its wake, the massive hole it drilled through Flauros — and then the explosion that *obliterated* almost the entire wall of the palace.

The flash of light nearly blinded me, and the boom filled my ears and drowned out everything else. I had to shut my eyes and clamp my hands over my ears to keep from being deafened, and the whole building shook, threatening to collapse for the billionth time in the last hour.

When I opened my eyes and blinked away the spots, an enormous hole had been ripped out of the far wall and the ceiling, like a gigantic hand had come down and scooped away a full third of the room. The midday sun shone down through it, casting light on the writhing form of Flauros, which was even now slowly filling in the damage done.

There was still no sign of the Grail.

“— **MONGREL!**” Flauros was saying when I could hear properly again. “**WORTHLESS SCUM! HOW DARE YOU! HOW DARE YOU! HOW DARE YOU!**”

The hole through its center — large enough to drive a SUV through — closed at a snail’s pace, but it was still fast enough that I could see it happening. Even what had to be one of Emiya’s strongest attacks hadn’t done anything more than piss Flauros off.

If even *that* hadn’t been enough... Balmung had taken the extra power of a Command Spell just to finish Fafnir off, and that attack had to be on a similar level. Would bringing Siegfried here to help even accomplish anything at all?

At this point, would even Arash’s Noble Phantasm be enough?

“Holy shit,” Rika breathed. “What does it take to put this guy down?”

“I-I don’t know,” Mash murmured miserably. “Senpai, this is...”

“**UNFORGIVABLE!**” Flauros thundered. He ignored the continued arrows from Arash and the renewed assault by Spartacus like they were nothing more than biting fleas. All of his eyes were focused on Emiya. “**THIS IS UTTERLY UNFORGIVABLE! YOU CHALDEAN WRETCH! I WILL ERASE YOU FROM EXISTENCE! NOT EVEN THE THRONE WILL REMEMBER EVEN THE TINIEST SCRAP OF YOUR HISTORY!**”

His eyes flashed, and Emiya dove to the side, enough to escape the brunt of the next explosion. Flauros didn’t let up; again and again, his eyes flashed, and again and again, Emiya did his best to avoid taking too direct a hit, even if he didn’t quite manage to escape them unscathed.

If nothing else, at least it kept Flauros distracted for a few moments.

My mind raced. Harpe? It would accomplish the goal of preventing Flauros from healing, but only what it directly cut, as far as I knew, so that was basically pointless. We didn’t have time to try and kill him with a death by a thousand cuts. That trick Emiya pulled off with the three sets of his twin blades would be similarly ineffective.

We also didn’t have much else in the way of options. Our capacity for large-scale destruction was limited, and when it came down to it, even if we had our whole roster here at once, that only increased by one. We just didn’t have the raw firepower to deal that much damage all at once.

Our best chance right now was probably to hope that what had worked on Romulus and Tiberius would be enough to work on Flauros, too.

Aífe, I tried.

My turn, is it? she asked, like she already knew what I was thinking. *Fine. I've got a few tricks up my sleeve. Let's see if they're enough to make him blink.*

And then, suddenly, she was dragging energy from me through our contract, and I staggered under the sheer amount of it she took. Beside me, both Ritsuka and Rika gasped.

Sorry about this, Master, Aífe said, sounding not very sorry at all. *But I'm not going to hold back on this one.*

“Super Action Mom?” Rika asked breathlessly, because apparently, that message was meant for all of us. “What are you doing?”

Even from here, I could see the cold smile that pulled at Aífe’s mouth, mirthless. *Killing a Demon God.*

The world shrank down, sucked into her hand, into a tiny point in her palm, only it was much, much stronger this time. It felt now like everything was being pulled in, from my eyes to my focus to my bones and marrow, down to my soul itself. Space itself warped and twisted until the black of her glove seemed to drink in the light, radiating shadows. All of creation was compressed down into the naked singularity she held in her fist.

Even in his blind fury, Flauros couldn’t miss this.

“NO,” he rumbled. Magical energy built up inside of him as his eyes gleamed. **“NO, I WON’T ALLOW YOU TO FINISH THAT.”**

Stars glittered into existence around him, even as their light was dragged towards Aífe.

“HARKEN, YOU UNWORTHY FILTH. THE TIME OF THE AWAKENING HAS COME.”

A stone pillar dropped from the sky, landing within inches of Flauros’ body, and the magical energy he’d been gathering suddenly fizzled and died. A second pillar landed, then a third, a fourth, until a total of eight had formed a circle around him, stretching up towards the sky. Between the pillars, glowing Chinese characters formed, burning the air.

Stone Sentinel Maze

“Unreturning Formation!”

From back near the entrance to the room, standing in the shadow of the hallway, El-Melloi II waved a feather fan and shouted out the name of his Noble Phantasm.

“NNNNNG!” Flauros groaned, his many eyes swiveling blindly about. They gleamed and flashed, and explosions ripped through the air, aimed at nothing and hitting no one. One or two of them came uncomfortably close to us, but not close enough to do any damage. **“YOU! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?”**

“Bought me just enough time and room.”

Aífe crossed the gap between them so quickly that she seemed to teleport, like between one step and the next, she'd gone from her starting position to her end point. She cocked back her fist, dragging reality along with her, and with the weight of the sun behind her, she swung it forward.

“*Torannchless.*”

BOOM

It hit like a bomb. The whole world seemed to shake and shudder around us, and everything in front of her knuckles was just...erased, blown apart and shredded like it had been ripped to pieces by the tidal forces of a black hole. There was no blood or scraps of black flesh — that punch was so powerful that they had been atomized, leaving nothing at all behind. It was like Flauros had simply been erased, and with him, everything behind him for what had to be at least a hundred feet.

What remained behind was only a moment of stunned silence as all of us stared at the aftermath. At the gigantic hole that had been made in the wall again, giving us a clear view of the divot that had been carved into the hillside outside. A crater gouged into the floor, leading from the point of impact to the wall that was no longer there.

The fact that what was left of the ceiling *still* hadn't collapsed after that was almost as amazing as the fact that she'd done that much damage with a single punch.

“Whoa,” wheezed Rika. “W-who knew Super Action Mom could do something like that?”

Aífe sighed and relaxed, letting her extended arm drop. “Unfortunately, not often. Putting that much power behind it is costly.” She shook out her hand as though trying to return the feeling to it. “Almost as much as one of my other Noble Phantasms.”

Something fell suddenly from above, and a mass of black flesh roughly the size of a car landed on the floor with a wet *plop*. Instantly, everyone's attention turned to it, and Rika let out a strangled sound high in her throat.

“He's *still* not dead?”

It was the final remnants of Flauros, a shapeless blob coated in ichor, less than a tenth of what had just been stretching through the ceiling in front of us. It had no eyes, and it was so weak that I couldn't even sense its presence from less than twenty feet away.

Aífe stepped forward, and Gáe Bolg leapt from where it had been thrown back into her palm.

“That can be changed quickly.”

The black mass moved, and then it sagged and began to shrink as the flesh evaporated, not like a Servant's would but like a pot of boiling water. Slowly, it disappeared, growing smaller and smaller with every second — and then, from inside of it, a bony shoulder covered in green fabric appeared, then an arm, then a torso and a head of long, shaggy hair, until the only thing left was a human body.

Lev Lainur glared feebly up past the spear pointed between his eyes.