

Chapter LI: The Mad Emperor

“Shit.”

The new Servant did not attack immediately, he stalked. His face was pulled into a rictus of agonized fury, with his eyes wide and crazed, and every footfall seemed to carry the weight of a mountain.

And then, suddenly, he burst into motion, racing towards Nero with wild abandon. Mash put herself between them, shield held out defensively, but when the new Servant’s fist slammed into it with a thunderous *CLANG* that I wasn’t sure I didn’t hear from all the way over in the market district, she was actually pushed back. Her boots dug twin furrows in the ground.

“Uncle?” Rika squawked, bewildered.

“The previous emperor before Nero took the throne, Caligula!” Mash told her, voice strained.

My first instinct was to rush back to help them, or failing that, because they would be held up by my being only human, to send Arash and Aife back first so that they could help the other team. When the enemy was strong enough to push even *Mash* back with a single punch, that was definitely someone we couldn’t underestimate. I had even spun around and taken a step back towards their camp outside the perimeter wall.

But then my brain kicked in, and I realized that might be exactly what the United Empire wanted. If I sent Arash and Aife back, that would leave me alone and otherwise defenseless, and they could send anyone at all — any Servant, because you didn’t need a Servant specialized in ambushes and assassinations to kill a normal human like me — to take me out.

Divide and conquer. I couldn’t say with any confidence that it was a phrase coined by a Roman general, but it certainly sounded like one, and whoever had first uttered the words, the tactic itself was old as dirt.

In that case, the absolute worst thing I could do was let myself be isolated. Not only because it could very easily get me killed, but because any fight that broke out here and now in this crowded market square would invariably involve a lot of collateral damage.

“Uncle, why?” Nero asked, pained and confused. “Why have you appeared like this, only to raise your hand against me?”

“This...is destiny,” Caligula answered. “My actions...are just. My beloved niece...for the future of Rome, you must...”

He rushed forward again, and Mash grunted as he slammed his fist into her shield with another, earthshaking *CLANG*. Again, she was pushed back — he was an unstoppable force, and Mash was not quite as immovable as any of us would have liked her to be.

Before I could even take a second step, I nearly tripped over myself spinning back around. Aife looked at me, brow knit in confusion.

“Aífe,” I barked at her, “Arash, trouble!”

Arash dropped the projected basket without ceremony, stopping only long enough to mutter a rushed apology to the shopkeeper, and whirled about to come towards me to see what was wrong. I didn't even wait for him to make it there, I laid things out immediately, projecting my mental voice along both of the threads leading to each of them simultaneously.

Arash, pick me up, drop me on the tower ramparts, I ordered him. I'd only just finished when he scooped me up and literally swept me off my feet, already moving back the way we came as he leapt over the rooftops. Aífe picked up on things immediately and followed behind. *Enemy Servant attacking the others. He seems to only be after Nero.*

Huginn swooped down from the sky as Muninn took flight. They opened their mouths and fired beams of scintillating light from their mana cannons, but they glanced off of Caligula's golden armor without leaving more than a faint scuff mark. He ignored them like nothing had happened.

But it wasn't nothing. The fact that my attacks had landed at all suggested that if he even had Magic Resistance, it was of a pitifully low rank. Rank D at the highest, but even that was probably pushing it.

Emiya came in from the side and slightly behind, where Caligula shouldn't have been able to see him, but Caligula leaned back and out of the way, and he stepped back and he neatly dodged every followup swing as Emiya swiped at him with swords that were little more than streaks of black and white even to my ravens' eyes.

Strong and fast, I cataloged. No apparent weapons on him. It was entirely possible that he just didn't see the need to use them, but the fact that he wasn't drawing even to fight back probably meant that his fists were his weapon of choice. Noble Phantasm? Maybe his armor, but I couldn't think of any anecdotes that would really indicate that.

I wasn't willing to rule out Saber, Lancer, or Archer, and Assassin was just plain unlikely, but I was leaning towards one of the cavalry classes. Not Caster, surely, not with that much raw physicality, but maybe Rider or Berserker. There was that thing about his horse, wasn't there?

On the next attack, Caligula stepped forward between swings and slammed his forehead into Emiya's with a bone-rattling *CRACK*, and Emiya stumbled backwards, blood pouring down his face. He barely got his swords up in time, crossing them over his chest the way he had against Aífe during their spar, and just like then, the force of Caligula's punch was enough to shatter them like they were made of cheap glass.

Unlike his spar against Aífe, there was nothing held back. Emiya was thrown away by the punch, flying over a dozen feet from the impact, and tumbled to the ground. He at least managed to recover enough to roll over his one shoulder and back to his feet, grimace on his face and one eye squinted shut against the blood.

His left arm also dangled limply in its socket.

Mash gasped.

“Emiya!” Rika cried.

“Damn.” Emiya turned his head to the side without looking away and spat out what might have been a tooth. “This guy hits as hard as Herakles.”

Behind my glasses, my eyes went wide.

Fuck.

“S-seriously?” Ritsuka asked squeakily.

Emiya smiled grimly. “Fortunately, I don’t think we have to worry about this guy having eleven extra lives, so if we kill him once, he’s dead.”

“I-I think you just said something really unbelievable!” Mash sputtered.

No time to think about how or why that would be possible for an otherwise normal human, I just had to accept that it was. Caligula’s strength was equal to the greatest hero of Greece, and Emiya knew from firsthand experience — so what did I do about that?

As my mind raced, Spartacus appeared from nowhere and literally dropped out of the sky, laughing loudly. He brought his sword down in an overhand chop, but Caligula lifted one arm and took the edge on the gleaming gold of his bracer without so much as a grunt to show the effort. His return blow smashed into Spartacus’ ribs, and I could hear them snap like kindling as even that meaty, musclebound maniac was thrown backwards from the force of it.

And then, while he pulled himself back to his feet, they cracked again as they moved themselves back into place. Something writhed under his skin, glowing beneath like spots of pink magma, and Spartacus kept laughing.

Huginn swept low, firing off another sizzling burst of energy and light that did nothing to Caligula, and as Spartacus leapt back into the fray, I brought Muninn down to land on Ritsuka’s shoulder.

“Rika,” I ordered through Muninn’s mouth, and the twins jolted at the sound of my voice, “first aid for Emiya. Ritsuka, use your Master’s Clairvoyance to get a read on Caligula.”

“R-right!” they replied.

Rika held out her hand, pointed at Emiya, and shouted, “First Aid!”

Emiya grunted, and with a series of cracks and a sickening pop, his injured arm reset itself.

“Thanks, Master.”

Spartacus swung down again, but Caligula caught his arm by the wrist easily, ignoring another blast from Huginn like the distraction that it was meant to be. Spartacus reared back his other fist and punched with enough strength to knock an ordinary man’s head clean off his shoulders, but when Caligula met his punch with one of his own, it was Spartacus’ arm that was reduced to a mangled mess.

A twinge of sympathy throbbed along the port that connected my prosthetic. Gold Morning — my own arm had been mangled just as badly, back then.

Still, Spartacus laughed, and before my ravens' eyes, the bones and flesh twisted and contorted back into shape. Slower than his ribs, but far, far faster than they had any right to, even as a Servant. It had to be his Noble Phantasm at work, and seeing it for myself now, it really did seem like my original comparison to Crawler and Lung was dead-on.

“Caligula!” Ritsuka said, squinting at the fight. “Class — Berserker!” My eyebrows rose. “Madness Enhancement — A... A-plus!”

A-plus? Then it was like Emiya had said before. Madness Enhancement looped back around — up to a certain point, you lost more and more coherence, but once you got so high, you started to become less mindless and more warped in terms of thinking. At A-plus, it made sense that Caligula would be less coherent than Spartacus was at EX, but more coherent than another Berserker would be at Rank B.

“Strength — A-plus!” Ritsuka kept going. “Constitution — B-plus! Agility — B-plus! Mana —”

“That’s enough, Ritsuka,” Muninn told him. “His skills? Is there anything important there?”

Ritsuka was silent for a moment. “Imperial Privilege, Rank A. It lets him use skills he doesn’t have. The other two just make his attacks stronger the longer and harder he fights.”

“Is that all?” Emiya drawled sarcastically.

Spartacus snapped his forehead into Caligula, and Caligula reared back from the blow, but only so that he could slam his own forehead into Spartacus’ nose. The crack of it breaking was like thunder, and blood fountained from his nostrils as he stumbled back, but only so far, because Caligula still had an iron grip on his right wrist. With a squeeze and another crack, that broke, too, and Caligula let him go to deliver another powerful blow to his unprotected stomach.

Spartacus folded over himself as he went flying backwards again, the air leaving his mouth in a huff, and he landed on the ground, tumbling along like he was rolling down a hill.

And still, after he came to a stop, he pulled himself to his feet, laughing and smiling as his flesh bubbled and twisted back into shape.

“We’re on our way back,” I told them through Muninn’s beak. “You just have to hold out for another thirty — Nero!”

“Nero!” the twins echoed as she rushed past them and Emiya, racing towards the fight. From the long, narrow bundle she’d been carrying over her shoulder the entire trip, she pulled a sword that looked like it had been forged of volcanic stone, black with a red edge, a thing with a jagged, undulating blade that looked better suited to ripping than cutting cleanly.

“Wait!” Mash cried.

But Nero ignored her, letting out a furious scream as she threw herself towards her uncle like a woman possessed. Her sword was nearly as long as she was tall, but she handled it like it weighed almost nothing and aimed mercilessly for Caligula's neck.

Red blood splashed across the grass as he caught the blade barehanded.

"Nero," Caligula rumbled. "My niece... My beloved niece... Child of my sister..."

He raised his other hand, balled into a fist, and ignored the flash of Huginn blasting him again.

"Everything... You will give it to me... Everything!"

And when his fist came down, Spartacus was there to catch it. His hand bent backwards, fingers snapping, the small bones in his palm snapping, the bones in his other forearm that he'd used to brace his hand cracked and snapped, blood splattered everywhere, but it was enough that when Caligula's knuckles made contact with his forehead, Spartacus wasn't instantly obliterated. The attack had been blunted just enough for him to survive.

"The oppressors stand before me," said Spartacus. "Who should judge the oppressors? Who should throw off the yoke of tyranny? Only the oppressed! Only those ground beneath the heel of oppression!"

"Rebellious...pest!" Caligula sneered.

Emiya was suddenly there, sliding through the gap between Spartacus and Nero. In the same motion, he drew back on his black bow and one of his trademark sword-arrow things formed, a twisted mockery of gray steel that shouldn't have been able to fly at all. Arash and I landed on the rampart for Massilia's outer wall just in time for me to watch that thing shoot off like a meteor from three different angles and distances.

Blood splattered across the grass. The arrow leapt into the sky as a streak of light and disappeared into the clouds, punching a hole through them as it went. But Huginn let me see it before the others did, the line gouged into Caligula's cheek where Emiya's shot had come frustratingly close to going through his eye but not actually managed it.

A few centimeters higher and to the left and Caligula would have been beaten, just like that.

There was no time to think about it and ponder the what-ifs, no time to lament that Emiya had missed by such a small margin. Seeing the opening for what it was, I didn't hesitate.

"Arash!" I barked. "Finish him!"

I had barely gotten my feet back under me before Arash was preparing to do just that. He'd only just dropped me off, and in the space of a blink, his bow had materialized and he already had an arrow nocked and ready to fire.

Caligula vanished. Between one moment and the next, he was gone, like he'd never been there, and Arash's arrow soared through the place his chest had just been and bit into the dirt with the force of a hand grenade. If it had landed, it would have hit Caligula right in the heart.

If it had landed.

Arash clicked his tongue, eyes narrowed. “He’s retreating.”

“Tch,” Aífe scoffed as she landed next to me. “Figured out how badly outnumbered he was, did he?”

“Can you hit him?” I asked.

In Spirit Form, he was intangible for all intents and purposes, even to my bugs, which meant that I couldn’t track him or keep track of him until he materialized again. If Arash’s Clairvoyance was good enough, however, then even in Spirit Form, he should be able to track Caligula and nail him with an arrow.

“No,” said Arash. “Not while he’s in Spirit Form. He’d have to materialize to block it, but he’s in the forest already. He doesn’t have to worry about getting around obstacles; I do.”

A scowl pulled itself across my face. Damn it. The enemy Berserker *would* have enough of his wits about him to know when he was beaten and pull a tactical retreat, wouldn’t he? It would have been so much easier if he was a maddened battle junkie who fought to the death.

Unfortunately, there was nothing else to be done about it. If Caligula was determined to retreat, then not only was he going to outpace us by virtue of having no Master to lug around, but he’d be almost impossible for us to follow anyway. It would just be a waste of time to give chase.

“Go back and finish picking up our supplies,” I ordered him. “It looks like this was just an attack of opportunity, but I’d like to be out of here as soon as possible in case he decides to grab reinforcements and come back.”

If he did, we would hopefully be in a much better position to counterattack at that point. Even better, if he followed us towards Rome, that would put him and his team deep behind enemy lines and cut off from that Pax Romana Noble Phantasm. He should be much easier to handle if we didn’t have to worry about that getting in the way.

“Understood.”

Arash vanished from the rampart next to me. I picked him up again a few seconds later in a deserted alleyway, and through my bugs, watched him stealthily insert himself back into the flow of people making their way through the streets. I had no idea what he would tell the shopkeeper he had bailed on when he got back, because I couldn’t think of a lie just then that sounded convincing enough to explain our sudden disappearing act.

It was his problem now, either way.

Down below, Muninn landed on Ritsuka’s shoulder as Huginn stayed up above, watching over them from the sky. Muninn opened her beak again and through her mouth, I asked, “Is everyone okay? No one was injured? Aside from Emiya and Spartacus.”

Rika saluted. “Tip-top, firing on all cylinders!”

“We’re okay, Senpai,” Ritsuka translated. He looked over at Mash. “Mash?”

“Ah!” She blinked. “Y-yes, I’m fine, Miss Taylor, Master. No injuries to report.”

I looked her over surreptitiously with Muninn, but couldn’t find anything wrong with her at a glance. If those two hits she took from Caligula had hurt her at all, she wasn’t showing it, or maybe she’d already healed from it. I still wasn’t sure I understood all the rules about how Demi-Servants worked.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything,” Boudica said regretfully, “but in my current condition, I think Caligula would have killed me in one hit.”

She gestured helplessly to her missing arm, and while I didn’t think it was impossible to fight effectively while down a limb, I also had to admit that fighting for me tended to involve a lot less direct physical confrontation than it would for her. Not none, because I had never been one to sit back and handle everything from afar with my swarm, but a lot less than a more physically imposing cape would have.

I turned to the most injured of us all as the other Servants rejoined the group. “Spartacus?”

Spartacus just grinned, still covered in his own blood. To see him smiling from a face dyed red, another person probably would have found it chilling. Eerie, maybe, or just plain unsettling.

Those people had probably never seen a fully transformed Lung.

“The rebellion cannot be slain,” said Spartacus. “Tyranny will always be opposed, for justice lives on in the hearts of the oppressed.”

I decided to take that as ‘I’m okay.’ As long as he was smiling, that was probably a good sign.

“I think I’m still feeling that first hit,” Emiya added, rolling the shoulder that had been injured, “and I probably will be for the next week, but I’m back to normal otherwise.”

Mash let out a sigh of relief. “That’s good. We all came out of it okay.”

Muninn turned her head to the last member of our group. “Nero?”

But Nero didn’t respond. She just kept looking out into empty space in the direction where Caligula had been standing when he fled, her ridiculous sword held so loosely that she might just drop it. She hadn’t moved since he left.

Muninn took off from Ritsuka’s shoulder and flew the short distance over to land on Nero’s, and she jerked; the sudden addition of new weight was what got through to her. “Nero?”

“Ah!” she said. “Yes, I am uninjured! Mm-mm! My august self won’t be done in so easily!”

She looked back out again, staring off towards the forest. Ritsuka, perhaps sensing the obvious turmoil in Nero, approached her slowly.

“Is something wrong, Nero?” he asked cautiously.

For a moment, she was quiet. Like she was trying to order her thoughts before she asked the question that was burning her up inside.

“Just now,” she began slowly and at length, “that was my uncle.”

“Uncle?” Ritsuka asked, not understanding.

“Yes,” I answered for him through Muninn’s beak, because he wouldn’t recognize the significance of that. “The person you just fought was Emperor Caligula.”

“My uncle is dead,” Nero said with finality. “He died...nearly twenty years ago.”

“Yes.” When she would have been... Come to think of it, it was actually pretty incredible that she remembered him well enough to recognize him on sight when she would have been about two years old when he died.

Of course, if there were busts or statues that had already been made in his honor, then maybe it wasn’t quite so incredible.

“Then... the version of my uncle we fought just now...”

“Was a Servant, without a doubt.”

She trembled. “And yet... My uncle, whose empire was entrusted to me... My uncle, who gave me the Rome that I now rule... My uncle, from whom I inherited everything... My uncle just tried to...”

“It’s worth pointing out that he was a Berserker,” I said. “He likely wasn’t in his right mind.”

Even more so with Mad Enhancement that high. There was no telling exactly how severely his mentality had been warped.

“Even so!” she burst out. “Even so, he attempted to...to...”

She couldn’t seem to finish the sentence, and in my real body, I frowned as my brow knitted together. Attempted to what? I still wasn’t quite sure what he’d wanted from her, exactly. Caligula had said something about her surrendering the empire, her life, and even her body, and while the first two made a degree of sense with the United Empire’s goals, the last had a lot of implications that I frankly didn’t want to unpack if I didn’t have to.

Roman Emperors got up to some crazy shit, sometimes, and Nero had been a toddler when Caligula died. Now that she was grown up, a fully matured, adult woman...

Purity of the bloodline, indeed.

“Am I truly so worthless an emperor?” Nero whispered. I didn’t think I was meant to hear it. “Am I so incompetent that my uncle has come back from the dead to take his empire from me?”

“Nero?”

A moment passed, a handful of uneasy seconds. Ritsuka shifted behind her, his own brow furrowing.

“No,” Nero said at length. “I’m worrying over nothing! Mm-mm! It’s clear to me that the United Empire has brainwashed my uncle and put strange thoughts into his head! In that case, it is all the more reason why I must cast them down in the name of the true Rome!”

The twins shared an uncertain look, but didn’t say anything. It seemed like they weren’t fooled by her bravado any more than I was.

Unfortunately, the only thing Chaldea had that even vaguely resembled a therapist was currently sleeping off the better part of half a week of all-nighters, so the best any of us could do for Nero was to keep an eye on her and offer to listen if and when she decided to unload some of that baggage. Unless and until it started getting in the way of the mission, I decided, we could afford to give her the time to try and work it out herself.

Nero spun around, nearly dislodging Muninn from her shoulder with how sudden it was, and strode back over to rejoin the group. Her sunny disposition had returned, but having seen that moment of vulnerability, I had to wonder how much of it was real.

“Forgive me, my friends!” she said brightly. “Your emperor saw something unbelievable and was momentarily disturbed! There is no cause for alarm, for even my august self might occasionally stumble when faced with something so outlandish!”

Emiya stared at her, disbelieving, and even Mash blinked, bewildered. They both looked towards my raven, like they expected me to call her out on her bullshit.

“This doesn’t change our plans,” I told them through Muninn’s mouth. “Although we might have to cut lunch a little shorter than we intended to.”

Emiya shook his head. “What the hell. Why not? Sure, if we’re going to ignore that little stunt, I guess that’s the way it is.”

Boudica chewed worriedly on her bottom lip, but didn’t say anything.

“I think she’s right,” Ritsuka agreed. “Meeting Caligula doesn’t change where we need to go or why, does it? So our plans shouldn’t change, either.”

“We still need to inspect the ley line at Mount Etna,” Mash said a little hesitantly.

“Yes,” I confirmed for them. “After lunch, we’ll make our way to Genua, then to Rome, as originally planned.”

Rika perked up.

“Does that mean you got the food, Senpai?” she asked eagerly.

“We came back immediately the instant we realized you were in trouble,” I told her. “After Caligula left, I sent Arash back to pick up where we were forced to leave off. Give it another ten or fifteen minutes.”

“Another ten or fifteen minutes...”

A slow, dreamy smile stretched over Rika's face.

“And then,” she said lowly, “another one of Emiya's delicious meals.”