

Chapter CLVI: “M”

For several long seconds, the evil fairy simply laid there, a grotesque tableau, like some kind of mockery of a butterfly pinned to the ground. Purple blood continued to seep across the cavern floor, slowly and steadily.

“I-it actually worked?” Ritsuka asked, stunned.

“Fuck me, it *did*,” Mordred agreed.

I could hardly believe it either. The reasoning had been sound enough, sure, but some part of me still hadn’t thought that there was any way the evil fairy could be killed by relying on something that flimsy — especially when the “incantation” Rika had used wasn’t even a spell she had cast, it was just a bit of poetic nonsense from the movie. There was no way it should have worked the way it did.

And yet, it had.

“It worked!” Rika cheered. “It really, actually worked! Senpai! Onii-chan!”

Jeanne Alter hopped down off of the horned head and strode back over our way. “Ugh, killjoys, the lot of you. I almost had that bitch.” She grimaced down at the smear of purple splattered across her boots and tried to wipe it off in the dirt. “Her blood couldn’t even be red either. What a disappointment this whole thing turned out to be.”

The dragon’s body suddenly shifted, and we all nearly jumped at the shock — but it was just shrinking, the wings and the scales flaking away like so much steam. No longer lodged in anything, Mordred’s sword, Clarent, fell to the ground with a clatter. She went over and retrieved it, inspecting it for any chips in the blade or other damage.

“Hope all of that shit made sense to someone,” Mordred said gruffly. “Thought I’d gotten used to that sorta thing, but you mages keep pulling more stuff outta your asses that throws me for a loop.”

“I must admit, Sir Mordred,” said Jekyll, “that I had not much of an inkling what was happening just now either. The fundamental principle, I believe I understand as well as I ever expect to, but the specifics elude me.”

“Trust me,” Andersen said dryly, “you’re better off not knowing. At least this way, you don’t have to come to terms with how ridiculous that entire sequence was. Walt Disney — if I ever have to meet the man myself, then I’m going to have a few choice words for how he reinterpreted all of these fairy tales. Good grief.”

“We should hurry,” Flamel said abruptly. “We need to find Renée — she *must* be here somewhere — before Perrault conspires to reconstitute the evil fairy again —”

“You *vermin*,” the evil fairy growled feebly, and before our eyes, her body slowly picked itself up off of the ground. An enormous, gaping wound bled more purple blood down her front, struggling to close, but against all odds, she was still alive. “You worthless, wretched *scum*.”

“Holy crap,” said Rika, “she’s still alive like that?”

“You didn’t really think it would be that simple, did you?” Andersen scolded her. “Whatever she might look like and whatever name she might use, that creature is *not* the ‘Maleficent’ you think she is!”

“It was worth a shot, wasn’t it?” Rika squawked.

Because Disney had introduced both strengths and weaknesses to her, but at the end of the day, she was still the evil fairy from the story, not Maleficent from the movie. The wound she was even now trying to heal was proof that those influences were not nothing and that they *could* change her, but at the core, her story was the story Perrault had penned, not Disney.

Damn. I knew it couldn’t have been that easy.

“The bitch doesn’t know when to stay down,” Jeanne Alter said, brandishing her sword.

“She really does remind me of that witch way too much,” Mordred agreed.

“You will...all of you...*rue* the day you set foot in this era!” the evil fairy snarled. She lifted up her staff, an ominous light glowing from the rounded head. Even I could feel the amount of magical energy she was gathering for that.

“Stop her!” Flamel commanded urgently.

And it couldn’t be for anything good.

“Arash!”

A brace of arrows leapt across the distance, cutting through the air, and they landed with unerring accuracy in several blows that would have been fatal — if she wasn’t a creature from a fairy tale. She ignored them completely, like they weren’t even there, even though the shafts jutted out of her flesh like the quills of a porcupine.

The fact that they were pushed out almost immediately probably had something to do with how contemptuously she treated them.

“A roving titan from beyond the skies,” she began, voice thready but venomous, “with strength that space and time defies —”

Mash choked. “E-even something like that?”

“Now sate your hunger with this meager treat, and consume the world that seeks my —”

But mid-sentence, she stumbled on the air, gasping, and clutched desperately at her wounded heart. Eyes wide, she spun about, reaching out towards the giant steam engine desperately with her one free arm.

“No!”

And just as suddenly, burst apart into motes of glittering dust, vanishing before even a single one could land on the ground. The magical energy she had been gathering just dissipated, seeping out into the atmosphere until it had diffused back into the air.

In the wake of her disappearance, a moment of silence passed, and was interrupted —

Beep-beep!

— by Romani, who frantically demanded, “— summon a black hole? A singularity within a Singularity?”

What?

He was pushed aside bodily by Marie, who scolded him, “That wasn’t funny, Romani! That was no joking matter!”

“I-I wasn’t joking!” his voice protested. “She seriously, actually tried to summon a black hole inside that cavern! How does a character from a fairy tale even know what that is, anyway?”

The evil fairy...actually tried to summon a *black hole* here? Of all things? Just...how would that have worked with her plans? Wouldn’t it have destroyed everything in the cavern, including both Angrboða and her creator, Perrault? Even if she could have survived the black hole itself, she would have been committing suicide by destroying her link to the world, so what was the point of that?

Or maybe, like Bakuda, she had some method of controlling its size and strength, a method of modulating it so that it only sucked us up and then evaporated. In that case, maybe it wouldn’t have been such a stupid move after all.

“What would happen if there was a singularity inside a Singularity?” Ritsuka asked seriously.

It was Romani who said, “The whole thing might have collapsed from the paradox! The entire spacetime might just have unraveled!”

A shiver went down my spine. And we would have been screwed either way. The thing that got me was, how were we meant to have stopped her, considering how quickly she got the incantation off and the fact that she had just ignored our actual attempts? If even Rika’s little trick with Mordred’s sword hadn’t worked, would trying to take her head off — even if only to delay her — have slowed her down at all?

I hated that I didn’t have an answer.

“Director,” I said, “have Renée’s vital signs changed at all?”

“No,” Marie answered. “They’ve remained steady this entire time.”

Flamel released a gusty sigh, as though he was breathing out all of the weight that had been pressing down on his shoulders this entire time. “Thank goodness.”

I nodded. “Then we’ll contact you once we’ve rescued her and secured the Grail.”

“I’ll be waiting for your report,” Marie replied as though it was a foregone conclusion, and then the line cut out. I worried for a second how much of that confidence was a front she put on, but there was nothing I could do to help her right now except finish this up and bring the team back home safely.

“Pardon my curiosity,” said Jekyll, “but if it isn’t too much trouble for me to inquire, what, precisely, is this object you refer to so simply as a black hole?”

My lips pulled into a line. How to explain this one?

“It’s a distortion in the fabric of space and time,” Mash preempted me. “An object formed when a massive enough star dies and collapses inwards under its own weight, forming a region where gravity is so strong that even light can’t escape its pull. At the center is what’s called the singularity, an unobserved spacetime where all known laws of physics are believed to break down, and the term for which these Singularities are named.”

I wasn’t the only one who looked at her, a little surprised she knew so much about it.

“You are,” Flamel said, pausing to choose the next words carefully, “remarkably well-informed on the subject, my dear.”

Mash blinked at him, and then her cheeks pinked a little as she seemed to realize what she’d said.

“Ah, y-yes, well, um... Most...of my time growing up was spent reading, so I guess you could say I have a very eclectic knowledge base. I don’t know that much about it, really, it’s just that I was curious about the origin of the term we use for these circumstances.”

“It’s way more than I know,” Rika opined. “What I know about physics can only fit in a high school textbook.”

“Because if it’s not from an anime, movie, or video game, you don’t care enough to look it up on the internet,” Ritsuka added. Rika stuck her tongue out at him, as she was wont to do.

“Goes to show what happens when you lock someone up in a box for most of her life and don’t give her much else to do but read,” Andersen commented.

The mood sobered. Ritsuka in particular looked tempted to say something nasty to Andersen, but held his tongue.

“Let’s go rescue Renée,” Arash said, trying to get our minds off of Mash’s circumstances by focusing on the task at hand.

“Yes.”

Emiya chose that moment to rejoin us. “That cat disappeared on me mid-fight, so I’m guessing the plan worked.”

“It did.”

“*Someone’s* did, at least,” Rika grumbled petulantly.

Jackie? I asked.

“Here, Mommy!” Jackie chirped, suddenly beside me as though she had been there all along. I wasn’t the only one startled, nor the only one who jolted a little in my surprise, but no one commented on it because she had snuck up on all of us.

“You found Perrault, then?”

She nodded.

“We found a man with a big book inside the Angry Body machine,” she answered succinctly. “He didn’t move even when we stabbed him, but he disappeared so he must have been the right guy, right, Mommy?”

A quick glance up and down her cloak showed no bloodstains, which wouldn’t have necessarily been an indication of much of anything if Jackie actually cared about keeping blood off of her clothes, but the fact that the evil fairy, Puss, and presumably the wicked wolf had all disappeared afterwards meant that she hadn’t just killed some random person. Whether or not it actually was Perrault would be impossible to prove now, but since our enemies had vanished, it functionally didn’t matter.

I nodded. “That’s right.” Then, since I didn’t have any better ideas for how to reward her, I defaulted to what I’d been doing the last few days and gave her a few gentle pats on the head. “Good job, Jackie.”

Jackie didn’t seem all that picky, like she didn’t care what kind of validation she received as long as it was validation. She preened under the attention, smiling a very open, childlike smile.

“What about Renée?” Flamel asked worriedly.

“Jackie? Did you find Renée while you were looking through that machine?”

Jackie nodded. “We found that nice lady who cooks that good food, too, but she was sleeping and trapped inside the machine, and we didn’t know how to get her out. Mommy wants her in one piece, right?”

The alarmed look that Jekyll and Flamel were both sending me might have been funny in different circumstances.

“Yes, Jackie, we don’t want to hurt Renée.”

Jackie nodded again. “We thought so, so we left her alone for Mommy and Mister Flamel to rescue her.”

Flamel heaved out another sigh. “Thank goodness.”

“I’m happy for you,” Ritsuka told him.

“As am I,” Jekyll agreed.

“Thank you for your kind words,” said Flamel, and then he turned to Jackie. “My dear, could you be so kind as to lead us to her?”

Jackie looked to me for permission, and I nodded, so she looked back to Flamel and said simply, “Okay. We’ll lead you there.”

“I’m very grateful.”

We hadn’t even made it a single step before a familiar voice called, “There you are, Papa!”

We all turned to find Nursery Rhyme skipping our way, completely untouched and uninjured, like she hadn’t just been engaged in a fight with a monster wolf big enough to make a try at swallowing her whole. Then again, she would be, wouldn’t she? After all, she had her Jabberwocky and her Bandersnatch and who knew what else to draw on, and if she ever had to fight directly, she was probably in pretty big trouble already.

“Alice,” said Tohsaka. “You’re okay.”

“Yup!” she said brightly. “We played with Mister Wolf for a while, but he didn’t want to follow any of the rules of our games, so I was glad when he vanished with a poof all of a sudden. Jabberwocky was getting tired, and Bandersnatch wasn’t strong enough to hold him back. Plus,” she wiggled her thumbs, “he doesn’t have thumbs the way Jabberwocky does, so he can’t hold an ax.”

“I see,” said Tohsaka. “Well, the important part is that you made it out of that fight without getting hurt, so I suppose the rest of it doesn’t really matter.”

Nursery Rhyme giggled. “But I *am* really tired, Papa!” She held out her arms. “Piggyback ride?”

Tohsaka grimaced, and for a moment, looked like he intended to refuse her, but then his will visibly crumpled and he heaved out a sigh of longsuffering. “Fine.”

He turned around and bent down, offering his back to his Servant, who let out a delighted, “Yay!” and climbed astride him as though she really was nothing more than an ordinary little girl. Rika, watching, tried to muffle her sniggering, and Ritsuka hid his smile behind his hand as Mash smiled openly.

Emiya, on the other hand, didn’t bother hiding his smirk or his quiet chuckles, and neither did Jeanne Alter or Mordred. Tohsaka gamely ignored them all, even as his cheeks pinked and his face twisted into a miserably embarrassed expression.

“Up we go!” Nursery Rhyme cheered as Tohsaka stood back up.

Jackie gave me a considering look, so the only thing I could do was promise her, “Maybe later. Rescuing Renée comes first.”

Jackie bobbed her head in a nod. “Yes, Mommy.”

“Jackie made it!” Nursery Rhyme said.

Jackie smiled and said, “Alice made it, too!”

And for just that moment, they looked like ordinary girls again — but only for that moment.

With the entirety of the group gathered together again, Jackie led us off towards the giant steam engine that dominated the center of the cavern, and the closer we got to it, the more obvious it became exactly how large it really was. It wasn’t something you might see in a museum, displaying the first steam engine ever created, nor was it a larger, bulkier model meant to serve as the heart of an old-fashioned train. No, it was much, much bigger than that, an enormous steel dome with holes spaced throughout to leave room for stacks that jutted out of them, large enough to fit an entire house inside several times over. The whole assemblage towered over us, so tall that even Servants might not be able to make the jump in a single go, not without transitioning into spirit form.

Inside of that steel dome, there was the main machinery, and insulated by the outer structure, it was humid and a good ten degrees hotter than the cavern itself. Some of the stacks belched thick, hissing steam from the tops, but others stretched further up and connected to a kind of scaffolding that formed the structure for a network of pipes that disappeared into the ceiling. These, no doubt, were the method Babbage was using to pump the fog out into the city, the vents that had blown steam almost right into my face earlier.

I couldn’t have explained how it all worked. There were belts that whirred and turned the wheels, and the wheels turned the gears, and the massive chambers contained and compressed the heated steam, that much was obvious enough, but what each mechanism did and how each of the individual functions came together to produce the end result, I had no idea.

“I’ll give him credit for one thing,” Emiya murmured. “That Babbage really knew how to build a steam engine.”

“It really is incredible,” Mash agreed. “It’s just like...the Fuyuki Great Grail. There’s so much magical energy, it’s no wonder the fog is so toxic to normal humans. This is, without a doubt, more than enough mana to summon so many Servants.”

“I don’t see Renée anywhere, though,” Ritsuka said.

“She’s this way,” Jackie told him, and led us around the machinery.

“Make sure not to touch anything,” I warned the twins. “This is a steam engine. It’s going to be very hot.”

“You don’t say,” Rika muttered, eyeing the metal as though it was a snake that would snap at her and bite.

Angrboða wound up being three main steam chambers, one in the center sandwiched by one on either side, and on the one end, they all connected down to what I would guess would normally have been the most basic part of the engine, the chamber where wood or coal was burned to heat the water into steam. Instead, however, fastened into a strange contraption just in front of it —

“Renée!” Flamel exclaimed.

— was a familiar white-haired woman, apparently unconscious. She was, bizarrely, dressed in some kind of strange, white gown trimmed in gold, arms thrown out to the sides as though she had been crucified, and a red glow surrounded her body.

“That can’t be,” said Emiya, sounding spooked. “The Dress of Heaven?”

“It is not,” a new voice announced from behind us. “It is nothing more than my half-hearted attempt at recreating it. For all my talents, however, it seems that replicating such a thing is simply impossible without the Winter Saint herself.”

We all spun around, startled, surprised to find that a man had snuck up on us somehow, completely unnoticed. My first thought, absent of any logic, took in his clothing — from the ascot to the tweed jacket to the long coat — and wondered how a civilian had managed to get down here with us. Immediately after that, however, I knew he couldn’t be, not if he could actually answer Emiya about something no one else here seemed to know anything about.

Also, his hair was blue. He didn’t seem like the kind of man to dye it, not by the look of his face, so that meant it had to be a side effect of some kind of magecraft. Kadoc had those kinds of marks, too, because his eyes were just too bright an amber to be natural and I doubted his hair was gray for any of the usual reasons.

Was this...another mage from the Association? One that had escaped the attack, just like Tohsaka had? Or...

My eyes narrowed on him.

...was he in on the entire thing?

“Hold on a second,” said Emiya. “That blue seaweed hair... I’ve seen that before, a lifetime ago. You can’t be...”

“M,” I guessed.

Red eyes turned first to Emiya, and then to me, dispassionate, like I was just barely worth noticing. Despite being surrounded by Servants, he didn’t seem at all concerned by their presence.

“I am the one your ally, Victor Frankenstein, referred to as M, yes,” said M. “The mastermind behind this entire farce of a Singularity, the leader of Project Demonic Fog. My name...is Makiri Zolgen.”

If he was expecting any of us to recognize it, none of us did, and if that disappointed him, he gave no indication of that either.

Mordred took a threatening step towards him, brandishing her sword. “So you’re the one trying to destroy London, is what I’m hearing you say, bastard!”

“Not London,” said Makiri. “Not merely London, no. A single city, even one so prominent, would not be enough to unmoor this Foundation of the Human Order. No. Project Demonic Fog is a plan

to destroy all of Britain. Only then can this pillar be broken and the course of proper history destroyed in accordance with my king's wishes."

"King...?" Mash said softly. "Then, just like Professor Lev, you're...!"

"A disciple of the King of Mages," Ritsuka concluded.

Did that mean he was possessed by one of those Demon Gods, too? If he was, then the very last thing we could do was let him take the Grail out of Angrboða and use it to summon its true form.

"So you're another one of Solomon's lapdogs," I said, trying to get a rise out of him. Maybe it would make him chatty enough to reveal more about what King Solomon was up to and why these Singularities were even happening. "Here to make sure everything goes to plan, I'm guessing."

But his expression didn't change, but for taking a brief moment to close his eyes. I would have called it resignation if he emoted in any other way, but the rest of his face remained placid.

"If you have already deduced that much, then there isn't much more for me to say," said M. "You betray your ignorance, however, to speak his name so freely. Now that you have drawn his attention here, my own course of action has been set in stone."

Drawn his attention...? Hold on. Was Solomon so powerful that just saying his name was enough to summon him?

"You might be a mage, but you're still just human, aintcha?" said Mordred. "Whatcha gonna do with my sword in your heart?"

"He's human?" Jekyll asked, surprised.

"You didn't notice?" Mordred retorted. "This guy, he ain't got no presence as a Servant. He's standing right in front of us, ain't even bothering to try and hide, and he's got none of that *weight* you'd expect from a Servant."

"Being fair..." Andersen began meaningfully.

"If he's a Servant that can hypnotize Professor Babbage and Paracelsus, then he's nowhere near as weak as you are," I said bluntly.

He winced. "Harsh," he allowed, "but a fair point.

Mordred's face screwed up. "Shaddup. Even without all of that, my gut tells me, this guy's completely human. Alive, even. Whether he's part of this era properly or got yanked forward like Tohsaka did, well, that part I'm less clear on."

Judging by his clothes, I was willing to bet on the former.

"And yet," Mash said, indignant, "you're willing to destroy the era you live in, Makiri Zolgen?"

“Of course, I tried to resist,” Zolgen said ruefully. “But it was useless from the beginning. There was no point. The future has been incinerated. The past has been incinerated. The present has been incinerated. Whether I resisted or not, that could not be changed. Our king has already decreed that it must be so, and so it is so. Attempting to fight against him was futile. No matter what I did, these things were immutable.”

“And so, you contrived of this mad plan to use the Holy Grail in conjunction with Professor Babbage’s machinery to drown London — to drown *Britain* — in fog,” Flamel concluded grimly. “I see. There is a madness to it, but I understand. There is only one other question I have, Makiri Zolgen: what purpose does Renée serve in this plan of yours?”

“Is it not obvious?” Zolgen replied. “Your brilliance is well-known, Nicolas Flamel. Your crafting of a Philosopher’s Stone is a matter of record at the Association. That you would not have one upon your summoning? Inconceivable. That you would hide it? The clearest choice, in your circumstances. Then, where else would you have hidden it than in the homunculus you crafted? For that very purpose, I would assume. A clever ruse, but obvious to anyone familiar with your history.”

Flamel’s face drew into a deep scowl. “I did not ask you to enumerate my failures, Zolgen, nor my strategic and tactical missteps. I asked you, for what purpose did you kidnap my daughter?”

“Why else?” said Zolgen. “To use the Philosopher’s Stone inside of her to amplify the output of Angrboða and accelerate the progress of Project Demonic Fog. For those purposes, the homunculus herself is unnecessary, so long as the Stone remains intact.”

But this was the wrong thing to say, because Flamel slapped his hands to the ground and a pillar of stone thrust up and out fast as lightning, catching Zolgen in the chest. He was flung, bodily and violently, backwards, tumbling out of one of the openings in Angrboða’s massive shell. Flamel followed him immediately.

“Abraham!” Jekyll called, but Flamel was too angry to listen to reason and all the rest of us could do was race to keep pace with him as he stormed towards Zolgen.

“Your logic is reprehensible,” Flamel seethed, “your choices indefensible, and your treatment of Renée unforgivable! Makiri Zolgen! A mage of your caliber will not have been done in by that! Stand and face my judgment!”

For a second, Zolgen was still, and then he slowly pulled himself back to his feet, hair disheveled and clothing scuffed and dirtied, but aside from a trickle of red blood from one side of his mouth, uninjured.

“Yes,” said Zolgen. “At this point, there is nothing left to say, is there? The time for words has passed. With the power of my king, I shall destroy the whole lot of you, and then the final Heroic Spirit will be summoned and Project Demonic Fog completed.”

A brace of arrows — two volleys, one from Arash and one from Emiya — slammed into Zolgen, and as a human and not a Servant, the sheer power behind them lifted him up off of his feet and threw him back even further, blood trailing in his wake. It happened too fast for me to see much more than the initial hit landing center mass, but given how good our Archers were at hitting their targets, I had no doubts they’d been aimed at vital points like his heart and lungs.

This time, Zolgen did not tumble as he had from Flamel's first blow. Instead, his body simply flew across the distance as though it had been picked up and tossed by a giant hand, not unlike people did when getting shot by high powered weapons in the movies. He landed on his back with a thump, splayed out like a cadaver in a morgue.

"Well, that was anticlimactic," Rika said.

"Futile," Zolgen's voice rasped.

"He survived that?" Rika squeaked.

"Jackie!" I ordered. "Hurry!"

"My king has already...unleashed the evil lurking in my heart!"

Jackie leapt towards Zolgen's body, dashing across the distance as a black blur and pulling out a pair of her knives as she went, but she was already too late. Before she could reach him, Zolgen's body expanded to twice its normal size and then exploded, flesh ripping apart as something inside of him tore its way out of his skin. A black mass of writing, leathery flesh, rapidly growing larger and larger before our eyes.

Jackie, not knowing what was happening or what else to do, could only retreat and come back to my side, eyeing the lump warily.

"It's another Demon God!" Rika announced unnecessarily.

"What?" Mordred demanded. "You know what the fuck that is?"

"Fuck me," Jeanne Alter grouched, "*another* one?"

"My god in heaven," Jekyll breathed.

"What...what is this?" Flamel gaped.

Fran gaped up at it. "Ah...ah..."

The mass of flesh began to elongate, reaching up towards the cavern ceiling, and the black, leathery skin split, opening up spiraling rents in the surface through which raw, red flesh glistened and massive red eyes began to protrude. The magical energy seething off of it was so potent and so thick that the innards seemed to glow with it, casting an eerie light across the steam that was still being pumped out by Angrboða.

"What have you done to yourself?" Tohsaka whispered.

"Magical energy response intensifying," Mash reported. "The reading matches our previous encounters with Flauros and Forneus. Senpai...that really is another Demon God!"

"So we were right," Ritsuka concluded grimly. "There really was another one controlling this Singularity. That means...it's also responsible for messing with Paracelsus and Babbage's minds."

And twisting them into evil caricatures of themselves, bent on destroying all of the things they would have wanted to protect.

“Yeah.”

A deep, rumbling groan thundered through the cavern, and the ground beneath our feet shook with the force of it. A crash from somewhere above announced the Demon God smashing into the ceiling, leaving bits of dirt to fall down around its bulk like dust. It seemed entirely unconcerned as its massive eyes swiveled as though attempting to focus on something much, much too small for it to properly see.

“Please don’t be Nazara,” Rika muttered, hands clasped as though in prayer, “please don’t be Nazara, please don’t be Nazara...”

At some point, when we weren’t, you know, about to face another huge monster and could safely talk, I was going to have to get the story behind that particular reference out of her, if only because she seemed to take it so seriously.

“**BARBATOS,**” thundered the Demon God (“Yes!” Rika breathed, barely audible over its booming voice. “Thank god!”). **“THAT IS THE NAME OF THE EVIL THAT LURKED INSIDE OF ME. BARBATOS, THE DEMON GOD, ONE OF SEVENTY-TWO. I SHALL USE THIS ABOMINABLE FORM AND ITS OVERWHELMING POWER TO DO AS I MUST, CHAMPIONS OF PROPER HISTORY, AND CRUSH YOU ALL.”**

Every single one of its eyes suddenly swiveled towards us, and I knew what was coming, what was about to be unleashed on us —

“Master!”

— but so did Mash, and as a Demi-Servant, she was just faster on the uptake and faster to move. By the time my mouth was starting to open, she had already thrown herself in front of us, raising her shield, and like she was daring Barbatos to try and get past her, she shouted:

“**LORD CHALDEAS!**”

The familiar ghostly rampart formed not a moment too soon, because a series of explosions rocked its surface and sent the ground beneath our feet quivering. Oily black smoke jetted backwards in thick plumes, happening too quickly for one to disperse before the next took its place. Mash let out a soft grunt with each one, but the barrier never fractured and never wavered. Every hit was blocked perfectly and flawlessly.

Eventually, however, the bombardment had to stop, leaving behind a faint ringing in my ears. There was no better time to take control of the situation and arrange the counterattack than that reprieve.

“Nicolas!” I called over to him. I retrieved my mask from my equipment pouch and swiftly set about getting it on. “Get Renée out of that thing! That’ll hopefully delay whatever he’s attempting to do with Angrboða!”

Flamel startled, looking at me incredulously, like he was surprised that I wasn't surprised. I guess he hadn't realized exactly how much experience the last four Singularities had bought us. Much as I hated it, this was now the third Demon God we'd had to face, and I imagined that — seeing as Barbatos had basically confirmed there were seventy-two in total — we'd have to face more of them going forward.

“Tohsaka!” Ritsuka said, picking up where I'd left off as I pulled my mask over my face. “Stay with him! You can't go out in the fog!”

“You don't need to remind me!” Tohsaka snapped back. “Tch! But fine! Alice, lend them a hand!”

“Okay, Papa!” Nursery Rhyme chirped.

“Emiya!” said Rika. “Time to pull out the big guns!”

“Without bringing the whole cavern down around us, you mean?” he snarked back.

“Duh! You got anything in that magic bag in your noggin that can do that?”

He smirked. “Heh. One or two I can give a try, I suppose.”

“You guys have seriously seen something like this before?” Mordred asked.

“Twice,” said Jeanne Alter. “Killed them, too. Try and keep up, British.”

“Keh! You ain't nearly as hot shit as you think you are, Bumpkin!”

“A VALIANT EFFORT,” Barbatos boomed. **“BUT ULTIMATELY, POINTLESS. YOUR END IS INEVITABLE. ALL YOU ACCOMPLISH NOW IS TO DELAY IT. THERE IS NO FUTURE WHERE YOU SUCCEED, EVEN IF YOU DEFEAT ME HERE. THE FATE YOU SEEK TO DENY HAS ALREADY BEEN WRITTEN.”**

“Ha!” crowed Jeanne Alter. “He's pulling out the whole goddamn playbook! What's that you said it was, Master, something about an overlord list?”

“Evil Overlord List!” Rika clarified. “And I'm *glad* he hasn't read it! This would be a whole lot harder if he had!”

“Go!” I ordered them, cutting across the commentary. Mordred and Jeanne Alter traded one more look, then took off, racing towards Barbatos. “Ritsuka! We're going to need some reinforcements!”

“Right!” Ritsuka answered with a nod, and clenched his fist. Lines of light raced up and down his uniform. “Aífe!”

I followed my own advice and fed the starter charge into my own mystic code. “Siegfried!”

“Hippolyta!” Rika added, joining in unexpectedly.

“Come forth!”

A trio of magic circles bloomed across the cavern floor, and from them, a familiar trio of Servants arrived, shadows lifting up off of the ground and filling in until Aífe, Hippolyta, and Siegfried stood in front of us.

“Another one of these things, huh?” Aífe asked as soon as she appeared.

“So it would seem.” Siegfried lifted his sword. “I’m sorry, Queen Aífe, but I’m afraid this one will be mine to kill.”

“Ha!” Aífe barked. “If you want to make it a competition, then I’m happy to oblige!”

“I’m afraid that support will be all I can do for this one,” Hippolyta said apologetically. “Nothing in my arsenal can deal damage with a wide enough spread to meaningfully hurt that thing, so I’m fine if all I manage to do is distract it for you.”

You can’t use Balmung at full power, I told Siegfried, and then to Aífe, I added, Our best bet is likely to be Ochd Deug Odin. Can you keep the blast contained enough to stop it from destroying this whole place and burying us down here?

“Of course,” she answered aloud. “Give me enough room and I’ll burn this one up, too.”

“It seems I shall have to endure this handicap,” Siegfried said. “Queen Aífe, I shall clear the way for whatever it is Master asked you to do.” He smiled. “However, if I should kill this creature on accident, I trust there will be no objections?”

Aífe’s lips pulled up into her familiar shark-like grin. “I can’t wait for the day you and I get to go head to head for real.”

Siegfried’s smile grew wider. “I look forward to that, as well.”

“We shall have to make a day of it,” said Hippolyta, “because I would like the chance to test myself against the both of you as well.”

“Go!”

And they raced off, too, running to join in on the action, where Mordred and Jeanne Alter were cutting into Barbatos — to not much effect at all. As expected, this one was just like the previous ones, and it was simply too big for ordinary sized swords and basic weaponry to do much damage. Despite Arash’s arrows being strong enough to shatter boulders and Mordred’s raw strength being enough to give Herakles a run for his money, they were using paring knives to cut into a thick oak. They were doing so little damage that Barbatos was frankly ignoring them, and even Hippolyta would take a minute or two to ramp up to the point where her fists did anything meaningful.

Barbatos did, however, take notice of our increased numbers.

“MORE SERVANTS?” he rumbled. **“I SEE. SO YOU HAVE CONTRIVED SOME METHOD OF INDEPENDENTLY CALLING UPON SERVANTS TO WHOM YOU ARE CONTRACTED, STORING PATTERNS OF THEIR SAINT GRAPHS FOR**

RAPID DEPLOYMENT. HOW NOVEL. AS EXPECTED OF A GENIUS LIKE LEONARDO DA VINCI.”

“What?” squeaked Rika. “He knows Da Vinci-chan?”

“BUT TRINKETS AND CLEVER PLOYS WILL NOT BE ENOUGH TO SPARE YOU WHAT IS TO COME.”

The eyes all swiveled and turned our way again, and Mash gasped out, “Lord Chaldeas!” a second time, deploying her Noble Phantasm to block the next series of explosions.

“Nicolas!” I barked back at him, because he was still just standing there, staring, apparently unaware that we had to stay right where we were to protect him and the others and he was just forcing us to do that longer. “Stop standing around and go! You have a daughter to rescue, don’t you?”

At last, Flamel jolted, and this seemed to get through to him. “Yes,” he said, “yes, of course. Forgive me, I lost myself for a moment there. Doctor Jekyll,” he addressed his Master, “with me, if you would. I believe I will have need of your assistance.”

“Of course, Abraham, of course,” Jekyll replied, just as spooked.

They hurried off back into Angrboða’s massive shell, disappearing into the steam as Tohsaka trailed behind them. Jekyll only gave one, last glance over his shoulder at Barbatos, eyeing the monstrosity with some mix of disbelief and terror.

“— and burbled as he came!”

The Jabberwocky formed in midair, loping off to join the fight.

“— frumious Bandersnatch!”

And a short moment later, the Bandersnatch followed it, skittering across the ground not unlike a bug or some kind of giant lizard. They attacked with fists and claws, ripping into Barbatos and his leathery flesh and tearing out fistfuls at a time.

Even these additions weren’t enough to make much of a dent, of course, but they weren’t useless. In fact, Barbatos was healing a lot slower than either Forneus or Flauros had, and that was when I realized the key difference between him and them: he didn’t have the Grail. As powerful as he was and as much magical energy as he had, Barbatos wasn’t supplementing his power with the Grail, and therefore wasn’t able to heal as quickly or dish out powerful attacks in as rapid succession.

Which meant he should be a lot easier to put down.

Taking hold of all of our Servants’ bonds at once was an unusual feeling, and my mind felt a little thinner than I was used to, like I was spreading myself out too far, but it didn’t stop me from managing it.

Retreat, I ordered them all. Back up and make some space. Jeanne Alter, use your Noble Phantasm and burn that thing to a crisp.

Ha! Jeanne Alter crowed as though she couldn't realize that I was the only one who could hear her. I win, motherfuckers! This one's mine!

Various assents from the others followed, completely ignorant of her smug declaration, and no one protested. They all knew what was at stake, and they all knew the limits we were working under.

A moment, a few, scattered seconds as the rest of our team put some distance between them and the giant pillar of flesh. The enormous eyes watched them go, tracking each of them simultaneously without seeming to care about what they were doing or trying to stop them. And then, a surge of magical energy lit up in the middle of the cavern like a candle in the dark —

“La Grondement du Haine!”

— and Barbatos was engulfed in flame.