

When Ritsuka Fujimaru's sight returned, the first thing he noticed was Lord El-Melloi looking at him.

"Ah, good, you're awake. Can you stand?"

"Whath happened?" Slurred the boy, feeling... well, like he had been zapped by an high-voltage discharge of electricity. His muscles weren't responding like he wanted, twitching slightly every time he commanded them. Even talking was difficult with his tongue moving without his consent.

"Caster blasted us good, even if not hard enough to kill us. On top of the damage, the lightning interfered with mana, so both me and Mash are pretty tapped out. But Mash was able to resist enough to engage Caster in melee and land some hit before he got his bearing. They're currently locked in a fight, but I'm not sure that Mash can take him, even without him amplifying his own strength and speed. We need you to give us some Command to overpower-"

"Lord El-Melloi!" Came Mash's shout of warning, but it was too late. Caster emerged from Lord El-Melloi's shadow and, before he could react, grabbed his head and smashed it against the floor with enough strength to crack the concrete. On top of that, reddish energy enveloped Caster's hand, before *sinking* inside Lord El-Melloi and absorbing... his vitality? That surely looked like a health absorption attack straight from a videogame.

And apparently it was, because Lord El-Melloi twitched a couple of times before stopping moving. Ritsuka quickly scrambled near him to see if he was dead... but stopped when Caster rose on his feet, apparently unharmed.

"Senpai!" Shouted Mash again, quickly jumping on Caster to make him go away. But he didn't.

"Time out, girl." He said, before waving his hand and erecting a wall of shadows on Mash's path. Since she was mid-air, she couldn't dodge and met the wall head-first.

There was no sound of her impacting against it, nor she passed through it. The wall dispersed, and she wasn't there anymore.

"Mash!" Cried out the boy. "Where did she go?" He demanded to the Caster towering over him.

"Oh, relax, I just sent her into the shadow world. She'll come out of it in a minute or so... well, assuming she survives. The shadow realities tend to be... hostile."

Ritsuka clenched his teeth and analyzed the situation. Lord El-Melloi was down. Mash was sent in some alternate dimension or more probably a Reality Marble of some kind. He was the only one capable of fighting Caster... and while he was not twitching that much anymore, his mana was almost depleted and his entire body ached. He *could* do something... but it was probably the last thing he was going to do in this Singularity.

And he needed to distract Caster while trying to do it, or he was going to stop him instantly. Even with all the training Chaldea's Caster had put on him, he was nowhere near strong enough to take on a Servant.

Fortunately, Caster seemed to be on a chatty mood. He just needed to push him into a monologue while he focused on something else.

"Why did you didn't do that before?" Asked Ritsuka, while focusing that little mana he still possessed.

"A magician never reveals all his tricks, boy. Besides, banishing someone for a minute or so is not that useful outside of combat."

Ritsuka narrowed his eyes. Caster did talk, but not enough. He needed more time. "You're underestimating us too much. You're not the first Caster we took out."

C'mon, he just needed a little more...

Caster laughed. "*Au contraire*, my young friend. I'm not underestimating you at all. You thought that the diversion was for the *other* participants of the War? No, you were the real threat, and you were even before Lancer joined you."

Ritsuka frowned. That... didn't make any sense. Sure, he probably thought it was suspect than another Master, with two Servants –or Pseudo-Servants, but he couldn't know that- had joined the War, but the real threat? Several other Servants and Masters were far more dangerous than them in an open confrontation.

Unless he knew something they didn't know... or unless his objective was never to defeat the other Servants.

Well, it didn't matter. He had gained enough time.

A sword composed of what little mana he had left materialized in his right hand, and Ritsuka *moved*. This was his last gamble. He dug deep inside his soul, searching for that single *moment* he needed to recall the technique Caster had showed him. He had just one chance. The technique could cut even a Servant and inflict massive damage, but he needed to do it just right. His stance, his timing had to be perfect.

And, most important of all, he needed to *believe*. He needed to be absolutely sure that his strike would work. Without that, he would fail. So his mind focused on a single thought.

*I am the sword.*

The sword materialized from mana *blurred* and sliced Caster right in the middle of his chest. There was no resistance. It simply sunk inside the flesh of the Servant, slicing him from the left hip to the right shoulder.

Then, both his mana and his stamina gave out. The sword disappeared into motes of light, and the boy fell on his knees. But he had done it. Even if Servants were tough, Caster couldn-

"Nice move, kid." Came a voice. Panic and disbelief gave him the energy to look up, even if all the muscles of his body had the elasticity and the temperature of hot metal. He raised his head and looked at Caster.

Who looked... fine. Surprisingly fine, considering that he had a large slash in the middle of the chest. A wound that was... not bleeding. In fact the only thing that got out from there were wisps of shadow...

Caster collapsed on the floor, transforming into a river of shadows that returned to the general darkness of the place. Then *Caster* emerged from the shadows, literally a foot from where it was, and punched Ritsuka in the face.

"Wrong target."

The last Master of Chaldea collapsed on the floor of the sewer and remained there. He was still conscious. Caster didn't really punch him. Well, he *did*, but considering that he was able to crack stone with his bare fists, he had basically done the equivalent of giving a finger flick.

Which meant...

"Why are not killing us?" Wheezed Ritsuka, still prone on the floor. "Mash... is not here. Lord El-Melloi... is unconscious. I cannot fight you. You could have killed us at any moment. Why?"

Caster didn't answer immediately. Instead, he waited for a second, like thinking about what to say, before sighing. "I suppose I cannot do more than this. Fine, I'll tell you. Just wait until your girlfriend returns. I don't want to repeat myself."

Ritsuka was too exhausted to reply to that. He just remained on the floor, breathing heavily, until the shadow wall that had swallowed Mash opened again and the girl fell out of it, landing on her stomach on the cold floor. She seemed fine, at least she didn't seem wounded. But she didn't stand up. Instead, she curled up in fetal position, her hands covering her ears and shivering uncontrollably.

"Mash?" Called Ritsuka, but he didn't get a reply.

"Hmmm... Shadow worlds tend to mess with people perception of reality." Commented Caster. "You could say she has taken sanity damage. She's going to be fine, but you should try to call her when she doesn't have her ears covered."

With supreme effort, Ritsuka rolled on his side and started to crawl toward Mash. It didn't take that much time, fortunately, she had landed quite close. When he reached her, he grabbed her hand. Mash immediately twitched and opened her eyes, looking at him with wide, scared eyes. "Senpai?"

Ritsuka managed to make her hand move away. "It's fine, Mash. It's over. You're safe now."

The girl's eyes started to wet, but before she could say anything, they were distracted by the sound of something hitting the floor. They turned to see Caster sitting a couple of feet from them.

Mash instantly tried to get her shield, either to attack or defend, but clearly whatever she had seen or heard in the shadow world had shaken her. She was still shivering and so she missed the first couple of times she tried to reach of her shield handle. When she finally grabbed it, she put the heavy metal plate between her and Caster... who had not moved even a little. He was looking at them with completely serene expression.

“So... you wanted to know why I didn’t kill you the moment I defeated you, uh?”

Mash froze. Ritsuka, instead, just nodded.

Caster sighed. “Really, I thought you would at least imagine what was my deal, but apparently not. And I even left a lot of clues around... don’t you remember what I called you before the fight with Archer?”

Before the fight with Archer? Honestly, he didn’t remember well. Between the possibility to Caster having killed a family and the fact that they had to fight Gilgamesh, he had not given his words much attention. Besides, most of the time he just said random shit to mess with them. So when he had called him-

Ritsuka eyes widened in shock when he remembered the *exact* words. Master of Chaldea. That’s how he called him. But that meant...

“You know about Chaldea?” He asked. Mash winced, eyes widening in realization.

“Bingo!” Replied Caster with a merry tone. “And, since I know who you are and why you’re here, I cannot kill you. It could mean a lot of problems, a lot of dead people. So, I decided to just make you exhaust yourself while trying to stop me, so you cannot try to interfere when the moments come.”

Ritsuka’s brain started to whirl in a frenzy of confused thought. Somehow, he managed to straight them enough to reach a logical conclusion. If the diversion that Caster had done was for them, and he did that because he knew why they were here, that meant...

“The Grail. Your Master is aiming for the Grail.” He whispered. “That’s why you needed us focused on you. Because if we didn’t, we could try to stop the War and remove the Grail directly.”

“Correct. Fortunately, I don’t need all the Grail power, so if I manage to get another Servant down, I’m good. That’s also why it’s a shame that Lancer was not there. I could have at least tried to weaken him before the grand finale. Unfortunately, seems like that will not be the case.” Caster sighed again. “Well, it doesn’t matter, I suppose. If everything went according to the plan, Rider has used his Noble Phantasm again, and considering that Waver cannot give him much power, he’s probably exhausted. Not much of a threat. That just leaves Saber and Lancer... seems like it’s time for me to return home.”

Ritsuka blinked. What was he talking about?

Caster stood and slammed his staff down on the floor, emitting an enormous pillar of light as his mana erupted around him. Both he and Mash staggered backwards, fearing a last attack of some kind, but instead, Caster chanted a spell, still in a language they didn’t understand,

before releasing a last, powerful flash of light. For a second, the sewers were lightened up as it was noon, then the light died down.

Leaving them alone with Caster, slumped on his staff.

“And that’s... the end of my journey.” He gasped. “I hope... that’s enough... to wound Saber and Lancer.”

The Servant lost his grasp on the staff and fell, managing to avoid smashing his face on the floor by tensing his arms. What did he just do? Did he expend all his mana on that last spell? Was he going to disappear?

“Good luck... with the Singularities...” Continued Caster. “You’ll... need it.”

Then he simply... collapsed. His arms gave out and he fell. Caster, the Servant that had basically manipulated the entire War from the start, died like that, expending all his energy just to hinder Saber and Lancer. It was... disconcerting. It went against everything he had done until now.

At least that’s what they thought, until they saw Caster’s body disappear. And, contrary to what they expected, he didn’t vanish by transforming into light.

Instead, his body sunk in the shadows.

The Chaldeans looked at the spot where he disappeared for several seconds before they realized what that meant.

The person they had fought *had never been Caster*.

-X-

The battle on the shores had kicked up considerably. Caster had abandoned the mostly defensive style he had used until now, meant to stall her while he used his bastardized dragon’s breath spells to hit her, and had decided to go full offensive. The problem was that, while normally that would have meant that he was leaving his defense somewhat lacking, Caster –or Dovahkiin, she supposed- had put out from the cylinder *another* series of Skills to compensate. She was not sure what they were, but they *looked* like supernatural martial arts. Which would make Caster an Asian Servant, and that was against everything she knew about him.

Urgh, this guy was so confusing.

Caster engaged her again, continuing with his aggressive offensive. His sword darted from several different directions, or at least so it would seem to a less trained eye. For her, it was still a very quick attack, aimed to overwhelm her with speed and land at least a hit. Which probably meant that the sword had some kind of effect, maybe a curse of some kind.

Arturia parried his strikes with some difficulty, then swung Excalibur, trying to bisect Caster. While he was fast and skilled enough to contend with her in a melee fight, she still had a slight advantage in brute power using her mana Burst. Landing a hit was going to end this.

Or it should have, but like the others three time she had hit him, he activated one of his powers and the swing was deflected by a layer of glowing draconic scales that appeared a few inches over his body. Then, he attacked again. His sword cut the air in rapid succession. Fortunately, whatever curse the weapon had on it didn't seem to work without direct contact with the body, so Saber was able to parry most of the attacks and deflect the others using her armor.

Armor that was not going to resist much longer if she continued to use it in this way. Sure, she could repair it using mana, but she was already pushing her Dragon Core right now, she didn't have the energy to add armor repairs to list of things that needed more power.

But there was one thing that gave her hope. He was slowing down. Slightly, but each exchange was a little slower than the previous one. He was either exhausting himself trying to defeat her, or every hit she managed to land, even if it seemed to be ignored, actually wounded him, and he was just putting up a show to not give her any opening.

In any case, he probably was not going to hold that much longer. The next exchanges were probably going to be the last.

He clearly thought the same thing, since he stopped his unrelenting assault and backed away, putting a good twenty meters between them.

Arturia briefly wondered if it was wise to engage. It sounded like the right move. If he really was losing his strength, not letting him take any breath would let him lose faster.

But her Instinct warned her against that tactic, and she remembered that he had almost no problem stalling her before. If he was forced to play defensively, he would simply do that and take a breather anyway while she lost her strength. No, if he wanted to tire, she would let him.

Of course, her Instinct also warned her up when Caster a deep breath... and electricity started to flow around him. Some kind of Mana Burst?

He took another breath, but instead of making even more electricity flow around him, he started what she had identified as the first word of one of his shouts. She readied to dodge... but what the shout did caught her by surprise.

The shout didn't emit anything, like she expected. Instead, it *propelled* Caster forward with far more speed she expected. Thanks to Instinct, though, she has already getting out of the way...

...So when Caster disappeared, she was expecting it. She turned, her eyes catching a glimpse of the man having teleported behind her. She readied her sword to parry...

And her Instinct screamed. A sudden spike of fear shot through her spine as she tried to move faster, but has the thought appeared, the electricity around Caster suddenly activated, making the air vibrate. His feet touched the ground and there was a sound like a thunder as the shout and whatever respiration technique he just used combined and *massively* accelerated him, making Caster shoot toward her like a lightning bolt.

Excalibur didn't reach the position in time.

The unnamed sword of Caster cut through her like soft butter. Her armor was useless. Her unnatural toughness as Servant was useless. The sword slashed clean, and it was just by some miracle that she managed to twist just enough maintain her spine intact and avoiding to get bisected. She also felt an unnatural force absorbing part of her mana. A curse, like she suspected. Life stealing, by the look of it.

Arturia's body felt light. It was probably the blood loss. Her Servant body imitated the one of a human pretty much perfectly, which was the reason a hit on the head or at the heart would have killed her. Caster attacked had just gutted her, thanks to her last moment dodge, so she wouldn't die immediately, and with a effort of will she could also avoid her guts to spill on the ground. Not so much fortune with the blood, who had splattered around her.

She felt her chest tilt, threatening to fall down on the soft grass. At the moment, taking a little nap didn't sound so bad. She felt so weak. Maybe she could just take a little pause from this madness that was the Grail War, after all?

Then she felt the weight of Excalibur keeping her straight. Ah, of course. She couldn't rest. She was the King. She had a duty toward her subjects to fulfill. She had to win.

Her gaze returned sharp, her right leg slid on the ground to keep her standing. Caster was in front of her, giving her his back, still recovering from the sudden acceleration, or maybe taking a breath after the stunt he pulled. She will not have another occasion like this. The next attack of Caster was going to be the last one.

So she had to be faster.

Excalibur shoot toward the sky as she poured all the mana she could inside it. The sword exploded with blinding light, and she saw Caster turn his head toward her.

"Excalibur!"

A giant, powerful ray of light erupted toward Caster, and this time, either him or the snake was going down. The Noble Phantasm was aimed straight at them. Caster could evade, she knew he could just teleport away, but in that case, his snake was going to die. And then... it would depend on Lancer and Rider, because if Caster avoided Excalibur, she was going not going to survive.

But the Caster didn't dodge. Instead, a shield made of bone materialized in the air, and a barrier stopped Excalibur blast cold. The light smashed against the defense, and for just a second, it seemed like it would block it completely.

Then cracks started to appear on the shield, and the barrier fell. Excalibur engulfed the shield, vaporizing it, and Caster, who disappeared into the light. Then, the attack proceeded... but instead of hitting the snake and explode in a massive blast that would have destroyed everything in several kilometers, the attack flickered as it sped toward the giant monster, and when it hit, it was just powerful enough to explode with the force a modern missile. The snake hissed, his pain audible from there, but it was still alive.

As Caster was. The Servant was prone on the ground, his armor broken in several places and still fuming from the heat emitted by her sword, but since both his monsters were still there –even if she heard a pained whine come from the wolf- he was clearly not dead enough.

So she straightened herself –the sudden moment had made her blood deprived head spin- and started to walk toward the Caster.

Before she could reach him, the wolf jumped over her and placed himself in her path.

He was not in great shape. His fur was marred by blood, and he had a particularly nasty stab wound on the neck that was bleeding pretty fast, wetting the grass under him. Despite that, the wolf flashed his fangs and growled, daring her to make another step.

Arturia stopped, evaluating her opponent. The wolf –Fenrir- was not in a good condition, but neither she was. And he was fast enough to made himself a challenge for Lancer, which was not dead or the wolf would have come sooner. She just had to wait.

After a surprisingly long pause, Lancer limped at her side.

“Sorry.” Said the Servant of the Spear. “He was an harder challenge than anticipated.”

She looked at him. There was a pretty nasty wound on his leg, probably the reason while he had limped coming there. By the look of it, the wolf’s claw had swept his inner thigh. It was similar to a wound she had seen before, caused by a bear.

There were also lesser wounds on the rest of his body, but they were mostly scratches.

“Seems like you were having more fortune with the wolf that I had with the summoner.” She said, returning her gaze on the wolf in question.

“Hardly.” Replied Lancer. “I managed to land a serious hit on the thing because he got distracted when you hit his master with your Noble Phantasm. Until that moment, we were pretty equally matched. Don’t let the blood fool you. He heal fast, and he’s smart enough to avoid my second spear.”

The one that could stop healing. Seems like Caster didn’t lie about that.

“You think we can take it together?” She asked. “I’m not sure how much I can move right now.”

“Probably. We should also hurry. If Fenrir came, I don’t doubt the snake is going to arrive soon.”

True that. If they wanted to deal with Caster, they probably needed to move right no-

“Saber, Lancer!” Called a voice, one she recognized as the young Master of Lancer. She turned, ready to ask where they were until now –Lancer didn’t have the time to elaborate- but she stopped when she saw the young girl which she found strangely familiar carrying the

older Magus of the group on her left shoulder, while the Master walked besides her, almost dragged by the same girl since he did look like he was more dead than alive.

"What happened?" Asked Lancer, suddenly worried.

"We ventured inside the sewer to defeat the draugr that could be hiding there. But he was there."

He? Caster? "But that's impossible. He's right here."

The group, well, the ones awake, looked at the body behind the wolf, that had lowered himself, ready to strike.

"He was not the real one." Replied the young man. "He was some kind of... shadow clone, or something like that. His body returned to the shadows once he died."

"Some kind of summon then. Seems like a specialty of his." Commented Lancer, as the giant snake, battered and bleeding, arrived on the shores.

"It's enough." Came a voice, and immediately everyone froze. "Fenrir, Jormurgand... you can return home."

Both the wolf and the snake remained paralyzed for a second... then the snake lowered its body and laid near his master. It just remained there, unmoving, its eyes covering themselves with a membrane, the most it could to close them. The wolf, instead, turned and whined, bumping Caster's hand with his nose.

"It's alright, buddy. The plan was never to survive anyway." Said Caster, before weakly raising his hand and patting the giant wolf on the head. "Return home. You have better things to do."

The wolf whined another time, rubbing his head on the hand. Then, with a last lick on Caster's face, he turned and disappeared into nothingness.

Arturia waited to see if this was a trap, but it didn't look like it. So, she stepped forward and made to reach Caster, who had given her so much trouble since the start of the War. Lancer, his Master and the rest of their group followed, and after a little while, Rider, his Master, and *her* Master, followed by Irisviel, joined, surrounding the Servant.

"Seems like everyone is still alive... shame. I hoped to have killed at least one of the Servants." Wheezed Caster. They could see part of his face, where the mask had broken. And he was no Loki. Loki never had brown hair and brown eyes.

"You came close." Admitted Lancer. "If your wolf hadn't been distracted by you almost dying, he could have killed me."

"Bad... luck... then..." The only visible eye of the man rolled to see Rider. "And you? I hoped Jormungand... had killed at least you."

“He will.” Commented the King of Conquerors. “He managed to spit his venom and catch me. Barely, but I don’t have the mana to expel the toxin, so…”

“Ah… so the plan… worked. Very well.” He closed his eyes, taking a last breath. “You… lost.”

Then he died.

And the body melted into shadows.

It was Lancer’s Master to summarize the thought of everyone.

“Fuck!”