

I was looking at the city when Da Vinci found me.

"There you are." She said, coming to my side. "So, how are things going?"

"The observer of the War put a stop to the fight between Masters until Caster is dealt with." I replied, not looking at her.

"Ah, yes. Unfortunate, but you knew it was a possibility."

"You know what that means, right?" I asked. I didn't exactly tell her *all* the parts of my plan, but that was because I assumed she was smart enough to get it anyway.

"Hmm. You cannot hope that the other Servants will kill each other... you have to force the matter."

"Yeah. We need more power... how much?"

"Another two, I'm afraid. Three is almost enough... but almost will not cut it."

I didn't reply. I just continued to stare in the distance.

"You know... there is an easy solution for that." She said. I sent a glance in her direction, taking note of the slight apprehension in her eyes.

"I will not order you to suicide... not unless I have no other choice."

"What does it matter? If your plan works, nobody is getting their wish anyway. Keeping me alive doesn't help anybody, and you risk staying here for years if you can't defeat another two Servants."

"I know. But I'm still not doing it. It's wrong."

Da Vinci paused. "You definitely are not a magus. Most would not have hesitated."

"As far as I'm concerned, that's a great compliment."

She giggled. "I supposed you would think that." She turned and looked at the city in the distance. "It's a shame that we had so little time together. I think we could have been friends."

"We're not?" I asked, more to play the devil's advocate than anything else. "You're helping me even if my plan is not going to give you anything. I'll say that'll make you my friend."

Da Vinci smiled. "I did that because I thought it would be an interesting challenge, and because I wanted to see how you managed to do it. We're more friendly colleagues than friends."

I nodded. I already knew that she was doing this out of curiosity.

“Still...” She said, pausing. “I hope one day you’ll get on the Throne too. So we can meet again.”

I smiled. “Yeah... that would be cool.” As I said that, the horizon started to brighten. “The dawn is coming.”

Da Vinci nodded. “If you’re not sure about it, we can delay...”

“No, there is not much more we can do to prepare. And the more time passes, the more time the others have to prepare themselves. Better strike now that we have the advantage.”

Da Vinci looked at me with worried eyes, but she nodded. “Yes, it’s better this way. Still...”

“Don’t worry about me, Da Vinci. I’ll manage to get this right. I always do.” I offered her my hand. “Let’s bring the final act of this together, shall we?”

She smiled. “Yes. Together.”

-X-

Ritsuka was nervous.

They had finally found out the hideout of Caster. They mainly did this by excluding every other possible place.

Unoriginally, he had decided to hide in the sewers. Not that it was surprising, it was the most logical place to use... but he had hoped that the mysterious Caster had more taste. Exploring the sewers was going to *suck*.

But they had to do it. Most of the group was... pretty reticent to actually fight Caster. Sure, his word was not worth much but...

...Come to think about it, was his word really worth so little? Sure, he liked to mess with them, but he still had to break his word. Despite all... maybe he really had not killed the Matou.

Anyway, whatever the truth, most of the group was not eager to fight. The only exception was Lancer... and maybe that was just because he continued to maintain a stubbornly stoic expression. He was not really sure what his real thoughts were.

“So we’re going.” Announced Ritsuka. “Are we ready?”

“Difficult to say, considering we know next to nothing about Caster’s true power.” Admitted Lord El-Melloi. “But we have to go anyway.”

And then, a powerful surge of magical energy exploded in the distance. Even from there, it was clear where the source was.

“The sea?” Asked Mash, looking in the direction of the source.

“So he really was warning us.” Muttered Lord El-Melloi. “But why? What is his aim? And this amount of magical power...”

Ritsuka made a decision, more on instinct than anything else. “Lancer, go and intercept whatever Caster is doing.”

“Are you sure?” Asked the man, visibly hesitating.

“Yes. He’s clearly trying to attract attention, and there will be only Saber and Rider to deal with him now that Archer is gone and Berserker works for him. Intercept him, defeat him, and return here as fast as you can.”

Lancer looked at Lord El-Melloi, since technically his previous Master had given the Command Seals to him. When he nodded, the Servant kneeled. “As you wish.” Then he dashed in the direction of the shore.

“You think Caster is really going to re-enact what Gilles did?” Asked the older magus, frowning.

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s just a coincidence... but we cannot risk it. If he really is Loki... there is a monster he could call to his aid that will require all the Servants to stop.”

“Jormungandr, the World Serpent.” Nodded Lord El-Melloi. “I see.”

“Then why are we not helping?” Asked Mash.

“Because he could still send his draugr to attack the Servants while they fight the monster.” He replied. “We need to reach his hideout and be sure he cannot interfere while they’re fighting. Once we have eliminated all the draugr, we’ll join them.”

Mash nodded, entered in what Ritsuka called ‘fight mode’, and they started to descend into the sewers.

He hoped that it would not take long.

-X-

Arturia was the first to arrive on the shores, to investigate what in the hell Caster was doing. After the huge surge of magical power that every magus in the city must have felt, there was... nothing. They had expected to see a monster of some kind, or maybe a gigantic tsunami ready to wash the entire coastline. But the only thing visible from the shore was darkness.

No, wait... was that Caster?

Well, there were no other figures in dark robes around, so he was probably him. Was he... walking on water?

He was. In fact, he looked like he was strolling without a care in the world. Arturia decided to intercept him. Better not make him come too close to the land.

"Ah, Saber. Nice to meet you here. Did you come for a walk on the beach? It's quite relaxing."

She ground her teeth at the casual greeting. Did he take anything seriously?

"What are you doing?" She asked, raising her sword.

"Making my best Jesus impression." Sarcastically replied Caster. "Why, what does it look like?"

"Don't make fun of our Lord!" Growled the knight. Really, his disrespect knew no limit.

Caster remained silent for a second. "Hmm, maybe I did go too far. I just don't remember anyone else that could walk on water. It was not my intention to offend you."

And he did it again! Why he was so... considerate?

"You're impossible." Muttered the King of England. "Why are you so gentle? We're enemies! We should fight to the death, not trying to have a pleasant discussion."

"Well, I'm trying because I like you."

"Eh?"

Did she hear that right?

Clearly her confusion was pretty visible, because he continued.

"What, I cannot like you? Sure, you should really learn how to relax and live a little, but that doesn't make you a bad person. I don't see why I should treat you badly."

Did he... did he just say that? "I'm not a person. I'm a weapon of my Master."

Caster scoffed. "Please, don't give me that. You have emotions, no matter how hard you try to hide them. You love, you hate, you get annoyed... I admit I've not seen much of your emotions, but you still have them. That makes you a person."

Was this guy for real?

Caster looked up, and following his gaze, she saw Rider coming on his lightning chariot.

"Uh, seems like I have to cut the chat. A shame, really, but good things never last."

Arturia... just gave up. Make sense of this man was a lost cause.

"So, you intend to fight me with the help of Rider, or an honorable duel like the one with Lancer?"

"I thought you wanted to cut the chat." Replied Saber.

"Meh, until he's here we can at least decide the rules of engagement."

Suddenly, something hit her. He was... strangely relaxed. Up until now, he had sound carefree, but now that he had all the other Masters against, he should have been more cautious, not even more reckless.

Something was not right.

"Why do you sound so eager to fight? You tried several times to avoid a confrontation with other Servants."

Caster chuckled. "Ah, well, you see, before I was trying to stay... somewhat low. I couldn't hope to match a direct attack from all the other Servants. But now two are gone and one works for me, and the observer put the remaining Servants against me anyway. So, I don't have to stay low as before. In fact..."

There was a distortion in the air, and Caster's robe transformed into an armor made of... bones?

"Ah, better. I hope there will not be too many people witnessing this. It's going to get... heated."

There, he did it again. He was using the lives of the bystanders as hostages, exactly like he had forced Rider and her to retreat from the battle with Archer by threatening their Masters. Fortunately, there didn't seem to be too many people around. The fact that they were walking on water helped.

"So you finally reveal yourself as the villain you are." Said the Servant of the Sword.

Caster looked at her and she could *hear* him grin behind the mask. "Villain? You *offend* me, my dear Saber. I'm not *just* a villain. I'm a *super-villain!*"

Arturia frowned. The knowledge granted by the Grail gave her a context about the meaning of the word, but... "What's the difference?"

"Oh, I'm so glad you asked." He said, his tone sounding positively giddy. He opened his arms, and the water under him rose.

No, not the water. Water didn't have yellow, fissured eyes, or scales the size of a shield.

"It's the presentation!" Exclaimed Caster, and the absolutely *gigantic* snake that had emerged from the sea opened his mouth –big enough to swallow an entire car- and hissed with enough force to make her mistake it for a shriek.

God, the fangs of that thing were longer than Excalibur.

Why did she have to ask?

-X-

It took a while to reach the center of the sewers, the enormous, cavernous clearing in the middle of the various tunnels where, in another War, Gilles had killed innumerable children to

fuel his army of demons. The travel until now had been... almost easier. Almost, because there was no army of demonic monsters trying to stop them.

There were a lot of traps though. Vicious traps. Runes that exploded, or released clouds of poison, or tried to freeze them. And those were just the most direct. Some traps tried to inflict terrible fear in them, others tried to confuse them, and some actually summoned groups of draugr to try and stop them.

All in all, when they arrived at the central room, they were pretty battered. Mash was great for the more physical effects of the various traps, but that didn't help with everything and even her shield couldn't completely cover them all the time. They were still going, but it had not been easy.

So, when Ritsuka saw a figure sitting in the middle of a summoning circle, he felt all his blood freeze.

"What...? Why... why are you here?" He asked, confusion and panic stopping him from elaborate further.

Caster, with his dark clothes and the mask of bone, turned toward them without standing. "Oh, look at that. Seems like you really did come."

Ritsuka blinked. He was... expecting them?

"But... how? How can you be here and offshore, doing... whatever you are trying to do?" Asked Lord El-Melloi. "And even if you could do this... why? What could be the purpose to attract everyone to the sea if you are there?"

"That's a good question" Admitted Caster, standing from the ground. "I could answer, but that would ruin the surprise, wouldn't it?"

The group remained silent, trying to come up with something to say... until an echo arrived from one of the various passages. A shriek... or an hiss.

"What was that?" Asked Mash.

"Seems like the battle on the shore has just started." Commented Caster. "And you don't have Lancer with you... well, it doesn't matter. I would have liked to fight someone with true skill with arms though."

"Hey!" Shouted Mash, offended.

"Sorry girl, that humongous hunk of metal you call a shield is not a weapon. So, unless you know how to use that sword at your side..."

Mash devolved into incoherent mumbling.

"As I expected. Now then... shall we start?" He asked, before grabbing his staff and-

"Why are you doing this?"

Caster looked at Lord El-Melloi, who had just interrupted his preparations. "To win the War?" He replied, apparently confused by the question.

"Don't give me that. The way you're acting doesn't make any sense. First you're demanding, then agreeable. First you try to make a pact, then you force one on us. First you boldly appear in front of the majority of the Servants of this War, and then you hide away in the sewers and send your draugr to do the fight. *Why are you acting like this?*"

Uh... well, Lord El-Melloi had tried to pierce the reasons and the aims of Caster, always coming short. The man didn't make sense, but while Ritsuka and Mash had just decided to roll with it, the older magus seemed to have taken on himself to resolve that puzzle, almost like a personal challenge. Evidently thought, his patience had reached a limit.

Caster didn't answer immediately. Instead, he released an explosive laugh. There was no derision inside it, just amusement. He really seemed to find the confusion of Lord El-Melloi funny. When he stopped laughing, he shook his head. "You still don't get it? Not making sense is the *goal*."

What? How that made any-

Ritsuka interrupted that line of thought when he saw Lord El-Melloi's eyes widen in sudden realization.

"No, it can't be. Your first appearance, the draugr, the destruction of the Matou mansion..." He stopped, one of his hands covering his face. He had a look of absolute incredulity, mixed with something else... fear?

"Lord El-Melloi?" Asked Mash, unsure of what the problem really was.

The man blinked and retook some semblance of control. He stood straighter and set a steely glance at Caster. "Let me reformulate my question: what is your Master doing while you're here fighting all of us alone?"

Ritsuka sent a glance toward Mash. What were...

Then it hit him.

Caster, always being flashy, while he could easily cover himself in a spell able to hide him from any form of localization. Caster sending hordes of monsters against all the participants of the War, instead of gathering his forces and striking when they weakened each other. Caster always presenting himself directly in front of his enemies, even when there could have been other methods to do the same thing more efficiently or safely.

They had assumed it was because of arrogance, or more likely, stupidity. Or both. Being a powerful magus didn't really require being a tactical genius.

But...

Not making sense was the goal.

"A diversion." Exhaled Ritsuka. By the look on Mash face, she had reached the same conclusion. "All you ever did was a diversion. You attracted our attention to you while your Master did... what?"

There was a second of silence where Caster didn't say anything... Then he chuckled. "You'll have to find out on your own." He tapped his staff on the floor, and he could feel the concrete under their feet shift. He turned just in time to see the exit behind them closing. "Now, then. I believe we were going to hit each other using magic and blunted objects until either of us ceased their biological functions. You want the first move?"

That was either very kind of him, very condescending, or very arrogant. At this point, Ritsuka was not even sure it was not just an elaborate scheme for... something.

Mash didn't seem to care about it. "Engaging." She said, before darting forward.

Ritsuka was half-tempted to stop her so they could attack together, but she was their better fighter, and if there was someone that could keep Caster occupied in melee, she was the one. She reached him in a second and made a horizontal swing of her shield against his face, trying to use thick metal to bash his teeth in instead of tackling him, which would probably have little effect.

Caster fell on his knees, not because he was hit but because he physically lowered himself under the attack, letting the metal brush his hood while he was unharmed. Then, from his kneeled position, he punched Mash right into the stomach.

Normally, a Caster's attack would have done nothing to Mash. While she was not the most powerful Servant around, her defense was unparalleled.

So, it was with a certain amount of surprise that Ritsuka watched Mash gasp for air as the punch sent her several feet back, and took a second to re-assess herself and recover her wits.

All the time Caster needed to reach her.

The bone staff of the Servant whirled into action so fast that Ritsuka couldn't follow it. He managed to see Mash head being smacked around at least four times, then Caster withdrew the weapon to stab her in the middle of the chest with all the strength he had. This time, Mash was sent flying, bounced a couple of times against the cold floor of the sewers, before speeding in front of their eyes and smashing against the wall behind them. Ritsuka turned in time to see the girl peel off from the cracked concrete, just the barest impression of her body impressed on the surface, before falling face first on the ground.

Oh shit.