

Chapter 74: Silhouette

I do not own Fate/Stay Night and stuffs.

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It was the second day of going through all the documentation and paperwork that had come with Barthomelloi. It was rare for anyone in her position to stay in a location outside of her usual working grounds for longer than a day under normal circumstances, so they all made it a point to get as much done as possible while she was still there.

Fortunately, with the help of Caster, they had altered a (mysteriously added) guest room to the home to accommodate the Vice Director to her extremely high standards.

She deemed the chamber modified by mysteries from the Age of Gods “sufficient for now”.

Nobody could say that they were surprised by her dismissive words.

High standards aside, progress had been made. The requests that looked feasible or exploitable had been separated from the ones that were either useless, unreasonable, impossible, or just outright too dangerous to carry out. Further investigations would need to be done in the oncoming months, but it was a start.

Of course that was just the cursory work. Now they were double checking what they had to ensure they didn't miss any critical details. Waver in particular was of immense use here, as he had already managed to steer everyone away from three potential bankruptcies, four likely attempts to frame Shirou for atrocities likely currently in the works, two underhanded attempts to steal their Servants, and a well hidden engagement contract of all things.

Luvia, Rin and Sakura took unusually detailed notes about the latter reveal. Shirou knew better than to ask questions. Waver and Bazett just pitied the poor idiot that tried to be clever. Lorelei just looked nauseous at being near the paper in general.

And Saber just continued to snack, which was probably for the best as it minimized the odds of her getting into another “discussion” with the Vice-Director.

As for Illya, she, Caster and Kiritsugu had been with Touko since last night preparing for her body transferral.

That said, not everything was so straightforward.

“Must I be the one to say it?” Luvia huffed, giving Rin a half hearted glare, “You've been reading the same paper for the last fifteen minutes, and barely at that given how little your eyes

were moving. Is page four of the contract to enlist Shirou as a part time assistant to the Department of Mineralogy that fascinating?”

Rin grimaced, realizing she had been caught and all eyes were on her.

For a moment she played with the idea of simply brushing off Luvia’s accusation, but realized that she couldn’t bullshit with a document of mundane legalese. She really should have lost her focus on something more interesting to work with.

“... Something’s bothering Archer. And he’s being evasive about it.”

A chorus of groans filled the building and all work stopped.

“And that’s a problem, why?” Shirou asked, the only one in the room confused by the reaction, only further bewildered when everyone else looked at him as though he was an idiot.

“Because they’re still cleaning out the bay of the leftovers from the last time YOU did the exact same thing.” Rin gave him a dry glare that dared him to ask any more stupid questions.

Truth be told the giant salt flows would probably still be a problem for Fuyuki for the next month at least if the local currents don’t work in the cleanup’s favor.

“... Not the exact same thing.” The owner of the building muttered under his breath, to nobody’s pity.

“How long has he been like this?” Sakura asked, genuinely concerned for the Servant.

“I felt something was off since before the War ended, but it’s only gotten bad recently.” Rin sighed. “I’ve tried talking about it, but he keeps on saying it’s fine and non-destructive unlike the last half dozen surprises we’ve had before pushing me away. He’s been trying to be subtle about it, but it’s seriously eating at him regardless.”

“Do you think it could have something to do with Kiritusgu being here?” Bazett asked a reasonable question. “He tries to avoid him whenever possible. I don’t think I’ve seen them speak more than a few words to one another.”

“Those two?” Lancer snorted from the side of the room. “A chat between them would either consist of just standing there, making jabs at one another, or talking about depressing shit that would send chills even down Berserker’s spine. And they both know it. No, it’s not Assassin. Not directly at least.”

“What about Illyasviel? He was unable to rescue her in his timeline. She’ll be in her new body in a few days.” Luvia noted.

“No. I already asked about that. He says that he vaguely remembers some realities where “ideal” victories were made and everyone lives, although the ones where Illya’s condition is treated are less frequent.” Rin shook her head. The sight and experience does hurt and dig at old wounds for him, but then again half of the things in Fuyuki did the same thing to one degree or another. It wouldn’t eat at him as badly as what he was dealing with now.

“And of the Apostles?” Surprisingly, it was Lorelei that spoke next, though the topic itself wasn’t out of character.

“Once the shock wore off, he couldn’t care less about them for the most part. Other than Primate Murder. He definitely made it a point to want to stay away from that thing, though I doubt anyone could blame him for that.”

“I second that.” Waver, having had the monster by his feet and on his lap on a couple of occasions over the past week, could speak from experience. “You said he was like this before the War ended? Hm. Do you have anything more specific to go off of?”

“I think it was around when Kirei tried to turn everyone against Shirou, after Zouken died and everything was getting heated between everyone. Maybe around the first time Shirou had tried to assassinate Caster on the mountain. There was a lot of confusion between the Masters and whether or not to believe what Shirou had been trying to tell us in the first place about the War.” Rin crossed her arms in thought. “Luvia and Caster had come to my place around that time, and we were still getting used to him... being Shirou but not.”

Shirou looked like he wanted to say something, but a quick glare from half the room made him decide to keep quiet.

Waver nodded absently as he stared at the ceiling in thought. “I can imagine there were more than a few tense discussions at the time. From what I learned when with Kiritsugu, Archer was always evasive when it comes to his personal history and details. He’s the sort that sees himself and his personal feelings as inconsequential to the matter at hand and the results to be had, but still acts on them from time to time. For anything to actually bother him to this extent must be truly significant from his perspective...”

“You have something in mind.” Lorelei saw that look in his eyes before. Waver was slowly putting pieces together that most wouldn’t think would fit.

“... I believe that it would be best not to voice my thoughts here.” The Lord started slowly, a small frown marring his face. “Archer is the sort of tired soul that has been worn down to the point that only a few select topics should truly agitate him anymore. Probing any of them recklessly would only make the situation worse.”

“And leaving any of them to fester would be just as bad.” Rin grimaced, knowing vaguely what Waver was alluding to. “I... am *mostly* confident that he won’t try to kill Shirou at a moment’s notice, but if that’s the case and I rule that disaster out, then I’m drawing a blank on what here would be eating at him so much that he isn’t willing to tell me.”

“Do you think he remembered something in one of those timelines where he stayed after the War? Maybe something happened?” Sakura asked.

“No. If that was the case he wouldn’t be so bothered before the War even ended.” Her sister shot the idea down. “And his situation’s messed up enough that he’s probably killed all of us at one point or another during the War and is at least somewhat used to it. Otherwise he wouldn’t have been so comfortable fighting in it in the first place.”

“And isn’t that a sobering fact to realize.” Luvia shook her head. “Keep in mind that this is the same Servant that in one timeline fooled everyone to be a traitor and ran off with the Witch in an ultimate gambit to kill himself. Literally and figuratively.”

“I thought we all agreed not to bring up that particular disaster again.” Rin growled irritably.

“Alternate reality betrayals aside, we don’t have enough information on the matter. And Rin, as much as she’s tried, hasn’t been able to get Archer to open up.” Waver cut in before the argument could burn more fuel. “I recommend someone else try for the time being.”

“Who?” Bazett frowned in confusion. “Kiritsugu isn’t much of a conversationalist. Irisviel can’t be trusted. Illyasviel might be able to do it, but I don’t think she has it in her to push him in her current state now that she’s got her family again. Rin’s already tried, and the only other person here that’s close to him in any sense is Shirou, which is a terrible idea in itself.”

“No.” Waver shook his head, surprising everyone. “There is one other person here that he is willing to talk to. One that he is unlikely to win a conversation with if he doesn’t possess the element of surprise.”

Everyone turned to where Lord El Melloi II was looking, and the room went uncomfortably quiet.

Saber blinked in confusion before realizing she was the center of attention. “... Me?”

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“I’m surprised. I didn’t expect for my new body to progress so rapidly.” Illya tilted her head to the side as she saw what was essentially herself floating in a tube. “Should I attribute it to the combined efforts of a Caster from the Age of Gods and one of the most infamous mages in the current era?”

“You could. Plus a few extra factors in the mix. We had some surprise developments over the past few days that helped speed things along.” Touko enjoyed her latest cancer stick while casually leaning back in her seat. “The fact that your mom and dad are conveniently around was a plus. Servants or not. Between all our efforts, I’m proud to say that your new body’s magical capacity is almost half of what you have now, with none of the defects.”

“*Half?*” Illya gave the woman a doubletake, and for good reason. Her current body was modified specifically to house the Einzbern Lesser Grail and sustain Berserker without any support. The vast majority of her current body was *literally* one giant array of circuits and command spells. Even being capable of half of that mana output made her a genuine freak compared to even exceptional magi.

And with no drawbacks? That alone was a concern in itself. If word of her new body ever got out, both she and Touko would be hounded by all sorts of organizations for inspection, investigation, and research. If they were lucky.

Touko snickered. “I can show you the tests and calculations if you want. Caster and I went over them ten times over and then some ourselves to make sure we weren’t fooling ourselves. Trust me kid, I’m going to be spending years pouring over the fluids your new body is floating in alone. A nice secret bonus if I do say so myself. Don’t tell your brother though, will you? Us contractors live job by job. Income’s not a steady thing in our line of work, infamy or not.”

“The money would last longer if you didn’t waste it all on random junk.” Her bodyguard snarked from the couch.”

“I don’t want to hear it from the girl with literally nothing in her apartment other than a mattress and a micro freezer stuffed with ice cream.”

Haaaah. Honestly. It was just one absurdity after another. The Vampires. The Vice Director. Mother. Father. And recently for some reason Justease’s memories related to relegating the Einzbern family had been slipping into her head while she slept, letting her know just how *easily* she could usurp control over her mother’s family from Jubstacheit if she wanted to, in either body.

For once she was glad that the Einzbern were so reclusive. It made hiding the nonsense around herself significantly easier and more realistic in the long run.

But the fact that it was happening at all still put her on edge. Let alone all at once. She didn’t like it.

In their world, if it was too good to be true, it usually was.

“How much longer until it’s ready?” She asked, though more to determine how much longer she could put off making a decision and try and figure out what can go wrong than anything.

“A day. Give or take. Normally getting your soul in there could vary wildly, but I hear that your fancy True Magic has good compatibility with procedures like this.”

Illya let out a halfhearted scoff. “You would know. The Einzbern are reclusive by nature, but even we wouldn’t dismiss the existence of peer families. The Aozaki have had our notice since they announced the existence of the Fifth.”

The fact that everyone in the know was aware that Touko was passed up to inherit the Blue by her sister went without saying. The incident was almost as famous as Touko’s rampages against those that earned her wrath.

“I’m honored. Still, who would have thought that the two would work together like this at any point? World’s got a disgusting sense of humor like that I guess.”

“I fail to see how this situation is amusing.”

“My point exactly.”

Illya turned to look at Touko skeptically. “Something concerns you.”

The redhead shrugged. “Whenever a True Magic rears its ugly head in earnest, partially or not, the counterforce has a habit of paying attention and turning things sideways. The payout for this job is nice and all, unexpectedly so, but personal experience says to get out while things are still nice and calm.”

“You’d think that we were past the interesting part already, would you not? That’s why you’re here. The War is over, and barring a few nights ago where clearly nothing happened, it has been rather quiet and pleasant in this dull city.” Illya wasn’t fooled. Touko was clearly alluding to something other than the obvious.

“So long as the foundation is still present and potentially primed, it doesn’t matter. I’ve seen enough to know that the sooner my work here is concluded, the better. Not that I don’t appreciate all the boons and unexpected bonuses I’ve gotten with this deal.” Touko concluded confidently. “Word is that you’re planning on cleaning up this Grail of yours and moving it elsewhere before trying to use it again. Well lets just say I wouldn’t put high odds on you getting that far to see it happen. Association support or not.”

All things considered, Illya didn’t care if the Grail was destroyed or not at this point either. She DID care that it meant that all the Servants would leave as a result though.

“I’ll take your concerns into account and be sure to forward them.” The Albino ended the topic neutrally, hiding her real thoughts on the matter. All things considered, if Touko was telling her this now, then there was no doubt that she had already discussed this with Caster, or the woman from the Age of Gods had already figured out this much on her own.

Either way, it was too late to have second thoughts or go back now. She could feel her current mutilated body falling apart already, slowly dying with each breath she took. There was nothing wrong with the replacement as far as everyone was concerned. Only the current situation.

The real issue at hand was to determine what the primary trigger and goal of the Counter Force was. Her new body wasn’t likely to be it. It was a marvel to be sure, but not something the world would take note of. Shirou, as frustrating as he could be at times, wasn’t the target either.

The Servants? No. There had been a scant few documented cases of some staying around or being reincarnated over the millenia in the annals of the Einzbern’s libraries. It was rare, but not an impossibility that would turn the world on its head. Hell, Gilgamesh had been lintering about doing who knows what for the past decade without any consequences.

It had to be the Grail then, which made sense.

There was a reason why the Seven Servants had to be summoned and sacrificed all at the same time after all for the ritual, even if it did result in a potential cataclysmic deathmatch. Other than the fact that it was absurdly difficult to contain the energy of their spirits once set free from their Servant bodies of course. Lesser Grails were amazing artifacts, but they weren’t capable of holding *that* much power indefinitely.

Summoning once every few years, or even every few months took too long. They couldn’t just wait a while, call a Servant in a kill chamber, execute them, and then wait a while to gain the resources to do it again like some twisted slaughterhouse for Heroic Spirits.

Once the first Servant was killed off, the planet would notice the Greater Grail, and would act. The closer the Grail was to activating and reaching the Root, the harder pushback there would be. That’s why it was convenient for the end of most Grail Wars to happen rather quickly with the most casualties. They’d clean up the rest of the Servants and reach the Root fast enough for the Counterforce to not react in time. It was ironically the safest thing for everyone to get it all out of the way quickly.

Even then, it was *highly* suspected that the Counter Force was the reason why nobody had managed to finish the Grail ritual after all this time.

But therein lay the problem with their current situation. So long as the system was remotely close to potentially accessing the Root, or bringing forth Angra Mainyu it was a threat and had to be addressed. One way or another.

The only question now was how?

... No. That was a rhetorical question. She already knew several ways the problem could be resolved. She just didn't like any of them.

"Just making sure nobody blames me if something goes pear shaped." Touko smirked with a helpless shrug.

"So long as you aren't involved or a party in the matter, I don't see why not. We have enough chores to deal with as it is to worry about someone as infamous as you." Illya waved off the woman's unspoken threat.

"Oof." Shiki smirked.

"No no. There's no need for that. Your pool is already full enough as it is. This game is far too crowded for my tastes, I assure you. I've grown up from trying to take the entire world on at once and learned to be patient with my goals." Touko dismissed Illya's backhanded insult as easily as she took another drag from her cigarette.

Illya didn't find the double entendre amusing, but she laughed bitterly regardless. "I'm almost envious. That being the case, let's see if we can expedite matters to suit both our desires."

"We're already working at a record pace, unless you want to cut more corners with that body of yours. I already told you, tomorrow." Sitting up with a shit eating grin, Touko took out a book and began to read.

The girl knew she was being dismissed, and didn't particularly like it. Not then by Acht, and not now. "Fine. I can see you are clearly busy. At the very least, have you finished with that second pair of Mystic Eye killing glasses that my brother requested?"

The original pair he had ordered were for Rider so she could walk out in public, much to the Servant's surprise and reluctance, but it had become blatantly clear that he had requested the second pair later for himself. His Pure Eyes were overwhelming him with information with the flagrant overuse he had put them through over the past few weeks and measures had to be taken to ensure that they wouldn't have to be removed from his skull within the next decade.

"Finished polishing them up this morning. Caster helped out with that too. They're in the box by the door." The woman lazily pointed to a pile of magazines near the exit with the requested item sitting precariously on top of it.

Illya stopped herself from asking how the woman had managed to amass such a pile of junk so quickly at the last moment.

“You know, I’m surprised just how much you two care about one another.” Touko mused out loud just before Illya left. “You’re not like most Magi. Servants and True Magic. You siblings actually care for one another. It’s almost sickeningly sweet.”

“It’s not that outlandish. I did try to kill him the first time we met with Berserker. Onii-chan’s just ludicrously stubborn and lucky that way.”

“Hah. So the rumors he actually survived Heracles were true? Damn. Kid’s got more hair on his chest than I thought.” Turning a page, the Aozaki snickered to herself more amused than impressed. “I’m guessing the fact that you inherited the Einzbern’s legacy and he got the Emiya’s helped clear up any inheritance headaches.”

“Not really. Onii-chan’s an idiot like that. He’d probably give me Papa’s crest if I asked without a second thought.”

“Yeah. I guess that does sound like the kid from what little I’ve seen. Though in retrospect that doesn’t mean much. Word is that he only has a fraction of the Emiya family crest and the rest is still stored away in the Association vaults.”

Ah. And wasn’t that a point of interest to investigate in the future?

“Fragmented or not, the Emiya family magecraft doesn’t suit me, so what becomes of it isn’t of my concern.” Illya played off the fact while quietly seething.

The fact that Touko knew this much about her family’s seized assets at all to this detail was not something that should be public knowledge.

The fact that Touko was flagrantly talking about it with her meant that the woman was not the only person investigating her family history and assets in detail behind the scenes.

It was a back handed warning. Rude and insulting, but still a warning.

“Hoooh. Well aren’t you a nasty piece of work? You didn’t hesitate the slightest saying that. I’m liking you more already.” Touko snickered, turning a page.

“There’s nothing I can do about it regardless. Given Onii-chan’s relationship with the Vice Director, there’s little doubt that she has it under high security for her own pride’s sake more than anything. The idea of having such a prized asset of her direct underling’s stolen from her control would do more damage to her than us.” Illya waved off any concern on the matter.

“Don’t tell anyone that. It’s been a while since anyone’s seen a Barthomelloi properly flustered about anything other than a Vampire in decades. You might give them ideas.” Touko clearly had more than a few “entertaining” ones running through her head at that moment.

“Let the fools run to their graves for all I care. If they cannot control themselves, that’s on them.”

“Alright. Don’t say I didn’t warn you though.”

Illya scoffed and walked out the door with the glasses in hand. Touko Aozaki left her with mixed feelings. The woman felt like an estranged aunt to her. Somewhat caring, but clearly someone with her own agenda. Still...

“Papa. Would you care what happened to the Emiya Crest?”

“Not particularly. I gave what I could to Shirou and you don’t want it. I was never that invested in the family craft either. Why?” His response was something she more or less expected.

“If what remains of it in the Association is sufficient, would you be interested in taking it yourself?”

Whatever Assassin was expecting, that wasn’t it. *“... What?”*

“Onii-chan had Archer’s arm grafted onto him. And you still have a copy of what you used to have on your body. It shouldn’t be impossible for you to take the rest. Since you’re a Servant, you might acclimate to it better than you were alive actually.”

“Illya, where is this coming from? I’m a Servant. If... when I disappear, the Crest will go with me.”

“But if the Crest is robust enough, it could possibly make you self sufficient and less reliant on me. It could serve as an anchor. Improve your Independent Action and other skills. Make you-”

“Illya.”

His soft request cut her off immediately.

It was only then that she realized that she was starting to tear up.

“I’m dead Illya. I’ve been dead for a while.” His words hurt her more than they should, even if they were ones that she had told herself repeatedly for a long time. *“I’ll stay for however long you and your brother need, but I will leave eventually. I never expected to be summoned to the War in the first place. Nobody did. And I don’t intend to push my luck any further than it already has.”*

She didn't fight back as warm arms hugged her from behind and embraced her.

"You're safe. Shirou's... doing as well for himself as he can. I got to see the two of you, and even your mother in this disaster, though through means that could be better. I don't have any wishes that could be granted at this point."

"Papa." Illya sniffed, holding onto the arms around her. She missed this feeling. She missed his warmth. "I don't want you to leave again."

"I know. But we both know that I will have to eventually." He gently kissed the back of her head. "I'll try to at least last long enough to see you finally start growing again."

"... Idiot. At least stay long enough to chase away the boys that annoy me." She laughed against her will.

"That's what you have Berserker for honey."

"I wanna see you do it." She pouted childishly.

"It would be kinder to have Berserker do it honey." Kiritsugu more or less repeated himself with a tone of amusement. At least with Berserker, it would be over with quickly.

"But that's why I want you to do it." She looked up at him innocently.

"... You really are our daughter." He couldn't help but chuckle as she tried to play him.

Echoes of a memory flickered through his head from when he was alive. From when Illya looked at him with absolute trust.

From when he ~~killed her~~.

"Papa?"

It was only after she spoke up that he realized his hands were shaking as he held her.

He swallowed heavily and forced himself to be calm again.

He didn't need to save the world anymore. He was past that. It wasn't his goal anymore.

Assassin smiled. It was a small, weak little thing, but earnest and true all the same. "I'll stay as long as I'm needed, Illya. But I can't be here forever."

“... I know.”

“You have to take care of your brother.”

“I know.”

“You have to make sure those other girls don’t get him killed.”

“I know.”

“You have to remember to eat properly so you can grow up properly.”

“You can stop now.”

“You have to remember to stay away from suspicious adults.”

“... Berserker.”

“■■■■” Surprisingly, the greek didn’t do anything but grunt.

“Traitor!”

“See? Even Berserker agrees with me.”

“Stupid! Stupid old men! You senile idiots don’t get anything!” Illya ran away from her Servants with a crimson face straight back to the house, much to their amusement.

“Heh.” Kiritsugu let out a brief chuckle, watching her disappear. “Was yours like that too?”

“■■■■” The fact that Berserker replied at all was an answer in itself.

“Good to know.” The Assassin nodded absently. “Thanks.”

“■■■■”

“Yeah.” The weakest Servant vanished in thin air. “They deserved better than us.”

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“Shirou.”

Archer's eyebrow twitched as Saber approached him. Partially in annoyance, partially because having Saber address him by his old name dredged up memories he genuinely did wish he had lost for good. If only for peace of mind. "I guess it's your turn to interrogate me, Saber?"

"In due time." The King of Knights stated factually, as though he had no choice in the matter. Which he probably didn't. "For now, I believe you are overdue for an evaluation."

That had the Counter Guardian off guard. "Come again?"

Saber didn't waste any time, turning around and walking towards the back yard. "Come. It will not do you any good to keep me waiting. Lancer and Rider have already agreed to take over your position overseeing the property's security."

"Yo." Indeed, in his moment of distraction, the two Servants had materialized on the far side of the roof, with Lancer being the vocal one. "Don't pin this on us Archer. Even we don't know what Saber's got in mind for you."

"You look far too pleased to say that convincingly." Archer rolled his eyes but didn't fight against the inevitable. He was blatantly outnumbered, and if he fought against whatever was going on, odds are Rin would get involved and make it even more frustrating.

"Please excuse our interference." Fortunately Rider was more amicable to his distress and merely apologized for her role, bowing politely.

Archer couldn't stop his eyebrow from twitching in annoyance. Lancer was one thing, but it was hard to be rebuff Rider when she was being genuine. She was cut from the same cloth of Sakura in that sense.

He almost would have preferred it if she just kicked him off the roof instead... almost.

"Heh. You knew that would work on him, didn't you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about Lancer."

Ignoring the two conspiring idiots on the roof, EMIYA reluctantly followed Saber across the property, if only to get away from their teasing.

That is until he realized where they were going.

"This is..." Out of the many curve balls he expected to be thrown at him once everyone realized he existed, this wasn't one of them.

Saber on the other hand, didn't stop as she opened the door to the dojo. "I hope you aren't getting cold feet."

"You're serious." He couldn't help but drop his guard as she walked inside. "Saber, don't be ridiculous. We'd break down this place in an instant if we got carried away. Spar or not."

"Then we should be thankful that neither of us are sloppy. Or are you insinuating that I am incapable of holding back like Lancer?" She didn't pay him any mind and continued into the building, not giving him a single glance as she spoke.

"I heard that!"

Archer's hands tightened into fists. He was still outside. He could still leave. The moment he walked in there it was automatically his loss. "When your competitiveness is tweaked? Yes. My memory is patched but don't think I'm unaware of what you're like when you think you're about to lose in any competition."

Unfortunately that was the wrong thing to say as she stopped walking and turned to look at him with a piercing and curious gaze. "Hoh? Interesting choice of words. Are you by chance hinting that your technique is superior?"

Shit. He had just stepped on the dragon's tail.

"If that was ever the case, it would be possible to summon me as a Saber class Servant. Which I ironically am not." He dismissed her accusation with a heavy sigh. "Just what is it that you expect to gain from this nonsense?"

"Your progress." Saber stood imperiously in front of him with a calculating stare. "A variant of myself trained you, if only for a short amount of time. And while I have spent some time with Shirou, I wish to see for myself, and for my other, how far you have come."

Archer couldn't help but curse under his breath. Saber had crossed blades with Lancer, Caster, Berserker, Rider, and Assassin at one point or another in some capacity in this timeline. Even Gilgamesh.

But not him.

"Don't suppose I can just forfeit as soon as this starts, can I?" He grimaced.

"You said it yourself. I am rather adamant about achieving a *proper* victory once I seek it." Her eyes narrowed dangerously, promising pain if he even tried it.

“Wonderful.” There was no point in running. He’d just be hounded by everyone until he caved eventually. He might have been able to get away with it if Rin wasn’t staying here too, but there was no point in trying to change that fact at this stage.

So, he walked into what he occasionally dubbed “the tiger’s den” whenever Fuji-nee was using it, and quietly closed the door behind him.

Saber nodded, pleased with his decision to not waste her time any further and turned to grab some of the shinai by the wall.

“Don’t bother.”

Before she turned even halfway to the wall, Archer had materialized a bamboo sword perfectly suited for her size and lazily tossed it to her.

She gave him a skeptical look as she effortlessly caught it with one hand. “It goes without saying that unsportsman tricks are not acceptable for this bout.”

“Of course.” Two more blunt sticks materialized in Archer’s hands and took their place at his side, leaving many taunting openings for his opponent. “I assure you, I am well aware of how scary you can get when disrespected and disappointed.”

“No doubt from personal experience.” The King of Knights readied her own weapon, and the two slowly began to move to the center of the room, circling one another to have the best possible footing to attack and counter at a moment’s notice. “You clearly found bitter amusement when you confronted my others.”

“You have no idea.” He didn’t like where this conversation was going.

“No. However I would prefer it if you attempt to at least articulate your concerns and grievances to me, unlike like what happened with my recent encounter with Lancelot.” Her eyes narrowed further.

Okay, maybe this was not exactly how he thought it was going to go after all. It was insulting, though rightly deserved, to be accused of being as difficult to communicate with as a Berserker. “Right. The Fourth War. I forgot about that detail.”

“How convenient.”

The two blurred.

Saber’s shinai struck down from above in a proper, clean, and overwhelmingly powerful overhead strike.

It was a blatant feint, but one that could easily crush the skull of a normal human being.

Archer was barely halfway through deflecting it as best as he could with one hand while simultaneously counterattacking with the other when her grip shifted and flicked, threatening to impale his shoulder while simultaneously slicing through his defending arm's wrist.

A half step back, pivoting his weight to spin counter to the strike would have had him use her strength to enhance his own strike in an instant.

She swiped her blade to take off his head.

He ducked down to lun-

He jumped back as her blade changed directions downward immediately and would have cleaved his head in two, resuming the original strike. To change the trajectory of one's blade mid swing in any capacity was something only a true master of the craft could manage. Although it was admittedly far easier to accomplish if the weapon was held with two hands.

They were back to their original distance.

The exchange had taken less than a quarter of a second.

"Not bad." She praised, "Though you overreached at the end."

"Most of my opponents tend to be on the larger side." Archer shrugged helplessly, admitting his defeat this round. Ducking under her strike at the end had been a mistake. He had less room to work with than he had estimated.

"Most are." Saber had no illusions with her physical condition. She was in her thirties, but still had a very young body with the limitations to match. She had power, but her physical reach was clearly less than her peers.

That said, even she could admit that the height difference between Shirou and EMIYA was a bit on the absurd side. Clearly there had to be some incident regarding magecraft in his past that resulted in such a disparity.

They slowly circled one another again.

"So you took part in the Fourth war?" Saber asked.

"Rarely. But it happened. Lancelot was just as frustrating of a matchup against me as he was against Gilgamesh. Personally though, I was always surprised that you did not recognize him

during that first skirmish. The Knight of the Lake's combat style was certainly something to remember. Noble Phantasm hiding his image or not."

The King of Knights grimaced slightly, "Admittedly, I mostly witnessed his swordplay and jousting events. While he was renowned for his skill with all armaments, I was rarely ever present for his displays and feats with more diverse and esoteric equipment."

"I see. A pity." He could tell she was berating herself for missing what should have been so obvious in hindsight. Another oversight by a King that did not truly pay attention or take note of those underneath her.

They blurred once more, this time Archer on the attack. His initial swipe to parry and steer her weapon away was premature on purpose, luring her to lunge while he shifted his body counter to the attack for his second blade to put the real pressure on the other side a moment later while avoiding her thrust.

A twist of Saber's grip played counter to his maneuver to keep her weapon's trajectory to his body, but she was caught off guard as he quickly dropped to one knee, stopping nearly all of his rotation in an instant and repositioning himself to lunge himself with his free blade.

This time it was Saber's turn to momentarily jump back.

She recognized that his moves weren't active decisions. They were practiced and predetermined maneuvers. Reckless and suicidal, but ones made to lure in masters and the strong to open themselves up to a decisive blow.

Shirou's technique was much the same... and yet...

"Have you encountered any of my other knights?" She asked instead, keeping her observations to herself as they once more resumed circling one another.

"A couple, from what I recall. Not all of them." Archer admitted, back on his feet once more. "Gawain is as much a simplistic brute as expected, and Tristan is seemingly always lost in his whims. Both carry their position proudly and shamelessly. The fools."

"I will not have you demean my men like that." Saber frowned.

"But you can with that plan of yours?" He gave her a bitter and flickering smirk. "Hypocrisy aside, I meant what I said. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say that being a Servant sometimes draws out the instincts and traits of heroic spirits that are best left tamed and balanced by the others depending on your class. Sometimes, ironically, the opposite."

"What do you mean by that?"

Emiya snorted. “It isn’t that difficult of a concept. What part of Lancelot do you think was exemplified when he was a Berserker? Do you think that he would be the same if called as a Saber?”

Her grip on her sword tightened slightly, understanding too easily what he was trying to say. “So if you were to be summoned as a different class, would you be easier to tolerate?”

“Heh. Who knows? I might just be able to hide my nonsense better.” Maybe not as a Berserker, but as a Caster...

“Somehow I suddenly doubt it.” The scathing look she gave him hurt as much as it amused him.

“Owch.”

Again they seemingly teleported to meet halfway, their blades clashing harder now. Hard enough to make the room shake. It was only due to the minor reinforcement that they gave their tools that enabled the pieces of wood to remain intact through the abuse.

More weight was put in each strike. More power was needed to deflect and defend properly. Smaller evasive maneuvers to weave around the other were more difficult to accomplish efficiently, and foregone for harder attacks and blocks.

Ten. Fifteen. Twen-

“Tch!”

Archer rolled back and held his blades in a defensive position while Saber finished her swing.

“Hmmm. Not bad.” The King of Knights reviewed their exchange with curiosity. Neither had been going all out, but in an exchange of pure refined technique Archer was certainly of passing muster. Shirou’s was nothing to scoff at, but it lacked the refined and familiar practice and strength that his older counterpart possessed. The Counter Guardian still lacked the raw power that many of her Knights possessed, but the gap in pure skill was a far closer margin.

“I thought you didn’t want to bring the place down.” With a huff, EMIYA got back on his feet. If they went at it any harder, they’d be taking out the foundations with their next set of missed swipes.

“You should be able to tell that Shirou reinforced this facility to adequate standards. It can handle at least this much.” Saber replied unconcerned.

“I’m starting to see where Mordred gets it from.” Rolling his shoulders, he mentally prepared himself for the next exchange and got back into position.

“So you have encountered Mordred after all.” The fact that Saber reacted to the topic at all betrayed her interest.

“Mmm. She’s certainly a wild one. Surprisingly proud of both being a Knight of the Round Table and being the one that brought everything down. And your child for that matter.” Fortunately, at least in his memories, he never told the Knight of Treachery that he was once King Arthur’s Master when alive. It was difficult keeping that mad dog in line in general.

“That fool. Even in death she dwells on that nonsense.”

“If it is about being your heir, I agree with you. That one does not have your temperament in the slightest. Any kingdom she ran would only head into the ground or on a perpetual warpath with other kingdoms.” He readied his blades again. “Though judging from her endless rants about you, some acknowledgement that she was your brat at all probably would have helped resolve matters between you two more peacefully.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You know how she was conceived.”

“I do.” He gave her a soft smile that was neither placating nor mocking. “And given how difficult the topic was, Mordred is likely as appealed on the matter as you were. Personally, in spite of the risks, I would have taken her in if only to spite Morgan and turn her ridiculous plan against her.”

Saber couldn’t help but be nauseated by the idea. “I’m surprised. I thought someone as cautious and skeptical as you would have assumed that my sister would use Mordred as a plant or puppet. You are more aware than I of how duplicit magecraft can be.”

A careless shrug was the reply she got. “Of course. That way you could have used her to give Morgan false information. At a bare minimum you could have told Merlin to fix something up to mitigate some of Morgan’s control. The whole debacle with Mordred is partially his fault after all.”

She couldn’t deny that was a possibility she could have taken. Risk aside, he wasn’t wrong.

That aside, she probably should have relied on Merlin a bit more. Fight magecraft with magecraft and all that...

But... that involved relying more on *Merlin*.

“Merlin?” Archer asked knowingly.

“Merlin.” She noted that Archer clearly encountered the incubus at some point.

Actually, she had been indecisive with Mordred from the moment she revealed her identity. Issue regarding heirship aside, Saber had been busy with plotting and organizing the Rome expedition at the time and before she realized it or follow through with the issue Mordred had vanished. Instead of using some of her resources to search for one of her most loyal and clearly very distressed knights, she had ignored the runaway to focus on the oncoming invasion.

Mordred was a product of her seed and Morgan’s duplicity. She was not worthy to be her heir. But that did not deny the Knight the right to be her child.

Had she gone with that approach, and forced Merlin to reduce Morgan’s influence on her... could Camelot...

“Stop.”

She blinked and snapped back to reality to see Archer looking down at her disappointed.

“I know that look. Don’t. It might not mean much coming from me at this point, but even Mordred was proud of being your Knight. They regret Camelot’s fall in their own ways, but they don’t lament it. If anything, what eats at them most is how they failed you.”

“Fools. The lot of them. As King it was my responsibility to maintain order and kingdom alike. I failed them.”

“From personal experience, I’ve found that it’s best to leave that sort of judgment to the victims rather than those directly responsible for it. Especially when the system supporting the rule and judgment is no longer present.”

Saber gave him a warning glare.

Archer just shrugged it off. “You would not speak to me of the matter if you didn’t value my input.”

“Your tact and decorum on the other hand leaves much to be desired.”

This time their exchange barely lasted three seconds before Archer was thrown back across the room, soundly defeated.

Clearly he had pushed Saber’s goodwill a bit too far that time.

“Very well. While we are on the topic of ironic hypocrisy and changing the past, we may as well bring your aspirations into the conversation.” She stood over him imperiously. “I won’t bother delving or contemplating the ethicality of either of our plans, as that would be pointless for both of us. Tell me Archer, what do you truly feel about me? About us? About what we are and what we are trying to accomplish?”

Archer didn’t bother to get up, instead settling for lying back on the floor and staring at a familiar ceiling that he had long since forgotten. “... I think we’re both idealistic idiots that refuse to listen to others, which ironically are common traits for those that made it to the throne.”

“Be serious. If there ever was a time to convince me of anything, now would be it.”

“No. That’s exactly the point.” He didn’t move from his spot. “Back when I was still the fool that was your Master would have been it, and I botched that up spectacularly for both of us.”

“Shi-”

“DON’T.”

He cut her off harshly before relaxing a moment later with a heavy sigh. “Just... too many have been trying to treat me like that fool. A vain hope or appeal to what little humanity I have left. I’ve long forgotten and lost the right to it. Especially from you.”

She didn’t like it. She didn’t like it one bit. But, she would be lying if she claimed ignorance as to why he felt that way. “Very well then, Archer. You still haven’t answered my inquiry. A vague comment about how we are both foolish is an insufficient answer for both our satisfaction.”

“Humph. So now you care.” EMIYA laughed bitterly, making no effort to move from his position on the floor before taking in a long deep breath to calm himself down. “What is Camelot to you, King Arthur? Is it the castle you inherited but never built? Is it the territory you claimed but have only laid eyes on from a distance and never up close? Is it the people that you lord over but never spoke to? Is it the societal system that you personally developed under your rule? Just what is it you are trying to revive without your influence in your eyes?”

Saber blinked, not expecting that question from Archer. “It is so hard to understand? It is all of them and more. The security established. The towns that the people could call home. The pride and name they could all live and function under with certainty and clarity. I have forsaken my humanity to-”

“You haven’t.”

“I, come again?”

“You haven’t given up your humanity Saber. Just as I haven’t mine, as much as I wish I could at this point. You just, dismiss it. Ignore its existence. Bury it. Whatever you prefer to say happened.” Archer didn’t bother to look at her confused expression. “You care, in your own way. As King. As ruler. You care to the point of blatant irrationality, but just as adamantly refuse to acknowledge it even when it’s driving your actions. In the end it’s just another way of being human, albeit a terrible one. And as much as you think you’ve done an admirable job of thinking you’ve gotten rid of that part of yourself to rule Camelot “perfectly”, I can guarantee that you haven’t. You’ll learn the hard way if you ever finish your contract, just like I did. And more importantly, too late to do anything about it afterwards.”

Saber wanted to rebuke his argument. That she was still committed to her cause and ready for the consequences of her actions. But it was difficult to make such a claim with Archer. The one that had already given up everything. The fool mad enough to have a Reality Marble and somehow recognize just how self destructive and twisted he truly was compared to his peers. “I’ve heard as much from Shirou already. Tell me something that he wouldn’t know.”

“So you want the cruel version then.” He let out a bitter laugh and finally picked himself up to sit and look her dead in the eyes. “Tell me Saber, who do you plan on being after this nonsense?”

The unexpected question caught her off guard. “Clarify.”

“At the end of this self inflicted torture, you only have two outcomes. Either you die as King Arthur of Camelot, or the witless child Arturia that never pulled the sword from the stone that somehow made it to the Throne as far as the world is concerned, with not a single merit to your name other than being good with a sword. The former implies you are still King. The Camelot with all its glory and failings, was still under your name. The latter implies you intend to give up on all that. On being King. On having any claim or dignity to lecture or look down on anyone. On being the fool that gave up their humanity to be the perfect ruler and failed to live up to your own impossible standards.”

“I intended to disappear nameless to atone for my failures-” She started, only to be cut off again.

“A decision you made while moping like a sullen child without talking to a single person about it.” Archer snorted. “Your sword and spear are so overwhelmingly powerful that you have them restricted not by yourself but by your Knights to ensure that they are used with proper restraint, but you don’t apply the same logic when it comes to *rewriting history*? If you don’t see the irony in that, then your sense of priorities are more skewed than even my own.”

That had Saber finally on the backfoot. Of course the Wrought Iron Hero would have eventually encountered and known about the locks on her prized weapons and at least some of their lesser known traits.

“And how was I to do that?!” She hissed, finally reaching the end of her patience. “My men were all but gone, betrayed or dead save for Bedivere and maybe a couple more! Some executed by my own hand! Merlin is imprisoned in that tower of his! What trusted council can I receive, save from your spited tongue?!”

Archer couldn't help but laugh bitterly. “Under normal circumstances, you'd have a point. You wouldn't have then. Both in your condition and emotional state. But now? As a heroic spirit with time to spare and an open ended contract? We're under rather twisted circumstances in this timeline, aren't we? You just encountered Lancelot, and while that conversation no doubt ended poorly, it's not like it is your only opportunity. Especially if events play out like they most likely will in the future.”

It took a moment for the King of Knights to parse together what Archer was alluding to, but the plan was blatantly obvious in retrospect.

Chaldea.

Whatever event took place there supposedly involved a grand multitude of Servants. Heroes. Warriors.

Knights.

“A summoning of the Round Table. A final council.”

“Saber... Artoria.” Archer spoke slowly, as though tasting the words before uttering them. “My deciding mistake, what guaranteed that I became, me, was that I didn't *listen*. I didn't listen to Rin. I didn't listen to my teachers. I didn't listen to my peers. I didn't listen to the people that I saved. I didn't listen to you. I heard what everyone said, but I didn't try to make sense of it all. I just blindly went forward without putting any weight to their words, their feelings. And I'm where I am because of it. You still have time. You haven't made your decision. You have the rare opportunity to still have your council. Value it more than even your blade when it happens. Don't make the same mistake I did. Don't walk forward dismissing what they have to say.”

“The King doesn't understand his people.”

Those damn words echoed through her head once again, and not for the first time she couldn't muster the dignity to deny it.

At the last moment, he had abandoned outright trying to change her mind and gave her something else. Something to look forward to. Someone to look forward to. Someone she was willing to wait for.

Someone that wasn't him.

For the briefest of moments, she didn't see the exhausted and bitter Counter Guardian on the floor, but a defeated and beaten Shirou Emiya. One that genuinely didn't know what to do anymore, but despised it when witnessing anyone make the same decisions he had made.

"Ten years is a long time."

"Consider it a long overdue vacation. Even the workaholics here in Japan know how to cut loose every now and then. Or at least try to. Just try not to end up twisted like Gilgamesh in the process, will you?"

"I suppose I can consider it a long term distraction. So long as the Grail is within reach, I can always make my decision eventually." She played coy and ignored the backhanded jab, never admitting one way or another just what her final decision would be.

"Mmm. Maybe learn how to swim while you're at it instead of cheating with that blessing of yours." He gave her a knowing smirk of amusement.

"No doubt another tale that you will keep in mind to never recite." She gave him a warning.

"Me no. Your brother on the other hand..."

Saber broke character and gave Archer a rare grimace. "Ugh. Don't bother. Kay's proficiency with swimming is borderline absurd, and one of his few outstanding traits. While I won't deny I was his superior in most fields, he was always particularly bitter and petty about the boons my blessing from the Lady of the Lake bestowed me."

Her brother's childish immaturity was just short of Mordred's in some circumstances, albeit far more amicable and warm in comparison. The others of the roundtable sometimes claimed he was so full of hot air that he could float with his armor on which was why he was so good at swimming.

She made a note to address her brother's loose tongue when next they met...

Yes. When next they met.

Perhaps it would be best to make a list of topics and tasks to complete when she did meet her Knights again.

"Heh. So you can make that face after all." Archer couldn't help but laugh at her reaction. It was rare that Saber ever expressed that much of her emotions or personal thoughts so openly. "I would have thought that you'd save it for Merlin."

“My brother is frustrating more than anything. My chief advisor, on the other hand, is blatantly aggravating.” And like that her usual schooled facade was back.

“Noted.” Archer finally stood up and rolled his shoulders, his own expression cooled into something more conflicted.

“What is it?” Archer or Shirou, she had enough experience with both of them to know when something was on their mind.

“Nothing, I... it may be paranoia, but if you do play the long game, be careful with your surroundings and decisions.” Archer fumbled with his words, as though trying to find out the best way to articulate what he wanted.

“Careful?” Saber frowned, unsure what he was talking about. They both know she was the ruler of a nation. She knew from personal experience the consequences of poorly made actions. If anything, the way he spoke made it sound like she wasn’t in control over her own actions.

For once Archer looked genuinely unconfident about what he was talking about, which only made Saber more bewildered. Of all the Servants in the War, Archer had been the one that had always more or less the most composed at all times. Even when matters looked dire. For this many cracks to show in his disposition now could mean a whole slew of problems that would not end well.

“I’m not too sure myself. But, if you find yourself doing things inexplicably and things turning out conveniently because of them, don’t assume it’s your Instinct skill. It might be... something else.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“No. Not when I’m just speculating. If I’m wrong I’m just spewing nonsense. If I’m right, it’s probably better if you don’t know and stay on guard regardless.”

“Is this related to what has been on your mind recently?”

“...”

The silence was damning.

“Archer, don’t pretend like the others haven’t noticed,” With every passing second, the Heroic spirit looked less like a bitter veteran, and more like a simple confused and lost man.

“No. Never mind. I’m just getting my paranoia get the better of me.” He shook his head dismissively and pushed himself up.

“From what little I know of Counter Guardians, your paranoia is liable to be more reliable than most clairvoyance based Skills. Even the idea of Primate Murder being near didn’t rattle you for more than a few hours. But whatever this is has been consuming you for days. If you need help, all you need to do is ask-”

“I don’t need-?!” Archer snapped before just as quickly cutting himself off as if realizing something and cursing himself for the slipup. “I *did* need help then, but I didn’t... but now does it even matter or am I still just... tch!”

“Archer?”

“I don’t know!” He hissed out quickly and irritable before schooling himself again and taking a few moments to calm down. “I don’t know. Maybe if this timeline was more dire. Maybe if everything wasn’t already resolved, I’d be more inclined to be reckless and push matters to see if this nonsense that’s driving me mad is actually true. But telling you, the implications might make you worse than even me right now. And I can’t do that. Not when you are so close to coming to terms with yourself here.”

He was blatantly admitting he was worried about her. Everyone knew he cared, but EMIYA never outright stated his feelings to anyone like this, let alone admitted he had them without every word oversaturated in sarcasm. Another glaring sign that something was severely amiss.

Slowly, she relaxed her stance and approached him with genuine concern. “When the war was growing its most stressful, when we lost control over Rider, when Van Fem’s presence here was known, the pressure Shirou experienced did overwhelm him. I am aware of just how difficult it is to maintain a facade to soothe the concerns of others. And I am aware of the unreasonable loads that both you and Shirou are willing to bear because you believe it is necessary. You don’t have to tell us what is the matter, but please don’t push us away.”

Shirou and Archer were different. Not just in history, but in foundation and temperament as well. Even their swordwork had glaring differences that reflected who they were once one got past the near identical techniques they possessed.

Shirou was deceptively aggressive when provoked. He was calm and collected most of the time, and when he needed to be. But it masked a genuine innate desire to tear down and pick apart each and every obstacle that dared get in his way to its roots as soon as he could to make certain that they *never* bothered him again.

His swords lashed out the moment an opportunity was available to *make* an opening to capitalize on. He struck at both his enemies’ strengths and weaknesses in equal measure to cripple and execute. The swords he used most often were for maximum effect and damage, chosen to address the source of whatever was in his way immediately, regardless of how cruel they were at times.

He was someone that had a goal that needed to be completed, and anything that got in the way of that goal was seen as a genuine insult from his perspective. A blemish that needed to be purged if not for himself than for everyone else he cared about.

Archer on the other hand was the opposite. His swordwork was defensive. Patient. Enduring. Painfully built and refined over years to tear apart opponents clearly stronger and more skilled than him. His blades of choice enhanced his defenses and were more complicated to utilize, though no less effective in comparison.

He had no teachers or specialized training like Shirou did at the beginning. Relying on little more than sheer stubbornness, EMIYA was someone that had clawed and scraped up every measure of skill, technique, and accomplishment to his name against the world itself.

He was not exceptional, superhuman, wise, or talented enough to gain the people's attention or support. The world never knew his name outside of taking the fall for another's crimes and being forgotten soon afterwards. All he could do was imagine and make tools to get around problems he normally couldn't.

Against enemies he might be able to overcome, he had to be patient and play them out before an opening to win showed itself, no matter how much he had to sacrifice and be beaten about until then. He had no choice if he wanted to survive the exchanges.

His technique may pass off as "clever" and "intricate" to the uninspired, but in reality it was simply that of a stubborn survivor that found something that simply worked consistently.

Against enemies he couldn't, he had to run away and let someone else take care of it.

But the way he was acting now was not indicative of either.

This was not an issue he could patiently out endure for a solution to be conjured, nor did he see anyone else capable of managing to address while he somehow escaped.

Not even as a Heroic Spirit.

That was what Saber's instincts were telling her.

"Archer." She continued slowly. "I understand you are stressed, but please bear with me. Is this issue one that needs to be immediately addressed? If not, can you potentially wait for a concrete solution? Just like I am?"

EMIYA twitched as his advice to Saber was used against him, as though he had just been slapped in the face.

“... Heh. Heheheh.” He couldn’t help but laugh in genuine rage and disbelief at the irony. At the sheer absurdity and hypocrisy of the situation and their exchange.

It did not stop the small tremors in his hands as he put one over his face to hide his twisted expression.

Saber did nothing to interrupt his rare display of venting.

“You. No matter what happens, I can never win against you, can I?” Moving his hand, he looked down at her with a peculiar mix of gratitude, frustration, anger, pity, and pure endearment. But, he was no longer borderline frantic.

She wasn’t sure if she liked this any better. “Shirou frequently laments my Charisma skill as well.”

“I suppose you set a high enough bar in that regard.” He breathed out slowly, making a point to avoid eye contact with her, but still notably rattled. “... I’m a fucking idiot. Doing the exact same thing you did.”

“I’ll pretend that you didn’t just speak of me as though I was a fool.”

“Humph.” With every passing second he resembled his old self once again, but it was blatantly obvious that he wasn’t better. “You don’t mind if we postpone the rest of our spar?”

For a moment it looked like she’d grant him his request, however, “No. Your mind is still clouded and I desire to see more of your sword. You’re distracted, which is a problem for everyone.”

A chill ran down Archer’s spine now, as faint memories of déjà vu plagued his subconscious. As though he had been in this situation once before, and only inevitability would come from trying to run away. “I thought you were better than beating down a defeated foe.”

“I am, however I am also a tried hand at smacking sense into my allies on occasion. How else do you think I kept my men in line during some of their less reputed moments of weakness?”

He didn’t like that small smile on Saber’s face. “Agravain?” He asked hopefully, while readying his own swords again for the inevitable battle to come.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I used Agravain as a means to keep my more reckless knights away from the foreign dignitaries and ensure they stayed literate.” Saber approached, her smile widening. “It just so happens to coincide with my occasional desire to ensure that my skills were up to muster.”

“That explains why they run from any form of litigation and paperwork whenever possible.” He should have figured she’d have a “kick them while they’re down and call it training” approach. Saber could be notoriously petty when she wanted to be.

He held his swords at his hips again, a taunting stance with plenty of critical openings for him to counter, but his body was less aggressive than it was before. He was prepared to fend her off, not fight.

She would have to correct that mentality.

“Oi, what’s with that look?”

“What look?”

“Don’t play stupid I can tell when you’re-what the?!”

WHACK!

“Distractions are the enemy!”

“You’d say everything’s the enemy when you don’t know how to answer a question properly!”

“Excuses are the enemy!”

“Stop proving my point!”

While the two Servants went at their “friendly” spar, a third party listened in from the back of the building, unnoticed by everyone there before fading from even the shadows.

o. o. o.