

Chapter IV: Contractual Obligations

“Battle concluded, Master, Director,” Mash reported as she let the bottom of her shield rest against the ground. The last of the skeletons vanished into dust.

“Good job, Mash!” Ritsuka said brightly.

“Wow, you’re so awesome, Mash!” Rika added. “You made that look so easy!”

Mash smiled bashfully, and it struck me that it must have been the most honest smile I’d ever seen on her face. How cruel it was that it was only happening here and now.

“Here, too,” the Director said thoughtfully, brow furrowed.

“They were at the other site, too,” I said. “They must be related.”

“More skeletons appear the denser the concentration of magical energy, you mean?” the Director mused, cupping her chin. “It’s starting to look that way. It’s strange, though. Normally, when you talk about reanimated corpses, you’d expect to find a necromancer of some kind involved. But we haven’t even encountered another living person, yet, let alone the magus who might be behind this.”

If I translated that into powers as I knew them, that would mean there shouldn’t be any minions without a Master to spawn and control them — no goblins without Nilbog, no ghosts without Crusader, no evil clones without Echidna. That was what made sense to me.

Of course, that didn’t mean magic necessarily followed the same logic, as I’d been learning for the past two years.

“Could the magical energy itself be reanimating them?”

The Director opened her mouth, paused, and then let out a disgusted sigh. “I want to say no, but nothing here is making any sense to begin with! Ugh! So it’s entirely possible that some sort of magical phenomenon has affected the ley lines, and any nexus points are causing spontaneous reanimation of human remains.”

“Maybe it’s a Servant, instead?” I suggested.

The Director grunted.

“It would have to be a Caster, in that case, and if they have the range to control their familiars from so far away, there wouldn’t be anything stopping them from crushing us the same way,” she said. “Otherwise, Romani would’ve notified us of a Servant’s presence.” She paused again and winced. “If...the sensors for it are still working properly.”

“Doctor Roman was able to scan my Saint Graph earlier,” Mash chimed in.

The Director shook her head. “Then even if the range was reduced, any Servant nearby enough to sic familiars on us would ping the sensors. Besides...”

She looked out over the ruins of the church, a mess of rubble so destroyed that there wasn't much of a single wall, let alone an entire building. The remnants were still smoldering as what was left of the pulpit and the pews burned down to nothing.

It was no better off than the rest of the city. In fact, it seemed as though someone had specifically gone out of their way to demolish this building in particular, smashing it to smithereens. Or maybe it had just been a casualty of some earlier battle, blown to pieces when a pair of Servants decided to duke it out inside.

Maybe two different Servants had had the same idea and killed themselves fighting over who got to claim the real estate.

That one was probably wishful thinking.

“...it's pretty obvious that there isn't anyone hiding here, isn't it?”

“If they were, they aren't anymore,” I agreed.

Beep-beep!

The band on Ritsuka's wrist chimed, and an instant later, a specter of Romani appeared in the air. The Director snarled. “What is it now, Romani —”

“Director!” Romani cut across her. “I'm detecting the presence of a Servant nearby your location!”

Immediately, everyone was on alert, and Mash hurried forward, interposing herself between the group and the road we'd come from, and planted her shield like a barricade.

“Everyone, please get behind me!”

No one questioned her, we all just huddled behind the massive shape of her shield, silent and waiting. I had the thought that she might be facing the wrong direction, but if she had the instincts of the Heroic Spirit fused to her, body and soul, then she probably knew better about that than I did.

I glanced past the embers of the ruined church anyway and found nothing.

It made me feel helpless, standing there behind a teenage girl who had been in a grand total of maybe half a dozen actual fights in her entire life, unable to do anything else. I'd underestimated exactly how impotent being a Master instead of a direct combatant would make me feel, and I didn't like it at all.

A nail-biting moment later, Romani made a confused noise. “Huh? It's gone?”

The tension deflated like a balloon, and the noise that came from the Director's throat sounded like one. “Romani! Did you misread the sensor output, you dunce?”

“F-forgive me, Director, but there was a Servant there, no question about it!” Romani said quickly.

“It appeared suddenly, stayed for a few seconds, and then it left! Almost like —”

“It came to observe us,” I realized.

To...what? Scope out the competition? Or just to take a look at the strangers who had showed up where they shouldn't be? No, we couldn't afford to give this mystery Servant the benefit of the doubt. We had to assume it was an enemy, here to scout us out and get our measure.

The Director turned to me, wide-eyed. "Romani," she said, quieter and with a thread of anxiety in her tone, "are you sure you didn't just misread the sensors?"

"I'm positive, Director," said Romani.

"Oh no," the Director moaned. She started chewing on her thumbnail again. "Oh no, oh no, oh no. This is bad. There weren't supposed to be any Servants here that we had to fight. There's no way we can take on a fully fledged Servant as we are with nothing more than a Demi-Servant like Mash."

"What's wrong with Mash?" Ritsuka asked.

The Director whirled on him. "What's wrong with — are you seriously asking that? In the first place, do you see any weapons on her?" She gestured at Mash with one hand. "In the second, a battle between Servants is a battle between Noble Phantasms, and Mash doesn't even know the name of hers! If that Servant has an Anti-Army Noble Phantasm, we're all dead!"

"Director." I placed my hand on her raised arm and gently forced it down. "Calm down."

"Calm down?" She turned on me, next. "How can I calm down? The instant that Servant comes back, there's nothing we can do!"

"And panicking won't change anything about any of that."

"I'm not panicking!" the Director snapped.

"You kind of are," said Rika with a shaky smile.

"I am not!"

"It's okay," Rika added, "I'm actually pretty freaked out, too."

"The first thing you've said that makes sense!" the Director said.

"Director, wait, that's not fair," Ritsuka began.

"Fair?" she demanded. "None of this is fair! None of this is right! Not a single thing has gone right all day! Lev is...is...! Chaldea is in ruins! Almost the entirety of the staff is gone, and I'm stuck here with a half-baked Servant contracted to two novices who don't know a Command Spell from a Mystic Code — !"

"Everyone, please stop!" Mash shouted, and immediately, everyone else cut off. "Director. You're right, this situation isn't ideal. However, please, have faith in me. I'm still performing at optimal levels."

"There've been no significant fluctuations in her readings so far," Romani added.

“I understand that I don’t meet all of the expectations that were placed on me for this project,” Mash went on firmly, “but even so, I think... No, I know that I can handle any Servant that we might encounter. As long as I have my Masters’ support, we can make it through this.”

A moment of long silence stretched. Somewhere in the middle of it all, Ritsuka and Rika had positioned themselves on either side of Mash, as though to lend her words weight, standing opposite the Director, with me caught in the middle.

The position of mediator... There was something darkly ironic about that.

“We need to keep investigating,” I said at length. “If that Servant didn’t attack, that means they’re probably not confident they can take us out. If that’s the case, then if I was in their shoes, I’d either regroup to find a more advantageous position or go for reinforcements.”

Mash’s brow furrowed. “If multiple Servants teamed up and attacked us...”

The Director heaved a deep, heavy breath. Her hands were still trembling.

“Even if you can fight off one, fighting two at the same time is too much,” she said. We all pretended not to notice the quaver in her voice. “You’re right. At this point, our best bet is to keep moving. Even if we wanted to find a good, easily defensible spot, this most certainly isn’t it.”

“Then the next point of interest?” I suggested.

“The Second Owner’s house, in the residential district,” the Director answered. “We’ll need to cross the bridge for that. So be on your guard!” She pointed at Mash. “If we’re going to be ambushed, the bridge is basically the ideal place to do it! Keep your eyes peeled for any enemies!”

She swung her finger around the group and landed on Ritsuka. “That goes for you, too! The more eyes we have keeping a lookout, the less chance we’ll get hit with a surprise attack!”

Rika gave her a cheeky salute. “Roger that, Boss Lady!”

Ritsuka sighed. “Rika, stop antagonizing her, please...”

His sister didn’t reply, but the glint in her eyes was familiar.

Like trying to wrangle Alec, I thought with a muted pang. Just as obstinate and just as determined to needle whenever she could.

“In any case, if there’s nothing of interest left to investigate here,” I said, “then we should get moving. Mash, you’ll need to take point.”

“Understood!” Mash nodded.

“Director —”

“The Masters should be immediately behind her,” the Director said suddenly. “It’s the best position for them to support her from.” She pinned me with a stare. “Hebert, that means I’ll be entrusting my protection to you.”

I didn’t reply immediately, just stared back, but her gaze didn’t waver.

I wasn't blind to what a show of trust this was. But then, the Director had had my back for a while now, so maybe it wasn't that strange that she was so willing to trust me with hers.

"Director, are you sure that's a good idea?" Romani asked worriedly. "Taylor isn't a Servant, after all."

I didn't even glance in his direction. Neither did she.

"Understood, Director."

She nodded, and then turned to Mash. "Back the way we came. The main road may not be in the best of shape, but it'll be the most direct path to the bridge. If we're careful and conserve our energy in case that Servant comes back, it should take us about an hour and a half to reach it. Two, if we run into any more skeletons."

"If, she says," Rika mumbled.

A huff came from the Director's nostrils, but she didn't rise to the bait.

"Remember. Keep your eyes wide open. Mash may be a Demi-Servant instead of a regular Servant, but her performance will still drop if her Master is incapacitated. Or worse, killed."

"And of course, you getting killed is the worst case scenario," said Rika.

"That should go without saying! I'm the Director! I'm the most important person on this team!"

Somehow, we eventually managed to start the journey back into the city. Materially, nothing had really changed, but there was an air among the group as we walked that hadn't been there before. Everyone cast furtive glances about the buildings around us, no matter what shape they were in, looking for the ambush that we were all worried was coming. Every nook and cranny and every shadowed doorway seemed sinister in a way it wasn't earlier, and the nervousness had put a damper even on Rika's humor.

The ambush we were all waiting for didn't come. There were more groups of skeletons that waylaid us along the road, but they weren't any more threatening or intimidating than they had been before, and they were just as easily dispatched. Mash handled them with an ease and aplomb that reminded me a little of Defiant, back in his Armsmaster days. Graceful and efficient, and brutally effective.

If she was slowing down, I didn't see it. She seemed just as capable and just as calm as she was hours ago, when we first got dropped into this quaint little hellhole.

Perks of being a Servant, I guess, even a Demi-Servant.

By the time the big, red bridge came into view, we were all waiting for the metaphorical shoe to drop. Even still, there was no sign of the Servant who had come by to scout us out while we were at the ruins of the old Catholic church.

"...Was it a fluke, after all?" the Director mumbled thoughtfully. "Maybe...no, just a sensor ghost? A blip caused by an accidental double read of Mash's Spirit Origin?"

My lips pulled tight. "We can't bet on that."

She looked around nervously up and down the banks of the river. No Servant materialized from the aether to try and kill us, but it did little to make her feel better.

Being entirely honest, I'd been expecting us to get attacked by now, too. We'd passed dozens of points where the Undersiders would've been able to stage a flawless ambush, made so numerous by the general state of the buildings around here, and anyone with a modicum of tactical prowess should have seen the opportunities for what they were just as easily.

So whatever the Servant who had been observing us was, it probably wasn't an Assassin — there was no way one of those wouldn't have taken the shot already. Not unless they were counting on the bridge itself as a trap.

An uncomfortably possible scenario.

A Caster...

Maybe. My money was on the Caster being wherever the source of the anomaly causing this Singularity was situated. It seemed to me that a Caster was the one most likely to be responsible for it in the first place, considering what I understood their skill sets tended to look like.

“We'd still know they were there before they came after us, right?” Ritsuka asked nervously. “So shouldn't it be fine?”

“Assassin class Servants have a skill called Presence Concealment, Senpai,” Mash told him solemnly. “They can hide themselves until the moment they go on the attack, even from Chaldea's advanced sensors. If the Servant was an Assassin, we won't know until the attack has already begun.”

“That's a cheery thought,” Rika groaned. “So they could be watching us right now and we wouldn't even know it? I feel kinda icky.”

“Think about that for a second,” the Director said. “If it was an Assassin, would we even have known they were watching us back at the church in the first place? Use some common sense!”

I shook my head. “And if they wanted to lure us into an ambush?”

The Director grimaced. “Then why not just attack us at the church? Our guard was already down, so it's not like we were expecting them and prepared to defend ourselves.”

A good point. Honestly, I agreed with her, but it didn't hurt to keep your mind open to even the stuff you thought unlikely.

I looked across the bridge. The light of the flames danced across the red, metal beams and the equally red suspension cables, making them look like they were on fire, too. “The road to hell” wouldn't have been an inappropriate comparison to make.

“We have to cross the bridge no matter what, right?”

“It's the only way to make it across the river,” the Director said grimly. “Anything else is miles further inland, which means hours or even days more walking.”

“Then we don't have much of a choice, do we?” said Ritsuka.

It seemed like we really didn't. Fuck. I didn't like this.

The Director took a deep, bracing breath. "Right."

"Keep your guard up," I added. "Mash, be ready with that shield."

"Understood, Miss Taylor."

Hesitantly, we started walking. Mash stayed in front, shield held in front of her as though to ward off danger, and she peered over one of the massive spokes that jutted out from the rounded center shape. We all stayed behind her, huddled as closely together as we could without tripping over one another. My ears were constantly straining for the slightest off sound, but aside from our footsteps, our breathing, and the low crackle of the flames, the city remained eerily silent.

"We're off to see the wizard," Rika sang to herself under her breath, so quiet that I barely heard her, "the wonderful Wizard of Oz..."

I glanced at her, thought about chastising her, but I seized the impulse before the words could even make it to my tongue, because I was trying to be better than the person I'd been before Gold Morning. It wasn't malicious or inappropriately jovial, anyway; the line of tension in her shoulders made it obvious she was using whatever she could to distract herself.

She was just a kid, I reminded myself. Older than I was when I became Skitter, sure, but far less experienced and far less prepared than even I had been on my first night out. A girl in the wrong place at the wrong time, in far over her head.

Still, there was no sign of the enemy. No one leapt out at us, no one fell out of the sky on top of us, and there wasn't even the blip of Romani reporting a Saint Graph reading nearby.

We were about halfway across when that changed.

Beep-beep

"Romani —"

"Director!" Romani shouted without waiting for her to answer. "There's a Servant near your location, North-Northwest!"

Mash stiffened and immediately swung around, facing a point off to the right as though she could see the Servant herself.

"Director!" she said urgently. "I'm picking it up now myself!"

Shit.

"Across the bridge!" I ordered. "Now, now!"

Mash hesitated and turned to Ritsuka. "Master —"

"Go!" said Ritsuka.

I broke into a sprint, and a bare moment later, the others fell into step with me. Mash kept pace, only instead of staying out ahead of us like she undoubtedly could have, she stayed to the side. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her glancing in the same direction every few seconds, like she was expecting to be attacked from there any second.

Maybe she was. I wasn't a Servant, so I couldn't detect them on my own, and I wasn't so accomplished a spellcaster that I could track the magical energy to find their location that way.

"Reading's...holding steady," Romani reported as we went. A burst of static punctuated his words. "They're not disappearing, this time. I'm sorry, the system can't get a better handle on the Spirit Origin or Saint Graph, so I can't even begin to tell you what kind of Servant it is or which Heroic Spirit it might be —"

"Just...keep an eye on it...Romani!" the Director huffed as we ran.

"Communications...still spotty," Romani said, interrupted by static halfway. "I...gen...location, but...more than... It's on...orthwest bank...the river."

"Romani?"

"Director," he said, and then the feed cut out.

"Damn it," the Director said. "Damn it, damn it, damn it!"

"Director," said Mash, "I think he was trying to say that the Servant is somewhere on the northwest bank of the river."

"I know what he was saying!" the Director snapped. "Damn...it! Why...is everything...falling apart...on me..."

The Director slowed to a halt as we cleared the end of the bridge. She hunched over, panting, hands on her knees. I stumbled to a stop a few paces beyond her, and Ritsuka and Rika did, too, hunching over next to the Director as they gulped down air. Only Mash seemed less bothered by the exertion of running across the bridge than I was.

"Director," I started, "we can't stay here."

The Director glared up at me. "Damn...it. So...unfair. You're not...even...breathing hard."

"Senpai...such a...badass," Rika whined.

"Director," I said more insistently.

She grimaced.

"The...Second Owner's house...should be...in the southern half...of the residential...district."

"Go," I said. None of them moved. "Go! If Mash can sense whoever that Servant is, you can bet they can sense her, too! We need to get moving before —"

"Master!" Mash shouted as she leapt, kicking off the ground.

Faster than I could blink, she'd interposed herself between Ritsuka, Rika, the Director, and the northern section of the riverbank, and at the same moment, a thunderous *clang* rang through the air as a dark figure materialized practically on top of her, feet planted on the surface of the shield and the butt of a polearm planted between her ankles. Her cloak and her long hair hadn't even had time to settle before the new woman flung herself away to land with the grace of a jumping spider, bent over in half, one hand planted on the ground, and her polearm held out behind her.

“Oh?”

The voice that came out of her was silky smooth and slippery, and as she straightened, she gave us a perfect view of her ample cleavage and her tall, slender body. Her cloak was ragged and ripped, but the pale skin she left on display was unblemished, with the exception of what seemed like red tribal markings. Her long hair fell almost to the ground, an inhumanly vivid shade of strawberry blonde.

But the most striking thing about her was not her body or her grace, it was her presence. A palpable aura radiated off of her, chilling the hot air, and it gave her the sense of some great predator, stalking its unsuspecting victims. A snake, coiled and ready to strike, to swallow us whole.

“You're better than I thought you would be,” she purred. “To have blocked me so effortlessly... My, my... And behind you...”

Her gaze traveled across Ritsuka, Rika, and the Director, and when it landed on me, I felt my insides freeze and all my muscles seize, like they'd all locked up at once. I couldn't have moved to save my life, not even to breathe. It was like I'd been turned to stone.

She licked her lips, and her gaze turned back to Mash. The instant she looked away, I could move again.

“Two unknown Masters and some more fresh meat.”

“Director, that's...”

“A Servant. Judging by that weapon, a Lancer,” the Director said, voice quivering. She shaped one hand into a gun and braced it with the other, although it didn't quite stop her arm from shaking. “Kuh...! O-of all the lousy luck! The first thing we run into that isn't a skeleton, and it's not even a living person!”

The woman chuckled. “My, a woman could take offense to that.”

“She appears to be operating without a Master,” Mash noted.

“Nothing about this situation is normal!” the Director bit out. “In a situation like this, where everything has gone wrong, I'm not surprised to find a Servant without a Master!”

“I thought you said Servants couldn't survive without a Master to support them!” Rika said.

“Ordinarily!” the Director shot back. “Does anything about this seem ordinary to you?”

“She's one of the Servants from the Holy Grail War, right?” Ritsuka asked hurriedly. “Then, if we just explain that we're not a part of it —”

“It doesn't work that way,” I cut across him. I addressed the woman. “Right?”

The woman smirked, cold and cruel.

“When fresh prey stumble into my hunting ground, I can hunt them down at my leisure, can’t I? The only thing my prey can do is try to run or try to fight.”

She hefted her polearm, turning the hooked blade towards us, and her off hand glided sensuously up the haft.

“So? Are you going to try to run? Or are you going to try and fight me?”

The Director bit her lip hard enough to bruise. Rika took a step backwards, face contorted with fear. Even Ritsuka’s hands were shaking.

Except for Mash, who squared her shoulders and took a brave step forward, holding up her shield. The woman’s smirk grew into a bloodthirsty grin.

“Fight, then! Good! Try not to die too quickly!”

Mash and the woman both moved at once, each kicking off the ground and throwing themselves at the other. They met somewhere in the middle, closer to our position than to hers, and Mash’s shield shrieked as the blade of the polearm scraped down its surface, to no apparent effect. Mash planted her feet and pushed forward.

But the woman was not deterred. She pulled backwards, and then surged back into action, swinging faster and faster with expert skill. Each blow glanced off of Mash’s shield, but if the thunderous *clang* of each blow wasn’t enough to tell me how hard each hit was, the way Mash’s shoulders and arms braced for the impact would have been more than enough to clue me in.

The woman laughed all the while.

“You’re new, aren’t you? You’re still getting used to what it’s like being a Servant! I can tell! The way you move, the way you don’t move, the openings you miss even when they should be obvious — it’s all you can do to try and keep up!”

Mash grunted and didn’t rise to the bait, she just kept blocking each attack. She weathered all of them, refusing to buckle, refusing to be beat down, holding that massive shield aloft as though it were the battlements of a castle and the woman’s blows a battering ram. Neither she nor her shield gave a single inch.

But it was obvious even to the others that she was outmatched.

“Mash...” Ritsuka whispered.

“There has to be something we can do!” Rika said frantically.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” the Director shouted back. “In a battle between Servants, the Master has only one place: in the back!”

Good thing I’m not a proper Master, then, isn’t it?

I pivoted on my heel and took off running at full sprint, aiming for the main road that led further into the residential district.

“Senpai!” Ritsuka shouted after me.

“T-Taylor,” the Director called, “where are you going?”

“Did you think I’d let you leave that easily?”

Chains whipped out, crisscrossing over the space between the buildings. They wrapped around whatever they could, whether that was a lamppost, a wooden beam jutting up from the corpse of a house, or even just steel rebar, and they formed a tightly woven net that blocked off my path.

I spun back around, and the woman was dashing towards me — leisurely, compared to her lightning fast attacks against Mash, but still too fast for a human to outpace. Her eyes seemed to glow as they pinned me in place, and my limbs froze again.

“My prey isn’t allowed to escape!”

It wasn’t fear that had paralyzed me earlier. No, of course not. I’d faced down Lung, Leviathan, Jack Slash and the Slaughterhouse Nine, Echidna, Behemoth, Nilbog, Scion. I’d spoken with the Faerie Queen as equals, killed Alexandria with *bugs*, survived being cut in half. A single woman with a scythe, no matter how superhuman she was, didn’t hold a candle to all of the things I’d been through.

The clue was eye contact.

Just by meeting my eyes, she’d been able to freeze me in place. I’d learned a lot over the past two years, and one of the subjects was Mystic Eyes, specialized attributes activated through eye contact and line of sight. A Servant, a Heroic Spirit, who possessed a set of Mystic Eyes that could freeze you in place?

I would’ve been embarrassed if it had taken me more than that to figure it out.

“Medusa!”

Magical energy circulated through my body, and the spell was broken, shattered with ease, now that I knew what it was and could fight it. Magic like this relied on surprise, on the victim not knowing what they were up against. It was much weaker if your guard was up.

My arm rose. Black light gathered on my fingertips. With a direct line to my target, I couldn’t miss.

“Gandr!”

And a ball of black energy flew at her face.

The thing about people, even capes with powers? They still had reflexes. Things they did automatically, things they’d trained themselves to do, over and over again for years. Ingrained responses, either instinctual or muscle memory. Pyrokinetics could get used to their own flames, sure, but it took a lot of experience fighting to keep yourself from flinching away whenever someone else threw fire at you. Even high level Brutes still dodged and winced until they got used to being invulnerable.

Servants were no different.

Medusa was a Lancer, one of the Knight classes, which meant she had some form of Magic Resistance as a rule. My dinky, little Gandr was as harmless to her as a gnat. But even if she knew that intellectually, her body reacted without thinking, and instead of taking the shot and letting it splash off of her futilely, she deflected it with her...scythe, or whatever that thing counted as, because her eyes tracked an incoming projectile and the response she'd trained into herself activated automatically.

She slid to a halt as my Gandr glanced off of her and dissipated. She snarled at me.

“You...!”

“Now, Mash!” I shouted.

Medusa whipped around — and as she went to swing her scythe into a counterattack, I reached out with my prosthetic's phantom limb and took a solid grip of it.

It wasn't enough to truly stop her. If she exerted any real effort, she could have wrenched it away and ignored me completely.

But the resistance distracted her, because she wasn't expecting it, and her head and torso turned back towards me, her eyes wide.

“Wha —”

“Raah!”

And Mash leapt at her, swung that massive shield around right into her face. Medusa went flying, soaring across the ground, to tumble to a halt some twenty feet away, crumpled into a heap.

“Yes!” shouted Rika.

“Good job, Mash!” Ritsuka added.

They started over our way.

“Ritsuka, Rika!” I barked out at them. “Don't get any closer!”

“What?” Rika squawked. “But Senpai, it's over!”

“Mash,” I said, making sure to keep my eyes on Medusa.

She nodded. “Understood!”

The lump on the ground chuckled, low and ominous, and slowly, Medusa pulled herself to her feet.

“You kids should listen to your more experienced friend,” she purred. “You two really are fresh-faced, if you thought that was enough to defeat me.”

She turned back around, grinning a demented grin, and her tongue snaked out to lick up the trail of blood that dribbled out of the corner of her mouth. She slurped it noisily, like she was enjoying a fine meal.

“Not that her experience will mean anything,” Medusa said gleefully. “After all, you worked oh so hard to get that one shot in on me, and all you have to show for it is a little bit of blood.”