

## Chapter VII: Brittle Fake

I wasn't sure how long I'd been asleep before a tugging sensation vaguely in the area of my chest woke me up.

It was hard to describe it, exactly. "Tugging" was as good a word as I managed, but it didn't fit perfectly. Pulling? Maybe... It wasn't like someone had stuck me with a hook and yanked on it, but it wasn't like someone had taken a fistful of my shirt and dragged me along with it, either.

The one thing that could be said for sure was that it was constant. Like... Like gravity, almost. An indescribable force that held me and inexorably pulled me along as it willed.

I didn't want to wake up, but the tugging wouldn't let me roll over and go back to sleep. A deep groan vibrated up my chest and out of my mouth as I buried my face into my pillow, and I sucked in a long breath through my nose, only to be hit by a smooth, floral scent that instantly jolted me wide awake with the reminder —

This was not my bed. I was not in Chaldea.

I leapt out of bed without a thought, but my legs tangled in the sheets I'd covered up with at some point, and I fell instead into an ungraceful heap on the floor with a yelp.

There was no time to lick my wounds, though. Not when I could now recognize the sensation inside of me as Caster drawing on my magical energy, and especially not when I could hear his voice shouting from outside as though he was in battle.

No, he must have been.

"Yah!" a feminine voice joined his.

Mash, too.

Had Archer come down from the mountain to ambush us? Or worse, had Archer *and* Saber decided to settle the issue here and now, instead of waiting for us to go to them?

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I scrambled for my shoes, hastily slipping them on as I hopped for the door to my borrowed bedroom. I had to use the knob for balance as I pushed it open, and immediately, I discovered that everyone else was already awake, as well, because all the doors were open and all the rooms empty.

Once more, I could only lament the loss of my powers. Three years ago, the mere act of my teammates waking up would have been enough for my passenger to jolt me awake, too.

I ripped down the hallway, racing as fast as my legs would carry me, and I took the stairs two at a time in my haste to get out the front door. My heart thundered anxiously in my chest, and my mind whirled a mile a minute as I tried to come up with some kind of tactic I could use to catch the enemy off guard while I had the element of surprise.

The front door practically flew open, and I nearly ripped it off the hinges with my prosthetic arm — and then I had to catch myself to stop from bowling the Director over, because she was standing right there.

Saying I succeeded wouldn't be wrong. Saying I failed wasn't wrong, either. I managed to avoid the Director, but my momentum was too much to stop, so all I wound up doing was skirting around her and tripping over my own feet to land behind her.

The blow to my pride was more painful than the one to my knees. Or my elbow. Or my shoulder.

“Hebert,” the Director said neutrally without looking at me. She didn't sound stressed or worried, and I might even have called her tone thoughtful. Or contemplative. “Good, you're awake.”

“Director?” I asked as I pulled myself to my feet. “What's going on?”

My gaze turned out to the street, where Caster and Mash were going back and forth, or really Caster was peppering Mash with spells and she tried to block them. Well, succeeded. She wasn't doing anything else, but none of Caster's spells were hitting anything except her massive shield. Further behind, the twins were watching the whole goings on, safely out of the line of fire.

“Caster decided that it's too risky to confront either of the remaining Servants guarding the Grail without Mash having access to her Noble Phantasm,” the Director explained. “To that end, he's trying to train her how to use it, although his methods...leave something to be desired.”

I eyed the spar, although calling any fight between two Servants a spar sounded ridiculous.

“No luck, so far?”

“None,” the Director confirmed. “His only real advice was for her to reach really deep and shout it out from her soul... or something utterly ludicrous like that. They've been at this for almost an hour, now.”

Caster chose that moment to let up and relax, and as he did, so did Mash, panting like she'd run a marathon.

“Alright, Girlie,” he called over to her. “Take a breather. This isn't working, so I need to think up another plan. In the meantime, you've earned a bit of a break, so relax a little.”

Mash sagged, and the twins, seeing that it was over, jogged up to join her. I couldn't quite hear what they were saying, but the tone of their voices sounded supportive, so I could only guess they were trying to lift her spirits. Mash, at least, seemed to appreciate the gesture.

“Yo, Princess!” Caster waved as he came our direction. “Good to see you're awake. Maybe I should start calling you Sleeping Beauty?”

“Hard to sleep with all of the racket you were making, Caster,” I said sardonically. I nodded over at Mash. “How is she?”

He glanced over in her direction and sighed, scratching compulsively at the back of his head.

“I don’t get it,” he lamented. “This sort of thing worked fine when my mentor used it on me.”

“Mentor?”

He chuckled. “That witch... She was the kind of woman to kick your ass, then lecture you about what you did wrong, then kick your ass until you got it right.”

My brow furrowed. “Your mentor was a woman?”

“Scariest woman in Ireland,” Caster confirmed. “Ah... Well, maybe second scariest, although that really depends on who you asked. My master was a terrifying, bloodthirsty warrior, and she put fear in the hearts of men and gods alike...but of all the things she put me through, fighting Aífe on her behalf was easily the closest I ever came to death under her teachings.”

“Fighting Aífe...” the Director trailed off, and then she jerked, staring at Caster with wide eyes. “Wait a minute! An Irish hero, learned under a fierce female warrior, got into a fight with another woman warrior named Aífe — you’re Cúchulainn of Ulster!”

Caster blinked at her.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said as his mouth pulled into a grin. “You’ve heard of me before, Boss Lady? I guess I’m more famous than I thought I was.”

“Why are you a Caster?” she blurted out. “Gae Bolg might not be as synonymous to you as Excalibur to King Arthur, but it’s easily your most famous Noble Phantasm! There’s no way you shouldn’t have been summoned as a Lancer!”

Caster smirked. “Unless the Lancer class was already taken.”

“Medusa — she should have been a Rider!” the Director protested. “Pegasus has a cleaner attachment to her legend than...whatever she had as a Lancer! No, that was the scythe that killed her, wasn’t it?”

Now that I thought about it, it probably was, wasn’t it? Maybe that wasn’t what had twisted her into the cruel monster we’d faced, but I couldn’t imagine any Servant would be particularly thrilled at the idea of wielding the weapon that killed them, to say nothing of the conceptual and psychological mess of walking around with the very thing you were supposed to be *weak* to.

“Are you forgetting, Boss Lady?” Caster asked, amused. “This place is a Singularity. *Nothing* here is as it should have been, and that includes the Servants and their classes.”

“Ugh!”

The Director grunted, massaging her temples as though that would somehow force the world to start making sense, again.

“And Mash?” I asked Caster, dragging the conversation back to the relevant part.

Caster grimaced and placed his hands on his hips.

“Well, frankly, I’m not sure what she is. She’s obviously not a Caster or an Assassin, she doesn’t have any form of madness, so she’s not a Berserker. No spear, so not a Lancer, no sword, so not a Saber, and no bow, although that last one isn’t as much of a disqualifier for the Archer class as it should be. I guess she could be a Rider, but that doesn’t help too much, does it? On the other hand, whatever she is, that shield is obviously her Noble Phantasm.”

“Obviously,” I agreed.

“Even just that would be a huge advantage,” he went on. “But just flinging spells at her until she manages to pull it out hasn’t been working, and that’s the only way I really know how to do this. Unless...”

I didn’t like the sound of that.

“Unless?”

“Well, now... That just might work, won’t it?”

“Caster?”

Caster grinned, a thing of teeth and edges, like a shark. “Fear for her own life just ain’t enough, is it? It’s not a part of her temperament. I’ve known a few folk like that.”

I *really* didn’t like where he was going with that, not if that meant what I thought it meant.

“Caster —”

He flicked at me, and whether it was a hastily drawn rune, some other spell, or just his raw strength, it was enough to send me flying into the Director. She squawked as we went down in a tangle of limbs, and I scrambled to climb back to my feet, but I couldn’t get my footing fast enough, because Caster had already stepped back out into the street.

“Girlie! New plan! If we can’t get your Noble Phantasm up by putting *your* life in danger —”

*CASTER!* I projected at him as firmly as I could. I reached out for him with my hand, as though I could hold him back — and when I saw the red markings on the back of it, realized my only option. *By the power of my Command Spell —*

*Don’t go wasting any of those, now, Princess!* Caster sent back. *Just put a little faith in your Servant, yeah?*

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” the Director shrieked.

“— then we’ll just have to put your Master on the line!”

A giant arm made of flaming branches manifested and slammed its hand against the pavement, as though lifting itself up from the ground. More and more of it appeared. A shoulder, a head, a torso, until a blazing, wooden giant towered over Mash and the twins. A burning effigy of a human being.

Should I stop him? Should I trust him? He was right, Mash needed her Noble Phantasm, but was that what this was about, or was he just pulling a trick to eliminate a potential threat? Had he truly escaped whatever corruption had claimed the other Servants, or was all of that a ploy just to get us to trust him?

Why would he do it now, instead of murdering us in our sleep?

“Caster!” shouted Mash, hefting her shield. She stepped in front of the twins to protect them.

“CASTER, STOP THIS RIGHT NOW!” the Director screamed.

“I won’t change my aim, Girlie!” Caster said, ignoring us. “If you move out of the way, those Masters of yours will get smushed!”

“HEBERT!” the Director screeched at me. “STOP HIM, RIGHT NOW!”

“Now, show me that Noble Phantasm of yours!”

“HEBERT! COMMAND SPELL!”

I hesitated. I knew I had trust issues. In the right circumstances, I could connect with people faster than I’d ever believed, but most of the time, I was suspicious enough for three people.

Could I trust Caster? I didn’t know for sure. Whatever logic I tried to apply, people were inherently irrational, and that included me. In the end, however, whether I trusted him or not, if nothing else, this would all be meaningless if I didn’t sell the illusion, too.

“Caster! As your Master, by the power of my Command Spell —”

“Wicker Man!”

Three people screamed as the giant’s fist descended. One of them screamed in my ear, and I was sure it was going to be ringing for the next hour as a result. One of them was Rika, who had huddled in her brother’s arms as he futilely tried to shield her with his own body.

One of them was Mash.

It was hard to see from my angle, but what happened was unmistakable, regardless. There was no invocation, no incantation, no true name shouted to the heavens, but the glowing blue barrier that formed between Mash’s shield and the giant’s fist couldn’t be anything else than her Noble Phantasm, and the giant’s fist just...stopped. With the sound of a massive gong ringing, it collided with that barrier and went no further.

A moment later, the giant faded away like smoke, and an ashen-faced Mash looked at us, at Caster specifically, from behind the spoke of her shield, eyes wide.

And Caster? Caster kept on grinning.

“There we go! Knew that would do the trick! Geez, Girlie, that was more painful than pulling teeth! Didn’t expect all of you to come out of that completely unscathed, though. Nice! That must be one hell of a Noble Phantasm!”

“It was a trick?” the Director demanded, her voice an octave higher than usual.

“Sorry about that,” said Caster, not sounding nearly as sorry as any of us would probably have liked him to be. “It had to be convincing. If the Girlie over there looked at you two and realized neither of you was freaking out, she would’ve known I wasn’t serious. As long as everyone else believed it, she did, too.”

“Caster, you jerk!” Rika shouted. “I can’t believe I actually thought you were cool!”

Caster just laughed.

“Sorry I frightened you, Little Missy! It’s like I said, though. This is just the way I was trained, so it’s the only way I know how to teach.”

“That just makes me question your teacher’s sanity, too!”

“I...I did it,” said Mash, and then louder, “I did it!”

Ritsuka set a comforting hand on her shoulder. “You did,” he told her, although there was a faint tremor in his voice that belied exactly how scared *he* had been.

*Beep-beep!*

“H-hey, what’s going on, there!” Romani shouted as his image appeared next to Ritsuka. “I just detected two massive surges of energy from Caster and Mash! Did you run into another Servant?”

The Director sighed as she dusted herself off and walked over to their group. I picked myself up and followed.

“Caster was helping Mash learn to manifest her Noble Phantasm,” she explained, and then tossed a glare Caster’s way and acidly added, “although he chose the most asinine, ludicrous, sideways method of going about it!”

“He used his Noble Phantasm against her!” Rika chimed in indignantly.

“Senpai!” Mash lamented.

“He *what?*” Romani demanded furiously. “Caster, you lunatic! Just what kind of game are you playing, using your Noble Phantasm against Mash?”

Caster brushed it off with another laugh. “I’m not going to be lectured by the likes of you.”

“As *questionable* as his methods were,” the Director said, shooting him another glare, “and they were *very* questionable, it’s undeniable that they produced results. Even so...”

She scrutinized Mash's shield, eyes narrowed, like she was looking for something that she knew wouldn't be there.

"Yeah, that's a problem, isn't it?" Caster agreed. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "She managed to deploy her Noble Phantasm, but she didn't tease out its true name."

"Not entirely unexpected, considering her circumstances," the Director hedged, "but not ideal, either. Inconvenient doesn't feel like a strong enough word for it."

"Does she need to know its true name?" asked Ritsuka.

"A Noble Phantasm can only be unleashed to its fullest potential through the invocation of its true name," Romani explained patiently, although he was still scowling at Caster. "At the very least, the efficacy of her Noble Phantasm will drop without it."

The Director shook her head. "It might not matter for now, but at the very least, she needs some method of focusing it. An incantation."

"Like a spell?" I said.

The Director nodded.

"Exactly. It won't get anywhere close to what you could expect from the true name invocation, but at the very least, we can increase the performance by giving it a more concrete image. Let's see..."

She clicked her tongue.

"Since it's a pseudo-deployment of your Noble Phantasm, an image of its true form... Let's call it Lord Chaldeas."

I grimaced. Romani's image blinked, and then a moment later, he laughed. "Of course you would choose something like that, Director."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" the Director spat. "Do you have a problem with my choice in names, Romani?"

*Seriously?* I knew my own naming conventions weren't exactly going to be winning any contests anytime soon, but even I had to call that one unoriginal.

"The bastion that defends the foundation of mankind's survival," Mash said quietly. "Lord Chaldeas... I like it. Th-thank you, Director!"

Romani's face blanched. "W-Well, whether it's unoriginal or not, what matters is that it resonates with Mash, right? As long as she has a connection to it, the strength of that connection is the most important part."

"You should know better than to question my decisions," the Director said haughtily. "Did you think it was just about glorifying my own family's legacy? I put more thought into it than just that!"

“Fou! Fou!”

The sudden squeaking of a high pitched voice startled me, and racing up the street was a tiny bundle of white fur with long, rabbit-like ears and a bushy tail. It even wore a little cape with a kind of ribbon tied into a bow at the front.

“Oh, there you are, Fou!” Mash said. She bent down, offering out her hand, and the little critter bounded onto her palm, up her arm, and settled itself in on her shoulder. “You must have gotten worried when Caster and I used our Noble Phantasms, didn’t you? Look, we’re fine.”

“How long has *that* been here?” I asked incredulously.

Fou hissed at me like I’d delivered some great insult. That was probably the thing about it that worried me the most: its obvious intelligence.

“He was with Senpai and I when we arrived,” Mash explained. She reached up and gave the thing a few pats, which seemed to mollify it. “He ran off for some reason earlier, but we couldn’t go looking for him, because the Director was in trouble.” She smiled at it. “I guess he managed to take care of himself just fine, didn’t he?”

“Fou!” it agreed.

“And how did it *get* here?” I asked her. “This isn’t somewhere you can just...take a casual stroll to.”

Mash blinked. “You know, I’m not sure. I guess he must have been in the room with us and got Rayshifted. Although... Before the explosion, the last I saw of him, he was running off somewhere in Chaldea. Maybe he just followed Senpai.”

“That’s because Fou already knows how awesome we are,” Rika proclaimed brightly. She offered her hand out, and Fou nipped playfully at her index finger. Ritsuka chuckled warmly next to her.

“It’s been here this whole time?” the Director asked disbelievingly. “How did it get past all the skeletons?”

Mash looked up at nothing in particular and she pursed her lips thoughtfully.

“He must be too small, so they couldn’t catch him. After all, if they were capable of getting tired, Master could have outrun them, too.”

“Heh.” Caster chuckled like he knew something we didn’t. “Skeletons are the lowest of the low, when it comes to magical monsters. Someone like you could pick them apart, Boss Lady. They’re only really a threat to mages in numbers.”

The Director’s eyebrow twitched. “In any case!” she said loudly. “Now that the issue of Mash’s Noble Phantasm has been resolved, we need to come up with a plan to take out Archer and Saber so we can retrieve the Grail.”

At that moment, Rika and Ritsuka’s stomachs rumbled, and both of them flushed, smiling awkwardly. The Director turned to me like she was hoping I would be the sensible one who could



go on regardless, but the very second she did, my own stomach loudly voiced its protests, and her face fell.

“...After we’ve had some breakfast.”

“Do you need any more supplies?” Romani asked.

The Director’s brow furrowed, but she shook her head.

“Being prepared to pull us out at a moment’s notice is a better use of the Rayshift system than topping up supplies that we hopefully won’t need in an hour or two. How is that looking, Romani?”

“Well, we haven’t gotten everything back in tip-top shape, but it should be fine if we’re just bringing you back to Chaldea. As for the rest of the facility... We’re still working on it, but we’ve at least managed to restore one of the primary generators, so we’re not relying solely on the backups, anymore.”

“Good.” The Director nodded. “Keep an eye on the readings, Romani. We might not have time to contact you if things fall apart too fast.”

“Be careful,” said Romani. “And... good luck. All of you.”

He flickered out of existence. The Director swept her gaze over the rest of us, like a general taking stock of her troops.

“We’ll eat first, and then we’ll make our plans on the move. Don’t leave anything behind, because I don’t intend for us to come back to this house. We’ll correct this Singularity today.”

“Roger that, Boss Lady!” Rika said with a salute.

Ritsuka only let out a fond but exasperated sigh.

Our little group squeezed back into the Second Owner’s house, and we had a quick, relatively light meal with rehydrated scrambled eggs as the main dish. For an instant, as I dug into it, a pang tugged on my gut, and I half expected a middle-aged man with a receding hairline to sit down with us, carton of orange juice in hand.

It didn’t happen, of course. If he had survived Gold Morning, then we’d been separated in the aftermath, and all I could hope for was that he hadn’t been caught up in this end of the world, either.

The Director let us sit and digest for about twenty minutes after we were all done, and then she hustled us out the front door again and ordered Caster to lead us to the Grail.

“It’s a bit of a hike,” he warned us with obvious humor. “Well. No more so than your trip to the church and back, but those steps up the mountain are gonna make it seem a whole lot longer.”

“Your schadenfreude is showing, Caster,” I told him.

He laughed. “Just telling it like it is, Princess. You sure you’re all up for this?”

“It’s not like we have a choice,” the Director said darkly. “One way or another, we either die here or fix this Singularity.”

“Bring it,” Rika challenged him.

Caster smirked and shrugged. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The path he took us on was definitely the main road, but it was anything but straight, and the destruction that had been dealt to the city became ever more obvious the further we went. There had been stretches of upturned pavement in the business district, too, but in the residential district and as we got into the outskirts of town, there were places where huge chunks had been ripped out entirely.

It reminded me, to an extent, of Scion. The difference was, Scion’s blasts had tended towards precision. Even the attacks that leveled continents or wiped out cities entirely were mostly edged with lines like the cuts of a scalpel. This damage, these holes, they were jagged, gaping wounds, like an explosion had gone off or some natural disaster swept through.

Japan was famous for its earthquakes, wasn’t it?

Navigating across twenty-foot gaps bridged by fifteen-foot craters slowed us down more than I liked, and having to have Caster ferry us across one at a time might have made it easier than climbing up and down the sides, but no less tedious.

Along the way, we passed by a large building four stories tall, surrounded by a bunch of other buildings and standing across the stretch of a large courtyard. The windows were all blown out and the whole place was dark, but it was still otherwise intact, and with a funny jolt in my belly, I realized it was a school.

Winslow had been a lifetime ago. Three lifetimes, if you counted both the Wards and Chaldea as separate from those hectic two months as Skitter. And still, seeing that beaten up old building left an indescribable knot in my gut.

Or maybe it was just coming face to face with yet more evidence of all the lives destroyed in this place.

“What can we expect from Archer and Saber?” the Director asked as we went.

“Well, naturally, Saber’s more impressive, in the raw power sense,” said Caster. “She’s the type to hammer you into submission with overwhelming strength, and if that doesn’t work, she’ll whip out her Noble Phantasm and reduce you to smithereens. Girlie here is gonna be the MVP in that fight. If that shield of hers is half as strong as it looks, we’ll need it just to stay alive.”

“Does she have a weakness?” I asked.

“She’s not particularly fast. Well, no more so than any Servant of her level is,” Caster answered. “She’s also kind of straightforward. Not the kind to come up with some grand scheme sixteen moves ahead of you to trap you, you know? Of course, when you’re throwing around as much power as she does, you don’t need to be all that clever.”

A classic Brute, then, with maybe Blaster thrown in for her Noble Phantasm. She would hit like a runaway train, but there *were* ways to maneuver around her. If we could lead her into a trap, we could win.

“She sounds really strong,” said Ritsuka, a thread of worry in his voice.

“Senpai...” Mash murmured.

“A Servant like Saber excels across the board,” Caster said. “That’s just the way it is with big legends, Boyo. She’s not unbeatable, though. That’s the thing you have to keep in mind. In a fight like this, the only ways to lose are dying or giving up.”

“Caster’s right,” I agreed. “I can’t say I know what fighting King Arthur is going to be like. But I’ve fought enemies like that, before. I beat them then, we can beat her now.”

Caster sent me an appraising look, like he was trying to discern how much of that was a lie. The best part was that none of it was a lie at all.

“Really, Senpai?” Rika asked. “How’d you beat someone so strong before?”

“I wanna hear about this, too,” Caster added. “What kind of enemy did you beat, Princess, and how?”

If he was expecting me to come up with some tall tale or bluster my way through an admission of exaggeration, what I gave him instead must have been disappointingly blunt and simple.

“I beat a dragon. First, I rotted off his dick, and then I carved out his eyes.”

The Director stumbled, a look of horrified mortification on her face, and from behind me, I heard only Mash’s high pitched squeak and silence.

Even Caster didn’t seem to know how to take that, at first, going by the utterly stupefied expression he wore, but once he got over the surprise, he burst out into a deep belly laugh.

“I sure picked an interesting Master, alright!”

*If that’s what you think now, I can only imagine what you’d say if you heard about Scion.*

“S-Senpai sure is intense,” Rika whispered.

“Th-that’s one way of putting it, Rika,” her brother replied.

“Our best bet against an enemy like Saber is to pull her into a trap. Force her to overcommit, and while she’s focused on Mash, have Caster use his Noble Phantasm.”

“Oh?” Caster grinned again, shark-like. “That’s pretty underhanded, Master. Some might call that dishonorable.”

“Would you?” I asked him pointedly. “I remember reading about your myth during our primer courses at Chaldea. Aife had you dead to rights, until you tricked her into looking away.”

“Heh!” Caster chuckled. “Like I said, fighting her was the closest I ever came to death while I was learning under my teacher. Honor’s fine and all, but when the stakes are high and you can’t afford to lose, all bets are off. You do whatever it takes to make sure you get to wake up tomorrow, and if you’re going to die no matter what, you make it count.”

“Glad we agree.”

He gave me another appraising look, and then he shook his head and sighed. “Man. If you had been my Master in a regular Grail War, we would’ve swept the whole field together. You know, you’re my kind of woman.”

I stumbled as heat flooded my cheeks, and next to me the Director sputtered, a look of shocked indignation on her face.

“Caster, are you hitting on her?” she demanded shrilly. “H-how dare you! D-don’t think I don’t remember your legend, you... you... you dog!”

Caster just laughed.

“His legend?” Rika asked.

“The name Cúchulainn means ‘Hound of Culann,’ Senpai,” Mash explained patiently. “It’s the name he was given after he slew a guard dog and offered to take its place until a new one could be raised. However, I think what the Director is referring to is... Um, what I mean, Senpai, is that Cúchulainn is rather famous for... Well...”

“He slept with just about every woman he met,” I said bluntly.

“Not every woman,” Caster corrected, but he didn’t sound particularly upset about the accusation.

“Enough of them that ‘Hound of Culann’ was an appropriate moniker,” the Director grumbled.

“Eep!” Rika squeaked, and when I glanced back at her, she’d slung an arm across her chest, like she was trying to block it from his view. Caster’s lips pulled into a smirk.

“You’re a little too young for me, Little Missy, don’t worry. You’re safe from this horny old guard dog.”

My lips pulled into a grimace — *that* was certainly an image I didn’t need in my head.

“We’ve drifted away from the original point,” I said, steering the conversation back on track. “Saber is a straightforward powerhouse. What about Archer?”

Caster sighed. “Sorry to say, he’s the exact opposite. He’s a conniving bastard with a penchant for sneak attacks and underhanded tricks. Even so... If you don’t mind, Master, I’d like for you to leave fighting him to me. I’ve got a score to settle with that copycat.”

“What happened to honor being pointless when too much was at stake?”

“That guy doesn’t have any either, so it’s not about that,” Caster said. “Besides. This is the kind of guy to take pot shots at Masters instead of fighting Servants straight up. The only way I can keep you all safe is if you’re all huddled behind Girlie’s shield while I fight.”

“This guy...sounds more like an Assassin than an Archer,” the Director said. “Do you know his true name?”

“Haven’t the slightest clue,” said Caster. “The one time I fought him for real, the guy tried to nail me with several counterfeit Noble Phantasms from several different places and eras. Nearly got me with Caladbolg, of all things, although having seen the original myself, it was obviously a fake.”

“A Heroic Spirit...capable of using imitations of other Servants’ Noble Phantasms?” she muttered thoughtfully. “Could it be... No, but why would someone like that be an Archer, of all things? I’d expect that from a Caster.”

Caster shrugged.

“Whoever he is, he’s crafty and he’s not above cheap shots.”

In other words, he sounded a lot like *me*. Leveraging whatever advantage you had, attacking weak points, using tricks and traps to catch the enemy off guard — that was the sort of thing I had done, back when I had my powers. Harder to do now.

If we were going up against someone like that...

Yes. In my days as Skitter, targeting the weaker enemies instead of trying to take the strongest head on, that was exactly something I would have done.

“The instant you look like you need help, we’re stepping in, duel or no duel.”

Caster grinned. “I’d expect nothing less from you, Princess.”