

## Chapter VIII: Sangraal

We wound up detouring back to the school for a short while and taking a break while we tried to hammer out a more concrete plan. Caster himself took several hunks of rock and rubble while we talked and carved out runes on their surfaces, and then he handed them out amongst the group — except for Mash, who didn't really have anywhere to stash them except her shield and wouldn't be able to make much use of them in the first place.

Our attack plan still wound up more rudimentary than my liking. Even when Caster elaborated more on what our enemies were capable of, it didn't really give us more to work with in terms of how we could handle them. Not when we were so very limited in what we could all do ourselves.

In the first place, Saber had high level magic resistance, more than the weakened, diluted version Medusa had sported. Even Caster himself hadn't been able to touch her with his spells, and if he couldn't, then my dinky, little Gandr would be worthless, and we didn't have the time or the energy to waste trying to teach the twins anything of worth, either, since they weren't even spellcasters like me.

The Director... Well, neither of us was particularly surprised that we would be useless against someone like King Arthur. It rankled, deep inside, and it made me feel weak and powerless, especially when so much of my cape career had involved punching above what was supposed to be my weight class, but that fight would inevitably come down to the Servants in our group.

If only, I found myself wishing, Cúchulainn had indeed been summoned as a Lancer. It would have been easier to have him as a frontline fighter instead of playing a mostly useless support for Mash.

About half an hour after we entered the husk of the school's main building, we left it and continued our journey. By some strange twist of fortune, the road actually got steadier and more intact the further and further away we got from its two main districts. As we approached the edge and the forest that marked it, the divots and gaps disappeared almost entirely, and it took us half as long to make the second half of the trip as it had to reach the school.

At last, we made it to the base of the mountain, and in front of us now was an enormous stretch of stairs. The path was so long that I couldn't actually make out the top, not in the dark and the gloom of the perpetually smokey sky, and just from what I was seeing alone, there had to be over a thousand steps. Maybe over two thousand.

I wasn't the only one who was intimidated. The look of dismay on the Director's face, the shock on Rika's, and Ritsuka's worn down resignation seemed a good mirror for my own thoughts.

Caster, of course, thought it was hilarious.

"I told you," he said, grinning. "The actual distance isn't the same, but the stairs up the mountain will make it feel a lot longer than it is."

"That's not helping, Caster," I told him.

“You’re all making it a bigger deal than it actually is.” He waved it off as though warding away an unpleasant smell. “We don’t actually have to go all the way to the top. The cavern where the grail is hiding is only about halfway up.”

“Only halfway, he says,” the Director grumbled. “Half of infinity is still infinity, you know!”

“My feet hurt just looking at it,” Rika complained. “Mash, carry me!”

“W-what?” Mash stammered.

Ritsuka looked up, tilting his head back as he tried to glimpse the top. “There isn’t another way up?”

“You could cut straight through the forest,” Caster allowed, “but that’s just making it harder on yourself. Sorry to say, there’s no escalator to take you up, here. You’ve just gotta use good, old-fashioned leg power.”

Rika groaned.

My lips pulled tight. “We don’t have a choice. Unless you want to stay down here and wait for the skeletons to come get you while the rest of us take care of the Grail.”

“It’s not that, Senpai,” said Ritsuka. “It’s just... Rika and I didn’t train for any of this.”

I got the sense he wasn’t just talking about the stairs, and I sympathized, I really did. There were a lot of things I wasn’t prepared for when I started out, no matter how much I’d tried to be. My first night as a cape had been a textbook case of things going wildly out of my control. Even so...

“Training or not, it’s here and now, and it’s on us. We can’t afford to give up and let someone else try, because there isn’t anyone else. If we don’t do it, that’s it, it’s over.”

“If you two can’t face this much down, then you might as well forfeit your contract with Mash,” the Director added, “because you won’t be Masters of Chaldea.”

That, more than anything, seemed to galvanize them, because their spines straightened and both of them looked to the Director with fierce determination. Even the goofy Rika was suddenly deadly serious, the perpetual smile hiding in the corners of her mouth gone.

“We’d better get going, then,” she said.

“Oh?” Caster grinned. “Looks like the two of you do have some steel in you, after all.”

He turned back towards the stairs.

“That Archer bastard is probably waiting for us. No matter what, there’s no way he won’t notice us coming, so however it lands, he’ll try and ambush us before we make it inside the cavern. Girlie, you’ve got the most important job here: keeping our Masters safe.”

“Understood!” said Mash.

“This is it,” Caster said. “From here on out, there’s no turning back, so I hope you’re all ready.”

We started up the stairs and towards the Grail's hiding place. One way or another, this whole nightmare would be over soon. If I had my way, every single one of us would wake up from it, even if it cost me my arm again.

The twins' resolve lasted maybe the first hundred steps, and by then, they were grunting and panting, beads of sweat dripping down their faces. The Director, despite her earlier words, lasted maybe twenty or thirty more before she too started to really show the strain. They struggled onwards even so, but the seemingly interminable climb was really taking its toll. Even my legs were burning from the effort.

It was maybe fifty more before it began getting to me, too. At that point, Rika, Ritsuka, and the Director were all lagging behind; the Director was several stairs below, and every following one seemed to take more out of her, while the twins were maybe twenty below her, with Ritsuka barely outpacing his sister.

Mash...wasn't unaffected, but she was doing better than any of us. Caster was completely unfazed, of course.

I made it to the next landing, looked ahead at how far up we still had to go, looked back at how far we'd come, and then said, "Maybe we should take a break."

Mash let out a relieved sigh, but the rest of our exhausted entourage were far less reserved, and three loud groans tore out of their mouths to let me know exactly how much they appreciated the idea. So I went to the next stair up and plopped down, massaging my burning thighs and flexing my toes to try and restore feeling in them.

The Director was the first to make it up, and she sat down next to me, reclining against the stairs that stretched above us, no matter how uncomfortable it must have been. Ritsuka and Rika joined us a couple minutes later, only they just threw themselves onto the ground and laid there, huffing and puffing.

Caster chuckled, leaning on the thick head of his staff. "I always forget just how fragile and weak humans are, these days. Guess people just aren't as strong or as durable as they used to be."

"Of course not," the Director scoffed breathlessly. "The definition of human limits has been solidified in the last thousand years. The things people could do back when you were alive are far and away beyond those of us in the modern era. That's the price for the proliferation of the human species and the advancement of its knowledge."

"I guess so," he said, shrugging. "I can't say I understand how all of that stuff works. I'm just a warrior. My only concern was always just how hard I needed to punch someone or how clever I needed to be to outthink him."

"Director," I said, "you have those ration bars, right? We should take a minute to eat and regain some of our energy."

The Director looked at me, and then she grimaced — no, they didn't taste that great, but we weren't exactly in a position to cook a full meal, out here. She leveraged herself back up with a grunt and

started digging into the schoolbag we'd filched from the Second Owner's house to hold what we could of our leftover supplies.

"Here." She handed me a ration bar that I accepted, and then she tossed two more at the twins with a lot less care. "Hey, you two! Eat up! This is the last chance we'll have to eat before the final battle, and we're going to need all the strength we can get!"

Grumbling, Rika and Ritsuka pulled themselves up into a sitting position and unwrapped their ration bars. Rika had barely bitten into hers when her face twisted with disgust.

"Blegh!" she spat. "This tastes like sawdust!"

Ritsuka's sour expression said that he very much agreed.

"Eat it!" the Director ordered, pointing at them with her own bar. She rummaged about in the bag again and pulled out a bottle of water that she tossed Rika's way. It landed unceremoniously in her lap. "Wash it down with that, if you have to, but just eat it!"

After a quick reach back into the bag, she pulled out another bottle and handed it to me. I clutched my ration bar between my teeth and twisted the cap on the bottle open.

We took another half an hour to rest and let the ration bars digest, and then we started up the stairs again. As we went, though, the air started to get thicker instead of thinner. It washed down over us like the breath of a sleeping giant, warm and oppressive and pungent, even though the only thing that I'd been able to smell since we'd arrived in Fuyuki was the acrid smell of the smoke and flames.

"We're almost there," Caster said another two flights of twenty stairs later. His face was drawn and serious, all hints of levity gone. Mash hefted her shield, shifting it so it was more in front of her and she could block at a moment's notice.

Eventually, Caster stopped us and led us off the stairs and through a hidden path in the forest. There was the sense of something straining as we walked it, like the gossamer strands of a spider's web, trying to tug us back towards the steps we'd been climbing.

Then, all at once, it broke, and we were standing in a clearing where a large cavern sat in the mountainside, supported around its mouth by manmade columns and tiles.

The center of Fuyuki City's spiritual ground, the largest concentration of magical power in the city... If that was the best place to build the system that summoned the Servants, it made sense the Grail would be there, too, and the obvious human touches to it spoke to that.

"The chamber holding the Holy Grail is through there, deep inside the mountain," Caster told us solemnly. "Now, everyone, I need you to get in there and get behind Girlie. *Now.*"

Mash startled and gasped, spinning about. "A Servant!"

Caster stepped past the group and back away from the mouth of the cavern, and with a shout, he waved his staff and carved a circle of runes in the air. They'd barely formed when something dark and almost invisible glinted and impacted, bouncing off as the barrier shattered like glass.

Whatever it was gleamed as it landed tip-first in the dirt, jutting up, a long, narrow shaft with twists and knots to its shape that didn't belong on an arrow, and yet that was the only thing it could be. Before our very eyes, it disintegrated, just dissolved into tiny flecks of light that flickered out of existence.

Archer. He'd come to intercept us before we could enter the cavern to fight Saber, as expected.

"Eek!" Rika squeaked.

"Behind Mash!" I shouted, and the group of us huddled up and piled in behind Mash, who brandished her shield and thrust it forward, planting the bottom spoke in the dirt for stability.

Another arrow whistled through the dark, and this time, Caster didn't bother deflecting it, he just leaned to the side, reached out, and plucked it from the air as it passed him. With a better look at it, now, I could see how the barbed tip curved sharply on the back ends and dipped into an undulating shaft that eventually terminated into a pronged butt. There was no fletching, and a moment later, it disappeared the way the first one had.

It probably said something that I didn't bat an eye, but then, powers hadn't really ever followed logic, either, so maybe it wasn't all that strange I didn't find it strange.

"You gonna come out, Archer?" Caster called into the forest. "Or are you going to sit in the bushes until I burn them to the ground and *make* you come out?"

Another arrow shot through the air. Caster knocked it aside effortlessly.

"Come on, Archer! We've played this game before! You already know you can't hit me with these! All you're doing now is wasting time!"

*Protection from Arrows.* Of course. As long as it was a projectile, Caster shouldn't have any trouble with it at all.

A moment of silence was the enemy Servant's response, and then Caster leapt out of the way as shafts of steel rained down from just above the treetops, thudding as they sank into the ground — Mash grunted as what had to be a full half of the barrage clanged off the front of her shield, bouncing, twirling, and eventually landing, many of them broken and snapped in half, in the dirt.

They weren't arrows, like I might have expected. They were too long, with bladed edges, handles at the bottom end, and prongs jutting out from where the handle transitioned into the main body of the weapon.

"Are those...swords?"

In hindsight, it should have been less surprising, considering Caster had already said that this guy could recreate Caladbolg, which was definitely a sword. I just hadn't expected something like *this* when Caster said he could rapidly produce more ammunition.

"That's so metal!" whispered Rika.

Ritsuka grunted and a disgusted groan vibrated in the back of the Director's throat. "That was a terrible pun!"

What kind of Archer was this? I... Maybe if you stretched the definition of what an archer was, but...

Caster was the only one unfazed. "Come on, Archer! That didn't work last time, either!"

At last, a figure appeared on the branch of one tree, a large, black bow in one hand and a sword held by the pommel between two of his fingers in the other. He was... Tall, broad-shouldered, with bronze skin and shocking white hair — attractive, if I was being entirely honest, and I might have spent longer tracing the curves of those muscles of his if he wasn't an enemy — but the thing that stood out the most about him was the jagged red lines that stretched up one side of his neck and over his face, while more zigzagged down one arm.

They looked like Lichtenberg scars, only redder and starker. Like someone had cracked open his skin, and what lay beneath wasn't muscle and bone, but rust and flames. The only thing missing was the glow.

Caster grinned. "That's more like it. Coming to protect Saber, like always?"

Archer dropped out of the tree and stepped forward to the edge of the bluff that overlooked the cavern, his expression cold, closed off, and utterly devoid of anything resembling emotion. He observed the entire group dispassionately, like a machine calculating the task ahead.

"There's no wish upon the Grail to be fighting for anymore," Archer said, disinterested, like he was reciting something he'd read out of a textbook. "In that case, the least I can do is the mundane work of chasing off intruders. You should understand that, Caster."

"What you're saying is that you're her guard dog, is that it?" Caster said sardonically. "Is that your idea of a joke? Or maybe you meant it as an insult!"

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

"Like I'd believe that!"

Caster swung his arm, drawing runes in the air, and blasts of fire shot out for Archer, who leapt from his perch to avoid them and landed in the ravine that sheltered the cavern. His feet had barely touched the ground before he was setting his stance, setting the sword in his hand across that enormous bow, and I could only watch as it streamlined down into an arrow identical to the first two that had been fired our way.

"Hu!"

That arrow shot off at Caster with a crack of displaced air, but Caster batted it away just like everything else Archer had thrown at him.

"Haven't I already said that won't work? Ha!"

Caster drew more runes, and more bolts of fire shot at Archer, whose bow vanished and was replaced by a pair of twin swords that he used to deflect Caster's fireballs. The flames rolled off the flats of the blades — one red and one black — and guttered out.

"Heh!" Caster grinned. "Finally starting to take me seriously, are you?"

"Who knows?" Archer said. "Maybe I just don't have the time to spend playing around with you."

He started walking, always keeping Caster in front of him, and across from him, Caster circled in the opposite direction until neither of them had their backs to us.

"You're going to make me sad, Archer," Caster teased. "After all, we're Servants. No matter what Saber does, our time back on Earth is limited. Shouldn't we go out having fun?"

"There's no point in something like that. Killing the lot of you is just my job. Enjoyment has nothing to do with it."

Archer's steely eyes — they were, quite literally, the gray of polished steel — flickered over in our direction, like a lion considering a gazelle or a snake a mouse, and I didn't need to be a genius or have any particular strategic acumen to realize his intent. Caster didn't miss it, either.

"Not so fast!" Caster shouted, and he jabbed his staff into the dirt as runes drew themselves at his feet. Four in particular, although I wasn't versed enough in runes to recognize their combined purpose on sight. "Your opponent here is me, you bastard!"

Archer stiffened and grunted, and he spat, "Ath nGabra."

"Ath nGabra?" asked Rika. "What's that?"

"It's a special runic spell used by Cúchulainn," the Director explained quickly. "It forces the opponent to fight a one on one duel to the death. Once you're bound by it, you can't retreat and you can't surrender. You either win or die. In his legend, he used it to hold off an entire army by forcing them to engage him one at a time."

"That's right, Archer." Caster's grin was full of teeth and edges. "There's no more running away. One way or another, we're finishing this battle here and now."

"If you're that eager to die..." Archer settled into a stance, brandishing his twin swords. "I guess the only thing I can do is oblige you."

"If you think you can manage it..."

Caster swung his arm again, drawing yet more runes.

"...that suits me just fine!"

The world exploded as they kicked off the ground. Hunks of soil and rock flew from where they'd both been standing, and somewhere in the middle, they met, arms a blur, moving so fast that I couldn't even keep up with what was happening.

Against all sense, Caster had abandoned his runes and was instead wielding his staff like a polearm, but Archer was fending him off with his pair of swords instead of putting distance to try and find something that Caster couldn't avoid. Their metal rang and shrieked with each blow, each so rapid that they began to overlap as both Servants got faster and faster.

"This is insane," the Director murmured. "A Caster fighting like a Lancer, and an Archer fighting like a Saber."

*This wasn't part of the plan*, I wanted to tell Caster, but I couldn't afford to distract him, so I could only bite my lip and keep silent. We'd agreed, he could fight Archer one on one and have his duel, but a deathmatch curse had never been a part of that. We needed him to fight Saber too much to risk him losing and getting killed. Caster's wishes be damned, I'd intended to intervene the instant it looked like he was about to die.

Now, he'd made that impossible. Had he done it specifically so that I couldn't, because I'd told him that I would if I had to?

My eyes flicked back and forth as I tried to keep track of the fight, but they were just moving too fast. Their bodies were little more than red and blue blurs as they danced across the gorge, and their weapons were essentially invisible. The only reason I could see Caster's staff was because it had burst into flame at some point, leaving a glowing trail in its wake.

It wasn't that I couldn't see the logic. A one on one deathmatch curse ensured Archer couldn't target us and draw us into the fight, which meant we were safer here than without it. It also meant Archer couldn't just run away and ambush us later, he *had* to finish it now, one way or the other. As long as Caster won, we could be certain we wouldn't have an enemy at our backs.

But I didn't like that Caster had made the decision without me, and I didn't like that it meant the only thing I could do was sit on the sidelines and watch.

The seconds ticked by. The fight kept going, a lightning fast melee where neither side seemed to have the upper hand. Every few blows, one of Archer's swords would shatter with the crack of breaking glass, but before I could even blink, it was replaced with an exact duplicate. They were stuck in a stalemate where neither of them could advance, because the match was simply too even at close range.

But it could only last for so long. The more intense the fighting got, the stronger the tug inside of me got, and the more magical energy Caster drained to keep going. Faster and faster, it dwindled — I'd thought before that he could have three more fights of the sort of intensity he went at it against Medusa before I had to worry, and it looked like he was determined to prove that he could still kick it up a notch.

Another one of Archer's swords went flying, the hilt in one direction and the shattered pieces of the blade another, and in that brief fraction of a second, Caster looked over at me and his eyes met mine. Could he tell he was draining me so fast?

"Where are you looking?"



Archer, sensing an opening, reversed his grip on his remaining sword and mercilessly thrust it into Caster's chest.

The rest of my group gasped.

“No!” said the Director.

“Caster!” Rika screamed.

Caster froze, hunched over the blade in his chest, face carved into a rictus of shock — and then vines sprouted from the wound, wrapping around Archer's hand, and Caster's body turned brown and coarse, like the bark of a tree from his head to his feet to his clothes. Before our eyes, his back cracked open, and Caster, whole and unharmed, stepped away from his own corpse.

“Thought you had me there?” Caster's grin was a thing of victory. “Don't think you can take me out that easily, Archer!”

He stabbed his staff into the wooden statue of himself, and it caught ablaze instantly, pouring flames from every crack and crevice like some mockery of a funeral pyre. Archer grunted and tore himself free, putting as much distance between them as he could; the burns that marked his hand and forearm were red and inflamed, but mostly superficial. For a Servant, they were probably nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

“Where are you going?” Caster demanded.

He slammed the butt of his staff against the ground, and a line of fire ignited across the gorge towards Archer, who leapt out of the way and into the air. The remaining sword disappeared, and Archer's bow rematerialized as he formed another longsword on its string.

It was a different sword from before. Not basic steel and rudimentary structure, like you might see on any old sword from medieval Europe, but a drill-like spiral that terminated in a narrow point and had a dark blue hilt. Even from where I was, I could tell that this thing was something special, just from the sense of foreboding, of *weight*, it carried.

I realized as he started to come back down — if he fired that off and Caster dodged, it would come and hit Mash. Us.

“Like I'd let you!” Caster shouted and smacked his palm into the dirt.

A wooden hand thrust itself out of the ground, and Archer, who was still in the air, couldn't dodge to avoid it as it reached up and took hold of him, hoisting him higher into the sky.

### **Cage of Scorching, Consuming Flames**

“Wicker Man!”

The wooden hand ignited and the arm it was attached to swung down. Archer, who was trapped between its fingers, couldn't escape as it smashed into the ground with a thunderous crash that shook the mountainside, shattering with a burst of white hot flames. Shards of wood splattered

across the gorge, skittering over the dirt, still flickering with the embers of the Wicker Man, and then they dissolved away.

In the crater made by the Wicker Man's fist, Archer's body lay, chunks of him missing entirely, half his torso gone, one arm torn off from the elbow down, one leg mangled and twisted in sickening angles. He didn't move, didn't seem to be breathing or even conscious, and then, he flaked away into little motes of light that winked out of existence.

He was dead. Again. Still. However the fuck that worked with Servants.

And the instant he was gone, I felt as though whatever force I hadn't realized was keeping me steady disappeared with him, and I sagged against the spoke of Mash's shield, arms and legs trembling, and panted for a breath I hadn't even known I'd lost.

"Taylor?"

"Miss Taylor?"

"Senpai, are you okay?"

I swallowed thickly around my tongue. My body burned. My nerves throbbed. Sweat dripped down my forehead, down the back of my neck, down the front of my shirt. I had to blink to refocus my vision, because it was blurring around the edges.

"I'm fine," I said belatedly, slurring a little. Fuck. What was wrong with me? "Jus... Just give me a..."

Footsteps. A familiar presence, cool and welcoming. I looked up into red eyes, trying to keep myself from collapsing to my knees.

I was ashamed to admit that Mash and her shield were probably the only things keeping me upright.

"Sorry about that, Master," Caster said, sounding honestly contrite. "I took a little more energy from you than I should have."

"It's..."

What was I supposed to say to that?

"It's fine."

"It's not fine!" the Director squawked. "Caster, we still have another fight to go through, you know! How are we supposed to face Saber when one of our Masters is like this?"

"Give her a few minutes to adjust," Caster said, unconcerned. "I'm guessing she never pushes herself, right? Or more like, she keeps ironclad control over how much she stresses her magic circuits. She's just not used to channeling that much of her magical energy all at once."

My cheek twitched. I resisted the urge to scowl at him, that he could so easily see through me. He wasn't wrong, though, in either sense; even as he spoke, I could feel the pain and weakness fading as

my magic circuits cooled and returned to normal. It was like I'd said, I'd only need a minute or so to recover my breath and my strength.

To take the focus off of me, I said, "Ath nGabra."

Caster grimaced and sighed. "Yeah, I figured you'd be mad about that," he said ruefully.

"Of course we're mad!" the Director spat indignantly. "Do you have any idea how reckless and irresponsible —"

"Director," I cut in, "a scolding would be more meaningful coming from his Master, wouldn't it?"

Her mouth snapped shut and her cheeks went a little red as she scowled.

"I'm not mad you did it," I told Caster calmly. "I'm mad you made the decision by yourself."

*I don't disagree with your reasoning, I continued silently, projecting my thoughts along the connection between us, nor do I disagree that it was probably the right decision. I disagree with you having done it without consulting anyone when you're essential to our fight against Saber. If we lost you, our chances of winning would plummet.*

"Geez," Caster chuckled awkwardly, looking younger for it than he had at any point thus far, "sometimes, Master, you remind me of my teacher, but sometimes, you just remind me of my wife."

"Are you flirting with her again?" the Director demanded.

"If talking about all of the other women they've loved is the way modern men flirt, Boss Lady," said Caster, "then I can see why it is a catch like you is single."

Rika gave a delighted laugh even as the Director's face turned a bright, cherry red, her mouth flapping silently, because she was at a literal loss for words.

"*That* was flirting," Caster added unnecessarily.

"In any case," I said before the conversation could devolve again, "are you good to keep going, Caster?"

He grinned. "Heh. Shouldn't I be asking *you* that? Don't worry so much, Master. You've still got those three Command Spells, right?"

He gestured in the direction of my left hand, where the web of red markings stood out against the pale skin of the back of my hand. They looked even more like blood than they ever had before.

"In that case," he went on, "you've got an emergency stash of backup magical energy. If I'm running low, just use one of those to give me a quick boost. No point in hoarding them during the last battle of the Holy Grail War, right?"

Unless he decided to stab us in the back afterwards, that was. But I was beginning to think that Caster, that *Cúchulainn*, just wasn't that kind of person. Could you call that trust? Maybe.

I took a deep breath and pushed myself off of Mash's shield, and I didn't collapse, although I wasn't back up to one-hundred percent, either. That was only natural, though. It wasn't like I was going to regain all of the magical energy Caster used up in just five minutes.

"Ritsuka, Rika, are you ready?" I asked.

Rika went ramrod straight, and Ritsuka startled a little at being addressed. "A-ah, yes, Senpai?" Ritsuka said uncertainly.

"Tip-top, running on all cylinders, Senpai!" Rika chirped.

It was going to take some getting used to, being addressed like that. Most of the rest of Team A hadn't thought much of me, although Wodime had never been exactly mean and Beryl... Beryl had just been weird. Like he could see something in me the others didn't, and he didn't want to risk whatever he thought that was coming out.

"Mash?"

Mash was the only one of them who treated me like I had any experience with anything more strenuous than bookwork.

"All parameters are normal, Miss Taylor," she replied.

"Then let's get going," the Director said. "Mash, take point. No sense in taking any risks this late in the game."

She looked over at me and I nodded. "Right."

"Understood, Director."

Mash hefted her huge shield again and swung around to face the cavern. She held it out in front of her to ward off any ambushes and started cautiously into the cave. A moment later, we all fell into step behind her.

The cavern turned out deeper than I'd expected. I wasn't quite sure how long we wound up walking for, but the roughly hewn pathway we walked along was winding and continued on for quite a while. It was also much roomier than I'd thought it would be, as well — stalactites hung from the ceiling, and stalagmites framed the sides, but there was easily enough space for our entire group to walk side by side, if we'd been so inclined, and more than enough space for Mash to swing that shield any which way she liked.

We must have traveled a whole mile into the mountainside before we saw the ominous glow ahead, and the tension in the party ratcheted up a notch as we kept going to the end of the tunnel and stepped out into a vast, utterly enormous chamber.

If I'd thought the tunnel was big, the chamber it led to was ridiculous. Easily large enough to fit an entire army, with a ceiling so far up that, even lit by that ominous glow, it was shrouded in darkness and shadows. It reminded me of Erebor or the Mines of Moria from *The Lord of the Rings*, and it was certainly big enough for an underground castle or city to be built inside of it.

At the back of the cavern was a raised ridge, a circular thing that stretched from one side to the other, like the nest of some giant serpent, and standing on the lip of that ridge, overlooking us and the rest of the chamber, was a young woman.

She was black all over, from her dress to the armor she wore over it to the exquisite sword she rested her hands on whose tip was planted in the dirt. A shock of platinum blonde hair sat on her head, and eerily glowing yellow eyes peered down at us from out of a pale-skinned face.

The thing that stuck out the most about her was the sheer *power* she exuded, an aura of darkness that permeated the entire chamber and could be felt even from its entrance. Her sheer presence seemed to fill the room and soak into the ground, choking the life away and pressing down on us.

And yet, there was something grand and majestic about it, something larger than life and almost noble. I could believe this woman, small and young as she was, could have been King Arthur.

“Welcome, Chaldea,” the young woman said. Her voice was cold and void of emotion, but there was something in there that I was almost tempted to call friendly. “I am the Servant Saber. I stand guard here, to defend this place against all trespassers and those who would covet the power within.”

And behind her, a massive pool of magical energy churned, so dense and so powerful that it was visible to the naked eye. It dwarfed Saber a thousand times over, a million times over, not only in sheer volume but in quantity and quality. There was so much of it that I couldn’t have hoped to make use of it in the course of a hundred lifetimes, let alone a single one.

Even as a novice spellcaster, I knew enough about magic to tell that this thing was the real deal, the authentic article. Not the cup of Christ from the Last Supper, but an omnipotent wish-granting device that could make any dream a reality. Without a doubt, this was —

“If you wish to claim your prize, you must first step over my corpse,” Saber said with the unshakeable conviction of the mountain around us. “That is the only way you can take this Holy Grail.”