

## Chapter CLXXIV: No Capes

The briefing took the better part of the rest of the day. There was simply too much to cover, too much of it that would be intensely relevant to our upcoming deployment, and the cat was already out of the bag. In fact, that just made it easier to talk about all of this stuff, because once I got the broader strokes out of the way, the minutiae was just adding onto all of the things I'd already shared.

I went over Trigger Events in more depth, to give everyone an idea of what to look for and what they looked like and how to calm a situation down when one was involved. I gave them more examples of how the Trigger Event could influence the power that resulted from them, pulling a bit on some of Lisa's theories, some of my own personal experience, and some of the stuff I had learned either during my stint as a Ward or directly from Cauldron at the end of the world.

I emphasized the importance of keeping a cool head, both when faced with someone else's Trigger Event and to help them avoid having one of their own. The Servants, I wasn't sure could even *have* a Trigger Event, and even if it was technically possible, Servants by definition had already experienced the worst moments of their lives. Some of them, like Hippolyta, hadn't survived it. The twins, however, and probably even Mash, they could absolutely trigger, and while Rika seemed a little excited at the idea of having superpowers, the cost was too steep for any of us to be comfortable with.

And that was *without* getting into the quagmire that would result if one or both of the twins was a cape at the end of all of this. Better to give the Association as few targets as possible. Cut down on the curiosity of people with way too many ways to fuck us all over.

The major players and their powers were also things I went into more detail about, particularly those we were almost certainly going to deal with, and when I had the knowledge, I even gave a brief overview of the personalities behind those powers. If we had to interact with Accord at any point, then knowledge of his neuroses was going to be essential to managing him and avoiding an unnecessary conflict. If we ever ran afoul of Coil and his mercenaries, this was how his power worked, so we should then assume that we were experiencing the version of events where he thought he was going to get what he wanted.

Naturally, fleshing out the profiles of the rest of the Slaughterhouse Nine was a part of that, too. Bonesaw being a biotinker with access to cybernetic enhancements and engineered bioweapons, Mannequin having enclosed himself into a system of hardened ceramic spheres and kitted them out with weapons. Crawler being sturdy and adapting to whatever didn't kill him outright. Burnscar being a teleporting pyrokinetic. Cherish having the ability to sense and manipulate the emotions of other people within a very large range. Siberian being a projection that bent the laws of physics over her knee, but with a completely normal master controlling her.

Hatchet Face was ironically the easiest. His power worked entirely off of shutting down others' powers, so the only one he would have any advantage over was me. No one else was reliant on a passenger to do anything, and frankly? I was willing to bet my knife would work on him just fine.

Of course, all of that necessitated eventually explaining the system of threat categories the PRT used to classify parahuman powers, with all of the obvious caveats that the system wasn't perfect and it wasn't meant for talking about *how* a power worked, only what it did.

The look on Rika's face at the possibility of having to *memorize* those threat ratings and what they meant was...actually a little funny. I did my best to reassure her — I didn't remember everyone's threat ratings, in no small part because I hadn't thought I would need to after leaving Earth Bet and also because the shorthand was meant for teams of PRT troopers, not for other capes who were going to be in the thick of the fighting.

'Brute 6' didn't really tell you much about how to actually fight Lung, it just let you know that trying to out muscle him wasn't it.

Eventually, we had to break for a late lunch, and as Emiya left the room to go and get everything ready for us, I heard him mutter to himself, "A superhero, huh. Looks like I'm never escaping that, am I?"

He was gone before I could ask for an explanation, and in the lull of my presentation, everyone started talking. The general buzz made it hard to really tell what they were all talking *about*, but I had a sinking suspicion I knew exactly what the technicians were discussing with each other, just from the looks they sent my way every now and again.

I was from a parallel world. There was no way the implications of that and what it would mean for both everyone here and for what would be coming after the final Singularity was solved and human history was restored. The magi in the group, at least, they had some idea, and I couldn't blame them for worrying — it was one thing for a Servant to come from a parallel world. Heroic Spirits existed outside of normal time and space, after all. But for a living person to cross over without assistance from someone like Zelretch or one of his artifacts? And to *admit* to it in front of a group of people who could and very likely would *have* to tell the UN and the Association when this was all over?

How bad were things, really, that both Marie and I were willing to lay those cards on the table? And just as importantly, how were they going to get out of it in the aftermath, when the accounting came due?

I doubted any of them found comfort in whatever answer they imagined.

The Servants all seemed much less impressed. Some of them had very obviously seen enough of my life in their dreams over the course of these long months to already have a solid idea of what I had gone through, but while the rest were surprised, El-Melloi II and Emiya were the only ones who really seemed to *get* all of the implications of what I was telling them all about. Small wonder when they were both modern humans with at least enough knowledge of magecraft to understand just how impossible my arrival to this world was supposed to be.

Eventually, Emiya returned with lunch: a selection of sandwiches and finger foods, stuff that would make the least mess and be easiest to eat on the spot. He even projected a table and chairs for Marie and me to sit down at, and Jackie stayed by my side, as though to offer me whatever comfort she could. He used the opportunity to lean in close to me, murmuring lowly enough that the only ones who could have caught it were Marie and Jackie.

“Rika and Ritsuka probably didn’t pick up on it, and maybe they won’t,” he said, “but your powers coming back was a surprise, wasn’t it? So you were expecting them to be gone. If they came from that god, Scion, then is he really dead?”

I couldn’t stop my head from snapping around towards him, and neither could Marie, whose eyes were wide and intense, but I was measured enough to pitch my own voice for his ears only, too, “Yes. Powers come from fragments of himself. Any fragments that weren’t destroyed when he was killed stay around. My powers being gone...was something entirely unrelated to that.”

His lips pulled tight, but he accepted it with a sigh. “There goes that theory, then. My other was that he cursed you as he died and that’s why you thought they were gone.”

“No,” was all the more I said about it. *It was a kind of mercy*, never made it past my lips. That pitiful girl confessing her regrets at the end of all things was a secret I didn’t intend to share.

Mercifully, he left it at that. Maybe he realized I wasn’t going to say anything more about it and maybe he just had enough tact to realize it was a sensitive topic. Either way, he went back to the cart he’d brought in and started distributing food to the rest of the room.

Several of the technicians didn’t look like they particularly wanted to eat — I didn’t blame them — but they knew better than to skip out on something, especially when it was made by Emiya or Renée, and I had deliberately front loaded the worst parts of life on Earth Bet so that no one would be at risk of revisiting their last meal.

After lunch, I dove back into things with the Empire and the ABB, telling everyone about the sort of climate to expect in each of their territories and what the local politics were like between them. Several people seemed bemused and offended that a Neonazi group had such a foothold in an American city, because they probably didn’t understand how economic desperation among poor whites led to scapegoats and the blame game, but it was Rika and Ritsuka who looked bewildered and frankly a little insulted when I explained the ABB.

“Azn Bad Boys?” Rika complained loudly. “What are they, twelve?”

The idea of a pan-Asian gang confused them more than anything. I guess they would know better than I did how poorly the Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans all got along, to say nothing of the Vietnamese and other ethnic groups whose names escaped me at the time. I remembered enough of the history to know that they had once all been separate, smaller gangs, all jockeying for supremacy.

But when a raging dragon told you to shut up and play nice together, it was hard to argue.

When the topic of Lung came up, Siegfried had to interject, all but begging, “Master, if we should find ourselves up against this enemy, I would like for you to call upon me to face him.”

“If the situation calls for it,” I promised him.

Bakuda got some incredulous objections.

“Hold on a second,” said Rika. “Her power was to make *bombs*? A supervillain with a Japanese name that basically means ‘Bomb’ made *bombs*? Does she have no sense of her cultural heritage?”

I didn't tell her that I wasn't even sure Bakuda had been Japanese, let alone purely.

"You might be thinking too narrowly," I told her. "Tinkers create exotic technology. When I say she was a Tinker who specialized in bombs, I don't mean things that just go boom and blow you to bits, I mean that they could do things like induce mind-numbing pain without physically hurting you or turn all organic matter in range into crystal. Several of her bombs were used against Leviathan and did things like create slow fields or time-frozen zones." I paused to let that sink in, and then continued, "But her tenure in the ABB was measured in weeks. As long as we don't get dropped in during mid to late April, we won't encounter either her *or* Lung."

By the time we finally finished covering all of the most essential parts of Earth Bet, it was approaching dinnertime, and a number of people were starting to look overwhelmed by the sheer amount of stuff we'd had to go over. By that point, my throat was sore and my voice was starting to get thready and hoarse. I made a mental note to ask Romani for a lozenge or a cough drop or something, and a cup of tea with ginger and honey would definitely be a good idea, too.

Fortunately, while we had originally talked about the idea of briefing everyone about the plan for Rayshifting into the American Singularity, Marie took a good, hard look at everyone in the room and decided that we should end it there.

"We'll stop for today," she announced, to the relief of all of the technicians as well as the twins and Mash. "The briefing for the plan to Rayshift into the American Singularity will occur in two days' time, after everyone has had some time to come to terms with the information we've gone over today. If you have any questions," she added with a note of warning in her voice, "I'll accept them at my office. Do *not* ask me or Hebert in the middle of the Command Room or the hallways."

She addressed this to the whole room, but had eyes in particular for Rika and Nero.

"Lastly," and *now* it sounded like a threat, "I shouldn't need to say this, but none of what you learned today will be in the official records once the American Singularity is resolved. The Association and the UN are absolutely not allowed to find out about any of this."

Dead silence answered her. Some of the Servants seemed disinterested — Mordred and Jeanne Alter in particular didn't give it any weight, and they cared so little for authority in general that some faceless organization across the world probably wasn't all that threatening — but the technicians, especially the magi, felt the weight of it. They understood the gravity even better than I did, and why it was she was so deadly serious about hiding all of this from the bodies that were ostensibly responsible for our oversight.

Satisfied, Marie nodded. "Dismissed."

And the group dispersed, everyone filing out of the room and going their separate ways. A number of them didn't even show up for dinner an hour later, still digesting everything. I couldn't blame them. It was a lot to try and wrap your head around, and I'd had the benefit of growing up taking a large amount of it for granted. The twins and Mash, too, were still coming to terms with everything, because even the infinitely exuberant Rika was quiet, subdued, and thoughtful as she ate, chewing as much on her thoughts as she was on her food.

I ate in the cafeteria as much as a show of confidence and strength as camaraderie, like I wasn't afraid of anyone's judgment and I wasn't going to shy away from their questions and their stares. And there *were* a lot of stares, I could practically feel them boring into the backs and sides of my head as I sat there, so much so that they actually made me feel a little self-conscious about the dimpled bullet scars that marked Contessa's 'mercy,' but none of them seemed willing to test Marie's command to save their questions for a more appropriate venue.

It was, naturally, Rika who proved she didn't give a rat's ass about it.

"So, like," she began slowly, releasing the words between bites as though they were contained in her meal instead of her mind, "I know you said Trigger Events are *bad*, Senpai, but... How, um... How *bad* are we talking?"

"Rika!" her brother scolded sharply. But the question was already asked and the damage already done.

I paused for a moment, let my fork — still with a bit of breaded chicken speared on the tines — droop back down onto my plate, and I began with, "First off, the one thing you should never do with a cape is ask them about their Trigger."

Rika perked up a little. "Cape? Is that, like, slang?"

To my chagrin, I realized that was something we hadn't managed to cover in everything else. Somehow or another, 'cape' as slang for a parahuman had slipped under the radar, and being fair, it wasn't like it was the most relevant bit of information either. Either way...

"Yes," I told her. "It's slang. A catch-all term for a parahuman, regardless of which side of the law they operate on. I'm sure I don't need to explain where it comes from —"

"No capes!" Rika blurted out suddenly in a strange accent. It earned a groan from her brother and a bewildered look from Mash, but I ignored her and kept going.

"— and I'm sure I don't need to explain why you shouldn't prod at the most traumatic events of another person's life just to satisfy your curiosity. They're shitty enough without other people demanding you recount yours just because they can't keep their nose out of your business."

"Which means don't ask Senpai about hers," Ritsuka added sternly.

"I wasn't gonna!" Rika replied defensively, indignant. She grimaced. "I mean, gonna be real honest here, Senpai, I don't think I *want* to know what gives someone the superpower to control all the bugs, because somehow, I don't think it was as simple as Sally dropping a centipede on your head."

The mental image threatened to pull a smile from me. "No. No, it wasn't."

I debated with myself for a second, using my food as a cover to give myself a few seconds, and then figured, there wasn't any harm in it. It hadn't been relevant to everything everyone had needed to know in the briefing, so we simply hadn't covered it, but if it was just a matter of curiosity, it was a safe enough topic.

“Trigger Events are...complex,” I decided on. “There are any number of factors that can result in any number of powers. Immediate, physical danger often leads to things like superstrength and invincibility, whereas a need to escape it can create superspeed or other movement-based powers. For Thinkers and Tinkers, it’s about a problem that you aren’t able to solve or a question you can’t answer. For *Masters* — people whose powers center around creating or controlling minions of whatever type — it’s about isolation. Feeling like the world has abandoned you and no one is coming to your rescue. Feeling like no one can even be bothered to care if you were to suffer and die miserably. It’s about being alone, even in a crowded room.”

I took a breath and shoved the Locker back into the dark corners where it belonged. To the twins and Mash, I gave a lopsided smile, little more than a quirk of my lips.

“It’s about being given the power to make friends when you don’t have any.”

“Oh,” said Mash softly. “That sounds...so sad, Miss Taylor.”

The only thing I could do was shrug. “It’s part of being a cape, Mash. There’s nothing I can do about it anymore. Besides,” I went on, “I haven’t been that person in a long time. It honestly feels like it happened to a completely different person.”

A moment of relative silence passed. The clink and clang of Emiya and Renée in the kitchen and the soft buzz of other conversations filled the space left by the conversation.

And then, because of course it would be Rika again, “So what kind of situation creates a guy who can turn into a raging dragon?”

Ritsuka groaned again, dropping his face into his hand, and Mash let out a sigh and breathed, “Senpai...”

“What?” said Rika. “It’s an honest question!”

A huff of air escaped my nostrils, not quite a snort, not quite a laugh. “I’ll be honest with you, Rika. I don’t have the slightest clue.”

Somehow or another, that little exchange managed to lighten the whole mood, and the three of them started asking me tentative questions about life on Earth Bet. Nothing serious or heavy or even really all that relevant to our upcoming deployment, but simple stuff, basic stuff, like whether we’d had smartphones and electric cars — we had — or cackling villains trying to take over the world — String Theory was a fun one to explain, although I wasn’t sure they took the threat of knocking the moon out of orbit seriously — or whether there were any villains still going around robbing banks.

The last one, I answered simply, just because I didn’t want to go into the whole...thing about my villain era in the middle of the cafeteria, but I *did* use the Undersiders as an example of what those sorts of small-time villains looked like.

It was honestly a bit freeing, being able to talk about it so openly. I’d had to keep quiet about it all for so long that I’d forgotten what it was like to just be able to discuss any of it with anyone aside from Marie.

Rika wound up insisting that we *had* to watch a movie that night, just the five of us, and the briefing had been heavy enough and taxing enough on my emotional reserves that I didn't fight her on it, so once we had all finished eating, Rika led us all off to her room and told us to make ourselves comfortable, then vanished off somewhere. Ritsuka and Mash insisted that Jackie and I take the bed, and then went and retrieved a bunch of pillows to make themselves comfortable with on the floor.

Eventually, some twenty minutes later, Rika returned and wheeled in a familiar AV cart, the same one Emiya had used for New Years', set it up so that we all had a good view, turned on the movie — all I managed to glimpse of the case was a large, stylized lowercase 'i' — and plopped down on the other side of her brother.

When I saw the title card, I wanted to roll my eyes — *The Incredibles* had come over to Bet from Aleph, but I had never bothered to watch it, because it bombed. Everyone who had seen it considered it a failure, from my classmates to the usual panel of movie critics whose words all of the news stations took as gospel, a cheesy movie about superheroes in a box office absolutely inundated with the genre.

And as I watched it, I could see why some people might have come to an opinion like that. *The Incredibles* wasn't much of anything at all like the realities of Earth Bet. That...actually turned out to be one of its charms, however, because the characters were all flawed with realistic struggles and problems, and I couldn't help but think that Mister Incredible and Elastigirl would have fit right in during Bet's Golden Age of superheroes.

Edna Mode actually startled a laugh out of me when I finally got the reference Rika had made earlier.

It was a nice fantasy, and I found myself thinking, as Jackie and I climbed into bed, that it would have been nice if Earth Bet had been more like the world of *The Incredibles*. A world like that wouldn't have created Skitter, or Tattletale, or the Slaughterhouse Nine, and there would have been no need for someone like Khepri to save the world. Even if a little girl still lost her mom in a tragic car crash and still got powers, maybe she could have been a hero from the start and found a place for herself among other heroes who lived up to the name.

But it was only a fantasy. Reality wasn't quite so kind.

The next day or so was relatively quiet. There was an almost imperceptible shift in the facility that told me when the rest of the staff had seen the recording of that original briefing, a change in the way they regarded me whenever I happened to pass them in the hall or the cafeteria. I couldn't go much of anywhere without feeling their eyes on me, the way they looked at me as though they had never seen me before.

I'd known it was coming. The story of Earth Bet was too huge a paradigm shift to expect that everyone would simply continue on like it was business as usual. Everything they thought they'd known — about me in particular, but also about Marie and what was truly possible in a vast multiverse — had been upended, and it would take some time for them all to come to terms with it.

Sylvia avoiding me still hurt more than I expected it to.

Two days after the first briefing, however, the second was scheduled, and so I went about my morning routine like normal. I got in my morning workout, with Jackie cheering me on as she usually did from the sidelines, and it was a bit of a relief that Nero, Mash, and the twins had all fallen back into that routine with me as though it was just another day in Chaldea. Afterwards, I took a shower with Jackie, then met the twins and Mash in the cafeteria for breakfast.

“I can’t wait for Da Vinci-chan to finish making that Roman bath,” Rika confessed over her food with a sigh. “Best Buddy gets to go into the simulator and relax, but I have to get a boring old shower if I wanna get clean!”

“You still have two more chances to take a dip in the *real* Roman bath before we deploy for real,” I reminded her.

“Sure,” she allowed, “but that doesn’t help me *today*, does it?”

No, I suppose it didn’t. Despite her grouching, however, her mood didn’t seem to match, because she still enjoyed her food with her usual gusto. She was just complaining for the sake of complaining.

After breakfast, I had a short lesson with Aífe, who proclaimed that I was “coming along well,” and while that wasn’t as good as I would have liked it to be, I had already learned so much just from the last month or so that I could be fine with that for now. As nice as it would have been to have mastered her runic magic before we ever went to America, the pace I was on now was still far better than it had been since she came back with us after Septem.

At 10:30, however, it was time for our second briefing, this one less on the situation inside the Singularity and what to expect and more about the plan for how to tackle it once we got in there. Marie, Romani, and Da Vinci were already present by the time I made it to the orientation room, waiting for everyone else to arrive, and the twins and Mash weren’t that far behind me. We all found seats while the Servants filtered in, slowly filling up the rest of the chairs around us and beside us. Jackie, of course, claimed the seat right next to mine, like she had to stay as close as possible for as long as she could because she wouldn’t be able to soon enough for who knew how long.

Once we were all present and accounted for, Marie nodded to herself, took a bracing breath, and began: “Today, we’re going to be going over the plan for how to handle the American Singularity. If you have any questions about what we went over during the previous briefing, then this isn’t the place to ask. You should have brought them to me yesterday.”

A couple of chuckles answered her, even though she was completely serious, and even Romani couldn’t help the smile that curled his lips. But for a twitch in her cheek, Marie gave no indication that it bothered her, and she pressed a button on that same remote again. The observation window behind her darkened and turned into a screen. Another press brought up two images, the same map, side by side, only with 1783 AD in one’s upper left corner and 2011 AD in the other’s corner.

“You should all already be familiar with this map, since you saw it only two days ago,” she continued. “As we explained then, these two versions display the fluctuations in the readings, with one showing the focal point of the Singularity in 2011 and the other showing an echo in 1783. At this time, we still don’t know what these truly represent, so the only thing we can do is make our best guesses.”



“I cannot promise that they will wind up being relevant to your investigation in the American Singularity,” Da Vinci chimed in. Marie pursed her lips, but didn’t say anything. “However, they’re still our only real point of reference, so we don’t have any better ideas of where to start.”

“To that end,” Marie said, “our plan is to Rayshift you as close to the echo as we can without running the risk of dropping you into the water.” She clicked on the remote again, and the 1783 map zoomed in on the ‘echo’ of the focal point. “Here, at Cape Cod, east of the bay. From there, you should be able to investigate the echo by sending a Servant out to check if there’s anything of interest, and we’ll be using our sensors to examine your surroundings as best as we can.”

“It might not amount to anything,” Romani warned. “We’re...kind of hoping that you might be able to find a clue about why the fluctuations are happening at all, but this really could turn out to be a wild goose chase, so don’t take any more risks than you have to, okay?”

“What, you think we can’t handle whatever might be out there?” Jeanne Alter drawled. “Scared of a little squid, Doc?”

“Not unless something has gone *horribly* wrong,” Da Vinci answered with some amusement. A faint smile graced her face. “Most of what you should expect of the local fauna are cod, striped bass, bluefin tuna, and haddock.” And a little mischievously, she added, “Feel free to do some fishing while you’re there, though. It would certainly be an excellent chance to stock up on some more supplies, and for Emiya to cook up some absolutely delicious recipes.”

Emiya huffed an amused breath and muttered, “It’s almost like that’s all I’m good for, isn’t it?”

“You bet your boots,” Rika teased in a whisper.

Mash raised her hand, and when Marie nodded her way, asked, “How long are we expected to spend investigating the, um, echo, Director?”

“Ideally, it won’t take you more than an hour,” Marie said. “Provided communications remain stable, we may ask you to circle around the other side of the peninsula to see if there’s anything of interest over there, but if there’s nothing there, then you should proceed along the coast and towards Brockton Bay.”

“If we *do* lose communications, though,” Romani added, “then make sure you find the local ley line first and reconnect with us at Chaldea, okay?”

*Reconnect the umbilical cord*, I thought but didn’t say. It wasn’t quite fair, and if something *did* go wrong with the Rayshift, then the first thing Marie would want was for us to check in and make sure everything was okay.

Ritsuka raised his hand now, and Marie acknowledged him with a nod, too. “What if the Rayshift is off target and we land somewhere else, like we did in Septem?”

Marie grimaced, and she looked like she hated admitting that it was even possible for it to happen again, but still told him, “Then you should all make your way as quickly as you can to the echo, especially if you wind up separated somehow. The most important part is that you Masters remain together and safe, so if all else fails, that will be your agreed upon meeting spot. Understand?”

She addressed it to all of us, and us three Masters and Mash dutifully answered her with, “Yes, Director.”

Well, Rika still called her “Boss Lady,” but there wasn’t any helping that, it seemed. Marie, who had long grown used to Rika’s personality, let it slide without so much as a curl of her lip or a twitch of her brow.

“If you can,” Da Vinci interrupted, “I would like you four to establish an exact date as much as possible, especially if you can get one from near the echo and one from Brockton Bay. There’s no telling exactly how these fluctuations will influence the state and overall appearance of the Singularity, so it would be helpful in establishing an understanding of the situation if we knew whether those fluctuations actually changed the timeframe of the Singularity itself.”

“Hold on,” said El-Melloi II. “You’re not expecting to find that it’s flip-flopping between 1783 and 2011, are you?”

My brow furrowed. How would that even work? What, go to bed in a city in 2011 and find ourselves camped out with the Revolutionary Army when we woke up the next morning?

“It’s a possibility, however unlikely,” Da Vinci answered. “I want to see instead if the fluctuations have something to do with a temporal deviance instead of a localized one. In the Fuyuki, Septem, and Orléans Singularities, things were mostly as we would have expected from those eras, with people and places that looked essentially as they were supposed to. In London, however, people and places were being pulled from a hundred years out of date in either direction, and if that’s happening in America as well, then that will tell us something about what we might expect from the last two Singularities.”

And whether we should expect to see things that didn’t belong, beyond just those immediately brought there by either the Counter Force or the Grail.

“That’s why you guys need to be super cautious until we get a handle on what’s happening,” said Romani. “You’ll be fine if the whole country is from 2011, but there’ll be a lot of questions if you wind up face to face with a bunch of colonial Americans from the late eighteenth century. The last witchcraft trial in the USA was in 1878, and they might just jump on the first scapegoat they can find, you know. So be extra careful, alright?”

“My order from the last Singularity still holds,” Marie said, voice hard. “The lives of the Masters are paramount. No other life in this Singularities is anywhere near as important, so if any of the locals are a threat, you deal with them however you have to.”

“Don’t worry, Boss Lady,” Rika chirped. “Mash knows how to use the back of her shield! No Founding Fathers will be harmed in the solving of this Singularity!”

Red spread across Mash’s cheeks and the tips of her ears, and she let out a miserable, “Senpai...!”

Marie looked like she was ready to explode at Rika, but at the last second, she visibly reined herself in and forced herself to calm down, taking in a deep breath and letting it out slowly.

“Be that as it may,” she said evenly, “lethal force is still authorized. Whatever steps you need to take to defend yourselves, do it.”

“Most of those guys were British back then, weren’t they?” Jeanne Alter asked. A grin curled the corners of her mouth. “Permission to kill a bunch of English fucks if they try and screw us over? Sounds like fun to me, especially since everyone I killed in London wasn’t even from there.”

“You’re not going,” Marie said sharply, and that took the wind right out of Jeanne Alter’s sails.

“What?”

Marie grimaced and nodded to herself. “This is as good a time as any to bring that subject up. Obviously, our standard setup will remain, so Emiya, Mash, and Arash will all be part of the initial Rayshift. Several other Servants have expressed interest in deploying outside of the Shadow Servant system, including Siegfried —”

“Who has not had the chance to leave the facility beyond the occasional vacation since he first arrived,” Da Vinci added as though reminding everyone. Marie nodded at her.

“However,” Marie went on, “considering the situation as it currently stands, we’ve decided that it would be better if at least one of the Servants sent was a contract shared between all three Masters. That way, in case all communications go down for whatever reason and the team is separated, it would be possible for all of the Masters to communicate using that Servant as a go-between.”

Arash raised his hand. “If Siegfried wants to go that badly, I can volunteer to stay behind, Director.”

Before Marie could say anything, Siegfried shook his head and told him, “No, please don’t, Lord Arash. You have been by Master’s side for far longer than I. If anyone would deserve to stay beside her through the end, then it would be you.” To Marie, he added, “I only ask that, should the need arise for another Servant to be sent, mine would be the first name for consideration. I’m sorry if that’s presumptuous of me, Lady Director.”

“It isn’t,” she assured him, “but that’s not a promise I can make. Who is sent when will depend on the circumstances at the time and nothing else.”

Ritsuka raised his hand again, and when Marie nodded his way, he asked, “Are we expecting to encounter that many Stray Servants, Director? No offense to Senpai and America, but, um, it’s kind of young as a country, isn’t it? Does it have that many legends to draw from for Heroic Spirits?”

Paul Bunyan, Billy the Kidd, Wyatt Earp, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, hell, I wouldn’t have bet against Betsy Ross, although I had no idea what she would look like as a Servant when most of her legend consisted of ‘sewed the first American flag for George Washington.’ That was supposing that the Strays all had to be Americans to begin with, when part of what made America what it was happened to be all of the cultures that had combined and mixed inside of it. It was entirely possible we could see Heroic Spirits from all across time and space, from English to French to Russian to Japanese, Chinese, or even African.

Harriet Tubman. That was another one.

“You’d be surprised,” I answered before Marie could.

“If there’s one thing that previous Singularities have proven, it’s that there aren’t any hard and fast rules about who can or can’t be summoned, so long as they have some connection to the land, the people, the era, or even a Servant already present,” Marie agreed. She was probably thinking of Flamel with that last one. “Given the number of cultures and peoples that have emigrated to the United States, there’s no way to be sure what sort of Servants you might encounter. That’s why we’re still only sending a single extra Servant with you from the start.”

El-Melloi II grunted. “Then that limits the pool of who can be sent pretty significantly, doesn’t it?” He glanced at Nero. “Sorry, Emperor Nero, but it looks like you’ll be getting left behind this time.”

“Mm-mm! I cannot say that I am at all happy to hear that!” Nero said sourly. “However, the Director Lady’s words make much sense, and it is a poor emperor who does not heed the wisdom of others more knowledgeable on a given subject! Mm-mm! Or else you might not have had a job, Court Mage!”

“I’m not...!” El-Melloi II began, and then he gave up and heaved out a sigh. “Forget it. Nevermind.” To Marie, he asked, “So? Who’s going, then? I hope you’re not intending to send me. I don’t much like the idea of having to trek across the entire continental US if you’re all wrong about that focal point and its importance.”

Rika let out a strangled sound of distress, a groan that got caught high in her throat and came out through her nose more than her lips. “I didn’t even think about that!” she bemoaned, horrified. “My legs! I can already feel them aching! And my poor feet, too!”

Even her brother had to grimace, imagining the amount of walking involved. I arched an eyebrow at both of them. “You two *do* remember that this is 2011, don’t you? Planes, trains, and cars?”

The twin looks of relief that crossed their faces was almost funny.

“Only if it really is 2011 the whole way through,” El-Melloi II pointed out, and it was my turn to grimace, because he had a point. “And even then, only if you’re lucky enough to get to stick to major cities instead of having to visit tiny towns in the middle of nowhere.”

And just like that, the horror was back. Mash herself didn’t look all that thrilled either, although she seemed more resigned than the other two were. I couldn’t say I was really looking forward to the idea of walking across the whole country on foot either, so if we absolutely had to, I was going to suggest stealing a wagon or something. If we didn’t have any other options, anyway.

“We’ve also taken that into consideration,” said Marie. “That’s why we’ll be sending Aífe along with the team in the initial Rayshift. As both a powerful frontline combatant and a means of transportation via her chariot, she was the obvious choice.”

She also hadn’t been on an actual deployment since Septem, come to think of it. The fact she wasn’t chomping at the bit like Siegfried probably said something about how successful the Shadow Servant system was.

“Don’t worry, though,” said Da Vinci with a smile. “I’ve been working on upgrading those e-bikes you originally took into Septem. They should be ready for you to take with you into America, too, just in case.”

“I’m gonna look like Chun Li by the time this is over!” Rika lamented. “I won’t be cute and cuddly at all!”

Who?

Ritsuka, this time, wasn’t the only one who got the reference, because Emiya chuckled quietly and El-Melloi II’s face twisted with something like disgust. Romani might have, too, because he coughed a laugh into his fist and turned his face away, like he was trying to hide a grin.

“Hey, hey, what’s wrong with Chun Li?” Mordred demanded.

“What isn’t?” drawled Jeanne Alter, who seemed like she was doing it just to stir up shit.

Mordred drew up in her seat, snarling, “You — !”

“IN ANY CASE,” Marie said loudly, speaking over them both, and Mordred grudgingly settled back into her seat, glaring at Jeanne Alter’s smug grin, “the team will first investigate the echo, and then the focal point itself directly. Depending on what is or isn’t found, the investigation will continue as the circumstances dictate. The Masters will be accompanied by Mash, Emiya, Arash, and Aífe, and the Rayshift will be in twelve days, on the morning of March 29th. If there are no other questions?”

She cast a steely look around the room, as though daring someone to ask something or start something again, and when complete silence greeted her, she nodded.

“Good!” she said. “Then make whatever preparations you deem necessary over the course of the next week and a half. Dismissed.”

And the briefing ended there.