

Chapter LXIII: Caput Imperialis

Pax Romana going down did change everything, and one of the things it changed was our timetable moving forward. Ideally, we would have been within spitting distance of the United Empire's capital city first, so that we could jump on the moment of confusion and weakness when their defenses were crippled and they weren't prepared to fight back. If we timed it right, we might even have been able to take Romulus out with a single decapitating strike — maybe even literally.

Unfortunately, we were still on an island hundreds of miles away. Even at our best speed, they would have hours to recover and start to rebuild, and by the time we got there, they would be ready instead of reeling. If they were feeling particularly vulnerable, it was entirely possible they'd use the Grail they had to summon reinforcements and fill out their missing members.

There was nothing we could do about that. Since we couldn't change it, we were just going to have to deal with it as and when it became relevant.

The only thing we *could* do was get moving as quickly as possible, because even if the United Empire was going to have more time to fortify their position than we wanted, it was still the better idea to give them as little time as we possibly could. That meant that one of the things we were going to have to do was cut our breakfast plans short.

“No way!” Rika complained when that part came up. “I refuse to miss one of Emiya's home-cooked meals!”

“Do you want to be *wearing* it in fifteen minutes?” I asked her pointedly. “Because I can guarantee you that it won't be in your stomach long if you eat right before we get on the chariots and ride back to the mainland.”

“Urk.” Rika paled. “I-I, uh... M-maybe...it might be worth it?”

“It's going to taste a whole lot better going down than it will coming back up.”

Still, she wavered, and then I got a bit of backup from an unexpected source.

“P-perhaps it might be best to wait to eat,” Nero suggested. “Mm, I'd rather not waste such delicious food in such a way.”

“We can eat when we rendezvous with Jing Ke and Lu Bu,” was the compromise I offered. “They should have information on what to expect from the capital itself, and that's going to be vital to attacking it.”

Rika looked torn. “But Emiya and Queen Booty already went through the trouble of cooking...”

“We barely had the chance to set up the cookware before Caligula showed up,” Emiya chimed in. “We aren't losing anything by waiting an hour or two to meet Jing Ke first.”

“We really didn't get very far,” Boudica agreed.

That was enough for Rika to give in.

“This breakfast better knock my socks off,” she muttered.

Fortunately, there wasn't much to do to get ready to leave. The tent, the cookware, most of the supplies we were using to camp out — they were projections made by Emiya. It was as easy as him dismissing them and letting them vanish.

Once everything else was taken care of, those of us who could — Spartacus, Emiya, Arash, and El-Melloi II — took to spirit form while those of us who couldn't split off into our separate groups again. As it had been the last few times, Ritsuka and Mash came with me and Aífe while Nero and Rika rode with Boudica.

“Are we even sure that Jing Ke and Lu Bu will be headed towards us?” Mash asked quietly as we mounted up.

“The *expected* route is for them to head straight for Roman territory,” Aífe answered. “If it was me, I'd go where they didn't expect me to go. Easier to shake a tail that way.”

“Going west or south won't take them anywhere,” I agreed, “and going northeast towards the wall is what the United Empire would expect them to do, since it's the shortest path back to allied territory. That leaves east, and Rome is east.”

“They might even have split up,” said Aífe. “Lu Bu could lead the enemy off Jing Ke's trail by heading towards the wall, leaving Jing Ke to safely go east towards Massilia and return to Rome unnoticed.”

It wasn't a guarantee, but we couldn't afford the time to search for Jing Ke any other way. Either we met up on the way to the United Empire's capital or we missed each other and we had to go on without a layout of the city. My hope was that Jing Ke *would* be coming east and come to investigate our presence when he sensed our Servants moving towards the capital.

“Then let's get going,” said Ritsuka. “We have to get to Jing Ke first, just in case.”

“Heh.” Aífe smirked. “You don't need to tell me that, Master.”

With a crack of the reins, we lurched into motion, and water sprayed as we rode out onto the sea. Under the morning sun, we left behind Stheno's island and the colossal waste of time visiting it had wound up being.

Based upon our maps, the trip from the island to the United Empire's capital was just about three quarters as long as our trip from the camp at Thiers to Rome had been, around eight-hundred kilometers. Fortunately, the first half or so could be covered entirely on the water, which meant no twists and turns, no major changes in elevation, and nothing we had to swerve around to avoid hitting. It was just a straight shot from the island to the shore.

My own stomach was very grateful for that.

It still took about an hour for us to cross that distance, and my range gave me an extra thirty seconds or so lead on our landfall. More crabs were in the sand and under the surf, and all sorts of bugs burrowed into the ground beyond and flew in the air above, including some dragonflies and some regular flies.

The transition from sea to shore was a little bumpy, made worse for me by my perpetual problem with new bugs constantly coming in and out of my control. It was a bit more of a shock than usual too, going from the sparse insect population on Stheno's island to the emptiness of the sea and now back to something more lively, but there was nothing in my stomach to heave up so the nausea was more manageable than usual, too.

This time, we didn't stop at the nearest town halfway through the journey, and to my knees' displeasure, we kept going. The smooth Spanish coastline quickly transformed into rolling hills, although Aife and Boudica both did all of us mere mortals the favor of weaving through them along the much more even dips and valleys instead of racing atop the peaks.

Eventually, however, the rolling hills smoothed down into much gentler and milder slopes as the terrain evened out. Vegetation became sparser and thinner, with patches of green among islands of bare earth and the occasional copse of thin, white-barked trees.

It was like some eclectic mishmash of the Mojave Desert and the Great Plains, though I'd really only ever seen pictures of either. Some strange combination of untouched nature and inhospitable no man's land, where the landscape couldn't seem to decide whether it wanted to be dry, barren clay or lush grassland.

Master, Arash said not too long after we'd pulled out onto this leveler ground, I'm sensing a Servant's presence in the distance.

I closed my eyes. Focusing on talking with him made the queasiness in my gut more bearable. *Is it Jing Ke?*

Can't tell from here, he answered. Whoever they are, they're headed in this general direction, but they don't seem to be course correcting to make directly for us.

That had to be Jing Ke. That Arash could sense him at all with his Presence Concealment meant that he was testing us to see if we were all going to track him down — he wanted to see if we were friend or foe. If our entire group changed course and started running him down, he would probably disappear and sneak away instead of risking us being reinforcements from the United Empire.

Break off and go make contact, I ordered him. Give him whatever information you think he needs to know we're allies, then make your way back to the group so we can pool intelligence.

Roger that, said Arash.

And Arash? I wished he was corporeal just then, so I could give him a meaningful glance. It lost its weight when I couldn't even be sure exactly where he was. Don't take any chances. We're too close to the end to lose anyone to something stupid.

I imagined a smirk curling on one side of his mouth. *Got it. Be back in a jiffy.*

I didn't feel him go, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw him briefly phase into existence on a nearby hilltop, appearing only long enough to push off before he vanished again. In the distance, atop another hill, he reappeared again for only a moment, then kicked off the ground and disappeared.

A neat trick. I had to wonder how much momentum he conserved when he went to spirit form like that. It reminded me a little of a few Breakers I'd known in a past life.

My attention turned towards the woman driving the chariot I was standing on. *Ajfe. Arash is going to check on a nearby Servant presence, so we should pull over and set up camp.*

Out the corner of my other eye, I saw her nod. *Understood.*

She pulled on the reins gently, and her horses obeyed instantly, going from full gallop to a canter to a trot. We slowly eased to a stop as Boudica did the same behind us.

"Miss Taylor?" Mash asked. "Is something wrong?"

"HEY!" Rika called over. "Why are we stopping?"

"Arash picked up a Servant's presence," I said, pitching my voice so Rika and Nero could hear me. "He's going to investigate to see if it's Jing Ke or not."

Rika went ramrod straight, her eyes widening. "Does that mean it's time for breakfast?"

This girl is ruled by her stomach, isn't she?

"Yes, Rika. That means it's time for breakfast."

And a break in either case, because my knees could definitely use a breather. Making the first half of the trip over the sea had cut some time off that we would have lost having to otherwise follow a road on land, but we had still been standing in those chariots for the better part of an hour.

"YEAH!" Rika cheered.

"Mm-mm!"

Emiya and El-Melloi II both shimmered into existence. "I guess it's up to me to get started," Emiya said.

"I'll help," Boudica offered.

Emiya nodded. "It's appreciated."

She smiled in return. "It's no trouble at all."

"Another home-cooked Emiya meal," Rika said excitedly. "I can't wait! Oh, it's gonna be so good!"

"Mm! My own stomach cries out impatiently!" Nero agreed. "They say that pleasure delayed is all the sweeter, and I intend to see if they're right!"

“Who’s they?” Rika asked.

Nero shook her head. “I haven’t the first idea!”

As Emiya and Boudica picked out a spot off to the side to set up and cook — aided by liberal use of Emiya’s projection magic — the rest of us dismounted the chariots, and as I had a few days ago, I sat myself down on the edge of the well, letting my knees rest. Aífe hopped down without trouble, and Mash helped Ritsuka down, whose legs looked about as steady as mine felt.

“Senpai,” Ritsuka murmured, keeping his voice low, “what if that Servant isn’t Jing Ke? Or Lu Bu?”

“That’s why the rest of us will stay on guard,” I answered, just as low, “and why Aífe will be keeping an eye out.”

“Understood,” said Aífe.

“I’ll set up a bounded field, too,” El-Melloi II added, having apparently heard us. “It won’t be my Stone Sentinel Maze, but if our mystery Servant is hostile, it should at least buy us a minute to get our bearings and get ready to fight.”

“Good idea,” I said. In fact...

I reached around and swung my bag across my chest, unzipping the main compartment to let my ravens out. After they’d unfolded into their active configuration, I threw them up and they took off, wings flapping as they climbed into the sky.

Between them, El-Melloi II’s bounded field, and my bugs, we would have more than enough warning, if the mystery Servant was an enemy. I didn’t know what Jing Ke looked like, but the fact he was Chinese meant I should expect him to be wearing traditional East Asian robes, so that would be a quick and relatively easy way of telling, although not necessarily the most reliable.

El-Melloi II eyed my ravens as I set them loose, but didn’t comment on them again, and instead, he turned away and set off to put up the bounded field he’d talked about. Several minutes later, I felt the shift in the air, something indescribable that nonetheless felt oh so subtly different than things had been before.

Good. Hopefully, it wouldn’t wind up being necessary, but an abundance of caution would always be welcomed, especially with the sorts of things we already *knew* we were going to have to deal with going forward.

Ritsuka and Mash eventually drifted over to Rika and Nero, and they began chatting amiably — punctuated by Rika and Nero’s boisterousness here and there — while we waited. It wasn’t long either before the heavenly scent of Emiya’s cooking wafted up my nostrils either, and my stomach gurgled eagerly for whatever dish he was concocting even as I sat there.

“A puppetmaster, are you?” El-Melloi II asked, having wandered back over my way.

“I’m assuming you’re talking about my magecraft.”

His cheek twitched. It was there and gone too quickly for me to see if it was a frown or a smile.

“I’ve met one or two of your kind throughout my tenure at the Clock Tower,” he said.

Somehow, I very much doubted that. Because if he had, we would be having a very different conversation right now.

“Aside from a certain troublesome woman, there was a cantankerous old codger,” he went on. “He’s the only other person I’ve seen who controlled so many familiars simultaneously.” He eyed a fly that buzzed past, like he suspected me of making it take that path, even though it was just doing its own thing. “Of course, the way he did that was a little...unsavory.”

I had a feeling El-Melloi II had a real talent for understatement.

“Unsavory how?”

“He split his soul among them,” El-Melloi II said simply, like he hadn’t just dropped a huge bomb in my lap.

Split his *soul*?

“What?”

El-Melloi II nodded. “It wound up as disgusting as it sounds. He divided himself up amongst his worm familiars and used their biomass to force them into a shape resembling his human body. In practice, he himself was made up entirely of blood worms.”

That...actually sounded a little bit like my bug clones. Or like an avenue my powers could have taken, if they’d been configured just a little bit differently in the Locker. Some part of me recoiled at the idea, but another part of me couldn’t help but notice how convenient it might have been if I could literally become a part of my swarm and reconstitute myself from replacement bugs if I ever got injured.

It would have made this prosthetic of mine a whole lot less necessary.

“I can’t help but notice a similarity.” He looked at me through the lenses of his glasses, eyes sharp as blades. “After all, it should take a lot of brain power to control that many bugs at once, at least for the average mage.”

Ah. So *that* was his game.

“So this guy that you’re talking about,” I began. “What happened if he lost too many of his familiars?”

El-Melloi II clicked his tongue. “He had to...*acquire* more biomass to construct replacements from. My understanding was that it usually came from unwitting bystanders.”

In other words, he slunk off, found the nearest oblivious pedestrian, and then he used his familiars — blood worms, El-Melloi II had called them — to eat them, for lack of a better word. Whether he

just processed the raw biomass the way Panacea could or had to do it the more natural way, by breeding, well, I guess that was academic.

The worst part was, I could imagine *that* as another way my powers could have wound up working, too. It was one of the times I was actually thankful I'd gotten what I had, because a version of me that had to make more bugs by consuming flesh? That had to *eat* people? *I* would have been one of the candidates for the Slaughterhouse Nine when they visited Brockton Bay again.

"I can at least assure you that my powers don't work like that," I told him. "I don't make more bugs except the long, tedious way, and I'm limited to taking over what's already there."

"Long, tedious way?"

I arched an eyebrow at him. "Have you ever seen a queen bee get fertilized?"

He grimaced. "Ah."

You asked, I thought dryly.

"I won't say I've never attacked someone with my bugs that way," I allowed. There were numerous examples, but Alexandria was the one that came to mind first. "But my options were somewhat limited, so I had to fight the way that I could."

El-Melloi II worked his jaw. "I've noticed you put it that way both times it was brought up. You call them powers, not magecraft."

Damn. He'd noticed that, had he?

"So?"

"So no self-respecting mage would be that...I guess 'plebeian' is the best word for it," he said. "Even that Emiya calls his magecraft what it is."

Double damn.

"I don't know what you're expecting me to tell you —"

"The truth would be nice," he snarked.

"Then the truth is that I was told to keep it all a secret," I transitioned smoothly. "Da Vinci and Romani both have at least some idea, but Director Animosphere had my past classified, for her eyes only. If you want to hear the full story, you'll have to wrangle permission out of her, and I'll wish you the best of luck."

Especially since she currently didn't have a body. Hard to ask a question of a woman who was a spirit stuck inside of a machine, right now.

El-Melloi II's eyebrows rose. "*Animosphere?* There's a Lord of the Clock Tower involved?"

“As for my terminology,” I went on, “there’s a very simple answer to that: I’m not a mage. I’ve been able to do what I can do since I was fifteen, but up until I joined Chaldea, I didn’t even know magecraft existed.”

His brow furrowed. “Then how —”

I arched an eyebrow at him, and he scowled.

“That’s all you’re going to tell me, isn’t it?” he muttered.

“It’s more than I’ve heard,” Aífe said suddenly, reminding us that she was still there.

Well, El-Melloi II, anyway. I hadn’t forgotten.

He startled. “Wha — you! How long have you been sitting there?”

“The entire time,” she answered simply. “I just didn’t feel the need to insert myself into your interrogation.”

“Interro — I had legitimate concerns!” he snapped back at her. “You may have had more of a chance to get to know her, but I’ve been with the team only a day or two!”

Aífe shrugged. “That may be the case, but look at who she’s surrounded herself with and how much they trust her, in spite of her secrets. Do you think someone like Arash Kamangir would follow her so willingly if he didn’t think her character was beyond reproach?”

El-Melloi II clicked his tongue and reached into his jacket, pulling out a brassy gold case. He flicked open the clasp and from inside withdrew a long, thin cigar, then closed it with a click and stuffed it back into his pocket so he could grab a lighter. A moment later, he was puffing on the cigar as the end smoldered.

My nose wrinkled. I’d never been fond of tobacco smoke. The smell had always been something that irritated my nostrils.

“Tch. Fine,” said El-Melloi II. “I can tell when I should retreat. I’ll let it drop for now, but the first chance I get, I’ll want to talk to this Director Animusphere about this.”

“More power to you,” I said nonchalantly.

You’ll have to come back to Chaldea and wait an extra week or two for that.

I wasn’t sure he’d want to go that far. Frankly, Boudica was a lot friendlier to us, and I wasn’t sure *she* would be willing to come back with us when this was all over.

“The bounded field’s up,” he announced, changing the subject abruptly. “Like I said, it should buy us a few moments to get ready if the Servant Arash went to find turns out to be an enemy.”

And with that said, he walked away, leaving me alone with Aífe.

“A bit nosy, that one,” she commented. “You have to realize, of course, that he won’t be the last one with questions like that.”

My lips drew tight. “We’re in a Singularity, hunting down a Holy Grail, fighting side by side with the resurrected spirits of dead heroes who wield their legends in the form of weapons. What I can do with bugs is tame by comparison.”

“It is,” she agreed. “However, the thing about all of that? You just compared yourself to a Servant.”

I froze.

I... Technically, I had, hadn’t I?

“I won’t pry,” Aife went on. “After watching that El-Melloi come up against the walls you’ve built, I know better than to try and push past them. What you have to understand, however, isn’t that controlling the bugs themselves is in any way special. It’s the sheer magnitude of how many you can control at once that makes so many of us raise our eyebrows.”

A long, slow breath hissed out of my nostrils. Yeah, I already knew that, didn’t I? That had always been the *real* strength of my powers, my ability to act through them in so many directions simultaneously. It seemed that much was still unusual, even in a world with actual magic.

Master, Arash’s voice jumped into my thoughts. *We’re on our way back.*

I straightened. *Jing Ke?*

Yeab. I could almost see him nodding. *It was pretty dicey for a minute there, but I managed to prove that I’m on the side of Rome.*

My cheek twitched. Dicey? I hadn’t felt him drawing on any magical energy from me. *Everything okay?*

We didn’t come to blows, so everything’s fine, he assured me. *We’ll be back in a few minutes. Jing Ke’s dressed in white robes.*

Good. It helped to know what we should be looking for.

I stood from my spot sitting on Aife’s chariot and took a brief second or two to stretch my legs. My knees were still a little sore, but there was nothing else to do about that right now.

“Head’s up!” I called over, pitching my voice to reach the others. “Arash is on his way back with Jing Ke!”

“Just in time for breakfast!” Boudica called back from the spot where she and Emiya were cooking — on an old-fashioned iron stove that he must have projected. This one, I think, I was willing to give him a pass on, since it wasn’t really that complicated.

“It’ll be done in a few minutes!” Emiya added.

“Yes!” Rika cheered. “I’m hungry enough to eat a whole hippo!”

“I would happily down an entire roast boar!” Nero proclaimed.

“I don’t think either of those is on the menu,” Mash said, quieter than the other two.

“And we’re fresh out of zebras,” said Ritsuka wryly.

Rika spun to face him suddenly, face serious and arm outstretched as she pointed at him like a disobedient dog.

“No!” And scolded him like one, too. “Bad Onii-chan! Bad! That’s my schtick!”

“You’re not the only one who watched Disney movies as a child,” Ritsuka retorted mildly.

Rika was undeterred.

“But making cheesy, wildly inappropriate references is my job in this party! It’s the thing I’m best at! Who else is going to make everyone laugh when they should be crying?”

“No one!” Nero agreed.

“Goddamn right!” said Rika. “This trauma bus has no brakes! It *needs* a little comic relief!”

“Take it from me, laughter is even more important when things are bleak.”

Rika turned with a gasp as Arash materialized from thin air, a smile on his face.

“Arash!”

Arash shook his head. “And somehow, I’m still the only one here without a patented Rika nickname. I’m starting to feel left out.”

“A tragedy,” Ritsuka said in a voice as dry as bone.

“H-hey, comedic genius needs appropriate timing!” Rika blustered. “I can’t reveal Arash’s super awesome nickname just willy nilly, you know! It needs the right moment!”

Ritsuka translated. “She can’t actually think of one.”

“Onii-chan! My secrets!”

“Because you can’t get married without at least some, right?” Emiya asked as he appeared at her shoulder.

“Being a little mysterious is the most important part of being a woman!” Rika insisted. “Just ask Senpai! She’s the most mysterious person here!”

“Don’t drag me into that,” I told her.

Rika gasped. “Wait!” She turned an accusing glare at Emiya. “You’re supposed to be making breakfast! Its flavor quotient drops by half if it’s burned!”

“Flavor quotient?” Mash muttered to herself.

“Boudica is handling the finishing touches,” Emiya answered. “I’m just here to take care of something first.” He arched an eyebrow. “Unless you’d like to eat standing up?”

Rika considered that for a second. “Will it let me eat sooner?”

Emiya shook his head, exasperated, and stepped off to the side towards a clear patch of land. He held out one hand, squared his shoulders, and set his stance. “Trace, on!”

And one after another, he formed the pieces of a tent, a gazebo really, that he propped up on sturdy wooden posts wedged into the ground with a Servant’s strength. A safe place to eat, that was what he was making, and given his track record, a picnic table wasn’t far off into the future.

I turned towards Arash. “Jing Ke?”

Arash, in turn, looked to the empty air next to him, and after a moment, a petite figure in a white robe with long, black hair and delicate features materialized there, a smile on her face. Yes, very *obviously* “her” face, because even if I discounted the very daring slit up the sides of her robe that revealed almost as much as a bikini did, there were too many other clues that were equally hard to ignore.

You know what? It’s happened one time too many for me to be surprised anymore.

King Arthur was a woman, Emperor Nero was a woman, what was one more Servant whose gender had apparently been recorded wrong?

“You were right, Arash,” Jing Ke said in a silky alto. “They certainly are a lively crowd, aren’t they?”

“Never a dull moment,” Arash agreed.

“Jing Ke!” Nero cried, grinning broadly.

Jing Ke inclined her head shallowly. “Emperor Nero.”

Nero’s expression morphed into a frown, and she planted her hands on her hips sternly. “You never told me you were one of these Servants, too! Mm-mm!”

“Ah.” The corner’s of Jing Ke’s eyes crinkled as she smiled. “It seemed easier that way. You’ll have to forgive me.”

She didn’t sound sorry at all.

“There are more important things to talk about besides,” Aífe chimed in. “Like the layout of the United Empire’s capital.”

Jing Ke opened her mouth.

“Breakfast, everyone!” Boudica called over. “Emiya, if you’re done, could you lend me a hand carrying the food?”

Emiya glanced at his makeshift tent, gave everything a once over with a critical eye, and then, apparently satisfied with how it all turned out, went over to help out Boudica.

“We’ll talk while we eat,” I slid into the conversation smoothly. “You can explain everything we need to know over breakfast.”

“I’m sure Emiya and Boudica made enough for you, too,” Arash said.

Jing Ke smirked. “Well, with an invite like that, how could I resist?”

So we all huddled in under the big tent Emiya had pitched, taking seats at the large, wooden picnic table that he’d made with that oh so versatile projection magic of his. Emiya and Boudica arrived with breakfast and plates shortly thereafter, with everyone already allotted a portion and anything extra set on a communal tray.

“Obviously, I know Emperor Nero,” Jing Ke said, “and I recognize the fearsome Aífe, if only by her reputation, Boudica, Spartacus, and Mister Court Mage over there —”

“I could have sworn I told you my name was El-Melloi II,” El-Melloi II said.

“— but the rest of you are strangers to me.”

Our group of Chaldeans sent each other silent looks. Mostly, it was the others looking to me for what to say.

Time to be a leader, I guess.

“We’re from an organization called Chaldea,” I began as I cut up my food.

What followed was one of the most informal debriefings I’d ever gone through. Between the four of us and our accompanying Servants, we described our purpose, our mission, and our names, one person picking up while the others chewed their food. Somehow, I still wound up doing the most talking, but not nearly by much, and by the end of it, we’d also wound up explaining what we’d accomplished so far in this Singularity.

“Tiberius, Caesar, Scaeva, and Caligula?” Jing Ke mused. “I guess that makes us four to four, then. Damn, I thought I was going to come out ahead.”

My brow furrowed as I digested that little tidbit. Did she mean...?

“Four to four?”

“Lu Bu and I also killed four enemy Servants,” said Jing Ke. “Although I guess I’m technically ahead, since all of mine were actually emperors.”

She launched into an explanation of her own, skipping over the trickery she'd used to get the three emperors manning Hadrian's Wall to let down their guard and focusing instead on the actual killing, and then she went into her infiltration of the United Empire's capital and the Servant who aided her — Marcus Junius Brutus.

“Brutus is here as well?” Mash asked, surprised.

I didn't blame her. He was the last Heroic Spirit I would have expected to side with either empire, simply by virtue that they *were* empires. The man had killed his own friend for the sake of preserving what was left of Roman democracy.

“Was,” Jing Ke corrected. “He didn't plan on making it out, and killing Hadrian was definitely the last thing he did.”

“Hadrian's dead?” asked Arash.

So Jing Ke explained yet more about the plan she and Brutus had concocted, a scheme where he helped her infiltrate the deepest echelons of the United Empire through his Noble Phantasm so that the two of them could each take down a target. She had gone for Constantine the Great because he was the easier target, and he had gone after Hadrian because he was the only one who could get close enough without getting caught until the deed was done.

By the time she was finished, we had all finished eating, and Emiya and Boudica silently cleared the leftovers away while we listened.

“He allowed me to get away with this,” she said, and she pulled a tube from somewhere in one of her voluminous sleeves. “This is everything he managed to figure out about the United Empire's Servants, from their true names to their Noble Phantasms.”

She twisted off the lid, and when she shook it out, rolls of parchment spilled onto the table, curling at the top and bottom like shriveled leaves. Neat Latin script filled out every sheaf, and although I couldn't read it, I could still see the amount of care and detail that had been put into every word, with the intent that whoever received it — probably meant for Nero's eyes, actually — would have more than enough to plan the United Empire's downfall.

“Well, that's convenient,” Emiya remarked. “The two most troublesome emperors are already dead, and intelligence on the enemy's forces gets dropped into our laps.” He peered down at the parchment. “Very thorough intelligence, too, by the looks of it.”

I know, I thought, I'm not used to things going this smoothly either.

“I'm not so sure we should be looking too closely at this horse's teeth,” El-Melloi II said, puffing on the final remnants of his cigar.

“Mm,” said Nero, quieter and more solemn than usual. “A man died to see this reach our hands. I cannot call that convenient.”

“No,” Ritsuka agreed. “Me neither.”

My lips pursed. No, I guess it didn't really matter that he was a Servant to begin with, did it? Maybe it was easier to sacrifice when you were already dead, but that didn't make that sacrifice less meaningful.

"It *does* make things a bit easier on us, at least," I said instead. "And this gives us a definite edge over the enemy."

I reached out and smoothed out one of the pieces of parchment, careful not to touch the ink, but it was no more intelligible to me than it had been a minute ago. Too bad Winslow had never offered a Latin course.

"I haven't had the chance to look at them myself," said Jing Ke, "but there should be more than enough there to help us figure out how to take down the United Empire's remaining Servants. Brutus was meticulous like that."

I didn't doubt it.

"So what's the plan, Senpai?" asked Rika seriously.

Not for the first time and definitely not for the last, I wished I had a watch. I was going to have to put that suggestion in for Da Vinci after this Singularity was over and done with.

"First, we're going to go over every word of what's written here," I said, jabbing my index finger against the table. "That should give our food enough time to settle. Then, once we know our enemies' weaknesses back to front, we'll come up with a plan of attack."

My head turned back towards the road, as though if I looked hard enough, I could see the walls of the United Empire's capital in the distance.

"And when we're ready," I went on, "we'll make our way to the capital and put an end to this civil war."

One side of Arash's mouth curled upwards. "Romulus won't know what hit him."