

Chapter CLXXVIII: Bargaining Chip

If there was any doubt in my mind that Archer was a Servant, then a quick glance at him with my Master's Clairvoyance dispelled it completely. An Archer class Servant — and that was all we had. Skills, Noble Phantasms, those were all still obscured, still complete unknowns, and his face was so generically European that there were any number of historical figures he could have been from the last two hundred years. We had nothing else to go on, except for that English accent, and even that was virtually useless.

A Servant working under Accord. I should have expected it the instant Celtchar suggested we come here.

“We need to set up a meeting with Accord,” I told him. I watched his face and his expressions closely, but I could have been standing across the room and seen the way he froze in place. “We heard that you can arrange that for us.”

Archer eased back into motion, resuming what he'd been doing and adopting the easygoing air he'd possessed when we walked up. His gaze, however, was just a little bit sharper than it had been before.

“Did you, now?” he said, affecting nonchalance, as though he really was nothing more than a simple bartender. “I'm afraid I can't be of service to you in that regard. I'm not sure where it is you heard I could do such a thing, but even if it were so, Mister Accord is quite notorious for being rather...exclusive with his clientele. One does not simply request a meeting with the man who runs Boston.”

Who told you about me and what do you want? He might as well have shouted it.

“We met Celtchar down south,” said Ritsuka. “He told us Accord could help us with our mission, and you could get us a meeting with Accord.”

Archer paused again, a momentary hitch in the motion of polishing the glass in his hands that was already sparkling clean.

“Is that so?” Archer said mildly. “I suppose that *does* rather explain a few things, doesn't it? Such as how it is you managed to waltz right in here so easily. Dear Greg looks as though Satan himself arose up out of the ground demanding entrance.”

Mash and Rika both glanced back at Greg, but Ritsuka didn't take the bait and kept his gaze on Archer. When Archer set the glass down on the bar with a heavy thud, he didn't jump a little the way they did either. A part of me was strangely proud of him.

“Very well, then,” said Archer. “Let's talk business, shall we? And on the first order — what should I get for the five of you?”

“We're underage,” Ritsuka said immediately.

“Onii-chan!” cried Rika.

Archer smiled, and there was something predatory in the way it curled his lips. “Come, now. You came to a bar and you weren’t prepared to imbibe a little?”

“We also don’t have any money,” Ritsuka said.

Archer’s eyebrows rose. “My, but you *are* in desperate straits, aren’t you, young man? It seems you came here quite ill-prepared, with not a penny to your name and making demands quite outside your apparent station. Throwing Celtchar’s name around has been enough to get you this far, that much is true, but I’m afraid it won’t be enough on its own to get you much further.”

Emiya clicked his tongue, folding his arms. “Tit for tat, is that it?”

“We’re not mercenaries for hire,” I said immediately and coldly, shutting down the idea before it could take root.

Archer shook his head. “As I said, Mister Accord is quite the busy man, and he would not spare much thought to a group coming calling, not even throwing around an...ally’s name. Unless, of course, you could provide him some reason why perhaps he should.”

“Is the end of the world not a good enough reason?” asked Ritsuka.

Once again, Archer froze, and slowly, his head turned Ritsuka’s way, eyes unblinking. “Oh my,” he said, although he still sounded calm and in control. “That’s quite a bold assertion to make, young man. Do you mean to imply you’re here to stop it? You’ll have to forgive me, but Mister Accord would find that quite a bit harder to believe than even I do.”

“The fact that they’re in the company of Servants doesn’t lend that a little bit of credence?” asked Emiya.

“Those dastardly folk out to the west would be as well, wouldn’t they?” Archer said silkily, mustache twitching in what might have been a small smirk. “Though I must admit, it would be quite bold of them to send you after Mister Accord so brazenly. I wouldn’t have thought they had the courage to attempt something so...desperate.” His eyes narrowed on us, and something cold and sharp filled the air. The tension in the entire room ratcheted up a notch, and everyone in our group felt it, stiffening. “Although not perhaps as foolhardy as it might at first glance seem. It is eminently possible, after all, that Celtchar did not give up his name *willingly*.”

So many instincts urged me to engage, to fight, to respond to the hostility with my own hostility, but I forced myself to relax, to ease back against the sudden pressure, and almost conversationally, said, “So he didn’t stop here himself, then.”

Archer’s gaze turned to me, and there was something a little more cautious and a little less hostility in his eyes. “You believed he might?” he asked carefully.

“He didn’t say,” I answered, “only that he had to report back to his boss about what happened with the Grail.”

Instantly, Archer went ramrod straight, and the narrowed eyes flew wide open. “The Grail, you say?” he said. “And just what happened with the Grail that he thought to report on it to his boss?”

Instead of answering, I closed my mouth and leaned back from the bar, and after a moment, Archer's surprise faded into resigned understanding. He huffed a short laugh, more at himself than anything else, it seemed. "Not for my ears, is it?"

"You *are* just a bartender, aren't you?" I said nonchalantly. Behind me, Emiya quietly chuckled.

"Touché," said Archer. "Very well. I shall inform Mister Accord that guests have arrived bearing relevant information regarding the Grail. I'm sure he'll arrange a meeting with you and your compatriots at his earliest convenience. In the meantime..."

He slid a glass my way, a tall thing with a long, thin stem and a slanted, oblong bowl, half full of a dark, red wine that looked more like blood than anything else. I hadn't seen him pour it.

"Compliments of the house," he said smoothly. And then he reached under the bar to pull out a stack of thin, laminated menus, slapped them down atop the bar, and spread them out cleanly so that one wound up in front of each of us. "Do feel free to peruse the menu while you wait. If your information is legitimate, then I'm quite sure Mister Accord will only be too happy to cover your tab."

After that, he stepped away, calling out across the room, "Greg, my dear boy! I'm afraid the bar will be closed for the rest of the day! Urgent business, of the kind that I simply must handle immediately — you understand, yes?"

"Ah — y-yes, of course!" Greg called back.

"Good lad," Archer murmured, and with that taken care of, he left, taking the stairs up to the next floor. I picked up the menu, leaving the glass of wine untouched, but with my bugs, observed Archer as he went about securing the room so that he could make the phone call to Accord.

"Ah, thank you!" Mash said belatedly. If Archer heard her, he didn't reply.

"Is it just me, or did that guy seem kinda squirrely?" Rika muttered so that only we could hear. Despite her words, she still picked up the menu, although she didn't look it over immediately. She was still watching the stairway where Archer had gone.

"It's not just you," Ritsuka replied quietly. He, too, picked the menu that had been set out for him, and he started reading it, looking over the options. "That guy... I think that's the first time since Fuyuki that we've met a Servant who actually tried to hide his true name."

"Abe," Rika pointed out instantly.

Ritsuka grimaced. "Aside from him, I mean."

"It could be that this Accord is not so loyal to this mysterious boss as he pretends to be," said Emiya. "In that case, Archer hiding his name is in preparation for his inevitable betrayal...or that's what I think, at least."

"It'll depend on who it is that's holding his 'leash,'" I said. "The Accord I knew really only cared about one thing, and everything else was in service of achieving it."

Which was not the same as saying he could be easily controlled, only that we, as the Undersiders, had known what levers we could use to convince him to play ball with us without making a mess of things. How that worked inside a Singularity, well, that would depend on whether he believed he was even in one. Convincing him of that might be the hardest part.

If we could get him on our side, however, that would be a massive boon — provided, of course, that it was the real Accord and not a pretender making use of the name. It wasn't like that would have been the first time something like that happened, and I could think of several reasons why someone would want to, starting with covering up his actual death so that there wasn't a power vacuum.

Ritsuka glanced at me. “If this *is* the real Accord, then what should we expect? You said a couple of things about his powers when we had that briefing, but not so much about what he's like as a person.”

“He's a supervillain, right?” Rika added. “Which means *presentation*.”

She was referencing something, but I didn't recall if I'd seen it yet. We'd been watching a lot of movies the last few months.

“More than you know.” I took a second to think about it, to gather my thoughts and consider how to word it. “Accord is...prickly. Particular. He likes the world to be a certain way, to have a certain *order*. He can react pretty violently to things that disrupt that order or clash with his harmony. It might not be all that inaccurate to say it's a lot like OCD.”

Rika groaned. “He's not a hoarder, is he?”

“No,” I said. “In fact, he'd find the mere idea of living like that to be physically repulsive, and he'd probably use his power to concoct a doomsday device that wiped it off the map.”

Rika snorted and Ritsuka chuckled a little bit, and even Mash let herself smile, but it was all wiped away when they realized I wasn't joking.

“Wait,” said Rika, “you're serious about that, Senpai?”

“Like I said, he can react pretty violently. He's not above having people killed for interrupting a business meeting, for example, or even for just speaking out of turn. He's *that* obsessive about it.”

Ritsuka turned dubious eyes on his sister, and she recoiled defensively. “What?”

“Maybe you should sit this meeting out,” he suggested tactfully.

“What?” she squawked. “I can totally keep my mouth shut! That's me, Miss Quiet! No jokes, no nothing! Totally zipped!”

“He might be offended by your hair,” I told her bluntly, and she clutched suddenly at the long, red locks that fell in gentle waves down the back of her neck.

“What about my hair?” she said. “It's cute! It's adorable!”

“It’s asymmetrical,” I cut in. “The first thing you’d have to do is remove the scrunchie and comb it down, maybe pull it into a ponytail to make it look more professional. How long has it been since you last got it evened out?”

She opened her mouth, paused, and then, sounding horrified, asked, “That matters?”

“I have Da Vinci do mine every six weeks or so,” I said. “A single hair or two out of place might not mean anything as long as it’s not too noticeable, but I would still make sure it’s brushed to perfection, just to be sure, and if you’ve let it go too long without getting everything evened out by a barber, that’s something he might notice and freak out about.”

“I could probably do a decent job for her, if I had to,” said Emiya, “but it might be better to find a local shop and have it done professionally.”

Even so, I wasn’t sure it was a good idea. Rika’s personality was...loud. She was bubbly and she stood out. I thought that no matter how much she tried to fit herself into a mould for meeting him, he would find something about her to hate, even if it was just the way she fidgeted when she was nervous. It was probably better to remove her from the situation entirely for her own safety, so that Accord couldn’t find anything objectionable about her to use as an excuse.

“I think it might be smarter if you and her do some investigating while Ritsuka and I meet with Accord,” I said instead. “There’s a lot we still don’t know about what’s going on here, so checking out the situation on the street and maybe picking up a few local phones might be a better use of your time.”

And less dangerous for Rika, I didn’t say.

“You might be right,” Emiya agreed, frowning. He cast a subtle look around the pub. “Back in the briefing, you said Accord was just a local crime boss, right? And yet, by all accounts, he’s the one running the city right now, isn’t he?”

That was another thing, yes. Local government collapsing during a catastrophe wasn’t unfamiliar to me, not as someone who had lived in Brockton after Leviathan came through and devastated the city, but there was obviously *some* form of larger scale government in this Singularity, and it wasn’t the federal government. What had happened to put Accord in charge here, and what did that mean for the situation for the rest of the country?

“Not you, too, Emiya!” Rika complained. “Hey, I can totally be quiet and sit still! I really can!”

“That doesn’t mean that you should have to,” I replied reasonably. “There’s no shame in the fact you aren’t cut out for tense political negotiations. If you’re just going to be sitting there and trying not to move or speak the whole time anyway, shouldn’t you be out doing something else more productive?”

She pouted. “Ugh. The stupid thing is, I know you’re playing me, Senpai, but you’re also right.”

“I guess that means I’ll be leaving the others to you, Mash —”

“*Don’t* give full names or a complete list of our forces,” I cut in sharply. “Not in a pub owned by Accord where we have no idea if or how many people might be listening in.”

“Right.” Emiya shook his head ruefully. “Heh. When I think about it like that, I almost pity this guy if he tries to start something.”

“Of course,” said Mash confidently. “I won’t let anything happen to Miss Taylor or Senpai.”

Emiya smiled. “Good girl.”

It got a small smile and a pleased flush out of Mash.

“Do we think Accord will have another Servant with him?” asked Ritsuka.

“Almost certainly,” I said. “If Accord is as critical to keeping everything running smoothly as Archer and Celtchar implied, then there’s no way a single Servant is all he has protecting him. That’s not even counting his Ambassadors — but those are less of a problem to our team, so I’m not quite as worried about them.”

Citrine and Othello should still be around, at the very least, although with so much unknown and so much that seemed out of place for the world of Earth Bet as I knew it, it was entirely possible that the rest of them had managed to escape getting killed by the Nine. In fact, until we knew where and when the divergence was centered, it might be better to assume that they *were* still around.

“And if he knows we have Servants on our side...” Mash began.

I nodded. “Then he’ll definitely bring one or two of his own. It’ll tell us something about what kind of forces he has at his disposal, at least.”

“And Master and me?” asked Emiya. “What should we be on the lookout for?”

I glanced his way, thinking about it for a second. “The Teeth,” I decided on, “as well as a Tinker named Blasto. He should actually be dead by now, but it’ll tell us a few things if he’s still alive. Don’t confront him if you *do* find him, because he’s not really a big problem. The Teeth, however, are much more of a concern. Again, they should have moved on by now and made their way up to Brockton, so if they’re still in Boston, that means something changed.”

And it changed maybe even as far back as Leviathan. It sounded absurd to me, but that might just be the divergence: Leviathan choosing another target to attack instead of Brockton Bay. It just seemed silly that something like that was enough to throw off the course of proper history enough to cause a Singularity.

“Do we avoid them, too?” he asked me.

“As much as you possibly can, yes. The Butcher is a problem we don’t want to be borrowing,” I said, thinking of how a fight between them would go. If it was just Emiya, I didn’t think he’d have too much of a problem, but with Rika in the line of fire, the last thing we needed was a big brawl with the Butcher and her little group of psychopaths. I also didn’t want to think of what might happen if the Butcher died, because the last thing we needed was for that inheritance to pass to *me*.

“Just prioritize Rika’s safety. Don’t get into any fights you don’t need to. And above all else, *never* kill the Butcher. Remember the briefing I gave on their powers and how they work.”

Emiya turned to Rika. “Does that work with you, Master?”

“Hey, I’m all for punching the teeth out of the Teeth,” said Rika, “just as long as I’m not in range of whatever bullshit they start flinging around afterwards. So if Senpai says we’re just on a scouting mission, that works for me. I’ll do my best Snake impression.”

Ritsuka paused and looked upwards thoughtfully. “Does that make Doctor Roman Otacon?”

A look of sheer delight crossed Rika’s face, and her mouth pulled into an enormous smile. “It does, doesn’t it!”

“Wh-who?” Mash asked uncertainly, unknowingly echoing my own thoughts. Another reference that only the twins seemed to get — and Emiya, who chuckled quietly.

Rika set a heavy hand on Mash’s shoulder, and very gravely, told her, “Cinnabon, when this is all over, we’ll have to introduce you to the wonders of video games and all of the glories they contain.”

My insides squirmed, even as Mash hesitantly said, “O-okay...?”

The twins still didn’t know. Mash had maybe a year left, maybe less, and no one had seen fit yet to tell them anything at all about what would happen or why. Romani, there was such a thing as sparing them the pain of having that knowledge hang over them for the rest of the Grand Order, but wasn’t this getting to be a bit unreasonable?

A brush against my prosthetic, setting the fine hairs on end, as though a hand reaching out to offer me comfort. Arash — no, of course he must have figured it out, too. Whether or not he knew the specifics, his eyes were too sharp not to realize something was amiss.

“We can worry about that later,” I said, shoving that uneasy feeling in my gut as far away as I could. “For now, pick something off of the menu for lunch.” I gave them all a brief glance. “And I shouldn’t need to remind any of you, no alcohol.”

Ritsuka and Mash agreed easily, but it was intended mostly for Rika, who groaned and grumbled, “Spoilsport.”

“You’re not missing out on much,” Ritsuka told her.

“Still,” Rika pouted.

I didn’t tell them that standard poison cleansing spells — ones that El-Melloi II likely taught them a long time ago — should have been enough to fix any of the pitfalls of alcohol. Better not to encourage bad habits, so if they hadn’t figured it out and no one else had told them, I wasn’t about to.

And then, we all turned our focus entirely to the menus Archer had given us, perusing them for the lunch options. It was quite a bit more extensive than I would have expected, given everything. The

Black Rose wasn't exactly tiny, but compared to some of the bars and banquet halls I'd been to for one function or another as a kid, it was downright cramped, and yet it had a menu more than varied enough to make it seem all the more professional. Not nearly all of it was strictly Irish either, although I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting. Different versions of haggis all the way through? Or maybe that was Scottish...

It was some twenty minutes before Archer finished his discussion with Accord, and given Accord, it wouldn't have surprised me to find out it had been timed down to the second. When he was done, he returned immediately, descending the staircase and sliding back behind the bar with a grace and ease that belied his apparent age.

I'd never bothered to ask Flamel how much that actually influenced him as a Servant. It hadn't seemed relevant at the time, but face to face with another Servant who likely matched him for age, it seemed all the more pertinent a detail now.

"I've spoken with Mister Accord," Archer announced.

"And?" said Ritsuka.

"He is a very busy man," Archer replied. "As he would be, if you truly believe the rumors that he is in fact the one running this city. Quite understandably, he has a strict schedule and many concerns that require his attention during the day, and it is very, very difficult to arrange a meeting with him on such short notice. He is...particular, you might say, about things being done in the proper order, and he prizes *discipline* in his...associates and subordinates."

Emiya huffed and muttered, "He really is obsessive-compulsive, huh?"

But for a sideways glance, Archer ignored him.

"Ordinarily," he went on, "Mister Accord would not even entertain meeting with you so suddenly and unexpectedly, and you would be required to perform some small task before arranging a meeting at a more suitable time through the proper channels — as a way of showing your respect for his time, of course."

"What kind of small task?" asked Ritsuka.

Archer's mustache twitched in what might have been a smirk.

"Oh, I'm afraid it's not for me to say." His voice, however, contained only the slightest trace of his amusement, so faint that I might not have noticed if I wasn't looking for it. "The task is entirely at Mister Accord's discretion, and so it could truly be anything. It is not, however, something with which you fine people need concern yourself, because he is willing to forgive the slight in light of the information you claim to possess."

Of course. The Grail was simply too big a draw for even Accord to pass up a chance to learn more about it. With something like that, he would have been able to pull his plan off almost instantly, wouldn't he? A utopia exactly as he imagined it, where all of his grand ideas could be brought to fruition with no more effort than the stroke of a pen.

A world like *that* would no doubt have created a Singularity, too. All the more reason to make sure he didn't try and get his hands on it, and the trick to that would be convincing him that he wouldn't actually get what he wanted.

"When does he want to meet, then?" I asked.

Archer slid me a glance. "As I said, a meeting on such short notice would ordinarily be impossible. However, because of the sensitive nature of the information, he was willing to make room in his schedule this afternoon. Three o'clock, sharp. He will be quite...*displeased* if you are late."

"We'll be there," Ritsuka promised.

"Excellent!" Archer clapped his hands together and smiled. "Now, Mister Accord has also instructed me to see to your accommodations in the meantime, as a show of goodwill. For today, your meals will be, as they say, on the house." From seemingly nowhere, he produced a pen and a pad of paper. "What would you like to order?"

The twins looked to me to go first, almost like they were asking for permission, so I took the lead and slid my menu back towards Archer. "I'll start off with the Caesar salad," I said as though this really was an ordinary restaurant, "and for the main dish, a Celtic Chicken Sandwich."

The scratch of pen on paper was nearly drowned out by the murmur of the other patrons behind us as Archer scribbled my order down.

"Ditto on the salad," said Rika, "but make my sandwich a Black Rose Burger!"

"M-me, too!" said Mash. "Um, I've always wanted to eat a hamburger."

"Did mine not count?" Emiya asked, amused.

Mash shook her head. "N-no, it was really good, Emiya! B-but I don't have anything to compare it to, so I'd like to try another one. Um, no offense!"

Emiya chuckled. "It's fine, Mash."

"I'll go with the Hearty Onion Soup," said Ritsuka, "and then a Roisin Dubb Club."

Archer dotted the final period with a nod and a solid stab of his pen, stuffed both into a pouch on the front of his apron, and then, wearing an absolutely immaculate customer service smile, told us, "Excellent choices! I'll deliver these to the chef and let him know you're at the front of the line. In the meantime..."

He procured three more glasses, these ones tall and sturdy and meant less for wine and more for regular drinks. One by one, he dipped each below the bar, and with a gurgle, filled them up from the tap. When he was done, he slid each one to one of the others, and it was only a handful of seconds before three fizzing drinks sat in front of the twins and Mash.

"Coca cola with a splash of rum for the adventurous lady," he said smoothly, nodding towards Rika and her glass of bubbling black. Then, to Ritsuka and his glass of bright green, "A Midori Sour for

the gentleman.” Lastly, to Mash and her pink drink, “And a Dirty Shirley for the young lady looking to dip her toes.”

Archer spread his arms gregariously. “Enjoy!”

And then he walked away again. The twins and Mash, instead of diving in immediately, looked to me again, almost like they were asking permission. In fact, I think they were.

Internally, I sighed.

“Go ahead,” I told them. “Just drink it slow and stop if you start to feel tipsy. Ritsuka, Mash, you two especially. Drunk is the last thing you want to be when we have to meet Accord later.”

That made them hesitate a bit more, but they still reached out and took tentative sips of their drinks, and they seemed to like them well enough, by the surprised delight on their faces. I would have been more worried about poison — half the reason I hadn’t touched the wine Archer had poured for me — but they had weathered the toxic fog in London with nothing more than complaints about its smell, the same toxic fog that had nearly killed me inside of half an hour.

My bigger concern really was them getting drunk.

The three of them nursed their drinks while we waited, and eventually, we wound up taking seats at the bar instead of standing around. Some twenty minutes later, Archer returned carrying a large silver platter, and when he lifted the lid, the smell hit me, and my stomach gurgled as though it had just realized at that moment exactly how hungry I was.

By the sly grin on his face, Archer knew it, too.

He distributed our meals and we dug in, starting with the appetizers and salads, and enjoyed our lunch all the more so because it was free. Archer stayed the whole time, just a few steps away, pretending he wasn’t keeping an eye on us the whole time. He was even courteous enough to let us take a few minutes for our food to digest once we were done eating before coming back over to retrieve our plates.

“Oh, man, that hit the spot!” Rika said, pleased, as she reclined in her chair as much as she was able.

Emiya at least had the sense not to tease her about whether or not it was better than his food in front of Archer.

“Your meals were to your liking, I take it?” Archer asked demurely.

“It was really good, yes,” said Mash. “Thank you, Archer.”

“I’ll be sure to pass your compliments on to Mister Accord,” said Archer.

“On that subject,” I began, “where are we supposed to be meeting him?”

“There are many places where Mister Accord conducts matters of business and state,” Archer replied, “but for matters such as this...” He retrieved his pen and notepad and began scribbling

down directions in a tidy, looping cursive. “The John F. Kennedy Federal building is a fifteen minute walk from here — ten, if you don’t dawdle. You have...” He paused to check his watch. “Almost two hours before your meeting with him.”

He ripped the sheet off the pad with a single smooth motion and held it out to me, an almost mocking smile on his lips, “I trust that is enough time for you to find your way there?”

Emiya shifted, but I didn’t rise to the bait, and I took the piece of paper without hesitation. “Of course. Thank you, Archer.”

If he was put off by my lack of reaction, he didn’t show it. “Not at all,” he said. “In fact, this has been a genuine pleasure. If your negotiations with Mister Accord end...amicably, then I will see you later for dinner. After all, Mister Accord *did* say *all* of your meals today are on the house.”

“How generous.”

And with Accord, it was either a blatant attempt at some other game or an honest expression of goodwill, maybe even both at once. Denying him might be considered enough of an insult to sour things if we wound up needing his help again.

“We’ll be sure to take him up on it,” said Ritsuka.

We left the Black Rose with full bellies and exactly what we’d entered for, but nowhere to really go where we could talk more privately, so I turned left and led the group down the street to the open marketplace, where we could blend in as we walked. Only once we were safely there and just another part of the sparse crowd did I open up the topic of what to do next.

“Mash,” I said, “do we have any idea where the nearest Terminal is?”

Mash blinked. “Um...” She looked around, head swiveling back and forth. “There’s...actually one nearby, Miss Taylor.”

That brought me up short, and I nearly twisted an ankle forcing myself not to stop walking. “There is?”

Mash nodded and pointed off to the right. “Yes! In...that direction.”

I followed her finger to the long, marble building that bisected the large marketplace, specifically to the rounded dome that sat in the middle like a smaller, greener version of the famous capitol building in DC. An interior view granted by my bugs showed a narrow corridor running through the center, surrounded on both sides by boutiques and open air restaurants and various other shops that wouldn’t have been out of place at the mall in Brockton.

“Well, that’s convenient,” said Rika. She wasn’t wrong.

“Come on,” I said, and we made a beeline for it. Fortunately, there weren’t that many people out and about, owing either to the cold, the time of day, or maybe the day of the week, so we didn’t have to fight a crowd to make it first inside the building and then down the comparatively cramped hallway, which was still wide enough to fit all of us walking side by side without issue.

Our luck ran out, however, when Mash stopped abruptly in the middle of that dome and said, “It’s here. This is the Terminal, Miss Taylor, Senpai.”

The banner of text above us, declaring, “This building has served the people of Boston as the central marketplace of the city since its dedication in August, 1826,” seemed almost to mock us.

“Wait,” said Rika, “*right here*, right here?”

Mash nodded. “Yes.”

“But we can’t do that in public!” Rika cried, and her brother winced and looked around, glancing surreptitiously about the place. We were alone enough that her outburst hadn’t been heard, but several people in adjacent shops paused and glanced our way, then lost interest when there wasn’t any more shouting.

“We can, actually,” I said, and when Rika gave me a weird look, I went on, “El-Melloi II taught you how to make bounded fields to keep out innocent bystanders, didn’t he?”

Understanding lit up their faces, and Rika shook her head, lamenting, “Why didn’t I think of that?”

And so they set about doing just that. I wasn’t sure the secrecy was really all that necessary, to be honest — it would all likely have been written off by the locals as capes doing cape things — but the privacy it afforded would be convenient. It would also mean that we didn’t have to worry about any of those locals putting in a call to the Protectorate or whatever forces Accord had replaced them with.

Once the site was secure and our privacy assured, Mash set down her shield in the middle of the hall and we contacted Chaldea. Marie’s face appeared above the shield, a familiar blue hologram with all the colors nearly washed out.

“What did you need?” she asked immediately, all business.

I explained the situation to her as quickly as possible, bringing her up to date on our objectives, our progress towards them, and our plans, and then the inevitable snag that we probably should have considered much earlier.

“We’re going to need some local currency,” I told her. “Accord is footing the bill for our lunch and maybe our dinner as a matter of courtesy, but I’d really prefer not to put ourselves too deep in his debt by relying on him and his money for everything going forward, and I’m not sure it’s a good idea to try tapping into my younger self’s account.”

“Wait,” said Rika, “Senpai has a bank account at this age? Weren’t you, like, fifteen in 2011?”

Without looking over at her, I explained vaguely, “Protectorate heroes are government agents, Rika, a form of law enforcement. You didn’t think we did that for free, did you?”

Rika opened her mouth, paused for a second, and then muttered, “Now that you mention it...”

“Don’t worry, Rika,” Romani chimed in from off screen, “I thought the same thing, at first.”

“Depending on the point of divergence, that account might not even exist,” Marie added sensibly. Her lips pursed. “I’ll talk to Da Vinci. I have an idea, but I need to run it by her to see if it’s possible.”

“How long do you think it will take, Director Marie?” asked Ritsuka.

Marie shook her head. “The time differential for this Singularity is...inconsistent. Just like that echo point, it keeps fluctuating, so there’s no way of saying for sure. But even if it remains exactly as it is right now, it should only take a few hours for us to arrange, so if you can find another Ley Line Terminal or just return to this one, we should have an answer for you by your dinnertime.”

That was...better than I’d feared, but worse than I’d hoped. In an ideal world, they would have had a solution for us before we even called them, but in an ideal world, we would have had a lot more backup and whole teams’ worth of Servants to help solve these Singularities. With things the way they were, a few hours was actually a pretty good turnaround.

“Then depending on how things go with Accord, we’ll contact you again either before or after dinner,” I decided.

“Understood,” Marie agreed with a nod, and then hesitated a moment. She worried her bottom lip. “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you to be careful. You know best of all that Accord is...”

Neurotic. A basketcase. Homicidally obsessive-compulsive. As likely to kill us if we did anything he didn’t like as he was to make demands as restitution for any perceived insult.

“Yeah.”

And also more than capable of setting up a Rube Goldberg device to catch us with later. Hopefully, we would only have to deal with him once.

Marie grimaced, but let the point drop, and the hologram winked out, disappearing. Mash bent down and picked her shield back up, then turned to me, “What now, Miss Taylor? Without any money, we...”

Didn’t have many options for how to get anything we might need, from food to lodging to passage through a toll booth, if it came to that.

“I trust the Director and Da Vinci to come through for us,” Ritsuka said confidently, and then he sighed. “But for now, we can’t really do anything, can we? A-ah, in a way that’s legal, I mean.”

“We could always knock over a drughouse, couldn’t we?” Rika said blithely. Mash and Ritsuka both looked at her incredulously, and she folded her arms defensively across her chest. “What? It’s not like any of that money was earned legally to begin with! And they’ll get it back when this Singularity is corrected, won’t they?”

“It’s not the worst idea,” I allowed.

“S-Senpai!” Ritsuka choked out.

“But if any of them exist here in Boston,” I went on, ignoring his outburst, “they’ll more than likely belong to one of three groups: Accord himself, Blasto, or the Teeth. Considering Blasto likes to grow his own supply, probably the Teeth or Accord.”

“Oh.” Mash breathed a sigh of relief. “A-and we really don’t want to steal from Mister Accord right before we meet with him, do we?”

“It would sour negotiations, yes,” I answered dryly. A hum vibrated in my mouth. “If we knew where it was, we could visit the public library and do some research there, but it’s out of my range at the very least.”

The building where we were going to meet Accord wasn’t, on the other hand, although it was pushing the edges, but I was being very careful about how much I dedicated to feeling it out. Catching Accord’s attention with my bugs — especially when I wasn’t sure if he had ever met my younger version to recognize the power — wasn’t part of the plan.

“I might be able to help a little with that,” Arash said as he rounded the corner.

“Arash!” Rika and Mash cried.

“Enjoy your clothes shopping?” I asked him dryly.

Because he had slipped into one of the nearby boutiques to grab a turquoise button-up and a pair of jeans, ditching his armor for the sake of blending in. With the sleeves rolled up the way they were, he... actually looked kind of dashing. I was honestly surprised that the girl he had chatted up at one of the shops hadn’t tried to slip him her number.

I was less surprised that he’d swiped them in the first place. Unlike Emiya, he couldn’t magically make a change of clothes to fit in.

“It’s for a good cause,” he said with an apologetic grin. “More importantly, I found something we can use to navigate the city while we’re here.”

And he held out a folded up piece of paper, crisscrossed with lines and names — it was a map, I realized. One that would presumably tell us where all of the major landmarks and most important buildings were so that we weren’t running around blind and didn’t have to try and get stolen phones working.

I wasn’t Lisa. I couldn’t know someone’s unlock code just by staring at their keypad for a few seconds.

Carefully, Arash unfolded the map, and then set it down on the nearby table and smoothed out the wrinkles until it was mostly flat. Unerringly, his finger traced across the paper and landed on a point.

“There.”

We all crowded around the table and leaned over, peering down at the map, where the words **Boston Public Library** sat just above his fingertip. Even Aífe had materialized, safe in the privacy of the bounded field.

“And we,” he said, dragging his finger across the paper, “are over here.”

He tapped a point several inches away, almost three miles, going by the map’s scale, labeled **Quincy Market**. It would take us close to an hour to reach it on foot, although significantly less so if we rode the bikes. The trouble was, we just didn’t have time to go there and start doing research, not at the risk of missing our meeting with Accord. We needed to be as presentable as possible, and I needed to coach Mash and Ritsuka in how to act around Accord.

I started to make adjustments to the plan in my head. Rika wouldn’t know what to look for, not the way I would, but she could at least find out about a couple of very specific things. And if she could find those things in the library, then there wouldn’t be any need to scout out suspected hideouts for the Teeth or any of the other local gangs, and therefore no need to risk getting into a fight with the Butcher or anyone else who was more trouble than they were worth.

It wasn’t what we were here for. If something happened right in front of me, I wasn’t sure I could stop myself from interfering, but I had at least enough sense to know better than to pick a completely unnecessary fight.

“Alright,” I said. “Here’s how we’re going to do this. Rika, you take Emiya and go to the library. I want you to look up a few things so we can get an idea of what’s happening here. Specifically, I want you to see what you can find on the Teeth, Blasto, and other gangs here in Boston, and then the Undersiders up in Brockton Bay.”

“Ugh, studying,” said Rika with a grimace. When I arched an eyebrow at her, she quickly folded. “Fine, fine. The Teeth, Blasto, the gangs in Boston, and the Undersiders in BB. Got it.”

“I’ll keep it in mind, too,” Emiya added. I nodded to show my appreciation.

“Arash will keep an eye on things from the nearest rooftop with a good view inside the JFK building,” I continued, “while Aífe, Mash, and Ritsuka will accompany me to our meeting with Accord. Aífe should stay in spirit form in case we need surprise reinforcements, but the rest of us are going in normally.”

“I may not like it, but I can understand the reasoning,” Aífe affirmed.

“Don’t...we still have over an hour before our meeting with him?” Ritsuka asked uncertainly.

I grimaced. “We’re going to need it.” Looking him straight in the eye and hoping I could convey the gravity of the situation, I told him, “I’m going to need to give the two of you a crash course on how to deal with Accord.”

And hope that he hadn’t gotten any worse than the last time I had to negotiate with him.