

Chapter CLXXIX: An Accord

“The most important thing to remember is not to speak out of turn,” I told Ritsuka and Mash.

“Only speak when spoken to. If he doesn’t address you directly, then err on the side of caution and let me talk instead. Don’t fidget, don’t slouch, do your best to sit straight the entire time.”

“Wow,” said Rika. “This really sounds like being sent to the principal’s office.”

I did my best not to react, because when I thought about it that way, she had something of a point. It was just that going to the principal’s office tended to be far less lethal than meeting with Accord.

“I-I wouldn’t know, but, um, this Accord sounds very strict, Miss Taylor,” said Mash.

“I’ve already explained to you why.”

“You did,” Ritsuka agreed, “but somehow, it seemed like something a lot easier to deal with until you started talking about what not to do in front of him.” He smiled weakly. “Is it...too late to back out?”

“If you two don’t think you can do this, then I can meet with him alone,” I allowed, because it was better if they were completely committed and confident than uncertain and hesitant. Being nervous would make it *more* likely they would do something that triggered Accord, not less.

“But then, if something happened, there wouldn’t be anything I could do to help,” Mash said softly.

And that seemed to firm up Ritsuka’s resolve, because his back straightened and he said, “We can do this, Senpai. If Accord has more Servants, then the last thing we should do is send you in alone.”

Ironically, alone might be when I was safest. It would be easier to keep the situation from devolving, although maybe not as much so as when I had held all the cards in that meeting shortly after my identity had been blown by Tagg.

“I know you can, Ritsuka,” I said instead. “That’s why we’re going over all of this. It won’t be the same as actually having to face him yourself, but we’re going to do what we can to prepare you guys for what he’s like.”

“Suddenly, I’m glad I’m not going with you guys,” Rika said dryly. “Studying might be boring, but at least the computer isn’t gonna get on my case about slouching.”

I was as good as my word. In the hour of time we had to spare, I drilled them on Accord’s habits and eccentricities to the best of my abilities, and even put them through a handful of mockups under the cover of that bounded field. Whether or not the security cameras could see us, I didn’t know, and it didn’t really matter. Anyone watching — provided they weren’t all closed circuit to begin with — would only have seen a group of people sitting at a couple of benches and talking.

By the time two o’clock rolled around, we were as ready as we possibly could be and Mash and Ritsuka were as prepared as I could possibly make them in the time we had. There was still an hour

before our meeting with Accord, but I was giving us enough leeway to make it to the JFK building, get through security, and put any finishing touches we needed to get ready.

“Do you remember what I asked you to look up?” I asked Rika before we split up.

She blinked at me for a second, nonplussed, and then recited, “Uh, the Teeth, Blasto, the gangs in Boston, and the Undersiders in Brockton?”

I nodded. “Good.” Turning to Emiya, I asked, “Can you project me a hairbrush?”

“Sure.” In a flash of light, he had one, a simple purple thing that looked like it had belonged to a teenage girl, and he handed it over to me. I shoved it into my utility pouch, and in the same motion, retrieved a nondescript black hair tie. “Any particular reason you wanted one?”

“To make sure we’re all presentable while we wait for the meeting time,” I answered bluntly as I tied my hair back into a low tail. “I wasn’t kidding about having hairs out of place earlier.”

Emiya’s eyebrows rose towards his hairline, but he didn’t protest. “It should last more than long enough, so feel free to dump it in the trash or whatever when you’re done with it.”

“Noted.” I unstrapped my Last Resort and its sheath, and these, I handed over to Aífe. “I want you to meet us inside instead of going in with us. I’ll ask for this back then, after we’ve made it through security.”

She accepted it with an approving nod. “Smart.”

And then, back to Emiya and Rika, I said, “We’ll contact you once the meeting’s over and we’ll all meet back here to contact Chaldea. Hopefully, things will go well and we can head back to the Black Rose for dinner.”

Rika gave me a mock salute. “Roger wilco, Senpai!”

“Just don’t get into any trouble,” Ritsuka told his sister.

She snorted and grinned at him. “Shouldn’t that be my line? I’m just going to the library. You’re the one about to go and bargain with a supervillain — imagine what Mom would say to that!”

Ritsuka’s lips curved into a smile. “I’m not sure she’d believe any of what we’ve been through, but I think that part definitely wouldn’t be the one she struggled with most. *I’m* not the one who’s best friends with a Roman Emperor.”

“Oh my god, could you imagine the look on her face when I introduced them?” Rika said with laughter in her voice. Her grin slowly died. “Seriously, though. Don’t you dare get hurt, Onii-chan. I only have the one brother.”

“Don’t worry, Senpai,” said Mash. “I’ll protect both Senpai and Miss Taylor no matter what.”

Rika smiled again, a little more subdued but no less honest. “I know you will, Cinnabon. Just don’t think you’re allowed to get hurt either, okay?”

“Looks like you’ve put the fear of God in them,” Emiya commented to me. “All of this over a neurotic guy with a big brain.”

“Good,” was my reply. “Accord came up with a plan to solve world hunger and became a villain when the government refused to even entertain it. No one here should underestimate all of the ways he could screw us over if we piss him off even the slightest.”

He hummed. “Well, when you put it that way...”

As ready as we were ever going to be, we made our way down to the other end of the Quincy Market and parted ways there at the exit. Rika and Emiya split off to head southwest for the library, and the rest of us went north towards the JFK building. Older buildings of red brick passed by on our right while newer buildings of concrete and glass stood like monoliths on our left. At the end of the street where it split into left and right turns, we crossed over to the other side and went left, and it wasn’t long before we could see a set of revolving glass doors. They sat deeper into the facade of the building, hidden beneath a slab of stone that jutted out and declared, “John F. Kennedy Federal Building.”

“That was closer than I was expecting,” Ritsuka murmured, because it really had only taken us a few minutes to make the trip.

“Not yet,” I told him. “This is the employee entrance.”

“Oh,” he said. “And even if he let us in, Accord probably wouldn’t like it if we tried to get in through there, would he?”

No. No, he wouldn’t.

We continued on until we reached the end of the building, and then rounded the corner and went until we came around to the front, where some sort of abstract sculpture stood on three legs in the center of the plaza. The words “PUBLIC ENTRANCE” were printed on the glass behind it, along with an arrow pointing towards a set of doors.

Here, Arash slowly spun in a circle, eyes raking over the skyline behind us, and when he completed a circuit, he nodded to himself, turned to me, and pointed at a towering black building not far away. “I’ll set up atop that building,” he said. “It should give me a good vantage point on just about any room you might be in.”

“Right.”

Aífe watched him go until he ducked behind a tree, his stolen clothes dropping limply to the ground as he slipped into spirit form to make the rest of the journey. “It seems that’s my cue, as well.”

“See you inside,” said Ritsuka.

With a nod, she leapt up and onto the roof of the JFK building, leaving just me, Mash, and Ritsuka there alone.

“Are you ready?” I asked the two of them.

They both nodded, resolute. “Mm!”

So we stepped inside, through the revolving doors, off of the concrete slabs and onto marbled tile. We were met immediately by the sight of security — officers in white shirts and black pants with brassy badges and guns, thin archways with unlit light bulbs that could only be metal detectors, and cameras mounted high on the walls so they could watch every angle at once. For an instant, every eye turned our way, scrutinizing us, examining every detail, and then slid off when we made no threatening movements.

Or so they wanted us to think. Most of them were still watching us warily, trying to pretend they weren’t keeping us — and especially Mash — squarely in view. An unavoidable hazard. She just stood out too much in that undersuit, even without the armor. Fortunately, it was also easy enough to mistake it for something else, so even on Earth Bet, the first assumption probably wasn’t anything near the truth.

We made it through the metal detectors without any trouble, thanks to my decision to hand my knife over to Aífe, and meandered our way over to the reception desk. A woman in a crisp pantsuit sat behind it, hair immaculately styled and makeup subtly and tastefully applied. Somehow or another, she seemed vaguely familiar.

“Can I help you?” she asked politely in a clear, melodious voice.

It took me an extra second, a moment of awkward silence that made Ritsuka and Mash glance my way, but...

“We have a meeting with Accord,” I said at length. “For three o’clock.”

...that was Citrine, wasn’t it?

The woman froze, and for a handful of seconds, she was still, staring intently at my face, as though searching for something. My heart skipped a beat in my chest, and I wondered if she would recognize me, if she had indeed met my younger self, and what that might mean for us going forward, but the moment passed and she gave no indication one way or the other. Her gaze swept briefly across to Ritsuka and Mash, and then turned back to the console in front of her.

“Yes, of course,” she said in her best customer service tone. “I was told there were going to be more of you.”

“Our other members had things to attend to,” I said smoothly. “I’m sure Accord understands...efficiency. No need to crowd our entire group into the room when the three of us can cover everything we need to discuss.”

“I see,” she said, and then she typed something in with smooth, precise motions of her fingers, practiced and elegant. “Please proceed ahead to the waiting area. Someone will be along to retrieve you when Accord is ready to meet with you.”

“Of course.”

When I stepped away, Ritsuka and Mash lingered for a second or two more, sensing that something that might just have happened but not knowing what, then followed after me. The woman at the reception desk didn't watch us go, not with her eyes, but I felt her attention on us the entire way as we made our way down the hallway.

"Senpai?" Ritsuka whispered to me.

"It's nothing, Ritsuka."

Or at least I hoped it was. I wasn't sure what it would mean if that *was* Citrine, but I hadn't found any other obvious signs of the Ambassadors in the building yet, and that alone was enough to make me suspicious. It was possible that Accord had them out in the city taking care of other things, but if he was confident enough that he didn't have even one of them here in the building with him, that made *me* a little nervous.

There was no way Accord didn't have some kind of protection with him in the building. If none of the Ambassadors were here, then that was all but confirmation that there had to be another Servant of some kind in here. And, of course, Archer hadn't warned us at all.

We wound up in a kind of antechamber with more than half an hour to spare, so I beckoned Mash and Ritsuka over to me and retrieved the hairbrush Emiya had made for me. With an expression of longsuffering, Ritsuka allowed me to make some kind of order out of his hair, smoothing out the mess left behind by his helmet from our trip over. Once I was done with him, Mash dutifully lined up for her own turn, although her hair cooperated a lot more easily than his.

I wasn't a stylist, but I managed something at least presentable. It was the best I could do just then.

Aiife? I asked, reaching down the thread that connected us.

Here, she replied, and she appeared suddenly from around the corner, out of view of the security cameras. She handed my knife back over to me, and I handed the hairbrush over to her. As I fastened my Last Resort back into place, she crushed the hairbrush, and it vanished into golden motes.

A moment later, she had gone into spirit form. She disappeared from sight, but her presence sat among us like a light blanket, only noticeable because I was familiar with it.

We waited in silence for several long minutes as the clock ticked, and neither Mash nor Ritsuka seemed eager to break it. They fidgeted a little nervously, eyes darting to check the time every minute or so, and I had to resist the urge to do the same.

Finally, however, Ritsuka spoke up. "What can we tell him?"

It was a good question. And mindful of the fact that Accord was probably watching us some way or another, I answered, "As much as we need to. Accord isn't an enemy we want to have, if we can avoid it. The more he knows, the better he'll be able to help us."

He eyed me for a few seconds, and a little uncertainly, he asked, "...everything?"

An old lecture about the importance of reputation sat on my tongue, but that was from a lifetime ago, and even if we told Accord everything we'd done over the past nine months, the only people whose word we had was our own. We wouldn't be able to prove any of it, and that meant we would just come off as inflating our importance.

"If we need to," I settled on. "As and when we have to. Don't just throw it all out from the beginning."

Grimly, Ritsuka nodded.

"Isn't Accord supposed to be an ally, though?" Mash asked. "Miss Taylor and Director Animusphere's briefing had him under the 'ally' category..."

"If our objectives align," I told her. "We're still trying to find out what's going on here, and until we know who this supposed boss of his is or what they wanted the Grail for, we can't be certain of anything."

Are you listening, Accord? I wondered silently. This wasn't us coming here to put ourselves in his debt, this was us coming to see if we could have a mutually beneficial partnership. The information we could give him was just as important to him as the information he could give us was to us. We weren't going to fall in line for him.

At exactly three o'clock, a woman appeared from down the hall, dressed almost exactly like the lady at the reception desk, with her black hair neatly pulled back into a tight bun. She looked the three of us over and said, "Accord will see you now."

"Of course," I said.

"Thank you," Ritsuka added.

The woman simply nodded and said, "Please follow me."

She turned around and began to walk away, heels clacking with each carefully elegant step, and our group fell into step behind her as she led us down the hallway she'd come from. I nudged Ritsuka as we walked, muttering to him, "Eyes forward, head back, shoulders squared."

Ritsuka adjusted his posture immediately, lips pulling into a brief grimace, and then he carefully smoothed his expression over into something flat and neutral. It looked almost unnatural on his face, because I'd gotten used to seeing him with a little smile curling just the slightest at the corner of his lips.

Mash tried to do the same, but she didn't quite manage it, and she wound up looking more serious and focused than calm, with her brow drawn down just a little, her eyes wide open, and her mouth pulled into a tight line.

It was the best I could hope for, given they didn't have a swarm to dump their emotional cues into. I just had to hope they would be able to maintain their composure throughout the meeting so that Accord could keep *his*.

The woman — who hadn't ever given us her name, but might have been another of Accord's Ambassadors — led us down a hallway with vivid blue carpeting and around several corners, past a number of displays that looked like they belonged in a presidential museum, and eventually we arrived at the door to an office. She knocked politely on the door frame, and then announced, "Sir, your three o'clock is here."

A voice I hadn't heard in what felt like a lifetime replied, "Send them in."

The woman took a careful step back, then turned precisely, stepped to the side, and gestured through the doorway.

"Single file," I whispered at Mash and Ritsuka. They nodded stiffly and minutely, as though they were afraid to make too large or too sweeping a movement.

I stepped into the office first, and Ritsuka came after me, followed shortly by Mash, and I was greeted immediately by what looked like a senatorial office, with a large, wooden desk that could have come directly from the Capitol Building down in DC. The walls were plastered with neat lines of pictures belonging to what had to be the people who had called this office home at one point or another going back decades, including a couple I recognized, many I didn't, and a few old enough to have been taken in the earliest days of cameras.

And sitting at the desk, dwarfed by its massive size, was the familiar figure of Accord, dressed in his usual fashion — a crisp, white suit and an intricate mask whose parts moved to mimic his facial expression. His back was straight and his hands were folded primly atop the desk, and he would have seemed far more dignified and elegant if he didn't look like a child pretending at his father's desk.

My attention, however, was immediately drawn away from him and to the other person in the room, a tall, sturdy figure with broad shoulders and an aged, weathered face. As though to contrast the pristine white of Accord's professional business attire, this man wore a silky red Chinese tunic, the kind that fastened up the side and had flaps down the front and back that hung nearly to the ankles. A shock of short gray hair sat atop his head, and he stood with his arms folded behind his back.

If he was wearing a mask, I would have mistaken him for one of the Yangban.

As we entered the room and stepped forward towards the desk, Accord stood up from his chair, leaned over, and extended his hand.

"Good afternoon," he said politely.

I took it and shook. Despite his stature, his grip was strong and firm. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with us."

Following my example, Ritsuka and Mash shook Accord's hand, too, mimicking me and offering the same polite, "Good afternoon," that he had. With that ritual observed, Accord gestured to the three chairs arranged across from his desk and bade us, "Please, sit. Make yourselves at home."

I took the middle one, letting myself sink back into it, but keeping my feet firmly on the floor and my back straight. Once more, Ritsuka and Mash followed my lead, with him on my left and her on

my right. Aífe's presence settled between us, situated so that she could rush to either my or Ritsuka's defense at a moment's notice. I wasn't sure I didn't imagine the way the stoic man standing behind Accord flicked a glance her direction.

Could he sense her there, even in spirit form? It was a discomfiting idea.

"As I'm sure Archer has told you, I would not ordinarily have entertained your group on such short notice," said Accord as he sat back down himself. He folded his hands in front of him on the desk again, and it did not look any less ridiculous than it had before. "The information he claimed you possessed, however, is of great interest to me, and so I am willing to bend my standards in this case. He did not, I must confess, tell me your names."

"We did not tell them to him," I said calmly, choosing my words with delicate care. "Our organization, our objectives, and our identities are all critical information, and giving them out freely to potential enemies can be quite dangerous, to say nothing of doing so in public." As an addendum, I said, "I'm sure a cape such as yourself can understand."

"I can understand your reasoning, yes," he acknowledged. "You have, however, come to me with promises of information, and you seem to be under the impression that I might be of assistance in carrying out this mission of yours. Archer has informed me of as much. I might perhaps be able to help you without knowing the true nature of this mission, but the question of my *willingness* to do so would then be a matter of concern. If you are so reticent to even tell me the vaguest of details, you should understand that such a thing would give me cause to believe it might not be in the interests of myself or my organization to assist you."

He wasn't going to let it go, and I'd known as much going into this, but this was how cape negotiations were — push and pull, give and take, posturing and presence. Give away as little as you can freely and make the other side fight for every scrap so that they could never be certain what you really wanted.

I made a show of frowning, and then pretended to give in. "Very well. If you insist on knowing our names and goal before going further, then I think we can afford to share that much. My name is Taylor Hebert." No reaction, not a flinch, not a curious tilt of his head, not even a shift of his mask. The name meant nothing to him. "To my left is Ritsuka Fujimaru."

Ritsuka inclined his head respectfully. "Pleased to meet you."

"To my right is Mash Kyrielight."

Mash did the same. "I'll be in your care."

And if my name meant nothing to him... Did that mean the divergence went as far back as his moving to Brockton? No, that should be obvious by the fact that he was still here in Boston. Was it instead as far back and as meaningful as the Slaughterhouse Nine's attack? Were the Undersiders still in charge of the Bay, ruling their own little fiefdoms in the aftermath of Leviathan, having never had to contend with Jack Slash and his merry band?

Later. Rika might find something out at the library.

“Our goal here on Earth Bet is to correct a distortion in the course of proper history,” I went on. “To be more exact, an...outside force is meddling in events as they are meant to happen, and that meddling is causing problems that can’t simply be ignored. We have already corrected five other such distortions.”

Accord froze, and only belatedly did I realize that my description was vague enough that there was another conclusion that could be drawn about who and what we were there to deal with. An outside force meddling with the proper series of events as they were supposed to go? Shit. If I’d heard that after Echidna, I might have thought that was *Cauldron*.

“What sort of distortion are you speaking of?” Accord asked tensely. The man behind him shifted minutely, stance widening just the slightest.

“We don’t know,” I answered evenly, trying to hide the fact that I knew what landmine I’d just come very close to stepping on.

A shift in Accord’s posture. “You don’t know?”

“In some cases, the distortion is obvious fairly early. If, for example, we are deployed into a series of islands that does not and cannot exist naturally on any map, then the fact that something has gone wrong is self-evident.” Although Okeanos hadn’t been as straightforward as it seemed at first glance. “Conversely, being deployed into the French countryside would tell us nothing on its own, and only through independent investigation would we be able to discover that Jeanne d’Arc had risen from the grave to exact her revenge on the people who abandoned her to the English. At the moment, Earth Bet is somewhere in the middle.”

For several seconds, Accord’s mask whirled, the parts moving and turning as it cycled through a number of expressions. I had to think it accurately reflected his thoughts as his mind raced through all of the implications in what I’d told him, because there was no way he hadn’t picked up the clues I had dropped for him.

Finally, he spoke: “Jeanne d’Arc rose from the grave to seek revenge, you say, and yet even if it was possible, she could certainly not take revenge upon people long dead, and I have heard of no such thing occurring.”

Here was going to be the tricky part.

“You would not,” I told him. “History, you see, is normally quite robust. As it was explained to me, minor events can be changed or altered, and as long as the broad strokes remain the same, there is no need for intervention. To continue with the example of Jeanne d’Arc, as long as England did not win the Hundred Years’ War and completely take over France, then the exact details of how the French beat back the English aren’t important. It’s only when the specter of France’s savior returns and destroys France herself that things start to deviate enough to cause problems — and even *that* can be corrected without our intervention, provided there isn’t something in place to stop it.”

Accord leaned forward on his elbows. “What might this ‘something’ you speak of be?”

“The same thing whose very mention was enough to convince you to meet with us on short notice,” I said. “The Holy Grail.”

Immediately, his body language closed off, became defensive, so before he could start planning ways to eliminate us, I pushed through. “When a wish is made on a Grail that causes a significant enough distortion in the proper course of history, that moment in time coalesces into a sort of knot called a Singularity. By nature, these Singularities are inherently unstable. They are unobserved knots of space-time, meaning they aren’t acknowledged as a legitimate series of events. If they reach the point where they *can* stabilize and become a part of actual history, then the results would be...catastrophic.”

I wished we had Da Vinci with us just then. She would be better at explaining all of this.

“If this revenant Jeanne d’Arc was an example born of experience,” Accord said stiffly, “then what you are speaking of would be *time travel*.”

“I couldn’t explain to you why it’s not, only that it isn’t technically,” I admitted, “but from our perspective, that’s not the wrong way of looking at it.”

Accord was silent for a moment, and I had to consciously force myself not to fidget or twitch by feeding the impulse into the bugs deeper in the building, where Accord couldn’t or hadn’t managed to exterminate them. The seconds stretched, and out of the corner of my eye, I could see both Mash and Ritsuka shifting nervously. The only thing that stopped me from hissing a reprimand at them both was the knowledge that doing so would only make it worse.

“Your clothing,” Accord said at last, “is unusual but not especially futuristic. The devices on your wrists are obviously some form of technology, but it does not seem far removed from current technology, and that would not preclude the work of a Tinker either. How far into the future have you arrived from?”

“Five years,” I said, and he twitched. “We deployed from March, 2016. The technology that allows us to do so is considered one of a kind.”

Let him think that we had our own Tinker at our beck and call. It wasn’t even strictly wrong, even if Da Vinci hadn’t actually been responsible for most of the technology Chaldea used on the regular. The fact she repaired it all and kept it running smoothly made the difference unimportant, in my eyes.

“You said that the distortion that formed this Singularity is somewhere between obvious and subtle,” he said. “I would have you explain what you meant.”

“Time does not normally skip back and forth two-hundred-and-thirty years,” I answered. He straightened — so he *had* noticed something. Did that mean those Revolutionary era soldiers weren’t a one-off? “The sensors used to determine the era and location of this Singularity detected wild swings between 2011 and 1783. The exact ramifications of that are still a matter of investigation, but the Revolutionary War era militia that Celtchar was fighting down south provided some clue.”

What that clue was and what it meant, we still didn’t know, but Accord didn’t have to know that.

“We do not, however,” I went on, “as yet know much of anything about what wish might have been made on the Grail or how that wish is causing the circumstances we *have* seen. We’re still trying to determine what caused the divergence and what that divergence was, and Celtchar told us that you

could arrange for us to meet with the one responsible for holding civilization together amidst all of the chaos caused by the Grail.”

“Yes,” Accord said slowly, “yes, I suppose I could arrange just such a meeting. Tell me, in order for your mission to be complete, is the removal of the Grail a necessity?”

“Yes,” said Mash before I could get the word out, and Accord’s head snapped around to look at her as his mask contorted into a look of barely contained fury. “The Grail must be removed for the Singularity to be corrected. Once the Grail has been retrieved, the Counter Force will remove all aberrant factors and restore everyone and everything inside of the Singularity to their proper place in history. It will be as though nothing ever happened.”

Accord took a slow, deep breath, and against all of my expectations, managed to calm himself down. The pieces of his mask clicked and shifted back into a stoic, neutral expression, and his voice was even and cordial when he spoke again, “When you say that all aberrant factors will be removed, what precisely do you mean?”

I bit my tongue, and Mash was silent for a moment, then realized that he was addressing her directly. “Ah, I-I meant that all things and people that don’t have a place in proper history will be, um, e-erased, for lack of a better term, and everyone and everything else in the Singularity will be reset to their natural time and place.”

If her stuttering and stumbling bothered him at all, Accord didn’t show it, and I could barely believe my eyes. Every time anyone had hit one of his buttons in our first meeting together, he had looked like he wanted to reach out and strangle them, but now, he seemed almost entirely unbothered.

“I assume that means that, for me, circumstances would revert to the state of affairs as they were at the moment of the divergence?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered. “Wherever and whenever you were at the moment the wish was made that caused this Singularity to form, you would return there. Life would continue on for you and everyone else as though it had never happened. History would be restored to how it was meant to be.”

“I see,” was all he said. “I assume, in that case, that if the Grail were to be retrieved by a third party and a new wish made upon it, the end result would still require your intervention? You cannot simply undo the current damage and allow another to make use of it?”

He wanted it, and he wanted it desperately. Whether he was desperate enough to try to steal it, either from us or from whoever currently had it, I wasn’t sure. No, I was sure, because I had no doubt he was cooking up plans in his head right now, but if he would keep going when he knew the price of them, that part I was a little less certain of.

“That’s right,” I said like I didn’t know exactly what he was thinking. “The Grail doesn’t belong to this era — it was placed here by that outside party I mentioned — and as long as it remains, the Singularity can sustain itself and grow. The Grail must be retrieved and taken into our custody so that proper history can reassert itself.”

What he might have thought of this information, he didn’t say, and his mask remained stoic; he swiftly moved onto the next topic, leaving that one behind.

“You mention this outside party,” he said, “and yet I notice you have not yet given it a name. What does it gain from creating these Singularities?”

“We don’t know.” I hated to admit that to him, because it weakened our position, but a lie would be found out one way or another. “We know his name, but to say it out loud would draw his attention upon us, and the consequences of doing that here and now might be fatal. He didn’t do us the courtesy of explaining the purpose behind all of this, only that it *did* serve his purposes somehow.”

“He shrugged off everything we threw at him,” Ritsuka added quietly, and Accord’s head slowly swung over his way like a pendulum, “and then he killed three Servants with a snap of his fingers.”

“Whatever his goal is,” I continued as though Ritsuka hadn’t spoken, and hopefully any ire from Accord was drawn back to me with his attention, “he made it clear that the only requirement for his victory is for there to be a single Singularity remaining by January 1st, 2017. At that point, his plan will be complete and even our organization won’t be able to stop him. Mankind as a species will cease to exist.”

I looked directly into the eye sockets of Accord’s mask. “When we told Archer that it was a matter of the end of the world, we weren’t lying.”

Slowly, Accord leaned back in his chair, and he spent a handful of seconds in thought. “You have offered me plenty of fanciful claims,” he began slowly, “but I must admit that they fit the fact patterns I have observed, despite the...holes that exist in some of them.”

I held my tongue; he wouldn’t appreciate the interruption, and we had already hit a few of his buttons. I wasn’t about to risk it.

“I will admit that I find it suspicious how convenient those facts seem to be for you,” he said carefully. “They could very easily be a ruse through which you intend to acquire the Grail for yourselves. It is not, after all, an insignificant prize, and if the legends surrounding it are any indication, one that many have coveted for the better part of two millennia.”

I took the risk to cut across him. “We already have five Grails in our possession, if we simply wanted it for its wish-granting capabilities. We could put you in contact with Director Animusphere or Leonardo da Vinci, if you wanted further verification.”

A tensing of his shoulders was his only reaction to my rudeness.

“Nevertheless,” he went on as though I hadn’t said anything, “there are signs to which I cannot simply close my eyes. The Triumvirate’s absence is keenly felt, and my own contacts of a more exclusive sort have fallen silent.”

“The Triumvirate is gone?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

The implications of that...

“Yes,” Accord said tersely, the tension in his shoulders winding tighter. “They and Scion simply vanished. As it happens, these...distortions of which you speak began nearly concurrently with their disappearance.”

...were staggering. Had they been killed? Had they simply been elsewhere when the Singularity formed, escaping its hold by sheer coincidence? Or was there something more behind their disappearance — and Cauldron's as well, for that matter, because I hadn't missed *that* one either.

"When?" And the second I realized my mistake, I tacked on, "did they disappear?"

Accord leaned back in his chair, tilting his chin up just a little. "I have already given you several pieces of relevant information, as a show of goodwill for your own forthrightness. I have not forgotten, however, what it was we were originally meeting to discuss."

The Grail. Of course. Its current whereabouts — as much as we knew them — *had* been the information that originally got us this meeting so quickly.

I took a breath and leaned back myself, forcing my body to relax by letting my tension bleed into my swarm. "We can still tell you what we know about the Grail and its current location, of course," I said evenly, "but that information has obvious value exceeding details that we could find from a quick internet search."

Accord hummed thoughtfully.

"True," he allowed. "By the same token, however, your information only goes for a premium as long as I myself do not readily have a method of obtaining it independent of you. I'm certain that I could discover it merely by making contact with my associate, who would most assuredly inform me of any such critical developments."

"The problem you run into with that sort of thinking is that it only holds as long as your...*associate* doesn't also have a reason to seek out the Grail," I countered. "In that case, you having an independent source of information is all the more vital, isn't it?"

Whoever it is, it's an alliance of convenience, I thought. The instant the Grail entered the equation, you had a very good reason to go behind their back to get what you want.

Like he said, mythology was rife with people who had sought out the Grail, and equally as much so with the tales of what they'd done to secure it. I wasn't sure even my warnings about the end of the world had been enough to convince him over to our side, but whether he wanted the Grail for its own sake or to hand it over to us, he wasn't beyond betrayal of his 'boss' to get it.

"Perhaps it would be," he replied, tone neutral. "Are you volunteering your services in that regard?"

"I'm saying that we *should* have common cause," I said. "The Grail cannot grant you a wish without distorting history, something which will result in the extinction of mankind, meaning that it is in your interests to see our mission succeed. As allies naturally share relevant information with each other, there would be no need for tit for tat or negotiation, because we would share resources in pursuit of a mutual goal."

The mask whirled and clicked, and Accord's mechanical visage regarded me with an almost disappointed look.

“I had you pegged as the practical sort, a pragmatic woman,” he said. “Now, however, you spout idealism as though it is a currency I might spend.”

“Is it any more idealistic than a plan to end world hunger?” I shot back.

He froze. The mask spun through a number of configurations, landing on none in particular for several seconds, and then it closed off into something flat, almost as though someone had set it back to its factory default.

“I suppose it is not,” he said finally. “Very well. You said you had some information on the Grail, but that you had something you desired of me, as well. Might I hear what it was?”

Ritsuka and Mash both let out a long, slow breath as quietly as they were able, as though they’d spent the last several minutes holding it in. Neither Accord nor I acknowledged it, although I was certain he’d heard. Had something happened beforehand that made him mellow out a little?

“As I said before, we need to meet with your associate, the one who is holding things together here,” I said. “You said yourself that it would be possible for you to arrange that for us.”

“You did say that,” he said with a nod, “and I did say as much myself, didn’t I?”

“As for the Grail,” I went on, “Celtchar fought another Lancer class Servant while a Rider dove into Cape Cod Bay to retrieve the Grail. How and why the Grail came to be there, we don’t know yet, but Rider raced off with the Grail in hand, heading due west, and only once his allies were safely away did Lancer retreat. We spoke with Celtchar afterwards, and it was by his suggestion that we came to you in the first place.”

Accord paused a moment, seemingly taken aback. “I see. If you’re right, then it would mean the Grail is in the hands of the western faction.”

“Celtchar didn’t say much,” Ritsuka interrupted. “Can you tell us about them?”

Accord’s expression shuddered, pieces of his mask vibrating for a moment as he fought down whatever violent impulse arose inside of him, and a little curtly, he said, “My understanding of their structure and organization is unfortunately far too rudimentary to be of much use to you. You would be better off asking that question of Coil, who is more directly engaged with them upon multiple fronts.”

Dread sank into my belly like a stone. I already knew the answer before I even asked, “What does Coil have to do with this?”

Accord regarded me plainly. “Should it not be obvious? The one who is currently maintaining the essential pillars of civilization here in the east, the one who is leading our own Servants in combat against the western faction, and the one whose auspices sustain every aspect of life here, they are all one in the same.”

Shit. Fuck. This was one time I really didn’t want to be right.

“That person is Coil.”