

Chapter III:

“We were supposed to be doing this with a proper catalyst,” the Director grouched. “At least then, we could have had a decent idea of which Heroic Spirit was going to be summoned. We were supposed to have more *control*.”

She wrapped one arm across her chest, cradling the elbow of her other arm as she chewed on the end of her thumbnail, her brow furrowed. It was a nervous habit I’d seen her adopt a few times, something she did when she was worried or anxious or just thinking herself in circles about a problem she couldn’t fix.

“Ugh. It can’t be helped. This whole situation is one big mess, and I’d feel a whole lot better about it if we had more than just a single Demi-Servant to defend us.”

“Director,” said Mash, “if my combat efficiency is a concern, I’m still functioning optimally. If we encounter more enemies of that level, I should be able to handle them all without any trouble.”

“That!” the Director said. “That is exactly the problem! *If we encounter more enemies of that level*. I know I just said Mash could handle it, but that’s only if we don’t run into anything scarier. You *do* remember the situation we’re in, right?”

“A burning city?” Rika suggested.

“No! Weren’t you paying any attention to the briefing? Ugh!” The Director let out a disgusted breath. “This is Fuyuki, Japan, 2004. According to Chaldea’s records, this is the site of a ritual referred to as the Holy Grail War.”

“Holy Grail War?” Ritsuka asked.

The Director pinched the bridge of her nose. “This is why I prefer selecting from the Association. They might be a bunch of students who think they know more than they actually do, but at least their knowledge base is good enough that I don’t have to explain everything every few minutes. But no, this is a joint initiative with the UN, so I have to take in any Master candidate that shows even the slightest hint of promise, no matter how utterly clueless they are.”

“Hey!” Rika squawked.

The Director pointed at me. “Hebert. Explain, please.”

I let out a breath through my nostrils.

“Seven Masters paired with seven Servants,” I explained shortly. “A battle royale between them, and the winning pair get their wish granted by the Holy Grail.”

The twins blinked at me.

“...That’s it?”

Rika huffed. “I was expecting three paragraphs of exposition, at least.”

My lips pulled tight.

It wasn't like I was exactly an expert on the subject. I understood the basic premise and the most important mechanics, but I only knew about as much as had been explained to me. A battle royale between Heroic Spirits summoned as Servants controlled by Masters wielding Command Spells, all for the prize of a wish on the Holy Grail. I didn't need to know how all of the bits and pieces worked to get the important parts.

“It's a vast oversimplification, but if we took the time to cover all the details, we'd be here for hours,” the Director said. “The important takeaway is the first thing: seven Servants. Without Masters, they shouldn't be able to stay in this world, and looking at the state of this city, the Masters are probably all dead.”

She looked around at the burning metropolis, and I had to agree. If there was anyone alive... Well, if we hadn't run into them yet, either we wouldn't at all or they'd probably be an enemy.

“Ordinarily, that should mean we wouldn't have to worry about Servants,” the Director went on. “But this is a Singularity, which means something went wrong somewhere, so none of our assumptions are reliable. It's entirely possible we might run into no Servants, or we might run into several. Either way, relying solely on Mash to fight them all off would be stupidity of the highest level!”

“Shouldn't we summon as many of our own Servants as possible, then?” Ritsuka asked worriedly.

“That's what the rest of Team A was supposed to be for!” the Director snapped. “Ugh! No, Masters can only handle supporting so many Servants at once! Generally, it's only the one, but if Chaldea was running at full power, we might have been able to get away with three or four. As it is now, however, we can't put too much stress on the backup generators, so trying for more than one more is too risky.”

Rika's hand shot up into the air. The Director glared. “Put your hand down. This isn't a classroom.”

“Couldn't we each try to summon a Servant?” asked Rika. “I mean, there's three of us. Wouldn't it be better to have one each?”

The Director looked between them for a second, then glanced back at me, and finally shook her head.

“No,” she said. “First off, didn't I just say we could only safely try for one? Geez! Secondly, you two are already supporting a contract with Mash between the two of you, aren't you? The last thing I need either of you doing in a situation like this is stretching yourself too thin!”

“Everything was a bit rushed, so the contract wound up split evenly between them,” Mash confirmed. “Sorry, Director.”

“This whole thing has been one gigantic mess from the beginning,” the Director griped. “Hebert! We’re not wasting any more time. We don’t have a catalyst to make things easier, so we’re just going to have to hope that whoever you summon is at least somewhat useful.”

I let out a breath through my nose, not quite a sigh. My stomach squirmed a little. “Understood, Director.”

She stepped away from the shield laying flat on the ground as I stepped closer, and the others followed her lead. “You remember the incantation, right?” she asked.

“You don’t need to worry. I have it memorized.”

She worried her bottom lip, but nodded, and I turned to the shield and the magic circle inscribed around it and thrust out my hand.

“Thy Essence is of Silver and Steel,” I began, and then I went slowly and meticulously through the entire incantation.

It sounded like a lot of nonsense, and I felt a little silly reciting it. Gems and the Archduke of Contracts, ancestors and grandmasters, forked roads and kingdoms, alighted wind and walls. Maybe it meant something to the people who had crafted the spell, but to me, it just seemed like gibberish strung together into vaguely coherent sentences.

Throughout it all, I watched the circle light up, the lines and symbols glowing as it connected to the spiritual meridian beneath our feet — the ley line, and when I’d learned about those, I’d kinda wanted to laugh. I wasn’t laughing, now. If my focus wasn’t so narrowly turned towards the nonsense spewing from my lips, I might even have been nauseous.

“Let there be fivefold perfections upon each repetition, and break asunder with perfection.”

Each member of Team A had at least a preferred class of Servant they had intended to summon, if not a preferred Heroic Spirit. I’d been hoping to get a catalyst for a heavy hitter, someone like King Arthur or Achilles, maybe Herakles. One of what they called the knight classes. Not an Assassin, because that kind of Servant played too much to my strengths and the ways of thinking I’d been trying to train myself out of.

The thing I’d dreaded most was summoning based on compatibility, without a catalyst at all. Because there were a couple of Heroic Spirits I feared summoning, both for the implications they carried with them and for the way of thinking they might encourage, just by existing.

“Arrive from the Ring of Deterrence, O Keeper of Balance!”

The glowing circle flashed, surging, filling up and expanding, and for a moment, there was a sense of peeking through the veil of reality as a presence loomed on the other side, about to step through and manifest, staring straight at me as though it could see into my soul. Off to the side, Mash gasped aloud, and the Director took in a sharp breath in anticipation. Rika made a noise of delighted surprise, like a kid in a candy shop. My own heart thudded in my chest, so loud that I was amazed the others couldn’t hear it.

And then, the glow flickered, guttered and died, winking out suddenly and inexplicably, as the circle went inert. The door opened to the Throne of Heroes had shut, and standing before us all was nothing but empty air.

For several seconds, a heavy silence hung between us. Something like disappointment curled in my belly.

“What?” the Director breathed disbelievingly.

“Was...that supposed to happen?” asked Ritsuka.

“I don’t see anybody,” Rika commented, head swiveling as she looked around. “Oh! Maybe they’re invisible!”

“Senpai,” Mash said wearily.

“No!” the Director snapped. “No, that’s not what was supposed to happen!”

She marched over to me and grabbed my hand, first the outstretched one and then the one at my side, inspecting the backs, and when she was done, she let go and grunted.

“No Command Spells, either,” she said, frustrated. “I don’t understand — your Master aptitude was among the highest in all of Team A! Only Wodime and Phamrsolone scored better! This should have been the easiest summoning we’ve done yet!”

Her thumb made its way back to her mouth, and she was chewing on her nail again.

“I don’t understand,” she muttered. “Why did it fail? Sure, this spot isn’t ideal, but the theory is sound and this place is a Singularity — it should be *easier* to summon a Servant here than it was in Chaldea. Is it a flaw in the system or... No, maybe it has something to do with Chaldea’s functionality being so far reduced? Damn it, I wish Lev was here, he’d know.”

“Maybe you should try next, Director?” Ritsuka suggested.

I grimaced as the Director’s mouth snapped shut so hard and fast that the clack of her teeth grinding together was audible. He couldn’t have known, so I couldn’t blame him for it, but he’d just stepped on the landmine of one of her biggest sore spots.

“I don’t have any Master aptitude,” the Director ground out, like admitting it physically pained her.

“What? Like, none at all?” Rika asked. “The Director of Chaldea can’t be a Master?”

“I just told you a minute ago that my job isn’t to be on the frontlines!” the Director snarled. “So it wasn’t supposed to matter whether or not I had Master aptitude, was it?”

“Director,” Mash said, trying to defuse the situation, “maybe we should try again? It’s possible the system just wasn’t prepared for the summoning, or maybe that with things as they are, we just need to try another time or two before it works.”

The Director swallowed whatever she was about to say and instead shook her head. “No. Whatever the problem is, it won’t be solved by bashing our heads against the wall trying to make it work. Standing here and shouting the incantation over and over again is just a waste of time.”

“Maybe Senpai did something wrong?” Rika suggested hesitantly.

“Senpai?” I repeated incredulously.

Ritsuka offered me a patient smile. “Well, you *are* the senior most Master on this team, right?”

“Taylor was hand-picked to be a member of Team A, the most elite team in Chaldea,” the Director said coldly. “She was recruited during the initial stages, back when we were being very selective about who joined. Only the best of the best were accepted as potential Masters. You two were pulled off the street to fill out the last few slots in our roster.”

“Right. Senpai is a total badass. Shutting up,” Rika chirped.

Ritsuka sighed wearily.

“Director,” I said as gently as I could while still being firm, “they’re new recruits.”

Ease up on them, I didn’t say. I liked to think she heard me, either way.

The Director grimaced.

“Right,” she mumbled. “There’s no point. I’m just wasting time and energy getting worked up by these neophytes.”

“Gesundheit,” Rika said.

“It wasn’t a compliment, you — !” The Director reined herself in. “You’re Japanese, how do you even know how to use that word anyway...”

“If we’re not going to try again, we should start our investigation,” I said, steering the conversation back on track. “We should also be on the lookout for a stable base of operations. Somewhere we can hole up in case this stretches on for days instead of hours.”

“You’re right,” the Director acknowledged. “Right, yes, of course. Although with the state of the city, there might not be anyplace safe enough to rest for any appreciable amount of time.”

Privately, I worried about that, too. It was good to know that Romani was alive and well and working on getting us out of here, it gave me a tangible goal to survive for, but losing eighty percent of Chaldea’s functionality and staff would only stretch out the timeline for the repairs they needed to pull us back to base. Without a solid estimate on how long that would take, we really had no idea how long we’d have to stay alive in this hellhole.

“We’ll worry about that when the time comes. For now, we need to know where we are and where we’re going.”

The Director's lips pursed. "The records showed that Fuyuki had two main districts that divided the city in half. The newer half was metropolis, with office buildings, strip malls, and places like that. It was oriented more towards business and commerce. The older half was almost exclusively residential, with some houses dating back to the Victorian era, or, um, the...Meiji Restoration?"

"The revolution that put the Emperor back into nominal power," Ritsuka added helpfully. "It was the end of Japan's isolationist policies, so powerful Westerners took advantage to establish trade."

The Director eyed him, like she wasn't sure whether she should praise him or not for offering useful information.

"In any case, we're in the modern business half of the city," the Director said. She gestured at the buildings around us, consisting mostly of modern high-rises and skyscrapers. "The other half, the residential district, will be across the river that splits the city in two. We'll have to cross the bridge to get there."

I nodded.

"Points of interest?"

"There should be four main areas we'll want to look at," the Director said. "According to the records, there were four possible places the Holy Grail could manifest at the end of the Grail War, four hotspots where the ley lines converged and the magical power was dense enough to support it. One will be on the mountain, on the far outskirts of the city, past the edges of the residential district."

I grimaced and looked towards the left, but immediately felt silly, because I had no idea whether that was even the right direction. "That's going to be a hike."

"All the more so because that's likely to be our best bet at figuring out what happened in this Singularity," the Director added.

"My feet are sore just thinking about it," Rika whined.

I turned back to the Director. "The other three?"

She gestured at the ground beneath our feet.

"There's one that should be near here, but I think we can rule it out. If it was the source, there should've been a lot more going on than just a few skeletons. There's another one in the residential district across the river. The city's Second Owner built their house on top of it."

"Second Owner?" chirped Rika. The Director sighed.

"The Second Owner is a family of magi that have been entrusted with the management of a significant spiritual ground, Senpai," Mash explained patiently. "They're chosen by the Mage's Association to handle all of the magical phenomena that occur in that place. For a city like Fuyuki to support an event as intense as the Holy Grail War... Director, wouldn't that make this one of the most magically active lands in the country?"

“For what that’s actually worth,” the Director said. “Despite being an island nation, Japan is notoriously poor in terms of its spiritual grounds, to the point that there’s really only two places in the whole country that are viable for large scale rituals like a Holy Grail War. It’s part of why the Association has so little interest in it — or in the magi who come from it.”

“I feel like I should be offended,” Rika commented.

The Director quirked an eyebrow. “Oh? So that’s what it takes to get you to pay attention.”

“That’s three,” I noted, trying to cut off another confrontation. “Where’s the fourth place?”

“An old Catholic mission,” said the Director. “There should be a church near the edge of the city limits on this side of the river. It’s the last possible place for the Grail to form at the end of the ritual, so at the very least, we should check it out and make sure there’s nothing of interest going on over there.”

My lips pulled into a frown. “You don’t think there will be?”

The Director let out a slow breath through her nose. Resigned, that was a good word for the sense I got from her.

“It’s possible, but I doubt we’ll find anything except maybe more skeletons. If there are any Servants still left in this Singularity, they might have chosen it as a place to hide out. However, having said that, my estimation is that we won’t find much of anything at any of the other three sites. Whatever is going on here, the most likely location for its epicenter is the mountain on the far edge of town.”

She was probably right. No, even knowing so little about the functions of magic and its practitioners, I had the feeling that she was absolutely correct. The church, the Second Owner’s house, whatever the last area near here was, they weren’t necessarily bad places. In fact, since they were apparently so significant, they might be good places for us to plant our flag, so to speak, and hunker down when we needed to take a good, long rest.

But if I were someone fucking around with history? If I wanted to screw things up badly enough and make it as difficult as possible to untangle it all? I wouldn’t have chosen any of those spots. Too easy to access. Too easy to get to. Good ambush spots, if I’d still had my power. Enough places to hide traps, to weave gossamer strands for any enemies to trip and tangle themselves up in.

Even so, the mountain... That was the best place. Remote, far less hospitable than the rest of the city, presumably rife with vegetation and even more places to hide traps. The most defensible spot, too. Not as convenient as a penthouse in the city or a mansion in the residential district, but that just made it better because it was the less obvious choice.

Despite that...

“We should check them anyway,” I said. “All of them, just to make sure.”

It wouldn’t hurt to be thorough.

The Director's lips pursed, but she nodded. "Nearest first, then the church. If we don't find anything, we'll cross the river and check the Second Owner's house."

"Rest up, even get some sleep, if we can," I added.

"Then, we'll check the mountain."

I nodded. "Closest first?"

"Closest first," she agreed, and then she turned to Mash. "Mash, you're in front. I'm entrusting you with our safety, got it? If anything attacks, it's going to be up to you to handle them and protect us."

"Roger that, Director!" Mash said.

The Director pointed off in a vague direction, a winding pathway framed by low flames on either side. I could just make out what looked like a side road, or at least one that branched off from the main road that we were currently standing on.

"It should be about half a mile that direction," she said confidently. "In 2004... It would have been a civic center."

"Understood."

Mash reached down and hefted up her massive shield, swinging it around and wielding it like it was nothing more than a toy. Even having seen her do it before... Well, no, maybe I wasn't that surprised, in the end, just unused to casual displays of superhuman strength, these days. It had been two years since I'd last seen anything resembling the Brute capes I'd known in my younger years.

Holy fuck, that made me feel old, and I was barely twenty.

Mash turned in the direction of the first point and looked at us from over her shoulder.

"Please stay behind me, Master, Director, Miss Taylor. I will defend you with my life."

And thus began our investigation into Singularity F.