

Chapter LVII: Deus Ex Ignotis

“There must be some kind of mistake,” Da Vinci said. “Even this close to the Age of Gods, something like this is just too far outside the realm of possibility!”

She bit down on one of her fingers, her brow furrowed with worry. Rapid fire theories tumbled out from between her teeth, cycled through so quickly that she never seemed to completely finish a thought before she moved onto another one.

“Could it be... No... If it was like that, then maybe... Just because it wasn’t recorded... No, it should still be... So maybe it’s... No, no, not for this era, it would have to be... And it’s essentially out in the middle of the ocean, too!”

“Da Vinci?” I asked, alarmed.

Da Vinci jerked violently, blinking as though she’d been ripped out of her train of thought, and finally, she turned back to me.

“What’s going on?”

She blinked again, and then she smiled apologetically. “Sorry,” she told me, contrite, “I let myself get carried away there. The preliminary scans are done, and, well, I found something I really wasn’t expecting.”

It must have been a pretty huge shock to get that kind of reaction out of her. I’d never seen the likes of it out of Da Vinci in the last two years, and that was terrifying.

“Like what?”

The console beeped again, and Da Vinci glanced back at it, grimaced, and then told me, “Several somethings, actually, and just one of them was already likely to have a significant impact on your future plans, to say nothing of the other results that are still coming in.”

I really didn’t like the sound of that.

“Hold on,” said Ritsuka. “What do you mean by change?”

Da Vinci took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh.

“There’s no easy way to say this,” she said, “so I’m just going to rip the bandaid off. If these readings are right — and I’m the one who calibrated these sensors, so they are — then there is an honest-to-goodness *god* currently inside of that Singularity with you.”

A ripple of shock spread throughout the group.

“What?” Mash asked faintly.

“Are you sure?” I asked immediately. “It’s not just a Servant with a high Divinity stat? Romulus was a demigod, wasn’t he?”

It wasn't like those were exactly rare, after all, not in Rome and especially not in Greece. Most of the Heroic Spirits worth talking about from the latter had one god or another somewhere in their family tree, often within one or two generations.

"No," Da Vinci said grimly. "It's the genuine article. The readings from its Saint Graph are fairly low, but its divinity is off the charts. The only reasons it would have such a low quality reading from its Saint Graph was if it was a fairly weak god, which is unlikely if it's stuck around this long, or —"

"It's hiding itself," I realized.

"Hiding?" said Rika. "Why would it be hiding?"

Because it wanted to escape notice for some reason, and there were a couple I could think of off the bat. Maybe this god wanted to avoid conflict. Maybe it had been badly injured from a fight with the United Empire's Servants and was trying to lie low while it licked its wounds. Maybe it was just disinterested in this civil war and wanted to stay out of it.

Or maybe it was building up power, gathering resources, biding its time... For what? I could only make guesses.

"I can only offer you theories," Da Vinci said apologetically.

"Do we have any idea which god it is?" Aífe asked.

Da Vinci shook her head. "None. Whatever it's doing to hide itself, it might not be thorough enough to hide its divinity, but it's definitely enough to obscure the details of its Saint Graph. The only other thing I can tell for sure is its location."

"There aren't many gods that managed to hold on past the end of the Age of Gods," El-Melloi II added. "Not on the continent, anyway. The pool to choose from should be pretty small."

"If it's even a god native to this era," Da Vinci shot back, "and not something that was brought here by the Holy Grail."

El-Melloi II gritted his teeth and grunted, conceding the point.

"Could it be Hephaestus?" Ritsuka asked.

Da Vinci opened her mouth to respond, paused, considered the question thoughtfully, and then let out a simple, "Huh. You know, you might not be wrong."

Nero gasped. "Perhaps we might see Vulcan's glorious forge after all!"

Even more than that...

"If it *is* Hephaestus," I began, "could he forge for us an Anti-Fortress weapon to take down the United Empire's wall?"

Emiya inhaled sharply. "Oh. That's clever."

“Under different circumstances...” Da Vinci hummed. “In that Singularity, however, you just might be close enough to the Age of Gods to bear witness to a god’s genuine miracle.”

Authority. That’s what she was talking about. My lessons hadn’t covered those in too much detail, but my understanding was that “miracle” wasn’t even the wrong way to describe one. Abilities on a level all their own such that even Noble Phantasms often paled in comparison — divine power at its purest and most potent.

“You’re getting a little ahead of yourselves,” Aífe chided us. “Da Vinci. Where would we find this so-called god?”

In lieu of answering directly, Da Vinci tapped something out on her keyboard, and a moment later, her face shrunk down to take up the upper corner of the hologram, leaving us to look at a familiar map of this Singularity. To the northwest of us, almost as far away from our current position as Rome itself, a big, red dot sat.

“...That’s the middle of the ocean.”

It was right smack dab in the middle of the deep stretch of blue that was the Mediterranean Sea, at least fifty miles from the nearest shore.

“H-hey, guys, I didn’t bring my swimsuit, you know,” Rika said nervously. “Please don’t tell me we’re going scuba diving after this guy? Maybe if he wants to be left alone, we should leave him alone.”

“Much as I hate to agree with Rika,” her brother chimed in hesitantly, “is it really a good idea to go after this god in a place where only two of us can fight? I mean, where would us Masters even stay that wasn’t right in the thick of things?”

“Ordinarily, that would be a very good point,” Da Vinci agreed. “However...”

She tapped something out again, and before our eyes, an island drew itself around the dot. It had no label, not even a question mark. For all intents and purposes, it was like it didn’t properly exist. Not according to Da Vinci’s map, at least.

“There’s an island that shouldn’t exist right where this god is hiding out,” she said. “Seems mighty suspicious to me, don’t you think?”

El-Melloi II clicked his tongue, eyes narrowed. “Definitely a god, then. If it can create an entire island out of thin air, that’s a step above the Noble Phantasm of a normal Heroic Spirit.”

“Fitting for a god of crafting to forge his own island out in the middle of the ocean,” Da Vinci agreed wryly.

That certainly seemed to line up with the very little information we currently had, didn’t it? I chewed on the thought. Even if we took the crafting bit out of it, Hephaestus — or Vulcan, whichever form was appropriate in this case — was also a god of fire, particularly volcanic fire. Theoretically, using his Authority could have let him spawn his own volcano wherever he pleased, no matter how much some part of me screeched about how plate tectonics didn’t work that way.

Even living my whole life with powers and capes as part of it, even if only as things I knew existed, magic had flipped it all on its head and sent my common sense into the corner to cry. Still didn't measure up to the "Scion is an alien and powers come from fragments shed from his body" bit, but that one was a little hard to top.

"If it *isn't* Hephaestus," I began.

"If you've got a better theory, I'm definitely willing to hear it," El-Melloi II told me.

"I mean, is making islands something all gods can do anyway?" Rika asked. "A bumbling neophyte wants to know!"

El-Melloi II grimaced. "Bumbling neophyte?"

Ritsuka sighed. "You had to be there," he informed El-Melloi II.

Damn, that was getting to be a mouthful, even in my own head.

"Um, it would depend on the god, Senpai," Mash told Rika. "Some gods just don't have the Authority for directly affecting the Earth, while some gods have enough crossover that their Authorities should let them do something like making an island."

"What does that mean, since we're in Rome?"

"W-well, um, there's a lot of connection between the Roman pantheon and the previous Greek pantheon, so really, if we're talking about gods capable of manipulating the Earth itself —"

"*If* it isn't Hephaestus," I cut across them all, raising my voice a little to silence them. "Do we have any other clues for who it might be, Da Vinci?"

"None," said Da Vinci. "The island and the divinity itself are our only clues. Since it's hiding itself, there isn't anything else I can tell you about which god you might be dealing with."

Aífe huffed. "In other words, we won't find out until we get there, is that right?"

Da Vinci smiled ruefully. "Unfortunately."

"This is the part where I'd normally say, 'it looks like we have another mystery on our hands,'" Rika revealed, "but I'm way too grouchy right now."

"Noted," her brother replied dryly, wiping some sweat from his own brow.

"As tempting as the idea of acquiring a weapon forged by the god of smithing himself is," said Arash, "maybe it would be better to avoid this mysterious god entirely. There's no indication that it's involved in the United Empire, right?"

"Aside from the fact that it's slightly closer to their territory than ours?" Da Vinci shook her head. "We just don't have enough to go on to say one way or the other. It's entirely possible that this is a

patron deity summoned here by Romulus and the Holy Grail, which would absolutely make that god an enemy, both of Rome and of Proper Human History.”

“Meaning that it might be necessary to eliminate them in any case,” Mash concluded.

Very deliberately, I didn’t look at Aífe.

If we had to fight a god no matter what, then I guess it was a good thing we had someone on the team who had fought two of them before and presumably killed them, for whatever that meant to a god. Did gods die when you killed them, or was continued worship enough to sustain them until they could pull themselves back together?

“As Aífe said, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” I said. “Da Vinci, this island, can you tell whether or not it counts as part of the United Empire’s territory?”

“As a matter of fact, I can,” Da Vinci confirmed. She tapped something out on her keyboard again, and a bright yellow border drew itself around what would one day be Spain, Portugal, and most of the rest of Western Europe. It cut right down the middle of the continent, carving out about a third of France in the process. “Based upon the scans, this is the land that is firmly enough under the United Empire’s control that the function of Constantine the Great’s Noble Phantasm is detectable.”

Notably, neither Britain nor this new island was part of it.

“Unfortunately, that still doesn’t give us a definitive answer,” Da Vinci went on. “Gods are notoriously finicky about their lowercase-a authority, and it’s entirely possible that this god supports the United Empire without allowing its island to be subject to their control.”

Damn it. That was actually a really good point, especially when it came to the Greco-Roman pantheons. Those guys were infamous for their pettiness and fragile egos.

El-Melloi II sighed. “No matter how you look at it, we need to investigate this god’s presence, don’t we?”

“Are you forgetting something?” Emiya asked, arms crossed over his chest. He jerked his head in Arash’s direction. “You have two Archer class Servants standing right here. It’s well within the abilities of our Independent Action skills to make our way over to that island and scout out this god.”

That was true, but there was a problem with that way of thinking.

“And if you run into trouble that you can’t handle?” I asked him.

He arched one eyebrow at me. “You have Command Spells to call us back with, don’t you?”

“Hey, now,” Da Vinci cut in, indignant. “Don’t go thinking you can all be reckless just because we can replenish Command Spells! Don’t forget, just one is going to take your Master almost three weeks to replace! That’s a long time to be down on an emergency resource you might actually need in an emergency!”

“I’m actually going to agree with Emiya on this one,” said Arash. “Actually, we might not even need to set foot on the island itself at all. I just need to get a good enough look at it from the right angle. If I got enough altitude in spirit form and materialized in the air, I think I might be able to see enough of the island to see what we’re dealing with.”

“Before the two of you start competing to see which of you is more willing to throw himself into danger,” Da Vinci said, “there’s a few other things you might want to take into consideration first, because that god isn’t the only problem you’re going to have to deal with.”

She tapped something else out on her keyboard, and a moment later, the land encircled by the border of Constantine’s Noble Phantasm lit up. Splotches of red took it over, filling up like blood welling from a wound, until a large swath of the eastern portion was covered in —

No, wait. Those weren’t splotches of red, they were *dots*. Hundreds of them, thousands, so many that I couldn’t have even begun to count them, they were showing up that quickly. The bulk of them sat in Spain along the eastern border at the foot of the mountains, but many were interspersed throughout, some solitary, some gathered together in clumps.

“Is that...?”

I was almost afraid to ask. It couldn’t possibly be that these were the Servants summoned to fight for the United Empire, could it? The idea that there could be so many boggled the mind. If a single Heroic Spirit was a legend that had left an indelible mark on history, then where on earth had Romulus managed to summon *thousands*?

“On a hunch, one of the things I scanned for was Phantasmals,” Da Vinci told me grimly. “Yes, what you’re seeing right now is every single magical beast in that Singularity. Anything and everything more powerful than a reanimated skeleton.”

“Holy cow,” said Rika. “There’s got to be thousands of them!”

“You’re off by an order of magnitude or two.”

An army, I realized. Romulus and his United Empire had created an army of magical beasts to serve as...as fodder for anyone who had the will and the ability to cross over into their territory. Anyone brave or foolish enough to try would find themselves surrounded on all sides by every manner of Phantasmal that still existed in this era, from manticores to chimeras and maybe even some wyverns. They would be torn to shreds by an endless tide of fangs and claws, ripped apart and devoured until not even their bones remained.

And if these beasts were all as closely packed together as they seemed to be, then it was entirely possible that even using my bugs to navigate a safe path around them wouldn’t work.

“This is where they all went,” said Aífe, coming to a realization of her own. “The magical beasts that should have been hounding us across all of Gaul. It wasn’t that they were afraid of confronting so many Servants, it was that they had all been gathered up and corralled into the United Empire’s territory.”

“Foouu,” the little monster whined, like it had been personally insulted.

Emiya clicked his tongue. “That’s a rare skill. Here and there, you’ll hear about a hero who managed to tame a single Phantasmal. A girl who befriended a dragon or a woman who punched one into submission. A knight who rides a hippogryph or an adventurer who rides a winged horse. There aren’t that many who managed the feat of bringing every magical creature he met to heel.”

“It’s a vanishingly rare skill,” Da Vinci agreed. “Based upon our record of his Saint Graph, however... Yes, the likely culprit is Lucius Tiberius.”

But we had killed him. Why were all of those creatures staying in the same place? Sure, it had only been a few days, but without him there to wrangle them, wouldn’t they have spread back out and started killing each other off in territorial disputes?

Beast Taming. He had the skill “Beast Taming,” rank EX. I hadn’t thought anything of it before.

“Son of a bitch.” Emiya chuckled ruefully. “That bastard, he didn’t just bring them under his thumb, he trained them to follow orders.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” said Rika. “Are you saying that Tiberius guy...that he made an army of dangerous magical creatures and gave it to the United Empire?”

“That’s what it looks like,” I confirmed.

“Son of a bitch” was right. As though it hadn’t already been difficult, things had just gotten a lot harder, hadn’t they? Now, we didn’t have to just worry about the Noble Phantasms that would make us all weaker, we also had to look out for the army of magical beasts that were waiting on the other side of this mysterious wall.

“You’re making a bigger deal out of this than you need to,” Aífe told us. “After all, between just those of us already here, we have numerous Anti-Army Noble Phantasms designed just for the purposes of routing contingents of enemy troops. It won’t be quick or easy, but if we’re not worried about collateral, then there’s nothing stopping us from mowing them all down.”

“There goes any subtlety,” Emiya said sarcastically.

“If their reach is as absolute as we think it is, they’ll know where we are at all times anyway,” Aífe replied stubbornly.

“I’m not sure we were ever going to be sneaking in,” Boudica said, looking meaningfully towards Spartacus.

“A gladiator fights for all to see,” Spartacus said by way of answering. “Only the dead remain in the shadows.”

There was no way to know that for sure, though, was there? The fact that there hadn’t been any reprisal for Tiberius seemed to indicate that no, Constantine the Great couldn’t actually sense what was going on in the territory covered by his Noble Phantasm, so it would absolutely be feasible to try and sneak our way into the United Empire’s capital.

Unless Caligula's attack on us at Massilia *was* that reprisal. Ugh. The uncertainty made this whole thing messier.

"We still have the core problem we have to worry about before we even start talking about this army of Phantasmals," I said. I turned back to Da Vinci. "What can the sensors tell us about the enemy forces? The United Empire's Servants?"

She grimaced. "More than we knew before, not as much as I hoped."

She tapped her keyboard again, and the map disappeared, replaced with a handful of symbols next to names, each of them belonging to a hero.

"These are the Servants I can confirm have manifested within the United Empire's territory."

Ruler class, Constantine the Great. Berserker, Caligula. Rider class, Constantine XI. Rider class, Traianus Hadrianus. Lancer class, Romulus.

"*Hadrian*," Arash said, picking up on that one immediately. "In hindsight, it was incredibly obvious, wasn't it?"

"Hadrian's Wall," Emiya rumbled his agreement. "We got worried it was Shi Huang Di, but it turned out to be someone far less troublesome."

"Hadrianus? Constantius?" Nero asked. "Mm-mm. I don't recognize those names at all!"

"That's because Hadrian won't be emperor until almost sixty years from now, from your perspective," Da Vinci explained. "Constantine the Great is almost three hundred years from now, and Constantine XI won't rule until almost a thousand years into the future. Much like Lucius Tiberius, these are emperors of the future, so they would be completely unknown to you now."

"Wait, there are two Constantines now?" Rika asked. "One was already one too many!"

"They're two completely different Heroic Spirits, Rika," said Da Vinci, amused. "You could even say that they're mirror opposites, since one unified the empire during a tumultuous time and the other presided over the empire when the final remnants of it fractured and collapsed completely."

"Romulus..." Nero muttered, devoid of her usual cheer. "So. It is true after all."

"You didn't know?" Da Vinci asked, surprised.

Nero frowned and looked away, refusing to answer.

"The United Empire has been using his name to recruit the citizens to their cause," Boudica revealed, stepping up to answer for her. "However, for all that they haven't been shy about advertising that Rome's divine ancestor is the one ruling the United Empire, Romulus himself has yet to make an appearance on the frontlines, so confirming that he's really there hasn't been possible."

"So you thought it might have been propaganda," Ritsuka realized.

It would have been a clever bit, if it was. Of course, better than propaganda was having the real thing. You had to tell fewer lies that way.

“And yet now...” Nero mumbled. A troubled look wrinkled her face as she looked back up at Da Vinci’s image. “You are...certain that this is true? The Divine Ancestor is a part of the United Empire’s forces?”

Da Vinci shook her head. “Our scanners can be tricked by the right spell or skill, but they aren’t *wrong*. The scan says that a Lancer class Servant whose true name is Romulus is in the city that is likely the United Empire’s capital. Ergo, unless it’s a Heroic Spirit so well-known for disguise that he can change his *true name*, it must be Romulus himself.”

“I see.”

Nero’s everything dropped. Her eyes, her expression, her shoulders, her head, her whole posture. She slumped in on herself, looking just as defeated as she had that moment when the truth of Boudica’s fate had been revealed to her.

Rika, sensing her distress, stepped closer and reached out to rest a comforting hand on Nero’s arm. “Hey, Best Buddy...”

“Excuse me.” Nero pulled her arm away from Rika’s hand. “I need a moment to consider this.”

She turned away from the group, and with quick, clipped steps, she walked some distance away and stopped near the edge of the light cast by the hologram and our flashlights. Rika made to follow after her.

“Rika,” her brother said softly, “I think Nero needs to be left alone for now.”

Rika sowed and wrapped her arms around her chest, glaring at the ground. I didn’t have the words to comfort either of them, just then. Not without bringing up a whole host of things that I wasn’t supposed to talk about.

But I could only imagine that what Nero was feeling just then was a whole lot like what I had felt when I realized that the heroes I had looked up to as a kid weren’t any better than the villains they fought.

“So where are all of these Servants located?” I asked. “Are they all in the same place, or are they spread out?”

Were we going to have to scour the countryside to find Constantine the Great? Or had they all bunkered down in the same place?

“Caligula is moving in southern France,” Da Vinci answered. “It looks like he might not actually have retreated that far after your first fight with him. The rest of them, on the other hand, look like they’ve all been staying in the same place this entire time, a city nestled between the Spanish mountain ranges near where Madrid will one day be. Based upon these scans, it looks to be an almost perfect replica of Rome itself.”

Emiya grunted. “That’s gotta be a Noble Phantasm.”

“Considering who they have on their roster, there’s no way of telling who it belongs to, though,” Arash added.

Aside from Caligula, it could have been any one of them.

“And what about these last two, these unknowns?” I said, gesturing at the two sets of question marks. “Do we not know anything about them?”

“Nothing,” Da Vinci answered. “We know that they exist, but the sensors couldn’t even get a location, let alone an identity, for either of them. In all likelihood, they’re Assassins. Presence Concealment would easily explain why they’re so well hidden that we can barely even detect that they’re there at all.

“Also, there’s one other thing,” she went on. “The sensors picked up one final Servant, but his presence makes so little sense that I wasn’t sure whether or not to classify him as an enemy or not. It’s a Berserker class Servant with the true name of Lu Bu.”

“Ah,” said Boudica.

We all turned to her. “Ah?” I asked. “You know him?”

“That’s a strong word,” she replied. “I had the…pleasure, if you can call it that, of meeting him once. That is, do you remember what you said about how Berserkers can’t communicate?”

“Yeah,” El-Melloi II added. “Like talking to a wall. You have no way of knowing if he even understands what you’re saying, let alone if he’s willing to follow your orders.”

“As Emperor Nero’s court mage, you must have met him earlier, then,” said Boudica. “Yes. Miss Da Vinci, I think I can solve one of your mysterious unknowns, too. Lu Bu was part of a special expeditionary force with an Assassin by the name of Jing Ke. Actually, those two *were* the special expeditionary force, just by themselves.”

“Jing Ke?” Mash asked. “I don’t recognize that name.”

“I do,” said Da Vinci. “I’m surprised that you don’t, Mash, but I suppose the most extraordinary thing about Jing Ke as an Assassin is his failure, so that might not have been covered in your history lessons. As far as Chinese history is concerned, Jing Ke is really more of a funny anecdote about how close Shi Huang Di came to being assassinated, not someone known for succeeding.”

“Emperor Nero said that she didn’t have any other Servants in her employ,” I said slowly.

“I don’t think she ever knew they *were* Servants,” El-Melloi II said. “The Emperor isn’t dumb, but there’s been a lot that she’s had to try and learn since this whole thing started. Jing Ke and Lu Bu didn’t advertise themselves as Servants, so the Emperor probably never connected the dots.”

Fair enough, I guess. I’d had almost two years to get used to all of this, and sometimes, it still threw me for a loop.

“So what does this special expeditionary force do?” Ritsuka asked. “Are they like Marcus and the others working with Boudica?”

“They’re an Assassin and a Berserker,” Emiya said with a snort. “Take a wild guess.”

“They kill emperors, Onii-chan,” Rika chimed in, smiling grimly. “Sneak in and put them down. Like a real life Terminator.”

Ritsuka let out a long, low sigh.

“Do we know if they’ve managed to take any out?”

I didn’t know anything about Lu Bu, but an assassin who failed to assassinate his target? That didn’t inspire confidence in how he would manifest as a Servant.

“I have yet to receive any reports on eliminated enemy commanders,” Nero revealed as she rejoined us, still subdued. “Mm-mm. However. I gave Lu Bu and Jing Ke discretion to act independently, so it is possible they would not have reported either success or failure in either case.”

“Best Buddy,” Rika murmured. Nero gave her a wan smile, devoid of its usual cheer, and this didn’t seem to reassure Rika, but it mollified her enough that she didn’t push.

“So if one of the unknowns is ours, what does that bring it up to?” Arash asked. “Six...plus Gaius Julius Caesar, Marcus Cassius Scaeva, and Lucius Tiberius, who are already defeated. Nine Servants on the United Empire’s side, total.”

“And they were enough to push my beloved empire to the brink,” Nero concluded solemnly.

Arash shook his head. “I’m thinking...it’s entirely possible there were more. Nine Servants is definitely enough to conquer a nation, but holding an empire the size of Rome? With Romulus, Constantine the Great, Hadrian, and Constantine XI in the capital to rule, plus Caligula, Julius Caesar, and Tiberius to act as the assault force, there’s a huge gap in their lines. There were probably at least one or two more Servants to act as the middle guard on the wall.”

He had something of a point. There was something to be said for arrogance, so it wasn’t entirely impossible that the United Empire had believed Hadrian’s Wall so unassailable that they didn’t need to guard it, but I would prefer not assuming my enemy incompetent unless and until I had concrete evidence to prove it.

“The scans showed nothing of the sort,” Da Vinci said, a little defensive. And then her eyebrows rose. “*Oh*. And if Jing Ke and Lu Bu have made it past the wall, then it stands to reason they must have eliminated the middle guard to do so.”

Arash nodded. “Right.”

Not necessarily. Assassin Servants were supposed to be sneaky, so Jing Ke might have slipped in under the United Empire’s watch...but that circled back around to the idea that a competent United Empire would have a watch to slip under.

“There’s no way for us to be sure,” I reminded them both. “Let’s not start jumping to conclusions.”

Although it would definitely be convenient if it turned out this “special expeditionary force” actually managed to help clear some of the field for us. It would also be a fairly ringing endorsement of their competence.

“Yeah, of course.” Arash shook his head again. “It doesn’t really change where we are right now, so... Hey, Da Vinci, where is Lu Bu anyway?”

Oh. That was good thinking, actually. If Lu Bu and Jing Ke were working together, then even if we couldn’t tell where Jing Ke was, we could still locate him based upon where Lu Bu was.

“The capital, actually,” Da Vinci answered.

Wait, seriously?

“Truly?” Nero asked. “They’ve made it that far?”

“As long as they’re still together? Yes.”

That...actually changed a lot. *Could* change a lot. If they made it past the wall, then they had to have run headfirst into Constantine the Great’s Pax Romana. There was no way they could have missed it. What they didn’t have, however, was the knowledge of who that Noble Phantasm belonged to like we did.

However...

“If they managed to figure out that Constantine the Great is the one behind Pax Romana...”

“Then if they take him out,” Aífe grinned fiercely, “there’s nothing holding us back from going straight to the capital ourselves. We just have to bust a hole in that damn wall.”

Not even that.

“Even better. Da Vinci, bring the map back up?”

Da Vinci tapped her keyboard again, and the current roster of the United Empire’s Servants was once more replaced with the map we had seen before. I pointed out our place on Sicily, then traced a line through the Mediterranean Sea towards our mysterious island.

“We can investigate this god that is supposed to be on that island. Best case scenario, they agree to help. But we should avoid fighting them if we don’t have to, because we can use that island...”

I swung my finger over.

“As a launching point. From there, we cut straight into Spain *here*,” I pointed it out, “from these islands to the south, which is technically United Empire territory. The instant Pax Romana goes down, we can make a straight shot for the capital. If we’re fast enough, we’ll get there in time to rescue Jing Ke before the rest can reorganize and fortify their position.”

Not likely at the speed Servant battles were fought, but it would comfort the twins and probably Nero to think we would.

“Neatly sidestepping both Hadrian’s Wall and the army of magical beasts in the process,” Emiya noted.

I nodded.

“Exactly.”

“And with the enemy right there,” said Arash, “we should be able to find the Grail pinning this Singularity in place at the same time.”

Yeah. Everything neatly tied off with a bow.

“Oh my.” Da Vinci chuckled, smiling broadly. “You’ll set a record at this rate. You haven’t even technically been gone a day, and you’re all set to resolve this Singularity. I guess Director Animosphere really did know what she was doing when she picked you for Team A.”