

Chapter XXI: Divide and Conquer

“Bradamante!” Romani exclaimed. “She was one of Charlemagne’s paladins! His elite generals and most trusted agents! A-although, ah, strictly speaking, her legend is really more focused on romance than combat...”

“Who’s there!” Bradamante swung her lance around and fell into a kind of half-crouch, like she was preparing for a fight. “Show yourself, foul devil!”

“D-devil?” Romani sputtered. “H-hey, I might not exactly be a saint, but I don’t think I deserve to be called a devil! Incompetent, at worst! Maybe a little clumsy! W-wait, neither of those is a good thing either, are they?”

Briefly, I closed my eyes and let out a slow breath through my nose. “Romani...”

“Wait, I know what’s going on!” said Bradamante. “You’re a magus, aren’t you? Well, I won’t fall for your tricks! I’m immune to magic, so you might as well drop the invisibility and face me head on!”

Okay, that was enough of this nonsense.

I stepped forward, and Bradamante’s lance swung back towards me. “Is it you? Are you the one responsible for this? I warn you, I’ve defeated many powerful mages in my time! You’ll regret it if you think you can beat me!”

Standing behind Mash’s shield, I fiddled with the communications device on my wrist, turned it from “sound only” to visual, and thrust my arm out over one of the spokes, just in time for Romani’s startled image to pop up above it.

Romani blinked at Bradamante. “Ah, hello?”

She studied him silently for a long moment., eyes narrowed on his image, and Romani fidgeted nervously. At length, she lowered her lance, relaxed a little, and asked, “What’s going on, here?”

Mash relaxed a little, too. Romani cleared his throat.

“Greetings, Lady Bradamante,” he began formally. “I am Director Romani Archaman of the organization known as the Chaldea Security Organization. We are tasked with the Grand Order, that is, the preservation of mankind as a species, and it is our job to correct irregularities that threaten humanity’s future. Irregularities such as the one you currently find yourself in, deviations from the proper course of human history.”

Bradamante eyed him warily. “Director Archaman? Are you really the Director?”

Romani faltered. “Ah, well, t-technically I’m just the Acting Director,” he admitted. “Director Animusphere is currently, um, indisposed.”

“Indisposed?”

She didn't say anything else, but I could hear the skepticism in her voice, the suggestion that the Director must not be much of a Director if she couldn't even do her job, and I didn't know what she was thinking it was that kept Marie from her position, but it *rankled*.

"She's in suspended animation," I cut in coolly, "while we try and come up with a way to save her life."

I'd put up with enough of the doubts over the last two years. Marie wasn't the best Director out there. She was young, inexperienced, and she overcompensated for that by being overbearing and strict, but she'd put her neck out there for me and I wasn't about to let her be judged for the fact that she didn't have a body to be here for her job.

The stupidity of the double standard rankled the most. When she tried to do her job, the rest of the staff was frustrated that she was nosy and not that great at it, and now that she wasn't around, people were judging her for not doing it at all.

Bradamante frowned and pursed her lips. "I'm sorry."

The sincerity of the apology threw me off more than the apology itself. Maybe I was stretching that comparison to Glory Girl a little too far.

"The, ah, issue of Director Animosphere aside," Romani said diplomatically, "this is our main combat team. It's their job to actually go out and fix the problem. Lady Bradamante, just to confirm what you said earlier, can I assume you're the Servant we've been detecting who has protected Thiers this entire time?"

Finally, Bradamante relaxed entirely. "Yes. I've taken the people and city of Thiers under my protection. A Servant of the Dragon Witch attempted to force me out some time ago, but I dispatched him after a pretty intense fight."

"A Servant?"

"Ah, I didn't get his true name, sorry," Bradamante admitted sheepishly. "He wasn't a very talkative fellow. I think he might have been a Berserker, because he kept screaming the same word over and over again."

"That sounds like a Berserker, alright," Romani agreed. "Were there any identifying marks on him? Any visual cues that might have helped pin down his true name or at least his region or era?"

Bradamante shook her head. "I'm sorry, but there was some kind of effect that stopped me from seeing anything like that. I think it was his Noble Phantasm. The only thing I can tell you is that he was wearing plate armor."

"So he was a knight." Romani let loose a gusty sigh and sagged back into his chair. "That certainly narrows it down, doesn't it?"

"It wasn't one of the other Servants we ran into, at any rate," I cut in. "That description doesn't match any of the ones from La Charité, and I doubt there was any connection to Phantom at Lyon."

“It looks like you were right, Miss Taylor,” said Mash. “Jeanne Alter has access to the Holy Grail, and she summoned more than just the five Servants we saw in La Charité.”

Romani nodded. “Given what we know now, it’s likely that she sends one or two Servants to handle cities that she doesn’t particularly care about, but attacks in force whenever she decides it’s personal. Places like Orléans and La Charité, which held some form of significance to Jeanne when she was alive.”

I nodded, because I’d been thinking something similar. Jeanne grimaced and muttered, “Her hatred extends that far?”

“Did she send any wyverns to reinforce the Servant you fought?” I asked Bradamante.

“Barely a squadron. I took care of *them* without even breaking a sweat,” she replied proudly. “They might as well have been children’s toys!”

So whatever her legend might have focused on, she was at least competent enough to handle a Berserker and a few wyverns. I wasn’t sure that was exactly a ringing endorsement, not without having seen what that Berserker had been capable of, but I could at least say she wasn’t dead weight.

Already, I was thinking about how we might slot her into our own forces. It was probably a better idea to wait until I’d had a chance to see her in action, first.

“Have you encountered the Dragon Witch herself, yet?”

Bradamante faltered. “Ah, that... Sh-she hasn’t been brave enough to attack me herself, so no! But I’m sure I could hold her off! I’ll protect Thiers with everything I am!”

“Your courage does you justice, Lady Bradamante,” Siegfried said warmly.

I glanced back at him. Right, I’d been getting caught up in the longer term plans. Taking care of his wound was more important, right now, and unfortunately, since the Servant protecting Thiers *wasn’t* Saint George, that meant we still had some searching to do.

Bradamante peered around Mash and me, sizing up Siegfried with a discerning gaze.

“You have the bearing of a knight,” she said, “but I don’t recognize you or your armor. Would you tell me your name?”

“Well met.” Siegfried inclined his head and bent his torso slightly. Only the barest twitching muscle in his jaw betrayed his pain. “I am Siegfried, Servant Saber. I was summoned to this era in response to the wyverns, but I have contracted with Chaldea to aid them in their quest to destroy the Dragon Witch.”

“Siegfried!” Bradamante gasped. “Then that is the dragonslaying sword, Balmung! Oh, to meet such a famous hero! This is incredible!”

“He’s also injured.” I gestured to his wound. “Jeanne,” and here, I pointed her out, to an awkward smile, “was summoned to defeat her evil counterpart, but she’s so new as a Heroic Spirit that she’s not strong enough to lift the curse.”

“When we discovered there was a Servant in Thiers, we were hoping it would be Saint George, summoned to fight the wyverns like Siegfried was,” Romani picked up. “Since he, too, is a saint, we thought he might be able to lift the curse and heal Siegfried’s wound.” He sighed again. “Unfortunately, it seems that he might not have been summoned after all, so that whole journey was for nothing.”

A beat later, he seemed to realize the insult inherent in his words and scrambled to reassure her, “N-n-not that I think you’re inferior or anything! It’s just that you’re not who we were hoping to find! Ack! I-I mean, I’m sure you’ve got your own strong points, it’s just not what we needed right now!”

“Romani,” I advised him, “unless you’re really fond of the taste of your shoe, maybe you should quit while you’re ahead?”

“Oh man...” Romani moaned. “I totally made a fool of myself, didn’t I?”

Except... Bradamante, when I turned back to her, didn’t seem offended at all. In fact, with her brow furrowed and her mouth drawn into a line, she looked more thoughtful than anything.

“You say he’s been afflicted by a curse?” she asked.

That wasn’t the question of someone just looking for clarification or wanting to make sure she had the story right. That was someone who might have a *solution*.

Maybe making the trek to Thiers wouldn’t wind up being a waste of a trip after all.

Siegfried nodded. “I’m not entirely sure how it works, but I’m almost certain this is the lingering effects of a Noble Phantasm. It’s the only thing strong enough to have done so much damage through my armor.”

“Do you have an idea?” I asked her.

Slowly, Bradamante nodded her head. “If it’s the lingering results of a Noble Phantasm, then it might be too much for even me to handle,” she hedged, “but my other Noble Phantasm, my ring, Angelica Cathay, might just be able to undo the curse that ails Lord Siegfried.”

That... Okay, no, I probably shouldn’t get my hopes up. Finding Siegfried at Lyon had already been an incredible stroke of luck, offset by his wound. It would be *convenient* if Bradamante could get rid of the curse, but since when had things been *convenient* when it came to my life?

“How sure are you that it’ll work?”

“W-well, it’s not a guarantee,” she admitted. “B-but there’s one way to find out for sure, isn’t there? In fact, I could do it right here, right now! No special ritual or anything required!”

A low, quiet rumble punctuated her statement, and we all turned to Rika, who smiled sheepishly and let out a slow, awkward laugh. “Do you think we could eat, first? Curse-breaking sure sounds like it works up an appetite, and I’m already hungry.”

Mash sighed. “Senpai...”

And then another rumble sounded from *her*, and her face flushed as she hung her head so that her hair hid her flaming cheeks.

“M-maybe this isn’t the place to be attempting to break Siegfried’s curse,” Mash said. “Miss Bradamante, do you think we could wait until we’re in Thiers to try?”

“I...” Bradamante didn’t seem to know what to say, for a moment, and then she beamed. “Of course! Yes, it’s more than okay if we get lunch for you before we try to break the curse! There’s no rush!”

Mash turned to me expectantly, like she was waiting for me to insist that we get it out of the way as quickly as possible. In a movie or a tv show, that would also have been the perfect moment for my stomach to let out a loud rumble of its own to prove them right.

It didn’t. Not loud enough for them to hear, at least, because we’d had not much of a breakfast, not much of a dinner, and not all that substantial a meal the entire trip here. It wasn’t really all that different from the sorts of things we’d had to eat in the aftermath of the Leviathan battle in Brockton Bay, when the city was limping on and stale rations were better than nothing, but that didn’t mean I had ever enjoyed it, and even if they were nutritious, they rarely felt filling.

Yes, I was hungry, too. Fine, Mash, Rika, there wasn’t any reason not to do it your way.

I held back my sigh and nodded. “Lunch first.”

“Yes!” Rika pumped her fist. “I’m so hungry, I could eat a horse!”

“I don’t think that will be on the menu,” Bradamante said diplomatically. “But I’m sure we’ll be able to find something to your liking! Please, follow me! When they see you’re with me, the people of Thiers will welcome you with open arms!”

I wasn’t so sure about that, given the current shape of things, but I could hope and extend a little trust her way, at least.

“We’ll be in your care,” Ritsuka said politely. It sounded rehearsed, or maybe perfunctory would be the better word. Like something he had been taught to say all his life, so it had become second nature.

Bradamante turned around and started back towards the city, and our motley crew fell into step behind her, weapons stowed into spirit form. By the anxious tightening of Jeanne’s eyes, it seemed I wasn’t the only one who was a little skeptical of Bradamante’s claims of the townsfolk’s hospitality.

But, another ten minutes or so of walking later, she was proven right. The outskirts of Thiers were relatively sparsely populated, but once we got into the town proper, more and more people were

milling about the streets, going about their day, and they all stopped to greet us — Bradamante in particular — as we passed.

None of them cast us an unfriendly glance, despite Mash, Arash, and Siegfried decked out in armor and the twins and I dressed in strange clothes, with my one arm still stained a muddy maroon from that wyvern's blood. At worst, they ignored us entirely. Some of them greeted us with the same bright smiles and warm words they did Bradamante.

They weren't even suspicious of Jeanne. No one side-eyed her, looked at her strangely, or worse, turned, fled, and screamed about "the Dragon Witch" coming to kill them all. It made sense when I thought about it and remembered that this was fifteenth century France, not modern America. This era didn't have photographs or cameras to capture someone's image for later viewing, so the only way for someone who had never seen Jeanne to know what she looked like was to hear her described by someone who had, and human memory was imperfect at the best of times.

For that matter, without the internet or telephones or even newspapers, the only way information traveled was by word of mouth, and the further it had to travel, the less reliable it was. That game one of my teachers had us play back in middle school had made it abundantly clear just how easy it was for anything relayed between people to become completely distorted between the beginning and the end.

So we were led through the city completely unaccosted — for a certain value of the word "city." Built into the slope of the mountainside, Thiers was a spectacular sight, for sure, but it wasn't anywhere near as sprawling or populous as Lyon would have been, and it really was closer in size to La Charité.

That didn't detract from the view at all. From the top, looking down, I imagined it was a pretty spectacular sight, but even from near the bottom looking up, there was a kind of rustic beauty to a human town fused into the side of the mountain, built into the slope. Almost like the brick buildings had grown up out of the soil, sprouting from between the trees and the side of the river. Moss grew along the bottoms, and vines snaked their way up the walls.

The strange feeling twisting around in my gut as we made our way deeper in... It wasn't quite nostalgia, but I didn't have a better word to encapsulate that sense of a world we'd lost somewhere along the way, that simple beauty of a time that had long passed us by. The people living here, life was less complicated for them, less busy, wasn't it? Their days were full, but the hustle and rush of modernity were completely absent, and as I observed them all with my bugs, there seemed to be less weight pressing on their shoulders.

Maybe having to fix these Singularities and live in the long past for weeks at a time wasn't full of nothing but pitfalls.

Bradamante's route was winding and circuitous, but there didn't seem to be a straighter road into the city. I thought I could see one further to the south, but just from feeling it out with my bugs, it would have taken us longer to cross the more treacherous terrain to reach it than it was to just keep going the way we were.

"How long ago were you summoned, Lady Bradamante?" Romani asked.

“It’s been almost a month,” she answered.

Romani made a sound of understanding in his throat. “So you would have showed up around the same time Jeanne did. In other words, shortly after the Dragon Witch materialized.”

Bradamante shook her head.

“I wouldn’t know. I only know as much as the townsfolk do, and information about the Dragon Witch is fairly sparse. Most of it is just rumors, although it turned out to be true that she commands dragons, didn’t it? Berserker came after her first couple attacks failed.”

“And you defended the town in each case.”

“That’s right. A few wyverns weren’t any trouble at all.”

Romani hummed.

“Now that I think of it... Lord Siegfried, would you say you were summoned around the same time?”

“There’s no need for such formality, Director Archaman,” Siegfried said with a polite smile, only slightly strained. Although he tried to hide the discomfort of his wound, he still winced and flinched every now and again. “Any claims to royalty or nobility I might have had died with me. Now, I am merely Siegfried, the Servant Saber. Address me however it pleases you.”

“Ah... Right.” Romani grimaced. “In that case, since your weak spot is as famous as you are, maybe it’s better to just call you Saber. Oh, uh, and it’s okay if you call me Roman, too.”

“I think it’s safe to say that all of the stray Servants were probably summoned around the same time,” I told Romani. “If they form a sort of autoimmune response to the problem, it only makes sense.”

“It’s difficult to say how much time I spent down in those dungeons,” said Siegfried, “but if I was asked to guess... Yes. A month sounds about right.”

“Then, if any Servant not summoned by the Dragon Witch herself was summoned around the same time...” Romani trailed off thoughtfully. “But you’d think we would’ve heard more rumors about them, wouldn’t we?”

I shook my head.

“If they weren’t summoned near someplace big enough to see lots of traffic, maybe not. Sieg... Saber only stood out because he was at Lyon.”

“That’s a good point...”

Eventually, Bradamante led us to a place in the city I should have expected: an old, weathered church made of timeworn stone that stood near the center of the city. In hindsight, we still didn’t really have any money, and as far as privacy went, it would be easier to discuss whatever we needed to talk about here than inside an inn, where anyone who so much as passed the door could listen in. This was definitely the better idea.

Was it too much to ask to find a place with an actual bed, though?

“The local priest was kind enough to let me stay here,” Bradamante explained as we went inside. “Even though I don’t strictly need sleep, it’s nice to have a place to relax a little. I’m sure he’ll be glad to let you stay as long as you need, as well!”

“I don’t think we’ll be staying that long,” I said mildly. “A day or two at the most.”

“Even still.”

The doors shut behind us with an echoing boom, and Romani’s fingers flying over the keyboard filled the emptiness of the hall.

“Hey, this is an incredible stroke of luck,” he said. “You guys are sitting right on top of a ley line terminal. Mash, if you set your shield down on a large enough empty spot, I can send you some food right away.”

Rika groaned. “Not more ration bars!”

Romani chuckled. “Nope. You guys are gonna love this — I managed to get Emiya to cook you up a hearty stew! It should hold you over for quite a while!”

“Yes!” Rika cheered. “Oh god — is it bad to say that in a church? Oh well — I’ve gone too long without my gourmet chef! I need some of Emiya’s cooking right away!”

Even I had trouble hiding my eagerness after hearing *that*. Mash all but scrambled to find a good spot to set down her shield, front facing upwards, and backed away.

“Ready when you are, Doctor Roman!” she reported brightly.

“Okay.” The clack of more presses on his keyboard only drove the excitement higher. “In three... two... one...”

A magic circle lit up over Mash’s shield, flashed, and an instant later, a large steel pot and a bevy of extra bowls and utensils appeared on the floor.

“Enjoy!” said Romani.

It wasn’t quite a mad dash to dig into Emiya’s cooking, but the twins were still almost fighting for first picks until Mash stepped in and lifted the pot onto a nearby table next to what must have been a donation box. When she lifted the lid, the aroma of a freshly cooked stew set even my own stomach to growling audibly.

Strictly speaking, I think the four of us wound up eating more than we should have, and Jeanne and Bradamante eventually joined us when what was there proved too much even for us hungry travelers, just so they could see what the fuss was about. The looks of surprised delight on their faces was satisfying on an entirely different level.

Yes, Emiya's food was that good. After weeks of rations and whatever Arash could hunt down for us on the road, it was like manna from heaven.

Once we had all had our fill and our used dinnerware was sent back to Chaldea, Bradamante turned our attention back to the issue at hand. "Now. Lord Siegfried, let's deal with that curse!"

Siegfried stepped forward and pulled aside his bodysuit. Bradamante let out a quiet gasp.

"That's a terrible wound!"

She took two long strides towards him and pressed one hand against it, muttering what might have been an incantation under her breath. Something on her finger glowed and glimmered, but it was hidden by the fabric of her glove.

None of us dared breathe. We all watched with baited breath and waited, hoping that this was it and our journey here hadn't been for nothing. For a moment, a jolt of nostalgia reminded me of Scapegoat healing me in the aftermath of the Echidna battle, his startled shock that I'd been fighting so intensely while essentially crippled.

Let this be that easy, I thought. Let this be all the more we had to do to get him cured.

But when Bradamante's mouth twisted into a frown, her brow knitted together, and she pulled away a moment later with a shake of her head, I wasn't surprised. I wanted to be, but I wasn't.

"It's too much for me to handle all at once," she reported, and I'd half been expecting her to say just that. "I'm sorry, but I can't lift the curse like this."

"I see," Mash sighed. "Thank you, Lady Bradamante. At least you —"

"All at once?" I asked immediately.

"I don't have the power to brute force it in one go," said Bradamante. "I could unravel it a little bit at a time over the course of...maybe a week, if I worked on it every day, but I can't afford to just pour magical energy into it until it breaks. I have to keep enough strength to fight, in case the Dragon Witch or her minions attack the city."

Siegfried nodded. "I understand."

"Sounds good to me," Rika blurted out. "A week-long vacation is just what the doctor ordered!"

"We can't really just sit around and wait for a week, but we could defend the city in your place while you recover your energy," Ritsuka offered instead. "If you break it all in one go, I mean."

"I'm okay with that," Arash chimed in. "In fact, that's a great idea, if you ask me."

"It... I think that could work, actually," Bradamante said with building hope and a slowly growing smile. "Yes. Yes! If you promised to watch over the city for...maybe five days while I recovered, then I could do it right this instant! Oh, it would be wonderful to have a team of heroes helping look out for Thiers with me! Especially a hero as great and noble as Lord Siegfried!"

Ritsuka nodded, and his face broke out into a wide smile. “Let’s do that, then!”

“We can’t,” Jeanne interrupted in a strong but quiet voice.

The excitement died immediately.

“Miss Jeanne?” asked Mash.

“I’m sorry, Ritsuka, Rika,” said Jeanne, gaining volume with every word. “I understand what it is you’re trying to do, but we simply can’t afford to stay in one place for too long. Not when it means the Dragon Witch has free reign to do as she pleases. Not when there is a *single life* that might be lost because of our inaction.”

Her fists clenched tightly.

“We need to keep moving,” she went on. “The sooner we find strong allies to help us fight her, the fewer people have to suffer. I’m sorry, Lady Bradamante, but Thiers is only one city, and it already has you to defend it. For the sake of the people of all of France, we can’t spend any more time here than absolutely necessary.”

Mash let out a quiet sigh. “Yes, Jeanne is right. I’m sorry, Master, Lady Bradamante. Our mission is too important to delay.”

I remained silent, lips pursing as an idea of my own slowly percolated in my head. A way to fix all of our problems at once.

“H-hang on a second,” Romani protested. “I get what you’re saying, but it’s not that bad if you take a break for a few days, you know! Your mental and physical health are important factors in fixing this Singularity too! Haste makes waste!”

“The more we lounge about, the more lives are lost to the Dragon Witch’s cruelty!” Jeanne rebuked. “Rest is important, that’s true, and I wouldn’t begrudge a day or two of relaxation, but a whole week of indolence is too high a price to pay! Not when innocents are at stake!”

“W-wait, it wasn’t just about relaxing!” Ritsuka hurried to say. “I was trying to compromise! Isn’t it better that we cure Siegfried as quickly as possible before we move on?”

“If it spares the lives of the Dragon Witch’s victims, then I will gladly suffer this injury for as long as I need to,” Siegfried said solemnly.

“If we wait an extra week, then those Servants we’re searching for might already be defeated before we arrive!” Jeanne added. “We can’t afford to delay any longer than absolutely necessary!”

“Romani,” I cut in, “how quickly do our Command Spells replenish?”

“One per day,” he answered immediately. “Ah, but that’s one per day in *Chaldea*. As long as you’re in that Singularity, it’ll really be more like one a week, from your perspective.”

Better than I'd feared, worse than I'd hoped. The fact that we even got Command Spells back at all was convenient, but the rate at which we got them back after using them wasn't as fast as I would have liked.

That we couldn't use them as and when we pleased was probably a good thing, because it stopped us from getting too reliant on using them whenever things turned just slightly against us, made them more strategic and tactical. Right then, it just felt like a huge hassle.

"Can you still detect that Servant to the west of here?"

"Give me a second, I'll check," said Romani, and his chair squeaked as he turned away.

I hated what I was about to suggest. My stomach was twisting itself up into nervous knots just thinking about it. It went against every instinct I had, and I had to fight with my own tongue to keep from telling him to forget about it. To just let it be and we'd make do as we were.

But I knew better than that. As much as I hated it, this was the *right* move. It saved us time and effort, it got us more allies as quickly as possible, and it let us solve about three different problems with one stone — more, if the Servant to the west was someone who would be really useful.

"At least one," Romani said. "There might be more, but if there are, they're grouped too close together for me to get separate readings at this range."

"How far?"

"Another...two-hundred kilometers or so."

Damn it. Another fucking *week* of walking both ways.

I looked at Ritsuka, at Rika, at Mash and Arash.

It didn't make sense for us all to be sitting here, waiting while Bradamante slowly lifted Siegfried's curse. Not when there were other allies we could find out there who might be killed off if left to fight on their own. Against Dracul and the Dragon Witch, we needed to stack the deck with as many strong Servants as we could, and that meant someone needed to go and see who it was further west.

The only problem was...it didn't make sense for it to be me. If *I* went with Jeanne and we ran into trouble, I could summon Arash with a Command Spell. But if the twins stayed here with Mash and trouble came knocking, they had to make do with an injured Siegfried, Bradamante, and Mash, while Arash and I might not even know anything was wrong until it was all over, and we wouldn't be able to help at all.

But the alternative, then, was to send the twins and Mash with Jeanne and Arash. If trouble came knocking, I could call Arash back, and if *they* ran into trouble, he was already there. It wasn't perfect, but it gave us enough wiggle room that no one would be undefended for longer than it took to use a Command Spell.

It made more sense that way. I just had to let the twins out of my sight for the longest time since Fuyuki.

Damn it. Damn it all. There wasn't much of a fucking choice, was there?

I swallowed around my hesitation and said, "We're going to have to split up."