

Chapter XXII: Common Enemy

Almost before the word had finished leaving my mouth, I started into motion and made briskly for the church's doors.

"Romani," I barked into my communicator as I went, "how much time?"

There wasn't much time, there *couldn't* be much time, not with Chaldea's sensors having such a finite range for picking up the smaller details. One or two miles out, that was all I had, and at a Servant's full on sprint speed, that wasn't much distance at all. He could be here and slaughtering his way through the townsfolk as I spoke, and that added an extra urgency to my steps.

"A minute, maybe two," Romani told me hurriedly. "The only reason we even have this much lead time is because we registered the readings from his Saint Graph during your last encounter."

Outside, as I pushed the door open with my free hand, I started to gather a swarm, mentally cataloguing the stuff that would be useful and setting aside everything that wasn't. It was the longest I'd stayed in one place since we'd first arrived in this Singularity, which meant I'd had much longer to start putting together some of my old tricks instead of just relying on sheer numbers and mass. Unfortunately, none of the stingers and the venomous bugs in my range were of any use against a Servant, so I had to reluctantly leave them all behind.

"What direction is he coming from?"

In the back of my head, I noted Siegfried and Bradamante following on my heels, both of them suited up in their full armor and with weapons at the ready. The latter of the two seemed to be paying particular attention to my abrupt briefing with Romani — of course. Probably the only reason she hadn't raced off to confront Dracul directly was the fact she didn't know where she needed to go.

How had she detected us so early that she could meet us before we even got into town? My only guess was that our larger retinue and the fact we'd had three (and a half? With Jeanne diminished, I had no idea how she read to a Servant's magical sixth sense) Servants had made us far easier to detect, but I didn't really understand it beyond "Servants can sense other Servants." Some could do it from farther away than others, although my sample size was tiny, so what the fuck did I know either way?

"North," said Romani, the word broken by a crackle of static halfway through.

Without even thinking about it, I spun on my heel and course corrected. Even then, I was building up a three-dimensional map of the city with my bugs, looking through for the quickest route northwards.

North, he said...

"That's from over the mountain."

“Strictly speaking, it’s really more of a large hill than a mountain,” Romani corrected, and then seemed to realize how stupid it was being pedantic about that right now. “B-but that’s not the important part, you’re right! What’s important is that there’s a whole city between you and him, and there’s no time to evacuate everyone!”

“Which means we need to meet him halfway before he makes it all the way over the hill.”

The advantage of high ground — for whatever that would wind up being worth in a battle between Servants — and no bystanders to get caught up in the fighting. The trees and foliage should also give me plenty of places to hide without being so far away that any help I could give would be entirely useless.

Not that I expected to be able to do much myself. Dracul had already proven my bugs were just nourishment to him, although how much was probably negligible. At the very least, being nearby would give me a good view of the fight, for a certain value of the word “view.”

The only problem: getting up the hill quickly enough to beat Dracul to the top. Bradamante wouldn’t do it, so there was only one real option, even if it wasn’t ideal.

I whirled back around.

“Siegfried,” I said, “we need to get to the top of the hill. We have about” — fuck it, best guess — “thirty seconds. Can you manage it?”

With his wound not yet fully healed and the curse not yet completely broken?

Siegfried smiled a confident smile and gave me a nod, and then his sword disappeared as he knelt down and offered his arms. Internally, I grimaced. The princess hold wasn’t particularly dignified for the woman being carried, but for a Servant moving at the speed of a race car, it was almost certainly a lot safer than me clinging desperately to his back.

“Bradamante —”

But I hadn’t even finished turning to face her before the wind of her passing whipped my hair about, left in her wake as she dashed up the streets at speed.

Still getting used to that kind of speed. Speedsters hadn’t been exactly *un*common capes, but Brutes, teleporters, and fliers had been much more common by far. The only pure speedster coming to mind just then was Velocity, and he was nowhere near that fast.

Without any more delay, I spun back around and climbed into Siegfried’s waiting arms. He wrapped one around my shoulders and looped the other under my knees, and I wrapped mine around his neck just to give myself at least the resemblance of control over what was about to happen.

“Ready,” I told him.

His legs bunched up — I caught the faintest wince, just barely there, at the pain of his wound — and then he leapt into the air. My hair whipped about my head, but even though that made it hard to see, I could tell just by the positioning of my bugs that we had cleared easily thirty yards in one go.

We would be reaching the summit of the hill in no time at all.

I hadn't forgotten that the others were currently fighting Fafnir, another enemy of seemingly insurmountable strength. How could I, when Arash was still drawing a steady stream of magical energy from me, even if it wasn't all that much compared to what Cúchulainn had needed to fight the corrupted Emiya in Fuyuki? But I couldn't do anything for the twins and Mash and I couldn't change the outcome of that fight from here. I couldn't afford to distract myself worrying about it when the worst possible enemy was even now fast approaching, coming to kill us all.

Whether he would slaughter the townsfolk after killing me, Siegfried, and Bradamante wasn't even a question.

Another leap carried us further up the hill, and Siegfried had barely landed with deceptive softness before we left the ground again. The wind howled around me, biting at my exposed cheek. My stomach lurched with each jump, like I was at the bottom of a swing on a swingset. The whole world whirled about me — even with my eyes squeezed shut, the galaxy of lights that marked my bugs rushed past too quickly to grasp.

But even before we made it to the top, my power settled on the bugs that lived there, and I realized that we'd been too slow to move.

Dracul was already there. Waiting at the crest of the hill, looking down on the city. In one hand, he held his spear, and pinched between the fingers of the other was a single, ordinary fly, held in a grip like steel just strong enough to avoid crushing it.

He seemed to sense my presence in the fly, because he turned to it with a mad grin.

“Oh,” he rumbled in that deep, dark voice of his, “there you are, clever Master. It seems I'll be seeing you shortly.”

Dracul's already here, I told Siegfried across our contract's bond, because I didn't trust my voice to the wind. There was a hitch, the barest hesitation on his next landing, but he kept going regardless and gave me a nod I felt in the shift of his corded muscles

Understood.

“Hurry along, now,” Dracul said. “If you and your Servant take too long, I might not be able to contain my bloodlust. This fly won't be the only thing I crush while I wait.”

With the slightest flex of his finger, the fly was squashed and my connection to it was cut. Through the eyes of the other insects crawling all about, I could see him shake the viscera from his hand, as though the blood and guts were of so little worth that they couldn't even take off the edge of his hunger.

Those bugs were also what let me see Bradamante come racing up the hilltop bare seconds later, brandishing her shield in front of her and keeping a vice grip on her miniature lance. She had eyes only for Dracul, and she was already tense and ready for combat when she came to a stop.

“No further than that!” she spat at him. “I am the Lancer class Servant, Bradamante! Paladin of Charlemagne! Thiers and all of its people are under my protection, and I won’t allow you to take a single life today!”

“What a coincidence!” Dracul’s grin split his face. “I, too, am a Lancer class Servant! Although you seem to have escaped the curse of Madness that my Master placed upon me during my summoning. Tell me, were you summoned by that human woman, or was it one of those brats she was shepherding back at La Charité?”

“I have no Master,” Bradamante told him vehemently. “I kneel before no mage. My allegiance belongs only to my king and to the people of this city!”

I grimaced.

Set me down and keep going, I ordered Siegfried.

Of course, Master.

He came to a jarring halt at the end of the latest jump and carefully knelt down to let me find my feet. I stumbled a little trying to regain my bearings, but the instant I was confident I wasn’t going to fall over, I took off in a sprint down the side streets and over my shoulder barked, “Go!”

Siegfried leapt like the wind, and I lost track of him from the sheer speed as I maneuvered my way closer to the fight behind the cover the city and its buildings offered me. Plans started to whirl up in my head as I sprinted, and while enough was different, I found myself comforted by the familiarity of the circumstances.

This was my element. This was where I thrived. The rush of blood thundering through my veins, the surge of adrenaline that set my thoughts into hyperdrive, the burn of my muscles as I raced towards the action, and the huff of my breath as I sucked down air. Skitter, Weaver, Khepri — whichever name I’d worn, whoever was standing beside me, whatever enemy stood against me, this had always been me at my best.

There was probably something incredibly sad about the fact I was more comfortable in the thick of combat than I was trying to be a good, understanding leader to a pair of teenagers, but that wasn’t the time to think about it.

“You’re one of the strays, then,” Dracul purred. He chuckled, low and menacing. “That means you’ll be all the easier to kill!”

Bradamante settled lower into her stance, leveling her lance at Dracul. “The only one who will die here is you!”

Dracul only laughed, tossing his head back as it peeled out of his mouth.

“Such fire! Such vitality! You will make an excellent appetizer until the main course shows herself!”

And at that moment, with all the grace of a cat, Siegfried landed in a crouch between them, clutching his massive sword with one hand. Slowly, he stood straight, flinching just the slightest from his wound.

But there was no quiver or doubt in his voice. “If you’re referring to my Master, Dracul,” he said confidently, “then you’ll have to make it through me, first.”

“Oh?” Dracul grinned. “You. Yes, you’re the Servant we defeated at Lyon. You still cling to this false life, do you? I’m amazed. A wound like that would have killed any ordinary Servant. Tell me, does it still ail you?”

Siegfried grimaced, but very intentionally didn’t let himself reach for his wound.

“Wound or not, I will defeat you all the same,” he declared.

“I’m sure,” Dracul said, voice dripping condescension. “Your Master — is she that woman from La Charité, then? She seems to have traded in. Did that Archer of hers get killed?”

Siegfried said nothing. Dracul seemed to take that for confirmation.

“A shame. I was looking forward to peeling the flesh from his bones myself.”

“Don’t ignore me!”

Bradamante rushed towards him and raced past Siegfried, snarling, but Dracul caught her tiny lance with the shaft of his own and held her there effortlessly.

“Of course I’m not ignoring you,” he said as though he was speaking to a child. “That would imply that I even remembered you were still here. If you’re going to offer yourself up to me on a silver platter, however...”

An ominous premonition tingled at the base of my skull. I didn’t know exactly what he was about to do, but I knew enough to know it couldn’t be allowed to happen.

STOP HIM!

Siegfried was already moving before I could even finish giving the order, and he bulldozed Bradamante out of the way, crashing into Dracul like a speeding train. Their momentum carried them ten, twenty, almost thirty feet, it had to be, and midway through their flight, Dracul’s body erupted with dark spikes like he was some kind of human porcupine.

Siegfried grunted, but weathered the attack with barely a scratch, little more than a handful of papercuts that scored only the surface of his skin. Dracul couldn’t hurt him, I realized suddenly. Armor of Fafnir negated everything that was B-Rank or lower, and everything higher got reduced by the same amount. Even with A-Rank strength, Dracul wouldn’t be able to do anything more than minor, easily healed damage.

I made a sharp turn down a side road that led to the hilltop, a plan starting to form in my head, and my magic circuits churned as I focused on him and activated one of the spells loaded into my mystic code.

“First aid!” I chanted between breaths.

Immediately, all of the cuts sealed up as though they hadn’t happened. The wound that plagued him still, however, remained unaffected at all, just as it had when Jeanne had tried to heal it. If I was a betting woman, that would be the only other place on his body where Siegfried would be vulnerable, right now.

Dracul broke out into laughter.

“So she *is* around!” His grin was all teeth. “Then if I kill the two of you, she’ll have no choice but to show herself, won’t she?”

“You won’t touch her,” Siegfried promised.

“As though you will have any say in that, once you’re dead!”

“Ha!”

Bradamante leapt towards him from the side, aiming to take advantage of his focus on Siegfried, but Dracul swung his arm around, and from his palm, brackish black blood lashed out like a whip. She was thrown to the side and crashed through a tree, disappearing into the undergrowth.

Already, I was diverting some of my swarm to check up on her, but it quickly became apparent there wasn’t a need, because she charged back out, completely uninjured. Her shield must have taken the brunt of the blow.

She and Siegfried attacked together, and Dracul met them both, deftly deflecting Siegfried’s sword to the side as he stepped out of the way of Bradamante’s lance. His hand came down over hers, and he used his superior strength to pull her off balance and push her into an overextension. He didn’t punish her for it, though. He just watched her stumble and right herself.

Something was wrong with this picture. Siegfried, I could understand, because he was injured and definitely not fighting at his best. But Dracul should not be casually manhandling both of them, toying with them the way he was. Not when he was a Heroic Spirit better known for his tactics, strategy, and psychological warfare than his martial skill, compared to someone like Siegfried or Bradamante, both of whom would have focused more on direct combat in their legends.

My focus honed in on Bradamante.

Was it because she didn’t have a proper Master? If being without a direct source of power was forcing her to be more conservative about how hard she fought and how much energy she spent, then it would make sense how someone who was being supported by a Grail could outperform her.

Or maybe I was just underestimating Dracul’s skill as a fighter. A bit of focus brought up his spread of stats and skills, and while they didn’t show him as particularly fast, he was sturdy, strong, and

undoubtedly tricky. They also told me almost nothing at all about how he fought or how good he was with an actual weapon.

Siegfried came around again, and in one fluid motion, Dracul blocked his sword and lashed out with his other hand to strike at Siegfried's wound with four sharp-nailed fingers. Siegfried gasped and stumbled backwards, fresh blood spurting from his side, directly into Bradamante. She squawked and diverted her blow from his back, but it cost her footing, and she barreled into Siegfried, taking them both to the ground.

Dracul only laughed as they both scrambled to their feet, licking red blood off of his fingers with a long, pink tongue.

"What's wrong, Saber?" Dracul taunted. "You're not fighting at your best. Perhaps that wound troubles you more than you're letting on."

"Wound or no wound, I will defeat you," Siegfried promised again.

"I said," Bradamante snarled, "stop ignoring me!"

She put on a spurt of speed, leading with her shield, and with a warcry, she fell upon Dracul, thrusting her lance directly for his chest.

Blood splattered across the forest floor. Bradamante gasped, and Dracul smirked at her, holding her lance by the crystalline green blade. Its point rested just above his chest, less than an inch away from the fabric of his clothing. The edge cut into the skin of his fingers, and small, red rivulets dribbled down it, but no matter how hard she pushed, it moved no closer to gouging out his heart.

"I'm giving you all the focus you deserve," he said. "If you want my attention so badly, then do something interesting, first."

He stepped to the side at the same time as he let go of her lance, and as she stumbled forward from the sudden lack of resistance, he delivered a punishing blow with his own lance that shook the trees and the ground itself and sent her flying. Red blood soared up into the air to mark her passing, and the crack of branches and whole trees snapping in her wake was like thunder.

Siegfried grimaced as Dracul turned back to him. One hand was gripping his sword like a vice, but the other was pressed to his side, clutched against his wound.

"Now then." Dracul's mouth split into another manic grin. "Where were we?"

Siegfried said nothing and just brandished his sword.

As I reached the edge of the city, I quickly turned and stepped off the beaten path into the trees.

Siegfried, I said as I ran. I've got a plan.

There was the most minute of pauses.

I'm listening, Master.

My feet pounded the earth, and I closed my eyes as I raced through the underbrush, ignoring the whip of branches and leaves that smacked me in the face. My bugs formed a map that let me navigate even still.

Dracul can't be killed with a single fatal blow. As long as his head's still attached, he's just shy of invincible, and I'm not sure taking his head off is even enough.

It should work, in principle, in theory. There had to be limits to what Battle Continuation, even at A-rank, would let him survive. The only reason I wasn't sure was because of his Shapeshift skill, because I remembered *Dracula*, and while it was supposed to be more limited in the daytime, he was supposed to be able to do things like transform into mist and escape attacks. He — the character, that was — had only actually been killed by a simultaneous decapitation and blow to the heart.

But without knowing for sure whether that held, there was one definite way of killing him.

So our best bet is to destroy him completely with your Noble Phantasm. I doubt he's going to give us the time to get that ready, though, so someone needs to distract him.

Siegfried's brow furrowed.

Not you, certainly, Master.

I shook my head a little, even though he couldn't see it.

We need Bradamante to make an opening. Look for it. The instant you see it, blow Dracul away. Until then, I need you to keep him busy. In fact...

I squinted open an eye and looked down at my pumping hands. The red on the back of one stood out to me.

Was it a waste? Maybe it was. Siegfried was strong enough and capable enough to hold off Dracul for at least a minute or two while I got Bradamante on board. But this wasn't the time to be skittish and hesitate, not when the other team was facing Fafnir and the only thing standing between Thiers and a violent death was a pair of Servants, one of whom was injured and weakened and the other who didn't have a Master to support her.

For how much I'd quibbled about using them when we didn't really need to, the decision was almost hilariously easy.

"By the power of my Command Spell," I said between breaths, "Saber, fight Dracul at your best."

On my hand, one third of the snaking tentacles flashed and faded away into vague smudges.

The change was immediate. Siegfried straightened, taller and more solid than he had been since we'd first found him in Lyon. His posture was stronger and surer, more like what I might have expected had we summoned him properly back outside Vaucouleurs. His wound still bled and it wasn't gone, but it didn't seem to bother him, anymore, at least for the moment.

"Yes, Master," he said confidently.

“Getting your second wind?” Dracul mused, walking slowly like a stalking predator. “I see. Your Master must have done something, then. A Command Spell?”

“My Master is none of your concern, Dracul,” Siegfried said as he took Balmung with both hands. “You won’t get anywhere near her.”

He launched forward with a devastatingly powerful swing of his sword that Dracul struggled to block, and I heard the ring of clashing steel even from where I was. I kept a selection of bugs watching, but put the fight to the back of my mind as I swung around the edges of it. I didn’t need to know any better than I already did just how badly they outclassed me in every metric, I just needed to keep track of how well Siegfried was doing.

I found Bradamante dazed and barely conscious something like a hundred feet from the fighting. A wicked gash over her torso bled fresh blood and had come dangerously close to disemboweling her, snaking its way up from one hip, across her stomach, and over her ribcage under the left side of her bust. He had even torn into the muscle of her left bicep.

Her armor *had* to be magical, because there was absolutely no way the flimsy-looking cloth she was wearing had been enough to protect her from a full force blow by Dracul. Not when I was fairly sure it would have ripped through even my sturdiest costume with ridiculous ease.

Focusing on her the same way I had Siegfried, I fed magical energy into my mystic code and chanted off the spell.

“First aid!”

The wound sealed over until there wasn’t even a faint pink line left, and Bradamante gasped to life, jerking upright. She blinked, and then immediately focused in on me.

“You!” She patted down the place where her wound had been, and her brow furrowed. “You healed me. Thank —”

“There’s no time,” I cut across her. “Siegfried is distracting Dracul, but unless he manages to get in a lucky shot and take Dracul’s head off, we can’t beat him like this. The only way we’re going to protect Thiers and get out of this alive is if we work together to take him out.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You want me to make a contract with you, become your Servant.”

“It would make things easier,” I told her, “but as long as you can use your Noble Phantasm without Chaldea’s support, it doesn’t matter. Can you?”

She hesitated. “Not consecutively,” she admitted grudgingly, “but I should be fine to use it at least once.”

I nodded briskly.

“Explain it to me,” I said. “Quickly, in the simplest possible terms.”

She hesitated a moment longer, and then she did. Nonsensically, despite the fact that she was a Lancer, it turned out that it was her shield, and the tiny lance was basically just a miniature mana cannon. She could combine the two to do extra damage, but the main attack was just a powerful charge with her shield.

A charge that not only did damage — and that alone may or may not be enough to defeat Dracul — but also stunned the enemy for a brief moment, not unlike a flashbang grenade. A moment where, say, another combatant might be able to guarantee a hit with his own Noble Phantasm.

It wasn't perfect. We were going to have to be exceptionally careful not to hit Bradamante in the process of killing Dracul.

The sound of clashing steel still rang out, and when I briefly turned my attention back to the fight more completely, things had returned to a more even footing. Dracul was struggling against Siegfried's punishing blows, but he forced Siegfried back and on the defensive even as I watched by targeting the grisly, half-healed wound, and that gave him enough room to protect himself from a finishing blow.

"Here's the plan," I explained hurriedly. "I'm going to grab Dracul's attention. I need you to hit him with your Noble Phantasm, and that should stun him long enough for Siegfried to deal the final blow. Got it?"

Her brow furrowed. "You want me to sacrifice myself?"

Someone save me from suspicious girl knights...

"No. Hit Dracul and keep going. Don't stop until you're way out of range, and even then, the instant you hear Siegfried call out his Noble Phantasm, put your shield between you and him, just to be safe."

Bradamante frowned, but accepted this with a slight nod.

"How do you mean to distract him?" she asked.

"You let me worry about that," I said. "You just charge in the direction I point and don't stop until the fighting does."

"...Fine," she said at length. "For the sake of defeating a common enemy, I will trust you just this once."

She took a deep breath and rolled her shoulders, then lifted her shield in one hand, her lance in the other, and crouched down in a defensive stance.

"I'm ready."

The swarm I'd been slowly building in the background suddenly burst into motion, taking flight, and they swirled about with exaggerated drama, circling the other two Servants. They broke off their fight, both of them eyeing the thick collection of bugs that poured into the clearing, although Siegfried had already seen this sort of thing and was keeping half his attention on Dracul.

The swarm buzzed angrily.

“DRACUL,” they droned menacingly in a discordant hum that shook the air.

Dracul laughed, delighted. A broad grin stretched over his face. “We meet again, woman! Are you going to retreat a second time and leave yet another city to my mercies?”

“NO RETREAT,” my bugs boomed, and the swarm flew down to condense into a vaguely humanoid shape, a familiar trick of mine from back in my Skitter days.

Siegfried, I ordered him, *disengage!*

At the same time, I pointed directly at Dracul and I told Bradamante, “Straight that way. On my mark...”

The bug clone spread its fake arms, even as Siegfried leapt backwards. “IF YOU WANT ME, I’M RIGHT HERE!”

Dracul burst into motion as blood exploded from every pore of his body. He descended upon my bug clone like a ravenous beast, and the tendrils of his blood speared into my bugs, killing them in droves in an instant.

“Go!”

Bradamante thrust her spear forward, and a beam of light shot from the tip, through the foliage, and through my bugs’ eyes, I watched it lance through Dracul’s body.

“Bouclier —”

Her shield lit up like an exploding star, so bright that I had to squint my eyes almost closed just to keep from being blinded. She didn’t seem to charge forward so much as take off like a rocket, like she was being reeled in by a high speed fishing line or something, and she crashed through every obstacle in her way. The trees that hadn’t already been bowled over by her when Dracul flung her back were being crushed underfoot now.

“— de Atlante!”

From behind, a shell of light seemed to form in front of her, but seen through the eyes of my bugs as she passed, she was like a comet, streaming a rainbow of colors in her wake. Dracul had only a moment to be surprised as my bug clone dispersed, a mere fraction of a second, and then Bradamante smashed into him like a freight train and kept going.

It was an apt comparison. Dracul was trampled and knocked down, tumbling across the clearing chaotically, even as Bradamante kept running, using her shield like a battering ram to push through. When Dracul finally came to a stop, he *looked* like he’d been run over, because one leg was bent in sickening angles in at least three different places, one arm had been ripped clean off, including the shoulder joint, and half of his face had been torn apart.

Even so badly hurt that he had to be barely alive, he still tried to climb to his feet, clutching at his remaining eye with his ruined remaining hand. Bloodstained lips pulled back into a snarl.

“DAMN YOU!”

Siegfried, now! I ordered.

And Siegfried was already ahead of me, racing forwards with a blazing Balmung held in both hands. He got in close, but only close enough that Dracul couldn't escape, and he swung his sword in a devastating upwards blow.

“BALMUNG!”

The blazing blue beam carved first into the ground, gouging out a chunk of the earth, and quickly expanded into a wave of light that consumed Dracul whole and shot off into the sky. Even from where I was, I could feel the weight of it and see it race upwards, parting the clouds as it passed through them.

He'd controlled it, I realized a moment later. Instead of just letting it loose and obliterating everything in front of him for a mile, he'd swept it upwards so that the majority of the blast would sail harmlessly into the air, and in the process, he'd minimized the amount of damage done to the surrounding landscape.

When it faded, there was no sign of Dracul, none that I could find with a cursory look through my bugs, at any rate. It looked like that had been enough to kill him.

Enemy Servant neutralized, Master, Siegfried reported.

I let out the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding and took off at a jog to meet up with him. My magic circuits ached faintly from the amount of energy he'd chewed through to fire off his Noble Phantasm, but unlike with Cúchulainn in Fuyuki, I wasn't really feeling much strain. Guess I had Chaldea's reactors to thank for that one.

Bradamante was already there by the time I had maneuvered my way around the wreckage to meet back up with Siegfried, and she was looking out over the deep, thirty-foot long divot that was carved into the hillside, up at the parted clouds. With my own eyes, now, I could see Dracul, or rather the complete lack thereof. There wasn't even a splatter of blood remaining of him.

“We did it,” she said quietly, and then she looked over at me and added, like she wasn't quite sure what to think of it, “together.”

Siegfried let out a long breath, and then he grunted, pressing a hand to his freshly bleeding wound. For good measure, I spun up my circuits again and chanted, “First aid.”

The wound didn't exactly seal over, but the bleeding at least slowed to a stop, leaving us basically where we'd been before the fight. Siegfried let out a tense sigh, like he'd gotten some relief but not all the way.

“Thank you, Master.”

If only I could have done more. But this much, at least, was within the scope of my abilities.

“You helped me to protect the city,” Bradamante said. “You *could* have run away. Lord Siegfried is injured. Retreating would have been the wiser option against such a fearsome enemy as the Lord Impaler.”

It would have been. If it was just me and Siegfried here, it might have wound up our only option, no matter how much it would have stung.

“And you would have died,” I replied. “You and all of the people in Thiers.”

She nodded. “I would have.” She turned back towards the city. “*We* would have.”

She turned at last back to me.

“I’ve decided!” she declared. “Tomorrow, I’m going to push the rest of the way and break the curse on Lord Siegfried! In exchange, I’ll be entrusting the protection of the people of Thiers to you!”

I felt my lips start to curl. “I’ll —”

Master, Arash interjected suddenly.

“Hold that thought,” I said to Bradamante.

Arash? I pushed back.

We survived, he explained shortly. *We should be back at Thiers late tomorrow or early the day after.*

What happened? I demanded.

Please, use my eyes for a moment, Master.

I frowned, but closed my own eyes and pushed myself towards him; a moment later, I was in a completely different stretch of forest, watching over a beaten down caravan consisting of the twins, Mash, Jeanne, and two new people who were dressed so uniquely that they could only be Servants. One was a man with long blond hair carrying a conductor’s baton, of all things, and the other was clad in burnished copper armor with a white surcoat. The most striking thing about the second was the pauldron shaped like a dragon’s head that was curved around one shoulder.

If that was who I thought it was... But who was the Beethoven wannabe?

Arash?

I can’t explain everything right now, Master, he said. *I can’t afford to let my guard down that long. I’ll explain everything when we return.*

I hesitated.

If that dragon chases you down —

I will protect Ritsuka and Rika, Master, he promised. Whatever it takes.