

Chapter XCV: Prince of Pirates

The water rushed in around me, pushing down, and I spun beneath the force of it, churned about by the waves and the currents until I couldn't tell up from down. The pittance of air in my lungs burned, trying to escape out into the sea, and I held it in as best I could, because even in that moment of confusion and shock, I knew I would die if I let it go.

The world whirled about me. The dark sky above, the dark depths below, they melded together until I couldn't tell which was which. Feuding tidal forces pulled me up, down, left, right, all simultaneously, like they each wanted a piece and would settle for the largest chunk of me they could get. One tried to drag my left leg down, another my right foot up, yet another tried to yank my left arm off into the distance, and the only thing I had any real control over was my right arm.

Something pushed on my back, right in the middle, and my body shot up as though I was being lifted by a giant hand. My face broke the surface, bathing me in chilly, salty air, and —

I gulped down a desperate gasp, flailing as I shot up towards the blue sky. My hands found purchase not in churning water, but on soft sand, as my chest heaved in air as though I'd been drowning.

Where —

“Hey.”

A pair of hands settled on my shoulders as Arash kneeled down in front of me. A comforting smile curled his lips. “Hey, it's okay. We're safe.”

It only took a moment for me to put the pieces together, but still far longer than it should have.

“You rescued me.”

“Well, I couldn't just let you drown,” he teased me. “Kinda hard to survive as a Servant without a Master, you know? And...I *did* promise you, remember?”

It took me an extra second to remember — right. Back in Rome. My faithful Servant, always by my side, until the day his body gave out. I should have expected that he'd be the first person to dive in after me. Arash was just that sort of person.

“What happened?”

“Hektor flung you off the ship — you remember that part, right?” he asked.

I nodded. One hand came up to touch my ribs, which were a bit tender, but not broken. Considering how easy it would have been for him to snap my spine like a twig, I wasn't sure if I was supposed to count it as a kindness or not that he'd only used his spear to catapult me across the ship instead of breaking me in two. On the one hand, I was alive and I wasn't hemorrhaging internally, so I didn't have to worry about drowning in my own blood.

On the other hand, I had almost drowned in the ocean instead, so while he'd spared me a more gruesome fate now, at the time, he was trying to drown me either way. The method he used didn't matter so much.

My back, however, felt like one, gigantic bruise, like there was an enormous strip of abused flesh that went from about mid-shoulder down to the small of my back, radiating pain. I'd hit the railing and rolled over it, ass over teakettle, and *that*, I was definitely still feeling.

A quick activation of my magic circuits and a mumbled "First Aid!" took care of that, though, and sweet relief washed over me. When I rolled my shoulders, there was a satisfying crackle, but no pain.

"I remember someone screaming for me, then hitting the water," I said. "Nothing after that."

Arash nodded. "Good. That means you didn't hit your head on the way down, so that's one thing we don't have to worry about."

Yeah, a concussion would have made this whole situation a lot more problematic. It was a minor miracle I'd plunged straight into the water, considering the waves, and hadn't been dragged under the ship by the current.

"As for what happened with Hektor, I can't be sure," he went on. He let go of my shoulders and sat back. "I dove in after you, and I was too focused on making sure I got you out of there alive to pay much attention to what was still happening on the *Golden Hind*. My guess? He retreated as soon as he thought you were gone."

Because that was his goal. He wasn't there to fight the Servants, he was there to make sure his side won, and the easiest and quickest way of accomplishing that was by killing one of the Masters — and by taking charge of the conversation the way I had, I'd shown him that I was the most experienced of the three of us. The leader.

A sigh hissed out of my nostrils. It couldn't be helped. Cowering and forcing the twins to try and take the role was... Well. Among other things, I wasn't that kind of person.

"He's treating this like an actual Grail War," I said aloud. "He went after the enemy Masters and made sure to target the one who looked most like she knew what she was doing."

"It looks that way," Arash agreed.

It...fit, from what I remembered of the Hektor in *The Iliad*. It wasn't to say that he was a dishonorable kind of guy, but that he was too much of a tactician to avoid crippling the enemy when he saw an opening. In a regular Grail War, that sort of thinking was even the kind I would have approved of, as long as I wasn't on the other side of it.

"And after that?"

Arash sighed. "Well, the waves were a little too chaotic, so we got dragged away from the *Golden Hind*. I managed to find an island to camp out on and swam the way here. It's been...I want to say

about half a day since then. You slept through the night, but you were breathing fine, so I didn't try to wake you."

"So you have no idea where —"

My head whipped around towards the nearby cliff face, just in time for another person to round the turn, a bundle of sticks and twigs carried in his arms. When he realized he'd been spotted, he stopped and froze, blinking back at me with wide eyes.

Arash sighed again. "Okay, I might have had a little help, too."

The stranger came closer, still clutching his bundle of wood — presumably for making a fire — and as he approached, he addressed Arash instead of me, "She doing okay, then?"

"Yeah," Arash answered. "Startled herself waking up, but there's no concussion and she remembers everything that happened, so it looks like we worried over nothing."

The stranger smiled, an honest, open smile that...actually made him look kind of cute. "Well, that's good! Everything worked out, then!"

I examined him a little closer, taking in the pirate's clothes, the black velvet jacket, the even darker black hair that he wore long, tied back at the nape of his neck. He had the bronzed complexion of someone who spent a lot of time in the sun — which made sense for a pirate, and Blackbeard had been similar — and he couldn't have been much older than me. Maybe mid to late twenties.

He was also decked out in enough jewelry to buy his own ship. Rings on nearly every finger, bangles around his wrists, chains accenting everything from the sash around his waist to the pockets of his coat. If he sold just half of it, he'd probably bankrupt a small country.

"Who are you?"

He blinked at me again. "Oh, where are my manners? Sorry about that! The name's Sam, Sam Bellamy. Nice to meet you!"

"The...pleasure's mine, I guess."

Sam Bellamy... That was another pirate name. "Black Sam" Bellamy, not because he was some terrible rogue who put fear in the hearts of men and gods alike, but because he wore his black hair free instead of using a powdered wig as was fashionable. Kind of like Blackbeard in that sense, because Teach's name came entirely from the color of his beard instead of something more nefarious.

Funnily enough, this one had nothing to do with Chaldea and everything to do with Dad. I remembered, vaguely, the story he'd told me when I was younger, about how rich we would've been if he'd been on the team that found Bellamy's treasure back in '84. If he'd gone diving just a few miles north, why, the Heberts might've been one of those fancy families living in a big house in the nice part of town.

Later on, it became recriminations about how he could've used that money to repair the ferry.

“Sam here happened to be in the area when you went overboard,” Arash explained. “He fished us out of the water and gave us a lift to this island.”

Bellamy smiled sheepishly. “I was the, uh, other ship you guys nearly ran into. That jerk was chasing me, so I tried to flee into the storm to get away from him, and, well, you know the rest. It was a good thing, though! It meant I was nearby, so when I saw Arash swimming around without any idea where to go, I could lend you guys a hand. It was the least I could do.”

That was...certainly convenient. I wasn't sure what Arash would have done if he'd had to carry me to the nearest island all on his own when the nearest island was, as far as we knew, still two days away — by the *Golden Hind*, at least. A Noble Phantasm like Bellamy's ship was no doubt faster, just by virtue of being able to propel itself without wind.

“I guess I owe you my thanks.” *If not my life.*

Bellamy blinked again and laughed it off. “Oh, don't worry about it! Rescuing damsels in distress isn't something pirates get to do all that often, you know? Definitely not something I got to do when I was alive. It's actually a really cool experience!”

This guy was very friendly, wasn't he? Maybe a bit of a ditz, too. It was strange, because pirates were supposed to be complete scoundrels, but this guy was breaking the mold in every way imaginable, with the exception of his looks.

I made a show of looking around. “So where are we, exactly?”

“That...I can't answer so well,” Bellamy said, shoulders slumping. “Sorry, but I haven't actually been here all that long, so I'm not as familiar with the layout of this place as some other Servants might be. That ghost guy has been chasing me around so much that I can't do much exploring.”

He meant the Servant that Rika was so convinced was Davy Jones. The mystery of what that guy wanted and why he was here was going to have to remain unsolved for now, it looked like, because aside from eliminating the competition, I couldn't imagine what he might have wanted from another stray Servant enough to chase him down so doggedly.

“The one thing I can tell you for sure,” he went on, “is that we're west of that big maelstrom. There's at least one more island down south of here, but other than that, I've been running from that jerk, so I haven't had the chance to go looking for anything else.”

I clicked my tongue.

“It matches what we already knew,” Arash said. “This island, another island to the south, and beyond that, an archipelago. That's what's on the maps, at least.”

“Da Vinci would have sent us an update if anything had changed,” I reasoned. I hid a glance at Bellamy behind my hair. Yeah, I guess for now, we could extend him a little bit of trust. He *had* rescued us from the ocean, after all.

Arash nodded. “Yeah, for sure.”

Bellamy perked up. “Da Vinci? As in, Leonardo da Vinci? You’re working with him?”

I picked at my clothes, pinching a bit of the fabric between my fingers. “She made the mystic code I’m wearing.”

“Whoa...” Then, he blinked again. “Wait, *she*?”

This was going to be a thing every time we talked about her, wasn’t it? Maybe I should look into having a brochure made or something, save me some time and effort.

Nonetheless, I explained Da Vinci as best I could, given what she’d told me, which wasn’t very well, because she hadn’t told any of us much. Most of her explanation tended to boil down to her choosing to present as a woman because of that line about how everyone would be a pretty girl if they had the chance.

Again, until they had to deal with the plumbing.

Bellamy listened raptly, hanging off of every meager word like I was telling him the secrets of the universe. I’d called him friendly before, but maybe a better word was earnest. It was like he didn’t have a single ounce of deception in him, because he was honest and straightforward almost to a fault.

Eventually, I wound up explaining Chaldea and our reason for being in this Singularity, too. I made sure to gauge his reactions, to watch for subtle twitches and microexpressions that might give him away, so that I could figure out which side he would come down on, if given the chance. When I told him about the Grail, he was naturally disappointed.

“Aw, really?” He sighed dramatically. “Crud. And I was really looking forward to finding that thing!”

“You wanted the Grail?” I asked the obvious.

He nodded. “It’s probably why I was summoned here. I’ve come across a few of these, uh, brainless guys over the past few days, when that guy wasn’t chasing me, I mean. Lights are on, but nobody’s home, you know? They were looking for it, too. Was the only thing they talked about. Like the words ‘Holy Grail’ were the only ones they knew. Really freaky stuff.”

These...manifested concepts we’d run into, that was what he was talking about. The idea of treasure-seeking pirates given physical form. So it wasn’t just us that had run afoul of them, then. If they were after the Grail, the same as Bellamy, then it was likely they had a kind of sixth sense for it, and they were drawn to both Drake’s and Blackbeard’s.

Hopefully, they’d pay more attention to Blackbeard. The more distracted he was, the better it would be for us.

“But I guess if it’s messing with history and throwing things out of whack, I’d be way too selfish to keep chasing after it, huh?” He came over to us and dropped down with another sigh, and then he let his bundle of wood spill out onto the sand unceremoniously. “Damn, that sucks. It’s not every day you have the chance to get your wish granted, you know.”

I could sympathize with that much, at least.

“What would you have wished for, if you don’t mind me prying?” asked Arash.

“Dunno! I just wanted to have it!” Bellamy grinned brightly, and as he thought about it, tapped his chin. “Hm, what would I have wished for? Probably a chance to keep living my adventure! Man, do you have any idea how much it sucks to have died so early on in my career? I was only a pirate for a single year! I had my whole life ahead of me, I just got a great haul, and then —”

He smashed his fist into his palm with a meaty smack.

“— just like that, it was all over! Me and my crew, smashed against the rocks! Or, well, the beach, technically, since that storm drove us into the sand, but the sentiment’s the same!”

“And you’re willing to give that up?” I asked. “The chance to fix it?”

He blinked at me, bemused. “I mean, yeah? It’s no use trying to get a wish like that granted if the whole world’s screwed up in the process. Kind of defeats the point, you know? There’s no reason to get a second chance if there’s no one else there to enjoy it with. It stings, but it’s just kind of silly getting too sad about losing something that I never had in the first place.”

I stared at him, perhaps longer than I really should have. Was this guy even a pirate? Drake was one thing, because her sense of fair play — the code by which even she lived — had compelled her to hand over her Grail to even the scales. This guy? What pirate willingly gave up a shot at the greatest treasure he could ever ask for?

This one, apparently. The stories I remembered hearing painted him in a fairly favorable light, compared to the likes of Blackbeard, but Blackbeard wasn’t exactly a favorable comparison to begin with.

Beep-beep!

My communicator interrupted anything else we might have said, and when I fiddled with it to turn it on, Marie’s relieved face appeared, hovering over my wrist.

“Taylor!”

“Thank goodness you’re okay!” Romani’s voice said in the background.

“When your vitals started to drop, I…” Marie began, and then she caught herself and affixed a paper thin confidence on her face. “I-I mean, I knew you would be okay, o-of course! Something like that is nowhere near enough k-kill you!”

“Easy for you to say!” Romani called. “I was running around like my pants were on fire the instant she went overboard! That’s harder to survive than people think, you know, especially in the middle of a turbulent sea like that!”

“We had some help.”

I turned my wrist around so that the camera could capture Bellamy’s face, and he blinked back at them, nonplussed. “Ah, hello? Sam Bellamy, here. Nice to meet you?”

“The...pleasure’s ours?” Romani replied, equally as uncertain. “Um... I...guess you can call me Romani, or Doctor Roman, like the twins... Well, like Ritsuka does, anyway. And the lady in front here is Director Animosphere, so...”

The camera came back my way.

“According to Arash, Captain Bellamy rescued us out of the sea and brought us to this island. We have him to thank for my continued well-being.”

Bellamy ducked his head.

“I mean, it was the decent thing to do,” he said bashfully. “Wouldn’t anyone?”

Not as many as he might have liked to think, but maybe more than I was willing to give credit. Brockton Bay’s gallery of misfits and malcontents probably wasn’t the greatest of examples to look towards for human decency.

“If they’re right, then I was out for the better part of half a day,” I said, “so I’m sure I missed some things. What happened with the twins and the *Golden Hind*?”

Marie frowned at me for a moment, but let it drop. No doubt, even though the sensors would have detected me as being unconscious for half a day, for her and the rest of Chaldea, that would have passed in an hour or two. It would have seemed like a much smaller amount of time.

She turned to her second in command. “Romani?”

When she left the frame, Romani took her place, smiling at me slightly. He looked much better rested than he had the last time I saw him.

“Well, they managed to escape Blackbeard, you’ll be happy to hear. They lost him in the storm, and the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* has left our sensor range,” he said. “Geez, that guy. Someone like him has the Grail? What a troublesome situation. Couldn’t it have been a weaker, lesser known pirate that we could have just knocked down without any effort?”

Preaching to the choir, Romani. It would have been much more convenient if, say, someone like Bellamy had the Grail instead. I wasn’t sure he wouldn’t have handed it over without a second thought if we just asked politely.

“Anyway,” Romani went on, “Hektor retreated after you fell overboard, so there weren’t any casualties, and everyone managed to make it out of that uninjured. Even the ship didn’t take any major damage, although Captain Drake didn’t seem all that happy about the minor damage it did take. Hopefully, that will get corrected when this Singularity is returned to normal. I don’t want to imagine the headache of Chaldea getting a repair bill five hundred years overdue.”

Thank goodness. We’d managed to get through that mess without anyone getting hurt — aside from me, and my aches and pains had already been taken care of — and no one was dead. All things considered, it might not have been a win, but it was definitely better than the alternative.

“I see. That’s good.”

“The twins will be relieved to hear you’re up and at ‘em, by the way,” said Romani. “I told them your vitals were well into the green, but no amount of reassurances was enough to make them stop worrying. I had to remind them that Command Spells only work on *Servants*, so they couldn’t just teleport to your side like that.”

My cheek twitched, but I didn’t let the smile bloom on my face. “I’ll be sure to contact them as soon as we’re done here. Where are they now?”

He looked aside and tapped on the keyboard to bring up the data. A moment later, he said, “The current carried them a lot farther out than, um, Bellamy?”

“That’s me!” Bellamy said brightly. “My *Whydah Gally* won’t let a little storm send us anywhere but where we want to be! A second time, I mean. The first time doesn’t count, since it wasn’t a Noble Phantasm yet.”

I wondered if he realized that admitting that didn’t exactly inspire confidence.

“Right.” Romani nodded. “So the, uh, the *Whydah Gally* went a completely different direction. The twins and the *Golden Hind* turned your way as soon as we gave them your location, but by your measure, they’re still...about half a day out? Geez, they got thrown way off course, didn’t they?”

So it seemed. That maelstrom turned out to be much more powerful than we’d given it credit for, didn’t it? After all, Drake had originally said it would take an extra two days to get around it and get to — presumably — this island, and yet even having thrown her off course, it had shaved at least half a day off the journey.

We were going to have to be incredibly careful about navigating around it, if we had to head that direction again. It might slingshot us ahead of where we expected to be, but it could also send us in the complete opposite direction.

“There’s one other thing.”

My brow furrowed. “One other thing?”

“Well, I didn’t mention it before, because Bradamante isn’t showing any signs of major strain —”

“Bradamante?” I interrupted. “She’s here, too?”

“She was right behind me when I dove off of the ship,” Arash informed me. “She helped me keep you afloat while we were swimming against those waves.”

Huh. She had, had she? I’d never thought that she hated me, necessarily, but she didn’t seem like she liked me all that much either. That flowery, idealistic, Romantic hero that she was just didn’t line up particularly well with someone like me, who had seen all the uglier sides of mankind and come out the other side more cynical for it.

“She’s active, but not so active that I thought it was something to worry about,” Romani went on. “That’s why, um, I didn’t mention earlier that there’s another Servant there with her.”

I straightened, alarmed. “Another Servant?”

Were we going to find more of them on every island we visited now? More importantly, who was it going to be? Hornigold? Redbeard? Bellamy aside, my patience for more pirates was really starting to wear thin, and I didn’t want to have to go and fight *another one* without any idea who they were and what they were doing here.

“Yes,” Romani answered. “Like I said, Bradamante doesn’t seem to be fighting this other Servant, although she *is* fighting — there are some readings that match the wyverns from the Orléans Singularity, and they’re all over the island.”

I resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose. “Wyverns?”

“The island is swarming with them,” he confirmed. “It’s like this place is a nest for them or something, that’s how many are hiding out here.”

Because that was what I needed on top of everything else: another army of wyverns was on this island with me and probably very disinterested in sharing it. A quick glance at Arash showed no concern for this news — without Fafnir or Jeanne Alter around to complicate things, he could probably handle them all on his own without much trouble. Small mercies.

Of course, that was presuming there *wasn’t* a Jeanne Alter or Fafnir around. It would be just my luck that one or the other was here, too.

“And this mystery Servant?”

“Unknown,” Romani said. “The Saint Graph isn’t registered with Chaldea, so the sensors don’t recognize it, although it registers similarities to Emiya and Arash, so it’s probably an Archer, with, um, some kind of...familiar of some kind hanging around it? A small echo, sort of like the way we read your bugs back here.”

“Oh,” said Bellamy wearily, “*them*.”

I turned to him. “Them? You know who it is?”

“A comedy act on four legs,” he answered, and then frowned. “Or...would it be six legs? I’m not sure how he counts, since he’s technically a bear...”

This kept getting stranger and stranger.

“A bear?”

“A tiny one.” Bellamy held his hand out about a foot and a half off of the ground. “Really small. I think he’s actually in the body of a children’s stuffed toy, for some reason. Kind of undignified, really, but the way he acts, maybe he deserves it.”

And because it wasn’t already strange enough...

“This stuffed animal guy have a name?”

Bellamy shrugged helplessly. “The Servant carrying him around keeps calling him things like ‘Darling’ and ‘Beloved.’ He, uh...” Bellamy coughed. “He keeps trying to get away from her. Can’t say I’ve ever been in that kind of relationship myself, but it looks kind of abusive to me, you know?”

Great. So we had a Servant with — at a guess — either some kind of split Saint Graph or some subordinate spirit attached to hers in a toxic relationship with a stuffed bear. Some way or another, they were near Bradamante, and they were fighting, but not each other, because there were wyverns on this island and that was probably what they were dealing with.

“The weirdest situations imaginable” should have been in Chaldea’s literature when I went through orientation.

“You said they’re not fighting each other?” I asked Romani.

“I...don’t think so?” he hedged. “Like I said, there’s *some* strain on Bradamante’s energy expenditure, but not as much as I would expect of her fighting another Servant. With the number of wyverns I’m detecting in that area too...”

They were probably working together against a common enemy. At least that meant we likely didn’t have to worry about this new mystery Archer being someone we were going to have to fight ourselves. I wasn’t quite sure what to feel just yet about the idea of having her as an ally, though, all things considered.

“Give me a moment,” I told Romani. I didn’t wait for his reply before I focused my senses down the thread connecting me to Bradamante — and abruptly found myself watching blood fountain from a scaly neck.

“Fifty-six!” Bradamante’s voice called.

A brace of arrows found the soft flesh of another wyvern, slipping past the scales with relative ease, and that one fell to the ground, too, motionless and dead. Its blood seeped into the grass, dying it red and turning the ground black.

“Sixty-nine!” a new voice called, and when Bradamante turned to look at her opponent —

Seriously? Is there something in the water in this Singularity?

— an albino in some mockery of a strapless white evening gown with a chest large enough to give *Drake’s* a run for its money, and yet also somehow with even *more* cleavage on display.

“You’re so far ahead of me!” Bradamante complained, but she sounded more excited than anything else. “I’ll endeavor to catch up with you! I’ll have sixty-nine kills before you know it!”

“Speaking of,” another voice put in squeakily, and an actual stuffed bear danced around, swooning. “My dear Bradamante, if you like, I can introduce you to the wonders of — ack!”

The shaft of an arrow quivered as the tip planted itself in the dirt mere inches from his stubby foot. The Archer, who had shot the arrow that had nearly pinned the bear to the ground, turned to him

with a strained smile that promised violence. “What was that, Darling? I could have sworn you were trying to flirt with her again! Aren’t I enough for you?”

If the bear could have sweated, I imagined it would have. “N-now, Dear, th-there’s no need for that —”

I left Bradamante’s senses behind before things could devolve any further and let out a low breath through my nostrils.

“You’re right,” I told Romani, “they’re fighting wyverns.” I looked back over my shoulder at the enormous plateau that jutted up in the center of the island. “At the top of the mountain, it looks like.”

The clouds I’d glimpsed during my brief look had seemed an awful lot closer than usual, and the edge of the cliff was too steep and too sheer to be almost any other part of the island that I could see.

“And she *is* an Archer,” I added. The bow kind of gave it away.

“Well, I guess that puts that to rest,” Romani said. “We’ll have to wait until you get eyes on her directly for your Master’s Clairvoyance to pick up more details —”

Marie shoved her way into the frame.

“Hey!”

“This is more important!” she told him waspishly, and then she regarded me with utter solemnity. “There’s something wrong with Blackbeard’s Noble Phantasm.”

“Wrong?”

Her brow scrunched up. “O-or...not *wrong*, exactly, but...” She lifted her thumb to her mouth and started up that bad habit of chewing on her fingernail. “Maybe...anomalous? N-no, that’s not the right word either. Abnormal? Ugh, isn’t that just saying the same thing?”

“Director?”

She blinked out of her tangent and looked down at her thumb, realizing that she’d fallen back on that little habit. Her lips pursed as she deliberately pulled it away from her mouth, as though she had caught it doing something it wasn’t supposed to while her back was turned.

“The sensors detected swings in his ship’s power,” she said. “With the time differential, it’s hard to tell exactly, but... They seem to correspond with whenever the Servants on his crew leave or board it.”

The implications bloomed in my head like a particularly ugly flower, and I didn’t like the picture that they painted for me.

“You’re saying his Noble Phantasm becomes more powerful the more Servants he has crewing his ship?”

“What?” Romani sputtered. “That’s ridiculous! What kind of overpowered nonsense is that?”

“That’s *exactly* what I’m saying,” Marie said grimly.

“Director, are you sure —”

“I triple-checked the data myself, Romani!” she snapped at him. “Yes, I’m sure! I don’t like it any better than you do!”

Romani, cowed, closed his mouth and subsided. I let out a breath through my nostrils as Marie tried to calm herself down.

So the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* got stronger the more Servants Blackbeard had serving on it. There was no telling what the limit was, but one had to exist, presumably, because the idea that it could get infinitely stronger just seemed...not impossible, but unlikely. Blackbeard was a strong, famous, infamous legend, but not so much any one of those things that he would have a trump card *that* powerful.

I wondered, for a moment, if the strength of the Servant mattered, too. Would he get a larger boost from having, say, Herakles or King Arthur on board? A consideration for later, and one that might not be relevant. After all, however it shook out, the situation seemed very obvious to me.

If his Noble Phantasm became more powerful the more Servants were on his crew...

“So if we want to beat Blackbeard, then we need to take out the Servants on his side first.”

“It’s looking that way, yes,” Marie agreed, something like approval in her voice. “Naturally, it’s something that sounds easier than it actually is to accomplish, but...”

Right. Our side wasn’t exactly hurting for options that would make it easier. Even if we couldn’t force them onto land and a more advantageous battlefield for us, now that we had a better idea of what we were dealing with, it should be easier to call on reinforcements to lend a hand. Siegfried came to mind, although Balmung might not be enough if the boost to the *Revenge* was really that large. If Aífe could get a clear shot with Gáe Bolg, then even with his ships defenses increased, even Blackbeard might go down just like that.

Those were still some bigger ifs than I liked, though. Better to just force him onto land, where the *Revenge* was less of an issue.

“We’ll have a plan for dealing with him figured out for the next time he shows up.”

Marie nodded. “You will.”

“Was there anything else we needed to go over?” I asked.

“That idea about replenishing our food supplies,” Romani offered from the background.

Marie grimaced. “I was getting to that!” she insisted, annoyed. “Ugh! Yes, your idea for using Captain Drake’s Grail to fill up our food stores for the foreseeable future. I’ve gone over it with Da Vinci, and even if it’s really short notice, we managed to clear some space to use. We’re going to try and find some more rooms we can free up, too, but for now, we’ll be ready to receive some supplies by the time the others make it to that island with you.”

“Wait,” said Bellamy, “Captain Drake has the Grail?”

The naked *want* in his voice was something I needed to squash right then and there. The very last thing we needed was to make yet another enemy with a ship for a Noble Phantasm, not when we’d just gone over one of them and how difficult an opponent he was going to be.

“A Grail,” I said to him. “There’s more than one in this era. Hers was already won before the Singularity formed, and she’s already made a wish on it. The other one is responsible for the formation of the Singularity.”

I...also kind of liked him. I didn’t want to have to fight and kill the guy who had just saved my life.

Bellamy deflated again. “Oh. Well, damn. Guess there’s nothing I can do about that, then.”

Marie eyed him suspiciously, because she hadn’t missed that eagerness either. I just had to hope that she and I were being paranoid and it wasn’t something we would have to worry about later on.

“I’ll make sure to contact you when we’re ready to transfer the supplies over,” I said. It was a painfully transparent change of subject. “Was there anything else you needed, Director?”

She eyed Bellamy for a moment longer, a handful of seconds that felt extremely obvious to me, although if Bellamy noticed the extra attention, he didn’t show it.

“No,” she said after that too-long delay, “that was all of the important parts.” She huffed a short breath. “Romani and I will be monitoring the situation from here. Once you’re ready, notify us, and we’ll begin transferring as much in the way of supplies as we can handle.”

“Understood.”

She shot one last glance at Bellamy, and then her image vanished and the connection cut out. The instant she was gone, Bellamy leaned back and let out a long sigh.

“Man,” he said ruefully, “she really doesn’t like me, does she?”

“Hey, don’t take it too personally,” Arash said, smiling as he laughed a little. “The Director has a lot of pressure on her shoulders, so she hates taking big risks. Not every Servant we’ve met has been as easygoing as you are, you know. A lot of them have tried to kill us, even the ones who wound up being our allies.”

Bellamy hummed and looked up at the sky, like it had some secret it was hiding in the clouds.

“Guess so.”

A moment later, he sprang to his feet and clapped his hands together. “Alright! No sense in sitting here wallowing in my bad luck, huh? I might not need to eat anymore, but I could go for some breakfast!” He turned a smile my way. “And I bet you’re starving, right?”

As though to agree with him, my stomach chose that moment to rumble and clench, letting me know that, yes, breakfast would be very much appreciated. Bellamy grinned and thumbed his nose.

“Thought so!”

With a sigh, I levered myself to my feet, dusting off the sand on my ass and my pants. Across from me, Arash stood, too.

When I held out my hand, Bellamy blinked at it, nonplussed.

“Taylor Hebert,” I said to him. “Master of Chaldea.”

The grin came back, and he took my hand with his, giving me a firm but gentle shake — gentle for a Servant, at least, because it was definitely strong enough for a squishy human.

“Samuel Bellamy,” he said. “Prince of Pirates, Robin Hood of the Sea, and probably half a dozen other ridiculous titles they slapped on me over the years. Nice to meet you.”

He let go. “Now, whaddya say we go and find some grub?”

Well, there were at least a few berry bushes hanging around, and some wildlife that might make for a decent meal.

“That sounds —”

“LOOK OUT BELOW-HO-HO-HO-HOOOOOOO!”

About fifteen feet away, something small dropped suddenly into the sand with a muffled, “Oof!”

“STAND CLEAR!” another voice called, and a much larger something — a person — dropped next. The Archer I’d seen through Bradamante’s eyes landed with much more grace, with one foot planted in the back of the stuffed bear that had landed first. She wore a bright, friendly smile, even as that bear let out a pained, breathless wheeze.

“Excuse me, sorry to drop in so suddenly,” she said politely.

“My back...” the stuffed bear whined weakly.

“MAKE WAY, MAKE WAY!” a third, much more familiar voice shouted down.

At last, Bradamante landed, only with much less grace and much more explosively, because she also happened to have a wyvern thrown over her shoulders, and it was very much dead. She was, as she had been when she asked to return to Chaldea with us, splattered head to toe in blood, and she didn’t seem at all disturbed by that.

“Master!” she said brightly. “Look! I brought breakfast!”

She bounced the wyvern's corpse around as though to demonstrate, the limp wings and head flopping all about grotesquely —

“Ah! I got some in my eye!”

— and accidentally splashed blood in her eye, just like she had back then.

“Well,” Bellamy said awkwardly, “that’s, um...a lot of meat! Enough for all of us!”

I swallowed a sigh, and instead, it hissed out of my nostrils slowly.

“I hope you know how to prepare that thing,” I said flatly, “because I don’t.”

“Can’t be too hard,” Arash said gamely. “It’s got scales, right? Shouldn’t be too different from fish.”

Bellamy brightened. “Hey, yeah! The, uh, bones might be a bit bigger than normal, but all we have to do is get the scales off and remove the internal organs, and everything should be easy from there!”

No, I thought bleakly, *no, it really isn’t*.

The wyvern’s tongue slid from its mouth and flopped down on top of the bear’s head. A glob of drool dribbled down and soaked him, turning the fabric of his body dark and wet.

“Ack!” the bear flailed helplessly. “Get it off, get it off! It’s — wait. Is this flammable? No, no, no! Get it off! Help! I don’t taste good well-done!”

Something told me my breakfast was going to be tough, chewy, tasteless, and nearly impossible to swallow, if it wasn’t burnt to a cinder first.

Where was Emiya when you needed him?