

Chapter XC: Divine Lookalike

In a flash, the Minotaur was upon us, and one of his halberds smashed into Mash's shield with a thunderous crash that made my teeth ache and my ears ring.

He's fast!

Mash grunted, knees buckling under the force of the blow, but remained standing and unmoved. There was no time for her to counterattack — with another resounding blow, the Minotaur brought his other halberd down upon Mash's shield, and Mash grunted again, knees bending, but took it without complaint.

“Mash!” the twins cried.

“Stay back, Master!” Mash replied. “H-he's too strong!”

BANG!

Drake, leaning over to the side, abused my poor eardrums further as she fired off a shot from her pistol. Blood spurted into the air as it landed, punching an almost insignificant seeming hole in the Minotaur's body, but it looked like he hadn't even felt it. He didn't so much as flinch.

“Kill...all...you...”

The Minotaur brought up his halberds again, smashing them against Mash's shield another time. The whole labyrinth seemed to shake around us from the sheer power behind his swings. Somehow, Mash still managed to hold on and stay standing, although how many more of those she could take, I didn't know.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Drake kept firing one after the other, stopping only long enough to pull back the hammer on her pistols, but even though she wasn't missing, she wasn't doing any more damage than before. In fact, he was already healing. Not like Altera had, not like Flauros, but his wounds barely bled and didn't slow him down at all, and even before my eyes, they seemed to be shrinking, slowly but surely.

“Damn it!” Drake cursed. “What's it gonna take to put this fucker down? It's like I'm not even hurting him!”

One of her shots *pinged* off of the metallic mask protecting his face and ricocheted into the ceiling, disintegrating. The Minotaur didn't acknowledge it at all, like he was in no danger even if it *had* hit him in the head.

Maybe he wasn't. Altera and Flauros had both had incredible healing abilities born from the Grail, but the last time I'd seen someone tanking hits like this was Caligula. The last time I'd seen raw strength like this was that same fight.

BONG!

“Ah!” Mash gasped, one foot sliding backwards to brace herself.

The Minotaur didn't relent. He kept hammering on her shield over and over again, raising a cacophony of noise that I was sure was going to give me a headache once this was all over, and Mash held on, refusing to take so much as a single step backwards.

And then, further down the hallway behind him, Arash and Emiya suddenly appeared, bows drawn, and a volley of arrows struck the Minotaur in the back.

Finally, he reacted, staggering under the sheer number of hits he'd taken at once. Hunching over himself, he almost looked like a porcupine, with the dozen or more arrows protruding from his flesh his quills.

But it was short-lived. With a roar that rumbled and shook the whole hallway, the Minotaur threw his shoulders back, flexing violently, and all of those arrows shattered and disappeared into motes of flickering light.

What the hell?

My eyes narrowed in on him — it stood to reason that if he was a Servant, we should be able to view his abilities with our Master's Clairvoyance — and quick as I could, I read through —

“Holy shit.”

I didn't realize at first that the words came from my own mouth, but the surprised looks on the twins' faces would have clued me in anyway, and it wasn't important. No, what was important was that the Minotaur didn't just have strength to rival Caligula, he was at least *twice* as strong as Caligula at his best.

Three modifiers, on both his Strength and Constitution. I wasn't even aware that was *possible*. Caligula had been trouncing us back in Septem with just *one*.

“You...die...” the Minotaur growled. “Me...protect...”

He lashed out with a kick at Mash's shield, and Mash skidded backwards, stumbling as she tried to keep her feet on the ground, but he didn't follow up. Instead, he turned around and raced towards Emiya and Arash like a rampaging bull.

More arrows rained down upon him, but the Minotaur crossed his halberds over his face so that the flats of the blades protected him and ignored all the rest. His arms, his shoulders, his gut, his thighs, even his feet — it didn't seem to matter where he was hit, none of them so much as slowed him down.

Shit.

Bang!

“Fuck!” said Drake. “Is this guy for real? I've put enough lead in him to sink a small boat!”

And every shot did nothing, or close enough to it that there wasn't much difference.

"Shit!" Emiya projected his usual pair of swords as the Minotaur bore down on him and Arash, but they might as well have been made of glass for how easily they were smashed with a single swing of one of those halberds. It might have been the only thing that saved his life, because with how hard he was thrown into that wall, even he might have died if he'd been hit with that at full force.

Arash dodged the backswing, but with everything in such close ranges, even that wasn't enough, because the sheer energy behind the blow still sent him sailing several feet back and into the wall. I felt my Command Spells twinge, but not enough to tell me he was in serious danger yet.

From how narrowly he avoided the follow up blow that would have taken his head off, if he was just a little bit slower, that might change very quickly.

"Holy crap!" Rika gasped. "This guy is — Emiya, dodge!"

My mind raced as I watched Emiya and Arash dance around the Minotaur as best as they could, narrowly avoiding a dozen fatal blows in half as many seconds. No Magic Resistance, which was a point in our favor, but with a Constitution stat like that, it might not have functionally mattered. He was taking shots from Arash and Emiya and walking them off, and those two's arrows were closer to tank shells than regular arrows.

That technique Emiya had used against Caligula...? No, that wouldn't work either. He didn't have the room to make it work. That was why we couldn't afford for him to use Caladbolg the way he had against Flauros either, because it might be enough to take out the Minotaur, but it would probably take *us* out with him.

Bugs...would do nothing. And it would take several minutes to ferry enough of them here to matter. My ravens had the same problem as Emiya did: not enough room. There was space for them to maneuver, the high ceiling that let the Minotaur stand up without trouble was still too low, and the only direction Huginn and Muninn would be able to attack from was head on. I might as well just dash them against the ground and stomp on them, because that would do less damage than those halberds would.

How were we supposed to fight this guy?

My eyes zeroed in on the wounds dotting the Minotaur's body, watching them as Arash and Emiya narrowly avoided another pair of swings that would have disemboweled them and *still* wound up smacked around. His wounds *were* healing, but it was still so slow. They bled, but only a little. I'd faced enemies like that before, who didn't seem to take much damage and recovered rapidly.

If we couldn't afford to even try to hit him with something powerful enough to actually hurt him and we weren't doing enough to hurt him yet, then there really wasn't much of a better option than to bleed him slowly. Even if we couldn't kill him, if we could hurt him enough to force him to disengage, then we could retreat ourselves and come up with a better plan.

I didn't like our chances of escaping if we tried the latter without doing the former.

It looked like this was going to be a good chance to test out one of Da Vinci's new functions.

I reached into the mystic code and touched one of the batteries. A single spark of magical energy was enough to turn it on, and I focused on the feeling — like I was using a Command Spell, without actually using one.

Lines ran up and down my uniform, creating a pattern I couldn't fully see. "Siegfried, come forth!"

The magical energy in the battery churned, surged, and...dissipated, accomplishing nothing. Siegfried didn't appear.

"Was that supposed to do something?" Drake asked. "Because the pretty light show was nice and all, but nothing happened!"

"I-it didn't work?" Rika stammered. "H-hey! Da Vinci-chan! I want a refund!"

"It must be the Labyrinth!" Mash said before I could get my thoughts back in order. "I-it's cut us off from Chaldea completely! We can't even summon Shadow Servants like Miss Da Vinci told us!"

Shit. That meant this wasn't going to be as easy as pulling in one of our powerhouses and letting them duke it out with the Minotaur. We were going to have to do this with the Servants and the supplies we had on hand and nothing else.

What else could we do? Think. How did you bring down a Brute that didn't seem to feel any attack you threw at him?

If you couldn't bring raw, overwhelming power, then you had to fall back on sheer numbers.

I didn't have any better ideas just then, so we were going to have to go with something simple and stupid until I could figure something else out.

Bang! Bang!

"Drake!" I shouted over the ringing in my ears. "Keep firing!"

"Whaddya think I've *been* doing?" Drake hollered back over the roar of her snap-crack of her pistols.

"Ritsuka, Rika — Gandr, and don't let up until he does!"

"Right!" said Ritsuka, and he dropped the spool of yarn to take aim.

"Roger wilco, Senpai!" Rika acknowledged.

Arash! I said urgently.

I...heard! he replied, and down the corridor, he ducked under another swing, his hair whipping about from the gust of the passing blade, and stabbed an arrow as deep as he could into the Minotaur's torso.

It didn't seem to do anything except make him angrier.

“Gandr!” the twins cried, and balls of black energy whipped down the hallway, to splash uselessly off of the Minotaur’s broad back. Instead, he took another swing at Emiya as though he hadn’t even felt them, completely ignoring Drake’s bullets, too.

Death by a thousand cuts. A form of torture, a style of execution whereby the victim was slowly bled dry from hundreds of small, individual cuts, all of them insignificant on their own, but painful, and when added up, deadly.

In principle, it was the same way you dealt with any other dangerous Brute. The regenerators, at least, or those who just took less damage instead of having some kind of threshold. There was one, Gavel, who had been there at Gold Morning and managed to actually hold Scion off for a few minutes on his own, and the Minotaur reminded me of him.

As I said, it was a simple plan, but right then, it was all we had.

I took aim and ran energy through my magic circuits. “Gandr!” I shouted, adding my own voice to the chorus.

It didn’t seem to do anymore than anyone else’s attacks. We *were* hitting him, but he was completely ignoring everyone except Emiya and Arash — thinking, rightly so, that they were the strongest and most threatening of our group. He attacked them with wild abandon, like a rabid dog, and it was all either of them could do to avoid the worst of it.

His strength really was unreal. The whole of the labyrinth seemed to shake with each blow, as though the entire hillside would fall in on our heads at any moment, but the walls didn’t threaten collapse. It made sense, in a way. If the Labyrinth was the Minotaur’s Noble Phantasm, then it wouldn’t break that easily. It would sooner fade from lack of energy than that, and if it was sitting on top of a ley line, then even that could be held essentially indefinitely.

But even a towering powerhouse like that had to go down eventually after accumulating so much damage. With more and more wounds pockmarking his flesh with every second, it didn’t matter that they weren’t that large and were healing fast enough that we could see it happen, because eventually, it would just become too much.

Even Gavel had died, in the end, killed by Scion. Damage mitigation wasn’t *invulnerability*.

The trouble was that it was quickly becoming a battle of attrition. The Minotaur couldn’t go on forever, even if he kept swinging as though he could, and we simply couldn’t fire Gandr shots at him indefinitely. The only one of us with truly “unlimited ammo” was Drake, and while she wasn’t missing, her shots seemed to do the least out of everyone’s.

Rank A Constitution, with three modifiers. A stat so far beyond the limits of what was supposed to be possible that it had only ever been a theoretical in our primer courses back at Chaldea. With a body that sturdy, it was becoming frighteningly possible that he *would* outlast us, all of us. He might even be resilient enough to withstand taking a Noble Phantasm to the face.

It was perhaps somewhat appropriate, therefore, when a voice interrupted the whole thing.

“*En garde!*”

A missile of green light streaked over our heads, and a tiny lance, made larger by the swirling vortex of magical energy that surrounded it like a halo, found the Minotaur's back unerringly. Red blood splattered across the floor, and the Minotaur threw his head back and *roared*.

"Tii-chan!" Rika cheered.

"Bradamante!" Ritsuka and Mash echoed in stereo.

Bradamante had no chance to respond, because the furious Minotaur whipped around with a roundhouse kick that would have reduced any of us Masters into pulp. Bradamante avoided a similar fate by blocking it with her shield, but there was still enough power behind it to fling her back and almost into Mash.

"Sorry I'm late, Master!" Bradamante said brightly. "Lord Ritsuka informed me of the situation, and I came immediately!"

"He did?" Rika blurted out, unknowingly echoing my thoughts.

"We needed the help," Ritsuka said simply.

Mash gasped. "Here he comes!"

The whole corridor seemed to tremble as the Minotaur growled low and deep in his chest, and he took first one, then another world-shaking step towards us with murderous intent. Bradamante and Mash both lifted their shields, ready to defend themselves.

They needn't have bothered, because a twisted black arrow the size of a spear sprouted from the Minotaur's torso in a shower of blood.

Finally, he staggered, gasping, and collapsed to one knee, and behind him, a panting, battered Emiya slowly let his bow droop in his hand. Red blood dripped from the wound, and when the wicked-looking arrow disappeared a moment later, the Minotaur staggered again, and the drip became a steady flow, running in rivulets down his chest and splattering all over the marble floor.

"On the plus side," Emiya said dryly, "that would never have worked on Herakles."

"One of these days," Arash replied, "you're going to have to tell us all about how you know these things."

Emiya scoffed. "Don't hold your breath."

"Won't...let..." the Minotaur rasped. "Kill...all..."

Slowly, shakily, he started to pull himself to his feet, and Emiya's eyebrows rose.

"Damn," he said. "Even after all of that, you can still keep going?"

The Minotaur stumbled a little, but managed to catch himself, giving us all a good look at the grizzly wound in his chest. It had apparently missed his heart — his spiritual core — but on a human being, that was easily a whole lung gone and probably a couple other very important organs.

I'd seen very few people able to survive a hit like that, let alone stand up afterwards. I hadn't seen a Battle Continuation skill when I observed him earlier, but with his Constitution so high, it looked like he didn't even need it. Despite taking so much damage, that wouldn't be enough to put him down.

It was obvious that he was beaten, though. As a Servant, he would eventually be able to recover even from a wound that bad, but it had weakened him severely. He was struggling to stand, let alone keep his grip on both of his weapons.

Grimacing, Emiya dismissed his bow and traded it in for a broad, square bladed sword obviously meant for chopping. "Master," he said grimly, "you're probably going to want to look away from this."

"W-what?" Rika asked.

An execution. Emiya was going to finish the Minotaur off.

"Hey, I think you might be getting a bit ahead of things," Arash said. "This labyrinth is his Noble Phantasm, isn't it? What's going to happen to us if it disappears when he dies while we're still inside of it?"

Emiya stopped suddenly. "Shit."

So I wasn't the only one who was worried about that. Yes, "the hard way" was *never* how you wanted to find out what would happen to the contents of a folded space when that fold collapsed.

The Minotaur shifted, the head of one halberd screeching as it dragged along the tile floor, and Arash lifted his bow, pulling back on the bowstring halfway as everyone else tensed, ready to fight again the instant the Minotaur made one aggressive move.

"He might not give us a choice," Emiya said sardonically.

"I can try and pin him down," Arash replied. "At the very least, if I fill his limbs with enough arrows, it should buy us enough time to escape before you work your magic and break this place over your knee."

"Your confidence in me is inspiring."

It was as good a plan as I thought we were going to get. Now that we knew who was here and where he stood, it would be safer to retreat and just blow the whole hillside up. There was no point in further risking our lives in a pointless brawl on the enemy's home turf.

"We'll retreat with Mash," I said, pitching my voice to carry. "Emiya, Arash, it'll be up to you to keep him busy until we can get out of here, then we'll send in Siegfried to finish him off.. Bradamante will cover us."

“Got it,” said Arash.

“That work for you, Master?” Emiya asked, looking Rika’s way.

“As long as you don’t take any stupid risks!” she shot back. “I can’t go back to MREs and protein bars! I refuse!”

One side of his mouth ticked up. “I hear you loud and clear.”

Bradamante didn’t look entirely happy, but she nodded. “Then I will leave this foe to you, Sir Emiya, Lord Arash.”

“Wait!” a new voice said suddenly. “Stop!”

From down the corridor behind Emiya and Arash, a petite figure came around the corner, dressed in a frilly white gown. She trembled a little and refused to step any closer, her fists clenched as she glared at our two Archers.

“No...” the Minotaur gasped. “Stay...”

She ignored him.

“I’ll go with you!” she shouted at us. Her voice echoed off of the walls, bouncing back at us. “You can do whatever you want with me! Just stop hurting Asterios! If you kill him, then this place will collapse, and we’ll all die!”

“Asterios?” the twins said simultaneously.

“It’s the name of the Minotaur,” Mash explained quietly. “Most people only know him as the Minotaur of Crete, but his true, proper name is Asterios. This labyrinth is the place where he lived and died in mythology...so I guess Daedalus isn’t here after all.”

No, probably not. I’d given up on the idea the instant I’d seen the Minotaur myself. As convenient as it would have been to be able to recruit him, it just seemed like a longshot that they would *both* be here, let alone that they could stand to be in the same place together.

The girl in the dress took a step forward. “Did...didn’t you hear me? I said I’m willing to go with you!”

And it put her directly under the light of one of the torches. Mash gasped. “Master! That’s — !”

“Stheno!” Ritsuka yelped.

My stomach roiled. A block of cold dread dropped into my belly like ice.

Immediately, Rika clapped her hands over Ritsuka’s ears, and Emiya and Arash turned to face Stheno fully, drawing back on their bows. Stheno backed up, shock rippling across her face, and raised her hands in an attempt to be placating.

The Minotaur growled and dragged himself around again, lifting his halberds, but before he could even attempt to do anything, Bradamante leveled her lance at him and commanded, “Don’t move!”

“H-hang on, what’s with the sudden attack position?” Stheno asked. “Don’t you guys need me for something? Alive?”

What — after what she’d done to us back in Septem, why would we want *anything* from her? Did she really think we’d forgotten all about that bit where she’d tried to turn us into her slaves?

“Unlike last time, we’re not on that island, so we don’t have to worry about it disappearing on us,” Emiya said. “If you think we’re going to give you another chance to bewitch us, you really aren’t that smart.”

“Island? Another chance?” Stheno said, bewildered, or at least faking it fairly well. “What are you even talking about? I’ve never met you goons before today!”

“Hey!” Rika said indignantly. “Who are you calling a goon? Especially after you sicced those two dragon girls on us last time!”

But Stheno seemed only more bewildered. “Dragon girls? What?”

Emiya, seeming to realize something, huffed and slowly lowered his bow. “If you’ve been summoned here as a Servant, then I guess it only makes sense that you don’t remember being one in the last Singularity, too.”

My cheek twitched. I wanted to say that was too convenient, but unfortunately, I knew too much about Servants to think he was wrong. Emiya himself was a prime example. It would explain her reaction to us, at least, if she didn’t have any memory at all of what went down on that godforsaken island.

It didn’t really explain the attitude, though. The Stheno we’d fought had been in complete control the entire time, with a kind of bored, disinterested affectation that only peeled away once we took that control away from her. If this one and the last one were the same person taking the same form, then why was one a lot less cool-headed than the other?

Were we actually dealing with Stheno? Or was there something else going on?

“What?” Stheno demanded, annoyed. “Would you start making sense already? I told you, I’ve never met you idiots before today! Not here and not anywhere else either!”

Slowly, Arash lowered his bow, too. “I think we’re *all* making some assumptions here. First off, let’s clear this up before we do anything else — you’re not Stheno, are you?”

Wait. Stheno was part of a set of *three* sisters.

Her face contorted with disgust, and I realized what he had a second before she opened her mouth. “Ugh, what? You seriously mistook me for my sister? You classless brutes really don’t know how to treat a lady, do you?”

If she wasn't Stheno and she looked far too young to be Medusa, then by process of elimination, that left —

“Euryale.”

“Whose eye did what?” Rika asked, bewildered.

“Euryale, the third of the Gorgon sisters,” Mash supplied helpfully. “Remember, Master? We talked about them before. Stheno and Euryale were the sisters of Medusa.”

Rika's brow furrowed, and she squinted back at Euryale. “No one said they were *twins*...”

No, that part really hadn't been incredibly explicit in the myths, but I guess it made some sense, didn't it? The oldest form, back before later revisions started changing things around, was a tale about three sisters, all of them identical at first, except the one who wasn't quite immortal and grew into a woman while the other two remained eternally young.

Comparing both the Stheno I remembered and the Euryale in front of me, yeah, I could see the family resemblance between them and that Medusa we fought in Fuyuki. Age Medusa down by ten or fifteen years, stick her in one of those gothic lolita dresses that the other two were wearing, and it would be hard to tell any of them apart from one another.

“Listen, do we have a deal or not?” Euryale asked, annoyed. “I already said I'd go with you if you leave Asterios alone, so just take me to that creep already and get it over with.”

“No...” Asterios the Minotaur groaned.

“Maybe you could explain why you think we want you for anything first?” said Ritsuka. “Because I'm...still a little confused about that part.”

I jumped in while I had the chance. “We came here to investigate a bounded field that activated not long after we anchored near this island because it caused our ship to stall. If you thought we were here to capture you, then you did a very poor job of trying to keep us away.”

But why were they here in the first place? We'd learned from Stheno that she'd been summoned as a sort of mistaken response to Romulus, a flub that resulted from him suppressing his own Divinity. There was no way the circumstances were exactly the same, so exactly what function was Euryale here to fulfill?

A quick glance told me that her class was Archer, but her skills were largely the same as her sister's, and having that on board was a disaster just waiting to happen.

She was functionally the same as Stheno. Maybe not in personality, but in ability, in combat potential. She almost certainly wasn't here to fight.

“Yeah!” Rika agreed. “You can't complain about us showing up in this creepy maze if you sent us an engraved invitation, you know!”

Euryale blinked at us, stunned, and her mouth flapped for several seconds soundlessly before she managed to squeak something out. “What...you...you’re...” She shrieked, “ARE YOU SERIOUS?”

It echoed off of the walls and bounced around, amplified, stabbing into my eardrums like ice picks, and even I had to wince at the sheer volume.

“Hey!” Rika squawked. “No need to shout in here!”

Euryale ignored her and stormed down the corridor, stomping past Emiya and Arash like they weren’t even there — they watched her go, exchanging bewildered looks — and as she came upon him, she seethed up at Asterios the Minotaur.

“It was supposed to keep them out!” she scolded him furiously. “Not lock them in! They wouldn’t even have known we were here if you hadn’t trapped them on the island!”

And Asterios just...slumped sheepishly, thoroughly cowed (an appropriate way of putting it, in hindsight). “...Sorry.”

“Ugh.” Euryale groaned. “All of this trouble over a simple misunderstanding... And look at you! If you kept going in that shape, they really would have killed you, and then where would we be? How exactly were you planning to protect me if I’m just going to die when your labyrinth collapses, does it?”

Asterios slumped further, and this time didn’t even offer a token apology. It was...strange looking, considering just how badly injured he actually was.

“Wow,” said Rika. “It’s like watching him get told off by his mom, except she looks like his little sister.”

“Yeah,” Ritsuka agreed.

Euryale breathed out a gusty sigh, and then turned to address us. “So if we lift the bounded field, you guys will just leave, right?”

The question became, then, if she wasn’t here to fight, was she another mistake, like Stheno, a purposeful choice, like Siegfried, or had she just gotten sucked in by the Singularity? Because damn it, that was a possibility, too, wasn’t it? This place was so twisted up that she might have been pulled for no other reason than she used to live on an island herself.

“Not immediately,” I answered, “but there’s nothing on this island we really need, so we have no reason to stay all that long.”

If we forgot about the question of her purpose in this Singularity for a second — because unless she knew herself, I didn’t see an answer forthcoming — then the reason we’d stopped on this island in the first place was to investigate for Servants and see if we could find anything out about the other party with a Grail.

That...was probably something these two might have *some* kind of answer to.

“Now, hang on a second, don’t be too hasty!” said Drake, butting in. “See, I’ve been around for a while and I’ve seen some pretty strange shit! It’s given me an eye for the peculiar and unusual. Lets me catch on to things some people might not see right away.”

“Your point?” Euryale asked archly.

“You’re here hiding from someone, ain’tcha?” Drake said pointedly. “Only reason why you two’d sit your asses down on this abandoned island and put up a gigantic sign telling folks to stay away.”

Euryale looked at her coldly. “It has nothing to do with you.”

Drake grinned. “And what if I *wanted* it to?”

Briefly, I closed my eyes and let out a slow, quiet breath, not quite a sigh. I guess we were going to run into this one head on, weren’t we? I was hoping to figure that one out *without* having to have an extended conversation with a goddess who could bewitch us with her voice.

Euryale blinked. “What?”

“Like I said!” Drake said. “I’ve gotten to have a good feel for this kind of thing! An instinct! And right now, that instinct is telling me...whatever you two are tangled up in?” She jerked her thumb towards me and the twins, and almost managed to jab me in the ear in the process. “It’s got something to do with what my *esteemed guests* are here looking for!”

I was afraid she was going to say that. Worse, I was afraid that she might be right, because that would mean —

“So here’s what we’re gonna do about that!” Drake went on. “You’re coming with us! We’ll take you along on this crazy trip and see what nonsense shakes out, and one way or the other, your problems will wind up getting solved. Everyone wins, aye?”

“Wait!” Rika squeaked. “We’re taking her *with us*?”

“That wasn’t part of the plan,” Ritsuka said faintly.

“We *did* come here looking for a Servant to recruit,” Mash mumbled. “And...they must be here for a reason, right? All of the other Servants we’ve come across in the previous Singularities were.”

“Damn it,” Rika grumbled. “Why do you have to be right about that, Mash?”

“Sorry?” Mash said meekly.

This was somehow easier when we thought it was going to be Daedalus holed up in here.

“I didn’t agree to anything like that!” Euryale protested shrilly. “You can’t just decide something like that on your — and I’m not leaving Asterios behind, so you can just forget whatever crazy schemes you’ve cooked up in that brain of yours!”

“Whoever said we were gonna leave him behind?” Drake retorted. “Of course we’re bringing him along, too!”

Euryale blinked once, twice, three times, and for a long moment, was stunned into silence. At length, she managed a dumbfounded, inelegant, “Huh?”

And there it was, the part I wasn’t particularly excited about: Drake wanted to bring both of them along. It made a lot of sense, strategically, because if the people hunting them also happened to be the ones with the other Grail, then taking Asterios the Minotaur and Euryale along would guarantee we’d run into them.

If they weren’t, then they might have information on who did, which would be just as valuable. We wouldn’t know until we met these mysterious pursuers and asked them ourselves. Or beat it out of them, whichever was necessary.

The part that made me most wary about this whole idea was that it could go from “fine” to “we’re all fucked” the instant Euryale decided she wanted it to. At least with Jeanne Alter and Bonesaw, there had been checks in place to stop things from going too far, whereas we didn’t really have any for Euryale’s Alluring Euphony.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I want him around?” Drake asked. “Look at him! Beefy —” here, Rika snorted, sniggering behind her hands — “hunky, he can take a hit and keep on going! I don’t even know how many shots I put into him, and he shrugged ‘em all off like it was nothing! I’d be a piss-poor pirate if I didn’t try and bring him into my crew!”

Euryale’s brow furrowed, but there was tentative, cautious hope in her voice when she asked, “Are you sure? Even if it means you have to protect us from some dangerous people?”

“All the more reason!” Drake said boisterously. “Ha! Dangerous people usually have better stuff to steal! That ain’t a drawback, that’s a selling point!”

“No,” Rika said, “no, I think that’s a drawback, Captain Drake!”

“Don’t get your knickers in a twist!” Drake retorted. “Whoever these wankers are, I’m sure we can handle ‘em just fine and dandy!” Her grin was closer to a leer. “Whaddya say there, Little Missy? That sound like a good deal to you? We’ve even got food and drink aplenty! And lots of gold, too, if you fancy some spending money!”

“Captain Drake must be very confident,” Mash murmured, “if she’s willing to give up some of her treasure for this.”

Considering this was the woman who would — in a few short years, from the perspective of the current era we were in — circumnavigate the globe for the first time in history? Her instincts, such as they were, were probably a lot more trustworthy than most.

It only made it all the more painful to admit that she was likely making a good decision by bringing Asterios and Euryale along.

There was just one thing I wanted to clear up, first.

“Before we go making any promises,” I interrupted right as Euryale looked ready to accept, “there’s something I think we need to hear from you first. Namely, who it is that’s chasing you and what they want from you.”

She grimaced. “Did you really have to bring that up? I already told you, it has nothing to do —”

“No,” I cut across her. “If we’re taking you along with us, then that *makes it* our business. You don’t really think we’re going to protect you against anything and everything that comes after you without any idea why, do you?”

“It’ll be easier to keep you safe if we know what we’re protecting you from,” Arash added, picking up my line of thought.

Euryale looked like she’d swallowed a lemon. To Asterios, she asked, “Are you really okay with going with these guys? We can just stay here if you don’t trust them.”

“You...go...I...go,” Asterios told her in that halting speech of his.

Euryale sighed. “Fine,” she said, “but let’s get out of here, first. I don’t want to talk about that creep in a place as gloomy and depressing as this.”

“Oh, good,” Rika said, relieved. “I can totally get behind that!”