

Chapter LXXXV: Two Grails

“That’s right!” said Drake. “Anything you want, boyo! We’ve got some rope around here, if that’s your thing —”

“J-just what are you even saying!” Mash sputtered out indignantly. “S-Senpai would never...!”

“That’s right!” said Rika, clenching her fist. “Onii-chan is saving himself for the Cinnamon Roll! Loose pirate captains are off limits, no matter how big their bazoongas are!”

“Rika!” her brother cried, dismayed, even as Mash’s face turned an interesting shade of red and she swooned a little.

And Drake just laughed like it was the greatest comedy routine she’d ever seen. The fact that she could laugh like that while she was pinned down beneath Arash and at his mercy said perhaps just as much about what kind of person she was as her early spiel about freedom did.

“If you’re through,” I said, and Drake’s laughter petered out.

“Yeah?” she said. “So what is it you want from me, lady?”

Let her up, I ordered Arash, and he climbed off of her, slowly and carefully, so that she could sit up and get back onto her feet. She seemed less tipsy than before, more sure in her footing, and I wasn’t sure it was supposed to work like that, but having never been drunk before, I couldn’t really say for certain.

“There’s a couple of things we want from you,” I said, “but the rest of it might not matter, depending on the answer to the first one. Have you come across the Holy Grail?”

“Holy Grail?” said Drake. “What, like that trinket from out of those King Arthur stories?”

“Basically.”

“I-it might not look exactly like a cup,” Mash said, still a little red around the cheeks. “But it’s...a form of wish-granting device, so it can do incredible things! If you found it, or if it was given to you...”

“Holy Grail, eh?” Drake mused. She reached towards her chest, her cleavage, and particles of golden light coalesced in her hand, taking a familiar shape. “This what you lot are talking about?”

And she held out a shimmering chalice, radiating so much magical energy that I could feel it. It looked exactly like the others had.

“Holy shit!” Rika breathed.

“She actually had it!” Ritsuka said, shocked.

Could we really be done already? We hadn’t even been inside this Singularity for a day, and we had already found the Grail. It was right in front of us. I really wasn’t used to being this lucky, but —

“Hey, now.” Drake drew the Grail back towards her chest, and I realized only then that I’d been reaching for it. “If this is what you want, I don’t mind that much forking it over, since I lost fair and square. Just what is it you want with this thing, though?”

“It’s the entire reason why we’re here,” said Mash.

I had a different concern. “Where did you get it?”

“You didn’t happen to see a giant tentacle monster drop it, right?” asked Rika. “Because I feel like it should be obvious that you don’t just pick up a giant tentacle monster’s droppings.”

“Ha!” Drake burst out, grinning. “Nah, nothing like that! It really ain’t that interesting a tale, truth be told!”

“What are you talking about, Boss?” Bombe shouted. “It was the adventure to end all adventures!”

Beep-beep!

“Taylor!” Marie said as soon as I answered my communicator. “We’ve detected the Holy Grail! It’s right —”

She blinked as I turned my wrist to get Drake into the shot.

“— in front of you?”

“Whoa-ho-ho!” said Drake. “What’s this, now? Some kind of strange magic or something?”

“Something like that,” I answered. “Now, you were saying? Something about an adventure?”

“It really wasn’t all that special,” said Drake.

“The hell it wasn’t!” Bombe said. “Seven nights of nonstop sailing! Maelstrom after maelstrom in sea after sea, and at the end of it, the legendary lost city of Atlantis!”

“Atlantis?” Marie demanded, leaning so far forward that she almost pressed her nose up against the camera. “You actually saw it?”

“Wait, Atlantis was real?” Rika blurted out. “Disney was telling a true story?”

“Oh yeah!” said Bombe, grinning. “There were even a giant sea monster that said it was gonna flood the world! Boss went right up to it, kicked its giant ass, and,” here, he mimed violently ripping something apart, “tore that there treasure right out of its carcass!”

A feeling of foreboding coiled in my stomach.

“A giant sea monster?”

Like Leviathan?

“It was pissing me off, simple as that!” Drake waved the whole thing off so casually. “Went around calling itself Poseidon. No self-respecting sailor could’ve accepted that, let alone a buccaneer like me, so I tore it a new asshole, kicked it back where it came from, and sank the whole place while I was at it. Even took this here thing you’re calling the Holy Grail from it.”

Marie choked. “You beat up a *Divine Spirit*? No, h-hang on a second, if it still had a corpus, that was a fully fledged god!”

“No way,” Mash breathed.

“Well,” said Emiya. “Not every day you meet a genuine godslayer.”

Arash’s gaze flickered briefly over my direction, and a cold stab of fear made me wonder just how much he knew.

“There’s a difference?” Rika asked.

“Y-you!” Marie sputtered. “Of course there’s a difference! A massive difference! Divine Spirits are one step removed from reality, so their power is vastly diminished, but a fully corporeal god *is* what it controls! Poseidon isn’t just a god of the seas, he *is* the sea!”

“Was, now,” Drake said blithely, like she didn’t just reiterate that she’d killed an actual god. She turned the Grail around in her hand. “And this thing has been pretty good to me ever since. Endless meat and rum, whenever I want! I can even hurt those strange guys we’ve been seeing ever since everything went all weird and shit!”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” Romani muscled his way into the frame. “I knew Francis Drake was an important person in history, but this just goes way beyond what I was expecting! The world was in legitimate danger from a rogue god, and she actually just solved the problem on her own? Just what kind of Heroic Spirit is that!”

The kind that was still actually alive, which I think made it all the more impressive. I didn’t know how Poseidon stacked up to some of the threats I’d faced, but if he was anything at all like Leviathan, the fact that Drake had essentially beaten him by herself said a lot about just how powerful she was.

“You said something about strange guys,” said Arash. “What kind of strange guys are you talking about?”

“Invincible fuckers. Take everything we can throw at them without blinking. But, if I just put this here thing back inside me...” Drake pressed the Grail to her chest, and as we watched, it dissipated back into her flesh. “All of a sudden, I can hurt them. It ain’t fun, though. Makes my chest feel tight, I can’t stand it.”

“Servants!” Bradamante exclaimed. “She’s encountered other Servants before, Master! That means there are others here!”

It confirmed, at least, that there *were* other Servants here, just like in the other Singularities. Strays? But where were they, then?

“Servants?” asked Drake.

“Spirits of the exalted dead, returned to life,” I told her simply. “You mentioned King Arthur? Heroes like that. The only way to hurt a Servant is with magic or another Servant.”

Maybe they were trying to take the Grail from Drake so the era could correct itself, or maybe they just wanted the Grail themselves.

“Huh.” Drake retrieved the Grail from inside her body again, examining it in a new light. “So I guess those guys were Servants, and this thing’s power is why I can hurt them now. Makes sense.” She looked back over at us. “What do you fellas want it for?”

“The Grail is the reason behind the formation of Singularities,” Mash said faintly, like she still hadn’t quite gotten over the bombshell of Drake killing Poseidon. I didn’t blame her. “If the Grail is retrieved and removed, the Singularity will be corrected.”

“It’s why this place is so strange,” I added. “If we take it, things should go back to normal. That’s why we’re here.”

“And what happens to you after you have this thing?” Drake waggled the Grail back and forth like it was a snowglobe.

“We go back to Chaldea,” I said, “and get ready to tackle the next Singularity. Your life goes back to how it was before this all started, like this was nothing more than a dream.”

“That simple, huh?” Drake said thoughtfully. “Here, take it.”

She tossed it over to me without warning, and I almost fumbled it as I scrambled to catch it. It felt like someone had just handed me a nuclear reactor, so much power radiated off of it.

“She gave it up so easily!” Marie said incredulously.

“Like I said, I lost.” Drake shrugged. “It’s a nice bauble, no doubt about that, and I doubt I’ll ever find another like it in all the world, but if you don’t want anything else, I can hand that over and move on. Nice to meet ya, thanks for making the trip.”

Immediately, I turned around and handed it over to Mash, who accepted it and announced, “Holy... Holy Grail acquired.”

A moment of silence passed.

“So,” Rika began, “are we leaving?”

“Yeah,” Drake agreed. “Was something supposed to happen?”

“There’s...no sign of the era correcting itself,” Romani said. “Nothing’s... Nothing’s changed. The readings are the same as before.” Marie sat back in her chair, brow furrowing as she stuck her thumbnail in her mouth. Romani turned to her. “Director?”

Marie took a few seconds to answer.

“Francis Drake said that she took the Grail from Poseidon,” she said slowly, “near the lost city of Atlantis. If recovering the Grail didn’t fix this Singularity, then...it’s entirely possible that this Grail isn’t one belonging to the enemy left to be found and used, but one completely native to that era.”

“So there’s a second Grail,” Romani reasoned, “one unrelated to Drake or hers. That...would actually explain how this entire situation happened, wouldn’t it?”

Marie nodded. “A single Grail creating a distortion of this magnitude sounded impossible, but two Grails whose functions are twisting and warping each other could feasibly have enough power to create that impossible spacetime.”

“So you’re saying there’s another one of these things floating about here?” Drake asked.

“Oh, great,” Rika groaned. “So much for being done and home before dinner!”

“I guess it really was too much to hope for,” Ritsuka agreed ruefully.

“I-it really is a shame!” said Bradamante, fooling no one.

I swung my wrist around so that my communicator faced Mash. “What does that mean for this Grail?”

Marie grimaced. “If it really is native to that era, then taking it will accomplish nothing,” she admitted, looking like the words physically pained her. “Francis Drake won that Holy Grail, and it therefore belongs to her. Chaldea has no right to take it.”

My brow twitched. Some part of me wanted to protest the direction I could sense this taking.

“Director,” said Mash, surprised, “you’re going to give this Grail back to Captain Drake, just like that?”

But at the end of the day, it wouldn’t be more useful to us in the long term than it would for Drake to keep it in the short term. Not if there was another one we needed to recover.

“O-of course!” Marie squawked. “Just how greedy do you think I am, Mash? Even if you forget about the fact that it’s a part of that era as a matter of history, Francis Drake is the rightful owner!”

“We’re not hurting for resources quite that badly, Mash,” Romani interjected. “Besides, it really does belong to Captain Drake.”

Mash nodded. “Understood.”

She walked forward and held the Grail out for Drake to take. Drake raised an eyebrow.

“Ain’t this what you lot were raising a stink over?” she asked.

“It seems there’s another Holy Grail in this era for us to retrieve,” said Mash. “Therefore, there’s no reason for us to keep this one.”

“You don’t say.” Drake accepted it back, looking it over again. “Another one, eh?”

“That means you still owe us,” I told her.

Drake laughed, and her grin split her face. “I guess it means I do! So, if you don’t want this bauble and you don’t want my body, what can this pirate offer you, aside from her life?”

“A ride.”

“A ride?” several voices chorused.

“If we don’t retrieve the Grail, this Singularity won’t be resolved, and you and your crew will spend the rest of your lives sailing about these islands aimlessly,” I explained calmly. “At best, you’ll run into other pirates. At worst, you’ll find nothing and no one, and you’ll wind up going in circles until you die, everything you’ve accomplished erased.”

“Ouch,” said Rika. “Senpai isn’t sugarcoating it.”

“Has she ever?” Ritsuka pointed out.

“Good point.”

“What Master is trying to say,” said Arash diplomatically, “is that we can both benefit by working together. We’ve already handled three of these Singularities, so we know how to fix this place, but we don’t have a ship to get from island to island, so you can help us do that with yours.”

Drake laughed. “Was about to say that I’ve never had treasure pass in and out and back into my hands so easily! But I get what you’re saying. You want me as part of your crew to help you turn this place back to rights, yeah? And unless I want to sit back and let you handle all the big fights, I need this here Grail so I can actually hurt the enemy.”

“Yes.”

Having her take part in the actual fighting wasn’t ideal, but it was better that she *could* actually defend herself if she had to than to have her be helpless when we inevitably ran into whoever had the other Grail.

“Sounds like a fair deal to me,” said Drake. Over her shoulder, she shouted, “What do you think, you scumbags? This place is nice enough, but it’s gonna get real boring lazing about all day, won’t it?”

“AYE, BOSS!” the pirates roared.

“Well, hell!” She grinned. “We ain’t exactly the heroing types, but it seems to me if we wanna get out of here and back to what we were in the middle of, we’re gonna have to become some big damn heroes, aren’t we?”

“AYE, BOSS!” the pirates echoed. Bombe added, “The biggest damn heroes!”

“So it looks like we’re gonna be taking orders from *these* folks for a little while!” Drake jerked her thumb back at us. “And that means that we have some new comrades in our midst, don’t we? A bunch of do-gooders here to teach us how this hero thing works! Almost enough to bring a tear to your eye, ain’t it?”

More than one of the pirates was grinning. “AYE, BOSS!”

“So,” said Drake, “you know what that calls for, right?”

“AYE, BOSS!” the pirates replied again.

“Someone get our new friends a drink,” said Drake, lifting the Grail in her hand, “because it’s time to PARTY!”

“YEAH!” they all cheered, and those who had drinks immediately chugged them down.

“W-wait!” Marie sputtered, barely audible over the whooping and hollering. “This isn’t the time for that!”

“Ah, don’t get your knickers in a twist!” Drake turned around, tipping the Grail back and taking a mouthful of the rum that had suddenly materialized in it. “A good captain knows when to let her sailors let loose, you know! There’s no rush. That crazy sea will still be there in the morning, won’t it?”

“That’s not the point!” Romani leaned into the screen. “Rika and Ritsuka are both underage! Taylor, too, by American law!”

“America?” Drake said blithely. “Who’s that?”

Romani’s mouth flapped, but no sound came out.

“Yeah, lighten up, Doc!” said Rika. “America technically doesn’t exist yet!”

“That’s not...!” Romani sputtered. “J-just because it isn’t illegal in that time period doesn’t mean that it’s okay to drink alcohol! You two are still growing!”

“Don’t worry, Romani,” I said, turning to stare at Rika, “they already know that they’re not supposed to drink. I’m sure they’ll be responsible, as expected of Masters of Chaldea.”

Rika, paling, nodded frantically. “R-right, Doc! I’ll be a good girl! No rum for me!”

“See that it stays that way!” Marie ordered sternly. “And stay on your toes! Just because they’re allies now doesn’t mean they aren’t still pirates!”

“Yes, Director!” Mash replied dutifully.

The connection cut, and the hologram disappeared.

“The old nag gone, then?” Drake asked.

I itched to correct her, to come to Marie's defense, but Drake struck me as very irreverent, sort of like Rika, only without even the veneer of impulse control and no respect for any authority that didn't beat it into her first. The only thing protesting that characterization would do was make her double down on it, and it just wasn't worth the effort it would take to make her stop at that point.

"For now," I answered. "Director Animosphere doesn't see a need to hover over us constantly. She trusts that we can work without her direct supervision."

"She trusts one of us for that, at least," Ritsuka said dryly.

"Then what're you waiting for?" Drake whirled around and tossed her arms up. "It's back to the grind tomorrow, so tonight, it's time to have FUN!"

Her crew roared their agreement, laughing, and toasted to their captain as she sauntered over to join them. A moment later, someone had started singing, and the whole group of them joined in, slurring their way through a drinking song that I didn't recognize. Drake was one of the loudest, and, it turned out, she couldn't carry a tune worth a damn.

"They certainly are a lively bunch, aren't they?" Arash commented wryly.

"Give it an hour or two and most of them will be passed out on the ground," Emiya replied.

"Well," Bradamante said half-heartedly, "at least they're not moping and depressed?"

"Are they really going to party all night?" Mash asked.

"Never underestimate the energy of men under the influence of alcohol," I said dryly.

Dad had tried never to drink too heavily around me, but I had more than one memory of times when he'd had a little too much and he and Kurt spent the rest of the night acting out some harebrained scheme. Like the time they decided to repaint the shed at two in the morning and wound up asleep in the backyard with paint all over their faces and hands.

Mom hadn't been sure whether she should be laughing or furious.

I shook my head and checked my communicator for the local time, but as I should have expected, the nature of this Singularity rendered it useless and wrong, so I looked up at the sky instead. Without any idea where in the world we were supposed to be, it wasn't the most useful of indicators, but if the temperature was any indication, this was closer to an equatorial region than not.

That meant the local time was probably closer to evening than later afternoon, and therefore — as my stomach chose to remind me at that moment — closer to dinner than lunch.

"As long as they keep their 'energy' in their pants," Rika said. "Are we just supposed to stand around and watch, Senpai?"

"Yes," I said. "Don't let yourself get dragged off. Try to stick together so that you don't have to worry about these guys remembering to 'keep their energy in their pants.'"

“Don’t worry, Master,” Bradamante said firmly. “I’ll make sure these scoundrels keep their hands to themselves!”

“Thanks, Tii-chan!”

“Feel free to be extra stern,” Ritsuka told her.

Bradamante nodded. “Right!”

I looked over at the corpse of my giant hermit crab as my stomach gurgled again. Well, that was essentially what I’d brought it with us for, so I guess it may as well serve its intended purpose.

“Emiya,” I began, “how good are you at crab dishes?”

Emiya blinked at me, bemused. “I’m...decent enough at them, I suppose. Why?”

Rika, who caught on to my intentions first, groaned. “Oh god,” she said miserably. “Senpai, *no*.”

Senpai, *yes*.

— o.o.O.O.o —

The party lasted long into the night, past the sun setting and into the early hours of the morning, but the twins had fallen asleep long before that after getting drawn into the festivities, and Mash had followed them almost as soon as we got them settled in Drake’s tent. Drake herself was somewhere off in one of the piles of bodies littering the camp, out like a light, probably with a half-full Grail clutched in one hand, and it left only myself and the Servants still awake in the silence.

“They’re going to be feeling that in the morning,” Arash said ruefully.

“It’s their own fault,” I said, unsympathetic. “I warned them. If they decided not to listen, then they have no one else to blame.”

“Hard to say no to a bunch of personalities like this,” Emiya commented. “And if we’re being fair, they *did* only take one sip. It was just one sip from each tankard that was thrust into their hands.”

“You *know* the Director won’t accept that as an excuse.”

Emiya shrugged, as though to say, ‘I tried.’

Bradamante sighed. “I’m sorry, Master,” she said. “I tried to keep them from imbibing too much, but there were just so many people!”

“It’s fine,” I said. “The worst they’re going to have to deal with is a hangover and a scolding from the Director. You did the most important part.”

So Rika wouldn’t wake up in the morning with a different kind of soreness. Her head was going to be the only thing that ached.

“Well, this will serve as a lesson for them,” said Arash. “Rika will be less eager to try some alcohol in the future.”

“And Ritsuka will learn how to say no,” Emiya drawled.

Especially when people were shoving stuff in his face. If we ever faced an Assassin in the future, that was going to be important.

“I’m going to get some sleep,” I announced. “I’ll leave keeping watch up to you three.”

“Roger that.” Arash gave me a two-finger salute.

Emiya snorted. “Since my own Master is currently out like a light, I guess you have to stand in for her. Fine.”

“I’ll guard the tent!” Bradamante offered.

“Sure.”

Arash and Emiya went to find posts from which to keep watch, and Bradamante followed me back to the tent, positioning herself at the mouth where the entrance was cut out of the fabric while I stepped inside. Ritsuka and Rika were curled up together on a bedroll over to one side, with Mash sleeping dutifully next to them, ready to protect the both of them even in sleep.

I found a spare roll over in another corner and laid it out next to them, then grabbed another to use as a pillow. It was, thankfully, warm enough that I didn’t need a cover, but cool enough that I didn’t need to strip anything off, so I laid down, made myself comfortable, and settled in. My head barely touched my makeshift pillow before I fell asleep.

It felt like a moment later when I was snapping back awake. Through my swarm, I sensed the movements of Drake’s crew as they meandered about the camp, pulling down the tents and packing away the supplies with surprising energy and clarity. Drake herself was no less spry and chipper, calling out orders, snapping out reprimands when someone fumbled something, and like her sailors, she seemed none the worse for wear, despite the amount of alcohol she had guzzled down last night.

It took a moment to convince myself to leverage my body up so I could sit on the bed roll, and I turned over to the still sleeping occupants next to me so I could reach out and wake them up.

“Mash?”

Mash’s hand whipped out before I could actually touch her shoulder, wrapping tight around my wrist, and one amethyst eye narrowed on me for a second before she realized it was just me.

“Oh,” she said, contrite, “Miss Taylor, I’m sorry!”

She let go of my wrist, and I resisted the urge to rub it where she had squeezed a little too tightly. “It’s fine. Wake up the twins?”

“R-right!”

I turned away to hide the grimace that crossed my face as Mash rolled over to shake the twins awake. “Senpai,” I heard her mutter, “it’s time to wake up,” answered by a pair of tortured groans. My wrist throbbed when I put my weight on it to climb to my feet, but a muttered First Aid spell put that to rights while the others were too distracted to notice.

“Five more minutes,” Rika said groggily.

“I’m sorry, Master, but I can’t do that,” Mash replied. “The others are already awake and getting ready to leave.”

Rika grunted. “Ugh. *Fine*, I’m getting up, I’m getting up!”

“Can you all just keep it down?” Ritsuka rasped.

“Nopel!” Rika reached over and slapped him lightly on the cheek, and he flinched. “If we have to get up, so do you, Onii-chan!”

“Gah!” Ritsuka rolled away from her on reflex and banged his toes against one of the support beams, sending the whole tent aqiver. He was fortunate to still be wearing his shoes, so it wouldn’t have hurt as much as it could have. “Ungh. How are you so energetic this early, Rika?”

“Because I actually listened to Senpai,” Rika said smugly.

“Ugh.” Ritsuka rolled onto his back and flung one arm over his face, hiding his eyes in his elbow. “My head feels like it’s two sizes too small. And my tongue has a carpet.”

“Maybe someone should drill a few holes,” Rika suggested, smirking. “Let some of that pressure out.”

Ritsuka pulled his arm down long enough to favor Rika with one bloodshot, angry eye, then hid back behind it.

“Senpai?” Mash asked worriedly. “Are you okay?”

“He’ll be fine,” I told her. “He’s just learning exactly what a hangover feels like and why you aren’t supposed to drink to excess.”

“Everyone kept handing me a mug,” he muttered, as though that excused it.

“We sailors have a solution to that,” Drake announced as she strode into the tent. “Wanna try it?”

“Hair of the dog?” I guessed wryly.

“Well, that’s a fine enough thing, too!” Drake laughed, and Ritsuka cringed, curling into a ball as though to escape it. “But we aren’t dumb, you know! You can’t sail if you don’t know how to take care of the little things, can you?”

She held out the tankard in her hand, and I took it first, lifting it up to my nose to sniff.

“Water?”

Considering part of what caused a hangover was dehydration, that was actually surprisingly smart.

“There’s a natural spring further inland on this island,” Drake explained. “Had the boys go out and stock up on it, in case the next island ain’t so accommodating.” She pulled the Grail out of her body again, waggling it. “And in case we happen to lose this thing.”

She set it down on a wooden chest with a thunk, and in the cup, a pile of apples appeared suddenly, like they’d been there all along. She took one for herself, then threw one over to me, and I caught it with one hand as I passed the tankard over to Mash, who bent down to help Ritsuka sip.

“Scurvy’s a bitch to deal with,” Drake said around a mouthful of apple. “Luckily, this thing here means that we don’t have to worry about it. Endless food and drink — and it ain’t limited to meat and rum!”

“That *is* convenient,” I said, and then took a bite of my own apple. It was refreshing.

“Is that what you wished for, Captain Drake?” Mash asked. “When you acquired the Grail, I mean.”

Still in his bed, Ritsuka was sitting up, gulping down water like he had been without for days.

“Huh.” Drake paused for a moment and looked at the Grail. “You know, you mentioned something about that yesterday, didn’t you? Called it a wish-granting device. If that’s true, I guess I must’ve! Yeah, that sounds like a great wish to me!”

Halfway through my next bite, I stopped and looked down at my half-eaten apple. Endless food and drink, she said, and it wasn’t limited to meat and rum.

We may have just found a solution to any of our future supply problems. I was going to have to talk to Da Vinci and Marie to see if we could find storage space for it.

“That’s really cool!” Rika reached over and grabbed her own apple. “Man, I would’ve wished for something so much stupider!”

“Like what, Senpai?” Mash asked.

“A boyfriend,” Rika replied nonchalantly.

Ritsuka choked on his next gulp of water, pushing the tankard away so he could pound on his chest as he coughed.

“Senpai!” Mash cried.

“Or maybe an endless supply of strawberries,” Rika went on blithely.

I looked over at her. “You’re referencing something, aren’t you?”

“Now you’re catching on, Senpai!” Rika said brightly. She affected a deeper voice. “The greatest action cartoon on the planet!”

I kept staring, because I had no idea what she was talking about. Rika pouted.

“It’s only half as much fun when no one else gets it. Senpai, didn’t you grow up in America?”

“I didn’t really watch cartoons as a kid,” I told her as an excuse. I did, they just weren’t the same cartoons that *this* universe would have had. Capes had infested every aspect of day to day life, even kids’ media. “Having a literature professor for a mom means you grow up reading instead.”

“Your mother was a literature professor, Miss Taylor?” asked Mash.

“No wonder Senpai’s so smart!” Rika said.

My mouth thinned, but I didn’t bother correcting her. Whether Mom and her career had affected how smart I grew up to be wasn’t something I could prove or disprove, wasn’t something I was particularly interested in proving or disproving either, but *my* career had been what honed my mind the way it did.

“Yeah,” I said instead. “I even sat in on one of her classes when I was younger.”

I realized only after I’d said it that I’d said more than I meant to.

“That,” Rika breathed, “explains *so much*.”

“It really does,” her brother rasped.

Mash turned back to him and offered the tankard of water again. “More water, Senpai?”

He shook his head, then winced. “N-no, I think I’m good for now.”

He caught the apple that Drake threw at him, and when he bit into it, it looked like it was the most delicious thing he’d ever tasted.

“Th-thanks.”

“We’ll be getting ready to cast off in, oh, twenty minutes?” Drake warned. “You’ve got maybe ten before this tent’s coming down. Finish waking up, get your shit together, and be ready to go by then. I might be following your lead on this Singu-whatsits business, but that don’t mean you can go slacking, got it?”

Rika snapped off a salute. “Understood, Captain Drake, sir, ma’am, sir!”

“We’ll be ready,” I translated.

Drake stood back up, swept the Grail back up, and tossed the last apple to Mash, who caught it, blinking, and then she left. Bradamante’s head peeked in a moment later.

“Master?”

“We’ll be right out,” I promised her.

“R-right!”

And she left us to it.

Five minutes or so later, we stepped out of the tent, and Ritsuka hissed against the sunlight, squinting as he lifted a hand to protect his eyes. Rika looked over at him and grinned.

“You know, this is a strange feeling,” she said. “For once, I’m actually the responsible one. Onii-chan, is this how you feel all the time? Because it’s pretty cool!”

“Shut up!” Ritsuka hissed at her.

“Oh, wait until Mom hears about —”

She cut off suddenly, grin falling and brow knitting together. Remembering, no doubt, that her parents and her friends weren’t there anymore and wouldn’t be unless we won.

“Senpai?” Mash asked. “Is something wrong?”

“I-it’s nothing!” Rika plastered on a grin so brittle it hurt to look at. “Just thinking about all the stuff I’m gonna do when this thing is over, you know! No one at school is gonna believe half of the stuff we got up to!”

“If you’re even allowed to tell them,” I said, pretending not to notice the fragility. “The UN and the Association will probably slap us with so many NDAs you won’t even be able to say the *word* Singularity.”

Rika looked appropriately horrified.

“The Association might make you sign a geis scroll instead,” Emiya said as he appeared. “If they do that, it’ll make you literally unable to talk about it.”

“That’s a thing?” Rika squawked.

“You’d be surprised,” Emiya told her. “Magi have a number of ways of ensuring compliance. Only the amateurs and the obscenely powerful rely on threats and violence.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it right now, Rika,” Arash advised as he approached to join us. “We have other things to focus on first, don’t we?”

“Right,” I agreed. “We still have this Singularity to fix, plus four more. We can start thinking about what’s going to happen *after* once we’ve made sure there’s going to *be* an after.”

It was on that appropriately sobering thought that Drake found us again. “Ready to set sail, cabin kids?”

“Cabin kids?” Rika repeated indignantly. “I thought you were following our lead? Doesn’t that make us your boss?”

“Sure,” said Drake, “but it’s still *my* ship, ain’t it? Means I’m still the one in charge!”

“Then don’t think of us as being in your chain of command,” I said. “Think of us as important patrons you’re escorting. We might tell you where we need to go, but you’re the one in charge of getting everyone there. Does that work for you?”

Drake waved it off. “Works fine by me! So, *important patrons*, are you lot ready to set sail?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Ritsuka said miserably.

“Lead the way, Captain,” Arash said.

With everything packed up and loaded, it was time to head back to the ship — Drake’s ship, this time, which was anchored on the other side of the island of Gallagher’s. Gallagher and his crew gave us a jaunty, cheery goodbye, and then went their separate ways while Drake, Bombe, and the rest of their crew hauled their camp supplies in almost the complete opposite direction. Our group wound up wedged in the middle, following Drake herself while the other members of the crew formed a surprisingly orderly column around and behind us.

“Enjoy yourself last night, kiddo?” Bombe teased Ritsuka as we walked.

“More than I should have,” Ritsuka mumbled.

“Director Animosphere isn’t going to be happy,” Mash lamented.

“If we tell her, you mean,” Rika said. “I’m all for tormenting Onii-chan, but there are some things that even I don’t want to subject him to.”

Marie wasn’t *that* harsh. “She already knows by now. Did you forget that there are technicians watching our vitals every second of every day while we’re here?”

Frankly, it was more surprising that she hadn’t already called to chew them out. Considering it had been the better part of a day since we’d Rayshifted, though, maybe she was off to lunch or something. Fifteen hours here should be about three back in Chaldea.

“They’re watching us *that* closely?” Ritsuka asked.

“They know your shoe size,” I told them both, “and when you stub your toe.”

Rika’s face turned bright red. “Including when I get my... when I get a visit from Aunt Flow?”

“That, too.”

“Ugh.” She hid her face in her hands. “That’s so...so...”

“Yeah,” her brother agreed, looking a little pale.

Bombe laughed. “Sounds like you’ve got a strict boss! Right, Boss?”

“Sounds like you’re saying I’m too easy on you shitstains!” Drake said boisterously. “Bombe, from now on, the punishment for backtalk is being floated in a barrel for half a day!”

“Right, Boss!” Bombe agreed. “You’re an angel of mercy, Boss!”

“And for that lip you just gave me, you’re the first one who gets to try it!”

The crew around us laughed, including Bombe. Like she was everyone’s favorite big sister, none of them took that threat seriously, not even Drake herself.

Eventually, we came to another beach, filled with white sand and framed on either side by steep cliffs that hid the slope down from view. Gentle waves lapped at the shore and gently licked at the longboats resting there, creating the picturesque scene of an island paradise. And there, sitting slightly out to sea, rocking slowly on the glistening water —

“Whoa,” said Rika. “Now *that’s* a ship!”

A fully sized galleon, with white sails furled and a hull painted in red, black, and gold. It was almost regal, and obviously well cared for, the sort of ship that really did fit a legend like Francis Drake, who had circumnavigated the globe.

“Ain’t she just?” Drake laughed. “Well, there she is, folks, home sweet home.”

She turned back to us and grinned. “The best ship to come out of England’s docks! The *Golden Hind*!”