

Chapter XCIV: Lost at Sea

“Who?” asked Drake.

“The most famous pirate to ever live,” I answered.

She glanced over at me, brow furrowed. “I thought that was me, weren’t it?”

Not hardly, I didn’t say, but that was mostly because Drake was more famous for the stuff she’d done that *wasn’t* pirating, whereas Blackbeard’s entire legend was his piracy. I’d once heard it described that pirates were like rock stars, in that their lives looked exciting and glamorous, up until you actually looked into what those lives were actually like, and it turned out they were all broke, up to their eyeballs in debt, and desperately scrambling for their next score.

“Your accomplishments are grander, Captain Drake,” said Mash, “but when it comes to the word ‘pirate,’ when people think of what a pirate is, what a pirate looks like, how a pirate acts, the only name that can come to mind is the most infamous scoundrel to ever sail the seas: Edward Teach, also known as Blackbeard.”

As I watched through Arash’s eyes, the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* — because that was the only thing that ship could be, when Blackbeard himself was the one steering it — drew ever closer. The *Golden Hind* had the wind on its side, by all accounts, but somehow, the *Revenge’s* sails were full and driving it towards us at alarming speed.

Unless he had something that would let him control the wind, that had to be a Noble Phantasm. No, I could almost guarantee it. The *Revenge* didn’t have as much renown as Blackbeard himself, but there was no doubt that it was his Noble Phantasm, because what else would it be, except for maybe something to do with the Republic of Pirates?

“He’s even famous in *Japan*,” Rika added. “I mean, Oda-sensei might have had a hand in that, but still!”

Drake didn’t seem particularly thrilled to hear that, almost like the very idea insulted her.

“Most infamous scoundrel ever, huh?”

She took her eyes off of the sea ahead long enough to get a look at the approaching *Revenge*, and the instant she laid eyes on the maroon sails and the fluttering flag that were becoming only more distinct the more the ship gained on us, she did a double take.

“What the bleeding hell?” she exclaimed. “Bombe, are you seeing this shit? I haven’t gone mad, have I?”

“Aye, Cap’n, that’s him for sure!” Bombe shouted back.

I drew back from Arash’s eyes and turned to Drake sharply. “You’ve seen him before?”

“You kidding?” she snarled. “That assbat tried to run us aground when we first got here! Bastard nearly sank us!”

“Dear me, that *is* a coincidence,” Euryale said airily, “because I happen to recognize that flag and those sails, too.”

I nearly gave myself whiplash from how quickly I spun around to face her. “You’re serious.”

Her mouth drew into a tight grimace. “I only wish it *were* a joke, but no, it’s true. That ship belongs to the man who has been chasing me the entirety of *my* time in this place.”

“Well, that’s convenient,” said Rika. “I guess the only ones who haven’t met him yet is us.”

It really was, I thought as I turned back towards the oncoming ship. It was rapidly closing the gap, near enough now that I could see the black square that was its flag with my own eyes, even if I couldn’t make out the design printed upon it.

“What do we do?” Mash asked.

“What the fuck do you think we’re going to do?” Drake barked. “Bombe! Get the cannons loaded! We’re gonna sink that bastard, this time!”

“You can’t,” I said immediately.

She turned to me, furious. “The fuck I can’t!”

I shook my head. “I mean that you literally can’t. You’d just be wasting ammunition.”

It took her an extra second for her brain to parse what I meant, and when she had, her face scrunched up with frustrated anger. “Fuck!” she swore. “Fucking... Shit! He’s one of them invincible bastards! My cannons won’t even scratch the paint!”

More than just that —

“I can do it,” Emiya offered. “Just say the word, Master, and I’ll sink him.”

“You can’t, either,” Ritsuka said before I could. “If he has the Grail and it goes down with his ship...”

“We’re all out of scuba gear,” Rika concluded.

Emiya’s nose wrinkled, and he looked away, towards the oncoming ship, with a scowl. It wasn’t that I didn’t understand the sentiment. Sinking him straight off *would* be easier, at least from the position of removing the problem before it had a chance to make itself more of one. It would be convenient if we could solve this Singularity like that with a single use of a Noble Phantasm.

Unfortunately, there was a problem with that idea.

“If you take him out and he has the Grail, there’s no telling where it might go,” I said. “The currents could carry it out for *miles*.”

Emiya’s lip curled. “Tch.”

Because the seas had been getting rougher the closer we got to that giant vortex. The waves were larger, the ship was rocking more, and provided the Grail didn’t get flung off into the distance by

Caladbolg, it could very well wind up being swept along and ferried to some distant part of this Singularity.

Or worse, it might be sucked down into the maelstrom, and we'd have to try and retrieve it from a whirlpool the size of a hurricane with waters moving at gale force speeds.

And even if it went straight down, which was the least likely possibility, then what? If I remembered the numbers right, something like eighty percent of the ocean floor was unexplored, and people had been searching for sunken ships in relatively shallow bays for centuries, despite having descriptions or even exact coordinates for where they went down. I didn't like those odds if we had to send our Servants diving for the Grail.

"We're going to have to let him get close," Ritsuka concluded, almost as though he'd been reading my mind.

"Are you mad?" barked Drake. "You want me to let that asshole within spitting distance of my ship? After he tried to sink her?"

"You have something you didn't, back then." I turned towards Euryale, whose mouth drew into a tight line. "Something that he wants quite badly."

"You're going to use me as bait, is that what you're saying?" asked Euryale, unimpressed. Asterios shifted uncomfortably behind her, hunching over a little as though to shield her with his bulk.

"He won't try and sink us as long as you're on board." Hopefully, anyway. You never could tell with some people, especially the really irrational ones. If he was willing to pursue her across this Singularity, however, then I was willing to bet he wouldn't just blow the *Golden Hind* full of holes as long as she was on it. "The longer we can convince him to talk, the more chances we'll have to find where — or *if* — he has the Holy Grail."

"If he *literally* pulls it out of his ass, I'm not touching it," Rika said dryly.

A slight tightening of my lips was the only reaction I let show on my face, although Mash's cheeks were reddening at the mental image and Ritsuka grimaced. I couldn't say I found it particularly thrilling either, but I'd seen things a whole lot worse and a whole lot more disgusting.

I didn't want to ever meet the man who wanted to try to outdo Bonesaw's worst.

"Do you think he might tell us more about who gave him the Grail?" Ritsuka asked.

"Maybe," I hedged. "It depends on a lot of different factors, and we can't be sure before we talk to him."

Loyalty, however, at least to governments and superior officers, had never been something pirates were well known for.

"Good luck," Euryale drawled.

Grinning, Rika turned to Bradamante, "Maybe he'll be more talkative if Tii-chan flutters her eyelashes at him?"

Bradamante's cheeks reddened. "I-I'm not that kind of knight, Master! I'm really not!"

"Maybe he prefers redheads instead of blondes," Emiya slipped in slyly.

Wordlessly, Rika gestured to Drake, which actually wasn't the worst rebuttal. Men tended to like figures like Drake's a whole lot more than mine, and a pirate like Blackbeard might even find that scar stretching across her face attractive. It was just a question of whether or not Drake could use that to our advantage or if the fact he had almost sunk her and her ship was too large a barrier.

"Like I said, we won't know until we talk to him." Because all of that might still be moot if he was single-mindedly obsessed with Euryale. "Captain Drake? If you could bring us down to half-sail, so that he knows we're giving him a chance to...parley."

"As set down by Morgan and Bartholomew," Rika added sagely.

Sure, why not. I was just going to pretend I understood what she was referencing that time. Probably something pirate related, considering the circumstances.

"Not sure I like this idea of yours, esteemed guests," Drake told us tersely. "This bastard nearly sent us down to meet Old Hob, and now you want to give him another shot at it? Sounds mental to me!"

As though I would make it that easy for him.

"That's why I want you and the crew ready to sail away at a moment's notice," I said. "Arash and Emiya will be keeping an eye on their cannons and shoot down anything they try, and Mash can cover our retreat with Ca — with *Lord Chaldea*. If, at that point, we're sure he doesn't have the Grail and he doesn't know who does, then there's no reason not to deal with him more permanently after we've gained enough distance."

"A *lot* of distance," Rika said dryly. "Tactical nukes aren't really that picky about who they blow up."

"Have a little more faith in me than that, Master," Emiya said. "I *do* have options between 'kill that one guy' and 'obliterate everything in that general direction.'"

"A-and what if he's not actually that bad?" Mash burst out.

I wasn't the only one who looked at her askance, because Blackbeard's various misdeeds weren't exactly a secret, and she flinched, then rallied to explain herself, "I-I just mean, Captain Drake isn't...um, isn't exactly the noblest or most virtuous hero in history, and yet, she's also generous and kind and friendly!"

"Hey, now," said Drake, sounding amused, "those are some pretty serious accusations you're tossing my way! You'll ruin my reputation! Who's gonna respect the lovable and cuddly Francis Drake?"

Her crew, for a start.

"No, I get what she's saying," said Ritsuka. "Just because he got remembered as someone horrible and violent doesn't mean that he actually is, right? I think...if there's one thing we've learned since Fuyuki, it's that history doesn't get everything right, and even when it does, it's not the whole picture."

“Yes!” Mash nodded firmly. “So...just because he’s after Euryale for, um...r-reasons, that doesn’t mean he has to be an enemy!”

They had a point. I closed my eyes briefly, and when I opened them again, I looked out across the sea towards the approaching *Revenge*. At the speed it was going, we only had a few minutes before they were close enough to engage, and from there, it wouldn’t take much longer until they were close enough to shout across from ship to ship.

“And when one of his demands is that you hand me over?” Euryale asked acidly. A tense Asterios huddled even more protectively over her. “Are you just going to pass me to him, like I’m a mere bauble? A piece with which to bargain with your new ally, no matter what he wants to do to me?”

“No one is saying that,” I said before things could get more heated. “But Ritsuka isn’t wrong to say that it would be better to negotiate than to jump straight to fighting him. Chaldea isn’t in the habit of shying away from its enemies, but neither are we in the habit of making them unnecessarily.”

It was a good reminder. I’d let myself fall a little too deeply into Euryale’s narrative, and I’d made some assumptions based on that. I needed to stick to the facts — that she was running from a stalker, Blackbeard was that stalker, and he wanted her for some reason. Euryale had made her own assumptions about why, but it was equally as possible that he was trying to protect her from someone else who wanted her for more nefarious purposes or that he’d assumed Drake’s Grail was the one messing this place up.

That didn’t mean that Euryale was automatically *wrong*, or that Drake hadn’t been attacked completely unprovoked for an entirely more selfish reason. Just that I should be keeping an open mind about the other Servants we met in this Singularity.

“Captain Drake?” I said. “Half-sail, please. Let’s see what Blackbeard wants from us.”

Drake grunted. “Fine. This Servant and Grail business is your lot’s wheelhouse, so might as well trust you know something about what’s going on here. Bombe!”

“Aye, Boss?” Bombe shouted back.

“Take us down to half-sail, but be goddamn sure we’re ready to run like the Devil himself is on our tails at the first sign of trouble!”

Bombe stared at her for a moment, hesitating, before finally saying, “A-aye, Boss! Will do!” He turned towards the rest of the crew. “You heard the Boss! Half-sail, and no slacking! If we go down because you sorry sacks of shit weren’t ready, Hell itself will seem like a nice spot to settle by the time I’m finished with you!”

“AYE!” the crew roared back.

They got to work, and in short order, the sails keeping us going were halfway furled. Almost immediately, our speed rapidly fell, and while we didn’t come to a full halt, compared to how quickly we’d been going before, it felt almost like we had.

“Just hope you stargazers know what you’re doing,” Drake muttered.

It was a tense few minutes while we waited for the *Revenge* to come closer. I took that time to push my mind at Arash's and ask, *Did you hear all of that?*

Enough, was his answer. *I can already tell you that Blackbeard isn't alone.*

My lips drew into a tight line. *How many?*

At least four other Servants, said Arash. *He's also got a ghostly crew, just like our friend from the other day. I can't say anything about how strong the Servants are, but the phantoms aren't going to be any kind of threat.*

Four other Servants. I took a deep breath. That was either going to be an incredible boon or a nightmare to fight, depending on which way his loyalty swung.

Any clues about their identities? I asked him.

Not many, he replied. *Two women. By the way they dress, they're pirates, too. Another is a young man. Early to mid teens. There aren't many Heroic Spirits who were famous enough so young, but I don't have anything else to go on. The last is an older man with a spear. Leather armor, with some bronze plate. Probably a hero from antiquity.*

Antiquity... *Meaning ancient Greece?*

I got the mental equivalent of a nod back. *Or one of their legends. He doesn't really look Grecian, and the armor doesn't match the usual style, but it fits the era.*

So one of Jason's Argonauts might just be here, then. What a motley crew Blackbeard had put together. The question was whether that crew was here to help us get this place back on track or had their own selfish aims they were trying to accomplish.

We were about to find out. As the *Revenge* pulled up alongside the *Golden Hind* — closer than I thought any pirate would have dared while alive and at risk of actually sinking — one of the figures on the deck rushed over to the side and hung so far over the railing that he would have tumbled over if someone gave him a shove.

I almost didn't notice Calliope dipping behind Asterios, like she was trying to hide from our guests' attention.

"AHOY!" he shouted in a rough, gravelly voice as smoke rose from his head. He shaded his eyes with one hand, as though the barely there sun was actually blinding him, and grinned at us madly. "What's this I see? One, two, three, four — and Euryale-chan makes five! Lovely beauties in front of me!"

The lit fuses smoldering in his hair meant this could only be one man: Edward Teach. Blackbeard. Physically, he definitely lived up to the image history had recorded of him, because that was definitely a healthy beard and it was black as tar, same as his hair, and he even dressed the part.

"Oi!" Drake said indignantly. "There's six beautiful women here, you wanker!"

In terms of personality, however...

"You don't count!" Blackbeard said, almost petulant, and I had to fight the jolt of surprise as I realized he'd counted *me* in his original statement. "An over-the-hill hag like you with those useless

udders just isn't my type! Come back fifteen years younger, and then we'll have something to talk about!"

Was...I allowed to be disappointed?

"See?" Euryale said flatly. "It's just like I told you. He's a useless pervert who doesn't know how to take no for an answer."

"My disappointment is immeasurable and my day is ruined," said Rika.

"Hey, hey, no need to talk like that!" Blackbeard said. "Euryale-chan might be the loveliest of all, but you four are definitely top notch, too!"

"Oh dear," one of the Servants behind him, a petite, ashen haired young woman with a scar as grisly as Drake's, said wearily, "here he goes again."

Blackbeard leered, and then mimed a curvy figure with his hands, aiming at Bradamante. "Older and experienced, with plenty of heart! A perfect maiden, saving herself for love! Joie de vivre!"

Then, he turned towards Rika, and swept his hands out in a gesture I couldn't quite parse. "Young and supple, full of gumption! She's got the spirit to MAKE! YOU! MOVE! A-rooooo! *Genki girl* for life!"

Mash recoiled when he looked at her next. "Age is just a number, yeah! She might be young and inexperienced, but she's got a lot of mileage on that soul! Unbending will, ironclad determination, willing to give it all for the people she believes in! Gotta love that De-Di-Cay-Shun! That's a perilous line to stride, so STRUT IT like you OWN IT, GIRL!"

"U-um, th-thank you?" said Mash, confused. I think I was the only one, besides maybe Emiya, who realized exactly what Blackbeard had just hinted at.

He was more insightful than his act made him seem. More *dangerous*.

Next, it was my turn, and I met his gaze impassively. Instead of another gregarious, exaggerated, and undoubtedly sexual movement with his hands, he adopted a more thoughtful pose, nodding his head.

"And the mysterious leader with the cool head," he said. "She's got a past she wants to let lie, and she tossed away all the fluff to make herself into what she is today!" He made a chopping motion with one hand. "Cut away the excess! Trim it all up! Oh yeah! The only thing sexier than those legs is that fierce gaze! She can strip you bare with just a look, and I wouldn't mind if she tied me up! Senpai, share that burden with me!"

My cheek twitched, and an unfamiliar warmth burned the tips of my ears. I... Okay, I hadn't been prepared to have that turned on me. He'd hit so close to home on the others, I really should have expected him to see right through me, too.

"Goddamn," Rika said, stunned. I had to stop myself from agreeing with her out loud.

"Four lovely ladies, each with their charms! Oh!" Blackbeard nodded to himself, arms crossed. "To have just one of them! No! To have them all, all at once or one at a time! Any man would give his left arm for a chance like that!"

“Don’t go cutting it off just yet,” I said. “You might need it soon.”

“Oh yeah! It’s only half as fun if you don’t cut it off for me!” He winked at me, and the way he just rolled with it so easily...actually threw me off my guard. The burning on my ears spread. “That’s how you show your L-O-V-E! It ain’t real if you ain’t willing to do a little permanent damage! Oh!”

“Uh...huh...?”

This was...not at all what I’d expected of Blackbeard. It wasn’t that no one had ever flirted with me before, but most of them tended to sort of stop when I tried to shut them down. A lot of people thought of me as too intense, and that was off-putting, so they lost interest and just stopped trying. I was used to that. I’d come to accept that not everyone was willing to push as far or as hard as I was. It was why the Chicago Wards hadn’t ever really been *friends*.

Blackbeard...actually seemed to get *more* interested the more intense I was, and I just wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do with that. Was I supposed to be flattered? Creeped out? I wasn’t about to leap into his arms, but running in the opposite direction didn’t seem like the right response, either.

“Oh my god,” Rika breathed, “he’s actually flirting with Senpai!”

“He’s got guts,” her brother agreed faintly, “I’ll give him that.”

“Has he actually moved on?” the petite pirate Servant from before drawled. “From how he’s been talking this whole time, I wouldn’t have believed it was even possible.”

“Even a dinghy can get where it wants to go, if you give it long enough to get there,” the taller, more buxom blonde pirate Servant said.

“No way!” Blackbeard said petulantly. “No matter what, I can’t give up on Euryale-chan! I just can’t set aside these lovely ladies either! I can’t choose between them, so I’ll just have to take them all!”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

“No, you heard him right,” said the blonde pirate. “He really is that dumb.”

“He’s the kind of guy who shoots for the harem route in a dating simulator,” the petite one added, like I had any idea what any of that even meant. I mean, I could kind of get it from the context, but I’d never heard of that sort of thing before.

“Wow,” said Rika. “He really is a scumbag.”

Which naturally meant that Rika had.

“I told you,” Euryale drawled. “He’s exactly the sort of person I described.”

“I have...very mixed feelings right now,” Emiya said tersely.

“I don’t!” said Bradamante, scowling. “My heart belongs to Ruggiero and no one else! This pirate is just another...another no-good, dirty rotten, scoundrel!”

Blackbeard gasped and clutched his chest as though he'd been dealt a mortal wound to his heart, and okay, this was starting to get out of hand. I might not know what to do with the flirting, but the antics? Those were familiar ground, and I could handle them more easily.

"Captain Teach!" I said, perhaps a bit louder and more firmly than necessary.

In an instant, he was leaning forward again, like he was hanging onto my every word. "Yes? Say the word and this pirate will sweep you off your feet and carry you to a grand adventure!"

"By now, you've no doubt seen what's become of this place, what we call a Singularity," I said, resisting the urge to grit my teeth. "If our goals align, then we can work together to solve it, so I have to ask: why are you here?"

Blackbeard's face fell, and then so did his head, and he leaned heavily on the railing, like the weight of everything was trying to pull him down. "Why, you ask," he said lowly. "Why am I here...? Yes, why indeed was Blackbeard himself brought to this endless sea? What does he chase? What does he desire?"

"Oh boy," the blonde said, sighing. "Here we go."

"I want," Blackbeard said gravely, "it all." Louder, he went on, "Everything there is to have! All the treasures of this world, all of its bounties!" He threw out one arm. "Sex!" He threw out the other. "Money!" And then, he clutched them both to his chest, like a dragon clutching its hoard. "Power! Women, treasure, status, glory! Everything you can possibly imagine!"

"You demand the finer things in life!" Rika suddenly burst out.

And Blackbeard...deflated, like the wind had been taken out of his sails.

"Holy shit," said Ritsuka, "that's *Greed*."

That was *what*? Was *everyone* making pop culture references I didn't recognize now, including the Servants?

Blackbeard, looking lost, blinked. "You...you recognize that?"

"I mean, duh!" Rika pointed at her face. "Japanese, see? That's an incredibly popular anime! Why *wouldn't* I recognize it?"

"Oh fuck me," Emiya murmured. "They're multiplying."

"Tch! Fine, I admit it!" Blackbeard shouted. "Fuck yeah! I cribbed that shit straight outta FMA! How could I not? Who would have imagined that 300 years after I died, some clever bint from an island I never even heard of would capture so perfectly exactly the way I feel? I'm a pirate! Of course I stole all of that without a second thought!"

"Well," said the young, redheaded teenager on the *Revenge*, "at least he admits it. There's something to be said for knowing exactly who you are, right?"

"Don't give him too much credit," the petite pirate said scornfully. "A cretin is still a cretin, even if he knows exactly how lowly he is."

Blackbeard spun around to face them and cried, “Just whose side are you on, anyway?”

“Yours, because we kind of have to be,” the blonde reminded him. “You’re the one holding our strings, after all.”

My heart jumped in my chest. I had to stop myself from asking if that meant what I thought it did.

“Can I take that to mean, then,” I began, “that you have no interest in returning this Singularity back to normal?”

“Normal?” Blackbeard looked back over his shoulder at me and slowly turned around. “Who wants normal? Why would I want normal? Normal’s a world where I’m dead! Caput! Toast! Buzzard food! Normal’s a world without Euryale-chan in it!”

My cheek twitched again. Was he really that big of a degenerate horndog that the absence of our snooty goddess was the biggest problem he had with proper history?

“Wow,” said Rika. “I know she said he was a stalker, but that’s just downright obsessive.”

“Are you satisfied?” asked Euryale. “It’s just like I told you, he’s not interested in being your ally, he just wants me. Are you going to kill him now?”

The Servants on the *Revenge* all tensed, tightening their grips on their weapons, and that made ours tense up, too, as the tension in the air thickened like soup. Blackbeard just clicked his tongue and shook his head, hands on his hips.

“Well,” he said, “I guess that this here is what you’d call a critical breakdown in negotiations, innit?” His eyes sharpened, dagger-like. “Anne, Mary, Alex, Hektor — these folk have a couple of things I want. Do me a solid and take the you-know-what from the old hag and grab Euryale-chan, too.”

The older man in the background, who had been silent so far, sighed. “Well, if that’s an official order, I guess it can’t be helped.”

“This guy doesn’t give too many of those,” the teenager agreed.

“Heh.” Emiya smirked, and his twin swords appeared in his hands. “Guess it’s coming down to a fight after all.”

Mash brandished her shield. “Master.”

“...Keeping them from taking Euryale is the most important thing,” said Ritsuka.

“Understood!”

“Then if Lady Mash is on the defense,” said Bradamante, “that means I can go on the offense!”

Arash, I began, *overwatch for now. If I’m right, Blackbeard has the Grail.*

I’ll keep an eye out for an opening, Arash promised.

And then the blonde pirate pulled out a flintlock rifle, took aim, and pulled the trigger, so swiftly that it almost seemed to happen all at once.

Mash threw herself forward, and the shot pinged off of her shield and went wide as I retreated back to the safety of the others. It seemed to be the signal for hostilities to start, because an instant later, Blackbeard's other three crewmates leapt off of his ship and over to ours as Bradamante and Emiya charged to meet them.

The petite Servant rushed over with a scimitar almost as big as she was and forced Emiya into melee — her and the blonde had to be Anne and Mary, although which was which, I had no idea — and the teenaged redhead collided with Bradamante, who pushed him back onto the *Revenge*. The last, the older man, went directly for Euryale and found himself stymied first by Mash, and then by Asterios, who had almost entirely recovered from the wound we'd dealt him the other day.

Blackbeard stayed back, cheering and barking silly orders, but there was no telling if or when he might throw himself into the fray.

I took a moment as the fights started to peer closely at each of our opponents, trying to discern a weakness or some hint about the Heroic Spirit each embodied, to not much avail. The older man was a Lancer, like that wasn't obvious, and he was the guy dressed in armor dated to ancient Greece. He didn't really look very Greek, though, and although he was somewhat pale, his features were somewhat more middle eastern than —

Wait. A spear-wielding hero from antiquity among a group where one of them was named *Hektor*. Of course, that was *Hektor of Troy*, the guy who got into a grudge match with Achilles.

So the redhead — Alex, by process of elimination — who was wielding a Greek broadsword... I would have been embarrassed if it took more clues than that. The clothing was a little weird, but a Greek hero named Alex who was famous enough that his legend had started as a teenager? There was no way that wasn't Alexander the Great. A Rider, so his Noble Phantasm was probably tied to his horse in some way.

The other two, I still didn't know. Anne and Mary, those didn't ring any bells, not for famous pirates, anyway. If I'd come across them in any of my research, they'd been minor enough to escape my attention.

It didn't matter. Alexander the Great and Hektor of Troy were big enough names on their own. Not the biggest ever, but big, and while Bradamante was holding her own against Alex just fine and Hektor had yet to find a way around the combination of Mash's defense and Asterios' offense, neither of them had pulled out their Noble Phantasms yet.

They might not have to. I tried to keep track of the multiple fights going on at once, but the battlefield was so small and tightly constrained that it was hard to focus on any of them aside from the one right in front of me. I didn't need to know the fine details, however —

“Hey!” Drake shouted as a chunk of railing was torn out by a stray blow. “Watch what you're doing! That's my ship you're ripping apart, you wankers!”

— to know that we were at a fairly big disadvantage. After all, the *Golden Hind* was made of ordinary wood. Although it might one day become a Noble Phantasm, today, it was just a regular English galleon, and Servant fights were none too gentle on just such a thing.

“Don’t listen to the old hag!” Blackbeard cackled. “Rip that gaudy thing to shreds! As long as the old hag and Euryale-chan make it out, that hunk of junk can be lost at sea!”

“FUCK YOU!” Drake howled at him.

“Asterios, Mash, Emiya!” I called to them. “Push them back to the *Revenge*!”

“I’m too young to go down with this ship!” Rika added.

Another shot pinged off of Mash’s shield. “U-understood!”

Asterios rumbled something, but whatever it was, it sounded like a growl to me. He swiped at Hektor with a blow hard and heavy enough to shatter concrete, but Hektor had the good sense — unfortunately for us — not to let himself get hit by the Minotaur that could turn him to paste with one, good hit. The reach of Asterios’ halberds forced him to leap back and onto the *Revenge* to avoid getting gutted, and he didn’t dare to risk coming back over just yet.

Emiya, having nowhere near that much raw physical power, proved that he had no qualms using underhanded tricks on what looked like a young girl, and he did a clever little feint with his swords that left her wide open to a kick that would probably have shattered my ribs. She, too, retreated to avoid the follow up swipe that would have taken her head off of her shoulders.

Bradamante, perhaps sensing that the lines had been reset, disengaged from her own fight and returned to the *Golden Hind*. She looked excited, but wasn’t even breathing hard. She probably thought that she’d just barely started to get warmed up, and the broad grin on her opponent’s face said he thought much the same.

“Hm,” Blackbeard said, scowling as he looked at us. “These guys aren’t just NPCs we can roll over, they’re full blown main characters. We aren’t gonna win this one by half-assing it, are we?”

“You say that like it means something,” said Emiya, smirking. “By my count, the only one of your lackeys with a Noble Phantasm that has any hope of sinking this ship is Hektor. I’d like to see him try.”

“No, no,” said Rika, “what are you doing, Emiya? We don’t *want* them to sink us!”

But I saw his plan an instant later when I remembered — one of the Noble Phantasms Emiya could replicate was called *Rho Aias*. A seven-layered shield with a hibiscus pattern, named after a hero whose seven-layered shield was said to have blocked Hektor’s spear. I didn’t recall if he’d ever explained, but the number of coincidences was too much to pretend that they weren’t one and the same.

“*He’s* the only one?” Blackbeard sneered. “Oi, oi, Hektor, just for that, you get to be the one to go and fish the old hag out of the sea!”

The air suddenly grew thick with power, and ghostly cannons shimmered into existence on the deck of the *Revenge* as Blackbeard surged with enough magical energy that he was actually glowing.

“M-magical energy response!” Mash reported. “Master! That amount of power, it has to be...!”

The Holy Grail. So he really did have it.

An arrow shot through the air, so fast that I didn't even notice it until Blackbeard had already deflected it with the high, tortured ring of his cutlass' steel. The blade even kept ringing for several extra seconds, and with that much power behind it, it was incredible he'd even managed to deflect that arrow in the first place.

“Anne!”

The blonde — Anne, which made the smaller girl Mary — took such swift aim that I didn't even have time to call out a warning before she fired a shot towards Arash. Wood exploded above us, raining splinters down on the shouting crew, and Arash landed in a crouch next to me with a thump. A line of red blood trickled down his cheek, a testament to how close she'd come to doing serious damage.

Blackbeard grinned. “Now that all of the enemies are in one place —”

The power surged, and the phantasmal cannons became more solid, massive black things that would have given modern warships pause with how big their cannonballs had to be. As one, they swiveled and pointed in our direction, their intent clear.

Shit. We did *not* want to be in the way of that.

“Mash!” Ritsuka ordered.

“Captain Drake!” I shouted. “Get us out of here!”

“Use your Noble Phantasm!”

“Yes, Master!”

As Mash rushed over to the side of the ship, Drake turned to her crew and barked, “Full sail!”

The crew scrambled to follow her order, and a moment later, the sails unfurled above and the ship lurched into motion right as Mash planted her shield and cried, “LORD CHALDEAS!”

“Queen Anne's Revenge!”

The massive barrels belched smoke and flame more terrifying than any of the dragons we had faced in Orléans, save Fafnir himself. Lord Chaldeas' protective rampart formed just in time to intercept the barrage of cannon fire from the *Revenge*, and the thud of each shot slamming home was almost as deafening as the thunderous BOOM of the cannons. One after another, they landed, smashing against the translucent blue wall, and each of them was the size of a beach ball and perfectly capable of reducing all of us to a smear. The ship shuddered around us and the whole world seemed to shake, but none of them made it through. Lord Chaldeas held.

I wasn't sure how many shots actually impacted, but by the time the barrage was over and Mash breathed a sigh of relief, the *Golden Hind* had picked up enough speed to put some distance between us and the *Revenge*. Maybe fifty feet and increasing fast. A younger me might have believed that was the end of it.

But I was not surprised when the *Revenge* went full sail, too, and started rapidly making up the gap we'd created. Worse, I knew that the Holy Grail meant that Blackbeard wouldn't have to stop at any

point to rest and regain some of his energy. The fight against Altera had proven just how much of a difference an inexhaustible energy source made for a Servant's performance.

He was going to catch up, it was just a matter of time, and when he did, what was to stop him from just gunning us down with back to back uses of his Noble Phantasm? Worse, what if he could just extend the barrage by pumping more energy into it until there was nothing left of us but splinters?

We needed to get away, retreat and find a better method of engaging him. In a battle between ships, his was always going to win, just by nature of it being a Noble Phantasm.

“Uh, guys?” Rika said, watching them as they chased us. “Can this thing go any faster? It's, uh, kind of important!”

Drake looked back over her shoulder and cursed. “Shit! That fucker don't know when to quit, does he? No, we can't go any fucking faster! We're sailing against the storm! Tryna avoid that vortex, remember?”

An idea came to me just then. Not the greatest idea ever, but it was daring and maybe a little desperate, and while those didn't always turn out the greatest for me on a personal level, they tended to work at doing what I actually needed them to accomplish.

“What if we didn't?”

Drake looked back again, goggling at me. “What?”

“If we're fighting the storm because we're trying to avoid the vortex, then what if we didn't?” I repeated. “Captain Drake, if we were to sail *into* the storm, skirt around the edges of the maelstrom, would the current give us enough speed to escape?”

I could see the wheels turning in her head as she ran that idea over, her brow furrowing in thought.

“It...it might,” she hedged.

“W-wait, I thought we were trying to avoid the maelstrom for a good reason!” Rika interjected. “Because, you know, it's kind of dangerous? Something about us getting swept overboard?”

“I still don't know how to swim,” Mash muttered.

It wasn't that none of those things was a concern now, and more that —

“At sea, Blackbeard has the advantage,” I reasoned. “If we're right and that *was* the Grail Mash sensed earlier, then he can use his ship as long as he wants and just keep firing at us until he wears us down. What we need to do is force the fight into a place where *we* have the advantage — on an island, where his ship doesn't matter as much.”

“He would still be able to manifest the cannons to fire at us,” Emiya pointed out.

I gestured to the battle scars the ship had suffered during our brief scuffle, the gouges carved into the planks, the chunks torn out of the railing that was supposed to protect us from slipping overboard, the bullet holes where Anne's shots ricocheted into the wood. Just from those scant few moments, the ship had taken that much damage.

“But we wouldn’t have to worry about the *Golden Hind* disintegrating beneath our feet.”

Emiya acknowledged this with a nod.

“And it would be easier to bring in other Servants to help,” Ritsuka added helpfully. “Like Aífe, or Siegfried. We’d have more space to fight.”

Exactly.

“We won’t be able to do that if he catches up and sinks us before we can lure him to land.”

“Tch.” Drake snarled. “Fine! Bombe, batten down the damn hatches, and make sure the lines are secure!” She spun the wheel. “Looks like Francis Drake and her crew are in for another wild ride!”

“Aye, Cap’n!”

The ship lurched again as the wind caught the sails, and the *Golden Hind* turned away from the middle line of softer gray clouds that straddled the outer edges of the storm and towards the dark, ominous clouds that sat at its center. The mast creaked under the strain of the sails suddenly being so much fuller, and the ropes pulled taut, groaning.

But the sudden increase in speed put more distance between us and the *Revenge*. It wasn’t enough to lose them completely, not right away, but they weren’t gaining quite as fast as they had been before. Instead, it was more like the distance was remaining mostly the same, with us slowly slipping away. The *Revenge* was retreating towards the horizon one little bit at a time.

“Holy crap,” Rika said, “it’s working! Ah!”

She stumbled as a particularly strong wave rocked the ship and threw her arms out wildly as she teetered. Emiya caught her before she could fall flat on her face, steadying her.

“Thanks.”

“No problem, Master.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” said Drake. “All right, boys, here we go! It looks like those fuckers and their half-assed ship can’t keep up when the wind’s on our side!”

The crew gave a half-hearted cheer, too busy making sure everything stayed stable enough for us to survive the storm ahead.

The seas started to get rougher as we left behind the calmer waters and made for the outer edges of the maelstrom. The waves were choppier, the wind was stronger, and the *Golden Hind* rocked and bucked as it plowed through. The sky grew steadily darker, and at some point, the clouds began dropping a torrent upon our heads. The deck became slick and wet, and it wasn’t long at all before our clothes clung to our bodies.

“This was a great idea!” Rika said sarcastically, hugging herself to ward off the cold, but she wouldn’t have been wrong if she had been serious. Blackbeard hadn’t given up yet, but the *Revenge* trailed behind us, so far behind that it was hard to make out the maroon of the sails as the light got dimmer and dimmer the closer we got to the maelstrom.

Thunder rumbled up above. A crack of lightning split the sky off in the distance, as though the heavens themselves were reaching down into the center of the whirlpool.

“Captain Drake?”

“Aye!” Drake replied. “We’ll be skirting it real close to — shit!”

A particularly large wave rose up out of nowhere and splashed against the *Hind*, spraying all of us with saltwater, and the ship threatened to teeter over and capsize under the force of it, but managed to stay upright through some miracle.

“Holy fuck,” Rika gasped. “That’s...!”

But the reason for the freak wave became quickly apparent, because sailing on the other side of it, running almost perpendicular to us, was another ship, one we’d never seen before. It was obvious whoever was aboard it was expecting us just as much as we were expecting them, because it suddenly swerved — impossibly adroit for any ordinary ship — until it was running almost parallel instead, separated from us by about three hundred feet.

In the poor lighting, at that distance, it was nearly impossible to make out any details, save for the general color of the wood and the paint. The only way to really distinguish it from the *Revenge*, aside from the fact that the *Revenge* was still trailing behind us, was the fact that the sails weren’t maroon.

“Servant detected!” Mash reported. She gasped. “Senpai, look! Behind that ship, it’s —”

Davy Jones. Or, at least, the Servant that Rika insisted was Davy Jones, because his ship was giving chase to the newcomer, and rapidly closing the gap. If he decided to ram, he’d probably go right through and hit *us*, because there were no signs he planned on slowing down.

“Oh, come on!” Drake groaned. “That fucker’s here, too? Who else is gonna show up here, the fucking *Pope*?”

“Captain Drake —”

“Yeah!” she hollered back at me, and then she turned the wheel further, putting us on an even steeper path through the maelstrom. “Shit! Hold onto your skivvies, everyone, because we’re gonna fly past this thing by a razor’s edge!”

But the captain of the other ship had obviously had a similar idea, because like we were watching a mirror, he swerved the opposite direction, taking him on a path further out of the storm, and the distance between our ships grew slowly larger. So, too, did the waves, washing over the ship in great, heaving splashes that hit hard enough that I wouldn’t have been surprised if they were peeling away the paint.

“Grab hold of something and don’t let go!” Drake ordered us all. “We’re about to hit that bigass vortex, and I don’t want any of you falling off on my conscience!”

“Then I guess I can’t afford to wait any longer.”

Hektor appeared suddenly in the middle of our group, and Mash gasped, raising her shield, as he aimed a blow in Ritsuka’s direction. His spear smacked off of the surface with a *CLANG*, but Mash

hadn't been ready, so the force of it pushed her back into her Masters. Ritsuka and Rika fell over in a tangle of limbs with a shout of alarm.

Before I had even finished turning around, Emiya was skidding backwards, one sword in hand and the other flying off into the storm. The surprise had left him off balance, unable to plant himself and absorb the blow.

Arash and Bradamante, both further away, turned just a fraction of a second too slow. They were set just a little bit apart from the rest of the group, better prepared to fight an enemy coming at us head on, not one who just so suddenly appeared in our midst.

Hektor's eyes met mine. He offered me an apologetic smile.

"Sorry about this, milady."

I had a bare moment for the dots to connect, and a feeling sort of like grudging respect that I didn't have time to examine too closely — his was a courtesy not many gave before screwing someone over, me least of all. Later on, looking back, I wasn't sure if that made it better or worse.

And then something hit me, hard and fast, right in the ribs. It flung me back, far back, and something else slammed into my kidneys like a freight train — the railing, I realized, but only after my body rolled over it and I was watching it — and the boat it was affixed to — fall away.

Oh, I thought faintly, be knocked me overboard.

"Master!" someone shouted.

But before I could recognize the voice, the water rose up to greet me, and my world became cold and dark.