

## Chapter XCIII: Black Flag

After a certain point, the exuberance died down, and the raucous party became more like a barbeque. Drake and her crew still ate and drank to their hearts' content, but by the time night fell, it was slower and more measured, because evidently, they knew their limits a lot better than they seemed like they did at a cursory glance, and they were all well aware that they would have to get up in the morning and drag themselves into the longboats and back to the *Golden Hind*.

Someone even convinced Euryale to sing, and despite my misgivings, she didn't use her voice to bewitch anyone, although from the dreamy, satisfied looks on some of the pirates, you would have been forgiven for thinking she had. It didn't stop any of us from Chaldea from covering our ears at first, but after the first song got cheers and applause and even a few whistles and the second song received much the same, we took a chance, with Bradamante ready and waiting to rescue us if that changed.

It was...nice. Maybe I should have expected it, considering her skills, but Euryale had the voice of a professional, classically trained singer — or what I imagined one might sound like, if I'd ever had the pleasure of hearing one — and it was actually kind of soothing to listen to her on the beach as the sun went down and the party petered off.

I slept well that night. I would never admit it to her aloud, of course, not at the risk of swelling her already swollen head, but Euryale's singing might have had something to do with it. On the other hand, it might have been funny to see the look on her face if I told her she would have made a hell of a nanny.

Just imagining it would have been worth a laugh. A goddess from the old days, before the dawn of the modern era, who had lived in the time when divinity of all kinds roamed the land, relegated to singing lullabies for unruly kids.

Once she got past the ridiculousness that was my life these days, Lisa probably would have laughed herself hoarse.

The next morning, almost as soon as there was enough light to work by, the pirates broke camp and packed up all of their gear. They were just as efficient about it as they had been before, getting it all put away and ready to go within half an hour, like they had loads of practice with it, because they undoubtedly did. And when I asked Arash —

*Nothing*, he told me across our bond. *None of them left the entire night, not even Calliope. They all even stayed materialized.*

— he let me know that none of our new “friends” had done anything suspicious while the rest of us were asleep. How convenient it was to have allies who didn't need to sleep, so they could keep watch for us instead of us having to schedule rotations. Ones who could see well in low light conditions, to boot.

Of course, that also meant that Euryale, Asterios, and Calliope should know they wouldn't be able to sneak off without drawing suspicion, so the fact that none of them had didn't necessarily mean

that we could trust them all yet. We were going to have to wait and see before passing final judgment.

I was inclined to believe them, though. When I put aside my sore feelings from what Stheno had done to us, if Euryale was anything at all like her sister, she probably didn't much care for the Grail or making any wishes on it, she just also didn't particularly care about saving proper human history either.

Not the best of allies to have, but it was convenient that she may be drawing the one with the Grail to us. I could forgive her ambivalence if she helped us solve this Singularity, even if she didn't want to.

Asterios...seemed to be there for Euryale, so his interest was protecting her and might not go any further than that. It made him easier to predict and account for. Calliope was the one whose motivations were still a big question mark. I got the impression that she was hanging around with the other two for safety in numbers and wasn't particularly close to them beyond that, so as long as whatever had happened to her wasn't the mysterious stalker's fault, it was entirely possible she might — literally *or* metaphorically — jump ship the instant she got the chance.

She was the one we were going to have to keep the closest eye on.

Emiya made us a quick breakfast while the camp was being packed up, courtesy of some eggs supplied by Drake's Grail, and once everyone was ready, we climbed back into the longboats and made our way onto the *Golden Hind*. It wasn't much more fun than any other time we'd ridden in them, but at least we seemed to be getting the hang of it more. Neither the twins nor Mash looked anywhere near as miserable as they had the last couple times, and my stomach was better settled.

It was just a shame we didn't have any room for the giant hermit crabs. Somehow or another, I found another colony at each island we'd yet visited, but they weren't fast or useful enough to do much of anything with. Asterios would have ripped through them effortlessly, and while distractions and disposable minions was my specialty, the crabs were just too lumbering and weighty to have tripped him up.

At the level of Servants, physical mass was meaningless. Their shells would have broken like cheap glass when he stepped on them. He wouldn't have even slowed down.

Maybe I would get lucky and find an older, more powerful crab later on down the line, a millennial beast instead of mere centennial ones. Something like *that* might wind up actually being strong enough to level the playing field a little.

"Everyone aboard?" Drake bellowed once we had all climbed onto the ship. "Esteemed guests, you lot all here?"

"Present and accounted for, Captain Pillows!" Rika chirped with a chipper salute.

"Ready to go, Captain Drake," Ritsuka reported more calmly.

Drake took them both in stride and addressed her crew next. “All right, you scallywags! We made a few new friends here, but there ain’t much else to look at, so it’s time to get moving! Let’s spin this tub around and make way for the next island!”

“Aye, Cap’n!” the crew shouted back.

“Hoist anchor!”

The anchor came up off of the sea floor, the sails unfurled, and like that, we set off again. A strong westward wind blew and carried us away from the island that Marie had so unimaginatively named New Crete.

I guess I didn’t have much room to talk on that front. I wasn’t exactly all that great at naming things myself, as evidenced by...my whole career as a cape, basically.

To keep out of the way of the sailors, our group wound up lounging on the deck behind Drake at the wheel. With the addition of three more people, it was quickly becoming fairly crowded, especially when Asterios sat down. Somehow, even on his haunches, he was still almost as tall as me, which really said something about his frankly ridiculous height.

As soon as New Crete was behind us and the open sea stretched out in front of us, Drake waved over at us. “Let me see that there map of yours again!”

Electing myself as the map bearer of our group, I walked over to join her and fiddled with my communicator until the map came up, displaying our position on the expanse of the endless ocean. Drake peered down at it, studying the locations of the islands on it.

“Hm,” she muttered to herself. “It took us... from there to there... and then... to there...”

She spent a few minutes looking it all over, and I could only imagine she was doing mental calculations and course charting in her head. When she was done, she clicked her tongue and straightened.

“Hope you lot are in for the long haul,” she warned. “If that map is right, then this trip is gonna be a whole lot longer than the last few.”

“How much longer is a whole lot longer?” Rika asked.

“A few days,” Drake answered. “The next island is at least two days away, if we keep this here favorable wind, four, if we don’t, and you better believe we’re gonna want to avoid that nasty vortex sitting in the way, so we’ll have to tack on another couple of days to account for sailing around that.”

“A week?” Rika squeaked. “We have to spend a *week* on this boat?”

My brow furrowed, and I looked back at the map. Sure, the next closest island was much farther away than the previous three had been from each other, but I wasn’t sure I would say it was *that* much farther away.

Then again, I wasn't exactly an expert navigator, was I? Drake obviously knew her stuff if she was good enough to circumnavigate the whole globe.

"If the winds change," Drake confirmed.

Rika's face looked pained. "Isn't there, like, a shortcut we could take or something?"

"Only shortcut's through the maelstrom," said Drake, "and while I ain't afraid to sail through a bad storm, something that risky is just unnecessary, ain't it? Don't want any of you falling overboard and getting swept away. Vortex that bad, you'd get torn limb from limb. We ever saw you again — alive, that is — we'd have good reason to call you stumpy!"

"No," Ritsuka said faintly, paling, "no, we definitely don't want that happening."

"Yeah, uh," Rika agreed, "somehow, I...don't think we'd find the Dragon Palace down there. No reason to go looking, right?"

"Don't trust your Servants to pull you out?" Emiya teased.

"Get back to me when you can walk on water," was her response.

"I...still don't know how to swim," Mash mumbled, which was probably something we would have to fix later on. I made a mental note to bring it up with Romani after we'd solved this Singularity, because not only would it give a sheltered girl like Mash a chance to have more normal experiences, but it was probably going to be relevant in a later Singularity, too, and that was a fairly important side benefit.

Instead, I studied the map again, then looked out at the ocean in front of us. It was calm, or as calm as it ever got, at any rate, and there was no sign of the swirling vortex that...took up a decent chunk of the map, actually. It had to be several *miles* across. In fact, it looked more like a hurricane than a whirlpool, at least in terms of size. Something that big would be more than powerful enough to suck us all under.

Arash, peering over my shoulder, made a noise of agreement. "Yeah, that looks too dangerous. Better not to take any chances with it."

"Scared of a little water?" Euryale taunted. "Well, I guess it can't be helped. It would be bad even for one of us Servants to be caught up in something that size. I can only imagine how much worse it would be for ordinary humans."

"If it really ain't that big a deal to you, we can always tie you to the prow and make a new figurehead of you," Drake offered.

Euryale grimaced and opened her mouth to offer something else, but Asterios rumbled something quietly, and whatever it was, it was enough to make her swallow whatever caustic remark she'd been about to make.

"Fine, fine," she said instead. "I'll stop playing with them. I suppose it *is* only fair when they've so generously offered us their protection."

“It’s only polite!” Bradamante added with a vigorous nod.

Euryale opened her mouth again, but Asterios gave her a gentle nudge, and she snapped it shut again with a sigh.

A few moments of relative silence passed, and when I was done studying the map, I turned it off, frowning. We’d already been to three islands, and on one, we’d encountered Drake, while on New Crete, we’d picked up Asterios, Euryale, and Calliope, who had given us some more information to work off of. We’d barely been inside this Singularity for a few days, but it already felt like we’d been here a while, and this cluster of islands wasn’t particularly large.

In fact, we’d already visited about half of them. There were more than just six, of course, way more if you counted each section of that archipelago to the southwest as individual islands, but most of them were little more than hilltops jutting out of the ocean. In other words, largely unimportant and probably completely abandoned, and so of no interest to us.

And yet, we’d yet to catch even a hint of the other Grail. It was a total tossup whether or not Euryale’s stalker had even encountered it, let alone had it in his possession, which meant that it was entirely possible that it was on one of those last three islands.

If I was a betting woman, I would have put my money on the archipelago. Because of course it would be in the very last place we would be looking.

“Say, Eury,” Rika began.

“Eury?” Euryale said, bewildered. “And who gave you permission to address me so familiarly?”

“Look, it’s easier for me than trying to butcher the whole thing, okay?” Rika said impatiently.

Euryale looked ready to protest still.

“Oh, let her have it,” Calliope said disdainfully. “It’s not like you were ever in line to be one of the Olympians, so there’s no reason for you to complain about the lack of respect.”

“As opposed to you, you mean?” Euryale said cattily. “All of those gods in your family tree, and still —”

Asterios nudged her again, and in that low, rumbling voice of his, “Nice...”

Euryale sighed again. “Fine!” She rolled her wrist. “Get on with your question, girl.”

Rika eyed her, but managed to hold back any commentary of her own. “Right, so... This stalker guy of yours, you said he’s chasing you, right?”

Euryale arched an eyebrow, like she thought this was a particularly dumb question. “Yes...”

“So, um, how did he know where you are, exactly? And, like, how is he following you around? I mean, he isn’t exactly tracking your IP address or anything, and it’s not like this place has GPS.”

Euryale blinked, because she obviously hadn't been expecting that. Being fair to her, I wasn't, either.

"Oh," said Mash. "That's a good point, Senpai. If Miss Euryale's stalker is following her, then can he still follow her even while she's aboard the *Golden Hind*?"

Euryale's brow furrowed and her lips pulled into a scowl, but she didn't answer. Instead, it was Calliope who said, "There are a number of ways he could accomplish it, under the right circumstances. If any of the Servants he has with him has the skill for it, then it doesn't matter how far we run, he'll find us eventually."

So he could be on our tail even now, and we wouldn't know it until he came sailing up to attack us. Worse, if he and his team could just astralize, then they didn't even need to be in physical form, and they could just drop in on us — either literally, or they could materialize once they were within range to attack us and have the advantage of surprise either way.

"Where was the last place you saw him?" I asked.

"I...can't say for sure," Euryale admitted. "We escaped him back when things were still settling down. We fled across the sea to that island, and we spent at least a few days there before all of you showed up. I'm not sure where we managed to slip out from under him, but it's not impossible that he might be tracking us still."

"So...he could show up at any moment," Rika said. "Great. That's great. Amazing."

"He's still a Servant," Emiya reminded her. "More importantly, this guy is supposed to have several Servants working under him, right? We'll sense him long before he gets here."

"And even when he does show up, we'll take his pride away!" Bradamante chimed in. "Don't worry, Master! He doesn't stand a chance!"

I wondered if she was still using that as a euphemism for a certain part of his anatomy, but I thought better of asking and shook my head. I was pretty sure I already knew the answer anyway, and I didn't need to encourage Rika to infect Bradamante any more than she already had.

With that part settled, the conversation petered out, and the rest of the day passed slowly. The pirates sang as they had before to occupy the time, and Rika joined in and sang along, but after the first hour, her energy started to flag, because even Rika's enthusiasm wasn't endless, and even if it had been, her throat could only handle so much abuse before she started to feel it.

Lunch was the highlight of the day, and armed with Drake's Grail once more, Emiya fed us what he assured us was an English dish, although I didn't recognize it from sight or taste alone, so I couldn't have said for sure whether it was or not one way or the other. It was still good, although much quieter than usual, because Rika's throat was too sore to make smalltalk.

Somehow, we even convinced our new allies to join us, and the normally dour Calliope was even more dour after she tasted it — or maybe jealous was a better word for it, because she took one bite and started sulking.

"It's not fair," she told Emiya sourly. "How are you so good at cooking, anyway?"

Emiya arched an eyebrow at her, smirking. “When I was growing up, someone had to be. My old man could have burned water, so if I wanted to eat something actually edible, I had to learn to cook.”

“Kuh...!” Calliope scoffed, and to choke down whatever she’d been about to say, she shoveled more food into her mouth and enjoyed it bitterly.

Even Euryale couldn’t find anything to complain about.

“It’s amazing how far food preparation has come in the past few thousand years,” she said airily. “Of course, it can’t compare to the gods’ ambrosia, but for something mortals came up with, it handily beats out anything from *my* era. Don’t you think so, Asterios?”

Asterios, meanwhile, looked almost like he was having a religious experience, which made some sense, seeing as he’d probably never eaten food that was actually prepared. If the myths were true, his only real source of sustenance was the sacrifices sent down into the Labyrinth, and if you forgot the icky part about him eating *people*, well, none of it probably tasted particularly good.

“I’m glad a goddess appreciates my food so much,” Emiya told her sardonically. “If even someone like you can be impressed, then my cooking must be something special indeed.”

“I’ll say!” Drake agreed as she dug in gluttonously. “Man, Emiya, the future you come from must be a pretty awesome place! If food like this exists, shit, what I wouldn’t give to see it! My treasure, my ship — ah, maybe not my ship. Definitely my treasure, though!”

“A goddess, an emperor, the pirate queen,” said Arash, smiling. “That’s quite a ringing endorsement, don’t you think?”

Emiya huffed, and under his breath, I heard him mutter, “Don’t forget a king. She was my best customer, after all.”

I wasn’t the only one who heard him, but based upon the look the twins shared and the pursing of Mash’s lips, they knew better than to poke that particular wound. Last time, it made him clam up tight enough to make Cauldron jealous, and none of us seemed eager to get a repeat performance.

After lunch, things were quiet for a completely different reason: we were digesting our food. The Servants were fine, of course, but Rika looked like she was ready to curl up and take a nap, and as for Ritsuka —

“I couldn’t eat another bite...”

— he sprawled out on the deck, shielding his eyes in his elbow. It looked like he might have eaten a little too much.

Somewhere along the way, the crew changed shifts, and the ones from the morning went to go and eat their own lunches while a better rested group took their places. For lack of anything better to do, I watched them work and listened to them sing, and about half an hour after the shift change, Drake climbed back to her feet and retook the wheel from Bombe.

The sun above drew across the sky, and then slowly began to sink. The afternoon bled into evening, and at some point, Rika had drawn Euryale into smalltalk about ancient Greece and what life was like there. I missed when she started — might actually have dozed off for a few minutes myself — but by the time I was actually paying attention, Euryale was telling the tale of the poor, unfortunate souls who had come to the sisters' island in search of her and Stheno and met Medusa instead.

“Of course, the fool had to be brave,” she was saying with relish. “He thought all the rest were simply cowards not to have looked in my sister’s eyes, and, well, he learned quickly that it was better that he not. Too late, naturally, because by then, he was already halfway turned to stone, but I’m sure it was a lesson he never forgot, even in the afterlife.”

“I dunno,” said Rika, grinning, “it sounds like he had a pretty hard head.”

“By the end of it, for sure!” Euryale agreed.

Ritsuka, who also seemed to have been listening, groaned quietly. Mash, on the other hand, seemed to have missed the pun entirely.

“It sounds like the three of you loved each other very much, Miss Euryale,” Mash said earnestly.

And for a moment, Euryale was silent. At length, quietly, she said, “Yes, we did.”

Asterios gave her a gentle nudge with his foot, as though to comfort her, because no one could possibly have missed how loaded that was. No one, fortunately, thought it was a good idea to go digging on it either, and Mash seemed to have realized that she had touched a nerve with that comment, because she didn’t press either.

Dinner came around as the sun began to slink below the horizon, and the monotonous ocean we’d been sailing since morning was slowly dyed in reds, yellows, and oranges as the warm day started to cool off. Emiya prepared us all yet another delicious meal, just as good as every meal before it, with a comment about how it was a modified Mediterranean dish.

“Less spicy than normal,” was what he claimed. “A ship at sea sounds like the worst place to get the runs.”

“Trust me,” Drake chortled, “you ain’t seen *nothing*.”

“You really haven’t,” Calliope agreed.

We ate slower than we had at lunch, savoring the food, Asterios especially, and even the raucous, boisterous singing from earlier in the day calmed down into something slower and softer as the evening stretched on and the last rays of sunlight painted the skies in pinks and purples. The crew themselves were more subdued and less energetic, and even when they changed shifts again, the atmosphere was far less excited and the air less charged.

It was almost like the night itself calmed them all down. The sea didn’t change, was still just the same, but the crew had, and if I had met these men as they were then instead of as they had been the rest of the day, I would have thought them all a very agreeable group.

“Man,” Rika said, stretching her arms out, “I know we didn’t do all that much today, but I’m beat!”

“I know what you mean,” Mash said, sighing. “All we did was sit around and talk, but I’m exhausted.”

So was I.

I looked up at the moon. Of course, I couldn’t tell the time just based on that, but given how it had been yesterday...no, that wasn’t a good measurement, because I might have been imagining it, but I thought the sun had set an hour earlier today. Without an accurate way of measuring time, it wasn’t possible to be sure, but...

Fuck this place. Even the length of the *days* couldn’t be consistent.

“Could put you to work, if you’re feeling lazy,” Drake said teasingly.

“Doing what?” Rika burst out. “No offense, Captain Pillows, but I don’t know my keel from my stern! We’ll wind up taking a wrong turn at Albuquerque!”

“Where, now?” Drake asked, bewildered.

“She’s referencing a character from a cartoon,” I answered.

Drake was no less confused. “A what?”

A breath hissed out of my nostrils. This was one of the perks of Servants — they came preloaded with modern knowledge, so I didn’t have to explain stuff like this all the time.

“Think a painting that moves,” said Ritsuka, coming to my rescue, “with sound. It’s meant to be entertainment.”

Drake looked back at him from over her shoulder. “The future sounds like one wild place.”

“Trust me,” Emiya drawled, “you ain’t seen nothing yet.”

Drake grinned and shook her head. She hadn’t missed that callback to her earlier comment. “Cute, Emiya.”

“I try.”

Eventually, we all got too tired to keep going, so us Masters and Mash dragged ourselves back into Drake’s cabin again, sorted out the sleeping arrangements, and crawled into the cots set up for just that purpose. This time, I wound up wedged between the twins and the wall, and Mash slept in the bunk closer to the door, so she could come to all of our defense instead of just theirs, should the need arise.

It took a minute to settle in and get as cozy as I was going to, but eventually, I found a position that I thought would leave me without a crick in my neck come morning and laid back in the dark to close my eyes.

*Still not the most uncomfortable thing I've ever slept on.* The thought carried me off to sleep.

That night, I had a strange dream. I didn't remember much of it, but I had the impression of a man in gold, smiling down at me with a mocking grin. I heard his laugh, but nothing else he said.

Despite that, I woke up feeling well-rested, with one of Rika's arms thrown over mine and her hand resting on my stomach. The room was mostly dark, and I was halfway to checking my communicator for the time when I remembered that it wouldn't tell me the right time anyway and let my hand flop back down onto the cot.

Rika snorted and rolled over, taking her arm with her.

The flashlight was obnoxiously bright when I turned it on, and I had to squint against it as I waited for my eyes to adjust while I inspected the room. Drake, I already knew, was outside and at the wheel, and the array of lice and other sorts of less savory infestations told me which members of the crew were also awake and going about their work.

Well, I was up. No sense in lying about on this cot for another couple hours.

It was a bit of work to extract myself from the cramped setup we had going on in the cabin, but somehow, I managed to do it without rousing either of the twins. Mash, though, was unavoidable, because she was directly in the way and there was no way I was going to climb over her without waking her up.

I wasn't expecting her to startle the instant I touched her arm.

"I'm awake!" she yelped as she shot up.

"Shh," I hushed her. "It's just me, Mash."

She blinked at me in the dark, all vague outlines thrown into sharp relief by the focused light of my flashlight, pointed past her shoulder. "Miss Taylor?"

"The twins are still asleep," I whispered, jerking my head in their direction over my shoulder. Sure enough, they were both still snoozing away, oblivious to Mash's outburst. "I'm going to go out. Figured it'd be better to wake you up like this instead of trying to climb over top of you."

"Oh," she said softly. "Thank you." A moment later, after my words had fully penetrated, she shifted. "U-um, just a moment, let me..."

Moving about was harder in the dim light, but after some uncomfortable rearranging, she had cleared as clear a path towards the door as I was going to get, and I ambled past her, stumbling a little when I misjudged the distance between the edge of the last cot and the floor. Mash, instead of lying back down, followed after me and waited until I'd gotten the door open and stepped outside before finding her feet herself.

The sky outside was dull and overcast, washing out all the color and leaving everyone looking sort of pale and muted. Even Drake's bright red coat had an appearance closer to maroon than crimson, the

gold accenting a murky yellow, and her hair looked closer to copper than its usually more vivid shade.

The air was cold, too, and I couldn't suppress the brief shiver that shuddered down my spine. It had to be a good ten or twenty degrees cooler out than yesterday's balmy, almost tropical warmth.

"Are you alright, Master?" Bradamante asked, concerned. I was frankly jealous that she could walk around in that sort of clothing when it was halfway to freezing out.

"Fine," I said somewhat shortly. "Just a little cold."

"Aye, now you get to see it for yourself, eh?" said Drake. "I weren't sunny and warm just a day ago, and now it's right and proper English weather."

If this was English weather, then the sooner we crossed the Channel and hit something more appropriate to a French beach, the better. Metaphorically speaking.

"So it is. I take it this is the 'freaky shit' you were talking about the other day?"

"None other," Drake confirmed. "To be expected, though. The closer we get to that vortex, the wilder this shit is going to get. Even steering around it, we'll hit some swings that'll make your head spin."

How wonderful.

"I can't say that I've ever had the pleasure of experiencing weather like this," Euryale complained, lounging about on the rearmost deck with Asterios. "If I'd known we were going to have to put up with it, I might have decided to stay on the island. Right, Asterios?"

"Cold..." rumbled Asterios. "Not...bother...me..."

Euryale sighed. "Yes, well, that's the one upside to this, isn't it? At least as a Servant, I don't have to worry about anything more than some discomfort. A pity that living humans aren't quite so lucky."

The smug condescension was so thick you could cut it with a knife, so I defused the situation by ignoring her comment and looking up at the crow's nest, where Arash was situated, on lookout. Emiya, by contrast, was positioned at the bow, although when he saw me awake, he made his way over, probably to prepare breakfast.

"First up again?" he asked me once he'd joined us.

"It's a habit I never grew out of."

"That so? I suppose I understand something of that."

And that was all he gave me. The frustrating part was that I didn't know if that comment had anything to do with whatever Grail War he'd been a part of, or if it was just a tidbit about his daily life that didn't actually mean much of anything.

I knew better than to ask.

The dreary day stretched on as Emiya started to prepare food for us to eat, and naturally, the smell of food attracted a pair of hungry teenagers, who wandered out of Drake's cabin groggily.

"Good morning, Senpai," Mash greeted them both.

"Good morning," Ritsuka replied, still not fully awake.

"I smell Emiya's cooking," Rika mumbled as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"Just in time," Emiya told her. "It'll be ready in a few minutes." He gestured to the small table he'd projected in what was quickly becoming the crowded deck behind the wheel. "Grab a seat."

Breakfast, just like every other meal we'd eaten cooked by Emiya, was wonderful, although I think I was the only one awake enough to truly appreciate exactly how good it was, aside from our Servants.

"If there's one positive aspect to this Singularity," Bradamante said, "it's that I can eat more than once a week!"

"Hey, if Senpai's idea works, that won't be a problem soon!" Rika told her.

"I know!" Bradamante sighed wistfully. "I can hardly wait! Just imagining being able to enjoy this delectable food every day...it's almost too much!"

"Too bad I can't convince you to stay, Emiya," said Drake as she ate with her fingers instead of utensils. "Eating like this, it's gonna spoil me!"

Immediately, Rika's head whipped around, and she turned a dead, cold stare Drake's way. "Emiya," she said calmly, "can you project a baguette? As stale and hard as possible?"

"We've been over this before, Master," said Emiya in the voice of a man who had dealt with this many times over. "Even if I wanted to stay, I couldn't. You don't have to worry about me being 'poached.'"

"You say that, but I still have to defend my investment! With force, if need be!"

Emiya arched an eyebrow. "With a loaf of bread?"

"It's the principle of the matter! And also, it's a callback! There's no more appropriate way of defending my chef than by sword fighting with loaves of bread!"

Emiya just shrugged, as though to say, 'what can you do?' I wasn't sure there really was anything he *could* do about it. Rika was Rika. It was just the way she was, and she didn't show any sign of changing anytime soon.

Things didn't really pick up after breakfast. The sky remained just as dark and overcast, with bare traces of sunlight making it through the thick cloud cover. Even the mood aboard the ship was

more sullen, less excited, like the cold and the dark had made the entire crew less cheerful. There was less singing than before, and it left the ship quieter and more subdued.

Ironically, this was what I might have expected the day after a big party like the one we'd had the night before we left New Crete. Instead, everyone had remained in good spirits, despite how many spirits they'd imbibed the day prior, and it was only now that everyone had spent a whole day stone cold sober that they were so unenthusiastic.

The day seemed to drag on in that gray haze, and it got to the point where Emiya had to project a deck of cards so that we actually had something to do aside from sitting around and staring aimlessly into the distance. We started with something simple, something that was easy to teach and easy enough to learn.

“Got any twos, Onii-chan?”

“Go fish.”

“Damn!”

“Do you have a five, Mash?”

“Um, two of them, Senpai. D-do I just...”

“Yeah, you're supposed to hand them over. Here...”

And after a few slow rounds of that, Rika all but bullied the rest of us into teaching Mash poker. She even roped Emiya into lending a hand.

“S-so if I have all five cards of the same, um, s-suit? Then that means...”

“It's called a Flush. If they're all in order numerically, it's called a Straight Flush. If they're all in order but they're not the same suit, it's just a Straight.”

When we got the part about betting, however...

“There's gambling in this game?” asked Drake, suddenly interested.

“Normally,” I answered. “It depends on where you play it and who you're playing with. In a casual game, you might bet snacks or low money stakes, but on the professional circuit, you can win millions of dollars if you make it to the end of a tournament.”

Drake let out a low, sharp whistle. “Sounds like my kinda game!”

“Don't forget about Strip Poker,” Rika said evilly, as though Alec himself had possessed her to say it. “The version where you bet articles of clothing!”

Drake laughed. “That sounds even more like my kinda game!”

“That's...not one you should be playing with family, though,” Ritsuka said diplomatically. He gave his sister a look that all but screamed, ‘like you and I are.’

“I’m willing to sit it out if you and Mash want to go head to head, Onii-chan,” Rika teased him.

Mash and Ritsuka’s faces both lit up like a Christmas tree.

“M-maybe, uh, m-maybe later,” Ritsuka said awkwardly. “F-for now, let’s, um, just play normally.”

Eventually, Drake couldn’t resist anymore, and she went to dig out a pile of doubloons that she had probably pilfered from the Spanish armada she was credited with sinking. She doled out an equal share to each of us, with the promise we could keep whatever we had left at the end of the game.

And then she promptly swindled us out of most of them.

“I’ve never had that much gold in my entire life,” Rika said, disgusted, as Drake raked in the pot. “And I’ve never seen it disappear so quickly.”

“I’d wonder if she was hiding cards up her sleeves,” Emiya drawled, “but I’ve been watching the entire time and she hasn’t cheated once.”

“I guess that’s the kind of luck you have to have to make it around the world in one piece,” Ritsuka murmured. He looked down at what he had left — three more doubloons, the last of his ‘funds’ — and then down at the hand he’d just lost.

Drake’s luck really must be that stupid, because she’d beaten his Four-of-a-Kind with a Royal Flush, and the odds on that made my head spin. In fact, she’d won every hand she played, and I was ready to call shenanigans. *Shamrock* wouldn’t have had this kind of luck, and that was basically her power.

By the time lunch rolled around again, Drake had cleaned us all out and taken back every bit of gold she’d handed us at the beginning, and then she flicked a single doubloon to each of us with a grin and a, “Thanks for the fun, guys!”

Somehow, despite having just learned the game today, it felt as though it had been rigged against us from the start.

Since we all weren’t particularly hungry, Emiya concocted something relatively simple and light, and it was still delicious in spite of that. Drake joined us for that again and let Bombe have the wheel, then lazed about for a little while as we all let it digest again.

The afternoon was much the same as the morning. The sun still hadn’t managed to break through the gloom, and things remained sluggish and dull, like the world was covered in a film.

“Ain’t gonna get any better,” Drake promised us. “We’ll be coming up on that vortex soon enough, and even sailing around the edges, well, the weather will be just as miserable.”

Given the size of that thing, I could believe it. I’d compared it to a hurricane before, and that description still fit.

“I thought we were sailing around it?” Ritsuka asked.

“We are,” said Drake. “But even if we put miles and miles between that thing and us, it’s a right old bastard. Doesn’t matter how far away we skirt, we’ll still feel its tantrum.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “We can deal with a little cold.”

“I just wish Da Vinci-chan had programmed in a winter coat,” Rika muttered crossly.

I elected not to tell her about the swimsuit setting, at least for now.

“Cap’n!” one of the crew shouted down from the crow’s nest at the same time as Arash called, “Master!”

“Yeah?” Drake hollered back.

*Something wrong?* I asked more discreetly.

*We’re being followed,* Arash answered.

“There’s another ship on our tail, Cap’n!” the crewmate said. “Starboard, and gaining fast!”

“What?” Drake bellowed, drowning out Rika’s echoing squeak.

“Who?” I asked aloud for everyone else’s benefit.

“I don’t recognize the flag,” Arash called down, “but they’re definitely pirates!”

My brow furrowed. More of those personified concepts we’d fought before? Or was this the mysterious stalker we’d been hearing about, come to take Euryale and do whatever it was he wanted with her?

*Show me,* I ordered.

And when I looked through his eyes, I saw it, a large galleon approaching off from the right, propelled by red sails the color of wine. Fluttering in the brisk wind was a black flag, and upon that flag was a skeletal devil with triangular horns. In one hand, he held a spear, and it pointed directly at a large, red heart.

“Shit.”

I recognized that flag. How could I not? After all, it belonged to the most famous pirate to ever live, the man who had made the profession so famous. There had been several others before and after, but there was only one that lived so infamously, only the one that everyone knew about, even centuries after his death.

“That’s *Blackbeard*.”