

## Chapter LXXXVIII: Uninvited Guests

“I dreamed a dream the other night.”

“Lowlands! Lowlands away, me Johns!”

“My love, she came, dressed all in white.”

“Lowlands away...”

I stepped away from the side of the ship, turning from the glassy black sea towards Drake, who still stood at the wheel.

“Arash says we’re about a mile off from the island,” I reported.

“That so?” she hummed. Louder, and with much less energy than she’d had earlier in the day, she called, “Alright, boys! Let’s bring her down to quarter sail! No sense running aground this far in, yeah?”

“Aye!” the crew answered, also much less energetic than they had been earlier in the day, and the sails on the mast furled as several of them pulled on the rigging at once.

“I dreamed my love came in my sleep.”

“Lowlands! Lowlands away, me Johns!”

“Her cheeks were wet, her eyes did weep.”

“Lowlands away...”

I looked back out at the ocean. In the dark, it was impossible to see anything except for the reflection of the night sky above and the glow of the ship’s lanterns. A shiver swept down my spine. Was this what it was like for the *Titanic*, traveling across an inky black sea towards an iceberg rendered all but invisible?

A good thing we weren’t sailing across the North Atlantic. I liked our odds a lot less than the *Titanic*’s would have been.

A yawn threatened to burst out of my lips, and I covered my mouth with my hand as my jaw cracked open. My eyes watered on reflex, and they burned with exhaustion as I wiped away the excess moisture.

“She came to me at my bedside.”

“Lowlands! Lowlands away, me Johns!”

“Dressed all in white, like some fair bride.”

“Lowlands away...”

Drake chuckled. “Can’t say as I expected you to last the longest of the group. That girl has mountains of energy, she does. Seemed like she was gonna be up the whole night.”

“Those who burn brightest burn out first,” I said in lieu of another explanation.

Drake hummed again. “Suppose that’s true,” she allowed. “Ah, but I think I’d like it that way better! Living a short, exciting life is heaps better than living a long, boring one, don’t you think?”

I said nothing. Technically, I would have been one of those bright, swiftly burning candles, too, if we were using that metaphor. A fast-paced, meteoric career, topped off with the fight to end all fights — if I hadn’t been dropped off with Chaldea, set on the path to continue the exact sort of thing I’d been doing before, I probably wouldn’t have any idea what to do with the rest of my life.

When you literally saved the world — all versions of it across the multiverse, even — what was there left for you to do? What could you meaningfully contribute that would hold up to what you’d already accomplished? I didn’t have an answer to that. I’d just thrown myself into saving the world again, like putting it off until later would somehow give me more time to come up with an idea.

“Depends on what you do with it, I think,” Arash said for me. “Not everyone is cut out to be a swashbuckling pirate,” he set a hand on my shoulder, “or a great hero saving the world. I think the important thing is living without regrets.”

“And bravely in her bosom fair.”

“Lowlands! Lowlands away, me Johns!”

“Her red, red rose, my love did wear.”

“Lowlands away...”

“I can get behind that!” Drake pulled out her Grail again, and when she lifted it to her lips and took a swig, it was filled with more rum. “Ah! Aye, a pirate’s life for me!”

She offered out the Grail, and I looked down at it, uncertain. Arash took the decision out of my hand when he accepted it with a, “Don’t mind if I do,” and downed a mouthful with the same gusto as Drake.

“Mm.” He smacked his lips. “Don’t think I’ve ever had rum before. Back in my day, it was beer.”

Vaguely, I remembered something about that being the oldest form of alcohol, originally made in ancient Sumer, although there might have been honeyed mead in Egypt, too, around the same time. The details were fuzzy, though. Winslow’s history courses had never been the most comprehensive.

“If you like piss, maybe!” Drake chortled.

Arash smiled a good-natured smile. “Hey, if you make it right...”

“I wouldn’t know,” Drake agreed. “All the beer I’ve ever drank tasted like the Devil’s armpit.”

“I’m a bit concerned you know what that tastes like,” Arash told her. “Your taste in rum, at least, is pretty good, though.” He held the Grail out in offering, not to her, but to me. “Give it a try, Master? It’s not every day you get to drink straight out of the Holy Grail.”

I eyed the Grail and the dark liquid swirling about inside its cup. My lips pursed. I really shouldn’t. Just as a matter of professionalism, drinking on the job was a bad idea, and it was kind of hypocritical to do the exact thing I’d warned Ritsuka and Rika against the night before.

Fuck it. Why not?

I accepted the Grail, put the cup to my lips, and tilted it up. Vaguely warm rum washed over my tongue, sweet and fruity with an undertone of vanilla, and it was...actually really good. Not, I would say, like drinking the nectar of the gods, but better tasting than it probably had any right to be.

Of course, I thought. Drake wished for endless food and drink. It should have been implicit in that wish that it be *good* food and drink, so it only made sense that the rum in her Grail was really good rum.

“She made no sound, no word she said.”

“Lowlands! Lowlands away, me Johns!”

“And then I knew my love was dead.”

“Lowlands away...”

As I’d told the twins the night before, I took only a single sip of the rum, and then I handed the Grail back off to Drake, who drained the rest in one go.

“I can’t say I’m especially familiar with all the forms of alcohol,” I said, “but I can see why you enjoy that rum, Captain Drake.”

Drake chortled again. “Don’t tell me you’re a beer drinker, too!”

“Tea, actually.”

Her brow furrowed. “Tea? That stuff the Portuguese have been bringing back from China?”

I felt my lips curl up into a smile. “It’s ironic that you say that, because over the next hundred years or so, drinking ‘that stuff’ is going to be very, very popular in England. To the point where dumping a bunch of it into the harbor is considered a viable form of protest against the government.”

People tended to forget that the American Revolution was British citizens revolting against the British government because they didn’t like how Parliament was treating them. The Boston Tea Party happened precisely *because* the ones doing it were also British and understood the importance of tea in the British economy.

“You don’t say,” said Drake. “Didn’t realize you Chaldean stargazers were in the business of divining the future, too.”

My smile turned into a grimace.

“Not...as such,” I allowed. “More like...time travel. For you, it’s the future. For us, it’s history.”

Maire would probably have preferred to give a powerpoint presentation all about the intricacies, but I was a grunt on the ground, in this regard. Knowing the ins and outs of how Rayshifting worked wasn’t part of my job description and involved stuff that mostly went over my head anyway.

Drake goggled at me. “Time travel?”

“From about four-hundred-fifty years in the future,” I replied. “2015, specifically.”

“Four-hundred...” Drake turned to her Grail, looking at it as though she couldn’t decide whether she’d had too much to drink or not enough. “Thought you folks was from somewhere far off, what with those strange clothes of yours and that magic hocus pocus you got on your wrist, but you’re coming here from a hell of a lot farther away than I ever imagined.”

“It’s part of our job,” I told her. “How we do what we do and why. We fix moments of history that have gone awry because someone is messing with them. Hard to do that if we can’t go to those moments and fix them ourselves, isn’t it?”

“Heh.” Drake grinned and lifted her Grail again, taking a sip from the rum that appeared in its cup. “Now that sounds like a grand adventure! And you said you kids have already been through three of these things?”

“Japan, 2004,” I recited. “France, 1431. Rome, 60 AD. This makes our fourth, yes.”

Drake sighed. “Man, it would be a blast to go with you guys on that sort of thing! Imagine seeing places like that in their heyday, walking with legends like Julius Caesar!”

Drake and Nero, I decided just then, must never be allowed to meet. Between the two of them and Rika, I wasn’t sure my sanity would come out the other side intact. Marie’s, either.

“It has its perks, I suppose.”

“What are we, chopped liver?” Arash said, smiling. “You’re already sailing with three such legends, Captain Drake. More than that, if you count our Masters and Mash, who have been traveling through time on their own adventures.”

“Oh yeah. Ha! You *did* say something about that, didn’t you?” Drake peered over at him. “Can’t say I’ve heard of you before, though, if you don’t mind me saying so. Not sure I’ve heard of a Bradamante or an Emiya before either.”

It was lucky Bradamante had gone to watch over the twins when they went to bed. I think hearing that would have broken her heart.

“Well, I’m not surprised,” Arash said, chuckling good-naturedly. “I’m just a simple bowman. I don’t think I’ve done anything all that incredible. As for Emiya, he’s technically not done anything yet, so of course you haven’t heard of him. And Bradamante...”

“She’s French,” I supplied bluntly.

Drake chortled. “Yeah, that’d do it! Shame. I actually kinda liked her!”

My brow twitched — I’d known the rivalry between Britain and France was kind of intense, especially this close to the Hundred Years War, but it wasn’t like being French was a terminal illness, so there was no reason to refer to her in the past tense.

“Frankish, technically,” Arash corrected me. “She was a few hundred years too early to actually be French.”

I considered pressing the point, but decided to let it drop, because it wasn’t an argument worth having. It wasn’t like we were literary scholars debating the exact cultural heritage of the Matter of France or something like that.

“It’s all the same to me,” Drake said with a shrug.

I opened my mouth, but a yawn snuck up on me and forced its way out before I realized what was happening. Drake cast a glance in my direction, then jerked her head towards the captain’s quarters.

“Looking pretty dead on your feet, there,” she said, not unkindly. “Think it’s about time you think about joining your friends and turning in for the night. No point in running yourself ragged this late at night.”

I blinked at her. I guess I *was* pretty tired. Not tired enough that I couldn’t keep going if I had to, but tired enough that I’d probably fall right to sleep if I crawled into bed.

“The island?”

“What, you think we’re gonna get in the boats and sail to shore? In *this* light?” Drake waved it off. “Nah. We’ll get close enough to drop anchor and make for land once we’ve got the sun on our side. No point in taking extra risks like that, yeah?”

I suppose not. She *was* the expert here, after all.

“What about you?”

She snorted and nodded towards the deck. “These scumbags would run us aground if I left them on their own. ‘Sides, I’ve got enough left in me to get us safely where we need to be heading. I can sleep once I know we won’t wind up wrecked on the nearest sandbar.”

That was when I realized — the singing had stopped. Had there been another verse, and I’d just been so distracted talking to Drake that I’d missed it completely? Fuck, if I was *that* tired, I probably should be heading to bed.

I glanced to Arash. *I’ll leave keeping a lookout to you.*

Arash smiled and nodded. *I’ll make sure we don’t wind up marooned in the Bermuda Triangle.*

I didn't have enough energy to stop myself from rolling my eyes. "See you in the morning, then."

The wooden deck thudded dully under my boots as I turned around and made for the captain's cabin. I hadn't understood before, back when Drake first mentioned us bunking there, but it really was quite small, small enough that the five cots set out inside of it all but took up the entire room. It was not at all like what Hollywood had conditioned me to expect, because there was no way a dining table with room for ten would have fit.

Rika and Ritsuka, as expected, were lying together in what must have been Drake's original bunk — not sure what she was going to think about that when she saw them — with Mash laying in the cot next to them, snoring softly. Amusingly, if a battle were actually to break out, there was no way she was making it out of that cot without tripping over *something*.

Presented with a dearth of options, I climbed over the closest cot and into the one closer to Mash, a precarious adventure that left me worried one or both would collapse at several points. Fortunately, I made it to what was to be my bed for the night without actual trouble, laid down with a soft grunt, and let myself sag into the canvas.

Somewhere between one breath and the next, my eyes fluttered closed, and I nodded off to the gentle rocking motion of the ship. My thoughts just sort of slipped away, as though they were being carried off by the tides one at a time, ferried deep, deep, deep down into the waters below.

If I dreamed, I didn't remember any of it. If I woke up when Drake eventually came in to join us, I didn't remember that either. I just sort of...floated in a calm nonexistence.

And then I was rudely awoken when the ship shuddered violently. Nearby, Rika snorted awake, too, and groggily demanded, "Who slammed the front door?"

A distant *boom* thundered, and the room shook as our cots rattled. I was pushing myself up off of mine when Mash suddenly shot up, going from lying to sitting without any transition in between.

"Something's wrong!" she announced urgently.

"Mash?" Ritsuka murmured.

Another boom. The room shuddered again.

"Cap'n!" a voice called, muffled through the door. A moment later, it swung out, and Bombe stood there, face a rictus of alarm. "Cap'n!"

Drake grunted and propped herself up off of the final cot next to me. "Bombe, I swear, if the world ain't ending —"

"Enemy ship, Cap'n!" Bombe said. "They're firing on us!"

Instantly, everyone was wide awake and scrambling to get out of bed, which was very hard when we were all crammed together in the same room the way we were. Drake, naturally, as the one nearest to the door and the only one who didn't have to climb over everyone else to get out, was the first to make it to standing.

“Familiar colors?” she demanded as the rest of us tried to follow her.

“No, Cap’n,” Bombe answered. “Ain’t never seen that flag afore!”

“Any attempts at parley?” she asked as she shoved her hat back on her head.

I made it onto the wooden floor at last, with Mash right behind me. The twins were still trying to extricate themselves from the tangle of limbs they’d become in their sleep.

“None, Cap’n,” said Bombe. “They just started firing on us. No warning shot or nothing.”

I stepped out onto the deck behind Drake, just in time for another *BOOM* to rock the ship as one of the *Golden Hind*’s cannons spat smoke and presumably a cannonball. On the same side, Arash drew back on his bow and loosed an arrow, and something exploded midair about twenty feet from the side of the ship.

He was shooting enemy cannonballs out of the air, I realized.

*Master*, he greeted me without looking my way.

Further along, Emiya also stood, his own sleek, black bow held in his hands as he kept steely gray eyes focused out to sea. In the distance, approaching at a fairly fast pace, there was a ship, another galleon, but *this* one looked more like it had come out of a pirate movie. Even from as far away as it was, it was obviously bigger, broader, and had more guns than the *Golden Hind*.

“What the hell...” Drake sneered. “More pirates, eh?”

“We fired warning shots back,” Bombe reported, “but they ain’t stopping, Boss. We might’ve been full of holes already if our, er, *friends* here weren’t shooting their cannonballs out of the sky.”

Ritsuka and Rika made it out of Drake’s cabin, hair askew and looking like they’d just rolled out of bed, because they kind of had.

“Enemy ship?” Ritsuka asked.

“Emiya and Arash are handling it,” I answered shortly.

“They in range yet?” Drake asked Bombe.

Bombe gave a quick shake of his head. “Not yet, Boss. And we’re sitting ducks out here, seeing as we’re anchored down and everything.”

“I hate it when the enemy doesn’t play fair,” Drake said sourly. “That’s our job!”

“It looks like they’re more of the same guys we met yesterday,” Arash called over. He paused long enough to fire another arrow, shooting another cannonball out of the air. “We can probably take them out the same way.”

“That so?” Drake grunted. “And if that ship of theirs comes in range, will that disappear in one, good hit, too?”

It stood to reason, but...

“We can’t know for sure.”

“Master!” Bradamante said, stepping forward. She was all but vibrating. “Master, I can handle it! Send me over and I’ll teach those villains a lesson!”

“All on your own?” Bombe goggled.

“Or I could do it!” Emiya called over. “Might be a bit overkill, though!”

With — ah. The same sort of thing he’d done to try and kill Flauros back at the end of Septem. Yeah, something like that was sure to work, but it was definitely overkill. Too much overkill, if it cost as much as I thought it did.

The twins looked to me, like they were asking permission. I decided to let them call the shots on this one.

“Either one will work.”

Ritsuka immediately turned to Bradamante. “Go!”

Bradamante’s face nearly split in half from her smile. “Yes!”

And then, she turned towards the enemy ship, bent her legs, *leapt* — and she disappeared ten feet above the deck.

“What the hell?” Bombe squawked. “Where’d she go?”

Drake chortled, grinning. “Don’t get your knickers in a twist, Bombe!” she said. “She’s just like those ‘invincible’ bastards we’ve seen crop up in this ass-backwards place!” She nodded towards Arash and Emiya. “Them, too. We’ve got some of that firepower on our side, now!”

Bombe gaped at them, looking back and forth between Emiya and Arash with a new kind of respect.

“Well, fuck me and call me a Spanish whore.” He grinned broadly. “Guess we made the right call, letting them on board, eh, Boss?”

“Damn right I did!” Drake agreed. “So why’re you pretending you had anything to do with it, Bombe? You wanna try out that new punishment so bad you’re trying to steal my thunder?”

“No, Boss!” Bombe hadn’t stopped grinning. “Never, Boss!”

“Then stop wagging that tongue of yours!”

“She made it,” Arash announced suddenly. “From the look of it — yeah, the same as yesterday. They’re a little bit sturdier, but they’re disappearing as soon as they take a good, strong hit.”

More of those “personified concepts,” then. When Marie said we should expect more of them, I wasn’t expecting to face more of them this soon. I probably should have.



“Tii-chan?” Rika asked.

Arash smiled, but kept watching. “Not a scratch.”

I strained my eyes, but as expected, the ship was too far away for me to see any finer details. Ironically, the people aboard it looked like little more than ants scurrying about, scattered by a faint green whirlwind.

Closing my eyes, however, and borrowing Arash’s sight let me see things in finer detail, and naturally, Bradamante was cleaning house with the enemy pirates. They tried to fight back, to swing swords at her and fire pistols, but even if they were a little bit stronger than they had been on the beach before, they were still too slow and too weak to compare against a Servant. She was making short work of them, laying them out with effortless ease, and every swipe of her tiny lance, every bash of her glowing shield, and every kick dissipated one of the pirates.

It was anticlimactic and over quickly. I’d barely started watching before she was finishing off the last one with a flourish, and then she disappeared as the pirate ship itself dissolved into thin air, leaving a rush of water to fill in the space it had occupied.

“Even the ship is gone!” Bombe exclaimed.

“Because it was never really here to begin with,” I said calmly as I opened my eyes again.

Bradamante abruptly appeared nearby, flush with excitement and not even breathing hard. Her smile threatened to split her face. “Enemy forces dispatched, Master!”

“Great job, Tii-chan!” Rika cheered.

Emiya shook his head ruefully and shrugged. “Guess I’ll show my party trick off some other time.”

“I’m sure the opportunity will present itself at some point,” Arash teased him.

Emiya arched an eyebrow. “That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.”

“Well,” said Drake, “now that those wankers have been seen off — and without a single scratch on my Golden Hind as well — how’s about we get on over to that island and start exploring —”

“Master!” Mash said urgently. “Magical energy reaction —”

The world *shuddered*. A wave of *something* swept out from the island like the breath of a giant, carrying an ominous tremor in its wake, and it passed through the trees inland, the sand on the beach, then into the water. In mere seconds, it reached us, and I felt it thrum as it passed through the ship and the crew and kept going. The Golden Hind creaked and groaned, and then settled.

Half a mile past us, the ripple weakened and died and was swallowed by the tides.

“What the hell was that?” Drake demanded immediately.

I had no idea. Whatever it was, it didn't appear to have done anything at first glance, but I wasn't so naive as to believe that it actually hadn't. The question was, what?

"Cap'n! We're stuck!" one of the crewmen said.

Drake rounded on him. "What?"

"Cap'n!" said another, the one who had been manning the wheel when we came on deck. "The rudder, she won't move!"

He wiggled the wheel to prove his point — or rather, he *tried* to, because the wheel itself wouldn't move, like it had been glued into place.

"Cap'n! The anchor's lodged, it won't budge!"

"The sails, Boss! They're caught on something! They won't open!"

Over and over, one thing after another, the crew reported in, telling Drake the same thing: we were stuck.

"What the hell is going on?" Drake demanded furiously. "What was that just now? Some kind of magic?"

"A bounded field," Mash breathed.

I glanced at her briefly, then turned back towards the island. This far out? There was no way. An ordinary bounded field just didn't have that much range.

"A what?"

"It's a kind of spell that is overlaid on top of an area," Ritsuka told Drake. It looked like those lessons with El-Melloi II were paying off. "Mages usually use them to protect their homes and their workshops. They do things like keep out unwanted visitors or enemies."

"Except a bounded field large enough to cover the island and still reach us out here is way too large for any old mage to make," Emiya cut in grimly, his face carved from stone. "Even for a powerful Caster, covering that much ground should be impossible. I don't know a single one that could do it."

"That means there's only one thing that could have both the power and the range to affect us out here," Arash concluded.

"A Noble Phantasm."

I guess that solved the question of whether or not there were other Servants on these islands. Not that Drake had given us any reason to doubt her, but, well, independent confirmation was always better than just taking someone at their word.

The next question was, was our host a stray Servant who was taking precautions because they didn't know who we were or why we were here, or was this an enemy laying down a trap and trying to convince us to walk into it?

“W-wait, so,” Rika said, “we’re *stuck* here?”

“As long as this bounded field is up?” said Emiya. “Yeah. This ship isn’t going anywhere. That means there’s only two ways to free us from it.”

“Either we convince the Servant who deployed it to lift it,” Mash murmured, “or we...force them to take it down.”

“This...sounds an awful lot like a trap,” Rika pointed out. “I’m not the only one who sees that, right? Like, this guy might as well have put up a giant neon sign with the word ‘TRAP’ in all caps!”

“Yeah,” said Arash. “Unfortunately, it looks like this is a trap we kind of have to walk into if we want to leave here anytime soon.”

Friend or foe — there was no way to tell without springing it.

“Well,” I said wryly, “whoever it is went through all the trouble to gift wrap an invitation. We might as well go and say hello.”

— o.0.O.O.0.o —

This trip in the longboats was significantly calmer and less taxing than our previous ones. It was owed, no doubt, to the fact that even the waves washing up towards the beach had been slowed to a near stop, which cut down on the rocking and the sway by a great deal. It was the smoothest sailing we’d yet experienced in this Singularity.

The mood was solemn as we climbed out of the boats and onto shore, and even Rika was quiet and nervous, her eyes flicking about as she looked for any sign of an enemy.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t that simple. The swarm that had fallen under my sway revealed nothing of interest, just trees, trees, and more trees, plus a few groups of animals that kept a wild berth from us. If the enemy Servant was nearby, then they were staying in spirit form — unlikely, since none of ours was sensing them.

Unless our mystery Servant was an Assassin. I hated when it was possible that an unknown Servant could be an Assassin. The last time it happened was with Stheno, and that incident had nearly cost us dearly.

“Anything?” Ritsuka asked.

“No,” both Mash and I said at the same time, and we traded a bemused look. Mash continued first, “There’s no sign of a Servant’s presence, Master.”

“I’m not seeing anything either,” I added. “Whoever it is must be further inland, probably by a mile or two.”

And hopefully wasn’t an Assassin. This Noble Phantasm wasn’t necessarily an Assassin’s Noble Phantasm, but it was ambiguous enough that it very well could be.

Rika's stomach growled suddenly, and she flushed as we all turned in her direction. "What?" she said defensively. "I haven't had breakfast yet!"

My lips pursed. None of us had, but, "We shouldn't stop long enough to eat. It would leave us wide open for an ambush."

Emiya sighed. "Even if I hate to admit it, that's not wrong. I might be incredible, but I'm not so incredible that I wouldn't be vulnerable in the second it took me to switch from cooking to fighting."

Drake — thinking ahead — retrieved her Grail from out of her chest, and with a flourish of her wrist, it produced more apples. "This should be enough to tide us over, yeah? At least until we find this fucker that's messing with my ship!"

She handed one off to each of us, even the Servants who didn't need to eat, and I bit into mine with relish. Just because I'd said we shouldn't stop to make breakfast didn't mean I wasn't hungry, too.

Rika moaned as she bit into hers. "I dunno what it is about these apples," she said around a mouthful, "but they taste *so* good!"

"It must be because they were made by the Grail," said Mash. "They're the, um...Platonic ideal of what an apple is? Maybe."

"Or maybe you're all just hungry," said Emiya, chuckling.

"Er, Boss?" said Bombe. "What about the rest of us?"

He gestured at the other crewmen who were climbing out of their own longboats and standing there, waiting for orders. Drake took a bite of her apple, and she used the time it took to chew it to eye the whole lot of them while she stuffed her Grail back into her body.

"No tellin' whether it's safer on the boat or shore," she said once she'd swallowed. "Get everyone gathered up and set up camp, grab some food from the stores and eat while you have the chance. No sense bringing any of you along with us if one of those invincible bastards is the one behind this."

Bombe straightened. "Aye, Boss!" He turned to the rest of the crew. "You heard her! We're setting up camp for now, boys! Hop to it!"

Drake turned back to me. "That quake that caused this whole thing came about eastwards, yeah? That sound like the right place to look?"

"The epicenter of that wave was too far inland for me to pinpoint the exact origin point through the trees," Arash said, "but based upon the way they moved? Yeah, it came from further east."

Or that's what our mystery Servant *wanted* us to think. We didn't have much else in the way of options, though. If the ship could still move, I might have suggested we go around the island and approach from the north heading south, but since the ship being immobilized was half the reason we were here in the first place, that wasn't a viable option.

“Then we’ll head that direction,” I said. “Bradamante will stay here to guard the ship. Mash, you’ll take point. If anything comes after us from the front, we’ll need you to defend us. Emiya and Arash will bring up the rear. Captain Drake —”

“Nah, I get it.” She waved it off. “Makes the most sense for me to be with you folks in the center, don’t it? This bauble of mine might make me able to hurt those invincible bastards, but it don’t make me one meself, does it?”

“The perils of being a squishy human,” Rika added dryly. She glanced pointedly at Drake’s chest. “Some of us a little squishier than others.”

“Senpai!” Mash scolded her.

Drake grinned, shark-like, and laughed.

“Let’s get going,” I said. “The last thing we want to do is spend the night here, because that would be an even worse time to have to defend from an attack.”

“If we do, I’m sleeping with one eye open,” Rika promised.

“Me, too,” her brother agreed.

“I-I don’t know how to do that, but...me, too!” Mash chimed in.

“Don’t worry, Master!” Bradamante said. “While I’m here, no enemy will come within a mile of the ship! You can count on me!”

“If any of those pirates gets handsy,” Rika told her, “feel free to cut their pride off, Tii-chan!”

Several of the pirates listening in eyed each other nervously.

“Understood!”

Ritsuka sighed. “Try not to hurt anyone permanently, okay? We do need a crew to steer that ship, after all.”

And so, we set off, heading deeper inland and leaving the sandy beach behind for grassy hills. The island quickly changed elevation on us, but it wasn’t nearly as steep or insurmountable as the last island was, so there were...ramps, of a sort, conveniently hewn out of the cliff faces that we were able to use to go up.

It made me wonder how the geography formed on these islands. Was it random? Given the flora, fauna, and just the vastly varying climates, I wasn’t sure if I could believe it. Had it been shaped by the owners of the Grails instead? If these islands were some twisted amalgamation of ones that Drake and our enemy had visited before, that would definitely explain the variety and the strangeness of their shapes.

Once we’d gotten up the cliff, however, we found another forest, the one that we’d seen swaying from the ripple of the bounded field activating, and unfortunately, it didn’t have a convenient path

cut through it like the ones in Orléans did, nor a road like the ones in Septem. We had to weave in and out and push through the underbrush the tedious, old-fashioned way.

“This feels really familiar all of a sudden,” Rika grouched as she pushed a branch out of the way. “I’m getting flashbacks to Senpai’s lessons.”

“Then they served their purpose,” I told her.

She scowled, and under her breath, she said, “At least there aren’t any crows cawing at us this time.”

There wouldn’t be. I’d let Huginn and Muninn out while Drake wasn’t paying attention because I didn’t want to answer questions about them right then, but it wasn’t like they were normal birds anyway. The cawing and the crowing was something completely under my control, and therefore only something they did when it served my purposes.

The forest continued on for quite a while, and I picked up new bugs as we went, some of which I recognized and some of which were new even to me. Not any Darwin’s Bark Spiders, sadly, although that really would have been convenient for me. Maybe *too* convenient. Just why would that very specific breed of spider find its way onto one of these hodgepodge islands, waiting for me to find them?

We must have spent an hour slowly picking our way through that forest, dealing with the shrubbery and the tall, thick-trunked trees, when my ravens finally saw something ahead of us that wasn’t more trees.

“Heads up,” I warned everyone, “about half a mile in front of us, there’s a lake.”

“A lake?” the twins parroted.

“How big?” asked Emiya.

“Big enough you’d have to sail across it.”

In fact, just based upon what I was already seeing, it must have been about an entire third of the island’s width. It was absolutely huge — relatively speaking, of course.

“It looks like it’s fed from a river that connects further north.”

Although what was up there was too far away and hidden behind both higher elevation and more trees. Even my ravens didn’t have enough height to tell for sure where that river started.

“A lake?” Arash mumbled. “What could be at a lake that would cast that bounded field?”

“The only thing I can think of isn’t all that likely,” Emiya said wryly.

Given his connections and what we knew about him? Yeah. This wasn’t Britain, so women in ponds distributing swords wasn’t likely.

Drake grinned. “Guess we’ll just have to find out the hard way.”

“Ugh,” Rika grunted. “More mysteries. I hate when we have more mysteries with our mysteries.”

“I think we’ll be fine as long as no one says, ‘Let’s split up, gang,’” Ritsuka told her.

“Don’t even joke about that!”

We kept going, heading towards the lake, and eventually, with the sun high in the sky, we came out of the trees and onto a narrow ledge that dropped steeply down into the water below. Light glistened off the placid surface, and calm, rich blue dominated everything in front of us until it seemed to stretch almost from one end of the horizon to the other.

“Holy cow!” Rika exclaimed. “It really *is* huge!”

“It would take us at least two hours to walk around to the other side,” Ritsuka agreed.

“Not all that deep, though,” Arash said. He reached down and picked up a rock, and with a flick of his wrist, he sent it out almost halfway across, where it hit the surface and sank. “Maybe...ten meters or so at the deepest sections. You could definitely drown, but you’re not going to hide a castle or something down there.”

Emiya arched an eyebrow at him, unimpressed. It looked like I wasn’t the only one drawing some conclusions about what he’d had in mind earlier.

“You could sink a ship,” Drake added, “but we’d still see the masts from here.”

Arash’s brow furrowed, and he looked my way. “You don’t think our friend from yesterday is the one behind this, do you?”

The guy with seaweed for a beard? That...wasn’t impossible, because whatever he’d done had held us in place then as well, but I couldn’t imagine why he’d be so roundabout when he’d come up to us and met face to face before. I also couldn’t really rule it out, since we didn’t know his class or identity with any certainty.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted.

“Master,” Mash said suddenly, “I’m...detecting a source of magical energy nearby.”

“You are?” asked Ritsuka.

“She always has been more sensitive to that stuff than the rest of us,” Emiya remarked.

“How nearby is nearby?” asked Rika.

“It’s...” Mash’s brow furrowed, and she looked down at her feet. “Beneath us.”