

Chapter LXXXIII: Compulsory Acquisition

As though my words broke some sort of spell, one of the sailors snapped out of his surprise long enough to exclaim, “Where the hell did you lot come from?”

Some of his comrades shifted uneasily, looking unsure of what was going on and trading glances with each other. None of them were yet getting aggressive, but the shock of our sudden appearance would only last so long before they started thinking about just getting rid of the problem.

“We missed our target again,” Ritsuka mumbled.

“This is the second time,” Mash agreed. “We landed off course in Septem, too.”

“Doc,” said Rika in a tone that promised violence, “I’m going to file a complaint when we get back.”

“Well, it could be worse,” said Arash, trying to sound positive. “We could have landed in the water.”

“It could also be a lot better,” said Emiya, “because we really might have landed in the water.”

The sailor who’d spoken — who seemed to have some kind of leadership role, since the others were looking to him for direction — took a step forward, his hand drifting towards the saber hanging from his belt. “Hey, now...”

I took my own step towards him before things could escalate, and projecting as much confidence as I could, I addressed him and the crew around him, pitching my voice to carry, “Boys. This doesn’t have to turn violent, but we need this ship of yours. Cooperate, and you can still be on it when we reach land.”

A moment of stunned silence greeted me. Every eye turned my direction, staring at me incredulously. In a past life, I would have been using that time to snare each and every one of them with silk threads spun by my spiders, but in lieu of that option, I just had to convince them with my words instead.

And then, the whole crew burst out into laughter.

Yeah, that went about as well as I’d been expecting. It would have been convenient if we could have solved this that easily, but it was a longshot from the beginning.

“Missy, you must be dreaming!” one of them called.

“You think we’re just going to hand the ship over to you fucks? Take a dip, sweetheart!”

“Come over here and shine my knob, and maybe *we’ll* let *you* stay on!”

“Hey!” Rika protested on my behalf, even as Ritsuka’s face turned red. “That was uncalled for, you jerk!”

“Very uncouth!” Bradamante agreed.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” the leader demanded, grinning broadly. “Dunno if you bothered to learn your numbers, girl, but there’s way more of us than there are of you! You think you can take over this ship with that puny knife of yours?”

Puny knife? A more hotheaded girl might have taken offense to that. This knife of mine had been through a whole lot more than a fight with some pirates — because I was becoming increasingly sure that was what these sailors were — and cut through things a whole lot sturdier than ordinary flesh and steel.

But my ego wasn’t quite that fragile. I had nothing to prove to these random strangers, so I treated their insults with all the weight they actually had — which was to say, none at all.

“Arash,” I said calmly, and he glanced over at me, “try not to do any permanent damage. We still need both the ship and the crew intact to get anywhere.”

He smirked. “Got it, Master.”

My hand went to my dagger, and I pulled it from its sheath and tossed it over to him. Arash caught my Last Resort effortlessly, flipping it over with expert grace a couple of times. Showing off to intimidate the pirates, if I had to guess. On a couple of them, it even seemed to work.

“Mash,” said Ritsuka, “you, too.”

“Right!” Mash’s shield materialized in her hands, and the crew actually hesitated and took a step back when they saw how easily she handled the massive thing. “I’ll make sure not to hurt them too badly, Master! I’ll use the back of my shield!”

“Hey, Emiya,” said Rika. “Give that one guy an extra hard kick for me, would you?”

“Hmph.” Emiya smirked as his twin swords appeared in a flash of light. “Do you want me to just damage his pride, or remove it entirely?”

“Remove it entirely!” Bradamante’s shield flared to life. “A man who treats a lady in such a manner has no business ever laying a finger on one!”

Rika smiled a nasty smile. “Oh, I don’t think he ever has, Tii-chan! A real man would know better!”

“H-hey!” one of the sailors protested.

“Oh, what are you even complaining about, Fournier?” the leader snapped. “Who gives a flying fuck what that little chit says? If it sticks in your craw that much, shut her up yourself!”

The so-named Fournier flushed, although with his ruddy, sunburnt complexion, it was hard to tell how much was embarrassment and how much was just how he looked naturally. “R-right, Boss!”

Rika’s cheek twitched. “Hey, Emiya? *Sic ‘em.*”

What happened next could barely be called a fight. Emiya appeared suddenly in front of the leader, who still hadn’t been named, and the man had barely managed to pull his saber free of its sheath

before Emiya batted it out of his hands and delivered a heavy blow to the gut with the flat of one of his blades.

The leader went down hard, collapsing onto his back on the wooden deck with a thud, but that seemed to galvanize his crew, because their boss had barely let out a groan, clutching his belly with both arms, before the rest of them were pulling out their own weapons, mostly sabers of a similar make to their boss. Even to my inexperienced eye, not all of those swords were in the greatest of shape — the perils of being out at sea, where whetstones and other things necessary to keep a steel blade in working order were rare.

The rest of our Servants took that as their cue to join the action, and with a pair of shouts, Mash and Bradamante leapt into the fray, swinging that massive shield and that tiny lance about and laying out whoever got in range of them. Arash followed with more precision, as was befitting of an archer and an Archer, carefully slicing belts and strings so that anyone in his path had an, ah, accident with their clothing.

A creative way of beating someone without actually hurting anything more than their dignity. An enemy who was too busy trying to pull their pants back up was one who was too busy to fight.

Everyone who didn't have the good fortune of facing our most merciful Servant was laid out by the others and left a groaning mess on the floor. True to the orders I'd given Arash and Ritsuka had given Mash, none of them was seriously hurt, save for maybe a broken bone here or there. There were no cracked skulls, no severed arteries or veins, no slit throats or spilled guts, just a whole lot of bumps and bruises.

When it was all over, we were the only ones standing. The entirety of the crew lay on their ship, moaning and groaning and utterly defeated.

I walked over to the unnamed leader, my shoes thumping against the deck, and looked down at him with the same expression I'd used before. Calm confidence carried a lot of weight in any negotiation; coming from a place of strength wasn't nearly as important as convincing the other guy that you were, although it definitely helped to have both.

"Like I said," I told him, "we need your ship. You can cooperate and still be on it when we reach land, or we can make other arrangements for you if you don't."

"Okay, okay! We surrender!" The leader groaned as he leveraged himself up, but didn't seem to have the strength to stand just yet. "Sheesh, lady. You really know how to drive a hard bargain, don't you?"

"I don't know about that." Emiya smirked and crossed his arms, swords vanishing mid-motion. "After all, you're all still breathing, aren't you?"

"Like I said," I repeated. I held out my hand, and Arash dutifully returned my knife. I slipped it back into its sheath, completely free of blood. "No need for that kind of violence."

The leader groaned and slumped back on his elbows.

"Um, Miss Taylor?" said Mash, coming over towards us. "Do you...think we should interrogate him? He might know something about this Singularity."

A good point. At the very least, he could give us *some* information on what had been happening here since it formed, and if we were lucky, he might know a thing or two about whoever had the Grail.

“Hey, yeah!” Rika chimed in. “Senpai’s American, right? That means you know how to waterboard him!”

Ignoring that stereotype and the problematic things that came along with it...

“Well?” I turned pointedly back towards the leader. “Do you know anything about what’s going on in this ocean?”

The leader grunted. “Fuck, lady, was honestly hoping you might have some idea. You sure seemed like you knew what you were doing, yeah? We been out here with our asses flapping in the wind for weeks. Maps are useless, compasses don’t work no more, fuck, even the constellations don’t look right.”

“I ain’t seen the North Star in over a fortnight!” one of the other sailors chimed in. It was surprisingly helpful information, even if it was just confirming more of what we already knew.

“Might as well piss overboard and see what direction it flows,” the leader said. “Sure as shit ain’t finding any better way of navigating this place so far.”

“Ew,” said Rika, disgusted. Her brother didn’t look any happier about that idea than she did.

The leader grinned at her, all crooked, yellow teeth. “Never sailed before, have ya, lass?”

That delightful mental image aside, “So you don’t know anything at all about this ocean?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say *nothing*,” the leader said slyly. He turned his grin on me, and my stomach turned a little. Proper hygiene was another thing that tended to suffer out at sea. “It just so happens that we’ve heard tell of an island nearby, a pirate’s paradise kinda place, if ya get my meaning. And, shucks, wouldn’t ya know it, we were just headed that way ourselves! We’re starting to run low on food and water, ya see, and thought it might be a nice place to restock...”

Who did he think he was fooling? He might as well have put up a gigantic neon sign with the word “TRAP” in big, bold letters, he was being that transparent about it. Lisa would have been laughing her ass off at the utter lack of shame.

But it wasn’t like we had any better leads. A pirate’s paradise, he said? There were decent odds that we would run into one of the famous pirates at a place like that, and a lead on a Servant — enemy or stray — wasn’t something we could pass up either. If we were particularly lucky, we might find something out about whoever had this era’s Grail and why they’d used it to make this place.

I had serious doubts about that, but just on the chance alone, it would be worth looking into.

“Then I guess you know where to go, don’t you?”

The leader grinned broader, probably thinking he’d pulled one over on me. He didn’t seem particularly bright.

“Aye, aye, ma’am!” He pulled himself to his feet with renewed vigor, and then he rounded on his crew. “Oy, whaddya sorry sacks of shit think you’re doing, lazing about on the job? Hop to, on the double!”

The sailors — pirates — who had been laid out by our team groaned.

“What’re you sorry lot complaining about?” the leader barked. “That little love tap weren’t enough to knock you all down, was it? How pathetic can you shits get?”

“Boss,” one of them began.

“Stuff it, Fournier! That goes for the rest of you lazy fucks, too! You heard the nice lady, we’re headed for the hideout, and right quick! If you don’t wanna be stuck in the brig eating tack and nothing else until we get there, you’d better get off your sorry asses and get to work!”

That seemed to get them all into motion. All together, the rest of the crew struggled to their feet as quickly as they could, shouting back at him, “Aye, sir!”

Some of them were a bit quicker than the others, but none of them dared risk his ire by staying put, and in short order, they were all back to doing the jobs they must have been doing when we were so unceremoniously dropped into their midst.

Our group moved out of their way, huddling together off to the side with our backs to the side rails that kept things — and people — from slipping overboard in choppy waters. Needless to say, we didn’t exactly trust these men, especially not when they were so obviously trying to pull a fast one on us.

“I dunno about this, Senpai,” Rika said lowly.

“Don’t we have any other leads?” Ritsuka agreed.

“I don’t trust these men,” said Bradamante. She eyed the pirates, like she was waiting for one of them to leap out and attack us again. I didn’t think we had to worry about that until we got closer to this hideout of theirs. “They’ve all but confessed to piracy, which means they’re a greedy, unsavory lot that would do...unspeakable things, if they had the chance. Especially to us ladies!”

“Unspeakable things!” Rika agreed vehemently.

“None of us thinks otherwise,” said Emiya. He watched the pirates, too.

“We don’t have any other leads,” I told them, “and we wouldn’t have any idea of where we were going if we forced them to take us somewhere else. Otherwise...” I looked pointedly over the railing. “You said you could swim, right, Rika?”

“What do I look like, a penguin?” Rika crossed her arms. “I didn’t bring my surfboard, Senpai.”

Ritsuka sighed, but didn’t comment on whatever she was referencing. “So we’re just going to go along with them?”

“For now,” I answered. “First, we need to see if we can find anything out at this pirate island they’re talking about. Whether it’s a . . . den of iniquity or not, hubs like that tend to be a great place to pick up information. We can make plans for where to go from there after we see if there’s anything we can find out about what’s going on here.”

“Oh!” Rika nodded sagely. “It’s a spy mission! Why didn’t you say so, Senpai?”

“There’s no guarantee that anyone there will know anything we need,” Arash pointed out.

As much as I hated it, he was right about that, and if I was being honest, I was expecting things to work out that way. I doubted very much that we would find out where the Grail was this soon and this easily.

“What if they don’t?” asked Ritsuka.

“Then we’ll have to pull up our maps, pick an island, and commandeer a ship to take us to it. Process of elimination might be slow, but without a better lead, it’s all we have.”

Left unsaid was the fact that we’d basically started out the other three Singularities in the same position. All three of them had begun with us essentially picking the nearest point of interest and heading towards it, and one thing or another had happened in the process that led us to where we actually needed to go.

“Won’t that take a long time?” Mash asked worriedly.

Yes, but... “We aren’t exactly swimming in options.”

Rika snorted. “Ha! Swimming in options! Good one, Senpai!”

Good one...? The realization hit me a second later, and I wanted to groan at the accidental pun, but I managed to keep my reaction down to a grimace.

Fuck, Rika wasn’t rubbing off on me, was she?

“If the pattern holds, either we’ll find something or something will find us that will lead to solving this Singularity,” I said, pretending it hadn’t happened. “We should have a better idea of what to do from there.”

“Right,” said Mash. “In Fuyuki, we met Medusa and Cúchulainn. In Orléans, it was Jeanne, who led us to La Charité. And in Septem, Connla introduced us to Queen Aífe, who introduced us to Queen Boudica, and from there, Emperor Nero.”

“Huh.” Rika folded her arms and cocked her head to the side thoughtfully. “Now that you mention it, things really did turn out kind of convenient like that, didn’t they? Hey, Onii-chan, do you think this is that Counter Force thing that Hot Pops was talking about?”

“How would we know if it wasn’t?” Ritsuka replied.

Rika nodded her head sagely. “Good point! I bet you if we asked, we’d get some kooky, bullshit response, like, ‘when you do things right, people won’t be sure you’ve done anything at all.’”

Emiya snorted. “You’re not entirely wrong. Having said that, Master, if you’re ever in a situation where you can interact with the Counter Force that directly, forget about asking questions or making deals, just run in the opposite direction. As fast as you can, preferably.”

“Oh!” Rika grinned. “That sounds like a story!”

“Not one I’m going to tell.” Emiya waved her off.

Beep-beep!

Without hesitating, I answered the communicator. Romani’s face appeared above my wrist, and he blinked at me, surprised.

“Huh,” he said, “we got through really easily, this time. I was expecting it to be a lot harder.”

“Hey, Doc!” Rika grinned nastily. “You’ve got some explaining to do!”

“Yeah,” said Romani, “about that —”

“Move aside, Romani!” Marie’s voice commanded, and Romani squawked as he was pushed out of frame. Marie’s face replaced his. “Taylor! What happened? Your location data —”

“We landed on a ship,” I told her simply.

She flinched. “W-what? But you were supposed to Rayshift onto an island!”

“This happened last time, too!” Romani’s voice chimed in from off screen.

“It did?” Marie jerked like she’d been slapped, and suddenly, she drew herself up, projecting an image of confidence. “I-I mean, yes, of course, I remember! The Rayshift into Septem was also off course!” She turned to Romani again. “Why wasn’t that corrected? The number of ways this could have gone wrong is unacceptable!”

“We never identified the cause,” Romani answered. “The coordinates were input correctly, the Rayshift occurred without error, and our calculations should have put them exactly where we wanted them to go. Whatever happened last time was a result of an unknown factor. Even Da Vinci couldn’t do anything but throw up her hands and shrug.”

Which said quite a bit about the situation, and none of it good. Unfortunately, it was a problem that we couldn’t do much about.

Marie grunted and pinched the bridge of her nose, scowling. “And this time?” she asked tightly.

I could imagine Romani shrugging, too. “Some other unknown factor. Frankly, Director, it might not even be the same thing that went wrong. It could just be that the Singularity’s geography is so distorted that even our scanners couldn’t account for the full scope of its spatial anomalies.”

“Great,” Marie said flatly. “Just great.” She pried open her eyes and met mine. “At least everyone is in one piece. Your vitals are all safely within acceptable ranges, although there *was* a brief moment of increased activity on the Servants’ end a minute ago.”

She didn’t word it like one, but I could definitely hear the question in that sentence.

“Hi, Boss Lady!” Rika waved cheekily.

“The locals weren’t all that happy that we showed up unannounced,” I explained. “There was an...altercation. It’s been handled.”

Marie’s brow furrowed.

“Locals?”

“The only thing pirates hate more than the navy,” Emiya drawled, “is other pirates.”

“Pirates?” both Romani and Marie echoed.

“They were quite rude!” said Bradamante. “Some of the things they said aren’t fit for polite company, Madam Director!”

“H-hold on, you said something about pirates!” Marie said. “Just what kind of ship did you land on, exactly?”

The twins shared a look, and Rika grinned again. She crooked one finger in imitation of a hook. “A pirate ship!”

The look Marie sent her could have curdled milk.

“There weren’t any major identifying marks,” I said. “No Jolly Roger or... Arash, did you see anything?”

Arash shrugged. “Nothing that would tell us who these people are. Pirates have existed as long as there was sailing, but if we’re talking about the Age of Piracy... It’s a little after my time. The only thing I know is what the Throne gives me.”

“Which isn’t all that much, unfortunately,” Bradamante added, sighing. “I could tell you that Blackbeard hid lit fuses in his hair! But...not anything else about what he looked like. I’m sorry, Master.”

“I’m about as limited,” Emiya said apologetically. “I could give you a list of names, even a few famous features, but I didn’t recognize any of them among this crew.”

Rika clasped her hands together theatrically, lifting her head as though she was praying. “Wikipedia, we knew not what we would miss!” She sighed. “Geez! How are we supposed to recognize any of these famous pirates even if we *do* meet them?”

“They’ll be Servants,” I told her.

She blinked, and then she smacked her forehead with her palm. “Oh. Right. Duh!”

“I didn’t sense any Servants on board with us,” Mash reported dutifully.

“There aren’t any,” Romani’s voice came. “The only Servants currently on our sensors are the ones we sent with you. Everyone else nearby is a normal human.”

My lips pursed thoughtfully. The only Servants on the sensors, huh? It worked before, back in Orléans, to at least some degree. Maybe it would work here, too.

“Romani,” I said, “the crew we’re sailing with right now is headed towards an island, what they called a ‘pirate’s paradise.’ Can the sensors detect a Servant over in that direction?”

“Wait, what?” Marie exclaimed. “Pirate’s paradise?”

“Hang on,” said Romani, “let me check.”

“Wait!” said Marie. “A pirate’s paradise? That sounds like the last place you should be going!”

“It’s the only lead we currently have,” I told her calmly. “And it’s also a place where a lot of people are going to be gathered. It’s our best chance of finding out what’s going on in this Singularity right now.”

Marie deflated. “Oh... Well, if you think it’s a good idea, then I’ll approve it.”

“So fast!” Rika remarked.

“I guess Director Marie really trusts Senpai to know what she’s doing,” said Ritsuka.

Twin spots of red bloomed on Marie’s cheeks. It looked strange through the faint blue tint the hologram gave everything. “W-well, of course I do! She’s the Master I hand-picked for Team A, after all!”

“Got it!” said Romani. He leaned over Marie’s shoulder so that he could fit his face on the screen. “Sorry, Taylor, it looks like your hunch didn’t pan out, this time. There’s a strong magical energy reaction on that island, but at least from this far out, our scanners aren’t picking up the presence of a Servant.”

“Drat!” said Rika. “There goes that one!”

“Are you sure, Romani?” Marie demanded, looking over at him.

He nodded. “I checked twice. I can’t say what the source of that magical energy reading is, but I can definitely say that it isn’t a Servant. No Saint Graph was detected.”

“Could it...be like Stheno?” Mash suggested tentatively.

Romani hesitated.

“Doc?” asked Rika, sounding worried. She wasn’t the only one, because Stheno had easily been one of the most harrowing parts of the last Singularity, and I wasn’t looking forward to a repeat.

“I want to say no,” said Romani. “This reading is way different than the one we got from her. For one, there’s no trace of divinity. But on the other hand, this isn’t like your scan from Mount Etna, so I don’t have as high a resolution as we did back then.”

“And the only way to increase the resolution would be to find a ley line as strong as Mount Etna’s was,” Mash concluded softly.

It wasn’t ideal and that wasn’t as certain a thing as I would have liked it to be, but I’d learned my lesson from before. If we encountered any goddesses hanging about, the very last thing we were going to do was let them get the chance to bewitch us the way Stheno had. Whether that was by beating her first or just removing her from concern outright, well, if and when it came up, we could address it then.

“Can you tell us anything else?”

He shook his head. “Not from here. The scanners get less accurate the further away from you guys they try to look, remember? I can tell there’s a source of magical energy in the general direction of that island you’re heading towards, and I can tell it isn’t a Servant, but anything more than that is just too much to ask for.”

How inconvenient. Even if I hadn’t been expecting much of anything better, I would still have preferred to have a better idea of what we were going to be finding on this island. Springing a trap happened to work better when you had some idea of what the trap itself was. For all we knew, Smaug was hiding out on that island and would smite us when we got too close.

I guess I should be glad we had Siegfried on speed dial.

“We’ll keep a close eye on that magical energy reading,” Marie assured me. “The instant we find out more, we’ll contact you and let you know what to expect.”

That was better than nothing.

“Thank you.”

“Either way,” she went on, “if it’s the only lead you have, then there’s no other choice but to investigate it. No, especially since there’s a magical energy reaction in that direction that we can detect from this far away! That’s suspicious, no matter how you look at it!”

“I agree,” I said, because it was. I just also didn’t think we were going to be lucky enough to find the Holy Grail that had started this Singularity that quickly and easily.

“Do you think it could be the Grail, Director?” asked Ritsuka.

Marie crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. “It may not be likely, but it’s certainly possible. All the more reason to go and check!”

“That would be some kind of record, wouldn’t it?” said Arash, smiling. “Retrieving the Grail in less than a day? That would be the fastest we ever solved one of these Singularities, wouldn’t it?”

“Technically, we resolved Fuyuki in less than a day, too,” Mash corrected him. “Um, but those were really unique circumstances, so that might not be a fair comparison.”

“Here and back at Chaldea again in just a few hours?” Rika asked wryly. “Sign me up! The less time I have to spend sleeping on the ground, the better!”

“C-could we really handle things that quickly?” Bradamante said with a nervous smile. “Maybe we should spend more time investigating! We only just arrived, after all! It would be a shame if we missed making new comrades because we moved too quickly!”

“Wouldn’t faster be better?” Emiya pointed out. “After all, this isn’t the last Singularity we have to deal with, is it? There are still four more after this.”

Bradamante hesitated. “I...suppose...”

My lips pursed, but I didn’t call her out on it, no matter how transparently she hated the idea of her first deployment ending right after it began. The others had probably noticed it, too, and were likewise pretending they hadn’t.

“Right now, we don’t know what we’re going to find on that island,” I said instead. “We shouldn’t go in expecting that we can finish things and be home by dinner, because even if it *is* the Grail, it’s not going to be as easy as picking it up off the ground like loose change. Whoever has it *will* fight to keep it.”

Rika grinned. “We’ll just have to fight harder!”

“Just be careful!” Marie insisted. “Don’t forget, you’re there to restore proper history! Your actions won’t just determine the future of Chaldea, but that of the entire human species! You can’t afford to fail!”

“So, you know,” said Rika sarcastically, “no pressure or anything!”

“We know, Director,” I assured Marie. “We won’t let you down.”

Her lips drew tight and she nodded. “Good!”

And then, her image disappeared, and the connection to Chaldea terminated. I let my wrist drop and looked out past the front of the ship towards the horizon, far in the distance. If I squinted, I could just make out a smear amongst the dark ocean and the pale blue sky, a blotch that broke up the monotony.

“Geez,” Rika whined, “that got me all excited! Can you imagine it, Onii-chan? There and back before dinnertime? My back is already crying with relief!”

“I-I suppose it *would* be better,” Bradamante hedged. “W-well! The important thing is that we solve this Singularity properly, right? Th-then...even if it’s done quickly, that’s what matters!”

“I’m just worried about what we’ll find on this island,” Ritsuka admitted quietly. “Even if Doctor Roman didn’t detect the presence of any Servants, he still found something there with lots of magical energy, and that could be *anything*.”

“We don’t have enough information to say for sure,” I told them. “Even if it turns out to be nothing to worry about, that doesn’t mean you should let your guard down, especially in a place where so many criminals and outlaws are gathered together. Don’t give anyone a single chance to take advantage of you.”

“Right!” said Mash and Ritsuka.

“And if someone gets handsy,” said Rika, “Emiya can cut their pride down to size!”

Emiya snorted and drawled, “Happily, Master.”

A pirate’s paradise, huh. Guess we were going to find out if it was as pleasant a place as it sounded.