

Chapter XCVII: Twice the Trouble

Fortunately for everyone involved, Rika didn't cling to me for more than a minute or two, so things didn't really have time to get truly awkward. Once she'd gotten her fill and reassured herself that I was alive and wasn't going anywhere, she sniffled, let go of me, took a few steps back, and then she offered a watery smile and a snappy salute.

"Fujimaru Rika, reporting for duty!" she chirped.

I opened my mouth —

"Oi!" a familiar voice called over. "So you managed to survive that mess after all, eh?"

— and Drake managed to break whatever moment we'd been having by lifting the weight off of it with that single, irreverent remark. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to be thankful or not as I turned to look at her, climbing out of the longboat far more sedately than the twins had. There wasn't a single tear shimmering in her eyes or even a crease in her brow to show how much she'd worried about me.

"Reports of my death were greatly exaggerated," I told her dryly.

It was, on the other hand, a much better moment to use a line like that. Rika, gobsmacked, gaped at me openly.

"So they were!" Drake said, unfazed. She raked her eyes over me, up and down, just the once. "Mm, a dead woman wouldn't look so lively! Bombe owes me — he thought you were a goner for sure!"

I'm touched by your faith in me, I didn't say.

"Y-you were betting on whether or not Miss Taylor survived?" Mash squeaked.

"They're pirates," Emiya told her. "They bet on everything."

Drake laughed. "Too true, too true!"

"Are we all done fawning over her like she's returned from the dead?" Euryale drawled as she daintily stepped out of the longboat. Asterios helped her down, and she favored him with a smile and a rare, "Thank you."

"Hey!" Rika squawked.

"Senpai is important to us," Ritsuka said firmly. "It's only natural that we worried about her."

"It's not like she was actually —"

Euryale froze. Her eyes met the Archer's, wide and shocked, as the Archer blinked back at her, bemused.

"Oh," said the Archer. "Little Euryale is here, too!"

“‘Little’ is an appropriate moniker,” the stuffed bear huffed. “Look at her. No curves at all! No chest to speak of! She’s tiny! Ack!”

The Archer stomped him back into the sand. “Be nice, Darling. Not everyone can be as radiant as me, you know!”

“You,” Euryale all but snarled. “What are *you* doing here, Artemis? In that silly getup, too!”

My stomach clenched. Almost everyone else on the beach turned to the Archer and, surprised, shouted, “Artemis!”

There was *another* goddess hanging around this Singularity? One of the actual Olympians at that?

“Oh, not really!” the Archer said bashfully. “I mean, yes, I *am* Artemis, but technically, I’m actually inhabiting Darling’s Spirit Origin, so at the same time, I’m not!”

“That’s a thing you can do?” Rika asked hysterically.

“Darling?” Mash gasped. “W-wait, then does that mean...!”

“Oh, ordinarily, no,” Artemis said, still talking as though she wasn’t dropping bombshell after bombshell on us. “I had to suppress so much of my Divinity to fit myself into this Saint Graph, it’s really only because I love my Darling so much that I was even willing to try. He gets into so much trouble, you know? I was worried!”

The dots connected, and I realized at that moment the same thing Mash must have just seconds ago. I looked down at the bear — an unassuming, frankly silly little stuffed animal that looked more like a children’s toy — and the fact that it *was* a bear he was inhabiting suddenly made a whole lot more sense.

“You’re Orion.”

The stuffed bear lifted its head from the sand. “P-leased to meet you.”

“Oh, fuck me.” Emiya laughed helplessly. “I thought I’d gotten used to it, but, Master, you really do wind up finding the weirdest nonsense imaginable, don’t you?”

“I-it’s not like I’m trying to!” Rika insisted.

The sad thing was that this probably wouldn’t be the weirdest thing we found ourselves stumbling upon. We still had several more Singularities to correct after this one, and while the weirdness here was abnormal in its quantity, I had a feeling there were still a lot more chances for us to find something even weirder than this.

“Hang on a tick,” said Drake, “does that mean we’ve got two goddesses here?”

“Only by technicality,” Artemis said. “Like I said, this is Darling’s Saint Graph, so you should just treat me like I’m him, okay?”

“And what about him?” Drake jerked her head over at Bellamy, who jolted at being addressed. “You a goddess in disguise, too, kiddo?”

“N-no, sir!” Bellamy said, going ramrod straight. “Er, ma’am! Uh, Captain Drake, sir! Just a regular, ordinary pirate! It’s an honor to meet you!”

“He *is* a Servant,” Mash muttered.

“Cut it out with the ass-kissing.” Drake waved a hand in front of her face as though to ward off a bad smell. “You’ll give me indigestion if you keep trying to crawl up my ass!”

Bellamy’s face went red. “Yes, uh, Captain! Sorry!”

Drake grunted. “You got a name there, kid?”

“Samuel Bellamy!” he reported dutifully. “Captain of the *Whydah Gally!*”

“That so?” Drake asked. “And what’s a brat like you doing out here, Samuel Bellamy, Captain of the *Whydah Gally?*”

Bellamy blinked, opened his mouth, but all that came out was an unintelligent, “Uh...”

“He was the other ship we nearly rammed into while we were escaping Blackbeard,” I said, coming to Bellamy’s rescue. “He was being chased by our mysterious friend and tried to escape into the storm.” A much riskier move for him, considering his weaknesses, so it must have been more desperate than he’d implied earlier. “He fished the three of us out of the ocean after I was knocked overboard.”

“It was a great help!” Bradamante added earnestly. “It’s thanks to him that we managed to make it here as safely as we did!”

Bellamy’s face got steadily redder, like he was embarrassed to receive such praise in front of what I had to assume was his own personal hero. At least he couldn’t say that he had underwear with her face printed on the front. In that respect, he was already topping my first meeting with Armsmaster.

Drake turned narrow eyes on him. “That so...” And then, a moment later, she broke out into her trademark grin. “Guess that makes you a friend! And with the busty bint over there and her stuffed bear, hey, that technically makes three more, don’t it?”

“Busty bint?” Artemis echoed indignantly.

“I’d argue about the stuffed bear part,” Orion murmured, holding up his blunted paws morosely, “but she’s not exactly wrong...”

Drake nodded. “Three more friends, by my count! Three new additions to the *Golden Hind*’s crew!”

Mash sighed. “Oh dear. I think I know where this is going.”

So did I. At this point, it was just pattern recognition.

“It’s Drake,” Emiya drawled. “There’s only one place it *can* go.”

“Ah, shucks, you guys know me so well!” Drake laughed.

“Or you’re just that predictable,” Ritsuka said.

“Then there’s no need for me to hold back!” Drake proclaimed shamelessly. “Today, we’re gonna celebrate making more new friends and have another PARTY!”

She was met by silence, and when she realized that no one else was cheering her on, she blinked and looked about. “Wait just one damn minute, where’s Bombe?”

Emiya coughed into his fist, and with his other hand, he pointed out towards the sea, where the other longboats were still several minutes out. The reason Bombe and the rest of the crew hadn’t cheered her on was simply because none of them had made it to the island yet. She, the twins, Mash, Emiya, Asterios, Euryale... They had all come in the same boat, and with Asterios there especially, I guess there just hadn’t been room for more of the crew.

“Well, damn,” said Drake, setting her hands on her hips. “Guess I forgot about the magic of your magic thingamabob, Emiya.”

“It’s a doohicky, actually,” Rika said matter-of-factly. “A watchamacallit, if you wanna be totally technical.”

Drake gave her a thoughtful hum. “That so?”

Emiya’s eyebrow twitched, even as Bellamy looked at Rika with horror.

“It’s called a propeller,” Emiya said tersely, “as my Master surely knows. For some reason, she thinks it’s funny to start teaching you nonsense about our technology and how it works.”

“Because it’s funnier that way,” Rika answered flippantly. “It’s not like this is going down in the history books or anything. What’s it matter if we have some fun with it?”

Drake laughed. “See? That’s the spirit! Who cares if she’s teaching me a crock of horseshit? Ain’t like I’m gonna be going around telling anyone in England! They’d burn me at the goddamn stake!”

“I guess it doesn’t really hurt anything,” Arash said mildly, “if Captain Drake doesn’t really care. It’s not like this is about mission critical details or anything, so it’s just harmless fun.”

I wanted to disagree solely on principle, but he wasn’t entirely wrong. Drake was the one getting pranked, so as long as Drake wasn’t bothered by it, it really didn’t matter at all. As he said, as long as she didn’t start feeding anyone bullshit about the stuff that mattered, it was just harmless fun.

“I guess so.”

“So how’s this propeller thingy of yours work, anyway?” Drake asked. “And more importantly, can it be scaled up to work on a ship?”

“In principle,” said Emiya, “yes, but...”

And he launched into a brief explanation of the function of a propeller and why it wouldn't be so simple to make a *Golden Hind* sized one, which I was honestly expecting. It would have been too convenient if he could project a motor, fuel, and propeller that could get us to and from the islands faster.

But that was something that wasn't as simple on a larger vessel. More weight being moved around meant it needed more support to keep it attached, and therefore it was more like you had to build the ship around the engine rather than just installing an engine in the ship.

“Shame, that,” Drake said when he was done. “Would've been mighty convenient.”

Emiya shrugged, as though to say, ‘what can you do?’

“Ahoy, Cap'n!” Bombe called as his ship made landfall. He glanced around at Bellamy and Artemis. “Are me eyes going bad, or am I seeing a couple of new folk hanging around?”

“You ain't blind yet, you old sea dog!” Drake said, grinning. She made her way over towards them as they pulled themselves from their boats. “We made some new friends today! New hands we're gonna be bringing aboard the *Golden Hind*! Sounds to me like cause for celebration, don't it?”

“AYE!” the crew roared back at her.

“The crew agrees with ya, Cap'n!” Bombe told her unnecessarily.

“I ain't deaf!” Drake said, to laughter from the crew. “Well, hell, with an endorsement like that, I can't exactly let you all down, can I? Looks like we're having another PARTY!”

The crew let out another thunderous cheer, and Bombe, grinning ear to ear to match his captain, turned to them. “You heard her, lads! Hop to it! The sooner we get camp set up, the sooner we can be balls deep in the nearest cup!”

“AYE!”

Drake, laughing, turned away from the boats and beckoned them along. “Come on then, you worthless shits! That little cliff up there looks like a great place to camp for the night, so grab your skivvies and get going!”

The crew reached into their longboats and produced bolts of canvas and large wooden stakes, and as a group, they trailed after her, following along as she led them further along the beach and deeper into the island.

There was, of course, a bit of a problem with that.

“Arash.”

He nodded. “I'll go and keep an eye on things. Don't want them catching the attention of any wyverns, do we?”

He vanished, right as Rika squeaked, “Wyverns?”

“Oh,” said Bradamante. “Yes, Master! There are wyverns on this island! I’ve already killed seventy-nine of them, in fact!”

“S-seventy-nine?” Mash squawked. “Th-there were that many wyverns here?”

The little gremlin hopped up — where from, I wasn’t even sure — and landed on her shoulder, his chest puffed out as though he would personally defend her. “Fou-kyuu fou fou!!”

“A nest of them, actually,” Artemis answered. “For whatever reason, they decided to settle atop the plateau. Is that normal wyvern behavior?”

Of course, none of us had an answer for her, because none of us was an expert on the nesting habits of wyverns. Orléans didn’t count by virtue of the fact that Jeanne Alter had been controlling them from the start, so nothing they’d done was what you could call natural.

Then again, this place wasn’t really natural either. There was no telling if the wyverns had found themselves adrift in this Singularity and chosen this island because it suited them best or if they had all just appeared on this island and had no reason to leave. I was inclined to believe the latter.

“Oh, great,” Euryale drawled. “This is such a fantastic mess you lot have dragged us into. How, exactly, is this safer than when we were hiding on that one island inside of the Labyrinth?”

“H-hey, it’s not like we were planning on this island being inhabited by a bunch of lizards with wings!” Rika squawked indignantly.

“I wouldn’t worry too much, Master,” Bradamante said. “They weren’t very strong. Granted, I’m not sure we found the, um, is ‘alpha’ the right word?”

Technically, the guy who did that study debunked the very idea of it shortly after he finished it, but, “It works well enough for shorthand.”

Emiya grunted. “I guess we’ll find out soon enough. At the very least, though, we should be able to put up a bounded field around to discourage any stragglers from wandering in.”

“W-will that even work on something like a wyvern?” Mash worried.

“We don’t lose anything by trying, do we?” Ritsuka pointed out.

“No,” I agreed. “And even if it doesn’t work, we’ll still have three Servants keeping a lookout, just in case. Trust them to keep us safe tonight.”

Provided the ‘alpha’ didn’t turn out to be something on the same scale as Fafnir, but if something like that was here, I expected we would have run into an actual dragon slaying hero to take care of it. On the off chance I was wrong, Siegfried should be just a short call away.

As Drake rounded the cliffside and disappeared from sight, Bellamy deflated with a sigh, sagging.

“Oh man,” he murmured, dragging a hand down his face. “I totally blew it! She must think I’m a complete dork!”

“I don’t know about a *complete* dork,” Rika said sassily. Bellamy only groaned, because that didn’t make him feel better at all.

“I don’t think you really need to worry about that, um, Captain Bellamy?” said Ritsuka, trailing into uncertainty at the end.

“Just call me Sam,” Bellamy said moodily. “All that captain stuff is just too formal.”

“Drake isn’t that uptight, Sam,” Ritsuka went on. “At worst, she was confused about how much respect you were showing her, and she might have thought that was weird.”

“And now she thinks I’m weird!” Bellamy moaned. He sounded more like a teenage boy who was pining after a crush than an experienced pirate captain pushing thirty.

“Well, this is just fantastic,” said Euryale. “Of all the pirates we could run into here on this island, it just had to be one who worships the ground that cow walks on.”

“Wouldn’t it be more accurate to call it the sea she sails on?” Emiya asked sardonically.

Euryale ignored him, and instead, she turned a glare in the direction of Artemis and Orion. “And to make matters *worse*...”

“Oh my.” Artemis smiled, but there was something menacing hidden in her expression. “It isn’t like we brought you here, Little Euryale. Us two lovebirds were just minding our own business on this island. We would have been fine staying here by ourselves the whole time!”

Euryale scoffed. “Typical of you Olympians.”

Asterios rumbled something that might have been an agreement.

“That’s not how Servants work,” I told her matter-of-factly. “If you’re here, it’s because you were summoned, and if you weren’t summoned by the Grail and you aren’t here to chase it, then you’re here to help us fix things in some way, shape, or form. To get proper history back on track.”

Even if, being completely honest, I would have preferred to sail away and leave both her and her diminished lover far in the rearview mirror.

Artemis turned that smile of hers my way. “And why should I care at all about proper — eep!”

In a show of athleticism that should not have been possible in the body of a stuffed bear — although, being fair, *moving* shouldn’t have been possible in the body of a stuffed bear — Orion leapt upwards and smacked his blunted paw against her face with all the force of a soggy noodle. Against all logic and reason, Artemis recoiled as though it actually hurt her.

“Ah! Darling!”

“Don’t be stupid!” The instant his feet touched the sand, Orion leapt back up again, and he smacked Artemis several more times. “I know that skull of yours is thick, but even you have to understand the situation, so stop pretending you’re a selfish idiot! If proper history is out of whack, then it’s the responsibility of any Heroic Spirit to do whatever it takes to fix it!”

He landed again, and this time, he crossed his arms and stared up at her imperiously, and just the image of it was so ludicrous that part of me wanted to believe I was dreaming.

“And since you’re the one currently occupying my Saint Graph,” he said sternly, “that means the responsibility falls firmly on you!”

Rubbing at her cheek as though his smacks had actually stung, Artemis sighed. “Fine. You win, Darling. Just as long as you don’t smack me anymore!”

Orion huffed. He might as well have said, ‘no promises.’

“I feel like I just watched a domestic violence incident,” Rika said faintly, a conflicted expression contorting her face, “but it was...far, far too weird and way too cute.”

“Yeah,” her brother agreed.

Euryale, with the tips of her ears burning red, hid her face in her hands like a niece who had just watched her aunt and uncle get into a heated argument at Thanksgiving dinner. I didn’t blame her.

Orion turned to me. “We’ll be coming with you. Just as long as you don’t send *me* into battle, okay? As much as I hate to admit it, I’m dependent on this clutz over here, so I can’t do anything by myself.”

I...wasn’t sure why he thought we were desperate enough to send a teddy bear into battle. Did we *look* that desperate? I’d been doing my best to make sure we didn’t.

“I...think we can promise that.”

Euryale grunted softly. Under her breath, she muttered, “That’s just great. Who are we inviting along next? Zeus? Poseidon?”

Asterios gave her a quiet, sympathetic rumble. At least Artemis didn’t have a track record of sleeping with just about any woman that breathed, for however low of a bar that was.

I didn’t respond to Euryale’s sarcasm; instead, I turned to Bellamy, who still looked miserable. “And you? I know we talked a little bit about it earlier, but we didn’t really formalize anything. Are you going to join us, Bellamy?”

“Is Captain Drake even going to want me?” Bellamy murmured sullenly.

“Didn’t you hear her earlier?” Rika asked incredulously. “Three new friends!”

She pointed at Artemis, then Orion. “One, two,” and then she pointed at Bellamy, “three.”

Slowly, Bellamy lifted his head and looked around, casting his eyes across our entire group. It only took him a second to do the math, and once he had, he started to perk up, his shoulders lifting along with his spirits.

“Hey,” he said. “Hey, hey!” A smile broke across his face. “Hey, yeah, you’re right! She *did* list me in the group of three new friends! That means...she accepted me, didn’t she?”

“I think she’d accept a ham sandwich if it called her captain,” Ritsuka mumbled, but the only one who seemed to hear him was Emiya, who snorted.

Bellamy turned, all smiles, towards Rika. “Hey, I needed that! Thanks, uh...” His brow furrowed. “Who are you, again? Sorry, I don’t think we were ever properly introduced.”

Actually... No, they weren’t. We just hadn’t really gotten around to it amidst everything else. Guess that was something we needed to rectify, wasn’t it?

One by one, I started pointing out the members of our group.

“The redhead is Rika.” Rika gave him a cheery little wave, smiling broadly. “The brunette next to her is her brother, Ritsuka.”

Ritsuka coughed into his fist. “We’re twins, technically.”

“Really?” Bellamy said, eyeing them skeptically. “You guys don’t really look anything like each other.”

“Fraternal,” the twins said simultaneously, like they got that alot. They probably did.

“He’s Emiya, Archer class Servant.” Emiya grunted a greeting. “The girl in armor is Mash.”

Mash bowed. “Pleased to meet you, Captain Bellamy!”

“Same!” said Bellamy. “And it’s just Sam, Mash.”

Mash smiled. “Sam it is, then!”

And lastly, “Euryale and Asterios.” I nodded to Bradamante. “You’ve already met Bradamante and Arash.”

“When I fished you guys out of the ocean!” Bellamy agreed.

“Fou!” the little gremlin protested.

“And this is Fou,” Mash added, placating him with a scratch under the chin. “He’s... I guess you could say he’s sort of like our mascot.”

Orion huffed and regarded Fou evenly. “You’re welcome to it, buddy. I might be cute and cuddly now, but in my normal form, I’m the pinnacle of manliness!”

He posed like he was some sort of bodybuilder, and being entirely fair to him, if he was human and as built as he was claiming to be, then it would have shown off his muscles quite nicely. As he was,

however, he looked more ridiculous than sexy, a parody of a great and powerful hero. If I was watching a satire, he would have fit right in.

“Fou!” Fou huffed, and he leaned in as Mash offered him more scratches.

“He’s also cuter than you,” Bellamy said honestly. He waved at the thing. “Hello, Fou! Nice to meet you!”

“Hey!” Orion squawked.

“Fou-kyuu kyuu-fou-fou.” As though to say, *The pleasure is all yours.*

“As for what we’re doing here,” I said, “you’ve already heard some of it, but to be more specific, we’re part of an organization whose job it is to correct things like this endless ocean, what’s called a Singularity, and restore history to its proper course.”

“And you do that by retrieving the Holy Grail,” Bellamy concluded. “Right?”

“By defeating whoever possesses it,” I confirmed. To head off the inevitable question, “Drake’s Grail is one belonging to this era, and one she got in proper history, so we have no reason to take it. The one we’re concerned about is the one designed specifically to throw things off course, and it’s currently in the possession of Blackbeard.”

Bellamy let out a low whistle. “That guy’s here? Man, you guys sure have your work cut out for you, huh?”

“I’ll say,” Rika huffed. She shuddered theatrically. “I’m gonna need *so* many showers after this is over to wash the *creep* off of me from when he checked me out. Ugh.”

“He’s the one who was chasing us yesterday,” said Ritsuka. “When you almost rammed into us in the middle of that storm.”

Bellamy let out an awkward laugh. “Yeah, sorry about that,” he said sheepishly. “I was trying to escape from my own creepy stalker. Wasn’t expecting to run into anyone else crazy enough to sail straight at the maelstrom like that.”

The twins both turned pointed looks my way, as though to accuse me of being the one crazy enough to do just that, but I pretended not to notice. It wasn’t like anyone had any better ideas at the time, and ignoring Hektor dropping in and knocking me overboard, it had worked out just fine.

“So that’s our current goal,” I said. “Defeat Blackbeard somewhere where we don’t have to worry about diving to the bottom of the ocean to retrieve his Grail, retrieve it, and that will return things to normal. We’ll go back to our headquarters and Drake will continue on with her life as though nothing happened.”

Because for all intents and purposes, nothing would have.

“And I guess us Servants go back to the Throne when it’s all said and done?” asked Bellamy.

“Not necessarily,” said Mash. “If a Servant is willing to continue working with us, we can take them back to Chaldea when we Rayshift. Bradamante, Siegfried, Queen Aífe, and El-Melloi II all decided to stay with us and help restore history past their original summonings.”

“You’d be welcome to come along, too, when this is over,” Ritsuka offered. “But you don’t have to if you don’t want to. Sir Lancelot decided to stay behind in Rome, and Jeanne d’Arc stayed behind in Orléans.”

Bellamy ducked his head. “Man, you’re throwing out some pretty famous names, there. I’m just a humble pirate. I’m sure those people are a whole lot more awesome than I am.”

“We’re two kids from Tokyo,” Rika told him, gesturing between herself and her brother. “You’re already way more awesome than us.”

Bellamy still didn’t look sure. It was almost unbelievable that he could be so humble when Drake was so bombastic and Blackbeard was so...Blackbeard.

“Think about it,” I said. “You don’t have to make up your mind right now, and the offer doesn’t expire.”

“Yeah...”

“Not going to ask us?” Euryale drawled.

I arched an eyebrow at her. “Would you accept it if I did?”

The huff that escaped her nostrils might one day have grown up into a snort. “Why would I?” she asked. “It’s not like I’m of any use to you as a Servant, and frankly, I’ve no interest in being your organization’s pet goddess.” She glanced pointedly at Fou. “You already have a mascot, after all.”

Asterios rumbled thoughtfully next to her, his expression wistful. “Might...be nice...have home...”

My cheek twitched, just barely. A home, a place to belong — I wondered if that might have been the thing he would have wished for on the Grail. Would securing his loyalty be as simple as offering that to him? Could we afford to pass up on the chance if it was?

Rika looked up at Asterios and stared at his horns. “I mean, you might have to be careful about hitting your head on some doorways, but...”

She turned to me expectantly, waiting for the final verdict. “We’d have to run it by the Director,” I hedged, “but I don’t see any reason why not.”

As long as he remained mostly as he had since joining up with us, then provided he didn’t start rampaging randomly or anything, there was no reason we should pass up on a Servant like him. He’d been remarkably docile, in fact, and for a Berserker as strong as he was, that was already as uncommon as it was incredible.

“Oh dear,” said Artemis. “Are you going to offer it to us as well? Oh my, I don’t know if I can accept, this is so sudden!”

“Hey,” said Orion, “you’re not forgetting this is a package deal, are you? You think I want to be stuck in this form any longer than I have to be? Of course we’re saying no!”

“But Darling,” she said, “weren’t you just the one who was saying it was your duty as a Heroic Spirit to help them out?”

Orion huffed and crossed his arms. “This and that are two different things! At least if we help them fix this place, I can be back to normal faster. If we go back with them to that Chaldea place just like we are now, then I’ll be stuck as a teddy bear for the foreseeable future! I refuse to suffer this humiliation an instant longer than necessary!”

“It might make it easier to get attention from other female Servants,” Artemis said slyly.

Orion stilled. If he’d been human, a cold sweat might have broken out on his brow.

“That’s a low blow,” he told her. “Especially since I know you’re just saying that so you can tag along with me and make sure that I don’t!”

“Phooey!” Artemis pouted. “You figured me out too quickly!”

“Of course I did! I know you too well for you to pull that kind of trick on me!”

“Oi!” Drake called down from atop the cliff above us, interrupting them. Her hands were curved around her mouth. “You lot coming? It ain’t much of a party without the guests of honor! And we need our expert chef!”

Emiya sighed. “Of course they do. When I became a Heroic Spirit, I never would have guessed that I’d spend most of my time after being summoned to save the world cooking meals for various historical figures.”

“Well, maybe if you were a little less good at it,” Rika said.

“You’re not asking him to start throwing, are you?” her brother said. “What’s to stop him from screwing up on purpose now?”

Rika’s eyes went wide as she panicked. “Wait — hey, that’s not what I was saying at all! Emiya!”

“I think there’d be a mutiny if I tried something like that,” Emiya said. He shook his head and shrugged helplessly. “It can’t be helped. I’m the one who got myself into this situation, so I might as well take responsibility.”

Rika wiped a hand across her brow. “We’re safe! Whew!”

Maybe that would teach her to be a little more careful about her teasing. It was all in good fun until someone took actual offense, and the minute it turned malicious, *I* would be the first to put my foot down.

“We might as well go join the party,” I said, “before they send someone else to make sure we didn’t get lost.”

“Or eaten,” Euryale said dryly.

Somehow, considering the — literal and figurative — firepower currently on this island with us, I didn’t think that one was particularly likely. To the twins, I said, “Standard rules apply.”

The twins just nodded; it was Bradamante’s face that lit up like a Christmas tree. She snapped off a crisp, obedient, “Of course, Master! You can count on me!”

Euryale heaved a sigh, but she didn’t offer any other protest, and Asterios seemed a little hesitant, but oddly hopeful. I didn’t think he had quite gotten used to the idea of being accepted as easily and eagerly as the pirates had that first day we “recruited” the two of them, but that didn’t mean that he didn’t enjoy it.

It was probably the first positive contact with other people he’d had since he died.

As we walked, following the footprints in the sand left behind by Drake and her crew when they all stomped past, Bellamy leaned over towards Bradamante and quietly asked, “Standard rules?”

“If any pirates assault any of us with unwanted advances, I’m free to remove them of their pride!” Bradamante answered with far more cheer than it really warranted.

Bellamy, wide-eyed and disturbed, leaned away. “Er, r-right...”

I could almost hear him thinking, ‘I guess that means me, too, doesn’t it?’

“Us Masters are also supposed to be careful about how much alcohol we consume,” Ritsuka added, because everyone had heard Bradamante and figured out what the conversation was.

“Wait, really?” Bellamy blurted out. “But that’s half the fun of a party!”

“Because we’re technically still on the clock as long as we’re here, Bell-boy.” A second after the words left her mouth, Rika’s face wrinkled. “Bell-boy? Sorry, that one totally sucks, I can definitely come up with something better than that!”

“And this island isn’t exactly a hotel,” her brother pointed out. She stuck her tongue out at him.

“Sam is still fine, guys,” Bellamy told them.

“So, u-um, Sam,” said Mash, “if you don’t mind me asking, what’s your relationship with Captain Drake?”

Bellamy’s face turned bright red, and there was enough tension in his body to string a violin. “R-relationship?”

Seemingly completely unaware of what she’d just implied, Mash nodded. “It seemed like...you really looked up to her, earlier.”

“Oh.” The tension eased out of Bellamy’s body. “Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

He looked up at the sky, towards the clouds that were painted orange and gold and pink by the sun slowly inching towards the horizon.

“She’s Captain Drake,” he said. “The great hero who circumnavigated the whole world and brought down the invincible Spanish armada. The greatest pirate to ever sail the seas! Yeah, I looked up to her when I was alive. Still do! She’s the golden standard of what a pirate should be! An inspiration to any sailor that left home to seek his fortune on the high seas!”

“Heh,” Rika chuckled under her breath. “*Golden standard*, he says...”

“Growing up, that was just the kind of sailor I wanted to be,” Bellamy went on. He laughed, self-deprecating. “Things...didn’t really turn out that way, though. You know? By the time I was captain of anything, I was already a pirate, and after that, I died in such an embarrassing way after just a single year. A sailor missing the signs of a bad storm on the way, that’s just kind of pathetic, isn’t it?”

“You’re the richest pirate to ever sail, if it makes you feel any better,” I told him.

He blinked at me, stunned. “Really?”

“There was an article about it after the remains of your ship were found off the coast. Forbes has you listed as the number one wealthiest pirate in history.”

The whole haul had been valued somewhere around a hundred and fifty million dollars, by modern day standards, which meant his great-great-great grandkids could have comfortably lived off of it, especially if he’d invested it and let it grow. Not the richest man ever, but more than enough to live off of.

That was why Dad had lamented missing his shot. Even if he had to hand it all over to a museum or something, just the finder’s fee would have been a hefty sum.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Bellamy said.

“I didn’t know you were interested in that kind of thing, Miss Taylor,” Mash said.

“My Dad —” The words choked in my throat as I realized just exactly what I’d been about to say.

But the damage had already been done, because everyone had noticed and was looking at me expectantly. I couldn’t hold this secret so tightly now, not when I’d already almost given it away.

And just this much should be fine, shouldn’t it? It wasn’t like Dad and his career somehow revealed all of the things I was supposed to be keeping quiet about.

“My Dad was a union rep for the Dockworkers,” I forced myself to say. “We didn’t live all that far south of where the wreck was discovered. Dad was always talking about what it would have been like to be the one who found it.”

“Huh,” said Rika. “A union rep and a literature professor. That’s an unlikely pairing if ever I’ve heard one.”

“I happen to think it sounds lovely!” said Artemis. “Don’t you agree, Darling? Very romantic!”

“It is!” Bradamante agreed.

“Almost as unlikely as a goddess and a hunter,” Orion said sarcastically. “And yet, here we are.”

“*Was?*” asked Ritsuka. “Did he...?”

The worst part was that I didn’t know. I’d never found out whether or not he survived Gold Morning. And even if he did...

“The same as your parents.”

And maybe that was a good thing. After all, if Dad had come with me to this world and somehow convinced Marie to let him join Chaldea, then it was very likely he would have been among the hundred-eighty or so people who died in the sabotage that crippled us. At least this way, I could pretend that he was with all of those who were erased by the Incineration, so saving the world would mean saving him, too.

“We’ll save them,” Ritsuka said firmly, and when I looked over at him, he was serious, resolute, and confident in a way that I didn’t see on him too often. “Everyone, including your dad. We’ll save all of them.”

He looked like a Master.

I turned away, back in the direction of the party. The celebrations had already started, although some of the crew were still setting up camp, and several of them, anticipating Emiya, had even begun collecting what firewood they could for him to use in his stove.

“Yeah. We will.”