

Chapter XCVI: Exaggerated Reports

“Thank goodness you’re okay, Miss Taylor,” Mash said. “When Hektor knocked you off of the ship, I really thought we’d lost you.”

Deliberately, I avoided looking back at the fire pit, where my companions were doing their level best — and failing — to make an appetizing meal out of the wyvern that Bradamante had brought back with her. They were still trying to figure out how to get the scales off so they could actually cook the thing.

“‘Okay’ is a relative term.”

My stomach probably wasn’t going to be very ‘okay’ later on today, but as long as it was edible, it was better to eat and not like it than to go hungry in a situation like this. I could, at the very least, comfort myself with the fact that Emiya would definitely be here to make dinner, and that meant I would only have to really suffer through one meal.

I did fully expect to suffer, though. The jury was still out on how much.

“But I’m not hurt, no,” I said. *Not anymore, at least.*

In the intervening time, I’d had the space to think about Hektor flinging me off the ship instead of killing me outright, and the only conclusion I’d been able to come to was that his intention had been to force us to separate. If I died going overboard, he got rid of an enemy Master. If I somehow managed to survive, he also had a decent chance of making at least one of our Servants follow me into the water, and we could have wound up just about anywhere.

Without Bellamy there to pick us up, he might have succeeded. *Had* succeeded, just not as well as he probably intended.

“I see,” said Mash, relieved. “I’m glad.”

I changed the subject.

“What about the twins? Everything okay with them? Romani and the Director said that no one else was injured aside from me.”

“They’re both fine,” Mash assured me. She sighed. “We were all worried...but it’s true, none of the rest of us were hurt in the battle. We all came out of it uninjured.”

“Speak for yourself!” Drake’s voice called from the background. “Those bastards did a number on my ship! My poor *Golden Hind* might not ever be the same again!”

“Everyone with the exception of the ship,” Mash amended, completely serious.

“Of course.”

I wasn't exactly an expert, so maybe I didn't have any room to say so, but the damage I remembered seeing to the ship had been mostly cosmetic. Maybe not easily repaired, but not serious enough to actually impede its function or its ability to sail. If the mast had been damaged, for example, then that probably would have been crippling, and I honestly had no idea how we would have fixed a problem like that.

Considering that it would be the easiest way to stop us from escaping, we should probably treat that as a priority target for the enemy. It was frankly something of a minor miracle that neither Blackbeard nor any of his crew had decided to try destroying it in the first place. We would've been sitting ducks if they managed to break it, and no amount of favorable winds or strong currents from the maelstrom would have been able to make up for losing the main mast and its sails.

If only disabling the *Queen Anne's Revenge* would be that simple.

"And you haven't seen any sign of those guys since you made it out of the storm?"

"None," Mash confirmed. "There's been no indication that Blackbeard or any of his Servants have been following us, although..."

Right. If Blackbeard wanted Euryale that much, there was no way he would give up that easily, especially not when he probably thought Hektor had managed to get rid of me. Down a Master and probably at least one Servant — if I'd been in his position, that would have been an opportune moment to chase down the enemy and take advantage of their weakness.

That made it all the more important that they got here as quickly as they could. Safety in numbers, and since Bradamante and Arash were here with me, they were technically down two Servants, which left them with three Servants — Emiya, Mash, and Asterios — who were actually combat capable.

Five on three wasn't the best of odds, especially when they had so many people to protect.

"We can talk about that when the rest of you get here," I told her. "There's no point in making plans until we're all in the same place to talk about them."

Mash nodded. "Right!"

If he wasn't as much of a fool as he seemed and his ship got stronger the more Servants he had on his crew... But no, as I said, that was something we could talk about later. There was no use speculating about it right now.

"Stay safe, Mash. Blackbeard and his team might not be the only enemy Servants in this Singularity."

Bellamy had almost been one, after all.

"You, too, Miss Taylor," said Mash. "We'll be there soon!"

The line cut, severing our connection, and I let my arm flop back down to my side. Still the better part of half a day until they got back, which left me not much else to do except watch four Servants struggle to skin a dragon.

It almost sounded like the opening to a bad joke.

When I turned back to look at the motley crew working the wyvern's corpse, they hadn't seemed to get much farther than when I'd turned away from them. Arash was using my knife only as a knife, for obvious reasons, and Bellamy had produced one of his own from somewhere, a thin, curved thing with a wicked looking blade, but they were still having difficulty getting anywhere with the wyvern's tough hide. Bradamante was holding the whole thing aloft, and had been for so long that I wouldn't have blamed her for complaining about her arms being tired.

The Archer and her plush bear were the only ones who weren't doing anything; they stood off to the side, watching, like I was.

I...wasn't quite sure what to do with the teddy bear thing. Mostly, I'd been trying to ignore, because it wasn't the most ridiculous thing I'd ever seen — not even if we were just counting my career before Chaldea — but it still felt really odd. Almost out of place.

“Any luck?” I asked, more formality than anything else.

“Not really,” said Arash. “This is slow going.”

“It's tougher than it looks!” said Bellamy. “Man! This isn't anything at all like descaling a fish, is it?”

I could have told him that from the beginning.

“Look, Darling, they're struggling,” said the Archer. “Shouldn't you give them a hand?”

“With what hand?” the bear said a little hysterically, waving his blunted paws around. I couldn't help imagining a teddy bear version of Jack Slash waving around toy knives, and just the idea was so absurd it made me want to laugh. “I'm a plush bear! I don't have any hands! On top of that, what makes you think I know anything about how to prepare a wyvern? It's not the same as other animals, you know! I'm insulted that you think it's that easy!”

“Hm,” the Archer hummed. “Maybe we should have brought back something a little easier to deal with, then?”

“This was all that we could find on that plateau!” Bradamante reminded her. “There wasn't even a rabbit or anything!”

And even if there had been other animals up there, they would all have been scared off by the wyverns and the Servants killing each other. I imagined that anything brave enough to stay so close to a nest of wyverns in the first place had been frightened when two squishy-looking humans came up and started slaughtering everything else that moved.

Of course, alternatively, I could have just dragged up a crab or two from the colony off the shore — kind of frustrating that the most stable thing around this Singularity was the population of phantasmal crabs. They would at least have been easier to prepare than the wyvern, although likely not any better tasting, considering who was here to cook them.

I *did* toy with the idea of offering to let my bugs crawl in and quite literally flay the thing, save us all some time and effort, provided they didn't just pop from the overload of being near it, corpse or not, but I had a feeling that none of them would be at all eager to handle the meat afterwards. Bugs tended to freak people out, and although I had gotten used to them, I could recognize that most people were still repulsed.

Instead, I found as good a place to sit down as I could and pulled out my two ravens, setting them aside so I could turn my bag inside out and let it dry after my dip into the ocean. The ravens themselves were, conveniently, waterproof, but considering what was flying about on this island, I wasn't about to risk them by having them fly around. Something told me that wyverns wouldn't be much impressed by their mana cannons.

It was a shame they'd been almost completely useless in this Singularity. The only place where I might actually have been able to do something with them was during that first fight with Drake, and that giant hermit crab had distracted me so thoroughly that I'd forgotten to even consider it.

Then again, Drake herself might have wound up shooting them out of the air if I actually had used them, so maybe it was better that I hadn't.

With that taken care of, I opened up my map, trying to study the two remaining islands that we hadn't yet visited. We hadn't gotten an in-depth scan, not the way we had with the Etna ley line, for obvious reasons, so there was no telling what or who might be waiting on those islands, but the geography was mapped well enough to get at least some idea of what each of them looked like, and therefore which of them might be a good place to plan an ambush against Blackbeard and his crew.

For this island, the disadvantages were fairly obvious, because it was basically a giant plateau. Sure, there was some advantage in having this much height, so if we cleared out the wyverns up top and made sure that there wasn't anything else up there to surprise us, that would be a great vantage point to fire down on the *Revenge*. It was also not particularly defensible, though, because as a counterpoint, Blackbeard could — with the Grail powering him — just bombard us until the structure got too unstable and collapsed.

It wasn't necessarily a bad idea, but if the goal was to force him into a land battle, then it would fail automatically.

The next closest island was basically a giant caldera, and I was a bit embarrassed that I was only noticing now that the islands we'd yet been to seemed to conveniently be dominated by a singular characteristic geological structure. "New Crete" and Drake's "paradise" were the obvious exceptions, since they looked more like you might expect out of an island, but that second island, "Crescent Island," and this one, and even the next one? All were taken up almost entirely by that single defining feature.

For the next island in particular, it was a caldera, because that seemed to be what the entire island was: a giant caldera. Inside that caldera was a lake and probably at least some land, since there were trees covering half of it, but if there was a cave system of some kind that would make it easier to get into that caldera instead of having to hike up and over it, well, that wasn't on the map. Or, I should say, if it was, then it wasn't obvious enough for me to spot it without going over the whole thing with a fine tooth comb.

A shame. Especially if there'd been a large gap in the one side, a gap big enough for a ship to sail through to make it inside the caldera, that would have been an excellent place to set up an ambush. Force Blackbeard to come our way through a single entrance? We could have trapped the entire place thoroughly enough to take him out — or at least weaken him — without having to get into a direct fight at all.

The way it *actually* was would be bad for us. Sure, getting up on the hillside would give us a great vantage point for our Archers to attack from afar, but it left us open to those cannons of his far more than I was comfortable with. If he used his Noble Phantasm, he could bomb the hillside until there was nothing left of us except ashes. The only part that would be difficult for him would be having Hektor sneak in and steal Euryale from under our noses, and as Hektor had proven by flinging me overboard, that wasn't as tall an order as it might have sounded.

The archipelago was much better. Not perfect, but it was much more manageable in terms of setting up that ambush. It was just as hard to defend, if it came down to the cannons, but the water that filled the space between the islands would be much shallower, so we should be able to take him down without worrying about losing the Grail. A couple dozen feet was a much less worrying dive than sending our Servants to the bottom of the ocean.

The ironic thing was that we actually would have been best off if we had stayed on New Crete, done something to advertise our presence for him to find, and hunkered down inside the Labyrinth. His cannons and his Servants would have been almost useless to him there, and we could have picked him off without much trouble at all.

My lips pursed.

In fact, that might still be the best idea. Not New Crete, no, because I doubted we'd be able to make the trip back there without running into him again, and I didn't want to take more unnecessary risks out near that maelstrom, not when it had nearly gotten me killed the first time. But...if we made our way down to the archipelago, picked the largest plot of land we could find, and *then* set up the Labyrinth so that he had to chase us down into it...

It could work. Not everyone would be happy with it — Bradamante least of all, I thought, since this wasn't exactly "chivalrous" — but as far as plans went, it was solid enough that it might just be good enough to beat Blackbeard and all of his friends. None of them looked to have a defensive Noble Phantasm of any kind, after all, so as long as we could get in a solid enough hit, that was all it should take to win.

Now I just had to wait for the rest of the team to arrive so that we could go over this plan and finetune it a little more. Emiya, I was sure, would almost certainly have something to say about it, if only to offer to be the one to take Blackbeard out.

While I was busy brainstorming, the others continued to struggle with skinning the wyvern and preparing it properly, and I was long done formulating my plan for taking down Blackbeard — and was getting pretty hungry besides — when they finally managed to get somewhere. It was kind of funny, in a sad, ironic way, to think that it took Heroic Spirits literal hours to figure out the proper way of dealing with a wyvern carcass, but eventually, it got more boring than anything else.

It wasn't like our trips aboard Drake's ship were that much more engaging, though. At least there, we had pirates singing to entertain ourselves, for whatever that was worth.

Of course, once they finally got the wyvern skinned, gutted, and the meat cleaned and cut, they ran into the next obvious problem: how were they going to cook it without proper cookware or a stove? That stumped them for a good fifteen minutes or so, until Bellamy remembered that he could manifest *parts* of his ship selectively instead of bringing the whole thing into reality, and one of the things a proper ship had was a kitchen, complete with cookware. Conveniently, that also meant a wood-burning stove, which he manifested just for the occasion.

The look of pride on his face would only last until the first time he saw Emiya project a stove, but I did him the kindness of keeping that to myself. No need to burst his bubble.

So it was that by the time I finally got served up a plate with something edible on it (I accepted it from Bradamante with a simple "thanks"), the sun had started westward and it was really more of a late lunch than a breakfast. That also meant that I was hungry enough that I might just have eaten it raw, if they had tried to serve it to me like sushi.

I only gave the strips of pale meat a dubious look for a few seconds before I gave in and used a knife — Bellamy's, not mine — to stab the nearest, most edible bit and stick it in my mouth. Everyone else watched me with bated breath, eager to hear my verdict on this strange monstrosity they'd cooked.

"So?" Bellamy asked eagerly. "Is it good? It's good, right?"

"If I could cook in this tiny body," the bear muttered, "she'd be singing my praises and begging me for an entirely different kind of white — ack!"

A huff of air left him when the Archer stomped him into the sand, which neatly hid the sound of my knife skittering across the metal dish Bellamy had provided for me.

"Hush, Darling," she said with a smile so fake it looked plastic. "Words like that are only for me, okay? We can save that sort of talk for later, in private. I'm sure she doesn't need to hear that while she's eating."

I had to wonder what she would have thought of Alec then, because he would have had a much worse line than something so tame.

When I swallowed, Bradamante immediately asked, "How was it, Master? We tried our best!"

It tastes like chicken, Alec would have joked.

"Bland," I said. "Dry. Tough. You cooked it for too long."

Their faces fell as I gave them my honest opinion. Bellamy clicked his tongue and kicked at the sand with his boot. "Damn. I knew we should've taken it off the fire sooner!"

I stabbed another strip of meat and refrained from telling them they could've made a sauce from some of the berries around the island. I planned on having my ravens go around and pick a few

sprigs, then check to make sure they were actually edible instead of something poisonous, and I wasn't sure these guys would have been able to tell the difference on their own.

Maybe. Probably, even, because wilderness survival was an actual skill they would have needed in their lives. But I also didn't trust them to know how to make a good sauce out of those berries, so no need to risk upsetting my stomach like that.

"You're still eating it," Bellamy noted skeptically.

"I'm hungry," I told him dryly. "I don't have the luxury of being too picky."

Arash smirked and shook his head a little. "They say hunger is the best spice."

"W-well, I guess there is that," Bradamante said awkwardly. "So, on the bright side, it's at least edible! That's something, isn't it? Right, Master?"

Some would argue it was the bare minimum. Emiya would probably have been incredibly offended by the mere suggestion.

"It's enough." *For now.*

Nonetheless, my review was enough to turn them off of wyvern meat, although Bradamante and Bellamy were both at least willing to give it a try on their own before passing final judgment, and Bradamante discovered it was exactly as I had described it: dry, tough, and mostly tasteless. Bellamy, on the other hand...

"Hey, this isn't half bad!" he said as he munched on a strip. "A bit on the chewy side, and I've definitely eaten richer, but I would've given my left arm to have food like this on voyages!"

...had never had the pleasure of a meal cooked by Emiya.

"Geez, you guys must be picky!" he said, already on his third strip. "You really don't know what you're missing, you know!"

"Nobody tell him," I ordered wryly.

Arash laughed. "Yeah, it'll be a lot more fun to see his face when he experiences it firsthand."

Bradamante looked a little more conflicted. "I-I suppose so," she said hesitantly. "And it's not like I can truly do Sir Emiya's cooking justice with just my words..."

Bellamy blinked and took a moment to swallow. "Emiya?"

"You'll find out soon enough," I promised him.

"So ominous," the bear sighed dreamily. "Chicks with secretive dark sides are so sexy — ack!"

The bear wheezed again as the Archer stomped him into the ground some more, so brutal that it kicked up a plume of sand.

“You know, Darling, the moon has a dark side, too,” she said pleasantly. “Would you like to see it for yourself?”

The bear struggled to lift its head enough to look up at her.

“I think I’m seeing it right now, and it’s incredibly unflattering — gah!”

She smiled and ground her heel into his back, and somehow, that was hurting him. “What was that?”

“S-save me...” the bear rasped, reaching out one blunted paw as though begging for water in the desert.

I wondered what it would actually take to kill him, come to think of it. His body didn’t have organs in the traditional sense, or even bones for that matter, and I’d seen him take several hits that probably would have killed him if he did. *Could* he even be destroyed, or was his existence entirely dependent on the Archer, so he would only disappear when she did?

How ironic it would be if he was technically indestructible, despite being nothing more than a stuffed bear.

At the very least, I could trust that the Archer herself wouldn’t do anything that could kill him, so whatever abuse she put him through, that was the threshold I should probably use. A pity he was too small to serve as a good distraction, otherwise we might have been able to use him as one.

Fuck me, I was actually questioning the durability of a *stuffed bear*.

When Bellamy and I were done eating, cleanup of our plates and utensils was fortunately extremely easy, because all he had to do was dematerialize them, since they were part of his Noble Phantasm. The remains leftover from the wyvern, unfortunately, were not so easy to rid ourselves of, and while a part of me would have loved to use its body for the sorts of incredibly rare ingredients it contained...

“If killing it was that easy, it’s not worth harvesting for parts.”

Arash made a noise of understanding in his throat. “Yeah, that’s a bit of a conundrum, isn’t it? If a dragon like that doesn’t take all of your effort to bring down, then it isn’t worth the effort of harvesting its scales or fangs.”

Which wasn’t to say that no one back at Chaldea would have any use for the scales or fangs or even the organs, but unless I was mistaken, the only one who had the skills in the necessary disciplines to actually make something of them was Da Vinci. I didn’t know Sylvia’s family craft, but she hadn’t made any mention of wyvern parts at any point during or after Orléans, so I had to assume it wasn’t relevant. The same for the other couple of magi still left in our tiny group of twenty people.

“It can’t stay here,” I said, because that might attract more wyverns, or with how this Singularity was, something *worse*, “but I’m not sure what else to do with it.”

At this point, I wouldn’t be surprised if it turned out *Moby Dick* was roaming about somewhere.

“I’ll handle it,” Arash promised. To Bradamante, he added, “I won’t be gone long, but I’ll leave things in your hands until I get back.”

Bradamante straightened like a little girl being called on in class. “You can count on me, Lord Arash!”

He smiled. “I know I can.”

And then he bundled the carcass up the way a housewife would her groceries at the store and took it towards the other end of the island, far enough away that any animals that went snooping wouldn’t immediately be led back to our little makeshift camp. Not so far, however, that he was technically out of my range, but fairly close to it.

I wasn’t sure if that was a deliberate choice, but I wouldn’t have put it past him.

“Huh,” said Bellamy, bemused. “Wonder what that’s about.”

“Obviously, it’s because he doesn’t trust us,” the bear said ruefully, shaking his head.

“Or perhaps it’s simply that he doesn’t trust *you*,” the Archer said pleasantly, “not to assault his poor Master with your lustful gaze.”

“Well.” The bear looked at me askance. I raised an eyebrow back at him. “If appreciating beauty is a crime, then consider me guilty — ack!”

The Archer lifted her foot, still smiling as though nothing was wrong, and stomped the bear into the sand again.

“Oh, Darling, haven’t I told you enough times?” she said. “The only one who can withstand your lustful stare is me!”

“He can stare all he wants. I don’t particularly care,” I told her mildly, and her smile froze. “The instant he crosses the line, though, I’ll string him up in the nearest tree and introduce him to a few of my *friends*.”

The sand near the bear shifted, and from its hiding spot, an absolutely enormous spider shook itself free, wagging its fangs. The bear squeaked and went still, as though he could escape notice by not moving.

It was not, unfortunately, a true sand spider, it was just a tarantula that looked close enough to pass for one at first glance. More was the pity. An actual sand spider might have been useful, if only for the sorts of things Da Vinci could make after studying its venom. Already, I could imagine a special potion for coating Arash’s arrows, one that would break down a Servant’s spiritrons and erode their body, a potent addition to our arsenal.

Too bad my imagination was where that would remain.

“Oh my,” the Archer said faintly.

Bradamante breathed a weary sigh even as Bellamy grinned and let out a low whistle. “Damn,” he said. “She’s got fangs!”

I did my best to keep my grimace off of my face, because that pun was just bad.

“I-I’ll be good,” the bear promised meekly.

Further out, I waited until Arash had left the wyvern’s corpse behind and started back our direction before setting upon it with every bug I had available in the vicinity. In death, at least, it seemed to have lost some of its mystery, or perhaps the fauna in this Singularity were simply more used to it, because they didn’t immediately explode from getting too close and being overwhelmed by its innate magical power.

That might have been why it had actually been a problem in Orléans; the wyverns there hadn’t been native to that time or that location, and because they’d been from a bygone era, the bugs weren’t accustomed to the level of power those wyverns took for granted. The end result was bugs popping whenever they got too close.

In this Singularity, with things mashed together the way they were, it seemed that the bugs were more acclimated to that power, so they didn’t explode, not even when I set them to devouring the corpse and removing the evidence of its existence. The organs and the remaining meat were going to be easy enough to deal with, it seemed, but the scales and the bones looked like they were going to be much more stubborn.

Arash returned a minute or so later, his job done, and when he saw the bear cowering away from me and my spider, he lifted an eyebrow at me, amused. I just met his gaze, completely unapologetic, because I’d meant everything I said.

With everything else taken care of, it left us without much else to do while we waited for the others to arrive, so Bellamy pulled out a bunch of dice, a table, and wood-carved cups, all from his Noble Phantasm, and introduced us to a game he called, “Liar’s Dice.”

I begged off playing the first couple of rounds and instead watched as he roped in Arash and Bradamante, listening as he explained the rules and went through a “practice round” so they could get a feel for it. It was a little bit like poker, and yet nothing like poker at the same time, but it wasn’t all that hard to understand how it all worked.

At its core, it was a mind game. The guessing and the bets didn’t matter quite as much as getting into the opponent’s head and making them think what you wanted them to think.

Lisa would have loved it, although we might have had to forbid the use of powers if we had ever played it with her. She would have cleaned house otherwise.

Eventually, I found myself confident enough in my grasp of the game to join in, and we passed the time like that, playing successive games against each other. Bellamy proved surprisingly intense after I went on a winning streak — it turned out that being able to bluff with a perfectly straight face was incredibly important in a game that revolved around bluffing. Who would’ve thought?

The hours passed like that, mindlessly, and the sun slowly slunk towards the horizon all the while. The afternoon wore on, and evening drew closer and closer, and eventually —

“Master.”

— Arash drew my attention and nodded his head out towards the water. When I turned to look, a familiar ship, painted in red, black, and gold, stood out from the waves, headed right for us. Bellamy, having realized something was going on, turned to look, too, and he squinted as though that would somehow make it easier to see more clearly.

“Huh,” he said. “That’s the *Golden Hind*? I mean, I’ve heard stories, but to think I’m actually going to get the chance to see it for myself...”

“A perk of the job,” I said wryly. “Fighting King Arthur with Cúchulainn, sharing a campfire with Jeanne d’Arc, bathing in the heart of Rome with Emperor Nero...”

“And now sailing with Francis Drake,” Arash concluded. “Yeah, it’s pretty incredible, isn’t it? Never would have thought this is the sort of thing I’d be getting up to in the afterlife while I was alive.”

If I hadn’t done it all myself, it would have sounded too fantastical to be true.

“Geez,” Bellamy said. “If a job like that had been around back in my day, I might not have become a pirate!”

It was still another hour before the *Golden Hind* made it close enough to drop anchor and deploy the longboats, and then the longboats took several minutes to make it to shore — one in particular raced out ahead of the rest, propelled by modern machinery and the Servant who could project it instead of mere human muscles and wooden oars.

I guess the twins were just too impatient to let Drake’s sailors do their jobs. One of these days, we were going to find ourselves in a situation where Emiya *didn’t* have a gadget he could pull out of his ass to make things quicker and easier, and, being fair, Rika probably wouldn’t be the only one missing the convenience.

As the first longboat slammed to a stop in the wet sand, I went down to meet them, watching the twins scramble out of it like it was on fire with some amusement. They were in such a rush that they both nearly stumbled and fell face first into the sand, compared to the much more sedate pace Mash and Emiya were taking things.

“Senpai!” the twins cried as they raced towards me.

“Ritsuka,” I greeted them, “Rika, Mash, it’s good to see —”

The air was nearly driven from my lungs as a ballistic missile with red hair launched itself into my gut. A pair of arms wrapped around my torso as though trying to squeeze whatever was left of my breath from my body as something burrowed into my shoulder.

“Senpai!” Rika said, muffled by my jacket. “You’re okay! You’re really okay! You’re really, really okay!”

Bewildered, I looked to Ritsuka, who had at least managed to keep himself from trying to tackle me into the beach, but his eyes were shimmering and he looked on the verge of breaking out into tears himself. If I tried to ask, I was afraid he would break down, too, and just start sobbing and sniffing.

I looked down at the girl buried in my chest. What was I supposed to be doing with this?

“One second, you were there, and then, you were gone!” Rika babbled. “And — and I couldn’t see you, and Arash wasn’t there, and Tii-chan wasn’t there, and I-I thought...I thought...” She broke off there, and she made a strange sound that was somewhere between a giggle and a sob. “But you’re here! You’re alive! You’re really, really, really okay!”

Reports of my death were greatly exaggerated, Lisa might have said there. It wasn’t the right thing for the situation, so I wisely kept it off of my tongue.

I wasn’t quite sure what else to do, though. I didn’t... It wasn’t that I had never given anyone comfort before. That moment with Brian, pulling him back from the headspace of his trigger event — but even that was a bit different. Not the same. I didn’t think it would work quite so well on a girl like Rika, and this wasn’t about trying to anchor her to the moment instead of letting her get stuck in her own head.

So maybe a good question was...if that one, terrible day that had so changed the course of my life had turned out to be nothing more than a nightmare, how would Mom have comforted me? What would she have said and done as I cried into her chest about how it was so real that I’d thought she died?

If I could have had my wish on the Holy Grail, how would Mom have soothed me? How would she have filled the shadow that Dad had drowned in?

Slowly, hesitantly, I brought my arms up and gently wrapped them around Rika’s shoulders. I closed my eyes and imagined for a moment the woman I had always looked up to, the one person I had always felt was better than I could ever hope to be. Her voice was the one I needed, just then.

“I’m here, Rika,” I murmured into her ear. “It’s okay. I’m here.”

Rika only clutched me tighter, as though to reassure herself that it was true.