

## Chapter LXXXIV: Paradise of the Pirate Queen

“LAND!” Rika cried as she threw herself onto the sand. This was one of those times where I didn’t blame her, because all of us were feeling a bit peaky from the trip in the longboats — significantly smaller than the main ship, and therefore much more susceptible to the chop and churn of the waves.

Ritsuka and Mash were similarly sickly looking, pale and drawn as I was sure my face must have been, and the only thing keeping Ritsuka’s mouth shut was likely the fact that I was pretty sure he would throw up if he opened it.

I couldn’t claim to be much better. The main ship had rocked a little, but it had been remarkably stable, and the longboats had been significantly less so. My own stomach was less than happy to have spent time in one and all the more glad to be out of it and back on solid land.

“Now I know you ain’t never been on a ship afore, girl,” the lead pirate — who had eventually introduced himself as Gallagher — said with a grin. He took great delight in our suffering. “Ain’t no sailor worth his salt what would kick up a fuss about a little trip in a longboat.”

Rika rolled over in the sand and sprawled out. She scowled at Gallagher. “As soon as the world stops spinning, I’m gonna kick you in the nuts.”

Gallagher laughed and shook his head. “Bigger women than you have tried, lass. I bet it won’t hurt much but tickle.”

Rika did the mature thing and stuck her tongue out at him. Gallagher just kept chuckling as he looked back at the longboat we had all just climbed out of. Only now were the rest of his crew arriving in their own boats and clambering onto shore.

“It’s the damndest thing, though.” He turned to Emiya. “Where’d you get that contraption that let you get here without rowing? And where’d it go?”

“Who knows?” Emiya said with a shrug. “I’m sure I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.”

I favored him with an unimpressed look as Gallagher shook his head again. This wasn’t the first time Emiya had done something so ridiculous, so maybe I should have expected him to project a motor, complete with propeller and fuel, to speed up the trip to shore. At that point, it may actually have been more shocking if he hadn’t had something up his metaphorical sleeves.

“Fou!” the little gremlin popped up on Mash’s shoulder, and then it hopped down to land in the sand and trotted over to Rika.

“Ah, Fou!” said Mash. “Have you been here the entire time?”

“Fou!”

“I guess he decided to tag along again,” Ritsuka said faintly.

The shudder of revulsion that swept down my spine sent my stomach to clenching again, and I squeezed my eyes shut and took a deep breath to try and calm the nausea. To distract myself, I stretched out into the swarm that I had started to feel as we got closer to the shore, and in the background, I heard Rika say, “See, you understand, don’t you, Fou? Those tiny boats weren’t any fun at all!”

“Fou-kyu-fou!” As though to say, no, they weren’t.

Wait. Was that...?

I turned around, nausea almost forgotten as I walked back down towards the ocean, my brow furrowing. I reached out into my swarm, tugging on what I felt at the other end, and I was halfway wondering if it was even possible for my powers to hallucinate.

“Taylor?” Arash asked, having noticed the first out of everyone. “Something wrong?”

The pirates gave me a wide berth, like they were afraid I would make good on my earlier threats if they got too close, but I paid them no mind beyond the fact that they were staying away.

“Senpai?” asked Ritsuka, stronger now that he’d had a moment to calm his stomach.

I stopped where the surf started and waited, examining what I felt but couldn’t yet see. The others, sensing that something unusual was happening, started paying attention to me now, and Emiya came up beside me, tensed and narrow-eyed.

“We expecting company?” he asked lowly.

“Yes and no.”

Company, of a kind, but not the kind he was worried about.

He huffed. “That was informative.”

“There’s...something *strange*...”

At that moment, the water pulled back, and my unusual acquisition appeared from under the waves, skittering slowly up the soft, wet sand of the beach on thick, segmented legs.

Emiya leapt back, arms spread and hands held out, ready to call up his favorite swords. “What the hell?”

“Holy shit!” Rika scrambled to her feet. “Look at the size of that thing!”

Echoing cries of alarm spilled out of the pirates, who all backpedaled away from the giant hermit crab that was making its way towards us. Someone pulled out a pistol, but a fly buzzing up in front of his face made his shot go wide, and the lead ball hit the sand instead of the crab.

“Shit!” one of the other pirates — Fournier, I recognized him — reached for his sword.

“Miss Taylor!” Mash cried, and her shield materialized at the same time as Bradamante’s blazed into existence.

“Calm down,” I told them.

Bradamante, who had looked ready to jump into a fight, hesitated, and Mash made it one step before she stopped, looking over at me incredulously. Gallagher stared at me like I’d grown another head, and Fournier looked to Gallagher, sword halfway drawn, for orders about what to do.

Like nothing was wrong, I crouched down, and the giant hermit crab scuttled over to me, presenting itself for inspection. It held out one massive pincer, and I ran my fingers down over the brick red surface, careful not to cut myself on the surprisingly sharp ridges of its claw.

Strangely enough, it felt exactly like it was supposed to, which was to say the same as any other hermit crab, despite the fact that it was the size of a large St Bernard and probably three or four times as heavy. Maybe more, considering the size of the shell it was using, and where the hell had it found one big enough to fit its body into?

“Senpai?” asked Ritsuka. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” I answered simply.

“That’s...a Phantasmal,” said Mash. “Miss Taylor, you... Your powers can even control something like that?”

Apparently, I hadn’t been sure before, and we hadn’t encountered anything that would qualify under my powers in Orléans or Septem, but I guess if it was something that fell under the category of animal my powers applied to, then I could control it just the same.

“Can’t say I’ve ever seen one this size before,” Arash commented as he crouched down next to me. “Those claws look pretty strong, too.”

“O-oy,” said Gallagher. “Missy, is that your *pet*?”

“In a way.” I turned to Emiya. “Can you make me a sword?”

He gave me a strange look, but a moment and a mumbled incantation later, an ordinary broadsword landed tip-first into the sand next to my crab.

“Thanks.”

The hermit crab reached out with its massive claw and took hold of the sword’s blade, and then, with a brief, metallic shriek, snapped it in half. The two halves fell to the sand unceremoniously, and a few seconds later, dissipated into motes of light that flickered and vanished.

More than one of the pirates — several of whom had drawn swords — looked dubiously down at their own weapons. Suddenly, they were much less sure about risking them against the hermit crab, especially the ones that weren’t in the best shape.

“Very strong,” Arash amended. “That’s definitely a magical beast, if it can break steel like that.”

“It’s kinda cute,” said Rika as she strode up to join us. “You know, in that vaguely horrifying kind of way.”

“Unusual, to see a Phantasmal this far out from the Age of Gods,” Emiya said. “But this far out from the Age of Gods...I guess something that can only break steel is about as much as you can expect.”

“*Only* break steel?” Gallagher goggled.

“I wouldn’t expect you to know.” Emiya shook his head. “But Mash, Bradamante, Arash, you should all be able to feel it, right? Even as incredible as it is...”

“Yeah,” Arash agreed. “It’s still too weak to be a threat.”

I wondered if they would have the same opinion if I told them that there was an entire colony of these crabs down there. Probably. With the obvious exception of Mash, they all had more than enough firepower to take them all out in one go, if it came to that, and none of them would flinch to do it.

Rika might actually mutiny if I suggested stocking up on them to help shore up our food supplies, even if just one of these could probably feed our entire group for a week.

I stood up. “It looks like Romani was right. If something like this is here, then it wouldn’t be that big of a stretch to expect the more dangerous kind of Phantasms, too.”

“Sounds like we’re going to have to be a little more careful about where we set up camp,” Arash said.

“Sounds like lunch to me!” a new voice called from the nearby copse of trees.

Everyone else turned towards it, Mash and Bradamante especially whipping their shields about defensively.

“Boss!” Gallagher shouted.

“Boss Bombe!” the rest of the crew cheered.

The last one to turn was me, because I was the least surprised to see him, and I got a good look at the man who had been stepping so indelicately through my swarm. Swaggering, really. Of all the pirates we’d met so far, he turned out to be the one who looked the most like one, with a red bandanna over his head, a black patch over one eye, and several thin scars across his face. He couldn’t have looked more like a pirate if he’d stepped out of the pages of *Treasure Island*.

“Looks like you made a few new friends there, Gallagher.” Bombe grinned, and from the sash around his waist, he pulled out a flintlock pistol and took aim. “Real shame we ain’t in the business of accepting visitors — alive, anyway.”

Mash and Bradamante both tensed, and Emiya projected his usual pair of swords, scowling.

“Are you sure that thing will even fire?” I asked him calmly.

“What kind of question is that?” Bombe laughed. “Course I am! I loaded it and cleaned it myself!”

As though to punctuate that statement, a pair of long, hairy legs squeezed out of the end of the barrel, then two more, then another four, and a large, black body pulled itself free and looked up at Bombe with beady eyes.

Bombe gave a shout and dropped it as though it was on fire, recoiling from the otherwise harmless tree spider as though its very touch was venomous.

“The hell?”

Then, the entire forest seemed to come alive as every flying bug in it fluttered their wings at once, creating a single, droning buzz, and several men fled out of it, stumbling onto the beach with wide eyes and thundering hearts. Bombe’s crew, at a guess, or at least part of it.

The lone spider that had plugged Bombe’s pistol skittered along the sand, and every pirate in its way scrambled away from it like it was the devil’s own familiar. Eventually, it reached me, and I bent down to let it scurry up my fingers, my arm, and it settled into place on my shoulder like a mirror to Fou’s usual spot on Mash’s.

“A very relevant question,” I said, “seeing as you just spent twenty minutes walking through a forest with all of these ‘pets’ of mine.”

“Fuck,” one of the pirates breathed, “and I thought she were scary afore!”

“You know, Senpai, you’re still the baddest badass I know,” Rika said. “But that’s never not going to be creepy.”

“Yeah,” her brother agreed, wide-eyed.

Emiya huffed and shook his head, his sword vanishing. “Damn. We didn’t even have to beat these ones up.”

“I...think that’s a good thing?” Bradamante said uncertainly.

“Now that we’ve got that out of the way...” I walked over towards Bombe, my newly acquired hermit crab skittering after me, and all of the pirates gave me an even wider berth than before. Bombe himself took a step back, looked over his shoulder at the forest, and seemed to weigh his choices between me and my swarm. “We need some information. Your friends over there couldn’t tell us much, but you look like you’re a bit more informed than they are.”

“Information?” Bombe’s hand twitched as though itching to reach for his sword, but his remaining eye flickered first to my dagger, then to the crab behind me, and then to the spider on my shoulder, and he gave up on whatever he’d been thinking of doing. “What kind of information are we talking, here?”

“Anything about what’s been going on here,” I said. “Why this place is an endless ocean, anything that’s been happening on these islands, particularly odd occurrences. That sort of thing.”

“That’s it?” Some of the tension left Bombe’s shoulders and he grinned. “Aye, that’s easy enough, ain’t it?”

“So you do know something!” said Bradamante.

“Fess up!” Rika called over to him. “Or we’ll make you walk the plank!”

Bombe looked at Rika, then at me, as though I was going to agree with her, and when I didn’t, he just let it slide. “Well, no, I don’t rightly know all that much, but if anyone knows what’s going on, it’ll be the boss!”

“The boss?” Rika parroted. “How many bosses are there in this place? We’re already at three, and that’s three too many!”

“Ain’t no one the boss of the boss!” Gallagher said insistently. “Boss Bombe’s Boss Bombe, but the boss is the boss!”

I resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose, because it sounded an awful lot like we were going in circles.

“Who *is* the boss?” asked Mash. “Um, the boss of everyone, I mean?”

“Ha! Only the greatest and most glorious pirate to ever sail the seas!” Bombe crowed. “We, here? We’re all the crew of the famous Francis Drake!”

I straightened, but the twins just looked at one another, confused. “Francis Drake?” they asked each other.

“Francis Drake?” Mash echoed eagerly. “The real Francis Drake?”

“None other!” Bombe said proudly. “Right through this forest is Boss’s secret hideout! In fact, we can take ya there right now! Boss’ll be wanting a word with you lot, I’m sure!”

The other pirates, thinking they were pulling the wool over our eyes, all grinned to themselves.

Another transparent trap, and also another one we couldn’t afford not to spring. Francis Drake — if *he* was here, could that magical energy reading from before be him? 1573 would have been right in the middle of his voyage. Were we about to meet another person like Emperor Nero? Someone whose Heroic Spirit had been summoned into their living body?

No, there really wasn’t any way we could pass this opportunity up.

“Then lead the way,” I told him. “We’d like to have a word with your boss, too.”

Bombe grinned broader. “Aye!” To his subordinates, he said, “All right, you wimps, you heard her! Let’s get these folks over to Boss’s secret hideout and show them our *hospitality!*”

“AYE!” Gallagher’s crew — and the men who had stumbled out of the forest — shouted in reply.

Bombe turned about and took one step back towards the forest, and then he faltered. “Er,” he said, “say, Missy...”

“Don’t worry,” I assured him. “They’ll only sting if I make them.”

“You don’t say,” he said dubiously. “What’s that? Some kinda...magic or something?”

“Or something.”

Emiya snorted, but didn’t comment. Rika looked like she wanted to agree with Bombe about my being so vague, but managed to hold her tongue — perhaps sensing that letting that detail out wouldn’t do us any good right now.

Bombe shook his head. “Ah, to hell with it! Let’s go!”

And boldly, some might say stupidly, he stomped into the forest. His crew and Gallagher’s moved to follow, still thinking they had us all fooled, and they leered at us as they passed, doing nothing at all to hide their attempted deceit. It was almost embarrassing exactly how transparent they were, like they were sitting there trying to bluff and didn’t realize they’d set all their cards down face-up.

The twins and the others were a little slower to follow and huddled around me instead of trailing behind the pirates. None of them were any more fooled than I was.

“So this is obviously a trap, right?” Rika muttered.

“Obviously.”

Rika nodded. “So are we just gonna pull a Kenobi and pop in, like, ‘Hello, there,’ and beat them up?”

“If we have to.”

I had a vain hope that it would be easier than that...but I knew it was vain. Could you call it pessimism when it had always happened that way, or was that just pattern recognition?

“Maybe Drake will be reasonable,” Arash suggested in a tone that betrayed his doubt.

“We should be so lucky,” Emiya drawled.

“We should still try and talk first,” said Ritsuka.

“And we will,” I agreed. “We’re just also going to be prepared when it doesn’t work.”

“Of course!” Rika grinned. “After all, true warriors only understand each other when they cross fists!”

I didn’t have any idea what that was referencing, but Ritsuka’s pained expression told me I probably didn’t want to.

“Wait up, fellas!” Rika called, and she took off after the pirates. “Don’t leave us behind! What if we get lost?”

“Master, wait!” Bradamante shouted, and she raced after Rika at a fast jog.

The rest of us shared a look, and then we followed, too.

It only took a minute for us to catch up, because neither the pirates nor Rika were really moving all that fast, owing at least in part to the fact we had to make our way through untamed forest. The pirates, at least, seemed to know where they were going, which was something of a relief given how...well, how dumb they were.

They still seemed to think we didn’t know they were trying to lead us into a trap. These men obviously weren’t chosen for their mental acumen.

“So, hey, Mash,” Rika said conversationally. “Who is this Drake person anyway? You sounded like you knew about him.”

I glanced at her. “You haven’t heard of Francis Drake?”

“Nope!” Rika replied, popping the ‘p.’

I guess world history wasn’t one of the Japanese education system’s strong suits, although being fair, it wasn’t exactly the American education system’s strong suits either. Drake was almost entirely someone I’d learned about at Chaldea.

“Um,” Mash said thoughtfully, “well... If I had to describe him in a single word...a scoundrel.”

Emiya snorted. “Yeah, that probably fits.”

“Francis Drake is a great hero,” Mash went on. “He was a pioneer who circumnavigated the globe for the first time in history, defeated the invincible Spanish armada, and through his actions, he brought incredible glory to Great Britain. The rise of the British Empire wouldn’t have been possible if not for him and his accomplishments. ‘The Hero who Brought Down the Sun’ and ‘El Draque’ are the sorts of epithets that were bestowed upon him.”

She sighed. “But even if he did a lot of great things, a pirate is still a pirate.”

“Privateer, technically,” I chimed in. “He was, after all, officially sanctioned by the Crown.”

“Still.” Mash shook her head. “I think you’re right to expect him to be unreasonable, Miss Taylor. Since this Singularity occurs in 1573, it’s likely this Drake will be a living person instead of a Heroic Spirit tempered by later perceptions of his character. In that case, he’s probably a thug, a gluttonous ne’er-do-well who passes the time by drinking entire barrels of rum.”

Rika’s eyes lit up. “He sounds like he knows how to party!”

“No,” her brother said flatly. “I don’t care what the laws are in this era, we are *not* drinking rum, because we’re still technically underage.”



“Party pooper,” Rika said petulantly. She turned to me, “Senpai’s of age, though! Senpai, you’ll have to tell us what it tastes like!”

“No,” I answered shortly, even as I explored the camp up ahead that had just entered my range. “We’re on the job, Rika. No getting drunk on the job.”

“Ugh!” she grunted. “No one’s any fun around here!”

She turned to the Servants next. “Hey, you guys actually can’t get drunk, can you?”

“As a Servant?” Arash shrugged. “I’ve never tried.”

“Me neither, Master,” said Bradamante with a shake of her head.

“We can’t,” Emiya confirmed. “Well. Maybe a Pseudo Servant like El-Melloi II could, but not us.”

Rika eyed him suspiciously. “I kinda want to know how you know that.”

“I, as well,” Bradamante agreed. “How did you come to know this, Sir Emiya?”

Emiya shrugged. “It’s not really that interesting a story. I’ve had alcohol before as a Servant, and that’s really all there is to it.”

“Boo!” Rika jeered. “That’s so lame!”

He arched an eyebrow, unimpressed.

“In regards to Drake,” I said, swinging the conversation back around, “if he knows as much about what’s going on as Bombe believes he does, then it’s going to be important that we secure his help. If that involves drinking with him, then you can have *a sip*.” I turned my head to pin Rika with a stare. “But *only* a sip, Rika. The rest of it, you either find some discreet way of getting rid of it, or you *pretend* to drink it.”

“Yes!” Rika cheered. “Senpai is cool after all!”

“But, Rika,” I cautioned, “if you get drunk, it won’t be me you’ll be answering to. It’ll be the Director.”

Rika froze, her grin turning frail and strained. “R-right. M-message received, Senpai. I’ll be a good girl!”

“See that you do.”

“Huh,” said Ritsuka. “Is that really all it takes?”

The instant my eyes left her, Rika turned to her brother and stuck out her tongue. I pretended not to notice.

Eventually, we came to the other end of the forest and stepped out into a large encampment settled between two cliffs, populated by canvas tents that looked like they had been made from the sails of

some large ship. Other pirates milled about the area, some sixty or so men in total, some of them going about tasks and some of them lounging about drinking with their comrades.

The instant we were all out of the forest, Bombe took off, shouting, “Boss! Hey, Boss! We’ve got some, er, *guests* here!”

And he made a beeline for the very last person I was expecting.

“They said they want to talk with you, Boss!” Bombe told not any of the sailors walking or lounging, but the short, lean *woman* who was chugging a thick tankard of some kind of drink and looked like she was getting quite the buzz.

“What the hell are you prattling about, Bombe?” she demanded in a voice that sounded like it came right out of an eighties action flick. “Guests? What kind of guests could we be getting out here? More pirates?”

“Holy shit,” Ritsuka whispered. “There’s no way those are real.”

She was also absolutely stacked, because her coat did everything it possibly could to show them off short of being actual lingerie. Frankly, they looked like they might pop out if she stretched too far in the wrong direction, and each one was at least the size of her whole head.

I wasn’t sure whether I should envy her or pity her. A woman that well-endowed in an era before proper support wear existed? It was a miracle she wasn’t hunch-backed.

“No wonder she’s a pirate!” Rika said. “She comes with her own flotation devices!”

Drake — because screw it, this wasn’t the first time this had happened, and I had run out of the fucks necessary to care — squinted over at us as Bombe said, “Uh, I don’t think so, Boss. They look like they’ve got a little more class than we do. A lot more class.”

“They took over our ship!” Gallagher supplied.

“Sounds like pirates to me!” Drake leveraged herself up from the barrel she’d been sitting on, swayed just a little, but managed to walk without any sign of trouble. “But you’re right, they sure don’t look like pirates. Huh? What are you lot? Government of some kind? All the way out here?”

Rika and Ritsuka shared a look, then Rika turned to me, “Hey, Senpai, *are* we technically government agents?”

“Of a sort.” To Drake, I added, “But not any government you would recognize as such, Francis Drake.”

Drake grinned. It stretched the jagged scar that cut diagonally across her face from her hairline, between her eyes, and down one cheek. “You’ve got me at a disadvantage. Fine, I’ll play along. Bombe, how’d you meet these people?”

“Found them down at the shore with Gallagher’s crew,” Bombe answered. “Said they wanted to meet you, Boss! They’re big fans!”

“We are?” the twins said in stereo.

“Fans, you say?” asked Drake, bemused.

“Oh, yeah!” Bombe agreed. “Heard ‘em talking on the way over. About the Great Captain Francis Drake, who defeated the invincible Spanish armada! El Draque! The Hero who Brought Down the Sun! The devil who could down entire barrels of rum!”

“Ha!” Drake said. “Well, they aren’t wrong!”

And she tipped her head back, taking several gulps from her tankard, and when she was done, she let out a refreshed sigh.

“So,” she went on, “what do you folks want with me, then? Sorry to say, if you’re looking to join my crew, you’re a little young to be anything but cabin boys.”

“Not...quite,” I said. “We’re here to investigate what’s been happening in this place. The...strangeness of this ocean and the islands in it.”

“Yes,” said Mash. “Our organization is called Chaldea. My name is Mash Kyrielite.” She gestured to the twins. “These are Ritsuka and Rika Fujimaru, my, um, my Masters.”

Drake eyed her shrewdly, no doubt picking up on her stumble — because Mash must have remembered, at the last second, that Drake had been part of the slave trade. Tangentially, to a degree, and only up to a certain point in his — *her* — career, but still involved.

“Chaldea, eh?” Drake said thoughtfully. “And what does a bunch of stargazers want with this place?”

Mash blinked, wide-eyed and stunned. “She...knows about Chaldea’s origins?”

“We’re here to correct it,” I told Drake. “A navigator of your skill can’t have missed how...strange this ocean is. Abnormal. Our job is to find the source of the distortion and remove it so that things can go back to how they’re supposed to be.”

“Remove it?” Drake laughed. “Now why would you do a thing like that?”

The words I’d been about to voice died on my tongue.

“You...don’t care that this place is nothing but an endless sea?” Emiya asked, unnerved.

“This unnatural world doesn’t alarm you?” Bradamante added. “Truly?”

“Why should I?” Drake asked bluntly. “Strange, you say. Unnatural. So what? That may be true, I won’t deny I’ve seen it for myself, but this place is fun!” Over her shoulder, she called, “Am I right, boys?”

“Of course, Boss!” Bombe agreed.

“The best, Boss!” Gallagher said.

“Yeah!”

“It’s great!”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way!”

Even the ones who hadn’t been paying us any attention and probably had no idea what she’d even been asking about answered her with a wholehearted affirmative. Several of them cheered and used it as an excuse to down another gulp of whatever they were drinking.

“What?” Mash squeaked.

“Hear, hear!” Drake took another gulp of her own drink. “You see? Good, evil, natural, unnatural, the way things are supposed to be — what do I care about any of that? I’ve got good men around me, good food in my belly, good rum to drink, and more freedom than I’ve ever had before!”

“Onii-chan,” Rika whispered, loudly enough that everyone heard her, “when did we fall into *One Piece*?”

“I don’t know,” Ritsuka answered faintly.

“You were right, Mash!” Bradamante told her. “Francis Drake really is a scoundrel, through and through!”

My lips pulled tight and I stared straight at Drake through my glasses. “So you’re not going to cooperate?”

I guess this was what you could call a breakdown in negotiations. Or perhaps a critical failure of diplomacy.

“With you brats?” Drake laughed. “Why should I? You’ve got nothing I want, and even if you did, I could just take it! I’m a pirate, remember?”

“I see.”

Suddenly, the forest behind us and the grass at our feet came alive, and the droning hum of the many bugs there filled the air, drowning out all other sound. The entire camp came to a stop, looking around nervously, and Bombe’s confidence suddenly plummeted.

“Uh, Boss?” he said hesitantly. “Maybe...this one ain’t one to mess around with.”

In other circumstances, we could have let it be and gone on and looked elsewhere, but right now, Drake had the honor of being the only person here who might know anything at all about what was going on in this Singularity. It wasn’t impossible for us to just walk away, but it would be a waste.

Brute force and terror tactics had worked on the other pirates. Time to see if they would work on Drake.

“Then you won’t complain,” I said calmly, “if we take what we want from you, right?”

A hand landed on my shoulder. “Hey, now,” Arash said genially, “that’s not really necessary, is it? Captain Drake, is there a way we can come to some kind of mutually beneficial arrangement?”

Drake looked around at the forest and the encampment, nonplussed, then back at me. “Huh. Guess I underestimated you, didn’t I?”

*Click*

And almost before I could realize what was happening, she’d pulled out a flintlock of her own from somewhere on her person and pointed it — directly at me. Her finger curled around the trigger, pulling, and the muzzle spat a flash of light and smoke.

There was the sensation of motion as Arash pushed me back and out of the way, taking the shot on his armor — and *staggering* as though he’d been hit by a heavy blow. A gasp tore itself out of his mouth.

“Magical energy reaction!” Mash shouted. “Master, it’s coming from Captain Drake!”

What?

“She’s a Servant?” Rika demanded shrilly.

“N-no! It’s something else! Almost like —”

*The Holy Grail.*

The pieces clicked together. Drake didn’t want this place to go away, she was happy here. Complete freedom, she said. Total autonomy. She’d laughed at the very idea of correcting it. She didn’t care that it was strange and unnatural, that it was all a dead end. She wasn’t alarmed. In fact, she was enjoying herself.

She wasn’t a Servant, but did that really matter? If she had a wish and she had the Grail, then did it even mean anything that she wasn’t a Servant?

Had...we really found the solution to this place that quickly and easily?

Emiya leapt into action, twin swords in hand, and brought them down with lethal intent, but Drake moved faster than a human should be capable of and leapt out of the way, stumbling a little as she landed. Her drink sloshed in its tankard.

“Don’t kill her!” Rika ordered desperately.

“She might not give me a choice!” Emiya called back. Drake pulled out another pistol and Emiya grunted as he blocked her shot with the flats of his blades.

“W-we can’t kill her!” Mash agreed with Rika. “F-Francis Drake doesn’t die in 1573! Killing her might upset proper history!”

That wouldn't mean anything if this Singularity — and everything that happened in it — was corrected. But, as a living human, she also wouldn't just disappear if we killed her, so we wouldn't have any idea where she hid the Grail.

If she'd done the stereotypical pirate thing and buried it on some other island, we could be here for decades searching. There were some treasures I'd heard about that had remained hidden for *centuries*. That were, in fact, still hidden by the time Gold Morning rolled around.

“We need her alive!” I told them all.

“Like I said!” Emiya grunted again as he deflected another shot, and *when was Drake reloading?* “She might not give me much choice!”

“Mash!” Ritsuka ordered. “Go!”

“Right!”

Mash leapt into the fray, but like before, Drake proved maddeningly nimble, despite the fact that she was both drunk and an ordinary human. She was also pulling out shots from her flintlocks out of nowhere like they were modern semi-automatics, and her shots hit hard enough that even Mash had to brace herself to take them.

I pulled in my swarm, trying my best to stuff as many expendable bugs as I could into the barrels of Drake's pistols, but she fired them like there was nothing wrong, and the bugs inside died violently and suddenly to no apparent effect.

“Ha!” Bradamante came in from the side and swept her lance up, knocking Drake's tankard out of her other hand and spilling the contents all over. Drake, snarling, jerked forward and smashed her forehead into Bradamante's nose, and against all reason and logic, Bradamante stumbled backwards, blood streaming from her nostrils.

“Bitch!” Drake slurred. “I wasn't done with that!”

*Arash?* I thought at him as Bradamante stared at Drake, wide-eyed, as surprised as any of us that Drake had actually hurt her.

*Not without risking seriously hurting her,* Arash answered me before I could even ask him.

I scowled. Killing her was off the table, for the reasons I already thought of, and maiming, too, because the line between them was much thinner than Hollywood let you believe. She wasn't like Lung or Altera, who had regenerative abilities that let them brush off anything short of actual death.

But she was also an ordinary human. We should be able to beat her just by knocking her around a bit and pinning her down until she surrendered.

*She's not a Servant,* I reminded him. *If we can knock her down, we can force her to give up, so if you see an opening —*

“Understood,” he said aloud.

But when that opportunity would come, I didn't know. Drake was clumsy and stumbling, because she was drunk, but she recovered fast, and with the obvious handicap of being unable to do serious damage, Bradamante, Mash, and Emiya were having trouble dealing with that. There were several moments, as I watched, where a killshot could have ended the whole charade, but they were too short and too small for something less lethal to sneak in.

It was maddening how she could be so strong and so fast despite not being a Servant, and that she could keep herself so steady despite the fact that she was intoxicated. The magic bullets didn't help, because I *still* had yet to see her actually reload any of her pistols, no matter how many rounds she fired from them.

Frankly, I was a little bit jealous, too. If I had a pistol that didn't need reloading and hit hard enough that even *Servants* couldn't afford to take a direct hit, well...

There was only so long she could last, however. Even if she was fighting on relatively even grounds with Servants, she was still a human, so her body still did things like get tired and her muscles could still seize up and twitch. The instant I saw her knee start to buckle, I didn't hesitate, I threw my crab directly at her like a miniature bulldozer.

Drake didn't even pause. She grabbed one of her flintlocks, cocked back the hammer, and put a round right between my crab's eye stalks. It crumpled almost before I could register the phantom sensation of the bullet passing through its head.

It was enough, because in that exact moment of her attention being on the crab —

“GANDR!”

— the twins fired off a pair of shots directly into Drake's chest. Vindictively, I watched the pair of black balls slam into the wide, open expanse of her unprotected cleavage, and she *staggered*.

“Ugh!”

Drake slapped a hand over her mouth as though she was about to be sick, and Mash swept in with a body slam that sent Drake stumbling and then falling onto her back.

“Arash!”

He didn't need me to give anything more specific as an order, because he was on Drake immediately, one knee pressing down on one arm, one hand holding down the other, and the head of an arrow poised threateningly at her jugular.

“Boss!” the gathered pirates cried in one voice. Several of them reached for their weapons and pulled out their swords with a series of metallic rasps.

“Give up?” Arash asked menacingly.

For a moment, Drake looked up at him, dazed, and then she did something totally unexpected.

She laughed.

“Looks like you lot kicked my ass!” she said as though she’d just lost a game of tag.

“Boss?” asked Bombe. “You all right?”

“What the hell kind of question is that?” Drake barked. “Of course I’m alright! I just got beat up a little, that’s all! Put your damn swords away!”

The pirates all looked at each other for a second, like they weren’t sure they should obey her, and then, hesitantly, they put their weapons away.

On the ground, Drake sighed.

“Well then,” she said, as casual as the weather. “Looks like I’m at your mercy, Chaldea. The great Francis Drake is yours to do with as you please.”

A beat passed.

“Did...” Ritsuka began incredulously, “she just say what I think she did?”