

Chapter CXXIV: Little Drop of Peace

Rika's words acted like some kind of signal, or maybe permission, because a scant few seconds after she shouted them, Bradamante and Mash jolted into action and sped after her, racing towards the surf.

"Senpai!" Mash called after her. "Wait! Don't just run off on your own!"

"Master, wait for me!" Bradamante agreed.

They stayed within human limits, so Rika still wound up the first in the water, splashing in the calm, shallow waves, but Mash and Bradamante weren't all that far behind and joined her, shrieking when she turned around, bent over, and threw a handful of water at them. And once the surprise wore off, they started laughing and splashed her back.

If I didn't know any better, I might have seen them and thought they were just a couple of ordinary girls, out having fun at the beach.

"Well?" said Aífe, and it took me a second to realize she was talking to Jeanne Alter and not me. "I can see it clearly, no matter how much you try to hide it. Aren't you going to join them?"

"W-what?" Jeanne Alter blustered, ruined by the faint splotches of pink on her cheeks and the shudder in her voice. "What do you take me for, a child? W-who even wants to do something like play on the beach, anyway?"

Aífe huffed a breath through her nostrils and gave Jeanne Alter a shove, sending her stumbling a few steps forward. Jeanne Alter squawked indignantly.

"Hey! Cut it out, Super Bitch!"

"You claim you are not a child, but shying away from things simply because they are called childish is itself the epitome of childishness," said Aífe. "Go. Don't miss this chance simply out of your own stubbornness. Seize it with both hands."

Jeanne Alter flushed vibrant red. "Fine!" she spat. "I don't have to stand here and listen to your stupid drivel! I'm gonna go do whatever I want, and not because you told me I should!"

Aífe arched an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"You bet your fat Celtic ass!"

And Jeanne Alter whirled away, storming down the beach towards the water. "Hey!" she shouted at the others. "Who said you bastards could start without me, huh?"

I looked over at Aífe. "You handled her quite well."

“She’s angry and rebellious and lashing out to hide her insecurities,” Aífe said plainly. She closed her eyes briefly and let out a short sigh. “Despite his impish nature, Connla never reached this point, but... As I understand it, this is the way of teenagers.”

I thought, for a moment, about my own teenage years, my time when I was fifteen and scrambling desperately for some control over my life. An escape from the world that was trying to grind me down. How that had led me to fighting Lung, to Lisa and the Undersiders, and to everything that followed.

Maybe I wasn’t quite the best example of teenage rebellion. Most teenagers didn’t take over a city in every way that mattered, after all, or kill pillars of society, and they most certainly didn’t unravel a supervillain’s plan to take over that same city.

But when I looked at it that way, I guess, in a very real sense, Jeanne Alter was a completely new person who had sprung up, fully formed, as a nineteen-year-old girl, trying to discover her identity and who she was now in light of the original Jeanne’s existence and the fact her purpose in the world — destroying the France the original had saved — was no longer possible for her to fulfill. Figuring out who you were and what your place was in the world was supposedly the big conflict a normal teenager tackled, or so I’d heard.

Although Aífe taking the reins as her mother figure was something I honestly hadn’t expected.

“Things must have changed greatly, because I certainly can’t recall any of my younger sisters behaving in such a manner,” said Hippolyta.

“Yeah,” said Bellamy. He hummed thoughtfully. “Then again, I was still a teenager when I signed up for the navy, and acting like that would’ve gotten you thrown in the brig until you started behaving. I guess things are different these days.”

“Peace will do that to you,” Aífe replied.

Hippolyta smiled a little. “I suppose it would. I have to confess, however, that I’m not sure I understood that last thing you said to her. If you’ll pardon me for saying so, it didn’t sound much like you, for how little I know of you yet.”

It *had* sounded a little uncharacteristic, yes, and also a little familiar.

Aífe huffed another breath. “With little else to do in our free time, I’ve taken to reading, when there’s nothing else to occupy my attention. One of the books I read, for all that I wasn’t particularly moved by it, the author said something to that effect.”

Ah. “C.S. Lewis.”

I thought I recognized it.

“The same,” Aífe confirmed.

“Come to think of it, Sam,” I said, “you might like it. *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* especially.”

Maybe I should introduce him to Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, too. It might wind up a case of the reality making it hard for him to enjoy the fantasy, but if not, I could see him getting a kick out of a pirate adventure novel like that.

Bellamy blinked at me. "You think so?"

"Remind me to pick it out for you from the library when we get back to Chaldea."

He smiled. "Sure thing!"

"Whatever its origin, it's a poignant piece of wisdom," said Hippolyta. "So I think that I, too, shall take your advice and, as they say these days, let loose a little." She glanced at Aife. "Will you be joining us?"

"Shortly, I think," said Aife. "Perhaps I'll convince Emiya to help us arrange a game of some kind. I've heard there's a sport practiced at the beach called volleyball, and it might be interesting to try it."

Deliberately, I didn't look at her bikini or at Hippolyta's...waist wrap thing. We were certainly dressed for it, weren't we? Maybe if we set up a boys versus girls thing, although that might get a little awkward with the Servants being so blatantly superhuman.

Hippolyta smiled again. "I look forward to it."

And with those parting words, she broke off, and at a sedate, calm pace, went over to join Mash, Rika, and the others as they played about in the water.

"I'm gonna go do a little exploring further out," Bellamy announced, and he punctuated this by pulling his goggles down over his eyes, then offered us a grin. "Gimme a shout when it's lunchtime. You guys weren't kidding about how great Emiya's food is!"

I wondered if that meant he had revised his opinion of that wyvern meat they'd fed me back when we got separated in Okeanos. It tasted a whole lot less exciting when you had something actually good to compare it to.

"I can do that."

He gave a jaunty little wave, then raced off down the beach, kicked off the sand into a long jump that would have made an Olympic gold medalist green with envy, and disappeared beneath the waves with a splash.

"And you?" Aife asked me.

Well, I could have thrown everything to the wind and raced down to the beach to join in on the fun, but right then, I didn't really want to. Maybe a little later on. For the moment...

"This is a vacation, isn't it?" I asked rhetorically. "I'm going to go relax and lie down. Maybe catch some sun, while I have the chance to enjoy it."

After all, England wasn't particularly famous for its bright, sunny days, and even if it was, we weren't going to have the time to just soak it up and enjoy it while we were working. This was probably going to be my last chance in a while, so I was going to take advantage of it.

Taking the time to just relax... It felt kind of novel. Almost wrong, even. And yet...

"I see," said Aífe, nodding. "I suppose you've earned it, haven't you?"

...I guess even I could benefit from it every now and again.

"We all have. After all, we've done the incredible task of resolving four Singularities in less than six months. I'd say we deserve a chance to just kick back and relax."

And all of us Masters had come out of it without a single major injury. That spoke well not only of us for our competence, but also the dedication of the Servants who fought for us and protected us, and by that metric, every single one of us deserved the break we were getting now. None of us could have come this far alone.

Aífe gave me a strange look. "Yes, I suppose we have. All right, then. I suppose I'd best go and make sure they all behave themselves."

Now who wasn't being honest with herself? Although I wasn't sure Aífe even really knew how to relax like this, now that I thought about it, not when there was something for her to take charge of and chaperone.

"Don't be too hard on them."

Aífe grinned, all teeth. "I make no promises."

But that was as good as confirmation by her standards, so I let it be and left her to go and join the fun. I made instead for the line of towels that had been laid out further up and away from the water, where El-Melloi II had sat down and reclined, puffing away at a cigarette. The umbrella he'd brought was big enough to cover all but his ankles and feet, throwing the rest of his body into shade, and not too far away from that, upwind to no doubt avoid the smoke, Shakespeare sat at a little table, nose firmly buried in a book.

I guess I should have expected that. If I'd known what Da Vinci's surprise had entailed, I might have grabbed one of my own to sit down with and enjoy.

Set up nearby was Emiya, who was already cooking snacks on that grill of his, and just far enough to avoid the smoke from *that* were Arash, who was getting himself a snow cone, Siegfried, who hovered close by, like he wasn't quite sure what to do with himself during a vacation like this, and Ritsuka, who was already in the process of eating one. Strawberry or watermelon flavored, by the pale pink of it, or maybe something more esoteric. I hadn't really experienced it for myself, but living in Brockton, with as high an Asian population as we had, I'd seen some very oddly flavored sweets advertised in specialty shops on the Boardwalk.

Like sakura flavored chocolates. I had no idea what those were even supposed to taste like.

“Hey, Senpai,” Ritsuka greeted me as I came closer.

I gave him a nod. “Ritsuka.”

Arash glanced at me over his shoulder briefly, and he and Siegfried both offered their own greetings.

“Morning,” I responded in kind.

I spared Ritsuka a quick once-over. At some point, he’d changed into his own swimsuit, a pair of blue and green trunks and sandals and not much else. I didn’t know how good a shape he’d been in before, but he’d filled out quite a bit under Aífe, and I didn’t let myself think about it too much more than that because he was almost four years my junior and still a minor, so the idea of ogling him felt a little too weird for me.

“Enjoying your snow cone?”

Ritsuka blinked down at his half-eaten treat and smiled back at me. “Yeah. It’s been a while since I’ve had one, so I’m trying to eat it slowly.”

Come to think of it, how long had it been since I’d had one, too? I couldn’t remember. At least before Gold Morning, probably even before I joined the Wards. Had it really been over four years?

As though he’d sensed my thoughts, Arash said, “I’ll make this one for you then, Master. What flavor do you want?”

You don’t have to, I thought about telling him, but knowing him as well as I did, the response I got would probably be something like, “But I want to,” so there really wasn’t any reason to protest, was there?

“Surprise me.”

“Alright!”

He topped up the cone he was already holding, then reached for bottles next to the machine and drizzled red syrup over the top with flourish. Once the ice had turned a pale shade of red, darker than Ritsuka’s, he set the syrup aside, turned around, and handed it over with a smile. “One cherry snow cone.”

I accepted it with a simple, “Thanks.”

Job done, he turned back around to make his own. The machine whirred lowly and ponderously as it churned the ice and ground it down into fine flakes.

The first bite tasted like childhood, and the chill sent a shiver down my spine that only halfway had to do with how cold it was. For a moment, I was reminded of summer days, walking beside a cherished friend, eating our snow cones together as we chatted about inanities that I couldn’t remember anymore.

Right then, more than anything in the world, I wanted Lisa to be there.

So I turned to Ritsuka and said, “Not going to join your sister?”

“In a minute,” he said. “I just wanted to make sure the snow cone machine was working first.”

“I told you it was fine,” Emiya called over without turning around.

Ritsuka laughed a little. “Yeah, but this way I get to eat a snow cone, too.”

Emiya shook his head. “You really are her brother,” he drawled.

Ritsuka just smiled and didn’t deny it at all. He busied himself with eating his snow cone, watching his sister play around in the water with Jeanne Alter, Hippolyta, Bradamante, and Mash as Aífe supervised their group. If his gaze wandered a few times towards Aífe, well, I didn’t call him out on it. She was a very attractive woman wearing a very sexy swimsuit, and it flattered every part of her, including her backside, and frankly, I was a little jealous of exactly how good she looked.

He seemed to have more eyes for Mash than anyone else, though. It made the knowledge of what would happen to her all the more tragic.

Should I encourage him to take a shot while he had the chance? Even if it could only end one way, he might be grateful for the experience later on, just for having the chance to have it.

Maybe not, though. I didn’t recall there being any prohibitions in Chaldea’s rules against dating coworkers, especially when we were all cooped up in a single facility in the middle of Nowhere, Antarctica, with essentially zero outside dating prospects, but there was a reason it was generally frowned upon.

I should probably discuss it with Marie first, just to make sure she wouldn’t put her foot down about it. Even if it wound up being against the rules, I might be able to convince her to relax them, just in this particular case, for Mash’s sake.

Ritsuka finished his snow cone before me, and when he was done, he crumpled up the paper cone and threw it in a trash bag that had been set up next to the table the machine was on. Idly, I wondered what would happen to anything we left behind when we went back to Chaldea. The era had already been corrected, as I understood it, and this place was what was left after that, so theoretically, any trash or knick knacks we forgot to take back with us would just sit here, wouldn’t they? Unless and until we came to pick them back up?

Something else I was going to have to ask about. Da Vinci would probably have the answer to that one.

“Alright,” said Ritsuka. “I’m going to go and join the others. See you later, Senpai.”

“Later.”

And he made his way down the beach. Rika, when she realized he was going to play with them, shouted, “Onii-chan! Just in time! We’re gonna play Marco Polo and we needed someone to be Marco!”

“So of course,” he said with an air of resignation, “you decided it had to be me.”

“Yup!”

Despite his apparent reluctance, he didn’t protest being roped into the game, and it wasn’t long before they had him dunked and blind, calling, “Marco!” as the girls waded out of the way, replying, “Polo!”

For a brief moment, I had to smile as I thought about the possibility of us actually summoning Marco Polo and how he might react to the knowledge that his name was being used for a game like that. Exasperated, maybe. Conflicted, probably. For your name to outlive you by so many centuries, only to be used for something completely and totally unrelated to your life’s work...

Well. It wasn’t like every historical figure was remembered wholly and accurately, were they?

“He’s changed a little,” I commented to Arash.

“Yeah,” Arash replied. “He’s a little more confident than before. I guess his experience in Château d’If really had a big impact, didn’t it?”

“Such an experience would change anyone,” Siegfried agreed.

So it seemed. After all, it was his first time being on his own as a Master, completely without support from me, Mash, Rika, or any of the staff at Chaldea. He’d had to figure things out without us and fight through a gauntlet of challenging enemies without any safety net there to catch him if he fell. And in spite of how daunting that must have been, he succeeded and came out the other end.

In light of that, I guess it wasn’t so surprising that he felt surer of himself than he had before going into it.

“They have to grow up sometime,” Emiya drawled from his grill.

It probably said something about my life that the first response to find its way to the tip of my tongue was about how it had taken long enough. But I swallowed it, because that wasn’t fair to the twins. They’d come a long way since Fuyuki, but it didn’t change the fact that their lives had been far more normal than mine had ever been before that.

The pride was probably to be expected. The trace of melancholy that followed it wasn’t.

When I was done with my snow cone, I did as Ritsuka had, crumpled up the paper cone, and threw it in the bag of trash. I took a brief glance at what Emiya was cooking — skewers of some kind, with sweet-smelling balls of dough on them — before I turned towards my original destination and went over to the towels that had been laid out.

El-Melloi II glanced at me, but he made no comment as I chose a towel far enough away to avoid smelling like his tobacco later and sat down.

“Enjoying that while you have the chance, are you?” I asked him.

“Until I can convince the Director to let me smoke in my room?” he asked. “Of course. A lolly isn’t the same thing at all.”

“I’m sure.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t picked up a vice like that yet,” he said. “If for no other reason than to deal with the stress of doing a job this big and important.”

“I know better,” I told him. “My parents impressed on me from a very young age the hazards of things like that.”

And living in Brockton Bay, I’d seen enough vices of all kinds to be turned off by the very idea. Who needed a drug abuse resistance program in your school when your city had the Merchants to show you exactly what and why you should stay away from the stuff?

Well. If Winslow had ever had a program like that, at least. I wasn’t sure some of the kids there wouldn’t have taken it in entirely the wrong way. What was that kid’s name again? Smokey? No, something else, but it had been so long and him so small a part in my life that I couldn’t quite remember just then.

“Responsible parents,” El-Melloi II noted. “Imagine that. And yet, they still wound up with a daughter like you.”

A brief huff of air left my nostrils. “Are you saying I’m not responsible?”

He glanced at me again. “Maybe too much so,” he allowed. “You know, that sort of thing is just as bad for your health as these things are.”

He waggled his cigarette.

“Maybe,” I agreed. It had nearly gotten me killed enough times in my career, to say nothing of recently. “But they also taught me the importance of standing up for what’s right.”

And Winslow and the rest of my career had hammered that lesson home with particular weight. As much as I might have suffered at the time, it was hard to imagine what kind of woman I would have grown into without those events to shape me. If it meant that I wouldn’t have become what I’d become at the end and everyone and everything I cared about died, well, that wasn’t a trade I was interested in making.

If it meant I wouldn’t have been here to save Marie from being sucked into Chaldeas by Flauros, all the more so.

El-Melloi II grunted. “Well. I guess it could be a whole lot worse.”

“It could. I could have joined a shadowy international conspiracy group that controlled the world economy.”

His eyebrow twitched. “If you’re going to screw with me, the least you could do is make up something believable.”

“Who said I was making anything up?”

He didn't seem to have a response to that, so he clenched his mouth shut and looked away, taking a furious pull of his cigarette.

With a sigh, I laid back on my towel, but I couldn't even try to properly relax because the sun was right in my eyes, like it was personally out to ruin my vacation. El-Melloi II hadn't brought more than a single umbrella, it seemed, so that was going to be a problem —

A pair of dark tanning goggles landed on my stomach. I glanced over at Emiya in time to see him turning back around to his grill.

“Thanks.”

He shrugged. “You looked like you could use them.”

I traded out my glasses for the goggles as a column of ants marched a bottle of sunscreen over, then lathered my front and as much of my back as I could reach, making sure to get underneath the fabric my swimsuit, too, because I knew my science well enough to understand that a flimsy strip of cloth wasn't enough to stop UV rays from reaching my skin.

It would've been easier to get those parts totally naked, but there wasn't a convenient shower or changing room to go into, and El-Melloi II at least did me the courtesy of pointedly looking away, even if he wouldn't have seen anything revealing.

Done, I laid back again, let my muscles loosen, and as my platoon of ants marched the bottle of sunscreen back where it belonged, I closed my eyes and allowed myself to enjoy the gentle heat of the sun on my skin.

“That's never not going to be creepy,” El-Melloi II muttered. I didn't bother to dignify it with a response.

I drifted. The sounds of laughter and fun from the others playing on the beach washed over me, background noise to the waves lapping at the shore and the sizzle of Emiya's snacks, and somewhere along the way, I dozed off.

An hour or two must have passed as I lay there, just sort of existing, my thoughts a floating, freeform stream of nothingness and vapor. In a distant way, I kept track of events through my swarm, the fliers attracted to Emiya's cooking but avoiding the smoke, the crabs that felt the vibration of every passing foot, the colony of ants that were expressly forbidden from partaking in any of the sugary treats we'd brought with us. It was all handled without my direct attention, left on autopilot for my passenger to deal with, but the basic gist all hovered just on the edge of consciousness.

Arash had gone off to make a sand castle, taking Siegfried with him, and was doing an admirable job, while El-Melloi II eventually climbed to his feet and went for a walk, still puffing on his cigarettes. The games down in the water changed and evolved, cycling through a handful that I recognized and a few I didn't. It was almost comical to see Ritsuka wrestling with Rika, trying to push her off of Hippolyta's shoulders as he sat on Mash's.

I guess it didn't quite work in the opposite direction, not when Servants were so superhuman.

At different points, they drifted over to the grill, picking up the skewers Emiya was making and munching on whatever that snack was, then going back to what they were doing before. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, and that made it all the easier to just lie back and enjoy myself as well.

Eventually, however, I was disturbed by something intruding on my calm, a parade of familiar presences that were slinking up from deeper in the ocean. Drawn, I realized as the film started to fade from my mind, by Bellamy's adventures in scuba diving and the fuss kicked up by Rika and the others playing in shallower waters.

The instant that they entered my range, however, and my awareness as a result, they also entered my control, although they felt a little...slippery, for lack of a better term.

"Hey, Emiya?" I called over without opening my eyes.

"Yeah?"

"How do you feel about crab?"

He made a face, a kind of grimace. "When you say crab..."

"There's a small colony of those phantasmals from before coming up to say hello."

"You have control over them, don't you?" he asked. "Couldn't you just send them away?"

"I could." Down below, under the water, I made one of the crabs wave a claw at Bellamy, who let out what would have been a startled yelp on dry land. A torrent of bubbles rose towards the surface. "But they'd probably just come back the instant they were out of my range."

Emiya sighed. "When you say a small colony, exactly how many are we talking about?"

So far?

"About twenty."

Some of them bigger than the others, some of them smaller than that one I'd first discovered on that beach. Taking a guess, their size corresponded to their age, so the bigger ones were older and the smaller ones younger.

"That's not too bad, I suppose." He hummed. "Well, if you want my thoughts on it, just keep them far enough inside your range to control them, but don't bring them too close. As much as I'm sure my Master would love the chance to eat crab again, the lunch menu has already been set, and we brought more than enough to satisfy everyone."

Yeah, that was probably the best solution. As long as nothing dragged me too far inland on the island, it shouldn't be too hard to keep that colony of phantasmal crabs near the edge of my range and safely away from everyone else.

Well. Everyone aside from Bellamy, at least. He seemed determined to take as much advantage of the fact that Servants didn't need to breathe as he possibly could while he could.

The sun moved slowly across the sky above us, and sometime around maybe one o'clock in the afternoon, Emiya projected an enormous picnic table, and then he started cooking something else on that grill of his, pulling supplies out of that enormous picnic basket as he needed them. The smell wafted over my way, drifting into my nostrils, and I couldn't have stopped my stomach from rumbling if I tried.

It was a relief when he opened his mouth and shouted, "LUNCH!"

As though he had cast some kind of spell, the others all but dropped what they were doing and made their way over at speed, with El-Melloi II dropping his cigarette into the sand and pretending he wasn't almost jogging back. I leveraged myself up more sedately, but even I couldn't keep myself from adding a little haste as I replaced the goggles Emiya had given me with my glasses and stood.

Sam, I sent to Bellamy, it's lunchtime. Come on back.

On my way! he replied. *Don't start without me!*

It turned out that what Emiya had been cooking was hamburgers. Loaded with spices and fixings and far more flavorful than any burger I'd ever eaten before, but a hamburger nonetheless. He served up each of us one at a time, and we all sat down at the large picnic table to eat, where communal trays of chips and vegetable platters were arrayed for us to enjoy.

"So good!" Rika moaned when she bit into hers.

"Sir Emiya's food is excellent, as always!" Bradamante agreed.

Silently, I agreed, too. Fugly Bob's would've gone bankrupt just for the recipe Emiya had used, because if they'd had it, they would have become a national hit.

"It's similar to something I ate when I was alive," Siegfried said, "but with much more flavor and far more enjoyable."

"If there's one area where the modern world excels, it's in its food," said Aífe.

"Modern food is amazing!" Bellamy proclaimed.

"Although even there, this guy really stands out, huh?" added Arash.

"So this is a hamburger..." Mash said thoughtfully.

"Do you like it, Mash?" asked Ritsuka.

She smiled and nodded. "Mm! It's heavy, with a robust flavor! I don't think I've had anything quite like it before!"

“I had to get a bit creative with the meat,” Emiya revealed. “Naturally, Chaldea doesn’t stock up on beef patties, so I had to make my own, and I figured, no reason not to make them a little bit healthier in the process. Glad to hear everyone likes them.”

Rika suddenly stopped eating. “These are *tofu burgers*?” she demanded, aghast.

“Not *that* healthy,” Emiya told her with a smirk. “They’re a mix of beef, turkey, and pork. I figured you’d mutiny if I made them with a meat substitute instead.”

“Goddamn right!” said Rika. “No self-respecting chef makes tofu burgers! It’s blasphemy!”

“Against which god?” her brother asked, amused.

“My tastebuds!”

“Now, *there’s* some blasphemy,” Arash teased.

Everyone enjoyed their lunch, and Emiya, who had made more while we ate, proved to have made the right decision, because several people went back for seconds, Rika among them, of course. I might have made a comment about her waistline and how many laps she was going to have to run to work off that second burger, but I had a second one myself, so there was no room to talk.

Once we’d all had our fill, we sat around together for a little while, letting our food digest. I wasn’t sure the Servants strictly needed to, since their bodies didn’t quite work the same way as a living person’s, but even if they were just keeping us Masters company, they stayed and we all chatted about inanities. Bellamy in particular regaled us all with stories about what he’d found while he was out scuba diving, and I had to school my face to keep from smiling when he mentioned the crabs that had waved at him and followed him around.

Arash and Emiya cast me amused glances, both of them knowing that I was the one behind that. I confessed to nothing.

After our food had had time to settle, the others started to talk about what to do next, and that was when Aífe slyly suggested a game of volleyball.

“Hey, yeah!” said Rika, turning to Emiya, and for the moment, she seemed to have completely forgotten her problems with him. “You can make a volleyball net for us, right? And a ball, too!”

“I’m beginning to regret letting you all know the true depths of my skill,” Emiya drawled. “But yes, Master, I can make the stuff you need to play volleyball.”

“How are we going to set up the teams?” asked Ritsuka. “With Servants involved, well...”

I looked meaningfully at Hippolyta. “It might be a good way for any of you who have trouble with it to practice controlling your strength.”

She nodded. “It might.”

“Boys versus girls?” suggested Arash.

“That might be a little lopsided,” said Emiya, looking out at each of the people present.

“I can sit out the first match!” Bradamante offered. “Um, if everyone else wants to play, that is...”

“I think Shakespeare is going to be sitting out regardless,” I said.

“But of course!” the man in question agreed. He gestured down at his body. “Do not let this idealized physique fool you, for I am no sportsman! Nay, such pursuits are ill-suited to my temperament!”

“You can count me out, too,” said El-Melloi II. “If you lot want to play around in the sand, be my guest.”

That left Emiya, Arash, Siegfried, Bellamy, and Ritsuka. With Bradamante willing to sit out at least the first match, the girls’ team would have Aífe, Hippolyta, Mash, Rika, and me, if I decided to join in. Five versus five.

“Then if Tii-chan isn’t playing the first match...!” Rika turned to me expectantly, having come to the same conclusions I had.

For a second, I considered declining and going back to my towel to relax some more, but... What the hell. Why not?

“Sure.”

“Five on five,” said Emiya. “Sounds fair enough. Alright, give me a minute to get everything set up then.”

Once the remains of lunch were cleaned up, the picnic table vanished into thin air as though it had never been there in the first place, and then Emiya left his grill behind to venture out onto the beach and find a good space to put the net. Different from a normal volleyball net, the one he set up was longer, with more reach and a wider net, and once it was firmly in the sand and didn’t look like it was going to collapse, he went around and started placing little flags to mark the boundaries, creating a far larger “field” than normal, too.

Probably accounting for Servants, in that case. Smart of him.

With the net set up, we split into our teams, with Shakespeare and Bradamante both staying put and watching while El-Melloi II went back to his towel and sat back down. When we were all ready, Emiya produced a ball in much the same fashion as he produced anything, smugly gave us the privilege of serving first, and Aífe, perhaps feeling a bit vindictive, decided she was first up.

What followed could only vaguely be called volleyball, and even then, only in the absolute loosest sense of the word. It started off fine, with everyone keeping things within human limits to the best of their abilities and only a few mishaps early on when someone got too excited and put a little too much *oomph* behind the ball.

But as the afternoon wore on, things got competitive, and “within human limits” got tossed to the side. The spikes got harder and more vindictive, the serves went farther, and if it wasn’t for the

larger field Emiya had set up, most of them would have gone out of bounds. They even broke the ball once or twice, forcing Emiya to replace it.

“Boulder-shattering spike” sounded silly and stupid until someone did it who could *actually* shatter boulders. Then, it became silly and stupid because it shattered the *ball*.

I wasn’t sure who started it, but Aífe and Hippolyta were only too happy to reciprocate, and things eventually devolved to the point where us Masters couldn’t do much of anything except serve the ball and, on the occasion one of the other players remembered we weren’t quite as strong as the rest of them, hit back what was set up for us.

“I think my arm is going to fall off!” Rika complained at one point, and I had to agree with her. The only reason I was any better off was because I was making judicious use of my First Aid spell in between rounds.

Of course, if that was the way they wanted to play the game, then I was only too happy to take advantage of it, too, so instead of using my real, flesh and blood arms, I started making use of my prosthetic’s phantom limb, and seeing the expression on Emiya’s face when I returned the ball without actually touching it was priceless.

Like that, we spent the next couple of hours, and the sun in the sky made its slow, ponderous journey from east to west. Eventually, after what must have been half a dozen games of volleyball without any clear winner, we all decided to call it quits for the day, because the twins were getting tired and I wasn’t exactly fresh-faced anymore either.

Conveniently, the only thing we had to do to clean up after ourselves was to let Emiya dismiss his projections. All the rest of us had to do was get out of the way.

“Man, that was brutal,” said Ritsuka with a sigh. “Remind me to never play a sport with Servants again. I don’t think my body can take it.”

“Noted,” I said, because it was a sentiment I could agree with whole-heartedly.

“Sorry about that,” said Arash, laughing a little sheepishly. “I guess we all got ahead of ourselves there and took things a little too seriously.”

“It started off well, but by the end of it…” Hippolyta lamented.

“It started to get fun,” said Aífe, grinning that shark-like grin of hers.

Of course she really got into it once things kicked up a notch. I didn’t know why I would have ever thought differently.

“I’m going to get myself a snow cone to cool down,” said Ritsuka.

“Get one for me, too!” Rika said. He grimaced.

“I’ll come with you, Senpai,” Mash told him. She looked my way. “Miss Taylor, do you want one, as well?”

Why not? It would be nice to have something cool to snack on after so many intense rounds of volleyball. “Sure. Cherry is fine.”

She smiled. “Of course! We’ll be right back!”

As they made their way back to the snow cone machine, Emiya looked at me and asked, “So how’s the colony of crabs doing?”

Rika suddenly went ramrod straight. “Crabs?”

“Keeping to themselves,” I said as I turned my attention back on them more fully. I’d mostly left them to their own devices in the background. My brow furrowed. Somehow, the bigger ones had gotten a bit closer without my noticing. “They don’t seem to...”

Something prodded the edges of my range, something larger than all of the others and thrice as slippery as the biggest one already under my control. I pulled the ones I had closer towards the beach and further away from the unknown, but that only seemed to make whatever it was more curious, and it went from the outer edges to firmly within my range, skittering along —

My vision skewed and my brain turned, and a gasp tore itself out of my lips as my sense of balance suddenly pitched in the wrong direction.

“Senpai!”

“Master!”

Several voices cried out, and when I came back to myself, I realized I had fallen to my hands and knees, but something still felt...*off*. Like I had too few limbs, like my body was too light, and there was a weight that I was supposed to have resting on my back. Protection from the elements, from predators, a shell to guard my weak point.

What?

The larger crabs in the water suddenly wrenched themselves against my yoke, moving erratically, even as I tried to still them. The largest presence, the one that had just stepped into my range, was completely outside of my control. I could feel it, could feel the legs that moved along the sand as it came towards us — towards *me* — the enormous shell that it wore like armor, the huge claws capable of rending steel as easily as bone, the eye stalks that swiveled as it marched, but I couldn’t do anything to so much as slow it down.

It was angry. I could feel it. Furious that someone had taken control of its colony, and all the more furious that someone had tried to take control of it. *Him*. The patriarch of the phantasmal crabs.

“S-s-s-someth-thing’s c-coming,” I managed. My lips felt wrong. Unnatural. Because it still felt like I should have more limbs and a differently shaped body.

In a flash, Arash was out of his ridiculous getup and back in his armor, bow already in hand, and while Emiya didn’t go that far, a pair of familiar swords settled into his grip.

“Something?”

I opened my mouth, but all that came out was an unintelligible gurgle.

I was too naive. I'd thought, once I took control of the phantasmal crab back in Okeanos, that it was as simple as that and even something so clearly magical would fall under my control just as easily. But that thing, even as a phantasmal, hadn't been particularly strong, and probably not particularly old.

The patriarch had to be ancient. Ancient, and too much for even my passenger to wrangle easily.

“It's here!” said Hippolyta.

And from out of the surf, as the water pulled back, a massive form emerged. Taller than a human, tall enough, when combined with his shell, to equal Herakles, and bulky enough to outmass him three times over, it was a hermit crab. Its claws were as long as my torso and almost as big around, and its body was the color of charcoal, with large, black eyes that swiveled about and took in all of us, and when they landed on me, its entire body tensed with rage.

“What the hell is that?” Rika demanded hysterically.

“P-p-p-patria-arch.”

“Damn,” muttered Emiya. “To be that big, it's gotta be at least a thousand years old.”

Older. Far, far older. The sense of scale was skewed, but I got the impression that he was at least *two-thousand* years old, putting him solidly from the Age of Gods.

The patriarch surged forward, skittering across the sand with surprising speed for his size, making a beeline straight for me.

“Looks like he's not going to give us much choice!” said Arash.

“Then we'll just have to kill it!” said Aífe.

Arash didn't contradict her, he just immediately fired off a volley of arrows — and they all broke against the patriarch's skin the same way they had against Caenis and Herakles. He just had that much power behind him.

Aífe kicked off of the sand and raced towards the patriarch. She lashed out with a powerful punch, one that would have smashed any of the other crabs in my range into mush. The patriarch wasn't fast enough to get out of the way, so he ducked down, withdrawing all of his vital parts into his shell and leaving that the only thing Aífe could hit.

Against all expectations, it held. A web of thin, hairline cracks spread from the point of contact, but it didn't break.

“Holy shit,” breathed Rika. “He actually took a punch from Super Action Mom!”

Like lightning, a claw lashed out from within the shell, and Aífe dodged it, but not quickly enough to avoid him scoring a thin cut along her leg.

“Tch,” she scoffed as she landed. “A thousand years, Emiya? You’re too conservative. This one might have been around when the Curruid died.”

“You don’t say,” Emiya said. “Well, never let it be said that I was afraid of doing a little crab fishing.”

He threw out his swords, and as they scythed towards the patriarch, he projected another pair. As the first swerved back around, he swung the set in his hands in a powerful downward chop. The patriarch, instead of risking it, stayed huddled inside of his shell, and although Emiya managed to score a set of deep scratches into it, like Aífe, that wasn’t enough to make it through.

“Keh!” Emiya grunted. “It doesn’t look like any one of us will be able to finish him off alone, does it?”

“Not as long as he’s hiding inside that shell,” Hippolyta agreed.

“Then either we pry him out of it,” Siegfried said, “or we break the shell!”

He descended from above as Emiya moved out of the way, bringing Balmung down with a shout, but the blade skidded off the surface instead of biting through it. The force behind the blow sent up a shower of sand and forced the patriarch deeper into the beach, but otherwise didn’t seem to do much to him.

“I’m not done yet!” Siegfried roared, and blue light lit up Balmung’s blade as he charged up a miniature use of his Noble Phantasm. “Take this!”

Balmung slammed into the shell like a battering ram, leaving behind blackened scorch marks on the surface, and although the patriarch didn’t seem any more injured by this than the first blow, there was enough force and power behind it to send him flying off further down the beach.

Aífe appeared suddenly in his path. “Nice serve!”

And with her foot alight with runes, she smashed the shell with a bone-rattling kick. I could feel it not only through the patriarch, but in the vibrations that shuddered through the air. The patriarch went soaring upwards and into the sky, tumbling.

“Then I’ll spike it!” Hippolyta declared, and she leapt up into the air, her fist aglow with power, and slammed it into the shell. I could feel it starting to crack.

Propelled by the blow, the patriarch shot back towards the ground, and Bradamante raced to meet him. “Me, next! Bouclier de Atlante!”

She surged forward, a cone of light forming around her as she went, and right as the patriarch was about to land, she bashed the shell with her shield, deepening the spider web of cracks formed from Aífe’s first punch. The patriarch went tumbling back into the air, spinning about so dizzily that I myself felt nauseous.

A set of cannons suddenly materialized, floating on nothing. “Fire!” Bellamy cried, and with a belch of smoke and flame, the cannons fired. Two shots missed entirely, but the third and then the fourth hit the patriarch, and I could feel the shell beginning to finally give way. “Mash, you’re up next!”

“Right!”

Mash charged forward with a yell, shield materializing in her grip, and she leapt up and bashed the patriarch with all of her strength. The patriarch went flying off towards the water, trailing bits of reinforced chitin as the shell finally broke open and shards fell away, but even like that, he wouldn’t leave my range and we’d be right back where we started soon enough.

“Guess it’s up to me to finish it,” Emiya said. Bow in one hand, he held out the other, and a familiar spiraling sword formed there. “My core is twisted in madness.”

He set the sword along his bow like an arrow, and as he pulled back on the bowstring, the sword itself streamlined, thinning down into a pointed metal shaft. He took aim out towards the sea, and then —

“Caladbolg!”

The air howled as the modified sword left his bow, leaving behind a spiraling trail as it went, and out above the water, the patriarch disappeared. In a flash of light and a ball of fire, his presence vanished utterly from my senses, and the instant it did, I could breathe and move and my body felt normal again. When I climbed back to my feet, gone was the sense that the shape of my body was wrong and the feeling that there was a heavy shell resting on my back.

“I am never playing volleyball with them ever again,” Rika announced.

I didn’t blame her.

Mash jogged back over to us, shield dematerialized again, still in her swimsuit. “Enemy defeated, Master.”

“I can see that,” Rika said. “You guys, uh, didn’t leave anything behind, did you?”

“What’s the saying, Master?” asked Emiya smugly. His bow vanished. “There’s no kill like overkill? Well, at least this one was easier than Herakles.”

Rika smiled a fragile smile. “Y-yeah. Something like that.”

“Oh!” Mash gasped. “Miss Taylor, I’m sorry! I dropped your snow cone!”

Of all the things to be worried about...

“It’s okay,” I told her. “I’ll get one myself, this time.”

“And I need to get mine again, too,” Mash lamented. “I had to drop both of them.”

“I think I’ll have one myself,” said Aífe. “No reason not to try the whole experience, is there?”

Somehow, I didn't think "the whole experience" usually involved killing sea monsters.

"Me, as well," Hippolyta added, sounding more interested than I thought a snow cone really warranted.

It was just shaved ice, sugar, and fruit juice.

Bradamante nodded excitedly, so eager she was almost bouncing. "Yes! I think I'd like to try one, too!"

Arash smiled and offered, "I'll show you how to use the machine, it's not hard."

And so our group went off to grab snow cones. Rika made to join us, but Emiya stopped her, murmured something I couldn't make out, and led her away, further down the beach, where they could have some privacy.

Ah. Finally going to have that talk, was he? Guess I wasn't going to have to intervene after all. There went my emergency plan of tying them up in silk thread and locking them in a closet until they hashed everything out.

I kept cursory track of them as the rest of us got our snow cones, but didn't eavesdrop, just made sure things didn't devolve. I could at least do them that courtesy. It was tempting to start paying closer attention once they started getting emotional, but as long as they stayed relatively calm, I was determined not to pry.

When they returned to the group something like half an hour later, Rika's eyes were red and her nose was stuffy and she was sniffing, but she was also smiling and so was Emiya. Good. They'd worked through things, then. Time would tell if there were still things they needed to discuss or say to each other or more problems to address, but for now, it looked like they were back to normal again.

The hour grew later. In the aftermath of all the excitement, everyone settled down and actually relaxed as the sun drew ever closer to the horizon. To tide us over until dinner, Emiya cooked up some more snacks, some more of those things he made on skewers earlier in the morning, and passed them around to each of us.

The instant I bit into mine, I recognized it. He'd made the same thing back in Septem, if I was remembering right, back when we first met Emperor Nero. It was the same treat that had convinced her she absolutely had to have him as her personal chef, and then Rika had gotten into a mock sword fight with her using loaves of bread.

As the sea turned gold and the sun started to set, our communicators chimed, and when I went to answer it, Da Vinci was there.

"Hello, hello!" she said. "As promised, everyone, this is your scheduled call to let you know we'll be bringing you back to Chaldea in half an hour! Time to start packing up! Anything you leave behind stays behind!"

"Thank you, Da Vinci," I replied.

“No trouble, no trouble,” she said. “Ah, but I did see that you ran into some of your own earlier. The data on that was quite something! It’s good to see you handled it without needing us — or the use of a Command Spell.”

If a single giant crab gave us that much trouble, then we had much bigger problems to deal with.

“It really was something,” said Mash. “Who knew that a Phantasmal of that rank was still around here in this Singularity?”

“A shame there wasn’t anything usable left of it,” Aífe added. “I might have been able to work with a mystery that ancient.”

“I think the Director might have had a fit if you brought any of it back,” Da Vinci whispered conspiratorially.

Not quietly enough, however, because in the background, Marie’s voice shouted, “Hey!”

“Well, I won’t keep you any longer,” Da Vinci said lightly. “Remember, half an hour. Don’t forget anything!”

And then the connection cut. For a moment, in the silence that followed, no one moved or spoke, like we were all reluctant to end our day of vacation.

“Well,” Emiya drawled at length, “we might as well get everything cleaned up and packed away. Don’t want to leave anything important behind.”

With a sigh, I levered myself up off of my towel. “Right.”

Like that was a signal, the others got into motion and started packing up. El-Melloi II folded up his umbrella, and the towels were shaken out and rolled into cylinders for easier storage. Emiya’s grill vanished, and so too did all of the things he’d projected to go along with it, like the plates and the utensils, and he set about getting the leftover food squared away inside that gigantic picnic basket he’d carried here.

It didn’t actually take that much time or effort to get everything put away. Since much of it had been projections of Emiya’s in the first place, it was mostly just the towels and such the like that needed folding and stuffed back into the box they’d come in, and all told, it only took us about ten minutes before we were all packed up and ready to go home. For us Masters and Mash, we didn’t even need to do all that much to get changed back into our regular wear. It was just a few presses of a button or two, a moment of whirring silver dust, and then back to normal.

While we waited for the next call from Da Vinci, we lingered, loitering about the beach and soaking up the last few minutes of our vacation that we could. El-Melloi II in particular was off to the side puffing away on the last cigarette he would get to enjoy for a while precisely because he knew this was the last chance he’d have for the foreseeable future.

It was Rika who separated from the rest of the group, plodding down to the shoreline, just far enough from the water to keep her feet from getting wet. She stared out at the setting sun as it painted the sea in beautiful pastels, something wistful in her posture and the way she stood.

Funny how sunsets seemed to do that to people. Maybe it was the day ending that made so many so introspective, made them think about the things they didn't give any attention during the daylight hours. Maybe it was just a cultural thing born of all those rom-coms that set heartfelt, emotional scenes to a setting sun.

Mash, being the kind of person she was, was the first one to get concerned.

“Senpai?” she asked tentatively.

Rika didn't answer right away. She didn't give any indication that she'd even heard Mash at all, she just kept staring out at the ocean.

“Rika?” her brother tried instead. “Everything okay?”

Rika took a deep breath, and then —

“Yo-hohoho, yo-hoho-ho. Yo-hohoho, yo-hoho-ho.”

Ritsuka groaned.

“Gather up all of the crew,” she sang quietly, “it's time to ship out Binks' brew. Sea wind blows — to where, who knows? The waves will be our guide. O'er across the ocean's tide, rays of sunshine far and wide. The birds, they sing, of cheerful things in circles passing by.”

It sounded like another sea shanty, but not one she'd sung while we were with Drake and her crew and not one I was familiar with. Given Ritsuka seemed to recognize it, it probably came from another movie or tv show I'd never heard of before.

“Gather up all of the crew, it's time to ship out Binks' brew. Pirates, we eternally are challenging the sea. With the waves to rest our heads, ship beneath us as our beds, hoisted high upon the mast, our jolly roger flies.”

No one spoke to interrupt her, and like that was permission, she kept going.

“Gather up all of the crew, it's time to ship out Binks' brew. Wave goodbye, but don't you cry, our memories remain.” Halfway through, her voice cracked, but she soldiered on as though it hadn't. “Our days are but a passing dream, everlasting though they seem. Beneath the moon we'll meet again, the wind's our lullaby.”

And when the last verse was over...

“Yo-hohoho, yo-hoho-ho. Yo-hohoho, yo-hoho-ho.”

She let the final refrain hang, and for several long seconds, stood there, staring out at the ocean. The slosh of the waves crashing against the shore filled the silence.

“Say, Onii-chan?” she asked. “Do you think Captain Drake would have liked that one?”

Ritsuka sighed and offered her a sad smile. “Of course. She would've loved it.”

“It’s a song about pirates,” I added dryly. “She would’ve made it her crew’s anthem.”

Rika giggled, reaching up with one hand to wipe at her eyes, and when she turned around, her usual grin was firmly in place.

“Yeah! For sure!”