

## Chapter CXXIII: Standing on Golden Sands

The next morning, a message from Da Vinci was already waiting for me on my communicator, letting me know that we had the day off from all other obligations and should report to the Command Room after breakfast. From the way it was worded, it had been sent just the same to all four of us — the Masters and Mash — and when they saw it, I had no doubt that the twins would roll over and go back to sleep for another hour or so, since it meant they wouldn't have to spend the morning working out under Aífe's tutelage.

Whatever this surprise was, I guess Da Vinci was expecting it to take up most of our day today. Had she finally fixed the simulator for Servants so we could have an entire day of stress-testing it? I'd been meaning to work in a few scrimmage matches whenever that happened, so one could only hope.

Nonetheless, I didn't see any reason why I should set aside my own morning routine, so I got up, got dressed for a workout, and then went to the gym, where I found Hippolyta, of all people, trying out the weight machines. She glanced up at me as I entered, then went back to doing her reps.

"Does that even do anything for you?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Speaking strictly, no," she said, and she didn't sound the least bit stressed or winded. "As a Servant, my strength will not increase, no matter how many repetitions I do or how much weight I lift. But there is a degree of...catharsis, I believe the word might be, to exercising like this. I've always found it to be a calming experience, although I confess that there is something different about modern methods of training."

Yeah. I had to imagine that the ancients probably mostly did body weight exercises, with some drills run in full kit so that their warriors could get used to the feel of moving in armor and carrying weapons. If they did any kind of weight lifting, it was probably some kind of free weights — either crude ones, considering the metalworking of those times, or improvised.

"I wasn't aware those were rated for Servants," I said.

"Truthfully, they are not," she replied, "so I must take great care to ensure I don't cause any damage. That, in itself, is also a form of exercise, and considering that the time might come where I must rescue one of you, my Masters, it is all the more worthy one to pursue."

My wrist throbbed with remembered pain from the time I woke Mash up and she grabbed my arm without controlling herself. It wasn't the only time she had accidentally injured me, but the others were mostly when she was trying to push me out of the way of an attack and didn't have the luxury of being gentle.

How fragile us Masters must seem to our Servants, that we could be injured or maimed by a single careless shove. I'd heard a few Brutes talk that way, too, way back when. About how one of the first things they had to learn after getting their powers was how to avoid hurting people without meaning to.

To Hippolyta, I said, "I agree. Remind me to tell you sometime about the egg exercise."

She paused, brow furrowing. “Egg exercise?”

Guess I was going to tell her about it now.

“An exercise for learning to control super strength,” I said. “It involves carrying an egg around and trying to avoid breaking it. I’m not sure we have any eggs to spare for it, though, so you might not be able to try it.”

“Perhaps not,” she agreed. “I will have to ask that Servant in the kitchen — Emiya, was it? He may be able to tell me if Chaldea can spare the resources necessary.”

Or he might be appalled at the idea of wasting good food like that. It could be interesting to see what kind of face he would make when she asked.

“Maybe a water balloon instead, then. We’ll have to see if that would work the same way.”

“Maybe,” she allowed. “I defer to your experience on the matter, since you are more familiar with it than I.”

Yeah. Maybe not. We’d have to do some tests to make sure it could still be done with something like that. Worst case scenario, Emiya made a few and wasted a tiny bit of mana for us to find out that there really wasn’t a good substitute for eggs.

I let Hippolyta get back to her own exercise and went over to the track to get mine in, running my usual number of laps plus three more, and then did a pair of cooldown laps so I didn’t crash. Then I went about the rest of my routine, and like that, an hour passed.

Afterwards, I bade goodbye to Hippolyta and went back to my room for a shower to rinse the sweat off, dried my hair, did the rest of my ablutions, and right around 9:30, I made my way to the cafeteria for breakfast.

As expected, the twins and Mash were already there and sat down, along with the day shift technicians and staff, so I went up to the front, where Emiya was already dishing me up a tray of food. Like he’d been waiting for me to step through the door.

“Good morning,” he said with a smile.

“Morning,” I replied. Blueberry pancakes today, crisp on the edges and browned to perfection — it was a wonder Rika hadn’t demanded chocolate ones yet. “Any idea what Da Vinci’s surprise is?”

Since it seemed like she’d told all of the Servants, considering she’d gotten Aífe and El-Melloi II to cancel their daily lessons with the twins.

He smirked. “Even if I did know, I think I’d leave it a surprise. I will tell you, though, that I think everyone will enjoy it.”

If he wanted to play it that way...

“And your talk with Rika?”

His smirk fell and he sighed, dropping a few strips of bacon onto my plate.

“It’s been hard to find the right moment,” he admitted sourly. “Especially with everything that happened over the last several days, there just hasn’t been a good time to take her aside and discuss such a heavy issue.”

“You can’t put it off forever,” I told him. “You need to get this handled before we deploy into the next Singularity.”

Or else I would take matters into my own hands. If I couldn’t force them to sit down and talk somehow, then as much as it would suck to go without his food, I would talk to Marie and Romani and get him taken off the team for the duration. This sort of baggage could get one or both of them killed, and I wasn’t about to let them carry it onto a mission.

“I know,” he agreed grudgingly, grimacing. “Maybe I’ll get my chance later on today. We’ll see. If not...” He sighed again. “I’ll figure it out.”

Gingerly, he set a glass of orange juice on my tray and said, “Enjoy your breakfast.”

“Thanks.”

I took my tray and meandered over to the table with the twins and Mash, and as I sat down, I asked, “Enjoy your morning off?”

“Senpai!” Rika greeted.

“Good morning, Senpai,” said Ritsuka.

“Good morning, Miss Taylor,” Mash said.

“Ugh, I don’t know what strings Da Vinci-chan pulled, but I owe her a big, sloppy kiss!” Rika groaned. “Another morning off from Super Action Mom’s training — I don’t care what the surprise is, that makes it all worth it!”

What was it I had told them a while back? “The more you sweat in peace...”

Rika stuck her tongue out at me. “After the last few days I’ve had, I just want to relax for a few days more. Is that so bad?”

Maybe not. But something told me that if we let her, Rika would spend her entire time relaxing, and then she’d be complaining the next time we had to climb a mountain or run through a city.

“Well,” I said, “you have one more day off, so enjoy it while you have the chance.”

“Oh trust me,” Rika said throatily, “I plan on it.”

Breakfast was demolished in short order, and the four of us lingered for a short while afterwards, just letting the food settle in our bellies, but all too soon, another message from Da Vinci arrived, letting us know we were expected in the Command Room shortly. We took our trays back to Emiya,

who accepted them and set the dishes aside to be washed, and then made our way in the direction of the Command Room for whatever Da Vinci's surprise turned out to be.

"Do you know what the surprise is, Senpai?" asked Ritsuka as we walked.

"Sorry," I told him, "not a clue."

"Knowing Da Vinci-chan, it's some sort of new gadget," Rika said, and then she lit up. "Oh! Oh! Do you think she actually got me a giant robot? That would be so cool!"

"Somehow, Senpai, I don't think the Director would approve of something like that," Mash said with an awkward smile.

Not even if we had quadruple our budget. Marie would see something like that as a complete waste of both time and resources, although considering some of the designs I'd seen in Da Vinci's sketches — the historical ones, from when she'd still been alive and male — I could see it as a personal project she took on just to prove she could do it.

And being entirely fair? If she had enough supplies and resources for it, I had no doubt she could. She'd reproduced Tinkertech. If anyone could build a functional giant robot, it was Da Vinci.

"I can still dream!" Rika insisted.

Of a world where she piloted giant robots into battle against legions of the exalted dead brought back to life? If that was what her dreams were like, maybe she'd been getting into some of Romani's hidden stash.

It couldn't be bad seafood when we had Emiya on staff.

Before long, we found ourselves at the Command Room, and the door whooshed open to admit us. Da Vinci, Romani, and Marie were already there, and as she turned towards us, Da Vinci smiled broadly.

"Good morning, everyone!" she greeted us.

"Morning!" Rika replied.

"Good morning," Ritsuka, Mash, and I all said, with them tacking on a polite, "Miss Da Vinci."

"I'm sure you're all wondering just what it is I have in store for you today," she said, "and the simple answer is...vacation!"

What?

"Vacation?" the twins echoed.

"Isn't this...already technically time off, Miss Da Vinci?" asked Mash.

"True, the four of you are, technically speaking, free of obligations to Chaldea in between your deployments to Singularities," said Da Vinci. "However, practically speaking, you're on call all hours

of the day, since you physically can't leave the facility and may be forced to deploy if an emergency arises, and that can be a bit...rough, don't you think?"

Yes, it could be, and even if we were technically in our off time between Singularities, the reality was that we still spent a lot of that time training and preparing for the next one, so it wasn't really the same. I wasn't sure how she intended to rectify that, though. We could set the simulator to account for just about any place, real or imagined, but that wasn't quite the same as actually being there ourselves.

"What do you mean by vacation, exactly?" I asked.

"I'm glad you asked!" Da Vinci said brightly. "You see, when you repair a Singularity, technically speaking, you're not destroying it. Although the aberrant factors are corrected and returned to their proper place in history, the Singularity itself — and its geography — technically remains intact. There just, well, hasn't been any reason to bother with them after the fact. Not much point in sending you to fight a few remaining wyverns in Orléans or explore an empty Rome in the Septem Singularity, is there?"

"Wait," said Rika, "we can go back?"

"For a given value of back," said Marie. "It's not like we have any interest in these Singularities once history has been set to right. A-and we'd still have to justify the Rayshift in our reports, for that matter!"

"But we can go back!" Rika insisted. There was an undertone in her voice that was hard to identify — something between hope and desperation. "Right?"

"I'm afraid that Emperor Nero won't be in the Singularity any longer, Rika," Da Vinci said gently. "She, like everyone else who was dragged into it, will have returned to where she was supposed to be. It isn't possible for you to simply pop in for a visit and go see her."

Rika deflated.

"However," Da Vinci went on, "as for the things inside that Singularity, there shouldn't be any trouble there. Fauna that didn't belong but technically have no place in proper history either might remain behind, so if we ever needed to gather things like food, well, it turns out that's not as big a problem as we originally feared."

Great news, as long as no one minded eating crab or wyvern for a while.

"What does this have to do with our vacation?" I asked her. "Are you sending us back into one of these Singularities?"

Da Vinci smiled again. "Exactly! Romani, the Director, and I were discussing it yesterday, and this is an excellent opportunity both to test the stability of Rayshifting into these cleared Singularities *and* to give all of you the chance to stretch your legs — so to speak — without the pressure of a mission looming overhead. To that end..."

She pulled out a folded pile of clothing, atop which sat a quartet of modules fit for our upgraded Mystic Codes.

“I’ve added a pattern to your Mystic Codes! And, Mash, I made one for you, as well!”

“A new pattern?” Rika asked excitedly as she swiped one of the modules. Immediately, she snapped it into place on hers and started fiddling with the settings.

The rest of us took ours more calmly, and Mash accepted the pile of clothes with a polite, “Thank you, Miss Da Vinci.”

“Well, I can’t imagine you brought a change of clothes for every occasion to an internship,” Da Vinci said wryly, “especially one taking place in the middle of Antarctica. So I took the liberty of designing for each of you —”

Rika pressed a button, having evidently discovered the setting for the new pattern, and in her haste and eagerness, seemed to have forgotten how the Mystic Codes changed designs, because a moment later, her standard issue uniform morphed into glittering particles that flowed up and down her body. Flashes of creamy skin shone through the cloud, there and gone before any details could be glimpsed, and a second or two later, the pattern settled.

Into a bikini.

“— a swimsuit!”

Rika, realizing exactly what she had changed into, squeaked, face bright red, and tried to cover herself with her hands. Unsuccessfully, considering the most important parts were already covered.

“Senpai!” Mash squeaked.

“Don’t just do that in the middle of the Command Room!” Marie barked sternly. “Especially when you don’t know what you’re changing into!”

“Rika!” Ritsuka shouted, embarrassed, as he covered his eyes.

“Don’t look!” Rika cried. “Don’t look!”

A couple of the technicians who had turned to see what the commotion was about turned away, their own faces burning. Meunier looked like he wanted the ground to open up and swallow him whole.

Romani sighed. “She’s going to be wearing it on the island anyway,” he said, “so it’s not like we won’t see her in it then, but...I guess it’s not the same thing, is it?”

Although he wasn’t technically wrong...

“You don’t go parading around the facility in your boxers, do you?” I asked.

He laughed awkwardly. “Point taken.”

“Stop trying to cover yourself and change back already!” Marie snapped at Rika.

Hiding as much of herself behind her arms and legs as she could, a hunched, frankly silly looking Rika fumbled with the module of her Mystic Code for several long seconds before she finally managed to hit on the correct setting. A moment later, after her orange-striped bikini dissolved into another silvery cloud, she was once more dressed in her standard issue uniform, which did nothing at all to make her feel better about exposing herself in front of almost the entirety of her coworkers.

“Oh my god,” she muttered, burying her face in her hands, “oh my god...”

Romani cleared his throat in the uncomfortable silence that followed. “W-well. So that’s it, then. We’ll be sending the four of you back into the Okeanos Singularity for the day, so that you have, um, a chance to...to relax, and, um, that’s why the...swimsuits...and...yeah...”

Da Vinci sighed.

“Officially speaking, you’re there to investigate what remains behind after a Singularity is corrected,” she said with a wan smile, “while we test the stability of Rayshifts inside of them. Unofficially, however, this is just a vacation day for all of you. Try to have fun, okay?”

“Will the Director be coming along?” Mash asked.

Da Vinci and Romani shared a look, grimacing.

“No,” Marie answered stonily. “It’s impossible for me to Rayshift, remember? Even if this isn’t technically my...o-original body, that hasn’t changed. Besides,” she added, “someone has to stay here and make sure this place runs smoothly, don’t they? It may as well be me!”

Privately, I thought that she also didn’t want to be seen by the twins in her swimsuit, so even if she’d had the ability, I didn’t think she would have come with us. She would have come up with some excuse — maybe even the same one she just used — to stay behind and avoid it.

It wasn’t like she had anything to be ashamed of. She wasn’t some busty bombshell, but she had way more going on than I did, at least. I think she just had...rigid ideas of what was proper amongst her subordinates and what wasn’t, and that got in the way of a lot of things.

Part of me wanted her to branch out a little and let down those walls. Me being her only real friend in Chaldea wasn’t a burden, but having more people for her to rely on wasn’t ever going to be a bad thing. Another part of me fondly thought that she would never change, because she just took herself and her position that seriously.

“Is there anything special we need to do?”

“Nothing,” said Da Vinci. “I’ve already taken the liberty of picking out a familiar island for you to relax on, and everything is already arranged for your arrival. We just have to get you there now, like any other Rayshift.”

“Last one there’s a rotten egg!” Rika suddenly proclaimed, and then she turned around and raced out of the Command Room like the devil himself was on her heels.

“How many times do I have to tell you? No running in the hallways!” Marie shouted after her, but if Rika heard her, she gave no indication at all.

Of course. It was just an excuse to get out of the room after she embarrassed herself. I understood that impulse a lot better than I cared to admit.

“Director,” Ritsuka began, grimacing.

Marie sighed. “Go!” she said, shooing him away. “This is supposed to be your vacation day, isn’t it? That means that every extra minute you spend here is another one you’re missing out on to relax!”

Ritsuka smiled and nodded. “Of course, Director.”

He made it one step before Marie barked at him, “But no running! Where do you think you are, a playground? Walk there, like a Master of Chaldea!”

The complicated expression I spied on Ritsuka’s face said he didn’t understand what one had at all to do with the other, but he obeyed and followed Rika out of the Command Room at a brisk walk, Mash on his heels. I wasn’t sure he wouldn’t break out into a run the instant he was out of sight.

I turned back to Marie. “Director.”

“It applies to you, too,” she told me. “Aren’t you at least as deserving of a day off as those two are? I expect you to relax and enjoy yourself, even if it’s only for today!”

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling a little. “Of course.”

So I turned back around and followed the twins, or more like just headed the same way they went, since I was walking and they very definitely were not, despite Marie’s warnings. It meant they were already there and waiting by the time I made it down to the Rayshift chamber, loitering about while I made my way there.

Almost the instant I was through the doors and inside the chamber proper, they whooshed shut behind me, and from the floor, four large tubes arose. Our coffins.

The PA system crackled.

“It should be just like a normal Rayshift,” Romani’s voice announced, “so all you have to do is step inside your coffin and we’ll send you off. There’s no objective for you to chase this time, so just relax and sit back, okay?”

Easy for him to say, I thought, when he didn’t have to climb into one of these things. I didn’t think I was ever going to get used to it, not when the Locker had affected me the way it had.

Nonetheless, the twins and Mash were evidently starting to become accustomed to this little ritual, because there was almost no hesitation as they climbed back inside their own coffins, leaving me the last and slowest one to get in. I hated that my claustrophobia — well-earned, I would say — made this more of an ordeal than I would have liked, but it wasn’t like I had much in the way of choice.



I was supposed to be relaxing, I thought as I leaned back, taking a deep breath and trying not to think about how tight a space the thing actually was. Getting all stressed out about this kind of defeated the point, didn't it?

I closed my eyes so I didn't have to watch the lid slide down and leave me in darkness, but that didn't mean I couldn't hear it. I sucked in another deep breath to try and calm my heart a little.

A familiar, computerized voice announced:

**UNSUMMON PROGRAM START**

**SPIRITRON CONVERSION START**

An equally familiar chill swept down my body, starting at the crown of my head and ending at the soles of my feet.

**RAYSHIFTING STARTING IN 3...**

**2...**

**1...**

My coffin opened up beneath me, and from behind my eyelids, I saw the streams of light as I fell down through a canal of stars. From some great distance away, the final words reached me.

**ALL PROCEDURES CLEARED**

**GRAND ORDER COMMENCING OPERATION**

For an eternity, I hung, suspended between moments, stretched out between eternities — and then, suddenly, my feet jarred as I landed on something soft with a sound like scattering beads. Warm heat pressed down against my head and the back of my neck, gentle but insistent. The slosh of rolling water filtered softly into my ears.

When I opened my eyes again, I was on a beach. White sand stretched out around me, far enough in every direction that the bugs in the forest in the distance were only just under my control, and in front of me, blue ocean undulated as weak waves lapped lovingly at the shore, kicking up streaks of pale white foam.

Up above, the sun shone brightly, casting the entire place in a balmy warmth. A gentle breeze wafted in from the sea, tickling my nostrils with the salty scent of brine.

“Hey!” came Rika’s voice from off to the side. “I recognize this place! This is the beach where we met Captain Pillows!”

It was, I realized almost as soon as she said it. More accurately, this was the first island we’d come ashore on, and this was the beach where we landed after commandeering that pirate ship at the very beginning. Further on, deeper in, there had once been a camp through that forest and beyond a

narrow valley, and Captain Drake and her crew had called that place their paradise, until we came along.

*Beep-beep!*

“Rayshift successful!” Romani proclaimed happily. “All readings are in the green, no anomalies or errors...everything went perfectly, everyone!”

“There is one thing, but it shook out basically as I expected,” said Da Vinci. “Everyone, if you were expecting to take advantage of the time dilation that exists in Singularities, I’m sorry to tell you that you won’t be able to. Looking at the data now, even when you aren’t in direct contact with us, time should flow at the same rate in there as it does out here, so one day for you will be one day for us. Sorry, but it’s only a single day’s vacation, this time.”

“Ugh!” Rika groaned. “Really? I was hoping to get, like, a whole week off!”

“I’m afraid it’s a natural consequence of your own success, Rika,” Da Vinci told her apologetically. “The entire reason the time dilation exists is because the Singularity diverges from proper history. Without that divergence — without Jason and his Grail pulling things out of place — the things that make that Singularity divergent aren’t divergent *enough* to cause a significant drift. Good news, if something *does* find its way into that Singularity and causes problems, we can respond with support and reinforcements immediately. Bad news, it means that you can’t get a whole week’s worth of vacation in a single day.”

Rika blew a raspberry like the mature adult she was.

“It’s okay, Da Vinci,” said Ritsuka. “She’s just upset that she can’t cheat the system.”

“It’s not cheating if I’m just taking advantage of somebody else’s rules!” Rika insisted.

Maybe she really had been taking my lessons to heart after all.

Even though it was sound only, I could hear the smile in Da Vinci’s voice as she said, “Don’t worry, Rika, I have one more surprise for you all!”

Was she...? I guess she wanted me to act all shocked, but...

“Another surprise?” asked Mash. “But I thought the vacation *was* the surprise, Miss Da Vinci.”

“Who said there was only one?” Da Vinci said smugly. “I can give you as many surprises as I want, as long as no one spoils any of them!”

“Is this the part where we dramatically reveal ourselves?” asked an entirely different voice.

“Not if I knew you were there from the beginning,” I said as I turned around with the rest of the group to find —

“Emiya!” Rika cried. “Tii-chan!”

“And you’re all wearing...what, exactly?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

— our entire roster of Servants, all dressed down from their usual armor into something more befitting a beach party. Arash was in trunks and a gaudy blue Hawaiian shirt, Bradamante in a one piece with cutouts around the middle, Jeanne Alter in a black and red bikini with flame motifs, Siegfried in a pair of black trunks with an *open* button up shirt that showed off most of his chest (and a pair of glasses, for some reason), Aífe in one of sexiest and yet most tasteful bikinis I had ever laid eyes on, Shakespeare in a t-shirt and trousers, Hippolyta in some sort of sarong or something in lieu actual bikini bottoms, and Bellamy in what looked like a scuba suit, complete with a pair of goggles resting on his forehead.

Emiya, carrying an absolutely enormous picnic basket, wore a pair of shorts, a tank top, and a dark shirt, unbuttoned. In the back, like he was trying to go unnoticed, El-Melloi II held an enormous beach umbrella and smoked a cigarette. He had on a short-sleeved button up, a black v-neck, and a pair of shorts, but what looked most out of place on him were the flip-flops he was wearing on his feet.

I wasn’t sure how to feel about any of what I was seeing just then. I think I would have felt better if they were all just wearing some kind of swimsuit instead of...all of *that*.

“Da Vinci thought it was only fair if the rest of us got a chance to enjoy some sunshine, too,” Arash said, smiling. “So she, ah, *magicked up* some clothes for us to wear for the occasion.”

I wanted to groan at that horrible pun.

“That was terrible,” Jeanne Alter said for me with a sneer.

“And just because you’re on vacation today doesn’t mean you’re skipping lunch.” Emiya hefted his gigantic picnic basket pointedly. “So she sent us along with some food for later.”

Of course. It wasn’t a beach party without sandwiches and finger food, was it?

“It was hard work, making sure everything was ready to go in just one day,” Da Vinci said proudly, “but I managed to get everything done for all of you in time for this vacation day. Food, supplies, sunscreen, beach towels, everything and anything you could possibly need to enjoy a day out on the beach.”

Arash gestured helpfully to the enormous box I already knew was there, just behind the group, which must have contained those supplies that no one else was already carrying. Rika raced over to it and all but ripped it open, rummaging about inside of it as she looked through to confirm that Da Vinci had been telling the truth. She gasped.

“You really did think of everything!”

And from out of the box, Rika lifted a large, unwieldy machine that she struggled to keep a grip on. Was that...?

“A snowcone machine?”

“Snowcone?” Mash echoed, confused.

“There’s a cooler in there, too!” Rika declared. She had to balance the base of the machine against one of her thighs just to keep from dropping it, but it was slipping down slowly and steadily anyway.

“It’s technically November here in Chaldea,” Da Vinci explained, “and while I’m sure the three of you are used to temperatures being colder that time of year, Rika, Ritsuka, Taylor, it’s also summer in the southern hemisphere, so there’s no reason you can’t enjoy a frozen treat. If you’re having any trouble, I’ve left an instruction manual on how to use it. It should be in there with the other supplies.”

Rika looked like she was going to try and fish it out, adjusting her grip on the machine and very much in danger of dropping it, until Ritsuka sighed and walked over. “Hold on,” he told her, “you’re going to hurt yourself.”

All he managed to accomplish was to get himself tangled up with her, the both of them holding a portion of the machine precariously between them and trying not to drop it as they maneuvered around in an attempt to lift it more stably.

“I’m sure you’ll figure things out,” Da Vinci said, amused. I wasn’t so sure about that. “In any case! It is now 10:09 am. I think it only fair to give you all a good eight hours or so to enjoy yourselves, so we’ll be Rayshifting you all back around 7 pm. That’s 1900 hours, Mash.”

Mash, who had opened her mouth, closed it again before she could ask the question.

“We’ll contact you again about half an hour before then, so that you have time to clean everything up. Until then, everyone, have fun! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

“Wait!” Marie’s voice interjected, but the line cut before she could say anything.

“There’s a joke in there, but it’s only half as funny without her,” Emiya drawled. A squawk from over by the twins drew a sigh out of his mouth, and he set his enormous basket down to make his way over to them. “Here, you two, let me handle that, you’re going to drop it...”

“I’ll get a table set up for it,” Arash volunteered.

“Bring me a towel over when you get the chance,” El-Melloi II told him, and then he broke off to find a section of the beach where he could set up his oversized umbrella.

As though that was some kind of signal, the others separated, with Shakespeare heading over to that big box so he could grab a table of his own and a folding chair to sit beside it, and most of the rest meandering over to join Mash and me.

“Hey!” Bellamy greeted me with a smile.

“Hey, yourself,” I answered lamely.

He took it in stride. “Who would’ve thought we’d be coming back to this place so soon after we left it, huh? It’s just too bad Captain Drake isn’t here with us to enjoy it!”

Knowing her, she'd already have been drunk.

"Yeah. Too bad."

"So we could listen to more of her god-awful singing?" Jeanne Alter said sardonically. Aífe's hand slapped the back of her head. "Ow! Stop doing that!"

Aífe arched an eyebrow. "Since when did you even hear Captain Drake sing?"

Jeanne Alter's lip curled.

"It feels a bit strange," Hippolyta said, and Jeanne Alter choked off before she could even get started. "We Amazons lived on an island ourselves, and it's true, there were often celebrations and festivals, but..." She picked at the cloth of her top. "If ever we braved the water, we would scarcely have bothered with something like this."

"Oh," said Mash. "Yes, I suppose things like swimsuits wouldn't yet have been designed, would they? When people in those times went swimming recreationally, they would have done it, um, n-naked, wouldn't they?"

Hippolyta smiled. "Quite."

"Oh!" Bradamante said excitedly. "Oh, Mash! You have a swimsuit now, too, don't you? Let's see it, let's see it!"

"That's right. Um." Mash looked down at her clothing, a standard issue Chaldea uniform, just like Rika's, and the module that attached to it. "I-I guess... If we're going to have a tropical vacation for today, I...might as well dress the part, r-right?"

"Fou!"

The little gremlin appeared from *somewhere*, like he'd been hiding out in the shadow of her hair, and leapt off of her shoulder to land in the sand. It looked up at her expectantly, and Mash offered it a weak smile.

"If even Fou thinks so, then I suppose I have no reason not to."

She took a deep breath, and then pressed the buttons on the module, and in a cloud of silver dust, her clothing dissolved, shifting, morphing, and then settling a moment later into a white one piece trimmed in magenta with a decorative bow in the center of her chest and a skirt that fell tastefully down to the tops of her thighs.

I felt my eyebrows rise. Okay, Da Vinci, you got a pass for this one. I wasn't expecting it to be as tasteful and conservative as that while still being flattering.

"Oh my gosh, Mash!" Rika squealed, and she raced back over to us. "It's so pretty! Wow!"

"Isn't it?" Bradamante agreed. "Lady Da Vinci is truly an artist!"

Considering that was what Da Vinci was most famous for...

"I mean, I guess it's okay," Jeanne Alter said petulantly. "Not as cool as mine, of course."

"I mean, adding flames to something makes it ten times as awesome!" Rika agreed, and Jeanne Alter blinked, stunned, like she hadn't expected Rika to agree with her.

"Queen Aífe, and you, too, Bradamante, both of your swimsuits are beautiful as well," said Mash. "Miss Da Vinci...she really captured the essence of all of us with these designs, didn't she?"

"Perhaps she has." Aífe slid a glance my way. "But of those of us here, there is still one of us who has yet to don her swimsuit even once, isn't there?"

My lips drew tight. I thought I'd gone unnoticed, for a second there. I guess it was too much to hope for.

"Oh," said Mash. "That's right! Miss Taylor, and Senpai, too! You have swimsuits as well, don't you?"

"A-hehehehe," Rika laughed awkwardly. "I think everyone's...already seen mine, though..."

*If I'm going to wear one, so are you.*

"Then there's no point being shy about it now, is there?" I said pointedly.

Rika's cheeks burned.

Without looking, I checked up on what everyone else was doing, and in the meantime, while we'd been talking, Emiya had successfully gotten the snowcone machine up and running and had moved on to setting up a grill. Since I hadn't seen it anywhere in that box, I had to assume he'd projected it again, and it wasn't like he hadn't done something like that before in Septem and Okeanos, so it was a sucker's bet.

Ritsuka, meanwhile, had gone with Arash and El-Melloi II to get spots laid out to relax on, with towels unfurled across the sand, safely away from the tides.

It looked like I wasn't getting out of this either. Fine.

I reached for the module attached to my Mystic Code and went about adjusting the settings until I found the one for my new swimsuit, whatever it was. Then, before I could second guess myself, I bit the bullet and pressed the buttons, and my uniform dissolved against my skin.

It wasn't like we hadn't bathed together before. Whatever Da Vinci had designed for me, it wouldn't be showing more skin than I had back in Septem, when we all hopped into the bath with Emperor Nero.

A moment later, the dust settled — quite literally — and my swimsuit took form. I chanced a look down at it, ready to hate what I found, but... Huh. Maybe Da Vinci really did know what she was doing after all.

“Senpai, too!” Rika groused. Almost angrily, she found the setting for her own swimsuit and turned it on. “Geez! Everyone with these stupidly cute swimsuits running around! There’s enough cheesecake and beefcake on this beach to start a modeling agency!”

The bikini was expected. At this point, I didn’t think Da Vinci would have let me get away with a one piece. It was tasteful, though. It didn’t try to show off cleavage that I didn’t have, and although it had less fabric than my usual sports bra, it covered me about the same. And the bottoms weren’t a glorified thong, which was always a plus.

I had to work with these people. I didn’t want them ogling my ass.

After a moment of silvery dust flying about, Rika was once more in her own swimsuit, and now that we weren’t in the middle of the Command Room with all of our coworkers, colleagues, and superiors, it felt a little more appropriate to appreciate the design. A little plain, if I was honest, although not quite as plain as mine, but the vivid orange stripes actually went very well with her hair, and if anyone had ever wanted proof that yes, Rika did attend her training sessions with Aífe, and yes, those sessions were producing results, well, there it was. It wasn’t the average teenage girl who sported that kind of muscle definition, after all.

For several long seconds, Rika stood there, waiting, fidgeting a little under our scrutiny, and belatedly, I realized she was looking for approval.

“It suits you, Rika,” I told her, for lack of anything better.

But the giant smile that broke out on her face was real and genuine, and you might have thought she’d just won a beauty contest.

“It really does, Senpai,” Mash agreed.

“Lady Da Vinci outdid herself!” Bradamante added, and okay, that might have been laying it on a bit thick.

“Aw, shucks, you guys!” Rika laughed bashfully. And then, abruptly, she said, “Hey, what are we all standing around for? This is a beach vacation! Sand, sun, surf! We shouldn’t be gossiping like old ladies at the park!”

“Who’s gossiping?” Jeanne Alter drawled. “I’m just waiting for you idiots to stop gawking at each other so we can actually do something.”

“Exactly!” Rika grinned. A second later, it took on a mischievous slant. “So…”

Suddenly, she spun around on her heel and raced off towards the shore. Over her shoulder, she called, “Last one in is a rotten egg!”