

Chapter LVIII: Shaped Isle

Da Vinci gave us one more warning about an unusual reading from somewhere in the mass of magical beasts near Hadrian's Wall, something that was registering on the sensors in a way similar to Mash's Saint Graph but way less structured, and then she Rayshifted a package of bottled water and bade us good luck.

Plain old water had never tasted so sweet.

With the basic outline of a plan to work off of and water to help us Masters hydrate, the next step was getting Boudica situated so she could feed off of the ley lines' abundant magical energy, a process that took all of a couple minutes and minimal effort. The groundwork for it had already been laid with our line to Da Vinci, after all, and there really wasn't much more to it. It was as simple as having her sit inside of that magic circle and making sure she was able to tap into the ley line.

After that, there was nothing else that needed our attention, so there was nothing keeping us in the sweltering heat of the mountain's heart.

No one thought it was going to be really necessary, but just in case, Spartacus stayed with her to make sure nothing happened while she was alone, and the rest of us made the trek back up to the surface, a journey that felt twice as long and arduous as the one down. By the time we finally made it back out into fresh air, I had gone through two bottles of water, Rika had made it most of the way through three, and Ritsuka was already dipping into his fourth.

I never thought I'd miss the stale, cool air of Chaldea's constantly controlled climate, but I would have taken it over that tunnel to hell any day of the week.

The mountainside's somewhat chilly air was a balm that all of us were grateful for. After spending what had to be at least two hours down in the bowels of Mount Etna, the brisk breeze against my sweaty skin was just as refreshing as that first sip of cold water had been back in the depths. It was *relief* — and the twins certainly weren't shy about showing it.

"Fresh air!" Rika cried, clawing at the sky. "Salvation! At last!"

"Have to say, I'm glad to be out of there." Ritsuka wiped more sweat from his brow and let out a deep sigh. "I know we needed to help Boudica and do that scan, but that whole time was miserable."

"Me, too." Mash sighed as well. "I wasn't expecting it to be quite that uncomfortable inside that tunnel. The Grail cavern in Fuyuki wasn't anywhere near that bad."

"Mount Enzou wasn't an active volcano less than a hundred years out from the Age of Gods," I pointed out.

"I guess so."

"Never again," Rika promised gravely.

I arched an eyebrow at her. “You’re going to be singing a different tune in about ten minutes, when you’ve cooled down enough to feel the mountain air.”

“Don’t ruin this for me, Senpai!” she whined.

I smothered a smile and busied myself with letting my ravens out so that they could keep an eye on as much of our surroundings as possible. Arash being there might have made it a bit pointless, but even if he could see farther and clearer than even my ravens could, having them out helped with the fact that I had a lot fewer bugs around than I was used to.

From there, there wasn’t much left for us to do but wait. There was no telling exactly how long it would take Boudica to heal, but with the amount of magical energy she was sitting on top of, if it took more than a few hours, I would have been incredibly surprised.

True to my prediction, the chilly mountain air turned from soothing to uncomfortable with speed once our bodies had time to readjust and reestablish equilibrium, so to avoid Rika’s inevitable complaints, I made the executive decision for us to head back down the mountain the way we came. Since there were no complaints, we started the trip immediately.

“Sometimes, Senpai,” a shivering Rika told me, hugging herself to try and keep warm, “I really hate when you’re right.”

“I hope Arash will be okay up there by himself,” Mash said worriedly.

“He’ll be fine,” I reassured her. “If he actually gets uncomfortable, he can just go into spirit form and stay like that.”

“H-how cold of you, Senpai,” Rika said, teeth chattering a little. “Have you no sympathy for poor Arash?”

“You’re welcome to stay up there with him if you think he needs company that badly.”

The whole reason he was staying up there in the first place was to wait for Boudica and Spartacus so he could lead them back down the mountainside to our group. The last thing we needed was for them to come out, realize we weren’t there, and then get lost looking for us in the complete opposite direction.

“I-I’m good,” she rushed to say.

“It’s not as though it’s strange for a Servant to be alone,” Emiya said. “Mash might need sleep like a normal person, but for regular Servants, it’s just a luxury we can engage in if we want. After all, we’ve stood guard around you Masters every night, haven’t we?”

“I guess that’s true,” Mash said thoughtfully. “Do you really stay up all night, Emiya? What’s that like?”

“Very boring,” Emiya drawled. He slid a glance at Aífe. “Of course, some of us pass the time a bit differently than the others.”

“I haven’t criticized you for your own hobbies and interests,” Aífe replied. “Would you prefer I started teasing you for having such a feminine interest as cooking, Emiya?”

An old instinct arose inside me to come to his defense, to call that sort of thinking sexist and old-fashioned, but before the words could come out of my mouth, my brain caught up with my ears and I realized that the point she was making was that she’d been respecting him enough not to go for such a cheap shot. Too, she was a female warrior, wasn’t she? A fighting queen who had surpassed even her male counterparts, to the point that the greatest hero of Ireland had resorted to trickery to beat her.

Wasn’t she basically the definition of bucking traditional gender roles?

“Was it a criticism?” Emiya wondered sardonically.

“How *does* Aífe pass the time while we sleep, then?” Ritsuka asked curiously.

Emiya shrugged. “I guess you’d call it shadowboxing.”

That was it? That wasn’t embarrassing at all. The way he’d been building up to it, I’d been expecting something really girly and feminine, like flower arranging or something. Something that a hardened badass might actually have some reason to hide, the way someone like Hookwolf would never admit he liked to crochet.

The idea that Aífe passed the time by shadowboxing...actually fit her personality pretty well.

“Shadowboxing?” Nero asked, bemused.

“It’s where you practice your skills by fighting imaginary opponents,” I explained shortly. “You’re ‘boxing’ with ‘shadows.’”

“Shadowboxing.” Nero repeated the word to herself, like she was trying to memorize it. “Mm-mm! I understand! I think.”

“Heh.” Rika grinned against the cold. “H-have the shadows ever fought back, Super Action M-mom?”

Aífe gave her a strange look, like she didn’t quite know what to make of that. Being fair to her, I couldn’t imagine she’d ever heard the joke about how talking to your stuffed animals was only bad when the stuffed animals talked back.

“Not since I became a Heroic Spirit,” said Aífe, and it took me a moment to realize that she was being completely serious.

“I...don’t actually have a reply for that one,” Rika admitted.

“I guess the Land of Shadows is quite deliberately named,” Emiya remarked.

“It’s a land of the dead,” Aífe said matter-of-factly. “A cursed place overrun by countless ghosts, wraiths, and evil spirits. Is there any better name for a land where specters haunt every shadow than ‘the Land of Shadows?’”

“And you lived there?” Ritsuka asked incredulously. “That sounds like a really dangerous place!”

Aífe’s lips pursed, and for a moment, I thought she wouldn’t answer. After a short pause, however, she said, “I grew up there. One of two candidates to hold shut the gates that kept those phantoms from leaking out into the rest of the world. A thankless, eternal task that could only have gone to one of us.”

“And it went to your sister,” Emiya noted.

A huff of air burst from her nostrils. “Yes. Scáthach was the one who was eventually chosen for that position, and I was passed over. It was one of many contests over which we competed.” Her trademark smile slowly curled her lips. “I was the one who won the rest.”

Was she? I didn’t call her out on it. What I’d seen in that dream, those moments from her past, the legends said that Aífe was the superior warrior, but up until they parted ways to pursue their own paths, Scáthach was the one who won every fight they ever had. If they ever met up again and fought after they’d spent time apart to hone their skills...

Well, I hadn’t seen it in the dream, but obviously, if Scáthach was so certain of her own defeat that she had hesitated to fight Aífe on that fateful day, they must have fought again before in a friendlier context.

“Didn’t she beat your ass a lot, though?” Rika asked.

I closed my eyes briefly. *Rika*... One of these days, that girl was going to learn some tact. Preferably, before it got her killed.

“Only when we were children,” Aífe replied crisply, “flailing at each other and swinging weapons we barely knew how to use. As grown women, she never once bested me.”

Considering they had to have been about thirteen or fourteen when they went their separate ways, yeah, I guess I was willing to let her have that one.

Eventually, we made it down the side of the mountain and set up camp — metaphorically — in the sparse, scorched landscape near the base, where life hadn’t quite managed to encroach. The sun had stretched high into the sky in the hours it had been since we first climbed Mount Etna, and mine wasn’t the only stomach that was rumbling and ready for food.

“Maybe we should have packed a *bento* for each of us before we left Rome,” Ritsuka said ruefully. “Or asked Da Vinci to send us something to eat.”

An idea that I was regretting not having just then myself.

“It’s not like it’s too late for that,” I said, and then I turned to Mash and Aífe. “Even this close to the ley line, we’re probably going to need to stabilize the connection...”

Da Vinci was only too happy to help, once we explained the situation, and she sent us a package of foodstuffs — mostly canned goods and other easily stored items, but even with that, Emiya managed to throw together a devilishly good meal. Fairly light, all things considered, but still filling enough that we were all satisfied by it.

“Another delicious meal, mm-mm,” Nero said with a sigh. “Are you certain I can’t tempt you, Emiya?”

“Are we going to go through this again?” Emiya asked, shaking his head. “My answer hasn’t changed. Even if I said yes, it wouldn’t change anything, in the end.”

“More’s the pity,” Nero lamented.

“Look on the bright side, Best Buddy,” Rika chimed in. “Even if you can’t enjoy his food forever, you can at least enjoy it now, right?”

Nero smiled. “Mm-mm. Yes, I suppose that is so.”

We lazed about as our food digested, lounging around in a collection of lawn chairs that Emiya had projected for us — and seriously, exactly what were that guy’s limits, anyway? “Fundamentally limited to bladed weapons,” my ass. This wasn’t the first time he’d done something that shouldn’t have been possible by that metric, and I doubted it was going to be the last.

I guess I didn’t have too much room to talk about secrets, though. I doubted Emiya’s were quite as dangerous as mine were, but then again, since he was a person who would one day *become* a Heroic Spirit instead of a Heroic Spirit of the distant past, maybe his were just as much about protecting his living self as anything else. If it was really that important to hide, then prying maybe wasn’t the greatest of ideas.

He was willing to get the twins off my back about the source of my bug powers. The least I could do in exchange was keep my mouth shut about the nonsensical limits to his.

Slowly, a boring hour passed us by as we waited down at the foot of the mountain. With nothing else to do, eventually, we had to wind up discussing what we were going to do next and how we were going to tackle the strange island where the mysterious god had set up.

“I maintain that it’s well within my ability to go and scout it out myself,” Emiya insisted. “We don’t need to put anyone else at risk to go and see what’s going on.”

“Anyone else but *you*, you mean,” Aífe rebuked him.

“I’d think someone like you would understand,” Emiya retorted slyly. “After all, isn’t ‘by yourself your preferred method of handling things?’”

“You seem to forget that I was also the leader of an army. Even if I prefer single combat, I’m not unaware of how to fight as part of a larger unit.”

“No one will be going to that island alone.” I put my foot down to forestall the argument that had been about to brew. “We might wind up sending you in to scout it out, but not from this far away. Not if we can help it.”

“If we get up close, it might be too late to discover that god has set up some nasty defenses,” he pointed out.

“So we should just send you in and hope for the best?” Ritsuka demanded.

“I’m a Servant. Technically, I’m already dead.” Emiya shrugged. “Which means that I’m more replaceable than you are.”

Mash’s face twisted. “That’s not...” But she trailed off, and in a quieter voice, continued, “I suppose the job of the Servant is to protect the Master, even if it means dying. In that sense, Servants are more replaceable than Masters, aren’t they?”

“A good Master doesn’t throw away their Servant like a cheap familiar,” El-Melloi II chimed in. “*Respect* is the most important part of any Master-Servant pairing. If both sides don’t respect each other, then failure is a guarantee.”

Emiya’s cheek twitched, but he didn’t comment. Whatever nerve that had touched, he didn’t feel the need to share.

“We’re not throwing anyone away,” I said. “Remember, we want to avoid engaging this god if we can. We’re just going there to investigate. On the off chance that whoever it is happens to be hostile, however, having the rest of the team be hundreds of miles away won’t help any of us. Besides, if there was some incredibly dangerous bounded field we had to worry about, don’t you think Da Vinci would have warned us?”

My understanding of bounded fields was that the stronger they were, the more the inside deviated from the outside, so the more detectable they were. If this god we were worrying about had set up something strong enough to seriously endanger our lives, then that should have been something Da Vinci picked up during her enhanced scan of the Singularity.

“It’s also counterproductive to set up something like that if this god is trying to hide its presence,” Aífe added.

“That’s not a guarantee either,” El-Melloi II said. “There are some incredibly nasty ways to trap a bounded field, and gods don’t have to play by the same rules as magi.”

“Which is why Emiya and Arash are going to be the spearhead and not lone scouts,” I said. “They’ll go in ahead of us to make sure it’s safe enough for the rest of us, but we’ll follow close enough behind to reinforce them if things go south. There’s going to be some element of risk no matter what, but we’re going to minimize it as much as possible.”

“Do we really need to go there at all?” Ritsuka asked reasonably. “If this god is leaving everyone alone, then shouldn’t we just leave them alone, too?”

“Onii-chan’s adventurer spirit is weak,” Rika put in, ignoring the flat look her brother gave her, “but he’s got a point, you know. Why are we poking the bear?”

“Because it’s better to poke the bear now than to find out it was just waiting for you to turn your back,” said Emiya.

“Basically that,” I agreed. “It’s entirely possible that this mysterious god we’re worrying about really is a neutral party that just wants to be left alone. But I’d rather be sure I don’t have a dangerous enemy at my back before going into battle with an enemy as powerful as the man who founded Rome.”

Especially when he had undoubtedly been empowered by the era he’d been summoned into. Here and now, at what was undoubtedly the peak of his strength? Romulus was going to take everything we had to beat. We couldn’t afford to be attacked from behind while we were fighting him, too.

“And if this god really does just want to be left alone?” Ritsuka pressed.

“Then we’ll leave them be,” was the simple answer.

I wasn’t stupid enough to try and force a *god* of all things into siding with us. If it didn’t want to fight and just wanted to do whatever in peace on its island? I was willing to let it sit and swivel. Things were already dire enough without borrowing trouble.

Lisa would probably laugh her ass off if she ever heard those words come out of my mouth.

“Personally, I’m hoping this god is the god of sandcastles,” Rika said flippantly. “Something nice, safe, and unthreatening.”

El-Melloi II snorted. “Trust me, if you think that even something as tame as sandcastles can’t be a nightmare when made by a god’s Authority, you’re in for a pretty terrible surprise.”

Rika stuck her tongue out at him.

“Sandcastles?” Nero asked. “Mm-mm. I can’t help but think that such a thing is not what I am imagining in my mind.”

Rika jolted upright in her chair, face contorted in mock horror. “You don’t know what sandcastles are? Best Buddy, you don’t know what you’ve been missing!”

And she proceeded to launch into a long, detailed explanation of sandcastles and how they were made. I wasn’t sure she would ever have made one in her life either, despite what she was saying — the twins had grown up in Tokyo, in the middle of Japan’s capital city, so unless their parents took them out to the beach as kids regularly enough for them to actually try building sandcastles, the only place I could imagine she knew them from was popular culture. Movies and tv shows.

Eventually, the talk of sandcastles devolved into funny stories about Ritsuka learning how to swim when he was younger, and another hour or so passed with the standard bickering and sniping of two siblings who knew everything there was to know about each other. Ritsuka gave almost as good as

he got, but as it went on, it became apparent that either Rika was far more ruthless about it than her brother or he just had a whole lot less dirt on her than she had on him.

Rika was just getting into the story of how Ritsuka had come home one day and begged her to help him practice kissing so he didn't look like an inexperienced idiot to his cool, new girlfriend when Arash announced to me, *We're on our way down.*

"Heads up," I cut in, interrupting Ritsuka's most embarrassing moment. "The others are coming down from the mountain."

Ritsuka let out a relieved sigh, his cheeks still cherry red from Rika's torment.

"But I was just getting to the good part!" Rika lamented.

I think your brother will thank me for my timely interruption, I didn't say.

"Too bad," I told her as I levered myself out of the chair Emiya had projected. Ritsuka and Mash followed suit, then Nero a moment later, and Rika, reluctantly, was the last. "Break time's over. It's time to get back to work."

"Ugh," Rika grumbled. "And we're not even gonna go back to Rome for another bath."

"A shame," Nero agreed. "I would have liked to enjoy another bath with you, my friends."

"With or without giving Ritsuka a show?" Boudica shimmered into existence, smiling wryly.

"There is nothing of which I am ashamed!" Nero insisted, throwing her chest out.

"Boudica!" Ritsuka exclaimed at the same time as his sister shouted, "Queen Booty!"

"Hello again, everyone," said Boudica. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Your arm?" I asked. Behind her, Arash materialized, too.

Boudica's smile grew, and she lifted her left arm to show a fully formed limb, sleeve and all, with five fingers intact. She was completely healed.

"You're all better!" Rika cheered.

"Thank goodness," said Mash.

"Yup! It even fixed *this* for me!"

In a flash of light, her shield formed on her restored arm, good as new. There wasn't so much as a scratch on it to show that it had been damaged in the attack that had amputated her arm.

"Awesome! Queen Booty is back in action!"

"Indeed! Mm-mm!"

“You’re back to normal, then,” said Aífe. It was more of a statement than a question. “Good. That means no more delays.”

“Right!” Boudica’s friendly smile pulled into something tighter, more like a smirk. Confident. “Then our next target is —”

“This mysterious ‘god.’”

We brought the others up to speed on the plan for how we were going to handle the uncharted island and the god who had set up on it and likely formed the thing in the first place. They weren’t any more enthused about it than the rest of us, and the hour or two it had been since we first discussed it in the cavern hadn’t warmed them up to the idea any more, but our options for dealing with it were fairly limited.

“I’m still not liking this whole plan,” Arash admitted.

“What if this god *is* hostile?” Boudica agreed. “I appreciate Aífe’s confidence, but…”

Aífe arched an eyebrow. “You don’t think I can do it?”

“As a living human, maybe,” Boudica allowed, “but as a Servant, your limits are different from when you were alive. That doesn’t always mean they’re higher.”

Aífe scowled, as though she’d been reminded of something very unpleasant.

“If all else fails, there *are* a few fallbacks,” said Emiya. He held out his hand. “Trace, on.”

In a flash of light, he held —

“That’s!” Mash gasped.

“Medusa’s scythe!” Ritsuka finished for her.

And it was, perfectly recreated, a flawless replica of the scythe we had seen Medusa wield in Fuyuki. The wickedly curved blade, the long, plain shaft, it looked more like a tool for farming than a weapon wielded against one of Greek mythology’s most famous monsters.

I was past the point of being surprised. He’d already shown off Gáe Bolg earlier, and Cúchulainn had told us Emiya Alter had used Caladbolg before. The idea that he could recreate Medusa’s scythe too wasn’t that much of a shock.

“Harpe,” Emiya said simply. “If the situation devolves to the point where we need to kill this god, this scythe will do the job.”

“I see,” said Boudica. “That *does* ease a few of my fears, I will admit.”

Aífe smirked. “Your stock of weapons in that head of yours really is *unlimited*, isn’t it?”

Emiya’s cheek twitched, and he plastered on a mocking smile. “I even have a few that are related to *thunder* gods, actually. They were used for some incredible *feats*, too.”

Aífe scoffed, whatever that was about, and glowered at him silently.

Arash sighed and shook his head. “I guess there’s no way around this, is there?” he lamented. “In that case, I guess I just have to do my best as the vanguard of this whole thing, don’t I?”

“Then if there are no more objections?” No one looked *happy* about it, but no one spoke up either. Story of a lot of my plans, wasn’t it? “Right. We’re running out of daylight. As it is, we’re probably going to have to spend the night on this god’s island, provided things go smoothly enough, so let’s get going. Aífe, Boudica?”

In but a moment, our two resident Riders had summoned their chariots.

“Dibs on riding with Best Buddy!” Rika immediately proclaimed.

“Then you and her will ride with Boudica,” I replied without hesitation. Rika saluted cheekily. “Ritsuka, Mash, we’re with Aífe.”

There were no objections to that, so we all mounted up as I said, with Rika and Nero standing with the healed Boudica and Mash and Ritsuka climbing up to stand with Aífe and me. Huginn and Munnin were tucked safely back into the bag I used to carry them, and with Emiya’s projected chairs disappearing into shimmering motes, we were all set and ready to go.

“We’ll make a straight shot through the Mediterranean,” I said, “and approach the island from the northeastern face. Once Emiya and Arash have made landfall safely, we’ll follow behind them and search for this supposed god. Everyone got it?”

“Right!”

“Roger wilco, Senpai!”

“Understood!”

“Yes! Mm-hm!”

“Then let’s get going,” I said.

Aífe and Boudica cracked the reins of their chariots, and with a jerk, we were back in motion, racing along through Sicily back the way we came in. Very shortly, the fauna picked back up, and my stomach started churning from the fresh waves of bugs that came and went through my range. My hands gripped the rail of the chariot tightly.

Blessedly, it didn’t last too long. The journey off of Sicily was comparatively short, and it was maybe ten or so minutes before we swung past the city along the northern coast whose name I couldn’t remember and left solid ground behind. The open sea stretched out before us.

Thankfully for my stomach, there was almost nothing within range that counted for the purposes of my power, and although it was a little strange to have my sense of self compressed back to my own frail, human body again, the relief was much more profound by far. Without that making everything worse, the ride in Aífe’s chariot was actually pretty tolerable. Not fun, but tolerable.

A long, uncomfortable hour passed, whereby my tortured knees only got more and more sore from the constant standing, and the spray of the Mediterranean Sea splashed anemically over my arms, protected as we were by whatever magic made Aife's Noble Phantasm work. The briney, salty smell got old and stale quickly, but eventually, I got used to it again.

At last, however, something appeared on the horizon, a splotch of greenish brown that grew larger and larger as we approached. Slowly, more and more details started to fill in as the distance closed — greenery that grew in sparse patches across the rolling hills, a beach framed by craggy cliff faces, and somewhere deeper in, a small mountain that towered over the rest.

“This is it!” Aife said over the sound of the waves and her chariot's wheels.

The mysterious island, and the god who called it home.