**Chapter LIX: Sweet Nothings**

The two chariots slowed as we approached the island, both so that we didn’t reach the coast before Emiya and Arash could test the waters — so to speak — and so that we could ease to a stop instead of jerking to one and giving us Masters whiplash. Almost a third of the mile out, I felt the beginnings of the local fauna slip under my control: shallow water crabs that were making themselves at home near the beach.

Their population abruptly dropped off, however, about a hundred feet from the shore, where there was almost a sort of line that none of them would cross. A plummet straight into the abyss, I found, a point where the seabed went straight down to the bottom, leaving the island like the finger of a god jutting up from the sea floor.

If we had needed any confirmation that this place wasn’t meant to be here…

Ahead of us, as we came within about a football field’s length from the shore, Emiya and Arash materialized on the sandy beach and cautiously ventured further inland. Contrary to our worst case scenarios, nothing happened to them. They were not accosted by some guardian waiting to protect the island, and no bounded field activated to smite them where they stood.

*Anything?* I asked Arash.

*I’m not sensing anything to worry about,* he replied. *The magical energy here is as dense and as pure as you’d expect from a god’s domain, but there doesn’t seem to be anything else unusual about this island.*

He turned around and gave us a quick wave, which Aífe and Boudica both took as a sign that it was safe to make landfall.

Something about the whole situation tickled old instincts. “Suspicious” was a good way to describe how I felt about our turn of luck, because why would this god leave his island apparently completely undefended? Why just let anyone come and go as they liked without even offering the slightest of resistance?

Unless this god was so confident in its power that it didn’t feel the *need* to lay down any defensive measures.

White sand sprayed out as sixteen hooves transitioned from water to beach, and our two Archers stepped aside to make room as the chariots trundled to a stop about halfway between the frothing waterline and the first patches of anemic green. The instant I took my first breath, I could feel what Arash had meant about the mana in the air, how it sat about the place, sticky and oppressive, like a humid day in early Spring.

We dismounted into the warm sand, the rest of the team materializing around us, and just like with Emiya and Arash, the presence of several more Servants didn’t seem to inspire any action from the resident god who had brought this island into existence and made it home. No beast from the Age of Gods surged down the beach to attack, no mechanical monstrosity built by Hephaestus dropped down on our heads, not even a threatening rumble of thunder to let us know we weren’t welcome.

“What?” Rika said sarcastically. “No welcoming committee? No women in grass skirts throwing leis around our necks? No drinks served in little coconuts? Two stars!” She kicked the sand. “At least the beach is kinda decent.”

“Leis are Hawaiin, Rika,” her brother explained, “not Greek.”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

“I’m not picking up anything,” Mash said, head swiveling as she looked about. “No sign of the god, Master.”

“Neither did we,” Arash said as he and Emiya rejoined the group. “Aside from the mana in the air? This place looks just like any other island in this part of the world.”

“Almost like it was pulled directly from the Reverse Side,” Emiya agreed.

That…actually would have made just as much sense as Hephaestus making this place from scratch. I couldn’t say I understood how the whole thing worked, but apparently, stuff got moved to the “Reverse Side of the World” as the Age of Gods ended, which I guess could mean whole islands, too, and a powerful enough god manifesting here would theoretically have what it took to bring an island back, wouldn’t he?

El-Melloi II grunted. “Can’t be. If this place was pulled directly from the Reverse Side, the Masters wouldn’t be able to even set foot on it without combusting.”

“W-wait, was that a possibility?” Rika’s eyes were round and wide as saucers. “H-hey, we didn’t go over that when we were talking about coming here! I like not exploding, thank you very much!”

“That’s why we had Arash and Emiya come first,” I told her.

“To check for traps!”

“To make sure it was *safe*.”

Although I hadn’t really considered the possibility of the mana density being a problem when we made those plans. It was just a happy bonus that it happened to be one of the things they could check for.

“You’re right about one thing, Rika,” Aífe said, eyes narrowed. “I was expecting a much more hostile welcome from this god than this.”

“Maybe they really do want to be left alone,” Ritsuka suggested, “and they won’t bother us unless we bother them.”

“Or they laid a trap deeper in,” Emiya replied. He swept his own narrowed gaze across the landscape, but nothing appeared to attack us. “This place… There are a couple of old Greek gods that were very much ambush predators. Hunters. If this island belongs to one of them, then they’ll wait until we’re in just the right place to try and land a critical blow.”

“And if there *is* a trap?” Ritsuka asked.

“Then we spring it,” I answered bluntly.

Emiya grunted. “Can’t say I like the idea of facing any of those gods on their home turf, but I guess we do have our very own godslayer on the team, don’t we?”

“Keep that scythe handy,” Aífe said, ignoring the jab. “If you’re right, then there’s one Greek god that would definitely be weak to it.”

Emiya’s brow furrowed, and then his lip curled. “Shit. *She* might be here? That just makes this whole thing a lot more troublesome.”

“She?” asked Rika. “What, old girlfriend of yours, Emiya?”

“Can you think of no one from Greek mythology, Master,” said Emiya pointedly, “who was once a god, but isolated herself on an island and became a man-eating monster?”

I straightened and immediately felt around with my bugs, looking for any sign of anything suspicious. Facing down Medusa as a Servant, as a shadow of the monster of Greek mythology whose stare could kill with a single glance, that was one thing. Facing down the original, however? A fallen goddess in all her terrible, awful glory? In an era and place where her legend and belief in it were at their height?

I wasn’t going to take any fucking chances with that.

But my bugs found nothing. No suspicious figures hiding on the hilltops or among one of the sparse copses of trees. If she was here, she wasn’t in range.

“I don’t see Medusa anywhere,” I announced for the group’s benefit.

“Technically, seeing her is the *last* thing you should do,” Emiya joked morbidly.

“Wait, Medusa?” Ritsuka asked. “She’s the one Emiya was talking about?”

“Oh dear,” said Boudica.

“If…if she’s been summoned as a goddess,” Mash said nervously, “then how do we fight her? U-um, we don’t have any of the Noble Phantasms used to defeat her. Unless…um, Emiya can make more than just Harpe…”

The look on Emiya’s face said that he didn’t.

Aífe’s lips pulled tight. “Give me a moment.”

She stalked off and up the beach, making a beeline for the nearest tree, a lone thing that was maybe twice my height and therefore absolutely tiny as far as trees went. Gáe Bolg appeared in her hand in a flash of light, and then she swung out, and with a single slash, she cut the tree down almost to its roots.

“Oh,” said Emiya, who had apparently figured out what she was doing. “Yeah, that might work.”

“You know what she’s got in her head?” El-Melloi II asked.

Emiya crossed his arms, watching her intently. “If she’s doing what I think she’s doing, then yeah.”

Aífe set her spear down, balanced on its butt, and lifted the tree with both hands, and then, with a grunt of effort, threw it into the air. Gáe Bolg leapt back into her palm as she reached for it, and as the tree came back down, she lashed out with a flurry of strikes that ripped through it like a woodchipper, sending splinters all about.

When she was done, a set of roughly hewn wooden plaques fell to the ground, compact enough to sit comfortably in the hand. It dawned on me then what her plan was, and she proved me right when she picked them all up and began carving runes into them one by one.

Clever. We didn’t have a magical shield that would let us fight Medusa without looking at her, so the only solution to that would be to make something that could let us look at her without worrying about being turned to stone.

“These should offer some protection against the effects of Medusa’s Mystic Eyes,” Aífe announced. She handed one of the plaques to me, and I was a little proud of myself for recognizing at least some of the runes scrawled on it. “If she is the goddess on this island, then even this won’t be a permanent solution, but it should at least last long enough to fight her and kill her.”

She started handing the rest out to the rest of the group.

“Super Action Mom does it again!” Rika said, grinning broadly.

“Mm, are these some form of barbarian magic from Britannia?” Nero asked, turning hers over in her hand.

“You’ve seen me use them before,” Aífe said. “They’re a form of magecraft from the Norse. The Primordial Runes that it’s said Odin learned by hanging himself upside down on the World Tree.”

“Ah.” Nero nodded. “Germanians, then.”

“You’re not going to keep one?” El-Melloi II asked as he inspected his.

“My Magic Resistance should be enough to offset her eyes,” Aífe answered. “It’s the highest of all of the Servants here.”

“It is until it isn’t,” Emiya told her as he took his.

“Then my skillset already offers me a solution.”

“My Noble Phantasm should help out too, if we need it,” Boudica added.

Emiya shrugged and shook his head.

“Don’t hesitate,” I ordered for good measure. I slipped the makeshift runestone — although it couldn’t really be a stone when it was made of wood, could it — snugly into the sheath that housed my knife, wedged between the blade and the leather. “We’re not taking any chances. If you even suspect that her eyes are starting to get to you, then use whatever countermeasures you have to.”

Aífe huffed, but didn’t protest.

“Emiya and Arash will take point again,” I went on. “The rest of us will follow a short distance behind them, so that we don’t all get ambushed. Mash in the front, Aífe and Spartacus on the sides, and El-Melloi II and Boudica will bring up the rear.”

“Smart,” El-Melloi II praised. “That would have been my arrangement, too.”

I wasn’t sure what that was really worth when we knew so little about him and the Heroic Spirit he was housing.

“Da Vinci-chan *did* say that Senpai fought like a ‘proper Caster,’” Rika said.

“Did she?” El-Melloi II’s thoughts didn’t show on his face. “That’s interesting.”

“When this is all over,” I said, “you can ask her yourself, if you want.”

“Maybe I will.”

We arranged ourselves into the formation I specified, and then Arash and Emiya started the trek inland, off the beach and onto more solid ground. As we’d glimpsed earlier on the approach, the island proved a less than hospitable place, with anemic patches of short grass that seemed to struggle to claw for every inch, revealing patches of bald earth and rock that seemed too dry and barren to grow anything at all. The tree Aífe had cut down and apart with her spear was one of the very few that managed to worm its roots deep enough to survive on some hidden reserve of freshwater, and none of them were all that much taller than the first.

Calling this place dead was a bit of an exaggeration, but not nearly as much of one as it could have been. Even the bugs swiftly began to dwindle as we made our way further onto the island until only the hardier species remained, eking out a living below the hard-packed ground and in the air above it.

The island itself was not overly large, but it was large enough that it took us the better part of an hour and three rocky, craggy hillsides to make any significant progress towards the center. It was as we were cresting one such hill that Arash and Emiya both held up a hand and we all jolted to a stop.

“There’s something up ahead!” Arash called back to us.

“Could you be a little more specific than that?” Rika retorted sarcastically. “Are we talking a person, a monster, a god, a monster god, or did we stumble on some buried treasure? Please tell me it’s buried treasure!”

“Some booty for Queen Booty, maybe?” Ritsuka suggested.

Boudica chuckled quietly. Probably as much because of who made the joke as it was the joke itself.

“No,” Rika told him flatly. “No, don’t you dare. You’re not allowed to make the jokes, Onii-chan. That’s *my* job!”

“It looks like…a temple of some kind,” Emiya answered.

A temple? Here, on the island that shouldn’t exist?

“Oh god,” Rika groaned. “When did this become Indiana Jones? I don’t know how to use a bullwhip!”

My cheek twitched — she’d come uncomfortably close to my own thoughts about it, although the way she’d phrased things was colored by the usual Rika flair.

Still. Having there be a temple here on the island wasn’t good news, in the sense that would almost certainly give this god an advantage, but it wasn’t all bad news either, because it meant we had a pretty good idea of where that god spent most of its time. Her? I guess we still didn’t know for sure who it could be, so it still wasn’t impossible for it to be Hephaestus.

My experience was telling me we weren’t that lucky.

The rest of our group joined Emiya and Arash on the hill, and when he sensed we’d come up beside him, Arash pointed out towards the distance, towards a valley sitting in the shadow of a far hill. It had to be at least two or three more miles away, which would feel twice as long when we had to climb the hills that were still in the way.

“See it?” Arash asked. “Built into the hillside, over there.”

Not really. His eyes were just that much better than mine, it seemed, because even with my glasses, I couldn’t make out anything distinct. Just a vague white blur smeared against the dry earth and green grass that was probably large enough to be a building. The late afternoon sun, glaring down on us from the right, made it all the harder to distinguish distant shapes.

“I don’t see it at all,” Rika complained, shielding her eyes with one hand as she peered across the hilltops. “What’s it look like?”

“A temple,” Emiya offered unhelpfully.

“What kind of temple?” Ritsuka asked.

“Greek,” Emiya went on. He frowned, squinting. “Maybe…late Antiquity. I don’t know, I’m not an expert on ancient Greek architecture.”

The twins turned to me. I arched an eyebrow at them. “I’m not either.”

“Hephaestus?” Nero asked eagerly.

Arash shook his head. “Somehow, I doubt it. Master? Borrow my eyes for a moment.”

I glanced at him, then did as he asked, closing my own eyes as I pushed myself down the thread connecting us so I could look through his.

It would never stop being amazing seeing through his eyes. Instantly, my vision was sharp as an eagle’s, and the indistinct blob of white gained a level of definition that I was frankly jealous of. White pillars held up the overhang that jutted out from above the entrance, and gleaming marble made up the whole thing, painted in bright colors along the bricks. It stood almost thirty feet high, maybe higher, and I could even see the reliefs carved into the front depicting three identical faces.

“Master,” said Emiya, “you may as well do the same.”

“Oh,” said Rika, “um, right, hang on. How did this work again…?”

But more important than all of that was the person walking about out in front of the temple, a young girl of maybe twelve or thirteen dressed in a gown that was a bizarre mix of an ancient Greek chiton and gothic lolita with long, strawberry blonde hair that was so luxurious it made mine on my best day look like a rat’s nest.

It was also so vivid that it looked *pink*. A very familiar, very worrying shade of pink.

“W-wait,” Rika said, having apparently figured out the vision sharing trick, “is that…”

“Not Medusa, fortunately,” Emiya confirmed. Rika let out a gusty sigh. “Unfortunately, with that level of resemblance, there are only a few options for who it *could* be, and I’m sorry to say that’s definitely not Hephaestus.”

“One of the other Gorgons, then?” I asked.

Their names escaped me. They were such a footnote to the Medusa myth that I honestly hadn’t memorized them.

“Others?” Ritsuka asked, his voice a little higher than normal. “There was more than one?”

“Stheno and Euryale,” Arash confirmed. “Although I’m not sure what kind of goddesses they were.”

“Goddesses of the Earth who embodied men’s desires, pure and virginal and forever lusted after,” Emiya drawled, and then he shrugged. “Or something like that. I don’t think we have to worry about her turning into a giant half-snake monster on us.”

“Thank the gods for that,” Rika said, relieved.

“I think you can actually do that personally, here,” Boudica said. “Although I’m not sure that one will be all that amused if you did.”

If she was as fickle and prideful as the other Greek gods had always been portrayed to be? Definitely not. Taunting or making fun of the gods was one of the fastest ways to become miserable or dead in all of those Classical myths. Odysseus spent *ten years* trying to sail home after he snubbed Poseidon, and one of the things I’d had to come to terms with at Chaldea was that those myths were probably more real than not.

“So what *can* she do, then?” Ritsuka asked.

“I don’t remember the myths mentioning anything that might be an Authority,” said Mash. “I’m sorry, Senpai. I don’t know.”

“The fact that they’re Medusa’s sisters is the extent of my knowledge,” said Emiya.

Arash shook his head. “Sorry. I’m familiar with their names and some of the details of their legends, but I’m not an expert.”

“That’s about how much I know, too,” Boudica said apologetically.

“The secrets of oppression are vast and varied,” Spartacus chimed in. As always, he was grinning. “Those who rebel can only discover the surface of their plots!”

“Sorry,” said El-Melloi II. “The Authorities of minor goddesses from the Greek pantheon weren’t a focus in Modern Magecraft Theories.”

“So it seems none of us knows anything about what this goddess might be capable of.” Aífe huffed and crossed her arms. “I guess there’s only one real way to find out now, isn’t there?”

We *could* have tried asking Da Vinci…but setting up the magic circle and establishing the connection would likely announce to the goddess down there that we were here, if she didn’t already know — and with how little she seemed to care about her surroundings, it was entirely possible that she didn’t. If it turned out she *was* hostile, then the closer we could get before she attacked, the easier it would be to project the entirety of our force in response.

It shouldn’t need to be restated, but a real, live goddess, flush in her divinity, was not something I wanted to take any chances with.

“Firsthand,” I agreed. Aífe grinned that shark-like grin.

El-Melloi II scoffed. “Because there’s no way that could backfire, is there?”

It wasn’t like we were flush with other options.

“Wait,” said Ritsuka. “We could just turn around and leave her alone, couldn’t we? Now that we know who it is, I mean.”

“I like that plan,” Rika agreed immediately. “That’s not the bear we thought it might be, so can’t we just not poke it?”

“And if she attacks us from behind while we’re fighting Romulus?” Aífe suggested.

“Why would she?” Ritsuka countered. “She’s a Greek goddess, right? What does she care about Rome or the United Empire?”

“Then what is she doing here?” was my own retort. “You know how this works by now, Ritsuka. She doesn’t belong to this era, which means she was brought here for a reason. Whether Romulus brought her here or the World itself called her to fight him, she’s not here just to sit around and do nothing.”

“I mean, she looks pretty comfortable doing nothing to me,” said Rika. “I say we let her keep doing nothing.”

“No, Taylor has something of a point.” El-Melloi II grunted unhappily. “The Counter Force doesn’t act on *whim*. If she was summoned to help us, then we’re almost certainly going to need her help at some point. If she was summoned by Romulus… Well, she might have more freedom in that case, but she’d be reliant on his Holy Grail to keep existing.”

Aífe nodded. “Which gives her a vested interest in his success.”

“Oh,” said Boudica. “She died several centuries ago, didn’t she? Then this would be like a second life to her.”

“And even if she isn’t normally inclined to help the United Empire, the threat of having that taken away might make her side with Romulus anyway.”

Arash sighed. “So she either has to be on our side, or we have to make sure she can’t interfere. I can’t say I like forcing the issue, but the stakes are too high to let her be.”

“Mm-mm!” said Nero. “It doesn’t matter if she was Greek! If she pledges to support Rome, then I shall make her Roman!”

Naturally. I wasn’t looking forward to what a clash between Nero’s ego and a goddess’s ego was going to be like.

“In the end, we’re likely overreacting,” said Emiya. “It’s true that she’s a goddess, and that isn’t meaningless, but compared to the Olympians, she’s so minor that she’s almost not worth talking about.”

Rika groaned. “Tell me you didn’t just say that. Tell me you didn’t just say, ‘Meh, we can take her.’”

Emiya smirked. “Petty superstition doesn’t look good on you, Master.”

“Think about the situation we’re in,” Rika ordered him flatly. “Think about how we got here and why we’re here. Think about what you and Arash and Aífe all are, and then tell me with a straight face that it’s petty superstition instead of *pattern recognition*.”

“All her other flaws aside,” said El-Melloi II, “at least this one has a good enough head on her shoulders to recognize the situation for what it is.”

“Either way,” I cut in, “we’re not going to take her lightly just because she isn’t one of the big names in the Greek pantheon. We keep going like before — Arash and Emiya out front, with the rest of us following at a distance in case they need backup. Whatever you do, don’t let your guard down.”

A round of assents answered me, some of them a little grudging, and we arranged ourselves back into formation as Emiya and Arash got their head start. We gave them a distance of about fifty feet, which was more than enough space for a pair of Servants to fight while not being so much that the others couldn’t rush in to lend a hand, and then started to make our way in the direction of the temple and the goddess out in front of it.

“He jinxed us,” Rika grumbled under her breath. “Mark my words, Emiya jinxed us, I just know it.”

“Aren’t you blowing it a little out of proportion?” her brother mumbled her way.

“You don’t tempt Fate, Onii-chan!” Rika hissed back. “That and Murphy are the two things you shouldn’t flip the bird!”

“Mm, I can’t say I know this ‘Murphy,’” Nero chimed in. “However, there are numerous stories about what misfortune befell those who taunted the gods.”

What a world this was that those stories were probably even true, and therefore valid warnings about what happened to those who flaunted forces they couldn’t hope to control.

It took us another hour or so to cross those two or three miles, made longer by having to go up and down the slopes of the hills that stood in the way. Finally, however, as the late afternoon sun beat down on our necks, we came over the last hilltop and started down the other side towards the temple that was nestled in the valley below. Facing away from us was a slight figure in white, a waifish thing with thin, weak-looking arms and a young, slender body.

The goddess. Stheno or Euryale.

Our group slowed as Emiya and Arash continued on, their hands empty and their postures relaxed and nonthreatening. We followed behind cautiously, Mash with shield in hand and Aífe’s shoulders drawn tight. My swarm was still anemic compared to what I’d been able to build up on the mainland, but I maneuvered what little I had into place just in case. If nothing else, they could serve as a distraction.

The goddess had taken a seat on the ground by the time we were close enough to make her out in better detail, propped up on one arm, and she seemed to be…playing with a flower? She looked content to laze about and stare at it, and it was such a stereotypical thing that I half expected her to start pulling out the petals, chanting, “He loves me, he loves me not,” like some schoolgirl with a crush.

Even this close, I couldn’t feel her at all. Was she hiding herself so thoroughly that I couldn’t sense her when she was within metaphorical arm’s reach? Or was she just that weak?

Emiya and Arash approached her from behind while the rest of us settled in to wait on a hair trigger. The goddess didn’t move, like she didn’t even notice them despite the fact that their presences should be like blaring horns so close to her and neither was making an effort to keep quiet, but when they came to a stop a respectful distance away, so did she as she let her flower drop to the ground.

Arash and Emiya shared a short look, like they were having a silent debate about which of them was going to take charge of the situation, and then the goddess took the decision right out of their hands. She sighed and stood without waiting for them to announce themselves, and even dripping with annoyance and disdain, the sheer beauty of her voice sent shivers down my spine when she spoke: “I had thought I’d seen the end of the days when men sought me out on my island long ago, but it seems a goddess as beautiful and desirable as me can’t ever escape the attentions of amorous suitors.”

Except what came out of her mouth was almost like a physical force, a trap not unlike my old tricks with spider silk, and it wove around our two Archers with every syllable that passed her lips, ensnaring their minds like a spider might a pair of flies caught in her web.

Old, dusty alarms that hadn’t seen use in over two years started wailing in the back of my head.

“That’s…not…” Arash tried to say, but the words came out slow and stilted, like he was having trouble stringing them together.

“We’re…actually…here to…ask…”

Emiya wasn’t much better.

“To ask…”

“Oh, dear me, how bold of you,” the goddess said coyly, smiling a smug smile that ill-fit her words. “Both of you at once? Why, you’d rip me apart! After all…” Her voice dropped to something seductive and suggestive. “This body has never once known a man’s touch. I can only imagine the sorts of things tall, strong men like you might do to it.”

“Guh!” Emiya stumbled, shaking his head as though to clear it, his hands spasming wildly like he wanted to reach out and grab her — whether he would throttle her or rip off her clothes to try and take her right there on the ground, I wasn’t sure just then.

Arash, meanwhile, swayed unsteadily on his feet, like his legs were trying to rise one at a time but something was keeping them rooted to the soil.

Half-forgotten Master-Stranger protocols rushed to the front of my mind — but they had to swim against the influence of the goddess’s voice, because even *I* was being affected by it. There was a hypnotizing quality to it that I couldn’t explain, something in the perfection of the pitch and timbre that made me just want to stop and listen to whatever she said.

Something was wrong with this. Something was wrong with what was happening…wasn’t it? What was wrong? What could possibly be wrong?

“Perhaps your friend would like to join in, too?” the goddess purred, and it was like the sweetest music in my ears. Her eyes turned to our group, but she looked straight past me and towards Ritsuka. “Well, young man? Won’t you come here and kneel before your goddess?”

Maybe it was me. Maybe I was what was wrong. After all, why else would this goddess ignore me completely and pick Ritsuka?

“Nnn…”

Ritsuka took one slow, halting step her way, and then another, and another, like he was fighting a losing battle to resist. The goddess smiled, and she reached out to gently place a hand each on Emiya and Arash’s bare skin, caressing them like she might a lover.

I had never been more jealous in my entire life than I was just then.

“No need to fight,” she told them both. “You’re only making things harder on yourselves than they need to be. Just submit and pledge yourselves to me, body and soul.”

She turned her gaze back to the struggling Ritsuka and held out a hand in offering. “Won’t you, young man?”

Ritsuka took another stumbling step forward, faster and surer than the graceless, plodding stalk from before.

“O…nii…chan,” Rika wheezed.

And then a droning mass arose from the world around us, a thin cloud of every flying bug in the better part of half a mile, and descended towards the goddess without care or mercy. She let out a startled shriek, and coming to her defense, Emiya rushed forward and projected a flaming sword that ignited every bug that came anywhere near the blade when he swung it. He waved it about like a torch, searing white hot lines through my meager swarm.

*Passenger!*

What was it doing? Why was it attacking the goddess? It was going to make her hate me.

“Chariot of Boudica!”

A familiar chariot raced around our group and cut through the space between us and the goddess, galloping about in a circle, and images of the wheels trailed behind it like a row of the famous Roman shield wall.

Her Noble Phantasm? But there wasn’t anything we needed protecting from.

Next came Aífe, who stepped between us and the goddess and quickly drew out burning lines of runes in the air with such speed that I couldn’t even see the strokes.

Instantly, I felt something snap back, like my brain was a rubberband and whoever had been holding the other end had lost their grip, and I staggered as though the goddess’s bewitching voice had been the only thing keeping me upright.

Ritsuka stumbled backwards, gasping like he’d just run a marathon, his entire body atremble. Buckets of sweat poured down the side of his face, and his hands were shaking so violently that they almost seemed to be vibrating.

I wasn’t much better. In the heat of the Mediterranean sun, I felt cold. Chills shivered up and down my limbs and my spine, and a cold sweat of my own had broken out on my forehead, leaving me feeling clammy and disgusting.

Worst of all, I felt used. Violated. It was hard to tie it back to any other moment in my past, because I couldn’t remember a moment that felt quite the same. Nice Guy was the closest, but his power was just to make us disregard him as a threat. He didn’t hijack my everything, make me hang onto his every word, seek out his approval, or hinge my self-worth on his attention. He didn’t drag me back to that small, tiny world that my life had been before the Undersiders, before Leviathan and the Slaughterhouse Nine, before Echidna.

He didn’t make me feel *worthless*.

Swallowing down on my anger, I did my best to reorient myself, to find my metaphorical balance again and regain the calm I would need for the battle about to happen. It was harder than usual.

I hadn’t been prepared for a mental attack. A terrible mistake, in hindsight, considering the number of relationships in Greek myths that began because Aphrodite or Eros made two people fall in love at first sight.

“Drat,” the goddess sighed, and it took me an extra second to realize that I could actually feel her presence, now. “You had to make things harder, didn’t you? Why couldn’t the whole lot of you just become my playthings and let me do what I want?”

“You…” El-Melloi II seethed. I thought I heard his teeth grinding.

“Spoiled brat!” Rika snarled. “What you just did, what you were about to do… We’re not toys for you to yank around however you please!”

Ritsuka panted, unable to contribute, but I could practically feel the fury in his glare.

“Master, are you okay?” Mash asked shakily. She and Aífe seemed to be the only ones who hadn’t been affected by the goddess’s voice. Even El-Melloi II had been bewitched. “The goddess seems to have some sort of voice-based mental interference type skill.”

“I-I’m fine, Mash,” Ritsuka said. I doubted I was the only one who didn’t believe it.

“I am a goddess,” the goddess said plainly, like it was obvious. “Even if some of you are Servants, you are all still humans. The natural state of our relationship is you following whatever I say.”

Emiya jerked violently, but a calming hand from the goddess soothed him back into complacence.

How did we break her hold? Aífe had obviously done something with runes, but without that, what methods could we use to disrupt her control? Would a simple bee sting knock them out of it? Could we block it by covering our ears, the way Odysseus had the sirens’ song? Was it a matter of distance and it got weaker the further away from her they were?

All things to think about, but the only surefire way was probably to just kill her and wash our hands of the whole thing. The only trouble with that was whether or not the island beneath our feet would disappear when she did.

“Heh!” Aífe spat, smiling a nasty smile. “Spoken like one of the Greek gods for sure! The whole lot of you were just a bunch of petty children! Each and every one of you lost your shit when one of your ‘toys’ refused to play along!”

The goddess’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t like you. I think you’ll be the first one to die.”

“Haha!” Spartacus stepped forward to the front of our group, grinning. “The emblem of tyranny stands before me! The greatest oppressor presents herself! There could be no greater field for rebellion!”

His grin threatened to split his face.

“And so I will rebel, even if it is against the gods themselves!”

“What he said!” Rika added.

“I couldn’t agree more, Spartacus,” Boudica said, her voice like iron.

“…What the hell,” El-Melloi said, his brow drawn down so deep that it almost seemed to have merged with the bridge of his nose. “I’ve never killed a god before, but there’s a lot of things I never thought I’d do twenty years ago.”

“Our primary goal is to free Emiya and Arash,” I told the group. No, my earlier sense wasn’t off, was it? Her presence was…tiny, for lack of a better word. “We can worry about what to do with this goddess after we’re sure we’ve got them back.”

“Right!” Ritsuka, Rika, and Mash chorused.

“Mash and Boudica, you’re our back line. El-Melloi II, you’re on support. Aífe and Spartacus, you’ll have to engage Emiya and Arash.”

“I’ll try not to enjoy punching his face too much,” said Aífe.

“My love overflows!” Spartacus crowed.

Across the distance, I met the eyes of the uncaring goddess, and her easy gaze was unbothered. If she felt the anger that was simmering behind mine, she gave no indication that she even cared, let alone that it unnerved her in any way.

She wasn’t a Jack Slash. She wasn’t near enough of a monster for me to put her in the same category as him. If anything, her casual indifference and her apparent disinterest reminded me much more strongly of Alec, although her aloof affectation was much closer to Alexandria than I was comfortable with.

That was fine, I decided. I wanted to kill her just as much.