

All vacations come to an end, and it was almost always accompanied by a solemn heart. Most wished they could stay forever without a care in the world and bask in that wonderful feeling of relaxation, but it wasn't to be. Too much rest was bad for the body, and besides, they had important work to do.

It was time to return to the real world.

They still had some time on the island, though. They weren't due to leave until the afternoon, and so those mighty Servants of Chaldea were making the most of their remaining time in Hawaii. It was another glorious day, and as Ritsuka walked along the beach with no destination in mind, he took in the beautiful sights.

A soft breeze rustled his hair, filled with the scent of the sea. Many of the stalls were already closed and packed up, though there were a handful still operating, most notable the ice cream stall that had a very healthy line.

Though no one was swimming, many frolicked in the shallows. He spotted Medusa with her sister's, their lovely purple hair gleaming beneath the rays of the sun, their pale, slim figures dancing as they acted as the siblings they were. Further along, Chloe and Illyasviel were splashing each with handfuls of water, their laughter and shouting carrying in the air.

"I'm going to miss this," Mash said from his side, and Ritsuka nodded, a faint smile on his face.

"Me too," he replied. "I had a lot of fun."

That was no lie. Setting his more risqué activities aside, he had very much enjoyed this time off, a rare respite. It wasn't often that Ritsuka could just be a human, not a Magus, or even a Master. Though he would always be that so long as these Servants walked the earth, there had been no catastrophe that needed to be averted, no enemy that needed defeating.

It was nice.

Well, maybe there had been one enemy to defeat. If you could call Koyanskaya of Light that.

Cheeky and frustrating as she was, she was one of his. They all were, and just as they stood by his side, he would stand by theirs. Even if they required scolding from time to time.

“Chloe, no, not the seaweed~!” Ilya screamed.

Some things never changed.

“Stop throwing sand~!” Chloe roared in response.

Ritsuka chuckled, shaking his head. Mash giggled behind a raised hand, her eyes filled with mirth.

“I wish I got to spend more time with Senpai,” Mash admitted shyly.

He looked at her fondly.

“Let’s spend our remaining time here together, then.”

Further down the beach, he saw a collection of individuals.

Even at a distance, they were recognizable. The Knights of the Round; Lancelot, Tristan, Gawain. But that wasn't all. He spied a slight figure in small denim shorts and a white tube top.

Mordred.

What were they up to?

"We spent too much time relaxing, we failed to capture our Liege in all their glory," Tristan was saying as they neared. "We won't get such an opportunity again for many months, if that. The time is now."

Lancelot agreed. "We must capture the King unaware, a most difficult task, for the mask of duty will conceal that which we wish to enshrine."

Gawain nodded. "A souvenir to keep our spirits high during the trials ahead."

Mordred scoffed. "You three are idiots."

Tristain smirked, eyeing her shrewdly. "And yet, here you are, Knight of Red."

Her cheeks flushed lightly, stammering, “W-Well, I thought I’d make sure you dumbasses don’t make too much trouble, that’s all. It isn’t any deeper than that!”

The three other knights shared knowing looks that only pissed her off more.

“Do you pricks want to die?” she shouted, making as if to summon her sword.

“What’s going on here?” Ritsuka decided to step in, speaking up. Mordred froze as the other three laughed.

“Master,” Mordred greeted, regaining her composure. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

“I don’t know what this looks like,” he said, not at all concerned with her outburst. “Mash, what does this look like?”

“I have no idea, Senpai.”

“Master, we’ve got a task most perilous,” Lancelot said, his voice deadly serious. Ritsuka snapped to attention.

“Has something happened?”

“We have failed in our mission,” Tristain said sadly.

Ritsuka frowned. "How have you failed?"

Gawain bowed his head. "We've failed to expand our collection, Master. We had the perfect chance, and yet we let our own relaxation get in the way."

He was completely lost.

"Um," Mash raised a hand shyly. "What are you talking about?"

Mordred rolled her eyes. "They want to take a picture of father."

Ritsuka blinked.

"Oh – uh," he didn't know what to say. "That's nice?"

"They're idiots," Mordred said without a hint of remorse.

Maybe she was onto something.

"You want to take a picture?" Mash asked, unsure.

The three of them nodded.

“Our Liege is our light in times most dark,” Gawain explained. “Our King inspires us and leads us, and we follow. But more than wanting to support our King, we wish to see our King happy. That is what truly lights the path forward.”

Lancelot took over. “It is so rare for our Liege to shed their burdens. This vacation has been good, and we’ve seen our King relax like never before.”

“But we failed to capture those moments on film,” Tristain suddenly shouted, arms thrown into the air in despair. “We’ve been remiss in our duties, and we are almost too late!”

“See?” Mordred deadpanned. “*Idiots.*”

And yet, Mordred was here.

As freely as she insulted them, her presence said a lot. She also wished to see her Father’s joy caught on film, and Ritsuka smiled, not going unnoticed by the Knight of Red.

“Master, what are you smiling about?” she grumbled, crossing her arms.

“I think it is very good of you, all of you,” he addressed them all at once. “That you wish to see Artoria happy, and want to immortalize it on film.”

Mordred looked away, clicking her tongue. "It's not like I'm a part of this..."

She was totally a part of this.

It was silly and maybe a little stupid, and Ritsuka wasn't sure he wanted to know what these knights would do with such a picture, but the thought behind it was sweet. It was well known that Artoria could be a little too serious at times. They were just looking out for her.

Though he did have a wonder...

"Which Artoria are we talking about?"

There were so many different versions. The Knights of the Round typically followed Artoria Saber around, though it wasn't unusual for them to be in Artoria Lancer's company also. She was the one that Mordred had bonded with most recently, growing closer to a father she'd always felt slighted by.

"Our King is our King," Lancelot said.

That was answer enough. Somehow.

It didn't matter which Artoria. Artoria was their King, no matter what form she took. Once and Future, you could say.

“Master, we beg your aid,” Tristain clasped his hands together. “If it is you, I’m sure we can attain the picture we seek.”

They all bowed their heads, these three brave knights. And after a moment, even Mordred nodded, as if in agreement, but unwilling to go as far as bow.

His Servants were asking for help.

It would be a nice way to end things here in Hawaii.

“Will you help us, Master?” Gawain implored.

“I will,” he said, ignoring the way they cheered. “Though I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do...?”

“Just be yourself,” it was Mordred that answered, looking away with a huff. “That’s all you ever need to do, Master.”

Just be himself. Ritsuka was sure he could manage that.

“You don’t mind, do you, Mash?” he asked.

She shook her head. "If this is what Senpai wants to do, then I support it."

First things first, they needed a camera. None of them owned one, but Ritsuka knew where to get one. The hotel had a gift shop.

So they made their way over and purchased one disposable camera. For whatever reason, they elected Mordred as photographer which prompted an argument between the knights but ultimately ended with her accepting the role begrudgingly.

After that, they just had to find Artoria.

Any Artoria.

Ritsuka thought it would be easy. As far as he knew, none of the Servants had left the island yet, and so they went in search of a King.

A King which appeared to be very elusive indeed!

No matter where they checked, there was no sign of Artoria. Lancer. Saber. Lily.

It was as if she had vanished into thin air.

Ritsuka asked around.

“I last saw her in the kitchen,” EMIYA said, eyebrow arched in question as the Knights of the Round did a poor job of hiding nearby. There were too many of them for that potted plant!
“Saber, that is. She was indulging.”

Hunger was the enemy, as she was so fond of saying.

But then they arrived, there was no Saber. Signs of her passing there present, however. The empty bowls stacked dozens high, not even a single grain of rice remaining. A poor kitchen hand was apathetically loading the dishwasher where Ritsuka saw many more bowls.

“She has the appetite of a lion,” the young man claimed when Ritsuka questioned him. “I’ve never seen such a small woman put away so much food!”

When she couldn’t be found, they asked around some more.

“I saw Lancer heading out into the forest,” Astolfo claimed, head tilted in interest. “She had a towel with her which I thought was a little strange.”

Ritsuka had a pretty good idea where she’d gone. The hot pools.

Mordred seemed to have the same thought. “I don’t think we should disturb Father.”

“No,” Ritsuka agreed.

An hour passed, and no other Artoria variant was found. They asked around some more but they mostly got conflicting information. It felt like their search would end in failure when a certain fox decided to offer an olive branch.

“Have you tried the roof?” Koyanskaya of Light asked with a smirk, eyes twinkling. It wasn’t an expression he trusted.

“The roof? You mean of the hotel?”

“What else~☆?” she brushed a hand along his shoulder, leaning in closer. “You’ll find what you seek there.”

Mash watched Koyanskaya warily while Mordred outright glared, untrusting. Ritsuka considered her.

“This isn’t a trick?”

“Would I trick you, Master?” she asked coyly.

“Yes,” he replied instantly. “Of course you would.”

She pretended to be wounded, clutching at her gifted chest.

“So little faith~! Perhaps you feel your *correction* hasn't taken hold?”

Ritsuka frowned. “Koyanskaya...”

“If Artoria is who you seek, it is Artoria who you should find – on the roof.”

With no other leads, they made their way up. Ascending the staircase, Ritsuka pushed open the door and stepped out onto the wide rooftop. A gust of wind buffeted him momentarily, Ritsuka squinting as the sun blinded him for a moment. Looking around, he stepped further onto the roof before catching sight of something dark.

Turning, Ritsuka paused.

Koyanskaya had been right.

She had also tricked him.

Artoria Alter casually sat on the edge of the roof, her legs kicking out over the side of the building. Dressed in a black one piece swimsuit, it flared out around the waist in soft frills, while the top was a halter design. As if feeling his eyes, she turned in an instant, revealing the diamond-shaped hole in the center, revealing her modest cleavage, her skin pale, alabaster in the light of the sun. In her mouth was a blue popsicle, her golden eyes narrowing briefly before calming, expression smoothing out.

Removing the popsicle, she asked, “Master, what are you doing here?”

An Artoria he had found, but perhaps the most difficult one.

“Did you bring snacks?” she pressed, eyeing him up and down. “I don’t see any.”

All Artoria were gluttonous, it was in their nature. But Saber Alter had a particular liking for junk food above anything else.

“I don’t have any snacks,” he said.

“Hmph. Then it seems you’ve come unprepared.”

He had. He had come very unprepared.

She licked at her popsicle in a provocative manner, not that she realized she was doing it. Ritsuka watched as her small, pink tongue lapped at the icy treat, her lips glossy as it melted from the heat of her mouth. The small pinch in her brow as she concentrated could almost be called cute, though never within earshot of her. Not if you wished to remain whole.

“Artoria,” he approached slowly. “I’ve not seen you around.”

“I dislike crowds,” she said dispassionately. “And my job was usurped. So I decided to spend my time alone.”

“Your job?”

“I am a maid,” she said, as if it were obvious. She didn’t look much like a maid, that was until she picked up something from beside her and placed it on her head. A white, frilly crown; a maid’s headdress. “I was to be Chief Maid, but that position was taken from me by a certain fox. She then gifted it to that mad dog, but I cannot say I was overly concerned. She took to the job well. She provided good service, yes?”

One delicate eyebrow arched in question. Ritsuka cleared his throat.

She knew. Somehow, she knew.

“She did.”

“Then my job is complete, my replacement did well,” she removed the headdress and tossed it aside. “I am no longer Maid Alter. You can call me Swimsuit Alter.”

“Uh – how about I just call you Artoria.”

“Hmm – if that is your wish, Master, then I will not deny it. I am only your lowly Servant, after all.”

“There is nothing lowly about you.”

Her lips twitched. “As you say, Master.”

Ritsuka joined her on the ledge, sitting down. Saber Alter watched him with cool eyes, missing her faithful knights sneaking onto the rooftop. They were quieter than a mouse, so much so that even Artoria's keen senses missed them.

"Did you enjoy your time here?" he asked casually, peering out into the horizon. They were very high up, and he had a magnificent view of the sea, glittering like a carpet of gems as the sun reflected off the surface.

It was a breathtaking sight.

To the right were the green forests and the mountain, rising up higher than the building. The leaves of the trees swayed in the breeze, and all Ritsuka could smell was the salty spray of the sea, and the sweetness of Saber Alter's popsicle as she licked at it.

There was something very nostalgic about it, as if these two scents were something buried deep in his memories, from a time he couldn't even remember. The scent of summer, of a coastal Japanese town, perhaps?

It spoke of childhood. It spoke of a life he wasn't sure even existed.

"I have. Though I seek the thrill of battle, to crush my enemies under foot, it has been a novel experience to sit around and do nothing," she said after a moment of consideration. She was wearing a pair of cute black sandals, her toes flexing as she kicked her feet idly. "Those that share my face have also enjoyed this rare respite. One more than the others."

Just as she knew about Barghest, it seemed she knew about Lancer, as well.

"You've been keeping an eye on me," he stated.

“Perhaps.”

That was as good as an admission.

“Thanks for looking over me.”

Artoria hummed.

They sat there together in silence for some time. Artoria finished her popsicle, setting her stick down to gaze out across the water. It was a comfortable silence, one of companionship.

“My knights have roped you into something foolish, haven’t they?” she suddenly asked.

Busted. Maybe they hadn’t been able to escape her notice after all.

“I wouldn’t call it foolish.”

“I would,” she replied instantly. “A King has no need for such preening.”

Ritsuka chuckled awkwardly. That was a little harsh.

“Besides, I doubt I’m the King they were hoping for.”

He shook his head. “Sir Lancelot said, ‘Our King is Our King,’. What do you make of that?”

The first hint of surprise appeared on her face, though it was small. “Truly?”

“That is what he said.”

She laughed, and it was such an unexpected sound that it caught Ritsuka off guard. It was not the laugh of a tyrant, nor was it cruel or dismissive. It was not the laugh she sometimes gave in the heat of battle when her blood was up and there was killing at hand. No, it was the laugh of a young woman, pure, good.

“Lancelot was always—.” but whatever she was about to say was cut short when the telltale sound of a camera shutter snapped.

Artoria froze, as did Ritsuka. As one, they craned their necks and saw Mordred some feet away, camera held up in the perfect picture taking position. When she noticed she had caught Saber Alter’s attention, she shied back, wary, her expression complicated.

Despite all her issues with her father, she never did well with seeing Artoria blackened. Behind her, Lancelot, Tristain and Gaiwan watched with Mash by their side, their expressions filled with joy.

There was a long beat of silence, the air filled with tension. Artoria slowly rose to her feet, and suddenly, a heavy pressure enveloped the area. Everyone tensed.

“I see,” she said quietly, tone tinged with danger. “Son,” it was said as a command, harsh, authoritative. “Give me that camera.”

Artoria held out a hand expectantly, assured that Mordred would obey. It was the voice of their King, and misgivings about her darkened father or not, she complied when faced with such presence.

Or would have, if not for Tristain dashing forward and snatching it.

Artoria blinked

“We must protect this prize at all costs!” he shouted before bolting for the stairwell.

A surge of power ignited, and Excalibur Morgan appeared in a rush of black light. The blade dripped with malice, the red runes blazing.

“You will all die,” she intoned as Lancelot and Gaiwan ran, Mordred bringing up the rear.

“Wait, don’t,” Ritsuka tried but it was too late, Saber Alter charging after them with killing intent. He sagged as she vanished through the doorway, sighing.

At least she hadn’t destroyed the rooftop and instead decided to give chase. A small victory.

Mash approached, fingers pointing together nervously.

“Um, Senpai – do you think we should try stop them?”

“I think that’s beyond us, Mash,” he patted the ledge next to him. “Join me?”

She nodded with a smile, and slipped onto the spot Artoria had previously occupied.

“Want to sit here until it’s time to go?” he asked.

Her smile became wider. “I’d love to, Senpai.”

And so that’s how they spent the rest of their summer vacation, overlooking the vast blue ocean and the clear sky above, the scent of salt heavy on their nose, the brilliant sun warming their skin.

There were many wonderful sights on planet earth, be it the modern era or the Age of Gods, or everything in between, and this was, without a doubt, one of them.

But what made it better was to share it with a friend, and to have experienced it with the others. A peaceful summer at last.