

## Chapter LXIV: Divine Ancestor

It was the better part of another hour of riding before the walls of the United Empire's capital loomed ahead of us, and as we approached the outskirts of the city, our group dismounted from the chariots. As much of an advantage as we could get, we had to have, so we had to slow down far enough away that we wouldn't draw suspicion.

It meant, unfortunately, that we were going to have to make the final approach on foot. If we rode in at full speed, the only thing we would have accomplished was the run headfirst into Constantine XI's threefold barrier.

"So that's the United Empire's capital, huh."

"It can't be," Nero muttered. "It looks just like..."

"Rome," Boudica concluded. "Yes, Miss Da Vinci did say, didn't she?"

"Has to be the work of a Noble Phantasm," said Emiya. "Even this close to the Age of Gods, building a city with magecraft that quickly would be impossible."

"Depends upon the magecraft," El-Melloi II said immediately. "But you're right. Building a perfect replica of Rome in less than a decade means that it had to have been sped up *somehow*."

Brutus had theorized that it had been constructed through the use of Romulus' Noble Phantasm, but he hadn't been able to confirm that one way or the other. It was as good a theory as any we had, so I was willing to accept it, even if it wasn't one-hundred percent confirmed.

As long as he couldn't turn the city itself against us and attack, it was immaterial, and Brutus had surveyed the city at length during his stay. He hadn't found any indication of any kind of defensive or offensive emplacements inside the city, so for all intents and purposes, it really was just a city, and how it got there didn't matter all that much.

"And protecting it..."

"Theodosios Constantinos," I said, frowning at the thick, stone ramparts that jutted up around the city itself. "The Noble Phantasm of Constantine XI. If Brutus is right, it gets weaker the more it has to protect, so if he's trying to cover the entirety of the capital city..."

"It's at its weakest," Arash agreed. "In that case, it shouldn't be too hard to make our way inside, should it?"

Rika grinned, all teeth. "I always wanted to be a ninja!"

"You did not," Ritsuka accused her. "You used to freak out whenever they showed up in the movies, because you thought someone had glued socks to their faces."

"I was five!"

“A ninja?” Nero asked, confused.

“Not now,” I cut in, stopping the tangent before it could get off the ground. “If you want to explain it, it can wait until later, after this is all over.”

Thinking I couldn’t see her, Rika stuck her tongue out at Ritsuka, who glared back at her. I pretended nothing had happened, because the only reprimand I could think of was to threaten to wash that tongue with soap, and I wasn’t her goddamn mother.

“Arash,” I began, thinking about the city not so far away, “you got a good look when we were on higher ground, right?”

“Pretty good one, yeah.”

“Then the gates are all where they’re supposed to be?”

“They are,” he affirmed. “Exactly where Brutus said they should be.”

I nodded. I hadn’t expected it to be any different, but getting confirmation was useful. And frankly, I just trusted Arash a whole lot more than I did a Servant I’d never met, especially one who had no reason to like either side of this civil war.

“Then the plan remains unchanged,” I said. “The main group will move in and head towards the eastern gate. Emiya, Boudica, and Spartacus will head towards the southern gate and stay out there. Emiya will use a Noble Phantasm to shatter Theodosios Constantinos, which should get Constantine XI’s attention, and we’ll sneak in.”

The small details had changed a little, but the important parts were the same as they were about an hour ago when we had first come up with this plan. It wasn’t the most involved and there wasn’t some higher dimensional chess going on to complicate things, but it should be perfectly serviceable to get us inside so we could take out Romulus and his court mage.

“And if Constantine XI brings reinforcements?” asked Emiya. “We know they have at least a legion’s worth of trained soldiers.”

Yeah, there *was* that little wrinkle, wasn’t there? We hadn’t really come up with anything solid for that. Brutus had given us the guard rotation and the deployment schedules, so the tentative plan there was to just sneak around them, but that could all very easily have changed once Hadrian and Constantine the Great were dead.

“We don’t have to kill them,” Ritsuka said suddenly.

“Senpai,” Mash murmured sympathetically.

“They’re not a threat to anyone but us Masters, right?” Ritsuka went on. “Then... We just have to knock them out. Or injure them so that they can’t keep fighting.”

“You don’t ask for too much, do you?” Aífe said dryly.

“It’s not how it is in the movies,” I agreed. “People don’t go down from a hard tap to the head and stay down. Not without serious brain trauma.”

“M-me, too!” Mash burst out. “I-I agree with Senpai! The soldiers, we don’t have to kill them at all!”

“Yeah!” said Rika. “We’re the good guys, right? The good guys don’t kill!”

Emiya clicked his tongue, frowning thoughtfully. “Well. I guess the soldiers of the modern era got out of it by shooting themselves in the foot, right? Guess I just have to aim there, then.”

Ritsuka turned to him, a hopeful look blooming on his face. “You can do that?”

“I never miss my intended target,” Emiya bragged.

“A-and...I can use the blunt edge of my shield!” said Mash. “That way...the only thing we have to worry about is broken bones!”

“I can do the same,” Arash chimed in. “Injuries to the foot may not be nice, but you can still walk away from them, metaphorically speaking.”

“Love is pain!” Spartacus pronounced. “But pain does not mean death! It is the audience who decides the gladiators’ fates!”

“I...think I could use the flat side of my blade,” said Boudica, sounding less certain than the others. “I-it won’t be easy, but I should be able to do it!”

My mouth twisted into a grimace. Fine, I could see where this was heading.

“And our Gandr shots should lay them out after one or two hits,” I allowed. “We just have to be careful to pace ourselves and not use too much energy too fast.”

“Even if they are misguided, they are still citizens of Rome!” said Nero. “Mm-mm! It is my duty as their emperor to deliver them mercy when needed!”

El-Melloi II let out a sigh. “You’re all getting too twisted up into knots about this whole thing. The answer is obvious. I’m the one here who will be least useful against Romulus, but I can at least handle keeping the rank and file soldiers from throwing themselves on your swords. Leave that part to me.”

Rika grinned. “Alright, Hot Pops,” she said. “You’re pretty cool, aren’t you?”

“Don’t give me too much credit,” El-Melloi II told her. “It’s precisely because I’m not a Heroic Spirit myself that I understand these things like you do, so it’s only natural that I’d want to make myself useful by doing something within my skill set.”

“At least this softness doesn’t extend to the enemy Servants,” Aífe said, sounding annoyed. “Fine. Mercy is the privilege of the strong. If we encounter any enemy soldiers, I’ll endeavor not to deal fatal wounds.”

And Ritsuka...beamed at her, for lack of a better word. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. We weren't always going to have the luxury of sparing the normal enemies we ran across in these Singularities. He was going to have to come to terms with that eventually.

I guess that just wasn't going to be today.

"Then if everyone's clear on their role, let's get moving," I said. "Emiya, Spartacus, Boudica, make your way over. Rika will signal you when we're ready for the diversion."

"I'll make it a loud one," Emiya promised, and then he paused, looked over at Nero, and held out his hand.

In a flash, he held a raincoat, bright yellow and glaring, and he tossed it at her. She caught it, confused. "What's this? Mm."

"You're emperor, aren't you?" he asked her sardonically. "If you don't want to get recognized right away, you need to disguise yourself at least a little."

"Good thinking," I told him.

"My house-husband is good for more than just his delicious food!" Rika said proudly.

"Who would have thought, right?" Emiya shrugged, and then he disappeared into spirit form. Boudica and Spartacus followed a moment later.

I looked back at El-Melloi II, Aífe, and Arash. "You three, too. The smaller our group is, the less attention we'll draw."

"And I need to lead the way," Jing Ke added.

"I'll let you know before I split off from the group," El-Melloi II said, and then he vanished.

"I'll keep an eye on things from the rooftops once we get inside the city," Arash told us, and then he vanished, too.

Aífe huffed. "Which means at least one of us needs to stick close in case things devolve into a fight." She shook her head. "A group of Servants this large, and we're still talking as if we need more."

She vanished last, and although they were still with us, just intangible, it gave the sense that it was just down to us humans and Jing Ke. After a moment, Mash looked down at her shield, frowning, and it evaporated into thin air.

"*Should* we have called in reinforcements from Chaldea?" Ritsuka asked uncertainly. "I mean, this Romulus guy, he's a big deal, right? Will it be enough with the Servants we have right now?"

"Tii-chan would've been happy to come," Rika added.

My lips pursed. "You'll notice it once the fight gets started. Servants use up a lot of energy, especially the high class ones like Aífe and Siegfried. The entire reason we didn't bring everyone we

had to begin with is because the instant they got into a fight, it would drain us Masters dry, remember?”

If it was an option, I would have just called in Siegfried and had him along for the ride. But having to support him, Aífe, *and* Arash simultaneously was probably beyond me, and it would do no one any good if I collapsed mid-fight from trying to keep them all well-stocked with magical energy.

When it came down to it, one strong Servant with a powerful Noble Phantasm was worth three who couldn't use theirs.

It wouldn't be bad to have backup, though, if things got a little dicey. We just had to be a little choosier about who we called for backup. Since Siegfried would probably be too much, that left the other Servant we'd picked up in Orléans.

“I'll leave that to you, Rika,” I decided. “If it starts looking like we're going to need help, contact Da Vinci and have her Rayshift Bradamante here.”

Rika saluted me. “Roger that, Boss!”

“Tii-chan?” Nero asked. “Bradamante?”

“She's a friend we made in the last Singularity,” Rika told her, grinning broadly. “She's really cool, Best Buddy! I think you'd like her!”

Nero beamed. “Then I would be very pleased to meet her! Mm-mm!”

“Only if it looks like we need her,” I stressed. “The less energy we have to split between different Servants, that's the more we can spare to help Aífe, Arash, Mash, and Emiya.”

“Right,” Rika said, much less excited than before. “Yeah, I get it, Senpai.” Under her breath, she added, “Doesn't mean I have to like it.”

I let that one slip. “Then let's get going. It should be about twenty minutes to the east gate. Let's not keep Emiya and the others waiting.”

We set off. As we walked, Nero fumbled around with the raincoat Emiya had projected for her until Rika took pity on her and helped her slip it on over her regular clothes. Frankly, it looked ridiculous, and I wasn't entirely sure that it wouldn't draw some unwanted attention on its own, but people looking at the yellow raincoat and thinking it looked silly would hopefully be far less inclined to look closer at the woman wearing it.

“I am emperor,” Nero mumbled petulantly. “My glory should never be hidden from my people.”

“You're also one of the prime targets of the United Empire,” I told her, “and the one the people here would recognize best. If we want to reach Romulus unaccosted, then we need to be able to get there without anyone realizing the Emperor of Rome is walking the streets of the capital city.”

Nero scowled miserably, but dropped the subject.

As I predicted, it took us a little over twenty minutes to make it to the looming gate of Theodosios Constantinos that led into the United Empire's capital, and as we approached, the sturdy brick constructs towering over our heads, I turned to Rika and mumbled her name.

"Right," she muttered back, looking about surreptitiously. Her brow furrowed with concentration, and then she nodded. "Message sent, Senpai."

A tense second or two passed. Then —

*BOOM*

The Earth itself seemed to shake beneath our feet, and a second sun rose to the south, bright enough and brilliant enough that I actually had to lift a hand to protect my eyes from the light. The others let out startled squeaks and shrieks, but I kept my attention on the city in front of us.

And as the light from the blast of whatever Noble Phantasm Emiya had used faded — we were going to be having some words about that later — the sturdy brick walls of Theodosios Constantinos began to crack, crumble, and at last, break. Great hunks of what I assumed to be sandstone broke off from the larger structure, forcing us all back a few steps as the nearby civilians descended into a blind panic, and they shattered and evaporated when they hit the ground. Disappeared, just like Servants did when killed.

Bit by bit, the walls fell. And when they fell, they revealed the city behind them, no longer protected and no longer impenetrable. There was no longer anything standing in our way.

"Go!" I shouted over the panicked screaming, and I took off into the city as my control settled over the insects inside it that had been blocked from me before.

It took the others an extra second to follow, and Jing Ke put on an extra spurt of speed to outpace me so she could take point and lead the way, and then we were racing through the streets of the United Empire's capital city. It really did look just like Rome, only cleaner and nicer, newer and fresher.

Like everything had just been built, because for all intents and purposes, it had.

The civilians who had chosen Romulus, perhaps realizing that this was an invasion of sorts and fearing an enemy army, scrambled to get out of the way and find the nearest building to hole up in. They raced through the streets just like us, but with the goal of hiding away, and more than one person was nearly trampled in the chaos.

We weren't spared from it. The crowd jostled us about, and I stumbled more than once as I was nearly thrown to the ground, but a pair of strong, thin arms caught me and kept me from falling.

"I'm breaking off to take care of the soldiers," El-Melloi II told me gruffly.

"Got it."

He nodded when he was sure I had my footing back, and then he vanished again, heading towards the southern gate where the city's legionnaires were likely to be going. I trusted him to be able to handle it on his own and kept going.

Jing Ke led us through the maze of streets, and the deeper into the city we got, the more the crowds thinned out — most of the populace had made it inside already, and with my bugs, I could see them, huddled in the corners and in their rooms, as far away from the windows and doors as they could possibly be.

They were scared. Terrified, as families clutched to each other and waited, no doubt praying to their gods that their lives would be spared, that the invaders wouldn't burst in and put them all to the sword.

It was hard to have too much sympathy for them, easier to blame them for their own suffering now, to say that this was what they got for choosing Romulus over Rome. But I'd also seen too many examples before of charismatic leaders convincing people of their way of thinking, of how the right person saying the right thing to the right people at the right time could make monsters out of ordinary men. Could make them make the worst decisions imaginable, because they were told those decisions were the correct ones.

I could disagree with their choices, I could condemn their choices, I could absolutely say they were wrong. But I couldn't forget that they, too, were victims of a kind, who didn't know anything about a "proper human history" or a "Singularity," and who were only faced with the decision of following one autocrat or the other. Choosing the living god back from the dead must have seemed like the obvious one.

As long as they didn't throw themselves in our way, that choice didn't have to be a fatal one.

The deeper we got into the city, the fewer people there were still out, and more than once, Jing Ke veered us through a side street to avoid a patrol of soldiers marching along — I saw them as they passed us by with my bugs. They all seemed to be going southwards, towards the gate that Emiya had blown wide open.

It looked like our distraction plan was working.

Like with the real Rome, the outer sections of the city were mostly for the poor and underclass, and the closer towards the center we got, the better the accommodations and the richer the owners. By the time we got to the villas and mansions of the truly rich — I spared a brief thought to wonder who had become this empire's aristocracy and how — things were starting to look almost frighteningly familiar.

It was one thing to say that the United Empire's capital was a perfect replica of the real Rome, and it was another thing entirely to see it for yourself, down to the brickwork and the placement of the marble columns.

"This is really creepy," Rika huffed under her breath as we went. "I *recognize* that building."

"You're telling me," her brother agreed.

“It really does look just like Rome,” Mash marveled.

Nero looked troubled by the very notion.

Eventually, Jing Ke led us through the aristocratic district and to a very specific building, a tall, large, palatial mansion that dominated the hill it stood upon. It was everything you might have expected from Roman architecture: bold, ostentatious, hewn from gleaming marble, and decorated with gold mounted upon every carving and relief.

This one building was where the two Romes differed. In proper Rome, in Nero’s Rome, this was Nero’s palace, a proud structure proclaiming Rome’s splendor and glory. It was the palace of an emperor, carved with the likenesses of gods and great men, a monument to everything that was Rome and everything that Rome had accomplished.

Here, in this Rome, it was Romulus’ palace. Superficially, they were fairly similar, but the reliefs etched into the facade and above the towering pillars depicted not many men and many deeds, but a single one — Romulus himself, from his birth and childhood raised by the she-wolf to the moment he founded Rome itself. Each image glorified only him, praised only him, exalted only him, because he was the first and true king of Rome.

It was a temple, dedicated to the Divine Ancestor.

Nero gasped and stumbled to a stop when she finally got a good look at it, gaping up at the myths carved into the stone. Her eyes were wide and her mouth flapped soundlessly.

I stopped and turned to her, and a moment later, Rika realized something was wrong, too, and turned herself. After that, Mash and Ritsuka were inevitable.

“Best Buddy?”

Nero didn’t reply.

Jing Ke, sensing that we had stopped following, spun on her heel.

“Is something the matter?” she asked. “This is it. This is where Romulus should be. Isn’t reaching him our goal?”

Nero startled and jerked, blinking wildly. “Ah,” she stammered. “Ah, yes, I... F-forgive me, I was just... M-mm, I mean, yes! Yes, that is why we’re here! Yes, we should absolutely get to that!”

My brow furrowed.

“Best Buddy?” Rika asked uncertainly. “You okay?”

Nero shook her head emphatically. “It is nothing, it is nothing! Mm! I was simply...momentarily overwhelmed by the Divine Ancestor’s splendorous abode! I allowed myself a moment too long to admire it!”



I wasn't sure I was the only one who didn't quite believe her. Even Rika looked a little uncertain and worried. Now would be the worst time for Nero to chicken out or start thinking Romulus might be right.

Jing Ke took it all out of everyone else's hands.

"You can admire it later," she said brusquely. "Or not, since it'll probably disappear when he does. Either way, we need to get going. Your handsome friend and the others won't be able to hold off Constantine XI forever."

"You're right." I turned away from Nero and put the issue behind me, almost literally. "If Romulus is just inside there, then shouldn't you be going to find a good shadow to ambush him from?"

If my less than delicate phrasing bothered her, Jing Ke didn't show it. She just smirked, one side of her mouth pulling upwards, and she turned around, running towards the palace. Over her shoulder, she tossed a flippant, "See you in there, then!"

"Mm!" Nero marshaled her resolve. "Indeed, we shall! Onward, my friends! Our destiny awaits! The Divine Ancestor is within reach."

Relief washed over Rika and Ritsuka's faces, and as Nero charged forth to take point, we started running again, scaling the stairs that led up the hill. When we reached the top, those famous marble pillars loomed overhead, and the ominous doorway that led inside beckoned.

Nero didn't slow down, so neither did the rest of us, and into the palace we went. My bugs were already crawling through the structure — like Nero's palace, it was surprisingly sparse on insect life, but unlike Nero's palace, there was no bounded field keeping them out — and when Nero tried to take a wrong turn, I led in the right direction.

"This way!" I shouted over my shoulder.

The team reoriented and fell back into step behind me, and I took point now, weaving through the spacious hallways and the fairly Spartan corridors towards the large, open room that had the palace's singular occupant. He was waiting for us there, I knew it, and maybe it wasn't the best idea to run into what may very well have been a trap, but there wasn't time to think up much in the way of alternatives.

If he was a Caster, I would have *made* time, but in many ways, Romulus being a Lancer was to our advantage, even if it also presented a few problems.

There were no doors barring the way, so we burst into what I could only call the throne room as a group, us Masters panting from the run, and across from us, at the far end, the towering, muscular figure looked up. He sat on a simple stone throne, little more than marble hewn into the shape of a chair, legs crossed and his cheek resting on the knuckles of one massive fist.

He looked even more impressive in person than he had through my bugs.

"You're here," he said simply in a deep, rumbling baritone. His blood red eyes swept over our group, lingering for an extra moment on Nero. "You're all here. Good."

“Th-this is...” Nero mumbled, huffing as she caught her breath. She stared, unblinking, up at the form of the man who was said to have built Rome into the empire it became through sheer will alone.

Slowly, leisurely, the man — the Servant — sitting on his throne uncrossed his legs and stood.

“Welcome, Chaldean Stargazers,” he rumbled. “Welcome, Emperor Nero, my child. I am Romulus, the leader and ruler of this United Empire, my new Rome.”

“The father of Rome,” Mash muttered. “Lancer class Servant, Romulus.”

“Indeed, I am he.” Romulus spread out his arms in welcome. “Come. Rest and be at ease. Lay down your arms and be welcome.”

“What?” Slipped out of my mouth before I could stop it.

He...wasn't itching for a fight? Every other member of his empire had been almost *eager* to trade blows with us, like they had some kind of grudge to settle with Chaldea or with Nero. Berserker or not, Caligula had been so driven that he'd followed us down to Stheno's island to get a shot in on us. This whole empire was a violent civil war fought against the *real* Rome, to the point that Rome itself had been split right down the middle.

“Will you not accept my hospitality?” he asked. “Even those Servants of yours who are still hiding — it isn't necessary. My United Empire bids you welcome.”

Aífe and Arash shimmered into existence, standing at the front of the group as though to protect us the instant the fighting started. Romulus regarded them with the same calm, dispassionate gaze, as though he was looking over different wallpaper options to put in his sitting room.

“I see,” he said. “A Celtic warrior queen and a hero of the Assyrians. Chaldea's allies are varied indeed.”

“They...are not merely Chaldea's allies!” Nero proclaimed, her voice gaining strength with every word. “They are the allies of Emperor Nero! Of Rome! Mm-mm! They are my trusted comrades in the war against the United Empire!”

“To have gathered them to your banner, you are indeed a worthy emperor,” said Romulus. There was a hint of something like pride in his voice. “Your Rome is a radiant beacon, my beloved child. It is only a stroke of misfortune that has brought me to it as your opponent.”

The whole group tensed, fingers tightening over weapons and hands clenching into fists, and Romulus, unbothered, took an unhurried seat back on his throne. I wasn't the only one thrown for a loop by it.

What?

“It is unfortunate that this became necessary at all,” he lamented. “However, this need not end in violence. Indeed, although history would see us as enemies, I believe we are allies in the same cause — the cause of saving humanity from annihilation.”

“W-wait,” Rika stammered. “I thought...you were the one messing history up. Aren’t you trying to *destroy* humanity?”

“That is not my goal,” Romulus said gravely. “It has *never* been my goal. I have seen the future, children of Chaldea. I know, as you do, that the world has been incinerated. The mankind of your time has already been destroyed.”

“By Lev Lainur,” I said. “Your court mage.”

We still weren’t absolutely sure of that, but Romulus’ response should give us a more definitive answer to that question.

“Lev Lainur’s ambitions are of no relation to me.” Romulus waved it off, unconcerned. “Indeed, that he is at all capable of doing such damage to the mankind of your era only proves what I already know. The mistake was that such a world was not prepared to fight for itself, to stave off its own death. That it was too weak to prevent its own end.”

He swung his arm about, as though to encompass the whole of the city. “The Rome I have built was built to rectify that mistake, to create a world that cannot so easily be snuffed out. The future I envision thrives and continues, resilient and strong. It cannot be undone by the whims of a single man, whether he is god or demon.”

That...was new. Different. Saber Alter’s reasoning hadn’t ever been made clear, but Jeanne Alter had crowed her motive from the metaphorical rooftops, shouting to everyone who would listen about how she had been wronged and how much she wanted to punish those who had done it.

When I’d given any thought to Romulus and his motives for this whole thing, I’d kind of been assuming that he thought Nero was a bumbling idiot at best and that he was a puppet for Lev at worst. The idea that his motive was...I wasn’t sure I could use the word “altruistic” here, but I hadn’t been expecting it.

Romulus held out his hand to Nero, palm up and fingers unfurled. Offering it.

“Nero,” he entreated. “My beloved child, my youngest child. The Rome you have inherited is doomed. Its future is already determined, and its destiny is oblivion. If you truly love Rome, then join me, and together, we will build a Rome that will never fall, that will never falter, and never fail. Our Empire will be eternal, stretching across the entire globe, encompassing all places and peoples. A new, glorious, immortal Rome.”

Nero trembled.

“And what of *my* Rome?” she asked tremulously. “The Rome of my uncle, Caligula, the Rome that burns so bright and will one day fall? What of the future that gave rise to the valiant warriors of Chaldea, who have come here to protect it?”

“Your friends are welcome to join us,” Romulus said easily. “All are welcome in my new Rome. But your question... Yes, the future that is now will be erased and supplanted. There will be no need for Chaldean Stargazers, nor for their warriors defending it. Only my Rome is necessary for the growth and perseverance of mankind.”

“Then...they will disappear,” she concluded. “As though they themselves were mere Servants returned from death.”

“They are a product of their future,” Romulus told her. “If that future ceases to be, then they too will cease to be, at least in the form they currently take. It is an unavoidable consequence.”

“No,” said Nero, “it is cruelty. It is murder!”

From the bundle strapped to her back, she produced that twisted mockery of a sword with its undulating black and red blade. With flourish, she threw the pack away, brandishing that sword towards Romulus.

“My Rome is not wrong!” she proclaimed boldly. “The future born from it is not incorrect! Mm-mm! Even if my beloved Rome will one day fall, the world it gives rise to is worth protecting! It is a world worth entrusting my legacy to! Mm! It is a world that will create many wondrous and incredible things!”

She grinned and thrust out one fist towards Rika, who blinked at it, surprised, and then met it with her own.

“Including my best buddy!”

“*Fuck* yeah!” Rika cried.

“It is my duty as emperor to shepherd that future!” Nero said. “To nurture it, to guide it! Mm-mm! To reject it is to reject everything that I and my ancestors built over the course of centuries! To reject the legacy of Rome itself!” She took hold of her sword’s hilt with both hands. “Even if the Divine Ancestor himself says that it must be that way, that is something I cannot accept, no matter what!”

“Well said,” said Arash, smiling. His bow materialized in his hands.

“For all her troubles and mistakes, Emperor Nero at least understands the important parts,” Aífe agreed. Gáe Bolg spun in her grip, the keen edge flashing in the light. “A shame the same can’t be said for Heroic Spirits who should know better, but if that were the case, we wouldn’t be here, would we?”

Arash nodded. “True enough.”

“I see.” Romulus briefly closed his eyes, grimacing as though pained. “That is your answer, then.”

“It’s not perfect,” I said sharply, “but it’s ours. If we didn’t think it was worth saving then we wouldn’t even be here.”

“That’s right,” Ritsuka agreed. “There’s too many people counting on us to give up now.”

“*You* can give up if you want to, though,” Rika told him. “You know. Cut out the part where Super Action Mom beats your ass like a drum and just hand us over the Grail.”

“Then you leave me no choice,” said Romulus.

He stood again, and his presence filled the room like static, like the jolt of energy in the air that preceded a thunderstorm, thick with power. Although he hadn’t gotten taller or changed form at all, he seemed to loom over us, and even Mash took a step back with a gasp, her shield forming in her hands. She held it up as though to ward him off, even though he made no move to leave that spot.

“This will be the final battle between Rome and the United Empire!” Romulus bellowed.

He held out one hand, and in his grip formed...*something*. It had a handle in the middle, long enough for about three of his hands to fit on it, but the top and bottom looked like shards of red wood. Like someone had taken an ax to a fully grown oak and whacked at it until they’d hacked off a large enough slab, then filed down the jagged edges into something resembling a blade and dipped it in red paint.

Obviously, it was supposed to be a weapon, a polearm of some kind, but at least Medusa, Aífe, and Dracul had all used something that actually looked the part. Even Bradamante, for all hers was tiny by comparison, wielded a lance that resembled one. Romulus’ looked crude and more like an oversized spade.

He lifted up that ridiculous thing he called a spear. “Let us see which Rome is more worthy of surviving. Let us determine whose love burns brighter. The future will be decided now, Emperor Nero.”

The butt of the spear slammed into the ground with a sound like a gong, ominous and final.

### **My Love Reaches All**

“Moles Necessarie.”