

Chapter LIV: Court Mage

I woke up the next morning feeling...strange.

I didn't have a better word for it. It felt like my thoughts were spread out, foggy and muddled, like my brain was slow to start, but it wasn't anywhere near as disorienting as Rayshifting into France had been — either time.

Instead, it was like...Dad's old truck, when the engine sputtered and refused to spark. No matter how many times I twisted my metaphorical key, I couldn't seem to get the momentum behind myself to put my thoughts in order.

The remnants of that weird dream I'd had only made things worse. Like adding a bunch of sludge to muck up the gears.

There hadn't been a single day in my tenure at Chaldea where I'd wanted to crawl back into bed and sleep more than I did that morning.

Fortunately — or perhaps unfortunately, depending on how you looked at it — I wasn't alone in my vague not-quite-misery, because as our group muddled its way to the dining hall and the three of us Masters met up, the twins proved to be in just as strange a state as I was. Even the normally energetic Rika was quiet and subdued, bleary-eyed, as though she had been dragged out of bed just before dawn and still hadn't fully woken up yet.

Of our group, only Mash seemed unaffected, although she wasn't quite normal either. The bath the previous night seemed to have done her some good, because she looked as relaxed as I had ever seen her. It was like a tension that had been steadily weighing down on her had lifted, if only a little bit.

If I was in a better mood myself, I might have thought, *Good for her*. Right then, I only envied her serenity.

“Good morning, Senpai, Miss Taylor,” she greeted us with a cheerful smile.

“Morning,” I managed to mumble through a tongue that felt thick and numb.

Rika just grunted, and Ritsuka made a sound that might eventually have one day grown up to be a moan.

Mash blinked. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Ritsuka tried to reassure her at the same time as his sister said, “Weird dream.”

They stopped and turned to look at each other. “You, too?” they asked one another in stereo.

My own brow furrowed. What were the odds, exactly, that all three Masters would have a weird dream on the same night while sleeping in three different rooms in the same palace?

Could it be a mental attack from an enemy Servant? But why that dream in particular, then? It wasn't like it made me think any less of Aífe. In fact, it actually made me respect her a bit more, if only for her work ethic and her sheer, dogged determination.

"A weird dream?" Mash asked.

"I had a dream about Super Action Mom," Rika said. "About her growing up and stuff."

"Me, too," said her brother, looking very uncomfortable and weirded out.

"Ah," Mash said knowingly. "That must be the dream cycle, then."

"Dream cycle?" the twins said in stereo again. Immediately, they turned to each other and pointed at one another. "Jinx! You owe me a soda!"

It really was too early for this.

"Magical contracts are bonds of a more spiritual nature than physical," Mash explained patiently. "With Masters and Servants, sometimes, one or the other might experience visions of the other's past in the form of dreams. Although... Since Servants don't strictly need to sleep, it's usually the Master who experiences the Servant's past as dreams."

Oh. Right. The dream cycle.

"I'd forgotten about that," I muttered.

It was part of Chaldea's courses on being a proper Master and how Servants worked, but it was considered such a minor detail that we'd only gone over it in enough depth to explain that it existed. There had been so much other stuff that was way more important that the dream cycle had just gotten buried and forgotten.

So not a mental attack, we'd just all had a dream about Aífe's past.

"But we haven't seen Mash's past in our dreams," Rika said, confused. "Right, Onii-chan?"

"No," Ritsuka agreed.

Mash gave a helpless shrug. "I'm sorry, Master. The dream cycle is irregular to begin with, and it may have something to do with the fact that I'm a Demi-Servant. It's entirely possible that it doesn't work that way for me."

Even if it did, would they wind up seeing Mash's past, or would they dream of the Heroic Spirit who had left behind his powers for her to use? I was actually kind of curious which it would be, and if they *did* start seeing visions of that Heroic Spirit's life, maybe that would be enough to give us the clues we needed to finally figure out what his identity was.

I didn't think of it too often, but when I did, it still bugged me that I wasn't any closer to pinning it down than I had been in Fuyuki. There were still just too many candidates.

“That’s too bad,” Rika said.

“Guess we’ll just have to learn about Mash’s past the old fashioned way,” Ritsuka said with a surprisingly charismatic smile.

Mash swept her hair out of her face, a nervous habit I’d observed several times in the last two years. “I-I’m not sure what you’d find even if you did start dreaming about my past, Senpai,” she admitted. “Most of it was pretty uninteresting. Just me in Chaldea, going through tests and reading whatever Doctor Roman... whatever I could get my hands on. I think you would find it pretty boring.”

Very deliberately, I didn’t glance in her direction, and I wondered if I was the only one who had paid any attention to that little slip she almost let loose. Maybe they just wrote it off as benign, since Romani treated her a lot like a daughter and his relationship with her was very obviously quite parental, but I tallied it up as another piece of evidence about the girl I’d been too busy preparing to save the world to question the circumstances of.

I was going to have a lot of questions for Marie once she got back on her feet, both literally and metaphorically.

Arash appeared suddenly just ahead of us, hand already raised in a wave and a smile on his face. The twins nearly leapt out of their skins, they were so startled.

“Good morning, everyone!”

“Why do you guys keep *doing* that?” Rika snapped, one hand held up to her chest.

“I think Emiya just likes to see the look of surprise on your face,” he answered wryly.

“We’ll see how he likes his surprise when the next surprise is my boot up his ass,” Rika mumbled, not quite quiet enough to go unheard.

“Please try not to do that again,” Ritsuka requested politely as though Rika hadn’t spoken.

“Can’t make any promises like that, I’m afraid,” Arash said with a shake of his head. “But I’ll try and keep the jump scares to a minimum. I’ll leave keeping you guys on your toes to Emiya.”

“That’s not very reassuring,” said Ritsuka.

“Anything happen last night?” I asked Arash.

“Nope,” said Arash, “just another boring night of guard duty. No sign of any hostile elements that I saw.”

And with eyes as sharp as his, that was as good of a guarantee as we were going to get. Good. I hadn’t ruled out the idea that the United Empire might try and send an assassin (or an Assassin) in to take out either us Masters or Emperor Nero, but I’d been hoping that the sheer difficulty of making it that deep into the Roman Empire’s territory would have discouraged them from it.

Not that it had discouraged Caligula from attacking us at Massilia, but that one could be chalked up to the fact he was a Berserker — in other words, notoriously difficult to handle.

“That’s good.”

“Were we expecting them to attack us?” Ritsuka asked.

“No. But nothing’s a guarantee in this sort of situation, so it pays to be prepared.”

He nodded. “Like when Cu stood guard during that night we spent in the Second Owner’s house.”

“Exactly.”

As we talked, we made our way through the tall ceilings and towering marble columns of the emperor’s palace. The brightly painted walls stood out much better in the sunlight than they had last night in the dark, and while they didn’t quite clash, they were much more vivid and eye-popping than I was used to, all done in blues and burnt oranges and golds.

Pretentious. That was a good word for it. Like someone flaunting their status by having everything done in the most eye-catching colors possible.

Eventually, we approached the dining hall, and as we came closer, a familiar scent oozed through the air and wafted up my nostrils, an acrid, fiery smell that brought to mind stereotypical mob bosses and speakeasy backrooms. My mind immediately conjured a table shrouded in a gray haze, lit by the dim yellow light of a low-hanging lamp. Men in pinstripe suits, hair slicked back, holding playing cards as they cast shifty looks at each other for tells.

Was that...?

“Tobacco smoke?”

Where the hell would someone get tobacco in this era? It was fourteen hundred years too early for that to be here in Europe.

My brow furrowed.

The emperor’s palace was remarkably clean for a building of this era, but not so clean that it was bereft of enough bugs to feel things out. I’d mostly been keeping them away from the kitchen and dining room out of a combination of courtesy and just good hygiene, but I peeled a few flies away from where I’d stuffed them and sent them to scope out the room ahead of us.

Except something blocked them out. No matter how much I pushed for them to fly into the dining hall, they kept hitting some kind of invisible barrier and bouncing off, and the more they did, the more I felt my alarm starting to grow.

A bounded field?

“Oh, that.” Arash laughed a little. “Yeah, I’d prepare yourselves if I were you, everyone. Emperor Nero’s court mage is something of a character, as you’re about to see.”

“Court mage?” Ritsuka asked.

Rika gasped. “The guy who enchanted the baths to always be clean!”

That...would also neatly explain the bounded field keeping my bugs away, actually. If this guy was so concerned about cleanliness that he'd enchanted the baths, then I could definitely see him putting up a bounded field to keep bugs out of the food.

“You've met him, then?” I asked.

“After a fashion,” said Arash cryptically. “He's definitely not what you'd expect, either from a court mage or... Well, like I said, you're about to see.”

“As long as he's not an ugly troll,” Rika said cheerfully, “I might just kiss him for —”

And when we stepped into the dining hall, her voice cut out suddenly as we came face to face with Nero's so-called court mage.

“Whoa.”

He was a pretty boy.

“I think he's a little too old for you, Rika,” her brother told her. “By about ten years.”

“I don't care,” she replied faintly, “I just got punched in the ovaries.”

“That can happen?” Mash asked worriedly.

“It's an expression, Mash,” Rika answered, distracted.

It wasn't that I couldn't see the appeal, even if the archetype didn't do much for me. He had a lean, narrow face that sloped into a narrow chin — angular, that was a good word for it — with dark eyes set into high cheekbones, and long, dark hair that was sleek and obviously well cared for, which all went well with his slender physique. The only thing overtly masculine was the cigar that he was still puffing on and the look of perpetual disgruntlement that drew everything tight.

He was also, ironically enough, dressed like a mob boss.

He took one look at us, grunted, and said, “You three must be the Masters from Chaldea.”

The tone of his voice was scornful, and it conveyed without words that he wasn't impressed with us. If he was actually a talented Caster class Servant, then maybe he had good reason not to be, considering the sorts of things Servants like that could do. Modern magi would seem infantile by comparison.

That didn't mean he had to be an ass about it.

“You aren't exactly what we were expecting, either,” I replied calmly.

He huffed. “Sorry, but I left my robe and wizard's hat back in my school days.”

“Yeah,” Arash said, still smiling, “I was a bit surprised, too.”

“The suit and the tie are a bit unusual for a Caster, too,” I noted.

Too modern, actually. The clothes themselves could fit any part of the last hundred years, if he was a rich aristocrat, or at least styled himself like one. The trouble was, that was way too modern in and of itself for an actual Caster class Servant that lived up to the name, so it was entirely possible that this was just one of the famous mid-century authors who had managed to claw out enough acclaim to ascend to the Throne.

...There was no way this was Tolkien, was there? I didn't know if I could deal with that if he was.

“You'd be surprised,” the mysterious court mage grunted again. “There are plenty of Heroic Spirits who take a liking to modern styles of clothing and manifest wearing them instead of what they actually had in life. Maybe I'm one of them and think this is just more dignified than dressing up like a Merlin wannabe.”

Except you just said that you left your robes and hat back in your school days, I thought, but I chose not to push that angle, because I could already see the easy excuse. For that matter, “school days” implied itself a much more modern education in magecraft, because as Marie explained it, every mage who could get in went to the Mage's Association in England like it was an exclusive, prestigious college.

...Which could also be explained by Tolkien actually being a magus. Damn it.

“We're dancing around the topic and it's getting revolting,” Aife chimed in from behind us, because apparently, she'd been leaning against the wall the whole time and I just hadn't noticed.

“Super Action Mom!” Rika said, surprised.

“You're Nero's court mage,” said Aife, ignoring her, “and you're definitely a Servant, but you haven't introduced yourself at all.”

“I could point out that none of you have, either,” the court mage said pointedly, “but if you really have to call me something, I guess you can call me El-Melloi the Second.”

My eyebrows rose. That... I didn't recognize that name at all. It wasn't impossible that his legend was fairly obscure, but something about that just felt *off*.

“El-Melloi?” Ritsuka asked, sounding just as confused as I was.

“*The Second*,” El-Melloi stressed. “El-Melloi *the Second*. I'm just a placeholder for the actual heir.”

Ritsuka nodded. “So instead of being your true name, it's sort of like a pseudonym. Or maybe a title? And you're just using it for the time being until it's time for you to pass it on.”

“Exactly.”

“Wouldn't that be *were*?” Mash wondered. “After all, by definition, Heroic Spirits are, well...”

“Dead,” Rika concluded bluntly. Mash sighed.

“Yes, that.”

El-Melloi grimaced. “I suppose...”

“No, the present tense is correct, or at least it was, as of the time of his summoning,” Aífe suddenly declared. A triumphant grin broke out onto her face. “I’ve been trying to figure out what’s so different about you this whole time, because you don’t have the same sort of feel as a normal Caster Servant. But that’s just it, isn’t it? You *aren’t* a normal Caster Servant. You aren’t even a normal Servant.”

“He’s not?” asked Ritsuka. “He seems like a Servant to me.”

For what that was worth, when Servants looked just like regular people. Well. For the most part, at least, the likes of Spartacus notwithstanding. I did agree, though, that something about El-Melloi just wasn’t adding up.

Please don’t be Tolkien in disguise, I begged him silently.

“Because I am,” El-Melloi II said tartly. “I’m as much a Servant as you are, Queen Aífe.”

“In terms of how you function, perhaps,” she agreed. “But you yourself are not a Heroic Spirit, are you, El-Melloi?”

“*The Second*,” he gritted out. “Stop leaving out the goddamned *Second*.”

“That’s why I’m so sure,” she said, nodding in his direction. “The way you phrased that. How you had a ready-made excuse for your clothing. The quip about your school days. I almost missed it, but this nagging sense of dissonance made them easier to spot. You. Before you were summoned here to Rome, you were an ordinary human, weren’t you?” Her grin gained teeth. “You’re just like Mash.”

Ripples of shock spread out across the room, because no one had been expecting that. Not even me. It hadn’t even crossed my mind as a possibility.

El-Melloi’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’re a Demi-Servant?” Mash asked. There was something like hope in her voice. “That is, you’re a Servant created by a human being hosting a Heroic Spirit?”

“He is,” Aífe declared confidently.

El-Melloi grimaced and leaned back into his chair, closing his eyes as he took a deep drag on his cigar. When he blew out the smoke, it was carried along a deep, weary sigh.

“Fine,” he said at last. “You win. Yes, I’m what you might call a Pseudo-Servant, created when a human host is chosen to hold a Heroic Spirit that can’t, for whatever reason, manifest on its own. Under ordinary circumstances, either the Heroic Spirit takes over fully, or the personalities are

meshed to varying degrees, but the Heroic Spirit I'm playing host to foisted his abilities and Noble Phantasm off on me and went to take a nap."

"That's possible?" were the first words out of my mouth, although in hindsight, Mash kind of proved that it was, didn't she? The difference was, Mash had been deliberately created that way by Chaldea's research, not summoned directly as a Demi-Servant.

"Don't ask me what the criteria are," El-Melloi II warned. "I have no idea if my case is the norm, or if the reason why I was summoned has something to do with the fact that I'm the one playing host to this lazy Caster."

"You know why you were summoned?" Aífe demanded.

"I thought you needed something like Chaldea's FATE System for that," Arash added. "The other Strays we've met so far seem to be acting mostly on their own will, not a set of instructions."

"Whydunnit," El-Melloi II mumbled, almost too quiet for me to hear. "It wasn't hard to figure out, given my location. As someone who participated in a Holy Grail War, the only reason the World would summon me to be Emperor Nero's court mage was to be her teacher in the finer details of Servants and how they work."

"Wait," said Ritsuka. "A Holy Grail War? Like the one in Fuyuki?"

"The very same," El-Melloi II confirmed. "For me, it was about twenty years ago, in the nineties. The Fourth Holy Grail War."

"Fourth?" Mash asked, confused. "Um, El-Melloi II... Chaldea's records show that the only Holy Grail War in Fuyuki took place in 2004. There was no previous or successive Grail War."

El-Melloi II was stunned into silence. His mouth fell open, like he had something to say, but he couldn't seem to find the words, and several long seconds passed before he finally let out a simple, "Huh." His brow furrowed. "I'm a lot farther away from home than I thought, aren't I?"

What was *that* supposed to mean?

"Farther from home than you thought?"

A disconnect between his own history and the history as recorded by Chaldea... Was he like me, from a parallel timeline? Someone who didn't belong in Chaldea's world natively? What would it mean if he was?

Marie had always told me that it was dangerous for people to know I was from an alternate reality. That it could get me in trouble with the Mage's Association. Shouldn't that mean he would just as jealously guard that secret as I was?

Fortunately for him, he was spared having to answer when a loud, boisterous voice declared, "Rejoice, my friends, because your favorite emperor has arrived! Mm-mm!"

Nero strode into the room proudly, wearing her usual dress and a broad smile.

“And!” She lifted up one arm, finger jutting high into the air. “I bring with me a glorious feast for us to partake in!”

She stepped to the side, and, from behind her, in walked Emiya and Boudica, both of whom were carrying trays of food.

“A certain someone insisted on waiting by the kitchen for breakfast to be done,” Emiya told us wryly. “I figured it was more trouble than it was worth to try getting her to move, and it was more important to cook breakfast than shoo her away.”

“Yes,” Boudica agreed, laughing a little, “she’s very willful, isn’t she?”

Emiya huffed and shook his head.

“Not the words I would have used, but it’s probably better to stick with something more polite like that.”

He set his trays down on the table, sliding them across the surface, and then took the one Boudica was balancing precariously with her one arm and did the same. The smell of something absolutely heavenly teased my nostrils with promises of things to come.

“You,” El-Melloi II almost spat at Emiya.

Emiya turned to him, and as he took his first real look at El-Melloi II, his own brow furrowed thoughtfully. “Have we...met somewhere before?”

El-Melloi II’s lip curled, but he went back to his cigar. “No,” he said grumpily. “You just look like an idiot I used to know from a few years back.”

Emiya snorted. “I’d say I get that a lot, but I’d be lying.”

El-Melloi II just grunted and looked down at the spread presented by our chef like he wasn’t sure if he should eat any of it. I wasn’t sure what it would taste like if he did, considering he’d been puffing on that cigar for so long.

“Emiya made breakfast!” Rika cheered as she threw herself into the nearest seat like a kid at Christmas. “Oh wow, is this Oyakodon? You really outdid yourself, Emiya!”

El-Melloi II startled, and he turned back to Emiya, mouth agape again as his cigar fell from his limp fingers. That was an interesting reaction.

“I actually managed to get my hands on some chicken,” Emiya said. “I figured now was as good a time as any to return to my roots and make something Japanese for you guys again, Master.”

“It looks delicious,” Ritsuka said with a smile as he moved to sit down next to his sister. “It feels like it’s been forever since we had Oyakodon.”

“That’s why I thought it was about time.”

El-Melloi II groaned and dropped his face into his hand. “Emiya,” he gritted out, massaging his temples. “Emiya *Shirou*. Of all the boneheaded, numbskull, imbecilic... Of *course* you did something that stupid. I should have expected as much.”

Emiya was instantly on guard, eyes sharp. His hands fell to his sides, fingers spreading slightly, ready to grasp a pair of swords the instant fighting broke out.

“You know each other?” Mash asked, missing the sudden hostility.

Arash, I projected at him. I didn’t even need to finish asking, he was already prepared.

I’ll step in if I have to, Arash promised.

“What’s this?” Nero demanded. “You know this man, Lord El-Melloi II?”

“Oh.” The tension left Emiya’s shoulders. “That’s it, then.”

“That’s too strong a word,” El-Melloi II grunted. “You could say we were allies, at one point. He knew one of my students, and we worked together on an important task. But I know enough about him to know that the only way he could get on the Throne of Heroes is by doing something monumentally stupid.”

“If you’re expecting me to argue about it, I’m going to disappoint you,” Emiya said casually. “I’ll be the first person to admit that my entire existence is a mistake. The hero Emiya shouldn’t exist.” He smirked. “Of course, for a hero like that, correcting aberrant histories that shouldn’t exist is the perfect job, isn’t it?”

There was definitely something we were missing, I thought as I glanced back and forth between the two of them. Clues to Emiya’s past had always been sparse, but now, yet another one had dropped into our laps — whatever had happened, however it had happened, these two knew each other from when they were alive, and however well they knew each other, it was at least enough for El-Melloi II to have an idea of how Emiya had become a Heroic Spirit.

A Heroic Spirit that Emiya himself had just claimed shouldn’t exist.

“Tch.” El-Melloi II’s lip curled, but he scoffed and turned away, looking sourly down at his cigar. He picked it back up gingerly, inspecting the smoldering tip, and shook his head. “Damn it. That was a perfectly good cigar. I don’t have many of those on me, right now.”

He stabbed it into the table and put it out, and when he noticed that he had everyone’s attention, he scowled. “What am I, a sideshow attraction? Sit down and eat this breakfast you were all raving about before it gets cold.”

For a moment, no one did anything, and when it was obvious that he didn’t intend on saying anything else and the excitement was over, we all did just as he said and sat down to eat. I was slowest as I kept an eye on Emiya and El-Melloi II, but neither of them seemed keen on starting things up again, so eventually, I had to stop procrastinating and sit down to eat my own breakfast.

“How fortuitous!” Nero said as she served herself up a plate. “Mm-mm! That my court mage already knows one of your Chaldean companions certainly saves some trouble with introductions.”

“Well, obviously, we’ve all heard his name by now,” said Arash, “but come to think of it, I don’t think we gave him our names, did we?”

“Shut up and eat your damn breakfast,” said El-Melloi II. “We can do the proper niceties later on. I’m not in the mood for it, right now.”

“Someone’s grouchy,” Rika mumbled, but when he lanced her with a sharp glare in response, she squeaked and buried herself in her food.

It was a little frustrating that I couldn’t keep any eye on everything with my bugs on account of the bounded field El-Melloi II had set up, but eventually, the combination of my own growling stomach and the tempting smell of this strange, Japanese breakfast got the better of me, so I had to eat my own food.

As usual, Emiya’s cooking was sublime. What Rika and Emiya called “Oyakodon” wasn’t much like anything I’d had before, in the sense that it was a very foreign recipe from the sorts of things I’d grown up on myself. That didn’t mean that it wasn’t delicious or that I didn’t enjoy it for what it was, and while my tongue wasn’t quite sure what to make of it at the beginning, by the end, I had already decided that I would definitely enjoy eating it again.

Even El-Melloi II eventually gave in and had his own dish, and he enjoyed it grudgingly, like he was personally offended that it was even being offered. Or like he had a beef with the one making it.

Since it seemed like they knew each other, that second one was an increasingly likely possibility.

Rika finished fastest of us all, and when she was done, she sighed, slumping in her seat with a satisfied smile.

“It was a little different than usual, but still amazing,” she said dreamily.

“I had to substitute a few ingredients that aren’t available here in this era,” Emiya told her. “Things like soy sauce and sake, for example. The wine I substituted should give it a bit of a fruitier flavor than normal.”

“As always, it is excellent!” Nero proclaimed.

“It’s a strange kind of recipe,” Mash commented, “but I think I like it.”

For a few minutes after we all finished eating, we sat around as our food digested, lazily considering not much at all. Eventually, however, reality had to reassert itself, because we weren’t there to just sit around and enjoy ourselves all day. We had, as the saying went, places to be and stuff to do, starting with a date with a certain mountain to the south of us.

“We should get going,” I announced, levering myself out of my seat and to my feet. “By the time we reach the edge of the city, our food should have settled enough for us to saddle up and make the trip to Mount Etna.”

Rika groaned. “Senpai!” she whined.

“Come on, Rika,” said Ritsuka as he, too, tried to pull himself out of his chair. “We have to help Boudica, remember?”

“Really, there’s no rush,” Boudica reassured them. “I’m in no danger of disappearing, so we can take our time.”

Rika groaned again, but slowly started to stand. “Fine.”

“You should know by now, Boudica,” Arash said with a smile, “that they aren’t the kind of people who can sit around and do nothing when other people are in need of help.”

“I guess sometimes, the fact that we’re helping Rome makes me forget,” Boudica agreed, and wasn’t *that* a loaded statement. There was no way I was touching that one.

“You’re going to Mount Etna?” El-Melloi II asked me, and I turned to regard him.

I considered, for a brief moment, that he could have been a spy for the United Empire. Whether or not he knew Emiya personally, we really only had his own word that he was on the side of proper history and Nero’s that he was trustworthy. It wasn’t impossible that he was a sleeper agent, waiting to strike while Nero was most vulnerable.

But the idea was discarded almost as quickly. Not only would an actual spy be a lot more personable and social than he had already shown himself to be, ingratiating himself with everyone he could so as to avoid suspicion, but if the only goal was to see Nero dead and Rome tear itself apart in the aftermath, he’d had who knew how much time to do it before we even arrived in France, let alone come here to Rome itself.

Plus, when I looked using my Master’s Clairvoyance, he actually was a Caster, not an Assassin.

“We have a couple of things we need to do there,” I settled on. “One of them is we’re hoping to get Boudica hooked up to the ley line so she can heal faster.”

“We’re helping Queen Booty!” Rika declared.

“Naturally! Mm-mm!” Nero agreed. “It’s only just and proper!”

“Queen Booty...?” El-Melloi II closed his eyes briefly, muttering something about a ‘flat’ something or other. “Right.” He glanced at Boudica’s injured arm. “Of course. The Mount Etna ley line is the most powerful in the Empire. It makes sense that you would use it to speed up a Servant’s recovery.”

“Da Vinci also suggested using it to boost the performance of Chaldea’s sensors,” I said, carefully revealing that little tidbit. “We hope to be able to pinpoint at least the location of every Servant in the Singularity.”

“Da Vinci?” El-Melloi II’s eyebrows rose. “You have *Leonardo da Vinci* as part of your team?”

He looked around, as though he expected her to suddenly appear like she’d been with us all along.

“She’s back at Chaldea,” I told him. “She’s helping to keep everything running smoothly after we had some...staff shortages.”

Aífe snorted at my euphemism, but El-Melloi II, whose expression had become pinched, didn’t seem to notice.

“She?”

I grimaced. “That’s...complicated.”

“*Try me,*” he ordered tersely.

How could I explain it when I didn’t quite understand it all myself?

“If you meet her, you’ll understand,” said Emiya, coming to my rescue. “It’s not like Saber, who hid her gender, or Nero, who acts masculine and got recorded as male as a result. Da Vinci is...something different.”

“Yeah.” Arash laughed. “It’s hard to describe her, isn’t it?”

Emiya shrugged.

“It’s not that complicated,” said Rika. “Da Vinci-chan is Da Vinci-chan.”

The *what* wasn’t hard, no, but the *why* was another matter entirely.

“We were going to use what we learned at Mount Etna to refine our plans going forward,” I said, steering the conversation back on track. “If we find out as much as we hope, then we’ll know where and who we need to attack first to start toppling the United Empire’s house of cards.”

“I see.” El-Melloi II closed his eyes briefly and let out a slow breath. “So that’s Chaldea’s goal, is it? Emperor Nero tried to explain it, but her view of the situation is a bit more simplistic, since she hasn’t received a broader education in how this all works. It lacks a degree of nuance.”

“My view of the situation is as nuanced as it needs to be!” Nero protested. “Mm-mm! Spirits of the honored dead have risen to take my Rome from me, and because it was not meant to happen, my new friends are here to help send them back to their graves!”

El-Melloi II arched an eyebrow at me, and I could see what he meant. She wasn’t *wrong*, exactly, but she was missing loads of nuance, like the fact that, if we *could* have waged war against the United Empire on our own, then it didn’t strictly matter what Nero did or where she went. Her life or death didn’t really mean anything to us either, in terms of our goals or logistics, except that there was no way we could afford to face the full might of the United Empire, undistracted by Rome’s resistance.

Of course, what she meant to *Chaldea the organization* and what she meant to *the members of Chaldea* were different things entirely.

“Well, when you boil it down to its essence, she’s got the most important parts,” Arash remarked diplomatically.

“What about you, Mister El-Melloi II?” Mash asked. “If you’re Emperor Nero’s court mage on the side of Rome and proper human history, wouldn’t that make you our ally as well?”

El-Melloi II winced.

“Mister El-Melloi II.’ That just sounds strange,” he muttered, more to himself it seemed than anything, and then, he sighed again. “Fine. I can tell what you’re really asking. You want to know if I’ll join up with your merry band of misfits and follow you around while you flail at the United Empire.”

“Who’s a misfit?” Rika squawked.

If I’d been so inclined, I could very easily have pointed out that just describing the makeup of our group sounded like the opening of a bad joke.

In any case, I wouldn’t say no to having an actual Caster along, even if he was a little suspicious. I was willing to reserve judgment on his skills and utility until I’d had a chance to see him in action, but even if he was mediocre, he’d received a full education at the Mage’s Association. As a magus, that already put him ahead of me and Mash.

“Were you planning to just sit here in Rome the entire time?” Aífe mocked. “Until the entirety of Rome fell down around your ears?”

“Don’t mistake prudence for cowardice,” El-Melloi II bit out. “I’m a Caster. Worse than that, I have almost no direct combat ability. Taking to the frontlines on my own would be tantamount to suicide and achieve nothing.”

“But as part of a group...” I began suggestively.

“We could always use more allies,” Ritsuka said earnestly.

“And Onii-chan has more than enough cheesecake to look at here,” Rika added, gesturing to Boudica, Aífe, and Nero. “I definitely wouldn’t say no to having more eye candy around.”

“I don’t know about eye candy, but I’d welcome another ally,” said Arash.

Emiya shrugged. “And you could eat more of my food, I guess. Apparently, I’m a pretty good cook.”

El-Melloi II’s eye twitched.

“Damn it, stop trying to be welcoming and persuasive,” he said, frustrated. “I’ve already decided to go with you!”