

Chapter LVI: Heart of the Mountain

Although her joke was in terrible taste, it turned out that Rika might have been a bit more on the nose than the rest of us living humans would have liked.

The entrance to the lava tube was small and cramped, so small that we had to go single-file and duck down, hunched over, in order to get inside, almost as though it had been made to fit someone about half the size and height of a normal person instead of us regular-sized people. We didn't quite have to squeeze in, it wasn't *that* snug, but we couldn't just casually stroll through either.

If Rika noticed that the entrance was perfectly sized for a *Hobbit*, she wisely decided to keep her mouth shut. For once.

Naturally, of course, none of this was a concern for the Servants, who could simply take spirit form and pass on through without a worry at all.

"It gets wider up ahead!" Arash called from down the tunnel.

It was more for the twins' benefit than mine. There was a point where the magical energy started to get too dense and the heat too intense for my bugs to make the trip, but I could at least get a good enough picture of the next hundred yards to already know that it wasn't going to be this cramped the whole way down.

"I'm more interested in whether or not it gets *cooler* up ahead," Rika muttered crossly.

"Sorry to disappoint," I told her.

She groaned. "Senpai!"

"We're going into a volcano, Rika," her brother chided, impatient. "What did you expect? Built-in air conditioning?"

"No, but I wasn't expecting it to be this hot, either." She wiped some of the sweat from her brow on the back of her sleeve, and then her expression lit up. "Hey, Emiya —"

Emiya, who had gone to spirit form so he could keep up instead of having to trail behind us, must have cut her off before she could even ask, because she immediately scowled.

"What do you mean, no? You don't even know what I was going to — well, it's not like it's the craziest thing you've made with that magic of yours! No, I'm not being unreasonable — what do you mean, I remind you of a troublesome person? Hey!"

"I'm getting the sense that this is a very one-sided conversation," Ritsuka said dryly.

A startled laugh burst out of Mash's mouth, and she slapped a hand over her lips to muffle the sound as she ducked her head. It took me an extra second to get the joke — one-sided, because the only part of it we could hear was Rika's, but also because Emiya seemed to be shutting down her suggestions before she could even finish making them.

I had to stifle a groan. Really, Ritsuka? Of all the ways to prove he was Rika's twin brother, making bad puns was the one he had to go with.

“What is this ‘air conditioning’ you speak of?” Nero asked from the back.

“It’s a device that cools the air in a house or a building during days when it’s hot out,” Ritsuka explained succinctly. “It’s usually paired with another machine that does the opposite when it’s cold out.”

“I see,” Nero said pensively. “Mm-mm, the future sure is full of many useful conveniences, isn’t it?”

“If air conditioning wows you, you’d flip out over a vending machine,” I told her wryly.

Nero cocked her head to one side. “Vending machine?”

I didn’t answer, so Nero turned to her new “best buddy” and asked the same question, and Rika answering that led them down a whole new rabbit hole of everyday modern conveniences and how they affected our lives. Perhaps ironically, their conversation also conveniently made them forget that it was only getting hotter the deeper into the mountain we went.

Of course, it wasn’t simply that the air was getting hotter, it was also that the flow of mana was getting denser, denser and purer than we modern humans were supposed to be used to, and the discomfort of that was being felt as extra heat. The twins probably couldn’t tell the difference, but even our new Caster friend was starting to sweat from the strain of handling it.

My brow furrowed, and I had to maneuver uncomfortably to reach for my bag and pull out one of my ravens. Huginn unfolded and took off, flying awkwardly in the mostly still air, and landed about fifty feet ahead of us. El-Melloi II, who was leading the way with some kind of flashlight spell that he was using in place of our communicators, looked back at me, brow furrowing.

“Senpai?” Ritsuka asked me. “Is something wrong?”

“For now, nothing,” I told him. “We’re just getting deep enough that the bugs are starting to thin out.”

It wasn’t strictly a lie, but I didn’t want to worry them about the mana concern just yet. Da Vinci hadn’t mentioned it — was that because she knew it wouldn’t be an issue, or had she just overlooked that particular detail?

Ritsuka accepted that answer, but the look on her face told me that Mash didn’t, even though she didn’t call me out on it. She was the only other one of us Masters with any training in magecraft, so it only made sense that she had picked up on it, too.

I guess she trusted me enough to believe I knew what I was doing.

Up ahead, El-Melloi II came out into the wider section of the tunnel, and he slowed down to wait for me, a solemn expression on his face.

“That’s a fairly high quality puppet,” he murmured, low enough that the twins couldn’t hear. “Only a couple magi in the whole world could make something like it. You sure you want to use it as your canary?”

“It’s replaceable,” I whispered back. “We’re not.”

He gave a short incline of his head, conceding the point, and kept going.

A small part of me did worry about losing Huginn in this tunnel. He might be replaceable, but not so replaceable that I could just pop on down to the supermarket and pick up a new one. Even if he wasn't destroyed completely, it might take a long time for Da Vinci to make repairs, what with our limited resources and her stretched so thin.

But Huginn's capacity was the closest to human that we had available. Better to lose him and find out that the mana was too dense and pure for us than for one of us Masters to spontaneously combust and burst at the seams.

So yes. Huginn got to be our canary. If our luck held, then there would be nothing to worry about and I was just being overly cautious. If it didn't, then Huginn would literally save our lives at the cost of his own.

The deeper we got into the tunnel, the hotter it got, and the more intense the friction of Etna's magical energy pushing against my magic circuits got. We had all long passed breaking out into sweat a while ago, but it was getting to the point that I was sure my shirt was going to be soaked through at the chest and pits before long. Rika and Ritsuka gamely kept on, but they were feeling the discomfort too and tried to alleviate it however they could — tugging at their collars, fanning themselves with their hands, whatever could provide even a modicum of relief.

It was one of the few times I was regretting my insistence on wearing my hair so long.

“*God*, it's hot,” Rika complained. “You sure we need to go all the way down, Senpai? Couldn't we set Queen Booty up here?”

“It's the difference between hours and days, Rika,” I answered her, and if I was a little more impatient than usual because of the heat, well, I didn't have it in me to feel bad about that just then.

I understood her problem, I really did, but having to deal with it for a couple of hours was better than having to spend days at Etna, even if the rest of us camped out at the base of the mountain or something while Boudica sat inside. It was just better to stick it out and get it over with as quick as we could.

Plus, we needed to get those higher resolution scans. We couldn't do that until we were sitting right on top of the nexus.

“We might need to get the Masters out as soon as everything is set up,” Arash said worriedly, his brow furrowing. “You guys are going to be losing a lot of water if you have to sit down there the whole time Boudica is healing.”

And the instant he said it, I knew he was right. With how much we were sweating just getting down there, dehydration was going to be a major concern before long, and if we tried to stay down there with Boudica the entire time, we'd be putting our health at serious risk. Even getting there and going back was probably going to be dangerous.

“We'll see if Da Vinci can send us some bottled water to tide us over,” I agreed. “We'll stay down in the cavern long enough to get the scans, get Boudica settled in, and then we'll go back out. Spartacus can stay behind to guard her.”

Neither Spartacus nor Boudica said anything, on account of the fact they were both still in spirit form, but the fact that they didn't materialize to speak out against the plan told me enough about whether or not they agreed with it.

"The less time we have to spend in this stupid tunnel, the better," Rika muttered.

The lava tube continued on for what felt like miles, and it may in fact have actually been that long. It was hard to tell time and distance down here, and with my swarm too thin to give me a good feel for my surroundings, even I was having trouble judging how deep into the mountain we'd gone or how long the tube really was. We had long since left any semblance of daylight behind, so for all any of us knew, we'd been walking for hours.

The one thing I was sure about was that the tube gently sloped downwards. It wasn't steep enough for us to feel it as we walked, but I'd noticed it much earlier, back when I still had a larger selection of bugs around me in the dirt. It wasn't as much of a concern as the slowly thickening magical energy all around us, but privately, I worried about that, too. If there was a sudden dropoff or if the slope got too steep too suddenly, it could spell trouble for us getting to and from the cavern we needed to reach.

What felt like hours later, Huginn finally fluttered out of the tunnel and into a much larger, much more expansive space. In the dark, he couldn't see far enough to tell for sure, but as I had him hop about, checking for the walls, it was wide enough and tall enough that he couldn't find them.

"I think we've found the cavern," I told the group. When I lifted my hand to wipe some sweat from my forehead, my fingers came back soaked.

Rika let out a relieved groan. "Thank god."

"Mm-mm," Nero agreed. "I have to admit, I, too, am quite ready for this whole adventure to be over. This journey to the heart of Mount Etna was not nearly as thrilling as I had hoped it would be."

If you were seriously expecting to find Hephaestus' forge, then you really need to work on your expectations, I didn't say. If it even still existed under this mountain, then it would be much, much deeper, down below us, probably situated in the middle of a lake of magma. As much as Rika's pop culture references were annoying, my mental image was basically just Mount Doom.

Arash shimmered back into existence next to El-Melloi II, who grunted and stumbled as he tried to make room. He scowled at the side of Arash's head, but Arash seemed not to notice.

"I did a quick survey of the cavern," he reported. "It's big. Really big. It was probably a magma chamber at some point that cooled off and hardened after a previous eruption."

"The ceiling and everything is structurally sound, then? No signs of a cave in?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"I'm not an expert on volcanoes, so I can't give you an answer with any certainty, but as far as I can tell, it's safe." He smiled. "What I *can* say for sure is this is definitely the place we need to be. If you think the magical energy you've been feeling up until now was something, wait until you get deeper in. It's not *denser*, exactly, but... Well, you'll see what I mean in a minute."

“Oh, *that* would be a great way to spice up this whole thing,” Rika grouched. “Have our only way out collapse behind us. What fun.”

“Is that something we have to be concerned about?” Ritsuka asked worriedly.

“Not likely, no,” El-Melloi II grunted. “It’s not like in the movies. If we had to worry about cave-ins, we would have seen the signs of instability a lot sooner than this.” He glanced back at us. “All the same, I wouldn’t go flinging around Noble Phantasms too carelessly. ‘Stable’ doesn’t mean you can do whatever you like to it.”

It was a good thing King Arthur wasn’t here, guarding the ley lines. She could have brought the whole place down on our heads — would have in Fuyuki, if the cavern under Mount Enzo wasn’t huge enough to build a castle in. If I actually believed in them, I might have thanked my lucky stars that level of power wasn’t common, or else the United Empire could have taken us all out in one fell swoop.

“I think the only one here with something destructive enough to worry about is Emiya.”

Ritsuka and Mash both immediately looked at Rika.

“What?” she demanded defensively. “Why are you two looking at me like that? It’s not like I’m going to use a Command Spell and tell him to start throwing around the most destructive stuff he can, just for kicks!”

“No reason,” the two of them said together.

“Hey, you two, I can hear the insincerity in your voices, you know,” Rika told them grumpily. “I’m not all fun and games. I can be serious when I have to be!”

“I wonder about that,” Ritsuka said mildly, teasing her.

“H-hey! Onii-chan! I can totally be serious! I really can!”

“If the lot of you are done fooling around,” El-Melloi II said sternly, “we’re here.”

He lifted his hand up and held his light aloft, but the cavern was so big and the ceiling so far above us that even that much light didn’t show us much of anything. High above our heads, faint glints of undulating rock glistened, a vague hint of the shape of this massive cave formation. When I lifted my wrist up to cast my own flashlight — with the twins following suit shortly thereafter — even those weren’t strong enough to reach it.

I swung my communicator around, trying to get a better grasp on the shape and size of this cavern, because the magical energy had gotten so thick that there weren’t any bugs around for my powers to latch onto, but the beam of my flashlight fell far too short to reach the furthest sides.

How deep into the mountain had we gone? For there to be a cavern this big and this stable, we had to be at least a mile beneath the surface.

Aífe flickered into existence off to the side, startling all of us so bad that the twins nearly jumped out of their skins as they squeaked. She pretended not to notice, but I was sure I saw a quick smile pull

at her mouth, there and gone again that I was almost willing to believe it was just my mind playing tricks on me in the sweltering heat.

“Cripes!” Rika gasped, clutching her chest. “Could everyone stop *doing* that?”

“Give me a moment, here,” said Aífe, “let me see if I can’t give us a better idea of what we’re looking at.” She glanced around the darkness. “Or not looking at, as the case is.”

“Har-har,” Rika said sarcastically.

“I wasn’t trying to be funny.”

Aífe turned away from the group and back towards the wall, and with her hand straightened out and fingers pressed together, she jabbed into the rock like it was soft clay and ripped out a hunk about the size of her fist. Casually, like it was something she did every day.

Guess that was what having a high level Strength stat did for you. It reminded me a little of Alexandria, how she would and could carelessly rip traffic signs out of the sidewalk or heft a car over her head to use as a bludgeon against the likes of Leviathan or Behemoth.

Completely unaware of that, Aífe waved her free hand and dematerialized her glove, then started carefully carving runes onto the surface of that hunk of rock, squinting against the dim light. I turned my flashlight her way and shined it over her shoulder so that she could see what she was doing better.

She glanced briefly in my direction, little more than a flick of her eyes and the slightest turn of her head. “Thanks.”

“Mm.”

I recognized some of the ones she was using from my lessons with her, but the way she was layering them and combining them was new and strange and unfamiliar. Using the analogy of trying to read a language I hadn’t fully learned might have been getting tired, but I still didn’t have a better one, so the only thing I could compare it to was watching someone write out a paragraph and only being able to pick out a word or two every sentence.

When she was done, she spent a second or two turning the hunk over in her palm, checking her work, and then she waved her hand again and her glove came back. She turned back around and sidestepped me to make her way around the group and towards the front, and she stepped out ahead into the dark, our lights against her back.

Then, she wound her arm back and threw that hunk towards the ceiling. I tried to track it with my eyes, but it was too small and the cavern was too dark, and I lost track of it.

She muttered an incantation, and up towards the ceiling, the hunk lit up like a lightbulb and exploded into hundreds of tiny pieces that lit up on their own, bright and brilliant, and for a moment, I felt like I was looking up at the starlit sky on a clear night.

But her plan became clear quickly, because the shining rubble cast enough light to see the surface of the ceiling, and my head swung back and forth as I tried to see as much as I possibly could for that brief moment that I could. My mind raced.

Not as big as Fuyuki's cavern, but it wasn't as big of a difference as I was expecting. Maybe three-quarters the size? It was hard to make an accurate estimate when there was so little light to see by.

For it to be that big and still stable, we must have been even deeper than my last estimate. A mile? More like two or three.

"Whoa," Rika said quietly. "This place is *huge!*" She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted into the empty cavern, "ECHO!"

"ECHO!" the cavern whispered back at her.

"Incredible," Nero breathed. "Perhaps this was Vulcan's forge after all! Mm-mm!"

"If it was, I don't think there's anything here anymore," Ritsuka said.

"It didn't look like it, Senpai," Mash agreed.

"No, it didn't," Aífe said up ahead, troubled. "In fact, it was completely empty."

"Something wrong?" Arash asked her before I could.

When she turned back towards us, she was frowning. "This much power in one place, and yet not a single magical beast has laid claim to it. Even with the Age of Gods over, this early into the Age of Man, I would have expected some sort of ancient monster making itself at home here. A chimera, perhaps, or even a Hydra. Something that has refused to acknowledge that its time is over."

"A last redoubt against the ending of an era," El-Melloi II mumbled.

"Exactly." Aífe folded her arms across her chest. "And yet, not only is there nothing here, but we have yet to so much as stumble upon a lowly woodland sprite." Her frown deepened. "It will still be another thousand years before the last vestiges of fantasy have finally dwindled down to near extinction, and in spite of that, not even a single demon boar has accosted us across the breadth of the Empire."

Boudica shimmered into existence. "I haven't seen anything like that either, not once during my campaign throughout Gaul."

"The cages are open," Spartacus said solemnly as he appeared too. "The cages are empty. And yet, my sword is still sheathed."

"He says —"

"I know what he meant," Aífe cut across her. She clicked her tongue and turned back to us.

"Perhaps this scan of yours will show us something about why all of the magical beasts are missing. Let's get the circle set up."

Mash and the twins shared a look, and then looked towards me.

"Consider this the next step in your magecraft education," I told them. "You two get to set up the magic circle by yourselves, with only Mash helping you."

Ritsuka's mouth twisted and Rika groaned. "Senpai!" she whined.

“You’ve done it before,” I reminded her. “The only way to master it is if you keep doing it over and over.”

Take it from someone who was learning Primordial Runes by having colonies of ants march into the shapes. Repetition was one of the most surefire methods of learning.

In spite of her grumbling, Rika joined her brother as they went to the head of the group — “Let me help, Senpai,” said Mash as she hurried to keep up with them — and started looking for a clear enough spot to start setting up.

“Not there,” I told them. “Further on. We need to get as close to the center of the cavern as we can, where the ley line will be closest to the surface.”

The both of them shot me a frustrated look, then stood back up and started walking deeper in. The rest of our group fell into step behind them, letting them lead the way to where we needed to set up.

“So this is your teaching style, is it?” El-Melloi II asked me, amused.

“I’m not a teacher,” I said, which got me a strange look from Aífe. “But I have to get them up to speed as quickly as I can, because we aren’t exactly swimming in options for who can tutor them.”

El-Melloi II’s eyes narrowed on me. “No, I guess you aren’t.”

I wasn’t quite sure what he meant by that. El-Melloi II was a strange character. Not exactly mercurial, not exactly short-tempered. Abrasive was probably a good word for it.

Not snooty, though. He said the El-Melloi name was a title he was holding onto until the heir came of age, didn’t he? And he’d been at the Clock Tower as a student at some point. But he didn’t behave like one of those Lords that Marie had told me about, so what exactly was his story and how had he wound up a regent for one of the bigwig families’ heirs?

He probably wouldn’t tell me if I asked, would he?

About fifty meters from the entrance to the cavern, I told the twins, “Here should do.”

“Thank God,” Rika groaned. “Why is it so damn hot down here? It’s like a sauna!”

“It’s because the magical energy down here is denser and purer than the two of you are used to,” El-Melloi II explained. “We’re much closer to the Age of Gods in this era than the modern era. Your magic circuits aren’t built for handling mana of this purity. When you combine that with the sheer amount of mana that builds up in a place like this, the friction caused when it comes into contact with your magic circuits makes your bodies heat up.”

The twins looked back at him, surprised. He worked his jaw, like he was chewing on an imaginary cigar again. “You’re lucky that the Age of Gods faded faster on the continent than it did in Britain and other island nations,” he told them. “Otherwise, you’d need a specialized mystic code to filter the mana in the air just to keep yourselves from exploding.”

“Exploding?” If Rika’s face wasn’t already washed out by the light of the flashlight, she would have been pale as a ghost. “Wait, you mean, like, we’d spontaneously combust?”

“Pretty much,” he confirmed.

“You don’t need to worry about that in this Singularity,” I reassured them, and wow, the fact that I was the one calming things down really was a novel experience. “If it was a problem, Da Vinci would have taken care of it before we even Rayshifted. You might be a little less comfortable here, but that’s all.”

They didn’t look exactly comforted by this, but it put them at ease enough to go back to making the magic circle we needed.

“Holy cow,” Ritsuka muttered, not nearly quiet enough to escape notice. “I feel like my life just flashed before my eyes.”

“I know, right?” Rika whispered back.

El-Melloi II grunted. “These two really are novices,” he said. “Why would Chaldea send them out to handle something this serious?”

“Necessity more than anything,” I said without giving much away at all. “In an ideal world, those two would be sitting back and watching as Team A tackled this whole thing on their own.”

“Oh?” He looked at me. “And what happened that necessitated putting these two on the frontlines?”

I smiled grimly. “We don’t live in an ideal world.”

He snorted. “No,” he said, “I guess we really don’t, do we?”

“They’re trying,” Boudica said quietly. “That’s what matters, isn’t it?”

“And our job as Servants is to make sure they don’t fail,” Emiya agreed as he materialized, arms crossed. He watched the twins like a hawk, unblinking. He did have some skill in magecraft himself, didn’t he? He hadn’t ever really said how much.

“Well said,” Aífe agreed.

Emiya slid a brief glance her way. “You’ll forgive me for being skeptical of that.”

“There’s a difference between letting your Master fail and giving them space to prove themselves to you,” was her reply.

“I wonder if you really understand the difference.”

Aífe arched an eyebrow. “Do you?”

Emiya scowled and went back to watching the twins. Had something happened between those two, or was this lingering from the fight against Tiberius several days back?

Or maybe I was overthinking it and these two just couldn’t stand each other. Incompatible personalities. It wasn’t like that was a new or unusual problem to have, after all. I just wasn’t used to dealing with it in a way that didn’t involve at least the threat of gratuitous physical violence, and neither of these two would be impressed by that.

Plus, you know, it would be kind of counterproductive. For a number of reasons, not the least of which being that I was trying to be a better person than that. I guess old habits just died hard.

It took a while for the twins to set up the magic circle, even with Mash there to help them out, and all I was left there to do was stand and sweat. Time, as it liked to do when you were miserable, stretched out until it felt like an hour had passed, and in the darkness, without even a watch to count the minutes, it was harder to prove to myself that it hadn't been anywhere near that long.

Finally, however, the twins stumbled to their feet from the crouched position they'd been in on the floor. "Done!" Rika announced, somewhere between proud and relieved. "Finally!"

"Magic circle complete, Miss Taylor," Mash reported dutifully.

I stepped over towards them, but it was El-Melloi II who shined his spell down on their work, looked it over with a critical eye, and with a grunt, said, "Looks fine to me. A little shoddy, but functional."

"Gee, thanks, Hot Pops," Rika drawled dryly.

El-Melloi II scowled. "She's going to keep doing that, is she?"

"Unless and until she finds something she likes better?" Emiya smirked. "Buckle in, Lord El-Melloi. You can't stop her."

"The *Second*," El-Melloi II corrected grumpily. He dragged a hand down his face. "Stop leaving out the goddamned *Second*. Ugh. I *know* you're doing it on purpose."

"Get your shield in place, Mash," I ordered her.

"Right!"

As the twins stepped back, Mash materialized that massive shield, hefted it up, and set it down right in the middle of their work. I walked over to it and turned my communicator on.

Beep-beep!

"Hello!" Da Vinci called cheerily as her face appeared in midair. "Good afternoon, Masters of Chaldea! And the Servants, too!"

"Da Vinci."

"Hey, Da Vinci-chan!" Rika greeted tiredly.

"Fascinating," said Nero. "This is...some sort of long distance communication spell? Mm-mm! Think of how much more efficient my empire would be with magic like this!"

"Proprietary Chaldea technology, I'm afraid," Da Vinci told her politely. "Plus, it would all disappear once that Singularity is resolved anyway."

"Mm." Nero shook her head, disappointed. "So I've been told."

"You know, you guys all look pretty haggard," Da Vinci commented. "I know the trip to the Ley Line Terminal couldn't have been easy, but you look way more wiped out than I was expecting."

"It's hot!" Rika whined. "Really hot! I'm dying over here!"

“Between the actual heat and the friction from the dense, high purity mana, it’s pretty hot down here,” I reported. “Da Vinci, we’re losing too much fluids. We need you to send some bottled water our way.”

“Roger that.” Da Vinci typed away at her keyboard. “I’m filling out the requisition form right now. Let’s see... I think it’s Sylvia’s turn to be the Requisitions Officer? I’ll get her to set things up and we’ll send them to you ASAP.”

She glanced around our group. “What are you going to do about Queen Boudica?”

“She and Spartacus will stay down here until she’s finished healing,” I said. “The rest of us will head back up to the surface as soon as everything else has been taken care of.”

“Not ideal,” she noted, “but it’s better than you Masters suffering heat stroke down there if you tried to stay.”

“Oh great,” Rika grumbled. “*Another* problem we have to worry about.”

“Which is why we’re trying to mitigate it,” Da Vinci replied smoothly. “Looking at your vital signs and tracking back from when you entered that volcanic tube, you should make it back out just fine. A little uncomfortable, but well within human tolerances.”

“A *little* uncomfortable, she says,” Rika muttered mutinously.

“Rika,” her brother scolded her tiredly.

“Oh, it could definitely be a lot worse,” Da Vinci told her wryly. “I won’t call you lucky, but trying to take one of the lava tubes higher up the mountain might have put you in, shall we say, hot water.”

El-Melloi II groaned. “*This* is Leonardo da Vinci?”

“Hello, hello?” Da Vinci turned to him. “And who might you be, Mister Caster? You’ve been given a provisional name of El-Melloi on your Saint Graph registry, but I think I would have heard if someone from *that* family managed to make it to the Throne of Heroes. The scuttlebutt last I heard was that the El-Melloi clan was in decline.”

“The Second,” El-Melloi II grumbled. “Why does everyone keep forgetting that thrice-damned *Second*?”

“He’s a Pseudo-Servant,” I answered for him.

Da Vinci’s eyebrows rose, and she regarded him with renewed interest. “A Pseudo-Servant? My, that *is* an unusual case, isn’t it? Technically, that’s the ideal Marisbury was striving towards with his Demi-Servant program, but we’ve never actually encountered one before. It’s mostly been theoretical.”

“I’m honored to be your first,” El-Melloi II retorted sarcastically.

“So if you’re still going by El-Melloi II...” Da Vinci hummed. “That means that the main personality in charge is the host, isn’t it? Even curiouser. Something like that is a rarity on top of a rarity.”

“If you’re looking for a complete explanation, I can’t give you one.” El-Melloi II clicked his tongue. “I had a total of one conversation with the lazy asshole riding shotgun in my head, and the only impression I came away with was that his perspective was too inhuman to be compatible with a nation of men.”

“Now you’re just teasing me,” said Da Vinci. “I’m guessing the fact you’re dancing around it so much means you don’t have any intention of revealing his true name?”

And against all expectations, El-Melloi II grinned. “Not on the first date.”

Da Vinci burst out into laughter, even as I turned to him incredulously. Off to the side, Rika cackled.

“I didn’t know you had it in you, Hot Pops!”

Neither did I. So far, he’d been dour and depressing with a relatively short fuse. And yet he’d just told a joke — worse, I think he just flirted with *Da Vinci*, of all people.

“Well, we can table that discussion for now,” Da Vinci said once she’d calmed down. “At the moment, our primary concerns are getting Boudica set up, and before that, the scan using the boost from Etna’s ley lines, yes?”

“Right.” I nodded. Thank god, familiar ground. “Is there anything we need to do on our end?”

Da Vinci waved me off, turning from the camera to type something out at her terminal. “No, no. This is something I can handle entirely from here in Chaldea, you don’t need to do anything else. I only need you to keep this line of communication open to stabilize our synchronization, and...”

With a flourish, she jabbed her finger down on one final key. “There! Now we just have to wait a minute or two for the program to run and the scan to complete.”

She turned back to the camera. “So! Did you enjoy your baths last night? They were quite exquisite, yes?”

“Oh man, yeah,” said Rika. “We really needed that. In fact, I’m looking forward to taking another one when we get back to Rome.”

“If we go back to Rome,” I cut in.

Rika turned to me with a dead-eyed stare. “I don’t like that word,” she said flatly. “If I really don’t like that word, Senpai. If. If is bad.”

“It depends upon the results of this scan,” I told her. “If what we find out is time-sensitive, then we won’t be able to go back to Rome and we might need to attack immediately.”

Rika continued to glare at me with that dead-eyed look.

Maybe this wasn’t the hill to die on. No matter what I said, there was very little chance we’d find something that was both close enough and too time-sensitive to ignore. One or the other, yes, but probably not both at once, which meant rushing to chase whatever this hypothetical thing might be down was moot to begin with.

Fine. I knew enough to know which battles were worth fighting and which ones were pointless.

“But as long as there’s nothing so close that we can’t ignore it, then I guess we have time to return to Rome today.”

A sigh left Rika’s nose, and she tilted her head back, closing her eyes as though to relax in a cool breeze. “Ahh. I can already feel the heat of the baths. Not even Senpai will stand in my way.”

“The Roman baths are good, but not *that* good,” Da Vinci said, smiling a lopsided smile.

“There are no baths in Chaldea, Da Vinci-chan,” Rika told her flatly.

Da Vinci tilted her head and cocked an eyebrow. “I suppose there aren’t, are there? Well, perhaps that’s an oversight I should see to fixing, yes?”

Rika turned to Da Vinci now. “Don’t give me hope, Da Vinci-chan. Don’t you dare give me hope.”

“Would I lie to you?”

Beep-beep! cut off any reply we might have given — obviously a resounding “YES!” that all of us could have agreed on — and Da Vinci turned back to her console, muttering, “Oh, the results of the scan are in...”

Her eyes darted back and forth at speed as she read through it, and her eyebrows shot towards her hairline as her mouth dropped open.

And then she said the scariest thing I’d ever heard her say.

“What the hell?”