

Chapter LII: The Eternal City

It was about twenty minutes before Arash arrived back from the city. His arms were laden with the basket that Emiya had projected for us earlier, filled with fish brought in by the local fishermen, and dangling from each hand was a sack that contained what my bugs registered as various kinds of fruit.

“I come bearing lunch,” he announced as he walked back towards our group. “Well. Kind of.”

He set the basket down, and Emiya, who’d been setting up the firepit over which he would be cooking our food, spared a moment to come over and peer down into it. He clicked his tongue thoughtfully.

“Red mullet,” he said with a nod, like that meant anything to anyone else here. Except it seemed it did, for all of the Servants, because none of them looked as lost as Rika and Ritsuka did. “Not my specialty, but I can work with that. Get anything else?”

“A couple of different fruits you might want to work with,” Arash replied, hefting his bags, “and if not, for the Masters to eat to keep their strength up.”

“Like?”

“Some dates, a few pomegranates, apples, pears, a couple of lemons —”

“Lemons!” Nero gasped, delighted. “Wherever did you find such a thing in Massilia?”

Arash smiled. “Guess that explains why they were so expensive. They’re rare, around here?”

“Food reserved for the nobility!” Nero confirmed with a nod. “Why, if I had known there were lemons in Massilia, I would have given you the money to buy out their entire stock!”

He shook his head and huffed a short chuckle.

“I did.”

“That should work well with the fish,” Emiya commented. “Hm... Yeah, I think I know what I’m going to do now.”

“You’re the chef,” Arash said. “Anything else you need from here?”

He held out the bag, but it was Boudica who told him, “Leave the dates. They should make for a good side dish to go with the fish.”

Emiya huffed. “I was going to use the apples, but I’ll defer to your judgment this time.”

“Thank you,” she said sweetly.

“Fine by me.” Arash reached into the one bag. “Ritsuka, Rika, catch!”

He tossed each of them an apple, and Rika almost dropped hers as she scrambled to catch it. A third, he held out to me, and I took it in the spirit it was given.

Fresh fruit was a rarity in Chaldea. It came with the territory of living in an isolated facility in the middle of the Antarctic tundra. Hard to get shipments of fresh food when you were situated in such an inhospitable wasteland.

“Thanks, Arash!” Rika said brightly.

“Yeah, thanks,” Ritsuka echoed his sister.

“It was no problem,” he said with a smile. He handed the bag over to Emiya, who took it and got back to work.

Did you really spend all of that money on a few lemons? I asked him as I took my first bite of the apple. It was juicy and delicious and somehow tasted only a little bit like the apples I was used to — the consequences of two thousand years of selective breeding, I had to imagine.

Maybe not all of it, he admitted to me silently.

I hesitated on my second bite, but only for a moment. *If Nero asks where the rest of it went —*

Then I'll tell her the truth, he replied firmly. *I used it to buy some food for a few street urchins.*

I paused again for a short moment, a strange feeling swirling in my gut as I kept eating my apple. Not quite nostalgia, but something related to it. The image his words had conjured was familiar, in an old, worn way, and it made me think of those days after Leviathan had hit Brockton Bay and I became a kind of warlord to keep my slice of the city alive and afloat. I hadn't been as involved in the day to day as some of the others in my territory were, but that didn't distance me from the orphans who hadn't had anyone else.

There was no way I could forget that kind of desperation. The desperation born of needing help and having little to no hope of it ever arriving.

And to at least a few of those desperate people, Arash became that help they needed, if only the once. Sometimes, I forgot that he wasn't just a hero, he was also a good man. It was frankly depressing how infrequently those two categories seemed to overlap.

I won't tell her if she doesn't ask, I told him. I wasn't sure if I would have agreed to lie if he wanted me to, but he didn't ask me to.

He glanced my way and offered a small smile. He didn't have to say the words for me to hear his thanks, and for that moment, I felt closer to him than I ever had before. Not like we were on the same wavelength, because we often were in battle, but like we saw ourselves in each other.

That sounded a little sappier than I meant it to when I gave it a second of thought.

The moment ended, and we both turned away as Rika continued to noisily enjoy her apple, biting into it with gusto. Her brother ate his more sedately and with more poise, but the content look on his face said that he was enjoying it just as much.

The better part of another half an hour passed, but it didn't take anywhere near that long for the smell of the cooking fish to reach our nostrils, punctuated by the zesty scent of the lemon sauce that it was being cooked in. There were even a few extra herbs and spices that underlaid it, although I couldn't name them all just by nose, but I didn't need to in order to get a sense for just how delicious it was all going to be.

Like I said. The instant we lost Emiya — whether that was in battle or after this whole thing was over — we were doomed.

All the while, Rika kept getting more and more anxious. She had enjoyed her apple well enough, but the more the smell of Emiya's cooking wafted over our group, the more impatient she seemed to get to dig into it. She was like a kid on Christmas, desperate to rip into her presents and see what "Santa" had gotten for her.

Which naturally meant, yes, that she just *had* to ask, "is it done, yet?" every two minutes. I felt a pang of empathy with Rika's mother for what she must have put up with for the past seventeen years.

Finally, Emiya's voice called, "Lunch is served!"

Rika zipped over towards him so fast, I wouldn't have blamed anyone for asking if she had teleported. Nero was much more sedate, but she still walked faster than normal as she made her way over. Ritsuka and I were the only ones who went at a reasonable pace, although even he and I weren't so immune to Emiya's cooking that we didn't put on a little extra speed.

For good reason, I found out a few minutes later as I sat at the table Emiya had projected for us (of course). The fish was flaky and fell apart like all well-prepared fish was supposed to, and it had been cooked in a salty brine that was offset by the bitter lemon sauce and the sweetness of the dates that had been paired with it, and it all combined with the fresh herbs and spices that formed a smooth undercurrent to the other flavors' sharpness.

Emiya was spoiling us.

"Are you certain he can't stay?" Nero asked mid-meal. She'd picked up how to use a fork with frankly astounding speed. "Emiya, I would reward you with whatever you like! Riches, women, land — for her personal chef, your emperor is most generous indeed! Mm-hm!"

"Very generous indeed!" Arash commented with a grin.

"Sorry," Emiya said wryly, smiling. "As tempting as the offers are, I'm afraid my current contract is too important for me to cancel, even *if* I could stay on as your chef in Rome."

"He can't," I added shortly, then went back to my food.

Nero stopped eating for a moment, considering Emiya with a shrewd look and narrowed eyes, and then, she nodded, as though she'd made up her mind. "Men, then? I assure you, I'm willing to cater to whatever tastes you have!"

Emiya sputtered, trying to muster a denial, and Rika snorted as she slapped a hand over her mouth to keep from accidentally spitting out her food while Ritsuka almost choked on his own. I couldn't stop myself from rolling my eyes, because that sort of joke was so...*sophomoric*.

"Oh?" said Aífe, grinning wickedly as she joined in on the fun. "Is that how you're so familiar with the Hound's spear then, Emiya? Did he...*penetrate* you with it, at some point?"

"Th-that's not how it happened at all!" Emiya blurted out desperately. "I-I mean, it is, and he did, but not that way!"

"Oh my," said Boudica, a faint blush rising on her cheeks.

"And of course, there was thrusting involved," Aífe added slyly. "I'm sure he was quite vigorous. It's the Hound, after all."

"Stop making it worse!"

"O-oh my god, Emiya," Rika rasped, nearly bent double over her food. "Everything makes so much sense now!"

"No, it doesn't!" he snapped back at her. "Stop making stuff up in your head! This doesn't make anything make more sense at all!"

"It explains quite a bit to me," Aífe said smugly.

"Like why he's such a good cook!" wheezed Rika.

"Th-there's nothing wrong with it," Boudica said diplomatically. "Many great men throughout history have preferred the company of other men."

"Love is unbound by the mortal shell," said Spartacus. "Love is the glory of the distant stars! My love is a sign of my struggle! Your love is a sign of your rebellious spirit!"

"Spartacus agrees," Boudica translated.

"Cúchulainn was trying to kill me!" Emiya protested. "That's all that happened!"

"He and Ferdiad fought to the death," Aífe countered simply. "That didn't stop them from being familiar with each other during their training days."

Emiya opened his mouth.

"I think we've tormented him enough," I cut in calmly.

"Ease up on him a little, yeah?" Arash agreed.

The laughter and joking petered off almost immediately. Nero, who had watched the entire proceedings with confusion, huffed. “Torment him? I was making a legitimate offer! Mm-mm!”

Emiya sighed, and through gritted teeth, he told her, “I’m not interested.”

She hummed. “You are the honorable sort, then.” She nodded. “I can respect that! Loyalty is the most attractive trait in a man!”

Emiya’s face flushed.

“Thanks, but I’m not interested in that, either,” he said. “No matter how much you look like Saber.”

Everything stopped, except for Nero, who just looked confused again. “Saber?”

The rest of us stared at him, trying to digest what he’d just implied. Even I was trying to wrap my head around how that one worked. Residual memories from his alternate self? I didn’t have a better explanation that made any more sense than that. Had Emiya Alter stuck with that corrupted King Arthur out of genuine affection?

But...when and how had Emiya met King Arthur? Was it something that happened before Fuyuki’s Grail War went sideways, or had he somehow known her from somewhere else? None of it made any sense.

“Emiya, you...” Mash said quietly. “Could it be...you were in love with King Arthur?”

A pained look ripped across his face, but he didn’t answer. That alone was its own kind of answer, though, and I honestly wasn’t sure what to do with it.

“That...actually *would* explain a lot,” Ritsuka agreed.

“Like why his evil self was working for her evil self,” said Rika.

Emiya spun away from the group and the question, and over his shoulder, he tossed out an explanation: “I’m going to go clean up, so we can leave as soon as we’re ready.”

He walked away to do just that, deliberately keeping his back to us, as though to say that he wouldn’t even acknowledge any other discussion on the matter.

“I don’t understand,” Nero complained into the silence he left behind. “Who is Saber, and what does she have to do with this King Arthur fellow?”

The twins and Mash exchanged looks, and then when they all turned to me, I told them, “Go ahead.”

There wasn’t really a reason to hold it back. Nero wouldn’t remember any of it after we left, and Fuyuki had already been resolved as a Singularity, so there wasn’t any intelligence that could really be gained from what little they could tell Nero that would come back to bite us later.

“The first Singularity we had to correct took place in a city called Fuyuki,” Mash began to explain, “in the year 2004. The events gone awry were related to something known as a Holy Grail War...”

She only focused on the essential background information, first, with the twins chiming in here and there with their own comments (or in Rika's case, wry jokes). Once she'd established the core situation, she talked about the Servant who had been holding the whole thing in place, the Saber class Servant of King Arthur, and how King Arthur had actually been a woman disguising herself as a man.

And then she went on to explain about the version of Emiya we had fought there, just as twisted and just as corrupted, but unmistakably the same person, the same Heroic Spirit, and how he had been serving as Saber's staunchest ally. Nero nodded along the whole way, absorbing the entire story attentively.

When it was all over, however, she admitted, "I don't think I understand how it all works, but... Emiya, he worked with this King Arthur Saber person, who was also a Servant? And even though it was a different version compared to this Emiya, he might have that Emiya's memories of it?"

"There's no way to be sure," Mash said. "Servants aren't supposed to remember the events of previous summonings. But..."

"How else would he know you and she look almost identical?" I reasoned.

"We do?" Nero asked, nonplussed.

"Down to the hairstyle," Ritsuka confirmed. With a sheepish smile, he added, "It actually threw us all off when we first saw you."

"Most of us," Arash corrected. "Not everyone here was around for the Fuyuki Singularity, after all."

"Hmm," Nero hummed thoughtfully. "That's no good. There can only be one Emperor Nero, and it wouldn't do for anyone to confuse me with someone else. But you said that King Arthur's legend takes place over four-hundred years from now?"

"Around 500 AD, yes," Mash answered.

"Then I came first!" Nero declared. "Therefore, it is her who looks like me and not the other way around!"

That... I mean... Technically...

"Hell yeah!" Rika cheered. "You're way more fun than she was anyway!"

"That is only natural! Mm-hm!" Nero agreed.

Whatever. It didn't really matter and I wasn't ready to start an argument about it, so if she wanted us to pretend like the resemblance went the other way just because she came first chronologically, that didn't really change anything.

"If you're done," I said, "you should probably finish eating. Before your food cools off all the way."

"Ah!" Rika said. "Oh no! I got distracted!"

“That’s karma for you,” Arash said, amused. “The universe is getting you back for being so mean to Emiya.”

“Screw the universe!” Rika retorted.

She dove back into her food with gusto, shoveling it into her mouth like it would freeze over if she let it sit for more than another few seconds. The rest of us turned back to our own meals and continued eating, if more sedately than Rika was, for the most part. Nero was still eating fairly quickly, which I put down to her being unused to having food quite as extravagant as Emiya’s fare.

When she was done, Rika sat back with a sigh. “Where has Emiya been all my life?”

“The Throne of Heroes,” Ritsuka replied matter-of-factly, although his small smile betrayed him.

Rika lanced him with a sour look. “You, shut up. If you had learned to cook anything more complicated than miso soup, we could’ve been eating like kings all throughout high school.”

“You could have learned, too, you know,” Ritsuka pointed out.

“Nopel!” She lifted her nose in the air. “I’ve been too busy overturning traditional gender roles. Learning to cook would be a step backwards!”

“...is the excuse you use for being too lazy.”

“I resent that! It’s not true in the slightest!” She smiled slyly at him. “Besides, Onii-chan, don’t you know? Women absolutely love a man who knows how to cook.”

“She’s not wrong,” I added mildly.

Ritsuka turned to me with raised eyebrows, like he was surprised I’d inserted myself into their little family ribbing. I pretended nothing unusual had happened and finished off the last of my own meal.

“I guess I can understand that,” Mash mused. “Courting rituals are still something I have trouble grasping, but if I was searching for a partner, I think...being able to cook well would be a definite positive.”

“Your future is so strange,” Nero complained. “Men cooking is considered attractive to women? In Rome, it is a sign of femininity! Mm-mm!”

“And yet,” I said slyly, “right now, a woman is emperor, isn’t she?”

Nero opened her mouth to say something, then closed it and was silent for a moment, frowning thoughtfully. What was it Da Vinci had said? Something like, in Roman culture, if Nero behaved in a fashion that was considered masculine, that would explain how she could be a woman and yet history knew her as a man?

By degrees, that made sense to me. I could understand how it might work. But it just seemed kind of whacky and backwards that anyone would go through that much effort just to pretend a woman couldn’t be just as good a ruler as a man.

The sexism of imperial Rome at work, I guess.

Finally, Nero nodded, having apparently come to a conclusion. “Your point is well-considered! Very well, I have decided that it is not so unusual after all!”

Arash shook his head. “That’s all it takes, huh?”

“Yup!” Rika chirped. “So we’re gonna make sure you get as much of Emiya’s food as we can while you still can! It’s a crime that you have to lose it, but we just need him that much more!”

“Weren’t you two just fighting over who would get to keep him not that long ago?” Ritsuka asked her.

“Our differences have already been resolved!” Rika declared. “We’re now best friends forever!”

She held out her fist, and Nero delightedly tapped it with her own. When they pulled back, they mimed an explosion with their fingers.

“Mm-mm!”

“How scary,” Aífe commented dryly. “The two of them, being friends.”

“It’s actually kind of cute, I think,” said Boudica.

“No,” Ritsuka said, as though haunted by the specter of future calamity. “No, scary is the right word.”

On the balance, I think I was tempted to agree with his side of things. I’d thought it before — those two together were a headache just waiting to happen.

“Just think,” Arash said. “What would it be like if they managed to rope Shakespeare into their group, too?”

Ritsuka looked absolutely horrified, which I thought was a perfectly reasonable reaction.

When everyone was done eating, we set about getting the rest of everything put away, and that took enough time for our food to digest well enough that us Masters could handle the ride to the next town on our route to Rome: Genua. Emiya remained quiet the whole while, although whether that was because of the ribbing he’d taken earlier, the accidental slip about Saber and Nero’s resemblance to her, or some combination of the two, that was anyone’s guess.

He struck me as a secretive kind of guy, for all that he could be surprisingly friendly. Guarded might be the better word. Letting out something he’d been trying to keep to himself was probably putting him even more on guard than he was usually.

The groups split up the way they had before, with Nero and me riding in Aífe’s chariot while Mash and the twins joined Boudica’s. Emiya, Spartacus, and Arash all vanished into spirit form, and then we lurched into motion, leaving Massilia behind us as the two chariots thundered down the road at speed.

I didn't think it would ever stop being nauseating to have bugs coming in and out of my range so quickly. It wasn't just the appearing and disappearing, either, because I couldn't remember it bothering me like this whenever I used a teleporter back during my cape days. No, it had to be the motion. The way they all moved around me as they passed in and out of my attention and my control.

I'd told myself that this was just something I was going to have to get used to, but that was proving a lot harder to put into practice than it was to say the words, even to myself. It was beginning to seem like it would never happen and I was just going to have to learn to deal with it, and that was an uncomfortable prospect for a number of reasons.

Losing sucked, even if it was to something as common and ordinary as motion sickness.

The journey to Genua was thankfully shorter than the one to Massilia, although it wasn't by that much in the grand scheme of things. The trip was also a little bumpier than the one from Lyon down to Massilia, but we'd chosen the route we were using specifically because it avoided the more mountainous terrain further to the north, so it was much smoother than it could have otherwise been if we'd taken the other path.

We passed by another town on our way, following along the coastline so closely that most of the horizon to our right side was nothing but ocean — the Mediterranean Sea, to be exact. So close to it, I could feel some of the crabs that were scuttling about on the seabed, but it got too far and too deep too quickly for me to get a good read on the happenings far below the surface.

By the time we slowed down for Genua, it was late into the afternoon, and I think we were all ready for another break, so Boudica and Aífe pulled over to the side of the road and we all dismounted or sat down to breathe.

"I am never taking airplanes for granted again," Ritsuka swore quietly.

"Could you imagine having to walk the whole way?" Rika groaned. "Or worse, use those e-bikes Da Vinci-chan made?"

"Why is that worse?" Mash asked curiously.

"It just is!"

Arash shimmered into existence next to me as I sat down on the edge of the well of Aífe's chariot. I deliberately kept my attention focused away from her horses, because the draw to admire them seemed all the stronger the more I was exposed to them, and it was twiggling my Master-Stranger instincts something fierce.

"How are you holding up?" he asked me quietly.

I grunted. "Fine."

My eyes tracked Nero as she walked over to the twins to join them, commiserating about the trip but completely and utterly unbothered by having to stand in a chariot for so long. I had no idea how

regularly she did this sort of thing, but considering what travel was like in this era, she was almost certainly much more used to it than we were.

Arash chuckled lowly. “The twins might buy that one.”

But I don't, went unsaid.

A breath huffed out of my nostrils. For a moment, I considered the merits of saying nothing, as opposed to admitting to weakness.

“It’s disorienting,” I admitted at length, barely above a mumble. “Having bugs coming in and out of my range so quickly.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “Well, I can’t say it works the same for all extrasensory powers, so I just have to imagine what it’s like, but it definitely doesn’t sound comfortable.”

It wasn’t. It really, really wasn’t. But it wasn’t like it was the worst thing I’d been through, either.

“I’ve been through a lot worse,” I said gruffly.

Like Gold Morning. Having my arm burned off. Having my body shorn in half. Having my brain put through a blender. Any one of those alone would have been horrible enough, but I’d also had the dubious honor of living through a Slaughterhouse Nine attack, fighting Endbringers on the regular, and nearly getting immolated on my first night out.

Yeah, a little disorientation was nothing by comparison.

“Pain is pain, Master,” Arash said with quiet solemnity. “Just because you’ve had more than your fair share doesn’t mean it’s okay that you have to handle more.”

“Doesn’t it?” I asked. “The world needs saving, and it’s down to me.” *Again*, I didn’t say. “There isn’t room for me to go complaining that I get a little nauseous when we move too fast.”

Arash rolled his shoulders and sighed. “Well, it’s a little cheesy to put it this way,” he admitted, “but, Master, it’s not *just* you, is it?”

He looked over his shoulder. I didn’t need to follow his gaze to know he was looking at the twins.

“That’s different,” I said because it felt like I had to.

“Is it?” he retorted. “You might be their leader, but they *are* your team, aren’t they? And we’re here, too, Emiya and I, Siegfried, Bradamante, Aífe, and Shakespeare.”

“And that means that it’s my job to *lead*,” I told him. “They need me to show them the way forward, to be *invincible*. So I’ll be invincible.”

Like things had been back in the Undersiders days: rep was *everything*. As long as everyone believed you were on top, you stayed on top. The twins viewed me as older, wiser, stronger, so to keep up their morale and to give them hope, I had to live up to that image.

Admittedly, I was still working on the tenderness part of that. Giving comfort wasn't exactly my strong suit, and it wasn't something I was all that practiced in.

"That's no way to live," Arash said sadly. "Taylor. You're human, too, you know."

"Parahuman, actually," I said with a mirthless smile. "It means I've got a little something *extra*."

And you and I... We've been working together a long time, haven't we, Passenger?

There was no response. Like always, my passenger remained quiescent, silent, without any sign at all that it had heard me. Not even a nudge from a single bug to acknowledge me.

Paradoxically, Arash smiled and shook his head. "You really are something else," he said ruefully. "You remind me of some of the soldiers I used to know, back in the day. I think you would have been right at home among them."

I said nothing. I wasn't sure it was supposed to be a compliment.

"So I'm going to make you the same promise I made them," he went on. "Master. I know we've already forged our contract, but as one warrior to another, not as Master and Servant, I'll stay by your side and support you to the end." He tapped one hand to his chestplate. "Until this body of mine gives out, I'll be your ally."

Until your body gives out? I thought. Arash, wasn't that the same as promising, 'until I use my Noble Phantasm?'

But I understood the meaning. A self-sacrificial Noble Phantasm like his, it wasn't one that could be used casually. He understood, better than most Servants did, I thought, the weight behind unleashing something so powerful and destructive. It meant he had to put his life on the line for something he believed in so wholly and utterly that he didn't care if it killed him.

Maybe, I thought, here was someone who would understand what I did on Gold Morning. Who would look at what I'd done to myself for the sake of victory and nod.

What a thing that would be.

I didn't know what else to say to that than, "Thanks, Arash."

Even if it felt wholly inadequate.

He smiled. "I think I'm really starting to understand why it was I was the one you summoned back in Orléans."

Yeah. I think I was, too.

The rest of our break passed as the sun slowly began to sink towards the horizon. There was still plenty of light left in the day, but we were losing it quickly, so as per the plan we'd come up with the day before, we saddled up for the last leg of the journey, the longest and farthest of the whole trip. I'd called the first part from Thiers to Massilia the first third and Massilia to Genua the second third,

but in terms of sheer distance traveled, the journey from Genua to Rome was easily as long as the first two combined.

Once more, Nero and I climbed back into Aife's chariot as Mash and the twins climbed into Boudica's, and after everyone was settled, we set off again. Our destination: Rome.

It was not easier than the first two times. In fact, I would have argued that it was, in many ways, harder, precisely because it was so long. The flurry of bugs coming and going from my control was not magically easier after my talk with Arash, either, and the disadvantage of my powers was that closing my eyes didn't really make it any easier to handle. In some ways, it actually made it worse.

It wasn't made any easier by the new varieties of bugs that started to pour in as we got closer and closer to Rome. The standard temperate climes gave way to something closer to tropical, and that meant a change in some of the fauna, particularly the insect species, and having new and unusual bugs that I hadn't ever seen before thrown into the mix of old, familiar species added a new dimension of nausea to the swirl.

Another day, I would have been delighted to explore new options. After all, there were some incredible insects out there, like the Darwin's Bark Spiders down on Madagascar, or the bullet ant, or any number of strange and unusual creepy crawlies, and it would be downright incredible to find something on the Phantasmal scale, if such a bug actually existed. *Magical* bugs — just thinking about it would have had me thinking up new and exciting strategies to use.

Here and now, the variety just increased my discomfort, sending jolts of new information into my brain as my power helped me grasp their forms and functions with startling speed. Even still, I barely had time to start compartmentalizing each bit before it was gone.

There was nothing to be done about it. It couldn't be helped. Not when the alternative would take us days and days longer.

So I soldiered through. My knees got stiff from standing straight for so long. My thighs and feet ached for the same reason. My stomach kept churning from the sensory overload of bugs appearing and disappearing so rapidly.

But I hung on, because this really didn't top the chilling, jarring feeling of your intestines *literally* sliding out of your body. Nothing was going to beat that, not as long as I lived.

The sun slowly slinked down as we went, and amidst it all, I had the funny realization that none of us had considered bringing sunscreen. I wasn't sure it would matter. Did sunburn count as a deviation that the technicians would correct for? I honestly didn't know. It seemed kind of silly that they wouldn't.

Finally, however, as purple painted the sky and a sliver of orange peeked out on the horizon, a city came into view, and it truly was a city. First, the outskirts resolved themselves, and in the dim light of the twilight, the pale bricks looked almost lavender, the red roofs almost purple. In the distance, the famous Roman aqueducts towered, set against massive buildings that must have been temples or the government offices. The Forum, maybe. Far off, I thought I could see the Colosseum.

“Stop!” Nero shouted imperiously.

Ahead of us, Boudica's chariot pulled to a stop, and Aífe did the same. The instant the chariot had come to a halt, Nero hopped down on her own, striding purposefully down the road. She did not, as I expected, go over to the twins, Rika in particular. Instead, she kept going until she was out in front of the entire group, and then she turned back to face us with the broadest of smiles, her hands on her hips.

"Mm-mm!" she said. "Be honored, for your emperor is here, and she graciously welcomes you!"

She swung an arm out and gestured down the road towards the city itself.

"This is the seat of imperial power in the empire!" she declared. "The birthplace of the republic, the origin from which our greatness sprouted! The divine ancestor looked upon this hill and built this city with his own hands, and we have prospered ever since!"

Pride all but radiated out of her from every pore.

"*This*," she emphasized, "is the Eternal City, the Capital of the World! My friends, I, Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, fifth emperor of this pinnacle of civilization, bid you welcome to Rome!"