

Chapter LIII: Caput Mundi

The sun had set by the time we set into the city of Rome, but the sky still clung to the last vestiges of twilight, even as the moon rose in the east, a faint crescent hung among the clouds. Some people had started lighting lanterns so they could continue about their business, but some navigated entirely through what natural light still remained, and Nero was one of them, because she led us through the streets as though she could have done it blindfolded.

The buildings around us weren't all the best. Some of them looked on the verge of collapse, like they had been left to rot for generations, but that made more sense once my bugs showed me how many families were packed into each one and I realized that the people living there were the poor, the underclass, who probably couldn't afford anything better or more extravagant.

They probably counted their blessings that they weren't homeless.

The deeper into the city we went, the more things started to pick up, in terms of quality. The buildings were even older, like we had stepped back in time — because, actually, we had — but better cared for and more sturdily built. These would be the wealthier peasants, then, the ones who could afford at least some degree of luxury, even if not much of it.

Had I mentioned that the whole place smelled like shit?

Yeah. Rika and Ritsuka didn't seem any more impressed by the smell than I was, judging by the expressions on their faces, and even Mash's brow and nose had wrinkled. Further in, I could see a sewage system in place with sort of rudimentary toilets for the people to use, but out on the outskirts and in these poorer districts, none of the houses featured any such convenience, so people literally did their business in buckets and threw it out onto the streets.

My stomach clenched as any appetite I might have worked up in the past few hours died a swift and inglorious death. The bricks that we were currently walking on likely weren't naturally that shade of brown.

Nero's brags and boasts about the glory of the city and the empire built from it washed over me, unheeded, and even Rika looked like she was having trouble focusing on her new best friend over the deluge of human waste that ran through the streets.

"Oh my god, Onii-chan," Rika whispered to her brother.

"Yeah," he muttered back. "I smell it, too."

"It's like that one time, out in the country —"

"But a hundred times worse. I know."

"The modern toilet wasn't truly invented until the Victorian era," Mash mumbled, almost to herself.

Thankfully, things started to improve once we got to the more affluent sections of the city. The rank smell never truly disappeared, not wholly, but it became less overbearing and more tolerable. It

reminded me more of the composting bathrooms from summer camp or the animals' stalls than the rotting garbage smell of further out, and I could live with that, even if I didn't exactly like it.

The flies, at least, were having a field day. I didn't think I'd ever had a larger collection of them than I did then, and I wasn't sure that was a good thing, no matter how much easier it made it to keep track of the goings-on around me. Some things just weren't worth the trade off — rich, coming from me of all people, but wasn't that part of what I'd been trying to do? Draw better lines for myself?

Some lines were going to be easier and more palatable to draw than the others, it seemed.

Along the way through the city, we entered what was probably meant to be an open air market, because some of my bugs could still pick out the remnants of fruit and other goods in the stalls, but so late in the day, all of the shops had closed up and the shopkeepers gone home for the night. Nero seemed quite disappointed that she didn't get to enjoy any of it.

"It's a shame we arrived back so late, mm-mm," she said ruefully. "Emiya's food is unrivaled in all of Rome, but I should at least have liked to fill my belly with an apple while we waited for him to prepare our dinner."

"A little presumptuous, don't you think?" Emiya chuckled. "Who said I was going to keep cooking for everyone? Maybe Spartacus should take a turn."

"Haha!" Spartacus laughed. "I have tasted the food of the gods! Ambrosia sits upon my tongue! Surely, all other food is now as ash in my mouth, for these hands can only hold a sword!"

"He can't cook for shit," Aífe translated bluntly.

Nero looked back at Emiya, one eyebrow cocked. "Weren't you?"

"I guess someone has to," he allowed. "At least if we want it to be edible."

If he thought he was going to get away with avoiding it, that would only last until Rika started begging. I wasn't sure she was even above threatening the use of a Command Spell, either. Considering exactly how talented Emiya was in the kitchen, I wasn't sure I would even reprimand her if she did. Even Marie would give it more than a moment's thought and probably let it slide.

I didn't want to say something like, "Good food is essential to good morale!" because it sounded like a cliché out of some kind of movie or a campy line from a war comedy, but the thing that a lot of people missed when they said something was cliché was that clichés often had a basis in truth.

Nero nodded. "Then I would have been presuming nothing but fact, wouldn't I? Mm-mm! In that case, there shouldn't be any problems!"

Boudica, whose injured arm had been hastily wrapped up in bandages and hung in a sling across her chest, laughed a little. "That's certainly one way of looking at it, isn't it?"

"You're all lucky I enjoy it so much," Emiya muttered lowly.

Mash inclined her head in as much of a bow as she could while walking. “Thank you for continuing to cook for us, Emiya.”

Emiya grimaced, sighed, and rubbed awkwardly at the back of his neck. “It’s fine. There’s no need to go that far, Mash.”

“He really is a house-husband,” Rika commented with exaggerated surprise.

“That, on the other hand,” Emiya said dryly, “I can do without. If you really want a house-husband, woman up and buy me a ring, first.”

Rika let out a high-pitched squeak, like a mouse that had been stepped on, and her face slowly turned red, starting at the tips of her ears and spreading across her cheeks.

“Wh-what,” she stammered. “B-but I’m too young — that’s not — it doesn’t work like — I’m not ready —”

She went down a list of aborted objections, growing increasingly incoherent, and Ritsuka watched her with fascination, like he was seeing something new and different that he’d never seen before. Finally, Rika turned to him with a simple, plaintive, “Onii-chan!”

“I mean, is he wrong?” Ritsuka asked her mercilessly. “Maybe this whole Master-Servant thing isn’t the same, and I guess Command Spells aren’t really a promise ring, but aren’t you supposed to be more committed before you reap the benefits of marriage?”

Rika let out another distressed whine, looking at her brother with betrayal written across her face.

And Emiya, who hadn’t turned to look since his comment, smirked smugly to himself, having finally gotten one over on her.

Eventually, we entered what had to be the wealthy district, home of the senators and other aristocrats that actually lived in the city, because from my research, I recalled that a number of bigwigs actually lived in expansive estates outside the city. Here, the buildings and houses were much better constructed, in much better repair, and very obviously much more upscale than those cramped apartments where all of the underclass and the poor peasants lived. Up on the hill in the distance, I could see what must have been a temple of some kind, and not far off from there was the famous Colosseum, and everywhere I looked, there were the famous marble columns that Roman architecture favored, jutting up above our heads to carry the roofs over us.

It was when we got to the “obscenely rich” area of town that we started seeing villas. Sprawling complexes that stretched out over enough space to fill an entire city block, filled to the brim with every extravagance that the imperial Rome of the time could provide. Private baths, private gardens, private toilets — private everything, where all luxuries were the exclusive property of and for the exclusive use of the owner.

Not many, I noticed. Although the handful of villas all had many private, exclusive things, only one or two actually had private baths. Right, bathing was supposed to be an important daily ritual in Rome, wasn’t it? We’d passed by a multitude of public bath houses, both big and small, on our way

through the city. I guess communal bathing really did mean communal bathing, and the rich bathed in the same baths as the poor.

The upper class refusing to mingle with the “unwashed masses” must have been an invention of a later culture.

Nero led us to a particular villa, not the largest of them all but definitely one of the largest, where she announced herself to her staff with a loud, boisterous, “Your emperor has returned!”

She was so loud that her voice echoed off of the vaulted ceiling, although that might not have been that much of an accomplishment considering these buildings weren’t exactly designed to be soundproof.

The first to approach was a fair-haired young woman dressed in a simple tunic. She kept her posture humble and deferential. “Emperor,” she murmured as she came closer, “forgive me. We were not aware you would be arriving today.”

“Mm, there is no need to apologize!” Nero insisted. “I myself was not expecting to return to Rome so swiftly!” She gestured towards us. “And I come escorting guests! See to it that the baths are heated and the kitchens prepared, for we are all hungry and exhausted from so long a trip on the road!”

“It will be done, my emperor,” the young woman said, bowing.

“Bath?” Rika breathed with cautious optimism. “Be still my beating heart — did I just hear the most wonderful word ever invented?”

Nero smiled brilliantly. “Of course! And you will find no finer a bath than my own private facilities, for no expense was spared in making them — ah!” She stopped the young woman, who had been leaving. “I had almost forgotten! Take Emiya with you.”

“Emiya?” the young woman said carefully, testing the name on her tongue. She looked over to us, confused.

Emiya sighed. “I’m the only one who doesn’t get to enjoy the baths, huh?”

“Such is the peril of being a house-husband,” Arash quipped.

Emiya looked skyward, like he was praying for patience. “I’m never going to escape that now, am I?”

“Nope!” Rika told him cheerily.

“You’re doomed,” Ritsuka told him flatly.

“You’re so kind, Master,” Emiya said sardonically.

Something like understanding flickered across the young woman’s face, and she regarded him now with a kind of empathy that she couldn’t completely keep out of her expression.

“Emiya is a chef of unparalleled quality,” Nero told her. “He shall be in charge of making our supper. I expect his word to be followed as though it was my own! Mm-mm!”

“Of course, Emperor,” the young woman demurred. To Emiya, she said, “This way, sir, and I shall lead you to the kitchens.”

“You’d think, all things considered, I’d spend more time on the battlefield,” Emiya remarked wryly, but he followed behind her and waved a hand in parting as they left.

“She was cute,” Rika commented after they were gone. “Kinda quiet, though.”

Arash and Boudica shared a look, like they were having a silent argument about which of them should break the news to her. I decided to cut the knot and do it myself.

“She’s a slave, Rika,” I told her bluntly.

Rika turned to me, uncomprehending. “Huh?”

“What?” her brother echoed.

“That girl is a slave,” I repeated. “That’s why she was quiet and deferential. No one wants an unruly slave.”

And while that girl’s life likely wasn’t particularly charmed, her quality of life was almost certainly better than even the best off of the poor. She was a slave of the *emperor’s* house, after all. She ate better, she had access to better facilities, higher quality clothing, better care if she got sick, and just a better life all around. There were probably a number of women who would have traded places with her in a heartbeat.

“Rome has *slaves*?” Ritsuka asked, his voice slowly rising.

I arched an eyebrow at him. “You don’t remember Spartacus’s story?”

He flinched. “Well, yeah, but...”

“I didn’t make the connection,” Rika mumbled as though she was completing his thought.

Maybe not so strange a thing. Sometimes, you had to be hit in the face with something before you realized the full implications of it, even if it was something you had found out a long time ago. It was one thing to know, and another thing to *know*, if that made any sense.

“Is it so strange?” Nero asked, confused. “Mm-mm! How else would you build such incredible things in this future of yours if you had no slaves to do the building?”

A mirthless smirk pulled at one side of my mouth. “Well, in a way...”

If I was more of an anarchist, I might have made a comment about how people in modern society were wage slaves, bound to a corporate machine that used them, abused them, and discarded them when they were no longer good enough to fulfill its purposes. The collars had changed, and they’d

turned in the whips and chains for pay cuts and meager healthcare benefits, but the culture of exploitation had never gone away.

There was some truth to that, and I'd had a front row seat to how someone could burn out fighting that same machine for a decade. But Dad was also a Union rep, and I had grown up around Union folk, so I also knew that some people found fulfillment in the boring, menial labor that we were always being told we were supposed to leave behind by getting an education.

"No!" Ritsuka insisted. "Slavery has been illegal in every major country for centuries! It's completely gone!"

No, it isn't, I didn't say, smothering a cynical smile. *Businesses just found better ways of disguising it.*

But there was no sense dragging politics into this. Ritsuka and Rika were still pretty young. They'd find out eventually exactly how all of this stuff worked, and I didn't have it in me right then to sit down and tear away all of their illusions about our grand, modern world.

"You said something about private baths?" I asked Nero, cutting the conversation off before we could go much deeper.

Nero smiled brightly. "Of course! Follow me!"

She started off, and we fell into step behind her as she led us into her sprawling manor. I angled my own path so that I was near the twins, close enough to whisper to them without drawing the attention of the entire group.

"Ritsuka, Rika," I murmured to them, "remember, we're not here to change history. We're here to get it back on track." They both grimaced, looking like they wanted to protest. I didn't give them the chance. "There's nothing we can do about that girl or her situation, and there's nothing we can do to end something so ingrained in Roman culture. For us, all of this is already settled."

That we were here with these people, laughing and smiling and fighting together, did not change the fact that their futures were, from our perspectives, set in stone.

"It's not right," Rika muttered back.

It wasn't, and it wasn't like I didn't agree with them about how wrong the practice was, but those were modern sensibilities, born from more refined philosophies. Like with Aífe and Connla, the culture and way of thinking of this era's Rome were different. To us, virtually unrecognizable.

"And we can't change it," I replied firmly.

Neither of them looked happy about it, but they didn't seem to have any other argument on the subject either.

The trip to the baths was a relatively short one, but Nero didn't lead us directly to the room like I might have expected. Instead, she took us to a kind of antechamber off to the side that had cubby holes and cabinets and hooks where you could hang your clothes, and after a moment, the room's purpose dawned on me with belated realization.

My brain stuttered to a stop for a second.

“Um.”

“This is the apodyterium,” Nero announced. “Come, come! Mm-mm! It is time to prepare for the baths!”

Without further ceremony, she started pulling off her armor and setting it aside in one of the cabinets, completely oblivious to how the rest of us were reacting.

Apodyterium — that word meant nothing to me, but I didn’t need to know its literal meaning to understand what it meant in a more contextual sense: *changing room*. The dots hadn’t connected earlier — and how ironic it was that what I’d thought just minutes ago about Rika and Ritsuka not realizing what Spartacus and his backstory meant about slavery in Rome now applied to me so soon afterwards — but there weren’t separate baths in Rome. Not truly. They were *communal* baths.

Which meant, naturally, that everyone walked around in them naked. Without a stitch.

“Oh,” said Rika, sounding only faintly surprised but not scandalized. “So Rome does *that* kind of bathing.”

“Bu... wha...”

My mouth refused to work properly.

“If it’s all the same to everyone else, I think I’m one person too many for this,” Arash said politely. “I’m going to go pick out a spot to keep watch from until suppertime. Even here in Rome, we can’t be too careful, right?”

“I mean, these baths *are* coed, right?” Ritsuka asked nervously, fiddling with the top clasp of his uniform.

“From my understanding, the rules *are* a little looser than in a Japanese hot spring,” Mash commented. “Um, which is to say —”

“There aren’t any!” Nero declared proudly.

I didn’t really think that was something to be proud of.

“Still,” said Arash, “I think you ladies would be more comfortable without me here, so I’ll catch you later.”

He gave a jaunty wave, and then he disappeared.

Rika, who’d been starting to undo her own uniform, stopped and looked between her brother and Mash, back and forth, and her brow furrowed.

“Okay, yeah,” she decided. “This is gonna get really awkward really fast.”

“We’ve...never been to a mixed bathing hot spring before,” Ritsuka agreed, uncertain.

Neither had I, I couldn't find the words to say. Stripping down in the locker room was one thing. No one paid too much attention to everyone else changing, and it was all same-sex besides. You went in, you got changed, maybe took a quick shower to rinse off the sweat somewhere in there, and then you were out.

This was closer to skinny dipping.

"Onii-chan, you turn around," Rika commanded. She pointed at him and twirled her finger. "Us girls will get in first, then you can get undressed and come in after we're all in the tub."

"That sounds like a plan," Ritsuka said, sounding relieved.

"Any objections?" Rika asked the room in a tone of voice that suggested she wouldn't hear any.

Aífe chuckled, grinning wolfishly. "You do remember one of the things we Celts are supposedly famous for, right?"

"Oh." Mash blinked. "Right, I'd forgotten about that. Legends say that Celtic warriors would go into battle wearing nothing but warpaint, don't they?"

"Right."

Aífe's clothes flashed, and then vanished, leaving her completely — wow, that was a lot of muscle.

Ritsuka squeaked and spun around so fast that he could have gotten whiplash.

Rika let out a low, impressed whistle. "Damn, Super Action Mom."

Aífe crossed her arms under her breasts, cocking her hips to one side. The sturdy clothing, it turned out, hid the figure of a Greek goddess, which might have had something to do with the fact that every part of her was lined with lean, compact muscle. She looked like I did, if I put on three cup sizes and spent another two years pushing my body to the limit every single day.

Boudica shook her head. "Those legends are largely exaggerated, you know."

"And even if they weren't, I have nothing to be ashamed of," Aífe said, and she really didn't. "This body is the body I earned through my own effort. Let them look on with envy at the results of my dedication."

"I'm not sure envy is what they're looking on with," Boudica replied wryly.

She took a deep breath, and then a moment later, her own clothing flashed and vanished, leaving her just as naked as Aífe. Her figure was softer, curvier. Matronly, if I had to put a word to it. If I hadn't seen her in action myself, I would never have believed so much power was packed into that frame.

Nero, who had gotten through both gauntlets and one of her boots, stopped and stared, her brow furrowing. "What is this? Where have your clothes gone?"

“Nowhere.” Aífe held up a hand, and in a flash, one of her gloves reappeared, and then she vanished it again. “They’ve simply dematerialized.”

Nero didn’t look any less confused. “Is this a Servant thing?”

“Yes,” Boudica answered patiently. “Servants, you see, are...basically just...how do I put this...”

“A Servant’s body is made of spiritrons,” Mash recited patiently. “They’re a type of particle... Um, basically, they don’t have a solid form under normal circumstances. Strictly speaking, the entirety of a Servant is just ether, so a Servant can choose how much of their physical form exists in the material world at any given time, although I don’t think they can just make body parts disappear without turning entirely into spirit form.”

Nero nodded, and then shook her head. “Spiritrons? Ether? I don’t understand it, but if you say that Servants can make their clothes disappear and reappear like magic, that’s all I need to know.” She pouted. “How convenient that is, however. Life would be much easier if dressing and undressing could be done with so little effort! Mm-mm!”

“I’m a little jealous, too!” Rika laughed, slipping out of the sleeves of her shirt. Her bra was pink with yellow sunflowers, because of course it was. “Hey, Mash, aren’t you going to get undressed, too?”

“U-um...” Mash looked down at her armor, although there really wasn’t much there to begin with. It was more bodysuit than anything else. “I-I guess... It’s just the same as any other Servant, right?”

She closed her eyes and screwed up her face, and a second later, she was just as naked as Boudica and Aífe.

I felt a little weird about it, so I looked away. Technically, Mash was only seventeen, so she was actually a minor, which made me feel kind of awkward, since I was three years older than her. For that matter, Rika was the same age, although how that was going to work out with the time differential, I had no idea.

Rika clicked her tongue. “Perks of being a Demi-Servant, I guess. You’re just enough of a Servant to do that crazy stuff, too.” She glanced over at me, and her brow furrowed in concern. “Hey, Senpai, is something wrong? You’re still fully dressed.”

Invincible, I’d told Arash just earlier today. Look how long that lasted.

“No,” I said, because it seemed like my tongue was finally back to obeying me. “Just never really been to this sort of thing before.”

My swarm buzzed in the distance, agitated, but it let my fingers be steady and sure as I set about undoing my own shirt. Besides, it wasn’t like I hadn’t taken at least this much off in front of them back in Orléans. Going full frontal was a bigger step, but I just had to treat it like the girls’ locker room. Nobody here was ogling, nobody here was judging, we all had the same parts.

Ignoring the nudity taboos you grew up with just wasn’t easy.

Rika was the first of us mere mortals to finish undressing — turned out she hadn't been lying back in Orléans; the carpet really did match the drapes — but I wasn't all that far behind her, because Nero's armor was a lot more involved to get undone. As I shoved my clothing into one of the provided cabinets, Rika whistled at me again.

“Senpai's pretty cut, too!”

“I was preparing for the end of the world,” I said as I turned to face her, telling myself that the trick was to pretend I didn't feel embarrassed at all. “Being in good shape was a pretty important part of that.”

Rika grinned and poked at her own belly, which was smooth and soft and lacking the definition Aífe and I both had. “Makes me feel kinda jealous, that's all.” Her eyes immediately shot towards my right arm. “That's a pretty gnarly scar, too.”

“Ah.”

She was talking about the marks leftover from where Lung had burned my original arm off. Well. “Original.” Where he'd burned off my flesh and blood arm during Gold Morning, rather. It manifested as a line of pinkish tissue that encircled my bicep just above where the prosthetic started, with a few undulating curls from Lung's less than delicate and careful treatment.

Marie had actually been pretty upset that she hadn't been able to get a specialist to fix it. I was fairly ambivalent about it, myself, although it did feel a little strange to have that one big scar when most of the other ones I'd earned during my career had been erased when Panacea healed me after Scion cut me in half.

“The dragon I blinded back before joining Chaldea eventually got revenge,” I settled on.

Rika blinked. “Wh-what?”

“Dragon?” Aífe asked, curious. “*This* sounds like a story.”

“There's not that much to it,” I told her, because not only was it something I shouldn't be revealing to the twins, but the backstory required so much explaining that I didn't want to even bother. “I fought a dragon. In the first battle, I rotted off his crotch with venomous bugs. In the second, I carved out his eyes with a knife.”

Boudica looked at me, bewildered. “You did what?”

“That explanation doesn't get less ridiculous just because you tell it more times!” Rika insisted.

“It really doesn't!” her brother agreed, still turned to face away from us.

Aífe grinned, laughing. “Why is this the first I'm hearing of this?”

“Mm-mm!” Nero chimed in. “It sounds like quite the thrilling tale!”

“It’s honestly not,” I said, because that first fight hadn’t even really been much of a fight. Aside from that heart-pounding moment where I had thought he was going to kill me, the rest of it actually sounded pretty boring. “He was about to go on a rampage, so I just threw every bug I could at him and targeted the biggest weak points I could find.”

Nero, about to pull off her dress, paused. “Threw bugs at him?”

“Oh yeah,” said Rika. “Senpai never explained her super special awesome bug powers, did she? To any of us.”

She was like a dog with a bone, wasn’t she? Even if she stopped for a little while, she was eventually going to come back to that question, one way or another.

“I can sense and control bugs,” I answered plainly. “Every bug of every kind, within a given radius. It’s how I know that one of your senators a few houses over is currently plowing his wife’s fertile fields and two of the slaves in another house are sneaking off for a minute alone.”

Rika pulled a face, sticking her tongue out like she had tasted something disgusting. “Ew, gross,” she said. “TMI, Senpai. That’s *way* too much information.”

I smiled thinly. “You asked.”

“Mm-mm!” Nero pulled off her dress the rest of the way, leaving her in only a kind of linen loincloth. Her chest bounced like they were filled with helium. “A remarkable power, to be sure! And yet you used it to defeat a dragon?”

“*Defeat*” is a strong word, I didn’t say. But I didn’t want to get into the Undersiders and how they saved me, either.

“He was on fire and covered in scales,” I replied. “I attacked the only parts of him I could reach without getting close enough for him to burn me to a crisp. Even then, I lost a lot of bugs just trying to get that far.”

“Hardcore,” said Rika. “Still think it’s more impressive that you killed that wyvern by stabbing it in the eye, though.”

My mouth twitched, but I didn’t say anything to that. Privately, I agreed with her. Lung was incredibly powerful, but at least he was something I could fight with bugs, even if it required sacrificing a lot of them. With that wyvern, getting up close and personal was the *only* way I could kill it, and if I’d tried that when I was fifteen and fresh-faced, I had no doubt it would have managed to kill me instead.

“Are you going to keep dangling these stories in front of me without actually saying what happened?” Aífe asked.

“Oh, *this* one, I can tell you.” Rika grinned. “See, at the start of the last Singularity —”

“Hang on,” I interrupted her. “Where did Spartacus go?”

He'd been so quiet and so unobtrusive since earlier that I'd actually completely forgotten about him.

There was a loud splash coming from the next room over, and Spartacus' voiced boomed, "Hahahahaha! Glorious! Splendid! This bath is surely the balm of freedom! It soothes my very soul!"

I clicked my tongue. "Nevermind."

"If he is already enjoying the baths, then we should waste no time to join him," Nero declared. "Mm-mm! Come, my friends! Let us soothe away the worries of the day! You have not bathed until you have bathed in a Roman bath!"

Completely naked now, she strode forward with purpose towards the next room over, and the rest of us girls followed after her.

"Aren't we worried about him seeing us?" Rika asked.

"He's a Berserker," Aife replied wryly. "As he is now, I don't think he's even *capable* of having a sex drive."

"Really?"

Rika turned to Boudica.

"I'm afraid I don't have an answer for you," said Boudica apologetically. "He hasn't said anything that might sound like it, for what that's worth, and I haven't caught him staring at any of us." She hummed thoughtfully. "If you were obvious about it and engaged him like that, he might reciprocate, but I don't think he'll take any initiative on his own on that front."

"I'll take your word for it," Rika said.

The next room over was the bathroom, in the literal sense. It was large and spacious and almost the entirety of it was taken up by what really looked more like a swimming pool than a bath. It was the sort of luxury you might expect from a rich businessman in his personal mansion, big enough that we could have fit maybe fifty people inside before it got uncomfortably tight.

It was also much cleaner than I had been expecting. The water was crystal clear and clean, marred only by the rose petals that floated atop it, and a flowery fragrance that I couldn't quite name drifted up into my nostrils, pleasant and soothing and just strong enough that it wasn't overpowering. Tufts of steam wafted gently upwards, giving everything a subtle haze that wouldn't exactly hide us from any accidental reveals when Ritsuka came in, but was thick enough that he'd have to be looking straight at us to see anything.

At the far end, Spartacus relaxed, head back and resting on the lip of the tub. His smile was smaller and less manic, and for once, I could see his face clearly. He wasn't exactly handsome, but he had a kind of rugged appeal with a strong, square jaw and well-proportioned features.

"Huh," Boudica said, bemused. "It's much nicer than I was expecting. Definitely nicer than the baths in Britain."

“My court mage worked his magic on it!” Nero boasted proudly. “He said something about these things called germs and bacteria, and then he put a spell on it so that the water is always clean! Mm-mm! I don’t understand everything he talked about, but I can appreciate his efforts either way!”

Rika stopped. “Bacteria?”

“Oh,” said Mash. “Yes, that’s right, Senpai. Um, Romans are famous for their bathing habits, but the water in the baths isn’t usually changed very often, which can lead to... Well, to bacteria and other contaminants festering. Even so, Romans continued bathing regularly, at least once a day.” She cleared her throat. “Baths, wine, and sex corrupt our bodies, but baths, wine, and sex make life worth living.”

“Mm-mm! That’s very true!” Nero said, nodding sagely. “You understand very well, Mash!”

Mash flushed a little. “I-I can’t claim any responsibility for that saying. That was actually said by Tiberius Claudius Secundus. I mean, it was the epitaph on his tombstone.”

“He was very wise!”

Of course the Roman emperor thought so.

“In any case, Emperor Nero said that the bath has been enchanted so that the water’s always clean,” said Boudica. “You don’t need to worry, Rika. It’s safe.”

Rika looked at the water dubiously. “I mean, I don’t know how good of a wizard this court mage guy is...”

“Fou!”

The little gremlin raced out from behind the group, ran towards the edge of the tub, and leapt in.

“Fou-kyu-fooooooou!”

It landed with a small splash and sank beneath the surface for a second, and then came back up for air, tossing its head and its soaked fur back.

“See, Fou’s not scared,” Mash told Rika. “Doesn’t that mean it’s safe?”

Rika still didn’t quite look convinced. Me, it had been way too long since I’d had a good, long bath, so I didn’t bother to wait for her to make up her mind, I just made my way over and slipped down into the water.

It was wonderful. Hot, but not too hot, and it felt like every layer of dirt and sweat and grim I’d been accumulating over the last week was being drawn off of my skin as more and more of me went beneath the waterline. Every ache and pain I’d been carrying seemed like it was being washed away, and I couldn’t help the sigh that escaped my mouth as I relaxed, too, just like Spartacus was.

God, it had been way too long. The showers in Chaldea just couldn’t compare.

Like it had been some kind of signal, the others padded over and started slipping into the bath themselves. Aífe came first, and an actual smile — an honest smile, completely bereft of her usual bloodthirsty bend — crossed her face as she dropped into the water. It was like years were disappearing from her skin, such was the difference in her demeanor.

I guess a good bath was the one thing that all women across every era could agree upon.

Boudica was next, and she let out a sigh as she carefully levered herself into the tub with her remaining arm. Her shoulders rolled, and a series of quiet crackles echoed from her spine.

After Boudica was Mash, who was a little more cautious and careful, and she looked almost surprised as she got in, like she'd never actually had a chance to enjoy a good bath before. Fuck, knowing her background, it was entirely possible that she hadn't, wasn't it?

Nero dropped in without ceremony like she owned the place, and that was probably because she did, but also because she was Nero. She would have acted that way if we were in a pond in the farthest reaches of untamed Britain.

Rika was last, and she dipped her toes in to check the water first, and then slowly slid down into the bath herself.

“Oh, wow,” she groaned. “Oh, damn. Oh, I really didn't realize how much I missed having a good bath.”

“And my baths are the best!” Nero proclaimed.

“Not gonna argue with that one, best buddy,” Rika replied. “Man, I really needed this. *God*, this is good.”

“So,” said Aífe, reclining leisurely against one of the walls. Her arms were spread out over the lip of the bath, giving everyone a clear view of her chest. “You were saying something about a story involving a wyvern?”

“Right!” Rika grinned. “So after we beat that first Singularity in Fuyuki City, our next stop was in France, which was being attacked by a crazy lady claiming to be the real Jeanne d'Arc, and she had an army of wyverns that she was siccing on everyone...”

She dived into the story, setting out the background of the Orléans Singularity, and I tuned them out as I let myself go limp. My head went blissfully blank, and for that moment, I let myself drift and stop worrying about everything.

At some point, Ritsuka came into the bath and slipped into the tub with us, and he joined Rika in bonding with Aífe and the others as they talked about our previous adventures in France and Fuyuki. I didn't stop them, because we were among allies and I was enjoying a nice, hot bath for the first time in *years*.

Nothing was going to stop me from relishing in this chance. Scion himself could pop up, ready to blast us all back to our composite atoms, and I would have let him. I was completely at peace.

“Fou, fou, fou-fou-kyu, fou-kyu-fou-fou-foou!”

I cracked open an eye, glaring down at the beastie as it paddled across the water, chirping out a familiar tune all the while, and I had the impulse to reach out and shove it beneath the surface, drown the little monster while I had the chance. Instead, I closed my eye and left it alone, free to swim and live another day.

I'll worry about you later, I promised it silently. I'm too relaxed to care, right now.

“Fou-kyu-fou-kyu-fou-kyu-fou-kyu, fou-kyu-fou-fou-kyu!”