

Chapter LXXIII: Invisible Scars

Romani reacted first of the whole group.

“El-Melloi, Arash, hold her down!” he ordered immediately.

They leapt into action — for once, El-Melloi II didn’t complain about “the Second” being left off of his name — and they each grabbed one of Marie’s shoulders, forcing her back down onto the mattress. Their other hands went to her thighs just above the knee to keep her kicking legs from lashing out at anyone else, leaving her feet and toes to thrash wildly about beneath the bedsheet.

It didn’t stop her arms from swinging about, landing blows to their stomachs, but Arash — having had the foresight to remove his armor so she didn’t break her fingers on it — took it without complaint and El-Melloi II only grunted after the first one hit and was silent thereafter.

“Gently!” Romani insisted. “We don’t want her to hurt herself!”

He rushed over to the bedside, squeezing into the space between El-Melloi II and the wall, and from one of his coat’s pockets, he pulled out a small penlight and clicked it on. With one hand, he held Marie’s head as still as he could manage, and with the other, he flashed the light in each of her eyes.

“Pupillary response is normal,” I heard him mutter as Marie gasped down a desperate breath. He stashed the penlight back in his pocket, and then felt along the column of her throat, pressing his fingers underneath her jaw. I didn’t hear what he said next over Marie’s resumed screaming.

One after the other, Romani checked her vitals for anything physically wrong with her, and I watched helplessly, my heart clenching in my chest every time she opened her mouth to let out another scream, like she was being tortured. Her tormentor, however, was in her head, not physically present, and a surge of vindictive anger boiled in my gut at the memory of Lev, beaten and at our mercy. Lev, cut in half by the very Servant he’d summoned in a last ditch attempt to destroy us and Rome.

It was too bad we hadn’t been able to bring his body back with us, so that Marie could face the man who killed her and find closure in his corpse.

Once the shock of seeing her waking up so violently had worn off, however, I realized that this probably wasn’t a great place for the twins to be. They didn’t need to see this — see their Director breaking down, trapped in the last thing she could remember and screaming incoherently.

“Mash,” I said as I turned to her, “take Ritsuka and Rika and wait outside.”

Mash blinked at me, bewildered. “Miss Taylor?”

“But Director Marie,” Rika began.

“You can’t do anything here but get in the way,” I cut her off, more harshly than I meant to, and Rika actually flinched like I’d physically struck her. The twinge of regret in my belly was summarily ignored. “Go.”

In her bed, Marie had lost the strength for screaming and had descended instead into nonsensical babbling, vacillating between begging Lev for answers and shouting for someone to save her. My hands clenched into fists, and I wanted very much just then to punch something as hard as I could. If I had a choice, Lev Lainur's smug face. It might not have fixed anything, but feeling his nose shatter under my knuckles would have been very cathartic.

"Senpai," Ritsuka tried next.

My first instinct was to say something even harsher, to start making demands, to throw my metaphorical weight around, but I checked that impulse and forced myself to be a little more diplomatic, a little gentler. The man who truly deserved my venom was already dead, after all.

"I'll come get you when she's calmed down a little," I promised, "but for now, you shouldn't be here. You don't need to see this."

They still hesitated, rooted to the spot.

"Do as she says, please," said Da Vinci. "Unfortunately, things didn't turn out as we had hoped, so we need a minute to make the Director presentable, okay? She wouldn't want you to see her like this. Let her at least preserve some dignity, yes?"

El-Melloi II grunted something, but whatever it was, he didn't feel like sharing with the rest of us, and if he felt the weight of my eyes on him, he didn't show it.

"Come on, Rika, Mash," Ritsuka eventually said. "Let's go wait outside."

"Onii-chan!" Rika protested.

But Ritsuka didn't back down, and his expression was stern when he turned and addressed her with nothing more than a firm, "Rika."

Her mouth pulled into a sour line as her brow furrowed, but she caved with a bitter, "Fine."

He reached out to take her hand, perhaps to lead her out of the room, but she jerked her arm away and followed of her own volition, casting one final look at Marie as she did.

"Senpai," Mash murmured, and she, too, gave Marie's bed one more worried glance before she walked after them towards the exit.

With them out of the way, I turned my focus back towards Marie herself, and I stepped closer to the bed, hovering near the foot and wishing there was something more I could do. The shouting and the babbling had died down, too, and what was left was a sobbing, insensate mess that couldn't seem to hear him as Romani tried to calmly call her name.

"You should probably take your own advice," Da Vinci told me quietly as she came to stand next to me. "I don't think this is something *you* really need to see, either."

Maybe it wasn't. It certainly didn't make me feel any better about anything to see her so broken. It hadn't taken too long after Marie took me under her wing two years ago to realize she was

something of a fragile mess, but she'd held herself together with sheer determination and a kind of terrible inertia I was all too familiar with. I'd done my best to support her where I could, to repay her for what she'd done for me, but this wasn't like that at all.

The Marie I'd met two years ago was a leaning tower. Bowing under the weight of what she was carrying, but still managing to stand in spite of it. The woman in front of me now was *shattered*.

As hard as that was to look at, I wouldn't let myself turn away just because it hurt.

"She was there for me," I said simply, "so I'm going to be here for her."

Because this might be her worst, but she'd seen me at *my* worst. She'd spent six months piecing me back together after Gold Morning. The least I could do was help her to piece herself back together after her own world had ended.

Da Vinci sighed and shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Arash glanced in my direction, but whatever he might have thought about that, he kept it to himself. His face gave nothing away.

Finally, after what felt like an hour of watching Marie helplessly, the worst of it passed as she wore herself out. She was still shaking and sobbing, but she wasn't kicking, scratching, and flailing anymore, and the screaming and shouting had subsided into slurred mumbling.

"Director Animosphere," Romani tried again, speaking calmly and clearly, "it's okay. You're safe. You're in the infirmary back at Chaldea."

This, at last, seemed to get through to her.

"Ch-Chaldea?" Marie rasped. She shook her head weakly. "C-can't be. Chaldea's g-gone. A-all gone. Chaldeas... Lev..."

She choked.

"Lev... Lev... Why, Lev? Why? What did I do wrong?"

"Director," Romani cut in before she could descend back into her desperate pleading, "the Fuyuki Singularity was fully resolved. The team made it back without issue. Chaldea hasn't been destroyed. You're safe, Director."

"But Lev," Marie moaned piteously.

"Lev Lainur isn't here," Romani told her. "He has no way to hurt you. You're safe. It's okay, Director. You can relax."

She still didn't seem to believe him. All things considered, especially when the last thing she remembered was Lev's betrayal, that was probably to be expected.

“Director,” Romani went on, “I’m going to ask El-Melloi and Arash here to let go of your arms and legs. Can you remain calm for me? I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

Marie whimpered, and my heart clenched in my chest, but Romani took this as some kind of positive sign, as though she’d given him a very confident “yes.” He glanced at Arash and El-Melloi II, and he told them, “Gently, now. Slowly let her go. If she starts thrashing again, I don’t want you to go too far.”

Gently, slowly, El-Melloi II and Arash did as he said: they relaxed their firm grips on Marie’s shoulders and thighs and cautiously lifted their hands away from where they’d been holding her down. Marie didn’t even seem to notice.

“Good,” Romani said soothingly. “That’s good. You’re doing great, Director. Now, if you can, please open your eyes.”

Marie whimpered again, and like she was afraid of what she was going to see, she slowly squeezed her eyes open, ready to shut them again if she saw something she didn’t like.

“See? It’s just like I told you, Director. You’re in the infirmary at Chaldea. It is currently…” He checked his watch. “11:36a.m. I’m sorry to tell you that breakfast hours are over.”

Da Vinci groaned and dropped her face into her hand. “Romani…”

“Right, that was in poor taste, wasn’t it?” Romani sighed. “As you can see, Director, we’re still here. You’re still here. Chaldea is still here. We’re safe. You’re safe.”

She looked at him fearfully. “L-Lev?” she whispered, like she was afraid just saying his name too loudly would call him down upon her.

It just made me want to punch his face again.

Romani grimaced. “That, I’m afraid, is a little more complicated. You’ve been…out of commission for quite a while, Director. There have been…new developments since your encounter with him in Fuyuki.”

“He’s gone, Marie,” I spoke up for the first time. “I watched him die myself.”

Marie’s eyes swung over towards me. “Hebert,” she croaked. It was too broken to read anything into it.

“And of course, I’m here, too!” Da Vinci said with false cheer. “None other than your humble genius, Da Vinci!”

I saw El-Melloi II’s cheek twitch out of the corner of my eye.

“L-Lev is…gone?” Marie asked hoarsely.

“He got cut in half,” I confirmed. “He’s not coming back from that.”

Marie just sort of...deflated, for lack of a better word. Like the air being let out of a balloon. She sagged into the mattress, boneless and weak, all of the fight gone, even if the fear hadn't quite left yet.

"Th-there were...two more," she mumbled, exhausted. "M-Master candidates...there with us. A girl and a...boy."

"Mash, Ritsuka, and Rika are waiting outside," Romani told her gently. "They made it through Fuyuki just fine, too, I promise."

"G-good..."

And then her eyes fluttered closed and she dozed off again, too spent to stay awake. Romani sighed and stepped away from her bed. He carded a hand through his hair, rubbing at his scalp irritably. When he turned towards us, he jerked his head away, and I caught on quickly enough to follow him towards the further end of the infirmary. Da Vinci, El-Melloi II, and Arash weren't far behind.

"So the good news is that Da Vinci outdid herself," he said frankly. He pitched his voice low so that he didn't disturb Marie. "Like I said earlier, all of Director Animusphere's readings match her last physical to a tee. Medically and biologically speaking, if I didn't know that it was a puppet Da Vinci made in the Director's likeness, I wouldn't even know there was a difference."

"As if there was any doubt," Da Vinci said smugly.

"The bad news, of course," Romani went on as though she hadn't spoken, "is that the last thing she remembered before we...restored her was Lev trying to suck her into Chaldeas, which resulted in the very obvious situation you all just saw. If we're fortunate, she was coherent enough at the end there that she won't have another episode the next time she wakes up, but unfortunately..."

"It won't stop the nightmares," I concluded.

Because what happened to her was the sort of thing that left a mark, one way or another. Saving her life was only half the job.

Romani shook his head. "I can't even say that the worst of it is over. The Director is in for a long, hard struggle, and frankly, even once she's well enough to resume her own duties, there's still just too much going on for me to dedicate the time and care she needs to make a full recovery. Mentally speaking, I mean."

"Tch," El-Melloi II grunted. "Like that girl wasn't neurotic before."

Romani blinked. "You know Director Animusphere, El-Melloi II?"

"I *am* technically a Lord of the Clock Tower, you know," said El-Melloi II. "Even if our timelines are somewhat divergent, they're similar enough that it's only natural for me to have met at least some version of Olga Marie Animusphere."

His lollipop came out of his mouth with another *pop*.

“In this case, she was friends with my...younger sister. The version I’m familiar with doesn’t seem remarkably different from this one, although this one looks to be even worse adjusted than the one I know.” He grunted again. “I didn’t even think that was *possible*. Just what is her karma, anyway?”

No one seemed to have an answer for that. Even Da Vinci was completely devoid of any witty comment, her face solemn and serious.

“Do you have any ideas for how to help her, then?” asked Romani.

“I’m no therapist,” El-Melloi II groused sourly. “Besides, I already said that she was really closer with my younger sister than with me. Even if I’m familiar enough to recognize her name and face, my knowledge of her personality is all either surface level or secondhand. *You* all should know her better than what little scraps I have.”

Romani sighed. “Yeah, I guess that’s how it is, isn’t it? I got my hopes up for a second there.”

So had I. I guess I’d been getting used to El-Melloi II being a contemporary and coming from a background more like Romani’s than the twins’. It made the things he didn’t already know stand out even more.

“Are we going to have to put her on suicide watch?” I asked lowly.

The Marie I knew six months ago would never even think of it. Her self-destructive habits were always driven by her anxiety and her issues with her self-esteem, never intentionally self-sabotaging. Her tendency to overthink things was what got her so worked-up and high-strung, and that was why she could start to spiral whenever she felt like she screwed up.

But the Marie I knew six months ago hadn’t been stabbed in the back by the one man she had trusted to always stand beside her, nor had to watch her family’s life’s work crumble around her like a sandcastle, and that Marie hadn’t been consigned to an infinite living death — and then saved by the narrowest of margins.

“There’s enough of us here,” Arash said. “I’m sure if I spoke to the others, they would all agree to take shifts so we could keep watch on Director Animosphere, just in case.”

Romani grimaced and glanced back at Marie’s bed.

“It’s too soon to tell for sure,” he said. “As someone who knows her personally, I want to say that she would never do such a thing, but as a medical professional, I have to acknowledge that her mental state right now is almost certainly very precarious. It’s difficult to say whether or not she’s going to experience suicidal ideation.”

“It would be a good idea to have someone on watch by her bed at all times anyway.” Da Vinci hummed. “It...might also be possible to make a dreamcatcher to help with any nightmares she might have, but...”

“Dreamcatcher?” asked Arash. “I’m not familiar with that term.”

“It’s a Native American thing,” I explained to him. “A protective charm that’s supposed to protect you from bad dreams.” I turned to Da Vinci. “But what?”

She sighed. “Well, naturally, the most effective way of tapping into the foundation of a mystery like that would be to make it according to traditional methods. Unfortunately, here in Antarctica, you might have noticed that we’re somewhat lacking in willow trees, and while it might be possible to make up some of the difference by reenacting the mythology behind a dreamcatcher, we’re also lacking in female spider goddesses. Spiders in general, as well.”

Yes, we were, I realized, but we also had the next best thing, didn’t we? Maybe it was a little arrogant to think so, and even if you stretched it as much as you could, I’d never had an ounce of actual Divinity in my body, but metaphorically, didn’t I count?

Or maybe I was just grasping at straws.

“Da Vinci,” I began slowly, “are you still willing to make that puppet you offered the other day?”

Da Vinci’s brow furrowed, and she regarded me with skeptical confusion. “That spider puppet? Well, yes, I don’t see why not, but I’m not sure I understand your sudden interest.”

My hand rose, almost of its own will, to my hair, the long, silky black hair I had spent the last two years regrowing and repairing in the aftermath of Gold Morning. My last connection to my mother, my last connection to my past life, and aside from a few bits and bobs I’d had on me when I was dropped here, the last physical proof I had that everything I went through was real.

Marie had approved of my growing it long again. She said that there was power in a female mage’s long hair. That it had mystical properties of its own. That it could be used in many ways.

“I’m not a goddess,” I prefaced the beginning of my idea, “but if I used that spider puppet and wove the dreamcatcher from my own hair, do you think it would help?”

Da Vinci blinked, surprised. “Oh.”

“I feel like I’m missing something here,” Romani complained. “Da Vinci, why is Taylor asking if weaving a dreamcatcher from her own hair using a spider puppet would make it more powerful?”

“The mythology of the dreamcatcher is that it was first woven by *Asibikaashi*, the Spider Grandmother,” Da Vinci said slowly. “That’s why it’s known as the spider web charm in the culture it originated from. As for why she’s offering to use her own hair... As a man, Romani, I suppose you wouldn’t know, but for female magi, long hair has its own sort of power.”

She looked back at me, her eyes boring straight into mine. “It’s a little too extreme to say that she’s offering to cripple herself, but it’s not too far off of the mark either.”

Romani balked. “H-hang on, that’s going a little too far, isn’t it? No one needs to cripple themselves! We just brought the Director back, that’s already pretty miraculous!”

“Speaking frankly, it’s all theoretical anyway,” Da Vinci admitted. “That spider puppet should be more than enough weaving with ordinary silk; using Taylor’s hair instead might make it more

effective in some ways, but silk has a cleaner connection to the mythology, so the tradeoff might not be worth it.”

She was giving me an out. I could see it. A way to save face and take it back, agree with her idea instead.

I didn’t take it.

“Does it have to be silk, or is the fact a spider is weaving it enough?”

What was my hair compared to Marie’s safety?

Da Vinci’s lips pursed. “Well, it’s immaterial right now anyway,” she hedged. “There isn’t yet a spider puppet, so we can’t make the dreamcatcher on short notice, and the issue remains that Director Animosphere shouldn’t be left alone until we can.”

El-Melloi II grunted. “So are we going to set up a rotation then? There are...what, seven Servants in this place, if we just talk about the ones contracted to the Masters? It shouldn’t be too hard to figure out shifts.”

“I’m...not sure Shakespeare is the safest Servant to have around someone in the Director’s condition,” Da Vinci said delicately. “It might be self-defeating.”

He’d been behaving well since he was summoned, but I could see what she meant. From what few interactions I’d had with him, Shakespeare struck me more as a man to pick at a scab to see what new and interesting ways it might bleed than to intervene in someone’s mental breakdown.

“Six, then,” El-Melloi II corrected himself. “Four hours each... Sounds reasonable enough.”

“And us Masters?” I asked.

He glanced at me. “I didn’t consider you three a part of the equation. After all, we Servants don’t need to eat or sleep, so we don’t have to worry about drifting off if we’re bored or getting distracted by hunger.”

“If you think that’s going to stop Ritsuka and Rika from coming to visit her whenever they get the chance, then you don’t know them very well at all.”

And I had no intention of sitting in my room or the library while I waited for word about how Marie’s recovery was going.

“I would want a Servant here in any case,” Romani said. “No offense to Ritsuka and Rika, but they don’t have any real way of holding her down if she wakes up determined to do...anything, really. Marie *is* a classically trained magus, after all.”

“With all of the pitfalls that entails,” El-Melloi II added dryly.

“It’s not like it’s going to be an overly long wait,” Da Vinci chimed in. “She’s just asleep, not in a medically induced coma. She should only be out for another few hours, a day at most. As long as she’s coherent, I can’t see any reason not to discharge her to her own quarters.”

Romani shook his head. “Even after she wakes up, I want someone with her at all times for at least the first week. Until you can put together that...dreamcatcher, you called it? Until you can put that together, it’s very likely she’s going to be waking up very violently for the foreseeable future.”

El-Melloi II sucked noisily on his lollipop. “However we do it, we’re going to have to find something that works around our respective schedules,” he said. “After all, several of us *do* have other responsibilities that take up our time. It’s not all just leisure.” He pinned Romani with a stare, arching one eyebrow. “Unless you’d like to take over Emiya’s cooking duties, Acting Director, or maybe my magecraft lessons with Ritsuka and Rika.”

Romani winced and shook his head again. “No, you’re right. We’re going to have to make sure there’s some structure to this whole situation. It’s too important to just wing it the whole way through.”

“I can take extra shifts to cover for the others, if I have to,” Arash offered.

Romani worried his bottom lip.

“That might actually be necessary,” he admitted. “Arash, I’ll leave the organizing to you, so if you could have a shift rotation in my hands before the hour’s out, that would be a lifesaver.”

“I can get right on that.”

“Go,” I told him. “Siegfried first. If you’re having trouble finding Aife, let me know and I’ll get in contact with her.”

Arash bowed his head and vanished into spirit form. I couldn’t actually feel him like that, but the skin on my right arm prickled as though a brief breeze passed by me, and I wasn’t sure whether that was a psychosomatic response or some sort of warning system Da Vinci had put into the prosthetic without telling me.

I almost told him that he could find Aife in the library, but she’d probably appreciate it if that secret stayed between us, so I decided to keep both my literal and metaphorical mouth shut.

Romani sighed. “There’s that part taken care of.” He turned to the door, smiling grimly. “Next, we should probably talk to those three about what just happened, huh?”

“Rika will probably claw her way into the room if we leave them too long,” said Da Vinci.

He grimaced. “Right.” He glanced at El-Melloi II. “For now, El-Melloi II, could you keep an eye on the Director?”

El-Melloi II grunted. “Well, at least she’s old enough now that I’m not *literally* babysitting her.”

He turned away and stalked back over to Marie's bed. I honestly didn't have any idea what she would think if she woke up to find him hovering over her, sour-faced and sucking on a lollipop. Whatever her reaction was, I was certain we'd hear it before we saw it.

The door of the infirmary whooshed open, and the three teenagers on the other side almost tumbled through it from how closely they'd been crowded around it. Luckily, they hadn't actually been leaning on it, trying to listen through to hear what was going on, so they caught themselves before they could wind up in a pile on the floor.

"Is Director Marie okay?" Rika blurted out immediately.

"Physically, there's nothing wrong with her," Romani answered calmly. "I double checked all of her vitals, and she's as healthy as any woman her age, all things considered. Mentally, on the other hand, I'm afraid she's not doing all that hot."

"It's because the last thing she remembers...it's the end of Fuyuki, right?" asked Ritsuka. "When she almost..."

"Professor Lev," Mash mumbled.

"Foouu," the little gremlin on her shoulder growled.

"That's what it looks like, yeah." In the worse case scenario... I didn't really want to imagine what it would have been like if she was stuck in the FATE System, unable to interact with anything, trapped in that moment of being about to die for the past few months. I'd seen that sort of horror firsthand. "It's too soon to know more without talking to her first."

It seemed I would be spending many moments in the upcoming days wishing we had managed to bring Lev's corpse back from Rome. I didn't know if it would be good for her in the short term, but giving Marie the chance to confront him and find closure would have been worth the trouble.

"Who's the medical professional here, again?" Romani asked me wryly. "In any case, Taylor's right. So far, it looks like the Director's last memory was of those final moments before we Rayshifted you out of Fuyuki, so it's only natural that she reacted the way she did when she woke up. Hopefully, we managed to calm her down enough that the next time she wakes up, it'll be significantly less... Well, less violent."

"The next time she wakes up?" Rika parroted.

"She tuckered herself out," said Da Vinci. "She fell back to sleep a few minutes ago, so she'll probably be sleeping for another few hours."

"El-Melloi II is keeping watch right now," I told them. "I sent Arash ahead to talk to the other Servants so we can set up a rotation and keep an eye on her until she wakes up again."

"Is she going to be okay?" Mash asked.

I looked to Romani, and he took that as his cue: “Like I said, physically, she’s fine. There’s nothing to worry about there. Mentally... It’s not that easy. Trauma like what she went through always leaves a mark, even if it isn’t physical. Some scars can’t be seen with the naked eye.”

“Is there anything we can do?” asked Ritsuka. “To help, I mean.”

Romani sighed. “Time,” he said wearily. “Patience. It’s still too soon to know the extent of how this is going to affect her, but just from what little we’ve seen... She’s probably going to be more irritable, more prone to flying off the handle, more emotional. Yelling back if she starts shouting isn’t going to help at all, so even if you have to bite your tongue, don’t push back.”

I looked deliberately at Rika as he said this. She noticed.

“So we’re just supposed to take it if she starts ripping into us?” Rika asked.

“In a word? Yes,” said Romani. “I’m not expecting you to be a saint. Any of you. She won’t accept it if you walk on eggshells around her either, so don’t do that. But don’t provoke her, and if she provokes you, don’t fall for it, okay? The most important thing is that she feels safe, and yelling isn’t going to help with that at all.”

“Easy for you to say,” Rika grumbled.

“Rika,” her brother chided sternly.

“I know, I know,” she muttered irritably. “I’ll behave. I *do* know how to do that, you know.”

I think that was the best we were going to get from her, at least right then. If I needed to pull her aside later, then I would, but for now, I was willing to let it drop.

Ritsuka turned back to Romani. “Can we see her? Now, I mean?”

“I don’t think a kiss is going to fix this sleeping beauty, Onii-chan.”

This time, both her brother and I fixed her with a stern stare, and she sighed, folding immediately, “Fine, I know. I’m shutting up.”

“As long as you’re quiet,” said Romani, pretending the whole exchange hadn’t happened. “The last thing we need is for her to wake up to loud voices, or worse, shouting, so as long as you keep your voices down and don’t get too noisy, there’s no reason why you can’t visit her for a few minutes.”

“We can do that,” Ritsuka promised immediately.

Next to him, Rika mimed zipping her lips. It was an oddly American gesture — but then, it wasn’t the first such thing I’d seen from her, was it?

“As long as you keep that in mind...” Romani trailed off, and after a moment, he stepped aside to let them into the infirmary. “Okay. Watch your step. It would be pretty embarrassing to go through all of this trouble just to wake her up by accidentally kicking a chair, right?”

Cautiously, carefully, he led the twins and Mash back into the room. I brought up the rear, trying to ignore the way Fou kept one ear trained in my direction the entire time. Marie, as we came upon her, looked peaceful — tired, worn, exhausted, but sleeping untroubled.

My own dreams probably weren't going to be particularly pleasant tonight.