

## **Interlude OMA: Personal Investment**

“How is she?” Olga Marie asked quietly.

Romani Archaman sighed and leaned back in his chair.

“Resting peacefully, for now,” he said.

The girl in the bed was swaddled in bandages, asleep. The equipment monitoring her condition beeped slowly and lowly, utterly unconcerned with the fact she looked like death warmed over. Thick gauze was wrapped around her head, stained red in two coin-sized splotches in the middle of her forehead that made Olga Marie sick just thinking about. The stump of her right arm was wrapped just as much, stained an even starker red from where the surgeons had had to scrape off the burned flesh so that the remaining parts could heal properly. Her neck was shiny with a cream to reduce the swelling of her bruises.

It wasn't the extent of her injuries, but they were the most obvious and visible ones.

The fact that she was even alive at all... She didn't look like a girl who had gone toe to toe with what was basically a god. In fact, her wounds spoke all too clearly of enemies who were human, who had mauled her to send a message or who had tried very, very hard to kill her and almost succeeded.

If Laplace hadn't recorded the events themselves as part of an alternate timeline, Olga Marie wasn't sure she would have believed it at all. Even still, it seemed far too fantastical to be true.

Alien parasites forming contracts with compatible humans? Superheroes and supervillains like something out of a cheesy plebeian comic book? A golden man with enough power to casually erase entire continents out of existence? And something that terrifying had been beaten by a slip of a girl, so tall but so lean and willowy that it was hard to believe she could even throw a proper punch?

It sounded outlandish. Impossible, even.

“And her injuries?” asked Olga Marie.

Romani frowned and looked back down at his patient.

“We've done what we can for her, for now,” he said. “She's stable, but we're going to need to contact a few specialists to handle some of the more difficult parts. Some parts of this are just too far outside of my skill set.”

Olga Marie swallowed and forced herself to look at the girl's forehead, at the splotches of red that sat in the middle of it like some parody of a third eye. Just imagining the internal damage those splotches hinted at turned her stomach.

“The bullet wounds?”

“It's a miracle, really,” Romani said, combing a hand through his hair. It got tangled in his ponytail, so he had to extricate himself carefully. “The damage is actually minimal, all things considered. I'm

not a neurosurgeon, so I'm not sure what sort of damage has been done to her memories or anything like that, and I can't imagine that kind of trauma won't leave some kind of mark. But the scans we've taken of her brain actually show normal brain activity, similar to REM sleep."

A miracle... The fact that she wasn't either dead or a vegetable after taking two bullets to the head definitely qualified.

Olga Marie's lips pursed. "Are we going to need to contact a physical therapist?"

Romani shrugged helplessly. "I honestly can't tell you. I'd like to get a second opinion from an actual neurosurgeon, but if I had to make a guess? I'd say it really depends on how long she's out for. We've got her in a medically induced coma for now, but I don't want to keep her like that for more than a couple days."

He sighed and looked down at the empty space under the sheet where the rest of her right arm should have been.

The original amputation hadn't been clean. Olga Marie had seen the wound for herself, and it had been so blackened and inflamed that the only reason she could think of why the girl hadn't screamed herself hoarse or convulsed whenever it was touched was because the nerves had been fried by whatever had burned it down to a stump.

She wasn't sure whether it had been intended as a deliberate cruelty to cause as much pain as possible, or if the amputation had been such an emergency procedure that the only way the girl had been able to make sure the wound was at least closed was by cauterizing it. What that said about the situation this girl had been in... That wasn't anything good, either.

"Her arm, on the other hand, there's nothing we can do about it. Fixing soft tissue damage is one thing, even stimulating bone growth to close up those holes in her skull is something that can be done with magecraft, but I don't know of anyone who could do something as incredible as regenerate her arm."

Olga Marie nodded. She'd been expecting as much.

In the first case, healers were a rare enough breed among magi. In the second place, someone capable of perfectly regrowing limbs and organs was the kind of person who received a Sealing Designation by the Association, and would therefore be out of reach, anyway, as a carefully guarded secret.

"I've already had Lev get in contact with a specialist. We're going to commission the best prosthetic we can."

Romani gawked. "That's going to be incredibly expensive! If you're getting it from who I think you are, you could buy a whole estate with what she's going to charge!"

"You don't think I know that?" Olga Marie snarled. "I'm perfectly aware of what it's going to cost me to commission a limb of such quality that it's indistinguishable from the real thing! I'm not an idiot, Romani Archaman!"

That woman was notorious for her exorbitant prices, after all.

“I didn’t mean to imply that you were!” Romani said hastily. “But, Director... I just don’t understand. By all accounts, this girl isn’t a magus. She’s got no unique magical attribute that I can tell, and even her Magic Circuits are basically average in quantity and quality. Investing this much money and effort into a nobody who was dropped at our feet is just...”

Did he think she didn’t know that, too? When the Association found it, they were going to throw a fit, and they might just call her up to a tribunal and start throwing accusations around about her fitness to lead an organization as critical as Chaldea, especially considering the amount of money and resources that had been dumped into it by her father and the other contributors.

By that metric, it would be better to cut her losses and dump the girl in a hospital somewhere to recover in obscurity.

“Are you saying I’m wrong?”

“Don’t misunderstand me,” said Romani. “From a moral perspective, this is absolutely the right thing to do. As a doctor, when I don’t have to be concerned about prices and budgets, I would absolutely agree with doing the utmost possible to help her get as close to back to normal as I can.”

Because Romani Archaman was a bleeding heart. It made him good at his job, and Olga Marie appreciated that much, at least, but it was also considered a liability by the magi from the Association who looked at things in terms of human calculus.

For the life of her, she couldn’t imagine how her father had agreed to hire him, nor why Romani had decided to stay on once he found out about the experiments with Mash.

“But?”

“As a member of Chaldea’s staff, especially as the head of medical, I *do* have to consider things like budget and prices,” Romani said. “Director, the treatments to fix all of this girl’s injuries are going to cost a fortune. Forgetting the top of the line prosthetic, just dealing with her other problems and the therapy she’s probably going to need to get back on her feet are already going to eat into a significant portion of my department’s budget.”

All of those were also things Olga Marie had taken into consideration.

“Do you have a point in all of this, Romani?”

He shook his head. “I just... I don’t understand, Director. Why go through all of this trouble for a girl you don’t know who by all accounts can’t hold a candle to someone as talented as Kirschtaria or Ophelia?”

Because it didn’t make sense, looking at it from the outside. The right decision from the point of view of the Association would be to ship this girl out. Spending so much time, money, and effort to get her back into working order was nothing more than a waste, better funneled elsewhere to more important projects and more promising Master candidates.

The difference was, Olga Marie knew what everyone else didn't, and she'd gone to great lengths to make sure that the data never made it into any official records. Even Lev himself didn't know all of the details, she'd been that careful about who knew what and how much.

"Do you know how this girl came to us, Romani?" Olga Marie asked lowly.

Romani looked at her, brow furrowing, confused. "I... No, Director. I can't say that you've told me who she is or how she got here."

Olga Marie met Romani's eyes. She searched them for any hint of deception or mistrust, but like always, Romani was an open book, earnest to a fault. It wouldn't be accurate to say he couldn't hold a secret — there was a lot about him that didn't make sense, and he'd never offered her an explanation that satisfied all of the question marks — more that he wasn't the scheming type.

In that moment, for a reason she couldn't properly explain, she trusted him, more than she trusted Lev, or at least in this one particular area, she did. Maybe it was because Romani was one of the rare people in Chaldea who took every part of his job seriously, especially his Hippocratic Oath, above and beyond every temptation for self-advancement.

Or maybe it was because she couldn't bring this girl back from the brink of death by herself, and the only person she could trust who was both willing and qualified to help her was sitting right in front of her.

"A woman appeared in my office," Olga Marie began slowly. "She used some kind of spatial transference magic. It might even have been a fraction of Lord Zelretch's Second."

"What?" Romani squeaked. Olga Marie shot him a glare and he swallowed whatever question he'd been about to ask.

"She was carrying this girl," she went on. "She told me that this girl is Taylor Hebert, a native of an alternate timeline calling itself Earth Bet."

"Wait," Romani interjected. "Hold on a second. An entire alternate timeline aware enough of itself and its place in the Greater History of Man to make its own label?"

"Yes, apparently," Olga Marie said irritably. "Are you going to let me finish or not, Romani?"

He mimed zipping his lips and she sighed.

Sometimes, his clumsy nature and tendency towards such overstated reactions really was a nuisance. Well, but if he was more like a traditional Clock Tower magus, she wouldn't even have been having this conversation with him, would she?

"She said..." Olga Marie hesitated, and eventually settled on, "She told me a wild, outlandish story about heroes and villains and monsters and a golden god, and she told me this girl's place in that story."

She looked down at the diminished, weakened form lying in the bed, so weak and frail that she could snuff the remaining life out with her own hands, if she had been so tempted.

“She said...”

*You have a choice, Olga Marie Animusphere.*

Olga Marie closed her eyes, and for a moment, she was back in her office, standing up from her desk, as that woman stood in front of a portal to another world and sat a half-dead corpse in one of the office chairs. Like it was an ordinary business meeting, rather than a complete stranger invading one of the most secure facilities on the planet.

*You can save this girl's life, and you will gain the staunchest ally you can imagine in your mission to preserve mankind, as powerful a Master as there ever was.*

As she did now, Olga Marie had thought then that the tall, willowy girl couldn't possibly have done all of those things. Not someone her own age. Not someone who looked so vulnerable. True, she bore the terrible sorts of wounds someone might expect of a person who had waged a great battle and come out of it by the skin of her teeth, but that had been the only really believable part.

The rest was just too ridiculous.

*Or you can save her body and use it as a catalyst to summon the Heroic Spirit she has left behind.*

But when she looked at it analytically, when she tried to think of it from the perspective of a magus — all about the goal, all about the end result, all about what she could use and how she could use it — it felt like she'd been handed the key to all her dreams and ambitions. Laplace's confirmation had only made it feel all the more like the providence of fate or some higher power, finally telling her that she could do something of *worth*.

Olga Marie had never had the capacity to be a Master. She couldn't Rayshift. She was, by all accounts, a failure as Marisbury Animusphere's daughter and heir. Being told that she couldn't participate in her father's greatest work had been the greatest blow she had ever taken, eclipsed only by the news of his suicide.

How proud of her might he have been if she recruited a Heroic Spirit who had managed to ascend in the modern day? Someone who had done the impossible and made such a mark on history in a world so bereft of mystery that she had been exalted into the halls of mankind's greatest legends?

How much praise might she have received? How much adulation? How much acclaim? How many of her former detractors might be forced to applaud her? How much respect would be heaped upon her, day after day, for managing something that should have been beyond her wildest dreams?

And Olga Marie...

“That I had a choice.”

“A choice?” asked Romani.

“I could let her die and gain all the secrets of her body,” said Olga Marie, hiding the critical detail, “or I could save her life and gain the most powerful Master possible for my Chaldea.”

...had chosen instead to save this girl's life.

Romani looked down at the girl, at Taylor Hebert, and his expression softened. His arm came up and reached out, as though he was going to stroke her hair or take her remaining hand, but he apparently thought better of it, because his arm dropped before it could go anywhere.

When he turned back to her, his expression was far more compassionate than it had been before.

"You chose to save her life."

"Don't say it like that's such a strange or unusual thing, Romani!" she huffed. "I'm not a monster, you know! Do you think, after everything that happened with...with M-Mash, that I'd be so heartless as to let a girl my own age die, just like that?"

Romani laughed a quiet little laugh. "Sorry, Director, I didn't mean to insult you or anything."

She didn't reply, she just glared.

Because he wasn't exactly wrong to think that about her, was he? No, if Olga Marie had been a little bit more like her father, there was no doubt she would have let Taylor Hebert bleed out in her office, instead of calling Romani to come and help the instant that strange woman left. A Heroic Spirit so capable as this one would supposedly be would be a boon of an entirely different sort, a trump card the likes of which Chaldea could never turn down.

But Olga's decision wasn't entirely altruistic, either. Deep down, where she was honest with herself and no one else, she could admit that she relished the idea of her own ace Master. Her father had selected Kirschtaria, his own apprentice, a genius of unparalleled talent whose theory of Astromancy would have been revolutionary, if only it could be proven, and Ophelia Phamrsolone, who had a Jewel rank mystic eye that had been passed down her family for generations. He had recruited talented up and comers like Kadoc Zemlupus and mysterious loners like Hinako Akuta. Team A was a who's who list of rare and unusual specialists.

All of the other potentials on their lists? Fodder. All of them fodder, and all of them picks from *Olga Marie's* Chaldea. None of them could compare at all to the shining stars her father had hand selected to be the organization's vanguard.

And now...now, an ace Master had been dropped practically in her lap. An ace Master whose accomplishments put the rest of Team A to shame.

And Olga Marie could tell no one about them. Not if she wanted to keep the Association's grubby paws off of Hebert.

"Romani," she said suddenly.

"Yes, Director?"

She stared him straight in the eyes, unblinking, to convey how serious she was. "This is our secret, understand?"

He blinked at her. “I’m sorry, Director?”

“I’ve already deleted the records confirming her history from Laplace,” Olga told him, ignoring his squawking protest (“Wait, you used Laplace for something like that?”). “Her medical history, her treatment, any abnormalities in her condition — all of that is for *your eyes only*, got it? *No one else* in Chaldea gets to see who she is or what she’s been through.”

“D-Director, there’s such a thing as patient confidentiality, but this is going to break a whole bunch of UN regulations!”

“I don’t care about that!” she burst out, and that shocked him into silence for a moment. “I’m not giving anyone any excuse to come and take her away! That’s why, Romani. You can’t tell anyone about anything strange you find out about her. We treat her quietly, we treat her confidentially, we treat her in secret. The rest of Chaldea doesn’t find out she even *exists* until she’s made a full recovery.”

“I don’t understand, Director,” Romani said. “Who is this girl that you’re going through so much trouble? You’ve said something about some strange woman, but you never explained what makes this girl so special.”

It was on the tip of her tongue. She was tempted to say it. Oh, so very tempted. She wanted to see his expression when he finally heard the words, just to watch his eyes widen and his mouth fall open. *She killed a god, Romani.*

But this was the secret Olga Marie had to keep. Everything else, she could have told him. Everything else, she could have explained. Everything else was tame enough that it would get some surprise, maybe an eyebrow raised here and there, but the most unbelievable parts were always the circumstances, the world this girl had come from and lived in, not really the things she’d done in it.

Except this one thing.

Olga Marie looked back at Taylor Hebert. Still frail and defeated, still weak and clinging to life so narrowly. It was still so hard to imagine what she must have looked like in battle, waging war.

“She’s Taylor Hebert,” Olga Marie eventually said. “Master Candidate Nine, the final member of Team A.”