

## Chapter LXXII: Lazarian Return

The next several days passed with agonizing slowness, made only somewhat more bearable by the comfort of the routine we had settled into. In the early morning, we Masters would get up, go to the gym, get in a daily workout session, and after we showered off all of the sweat, go to the cafeteria to have one of Emiya's delicious meals.

It was the rest of the day that proved to be a problem, because that was entirely free for us to do mostly whatever we liked. Unfortunately, at least for me, the Wards had trained me too well. My after action report on the events of the Septem Singularity was done long before the deadline for Marie's return was anywhere close, and that meant that most of my days were relatively empty, because there were only so many times you could check for errors in your report before you had to call it finished and there was only so much training you could get in before it started to be detrimental instead of helpful.

The twins, at least, were otherwise occupied. El-Melloi II had appointed himself as their teacher in the fundamentals of magecraft, although he didn't seem particularly enthusiastic about the job, so their afternoons were filled with lessons on magic and how it worked, how to cast spells properly, how to safely control the amount of magical energy running through their magic circuits, and so on.

I thought about sitting in on their lessons — there weren't many who could say they'd learned at the feet of *one* of the Association's Lords, let alone *two* — but when I spied on them to see what they were learning, I realized immediately that it was all stuff that I already knew. There just wasn't a point in putting myself through the boredom of listening to El-Melloi II lecture on topics I'd learned over a year ago.

It didn't leave me with a plethora of options for how to occupy my own time, because Da Vinci hadn't given us very much information about where and when the next Singularity was going to occur, which meant that I couldn't distract myself with research on that era and nation. "Late sixteenth century" was frighteningly vague, and quite aside from the fact that it covered a period of at least thirty years, I didn't even have a geographical location to focus on.

The only thing really left for me to do was grab one of my novels off of the bookshelf in my room and find the most comfortable place I could to sit down and read it, so I made myself a cup of my favorite tea from my secret stash, sweetened it to my liking, and then made my way down to Chaldea's very, very expansive library, where no one was likely to disturb me.

I wasn't expecting to find Aífe huddled in the exact corner I'd planned to sit myself down in, nor was I expecting her to be dressed in a tank top and a pair of sweatpants, and I definitely wasn't expecting her to be reading what she actually had her nose buried in.

"Is that..."

A romance novel?

Aífe startled at the sound of my voice and swiftly snapped the book closed, hiding it out of sight as her head swiveled around to look at me. A faint blush dusted her cheeks, the first real sign of femininity I think I'd ever seen from her.

“Yes?” she asked awkwardly. “Was there something you needed from me, Master?”

“No, I...” Should I even bring it up? I’d never seen her actually *embarrassed* about something. “I was just coming here to do some reading myself.”

I held up my book, *Under the Moonlight*, a thick vampire novel set in Victorian era France about a woman getting revenge on the one who turned her. The author had never been born on Earth Bet, so this was actually the first thing he’d written that I would have the chance to read, but the blurb on the back made it sound interesting enough.

“Oh.” She settled down, and some of the tension in her shoulders eased. “So you came here for a quiet place to read.”

“That was the plan.”

She nodded and stood from her chair. “Then I shall have to find another place, I suppose.”

She made to leave, and maybe the twins and their nosiness was rubbing off on me, but whatever the reason, my mouth opened on its own.

“Aífe.”

She stopped.

“I know it was my suggestion in the first place, but...can I ask?”

Aífe sighed and stopped hiding her book, revealing a flowery cover that depicted a man and a woman embracing very intimately, as though they’d been captured in the act of leaning in for a kiss. I’d never read it myself, but I’d seen it — or another copy of it, at least — in Akuta’s hands on occasion. From what little she’d told me about it, it was a pure romance novel, a sort of modern day *Pride and Prejudice*, where two people from vastly different backgrounds fall in love and have to reconcile those differences.

“You saw it, then.” It wasn’t a question.

“Sorry.”

“No, I suppose if I wanted to truly escape notice, then I should have hidden out in one of the empty rooms,” she said ruefully. “Those, at least, no one would have had any reason to visit.”

Depending on the room. Da Vinci hadn’t gotten back to me yet about setting up a terrarium in one of the unoccupied rooms, so I hadn’t had reason or opportunity to go shopping for one to pick out, but that was only a matter of time.

Aífe looked down at the novel, the pad of her thumb rubbing over the cover, and for a long moment, she was silent. It struck me then that she hadn’t actually revealed much of herself to us before, not anything that we couldn’t have found out either from the myths or from reading between the lines, and I think I was beginning to realize that she was actually a fairly private person.

“You’re aware,” she began at length, slow and deliberate, “that I...didn’t have much luck with love.”

“I know that Cúchulainn essentially forced himself on you,” I replied carefully, “and that he had you put those geasa on Connla.”

A breath huffed out of her nostrils, not quite a snort. “Yes, well, I wasn’t in the best of positions to be denying him, was I?”

I didn’t say anything. What Emiya had said at the beginning of Septem came back to me then — the value system of the ancient Celts was vastly different from the modern day. There was too much I didn’t know about that kind of life for me to inject my modern beliefs without care.

“By the time he left, I hadn’t made up my mind whether I hated him or not,” she confessed. “The original defeat still stings, and the method he used was the gravest insult I have ever suffered, but he was...unique, as a man. I’ve yet to meet anyone quite like him, in this life or my last.”

She looked back down at the cover of the book. “There hasn’t been anyone else. No one who quite lit the same flame, and that means that this one area is a place where I am...inexperienced.”

My brow furrowed, although I guess I could understand her problem. Brian was... Well, he was the only boy I’d made time for, and there hadn’t been a space for anyone else after I left the Undersiders and turned myself in. Preparing for the end of the world had simply been too important.

“Inexperienced?”

Aífe sighed again, irritably. “You’ve doubtless heard the myths already, yes? My sister found a man pleasing enough to give her a daughter, and she was quite familiar in that sense with the Hound as well. For myself, I never allowed a man to distract me while I was younger, still perfecting my skills, and after Connla left, I had lost any interest I might have had in seeking out a husband. My only frame of reference is the Hound.”

*The guy who slept with just about every woman in his myth*, I didn’t say, but I had no doubt that she was already keenly aware of the sorts of things he’d gotten up to. Theirs was in no way a committed, normal relationship, even by the standards of the ancient Celts.

“So this is...research, then?”

“In a sense,” she said. “It is also...I suppose, a look at what kind of life I might have led, if I had chosen differently.”

The dream I’d had while we stayed at Nero’s palace... She was talking about how things might have gone if she’d chosen not to become a warrior and settled for being some king’s queen.

I guess even hardened warriors like Aífe, who had spent her entire life honing her skills and pushing her limits, wondered what it was like to be a woman in love. To feel something so intense and all-consuming that it could change you and your life so drastically.

Maybe that book was one I should put on my own reading list.

“I understand.”

She blinked and looked over at me. “Oh?”

“My situation was a little bit different.” Understatement of the year. “But I’ve only ever had one partner, too. There was never any room to try again after we separated.”

She gave me a considering look. What else, if anything, she got from that, she didn’t share.

“I see.”

“You don’t have to go anywhere,” I told her. “Feel free to keep reading and pretend I’m not here. I won’t tell the twins what books you keep on your shelf as long as you keep quiet about this little corner.”

Her lips pulled into a familiar grin. “That, I think, is something I can do, Master.”

“You can call me Taylor, you know.”

She gave me another considering look, like she was looking for a hidden meaning in what I’d said. “Taylor, then,” she eventually decided.

And that was how I found a reading buddy.

Every afternoon, while the twins were off getting lessons from El-Melloi II, she and I sequestered ourselves into that little alcove and silently read our books. It was...nice, as quaint as it was to put it that way. Even if we didn’t talk, the subtle air of companionship was pleasant.

Finally, however, the day arrived, and Da Vinci’s week was all used up. I was ready to skip everything and go straight to her workshop — except I hadn’t even gotten out of bed before receiving her message, letting me know that she’d call us down when she was ready to commence the procedure that would bring Marie back.

Great.

It was tempting to go down anyway and wait, but I wasn’t a kid at Christmas, lying on the couch so I could see Santa come and deliver presents, so I forced myself to be patient for just a little while longer and went about my daily routine. If I pushed myself a little harder than usual to try and work out some of the frustration, well, no one decided to comment on it, if they even realized it.

Unfortunately, it also made breakfast hard to enjoy, and *that* wasn’t something that escaped Arash’s notice.

“You look like you’ve got something on your mind today,” he said from across the table. Even though this wasn’t one of the Servant meal days, he still chose to sit with me, and had every day.

I debated the merits of deflecting, but unfortunately, I didn’t think he would let me get away with it.

“Da Vinci’s supposed to bring Marie — Director Animosphere — back today.”

Rika — because the twins had *also* decided to sit with me today — gasped, giving me a very good look at the half-chewed food in her mouth. It didn't make my own food any more appetizing.

“That's today?” she slurred around her breakfast.

“Rika!” her brother scolded her. Even Mash looked a little grossed out by the display.

“Yes,” I said, “although she didn't tell me exactly when.”

Rika looked ready to start talking again, until Ritsuka reached over, stuck one finger under her chin, and forced her mouth closed. “Don't talk with your mouth full,” he chided her.

Rika gnashed her teeth with exaggerated motions of her jaw, swallowed audibly, and then stuck her tongue out at him. A put upon sigh breezed out of his mouth.

“We're really getting Director Marie back today?” she asked once she was done antagonizing her brother. Thankfully, without shoveling more food into her mouth first.

“Da Vinci said it would take a week,” was my simple response. “It's been a week.”

“Oh,” said Mash. “I guess it has, hasn't it?”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Rika asked. “Let's finish so we can go see her right away!”

“Don't you want to enjoy your breakfast properly?” Ritsuka said wryly.

Rika's expression twisted, torn, and she looked down at her remaining food uncertainly. Like she couldn't decide whether it was more important to go bug Da Vinci immediately or stay and savor every bite she could of the meal Emiya had prepared for us.

I decided to spare her the dilemma.

“Da Vinci already sent a message saying that she would let us know when she was ready to bring the Director back. Didn't you get one this morning as well?”

“*That's* what that was about?” Rika asked, surprised.

Of course she hadn't listened to it.

“Yes.”

“What did you think it was about, Senpai?” asked Mash.

“I thought it was another reminder from Doctor Roman about that report thingy,” Rika answered. “I'm going as fast as I can, damn it!”

“You're still working on it?”

It had been a week. It wasn't like it was a book report and she had to read some thick novel and analyze the themes or something like that. She just had to write down what had happened in Septem.

“She’s always been like that,” Ritsuka told me. “Whenever we had a project for school, she always put it off until the last possible minute. I had to force her to sit down and do it on time more than once.”

Rika pouted at him.

“Well, we didn’t exactly have paperwork in my era,” said Arash, laughing a little. “And I wasn’t really anything more than a footsoldier, so working out logistics wasn’t part of my responsibilities. I guess it’s a good thing we Servants aren’t expected to hand in any reports to Chaldea, huh? I don’t think I’d be good at it.”

“Really?” asked Mash. “You seem so responsible though, Arash.”

“It’s kind of you to say so,” Arash told her, “but there really are things that I never learned how to do while I was alive. Chaldea’s summoning system may have given me the knowledge of how to read and write in this modern era, but any reports I had to give to my superiors in the army were all oral, so writing up a report like that isn’t something I’m familiar with.”

He might have said so, but I had no doubts that he wouldn’t have any trouble with it if he was actually asked to do it. The twins might not have realized it, but I could tell immediately that he was trying to make them feel better about not being good at writing up those after action reports Romani wanted.

As if I needed more proof that he really was a good guy.

“It’s a skill you learn in any modern organization,” I said, “so it’s better to learn it now, Rika. Most jobs you get worth anything are going to ask you to write reports at some point or another.”

“At this point, I’d settle for *surviving* this one,” Rika said dryly. “I’m not super worried about my future prospects right now. I’m still technically in high school!”

“You are?” Mash asked.

“This was just supposed to be a summer internship,” said Ritsuka. “We were going to be starting our senior year...but I guess that kind of got put off, didn’t it?”

“Kinda hard to attend high school when all the teachers and students are gone, you know,” Rika added.

A snort ripped itself out of my nostrils before I could stop it, and the twins both looked over at me, surprised. It would probably have been less surprising if they had any idea what my own high school education had looked like, but my circumstances hadn’t exactly been normal in any way, had they? Forgetting the fact that Leviathan had interrupted the school year pretty drastically, finishing high school had just seemed like such a small concern next to everything else I was handling at the time.

Frankly, it was a small miracle that I *had* gotten my GED. If I hadn’t surrendered and joined the Wards, I wasn’t sure I would have even bothered.

“Senpai?” Rika asked, confused.

“Natural disasters and the end of the world *do* make it kind of difficult to finish your education, don’t they?” I said without really saying anything.

“Yes,” said Rika, still confused. “Yes, they do.” She turned to her brother and whispered, “It sounds like she’s talking from personal experience. *Why* is she talking from personal experience?”

“I don’t know!” Ritsuka hissed back. “Why don’t you ask her?”

“Because I have self-preservation instincts!”

Like I would kill her for her curiosity, I thought, amused. It seemed like she was putting a little too much stock in that line about curiosity killing the cat.

“Did...you not finish high school, Miss Taylor?” Mash asked.

“Bless the cinnamon roll for her courage,” Rika muttered.

I considered my answer for a moment. This should be mild enough and innocuous enough not to worry about, right? After all, there were plenty of places that were hit by hurricanes every year, so it wasn’t like I was revealing anything about Earth Bet by letting them have this much.

“My hometown was hit pretty hard by a natural disaster near the end of my sophomore year,” I revealed mildly. “Happens, when you live on the coast. Going back to school wound up being pretty low on the priorities list.”

Grades seemed petty when people were starving and homeless. Then again, even if I hadn’t been busy trying to keep order in my little section of Brockton, I wasn’t sure I would have gone through the trouble of dealing with school after everything else that had happened.

“...I don’t know how to feel about this,” said Rika. “Does this mean we technically have more education than Senpai does?”

Not quite.

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but I *did* eventually get my GED. So no. Technically, I *did* eventually finish my high school education.”

“Eventually?” Ritsuka mumbled under his breath.

Rika squinted at me. “Senpai’s only in her early twenties, though, aren’t you?”

“And you spent most of your time at Chaldea learning magecraft,” Mash added, “so wouldn’t that mean that you finished your education at a normal time, Miss Taylor?”

I blinked. Huh. I guess I actually had, hadn’t I? Even if I hadn’t graduated like a normal high school student, I’d technically been the same age as one when I finished my GED.

“I guess you’re right.”

“I’m not sure ‘the world ended’ is going to be an excuse your school is going to accept not to go back once this is all over, though,” said Arash. “So maybe you should just consider your senior year of high school delayed instead of canceled.”

Rika groaned. “Oh no. We’re going to have to go *back*? We’re going to be a year behind on everything!”

“Which means we’re going to have to study,” Ritsuka concluded with something akin to dawning horror.

“Hot Pops and Super Action Mom are *already* running us into the ground!” said Rika. “I can’t study normal stuff too at the same time! My brain will explode!”

“I-I’m sure Chaldea will make sure you have any tutoring you need to catch up!” Mash hurried to reassure her. She turned to me for backup. “Right, Miss Taylor?”

They’d done as much for me, hadn’t they? Well, that was studying magecraft, though, and Marie was the one who did most of the tutoring, so that wasn’t quite the same situation. I wasn’t sure how exactly a mundane education would be treated by comparison.

The twins had gotten in on an internship, technically, so finishing high school might actually be something that the organization didn’t care about one way or the other. It wasn’t like you needed any of the skills traditionally taught in high schools to be a Master, after all.

Another thing to ask Marie about, once she was back on her feet, figuratively and literally.

“Chaldea is invested in the success and continued well-being of its Masters and Master candidates,” I settled on. “If needed, I’m sure the Director will be willing to arrange for anything you need to complete your high school education once the Grand Order has been resolved.”

Maybe not *happy*, but willing. Knowing Marie, she’d probably have a caustic comment or two about how low our standards had to be if we were accepting candidates who hadn’t even graduated high school yet. And then she’d set them up anyway, because she took care of her people.

“What if we decide not to?” Ritsuka asked.

“What?” Rika squawked incredulously. “Who are you and what did you do with my Onii-chan, you imposter!”

“I-I’m just saying!” Ritsuka scrambled to explain. “Th-this job is really important, right? What if it’s *too* important to waste time going back to school instead of staying here?”

My lips pursed.

“Don’t worry so much,” said Arash. “I’ve never met her, but this Director Animosphere sounds like a rational enough person. I’m sure she wouldn’t kick you out just for deciding not to finish your high school education.”

“You might not have a choice,” I warned.



“No choice?” the twins parroted simultaneously.

“What do you mean, Miss Taylor?” asked Mash.

Had they really not realized it?

“I’ve said before, there’s going to be an inquiry when this is all over. The entire world can’t go to sleep one day and wake up to find however many months have passed without there being a lot of questions that need to be answered, and we’re the only ones who will have those answers. Chaldea as an organization will almost certainly be temporarily shut down while the UN and the Mage’s Association investigate what happened.”

“But we’re saving the world!” Rika protested.

“That’s not going to mean anything to the Association, when the time comes,” a new voice interjected.

“Hot Pops!”

“Nor will the fact that Director Animusphere is a Lord of the Clock Tower,” El-Melloi II went on, stepping closer to our table. The white stick of a lollipop sat between his fingers like one of his cigars, which was just as ridiculous an image as it sounded. “Neither the United Nations nor the Mage’s Association are the sort of organizations that are willing to take no for an answer. No matter what we accomplish between now and fixing this mess, both of them will be willing to scour Chaldea down to the bedrock to find out what happened.”

That was just what happened when people were that scared, I thought. They were willing to do anything to make the scary thing go away — or, in this case, make sure it could never happen again.

“Which is why your after action reports are so important,” I chimed back in. “The fewer questions they have to ask you directly, the less you two will have to worry about.”

Rika groaned again. “Fine, fine, I get it. Scary stuff will happen later if we don’t write our reports now.”

It was going to happen either way, there were just likely going to be fewer problems for the twins than for me. After all, I *was* the only remaining member of Team A, and I was technically their leader in the field. My decisions were going to get almost as much scrutiny as Marie’s and Romani’s.

No need to worry them about that sort of thing, though.

“As long as you don’t present too tempting a target, you should get by just fine,” said El-Melloi II.

I looked at him askance, and he glanced back at me, as though daring me to deny it. He wasn’t necessarily wrong, but I’d heard enough horror stories about the Association to be less sure he was *right*.

Well. Again, more likely to be my problems than theirs.

“Wait,” said Rika. “Why are you here, Hot Pops? You’re not gonna drag us into another lesson, are you?”

“So that I can deal with you hours before I’m scheduled to?” El-Melloi II huffed. “No. I’m just the messenger, this time. Da Vinci asked me to come and get the lot of you, says there’s an emergency she needs you all for in the infirmary.”

We all straightened.

“Emergency?” the twins asked.

“In the infirmary?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?” El-Melloi II stuck his lollipop back in his mouth. Muffled a little, he continued, “That Doctor Romani Archaman is there, too.”

“Doctor Roman’s in trouble?” was naturally the conclusion Rika came to. I wasn’t sure it was the wrong one, considering what he’d been doing to himself for the last month or so.

Mash gasped. “Oh no!”

“Calm down,” I told them, and then I turned back to El-Melloi II. “Did Da Vinci say what she wanted or what the emergency was about?”

The lollipop came back out with a loud, wet, obnoxious *pop*. I had the distinct feeling that he was being incredibly passive-aggressive about sucking on it because he was just that annoyed that he wasn’t allowed to smoke.

“No. Just that she needed you there as soon as possible.”

The worst part of it was that it just wasn’t possible to tell if there was a real, actual emergency or if she was just doing this to get our attention as quickly as she could. With Da Vinci, it really could go either way.

I looked thoughtfully down at my tray of half-eaten breakfast. Even if my appetite wasn’t up to snuff today, I knew better than to miss out on a meal, especially given my daily workout routine.

“She can wait until we’ve finished our breakfast,” I decided.

“But Doctor Roman!” Rika protested.

“Is probably fine,” I said. “But if you’re that worried, then you’ll just have to eat a little quicker, won’t you?”

She did just that. So did I, really, because on the off chance this actually was something incredibly important, it would be better to get down to the infirmary sooner rather than later.

With our food polished off and the plate and trays returned to Emiya, we set off as a group towards the infirmary. Rika was antsy the entire way and visibly restrained herself from racing off to run

through the hallways, and Mash was better off, but anyone who knew her at all could see the anxiety in her posture, in the way she walked and the clench of her fists, in the way she would periodically bite her bottom lip.

It was starting to make *me* worried, too. The last time we'd been down the infirmary was...what, when we'd woken up after Fuyuki? There hadn't been a reason to visit since then, and if either of the twins had gone to talk with Romani, well, they were more likely to have visited his office or the Command Room, because that was where he spent most of his time these days.

So what could this be about, then? His abuse of stimulants aside, Romani had seemed otherwise healthy every time I'd seen him. A little more tired and a little more drawn, and maybe he'd lost some weight, but none of that was unexpected when he was trying to run Chaldea with only twenty staff members.

What if it wasn't Romani?

If anyone noticed the stutter in my step, they didn't comment on it. Probably too distracted with their own doomsday scenarios.

What if the emergency was that something had happened with the plan to bring back Marie? Da Vinci had told us that it should work out just fine, but this whole thing was unprecedented. A shoddy, ad hoc plan put together under pressure, and although Da Vinci liked to claim she was an unrivaled genius, she wasn't perfect. She could make mistakes.

What if that mistake was that she had messed up preserving Marie's soul, back at the end of Fuyuki? After all, she'd as good as admitted that the FATE System wasn't designed for something like that. There were any number of ways it could have gone wrong.

Most of them would mean that Marie wouldn't be coming back.

Romani, healthy and whole, was waiting for us at the entrance to the infirmary, serious and solemn-faced. My stomach dropped. He turned to look as our group arrived.

"Good," he said, "you're all here. Thank you for bringing them, Lord El-Melloi II."

El-Melloi II grunted and noisily shifted the lollipop in his mouth. The stick bobbed from one corner to the other. "You can thank me by setting up a private room I can smoke in."

Romani laughed a little. "I'll see what I can do about that."

"Doctor Roman!" Rika cried. "You're okay!"

"Thank goodness." Mash breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ah?" Romani blinked, bemused. "Oh. Sorry. Did I worry you guys?"

"El-Melloi II didn't tell us any details," said Ritsuka. "He just said that you were here and Da Vinci needed us for an emergency."

“Oh.” Romani laughed again. “Sorry about that. No, this is important, but it’s not about me. I’m fine, so don’t worry, okay?”

“That’s a relief,” said Rika.

“Is it about the Director?” I asked.

Romani turned to me, sighed, and shook his head ruefully. “I should have realized you were going to pick up on it first. I was hoping to make it a surprise, but I guess there’s no point trying to keep it a secret anymore, is there?”

“Did something go wrong?” Mash asked worriedly.

The door to the infirmary wooshed open, and Romani stepped aside, smiling. “Come and see for yourselves.”

My heart thudded in my chest as we walked into the infirmary, and Romani came in with us, leading our group through the rows of stark, empty hospital beds until we reached a drawn curtain, a stiff, yellow thing that was pleated like an accordion. Romani pressed a button on the wall, and with a mechanical whir, the curtain drew back to reveal yet another hospital bed with sterile, white sheets and a boxy, uncomfortable frame.

The difference between this one and the others was that there was a person in it.

My heart skipped a beat.

Rika gasped. “Director Marie!”

Because the person lying in that bed had long, platinum colored hair and pale skin. The sheet was drawn up over her modest chest, but her arms laid atop it, poking out of the sleeves of a pale blue hospital gown.

“Shh!” Da Vinci, who sat in a chair beside the bed, pressed her index finger up to her lips. “Don’t startle her awake! What do you think the last thing she remembers is, anyway?”

Lev trying to kill her. Being sucked into the crushing weight of Chaldeas itself.

“Sorry!” Rika squeaked sheepishly.

“Is she okay?” I asked immediately.

“I kept her body sedated during the entire process, so there was no trouble there,” said Da Vinci. “Everything went off without a hitch.”

I sensed a “but” in there. I *really* didn’t like it when there were “buts” like that.

“But?”

Da Vinci sighed. “You really are too sharp, Taylor. I don’t want to worry any of you unnecessarily, but there really isn’t any way to tell if she lost anything during her...captivity until she wakes up.”

“Is that likely?” Ritsuka asked before I could.

“I just said, there’s no way to tell.” Da Vinci shook her head. “I did everything I could to pull this off as flawlessly as possible, but this was an emergency procedure from the start. Almost every part of it was completely unprecedented.”

That did nothing to reassure me.

“Her vital signs are good,” Romani chimed in. “No signs of rejection between her soul and her new body. All of her readings match the baseline taken at the Director’s last physical. By all indications, she’s fine.”

That...didn’t really reassure me either. There were a lot of things that could go wrong in the margins between “she’s physically okay” and “she’s mentally messed up,” and I was better acquainted with those margins than either of them likely were.

“So we just have to wait for her to wake up,” Ritsuka concluded.

“When?” I asked.

“As I said before, she was sedated for the procedure,” Da Vinci answered. “I took her off of it once I was sure everything had gone correctly and there weren’t any complications. She should be waking up any —”

On the bed, Marie drew in a sudden, sharp breath.

“— minute.”

And then she shot up off the mattress and *screamed*.