

## Chapter LXXV: Difficult Adjustments

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Marie demanded loudly. “Two months? In the FATE System?”

Romani sighed. “Ritsuka, Rika, I know you just got here, but could you please take Mash with you and go and get the Director something to eat? I’m sure Emiya is still in the cafeteria, and it *has* been a while since she had any food.”

“What?” Rika squawked. “But, Doctor Roman —”

“We want to help!” her brother said passionately.

“And that’s exactly what I’m asking you to do,” Romani said patiently. “Guys, I know I’ll only be Acting Director for a little bit longer, and I wasn’t doing the best job at it either, so as your friend, please?”

“Acting Director?” Marie sputtered from her bed.

“Please,” Romani repeated, looking at them specifically.

The twins turned to each other and seemed to come to some silent, miserable agreement. Neither of them looked happy with it at all.

“Fine,” said Rika. “We’ll go get Director Marie some food.”

“Come on, Mash,” said Ritsuka. “Let’s go talk to Emiya.”

Mash blinked rapidly, confused. “D-did I say something wrong?”

Rika gently took Mash by the hand and pulled her away, back the way we came. “The delivery was fine,” Rika told her, “but your timing was off —”

The door whooshed shut behind them, leaving me, Romani, and Bradamante with Marie, who looked like she was swiftly building up to another outburst. I didn’t blame her, considering how disorienting this whole situation must have been for her, but this whole thing would go smoother if we could avoid shouting.

“Bradamante,” I said, “you can go with them.”

She looked grateful for the out, but put up just as much resistance as she thought she needed to. “I-if you’re sure, Master.”

“Go. Romani and I can handle things from here.”

Bradamante vanished into spirit form, and Marie startled in her bed at the suddenness of it, letting out a squeak like a mouse whose tail had been stepped on. It only lasted a moment, however, and then she was right back to where she’d been before.

“What’s going on here, Romani?” Marie demanded again. “What did Mash mean, two months in the FATE System?”

Romani sighed again. Warily, he asked, “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“What kind of stupid question is that?” Marie countered.

“Humor me,” said Romani.

Marie huffed irritably. “We were in Fuyuki! Me, Hebert, Mash, and those two, and we’d just beaten that corrupted Saber! And then Lev showed up and —”

She cut off, and her face twisted with horror.

“Lev,” she breathed. “Lev was there, and he... No, no, no, he wouldn’t, he can’t have, he must have —”

“Director,” I cut in before she could start spiraling again.

It didn’t work.

“He said I was... That my body...” She stared down at her hands, splaying her fingers out like she would suddenly find some seam or imperfection, or like the flesh would flake away to reveal her burned, destroyed body. “The only way I could Rayshift was...”

If, as Flauros had said, her spirit was no longer tied down by her flesh.

“I’m sorry,” Romani said, not unkindly. “I wish I could tell you differently, but the fact of the matter is that everything he said seems to have been the truth. Most of the remains we found in the Command Room were too damaged to identify, but...”

“He...he tried to...” Marie squeezed her eyes shut, and her fists clenched so tight that her knuckles turned an even starker white than her already pale complexion. “This...this isn’t my body...”

Romani hesitated, grimacing. To be fair, it wasn’t every day that you had to tell a patient that she’d essentially gotten a full body transplant, and it definitely wasn’t the kind of conversation medical training prepared you to have.

“No,” I told her. “It’s a replacement, constructed from raw materials gathered on-site during our last deployment. Da Vinci made it.”

Marie bit her lip so hard I was afraid she would draw blood. “Then this is...just a puppet. I-I’m not even...”

The door whooshed back open, and in stepped a familiar curvy figure decked out in her full regalia, carrying her staff and wearing her ridiculous gauntlet.

“Technically speaking,” said Da Vinci, “it might be more akin to a full body prosthesis. Even that, however, is a woefully inadequate description for exactly how much of a masterpiece your new body is, Director Animosphere.”

Marie’s head jerked around. “You!”

Da Vinci smiled and gave a short bow. “Leonardo da Vinci, at your service!” She straightened. “One would think that you would understand best, Director. After all, wasn’t it me who tuned up and adjusted our own Miss Hebert’s prosthetic before it was attached, so that it matched her body exactly? You should already know that my work is indistinguishable from the real thing!”

“Th-that’s not the same!” Marie sputtered. “That was an arm! This is...!”

“I’m sure you’ll be thinking quite a bit differently the first time you have your cycle,” Da Vinci said wryly. “My dedication to faithfully replicating every part of your physiology might not be so welcome then, will it?”

My lips pulled into a grimace as Marie’s cheeks flushed red. Romani groaned.

“Not the way I would have put it,” he grouched. “There are probably a dozen different examples you could have used that would have worked just as well.”

“This was the most fun one,” Da Vinci said.

Romani sighed a longsuffering sigh. “If it makes you feel any better, Director, I gave your body a thorough an inspection as I feasibly could without being invasive. As far as I can tell, it’s an exact match to your original body, so for all intents and purposes, you’re still a one-hundred-percent flesh and blood human.”

“Of course,” said Da Vinci. “My work is nothing less than the best, after all. If a modern mage could achieve something of this level, then it’s only natural that I could as well.”

Marie was silent, her head hung and the curtain of her hair hiding her face. Her fingers curled into the fabric of her hospital gown, and it was hard to see, but her shoulders were trembling, just a little.

I didn’t have the words that could convince her, right then. She knew enough about my life that she undoubtedly knew that I had lost half of my own body before, during Gold Morning, but reminding her of that — and that the half I’d lost had been remade from scratch afterwards — would raise too many questions with Romani and Da Vinci that I just didn’t want to answer at the time.

So I did the only thing I could. I went up to her bed, crouched down next to it, and laid my hand down next to her thigh, palm up. My right hand, my prosthetic.

Romani and Da Vinci watched, no doubt a little confused, and for a long moment, Marie didn’t react. But then, slowly, one her hands unfurled from the deathgrip it had on her gown and reached down, hesitantly brushing gently against my palm. She traced the wrinkles and the folds in the flesh, finding every crease and crevice, every faint, purple blood vessel that snaked through the skin under the surface.

For all that I felt the phantom pain of the port acting up every now and again, the fact of the matter was that there technically wasn't one. This was a prosthetic in the strictest of senses, but if it wasn't for the pinkish scar left over from where the damaged flesh had sloughed off after Panacea healed the burns Lung had left behind, it would have been completely indistinguishable from my real, flesh and blood arm. For all intents and purposes, it was as real as my other one, just with a little extra I could do with it.

Eventually, Marie's fingers pulled away, and in a quiet, scared voice, she asked, "Was it...really Lev?"

Romani didn't answer right away. Again, I didn't blame him. Lev, by all accounts, had stood by Marie since long before I came into the picture, and to have him suddenly turn on her and do what he did... Having to tell her that the man she trusted and relied upon utterly and completely had tried to condemn her to a fate to match Gray Boy's worst wasn't easy.

"...The vocal pattern, spiritron wavelength, and physical stats all match Lev Lainur exactly," he said at length. "Having said that, there were some...strange things that lead us to believe it might not have been Lev himself, exactly."

Marie's shoulders sagged a little. "So it wasn't Lev?"

*He didn't betray me?* I heard in her voice.

"It was his body, at least," said Da Vinci. "Given what we learned from him afterwards, however, we have reason to believe that this may be a case of demonic possession."

Marie's head whipped around. "D-demonic possession?"

"He introduced himself as Flauros," I told her, "one of the seventy-two demons that King Solomon commanded."

Something like hope started to spread across her face. "Th-then, if we could exorcise the demon possessing him —"

She cut herself off when she saw the grimace that pulled at my mouth, and which was no doubt pulling at Romani's as well. Da Vinci could have gone either way, but I imagined her smile becoming awkward.

"W-what?"

"Flauros appeared at the end of the last mission," I told her. "The demon using him as a host transformed his body in front of us, and was then killed by friendly fire."

Marie's brow furrowed. "What? *What* mission?"

"It's been about two months since Fuyuki, Director," I said. "In that time, we've resolved another two Singularities, out of a total of eight."

Marie stiffened. "Two more?" she choked out, her voice an octave higher than normal. "Out of *eight*?"

Romani sighed. "I guess that's my cue."

He stepped closer, looked around for a second, and then grabbed the nearest chair and wheeled it over. He sat down in it, hunched over, elbows resting on his knees.

"There's no easy way to say this, Director," he began, "but after we retrieved the team from Fuyuki, we detected another seven Singularities in various locations and eras..."

He went on to explain what we knew about the previous and remaining Singularities, sticking to generalities. Orléans, 1431. The Roman Empire, 60 AD. He didn't go into everything we'd done in each of them, because that would take hours more, but he spent about ten or fifteen minutes summarizing the key takeaways and the little information we had on the upcoming Singularities, including the three Grails we'd managed to collect from each of the ones we'd already finished.

It didn't paint the best picture of our odds, and Marie picked up on that, if the set of her brow and the worry in the lines of her face was any judge.

"So we have a little over fifteen months to resolve another five Singularities," she summarized. "We're down to a staff of about twenty people of the two-hundred we started with, including three Masters and a handful of technicians who were actually trained for the jobs they're currently doing. And the world outside is, for all intents and purposes, gone."

"Obviously, it's difficult to confirm that last part," said Romani. "We can't exactly step outside and take a plane to Paris to check if anyone's home, but... I'm sorry, Director. We haven't been able to get in touch with anyone outside of Chaldea itself."

"It's not all doom and gloom, Director," said Da Vinci. "For example, we *have* confirmed the active presence of the Counter Force in each Singularity so far. That is to say, our team has encountered several 'Stray' Servants that have been summoned by the World in order to deal with each Singularity. We've even managed to establish contracts with a few of them and bring them back to Chaldea for future deployments!"

"That's not exactly great news!" Marie snapped. Her head dropped. "B-but it's not the worst news, either. The FATE System itself should be able to handle over two-hundred contracts without major strain, no matter their origin." She stared down at her hands and bit her lip again. "Romani... Mash said... I spent two months in the FATE System, right?"

"Ah..." Romani said awkwardly, trying to find the right words to explain it.

"It was the only way we could preserve your consciousness," Da Vinci slid in smoothly. "It wasn't the most elegant method, and it wasn't without some risks, but on such short notice, it was the only available option that had any hope of being fixable in the long term. Essentially, since the FATE System allows for Saint Graphs to be recorded and restored in the case of termination in the field, it acted as a form of suspended animation for your soul."

Marie relaxed a little, and that gave room for the fire to burn again. "Well, why did it take so long to get me out, anyway? Two months is way too long!"

*Better than six*, I didn't say. Or the fate that originally would have awaited her if we hadn't managed to save her in time. It didn't make losing two months any better, but I was just glad we had her back at all.

"Ah," Da Vinci said hesitantly, "y-yes, about that..."

"Because of the sabotage, we didn't have the materials necessary to build you a replacement," I said, saving Da Vinci from having to admit that she'd used them all up on her own puppet Master. "We had to gather them from sources inside the Singularities, and it wasn't until Rome that we could get everything we needed."

I glanced at Da Vinci over my shoulder. *You owe me one.*

"Y-yes, that's it exactly!" Da Vinci laughed awkwardly. "Th-the sabotage was hard on our stores of supplies, so I didn't have what I needed on hand without cutting into our more essential things, like the food storage. It's only because of Taylor that we were able to gather the raw materials necessary for me to synthesize what I needed to construct your body!"

Marie's brow furrowed. "I don't understand. Hebert is obviously an exceptional talent, but the process of making puppets is still something that takes years of study. Shouldn't you have been better able to get what you needed on your own, Da Vinci?"

"Even I can admit that it would have taken me much longer without our illustrious team leader's unique talents," said Da Vinci.

The furrow of Marie's brow deepened. "Unique talents?"

I lifted my hand, and Muninn hopped up to perch on my arm with a flutter of her wings. Marie startled a little.

"My powers came back," I explained simply. "Immediately after our Rayshift into Orléans."

Marie's brow reversed course and rose towards her hairline. "What? I thought that you lost them after —"

She managed to shut her mouth before she could say anymore, but some of the damage had already been done, and her slip right there was going to do nothing if not arouse Da Vinci's curiosity.

"They came back."

I didn't have an explanation for it either. However my passenger had done it, it had done it. Whether that had been the result of some loophole in its restrictions or something else entirely, I doubted I would ever know.

"Trust me, we were surprised, too," said Romani. He sighed. "The unreadable data volume that is apparently behind it has been with her since Fuyuki, even though it didn't show up on any of her tests prior to that."

"Unreadable data volume?" Marie echoed.

“A blank spot in her readings,” Romani explained. He tapped his head. “A small section about an inch in diameter with hairline tendrils that spread throughout the rest of her cerebrum. We’ve been trying to convince her since the Orléans Singularity that it presents enough of a danger that she should refrain from Rayshifting.”

Marie went ramrod straight, eyes wide and panicked.

“That’s!” She looked at me, and the alarm on her face rapidly drained away. She took a calming breath before speaking again. “Is it an immediate problem? Does it interfere with her ability to Rayshift safely?”

“Well…” Romani said reluctantly.

Da Vinci let out a sigh. “No,” she admitted. “Although it presents some risks, it doesn’t actually interfere with any of the things that are vital to actually establishing her presence in a Singularity, so there isn’t an issue Rayshifting her.” To Romani, she said, “It looks like that plan went up in smoke. We probably should have expected her to side with Taylor.”

“In hindsight, it was a fifty-fifty shot at best,” he agreed.

And it probably would have worked if they had waited until after I left the room to drop that little bit of information on Marie. I might have been able to convince her it was still okay even then, but she would have had way more time to doubt and start cooking up doomsday theories in her head, and that would have made it much harder.

“Then as long as that’s the case, we can’t afford to bench our best Master,” said Marie. “Especially when she’s the last remaining Master candidate from Team A.”

“I feel like I should defend the twins, since no one else is here to do it,” Romani said.

“The twins?” Marie’s brow furrowed. “You mean those two neophytes we pulled off the streets?”

“Hey, now, they’re not that bad anymore!” said Romani. “They’ve really been improving these last two months!”

Marie scoffed.

“They’re still rough around the edges,” I told her, “but they *have* been getting better, Director.”

She looked at me, surprised. My patience with them hadn’t been *that* thin in Fuyuki, had it?

“Field experience does wonders for competence!” Da Vinci chirped. “And, well, it doesn’t hurt that Taylor here has taken to teaching them the ropes in the simulator in the downtime between deployments. Speaking of, remind me to show you the recording of her little Caster scenario, it really was quite something else.”

“Caster scenario?” Marie echoed. “I… What?”

“I set up the simulator to emulate what it would be like for them to face a competent Caster in her own territory,” I explained simply. “I decided it would be a good learning experience, since we haven’t really encountered any proper Casters in these Singularities yet.”

Marie’s hands rose to the sides of her head, and she pressed her fingertips to her temples and rubbed, eyes squeezed shut. “Just how much have you all gotten done in the past two months?”

Quite a bit, actually, I realized just then. If we discounted Fuyuki, then technically, we were averaging one Singularity resolved per month, and that was a fairly fast pace when I thought about it. With seven Singularities after Fuyuki started this whole thing, if we continued at this rate, we’d have everything taken care of long before our supposed deadline.

Romani laughed awkwardly. “Things *have* been pretty busy, but we’re on a pretty strict time limit, too, so there wasn’t really much we could do about it. Mostly, we’ve just been doing whatever we can to get through all of this together, and it hasn’t all been smooth sailing, but we’ve done okay, I think.”

“Of course,” said Da Vinci. “Well, naturally, the one who has been doing the most work is yours truly, but it’s been a team effort. You’d be proud of them, Director. They’ve all been doing wonderfully, including your ace Master here.”

*Flattery will get you nowhere*, I thought dryly.

Contrary to what Da Vinci had intended, however, hearing how well we’d been doing in her absence didn’t make Marie any happier. Slowly, her face fell, and she turned away from us, hiding her expression behind her hair.

“And...” Marie’s hands fell and wound up on her legs. Her head hung and she hunched over. “You didn’t need me for any of it, did you? You all managed just fine on your own.”

I straightened, my eyes widening a little. “Marie —”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” said Da Vinci. “After all, Romani here has been doing his level best to drive himself into an early grave!”

“Da Vinci!” Romani sputtered, jolting up in his seat.

“He’s been abusing so many stimulants to stay awake, I had to force him to take a break and sleep during the latter half of the most recent deployment,” she went on, ignoring his protests. “I think he’s been averaging...oh, maybe three hours a night, since Fuyuki? There’s no way it can be healthy!”

“I-I’m not stupid!” Romani said defensively. “I’m a physician! I know what I’m doing! I can self-prescribe and self-medicate!”

“See what I mean?” Da Vinci waved his direction. “Poor Romani isn’t cut out to handle the pressures of leadership. If you don’t take the reins again, why, he’ll probably have a heart attack within six months!”

“Da Vinci!” Romani whined.

Marie's fingers curled into the fabric of her bedsheet. "Do you really...need me that much?"

Both Da Vinci and Romani fell silent, and that left it to me. I had a feeling they both felt that it really was more my place to reassure her than it was theirs.

I didn't have heartfelt words to give her. There was no grand speech I could start spouting that would sway her. Not like that time in the cafeteria at Arcadia — my audience was much, much different from then, and I wasn't convincing a group of teenagers to side with me because of how much I'd done to help them.

Instead, I told her something simple. Something that said everything she needed to hear without saying it at all.

"It's not Chaldea without you, Director."

It took an extra second or two, and I was worried that maybe that hadn't been enough, but then the miserable tension in Marie's shoulders eased, and she straightened up in her bed.

"O-of course it isn't!" she blustered. None of us called her on it. "I-in fact, it's a miracle the whole place hasn't already burned down with Romani in charge!"

"Hey!" Romani protested.

"She's not wrong, though," Da Vinci teased him.

"Just whose side are you on, here!"

At that moment, the door whooshed back open, and Rika strutted back in, proclaiming, "We come bearing food! And also a Jesus pun, but I didn't have three days to come up with it, so I couldn't think of one!"

"What are you even trying to imply with that?" Marie sputtered.

Rika stuck out her tongue and stepped to the side, and in came Ritsuka and Mash, each of them carrying a tray piled high with food. The smell of that same chicken dish from before wafted up my nostrils, and even having already eaten, I was tempted to dig into some of it myself. The second tray had several condiments of different kinds alongside three large slices of bread, butter, and a dipping sauce, and the garlic was strong enough that I could smell that clear from across the room, too.

*Emiya really went all out for this*, I thought. Maybe he was trying to make a good first impression to make up for his altered self in Fuyuki.

"We're back, Director!" Mash said brightly.

"When we told him you hadn't eaten all day, Emiya sent us with a load of food," Ritsuka added, smiling. "I hope you like it, Director Marie."

The mouth-watering smell of Emiya's cooking wasn't enough to distract Marie from the other salient points of that.

“Emiya?”

“He was our first successful Heroic Spirit summoning, after Fuyuki,” Romani explained. “It turns out he’s actually a very good cook, so he’s taken over kitchen duty after the, ah, other cafeteria staff were...lost.”

Her head whipped around so fast that my own neck throbbed sympathetically.

“You successfully summoned a Servant?” Marie asked immediately.

“Three, technically,” Da Vinci answered, holding up three fingers. “Two here in Chaldea, one in the field in Orléans. Emiya was the first, Arash was an attempted catalyst summon in France, and Shakespeare was the third.”

Marie gaped at her. “*Three?*”

“We can go over the details later. There’s a lot we need to catch you up on, and this isn’t the best time and place for it.” Da Vinci waved it off. “For now, why don’t you eat? Emiya really is quite the chef, you know.”

“I’m not —” Marie flinched as her stomach let out a loud growl. Her cheeks bloomed with pink splotches. “F-fine, I guess I could eat. Everyone’s saying how good it is, I might as well see for myself.”

Rika giggled under her breath. “Just you wait, Boss Lady. My house husband is unrivaled.”

Mash and Ritsuka took that as their cue and approached the bed, and then looked for where to set their trays down and came up empty. One could have fit on her lap, but two wasn’t going to, and it would make for an awkward way of eating besides.

“Uh...”

“Oh!” said Romani. “Right, give me a second here...”

He reached over for a console built into the wall and fiddled with it for a moment, and then a compartment opened up and a mechanical arm unfolded from behind Marie with a hydraulic whir. She squeaked a little as it spun and turned and presented a flat board right in front of her, just above her navel. It was big enough for only one of the trays, though, which was proven when Ritsuka set his down and it took up almost all of the space.

“U-um,” said Mash, “Doctor Roman, should I...?”

Romani sighed and held out his hands. “Here, let me take it.”

She handed it over and Roman spun around so he could set it on the desk space set next to the bed just outside of where the curtain would be.

“All right.” Marie took up the silverware Emiya had helpfully provided, spent a brief moment inspecting it, and her lips pursed. “Let’s see what all of this fuss is about.”

The twins waited with baited breath as she cut her first piece off of the chicken, stabbed it with her fork, and then put it in her mouth and froze. Her eyes closed, squeezing shut, and a high pitched noise vibrated out of her nose.

“This is...!” She caught herself and cut herself off, clearing her throat. “A-adequate, I suppose! A-at least this Emiya isn’t a total buffoon!”

“And that,” Rika said smugly, “is the Boss Lady seal of approval!”

“H-hey, you!” Marie sputtered. “Don’t put words in my mouth! I-I said it was adequate!”

“From you, Director Marie, that’s high praise indeed,” said Ritsuka, smiling. “I’m sure Emiya will be glad to hear you enjoyed his food so much.”

“Th-that’s not what I...!” But Da Vinci and Romani smiling took the fight out of her response, and she huffed, cheeks flushed. “F-fine. S-so maybe this food is really good — compared to what we used to eat in the cafeteria, at least! That doesn’t mean it’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted!”

Romani laughed. “No, of course not, Director.”

Marie pointed her fork at him.

“I can tell when you’re patronizing me, Romani! You might have been handling things while I was...i-indisposed, but I’m still the official Director in charge of this organization!”

“No one forgot,” I told her, both earnest and attempting to calm things down a little. “Everyone here has been waiting for the day we could bring you back.”

It did the trick — her cheeks flushed an even brighter red, and she turned her face away again to hide the blush.

“A-as you should!” she said, all bluster. “I’m your Director, after all! Irreplaceable!”

“That you are,” said Romani. “For now, though, you really do need to eat. We just got you back. We don’t want you to starve, okay?”

Marie looked back down at her food. Her stomach gurgled again, as though to remind her that it very much enjoyed that first bite and would like some more.

“F-fine. If this Emiya really went to that much effort for me, th-then I guess it would be insulting to let all of that work go to waste. Especially when we don’t have a supply chain from the UN anymore! I might as well eat it all, right?”

“T-sundere,” I heard Rika mumble under her breath. I was going to have to ask one of them what that word meant later on.

Mash smiled. “It’s good to have you back, Director,” she said fondly.

Marie hesitated as she was about to take her next bite, and her mouth wobbled a little. Whatever emotion was trying to escape, she smothered it beneath another bite of her food, shoveling a forkful of chicken and rice past her lips.

I stood from my chair, stretching my legs a little, and turned towards the twins. When I checked my watch, it was almost eleven — three hours had slipped by without me even realizing it.

“Come on,” I told them. “Let’s leave her to eat in peace.”

They blinked at me, confused.

“Eh?” said Rika. “But we just got back!”

“And it’s almost eleven o’clock,” I countered. “We all have training in the morning. Unless you think Aífe is going to let you out of it just because you stayed here visiting the Director until two in the morning, then you can go ahead and stay.”

The twins blanched and winced.

“Besides,” I went on, pretending not to notice, “I’m sure Da Vinci and Romani are going to want to talk to her about some things you don’t want to hear about.”

“R-right,” said Ritsuka. “L-let’s let them have some privacy.”

“A-and not give Super Action Mom any more excuses to drive us into the ground!” Rika added.

“Aífe?” Marie asked around a bite of food. “Super Action Mom?”

“We’ll get into that later,” Romani assured her. “It’s like I said, Director, there’s a lot of things we need to catch you up on.”

Marie scowled around her fork, but let it go and accepted it for what it was. Taking that as permission to leave, I led the twins back out of the room. The door whooshed shut behind us.

What a long day, I thought as we left. I wouldn’t be surprised if I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.