

## Chapter LXXIX: Road to Recovery

“One more step.”

Marie looked at the floor, down at the cushioned mats that covered it, and at the distance that still separated us. Her knees shook from the effort of staying upright, and her face burned with the humiliation it took to manage just that alone. Her hands gripped the rails that helped her stay balanced so tightly that her knuckles stood out starkly against her already pale skin, a feat considering the sterile white lighting that lit the whole room.

“I hate this,” she mumbled miserably. “This is so humiliating.”

*I know*, I thought but didn’t say. It had been humiliating for me, too, having to relearn how to walk again. The determination to get better had let me distract myself from the frustration and embarrassment of having something that was supposed to be so easy become so hard, but every stumble had carried the sting of failure that no amount of distraction could completely overcome.

“If I did it,” I told her, trying to be encouraging, “then you can do it, too.”

The guard rails she was using to support herself squeaked under her tightening grip. The blue padding was at least sturdy enough not to burst under the torment she was putting it through.

“That’s right,” she murmured, almost like she was talking more to herself than to me, “you had to do this sort of thing, too, didn’t you?”

Months of it, after Gold Morning, which meant that I’d become very familiar with this private room adjacent to the main gymnasium and all the myriad forms of torture that it contained. Quite aside from what Contessa’s bullets had done to my brain — and what I had done to it myself, by having Panacea mess around with my Corona — I’d been bedridden for weeks. There were a lot of things I’d had to relearn how to do in the aftermath of that. Walking was only one of them.

Marie closed her eyes, took in a deep breath, and then took one more step forward. A look of triumph and victory dawned over her face, but it only lasted until she took her hands off of those guard rails, and then she started to tumble forward. Fortunately, that was what I was there for, so it was no effort at all to reach out, take hold of her arms, and steady her.

“Damn it,” she cursed.

“You did well,” I told her.

“At least I didn’t fall flat on my face, you mean?” she bit back bitterly. “God! At least those two neophytes aren’t here to see this!”

Then they might get to see their Director as a human being, and how terrible that would be. Not like they hadn’t already gotten a taste of it when she woke up screaming her head off and sobbing about Lev’s attempt to kill her.

“Technically, those two now have more experience than all the rest of Team A,” I reminded her.

Something flashed in her eyes as she looked back up at me, hungry and proud. “Except for one.”

I acknowledged that with a short incline of my head. I didn’t know if it was the fairest assessment, since I was pretty sure that I was the one with the greatest amount of field experience on the entirety of Team A, but I could at least let Marie take pride in this much.

“They wouldn’t think less of you,” I told her quietly.

Her face twisted into a grimace. “It doesn’t matter. I’m their boss, the Director of Chaldea. They shouldn’t see me like this.” She ducked her head, and quieter, she said, “I didn’t want *you* to see me like this.”

“You did it for me,” I reminded her. “The least I can do is return the favor.”

Her cheeks burned, and even the tips of her ears turned red. It wasn’t strictly true, because she’d really been more like a harsh taskmaster demanding I give my best from the sidelines, but she didn’t bother to correct me.

And even if it wasn’t strictly true, that was only because she left it up to the professionals to treat me. She’d still been there the entire way, making sure I got the best treatment she could afford with the utmost discretion.

“Romani should be the one doing this,” she mumbled.

“Romani is also still the Acting Director while you get back on your feet,” I said. “Since he doesn’t have the time to help you himself, of course he delegated it to someone who was willing and able.”

And too stubborn to take no for an answer.

It wasn’t like anyone had been chomping at the bit to get the chance to take my place, though. Of the remaining staff, the only one who was anywhere near as close to Marie as me was Romani himself. Everyone else was too far removed from her in the organization or too put off by her standoffish personality to have had the chance to get to know her the way I did.

Even if that hadn’t been the case, I still would have volunteered. I owed her at least that much.

Her fingers dug into my wrists. “It’s already been a week.”

“And it takes longer than that,” I reminded her again. “You should already know, this isn’t something that happens overnight.” I gave her arms a comforting squeeze. “But this isn’t going to take forever either. You’re just getting used to your body again, not relearning from scratch. Romani said it should only take about two weeks.”

And we had already gotten her through the first one, I didn’t say, because I didn’t need to. She just had to get through one more, and by then, she should be able to walk on her own. Maybe not unassisted, but without someone half-carrying her or wheeling her along in a wheelchair.

Marie ducked her head. “It doesn’t feel like I’m getting anywhere,” she murmured miserably.

“Compared to where *I* was after the first week?” I said. “You’re already doing way better.”

She didn’t have a response to that. Or maybe she did, but she thought it sounded too petulant or childish to actually give voice to, so she simply didn’t. It wasn’t like she wouldn’t have had a point if she said that my recovery had been harder because of how much more I’d had to piece back together, but by the same token, I hadn’t had my soul transplanted into a new body after my old one got blown to pieces, so technically, she had it a whole lot worse than I had. She just had it easier because there wasn’t actually anything *wrong* with her, she just had to get her new body used to moving around and carrying its own weight.

“Come on,” I said as I lifted her back up and maneuvered her hands back onto the guide rails. “We should have enough time for you to get one more round in before the twins finish their daily lessons with El-Melloi II.”

She grimaced. “Don’t remind me! Ugh. I’m still trying to wrap my head around how he’s supposed to work!”

“You’ve read my report —”

“The concept is understandable enough,” Marie waved it off, quite literally lifting one of her hands as though to swat away a fly buzzing about, “it’s the person that makes so little sense! Of all people who could be the host of a Heroic Spirit, why *him*?”

“Maybe it’s just a matter of personal compatibility.”

She blew a puff of air out of her mouth, and her bangs flopped about for a second over her forehead.

“The frustrating thing is, I can’t refute that because he still hasn’t told us the identity of the Heroic Spirit he’s playing host to!”

I smiled a little as I walked around to the other end of the guide rails. It wasn’t like it was hard to look up “Unreturning Formation” or “Stone Sentinel Maze” now that we were back at Chaldea, and it betrayed the fact that Marie had been so dogged about catching up as quickly as possible that she hadn’t read the notes I’d attached to my report yet.

No need to bring that up right now, though. It would just embarrass her even more. She would get to that eventually.

“Okay.” I set myself up at the opposite end of the guide rails. She looked back at me over her shoulder. “One more time, Marie.”

Her lips pulled tight into a grimace, but whatever else Marisbury had done — as a man, as a magus, and as a father — he hadn’t raised a quitter, and Marie turned herself around slowly and deliberately until she was facing me, then started the arduous journey from one side of the eight-foot rails to the other. Even when her knees shook and threatened to give out beneath her, she didn’t let it stop her from making it across.

She probably would have preferred to go straight back to her room when we were done, but dinnertime was fast approaching and Romani had forbidden her from eating in her room. Privately, he'd told me that he wanted her out of her own head as much as possible, so I wasn't to let her take her meals anywhere else than the cafeteria, but to Marie, he'd said something about how much it would raise morale for the rest of the remaining staff to see their Director alive and well, if not fully recovered.

I suspected that was truer than he even realized.

Naturally, appealing to her responsibilities as the Director of Chaldea was the quickest and easiest way to convince Marie of a plan, if not necessarily the most guaranteed, so even if the idea of being pushed into the cafeteria in a wheelchair grated on her pride, she'd had to reluctantly agree.

The halls, of course, were all but empty, leaving us only the company of my echoing footsteps and the squeaks of the wheelchair's wheels. The day shift should have just traded off with the evening shift about an hour before, and the night shift were still in bed, so the day shift was probably getting dinner in so they could relax for a few hours before they had to climb into bed themselves — a bit of a funny way of saying six people were eating, six people were working, and six people were sleeping.

Halfway there, Arash materialized next to us mid-step, and Marie squawked, nearly startled out of her wheelchair.

"Afternoon, Ladies," he greeted us.

"You — how long have you been there?" Marie sputtered.

"The whole time," he answered simply. "Taylor *is* my Master, after all."

Marie's face cycled through a series of rapid emotions, going from surprised to horrified to furious and back again, like she couldn't decide whether she was supposed to be outraged or mortified.

"Was there something you needed?" I asked him.

He smiled. "That's what I was just about to ask you. Do you want me to pop on ahead and let Emiya know you're coming?"

"W-wait," said Marie, "you said — then you saw e-everything? All of it?"

"Was I not supposed to?" Arash asked. "I'm sorry, Director, I didn't mean to spy on you or anything. It's just that we Servants don't have much to do around here right now. Those of us who don't have a hobby just stick by our Masters. Keep an eye on things, you know?"

Marie's face turned a violent shade of red. "I-including when I had to... And when I was getting dressed?"

"Well, naturally, I stayed outside the room for that," Arash said smoothly. "If we need to watch our Masters during moments like those, Bradamante takes over. She says it isn't proper for a man to see a lady like that."

I almost missed the subtext in all of that. It was a very shrewd way of telling me without telling me.

“Th-that’s not much better!” Marie protested. “You, haven’t any of you heard of something called privacy?”

“I don’t think they’re watching us constantly,” I told her calmly. I glanced over at Arash. “Here in Chaldea, I think we’re safe enough that we don’t need round-the-clock supervision.”

*Romani still has her under observation?* I asked silently.

*He wants to be sure she doesn’t relapse, Arash answered. Or hurt herself by trying to do too much too soon.*

I kept my reaction off of my face as I told him, *I agree. At least until she can walk on her own again.*

Arash dipped his head. “I understand.”

“W-well, good!” Marie blustered. “There are some things you don’t have the clearance to see! Even Servants have to follow the regulations, you know!”

Arash bent forward into a shallow bow, smiling. “Of course, Madam Director.”

“I can tell when you’re patronizing me,” Marie informed him sourly, scowling.

“No, no, I do understand,” he assured her. “I was a soldier once. I only need to know what I need to know, right?”

She eyed him for a moment longer, like she was looking for any sign of dishonesty or mockery, and when she was satisfied, she settled back into her wheelchair. “At least *someone* in this organization understands operational security,” she muttered.

Arash pretended not to hear her, and instead, he turned back to me. “I’ll go tell Emiya to prepare meals for two more people, then, if that’s alright with you, Master?”

“Go ahead.”

Once more, he disappeared, leaving me alone with Marie again.

“He was your compatibility summon?” she asked me.

“Yes,” I answered. “Our first field test of the summoning system inside the Orléans Singularity.”

“The Hundred Years’ War deviation, right,” Marie said. “The one featuring this ‘Jeanne Alter’ character.”

I let myself smile a little. Yeah, that sounded like Marie. Even though she was supposed to be resting and recuperating, she had spent that time catching up on what had been happening while she was...indisposed, so to speak.

“He could stand to be a little less cheeky,” she grouched. “But...he’s a good match, I think. A strong Heroic Spirit.”

I appreciated the sentiment, but I wished she would have phrased it a little less like she was my mother approving of the boyfriend I brought home.

“He is,” I agreed neutrally. “Saved our lives a couple of times, too.”

“And killed two Servants without taking a scratch,” she added. For another second, she was silent, and then, quietly, she asked, “He wasn’t who you were originally going for, was he?”

My lips drew tight. I’d made no secret of that to anybody, least of all Arash, but I’d never let on to anybody which Heroic Spirit I’d originally been hoping to get, back when we started lining up catalysts.

In truth, I didn’t really know who I would have picked, just based upon who I thought I might work well with. Herakles and I might have been fairly compatible, being that we were both lateral thinkers, but the trouble with powerful heroes like that was that they were often mana hogs, so any advantage I might have had with him would have evaporated against the fact that I probably wouldn’t be able to handle supporting him for more than a few minutes at a time.

Other than that and my pie-in-the-sky wishlist? There wasn’t a particular Heroic Spirit I’d really been hoping for.

“No,” I said, just as quietly, “but I’m glad he’s the one who showed up anyway.”

“Good.”

Not too much later, we arrived at the doors to the cafeteria, and they whooshed open to admit us. I pushed Marie along, and the instant we were inside, all conversation stopped and everyone who was there eating turned to look. Under their scrutiny, the tips of Marie’s ears turned red.

“Well?” she demanded. “What are you all staring at? Stop wasting your time gawking and finish your food!”

As though that was some great sign that she was alive, well, and (mostly) back to normal, the seven members of the staff who were in the cafeteria with us turned back to their meals so they could avoid the Director’s wrath. Marie harrumphed and folded her arms, scowling at the whole world, so I wheeled her over to the nearest empty table and moved a chair out of the way for her.

“I-idiots,” she mumbled lowly. “What am I, a circus attraction? Th-there’s nothing unusual about this!”

I was about to go over to get us some food, but Emiya chose to bring the food to us instead, hefting a pair of trays, one on each arm. He still had one of those ridiculous novelty aprons on — I was convinced he had a stock of them that he rotated through, because it seemed to be a different one each day with a different phrase stitched into the front. This one featured a fork and read, “With prongs like these, who needs a recipe?”

“Special delivery,” he told us. “A certain person told me to expect our illustrious Director to make an appearance, so I went out of my way to prepare a platter for you.”

He set down another mouth-watering meal within Marie's reach, and then immediately opposite her, he set the second tray down, laden with the same exact food. Marie took a breath, and she couldn't seem to help herself but to take in the smell wafting up from her steaming tray. It was another chicken dish of some kind, although I didn't recognize it on sight.

One of these days, he was going to run out of new stuff to make. I just wasn't sure it would be anytime soon.

"I decided on something a little more Western today," he told us. "Thought I might shake things up a little. This one in particular is Greek."

Marie looked down at her tray critically as I took my seat across from her, eyeing her meal like she suspected him of lying. Or maybe poisoning it. She'd nearly thrown a fit the first time she saw him, until we explained how he wound up here and cooking our meals.

"Greek, huh..."

"If you've had it before, it might not be exactly the same," Emiya said. "I was a bit more limited with my ingredients, after all. I had to adjust the recipe to account for that."

"So you say."

Marie took up her utensils and started cutting into her meal, lifting the first bite — and stopped halfway to her mouth to shoot Emiya a withering glare.

"Are you just going to stand there and watch or something? It's creepy!"

"The customer's satisfaction is the greatest compliment a chef can receive," Emiya retorted without missing a beat. "I wanted to make sure you liked it, because my skill with Western dishes isn't as great as my talent with Asian recipes."

With a large, exaggerated motion, Marie bit off her first bite, had to stop for a second when the flavor hit her tongue, and then chewed it more sedately.

"Well?" Emiya asked once she'd swallowed.

"I-it's good!" she said huffily. "Now will you let me eat my meal in peace? I don't need everyone staring at me so much!"

"If the Director is pleased, then I'm sure Rika will enjoy it as well," Emiya said, nodding to himself. "Enjoy your meal, Director."

He turned around and went back to the kitchen, leaving us by ourselves. In all of the fuss, I'd started in on my own meal, and like always, Emiya had made something spectacular. The truly frightening thing was that when my tastebuds finally got used to eating so much high class, delicious food, going back to ration bars and mass-produced cafeteria fare was going to be torture.

“Seriously,” Marie muttered angrily as she stabbed her fork into her food, “why can’t everyone just mind their own business? They have more important things to be doing than gawking at me just because I’m in a wheelchair!”

“They’re still getting used to having you back,” I told her between bites. “Most of them probably thought you were gone for good.”

I wasn’t sure how much Romani had told them. It was entirely possible that he’d spread the knowledge that the Director wasn’t permanently gone amongst the rest of the staff, but it was also possible that he hadn’t wanted to commit to anything, so the only ones who had been in the know were those of use directly involved in bringing her back.

Then again, we weren’t exactly in a private room when we first discussed the issue after Fuyuki. Anyone with ears who was paying attention to use must have heard that we had a plan to save her. Whether that made the rounds, well, I hadn’t thought to ask.

Marie hunched in on herself a little. “They did, huh…”

“I wasn’t around right after Fuyuki to say for sure,” Arash said as he shimmered into existence in the chair next to me. Marie squeaked, startled, and jumped a little in her seat. “But I talked to a few people after we got back from Orléans, and it seems that most of them thought there wasn’t any hope. Your return is something of a minor miracle, Director.”

“Stop doing that!” Marie hissed at him.

“Sorry, sorry!” Arash held up his hands in surrender. “I know, Rika has complained about that, too. There just isn’t a great way to materialize that doesn’t involve giving *someone* a shock.”

“It should be a matter of common courtesy!” she insisted. “Besides, you can materialize right outside the door and walk in, can’t you? At least then we’d see you coming!”

“I guess so,” Arash agreed easily. “Either way, Director, a lot of people didn’t think you were going to be coming back.”

Marie ducked her head, staring a hole in her plate. I didn’t need to be a mind-reader to see the direction of her thoughts: *And I was one of them.*

I couldn’t do anything about that. I didn’t have the tools to make that better or help her learn to deal with it. I wasn’t even sure Romani could help with it, although I intended to see if he could try.

“It’ll die down,” I assured her. “It’s a novelty right now, but once they get used to the fact that you *are* back, things will go back to normal.”

As much as they ever were around this place.

As though summoned by that very thought, the door to the cafeteria whooshed back open, and Rika loudly complained, “Ugh! My brain feels like it’s leaking out of my ears! Why does magic have to be so complicated?”



“Because it’s so dangerous,” El-Melloi II answered as he followed her and Ritsuka into the room. “The more complicated something is, the more prepared you need to be, because the higher the chances are of something going wrong. That saying I mentioned in our first lesson might sound like a cliché, but that doesn’t stop it from being true.”

“A-at least you’re making progress, Senpai!” said Mash, trying to reassure her.

“Harry Potter lied to me!” Rika whined.

“It’s not all wand-waving and silly incantations,” Ritsuka agreed. Rika reached over without looking and gave his arm a half-hearted slap, as though to remind him that he wasn’t allowed to make pop culture references.

“Of course not,” El-Melloi II said. He grinned. “If it was that easy, then everyone could do it, couldn’t they?”

“I feel like you’re referencing something from season two of an anime when I haven’t even watched the first,” Rika told him dryly. “In the name of the Director, I’ll punish you!”

Across from me, Marie suddenly choked on her food and slapped her hand over her mouth so she wouldn’t do something embarrassing, like spit it out on her plate.

Completely oblivious, the twins’ group arrived at the counter, behind which Emiya’s form could be seen in the kitchen, still cooking. “Emiya!” Rika said dramatically. “Brain mush, need fuel! Much delicious!”

“Senpai, there’s no need to be so rude!” Mash chided.

“Eh.” Rika waved it off. “My house-husband knows the score by now.”

“Indeed I do,” Emiya drawled. He arrived at the counter, trays in hand and plates already filled. He set one down for Ritsuka, one down for Rika, and to Mash, he said, “I’ll be back with yours in a moment, Mash.”

“Thank you, Emiya!” Mash said brightly.

“It’s no problem.”

“See?” said Rika. “Look at how well-trained he is!”

“Much as I like to malign that particular person,” said El-Melloi II, “even I have to say that he’s more than a well-trained dog.”

“I just know better,” Emiya replied as he came back. “If I tried to serve Mash before Master, she’d just hand her tray over and wait to get her own.”

“I…” Mash ducked her head, embarrassed. “Y-yes, I guess I would…”

“You’re a good person, Mash,” Ritsuka told her kindly.

Mash ducked her head even more. “Th-thank you, Senpai.”

“There’s such a thing as being *too* kind, though,” El-Melloi II put in. He pulled on his lollipop with a loud smack, and at the same time, his eyes scanned over the room and landed on us. For a brief moment, they widened, and then they narrowed. “Anyway, Master, I’m going back to my room. I’ll see you tomorrow for our next lesson.”

He shimmered and faded from view, gone.

“Ugh, *so* not looking forward to that,” Rika grouched.

“But we definitely need it,” Ritsuka admitted reluctantly.

“Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

At that moment, Mash turned around and saw us, gasping, “Director!”

The twins turned around immediately, and their faces lit up. “Director Marie!”

They rushed over to join us, and by then, Marie had managed to regain control of herself and swallow whatever she’d choked on.

“You two,” she rasped, “just who do you think you’re addressing so familiarly?”

“Sorry about that, Director,” said Ritsuka, although he didn’t sound all that sorry.

“We just haven’t seen you all that much in the past week!” Rika concluded. “Senpai wasn’t the only one waiting for you to do your Gandalf impression!”

“What?” Marie asked, bewildered.

“From *The Lord of the Rings*, Director,” I supplied helpfully. “Wizard who came back from the dead.”

“Oh.” She gathered herself up. “W-well, that’s still no excuse! Even if I was gone for a few months, I’m still your director! Your boss!”

Rika saluted with her fork. “Roger wilco, Boss Lady!”

“Don’t you start!” Marie growled.

“It’s good to see you in such good spirits, Director,” said Ritsuka.

“We were worried about you,” Mash added.

“Fou!” the little gremlin chimed in, as though to agree.

Somehow, I was the only one in the whole facility it hated. I couldn’t even remember Lev getting such vitriol from the thing as I did, and if it could sense whatever it was about me that it didn’t like as clearly as I could sense whatever it was about Fou that set my hackles to rising, then there was almost no way it shouldn’t have been able to sniff out his malicious intent.

I wasn't sure if it had and just hadn't let on, or if it hadn't and there was just something special about whatever we had going on between us.

"W-well, there's nothing to worry about!" said Marie, who didn't seem to know how to deal with their concern. "As you can see, I'm fine!"

Rika looked pointedly at Marie's wheelchair. "Uh..."

"It's temporary! I'm not stuck in this contraption for the rest of my life!" A second later, her brain caught up with her mouth, and her cheeks burned. "Ugh! You know exactly what I mean, don't pretend you don't!"

"Good afternoon, Ritsuka, Rika, Mash," Arash said suddenly, drawing the attention in his direction. "How did your lesson with El-Melloi II go?"

"Ugh, don't remind me," said Rika. She shoved a bite of her meal into her mouth, and around her fork, she continued, "Hot Pops is the kind of teacher to throw chalk at you if he thinks you're not paying attention."

"But...we don't even have any chalkboards in Chaldea," said Mash, confused.

Rika waved it off. "It's the principle of the thing! A metaphor!"

"I don't know if I'd really call him strict," said Ritsuka, "but he's definitely the kind of guy who won't accept you slacking off."

"Which sucks," his sister added, "because slacking off is my favorite thing to do in class."

"Do you not have any idea how lucky you are?" Marie demanded. "You're getting personal lessons from a Lord of the Clock Tower! There are magi who would gladly sell their organs to be in that position!"

Rika blinked. "You tutored Senpai, though, didn't you?"

Marie flinched. "W-well," she said, flustered, "th-those were extenuating circumstances!"

Rika's eyebrows rose.

"I dunno about you, Boss Lady," she said, "but these circumstances feel pretty extenuating to me."

"That's why you have to give it your best, guys." Arash swooped in to save the day again. "All of the stuff you're learning from Aife and El-Melloi II is super important. It might just save your life in the future."

"Ugh," Rika grunted. "I hate it when you say stuff like that, because it makes too much sense and I can't argue against it. Logic is my weakness, you know!"

"I've known you our whole lives," Ritsuka said dryly, "and it definitely is not."

She shoved another bite of food into her mouth. “Mm. At least I can always trust Emiya’s food to be amazing. Emiya’s cooking will never betray me.”

“Unless you eat too much of it,” Ritsuka pointed out. “Then, it’s going to be in violent rebellion against your stomach.”

“Ugh!” Bradamante suddenly appeared in the chair next to Arash. Marie let out a startled shriek again. “Don’t remind me! I still haven’t recovered from curry night last week!”

“Tii-chan!” Rika greeted brightly.

“Stop doing that!” Marie snarled. “Don’t any of you have a single shred of common decency? What kind of troglodyte just randomly materializes in the middle of a conversation?”

“Oh!” Bradamante gasped. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t even think about it!”

Just as suddenly as she appeared, she vanished, and Marie squeaked in surprise. “What? Where did she go now?”

A moment later, the door whooshed open, and Bradamante stepped through and walked back over to our table. She took the seat she’d just vacated, and as though nothing had happened, she continued, “Sir Emiya’s cooking is wonderful, but that makes it all the more dangerous. You must take care not to eat too much of it, or else suffer for your gluttony.”

“You...” Marie pinched the bridge of her nose with unsteady fingers. “As though leaving just as suddenly was any better at all...!”

“I’m sorry?” said Bradamante, confused. “Should I have stayed instead? I confess, some of these matters of Servant etiquette are a bit befuddling. I’m still learning the proper forms.”

“It *is* a bit different from how it was when we were alive,” Arash agreed. “Just being able to take spirit form changes a lot.”

“I don’t know if I can say anything,” Mash admitted. “Since I can’t take spirit form, I don’t have to think about those sorts of problems.”

“Maybe Boss Lady should hold a seminar or something,” Rika suggested helpfully. “Hey, yeah! A class about the proper use of spirit form and when it’s okay to go in and out of it!”

“That’s...!” Marie began angrily, and then she stopped, thought about it for a second, and leaned back into her wheelchair. She took what I’d come to think of as her thinking pose: head tilted down, her chin resting in the corner of the index finger and thumb of one hand, and the other cupping her elbow. “That’s...actually not a terrible idea.”

Rika paused, blinking, her fork halfway to her mouth. “It isn’t?”

It really wasn’t, and the surprising part was that no one had given it enough thought before now to how it would work. I’d had some inkling that it was going to be necessary before, but it had been such a low priority that I hadn’t really tried to plan it out or anything.

Rika's plan wasn't perfect, but it was pretty simple. On the plus side, it would give Marie something to work on and brainstorm until she was in good enough shape to resume her duties as director.

"Obviously, it's going to need some refinement!" Marie said. "But Chaldea is a secure facility! The technology that protects our mission and our very lives isn't something that everyone should have access to! For that matter, if one of our technicians is startled while they're working and damages something so vital, then it's no better than if L-Lev himself had destroyed them! Who else should explain something this important than the director?"

"Well, look at that." Arash smiled. "Good job, Rika."

Rika looked from Marie to Arash and back again. Hesitantly, she pumped her free hand.

"Go me?"