

Chapter XXVIII: Return to Normalcy

The next thing I knew, I was upright with cool, artificial air clinging to my skin and a pervasive sense of claustrophobia that had my heart skipping a beat.

My eyes snapped open just in time for the glass panel that served as the door of my Klein Coffin to hiss and rise away, and I stumbled out with a desperate gasp as my pulse pounded in my ears. The environs of the Rayshift Chamber greeted me, but they seemed almost foreign after having spent over a month in medieval France, and my skin felt too tight on my body, like it was stretched over something that was supposed to be much bigger, much more expansive, so much —

Oh, I realized as I gulped down breath after breath. Yeah, that made sense, didn't it? Chaldea was as clean as clean could reasonably get. I'd gotten used to having that expanded proprioception again, that sense of inhabiting something *more* than just my frail human body, and now I was going back to having none of that.

Couldn't control bugs in a place that didn't have any, after all.

I steadied myself against the lip of my coffin with one hand, panting and trying to get used to the idea of being so miniscule, so much *lesser* again. It was hard when I felt so impossibly *tiny* now. Compressed, that was a good word, like I had been shoved back into a container that was a dozen sizes too small.

"Ugh," I heard Rika's voice say, "as glad as I am to be back, I wish the trip was easier on the stomach."

"It's definitely going to take some getting used to," Ritsuka agreed.

"I don't think there's anything to be done about it, Senpai," Mash answered.

"Maybe it would be easier if we just came back unconscious like we did with Fuyuki," Rika grumbled. "Sleep it off instead of toughing it out."

"Does that mean you aren't up for that three course meal you wanted, Master?" Emiya asked from somewhere nearby.

"Absolutely not!" Rika barked. "Back to the kitchen with you, house-husband! Back, I say! Mama needs her gourmet celebration feast!"

Emiya chuckled. "As you say, Master. How about a little taste of home, then? Tempura sound good?"

Rika was silent for a moment.

"...Oh my god, marry me."

"Rika!" Ritsuka yelped at the same time as Mash's scandalized, "Senpai!"

Does that count as necrophilia, since he's technically dead? the little Lisa in my head sniggered.

I didn't realize I'd said that out loud until Mash and Ritsuka both gasped. Rika cackled while Emiya coughed awkwardly into his hand.

My head swam a little as I shook it, but it helped to clear some of the fog and disorientation, so with a deep breath, I rolled my shoulders and stood straight.

"Pretty sure it's illegal, at any rate," I went on, doubling down. "You have to provide a birth certificate on the marriage license, and that's kinda hard for a guy who doesn't have one."

Emiya coughed awkwardly into his hand again and looked away shiftily.

...*Oh, you've got to be kidding me.* Is that why we didn't have any records of him as a Heroic Spirit? Because he technically hadn't become one, yet? I must be more out of it than I thought if I was actually entertaining *that* possibility.

The sound of a cleared throat broke into our little thing, whatever it was that was just happening, and that was when I realized Romani was there, tablet in hand and smile a little forced.

"Welcome back, everyone," he said. "It's good to see you're all in one piece. Ritsuka, Rika, Taylor, Mash, I'm glad you all came out of that mess unharmed."

"Fou!" the little beast chirped, appearing suddenly on Mash's shoulder.

"And Fou, too," Romani added.

"He's very lucky, isn't he?" Mash smiled tiredly and stroked Fou under his chin, earning her a purr. No, seriously, what was it? A cat, a dog, a squirrel? No one had ever given me a straight answer. "I guess he must have good survival instincts. He had to have hidden during all the action."

"Or maybe he just doesn't know when to die," I muttered under my breath. No one else heard me, but Fou's head jerked around and he pinned me with an unnerving, unblinking stare.

"In any case," said Romani, "I just got the data back from Da Vinci. The restoration of the timeline has gone off without a hitch, and everything has returned to its proper place. Congratulations on resolving the Orléans Singularity!"

The others exchanged exhausted smiles, and even I couldn't stop my lips from curling upwards a little. One down, six to go.

"Oh no!" Mash gasped suddenly, aghast. "We left our supplies sitting in the middle of the road outside Orléans!"

My eyes went wide as I remembered — we had. We'd discarded them when that Archer started attacking us and never had the chance to return for them because Jeanne Alter had attacked us with Fafnir almost immediately afterwards.

It had slipped my mind entirely in the aftermath of everything. Too much had happened one after the other.

“Ah, shit,” Rika said, and she summed up my own feelings on the matter, too.

Romani winced. “I’m afraid there isn’t much we can do about it, now. Even if it was feasible to send you back in, there’s no guarantee the timeline hasn’t already corrected itself and removed them as ‘excess.’”

Mash sighed. “All of those supplies that everyone put together for us,” she mumbled morosely, “and we just forget all about them in the middle of the road.”

From behind us, Arash chuckled, and we all turned to look at him. “Don’t worry so much, Mash.”

He and Siegfried shrugged their shoulders, and as the straps I hadn’t noticed before slipped down their arms, the packs with all of our supplies slid to the floor next to them.

“After the Dragon Witch was defeated, the wyverns started to disappear on their own,” Siegfried explained. “Lord Arash and I thought it prudent to retrieve the supplies we were forced to abandon at the outset of the fight.”

“Yes!” Rika cheered, fist pumping. “You guys rock!”

“It was no trouble,” Siegfried assured us with a smile.

“We couldn’t just leave all of that behind,” Arash added, “not after all the hard work that went into making sure everyone was well-stocked.”

“I’m sure everyone will breathe a sigh of relief to know their efforts didn’t go to waste,” said Romani. He changed the subject. “In any case, everyone, I think you’ve earned a good rest, for now. Emiya, I know you just got back, but it seems like the Masters deserve a reward for their good work. Do you think you could prepare that celebratory dinner like Rika asked?”

Emiya shrugged, chuckling, “If that’s what my Master wants. Servants don’t need sleep, so I don’t see any reason why I can’t go the extra mile and make something a little extravagant.”

“Thank you,” Romani said politely.

“I can already taste it,” said Rika, and I thought I saw her drooling a little. “Emiya’s cooking... Emiya’s tempura... Ufufufu, it’s gonna be so good...”

Her Servant shook his head, but took that as his cue.

“Might as well go get started,” said Emiya, and he went to leave.

“Tem-pu-ra!” Rika chanted at his back. “Tem-pu-ra! Tem-pu-ra!”

Emiya lifted a hand and gave her a wave without looking back.

“Roger that, Master.”

“Tem-pu-ra-ra-rah!”

“Arash, Siegfried,” Romani turned to them next, “if you could get those supplies back to our...*Acting* Quartermaster, I would be grateful. I’m sure...whoever it is today would appreciate being able to unpack the stuff we can save for Rome.”

Arash smiled. “No problem, Director Archaman.”

Romani’s cheek twitched. It seemed he was still getting used to being the guy in charge.

“I’d be glad to,” Siegfried added.

They picked the bags they’d dropped back up and left after Emiya. My brow furrowed as I watched them go, because I wasn’t sure how they were going to find the quartermaster when they’d never stepped foot inside of Chaldea before, but maybe Arash’s Clairvoyance would show them the way. They didn’t seem worried about it in any case.

“And you guys,” Romani began, and his smile grew broader. “I’m really proud of you. All of you. There were some pretty tough battles you had to go through to make it to the end, and I was worried sometimes, but you all pushed on anyway and saved France. You performed better than I could have ever expected of you. Good job.”

The others smiled again, proud of what they’d accomplished, and I was a little surprised to find I was proud of them, too.

“We kicked ass,” Rika said with relish. Romani laughed.

“That you did.” He turned to Mash. “Mash, we already handled the Grail you retrieved from Jeanne Alter and Da Vinci will deal with it from there, so the rest of you, take a load off for now and we’ll have the more formal debrief later on. You’ve earned a break for now.”

A collective sigh was heaved, although Rika’s was the loudest and heaviest. Romani just laughed.

“Go on, get out of here,” he said, shooing us with one hand. “It’s going to take Emiya some time to cook something up, whatever he winds up making, so you have some time to get some rest, if you want. No need to stand around here waiting.”

“No need to tell me twice!” Rika chirped, and she immediately started for the exit.

Ritsuka followed behind her a moment later, gently taking Mash’s wrist with a soft, encouraging, “Come on, Mash. I’d bet you’d like to take a nice, hot shower.”

“Thank you, Senpai,” Mash told him, and she let him lead her away.

I shook my head and made to follow, because my bed was calling my name with a siren’s song and I didn’t have the strength to resist it.

“Actually, Taylor,” Romani stopped me, “Da Vinci needed to talk with you about something. She’s waiting for you in her workshop. I’m heading that way as well, so why don’t we walk together?”

I eyed him, immediately suspicious, but I didn't have the energy or the desire to raise a stink, so I went along with whatever this was about to be. "Okay."

He tapped a few more things on his tablet, and then nodded at me and said, "Let's get going, then."

He walked towards the exit and I fell into step next to him, slanting glances at him from the corner of my eye as we made the trek to Da Vinci's workshop. He didn't give anything away, though. His expression was serious, but perfectly even, and he didn't even look my way as we went.

He didn't think he'd actually convinced me with that half-assed misdirect, did he? Ugh, I was way too spent for this subterfuge.

"What's this really about, Romani?" I asked halfway there.

His lips tightened, but he shook his head and quietly muttered, "Not out in the open. That's why we're going to have this talk in Da Vinci's workshop."

A frown tugged at my mouth, and I side-eyed him again, but I wasn't Lisa or Alexandria. I couldn't read his secrets in the lines of his face or the tightness of his expression.

Romani had been good to me, though, for all that he could be kind of bumbling and a little overprotective, so I guess I could at least extend enough trust to hear him out on whatever this was about.

Da Vinci's workshop looked like it came right out of the fourteenth century, complete with diagrams and miniature mockups of all of the original's famous inventions. In fact, almost the entirety of the interior had been redone and cast in a mimickry of what the original Da Vinci's workshop had likely looked like, way back when, with wooden flooring and rafters pasted on top of Chaldea's sterile tile, bookshelves against the far wall, and a pair of large, oaken tables sitting in the middle of it, complete with a set of chairs.

Da Vinci herself was waiting for us, tinkering away at some project or another that she set down as we entered.

"Ah, good, you're here," she said.

"What's this about?" I demanded. "And why here, exactly?"

"This is the most secure room in the entire facility," Romani explained simply. "The only place with a tighter lock and better warded against eavesdropping is the Director's office. We still haven't managed to get it open."

"Marisbury always was a paranoid man," Da Vinci added sardonically.

"So?" I prodded. "Whatever this is, it has to be serious if you didn't want the twins around to hear it."

The two of them shared a look, and something seemed to pass between them. If I'd had any remaining doubts that they were both in on this, that would have dispelled them.

“There’s an unusual data volume in your readings,” Romani began slowly.

My brow furrowed. “An unusual data volume?”

“Unusual is putting it somewhat mildly,” Da Vinci interjected. “Frankly speaking, it should automatically disqualify you from Rayshifting entirely.”

My heart skipped a beat, but I latched onto the particular wording of her sentence. “It *should* disqualify me?”

“We’re having trouble reading it,” Romani explained. “As in, it’s somehow obscuring itself from our sensors. We can tell how big it is generally, for a certain value of that word, and we can tell that it’s connected to you in some way that makes it basically impossible for us to safely remove, but we don’t understand what it is or how it got there.”

“And that’s dangerous when we’re undergoing an operation as sensitive as a Rayshift,” Da Vinci added. “As I’m sure you’re aware, we have to keep a constant eye on your presence during a Rayshift to prevent you from being excluded or erased by the Counter Force, and that means that knowing who and what we’re observing is essential. An unknown factor like this is dangerous.”

An unusual data volume that they couldn’t read... There was only one thing I could think of that would explain that. So, my passenger really was back, then. Somehow, somehow, it had reconnected with me and given me back my powers. The original ones, from back when I first triggered.

All things considered, maybe I’d never lost it in the first place, and there had just never been enough bugs around for it to latch onto. If bugs had been my only power, I probably would have been able to believe that.

“But you’re not taking me off the team,” I cut in, folding my arms over my chest.

The two of them shared a look.

“Whatever this data volume is,” Romani said, “it’s been mostly quiet. There’s a constant degree of activity, and it got more intense during Orléans, but whatever it is, it’s not interfering with the measurements that are actually vital to establishing your presence in Singularities.”

“That’s the only reason we decided to let it be,” said Da Vinci. “If it had been entirely up to me, I would have taken you off the team in a heartbeat. This thing has been with you since you came back from Fuyuki, however, and since none of our simulations showed any problems based upon the data we collected when we brought you back, Romani decided that the risk was worth taking.”

“And I’ll stand by that decision,” Romani chimed back in. “We needed her to get through Orléans. I don’t think Ritsuka and Rika would have been able to handle it by themselves.”

I pursed my lips. “So why are you bringing this up now?”

“Because we’re in a better position now,” Romani replied. “Things still aren’t great, but we’re starting to pull together a solid team of Servants and we can afford to give you some slack. If you’re worried about your safety going into Rayshifts from now on, we can keep you in reserve and only

send you in for absolute emergencies. You don't have to risk this becoming a problem that gets you killed."

This was starting to remind me of the Protectorate's insistence that I never attend a battle against the Simurgh. I hadn't liked it then, back when I couldn't do anything to change their minds, and I didn't like it now.

"I'm not going to just let the twins flounder on their own." I shook my head. "No, I'm staying on the main team."

Da Vinci's eyes narrowed on me. "You're not worried," she said, and it sounded like an accusation. "No, it's not even just that, is it? You know what this strange data volume is, or if you don't know for certain, you at least have some idea."

A muscle in my cheek jumped. Her eccentric personality sometimes made it easy to forget that this *was* a genius, an unparalleled mind who had been centuries ahead of the times back during the Renaissance.

"What makes you say that?"

"You're far too calm about it," she retorted. "You're not surprised to hear this, either. In fact, I'd wager... Were you expecting this sort of confrontation at some point?"

And now she was starting to remind me of Lisa, which only served to make me miss her all the more, right then.

"Not from you," I said simply, and then I elaborated. "The twins and Mash had some questions that I never answered in Orléans. There never seemed like a good moment to talk about it, and I honestly didn't know what to tell them."

"Does that have something to do with the sensors ghosts that were following you around?" Romani asked.

I looked at him, confused. "Sensor ghosts?"

"Wherever you went, there were little blips on our sensors that registered as you," he told me. "In a radius of about one third of a mile, if we're talking American measurements. They were too small and too weak to be human, so I chocked it up as a mistake in the sensors or a faulty repair job."

Da Vinci's smile was tight, like she was remembering something that pissed her off and was trying to hold in violence. "Of course it wasn't. *I* was the one who did the repairs, after all."

Romani laughed awkwardly. "Right."

Sensors ghosts...in a radius of about one third of a mile? Considering my range...

"Are you talking about my bugs?"

There weren't many things that could be. But why would my bugs register as weak echoes of me? Everything was filtered through my passenger, so there shouldn't have been anything of me to "register" in them.

"Bugs?" Da Vinci and Romani asked simultaneously.

My lips pulled tight. "How much about my past do you know?"

Da Vinci didn't answer, just turned that narrow-eyed look on me again, but Romani said, "Almost nothing. Director Animosphere said something about a world of heroes and villains, but not much else. It sounded like something out of a comic book."

I snorted. If only things had been that idealistic. In comic books, the heroes and villains died and came back to life, fought against terrible enemies and eked out a decisive victory, suffered horrific injuries that should have crippled them, and got up to do it again the next day without any sign anything was wrong.

The real thing wasn't anywhere near that pleasant.

"The term we used was 'capes,'" I said. "People with strange, supernatural powers who donned costumes and went out to do... Well, to commit crime and to fight it, depending on which side of the line you were supposed to be on." Although the labels turned out to not really mean anything, hadn't they? Hero and villain was more a matter of PR than deed. "I was one of them."

"What kind of supernatural powers?" Da Vinci asked carefully.

I shrugged.

"A lot of it might sound like magecraft to you." It certainly hadn't been hard to draw the parallels myself once I started learning magecraft. "We had Tinkers who built super advanced technology that no one could replicate, Thinkers who could pluck the secrets from your head by reading the lint on your jacket, Shakers who could bend space and change the world around them, Changers who could take on different forms, Brutes with super strength and superhuman durability, Movers who could fly or teleport, Breakers who bent the laws of physics over their knees... A whole gamut of things that we thought impossible before 1981."

"And you?" Da Vinci posed.

My lips twitched a little as I remembered Tagg's threat rating, how he'd thrown everything in the book at me just to make me seem more threatening. Maybe some part of that wasn't exactly wrong, but few people had pushed the limits of their powers quite as hard as I had.

"I was a Master," I told them. Romani winced, like he'd just got the punchline of a bad joke. "Which meant my power was controlling minions. Insects. Anything that gets called a creepy crawly, in fact, from house flies to black widows and everything in between."

"Oh geez," Romani muttered, low enough that we probably weren't meant to hear him. "Did the Director never realize what that was supposed to mean?"

Da Vinci nodded and made a noise of understanding in her throat. “That’s why the sensor ghosts. They registered all of the bugs under your control as ‘familiar,’ so your presence was detected as a kind of echo in each of them.” Her brow furrowed. “Wait. The radius covered one third of a mile. Exactly how many bugs can you control within that range?”

“Yes.”

Lisa would be proud of the snark in that one.

Da Vinci’s eyebrows rose. “You mean... *All* of them?”

“Anything bigger than a dust mite that doesn’t have an endoskeleton. That includes crabs, by the way, for some reason. I lived in a coastal city and learned that one when I got close enough to the bay.”

I’d never understood that one. Did crabs technically count as insects? If not, then what definition had my power been using when it adjusted its parameters for “bugs?”

“That’s...”

She turned away and started muttering under her breath, hunched over and head bowed as she...used her fingers to do the mental math? Having a Thinker for a best friend had introduced me to some strange tics, but this one was a little new, even for me.

Romani looked at her and sighed. He ran a hand through his hair. “Well, *she’s* got something she’s trying to figure out... I guess you don’t know anything about where these supernatural powers came from?”

I shrugged.

“I know more than most did, I guess,” I hedged. “But even as much as I know is definitely only a tiny sliver of the whole story. The important bit is that they *did* have an external source that connects with the chosen host via the brain. That anchor is strong enough to reach through parallel worlds, so I wouldn’t be surprised to find out it can even find me during a Rayshift.”

Scion... I steered well clear of even mentioning his name. That was a can of worms I didn’t want to open, filled to the brim with things I was still trying to get over even two years after the fact.

Romani’s eyes went wide, and one of his hands drifted up to his forehead, right in the center, where two of his fingers touched — right where, on *my* forehead, there would be two tiny divots from the bullets Contessa had used to put Khepri out of her misery.

It occurred to me, then, that as my primary care physician in Chaldea, Romani would have seen and treated *all* of my wounds, back then. Including those two bullet holes.

“Can the connection be forcibly severed?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” I answered, just as quiet. Like admitting it would summon the specter of Contessa back to finish the job. “I thought mine was, when I woke up here.”

Romani sighed. “Well, even if I knew what to look for, I’m not qualified to do brain surgery, so I can’t offer to remove it for you —”

“I wouldn’t accept, even if you did,” I told him sharply.

“Which is about what I expected you to say,” he said with a shake of his head, smiling a little. “Like I said, it isn’t proving to be an issue, so we can leave it alone, if you don’t want to try getting rid of it. I’m not going to say I don’t have any reservations about it, but you’d know better than I do regarding this particular —”

“Haha!” Da Vinci cheered. “I’ve done it again!”

Romani let out a breath through his nose and briefly glanced at the ceiling like he was praying for patience, and then asked, “Can I ask what it is you’ve done, Da Vinci?”

She spun back around to face us, a triumphant grin on her lips.

“I’ve figured out a way to fix the problem of our Director’s missing corpus!”

A jolt ripped through my stomach.

“Really?”

“You have?” Romani said, surprised.

Da Vinci nodded, her hands on her hips.

“It’s quite the simple thing, actually,” she explained smugly. One hand rose, like a teacher beginning a lecture. “Our biggest hurdle in building her a new body is biological material. Quite frankly, even if I repurposed the remains of both the Director and the rest of the staff, there was too much decay by the time we finally got everything cleaned up, so building a functioning body that didn’t have a prohibitive number of issues wasn’t possible. But! If I processed the material of enough biomass from living specimens, I could use a kind of printing process to recreate the necessary structures. The trick has been trying to find enough material of the right kind to form the structures properly.”

“Wait a minute,” said Romani. “I’ve heard of that. Hasn’t there been talk of that kind of thing with modern medical science? Printing replacement organs for people in need of transplants? They can’t figure out how to do it on Earth, though.”

“The difference is, I’m a genius!” Da Vinci boasted. “Concerns like that are just obstacles to be overcome!”

I made the connection after a moment of thought. Panacea had done something similar, after all.

“You need my bugs.”

“Just so!” said Da Vinci. “In the next Singularity, we’ll have to take a moment when the team is resting to pull a portion of your bugs back to Chaldea. Small portions at a time, of course. Our food stores are too vital to risk a colony of ants or cockroaches getting into them while you’re not here to

control them, but I'm certain I could rig up some kind of containment device, and we should be able to pull them directly inside it."

My heart thundered in my chest, and I had to swallow around my own excitement.

"How long would it take you to make her a new body? How many bugs would you need?"

Da Vinci gave me a shrug and an awkward smile. "That part, admittedly, I'm not certain of. It will depend on the variety of insect we manage to find in Rome and how difficult it will be to overcome the current issues with the process. You said crabs also count for your powers, yes? Retrieving at least a few dozen of those will make fabricating the bone easier, but I can't be certain of any of it until I've started."

Oh. Some of my excitement died. I probably should've known better than to get my hopes that high.

But still. This was a more solid lead than we'd had after Fuyuki, and Da Vinci was a far better and more talented mage than I could ever have hoped to be. She figured out Defiant's nano-thorn dagger, after all. She'd figure this out, too. It was just a matter of time.

"Whatever you need, I'll get it for you," I promised. I owed Marie at least that much.

Da Vinci smiled. "Later," she said. "For now, I think we've resolved the main thrust of our previous concerns. Wouldn't you say, Romani?"

"Resolved might not be the right word for that," Romani began. "She gave us an explanation and there's nothing to be done, but the whole business kind of leaves a bad taste —"

"I said," Da Vinci cut across him pointedly, "*wouldn't you say*, Romani?"

Romani blinked. "Oh! Oh, yes. Ahem. Sorry, we pulled you aside without warning, Taylor. You must be exhausted. Why don't you go ahead and get a nap back in your room? I'll send someone over to get you up in time for dinner, okay?"

I forced myself not to smile and settled for a nod. "Alright. Sounds good."

I turned to leave.

"Good night," he called after me.

I stopped, considered that for a moment, and decided on a neutral, "Thanks."

As I walked away, I heard him say to himself, "Ugh, 'good night?' Why did I say that? It's the middle of the day..."

Never change, Romani, I thought fondly.

From Da Vinci's workshop, I made my way back to my room, walking the mostly empty halls. There was no sign of the twins around, but if they were as tired and mentally exhausted as I was,

they had probably settled down for a nap of their own, and they'd earned it. Mash... I'd have to check on her later, see how she was coping with what happened there at the end. If I had to, I'd bring up the idea of therapy with Romani and Da Vinci, but I didn't know if we had one on staff and I wasn't sure Romani had the training for it.

Perhaps not so strangely, at that moment, I missed Doctor Yamada.

My room was the same as I'd left it when we began our journey into the French Singularity, but that was only natural. By Chaldea's reckoning, we'd only been gone about a week, even if it had been a month for me, Mash, and the twins. Of course nothing would have changed.

I stripped off my outer layer unceremoniously and dumped my jacket on the seat of my chair. My boots were left where I toed them off at the foot of my bed.

Compared to the cots I'd had to sleep on and the hard ground we'd camped out on, the basic mattress I threw myself onto was like a cloud. It felt like my head had barely hit the pillow, filled with vague hopes for the future born of Da Vinci's promises, and then I was out like a light.