

Interlude JtR: Collective Will

There was something wrong with Mommy.

Jackie knew this as surely as they knew that there was nothing they could do to fix it. Wounded flesh could be repaired. A severed limb, reattached. A cut, stitched. A broken limb, set. Jackie knew well that their methods were just as crude and primitive as they were effective, and if any of these sorts of things had plagued their mommy, they would have had her fixed up in no time, because Mommy wasn't allowed to die before Jackie did.

But some wounds couldn't be fixed like that. Some wounds went deeper and hurt all the worse for the fact that there wasn't any kind of medicine or surgery or treatment that could make the pain go away and solve the problem.

Jackie knew exactly what those kinds of wounds were like. They — each and every one of the children abandoned on the streets of London and left to die who made up the collective known as Jack the Ripper — had felt that pain and borne those wounds. Someone to soothe away those aches and love them all the way a mommy should was the only thing every single one of those children had ever wanted.

And that was why it was all the more painful to see their Mommy hurting now, too, and know that there wasn't anything they could do to make the hurt go away. They couldn't even comfort her properly, because Mommy was trying to be strong so they didn't have to worry, but that just made Jackie worry all the more.

If only they could be alone together. Mommy would surely open up and hold them close if there was no one else to see them, wouldn't she? But that girly guy in a kimono and the Dragon lady were around, and Mommy had to be strong in front of them, too, because the snake man had betrayed them and now Mommy didn't know who to trust anymore except Jackie and Aífe and all their friends.

But no. Not now. Not yet. When they got to that Los Angeles place and could finally be alone together, maybe then, Mommy would hold Jackie tight and stop having to pretend for a little while, and then Jackie could help Mommy in the only way they knew how. For now, they had to wait and watch and be careful, because if the Dragon lady and the girly guy decided to hurt Mommy, then Jackie was the only one who could stop them while Mommy called for backup. Aífe was still too hurt from her fight with Mister Coocootrain.

So Jackie watched, keeping mostly silent and talking only when someone addressed them directly. They watched with eagle eyes every twitch, every shift, every movement made on the off chance that it was dangerous. Jackie loved their mommy too much to do anything less.

“Can't say I was expecting Chinese, under the circumstances,” Mommy said mildly.

She stabbed her chopsticks into the dish of rice and chicken that sat in front of her on the dining room table, lifting her captured bounty to her mouth and taking another bite. Jackie mimicked her, copying the way she held her chopsticks so that they could be sure they weren't doing anything wrong.

Chopsticks were hard. Mommy had done her best to show Jackie how they worked, and even Ritsuka and Rika had tried to help, too, but Jackie didn't think they would ever master the skill of wielding them.

Although it would be really cool if they could be like those guys in one of the movies they had all watched who could turn an ordinary pair of chopsticks into a deadly weapon. Kung fu was so *cool*. It was one of those things that made Jackie wish they had been born in the modern era so that they could have learned those things, so that they could have been Mommy's *real* daughter instead of her Servant.

But if that were true, then they wouldn't be able to protect Mommy, and Jackie figured that was more important than whether or not Mommy's blood ran through their veins.

"In spite of everything, there are some parts of life that still stick around," the Dragon lady said. "I would have offered to cook, but I'm afraid this place doesn't see too many guests, so I don't keep it stocked with fresh food or ingredients."

"It's fine," said Mommy with a little smile. A complicated feeling swam in Jackie's gut, and they looked away and down at their own food. "I'm not ungrateful for the food, it's just that Emiya has spoiled us a bit. Hard to compare takeout to a guy who almost got snatched up by Emperor Nero."

Jealousy. Jackie was jealous. The Dragon lady had come along and was making Mommy less sad, and that should have been a good thing, but Jackie wanted it to be them. *They* should have been the one making Mommy smile.

"It sounds like there's a story behind that," the Dragon lady said.

"Not a very long one," Mommy said, "but it was the start of a long-lasting friendship, one that surpassed the bounds of death and time and the Throne of Heroes..."

And so Mommy told the Dragon lady the story about how Emperor Nero had nearly gotten into a sword fight — using loaves of bread, which just sounded like so much fun — with Rika over who would get to keep Emiya. It was only because they had told Emperor Nero that Emiya couldn't stay once the Singularity ended that Emperor Nero had agreed to let the matter drop.

A pang of longing joined the jealousy. Mommy had so many adventures, and Jackie wished they could have gone on all of them together. If only they had met sooner. Jackie could have been there to see Emperor Nero threaten Rika with a loaf of bread, to fight against that Saber Alter lady in Fuyuki that Mommy had talked about, to ride through the French countryside and see what life was like outside of the big city where they had lived their whole lives.

They could have even seen real, live dragons. What was it like to ride one? What did they sound like when they roared? Did they have extra organs that let them breathe fire, and if so, how hard was it to remove them? Could Jackie's knives cut through their scales? Oh, how Jackie wished they could have been there to find out.

But no, it hadn't happened that way, and now Jackie had to quietly eat their Chinese food — which wasn't bad, but really didn't taste anywhere near as good as Renée or Emiya's food — and share their mommy with the Dragon lady. Jackie knew they shouldn't, knew it was a bad girl thing that Mommy

would have scolded them for, but they wanted the Dragon lady to attack, because it would be simpler. It would make the Dragon lady an enemy, and that meant Jackie could kill her.

The only problem was that it would probably make Mommy sad, too.

Eventually, the Chinese food was all gone, and Mommy and the Dragon lady sat together in silence for a long moment. Jackie wanted to climb up into Mommy's lap, because they were the only one Mommy allowed to do that and the Dragon lady was too big anyway, but there wasn't enough room between Mommy and the table for them to fit, so they stayed still and kept watching.

The betrayal could come at any moment. Jackie had to be prepared to protect Mommy the instant it happened.

"Are you ready to go?" the Dragon lady asked after a while.

Mommy let out a sigh and stood up from her chair; Jackie did the same thing. "I guess so." She gave the Dragon lady a look. "Your other self?"

"She'll have to stay here in hibernation," the Dragon lady answered. She sounded sad. "It may be that it won't be possible to completely restore her before this Singularity is resolved...but the resolution of this Singularity will return her to normal regardless, won't it?"

"Yes," said Mommy.

The Dragon lady smiled a sad smile. "Then perhaps it's for the best to simply leave her be. If nothing that occurs inside of this Singularity will persist after it is corrected, then all that I'm doing by trying so desperately to piece her back together is torturing her needlessly."

Mommy shook her head. "I can't make that call for you. If you think that's for the best..."

"It's a concern for another day, in any case," said the Dragon lady. "For now, we have other places to be and other things to worry about. No need to put it off any longer, yes?"

"Right," Mommy agreed. She turned to Jackie. "Let's go, Jackie." And to the Dragon lady, "We're taking the Dragonfly again?"

"Of course."

Dutifully, Jackie followed, and they and their mommy went with the girly guy and the Dragon lady as she meandered through the house and led them all back outside into the midday sun. The strange looking airship thingy — Jackie understood why it was called the Dragonfly, because it looked an awful lot like one — sat where they had landed it earlier, and the ramp descended from its back once more so that they could all go back inside of it.

Mommy made a beeline for the cockpit again, but as the ramp closed up behind them, she stopped and turned back to the Dragon lady.

"Los Angeles Protectorate HQ, right?"

“Oh,” said the Dragon lady. “Yes, perhaps it would be best if I... Just a moment, I’ll handle it.”

The Dragon lady didn’t move, but after a moment, the Dragonfly did, lurching gently as it lifted off of the ground. That funny feeling, like their stomach dropping down to their ankles, bounced inside of Jackie’s belly for a second, tickling, and was gone just as quickly.

“I’ve programmed the autopilot to take us directly to the LA PHQ,” the Dragon lady informed Mommy. “I’ve also included the relevant security codes so that they don’t assume we’re a hostile force attempting to attack the Protectorate there, although we might still be asked for our credentials before we land. I’ll take care of it in either case.”

“Good.”

And Mommy sat back down in the cockpit chair. After a moment, Jackie went up to it and climbed into Mommy’s lap, and Mommy huffed a quiet laugh before wrapping her arms around them. *We’re the only ones allowed to sit in Mommy’s lap*, Jackie thought smugly at the Dragon lady. She had no idea what she was missing, and Jackie was just fine with that.

Out the window, a slice of the city of Vancouver briefly spun past, but it was replaced an instant later with blue sky, and the Dragonfly lurched again as they sped off and towards the horizon. Jackie just snuggled deeper into their mommy’s arms.

“The trip to Los Angeles will be about as long as our trip here from Newfoundland,” the Dragon lady said. “For much the same reason, I’m afraid. We’ll be able to speed up as we get deeper into the Patriots’ territory, but until then, we have another couple of hours in terms of travel time.”

Mommy’s breath puffed against the top of Jackie’s head. “Are you trying to say that you want to hear another story about our deployments?”

“If you don’t mind,” said the Dragon lady. “I must admit I’m curious about what these other Singularities looked like. You mentioned meeting Emperor Nero in one of them, and while I’ve met quite a few historical and mythological figures over the last several months, Emperor Nero wasn’t one of them.”

“I think you’d like her,” Mommy told the Dragon lady. “She has a very big personality, which is probably why she and Rika hit it off so quickly.” Mommy fell silent for a moment, and then she sighed. “The Septem Singularity, then?”

“Please.”

Mommy’s lips drew into a wry smile. “It’s technically out of order, since we tackled the Orléans Singularity first, but we didn’t get off to the greatest start. We landed way off course when we first dropped in, you see, so while we meant to start off in Rome, we found ourselves on the complete opposite side of the continent...”

Jackie listened as Mommy told the story of the Septem Singularity. It was different, listening to it as a story being told instead of a dry briefing meant to bring new Servants up to date about everything that had happened before. Warmer, with more personality, to the point that Jackie almost felt like they were there, experiencing it firsthand, living it with Mommy and Rika and Ritsuka and everyone

else, and with a pang of regret, they wondered why they hadn't asked Mommy to tell them about it sooner.

Connla sounded like a fun kid, too, and he had died when his daddy killed him by mistake, which was both different and the same as all of the kids who made up Jackie. Would he have wanted to be friends with Jackie? They weren't too sure about that. Jackie didn't like fighting for the sake of fighting — or most of them didn't, anyway, even though there were some parts that got excited by the idea of getting into a brawl with Connla — and Connla and Mister Coocootrain sounded like they did. Would he be satisfied playing Tag or Hide and Seek? Jackie wasn't sure about that either.

But Boudica sounded like someone Jackie would have liked to meet. Not a mommy, because Jackie already had a mommy and she was the bestest mommy in the whole world, but maybe an auntie? The closest thing they had was Rika and Mash, but it didn't feel quite the same, maybe because neither of them acted like Jackie thought aunties were supposed to act.

Could Emiya be an auntie? He acted like one, but then, aunties were supposed to be ladies, weren't they?

The more Jackie listened to Mommy talk about what it was like in the Septem Singularity, the more Jackie wished they could have been there, too. Riding around the countryside in Aífe's chariot, camping out under the stars, seeing what the world looked like hundreds of years before any of Jackie was ever born, it all sounded like so much fun.

And if Jackie had been there, that mean goddess would never have hurt Mommy. They would have made sure of it.

The scariest part was the part where the whole fake Rome was destroyed by that Altera lady. If they ever had to face someone like that... Jackie couldn't hope to defend Mommy against a Noble Phantasm that could destroy an entire city at once, and even if Jackie made it out, Mommy would be in too many pieces way too small to fix.

So they would just have to kill someone like that before they could use their Noble Phantasm. Even if it got Jackie killed in the process, it would be worth it as long as Mommy survived. This, Jackie promised themselves.

And whenever Mommy had to mention Arash and talk about how he helped out, whenever she stumbled over his name like it hurt to even say it, Jackie took hold of Mommy's hands and held them, comforting her in the only way they knew how.

Before Jackie knew it, the Dragonfly began to slow, and out the front window formed the shape of a city skyline. Differently colored towers stretched towards the sky, an island of steel and glass and concrete amidst a sea of funny looking trees, and off to the west, the slowly falling sun painted the eastern mountains in oranges and purples that danced across the snowy peaks.

Jackie had only ever seen four cities that they knew of: the first, where they had grown up, was a metropolis covered in almost perpetual smog, a miserable, dreary place that they were largely ambivalent about; the second was rustic by comparison, a marvel of marble and wood and stone that had been built, it seemed, for the sole purpose of making itself appear grand and important, and they liked it a little better.

The third was Boston, where they learned exactly how much comfort money could buy when they slept in that hotel bed with Mommy. The fourth, Brockton Bay, was their favorite only because it was Mommy's home, and Jackie wished they could have seen it when Mommy lived there with her mommy and daddy so that Jackie could meet them for real instead of their graves.

Never before, however, had Jackie seen a city from so high up and so far away, and never before had they seen one framed by mountains with sunlight glistening on the tops. They decided then and there that it was their favorite looking city, and they were going to remember the sight of it forever and ever.

"It's so pretty..." they breathed, sitting up taller so they could get a better look at it.

Mommy chuckled. "Wish I'd had the chance to show you the view of the bay while we were in Brockton Bay. Can't beat the sight of the sun rising over it in the morning — and when it catches the shimmer of the Rig's forcefield...there really isn't anything like it."

"I'll have to see if Defiant saved any pictures," the Dragon lady said with a smile. "I'm sure he would be only too happy to share them."

"I'd like that," Mommy said.

The city grew larger and larger out the window, and then, they weren't flying towards it anymore, they were flying over it. The shorter, squatter buildings passed by beneath them, and the Dragonfly gently turned towards a specific building, one of the taller towers in the city with a flat top and a sturdy looking base, like it had been built to withstand the strongest earthquakes or even Servant fights.

They were still far enough away that the windows were little more than tiny squares when the screen in front of Jackie let out a shrill, high-pitched beep, and the Dragon lady shifted in her seat, saying, "That's the Protectorate HQ hailing us. Just a moment, I'll authenticate our landing codes."

A moment of silence passed, and the Dragonfly slowed down even more until it was almost hovering in place, and then it picked up speed again and they drifted almost lazily towards that building.

"We're cleared to land," the Dragon lady announced. "Taylor, that temporary housing in the Protectorate HQ that Defiant promised is available to you, if you would like to take advantage of it. He has also arranged for an escort to show you around the facility."

Mommy shifted, and Jackie, sitting in her lap, could feel the sudden tension in her body and in her arms. "An escort? Was that his idea or something the directors came up with?"

"His," said the Dragon lady. "He wants to treat you as much like a foreign dignitary as possible to reflect the importance of your mission. He even suggested making you an honorary member of the Guild to give your words more weight, but I'm afraid that might create complications further down the line. Best to leave as clear a separation between us as we can; it simply isn't possible to completely allay certain directors' fears that Defiant and I are attempting a kind of coup, but the fewer lines of connection between us, the easier it will be to dismiss them."

The tension in Mommy's body eased, and Jackie, who had been ready to jump up and cut their way loose for her, eased back, too.

It was only a few minutes later when they came close enough for the rooftop of the big building to disappear below the window, and the Dragonfly started to slowly go down, descending towards the flat, round pad that Jackie had seen atop the roof. The jets or turbines or whatever it used to fly whined quietly, barely audible even now, and then there was a gentle lurch as the Dragonfly touched down. At the back, the ramp's hydraulics whirred as it opened up, and Jackie hopped off of their mommy's lap so that Mommy could stand, too.

The girly guy was the first off, and the Dragon lady wasn't far behind him. Jackie and Mommy brought up the rear, and the presence of Aífe hovered nearby, staying close. Jackie only knew she was there because they had more than enough time to pick out the subtle nuances between the girly guy, who wasn't trying very hard to hide, the Dragon lady, and Aífe herself.

It was almost like a game, although it got pretty boring pretty fast.

As they stepped down the ramp and onto the rooftop, the wind whipped around them, howling and tugging at their hair and clothes. A door set a safe distance from the landing pad opened up and a tall boy stepped out, only he was dressed really weirdly. An armored chest plate stretched over his torso, etched with tiny designs that looked kind of like hands and black as tar, and he wore a strange skirt of some kind made of overlapping plates, only each one seemed like it was made of something different. Jackie recognized steel and what might have been stone as well as wood and leather.

But what made them immediately suspicious was the mask he wore on his face, a statuesque thing with sharp, angular features and a solemn expression.

Next to them, Mommy froze, sucking in a sharp breath, and Jackie turned, concerned, to her wide eyes. Did she know this boy?

"Theo," Mommy said, barely above a whisper. It was swallowed by the wind.

The boy seemed to hear her anyway, because he stopped some feet away and reached up to take off the mask. Beneath it was the face of a teenage boy, lean and soft, with sad blue eyes. His mouth moved, but his words, too, were swallowed up by the wind. Jackie could still read them on his lips.

"Weaver," he said as though it meant something.

He gestured back the way he'd come, and then he turned around and went back inside. The girly guy and the Dragon lady followed, and after a moment, so did Mommy. Jackie stuck with her, close enough to reach out and grab Mommy's hand if anything made her sad, and they went into a stairwell, a bland thing with white walls and gray stairs, then down the stairs themselves. The boy held the door open on the next floor down, nodding respectfully to the girly guy and the Dragon lady as they passed.

"I'll leave her in your hands, Golem," the Dragon lady said to the boy, Theo, or Golem, or whatever he was supposed to be called. "Defiant is waiting for me, and I'm sure he has an update on the warfront from Ruler."

Mommy's head turned, even as the Theo boy said, "Of course, Ma'am."

"Ruler?" Mommy asked.

"The Chinese general in those dossiers Coil gave you," the Dragon lady elaborated. "I'm sorry, but that's all I can give you."

"No," Mommy said, and she had gone all quiet, the way she did when there was something incredibly heavy on her mind. "No, I think that's more than enough for now."

Jackie reached out and took hold of her hand, giving their mommy something to keep her rooted. It was an extra few seconds before Mommy squeezed back, like she had forgotten she was supposed to for a moment. That was fine. Mommy could forget, and Jackie would remind her every time.

It didn't go unnoticed. The only one who didn't glance at their joined hands was the girly guy.

"This one desires tea," said the girly guy. "Would our esteemed guests like a cup as well?"

"What kind?" asked Mommy.

"*Matcha*," said the girly guy. "That is, green tea, made in the way of this one's homeland."

Mommy shook her head, "No, but thank you."

"I'll have to decline as well," the Theo boy said. "Maybe some other time."

The girly guy gave a shallow bow, and then he disappeared. The Dragon lady said, "I'll see you later, Taylor," and then she left, too. Jackie and their mommy were alone with the Theo boy.

An awkward moment of silence stretched, so thick with tension that Jackie thought they might have been able to cut it with their knives. The Theo boy and Mommy both had something to say, and whatever it was boiled up inside both of them until it seemed like they would burst from the pressure.

Mommy broke it first. "Was it you, or your younger self?"

The Theo boy didn't answer immediately, just looked confused, and after a second, he seemed to understand. "Oh. I'm not... There *is* no younger me. I'm..." He waved a hand at himself. "This is just...me. Here. Now. As far as I know, there *is* no...other Theo Anders. There isn't another Golem running around, I mean."

"Then why did you pretend not to recognize me earlier?" Mommy asked, all hard edges.

It took Jackie an extra second to remember, too — the phone call in that karaoke place, right before they went and visited Grandma and Grandpa. This was one of the people Mommy called?

The Theo boy's face twisted into a grimace, and he looked away awkwardly. "It's...complicated." He glanced down at their entwined hands, and then back up at Mommy's face. "Can we...do this somewhere else? Somewhere that isn't the middle of the hallway?"

“Like your room?” Mommy retorted.

“No,” the Theo boy said immediately. “No, just...” His head swiveled, and he pointed down the hallway and towards a door. “There? This floor is mostly meeting rooms, so we can at least have a little privacy.”

“Fine.”

The Theo boy breathed a relieved sigh, and then he led them over to the room he’d pointed to, opened the door, and stepped inside. Jackie and their mommy followed, and Mommy closed the door shut with a click once they were all in. A long table and a bunch of chairs sat in the middle, with a big, flat tv screen mounted on the one wall — it looked kind of like that room where they talked to the snake man, only nicer and more expensive. Jackie even spied panels in the walls where something was hidden, although what, they had no idea.

Guns? But why would anyone build a bunch of guns into the walls of their meeting room? It sounded silly to them.

The Theo boy didn’t sit down in any of the chairs, he just stood there awkwardly, glancing every few seconds between Mommy’s face and where she was holding Jackie’s hand. He didn’t seem to know what to say.

Jackie didn’t let go and neither did their mommy. Let him see, Jackie thought. Mommy wasn’t ashamed of them, and they weren’t ashamed of Mommy. She was the best mommy ever, and Jackie would say as much to anyone who asked.

“So?” Mommy said before he could figure it out.

“It’s...complicated,” he replied. “I don’t...” He cut himself off, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, then stared Mommy straight in the eye. “I’m still sixteen.”

Mommy didn’t look like she really believed him. She raked him up and down with her eyes, and her silence said a whole lot of stuff that Jackie probably didn’t understand because they weren’t the Theo boy.

It was a bit frustrating, not getting all of the subtext. But Mommy had a life long before Jackie entered it, and Jackie knew enough to understand that. They could console themselves with the knowledge that no one else got to have Mommy read to them every night. Those memories belonged to Mommy and Jackie alone.

Finally, Mommy said plainly, “Sixteen year old Theo Anders didn’t meet Weaver until she was already in the Wards. Didn’t train with her until she got officially transferred to Chicago. In this Singularity, Weaver never existed, because Taylor Hebert died the night she first fought Lung.”

“Which is part of why I pretended not to know you when you called,” he said. “I...wasn’t sure how to handle it. Taylor Hebert was dead, so she couldn’t have been the one to call me, even if it sounded like her and the person calling knew some of our cover stories for the Wards program.”

“But you still recognized me,” said Mommy. It sounded like an accusation.

His face pulled into something not quite a smile. “You left an impression.”

“That’s only possible if you’re not the Theo Anders native to this Singularity,” Mommy pointed out. “For that matter, your Trigger Event...”

She didn’t finish her thought. Jackie wanted to ask, but stayed silent, watching, cataloguing all of the little clues.

“Couldn’t have been the same,” the Theo boy said like he was finishing it for her. The not-quite-a-smile vanished from his face until his expression looked more like the mask he was still holding in one hand. “It wasn’t. But despite everything I know that says otherwise, my *powers* were, and when I got them back, I started having...*dreams*.”

Mommy’s hand tightened around Jackie’s, and her entire body went stiff. “Dreams?”

“Things that...had never happened, but felt like memories,” the Theo boy said. “I never met Jack Slash, but in the dreams, he came to me in Kayden’s apartment. Made me a deal, a promise. Two years to get powers and become strong enough to hunt him down and kill him, or else he would kill a thousand people, leaving Aster and me for last.”

“The dream cycle?” Mommy muttered, quiet enough that only Jackie heard. “But that’s...”

Impossible, Jackie agreed. After all, the Theo boy wasn’t a Servant, although he *could* have been a Master. His hands were covered in gauntlets, after all. He might have been hiding Command Spells.

“The dreams never stopped,” the Theo boy went on. “I saw...a lot of things. Fighting Behemoth. Training with you. Dating Ava. Chasing after Jack Slash and the Slaughterhouse clones.” He paused for a moment, but Mommy’s hand had already started shaking. Even the Theo boy seemed to notice, although he didn’t tease her for it. Jackie could give him credit for that much. “Everything that happened for the next few years, or at least the most important parts.”

“I see.” Mommy’s voice trembled only the slightest, but Jackie had been with her long enough to recognize the tells. The way Mommy’s whole body seemed as rigid as a wooden board, how she got even quieter, how her face shut down and closed off like windows shuttering. “Including...?”

The Theo boy didn’t answer, but that seemed to be answer enough for Mommy, because she didn’t ask him for more, just got even tenser and more rigid. Jackie pressed closer to their mommy, squeezing her hand so that she knew they were there and they weren’t going anywhere.

“I asked around later on,” the Theo boy eventually said. “I wasn’t the only one. Capes who survived Gold Morning and had their powers before April have been experiencing the same thing. Memories of the future in their dreams, memories of things that were supposed to happen but didn’t. Some of them...thought they were going mad. The rest of us — the Wards, at least — formed a...kind of a support group.”

“You joined the Protectorate — the Wards — as soon as you realized what was going on?” Mommy asked.

The Theo boy's face cycled through a number of emotions before calming down and settling into something sad and solemn. "I said my Trigger Event was different."

Mommy sucked in a sharp breath through her nose. "You don't have to —"

"No, it's fine," said the Theo boy. "The whole...reveal of the Empire's identities, I'm not sure if you've heard by now, but it happened very differently from how it did in...in the original timeline."

"Proper history," Mommy corrected him quietly.

"Proper history," the Theo boy agreed. "It was... There was no calming things down, this time. Coil and his...*Servants* didn't spare anyone, and they didn't take chances. Kayden..."

He trailed off, like he didn't want to say it. Everyone in the room figured out what he was saying anyway.

"We were in a foster home for about a month," he continued after a few seconds. "By that time, I had things figured out enough that I took Aster and left with the Protectorate when they got driven out of Brockton Bay."

Oh. *Oh*. Suddenly, Jackie understood. *Aster*. That was the name of the little girl Mommy had killed, the one who had only been spared a terrible fate by a single well-placed bullet. *That* was why Mommy was so sad.

Like she almost didn't want to know the answer, Mommy asked, "Then Aster is...?"

"Here, with me," the Theo boy confirmed. "I put her down for a nap before you got here, and Ava is looking after her right now."

Mommy didn't look surprised, only weary and resigned.

"And does Ava...?"

He grimaced again. "Not as much as me, I don't think. But she was there. She saw Gold Morning."

She knows what Mommy did, Jackie thought. They barely understood some of it themselves, but they'd seen enough of Mommy's life in their dreams to know what had happened, too, and if anyone wanted to be mean to Mommy about it, then they were an idiot and Jackie would tell them so. Mommy wasn't perfect, but she loved them, and that made her the bestest and the greatest mommy ever, no matter what anyone else said.

"Does she know I'm here?" asked Mommy.

The Theo boy was quiet for a second. Then, "Yes. I told her before I left the apartment I share with Aster."

"I see," said Mommy. "Is that going to be a problem?"

The Theo boy let out a slow breath through his nostrils. “Not for her, not that she’s told me. But the rest of the capes here in LA will find out about you eventually, and you should expect some...different reactions. Most of them won’t be good.”

A soft breath left Mommy’s nose.

“They hate me.”

“Some of them do,” said the Theo boy. “Some of them... There’s no easy way to say it, Taylor, but some of them worship you.”

A strangled sound of disbelief squeaked out of Mommy’s throat. “*Worship* me? After what I did?”

“You think it’s strange?” the Theo boy asked. “Some of us knew it was you, some of us knew who you were when it happened, but most of the capes who fought and lived through Gold Morning didn’t know where you came from or who you were. You just appeared, swept through, and took on Scion like you knew exactly what you were doing the whole time. You turned a rout into a fighting chance. Our casualties *dropped* while you were in control of things.”

“Stop,” Mommy told him as though hearing him say it was physically painful, “stop, that’s not at all what...” She fell silent for a few seconds, then shook her head. “What I did... It was unforgivable. A violation. I knew that the instant I did it. I knew that the instant I *decided* to do it. Even if it was what had to be done, even if it was the only way I could even *do* something meaningful, that wasn’t something worthy of being praised or worshipped.”

“I’m not sure that’s your decision,” the Theo boy said. He shook his head, too. “There was a lot of uncertainty in the aftermath. A lot of fear. Those of us who knew what you did and what it cost you, we kept silent out of respect. Those who didn’t and were afraid you might show up again and try to take over, they kept silent, too. But that secret was too big, and there was no way for all of us to keep it, not forever. It was only a matter of time before it got out and people started talking about the fearless warrior cloaked in golden light who led the fight against Scion. About the woman who unified the entire defending force and used her powers to turn them into an effective army.”

Mommy’s face drew into a miserable scowl.

“What people think about that is up to them,” the Theo boy went on. “You could try to change that, if you like, but I don’t think you would have all that much success. Especially not now, when lots of us barely understand what these memories even mean.”

“It wouldn’t mean anything anyway,” Mommy said bitterly. “Anything I did here would just get erased when this place is reset and proper history is restored. Whatever people think of me in the world after Gold Morning, they’ll keep thinking that, and there’s nothing I can do to change it.”

The Theo boy didn’t respond to that. Jackie wondered if he realized what that all really meant, because the only reason they understood it at all was because of the fact they were a Servant. The Fate System thingy from Chaldea had given all of the Servants contracted under it a basic enough understanding.

He didn’t have any of that.

Mommy sighed, and some of the tension oozed out of her body like steam. Jackie wondered if this place had a nice bath in the room where they were going to be staying, because Mommy looked like she needed it.

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s just... You were supposed to be giving me a tour of this place, right?”

The Theo boy nodded. “Yes. Right. The room we prepared for you is in the same area as Aster’s and mine. Would you like to go there first, or...?”

Mommy didn’t answer for a few seconds, and then, quietly, she asked, “Are you sure you want me that close? After I...”

The Theo boy’s face drew tight with what looked like an old pain, but his voice was strong when he said, “Aster’s still here. She’s still alive. What took place in...proper history doesn’t change that, and I know full well what happened that day. So unless you’re going to tell me that the woman I knew is gone and the one standing across from me is a baby-killing monster...”

He looked meaningfully at Jackie, and Jackie pressed herself tighter against Mommy’s side.

“...who also adopted a little girl of her own, then shouldn’t I be the one asking *you* that?”

Mommy squeezed Jackie’s hand tighter. “If you knew...”

“I know that a lot of terrible stuff happened that day,” said the Theo boy, like he was trying his hardest to make himself Jackie’s second favorite person. Third, after Arash. “And I know that as hard as it was for me to lose her...I wasn’t the one who had to look her in the face and pull the trigger.”

“I still did it,” said Mommy like the words were poison.

“And I came to terms with that a long time ago,” said the Theo boy. “So as long as you can be near Aster without scaring her, I don’t have any problems.”

Mommy trembled again for a moment, and Jackie gripped her hand all the tighter so that she knew they were still there and they weren’t going anywhere. Mommy clutched their hand like it was a lifeline, a life preserver thrown out to a woman drowning in the ocean, and it took an extra couple of seconds, but eventually, she did calm back down again.

Jackie wished they had the words that could make it easier, that could help their mommy in a way simply holding her hand couldn’t. But all Jackie could say was, ‘We love you, Mommy,’ and sometimes, she needed something more than that, something that would tell her it was all okay.

Sometimes, Mommy needed her own mommy, and Jackie knew that nothing could bring Grandma back now.

“We’ll get to the apartment later,” Mommy said. “I’d like you to show me what you can of the rest of the building first, so that I know what places are supposed to be off-limits.”

And we can sneak around and see what everyone's trying to hide, Jackie thought, smothering a smile. If Mommy could make plans like that, then everything was going to be okay.

“Of course,” said the Theo boy. He slipped his mask back on over his face. “Follow me, please.”

The door of the meeting room clicked shut behind them. Jackie didn't know what their mommy had left behind in there, and it didn't matter. They would support her the entire way and without question. They would support her, because she had held a knife to their heart and chosen to embrace them anyway.

Taylor Hebert had chosen to be their mommy, so Jackie would be a good girl and always choose to be her faithful, loving daughter.