

Chapter CLXXXV: Hitokiri

Despite my best efforts, it was impossible to squeeze my bugs into the base past the doors, and as was becoming a frustratingly common refrain, the inside of the base was meticulously bug-free, giving me nothing to leverage to look closer from the outside. A lifetime ago, back when Coil knew me and knew at least vaguely how my powers worked, I could have believed it a deliberate move to deny me access.

Here, I couldn't take it as obvious action against me. Whether it was Coil being cautious or simply his careful and methodical nature, I couldn't say, and it didn't particularly matter. The end result was the same.

"Is this confirmation, then?" asked Emiya. "If the base is closed up, does that mean he still uses it?"

"Maybe," I hedged. A mumbled incantation unlocked the padlock with a click, and when I pulled it free, the chain fell with a metallic jingle. "I'd want to check just to be sure, though."

I undid the chain from around the gate, then pushed it open and stepped inside.

"Whoa, whoa," Rika said lowly. "I didn't know this was an infiltration mission, Senpai! I didn't bring my sexy catsuit!"

And I hadn't brought my full costume. This was one of those times since I'd first let Da Vinci have it where I wished I had the whole thing, despite my misgivings about what it represented about my past and the person I'd been. The disguise would have simply been too convenient.

"We're not going that far in," I promised. "The doors are shut too tight for my bugs — I'll send Jackie in to snoop —"

"Don't move!" an unfamiliar voice barked, smooth and feminine, and we all whirled about to face the direction it came from. "Stay right where you are, trespassers!"

And there, across the street from us, stepping out of the alleyway as though she had come from the shadows, a young woman with pale, blonde hair and eyes the silver of polished steel. A teal blue overcoat with wide, flapping sleeves hung over her torso, a black scarf wrapped over her shoulders, and she wore a strange, aborted kimono that ended mid-thigh, a bare inch below being considered indecent. In one hand, she brandished a naked blade, a katana.

Mash gasped and immediately summoned her shield and armor; Emiya was a fraction of a second behind her. "M-Master! Servant detected!"

The newcomer's eyes narrowed — a quick glance identified her as a Saber — and swept over our entire group, pausing deliberately on Emiya, Arash, and Mash. Slowly, she shifted her stance and took hold of her sword with both hands.

"Servants," she all but growled. "Which means you can only be infiltrators from those out west. This is my Master's city. You are not welcome here."

Her Master — Coil. It had to be. Had he sent her out to guard the entrance against intruders, or did she patrol the general area and just happened to catch us in the act of sneaking in? I was inclined to the former, but both were equally possible, so we might just have gotten incredibly unlucky that her route happened to take her past this spot at this exact moment.

“Wait,” said Ritsuka, holding up his hands in a placating gesture, “wait! Your Master is Coil, right? We don’t have to fight!”

“You made a mistake coming here,” Saber declared, ignoring him completely. “Don’t move — I promise you I’ll end it quickly.”

She took a step — and then, instantly, as though she had teleported, she appeared in front of us, sword already moving to stab Rika straight through the heart. Mash scrambled to intercept, and Aífe appeared just as suddenly, swinging Gáe Bolg down in the path of the blade to deflect it.

Before either of them could make it, however, a shadow interposed itself between Saber and Rika, and with a ringing clang, knocked Saber off balance and back several steps. She stumbled halfway across the street, eyes wide.

“Impetuous as always, Okita-san,” a new voice said politely. “This one is glad to see that your swordsmanship has not been dulled by your illness.”

“You!” Saber — Okita? — snarled.

The shadow turned out to be a man, a very short man who couldn’t have been more than five feet tall, with long, black hair held in a high ponytail. In the dark, even with the streetlamps to provide some meager light, the finer details of his form were vague and indistinct, because he dressed in a kimono, dark colors and navy blue. The brightest thing about him, aside from his pale complexion, was the curved, polished sword he held in one hand, a match for the katana in Saber’s. A black sheath hung from his belt.

“What strange circumstances these be, to find the two of us once more on opposite sides of a war,” said the stranger. When I looked at him through Master’s Clairvoyance, it said only Assassin, which would explain how he had appeared without any of us even noticing him. “This one wonders if there is some poetry at work in the cosmos.”

“Wait a minute,” Rika whispered. “Okita? No way!”

Assassin glanced back at us over his shoulder. “Please forgive this one for the interruption. It has been quite some time since one had the chance to cross blades with a rival as worthy as Okita-san — one could not possibly have resisted.”

The so-named Okita took a threatening step forward, hand wrapped in a white-knuckled grip around the hilt of her sword as she pointed its sharp tip at his chest. “What are you doing here? Kawakami Gensai!”

Assassin — Kawakami Gensai, and they obviously knew each other — took an answering step towards her, only his was casual, as though he was simply out for a walk. The only thing to suggest

otherwise was the firm, steady hold he had on his sword; his arm might as well have been an iron bar.

“Oh, nothing so ominous, Okita-san,” he said conversationally, and yet there was an underlying thread of steel in his soft voice. “This one is merely doing his duty, that is all. That is, the just work of the heavens.”

As though these were the most offensive words he could have said, Okita dove for him, sword poised to kill. Assassin, mirroring her, *moved*, disappearing between one step and the next, and with the ring of clashing steel, they met somewhere in the middle, reappearing only long enough for their swords to slam into each other.

A dance began in front of us. Like they were trying to put to shame every other Servant we had yet met, they seemed to move even faster, too fast for my eyes to track, let alone for me to take a closer look with my Master’s Clairvoyance. I followed them more by the sparks of ignited mana that flew from their collisions than I did their actual actions, catching only brief flashes of blonde, black, and silver amidst the intense bursts of energy that seemed to flow up and down the street in wild, zigzagging patterns.

This level of speed was ridiculous. How many laws of physics were they shattering over their knees not to leave a sonic boom behind with every step?

“Master?” Aife asked warily. She was the only one I’d yet seen who got even close to this, and even then, not so casually or effortlessly.

“Don’t interfere,” I ordered. Not while we didn’t know which side we were supposed to be on. “Rika? You seemed to recognize them. Context?”

Rika did a double-take. “Recognize — of course I recognize them! How could I not? Those are two of the greatest swordsmen in Japanese history! Okita Souji, Kawakami Gensai, both renowned for their unmatched speed and raw talent! The only one more famous than them is Miyamoto Musashi!”

I reached out down the thread connecting me to Jackie. *Jackie, hiding under that hatch below the yellow sign is a tunnel. I want you to go down there and look around while these two are fighting.*

“You’re right,” Ritsuka said, eyes locked on the action — or as much as he could see of it, at least. “That woman, she’s wearing a Shinsengumi haori, and there was only one swordsman in that group named Okita.”

What are we looking for, Mommy? Jackie asked.

“Shinsengumi?”

People, I answered, but three people in particular. A dark-skinned man wearing a skintight black bodysuit with a snake pattern printed on it, a girl about Rika’s age with long, blonde hair, and a twelve year old girl with long brown hair. Those two girls might be locked up in one of the rooms down there.

Okay! And the skin of my prosthetic arm prickled as she rushed past me and towards the hatch behind us.

“A kind of ultra police force from the Meiji Restoration,” Ritsuka explained. “They fought for the Shogunate. Kawakami Gensai was on the opposite side, the Ishin Shishi, who were fighting to restore the emperor to power. He was one of their four famous assassins.”

“Not to mention the inspiration for one of the coolest manga characters ever!” Rika exclaimed. “He’s the real life Himura Kenshin!” She backtracked. “Ah, only without the scar, the red hair, or the crippling guilt for all of the lives he took during the war!”

That didn’t tell me which one was supposed to be on our side. Not when siding against Okita could very well mean ruining any chance of negotiating with Coil before we even had a solid idea of what was going on here, and not when Gensai had revealed himself for the sole apparent purpose of defending us from her.

There had to be an ulterior motive, but I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what it was.

Assassin and Saber separated, each retreating up or down the road until almost thirty feet yawned between them, although I had no doubt it could vanish in an instant. Neither spared a second to look our way, focused entirely on each other.

Gensai, holding his sword down by his leg in a relaxed grip, smiled faintly. “It seems our reputation precedes us, Okita-san. This one never imagined history would remember him so well.”

Okita, by contrast, was still tense, standing in a sort of half-crouch, both hands on the hilt of her sword and the blade held parallel to her shoulders. The tip remained pointed at Gensai. She said nothing, keeping her eyes laser-focused on her opponent.

“This is not our war,” Gensai said reasonably. “This one has achieved his goals for the moment, so one might offer the humble suggestion that our duel be postponed for a later date.”

He turned and made to walk away, but Okita barked, “Stop right there! Did you really think I was going to just let you retreat like a coward, dog of the Ishin Shishi?”

Gensai stopped, glancing back at her. “The *bakufu* ended many years ago, Okita-san. The Ishin Shishi were victorious. One would think enough time has passed that a swordsman of your caliber could gracefully accept defeat.”

Okita leapt towards him with a vicious snarl, magical energy surging. “Hiken — !”

But midstep, she jerked to a halt as Gensai turned halfway to face her — his sword, paradoxically, sheathed at his hip, with one hand resting on the hilt. In the light of the streetlamps, I could see the glistening bead of sweat that traveled down Okita’s cheek.

“I see,” Gensai said into the sudden oppressive silence. “So even a genius like Okita-san is wary of this one’s ultimate blade. This one cannot help but wonder, which technique is truly superior? The lightless thrust, or the wisp-cleaving slash?” His hand left the hilt of his sword, and he turned away again. “Alas, such a competition is not for tonight. This one has engaged in more than enough mindless play for now.”

Between one step and the next, he vanished, disappearing into spirit form, and for several long seconds afterwards, no one dared move. We were waiting for some hint of what would happen now, and Okita seemed as though she was waiting for Gensai to reappear and attack her.

Ritsuka was the one to brave the moment and offer a tentative, “Um, Okita-san?”

Okita whirled about to face us. “You! Trespassers! Don’t think I’ve forgotten —”

Abruptly, however, she doubled over, wracked by violent coughs, her chest shaking as she desperately attempted to control it. Blood splattered all over her fingers, seeping between them to drip to the pavement below and leaving flecks of red across the pale skin of her face. Disturbingly, it reminded me of my own attack in London, when the corrosive mist had come dangerously close to killing me.

I hadn’t even seen her get injured. What the hell?

“Oh yeah,” said Rika. “Okita Souji was pretty famous for another reason. He died in bed of tuberculosis instead of on the battlefield. Uh, *she*, I mean.”

And in my mind’s eye, a new entry bloomed to life under my Master’s Clairvoyance: Weak Constitution, a skill reflecting Okita Souji’s chronic illness. It would be useful to know for later, if we wound up having to face her for real.

“D-don’t think I’m...I’m b-beaten!” Okita said in a thin, unsteady voice. Her sword trembled as she pointed it at us with one hand, holding the other to her mouth. “I-I can still...f-fight all of you, even l-like this!”

“Okita-san,” Ritsuka said calmly, “like we tried to tell you before, we’re not here as enemies, we’re here — in the city in general, I mean — to meet with Coil. The reason we’re out here right now is because we’re investigating points of interest throughout the city.”

Smooth, Ritsuka. Very smooth.

Okita looked us over with narrowed eyes and accused, “You’re lying.”

“We’re not,” I said confidently; it helped that I was telling the truth. “Accord arranged the meeting for us for the day after tomorrow. We also met Celtchar down south of Boston.”

Okita’s brow furrowed. “Celtchar?” And then, a moment later, realization bloomed across her face. “Ah! You would be the group who attempted to stop the American Rider from making off with the Grail!”

“That’s us!” Rika said almost proudly.

“American Rider?” I asked. Did that mean he was a Rider from America, or a Rider on the side of America, and what did the latter mean for Coil and his position in things?

“He is a Rider hailing from America,” Okita explained simply. “Because there are other Riders here, it would just get confusing to call him ‘Rider’ all the time. Everyone would start asking, ‘which one?’ so it’s really just easier to call him the American Rider or Rider of America.”

Sensible. It was half the reason we didn’t bother using class names for our own Servants, seeing as we had met numerous Servants of the same class, and it would just get confusing to call for ‘Rider,’ only to have Bellamy, Aífe, and Hippolyta all respond at once. It didn’t hurt that Siegfried was the only one on our roster who had a glaring and famous weakness, and it could barely be called one when you had to get behind a swordsman who wielded a greatsword with the finesse of a rapier.

“You don’t know his true name?”

With the clues I had now, I had a guess, but it would be nice to have some kind of confirmation, or failing that, a few more hints to work off of.

“Master might know,” Okita said with a frown. With some shame, she admitted, “I have to be honest, I never bothered asking. If it was something I needed to know, then Master would surely have told me...is what I think. Until that time, it just isn’t relevant to me beyond idle curiosity.”

A part of me couldn’t believe that anyone could put that much trust in Coil. Another part of me had to acknowledge that Okita came from a culture and era that placed an emphasis on conformity and unquestioning loyalty to one’s lord or commander, inasmuch as I understood what Bushido was and how samurai worked — which was admittedly not as much as Rika and Ritsuka almost certainly did.

A third part reminded me that Coil had held the Undersiders’ leash, too, and they had obeyed almost as unquestioningly for the simple reason that he was giving them something they wanted. It wasn’t until the thing with the release of the E88’s identities and the subsequent fallout had put their lives at risk far beyond whatever they might have tacitly agreed to when they signed onto the team that any of them except Lisa had been worried enough to start questioning whether it was worth staying on and keeping the arrangement as it was.

“We’ll be sure to ask him the day after tomorrow, then.”

“You didn’t expect you might run into this, um, American Rider, Okita-san?” asked Ritsuka.

“No,” was Okita’s answer. “My role is the safety and security of Master’s city. I am Master’s sword, here to carve away the filth that infests this city, whatever form it might take. It would take far more courage than that American Rider has to venture as far into Master’s territory as this.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. There was a line between cowardice and prudence, and a Heroic Spirit from the era of America’s Revolutionary War would surely know the difference. If I knew Coil as well as I thought I did, then he was definitely keeping Medb, Cúchulainn, and Ferdia in the city, too, and that was enough muscle that any Heroic Spirit familiar with their legends would think twice about trying to face them without some serious backup of his own.

“Can you tell us anything else about the...enemy Servants out west?” I asked.

Okita shook her head, frowning. “I’m sorry, but I can’t. Like I said, my job is the protection of this city and its streets. None of the enemy’s Servants have yet dared to attempt a direct assault here, not

since Master drove out all dissident elements. Master would know more — Lord Fionn is leading the fight on the western front, and he reports directly to our Master.”

Fionn? Nothing jumped out at me immediately, but I was sure once we had some time to brainstorm, we’d manage to figure out who that was and what to expect from him.

“I see. Still, you’ve been a great help, Okita.”

Okita frowned. “That doesn’t make up for my initial mistake.” She took a step back, then bent at the waist into a deep bow, deep enough that I could see down the back of her coat and kimono to an expanse of equally pale skin. “Please forgive my imprudence.”

The twins reacted with immediate surprise, and even Emiya’s eyes went wide. Mash gasped softly.

“Ah, no, no!” Ritsuka rushed to say, waving his hands. “There’s no need for that, Okita-san! Really! It was an honest mistake, and no one was hurt!”

“Yeah!” Rika agreed. “I mean, sure, it was pretty scary, and sure, my life flashed before my eyes, but we’re just a pair of kids from Tokyo! You really don’t need to do that!”

“Nonetheless,” said Okita, talking directly to our feet, “please accept my humblest apologies.”

“Of course, of course!” said Ritsuka. “You’re forgiven! Now, please, stand back up? This really isn’t necessary...”

“Fou-kyu fou kyu-fou,” the little gremlin declared stiffly, as though to say, ‘yes, it absolutely is.’ For once, I think I agreed with it.

“Very well.”

Okita slowly straightened.

“If there are no other concerns you feel need addressed,” she began formally, all business again, “then I would ask you to vacate the premises so that I can continue my patrol.”

The twins glanced my way, silently asking.

I reached down the bond connecting me to Jackie. *Jackie?*

We’re done here, Mommy, Jackie replied.

Come on back, I told her. *We’ll discuss what you found once we’re back home.*

Okay! she chirped.

“I think we’ve gotten all the answers we need for now,” I said aloud. “We’ll wait until our meeting with Coil to ask the things you couldn’t answer.” To the others, I said, “Let’s head back.”

They hesitated a brief fraction of a second, but when I turned to leave, they all followed, some of them glancing Okita’s way as she followed us back with those uncannily silver eyes.

“Bye, Okita-san!” Rika said. “It was, um, nice to meet you, I guess?”

Okita gave her a short bow, and then turned away herself once we rounded the corner onto the next street. I lost track of her entirely when she shifted into spirit form, but I had no doubts that she would be on us again in an instant — and far less willing to overlook our presence at Coil’s base — if we turned back around and went snooping again.

Once we had enough distance, I asked lowly, “What was that bowing all about?”

The twins shared a glance, but it was Mash who said, “It was, um, a very respectful bow, Miss Taylor.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Emiya muttered. “Just about the only way she could’ve been more deferential with that is if she dropped into *dogeza*.”

“With or without stripping off her clothes?” Rika blurted out, and then her cheeks turned red and she shook her head. “S-sorry. That was super uncalled for.”

Ritsuka — who, from his expression and the dusting of red on his cheeks, had just imagined exactly what his sister suggested — explained, “*Dogeza* is an extreme form of submissive bow, Senpai. You get on your knees, place your hands on the ground, and then press your forehead to the floor. To apologize in *dogeza* is reserved when you absolutely mean to show your sincerity.”

“The deeper you bow, the more respectful it is,” Mash added.

So the fact she’d bent nearly ninety degrees meant Okita was really serious about how sorry she was? I guess it was one of those cultural things that didn’t translate all that well in the West. I could understand it well enough, but it didn’t seem quite as big a deal to me.

“Let’s just get back to the house,” I said, changing the subject. “We can talk about what we found out tonight there.”

No one protested that idea, so we found a secluded place on an empty stretch of road where no one was watching and mounted up on our bikes again, then took off with a quiet purr. This time, we didn’t make any more stops, and I led us straight home. For now, we didn’t detour deeper into the Docks to check on the ABB and see if we could find anything.

I was beginning to think that there wouldn’t be anything to be found. Faultline had fled the city, and according to the doorman at her club, it was to escape sharing the ABB’s fate. On some level, I’d suspected it. Coil wouldn’t suffer competition from the criminal element in the city, so while I’d left room in there for the possibility that he’d been too distracted running things to bother stamping out the gangs, the signs were pointing the other way around: Coil had likely eliminated all of the major gangs before transitioning to the only major power in the city.

We would have to check, but the Empire was probably a part of that, and maybe even the Merchants. Whether the smaller gangs — and considering how small they usually were, “gang” was being generous — had also been eliminated was another question.

For that matter, where was the PRT in all of this? The Protectorate? The Wards? Even if DC was gone or otherwise unable to keep the peace, I couldn't see any of them just standing back and letting a villain openly take control of not only the city, but the entire eastern United States. Piggot, Tagg, Armstrong — none of the directors I knew would stand for it.

Although without Alexandria and the Triumvirate around, the PRT and Protectorate might be facing their own crisis of leadership.

By the time we pulled back into the driveway at my house, it was already past ten o'clock, and the chill of the night had fully descended, biting at my knuckles and ankles. It was a blessing to slip back inside and into the comfort of a house with an active furnace, and by the grimaces on their faces, the twins thought so, too.

Our mystic codes had some degree of temperature regulation built into them, but they were intended for the extremes to protect us from climates that could very much kill us in minutes without protective wear. Mount Etna was a good example — the heat we'd dealt with there had been as much the friction of its dense magical energy grating against our magic circuits as it had been the scorching environment of a volcano, active or not.

Even so, I wouldn't have said no to something that kept us at a constant, comfortable temperature instead of just protecting us from blizzards and lava pools.

"Alright," said Ritsuka once we had closed the door behind us and gotten comfortable, "so we learned tonight that something happened to the ABB. What else?"

I turned to the air next to me. "Jackie?"

And Jackie materialized. "We looked through that underground base, Mommy," she reported dutifully, "and there were some people down there, but no one that looked like the people Mommy told us to look for."

No Tattletale, she meant, no Coil, no Dinah Alcott. If there were still people down there — Coil's mercenaries, presumably — then the base was still obviously in use, but not necessarily for the purposes I'd originally assumed.

Had he moved to another base, then? It wasn't impossible. Coil was the slippery, conniving type, extra cautious, so if he thought one base was compromised, he would definitely move to another. But if he was in charge of the city — if he was keeping the entire east coast running, as Accord and Celtchar had said, and securing his rule with Servants — then what could send him running from his own base?

"Cobra Commander wasn't home?" asked Rika.

Who? Nevermind. I got the idea anyway.

"It looks that way," I said. Alternatively, he was simply somewhere else for the evening, maybe wrapped up at home as Thomas Calvert, enjoying a nightcap. "With his power being what it is, he might just be at home instead. That doesn't answer the question of where he might be keeping Dinah."

“Maybe he didn’t go through the effort of kidnapping her,” Mash suggested. “Future sight...isn’t a rare ability among Caster Servants, so if he managed to recruit one, then he wouldn’t need her, would he?”

“My sister is far better at it than I am, but even I can use runes to predict the future,” Aífe chimed in. “It simply isn’t worth the effort in most cases, so I don’t see the use in it.”

Arash hummed. “The further ahead you look, the less precise things get?”

Aífe nodded. “Exactly.”

I still didn’t see Coil passing up on a precog as powerful as Dinah. Not unless the presence of Servants skewed her numbers into unreliability, and I’d had that thought before, too. To make things even murkier, the bank job that would otherwise have been used as cover for her kidnapping hadn’t happened here, so I had no idea whether or not he’d made the attempt at the same time or found another opportunity.

“I’ll look it up tomorrow afternoon,” I said. “If the papers still mention her disappearance, then we’ll know he took her, even if not where.” A thought occurred to me. “Jackie? While you were down there, did you see a giant vault?”

She nodded. “We did.”

Shit.

“Was there a monster in it?”

She shook her head. “No, Mommy, it was empty.”

Empty? No Travelers, then, or no Noelle, at least. Had Coil simply disposed of them the instant he no longer had need of them? Had he driven them out of the city? Or had they never come here in the first place as a result of whatever the divergence in this Singularity was?

Another thing I was going to have to look up tomorrow.

“A monster?” Ritsuka asked.

“The Travelers,” I answered. “I covered them during the briefing, remember? Coil had them employed as minions. They’re a nomadic group jumping from city to city, looking for a cure for one of their members. Her power turned her into a monster, mutating her lower half into a grotesque...*thing*.”

“I...” Ritsuka looked overwhelmed. “I’m going to be honest, Senpai, I don’t remember all of the things you covered during the briefing. It was...a lot.”

“I remember,” Mash said. “Miss Taylor said that they were like the, um, the Slaughterhouse Nine, in that whether we encountered them at all would depend on when the Singularity took place. She also said, um, that they might be working alongside the Undersiders, too.”

Ritsuka blinked. “Wait, worked alongside? The Undersiders worked for Coil, too?”

“What?” said Rika. “Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute! Coil’s a supervillain, has the lair and everything! And the Undersiders, that stuff I found online said they were basically petty thieves! They mostly stole from the gangs, sure, but that would still make them villains too, wouldn’t it? And Senpai...” She turned to me, eyes alight with expectation. “Senpai, they were...”

“My friends,” I concluded, and I briefly closed my eyes. What an oversight. “Did I never explain all of this?”

The twins shared a guilty look, then turned to Mash. “No,” she offered. “There was so much that was covered in that briefing, but it got so late that the Director called an end to it before you could explain your relationship to Coil or the Undersiders, Miss Taylor.”

I still wasn’t sure how that had slipped us by. The original briefing, I thought could be forgiven, because there had just been so much to go over and we hadn’t been able to cover everything or get as deeply into anything as maybe we would have liked, but in the time since? Especially when the topic started to become relevant? Not having a good moment to bring it up was a stupid excuse, so I didn’t know —

No. Maybe I did.

“Remember that the Undersiders basically rescued me on my first night out,” I told them all. “They gave me a recruitment pitch the next day, and I...” made a few decisions that weren’t really well thought out, “I went in looking for information first, then found out they had a boss and thought it would be a big feather in my cap to bring him down. But the thing about infiltrating a group that a lonely fifteen year old girl wouldn’t understand —”

“If you make friends with your mark, it gets harder to actually put a knife in their backs,” Emiya said knowingly.

Maybe...I just didn’t *want* to explain it. Didn’t want to drag those skeletons out of my closet and admit that I still didn’t regret them, because despite everything, I cherished the memories of those friends. The moments I shared with Lisa, Brian, Alec, and Rachel, good and bad, I wouldn’t trade them for anything, and I wasn’t sure the twins would have understood.

“So I became a supervillain,” I said simply. “The Undersiders became my friends. I did some things I...wasn’t exactly proud of, but the ‘heroes’ we wound up fighting didn’t do a very good job of living up to the title, so it got easier to let the lines blur about why I was there. Until I found out about Dinah.”

I heaved a short sigh. “To make a long story short, I got into a fight with the Undersiders about Dinah’s situation and our complicity in it, then Leviathan came and wrecked the city, and in the aftermath, I didn’t have anywhere else to go except back to them. Then the Nine came, and the Teeth, and the Travelers’ situation blew up in everyone’s faces, and it seemed like we were the only ones fighting to keep the city alive. Coil...forced my hand, so in the middle of everything else, I had to put a bullet in him. Most bosses don’t lock you in a burning building as a termination notice, though.”

“Hold on,” Rika protested, “you can’t just say, ‘I became a supervillain,’ and then ‘long story short’ the entire thing!”

“If you want a bedtime story, this one will have us up all night,” I told her dryly.

Rika opened her mouth to say something, but Ritsuka cut across her: “I thought you said before that you were a superhero, Senpai.”

“I was,” I answered. “You have to remember, Earth Bet was in dire straits, although not...quite as dire as things are now. If a villain could be reformed, it was better to slap them on the wrist, put them on probation, give them a rebrand, and then ship them out to a different city. Only the worst of the worst got sent to the Birdcage or branded with a kill order.” A little awkwardly, I had to admit, “Dinah...told me the numbers were better for what turned out to be Scion’s rampage if I joined the Protectorate, so I got my affairs in order and surrendered.”

Then killed two more people: a PRT director and Alexandria herself. I...wasn’t sure I’d ever felt as guilty for that as I was probably supposed to. Hard to feel bad about hurting people who used psychological torture tactics to get what they wanted from you.

“After that, they shipped me off to Chicago, and I spent the next two years as a hero preparing for the end of the world. You already know how that turned out.”

“Jack Slash set Scion off,” Ritsuka concluded.

And after scrambling around, mercy killing a toddler, and finding out how the metaphorical sausage was made in regards to powers, I had a messed up teenager fiddle with my brain until the settings on my powers changed. In hindsight, also not the best decision, but considering what probably would have happened otherwise, I was willing to admit that it was probably the only one that would have seen us beat Scion.

“What does it mean then, Miss Taylor?” asked Mash. “If Jackie couldn’t find the people you were looking for in that underground lair?”

“I don’t know,” I had to admit. “For Coil, it really is as simple as him being elsewhere — at home in his apartment or something. For Dinah and the Travelers and...Tattletale, it could mean any number of things. For Dinah and the Travelers, we can at least look up the news articles or check online to see if or when anything happened with them.”

“Wait,” said Rika. “Tattletale is a member of the Undersiders, isn’t she?”

I nodded. “My best friend from back then.”

“Oh.” Her expression fell for a second, and then she rallied. “Hang on, though! Senpai, that other guy whose apartment we scoped out today, he’s an Undersider, too, isn’t he? And it’s not like there were any reports about how they got into a bad fight and died or anything! So she might be okay, too, right?”

“Maybe.”

But Coil had gone to the length of threatening her at gunpoint to make her work for him. Even if he recruited Servants that made the rest of the Undersiders and his plans for them obsolete, I didn't see him letting go of Lisa that easily.

"I don't think there's any point in assuming the worst right now," Ritsuka said. "We're still trying to figure out what happened to all the gangs and how Coil wound up in charge of the eastern US, right? Until we have more information, all we have are guesses that might be wrong."

"Well said, Ritsuka," Arash praised.

He wasn't wrong. Lisa and Dinah... I was sure that Coil had them and wouldn't let them go, and I was just as sure that we were going to eventually wind up fighting Coil before this was all over. But if he *did* have them locked away somewhere, then all we had to do was fix this Singularity to set them free, and everything would go back to the way it was supposed to be. I didn't have to personally go in and tear Coil's entire organization down, fighting through all of his Servants and capes, to rescue them from whatever he had done and wherever he had hidden them away.

I just wished I could convince myself that it would be that easy to stick to that.

"So it looks like the new plan is just to stick to the old plan," Emiya said.

"Yes," I agreed. "Although if we take what the doorman at the Palanquin said, it doesn't seem like your parts in it will be all that interesting."

"Hey, I'm not going to be upset that we won't have to worry about getting into another life or death fight!" Rika said, and then she grinned. "I have to admit, though, I was kinda looking forward to partaking in the time-honored tradition of punching Nazis."

"You might still get your chance," I told her, I just wasn't betting on it. Coil's plan had always been to get rid of the other gangs, hadn't it? So if he'd sent his Servants out to dismantle the ABB, then it was almost certain — like I'd thought earlier — that he'd taken out the Empire, too.

"Don't make a girl a promise, Senpai!" Rika sing-songed.

With all of that settled (and my mistake from a few weeks ago rectified), we discussed mostly a few finer details of our plans for tomorrow. We still needed to get some shopping done so that we could walk around without catching too much attention, but I also gave the twins, Mash, and Emiya a few ideas for where they could go on their "dates" that would put them most solidly in each gang's territory, as well as what to expect if there *was* someone still around to kick up a fuss.

Medhall. That was another topic I was going to have to research. Even if the Empire had been destroyed, that didn't mean that Kaiser was necessarily dead. If Max Anders was still around, that would tell me a few things, too.

As the clock ticked closer to midnight, however, energy flagged and yawns became more common, and it got bad enough that even the seemingly inexhaustible Rika looked like she was having a hard time keeping her eyes open. Since we'd covered all of the important parts, I called an end to our meeting and suggested we all get some sleep.

“Ritsuka, Rika, Mash, you three will have to share the bed in the master bedroom,” I told them. Mash’s eyes slowly went wide as red started to gather on the tips of her ears. “Unless Emiya wants to pull out an inflatable mattress for you, Mash.”

“I can manage that,” he agreed.

“But,” Ritsuka protested, “isn’t the master bedroom your dad’s...?”

“He’s not using it right now,” I said as evenly as I could; Ritsuka flinched, “and it’s way more space than I need. You three definitely aren’t fitting in *my* room.”

“We could...stay down here,” Mash offered. “Senpai and Senpai could both fit on the couch, I think, and I could use, um, Emiya’s inflatable mattress on the floor.”

I gave her an incredulous look, intentionally exaggerated. “When there’s a perfectly good bedroom with a perfectly good bed that we already fixed up for you guys earlier?”

Ritsuka and Mash traded guilty looks, like they didn’t want to offend me and my hospitality — insomuch as I could even really lay claim to this house, considering I hadn’t actually lived here in over four years. It was Rika who, fighting down a yawn, levered herself up off the couch with a little wobble.

“Screw it,” she said. “I’m too tired to be super polite and proper about this. If Senpai says it’s okay, I’m going to go sleep in that nice, warm bed so that I can wake up tomorrow well-rested and ready to face whatever bullshit this place is ready to throw at us.”

And with that, she marched towards the stairs. Ritsuka watched her go, and only once her plodding footsteps vanished up the stairs did he heave out a sigh.

“I guess it can’t be helped,” he lamented, and then he, too, climbed to his feet. Before following after his sister, he said to me, “Thank you for your hospitality, Senpai.”

Mash hesitated for a few moments longer, and then turned to me herself and said, “If...it’s really okay with you, Miss Taylor...”

“Go and get some sleep, Mash.”

With my permission granted, she gave me a short bow, then scurried off to join the twins.

“I guess that leaves us to keep watch,” Emiya drawled.

“Are you complaining?” I asked wryly.

He shrugged carelessly. “I suppose not, when the alternative is camping out on the floor or trying to squeeze into bed with three other people.” He turned and made his way over to the stairs, and over his shoulder, he tossed, “I’ll go and help them get set up. I promised an inflatable bed, so I may as well deliver.”

“Guess that leaves me to take the roof for now,” said Arash. He gave me a friendly smile. “Pleasant dreams, Taylor.”

“Thanks,” I said for lack of anything better. I stopped the reflexive ‘you, too’ that sat on the tip of my tongue and instead nudged Jackie. “Come on,” I told her. “We might as well head to bed, too.”

“Kay,” she mumbled.

As we made for the stairs ourselves, Arash vanished and reappeared atop the roof with a thump so slight and quiet that I could have mistaken it for the usual creaks and groans of the house. A shaft of light shone into the hallway on the second floor, and quiet voices talked back and forth from my dad’s room as the others got ready for bed.

For the first time in four years, I entered my childhood room...was what I would have thought if I hadn’t already been in there earlier in the day. Somehow, it looked different at night as I turned the light on and looked out the window to a nostalgic view that I had once taken for granted. A sudden sense of loneliness struck me like a knife in the gut, and I couldn’t shake the pervading thought that Dad really was gone. The house really was empty. Everything that had made it mine — from the people to the posters to the different bits of paraphernalia that had once sat on the furniture and in the closets — had been stripped out of it.

I was the last of the Heberts, and I was a stranger in my own home.

“Mommy?” Jackie asked, concerned, and I shook the thought away as best I could. The only thing I could do was give her a smile.

“It’s nothing, Jackie.”

We stripped out of our day clothes — me down to my underwear, and Jackie climbed into my discarded shirt, as was her custom — and then shut the lights back off and slipped under an unfamiliar set of bedsheets. My bed, built to house only a single occupant, struggled to accommodate two, but when Jackie snuggled into my chest the way she always did, there turned out to be more than enough room for the both of us.

“Goodnight, Jackie,” I murmured against her hair.

“Goodnight, Mommy,” was her reply.

And I did my best to relax and fall asleep. Down the hall, the twins and Mash settled in, too, while Aífe reclined on the couch downstairs. The house creaked and groaned, and the furnace huffed blasts of heated air through the vents, fighting back against the cold of an autumn night.

But for the chill inside me, Jackie’s presence in my arms was the only thing that warmed me.