Following the return of Bruce Wayne to his post as Batman, Gotham City seemed like it had returned to some semblance of normal...that is, until a mysterious string of thefts and murders begin, untraceable by the police and wiped completely from virtual reality by a hacker whose skills may be on par with Oracle herself. All this while the Batfamily tries to heal their old wounds and unforeseen circumstances force two people to consider where they really stand with each other.

Enter old characters and new in a story about love, murder, shovel talks, computers, pizza, slow dancing, bat puns, family bonding, and above all, Barbara Gordon being the hero of her own story.
So…I’m trying to write another long fic? Am I crazy, overly ambitious, or unrealistic? Most likely, all of the above.

But this was calling my name, and when it said "Oracle...Oracle...write a longfic about Oracle..." I simply could not resist.
Judgement

**Root (n.):** The name given to the most fundamental and most powerful level of access to the system of a computer, or the name of the account that has those privileges. The root can install anything within the computer; create and delete any files it wants. If a hacker gains root within a computer, they have absolute power over the system, and anything that happens within.


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*June*

It was said among the residents of Gotham City that there was not a single normal person living there any more. Most of them carried this title reluctantly, wishing with all their hearts that they could afford to move to Metropolis or Washington D.C. or somewhere they didn’t have to fear for their lives and minds on a regular basis. But for others, it was a badge of pride. For although, naturally, that place had produced its fair share of costumed freaks who wreaked havoc and killed for sport, it had also produced plenty of costumed freaks who saved lives and made an active effort to do good. On days when the rent was due or you were failing your courses or you were hungover in a bathroom or a thousand other little things were happening, it could be comforting to remember that even within your foggy hellhole of a hometown, there was always hope. Always someone willing to do what was right.

But these kinds of thoughts were vacant from Apartment 140 in a second-rate complex in midtown Gotham. Instead, one could find a brand new laptop propped crookedly on the dented yellow plastic of a kitchen table, the blue screen already glowing gray with grease. Around this particular kitchen table on all sides were layers of pictures, pinned to all of the walls with chipped red tacks. The subjects of these were not immediately apparent, as the faded curtains remained drawn across the windows…

That is, until the apartment’s occupant moseyed out from his lonely bedroom and roughly shoved aside the curtains aside.

The muffled clatter of evening traffic poured in alongside the grimy rose light of an early summer sunset, throwing both the walls and the man within them into sharp relief. He himself was slender, mid-thirties perhaps; all in all nothing remarkable to look at, with pallid skin, steel-gray eyes, and the type of blond hair that looked like it had been leached of both pigment and the ability to obey gravity.

Shuffling away from the windows, he made his way towards the kitchen; not bothering to stop and look at the walls. He had already done so so many times, he’d memorized the layout of the pictures.
They were clipped from newspapers and tabloids, or shot by overeager tourists. The most recent of them were from just the previous week; the oldest from nearly seventeen years ago.

The famous black cape and cowl flashed across the walls of course, but there were far more than just him. Five young children in red, yellow, and green grew up across those walls. A blond girl appeared in one purple costume and then another; a different girl in black and yellow. A teenage boy in red with a black hood, a man barely older in black with a red hood. A woman in slinky leather ducked away across the rooftops, a different woman in a blaze of scarlet stood proud and smirked at the viewer. A man in blue and black cartwheeled across a slightly different skyline. New ones kept popping up over the years, but the old ones never disappeared for long; they simply came back under different names.

Which made the redheaded girl in gray and blue all the more enigmatic. All those years ago, after so long crimefighting, she had simply…dropped off the grid. No relocating, no change of costume, not even a record of her death. For all intents and purposes, she had completely disappeared.

Pondering this, not for the first time, but with hardly any intent of actively pursuing the subject, the man in the apartment brewed himself a cup of coffee. It was the instant kind, barely more than grainy sludge, but it was caffeine.

Puckering at the disgusting mess in his cup, the man sat down at his yellow plastic table and touched the keys of his computer. Immediately, his screensaver broke to reveal a wall of code.

For the first time in nearly a week, the man smiled.

As usual, upon that same summer evening, the Batcave was a riot of noise. But what was clearly unusual was that upon that particular day, although the occupants of the cave were doing their best not to acknowledge it, the cave had never had so many people all interacting (relatively) peacefully before.

An odd mishmash of handheld fans, masks, cowls, water bottles, utility belts, and women’s purses were strewn across the floor. A cat and two dogs napped in a corner. A full-grown cow napped in a different corner. Two feet from the enormous blinking screen of the Batcomputer, Red Robin’s cape had been propped up to form the roof of a pillow fort.

Underneath that cape, two young women and a teenage boy played poker for a stack of Oreos. A young man in black leather napped with a copy of The Three Musketeers open over his face. A boy of eleven, nearly twelve, kept one eye on the poker game and the other on the Pokemon gym battle occurring on his phone. Seated just outside the fort, the eldest young man watched everyone else with a slightly bemused smile on his face.

A quiet few minutes passed like this, with the only sounds being the flip of the cards and the muffled snores from underneath The Three Musketeers. It was startlingly sweet and domestic, the kind of willing cooperation that most families would kill for.

Then the blond girl threw down her cards.

“God damn it, Timothy.”

Everyone else looked at her. The snores turned into a loud snort, followed by a groan.
“What did Drake do now?” the youngest boy asked eagerly.

“Yeah, what did I do?”

“Okay, you know exactly what you did.” She lifted the queen of spades and pointed to the corner. “What do you call this?”

Tim scratched his jaw.

“Your chipped nail polish?”

The other girl let out a quiet laugh. Her friend shot her a look of betrayal.

“Stop being a bitch, Replacement,” came the bored voice from beneath the dog-eared paperback. “You marked the deck again, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but I saw Steph stick an ace up her sleeve five minutes ago, and I didn’t say anything about that.”

“That’s because you are an innate failure with no sense of competition,” his younger brother jeered.

“Did you just call me a loser? …That is so little-kid of you.”

“Drake, I can fight you now if you want–”

“Fight him Damian, fight him–”

“Guys, knock it off,” the eldest brother sighed as Damian launched himself at Tim and the last poker player quietly filched three cards from his deck. “Bruce’ll be here any moment, and we’re supposed to be having a meeting, not another fight. Cass, put those back.”

Cass smiled at him and then did absolutely nothing of the sort.

“I don’t think he’ll really be surprised. Asshole doesn’t have much in the way of standards for us, and for once, I don’t blame him.”

“He’s giving us a chance, Jason. Asshole that he is, we should probably do the same thing.”

Jason snorted again, finally prying *The Three Musketeers* off his face.

“And you’re all about second chances, aren’t ya, Dickhead?”

Dick actually grinned this time.

“Always.”

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The code cracked forth to reveal a static-riddled audio clip. It was, unfortunately, far too candid for the listener’s purposes; with the women’s voices mostly obscured by the sound of gunfire and explosions. A different woman cursed in Chinese off-camera, masking the conversation even more.

But after dragging the file into an unnamed audio program most costumed villains would’ve paid
through every orifice in their body for, he could hear them as clearly as if they were normal people
talking on the phone.

“So, how *is* the family doing? Everyone seems so worried about them.”

“Well, they seem to be getting better since B came back; I can’t deny that. But I still think that he’s
tempting fate with this meeting.”

“No faith in your kids, huh?”

“I, I didn’t say that, and 2, they’re not my kids.”

“Oh, don’t give me that. You’re practically Black Bat’s unnaturally young mother, everyone knows
that. Red Robin and Batgirl adore you, Red Hood and Robin actually respect you, and Nightwing—”

“Yes, thank you.”

“So believe me when I say, if they’re gonna listen to anyone, it’ll be you.”

“…”

“Speaking of Nightwing…”

“Don’t you have something better to do than gossip, Dinah?”

“Yes, but gunmen sent from the Yakuza to assassinate Congresswoman Zhang are old news; I
practically won this fight already. Ohh…shit! Shit! He’s got a grenade launcher!”

“You and Batgirl both; one of these days you two are going to give me an ulcer.”

“Stop complaining and tell me what to do!”

“Oh, now you want my help? What happened to you having won this fight already?”

“Stop snarking at me and help, Oracle—”

That was all he had been able to recover from the files inside Black Canary’s stolen earpiece.
Oracle’s tech had been set to self-destruct after a certain period of disuse, intended to destroy all
incriminating conversations. Another wave of smugness swept over him; she hadn’t counted on him
to be able to figure out what Batman was up to, had she?

Granted, most of that conversation was useless to him. But what was there was enough to confirm
that his plan might work after all.

______________________________________________________________

Tim and Damian were in the middle of a two-way slap-fight, Jason was egging them on, Dick was
trying to pry his brothers apart with both hands and one foot, and Cass and Steph were dividing the
Oreo between the two of them when Batman walked in. His steely scowl had many a time caused
new members of the Justice League or the more sensible criminals to start cowering on the spot, but
not a single other person in the room was affected.

With a sigh, he pulled back his cowl. A few graying strands of hair fell into his eyes, and he rubbed
his forehead wearily.

“Oracle, did you say you’d be down soon?”

“I’m pulling into the driveway now,” she replied into his earpiece. “Give me five more minutes.”

There was too much riding on this meeting to try chastising them now. Instead, he sank down into the chair in front of the Batcomputer, tuned out the yelling, and pulled up the relevant file.

*Wayne Industries Employee Found Slain* screamed the Gazette headline. Just beneath it, a headshot of the youngish woman that had been taken from her Instagram page, gingery hair tucked up into an artfully messy bun, a half-smile on her face. A far cry from how she’d appeared when he’d arrived at the crime scene the previous day.

“Well, who’s that?”

Bruce started.

Steph had paused her efforts to stack her sugary spoils of war, her gaze instead trained on the computer screen. One by one, the others all looked up as well, expressions of shock and confusion and resignation playing across their faces. Tim in particular looked like he was trying to swallow a marble.

Cass made two slight hand gestures that might’ve been “Yikes” and “Trouble.”

“She was the new head of RnD, directly involved in our branch of Batman Inc. Her name was Kelly Nolan, and we have no idea how or why she was killed.”

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After retiring the audio clip of the Birds of Prey, the man finished his coffee perusing the the local newspapers. He hesitated just a little longer over the Gotham Gazette, a tiny smile crossing his face over the forefront headline.

But that was over and done with. It would probably keep him going on satisfaction alone for another week, maybe, but there were so many bigger, more exciting things ahead.

He drained and set down his coffee mug before heading over to the nearest wall. The only photo there that hadn’t yet gathered dust: Nightwing and Batman, side by side. The pair of whom had not been seen together in over a year.

Oracle’s tape confirmed it: the original was finally back.

Finally, that woman was good for something.

“So they left no clues, no fingerprints, no residues, and no calling cards?” Jason reiterated. “Definitely not one of our costume-partygoers. I’d say we’ve got a more classic murder going on here.”
“You would know, wouldn’t you, Todd?” Damian remarked.

“So would you, brat.”

“Boys,” Bruce snapped instinctually. As he could’ve predicted, neither of them stopped glowering, but at least they stopped insulting each other. “Does anyone else have anything useful to add?”

“Yes. Have you considered that she was murdered for her connection to developing tech for Batman Inc?” Stephanie asked. “Plenty of people would literally kill to get our tech and then the drop on us.”

“How are we supposed to find out if she was killed for her tech?” Dick interjected. “You said her computer – with all her plans and projects on it – was left alone. But if the killer wanted to steal her ideas, would they be able to steal them between when she was last heard from and when her body was found? Tim?”

“It’s possible,” Tim admitted, staring owlishly at the computer screen. “But it’s hard to believe that someone could break in, commit the murder, clean up after themselves, break into her computer, and download all her plans, without leaving a trace, all within twenty-seven minutes.”

“Not to mention stay off all the security cameras,” Jason pointed out.

“Tt. Obviously, the killer fed them a loop,” Damian sniffed.

“Possibly. But still, the IT guys at the GCPD should’ve been able to break the loop from the real footage by now.”

“Must have…very advanced computer abilities,” Cass mused. “Also, why they were able to break into a Wayne Industries computer and…” She made a quick sweeping gesture. “Steal files so quickly.”

Bruce couldn’t keep down a swell of pride in his chest. It had taken the forensics team at the GCPD hours to determine with what his scattered sidekicks had figured out within four minutes. Already too, Dick’s shoulders had relaxed, and Cass and Jason had inched just a little closer to their brothers. It wasn’t peace or obedience, but it was all he’d ask for at the moment.

Stephanie sat back on her hands and chewed her lip, gazing at the ceiling.

“I have a question though…if the killer left no trace of himself – or herself, or themself, or whatever – then how do we figure out who and where they are?”

“That’s where I come in.”

Every head in the room swiveled around in unison.

Oracle had arrived.

Slowly rolling down from the elevator, Barbara moved with deliberation and confidence; back straight, chin held high. As she got closer, Bruce’s assortment of children and partners all moved closer to her, but that group of loudmouths didn’t speak yet for fear that she had something more important to say.

To someone who didn’t know Barbara, it was hard to tell what about her was so compelling. After all, she was far from appearing like a shining feminine beacon of hope and justice the way other super-heroines were. Rumpled green sweater and faded blue jeans instead of spandex or leather. Her red hair tied up in a messy ponytail; not a trace of makeup on her bespectacled face. The chair of
course, with the one squeaky wheel.

Yet, just as she had all those years ago when she had donned her own cowl, got up in his face, and told him that she would keep fighting crime in his city whether he liked it or not, she commanded everyone’s attention from the moment she entered the room.

Jason was the first to break the silence.

“Long time, no see, Barbie.”

“Long time, no staying off the wanted list, Little Wing,” she returned.

He would’ve punched one of his brothers for that remark. For her, he only said “Touché” and left it alone, a slight smile on his face.

The ice now broken, Cass, Steph, and Tim all darted over towards her. The girls each wrapped the older woman in a one-armed hug, which she immediately returned. Tim bent down until he was eye-level with her and started talking.

“I’m guessing you already know about the details of the Kelly Nolan murder?”

“What do you take me for, Tim?” she teased. “I know everything.”

“Okay, Big Sister. Do you also know a way to get around the ‘no trace’ aspect of the ‘killer left no trace’?”

The girls unwound their arms and stood back. Barbara’s easy smile dropped into a thoughtful gaze.

“Clearly she does not,” Damian inferred.

“She’s working on it—”

“It’s okay, Tim,” she interrupted. “I will figure it out.” She looked up at the computer, and her expression solidified even more. “Whatever this guy’s game turns out to be, or how smart he thinks he is.”

“We know you can do it.”

That was odd. Dick didn’t usually wait that long before offering his opinion.

He snuck a glance at his oldest and saw…oh no.

He knew that expression.

The soft eyes; the tilted head resting on his hand; the goofy, punch-drunk smile…he’d seen it far too many times during the course of their ill-fated romance. Tim and Cass, who’d been there for it too, were already throwing him suspicious looks.

Luckily, Damian was still ignorant.

“Have you contracted some horrible mouth disease, Grayson? Because that look on your face seems to be the result of your cheek muscles retracting and your lips melting.”

Stephanie cackled, Jason sniggered, and Dick desperately clamped his jaw shut.

If he was still in love with her…which it seemed, he was…then Bruce was going to have to watch
him break his heart on Barbara all over again. Their previous relationship had hurt both of them too
much when it ended, and she’d made it clear several times over that she wasn’t interested any more.
This unrequited pining was just guaranteed to get his son hurt.

He’d take an unsolvable murder over his children’s painful love lives any day.

“Anyway,” he said, desperately trying to steer the subject back on course, “Oracle is in charge of
tracking the murderer through any digital evidence of themself they might’ve left in the apartment
building. If she can do that, than we can proceed with bringing them to justice the usual way. The
usual way which will not involve more murder.”

“Love how you looked right at me when you said that,” Jason remarked, insolently ruffling his hand
through his hair. “Really fuckin’ feeling loved over here. Or y’know, as much as I can in this
family.”

“I have another question,” Tim spoke up. “If we’re going to bring the killer to justice 'the usual way,’
why is he here?”

Bruce didn’t know how to answer the question without saying “because we all should be getting
along better” and inevitably starting a fistfight, so he was about to resort to the classic “because I said
so” when Barbara answered for him.

“Because he can get into places we can’t; he has contacts who would never speak to the rest of us. I
think you understand the importance of getting information from every source possible, Tim.”

“You know better than me,” Tim sighed, and didn’t further the argument.

Bruce stared at her. She only arched an eyebrow; wheeling closer to the center of the cave. Cass and
Steph trailed after her; Dick quickly scooted until he was seated beside her left wheel. Bruce stifled a
grimace.

“What’s with the face, B?” Steph asked.

Apparently, his stifling was getting worse with age.

“Headache,” he grunted. “Now—” He sat straight in his seat and pulled his cowl back up, “—if there
are no more questions, we can all get ready for patrol. Tim, you take uptown. Cassandra, Stephanie,
you take downtown. Damian, you can come with me to midtown. Jason, do…whatever you do. And
Dick—”

“Bludhaven’s always slow on Sundays,” Dick interrupted. “I think I’ll stay in town for tonight, be
extra backup if you guys need it.”

As if on cue, everyone turned and stared at him.

A full five seconds passed.

“But wouldn’t it have gotten worse since you’ve been spending so much of your time here as
Batman?” Tim finally asked. “I…would’ve thought that you’d need to spend more time over there
since…well, y’know.”

Since I came back.

Dick shrugged.
“I would’ve thought so too. But nope. I guess they need less vigilante-ing these days.”

“That may be so, Grayson,” Damian said slowly, “but it’s still not like you to not go back and do a preliminary sweep just to be safe.”

Under his siblings’ gaze, Dick chuckled a little bit. One hand slipped upward and began rubbing the back of his neck, the way he always did when he played cards with Alfred and tried to bluff.

“I’ll…be staying with Babs–” Barbara’s eyes narrowed behind her glasses, “–and she’s in pretty much every camera all over the city. So I’ll still be able to keep an eye on things, and help her with the investigation if she needs it.”

Her expression didn’t waver, but her tone was soft.

“I will not need it, Hunk Wonder, but the gesture is appreciated.”

Oh no.

Oh no.

Stephanie shot to her feet.

“I knew it!” she crowed. She began doing a kind of war dance in place, cape flapping and her hands clapping with glee. “I knew it! How long have you two been sleeping together again?”

The effect on the room was instantaneous. Tim gagged on his own spit, Cass broke into a wide smile and began drumming her hands eagerly on the floor, Damian fell over, Jason’s mouth fell open nearly enough to touch his collarbone, Dick started spluttering, Barbara’s face turned almost as red as her hair, and Bruce made a valiant effort to melt into his chair.

Meanwhile, Stephanie kept dancing and chattering.

“Has it been a month? Three weeks? Two weeks? A few days? Oh my god, is tonight going to be the second first time?”

“Stephanie!” Bruce groaned. She ignored him.

“Stephanie,” Barbara managed to choke out. Reluctantly, Stephanie settled into place, and the collective attention turned back to Barbara. “You…you’re right, Dick and I have started seeing each other again–”

Cass and Steph cheered, Tim grinned a little nervously, Jason whistled under his breath, and Damian just looked dumbstruck. Dick got over his embarrassment and began to smile.

“–However,” she continued. The cheering died down. “We’re taking things very slowly and casually, so I don’t want to hear any pressure or matchmaking, okay?”

Those words should’ve been enough to alleviate some of Bruce’s shock. However, he had been still looking squarely at his son when she said that, and he distinctly saw Dick’s smile flicker.

He rubbed his forehead, digging each finger into the lines that had definitely not been there at the start of this meeting.

“If you say so.” Stephanie sounded as disappointed as Dick must’ve felt. Cass made a soft noise of frustration. “But is he really going to keep an eye on things with you up at the Clock Tower, or are the two of you just gonna–”
“Well…” Dick perked up again.

“We are not just gonna have sex,” Barbara sighed. “How irresponsible do you think we are?”

“Just?” Cass questioned. Tim choked again.

“That’s disgusting!” Damian yelled. “People eat up there!”

“Someone eats something all right,” Stephanie whispered far too loudly.

“ENOUGH,” Bruce finally interjected. “If they’re only seeing each other casually, this is not important enough to divert as much time on it during a serious meeting that we have.” Barbara nodded. “We have more urgent issues to worry about besides minor romantic ones. Now, do you think you can all be ready for patrol?”

There was a slow series of reluctant sighs and murmurs of agreement.

“Good. Now if there really is nothing more to be said…”

Barbara dug her car keys out of her pocket, then dropped her arms to the side and began to wheel away. Dick walked just behind her with a hand on her shoulder and his gaze locked on hers.

Jason watched them leave with a curious expression on his face.

“Leave it to Dickie to steal the show, as usual.”

“You call Brown revealing their implausibly unnecessary sexual relationship ‘stealing the show?’” Damian demanded, pulling on his gloves and sliding on his mask. Steph shrugged, yanking her cowl up over her head.

“Um, yeah. I mean, I was gonna shock you all by telling you about my boyfriend, but there he went ruining it~”

“Wait, your what?”

“I knew it!”

“Stephanie!”

With his back to a photograph of Nightwing talking on the com, the man pulled out his phone and tapped on one of five names in his contacts list. The woman at the bank picked up after the fourth ring.

“Good evening, Mr. Drew,” she chirped. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Yes, and I want you to be quick about it,” he rasped, not even bothering to greet her. “I need you to close my account and have the check ready for me by the time I arrive.”

Several seconds of static.

“Did you drop the phone?”
“No, Mr. Drew.” She was clearly fighting to keep her customer-service tone. “May I ask why? Is there about our services that you find—”

“No, you may not ask why.” He hung up without waiting for another question; within a few more swipes of his finger he had remotely contacted a Caribbean holding account, unlocking it for future transfers and deposits. Lastly, he deleted the number to the front desk of Gotham Regional Bank off his contacts list.

The apartment took in the last of the evening light with a sigh, the curtains caught in exhale. The last of the sunlight disappeared over the top of the skyline.

He shoved his phone into his pocket, grabbing his wallet and car keys off the table beside the computer. When he left, the door shut with a bang, ruffling the nearest pictures.

The picture he had been ignoring, loosely pinned, fell to the floor.

It was fairly good quality, for a tourist’s photo that he had stolen from the records of a camera store a few years ago. Nightwing had been caught standing on the rooftop, his posture relaxed, the mask slightly crinkled with his smile. The only blurry part of the photo was his mouth, which had been mid-sentence when the middle-aged mother of four from Central City had become overcome with youthful feelings and snapped the picture. What he’d been saying was impossible to make out from a still picture, and the photographer herself had been unable to tell from the ground. But if you asked Nightwing himself, he could’ve told you that he’d been saying:

“Okay, I gotta go now, but good luck with the case! I love you too, Babs.”
The Hermit

Chapter Notes

Aaand we’re off! Brace yourselves, things are gonna be getting very exciting very quickly.

If you have any questions by the time you’re done reading this, which I expect you to, don’t worry. All will be explained soon.

(Minor warnings for non-graphic descriptions of physical illness and vomiting, if that bothers anyone.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes


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**September**

For the last month, as Gotham remained relatively quiet and the investigation refused to progress, most of Barbara’s days seemed to blur into themselves.

Yet the mornings still stood out, in clear tandem, despite the routine she dedicated to each one.

Wake up half an hour before dawn, turn off her backup alarms, wheel herself into the bathroom and hoist herself into the seat of her shower.

The nights had barely begun to cool, so the thrumming stream of water remained lukewarm. She remained hyper-aware of the pounding of the water, the cool froth of shampoo in her hair, the sweet mint scent of her soap. All sensations were heightened.

Because the morning was also filled with a blurry head, an aching chest, and a churning in her gut.

As soon as she got out of the shower she vomited bile and mucus into the toilet, flushed, then brushed her teeth; praying that it wouldn’t come back during work hours. The dull aches in her body faded into background noise while slowly pulling on her clothes, and by the time she made her way out to the balcony to drink decaf coffee and watch the sunrise, her head had steadied itself again.

Barbara knew that she only had half an hour at the most before she would be expected back online.
So she savored the tang of the coffee and the damp, mild wind against her skin as the sun climbed, marigold-orange, above the slate-gray smog, and the hum of morning traffic became a roar.

But she was soon startled out of her reverie by the ring of her cell phone.

Sighing, Barbara set the coffee mug on the floor of the balcony and wheeled backwards into her bedroom. She swept the phone off her nightstand and checked caller ID.

“Cass, what’s the matter? Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine.” The younger woman’s soft voice grated like sandpaper over Barbara’s nerves.

“Are you sure? Because I can’t think of many reasons why you’d call so early, unless–”

“No, I’m fine. But…Helena…told Karen who told Kon who told Tim who told Steph who told me…that you’re sick. That you should take a break.”

Damn Helena.

Barbara ground her teeth and glared back out at the balcony, making a mental note to turn off her mic the next time the nausea came back.

“It’s just a bug, Cass. It’s nothing to panic over.”

The thirty seconds of total silence that followed managed to say a lot more than ten minutes’ worth of most conversations.

“I know you’re worried about me, but I’ll be fine.” The lie slipped out with disturbing ease. “Besides, would you take a break from your night job over a little bug?”

“……no. But…they said you’ve been sick for three weeks now.”

“Well, it’s not getting any worse–” Another lie. “–so I’m assuming that it’ll get better soon.”

Cass let out a quiet sigh, and Barbara’s heart twisted.

“If you say so.”

“I do.” She willed her tone to become gentler. “Don’t worry about me. And good luck with that scheduled bank robbery this afternoon.”

“Okay.” Click.

Barbara hefted a sigh, rolling her shoulders back and moving back out to the balcony. The blurry exhaustion had settled back over her, made worse by the knowledge that the Birds and the rest of Bruce’s partners were guaranteed to be up in her business by lunchtime.

She took another sip of her coffee, then made a face. It had gone cold.

The second Cass hung up the phone, Tim and Steph looked around their mugs and the enormous stack of syrup-drenched toaster waffles at her.
“She won’t take a break,” Cass reported. Steph groaned, shoveling a forkful of Eggo in her mouth.

“She’s exhausting herself,” Tim sighed. “Coming from the resident king of exhausting himself, that’s saying something. Last time I saw her, it took her like, five seconds to recognize me. And this was with the glasses on.”

“No mask?”

“No mask. And the Superboy t-shirt. How many other people do you know who wear Superboy t-shirts unironically?”

“Kon does. Always.”

“Well, yeah, but I’m half his size.” He did his best imitation of Martha Kent’s voice; which was still not the best imitation Cass had ever heard. “‘Conner, dear, why are you kissing a bag-eyed seventh-grader?’”

“Not the point, Tim,” Steph interrupted with as much dignity as she could with a mouth crammed with waffle. “It’s not like her to be irrational about rest and taking care of herself when she’s sick…I mean, it’s not unrealistic to say that she can still do most of the same hacker-genius stuff from bed with a cup of tea, right?”

“Well, yeah. What’s unrealistic is me being able to understand you with that much food in your mouth.”

“I’m gonna spit it in your lap, Timothy.”

Cass cleared her throat.

“You’re right. This isn’t about us, it’s about Barbara.”

Cass settled back into her seat at the kitchen table, satisfied.

“If she won’t rest, I could brew her some of my extra-concentrated espresso, leave it in the pot all day, and then pour a can of Monster in it,” Tim mused. Cass’s satisfaction abruptly evaporated. “That’s what I always do when I don’t have time to sleep.”

Cass slapped the table, making them both jump. Then she slapped the table again with each word. “You. Will. Kill. Her.”

“Okay, okay, half the Monster then.”

“Alfred?” Steph yelled, leaning over in her seat towards the living room. “Do you have any ideas for something we can give a tired woman with stomach flu that won’t give her five heart attacks?”

As if summoned by magic, Alfred emerged in the doorway; still toting the vacuum cleaner attachment in one hand and the feather duster in the other.

“I’ll make Miss Barbara some chicken soup this afternoon. And if I were you, Miss Stephanie, I would ’accidentally’ drop some medicine into her present before you give it to her tomorrow. It’s similar to what I do with Master Bruce when he tries to prioritize his work over his health.”

“You mean when he’s a stubborn manbaby?”

“Yes, that as well.”
Cass couldn’t stop herself from smiling this time.

It had only taken her five minutes to dump her coffee cup in the dishwasher and move from the
kitchen to her workspace.

Thirty-seven unread messages awaited her; including three panicked voice calls, a ridiculous amount
of junk emails for the most secure computer on the planet, a reminder from her father regarding their
movie outing on Sunday, three unsolicited nudes that were definitely not from Dick, and one
notification of an opened com line.

She deleted the irrelevant messages and put on her headset. The com line hissed into life.

“…you there, Oracle?” Behind Dinah’s voice, there remained the steady creak of cheaply welded
steel and the rhythmic metal slap of waves against the hull.

“Hi, Canary. How’s the bust going?”

“Not much different than when we hung up yesterday, but I think we’re getting close to the
rendezvous point. Though it’s a bit hard to tell just from listening through the door. Most of them
don’t speak English, and I know Spanish, not Portuguese.”

“Hang in there, I’ll get a read on your location.”

She quickly traced the feed from Dinah’s communicator, then pulled it up on her map. The computer
hummed, spitting out coordinates as faint voices shouted and cursed in Portuguese from Dinah’s end
of the line.

“I’d say, at the rate your ship’s moving, you should be at the rendezvous point in an hour or so.”

“Thank god.” There was another metallic groan, presumably from Dinah leaning her seat back.
“These ropes are itchy as hell.”

“Could be worse,” Barbara reminded her. “Remember Apokolips?”

“Don’t talk to me about Apokolips. Oh! Or remember that thing with Penguin? Or the gorillas? Or
every single time I had to team up with Selina?”

Barbara laughed.

“How about all those times with Lady Shiva? Or back when we had to deal with Blockbuster? Or –
my personal favorite – Joe Gardner?”

“I still can’t believe I kissed an alien clone!”

“I’ll do you a favor and not tell Red Robin you said that,” she teased Dinah. The shudder on the
other end was almost audible.

“I know you like that kid, but I’m telling you, he is one tragic backstory away from being an evil
genius.”

“I think there’re enough tragic backstories in this family as it is.” She stretched her arms up and out,
swallowing down the wave of acid in her throat. Dinah’s half-serious sigh fizzled out into a crackle of static.

“And I thought my personal life was a mess.”

*You have no idea.*

“I like to think that mine is relatively easy. Put in a few hours at the library’s website, put in a few hours saving the world, get a snack or go on a date in between. You know, the simple life.”

“Ah, so it’s just your kids-and-dad-in-law that are crazy?”

The joking air deflated like a punctured balloon.

“Dinah.”

Dinah didn’t apologize; only let out a long breath out her nose.

“You know I’ve asked you not to say things like that.”

“What? Kids?”

The glare practically crackled down the comline.

“Sorry, I know what you mean. But seriously, Babs—”

“Oracle.”

“Babs. This great, wonderful thing that got away before, now literally fell back into your lap. You’ve been back together for three months, and you won’t admit that you’re even exclusive.”

“We’re not even exclusive. He’s got men and women lined around the block who’d kill to—”

“Have you slept with anyone else since you two got back together?”

The truth was, she hadn’t.

There’d been a few attractive people willing to go out with her, sure, but they never made it beyond the second date or a kiss on the cheek. Not to mention the dates had quickly fizzled away after the first two weeks, when Lani Cho (aka Cute-Dimples-Lani) had refused to go out any more with “someone who clearly has a boyfriend” and didn’t believe that her thing with Dick was still fairly casual.

Even the first time she and Dick had been “not together-together,” she hadn’t wanted for other suitors. She chose to believe that this time, the lack of other dates was because she’d been devoted to her work more than ever recently. But even still, since she couldn’t exactly tell them what kind of work she’d been doing, she couldn’t quite fault them for thinking that she’d been spending most of her time with Dick instead.

She could, however, fault Dinah for being nosy.

“Whether I have or not isn’t the point. We’re not going to rush back into something serious, considering how we left each other and our work relationships after we broke up.”

“Why wouldn’t you be serious now? You were serious as hell back then. Everyone thought you were going to get married! There was literally a Justice League betting pool about it! Victor Stone
was the bookie, if you must know, and Kyle Rayner had all his money on a rooftop wedding with live music and Wally as your maid of honor.”

She ground her teeth.

“Does this spiel have a point, Dinah?”

“Yeah, it does. Don’t make the same mistakes you did last time. If you two are even bothering to make the effort to be together again now, I say you should just say ‘fuck it’ and run off to Vegas the instant your dads’ backs are turned.”

Barbara rubbed her temples; which did absolutely nothing to stave off the oncoming headache.

“I can’t believe I’m getting life advice from a woman tied up by Brazilian pirates on a Jamaican cargo ship on her way to be a Spanish fence’s third wife.”

“Hey, this bust was your idea, oh wise and all-knowing Oracle.” The last part had a little more bite in it than it normally would’ve. “How is it that you can be so smart about books and plans and machines but so stubbornly blind about romance?”

“I’m going to go check up on the other people in Gotham.”

“Barbara, don’t let go of your chance this time—”

“Oracle out.”

As soon as she turned off the line, she tasted bile in the back of her throat. She threw the headset somewhere off to the corner and grabbed the trash can; buckling over and emptying her stomach of the coffee she’d drank.

Perfect. Not only had she alienated her best friend, but now she didn’t even have the decaf placebo effect to stave off her fatigue.

Way to go, oh wise and all-knowing Oracle.

“Oh come on!” the last perp complained as Ayesha slapped a pair of cuffs on him. “It’s not my fault! He pulled a gun first!”

Ayesha, bless her, ignored the stream of protests and loaded him into the back of the police van, slamming the door shut.

“And that’s five down, the entire rest of this city to go,” she grumbled. Fists banged against it from the inside, but the disruption didn’t seem to bother her. “Welcome to Bludhaven. Population: a million damn crooks.”

“At least it’s not Gotham,” Dick pointed out, smiling a little. “There, the population is millions, plural, damn crooks and no overenthusiastic rookie cops.”

It was a clear day, with swaths of blue poking through the smog and only a faint cool breeze to indicate that autumn had arrived. It was already ten in the morning, and nobody had reported in a felony yet. There had been fresh chocolate donuts left in the rec room even after the usual crowd had
moved through. For the majority of the BHPD, that was as close to heaven as a living person could get.

“Way to be the optimist, Grayson.” Ayesha rolled her eyes, but even her scowl began to fade. She readjusted her hijab and strode over to the driver’s side of the van, clambering inside. “And I may be a rookie, but at least I’m not an old man like you. See you back at the station.”

With a squeal of the tires, and a roar of her favorite classic-rock station coming to life, she drove off. Dick chuckled.

“And she calls me an old man.”

One more sweep of the precinct, and then his shift would be over. Of course, there was the ever-growing stack of paperwork on his desk to get done, but at least he’d had the foresight when coming back to the force to pick the desk next to the window.

He clambered into the driver’s seat of the squad car and flicked on the Top 40s station. Upbeat pop music jumped into life, and between that and the broken seatbelt buckle, he was so preoccupied that at first he missed the flash of red outside the window.

The civilians on the sidewalk, however, had no such things distracting them.

“Who’s that clown-looking motherfucker?” a short man with a magenta fro-hawk demanded. The woman beside him with gang tattoos and a dress that implied it was midsummer instead of fall scowled her agreement.

“First of all, my mother may have been a junkie, but I would’ve never disrespected her like that. Second of all, don’t compare me to a clown; I was murdered by a clown once and it offends me.”

Dick slowly turned his head around.

It was the completely wrong city, thirty-three miles and a turn off the interstate away; but sure enough, his brother stood on the sidewalk him. Fresh leather jacket and secondhand guns and an expressionless helmet that still couldn’t hide the sarcastic voice.

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“Now that’s a man with a lotta internalized pain and self-hatred,” a different woman in a chiffon skirt observed.

“And I’ll take 'totally obvious’ for $200, Alex.”

“Red Hood,” Dick interrupted. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I’m not here to get grilled by the cops, that’s for sure. I’m here for Nightwing; have you seen him lately?”

It was all Dick could do not to roll his eyes.

“Red Hood?” exclaimed Chiffon Skirt’s denim-clad friend. “The crazy vigilante from Gotham?”

“S’not like Gotham needs no more crazy vigilantes,” Gang Tattoos muttered around a mouthful of gum.

“I need to talk to Nightwing,” Red Hood said again. “Annoying as he is, we’ve got business to attend to.”

“What kind of business?” Dick asked, despite himself.
“Nothing illegal, officer.” He said “officer” not unlike the way G. Gordon Godfrey said “Justice League.” “But if you must know, he stole my girlfriend and stiffed me a thousand dollars for a bet. I’m gonna beat his ass for it.”

This time, Dick really did roll his eyes.

“The violence stems from my childhood trauma, Officer Grayson. You know, crappy father, premature death, selfish brother, that sort of jazz. And if any of you see Nightwing, tell him to meet me for an ass-kicking on top of the police station roof at 8 pm tonight.”

“This ain’t Gotham, y’know,” Fro-Hawk grumbled. “We sure don’t know where the hell Nightwing is. And I dunno what you’re checkin’ the cops for, neither; ain’t like they interact much with their local vigilante here.”

“Just thought I’d ask. Ladies, gentlemen, Officer Grayson – don’t wait up.”

Toting the AK-47 over one shoulder like a messenger bag, Red Hood hailed a taxi and clambered into the backseat. The taxi then vanished, leaving behind a cloud of exhaust and a sinking feeling in Dick’s chest.

“Good thing that guy’s usually Batman’s problem instead’a ours,” All-Denim remarked.

Dick twisted the key in the ignition port; the car spluttering to life.

“Y’don’t think he’s going to be our problem while he’s still here?” Chiffon Skirt asked.

Dick looked back up, his gaze following the direction that the taxi had gone in.

“I guess that’s for Nightwing to decide.”

Barbara had been staring at Kelly Nolan’s picture in the paper for what felt like days, but had probably only been half an hour. The other woman appeared far younger than thirty-three, not unlike how she herself had looked when she’d still been running around in a cape and cowl.

The fact sheet she and Bruce had compiled on Nolan glared back on her from the opposite screen, intimidatingly useless:


Hometown: Gotham City (Burnside; aka “Gentrification City”).

Family: Mother, father, two older sisters (both married with children).

Education: Bachelor’s in economics, Master’s in both computer science and business administration.

Joined WayneCorp as an intern at age twenty, got a paid job by age twenty-one, rose to a position of command by age twenty-nine. Became involved in Batman Inc just two months before she was murdered (“Not a lot of time to gain information; if that’s what she was killed for,” Bruce had mused).
Spent most of her free time at home alone or at the greasy-spoon diner three blocks from the building she worked at. The diner staff claimed that she never did anything there but drink coffee, eat apple pie, and work on her laptop. Not particularly popular among her peers, but not particularly disliked either. No romantic partner, no children.

Barbara’s gut twisted.

“Don’t judge me,” she muttered.

Taken from the GCPD’s forensics files: tox screen revealed trace amounts of tetrodotoxin; which matched the needle-sized puncture wound on the back of the victim’s neck. Minor defensive injuries, indicating an average-sized assailant fighting a slight woman who had been swiftly weakened by the poison. But no DNA from anyone other than herself had showed up anywhere on the victim.

This was going nowhere. She closed the factsheet and the newspaper article and instead pulled up the security footage, broken down by the pixels, side by side with a wall of code. The videos of the fire escape and the lobby were still infuriatingly empty – aside from the desk clerk asleep in his seat. At the same time, the apartment door remained firmly closed for the entire length of time between when Nolan came back with her mail and when the landlord dropped by to inform her about the rent to instead find the lock picked from the outside and his tenant dead.

Nolan’s killer had to have some kind of individual cipher that they had used to cover themself from the security footage. All codes had a way to translate them, right? All she had to do was figure out what that was, apply it to the code, and then dissolve the false footage. Simple.

Ha.

She still knew absolutely nothing about the killer or their motives, so how the hell was she supposed to know what dialect of this language they spoke?

This couldn’t go anywhere either until she knew more about the person behind the act.

Anonymity. She couldn’t operate without it, but then again, neither could the murderer.

Nolan’s computer would have to suffice as her Delphic fumes, for now.

She clicked open the machine, with its sleek screen and lack of any personal decoration, and input the passcode that she’d figured out within the first day of the investigation: 19bbkane39.

The computer came to life with a welcome purr, opening on to the file she’d been last looking at. But today, it wasn’t the current contents of Proposals For Next Summit she was interested in.

As she began to bring the computer’s backup system to life, her headset buzzed.

“‘You there, Oracle?’”

“Where else would I be?”

“Fair point.”

Bruce’s gravelly voice was making it a bit difficult to focus, but she could make do.

“Is Black Bat still with you? Or is she already done with the bank robbery?”

“She’s a rooftop over, waiting to jump down. The Riddler and the Penguin are about twenty feet away from being just below her.”
“Rest in peace, Riddler and Penguin,” she joked. “I’d hate to be them when she leaps down.”

“Later, I’ll tell you about the looks on their faces when she jumps…there she goes!”

Barbara could’ve sworn she actually heard Nygma’s and Cobblepot’s screams when Cass hurtled down on them from at least four stories up. She knew that she heard Steph cheering only a few feet away from Bruce’s earpiece.

“Batgirl’s there too?”

“You know her and Black Bat: chained at the hip.” A note of disgruntlement slipped into Bruce’s proud tone. Barbara held back a laugh. “But that’s not important. Made any progress with deciphering the code?”

“No. But I think I might be able to recover a copy of the files downloaded from the laptop, see what the killer was specifically after.”

Might was an understatement. She was already downloading the files onto a separate folder, which would be easily transferable onto her own system.

“Seems sloppy,” Bruce mused. “All that work into erasing themself from the footage, and then none into making sure you couldn’t tell what they were after.”

“Yeah. I’d like to think it was a misstep on their part, but…”

Barbara suddenly had a horrible thought.

“Batman.”

“Yes?”

“What if they wanted us to know their motive?”

For a full five seconds, the only noise she could hear from his end was Steph whooping and jeering at Nygma and Cobblepot.

“Then I trust you to also figure out why they wanted that.”

“Understood. I’ll send you a copy of anything I find.”

“Thank you. Batman out.”

Good old Bruce. He may have been the most pressuring, emotionally-stunted ass she’d ever met, but at least he knew how to keep his work life separate from his personal life and give his coworkers some space. Those kinds of habits may’ve been irritating for someone like Steph or Dick, but it was extremely convenient for when she had to work with him and didn’t want to answer any more questions.

Download Complete, the computer announced. Backup Files Successfully Recovered.

Within a few more keystrokes, she had sent the information to her system and pulled it up before her. The churning in her stomach turned into a sinking.

_Batman Inc: Communications and Funds._
“Hey, Oracle? It’s, um, it’s Black Canary. I got the information out of the pirates, and I’m en-route to Barcelona right now. And…look, I’m sorry about earlier. I stepped out of line, and I shouldn’t have…hello? Oracle? Are you there?”

Bludhaven stretched out below the police station like a carpet of gray quartz. Scattered, stray window lights glittered orange, and the crisp dusk wind smelled like exhaust and marijuana.

Nightwing swung down from the nearest rooftop with a hiss of his line, alighting with barely a sound.

“You’re late,” Red Hood remarked. His voice was slightly muffled from under the helmet.

“Last-minute mugging.” Nightwing wound his line back up and headed over to the far side of the roof.

His brother was seated on the very edge; propping himself up with his hands behind his back, and his feet swinging lightly over the side the way he used to when he was still Robin. The childlike pose made an odd contrast against the plethora of guns, knives, and the faint scent of cigarette smoke.

“If I say those cigarettes are gonna kill you someday, will you shoot me?”

“Nah. You die one time, you learn to numb yourself to it.” Without warning, he reached up and unclasped his helmet with a click and hiss. His tufty black hair with the single white streak poked up in all directions like hedgehog quills, but his eyes remained hidden behind a red domino mask. “It’ll happen to you too sometime.”

“So…” Dick sat down next to Jason, propping his knees up and wrapping one arm around them. He forced a lighthearted air into his tone. “You really gonna kick my ass? In defense of my alleged stealing, Roy and I were friends long before you were even running around in green hot pants.”

“Those I blame you for, by the way, Mr. Walking Fashion Disaster.” Jason paused. “Come to think of it, I blame you for a lot of things.”

Dick winced.

“Which brings me to the reason I dragged myself out to the world’s second ugliest hellhole.” Jason rummaged around in the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Dick patiently held a hand over his nose while Jason lit one up and inhaled. A ragged, lengthy exhale followed; blue smoke curling over the horizon like dragon’s breath. “It’s about Barbara.”

Dick’s chest tightened. His heart began to speed up.

“Isn’t everything?” he asked. But the joke – well, half-joke – fell even flatter than the previous one had.

Jason took another long drag on his cigarette until the tip glowed scarlet.

“To be perfectly honest, I never knew what she saw in you. Even when I was just a kid running around in your hand-me-downs, she seemed like…I dunno, the fucking sun or some shit. She encompassed everything; still does, y’know?”
He did know.

“I never loved her the way you do, though. Even I, the stupid fucking naive kid, could tell that you were hers, through and through. And that half of it, I understood.”

“Jay…when you were Robin, I was still with Kori.”

“I know.” Jason paused, tapping ash over the side of the roof. A car horn honked in the distance. “But anyway, you two have been officially back together for a few months now. I guess… I actually want you two to work out. So don’t fuck it up this time, Dickhead. If I were you, this time, I’d ditch the casual, non-exclusive bullshit and just say the words ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend.’”

“But it’s just like last time. She doesn’t want us to be called ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’ yet, Jay,” he blurted. “She wants to keep taking it slow for at least a few more months, I’d guess. I mean, I can understand if she’s okay with seeing other people too for a while longer, but I haven’t slept with anyone else since we got together.”

There’d been quite a few offers, naturally. Not to mention a lot of complaints from people who heard he was “off the market,” despite his insistence that she was taking it slow. But then again, what with the picture of her on his desk at the station, and his eagerness to talk about her to anyone who’d listen, maybe it wasn’t so hard to believe that she was his girlfriend.

For the first time, Jason looked less sure of himself.

“That…sucks. You guys not being together, I mean; not you not sleeping with other people.”

“Thanks.”

They sat in silence for a few moments; feet dangling six stories about the busy street.

“I’m worried about her, too. She’s been sick for too long, and I think it’s because she’s overworking herself.”

“Fuck if I know,” Jason shrugged. “My idea of taking care of my body is to slap a band-aid over a bullet wound and call it a day.”

“You and Bruce are the single reason why healthcare for everyone else is so expensive. But seriously,” he added hastily upon seeing his brother’s expression, “I wish there was something I could do to help her.”

“Honestly? Just support her, dumbass. Be there for her. That was your first instinct, I’m guessing?”

Nods. “Much as I hate to admit it, your first instincts are right a lot.”

Dick smiled a little bit.

“I’m starting to see why you and Roy are doing so well.”

“Well…” A little bit of a blush actually crept up under the mask. Dick gently shoulder-bumped him.

“C’mon. Give yourself a little credit. Two guys with one adorable little girl, being loving partners and fathers? While at the same time being vigilantes and a crime lord? Not everyone can pull it off.”

“I honestly cannot tell if you’re fucking with me right now.”

The smile became a laugh.
“And to think, I was always so sure I was gonna be the first one of us to be a dad.”

“First of all, I’m more of a stepdad right now, or, in Lian’s exact words, 'Daddy’s special friend who has sleepovers sometimes.' Second of all, you’ve still got time to catch up; don’t worry about it.” He paused. “Third of all, thank god you didn’t have kids first, because your little half-alien babies would’ve made people uncomfortable.”

“They would not. They would’ve been adorable.”

“Only if they’d taken after Kori alone.”

A perfectly fair and valid point.

“So…” Dick let go of his knees and mimicked Jason’s pose. “As long as you’re here, wanna go catch some bad guys together? There’s plenty here for both of us, believe me–”

Jason was on his feet in an instant. His shoulders had tightened; his face twisted up in disgust.

“What? Stay here? With you? Sorry Dickhead; my love for Barbara only extends far enough to giving you a chance. And I’m still not entirely sure that I won’t regret it.”

He picked up the helmet and fitted it back into place. Then he walked to the edge of the roof and climbed down the drainpipe. Before long he had vanished down the blue-lit streets, leaving Dick with the faint impression that when he’d said “chance,” he hadn’t just meant with Barbara.

“So let me get this straight. You figured out that Creepy Killer Guy–”

“We don’t know yet if it’s a guy.”

“Right, right, equal opportunity feminism. You figured out that Creepy Killer Guy, or Girl, or Individual Who Doesn’t Identify As Either–”

“Can’t you just say Creepy Killer Person?”

“Can’t you let me finish?”

Barbara massaged her temples with even more unnecessary force.

“–that they were after the people Batman Inc, and by extension, Batman himself and the rest of your Bat Scooby Gang, have been most in contact with. And I’m not a genius like you, but even I can guess that if they’re a regular person, they’re probably not stupid enough to go after the Justice League…which narrows it down to all you guys’ contacts in Gotham and Bludhaven.”

“Pretty much.” Barbara sank backwards into her chair and gazed out the window. She would’ve said that it had gotten dark, but in Gotham, dusk actually wasn’t much darker than the average high noon.

“That’s great!”

“You don’t have to sound so jubilant, Dinah.”

“Not Creepy Killer Person being after you and your friends. I mean, this is the best lead you’ve
“Yeah.” She wearily swept some hair out of her eyes; her glasses falling down the bridge of her nose. “I guess I am.”

“Listen. I’m taking the next plane out of Barcelona ASAP. I was going to go back to Star City for some personal stuff, but if you want, I can fly to Gotham instead. Tomorrow’s your birthday; I can crash at your place, we can get dressed up, and make a night of it! What do you think?”

Barbara’s shoulders slumped. She’d been afraid of this.

“Dinah…I have too much on my plate for a birthday party. We’ve left the killer alone for three months; who knows which of the people we rely on he’ll go after next? I’m really sorry, but I can’t celebrate this year.”

Silence. Then a deep sigh down the end of the comlink.

“Yeah, plus you’re sick.”

“It’s not the sickness that’s–”

“Don’t bullshit me.” Dinah didn’t even sound angry or resentful; just tired. “I know there’s something that you’re keeping to yourself. And look, when you’re ready, you’ll tell me what that is. I just hope you’re able to catch Creepy Killer Person and figure things out with Dick in the meantime.”

“Dinah…”

“I gotta go. Plane to catch.”

The line went dead before she could say “please don’t lose your com again; I worry about you” leaving Barbara feeling, if possible, even worse than before.

She slumped back against the back of the wheelchair, gazing out the window.

This brooding spell lasted approximately thirty seconds.

Then she pushed her glasses up her nose and went back to work; this time alone except for the gentle whir of the computer and the ache in her belly.

The next day dawned quiet over Wayne Manor. The sculptured lawns glowed like peridot under the orange sun, topiary animals sloping gently skywards. Ace and Titus had been let out on their morning romp around the grounds, wagging their tails and sniffing the flowerbeds. Alfred the Cat perched in a gleaming windowsill, neatly licking his tail.

The floors had been swept. The carpets were beaten free of debris. The banisters had been polished to a mirror-like gleam. All was still and peaceful; even the odd dust motes seemed suspended in the air.

But of course, Damian ruined it.
Both dogs tilted their heads back and started howling. Alfred the Cat hissed and darted off into the pantry. The original Alfred stopped dusting the bookshelves just long enough to raise an eloquent eyebrow.

The pounding of footsteps on the stairs must’ve had the neighbors a mile away convinced that the local zoo was having an elephant stampede. But instead, it was caused by an angry eleven-year-old trying to duck two of his older brothers in their pajamas, one of which was brandishing a bow tie.

“Father! Help me!”

“Come on Dami, it’s Babs’ birthday! All the rest of us are gonna get dressed up!”

“Todd’s bow tie has been around his wrist since he came in an hour ago and you said nothing about that!”

“It’s Cass’s job to bother Jason; she’s the only one he’s gonna listen to. Get back here, brat!”

“Tim!”

“Dick!”

“Damian!”

“My word,” Alfred remarked.

“Grayson! Drake!”

“BOYS,” Bruce bellowed up the stairs. His attempt at authority was somewhat undermined by the bedhead, stubble, poorly-tied white bathrobe, and carpet slippers. “Stop screaming!”

“He said, while screaming,” Jason remarked as he walked by. He had shaved and gotten rid of the leather since the previous night, but the collar on his shirt had been deliberately turned up, and he was indeed wearing his bow tie on his wrist.

Bruce rubbed his forehead.

“Damian,” he called up again, “Stop biting Tim’s hand; you don’t know where it’s been. Tim, go down and help Stephanie with the cake. I don’t trust her to be alone with the oven.”

Neither of them moved.

“You’ve been gone too long, old man,” Jason snorted. “Nobody’s gonna listen to you anymore.”

“Don’t you have presents to put out, Jason?” His second son rolled his eyes and walked away towards the living room.

“Guys,” Dick said from the top of the stairs. “Do what Bruce said.”

Bruce’s head whipped around as Damian reluctantly spat out Tim’s hand and Tim subsequently made his way down the staircase.

“I did that because Drake’s hand is disgusting, not because you told me to, Grayson.”

“Duly noted.”
As Tim walked by towards the kitchen, Jason’s comment began to hit uncomfortably close to home. After he’d been gone a year…most of them had gotten used to having Dick as the leader and head of the family.

Bruce pushed the thought aside. Dick’s sense of independence had already compelled him back to Bludhaven. His eldest son trusted the others with their space, anyway. It was only a matter of time before he would be able to re-establish himself into his children’s lives.

Besides, Dick was too young to make himself responsible for an entire family.

“Hey, B?” Stephanie hollered from the kitchen. “I think I’m going to have to start over with the icing; I’m pretty sure it’s not supposed to be this color.”

Of course, there were still some aspects of the children’s lives he’d decided that should probably not get involved in.

Barbara hadn’t been expecting the call when it came.

She’d been sitting at her usual spot, drinking ginger tea and keeping an eye on Kate and Charlie via a hacked security camera, when her headset buzzed.

She immediately put the caller through.

“Oracle…” Tim. And he sounded panicked. “Come…come back to the Manor right away. It’s an emergency.”

Without even responding, she shoved the tea mug to the side and rolled as quickly as she could to the door, snagging her jacket on the way out.

It had to be serious, if Tim had called her with her headset instead of her cell phone.

“What’s the matter, Red Robin? Is someone hurt? Was there another mass breakout from Arkham? Has our security system been compromised?”

“It’s too much to explain over the line. Just please hurry back as fast as you can.”

The line cut off. Cursing, she slung it into her purse and slammed the elevator button.

The ride down to the street seemed to last much longer than thirty seconds (thank god she’d talked Bruce out of installing music in the elevator; the last thing she needed right now was the easy listening station). She struggled into her car, jamming her chair to the side and slamming the vehicle into gear.

The twenty-minute drive to the manor – choked with traffic and smog – was worth a night in Arkham and a trip to Apokolips with all the horrible possible scenarios that kept playing through her head. The Birds’ most disastrous missions were nothing compared to the idea of the family being compromised.

But finally, finally, she made it over the river and to the manor. She pulled along the lengthy driveway and into the garage, screeching to a halt next to two limousines and a Lamborghini. Then she hurried out of the car and up to the first floor.
The wheels of her chair squeaked against the marble floor as she moved down the silent hallway. The spotless walls loomed up on both sides, portraits of Waynes from the last three hundred years looking down at her with Bruce’s glower. The staircase was abandoned; the rooms all empty. As she rolled past, the only sign of life was Alfred the Cat’s meowing at her from the pantry.

She slowly headed towards the living room. It appeared just as unoccupied as the rest of the house.

“What happened to…?”


She stopped.

Suspicion took hold in her mind.

To be certain, she wheeled just a little bit closer to the doorway. Sure enough, she could hear soft voices emanating from the empty room.

“Anyone there?”

Absolute quiet. Then a brief cough.

Barbara stifled a groan. For a family of night-stalking vigilantes, they were remarkably unsubtle.

“Well, since there’s obviously nobody here…” she began sarcastically.

“SURPRISE!”

Everyone leapt up from behind the couches in unison; all of them wearing dresses and suits paired with conical paper party hats. Bruce had accessorized his with a scowl that didn’t really match the pink polka dots. Alfred managed to make his green-and-yellow-striped hat look dignified, but even if he hadn’t, she would’ve forgiven him for the massive chocolate cake in his hands.

Stephanie ran over, her orange hat clashing with the lilac dress.

“Did we get you?”

“Yes, I was absolutely shocked.”

“I told you it wouldn’t work, Brown,” Damian sniffed.

“See, right there, right there is why I didn’t and don’t listen to you. Your voice is so much higher pitched than mine.”

Damian puffed up like an angry kitten while Tim laughed until his hat fell off.

“You know, it doesn’t matter if we didn’t get you. We can still party!”

Her eyes fell back to the cake. Happy Birthday Barbara had been spelled out in green icing among blue roses and matching green leaves, dotted across the fluffy chocolate frosting. Pinpointed across that were miniature white candles. Alfred had somehow managed to fit all twenty-nine of them on there without obscuring the pattern.

Twenty-nine. God damn.

“You’re an old lady now,” Jason teased. “So I think it’s past time to mention that you’re way, way
“He’s six years older than you, Jason,” Tim interrupted. “If he’s a child, what does that make you?”

“I’m not the one dating a woman who’s a generation older.”

“I’m okay with it,” Dick interjected from the couch, his voice immediately drawing her gaze. It had been nearly a week since they’d last talked in person, and despite everything, Barbara’s heart still softened upon seeing him. He’d draped his arms casually around the back of the couch; his hair had been swept up to fully reveal his amused expression. His blue party hat matched his shirt and his eyes.

Jason scoffed.

“You only say that because you’re used to it. From an outsider’s perspective, such an old lady sleeping with someone fresh out of boyhood seems a little bit–”

“Suspect?” Bruce finished.

“Oh for – not you too – HE’S ONLY THREE YEARS YOUNGER THAN ME.”

“Excuses!”

“I don’t think you have anything else to say for yourself, Ms…uh…” Jason snapped his fingers. “Damn it, I had something for this.”

“Barb Cougar Mellencamp?” Tim suggested.

Everyone looked at him at the same time. Stephanie offered her hand, and he wordlessly high-fived it.

“That’s…better than what Jason had,” Cass said.

“Yeah, thanks Tim.”

Tim did a very bad job of hiding a smile.

“Y’know Tim, because of the clone thing you’re like, chronologically, ten years older than Kon. And Jason, Roy is five years older than you; both of you shouldn’t be throwing rocks.”

“You just be glad I’m not throwing bullets at you, Dickhead.”

There was an odd inflection on that sentence that Barbara couldn’t understand. Not to mention, the glare that Jason threw his brother at the end of it.

Suddenly, her newfound lightheartedness evaporated.

“Would you care for your presents now or after you have cake, Miss Barbara?” Alfred prompted.

“I–” Her chair creaked backwards; “I actually don’t think I can eat any cake. No offense, I mean, it’ll probably just come back tomorrow.”

“Yeah, you’re still throwing up, huh?”

Now the inflection she didn’t like was in Stephanie’s voice. There was also a look of dawning comprehension on the younger girl’s face – but not like she thought that Barbara was lying.
Worse.

“Yes Steph, I’m still sick.”

“I figured.”

“At least have some of Alfred’s chicken soup. And it’s okay if you take a few minutes off from the investigation to open your presents; we won’t blame you.”

Her insides clenched.

Dick had gotten off the couch and made his way over to her. He wore a look of pure concern, and it made her chest ache in a way that had nothing to do with the physical problems.

“Besides, having your food out is better than having it in-fluenza. You know? Because it’s stomach flu?”

The entire family groaned in perfect unison.

“Grayson, your jokes are making the rest of us ill.”

Under any other circumstances, Barbara would rolled her eyes and smiled. But instead, she backed away from him. The hopeful smile turned into an expression of hurt.

“I’m sorry, Dick. But I really have to go. All of you…” She addressed the room. “Thank you for the party, and for everything else. But I can’t keep you waiting for a lead any longer, and I don’t want to get the rest of you sick too.”

Most of them looked mollified by her words. But Jason and Cass still seemed concerned, Steph still looked suspicious, and Dick was still hurt.

“Take all the time you need to finish up,” Bruce said gruffly.

“But at least take some medicine, Miss Barbara,” Alfred insisted, as Steph fished out a bottle of Tums and he pressed it into her hand. “Especially if I spent last evening making soup for nothing.”

“Fine, I’ll take the soup too.”

“And your presents,” Tim added, dumping a veritable mountain of wrapped gifts into her lap.

“Would you like me to carry you out too while I’m at it, Tim?”

“I’d like to see that,” Cass said eagerly.

“Someone just help her get her things to the car.”

“Bruce, I don’t need anyone to carry my things—” she protested while Damian’s present fell to the floor with a metallic thump. It sounded suspiciously like yet another weapon.

“I’ll do it,” Dick volunteered immediately.

Jason’s eyebrows shot up into his hairline. Bruce let out one last sigh and waved his hand.

“Just please don’t deface any of my cars while you’re out there.”

“That was one time…” Dick muttered, picking up the Tupperware of soup along with half the
presents and following her out. As they left, the last thing Barbara heard was Cass saying, “Don’t worry...they’re not going to have sex,” and Damian complaining, “So I had to wear this godforsaken tie for nothing?”

The two of them walked in silence down to the garage, still not saying anything as they loaded her things into the trunk. Then he reached for her...scooping her out of her chair with one hand and folding the chair into the space beside the driver’s seat with the other.

She held on to his shoulders before he put her down in the seat, taking some comfort in the moment of intimacy. As she turned her key and tapped the hand controls, he didn’t leave just yet, and she didn’t tell him to.

“Good luck with the case,” he finally said.

“You too.”

There was another moment of quiet.

“Happy birthday, Barbara.”

I’m being unfair. It’s not entirely his fault.

So she leaned out through the open car door and kissed him. He made a soft sound of surprise, then kissed her back, bare hands clutching her hair like he didn’t want her to leave.

When she finally pulled away, some of the hurt had fallen away from his face.

“I was beginning to think you were angry at me.”

She flinched slightly.

“I’m not angry at you.” Well, that was mostly true. “I just have a lot on my mind right now; and way too much to figure out. I need to get back on top of things as much as I can.” That was wholly true, if not the whole truth.

“Oh.” He stood up straighter. A little bit of self-assurance seeped into his shoulders. “So I’ll see you again soon?”

“As soon as I can manage.” She rolled down the window and shut the door. Her tone became lighter. “I hope you don’t expect any more hot dates in those dresses Kori keeps sending me any time soon, though.”

“I might expect them. You won’t be able to stay away forever,” he teased.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” she half-joked. “See you soon, Dick.”

“Let’s hope so.”

She backed out of the garage and drove away from the manor, her mind on that look on his face.

She was still thinking about him and his family when she headed back up the Clock Tower, struggling to keep all the presents from falling over in the elevator. She dropped them in scattered, multicolored constellations all across the living room floor as soon as she got home; shoving the chicken soup in the fridge and gulping down two Tums dry.

It only took a minute for the omnipresent queasiness to subside, but that was only one problem dealt
The computer remained churning with notifications. The line on her headset had opened; she could hear Helena yelling about killer mimes from the bottom of her purse. Her friends and family were still concerned, and worse, suspicious.

Not to mention the question her current situations still begged: what was she going to do?

Chapter End Notes

Hit me up if you wanna talk about what each of the Batfamily gave Babs for her birthday.
Chapter Notes

Before you come at me after reading this, don't panic. I promise that none of the characters listed in the tags are going to die. I have other things in mind for them instead...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The High Priestess (Tarot): Upright – Intuition, higher powers, mystery, subconscious mind.
Reversed – Hidden agendas, need to listen to inner voice.

As Stephanie waited up in Tim’s bedroom, lying on his unmade bed and gazing up at the glow-in-the-dark star stickers he’d put on the ceiling when he was thirteen, she felt painfully aware of her perceived role within the family.

More so than usual, anyway.

Even as a civilian, she stuck out from the actual Wayne kids. The general public thought that she was the worst Robin, the least memorable Batgirl. That she wasn’t good enough to be a partner or a girlfriend. Most days, Bruce seemed to barely tolerate her being Tim’s and Cass’s best friend. She was the sidekick who couldn’t even die right, the teen mom, the poor girl from the East End, the fuck-up.

Which was why she had always been determined to do something right. Today of all days especially.

The door creaked open, snapping her out of her spiral. She bounced upwards and turned her flat-on-her-back pose into a fidgety half-lean.

“We got your text,” Tim announced, nervously shuffling his hand through his mop of hair. His sister followed in silently, her soft brown eyes filled with concern. Steph’s heart clenched just looking at her. “What did you mean you had some detective work to show us? Did you find a lead on any of our investigations?”

“Should I get Bruce?” Cass inquired.

“No!”

Both siblings started.

“Um, I mean…no. This probably isn’t something he’s going to want to hear.”
“But if it’s detective work…”

“Trust me, Tim,” Steph insisted, “this kind of detective work is not for Batman’s ears. Or the GCPD’s ears. Or…you know what, maybe we should just keep it to ourselves for now.”

“Okay.” He held up his hands. “I know you said not to worry, but right now, this kind of sounds like I should be worried.”

Cass inclined her head to the side.

“No, I don’t know what it could be. Steph? What kind of investigation are you conducting that you don’t think Bruce should know?”

Steph took a deep breath, then yanked out her phone and clicked into the Notes app. On a second thought, she also clicked into Spotify and started her “Detecting” playlist.

The theme song from “Where In The World Is Carmen Sandiego?” started up.

“First things first, this is about Barbara.”

Cass’s eyes grew wide. A grim expression settled in over Tim’s forehead.

“There are some things about her that I’ve been thinking about since her birthday last week…”

The thick-bitter-acid scent of instant coffee had filled the apartment again. To pass the time while it brewed, Avery Drew busied himself with improving his interior design.

The process was a slow, delicate one. With great meticulousness, he trimmed excess paper from the pictures he’d printed; turning them just so, careful to not to cut off the corners.

Those pictures had been far too easy to obtain. Knowing what names to look for, the first thing that had popped up was the two eldest children’s social media accounts. Nearly at the top of the oldest girl’s Instagram feed was a picture of the entire family clad head to toe in horrible, knockoff Justice League merchandise; most of them grinning at the camera, the father with an embarrassed smile. The girl’s right arm were slightly in the foreground; indicating that she’d taken the picture.

He finished trimming off the picture and reached for the plastic box of tacks. He selected a blue one before taking it and the picture to the wall.

He laid the family picture directly on top of an ancient newspaper article about the first Batgirl, then drove the tack in with one fierce push. The old newsprint crackled in protest at being disturbed.

“Thanks for the picture, girl,” he murmured to her frozen smile.

Tam Fox said nothing in reply.
The heating system in Tim’s room hummed with mild content at the shut windows and the locked door. To the occupants, it was bordering on stuffy; especially with the minefield of dirty laundry and dog-eared books on the floor, the half-eaten meatloaf on his desk, and the framed pictures that had fallen off the walls on top of his unwashed cape.

“…Can we open a window?” Cass interrupted before Steph could lay out her evidence. “Your room is…hmm…gross.”

Tim drew back in affront.

“My room is just fine.”

Cass reached over, pulled the cape out from under the panorama of all the Teen Titans making silly faces, and gingerly sniffed the hem. She then handed the cape to Steph, who recoiled.

“Ugh, your cape smells like my mom’s scrubs do after a shift in the infectious diseases ward.”

“My cape does not have infectious diseases!” He took a sniff. “…Though, that being said, maybe I do need to do some laundry.”

“Understatement.” Steph picked her phone back up. “But unfortunately, we can’t open a window. If the old man’s creeping around on the grounds or a floor below us and happens to overhear, he might have an actual stroke. And that would be a tragedy.”

Knowing from experience what Bruce could be like, both siblings ignored the obvious sarcasm.

“So…” Cass braced her palms against her thighs. “Tell us what you know.”

Meeting her best friend’s gaze, Steph couldn’t put it off any longer.

Her chest constricting, she looked back down at the notes on her phone. Although these had only been compiled one sleepless night ago, the first point had been figured out approximately a month previously.

“Okay…fact number one: even factoring in the extra work she’s been putting in on the investigation, she’s seemed way more tired than usual.”

“And you wouldn’t let me give her caffeine,” Tim remarked to his sister.

“It’s a good thing she didn’t let you give her caffeine,” Steph said before Cass could respond. “Speaking of which, fact number two: all her coffee for the last couple weeks has been decaf. Usually, she only drinks decaf in the afternoon, and even then, only on days when she knows she’s not going to be up late.”

Tim nodded, like what she was saying was finally sounding relatable to him. Steph smirked a little.

“Fact number three: she’s almost completely stopped wearing bras.”

He yelped and nearly fell off his bed. Both girls burst out laughing.

“Which,” she finally gasped out, “cause she’s, y’know, bigger than us and normally never goes without bras at all, we can infer means that her old ones don’t fit her anymore. Oh, stop looking at me like that Timmers; it’s a perfectly normal thing to notice about your mentor.”

“I never noticed anything like that about Bruce,” he protested, clambering back into his seat.
“Considering how many times he’s taken someone back here just since I was un-banned from the Batcave, I think that one’s down to you being willfully ignorant.”

“Bruce wears bras?” Cass interjected.

“I don’t know, Cass. I just told you, I try to avoid noticing things like that.” He turned back to Steph. “So what does her being…I mean, getting…I mean, why does it matter that she can’t wear her old bras anymore?”

“I’m getting there. Hope that you’ll start noticing if anything sounds familiar.”

“Familiar?”

She met his gaze. In that moment, she remembered a similar conversation she’d had with him a few years ago; laying out the facts and seeing if this young detective could figure out what was happening to the girl he liked.

“Yep. Familiar.”

The layers of files before her were staggering in their numbers. Gotham had always been a hotbed for do-gooders just as much as it was a hotbed for cruelty and corruption, but until piecing them together, it’d still been hard to visualize just how many people the family had associated themselves with. Or, her personal favorites, the ones that had associated themselves with the family without considering whether Bruce would want more vigilantes in town.

The GCPD seemed a likely target for another murder; the few honest cops had always been necessary for putting the criminals behind bars. But they all had guns, and no moral qualms about using them.

The masks allied with the family but who preferred to operate alone obviously had less protection, but on the other hand, it would hurt Bruce less to go after them instead of his children.

It was the Wayne Enterprises employees and the immediate family that seemed to be in the most danger – that was, if the killer was reckless enough to try murdering one of the higher-ups or an angry vigilante with emotional issues.

Logically, it made no sense. If the killer was cautious enough to cover up their tracks so well, why would it seem like they would be careless enough to go much more difficult targets?

At least she knew who to warn, now.

This time, the insistent buzz of notifications that startled her out of her thoughts came from her computer and cell phone instead of her headset.

The first message, copied to her from Bruce’s work email, was Lucius Fox; agreeing to back the request for extra security measures to be placed on the WE buildings and computer systems.

She let out a small breath of relief.

Then she checked her own phone, and that relief morphed into resignation.
She quickly fixed her computer so that work-related messages and calls would go to the Batcave, then removed her headset before sweeping her belongings into her purse and heading to the door.

“So what else have you noticed?”

Steph shifted in her half-reclined pose, bouncing her weight between her hand and her legs. She wasn’t even looking at her phone anymore.

“Fact number four: she keeps going offline for a couple hours during the day every so often. She says that she’s going to ‘dentist’s appointments–’” She sat up just long enough to make exaggerated air quotes, “–which is a pretty obvious lie; her teeth are perfect. And even if they were riddled with cavities, there’s still no need to go to the dentist twice in two weeks. Number five: she hasn’t bought tampons in nearly two months – Tim, how is it that your sex-repulsed ass nearly had an aneurysm about breasts, but I barely get a flicker out of you about vaginas?”

“There’s no way you can think about periods in any kind of sexual context.”

“Depends on who you ask.”

In almost slow-motion, the two of them twisted their entire bodies around to stare at Cass. She blinked twice.

“Who…who exactly have you been talking to about that?”

“Kate Kane.”

Steph said “Figures” at exactly the same time Tim groaned “Wait, do you mean you girls have sex with each other on your periods? Oh god.”

“I don’t have sex. And your room is worse,” Cass rebutted.

“That’s…there’s no blood in that meatloaf.”

“Anymore.”

Steph didn’t even bother telling them to shut up.

“Number six, and I think this one wraps things up pretty well: according to like, six relatively legit medical websites, the only way the symptoms of stomach flu last longer than a week-ish is if the person in question either has allergies, which she does not–”

Tim was paying attention now. Comprehension was finally beginning to fold open across his face.

“–really really needs to go to the hospital, which she doesn’t seem to, or–”

The penny dropped.

Tim stumbled back, nearly falling off the bed again.
“Oh my god.” He paled. “Are you saying that–?”
Steph nodded very slowly.
“Oh, yeah.”
“Oh, wow.”
“Oh huh.”

The two of them stared at each other. She with earnestness, he with astonishment. As the phone’s battery died and the music came to an end, there was a rare moment of silence for their little gang: the three college-age kids with matching messy ponytails and faded jeans, she in a lilac blouse, he in his silly *May The Mass Times Acceleration Be With You* t-shirt, and Cass in the oversized black hoodie that was probably not hers.

Cass.

She was the only one of them that still looked confused.

Right, of course. No experience.

“Cass…” She put a hand on her best friend’s shoulder. “She’s…”

“The doctor will see you now, Mrs. Gibson.”

Barbara glanced away from her book long enough to see the older woman totter out of the waiting room and after the nurse. The others gathered around her let out a collective sigh; frustrated in their inability to be chosen.

This was probably the oddest gathering of women she’d ever been a part of; including the female members of Justice League or her teammates on the Birds of Prey. The teenage girl on her phone with green hair and tattoos down her biceps was seated next to the thirtysomething woman in a burqa who was reading *The Hitchhiker’s Guide To The Galaxy*. An elegant businesswoman with cornrows and a tie under her blazer sat next to a brunette with a spiky pixie cut and a vaguely steampunk outfit who in turn sat next to a suburban housewife type in a floral sundress who had an Iron Maiden song scrolling across her phone screen. A lesbian couple who looked like they’d stepped out of a country music video were deep in conversation with a middle-aged woman who was dressed in practical pantsuit, albeit entirely in shocking magenta.

Some of them weren’t yet or were barely starting to show. Most of them looked like they were ready to give birth in the middle of the waiting room.

Compared to all of them, Barbara felt pleasantly inconspicuous.

Settling back into her chair, she turned the next page of *Serial Killers: The Method and Madness of Monsters*; letting the mild chatter of the other women fade into background noise. It was almost comparable to the steady typing of a keyboard.

“Hello! Mind if I sit here?”
She started.

The woman standing above her had a soft black bob and almond-shaped dark eyes. She was perhaps two or three years younger than Barbara herself, dressed comfortably in jeans and an oversized Batman t-shirt, the sort that most locals wouldn’t be caught dead in. A wedding ring glinted on her left hand.

“Sure, go ahead.”

The woman sat beside her with startling grace, leaning in close. Barbara lifted the book again.

“I’m Maria, by the way. Maria McGinnis.”

“Barbara.”

Maria smiled cheerily, reaching for a magazine – before she abruptly froze. She glanced back at Barbara’s face.

“Barbara Gordon?” she exclaimed.

Three other women looked over in their direction.

“Shhh!” She scanned the room, then leaned in closer. Maria’s eyes had gone wide with excitement. “Yes.”

“I had no idea that you–”

“That’s because I don’t advertise it.”

“Oh.” Maria finally lowered her voice. “Yes, I’ll be quieter now.”

Barbara nodded, leaning forward into her book.

“So which of the Wayne men was it?” It was far too loud to be considered a whisper.

“Whah–” She could feel herself turning red. “What do you–”

“I didn’t mean anything by it!” Maria said quickly. “It’s just, your family spends a lot of time with their family, that’s all. You seem very close to them. But if I’m wrong–”

Barbara’s fingers twisted over the edges of her book.

“Yeah, we spend a lot of time together. But that doesn’t mean that–”

“Right. Yes. I’m sorry.” The younger woman ducked her head in embarrassment.

Still flushed, Barbara turned her eyes back to the words on the page.

_Policemen would tell you that most murderers, when they killed, did not know they were going to kill […] Serial killers deliberately and relentlessly hunt down their victims with the sole purpose of coldly murdering them. The motive for a serial killer does not arise from factors in his relationship with the victim – there usually is no relationship. The serial killer generally preys on strangers for a complex set of motives known only to him._

“Of course,” she muttered to herself, “with every ’generally,’ there are exceptions.”
“Ms. Gordon?” drawled the bored nurse.

Her head snapped up.

“The doctor will see you now.”

She marked her spot and slipped the book back into her purse. As she wheeled over to the door, she could feel every envious eye in the waiting room against her back. Those were no matter.

What worried her were the few curious ones.

“So…now that we know…what will we do?” Cass wondered.

The three of them had left behind the overpowering mess of Tim’s room, and instead made their way to the staircase, where the cat had curled up directly in their path. The delicate spice of chicken curry had wafted up through the house, making the dogs sit up and sniff the air.

“Alfred is a godsend,” Tim sighed, picking up the cat and dropping him away from the top of the stairs.

“I don’t think he appreciates you grabbing him like that, though.”

“Wha – not the cat, Steph.”

Alfred the Cat hissed indignantly, clawing at Tim’s leg.

“I swear, he has it out for me personally,” Tim grunted, dodging the claws. “And uh, to answer your question Cass, first things first Steph and I are gonna call in sick.”

“The opposite of what Barbara’s been doing,” she noted. “But none of you are actually sick.”

“No, but the daughter of one of the leaders of the Italian mafia is getting married this afternoon,” Steph explained as they started down the staircase. “I have a one-o-clock class with an essay I haven’t done due, and Tim’s supposed be sitting in at a meeting with Bruce and the board of directors. Both of us are very happy to be missing those things in order to go bust some wedding guest heads.”

Cass inclined her head forward slightly. Then her forehead twisted up in thought, and she stopped dead in the middle of the stairwell.

“Cass?”

“Barbara.”

“Huh?”

“She’s been lying to us.” There was no hurt in her voice, only palpable concern. “But she’s scared; feels out of control. Feels alone, too.”

The pair of friends exchanged a long look.
“We should talk to her,” Tim decided.

“Cass and I’ll do it,” Steph agreed. “You’ll just have bust wedding guest heads without our charming presence.”

Tim nodded. There was nothing personal about it; he just wasn’t a woman. All that mattered to him in that moment was what was best for their mentor, and right now she needed to see other women. Besides, he thought wryly, in her current predicament, he wouldn’t blame her if she didn’t want to talk to any of his male relatives.

“Okay, so it’s settled,” he said as they reached the bottom of the stairs. “I’ll go arrest the mafia family, and you girls can go deal with the issues of our family.”

“What issues does our family have now?”

All three of them yelped and jumped back; smacking their heels painfully against the bottom step.

Bruce had appeared, designer suit-clad and briefcase in hand. His face was marred with a curious frown.

“Nothing!” Steph exclaimed. “Nothing. Nothing’s wrong. We’re all fine. How are you?”

Cass elbowed her. Steph shoulder-bumped her in return.

Bruce stared at them for a long few moments. Then he sighed and dragged a hand through his hair.

“You don’t have to keep secrets from me, you know.”

“Who’s keeping secrets?” Steph said at the same time Tim said “Actually, yes, we do.”

Both of them glared at each other.

Bruce’s frown became less curious and more stern.

“Tim…”

“You don’t want to know,” Cass interrupted. “You. Do not. Want to know.”

His gaze fell directly on his daughter. She stared back at him.

Until finally he sighed and shouldered the briefcase.

“I’ll tell the board you won’t be coming in today, Tim. You and Cass have a good day. Stephanie… do whatever it is you do.” He disappeared through the grand doorway.

“Nosy old asshole,” Steph muttered, straightening back up and starting off toward the kitchen.

“Do you think he’s on to us?” Tim asked, almost jogging to keep up with her pace.

“He knows we’re hiding…something,” Cass informed them. “But he has no idea what it could be.”

“Does he want to find out?”

“Yes.” That much was obvious. “But doesn’t know how to right now.”

A general feeling of relief settled over the trio.
“No wonder you wanted to keep it quiet,” Tim remarked to Steph. “If he found out he was—” He looked around, then lowered his voice, “—going to be a grandfather, he might’ve gone into shock. He’s still not thrilled about Dick parenting us, albeit with a lot of favoritism involved, while he was gone.”

Steph snorted.

“He might be happier if he knew that Dick really needed a parenting manual sometimes. Or should I say needs?”

“Wasn’t that bad. Just… he was a big brother. Not quite a father. Not to us.”

“Glad you were the better for it, at least. And that reminds me.” Coming up on the white sunlit doorway of the kitchen, Tim glanced around. “Has anyone seen the demon spawn?”

“Master Damian is taking his lunch here with me,” Alfred reported, appearing in the doorway backed by a corona of sunlight. He had dispensed with the party hat that particular day, opting instead for the “World’s Greatest Grandpa” apron that Selina had given him as a joke, and that had instead turned out to be quite fitting.

Steph privately wondered if anyone would try to re-gift that apron to Bruce sometime within the next few months.

“And you know I can hear every word you say, Drake,” came the sulky, pitched voice from behind Alfred. Framed by the doorway, Damian sat rigidly at the kitchen island, stirring at his curry with a fork. Steph instinctively took a step towards him.

“Yeah, whatever.”

Cass glanced quickly at her youngest brother, then looked back and gave Stephanie a look of concern for his sake. But she didn’t voice anything to the rest of the kitchen’s occupants.

“I guess… food is more important than phone calls right now,” she remarked instead.

“If Alfred’s cooking, then yes.”

“You flatter me, Master Timothy.” Despite his words, he looked very satisfied with the compliment. “However, I would recommend eating all of it this time, or perhaps saving it in the refrigerator instead of your desk.”

Tim actually looked abashed. Damian’s sulk broke for a moment and he sniggered.

The girls exchanged another look, this time of amusement; their difficult task momentarily less daunting.

Pit-tip-tap, tappity-click-tap.

The fresh bottle of vitamins sat on her desk alongside her tea mug and Batgirl plushie, the cap slightly loose from where she’d taken one half an hour previously. Otherwise, nothing else seemed to have changed about her surroundings.
Click-tap, clackclackclack.

“Huntress? What? No, I’m fine. You survived the killer mimes? And the cocaine smugglers? They were involved with each other…I’m sure there’s a joke about not being able to feel or move your face in there somewhere. You want me to…okay, give me a minute; tell her to keep the guards occupied while I get you in.”

She stuck the remainder of her snack – saltine crackers dipped in Alfred’s chicken soup – between her teeth and tapped a few more keys. Several loud beeps emitted from the screen.

“Oh, you should be good now. Call me back when you’re done.”

Barbara leaned back in her seat for a few moments, stretching her arms and twisting her neck. Her stomach seemed to be taking a minute to decide whether or not the crackers and broth were worth staging another coup against her.

In the meantime, she put through another line.

Before he could even say a word, his surroundings punched through the wires and into her eardrums.

Screaming in both Italian and English intermingled with cursing; while the odd explosion made sure to chime in. Layered underneath the rest of the cacophony was the ever-present rattle of gunfire.

“But another day at the office, Red Robin?”

“You know it.” A woman’s voice yelled something about her father’s honor and…something else about cannoli? “Half the mafia is after my head and I think the new wife is getting a bit impatient over how long they’re taking.”

“Everybody wants to kill you? Sounds inconvenient.”

“Not really.”

“Vito!” the same woman screamed from the other end. “Vito, where are you? Get over here!”

“What is it, cara mia?” a man’s voice answered indistinctly.

“Oh, you’re not dead yet. Tesoro, get me my shotgun; your sweet blushing bride is getting a bit antsy for this brat’s head on a spike.”

“You know?” Barbara remarked. “I think their marriage is actually going to work out.”

“Right? Oh. Hello, Antonia. Did you like the wedding present I got you?”

Antonia hissed something in Italian and Barbara heard the click of the gun cocking.

“Red Robin, get out of the way!”

“You don’t have to tell me twice!”

The shotgun roared. Glass shattered and a different man in the background wailed at the top of his lungs.

Barbara contemplated taking another sip of her tea.

“So what wedding present did you get her?”
There wasn’t silence on the other end, exactly; what with the snarling fire of the shotgun and Antonia shouting out some very creative uses of the word “motherfucker,” but Tim was definitely putting off the question.

“…handcuffs.”

“What?”

“I got them a pair of handcuffs – stop laughing! It was supposed to mean that I was going to arrest them!”

“You are–” she wheezed between chortles, “–probably the only one who would’ve interpreted it that way. Especially at their wedding.”

“We can’t all be kinky freaks like you, Oracle.”

“I’ve run into that problem myself a few times.”

“Eww.” There was a grunt and a clatter, as well as the undefinable sound of a table being flipped over. “Ugh, this would go so much quicker if Batgirl were here–”

Barbara sat up straight; all laughter gone.

“Batgirl’s not there? You said that you and she would be taking this case. Is she all right?”

Tim went quiet again.

“Red Robin…Timothy…”

“Batgirl’s fine,” he said way too quickly. “She just…had to do something else instead.”

“Something else?” she echoed. “But it’s the middle of the afternoon, and Batman’s not assigning any more missions until tonight. Is she actually going to her class this time, or–?”

“Not my place to explain. But uh, good luck with the rest of your day. I gotta go now; tons more mafia members to round up. And if you get any unexpected visitors – Antonia, I swear I didn’t mean my gift like–”

The line went dead.

Barbara shoved herself back from her desk. The wheels squawked in protest.

“Stephanie,” she muttered to herself, “what the hell are you planning to do?”

She reached for her cell phone.

But before she could do anything, her stomach finally made up its mind.

The whiplash of nausea hit her with such violence that she doubled over in shock, toppling out of her chair to the floor with a crack.

Groaning, she stretched out her arm, fumbling about for her much-abused trash can–grabbed it and pulled it under her face only just in time; retching over and over again.

She was so preoccupied that she didn’t hear the key rattling in the lock, or the soft footsteps against
the linoleum, or Steph’s hurried whispering. By the time she finally stopped, the two young faces looking down at her might as well have come out of nowhere.

She gasped slightly and started.

“Well, that was disgusting,” Steph said conversationally.

Both girls were still wearing their civilian clothes; feathery black and frizzy blond hair falling out of their ponytails and around their eyes. Steph had a strange half-smile playing about her lips and an actual wicker basket in hand, while Cass’s brows were twisted and her eyes soft with sympathy.

Barbara shakily reached up to her desk for a box of Kleenex and wiped her mouth.

“What are you two doing here?” she asked, steadying her voice. “You’re supposed to be working.”

“Yeah, about that…” Steph shifted her weight from foot to foot. “Since that, uh, stomach bug of yours has been kicking your ass so bad, we decided to drop by and give you a gift basket instead.” She passed the basket down. “It’s got everything you’re gonna need to feel better.”

“Also, to help clean up,” Cass added.

“Right. No offense, but that smells pretty bad.”

Barbara took the basket; looking up at her young protégées.

“You two ditched Tim for me?”

The two of them exchanged one of those meaningful looks of theirs.

“Guns, mobsters, angry brides…” Cass counted off. “…he’s fine.”

“That’s probably true.”

Clutching her nose, Steph picked the bag out of the trash can and headed off towards the main disposal. Cass alighted down next to Barbara on the floor and watched, owl-like, as she opened the top of the basket.

A collection of herbal teas sat next to another small bottle of Tums, which in turn was framed by a surprisingly large amount of food.

“What do I need bananas, yogurt, and avocado for?”

“I asked Steph about what helped…last time she…had stomach flu.”

“And I said that I still had to keep eating, even when I felt like crap,” Steph added, coming back and sitting down beside them. “But that stuff shouldn’t upset you too much.”

“I don’t even remember the last time you had stomach flu,” Barbara murmured, pushing aside another packet of saltines to reveal enough water bottles for a small army. “You guys were the ones who told Alfred to make me soup, weren’t you?”

“She was,” Cass reported.

“But the gift basket was her idea.”

She looked at them for a few seconds.
Then she leaned forward and wrapped her arms around the two younger women; relishing when they got over her surprise and hugged her back.

Those girls may have been, in turns, irritating, ulcer-and-heart-attack-inducing, and painfully oblivious about love at times over the years, but she never would’ve wanted to pass on the Batgirl legacy to anyone else.

“Okay, mama bear,” Steph teased lightly, “let’s get you back into your chair.”

“Please do.”

The two of them got to their feet, then each hoisted her halfway up by one arm; dragging her legs along the floor and very ungracefully dumping her into her seat. Barbara shuffled back into a comfortable position, readjusting her glasses.

“Thank you. I think you only partially dislocated my arms this time.”

Cass scoffed lightly, and Steph drew back with mock offense.

“Such ingratitude. And after we bought you all that stuff with Bruce’s credit card, too.”

“As the other cops used to say to me when I was little, 'if you want gratitude, you can find it in the dictionary.'”

“Pretty sure that’s sympathy.”

“Same principle.” Barbara rolled back to her spot, picking up a water bottle from the gift basket and opening up her cameras. In most ways, it seemed like the same old routine. Huntress fired arrows from the top of a warehouse, Batman and Robin sprinted across apartment roofs after Catwoman (no prizes for guessing how that encounter was going to work out), and three very different cops went through files at the Bludhaven Police Department.

Her gaze trained on the screen, she didn’t see Cass nodding at her best friend.

“So…” Steph strode up behind her, leaning forward and bracing both hands against the desk. Her eyes fixed on the screen too. “You got cameras in the BHPD buildings, too?”

“It’s still pretty riddled with corruption,” Barbara answered immediately. She unscrewed the cap of the water bottle and took a sip. “This is good physical evidence should Rohrbach need to fire any dirty cops.”

“Right…” Steph’s gaze didn’t waver. “Y’know, this gives me a couple of questions.”

“What kind of questions?” she said absently.

“The first one: does the police captain know that Oracle is spying on their employees, or where do they think the information comes from?”

Across the screen, the girl with the blue hijab – Ayesha al-Hamdani – groaned loudly and dropped her pen, roughly rubbing her wrist with her other hand. Sandy-haired Herman Dale from two desks over scooped the completed paperwork off her desk, before walking forward a few paces and dropping it in front of the familiar set of silky black hair and bright blue eyes.

“I record it from the security cameras, and give it to Dick to give to his superiors. It’s not against the rules for the other cops to use the security cameras to expose crimes within the unit. Plus, it helps
Onscreen, he finished checking the paperwork and nodded, smiling encouragingly at Ayesha. She made a childishly rude face at him, and he laughed.

“Okay, that makes sense.”

Still smiling, Dick swept up her paperwork and headed into the precinct captain’s office, shutting the door behind him.

Barbara’s eyes focused on that door; the image reflecting back in her glasses. Her gaze didn’t flicker even as she lifted the water bottle again. Steph turned her head to look directly at the older woman.

She took a deep breath and steeled herself.

“Leading from that, my next question is…does Dick know that you’re pregnant?”

Avery Drew leaned back in his chair as the Wayne Enterprises meeting played out across his computer screen. The security feed hadn’t been quite child’s play to hack, but he figured that if Brucie Wayne already had so much money, he could still stand to invest in a better firewall.

“And where is your son, Mr. Wayne?” shrilled one of the women. Drew winced. “You said that he would be here.”

“Tim had more important things to do,” Wayne replied. “Actually, I have more important things to do too; so could perhaps we could get around the bickering and posturing?”

“Empty-headed supermodels are not more important than this meeting, Mr. Wayne,” an old man with a walrus mustache interrupted snidely.

“You suggest we divert more of our attention towards Batman Incorporated?” exclaimed a man who was rather young and springy compared to the rest of the board; although he did have a sizable bald patch on the front of his head. “We already waste a huge chunk of our budget on that ridiculous PR stunt of a department, and you want us to waste more?”

“It’s not wasteful if it prevents more of our employees from getting murdered,” Wayne said wearily. “As I’ve been saying for months, increasing web security on our systems–”

“Is a waste of time! Look, I agree it was unfortunate that that woman was killed, but as it was clearly an isolated incident–”

Drew couldn’t help but grin.

“–and since you already divert enough of our profits to meaningless enterprises, the board feels that your feelings on this matter, Mr. Wayne, are irrelevant.”

“Reform programs and foster agencies aren’t meaningless, Mr. Stephens, and those are not the point. There’s reason to suspect that Ms. Nolan’s murderer might strike again, and I would like to prevent that from happening.”

Hilarious, if somewhat worrying. What would a spoiled billionaire Playboy know about reasonable
suspicion, and how would he have come to that conclusion in the first place?

It seemed that Brucie Wayne was not quite as stupid as he let on.

“You have absolutely no proof of that! I’m sorry, but we cannot fund your crackpot idea to–”

“I agree with Mr. Wayne.”

There he was. He’d been wondering when Mr. Fox would speak up.

Across the crackling screen, the older man got to his feet. His navy blue suit wasn’t quite as expensive as Wayne’s black one, but he carried himself with the kind of dignity the rest of the board seemed to lack. Taking a brief moment to adjust his tie, he spoke again.

“Should we divert more funds to security within Batman Inc, we could curry favor with the public, and alleviate worries within our own company. There is already talk among some of our employees of collecting their pensions and quitting; they’re afraid they’ll be murdered next. It may seem difficult in the short run, but in the long run Mr. Wayne’s idea will do more good than harm.”

“And that, Mr. Fox,” Drew sighed, “is why you’re in my way. Nothing personal.”

Since he couldn’t hear, Fox’s expression didn’t change as he surveyed the rest of the board. There were a few mutters and ducked heads, but nobody outwardly contested what he was saying. A few of the lines in Wayne’s forehead seemed to fade.

Drew leaned backwards, resting a hand behind his head as Fox sat back down.

“Well, I think that settles it,” Wayne decided. “All those in favor–”

Drew clicked the Exit button, and the video shrank to nothing. Still reclining back, he tapped into a new window; pulling up a luminous green wall, bricked with binary numbers.

One hand on the keyboard, he set back to work.

Barbara’s reaction was instantaneous.

The water that she’d been about to drink splattered across the keyboard; accompanied by loud, irregular coughing. Cass materialized behind her and thumped her roughly between the shoulder blades while Steph shifted nervously from foot to foot.

“I will take that as a no,” she decided.

Cass patted her own chest with one hand.

“You’re right; when he does find out, he’s going to have a heart attack.”

“Like Bruce.”

“Right, which is why I said not to tell him anything. But oh boy, just imagine how Commissioner Gordon’s going to take it–”
“If you tell my father,” Barbara rasped, sitting back up, “no matter that you’re my protégées and I love you both dearly, if you tell him, I’m going to string both of you off the side of the Watchtower.”

Steph threw her hands up and backed away.

“Can’t you string us off something a little warmer than deep space? Like, I heard Apokolips is lovely this time of year.”

“Don’t tempt me—”

“So she’s right?” Cass interrupted. “Not about Apokolips. You’re really pregnant?”

All aggression evaporated. Barbara slumped forward, dropping her head into her palms; glasses falling askew. The despair and the feeling like a complete, utter idiot washed back over her.

No matter that she had an eidetic memory and a genius-level IQ, that she was one of the most powerful and influential women in the world, she’d still been stupid enough to get herself knocked up by one of her closest friends, by her most longterm source of love and uncertainty, by Dick fucking Grayson.

Or rather, by fucking Dick Grayson.

It was tempting to blame him for being the other half of the equation, to blame Kori for encouraging their rekindled relationship and sending her that damn dress, or even to blame Dinah for talking her into that night out with him in the first place, but that would be neglecting to accept how, for someone who was supposed to be taking things slow, she’d been all too eager for it to happen.

“Yes.”

Steph exhaled, long and loud.

“…and you two are the only other people who know, besides my obstetrician and a bunch of strangers from the waiting room.”


“Great.” She didn’t take her face from her hands.

Steph and Cass simultaneously moved forward again. Cass rested her hand back on Barbara’s back, but began moving it in tentative rubs instead of slaps. Steph gently moved a few strands of copper hair out of her face and behind her ears.

After a minute or so, Barbara slowly pulled her hands back down and sat up. Her glasses rested crookedly on the bridge of her nose. Cass’s palm came to a halt on her left shoulder.

“So…” Steph regarded her. “How far along? Eight weeks?”

“What makes you think it’s eight weeks?”

“You’re still puking, not showing yet, and you’ve only been going to the doctor, like, pretty recently I’m guessing. Also, that big charity gala was about eight weeks ago. I remember ’cause you turned up five minutes late and told Bruce that you and Dick had been getting coffee.”


“Cass, we have got to have a discussion about the shows you watch.” Oh my god, I’m already
She groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“That night out on the town. We headed out to a nice dinner, then to a dance hall, then went on a drive around town to talk and blast music and laugh and…go back here afterwards.”

What was left of Steph’s bedside manner evaporated; she instantly yelled in excitement and began clapping her hands.

“Oh! Ohhh! I remember that night! I was at the manor playing video games with Damian, the whole family was just hanging out, and then you just turned up at the door and asked Bruce if Dick was ready to leave yet. Ha! When he saw what you were wearing, I thought he was going to have an aneurysm. That dress—”


“That deep and broad v-neck; yeah, that one.”

“I loved that dress,” Cass sighed.

“Heh, you clearly weren’t the only one of your family who did.”

“No kidding.” Barbara’s fingers migrated up to her forehead.

“Oh, yeah…right.”

Cass glanced up, and then looked around the room. She slowly pulled her hand away; meandering towards the furniture and bending down to peek at the couches’ fabric.

In the meantime, Steph managed to stop clapping and bouncing around. She tapped her fingers rapidly against the back of Barbara’s chair instead; furrowing her brows and twisting her lips.

“So uh…” Tap-tap-tap. “What are you planning to…do about it?”

The unspoken implications hung in the air.

She could have an abortion. But then again, wasn’t it possible that it would be more difficult; that complications could arise from performing an abortion on her already-injured body? And did she even want one?

If she stuck it out, what then? Give it up for adoption? The Wayne kids were living proof that adoption could be a blessing for children with nobody, but at the same time, there were millions of children still left unnoticed in the foster system.

Or she could keep it.

That, by itself, was practically a sea of unknown variables.

“I don’t know yet,” she said honestly. Steph’s fingers slowed to a steady tap…tap. “There’s just so much going on; so much to consider. I’m going to have to think about it more before I make up my
mind…and please, don’t tell anyone else. Especially not anyone else in the family. I don’t want everyone jumping to conclusions before I decide what to do.”

Steph’s brows furrowed, but she nodded nonetheless.

“Okay. We weren’t planning on spilling it, anyway.”

“And we will help you,” Cass called from over by the couches. “No matter what.”

Barbara turned around, expecting to give the girls another hug.

“Cassandra, you don’t know what that means to…what are you doing?”

For she’d now taken out a blacklight and was kneeling on the floor; her eyes fixed on the purple beam as it roved over the cushions.

“I am seeing…where’s not safe to sit.”

“Seeing where it’s not safe to–” She groaned. “Cassandra, the couches are fine. Even post-conception-slash-date-night. There’s nothing on them!”


“It’s just the bed we can’t sit on without disinfecting our pants afterward, right?”

Barbara opened her mouth to counter her statement…then sighed.

“Just remind me to not let Damian into my room anymore. He’s already suspicious enough about me defiling his brother.”

“I think Dick was plenty defiled before you got to him.”

“Of course, why do you think Damian was suspicious of Wally and Kori too at first?”

“No wonder–” Cass got back to her feet and moved back beside Steph. “–you don’t want to tell the family you’re pregnant. Our relations are…messsed up.”

“Well…I suppose that’s part of it.” Barbara looked up at the girls; side by side, shoulders brushing. “And for the record, only most of your family’s relations are messed up.”

Steph’s eyebrows shot up. Cass blushed slightly.

Across the computer screen, the cops continued to work and occasionally rib each other. Ayesha shot a rubber band across the room at Rachel Kosakowski passing down the hallway with a stack of paperwork; who promptly yelped and dumped it on the head of her male companion, Jeffrey Yoong. The poor man tried to catch himself on a wheelie chair, only to slip and push it away instead. Dick emerged from the captain’s office all smiles only to have a wheelie chair shoot across the room and nearly hit him in the crotch.

“This is not your lucky day, Grayson,” Ayesha snorted.
“…so then he stuffed the gun down his underpants and ran?”

“How did you guess?”

“Forgive me, but after all these years, street-level thugs can be really predictable. Did he at least have the safety on when he did?”

“I think you can guess that, too.”

“Wow. I almost feel sorry for the guy. But I actually feel sorry for you; I don’t envy anyone who has to chase after the D-list henchmen of drug-dealing pimps for six hours.”

“Could be worse. At least I had Ayesha and her commentary and body-slamming along for the ride. I kinda felt like I was with one of my siblings, or chaperoning a very weird dance.”

Barbara laughed.

“Now you know how I feel all the time.”

“Yeah, speaking of which…” He paused, long enough for there to be a soft thump and a scuffling of pebbles. She pictured him perching on the edge of a rooftop, scanning the streets below. “After patrol, if all goes well, I’m taking Damian out for ice cream. So if you don’t hear from either of us, that’s why. Either that or I’m tied up over a vat of acid again; but I hope that won’t happen.”

“I notice you got tied up pretty often when you were Robin.”

“Explains a lot about me now, doesn’t it?”

“Mmmm.” She leaned back in her seat, biting her finger and closing her eyes.

“You’re thinking about it, aren’t you?” The grin was unseen, but greatly implied in his tone.

“Shut up.” Her eyes fluttered back open. “…Back to you and Damian. That kid misses you; it’ll be good for you two to spend some time together.”

“Yeah.” His soft sigh echoed down the line. “I mean, I know Tim still resents me, and Jason’s probably never not going to resent me, but I don’t have to screw things up with Damian too.”

She exhaled softly, running a hand through her hair and glancing up at the ceiling. Her reply didn’t come for a long time.

“Maybe you should trust that your love for your siblings will eventually be worth your problems,” she said at last.

He was quiet, at first. She dragged her hand back through her hair, more roughly this time, until he said:

“You’re a wise woman, Barbara Gordon.”

“I learned it from you,” she murmured. Then, regaining her more lighthearted tone: “If I hadn’t, I probably would’ve just told you to trust that they all like me best and will eventually have to concede that I have excellent taste.”

He scoffed a bit modestly.

“When it comes to men, excellent is kind of a stretch. I will concede that you have excellent taste in
women, though."

"Oh, so you were jealous of Ted, but not of Dinah?"

"It’s hard to be jealous of a woman who gives out compliments like candy, albeit kind of pervy ones. Hang on." There was a thwip, a thunk, and a very male yowl of pain. "Mugging successfully averted. And uh, while we’re on the subject…” His genuine casual tone turned into a forced casual tone. “…you been seeing anyone cute lately?"

Barbara shifted slightly in her seat. Her eyes flicked back from the ceiling to her hands fidgeting in her lap.

"Besides you? Not really. I think that Lani Cho went and told all her friends that I’m a terrible date.”

"So she’s the one with bad taste, then.” Some of the the tension left his words. There was the sharp snikt of his line flashing out, then wind whistling brightly as he swung between the rooftops. Barbara could almost feel the damp, cool air over her own skin.

"Hmmm. Maybe.”

Had he been able to see her in that moment, her casual voice would’ve been belied by her inability to sit still and her lip being worried between her teeth.

“So…I should probably get back to checking on the others in a moment, but I need to tell you…sometime this week, when you’re done with all your cop and vigilante responsibilities…you wanna come by the Clock Tower and just…hang out?”

She held her breath, waiting for his response.

“No mission briefings?” He sounded doubtful. “No work-related stuff? No Dinah or Helena dropping by to quiz us on our sex life?”

“I can’t guarantee the last one, but yes.” She swiftly turned to bribery. “I still have a bunch of movies queued up, and Yale’s just added two new toppings to their menu. Tim’s not due to head back to the Titans for another ten days, so I can pass him the reins for a night.”

He didn’t respond to the implication of “a night,” but when he did speak again, his voice was light and hopeful.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’d like that. I’ll see when Rohrbach can spare me this week. I don’t know how Yale’s does it, but their pizza–”

“–is better than anything else Gotham can cook up,” she finished, genuinely smiling.

“Damn right.” He paused. “I’m looking forward to it, Babs. The only problem…”

“Yes?”

“…I won’t be able to kiss you as much as I want to, what with that stomach flu and all.”

Her chest fluttered.

“You’re such a cheeseball, Grayson,” she teased.

“Also damn right! I’ll see you soon.”

“See you soon.”
The implied *I love you* went unsaid as Barbara hung up.

She exhaled hard; falling back against her chair and turning her gaze back to the ceiling.

“Stomach flu,” she murmured. “Yeah. That’s what I need to talk to you about.”

Chapter End Notes

Tim isn't slandering periods or lesbians; he just thinks that way about ALL forms of sex. Plus, I think at this point, they've all seen enough blood for several lifetimes.
Happy one-day-late Mother's Day, everybody.

Babs' playlist: https://open.spotify.com/user/stormy-ella/playlist/7fr1egMWBQE1kLrjwwrx0O?play=true&utm_source=open.spotify.com&utm_medium=open&utm_campaign=spotify

(Warnings: ableist language, homophobic language, more minor sickness, violence. Basically, the M rating is starting to kick in more strongly.)

**Strength (Tarot):**
- Upright – Strength, courage, patience, control, compassion.
- Reversed – Weakness, self-doubt, lack of self-discipline

The night sky was still painted dirty blue-orange, dotted with the occasional searchlight or an airplane to be mistaken for a star, when Nightwing and Robin settled in on the roof of a downtown apartment complex. Across the street, the twenty-four-hour convenience store blinked fluorescent white and neon bubblegum pink, framed by the unilluminated blocks of concrete that were the other buildings. With their legs dangling over a dark window, the two vigilantes dug plastic spoons into half-quarts of convenience store ice cream and talked between themselves.

“–and he’s been trying to convince me to join the Teen Titans after my birthday next year,” Damian scoffed, pausing just long enough to stuff a spoonful of lemon sorbet in his mouth. “Tt. As if I need a team of schoolchildren to help me defeat my enemies…or need to spend more time around Drake.”

Dick decided not to point out that Damian was also, technically, a schoolchild.

“They’re not children. They’re teenagers. And some are even in their twenties at this point.”

“That’s even worse.”

Dick swirled his own spoon in the plastic tub’s dregs of bubblegum ice cream. Across the street, a pair of mustached men strolled out of the convenience store next to one woman in cornrows and a police uniform, and a different one in a fluffy pink boa and not much else.

“She’s going to freeze to death,” he remarked, almost unconsciously attempting to shield his brother’s eyes.

“She’s probably used to this godforsaken weather at this point,” Damian grumbled, shoving Dick’s
hand away. “And you’re changing the subject. How do I convince Wilkes that I’m better suited to
solo work than working on a team?”

Dick looked away from the convenience store front and back to Damian’s mask-hidden eyes. He
raised both brows.

“You were an exception. Besides, we were a duo, not clustered in with a bunch of other liabilities.”

“People you care about aren’t liabilities. They’re your strength.”

Damian finished the last bit of sorbet, dropping the now-useless spoon into the tub.

“I believe that you mean that, and that’s what truly bothers me.”

The two of them were quiet for almost a minute. Dick tapped his heels rhythmically against the
window pane beneath them, while Damian pulled batarangs from his belt and tapped a finger against
the point of each; testing their sharpness.

“Is this because Bruce is back? You’re worried that bringing the family closer is a bad idea?”

“I still can’t believe you think it’s a good idea.” Damian stabbed the batarang he’d been holding
against the top of the rooftop. Metal shrieked against concrete. “Todd’s mentally damaged and holds
grudges, Drake’s emotionally stunted and pathetically blinded by resentment, Brown’s impulsive and
insecure, Cassandra trusts too much in her false sense of duty, Father has…Father has little control
over them anymore, you stubbornly insist that their apparent redeeming qualities outweigh their risks,
and Gordon…” He hesitated. Then he started up again with a hurried vengeance: “Gordon is brilliant
and invaluable to us, I know that, but she is also obsessive and a…‘control freak,’ as I believe Brown
would put it. When situations are out of her grasp, she loses herself.”

The truth was, he was right about all those things. Their family was a collection of proud, stubborn
human disasters; stitched together with hurt and tragedy. Some – or in a few people’s cases, more
than some – of that hurt had come from each other. In a personal crisis, old wounds reopened and
they were be more likely than not to lash out at each other.

“Damian,” Dick eventually said, his voice strong, “the city’s been relatively quiet since Batman – the
original Batman – came back. No gang wars, no rampant destruction, no monsters or murderous
aliens. Just the same old corrupt, miserable Gotham; good as ever. As long as things are quiet like
this, it’s less likely that we’ll have a crisis; so we have time to resolve our issues. And things can get
better. In fact, I know they will.”

In response to his heartfelt speech, his brother gave him a look of exasperated skepticism. It was so
familiar, so Damian, the last of Dick’s uncertainty vanished and he burst out laughing.

“You are truly a Pollyanna to the end, Grayson.”

“You’re not the first person tonight to point out my best personality traits.” Dick tilted his head back
slightly and smiled.

“Ugh…Gordon?”

“You got it.”

“Why did you go back to her? Is intercourse really that appealing? Because from what I know about
it, it sounds absolutely disgusting.”
“It’s not about interc – I mean, sex.” The smile became softer. Damian’s eyebrows shot up over the top of his mask. “I love her.”

“Oh, god.”

“Really, I do. A lot of people think that she was my rebound after things ended with Kori, or that I was mooning over her while Kori and I were still together. But the truth is, I did love Kori too. She was what I needed at the time, and she’s still important to me now.” Damian looked suspiciously like he was rolling his eyes under the mask. He never had much liked his brother’s talks about feelings. “But Barbara…she and I have always been important to each other. I can’t imagine life without her, whether as a friend or a teammate or a lover or all of those things at once.” That must’ve been what Jason meant when we talked a couple weeks ago. Kid always was a smart one; even if he can be a pain in the ass. “So, yeah. She is and means so much to me. And I love her for all of it. That’s why I’m with her again.”

Damian stared at him quizzically for a long few moments. Then he sighed.

“I do understand that she’s important to you, Grayson. But doubt I will ever understand your line of reasoning about love.”

“No more girl talks in our foreseeable future, huh?”

He shuddered.

“No. Never again. Save it for Cassandra.”

Dick laughed, scooting a little closer to where his brother rested. Damian didn’t move away; in fact, he may have leaned in a few inches.

“That reminds me; there’s this one girl I’m pretty sure she’s in love with. You wanna guess who that girl is—?”

“Stop! No more about love! God, you’re both a Pollyanna and a hopeless romantic.”

“Not true. I am full of hope.”

The wind picked up over the skyline; sweeping smog up towards the invisible stars. Police sirens sang shrilly in the distance.

“You know, this reminds me of a conversation I had with…you know what, never mind.”

October

Eyes bleary with exhaustion, head swimming with rage and the whining desire to sleep, Barbara fumbled around on her nightstand for the incessant beehive that her phone had suddenly turned into.

Two hours before her alarm. Two fucking hours.

After spending her night trying to mediate between Jason’s and Tim’s argument over who had claim
on interrogating a pack of thugs; offering frantic advice to Zinda in the middle of a painful heart-to-
heart with Cheshire on a hotel roof in Ho Chi Minh City; listening to a bunch of cops – not Dick’s
squad – in Bludhaven talk about hookers’ pussies before they got around to talking about
embezzlement; listening to a bunch of different cops in Gotham compare the tits of their female
coworkers; and then spending three hours bypassing all the security protocols on a LexCorp shell
company in Central City only for Captain Boomerang to get there before Wally, the so-called fastest
man alive.

Getting to berate Wally (mostly about the connotations of being the “fastest man alive”) had helped,
but not much, considering that once the berating was done, she’d gotten approximately twenty
minutes of sleep before the texts started pouring in.

Somebody better have died again for this.

Hair a frizzy corona of copper around her head, morning sickness chewing halfheartedly at her gut,
she shoved her glasses on crookedly and squinted down at the phone screen.

The first text indicated that her coupon for 20% off at the supermarket was about to expire.

The next text was an overly cheery reminder from the bank to check on her credit score.

The third, fourth, fifth, and ninth texts she could barely read for squeezing her phone too hard, but
once she stopped gritting her teeth and looked back down, she could make out the most recent ones
from Tim and Bruce.

sry abt giving u shit with jason last night but pls check the morning news it’s rlly not good

And:

Barbara, I don’t know if you’re still awake, but when you get this, I would suggest checking the local
news stations. I would explain more, but I have to go do damage control. You should soon see why.

Her grip loosened. The panicked messages became more clear; mostly from the rest of the family, all
implying that something was very, very wrong.

She snapped down the phone and grabbed the remote control off the nightstand, clicking the TV on
the opposite of the room to life.

Gotham Hourly exploded into existence.

“And in other breaking news, we have just been informed that Lucius Fox, president and CEO of
Wayne Enterprises, has just been robbed of five hundred thousand dollars from his private account,
and has had potentially career-ending information regarding his work leaked online.”

The remote slipped from her grasp, falling with a soft thud to the duvet.

“We now go to our own Bill Finger, reporting live outside the main WE office building.”

“Thanks, Joe.”

A hungry crowd of reporters had already gathered, despite it being the wee hours of the morning,
flashing pictures and yelling questions. Bruce, the bags under his eyes more pronounced than usual,
deflected the more stubborn reporters and spoke quietly to the less invasive ones. Several police
officers were fighting their way through the crowd. Lucius stood at the steps of the building, looking
tired and haggard. Tanya, Tiffany, even Luke and Tam slumped beside him; half asleep, wholly
miserable.

“Reports are coming in that there are implications of Mr. Fox trading insider information, as well as embezzlement. Commissioner Gordon, what do you say to this?”

Her father scowled at the reporter’s camera. He and the handful of young cops next to him all looked like they were several seconds from shooting out the lens.

“We’re under legal obligation to investigate this,” he eventually grumbled, “but there’s no conclusive proof, so there will be no arrest yet.”

“Are you certain? The evidence seemed pretty overwhelming.”

“What do you know about it, you pampered parasite–”

“Yates, shut up,” another one of the rookies snapped. The bags under hers and his eyes, respectively, made Bruce look well-slept.

“We’ll have our detectives and computer experts look into it,” her father continued, ignoring both of them. “If it’s solid, we’ll make an arrest. For now, all we can do is interrogate the family. Excuse me.”

“Mr. Wayne! What do you have to say to this?”

Even dead-eyed, Bruce managed a half-smile. Only the people who knew him well would’ve recognized the calculating gaze under the polite facade.

“Lucius is a supremely competent CEO. I doubt he’ll lose his job any time soon, especially if he’s innocent. Which I believe he is.”

She could almost see the reporter sighing in frustration, and hear the board of directors’ hisses of disgust.

“We may have to wait a while longer for more reports to come in. In the meantime, back to you, Joe—”

The screen went black.

Barbara took a long, shuddering breath.

She ran her fingers through her tangled hair; trying very very hard—

—not to explode.

“Inn abn aleahira!”

“Master Damian, watch your language.”

“I would argue that now is the perfect time to not watch my language, Pennyworth! What the hell are we supposed to do now that Fox has lost half a million dollars and is under investigation? Our company is about to suffer! Look at this!” He held out his phone. “Our local stocks are already
“Our company?” Tim said indignantly. “I don’t see your name on it, kid – oh wait; crap.”

“Do you wish to continue your line of thought, Drake?”

“Do you wish to shut your big, fat, negative-wordsy mouth; Demon Brat? I’m part of the company; I know frickin’ well what our CEO being framed for corruption is going to do to us.”

“And yet, you don’t know well enough to have stopped this from happening.”

“Would you have wanted to take a shot at the worm in the bank’s security system? Seriously, I would’ve loved to see you try.”

“You listen here, Drake–”

“I’m listening.”

Normally, a family gathering in the living room accompanied by cinnamon cookies and a pot of mint tea, the grandfather clock left untouched in the corner, would’ve been grounds for…well, maybe not relaxation. But civility at the least.

Cass was curled in the fetal position in one of the armchairs, her eyes peering over the tops of her knees. Damian paced back and forth across the carpet in sharp contrast to Tim’s boneless flop across the couch.

Dick was still at work. Jason was too, presumably; albeit a very different sort of work.

“How did it happen?” Cass asked quietly, ignoring her brothers’ squabbling.

Alfred set down the platter of cookies. The boys interrupted themselves long enough to take one each.

Bruce sighed.

“It was done electronically. Like Tim said, the thief placed a worm in the bank’s computer system; corrupting the security and allowing them to divert the money out of Lucius’ account. And obviously the financial records leaked were false, but they were done…very convincingly. It should be enough to convince the general public and the rest of our coworkers that they’re real, even if the GCPD ceases their investigation.”

“Did Batman find this out, or Bruce Wayne?”

“Neither. Oracle did.”

“To the surprise of approximately no one…” Tim mumbled around a mouthful of cookie. He swallowed, then said aloud: “That was quick of her.”

“Compared to you, maybe,” Damian mused. “How long did it really take her?”

“She’s been online ever since she woke up. That was three hours ago. In all that time, barely even the other Birds of Prey have heard from her.”

“Tt.” Damian took a long draught of tea; cradling the cup in both hands. “Gordon’s self-isolating again. At this rate, one would think that she had something to hide.”
Bruce did not miss the nervous looks his daughter and other son threw each other at this.

He privately wondered if it was worth the risk of life and limb to set cameras in the Clock Tower again.

“Maybe she’s just hyper-focusing on the case again,” Tim ventured. “You know. Like I do. It’s a thing.”

“I would not cite yours and Miss Barbara’s hyper-focus on cases as a healthy alternative to conventional self-isolation, Master Timothy,” Alfred cautioned.

Tim’s ears flushed.

“Okay, fair. And uh, it’s probably not a neurotypical thing, either. But right now it doesn’t mean that she has anything to hide. And debating whether she does or doesn’t isn’t going to help with the case.”

That discussion was obviously over.

For the moment, at least.

Bruce sighed again, then got to his feet.

“You’re right. Cassandra, you go check out the GCPD. Learn if they plan to investigate Lucius further. Tim, head to work. See if you can quell the rumors within the higher-ups. Damian–”

“I get to investigate Gordon?” he asked far too eagerly.

“No. You and I are going to the bank. I’ll let you go home early once I know more about the circumstances of the robbery.”

His youngest son visibly deflated.

“Grayson would’ve let me investigate her…” he muttered.

Bruce ignored the twinge that statement put into his chest.

“I doubt that very highly.”

Though it was mid-morning, the sunlight filtered weakly through the smog-cloud mixture swirling in the sky. Black Bat hovered at the top of the precinct roof; cape fluttering raggedly behind her. Her gaze was blank white behind her mask; her expression as unchanging as a marble statue. Compared to her, Batman had all the serious stoicism of a pantomime actor.

In a heartbeat, she crept to the edge of the roof and flew over the side. One hand on the drainpipe, she ghosted down the concrete walls, then planted her feet down to end her fall outside a shuttered window.

From within, she could hear voices. Coffee pouring. The occasional flip of papers.

Her fingers on the pipe like metal clamps, she leaned closer.
“So, did Fox do it or not? All the papers say he did, but–”

“Who gives a shit whether he did or not? I say, lock him up quick so WE can stop sucking Wayne’s dick all the time.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me one bit if he was actually sucking Wayne’s dick. Everyone knows that family’s a bunch of faggots and uncivilized brats.”

Black Bat’s lips tightened slightly.

“You talking about Wayne’s, or Fox’s?”

“Both. Either. Who gives a fuck.”

“Forensics says that it looks like the files leaked were fake. Took ’em all damn morning just to come up with that.”

“Looks like?”

“Hey, I dunno. They’re not paying me to be a genius.”

“Well, it ‘looks like’ they’re not paying you to even have an average-type brain, Owens.”

She clicked her com into life.

Static from all ends.

Frustrated, she clicked it back off. Then, bracing her hand against the wall…let go of the drainpipe. She sprang to the windowsill, then perched, ever so lightly. Delicate as a cat.

If no one else would report back in with what they had discovered, she had to stay longer. Make sure that as they gathered findings, she would not be left in the dust.

“Even if the files are fake, they look good enough to fool the public into kicking out the faggots, so that’s something.”

“Wait, I thought that Fox’s daughter was engaged to that Drake kid.”

“That was months ago, Owens. Now they say he’s got someone over in San Francisco. And you know what kinds they have in San Francisco…”

“Hippies?”

“No.”

“Stoners?”

“No.”

“Homeless food-stamp hoarders?”

“For shit’s sake, Owens. No wonder you only pull your gun on all your suspects six days a week instead of seven; you don’t understand the kinds in this country that put a drain on everyone else.”

On second thought, this line of conversation wasn’t going anywhere important.

Although, this was helping her understand better why Jason hated cops so much.
“What I don’t get is why you’re surprised, Jonesy. Wayne and his brats have always wanted to fuck all kinds of freaks. Take Grayson; he’s back together with Gordon’s bitchy cripple daughter.”

“Don, shut up! Gordon might hear!”

“What? It’s true, she is a cripple. God only knows why Grayson fucks her when he had types like that model from a few years ago. And remember before Fox’s daughter, Drake was slumming it with that blond slut—?”

That was the last straw.

Cass rapped her knuckles sharply on the window.

The six-stories-up-with-no-balcony-and-a-four-inch-mantle window.

“What the hell?”

“What’s going on outside?”

“Eh, probably a pigeon hit the window again.”

Cass tapped out f-u-c-k-c-o-p-s in rapid Morse code.

“Well, make it stop!”

“How the hell am I supposed to make it stop?”

Y-o-u-s-h-o-u-l-d-r-e-s-p-e-c-t-w-o-m-e-n

“Guys…that ain’t no pigeon.”

“We’re six stories up. It’s not like there’s a person out there—”

B-a-r-b-a-r-a-a-n-d-S-t-e-p-h-a-n-i-e-d-e-s-e-r-v-e-l-o-v-e

It could be worse, though. Barbara has people who adore her and she knows it. …Why can’t Steph see that? Is it something I’m doing?

Her fingers faltered.

“Screw this. If there is a pigeon out there, I’m getting rid of it.”

Still caught up in thinking about Steph, she realized what was happening too late.

The shutters flew up.

Through an inch of glass, she was suddenly mask-to-eyes with a surly-looking white man with a week’s worth of stubble and a triple chin.

Cassandra was fully aware of the absurdity of the situation. Her, crouched on a hands-width mantle, her fingers and nose resting against the glass. Him, beady eyes and long-past-needling-a-dentist’s-appointment mouth growing slowly wider as she shifted her weight on the mantle.

“Hey, Don? What’s going on out there?”

Cass smiled…long and eerie.
Then she mouthed:

*I wouldn’t keep bad-mouthing the Waynes, Barbara Gordon, and Tim Drake’s female friends, if I were you.*

Still smiling, she did a tiny salute and backflipped off the mantle.

His slack-jawed look still burning in her mind as she plummeted towards the sidewalk in half a second—

—she shot out a bat-line—

—caught—

—and shot up—

—the gap between the police building and an apartment-slash-bakery. She turned the swing into a somersault; rolling over the skylight and sliding to a halt at the edge of the rooftop.

The baker, for her part, upon seeing the vigilante girl spinning across her rooftop, simply shook her head and went downstairs to open up shop.

As she gathered herself on top of the roof, Cass wound her line back in, breath heaving in and out.

_They’re relying on me, _she told herself._ This isn’t Hong Kong. I’m home now. Can’t just make it up as I go along and expect it to work out. No getting distracted._

But she was still haunted by the look that had been on Steph’s face when she’d gone into Tim’s room—had it really only been two days ago?

Steph’s mental state had been getting better in recent months, but in that moment, she’d been practically radiating insecurity and doubt. She needed to prove herself. She needed to be better than good; better than the best; better than even herself.

The Batgirls were all a lot alike in that way.

She clicked her com – direct line to Oracle – back on.

_Static._

Cass punched it off again with enough force to nearly shatter the tiny device.

She then readied her bat-line and leapt away across the rooftops; not eager to give her non-findings to the rest of the family.

Tim had been half-asleep for nearly an hour now.

He probably could’ve died on that desktop and nobody would’ve noticed.

*Now there’s an idea. This is about as fun as sparring with Rose after she gets off the phone with her*
dad. At least with Rose, I’d probably be more awake. Or if not, I’d be dead! Wait, did I forget to take my meds again?

He’d been getting angry phone calls from the board of directors since before he’d sat down at his desk that morning. Half of them were messages for Bruce (he was getting really sick of telling people that Bruce wasn’t in today), and all of them were asking (read: demanding) for opinions on the situation with Lucius. It was a bit exhausting being constantly treated as just someone’s mouthpiece.

Granted, being treated as his adopted father’s mouthpiece was miles better than almost anyone else’s, but still.

Again, he longed for it to be a usual Saturday morning in San Francisco with the Titans: listening to Vic and Gar argue over video games, attempting to eat whatever new alien vegetable concoction Kori had made from her garden, being painfully outstripped by Bart and Cassie on the jogging paths, fighting killer robots with Mia and Kiran, or even (his heart clenched) taking an hour off to sit on the roof of the tower with Conner and just…forget his responsibilities.

*You missed your shot when you promised to help with this case in “any way possible,”* he reminded himself. *But you’ll see them next weekend. Just forget it for now, and focus.*

And so he’d focused. He’d been crunching stock numbers and statistics for so long, his eyes were starting to blur. And if he had to explain one more time to one of his coworkers that the company had no intentions to fire Lucius, the idea of pulling a Jason on them would become very alluring. In both the dying and the killing way.

“Mr. Drake? Mr. Drake.”

Tim’s head snapped up.

Bruce’s secretary glowered at him from the other side of his desk. Her glasses were falling off the tip of her nose; not unlike the new files in her arms threatening to spill to the floor.

“What is it, Natalie?” he yawned, resisting the urge to pull up the case notes on his computer again and go back to doing what he was best at.

“You have a guest.”

“Did you tell them that Bruce isn’t in today?”

“I did.” Natalie’s voice was clipped. “She’s asking for you, specifically.”

Tim started.

“She…?”

Without waiting for an affirmative, Natalie gestured over her shoulder towards the door.

Like the antithesis of a dame from a 1940s noir, Tam Fox shuffled into the room. Her pink blouse hung loosely off her shoulders, and her brown eyes were sunken into purple. Her hair was starting to frizz out of its stylish straightened ‘do.

“Oh. Thanks, Natalie.”

With a curt nod, Natalie frog-marched herself out of the room; presumably to go grumble about Mr.
Wayne’s lack of responsible business hours.

Tam glanced over her shoulder to make sure she’d left…

…then darted forward and around the desk to sit down on his paperwork.

“You know my dad was framed, right?” she said bluntly.

“Well, yeah, but…Tam, what are you doing?”

“You guys are detectives. I need you to get detecting. That jerk stole my family’s money, and my dad’s in danger of losing his job. And that’s even if he doesn’t go to jail!”

“Whoa, Tam, they haven’t even arrested him yet.”

“Yet! You know a lot of the system sucks, Tim. Why else would you have your–” She quickly cut herself off, then amended, “–night job? And it’s gonna suck way worse for someone in my family than someone in yours.”

“I think being in your dad’s position would suck pretty bad for Dick or Damian.”

“Good point,” she allowed. “I actually still kind of wonder why Dick wanted to become a cop. Twice? Like, what’s up with that? But what I’m trying to say here is, someone doesn’t like my dad having his job. They’re trying to take my family’s money and the rest of our income.”

Tim sighed deeply. Tam’s shoulders turned rigid.

“What’s with that sigh?”

“It’s actually worse than you think.”

While she still sat on his desk, he clambered to his feet and headed to the office door, pulling it shut. Then he walked back until he stood in front of Tam; ensuring that nobody could see their faces – or their mouths – from the outside.

“We think that someone’s planning to target people who are connected to or who help out with the family’s ‘night jobs.’ Your dad was actively involved in supporting Batman Inc. and in protecting the rest of our employees. So it’s likely that this happened because of his connection to us.”

Tam’s face morphed from shock to confusion to fury in a matter of seconds. Her fingers squeezed the side of the desk until the blood was forced from her knuckles.

“We were targeted…to get to you guys?” she said. “Just for that?”

He nodded.

“That’s humiliating.” She was seething. “To think that we’re just a step to getting to…” She shook her head. “If there’s any way I can help you guys catch who did this, I want to do it. And before you say anything, I know, you told me B doesn’t like civilians getting involved, but since it’s my family…and you’re sort of still my friend, even if you can be a cold jerk…I guess I’m already involved.”

Tim hesitated.

Tam looked at him.
“I’ll ask Bruce,” he decided. “I will ask him…very strongly.”

She scoffed.

“You’d better. My family’s robbed and humiliated, and that RnD lady’s dead. You guys kinda do need help.”

“We’re beyond needing help. If Oracle doesn’t get a handle on this, the entire family and the people in this city we rely on are all screwed.”

Tam nodded. Then, briefly, her thunderous expression became one of thoughtfulness.

“Y’know? Normally your pessimism gets on my nerves, but right now, I am really grateful you’re so bitter and angry instead of a nice optimist like your girl Steph. It makes me feel a little more justified.”

“…Thanks, Tamara.”

Red Hood leaned against an alley wall, helmet lying on the ground at his feet, gazing up at the rooftops through his mask. His jacket – the brand new one, at that – was freshly spattered with blood. By pure coincidence, several feet away from him lay the unconscious henchmen of a drug-dealing pimp centered in Bludhaven; several teeth and small puddles of viscous red liquid sinking into the porous concrete.

Stepping over one man’s leg, he took out his cell phone and checked his messages.

Barbara hadn’t texted him back about going to the movies next week, but that was alright. From what he’d heard from Stephanie over the coms, she’d barely replied to anyone all day. He could understand that.

His informant had gotten new information about Black Mask’s new extortion deal, including when and where it would happen. He added “make Black Mask’s life more difficult – bring extra guns” to his calendar.

Finally, Lian had gotten hold of her father’s phone again and sent a picture of said father napping on the couch with stickers on his face. Jason replied with a string of appropriate emojis before making the picture his new wallpaper (in loving memory of the photo from the official JL Instagram of Wonder Woman carrying Batman over her shoulder from a battle. Unconfirmed, but most likely, posted by Hal Jordan).

“Checking your fashion page’s follower count, Hood?”

Like an annoying angel sent to punish the wicked, Robin leapt down from the nearby building’s fire escape and alighted next to one of the henchmen.

“That’s right. The new hot makeup tip: smear the gore of your enemies around your eyes to bring out the natural redness of your blood vessels! Do you have a reason for being here, brat?”

“Father forced me to leave early. Otherwise, I need to talk to you.”

“Oh, goody.”
Damian pattered forward until he was nose-to-chest with his older brother—and then stole his phone.

“Son of a bitch—”

“You keep a civil tongue when talking about my mother!”

“Uh, what? Kid, even between your extremely fucked-up parents, Talia’s not the bitch.”

Damian’s eyebrows shot up.

“Father can be irritating,” he conceded.

“That’s one way of putting it.”

Damian peered down at the phone screen, then snorted loudly.

“I can’t believe you’re attracted to this man.”

“Well, I am. But that’s actually exactly what Bruce said when I told him. And what Wally said. And what Cissie said. And what Oliver said, like, three times. Dinah said that I’m lucky.”

“Yes, well, we’ve established by now that Lance has horrendous taste in men.” Damian handed back the phone. “Her taste in women, however, is acceptable.”

“Damn straight. Or rather, damn not-straight.” Jason pocketed the phone. One of the henchmen groaned. Damian stomped on his ankle. “You seem slightly less shitty than usual, kid.”

“You know I live for your approval, Todd; that is, your brief respites from holding a grudge.”

“Right. So I’m gonna ask my follow-up question: why do you need to talk to me?”

Damian paused; foot halfway back to the henchman’s ankle. His look of childish contemplation was offset by the city grime set into his gloves and the blood he was getting on his boots.

“You are a murderous mentally ill psychopath with parental issues—”

“And you’re who, Shirley Temple?”

“You’re lucky I don’t understand that reference. As I was saying, you may be all those things, but you seem to be good at giving advice about women; despite your lack of experience with them.”

“Advice about women—” Jason realized what he meant and groaned, slapping a gloved hand to his forehead. “Dickhead told you about our conversation.”

“Grayson is very bad at withholding information from me. All I have to do is agree to go on another one of his ridiculous ’brotherly bonding’ excursions, and he’ll tell me anything. Most of it is far more than I wanted to know. But I digress. I need you to tell me more about Gordon.”

“What’s there to tell?” Jason kicked a used condom across the alley ground. “She’s not exactly secretive…to the family, at least. She’s smart, she’s brave, she’s capable, she likes to plan things out but has still been known to do impulsive shit. People tend to follow her because they trust her to do what’s right and because they love her.”

“Do you love her?”
“Like a sister. What’s this all about? Did Roy hire you or something?” he joked.

“She couldn’t afford my services.”

“Please never say those words in that order ever again.”

“Tt. Obviously not. I want to be able to trust in her. And not just for our work.”

“For what else, then?”

“To be sure that she’s a suitable partner for Grayson.”

Jason stared at his youngest brother for a full five seconds.

Then he threw his head back and laughed so hard he woke up all the henchmen at the same time.

“What’s so damn funny, Hood?”

“Okay,” he gasped, straightening back up, “let me see if this is true: I think she’s too good for him… but you think he’s too good for her. How does that work?”

“What do you mean you think she’s too good for him?”

“Look, I know you worship the ground Nightwing walks on, but he’s no fucking saint, let me tell you.”

“I do nothing of the sort! And she’s hardly perfect either. Haven’t you noticed the way she’s been acting lately? That’s not the behavior of a selfless woman. I don’t want Gr–” He quickly looked down at the stirring henchmen, then amended himself, “–I mean, Nightwing to shatter his heart on her again.”

“Nightwing’s a big boy. Usually. You need to let him handle whatever she’s got going on.”

“You don’t care?”

“The only reason I give a shit about his relationship difficulties is because I don’t want her to get cold feet again and start worrying about minutiae as an excuse to push away something that’s good for her. Because much as I hate to admit it, he is good for her. And vice versa.”

A pair of odd looks crossed Damian’s face. Relief, and also…jealousy?

Damian was jealous of Dick’s affection?

Well, that was interesting.

“Even if I admit you’re right about her, Hood–”

“Who is ‘her?’” one of the thugs interrupted. “Who’s Nightwing’s new girl?”

“Oh, now the bastard wants to talk,” Jason muttered.

“I got a bet with my girl, see. She thinks he’s hooking back up with Starfire, I think it’s Huntress.”

“Nah, stupid, it’s a guy. That’s why he’s been so quiet about it.” The second thug looked thoughtfully at Damian. “Which one of ya is it? Is it Batman? Red Robin? Red-steel-toes-gun-fetish over there?”
Damian looked absolutely revolted.

“The entire male populace of the meta-human and vigilante communities to choose from, and you think he’s having intercourse with one of us!”

“Well, is he?”

“No, you despicable imbecile!”

“I told ya, Miles, Nightwing’s not gay or nothin’,” the last goon snorted. “It’s definitely a girl. And I know which girl, too…” He paused for effect. “…He’s shtupping Catwoman behind the Bat’s back!”

Everybody else groaned in unison.

“What? I’m telling ya, there’s some real sexual tension in the way they blinked at each other that one time—”

“Oh, you shut up,” Jason snapped. “You’ve done nothing but lie since you got here, and you somehow managed to shoot your own cock and balls off two days ago.”

The other two goons sniggered.

“That was those cops’ fault, not mine!”

“No wonder you have such a lovely soprano,” Damian observed.

“What did he say? Was that Arabian? Did that kid just insult me in Arabian?”

Damian stomped on his already-injured crotch. The henchman made a noise rather like an ostrich being strangled; flopping upwards and then back into the bloody concrete.

The other two nervously crossed their legs.

Jason laughed a bit sadistically.

“You know something, Robin? Out of all our brothers, I think I hate you the least.”

“The feeling is not mutual, but I appreciate the sentiment nonetheless.”

Barbara’s eyes were starting to water from screen exposure.

Unblinking, she gazed at the wall of code, pondering Tim’s message from earlier.

*Since what happened to Nolan and what happened to the Foxes most likely are connected…I need to find proof.*

She rolled her stiff shoulders and laced her fingers together; cracking them outwards.

Then they landed back on the keyboard; all but flying across the keys.

All morning, she’d been chasing the thief.
They and the murderer had both encrypted their specific digital signature in hacking the security cameras and retrieving the money from the bank account. But if she was good enough, she could at least determine that the signature had come from the same computer.

She’d already determined that both had emitted from a computer in the Gotham-Bludhaven area.

Narrow.

The worm that had been implanted into the bank account had originated within a mile of the different worm that had been placed into the security cameras.

Get a read on where those worms had originated. Be more clear.

They had both come up on the same wire, emanating from midtown. Could she—

No. She couldn’t get a read on the precise location. Yet.

But the worms and the fake files all had similar digital fingerprints. They were encrypted with similar codes; similar frustratingly unreadable patterns.

But even if she couldn’t read them yet, she at least knew they had all come from the same person.

It wasn’t much, but it was something.

It was a victory.

She couldn’t help but smile about it.

That is, until she glanced over at the clock on her computer and realized how many hours had passed since she’d last checked up on everyone.

Clicking her com back on, she was instantly bombarded by a flood of yelling.

“—where were you—”

“—we’re not rainchecking the movies, are we—”

“—the fucking coke mimes are back—”

“—god damn it, B, return my texts—”

“—can you check over those files we sent you—”

“—you said you’d help me with my pre-calc homework—”

“ONE AT A TIME,” she bellowed down the line.

Birds, Bats, and Leaguers all abruptly went quiet.

“Batman, I was where I always am. I don’t know why you’d even ask that. No Hood, we’re still on for Wednesday at eight-thirty. Huntress, Batwoman’s going to be in your area today. If you need help with the coke mimes, ask her. Canary, I will return your texts tonight and call you back by morning, I promise. Lantern, I am not the Justice League’s secretary; back up your own damn files. Misfit, email me your pre-calc homework when you’re done; I’ll look it over and send it back tomorrow night. Are you all finished?”
There was a grumbling chorus of affirmations.

“One more thing.”

“…Yes, Black Bat?”

“Had to give my information directly to the cave. Robin and Red Robin were there. Red Robin was on his lunch break, I think. They were fighting over who ate the last donuts. I had to listen to that.”

Barbara winced in sympathy.

“Sorry about that. I owe you a milkshake. And a calzone.”

Cass paused.

“That’ll do,” she decided.

“Oracle, I had to stand Red Robin’s baseless accusations that I had eaten his donuts—”

“You can buy your own calzone, baby bird.”

“HA!” Tim whooped. Barbara hoped that he’d had his office door shut when he did that.

“As Americans such as yourself put it: Red Robin, go fuck yourself.”

“ROBIN!” Bruce shouted.

The Leaguers and the Birds oohed.

Jason cackled.

Barbara rolled her eyes.

“He started it, Father!”

“I don’t care who started it; I’ll finish it!”

“I swear, Bats’ family is better than a sitcom,” Hal said gleefully. She could almost see John Stewart sighing and rubbing his forehead beside him.

“Don’t make me come up there, Jordan. Robin, you’re grounded.”

“What?”

“HA!”

“Red Robin, I swear to god—”

Barbara hung up.

She stretched back in her seat again, then pushed herself away from the computer towards the bathroom. She observed her reflection in the mirror: messy hair, same flannel pajamas she’d been in for the last thirty-five hours, crooked glasses, and–

She breathed on her hand and held it up to her nose.

–teeth in desperate need of brushing.
Her gut was whining in protest of the meal she’d made of the girls’ gift basket, which she did her best to ignore as she scrubbed at her teeth and shed the rancid pajamas. Then switched the taps in the bathtub on to mind-meltingly hot.

Her phone blaring gentle love songs at an inappropriate volume, she engaged the parkour tactics necessary for clambering out of her chair and into the tub, and let herself sink under the steaming water. Her sore back, shoulders, and wrists burned pleasantly.

Chipped blue nails tapping absently against the porcelain in time to slow piano keys, she let herself forget the case…even if it would only be for an hour or so. She knew that she couldn’t avoid her job forever. Dinah’s gossip sessions and Jason’s movie commentary would have to be put on the back burner again. Dick still hadn’t said when he would be off work…

Her heart clenched in prospect of that conversation.

*No. Don’t think about that either. Just enjoy this moment. You can’t take too many of them, you know.*

So she considered the snide remarks Jason would make about any of the dumb comedies currently in theaters, or the new information she could share with Dinah about the ongoings of Gotham’s elite, or even the algorithms she would need to go over Charlie’s homework. She didn’t think about the case. Or about Dick.

She was so lost in her plans, it wasn’t until after her skin had begun to reach shades usually only attainable by boiled lobsters that she leaned forward and pulled the plug.

Propping herself up on the tub edge, she grabbed a towel and began drying herself off as the playlist kept going; an acoustic guitar practically rocking the walls with its volume.

She snatched up a comb and was just about to run it through her wet hair when she was struck again by the burning of acid in her throat.

Rolling her eyes, she almost routinely set the comb aside and crawled down to the toilet, pulling her hair back for the last traces of well-past-noon sickness.

This time, when it came, she heard the spare key jingling in the lock.

*This is beginning to get embarrassing.*

“Stephanie, Cassandra, I appreciate that you came to check on me again, but please don’t come into the bathroom.”

“Wow. I don’t know whether to be flattered or worried that you can’t tell the difference between me and my sister.”

Barbara froze.

*But…he didn’t even call or text. He was off work and I didn’t know…?*

Her heart skipped right past the clenching and started racing instead.

At the same time, his voice grew closer as he rounded the corner towards the bathroom.
“And when were Steph and Cass over here? Was it one of those Batgirl get-togethers? Because if there was group bad-guy-punching involved, I would’ve liked to have seen—” He appeared in the doorway, and the smile fell away, “—that.”

As they stared at each other, she became very, very aware of the positions they were both in. Him in his police uniform with the hat in one hand and a potted orchid in the other. He looked a little bit ruffled, but otherwise in as good condition as a vigilante-slash-cop could be. She, on the other hand, was stark naked, dripping hair clinging to the nape of her neck, useless legs sprawled out behind her. She was still shaking a bit from being sick; feeling very, very vulnerable.

This is ridiculous. This isn’t the first – or even the twentieth – time he’s seen me naked.

But she still covered her chest and stomach with one arm as she slid back from the toilet; closing the lid and flushing with the other.

Dick immediately set down the hat and flower on the sink; shedding his jacket to the floor and descending forward. He reached out his arms, and she shuffled into them; clutching his torso and burying her face in his shoulder.

“Babs,” he sighed, “I’m worried. Should you still be sick? Do you think you should go to the hospital?”

“Already been,” she blurted.

Fuck.

I guess this is happening now, then.

Dick went rigid in her arms.

Heh. Phrasing. She stifled a chuckle. Not the time for that.

“You already went? So, are you seriously sick, then? What do you have? And why didn’t you tell me about it?”

She grimaced.

Then took a deep breath.

Heart hammering, she pulled back until they were eye to eye. Green into blue.

“Dick…I don’t have a serious illness.”

The accusatory note in his stare faded, and he sighed with relief.

“So, why’ve you been sick so long? Stress?”

“Something like that.” Barbara’s shoulders heaved as she pondered her next words. Dick’s gaze didn’t falter. “I’ll tell you what it is, but…I…you know those stupid pickup lines you sometimes use on me when we’re fooling around?” she blurted.

“They’re not stupid; they’re brilliant. But what does that have to do with–?”

“Just humor me.” She inhaled. “You know that one…where you asked about my ethnicity?”

His eyes softened slightly.
“What’s your Gordons’ heritage again?”

“The name’s English, but I think I also have some Russian, Scottish, and definitely some Irish in
me,” she said, word for word what she’d replied with the first time. “And then you said—”

“—would you like a little Romani in you, too?” The cocky smile came back, just a little bit. “That was
one of my favorites; I still don’t know why you groaned and rolled your eyes at it the first time—”

“There already is one.”

His face went almost comically blank. She held back a nervous laugh.

“…what?”

“There already is a little Romani in me.”

He stared at her.

“I…I’m pregnant.” Her voice shook. “Dick, I’m pregnant. And you…you’re the father.”

He had always loved kids. You couldn’t not love kids to be friends with most of the former Titans, in
the past when they’d acted like immature children and now when they passed along their personality
traits to their own children. You couldn’t not love kids to have four younger siblings; and to use
patience and affection to turn one of those siblings from a perpetually angry mini-assassin into a little
brother who loved him.

Ever since he’d been a gawky fifteen-year-old who made mooney eyes at her in that tight uniform and
still made bad “Holy _ Batman!” jokes all the time, he’d been willing to chatter hers and Bruce’s ears off about how nice it would be to have and guide sidekicks of our own someday, right Batgirl?

Bruce hadn’t taken it seriously at the time, and had encouraged Barbara to do the same. Rambling on
about having children when he was – they both were, actually – barely past childhood.

But no matter how Bruce thought of them now, they had grown up. The younger members of the
family relied on and looked up to them. They had had entire teams at their command. And now, they
were about to be parents.

She may have been the farseeing Oracle, but _he_ had been the one to predict their future.

She shivered.

While those thoughts were going through her head, a series of emotions played across his face:
bewilderment, shock, joy, then back to bewilderment.

“How…how do you know it’s mine?” he eventually asked. “I mean, I know you were seeing other
people, even if I wasn’t—”

Her heart stuttered.

Dinah was right. Damn her.

“I actually…haven’t slept with anyone else since we started seeing each other again,” she admitted.
“Let alone when this—” She gestured to her stomach, “—happened, two months ago.”

His gaze finally dropped down from her eyes to her hands. One of his hands then slid from around
her back; slowly, over her side, skimming the ugly bullet scar across from her spine, before his warm
fingertips came to a halt over her lower belly.

She shivered.

“That’s our kid in there,” he murmured.

“Yeah.”

“So…” Dick looked up at her again. There was something in his eyes she couldn’t place. “You’re keeping it?”

She took her final, shuddering breath.

“Yes. I’m keeping it.”

So much would have to change. She would have to uproot, inconvenience herself. Somehow manage to work a child into her lifestyle. She couldn’t even guarantee the support of her father, her friends, or the rest of the Bats. There were so many terrifying factors to consider; factors that she would give anything to not have to confront.

But she was still going to do it.

Because – and this was more than a little bit scary to her – if she was going to have a baby…she wouldn’t want anyone other than Dick Grayson to be the father.

Excitement lit his eyes, and he broke into a wide grin.

“We’re having a baby. Babs, we’re having a baby.”

She couldn’t help it; she smiled too.

“Yeah. Yeah we are. God, this is…this is crazy.”

“Crazy good!” His arms slid back around her; getting to his feet. Her toes dangled above the tiles as he staggered upwards, spinning her around in a tiny circle and nearly stumbling into her chair.

She laughed.

“Calm down you lunatic; this isn’t a bad rom-com.”

“No, it’s better! Because it’s real, and we’re going to have a kid, and…wow.” He stopped spinning. “Holy crap, everyone we know’s going to freak out.”

“No kidding. My dad’s probably going to have a heart attack. His little girl’s not going to be so little in a couple months.”

“Your dad! Imagine Bruce!”

Both of them shared a guilty laugh over the potential flabbergasted look on the fearsome Dark Knight’s face.

“Could be worse. I bet the Birds are going to get us a Congrats On The Sex cake.”

“My old Titans team’s going to get us another one.” He paused. “I just hope my siblings don’t get jealous or anything.”
“Jason’s probably just going to be grateful the kid’s half me,” Barbara mused. “It’s Damian who you might have to worry about.”

Dick nodded solemnly.

“He needs to know I’m not trying to replace him. There’s been too much anxiety about being replaced in this family already. Speaking of which, how do you think Tim’s going to react? I mean, he doesn’t have a lot of experience with kids, but he loves you and was really great with Steph when she was pregnant.”

“Oh, Tim already knows. Cass and Steph too,” she said without thinking.

The joy slid off Dick’s face faster than a ten-story plummet with no grappling line. He pulled her slightly away.

Oh no. Oh shit.

“How do they already know? You only just found out…didn’t you?”

Barbara’s gut felt like it was being filled with concrete. Her head tipped forward.

“Dick…I…”

“How long? How long have you known?”

“I…” She sighed. “A little less than a month.”

“A month?” He nearly dropped her. His face twisted with incredulity. “You lied to me! You kept telling everyone that you were just sick…You’ve been lying to me for a month!”

“Dick, listen—”

“No!” He set her down in her chair, more roughly than usual. “Unless you have a great excuse for lying to me, especially about something like this – something that affects my life just as much as it affects yours! And you told Tim and Steph and Cass before you told me!”

She found her voice.

“I didn’t tell them!” she shouted back. “Steph figured it out on her own, and she told the others. I haven’t even told Dinah yet!”

“It’s not like that makes it much better!” he exclaimed indignantly. “Barbara, this is my child too! Why didn’t you consider that I’d want to know our lives would be changing so much? Do you not trust me anymore?”

“No!” The word fell out almost before he was done talking. “No! It’s not like that!”

“Then what is it like?” His eyes were blazing with anger.

She shuddered, drawing her arms in on herself and covering the lower half of her face. The water in her hair, now cold, drip-trickled down her back; over her injured spine.

“I’m scared,” she confessed into her hands.

Immediately, his look of fury became one of concern. But the anger clearly wasn’t gone from his tense shoulders or clenched hands.
The words, that she hadn’t even voiced to Cass or Steph, finally began to pour out.

“I know, it’s ridiculous. Me, scared. But I am. My old life has already been snatched from me once, and although I know this is a good change, there’s still a lot about it I don’t understand and might not ever. There’s so much to process, and even more to plan for. I already get all this shit for being in this chair; which I’m used to, I can live with it. But there’s going to be so many people who think I won’t be a good mother because of it. I might not even be able to go into labor safely or give birth normally because of my spine.”

There was no reply, except for his steady blinks and the cold water puddling onto her seat.

“And what if I’m not a good mother? I’m hubristic, I’m overbearing, I’m temperamental. Cass and Steph have already suffered for it—”

“Cass and Steph adore you.”

“But I have hurt them before, with my assumption that I always know best,” she insisted. “And what’s worse, I alienated Tim when he was miserably depressed and needed support. I hurt Jason by invalidating his feelings; he may have been deranged and volatile post-Lazarus, but he still craved love and rightful justice. It’s been a year and a half, and Damian…Damian still doesn’t trust me.”

“I think that last one’s down to him being protective of me.”

“And that’s my other point.” She lowered her hands and looked him in the eyes again. “You. You terrify me, Richard Grayson.”

She’d never said that out loud before; as illustrated by his look of hurt and confusion.

“How you make me feel…it’s terrifying. I have no control over it, no way to plan for it. That’s why I insist on taking things slow; give myself time to get my thoughts and feelings in order. This is going to bring us closer together in the space of just a few months; even if we break up again it’ll bind us for good. And I…kind of like that idea. I like the idea of you fathering my child. But it’s still one of the most daunting concepts I’ve ever had to factor; not just for my life, but for yours and our child’s too.”

Dick bent down until his knees scraped the tiled floor. He stretched out a hand, cupping her chin in his palm.

She sighed and tilted her head to the side, leaning into his touch.

“So, no. It’s not that I don’t trust you. I do trust you, even if you might not trust me now. And I’m so sorry that I lied to you.”

He was quiet for a moment.

“Yeah, I’m still mad at you for that,” he finally admitted. “But I think I get where you’re coming from now. Next time, just talk to me, Babs.”

“You’re always so insistent on talking about feelings.” She smiled slightly.

“Damian says that too. Our kid is probably going to hate me for it when they hit the teen years,” he said half-seriously. Then paused. “Oh god. It still doesn’t feel totally real. We’re having a kid. Wow. How did that happen?”

“How? You still have no self-control when confronted with the chest-baring dresses Kori picks out.”
“Oh, it happened that night, did it?” he questioned, a little playfulness seeping back into his eyes. “Cause I explicitly remember somebody undressing me with her eyes all through dinner. That poor infatuated waiter never stood a chance.”

“You chose the tight pants on purpose, Grayson, don’t act like you were innocent there.”

“I officially deny anything and everything I might’ve blurted out while you were doing that thing with your tongue.”

She actually smirked; sticking her tongue out before rolling and flicking it in that exact way.

“God damn it, Gordon, I can’t have sex with you again while I’m mad at you.” It was phrased like a joke, but she knew him well enough to hear the truthfulness of it underneath.

She leaned backwards a bit, the playful moment fading.

“That’s…fair. So is it okay if I give you the next best thing instead?” she offered. “I still owe you a pizza and movie night. And I’ll pay for everything.”

“That’s actually probably the sexiest thing you’ve ever said to me.” He got back to his feet. “Can I pick the movies?”

“Knock yourself out. You know my password.”

“Thanks, Babs.” He stood up – no kiss this time, but that was alright – before directing one more glance towards her belly and a longer look towards her face.

Then he took his leave towards her bedroom.

Barbara slumped all the way back in her seat, feeling quite boneless. Her shoulders grew lighter; the dripping water no longer a bother. She pressed her hands to her forehead, taking a moment to exhale softly.

This is real. This is happening.

Then she rolled out of the bathroom with her cell phone in hand – pausing only to pick up the orchid from the ledge of the sink.

Maybe she could put the case entirely on hold for a night.
The Hanged Man

Chapter Notes

The chapter that nearly killed me…long as hell and full of emotional whiplash…phew. Buckle up kids, it’s finally starting to get intense.

(Warnings: mentions of past canon sexual assault, as well as offscreen child murder and an onscreen dead child. It’s nobody we’re familiar with, but still.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


For the first time in over a month, Barbara was awakened by grayish sunlight filtering through her window instead of the shrill of her alarms. She was able to sigh quietly, stretch her arms, and wipe the bleariness from her eyes without rush. Not only that, but the usual autumn chill failed to reach her with Dick “living-space-heater” Grayson dozing next to her.

She knew it was silly, but the bed seemed more soft and inviting this way; the rumble of traffic less irritating and more like simple white noise.

Hormones. That’s all it is.

She nudged the mostly-empty pizza box up off her nightstand, and checked the time.

“Son of a – eight in the morning?” she muttered.

“Whazzat?” came the drowsy voice to her right. “Ugh…Babs…turn the sun off, I’m trying to sleep.”

“I can do many things, but that’s not one of them,” she said, setting the box back down. “And shouldn’t you be getting to work anyway?”

“Nuh-uh.” His head popped up over the sea of pillows; black hair sticking up in all directions like a startled blowfish. “Sundays ‘n Mondays’re my days off. Why d’you ask? Trying to get rid of me?”

His tone was lighthearted, but it sent a twist of guilt into her chest anyway.

“Never.” She rolled over to her other side and faced him.

His long eyelashes were thick with sleep, the hem of the bathrobe he’d borrowed from her – maybe they should reestablish keeping clothes at each other’s places, she mused – poking out from under
the duvet. His gaze was blurry with tiredness, but still fixated on her face.

“When was the last time we did this?”

“What? Had a decent night’s sleep? No idea; I feel like I’ve been turning into Tim, what with this case and all.”

“I’m telling him you said that.”

“Ass.”

“Don’t objectify me first thing in the morning,” he protested, then chuckled to himself. “No, seriously. I mean, when was the last time we spent the night together without having sex?”

“I…” She hesitated, running a hand through her hair. “I have no idea. When was the last time we even had sex?”

“I dunno, a month ago? Something like that…oh.” Comprehension bloomed in his eyes. “Ah.”

Barbara grimaced slightly.

“Yeah. What with testing positive, and the case…”

“We haven’t seen each other much lately.”

“I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair to you.”

“Apology accepted. But Babs, it was still tough. I missed being close to you,” he confessed, shuffling closer. Their noses were an inch apart; she could feel the heat off his skin. The borrowed bathrobe and the Wonder Woman pajamas barely seemed to exist.

“You wanna be close to me?” she breathed.

“Mmm.” He nodded.

She slid a hand up over his shoulder.

“You less mad at me now?”

“Less so, yeah.”

“Well, in that case…” She leaned forward until her lips brushed the outside of his ear. Then said in her normal voice: “You need to brush your teeth, Hunk Wonder. I’m not kissing you – let alone doing anything more – with morning pizza breath.”

He snorted indignantly, drawing back with false affront.

“Yours is worse than mine!”

“Liar.” She shuffled back too, grinning. “And you could use a shower, too; after all the time you spend running after criminals in that other filthy city.”

“Really? ’Cause I didn’t hear you complaining last night.”

“That’s what he said,” she retorted childishly. “And that’s because I’m a kind and generous person who only enjoys interrupting you when you want something as simple as sex and not when you’re
getting emotional over the ending to *Love Actually.*”

“I’m impressed you actually stayed awake until the ending this time.”

“I had good incentive.” She reached her hand back out, stroking her fingers over his cheek. “You would’ve eaten my share of the pizza if I’d fallen asleep.”

“I’ve spent too many years with you. Now you know me too well.” Dick took her hand from his cheek and pressed a kiss to the inside of her wrist. “I have no excuses that’ll work on you anymore.”

Despite the warmth, she shivered.

“I guess that goes for both of us.”

Smiling, he let go of her arm and pulled back the covers, sitting up straight.

“If you need me, I’ll be in the shower.”

He started to get out of the bed.

“Dick, wait.”

He looked back at her. She settled into the pillows, biting her lip.

“Leave the bathroom door open.”

The look of surprise almost immediately became a full-blown smirk.

“What?” she said innocently. “*It has* been a month.”

“But not as in control of ourselves as we like to think, are we Ms. Gordon?”

The bathrobe hit the floor.

“Just get your ass in the shower.”

“Sure thing. As long as you keep your eyes on it the whole time.”

After a lengthy hair ruffle and a completely unnecessary hop-kick, he sauntered across the room towards the bathroom door. Then upon reaching it, rested a hand upon the bathroom door, and paused; putting his other hand on his hip and cocking it exaggeratedly to the side.

Barbara’s giggles turned into delighted, full-bodied laughter.

“Your methods of seduction could use some improvement.”

“And yet,” he called over his shoulder, smiling playfully, “they always seem to work on you.”

Well. She couldn’t argue with that.

She made herself comfortable as he walked the rest of the way to the shower, slipping her arm back under the covers, readying herself for a good lengthy period of uninterrupted–

The phone rang.

*God damn it.*
Groaning, Barbara reached over and hefted the pizza box onto the bed, grabbing the phone out from under it with her other hand and bracing herself to hang up—

—before she saw the caller ID.

*What’s she doing calling at this hour?*

“Dinah?”

“Hey, Babs.” Her friend’s voice sounded rusty with exhaustion and irritation.

Instead of putting the pizza box back, she opened it up and grabbed the second-last cold slice of pepperoni. She was probably going to be there for a while.

“What are you doing up this early? Isn’t it like, five in the morning in Star?”

“Don’t remind me. You’re not gonna believe this—” The sarcasm was almost palpable, “—but this was Oliver’s fault. You know how I sometimes check-up-on-slash-hang-out-with Connor while he’s here? Since he’s still technically my stepson, I guess? Well, yesterday, he and I tried to get into the Arrow Cave to pick up some exploding arrowheads or something, and it turns out we were never told how to operate a lot of the shit in there.”

“Don’t tell me.”

“Yeah.” Dinah let out a long sigh. “To make a long story short, we blew up the exploding arrowheads we were supposed to get, set half the Cave on fire, and Connor accidentally melted his hotel key. So I told him he and Kyle could crash at my apartment, which turned out to be the third-biggest mistake of my life, and you know that’s saying something. They’re making so much fucking noise, I haven’t gotten any sleep! Now I get how you feel all the time.”

“They’re having sex at five in the morning?”

“Worse. They’re playing *Bioshock Infinite* and eating all my pancake mix at five in the morning.”

“Ah, that makes more sense.”

Dinah’s groan rattled down the line.

“How are you so calm?” she demanded. “You’ve been getting even less sleep for weeks than I just did, while infected with the plague. And I checked; you haven’t been online all day! That stresses you out; not relaxes you.”

Barbara shrugged, folding the pizza slice in half and nibbling at the tip.

“Maybe being infected with the plague has been good for helping me figure out my priorities.”

“Yeah, and maybe Batman’ll name one of the Green Lanterns as his future successor. (No, Kyle, I wasn’t talking to you.) Are you ever going to tell me what’s really going on or not?”

*Well, speaking of Batman’s successors…*

“Dinah, it’s kind of difficult to say…”

The water in the next room started gushing.

“Hold that thought. Is someone there with you?”
Barbara slumped backwards.

*She is not making this any easier.*

“Yeah, Dick spent the night. But like I was trying to say—”

“He spent the night!?” From the other end, there was a whoop of joy and the unmistakable sound of two young men cheering. “Well, it’s about damn time! Holy shit, how long has it been!?”

“We haven’t actually had sex yet.”

“Yeah, sure. No wonder you’re in such a good mood!”

“Not for much longer, if you don’t let me finish talking,” she grumbled.

Dinah took a long breath down the other end.

There was a soft *thud*, and the rushing of the water become less sudden and more rhythmic.

“Honey…does your having the plague have something to do with Dick?” Barbara started.

“How did you–?”

“We’ve all been speculating, especially after you didn’t get better after a week-ish. Zinda thinks you have chlamydia. Helena thinks it’s HPV.”

“I don’t – that’s not – neither of those cause vomiting!”

“Eh, that’s what I told them. Pretty sure that French hooker Zinda met during the war was preggo, not chlamydia-ridden.”

Barbara held her breath…

But Dinah carried on, oblivious to what she’d just said.

“I really hope that the only thing you caught was your common sense, and that you just have food poisoning or something that’ll clear up soon while you carry on like a valiant stubborn bitch, and in the meantime your little roommate scenario will become a more common occurrence. Everyone wins.”

“Still haven’t had sex yet.”

“Still don’t believe you, also, not the point.” Dinah hesitated. Barbara closed her eyes and imagined her best friend seated at the kitchen island in her apartment: makeup-free, black roots poking through her blond hair, most likely dressed in her favorite fluffy, full-body bathrobe. The opposite of the sexy, confident, do-no-wrong superhero. Just Dinah. “I want you to be happy, Barbara. This little dance you’ve been doing, not ready to take the real plunge…it’s not working. Neither is keeping secrets. I know you’re scared, but some things are worth being afraid for, you know?”

“Dinah, I need to tell you–”

“I know, I know, why should you listen to me? I’m divorced twice, bordering on middle-aged, can’t keep a job for long as a civilian or a hero, and sometimes I feel like the only person I’ve slept with who wasn’t a giant fucking tool was you.”
“Dinah–”

“But I do know you. And I know what works with you, and what doesn’t.”

She really, really didn’t want to interrupt this surprisingly heartfelt speech–

“And you need a push, Barbara. A big push out of your comfort zone, get you out of your bubble of control and into something that’ll make you happy. And if you won’t do that yourself, I’m perfectly willing to do it for you–”

—but she might as well do it now.

Way to take her friend’s advice in the last way she’d expect.

“I’m pregnant, Dinah.”

The silence on the other end lasted so long she began to wonder if Dinah had dropped the phone. Even the faint computer-generated explosions and gunshots from her houseguests’ video game came to a halt.

“…you’re…what?” Her friend’s voice was almost inaudible.

“Oh diós,” came Kyle’s voice in the background. “I was not expecting that.”

“At least it’s better than chlamydia,” Connor pointed out.

“Is it?”

“Whah…I…” Dinah still seemed incapable of putting a sentence together. “…How?”

Barbara dropped her pizza crust back in the box and touched her fingers to her temple.

“I’m hoping I can hold off the birds and bees talk for another few years. I had sex, I was careless while I was having sex, now I’m gonna be a mom in seven months. Surprise.”

“Is that what this is all about?” With each word, Dinah’s voice increased in volume. “It’s Dick’s, isn’t it? Holy shit, no wonder you’ve been acting so weird and lying to everyone! Your already-fucking-huge Bat colony’s going get even more fucking huge!”

“And I,” Barbara grumbled, rubbing her ear, “am going to get tinnitus.”

“Sorry.” Her voice went back down from just-below-Canary-Cry levels. “Wow. A lot of things just started making sense.”

“You’re not angry?”

Dinah paused. The video game turned back on in the background.

“Shellshocked, yes. Confused as to why you plan to keep it, yes. Angry? No. You were scared, confused, out of control…no wonder you put off having to confront it. Plus, I’m not your baby-daddy, so I’m not obligated to stick around and change my whole life and whatnot. Doesn’t mean I won’t,” she added hastily, “cause you bet your ass I’m going to spoil my honorary niece or nephew rotten.”

“Thanks.”
“Yeah, expect a full baby shower at some point.”

“God can’t help me now,” she joked. “But honestly, I’m surprised you’re not angrier about me lying to you.”

“Eh, I know you pretty well. You tend to have a good reason for hiding things. Plus, our entire relationship is based on years where you were lying to me constantly about who you were; first when you were Batgirl, then when you were Big Sister in my ear.”

“Whereas Dick and I’ve usually been totally upfront with each other since we were teenagers,” Barbara mused out loud, picking at the hem of the duvet and turning her gaze back towards the bathroom. “Maybe that’s why you can forgive it more easily.”

“Yeah, exactly. And speaking of your baby-daddy…”

“He knows.”

“Oh good. For a moment, I was worried I would have to kick your ass.”

She chuckled.

“No qualms about kicking a disabled pregnant woman’s ass?”

“Please. Like you couldn’t still take me.” She paused. “There’s one last thing I’m curious about. Why are you keeping it? Your life’s pretty insane right now as it is, plus you’re only married to your job and whatnot.”

Barbara pondered how best to answer the question, watching the open bathroom door. Through the opaque glass of her shower cubicle, she saw him move about, frothing shampoo through his hair and humming one of his fast-paced pop songs.

“I’m still in love, Dinah. That silly, besotted part of me who blushed like a schoolgirl and left love notes in his gloves never really left, even when I wanted it to.”

“Honey, I could’ve told you that.”

“You did tell me that. Repeatedly. But my point is, the idea of having him – and no one else – father my child make me far, far happier than I’d like to admit. If I have a daughter, she’ll be sure to never settle for subpar treatment from men in her life. If I have a son, I’d want him to be like his father. Not perfect by any stretch, but one of the best men I know.”

“’Cause the players gonna play, play, play, play, play, and the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, baby, I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake–” There was another thud. “—God damn it! Was this soap rubbed with butter, or something–!”?

She took a deep breath, trying not to roll her eyes.

“Oh, honey.” It was unclear whether Dinah was holding back laughter at him, her, or both of them. “You caught something way, way worse than chlamydia.”

“Tell me about it.”

Despite being on opposite sides of the country, the two women sat together in silence for a few moments. Barbara closed her eyes and reveled in the company, soaking in that strange feeling of stillness and peace.
“So…how was the sex? I assume if it led to you getting knocked up, it must’ve been pretty wild.”

She opened her eyes.

“Remember a couple months ago when you insisted on my going on a date and nobody heard from me until nearly noon the next day?”

Dinah’s subsequent shriek of delight nearly did give her tinnitus.

“Holy shit!” she cackled. “In that case, I take full responsibility.”

“Mmm, Koriand’r had a hand in it too.”

“That’s incredibly ironic. I love it.”

Over in the next room, the shower switched off, to be soon replaced by the rapid-fire flow of the sink and the occasional spit.

“Sounds like my cue. I guess at this point I might as well go steal back my pancake mix and start the day. There’s a lot I gotta get done.”

“It’s a Sunday. And you have no missions yet.”

“Well yeah, but there’s still a lot I gotta get done. Or, to be more accurate, there’s a lot that you gotta do, if you catch my drift, and I’m not gonna keep you any longer.”

Despite herself, Barbara smiled.

“You are the least subtle matchmaker ever.”

“As long as I get results, I don’t care. Alright, I love you, sweetie. Hope we can talk again before you send me off god-knows-where again. Kyle, if you don’t give me that back right now—”

“Love you too,” she laughed, hitting the End Call button as Dinah and her houseguests started scuffling over the pancake mix.

She sighed affectionately, about to set the phone back…and then thought better of it.

Instead, she opened up her messaging app and sent a quick text to Stephanie:

I’ve made up my mind. You can start telling people now.

She was finally putting the phone and the leftover pizza back when Dick came back into the room, still a little damp from a clearly rushed encounter with her towels.

“Who was that?”

“Dinah.” She reached forward, taking him by the hand and pulling him back on the bed. “She’s very supportive, but it’s also very likely that everyone from the Lantern Corps to the Doom Patrol is going to know about this situation by lunchtime. You know how heroes love to gossip. Stephanie’s only going to speed that along, now that I gave her the green light.”

“So what’s your solution?” He clambered up until he was situated on his hands and knees, directly above her. The room suddenly seemed to go from comfortable warmth to oven-like red heat. “Hide away until after lunchtime? That sounds like it could get awfully boring.”
She reached up and kissed him, long and slow.

“Not to steal your lines or anything,” she said when they separated, “but I can think of a few ways to pass the time.”

“Are you kidding? You can steal my lines any time you want,” he replied, bending back down to kiss her again.

Stephanie had been sprawled out over the floor of the Batcave, alternating between watching Titus nap under the swivel chair, staring at the ceiling, and drumming her fingers on the floor when she saw Barbara’s text.

Yawning, she dug out her phone and scrolled through her unread messages until she saw—

_I’ve made up my mind. You can start telling people now._

Her boredom evaporated.

“Has anybody heard from Dick?” Bruce griped, pacing the length of the cave. It was strange to see him down in the cave in slacks and a polo shirt instead of his suit, but she supposed that even he couldn’t live in-uniform. She certainly couldn’t talk, what with her jeans and Supergirl hoodie. “I’ve been trying to call him all morning, but he’s not answering his phone or com.”

“Maybe he’s sleeping,” Selina grumbled. She was the only person in the room not wearing pants, making up for it with a man’s shirt that went halfway down her thighs and makeup that hadn’t budged since the previous night. “Like the rest of us should be doing.”

“Could be worse,” Tim pointed out, stretching his arms up over his head. His long, ruffled hair reminded Steph of bird feathers. “I mean, I can’t think of what could be worse than a ‘family meeting’ at this ungodly hour, but it still could be.”

“You’re normally up until at least three, at best. And it’s currently eleven-o-clock in the morning,” Damian said, like his brother was an idiot.

“Yeah, exactly. It’s like what Kate said being in the military was like, except with more out gay people.”

“Watch it, kid, some of us are bi. Don’t be biphobic,” Selina said with a perfectly straight (ha) face. Then she looked to the front of the cave and her tone became more serious. “Also, Bruce, I notice that you haven’t called Jason.”

Bruce paused, then deflated, ever so slightly.

“Jason wouldn’t come even if I called,” he said brusquely. “He’s been busy taking on some of the rest of our cases.”

“Generous of him.”

“No, he’s most likely doing it to spite the rest of us.”

“You always think so poorly of that kid.” Selina looked away from him, which worked surprisingly
well considering that it was his shirt she was in.

Slowly, so as not to draw any of the older family members’ attention, Stephanie sat up and slowly scooched in between Tim and Cass.

“Normally Kyle, people are correct in assuming the worst about someone.”

“You’re right, but that doesn’t mean I have to take it from your dad.”

“Alright,” Bruce sighed loudly, “I guess if nobody can reach Dick, we’re going to have to start without him.”

“Lucky bastard.”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“Are you really, Bruce? Are you really? Or are you just going to be passive-aggressive about it?”

He looked like he was about to say something, then thought better of it. Instead he cleared his throat and clicked the Batcomputer to life. One of his infamous PowerPoints filled the screen.

“To start off, let’s summarize what we’ve found so far…”

“Hey,” Steph muttered to her friends.

They both started.

Oblivious, Bruce kept talking about compiling evidence while Selina examined her nails and Damian twirled a batarang between his fingers.

“Just so you guys know…I’m gonna stand up and start talking in a minute, and I need you to act surprised when I do.”

“Start talking about what?” Tim whispered back. “And why do you need us to act surprised?”

She showed them her phone screen.

Their eyes grew wide in synchronization.

“Ah.”

“Yeah. Ah.”

The three of them were quiet for a moment.

“How will you–?”

“I dunno.” Steph chewed her lip, looking thoughtfully over at Bruce. “Something memorable.”

“I’ll film it,” Cass offered. “So we can show Jason later.”

“God, you are such a good sister.”

Cass beamed. Steph did her best not to smile like a dope upon seeing that.

Tim, in the meantime, looked thoughtfully up at the dark cavernous ceiling, dripping with stalactites. From the shadows, the occasional chitter and squeak could be heard, interspersed with the rustling of
“You know…” he mused. “We are bats. In a bat cave.”

“Tim, exactly how much sleep did you get last night?”

“No…” Cass said slowly. “I think what he means is…”

Steph turned her head up slowly to look at the ceiling. One of the female bats was dangling about ten feet above them from a fairly large stalactite, her baby snuggled up under her wings.

“Ohhhhh. Okay, I get it.”

Tim and Cass each gave her a thumbs up.

“…and that concludes what we know so far,” Bruce finished. “Are there any questions?”

For a beat, there was no reply.

“Alright. Then we can move on to–”

Steph’s hand shot up, and every eye in the room turned to her. Bruce seemed to age ten years as he deliberated whether to let her talk or not.

“…what is it, Stephanie?”

“I need you all to know something important. All the information we need is not actually on the table yet.”

Silently, Cass raised her phone. Tim sat back on his hands as Steph clambered to her feet; dusting off her pants and clearing her throat.

Alfred chose that exact moment to clamber out from the elevator, holding a tray with a pot of coffee, a collection of mugs, and bowls of sugar and cream.

“Oh my,” he observed. “Are you planning a soliloquy, Miss Stephanie?”

“That’s what I’m afraid to find out,” Bruce mumbled. Selina glowered at him.

“You might wanna put that tray down, Alf. I’ve got really interesting news to share, and I don’t want you to drop it or anything.”

“Rest assured, Miss Stephanie, nothing this family has to offer can surprise me anymore.” He began pouring out the coffee in equal measures into everyone’s mugs.

Steph shrugged.

“Alright, if you say so.” She cleared her throat again, and posed like a newscaster. Everyone continued looking at her. “Local zoologists have just obtained some rather interesting data regarding the bats here in Gotham City. It seems that, unexpectedly, after a long dry spell with fewer than usual orphans – I mean, offspring – boosting the colony, things may be about to change.”

“What is the point of this, Brown?” Damian interrupted.

“I’m getting there, kid. Scientifically speaking, the next generation has grown up, and we should all be very proud of them.” She pressed a hand to her chest, pretending to wipe a tear.
Alfred raised an eyebrow. Bruce sighed.

“So now we seem to be entering an unexpected breeding season. And,” she lifted her voice, “I am very pleased to announce that, within a few months, we’ll be seeing a slight increase in the local bat population.”

Everyone stared at her.

A bit of water dripped off a stalactite.

Cass blinked; innocent as ever.

“Well, that was a complete waste of time,” Damian complained.

“Agreed.” Bruce turned back to the computer screen. “Now, if anyone has anything relevant to add–”

“Barbara’s pregnant.”

Stephanie knew schadenfreude was wrong, but she had to admit, the reaction she wrought on the cave from that news…was so…satisfying.

Bruce froze. Completely froze. In place. She didn’t even think he was blinking or breathing.

Damian shrieked at the top of his lungs, scattering a small crowd of bats from the ceiling, and nearly impaled his hand on his own batarang.

Selina fell out of the swivel chair and on top of Titus, who barked loudly and ran away.

Alfred’s eyes grew wide, and he dropped the tray he was holding. A two-pound ceramic coffee pot, six mugs, two bowls, eight spoons, and an antique silver tray all crashed to the cave floor at once, shattering on impact.

“Aw, coffee, no,” Tim sighed.

Bruce still hadn’t moved.

Stephanie sat back down next to Cass, who switched her phone off.

“You are evil.”

“That is true.” She wagged her finger dramatically. “You’re darn lucky I like you so much, Cassandra Wayne, otherwise you’d be flailing on the floor there with your little brother.”

Cass nodded with exaggerated seriousness.

In the meantime, said little brother had finally regained the ability to speak English.

“Pregnant?” he shouted. “She’s – she’s –”

“Saying it again isn’t going to make it any less true, kid,” Selina said dryly, picking herself up off the floor and pulling the shirt back down over her crotch (thank god she’d at least put underwear on).

“I am aware of that, Kyle!” Damian’s voice sounded dangerously close to cracking. “She – Grayson – they–”
“Yeah.”

“And she will–”

“Uh huh.”

“But I don’t–”

“It’s not really your choice to make, Damian.”

“Believe me, I loathe the idea of sharing the title of ‘uncle’ with you,” Tim interjected rather unhelpfully. “But since Barbara apparently wants to keep it, this is gonna happen whether we like it or not.”

Damian looked at them for a long few moments.

Then he threw the batarang to the floor and stormed off to the the elevator. Nobody went to stop him.

Steph’s feeling of triumph suddenly melted into guilt.

“Well, I think Master Damian took that about as well as he possibly could,” Alfred said, picking bits of ceramic out of the newly-formed pool of coffee. “Next time I ever doubt your ability to shock, Miss Stephanie, please do me a favor and remind me of this incident.”

“Will do, Alf.”

He paused, hand halfway between the floor and the bent tray. Selina looked away from the group and meandered over to the police scanner.

“I will say though, it’s quite strange to think about. Forgive me for this lapse of sentimentality, but despite it being so many years ago, it seems like only yesterday that we first brought Master Richard to the house. He was so tiny for his age, yet so full of energy. I had to keep prying him off the chandelier and the curtains.”

“This will be a…very acrobatic baby,” Cass remarked.

Alfred smiled.

“Indeed, Miss Cassandra. And if that was only yesterday, then it was mere hours ago that he and Miss Barbara first became teammates. In retrospect, I suppose romantic inklings were only inevitable. But even I wouldn’t have guessed that Master Richard – and especially not Miss Barbara – would become parents so soon.”

“They’ve had a lot of practice parenting,” Tim observed wryly. “Including a lot of trial and error.”

“You make an excellent point, Master Timothy.” Alfred picked up the last of the broken crockery and swept it neatly into the trash can. “In fact, as even Master Bruce can attest to – Master Bruce?”

The four of them looked over at Bruce.

He was still almost perfectly frozen; the look of shock on his face not budging.

“What’s with him?”

“He just realized that neither he nor his first baby bird are so young anymore.”
“I was already aware of that.” Alfred walked smartly up to his employer and snapped his fingers twice in front of Bruce’s eyes.

The poor man collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut; sinking rapidly to the floor.

The remaining occupants of the cave looked at him while the police scanner chattered softly in the background.

“Bruce?”

“Are you okay?”

“Did I give you a stroke? Because I swear, it’s not because I’m after your money or anything.”

Bruce looked up at them. There was so much swimming in his expression, which was an unusual sight for anyone, but especially the people who knew him.

“I–”

“Everyone?” Selina’s voice sounded odd.

Their heads all snapped in her direction; the quickest of which was Bruce’s.

“You’d better get over here, now. And somebody get Damian.” Selina had a hand pressed to her mouth, horror widening her eyes. The kind of expression one only wore listening to a police scanner when it was personal.

“Selina, what happened? What’s wrong?”

She lowered her hand and looked at them directly.

A sinking feeling of despair took root in Stephanie’s gut.

“For one thing…turns out, it’s a good thing Jason didn’t come to the meeting today.”

This was the longest break Barbara had taken from investigating in months, and it was…actually kind of welcome.

Her body felt unusually light with rest and sex, the dead weight of her legs less of a burden than usual. The fatigue and nausea were alleviated, if not completely gone. Even her outlook felt better after the time she’d spent with two of her favorite people.

So she decided to do something spontaneous.

She’d left Dick a note while he napped in her bed, finished off the pizza, then got dressed and headed out.

Her dad’s favorite radio station crooned out an old Cat Stevens song as she drove through the autumn smog and traffic, dodging grouchy middle-aged truckers and anxious older women returning from Sunday mass. Her chair creaked almost contentedly next to her as the wind ruffled across the open window and through her undone bob.
This is probably about as peaceful as this city gets, she mused.

The familiar drive seemed shorter than usual; barely a few minutes before she pulled into the parking lot in front of the Gotham Public Library. She hoisted her chair out across to the pavement; carefully turning off the car and shimmying herself down from the driver’s seat. There were a few other patrons parked out near her, but not enough to disturb her peace.

Upon rolling up the ramp and through the doors, she immediately drew the attention of the man reading behind the front desk.

“Barbara!” he exclaimed happily, setting aside The Color Purple and getting to his feet. He was tall and slim, with a lemon yellow collared shirt and a stack of coiled curls that was just shy of being an Afro. He was about Jason’s age; a faint Tennessee drawl still coloring his voice, even after spending all his undergrad years in Gotham. “It’s been a while since y’all came here in person.”

“Hi, Louis,” she greeted him. “Digital work gets a little much, you know? I’d just prefer to get some reading material this time.”

Louis nodded, walking around the front of the desk.

“I’m guessin’ y’already know about all the new shipments of books we got in?”

“I know everything, remember?”

He chuckled.

“Now y’all sound like my mom.”

“There’s a reason for that.”

He walked alongside her down the liberally stacked aisles, a muted rainbow of covers and titles poking out from between the towering oak shelves.

“Is there a reason for your not visiting in so long, too? Boyfriend troubles?”

“Yep. You too?”

“Yep. Mom’s worried that after my sisters bring over their husbands and kids, there won’t be enough room for Zeke at the Thanksgiving table. Pretty small house, y’know? We’re still tryin’ to figure out how to wrangle him in there with Jemma’s baby and Ellie’s toddlers.”

“If only my troubles were that simple. My boyfriend’s family’s going through a lot of difficulties, and I’m trying to help, but…there’s so much I can’t do right now.”

“Nobody’s all-powerful, Barbara. Not even you.”

“Don’t remind me.”

Passing through the nonfiction section, they rounded past a pair of young women with the bags under their eyes and coffee cups in their hands to denote that they were college – maybe grad school – students. One, with crutches and a dreadlocks-underline-combo hairdo, was holding a book on coding (Barbara silently approved) while the slightly older one with a wedding ring on her hand balanced a quartet of textbooks.

All three of them glanced up as they headed by.
“Y’all ladies need help?” Louis asked.

“Yeah. We can’t find Representing…” The woman with the wedding ring realized she was looking at Barbara and flushed. “Representing Disability in an Ableist World.”

“Alysia here and I checked the registry, so it should be here,” her friend said, looking unbothered.

Louis looked at Barbara.

“It’s okay, go help them. If you need me, I’ll be in the kids’ section.”

He gave her a quizzical glance.

“There’s a good reason for that, too.” And it should start to become apparent in about a month.

“If y’all say so.” Louis walked over to the two young women, and Barbara rolled on down the aisle.

The library was silent in an almost eerie way to a person who lived surrounded by roaring cars and rattling machines, but she liked it. The soft covers of the books and the thick slabs of wood seemed to soak up excess sound, so that all she could hear was the squeak of her wheels and her own breath.

It was a refreshing experience for someone used to answering other peoples’ needs all day.

Passing by the adult fiction section, she picked up a couple books and made her way along the history titles towards the children’s section before–

“Are those John Ostrander? You have good taste.”

She started, looking around.

A thin, pale man with hair like dandelion fluff was looking at the novels in her lap with intrigue. He was dressed fairly inconspicuously in jeans and a plain white t-shirt, a computer bag slung over his shoulder and several histories of the Gotham-Bludhaven area in hand. The only part of him that unnerved her were his metallic gray eyes.

“Thank you. He’s one of my favorite authors.”

The man smiled, making his way over to her. There was something methodical about the way he walked…almost as if he were echoing the way she had to move in her chair.

“Avery Drew. Pleasure to meet you.”

“Barbara Gordon. Likewise.”

For a moment, his smile was frozen in place. Then his eyes grew wide with recognition.

“The commissioner’s daughter? Companion to Bruce Wayne and his sons?”

She swallowed down a surge of irritation.

“I consider myself more of a companion to his daughter, but I suppose we could go with that too.”

“Ah, forgive me.” He drew back slightly. “I was just under the impression that you were close to the men of the family.”

“I am. But Cassandra Wayne is very dear to me, and there’s far more to me than the men I’m close
to.”

Drew nodded, but she couldn’t quite tell if he really understood what she was saying.

“Now you’ve made me curious; what else is there to one of Gotham’s most elusive and iconic women? Besides the ones in masks, of course.”

Well, I used to be the first Batgirl, which started after I got up in Batman’s face and yelled at him for being a hypocrite. I’ve punched Deathstroke in the face. I’m on good terms with most of the Justice League. I can eat whole habanero peppers without flinching. I once kissed Poison Ivy, and she was actually really good. I’ve skinny-dipped in the lakes outside of Smallville. I got shot and sexually assaulted by the Joker, so now I can’t use my legs. I then became Oracle, the infotech and power behind the scenes for the entire meta-human and vigilante communities. Wonder Woman once took me to visit Themyscira. I helped foster Black Bat and gave her her name. I can deadlift 200 pounds. Black Canary is my best friend, and we dated for a while, too. I’ve gone shopping and baked muffins with Starfire. I broke a few good people’s hearts. I’ve gone skydiving, swung on a trapeze, and been flown in advanced aircraft and in the arms of aliens and meta-humans. I’m friends with the whole Bat-family, and trusted implicitly by nearly all of them. Also, I’m going to have Nightwing’s baby. What do you think of this weather we’re having?

“Nothing much. I do computer work for this library, and I do some coding in my spare time.” She shrugged. “It’s not that I have anything to hide; I just like my privacy. People can be a little invasive, you know?”

“I do know.” He looked almost wistful. “You seem like an intelligent woman, Miss Gordon. It’s a pity you have to hide yourself away.”

“I am an intelligent woman.” His wistful look turned into surprise.

She bit back a grin.

Expecting me to downplay it, was he?

“But it’s not exactly hiding myself away. I still have a lot of friends, plus an extended family in the Waynes. I think my life is plenty full and interesting already; I don’t need to be a social butterfly or show off every instant of it for that to be true.”

“It is interesting,” he promised. His look finally settled, concrete-like, into satisfaction. “You are a rare woman, Miss Gordon.”

“Hmmm.” She lifted her chin, smirking. “But what about you? What’s your life like?”

“Nothing as exciting as yours, I’m afraid,” he sighed. “I’m only another accountant. But I do coding in my spare time as well.”

“Well, between that and Ostrander, you have pretty good taste too.”

“I like to think so.” His gaze seemed to bore into hers. She was reminded strongly of a documentary she’d once seen about ocean animals. Dolphins, she’d learned, had a superior intellect to most animals, meaning that they were just smart enough to potentially be cruel if they so chose. The smile was pleasant enough, but the look in his eyes reminded her of how one of those dolphins had appeared right before they rammed their beak into a shark’s gills. “On the other hand, my life seems to be getting a little better.”

She tilted her head. “How so?”
“Just a few minor personal successes. One of them just came into effect this morning.”

She opened her mouth to ask more.

“Barbara! Thought you said you’d be in the kids’ section?”

She wheeled herself back around.

Louis appeared at the front of the aisle, tailed by the two young women from the nonfiction section.

“This is Frankie and Alysia. I told ’em a little bit about you, and now they’re all excited to meet y’all. Told ’em you were old enough to be their mom—”

“Thanks, Louis,” she smirked.

“—but for some reason, that didn’t seem to stop them. Maybe it’s ’cause there’s no way you could be their mom – y’know, since you’re so white and all.”

She laughed.

“I dunno, Damian Wayne’s not exactly as pale as his father, is he?”

“Fair point.”

“Who were you talking to? Before we got here?” the girl with crutches – Frankie – asked.

“This guy–” She looked over her shoulder.

But Avery Drew had disappeared.

Before she could ponder how strange that was, her phone started ringing.

Louis pursed his lips at her.

“I know, I know; I’ll just take this quickly.”

She dug the phone out of the bottom of her purse, registered the caller, and held it up to her ear.

“What is it, Bruce?”

When he answered, she was taken aback by his voice; like his throat had been rubbed with sandpaper. Almost like he’d been crying.

“Barbara…” he rasped, not even trying to sound put-together. “Come…Crime Alley…now. Call Dick. He hasn’t been answering me all morning.”

“That’s my fault,” she confessed, snapping from relaxation to business. “I’m sorry. What happened?”

“Your fault…” He chuckled miserably. “That seems to be a theme here.”

“What the fuck, Bruce, I–”

“Stephanie told me. Us.”

Concrete settled into the lining of her stomach. She resisted the urge to be sick on the library carpet.

I knew he wasn’t going to take it well, but how is he this shaken?
“That cannot be everything.”

“It’s not.” He was quiet for a moment. Police sirens shrilled in the background, and she was certain she could hear Tim talking to someone and her father shouting orders. “Come to Crime Alley. You’ll see. I…I can’t say more.”

The line went dead.

The three other people in front of her stared.

“I’m so sorry, but I have to go. Family emergency.”

She threw her phone back in her purse, then began rolling towards the door as quickly as she could.

“Barbara, wait!”

She looked back. Louis pointed at the books in her lap.

“You haven’t checked those out yet.”

Damian decided that this was, without a doubt, the worst he’d seen his family at this place.

Even when he and Tim had staged a Battle Royale over their grandparents’ death site, at least they hadn’t seen anybody actually dead.

Let alone a teenager in a Robin t-shirt with his face and chest beaten open.

The police had already surrounded the place; Gordon himself shouting at civilians – drunks and homeless people and the odd daytime prostitute – to stay back from the yellow line. Batgirl hung back at the fringes, her yellow hair hanging over her face like moss, looking anywhere but at him. Red Robin and Black Bat were standing perfectly still next to the corpse. Batman, for his part, had seemed to shrink in on himself, hiding beneath the cape and cowl.

Although he wouldn’t admit it, it terrified Damian to see his father so visibly shaken.

Catwoman had gone to inform Batwoman, Huntress, Azrael and the like to not bother the immediate family for a few days (of all his father’s paramours, he had to admit that he had a bit of a preference for Selina. After all, she was intelligent, and independent, and took care of animals. He could respect that).

Nightwing had yet to arrive. He didn’t quite know how to feel about that.

“How did the kid die?” one of the policemen asked his female companion.

“The killer bashed his head and chest in with something long and heavy,” she replied. “There were some other blows to the arms and legs, too…then it looks like the poor kid was…charred. You saw the burn marks?”

“Lord Jesus God in heaven.” The man crossed himself. “All that just for going out in a Robin t-shirt.”
“Yeah. It looks a lot like when that actual Robin died on the job back in…what was it? 2011?”

“You think the killer deliberately recreated that Robin’s death with this kid?”

“I don’t know. But the Bats seem to think so.”

The man muttered a prayer in Spanish.

Damian turned away from the police and moved forward until he was standing next to Cassandra.

Up close, even with a face half caved in, the corpse was a poor substitute for the dead Robin…Jason. The nose was too narrow, the eyes gray instead of blue. It was clear that this boy had been malnourished – when Jason had died, he’d been eating well for three years. But to someone who hadn’t known Jason well, they looked near-identical. Even to someone who had known him well, they at least looked similar enough to be brothers.

Or rather, *blood* brothers.

“I was going to ask who could be sick enough to do this,” Tim said quietly, “but then I realized…it could be almost anybody.”

Cassandra bowed her head.

“For once Red Robin, you are correct,” Damian replied. “We already know that somebody is targeting Father…Batman. This is not like the previous efforts to weaken him. Instead—”

“—this is a more personal way to hurt him,” Tim finished. Damian didn’t even argue with him for interrupting.

Cassandra bent down until she was kneeling beside the dead boy.

“Why?” she said softly.

“To hurt Batman—”

“I know. But why do it? What is worth doing this?”

Neither of her brothers had an answer.

Damian shifted his gaze away from his sister and the battered corpse back to his father. Bruce was talking in low tones with Gordon, his voice like he’d been eating rusty nails.

He wanted to hit a wall. There were so many people to blame for the chaos the family was in, but for once, he didn’t want to take it out on Tim. After all, Tim had been upfront with his disdain from the beginning. He hadn’t been the one to spend a year and a half building up his trust only to replace him.

When he heard Nightwing alight behind him, he didn’t turn around.

“I saw what happened to that kid.” Dick’s voice was low, sorrowful. “No wonder B’s so upset. Nobody deserves that to happen to them or to their family.”

“I suppose you’d know.” Damian still didn’t turn around.

“Well, of course. It’s bad enough knowing it happened to an innocent civilian teenager, and that it happened to Jay – the second Robin – before. If anything like that were to happen to you now, god
knows what I’d–”

“Don’t mock me, Nightwing.” He wheeled around. Confusion wrote itself across his older brother’s face. “It’s bad enough that you quit being Batman and ran back to Bludhaven the moment you had the chance–”

“Is that why you’re angry at me?” Dick asked. “You miss our partnership? Da – Robin, I miss that too. I didn’t want to leave, but Bludhaven’s still riddled with crime and B has been gone for too long. You need to get to know your father–”

The last sentence made him, if possible, even angrier.

“You have no intentions of following Father’s example, do you?” he snarled. Stephanie, Tim, and Cassandra were now definitely staring at them, but he didn’t care. “That is, caring but not saying. Outward disapproval, but loyalty without wavering. You’re the other way around, aren’t you? You proclaim affection, but you’re flighty and selfish and make no effort to change. You ignored Red Hood when he was a child who needed companionship. You left behind your mentor without a second thought. You discarded Red Robin when you grew bored of his company…you discarded the Titans…Starfire…your first life in Bludhaven…I suppose I should’ve seen that you’d eventually discard me too.”

He’d never said anything nearly as cruel to Dick before, and it was clear in the palpable anger and pain on his brother’s face. Part of him knew that most of it was unfair. But the words spilled out nonetheless.

“I hope you enjoyed your pleasure while it lasted. Because no matter where you run away to next, this is one tie you can never unbind. I should know…I am the expert on being unable to leave behind the burdens of blood.”

“Damian, I’m not trying to replace you–”

Without letting him finish, he shoved Dick roughly away. Before his brother could recover, he marched through the throng of cops and past his shellshocked father.

By the time he reached the ring of civilians, the familiar figure in her chair had approached him. Despite the unusual lack of dark circles or bloodshot vessels around her eyes, she was clearly fraught with nerves; hands clutching her phone until it seemed seconds from cracking.

For a moment only, Damian’s eyes flicked down to her still-flat midsection.

“Robin, what’s going on?”

His gaze snapped back up.

“Ask Nightwing,” he spat, marching back towards the Batmobile. He could hear her wheels shrieking against the concrete as she approached, then her gasp and sob of horror.

As he locked himself in the passenger seat and rolled up the tinted windows, it was only then that he took off his mask and let the tears spill out.
Tim and Cass were the only members of the family that remained.

Damian had been taken home by Bruce, who was still so lost for words that he didn’t even scold his youngest for running away from the crime scene. Steph – their beloved Steph – had gone back to her mother’s house near tears. Dick had gone back to Bludhaven actually in tears. Barbara had insisted she could handle it, but that she needed to return to the Clock Tower and process the information immediately.

Nobody had had the heart to tell Jason yet.

Jim Gordon slumped into his office, all the energy sapped out of him. He practically collapsed into his swivel chair while the two siblings closed the door behind him.

“I can’t go on like this much longer,” he sighed. “It’s been more than thirty years since I came to Gotham, and I’m still never, never going to get used to how many kids fall through the cracks here.”

“Tell us about it,” Tim sighed.

_We and our siblings nearly were those kids_, Cass thought.

“I guess it’s no wonder that my son went a little…” He cut himself off. “Well. At least my daughter’s a survivor.”

Cass thought about the emotions written across Barbara upon seeing that dead boy. Horror and shock, obviously. Sympathy and empathy for the murdered and brutalized. Dread, for Jason himself. And, most overwhelmingly, _fear_.

“She is braver than you even know,” she stated.

“Maybe not more than I know,” Jim Gordon mused.

There was something very interesting in his face as he said that…

Tim carried on, oblivious to this fact.

“Is there anything you need to share with us that you haven’t already told Batman, Commissioner?” he asked, like he had never called the man “Jim” and had him over at the Manor for the annual Wayne/Kane Hanukkah celebration.

“Didn’t get to tell Batman much of anything this time.” Gordon pushed a file across the desk towards the masked siblings. “Here’s the case report, along with a note I found alongside the victim. You kids and that Oracle should be able to make use of it while Batman’s still in his state.”

There it was again, when he said Oracle’s name.

A suspicion, already long lingering in Cass’s mind, began to come to fruition.

“You kids need anything else?”

“Need to tell you…one thing.”

Tim looked at her in surprise.

Cass leaned forward and braced her hands on the desk. Gordon peered back at her with genuine curiosity.
“You are going to be a grandfather.”

Gordon’s eyes grew wide behind his glasses; his mouth hanging open.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Black Bat!” Tim yelled frantically, waving his arms at her like a bad actor.
“There’s no way we could possibly know something like that! Seriously! We barely even know his daughter!”

“It’s okay, Tim. He knows.”

Tim froze mid-yell.

Gordon shut his mouth, and he nodded.

“You’re a smart girl, Cassandra.”

“Just good at reading people,” she replied, the tiniest grin on the corner of her mouth.

Tim pulled his cowl off, hair sticking up in all directions like he’d been standing in a hurricane.

“How long have you known?” he asked.

“Ever since she snuck out her window the very first night and trashed a party fighting Killer Moth,” the older man replied. “Once I knew that Barbara was the first Batgirl, it didn’t take a lot of detective work to figure out who the rest of you were. I’d already had my suspicions about Bruce, anyway.”

“How’d you…figure she was Oracle?” Cass inquired.

He broke into the first genuine, if tired, smile they’d seen all day.

“Who else but my Babsy would not only have the opportunity, but also be smart enough and savvy enough to handle it?”

“Fair,” she allowed, smiling back.

Tim shook his head.

“And all this time, you’ve been letting us think that we were good at lying to you. Did you think it was funny watching us bend over backwards to find excuses for our behavior?”

“I was trying to preserve your identities for you,” Gordon protested. “But also, yes.”

Both siblings rolled their eyes at each other.

Gordon’s smile faded, and he looked up to the ceiling in astonishment.

“I can’t believe my baby’s having a baby of her own.” He looked back sharply. “That Ted Kord fellow’s not the father, is he?”

“Don’t worry. Ted Kord married Booster Gold after Jai – um, I mean, this other kid became the new Blue Beetle,” Tim reassured him. “They moved back to Chicago after honeymooning in…what was it? Los Angeles?”

“Las Vegas.”

“Figures.”
“Our brother’s the father,” Cass finished.

Gordon mulled that over for a few moments.

“I guess telling him ‘Not on your life, Boy Wonder’ is a bit moot at this point,” he finally said. “But then again, I suppose if it had to happen…she could do far worse than your brother.”

The office was quiet for a moment.

“But that doesn’t mean I won’t threaten to castrate him when I see him next.”

Cass burst into a flood of giggles. Both men looked at her.

“I’m slightly concerned on Dick’s part right now,” Tim remarked. The giggles increased in frequency.

“But…does that mean…” she choked out. “If the commissioner did…we would have to…call our brother…No-Dick Grayson?” She doubled over in hysterical mirth.

“You’re going to have to tell Steph that one when you see her next,” Tim informed her as she kept laughing. “It might make her feel better. Commissioner – Jim – we’ll take this file to the Cave. And I promise we won’t tell Dick that you approve.”

“You’re good kids.” Gordon leaned back in his chair. Tim pulled his cowl back up and scooped up the file; Cass finally regained control of herself and reached for the door. “But you know what you can tell my daughter…”

They both looked back.

“I can’t control what she does anymore, as she’s proven multiple times over since she first became Batgirl. But…” He paused. “I wouldn’t keep my complaining and threats to a minimum about any old partner of hers. You know I want her to be with someone who loves and respects her, no matter what. And despite all his faults, that’s your brother.”

“Despite all his faults…yeah.” Cass suspected that Tim was thinking about what Damian had said earlier, too.

Gordon nodded, then shook his head in disbelief.

“Faugh, I sound all sappy. But you kids know what I mean.”

The siblings exchanged a smile.

“Yeah. We do.”
previously, the chair looked brand new with its pristine leather and polished chrome, a shocking contrast to her long greasy hair, sunken eyes, and dead expression.

What had happened in seven years to turn that hopeless wreck of a human being into such a confident woman at peace with her existence?

Whatever it was, he didn’t like it.

“Way to ruin a perfectly good, successful day, Miss Gordon,” he murmured.

She was weak. Weaker than him. So what gave her that inexplicable sense of strength? Any normal young, beautiful woman would realize that she’d been destroyed, ruined, by having her body maimed and raped. What gave her the idea that she could be proud of herself? Could be satisfied with her life? Could – he gave an odd shudder at the thought – leap into bed with Gotham’s most eligible young bachelor?

He’d meant to continue his line of thought, but the idea of Barbara – not grown-up, proud, laughter-lined Barbara; but young, shaken, weakened Barbara – naked and underneath a man was very distracting.

He imagined that this was how Dick Grayson felt all the time.

So apparently he had a new goal, besides Batman. Compared to that, suddenly dodging that damn cold bitch Oracle and her endless gaze seemed easy.

But he’d never been the kind of man to back down from a challenge.

Chapter End Notes

I like to imagine that Jim Gordon's music library looks a lot like the Awesome Mixes from both Guardians of the Galaxy movies.
Chapter Notes

This is long overdue, and I’m still not entirely happy with how it turned out. But I figure you guys deserve some closure sooner rather than later. It’s a little less of an emotional mess than the last one, at the very least.

(Warnings: mentions of child murder & parental abuse, some violence, and a super brief mention of drugs. Plus, Jason’s issues in general.)


El Gorro Rojo was no worse than a good majority of the dives in the East End. Sticky tables and smoke-choked air aside, at least the waitresses were allowed to be fully clothed and people generally kept their weapons tucked under their jackets.

Unlike the places in Midtown that served Arkham’s royalty on the regular, this was more frequented by henchmen and the odd hit squad; maybe a lower-ranking mafia member or two. No drug lord or mob boss would be caught dead at a two-bit place like El Gorro.

Which was why when Red Hood himself stomped through the doors and over to the bar, he drew complete silence.

Every eye fixated on him. That massive figure with his broad, muscular body almost folded in on itself still cast shadows as he walked through the dive. One of the waitresses was unaware that the drink she was capping off was spilling over the top. Even the pool balls ceased their incessant clack-clacking.

He grabbed the edge of a stool and positioned himself on top of it, roughly dragging it back into place. The two men on either side cringed back in unison.

The unexpressive helmet clicked open to reveal a twisted face, which the mask over his eyes did nothing to alleviate.

At that point, the only person in the entire place not gaping or cowering was the bartender. Middle-aged, fake redhead, might’ve been called buxom in her younger years. She had chipped scarlet nails with matching lipstick, and Isaac was scrolled across her left bicep in tattoo-font cursive.

“What’ll it be?” she grumbled.

“El Gorro Rojo Rojo” she grumbled.
Jason, for his part, didn’t retort or acknowledge any of the eyes on his back.

“House brew, thanks.”

The bartender impassively passed a dusty bottle and dented opener across the bar to him. Without another word, he slid her some cash, then cracked open the bottle with unnecessary force.

For a moment, he simply sat with his freshly-opened beer in hand.

Then he wheeled around; masked eyes to the crowd, handgun gripped outwards.

Immediately, everyone else — waitresses included — drew their own guns.

“I’m not looking for trouble,” Jason announced, his seething voice belying his intentions. He surveyed the quivering men with disgust.

Which one of them did it?

“All I need to know is one thing: which of you is Fisher Di Nero?”

Most of the patrons blinked at him in confusion. The bartender took out a rag and began polishing shot glasses.

“I’m gonna ask again —”

He pointed the gun at the dartboard on the far wall and fired three rounds.

One of the waitresses ducked and screamed. Three consecutive holes appeared across the bullseye — twenty feet across the room.

“Now, in case that wasn’t an obvious enough implication for some of you: if I can hit a three-inch target from twenty feet, imagine how accurate shooting at your chests or thick foreheads would be from five feet.” While the crowd quivered, the bartender went on polishing, having stood through his display without even blinking twice. “So which one of you is Fisher Di Nero? And please don’t waste my time lying.”

“You wouldn’t,” one henchman dared to say. “Y’don’t kill like you used to.”

“Hmmm…you’re half right.” Jason took a swig of his beer. Part of the act: seem like you’re lowering your inhibitions, you’ll seem like you’re more likely to do worse things indiscriminately. “I got some people that I love now, both old and new. They help, you know? But here’s the thing…” He took another swig, then pointed his gun towards the front of the crowd. “They’re not here now. And thanks to the man who won’t step forward, neither is a kid whose only fault was being in the wrong place at the wrong time.” He addressed the room. “Right, Fisher? You got out of the way and sent the kid out to buy milk or something, all for a tidy sum. And now he’s dead, and you got the cash.”

The henchmen started murmuring amongst themselves. Even among scum, killing children was still mostly taboo.

“It’s not like that! Pedro was no good, everyone knew that, and his mom wanted him out too, and —”

Everyone gasped.

The man who’d spoken cut himself off. He was in his early thirties, slightly skinny, with thick black hair. His eyes were set upon his face like coins upon marble, sweat shining across his forehead. The
perspiration only increased when the gun turned to him.

“And you sold your own son out to be beaten and burned to death,” Jason finished. “For what? Five thousand dollars? Ten thousand dollars? Thirty pieces of silver?”

“He was a thief!” Di Nero stammered. “The kids he hung around with were junkies.”

“You’re getting jack shit sympathy from me, Fisher. I boosted tires for groceries when I was twelve, and my boyfriend used to shoot heroin.” There were a few mutters at the word “boyfriend,” but he ignored them. “No matter what he did, you still killed him.”

“But—but I…” Di Nero was getting cross-eyed from staring down the handgun’s barrel. “I didn’t kill him.”

“You knew what the guy offering you cash was like. You sent him to his death. You killed him just as surely as the one holding the crowbar did.” Just like Sheila. “But I’m not here to debate semantics. I’m here to get information. Now, I swear on my mother’s grave, I will not shoot you in what passes for a heart…but only if you tell me about your employer.”

Di Nero deliberated about it for a moment, but what choice did he have? He’d have no chance starting a fight. Even the other thugs would hate someone complicit in a child’s death more than they would hate a man dating another man. He couldn’t run; all the waitresses were clustered by the door and far more heavily armed than him. The only chance he had to save his own skin was to tell the truth.

“He sent me an email,” he finally said. “Anonymous, and all. Said he would wire me fifteen thousand bucks for making sure Pedro was in Crime Alley in a Robin shirt and then staying out of the way. Seemed kinda like an unsafe way to exchange cash, but he promised he could make it untraceable.”

“How did he know about Pedro?”

“I dunno, saw him around? The security tapes from the public school? He didn’t say.”

The idea of the murderer surveying other innocent teenagers from a public school security tape made Jason sick to his stomach.

“What else do you know?”

“Nothing.”

Jason took another long draught of his beer.

“Nothing! That’s it, I swear, I swear.” He was visibly shaking now.

Jason looked at him, hatred coiling in his chest.

“I believe you.”

Then he pressed the barrel of the gun to Di Nero’s forehead.

The other thugs drew back.

“No!” Di Nero spluttered. “You wouldn’t shoot me — you swore —”

“That I wouldn’t shoot you in the heart. I didn’t say anything about shooting you in the head.” His
finger curled in over the trigger. “I left a lot of friends down in hell when I was a kid. Say hi to them for me, will you?”

He had planned to do it slowly; draw out as much time as possible to make Di Nero as miserable and terrified as possible before he shot him.

The two girls in capes sent that plan to hell first.

They burst in with the door hitting the wall with a BANG —

— then Jason started; the finger on the trigger tensing. A smoking hole appeared in Di Nero’s head; the cowering look transforming into shock immortalized on his face as he hit the floor.

Batgirl and Black Bat walked in, finally causing the bartender to look up.

“What the *fuck* are Bats doing here?” she snapped, slapping down her rag. “Go chase a clown, girlies; you’re not welcome here.”

Unbothered, Batgirl cocked her head to the side and pressed a finger to her cheek.

“Uh, ignoring the fact that I count at least five dumbass Joker goons in here—”

“Hey,” one of said dumbass Joker goons protested.

“—we Bats, especially me, kind of have a bad habit of going places we’re not welcome. When I got locked out of the Cave three months ago, I hung out above it for a whole day stomping over Batman’s head and blaring music he hates before he let me back in, so. Vague threats don’t really work.”

“It’s true,” Black Bat confirmed to no one in particular. “She did that.”

Under different circumstances, Jason would’ve been happy, or at least not angry, to see them. But standing above a corpse with a smoking gun, he had absolutely no desire to listen to Bat moralizing.

“Guys, I can handle this,” he said brusquely. “Go tell Batman to let you go investigate a part of the case that actually needs your expertise, and not your babysitting.”

“Batman didn’t send us, idiot,” Stephanie snapped. “Oracle did.”

That threw him for a loop.

“What’s an all-powerful screen presence doing sending a couple of little girls out to handle shit?” one man asked disparagingly. Cassandra slapped him so hard all the saliva flew out of his mouth.

Jason actually resisted the urge to smile.

“To rephrase my charming misogynistic associate: why did Oracle send you?”

“She wants to talk to you. Apparently, you haven’t been texting her back for the last couple weeks.” She looked at Di Nero’s body on the floor and her cocky stance faded. She shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. “Also apparently, your coping mechanisms could…uh…use some work.”

Jason stared down at the floor, gun loose in hand. The bartender looked like she was about to bust out one of her own, and the other thugs, seeing Red Hood appear to be talked down by a couple of young girls — and not just any young girls, but a couple of Bats — were beginning to get over their fear.
The truth was, they weren’t even wrong. The anger was still there, throbbing like an exposed nerve, but the wave of murderous rage had abated. He didn’t like it, but the Batgirls had the kind of sway over him that Batman or the male Robins would bleed for.

All the Batgirls.

“You just gonna leave with these chippies, Hood?” a lone thug challenged. “Not even gonna argue with a pair of girls — let alone Batman’s girls?”

Jason’s grip on the gun tightened again.

Cass’s normally impassive expression twitched.

Steph had no time for such subtleties.

“I’m not Batman’s anything, asshole,” she snapped. One of her hands drifted towards her utility belt. “Have you not been listening?”

“I’m listening, but you little girls’re still wearing his symbol on your chests, so forgive me if I trust my eyes more than my ears.”

“Not just his symbol anymore. Ours.”

Cass said it so quietly he wasn’t sure if anyone else heard.

Not that it mattered. The smoky air was thick with tension; Steph’s shoulders wound like a bowstring. More than a few people were growing bold enough to reach for their weapons.

Jason picked up his helmet and put it back on as he crept towards the girls. The three of them assumed the same fighting positions that they’d all been taught.

“Can’t let anyone think they can fuck with me,” he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. “No offense.”

“None taken.”

Cass inclined her head to the side.

“You’re right. On three?”

“Who has time for that?” Steph’s whisper was punctuated with a smirk.

She then screamed at the top of her lungs, snatching Jason’s abandoned beer bottle — and in the process spilling all that was left down her uniform — before shattering it over the head of the biggest, burliest thug she could find.


Dick had been running on zero sleep for the last thirty-six hours. He’d been too swamped with work to able to talk to anyone he loved in nearly three days. He’d lost his target. Worst of all, he was late to a stakeout, and Ayesha was probably going to kill him later, if Amy didn’t get to him first.
So maybe having an opportunity to fight someone was a blessing in disguise.

Even if that someone was tricked out with more weapons than Fort Meade.

“Nightwing,” the mercenary remarked in her elegant accent. She looked more tired than when he’d known her earlier, maybe a little bent over, but she was still holding a pair of daggers; the blade attached to the end of her blond plait gleaming. “Fancy seeing you back here and in that uniform.”

Dick pulled out his escrima sticks and spun them between his fingers with a lot more casualness than he felt.

“Lady Vic. Fancy seeing you alive.”

“It’s not as if a few second-rate assassins could defeat me,” she scoffed, assuming a light, strong stance. “You, on the other hand…I doubted I would ever see you here again.”

“Yeah, well, maybe I got homesick.”

“For this rancid stew of corruption?” She wrinkled her nose. “I highly doubt it.”

“Believe whatever you want, Vicky.” He balanced himself, preparing to spring. “Now are we gonna fight, or what? You were never the kind of lady to be happy about me getting in the way of your kills.”

“You’re quite right.”

Fast as thought, the daggers spun themselves towards him —
— gleaming metallic shards of light —

He leapt forward onto his hands and spun into a kick, his foot launching towards her chest —

The blow knocked her a few paces backwards, but she quickly caught herself and snatched him out of the air by the throat, pulling him into a headlock.

“What do you know,” he gagged, “sixth grade all over again.”

“I’ve always wanted to shut you up.” Another dagger materialized out of thin air, the blade dragging up from his neck to his lips. “Do you want me to remove your tongue before or after I cut your throat?”

“Doesn’t matter, really; just keep that thing away from my hair. It’s my fourth-best feature, you know.”

While he nattered on, he simultaneously took in that her stance was affected by holding him. One swift kick to the kneecaps should destabilize her enough to get loose.

“Tongue first,” Lady Vic decided.

Dick braced himself to kick…

There was a metallic whistle, a clang, and the dagger spun away out of her hand.

“‘What the hell —”

“Nobody berates Nightwing for being a chatty fool but me.”
The voice echoed through the darkness of the dockyard, seeming to originate from every shadow. But it was still there, even if he couldn’t see the owner, and it made his heart swell with unexpected hope.

“Robin,” he breathed.

“Correct.”

Lady Vic started.

Dick swiped at her legs, and she stumbled. He twisted and flipped backwards into a crouching position beside the shadows of abandoned shipments.

“You know I had everything under control,” he remarked to the general vicinity.

“Tt. English may not be my first language, or even my fifth, but I highly doubt that phrase means what you think it means.”

Robin emerged from behind a different stack of boxes with his hood obscuring his face. His sword was strapped to his hip; a batarang was clenched in each fist. Looking at him, even taking into account that he hadn’t yet hit a growth spurt, one could almost forget that he was only twelve.

Lady Vic had the opposite problem.

“I don’t normally kill children,” she admitted, drawing a katana and a wakizashi. “But if you two are together, then I will have no choice. If I were you, little boy, I’d run back home to Gotham.”

Damian placed his batarangs back into his utility belt and drew his own sword. Dick gripped his escrima sticks.

“You highly overestimate your abilities, wench.”

With a snarl, she charged them.

Dick twisted away from the smaller sword, while Damian caught the katana’s edge on the flat of his own blade. He bent backwards and struck her against the legs with his escrima sticks, making her stumble. Damian withdrew his blade and nicked her on the jaw with the tip. Just to make a point *(ha, Dick thought).*

In return, she smacked him in the chest; sending him barreling.

Dick lashed out, and soon he was dueling her; blunt weapon against edged.

“Robin!” he called out across the dockyard. “What are you doing here?”

“Now seems like a poor time to make your incessant small talk —”

“Yeah, I know, I never shut up.” Dick got in a strike to her collarbone before she slashed a shallow cut along his leg. “But all I want to know is what brought you here.”

He dodged another blow and spun, kicking her back a pace. Just enough to push her into Damian’s range.

She caught both their blows at once, before slicing Damian lightly along the cheek and Dick farther up his thigh. *Too close for comfort.*
“Trying to give him a vasectomy, woman?” Damian remarked, wiping blood away with his other hand. “I applaud you in your efforts, but you’re a bit late.” He struck her away with the flat of his sword. “And to answer your question, Nightwing, I needed to escape Father. He has not been himself ever since we found the body of Pedro Di Nero.”

Dick winced.

“But how did you get here?”

“I hailed a taxi. What kind of a question is that?”

The idea of Damian, a stony-faced prepubescent kid laden with weapons, hailing a taxi and making some poor underpaid driver sweat the entire drive from Gotham to Bludhaven was almost entertaining enough to make him forget Bruce’s and the family’s calamity. Almost.

“And I seem to have been more successful in my efforts than you. You let the Odessa Mob escape before who you could see who they were paying off, and now thanks to you, we’re fighting a glorified street hoodlum.”

“Nobody made you save me from her, Robin,” Dick pointed out through gritted teeth, deflecting her attempt to stab Damian for the “glorified street hoodlum” comment. “And nobody made you come find me in the first place, either.”

Damian gave him a look of such scathing heat to make a Kryptonian’s laser vision look inadequate.

“That I stumbled across your incompetency doesn’t mean I came to find you.”

Dick momentarily recoiled. But horribly painful insults were one thing. Scathing looks and petulance, he knew how to deal with.

He was going to make his brother listen if it killed him.

Which, if Lady Vic had her way, it might.

It had been an unusually fast-paced day, making the evening’s sudden lull in Barbara’s workload even less welcome.

The bloodstained note that her father had found beside Pedro Di Nero’s body sat in a plastic binder on her desk, practically burning a hole through the wood. But she didn’t want to read it again any more than she wanted to deal with any more able-bodied strangers who kept stealing handicapped parking spots. Besides, the exact appearance of the brief contents had already been seared into her memory.

*Keep your family close, Batman. This is what happens when people think they can fuck with me.*

It hadn’t been signed with a name. But it had been signed with a meticulously accurate drawing of a symbol: a red, broad-winged bat.

Identical to the one that Red Hood had splayed across his chest.

Barbara pinched the bridge of her nose; displacing her glasses. She stared at the blank screen, almost
praying for the Birds of Prey to call her for help or backup again to lift her out of her reverie.

Instead, her attention was called by the loud voices outside her door; accompanied by the rattling of the doorknob.

“— and quit jostling my shoulder, Stephanie.”

“It’s not my fault this doorway’s so narrow. Sorry Cass, you’re right. We should let His Burly-Ass Majesty go first.”

“There’s no need to be rude.”

“I’m sure the guy you called a two-hundred pound sack of shit-stained, prolapsed anuses would agree.”

“In my defense, that was after he stabbed me and before I did him the favor of getting pistol-whipped. Ow! Stephanie!”

“You are a baby. We should call you…the Red Bib.”

“You’re a great sister, you know that?”

“I know…I’m your favorite sibling.”

“Yeah, but your competition is Dickhead, Replacement, and Demon Brat, so…”

Barbara turned her chair around as her three scraped-up houseguests stumbled into the living room, dripping blood on the floor. Jason actually appeared to be in good shape; his massive arms and shoulders looming over his tiny, unimpressed sister. His only worrying wound was a slash across his left shoulder; half-tearing the sleeve off his leather jacket, the dusty brown material stained the color of old wine. Cass was sporting a shiner that extended out from under her mask and was holding her right hand a bit awkwardly, but otherwise seemed fine. It was Steph that needed the most immediate attention; blood was dripping from her lips and she seemed to be having difficulty breathing. She was also holding a half-empty bottle of vodka.

Barbara almost sprang from her chair when she saw them.

“What the fuck happened?” she yelled. “This was supposed to be a simple grab-and-go, but you look like you had a cage match with half of Arkham! And Stephanie, why the hell do you smell like beer?”

“Priorities,” Steph grunted, flopping down on the couch. She let out a long, pained moan. Cass flinched. “Look, it’s a long story. Suffice to say, we pissed off some thugs, and I think my ribs are bruised.”

“So, a normal Wednesday evening,” Jason summed up. He grabbed the bottle of vodka and took a deep quaff before pouring what was left over his shoulder. As the alcohol hit, a coral stain grew across his olive cheeks. “This was my favorite jacket. I hope that jerkoff wakes up with a concussion, and that it’s not covered by his medical insurance.”

“You should count yourself lucky the cut didn’t go long or deep into the muscle or hit a major artery,” Barbara snapped. “Otherwise, you’d need a lot more than my first aid kid to patch you up, you ass.” She made her way up to him, her eyes roughly level with his diaphragm, before grabbing him by the hem of his ruined jacket and forcing him down into an armchair. “You people and your goddamn need to enforce your reputation.”
“Don’t look at us,” Steph coughed. “We were just doing it ‘cause we needed someone to beat up.”

“Don’t make me slap you, Stephanie.”

Cass sank into the other unoccupied armchair as Barbara made her way to the kitchen. She dug two bags of peas out of the freezer before grabbing her first aid kit off the top of the refrigerator and rolling back to the living room.

She tossed each of them a pack of Justice League Band-Aids and small bottles of bacitracin and rubbing alcohol.

“Put those on the smaller wounds on your faces and hands. Jason, take your shirt and jacket off before I dress that cut. I don’t want you getting sepsis.”

“Aww, Barbie, you do care,” Jason grinned.

“And you’re drunk. Stay still.”

Once Steph had cheerful cartoon renditions of various Leaguers decorating her cheek and jaw, Barbara settled in beside her; then carefully felt along the younger girl’s ribs. Once she was satisfied that none were broken, she pressed the frozen peas to her lower chest, handed her a couple ibuprofen, and gently wiped the blood off her lips.

“Bit your cheek?”

“Yeah.”

“That’ll heal on its own. Just rest, and stay off patrol for a while.”

“No problem. I don’t want to run into Bruce or Damian any more than I have to.”

Barbara grimaced. She knew exactly what Steph meant.

For the last couple weeks, Damian had been even more withdrawn than usual. At anyone attempting to reach out to him — even Dick, especially Dick — he would lash out with snarling insults. Bruce was, well…Bruce. But for as long as Damian had been especially angry, he had been especially quiet and solitary. He hadn’t even made any public appearances as Brucie.

Barbara hated that Steph blamed herself for that. Especially as none of it was because of Steph, but a lot of it was because of her.

She went to Cass next, running her fingers over her surrogate daughter’s knuckles with featherlight precision.

“Just bruised.” She handed Cass the other bag of peas. “Put it to your eye. It’ll help with the swelling.”

“No more winning beauty contests.” Even now, she wasn’t always sure when Cass was joking or not, but despite the situation, she thought she saw a spark of humor in her eyes. “But since I died twice…guess this is just dessert.”

Barbara sighed deeply while Steph groaned good-naturedly. Jason actually cackled.

“You are definitely my favorite sibling.”

Cass beamed under the peas.
“Knock it off, Red Bib.” Barbara rolled up to him next, ignoring the faded bruises and scars along his bare torso. He grimaced as she inspected the wound.

“Guess you’d know all about babies, these days.”

She looked up sharply.

“Oh, come on, you should’ve guessed that everybody would know by now. Roy heard it from Donna, who heard it from Mari McCabe, who heard it from Zatanna, who heard it from Constantine, who heard it from Midnightrer, who heard it from his husband, who heard it from Kori, who heard it from Rita Farr, who heard it from Garfield Logan, who heard it from all the speedsters at once, who heard it from Kyle; who apparently also informed the Star Sapphires, and everyone knows how Carol Ferris gets in intergalactic bars. Plus, Cass sent me a video of Steph telling the family.” He chuckled rustily. “Thanks for that, girls. Those reactions? Priceless.”

“I’m feeling less than proud of that, these days,” Steph mumbled.

“Stephanie.” Barbara’s voice was firm. “It’s not you he’s angry at.” She took out the sewing equipment from the first aid kit. “Honestly, I think you three are the only ones he doesn’t resent right now. Tim didn’t do anything, but he always resents Tim.”

She carefully disinfected the wound again — despite being a literal chemical solution, vodka was not a solution in this case — and readied the needle.

“You sure you wanna bring a kid into this fucked-up family?” Jason asked. “I mean, I’m sure any kid of yours would be pretty amazing. And I guess I still technically became a dad before Dickhead did, but — OW! — shit, fuck, fuck. You didn’t need to stab me for that.”

“I’ll accept the compliment, but next time make your point without insulting the father of my child, please,” she said coolly, pulling the first stitch closed. “And I’ve already made up my mind, which includes…” The needle hovered for a moment. “…how difficult it can be for kids around here.”

Jason’s caginess melted away, to be replaced by bone-soaking despair and misery. His entire upper body slumped; the white streak falling in his eyes like snow.

She didn’t want to provoke him now, of all times, but…

“You killed Fisher Di Nero, didn’t you?”

“The bastard had it coming,” he replied without a trace of remorse. “But I didn’t kill Pedro.”

The younger girls looked away.

“I know, Jason. But not only do you already have a criminal record with dozens of kills on official record alone —” Despite herself, her voice had hardened, “— you have no alibi. And while that note is the only thing tying you to the actual murder, there’s nothing that ties anybody else to it. Besides, everyone knows about how you went after the rest of the family when you first came back.”

He looked up and faced her.

“I know that a lot of your reputation relies on being seen as being outside control. But that reputation is why it was easy to frame you. In disassociating yourself from us, especially in public, you make yourself a target.” The clinical, harsh tone faded slightly. “Besides, I miss having you around in meetings and discussions, and I hate how everyone assumes you don’t care.” She got to the end of
the wound; pulling it shut. “You’re still one of us whenever you choose to stop taking your issues out on the family and officially rejoin, Little Wing.”

He started at the nickname.

“I’m not the kid I was before.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to be. Would you expect me to still be Batgirl, all these years later?”

He snorted lightly.

“Not unless someone managed to put you in a time machine that made you a twenty-year-old with working legs again.”

“Well, there you go.” She pressed a bandage over the stitched wound, fastening it down. “Now you should have some water and go sleep, you lightweight. Take the guest room, the girls can share my bed.”

“We don’t want to share your bed,” Cass called from the armchair.

“Well, fine, leave Steph on the couch —”

“No!” Steph interrupted. “Your bed is nasty. Neither of us want to be in it at all!”

Some of the tension dissipated as Barbara groaned and Jason began cackling again.

“Oh, for — I just changed the sheets this morning! Jason, stop laughing! All of you! My bed is the farthest thing from nasty. So Stephanie, stop being dramatic and go lie down. Cass, wait till after you can take those peas off your face.”

“Fine.” Steph groaned to her feet. “I’ll go rest on your baby-making station. But if I roll over and land on a wet spot, I’m locking myself in the shower cubicle.”

“Not like you’ve never touched semen before,” Cass pointed out before Barbara could argue further.

“Well, yeah. But not any of your brothers’ semen. And I’m trying to keep it that way.”

Cass looked like she was about to agree, then frowned.

“None of my brothers?”

“Nope.”

“Not even—?”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Called it!” Jason yelled.

“Since when do you care what or who Tim does?” Barbara asked as he got to his feet.

“You mean who he doesn’t do? Usually never. But I was betting with Artemis about all your sex lives the other day, and she didn’t think it was possible that he and Steph dated for so long without it happening even once.”

“Who’s Artemis?”
“She’s an Amazon warrior, and one of my friends.”

“You have friends?”

Jason glowered while Steph sniggered at her own unfunny quip, Cass hid her smile under her bag of frozen produce, and Barbara remarked:

“I love that that’s what surprised you about all that he just said.”

“Meh, you know how weird our lives are. At this point, dinosaurs, superhuman armies, aliens, giant monsters, the end of the world — none of that is ever gonna be on the level of just regular relationship drama.”

“Go to bed, Stephanie.”

While Dick prepared himself to respond to his brother’s anger and to catch the next strike, the nearby wailing of police sirens threw him off.

Damian stumbled, and Lady Vic took a step back, an unpleasant smug smile across her lips.

“Nakah,” Damian growled.

“Robin!”

“Considering how corrupt much of your police force is, I highly doubt they’re here to help us,” he continued as if he hadn’t just been chastised.

“Quite right,” their opponent agreed. “So if you boys don’t mind, I think I’ll take my leave.” She sheathed her swords and made to casually walk away.

Then all three of them were bathed in blinding headlights.

“GRAYSON, I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!”

Dick froze.

Damian gaped at him incredulously.

“You told —?”

“No — no — I —”

The headlights switched off, revealing the image of — albeit obscured by purple blotches — a young scarf-clad woman seated in a police cruiser with a grouchy-looking convict in the backseat. She frowned at them.

“Oh, sorry, Nightwing. I saw your silhouette and I thought you were my jackass partner. He stood me up for stakeout, and I had to catch this guy —” She jabbed a thumb over her shoulder towards the backseat, “— all by myself.”

Dick relaxed. Not totally, she was still going to kill him later, but enough.
“Sounds like a real jerk,” he replied.

“Yeah, usually he’s not, which is why Rohrbach doesn’t have to know, I guess. On the other hand, that makes it even more of an asshole move. But if that’s who I think it is, my partner is way beyond the point.” She threw open the car door and got out, aiming her handgun at an astonished Lady Vic. “Drop the weapon — actually, drop all of them — and put your hands in the air.”

Confronted with a child with a sword, a grown man with escrima sticks, and a young cop with an indeterminate amount of weapons, even the mercenary knew she was in over her head.

“Until next time,” she decided.

She ran off into the shadowy alleyways, dodging the gunshots that followed over her head.

As she vanished, the gun finally clicked.

Ayesha glowered at it.

“Damn it.”

While she fiddled with loading another round, Damian stared openly at her. Loading the gun back into her holster, she looked up.

“Robin? Kid? Staring’s rude, y’know.”

Dick bent down and muttered in his ear:

“She’s Jordanian and Iraqi, but she’s also fourth-generation American. If you try to talk in Arabic to her, I don’t know how much she’s going to understand.”

“Oh.” Momentarily forgetting his anger, Damian deflated a bit. “She looks rather like Nooni…one of my mother’s servants. She helped nurse me when I was a child.”

You still are a child.

“Did your nurse Nooni have a black belt in Krav Maga and keep three enormous knives on her at all times, too?”

“Actually, yes.”

Dick chuckled.

In the meantime, Ayesha was clambering back into the driver’s seat of the cruiser. She leaned out the window.

“See you around, Nightwing. Keep doing my coworkers’ jobs for them, cause God knows most of them don’t. Robin, come back again sometime; I like your sword.” She started the engine. “And if either of you happen to see a cop named Dick Grayson — yes, that’s his real name — tell him I’m gonna kick his ass.”

The cruiser roared away into the night.

“She’s nearly as chatty as you, but I like her,” Damian decided.

“You should visit the station sometime,” Dick offered. “I can properly introduce you guys. And the rest of my work friends too, if you’re up for that.”
At that, the tentative peace evaporated.

“Shouldn’t you be busy preparing for the arrival of my replacement, instead?” Damian asked acidly. “After all, I hear infants, on top of being largely useless, are highly demanding.”

To anyone else, “replacement” would’ve seemed an odd choice of words. There was no way that baby could be Robin until years after Damian had outgrown the title. If he was insecure from a younger sibling’s perspective, he would’ve been worried about time or attention, but not about his place. There was only one point of view where a child would be worried about being upstaged by a new arrival to the family…the older sibling’s.

So, channeling the jolt of anger that came at Damian’s words, Dick knelt down until he was eye-level with the young boy, then reached up and peeled away his mask. His whole face came into view.

“Grayson, what are you —”

“I know you don’t read body language or micro-expressions the way Cass does, but look at me while I say this before you tell me I’m lying.” Dick took a breath, then his voice went from shaky to stern. “I am not replacing you. I am not handing you off to your birth father because I don’t want to be around you anymore. And my living here again is not because I’m running away from the family, or from you.”

He was quiet. It was hard to see quite what he was thinking through the mask, but Dick knew that if he wanted to leave, he would.

“Do you think Bruce loves me any less because he took in Jason, or Tim, or Cass? That he was actually trying to replace me when he made Jason Robin, or Jason when he did the same to Tim? Do you think…” He took another breath. “That I’m trying to replace my father because I think of Bruce as my dad? Or that you’re replacing Bruce with me?”

“You are not my father.” Damian averted his gaze.

“You can have two fathers. Or, if you want to think of it this way, you can have two father figures.” Then, trying for a bit of levity: “If you still don’t believe me, I can get you one of those books for little kids: Timmy Has Two Dads. Except I don’t think they have one called Timmy Has Two Dads And One Of Them Was Fake-Dead For A While And The Other Is Also His Older Brother, Please Don’t Misinterpret That. You’re going to have to fill the rest in for yourself.”

Damian sighed with exasperation.

“I am not questioning that a child can have two fathers. But why does a book explaining such have to be about someone named Timmy?”

Dick actually laughed at that.

“My point is,” he said once he’d calmed down, “me having a biological kid now doesn’t change the fact that you’re still really important to me. And that I love you.”

Damian shifted his feet and gazed at the concrete, not responding.

Encouraged by the lack of derisive commentary, he then pushed his luck a little bit:

“And I don’t want you taking out your frustration on Steph, and especially not on Barbara. You got an issue with me, talk to me. Don’t pull a Jason.”
“I’ve actually been starting to empathize with Todd a bit.” Damian looked up. Then started, as if he’d been suddenly woken up. “Wait. What are you doing, you idiot? Put your mask back on; anybody could see you.”

In the few seconds it took to slip the mask back on, Damian had shot out a bat-line to the roof of a nearby warehouse and positioned himself; ready to fly up.

“We’re not done talking, Damian.”

“That’s Robin to you, Nightwing.” He shifted his pose once more. “And we most certainly are done for now. I must…reflect on what you have told me.”

In a blur of red and black, masked by the shadowy night, he rocketed up to the top of the warehouse, then leapt away across the roof.

“And for god’s sake —” The child’s voice echoed across the dockyard, “— try not to get murdered by your partner. It would be a shame if she were arrested by her peers before I could meet her properly.”

He was gone; leaving only the smog clouds and the faint glimmer of starlight reflecting on the polluted water. Even so, some of Dick’s anger and frustration melted.

“It’s a start.”

Barbara scanned the note into her computer system, then pulled up the grocery list that she’d found in the pocket of Jason’s ruined jacket.

*Milk, ground beef, Oreos, bread, .50 caliber bullets* was then scanned into the system along with the imposter’s bloodstained paper.

The two pieces of paper pixelated into view, side by side.

“Apply handwriting comparison algorithm,” she ordered.

The computer hummed, then bars of light flickered up and down over the images.

*10% Match.*

She allowed herself a small grin.

The algorithm confirmed what she already knew: Jason hadn’t written the note. True, one could argue that he could’ve ordered one of his employees to write it instead, but everyone working in crimefighting, law enforcement, and the criminal underground knew that Red Hood always did his jobs himself.

The only problem: there was no way her father was going to be able to explain how the Waynes managed to find Red Hood’s grocery list just lying around; other than that his daughter had a crime-lord-slash-vigilante snoozing on her guest bed in her favorite Wonder Woman pajamas.

She needed him to write something else, instead.
While she was pondering this, her gaze alternating between her camera footage and the scans, her com beeped.

She put the caller through.

“Oracle here.”

“Hey, Oracle.”

“Nightwing. You sound like you’re in a better mood. Did work go well?”

“Work went horribly. I still don’t know who the Odessa Mob is bribing, Lady Vic slashed up my uniform and nearly gave me a vasectomy sans morphine, and I missed stakeout, so I’m pretty much doomed when I go to work tomorrow. The only good thing is, Amy doesn’t know, so she won’t think I’m throwing her second chance back in her face.”

“…did Poison Ivy douse you in her ‘insufferably happy about being to be fed to a plant’ toxin again?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not what she was calling it when I was about to be fed to that plant.”

“Please don’t quibble.”

“What are you going to do to me if I do?” he challenged with a touch of his usual playfulness. “Give me that disapproving schoolteacher look?”

“I don’t have a disapproving schoolteacher look.”

“Yeah, you do. Your eyebrows scrunch together, you tilt your head to the side, then roll your eyes up to that side, and then your mouth —”


He took a deep breath.

“I think…that I’m on my way to resolving things with Damian. He went out of his way to give Bruce the slip and drop by Bludhaven tonight, and then I was actually able to talk to him.”

“He is so grounded. But otherwise, that’s wonderful.”

“It is.” He paused. “How about you? How are your girls?”

“My girls…” She looked back over her shoulder.

Her bedroom door was wide open, revealing Steph rolled up asleep in her bed. Cass, for her part, was curled up in the armchair with headphones on, rhythmically shadow-boxing. Barbara had forbidden her from using the training programs while she was still sore, but that wasn’t going to stop her from working on her uppercuts.

“I think they’re doing okay, even post-bar-fight.”

“They got into a bar fight!? Was it Jason who —”

“Yeah, it was. But the girls are okay. Don’t go after him, he’s here with me. Besides, he already has enough on his plate.”
Dick was quiet for a moment.

“We know he had a lead on Fisher Di Nero that we couldn’t find. I’m guessing he got there before we did.”

“Yes.”

Dick sighed in frustration.

“No. Don’t do that to yourself,” she told him firmly. “Those are Jason’s morals and his issues getting worked out, not yours. And it’s not like you could’ve found out first; he goes places the rest of us don’t.”

“I know. But sometimes I can’t help but carry other people’s troubles, even if they have nothing to do with me. And whoever’s behind all this is targeting my family.”

“Our family,” she corrected.

For a moment, the only sound was the hum of the computers and the swish of Cass’s fists through the air.

“I know how you feel, Dick. I would give anything right now to be able to snap my fingers and make this all be resolved…” She trailed off. “And I don’t…I’m sorry. I can’t do what you do; I can’t say anything reassuring that won’t make me a hypocrite. Just do me a favor and don’t blame yourself for your brother’s daddy issues.”

She couldn’t see him, but she imagined that his expression softened to something more like when he first called her.

“Okay.” He paused. Barbara noticed that Cass had stopped punching. “I’ll call you tomorrow if Ayesha doesn’t kill me first. I might need you to get into City Hall’s computer systems.”

“Please,” she scoffed, “any of you could hack the Bludhaven City Hall system without me. That’s baby software.”

“Did you just imply that we’re all babies compared to you? Which, when it comes to hacking, fair, but still.”

A laugh was startled free.

“Go get some sleep, Boy Wonder. I’ll talk to you as soon as I can.”

“Sounds good.” He sounded in a better mood again. “Talk to you tomorrow. I love you.”

He then hung up. She took off the headset, staring at it for a moment…before tossing it across the keyboard. Her gaze locked on the innocuous object was not unlike one that might be used on a brightly colored snake; where you couldn’t decide yet if the vivid stripes were just pretty or meant you were going to get poisoned.

She then felt, rather than saw, the quiet shadow over her shoulder.

“You about ready to go to bed, Cassandra?”

“No.”

She turned in her seat to catch the girl’s impassive gaze. Even with the blue-purple bruise over one of
them, her eyes were subtly soft with concern.

“Work is important. But you are more tired…than me. Sleep. I will investigate.” Cass caught her
breath, than resorted to being nonverbal: pointing at Barbara, then a punch over her heart, a point to
her own face, then a quiet hand over her heart.

“Yes, love has been hard for me, and yes, I’m tired,” Barbara replied. “But you’re not a machine
either, Cass. And you do have your own difficulties with love. They aren’t totally invisible to me,
you know.”

Cass’s impassive gaze shifted into barely-perceptible caginess.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said aloud.

“Really?” Barbara looked towards her bedroom. “You read body language, Cassandra. I think you
know exactly what — who — I’m talking about.”

Cass drew her arms and head back in on herself like origami, instinctively shrinking away.

Barbara took her hands.

“Do you know how she feels about you?”

“I am…confused.” Cass still didn’t look up. “She calls me her friend, acts like she’s in love with me.
I don’t know what to do.”

Barbara stroked the younger woman’s hands; nimble, calloused fingers over powerful, bruised bone.

“If there’s one thing I know, Cass, it’s how much you two care for each other. That’s not something
that can be shaken by petty differences or time. Give her a while to realize her own feelings, and
you’ll be able to work it out.”

Cass looked doubtful.

“And in the meantime, do what you’re good at. Spend time with the family. Dance; keep learning to
read. If she’s worth it —”

“She is.”

Barbara was momentarily taken aback by her protégée’s immediate assurance.

“Then she’ll be worth waiting for.”

“I thought that love was worth…taking action for,” Cass argued.

“You can’t solve everything with head-on action. It’s not a mission or an assignment. You can’t
punch your way out of difficult feelings.”

“Hmm.”

“Please don’t try punching your way out of difficult feelings.”

“No guarantees.”

Through the open door of the bedroom, they saw Steph mumble and turn over in her sleep. Her
blond hair was a tangled net around her face; the blankets wrapped snugly around her torso, but not
quite hiding the fact that she was only in her underwear and an ill-fitting t-shirt.

Cass couldn’t stop herself from turning and looking at her sleeping, disheveled best friend this time. Her cheeks infused with the color of peony petals.

Barbara smiled, then leaned up and pressed a kiss to Cass’s forehead.

“Go join her. You need some rest, and I’m not having you actually sleep on the couch or in with Jason. I don’t know if he still sleeps with Bowie knives strapped to his chest.”

“He does not,” Cass protested, but she headed to the master bedroom anyway. Still clothed, she slipped under the covers beside Steph and wrapped her arms across her best friend’s upper chest. Before long, she was still.

Barbara waited at her desk, silent, until both girls breathed deep and slow. She moved from her work area just enough to peek in on Jason childishly sprawled across her guest bed, for once looking his age without the bitterness written into his face.

Maybe the girls didn’t have their hearts and priorities sorted out yet. Maybe Jason took his pain out on other people. Maybe Dick carried everyone on his shoulders. Maybe the other boys and men were drenched in insecurity over their places and lovability.

But whether under the fluorescent ceiling lights or wrapped in cool soft shadows, the presence of the Clock Tower drained the rest of the family’s problems away like debris down a white river.

Meanwhile, the weariness settled in on Barbara’s shoulders.

She checked one last time to make sure that the other Birds hadn’t called her back, before finally slipping in beside the sleeping girls. Careful to set all her alarms, she soaking in the warmth of their company and soon slipped into soft, dreamless sleep.
The Emperor

Chapter Notes

For those of you reading this and thinking “Wait, that happened way too easily!”: patience. It’s all part of the plan. Remember, even good theories and intentions can get tripped up in practice.

Also, for the record, the referenced part with Robin and Batgirl being locked in Crazy Quilt’s safe is the only part of Nightwing Annual 2 I don’t pretend never happened.

Lastly, in preparation for all the sexual humor and bat puns, here’s my favorite ginger joke:

Why aren’t there any more redhead jokes? Someone told them to a redhead.

(Warnings: minor mentions of past sexual assault and a brief panic attack.)


November

The chill of autumn had finally settled in. There was an unusual crispness to the fog-choked air, and the leaves of the meager park or sidewalk trees had littered the ground with shards of artery red and jaundice yellow. Upon waking up with the traffic or the buzz of superhero activity around the world, one could find the first curls of frost on their windowsills.

Barbara made an unusual point of touching a layer of powder and lipstick to her face that morning, along with a little of that hair mousse that Dinah had pressed upon her, before shrugging into a snug green sweater and a long skirt mosaic-patterned with fall colors.

“So talk to me. How’s the outfit?”

Speak of the devil.

Barbara touched a finger to her headset.

“The sweater’s that clingy v-neck you like. But I’m sticking with a comfy skirt, now that it’s cold.”
“Honey, you’re wearing a clingy v-neck; you’re not going to need to worry about down below at all. If Karen Starr were there, you’d be giving her a run for her money.”

Unfortunately, Dinah was right. Upon re-surveying her reflection in the bathroom mirror, the sweater looked at least a size too small. It wasn’t just the newly formed small swell of her belly that appeared glaringly obvious in it.

“I’m changing the sweater.” Then, interrupting Dinah’s protests with: “I hate it when strange men stare at my chest.”

“Oh, you worry too much. Look, you’re pregnant, pushing thirty, and going on a date. I think any creeps in the neighborhood’ll be more preoccupied with the local teenagers.”

“I’m sorry, was that the part that was supposed to make me feel better?”

“Just wear the sweater, Babs.”

“No.”

“Babs…” Dinah’s voice had turned into a wheedle.

“No! And before you say anything else, remember the last time I listened to you about this sort of thing?” Momentarily forgetting that her friend couldn’t see her, she gestured sharply to her midsection. “Let me give you a hint: it’s the reason why I went from a 36C to a 38D and why every heterosexual man in the state is going to notice that!”

“Alright, alright, I get that you’re mad, but don’t take it out on me. I’m not the one making your life more difficult right now, Captain Control Freak.”

“I’m not a control freak…” she muttered, avoiding her reflection. “I just like it when things go according to plan and people listen to me, that’s all.”

“Yeah, sure you’re not.” It must’ve been even less convincing than it sounded. “Look, you don’t have time for me to argue with you about this, so just trust me, okay? The lightning bolts of sexism aren’t going to smite you just because you want to dress a little sexier than usual, or because you want to feel sexy with your man. I do it all the time, and I say you’ve earned the feeling, after all the crap you’re going through.”

Barbara sighed.

“It’s so hard arguing with you about this stuff.” She snapped the makeup compact shut and yanked up her neckline. “Fine, I’ll wear the sweater. Now will you get off my back?”

“That’s great coming from you, you know.” Dinah sounded far too cheerful. “I’ll stay in touch. And try to lighten up a little, would you? Most people don’t head out on dates with someone they love acting like they just got the death penalty.”

“Dinah, did you just say —”

The line went dead.

Barbara took off the headset and sighed, massaging her temples. Her reflection seemed to have already aged with the effort of mothering; as if this were her tenth and not her first.

“Think I’d still be in denial if it wasn’t for you and my meddling best friend?”
The living room of the Manor was already a hum of lazy relaxation. Sprawled out in his Nicki Minaj t-shirt and ragged jeans, Jason made an odd contrast against Alfred’s prim professionalism as the two of them played chess. Cass leaned against Steph on the couch with her eyes closed, the *Order of the Phoenix* audiobook playing through her headphones while Steph flipped through Tim’s *Saga* collection. Tim himself was using Titus as a pillow next to the fireplace, watching a movie on his computer and slumped down into his Flash hoodie. Damian had commandeered the center of the room, intently creating a perfect model of the Taj Mahal out of Legos.

Bruce watched his family’s picture of civility with sick apprehension.

“The Foxes should’ve been here by now,” he worried aloud. “They’re ten minutes late already. And where the hell is your brother?”

“Bruce, chill.” Steph turned the page to a frankly horrifying depiction of a naked giant without batting an eye. “You know what the traffic downtown’s like on Mondays.”

“And you seriously don’t know about Dickhead?” Jason asked, moving his black bishop forward to capture Alfred’s white rook. “Seriously? He’s been prancing around all day and most of last night —”

“He’s got a hot date,” Tim interrupted, not taking his eyes off his computer screen. “Some people have all the luck.”

“Homophobia,” Steph said sympathetically. “Look on the bright side, Timmers. You at least have Kon, even if he spends a lot of his time back in Hickville, Kansas. I don’t even have a girlfriend.” She appeared not to notice Cass flinching at that.

Bruce tried not to think about the implications of his daughter’s behavior, and instead focus on the child with an active love (read: sex) life.

“Why did he tell all of you, but not me?”

All five of them looked at each other.

Then they burst out laughing.

“You are aware that Master Richard is twenty-six, nearly twenty-seven years old now, sir?” Alfred posed, capturing Jason’s queen to a slew of curses. “I assume you remember his birthday. After all, it has not changed even once in the last seventeen years.”

“What Pennyworth is saying,” Damian interjected, touching up the turrets, “is that Grayson is not a child, Father. He and we do not need your permission to engage in social interactions; even if said social interactions are foolish wastes of time that will undoubtedly lead to intercourse, which is even more of a foolish waste of time at the moment.”

“Dear god.” He really needed to sit down. Or a drink. Or both.

“Besides, why would he even need your permission right now?” Tim chimed in. “What are you
worried’s going to happen?”

Steph laughed. “Yeah, she’s already pregnant.”

“Which is why intercourse is a waste of time at the moment,” Damian said again, ignoring his father’s pained expression. “And why he won’t listen about this is still beyond me.”

Jason looked up from the chessboard with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“Bruce skipped the concept of an orgasm from your birds and bees talk, huh?”

“Jason, he is TWELVE.”

“I know what that is, Todd, I’m not an imbecile,” the youngest child said with a haughty air. “But it’s only the release of sperm at the end of the act. What does it have to do with pleasure?”

“Ohhhh boy…”

“Shouldn’t it be…birds and bats talk?” Cass wondered aloud.

“Kid, I am gonna rock your world.”

“No, that’s what Roy told him,” Tim said. “He’s the older one.”

“Timmy, holy shit.”

“That’s not what I meant, I swear!”

“Jesus god.”

“Does this mean…she has a bat in her belfry? So to speak?”

“Y’see kid, people don’t just have sex for making babies, no matter what Talia told you. Why do you think I have sex?”

“You are touched in the head?”

“That’s true, but not why. So skip the implied homophobia, okay kid?”

“Tt.”

“I wouldn’t put that there if I were you, Master Jason.”

“Is that also what Roy told you last night?”

“STEPHANIE.”

“Steph, please, you’re making him batty.”

“Anyway, orgasms happen because you’re all worked up, and both of you — even if the other’s just your hand or a toy — are making each other feel good, and the action and pleasure of whatever’s grinding on or in or around you actually causes you to —”

“— finish like bats out of hell.”
“Ha! Probably.”

“Isn’t ‘finishing’ quickly a good thing? Does that not mean that it’s more likely the coupling will result in impregnation?”

“Kid, you still have so much to learn.”

“Is that what —”

“STEPHANIE BROWN, IF YOU FINISH THAT SENTENCE, SO HELP ME GOD.”

All four of the older children — no, adults — promptly fell to pieces laughing. Even Tim chuckled nervously. Damian managed to look confused, disgusted, and fascinated at the same time, but there was still no chance of keeping him in the dark any longer.

As they kept on exchanging dirty jokes and anecdotes, Bruce felt struck by how old all of them were.

Jason and Cassandra were already twenty…and they’d suffered countless times over and died thrice between them. Stephanie was nineteen, carrying with her the struggles of an abusive father, torture, and a life below the poverty line. Tim was eighteen, had lost almost everyone and everything he’d ever loved, and had been fully willing to die at Ra’s al Ghul’s hands. Even Damian, his baby, was already twelve, and saddled with more experience to life’s abuse than most adults would be able to bear. His oldest, the chatty little boy who’d picked his work uniform out in stoplight colors and did backflips when he was excited and begged with those huge blue eyes to get ice cream after patrol, carried the world on his back and was more of a father to most of them than Bruce could ever be. Not to mention, was fathering his own child with the woman who’d broken his heart before.

Bruce turned away from the mirthful group and walked back into the kitchen, reaching for the liquor cabinet. His back to the door, he didn’t see Alfred quietly check Jason’s king, tipping it over with a flick of a finger before the old butler got to his feet.

It was a beautiful day.

By Gotham’s standards, at least.

Drew breathed in the smoky, cold wind, ignoring the tang of pollutants on his tongue. Tiny streaks of blue sky poked through the clouds like toddlers’ fingers, and the leaves smeared under boots upon the dull concrete; vivid as fresh blood.

The young, timid waitress headed back outside with the coffee pot in hand. She had mousy blond feather-wisps for hair, tied in a careful ponytail. Her eyes were limpid blue, goosebumps raised on every inch of pale exposed arm.

“Refill, sir?” Her voice was soft and wispy, too. Not strong and steady like Barbara’s.

“Well, get on with it.”

Her name tag read “Amanda,” but he didn’t even notice as she refilled the mug.

He was only one of four seated at the French bistro’s outdoor tables. The remainder of that number
was a college girl in flannel, roughly Amanda’s age, sipping cafe au lait and typing furiously at a laptop, and a gay couple cozied together over sandwiches and chocolat chaud. Neither of whom would pay any sort of attention to him.

Taking a draught of his own coffee — greatly preferable to the instant stuff — he pulled out a cell phone and searched her name.

No risqué photos on her own or even Grayson’s social media, but he wasn’t really expecting anything else. She seemed too intelligent and careful; not some silly whore who’d post pictures of herself anywhere.

Instead, he began to do what he’d planned to do in the first place: hack into Grayson’s phone from afar.

“Sir, would you like anything to eat?” Amanda the waitress prompted.

“Later.”

Sighing under her breath, Amanda instead walked over to the college girl, who immediately accepted the offer of fresh crème brûlée.

“Some people have no manners,” the girl said sympathetically, most likely planning to overtip the waitress later.

Turning in disgust from the two young women, Drew resumed his work. The crusade against Batman could wait a bit. For now, he had a much swifter reward awaiting him.

“Something on your mind, sir?”

Bruce started, slopping twenty-five-year-old Glenlivet out of the glass and all over the countertop.

Alfred approached from behind and observed him silently for a moment.

Something told Bruce that the inquiry hadn’t really been a question.

“Normally it takes far more than the children’s sense of humor to drive you from a room, distasteful as it is.”

He sighed, mopping the whiskey off the countertop and topping the glass up again.

“Am I getting old, Alfred?”

The butler’s silver eyebrows shot up.

“I’ll do my best not to take that to heart.”

“No, no, I mean…my kids. They’re not…kids anymore. Not even Damian, really. I missed most of their childhoods; couldn’t protect them from all the terrible things that happened to them. Then I ruined what was left. Now look at them: they’re adults now, Alfred. I’m old, and my kids are grown up. They don’t need me anymore.”
He had intended to leave it at that. Nobody needed to know his jealousy for his own son’s position in
the family, the wracking guilt over everything he never said to them all, the fear in his heart for his
future grandchild and their family —

“What utter nonsense.”

Bruce looked up from the whiskey glass. The man who’d raised him was looking at him with an
expression like thunder.

“Now, for once, listen to me. The eldest four may be grown, and they all may have experienced
things that no child should, but you are their father. No matter who they were born to, you have
raised and loved them, and they all needed you for that. Lord knows you have made mistakes with
all of them, and Master Richard did step in for them while you were gone, but none of that changes
the fact that you are still their father. Master Damian’s childhood is not yet over; you have years left
with him yet. Even the others are still young; you have a great deal of time to amend your mistakes
with them.”

Bruce took in a shuddering breath.

“But nonetheless, you should be proud of the men and woman they have become, not trapped in
despondency and self-pity. Master Timothy has the drive and loyalty to accomplish anything he has
ever wanted. Master Jason is compassionate for the forgotten and downtrodden. Miss Cassandra has
always been kind and altruistic no matter what has happened to her. As for Master Richard…judging
by his sense of responsibility alone, I do believe he is, in fact, ready for his turn to be a father.”

Bruce weighed all that Alfred had told him. The air hung heavy in the kitchen; broken sunlight
filtering through the cold clouds, casting itself across the house.

“I’m worried about Barbara, too,” he blurted. “I don’t want her to lose herself in this case, or any
other case, the way I do, and I don’t want her to break her own heart any more than I want her to
break Dick’s again. I want my grandchild to have what my children didn’t: loving, living, capable
parents.”

“Quite frankly, sir, you do not give your grandchild’s parents or yourself enough credit.” Alfred
rested a hand on Bruce’s shoulder. From the outside, it must’ve appeared odd that a small, slender
old man could open such a well of vulnerability in someone so gruff and strong.

“That’s funny, considering how many instances you’ve reminded me when I’ve been fucking up.”

“And I firmly stand by all those instances. But at the same time, I stand by what I’m telling you
now.”

Bruce sighed, his tense shoulders melting under the touch and the words.

“Alfred, how does it feel to be always right?”

“I strain under the burden, sir.”

Bruce chuckled softly, the last of the tension in the room dissolving. The tiniest of smiles broke
through the old butler’s polished decorum.

“Now, I would advise you to inspire some sort of organization into your children before Master and
Miss Fox arrive.”

“Stephanie’s not my child,” Bruce mumbled in last-ditch rebellion as he headed back into the living
room, whiskey in hand. The two girls were nestled side by side on the couch, laughing over something Jason had said, so close that blond and black hair appeared to be growing from the same being. “And thank god too, otherwise that would be even more awkward.”

“Say what, old man?” Steph asked, turning around.

“Nothing.”

“Jason, how do you know so many redhead jokes, anyway?” Tim asked, a faint look of concern on his face. Damian had lost interest in the conversation and instead returned to toy architecture, which was a relief in multiple ways. “And more importantly, why hasn’t Barbara killed you again for them?”

“I only repeat the ones that she doesn’t get mad over. In other words, the ones that aren’t inaccurate in referral to her.”

“Okay, ew. When the Foxes come, you’re not allowed to talk to them.”

“That’s fair.”

Almost the second the words left Jason’s mouth, the doorbell rang. Damian abandoned his near-completed Taj Mahal and raced down the hallway to the door, tailed by a barking Titus and Ace. The dogs bouncing around his ankles, he stood on his tiptoes and squinted through the peephole.

“Is it the Foxes?”

“No, it’s Gordon,” he reported. “Should I lock her out?”

He couldn’t tell if that was supposed to be a joke or not.

“Let her in, baby brat.”

Bruce considered it a mark of excellent parenting that Damian only shot his brothers a scowl before reaching for the doorknob. Maybe there was hope, after all.

Of all the people she might’ve thought would let her in, she was not expecting Damian.

He looked her up and down as if he were an art critic and she an ambitious piece from a relatively new practitioner.

“How are you, Gordon?” he inquired. “I have not seen you in person for some days.”

“Well, I do work from home.” She wheeled herself through the doorway, pausing to scratch Ace and Titus behind the ears. The young boy trailed after her, still talking in an uncharacteristically casual tone.

“I see that your pregnancy has been progressing well, and that you have not miscarried. There is little likelihood of the fetus developing complications from here on out, but problems may still arise.”

“I know, Damian. I did check a few websites and crack a few books.”
He kept talking, more to himself than to her.

“Have you had any pain in your lower abdomen? Have you secreted any blood? Had any severe headaches? Gained too much weight too suddenly? Woman, if you’ve been foolish enough to have contracted Zika or rubella —”

“No. To literally all of those.” She wheeled herself into the living room, greeted by everyone looking up and smiling in her direction, even Bruce. Despite all that she’d been dealing with lately, her heart fluttered at their affection. “And I’m kind of scared to ask, but how do you know so many potential pregnancy complications?”

Damian abruptly stopped talking.

“He asked me.”

Every eye turned to Tim. Several mouths fell open.

He shrugged.

“Apparently because I have more hands-on experience with pregnant women than anyone else he knows. He only threatened me a couple times while asking, too. It was kind of nice.”

“I told you not to tell anyone that!” Damian hissed. “Must I enunciate everything to get it through your thick skull, Drake?”

“And he’s back.”

“Tim does know about pregnancy,” Cass said thoughtfully. “Not enough, though.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Steph found out first.”

Tim rolled his eyes fondly while Bruce sighed and Steph whooped, punching the air.

“Ha! Suck it, World’s Greatest Detectives! You don’t have shit on me!”

“Damian, why don’t you call your brother down?” Bruce interrupted quickly, before Steph could say anything else.

“Yes, good idea.” Damian was also clearly flustered, and so happily took the opportunity to walk up to the staircase. He took a deep breath, and everyone else immediately covered their ears.

“GRAYSON!”

Both dogs started howling in unison.

From upstairs, there was a crash and a faint stream of cursing.

“Gordon has already arrived! So what exactly is taking you so long? At this point, you must be wearing more makeup and hair product that Harley Quinn does daily!”

“Gosh Lil’ D, you say that like it’s a bad thing,” Dick replied with a smirk, appearing at the top of the stairs like Juliet at her balcony and leaning over the banister. The outfit he was wearing was surprisingly flattering; snug black jeans and a blue button-up that matched his eyes and complemented his golden-brown skin. “And for the record, it’s more makeup and hair product than
she wears on a Friday night, not daily.”

Bruce stepped forward, then frowned up at his eldest son with habitual parental concern.

“Dick, all other concerns about those pants aside, how are you able to walk in them?”

“Hmm. You know, most fathers would wish their son luck in charming his lady.”

The frown didn’t lessen. Barbara rolled her eyes.

“I’m too smart to be seduced by a single date with you, you know,” she called up.

“Yeah, sure. And to answer your question Bruce, I’ve had tighter.” With unfair ease, he slung himself up onto the banister and slid down, landing next to his unimpressed little brother. “You’ve all seen my uniform.”

“Frankly, Master Richard, I’m not certain how you’re able to perform such acrobatic feats in that uniform either,” Alfred remarked as Dick ran around the room, hugging his siblings goodbye. Cass hugged him back albeit quickly, Damian stiffened in surprise, Tim leaned slightly into it but otherwise didn’t respond, and Jason slapped him away.

“The acrobatic feats are pretty obviously second fiddle when it comes to a uniform like that, Alf,” Stephanie said slyly. “First fiddle is showing off that he looks like a bunch of women and gay guys built him in a laboratory. Ones that weren’t these gay guys, obviously.”

“Ooh, you found my real secret identity, Steph. Whatever will I do?” He wrapped her in a side-arm hug, ruffling her hair like he was her older brother too. She laughed and pushed him towards Barbara, close enough for him to take her hand.

“Have fun, kids.”

“Isn’t that our line?”

They started towards the door, his footfall keeping in time with the rhythmic creak of her wheels.

“Wait! Gordon!”

They both turned around.

Damian darted up to her, a serious expression across his young face.

“I need to tell you something important.”

“Yes...?”

Dick looked at his younger brother hopefully.

“Since you are even more of an intrinsic part of the family now, I must warn you, on behalf of all of us, not to do anything that could permanently hurt Grayson, including to be as foolish as to break up with him. Otherwise the family will be split down the middle, I will be forced to disavow you, and without the shaky unity your intimacy provides our family, all of Gotham will fall and most likely be destroyed forever. So don’t do it.”

Barbara blinked twice.

Everyone else in the room stared.
“Did you just…give me your version of a shovel talk?”

“Yes.” He eyeballed her. “Do you understand me, Gordon? I do not much want to hurt you.”

All of her worry and frustration threatened to spill over, but she managed a tight smile.

“You know that I could totally take you in a fight, right baby bird?”

“Tt.” Despite that, he looked satisfied. “I hope that we won’t have to see.”

Dick knelt and swept the boy in another quick hug, ignoring his complaining.

“See you later, Lil’ D. Bye guys,” he addressed the bemused family. “We should be back in a couple hours.”

The door swept open just as Selina was reaching for the doorbell.

She, Tam, Luke, and Kate stared at the pair of them, then peered over their shoulders, hoping in vain for answers from the rest of the family.

“Hi guys. Bye guys.”

Barbara maneuvered her chair past the small crowd, she and Dick heading to her car. Before she got in, the last thing she heard was Tam asking,

“Um…did we miss something?”

Drew leaned forward into his coffee, picking at a croissant. What kind of man didn’t have lewd pictures on his phone of a woman he was fucking? Or rather…what kind of airhead pretty boy had both the foresight and technology access to encrypt his phone to the degree that Drew actually couldn’t tell, at a glance, whether he had lewd pictures or not?

It was not only embarrassing, but suspicious. Where would someone like Grayson be able to get that kind of encryption? The computers in the Pentagon couldn’t claim some of the code in that firewall.

Drew was pondering this so thoroughly, he didn’t notice the couple seating themselves at a outdoor table at the restaurant across the street.

A teenage boy darted across the street through a red light, and a car honked furiously. The boy flipped the car the bird, then raced past the bistro.

Drew looked up irritably, intending to throw a sneering comment at the boy for bothering other people, then his eye caught the flash of scarlet on the other side of the street.

Though she was a good twenty feet away, he recognized Barbara immediately. Her red bob looked well tended for, glasses gleaming like silver, a subtle touch of makeup on her face. She was leaning somewhat forward; armrests and gesticulating hands obscuring her torso from below the chest…not that he minded much.

He almost couldn’t look up to see the crease in her forehead, the way her mouth twisted as she talked.
He wondered what she was so agitated about.

He didn’t feel even slightly ashamed of hoping that Grayson was the cause.

“For the last time, I don’t blame you for feeling like crap. All the books say that it’s normal to be hungry all the time and have constant heartburn and all that other delightful shit right around now. I’m just glad that the nausea’s over, and that when the varicose veins and swollen feet hit I’m not going to be able to feel them. Besides, this is half my fault too, remember?”

“If you don’t want to throw Dinah’s and Kori’s advice into the mix, sure,” he replied, a touch of the guilt vanishing from his face. “And if it makes you feel any better, you still look really beautiful.”

“You just enjoy the small belly and giant breasts combination while it lasts,” she said wryly, resting her head on her hand. “In the meantime, I need to redecorate my guest room to make it a nursery. And go shopping. I already had to buy all this new stuff for myself, since I don’t fit any of my old bras and this sweater looks like it was painted on —” She tugged irritably at the neckline again, “— and I haven’t even touched what the kid’s going to need. And —”

“Barbara.”

He put his hand over hers, and she cut off.

“What’s really wrong?”

She was about to make an excuse…but instead sighed, her head dropping lower.

“I’m so tired, Dick. This case with the hacker, and our friends, and those poor murdered people, I’ve been driving myself crazy for the last few months trying to get a clue as to who it is. And I’ve still got almost nothing. I can absolve Jason, but that doesn’t get me closer as to who really did it. They’re still out there, and there are still so many people they can hurt to try to get to Bruce. I’m worried about all of them, and on top of that, they still have so many goddamn issues that I can’t fix for them! I’m powerless,” she finished, shutting her eyes. “And there’s nothing I can do about it.”

He was quiet for a few seconds, not giving her any spiels about how it was going to be okay or that everything would work out.

“I’m tired too,” he admitted. “Every moment in my cop uniform, I’m scared that I’m going to do something that’ll make Amy rethink her second chance. Every moment as Nightwing, I’m scared for everyone else that I care about as they throw themselves into danger. Not that I don’t think they’re capable, but in this town, even the most capable and the least deserving people get badly injured, traumatized, and killed.”

She knew immediately that she was one of those people he was talking about.

“My family’s a mess. A recovering mess, but still. Innocent people are suffering just for being associated with us. And the woman I love is punishing herself for not being omnipotent.”

Her heart stuttered, then sped up at the last sentence. Clutching his hand, her pulse clogging up her throat, Barbara managed to say,
“Seems to me like the two of us have similar problems.”

“Seems to me.” He took her other hand from her cheek. “I’m not going to pretend that my problems hold a candle to yours, though. You shoulder even more people than I do.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

Their eyes locked, she pondered another, unspoken similarity: she pretended to always know exactly what she was doing, while he pretended to be able to shoulder anything with just a positive outlook to assist him.

She smiled a little sadly.

“Heh. Some date conversation this is.”

“Not like we’ve ever exactly been a normal couple.” Then, after a moment of studying her expression: “But we can flirt like dumb teenagers and give each other sappy compliments too, if you want.”

“Please don’t. I remember what you were like when you were actually a dumb teenager.”

“Excuse you, I was a smooth operator from the beginning.”

“You do remember being locked together in Crazy Quilt’s safe, right?”

“You promised to never bring that up again!”

She actually laughed a little, relaxing enough to lean backwards, but not letting go of his hands.

“If it makes you feel any better, I still tell myself that that was only your utility belt poking against my leg, and the fact that you were hunched over with your cape around your waist when Bruce let us out meant nothing.’”

“That’s because it did mean nothing.”

“Sure thing, Lives-Up-To-His-Name Wonder.”

Dick was spared having to retort when the waiter arrived with the drinks and appetizers.

Barbara took a sip of mint tea, realizing that she felt…well, not good, but better. Her problems weren’t gone, but she knew she wasn’t alone in the matter, or in general. That she could trust in someone, despite the terrifying impossibility of being able to plan for that.

She thought about her closeness with her father, her faith in her friends, her pride in the other Batgirls, her affection for the other Bat-guys, and what she felt in that moment. They all felt similar, and equally important.

But that’s love for you.

Drew wasn’t sure what shocked him more: the swift change in her from agitated to settled, or what he saw when she lifted her arms out of the way and leaned back in her seat.
She’s pregnant. She’s pregnant. And I’d bet anything that Grayson’s the father. That idiotic manwhore ruined her body even further. How can she possibly sit there and smile like that? What’s wrong with her?

“Sir, would you like your check?”

Amanda had returned, nervously taking in his thunderous expression. The college girl, who’d been continually asking for refills since she’d put her suspicious gaze on him, looked ready to leap out of her chair.

“Yes, you stupid cunt,” he nearly yelled, forgetting to be careful, “and get on with it.”

“Watch your mouth, asshole!” the college girl snarled. Amanda practically sprinted back inside. “She may be professionally obligated to put up with you, but I’m sure as hell open for an excuse to beat your arrogant, mediocre ass.”

Mediocre?

Drew dearly longed to tell both those stupid females exactly how mediocre he was…

But he’d already drawn enough attention to himself.

Instead, when Amanda returned with the check, he slapped down the cash (neglecting to tip a single penny), and marched away towards the crosswalk. What galled him even more was hearing the college girl say to the waitress, “I’m so, so sorry you had to put up with him. Want to go for drinks later? I’ll buy; you deserve it.”

Though that paled in comparison to Oracle’s firewalls and Barbara Gordon’s smiles and laughter.

“You’re making that up.”

“No, I’m serious! I mean, she didn’t know he was Ra’s al Ghul himself, she just thought he was a distinguished older guy. And honestly, I wish I could say it had been surprising.”

Dick raised his hands over his plate of spaghetti, looking both bewildered and amused.

“So let me get this straight: between you ladies, Kate’s divorced and celibate, Dawn’s got her weird on-again-off-again thing with Hank, Zinda has a horrible gaydar, Helena’s and my disastrous one time was somehow the most successful relationship she’s ever had, meanwhile Karen’s pining over her, Tatsu’s widowed, Selina’s…Selina, Kendra tried to hook up with her great-uncle, Charlie’s a baby, Mari’s married to her jobs, Lady Shiva only has sex to make smaller assassins, Dinah’s divorced too and that’s the least of her relationship problems, and Barda’s been happily married for years.”

“And then there’s me: a failed engagement, god knows how many other failed relationships, half the people I’ve tried to date think I can’t feel my vagina anymore, and to cap it off, now I’m having our kid out of wedlock,” she finished, spearing a piece of meat. She’d singlehandedly polished off the bread basket and most of the appetizers, and still going strong through her chicken piccata. “So yeah, we all suck at romance. Nobody knows how Barda managed to escape the ‘curse,’ as Hel put it.”
“Mutual respect, trust, and an ability to communicate, aka the foundations of a healthy and loving relationship?”

“Be realistic.”

“Alright then, Apokolips is clearly a magical romantic place that inspires perfect dream marriages as well as being a hellish pocket-dimension of fire and death.”

“Now that’s more believable.”

“Wow. And they call me a hopeless romantic.”

The gossip and banter might’ve gone on longer, but as Barbara pondered the love lives of the other Birds of Prey, a shadow was cast over their table. When it didn’t pass after a few seconds, she looked to the side.

It took her a moment to recognize the man standing beside them. His pale, hungry gaze was fixated on her neckline; the rest of her body in a virtual shadow and her breasts in the spotlight. As if she were on display; ripe for use and consumption. A sick feeling began to pool in the pit of her stomach, and it came with the memory of a similar gaze…paired with a sick, echoing laugh and a flashing camera.

Keeping her shaky breaths quiet, she shifted so that her arms and shoulders crossed in front of her chest. Dick’s gaze flicked to the man opposite, and his teasing smile slid into an glare.

“You’re the one from the library,” she realized. “Aiden — no, Avery Drew, was it?”

“Yes, Barbara.” His gaze swept across her body. “You look…well. Did you enjoy your novels?”

“Yes, of course. In my experience, it’s easy to find a book with substance, even when you’re just browsing.” He nodded, then looked ready to reply before she cut him off. “Men, on the other hand…”

His white eyebrows shot up.

“Now, that was uncalled for, Barbara. Are you sure you’re feeling quite alright?”

“If you’ve done nothing worth being insulted for, then why are you worried?” she returned. “And to be honest, I haven’t been alright in months. But the thing is, it feels good to have someone who cares around to help, instead of some people who just exacerbate the problem.”

A touch of relief seeped into his tone.

“Yes, of course. I can only imagine what it’s been like for you since some unappreciative boor put his —”

“Yes, unappreciative boor’?” Dick interrupted, his eyes flashing. “‘Unappreciative?’ I know you don’t mean me when you say that.”

Drew shifted his gaze over to him; cold gray meeting vivid blue.

“So you’re Richard Grayson.”

“Dick, actually. And believe me, I’ve heard all the jokes.” The light words sounded out of place in the fuming tone.
“Aren’t you clever?” Drew jeered.

“Only so I’ve been told.”

Normally, both of the two men fighting over Barbara would annoy her, but in this case, the stench of testosterone from her boyfriend took a backseat to the cloying words and nauseating lust of a near-stranger.

“Dick, knock it off; I don’t need you to fight my battles,” she ordered. He sat back, jaw tight, and Drew shot him a barely-restrained smile. “And I wasn’t finished talking, pervert.”

The smile melted.

“Listen to me, and listen to me good, because subtleties are clearly wasted on you. Just because I’m a woman, and that I was nice one time, doesn’t mean that you get to stare at me, hit on me, and collect some sort of entitlement to my attention, all while I’m on a date with my boyfriend. So fuck off and leave us alone.”

The look of incredulity on his face was almost laughable.

“What did you say to me?”

“I said,” Not even bothering to keep her voice down, “Fuck. Off. Or I will call the police right now and file so many restraining orders against you that you’ll never leave your house again. Believe me, I have a lot of fast tracks through the GCPD.”

He remained rooted to the spot, almost too astonished to blink.

In the meantime, the manager of the restaurant appeared as if summoned.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Grayson, Ms. Gordon?” Upon realizing that one of his customers was Bruce Wayne’s son, the manager had nearly bent over backwards sucking up to them the whole time they were there. In this case, she was grateful.

“No. In fact, our friend here was just going.”

“Yes, Ms. Gordon.” The manager turned to Drew. “Sir, I think it’s best you leave now.”

Drew shot Dick a look of loathing, and one to Barbara telling her to reconsider. She remained firm.

“Very well, then.” With a haughty air, he pulled away from the manager and marched away down the street. Everyone else in the restaurant turned back to their own business, but Barbara watched him go until he turned round the block and disappeared.

She finally pulled her hands out of her lap and braced them against the table, letting them tremble. She took several long deep breaths, trying to steady herself as strands of red hair fluttered before her lips.

“Are you okay?” It was a rhetorical question.

“Men don’t usually look at me like that…like they want to consume me,” she breathed. “At least not anymore. I get the odd stare at my chest, yes. But usually I’m not enough for them to really want, or to imagine that anyone else could want; too broken.” Her voice was edged with bitterness. “But it looked like…to him…it was physical vulnerability that appealed to him, and my strength was what put him off.”
Or was what made it a challenge for him.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not as if you’re a representative of your entire gender,” she replied, resisting the urge to make the dirty joke that she would’ve under less serious circumstances. “I mean, the male population’s more than three and a half billion. I know that there are plenty of good men, and I know quite a few of them personally, but I also know from experience how awful men can be.”

And even with the good ones that I know and love, people tend to define me by my relation to them. Someone’s daughter, someone’s sidekick, someone’s friend, someone’s lover, and now…someone’s mother. Never more than that, as if I’m just a supporting character for the men in my life. Someone to be wrested back and forth depending on who wants me next.

He said nothing more for a while, letting her finish her food in silence as she tried to shake off the lingering feelings of exposure.

“Next time we go out,” she finally declared, setting down her fork, “we’re going somewhere where there are only women.”

“One of those big-name movies with a female hero that men are boycotting?”

“…Actually, that’s not a bad idea.”

“Well now I know what to look up when we get back to the Manor.”

While he flagged down the waiter to ask for their check, her phone suddenly buzzed with a message from Bruce.

We need you both back home now.

Dick looked at her as she put her phone away.

“Family needs us?”

“Always.” She slapped down her credit card, letting the waiter whisk it away and not thinking about how she’d finally dropped the “b” word.

Drew was seething with frustration by the time he arrived home. That woman’s pride was rankling; her strength and ferocity a blight upon her. Taking up space with her chair like a throne, carrying the future of Gotham’s family of white knights. The only way that could possibly be worse would be if she’d gotten herself on one of the Bats — Gotham’s family of dark knights — themselves.

But all that only perpetuated his determination.

“Plan first,” he reminded himself, getting seated at the yellow plastic kitchen table. His computer screen glowed gray-blue with promise. “The woman can wait, however long it takes.”

The numbers clicked to life.
“You need to let us help,” Tam insisted.

The whole group had assembled, an odd mishmash of uniforms and civilian clothes, in the Batcave prior to Dick and Barbara’s arrival. Luke, who had never been in the Cave before, was making an active effort to not stare at the bombs or the cow or the many vehicles or children’s drawings decorating the rock walls.

Barbara surveyed the rest of the group. Alfred stood at attention with coffee, careful to keep a firm grip on the tray this time. Tam was talking, loud and tense; her brother’s gaze trained forward. Kate’s eyes were narrowed in anticipation, Selina’s shoulders tense. Cass was dressed for battle in full uniform; silent as a ghost. Steph had her cowl down, compulsively sucking at a frothy Starbucks drink. Jason stood beside her, flicking a switchblade in and out. Damian was slumped over and glowering; his father fully outfitted and straight-backed. Tim stood slightly ahead of the rest of them, cowl down and face-to-face with his friend.

“What do you suggest?” he asked. The Red Robin voice. It didn’t growl or rumble like the Batman voice, but he made up for it with strong clinicalness.

“I suggest crowdsourcing,” Tam decided. She made a sweeping gesture towards the rest of the Cave. “C’mon. This isn’t even everyone you guys are friendly with! You should get everyone together, come up with a big plan.”

“Enlist some more heroes, if you have to,” Luke added. “Ones that won’t argue with each other at the drop of a hat.”

Steph spat out her straw.

“It’s less ‘arguing’ and more ‘attempted fratricide,’” she corrected.

Luke did a double take, then dropped his stoicism to gape.

“Attempted — what the hell is wrong with you people?”

“A better question would be what hasn’t been wrong with us at some point,” Kate said dryly.

“Severe PTSD, crippling depression, and daddy issues being the most reoccurring problems,” Jason added, as if he were reciting a grocery list. “You know, the kind of stuff that makes you want to be dead again.”

“You died!?”

“Don’t forget the attempted and successful sexual assaults.”

“Right,” Barbara muttered, “Who could forget that?”

A strange expression flickered across Luke’s face — like he was having second thoughts about something.

“Um, guys, the fact that you all need serious help isn’t…um…isn’t the point right now,” Tam interjected. “What is the point is that we need a way to get rid of this bad guy and his murder and computer worms, and we also need to fight the other bad guys at the same time.”

“That’s what the media keeps saying, too,” Kate replied.

Barbara said nothing to confirm the two older women’s words, but she didn’t need to.

“You mean we need to rely on each other, and on the rest of the community here,” Tim summed up.

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“But do we really need to recruit new masks? It’s difficult enough to rely on family, let alone strangers.”

Dick grimaced.

“Was he talking about me?” Jason asked Steph. “I feel like at least part of that was directed at me.”

“Not everything’s about you, Todd,” Damian sniffed.

“Oh, that’s great coming from you.”

“Perhaps you should watch the way you phrase your sentences, Master of Orgasms.”

Steph spluttered and shot sugary milk-coffee out her nose.

“You should at least think about it, little birds,” Selina pointed out, briefly looking like she was trying to decide whether to react to the more or less serious conversation. “One of your biggest problems over the years is not trusting each other, and being dishonest with each other enough that it justifies a lack of trust.”

“So what are you trying to say, Selina?”

She shrugged.

“I’m saying, stop stabbing each other in the back, stop lying to each other, and let me and Jason go on officially sanctioned patrols and investigations, instead of pretending that we’re not doing your jobs for you anyway. He and I can find out more together in a single night in the underworld than the rest of you can in a week of talking to law-abiding citizens.” She nodded to Barbara. “Of course, you’re the exception to that.”

“Since when have you needed anyone to allow you to find information?” Kate scoffed.

Selina smiled, teeth glittering like diamonds between ripe-cherry lips.

“I don’t. Jason and I will do it anyway, whether Bruce or anyone allows it or not. It’s just the spirit of the thing, you know.”

Bruce looked around the room.

“I say we do it.”

Everyone looked at Barbara as she spoke up for the first time.

“Selina’s right. The more information we can gather, the better, no matter the source. Jason has more contacts here in the city than the Justice League has extended members, and if anyone feels uncomfortable taking orders from Bruce for any reason, they can come to me.” She looked at the Foxes. “And Tam’s right, too. Speaking as an experienced crime fighter and a team leader, the more hands on deck we have, the better; helping out with organized crime and the Arkham rogues while
we at the center work bigger cases. Speaking as a member of this family —” She looked squarely at Tim, “— we need to forgive and trust each other, and try to do better in the future.”

Tim pulled off his cowl, tufts of hair flying up like baby bat wings. He gave her a careful, curious look that was reminiscent of both the bright boy with a camera around his neck who’d insisted on being Robin and the cold young man who’d wanted nothing for himself anymore.

“Get our shit together,” Steph summed up, chucking her empty cup towards the recycling bin.


“You people like to say what you mean, huh?”

“Well, we sure don’t mince words around here,” Dick replied, resting a proud gaze on each of his family in turn. Tense muscles relaxed under the warm light.

“Only garlic,” Alfred quipped in turn, stirring each person’s preferred additives into the coffee mugs.

Bruce, for his part, hesitated, twisting his head just enough to meet Barbara’s gaze. She inclined her head slightly forward.

After a moment, he spoke up.

“Very well. We’ll see if we can convince some of the other local crimefighters — Question, Flamebird, Orpheus, and the like — to cover isolated incidents, the gangs and mobs, and our more noteworthy rogues. Later on…we will…” It seemed to pain him to say it, “…consider taking on new recruits sometime in the next few months.”

Tam and Luke shot a triumphant look between them.

Barbara nodded.

“I can contact Proxy and ask her to be their infotech to free up some of my time.”

“Wendy’ll do it,” Steph chimed in. “She’s been complaining to me lately that she doesn’t have enough to do anyway.”

“Barbara gets Manhunter and Huntress,” Cass interjected.

“At the very least, yeah. Since they’re on her payroll, metaphorically speaking,” Jason agreed. “So once all their and our time’ve been divided up so everyone has more of it, Bruce can go hang out with the Super Friends —”

“Please don’t call the League that.”

“Meanwhile, I cover your duties here in town while you’re with them,” Kate continued. “And while you’re here —”

“He and I keep up regular appearances together, both as partners and as a father and his son,” Damian finished. “And the rest of us may work together or separately on cases that take high priority.”

“I’ll see what I can gather over at the police department,” Dick agreed. “We can all figure out a schedule to alternate between detective work, the stuff that needs punching, and anything else that might crop up. In the meantime, Babs does her genius shtick.”
“Way to oversimplify my job,” she replied, trying not to blush. “But you’re right. To make a long story short, once we can collaborate our work, we’ll be considerably more effective.”

“If you guys don’t kill each other doing it.”

“Nah, we haven’t tried anything like that in months.”

Before Luke could ask for more details, Bruce cleared his throat.

“Jokes aside, I need to ask if I can trust all of you to do this work. Together.”

Barbara looked over them one last time. She thought about all the years that had passed since she had first put on the cowl: all the fights and backstabbing and doubt and resentment and all their spiraling circles of bad habits.

Then she put it behind her.

No matter how Bruce used it to compel himself, what was past was gone. What mattered was what lay in the future, and what they could make of it.

“You don’t actually need to ask that.”

His eyes widened in surprise…and consideration.

Then, under the gaze of his family, the last of his resolve crumbled.

“Very well. I suppose we have a plan, then.”

Everyone laughed with relief, exchanging cheers and high-fives.

“Always good to have a plan,” Barbara grinned, feeling buoyed by the success. Dick walked over until he was next to her, the smile on his face matching hers perfectly for brightness.

“Particularly when it manages to be achieved with such ease,” Alfred agreed, passing around the drinks. If there was any more tension left in the group, it vanished as they each accepted their coffee cups, each brew done to perfection.

“Meeting adjourned, then,” Tim decided, the Red Robin voice evaporating. “Coffee break starts now.” He gulped the liquid like it was mother’s milk, Steph shaking her head at him with fond exasperation.

A light buzz of chatter soon filled the Cave. Barbara sipped her cup of decaf as Dick seated himself on the rocky floor by the wheels of her chair.

“That went really well. Even I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Oh, that was just thanks to me and my genius shtick.”

“No kidding.” The look on his face while gazing at her was reminiscent of a child gazing at the moon and stars on a clear summer’s night. She thought about the word “love” again, but didn’t say it.

“Maybe we should have our dates in Bruce’s house from now on if you’re going to look that happy,” she teased instead.

“Maybe not. I doubt he’d appreciate it if we christened my childhood bedroom the way we christened your computer desk,” he rebutted.
“He wouldn’t need to worry. Even hopped up on hormones I couldn’t get in the mood underneath your dorky glow-in-the-dark dinosaur ceiling stickers.”

“I was eleven when I picked those out, leave me alone.”

“And yet you didn’t take them down in fifteen years.”

“Hell no, I love those dinosaurs.”

She rested her head on her hand, peering down with a glowing look of her own.

“You are such a kid.”

“Oh? Do I have to bring up your teddy bear?”

“You leave Woobie out of this.”

As the banter progressed, Selina peered at both of them around the edge of her own coffee cup, smirking lightly.

“What?”

“You two are not going to have to accommodate yourselves for a baby, at all.”

The moment broke, and both of them turned red in unison.

Drew finished his business with the Gotham City Police Department, then reached back for that old picture of Barbara coming home from the hospital.

He took it to the wall, a thumbtack in hand. In his eagerness to put it up where he could see it at all times, he fumbled; trying too quickly to tack it down and letting it drop a few times.

In the meantime, the computer began to beep frantically with notifications as the newly leaked information spread through social media.

Halfway through the pot of coffee, Steph’s and Tam’s phones started chiming in unison. Tam absently switched hers to vibrate, but Steph whipped hers out one-handed while still drinking her coffee.

“Seriously, Stephanie?” Bruce griped. “Now?”

“Hey old man, if something starts trending across all the sites I have accounts on, it’s gotta be important.”

“That’s how you young people determine importance now?”

>Welcome to the twenty-first century, Bruce.” Steph glanced down at the phone screen, taking a sip.
Two seconds later, she spat everything in her mouth down the front of her uniform.

“Apparently, no coffee is safe from Miss Stephanie.”

Steph was too bug-eyed and lost for words to even retort. She held out her phone towards Tim, totally silent.

“What is —?”

She tapped the screen towards the top. As Tim’s eyes grew wide in turn, Barbara rolled over as quickly as she could to see what was going on.

*Gotham City Police Department Secrets LEAKED!*

Her eyes flicked down the page, heart constricting in her throat. It read horribly like Lucius’ faked bank records, right down to the “anonymous source.” Only she knew, from hours of tapping cameras and sifting through files, that while somewhat exaggerated, the heart of it was true.

“This…” She swallowed hard. “This isn’t just a collection of good-looking lies. This genuinely discredits the entire police force, and it taints the few honest, good cops with the previously-hidden actions of the bad ones. It makes my father look incompetent for having these people work for him. He’ll be cleaning up this PR mess for months, and we’ll have a huge number of people getting fired and quitting.”

She didn’t have to tell anyone that this was the last thing they needed after work at Batman Inc was delayed, several-dozen-odd local Wayne Enterprises employees had quit out of fear, and that the approval rating of Lucius, their friend and greatest advocate, from both the public and the populace of WE had been at a record low for a month.

Granted, she was glad that the bigoted, corrupt assholes that had been hiding behind the system for years had been dragged out into the light. She’d been trying for years to gather enough evidence to have the bad cops removed and replaced with honest officers, but they kept escaping on technicalities. What’s more, the idea of having a gun, gross overpayment, and the opportunity to bully civilians kept attracting yet more awful people. Upon the whole department being exposed, those people would be getting nothing less than what they deserved in the oncoming public storm.

But since none of the family wore a Gotham uniform and badge, no matter how much better work they did outside the system, they couldn’t incarcerate anyone themselves. Who knew how many criminals would walk free, forcing the family to waste time chasing them over again?

“Damn it,” she said aloud. “God fucking damn it!”

Her fist banged down on the armrest of her wheelchair. The metal rattled with her frustration and rage.

“Barbara —”

“Out of my way.”

Shaking with fury, she rolled over to the Batcomputer, fingers flying over the keys. Strings of green binary spiraled into existence as everyone else gathered around her in a tentative crescent; a dozen different faces gazing up into the screen’s peridot glow like supplicants at prayer.

“She’s doing her Oracle thing?” Tam asked, leaning in closer.
“Yeah. You never quite get used to it,” Dick told the younger woman.

Barbara didn’t respond to either of them, eyes narrowed in focus behind her glasses.

If I can’t get a read on the person who implanted these files, I can at least put a tracker on their signal.

She typed so fast the clatter of the keys faded into a buzz. It was still infuriating not being able to decode the encryption the other hacker had used to hide their location, equal to not having any concrete evidence, but the tracker would at least be something to hinder her opponent.

The numbers blinked into black, before a loading bar slowly inched into fullness. Then the emerald symbol of the Oracle emblazoned itself proudly across the screen — as well as, she knew, the screen of whomever she’d just latched herself onto. A badge of success for her, a blow to her opponent.

Barbara slumped backwards in her chair, exhaling hard.

“What’d you do?” Cass asked.

“I put a tracker on the person who’s been after us; who framed Lucius and murdered Kelly Nolan and Pedro Di Nero,” she said, glasses still reflecting green light.

“And that’s significant, because…?” Selina inquired.

“Because if the hacker ever tries to leak files, whether real or fake, ever again, she’ll know instantly, and be able to stop them before they get out,” Tim explained, his eyes getting wide. “Brilliant.”

“Yeah…” Luke looked astonished, his inexperience to the hero business shining through his eyes. “Brilliant.”

Tam, for her part, just smiled and folded her arms.

“Maybe so, but she’s too old for you,” she teased her brother. His cheeks darkened.


“It’s not brilliant enough,” Barbara seethed, ignoring the others. “If I actually knew how to do my damn job, I —” Her fists clenched over the keyboard, “— I’d be able to figure out a way to do this right, the way I always do.”

A hand rested on her shoulder. She looked up to meet Cass’s soft brown eyes, and a slight incline of the younger woman’s head to the side.

And you tell me to stop being so hard on myself, her expression said.

“Good job here today, everybody.”

A dozen heads snapped around in unison to confirm that those words, indeed, had come out of Bruce’s mouth.

“I’m very proud,” he said gruffly, his gaze lingering on his children. “I hope you all know that.”

Dick looked taken aback, Jason suspicious, Cass neutral with a slight positive shine, Tim surprised, and Damian just frowned with confusion.

“But Father, most of us didn’t even do anything today.”
“It’s um…what did you say, Selina?” He looked so awkward, his girlfriend took immediate pity on
him.

“The spirit of the thing.”

“Right. It’s the spirit of the thing.”

His kids, especially his sons, still looked more confused than flattered, but Barbara thought she saw the corner of Alfred’s mouth twitch upward, just a little bit. The edge of her frustration melted.

She reached up and took Cass’s hand.

“Bruce is right, guys,” she said, trying to force herself to believe it. “Today’s been a good day.”

Dick caught her eye and finally smiled — small and genuine — again.

“That fucking cold nosy bitch!”

Drew managed to slow himself down enough to not throw the computer at the wall, but only barely.

Her symbol emblazoned across the screen, vivid green glowing against black, was deliberately taunting him, along with the message:

YOU HAVE BEEN HACKED!

He should’ve realized earlier that Oracle would’ve been his true opponent in his mission to take down the Bat. She was good. Better than he anticipated. He certainly wouldn’t have guessed that she would’ve thought to put a tracker on him.

But this was the power behind the scenes. The voice in the ear of all those so-called heroes. The commander of the Birds of Prey, the wisdom of the Justice League, resting herself neatly in the laps of the Bats.

She had to go down first.

For all his posturing about being an impartial, invincible agent of justice, Batman’s weaknesses were as obvious as a Robin’s uniform. Oracle’s were…less so.

But not for long.

A slight gust from the heating system ruffled the photographs on the walls and dislodged the com on the windowsill that Black Canary had lost months ago.

Drew cast his eyes over those monuments, taking a moment to forget his rage in that photograph of Barbara, before allowing it to seep up in him again upon gazing at that impassive symbol.

“‘Computer worms on the scale that they might be snakes,’” he mused, thinking of the local media’s opinion on him. “‘Snakes, indeed.’”

The symbol blazed brightly for one more moment before pixelating into blackness.
Chapter Notes

First of all, I'm so sorry for the wait on this. Writer's block hit hard around the same time my family was visiting, and it got really hard to churn this out.

Second of all, in light of what just happened in Charlottesville, I'm also sorry that I have to deliver a chapter drenched in fear and anxiety. I promise I'll have the next one up as soon as possible to make up for it, and if that if you're enjoying this, I'm grateful to provide a way to escape these difficult times. As always, feel free to message me here or on my Tumblr.

(Warnings: brief, non-explicit mention of past canon sexual assault; a couple brief mentions of the Joker and what he does; talk of severe depression and anxiety.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**The Moon (Tarot):**


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All she knew was smoke.

The green vapors glowed with electric light, curling around her and caressing her cheek like a living being. They were the only source of light in the dark cave, their incense-heavy clouds the only thing that curled through her nostrils. It was almost like the breath of some invisible beast, heady inhales and exhales covering up the steady drip-drip of the stalactites.

In the corner of her eye, she could've sworn that she saw the shapes of her loved ones...Jim, Dinah, Sarah, Kate, Tim, Damian, Helena, Selina, Jean-Paul, Charlie, Ted, Jason, Bruce, Zinda, Stephanie, Cassandra, Alfred, Dick...but when she turned to look, their smiling faces evaporated into the smoke. Her belly was immensely swollen, as though she were due to give birth that day, but she couldn’t feel any movement, even the little butterflies that had started recently.

Looking down at herself to see this, she realized she was seated on a wooden tripod, wearing a long, loose white robe and leather sandals. Resting on top of her red hair was a crown of laurel leaves.

Classical Greece, she realized. Delphi.

She squinted through the smoke, but there was no sign of worshippers or supplicants. No one coming to seek her wisdom.

I’m alone.
You are not alone.

The voice hissed through the smoke, parting the green mist like water. A glimpse of unyielding black rock poked through, the jagged edges carving through the smoke. She shifted nervously, searching in vain through the folds of her dress for a weapon and longing for the mobility of her wheelchair.

Who are you?

The only companion of yours that matters.

As she continued to stare through the vapors, she was greeted by a faint gray glow. The glow coagulated and solidified, morphing into a pair of enormous eyes…slit-pupiled eyes.

She started in fear and fell to the cave floor, the jags slicing through her dress. One rock punched against her broken spine and she cried out in pain.

Her cry echoed around the cave, dispersing more of the mist. Below the cruel, light eyes emerged a mouthful of dagger-sized white fangs; a curious forked tongue poking through.

She backed away, but those eyes and fangs kept growing closer; shining cold amusement and drooling venom. Drops puddled on the floor beside her, hissing with steam and eroding the rock.

You’ve been the queen of this domain too long. Arrogant, loud-mouthed, lonely little girl daring to speak to gods…you’ve been a living blasphemy. But now…

She couldn’t move. Couldn’t fight. She could only watch as those fangs opened wide to surround her.

Now I think you’ll make a nice appetizer, don’t you —

—

— Darkness.

——

Barbara practically leapt out of bed as she woke up, gasping. Drenched in cold sweat, clawed fingers scrambling at the edge of the duvet.

She braced her shaking hands on either side of herself and breathed deep, forcing her blurred vision to swim into focus.

It’s only a nightmare, she reminded herself. Only a nightmare brought on by the excess hormones. It’s not real, there’s not a monster out to eat me, it’s not real…

“Babs?”

From the other side of the bed, Dick lifted his head. He blinked a few times, trying to clear the sleep from his eyes.

“Nightmare.” She shifted back down, rolling onto her side.

Through the windows, the sky was still dirty black-blue, punctuated with the rooftops and the
occasional blinking light of an airplane. It couldn’t have been later than four in the morning, at the most.

“Joker?”

Though mostly asleep, Dick still had enough ingrained knowledge to predict her nightmares. Some were about villains from her old Batgirl days. Most had to do with more contemporary foes and the fear of loss of her loved ones. The worst were about that horrible night, and the miserable months that followed where she was alone and powerless.

He understood those just as well as he understood the ones about losing love. After all, he had similar dreams about Catalina.

Just thinking about that made her move closer and wrap her arms around him.

“No,” she breathed. “No Joker.”

He relaxed slightly.

“But…who…”

“A monster.” He started up, clearly concerned. She began stroking his hair, as if it’d been him who’d had the nightmare. “I was alone, a priestess in a cave…no one that I loved was there with me. I had to face some dragon alone, and there was nothing I could do against it. All I’ve done, all I’ve become, for nothing.”

He pulled her closer, burying his face in the crook of her shoulder and neck.

“That’s not going to happen to you,” he mumbled. “I know how awful those kinds of dreams are, but it wasn’t real. So many people love you, and you can do so much.”

“But what if one day it’s not enough?” she worried aloud. “I’m not the most stable person as it is, and I think if some day I lost a lot of the people I love or lost control to the hands of some bad guy… I’d lose myself, too.”

He was quiet for a moment, just letting her touch him and ground herself.

“You thought you lost yourself when you lost your legs and lost Batgirl. But you didn’t. You should have faith in yourself, Barbara.”

“I try,” she choked out, “and most days, I’m on top of the world. My life is good; I’m happy with it. But the bad old days, where I had nothing to live for, sometimes they creep back in and remind me of what my life was like then. I don’t know if I can survive that again. I don’t want my life to change.”

He had no response to that.

“You don’t have to fix these thoughts, Dick. Just be here with me.”

“Of course I’ll be here with you. I’m never going to leave you.”

It was a stupid promise to make, with their history and in their line of work. But she didn’t argue the point.

“Okay,” she sighed. “Go back to sleep. I’ll be fine.”
“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Then, “Please. You’ll still be with me, and I don’t want you to be exhausted tomorrow.”

Finally, he allowed the exertion from long patrols and their earlier — better — part of the night to pull him back into sleep.

As he drifted off, she held him close, watching the yellow beacon of the Bat-Signal light the cold night through her window. She knew that she was safe; that she had her loved ones nearby and that someone trustworthy would be on the job tonight, even if the innermost family were occupied with something else.

But nonetheless, she doubted that she would be going back to sleep that night.

“So let me get this straight. Despite the fact that he knows about the death rate, the trauma, Bruce’s paranoia-slash-strangerphobia, and worst of all, my brothers, Luke still wants a costume and a name?”

“I keep telling him it’s a bad idea. He knows the risks…and he’s not very good at coming up with names. Come on. Batwing? That’s what you guys call the plane.”

Tim chuckled, despite himself, getting a couple curious looks from the other people in line.

“Does he really have a crush on Barbara, though?”

“Probably not.” Tam paused. “But if he does, kinda hard to blame him. Older lady with a baby or no, she’s cute.”

“Just wait. One of these days, you guys are going to experience her in one of her moods, the kind every Robin meets her in, and then we’ll see if you pass the Do You Really Love Her? test.”

“One of her moods?”

“Yeah, she’s got a few of those.” Tim paused, glancing around the shop to the clock on the wall. “So hey, I’m pulling double shift tonight both downtown and at her place, so after I order, I’m gonna be AWOL for the rest of the day. ‘Cause, you know, the regular work today wasn’t lengthy enough.”

“You’re a Wayne. How much regular work were you even doing?”

“Plenty. I do plenty of work. If it involves putting on pants and having to leave my room, whatever they assign me is work.”

“Just be glad you were able to skip college. Here, I take a fifteen minute break from studying, and I’m failing ten classes, even though I’m only taking six.”

Tim sighed in sympathy.

“Want me to run by your house with some donuts? I’m already taking a box to Steph and Cass before I head to Babs’ place.”

“God, yes, please.” Tam sighed in anticipation. “Speaking of college, aka purgatory, your being
busy tonight is actually pretty convenient. I’ve got a twenty-page paper due tomorrow, and my mom’s already starting to give me the evil eye. And while you’re at the whatchamacallit —”

“Clock Tower.”

“Yeah, that. You can check in with your Teen Titans buddies while you’re there.”

“I do miss them,” he confessed. “I haven’t been able to go to San Francisco as often as I want in the last couple months.”

“Right, there you go. Also, maybe if we minimize the phone calls for a while, your big brother with all the guns will stop calling us ‘Timtam.’”

Tim groaned so loudly that half the patrons of that Dunkin’ Donuts turned and looked at him.

“Jason.”

“Yeah, that one.” She paused. “He kinda scares me.”

Tim wondered if he should tell her that Jason had tried to kill him more than once, successfully shot him, that the reoccurring nickname “Replacement” was an insult and not familial ribbing, and the only apology thus far for any of that had been an I’m Sorry card he’d bought at Walgreen’s with a coupon for one free ice cream inside. He still wasn’t quite sure which event Jason had been apologizing for.

Though admittedly, the ice cream had been good.

“Jason kinda scares a lot of people, don’t worry. Just…stay away from the weapons. Which are on all of him. Okay, you know what, just keep a five-foot radius from him at all times.”

“That is not what Steph told me.”

“Look, I still don’t know how Steph manages to get along so well with my family, and I’m pretty sure it has something to do with demon magic, so it’s hard for most people to relate to anything she says about my brothers.”

“You know that you’re a part of your family too, right?”

He paused.

“…What’s your point?”

“My point is, go get me some coffee and donuts. I have a grade-point average to maintain in this class.”

“…Bye, Tamara.”

“Bye!”

As her image vanished from the phone screen, he spent too long staring after it.

“Maybe Babs is having better luck with relationships and work than I am.”
Barbara’s eyes seemed to blur over as she attempted to navigate her headset and her screen all at the same time. The numbers blinked incessantly at her, and the com’s wires had gotten fried, so her teammates’ words were interspersed with soft static. After the early morning routine had passed and Dick had gone to work, her long day had seemed to take on more of a dream-like state than her actual dream had been.

She rubbed her sore eyelids and wished miserably to be allowed caffeine.

“Huntress, stop arguing and listen to me for a goddamn minute. I can get you the blueprints of the building. Not only that, but I can cast a simulation of the blueprints in my living room. I can bypass the security in less time than it takes us to have this argument. What I cannot do is predict every single goddamn thing the people inside the building decide to do, including deviate from their guard shifts and change without checking in with me, the woman attempting to take them down, first, because much as I would like to be I am not omniscient!”

Helena abruptly fell silent. For a long few minutes, as the three other women crouched in the bushes opposite the compound they had just been chased from, the only sound from the other end was their heavy breathing and the occasional shout from the security teams.

“So…are we gonna forgo stealth and charge in guns and arrows blazing, or try again another night?” Zinda finally asked.

“If we try again another night, they’ll have moved the girls to another hideout,” Dinah pointed out. “Then we’ll have to search for them all over again.”

“But if we charge in, they might move them anyway while we're fighting the guards off.”

“I’ll just scream and then you guys can run past while I’m beating the guards up.”

“Canary, you do realize you just summarized, like, ninety percent of all your plans in a single sentence?” Helena asked, recovering her voice.

“It works, doesn’t it?”

“…Usually.”

“When did that not work?”


“Don’t forget São Paulo this February,” Zinda agreed.

“I thought we agreed to never mention São Paulo ever again.”

“You agreed.”

Barbara was tempted to yell at them to get their minds back on the mission, but she knew how scared and angry they already were. Their stupid banter was their coping mechanism in the middle of a stressful mission just as much as it was the family’s.

Instead, she pinched the bridge of her nose, tilting her head and body back. The seat groaned with the sudden exertion; leather sagging under her weight.

“If I were all of you,” she said, voice ragged, “I would go with Canary’s plan. There’s a risk in
attempting to rescue the girls now, but there’s an even greater risk in waiting longer. By the time we can reorganize and find them again, they’ll probably have been split up and sold.”

“Alright.” Helena still sounded wary, but didn’t argue anymore.

“Oracle, are you alright?” Dinah asked. “You sound…”

“Not really. I’ll tell you in detail after the three of you get the girls away.”

“Deal. We’ll keep you wired.”

She sat back up and turned down the volume on her headset as her teammates took some deep breaths, then the roaring rattle of gunfire, the rapid *thwip-twip* of a crossbow, kick-grunts, and some very masculine wails abruptly filled up the background.

She refocused her attention on the screens before her. Her email revealed that her father was doing his best to clear Jason’s name from Pedro Di Nero’s murder, but that with half his forensics team either gone permanently or taking leave, it was difficult to get anything through. The news outlets revealed a strained Lucius being harangued by Vicki Vale, who kept asking him if he planned on taking any sort of leave himself. Louis had left her a message reminding her that the library needed her to sort through the next shipment of orders. Lastly, when she checked her tapped cameras at the BHPD, both Dick and his partner were out on the streets for the day.

Sighing, she was about to turn her attention back to the Birds, should they need virtual assistance, when a notification on her system started chiming insistently.

To her surprise and horror, she realized that it was her tracker.

The hacker and murderer…he was putting something out onto the interwebs.

She was just about to pull up the tracker to stop whatever files he was about to leak when her screen went black.

She tried to reboot. No response.

She started to wait for it to come back. But…nothing.

The seconds ticked by…a cold drop of sweat trickled down the back of her neck. The explosions and screaming in her ear seemed to fade into white noise.

Then she saw the words.

Appearing across her screen, slowly, glowing white letters formed themselves.

*I know you’re tracking my signal, Oracle. But — rather careless of you — you should’ve known that if you could latch onto my signal, I could latch onto yours. I may not be able to know who or where you are yet, but I am still with you.*

Her insides seemed to compress. The faint flutters in her lower belly felt like thunderclaps upon her spine.

She clutched the desk, knuckles turning white under the pressure. Her shoulders trembled.

_Calm down_, she told herself. _He’s made a classic mistake…revealing to me exactly what he knows just for the sake of bragging. Try to find out more. The more you know, the likelier it’ll be that you’ll be able to find a weakness._
She tried the keyboard. Below the white words, her own green letters took shape.

*What do you want?*

She wasn’t certain that he’d actually respond. But only seconds later, the typing resumed.

*At the moment, not much. You know who I am and what I can do. I will have you know that your shadowy posturing, and that of the Bat and his offspring, does not intimidate me. I am safe from you on the interwebs. I am safe from the Bats, simply because I’m not a fool like most of the killers they chase. Even months later, none of you are any closer to exposing me. At the moment, this is satisfying enough.*

Barbara ground her teeth.

*I should rephrase: why are you talking to me? I’m your enemy.*

*Exactly. You’re the only one who actually stands in my way of taking down the Bat. The others may provide mild amusement from time to time, but you’re my only true challenge. Which will be all the sweeter when you inevitably fall too. No matter how skilled you appear to be, this will happen.*

“Not fucking likely,” she said out loud.

*Don’t count on it. How exactly do you plan on taking me down? You said it yourself: we’re as close to being equals as you’re willing to admit.*

*I’m not stupid enough to tell you my plan, woman.*

*‘Woman’?!*

*But no matter how much you act mysterious and invincible, you’re not without vulnerabilities. All I have to do is find out what those are, after which, taking you down will be easy.*

Barbara shook, fists pressing against the wood grain of her desk. It was nearly a minute before she was able to unclench her hands and put fingers to the keyboard.

*You want to talk about vulnerabilities? You have no idea who I am, or what I’ve encountered and lost before you. Whatever you want to do to me, I guarantee I’ve already had to face it. If you think you can defeat me with cheap tricks and a few meager blows, you picked the wrong challenge.*

A minute passed. She began to wonder if she’d actually managed to intimidate him, or if she’d overstepped herself. Had she accidentally revealed something he could use against her…?

*Maybe you’re tough. You’ve clearly experienced a lot, that’s for certain. But I will tell you, my days of just killing civilians are over.*

He paused just long enough for her to realize what he meant by that, then finished:

*Also, you may not know who I am, either. But as I call you Oracle, you may call me Python.*

The screen blinked twice, then the type vanished. In its place blazed an ivory insignia in the image of a snakehead with bared fangs.

The symbol burned itself into her memory, calling back her dream in full. Alone in her den of metal and screens, she could nearly smell the vaporous cave…and feel the slow-burning venom of the serpent against her skin.
Python’s insignia vanished. In its place, her regular screens appeared, as if nothing had happened. But Barbara could taste acid in the back of her throat; feel her heart racing through her veins. Her muscles were tight with the desire to…she wasn’t sure. The pressure on the desk offered no relief, and it seemed seconds before she’d end up breaking something important.

“Oracle?”

The soft sound of Dinah’s voice dissolved a touch of her anger and despair. Reaching up with one shaking hand, she turned up the volume on her headset.

“Yes, Canary?”

“We got all the girls on the Aerie One. Wheels up in t-minus thirty seconds.”

In the background, she could hear the terrified wails and babbling of the young human trafficking victims; as well as the faint shouting of whatever staff was still capacitated and the roar of the plane engine.

“Good job, Canary.”

“It’s not over yet.” Then: “Blackhawk! Hurry up!”

Zinda yelled something that sounded very unladylike, then the roar of the plane grew to a crescendo. One of the girls screamed, and another gun fired.

Barbara’s shoulders clenched.

“Are they —?” She felt sick with protectiveness on behalf of the scared children.

“Everyone’s okay. Helena just opened the door long enough to shoot the girls’ head handler. While we were taking off.” The crescendo faded into a whine. “We’re airborne now.”

“She has got to stop opening the door while the plane’s in the air.” She collapsed forward; the entire working half of her body folding in on itself as she dropped her head into one hand. “But I’m glad you’re all okay.”

“Yeah, me too.” There was a metallic thump, and she pictured Dinah dropping to the floor of the plane; tights torn, maybe one of the heels on her boots broken or her jacket ripped. “We’ll fly all of them back to their families, but that might take a while. In the meantime, they can crash with me, and Zinda can park the plane in the Arrow Cave.”

“Ollie’s gonna love that.”

“Ollie can stick his quiver up his ass.” As she said that, there rose a quiet, almost tentative giggling that didn’t sound like any of the Birds.

“Do you have an audience, Dinah?”

“Well, I can’t exactly tell them to go away. They were only just saved from a lifetime of god knows what, after all. Besides, the plane doesn’t have much space.”

“Are you talking to your boyfriend?” a young voice — maybe eleven or so — intoned.

“She wishes she were that lucky. Again.”
Despite her encounter with Python, Barbara managed to find enough energy to roll her eyes. On the other end, there was a simultaneous, bolder resurgence of giggling and ooh-ing.

“Okay but seriously, girls. I’m going to talk to this nice lady now about some personal stuff, and if you hear anything you don’t understand, that’s fine, but please don’t ask questions until I hang up, alright?”

There was a soft murmuring as the children settled in beside their rescuer, finally safe.

As she rolled away from her desk towards the drawer where she kept her workout gear, Barbara hoped that it would stay that way for them.

“Don’t come any closer!”

As the three of them stood at the end of the alleyway, the teenage boy on the other end of the gun shied away, trying to steady his breath. The man’s free arm, patterned with dozens of gang tattoos — Cyrillic slogans, insignias, Юрий♡Валентина, an image of Ares choking Wonder Woman with her own lasso — wrapped around the boy’s neck.

“I not telling you nothing about Odessa Mob, Police Man. I will escape again. So come no closer, or civilian gets bullet in his brain.”

The boy was about sixteen or seventeen, wearing faded black jeans, running shoes, and a yellow hoodie. His hair was close-cropped, and he looked tired and slightly underweight. The muzzle was pressed directly against his temple, but the way he looked at Dick intended that he feared the police officer just as much as he feared the gang member actively threatening his life.

He wanted to hit a wall.

“Sir, let the civilian go,” he growled, grip tightening on his own gun and silently wishing the other cops would come back. “He has nothing to do with this.”

“You want me to let civilian go?” the man yelled. “Only way I let him go is if you let me go.” The gun was shoved roughly against the boy’s head, who tried to jerk away.

Dick tried to steady his own breath. He was reminded painfully of all the times the younger Robins had been held hostage and threatened by villains, of the little girls the Birds of Prey were trying to save from human trafficking, of the murdered civilian boy, of Jason’s and Steph’s funerals, of all the Gotham kids he’d seen over the years who’d fallen through the cracks…

He willed himself to not lose his temper and start shooting.

“Oh. Just let the kid go.”

The man’s hold loosened, the muzzle falling slightly from the boy’s head.

“Look.”

He clicked the safety on the handgun back on, slowly setting it on the ground. As he straightened up, he carefully held his hands up; trying not to let the other man see his gritted teeth or narrowed eyes.
The arm around the kid’s neck went slack…

Just enough so that the kid kicked him roughly in the legs, then squirmed loose and belted him across the face. The gun went flying.

Dick barely had time to be impressed by the boy’s form before he ducked and rolled behind a Dumpster; crouching into a ball to minimize himself as a target. The mobster looked around desperately for his gun, before spying it in the corner of the alley and diving for it —

— But not before Dick was on him, knocking him flat and crashing his face against the dirty concrete.

“Next time you’re trying to negotiate with a cop,” he growled, jerking the man’s wrists into handcuffs with more force than necessary, “I recommend that you —” he yanked him to his feet, “— don’t threaten children.”

Right then was when Rachel Kosakowski, her partner Jeffrey Yoong, and Ayesha came running to the mouth of the dank alleyway, the rest of the mobsters accompanying them in chains.

“Jesus, Grayson, it shouldn’t have taken you that long to get one guy.”

“He had a hostage,” he said shortly, handing the last mobster off to Rachel by his tattooed arm. “A teenager.” His voice softened somewhat.

“Son of a bitch,” Rachel said sympathetically, grabbing the man by his handcuffed wrist. “Is the kid okay?”

“Not a scratch, thank god. I, uh…” He looked over to the Dumpster. “I’m gonna stay behind and talk to him, if you guys don’t mind.”

Jeffrey frowned, and looked like he was about to say something about it, before the women each shot him a look — Rachel imploring, Ayesha you’d-better-or-else.

“Alright. But don’t take too long, okay man?”

He nodded.

The other cops, hands on their perps’ cuffed wrists, started back towards the cruisers.

“Yoong, you know Grayson’s always sensitive about stuff with kids,” Rachel told Jeffrey as they walked away.

“Shit. Yeah. No wonder he got so pissed.”

“There’s that, and he’s had something on his mind all morning. I think his girlfriend’s going through some hard stuff.”

“Stuff that’s harder than building a small human inside her?”

“I don’t know, it’s not like she’s talking to me.”

Dick made his way over to the Dumpster. The boy had unclasped his hands from around his head, but was still tense; eyes full of contemplation. Now that the situation was calmer, he realized that the boy looked oddly familiar.

“It’s okay. I’m not gonna hurt you.” As he knelt down, he left his gun where he’d put it earlier,
instead resting his hands on his knees. “Look, I’m sorry if I scared you. I got four younger siblings, you know. And my girlfriend’s having a baby. I wasn’t mad at you; I was mad at the guy putting a gun to your head.”

The boy was still quiet. He exhaled softly.

“I get that you don’t trust cops. Before I got a uniform of my own, when I was out by myself, I used to get stopped by the ones in Gotham all the time. And they wouldn’t put in an investigation after my parents were murdered. Said it was an accident, even though everyone knew it wasn’t. I was just lucky that Batman and Robin were able to catch the man that killed them.”

The boy’s eyes flicked to the name on his badge, then his eyes grew wide with recognition.

“No way. Dick Grayson?” He exhaled. “So this is what you did once you were done with the super-rich-child-prodigy life.”

“Well, actually, first I ran away to San Francisco. But, long story that involves a failed engagement and lot of bad fashion choices short, it didn’t work out.” He offered his hand.

The boy took it, clambering to his feet.

“My name’s Duke. Duke Thomas.”

“Nice. So, uh, Duke…where are your parents? I need to take you back to them.”

Duke’s newfound enthusiasm abruptly wilted. His shoulders slumped inwards; head drooping.

“Oh.”

“You remember last year when Joker suddenly kidnapped a big group of civilians, then gassed them before anyone knew what was happening? And how Batman was able to get them all out afterwards, but several of the people there had already overdosed on the gas?”

It had been all over the local news. But for the person who’d actually been Batman, been on the scene afterwards, and had tried in vain to comfort the affected civilians after they’d succumbed to the insanity the gas brought on, it was far fresher in memory.

Now Dick realized why the boy looked so familiar.

“That’s what happened to your folks?”

Duke nodded.

“I’m in the Gotham foster system now. One of the social workers thought it would be a good idea to take some of us on a ‘break’ outside the city. Though no offense, this hasn’t been much of a break so far.”

“None taken.” He swallowed around the lump in his throat. “I’m sorry about your parents. And I’m sorry Batman wasn’t able to find out and get there in time.”

“It’s not your fault.” Duke rubbed his hand over his hair. “And you know, it’s not Batman’s fault, either. I mean, the sidekicks and ex-sidekicks are the coolest — I’m actually kind of hoping I’ll see Nightwing while I’m here — but Batman’s still okay with me.” He picked at the strings on his hoodie. “His only problem, that I can see, is that he just waits around and worries a little too much. I can’t do that. All I can do is go ahead and try, I guess. And hope that I’ll be lucky enough to have
Someone with me when I do. Thanks though, man.”

Still reeling from being called cool (he was never going to get used to that), and from Duke’s heartfelt words, Dick managed a smile.

“No problem. You should talk to my girlfriend sometime.”

“Maybe. But if I don’t see you again, my advice for her is: if you guys are having a kid, you should stay away from the Joker.”

“Trust me, that’s not going to be a problem for her.”

Putting a hand on the boy’s shoulder, Dick escorted him out of the alleyway, his thoughts on Barbara’s fresh bout of anxiety…and whether he could make an appearance as Nightwing at one of the kids’ homes in Gotham, and if it would make them feel better.

“…Well, this fucking sucks.”

“Way to sum it up.” Barbara struck away the hologram, barely ducking a blow from another. The wooden escrima sticks in her hand were slippery with sweat; her t-shirt like a second skin against her torso. She’d put the training holos on extra hard mode, the kind Wonder Woman or Big Barda or Cass usually used. The hologram warriors were kicking her ass, but she was still working up a braindead blind sweat, and in that moment, not much else mattered.

“Miss Black Canary, what does ‘fucking’ mean?” one of the littlest girls in the background asked innocently. An older girl coughed.

“I’ll tell you when you’re older,” Dinah replied. Then, her voice redirected back through the headset. “So…what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know yet.” The next blow clipped her across the jaw. She wheeled herself away, panting.

“But whatever it is, I’m going to need to do my best. This guy isn’t going to settle for me and Bruce, you know that. It won’t just be a kid who looks like someone I love that he goes for next.”

“Yeah, color us terrified.” Her best friend’s voice was hard. “It’s you, Babs. I’m not turning tail just because some creepy guy established himself as your enemy, and I know none of the family will, either. Which brings me to my next question: how do you know it’s a guy?”

“The way he talks. Imagine every condescending, arrogant, sexist brat who thinks he knows everything that you’ve ever met. No woman I’ve met talks like that.”

“‘Met’? I’ve dated a few of those.” She laughed hollowly. “But I know what you mean.”

Barbara caught a strike across the chest and pushed back with all her might. Her shoulders strained under the effort.

“I need to do something right again,” she murmured. Then said aloud: “Just…in light of everything…please tell me the little girls are okay, at least.”

“Don’t worry, mama bat. They’re shaken up, but okay. Apparently, their handlers’ orders were to have them unscathed before they could arrange a buy.” The chatter on the other end grew slightly
subdued. Barbara pictured battle-fresh Dinah pulling the girls close, maybe stroking the hair of a couple of them. “We’re actually gonna be landing in Star pretty soon, so I might have to put them in the guest room and kick Connor out onto the couch. I only hope that none of the other Arrow kids decide to drop by in the next week.”

Barbara rolled backwards and hit the off-switch, the holograms dissipating.

“Good,” she sighed, rubbing a towel across her skin and reaching for her water bottle. “I’m glad we were able to work that out for them.”

“Me too.” She paused. “How are you going to tell the others about…?”

Before she could answer, she heard the sound of the front door opening and shutting.

“I guess I’ll find out now. Talk to you soon, if this all doesn’t kill me first.”

“Yeah.” There was an odd inflection in Dinah’s voice. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

Tim wasn’t quite sure what he’d been expecting, but Barbara fresh from a workout was surprisingly normal. Taken by it, he almost missed the blue circles, like inky thumbprints, below her eyes.

“Got you coffee after work.” He offered her the decaf-marked Dunkin’ Donuts cup. “It’s not Alfred’s, but it’s still bona fide New Jersey.”

“Timothy Jackson Drake, you are a boon to your family,” she exhaled, setting aside the freshly empty water bottle and accepting the cup.

“Your family?” He echoed.

She paused, brilliant eyes watching him over the rim of her cup.

“You and the rest of your siblings are family to me, Tim. And not just because of your brother’s baby.”

He felt himself breaking into a genuine smile.

“I know. And it’s been really cool having you as a sister.”

“Thank you. And look at you, emoting like a human being.”

“Jesus, you sound like Tam and Steph.”

“Wrong. I’m not Jesus, I’m God herself.”

“She said to the atheist.”

Barbara smiled a little bit through her exhaustion.

“Well, as far as family interactions go, this one’s turning out comparatively civil.”

“No kidding.” He thought of his brothers.
Taking a sip of his own drink, Tim paused to take in the rest of her disheveled appearance. Her face was still red and shining with sweat, but it was clear that her exhaustion had little to do with her overly-intense workout. He knew both exercising-your-body-too-hard tired, and sleep-deprived-and-overworked tired, and it was obvious to him that she was the latter.

“So, sister mine, have you made any headway in the case that you obviously lost sleep over last night?”

Barbara’s smile faded.

“That’s not why I lost sleep.” She wheeled out of the training room, leaving him tailing behind into her workspace.

“Um…you didn’t lose sleep having hinky sex with my brother, did you?”

“Of course not. I went to bed at a reasonable time after having hinky sex with your brother.”

He was fairly sure that she wasn’t joking.

“Let’s just say that the family’s chronic nightmares kicked in with full force early this morning.” She turned the computer back on, then started typing. “But that’s not important. I asked you to come over this morning so we could review findings, but something’s come up.”

Tim’s grip on his drink went slack as she pulled up lines worth of conversation.

“You’re kidding me,” he breathed.

“I wish I were.” She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

He leaned in close, pulse thrumming, eyes skimming over the conversation between her and their mysterious hacker-killer — a conversation, like it was nothing for a dangerous criminal and a family member to have.

“Python?” he asked, keeping his voice calm.

“It’s a reference to Greek mythology.” The lines of text were reflected in the lenses of her glasses, obscuring her eyes. “Python was the name of the dragon that lived in the caves of Delphi, one of the curses sent by Hera to punish the Titaness Leto for sleeping with Zeus. Leto’s son Apollo eventually killed Python and afterwards installed the Pythia in Delphi — a woman imbued with the spirit of prophecy. The Oracle.”

“I appreciate that…but the name Python, for a villain, still sounds like it was made up by some two-bit teenage fanfiction writer.”

“Well, I didn’t make it up,” Barbara sighed. “And whether you think it’s cheesy or not, it’s part of a point he’s trying to drive home. That he believes the position I’m currently occupying, as the greatest, anonymous, technology power…is rightfully his. That I’m just a usurper.” She rested her chin on her hand, gaze locked on the screen.

Hesitantly, Tim set his unoccupied hand on her shoulder. Her gaze didn’t break.

“Well, uh…” He struggled for words. *Dick and Steph are so much better at this kind of thing.* “I know all about being a usurper to someone’s rightful position —” *Thanks, Jason,* “— and Barbara, you…you established yourself. This guy doesn’t have anything on you.”
“That’s not what’s making me uncomfortable, Tim.” She finally turned to face him. “He invaded my space and threatened the people I love. This tower is my home, and these computers are my…not to be corny, but they are my superpower, of sorts.” She patted the keyboard. “I use them to do good. Everything that he’s threatening, trying to take over, is part of who I am.”

“I get that.” He pulled up a chair and sat beside her. “I really do get that. Both the times I had to stop being Robin, I…” He struggled to put words to the buried feelings, “…I felt lost. Like who I was was threatened. Maybe I was just Jason’s replacement, but I did good as Robin. And it was everything to me. Red Robin? That’s just another knockoff.” His voice was bitter. “I guess as far as my brothers are concerned, that’s all I’ll ever be. But you’re an original, and this guy can’t take that away from you.”

“Don’t give me that, Tim Drake.”

He looked her in the eye. Her brows were furrowed, her voice sharp.

“I understand that you’re depressed, and that you lost an identity that was important to you.” He realized with a jolt that she was describing her own loss; the loss of her legs, her own mental stability, and of being Batgirl. “But you can’t go back. You can only hold on like hell to what’s really important, and what really makes you, you. You have your second father, your friends, your boyfriend, and your sister back again. You’re still intelligent and accomplished. You still do good. You defeated Ra’s al Ghul, for god’s sake. You have so many good things in your life, and you shouldn’t let go or give up…even if you’re hurt and afraid.”

He looked back at her, brushing a few strands of hair behind his ear.

“Are you talking to me, or to yourself?”

Barbara’s gaze didn’t break.

“No, I already know not to give up on a cause, even though I’m afraid. But I’ve still had had a problem of letting go of people for that very same reason.”

“I guess that makes us both hypocrites.”

“I guess it does.” She turned back to the screen. “Can you help me compile digital evidence? I’m going to try to evaluate our killer’s motives, to try and figure out who he’s going to go after next.”

“And I thought evaluating people I actually care about was hard.” He watched the screen flicker as her fingers fell into that comforting rhythm against the keyboard.

“And afterwards,” she continued, pausing to take a sip of her decaf coffee, “I’ll put you on the line so you can talk to the Titans. I think Bart, Cassie, and Kon miss you.”

Tim got to his feet, then bent down and navigated his body around the armrests of her chair so he could hug her.

The tension in her shoulders didn’t leave, but she did hug him back. He felt the warmth of her core, and the power in her upper body from all the wheeling around and workouts. Part of him was horrified by how sticky she still was from exercise, but he managed to quash his disgust.

“And Dick still loves you a lot,” she said into his shoulder. “You should go on patrol with him tonight.”

His heart leapt, but his face didn’t change.
“I won’t be getting in the way of any more hinky sex?”

“Okay, I don’t know how much sex you guys think we’re having, but the real amount is definitely less. We do other things together, you know.”

He pulled away and looked at her with a perfectly straight face.

“That would be a lot easier to take seriously if you weren’t visibly pregnant.”

She drew back, then cuffed him lightly upside the head.

Hiding a newfound smile, Tim rubbed the back of his head, all the while watching her and hoping for a positive change.

Barbara turned back to the screen, clicking her conversation with Python to the bottom of the screen and hoping that it would stay out of mind.

The news feed leapt back into view, revealing an angry crowd congregated outside the central police station. Azrael was attempting to escort a pair of gang members to the door, but was blocked by the protesters. Batwoman was trying to clear a path for them as the reporter chattered on about how long the protest had been going on.

“How can you justify delivering people who break the law into the hands of more people who break the law?” a woman cried out in the background.

“Ma’am, I just —”

“You’re no better than the rest of them!” a man raged. “You’re backed by a criminal, you work with criminals, how can we trust you to keep us safe from them?”

“That’s enough!” Kate bellowed at a pair of college kids attempting to pry the gang members out of Jean-Paul’s hands. “First off, Lucius Fox is not a [censored] criminal you ignorant [censored], and unless you want to do our jobs for us, get off our [censored]! [Censored]!”

“Tensions are rising in front of the main facility of the Gotham Police Department,” the reporter chirped, which Barbara thought was rather like pointing out that water was wet. “Amongst demands for accountability from Commissioner Gordon and the removal of the corrupt officers, the protesters are also demanding explanations from Batman and the extended, quote, Bat-family, unquote.”

The camera cut to a young couple in cheap clothes, the mother holding a crying toddler.

“They say they’re tryin’ to help us,” the mother said, rocking her daughter in place. “And yeah, they’ve done lots of good stuff for us over the years. But that doesn’t mean they’re above bein’ criticized! And the facts are, it’s still not safe to live here. Those cops, they make it less safe. The Bats are supposed to be helpin’ us…but right now, they don’t seem to be doin’ much good.”

They cut back to the reporter.

“Well, there you have it, Bob. As no one, not even the employees of the great Wayne Enterprises, are exempt from danger or possible illegal activity, the city seems to be needing more from its mysterious heroes —”
Tim reached over and minimized the news feed.

“You’re gonna give us both anxiety, watching that.”

Barbara rested the tips of her fingers against her temples, staring at the wall of data now before her, the reminder of that man lurking, blinking red, in the bottom of the screen.

“I think it’s a little late to be worried about my mental state, Tim.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys don't mind that I tweaked Duke's backstory a bit. Also, you're gonna want to remember that he's here, because he's gonna come back towards the climax of this story.
This one's a beast, you guys. Let me tell you, shit's going DOWN right now. But we're finally making real emotional progress, so that should be satisfying at least.

Also, apologies to those primarily following this story for Dickbabs, as this pretty much entirely focuses on the platonic relationships. We'll be right back with our regularly scheduled romance soon, don't worry.

(Warnings: discussion of infertility, graphic violence, brief ableism)

**The Hierophant (Tarot):**
- Upright — Religion, group identification, conformity, tradition, beliefs.
- Reversed — Restriction, challenging the status quo.

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**December**

“So Cass, does my moral support during your dance practices count as my present to you this year?”

“No.”

“Damn.”

The three women clambered out of Barbara’s car, making their way along the white streets. Ever so often, one of the pedestrians in dark coats would bustle past the trio like a overgrown, skittish raven. In contrast to this monochrome palette, advertisements and multicolored lights adorned every storefront and window in the neighborhood. Every slab of gray concrete or black steel had become a bauble upon a very strange Christmas tree.

The only exception to this was the Tower at the end of the street, plain and unadorned aside from the glowing clock face; drawing the three women forward.

“I can’t believe you haven’t bought your holiday presents yet, Steph,” Barbara sighed, her breath coalescing into fog. She wheeled herself over the snowy sidewalk with some difficulty, shoulders bunching under the navy fabric of her coat. “Hanukkah’s in a week, and Christmas is just the day after that.”
“We can’t all be you, Ms. Somehow-Manages-To-Get-All-Her-Shopping-Done-On-Black-Friday.” Steph pulled her violet jacket tighter around her, pink scarf flapping behind her like flamingo wings. “The way you muscled your way past those lines? Even Diana would’ve had a hard time in your place.”

“Diana is not you,” Cass informed her best friend, and earned a glare in response. She smiled to herself, the gym bag holding her leotard and shoes swinging beside her legs. As the snowflakes continued to fall, they quietly gathered into a circle on her dark hair and black-clad shoulders, making her look like she was wearing a white tiara and collar necklace.

“But anyway,” Steph continued, swiftly regaining her cheer, “it really is too bad all the guys had to stay at the Manor today, ’cause you killed that routine.”

“Don’t…flatter me,” Cass said, though her smile didn’t fade. “Only been taking lessons two weeks.”

“No, she’s right,” Barbara argued. “You’re a natural, and we all know you love what you’re doing. We should’ve signed you up for this years ago.”

Under the barrage of support, Cass ducked her head, blushing. A stray snowflake alighted down on her nose, just adding to the charm of it all.

“Didn’t have room for anything but work, years ago.”

“Yeah, even now we practically had to wrestle you out of the Cave.” Steph wound the ends of her scarf once more around her shoulders, then put an arm around Cass’s. “It’s not a crime to put pleasure before work sometimes. The grunt work is what we pay other people to do.”

Barbara raised her eyebrows.

“You can’t talk. You swiped Bette’s mafia case right out from under her the other day and spent the afternoon beating up low-level thugs because you got a bad grade on your exam. And after I offered to let you relax at my place instead!”

“Beating up thugs is very relaxing!”

“Agreed.”

The younger women sealed their agreement with a crisp high-five, ignoring Barbara’s obligatory eye roll.

“You two worry me sometimes.”

As she approached the base of the Clock Tower, she began rifling through her purse for her keys; so preoccupied that at first she didn’t think about the red rental Saab convertible parked right in front of the building. But as she was posed to open the door, she realized that none of her neighbors would be caught dead with a car like that, and as far as she knew all their distant relatives had already arrived for the holidays.

“That’s weird,” she muttered.

“What?” The other two caught up, peering around.

Barbara kept her gaze on the empty car.

“Probably nothing. But when we go in, I’m going to check to see if there’s anything weird on the
cameras or if someone tripped my security system, just to be safe.”

The ride up to her living space was considerably subdued; the only sounds zippers buzzing downwards, buttons snapping open, and fabric rustling out of place. By the time they arrived, they’d all shed their winter wear and had one hand on where they were hiding their weapons.

Barbara’s gaze found the door. None of her alarms had been tripped, but the door was unlocked and left slightly open. On the other side, a shadow moved.

Her pulse jackhammered.

She carefully slid her escrima sticks out from under her armrest, then turned to the others.

*Cover me*, she mouthed.

They nodded.

One hand wheeling herself forward, the other gripping an escrima, she moved on the door. The shadow flickered, and she could vaguely hear footsteps and high-pitched muttering.

Behind her, the girls shifted into place. Barbara took a deep breath…then burst through the door.

Steph followed, yelling, and Cass swept fluidly into the room —

Causing the bathrobe-clad blond woman pattering from the kitchen to yelp and drop her armful of full shopping bags.

“God damn it, Barb; is this how you greet all your houseguests these days!?”

She caught her breath; escrima clattering to the floor.

“*Dinah*?”

“In the flesh, minus a little urine.”

The Black Canary herself bent down and retrieved her bags. Her hair was damp and looked freshly dyed, and she was wearing her favorite fluffy bathrobe and a sheet mask that gave her the appearance of a yuppie ghost. Her toenails were a lacquered crimson.

“Jesus, I go to get a snack and I get the full Batgirl Welcome Wagon.”

Steph turned red, shuffling her coat under her arms and setting aside her batarangs.

“Sorry, Dinah. We’ve been kind of on edge recently.”

“So I’ve noticed.” Dinah swept her wet hair over her shoulder with her unoccupied hand, then gave Steph a look that might’ve been sympathetic. It was hard to tell under the mask. “I’m not actually mad, what with all the shit that’s been happening here recently. That’s actually why I’m here visiting now.”

“Wait, what?”

“Should be here for at least a week. Ten days at the most. If your mentor doesn’t mind me crashing on her couch.”

“Oh, um, you should be okay.” Steph blushed harder. “It’s good to see you again, Dinah.”
“You too, kiddo.” The warm smile nearly dislodged the sheet mask, and Stephanie darted back, allowing herself full room to get excited.

Barbara rolled forward to her friend. Her heart had slowed again, but she still couldn’t quite internalize that Dinah had come all the way from Star City just to offer moral support.

“I can’t believe you did this for me — for us,” she said quietly, while Steph gushed in the background about “Black Canary! The Black damn Canary! I actually get to hang out with her without gang wars or friends getting framed for murder!” “I know I’ve been kind of a bitch lately, and all that work —”

“No worries. Zinda flew me over once she had a moment, and I got Kendra and Karen to cover my trips to Sicily and Tampa, so I’ve got about two weeks freed up there. Plus, my civilian job doesn’t start until New Year’s.” She paused. “As for you being a bitch lately, I don’t deny it —”

“Thanks.”

“— But you’re still my best friend, and I still chose to come here, provide moral support, and buy you and your girls presents.” She started rifling through the shopping bags. “Just keep in mind, I still don’t have a steady job yet, so most of this is from the drugstore.”

“It’s…it’s still more than I expected.” Barbara suddenly found it hard to swallow.

The girls bounded over like a pair of excited puppies, peering eagerly into the bags. Cass inhaled sharply, Steph squealed with excitement.

“Skincare stuff! Lotions! Bath salts! Oh my god, I’ve wanted new nail polish for forever — you really are the best superhero.”

Dinah turned slightly pink.

“Well, I don’t know about best…” she chuckled.

“You’re definitely up there,” Barbara said warmly, drawing out a pot of mud mask. “And for that, since you were looking for snacks, I’ll go right back into the snow and go grocery shopping. Again.”

“Yeah, about that,” Dinah said while the girls rifled through the bags in her hands, “I noticed that you have basically nothing in your fridge and cupboards. What’s up with that?”

“Let me put it this way. If you don’t see an edible item in my kitchen, either my doctor won’t let me have it, or I already ate it.”

“She’s not kidding,” Steph chimed in, her hands full of various hues of nail polish. “Alfred hasn’t had this kind of challenge since Wally had that big fight with his wife and had to spend a week at the Manor. Even I wasn’t that bad.”

“You were.”

“How would you know? You weren’t even around then!”

“I know you.”

“Oh for — no manicures for you, Cassandra.”
Paulo Lache didn’t consider himself a bad person. Some days, you just did what was necessary to make a living. The local costumed rogues and crime lords paid good money, what with all the robbing they did, and it was worth all the frankly horrifying things Paulo had seen his employers do over the years. The money even made it possible for his ex-wives to pay his bail a few times, until each of them got sick of it and filed for divorce in turn. The last words of Sheila, the third and latest, before he was shipped off to prison for aiding and abetting, had been, quote:

“Paulo, money can make me look the other way for a lot of the stupid shit men do. But trying to murder a superhero? What the fuck did you think was going to happen, you moron? Also, by the way, I’m taking the dog.”

She had, in fact, taken the dog.

But Paulo was determined that this job would not be like the one with Nightwing and the Bludhaven ex-cop. For one thing, this particular employer didn’t seem to have any connection to the mark that could be traced. Actually, he didn’t seem to have anything that could be traced at all. He trusted that the mysterious man could keep him covered, considering the huge amount of money he was being paid for the enterprise.

As he sat in a cafe, reading the email that transcribed Dinah Laurel Lance’s phone call to her landlady explaining that she would be in Gotham for a few days, Paulo slipped a hand under his jacket and nervously fingered the inhibitor collar and garrote wire tucked away there. That woman needed to die, but she would not go down easy…and more importantly, she definitely would be missed.

Despite the small crowd that had gathered at the Manor, it was mostly quiet. Jason lurked in the corner of the living room, absorbed in background-checking guests for a Wayne New Year’s gala. Tim had set up the menorah by the window, then began to occupy himself with assembling the yet unlit candles. Damian lorded over the decorations for Alfred’s Christmas tree, despite the fact that he neither celebrated Christmas nor was tall enough to reach the upper half of the tree. Alfred himself had busied himself with dinner preparations, Bruce trying and failing to help.

Dick, for his part, had finished getting out the stacks of well-worn recipes for the upcoming holidays, taking a moment to flick over his favorite meals.

“You know we’re eating in an hour, right?” Jason called to him from the corner. Atop a ladder, Damian strained and cursed in his attempt to wind lights around the tree’s prickly girth. “And kid, just give it up. Let Steph and Alfred do the tree; they’re the ones around here who actually celebrate Christmas.”

“Just because you have an innate sense of failure, Todd, doesn’t mean that I do,” Damian huffed, leaning too far forward and getting a face full of pine needles.

“Be careful, Dami!”

“I don’t you to weigh in either, Grayson!” He spat out needles.

Sighing, Dick set down the recipes and meandered over to Jason’s corner. His younger brother
looked up from his phone.

“I’m sorry, did I accidentally give the impression that I wanted company?”

“No, but I do.” He sank to the floor next to Jason, who rolled his eyes.

“You are one clingy bastard, wanting company from everyone, even when they don’t want you around.”

“Yeah, well, that’s just me.” He blew hair out of his eyes. “And you talk real tough Jason, but you didn’t have to come here and help out. You especially didn’t have to keep doing it multiple times over the last few months.”

“Whoa.” Jason looked up from his phone, then turned and faced him. Dick took in the fresh bandage on Jason’s jaw, along with a black eye and matching bruised knuckles. “Let’s get one thing straight, buddy. I am *not* doing this for you, or Bruce, or the kid, or Eyebags Drake over there. I’m doing this for Alfred, and for the girls. Because, those girls…I respect Steph, I love Cass and Barbara, and I owe all of them for not ratting me out to Bruce about how I’ve killed recently.” He paused, looking back down at the files on his phone screen. “And as far as I’m concerned, this distance between us is fine. The girls are all the incentive I could need or want.”

“So…you don’t plan on things ever changing? Ever really getting better?”

“Why would I?” Jason looked away. “We all say we’re turning over a new leaf, but I don’t think we’ve changed, or that we can change, as much as we think.”

“Is it that?” Dick challenged. “Or are you just letting your fears and grudges stand in the way of taking that risk?”

“Who are you? The living embodiment of Facebook Mom Quote of the Day?”

“Maybe it’s cheesy, but at least I’m *trying* to get better,” Dick said irritably. “The way you come off, it seems like you just don’t want to bother.”

Anger flashed in his brother’s eyes.

“You don’t know a goddamn thing about what I want. I’m trying not to blame you for being the perfect ideal I had to live up to when I was a kid, or never having to work to earn anyone’s approval, or leaving to party with the Titans while Bruce was being an emotionally closed-off bastard and I needed some goddamn support…but the way you talk, it makes it really fucking hard to want to improve any sort of standing with you.”

Dick gritted his teeth.

“So you’re just not going to try to change things.”

“You’re not giving me any reason to. I’m giving you and the others a chance to not fuck things up even worse than they are, and as far as I’m concerned, that’s all I should give you.”

“You think *I’m* the one fucking things up?” he hissed through his clamped jaw. “I’m not the one who killed —”

“There you two are. Do you think you could set the table?”

The two of them looked up. Bruce stood tall and imposing over them; from their perspective on the
floor it was almost like being Robin again. Almost.

“There’s no point, B,” Dick sighed. “I don’t think we’re going to want to eat together anyway.”

“For once, you’re right.” The two of them got to their feet, bringing Dick up to Bruce’s eye level and Jason to the tallest person in the room. “If you need me, I’ll be in the attic looking for the dreidels and contemplating the blood that’ll be shed over chocolate candy.” He brushed past, deliberately walking underneath Damian’s ladder. The youngest boy watched him leave.

“Todd makes the rest of us look downright emotionally stable,” he observed. “It’s almost admirable.”

“Hn. Neither of those statements are true,” Bruce grumped. “Damian, after we’re all done eating separately, can you and Tim take patrol tonight?”

“Me and Drake? No offense, Father, but did you get hit with a strange spell or a heavy object again that turned you simpleminded?”

“Shabbat just started, and so most of the family can’t go,” Dick explained before Bruce could respond. “Remember? How we’ve been doing this since I was Batman?”

“Yes, and how we’ve been doing this is that either Drake or I go with Brown, or we go individually, and quite frankly I prefer it that way.”

“I still can’t believe Dick trusted you with the entire city for a whole night every week,” Tim called from across the room. “You, the undergrown shrimp with a squeaky voice.”

“Yes, he had to, what with you having your midlife crisis twenty years too early,” Damian shot back. “And I have another one every time you open your mouth!”

Bruce sighed, but made no attempt to stop them. Dick dropped his head into his hands, counting the seconds until he could reprimand them without losing his temper.

Long before the grocery shopping and ensuing late dinner preparations were over, the sun had dipped low over the whitewashed city. By the time the four women had finished eating, the sky was dark, and the day’s steady snowfall had blown itself up into the imitation of a blizzard.

Steph and Cass excused themselves soon afterwards to watch a movie in the to-be-converted guest room and play with their new cosmetics, leaving Barbara to do the washing up. Dinah stood beside her at the sink with a mug of Zinda’s patented “Nazi Killer Hot Chocolate;” the recipe for which was a Birds of Prey top secret and involved copious amounts of cinnamon, nutmeg, and rum.

“I wasn’t going to say this in front of your girls, but you look like hell,” she commented.

“I love you too.” Barbara ran one of the plates under the tap before loading it into the dishwasher. At the bottom of the sink, the pot left to soak slowly released its grip on what was left of dinner, the soap bubbles at its rim steadily popping out of existence.

“I’m serious. You’re having a shit time with this Python staying out of your grip, I get that, but you need to let other people do some work for and with you. Take a break.”
Barbara paused. Then, with more force than necessary, she upended the pot and let the dirty, chunky water spiral into the sink’s disposal.

“I can’t.”

“Then point me in his direction and let me find him and take him out. I’m not going to watch you kill yourself over some random bad guy —”

“And I’m not letting you kill yourself either.” Barbara spun herself around to face her best friend. “It’s me he’s after. I don’t want to argue about it any more.”

“God.” Dinah ran her free hand through her hair. “You don’t get it. You need help! You can’t get through this on your own; you’re trying that now and it’s not getting you anywhere!”

“And you can’t just punch and yell your way out of this!”

“Are you saying I’m too stupid to help?”

“No.” Barbara braced her hands on her armrests. “I’m saying you’re too important to risk with this guy. I don’t know his full capability and plans yet, and I can’t lose you. I can’t lose someone I love again.”

Dinah’s head dropped low. She sighed.

“I don’t like to fight with you about this.” Barbara turned back around, dropping the last of the silverware in the dishwasher. “But the truth is, I’m the best qualified to handle this guy, and the sooner he’s off the streets, the better for everyone. Please, just accept that.”

Dinah exhaled even harder, blowing her hair out of her face.

“Maybe. But you don’t think you’re getting obsessed at all?”

“Me, obsessed. This coming from the woman who went to all the trouble of taking two weeks off just to lecture me.”

“Two weeks off from what? My full-time job kicking bad guys in the face? Remember, I’ve been living off donations from my ex-in-laws. You ever think I’m getting high and mighty, telling you what to do, you just know I’m more of a hot mess than your baby-daddy was when he still had those godawful hairdos and thought moving to another cesspool would make him feel better about life.”

This time, the laugh was genuine.

“Okay, that does make me feel better.”

“That’s what I’m here for, honey.” She patted Barbara’s shoulder. “Sometimes I think about that and don’t know how you could’ve been attracted to him.”

“Who says I was attracted all the way back then —”

“You were. I know you have weird kinks.” Before Barbara could defend herself, Dinah steamrolled on: “Though come to think of it, I don’t know how I could’ve been attracted. To be fair, I didn’t know he was younger than me; I prefer to leave that shtick to you and the people I date.”

“I’m younger than you, and I was people you date.”
“No wonder we didn’t last.”

They shared another laugh, which on Barbara’s end quickly turned into a curse.

“What is it?”

“I’m out of soap.” She snapped the dishwasher all the way open, still grumbling. “Now I’m going to have to wash all these by hand —”

“Chill.” Dinah set down the half-empty mug of impending diabetes and cirrhosis. “I’ll just run down to the corner store and grab some soap. Those places are always open.” She snatched up her purse from where she’d left it near the table. “Just let me put some pants and my coat on, and then I’ll be good to go.”

“You don’t have to do that. It’s late, it’s snowing, and it’s as cold as the ninth circle of hell out there. I’ll just wash these myself.”

“Come on, honey.” Dinah was already making her way towards the guest room, where her suitcase lay open on the floor. “It’s no big deal; just a ten minute walk. Nothing’s going to happen.”

Barbara sighed, then looked out the window at the swirling snow.

“If you really think it’s not going to be a big deal.”

“Compared to all the other shit I’ve done —” Dinah paused, one leg in her pants, “— I’m pretty sure this isn’t on the same level as risking life and limb.”

It was early yet for Batman, and he wasn’t taking patrol, so Bruce decided to head down to the Cave and go over a few scrap pieces of evidence, just to tie things up. It would be over and done with before Damian even got back from patrol, so he figured that God, if they were there, wouldn’t count it as a transgression.

The first thing he took note of were emails from Jim, one which was to his work account that decided that Jason was innocent in Pedro Di Nero’s murder, and a personal note that informed Bruce that he would be available to come over the first night of Hanukkah, although Sarah had to work that night.

Bruce sat back in his chair, satisfied. He liked his friend’s wife, but smaller family gatherings seemed far more appropriate for this sort of occasion. Sarah wasn’t Jewish, and even though neither were Tim, Stephanie, Damian, or Alfred, they all knew each other well enough to expect the inevitable squabbles. His children, though they now worked together, still had issues with each other that seemed they would never be resolved, and he knew far better than to request them to talk to each other about it.

Speaking of which, Jason…

He had low hopes for repairing his or his other sons’ relationship with Jason. But he was glad, at least, that his child was innocent in this crime. Maybe he was turning himself around with the help of those strange new friends of his; becoming the man he should be, without ruling through crime. He certainly hadn’t heard anything about Red Hood killing anyone in recent months.
Bruce’s spirits rose higher.

The Batcomputer in the corner beeped, interrupting his thoughts.

He got to his feet, heading over to check which gun the bullet that had killed Fisher Di Nero had been registered to. This was long overdue, but he had been very busy until those lower-level vigilantes had taken the strain off.

Now, he had time to rest, and to hope.

Bruce examined the results.

The gun was registered to someone who had claimed his name was Pedro Rojo; the picture in the ID that had been used badly corrupted. All he could tell was that it was a young man with powerful shoulders and dark curly hair.

“Computer, remove knife marks and bleach stains.”

The computer hummed, then the image became clearer. It was still blurry, but he could definitely tell that the young man was broad-jawed, of Latin descent, and…

Bruce’s insides turned cold.

There was a pale streak in his hair.

“…En…enhance and sharpen.”

He had hoped that he was wrong, but he couldn’t deny the truth. The fake ID used to purchase Fisher Di Nero’s murder weapon had undoubtedly belonged to Jason. Jason, who was well known for doing his jobs himself. Who had killed one of their leads to exposing Python for…for what? Spite? Vengeance? A misplaced sense of justice?

One of the bats let out a shrill squeak, the sound echoing around the dark expanse of the Cave. Bruce’s fists clenched against the desk.

- - -

Paulo checked the tracker on Lance’s cell phone. Apparently, she was leaving that ridiculous clock tower down the street where she and that pack of jabbering women had parked that afternoon; heading down the street towards him.

His hands trembled, unwrapping the dart gun from under his jacket. The collar and wire clattered to the icy concrete, and he hurriedly stooped down to pick them up.

Heels clacked against frozen sidewalk, growing swiftly louder. Paulo knew he had to hurry.

Steadying himself as best he could, he flattened his back against the cold alley wall.

A flash of bottle-blond hair; of a black trench coat.

Paulo closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.
Dinah wasn’t normally one to dwell, but she had been lost in thought ever since leaving the Tower. The funny thing about Barbara, for someone who gave out so many favors for civilians and heroes alike, was that it was easy to buy into the idea that she was selfish and callous.

Their earlier relationship had been a bit one-sided at times. Dinah remembered how much she’d resented being given so many orders from someone who was physically safe in her chair and stronghold, someone who seemed to think she knew everything, who did know Dinah’s whole identity but refused to divulge her own.

But after the professional relationship turned personal, that was a whole other story.

She remembered being comforted and reassured after finding out about her infertility, after having to send Sin away, after the cheating and the subsequent divorce. The steady love, even after the Birds broke up for a while, even when they weren’t sure whether it was romantic or platonic. The little things that helped, such as the anonymous donations to her bank account while she was still between jobs that she would’ve had to be an idiot to not figure out who they were from.

There was still an ache in her chest that emerged whenever Barbara seemed to be on the verge of making old mistakes. There was a far different kind of ache that surged inside her gut; bad-tasting jealousy that tried to rise up in her throat while she watched her friend’s belly grow.

But nonetheless, she sure as hell wasn’t going anywhere.

Still thinking about her love for her friend, Dinah nearly missed the sharp prick against the side of her neck.

With a sigh, she reached up to brush whatever it was away…before her fingers wrapped around a cold slip of metal.

Her pulse jolted.

She ripped the dart out of her neck, pulling it before her eyes —

Her vision wavered.

She shook her head, stepping awkwardly backwards towards the nearby alley —

Before a pair of strange hands clapped an icy metal circlet around her throat. With a beep and a whine, the device powered to life.

She wheeled around, facing the man who’d just collared her.

He was fairly tall and in good shape, surprisingly bare of prison tattoos. His sandy hair and blue eyes made him look almost handsome, aside from the pitying look on his face and the length of wire in his hands.

“Nothing personal, Miss Lance.”

She steadied herself, fighting the drug in her system. Being throttled by a second-rate pretty boy thug would be the most embarrassing way to go after her long career. If there was an afterlife, everybody there would laugh at her.

“Nothing personal this.”
She opened her mouth to scream —
— but could barely muster a squeak.

The man looked on.

Dinah blinked a few times, swaying in place. One hand reached up almost unconsciously, feeling along the metal chokehold and realizing what it was.

“Oh shit.”

The man lunged.

Dinah summoned her strength and high-kicked him viciously in the stomach. He doubled over, gasping and retching.

She moved in to knock him out, but the drug wavered through her head. She stumbled.

He punched her in the jaw; she was knocked to the side, teeth clattering. She felt her neck tweak and tasted blood.

She struck back, scratching at his eyes with her nails and kicking at his shins —

He seized her by the throat, shoving her against the wall, whacking her skull against the frozen concrete. Her vision swam, head pounding.

Well, I probably have a head injury now anyway.

She knocked herself forward, her forehead connecting with his with a horrible thwack. He stumbled back, and she raked her nails across the side his face once more, then punching the other side.

As he straightened his head up, she realized that her nails had drawn blood, dripping in thin lines down his eyelids and cheeks and definitely ruining his looks. His look of pity had turned to snarling indignation, the fear in his eyes even brighter than before.

Despite everything, Dinah shot him a grin through the blood in her mouth.

Didn’t think I could land a blow while I was drugged and powerless, did he?

He growled, pulling out the wire with one hand.

She kicked out again, this time catching him in the groin. Through the solid heels of her boots, she felt soft flesh coalesce and collapse.

His grip vanished, eyes bulging. He grabbed at his crotch with the hand he’d been using to hold her, gasping and moaning in pain, stumbling back.

Dinah fell free, catching herself before she could fall over too. She delivered another series of open-hand blows and kicks, putting as much effort into it as she could, feeling flesh cave and bone splinter. But too soon, she realized that if she threw another good punch, the effort would probably knock her out.

Instead, she tried to stay on her feet, barely registering her phone buzzing incessantly at the bottom of her purse. The tranquilizer fought to take over, her vision wavering intermittently dark.

She stumbled to the entrance of the alleyway, bracing her hands against the side of the building,
hoping to catch another pedestrian. But the streets were deserted, most of the doors in the area snugly closed for the night. She took several long breaths, wondering if she could make it down the street to the corner store like she’d originally planned so someone could call 911 or whoever had access to the Bat-Signal…

A thin line of pressure looped around her neck, slicing against her windpipe. The pressure increased, her throat and lungs abruptly closing up. She gagged, trying to suck in more air, feeling her lungs flap uselessly and implode on themselves. Spit welled up in her mouth and spots danced through her fading eyesight. Blood rushed to her head and dripped unencumbered from her lips.

She clawed feebly at her throat, but the tranquilizer was finally taking hold. As her vision began to turn dark, the wire pulled harder, her throbbing head forced backwards. Her throat burned, she choked; trying in vain to force air into her lungs…
The last thing she saw before she blacked out entirely was a flash of red.

Dinah wasn’t exactly glued to her phone (or, for that matter, any form of technology for longer than absolutely necessary), but she was usually good about replying to her texts and calls. So when she didn’t reply to Barbara’s questions about whether she knew which dishwasher soap brand to pick up, it was strange. After twenty minutes had elapsed with no sign of her friend and her call went straight to voicemail, it was past strange.

Barbara left the kitchen and snatched her jacket off the couch, slinging it back on as quickly as she could.

A wild mane of blond hair atop a face covered in plant goop appeared around the door of the guest room.

“Y’know, if you want us to help you convert this place into a nursery, we totally could assemble a crib or repaint the walls or — what are you doing?”

Barbara had picked up her escrima sticks again, staring at the polished wood, hard as stone in her hands; contemplating whether to take them with her.

As Steph finished her question, she raised her head.

“Something’s wrong with Dinah.”

“Superhero wrong?”

A nod.

“You’d know better than me. And if something is wrong, you know us, it’s probably not something small.” She paused, momentarily glancing over her shoulder. “Cass says bring the escrima, and I agree.”

Barbara said nothing in reply, just placed her weapons into the slot under her armrest and zipped up her jacket; sucking in her breath to make the zipper go up all the way.

“I think I’m going to have to take you up on your offer to help me convert that room,” she said at last. “There’s so much to be done, and I don’t know how I’m going to do it all…”
“Keep accepting help, and worry about one thing at a time,” Steph said sagely. “Or do the opposite of what you always do and just do shit without thinking about the consequences too much. It’s what I do.”

“Great.”

“Okay, but seriously, for now, just go save your friend.”

Paulo couldn’t believe it. Lance had finally collapsed; her body weight pulling herself farther down against the garrote. Grinning to himself, he tugged back against the insistence of gravity.

He ached with her defense blows, which, even for a tranquilized half-conscious woman, had been formidable. He worked up a mouthful of blood and spat on the dirty snow, hobbling into a better position as he pulled against her throat.

Another couple minutes, maybe, and she’d be dead. And that anonymous man on the computer would make him rich.

As the thought crossed his mind, Paulo registered the sound of metallic creaking, and a continuous crunching against the concrete.

He turned, facing the front of the alley and making eye contact with another woman.

This one he didn’t recognize. She was an invalid in a manual wheelchair, a few months pregnant, with wire-rimmed glasses like a librarian, freckles, and big green eyes. Wrapped in her dark blue jacket and a thick scarf obscuring the lower half of her face, his first impression of her was that she looked rather soft and delicate, almost pathetic, under the onset of the storm.

But in the second it took her to take in the scene before her, something else entered her eyes. Something that made him take a step back; grip slacking on his chokehold.

“Let her go.” Despite the scarf, her voice was clear, and as hard and cold as the frozen stone. Paulo felt sweat start to coalesce at the back of his neck, which was ridiculous. There was no way this woman could be a threat.

“This doesn’t concern you,” he blustered. “Maybe you care if she dies, but this is Gotham, sweetheart. People die all the time, even so-called heroes.”

“Believe me, I know.” She shifted in her seat, a hand slipping under her armrest. “But you had better let the Black Canary go. I’m not going to warn you again.”

“Warn me?” Paulo chuckled, deep and macho. “That’s funny. You should better go now, sweetheart. You’re not involved here, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

Her eyes narrowed; forehead creasing like lines of thunderclouds.

“I wouldn’t stress about it, if I were you.”

“You’re in a delicate way,” he blustered, “being crippled and pregnant and all.” He set down Lance upon the concrete, the wire around her throat going slack. “So I’ll just go easy on you and send you off with a warning —”
She moved faster than he could’ve believed possible.

She pivoted forward and balanced on one side; bringing one big wheel down on his foot with a *crunch*. He barely had time to yowl with pain before the escrima stick in her hand caught him underneath the side of his jaw. He heard the *crack* before he felt the broken jaw.

*This* woman was fully awake, and fully *enraged*.

He tried to pull away, but she still had his broken foot trapped under her wheel. Besides, he had been already injured before she got to him.

She breathed deep, knuckles white on her weapons. He looked at her once more.

“Please,” he finally rasped, “have mercy —”

She recoiled at his words —

— then sheathed her escrima back within their hiding place.

He sighed with relief.

Then her knuckles connected with his face.

He crumpled to the ground next to the unconscious Lance, vision swimming out of focus. He just had time to wonder why his employer hadn’t known about an invalid woman who was viciously protective of superheroes before everything went black.

Barbara roughly jerked away from the knocked-out thug, knuckles smarting from where she’d punched him, adrenaline crying through her blood.

She rolled towards Dinah as quickly as she could, roughly grabbing her by the front of her coat and hauling her torso into her lap. Fingers shaking, she unwound the garrote from around her neck, then tried to steady herself enough to take stock of her injuries.

Two sickly bruises was forming across her face, and another on the back of her head, though she couldn’t tell whether her skull had been cracked or whether she was just concussed. The skin on her neck had been lacerated, the windpipe likely damaged. A thin trickle of blood dripped from her mouth, splattering in droplets on Barbara’s lap. She needed immediate medical attention, beyond what the Clock Tower’s first aid equipment could offer.

Fumbling out her phone, she sent off a quick text to Stephanie, asking her and Cassandra to bring the car around, set with industrial-strength binds and antiseptic.

Still knocked out, Dinah breathed, albeit shallowly. Barbara gathered her in her arms and tried to steady her own breath, hands shaking, suspecting that she knew who had sent a man on his payroll to kill one of the Birds of Prey. One of Oracle’s women.
Although it was late — or early — Bruce didn’t expect any of his sons to be asleep. In fact, as he stormed up from the depths of the Cave, he was counting on them all to be awake.

“JASON!” he bellowed, emerging from behind the grandfather clock. Damian, who’d just arrived in the living room in full Robin regalia, dropped his scabbard and armful of field notes, cursing furiously. Titus, who’d been dozing on the couch and subsequently startled awake, whimpered and scampered to the other side of the room. “Jason Peter Todd, I don’t care where you are, you come here this instant!”

“What did Todd do this time?” Damian said irritably, leaning over to pick up his scribbled pad of paper. “And why must I be subjected to your shouting because of his idiocy?”

“I don’t need your attitude right now, Damian,” Bruce growled. “Where is your brother?”

“What’s all the fucking screaming about, old man?”

He looked around. Jason, still fully clothed, had appeared at the door, followed by Dick and Tim in their pajamas. Bruce rubbed at his forehead.

“Dick, Tim, Damian, get out.”

Nobody moved.

“I said get the hell out!”

“You didn’t answer my question. Why are you screaming at me at this fucking ungodly hour of the night? There’d better be a damn good reason for that.”

Bruce was momentarily lost for words.

“You — you stand there and insist that you deserve a damn good reason — I’ll give you a damn good reason.” He pulled out the evidence bag containing the bullet that had killed Fisher Di Nero. “Next time you use a fake ID and name to buy a gun, make sure you’re not recognizable in your picture.”

Jason blanched. The other boys went perfectly silent.

“So I bought a gun,” he said at last. “So what? I buy guns all the time.”

“You killed Fisher Di Nero, didn’t you? Don’t lie.”

The silence lasted longer this time.

Jason wouldn’t look him in the eyes for a while.

“I reprise my earlier statement: so. What.” He finally looked Bruce in the eye. “He helped kill a fifteen year old boy just to help a psychopath make a statement. For money. His own son. Even you know that’s monstrous, especially when you consider how the kid went, huh?”

It was Bruce’s turn to flinch. He opened his mouth to reply, but Tim beat him to it.

“You would know a lot about hurting kids and family members, wouldn’t you, Jason?” Even in his too-large flannel pajamas and too-long hair hanging about his slim face, Tim’s eyes were cold. “Considering your dabbling in patricide and fratricide, I’d say you definitely know a lot.”

Jason was almost lost for words. Then he wheeled on his brother.

“Not anymore,” Tim snarled, “not that that stopped you before, when you had a bullet out on me for no reason other than using your hand-me-down place here you wouldn’t have wanted back if it could’ve saved your life. Guess your rule only counts if it’s not family, huh?”

“Tim!” Dick ran up to stand between his brothers. “That’s enough!”

“And you fucking wonder why I don’t want to be a part of this family!” Jason shouted.

“What with you and Bruce’s psychotic bastard trying to kill me every time I turn my back, that’s the only thing I want to agree with you about!”

“Why do you care? It’s not like you don’t want to die all the time anyway!”

“Jason!” Bruce shouted in unison with Dick. Then Dick by himself: “I said, that’s ENOUGH!”

“And you!” Both of them wheeled on him. “You’re a hypocrite —”

“You were my partner, my brother, and you took away the only thing I ever really wanted to give to the kid who hates me —”

“You preach all the time about love and accepting each other, but you’re as dirty as everyone else. You didn’t want to be the Batman, but you were, even though couldn’t even keep the family together. And fitting, considering that you’re as selfish as him; wanting everyone to cater to what you think they should be.” Jason pointed at Bruce, who was watching this with all the powerlessness of watching a pack of wild beasts tear at each others’ skin.

“I’m selfish?” Dick’s eyes began to burn. “Tim, you complain all the time about how we treat you, then you turn around and push people away. Jason, you want acceptance and affection and you give absolutely no reason for anyone to give you either.” He paused, then delivered simultaneous blows. “It’s a wonder that Kon and Roy want to stay with you. Frankly, at the rate you’re going, I don’t think they’re going to want to much longer. No wonder Stephanie left.”

“Richard John Grayson!”

His brothers recoiled. Jason snapped back, while Tim still looked shellshocked.

“Ha! There you go again, being a hypocrite. Why do you think no one ever wants to stay with you, Grayson? Why do you think Kori all but jilted you at the altar? Why do you think Wally fell in love with Linda instead? Why do you think Barbara’s always been pushing you away while you’ve chased her, keeping her distance, and why do you think she left you for no apparent reason the last time?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me at all…” Tim’s voice was quiet. “Wouldn’t surprise me at all if she was only staying with you this time for so long ’cause she feels obligated to. Bet if she weren’t having the baby, she’d have left you for good by now. Keeping people you’re close with feeling obligated to you is the one thing you’re good at, I suppose.”

“That and dragging your cock through them,” Jason sneered. “Convenient.”

Damian threw his possessions to the ground, storming towards his siblings in a snarling fury.

“Todd! Drake! You leave him out of your own insecurities and issues!” he raged. “Just because your daddy didn’t give you enough attention, and you’re an unambitious whiny brat with an inferiority
complex, doesn’t mean you get to take it out on Grayson!”

“You’re one to talk!” Tim shouted back. “You’re the one who laid right into him after that kid was killed just because you’re insecure. You take all your issues out on other people, so you do not get to weigh in here!”

“At least I don’t stew in them,” Damian sniffed. “Whereas you two are still nursing your bruised prides and whining for more privileges like a pair of entitled children. No wonder one of you was stupid enough to get himself blown up fresh on the job, and everyone made clear that they don’t want the other of you around, since he isn’t good enough for the job.”

“Damian, stay out of this,” Dick snarled through gritted teeth, shoulders tight.

“Do not tell me what to do! Do not tell any of us what to do!” he yelled, stomping his foot, childlike. “You may think yourself able to act like it, but you are not our father!”

Dick finally lost it.

“That’s right! I’m not your fucking father!” He pulled at his hair, face twisted up in fury. “So why the hell do I have to keep stepping up for all of you, why do I keep vouching for all of you and giving you second chances, when you keep throwing it back in my face? You rip each other to shreds for petty selfishness, you terrorize this city for the sake of your angst, you disrespect my leadership and experience, you might as well be a pack of spoiled children the way you act! I never wanted to step up like this; I know I sucked at being Batman and being the head of the family! I know that nobody wants to be with me for very long! You don’t have to fucking remind me, thank you!” Tears of rage were beginning to stream down his cheeks.

“You may not want to be a part of this family, you may not want to be or consider yourselves my younger brothers, but you are! And look, I sure as hell don’t always want to be your brother, the way you act! So did it ever occur to any of you that the reason I stepped up in the first place is because none of you were going to do it?”

“Sure it doesn’t have something to do with your —”

Up until that point, Bruce had been unable to string words together, watching his sons pour out their resentment towards each other, their pent-up frustrations, like a river of pus from an infected wound that had finally been lanced. But upon Dick confessing why he’d taken on the burden of the family, he was jolted back into action.

“Richard, Jason, Timothy, Damian, ENOUGH.”

They all looked at him, mouths open, cut off mid-tirades.

“You should never have had to take on the family; you’re too young and ill-equipped. None of you should’ve suffered the way you did so early in life. But it happened. So learn to deal with it, and stop blaming each other for it!”

A beat passed.

“That’s right!” Jason shouted. “We should blame you!”

There was a shout of agreement.

“You never trusted any of us, your own children —”
“You burdened us with too much when we were just fucking kids; couldn’t stop us from being permanently hurt and traumatized —”

“You’d rather stew in your own pain and throw up fifty walls of emotional barriers then try to heal from it, and then you hurt other people —”

Bruce stood under the barrage of their fury, letting it come.

“You’re a control freak, a hypocrite, a commitment-phobe —”

“You say I’m too young and ill-equipped to take care of children? You took me, a little kid, in when you were younger than I am now, and you let me fight on the frontline of a war! My worst nightmare is turning out like you!”

He flinched at that one.

“You abandoned us, Father!” Damian cried out. “We needed you, and you abandoned us! When you returned, you were not half the parent you should’ve been! From what I’ve heard, you never were in the first place! If you cannot take care of us, if your trauma really runs that deep, why take care of us at all? Why try enforcing your morals and ideas upon us? Why do you even bother?”

Bruce steadied himself, then took a deep breath. His sons waited for his rebuttal, for an answering shout.

“Because I love you,” he said quietly.

They started, astonished quiet. Tim’s mouth fell open.

“All of you. You boys, your sister, Alfred, Kate, Selina, Clark, Diana, Jim, Lucius, most of the rest of the League, those other scattered vigilantes around this city, hell, even Stephanie, and of course, Barbara. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I don’t deserve your respect, or leadership. You infuriate me often, and I know I don’t handle that well, or most things well. I don’t agree with some of your viewpoints…especially you, Jason. But if you want to know why I bothered with any of you in the first place, it’s because I love you, and I’m proud of all of you.”

They were still struck dumb, their anger with him and each other frozen. Even he had had all the frustration sucked out of him, to be replaced by exhaustion and soft-spoken truth. He couldn’t remember the last time the truth had come out of him so easily; inspired by his sons’ need for it.

“I still don’t understand why you killed Di Nero though, Jason. He was a lead in our case, we might’ve been able to piece together more information about Python had he lived. We would’ve been able to gain true justice for Pedro more quickly that way.”

Under those words, and under the gaze of his brothers, Jason finally deflated. He sighed, running a hand through his hair.

“You manipulative old son of a bitch.” When he wasn’t shouting, he finally looked younger, fresh out of boyhood…which he was. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I don’t want to be associated with the rabid lunatic I was when I got out of the Pit, the one who would’ve killed a teenager, and anyone else. I only do what I do to people who deserve it now, the ones who irreparably hurt innocents. I made it perfectly clear that it wasn’t me who killed that kid, that I was doing something about it, to…well, to the scum who knew who I was, at least.”

“For…refining your image?”
Jason’s head snapped up sharply.

“It’s really not like you can talk about doing something for your image, Bruce,” Dick said softly.

“Yeah, and besides: I was doing something right, wasn’t I? Python has one fewer goon off the streets, and knows I’m onto him.” Despite these words, Jason’s voice cracked.

“ Didn’t make you feel any better though, did it?” Tim’s voice was even quieter than his oldest brother’s. “Defying the no-killing rule.”

“The no-killing rule is bullshit.” He threw his hands up. “I don’t know why you all blindly follow it the way you do…well, actually, I understand why for you, Damian, and for Cass. But don’t you think we’d be safer without white supremacists, human traffickers, rapists, pedos, anyone who hurts kids, off the streets? Don’t you think our Babs would sleep better at night if her assault was avenged, and that psycho who’s terrorizing her now had no more resources to draw upon? Why do you all obey Bruce like that?”

“It’s not obedience, Todd,” Damian spoke up. “It’s respect. Though as to why Father himself does it, I can’t say. He know full well that some lives no longer display the inherent worth we are born with.”

“I do know, Damian. I know that better than almost anyone. But if I started killing…if I could suddenly wipe out any criminal that crossed my path, get them out of the way forever…I’d never be able to stop. Serial killers, petty thieves, the populace of Arkham, any of them. The idea of finally being able to stop, to never have to argue with them again, never put in the effort of trying to rehabilitate them? It would be too tempting. It’s not a matter of morals. It’s a matter of knowing your own limits.”

He surveyed his sons; the astonished looks on their faces. He’d never told them any of this before. “So instead I try to still see that inherent worth in everyone, no matter how far they’re gone. And by imposing that rule on all of you, I hoped for two things: one, that you’d never overstretch your own limits and do something you regret forever. And two, that you’d get the implication that no matter how far any of you have gone, no matter what you said or did, I’ll never hate you. I’ll never not want you. If I can forgive a criminal over and over, it should’ve gone without saying that I’ll always love and forgive my own family.” He sighed, rubbing his forehead. “But I guess it didn’t go without saying. God…I should’ve told you all this years ago. I should’ve told you so much…”

Dick walked over to his father, his brothers still dumbstruck. He placed a hand on Bruce’s shoulder; eyes and cheeks still shining with tears.

“I’m gonna be honest: you fucked up really bad with us sometimes. Like, really, really bad.” He let out a watery chuckle. “But anyway. I can’t speak for the others, but I still believe in this family. You’re our dad. You raised us, and we all have redeeming traits; at least one, maybe two.”

Jason snorted; Tim rolled his eyes.

“And that counts for something, you know. We’re obviously never going to be a dream family, and we still have a lot of shit to work out, but I think there’s hope, especially if we keep working at our relationships with each other. And again, I can’t speak for the others, but I love you too.” He peered over his shoulders. “And I love the rest of this family.”

Damian hid a snifflle, discreetly wiping his eye on his cape.

“I…have great affection for you too, Richard.”
Tim made a conflicted, choked noise.

Jason paused.

“Jury’s still out.”

Dick smiled slightly.

“I’ll take it.”

After a moment of consideration, Bruce placed a cautious, answering hand on his eldest’s shoulder.

“You’re going to be a good father, Dick.”

The astonished expression returned; the only reply several rapid blinks.

“No matter how old it makes me feel, and how much I still hate the fact that my child has an active sex life.”

Damian made a face. Dick sighed.

“You ruined it. You ruined the moment, Bruce. We were having a moment, and you ruined it.”

“That’s my specialty.”

“I’ve noticed.”

Jason’s tense shoulders relaxed a little bit, then he stretched his arms up over his head. Tim turned around and went back up towards his bedroom, while Damian meandered across the room for some well-earned time with his dog.

“Well, that was intense. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m gonna go get some sleep —”

“No, you are not out of the woods yet. *You* are going to be the one who types up the statement I’m going to submit to Jim Gordon about why Fisher Di Nero turned up dead, and how it’s nobody we know, and then fills out all the corresponding paperwork. By hand.”

“…Aw, shit.”

“Still think it sucks being accepted, Little Wing?”

“Yes. And I wouldn’t say another word if I were you, unless you want to have to take back your spiel about how much you love everyone, Dickhead.”

Dinah woke up with a plastic oxygen mask clamped over her face and sensations like someone was using her brain as a Taiko drum and a different someone had used the tissue of her throat as a steel guitar. She groaned, the heart monitor next to the bed she was lying in suddenly beeping faster.

“Oh good, you’re awake.” A young voice attached to a separate blond head. “It’s almost five in the morning. We were really starting to get worried.”

Dinah looked over to her right. Her eyesight focused, and Stephanie Brown’s features became clear.
The girl was still in her pajamas, eyes bloodshot with no sleep, and a few lingering flecks of herbal mask on her face. The room around them was painted plain gray-blue; medical instruments on a nearby table and faint instrumental jazz music playing from a hidden speaker.

In the distance, she could also hear a pair of female voices arguing. She made out one of them as Barbara, but didn’t recognize the other, or what they were saying.

“Where am I?” She was horrified by how ravaged her own voice sounded, and how much it hurt just to talk. “How bad is it? What happened to the guy who attacked me?”

“You’re in a special clinic. The lady who runs it, and who took care of you, is called Dr. Leslie Thompkins. She’s…um…kind of a friend of the Wayne family? It’s complicated. She hates vigilantism, and faked my death, then she and Bruce had a big fight before he got trapped in time… but uh, that’s not the point. Anyway, Leslie says that you have a concussion, and that your vocal chords and windpipe were damaged. But she also said you have no broken bones, and that you should make a full recovery eventually. So, your screaming days aren’t over, don’t worry.”

Dinah slumped in relief.

“As for the guy, we dropped him off at the police station with a note for the commish before coming here. Babs says she caught up to him just before he could finish you off, and then she went all gangster on his ass. He was pretty beat up when Cass and I got there, I’ll tell you that.”

“Yeah, I can only take partial credit for that.”

She reached up and felt around her aching throat, even more pleased to discover that the inhibitor collar had been removed. Even if she wouldn’t be able to Cry for a while anyway, it was a relief.

“So if Leslie, um, Dr. Thompkins, hates vigilantes and had a falling out with the Bats, why did she agree to help me?”

“She doesn’t hate vigilantes. She hates vigilantism. Big difference.” Steph paused. “You were really badly hurt, and we would’ve gotten too many questions going into a regular hospital. Leslie knew that. ‘Sides, you’re not a Bat, and you’re not the head of a family who recruits kids and teenagers into the life, so it’s not you she’s pissed at.”

The arguing began to grow steadily louder until the words became clear.

“— it’s completely irresponsible and selfish —”

“— And it’s also none of your business, Leslie! You didn’t have a hand in this, you’re not my obstetrician, so you can butt out of my uterus!”

“Oh no,” Dinah muttered.

“Oh yeah.” Steph grimaced. “They’ve been at it for two hours already.”

“Really? It seems like a pretty straightforward argument.”

“Well, she’s nearly as stubborn as we are.”

“It’s going to become my business in a few years after that fetus is born and you end up roping them into your meat grinder of a war. I’m going to have to patch up another child who thinks that fighting alongside their parents is good, worthwhile even! While their mental and physical health is permanently ruined! But of course it’s none of my business.”
“I was an adult when I decided to fight! You think I’m like Bruce? You think I’m going to let a child onto the frontline before they’re old enough to understand what they’re fighting for?”

“I think you’re worse than Bruce! You and those computers of yours! You fight at a distance, by proxy, it’s too damn easy for you to forget you’re staking human lives in your battles. Look at what happened to that friend of yours! This can hardly be the first time you let her be wounded for your sake!”

“You don’t know anything about my relationship with Dinah.”

“So this is the first time she was wounded for your sake?” There was almost hope in Leslie’s voice, although it was too tinged with concern, anger, and weariness.

“No! I — it’s not the same as letting a child fight! Dinah’s a grown woman! She knows the risks!” The volume and pitch of Barbara’s increased exponentially. “And I could never have prevented nearly any of what she’s done! I can’t stop what these people decide to do!”

“Don’t be hysterical; you know that’s not what I’m talking about —”

The two women finally appeared at the door. Barbara’s eyes were even more bloodshot than Stephanie’s, her shoulders hunched forwards and her body put entirely into propelling her chair forward. The knuckles on her right hand were dusted with purple bruises.

The doctor was in her late sixties or so, with practical short silver hair, a slightly worn lab coat, and square glasses. She would’ve appeared almost whitewashed, aside from the expression of thunder in her lined face.

“I mean you need to remember these are actual lives, including this new one, that you’re putting at risk with your line of work. It’s naive to assume that any child of two crime-fighters won’t want to pursue that path themself, and that it’s irresponsible parenting to burden that child with Batman’s violence and moral black-and-white attitude —”

“Lay off her, Leslie,” Stephanie interrupted. Dinah was quietly grateful to the younger woman for stepping in. “Look at her; she’s stressed and upset enough, okay? Take it from me, it’s difficult enough to be pregnant without everyone breathing down your neck and a bad guy out to get you and the people you love.”

“I mean, I personally wouldn’t know,” Dinah rasped, “but I agree.”

Steph threw her a thankful look.

Leslie looked at her for a long moment, before turning and leaving the room. Barbara sighed, then approached the other two.

“Thanks, Stephanie.”

“Eh, she still feels kinda guilty over the whole fake death thing, so I think I can keep her off your back until you give birth or we get Python, whichever comes first.” She paused. “Do you mind? Cass dozed off an hour ago in the waiting room with a magazine over her face, so I’m going to go sit with her and read it.”

“Those tabloids rot your brain, you know.”

“Are you kidding? That headline: ‘Long-Lost Illegitimate Tamaranean Princess Weds Two-Headed Elvis Clone.’ That’s modern Shakespeare right there.” She headed out too, leaving the older women
Dinah lay silently as Barbara fiddled with the hem of her shirt, glasses slipping down her nose.

“How are you feeling?” she finally asked.

“Honestly, I kinda wish I could read that magazine too.”

“Very funny.”

“Who said I was joking?” Dinah cleared her throat, which felt like swallowing a mouthful of nails. “But I know what you mean. Look, I’ll be able to use my powers again, this is only temporary — ” She interrupted herself with a coughing fit, “— so it’s nothing worse than what I’ve already gone through.” She slumped against the pillow.

Barbara edged closer, the one squeaky wheel shrilling quietly against the tiles.

“Honestly though, this is just bad. Getting drugged, then nearly strangled in an alleyway, of all the ways to go…if Python’s going to kill me to get to you, he needs to find a less humiliating way to do it. I feel like one of those girls in movies and books who get killed or hurt by the villain just to get to the men the girls are close to.”

“Getting fridged.”

“Sorry?”

“That’s what it’s called when a woman’s hurt or killed for the sake of a man’s, or men’s, character development or just for his angst. The focus is on the men, and the woman gets fridged.”

“How do you know so much about that?”

“…I just do.” Barbara glanced downwards. “Trust me, it’s a shitty trope. But that’s not the point. Dinah, when you came here, I was so worried about how your actions would affect me, I didn’t think about your feelings. I may be your leader, but I’m also your best friend, and I was an asshole beyond the hormonal bitchiness. And I’m sorry that I was so selfish about that, and that you got hurt because I deliberately pissed off an egomaniacal murderer.”

She shifted a little in the bed until she was lying on her side; able to look into her friend’s eyes.

“I forgive you.”

“I—”

“No, seriously. Yeah, you can be selfish sometimes, and you bet your ass I’m gonna keep calling you out on it when you are, but at heart, you’re not a selfish person, or someone who enjoys putting people you love at risk. So yeah, I forgive you.”

“I…” She trailed off.

Dinah paused to cough again.

“How do I know, you ask? You wouldn’t hang around with the rest of us if you were selfish. We provide good work, you’re welcome for that, but we’ve — and yeah, I’m including the other Bats in this — all got really high-maintenance needs and personalities. If you were really selfish, you’d just use that work and not interact with us on a personal level. So I don’t think you really have to worry as much as you do about your platonic, familial, and even romantic relationships.”
Barbara shook her head.

“Dinah, how did you get so wise and forgiving?”

Again, she thought of her friend’s kindness and strength and courage, shown to both her and to the others she loved, far, far outweighing the resentment and sadness. All those times she’d given forgiveness to the people who didn’t deserve it, and blown up at the people who did. The long years of getting to know all of the women she would now readily die for.

“Aunthood,” she said instead, nodding sagely. “It really changes a woman. I feel as though I am connected to the universe, part of something bigger than myself…”

“Sure.”

Dinah chuckled hoarsely, shuffling an arm free.

“And um, speaking of which…”

The budding smile on Barbara’s lips began to wilt.

“You don’t…don’t have to if it’ll make you upset or uncomfortable.”

“I want to.” Dinah gestured with her free hand. “Come over here. I want to feel my future nibling. Besides, you got a few more months left of random people trying to pet your stomach, you might as well get used to it.”

Still clearly unsure, Barbara rolled over until the wheels were brushing against the legs of the bed.

“You know you’re not going to be able to feel him move from the outside for a while, right?”

“I’ll have his whole life after he comes out of the womb to feel and see him move — wait.” Her concussed brain finally caught up to what Barbara had said. “‘Him’?”

She actually ducked and blushed, hiding her smile behind her hand.

“We went back to the doctor a couple days ago. Ultrasound confirmed it. I was gonna tell everyone at Hanukkah, but I guess you get to hear it before the family.”

It hurt to smile, but a huge grin crossed Dinah’s face anyway.

“That’s — wow. That’s great! Oh man, Jason’s gonna be so pissed. Cass told me that he bet her fifty bucks that your X chromosomes were gonna kick Dick’s Y chromosomes’ ass.”

“That is not even slightly how genetics work. Also, are you kidding? Have you seen how many boys Bruce has amassed? How often superheroes in general tend to have sons? The odds were so rigged.”

“Well, there goes my plan to hypnotize you into naming your kid after me.” She couldn’t stop smiling. “C’mere, mama. Let me feel your boy.”

She stretched out her hand, cupping the swell under her palm and crooked fingers. As she did, she waited for the unwanted surge of bitterness and jealousy, but she felt none. Only joy.

“Do you have video?”

Barbara nodded, eyes downcast towards the hand on her stomach.
“The doctor gave me a copy of the ultrasound itself, which is really grainy and in black-and-white… but wow. Also, Dick made one of the nursing students start filming us as the doctor began the procedure, so we have our reactions on video too.”

“Did he cry?”

“He did. A lot. He also tried to kiss me in front of a roomful of nursing students. And I let him.”

“I am so glad there’s video of that.” Dinah finally pulled her hand away and took Barbara’s instead; warmth blossoming in her chest, despite the circumstances.

Barbara nodded, chewing her lip and regarding her body like she couldn’t quite believe it belonged to her. She was quiet for a while, peering over her shoulder back towards the door.

“Do you mind if I just sit here for a while with you?”

“Do I mind enjoying your company? While I’m concussed and my throat feels like I’ve been gargling with lava and there’s nothing to read? No, honey. I don’t mind.”

“Always curbing my genius’s ego,” she smiled, her attention turning to the room’s lone window. The sky was blue-black instead of pitch, flecked with faded clouds and fleeting spots of white. The sun hadn’t yet risen to break the winter night, but the snowflakes were coming down with less intensity.

Dinah closed her eyes, letting the jarring pain fade to a hum. But it was still there, and no matter how still she lay, she couldn’t go back to sleep.
Holiday special a month before Halloween? Sure, why not?

This one’s a way less heavy chapter than usual, but I don't think anyone's complaining, especially not me.

Although there are quite a few Star Wars references, which is possibly because I’ve been thinking a lot about The Last Jedi. Who else is excited for the new trailer coming on the 9th?

(First chapter where no extra warnings apply!)

**The Fool (Tarot):** Upright — beginnings, innocence, spontaneity, a free spirit. Reversed — naivety, foolishness, recklessness, risk-taking.

The day opened up as bright, crisp, and cold as a glacial spring. Rare sunlight had filtered through the clouds, a sharp breeze whisking away the dampness of both Gotham’s and Bludhaven’s heavy smog. The last of the snow hadusted the sidewalks and rooftops, leaving a healthy couple feet of white that had yet to be trampled gray by pedestrians’ or vigilantes’ boots. Many citizens of the two neighboring cities had taken advantage of the unusually pleasant Saturday to flood the local public venues, parks, and neighboring backyards with chatter, dogs’ joyful barking, and the squeals of excited children.

The Arkham staff had doubled down on what security they had to ensure that the holidays stayed this uneventful. Unfortunately, they couldn’t do the same with petty criminals.

“You can’t expect them to stand still and let you arrest them, Okoro,” Jeffrey was saying to the embarrassed woman helping him escort newly arrested crooks through the bullpen. The other officers barely looked up from their paperwork. “Toto, we’re not in Metropolis anymore.”

“Sorry,” Shawndra sighed, shutting the holding cell door on their perps. “Born and raised, you know. I still keep expecting Superman to swoop down out of nowhere and pluck the bad guys out of my hands before flying them back to the precinct for me.”

“Well, you’ve only been here three days,” Herman said kindly, sweeping his paperwork into a binder. “Besides, I think the rest of us would like Superman to come round up some crooks for us occasionally too.”

“Nightwing does a pretty decent job on his own, though,” Ayesha pointed out. “Especially
considering he doesn’t have any powers, and the other Bats are all fucking around over in Gotham.”

“I’ve only heard about him,” Shawndra said, taking her seat. “What’s he like? I only know that he’s very handsome.”

From the other side of the bullpen, Dick hid a grin behind the form he was filling out. No need to let his partner or their new transfer think he was making fun of her.

“Handsome and has a sense of humor, which Batman could use,” Rachel agreed. “The other day he dropped off some gangsters from the Odessa Mob that we missed, and he had this joke about Thunder, Apollo, and Queen Bee all walking into a bar…also, he likes to recommend music and do impressions of other superheroes.”

Shawndra ooh-ed in appreciation. Jeffrey pretended not to be interested.

“C’mon Jeffrey,” Herman wheedled, leaning over in the other man’s direction. “Even you have to admit that Nightwing’s great.”

Under the gaze of the others, Jeffrey let out a faux long-suffering sigh.

“All right, fine. Those acrobatics are impressive, even if his jokes are really cheesy. And I admit it, he’s really charming…and hot.”

“Mmmm…agreed. Makes you forget about those crazy outfits and hairdos he had a few years ago.”

“Oh yeah. You can forgive anything from bad fashion sense to cheesy jokes if someone’s hot. Not that there’s not much else to forgive.”

“True. Do you think he’s single?”

This time, Dick couldn’t stifle his laughter. The other cops all turned and looked at him.

“What’s with you, Grayson?” Ayesha demanded.

“Sorry, I just — ” He chortled some more, setting his form back on the desk. “Honestly? Nightwing’s not that attractive.”

They all stared at him like he’d just grown a second head.

“Not to be rude, but have you lost your damn mind?”

“No, I’ve just never found him attractive.” Dick signed his name, then set the form aside. “I like to know what someone’s eyes look like, and anyone who wears that stupidly tight costume and flips around all the time has got to be a total show-off. And besides, his ass is… sub-optimal.”

“You are crazy.” Shawndra sounded almost in awe. Ayesha just snorted.

“You’re only saying that ‘cause he’s not a redhead and doesn’t fit your weird fetish.”

“It’s not a fetish! It’s a preference.”

“Suuure.”

“You guys can’t prove anything.”

“Your girlfriend’s number is on your backup contact list; I think we can.”
Before Dick could hack into his own file and delete Barbara’s number from the list, the elevator door dinged open; their lieutenant stepping out.

“Afternoon, everyone.”

“Hi.”

“Hello.”

“Afternoon, ma’am.”

“Hey.”

“Hello.”

“What’s up, Amy?”

“That’s Captain Rohrbach to you, Grayson,” she scolded, although she otherwise seemed unbothered by his show of familiarity. “And at the moment, nothing much. Except that I need to speak with you a minute.”

Dick froze up, pen halfway in the air.

“What did I do?”

She folded her arms across her chest.

“That depends. Do you think you did anything wrong?”

“Is that question a trap, ma’am?”

Amy’s gaze was impassive enough that even Bruce would’ve been impressed.

“Just come into my office.”

The other officers watched the two of them with trepidation as he followed her out of the bullpen and into her office. Once inside, she shut the door behind her as he sank into the chair opposite hers.

“You’re not going to fire me again, are you?” He tried to make it sound like he was kidding. “I mean, I haven’t done anything really bad. I’ve kept a balance between this work, vigilantism, and my personal life —”

“I know, Dick.” She sank into her chair, resting her temple on her fingertips. “And I’m not going to fire you again.”

“Oh. I mean, uh, of course not.”

“You know I’m not crazy about you still being Nightwing, but I’ve noticed that there’s been a drop in crime in Gotham lately. So it’s less likely that the others — who I assume you know?”

He shrugged. “We’ve met.”

“Right. So it’s less likely that the others will call you suddenly while you’re supposed to be working. And I think you can handle crime in Bludhaven as long as you’re living here.” She paused. “You are very good at what you do —”
“I don’t mean to interrupt you or nitpick, you’re being really nice right now, but I don’t actually think I’m going to be living in Bludhaven much longer.”

Amy froze, her mouth still open.

“I mean, I’ll get up early and commute to work here. I’ll still fight crime here, maybe even get a few of the others to help out sometimes. But I think I might have to move back to Gotham pretty soon.”

She’d relaxed when he’d said “commute to work here,” so she peered at him with more curiosity than aggression.

“Can I ask why?”

Dick shrugged.

“Well, I mean, it’s not finalized yet. Barbara and I are still talking about it, ‘cause it’s a big commitment, and the last time I did it was with my ex-fiancée, and she’s never done it…but, well. Would you live a half hour away from your husband and your kids?”

“No.” Her eyes softened. “I would not.”

“So, yeah.” He nervously rubbed the back of his neck, ruffling his hair. “So what did you call me in here for, if I’m not in trouble?”

“Right.” Amy straightened up again. “I heard that your family’s coming together in a few hours for the first night of Hanukkah, and that you’re going to miss most of the gathering if you stay here to work the Toothpick Slayer case.”

“You don’t have to remind me…wait. ‘If?’”

She nodded.

“Since you’ve been doing such good work around here, I spoke with your captain, and he agreed to let you go early.” She paused. “Also, I’m inputting a request for next year to make Saturday one of your regular days off, not Sunday.”

Dick got to his feet, knocking the chair back and leaning his hands against the desk.

“You’re serious?”

“Mm-hm.” Her conduct was still professional, but he caught a sparkle in her eye. “You’re dismissed until Tuesday morning, officer.”

He rounded the desk, bending down to hug her.

“Grayson, you can’t just — oh, all right. Just this once.”

“‘Just this once’ never actually means just that once, you know.”

“Don’t push it.” She was definitely smiling now.

The hug was brief, and made more awkward by their positioning, but he was grateful for a touch more of their old friendship. Even more so by the idea of being able to go back early and surprise two very different women.
“No, no! Come on, Hector! When you tell someone you love them, you don’t turn around and sleep with her friend from yoga class, two of her coworkers, her masseuse, and her evil half-sister, you cheating horny bastard!”

Barbara glanced back towards the living room, where there arose simultaneous yelling in Spanish and her best friend’s running commentary.

“Do you mind turning that down?”

“Are you kidding? Lupe just got the frying pan out and she’s chasing him around the kitchen with it. Now she’s telling him that she should’ve guessed that Rosita was telling the truth all along, and that Eduardo is much better looking than him anyway…”

“My technology can pick up over three thousand stations from a hundred different countries,” Barbara muttered to herself as Dinah kept up her narration, “and this is what she wants to watch.”

In retrospect, she probably should’ve guessed that Leslie’s recommendation for “bed rest” would really mean “couch rest, along with *Real Housewives of Metropolis* and telenovelas.” Resigning herself to the fact that none of the shows she liked would be on for another few hours, Barbara reached across the keyboard for a set of noise-canceling headphones; plugging them into her computer system and turning up the volume.

Lupe’s wailing about her soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend’s infidelity was swiftly replaced by the scratchy live frequency of tapped cameras. Barbara settled in with a sigh, fingers flying over the keyboard as she checked in on her most important fields. It was a good task; not too urgent, but would keep her busy for a long while before they had to leave for the Manor.

Dinah had been healing up well for the last week, providing a steady stream of conversation and close companionship around the Tower while the family was busy. While she and her friend were together, she could almost forget the abhorrent thing that had happened to her.

Almost.

The bruises and cuts on her face and throat hadn’t entirely vanished yet, and she couldn’t do anything very strenuous for another two weeks at least, or even perform her signature Canary Cry without ripping her vocal chords to shreds.

Considering that this was hardly the first time a villain had tried and failed to kill Dinah, it probably shouldn’t have disturbed her as much, or at least not more than it relieved her that it was unsuccessful. But the man had been prepared with everything he could’ve possibly needed to kill her, so even a random thug who was much physically weaker and much less well trained had very nearly managed to do so. He’d known that he’d needed all that. He’d known where she would be. Worst of all, he’d been specifically told to target her own right-hand woman. If Barbara had turned up two minutes later, Dinah would be dead.

Her father hadn’t been able to get much helpful information out of the would-be killer, either. One of her files held a transcript of the GCPD’s interrogation, as well as the most important notes on it:

*Lache confessed immediately after being offered a plea bargain, then willingly offered details about his employer*

*Was hired in late November*
Was contacted via anonymous email

Was untraceably wired five thousand dollars up front, then was promised twenty thousand more upon completing the job

A tracking app was placed on his phone, keeping tabs on the whereabouts of Ms. Lance’s phone (Barbara had immediately helped Dinah get rid of it and bought her a new phone after hearing this, although she feared Python might’ve been able to glean information about her location before she did.)

The employer destroyed any trace of himself from Lache’s inbox, as well as his own signature from the phone and the interwebs, making tracking him down impossible

Lache wanted to know whether he’ll be able to keep the five thousand he already has, the answer his interrogator offered him has been censored due to a lack of professional conduct

She rubbed at her forehead, staring without seeing at the interior of the Watchtower. Obviously, trying to get a read on Python after he’d wormed his way through the internet was useless. He just knew how to cover his tracks too well. But then again, he’d disguised his IBM address with the same style that he’d erased himself from the security cameras of Kelly Nolan’s building. It was likely, in his believing that she wouldn’t be able to crack his code, that he’d applied the same one to all his activities.

Now, just because she hadn’t yet been able to crack his code didn’t mean she never would. She just had to understand him better than he understood her. Besides, even though she still needed to learn his motives for taking her and the family down, she knew that hers for getting him would take her much farther. Love, she figured, was one of the most powerful motivators for accomplishing difficult things, right alongside spite and vengeance. And all those things were even more powerful motivators in a person who hated being told how things were going to be.

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Dick shut the door behind him with the tiniest of clicks, pocketing his keys and hanging his hat and jacket up. He shuddered, taking a moment to appreciate the constant buttery warmth of the Tower during the long winter.

From the living room, he could hear no sounds of activity or women’s chatter, although he did hear the TV. Spanish wasn’t one of his better languages, but he was pretty sure that the person speaking was about to seduce her best friend Eduardo to get revenge on her cheating ex-boyfriend.

“You get him, Lupe,” he murmured, wiping away the last of the snow on the welcome mat and making his way into the living room. To his amusement, Dinah was lounging on the couch, hair unbrushed and with no makeup, in a t-shirt that was far too big for her and a pair of his own jeans.

“Let me guess. It’s laundry day?”

She yelped, nearly toppling off the couch.

“Damn you Grayson, next time warn a bitch before you sneak up on her.”

“Sorry. Old Bat-habits die hard.”
She rolled her eyes good-naturedly.

“And yeah. It is laundry day.” She tugged at the hem of the shirt. “So all I have to wear before the party is Barb’s maternity stuff and the drawer full of your clothes. Although, your pants do fit super well, which is doing marvelous things for my self-esteem right now.”

“Happy to help.” He grinned, despite himself. She smirked right back.

“So what are you doing back so early?”

“My boss did me a favor and let me off. And, well, I was hoping to see if the pretty redhead who lives here is home, and maybe get some time with her. Don’t tell my girlfriend.”

“Cross my heart.” She winked conspiratorially. “She’s at her work station, as usual.”

“Thanks, Dinah.” He blew her a kiss, which she pretended to catch, before turning around and starting to head off. “You’re a peach.”

“Mmm, I don’t think that title belongs to me…”

He paused, glancing back over his shoulder.

“You’re staring at my ass again, aren’t you?”

She looked up.

“What can I say? I like to live vicariously through my best friend. Be a dear and go seduce her, will you?”

“She doesn’t think much of my seduction techniques.”

“And yet they still work every time. What does that tell you?”

“She’s fine with settling for her dumbass childhood friend?”

Dinah scoffed.

“No, Grayson. She loves you enough to put up with your bullshit, even the weird little stuff.”

He wondered if she noticed her casual use of the “l” word, or if it was a deliberate choice.

“Well, nobody ever said sex wasn’t weird.”

She nodded sagely.

“True. Take it from someone with phenomenally low standards, if you’re not able to laugh with the person you’re sleeping with, you’re not doing it right.”

“Facts.” Dick nodded in return with equal solemnity. “Alright, I’m gonna go see how she’s doing. I’ll tell you everything interesting that happened at work later, if all goes well.”

“I’ll be here.” Her attention turned back to the TV. “Have fun, you crazy kids.”

His mood buoyant, he turned back and headed towards the work station with renewed enthusiasm.
Barbara didn’t hear the footsteps approaching, so when a pair of hands gently brushed down and rested on her shoulders, she nearly jolted out of her seat.

“Oh!” She pulled the headphones off and turned around. “Dick! I — you’re home sooner than I expected.”

“Yeah, Amy talked to my captain and I got to leave early. Guess I could’ve gone back to the Manor before the party, but I wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, you definitely did.” She reached up as he bent down, meeting for a brief kiss. “I was just…lost in thought, I guess.”

He knelt until they were eye-level, his expression warm.

“It looks like there’s not much going on right now,” he noted. “You wanna take a break and spend some time together before we get ready to go?”

“Oh.” She sighed. “That is incredibly sweet of you, but I was just about to begin my work figuring out an algorithm to crack Python’s code. It could take me weeks…I need to start as soon as possible.”

“Oh, okay.” He deflated slightly. “That’s fine. Your work is really important; I understand.”

“I knew you would.” She glanced over at the computer for a few moments. “But…maybe I do need a break.”

Dick perked up for a second, then looked at her questioningly.

“You can’t spend too much time at either of your jobs before you start to crack under the pressure. I can’t spend too much time at mine without becoming crazy and obsessive.” She stroked a hand over his cheek. “I need some time off from that.”

Dick sighed, leaning hungrily into her touch.

“You always are.” Barbara leaned slightly forward, until she could feel the heat from his skin. Her glasses slipped a bit down her nose; she licked her lips, words taking shape and growing bigger in her mouth until they spilled out.

“I love you.”

He started, lips slightly parted. Her pulse sped up.

“You said it.”

“Yeah.”

He moved in closer until they were kissing again. She hummed slightly, leaning in, letting him move
his hands up until they were in her hair, cupping his face with hers.

“I love you too, Babs. So much.”

“I know,” she quipped, imitating Harrison Ford. He smiled.

“Geek.”

“Jock.”

“Who’s a jock, Miss Never Skips Arm Day?”

“And who’s a geek, former teenage math prodigy?” She tapped him on the nose playfully. “Least I’m not a show-off.”

“Show-off? Who?”

“You know damn well who.”

“Yeah, you’re talking about Clark, right?”

Clark, who wouldn’t show off being able lift a train, let alone do a flip or solve an equation. She smirked at the thought.

“Sure. Clark.”

“Hmm.” He got to his feet, looking down with that infamous crooked grin. “So, about that break…”

She lifted her arms, allowing him to sweep her up out of her chair, shifting her into a bridal carry. Her heart was light.

“You making a move on me already, Hunk Wonder? Without even buying me some dinner first?”

“Hey, you know me. I like to eat dessert before I have dinner.”

“Oh, that’s what we’re doing?”

“That’s what we’re doing. If you want to.”

“Hell yes.”

“Ooh. Love the enthusiasm.”

“Let’s just see if you can keep it up.”

Dinah, who’d heard the entire exchange from the next room, had gone from wiping at her eyes to fidgeting with anticipation in a matter of seconds, and was now gleefully bouncing in place as they headed off.

“‘Hell yes’ is absolutely fucking right.”

“Oh Eduardo, llevarme a la habitación.”
“You said it, Lupe.”

Unfortunately, as she looked back over at the show, she happened to see the time displayed on the base of the TV. She settled back down, glancing over the couch and biting her lip.

“Should I tell them that if they go through with their delightful plans, they’re not going to have time to shower, get dressed, and make it on time to the party?”

She pondered it for only a few seconds before making up her mind.

“…Nah.”

“Jason, for the last time, we are not all watching *Die Hard* together just because it’s ‘seasonally appropriate.’”

“But it is!”

The Manor was bedecked with warm yellow lights around the banister, the massive fir tree sparkling with old and new ornaments alike, the rich smell of home cooking filling the air. Bruce had set his phone up on the speaker set to play old jazz and soul, warming the atmosphere further. The old family menorah stood proudly in the window, candles unlit, waiting the arrival of sundown. Steph had someone managed to pin branches of holly onto all the collars of the animals (Tim had tried to do it to the cat and was now nursing a three-inch scratch on his hand), and the enormous grounds were as pristine white as a new, unpainted canvas. Bruce was yet unaware of it, but his children had managed to distract him long enough with the *Die Hard* debate to sneak a sprig of mistletoe behind his ear. He *had* trained them, after all.

“Your brother is in middle school, and he doesn’t need to be encouraged to curse more.”

“Right, like Damian has a problem with cursing.”

“Pennyworth! Cease your vile ministrations!” The youngest child yelled, fighting off Alfred’s attempts to pull a sweater over him. “This damn garment is too hellishly itchy, and will make me a bloody laughingstock! I refuse to wear it!”

“Oh come on, kid,” Tim said, safely over on the other side of the room. “All the rest of us got ugly holiday sweaters. Besides, five minutes ago, weren’t you complaining about how cold it was?”

“I am from the desert, everywhere seems cold in comparison. But that is no reason to put me in this hideous piece of —”

“Damian!”

“Hideous piece of Damian?” Jason muttered under his breath.

“Master Damian, in a few years, the state of your mouth will be making Mr. Constantine flinch,” Alfred said crisply, finally winning the struggle and tugging the sweater over the boy’s head, ignoring the whining. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I must go attend to the crock. And in this case, I do not mean your father.”

Bruce let out a long, pained grunt while the kids all snickered.
“Hrrrmnn.” As Alfred returned to the kitchen, he decided to change the subject. “Do any of you know why half our guests are late?”

The kids paused their laughter long enough to look at him, from all points around the living room. Stephanie was crouched under the tree, previously occupied with shaking all her presents like she was a young girl again. Tim and Cassandra were seated beside her, him playing on his phone and she residing quietly beside two of her favorite people, smiling to herself. Jason was slumped on his back over the couch, alternating between rereading *The Golems of Gotham* and offering his commentary to the room. Damian stood by the coffee table, buried in the thick neck of his sweater for all the world like an angry little turtle.

“Beats me about Selina or Dinah,” Steph replied, setting aside a rather large present. “But the others are probably kicking back for some time with their partners before they have to come over.”

“Like, do you think, time with their partners, or *time* with their partners?”

“Hey, I’m not going to judge how people ring in the holidays, even if they’re my mentor, my best friends’ brother and aunt, and an old dude.”

“I regret asking,” Bruce groaned, rubbing his temples. “I’m never going to get those images out of my head.”

“Uh, you know, maybe they’re just picking up their presents,” Tim suggested quickly, “or some wine, or extra desserts from the bakery.”

“Cute, Timmy,” Jason snorted.

“No, come on, get your heads out of the gutter and have some shame, you guys! These are religious holidays.”

“a) No, b) you’re an atheist!”

“Yeah, and yet you need Jesus more than I do.”

“We’re Jewish!”

“Most of us, anyway.”

“Every conversation is a goddamn ordeal in this family,” Bruce sighed, moving Jason’s legs out of the way so that he could sit on the couch. Jason very pointedly put his socked feet up on his father’s shoulder instead.

“I dunno,” Steph said thoughtfully. “Compared to how you guys usually are with each other, this is almost polite. Why —?”

“They had a fight,” Cass said bluntly. “Men and boys.”

“What?” Tim sat up straight, knocking his head on the tree. “Who told you?”

“She reads body language, you moron,” Damian yelled across the room.

“Oh yeah.”

“It’s okay.” Cass leaned slightly towards her brother. “You get it out, you deal with your problems. Or…try.”
“Try ‘try,’” Bruce muttered to himself.

“Come on, old man,” Steph coaxed. “You want to have a better relationship with your kids? Do or do not, there is no try, especially in this family’s case.” She turned the last of her presents upside down. “I honestly cannot tell what this is.”

“Speaking of which,” Damian ventured, “perhaps, sometime soon, we could all go see the new movie in that franchise. It seems to be…an appropriate exercise…for a family.”

“Yeah, especially considering what Kylo Ren did to Han in the one last year.”

Everyone looked at Jason.

“I’m kidding! I’m kidding! Tim, don’t look at me like that.”

“I didn’t know you liked Star Wars, Damian,” Bruce interrupted. His youngest son’s ears turned red.

“Grayson made me watch the original trilogy as a part of my ‘cultural education.’ From there it was, as you say, all downhill from there.”

“I cannot believe I’m saying this, but that’s awesome, Damian,” Tim said. His brother flushed even harder, while Steph grinned.

“I think…” Cass said slowly, “there is hope for us. Fitting. Since we’re talking about Star Wars.”

“You said it, sister.”

The doorbell rang.

Barbara pulled up in the driveway, fidgeting in embarrassment as the three other cars pulled up ahead of her.

“Honey, it’s okay,” Dinah soothed from the backseat. Sitting next to her, Dick shifted nervously. “It’s not like any of us realized we were going to be late. And they’re probably not even going to notice.”

“Knowing Bruce, I doubt that.” She watched Kate and Selina clamber out of their respective cars, meandering towards the door. Framed by yellow light, Bruce greeted them in the doorway, then was surprised by a sudden kiss from Selina (someone had probably managed to sneak mistletoe onto his person again). Jim Gordon’s loitered next to the only other open parking space; just as she pulled in he clambered out of the driver’s seat.

Despite herself, Barbara’s heart leapt further as her father came around the side of his car and she made eye contact with him. He smiled, waving at her through the window just before she opened his own door.

“Babsy!” The silly nickname that always made her cringe in high school instead made her smile.

“Hi, Daddy!” she enthused, easing herself out of the car and into her chair. “How’ve you been?”

“Same old, mostly.” He bent down, a little more stiffly than he used to, embracing his daughter.
“How’s my little girl these days?”

“Hard at work, and not so little anymore,” she said with joking ruefulness, resting a hand on her stomach.

“Yes.” Jim frowned at Dick, who was at that moment clambering out of the car after Dinah. “I’ve noticed.”

They approached, Dick looking awkward and Dinah doing a terrible job of stifling a grin. The scowl grew in prominence; Barbara sighed.

“Dad, come on, you don’t have to do that. We’re not teenage sidekicks anymore.”

“I’ve noticed that too.”

“Wait, he knows?” Dinah exclaimed. “About your night jobs? The family business? Whatever other euphemisms you have for it?”

“He’s my dad, of course he knows.”

“Not that you knew that I knew until recently. You thought you were keeping that secret from your old dad for years, didn’t you, Barbara?”

She flushed redder than her hair, her face feeling especially hot in the crisp December air.

“Please go back to antagonizing my boyfriend.”

“Hey!”

“With pleasure.” Jim turned his teasing disapproval back to Dick. The poor man looked like he wanted to crawl out of his skin, which was probably due to what the two of them had been doing just before he came face-to-face with her father. “You watch yourself there, son. I’ll not have you give my daughter anything less than the royal treatment while she’s having your child. Most importantly, you better not even think of her in any kind of sexual context ever again, you hear me?”

She bit down a laugh, despite herself. Dinah looked like she was seconds away from going into amused hysterics.

“Right, yeah, sure, okay Commish.”

Jim’s mustache twitched, but otherwise he gave no indication of his true feelings.

“I’ll go catch up with Bruce and the kids.” He turned back to his daughter. “I’ll see you in a moment, sweetie. Keep that scoundrel five feet away from you at all times.”

“Sure thing, Daddy.”

Jim nodded, then followed the other women to the door. Dinah turned to Dick.

“You have absolutely no intention of keeping that promise, do you?”

“Stop grinning at me like that; you look like a shark trying to eat a watermelon.”

“Can you go get the pizza from the car?” Barbara asked her friend quickly, still trying to stifle her own laughter. “Dick and I’ll go on ahead.”
Dinah reluctantly seemed to realize she didn’t have a choice in the matter, and so doubled back. Barbara readjusted her coat, and the couple headed towards the door.

“I really hope that overprotectiveness in dads is more of a nature and not a nurture thing, considering what ours are like.”

“You know how mine acts around you is just a front he puts on, right? He actually really likes you, and he’s never tried to stop me from dating whomever I wanted.”

“Really?” He looked dubious. “He didn’t let you go to the mall without an adult until you were fifteen and didn’t want you to become a cop, but he let you date whomever you wanted, whenever you wanted?”

“Yeah well, yours let you run around in your underwear kicking criminals in the face when you were nine, but he didn’t let you date at all until you were sixteen and has tried to stop you from getting with nearly all your partners.” She chuckled slightly. “My dad only ever showed any disapproval to the people I dated, not me.”

Dick held his fingers up by his head like the ears on Bruce’s cowl and did a good imitation of the gruff Batman voice:

“No dating, only justice. No hanky-panky in this household because it distracts from the mission, unless you’re me and Selina. I only dislike the people my teenager dates because they’re unforgivably evil people, not because I am in denial of basic biology such as kids maturing and wanting to have sex.”

This time, they both dissolved into snickers. Recovering earlier, Barbara chose to join in.

“What’s that? Laughter? Whatever it is, it’s distracting from my brooding and soliloquizing about Gotham City like I kind of want to have sex with it. And as you all know, I have five kids and god knows how many sidekicks and coworkers, but I still work alone. I am a lone, lonely loner —”

“If you two are quite finished.”

The real Bruce had materialized in the doorway, a reduced version of his usual scowl on his face, along with a red lipstick mark. Although, unusually, over his button-up and slacks, he was wearing a chunky yellow winter sweater with glittery dreidels knitted into the pattern.

“Nope.”

“Not at all.”

“Heh. That a part of your new stealth suit, Bruce?”

The scowl faded, to be replaced by the kind of knowing toothy smile that made criminals tremble.

“I wouldn’t make fun, if I were you. Everyone’s getting one. Everyone.”

The couple paused on the foyer just long enough to exchange looks.

Sure enough, as soon as they passed into the house, they were dive-bombed by a pair of very determined mentees bearing equally hideous multicolored gifts of wool and sparkles.

“Aww, thanks Damian. This looks great!” Dick exclaimed of his shocking red, tinsel-and-plastic-candy-cane covered garment, immediately putting it on.
The worst part was, he wasn’t even being sarcastic.

“You can stop with that smirking, Cassandra,” Barbara grumbled, reluctantly pulling the cheerful-snowmen-and-pompoms monstrosity over her head. Much to her disappointment, it was a size extra large, so she couldn’t even play the “it doesn’t fit anymore, I can’t wear it” card. “It’s not like either of you can talk in those getups.”

Cass’s Let’s Get Lit menorah sweater actually lit up, and Damian’s was even worse. She recognized a hidden speaker hidden within the glittery fabric, meaning that the snowflakes with their smiling cartoon faces were supposed to be spontaneously bursting into song, should some foolish relative poke him in the chest.

“I had no choice in the matter, even after I pleaded child abuse and violation of the Geneva Convention,” Damian complained, folding his arms carefully so as not to set off the music. “I do not remember the holidays being this onerous last year.”

“That’s ‘cause we didn’t have the whole crew together last year, Dami.” Dick wrapped his arm around his brother’s shoulders, which would’ve been very sweet if their outfits weren’t visible from Mars. “We’re a complete family this year, so we get to go all out!”

“Joy.”

“Wait for me!”

Bruce quickly stepped out of Dinah’s way, letting her through and shutting the door behind her. The pizza boxes in her arms were stacked so high she could barely see over them, and she stumbled into the entryway, shedding snow all over the marble floor.

“So, uh, sorry we’re late,” she said into the cardboard. “We picked up some extra food to make up for it — what the hell are you guys wearing!?”

“See Father? Even Lance agrees! This party is a farce! Everything is a failure!” Damian paused.

“Did you get vegetable pizza?”

The sun dipped below the horizon as everyone gathered around the menorah in the window, most of the adults with mugs of mulled wine and eggnog, Damian, Barbara, and Dinah with hot chocolate. As they watched silently, Bruce lit the shamash, waving out the match and lifting the candle. He murmured the blessings quietly, almost under his breath, before touching the flame to the first candle on the menorah.

As it lighted, the whole family set down their mugs to applaud, as they had done since Dick was nine and had been the first to witness the event. Bruce quickly replaced the shamash, an actual, genuine smile on his face.

“Alright. So what should we do between now and dinner?”

“I dunno. How long will that be, Alfred?”

“I have Miss Barbara’s and Miss Dinah’s pizzas being kept warm in the second oven, and the goose should be done fairly shortly, so…perhaps half an hour,” the old butler replied, his expression
unusually soft.

“Perfect.” Kate settled herself into the nearest armchair, sipping her wine. “Since this is our first
Hanukkah all together as a family, I vote we look at embarrassing old pictures of each other.
Namely, of Bruce.”

“Not likely,” Selina retorted, sitting on the floor next to Jason. “Bruce in Bat-diapers? That’s a mood-
killer if I ever heard one.”

“Hrrmn.”

“I do have photos of the children, Miss Katherine,” Alfred said smoothly. “If you would care to see
those.”

“Yes please. I missed most of their childhoods, and I wanna see some evidence of Bruce’s
parenting.”

“You could live without seeing most of our childhoods, Katie,” Jason interjected.

“You just don’t want your aunt to see you in hand-me-down scaly undies,” Tim scoffed, taking a
draught of eggnog. “Seriously. It didn’t occur to either of you to wear pants? Even when you were
older?”

“They were not underwear!”

“Sure.”

“I actually thought the old Robin outfit looked okay on you, Jason,” Barbara offered. “You were a
cute and sweet enough kid that you made it work.”

Jason turned scarlet; Dick looked offended.

“Are you saying I’m not cute?”

“No Dick, you’re a grown man. You’re adorable.”

“Awwwww,” Dinah cooed as he turned the same color as his brother. Cass gave him a thumbs up;
Tim and Damian mimed gagging like a couple of elementary-schoolers.

Alfred promptly reappeared with an unnaturally massive photo binder, dropping it on the floor before
Bruce with an earth-shaking thud.

“These are all the most important pictures from the last seventeen years, sir.” He positioned himself
beside his charge, giving himself a good view of the old photographs.

“Alfred, how were you able to take this many pictures without me noticing?”

“You are not always as observant as you would like to be, sir.”

Everybody else snickered. Bruce just grunted in reply, opening the binder to the very first picture
from seventeen years ago. A tiny, skinny, nine-year-old boy with too-big ears and a huge smile
waved at the camera, clad in a brand-new work uniform…if one could call the traffic-light colors
work-appropriate.

“Never let a circus kid pick out his own outfit,” Jason remarked.
“Oh, I remember this little bird,” Selina said affectionately, resting a finger on the picture. “I don’t know Barbara, I think this one was pretty cute too.”

“Yeah, wonder what happened,” Jim joked.

“Thanks a lot.”

Dick was alone or with just Bruce and Alfred for a good few years...math awards, school plays, posing triumphant post-mission, sports games. Here and there, Catwoman, Superman, or Wonder Woman snuck in, one particular picture with Hal and Barry photobombing Bruce doing lab work.

“God, the Bat-Cave looks so empty compared to now.”

“Yes. Well. Brace yourself for a change, Master Richard.”

“Oh, on comes the end of the all-boys’ club,” Dinah laughed. “Although they’re still going to be the majority, they just know that they’re beat.”

Sure enough, Barbara was greeted by her own eighteen-year-old face, cheeks still a bit round, body not fully developed yet, tall and gangly with lots of freckles and big eyes. She was fully clad in her Batgirl outfit, facing the camera and posed for war; index finger up, mid-yell.

“I believe I was standing behind Master Bruce when I took that.”

“Telling Bruce off on her first expedition to the Cave? Barbie always was a gal after my own heart,” Jason said affectionately. Barbara leaned over and kissed his cheek, and he turned red again. Dick glanced at his brother.

“Honestly Jay, we have never looked or sounded more related.”

“Shut up.”

The very next picture was Batgirl and Robin, cowl and mask off, lounging on the floor of the Cave eating a plate of cookies; alongside the photo was tucked a copy of Barbara’s high school diploma. She wasn’t sure which was more simultaneously sweet and embarrassing: that even then the family had accepted her into the fold and had been proud of her accomplishments, or the look on Robin’s face as he listened to her talk.

“Some things never change,” Tim commented.

“He still makes the same face!” Steph exclaimed.

“I meant the ‘high honors’ notification on her diploma, but that works too.”

“You guys…” Barbara could feel herself turning as red as Jason.

“I notice that you show up in quite a lot of the photos after this, honey,” Jim observed, peering over Bruce’s shoulder at the binder. Jason sharpening a Batarang with a massive book on his lap, Tim asleep on his keyboard in an oversized 90s rock t-shirt, Steph posing for the camera while sewing sequins to the Batman cape, Cass meditating solemnly before a television screen blaring an adult comedy, Damian holding his sword in one hand and Alfred the Kitten in the other. And Barbara, with all of them at some point.

“You know we’d all be dead without her, Jim.”

“Yes, we need the estrogen, what with all these boys around,” Selina agreed.
“What’s wrong with having boys?” Bruce asked his girlfriend. “Boys are a blessing.”

“Two weeks ago Jason and Damian got into a Battle Royale over the remote control and Tim filmed the whole thing, did they not?”

Bruce had no reply to that.

In the meantime, Dick looked over at her, raising an eyebrow.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said indignantly. “It was your fault.”

“Since when was it my fault?”

“What are you two talking about?” Kate asked absently, checking out a picture of Cass and Steph playing parkour tag over the shrubbery.

“Without going into details, it was your stupid chromosome, not mine.”

“Yeah Dick, take a biology class — hey, wait a minute.” Tim goggled at her. “What are you saying?”

Damian scoffed, leaning into his father’s way and lifting the next page.

“Drake, you have the highest IQ of all the males in this room, and you can’t figure out a very simple implication…Pennyworth, this angle is terrible! I look awful in this picture.”

“No, your face is just always that twisty and angry.”

“Don’t make me nerve-pinch you, Drake.”

While the youngest squabbled, Steph darted over and gave her mentor a congratulatory hug. Cass smugly held out her hand, and a grumbling Jason placed a fifty-dollar bill into it.

“I…that’s…”

“You can be happy Bruce, it’s not illegal,” Kate teased her cousin, gently punching his shoulder. “Congratulations, you two. Just try to make the next one a girl; there’s still a little too much testosterone around here.”

“Well, it’s not like I can really control it…”

“What — what do you mean, ‘the next one’?” Barbara spluttered. “Kate —”

“I’m going to get more wine,” Kate decided, quickly excusing herself. Selina chuckled knowingly, green eyes aglow.

“How about we focus on this one for now?” Jim suggested, clearly reading his daughter’s mind. He turned to her, smiling. “That’s wonderful news, sweetheart.”

“It is!” Damian agreed from the headlock Tim had put him in. “I’m told that what your fetus’s genitalia looks like is very important in Western culture. Of course, it’s important where I come from as well, but I doubt Mother and Grandfather released blue balloons or cut a cake for the rest of the League when they learned of it, in my case.”

“I would’ve loved to see ole Ra’s and Talia do that,” Jason snorted.
“Yes,” Barbara agreed, “it’s not too out of character…considering how he treats his daughters, Ra’s would subscribe to outdated ideas about gender and genitalia and how it affects your worth.”

“I think he already does,” Tim pointed out.

“Yeah. Hey, speaking of which…” Jason turned back to his sister. “I could still be right. We’ll check back in a few years with the kid, and if I am, I’m gonna want my money back.”

Cass nodded. “Fair enough.”

“That’s what we love about you, Jay. You may be a mass murderer, but you’re definitely not transphobic.”

“Right. Does that allow you to overlook the mass murdering part?”

“Not really, no,” Jim grumbled.

“Right, right, you’re a cop, yeah, okay.”

Damian finally fought his way free of Tim’s grip and positioned himself on his father’s other side, safe from his brother. He peered at her in a manner full of childish curiosity.

“I find it hard to connect that young person in those photographs to you. She appears to be so…assured. It’s strange to think you’ve stayed so long, through so many changes.”

She shrugged, moving her chair a bit closer.

“Well, for starters, I was a kid, Damian. I always thought I could force things and people to work my way, no matter what.”

“Wow, you have not changed that much,” Dinah joked.

“Duly noticed,” Bruce agreed.

“Ha ha ha. Fine time for you to grow a sense of humor, Bruce.”

He gave her a blank look.

“Who said that was supposed to be humorous?”

Jason made a face behind his father’s back.

“Don’t mock her, you two. Having assurance in one’s ability is a good thing. Unless you’re incompetent, in which case you should have no assurance in yourself at all.”

“Dami, we talked about this,” Dick sighed. His younger brother harrumphed.

“I’m not insulting anyone in particular this time. And I’m trying to give her a compliment, Grayson. You of all people should be pleased by that.”

“Hey, I’m pleased by it too,” Jim exclaimed.

“Me too!”

“Yes.”

“I mean, duh.”
“So am I!”

“I’m drunk enough to be.”

“I’m barely tipsy and I am too!”

“I take it back. I now understand why you’ve stayed with these morons for so long.”

“Yeah, I love these morons.” She wrapped an arm around Cass, who started, then hummed gently and leaned into her touch. “Even though most of them keep turning out to be guys.”

“We can’t help that!”

“Bruce can.”

Even Bruce smiled at that, albeit sheepishly. There were a few moments of quiet afterwards, the moon beginning to rise in the window; snow over the grounds striped lilac and rose with the last of the sunlight. Wax dripped down the menorah. Selina took the photo album and hoisted it into her lap; Steph going over to her to get a better look.

“So speaking of which, have you two thought of names yet?”

It took Barbara a second to realize that Tim was addressing her and his brother. She shrugged, then glanced over at Dick.

“Oh, no, um…” He was rubbing the back of his neck, ruffling his hair in a frankly adorable way. “Not yet.”

“Well, since you’re still making up your minds, Stephen’s a good name,” Steph said innocently. Everyone looked at her. “I’m just saying.”

“Not as good as Kit,” Kate rebutted.

“Yeah, but Jason Junior has a better ring to it.”

Soon everyone was shouting out their own names, male versions of their names, and the names of their friends and significant others. Even Bruce and Jim. Dick looked overwhelmed, like he was genuinely considering all of them; Barbara was struggling not to laugh again.

“You are all wrong,” Alfred interrupted, speaking up for the first time in a while. Everyone fell dead silent. “Young sir and miss, if I may say so, if you wish to have the best name for your son, I am told that the one in question would be Alfred.”

The entire family completely lost it.

By the time dinner and a very enthusiastic showing of *A New Hope* in the home movie theater were over, many servings of wine and eggnog had been distributed, nearly as many had been consumed, and there was overall very little food left in the house.

Alfred had *very firmly* declined help from the manor’s drunk residents, before setting about wrapping up leftover pie for the next morning’s breakfast and putting the dishes in the dishwasher. Barbara
could still hear him quietly bustling around the kitchen.

After being turned down, most of the family had fallen asleep in various positions around the living room. Tim and Steph had been relatively sober enough to stumble up to his bedroom, where they had most likely given up and collapsed on the floor. Kate was sprawled out beside the fireplace, dreamily mumbling something about baseball. Jim was slumped over, snoozing, in one armchair. Dinah, who wasn’t even drinking until her head injury had healed, had flopped across the expensive carpet like a starfish. Jason was draped over a different armchair in a way that was going to hurt in the morning, Bruce curled up on the floor underneath that armchair, both of them snoring like hibernating grizzly bears. Selina had, ironically enough, snuggled up in her sleep beside Ace and Titus.

Meanwhile, she was lying across the edge of the couch, her boyfriend wedged up behind her, spooning her with his face buried in her hair. Cassandra, who, as it turned out, was very good at holding her liquor (she’d snuck extra drinks when Bruce hadn’t been looking), was draped on top of the both of them. The three of them greatly resembled a group of sleeping cats, and the warm pressure and weight was about to send Barbara, even completely sober, off too.

That is, until a pair of large green eyes attached to a bent-down child suddenly appeared before her face.

“You look like an overstuffed turkey that has been shoved into a too-small oven and then forgotten about,” he observed.

“Is that your bratty, overly complicated way of telling me I’m fat, Damian?”

“No, this is: you’re fat.”

She looked at him with slightly exaggerated balefulness.

“You’re lucky I have both arms pinned down, kid.”

“Oh, I quiver with fear,” he retorted, straightening up. “But in all seriousness, I must ask: are you certain that you are twenty weeks? You do not…” He gestured towards her, “…seem as grown as you should.”

“Well, it is my first. Besides, your brother was smaller than normal too, up until he was about sixteen…and I know you’ve taken into account both those things.”

Damian huffed slightly.

“Ever since Grayson and I reconciled, I find that I’m unable to stop concerning myself over you,” he admitted. “Beyond what work companions should concern themselves with. I would be…put out, were anything to happen to you, and by extension, to the fetus you carry.”

She blinked a few times, shifting slightly.

“Wow. Coming from you, that was practically sweet.”

“Yes, well, don’t go spreading it around.” He shuffled his feet a bit. “Besides, Grayson is like a second father to me, as well as a brother. It is likely that I am only concerned for you for his sake —”

Good god, how he was like Bruce when it came to emotions sometimes.

“— and lord knows why I should care about your fetus, considering that it will likely take all his
attention once it’s born, and that it’s tainting his reputation by being…a…” Damian’s brain finally seemed to catch up with his mouth, and he slowly trailed off.

“Were you going to say ‘illegitimate blood child?’” Barbara asked dryly.

“I was going to say ‘bastard —’” She let the sardonic look grow more like a scowl. “— but…your point still stands.”

She rolled her eyes.

“First of all, he’s a man. Having a kid out of wedlock isn’t going to taint his reputation. Second of all, it’s not strange, it’s natural to care about your loved ones’ children; who in this case will also be your family too. And despite all else Damian, no one can deny that you love him.” She looked behind her as best she could, feeling her expression soften. “You love him just as much as I do.”

Damian scoffed, but his own face was relaxing.

“You could do a better job expressing it.”

“True. We’re a pair in that, aren’t we?”

He raised a finger and opened his mouth, then shut it again. He regarded her with a sort of grudging respect.

“You win this round, Gordon. But I still stand by what I said last month.”

_Last month._

That had seemed like an eternity ago. Had it really only been six and a half months previously that they had all sat down together in the Cave for the first time to discuss Kelly Nolan’s murder? It felt like ages; all that had happened since, all they had progressed.

“You mean that shovel talk?” Despite herself, she smiled. “I’m still warned, don’t worry.”

“Excellent.” Damian finally fully relaxed, steepling his fingers and smirking contentedly like a miniature evil genius. She privately wondered if she really should’ve bought him that Artemis Fowl boxed set for the holidays. “I’ve concluded: you are acceptable after all, Gordon.”

“High praise. You’ve got potential too, kiddo.” The smile grew.

“Thank you. Now I should take my leave for bed…”

Just before he was about to head upstairs, an impulse seized her. Maybe it was the mood, a seasonal burst of sentiment, but it likely wasn’t.

“No. Stay.” She inclined her head. “Spend the night with me and your siblings.”

Damian cocked his to the side, birdlike.

“Spend the night in a tangle of limbs and likely wake up with aches and pains in the morning?”

“Well, I’ve got two people lying on my legs, and I don’t feel any aches or pains in them yet.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Todd,” he complained, but clambered onto the overcrowded couch nonetheless. He nestled somewhere in between the gap his brother and sister created, lying on his back; surprisingly heavy. “Also, Grayson appears to be nuzzling your hair.”
“He does that sometimes.”

There were a few minutes of blessed quiet. From the window where the menorah rested, the moon had risen. Alighting upon the unusually clear sky, it was as wide and welcoming as a pair of arms, washing the whole night in cool silver and lighting up even the shadows.

“This reminds me. What, pray tell, is a redhead fetish?”

“…Ask Jason.”

“He told me to ask you.”

“Good night, Damian.”
I've been completely exhausted and swamped with schoolwork for the last few weeks, so if anything seems weird or incoherent, now you know why.

Also, as a side note, I stand firmly behind the concepts mentioned in this chapter of Jason and food.

(Warnings: mentioned child abuse/endangerment, sexist language, homophobic language, mentioned past rape, onscreen death, talk of having to give up a child. There's a lot that gets brought up in this one, so if I missed anything here, please let me know.)

**The Magician (Tarot):** Upright — Power, skill, concentration, action, resourcefulness. Reversed — Manipulation, poor planning, latent talents.

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**January**

“So what New Year’s resolutions did you guys make?”

Barbara normally kept her headset off while she was away from her workstation, but on occasion, emergencies and urgent Birds of Prey matters had forced her to multitask. In this case, she kept a careful eye on the omelet cooking atop her stove as she rooted around in the fridge, her friends clamoring in her ear.

“I’m very proud of mine: I resolved to drink less,” Zinda chirped. Helena didn’t even politely pause like the others; she immediately started laughing.

“Zinda. I am sitting next to you on this airplane, two hours into our flight, a week after New Year’s, and you’re already on your second whiskey. All I can say is thank god you’re not the pilot this time.”

“Well, I can’t quit all at once, can I, Hel? I’m pretty sure the cumulative hangover would literally kill me. Besides, you resolved to not have so much casual sex, and then five minutes later you went home with your New Year’s kiss.”

“Not so much, Zinda! Not none! Not so much!”

Barbara snorted, pulling out a massive jar of roasted habanero salsa and backing up to turn over the
“Did any of us actually manage to last a week through our resolutions?” she asked.

“I did,” Dinah bragged. On the stove, the cooking egg crackled and sizzled, the smell of fried cheese and vegetables permeating the air. “I resolved to not get fired from my new job teaching self-defense. And I haven’t yet.”

“That bar…literally could not get any lower.”

“Okay Miss Smarty Pants, what was your resolution, and did you stick to it?”

Barbara paused, the jar halfway open.

…I resolved to get all of Dick’s stuff unpacked and put away within three days.”

This time, all three of them burst out laughing.

“What kind of a resolution is that?” Zinda gasped.

“No kind, judging by how it’s going so far.”

“Oh, shut up. For some reason, I thought he would have way less crap than he does.” She grabbed the spatula and carefully transferred the omelet onto a plate, dumping the frying pan in the sink.

“How are you and he doing?” Helena asked once she finally stopped cackling. “Still lost in domestic bliss?”

“If by ‘bliss,’ you mean ‘unpacking boxes and remodeling the guest room.’” She spooned the salsa onto her enormous breakfast. “I would be tripping over all the stuff lying around my home right now…if I could trip.”

Now they were all groaning.

“You sound like Roy,” Dinah complained. “The other day, he was making a smoothie while he was Skyping me, and I made an offhand comment about watching out for the blender blades…then he took off his prosthetic, held up the stump of his arm, and screamed: ‘Oh no! You were right! Look what happened!’”

Barbara laughed, taking her breakfast and coffee and maneuvering out a good spot beside the window. Through the frosted glass, as the sun ascended higher towards noon, the city seemed to turn over with life.

“Maybe we’ve both been spending too much time with Jason.”

“ Entirely possible.”

“He’s good company, though.”

“That reminds me, I’d kind of like to meet Jason sometime,” Zinda said thoughtfully. “And the rest of the Waynes. I’ve only met Bruce and Dick so far.”

“I know! It’s a travesty.” Barbara tucked into her food with gusto. “You’re one of my best friends, and you’ve only met two of my family? Horrible.”

“…Your family?” Helena echoed.
Barbara paused, fork halfway to her mouth.

“Yeah,” she said softly, setting it down on her plate. “My family.”

“Told you so.” The smile was evident in Dinah’s voice. “You guys should’ve seen her with them. Even the demon kid likes her now.”

“I thought the demon kid didn’t like anyone,” Helena interjected.

“Exactly.”

She settled back into place, resuming her breakfast, looking out her window.

“It has actually been very domestic around here lately,” she confessed, sipping her coffee. “I was just waiting, worried, for the last couple weeks, that something would go wrong. We’d have a fight, Bruce and the kids would have another fight, my doctor would find that the baby’s negatively affecting my damaged spine or the scar tissue in my abdomen…anything.”

“Oh, that is just classic you,” Helena snorted. “The second things start going right, that’s when you start panicking.”

“What Hel means to say is,” Dinah said quickly, “you’re worrying too much. You should enjoy being happy.”

“I’d like to.” She swirled her next bite of egg in a puddle of salsa before raising it to her lips. The heat from the chilis was near-palpable. “But I’ve got a lot of things to take care of and work at. And I don’t plan to change those, even for the sake of settling down right now.”

There were three identical, fond, exasperated sighs down the other line.

“Also, to be honest, even when I was little, I never really thought about having this kind of domesticity before. Lord knows I’m not used to it, and I’m still figuring a lot out —”

“You’re more of a general than an army wife, we know,” Zinda’s voice was still a little exasperated, but mostly endeared. “We’re glad you can have both the hustle and the quiet life, though. Never would’ve been able to have both back in my day.”

“Thanks, Grandma Blake.”

The women’s chatter was interrupted by the urgent beeping from another line on her headset. She quickly rolled back into the kitchen, dumping her empty plate and fork in the sink along with the frying pan; pausing just to refill her coffee cup.

“Guys, I gotta go. Someone else needs to talk to me.”

“Important?”

“Most likely, yeah.”

“We’ll call you when we land,” Helena promised.

“Good luck on your algorithm-whatever,” Dinah chimed in. “Hope everything keeps going well.”

“Thanks guys.”

Still in fairly high spirits, she clicked the next caller through.
Most criminals in Gotham didn’t fear the day as much as they feared the night; which at first seemed reasonable. Batman would look less like a terrifying half-human creature of the dark and more like a fortysomething man wearing a Halloween costume and a fanny pack in the damning light of day.

The thought of which made Jason snicker to himself.

But looks weren’t everything, and neither was Batman’s reputable aura of fear. Sometimes, you had to forget how something would make you look, and just carry it out. Even if there were no convenient shadows to lurk in or gargoyles to brood atop, or any other such methods of enforcing one’s reputation.

Red Hood squared his shoulders, the weapons hidden on his person clattering together. The winter sun offered no relief from the bone-dampening cold; faint trails of steam escaped from under his helmet. He shivered slightly, recalling the frequent days in his early childhood when his mother’s landlord would turn off the heat.

“You dying over there in all that leather too, Selina?”

“The things we do for our aesthetics,” she sighed, adjusting her cats-eye lenses; squinting behind them in the daylight. “I’m freezing my tits off. Let’s hope that he’s worth the trip. He can be…less than helpful. By which I mean he’s a fucking nuisance.”

“Joy.”

Jason took his helmet off for a better look, gazing down into the alleyway.

He and Catwoman had reached the belly of the East End; filthy and infested with all sorts of crime. The poverty level here was the highest in the city and the whole district seemed to be tinged with a layer of gray, even the flashing neon signs advertising cheap beer and hot girls. A rank smell hung in the air, even in the dead of winter.

“Hey, at least we’re in ours and Batgirl’s childhood home,” he observed with a touch of his dark humor. “Sure brings back happy memories, huh?”

“Oh yes. Abusive father, juvie, prostitution…loved it,” she replied, her voice equally dry. “Don’t know how anyone else lived without it.”

“I’ve been there. And I know, right? Poor bastards.”

They were both quiet for a moment.

“I notice you still stick around the place, though.”

“Could say the same about you. Besides, no matter how much shit happened to me here, there are too many people in need also here.” She shifted in place. “They make it worth it, I guess.”

“Hey, the East End could do worse for a guardian.”

From the alleyway, there was a shiver of movement. Then the figure of a squat little man took shape,
peeling himself from the alley wall, nearly as gray and covered in grime as the wall he had come from.

“I take it that’s our guy.”

“Yes. That’s Caruso.” The distaste was obvious in Selina’s voice. “You wanna be the good cop? I hate playing nice with him.”

“You know I’m about as good at playing nice as I am at being straight.”

“Fair enough. Bad cop-worse cop then?”

“You always were my favorite stepmother.” Jason clipped his helmet back into place, watching as Selina neatly leapt down the rusty fire escape to the dingy gray snow. The man there started in place.

“Whah — whatcha doin’ here, kitty? Don’t you and the Bats have bigger fish to fry than just lil’ ole me?”

Caruso was a week beyond needing to trim his beard, and his teeth resembled nothing more than eroding tombstones. The t-shirt peeking through his coat sported what appeared to be the silhouette of an anatomically impossible woman.

“Unfortunately, you are the bigger fish at the moment.” As he descended, Jason watched Selina advance on him, the man’s attention fully on her. “Here’s the thing: you may not work for any of the big-name Rogues, but you do know all the thugs and henchmen in the Gotham-Bludhaven area.”

“Yeah. So? You lookin’ for a sidekick, kitty? You wanna match with the big bad Bat and his birds?” Caruso laughed wheezily. “Lil’ no-good kids in traffic-light colors really must be good for catchin’ all the fire.”

“Meh, I actually think little no-good kids in traffic-light colors would be pretty difficult to hit. The Bat’s really protective of them, for some reason.”

Caruso’s piggy little eyes nearly bugged out of his head as Jason approached from the shadows; handgun cocks lazily to the side, massive boots crunching slowly against the gravel.

“Then again, why anyone would want to go shooting at little kids in the first place when Joker’s right in the same city, I have no idea.”

“Red Hood.” It was nearly a whisper. Then the man cleared his throat, and said in a faux casual tone: “Never pegged you as the type to hang out with women in tight clothes, Hood.” The implication was glaringly obvious.

Jason just chuckled.

“Well, out of all the accusations that’ve been made towards me, I gotta say, that’s one of the least offensive.” Selina hid a smirk. He drew a round of bullets out of his jacket, slow and casual, tapping it into the chamber of his gun. “Also, you win points for accuracy this time.” He flicked a speck of invisible dust from the barrel. “But I didn’t come here to gossip about my love life. We need to know what you know about an employer who calls himself Python.”

Caruso’s eyes were still locked on the gun.

“Never heard of the guy.” His gaze didn’t waver. “Beats me why the pair of you would be interested in gettin’ that kind of employment —” Selina extended her artificial steel claws, and Jason clicked off
the safety, “— pretty kitty and Red Homo.” Despite the insulting words, his voice quavered.

“Cute. Take you all day to come up with that one?” Jason snorted. “Guess we’re doing this the hard way, then.”

Selina inclined her head upwards, and he nodded in agreement.

She leaned in, claws flashing bright-sharp. The tips slowly dragged across the crumbling wall, scratching little lines...then she yanked her arm down, and four deep score marks SCREECHED their way into the brick. She drew her hand back, examining her unscathed claws, the steel winking with promise.

“Imagine what they can do to your dick,” she said bluntly. “Or rather, you won’t have to imagine.”

Caruso cringed in horror. Jason chuckled nastily.

“Okay!” he whimpered. “I do know Python. Know him pretty good at this point, I think. But I can’t say any more.”

Jason leaned in close enough to smell the other man’s sour body odor. Resisting the urge to gag, he pressed the barrel of the gun to the bottom of his jaw.

“You’re going to have to be more specific, buddy.”

“I can’t say more! He’ll have me killed!”

“Really?” Jason pressed the barrel in closer; Selina started. A thin red circle of pressure began to appear on his chin. “Python’s a killer? I had no idea. Now, here’s something people may actually not know: Catwoman’ll be happy to scratch you up good, but she’s not a killer. I, on the other hand, make no such promises. You hear about the major Gotham drug lords, and what I did to their lieutenants a couple years ago?”

Caruso made a terrified keening noise.

“I hear one of Gordon’s rookies threw up when he saw ‘em. Six severed heads in a duffel bag. That took me two hours. I have no time limit today.”

Selina made a quiet noise, almost imperceptible, under her breath. Upon hearing her, Jason softened, albeit slightly. The pressure on the barrel of the gun loosened, his shoulders slacking. But not enough for Caruso to stop quaking.

“So it’ll be better for everyone if you just tell us what we want to know.”

The smaller man swallowed hard, then nodded as best he could with the gun barrel pressed against his jaw.

“Okay. Okay. I’ll…I’ll tell you about Python.”

Barbara had rolled back to her workstation by the time she clicked the other call through. A half-dozen live screens played inactive footage of the Cave, the Watchtower, and the preferred stake-out positions of a few other active Leaguers.
“You’re patrolling awfully early today.”

“Red Robin and I thought we’d get it done ahead of time.” Steph’s voice was bright. In the background, Barbara could hear Tim muttering something about golden penguin statues. “Tam hasn’t seen the new Star Wars yet, so he’s going with her this afternoon, and I have a hot date with my textbooks; my first midterm is in two days.”

“You didn’t bring Black Bat?” Barbara let a teasing note slip into her voice. “That’s not like you.”

“I know! But Batman personally asked her to train with and then bust Poison Ivy’s and Harley Quinn’s planned crime spree with him, and you know she can’t resist take-your-daughter-to-work night, even for me.” There was an amusing huff of jealousy in Steph’s voice. “Robin’s out too because I’m not in the mood to listen to sibling rivalry or being called ‘Fatgirl.’ And I couldn’t ask Nightwing to come along either, because he’s —”

“Babysitting Lian while Red Hood’s on interrogation and Arsenal’s job hunting, I know.”

“Right, he would’ve already told you. Anyway, that means it’s just me and the ex, dismantling villainous activity before it even happens. Cobblepot really panicked when we caught him before he finished planning his heist, I’ll tell you that.”

“He tends to do that.” Barbara regarded her screens. “You taking your regular patrol route?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, I hope you don’t find anything particularly exciting. You and Red Robin call me when you’re done. And study hard on your midterms.”

“You practicing your mom skills on me again?” Steph laughed. “They’re not half bad.”

“Don’t forget to check in, Batgirl.”

“Sure, sure.” The smile was evident in her voice. “Talk to you soon.”

The line went dead, the com surprisingly quiet for once. Barbara shrugged and buried herself back in her work; pulling up a wall of code and equations, her fingers moving rhythmically over the keys. Every so often, the little flutters of movement she was getting used to would start up again, making her sigh and settle in a little more. Even the decaf coffee didn’t seem so bad.

Then the screen flickered, temporarily going black; static crackling.

She sighed, setting down her mug.

“Come on.” She swatted the side of the computer. It flickered more, staying black for longer this time. She hit it harder. “Come on, you stupid piece of crap —”

The screen completely disappeared.

“Are you shitting me?”

The computer did not respond.

Barbara pushed herself back from the desk, easing out of her chair and down to an awkward crouch on the floor, legs splayed. She examined that particular computer’s power box, which appeared to be functioning normally. The Wi-Fi router was alright too. There was no reason for the machine to have suddenly started malfunctioning.
Unless.

A cold bead of sweat coalesced on the back of her neck.

No. Not again.

She quickly crawled back over and hoisted herself back into her chair just in time for the ivory snakehead to manifest across her screen. Her chest clenched; bile rising in her throat.

The words began to appear.

_How’s Black Canary doing these days?_

She slammed her fist down on the desk. The coffee went flying, splattering in abstract patterns across the wood; dripping to the floor in muddy rivulets.

“Goddamn fucking son of a bitch —!”

Hot tears, unbidden, sprung to her eyes. She wiped them away furiously, fingers reaching the keyboard.

_She’s alive. Nice try._

He was silent for a few moments.

_Clearly, I have incompetent help. And clearly, the attempt on her life was not enough to break you._

_Your help are the incompetent ones? Are you sure about that?_

_I am no different than you in the sense that for all my talent and skills, I must rely on lesser beings to carry out physical tasks. However, unlike you, I have no emotional attachment to them._

Her hands clenched again.

_Your Black Canary was foolish enough to come to Gotham, to stay with civilians._

At least he still didn’t suspect Barbara Gordon of anything. Thank god.

_But unfortunately she doesn’t live here. She is safe, for now. Which is more than I can say for a whole group of your lackeys._

The lukewarm relief trickling through her veins turned to ice water. Her fists tightened further; knuckles turning white. It took a full minute before she was able to unclench them and write a response.

_What makes you think I have any sort of emotional attachment to the Bats? Her words were as cold as stone. Perhaps I care about the Birds of Prey to some degree, they are of great usefulness to me. But it’s not worth getting entangled in the Bats and all their emotional issues. If you want to hurt me, I recommend you look elsewhere._

There was little time wasted in his reply.

_Nice try. If you really didn’t care about them, you wouldn’t know about their interpersonal affairs in the first place. At least one of them has your heart…cold, wire-entangled machine that it is._

_You’re one to talk._ Her hands were shaking, tears sloshing down her cheeks. She scrubbed at her
face until her nails left red tally marks on her skin; silently damning her hormones. *Face it Python,*
*we’re at a stalemate. One of us wins, then the other does. One of us loses…same pattern. You can’t
find me. You can’t take me out alone. The Bats aren’t stupid or incompetent enough to fall into your
grip, now that you’ve demonstrated your hand with the Canary.*

*I don’t need to catch all the Bats. I only need to cripple them.*

Her breath shook —

*And that deli along Batgirl’s and Red Robin’s regular patrol route seems to be a good place to start.*

— Then caught.

“*So you give him information over the internet about available thugs and henchmen?*” Selina
demanded. “*And about which ones he can milk for more information about the histories and habits
of the Bats?*”

“Ain’t that what I just said?” Caruso whined.

Jason snarled quietly, his grip on his gun tightening and loosening a few times.

“You fucking diseased canker sore. Innocent people are *dead* because of what you told him.”

“Innocent people die all the time in this town!” He held up his hands in supplication. “I’m only
speedin’ along the process. ‘Sides, you should’ve seen what my bank account looked like
afterwards…of course, ‘fore I went gambling, and then ‘fore I cashed in on whores and liquor…god,
that man’s got money.”

“Shut up!” Jason jammed his gun into the smaller man’s chin again. “I’m not interested in your
justification for Nolan’s and Di Nero’s deaths, and the attempt on Black Canary.”

“Canary? Not that I care if one of them so-called heroes is dead, but why’d he try to kill the
Canary?”

“None of your business,” Selina snapped. “Tell us what else you told Python about.”

Caruso looked like he was still pondering the Black Canary conundrum as he continued to speak.

“Well, he wanted to talk ‘bout the regular patrol routes of the Bats, too. And somethin’ ‘bout a guy to
keep an eye on where a family called the Foxes like to visit…and if the Bats ever came round that
way.”

Selina and Jason locked gazes, realizing at the same time.

“He wants to take them out simultaneously.”
Tim’s cape billowed out in front of her as they ran, and she reveled in the heat created by their movement. She could feel her face flushing hot, hotter, against the January wind, the insulated suit warming her up farther.

Steph laughed giddily, watching her breath condensate in the air, turning a leap into a continuous cartwheel, finally passing Tim.

“This is supposed to be a serious patrol, you know,” he called from a few feet behind her.

She finished the cartwheel crouching at the edge of the apartment complex, gazing down into a cluster of cozy multicolored building fronts. For downtown Gotham, it wasn’t half bad.

“Nothing’s serious when you’re cosplaying as Dr. Mid-Nite,” she replied.

He caught up to her, the run slowing to a walk.

“Are you ever going to let that go?”

“Never.”

Tim sighed ruefully.

“Maybe I should go back to wearing just a mask.”

“Or at least pick a cowl that doesn’t make you look like you’re wearing a big black condom on your head.”

“I do not!”

She laughed, shifting on the balls of her feet, taking in the scene before her.

Directly across the street were a bodega and a mom-and-pop deli, squashed in next to each other. Around, clustered around a small courtyard, were relatively well-kept apartments, the middle-class civilians mingling around ranging in age from children bundled up like little snowmen to baby boomers just shy of retirement.

“Oh, we have to be careful, Red Robin. The old guy with the cane and the poodle looks like he’s up to nefarious purposes. That villain.”

Tim held up his hands.

“Point taken. Think we could take twenty minutes off to grab some matzo ball soup from that deli?”

“Timothy Jackson Drake, under very different circumstances, I’d kiss you for saying that.” She hooked a line over the edge of the building and hopped over the side, slowly shimmying down. A couple seconds later, he joined her. “Although it’s probably not going to be as good as Jason’s.”

Tim avoided stepping on someone’s window.

“Jason cooks?”

“Jason’s a fantastic cook. Might have something to do with the fact that he’s got his weird domestic set-up going on, and he’s the only member of your family who eats like a normal human being.”

“I would resent that if it weren’t true.” He hopped down a few more feet. “God knows Kate basically subsides on powder food, and Damian, Bruce, and Cass would forget to eat entirely if
Alfred weren’t around.”

“Yeah, and Dick doesn’t have time to cook between his two jobs, so he just survives on cereal.” She released a hand to wave at a little boy playing with a Batgirl toy inside one apartment. His jaw dropped. “Maybe he’ll eat more normally now that he’s living with Babs…and then, of course, there’s you, he whose body has been wrenching nutrients out of coffee and preservatives for years now.”

“Glass houses, Processed-Sugar Queen.”

She didn’t deny it.

“No wonder Jason’s so damn big, considering how much he eats compared to the rest of you.”

“He’s a little chubbier around the stomach too lately, I think.”

“Eh, I’m not gonna call him out on it. He can pull it off with his muscles, plus, he deserves a little extra weight, after nearly starving as a kid.” The two of them hopped to the ground, flicking the lines free, pulling and winding in the slack. “Besides, now he and Barbara can match.”

Both of them laughed, which tapered off into nervous chuckles.

“Don’t tell them I said that.”

As the pair headed across the courtyard, they earned more than a few stares from the civilians. A small girl reached out to touch Tim’s cape, but her mother whisked her away. A few people gazed at them in wonder. A collection of teenagers barely younger than them snapped some pictures. But there were a few others giving them looks of suspicion and mistrust; borderline angry.

The front of the deli was made of thick glass, the patrons cozy in line for their soups and bagels. Most looked either content or slightly bored, one pale, dark-haired man fidgeting nervously, glancing around himself; his eyes growing wide in recognition upon seeing the two young heroes. As he did, he edged slightly into the back of the deli, behind the line, behind the seated customers.

But neither of them took notice of him, in favor of a pair of people they recognized.


“Stalking you to make sure you’re a good platonic-date for Tam?”

“I’m gonna pretend it’s happy coincidence.”

Lucius looked tired, as he always did those days, but there was still a smile on his face for his son. Luke, for his part, was eyeing the blueberry scones with visible excitement, clearly unaffected by the nonchalance of his surroundings.

“Think it’ll look too suspicious if we acknowledge WE’s CEO and his kid?”

“Eh, nah. We’re supposed to be heroes to all, including the Foxes.”

“Fair enough.”

The pair eagerly ran to the window, tapping on it with their fingers; making the occupants start. Once they had successfully obtained the attention of the patrons, Steph started waving excitedly, Tim sharing a rare public smile.
As it had been outside, their reception was mixed. Several people waved back. About twice as many
drew away or cringed. Luke grinned at his younger compatriots, while his father offered them a
smile of their own.

None of them saw the man in the back of the deli drawing a device out of his jacket and tapping a
few buttons.

Barbara would’ve stood up.

In her panic, instincts refused to catch up with reality.

Instead, she crashed to the floor, bringing down her chair on top of her.

Her legs crumpled like paper underneath the mess, which should’ve hurt, but didn’t. Instead she felt
the the chair striking her against the forehead and shoulders; she cried out in pain, immediately
struggling to hoist both it and herself back into position.

Clutching the desk, her arms shaking, as she pulled herself up, she saw the next string of words:

*Since you are the only one who knows, anyone who dies today is on your hands too. It’ll be because
of your incompetence. Your inability to keep people you care about.*

Python could’ve easily guessed how the first two sentences would gut her. But what he didn’t know,
because he didn’t know Barbara Gordon, that the third sentence instantly drew a gasp, a sob, and a
fresh wave of tears behind her eyes.

She was choking as the screens faded from black back to normal, hand shaking as she fumbled for
her earpiece.


Jason swore violently in three different languages, roughly shoving Caruso away. The man crashed
against the wall, crumpling slightly.

“*Dios mio.*” Selina didn’t seem to realize that she’d slipped back into Spanish. One clawed hand was
over her mouth. “Red Robin and Batgirl are the ones on patrol today…they have no idea.”

Jason clipped the safety back into place and stowed his gun under his jacket. He turned his hatred
back to Caruso, who was getting back to his feet.

“I should kill you where you stand.”

Their lives were in danger…Jason’s fear for them churned with loathing for the man before him. The
temptation to throttle him, to bring something edged down on his throat, to knock his head with a
piece of lead pipe, was overpowering.
But the coms were busy and he had no idea how far Steph and Tim were along their patrol route yet. If he wasted time killing that man, he’d never get to them before it was too late.

“But I won’t.”

Nothing but a soft whine of relief.

Selina hoisted the little recording device that she’d been hiding in hand.

“I’ll drop this sack of shit and the evidence against him off at the GCPD before the cops can see me. No guarantees it’ll hold him in their state, but it’s something. You know the kids’ patrol routes better; you get to them.”

Jason nodded, running to the alley entrance, preparing in his head how to get across town as fast as possible.

“But…I thought you hated Red Robin.”

He turned and spared their informant one last look.

“You and your employer don’t know as much as you think, do you?”

Then he was gone.

Stephanie had one hand on the door handle when her com began to buzz.

“Aw geez. What does your dad want now?”

She reached up and clicked the caller through.

“Batman, for the last time, I did pack the smoke grenades —”

“Batgirl, Red Robin, listen to me.”

Steph cut herself off. Oracle’s voice was strung out, frantic. Something was wrong.

“Dixon’s Deli, on the corner of Lexington and 59th.”

“We’re there. What about it?”

“It’s a trap, it’s —” The older woman took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to steady herself.

“Python set a trap for our family and the Fox family. I don’t know what he has planned, but he thinks he can take out all of you at once. You need to figure out what’s going on, and get the Foxes and other civilians out of there as soon as possible.”

Stephanie felt like someone had set a taser to her gut. Her mouth drained dry, gasping in horror. Beside her, Tim’s face had gone two shades paler.

“We — we’ll get everyone out,” Steph promised. She cleared her throat, the shock beginning to give way to anger. “If that son of a bitch thinks he can kill more civilians to get to us, he’s got another think coming.”
Tim looked at her.

“You’re taking point, Batgirl?”

“You know more about traps than I do.” She did her best to sound authoritative. “I’ll evacuate everyone, and take out whatever goon’s there.”

He nodded.

“Okay. I think I’ll defer to you on this one.”

Steph felt a tiny warm swell in her chest, easy to miss among the fury and adrenaline pounding through her head. The two of them had known each other a long time, and he rarely, if ever, deferred to her. Tim, who had found it hard to trust at all in the last year, trusted her.

“Let’s go.”

“Keep me wired.” Oracle’s voice was still tight with fear.

“It’s okay, O.” The last of the warmth in his voice was used in those three words, then it turned cold. Emotionless. “We’ll get him.”

The door burst open, and every eye in the establishment trained on the two of them. In the back of the deli, the dark-haired man started, nearly dropping the device in his hand.

Steph took a deep breath, gazing around the deli.

“All of you! Listen to me. You need to get out of here now. Someone’s planning a mass murder here, and you’re all in the crossfire!”

Nobody moved.

“I’m serious! You need to get out of here!”

“And why should we listen to you?” demanded a woman, one hand on her latte. “You Bats haven’t exactly been doing a bang-up job of keeping the city safe, since, well, always. And your allies leave something to be desired.”

“Melanie, they’re heroes,” her friend protested.

“Some heroes. That girl doesn’t even know what she’s doing.”

Steph caught the man in the back’s eye. He fidgeted, attempting to set the device in his hand down on a table, edging away.

Tim followed her gaze, his mind working…

“Is that a…” he realized out loud. “It’s — that man has a bomb!”

The patrons circled around, facing the man in question. He dropped the device on the table with a clatter, sprinting for the door —

Steph spun low and kicked out, catching him against the knees. He fell hard, cracking his head on the floor.

Tim, in the meantime, darted through the crowd and scooped up the device.
“It *is* a bomb,” he said grimly.

Steph looked up from where she’d been examining the man for a pulse. Jaws had fallen open, eyes blinking slowly.

“How do you believe me?”

No sooner had the words left her lips that there was a veritable stampede for the door. The people who’d been working behind the display case ran first to the kitchens, drawing out the last of the other employees, before they too sprinted outside, darting across the courtyard.

Luke, who was muscling a way through the crowd for his father, paused just beside Steph.

“St — Batgirl,” he murmured, “You two need to come with.”

“One minute.” She staggered to her feet, struggling to hoist the unconscious bomber. “Red’s going to try to defuse the bomb, and either way, I need to make sure everyone gets out.”


“Don’t worry, we’re professionals. Go. You guys need to get safe too.”

Nodding reluctantly, he pulled Lucius close and the two of them were through the doors. Tim was frantically checking the device all over, and the only civilian left in the deli was a squat man in his fifties, slowly chewing a lox-covered sesame bagel.

Stephanie set down the bomber and headed over to him.

“Hey, you need to get out too. Unless you’re an alien or a metahuman immune to explosions —”

“That’s not a real bomb.”

His assurance took her by surprise.

“…Yes it is. It *is*.” She indicated Tim. “Why would he go to the trouble to defuse a fake bomb?”

“Cause you kids can’t do anything right. ‘Specially not a little girl who never thinks before she does shit and fucks everything up. So *excuse me* if I don’t believe you.”

Steph reeled slightly.

“It doesn’t matter what you believe! What matters is that there’s a bomb in this building, and even if Red Robin defuses it —”

“That’s not going to happen.” Tim came over, still holding the bomb, his expression grim. “It’s linked up to an external computer system. The guy who brought it in just sent a signal to that system, and then the person controlling it set the bomb to go off. To defuse it, I’d have to hack into that system from afar…I could do it, but it’d take me at least ten minutes.” He turned it around, revealing the ticking red numbers. “We have just over two.”

Dread sank into her gut like concrete.

“Can we take it somewhere else?”

“Not in two minutes. There are too many clusters of civilians in the vicinity; if we tried to take it somewhere nearby, this type of bomb would kill us and at least a dozen more.”
Steph took a deep breath, trying not to let her voice rattle.

“Red Robin, you need to leave too. Make sure the other civilians keep a wide berth. I’ll get these two out.”

“But —”

She looked at her friend, the boy she used to love.

“Please.”

Barbara’s voice, metallic and computer-distorted as it was, echoed down the line.

“You know she’s right.”

Tim sighed, crumpling slightly.

“I’ll go.”

His cape billowing behind him, he ran out, joining the crowd that had gathered on the other side of the courtyard. Stephanie gave him one last look, then faced the ticking clock and the two men. The man who had set the device, the man who still wouldn’t leave.

“Come on! You have to go! It’s going to go off in less than two minutes!”

“No! Leave me alone, you stupid little bitch!”

He tried to go back to his bagel, but she slammed her hands down on the table, making him jump.

“Listen, asshole. Call me names all you want, but I’m getting you out of here, whether you like it or not!”

A minute and thirty seconds.

Steph seized him by the arm and tried to hoist him out of his seat, but he was even heavier than the bomber.

“I. Am. Not. Leaving!”

He struck her across the face with his free hand, and she stumbled.

“You goddamn Bats can’t do anything right, can you? Especially not you fucking Batgirls!”

Stephanie growled, preparing to grab him again.

“Batgirl.”

Oracle’s voice gave her pause.

“You need to get out of there now. Leave them.”

Steph froze, her heart stuttering.

“But Oracle…they…they’ll die.”

Barbara’s voice fairly exploded in her ear.
“God damn it Stephanie, I know, but you have less than a fucking minute! If you don’t get out of there now, you’ll die! You can’t get them out, so just leave them and run for your life and you better goddamn pray that you fucking make it!” Her mentor’s voice cracked. “Go! Now!”

Steph’s feet felt like they were encased in concrete in the steps to the door.

She shoved the door open, then her slow steps became quicker, until time seemed to slow down and she was running across the courtyard —

— Everything was a blur —

Then the explosion.

The world shook; she was thrown off her feet by the force of it, propelled a good five feet forward, rolling and crumpling to the cold concrete.

Her ears rang.

Red Robin bent over her, his lips moving, his face shifting in and out of focus. He was soon joined by Luke, their voices still inaudible, and…Red Hood?

*She had failed. She had let them die. She had taken charge, and she had failed.*

Her heart like an anvil in her chest, those were the last thoughts in Stephanie’s head before everything went black.

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“Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Jason frantically checked her over. No blood, that was good. The shrapnel and broken glass had been stopped by the insulation of her suit, and she hadn’t been close enough to the explosion that it had blown out her sinuses or eardrums. Her limbs were all pointing the right way, and when he felt her torso, she appeared to have no broken bones at all.

He sighed, sitting back on his heels.

“Well, physically, she’s okay, at least.”

His heart was thrumming a mile a second in his chest, the orange flames engulfing what was left of the deli burning his eyes. Too much like the warehouse explosion, like the all-consuming heat and the smoke in his fifteen-year-old lungs…

*Get it together, Todd. No time for a panic attack.*

Tim was still staring at him with a mix of awe and trepidation. Luke seemed slightly nervous. The shaken civilians were giving the entire group a wide berth, but none of them seemed to have caught any of the shrapnel.

“Hood.” His brother recovered his voice first. “How did you know to come for us? And…why?”

“Long story on the how; tell you all back at the Cave.” He scooped up Steph’s unconscious form gingerly, careful not to rattle her. “As to the why…well, obviously, I wasn’t going to risk losing
either of you —” He looked at Luke, “— or you and your dad.”

Luke seemed to accept this.

“Well, thanks then, man. I’m glad that we’re not dead either.”

“Either of you?” Tim echoed, still looking disbelieving.

Jason sighed.

“Did the explosion knock out your eardrums, kid? Yes. Either of you. Getting blown up is a shit way to die, trust me. You may have replaced me, and you may be a punk-ass rich brat with emotional issues —”

“So, do you get paid to be an asshole, or what?”

“Nah, it’s volunteer service. But my point is, I don’t want you dead. Maybe it’s ‘cause I finally realized you’re not just my shiny upgraded model that the old man stuck us with, but you’re really my stupid brother, I don’t know. Either way, these days I prefer you in one piece.”

It was hard to tell under the cowl, but it looked like Tim was blinking in shock. That kid really needed to get a better costume.

“That’s…Jay — Hood. That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Oh god.” Luke looked horrified. “Red Robin, that — what you just said — that is so, so sad. And yet that doesn’t even make the top ten list of saddest things you’ve ever said.”


“Oh my god.”

Despite the situation, Jason chuckled darkly.

“You should get to your dad, Fox. Make sure he’s okay and gets home safely. We’ll take Batgirl back to the Cave.”

Still looking rattled, Luke nodded. Tim got to his feet, pulling out the keys to the Redbird. Jason shifted in place, looking down at the unconscious girl in his arms.

“I just hope she’ll be alright after this.”

Barbara didn’t notice a single detail of the drive to the Manor. Every action was done on muscle memory; her eyes not registering the road in front of her, brain fizzing with static.

On one hand, it was hard to believe she’d let that man get to her so easily. But on the other…

*Your inability to keep people you care about.*

Her birth parents, dead. Her mother, left and never looked back. She’d broken up her team because she lost confidence; left her friends. Cassandra had been gone for so long, Stephanie presumed dead.
Jason had died, then been left cold. Tim had struggled alone far away. She’d left so many partners; gotten cold feet so many times. All of those people she’d hurt or alienated at some point. For someone so obsessed with keeping control, keeping hold, she’d let a lot of loved ones fall through her fingers.

The logical part of her knew that many of those events weren’t really her fault. Her parents’ marriage had been rocky for years before she came along. There was no way she could’ve stopped the Joker from beating Jason to a pulp when she had been lying in a hospital bed after his last attack on the family.

But the breakups? The friend problems? Her fault. Her issues, her unwillingness to stick it out. Now Steph, Tim, Lucius, and Luke had nearly paid with their lives because she hadn’t been able to predict a serial killer’s next move. Those men’s deaths were on her conscience.

The gravel crunched under the wheels as she pulled up the driveway, finally coming out of her reverie. The descent into her chair and ascent up the ramp to the front door was slow; an eternity passing before she rang the doorbell.

Alfred opened the door, looking, unusually, like his age.

“Hello, Miss Barbara.” His conduct was as professional as always, but his tone was grave. “You need not worry about Master Timothy’s and Miss Stephanie’s physical health. They managed to escape the worst of the bombing, and Master Jason was able to safely escort them back here.”

Jason…?

“What about their non-physical health?”

The old butler winced.

“That you will have to gauge for yourself. Come inside.”

As she rolled herself across the foyer towards the living room, she was unsurprised to see Bruce approaching the grandfather clock as well.

“You heard about what happened too?” she asked quietly. He started, then sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“Yes. At least we got some information out of the interrogation, but the patrol was a disaster… Stephanie took charge, and she let two people die —”

Bruce didn’t even get a chance to finish his sentence before she seized him by the front of his shirt and dragged him, the two-hundred-plus-pound superhero, down to her eye level. Anger thrummed hot through her bloodstream.

“If you say a word of that to her,” she snarled through gritted teeth, “I will take a shotgun and your irreplaceable family heirlooms and skeet-shoot them outside your window, do you hear me?”

He was so shocked he didn’t even respond.

“I heard what happened first-hand. She did everything she could; those deaths were not her fault, and I guarantee that she’s already beating herself up enough for failing. But if you want to blame someone for those deaths, blame me.”

“Barbara —”
“I’m in charge of keeping tabs on Python. I should’ve realized the connection between the Foxes and the kids. I ordered her to save herself and leave them behind. Don’t take out your moral hang-ups on her.”

She released his shirt front, and he straightened up again, sighing.

“I constantly keep expecting new atrocities, and they’re still no less awful when they happen. And I can’t do anything about that.”

She laughed humorlessly.

“That is kind of how atrocities work, Bruce. But I know what you mean.”

The ride down to the Cave was silent, even the elevator doors opening with a barely-perceptible whoosh. Once crossing inside, she noticed how unusually quiet it was as well, even with the majority of the family inside.

Tim, slumped on the floor, had his cowl down and a bandage on his jaw, likely nicked by shrapnel. Jason was standing off in the corner, talking into his cell phone in a low voice. Stephanie sat on the slab usually reserved for severe injuries, cradling Alfred the Cat in her arms, her head bowed. Cass sat on one side of her, arms and hands wrapped around her best friend, silently, gently, touching her. Damian sat on her other side with a bag of cat treats in hand, looking both awkward and sympathetic.

Bruce cleared his throat softly, and they all looked at him, even Jason.

“Yeah, no, Roy, I promise I’m not hurt. You should go home to Lian, Dick’s probably going frantic wanting to check up on them…yeah. I gotta hang up now…no, I’ll still be home by three. I love you too.” He pocketed his phone, walking closer to his father and siblings. His expression was unusually vulnerable. “Hi, Barbie. And hey, be nice to the kid, will you, old man? She’s pretty shaken up.”

“I don’t need you to protect me, Jay,” Steph mumbled, still looking at the cat. She was stroking his head while he plastered up against her just as close as Cass, both sensing that she needed the physical comfort. “Yeah, I’m shaken up, but I don’t care what Bruce thinks of me.” Her voice quavered.

Bruce opened his mouth to say something…then shut it again. Barbara’s heart felt like a stone, her stomach roiling.

She rolled over to the younger woman.

“I’m sorry I snapped earlier, but today I nearly lost you, Steph.” She finally looked up. “We nearly lost you. Your mother needs you, your friends need you. Tim couldn’t get by without one of his best friends —” Tim nodded, “— and Cass…”

Cass caught her breath, clutching Steph’s shoulder.

“You and she are so close.” Cass breathed normally again. “When you ‘died,’ she was shattered. If you actually died, I don’t know what it would do to her.”

Steph looked in horror at the girl by her side.

“You never told me that,” she said softly.

“Didn’t…want to burden you.”
“Oh, Cassandra…” Steph clutched the cat tighter, who meowed. “Your feelings aren’t a burden to me. I’m so…” Tears were welling up in her eyes. “I’m so sorry I hurt you like that.”

Cass said nothing; instead laid her head on the other girl’s shoulder, shutting her eyes.

“We couldn’t have stood it if you were gone.”

But at her words, Steph’s tears finally broke free. She sobbed, letting the cat escape to cover her face with her hands. He keened loudly, curling fearfully around Damian’s shoulders.

“I’m such a failure!” she wailed. “I fuck up everything! I don’t know why any of you would miss me, I let all of you down over and over again, I’m not smart or talented or anything! I fucked up my relationships with you, I’d have fucked up my daughter, but I’m so selfish, I wanted to keep her anyway! I’m so selfish, I see one of the people I love most about to be happy and I hate myself for being too stupid to have that for myself!”

The words were like a knife to Barbara’s heart.

“Stephanie…you did what you thought was right.”

“When has that ever mattered?” she sniffled. She looked at Bruce, who was frozen with helplessness. “No wonder you hate me.”

He finally found his voice.

“I don’t hate you,” he said quietly. In the harsh artificial light of the Cave, his hair looked lighter, grayer, the lines on his face more visible. “I used to think that you were reckless and stubborn and disobedient, that being young and unsupervised would only lead to you getting hurt. But I know my children love you. And I never hated you.”

Steph let out a gut-wrenching sob and wrapped her arms around Cass, burying her face in the other girl’s shoulder. By then, both of them were crying.

“Way to be comforting, B.” Jason sounded more sad than sardonic.

Barbara moved closer, placing a soft hand on Steph’s back.

“I didn’t know my pregnancy upset you so much.”

“It doesn’t, most of the time.” Her voice was muffled. “But…but you’re so…you. Not keeping it isn’t your only choice, and you don’t have to worry about if you would, if you will, be a good mother.”

“Really?” She let out another mirthless laugh. “You think I feel qualified or capable? I don’t. I do want this, but I still can’t be sure if it was the right choice for my life or my relationship. I have no idea if I’ll be a good mother to this child. Frankly, I don’t know if I’ve been good at all in any of my interpersonal relations.” Steph turned her head to look at her; eyes red, cheeks soaked. “And you’re not a failure. You did not fail in this mission. You may need some time to believe that, but I assure you, it’s the truth.”

“You’d best believe her, Brown,” Damian said, speaking up for the first time.

“She’s right.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Steph.”
Cass still didn’t say anything, but she didn’t have to.

Steph sighed, wiping her wet face across the tattered arm of her uniform. Barbara moved her hand off her back.

“If you call your mom first, you — and you too, Cassandra — can spend the rest of the weekend at my place. Maybe having more people around will make you feel a bit better.”

“Is there…even a guest room at this point?” Cass questioned. This time, the small laugh was genuine.

“Yes, but I sold the bed frame and mattress already and started the redecorating, so you two are either going to have to sleep on the couch, or sleep on my bed with me and Dick.”

What was especially troubling was that none of them even had enough in them to make a snide or disgusted comment about the state of her bed. The girls nodded slightly, the boys just looked tired.

Bruce turned to her.

“Will you mind, having a crowd over at the Tower?” he asked, voice quiet.

“No. I can still work with three people around me, it’s fine.” She put assurance into her voice. “And I think the girls would benefit from the company; just — let me handle this. It’s the least I can do after today.”

Bruce exhaled hard, then slumped, nodding.

“Alright. Jason, you can head home. Tim, Damian, you can stay here instead of going out tonight. Girls, go with her.”

“Thanks, B.” Tim’s voice was quiet too. “I think I’m gonna call the Titans too, if you don’t mind.” He looked around the Cave. “I think we all need some company right now.”

Instead of waiting patiently, Dick was pacing across the living room, running his hands through his hair, muttering, when the three women arrived at the Tower. When he saw them, he bolted across the room, bent, and threw his arms around all three of them.

“I saw the news!” he gasped. “I saw the news, and I thought one of you was going to be seriously hurt, or killed…” He let go of the older two, and hugged Steph, who looked like she was on the verge of tears again. “I’m glad you’re not hurt, Stephanie.” He pulled back slightly, and looked her in the eyes, serious. Gentle. “You know…you know their deaths weren’t your fault. It was the bad guy who pulled the trigger, so to speak. Not you. Please, if you take anything away from today… don’t blame yourself.”

The two of them weren’t particularly close. But she clutched him back, and for a full minute, he held her steady, stroking her hair like a child after a nightmare. Watching Steph be comforted, Barbara felt like her heart was being filled to the point of shattering open and flooding her chest.

Cassandra silently approached, placing a hand on her best friend’s shoulder. Someone who didn’t know her would think her expression unreadable, but it was clear to everyone in the room that she
was hurting right along with Stephanie.

Her brother gently released her friend.

“You two need some time alone? We’ll go in the next room.”

The two young women sat down on the couch, leaning into and holding one another, a hand or two occasionally moving along skin.

In the meantime, the other pair moved out of the living room, out of earshot.

“She’s not hurt, but she’s not alright either,” Barbara sighed. “It’s not just that she feels responsible for the bomber’s and the civilian’s deaths, but a lot of her insecurities got brought up. She’s going to need some time to gain back confidence after the catastrophe that was today.”

“What about my brothers?”

“Tim’s shaken up too, but he’ll be okay. Jason’s pretty upset though; apparently the interrogation rattled him a lot. You know it’s still a little hard for him to understand why people do the horrible things he knows they do.”

“He was — is a kid.” Dick paused. “My sister?”

“Still having a hard time with her emotions. She’s not vocalizing her fear or sympathy…” She looked back over her shoulder. “I’m probably going to have to make the first move, talking to her about this, again.”

“And…you?”

She was about to speak, then sighed. Her shoulders fell inwards.

“Let’s talk about it in my room.”

It wasn’t until they were lying in bed, fully clothed in the middle of the day, she was able to say it.

“I wish there was something I could’ve done, could’ve foreseen. I should’ve been able to stop him. Not had to…” She choked on the next sentence. “…Not had to tell her to leave them behind just to make sure she wouldn’t die.”

He said nothing for a minute, just held her face in one hand, a thumb stroking over her cheek. In their line of work, free from the restrictions of conventional law enforcement, maybe the right thing should’ve been easy to do. But guilt was nearly as frequent as fear for them. No human being could always make it in time, or always make a decision that caused no pain.

“I know how she feels,” he said at last. “I know how you feel. Among a lot of other things, what happened with Desmond, and Catalina…well. You know how long I blamed myself for everything that happened on that rooftop.”

“Dick, I’m so, so sorry for what happened. You never should’ve had to suffer any of that.”

God, if she hadn’t already been dead when I finally found out, I’d have made her wish she was dead.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“But I’d left you. I wasn’t there for you then.” She reached out. “I’m here for you now.”
“And I’m here for you.” He took her hand with his free one. “You should know, this isn’t your fault either. It’s none of our fault. It’s Python’s.”

“I don’t…entirely…blame myself for what happened. He provoked me before it happened, you know that? He contacted me just to rub it in my face, to taunt me with the knowledge of what he was planning, just so I could react like this.” She sighed softly. “He couldn’t have known before…he couldn’t have, but…apparently now even anonymous villains realize how lousy I’ve been at keeping people I love.”

There wasn’t just sympathy in his face now, but rising anger as well.

“If I ever meet him…”

“Trust me.” She brushed her thumb over his knuckles, leaning into her boyfriend. “He’s going to get what’s coming to him.”

She held him close; breathing in his presence, lovingly stroking over his skin.

“I will *personally* make sure of that.”
So this chapter turned out a little shorter, slower, and more introspective than the others. But at the same time, backstory! Motivations! And of course, communicative romance, particularly some gay communicative romance.

(Warnings: sexist language)


He still thought about Barbara Gordon sometimes. Perhaps more often than he should, considering that he’d only met the woman twice, and the second time she’d thoroughly spurned him. His thinking of her was reminiscent of all the sort of attitudes that, carried too far, could ruin his careful planning: assuming too little, obsession, rushing in because the reward was too much to resist.

He’d already given into the urge to gloat, to rub his scheming in Oracle’s face. That had been careless. If he showed too much of his hand, she might be able to outmaneuver him at some point. Of course she would never defeat him, but it wouldn’t do to give the game away nonetheless.

But at the same time…he liked to imagine how upset, how unbalanced, he must’ve made his rival. He had no idea what she looked like, but he could still imagine the horrified expression on her face when she’d realized the danger Batgirl and Red Robin had been in, that she bore some of the responsibility for the two people who’d died.

Perhaps it had been worth indulging in.

Perhaps, this too, was worth it as well.

Drew had already positioned himself, half-seated, half-lying, on the worn couch in his living room. Dusk had long since fallen, dark blue skies penetrated by neon lights shone through the gap in the gray curtains. Blinking magenta and white, like stars, like some great man-made eyes, peeped through the window without reservation or judgement.

For once, the computer lay untouched on the yellow plastic kitchen table.

He regarded the old newspaper photo-clipping in his hand. All those years ago…she had returned
home from the hospital after her shooting, miserable and weakened.

Powerless.

A version of that woman who was far more attractive after she’d been beaten down and ruined than a present version of her that was happy and confident and strong.

He groaned slightly and tilted his head back.

“I’m never going to get used to this.”

She smiled with no small amount of pride as the man beside her lay boneless within a mountain of sheets and pillows.

“What? Living together? I’m not used to it either, but it’s kind of nice.”

He tried to give her a baleful look, which would’ve been much more effective out of context.

“You know what I mean.”

She giggled, edging closer, propping herself up on one elbow and resting her head on her hand.

“I didn’t hear you complaining ten minutes ago.”

“Do you think, ten minutes ago, I would’ve been able to say anything? If you do, you’re not giving yourself enough credit.”

“Hmm.” The smile grew. He shifted himself slightly, just enough to face her. “Flatterer.”

“It’s only flattery if it’s not true.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. And I think you know it, no matter what you say; when it comes to your skills, you don’t have a self-deprecating bone in your body.” He paused, then his eyes lit up. A tiny grin pulled at the corner of his mouth. “Well, except that you did ten minutes ago.”

She groaned, falling back and slapping a hand over her eyes.

“That was terrible.”

“That was fantastic!”

“Fantastic, my ass. You are so lucky I’m already in love with you.”

He kept snickering at his own pun for a few seconds, then tapered off, the smile matching hers.

“Hmm. Yeah, I am.”

She dropped her hand, looking at him.

“How do you always do that?”
“Do what?”

“Always be so sincere. Even when we’re goofing around. Actually, you know what, you’ve really *always* done that, even when we were together before. I hope you’re aware of it, because I’m definitely aware of how difficult it becomes to think straight when you do.”

“Well…” He shifted a bit more. “All I do is say what I mean, I guess. Even if maybe it sounds cheesy. But what about you? I notice you’ve been casually dropping the ‘I’ word a lot recently.”

“Have I?” Her heart fluttered. “It’s just been getting easier to say…and to feel.”

Dick stayed quiet for a moment.

“I can tell. And that you let me move in with you? That’s a big commitment. I still can’t believe you want this with me.”

He meant it as a compliment, a statement made in wonder, she knew that, but it still put a slight twinge of guilt in her chest. Reminded her of how she’d twisted away from him before.

“I decided to have your child, didn’t I?” Her voice was soft. “That’s not a small commitment, either.”

“I know, but…” He paused. “Sometimes, I’m still afraid that I’m going to lose you. You mean so much to me, because you’re so much. You’re so you. And I don’t know if I can measure up.”

“You? Measure up —” She shifted a bit. “God, you sound like Stephanie. I don’t need you to measure up to some perfect ideal. I just need you to be you…” Something dawned on her. “Do you think it was your fault that I put off getting back into a serious relationship?”

He didn’t say anything, which, for someone who’d been so close for so long with his sister, was more than enough of an answer.

“No, no, sweetheart, no. That had nothing to do with you not being good enough. I told you, I was scared, I was…” She breathed out, combing her hair back away from her face. “I was scared of *my* feelings. I told you that. I never doubted that you would stay with me. But I didn’t know if I would have the courage to not bolt if we got back to where we were too soon.”

He exhaled softly.

“Now you’re really not giving yourself enough credit.”

“Am I? Look, the point is, you’ve always put too much pressure on yourself, especially to carry everyone else’s issues.” Barbara leaned back in. “And okay, that sounds a little hypocritical when I say it out loud —”

“In this family? That’s like, level one hypocritical. Still hypocritical, but —”

She swooshed him on the head with a pillow; he rolled away, laughing.

“Let me finish! I *want* to stay with you, you big dope. I told you, I love you!” She sighed slightly, settling back down. “My issues aside and everything. And I know nothing’s permanent or guaranteed in our lives. Not even death, in some cases. It frustrates me…all I can offer you is my word. And I know it’s not enough —”

It was his turn to move back in and kiss her, resting one warm hand on her shoulder. She hummed, sinking into it while it lasted.
“I take it I don’t need to keep talking.”

“Mmm, yeah, leave the inability to shut up to me.” He kissed her again. “I love you too.”

She sighed again, but smiled this time.

“I’m glad I have you with me.”

“Me too. Especially since this might be our only night off for a while. You wanna get some rest?”

“Do I really have to?”

Her spirits lifted a bit, she tapped him playfully on the nose; very aware of the fact that they were both still naked.

“Think you’re up for round two instead?”

He considered her proposal — although not for very long.

“Figuratively, or literally?”

She groaned again while he burst into another round of snickers.

“I get it, your name is Dick.”

He finally recovered, eyes sparkling.

“Just because all the jokes have been already made about it doesn’t mean I can’t tell them again.”

She shook her head, exasperated, fond.

“Come here, Grayson. Ah — don’t say it.”

“Killjoy.”

“Am I?”

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Drew readjusted himself just as his cell phone began to ring. Growling under his breath, he swiped it up.

His boss’s nasally voice echoed down the line.

“Avery,” she sniffed, “stop ignoring my calls and listen to me. You are in serious trouble here at the firm. You haven’t been to work at regular hours in nearly a week. You keep neglecting to complete the work you do get assigned.”

Stupid, bossy bitch.

“You’ve been working for this accounting firm for nearly five years Avery, and yes, you used to do good work, but this has gone far enough. Ever since last June, the quality of your work has been sporadic, you’ve been unnecessarily rude to your fellow employees —”
“Not all the other employees.”

“Yes.” Her voice became sharper. “Only the women.”

He rolled his eyes.

“And only that makes it worse. I’m afraid to tell you Avery, if you don’t clean up your act soon, I and the rest of the board will have to terminate your job. Now, can I expect you back at work at eight-thirty tomorrow?”

The entire time she’d been speaking, he’d been seething quietly, gritting his teeth. For too long, he’d had her as his boss. She’d never liked him. She’d never recognized that his computer skills far outstripped his colleagues, well beyond “good work.” For years, he’d rotted at that accounting firm, never accomplishing anything, only being able to do what he loved at home.

He learned how to code entirely on his own, his natural talents helping the skills come. From there, he progressed to hacking. The things he’d been able to do, the rush of pleasure that came with superior work and the ability to defy, to puzzle, to slip past inferiority.

All those years, she had no idea of who he was, who he’d become. It was so satisfying, being able to elude that pack of whiny children in costume, but at the same time, he wished he could let all his lessers know that he was more than worthy of their fear and awe.

For now, this would have to do.

“No,” he spat down the line.

God, that felt good.

As did her long few seconds of baffled silence.

“Avery, I’m afraid I don’t understand —”

“Then let me help you understand.” The words kept pouring out. “I. Quit. That understandable enough for you, you stupid bitch?”

Her bristling was almost audible, and very predictable.

“What — why are you quitting? What possessed you to do that? And that — that language is entirely uncalled for!”

“I’m quitting because I’m too good for your goddamn firm. I have more important things to accomplish, bigger goals ahead of me. Things that no one else has been able to do, but that I can.”

Breathless from his admission, he finished with satisfaction: “Not that you would know about any of that.”

He hung up, watching her number vanish from his phone screen. On the ruined couch pillow to his right, the girl coming home from the hospital still had a face frozen with lackluster misery, the ancient photograph of the first Batgirl still lay undisturbed under dust upon his wall, and the digital conversation with Oracle remained written into the wires of his system.

“It’s so hard to find a woman worth your time these days.”
Hours later, both halves of the couple had drifted off to sleep. Under the velvet blanket of night, all responsibilities had been temporarily relegated off to other members of the family; other allies within the city. Outside the glazing of ice upon the window, snow swirled down, the occasional police siren wailing in the distance.

It was then that Barbara started awake.

Her eyes flew open, instantly clearing of sleep, taking in the red numbers of her clock.

“Whah —” She sat up, grabbing the clock. “Son of a — why am I waking up past one in the morning this time?”

She glanced over to her side, but no, her boyfriend was still sound asleep. She felt a soft rush of affection and relief at his peace that she couldn’t blame on the hormones.

None of her alarms had been tripped, her com was still inactive. Her other options all eliminated, she glanced down at her midsection.

“Are you hungry again?”

The tiniest of kicks answered her, almost shy.

“Oh, all right.”

She peeled back the covers, shivering at the cold air against her bare skin. Quickly slipping into her bathrobe, she then eased herself into her chair, grimacing at the effort.

“But after you’re born, your dad can deal with your late-night cravings.”

The kick seemed a bit more insistent this time.

Scoffing quietly, she wheeled out of the bedroom towards the kitchen, turning on the light. In the dark stillness of the Tower, she felt strangely isolated, which was absurd. She was anything but alone.

Working late had always given her the simultaneous feeling of being both part of and cut off from everyone else though, Barbara mused, taking a jar of peppers out of the fridge to put on a sandwich. She worked for, and slightly above, multitudes. Even without speaking in their ears, her work was for others. For good.

Though it was still strange to exist figuratively as a part of something great, and literally as a lone individual before a desk in a giant tower, to have someone’s company and still crave their presence. To ache for people she’d never met; to feel guilt and sorrow and sympathy for them. Maybe that was what distinguished her from her rogues: she wasn’t just bound to people in a virtual or a professional or an intellectual way, but in every way she could be.

She bit into her enormous mess of a sandwich, still lost in thought, tired eyes roving around the shadowy tower. Over in the corner, the computers lay still, quiet.

Maybe it was because she was still thinking about her work, but she found herself inclined towards the computers.

Balancing the sandwich on her lap, she rolled back over to her workstation. On an ordinary,
relatively quiet night, she probably would be completing her last rounds before bed. She had hoped on that particular night for a little bit of peace, but she was now wide awake, and sleeping early was apparently out of the question.

It had been nearly a week since the bombing of Dixon’s Deli. She owed it to Tim, Stephanie, Luke, Lucius, and the nameless men who’d lost their lives, to utilize her wakefulness and accomplish something good. Not to mention Nolan and Di Nero, who’d already gone unavenged too long.

Those thoughts evolved as the computer turned on. She had time to refine her algorithm, to try and apply it to Python’s code. At the very least, she might be able to narrow her search, to probe past the masking of his IBM address.

She squared her shoulders, flexing her fingers. Before her swam a glowing green wall of code, a Babel Tower of number-language, teeming with information.

*Talk to me, whoever you are, you horrible bastard. Give me your dialect of our language. Because as soon as we both speak it, I’m going to find you.*

None of Drew’s history could be found within his relatively-new computer. He kept no social media, saved no personal photos. The first because he had no desire to chance even the most remote risk of being found out by Oracle or her ilk (as he was, he was safe from her), the second because he had nobody close enough to him that he would want to have photos of them. Not even his mother; he had not spoken to her in years.

Instead, upon his computer was the local news.

As he scrolled through the headlines, Drew sipped at fine quality coffee that had been harvested from the Amazon rainforest with local child labor and had involved the destruction of the habitat of a dozen golden lion tamarins, relishing the taste. Lucius Fox’s money tasted sweet indeed; steadily gathering interest in the offshore Jamaican account, feeding his supply of disposable henchmen and quietly improving his own quality of life. True, it would taste even better if Fox were dead, but he had still emerged from his last encounter with Oracle victorious.

Nobody had ever been able to truly defeat her yet, just like nobody could kill the Batman, or keep down those brats of his for long. Nobody.

Drew was still lost in those thoughts when he stumbled across a minor article in the Gazette.

*William Caruso, an informant and self-proclaimed talent scout for the organized crime heads and the Arkham Rogues, after allegedly gathering henchmen for them from all over Gotham and Bludhaven, has pleaded not guilty to the crimes charged against him. Accused by Batman and his associates on multiple counts of aiding and abetting murder, attempted murder, involvement in illegal gambling rings, cocaine possession, buying prostitutes, and speeding, Caruso insisted that the recorded conversation turned over to the GCPD with him had been faked, stating:*

*“They can’t be trusted, y’know. Whatcha gonna do, believe a couple’a freaks who both probably get on the rag once a month?”*

*Selina Kyle aka Catwoman and Red Hood, whose voices appear on the recording and who apparently turned Caruso over to the GCPD, both declined comment and the latter told one of my*
coworkers to go do something anatomically impossible. Whether the recording and testimony of several low-level henchmen will be enough to convict Caruso remains to be seen.

The coffee suddenly turned to mud in his mouth. Drew stared almost unseeingly at the screen, mouth puckering.

“Do I have to seek out help myself now?” he muttered under his breath. “It was difficult enough finding Caruso in the first place...it’s not as if you can search for decent thugs on Craigslist.”

He almost regretted the smug speech that he’d delivered to his former boss. Almost.

The Bats seemed to be looking to strike at his most vital, most invaluable resources, since they were yet unable to find him. He would simply have to return the favor.

Black Canary had been a good start, but if he targeted anyone outside of Gotham’s crowd again, he’d likely bring the Justice League themselves down on his head. He would have to be careful, limit himself to the Bats and their allies alone. Despite his previous words to Oracle, he had yet to know which of them she favored. Batman himself would be devastated by a loss of any of his brats, which was convenient, but he wasn’t just fighting to bring down Batman any more.

He had to employ another strategy along with his current ones: he needed to discover which of those Bats she favored. Then that one would be his key to bringing her down.

Well, the male Bats, anyway. That pathetic, unmemorable Batgirl wasn’t worth wasting his time on, nor was that whore Catwoman. Batwoman, the hothead, operated alone more often than the others; it was unlikely that she was particularly close to her. Black Bat, apart from being cold and boring, was too skilled for any of the thugs the city could dredge up, so she was out for multiple reasons.

But the men? The men were fascinating, being easily manipulated notwithstanding. And one of them could potentially secure for him the prizes that no other rogue had ever been able to really obtain before.

Many had attempted it. Joker had tried and failed, again and again. Calculator and the late Blockbuster had tripped at the finish. Darkseid himself hadn’t been able to really end the Bat, for fuck’s sake. But most importantly, no hacker had ever been able to rip Oracle down from the pedestal she’d built for herself.

Which was why it was so alluring. His blood boiled to think of her, so secure in herself, unapologetically holding so much power in her hands. She was a queen in all but name. Who did this anonymous girl think she was, to claim so much power? To love her position, to not apologize for it? She was just a woman. She was vulnerable and plagued by emotions like any other; unable to really fight, trapped within a weak body.

He longed to expose her for that for the same reason he had first longed to expose the Batman: in short, nobody, nobody had been able to do it yet. Nobody had ever been good enough yet. But with her, the desire was doubly intense.

Drew was unable to put his finger on why, as these insomniac thoughts crossed his mind, as he stared out the crack in the curtains, tapping his finger against the couch’s armrest. The ever-present neon lights pierced through the swirling snow; the radiator whining in protest as it struggled to keep up with midwinter’s leaching of all semblance of heat.

Something about the idea of that woman claiming rule over the domain that should belong to the best.
Or, perhaps, it was the idea of any woman.

Cassandra hadn’t rested that night.

While Bruce had insisted that he could handle patrol alone again, she had slipped out of the Manor after dinner nonetheless. She probably should’ve stayed home; maybe slept, maybe played video games with Damian or caught up on TV shows with Tim, but she couldn’t stand it. She couldn’t stand being idle, not achieving anything.

She had to work. It was the only thing that made sense to her right now.

Black Bat perched on the City Hall roof, a shadow within the snow, undetectable. Even the olive-brown areas of her face not hidden by the mask blended into the night.

She had already stopped three muggings, foiled an attempted murder, and saved a woman from a drunken gang of frat boys. She’d punched out the Riddler, kicked Firefly in the crotch, and chased Killer Croc down five blocks’ worth of sewers before wrangling him like a rodeo bull. She had likely made her father’s job much easier. But she still had no desire to go home yet.

Cass crouched motionless against the snowstorm, surveying the streets a hundred feet below her. Pedestrians were spots of shadow, cars solid blurs of motion. The light, always the light, left imprints on the back of her eyelids. She remained. She didn’t want to see her father exhausted, her mother anxious and frustrated. She didn’t want to get in between her brothers. She didn’t want to confront her feelings while Stephanie still treated her like just a friend —

Her phone buzzed.

For the first time in an hour, Cass stirred.

Her hand moved across her utility belt, drawing out the phone. It took her a while to read the single text message:

can u come to my house? [prayer-hands emoji] please? it’s probably not a good time, i know, but mom’s working the night shift & i need to talk to someone [sad-face emoji]

Cass was frozen again for a few moments. That was a little less than one-quarter of the emojis she would’ve normally had in a lone text. What did she need to talk about?

Still slow, squinting carefully at the tiny keyboard on her screen, she typed back two words:

I’ll come.

Stephanie replied with a thumbs-up, but that was all.

Cassandra pocketed her phone again, wondering what she’d just gotten herself into. Her heart already ached for Steph; had been aching for the last week. She should just stay at work and not confront these feelings again.

But in less than a second of deliberation, her desire to help her best friend outweighed all that.

She flew off the side of the building, swinging away into the night. The wind folded around her, and
the stinging cold and snow seemed only a minor irritation in the face of her new mission.

Barbara ate as she thought, facing the code, the numbers swirling before her eyes.

She had no idea whatsoever about this man’s personal life; about what background he had come from or whether he was a cat person or what ice cream flavor he preferred. She could only work off of what he had revealed to her with his actions, and with his limited contact with her.

He hated her on principle for what she was. She held an incredible amount of power and influence, more than almost any other hero of Earth, more than she ever could’ve dreamed of, miles beyond what she’d had as Batgirl. Any advanced hacker or computer expert knew of her at this point, if only by reputation. Most of them knew that they could never be what she was.

That hadn’t stopped a few of them, though...

Plenty of supervillains, from the late Blockbuster to Ra’s al Ghul, had sent their men — always men — after her. Calculator had tried his hand at it himself. If Python was aware of those incidents, and he likely was, what made him so sure that he could do what they couldn’t?

What made him so sure he could destroy her, and by extension, the rest of the Bat-family? What had made him decide to do it in the first place?

Anyone could realize that he had no regard for other people’s lives, or livelihoods. But it went beyond that. He had referred to the men he’d hired as lesser. The Bats even, were lesser. The civilians who’d gotten in the way weren’t even worth mentioning.

That was when she realized.

It wasn’t just arrogance fueling him. It was pride. He thought he was better than all the other people around him.

Barbara exhaled softly, leaning back in her seat. She lifted her hands, running one through her bob.

“Pride,” she murmured to herself. “Well. I can work with pride.”

She brushed the crumbs off her bathrobe and flexed her fingers, before stretching her arms up over her head.

“Now it’s time to figure things out.”

Cass had had a key to the Brown homestead since her Batgirl days, but she never used it. Instead, she landed on the roof, carefully moving down the drainpipe until she was just outside Stephanie’s bedroom window.

Inside, despite it being nearly two-thirty in the morning, Steph’s light was on. Crystal would definitely be too tired to notice when she got home, and there were no neighbors in the area that
hadn’t been over at some point for one of Arthur Brown’s get-togethers. Cass knew full well that Steph would gouge out her eyeball with a butter knife before she accepted help from someone associated with her father.

The room was poorly compared to anything at the Manor. The plaster on the walls was crumbling; the Black Canary and Wonder Woman and pop-singer posters frayed, slightly crumpled. The sheets on the bed were from the dollar store, as were the threadbare pajamas she was wearing; the makeup on her vanity drugstore-brand.

Cassandra didn’t care about any of that. All she cared about was Steph, her Steph, crouching in the fetal position in a mess of sheets, staring aimlessly at her phone screen.

She knocked twice at the window.

Steph started, glancing upward. Upon seeing her friend, her body changed from I’m dwelling on my insecurities and perceived inadequacy to Thank god. She’s here. Thank god, thank god.

She set aside her phone, walking over to the window and hoisting it open.

“They built a door into this place for a reason, you know.”

“You are not...usually...one to wallow in sadness,” Cass said bluntly, not bothering with banter or small talk. This was too important to waste words avoiding.

She jumped off the drainpipe to the windowsill and down, Steph getting out of the way just in time for her to land neatly on the floor. She then closed the window behind her, cutting off a stream of snowflakes.

“So...talk.”

Steph looked like she was about to argue, before she sighed, shoulders slumping.

“C’mere.”

She collapsed back onto her bed. Cass hopped up beside her, fixing her gaze upon her; Stephanie being one of exactly four people who never got creeped out by her deadpan, unblinking stare.

“This is...about what you told Barbara about.”

“Yeah.” Steph grabbed her pillow, hugging it to her chest.

“You still don’t feel good enough. After everything. All you’ve done...why...is that not enough to prove...you are enough?”

“Pfft, with you I never have to do as much actual talking.” She fingered the hem of her pillow. “I’m never gonna get over that, I guess. I’m not exactly spectacular, compared to you guys. I love this job, and I’m glad I do it, I think it’s good for me and in general, but...c’mon. Look at us. I’m not skilled like you, or fierce like Damian, or streetwise like Jason, or a detective like Tim, or a leader like Dick, or smart like Babs. I’m barely good enough as a person or a crime-fighter to stay in the business; I fuck up constantly. I’m —”

“You.”

Cass reached out, startling Steph into dropping her pillow. A single gloved fingertip rested against her chest, just over her heart.
She struggled in silence for a few moments to find the words for the truth she needed to convey.

“You are grounded. Stubborn. Practical. But optimistic. You love us. We all love you. You...” Cass was really struggling to find the words now, “you pull...my family together. You are a —” What was it? “— I — I — li —”

“Linchpin?”

“Yes. Stephanie, I — we need you.”

Stephanie’s mouth was open slightly, her cheeks flushed. Cass could see some of her negativity begin to melt away.

“All I am...is a soldier. Perfect soldier.” Cass dropped her hand, finally breaking eye contact to look at the duvet cover. “It is good for me too. I love it too. But you...feel. You are brave to feel. You are so...much. I am not.”

Steph’s hand rested atop the fallen one.

“Now Cassandra Wayne, that’s total bullshit.” Her other hand brought Cass’s chin back up. Those blue eyes connected again with hers. “You’re clever. You’re funny. You’re loyal. You like audiobooks and instrumental music and watch too much TV. Babs loves you. Bruce and your brothers adore you. You’re one of the strongest and most ethical people I’ve ever met.” Her touch vanished, then Steph carefully took off the Black Bat mask, leaving her face bare. “Mindless soldiers aren’t like that.”

Cass felt very, very aware of where their skin had been in contact; body flushing hot. There was nothing between their faces anymore, and they were only a foot apart, and she had never wanted to kiss the other girl more than in that moment.

It didn’t help that Steph’s body language was screaming love, love, love and her heart was swelling with the same emotion in her chest and everything felt right and was this how her family members felt with their lovers...?

But at the same time, she was still wearing vulnerable. It would be wrong to take advantage of her while she was like this.

Besides, she couldn’t be sure where they would go afterwards anyway.

“Not about me,” she finally said instead. “It’s about you. And you need to know that...you...are invaluable.”

Steph sighed quietly, setting aside the mask and leaning forward, almost collapsing. To Cass’s surprise, she rested her forehead against the other girl’s, resting like that without a word.

Cass’s heart sped up. She leaned into the touch, savoring the heat from her best friend’s skin, savoring her expression of trust and love.

When they finally pulled away, there was something odd in Steph’s expression. Relief, but also...astonishment, confusion, and like she was coming to some long-awaited conclusion.

“You, um...” She tucked a strand of blond hair behind her ear. “You don’t have to stay any longer. You can go back on patrol now, if you want.”

“Bruce is handling it. I will stay with you.”
Steph blushed again.

“Well, okay then.”

She put her phone on her nightstand and slipped under the covers with unusual trepidation, occasionally glancing back at the other girl.

Cass was halfway through peeling off her uniform when she realized Steph was trying not to stare. *Anyone* could’ve read the emotion in that particular gaze.

She had to bite back a grin, a new bubble of hope forming in her chest.

“You have pajamas...I can borrow?”

“What?” Steph glanced away again, her blush deepening. “Oh yeah...third drawer down on the left.” She tried to make eye contact one more time, then gave up and burrowed under her sheets.

Smiling, Cass quickly shrugged into a floor-length nightgown, leaving her uniform in pieces on the floor. She slipped under the sheets too, both girls buried under the warm layers of fabric.

Stephanie faced away, her stew of misery replaced by tension and contemplation. She wasn’t quite back to her old self yet. She might not be for a while. But Cass knew her, and knew that her presence, her physical closeness, had changed things. For now, that was enough.

She placed a hand on her friend’s shoulder, not surprised when she started.

“Good night, Stephanie.”

“...Good night, Cassandra.”

In the dark, her smile grew.

At that point, Drew had no desire to try sleeping. He swept his computer up again, marching over to his usual spot at the yellow plastic table.

He briefly toyed with the idea of tapping into the frequencies of the Bats’ coms, but decided against it. He had no desire to be subjected to idle chatter at all hours of the night, and it would be enough to obtain information from a single device.

All he had to do to get that information was to steal another com and break into it.

His mother never would’ve dreamed of this kind of life for him. She had marched for equality in the late sixties and through the seventies; had been a voice through a megaphone in the crowds before Congress and the Supreme Court. She’d attended one of Martin Luther King’s last speeches and still read feminist trash religiously. She’d raised his sisters to be the same way: the older one was an outspoken lesbian who owned an art gallery in Metropolis, the younger a happily engaged journalist in Central City whose fiancé planned to take her last name.

“Avery,” his mother had often said when he was younger, “nobody is worth more or less than anyone else. Nobody’s life is granted more or less inherent value just because of how they happen to be born. People with mental or physical differences, people of all colors, gay and transgender people,
rich and poor and everything in between, women and men...none of them have more worth than another because of that. Do you understand?"

He never had. Because to him, she had never understood his point of view. He never considered that she might’ve known how easy it was to say “I am smarter than they are” or “I am better for doing or not doing this” and then for it to snowball into “I am the smartest” or “I am the best.”

After all, who was she but just his mother?

As he sat before his computer, he pondered. It would be crucial to find another henchman while he plotted his next move; someone to keep tabs on the Bats, to take the fall for trying to rob them of their technology. But that could take a couple weeks. Oracle would probably have made a move of her own by then.

It was important to do this right. So that when he took her down, he would first be sure to undoubtedly have her in his grasp, then kill her and her favorite. Afterwards, without her, the remaining Bats would fall.

The idea of succeeding where lesser minds had failed tasted deliciously sweet.

So under what was left of the night, Drew settled in to work once again.

Under her fingertips, the algorithm on her computer screen shifted and refined itself, but there was still something missing. Every piece of binary had a letter equivalent; transforming Python’s encryption into a very different kind of code.

She highly doubted that he would be stupid enough to use his own moniker, or even hers and Bruce’s, as the key to his code. But maybe, he would just be arrogant enough to assume she couldn’t come to any conclusions about him on her own.

The security tape, the looped footage, from Kelly Nolan’s apartment complex broke into a wall of numbers. She began to type, inputting her algorithm first. She then tried NOBODY as the decryption word.

Now all that was before her was a jumble of nonsense.

Barbara thought for another minute or so.

Then she tried NOBODY ELSE.

The blank hallway of the tape dissolved, to be replaced by a near-identical looking hallway. However, the footage was marred by a thin, pale man in rubber gloves with a bag in hand and innocuous, disposable clothing; his face turned away from the camera.

Barbara exhaled hard and loud, pausing the tape, a huge bright grin breaking across her face.

I did it. I DID IT! I finally did it!

It was all she could do to not throw her hands up and shout for joy. Then she reminded herself: whoever he was, this was only one crime he could be tied to; for him to be served true justice, she needed to figure out how to prove his guilt in all of the crimes he had committed.
But nonetheless. This, decrypting his code, tying him to at least one of the murders...this was a victory.

This...this I got right.

Still smiling, Barbara hit play again. She could run her facial recognition software as soon as he turned to look near the camera —

But she didn’t need to.

As his head turned, a pair of familiar metallic gray eyes stared out at her from her screen.

She nearly fell from her chair; the bottom seeming to drop out from her stomach.

For a few seconds, she just gaped.

Then her reaction burst out of her throat.

“Are...you...shitting me!?”

She hadn’t seen the man in two months, but the last encounter had been unpleasant enough to stick in her mind even without an eidetic memory.

Without a doubt, the man on the screen, the man who’d committed all those crimes, was that entitled, voyeuristic accountant Avery Drew.

The tape paused again. Barbara stared in horror, shivers creeping over her body. A distinct feeling of uncleanliness seemed to settle into her skin.

She rubbed at her arms, grimacing in disgust as she recalled her two encounters with him.

“God...he has no idea I’m Oracle. He just wanted to...oh my god, he was staring at and hitting on me. He was attracted to me.”

The irony of it all was breathtaking. He wanted to destroy her, to kill her friends and family. He wanted to take her power, her empire. But when he perceived her not as Oracle, but as poor broken Barbara Gordon, he wanted her.

The feeling of dirtiness swelled. A nasty little voice in her head began to whisper, that maybe next time she got naked, she would still feel like she was being watched, that her rival’s gaze could be present in her personal life as well, in her most private moments...

Her hands became fists.

“No. He does not get that part of my life,” she continued aloud. “Any more than he gets to touch the people I love. It’s my goddamn body; no matter if I’m disabled, no matter if I’m a woman, no matter who I sleep with, no matter if I’m pregnant. No matter what right he thinks he has to what’s mine.”

Her fingers clenched and unclenched a few times as she spoke. On the screen, Drew’s face was full of cold intent; even already knowing what he had done, she couldn’t help but feel unsettled and apprehensive.

But in real life? She’d revealed his identity. For the first time in months, she’d made a major breakthrough towards bringing him to justice.

She sat up straight, gaze fixated on the screen. The cloud of grime that seemed to have settled on her
skin dissipated.

He wanted to play? He wanted to see who was best; make this some battle of genders? Fine. He’d already shown her exactly what he was, not to mention what he thought of her. She had already made up her mind to win, and when she had made up her mind to win before, she had never lost.

With that in mind, Barbara finally relaxed somewhat, settling back, closing the video tab. As she did, she noticed the time — 3:02 — displayed on the top corner of the computer screen.

She sighed, the last of her tension and energy melting from her body as she rubbed her sore eyes, glasses askew. She then powered off the computer and rolled away. The dishes landed in the sink without her really thinking about it, her bathrobe tossed to the bedroom floor.

The shivers abated once she was back in bed. Dick was still sleeping, his body heat warming the interior of the covers like hearth fire. She slipped in closer to him, letting out all her breath, turning her attention back to the frosted window.

Through the ice and the flurries of snow, the city continued to shine its typical light. As she watched, just leaving behind the buildings’ grid of yellow and neon pink, the white-gold glow of the Bat-Signal finally disappeared from the sky.

It was then that Barbara was able to sleep.
There’s quite a bit of fluff mixed with feelings in this one, but honestly, all that’s just a warmup to the chapter after this. Brace yourselves.

Also, see if you can tell who’s who of all the Justice League members by just their first names.

(Warnings: alluded references to having to give up a child)

**The Empress (Tarot):**

*Upright* — Fertility, femininity, beauty, nature, abundance. *Reversed* — Creative block, dependence on others.

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*February*

As the winter continued to wear on within the city, upon that cold weekday, Barbara had donned the enormous *Not The Medical Kind of Doctor* t-shirt she tended to work in, and which finally fit, along with a tattered pair of jeans that had once belonged to Bruce. She kept her headset on as she worked, copper wisps of hair escaping from the bandana she’d tied it under. Her arms, wired with firm cords of muscle, bunched and strained as she moved the roller up and down the wall, adding a final layer of color. The rest of the room was just about done, but that one last layer was still eluding her.

Flecks of green sprinkled her arms, scattering across her pale skin like new freckles.

“I’ll connect to the Watchtower’s mainframe this afternoon,” she said into the mouthpiece, extending her torso as far up as possible to get that stubborn spot near the ceiling. “From there, I can pass along the information I gathered from LexCorp’s database. And whoever’s on monitor duty starting at three o’clock can catch a break.”

There were collective sighs of relief from the other end, the largest sounding like they were from Wally and Kyle. The Flashes and Green Lanterns tended to get shafted with monitor duty the most often, something she suspected Bruce did on purpose.

“You’re the coolest, Oracle!”

“Thank you, Billy.” She wiped sweat from her brow, smearing a line of paint across it instead. “Since this conference has less bickering than usual, I take it the battle with the killer robots in
Malaysia was a success?"

"Don’t you already know that?"

She paused.

"Yes. I do."

Several people chuckled, several more, those being her friends, groaned instead. She laughed.

"What really surprises me is that Batman isn’t here to berate those of you involved in the battle for what you could’ve done better."

The resulting chorus was now entirely of groans.

"He already did berate them," Jefferson told her rather unnecessarily.

"He says I was too enthusiastic," Courtney sighed. "Just because my victory cheer was very badly timed and happened just before that power line fell over..."

"Let me tell you, god," Beatriz complained, "you set that guy’s lousy cape on fire once and pay for it the rest of your life."

"I shoulda kicked the Bat-jerk’s ass years ago!"

"Yes, you should’ve tried that again, Guy, we would’ve all liked to see more pictures from Dinah of you floored unconscious again," Diana said dryly. Diana liked to keep her interjections during meetings infrequent, but meaningful. "You know she sent them to everyone, right?"

There was a round of hysterical cackling from Michael, along with a thump indicating that he’d fallen out of his chair again. Fairly typical of Ted’s husband.

"Isn’t this supposed to be a serious conference?"

"You ruin everything, J’onn."

Holding back more laughter, Barbara instead cleared her throat. The Justice League fell silent for her.

"So what is Batman doing?" she inquired.

Clark broke in before any of the other Leaguers could offer commentary.

"He’s writing our press release and statement to the Malaysian government. He might not be back for another day or two; although you can tell Catwoman he will be back before next Tuesday."

"Selina’s going to be glad to hear it."

"Why, what’s next Tuesday?"

Dead silence.

"Hal..." Kendra said slowly. "What’s the day after the thirteenth of February?"

"...the fourteenth of February?"

“For the gods’ sake, Hal, you don’t know anything,” Arthur groaned. “We don’t even celebrate this in Atlantis and I still made plans with Mera.”

“Hal really doesn’t know anything,” Wally agreed. Then, to Barbara: “He didn’t know you were pregnant until like, last week. I told him I’d claimed godfather rights, and he had no clue what I was talking about. Come on! Everyone knows Nightwing’s my twins’ godfather, and that I’ve had dibs on the same honor for his firstborn since we were fourteen, in case we weren’t married to each other by then.”

“It’s not official yet, Wally.”

“Well, who else would you guys make godfather?”

“Ted? Roy? One of his brothers?”

“You wouldn’t!” Wally gasped.

“No, of course not, but it’s still not official until we both grant you the title together. And lately, that hasn’t been possible, due to time differences and work schedules.”

“Damn you, adulting.”

“Hal, how the hell did you not know she was pregnant?” Mari demanded. “Literally everybody else’s known that since October.”

“I was in space for three months!” Hal yelled, attempting to defend himself. “Come on guys, give me a break! What was I supposed to do, get cell phone reception on the other side of the galaxy?”

“Isn’t that what you manage to do with the internet when you want to stay caught up on Game of Thrones?” Barry asked.

“Carol’s going to give him a break, all right,” Kyle mumbled, presumably to Connor. “If he forgets Valentine’s Day for the fifth year in a row, she’s going to put them on another break.”

“Kyle...babe...your com is still on.”

“...oh shit.”

Barbara clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Seriously?” Now even Clark sounded aghast. “Five years in a row?”

“Shut up, Boy Scout.”

“Hey! Only Bats gets to call him that!”

Barbara decided that that was a good time to make her exeunt, and turned her com off, chuckling. Quickly wheeling over to the dry corner of the room and turning the volume on her music back up, she settled back into finishing the wall.

The former guest room might’ve seemed a bit bare-bones from an outsider’s perspective, but she liked it. The paint job had transformed the room from ordinary white to soft leaf green. The maple-wood crib had already been set up, low enough to the ground that even she would be able to move her baby with ease, accentuated with some of her superhero plushies. Tiny Flash, Black Canary, Troia, Arsenal, Blue Beetle, Huntress, Tempest, and Lady Blackhawk all lay around the edge of the sleeping mat like miniature royal guards. Aside from that, there were few decorations, but Dick had
given his old Flying Graysons poster to hang over the crib, and that...well. That was just perfect.

She finally finagled the paint roller up into the stubborn high corner, covering the wall with its last coat of green. Sighing with relief, she dropped the roller, letting it sit on the jeans and once and for all ruin them as she wiped her hands off on her shirt.

“Now the rest of us can worry about Valentine’s plans, too.”

In his relatively short life, Jason had experienced a lot. Strange, painful, upsetting, traumatizing, everything one could think of. But in twenty and a half years, he had never stumbled across a frustrated college girl and an equally frustrated middle-schooler in his kitchen, eating his food, after he’d just returned from taking his sort-of stepdaughter to school.

“Oh, what the hell, you two? Why are you in my house? What’s going on? Did Bruce die again? Did you get kicked off the kiddie table? Are we starting a Loser Robins Club?”

“You two could start a Loser Robins Club, maybe,” Damian sniffed.

“You know I’m only a year younger than you,” Stephanie said irritably. “So if I’m at the kiddie table, you’re at the head of the kiddie table, buddy.” She shoved her spoon into her bowl of Crocky Crunch with more force than necessary.

“Touché.”

Jason pulled up a chair and sat on it backwards, setting his forearms against the top of the backrest.

“But seriously, how did you get in my safehouse?”

“A bird’s nest has better security.” Damian still managed to come off as arrogant with a mouthful of banana bread. “I picked the lock, of course. Also, you had better come up with a better combination for that locker-full of Harper’s homemade weapons, because otherwise his daughter is going to master flamethrowers at the same age I did.”

“And I thought my childhood was shitty.” Jason rested his chin on his forearms. “So what brings the two of you to Uncle Jason’s PTSD Shack? You had better not need money; I’m not loaning anything to anyone until Kori gives me my hundred bucks back.”

“No, although I would like not to be poor.” Stephanie swirled her spoon through the sugary milk. “I, um, I actually...it’s kind of embarrassing.”

They waited. Damian grew impatient.

“She needs advice on courting our sister.”

Jason’s mouth fell open.

A dozen thoughts rose to his mind immediately, from Holy shit, Stephanie likes our sister? to Bruce is gonna have a coronary.

What he actually said though, was:
“And you went to Damian first?”

Damian puffed up indignantly, while Stephanie threw her hands up.

“Well, I can’t talk about it to Tim! I’m his ex-girlfriend, for god’s sake! And Dick’s at work; I doubt he’d appreciate me crashing the police station in the middle of the day.”

“So...your options for helpful advice are me and Damian?”

She nodded.

“Well then, you’re fucked.”

“Excuse me, Todd,” Damian interrupted hotly, “but I gave her excellent advice. Going to the object of one’s affection’s father is a very good way to determine if the relationship should proceed.” He added under his breath: “And it allows said object’s brothers to remain out of the mess she’s now pulled me into.”

“Oh please.” Jason rolled his eyes. “Can you imagine Timmy going to Superman or Lex fucking Luthor? Or worse, me going to Oliver? And I really hope you don’t think Dickface went to Gordon to ask permission to date his daughter like it’s the 19th century. She would’ve scalped both of them.”

“Alright, alright, point taken,” the youngest grumbled.

Steph shoved her bowl aside.

“None of this is helping me decide what to do! Don’t either of you know anything about girls?”

A few seconds passed. Both of them stared at her.

“Wait. Why did I just ask that of the gay guy and the romance-hating twelve-year-old?”

Jason shrugged.

“I told you you were fucked coming to us for advice.”

“You must know something of relationships in general though, Todd, since you’re in one.”

“Well to be frank, I don’t really know how I got in one in the first place. First I realize I’m attracted to my best friend, with feelings to go along with the attraction, then I wake up one day and I’m lucky enough that he likes me back, so...it just sort of happened.”

“I got the first two parts down, at least,” Steph sighed.

“How long?”

“I only just realized a couple weeks ago. But...” She fidgeted in her seat. “There always was a spark there, in retrospect. We’ve loved each other for years, but I never considered before that it might not be the platonic type of love.”

Jason nodded sympathetically. Damian shook his head.

“I will never understand this family’s romanticism, nor their tendency to develop such feelings for their close friends.” He paused. “To me it seems like you’d be better off asking another woman for advice.”
She pointed at him.

“Okay, now we’re getting somewhere! Should I talk to Kate?”

“She’s taking on Father’s responsibilities while he’s still with the Justice League.”

“Selina?”

“She’s out of town visiting Holly until Saturday.”

Stephanie shrugged helplessly.

“Barbara?”

The two brothers considered the idea.

“Okay. Let’s go talk to her.”

After a hot shower and a change of clothes, she pulled on her coat (with a great deal of difficulty), wrapped her scarf around her neck, and headed outside.

Instead of more snow, the wind moaned through the streets of Gotham, bringing along with it low gray skies and a bone-damp chill. She nestled into her layers of winter wear as she moved along down the street; the other pedestrians huddled into their own coats and into each other, for all the world like penguins.

Two blocks later, she finally got to the nearest Starbucks, ducking inside and immediately being greeted by a wave of steamy scented air.

Even though it was one in the afternoon in the middle of the week, the place was still fairly full. Men and women of all ages, some teenagers who were likely cutting class, and a scattering of very young children accompanying their parents. One small boy with a head full of curls stared at her with something like awe as she took her place behind his mother in the line.

One hand holding his mother’s, he waved shyly. She smiled at him, while he giggled and ducked his head against the other woman’s arm, his face bright.

“I can serve whoever’s next,” the barista called.

“C’mon, baby.”

The mother bent down and picked up her son before heading over to the counter. The little boy waved at her one more time over her shoulder, still beaming, and she couldn’t help but wave back.

She was still lost in a slight rush when the door swung open, but the three familiar voices quickly snapped her back to the present.

“— and I am not paying.”

“Well I sure can’t pay! I’m a broke college student! You gotta pay, you’re the only one who has any money.”
“Nope. Make Damian pay; remember when he used to go on about how rich he was gonna be when pigs fly — oh sorry, I mean when the old man left him everything?”

“I was young and foolish!”

“It wasn’t even two years ago, and you’re still both of those things.”

“Don’t make me maim you, Brown.”

She looked back over her shoulder, more than a little surprised to see Jason’s burly frame crammed into a long black coat and a red knit cap, Stephanie in her trademark purple along with a pink scarf and blue gloves, and Damian, the desert child, bundled up to the point that he resembled Randy Parker from A Christmas Story. They approached the line, still arguing so much they didn’t even notice her.

“And you, you’re a freakin’ crime lord, you can spare thirty bucks —”

“Only an idiot would spend ten dollars on a single order of coffee and pastries —”

“No, one of you two has to cough up —”

“Now you’re bullying the poor kid —”

“I was poor too, you don’t get to play that card —”

“No wonder we’re going to ask Gordon for advice, you’re both imbeciles —”

“I may be the imbecile, but who’s gonna be the one out of money?”

“At the rate you’re going, still you, Jason,” Barbara said dryly.

All three of them jumped. Stephanie’s scarf flew around and whacked the next man in line in the face.

She resisted the urge to snort.

“What are you three doing here, anyway? There must be at least fifty Starbucks’ around the city.”

“We thought we’d stop for a drink before coming to see you, because, well...”

“Stephanie requires your help,” Damian interjected, trying to look dignified in three thick layers of clothing.

“The boys are here for moral support,” Steph added. “Although they’re doing a lousy job of it.”

Barbara paused, wondering what Stephanie could need her help with. After a few seconds, she made up her mind.

“Alright. You three just...go sit down. I’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

Despite her complaints about them, Steph did like Jason and Damian. The three of them were a match made in Batman’s worst migraines: the Robin who came back rabid, the Robin who came
from hell, and the Robin who came when she was told not to. The boys’ attitudes and biting streams of insults were irritating, but at least she understood where they were coming from.

After all, they all shared something else in common: salt.

“Are you guys happy now?” she snapped at her companions. “You probably just pissed off the person who I’m about to ask for help. Way to go.”

“Between her work and her hormonal imbalances, I’d say it’s likely she’d be pissed off anyway,” Damian sniffed, finally starting to unwind some of his layers of winter wear. “Your charming presence also likely accentuated that.”

“All in favor of making the kid walk home?” Jason raised his hand.

A throat cleared behind them before his younger brother could retort. They turned around to face her.

Stephanie had always admired Barbara’s beauty the way one might admire an older sister, but as the months had gone by, tired and worried as she had been, she seemed to have become more beautiful. Her hair was thicker and shinier, skin healthier. The extra weight didn’t look excessive on her, probably because she’d been mostly muscle beforehand. Her eyes were bright behind her glasses, steam rising from the four lidless cups she was carrying and swirling into a mist around her face. When she wasn’t scared or angry or frustrated, she really did seem to glow.

Something inside Steph ached, just a little bit.

“So...” Barbara began passing out the drinks. “Caramel latte for Jason, hot chocolate with extra whipped cream for Damian —”

The boys accepted their drinks eagerly.

“— raspberry white chocolate mocha for Steph —”

“White girl,” Jason teased. She rolled her eyes at him.

“— and decaf cappuccino for me.” Barbara squeezed in next to Jason and sipped at her drink. “So. Stephanie.” The infamous piercing look sharpened into being. “What do you need to ask me advice about?”

Steph fidgeted in her seat, acutely feeling the three green gazes on her.

In retrospect, this might have been another bad mistake. It wasn’t as horribly embarrassing as going to Bruce for advice on asking out his daughter, but it was equally daunting. Barbara loved Cass just as much as he did, and although Steph might not have always acted very obedient or even respectful, the last thing she wanted to do right then was piss off her mentor further. Should she just cut her losses for once and laugh it all off...?

Nope. Screw it.

“I wanna ask out Cassandra.”

Barbara arched an eyebrow behind her cup, but otherwise barely reacted.

“I’m surprised it took you so long,” was all she said.

“Wait. You knew?”
“Of course she knew,” Damian muttered. “She knows everything.”

“You’re learning, kid,” she said lightly. “But in all seriousness, Stephanie, I have been waiting for you to say something about this.”

And with that, the dam broke.

“Babs, I don’t know what I’m going to do! I know she likes girls, but what if she doesn’t like me; god she’s so pretty and strong and everything else y’know? But I can’t believe I didn’t realize this before now; I mean, duh, I know I’ve always liked guys and I know I like girls now too, but why did this take me so long? I feel like an idiot, it was so obvious in retrospect —”

Jason stared at her with a mix of concern and trepidation.

“Is she okay?”

“Bisexual crisis. I had one of those too when I was her age.”

“Wait. When you were her age, was that not the time you first worked with Lance?”

“Heh. I’m guessing your crisis had something to do with fishnets.”

“Oh shut up, both of you.”

In the meantime, Steph kept babbling, waving her hands around and nearly smacking Damian a few times.

“You gotta help me, Babs! I don’t know anything about dating girls! Or, really, anyone. My first couple boyfriends were tools, one of which knocked me up and ran for the hills, then there was Tim — no commentary about him, you two.”

Jason and Damian abruptly shut their mouths.

“Tim, who’s nice and all and a good friend but he wasn’t good at compartmentalizing relationships with secret identities, plus he’s gay. Typical. My first boyfriend who wasn’t a tool was gay.”

“Mine too,” Jason interjected.

“And y’know, you do know something about dating people! Including girls! You’ve dated tons of people! Just because most of them haven’t worked out doesn’t mean that you don’t know anything!”

Barbara now looked distinctly put off.

“Gee, thanks,” she monotonically sardonically, putting her cup down.

“Tt. And I’m supposed to be the rude one?” Damian muttered. “I never would’ve said that to her face.”

Steph felt like her insides were crumpling as she realized what she’d said.

“Oh my god.” She thunked her head down on the sticky table. “Fuck. I’m so sorry. I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot.” The older woman’s voice echoed from over her head. “You’re flustered and excited and overwhelmed. Everyone gets that way when they realize they love someone who they know is really, really good. God knows I did.”
“You did?”

“Yes, Damian. I did.”

“Good. You should know that.”

Steph pried her forehead off the table, reaching for her drink and taking a long quaff. She felt slightly better after she did.

Barbara regarded her, not with anger, but with sympathy.

“The point is, Stephanie, don’t think about her like she’s suddenly some insurmountable problem because you love her in a not-so-platonic way. She’s still just Cass. She’s known you for years. She’s your best friend.”

“But that’s exactly why I don’t wanna mess this up,” she keened.

“I understand. You want this to be perfect, and you don’t trust yourself not to ruin that.” She paused. “But learn from my mistakes, Steph. Don’t be me. Be you.” She leaned in, eyes alight. “Don’t think about what could go wrong, and just fucking do it.”

In the corner of the crowded, noisy, coffee-scented room, Steph felt warmth brewing in her chest. She lowered her eyes, cheeks hot, watching the whipped cream melt into pale pink liquid.

“Should you really be cursing in front of the little kids?” she said after a moment.

The two oldest laughed, while Damian huffed.

“I don’t know where you’ve been, but I’ve been cursing long before I’ve been spending time with Gordon, Fatgirl.”

She ignored that, her voice growing.

“Don’t laugh! You two are bad influences!” She put one hand on one of Damian’s ears, the other on the crown of Barbara’s belly. “Ruining the innocence of children like that.”

“Get your hands off me, woman!”

Grinning, feeling much lighter, she quickly jerked her hand away from Damian before he could slap her.

“But in all seriousness, I would not have expected you to tell me to be myself.”

“She’s right, though,” Jason spoke up. “We Loser Robins get a lot of flack, from both other people and ourselves, but just because we go against the grain doesn’t mean we’re only crazy idiots. We just have different perspectives.” He paused. “If you weren’t here Barbie, I’d finish my wise statement by lighting a cigarette. As it is, I’m gonna go look for my nicotine patches.” True to his word, he immediately started rifling through the pockets of his coat.

“Though Todd really needs to give up those disgusting cigarettes, he’s got a point.” Damian seemed to have gotten over having his ear grabbed. “Brown, I will deny that I said this, but although you may be impulsive and overly emotional, you’re no mistake and no fool.”

“Awwww, you’re such a sweet little brat. I’m sure Dickhead’ll be thrilled.”

“You ruined it, Todd.”
Steph couldn’t help but grin.

Barbara wondered if she should tell the younger woman that her hand was still on her belly. In the meantime, she brought forth a paper bag of mini vanilla scones, and grabbed two of them.

“So here’s my next question. Why aren’t you two at school?”

The two younger ones immediately looked like deer in the headlights.

“And Jason, why didn’t you get mad at them for not being at school?”

“I thought it was a holiday,” he admitted. “If I’d known they were cutting class, I wouldn’t have wasted gasoline on driving them down here.” He eyeballed the two of them.

“It’s just a required class I’m missing,” Steph mumbled. “It’s no big deal.”

“Similarly, I could’ve taught my history lesson. The teacher’s information on Arab countries is very lacking in detail, and also clearly biased. In any case, I told her I had the stomach flu. Then I took some ipecac so that she would believe me.”

“...You just carry ipecac around with you so you can throw up on command?”

“Do you not?”

The two brothers immediately started debating which items they carried around with them should really be included in one’s arsenal, while Barbara leaned in closer to Steph.

“Just because I respect your skills really doesn’t mean you should be skipping classes.”

“C’mon, Mom, lighten up. It’s one class, not the whole semester.”

“Calling me ‘Mom’ isn’t going to make me soften on this, Steph; I have three PhD’s and I didn’t get any of them by skipping class. Jason can confirm, once he stops debating with his brother. You have a lot of your life ahead of you, you need to get your education.”

“Jesus, you really care, don’t you? So what is going to get you to soften, mother dearest?”

Barbara opened her mouth to rebut, though before she could, the baby kicked softly. She had grown quite used to the movements by then and would’ve continued talking anyway, except for the look on Stephanie’s face as she too felt it.

The girl appeared shocked, almost awestruck. She glanced down at her hand, then jerked it away like she’d touched a hot stove.

The sudden movement drew the boys’ attention.

“What’s wrong with Brown?” Damian asked, reaching for a scone. “Though I loathe using cliches, she does look like she’s seen a ghost.”

“I...um...” Steph clutched her hand with the other.
Barbara answered for her, heart tight.

“Steph just discovered my baby’s acrobatic genes for herself.”

“Oh!” Damian’s eyes lit up. “There’s no need to worry, Brown, that’s quite normal. At this stage, the fetus will be quite active, and tangible even from outside the uterus —”

His brother shoved him, and gestured to Steph’s face.


“It’s okay, guys.” Steph brushed some hair out of her suddenly-bright eyes. “I’m okay.”

“You’re not,” Jason interjected. Barbara realized with a great deal of pride and love that both boys looked concerned, although Damian also looked slightly awkward and panicked. “Hey, look. I know what it’s like to be triggered into sad memories, even with people I love. It fuckin’ sucks.” He fidgeted, massive calloused hands turning over each other, nearly displacing the nicotine patch on his wrist. “But you don’t have to be ashamed of yourself.”

Barbara gently placed a hand on his shoulder; he ducked his head, flushing slightly.

“I...have no such common experiences as you and Todd do,” Damian began, ears red, rubbing the back of his neck in a way that echoed his eldest brother. “But...I agree with him. You need not be ashamed, of your past or being reminded of it. You have no reason to be.”

“Guys,” Steph spoke up, “I’m not just sad.”

All three of them looked at her.

“Couple weeks ago, yeah, I was. And I still am, kind of. But I want to be happy for myself, and for you —” She gestured to Barbara, “— too. Not every day someone you care about gets an opportunity you never had, and not every day the girl you like comes to talk to you, goes out of her way to make you feel better, and then you realize you like her.”

Barbara’s throat felt tight with emotion.

“But...I didn’t tell Cass to talk to you.”

“You didn’t?”

She shifted; propping her elbow up on her chair’s armrest and resting her head on her hand. The humid, hot air suddenly felt less stifling, and more freeing. “I guess I didn’t have to.”

Stephanie rubbed at her eyes, then sniffed, smiling.

“Looks like all the Bat-kids are finally learning to emote like human beings.”

“Oh, shut up,” the brothers said in unison, although they looked far less bothered than they might’ve been.

“Let’s be real, Stephanie, there’s no way Jason would be emoting on the level he did if your name was Dick, and neither of them would be, god forbid, if your name was Tim.”

“Eh, it’s still a start.”

“Dick emotes plenty enough for two people,” Jason said defensively. “The way Mr. Perfect acts,
“You should really clean up your desk,” Ayesha remarked, sitting on the edge of said piece of furniture, sipping battery-acid coffee from her thermos. She hadn’t even added cream or sugar to the machine in the break room’s evil concoction, and he was beginning to suspect she and Tim alike had no taste buds anymore.

“My desk is fine.”

“All the rest of the mess aside, your desk, has like, fifty framed pictures. That’s what the Cloud’s supposed to be for, you know.”

“I like having physical pictures too.”

Maybe she had a point, though. Dick had framed seven photos in the months since he’d come back to the force, all of which he kept more free of dust than any other spot on his desk, all of which he had smaller versions of in his wallet. His friends all hugging, Donna smiling, Wally making a silly face, Bruce and Clark and Diana eating ice cream together, Damian pretending to hate getting his picture taken, Barbara mid-laugh, and a shot Alfred had insisted on of the whole family at Hanukkah. It paid to have an impossible-to-argue-with butler for a grandfather sometimes.

“You are an old man,” she concluded, taking another swig.

Deciding not to further the debate, Dick turned away, intending to keep looking over his case file. But something outside the window caught his eye.
The man on the opposite street had a pair of binoculars around his neck, scanning the skyline. He was in his late twenties, with pale brown hair and slight muscles. He looked drawn and worried, not looking down from the building-tops even as he walked along the sidewalk.

“What are you looking at, Grayson?”

Before he knew it, Ayesha had hopped down from the desk, her gaze trained in the same direction.

“The white guy who looks like he’s going bird-watching?”

Dick made a noise of affirmation.

“There’s something about him that doesn’t sit right with me,” he admitted.

She just snorted.

“No need to worry, it’s just another kind of bird-watcher: the cape-chasing tourist kind. He’s probably out hoping to grab a chunk of Nightwing’s hair or something.”

“Or something.” Dick’s worried stare didn’t waver.

Ayesha put a hand on his shoulder; he started.

“Nightwing can take care of himself,” she assured him. “He’s a tough guy. Even so, we got that string of B&E’s to cover by the end of our shift. You coming with or what?”

Reluctantly, Dick got to his feet, still looking out the window. If that man really was looking for heroes in town, he didn’t particularly want to meet him on patrol that night.

Drew was expecting the hourly email when it came:

Nobody yet.

But that didn’t make it any less frustrating.

He understood that the Bats didn’t operate as often during the daytime. But for god’s sake, all he needed was one man’s com. One. Was that really too much to ask of that moron?

He rubbed at his temples, trying to steady his own breathing.

Patience. Stick to the plan.

As he continued to wait it out, meticulously budgeting his offshore funds, his mind drifted towards the male Bats, wondering which of them she would miss most. Whoever it was, he had to come up with another careful plan, but this time for a capture. It was notoriously tricky to hold on to one of them for more than an hour, and he would need to keep the man or boy in question until he could fulfill the next part of his plan: getting her into his power.

Each of them would present his own set of troubles: Batman had the most knowledge of and the most experience with getting out of scrapes, Robin was difficult to catch and vicious when you did, Red Hood would have the least qualms about using extreme force, Red Robin was the cleverest and
a chameleon fighter, and Nightwing...Nightwing was *unpredictable*.

He dearly hoped it would be Nightwing.

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Hours later, the monitors of the Watchtower open on her screens, her com wired, Barbara busied herself with the next important line of business: dinner.

“Hi, Kim, it’s me again. Could I get two large pizzas...one half-Hawaiian and half-pepperoni, the other half-vegetarian and half-barbecue chicken...? Yeah, okay, hang on.” She rattled off her credit card number. “No, I’m not having a party, I’m just babysitting.”

“Hey!” all three of her guests yelled at once.

“Okay, thanks.” She hung up, gaze still trained on her computers. “Dinner in twenty, everyone.”

“I resent the babysitting comment,” Damian complained.

“Don’t you mean ‘resemble’?” Jason jeered at him.

“She included you in it too.”

Damian was slumped across her couch, backpack at his feet, winter clothes lying in a heap by the door. He was playing something on his phone while Steph leaned over the back of the couch to occasionally offer advice, while Jason half-busied himself with Barbara’s copy of *The Invisible Man*, half-took time off to make fun of his brother.

“Don’t take it personally,” she teased, setting her phone aside, fingers resting atop the keyboard. “I’ve known you all since you were kids, remember? That’s kind of hard to forget...back when you used to be cute.”

Jason’s book hit the top of his thighs with a *fwap*.

“‘Used to be’?” he protested while Damian started snickering again. He got up, walking over to her workstation. “What do you mean, ‘used to be’?”

She looked up at him over the frames of her glasses, smirking slightly.

“I’m adorable, fuck you very much,” he huffed, massive arms folding across his equally broad chest. Silvery scars tabbied the skin of his forearms; the white streak in his curly hair, that had only been there since his resurrection, fell in his Lazarus-green eyes.

“Yes, Jason,” she finally conceded. “You are still adorable.”

He threw his hands up.

“Thank you!”

Steph meandered over too, propping one hand on the back of Barbara’s chair.

“I may be a kid, but you’re the one who gave me Batgirl, so who’s the real person with poor judgement here?” she teased in return.
“Got me there.” Barbara shifted her focus from the Watchtower monitors to another of her screens; the wall of code she couldn’t help but drift back to. Her next project was her attempt to trace the apparently-erased emails Drew had sent to various goons; attempt to prove he had told Fisher DiNero to stay out of the way while his son was murdered, to prove he had sent Paulo Lache to kill her best friend, to prove that he had second-handedly ensured the bombing of the deli. Maybe she shouldn’t while surrounded by her easily-angered loved ones, maybe she should let herself rest entirely today, but...

“Are you gonna tell us what all that means?” Jason asked.

She leaned back slightly.

“It’s my attempt to tie Drew to more of his crimes as Python,” she replied without preamble.

Their lighthearted attitudes evaporated. Jason stood straighter, the amusement gone from his eyes. Steph’s brow furrowed.

“You just found out it was him, like, two weeks ago,” she pointed out. “Aren’t you putting a little too much pressure on yourself now?”

“Not at all. It’s already been too long, Stephanie; the sooner we get more evidence, especially the kind of concrete evidence you guys can gather, the sooner my father can get an arrest warrant. I want this man out of my system and my life.”

“Understandable.” Jason paused. “However, considering that a couple hours ago you were giving Blondie here advice on getting her shit together, and that you tend to give us advice like that in general, you should probably, I dunno, stop putting all the responsibility for this guy on your shoulders?”

“He’s after me, specifically, Jason. I don’t want any of you getting caught in the crossfire anymore.” She exhaled hard, leaning back into her seat and resting her hand on her stomach. “I don’t think I could live with myself if our feud got someone I love killed.”

“That I also get,” he admitted. His eyes were a thousand miles away, and if Barbara knew him, he was also thinking about Batman’s feud with the Joker — and the collateral damage that had taken the form of the pair of them.

Steph looked lost in thought too, but not about the same thing.

“I dunno, though. Even by our standards, it seems like an awful lot to blame yourself for — hey, Damian, you’re being uncharacteristically quiet. What do you think about this?”

All three of them turned around.

“Damian?”

The living room had been abandoned, as had Damian’s school uniform on the floor. A few of his heavier winter items still hung by the door, his backpack as well, though zipped open and looking considerably less bulky.

For a few moments, none of them said anything.

“So...did you guys know that Damian keeps his Robin suit in with his school stuff?”

“No.”
“Yeah, me neither.”

Once the muggers had been subdued and tied up, the first thing that crossed Dick’s mind was that those women must be freezing.

“I can’t believe Nightwing saved us,” the first of them gushed. Her gaping jacket and short dress did not look nearly warm enough to protect her from the early February winds, and neither did her fishnets or sky-high heeled boots. Her lipstick was vivid magenta, her blond hair, surprisingly, was natural. “It’s like, getting an autograph from a local celebrity.”

“Better.” The second woman was dressed slightly more sensibly with a long fake-fur coat, although she was also wearing leather pants. Her hair was natural too, in a wily halo around her head, though her long violet nails were acrylic. “Celebrities don’t save you from creepy guys with knives.”

The third was small and moon-faced, at least five years younger than the other two, in stilettos she was teetering in and the tightest silver dress money could buy. Her sleek hair was dyed teal, matching shadow over her eyes. She held out her phone, a Green Lantern sticker decorating the back of it.

“Is it cool if we get a selfie?”

He smiled at her.

“Yes. It is very cool.”

The three of them posed around him. He grinned at the camera just before the flash went off.

“You’re the best,” the teal-haired girl said happily, examining her picture. “I’m so glad we have you here.”

Yeah, me too, Gotham’s not exactly friendly towards my family at the moment, he thought darkly.

What he said though, was:

“Thank you, but I’m just doing my job.”

“You’re doing damn more than that, I’d say,” the woman in the fake-fur coat opined.

“And speaking of doing our jobs, you wouldn’t happen to be lonely tonight, would you?” the blonde asked hopefully.

“Sorry, I’m taken.”

“Well, that normally never matters.”

Dick was about to politely turn her down again when a different, much younger, and male voice emerged from the top of a nearby roof.

“You’re out of luck, woman; you’d have to pry him away from his partner with a crowbar. He’s sickeningly in love with her.”
All four of them looked up. Dick’s heart leapt.

Robin crouched by the edge of the closed Greek restaurant’s roof, cape flapping in the sharp wind, although his absurdly puffy winter coat made him look considerably less intimidating and more like an actual middle-schooler.

The teal-haired girl instantly voiced Dick’s thoughts.

“Oh, he’s adorable!”

It was all he could do not to crack up when Damian puffed up with rage.

“I’m not adorable! I’m the partner and son of the Batman! The blood of immortals runs in my veins!”

“Awww, he’s so precious. He looks like a little marshmallow!”

“He does,” the one in the fur coat agreed while Damian spluttered. “Look at the cute lil’ guy. I wanna squish him and pinch his cheeks.”

“Touch me and die!”

All three women cooed. Dick thought he must be breaking a rib in his effort not to laugh.

“Nightwing! Do something!”

“Okay ladies,” he managed to choke out in a reasonable-sounding voice. “I think he’s here for me. You’re safe; you can go now.”

They sighed in disappointment, turning to leave.

“If you change your mind, call my pimp,” the blonde shouted over her shoulder. “He’s very professional! Has an office and everything, albeit in our cathouse, but —”

“Give it up, Alyssa.”

“Never.”

Dick chuckled as they disappeared and Damian hopped down next to him, his ears still red.

“Did women talk to you like that when you were Robin?”

“Up until puberty hit, yes.” Dick beamed down at his brother. “Comes with the name. But anyway, it’s good to see you.”

“Tt. Well, yes, obviously, it’s good to see you too, since I sought you out.” Damian shifted his feet.

The smile grew.

“So, you wanna go catch some bad guys together? Fly for a bit? It’ll be just like the good old days,” he coaxed.

Damian’s bristling turned to eager fidgeting.

“Yes, we can speak then,” he agreed. Then paused. “But perhaps you should call Gordon. I didn’t tell her where I was heading.”

“You were with Babs? But why —? Wait, hold that thought, you didn’t tell her where you were
“Dick fumbled for his com. “She must be going out of her mind.”

“She was working, I thought it best not to bother her,” Damian protested as Dick clicked the com on.

Instantly, a flood of yelling shot down into his ear.

“Yeah, well, I think she’s pretty bothered.”

“Nightwing, where have you been? You’ve been off for ages; what were you doing? Robin’s been AWOL for over an hour and I haven’t been able to reach him, if B finds out he ran off again he’s so grounded —”

“Oracle, relax, he’s here with me.”

She paused mid-yell.

“I really should’ve guessed that.” She sounded almost embarrassed. “Okay, tell him from me he’s a stress-inducing little twit.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Pick one.”

“You’re insufferable.” A touch of playfulness entered her voice, which was all the permission he needed.

“Yeah, but you love it.” His own voice dropped in timbre as he grinned.

“Bit presumptuous of you, isn’t that?”

“I dunno, I think I have all the proof I need.”

“Well, aren’t you a great detective?”

“Attacking my skills? That’s low, Oracle.”

“Aww, you didn’t think I had it in me?”

“No, but I know you had something else, and have a different something else, in you. And that’s my proof.”

“The audacity...I should turn you over my knee.”

“Really? You promise?”

“Excuse me,” Damian interrupted hotly, “but I am right here. So if you two are going to flirt, please note that I will punctuate it with all the disgust I feel on the matter.”

Dick felt his face go hot, while Barbara groaned. There were some noises in the background on her end that sounded like giggling and wolf-whistling.

“Great. Of all the times for us to forget we have an audience. Can you at least tell him from me not to run off like that again?”

“Sorry. I doubt he’d even listen to me on that matter.”
“Hmph. Ass.”

“Maybe, but I still love you.”

She was startled into silence for a few moments. Damian’s mouth fell open.

“...I love you too.” Her voice had grown considerably softer. “Okay. I’ll let everyone know Robin’s with you. Call me back if you need me.”

“I know you’ll be there.”

Barbara hung up, cheeks burning. The other two looked at her, grins still across their faces.

“Seriously? One ‘I love you’ and you just fall to pieces?”

She shrugged.

“My god. There really is no hope for you. You’re so starry-eyed over my dumb big brother, and everyone thinks he’s the sap.”

“Bite me, Jason.”

Stephanie started giggling again.

The winds grew sharper, fiercer, swifter, as they plummeted between the sky-grazing metal buildings, cold ripping through their armor, the inevitable moment of terror then the adrenaline rush as he began to free-fall, no matter how many times he’d done it before —

He was giddy with euphoria.

Sailing with him above the foul sea of neon, metal, and concrete, the last of Damian’s self-consciousness had vanished as they fell. The boy’s cape repeatedly snapped out against the air currents; the two of them swung and hit the next rooftop with a synchronized thump.

Dick laughed with joy, reeling his line back in, heart still racing.

“God, I love that.”

“As do I,” Damian agreed, the rare genuine smile still on his face. But he had stopped running to catch up, his gait slowed to a walk. As he did, he turned to look out over the skyline.

Dick paused beside him.

“Something on your mind, Dami? You said you wanted to talk to me.”

“Yes.” He sat down on the edge of the building, dangling small feet over a darkened window. His older brother sat down next to him. “You said...this would be just like the good old days.”
“Yeah.”

“I do still enjoy this. But you’re wrong. So much has changed since then.” Damian finally looked at him again. The smile had turned to a contemplative — not angry or upset — gaze. “My time with the others this afternoon has proven that. I still miss what you and I had sometimes, and yet, we’ve all changed.”

“Everyone’s still themselves, Dami.”

“Yes, I know.” He tilted himself back, resting his weight on his hands. “They’re still annoying, insufferable, laden with issues —”

“I get it, you like them.”

His little brother scowled briefly at him.

“But seriously, this is a far cry from your thinking that the family reconnecting would only end in disaster, that we were never gonna change.” Dick brought up his knees and rested his arms on them. “That my love was only going to break my heart.”

“Father thought the same,” Damian protested in self-defense. “To the second point, not the first, as far as I know.”

“Yeah. He has always been afraid of us breaking our hearts.” Despite his annoyance about that, Dick still managed a little ironic smirk. “Though I got off easy compared to Jason. Look at how Bruce feels about his love life, or rather, the friends and family of the people who’ve been part of his love life.”

“I’d admire nothing about Todd if I didn’t admire his dedication to his causes.”

“His causes?”

“Specifically the cause of giving Father more gray hair.”

Both of them laughed.

“But I’m glad for you, seriously. You guys deserve to get better, though Jason would probably punch me if I told him that.” He paused. “I’m also glad that you’re growing to like Babs.”

“I would not have assumed her to be the motherly type,” Damian confessed. The heels of his boots tapped awkwardly against the glass. “Yet even though she’s fierce and powerful and intelligent, she still isn’t...won’t...” He crumpled in on himself somewhat. “I have no fear for your son.”

Dick extended an arm and wrapped it around Damian’s shoulders, pulling him in. Damian didn’t fight it, as he would’ve a year ago, but leaned against his side instead.

“If you didn’t think she was motherly, you should really talk to Cass.” Dick’s voice was soft. “I definitely wasn’t the first of us to become a surrogate parent.”

“Perhaps I should.” The boy looked up at him; mostly restored. “My point is, Richard, she’s proven herself as a skilled crimefighter and, more importantly, a part of the family. I approve.”

From Damian, that was high, high praise. A moment passed while Dick soaked it in, before a smile as wide as earlier came over him and he pulled Damian into a full embrace, holding him close.

“This is pushing it. You’re squishing me.” His voice was muffled against Dick’s chest as he
squirmed, accidentally clipping his older brother in the ear. “And I know you’re still making that stupid face. Stop making that face, Grayson.”

“No.” He snuggled his cheek against the top of his brother’s head. “I wanted to say: thank you. And I love you so much, Dami.”

“Mmph.” Even squished, Damian sounded embarrassed. “Obviously, I love you too, idiot. Now get off so I can breathe.”

Dick finally released him, and he immediately started muttering and readjusting his uniform, trying not to look pleased.

“I can only hope you never accidentally smother your son.”

“No way. He’ll grow up with the hugs. By the time he’s your age, he’ll be used to physical affection and won’t fight it.”

“Devious, Grayson. Truly devious.”

He chuckled, reaching a hand up to tuck his hair back, before realizing something.

“Wait. Did I drop my com?”

Far below the rooftop where Nightwing and Robin sat, a lone man with binoculars puffed and gasped for air. He’d been tailing the two of them for ten blocks after a lucky sighting, nearly lost them twice, finally, finally caught up.

As his breath steadied, he caught a glimpse of metal falling down past the fire escape —

*Clink, clink, clink, clatter* —

The tiny chrome device caught on the stairs twice before hitting the ground and rolling to a halt.

The man bent down, then caught his breath as he realized what it was.

He could scarcely believe his luck. With no effort — well, really, with less effort than he’d expected — he’d managed to obtain one of the Bats’ coms.

Fingers trembling, he scooped up the little device, cradling it in one hand. Python had been vague on the subject of why he needed one of these; something about breaking in to see who a woman loved, or something like that. But that hardly mattered. What was important was the compensation he’d get for this.

Grinning, the man stowed away the com, mentally rehearsing the spot he’d been instructed to drop the device off at, and the amount of money he’d been promised for the job.

If they were all going to be this lucrative, he might just have to take the man up on a second offer.

Maybe he should get some friends involved, too. Who gave a damn what happened to any of the Bats, right?
The remains of the pizza lay in shambles around the living room, the empty boxes stacked on the coffee table. It had been demolished to nibbled crusts and scraps of cheese, the boxes yet to be thrown out or recycled, depending on how greasy they still were.

Jason had passed out on the couch with his half-finished book over his face, Steph, equally dead to the world, was curled up over his massive chest, drooling onto his shirt. Both looked, for once, peaceful.

The only sounds remaining in the Clock Tower were Jason’s snores, Steph’s snuffles, and the persistent tap-click of fingers on a keyboard.

That is, until the key rattled in the lock.

Barbara turned around just in time to see two brothers walk in, both still in-uniform. Nightwing, looking buoyant, put his hands on his hips and looked softly down at the boy beside him. Robin, for his part, was rubbing his eyes through the mask, and looked like he was trying not to appear even slightly regretful or ashamed.

“You are not running off on me like that again, kid.” She pushed her glasses up her nose. “Next time, I’m telling Bruce.”

“Micromanager,” Damian grumbled, stifling a yawn. Then: “I’m tired, and I’m in no mind to listen to one of Father’s lectures. You didn’t tell him this time, did you?”

“No, but you did miss dinner, so I ate your pizza.”

For the first time, Damian noticed that his designated vegetarian half was gone, and he ripped off his mask just so he could be properly bug-eyed in outrage.

“You ate a whole pizza by yourself?” he exclaimed incredulously. “My pizza?”

“Unless you too plan on making all the effort of creating another person, I don’t want to hear a word about my eating habits.”

Dick stifled a chortle. Damian scuffed his feet before heading over to her armchair, muttering something about “Kent” and “that clone” and “Luthor didn’t eat like a wild beast.”

As the boy curled up under his cape, still fully dressed, and began to drift off, Dick moved back in towards her and gave her a small kiss.

“Hey, honey. Rough day at the office?”

“Mmm. Apparently, my job still entails counseling small birds and half the Justice League.” She reached up and peeled his mask off. “Speaking of which, Jason told me to tell you that he’s going to leave early tomorrow before you go to work, and...” She glanced over at the couch. He followed her gaze.

“Is Stephanie shaping up okay?”

“I think both the girls are.” She looked back up at him. “Stephanie plans to ask out our Cassandra soon.”
For a moment, his eyes grew wide. Then he looked back at the girl, his gaze growing softer.

“That’s huge, Babs. Especially since I know how much those girls mean to you,” he said quietly. “Of course, I love Cass too, she’s my sister, but you gotta especially be so happy for them.”

“I am.” She took his gloved hand. “And don’t think I haven’t noticed how comfortable Damian’s gotten in his life, especially around you.”

They were both quiet for a moment.

“Makes me kinda think I can repair my relationships with Tim and Jason someday.”

“That’s the spirit.” She gently squeezed his hand. “In the meantime, get some rest, Hunk Wonder. I’ll join you in a few hours.”

Instead of arguing, he bent down and pressed a kiss to her forehead, rubbing his free hand over her stomach. Her heart fluttered.

“Knock ‘em dead. I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said again.

As she watched him go, she had no hesitation or embarrassment about the truth of her words.

The public locker that the com had been dropped off didn’t belong to him, but it didn’t belong to anyone else at the moment, so there had been small chance of anyone else picking it up. Even so, there was next to no chance that it would’ve been picked up by anyone capable of gleaning anything from it.

As it was, just as the night became old, Drew picked apart the wiring of Nightwing’s com, looking for some audio that was new enough so as not to have been corrupted away. After half an hour of carefully downloading and sifting through the memory, he recovered a single conversation, only hours old.

He was genuinely astonished by the snippet of easy banter and flirting, like they’d known each other for years, like he had gotten lucky on the first try and there was definitely something there between them —

“Maybe, but I still love you.”

Drew was so taken aback he nearly knocked his computer to the floor. Even more so by her answer, her voice almost tender, with neither exasperation nor teasing in it.

“...I love you too. Okay. I’ll let everyone know Robin’s with you. Call me back if you need me.”

“I know you’ll be there.”

From there, there was only static. But he knew what he needed to know.

There was far more than something between his enemy and Batman’s firstborn. He had guessed that she cared about one or all of the Bats to some degree, but...the heart of that cold, stubborn, vicious
It was almost poetic, he mused, beginning to grin. Besides, he had always enjoyed a challenge, and Nightwing would certainly provide a unique one.

Drew almost felt sorry for the man. Just because he was loved.
The Lovers

Chapter Notes

This is nearly /entirely/ romantic filler fluff, so if you were expecting something with tension or actual plot, you’re going to have to wait until the next chapter.

Also, I may or may not have plugged a few of my personal opinions into the story. But whatever, it’s not like comic writers don’t do that all the time.

(No extra warnings apply!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


Bruce just had to love his daughter and want to spend time with her.

The late-winter night had grown relatively mild, creeping back up towards freezing. The winds kept themselves to a few gentle puffs under the three vigilantes’ capes; the clouds had risen high above the building-tops, taking most of the bone-soaking dampness with them. For Steph, the weather was about as ideal as it could get.

Batgirl and Black Bat had been supposed to patrol alone together that night, but Robin had extra homework to do that night, so Batman offered his daughter his company instead.

Naturally, Cassandra had said yes.

She knew a lot about her loved ones’ thoughts and feelings, but she had no idea what Steph was planning.

So the three of them found themselves scoping out midtown together. Naturally, Bruce stopped the group at the police station, so the girls loitered atop the roof with the Signal’s projector behind them, bright as a second sun. The symbol itself graced the high clouds, a mirror to the moon, the night punctuated by its light and the distant wail of sirens.

Jim Gordon, wrapped in a long coat, cigarette glowing red, stood silhouetted against the light while Bruce lurked just beside the projector, cloaked in the shadows. The two men spoke in low tones, the girls standing in awkward silence a few feet away.

Steph shuffled her feet.
“So, uh. How long do you think they’re going to take?”

Cass turned her masked gaze to the two men. Neither even looked in their direction as they carried on their conversation.

“Been fifteen minutes. Give it five more.”

“Great.”

Cass was like a stone carving even as Steph continued to fidget, wrapping her cloak around her to conserve heat. The only movement from the other girl was her hair and cloak being slightly carried by the breeze.

She was as lovely as ever in her quiet professionalism.

But as she looked her best friend in the eye, she started. Just slightly. And in that moment, Stephanie realized that Cass knew...knew that she was admiring her.

A tiny blush crept into her impassive face. Warmth flooded Stephanie’s chest.

The men’s voices grew slightly louder, though she paid less attention than she normally would.

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do, Bruce,” Jim sighed. “We’ve been doing our best to get new hires, good ones this time, but we’re still understaffed. Even with you and your partners’ help, it’ll be some time before we have enough evidence to get an arrest warrant.”

“Your daughter’s working on it from her end,” Bruce said gruffly. “But as strong and far-reaching as she is, she’s only one person. Apparently, the warrant’s going to have to wait.”

“She’s not gonna like that.”

“She doesn’t have a choice. She needs rest, and help, not to overexert herself. That won’t help anyone.”

“Isn’t that a bit rich of you?” the commissioner asked sharply. “Taking it out on my daughter for putting too much on her shoulders?”

“I’m not taking it out on her, Jim. And my health doesn’t matter in this case. Hers does.” He let out a long breath. “You’re not the only one who cares about your daughter, you know. You’re not even the only one on this rooftop who cares about her.”

“I know, Bruce. I know. Those girls...um...”

“What?”

“What are those girls doing?”

Steph had moved closer, becoming more and more aware of the heat from Cass’s body, the details in her mask, the faint scars that marked her hands and jawline. Blond hair drifted out, brushing against Cass’s shoulder, a sharp contrast against the black armor.

“Batgirl. Black Bat.” Bruce’s voice had turned back from father and friend to Batman. “Snap out of dreamland. I need to brief you before we go back on patrol.”

Steph waved at him absently, beginning to walk to the edge of the roof. Cass followed her; in spite of her unrevealing expression Steph could tell she had her attention.
“Give us a moment, B-man.”

Bruce instead walked after them; his silhouette huge in the sharp light of the Signal and the shadows of the building. Jim, curious, followed too.

“No. What are you talking about? What is more important right now?”

Boots crunching over the icy gravel, all three Bats found themselves walking to the very edge of the roof, their capes billowing out behind them.

Before them, the city stretched out: stone and steel buildings looming like enormous crooked teeth, car horns blaring, the wind picking up into an alarmed whistle, a thousand spots of white and yellow neon dazzling the night.

Stephanie stood before the expanse of the city, the police commissioner, the light of the Signal, and Cass’s father, the Batman himself. But she looked her best friend dead on and held Barbara Gordon’s advice in her mind.

“Cassandra Wayne,” she breathed out, “will you go out with me tomorrow night? Like, on a date?”

Cass’s mouth opened slightly; her blush deepened from peony to rose.

Jim’s cigarette fell from his fingers.

Bruce lost control of his legs entirely and toppled off the roof.

CRASH!

Everyone gasped. Jim rushed over to the edge and peered over.

“Oh, he landed in the Dumpster,” he remarked. “No worries girls, he’s all right.”

Steph exhaled sharply, turning back to Cass. The other girl seemed at a loss for words, like once again, language was not enough for her.

After a second, her reply: a single nod, and a smile.

Stephanie laughed with delight, pumping both her fists and letting her whoops get carried off by the wind.

“Yes! She said yes! You hear that, bitches? She said yes!”

“Good for you, kids,” Jim said warmly, placing a hand on Cass’s shoulder. The other girl’s smile had grown wider, until it threatened to take over her face. She reached out, then recoiled once, tentative, before she got over herself and took Steph’s hand. Steph gripped it in response.

“Pick me up at the Clock Tower. Five o’clock. Don’t be late.”

Steph felt her own smile grow wider in response.

It was enough that they almost forgot Bruce was still lying in the garbage.
Barbara awoke upon that morning to the blare of her alarms and the darkness of an early winter morning. Groaning, she fumbled around and switched them off before sitting up, preparing to haul herself into her chair.

Instead, she found herself looking directly into what appeared to be a disembodied pair of staring brown eyes.

She screamed, hurling herself against the backboard with a thundering rattle. From the other side of the bed, there was a loud masculine snort, a groan, and then an answering scream.

When the light clicked on, both halves of the couple, in their pajamas and mussed hair, were holding their escrima and looking at the embarrassed guest perched on the end of their bed.

“Cassandra?” Barbara dropped her arms, the escrima gently thumping against the duvet. “Cass...it’s five o’clock in the morning, what are you doing here?”

Cass was still wearing her Black Bat gear, albeit sans the mask. Perched on her hands and feet, she shuffled a bit, looking at the duvet cover. She didn’t answer for a long few moments.

Barbara looked over at Dick, who shrugged cluelessly.

“Stephanie asked me out. I said yes.”

Barbara gasped, clapping her hands to her mouth. Dick collapsed, exhaling hard and grinning.

“Way to go, sis.”

“No.” Cass looked up. “She asked me out. For today.”

“Today, as in...?”

She nodded. Barbara felt her eyebrows shoot up.

“Short notice, but bold,” Dick marveled. “I approve.”

“Yes, but...” She looked almost sheepish. “I don’t know...much. About big dates.”

“You’ve been on big dates,” Barbara pointed out.

“Not with someone this important.”

She couldn’t argue with that.

“Right.” She pushed the messy tangle of hair behind her ears. “Today, if you stay with me, when I have some free moments I’ll help you get ready for your date.”

“But...don’t you have to get ready too? Plus your work?”

“I’ll get you out early,” Barbara promised. “Then I should have time to prepare for my date.”

Dick squeezed her hand over the covers.

“Good.” Cass relaxed, moving from her crouch into an upright sitting position. She watched, owl-like, as Barbara shuffled over towards her parked chair and Dick stretched his way out of bed. “Do you...”
“Yes?”

“Have some nice clothes? For tonight?”

“...None that are gonna fit you.”

“Actually,” Dick spoke up, “I think I might be able to help with that.”

Dawn had finally lifted by the time Cassandra had gotten out of her uniform, showered, tossed her own clothes in the laundry, and shrugged into one of Barbara’s maternity shirts. The hemline fell down across the top of her thighs and the front sagged across her chest and torso, but there was no way Barbara would let her wear her sweaty armor all day before a big date. Picking at one of the stitches, she examined the outfit her brother had left for her.

From the next room, she could hear their voices, low, likely hoping that she wouldn’t be able to eavesdrop.

“Look, the thing is, I have a lot of casework left from last week.”

“Are you worried that you won’t make it?”

“To our date? No! I might be a little late, is all. I just don’t want you to think that I’m standing you up.”

“Trust me, I’m not worried about that. Besides, I have a lot of work too, even without helping Cassandra, it’s just...so much. In all likelihood, I’ll probably be late too.” She paused. “They had better not give away our reservation though. I have a whole nice night planned.”

“C’mon, what else do you have planned? You can tell me.”

“Nope. But it’s very romantic, you’ll love it.” Her voice took on a bit of sultriness. “If all goes well...”

“Hey stop it, I have to go to work!” He didn’t sound too upset, though. “Babs look, it’s fine if we end up having to eat somewhere else.”

“You don’t have to worry about it. Everything’ll be under control.”

“I’ll see you tonight then?”

“Six-thirty.”

“Can’t wait.”

Cass ended her reverie and walked to the bedroom door just in time to see them kiss. Dick was already in his police uniform, Barbara in jeans and a sweater. Both of them were fairly shining with affection; for once she lacked all self-consciousness...possibly because she wasn’t aware she had an audience.

But once they broke apart, they both looked over and saw Cass. Dick’s posture barely changed, but Barbara quickly attempted to compose herself.
“You plan to go out in that fancy dress?” her older brother teased. “I’m sure you’ll make all the girls swoon.”

She quirked a small smile. He grinned, while Barbara rolled her eyes — though Cass knew it wasn’t without affection.

“Only want to make one girl swoon.”

“I can respect that.” He came over and gave her a hug. “Good luck with tonight, Cassie.”

“You too.”

She watched him disappear through the door. The click of the lock was soft, almost a promise.

Barbara rolled closer. It had never surprised Cass how easily the older woman could cover up, pull her heart close, almost shy, when she was in love. Though she knew she’d seen a lack of fear and inhibitions...or at least a desire for such.

In the meantime, she was carrying an air of business. Red hair lightly brushed, glasses balanced on the end of her nose. Beautiful, but rushed. Throwing herself right into what she needed to do, time limit and physical limits be damned.

“Now then.” She pushed her glasses back into place, then folded her arms across her chest. That familiar green stare, full of love and determination. “What would you like to know?”

Cass balanced her weight on the front of her feet. The wooden floor was cool under her toes, as was the air against her legs. She could hear the kettle on the stove whistling; out of the corner of her eye, she registered that a gray cloud cover had formed behind the windows.

She thought about her family, and the people they loved.

“Just...what should I do?”

“Go fuck yourself!”

Bruce grimaced, holding the phone away at a distance, rubbing the ear his cousin had just shouted down, quickly putting her on speaker instead.

This is what I get for taking the day off work and actually answering Kate’s call.

“All I’m saying is that dating one of my children didn’t work out for him or Stephanie before,” he protested. “And yes, before you say it, part of that had to do with both of them being on the rebound and Tim struggling with his sexuality, I know that. But Cassandra’s even worse than her brother at compartmentalizing her work and dealing with her feelings —”

“Gee, could that possibly be because of who she has for role models?”

“You’re a part of this family too, Katherine. My point is, Stephanie’s reckless and disobedient, and she’s already gotten herself into trouble plenty of times before. She might be making another snap decision, this time about something as big as dating a teammate. And I’m worried about what kind of effect being seriously in love is going to have on my daughter; that she won’t deal with it well.”
“Bruce, I called you to congratulate you on this. This is fantastic! The girls have been best friends for years! You really think this is going to have a negative effect on either of them? Trust me, I know what I’m talking about.”

“You know what you’re talking about?” he replied archly. “And yet, you’re still asking out Maggie Sawyer.”

“Not this shit again. The only way to move on is to get out there and move on, you know that!”

“Yes, but you can’t keep stringing Maggie along when you obviously still have feelings for Renee. It’s not right, and I don’t think you should be telling me you know what you’re talking about in my daughter’s case; your track record isn’t exactly ideal.”

There was a pause.

Then Kate let out a long growl and hiss of frustration down the phone.

“Fine. Fine. Fine! Judge me all you want! Drag up my track record. But since you think I’m such a bad example, let’s look at the other members of this family, shall we? You: well-known Mr. Playboy, fucked your bodyguard, fucked a reporter of all people, knocked up the daughter of a supervillain, has been on and off with a cat-obsessed kleptomaniac for the last twenty years, has fairly obvious latent attraction to Superman.”

Bruce nearly fell over his own feet.

“I do not —”

“Your first son: was engaged to and engaged in fucking an alien, had previously fucked his best friend, then knocked up the woman he’s been mooning over since he was fifteen, not to mention may or may not have a fetish for red hair. Your second son: slept with your ex-girlfriend, then dated the associates of the exact two members of the JLA that piss you off the most, said associates being a starving artist and his fellow black sheep of the family.”

“Everything else aside,” he muttered, “I want to believe Jason dated Kyle and Roy because he liked and likes them, too. But Hal and Oliver pissing me off was definitely a bonus for him.”

“Exactly. And your third son: terrible history with honesty and steady relationships, repressed, and dating his sister’s ex — okay, she’s dating his ex too now, but the ex he’s currently dating also happens to be an alien clone! Do I have to go on?”

“Please don’t.”

Bruce whirled around.

Standing behind him were Alfred, eyebrows nearly up to where his hairline had once been, and his two youngest sons, both looking slightly ill.

“I believe Miss Katherine, as they say, snapped,” Alfred observed.

“Which ex-girlfriend of yours did Todd have intercourse with?” Damian demanded. Bruce pretended not to have heard him.

“Kate, if you’re going to roast me, at least do it to my face,” Tim sighed.

Bruce noticed that although Damian was wearing his school uniform, Tim had yet to change into a
work outfit. Instead, he was wearing crisp black jeans and red flannel, his long hair freshly washed and combed and his sneakers in relatively good condition.

“Sorry, kid.” Upon Bruce not being the only person she was talking to, Kate’s voice finally softened a bit. “What I meant was, your sister’s doing pretty well for herself, comparatively. You’re pleased for her, right?”

“What’s not to be pleased about?” Tim flopped down onto the nearest couch, tucking a pillow behind his head. “Steph and I are long over, for obvious reasons. She and Cass make each other happy. Now everyone in the family’s got somebody, even the crazy people, which is enough to almost make me optimistic.”

“Not I,” Damian bragged. “School aside, I get to have an entire pleasant day free from you lunatics while you’re off making moon eyes at each other. We’re still on for tea at four-thirty, right Pennyworth?”

“I’m hardly in a position to make new Valentine’s plans, Master Damian.”

“Excellent.”

“Yeah, uh, speaking of plans...” Tim glanced up. “Alfred, what time is it?”

“Five to eight.”

“Great.” A rare, genuinely warm smile lit Tim’s face. “Kon should be here any minute.”

“Kon should...?” Bruce suddenly understood why he wasn’t going to work, and dressed like that. “You...you got him to willingly get up before noon?”

“Believe it or not, it was his idea.” Tim stretched, tucking his hands behind his head too. “He’s flying all the way in from Kansas, and we’ve got a whole day planned. I told him not to go too overboard, but I guess since this is our first Valentine’s Day together...”

“Sounds like Todd,” Damian spoke up. “I heard him last week on the phone with Harper; apparently they’re taking the day off to be with each other too.”

“Ugh, please don’t compare my love life to Jason’s.”

“Of course not. Should I compare your emotional intelligences instead? Those are far more similar.” Kate cleared her throat before the brothers could start another fight.

“Well, no matter how weird and ridiculous you kids’ love lives are, it’s good to know you’re happy. And that you’re not your father.”

Bruce grunted unhappily while his sons snickered.

“Always good to hear from you, Kate. And all of you, I’m patrolling early today,” he said abruptly. “If you’re nearly all going to be on dates, the city needs to have me at least out there.”

“Sure, Bruce.” There was another teasing note in his cousin’s voice, though why this time, he wasn’t sure. “There’ll be no date for you on patrol, of course.”

“Hmph.” He hung up before she could continue, stowing his phone in his pocket.

“Good to know you’re keeping your own life professional, Master Bruce.” Alfred, who looked like
he was trying to hide a knowing smile of his own, turned to Damian. “Come, young sir. You’re not going to be late to school today.”

“As long as I’m not expected to give anyone any silly paper cards.”

Once they were gone, he looked back at Tim. His third son was on his phone, scrolling through his texts, looking happy and at peace as he waited out the last few minutes.

A rare thought occurred to Bruce: what if, in this case, he might be overreacting on his children’s behalf a little bit?

Barbara indicated the couch.

“Wait there while I get breakfast.”

In one fluid motion, Cassandra ascended and assumed a curled position on the end of the couch, peering out from behind her choppy black hair. She watched silently as Barbara rolled back to the kitchen, taking the kettle off the stove and grabbing two mugs from the cupboard.

As she poured tea for both of them, she began to think about how this would go. She wasn’t worried about Stephanie’s ability to express herself, nor whether she would hesitate to make a move. But Cassandra was a little too much like her father sometimes.

“Though come to think of it,” she muttered to herself. “Those aren’t just flaws of hers and Bruce’s.”

The younger woman was still fixated on her when she came back into the living room, a tray of steaming lavender tea and cinnamon-raisin toast balanced precariously on her shrunken lap. Barbara offered her a plate and the purple-glazed mug, taking the blue one for herself.

Both of them were quiet for a minute or so. Cass dunked the tea bag in and out of the mug a few times.

“If you’re worried about having to show physical affection,” Barbara finally said, “you needn’t be. I know she’ll back off if you don’t want to kiss — or do anything else.”

“Not worried.” Cass lifted her head. “About me. Worried about you.”

“Oh?”

“Work doesn’t go down on holidays. Family and friends will be off the job, on dates. Resources stretched thin.” She paused, lifting the tea bag away and dropping it on her plate. “When I say what should I do...should I help you? Spend the day working...instead of preparing? Want you to have a nice time too.”

Barbara set down her mug.

“Cassie, I’m touched that you want to help me,” she said quietly. “I really am. But is is possible that you’re also putting off preparing for your date with work because you’re afraid?”

Cass went still. Barbara placed her hand over hers.
“Look, you don’t have to worry about me. Let me worry about balancing my job with my love life. But if she makes you happy, if you want this...”

“She does. I do.”

“Then let yourself be happy. Let yourself go.” She stroked her thumb over the younger woman’s toughened knuckles. “And you have every right to not trust your big brother’s fashion sensibilities, but I think I can work with what he gave you anyway.”

Cass finally cracked a smile.

“Thought you loved him.”

“I do, but that doesn’t mean I have to love everything he’s worn or done with his hair. You’re lucky, Steph’s always had good taste.”

A small giggle escaped her lips, accompanied by a faint blush. Her hands and arms, scarred from far too much violence far too young, lifted and wrapped around her chest. Barbara raised an eyebrow playfully.

“Are you thinking about her? Are you thinking about how pretty she is?”

Cass turned a tiny Mona Lisa smile to her.

“Maybe so.”

Barbara counted that as a triumph.

“Come on. Eat your breakfast, and let’s get started.”

“Can I open my eyes now?”

“No.”

“Can I peek, at least?”

“You’re gonna ruin the surprise, babe.”

“What surprise? I know we’re still thousands of feet in the air; it’s freezing and you fly about as stealthily as a jet liner.”

“Ehhh, more like hundreds.”

“I feel like someone’s going to start calling me ‘Lois’.”

“How’s this: you don’t peek, and I don’t tell her you said that.”

“Ass.”

“You noticed it? Thanks!”

Tim grumbled, but kept his eyes shut.

A minute or so later, the wind began to shrink from a yell to a whisper, the cold easing somewhat as
they descended. There was a slight crunch as Conner’s boots came in contact with solid...something.

“You can open ‘em now.”

Shivering even beneath his jacket and pressed up against his boyfriend, Tim looked.

Beneath them lay the illuminated chrome-glass sprawl of Metropolis, the February sky above them bright and scattered with only a thin layer of smog. Conner, all bright blue eyes and multiple earrings and that stupid hot undercut, gave him a hopeful grin.

“Are we...on the Daily Planet roof?” Tim realized that he was breathless. “Won’t Clark mind?”

“Nah, Mr. Lois and Ms. Lois are having a ‘day in’ —” He emphasized his point with one-handed air quotes, “— if you know what I mean —”

“I do, please don’t elaborate.”

“Don’t plan on it. My point is, nobody’s gonna recognize us if we get caught.” Conner set down Tim, who in turn sat down upon the roof, starting to unpack their lunch — along with the electric candles and music speakers.

“You do realize that I’m on the cover of this month’s issue of *Financial Times* and you look exactly like Clark?”

“...okay, we’re slightly less likely to get recognized and more likely to escape if we get caught.”

“Whatever you say, clone boy.”

Conner sat down beside him, reaching for a sandwich and leaning into his shoulder. He was heavy, but warm, and Tim let him lean in. He wrapped an arm around his back.

“Thanks, by the way. This is really nice.”

He pressed a kiss to his temple.

“Whatever you say, bird boy.”

Cassandra stood patiently off to the side, squinting carefully at the words in an old issue of *Cosmo* Dinah had left lying around. Barbara, hands free of her headset, kept talking as she sewed up the pants Cass would be wearing to fit her better.

“Hawkgirl. Hawkgirl? Are you hearing a word I’m saying?”

“Sorry, Oracle!” Kendra’s voice was strained, and accompanied by a background rattle of gunfire. “I think the Bialyans knew I was coming...man, are they pissed.”

“Stay on, Hawkgirl. I’m going to check in and see if anyone’s near enough to back you up.”

“I doubt it.” There was a grunt, the unpleasant sound of a mace hitting its target, and a series of *thuds*. “Everyone who’s not single is either out or getting out as soon as possible. And that’s a lot of people.”
Barbara paused the sewing to check in on the other Birds, one at a time. Finally, she landed on a possibility.

“Power Girl. Hawkgirl needs backup in Bialya, I need you to —”

“Seriously?” Karen complained. “I just got off shift at the Watchtower, and Metropolis needs me since Kal and Kon are off-duty. Instead you’re going to order me around some more?”

“Don’t argue with me, just get to Bialya. I’ll get Supergirl to cover Metropolis.”

Karen grumbled her agreement (then added something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like “bossy bitch”), before hanging up.

“You got that, Hawkgirl?”


Five minutes later, poor Kara had been wrangled into covering Metropolis almost entirely by herself after being promised that weekend off, and the pants were done. Barbara exhaled sharply, leaning back in her chair and admiring her handiwork.

“Not going to tailor the shirt?” Cass inquired. “Or the blazer?”

“A little bit, but not as much. We won’t have time to do your hair and makeup otherwise. Besides, oversized shirts and blazers are stylish, or so Kori tells me.” She handed the younger girl the pants, who took them gratefully, and in turn showed Barbara a page from the magazine.

“Can you really...like this?”

She peered at the illustration.

“No.” She paused. “...I tried that.”

“Thought so.”

“Okay, I admit it. You were right. That was the best version of Batman I’ve ever seen.”

“Told you so. And they were all great, too. How about Rosario Dawson, huh?”

“Oh yeah, she was perfect. Wait here, I’m going to get some food.”

Still quietly marveling that they’d managed to get through a whole movie without anything catastrophic interrupting it, Jason began methodically removing his hidden weaponry as he made his way to the kitchen. Roy just tossed off his shoes and prosthetic before flopping down on the couch.

“That’s sweet of you, but you know you don’t have to make me anything, Jaybird. I filled up on popcorn.”

“I do know, that was my popcorn. This is for me.”

Roy snickered quietly, tucking his remaining arm behind his head. His tired, unshaven face was
unusually relaxed, especially as Jason came back over with peanut butter and apple slices. The two men sat in comfortable quiet for a few minutes while he finished his snack, leaning into each other.

“Have you given more thought to what I said about changing the combinations on your weapons caches?”

“Lian’s not going to get into them.”

“That’s what you said about the dessert cupboard, too.”

“The dessert cupboard was different. She had help.”

“All Artemis did to ‘help’ was encourage ‘the young warrior’ to do what she would’ve done anyway. You’re influencing her to become a tiny ninja.”

“Me? Uh, have you noticed your family?”

“Please, we’re great with kids.” While Roy snorted in disbelief, Jason leaned in closer, an ironic smile of his own on his face. He put a hand on his boyfriend’s shoulder. “Though we might have room for improvement.”

“No fuckin’ kidding.” He took in the hand on his shoulder. “I do think you’ll get there though. And uh, speaking of kids, Lian doesn’t get back from school for another few hours.”

“Yeah? You got any ideas for how to pass the time?”

“A few.”

Fabric rustled, and a zipper opened with a quick *snizzt.*

“But seriously, you need to change your combinations. We’re going back to that after this.”

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Cass was quiet and still, almost unblinking, as Barbara did her makeup. She sat on a kitchen chair before her, down to her pants and bra to avoid getting anything on her shirt.

“Fair warning: I’m not as good at this as I could be.” She dipped the brush back in the tub of powder. “So I didn’t do much contouring or fancy techniques or anything like that.”

“S’okay.” As she spoke, she still managed to barely move her face, keeping the stuff from dislodging. “Not good at it either.”

A couple quick flicks of mascara, and she was done. Cass blinked.

“Now turn around.”

The chair spun, and soon Barbara was running a brush carefully through her soft black shag. The short layers tapered off into choppy points, like pine branches, but the hair itself was as fine as silk.

“I could do this myself.”

“I know.” She pulled through a tangle. “I’m not trying to infantilize you, I just...I don’t know. My
mom used to brush my hair a lot.” *Before she left.* “It was nice; I kinda missed it when I got older.” She paused. “Although mine was never as pretty as yours. When I was a kid it would frizz everywhere; come summer I would have a big poof of red wires hanging off my head. My dad used to think it was hilarious, but joke’s on him, *his* went gray early.”

Cass chuckled a bit.

“Okay. You can brush my hair, mother. Though yours *is* pretty.”

Smiling, her heart warm, Barbara pulled the brush through the last snarl and spritzed on a bit of mousse. Cass picked up the blush compact and admired herself in the tiny mirror.

Meanwhile, the computer beeped.

With no small amount of difficulty, Barbara rolled herself back over. Cass shrugged on the oversized shirt, buttoning it up.

“Vixen, what’s your status?”

“My status, Oracle, is annoyed. You didn’t tell me there was a computer mainframe to break into at this facility. There aren’t a lot of animals that know how to hack.”

“Look, I get it Mari, everyone’s all grumpy because you missed the opportunity to go on dates,” Barbara sighed, “but we’re stretched thin, and I didn’t know that you had to break into the mainframe. Give me five minutes to get you in, and try not to get spotted.”

Mari sighed a bit, but didn’t grumble.

Barbara settled in and her fingers began to fly over the keys.

Cass was nearly ready to go, and she was still in just the jeans and sweater she’d been wearing all day.

Steph’s fingers trembled as she zipped up the back of her dress, checking her hair and makeup in the mirror one last time before she slipped on her jacket and shoes.

“You look beautiful, honey,” Crystal said encouragingly as her daughter came down the stairs. “She’s going to love it.”

“Sure, Mom.” Steph fidgeted. “Whatever you say.”

“I’m serious.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath, scooping up her purse. “Alright. I should be back by midnight, but don’t freak out if I’m late.”

“I have no worries, honey. From what you’ve told me, she’s a very nice girl. I’m glad you’ve found someone who cares about you and doesn’t get into trouble like your boyfriends did.”

*Well Mom, you’re mostly right.*
When the doorbell rang, Cass’s head instantly snapped up.

“She’s here.” For the first time, there was a slight quaver in the younger woman’s voice. Barbara moved to her side.

The dress shirt was frost-white, hanging loose, the top two buttons undone. The oversized blazer and the resized, now-form-fitting pants on the other hand, were dusk blue. Her hair was teased to soft choppy spikes; her makeup mostly subtle with touches of silver and blue around her eyes.

“No need to worry. You look like you’re going to be Tegan and Sara’s opening act.”

“Not likely. Can’t sing for shit.”

Barbara laughed, then squeezed her hand and headed to the door, pulling it open.

Stephanie, near the opposite of her date, was a riot of pastels. Her blond hair was pinned up in loose curls; her full-length empire-waist dress lavender and dawn pink, with matching lipstick and dangly silver earrings. She squirmed, clutching the straps of her purse.

“You here to give me a shovel talk?” she joked nervously.

“Maybe...oh, alright, just a little one.” Barbara put her hand on her hip. “Don’t you dare hurt her, or I’ll tell Bruce it was you who convinced Damian that ‘to bust a nut’ meant to get angry.”

“Jesus, you don’t hold back, do you?”

It was then that Cass materialized by her side, staring. Spellbound.

Steph looked her over, then flushed the same color as her dress. Ducking her head slightly, she extended her hand. Slowly, Cass took it; the two girls approaching each other with Barbara in the middle, watching them.

She let them have a moment to get used to the new sensation.

“Okay,” she said at last. Her protégés started. “Have fun, you two. I hope it all goes well.”

The girls pulled out of their interlocked gaze just long enough to look at her and nod. Almost tentatively, Steph took Cass’s hand, and by the time they moved back into the hallway, they were beginning to look as comfortable together as always.

Barbara shut the door behind them, then exhaled hard, grinning despite herself.

“Well, that was easy. Who should I set up next?”

She genuinely thought about it for a minute.

“Karen and Helena.”
“Check, Pennyworth,” Damian said smugly, moving his bishop into place and lifting his cup of Earl Grey. “And thus, the apprentice becomes the master.”

“Some might deem it unwise to declare yourself victor before the game has ended, Master Damian,” the old butler remarked, his deadpan expression barely twitching. He topped off his own cup, stirring delicately.

“Some who lose might declare it unwise to declare yourself victor.”

The days at Gotham Academy got to be tedious sometimes; most of the students the children of the city’s elite. In other words, most of the students were spoiled white kids. The rest of the freshmen were all at least two years older than him, and for some reason, the teachers seemed to be perpetually exhausted with him, especially the ones who’d first taught Dick some years ago. (For some reason, the ones who’d taught Jason considered his second brother to have been a delight.)

A few of the students were tolerable though. Not that he needed their company, but being friends with people around his age was...pleasant. Ahead of the curve as he was, he still found that most adults could be just as much, if not more, tiresome than children.

But naturally, there were exceptions.

“Perhaps you have won after all, Master Damian,” Alfred sighed as Damian swiftly moved to take his now-vulnerable queen.

“There’s no perhaps about it, Pennyworth,” the boy crowed, sitting back to sip at his tea, waiting for his opponent’s move.

“True. There is no perhaps about it.” Still looking deadpan, Alfred moved his knight forward into the space Damian had just left open in taking his queen. With a flick of a bony finger, he tipped over the king. “Checkmate.”

Then again, even people who weren’t tiresome could still drive you up the wall.

“You sneaky obscene old relic! You cheated me!”

Not bothered by his charge’s ranting, Alfred just sipped more at his tea.

“Some who lose might declare victory to be cheating, young sir.”

Damian opened his mouth to rebut, but was interrupted by the doorbell ringing.

“Don’t think this is over, Pennyworth. You owe me a rematch.”

“I quiver with fear, young sir.”

Scoffing under his breath, Damian set aside his tea and darted through the living room down the hallways of the empty house. Finally reaching the door, the dogs already barking eagerly at it, he undid the locks and wrenched it open.

On the other side stood a boy his age in jeans and flannel, red hair a floppy mess, peering hopefully at him through the crack in the door.

“Wilkes? What are you doing here?”
“I took a taxi from St. Aiden’s,” Colin said helpfully. “I used up a ton of my last couple months’ allowance.”

“No, I mean, what are you doing here?”

“Oh.” The other boy shifted from foot to foot. Ace and Titus pawed at the crack in the door, excited to see him. “Well, since it’s Valentine’s Day and your dad and all your brothers and sister are with their boyfriends and girlfriends, I thought you might be lonely?” He shrugged.

Damian paused.

“I? Lonely? No, I welcome not having to deal with those morons for a whole day. I mean, I might miss Richard and even Cassandra a tiny bit, but on the whole —” Then he realized. “Wilkes.”

“Yeah?”

“Are you just looking for an excuse to spend time with me?”

Colin shrugged again, then smiled.

“ Took you long enough to figure it out, Dames.”

“Oh shut up.”

Damian opened the door, letting Colin pause on his way in to pet the exuberant dogs.

“Come have some tea and scones with Pennyworth and me. I’m just about to crush him at chess.”

The two boys walked back towards the living room together, the dogs trotting at their heels.

“You mean like how you crushed your sister at poker?”

“...You’re lucky I like you enough to let you get away with that remark, Wilkes.”

“Sure, Dames.”

Barbara had been meaning to shower and get changed for the last forty minutes.

Instead, she was frantically on the line with the Justice League, trying to navigate the situation that had just developed.

“What do you mean Luthor incorporated Apokoliptian tech into his animatronic suits?”

“Exactly that!” There was a loud explosion on the other end.

“Don’t talk back to me, Cyborg, just explain.”

Victor grunted in exertion, with a noise like the world’s largest paper shredder followed by a burst of sound — his sonic cannons.

“You know last month when Guy got stranded on Apokolips after Booster Gold ‘borrowed’ Barda’s mother box for a prank, and then accidentally brought back that parademon he was fighting with him
“Luthor got ahold of the parademon and used its armor to reinforce his robotics?”

“Bingo.”

“God fucking damn it.”

“My thoughts exactly. There are five of Luthor’s suits against four of the League, and none of our big guns are responding to their coms or their cells. I even called Superman’s land line. Who the hell still has a land line?”

“Don’t expect any backup from the Bats or the Birds,” she sighed. “Alright, between the two of us, we might be able to remotely gain control of the suits if you can establish a connection —”

Her cell phone rang.

“Um... Victor, can you hold for a minute?”

“What —? Ugh, fine. In the meantime, I’ll try to get a connection with the lead suit, if the newbie Lanterns don’t wreck everything first.”

Making a mental note to call Simon and Jessica later and tell them about more refined fighting techniques, Barbara grabbed her cell phone.

“Dick, if this is about our date —”

“It is, but... ugh, I’m so sorry.” Police sirens wailed down his end of the line. “I just got done with my casework, but now we have a gunmen-and-hostages situation downtown. I’m on my way now; they think it’s gonna be at least two hours until we can get it contained.”

Her heart sank into her gut; her throat seeming to fill with lead.

At least two hours.

She looked at the time. It was already twenty to six. And now that she thought about it, two hours was probably less than how long it would be until she could get the various other heroes’ circumstances back under control.

“It’s okay,” she managed to say.

“No, I know you planned a nice evening, and now I’m going to miss it.”

“What I meant was, I’m going to be really busy for a while now too. The League and the Birds are all tied up on both ends. I wouldn’t have been able to make it anyway.”

“Oh.”

For a long few moments, all she could hear were the sirens and the faint explosions.

“I guess I’ll see you at home, then.”

“I guess.” She traced her finger over her keyboard. “Bye. Good luck.”

“You too.”
She took a deep breath as she set her phone aside, trying not to let her frustration and disappointment seep into her voice.

At least the girls are okay, she thought. I really do hope they’re having a good time.

She then slowly clicked the channel back open.

“Okay, Cyborg. Are we good to go yet?”

She had expected it to be difficult. Awkward. Peppered with silences where neither knew what to say, or what dynamic they should have.

But the nervous quiet had evaporated in the taxi when Cass had brought up the Titans gossip she’d heard from Tim, along with what the ballerinas were saying in her dance studio, and the two girls had fallen back into their usual flow of conversation.

Which reminded Steph of what she had planned for after dinner, actually.

“You’re making that up!” she crowed with delight, mouth half-full of mashed potatoes.

“Am not,” Cass rebutted, smiling.

“So you heard from Tim who heard from Rose who heard from Cassie who heard it from Miguel who heard it from Kiran who you’re sure saw it with her own eyes? She saw them kissing with her own eyes?”

“Tim says...Kiran saw hands moving, too.”

“Ha!” Steph speared the last of her food. “Who’d’a thunk it? The furry green guy and the weird demon woman. Good for them.”

Cass sipped her water, pretty brown eyes sparkling.

“What I wondered...how do they have...?”

“What, without laughing? I dunno, I guess they have weird kinks about green fur and glowing red eyes.”

Cass snorted out her last sip of water.

Both women were still giggling at the thought when the waiter came back over, a placid smile on his face.

“Excuse me, Miss Wayne, but would you and your friend care for dessert?”

“Dessert?” Steph said at the same time Cass said “Friend?”

They looked at each other, then started laughing again. The waiter kept smiling, but there was a note of bemusement on his face.

“Yes. We will have dessert,” Cass confirmed.
“And try ‘girlfriend,’ buddy,” Steph added.

“‘Girlfriend,’ yes, I understand that the two of you are quite close.”

Steph stifled more sniggers as he took their orders, then walked away. When he was gone, she rolled her eyes.

“Quite close.’ Can you believe it? I mean, I only thought that happened in —”

“So.”

She cut herself off, looking at Cass. The other woman had shrunk in on herself again, fiddling with her napkin.

“Is that...what we are? Girlfriends?”

Steph opened her mouth, then for once, shut it, thinking. She was quiet, serious, pondering how best to answer.

“If that’s what you want.”

Cass lifted her head. For once, she didn’t hesitate.

“Yes.”

The smile threatened to split her face.

Bruce honestly didn’t know what he’d expected.

“You spend a whole month totally clean, helping out around the East End, and then you go rob a jewelry store of ten thousand dollars’ worth of gems? Why?”

Selina looked less than impressed with his frustration, the duffel bag open at her feet while she examined a diamond ring.

“I’ve barely gotten any attention from you since you came back from the not-dead,” she said at last. She tried slipping the ring onto her right fourth finger. “Hmm, no, not my style. Besides, I’d need bigger hands. Look, Bruce —”

“Batman.”

“Bruce,” she repeated blithely. “It’s been most of a year, and nearly all I’ve seen you is through your do-gooding work. A few nights of fun, maybe. But all you seem to want to do these days is punch things and needlessly stress about your children.” She held up a pair of ruby earrings next. “Ooh, these are nice. I’m keeping these.”

“Selina.”

“Killjoy.” She put the earrings back in the bag. “My point is, you need to face the fact that you couldn’t control what happened while you were gone, i.e. that you couldn’t be The Batman, and the fact that your grown-ass kids can make their own decisions. Hmm.” She indicated a sparkling,
multicolored necklace. “Too much?”

“Too much,” he agreed. He paused. “Look Selina, I’m really sorry I’ve been neglecting you, to the point that you felt you needed to rob a store to get my attention. I don’t have any excuses, especially since there hasn’t been anyone else since I came back.”

Something flickered in her eyes.

“I can’t promise that I’ll stop stressing about my job though, or my kids. I care about them too much.”

“You should try telling them that sometimes, instead of making it seem like you don’t trust them to make their own choices.”

“I do trust them. I just don’t want them to get in over their heads or get hurt...again. Their personal sense of responsibility worries me enough, let alone their strange love lives.” He paused. “I care about you, but I care about them too. And apparently, I keep fucking up both of those things.”

She put her hands on her hips.

“Look Bruce, here’s the thing. I’m not your conscience, or your therapist, or one of your acolytes. And I don’t want to be, or only want to talk to you about how you’re fucking up this time. Just...try to be less of a hypocrite, because you literally do all of that too. Be better. Then maybe I won’t need to rob a store to get some time with you.”

“You know I love you...but you’re not cut out to be anyone’s conscience.”

“That’s my boy,” she grinned. She nudged the duffel bag away with her foot, then sauntered up to him. One hand graced up over his armor-clad shoulder; he was reminded very much of their youthful days, having barely first put on the suits. “I love you too. Even if you are ridiculous.”

“I’m not the one in a skintight leather cat suit.”

“I’m not the one dressed up like a flying rodent with a fanny pack.”

“Touché.”

Before he knew it, he was flat on his back on the rooftop with his armor coming off in pieces, his hands in her hair, kissing her.

“Mmmm...Selina?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you still have that ring?”

“I swear I’m not going to keep it. But I was actually thinking you could buy it. Give it to your eldest, for later.”

“What ‘later’ would he need a diamond ring for?”

She only chuckled. He was silent.

“Now let’s stop thinking about your kids.”

Bruce closed his eyes and obliged.
“So...where are we?”

Giddy with excitement, Steph dragged her girlfriend — god, it felt so good to call her that — down the sidewalk, Cass holding one hand over her eyes.

“Open your eyes and see.”

She looked up, and gasped slightly.

Puckett’s Dance Hall, the sign proclaimed. Inside, despite the rather old-fashioned type of establishment it was, there were a couple dozen people inside, swaying and spinning to a beat that the girls could feel even from outside.

“It’s LGBT-friendly, I checked,” Steph continued while Cass stared. “And they play all this jazzy music. Not the sort of stuff I usually listen to, but Babs loves this place; she says she used to come here all the time when she was younger. I know it’s not ballet, but since you love dancing so much I just thought —”

Cass spun and looked her dead in the eyes.

“It’s perfect.”

Steph blinked, then felt her wide smile from earlier return.

“In that case...” She offered her arm. “Lead the way, Miss Wayne.”

Cass took it.

“‘How are we in Bialya?’”

“We got away from the militia squads, and we think we might have enough evidence to convict al-Khinzir.”

“Good. D.C.?”

“Got everything we need, O.”

“Metropolis?”

“Tired, but alive.”

“Copy that. We sent the suits back to the Watchtower, and Luthor’s currently under questioning.”


“All clear, Oracle. Signing off now.”
With a great deal of satisfaction and relief, Barbara pulled off her headset.

It was nearly eight-thirty, and though all was relatively well again, she still had a pounding headache and ravenous hunger accompanying her catharsis.

Grabbing some Tylenol and water from the kitchen on her way, she rolled to the living room and collapsed on the couch, making a quick call before tossing her cell phone on the coffee table. She sighed, setting a pillow behind her head and gulping down the painkillers.

There was a half-hearted stir of movement within her.

“Yeah, I know,” she sighed.

For a few minutes, she lay there in a haze, staring at the ceiling and willing her headache to abate. Then, breaking her out of her reverie, was the sound of a key in the lock.

She instantly sat up, albeit with difficulty, and faced the door just as Dick came in.

He had a small cut on his jaw, and part of his uniform was ripped too. His hair was frazzled, and he practically collapsed against the door frame after shutting it behind him, not bothering to take off his jacket or boots for a minute. But much to her surprise, despite his obvious exhaustion, he had still brought a bouquet with him: a burst of fresh multicolored blooms, standing out against the melting white cap of snow on their plastic wrapping.

“You’re back,” she breathed. Then: “Are you okay?” as he came over, stopping just before the couch.

“Not particularly.” He stretched, the last of the snow falling away from the flowers. “But at least we caught all the bad guys and all the hostages are out safe. You?”

“Same. Everything was sorted out with the League and the Birds, but my head feels like an Amazon in metal boots did a tap-dance on it.”

“Sorry about that. I wish I could’ve been there to help, but...” He shrugged. “Saving people in danger. That’s both our jobs. Besides, you handled it, like you always do.” He offered her the bouquet.

She took it, breathing in the heady sweet scent.

“I’m glad you’re not blaming yourself.” She peered at him over the tops of the flowers. “I’m sorry too. I really did have a nice evening planned, but what with everything that happened...”

“What did you have planned?”

“I had hoped to have a nice dinner with you for one thing, then come back here and have the place fixed up so I could romance you properly, but...” She gestured around at the Tower, which was in its usual state of being. Not dirty or too messy, but still, nothing special. “As you can see, I didn’t even have time to shower.”

Dick sat down next to her; they all but collapsed into each other.

“And I hate that all my plans got ruined,” she sighed. “But I am glad you’re back now. I didn’t think I’d see you until even later.”

He pressed a kiss to her temple. Still holding the flowers close, she leaned in.
“I’m glad to be back. And that we’re both off work.”

“God, tell me about it.” She flexed her shoulders. “If I never have to hear the words ‘Can’t you hack any faster?’ ever again, it’ll be too soon.”

“Your friends are still Luddites, huh?”

“Will they ever not be, is the real question.”

“Heh, and I thought my friends’ geekiness was embarrassing.” He shifted a bit, then began to get up.

“Geekiness is not embarrassing, Grayson, and you will get your ass back over —” Her teasing voice dropped. “Wait, why are you leaving, anyway?”

He stared at her like she was crazy.

“I’m hungry! And there are five boxes of sugary cereal just a room away, so I’ll just be a few minutes —”

“Get back here, Cavities Wonder, I ordered out. If you can wait twenty minutes, you’ll have an actual meal instead of that sugary crap.”

Looking very pleased to no leave, he rejoined her on the couch, dropping his head on her shoulder, nestling in.

“More pizza?”

“Indian, actually. I’m craving spicy food again.”

“You’re always craving spicy food. At the rate you’re going, our kid’s gonna come out breathing fire. They’re going to have to call you Barbara, the Oracle of the House of Gordon, Second of Her Name, Mother of Dragons.”

Barbara burst into raucous laughter.

“And you call your friends geeks!”

“Hey, most of them could recite your whole title off the top of their heads. Between you and me, I think Donna kinda has a crush on Dany.”

“Well, at least the two of you have good taste in women.”

“How true.”

Cass was still giddy from the music and the quick footwork that had come with the last several songs. Swift or a touch slower, with bouncing melodies and bass lines, it really wasn’t anything like her ballet classes, but it was still music, and she still moved to it.

It wasn’t too much of an effort compared to a night on patrol, but she still suspected her brother wasn’t going to want the much-smaller pants or the sweat-in shirt back.
Steph was having some difficulty keeping up, but even with the sheen on her forehead that was starting to take off her makeup, she kept moving by her side.

The energetic tune came to an end, and the dancers paused to take a breather. Steph clutched her sides.

“Wheeze — how you kept up through that last song, I have no idea,” she laugh-gasped, pushing her hair back. Cass’s mouth twitched.

“I am a trained assassin. I can keep up with Aretha.”

“Evidently so — wheeze.” Steph took in one last breath before she recovered.

The lighthearted air might’ve stayed had the faster songs continued, but instead, a slower, softer tune began to play. Around the hall, people began taking gentle hold of their partners’ hands and waists, guiding them in small circles.

Cass felt her face get hot. Her palms began to sweat more.

Steph tossed her hair back and wiped her own palms off on her skirt; it was obvious that she was about to make the first move, about to take her hand.

So that determination morphed into surprise when Cass took her instead, one calloused palm resting against the purple-and-pink-clad waist. The other hand took Steph’s, feeling the old chafe scars around her wrist before their fingers interlocked. Steph, starting to overcome her surprise, placed her remaining hand on her date’s shoulder.

A lone trumpet played out alternating notes, their feet moving in time.

Instead of bending and stepping to the music, they merely swayed in place, eyes locked, somehow even more breathless than before. A man’s voice sang about love; Cassandra wondered if the inches between them had shrunk, the air was so hot. Prompted by the soft melody, the few minutes the old song lasted seemed to stretch further.

Again, Cass read love in the other girl’s face and body. But this time, it was a whole different kind of vulnerability.

So as the last strains of music faded and Cassandra finally kissed her, tasting sweet waxy lipstick and smelling exertion, she wasn’t at all surprised when Stephanie kissed her back.

She was a bit surprised by how many people in the dance hall clapped their approval for the two of them, however.

Breaking apart, their fingers remained interlocked. Everyone was looking at them under the soft yellow lights, the pink lipstick was smudged across their lips and teeth, Steph was red in the face and Cass likewise felt vaguely feverish.

And at the same time, she knew that they were both happy.

It was hardly the most glamorous date she’d ever had.
They had ended up moving from the couch to the bed; nestled under the sheets in their socks and pajamas while eating garlic naan, samosas, saag paneer, and chicken vindaloo straight from the takeout boxes. The flower bouquet had been placed in a vase that now crowned her nightstand. A slew of freezing rain had started outside, drumming against the windows while the heater whirred softly, releasing more crisp warmth into the air. Before them, old episodes of Friends played across the TV screen.

“Are we sure this is the right episode to be watching on Valentine’s Day?”

“Probably not, but c’mon. This episode is iconic.”

“You’ve seen it like twenty times in the twelve years I’ve known you —”

“What’s your point?”

“— and yet you still lose it every time Ross says —”

“Shhh! It’s about to happen!”

Scoffing lightly, Barbara swept her naan around the box, picking up the vindaloo sauce, not taking her eyes off the screen. As always, as soon as “Take thee, Rachel” came from the speakers, Dick shrieked in a mix of outrage and excitement. Luckily, he’d already swallowed his most recent mouthful of saag paneer.

“Those two are a mess.”

“Yeah, I don’t get why people like them so much. Monica and Chandler are a way better couple.”

She threw up her hands in vindication.

“Right!?”

The volume went down on the TV while the two of them continued to discuss the pros and cons of various sitcom couples. The numbers crept along the clock while they remained lost in the bubble of conversation and good food; they were a third of the way through the season by the time they realized they’d eaten everything.

“Okay, so we’re in agreement that Jim and Pam, Jake and Amy, and Ben and Leslie are top-tier, right?”

“Yeah, but April and Andy are up there too.”

“True.”

“...”

“...Did we forget Captain Holt and Kevin?”

“Oh my god, we did. And we’re supposed to be detectives. We failed the legacy of the Bat.”

“He taught us nothing after all. We might as well become Green Lanterns.”

“I’ll give you ten bucks to try and trick him into thinking we were given Lantern rings. But in all seriousness, you’d make a hell of a good Green Lantern. I’m more of a Blue, though, maybe Red on a bad day.”
“Nope.” She smiled. “And I swear, this has nothing to do with being able to pull off Carol’s outfit...you’d be a Star Sapphire.”

He pondered the idea.

“You sure? I haven’t had the best track record with love.”

“I’m sure. My track record with it’s been worse, and yet the Batgirls still took my advice on it to heart.” She crumpled up her dirty napkins. “So maybe we’re both better at it than we think.”

“In that case: who needs proper romancing when we have Indian food and sitcoms on a Tuesday night? We’ve never had anything happen properly as long as we’ve known each other, anyway.”

The empty boxes were set on the floor to be thrown out in the morning, the TV finally switched off. As the two of them settled in together, the icy rain outside slowed to a steady patter, keeping in time with the heater’s humming. The room smelled like rose and lavender.

She fell and remained asleep easily, her last thought before drifting off was of the rest of the Wayne family, and her hope that they too had fared well that day.

Chapter End Notes

I personally imagine that Steph and Cass slow-danced to Louis Armstrong’s version of “La Vie En Rose.” And the same note, since music was involved in this chapter, I made a short playlist for it: https://open.spotify.com/user/stormy-ella/playlist/2KraMFnDsIT72pBt8vplE?si=ps39warYQ3yxWMZwlpwOA

If you don’t want to listen to it though, you can do what I did while writing this and listen to old jazz and Taylor Swift’s discography on loop instead.
Happy New Year!

To celebrate, have my specialty: feels and humor in the same place.

Also, you guys do remember what Selina stole in the last chapter and that Bruce bought for Dick, right? Good. Hold on to that.

(Warnings: sexist language and mentions of child death)

**Temperance (Tarot):** Upright — Balance, moderation, patience, purpose, meaning. Reversed — Imbalance, excess, lack of long-term vision.

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**March**

He hadn’t expected this to go anything like the way it did.

The abandoned office building had once belonged to a branch of Wayne Enterprises; the Electronics branch, actually, before it had been moved downtown to provide jobs for poorer citizens. The building was slated for demolition in May, with yellow tape across every entrance and old security cameras that still ran live back to Wayne Tower.

Or at least, they were supposed to.

Jack Leavey felt the wrongness of this all in his throat as he crept from the elevator across the thirteenth floor. Plaster had fallen away from the ceiling in chunks like broken teeth from a diseased mouth; a thick layer of powder now covering the formerly blue carpet. The fluorescent lights barely worked; not a flicker of electricity had been diverted from any surrounding buildings, so as not to draw suspicion. Upon checking his phone, Jack realized that it wasn’t picking up any hotspots, so either Python had no Wi-Fi network set up (unlikely), or he had built his own hotspot and somehow managed to mask it.

Jack, who had little knowledge of technology beyond unlocking the defrosting option on his microwave, felt the sense of wrongness swell until his windpipe felt congested. He had done good work in retrieving Nightwing’s com for his new boss, and he genuinely did not care one way or another what happened to the Bats, but himself? It was one thing to receive orders from a faceless
entity on the internet, and quite another to meet the boss face to face.

Plastic wrap over a broken window fluttered. He shivered.

*Turn left at the end of the hall.*

He faced a steel door. A keypad sat squarely on the wall next to the handle.

Jack’s hands shook as he reached out.

0-9-2-3-8-7.

The handle clicked beneath his fingers.

As he pushed the door open, scenarios flickered through his head. A monstrous hulk like Bane or Killer Croc, a shadowy half-human costume like Scarecrow’s, an acid-bright grinning maniac like the Joker, hands dripping with fresh blood and a gun pointed —

“Took you long enough, idiot.”

Jack blinked in surprise.

There were several other men in the room. Most resembled less ordinary people and more six-foot Rottweilers with switchblades and handguns. These men hung back at the corner of the room, waiting for something to do. Jack did not like the way several of them instantly looked at him as he came in. One man looked more like him, somewhat more diminutive, kneeling beside a wall as he bolted down...metal shackles?

The last man looked like he’d been made out of dandelion wisp. He was slim and slight, with fluffy yellow-white hair and skin that was so pale it was nearly translucent. A computer bag hung over his shoulder, but otherwise he could’ve faded into any crowd.

Jack could hardly believe at first that this was the mysterious Python...

...Until the man turned his steely gray gaze upon him, and he immediately wondered if the money was worth feeling like a mouse under the stare of a predator.

“I’m here now, boss. Reporting for duty.”


Before Jack could blink, he had been gathered into the circle. Men, eager for money, eager for blood, breathless with anticipation for what their boss was about to say.

Python, for his part, was clearly enjoying their rapture.

“I suppose you all wonder why I’ve chosen to reveal my face to you; to meet you personally. I assure you, it has nothing to do with being impressed with any of your debating skills.”

One of the slower men chuckled, unaware that the joke was at his expense.

“Before I tell you why, I will ask you two questions. First, how many of you have ever been inconvenienced by the Bat and his brats?”

Everyone raised their hands.
“I thought so. Second...how many of you have ever been frustrated by an uncompromising woman?”

The hands remained in the air.

Python smiled. Though it was less of a smile and more of a baring of teeth.

“I have both of those problems. Batman himself has irked everyone for too long, and that heinous cunt he has whispering in his ear is known as the most powerful hacker in the world. I think we’d all be better off without either of them and with a tidy sum in our bank accounts, don’t you? Now, my plan to get rid of them will have to involve face-to-face contact with at least of the brats, and all of your involvement. It should be quite cathartic for you to get your hands on one of the former Robins.”

Most of them began to look pleased, nodding their agreements, uncaring of the rest of the details.

Jack, however, was slightly confused.

“Sir, by ‘that heinous cunt’ do you mean...Oracle? I...I thought Oracle was a man.”

“For once Leavey, you are proving more than an idiot. Most outside the community of imbecilic do-gooders in tights think Oracle’s a man, if not a computer program. I myself thought she was a man for years; that level of skill and influence...But she’s a woman.” The unpleasant smile twisted even more unpleasantly into a sneer. “And she’s in love with the Bat’s eldest brat.”

Jack suddenly realized why Python had needed Nightwing’s com...and he had delivered it to him. If he was lucky, and kept playing his cards right, there might be another payoff for being such a vital part of the plan.

Suddenly immune to the disparaging attitude, Jack stood a little taller.

“Do you all see what I’m getting at? I refuse to repeat myself for your sakes.”

Everyone nodded. It was the only right answer.

“Good. Now, I only have a couple more months to carry out my plan, so speed is of the essence. If all of you keep working diligently and your mouths shut, I shall keep you well paid and in one piece. Am I understood?”

Jack’s brain suddenly flashed the picture he’d seen in the news of the fifteen-year-old boy, the second Robin’s doppelgänger, who’d been beaten to a pulp, presumably by the man standing before him. He pushed it down and away.

“Good. Now we can begin.”

Red Robin might not have technically needed a warrant to break into a man’s home, but if Drew didn’t know that the Bats were on to who he was, he would definitely be tipped off should a nosy neighbor spot one of them poking around.

Thus, a new strategy had to be put into order.

“So, Mr. Driver —”
“Draper.” Tim did his best to slouch over further.

“Right.” The man at the apartment complex’s front desk looked considerably less than impressed.

“Mr. Drew never mentioned having any nephews.”

“Uncle Avery doesn’t talk about me much.”

“I can see why.”

Breaking out the tracksuit again had been bad enough. But the amount of gel in his slicked-back hair felt like he was wearing some kind of space helmet, the sunglasses during the foggy March day made it hard to see anything, and he’d crossed a personal line in digging through Bruce’s stash of Matches Malone gear to obtain the chain necklace he was wearing.

_Nobody on Earth could pull off this outfit._

Should the clerk kick him out, as seemed likely, he’d have to break in the old-fashioned way. But Tim would really, really prefer to do this with minimal suspicion.

“Y’see here, my dad and I were in town, and we thought we’d leave Uncle Avery his birthday present while we’re here. We know how shy he is, so coming by while he was in just wasn’t gonna work, y’know?”

“If that’s true, young man, I’m going to need to speak to your father.”

Tim froze up.

“I see. Well, if your father’s not here —”

“Lay off my boy, buddy; I’m here.”

Both Tim and the clerk started.

Striding into the lobby was a youngish man wearing a long ratty black weave, even worse sunglasses than “Alvin Draper’s,” his police-issued gun on his hip, rings on every finger, and...were those gold plates on his teeth?

If Tim weren’t so shocked, he would’ve burst out laughing.

The clerk, for his part, looked like his eyes were about to pop out of his head.

“I know what you’re thinkin’,” Dick continued. “I don’t look like I could be his daddy. Well, firstly, Alvin here gets his looks from the Drew side of the family. Secondly, I was pretty young when I made ‘im. His mama and I were thirteen, and her dad told her to stay away from me —”

“Aw Jesus, dad, not this shit again,” Tim whined.

“Shut up, it’s a beautiful story. Kids like you make bad grades and joints when they’re thirteen. I made you.”

“Yeah, and I wish you hadn’t.”

“Well now you sound like your grandpa.”

The clerk made a noise that was halfway between a cleared throat and a whimper.
“Oh yeah, right.” Dick flashed a fake ID. “See, now that it’s all cleared up and y’know I’m his dad, let us go leave his uncle his present.”

The poor man nodded.

“There ya go. Was that so hard?”

The second the elevator door closed behind them, Tim started laughing so hard he had to support himself on the handrail.

“What’s so funny?” Dick’s grin was made considerably worse than usual by the gold plates.

“You — look like — a pimp!” he choked out. “But like — a really cheap pimp — who sells tainted drugs on the side. Where the hell did you get that wig from?”

“The undercover-costume trunk at the station.”

“Figures.”

His brother lightly poked him in the ribs, still unperturbed.

“Hey, leave the BHPD out of this. Besides, your outfit’s no better. Pretty sure you could incapacitate a major supervillain with all the gel in your hair — and with the amount of Axe you’re wearing.”

“At least I’m not wearing fake tattoos on my knuckles. Dess and Troy, really? I hope Barbara didn’t see you like this, or she’s not gonna be able to have sex with you for like, a month, without cracking up.” He finally calmed down slightly, and something occurred to him. “But how did you know I’d be going undercover like this? And...how did you know I’d need backup? I’m surprised you even took a break from the planning and set-up for this afternoon in the first place.”

Dick shrugged.

“Steph told me you were scoping out Drew’s apartment undercover. And she was giggling so much when she said it, I could pretty easily guess which persona you were using.” He paused. Something about his body language changed; he suddenly looked more awkward. “And after that...well, Alfred has what’s left for this afternoon covered, and I just wanted to make sure we get the evidence we need.”

“Well, I’m perfectly capable of getting evidence on my own —”

“And I wanted to spend some time with you again, Tim.”

Tim’s brain seemed to screech to a resounding halt.

Before he could think of a reply, the elevator dinged, and the two of them were thrust out into the hallway, Drew’s apartment door swiftly coming up in front of them.

Dick pulled a rod of metal with a slightly curved edge from his pocket before shimmying it into the lock. A little bit of jiggling, and the door clicked open.

Tim knew by then that most criminals’ apartments didn’t only consist of bloody tools, bare wooden interiors, and convenient lists that were titled My Evil Plan, but he was still taken aback when he saw Drew’s apartment.

“That...is one small Fleshlight on the floor there.”
Dick didn’t even agree with his initial reaction; he was too busy staring in shock.

Most of the apartment looked fairly innocuous, but the walls were absolutely papered with pictures of their family; cut out from old newspapers, printed from the internet, amateurish snapshots processed by photo shops. The oldest were from nearly eighteen years ago; nine-year-old Dick and Bruce with far fewer lines on his face. The most recent looked like it had been taken during Tim’s and Cass’s most recent patrol together the previous week.

He felt his body grow cold.

His brain began to tick.

The door swung softly shut behind them, but neither noticed. Both brothers approached the the other side of the apartment.

Dick came to a halt and stared at the pictures. Tim began to examine the surrounding area, peering around, opening —

A crowbar.

He felt vaguely sick as he stared into the drawer. The crowbar was clearly old, blunt on both sides.

His hands trembled; he took out a blacklight and shined it on both sides.

Blood.

“Why didn’t he dispose of the one murder weapon he used himself?” he murmured. “A trophy? Did he really think we wouldn’t be able to track him down, find out his identity? Babs said he had a problem with pride —”

He trailed off, then looked back at his brother.

Dick seemed to have frozen. His gaze was fixed on the pictures of his family upon the killer’s wall; his knuckles turning white as his hands turned inwards. Tim wasn’t afraid for himself, he hadn’t feared for his own life in a long time, but as protective rage began to manifest on his brother’s face, he was still cold with anger and worry of his own.

“Dick,” he said quietly. “You knew before now that he had it out for us. This isn’t a surprise.”

“I know that.” His voice seethed with barely-controlled emotion. “But there’s a difference between knowing it and seeing it. After all these months of this animal being out there, I’m so sick of it, I’m —”

Tim caught his arm before he could hit the wall.

“Stop,” he grunted, struggling to restrain the older man, “you won’t do us any favors by letting him know someone’s been snooping around in his house.”

After a few seconds he let his arm loose, but Dick didn’t hit the wall. He just let out a long half-growl, half-sigh through his teeth.

“You always were the smart one.”

Tim scoffed quietly, masking it with a laugh.

“Yep, I’m the genius. Look, can you take some pictures of the...crowbar, maybe a couple with the
blacklight on it? And then the wall? I’m gonna look around; see if I can find a computer or phone or something to search through.”

He hadn’t quite calmed down, per se, but Tim was at least glad he could take his brother’s mind off his worry and let him focus on the job.

In their line of work, personal hang-ups could be killers. Literally.

Barbara was lost in her work.

She was counting on physical evidence from Tim for the murder of Pedro Di Nero, since Fisher’s personal belongings had been lost upon Jason’s killing of him — including his phone and computer. The restored security tapes confirmed that he was the only one in Kelly Nolan’s apartment between when she was last seen and when she was found dead.

But for the bombing and the attempt on Dinah’s life, she needed the emails he had sent. The ones that he had gone back and erased.

Her passcode had to work. But she would have to do some more digging to recover the emails from the abyss of the internet.

She settled in, her fingers beginning to fly over the keys.

Outside her window, the swirling snow had finally been replaced by fat bullets of rain. It drummed against the chrome and glass; the tower’s massive clock face dripping with water, like it was crying.

Barbara shrugged further into the blanket she’d wrapped around her shoulders. The baby seemed to stretch and fidget inside her; as if she weren’t the only one dissatisfied with her circumstances.

“Soon,” she muttered, not certain who she was talking to. “Just give me time.”

But she knew that time was something she had a shortage of. Every day an enemy of hers was out on the streets, someone she loved was in danger. She doubted Drew had a specific person in mind at that point, but someone nonetheless. Simultaneously, she was due in early May, her C-section scheduled a little past the beginning of the month.

Everything rode on winter’s ending.

She stared at the screen, eyes watering slightly with exposure.

*As long as everything else, the personal stuff, stays controllable, I can handle this. As long as nothing major throws a wrench in the works, I can get through the time limit.*

In the meantime, she had a call to make. Though she could’ve carried out her next plan without the call, she figured it would be a good idea to be certain she had Lucius’ and the other Foxes’ permission before she went through with it.
With his brother’s best camera in shaking hands, Dick took pictures of the apartment. The photos of his family, god knows how long an obsession curated upon the walls. The crowbar, the innocent teenager’s blood still speckled upon it.

Tim came back into the room, grim-faced.

“No phone or computer; he must’ve taken it with him, wherever he is now. But I did find this.” He held up a small thumb drive. “Give me a minute, and I can get whatever’s on it onto my phone.” He then pulled a small wire, unique in that it would fit a phone, and began the downloading.

Dick lowered the camera, looking at the pictures again with his own eye and not the machine’s.

He could live with knowing that Drew had his own pictures upon those walls. But his family...?

Damian, Bruce, Cass, Selina, Tim, Kate, Steph, Jason.

Python would want someone to pay for loving Oracle, just like he wanted her to pay. It was bad enough that she was at risk, but any one of the others could be too, and he had no idea who else that psychopath wanted.

“We can’t take the crowbar with us yet, either,” he said hoarsely. “That’ll likely tip him off that we were in his apartment. He might be tempted to move up the timetable of his plans.”

Tim looked up, startled.

“Yeah.”

He quickly averted his eyes again, fiddling with the loose wire. Dick approached him.

“Tim, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you earlier.”

“You’re my brother.” He still wouldn’t look at him. “I know you were mad at him, for me; that you’re not going to hurt me.”

The slight pull of guilt became a sharp twist. The feelings welled up; threatening to spill out again.

“We need to get back to the Manor,” his younger brother declared, taking the camera and stowing his machines. “They’re gonna need us there, especially you —”

“Tim, I’m so, so sorry.”

The professional mask broke to reveal shock.

“I should’ve apologized to you long ago, but god, I’m sorry.” Dick fell to his knees, looking up at Tim’s astonished expression. “I know what I did, giving Robin away, was right for Damian, but I should’ve considered more how you’d be affected, especially right after losing so many people you love. I shouldn’t have dismissed you, or your theory about Bruce still being alive. I hurt you, I —”

“Dick.” Tim’s voice was seconds from breaking.

“— I was wrong.” He took a deep, shuddering breath. “And we’ve been avoiding that for too long. You’re my brother too. I miss you. And I don’t want to lose you for good.”

Tim drew back slightly.

For a few long seconds, he didn’t respond. The two of them, in their ridiculous disguises, one
standing and one on his knees in the middle of a perp’s apartment, surrounded by evidence of how dangerous being there was. Silent, waiting for something to happen.

“I don’t want to lose you either.”

It was so quiet, Dick almost thought that he’d imagined it.

Then Tim drew back in on himself, almost seeming to fold back.

“We really do need to go.”

“Tim —”

But the words died in his throat as in the distance, footsteps seemed to sound down the hall. Dick shot to his feet, the two brothers staring at each other in shock.

“Window.”

In a flash, they’d hauled across the room and the window open, quietly shutting it behind them and leaping down the fire escape —

— taking the stairs several at a time —

— coming to a landing, rolling off the concrete and nearly running headlong into the opposite building. Tim stumbled forward the last few steps and fell against a collection of trash cans.

clatterCRASH!

An alley cat yowled and scampered off.

Dick darted forward, frantic, as Tim lay stunned among the broken trash bags. For a moment, his brother just stared at him.

“I’m not going to be able to reuse this outfit, am I?”

The moment broke, and Dick actually laughed, albeit with a slight sob. Despite that he was still sitting in garbage, Tim smiled a little bit.

The bank statements went back some years, to the exact date where Drew had first falsified them. Lucius’ history was as clean as could be, not a single incident that could be interpreted as embezzlement or bribery, even to the most suspicious of eyes.

An anonymous leak to social media and the press had done the damage to the Foxes’ reputation. Another anonymous leak would definitely get the public’s attention again, even if she was yet unable to restore what had been stolen from the family.

It was a drastic plan, and under different circumstances, an invasion of privacy. But everyone who relied on Batman needed Wayne Enterprises functioning at full capacity, and for that, she needed people to trust the company’s CEO and his decisions.

She smiled grimly as she hit the last key. She’d like to see WE’s board of directors try to find
something wrong with her records.

It went to the local news agencies.

It was sent to her father.

It uploaded to social media.

Her phone beeped.

And immediately started trending? Not bad.

Barbara tapped another few keys.

“This just in: we’ve received a complete documentation of the accused Lucius Fox’s bank records, undermining several months’ earlier accusation of corruption and embezzlement. Mr. Fox was previously under investigation from the GCPD, along with many calls from both his company and the public to retire, due to such alleged criminal behavior. However, this new source seems to call these allegations into question, most likely proving Mr. Fox’s innocence —”

Barbara closed the window, her smile becoming genuine. It sounded like a different kind of phone call to the Foxes was now in order.

The two brothers had hoped to sneak in through the Manor up to the bathrooms, then get showered and changed before anyone could see them.

The flash off Stephanie’s phone rather put the kibosh on that plan.

Both of them flinched, then jumped around as the light went off.

Unfortunately, no villains had snuck into the Manor; instead it was just their sister and her girlfriend, giggling hysterically as Steph fired off another round of photographs.

“Do not make that a meme!”

“No promises,” Steph snickered, pocketing the phone again. “You two look like the nineties gone worse. Sure brings back memories of Tim’s early teens and Dick’s early twenties, eh?”

“It was a phase!”

“Bruce says...that’s not what you said then,” Cass told her older brother.

Both of them were already dressed, Cass in black slacks and a yellow silk blouse, Steph in a turquoise scarf and magenta dress. They also had their arms around each other’s waists, Dick noted with a burst of satisfaction, and seemed just as happy in each other’s presence as always. It almost made up for the photos.

“Honestly, I’ve never been to one of these, even for myself,” Steph told the men as she noticed them taking in their outfits. “So I don’t know what to wear, just kind of drifted to one of my favorite outfits. I was gonna ask you guys if you thought it looked okay for the occasion, but now I think I’m gonna ask Jason.”
“Jason’s responsible for the Red Hood helmet that looked like a strawberry push pop, remember?”

“That’s not what I thought it looked like,” Dick muttered.

“...You know what, I think I’m gonna go ask Alfred.”

“Wise move.”

“Now you two...get changed. Or you...Barbara will regret the events that...”

“Led to us needing one of these in the first place?”

“Yes.”

Dick sighed.

“It’s the hair, isn’t it? It’s too much. Or is it the teeth? Which is it, the hair or the teeth?”

The girls just snickered.

“It’s the tattoos,” Tim told him.

“I thought so.”

Barbara clicked the call through as she went back to her screens.

“Oracle here.”

“Hey, honey.”

“Dinah?” She paused, fingers an inch from the keyboard. “I thought you were off-duty for the week.”

“I am. Just thought I’d check in, see how everything’s going.”

“Well, is everything going okay with you?”

“Oh, hell yeah. I’ve made arrangements to go see Sin in July.” The happiness in her friend’s voice was almost tangible. “Connor, Mia, and the rest of my kids are all doing great. The women and girls I teach at the dojo are fantastic too, though some of them are still nervous to hit me. I keep having to restrain myself from telling them that I’ve been hit by intergalactic dictators and world-class assassins; their little love taps aren’t gonna hurt me.”

Barbara chuckled.

“Well, y’know, I wish I weren’t so rushed with this Python case, it’s stressful, but everything else is okay. My kids are getting better. My relationship’s going — actually, it’s going really well. Surprisingly well. Library overdue fees are up, though.”

“Ain’t that always the way.” There was a noise like car brakes in the background; a brief pause. Then an odd inflection entered Dinah’s voice. “How’s the kiddo?”
He kicked at that moment, as if aware he was being talked about.

“Doing just fine, according to the doctor. And about to have a fantastic godmother.”

“Well, now you’ve brought this on yourself.” The odd inflection was still there, but Dinah’s voice was warm too. “If I’m going to be his godmother, I have no choice but to spoil him.”

“I quiver with fear.”

Abruptly, there was a garble of a male voice in the background of Dinah’s end of the line; cursing at traffic.

“Um...that wasn’t one of your boyfriends, was it?”

“Ha ha. No, I’m in a taxi. Hang on, I’m gonna roll up the partition, this guy swears worse than Barda.”

“...And that by itself begs the question: why are you in a taxi? I know you have your BMW in Star.”

She was quiet for a few moments.

“You’re just too smart sometimes, you know that?”

“Dinah...”

“Fine. I’m in Gotham; just got off the plane. I was going to surprise you again.”

“Oh.” Barbara sat back, the beginnings of a smile on her face. “Well. I’ll roll out the couch.”

“Um, no need for that just yet. I have a few errands to run here before I come over.”

“Errands, like, your fist has an errand with local crime’s face?”

“Exactly.” Dinah sounded considerably relieved. “So forgive me if I can’t get around to the spoiling just yet.”

“You’re forgiven. I’ll see you soon. Call me when you’re on your way, okay?”

“Gotcha. I plan for this visit to be a bit less eventful than the last one.”

“One can only hope,” Barbara murmured as her friend’s caller ID vanished from the screen.

The taxi pulled up in front of Wayne Manor with a wet crunch of gravel.

Holding her jacket up over her head against the rain, Dinah shoved a handful of bills at the driver before one-handedly hauling her suitcase out of the back and marching up the driveway to the door.

Alfred, of course, didn’t look surprised to see her.

“We’ve been expecting you, Miss Dinah.”

“I’d hope so. Is anyone else here yet?”
“For now, just the family and Miss Stephanie. The others have yet to arrive.”

“A fiver says Wally’s gonna be the last one here again.”

“You can keep your ‘fiver,’ Miss Dinah.”

Grinning, she made her way into the entrance hall, depositing her suitcase and wet jacket. Bruce and his family were hardly her first interaction with billionaires, but the Queens were new money. The Waynes were as old money as an American family could be; the house reflecting that in its antique mahogany furniture, Han dynasty vases, ostentatious marble and velvet on the floors and walls, Louis XVI chandeliers, and, of course, the scowling oil portraits of family members long dead that graced every floor of the house, and who furrowed their brows exactly like Bruce did.

As her boot heels clicked against the stone floor, she didn’t envy him, growing up in this big old place all alone.

The thought barely had time to occur to her before another of the Waynes popped up before her.

“Lance,” Damian greeted her coolly, his sketchbook in hand. He was dressed like a miniature art student in his black jeans and turtleneck, and in many ways a far cry from his ancestors upon the walls.

“Kid. You dressing up for the occasion?”

“You didn’t.”

“I just came off an airplane, and I’m about to get changed.” She bent down until she was eye-level with him. “Don’t you want to show your support for your big brother and the person he loves?”

Damian stared her down for a good few seconds, before he sighed loudly.

“You’re manipulating me, but you’re also right.”

“Glad to hear it.” She straightened back up, ruffling his hair and ignoring the grumbles that came with it.

Wayne Manor was far better, in her opinion, for each of the people that had occupied it in the last eighteen years.

(No matter how weird and dysfunctional they were.)

Something might be wrong with his apartment.

The cleaning lady had sworn she’d heard a noise within his apartment when she’d come down the hallway earlier, but the door was still locked when he entered, the window still tamped down.

He approached the far wall. The dust hadn’t been disturbed from the photographs, none of the furniture had been moved or changed.

He moved to the yellow plastic kitchen table, then picked up his thumb drive from exactly where he’d left it.
Drew sighed with slight relief. Nothing was out of place. Nothing had been moved or disturbed. That idiotic woman had likely just been hearing things again. Or maybe her English was still poor enough that she hadn’t gotten the very clear meaning of “only bother me if it’s an emergency.”

He made a mental note to complain to the superintendent about her, before delicately removing his computer from its case. He had no time to think about menial worries; he had a plan to carry out.

Almost unconsciously, he then reached for the thumb drive, stroking his finger over it. His bank account details, and the ill-gotten fortune within that account, was still safe.

Quite a small crowd had gathered around the living room; even if Tim were not a detective he could’ve noticed that.

As it was, he carefully propped up his computers on the coffee table, quickly tapping in a message to two different accounts:

*Half an hour.*

Before he could straighten up, he became very aware of two shadows being cast upon him.

“Hello, Dick. Hello, Dinah.”

“That kid really is a detective. How did he do that?”

“Deductive reasoning and logic.” Tim turned around, coming face to face — or rather, face to shoulder — with two pairs of blue eyes, a cascade of bleach-blond hair, and his brother’s familiar smile.

“If it were Bruce or Jason with you, the footsteps would’ve been heavier. If it were Damian, it would’ve been accompanied by commentary. If it were Cass, he wouldn’t have noticed anyone with you at all. If it were Steph, he would’ve definitely noticed about a minute previously. And if it were Kate, she wouldn’t have stopped here, she would keep going on to the spring rolls Alfred’s laying out right now,” Dick translated. “As for you, Dinah: your perfume. It’s very distinctive.”

She whistled in appreciation. It was much louder and sharper than the average whistle.

“Hey, leave what I do some mystery,” Tim protested lightly, getting to his feet. “It’s the only thing I got going for me.”

“Are you shitting me? Kid, you took down *Ra’s al Ghul*, my one of many crazy exes,” Dinah pointed out. “There aren’t a lot of eighteen-year-olds who can say that, no matter who their mentor is.”

As usual, the heart of the compliment whistled right over Tim’s head.

“I’m sorry, Ra’s al Ghul is your *what now*?”

“Not the point,” Dick interrupted, which made Tim guess that he had already been told the story. He made a mental note to ask Barbara about it later. “C’mon, Timmy. You’re one of the best, everyone knows that.”
Tim wondered how much of that Dick actually meant, and how much was him laying it on thick because he was desperate to repair their relationship.

But at the same time, his lack of trust and self-esteem was warring with an answering desire to curl up and bask in his brother’s praise, because, damn it, he wanted to repair their relationship too.

“Thanks Dick,” he finally said, inserting some cheer into his voice. “That’s me, best at puzzles, best at leading the League of Assassins, best at needing mental help...well, okay, maybe I’m not the best at that last one, but I’m up there.”

Poor Dick clearly had no idea how to respond to that. Dinah patted him sympathetically on the shoulder.

“This one’s on you, sweetie. I’m gonna go snag champagne and appetizers with Helena before the guest of the hour shows up.”

She left the brothers in a few seconds of silence.

“I guess using bad humor to cope is a staple in our family.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that in a lot of them, not just us. And Jason thinks he’s original.”

“Original? Original? Jason stole multiple peoples’ looks and names, and more importantly, two of my best friends! And my ex-fiancée!”

Tim actually chortled.

“Not surprised about that last one, your friends are a scream. Actually, wanna go hang out with them?” he said, still trying to sound semi-cheerful. “I’d like to get to know them better. Though um, Roy’s kinda out for the moment, I saw him and Jason, speaking of which, sneak off ten minutes ago.”

Dick scoffed affectionately, and some more of the tension melted.

“Some things never change.”

He rested a hand on Tim’s shoulder, and he didn’t start or shy away.

“C’mon. I never introduced you to Donna, did I?”

They walked off together.

Barbara was finishing off her routine checks when her cell phone started ringing. Much to her surprise, this time, one of the Foxes was calling her.

She picked up. The incessant drum of the rain had begun to peter off, slowing to a drizzle.

“Luke, I appreciate the recognition, but you don’t need to thank me again,” she said gently. “I’m only doing my job.”

“Yeah, but now my dad can do his without half the city up his ass.” Luke’s voice was a steady,
controlled rumble, but in the background, Barbara could’ve sworn she heard whispers and giggles. “And uh, that’s actually not what I called you about.”

“Yes, I do think the company can spare you Batman Inc’s prototype mechanical suit.”

“You do!? — I mean, that’s not it either.” He cleared his throat. Someone on his end definitely giggled. “My family’s having a celebratory lunch over at the Manor with the Waynes. We’d all love for you to join us.”

“We’? The others put you up to this, huh?”

“Why would they —”

“They know that usually when someone interrupts me when I’m working, they get snapped at. But they do not know that I’m on to them this time.”

“Damn it,” someone muttered on the other end.


“I should’ve known they were pranking me. Look Barbara, if you’re really too busy you don’t have to come —”

The reaction was instantaneous; Barbara actually had to jerk her phone away from her ear.

“NO!”

“LUKE NO!”

“Dude, we need her, remember?”

She was instantly suspicious, raising her eyebrow as there was a slight scuffle on the other end.

“Sorry about that. No, but seriously, you do need to come.”

“Why?” she demanded. “What’s really going on?”

“It’s like I told you, Barbara, it’s a celebratory lunch.” His voice was completely sincere, and she suspected he was telling the truth. But she also suspected it wasn’t the whole truth.

“Luke, I really do have a lot of work.”

“We all know that. But you’re gonna want to be at this lunch.”

She deliberated for a few moments, flicking the cap of her pen.

“You’re terrible at keeping secrets. Did anyone ever tell you that?”

“My family, all the time. But luckily, they already know about all you Bat-people.”

She couldn’t help grinning as she hung up.
Though clouds still hung low over the outskirts of the city, the rain had stopped by the time she pulled into the driveway. Loosening her jacket, she rolled up to the front door and rang the bell.

No reply.

Her eyebrows shot up.

Her spare key rattled the ancient lock, and the wet rubber of her wheels squeaked against the marble floor of the foyer. At she made her way down the entrance hall, towards the living room and dining room on either side of each other, the house was almost eerily silent.

That is, aside from the familiar sound of whispers and giggles from the apparently-empty living room.

Her smile grew; briefly becoming a grimace as she recalled the painfully awkward birthday party they’d attempted to throw for her...but September already felt like a lifetime away.

“Well, Dick’s birthday isn’t for another week and a half, so I don’t know what you guys are doing,” she called from the hall, “but I do know you’re there. Celebratory lunch, huh?”

The living room was still a few feet away, the door only slightly ajar, so she unfortunately didn’t get to see their faces. She did savor their brief moment of embarrassed quiet, though.

“Should we even bother trying to pull one over her anymore?” sighed...wait, was that Wally?

“That kid’s going to have a hard time lying to her about why he hasn’t done his homework.” Definitely Helena.

“Uh, technically though, Luke didn’t lie,” Tam, yes, that was Tam, called from the living room. “This lunch is celebratory.”

“But it’s not related to business in any way.”

Barbara finally made the last few feet and pushed the door open...

To be greeted by a veritable color explosion of balloons and streamers and long party tables laden with food and boxes, and, most importantly, a couple dozen beaming people; some holding those boxes and some instead getting right on Bruce’s expensive champagne.

“SURPRISE!” they all shouted in unison, and her eyes adjusted enough to take in everyone...

...The family, all of them standing together, and this time Damian only looked slightly annoyed about his dress shirt. The four other original Titans, with grins on their faces and paper party hats on their heads. The Foxes, Tam and Luke and Lucius taking it in stride, while Tanya and Tiffany looked more than a little bemused. Her father and Sarah, looking as proud as parents could be. On the coffee table, two Skype lines displayed on each of Tim’s computers, showing the rest of the former Titans, and all rest of the Birds of Prey, save for three. Dinah, Helena, Zinda, even Ted, standing next to Dick, all with the biggest smiles on their faces.

“Not that it’s much of a surprise anymore,” Damian pointed out, fidgeting with his cuffs.

In a blur of red, Wally materialized next to her and planted a kiss on her cheek.

“How’s the mother of my future godchild doing?”

“Despite myself, I am surprised,” she laughed, pushing her hair from her forehead. “At least by what
this is. You guys...went to all this effort, all this secrecy...to throw me a baby shower?"

“Well...you had not had one yet,” Cass pointed out.

“It was my idea,” Jason interjected.

“Who in the bloody hell ate all the sushi before she even showed up?” came Alfred’s indignant voice from the other room.

“It was my idea!” Dinah exclaimed. “I mean the baby shower, not the sushi.”

Ted looked in the other direction.

Dinah continued:

“Since you’ve been doing so much for everyone in the last month, you really earned something nice for yourself.” The gentle smile on her friend’s face became wicked, and she pounded her fist into her palm. “Y’know, besides whipping that Python guy’s ass. Though we all know that’s gonna be legendary.”

Everyone cheered.

“Hear hear.” Zinda gulped her champagne, before making a face and reaching for a bottle of beer from her purse instead.

Barbara could feel her heart swelling until it felt like it was going to fill her entire chest. Her vision began to mist up.

“You guys...” She cleared her throat, dabbing at her eyes with her knuckles. “You guys are the best teammates and friends and family I could ever ask for.”

The smiles grew wider. Several people ducked their heads.

“I appreciate the sentiment,” Wally teased lightly, though he looked like he was getting a bit teary-eyed himself. “But don’t count your chickens before they’ve all hatched.” He poked her lightly in the stomach. “Wait till my god-baby shows up, then you can make an accurate statement.”

“Your god-baby?” Victor echoed, his voice slightly tinny from the laptop speakers. “So it’s official now?”

“I actually don’t think it is yet.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake,” Roy said loudly, throwing his hands up. “What do they have to do to make it official? Does Dick have to go on bended knee?”

As soon as he said it, Barbara knew exactly what Dick was going to do next, and she had to hide her next laugh behind her hand before anyone else knew what was happening.

She watched him with a mix of exasperation and affection as he dramatically threw himself across the room, sliding on his knees across the floorboards, prostrating himself before the two of them.

“Wallace Rudolph West,” he began in an exaggerated voice. All his friends and siblings groaned in unison; Barbara stifled another laugh. “You’ve been one of my best friends since before I started wearing pants on the job. You’ve seen me at my best and worst, you’ve even seen me naked —”

“I like how you’re saying that while your girlfriend’s right there,” Raven deadpanned.
“— and now, on my bended knee, with God and Batman as my witnesses, I ask you...will you be my son’s godfather?”

Wally burst into loud fake tears; Barbara threw her head back and started laughing uproariously.

“Oh Dick, yes, yes! Yes, yes! Yes!”

“I think the Frenchies call that a little deaf,” Zinda remarked.

“It’s a little death, Zee, and that’s not what that was.”

“Are you sure? Because I’m pretty sure I heard exactly that the last time we visited the Clock Tower __”

“Do NOT finish that sentence,” Jim and Bruce roared in unison.

In the meantime, the two best friends had finally stopped dramatically embracing each other, and Dinah, who wasn’t short on giggles herself, caught Barbara’s eye from across the room.

“So how come you never act like that with me?”

“Well...” Barbara was still smiling. “When I actually gain the ability to get and stay on my knees, I’ll send you a memo.”

“Touché.”

Dick pulled away from Wally and finally moved over to Barbara as the guests began to freely chatter amongst themselves.

“If I’d known they were going to do this, I wouldn’t have bought quite so much baby stuff,” she admitted.

“Don’t worry about it. From what I’ve heard, we’re gonna need all the diapers and wipes and paper towels we can get.”

She looked up at him.

“How long have you known about this?”

“Ever since Dinah suggested it.” He glanced over to the best friend in question, who lifted her glass in their direction before going back to talking with Roy. “So...I’ve been in on the planning the whole time, about three weeks.”

“From just after Valentine’s Day.”

He looked at her.

“She’s right, you know. After all you’ve been doing, you do deserve all this spoiling. And more.”

Her throat tight with emotion, she suddenly strained herself up and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“I love you!”

The words came out louder than she’d intended. Much louder.
The room echoed with answering joy.

Their fathers exchanged proud looks, Donna clapped a hand to her mouth in delight, the men whooped, Dinah threw her hands up and cheered. Steph wolf-whistled, Cass clapped her hands ecstatically. On the screens, Charlie was squealing excitedly while Dawn swooned, Victor fist-pumped, and Kori glowed.

Barbara could feel her face heating up as everyone’s attention stayed on her. She ducked her head, feeling her blush grow, but there was no denying that it was true, even if she’d wanted to.

Dick gently set her back down in her chair, and leaned in close until they were embracing. The fact that everyone’s eyes were still on them became a minor issue.

“Of course, I definitely owe Dinah big too. Like, a long hug, a mani-pedi, and a girls’ night while she’s still here,” she murmured, her lips an inch from his ear. “But as for you...” She dropped her voice to a throaty whisper. “After I get in the last of my job and my workout, you are so getting laid tonight.”

He pulled slightly away, eyes wide, before another delighted grin spread across his face.

“You make a very compelling case, Ms. Gordon.” He paused. “Can I watch you work out?”

“Counterproposal: you work out with me. Care for a sparring session?”

“Lucky for me I like getting my ass kicked by you.”

Her grin finally grew to match his.

Just then, Alfred finally made his way into the living room, elegant as always, even with a massive cake delicately balanced atop his hands. Every single person in the room snapped back to attention; Wally actually moaned.

“I do believe you’d care for cake and lunch before presents, Miss Barbara.”

“You believe correctly, as usual.” Dick moved until he was standing at her side. She followed the cake eagerly as it was set down upon the coffee table; nearly obscuring the others’ view. It was mostly covered in black icing, but the sides were frosted with blue and green swirls, and the top was illustrated with an image of two adult bats snuggling a bat pup with their wings. Judging by the quality of the illustration, and by how the frosting was smudged in places, she guessed that Damian had done most of the artwork, but his siblings had tried to help as much as they could.

Now she was in danger of crying again. Damn hormones.

“You’re in luck, Alfie,” Dinah remarked, who was watching this all with a loving eye. “That’s her favorite kind of cake these days.”

Alfred actually looked puzzled.

“By that do you mean chocolate, Miss Dinah?”

“By that she means gigantic,” Helena snickered, and the other Birds joined her.

“Yeah, gigantic like her.”

Barbara rolled her eyes as hard as she could, the spell temporarily broken.
“I take back what I said about you being the best friends I could ever have. And you, Theodore Stephen Kord, I’m seven months pregnant; what’s your excuse?”

Ted shrugged.

“I have mental and physical health problems and I eat my feelings.”

“Alright, fair enough.”

Wally popped back up over his best friend’s shoulder.

“Does this mean I can have their servings?”

Everything seemed to be turning out after all.

Over in the corner, over plates of chicken and noodles, his four best friends, suddenly sentimental, were showing each other the latest pictures of their own children.

At least they won’t be able to tease me about being the only childfree one anymore, Dick thought to himself with a slight grin.

Jim was having a very serious conversation with Kori, Gar, Joey, Raven, Karen, and Vic over Skype, and actually seemed to like them, miraculously. Selina had taken it upon herself to get acquainted with Sarah, and the two “stepmothers” were now having a spirited debate over the role of the law in modern society. Lucius had relaxed for once, and was chatting with Ted and Luke about recent technological developments, while Tanya and their daughters eagerly got to know the majority of the Birds of Prey via Tim’s other computer.

The last four members of the Birds were having what sounded like a furious whispered argument over on the couch. Dick pretended to be engrossed in his lunch as he listened.

“— but you’re enormous now. How do you not smoosh him?”

“It’s none of your business, Helena!” Barbara hissed, glancing over at her father. “And why you’re so suddenly so interested in the logistics of how I have sex —”

“Honey, we’ve always been interested in that,” Dinah grinned. “Some of us more than others, especially at some points.”

Dick snorted into his plate.

“And we don’t need that many details,” Zinda added. “Just, you know, the basics.”

“No way, I really gotta know how it works. ‘Cause the way I see it, if you sat on his face now, you’d break the poor man’s neck.”

“I’m gonna break your neck, Helena!”

Dick doubled over, then quickly stifled his laughter behind a cocktail napkin as he walked away. Tim, who’d been standing fairly nearby, looked more than a little pained.
“Sorry you had to hear that,” Dick said, forcing down the last of his snickers.

“And I thought your crowd was bad.”

“Yeah, Wally, Gar, and Roy have mellowed out since our early Titans days. Those ladies, though...”

“Even Barbara. She’s not as blatant about it as her friends, but she is pregnant, and I know that wasn’t just your fault.”

“Yep, it takes two to horizontal tango.”

“Okay, ew.”

He laughed again.

“All sexual humor aside, though...”

“I know, you really love her.” Tim shook his head affectionately. “I was there the first time you guys were dating, remember? Cass and I were rooting for you every step of the way; she’s family to us too. And I just...” He paused, freezing up.

“...You want me to be happy,” Dick inferred.

His throat suddenly tight, he reached out again...wrapping his arm around Tim’s shoulders.

“That’s what I want for you too.”

“Won’t be easy.”

“Nothing in our lives ever is.”

The two of them were quiet for a few moments.

Then, across the room, he spotted Bruce and Jason. Bruce was palming something small, and Jason was pointing to it, his lips moving:

*What’s in the box, old man?*

“What’s his problem now?” Tim muttered.

Before either of them could come up with theories, Jason snatched the little box out of Bruce’s hands; dashing across the living room and vaulting over the couch, skidding to a halt in front of his brothers.

He grinned triumphantly, holding up his occupied hand, white streak falling in his eyes.

“Old man had something for you, Dickhead. Said Selina stole it, but he went back and bought it, then he said he was gonna give it to you ‘when the time’s right,’ whatever the hell that means.”

“What is it?” Tim asked.

“How the hell should I know? Seems like jewelry.” His fingers parted slightly, and Dick caught a look; the box was blue velvet, too small for most kinds of jewelry.

“Well, let’s find out.” Dick reached out —

— but Jason snatched his hand back.
“Hey Demon, catch!”

Damian, who’d been heading across the room with Cass, neatly snatched the box out of midair from where Jason had thrown it.

“Don’t involve me in your idiocy, Todd,” he shouted, throwing it back — from where it was caught by Tim.

“Give it here!”

“No, I wanna know what it is!”

Dick, still ignorant, just sighed deeply as his brothers started tussling. Most of the other guests didn’t even bat an eye. But from across the room, Bruce looked like he was about to start panicking at their violent treatment of his gift.

That was strange.

“Both of you knock it off!” Dick yanked the two of them apart, then grabbed the box. “Whatever this is, it is not worth your ridiculous behavior —”

It popped open in his fingers.

When he saw what it was, it took a moment for him to register the significance of it.

And then his brain shut down.

“So...what is it?” Jason asked, leaning in for a better look.

All Dick could do was gape.

Now, from across the room, even Damian’s and Cass’s interests were piqued, and before he knew it, all his siblings had crowded around him, and were gazing at the contents of the box in astonishment.

“It is...a big deal,” Cass summed up.

It was then that Alfred made his way over.

“Young sirs, young lady, it’s time for Miss Barbara to open her presents. I would advise that you’re there for it.”

All five of them looked up and stared at him mutely.

His eyes flicked down, and he nodded in understanding.

“Ah, yes. An odd show of support and wise forethought, in Master Bruce’s case. Most likely due to the fact that it was Miss Selina’s idea. Yet, if I were all of you, I would not make any more of a show about it. Today is...” He looked over at Barbara. “Perhaps not an ideal time.”

“You can say that again,” Jason said in a hushed tone as Dick closed and pocketed the box. His siblings all looked at him again.

“Maybe it’s not an ideal time yet,” he said, finally recovering his voice. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to do it eventually.”
Jason’s and Damian’s eyes opened very wide. Tim and Cass broke into enormous grins.

Dick smiled.

Drew was so angry he could barely breathe.

The news anchor’s chirpy voice was like a drill embedding itself into his skull, happily proclaiming the GCPD’s and Wayne Enterprise’s joint statement of Lucius Fox’s innocence. Simultaneously, across his phone screen, he could see WE’s stock already beginning to rise, emboldened by newfound trust.

The Bats had regained one of their advantages. They would soon once again have the full might and capability of the Fortune 500 company behind them, and he would only have what was left in the bank, along with a greedy collection of muscle-bound idiots.

He had not lied. He would indeed have to move swiftly now, to put all the pieces of his plan in action before it was too late.

Everything rode on winter’s ending.
Dick had set his alarm for the usual time the previous night. Work or not, special day or not, cases and papers in need of filling out waited for no one.

But he didn’t wake to its shrill tones that morning. Instead, he opened his eyes to silence, streams of gray-white light through the window, the red numbers of the clock proclaiming it to be nearly ten, and half the bed empty.

“About time you roused yourself, birthday boy wonder. I’ve been up for hours.”

His eyes focused on the woman in the doorframe.

She did look like she’d been up for hours. Fully dressed, her gaze was clear and sharp, but the look on her face was affectionate. Her beautiful hair was dry and brushed into soft curls, and in her hands, she held a package that bore the logo of the bakery three blocks down.

“Oh, is it my birthday?” He propped himself up on his elbows. “How much older than me are you now? A decade?”

“The cougar jokes are really getting old, you know.”

“You know what else is getting old...?”

“It’s your birthday, so, you.”

“Hey, eighteen years of crime-fighting’ll do that to a guy.” Dick exhaled hard and tilted his head back. “God. Eighteen years. Where does the time go? I’m twenty-seven, and cliched as it is, I feel
“I’m gonna be thirty this year. If I were a Hollywood actress, they’d be only casting me as a mom by now. I’d be missing the good old days, if they gave disabled women any decent roles in the first place.” She wheeled herself forward and leaned across the bed, kissing him on the forehead. “Granted, I am a mom, but I can also shoot a gun and land a punch better than any of those skinny kids they’re casting in action movies these days.”

“The best part is, I know you’re talking from experience.” He sat up and looked her in the eye.

She grinned knowingly, then softened again.

“Happy birthday.” She gently passed the package into his hands. “Hope yours is better than my last one was.”

Within was a huge cupcake, liberally swirled with electric blue frosting, a little marzipan figure in darker blue of a bird delicately balanced on top.

“I ordered ahead and commissioned it from Gail’s, special. The head baker wishes you a happy birthday too, by the way.”

“You and she are both godsends.” The package balanced on his lap, he leaned over and kissed her eagerly.

“Me and the baker?” They were still nose to nose. Her eyes were sparkling. “Should I be worried? I mean, she does make a mean Key lime cheesecake.”

“Maybe so, but you’re much tastier.”

Barbara threw her head back laughing. Dick felt his heart fill with affection.

“You’re terrible.”

“Mm, you love it.” He went in for another kiss.

She hummed against his lips, stroking her hand through his hair, even after they pulled apart again.

“On that note, do you want your birthday present now, or after breakfast?”

“That depends.” He rested his hand on her thigh. “Is my birthday present also my breakfast?”

“Down boy.” She smirked, taking his hand away. “That’s for later. I meant your actual birthday present.”

With a flourish, she produced an envelope.

A signed affidavit, printed on crisp white paper, Barbara’s neat cursive curling across the bottom line.

“An official promise to...spend the whole day off work with me once you finish your morning rounds?” Dick’s head snapped up. “The whole day? You’re serious?”

“Cross my heart. One hour to get everything as close to being in order as it can be, then—” She clapped her hands, “— done.”

He just stared at her for a long few moments.
Then he very slowly set the cupcake aside, before grab-hugging her and pulling her onto the bed with him.

“I love you!”

“You’re squishing me!” But she was laughing. “Dick, let go!”

“No!”

“The sooner you let go, the sooner I can get that hour out of the way and you can have me all to yourself.”

“Well, that’s different.”

He watched her gather herself back together and roll to the door, shooting him one last smile over her shoulder before making her way to her workstation.

Dick finally clambered out of bed, swapping his pajama pants for a pair of jeans. The affidavit in one hand, the cupcake in the other, he meandered into the kitchen.

Licking bits of frosting from his fingertips, he set the coffee on to brew. Outside the massive kitchen window, he could’ve swore he saw more of the remaining snow drip down into slush, down into water, before swirling away into the gutters. On the big tree across the street, there were tiny green buds beginning to grow.

As the smell of brewing coffee filled the air, he leaned against the kitchen doorway and watched Barbara work. Her computer screens blazed the emerald of sacrificial flame; her fingers flew as she spoke into her headset, commanding as a queen.

“Watchtower, come in. Get me Black Canary.” The keyboard clacked rhythmically under her touch. “Hi, Dinah. No, it’s all been fine since you left. Really? Oh, that’s great. Look, I have another mission for you. I have all the details planned out, just sent them to you...okay, great. Good luck.”

Dick reclined further against the doorway.

“No, I said now last Friday. Gardner, if you give me attitude again, I’m putting you on a mission with Batman. Yes, I will! Now shut up and get me those documents! Hello, Barda, Scott. Yes, I do have an assignment you can go on together...here’s what you have to do...”

The thought came back to Dick unprompted.

I want to marry her.

“Sorry for the delay,” Cass said as she passed off the photographs. “Personal things. You know.”

Winter lingered just slightly in the night air now. Most of the snow had gone, but gray slush still clung stubbornly to the side of the roads. Atop the roof, the Signal was shut off, which hadn’t stopped the pair of siblings from dropping by anyway.

“I do know,” Jim replied, accepting Tim’s and Dick’s pictures of Avery Drew’s apartment. “I was there for the baby shower, after all.”
“Seems like everyone was,” Damian remarked. “You missed Grayson’s birthday party two days ago, though. It was quite tolerable, despite some people who don’t know how to give presents.”

Jim raised an eyebrow.

“Jason gave him a t-shirt. Clearly didn’t put much effort. It said...‘Don’t be a Richard.’ Thought it was funny.”

“Whereas I gave him a polishing kit for his escrima,” Damian added. “Very practical. And also tickets to the circus next month, which were far less practical and obscenely expensive, so he’d better enjoy himself.”

“He was happy when you gave them,” Cass pointed out, her lips twitching with the hint of a smile.

“Don’t remind me. At this rate, he’s going to suffocate me.”

Jim chuckled slightly, but his amusement dissolved as he looked down at the evidence in hand. For a minute or so, he studied the photographs, solidifying into worry.

“My god. This is all of you?”

The siblings shifted instantly into professionals, experienced warriors. Cass’s face dropped back into cold neutrality, Damian’s twisted with the warnings of anger.

“All except for your daughter.” The boy’s voice was deceivingly quiet. “For obvious reasons.”

Cass’s hands clenched slightly.

“This is...frighteningly detailed.” Jim shifted through the photos. “These go back...Christ, nearly eighteen years.”

“We theorize...that he has been planning for shorter,” Cass interjected. “Less than that. But, still. Went back all the way. Found so many old photos. Still...”

“Still a mark of an obsession.” He tucked the pictures back into the evidence bag. “Tell your brothers we’re grateful for these. Once Barbara gets more of that digital evidence, we’ll just about have enough for an arrest warrant. But we’ll need to get testimonials in order to convince a jury —”

“We don’t have the time!” Damian burst out.

The other two turned to stare. He hissed in frustration, then stomped his foot, childlike.

“Don’t you see? That psychopath wants to get to her, and he plans to use one of us to do it! He was nearly able to kill one of the Justice League, and though god knows they can be idiots at times, Lance is one of their best fighters! Every day this is prolonged, she and another one of our lives remain in danger, and to top it off, nobody knows whose life it is!”

“Damian —”

“Don’t ‘Damian’ me, Cassandra! You of all people...everyone knows how much she loves you. Perhaps he will not go after you, considering how renowned your fighting skills are, but perhaps he might! Good people are easy to manipulate out of a fair fight and into a winning game. And even if he does not, it’s also common knowledge that Gordon loves Brown nearly as much as she loves you. It could very well be your partner at risk, even if it’s not you personally.”

Cass visibly flinched.
Damian immediately felt ashamed of himself for awakening that fear in her, but then quashed the feeling. It would do no good feeling guilty when he could spend his efforts preventing another death in his family.

“So why are we wasting our time going through all this bureaucracy? We know who he is and where he lives! We should go after Drew now and tell him we know everything, force a confession from him —”

“It might not work.” His sister’s voice was quiet.

“But it might!” Damian’s voice cracked slightly, to his horror. He cleared his throat, then began again strong. “And if I can get him to talk —”

“If you can’t...we look like bad guys again.” Cass was staring at her hands. “And we show our hand. He then destroys evidence. Covers his tracks. We are back to the beginning.”

“She’s right.” Jim approached the agitated boy, gently laying a hand on his shoulder. “We need that evidence in order to get him what he deserves. There’s not going to be a shortcut through this. You need to trust that Barbara, and your family, can do their jobs and protect themselves.”

He took a shuddering breath, and Damian realized how hard it was for him to say that, to take his daughter’s and their family’s fate out of his hands for so long. He, like she, craved being in control of a bad situation. Being able to force it into something they could handle. And like her, it killed him to drop that control of the situation and to let someone he loved be at risk. But he was doing it. Had been doing it since she was eighteen years old.

Jim then composed himself, offering him a strained smile.

“Besides, you really shouldn’t be suggesting circumventing the justice system in front of an old cop, kid.”

“Tt,” Damian scoffed, but reluctantly chose not to protest. He felt himself close on himself somewhat, shoulders folding inwards. “I only...only wish that I did not have to risk their lives like this, waiting so long when he could make a move at any time. I could not bear it if one of the others...”

“Even Tim?” Cass smiled with no small amount of black humor.

“Tt. Yes, even he.” He could not help but give her a matching smile. “Don’t tell him I said that.”

The hand on his shoulder squeezed lightly, a kind of comfort.

“We...me and he...understand,” she interpreted. “Don’t want to risk her, or any of the others, either. Definitely not her. But this is the best way. This is her fight.”

Damian could understand that.

No matter how much he disliked not being able to take direct action. Worse, not being able to protect the people he, and his brother, cared about.

Drew had realized something within the two weeks since Lucius Fox had been exhumed.
That if the GCPD were able to make a statement in the man’s favor so quickly, if they were immediately able to back the Bats, they had managed to regain some ability to function, at the very least, since he’d gotten most of their members exposed and cleared out. That was worrying.

Something would have to happen again, something to throw the police department back into disorder.

Within the gray-dust, dimly lit apartment, he took another careful sip of fine, unethically sourced coffee. He really did enjoy such little luxuries with the freedom of the Foxes’ money...

Which was how he decided what to do to ruin the GCPD again. To slow down the Bats for a while, at least until he could put his plan into action.

The last several months had gone by like sand between her fingers, but simultaneously, Barbara knew how much had changed within their family. She herself could feel the effects of that time within her.

Literally, in a certain case.

She breathed heavily, balancing a hand against the crown of her belly.

“I can do it,” she assured herself aloud, stroking her hand up and down, rumpling the fabric of her shirt. “I can be ready by mid-May. I have to be.”

The wall of code stared her down. A challenger to her faith in herself.

“No,” she continued. “No matter what wrench gets thrown in the works this time. I’m going to get ahold of it, and I’m gonna kick that wretched man’s ass all the way back to hell —”

“Talking to yourself’s the first sign of madness, you know.”

Barbara started, then sighed a bit.

“You still there, Dinah?”

“Where else would I be? By the way, I hate stakeouts. They’re boring as fuck. Give me a honeypot with some fat hairy crime boss any day.”

“Canary —”

“I do mean that literally, by the way. Next time, give Hel or Zee the stakeout and let me go seduce the bad guy. Or bad girl. Whichever. Women are always fun anyway, and in the case of men, my gag reflex is much better than my attention span.”

“Ew.”

Dinah laughed, and Barbara knew that she was mostly putting it on. Despite their conversation, and despite the fact that she seemed like just another American tourist taking too long on early breakfast in a Budapest cafe, Black Canary had been thoroughly engaged in waiting for her targets for the last three days. She’d just always had a special place reserved in her brain that she could divert to focusing on annoying her best friend, without breaking stride at all.
“But in reply to your conversation with yourself, you should know I have total faith in you. Work-wise, anyway.”

Barbara squinted.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Non-work-wise, I have almost total faith in you.”

“Dinah, whatever you want to call me out for, just call me out.”

“Ooh, my favorite pastime.” Dinah’s voice became serious again. “I was just wondering...since your relationship’s going so well, since you’ve progressed so much. You’re having a kid together, now you live together, hell, you guys haven’t even had any legitimate fights since October. And on top of that, you’ve known each other so long and dated even before this...so what I was wondering was...is taking that next big step a feature in those detailed plans of yours?”

“No, we are not inviting anyone to have a threesome with us.”

“That is not what I meant, but I can think of a few people who’ll be disappointed. No, I meant, like. Marriage,”

Barbara choked on air —

— the world seeming to screech to a grinding halt.

It was only seconds, but seemed like hours before Dinah spoke again.

“Oh Jesus, I didn’t make you go into labor, did I?”

She braced her hands on either side of her keyboard.

“No. I’m fine. Well, I’m not fine, but...” She took a deep, long breath. “Look, I’m not thinking about marriage. Maybe someday, but...” She froze up for a moment, terrified, before regaining her composure. “It’s too soon to think about...that kind of commitment. I have no plans for anything like it happening for a while, at least.”

“Too soon!? Too soon — it’s been twelve goddamn years! When is it not gonna be too soon? When you have grandkids?” There was suddenly genuine anger in Dinah’s voice, which took her aback. “I told you not to let this one get away again, Barbara. Remember when I got engaged, when I told you that I didn’t want to spend my life wondering what could’ve been? Like the two of you?”

She swallowed hard. Her eyes suddenly felt hot, prickling with shame.

“And yeah, well, look how great that turned out for me. My romantic life has been a trainwreck. All I’ve had reliably is sex. I’ve been divorced twice, including from the apparent love of my life: a womanizer and a cheater. Most of my stepkids have terrible things happen to them, which I couldn’t do anything about. I can only see my adopted daughter three times a year, if I’m lucky.” The anger had become mixed with anguish. “I’ve craved motherhood half my adult life, and I love Roy and Sin and Mia and Connor, I do, I do, but I wanted babies too. And I can never have that.”

Hot tears streamed down Barbara’s cheeks. No matter how many times they talked about all this, she never stopped hurting for her friend.

“I love you and want what’s best for you, but don’t you understand why I want this to work out,
now that you have it again? A love of your life who adores you and is devoted to you, who came back to you, and who gave you a child on top of everything. You don’t know how lucky you are to get a second chance like that.” The heat in Dinah’s voice had all melted away, and she could hear one slight sob from the other end of the line. She, in return, bowed her head, letting the tears keep coming. “Please hold onto this one.”

Her voice choked, Barbara finally managed to speak.

“It’s not that I don’t want this. That I don’t want to keep this. It’s just — I’m still scared, Dinah. Especially now that it’s gotten so good.”

Her best friend was quiet.

“You’re a goner, huh?”

Barbara chuckled weakly.

“Yeah. I’m a goner. I don’t know — I don’t want to have to think about, to deal with, finally letting go all the way when I’m so close to getting this big case wrapped up. Maybe after I deal with Python, I’ll feel a little braver.”

“You’re already one of the bravest, most badass fucking bitches I’ve ever met. Give yourself some credit.”

“Same to you.” This time, the chuckle was a little more genuine. “But it’s a lot easier to be brave when you’re facing a homicidal villain than when you’re facing one of the people you trust most in the world. Go figure.”

“Can’t relate. But I’ll take being a badass fucking bitch.” She could hear a little bit of a smile returning to Dinah’s voice. “And look, I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that. Or projected onto you like that, for that matter.”

“It was understandable. I, um, actually don’t mind you being my cheerleader.” She rested her chin on her palm. “All this support’s been really nice, especially in the early days when I wasn’t sure I’d get it from anywhere else but the Batgirls.”

“You really mean it? You’re grateful?” Dinah’s voice was softer than it normally would’ve been. “...Oh honey, in that case, I am gonna be all up in your romantic shit. Catch me dropping in and quizzing you at three a.m., making sure you get treated right, and the verb tense that rhymes with ‘treated’ too —”

‘Eated’ is not a real verb tense!”

“Nerd!”

“Shut up!”

Both women laughed, their laughs still slightly choked, slightly hysterical. But the heaviness in Barbara’s chest eased, the imaginary blockage in her throat clearing somewhat.

“But seriously honey, I don’t think you have to worry about facing the big step for a while. At least not for a few months after you kick Python’s ass. The kid’s not even born yet, and I seriously doubt Dick’s gonna want to go for a shotgun wedding. Especially not one where the bride looks like she’s trying to smuggle a beach ball under her dress.”
Barbara rolled her eyes even as she smiled weakly, wiping the tears off her cheeks.

“You know, you were doing really well there, and then you ruined it.”

“It’s a skill.” From the other end of the line, there was a loud screeching of tires, followed by several guttural voices yelling in Hungarian. “And on that note, they’re finally here. I love you, really, but right now I gotta go kick some Ader Jan-ass.”

“I love you too. Talk to you later.”

She took off her headset, then reclined her upper body weight onto her arms and the computer desk, massaging her temple.

“I hope she’s right,” she murmured. “That level of commitment...throwing everything off balance...that’s the last thing I need to worry about right now.”

She glanced up at the screens, then down to a file that Tim had sent to her two weeks prior.

“And in the meantime, I have work to do.”

All Jason had wanted was an hour alone. How had that become too much to ask for?

His favorite gargoyle from his childhood was still secluded, hundreds of yards above the street; he leaned into the curves of stone, propping his boots up on the gargoyle’s shoulders and peacefully working on a cigarette. From so far up, the city streets looked almost clean, winter’s cover-up job not yet melted away by the oncoming warmth of spring. Several metal buildings loomed up around him, but even though he hadn’t really become much larger compared to them, he felt so much less small than he’d had as Robin.

He wasn’t afraid of anything the city could throw at him anymore.

“Look Cassandra, Todd has returned to polluting his lungs, as if his mouth and his attitude weren’t already noxious enough.”

Except his family.

Jason inhaled his mouthful of smoke too fast and began choking, pounding himself on the chest with one fist. As he did, two black capes fluttered down and settled near him, his sister silently neutral, their brother scowling.

“Fuck off, kid,” he wheezed. “I already died once, I really don’t give a shit anymore, especially about what’s got you pissier than usual today.”

Damian huffed loudly, leaning back against the stone wall. Cass, balanced in a crouching position, just shifted a bit.

“He’s worried,” she translated. “Uncertainty is hard to...deal with. When someone is out to kill one of us.”

“Well, if you’d all let me kill you when I first came back to life, we wouldn’t be in this mess.” Jason flicked a cigarette butt over the side of the building.
“You couldn’t even...get one blow in,” his sister scoffed. “On me.”

“Okay, that’s true.” He chuckled darkly, before turning back to the youngest. “But seriously, kid —”

“Oh, so you weren’t being serious about the killing thing?”

Jason started again. The voice had come from above them, and was even less welcome than the other two.

“He wasn’t being serious. You weren’t being serious, were you Jay?”

“What the hell are you two doing here?” he demanded as Dick swooped in and Tim clambered down. “We having a pajama party?”

“Why...are we talking in questions?” Cass wondered out loud.

“Why do you care?” Damian asked her.

“Dick and I were on patrol together, and Jason, you don’t have a monopoly on the rooftops.” Tim raised his voice above Damian’s. Beside him, even in his absurdly tight costume, Dick looked almost relaxed, as opposed to the tension radiating off the others.

Still riding the post-birthday high? Even though it’s been three days? So maybe it’s a can’t-stop-thinking-about-proposing high. Not like I’d know.

Jason’s mind drifted to Barbara, and it took him a minute to realize that he still hadn’t responded to Tim.

“Is it so wrong to want to get an hour of peace? The Golden Dragons and the Hanoi Ten have been feuding again, one of my employees that I actually liked got capped by a street dealer last week, and one of my best informants was found out by her pimp. The streets are even more of a wreck than usual today.”

“We know.” Dick held up his hands in a placating gesture before Tim could start bristling. “We just got back from Red Robin’s talk with Lynx about laying down a cease-fire with the Ten, so the gangs should give you a break, at least. But I had to chase the Double Dare twins all the way from the Bludhaven docks to downtown last night —”

“Killer Croc tried to eat Damian,” Cass said.

“Like I’d let him lay a scaly finger on me,” Damian sniffed.

“Yeah, you’d taste terrible,” Tim chimed in.

Once again, Dick quickly steered the conversation away from squabbling territory. Jason almost resented him for it. A good argument would be sure to get out some of that tension.

“— and I know you’ve been busy with the street dealers, Cassie. You’re not the only one having a tough time, Jay.”

“Oh please, like you’re having a tough time, Mr. Domestic Bliss,” Jason scoffed, blowing out a mouthful of smoke. “Don’t you talk down to me.”

Damian really did bristle this time.

“Don’t you ever try to empathize with different people, Jason?” Tim snapped.
“Don’t you even keep your nose out of it, Drake?” Damian snapped in return. “And it’s hardly like you’re the authority on other people’s lives, Todd, you weren’t around enough to know before now.”

“Shut up!” both of his older brothers yelled in unison.

Cass sat back and stared at them. Her gaze, piercing, owl-like, not interfering. Whatever happened next, Jason realized, she thought that it needed to happen.

“For your information, Replacement, I constantly work my ass off for other people, I’ve been working alongside you idiots for months, helping you, and you have the gall to ask me if I ever try to empathize with others?”

“Yeah, alongside us, provoking us, calling us names, mocking us —”

“That was being funny!”

“Not to me!”

“Who cares about what you think?” Damian interjected again.

Both of them opened their mouths to respond, before they were both seized by their shoulders and had their foreheads knocked together —

— Which, since Jason wasn’t wearing his helmet, hurt.

He swore loudly while Tim groaned in pain.

“The three of you! For the eternal-fucking-love of god, knock it off! Just because you’re stressed, that doesn’t give you an excuse to go back to taking it out on each other. I’m sick of that!”

Dick was clearly not relaxed anymore. He leveled a irate glare at his brothers, almost reminiscent of their father, but with their oldest sibling’s signature fire in it instead of Bruce’s colder brand of fury.

“I am not going to be responsible for your bad behavior anymore.” Dick pointed a finger at them. Tim cringed, Damian ducked his head. “Two of you are grown adults, and Damian, you know better. We’re never going to be effective as a unit or a family if we don’t work together, and I don’t just mean on the job. You guys have gotten so much better over the last few months, and the last thing you need is to revert to blaming and projecting your resentments onto each other. That. Does. Not. Work. And you fucking know it! So act like it!”

Though Damian and Tim looked sufficiently embarrassed and ashamed of themselves, Jason didn’t lower his glare, instead choosing to meet Dick’s with his own. The two of them stared at each other, neither looking down or away.

I wonder how often he misses the sweet, naive little kid who looked up to him. I wonder if he thinks who I am now is even worth the effort.

But if he didn’t think that, why would he even bother?

Why do I even bother...to stick around? Is it even just for the sake of Alfred and the girls anymore?

His sister placed a hand on his shoulder, and Jason started. He realized that she probably knew exactly what he’d been thinking, and prayed that she wouldn’t bring it up in front of Dick.

“Time for this later. Now, we must work.”
All four of them looked at her, probably all intending to argue the point.

That is, until all of their coms beeped in unison.

Dick clicked his through, and they all waited as he listened to whatever Bruce had to say. The longer it lasted, the more color drained from his face, until he looked nearly ashen.

“Well?” Damian asked as Dick ended the call.

Their oldest brother was silent for a few moments, before clearing his throat and falling back into being the leader.

“Tim — Red Robin, you’re done for the night. Go back to the Cave with our notes and findings. Robin, Black Bat, come with me. We need to get to the GCPD station.”

“But we were only there an hour ago.”

“We need to head back.” Dick’s voice was frantic. “Trust me, it’s urgent. I’ll brief you on the way over.”

Jason got to his feet, ready to climb to the roof and leave.

“Hood...” His brother’s voice was still tense. “I guess I don’t have anything else to say to you.”

“You’re right. You don’t.”

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With the information Tim had gleaned from Drew’s thumb drive, Barbara had quickly been able to access the logistics of an account in the Caribbean, an account that just so happened to contain half a million dollars, such as that had been stolen from the Foxes — plus interest, plus whatever savings he’d deposited there previously. Minus, she guessed, the money that had been used to pay off various men to do his dirty work. All together, it came to just over five-hundred-forty thousand dollars.

Drew hadn’t registered the account under his real name, most likely to make sure law enforcement, at least, wouldn’t connect the theft to him. He may have been proud, but he wasn’t an idiot. That would make it very difficult to peg him for grand larceny.

However, it would also make it very easy to get justice another way. Avery Drew could hardly complain if someone else’s account lost the half-million now, could he?

Barbara flexed her fingers, smirking to herself as she imagined the look on his face when he found out what had happened —

But before her eyes, the numbers began to change. Four more zeroes attached themselves to the end of the total, the previous numbers ticking up higher —

— Just as Bruce’s voice sounded in her ear.

“Oracle, come in.”

“Oracle here.”
“Listen. This information just came in. Twenty high-ranking officials of the Gotham Police have just been robbed of fifty thousand dollars, in total. The commissioner alone lost ten thousand.”

Static seemed to ring in Barbara’s ears.

“In their banks’ systems were placed worms — erasing evidence of the thief’s digital presence.” A little of Batman’s professionalism slipped. “This indicates that it was —”

“Python,” she snarled. Her hands curled into fists; knuckles whitening. Her vision blurred with rage.

How dare that psychopath touch her father. How dare he make his job harder again, after spending months working overtime and searching nonstop for more, honest recruits. After all that time, after all he’d already done, and after what he still schemed to do, he still kept screwing with her family.

She had planned to take back what Drew had stolen and nothing more. But as she sat there, breathing heavily, Bruce’s voice a background hum as he explained that three of the others had gone to the police station already, the boiling emotion began to come to a head.

He’d killed innocents. He’d tried to kill her best friend. He’d tampered with the livelihoods of the Foxes and her father. He planned to kill one of her family. The least he deserved was a little punishment now, before he got dealt his final comeuppance.

Moreover, she could deliver that punishment...with little stress or effort.

Her fingers set upon the keyboard; she grinned viciously as she began to type.

Drew had been in an excellent mood.

The cops had been foolishly lax in which banks they trusted their money to, even, surprisingly enough, the commissioner. Now there was a fool who needed to be brought down a peg, considering how close he was to the Bats.

He’d just paid off the advances of his henchmen, including the plethora of new ones he’d just hired.

Supervising Chance’s work finishing up the shackles, computer in his lap, a cup of coffee in one hand, he hummed quietly to himself as he went to check on his bank account again. Make sure he’d wired the correct amount to all the men.

But when he clicked on the account, he saw no lists. No records. No numbers. The screen instead immediately went to black.

Drew hissed in indignation, preparing to boot the computer up again. The sudden movement drew Chance’s attention, who paused working to walk over and look.

Before Drew could hit the power button, or snap at Chance to go back to welding the metal, the black became marred with green. Pixels slowly faded into bright, bold color, making a familiar emblem across his computer screen.

His coffee mug hit the floor and shattered. Chance gasped.

The priestess symbol, taunting him with its existence. It remained there for a few seconds, glowing
emerald, the face he’d grown to hate. He was still processing, still filling with indignant rage, when
the screen blinked black again, then back to his account.

Which was glaringly, horrifyingly, empty. Not a cent remained.

Drew realized immediately. She had done that. She had taken everything. And he knew that she was
immediately funneling the stolen money back to its rightful owners, his savings and interest going
god knew where.

He realized something else a second later: he had been careless. Somehow allowed the Bats to find
his account. They were growing onto him; he had no idea what they knew. He’d been too clever for
his own good, and now he had even less time than he’d thought.

His hatred seethed and swirled within him, growing to a crescendo. He had loathed no one like he
loathed that woman. Death alone was too good for her. He would make her helpless, make her beg,
make her hurt, even before he killed the man she loved in front of her.

Chance interrupted his thoughts.

“Hey, wait a minute. If all your money’s gone, how are you gonna pay us the rest of what you
promised —”

Drew very calmly set down his computer. Then instantly snatched up the nearest tool from the kit
that’d been lying around — a screwdriver — and drove it through the other man’s eye socket.

Chance screamed in pain, clutching his face. The screwdriver hadn’t gone in deep enough to pierce
his brain, so he was still alive, but the eyeball had been crushed into useless jelly, blood gushing out
in rivulets. His shaking hands did nothing to alleviate the blood flow, tiny spurts of red jetting out
from between his fingers.

Drew then picked up a gun that another of the henchmen had left behind. Without a second’s
hesitation, he shot Chance through the head, then twice more, then another five rounds in the chest.
He paused for a moment, then shot his mangled face once more, finally emptying the gun.

Two more men appeared at the door, gasping when they saw their dead, bloodied comrade on the
floor. One nervously took a step back.

Drew picked up the computer, closing the tab with his bank account information on it, silently
disgusted at the possibility of trying to get a job again. Of having to be second-class.

“He was a leak,” he lied curtly. “I caught him trying to give information to the police.”

The henchmen accepted the story, though they still looked slightly disturbed.

“Go. Get out of my sight.”

They wisely obeyed. Drew took a deep breath and exhaled it through his teeth with a hiss, glancing
over at the shackles.

He still disliked having to rush his plans. But at the same time, the day when he would finally get to
enact them was even closer now. That could hardly come soon enough.
Barbara hit the last key, sending the extra money along to her favorite charities. She then typed in a quick email to Bruce, picking up the phone and dialing her father.

“Dad, did you see yet —”

“The bank just checked in with me, yes. Apparently all my money was digitally restored. Now who could’ve possibly done that?”

She exhaled hard, leaning back into her seat. For the first time that night, she smiled genuinely. Some of her worry, her tension, faded away at her father’s voice. The swirling anger cooled, melting down through her chest.

“I gave it back to all the other officers too. And to Lucius and his family.” The phone chimed twice against her ear. “I’m actually pretty sure that Tam and Luke are sending me thank-you texts right now.” Chime, chime! “Texts, plural.”

“You’ve done so much, Barbara.” Jim’s voice was warm, but she detected a familiar note of concern in there too. “Are you doing okay?”

The question took her so aback, she almost collapsed. All the tension rushed out of her in a gasp, the good memories of the last couple months returning to her.

“I’m on top of everything. You guys have been so great, so there for me...I owe you so much.”

“Sweetie, you don’t owe us anything. From what I can tell, when you start a case, a mission, with any of us, you’re quite the powerhouse. You’ve been doing us all favors for years. Those hero-types need you.” He paused, collecting himself. “Besides, you’re my daughter. It’s my job to be there for you; you don’t owe me for that.” A little more warmth entered his voice. “You’ll see for yourself soon enough.”

Her smile grew. Her worries and fears felt so much less painful.

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, Babsy. Don’t work yourself too much —”

“You’re one to talk!”

“Exactly. I know that shit, so I know when my own kid’s pulling it.”

“Dad, I took a whole day off earlier this week, I’ve been going to parties and talking to my friends. I’m not exactly working myself to the bone here.”

“Wasn’t it your boy’s birthday earlier this week?”

“Yeah.” Barbara self-consciously pushed her glasses up her nose, tucking her hair behind her ear. “We watched movies, had a couple nice meals together, talked, um, among other stuff...it was really nice.”

“Well, the more you two are together, the more it seems like he’s good for you.” His voice became teasing. “Don’t tell him I said that.”

“Oh don’t worry, your disapproving-father-act still works just fine.”

There were faint voices in the background, including female giggles and male protests.

“No, Robin, tell Nightwing that he did not hear right!”

Barbara laughed. Now she knew who had gone over to the station, at least.

“Well, on the bright side, it’s not like Nightwing can go telling my boyfriend anything silly, like that you might actually like him.”

“Yes, that would be strange.” More voices in the background. “I’m glad you’re doing okay, Barbara.”

“It’s not over yet.” She refocused on her computers. “But...things are going well, I think. And I’m glad too.”

When the call ended, she stretched her arms up over her head, her muscles stretching, the last of her tension becoming an ordinary surge of energy, riding through her body alongside a sense of satisfaction. Even a little bit of peace.

With all that in mind, she went back to work.

Cassandra kept her eyes trained on the commissioner as he hung up the phone, registering the affection and relief radiating off his body. Similar feelings swept over her, grateful that her mother was doing alright for now, that she’d managed to do so much. She knew the satisfaction that came from a job well done, that came to Barbara when she enacted her righteous vengeance.

Meanwhile, standing beside her on the station rooftop, her brothers waited for a response. The concern for her was almost palpable, even from Damian. It warmed her.

Jim looked at the three siblings, mustache twitching slightly.

“Guess Batman didn’t need to send you three after all. She got everything under control. She’s good.”

Cass felt the corners of her own mouth twitch as her brothers sighed with relief.

“Thank you, Commissioner,” Dick said, voice formal. He paused for a moment. “So you do secretly like your daughter’s boyfriend? That’s very cute.”

Cass giggled while Damian rolled his eyes and Gordon spluttered, turning red. Dick allowed himself a brief triumphant grin, before resuming his serious tone.

“Well, if that’ll be all, we’ll be taking off.”

Gordon, grumbling under his breath and embarrassedly adjusting his glasses — not unlike his daughter — finally regained the ability to speak.

“Fine. Go! Get out of my sight!”

But as the three of them shot out their grappling lines and swung off the roof, Cass knew nonetheless that though Jim complained a lot, he did care about all of her family. Even Dick.
“One of these days he’s going to shoot you,” Damian remarked as they landed on the next roof over. “And all your baiting will have resulted in nothing but his daughter having to raise your child with no one but herself and me!”

“Okay, first of all, he’s not really going to shoot me —”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“— and second of all, even if I was gone, Babs wouldn’t have to do it alone. She’d be fine. She’d still have the Titans —”

“Immature.”

“— the League —”

“Disasters.”

“— the Birds —”

“Female disasters.”

“— and of course, the rest of the family.”

“Doomed. That child is doomed. You’re unbelievably lucky you have me to protect him, Grayson.”

Cass would’ve laughed again, except that she saw past the veil of humor to what they were really feeling.

Unsure of how to phrase herself, it wasn’t until they were falling again that she spoke.

“You are wrong, Dick.”

He was so surprised he nearly crashed into a window.

“It would not...be the same. If you were gone. She needs you, in...one way or another. The way you have always been, for each other. Does not want to lose you. Not again. And...no matter how Jason complains. We all need you.”

She took a deep breath, her feet grinding to a halt against the gravel on the next roof. Her brothers perched on the edge. Staring.

“Speaking of. There is difficulty, resentment still, but less so now. We would not all be here...working alongside...if we did not care. About each other.”

Dick hopped down from the ledge and walked over to her. She didn’t need to read his body language to know what he was going to do, just had to know him, her big brother, and know both his expression of love through open affection, and his unacknowledged need to be loved as much as he loved everyone else.

So she accepted his hug, pouring her own strength into hugging him back. For the first time that day, neither she nor he, the golden children, thought of their own responsibilities at all, instead releasing their feelings into holding each other.

Still buried in Dick’s shoulder, she heard rather than saw Damian coming over, felt rather than saw him join their hug. Of course, he was hugging Dick a bit more. But she didn’t blame him for it.
After all, she knew that Damian loved and craved love just as powerfully, but rarely expressed it in so many words.

That was a common theme in their family, she supposed.

But among death and sorrow and nightmares, though they needed to keep fighting, they also needed to do a better job expressing and holding onto their love. Because they weren’t supervillains who just happened to be punching the right faces; in a life devoted to fighting, what could possibly be more worth fighting for than other people?

Cass felt her brothers let go, then smiled at them. Dick smiled back, and after a moment, Damian did too. Just a little bit.

“Let’s...go home.”

Barbara expected the rattle of her doorknob when it came.

She pushed back from her desk and rolled to the entrance just in time to meet the trio.

“We have something of yours,” Damian informed her, giving his eldest brother a slight push through her doorway. “Thought we’d drop him off before going back to the Manor.”

“And check on you.”

“I did not say that, Cassandra.”

“Didn’t have to.”

“Oh, damn you and your body-language-reading.”

Dick peeled off his mask and looked down at her, and despite herself, her muscles finally relaxed and her heart swelled under his gaze. Her energy and satisfaction from a job well done still lingered, but her vengeful rage had abated. Her father was well. The kids were alright. She had done her job, and everything could still be okay.

Dick reached over and took her hand.

“I’m...fine. Great, actually.” She squeezed his glove-clad fingers. “Though it was very sweet of you to be concerned for me, Damian.”

His ears turned red. His sister ruffled his hair teasingly, and he swatted her away. Dick chuckled affectionately.

“But seriously. I am doing fine.”

Recovering, Damian gave her a long, curious look, like there was something else he wanted to ask. But hesitated.

“Can I...I...I haven’t yet...”

She understood.
“Go ahead.”

With her free hand, she guided his to the crown of her abdomen. His eyes, set in a face that hadn’t yet lost all its childish softness, narrowed in focus as he laid his palm down, his siblings watching.

Sure enough, after only a few seconds, they both felt movement, two quick stirs of motion. Damian sucked in a sharp breath.

“Someone’s excited to greet his uncle.”

The boy looked directly at her as she said it, odd vulnerability in his face. At the same time, the sudden motion became more gentle.

His eyes had become very wide.

Cass’s hand laid down next to Damian’s. Her face was softer than usual, her smile allowing itself to broaden.

It came back to Barbara in that moment — the reminder that neither of them had gotten childhoods, that from even before their births they’d started being molded into weapons by their blood families. That they had come into Gotham bleeding and traumatized, having never experienced unconditional love before. That Damian could’ve easily had the last of his goodness stripped from him, that Cassandra could’ve lived and died voiceless and unknown.

If not for her, and for the man she loved.

Barbara regretted a lot of her impulsiveness and stubbornness, her pride and micromanagement. She was sure there would be more to regret in the future. But she never regretted choosing to mentor and nurture and stand by and love Cassandra.

And she knew that Dick felt the same way about Damian.

“He likes to move,” Cass observed.

“I know, I never get a moment’s peace.” Barbara glanced up at her boyfriend. “Now where do you think he gets it from?”

“Hey excuse you, I am a delight. Your kid clearly gets it from the Gordon side of the family.”

“My kid? My kid? Come here and let me explain something to you —”

Dick threw his hands up and walked away, laughing. She shook her head in exaggerated exasperation as Damian got up next, chasing after him and yelling about having to pry a toddler off the chandeliers and curtains, and how it would be all his fault.

“You made them feel better,” Cass said after a moment.

“Feeling’s mutual.” She met the younger woman’s gaze. “Look, I know it’s been tough...and there’s been kinks we still need to work out...”

“Relationship-wise.”

“Those, definitely. But you guys have been good for me. And I’m not optimistic by nature, but the rest of you should keep working at it with each other. Shitty as we can be, in general and to each other, we’re a family.”
“Fucked up. But a family.”

“True that.”

The two of them watched the boys pursue each other, Dick vaulting over the furniture with unreal poise and Damian determinedly clambering over the back of the couch, huffing and yelling in Arabic.

“I never...thanked you. For helping me with Steph.”

She took Cass’s free hand.

“Of course I helped you. It made you happy, after all.”

“It did. I hope...I hope that you *stay* happy.” Something she couldn’t quite read flickered in Cass’s eyes. “Hold on to it. Don’t lose it.”

A tiny bit of fear clawed its way through the contentedness, as the younger woman unconsciously called back her earlier conversation with Dinah.

*Don’t think about that. Think about the challenges ahead with the case, the unknown you will conquer. Protect your family. No need to waste time worrying about what you need not fear yet.*

She tried to shake off the anxiety for the future, though it was hard, trying to focus on her contentment and accomplishment in the present as her mind already began to tick with new plans, justice yet to be served.

“I hope I don’t lose it again, either, Cassie. I really hope that I don’t.”
The Sun

Chapter Notes

First of all, since this fic has garnered so much traffic in the months it’s been in progress, I’d like to give my blanket permission to anyone reading this to write and/or make art based on it. Seriously, any art and/or fic is welcome. I only ask that you provide a link to me when it’s done.

Secondly, I’m excited to say that I’m posting this less than an hour before I go see Black Panther, so if any of you have any thoughts/opinions on the movie you’d like to discuss with me, feel free to share those too!

Lastly, I borrowed a moment here from “Not Anymore” by orphan_account, which is one of my go-to fanfics when I want to be happy, and I highly recommend you all read it. There are a couple more references sprinkled in here too, if you want to try to spot them.

(No additional warnings apply)


April

As to be expected early in the month, a crisp steady wind had whipped down into the city, piercing through gaps in clothing and lifting hair until it fluttered like feathers. The last of the snow congealed into small mounds of slush under the chilly breeze, but even while it did, the clouds broke over Gotham. Blue pushed aside gray, the sun stretching out and leaving trails of illumination from the inner-city heart to all the way along the outskirts. Wayne Manor and its grounds, quarantined from the worst of the downtown pollution, had been bathed in rare springtime light.

Excellent weather for flying.

“Now remember Luke, the suit is built on intuitive electronics, so you don’t have to mash the buttons. If you use them at all, just push them gently. And the batarangs are highly explosive, so don’t point them at the house, or at any people or animals —”

“Except if my dad breaks out of Blackgate again. Then you can blast him all you want.”
“Stephanie!”

“What?”

“Guys, I know all this already,” Luke interjected. “Well, not what Steph said. Seriously, you have a dad in Blackgate?”

Barbara had to admit that he cut a striking figure as he stood before them on the perfectly manicured lawn. The suit was unlike anything the majority of Gotham’s heroes wore; pure metal and electronics, functional wings, the chest plates and familiar symbol accentuated with glowing electric blue. It didn’t hurt that Luke himself was impressive on his own, let alone with the suit.

“Get with the times, Lucas,” Tam sighed. “Everyone else knows about her dad being Cluemaster. Seriously, this is like that party your freshman year at MIT when you didn’t realize Jordan O’Hare was hitting on you until an hour after he left.”


“How the hell do you even know about that?”

“Not the point,” Barbara cut them off. “We’re not talking about that.”

“I’d like to talk about that...some more,” Cass opined.

She ignored her giggling acolytes and turned back to Luke.

“So you’re sure you’re ready to test-drive the suit? Just because David Zavimbe quit doesn’t mean you have to rush into this. No one’s going to think less of you if you wait a while longer — except maybe your sisters —”

“No, it’s okay Barbara, I’m ready.” He flexed his fingers, watching the leather and metal flow smoothly with his motions. He then shot her a brave smile under his visor. “I’m ready...to be Batwing.”

He then bent his knees, bracing to lift off. The four women watched breathlessly.

He took off with such suddenness that the grass was charred; zipping frantically into the sky, yelling in terror.

Tam, barely batting an eye at her brother, turned to Barbara.

“He totally has a crush on you, you know.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“Yeah, you’re too old for him.”

“Exactly how old do you think I am?”

“I dunno. Mid-thirties?”

“...No wonder you looked so awkward when Dick told you he was twenty-seven.”

Steph snickered again, then did a surprisingly good imitation of Dick’s voice:

“Ms. Gordon, you are trying to seduce me.”
From up above, Luke yelled again as he took a brief, sharp nosedive. Barbara cuffed her protégée upside the head.

The wind ruffled though Bruce’s coat, even as the rare sunshine bathed the manor grounds in white-gold. He leaned back in his seat, huddling slightly into the collar, even as his friend seemed to be enjoying their lunch on the patio.

“We could’ve just gone out to lunch, Bruce,” Lucius remarked, sipping his coffee. “You didn’t have to bring half my family into your house, considering how many of yours you already have here.”

“Hmm.” Despite the glaring light, Bruce smiled slightly. “It’s important for Luke to practice, if he’s going to fight with us. Besides, it’s also useful for our families to get along like they do.”

“You also could’ve just said that you’re happy your kids are happy.” Lucius glanced off the patio over to the grounds, where his son was flying jagged loop-de-loops thirty feet in the air. “Though, speaking of which. I know Luke’s excited to join you all, but I worry. I know the kind of criminals Gotham produces. Up until ten days ago, one of them had half a million of my money.”

“People are often far more resilient than one might fear, Master Lucius,” Alfred said sagely, materializing before the table with the lunch trays. “Even those that one would rather keep safe. And those who seem to have no concept of their own personal safety at all.”

Bruce huffed at the thinly veiled jibe, before turning back to his friend.

“I understand that you want to protect your kids. There’s plenty I’ve wanted to protect mine from too. But people, especially kids, tend to defy that. And getting past how annoying it is when it’s me they’re defying, their independence and intelligence makes me proud.”

“Not that that’ll stop you from continuing to attempt protecting them, Master Bruce.”

“Hrn. No. Their romantic partners still have to answer to me. Especially that Harper. If Jason’s going to force me to be related to Oliver Queen someday, I’m damn well going to make sure that my son’s as happy as he can possibly be, at least.”

“Have you considered telling your kids this kind of thing? More often than once in a blue moon?”

“...They know how I feel.”

“Do they really?”

“...Yes.”

“Good lord, you hero-types.”

At that very moment, Luke flailed his arm down towards the grounds and accidentally shot off a stream of batarangs. The resulting explosions decimated a whole row of topiary statues, igniting what was left of that row, while the four women hollered up at him from the ground. Lucius gaped in shock.

“I shall assume that we can skip the gardener this month,” Alfred said primly.
“It was good to see you guys too. Yeah, I know, right? Hey, um, I gotta go, but tell Cassie and Bart I love them. Give Kara a hug for me, and make sure Rose stays out of trouble. Yeah. No! I love you too. Bye.”

Tim darted around from the front door, tucking his phone away, hoping to catch one of his friends or family in a quiet moment.

But he wasn’t surprised to find them in total chaos instead.

“— Don’t *hit* the buttons, just press them gently!” Barbara was shouting. Tam nervously shrank away from the burning bushes, while Cass had run off, hopefully to find a fire extinguisher, and Steph very unhelpfully and rather hypocritically yelled at him to keep calm.

“I *am* pressing them gently!” Luke shouted right back, repeatedly whacking the buttons on his arm with his fist and subsequently whirling upside down. “It’s not working!”

“Well then land! Luke! Land now!”

He descended slowly at first, then in quick jumps and stops, before finally crashing to earth feet-first and falling over onto the lawn.

To add insult to injury, it was then that Cass returned with the fire extinguisher and immediately sprayed him with it *before* the topiary.

“Just making sure,” was her excuse as Luke spat foam and curses.

Tim sighed deeply, shaking his head at his sister. She shrugged innocently, turning her attention to what was left of the bushes.

“So, looks like flight practice went pretty well,” he finally remarked.

Tam squinted at him.

“Is that your idea of a joke?”

“No, it actually *did* go pretty well. One of these days you should see the old footage from all us Robins’ first few rounds of training.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Just how badly did you guys’ training go?”

“Let’s just say that even the Pacer Test and the rock hard dodgeballs in eighth-grade PE were child’s play after what happened with the malfunctioning practice-bot when I was thirteen. Steph and Damian are lucky; we never used fully armed robots again after that.”

“I don’t even want to know.”

“And still, I think you can figure out that vigilantism and child safety don’t exactly gel,” Barbara said dryly as Steph helped Luke to his feet, helping him brush off the foam (although the gesture was ruined somewhat by her poorly suppressed giggling and Luke’s wounded look). “And Bruce has
always had very odd ideas of what he actually needs to protect us from.”

“Tell me about it.” Steph swiped her hand along Luke’s visor, smearing the foam more than removing it. “But y’know Babs, you did sign up for this shit. Right along with all the rest of us.”

There was a murmur of agreement from everyone else. Barbara sighed, drawing her hand through her hair.

“When I was Batgirl, it seemed a thrill. I did the right thing and that was important to me, but also, I was good at it, and kicking in the teeth of a guy three times my size felt like the biggest rush ever. Even without getting shot, the role was always something I was going to outgrow.”

She glanced back towards the house, then to Tim. Even after years of growing familiar with it, he shivered under the intensity of her gaze.

“It’s only now that I’m older — and more experienced — that I recognize what all of you risk when I send you out on the job.” She heaved a sigh. “And what I risk too.”

“You don’t have to take all that on yourself,” Luke pointed out, wiping away the last of the foam. “The job is the job. And someone’s got to do it, so it might as well be the people who want it. Or, well, the people who need that kind of catharsis.”

Cass nodded.

“But more importantly,” Tim spoke up, moving so that he was close to his friends. Steph and Tam almost unconsciously moved closer in return. “We trust you to do your job the best you can.”

Barbara looked at him, clearly readying herself to respond.

“What he’s trying to say is, we don’t expect you to never fuck up,” Steph broke in, “We expect you to try. And if you try, if you really do your best, than the fuck-ups can be forgiven. Perfection’s overrated anyway.”

“I’m...not perfect,” Cass agreed.

“Right, babe. Even you’re not perfect. And you’re pretty awesome, so that’s saying something.”

His sister beamed. Tim felt himself warmed, despite everything.

“You kids give good advice,” Barbara admitted, pushing her glasses up her nose. “But I do kind of wish you’d internalize it for yourselves when you fuck up.”

“I never fuck up,” Tim exclaimed dryly, while Stephanie and Cassandra grinned guiltily. Tam rolled her eyes at him, which he returned.

“Speaking of which, Luke, he’s right. You did very well for a beginner. And you didn’t destroy the flowerbeds, which is more than I can say for Dick’s first time on a motorcycle. It’s been thirteen years and Alfred’s still mad about that; he takes the rhododendrons very seriously.”

“Now that’s a story I gotta hear,” Tam remarked while her brother offered a cautious smile.

“You better ask Alfred,” Steph laughed, “he loves retelling it when he’s mad at Dick. Come on...”

The three younger women walked away, Steph and Tam still chattering amongst themselves. Luke followed, presumably to go change out of his suit. Tim moved over to Barbara.
“If the girls are preoccupied, you should go touch base with Bruce and Lucius.”

“Agreed.” She tucked her hair behind her ears. Even very pregnant, wearing faded jeans and a cardigan, Tim was still very aware of the authority she radiated. “I’d like to know what’s going on with the business.”

“You do business now too?” The two of them started across the grass. “Is there anything you’re not involved in?”

“Local sports teams. The Knights suck.”

Tim was startled free of a laugh.

“That’s true, they do. But seriously, I’m glad you’re finding time to help out here too; with the company or otherwise, even Bruce and I can’t do everything. Having dependable allies matters.”

“I’m glad you of all people think that, Tim,” she said warmly. “You’re very important to us on both personal and professional levels. And it’s good that you’re finally getting the rest of the family to be that too for you.”

He ducked his head, feeling his cheeks heat up.

“Babs, c’mon. You’ve always been that. You’re gonna be — um, I mean, you are my sister, after all.”

If she noticed his slip, she didn’t show it, instead blushing right alongside him.

“Wow.” He felt genuinely astonished, not a trace of teasing in his voice. “How did I get you to blush?”

“Don’t freak out about it. Last week I cried rewatching Return of the Jedi. A blush is nothing.”

“Who’s freaking out? I still remember when Stephanie was pregnant; she cried all the way through the last two seasons of The Office. I had to hold her when she found out that Dwight really was the father of Angela’s baby.”

“Seriously? I saw that coming a mile away.”

“Me too. Don’t tell Stephanie.”

Barbara hoisted herself up the wheelchair ramp to the patio, rolling over to the table. Alfred, ever perceptive, had already set out a third place for her.

Bruce and Lucius looked up from their rosemary lamb and potatoes as she approached, respectfully going quiet. Tim nodded a temporary goodbye as she settled into place, weaving around and heading in after Luke and the girls.

Lucius cleared his throat, pressing his napkin to his mouth.

“I never thanked you properly for what you did for me and my family, Barbara. But I hope you know how grateful I am.”
“You’re welcome.” She smoothed down the front of her cardigan, registering, but not fazed by, the stark differences between her and the two older men wearing expensive suits. “But it’s not over just yet. There are still a few more things I need to do.”

“Well, the company’ll stand behind you all as you do.” He pulled out a top-of-the-line Wayne Electronics phone, tapping it a few times. Across the screen, stock charts flashed lines of black and red. “We took quite a jump when you had me exhumed, and have been in a bull market ever since. I have everything I need to back Batman Incorporated and your family again.”

“Almost everything,” Bruce grumbled, stabbing a piece of meat with unnecessary force. “Hires in Batman Inc are still down. The departments need firm hands, and good representatives, so that we can keep developing, and keep contact with our allies across the world.”

“I’m sure we’ll find people eventually.”

“Eventually’s not now.”

Barbara rested her chin on her hand, looking down meditatively.

“There are only so many people who’d be qualified for those positions, Bruce —”

She had a flash of inspiration. Her back straightened; her head snapped up.

“Lucius, your kids.”

Both men looked at her in astonishment. Alfred, from where he was coming over with her lunch, smiled slightly.

“Luke’s already got Batwing in the bag — you know, once he figures out how to control the suit without setting the shrubbery on fire. David Zavimbe was our representative from the Congo while he had the role, it would make sense for Luke to eventually be an ambassador as well as a crime-fighter. And he’d be a perfect representative; he’s one of the most upright people I’ve ever met, and I personally know Superman.”

Bruce was staring, slack-jawed, as he processed what she was saying. Lucius took off his glasses, looking conflicted.

“I did use to encourage Luke to take an interest in the company. But...being an ambassador...”

“Is considerably less of a risk than you’d think. Less so than a full-time crimefighting gig, for certain. WE can buy the best kind of protection for him and his sisters — speaking of which, Tam. She’s already familiar with business, and with the company, after her college courses and being exposed to yours and Tiffany’s jobs. Besides, people like her, and she has insight into how the family operates, thanks to Tim. If you give her a position of responsibility in our branch of Batman Inc, I guarantee hires will come, and productivity will increase.”

Barbara took a breath, sitting back and letting her words wash over the men. Bruce seemed convinced, though Lucius was clearly still worried.

“If I may, Master Lucius, I would trust your children.” Alfred set her lunch before her, refilling everyone’s glasses. “They have great potential, and as such, they should have the opportunity to, well, to spread their wings.”

Lucius softened somewhat. Then squinted at Alfred.
“Was that a bat pun?”

“Never in my life would I ever do such a thing, sir.”

Bruce actually smiled a bit.

“It’s settled then. We’ll talk to Luke and Tam, offer them your idea,” he promised.

“Thank you. But first, lunch.” She finally began to tuck into her food.

“I took the liberty of preparing a larger helping for you, Miss Barbara.”

“Good idea, Alfred,” Lucius agreed, relaxing enough to smile. “I remember what Tanya was like with food when she was expecting the kids.”

“She eat you out of house and home too?” Bruce asked dryly.

Barbara, ignoring business decorum entirely, paused eating just long enough to look her beloved mentor in the eye and flip him off. Alfred and Lucius both burst out laughing.

“I’m serious Jason, you should come over. We’re having a great time.”

They had grabbed their lunch directly from the kitchen, along with glasses of homemade lemonade — and coffee, in Tim’s case — settling into the living room. Luke had gotten changed into jeans and a polo shirt, and had preoccupied himself playing with a delighted Ace. Damian was still at school, fortunately, otherwise he would’ve been outraged to see Titus napping with his head on Tim’s lap. Tim himself was engaged in a very serious conversation with Tam about whether the Hulk or Thor would win in a fair fight. Cass had gotten custody of Alfred the Cat, who purred atop her legs while she peacefully listened to something on her phone. Watching them, demolished lunch plate beside her, Steph’s heart was softened by it all.

“Yeah, but there’s no family meeting, Stephanie. I have no pretense for being there, and it’d be kind of weird if I showed up on my own time just to hang out.”

“It’s only going to be weird if you make it weird,” she scoffed. “ Seriously. You Bat-guys, always making a big deal out of things that are really not a big deal.”

“Hey, don’t lump me in with Bruce and my brothers.”

“Too late. You’re lumped. So I say: drama queens, all of you. It’s like the old man picks his kids based on inability to communicate and/or off-the-charts levels of extra.”

“Cass and Damian can’t entirely be blamed for that though.”

“Yeah, I know what my girl’s been through. And the kid too, plus he’s operating on pretty unfortunate genetics.” Steph paused. “But that’s not the point. It’s not going to get much less awkward if you keep needing a pretense, Jay. But the more you swap out for good habits, the more you can get around your internalized Bat-bullshit.”

There were several moments of silence on the other end. She played her trump card.
“Plus, Alfred made Mexican-chocolate cookies.”

Jason sighed. The long, drawn-out sigh of a man who knew he’d been beat. She didn’t hear that too often from him, which she counted as an even more definitive victory.

“Alright. I’m coming. But only for you.”

“You two-timer!” yelled a male voice in the background. “And here I thought you were only coming for me!”

Jason groaned loudly while Steph burst out laughing.

“That’s my line, Roy! I’m supposed to be the one with the lewd humor!”

“I guess you’re going to have to come first next time.”

“God damn it Roy!”

Still laughing, Steph hung up. The others gave her quizzical looks.

“Good news, everybody. We’re getting another person to hang out with.”

“Why do I have a bad feeling about the look on your face when you said that?”

“Because Tim, you’re paranoid, like your dad. Now shut up and drink your lemonade.”

Bruce was more than a little surprised when his second son’s motorcycle roared into the driveway, spraying gravel as it growled to a halt. Clambering to the ground, he twisted off his helmet before tossing his bare head back, shaking tangled black curls like an impatient mustang.

“Isn’t that the kid of yours who put people’s heads in a duffel bag?” Lucius asked, wiping his mouth.

“Well, that’s mostly the kid who’s big into literature, social rebellion, and compassion for his friends,” Barbara pointed out, leaning back in her seat. “...But yes, that’s also the kid who put people’s heads in a duffel bag.”

“Master Jason is quite the multifaceted young man.”

“You don’t say.”

Bruce pushed his empty plate aside, getting to his feet and walking to the edge of the patio.

“Where are you going?”

“There are no pressing issues right now, especially none that need the whole family. It’s surprising that he’d come with no incentive.”

“You suspect your own son —?” Barbara cut herself off with a groan. “What am I saying, of course you do.”

“I don’t suspect him. I’m surprised.”
Nobody looked convinced.

“Believe what you want, I’m going to go see him.”

As he went through the glass doors back into the house, he heard Barbara say:

“Maybe I should go in after them, just to make sure.”

And people think I’m the only control freak in this family. She already fits in just fine.

Steph felt the thick layer of silence fall over the room when Jason walked in. It lasted a second or two, punctuated by surprised blinking and the false what-are-you-going-to-do-about-it front coming from the man in the living room doorway.

“I gotta say, you were not who I was expecting,” Tim said finally. Suspicion and worry was written across his face.

“I’m usually not.”

The silence shattered, Cass and Tam leapt up from their seats and ran over to him. He greeted Tam with a friendly fist-bump, before wrapping his sister in a hug.

“Hey, scary brother,” Tam said. “How’ve you been doing? You, uh, haven’t killed anyone, have you?” It was phrased like a joke, but Steph could hear the undercurrent of nervousness beneath it.

“The only things I’ve killed recently are the ants in my apartment and my teammates’ patience,” Jason assured her, his arms still around Cass. “Those goody-goody relatives of mine are rubbing off on me.”

Steph nudged Tim at that. Her friend shook his head, some of his suspicion falling away.

“You think they’re goody-goodies?” Luke asked, still sitting on the floor with the dog. “They are not. And another thing, if you think they are, what would that make me?”

“Not yet indoctrinated into the madness that is this family, so not yet to be judged.”

“Lucky me.”

“You have no idea.”

It was then that Bruce stumbled into the room, still in his expensive work suit. Jason jerked back in shock, finally letting go of his sister.

“Jay-lad, what are you doing here?”

He flushed at the nickname. Cass backed up a few steps, her gaze shifting back and forth between her brother and her father.

“Stephanie invited me.”

“But there’s nothing happening that you need to come to. No meetings, no emergencies, not even
any holidays.”

“Yeah, I know.” Still flushed, scowling a bit, he developed a sudden fascination with the tops of his combat boots. “It’s not a crime to visit now, is it? Though even if it were, I probably still would.”

“You’d break the law for us?” Steph piped up. “That’s cute.”

“Aw, shut up.” The blush darkened. “I break the law all the time.”

“Technically, you guys all do,” Tam pointed out. “Breaking and entering, assault, making arrests without a warrant...Jason here’s just kind of a step up. Or, several steps up, depending on what he’s doing.”

Bruce gave his friend’s daughter a surprised look, considering her for a moment before turning back to his son.

“My lunch meeting is over. I suppose...” He cleared his throat. Jason raised an eyebrow; Tim looked apprehensive. “Well, those cookies look excellent. I suppose I could take a few hours off.”

Stephanie felt her mouth drop open, before it spread into a grin as Bruce positioned himself between Tim and Cass.

A breeze ruffled through the open glass doors, through the manor, fluttering the air of the living room. Dust motes caught in the springtime sunlight scattered.

Jason hesitated for a long few moments, then walked forward and seated himself too, across from his family, directly in a pool of light.

“So, Timmy, what were you saying about Thor and the Hulk?”

“You don’t get an opinion on this, Jason.”

“Says who?”

“You’ve only seen the Avengers movies!”

“Yeah, and all that posturing sent me right to sleep. What’s your point?”

“You’re one to talk about posturing.”

“Nerd.”

“This coming from the guy who kept a 3.8 GPA for three years straight.”

“And the fact that you dropped out of high school reflects well on you how?”

“Boys,” Bruce sighed, but there was no real anger behind it.

Stephanie rolled her eyes; as she did, she caught a glimpse of the far doorway where Bruce had come from. Within it, Barbara was waiting in the shadows, surprise and calculation etched across her face.

Uncharacteristically quietly, Steph got to her feet, leaving the others to lightly bicker while Cass swiped the cookies behind their backs. A few paces took her to the other woman in the doorway, tilted back in her chair with her arms folded over her chest.
“Wouldn’t kill you to smile, you know.” Steph gestured to the tableau behind her. “You don’t see any of them brooding. And it’s them, so that’s saying something.”

Barbara did soften as she looked at them.

“Bruce and his kids quiet together. That’s a sight I haven’t seen in a long time.”

“Thanks, Obi-Wan.” Steph met the subsequent unimpressed look with a smirk of her own. “You’re welcome, by the way. Jay and Timmy can bicker all they want, but with we Batgirls around, they’re not going to get into any more cat — or rather, bird — fights.”

“Only ‘with we Batgirls around’ isn’t ideal, but I’ll take it.” Barbara propped her bag up in her lap, albeit with some difficulty finding a place for it. Stephanie, recalling everything being in her way and repeatedly getting stuck in car doors, felt her usual sense of being torn between wanting to laugh and wanting to grimace.

But wanting to laugh was definitely the stronger sensation these days.

“What are you smirking about now?”

“I’m remembering the other day when the cat tried to curl up in your lap and gave you the most offended look when he couldn’t fit.”

“That’s his problem. I have enough to worry about; I have emails to restore and it feels like —”

“The top of your uterus is pressing up into your throat?”

“...Yes.”

“Pfft, you got off easy. Count yourself lucky that Graysons make small babies, and that your only problems are that you’re hungry and horny all the time.”

“My only problems? I don’t need a bra to haul my chest around, I need a wheelbarrow —”

“You realize you’re complaining about this to the girl with B-cup boobs. When people talk about my less-than-mild-mannered alter ego at school, the football team inevitably refers to me as Flatgirl.”

“Men are stupid, and I would kill for B-cup boobs. God knows how Kori and Karen and the rest do this all the time. And also, do you know how hard it is when you have to pee every half hour, and you can’t use your legs, so have to do parkour to use the bathroom?”

“Okay, ugh, that one’s just TMI.”

“You started it.”

The light wool jacket of his uniform dug into his skin, and Damian resisted the urge to scratch at his arms. Instead, he leaned against the stairwell of the student life building and contemplated his surroundings.

Between the unusual white light of the sun and the cherry trees within the wrought-iron gates of the school budding into blossom, Gotham Academy’s buildings and grounds looked almost like they had
been etched out in graphite and white pencil.

Maps and Olive had already left for home, Maya was who knew where, Nell and Colin were still in their last classes at their own schools. His father was staying at the Manor for the whole day.

Several other students walked by, on their way to the adjacent parking lot. Damian dug out his phone, preparing to call a cab.

But his finger froze above the screen as a familiar blue car pulled up nearby.

“Sorry I’m late, Dami. Only just managed to get out of work early; really wish Bruce hadn’t told me he couldn’t pick you up on such short notice.”

Seated in the driver’s seat with the windows down, Dick was in his police uniform; dark circles under his eyes, hair frazzled, still managing a smile. The teenagers heading over to their parents, au pairs, and chauffeurs openly gawped. One sophomore girl hid behind her purse, blushing.

“You didn’t have to take work off just to pick me up, Grayson.”

“I did. The whole family’s at home; I’d like to say hello to them. Besides, you know I like to spend time with you.”

“Yes, you don’t need to say it for the twentieth time. I get it.”

“Big difference between need and want, Dami.”

His skin feeling hot, Damian rolled his eyes, trying to pretend not to be affected. But as he did, several older boys nearby snickered.

“Guess since Wayne’s daddy doesn’t care about him he gets one of his charity cases to baby him instead.”

“Since nobody wanted him when he was at school either —”

“But god knows why this one. My brother says he barely saw him when the dead kid was in school.”

“Don’t you know? Foreign trash like to stick together.”

Damian finally wheeled around.

“Not that you or your moronic cronies would know trash from treasure if it bit you on your abnormally small genitals, Powers, but every one of us is worth a hundred of you, and Richard has been so since long before your syphilitic canker sore of a father decided to spend himself in the wrong hole of your mother’s, thus creating the diseased anus that is you.”

Derek Powers was so taken aback he couldn’t even speak for ten whole seconds, instead taking the time to turn an unattractive shade of puce.

“Damian! Come on! We have to go home!”

Grinning, Damian rushed over to the car, slamming the door shut in his peers’ faces. Rolling up the windows, Dick gave him a look that mingled pride with exasperation.

“I’m glad that you’re defending your family, but I also think you’ve been spending too much time with Jason.”
“Todd wishes he could insult people as effectively as I do.”

“Well, unfortunately I can’t tell you not to piss off people like the Powerses, considering who I and the rest of us have pissed off in our time.” Dick’s smile became a little more dry as he shifted into reverse. “Including each other.”

As the car backed out from in front of the school to reenter the tangled sea of Gotham traffic, Damian shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Unconsciously, he dragged his nails under the wool sleeves, and against his skin.

“Are you still angry with me for escalating that argument with Drake and Todd?”

“I haven’t been angry, per se, since it happened.” Dick kept his eyes trained on the traffic light. “Just frustrated with us, sometimes.”

“I freely admit that we have gotten better. But our life is never going to reflect your hopes, you should know that.”

“We’re certainly never going to be and have the best versions of ourselves and our relationships if we give up.” Dick insisted stubbornly. “And I refuse to be the only one who cares, who takes sole responsibility for that change. You all have that in you. I believe that.”

There was quiet for a few more moments.

“All this change, and you are still both a Pollyanna and a hopeless romantic. Or rather, too hopeful.”

“Give me a break, I didn’t even mention romance this time!”

“It was one of the things on your mind,” Damian said shrewdly. “You hope that she’ll be willing to face her fears for you.”

Dick softened; his shoulders and face relaxing.

“I do hope that she’ll say yes. We’ve come so far over the last few months, it’s become even easier to see a future with her.”

“Just because I approve doesn’t mean you aren’t still disgustingly sappy about her,” his brother complained, eliciting a soft chuckle. “The two of you are going to be those parents that mortify their children with all your awful lust and, even worse, affection.”

“Eh, I think Bruce and Selina already took that position.”

“Don’t remind me.” The boy shuddered with revulsion, watching Dick bite back another laugh. “It’s going to be so odd to think of you as married. It was odd enough thinking of you begetting a child, at first.”

“And jealousy-inducing. I know you didn’t want to share me. But you got over that, didn’t you? Now you’re a self-made pregnancy expert, and you keep volunteering to babysit —”

“You know I don’t trust your friends.”

“— and I’m thinking you could be one of my boy’s godparents.”

Damian’s mouth fell open. He gaped.

“...Really?” His voice was very small.
“Yeah, we’ve agreed that it makes sense. You and Cass, along with Dinah and Wally. I’m proud of you, Damian.”

He sunk down in his seat, fabric crinkling, his face feeling like it was on fire.

“That’s...an insignificant thing to be proud of me for, Richard.”

“And I’m proud of you for how far you’ve come in general.” His brother’s loving gaze was still trained on him. “You’ve only been with us for two years, but in that time, you’ve grown so much, become so much. You have no idea how proud I am of you.”

“Point made.” Damian knew how small his voice was, how red his face must be. “I have accomplished a lot, so even the others, especially even Father and our moron brothers, have and can do that too.”

Dick leaned over and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“I love you so much.”

“Hmm.” For a moment, Damian allowed himself to be hugged. “I love you too.” Two cars nearby honked obnoxiously at them. “But you need to keep your eyes on the road, you idiot.”

“And he’s back,” Dick teased as he sat up again, ignoring the obscenities from the other drivers.

Damian settled back into his seat, cheeks and ears still hot, but feeling oddly light nonetheless.

Barbara lay on the couch, watching the numbers scrawl down her screen, listening to the chatter of the others a few feet away.

“— And when I was picking out my gift for the baby shower,” Tim said, “I couldn’t decide whether to get a Luke Skywalker or Princess Leia blankie, and so while I’m on the website looking at them both, Jason comes up behind me and says ‘Screw that, get the baby a Darth Vader blankie.’”

“So that’s why you got him a BB-8 blankie,” Tam exclaimed, grinning.

Jason pointed dramatically at Tim, clenching his index finger and thumb in a circle.

“Be careful not to choke on your blankie aspirations, Timothy.”

“...Jason, what is it like living with you?”

“You know,” Stephanie mused, “it’s actually fitting, since Barbara’s kind of like BB-8 herself.”

“Because...she’s cute and ginger?”

“No, because she’s round, rolls everywhere, and only speaks in computer noises.”

Barbara’s head whipped around.

“I heard that, Stephanie!”

Almost everyone stifled a laugh while Steph cackled. Even Bruce bit back a smile. In the face of all
that, she rolled her eyes and heaved a very long sigh.

“Seriously, enough with the fat jokes. Next one of you’re going to be telling me that when I wear yellow and go downtown, everyone yells ‘Taxi!’”

“No, I have some standards, and that is both an obvious and terrible joke.”

“So, like...something Dick would say.” Cass remarked, giggling slightly. “The first thing you thought of...is something Dick would say.”

Jason snickered loudly at that, his laughter only increasing when Barbara shot a look over at him.

“Y’see Barbie, what that means is that...” He paused. “Dick’s rubbing off on you.”

Most of the room yelled in unison while Barbara hid both a laugh and a grimace, Bruce buried his face in his hands, and Jason cackled hysterically at his own joke.

“Oh yeah. Still got it.”

“I’m far too afraid to ask what you just said to them, Todd.”

Dropping her hand from in front of her mouth, Barbara looked up and smiled genuinely at the uniformed pair standing behind her couch. Damian’s mouth was twisted in disgust and concern, but his brow was unusually relaxed. Dick regarded the scene before him with curiosity.

“You guys all together?” he queried. “There’s no big family meeting or emergency happening.”

“Almost all together,” Tam pointed out, an expression on her face like she was still recovering from Jason. “Dad’s in the kitchen helping Alfred wash up. But hey, these guys are pretty okay company...mostly.”

“Mostly...?” Tim shrugged. “I’ll take it.”

The curious look broke into a grin.

“So you guys have just been hanging out all afternoon?”

“Don’t smirk at me Dickhead, I’m only here because Steph asked me here.”

“But nobody made you stay, Little Wing.”

Jason shot Barbara a look of betrayal.

“Oh god, are you taking his side?”

“Perhaps.”

Still beaming, Dick bent down over the couch and kissed her, which she returned warmly. This was greeted by a generous reception of disgust.

“Ugh, get a room,” Tim groaned while his brothers made faces.

They broke apart. Barbara, hit by another bolt of inspiration, shot the family her best diabolical look, the kind she usually reserved for supervillains or teasing her friends.

“We did get a room.” She gestured to her belly. “How do you think I wound up like this?”
She was instantly rewarded with everyone yelling even louder than before; Damian emphatically pretended to vomit, Dick looked incredibly smug, and poor Bruce seemed to age ten years in two seconds.

“Yeah. Not so good when you’re on the receiving end of that, huh?”

Jason shook his head.

“At this family. Now my trademark’s gone; I don’t even have the monopoly on morbid or self-deprecating or dirty jokes anymore.”

Amid the chaos, Stephanie just scoffed at him.

“If that’s your only complaint about this family right now, quite frankly, I think you guys might finally be doing something right.”

By the time Alfred had started the preparations for dinner, his house was still full. Bruce was half-tempted to invite the rest of Gotham’s vigilantes along with the better members of the police force just to round it all off.

Luke had headed down to the Cave with Cassandra and Stephanie to tinker with his suit, while the girls went to find their own suits for the night’s patrol. Tim, Lucius, and Tam were discussing something in the lounge. Jason had gone up to the library, while Dick had gone to help Damian with his homework (despite Damian’s protests that he didn’t need help).

Bruce had been on his way to the kitchen to see what was for dinner, with a possible stop in the lounge to check up on what they were talking about there...but paused halfway across the living room.

Barbara was still lying across his couch, holding up her tablet as she worked. She looked less rigid than he was used to from her; focused, as she always had been, but not frantic.

He’d always noticed her drive, ever since she was barely more than a child. Her sheer force of will had always impressed him, albeit grudgingly at times, i.e. when it was directed against him. What he thought was right, for himself or her or others. Facing her head-on, the way he did, was no good; for sheer force of stubbornness she usually outmatched him. He knew that well, from much experience over the years.

As he lingered in the center of the rich red-gold-and-indigo Azerbaijani rug, she glanced up from the blue-white glow of the screen.

“Are you still there, Bruce?”

“Are you still working?”

She adjusted her glasses, glancing down at the scrolls of binary.

“My algorithm is, at least. Should be a few minutes now.”

“While you wait...” Bruce felt the words swell up in his throat. “I’m going to the kitchen. There are a few of those spicy chocolate cookies left, if you’d like that.”
Barbara looked at him for a few moments.

“Sure, I’ll come with.”

She powered off the tablet, sliding it back into her bag. Then, she partially sat up. Stopping halfway. Bruce stared quizzically. She made another jerking motion forward, still not sitting up all the way, then yet another attempt, with just as little progress.

She exhaled hard, dropping her upper body back down.

“What’s the matter?”

She gave him an extremely pained look.

“I realize this request may be unnecessary, since it’s you, but...please promise me you won’t laugh.”

“I laugh. Sometimes.”

Barbara let out another long puff of air.

“I can’t get up. I’m stuck.”

He stared some more. Then his brain provided him with the image of a turtle stuck on its back; little legs flailing in the air.

Except if the turtle’s shell was in reverse.

“Don’t worry, it’s not funny,” he said gravely, suppressing the desire to laugh uproariously. “Do you want me to help you?”

“Ugh. Please. And also, please don’t tell the kids.”

He pushed his hands under her back and knees, scooping her up into his arms. She was heavy; when she was young she’d been almost light. He’d had to carry her quite a few times after she’d sustained fighting-induced injuries, to a great deal of protest from her, a feeling of protectiveness coming over him for this mouthy girl he hadn’t learned to trust just yet.

For though she was his friend’s beloved daughter, for though even then Dick had favored and vouched for her (he rolled his eyes at the memory, at his past assurance that nothing would come of his boy’s crush), she’d still had to prove herself as herself. But maybe even then he’d known, deep down, that she would. Many times over.

“Are you getting nostalgic again?” she asked as he carried her. “You have that look in your eyes.”

“Nostalgia’s my trademark.”

“And here I thought it was your tendency to speak in grunts and those cute little ears on your cowl.”

“Yes, that makes me nostalgic too: you mocking me. You’ve been doing that for a very long time.”

“Mocking you is us sidekicks’ trademark.”

He eased her down into her wheelchair, rough hands brushing along her abdomen. His pulse caught.

“It’s still hard to believe that one of my sidekicks became...” As his heart hammered, his throat
seemed to close up again. “Everything that you did.”

Settling into her chair, she fixed her piercing gaze upon him.

“I know I’m not the first to say this, but you need to tell all of them that you’re proud, Bruce,” she said firmly. “Way more often. And you need to hug them, too. Dick carries so much on him, Tim and Jason were starved for affection for long periods of time and fear losing it, Damian used to think he couldn’t get it from anyone but Dick, Cass looks up to you more than almost anyone, and Steph still worries about her place here.”

“I —”

“I know you love us. I know pretty much everything, remember?” Her eyes sparkled. “But positive habits, actions, are important, especially if you’re trying to do better than before.”

“You’re speaking from experience, aren’t you.” It wasn’t a question.

She kept looking up at him, keeping firm eye contact. Wrapped in soft wool and cotton, her hair in delicate waves around her face, she was as steady as iron.

“It’s how I know it so well.”

Bruce sighed softly, acutely feeling the years upon him. Her advice, along with the earlier words from Alfred and Kate and Lucius and Selina, among others, seemed to settle into the lining of his chest.

“You are invaluable to me, Barbara. And not just because you’re my friend’s daughter, my son’s partner, or my grandson’s mother.”

She started. Then as the words sank in, her gaze softened.

“You finally gonna unplug all those emotions, old man?” Her voice was gentle.

“Actually...” His hands twisted, rough, calloused, against each other. His voice was similarly twisted with awkward hesitation. “I was thinking I might start with giving you a hug.”

She didn’t hesitate; reached up and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, just as he bent to wrap his arms around hers. It was a bit stiff, the positioning more than a little awkward; full of strength and warmth. It reminded him of how he and Cassandra hugged each other.

As they pulled apart, she was smiling.

“Let’s go grab those cookies before Jason comes back and scarfs them all down himself.”

“Agreed.”

But before they could make it to the kitchen, a sharp beeping emerged from her bag.

They looked at it in unison. A beat passed.

Then she quickly unzipped it; unlocking her tablet as he bent over her shoulder to see what was going on.

The strings of numbers had given way to display a series of messages. Emails. Which he knew from experience that, given a few days, she could trace back to the original sender.
For a minute, they were both speechless.

“I take it your algorithm worked.”

She wheeled around, meeting his eyes again. And again, she was grinning, this time with triumph.

“Go get the others. We’ve got more good news to share.”
The World

Chapter Notes

The eye of the hurricane’s almost at an end; last chapter before the storm comes back with a vengeance.

(Warnings: non-explicit (and not serious, but just to be safe) mentions of incest, mentions of having to give up a child, non-explicit references to child prostitution and past sexual assault)


In the last few months, many women had come and gone from the waiting room where Barbara now sat. Only four were about as far along as she was, that she’d gotten to know well as they progressed at the same time: Cherry, an Art Deco-loving businesswoman who lived out in the Diamond District; Fatima, a friendly Egyptian immigrant with an affinity for science fiction; Paulette, a volatile teenage girl at odds with her parents and talented at stick-and-poke tattoos; and Annabelle, who’d moved up from the South to study fashion and wore a lot of flowing dresses.

Along the way, they’d been joined by Frida, Daphne, LaKeisha, Rosie, Winifred, Carol, Jin Soo, and Imelda, all of whom were now submerged in magazines or conversation. Of those women, only three, including Barbara, regularly brought their significant others: Cherry, who brought her husband Khalil, and Annabelle, who brought her wife Ida-Jean.

“Lesbians from Alabama?” Cherry had remarked when she’d found out, shaking back her neat cornrows. “Isn’t that an oxymoron?”

“And here I thought Alabama only recognized same-family marriages,” had been Paulette’s contribution.

“Ha ha ha. Y’all are thinkin’ of Kentucky.”

In the present, Cherry and Annabelle looked as content as Barbara felt, but several of the unaccompanied women gazed enviously at Dick as he chatted with Khalil and Ida-Jean. Paulette, barely seventeen, looked particularly frustrated, kicking her boots against the linoleum, slumped down into her arms.

The two of them were in nearly opposite situations. After months of gleaning information, she now knew full well that the father wasn’t claiming responsibility, the girl’s family was ashamed of her,
and they were forcing her to have a closed adoption.

Struck once again by sympathy, Barbara lowered her book and leaned in close to her.

“Do you need to talk to someone?” she said quietly.

“I already told you, I told you a million times, I don’t need to talk. I need to get my fucking parents off my back.”

Barbara was quiet for a moment. Then she snapped *The Red Tent* shut.

“Okay, well, if you’re not going to talk, then you’re going to listen.”

“You’re not my fucking therapist —”

“*Listen.*”

The girl was quiet.

“Full disclosure? Your parents and your ex-boyfriend are assholes.” She was rewarded with a reluctant laugh, which encouraged her. “You made a mistake, Paulette, but don’t you feel like you’re forever damned because of it. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“...Easy for you to say. Look at you. You’re happy with yourself, you have a job that you like, lots of friends, and *that* man is the father of your baby?” She gestured over to Dick, all easy smiles and crinkled blue eyes, halfway through a joke about Lex Luthor and Superman. “You have it easy.”

“I didn’t always have all that, all those good things in my life. And when I didn’t, it was often *my* fault.” She took a deep breath, fighting back the old surges of guilt. “The fact that you can point those things out about me now is proof that a mistake, a bad beat, doesn’t necessarily doom you. You can always change, get better.”

Paulette’s black eyebrows, a sharp contrast to her green hair, shot up slightly. Her expression softened.

“And if you still don’t believe me? Dick’s sister’s girlfriend, *she* had a baby that she gave up for adoption when she was a kid, even younger than you.” She drew out her phone, pulling up a picture of Steph from the previous week with her arms around Tim’s and Cass’s shoulders, all of them illuminated mid-laugh in the spring sunlight. “This is her now.”

“...Those look like some good friends.”

“That’s important too. Who you choose to let in to your life, to befriend and to trust...they can absolutely make your life, even the mistakes and difficulties, so much better.”

“— and then he said ‘No Lex, Superboy gets it from your side of the family!’”

Ida-Jean groaned loudly, muttering something about how this was why she was gay while Dick and Khalil howled with laughter. Cherry met Barbara’s gaze from several chairs down, rolling her eyes.

“That being said, *some* of the people you love and trust get on your nerves every once in a while.”
“So what does that mean?”

Bruce sat before the assembled information; the restored emails that Barbara had uploaded to the Batcomputer. Behind him, Damian stood on his tiptoes to see over his father’s chair, peering at the screen; Alfred the Cat meandering around the boy’s ankles. Upon clicking each, Bruce was able to witness the digital trail that led back to Avery Drew’s computer scrawl across the enormous screen.

“Would you prefer the version Oracle gave me, or the short version?”

“Short version.”

“Paulo Lache and the man who both conducted and died in the bombing, who we now know as Raymond Dale, were both hired via the email address alethinophidia@outreach.com, with no name given by the sender, and they were both offered large amounts of money to be wired to them, one to kill Dinah Laurel Lance, and one to conduct a terrorist attack on where the Fox family and former Robins were sure to be, both of which had instructions enclosed —”

“Father, is it possible to make the short version shorter?”

Bruce huffed out a grunt.

“She finished the process her recovery algorithm started. She was able to restore the emails that incriminate Drew in the bombing and in the attempt on Black Canary’s life.”

“There, Master Bruce, was that so hard?” Alfred — the original — snarked, coming up behind father and son with a tray of chai tea and apple scones, regarding the computer. “Admittedly, most of the intricacies of Miss Barbara’s work are lost on me, but I am duly impressed with the outcome of it.”

“As am I.” Grabbing a scone in one hand, Damian just managed to reach up and rest his other arm over the back of Bruce’s chair. “I believe this will be enough for an arrest warrant, and a good basis for prosecuting him in court. She has done it.”

“She really has.” Bruce felt a smile crack through his professional demeanor. “A short wait for the police to process the evidence and write up a warrant, and then Python will be off the streets. And while we wait for a trial, we can convince his thugs to give us testimonies for the jury.”

“Believe me Father, I will be happy to convince them,” Damian said threateningly while Alfred wiped scone crumbs off his chin and the front of his uniform. “Cease, Pennyworth, I can do that myself!”

“Speaking as the one who does your laundry Master Damian, I beg to differ.”

This time, Bruce felt a chuckle slip through, brushing aside the scowl his youngest shot him at that.

“I’ll be glad when she wraps this case up. It’s been a load on all our minds, but especially on hers.”

“She’ll be glad to hear that you care, Master Bruce.” Alfred had begun pouring out the tea into separate cups, doling out cream and sugar. “And that you wish her peace. Especially since she’ll be having your grandchild in mere weeks.”

Both Waynes perked up instantly at the thought, exchanging looks of barely-suppressed happiness. Alfred hid a knowing smile behind one hand.

Damian scooped up the cat and began scratching him under the chin, encouraged by vigorous purring. Damian himself seemed equally content.
“You should ready yourself, Father. Not only will you have a grandchild soon, but a daughter-in-law as well. How old does that make you feel?”

“Very.” Bruce slowly got to his feet, minimizing the tab. Barbara had already since sent the information to her own father. The arrest warrant seemed almost tangible to him now. “Maybe I should take my tea and scones in a rocking chair this afternoon.”

“I wholeheartedly agree.” Bruce realized that Damian didn’t know he’d been being facetious, and was about to clarify when Alfred chimed in.

“Perhaps you would also like me to drape a blanket around your shoulders, as you seem to be embracing your age and decrepitude.”

“You’re older than me.” He sounded embarrassingly petulant.

“No response for being decrepit, sir?”

Damian snorted with mirth while Bruce glared at both of them.

“I take it back. I am not looking forward to having two more people in my family mocking me.”

“Please,” Damian scoffed, “You have nothing to worry about. Infants don’t talk. And more importantly, Gordon’s been mocking you for years. That’s not going to change one way or another based on her marital status.”

“Hrm. For once, I hate that you’re right.”

The doctor smiled at them.

“Well, as you can see, everything still looks good. Nothing more to say except just relax and take it easy, and I’ll see you in three weeks for the surgery.”

They thanked her as Barbara eased into her chair, and they headed back out to the supportive beams and encouragement from the other women in the waiting room. Several waved. Several more remarked to each other about how lucky she was. Fatima kissed both cheeks, Annabelle and Cherry hugged her, Paulette even offered a smile.

“Maybe I should take it easy for the last couple weeks,” she remarked as they made their way through the obstetrics wing, the walls emblazoned with cheerful pastels and beaming cartoon animals. “I’ve got the Python case just about in the bag, and just in time to stop him from hurting any of the family. Get Proxy to handle some of the more local stuff, stay on call for the close family and the major things, but not sweat the little issues...I mean, I’ve wanted to learn Mandarin for a while now...”

“You’re going to take going on a break as the chance to learn one of the hardest languages in the world? Classic you.”

“It’s very commonly spoken, and practical in today’s economy. Besides, you chose to work two extremely taxing jobs, you can’t talk.”

Dick stretched his arms up over his head, bending slightly and wincing.
“You got a point there. Maybe we should both take it easy for a while. Who knows when we’re going to get another opportunity like that with our lifestyles plus a newborn in the house?”

She exhaled softly.

“Yeah. I know you like to take do the responsible thing for others all the time, but right now I think taking care of yourself is actually the most responsible thing to do.”

“You think so?”

“I do. And it’d be good to have some time together, just us, before the baby comes. It’d be good for both of us, all around. And I’d...enjoy it. A lot.”

He reached down and took her hand. She paused, just before the elevators, looking up into those eyes like she’d done countless times over the years, still never growing sick of it.

“What I do without you, Babs? Not even in the romantic sense; without that level of knowledge and caring and trust. How many men can legitimately say that the person they’re in love with really is their best friend?”

The sheer adoration in his voice brought warmth to her chest and face. Not breaking eye contact, feeling herself smile, she reached over and pressed the elevator button.

“To your second question, I doubt we’ll ever know. To your first...I don’t ever want to find out.”

“Everything is ready.”

Drew surveyed the room full of men before him with excitement; none of his usual disdain. There were nearly two dozen of them now, all with disturbingly low IQs, but despite their thuggishness and lack of personal hygiene and the grammatical incoherence of their slang, he could only face them with all the malicious joy he felt.

“How soon, boss?” one man asked eagerly.

“Very. A week, at the most, I’d say.”

“A week?” a different one whined. “That’s too long. Why do we gotta wait that long?”

Normally, so much complaining would be an intolerable offense, but Drew was in a good mood.

“Because he alternates his time between Gotham and Bludhaven, so our timeframe to catch him is limited. Even more so because he’s usually accompanied by one of the other Bats. We must wait for him to be alone, and take him by surprise.” Drew allowed himself a smile at the thought.

A third man scratched his head with the butt of his gun.

“If all that’s true, how do you know we can even get ‘im?”

The others froze up. Drew very slowly turned in the man in question’s direction, who now looked deeply regretful.
“Are you questioning me, Ward?”

“N-not you, boss,” Ward stammered, cringing back. “Me, and the others. I dunno if we can catch Nightwing.”

“You will catch Nightwing within the week, incompetent and stupid as you are, if you do as I say and follow the plan.” Drew’s head snapped up. “And remember, all of you: I want him brought to me alive. You do not want to know what I’ll do to you if you kill him before I can.”

Frantic nods all around. It was nearly a minute before anyone else spoke.

“What if there’re witnesses? Not Bats. Normal people.”

“Ah.” Drew was dismissive. “Them you can kill. In fact, you should.”

Recovering their bravado, they began exchanging nasty grins.

“If you all understand, you’re dismissed.”

Each hoisting their new tranquilizer gun, the formula strengthened since the failed attempt on Black Canary, the men began to file out, talking eagerly to each other.

“It’s been ten years since the first Robin ruined my chances to work for the Joker, I can’t wait to rough him up now —”

“Nightwing got rid of the cops in Bludhaven I actually liked —”

“ — And he got Blockbuster killed, put me out of a job for months —”

“When he was Batman, he let that little bastard Robin beat me within an inch of my life —”

“We may not be allowed to kill him, but d’you think the boss’ll let us watch him die?”

“Oh, I hope so.”

The door clicked shut behind them.

Alone in the gray room, humming with electricity, Drew settled back into his office chair. A bank loan wasn’t going to last him too much longer, especially since he was still unemployed. Yet another reason to look forward to taking Oracle down soon; he’d be free to rob fifty CEOs if he wanted. With no competition, he could pick this city, any city, clean.

A lazy smile crossed his lips as he imagined the future.

Who could stop him with her gone? No one else but him, especially none of the heroes, were as skilled as she was at what they did. He could come out of the shadows. Get the praise and fear and awe he was due for. Gotham’s rogues would go down on bended knee to thank him for crippling and eliminating those pesky vigilantes.

His breath caught; fingers trembling on the keyboard. He could almost taste the sweetness of the future on his lips.

As he daydreamed, the cameras in the building ran on silently. Once, they had delivered live footage back to Wayne Enterprises. Now, they were linked directly to his computer; every room, everything that happened, poured into his files in high definition, loud and true.
Barbara didn’t mind the chilly wind, the threat of rain from the low-hanging lavender clouds. She’d exchanged companions, and exchanged the sleek hospital for the warm steamy interior of Stephanie’s favorite diner, but her good mood carried over. Sipping coffee, not even minding that it was decaf, she let the girls chatter as Solange crooned from hidden speakers.

“— So then he said, ‘How do you even know she’s one of those? It’s not like she could’ve told you.’”

Cass snorted.

“Yeah, right? And then I said, ‘Dude, it literally says so right in her Twitter bio. *Princess of the Amazons, Ambassador of Themyscira, Justice League co-founder, daughter and sister. I use she/her pronouns, and I am proudly bisexual.* Can you not read, Grant — actually no, you probably can’t.”

“From what you’ve said about Grant, it seems like he’d benefit from seeing what Diana has to say on Twitter,” Barbara remarked. “Did you see her response to that guy who tried to explain to her that Luthor’s presidency actually benefited the country?”

Steph exclaimed affirmatives while Cass nodded eagerly.

“It was the best thing I’ve seen since this place started putting fresh garlic bread on the side of their spaghetti and meatballs.”

“They did?”

“And it’s *baguette* garlic bread!”

“Well I guess I know what I’m having for lunch.”

As if summoned, the waitress reappeared, beaming a perfect toothpaste-ad smile. She was in her early thirties, slight laughter lines around her brown eyes, texturized curls dyed a warm honey blonde.

“Have you ladies made up your minds yet?”

Stephanie requested a tall order of chocolate chip waffles and maple syrup, Cassandra opted for a barbecue burger and fries, and Barbara asked for the aforementioned pasta.

“Coming right up,” the waitress chirped, pocketing her notebook. “And may I say, Stephanie, you have very lovely friends.”

“Thanks. But actually Danielle, Cass’s my girlfriend.”

“And I’m...*her* daughter.”

Danielle, who hadn’t even blinked twice at “girlfriend,” looked confusedly between Cass and Barbara.
“She’s adopted.”

“Ah, I see.” She began topping off each of their drinks. “I bet you’re all very happy, but it must be a little strange getting a younger sibling in your twenties, Cass.”

“More like...a nephew.”

“Come again?”

Cass jerked her head in Barbara’s direction.

“The father of her baby...is my brother.”

The subsequent look on the poor woman’s face could’ve been immortalized in a museum of great art, so many emotions were conveyed upon it. It took her a full five seconds before she realized she was overflowing Steph’s cup.

“I...um...I’m going to go input your orders.” She scurried away, one hand clapped over her mouth.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Steph began howling with laughter, while Barbara dropped her forehead into her palm.

“Cassandra, you have got to stop telling people that.”

“But...it’s the truth,” Cass said innocently.

“And now I’m not going to be able to come back, especially not with Dick, without explaining how convoluted our family is.”

“You’d — better — enjoy that garlic bread — while you can,” Stephanie wheezed between laughs. Barbara chucked an open sugar packet at her, the white crystals exploding all over her forehead so that the chortles became splutters.

“Nice of you.”

“Says the girl who thinks it’s funny to imply to strangers that her family’s a bunch of incestuous dysfunctional maniacs.”

“Two out of three is true.”

“Alright, I’ll give you that one.” Barbara emptied a cup of half-and-half into her refilled coffee as Steph combed sugar out of her hair. “What a crowd I’ve chosen to add to.”

Cass’s faux-innocent look finally dropped down into a more relaxed expression.

“Everyone is excited...to be added to, though.”

“No kidding.” Steph picked the last of the sugar out of her eyebrows. “Even fucking Bruce is all excited and being nice. And yet, pigs aren’t flying and the core of the earth is still molten.”

“Actually, the inner core of the earth is solid, the outer core and mantle are molten.”

“Thanks Ms. Frizzle, way to undermine my point.” Stephanie rolled her eyes. “As I was saying, if you really do plan on resting, literally a whole family and city full of vigilantes will be willing to step up and/or babysit for you later. Damian’s taking it scary seriously, actually.”
“That kid’s alright,” she said warmly. “But you’ll actually step up your work, on top of everything else? I’ll owe you big time for that.”

“After all you’ve done...for us...” Cassandra shrugged. “You don’t...owe us shit. We don’t...keep score.”

She froze with her mug halfway to her lips, watching them over the rims of her glasses. The girls were still for a few moments, as the diner clattered and flowed with conversation around them, the smell of frying meat and sweet pastries permeating the steamy air.

“But if you really want to do something nice for us, you could pay for lunch,” Steph finally suggested.

“How many more times am I going to have to pay for your food, Stephanie?”

“Think of it as practice for when your kid’s a teenager.”

“So you’ll still be around then to tell me that all your mooching off me in your college days helped develop my patience?”

“Bitch, I will absolutely still be around then. I will work my ass off and get my god damn bachelor’s degree and save the god damn city a few more times and I will help you raise your son.”

Barbara couldn’t help but smile.

“So you can try to become his favorite aunt and rub this in my face?”

“Exactly.” Stephanie returned the smile. The girl’s eyes were alight with passion.

Meanwhile, Cassandra’s were soft with affection, teasing lightheartedness in her voice.

“What makes you think...I won’t be the favorite aunt?”

“I’ll be the fun one.”

“But I will be...the cool one.”

“Are you saying I’m not cool?”

“Yes.”

“Some girlfriend you are. Babs! Is a law degree one of the seven million you have? I want a divorce.”

The smile turned to laughter as the girls playfully squabbled. Even poor Danielle’s pained look as she brought them their food couldn’t quite disturb their peace.

He knew it wasn’t quite a typical occasion, seeing Nightwing in Gotham. It was even more unusual seeing him in the middle of the afternoon, as made clear in all the stares he’d gotten as he’d swept through downtown on patrol.
Something else felt a little off to him, though. As he perched on a rooftop, scoping out a seedy-looking establishment, a bulky man lingered near the entrance, not entering. Staring. Staring up at the cluster of dilapidated apartment complexes where Dick had situated himself.

The longer he and the man stayed, the more uncomfortable he felt. But on the other hand, he’d been chasing Emil Levesque, the mysterious shipping magnate, for three months, and he was certain that *Le Oiseau Mort* was an extension of Levesque’s side business...

“Waiting around and watching never struck me as quite your style, Nightwank.”

“Super mature of you, Hood,” he said without any real heat, lowering his binoculars. He’d heard his brother’s heavy boots on the crumbling concrete about a minute previously. “I take it you’ve already heard of Emil Levesque?”

“Runs shipping companies out of Bludhaven and Gotham, worth about a couple million, also happens to be a scumbag dealing in underage teenagers, yep. Scarlett and Jewel heard all about this guy through the grapevine. Luckily, they know how I feel about people who abuse kids.”

“I take it Scarlett and Jewel are more of your working-girl friends.”

“I have a lot of working-girl friends. And a lot of friends in general. Petty thief friends, mercenary friends, sell-you-out-for-a-corn-chip-professional-informant friends, you name it. However, I know that guy down there, and he is definitely not my friend.”

Dick looked to where Jason was pointing. The man who’d been lingering, who was now getting annoyed looks from the bouncer, who suddenly looked disgruntled at Jason’s appearance.

“Mario Degrassi. Used to work for the Falcons. That is, until Demon Baby unleashed himself on the mobs’ hired muscle after they tried to put a hit on you. Degrassi was in traction for...what was it? A month? Anyway, his kill count was at least a hundred before the kid broke all his fingers.” Jason snorted quietly. “Never let it be said he’s not protective of you.”

Dick did remember that. Six months into Damian’s stint as Robin, he was still having difficulty restraining his killing instincts; meanwhile the man beside him had taken up violent globe-trotting with two of his best friends, Cass had been in Hong Kong, Bruce had been presumed dead, Tim had been in Europe looking for clues towards disproving that presumption, Steph had been running wild, things had still been awkward between him and Babs...

“Honestly, the crime families having a hit on me was the best thing about that time.”

“Sounds about right,” Jason agreed. “Roy and Kori were so worried about you...I could never get them to shut up. Heh, maybe if you hadn’t been Batman, I might’ve figured out a few months sooner which Robin Roy was really in love with.”

Dick shifted in place, caught between sympathy for his brother and worry about their current situation.

“Jay, Roy and Kori love you. And as far as I can tell, the new members of your Outlaws love you too — it’s um, a little hard to tell with Artemis.”

“And she was being open and friendly, comparatively, to you.”

“My point is, there’s more than enough love to go around. It’s not like it can all be used up on one person. You just have to give people a chance to show it, preferably a chance that doesn’t involve death and explosions.”
“Thanks, Princess Anna.” Jason abruptly grabbed the binoculars right out of his hands, peering down towards the door. “Degrassi’s leaving. Whatever he was planning, I guess it didn’t account for my illustrious presence.”

Sure enough, the tiny figure had slunk away, blending back in with the dull grays of his surroundings. A touch of worry melted from Dick’s shoulders.

“I don’t like that we still don’t know what he was planning, though.” He paused. “Frozen references? And I’m supposed to be the cheesy one?”

“I live with a six-year-old, shut up.” Jason lowered the binoculars. “And I also don’t like that Levesque still hasn’t left yet. By all accounts, if he’s sticking to his usual schedule, he should’ve left ten minutes ago.”

“And he doesn’t seem like the type to be late...”

Dick was two seconds away from connecting the dots on his own when the first gunshot rang out.

“Get down!”

Jason grabbed him by the front of his uniform and hauled him down. A few sharp clicks —

“Cover your ears.”

“What?”

“I said cover your ears, Nitwing. It’s you they’re shooting at; you’ve been after Levesque longer.”

Dick decided that now was not the time to argue, just managing to cover his ears in time before answering fire rang out from his younger brother’s favorite AK-47. From below them, several goons, previously masquerading as people in line for the club, wailed in agony, the rest scattering.

“Cowards.” Jason reloaded. “Now, if we’re in luck, we’ll have twenty minutes or so before they can regroup, and so Levesque’ll be outgunned when we get in there.”

“Even if he’s not, he’s due for a reckoning for hurting kids.” Dick clicked the shock function on his escrima to life. Jason chuckled darkly.

The two brothers darted for the fire escape, but as Jason jumped onto the creaky metal, Dick paused.

“Hey. Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Saving me.”

Jason froze in place.

“I, uh, didn’t mean anything by it. It was just instincts.”

“So, your first instinct is to protect me?”

It was impossible to see through the helmet, but Dick was sure that his brother was blushing.

“Hey Little Wing, for what it’s worth, I would’ve done the same if it’d been you.”
“Pfft, okay.”

“I’m serious. I know you think you’re the least favorite sibling —”

“Alright.”

“But you’re one of us. And I know you care; we care about you too.”

For a long few seconds, the two of them stood in silence.

“I used to look up to you. You were my big brother, my hero. But everyone expected me to be like you. And I can’t do that. I’m not good like you.”

His sigh was soft.

“I wasn’t born incorruptible or with unending stamina, Jay. I wanted to kill Tony Zucco for what he did to my parents. I wanted to kill the Joker for what he did to you, to Barbara. I came so close, I very nearly beat him to death. He wasn’t the only one; I’ve beaten other criminals within an inch of their lives because they pissed me off. I know I wasn’t great to you when you were a kid, that I hurt Tim. I resented Bruce for years for not opening up more, for hiding, for lying; we used to fight constantly when I was younger.

There’ve been times when I felt like I was coming apart under the weight of everything that’s happened to me, what Zucco did to me, what Desmond did to me, what Mirage and Catalina did to me, what the people I’ve loved did to me, and under the weight of everyone I chose to bear. Other times I wanted to rage and rage until I was spent. I still feel like that sometimes. And all that? That’s not even close to everything.”

Silence.

Then Jason let out a long ragged breath.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Maybe I thought it was better for you to resent me than to worry about me. Now we both know I was wrong.”

“Yeah, speaking of B, that’s a little too much like what he does.”

They both let out strained laughs. A few more moments passed before either knew what to say.

“...Did I ever tell you that I saw you performing in the circus when I was a kid, just like Tim did? Maybe it was even at the same show... anyway, I was little. Barely old enough to remember. But I did remember.”

“What did you remember?”

“That you were amazing. That I admired you. Hyperactivity and stupid outfits fitting for a nine-year-old included, even.”

There passed a few more moments of silence, longer and heavier than before.

Then, a familiar sigh and soft chuckle echoed down Dick’s ear.

“You boys do know your mics have been hot for the last hour, right?”
Dick felt his face heat up while Jason spluttered. Probably feeling a lot more embarrassed than Dick did; at least he was *used* to opening himself up in front of her.

“Why the hell didn’t you say anything, Oracle?”

“Because Nightwing’s whispered renditions of various Bruno Mars songs were very entertaining, and I liked your insights when you were soliloquizing to yourself about the *Jurassic Park* sequels and *Brave*.” She allowed herself another chuckle while the brothers stood dumbfounded. “And because this kind of talk was long overdue between the two of you. I’m proud. Good luck with Emil Levesque, by the way.” The connection went dead.

A few more seconds of silence.

“*Brave*?”

“Okay, talk’s over. Shut up.”

“You gonna blame that one on the six-year-old too?”

“Shut. Up.”

Tim felt unusually happy with himself. He’d willingly taken a shower and cleaned up his room (sort of), and remembered to take his meds with no reminders. Not only that, but he and Damian had been in the same building all day without a serious dispute.

“Making yourself useful for once, Drake?” the boy had remarked cheerfully, leaning over the back of the couch to peer over Tim’s shoulder. The cat purred contentedly in his arms. “Ah, busying yourself with the company. Good, since you spent all of last weekend letting other people work and cavorting with the Titans instead.”

“I wasn’t *cavorting*, I was fighting Deathstroke. And trying to mediate between him and Rose. Which was not fun, let me tell you, but it did put a lot of things about us and Bruce in perspective.” Tim wheeled the laptop around to show Damian. “And I’d take that over paperwork any day.”

Damian squinted at the reports.

“Sales are down in Japan and Korea again, I see. You need to fire Robert Hancock; you and I both know he’s skimming profits.”

“Rob Hancock Sr.’s on the board of directors, that’s not going to be easy.”

“Still, though. Wasn’t the younger one in the marketing section of Batman Incorporated before he was transferred? If I recall correctly, he was the fool responsible for those ridiculous Batgirl toys and posters.”

Tim winced viscerally at the memory.

“Boy, did the girls have words when Bruce and I brought the prototypes home. Steph and Cass were pissed because all the designs for Batgirl were redheaded, Babs was pissed because they made her look like an airheaded millennial stereotype, and Kate wanted to know what the all-male artist team had modeled her breasts on. She suspected vacuum-sealed cantaloupes.” He paused. “Wow, Rob
Hancock really does need to be fired.”

“As I said.”

Tim minimized the tab and began drafting an email to Hancock’s boss. Damian occasionally punctuated the atmosphere with curt suggestions.

“Yes, I know not to split an infinitive in a business letter. Don’t you have to be annoying anywhere else? And also, what makes you think you know English better than me? It’s like, your twelfth language.”

“Tt. Firstly, no, I don’t patrol until after dinner and Gordon sent her findings to the police before we could do so. Secondly, it’s ‘better than I.’ Thirdly, English is actually my seventh language. First is Arabic, second is Farsi, third is Latin, fourth is Urdu, fifth is French, sixth is Russian, eighth is basic German, ninth is conversational Punjabi —”

“Stop, stop, I get the point. You’re better than me, hooray.”

Damian huffed out a long breath.

“For someone supposed to be so intelligent and skilled, Drake, you vastly underestimate yourself.”

“And for someone who’s supposed to not care about what other people think of him, Damian, you put a lot of effort into throwing your successes and abilities out there for us to see.”

The two of them stared at each other for a long few seconds.

“I’d think you cared.”

“Tt. And you too.”

“We are kind of stuck with each other. We might as well make the most of it.”

“If nothing else than because it’s what Grayson would want.”

Tim couldn’t help but smile a little. Damian blinked and looked down quickly, before clearing his throat.

“Ugh. How do he and the women discuss these things so often? Doing this once in minimal detail with you is exhausting.”

“Babs and Dick are still better adjusted than we are right now. And the girls gravitated towards her. So, uh, my point is, don’t suggest to them that it has something to do with them being women. Steph’s got a temper, Cass is a better fighter than everyone, and Babs has hands like cricket bats.”

Damian actually snorted.

“I take it you’re speaking from experience.”

Tim found his smile growing.

“Maybe.” He hit Send before leaning back. “So, speaking of Dick, which one of us gets to go out with him on patrol tonight?”

Damian idly scratched the cat behind the ears.
“I, obviously —”

“— Me.”

They straightened up and looked at each other again.

“You can both go with Dick,” Bruce shouted from the hallway, surprising both of them. “I’m heading out with Kate tonight anyway.”

Reconsidering each other, slightly tense, the brothers offered a nod. Bruce’s sigh of relief was very audible.

“Thank god.” Then: “And boys, thank you.”

They both turned and looked at their father. He nodded — Tim could’ve sworn he was proud of their quick resolution — before turning and heading back down the hallway.

“Grayson and I will outpace you all night. Try to keep up.”

“You’re on, demon.”

Barbara had checked up on her team one last time, her alerts set just in case, but with little expectation of them actually being needed. Stephanie had long since been lulled into a siesta by the rolling incomprehensibility of Shakespeare and the rich smell of dinner on the stove. She remained curled up into a ball on Barbara’s other side, snuffling in her sleep, blond hair sprayed out in the stormy afternoon light like wisps of sun.

Meanwhile, Cassandra was still fully alert, eyes glued to the page, trying to make each of the printed words match the the ones pouring out of Barbara’s mouth.

“‘Arise black vengeance, from thy hollow cell! Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne, to tyrannous hate!’”

Having been silent for the last half hour, it was then that Cass spoke up.

“Do you know...who’s on patrol tonight?”

Barbara lowered Othello, pushing her glasses back up her nose from where they’d slipped.

“In the family? Tim, Damian, Bruce, Kate, and Dick...but since he spent the day out and about too, he’s taking a few hours at home this evening.”

“Hmm.” Cassandra leaned in closer. “So...we should leave soon.”

“You don’t have to.”

“No. You two want time together.”

Barbara hummed softly.

“Twist my arm. But why did you ask? Do you plan on joining the others?”
She shook her head, choppy layers of hair swishing around her jaw.

“We will...take time off too. For a date night.”

Her smile slowly became broader.

“Well. Good luck, both of you.”

Stephanie mumbled a long string of gibberish in her sleep, burrowing in closer. At the same time, Cassandra nestled under Barbara’s outstretched arm and continued listening to the play. While the gray afternoon sunlight dimmed and fat droplets of rain finally began to patter against the windows, the scent of the beef stew left to cook in the kitchen grew stronger.

“‘Never, Iago. Like the Pontic sea, whose icy current and compulsive course ne’er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on to the Propontic and the Hellespont, even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace, shall ne’er look back, ne’er ebb to humble love, till that a capable and wide revenge swallow them up.’”

At that, the doorknob rattled, and both women looked up. Stephanie let out a faint snorting noise.

“Hey, package for Barbara Gordon. Comes wrapped in really tight black and blue, contains a lot of puns and motivational speeches. You ordered that, right?”

“You can both come in, Jason.”

Sure enough, the two brothers, in full regalia, squeezed past each other through the doorway, greeting the two women with enthusiasm. Much to her delight, when Jason pulled off his helmet and mask, he looked unusually relaxed, even more so than delivering a good beating to bad guys usually got him.

“Is that beef stew I smell?” The younger man wandered into the kitchen. “Damn, I want some. Hell, I’d stay for dinner if I wouldn’t be third-wheeling.” He glanced back out. “Or fifth-wheeling, for that matter.”

“Jason Peter Todd, if you go sticking your grubby fingers in my stew, that wooden mixing spoon’s going across your knuckles.”

He quickly withdrew his hand, then began searching for some bread to dip in instead. Meanwhile, Dick approached the women gathered on the couch, peeling off his own mask.

“Hi, big brother.”

“Hi, little sister.” He bent to hug her, the two practically glowing with enthusiasm. Barbara marked her spot in Othello and set it down on the coffee table while she waited; her patience was soon rewarded with a swift kiss.

Luckily, Jason came back in munching a stew-soaked chunk of bread after they broke apart.

“You better enjoy this quiet evening, Dickie; Thing 1 and Thing 2 are going to be vying for your attention all night.”

“Really? Both of them together?” Dick temporarily perked up, before sighing. “I’m not sure whether to be proud or to worry about whether this’ll be like babysitting Wally’s twins.”

“I thought...you loved Wally’s twins.”
“I do. But they’re always insisting that they’re ‘Uncle Dick’s’ favorite godchild, and then Irey ends up literally running circles around Jai to make mini-twisters while he screams at the top of his lungs for me to come save him.”

“So, exactly like Damian and Tim.”

“Yep.” Dick rubbed the spot above his eyebrow where he always got headaches, still smiling fondly nonetheless.

Jason scoffed, stuffing the last of the bread in his mouth before throwing his hands up.

“Well, if that’s what patrol’s going to be like tonight, I’m definitely punching out. I’m going to go home, dodge whatever hellish contraption Roy made today, and fall asleep in front of the TV.”

“Will you have Lian with you, or do you not need excuses to watch your favorite movies at home?”

Jason flipped him off.

Meanwhile, Cass was now poking Steph repeatedly in the ribs trying to wake her up, to no avail. Barbara shifted in place with more than a little difficulty, giving a series of vigorous shakes to the girl beside her.

“Steph. Stephanie. Wake up.”

The girl moaned and pulled her head in, turtle-like.

“Five more minutes, Mom,” she mumbled into the couch cushion. The trio of siblings suppressed laughs.

“Close, but no. Get up.”

She lifted her head, hair sticking up in all directions, blinking owlishly.

“Oh hey, Dick, hey Jay. Cassie, we didn’t miss our movie, did we?”

Cass shook her head, still hiding a smile.

“Which movie are you two seeing?”

“Ugh, the one that came out last month, with the robot dinosaurs and aliens and kids in funky suits fighting bad guys. You people and the rest of your nerd family are influencing me.”

“Oh, Tim said that was good. He and Kon went last weekend.”

“See? Nerd family.” She got to her feet, stretching her arms up over her head. Cass soon followed, the image of the girls brushing shoulders cast in rainy afternoon light.

Barbara eased off the couch and into her wheelchair.

“I’ll walk you guys to the door.”

The door was only thirty feet across the apartment, but Cass would hardly argue with an opportunity
for a few extra minutes with the others.

Jason was light, full of slight turmoil and question, but happier overall. Stephanie was content, with little weighing on her mind at the moment. But Barbara seemed to radiate happiness and satisfaction, and for Cassandra, that alone was enough to make her happy too.

Meanwhile, Stephanie was still bemoaning her fate.

“Isn’t it bad enough that Tim’s a brilliant fan of all this geeky stuff, Jason’s a workaholic who unironically loves classic lit, and Babs, you’re both? Now I’ve succumbed too.”

“Oh, stop whining.” Barbara said briskly. “You’ve been hanging around us for years, us influencing each other was inevitable.”

“Interests overlap.”

“Exactly. You’re officially one of us now, Stephanie,” she teased. “You fit with us. All because you made the mistake of caring.”

“Pfft, you sound like those people who yammer on about love changing you.”

“And you know damn well I’d never let anyone, whether I loved them or not, change who I am.”

“I don’t think real love actually does try to change who you are,” Jason said suddenly. The women all looked at him. He cleared his throat. “What I mean is, love might change you in small ways, in your surroundings and knowledge and interests. But it should accept you for who you are at heart. And not change you there, per se, but influence you to be better, not a different person, but a better version of who you are.”

The three women were silent. Cass read empathy in Steph’s and Barbara’s bodies.

“Wow, not a single mention of blood or guns or Pride and Prejudice.”

“Fuck off, Brown.”

“No, seriously. That was...really insightful, Jason.” Barbara’s voice was soft.

“You...would know.” Cass gently nudged her. “All...of what he said. You would know.”

“You don’t say.” Barbara glanced back over her shoulder towards her living room, where Dick waited for her. “My house is a mess of vigilante gear, every day I become more knowledgeable about the ongoings of the BHPD, and the other day when one of those upbeat pop Taylor Swift songs came on the radio, I not only kept the song on, but I realized that I knew all the words too.”

“The horror,” Stephanie deadpanned, before grinning.

“And I’m more open, more happy, and, usually, less afraid.” The dry grins around her became more genuine. “So I think you’re on to something, Jay.”

“Eh.” He shrugged. “It ain’t just romantic love that does it. I was in a really terrible place before I found the Outlaws, before they became my friends. And Alfred and you girls inspired me to come back and give this a try in the first place.”

“Here’s hoping your idiot dad, dumb brothers, and you get there someday too,” Steph said lightly, taking his huge hand in her small one and squeezing it. Cass’s heart fluttered. “Alright. Cassie and I are punching out too. See you soon, boss.”
“See you soon, Stephanie, Jason,” Barbara replied, her voice warm. Affection rolled off her in waves.

So Cass bent down and hugged her, with only a tiny beat of surprise before Barbara hugged her back.

“I’ll see you soon too, Cassandra.”

When Cass pulled the door shut behind the three of them, she felt no compulsion or worry. Only peace.

Barbara lingered for a moment at the door before turning and maneuvering back into the living room, then hauling herself back onto the couch. Dick waited patiently while she lifted her entire weight onto her arms, trying to get into position, finally dropping down into the cushions.

“Well, that’s my arm-and-shoulder workout for the day. God, that was probably equal to bench-pressing Bruce in full armor.”

“You’re not that heavy.”

“Thanks, but you and I both know you’re lying.” She shuffled over, leaning in. He took the invitation, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her even closer.

“You could totally bench-press Bruce, by the way.”

“I know. And he’d hate it. Which is just all the more reason to do it.” Pressed in close, she felt his chuckle reverberate through his chest. “It’s so strange to think that after all this time, this is soon going to be over.”

“What? The Python case? Or your being pregnant?”

“Both.” She let out a breath through her nose. “I’ve been chasing this guy for nearly ten months, and by the end of a week, the GCPD’ll be rounding him up. Testimonials are easy to get from thugs trying to save their own skins; we won’t even need a confession. And with little physical confrontation, and without losing anyone I love.” She looked down. “And to think. Just two weeks after that we’ll be parents. Parents. Us, together.”

He tilted her chin up and met her gaze.

“I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather have be the other parent to my child.”

“Me neither,” she said truthfully.

The moment between them after she said that seemed to stretch into eons.

“I never...” She swallowed hard. “I never told you how grateful I am. That you came back to me.”

“I’ll always come back to you.” He blinked slowly. “I love you. I’ve loved you for nearly half my life. I felt like the luckiest man in the world when you called me up that night last June and asked me if I wanted to give us another try.”
“And I was terrified when I did,” she confessed. “Terrified that this would fall apart again, that I was making a mistake. But it wasn’t, was it? This was the right thing to do.”

“This is the right thing.” He rested his head on her shoulder.

“It is.” She thought back more to the previous June. “Hmm. Bruce totally thought we were going to fall apart again too. He was already surprised enough about Tim and Conner getting together while Tim was looking for him.”

“And then Jason chose the next moment to steal our thunder and come out,” Dick chuckled. “But really, don’t be too hard on Bruce for worrying we were going to fall apart, and panicking when he found out about the baby. Or on yourself, for that matter.”

Barbara shifted a little bit, Dick raised his head; they both found themselves eye-to-eye.

“All the overreacting might have been warranted, even if not for why we originally thought. This whole family’s been changed, and all because of a few risks and a few examples of being honest about how we feel. It feels so new, so unlike anything I’ve ever had.”

“I know it’s new, and a little out of control, and I know you don’t like that, but it’s changed for the better.” His voice was soft. “And with a little luck and a little work...it could keep changing for the better.”

“Unfortunately, we’ve never had much luck.” She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “But I know we can, we’ve always been able to, all put in the work.”

Something hopeful sparked in his eyes. She wondered at what point they’d stopped talking about just the family, and had included themselves in the “we.”

“We’re going to need to put in the work. After we enjoy these couple weeks while they last; we’re going to be foregoing sleep for like, the rest of our lives.”

“When have you ever slept much anyway?” she scoffed. “And anyway, that’s what making Bruce and your siblings babysit is for. It’ll certainly make them happy.”

“And for once they might even end up bonding over the experience.” He smiled. “Sounds like a win-win to me.”

When they kissed, she noticed a kind of eagerness to the familiar experience. Something they both knew well, but something he was still excited to continue, to see what happened next, whether it be something she planned or something that just occurred.

In that moment, she felt the same.

The occupants of the kids’ home were absolutely not allowed to climb up on the roof, especially not at night, but Duke had never been much for rules anyway.

Atop the damp tiles, shivering slightly in his bare feet and pajamas, he gazed down at the city spread out before him. A crooked, never-ending jungle of concrete and glass and smoke, the Bat-Signal piercing the gloom with its hopeful light. Alleys twisted with shadows, buildings that both crumbled
and sliced through the smog, countless people of all degrees of strangeness living — albeit often violently — side by side. The overcrowded building in the Narrows felt small, restraining, in the face of something so frightening and intriguing.

A small glimpse of movement across the street caught his eye.

A man. Bulky white guy, shaved head, alternately gazing down impatiently at his cell phone and scanning the sky. It was hard to tell from so far, but Duke could’ve sworn that his fingers were all bent and twisted at odd angles, as if they’d been broken, but never healed properly.

Just looking at him set Duke’s nerves on edge.

The man looked up again, scowling in the direction of the Bat-Signal. He seemed to be waiting for something...or someone. And Duke couldn’t help but wonder whether that had anything to do with his obvious disdain towards anything to do with the Bats.

“Hey man. You’re not supposed to be up there.”

His head snapped down, looking towards the other teenagers peeking through the window above the fire escape.

“You’re not gonna catch sight of any vigilantes, you know.”

“And more importantly, you’re gonna get caught.”

“Only if you guys keep making so much noise,” he returned.

“Sorry.” Cullen looked embarrassed. “But seriously, you’re not supposed to be on the roof.”

“Old Man Miller can yell at me all he wants, I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“I can’t believe you’re shrugging off a yelling from Miller,” Claire sighed, although Carrie and Kathy looked kind of impressed. “Being up on rooftops must be super important to you.”

“What were you even looking at up there?” Harper asked.

“I —”

Duke looked over at where the man had been. But he had vanished, leaving nothing but empty shades of gray and purple. If he focused, he could almost see, in the dim post-rain moonlight, that he had gone through the alley, but the shadows swallowed up any light signals that could’ve revealed more.

“Nothing. It’s not important.”

But he knew, somehow, that it was. Climbing down the fire escape and back into bed, as the other kids lay absolutely still in their anxious attempts to relax, he fidgeted quietly, lost in thought. Through the window, the black shadows and the gold-white light of the Bat-Signal imprinted themselves on his eyelids while he wondered who that man was, what he wanted with the Bats, and whether something was about to be very, very wrong.

He didn’t get any sleep that night.
The Tower

Chapter Notes

... 
Well.
Don’t say I didn’t warn you guys.

(Warnings: threats of violence, threats of harm to a child)


The rain had continued in a near-nonstop blur of gray for the last few days. Barbara’s time was divided mainly between routine check-ups, supervising the Birds, and long afternoon naps; mostly only braving the weather to buy groceries. She honestly could not remember the last time she had felt so little stress.

The afternoon was akin to being wrapped in a periwinkle shell of clouds and rain, soft pattering a constant rhythm against the enormous clock face. Her headset was live and wired, but the most urgent thing requiring her attention was instead the sudden urge to clean her home from top to bottom.

“Why do you need to make your bed?” Dinah asked. “I never understood that. I mean, it’s just going to get messed up again in a few hours.”

“Some of us prefer not to sleep on wrinkled lumps of fabric.” She fluffed the pillows for the third time before pulling the sheets taut.

“Picky, picky, picky. Honestly, I kind of like lying on a flat pillow.” She cleared her throat slightly, pausing to take a sip of coffee, and Barbara imagined her leaning back onto her couch in her bathrobe, most likely with the TV on too. “Nice to have a lazy Monday for once, though. No Birds, no League, no day job. Guess I can’t fault you if you want to spend that vacuuming and tuning up your gizmos.”

Technically, Dinah wasn’t supposed to use the headsets when she wasn’t working, but after seeing her friend’s phone bill for the previous month, Barbara had decided to let it go.

“It wasn’t ‘tuning up my gizmos,’ it was improving my wireless to make my Internet faster. Everything can always be improved.” Finally satisfied with the bedroom, she moved on to the living room. She was saving the unholy heaps of clothes in the laundry room for last.
“Sounds about right, especially for you,” she teased.

“Hmm.” A small smile twitching the corners of her lips, she brushed her hair out of her eyes and kept searching for the vacuum cleaner attachment. “And especially in the case of this house.”

“Yeah, speaking of which, is Dick there? I wanna talk to him.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but no, he volunteered to cover another cop’s shift today.”

“Isn’t it supposed to be his day off?”

“Yes.”

“Wow, you two really are made for each other.”

Barbara snorted.

“In both of our defenses, the shift today is just a beat. Routine stuff. And also, I’m here talking to you instead of back at my desk nagging the League, aren’t I? Half an hour swapping theories about TV shows isn’t exactly productive.”

“Alright, fine, that does cancel out the fact that you were cleaning the bathroom while telling me those theories,” Dinah laughed. “You may be just about ready to give birth, but I know if you wanted to be doing any more strenuous work, you would be.”

“Damn right. Even if your godson won’t sit still in there.”

“Awww. Takes after his parents.”

“Hmmm.” Something occurred to her. “Why do you want to talk to Dick?”

Dinah went quiet, clearing her throat slightly. The only significant noise from the other end of the line was the faint chatter from her friend’s TV.

“I just wanna keep making sure everything’s okay with you two. You know? Just to check up.”

She let out a long breath, smiling.

“Everything’s fantastic, Dinah. Nothing’s wrong. We’re...we’re still doing really well. Surprisingly well.”

“I also still don’t know why that’s a surprise to you.” The warmth and light had returned to her friend’s voice. “That kind of love...you’d better keep holding on to that. I’ll be watching you.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything else. You don’t need to worry too much, though. Nothing’s going to shake us up, and I do not plan on letting him get away this time.”

The Manor was unusually peaceful, even with two of Bruce’s children at home. Alfred had taken the dogs on a walk despite the rain, the cow was napping in her stable, and the cat had sprawled out in a patch of gray light. In the living room, Damian had buried himself in one of Jason’s novels while Cass watched a movie on her phone, both of them nestled on the sofa in front of the fireplace.
Fresh from work, Bruce loosened his tie and removed his jacket and cufflinks, quietly observing the two of them. His other sons were still working, and though he knew he’d soon call those two to action, it was...surprisingly nice to see his normally high-driven children take a breather.

“Bruce,” Cass greeted him, not even glancing away from her phone.

Damian wheeled around, looked at his father, then looked back at his sister in admiration.

“How did you do that?”

“Trade secret.” She smiled mysteriously.

“Don’t listen to her Damian, I told her I’d be home by four —”

“And knew...you’re always late. Usually by a half hour. Plus, heard your footsteps.”

“Hmm.” Damian looked like he was filing the information away so he could pull a similar trick on his brothers.

Bruce folded his jacket over his arm.

“Have either of you heard from Barbara? I’m hoping for news from her father about Drew’s arrest warrant.”

Cass shook her head.

“And if she’s not contacting Cassandra, she certainly won’t be contacting any of the rest of us.”

Damian had a valid point.

“Except for Grayson. Obviously. Probably cordoning the rest of us off so the two of them can copulate.”

The point was less valid now.

“She’s...thirty-seven weeks pregnant,” Cass pointed out. “How would that...even work? Even if he is an acrobat.”

“How should I know? Not that I want to. All I know is that it is actually quite unlikely for it to bring on premature labor if they don’t break her water, so, knowing those two and their revolting habits, they’ll likely want to try, at least.”

“You are...the expert.”

“Quite. Everyone comes to me with questions now. Yesterday Todd asked me what an episiotomy was.” The twelve-year-old offered a rather nasty grin. “He still hasn’t recovered.”

“Jason deserved that. For rearranging Batcomputer files.”

Bruce finally pulled his face out of the severely pained expression it had been in and regained the ability to speak.

“Jason’s the one who rearranged all my criminal files by ‘perp hotness!’?”

“Obviously, Father. He ranked all the women at the very bottom; Brown certainly wouldn’t have done that.”
Cass giggled.

Bruce decided that this conversation had gone far enough off-track.

“I’ll deal with Jason later. In the meantime, first of all Damian, your brother promised to be in contact up to and through going on patrol with Tim tonight, so there will be no copulating. Thank god. Second of all, I want to know the minute Oracle patches through. I want to know how everything is progressing; nothing should be going wrong.”

His children just exchanged looks.

After Dinah had hung up, the quiet had melted into a sort of bliss. Barbara picked through the mess of maternity clothes and police uniforms that littered the floor of the laundry room, the scent of detergent steadying her head.

She picked up one of several gray-white shirts, with an empty spot for his badge, black Bludhaven Police patches edged with gold, and Grayson stitched above the breast pocket. It was slightly frayed at the hems, stained with dust and sweat.

She contemplated it for a few moments, stroking her fingertips over the name. In the stillness of those few moments, right then, everything seemed just right.

The shirt was placed, almost carefully, into the washing machine before she turned her attention to the Nightwing suit. Dick never remembered to empty his gear out of it before she wanted to do laundry, which was why he always insisted on doing it himself. For some reason, he’d become especially insistent upon washing his suit himself in the last couple months.

But Dick wasn’t here, and she wasn’t just going to leave the suit lying around on the ground.

She pulled the escrima out of their sheaths and set them aside, then began stripping the suit down. Hidden pockets were opened and flash-bangs, tiny magnifying glasses, fingerprint powder, rolled-up dollar bills and coupons to various frozen-yogurt shops in Bludhaven, all emptied out.

Eventually, she arrived at his gloves. He always kept the most valuable items in there. Usually that meant lock-picks and delicate chemicals and the like.

But when she turned them upside down and shook them out, an unfamiliar black box bounced out, coming to a halt just beside her wheels.

For a moment, surprised, she froze.

It took quite a bit of stretching to reach it. It then sat like a frog on a lily pad atop the palm of her hand while she contemplated it.

It was small. Unassuming, at first. But the outside was lined with fine dark velvet; it had to be valuable. Most of all, Barbara was certain that she’d never seen Dick with anything like it before, nor could she decide what he needed it for.

An odd feeling began to coalesce in her stomach the longer she looked at it; a sense of intuition she couldn’t quite put a name to.
She’d never known Dick to deliberately hide something from her, even something as nondescript as a new tool; now that she thought about it, that was almost certainly why he hadn’t been letting her near his gear. Despite its size, whatever secret he was keeping had to be of vast importance to the both of them.

Her heart thundered, swelling to fill her throat.

Fingers shaking slightly, she popped the clasp, the box falling open in her hand.

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Dick took off his jacket and hat, hanging them both up at the door, kicking off his boots and putting away his keys. The life he’d chosen as a cop wasn’t exactly easy, especially with vigilante business on top of it, but he was still grateful to have it again, even grateful for extra hours. Besides, Rachel’s shift hadn’t even been too strenuous, he thought as he stretched his arms up over his head. And his reward was worth the most difficult of beats: a few hours alone with the woman of his dreams before patrol.

The hours in question which would probably involve, at least, some nice quiet time together; reading, a movie or two, dinner, maybe even a much-needed nap, before their respective night shifts. Not particularly romantic, but he honestly couldn’t think of anything better.

Humming to himself, he made his way through the Tower, wondering to himself at how clean it was. But more importantly, at where Barbara was.

An inarticulate, painfully choked noise suddenly came from the laundry room.

He immediately wheeled around and burst through the door —

The first thing he noticed was that she was just sitting there, not in any pain or danger, and he sighed with relief.

Too soon.

Because the next thing he noticed was that the contents of his Nightwing suit were strewn about all over the laundry room floor. Which meant that she had been going through it. Which meant...

His eyes were drawn to the open jewelry box in her hand. More importantly, to the contents, Bruce’s gift to his eldest child. Thomas and Martha Wayne’s wedding bands, which their son had been saving since their deaths, for just the right couple. The diamond ring, glinting knowingly in the fluorescent light, beautiful and perfect, that Dick had hoped to offer her after their child was born. Had hoped that he’d make her happy.

Instead, she looked nothing short of blindsided.

“You...” She swallowed hard. “You’re planning to...”

He nodded, thinking of how to ease her out of her shock, shifting in place.

“I wasn’t going to for a couple more weeks,” he said gently. “And I, um, was going to wait till the right place, the right moment. Not...” He gestured to the laundry room, chuckling in embarrassment. “Not, um, this.”
Barbara glanced down, so that he couldn’t read her expression.

“Does it matter?”

He was encouraged by how steady her voice sounded, how quiet. A bolt of courage and inspiration hit him.

“You’re right. It doesn’t.”

He walked forward, then knelt before her. The jewelry box still extended before him, resting in her hand.

Dick cleared his throat, not minding the cold floor, the overly bright lights, the fact that she was in jeans and a sweatshirt and he in the police uniform he’d been wearing all day.

“I actually kind of rehearsed this a few times, went through a few scripts, trying to get it right. But what matters is just this...”

He took a deep breath. His heart seemed to swell to fill his whole chest.

“Barbara Gordon. Will you marry me?”

He was still brimming with hope when she met his eyes, but what he saw took him aback, twisted that hope away. She looked...afraid. Sorrow and regretfulness marred her expression.

“I...” Her voice was still steady, but he now heard the sadness in it. “No.”

His breath caught.

Her hand closed; the box snapped shut.

“I love you, but...no. I...I’m not ready.”

Still kneeling, he stared at her, for once not knowing what to say. She pulled the box in close, fingers curling around it until her knuckles turned white.

“Can’t we just...have what we have? I can’t...I’m sorry.” She took deep breaths between words.

Ignoring the sharp, twisting pang of sadness and disappointment in his chest, he got to his feet and mustered a small smile.

“No, don’t apologize. You’re not ready. That’s fine.”

“...Really?”

“Really.” He tried to swallow down the bitter taste in his mouth. “I understand.”

Still reeling, Barbara began to make her way forward, faster than normal, out of the room that suddenly felt way too small. Not really thinking about it, she tucked the rings away safely in the pocket of her jeans.

Dick followed. She saw that he was trying to look positive, but she knew that he really felt anything
“Dick, I promise, it’s not that I don’t care about you,” she insisted again. “We’re just...in different headspaces, I guess.”

“And I didn’t realize that we were.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, that...that makes sense.”

When Barbara laughed to herself, it sounded strained, almost crazy.

“Well, what do you know,” she mused out loud, not really hearing it. “We’re in different states of mind and you didn’t realize. Just like last time.”

Dick’s head snapped up immediately, his brows furrowed.

“What do you mean, ‘just like last time?’ You don’t mean last time like when we were having difficulties just before we broke up, do you?”

“What of it?” She looked around, her chest still feeling tight. “It was just an observation. That’s all.”

“Yeah, an observation of when we couldn’t communicate and were always squabbling about one thing or another and when right afterwards you freaked out and dumped me.”

“Don’t you put words in my mouth, I didn’t say a thing about our breakup.”

“No, but you said ‘you didn’t realize.’” He took a step back. “No. I mean, you said you don’t blame me for how long it took us to get back together. You wouldn’t blame me for our breakup, not when you were the one who —”

“The one who what, Dick?” She wheeled all the way around. “The one who’s at fault?”

“Well, it sure wasn’t me who left you, was it?” Something snapped in his eyes. “But apparently, I’m the one responsible for getting left in the first place.”

“No, you’re the one responsible for pushing me!” The words spilled out before she could stop them. “You expect me to be in the same place as you, to move at the same pace as you —”

“And you never want to move forward at all! You’d rather do nothing! Or you’d rather panic and pull back away!”

“Because you keep pushing me!” she shouted. “And how dare you say that I never want to move forward! I initiated this, I opened up my home to you —”

“And it only took you twelve years to get to that point!” he jeered. “Congratulations!”

“God, you —” She fist ed her hands in her hair, teeth grinding. “It’s always about being on your time, isn’t it? Living up to your standards? You think I’m like one of your siblings, like I should abide by some code you made up?”

“You’re one to talk about forcing someone to live up to your standards! You expected me to let you push me away, hold me at arm’s length, because it took you years just to admit you felt something — because you’re scared.” His voice dripped rage and scorn. “You’re scared of change, of not being in control, of your own feelings. And you’re supposed to be a brave hero.”

That struck a nerve.

“At least I’m not always running around, desperately clinging to everyone I meet, shoving myself
into their lives whether they like it or not cause I’m scared of turning out like my daddy,” she retorted immediately, her recoil instinct overpowering her restraint. “Well, guess what, ask any of your damn family, you’re already controlling, you already think you know best. But you still don’t want to be cold and emotionless, so instead you overwhelm people? No wonder nobody you fall for ever wants to stay.”

She regretted the words the instant they came out of her mouth, but it was too late. Hurt flashed in his eyes, betrayal crumpling his face.

Then he came back with a vengeance.

“Whereas not only are you controlling, but you’ve pushed away everyone who’s ever cared about you. You may have initiated us now, but don’t forget, you were the one who broke us up before, who kept us apart. Don’t you try to pin that on me, because you have no one to blame for that but yourself.”

What was worse was that she was also scared he was right. That she would have to keep living with being the one who kept good things, good people, out of her life, who kept breaking her own heart.

But she still couldn’t stop herself.

“That’s the thing, huh? You have no faith in me.”

“And you won’t even consider me!” He gesticulated violently. “After everything we’ve gone through, after all these years, after our child —”

“Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare use our child against me,” she snarled. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

“Why not? Nothing seems to be off-limits to you.” She saw another flash of pain in his eyes with the anger. “Besides, you get angry at me for apparently not having any faith in you, when you lied to me for a month about being pregnant in the first place.”

“I was still in shock, damn you! You expected me to gleefully jump into you turning my life upside down?”

“I expected you to tell me the truth about both of our lives being turned upside down! How is that too much to ask for? You took a month’s worth of happiness from us, from me!”

“And that’s the thing!” She slammed her hands down on the armrests. “You would’ve assumed right off the bat that I was happy about it too. It took me time to come to a decision, to be happy about it. I am not you! I do not go at the same pace you do! Do you ever wonder why I don’t like to be pushed? Don’t you ever think about it, that maybe I want to be respected and not rushed into something?”

“Ohhh, oh that’s great! You’re telling me about respect!” His laughter was borderline hysterical. “A minute after throwing my past relationships in my face! You want me to bring up Dinah and Jason Bard, and how you left them too? How you broke up your friends? Shut out your dad?”

“They have nothing to do with this!”

“They’re part of the everyone you pushed away, so yeah, I think they have something to do with this!”

“And you’re so good-hearted, you never did anything wrong to anyone,” she spat. “You get hurt, you lash out, you only consider how you feel and you don’t give a damn about the other person’s
“Funny, considering how you’re so wrapped up in your own fears you don’t bother to consider how you hurt other people.”

“Oh, so I’m the selfish one?”

“Maybe!”

“Oh, great!” She threw her hands up. “So if I’m so impossible, so selfish, if you never get anywhere with me, why are you even still here? Why do you even bother?”

Dick was silent for a few moments, breaths long and heavy, eyes smoldering.

“Because all I wanted was to be with you. To commit to you. And you...you want...I don’t even know what the hell you want.”

Barbara’s breath caught.

*I want you.*

“I want you to get the hell out of my home.” Her voice was low. He recoiled, took a step back from her.

“Pushing me away again. Figures.”

He spun away and stalked off before she could retort.

She dropped her forehead into her hand, eyes swimming, staring out at nothing, ears full of gray static. She didn’t know how long it was, minutes, an hour, before he reentered the living room wearing the Nightwing suit, a full duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

He paused, inches from the door.

“I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

“Get out.” The words were low, but they carried.

The door wrenched open then slammed shut.

It was only then that traitorous streams of tears began to escape from her eyes.

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Tim had planned on working late; there were important meetings and consultations that awaited him for the majority of the evening.

But instead, he steadfastly faced one of his best friends, meeting her gaze with intent.

“Tam, I want you to take over for me for the night.”

She stared at him, jaw slightly open. Beside her, her brother, who had just dropped by for a visit, looked confused.
“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I want you to go to all my appointments, do the important work, all of it.”

“Tim, I am your friend, I am not your secretary,” she said, annoyed. “You want the gist of what happens, read the briefings tomorrow morning.”

“Uh, no, I didn’t mean it like that,” he said quickly. “I don’t mean just sit around and take notes. I mean, you’re officially standing in for me. You’re in charge.”

Her jaw fell all the way open.

Luke cleared his throat.

“Are you sure, Tim? She only just got her job here.”

“Yeah, but I think she can do it.”

Tam recovered, fixing him with a big grin.

“Hell yes I can do it.”

Tim tried to meet her fist-bump, but fumbled it, which made both siblings laugh.

“And Luke, since Bruce said that it’s a family emergency, I don’t know what regular patrol’s going to be like tonight. I think we’re going to have to take you up on your offer to officially get started.”

Luke did a double take, then smiled a little nervously while his sister beamed at him.

“I recommend rendezvousing with Azrael on his regular patrol route; 45th and 3rd at nine o’clock. Jean-Paul will show you the ropes from there. And I think you and he’ll like each other.”


“I guess we’re going to find out what Bruce meant by ‘family emergency, meet at the Manor ASAP.’”

“Good luck,” Tam said urgently.

“You guys too.”

As the Fox siblings walked away, heads high, shoulders squared, Tim was still worried. But not for the two of them.

Bruce surveyed the majority of his family anxiously.

Alfred remained poised, ramrod straight, face pinched in concern. Kate, Jason, and Stephanie were clustered together on the couch. Cass perched on the armrest. Damian sat upright in one armchair, while Tim sat opposite to him in the other one. Selina had taken a place on the floor, the dogs and cat surrounding her on all sides. Their faces were alternately decorated with worry and annoyance.

Most of them were in their civilian clothes, but Jason and Selina had already changed into their suits,
and looked especially unhappy about getting called off their first leg of patrol.

“Just FYI, we are in fact wondering why you gathered us here today,” Stephanie said blithely, breaking the silence.

“This is serious,” Bruce growled. A nerve in his temple throbbed; he rubbed it vigorously. “Something’s gone wrong. Dick is missing.”

The resentment towards him instantly evaporated. Cass tensed; Damian gasped, eyebrows pressing upwards in fear; even Stephanie sat up in concern.

“Like, really missing, or he’s not texting you back immediately missing?” Kate said cautiously.

“Really missing. I know that he sometimes goes off the grid for a little while, but he promised me that he’d be available all evening, that he’d call me at dinnertime, and he keeps those kinds of promises. But he hasn’t. I’ve called him ten times in the last two hours, and he hasn’t responded at all. His com is switched off. He hasn’t texted or even emailed me back —”

“Have you tried calling Barbara?” Tim asked.

“Yes. The first time, she just told me he’s not with her, she doesn’t know where he is, and then she hung up on me. The second and third times she didn’t even pick up.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Damian exclaimed. “We must mount a search party at once!”

“Calm down, kitten,” Selina interrupted. “We don’t know what’s happened yet. Maybe his phone just ran out of battery.”

“You don’t know that either!”

“Well great,” Jason groaned. “Either something’s really wrong, or Dickhead’s freaking us all out for nothing. What the hell are we going to do?”

Stephanie, all traces of insolence gone, voiced her own opinion.

“I think we should all head out on patrol, like usual, but all of us at once. That way, we’re not doing anything crazy, but each of us becomes more likely to run into him or even just see something. Hopefully, he just went out on patrol early, and is swinging and flipping around somewhere like usual.”

Slowly, there was a series of nods and soft noises of thought. Bruce looked at Stephanie; she just inclined her head and raised her eyebrow in return.

He sighed.

“Alright. We’ll go with that for now.”

“Thanks, old man. Chin up, guys. We might get lucky, and nothing will be wrong.”

The duffel thumped rhythmically and painfully against his back as he swung, the line snapping and pulling taut on muscle memory. His eyes were so blurred he could barely see the city around him,
barely cared where he was going.

Not that it mattered much. Gotham was in his blood, his bones. Cruel and messy as it was, it was still one of his homes, and he still felt safe swinging blindly with tears in his eyes through showers of rain and mountain-high pillars of chrome.

Nightwing was bound to draw a few stares, especially with two weeks’ worth of clothes and supplies on his back. But that hardly mattered much either.

Dick landed abruptly on a random roof, dirty tiles crunching under his boots. He collapsed, falling first to his knees, then all fours. The duffel fell down over his shoulder, pulling, exacerbating the ache from its weight. For a long few seconds, he remained like that, tears dripping from under his mask to the rooftop, joining the drizzles of rain, dots of black against gritty gray.

“Hey. Um. Are you okay?”

He slowly sat back on his knees, then looked up.

Standing above him was a teenage boy in threadbare flannel pajamas, only moccasins and a hoodie protecting him from the chill, the rain, and the dirty rooftop.

As the two of them locked gazes, the city lights casting a glow over their faces and the symbol on Dick’s chest, they recognized each other.

“Nightwing? You’re back?” Duke Thomas breathed. “I really appreciate it man, I do — the time you visited us a few months ago was really cool — but, um, everyone’s either having dinner late or doing homework. I’m not even supposed to be up here.”

“Don’t worry.” Dick cleared his throat and wiped his tears, some of the anger and hurt in his chest easing. “I won’t snitch.”

Knees shaking, he got to his feet. Duke watched him, wide-eyed with a mix of awe and concern.

“And look...kid...I didn’t even realize I was here, to be honest. I just...had to get away.”

“What’s wrong? Something happen to one of the other Bats? Someone break out of Arkham again?”

Dick opened his mouth, intending for something reassuring to come out, something that wouldn’t burden the teenager before him.

“I had a fight with my girlfriend.”

“Oh man.” The kid winced. “She kick you out? You look like you’re ready to go camping or something.”

“Or something.”

A good few hours swinging around, finding bad guys to punch, something to do, anything. Then to find Bruce and beg to let him stay at the Manor for — for a while, at least. He had no idea how long he’d be kicked out for, if — a horrible thought occurred to him — if he’d even be allowed back.

More tears sprang to his eyes, and he scrubbed at them furiously, the fabric of his mask and dirty gloves chafing his skin.

Meanwhile, Duke rubbed his hand over his hair, face twisted up in sympathy.
“I’m really sorry, man. Is there anything I can do?”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Dick said miserably. “It’s my problem, I don’t want to bother you.”

“Hey, look.” He spread his arms. “I’ve been in the foster system for a year ‘cause my parents got Joker-gassed. I don’t know if they’re ever going to be okay again. Trust me: this, of all things, is not a bother.” He walked closer, putting a hand on Dick’s shoulder. Though Duke was slimmer and a good decade younger, they were about the same height. “And I want to help.”

With their gazes locked, neither noticed the man with the permanently twisted fingers who’d made a reappearance in the alley across the street.

Mario Degrassi had been having a fairly slow night. His text chain with Python’s other hires showed that none of them had gotten a good sighting of Nightwing in nearly a whole week. His own previous opportunity had been ruined by Red Hood showing up. Their boss was getting impatient, and Mario didn’t want to know what would happen if nobody could bring him Nightwing by morning.

More importantly, he still resented the beating he’d gotten from Robin, the broken fingers that had never healed properly. He hoped dearly that this would not only hurt Oracle the way Python anticipated, but that psychotic little brat too.

The Narrows were bright and almost open during the day, but during the evening, even thugs had to watch their backs in Gotham. He edged along carefully through the alleyways, back along his route from the East End.

Again, the kids’ home loomed up ahead of him. He grimaced. That place was damn depressing; too small, and with all that concrete and those small windows. He didn’t care much about the kids inside, but why couldn’t Python have put him on Ward’s route past Robinson Park?

Mario was so caught up in feeling uncomfortable that for a few minutes, he didn’t notice the figures on the roof. Even when he did, the boy in the yellow hoodie that caught his eye at first meant nothing, just a regular teenager.

But then. As the boy advanced on the second figure, Mario’s eyes grew wide as he recognized the silhouette, the blue on black Kevlar.

It seemed too good to be true. No other Bats. Only a single witness: one dumb kid. He even looked around a few times to make sure no cops or other heroes were around, that no other thug could snatch up this opportunity first.

But it was true. The chance had practically laid itself down at his feet.

And Python would be very pleased.

Carefully, he crossed the street, calculating an appropriate angle to fire upon the roof.

Hands shaking, mismatched fingers fumbling the dart a few times, he loaded up the tranquilizer gun —
Nightwing’s eyes were hidden behind the white lenses, but Duke could see the hesitation in his tense shoulders as well as the anger and sorrow in his face.

“I really don’t think there’s anything you can do to help with this,” he said at last. “This wasn’t a small fight by any means, there were a lot of issues that got dredged up. I honestly don’t know how long I’m going to have to stay at the — um, with my family.”

The what? he wondered. The Batcave, maybe?

Duke took a deep breath.

“Look. I don’t have a lot of practical experience with love. But if you’re out here trying to calm down, blow off steam, maybe she is too. Maybe you should just wait until you’ve done that...and then you could both try apologizing?”

“I’d like to. Believe me, I don’t want to lose her again. But I don’t know what she’s going to do. And to be honest, I’m still pretty fucking pissed.”

Lose her again?

“Yeah, but man, now I really think you need to apologize.”

Nightwing looked like he was about to say something, maybe even agree.

But before he could, a sharp whistling noise filled the air —

— instantly followed by a dart imbedding itself in his neck.

Duke gasped and jerked backwards; Nightwing reacted instantly and ripped the dart out, staring at it in horror.

“Dinah,” he said quietly. “Like Dinah — oh no. Oh god...no.”

He stumbled.

Duke rushed forward and tried to catch him, but he’d already fallen to his knees. His movements had become sluggish, almost dazed.

“What’s wrong? What’s happening?”

“Take my...take my duffel.” Nightwing’s voice and movements like he was underwater, he handed Duke the bag. “‘S got...things that m’reveal my...identity. Don’t want ‘im to get it.”

“Who?”

“Python. He...” Nightwing shuddered. “He wants to hurt her. I should’ve seen it...he’d use me. Me. To get to her.”

“Who?” His voice was getting to be hysterical. “Who’s Python? Who does he want to hurt?”
“N’time t’explain...” He looked up slowly. “Can’t let him hurt her. Get to the Signal. Get Batman. Tell ‘im Python has me...tell ‘im he’ll try...try to hurt her...can’t let him hurt her...”

“But Python doesn’t have you,” Duke said optimistically. “You’re still here — oh shit.”

For he’d finally seen the man with the crooked fingers climbing the fire escape, tranquilizer gun slung over his shoulder, a pistol strapped to his hip. One hand held a length of rope, his eyes alight with malicious joy.

Nightwing clasped Duke’s hand one last time.

“Get t’...Batman. Can’t let ‘im hurt her...”

His fingers went slack. He collapsed, unconscious, to the rooftop, arms sprawling open like he’d been crucified.

The man with the broken fingers alighted on the rooftop, drawing the pistol.

“Can’t have any witnesses.” His voice was barely more than a growl. “Say your prayers, kid.”

Duke froze. But only for a moment.

He snatched up the duffel bag, slinging over his shoulder and bull-rushing the man before him — — Who was so shocked that his first few shots went wide.

Before the man could get his bearings, Duke roughly shoved him down, then darted past and leapt onto the fire escape, scaling down as fast as he could while the man recovered himself — — and when he did, ducking each bullet as it came.

When he hit the ground, he ran.

He ran in a jagged zigzag, down the empty street, down a side road and ducking into an alley. His breath came out in ragged gasps, the heavy duffel straining his shoulders, silently hoping that the man wouldn’t chase him.

No footsteps chased after him. No tires screeched.

For a minute, Duke was relieved.

Then everything sank in at once, and he all but collapsed against the alley wall.

Nightwing was incapacitated, about to be kidnapped. Batman had no idea. Some villain named Python, out to get some mysterious “she.”

So what the hell was he going to do about it?

Drew had been about to take his impatient rage out on someone when one of the exterior cameras showed a car pulling up. The car he’d had Leavey keep lingering near Crime Alley, that he’d given strict instructions to Leavey to keep near Crime Alley unless one of the other men needed
pickup...because they’d accomplished their mission.

He immediately clicked on that camera feed, pulling it up to fill his screen.

Sure enough, Degrassi had smugly occupied the passenger seat of the car, Leavey sitting next to him all tense excitement. The two of them then clambered out of the front and Degrassi went to retrieve his prize from the backseat: an unconscious man in black and blue, clumsily hogtied with duct tape and cheap rope.

Drew could hardly believe it at first. Then excitement and savage delight began to swell in his chest, growing closer to a crescendo as they approached through the doors.

He set down his computer for a moment. Took the time to savor the feeling, impending triumph tasting sweet in his mouth.

He then hit the intercom.

“Leavey, Degrassi, bring him up to the fourth floor. You know the room. And then call the others; their presence is required here now.”

Startled, the two men in the lobby faced the general direction of the intercom, then nodded dutifully.

The taste in his mouth grew sweeter.

Nightwing was at his mercy now. And so, Oracle would be.

The Bat-Signal lit the night brighter than the moon.

Duke waited anxiously, duffel lying at his feet. The zipper was slightly open, revealing a flash of gray-white fabric within. As the Signal clicked and whirred, humming with electricity, piercing through the gray-black haze of evening rain, it formed background noise to his thoughts.

Something about what Nightwing had said, about the contents could expose his secret identity, nigged at him. It clicked with how familiar his voice had sounded, even when he’d met him the apparent first time.

*Open it.*

*That’s violating his privacy.*

*And it might help you save him. Open it.*

He caved, stooping to the ground and unzipping it all the way and blindly pulling out the shock of fabric.

He hadn’t been quite sure what he’d been expecting, but a...police uniform?

He sniffed. Clearly used, too.

What did Nightwing want with a...
It was then that he saw the name on the badge and above the breast pocket.

No. No way.

But as impossible as it was, Grayson still winked at him in the blinding yellow-white light.

Hands shaking, Duke set it down, then began fumbling around through the rest of the duffel.

Toothbrush, phone, handgun, shampoo, earpiece, a spare pair of weaponized rods (definitely not departmentally issued), several sets of clothes, a wallet —

He yanked it out and open.

The name was the same on the credit cards and crumpled bank statements. There was no getting around it.

“Dick Grayson is Nightwing,” he murmured aloud.

His eyes remained fixed on the wallet, but began to drift to the various photos kept within. A couple people he didn’t recognize, but those men could easily be Tempest and Arsenal and maybe even Flash, those two women looked a hell of a lot like Ambassador-Princess Diana and her sister Troia, and that other man...wait, wasn’t he a Daily Planet reporter? And the rest of the famous Wayne family...Bruce Wayne himself, Grayson’s adopted father. A big man within the family picture who looked a lot like little dead Jason Todd. Wayne’s biological son, who scowled just like Robin.

“The Waynes are the Bats.” His voice had become much louder. “If Dick Grayson is Nightwing, then his brothers must’ve been the other Robins, but who was that girl Robin, the one who’s Batgirl now...? Cassandra must’ve been the second Batgirl. And so that means Bruce Wayne...” The idea was so absurd he actually laughed out loud, so it had to be true. “Bruce Wayne is Batman.”

The city, crawling with life, alight with neon and car lights, did not respond as Duke laughed with hysteria and astonishment.

“Bruce Wayne is Batman!”

Still laughing, he looked down at the wallet one last time. There was another woman’s picture who kept drawing his eye. The photo of her had been taken quite lovingly; she was bathed in sunlight and had been caught wide-mouthed with delight, green eyes crinkled with joy behind wire-rimmed glasses. She was very beautiful, but it was her shock of red hair that had really caught his attention.

“If you’re in with the Bats...you were the first Batgirl,” he realized. “Holy shit. Whoever you are, you were the first Batgirl.” His next laugh was much softer. “Well, now I guess I’m one of a few people who know you’re still around.”

“Hey! Kid!”

The wallet fell to the roof as he slowly turned around, reflexively raising his hands. A flashlight beam temporarily blinded him.

Standing before him were a quartet of cops, headed by the commissioner himself. A bolt of fear flashed through him, only partially alleviated by the fact that one of the cops was black too.

“What the hell d’you think you’re doing?” demanded a big man who looked rather like an unmade bed. “Screwing around with the fuckin’ Bat-Signal?”
“Stand down, Bullock, he’s just a kid,” scolded the only woman, an older, handsome blonde.

“Jesus, Essen, you gonna give him the keys to the city, too?”

Commissioner Gordon cleared his throat loudly, and Bullock went silent. Essen looked relieved.

“How did you get up here?”

Duke really didn’t want to respond, but did so anyway, voice steady.

“Fire escape.”

“We really need to fix that,” Gordon sighed. “Alright, next: why did you turn on the Bat-Signal? You should know it’s not for civilian use.”

“I need to see the Bats, in person.”

All four cops looked rather pained. Bullock groaned loudly.

“Great, another cape-chaser. Kid, if you want Batgirl to sign your ass, just put an ad on the internet like a normal groupie.”

“Another — I’m not a cape-chaser!” He decided not to mention the nights watching out for them on the rooftop or his merchandise collection. “This is an emergency, and I need to talk to Batman!”

“Whatever the emergency,” the only black man began, a touch more sympathetically, “I understand that it must feel urgent, but you could’ve just called us instead of —”

“Nightwing’s been abducted.”

All four of them fell silent.

“I saw it myself. He’s been taken by a guy who works for someone called Python. I don’t know much about what’s going on, but I do know that they’re trying to hurt him to get to...well, I don’t know the name, but...they’re trying to hurt him to get to some woman. And I think she must be important, he was really insistent that she not be hurt.”

In the stark light, two shades of color drained from Gordon’s face.

“Oh Jesus Christ.” It was barely more than a whisper.

“You, um...you know which woman?”

The other three cops looked at the commissioner. For a few seconds, Gordon was still struck dumb.

“Bullock, get Avery Drew’s arrest warrant ready as soon as possible. Allen, round up the SWAT team, and do it fast.”

The men didn’t waste time arguing, just turned tail and raced for the entrance.

“Essen —”

“I’m staying,” she insisted. “She’s a part of my family too.”

Gordon almost looked like he was about to smile, before he immediately switched back to terror.

“Who is ‘she’ —?” Duke was hit by a sudden bolt of intuition. He stooped, and picked up the
discarded wallet, indicating the laughing redhead to Essen and Gordon. “Is it her? Batgirl?”

“How...how did you know she was Batgirl?”


The two exchanged looks.

“It...is my daughter.” Gordon’s voice was hoarse. “And in her current job, she’s tangled up in so many more dangerous people and events than she ever was as Batgirl.”

Duke felt the blood drain from his own face.

“Oh shit.”

“Way to sum it up,” Essen sighed.

“What’s going on?”

Duke spun around again with a loud yelp. Behind him, the shadows appeared to have grown a voice; a deep, growling bass.

Then a familiar silhouette emerged from the shadows. Despite the situation, Duke couldn’t help but catch his breath in awe.

“Gordon, who is this, and why does he have these?”

Gordon let out a long, shuddering breath. Essen’s face was twisted with concern.

“B, we have...we have a serious problem.”

The simulated assassin shattered under a single blow.

Barbara was grateful for the distraction of the workout, for her sore arms and shoulders, for the sweat pouring down her face. She’d take the physical discomfort any day over the additional weight in her stomach and the hollow ache in her chest.

But no matter how many virtual enemies she defeated, she couldn’t make either feeling quite go away.

She finally switched off the training hologram, wiping her brow. A sharp, albeit fairly painless cramp gripped her insides, and she gasped quietly.

“Damn Braxton-Hicks,” she whispered, throwing her towel to the side and rolling from the training room.

There were a couple of soft kicks in response.

“Don’t give me that. I’m not apologizing until he does.” She entered the bathroom, cranking on the shower knobs with unnecessary force. Steam filled the room until the mirror turned gray. “And I’m definitely not going to admit that I miss him.”
The hot water nearly scalded her skin, but she welcomed it. Like the workout, it couldn’t take the feelings away, but at least it distracted her from them. For a little while.

It wasn’t until after the shower, wrapped in her bathrobe, hair dripping, that she found her discarded clothes from earlier that day. As the puddles on her back and shoulders steadily grew larger, she picked up the work jeans, smoothing out the fabric —

— Unexpectedly pushing the jewelry box free from the pocket and onto her lap.

Seeing it, Barbara wanted to swat it off onto the floor, or to throw it across the room. But instead, something compelled her to pick it up.

The soft velvet against her hand felt like an accusation, the glint of gold and diamonds — for she had indeed opened it again — like frustration and disappointment.

Barbara sighed, long and loud.

“What am I going to do?”

This time, silence. Not even another kick answered her.

It took some minutes before she was snapped out of her funk; realizing that across the room, her headset was beeping.

Snapping the box shut, but still not able to bring herself to discard it, she rolled across the room to her desk and snatched the headset up.

“Oracle here.”

“Oracle.” Bruce’s voice was more gravelly than usual, but underneath, she heard that his breathing was quicker. Panicked.

“B, for the last time, I do not know where Nightwing is and I’m not going to —”

“But I do.” He took a long breath, which came out in a rasp. “Oracle. Barbara. I just found out, a civilian witnessed it. Python has him. Apparently, he went out alone on patrol early instead of going late with Tim like he’d planned, and — and it was him, him that Python decided to use against you. Barbara, Drew has my son.”

All the air seemed to rush out of her lungs at once.

“Why was he out on patrol so early? He said he was going to stay home with you until Tim got off work. He should’ve been safe...god help me Barbara, I can’t lose another one of my children...”

Her own breaths were hitched; painful and ragged.

“Why wasn’t he safe at home with you?”

“Bruce, I’m going to have to call you back,” she gasped. She didn’t even wait for a reply before she ended the connection, burying her face in her hands and beginning to cry for the second time that evening. The terrified, despaired sobs tore through her throat like they had claws.

_This is my fault_, she realized. _Python wanted him in the first place because of his connection to me. He would never have gone out alone if I hadn’t overreacted, if I hadn’t gotten into the fight, if I hadn’t kicked him out. He could’ve been safe with me, with his brother. This is my fault._
It seemed like a long time before she could do anything but drown in fear and guilt.

When she finally glanced up through her tears, her breathing still labored, she saw, emblazoned across her computer screen, the only thing that could possibly make her feel worse.

The screen had gone black again.

She was expecting the slow scrawl of white letters when it came.

*Are you missing something, Oracle?*

And though she had been expecting it, another sob still hitched in her throat, hurting on its way through her body. She let it pass, let herself shudder, before setting her fingers to the keys.

*I know you have Nightwing. So what do you want from me?*

*Oh, it's very simple. I want you to come to me. I want you to surrender yourself to me. Not virtually. In person. I want to see you surrender before me.*

Her hands shook.

*Or what?*

*Well. You love him, don’t you? So I imagine you wouldn’t like it very much if I cut open his throat and hung his corpse off Westward Bridge. Which is exactly what I’ll do if you refuse to acquiesce to my terms.*

The bitter guilt and terror didn’t fade, exactly, but a new feeling began to fill Barbara’s chest. A bright, burning sensation, as though a pilot light had been lit within her heart. The heat filled her torso, swelling up into her mouth.

*Give me your terms.*

*You will come to the abandoned Wayne Electronics building on 13th and Park by eleven o’clock tonight. You will meet me on the second floor and formally surrender to my custody. Do not attempt any tricks. Do not attempt to free him in any way. The security cameras within no longer run to Wayne Enterprises, but directly to my computer; I see and record everything that happens in that building. If you do all that, I’ll let him go.*

She hesitated for only a moment.

*I’ll do it.*

Drew didn’t reply. He didn’t need to. Instead, her screen blinked right back to normal.

Barbara took a series of long, deep breaths, bracing her hands on her computer desk, letting a few more tears trace their way down her face.

Then she turned her com back on; this time, she tuned in the entire rest of the family.

“You all heard about Nightwing?” Her voice was hoarse, but clear. “B told you all what happened?”

There were a series of subdued, terrified murmurs of agreement.

“Well, now Drew contacted me. He wants me to surrender, to give myself into his custody, or he’ll kill Dick. He almost certainly wants to kill me once I do. There’s not even any guarantee that he’ll
keep his end of the bargain.”

Now the murmurs grew louder.

“Victory for Python,” Cass said quietly. “What are...we going to do? What are...you going to do?”

Barbara’s gaze was steady. Bathed in the green light of her computer screen, chest burning with rage and purpose, her broken back like steel, she spoke.

“I’m going to go straight to Python. I’m going to confront him and I’m going to fight him in person. And this time, once and for all, I’m going to defeat him.”
The Chariot

Chapter Notes

This chapter was long coming...and I’m so, so glad that it has. This is easily one of the most cathartic things I’ve ever written, and I hope that it’s as emotionally satisfying for all of you as it was for me.

Also, it was my birthday on the 2nd, so this was especially good timing for me.

(Warnings: graphic violence, sexist language, ableist language, racist sentiment & one particular racist slur, threats of child death)

The Chariot (Tarot): Upright — Control, will power, victory, assertion, determination. Reversed — Lack of control and direction, aggression.

The family were silent for approximately thirty seconds.

After which they all started yelling at once.

Letting their voices pour down her ear, she pushed herself back from her desk, grabbing her tablet computer on the way and stowing it in one of her chair’s compartments.

“Absolutely not!” Bruce thundered, his voice rising above everyone else’s. “You are not going. Nightwing’s already in Drew’s power, I refuse to let you put yourself into that scum’s hands too.”

“You don’t have a choice, B.” She was almost surprised by how level her own voice was, how assured, given the storm boiling in her chest. She rolled into her bedroom, picking up her escrima, feeling the smooth, hard wood of the weapons in her hand. “I’m going. And you can’t stop me.”

“Barbara, he wants to kill you.”

“I know.”

“He’ll undoubtedly have an army’s worth of men backing him up.”

“I know.”

“Damn it, you’re risking your life for nothing!” he shouted. “In just a couple hours, your father will have the arrest warrant and an entire SWAT team ready —”

“By which time it’ll be too late.” She slipped the escrima inside her armrest. “I told you, I’m going. Is
it a fight you want? Or a test of who’s more determined? You know you can’t beat me, Bruce.”

He snarled inarticulately. Meanwhile, Kate spoke up.

“Look, I hate to be the voice of reason, and normally I’m all for charging right into battle, but I really don’t think that you should. I mean, you do realize that you’re…”

“Paraplegic?” Barbara challenged her.

“Thirty-seven weeks pregnant!” Tim burst out. “You’re thirty-seven weeks pregnant! You can’t — this is insane!”

“I agree!” Damian’s voice rose to join the others, youthfully plaintive. “You can’t go! You’ll be putting your child’s life at risk too! Gordon, Barbara, if you’re that foolish or suicidal enough to not stay for your own sake —”

“You’re both quite right,” Bruce growled. “Barbara, you have to stay. Fight me all you want, but there’s no way around it.”

Her shoulders tightened. A note of her anger slipped into her voice.

“Listen to me, all of you, and listen good. Drew threatened Dick’s life. If I stay, no matter who goes in my place, Drew will kill him. He. Will. Kill. Him. He slaughtered innocent civilians, one of whom was a child, I have no doubts that he will kill Dick if he doesn’t get who he wants.”

There were several involuntary, plaintive, and terrified noises from the people on the other end.

“If we wait for the police, Drew will be arrested, yes, but he will have taken Dick Grayson from us.” She felt her heart clench and speed up. “And I, for one, am not going to let him win. I am not —”

More of her rage seeped into her voice, until she was shouting, “— I swear to god, I swear to all of you now, I am not going to let this arrogant second-rate gaping asshole steal the love of my life from me!”

Most of the others were silenced by her outburst. Bruce made a noise like he was going to say something else.

“And Bruce, shut the fuck up. You are not the only person who cares about your son, and you are not the only person who wants your grandson to be born safely! You couldn’t control me when I was eighteen, you can’t control me now. I. Am. Going. With or without the approval of any of you.”

Another long silence stretched out between the family.

Until, finally, Cass made a soft noise, about to speak.

“Not even you can stop me, Cassandra.”

“I will not…try to stop you.” Cass’s voice was quiet, but clear. “I…am coming with you.”

More murmurs greeted this statement. Then Steph spoke up next.

“I’m coming with you too.”

“Me too,” Tim agreed.

“So am I.” Jason.
“You need someone to watch your back.” Damian.

“I think you need many people as possible to watch your back.” Selina.

“So count me in too.” Kate.

Barbara was dumbstruck, blinking in shock as they each voiced their support, one by one.

“I mean,” Tim added, “you’re gonna face a villain, you might as well have the people you love there beside you, right? Besides, we all got a bone to pick with Python too.”

“If he thinks he can take Richard from us,” Damian decided, “he’s got another think coming.”

“Hey, I already lost my miserable life once, I can risk it for my stupid brother,” Jason agreed.

“We’re Batgirls,” Steph chimed in. “We gotta have our mentor’s back, right?”

“Or...what was all you gave us...even for?” Cass finished.

At all of their words, some of the rage made way for something softer, but no less warm, and no less powerful. The love she felt for each of them brought renewed strength and confidence...

...And at the same time, the seeds of a plan, that immediately began to grow in her mind. A bold plan that, with all of them working together, might just work.

Bruce cleared his throat. Everybody went silent again, holding their breath.

“I...I need to be there too. I need to be there for him. For all of you.”

A chorus of enthusiasm greeted him, Jason teasing his father mingling with Kate’s exasperated pride.

“You do indeed need to be there, sir.” Alfred’s crisp voice finally rose to join the others. “Frankly, I’m very pleased you came to that conclusion on your own. As for me, Miss Barbara, I will be happy to drive the getaway car, if you will. Perhaps provide moral support if necessary. With a shotgun, of course.”

For the first time that evening, an actual laugh escaped her lips.

“It’s a date then.” Her voice lifted to a crescendo, commanding and strong, and everyone listened.  “Everybody, make sure you all have your weapons, gear, and a ride. We meet on Park Avenue a block away from the old abandoned Wayne Electronics building at a quarter past ten. There, I’ll tell you what we’re going to do.”

For the first time really truly in sync, the family all voiced their agreement. Barbara felt a broad grin spread across her face, and her plan began to really take shape in her mind.

“Um...excuse me?” A background voice on Bruce’s end of the line spoke up. “So...um...what am I going to do?”

Dick woke to a shot of adrenaline being jammed into his neck; he jerked back, heart jackhammering, straining his shoulders and hitting his head against the wall behind him.
He groaned.

“He’s awake,” a deep voice said rather unnecessarily.

Dick blinked a few times, trying to shake off the tranquilizer, to take stock of his surroundings. What looked like a rather ordinary meeting room greeted him, swivel chairs circling a round metal table. But a series of guns rested on the table, and the rest of the room was occupied by three enormous men, eyeballing him like they couldn’t wait to put those guns to use.

He tugged at his arms — only to recognize the heavy shackles spread-eagling his arms and pinning his wrists back to the wall, with matching weights around his ankles. His knees were sore from however long he’d been standing like this; his head ached and throat was parched from the tranquilizer.

He glanced down at himself. Still in the Nightwing suit. Nobody had removed his mask, either. That was fortunate, at least.

“Nice to meet you, gentlemen. But I gotta ask...does Python send the ugly posse to greet all his guests, or am I just special?”

All the men looked taken aback. One turned to his friend.

“Y’sure we can’t kill him?”

“I’m sure. Only the boss can kill him. Hey, don’t look so upset, man. At least we’ll get to watch.”

“That does make me feel better.”

“But still,” the third man muttered.

Dick tossed his head back as best he could, trying not to let his racing heart show on his face.

“If you fellas really think that I’m going to be taken out by your second-rate hacker boss, you’re even stupider than you’re ugly, and that’s saying something.”

“Shut up!”

He saw the ham-like hand before it connected with his cheek. A shock of pain blossomed across the left half of his face.

“Damn, who taught you how to hit?” He coughed. “My baby sister? Nah, scratch that, my baby sister could take all of you with both hands tied behind her back.”

The man pulled his hand back again. Dick braced himself.

“Foley, stand down.”

The cold voice emanated from the doorway across the entire room. The other two thugs froze in place. The one about to hit Dick again looked frustrated.

“But boss —”

“I said stand down, Foley.”

Reluctantly, Foley withdrew, offering Dick a nasty look.
At the same time, everyone’s attention turned to the doorway.

He had only seen Avery Drew once in person, but he still felt the same clammy sickness grip his skin as he regarded the other man. Dressed all in crisp white linen, his skin near albino-pale, his shock of tufty blond hair all but leached of pigment, his icy gray eyes landing on his prisoner like a hunter regarding a wounded animal.

Drew walked over slowly, hands casually shoved in his pockets, cold gaze fastened upon his target. He paused inches away, revealing himself to be about half a head shorter. Dick insolently lifted his chin to make the height difference more obvious.

For a few moments, they remained that way.

“You know, I always wondered. What are you?”

Dick drew back, then scoffed.

“What kind of a question is that?”

“What are you?” Drew repeated, running the tip of his finger along the skin of his captive’s jaw. Despite himself, Dick shuddered in revulsion. “Arab? Latino? Do you fuck her because she’s like you, or because you always wanted to get inside a white woman?”

He twisted his face away from the clammy hand.

“First of all, I’m Roma, idiot. Second of all, anyone ever tell you you’re a real charmer? No? Well, there’s a reason for that.”

“Need me to knock some respect into him, boss?” another one of the thugs offered.

“No.” Drew smiled, slow and unpleasant. “In fact, you three can leave. I’d like some time alone with our gypsy friend here.”

“Wow, this must be a first for you,” he remarked as the three thugs left the room, casting lingering looks over their shoulders. Drew, meanwhile, seemed like he was trying not to be bothered by the chatter, pulling up a chair from the nearby table and sitting down. “I doubt you’ve been able to get alone time before now unless it’s with your hand or people you pay. Then again, people you’ve kidnapped and chained to your wall really isn’t a step up from that.”

“Kindly do yourself a favor and shut the fuck up.” Drew folded his hands and rested his chin on them. “You don’t have that many breaths left, so you shouldn’t waste them on jabbering.”

Despite his show of bravado, despite all his bragging to the thugs, the idea of dying...it really did give Dick pause. Eighteen years of fighting crime, two-thirds of his life, of battling countless foes from Trigon to Kite Man, could, in a few hours, be capped off by a glorified male supremacist. All that would be over. All the glory and pain of his life would end. He’d never see his friends or family again.

He’d never get to watch Damian grow up or hold Donna close or learn to catch Roy’s trick arrows or have another talk with Clark or celebrate with the other officers after a closed case or tell Bruce how much he’d improved his life or dance with Cass or prove how much he really cared about Tim and Jason or laugh with Wally or stand on the very edge of a building with the intent to fall and fly.

Never make things right with Barbara. Never get to meet his son.
“I’m the bait, aren’t I.” It was quiet and somber, and not a question. “You want to use me to lure her to you, on the possibility that you might let me go. But you won’t let me go. You’ll kill me whether she comes to you or not. You just want to see her before you begging for my life.”

“You’re smarter than you look.” Drew smirked. “Then again, it’d be almost impossible not to be.”

Dick tilted his head back, exhaling softly through his nose.

“But you don’t know Oracle like I do. She doesn’t surrender. And she doesn’t beg for anything from men. Especially not men like you.”

“She will surrender, and she will beg.” Drew’s eyes flashed. “And there are no men like me.”

Dick turned away, mouth twisted in disgust, chin high.

“Frankly, I would’ve thought you’d be more afraid, Nightwing. After all, you are about to die.”

“I’ve been about to die before.” Still not looking at Drew, he looked up. Through the meeting room’s window, through the shadows of the night, he could see the structures that made up Gotham, the crooked teeth in the city’s twisted mouth. Neon, concrete, fog, smoke, steel. Home. “I doubt she’ll stay away, but even if she does, at least I’ll be dying for her. But if — when — she comes here, the truth is, I’ll have nothing to be afraid of. Because when she outsmarts you, when she defeats you —”

Python’s decorum finally slipped.

“She won’t,” he snarled, fist banging down on the chair’s armrest. “That worthless woman will die right after she watches you die.”

Dick continued.

“— when she defeats you, she will defeat you in every way.” His voice rose over Drew’s. “Because I know her, and I know that’s what she does.”

Drew remained frozen with indignant fury for a few moments.

Then, quicker than Dick could’ve realized, he lunged forward and punched his captive under the ribs.

While Dick gasped and choked for breath, spots dancing before his eyes, Drew stood over him.

“Believe whatever you want, caravan trash. But I will kill her, and then —” He met Dick’s gaze, dirty-ice gray into the lenses that hid sky blue, “— nobody will be left to stop me. Nobody will stand in my way.”

Dick smirked at him.

Which earned him another blow, this time to the face.

Still with one finger on his earpiece, Batman turned to face Duke.

Hidden together in the shadows behind the Bat-Signal, Duke still couldn’t shake the feeling of awe.
But nonetheless, being face-to-face with the man himself, knowing who he was behind the cowl, Duke felt no fear. Only curiosity...and determination.

“Oracle, huh?” he remarked aloud. “She’s the one? The one everyone’s talking about? Oracle is the commissioner’s daughter, Nightwing’s girlfriend; she was Batgirl?”

Batman grunted slightly, which he took as a yes. Then:

“Oracle is much more than that.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard the stories.” Granted, some of them had to have been exaggerated. No one person could shake off being possessed by Brainiac, could single-handedly command a personal cohort of metahuman women, could turn and threaten former villains to her side, could be feared by Batman’s enemies as much as the man himself, and be relied on by every single major hero and heroic team for unlimited information and technology assistance.

...Could she?

“Look, uh, B — can I call you B? — she’s like, your daughter-in-law or something. I didn’t hear much, but from what I did hear, it sounds like she needs a lot of backup.”

Batman saw through him immediately.

“You’re not coming,” he said roughly. “You may know our identities, but you’re still a civilian. I’m grateful to you for getting me the information, but you need to go home now.”

Duke scuffed his moccasins against the rooftop.

“Home.”

“I don’t have one,” he replied. “My parents are...gone, and I don’t have any other living family. I live in a kids’ home. I really don’t have anything to lose.”

Though half of his face was covered, Duke still could’ve sworn he saw something change in Batman’s expression.

“And look, I’ve done this much,” he continued stubbornly, “Besides, I want to help. What else am I supposed to do with nothing to lose and everything I know?”

Batman stared at him, then grunted in frustration.

“This is not a game, and it’s not something you can do on a lark. I’m already risking enough as it is. These people are dangerous —”

“Man, you think I don’t know that? My parents are out of the picture because of one of these people. One of the Robins died, the other was tortured and vanished out of the blue. Everyone knows villains try to capture and/or kill your sidekicks all the time. But I can’t just stand by and do nothing.”

Several seconds ticked by. Duke held his ground.

Then Batman sighed, and seemed to deflate slightly.

“If you’re really so determined...I...I have...a spare Robin suit. For when Damian hits his growth spurt. I think it’ll fit you.”

Duke’s mouth dropped open.
“Whoa wait, really?”

“You will not be actively fighting Python or his men,” Batman growled immediately. “You will listen to me and Oracle, and you will not argue with us, or provoke the others. This is only for the moment, and only because your reasons...are good. To be frank, I don’t even know that you should even continue crime-fighting after this; it’s likely that you shouldn’t.” He paused, giving Duke one last stern look. “Don’t make me regret this.”

He let out a deep, but quick, breath.

“Okay. Okay. I get to wear a costume along with the Bats...no big deal.” His excitement was bleeding through. “So, tell me. Who in your family is who? And tell me: what are their deals?”

Batman — Bruce — raised what he realized were the keys to the Batmobile. His enthusiasm only surged higher.

“That, among many other things, you’re going to have to learn on the job.”

Barbara parked her car, then slowly lowered herself out and into her chair. The door clicked shut behind her, the Hummer as unassailable as a fortress.

There was nothing at this end of the block, only an empty parking lot. At ten past ten at night, nobody was around. Nobody to disrupt the family’s gathering.

The rain had stopped. A chill spring breeze ruffled through her hair; it had grown longer and thicker over the last few months, spreading out through the city air like flame.

Nearly all the rest of her was covered, though. She was clad entirely in black, a long-sleeved shirt coiling up to her neck and around her wrists, a Greek-style skirt brushing down to her ankles. A matching wide black scarf was draped around her neck.

In her hands was a mask.

She almost never used it. Whenever she made personal appearances in Oracle’s name, people tended to assume that she must work for him — always a him — rather than believe that the paraplegic woman was the mysterious power. But she still owned that priestess mask, green and delicately ovoid, its features shaped into her infamous symbol.

She laid the mask down on what little room there was in her lap. One hand rested atop the mask, the other checked her tablet and the hiding spot for her escrima before coming to a protective halt over the crown of her stomach.

She waited like that until she heard the telltale screech of tires approaching.

Tim’s Redbird was the first to pull into the lot; Steph, in full Batgirl regalia, jumped out of the driver’s seat. Tim stumbled out of the passenger side, looking rather ill, while Cass stepped stoically out of the back. They cut a dramatic picture in their uniforms and black capes, although the effect was somewhat ruined by how green Tim was under the cowl.

“I’m never letting you drive my car ever again.”
“Suck me, Drake, there are no red lights or turn signals in an emergency. Especially one that involves your family.”

Jason’s motorcycle roared in barely before she was done talking; he jumped off while the engine was still running, snapping up the keys, the veritable arsenal of weapons hidden on his person rattling ominously.

“How many guns?” Cass inquired of him.

“Only two.” Jason’s expression was unreadable behind the helmet, but his voice was seething beneath the veneer of casualness. “No need to worry. What you need to worry about is the knives, the bolas, the very small grenade, the nearly as small ax, the flamethrower, and the...wait, what am I forgetting? Oh yeah, the cosh. I also have a cosh stuffed down the front of my pants, you know, where it won’t stand out.”

“Your pants?” Tim looked, if possible, more sick. “Where are you keeping the grenade?”

Before Jason could reply, Kate’s motorcycle snarled to a halt next to his, Selina riding on the back of the machine behind their aunt. Kate’s expression was twisted with obvious fury, Selina’s, like Jason’s, a calm front. Her claws flashed in the dim light of the street lamps.

“So, you got a plan yet, almighty Oracle?” she inquired.

Barbara slowly looked up and faced them. She wasn’t sure what her expression must’ve been like, but something in it effectively silenced the chattering kids and cut off whatever snide remark Selina had been planning. Kate actually took a few steps back towards the motorcycle, just as the Batmobile finally completed the group.

Behind the tinted windows, Alfred’s silhouette behind the driver’s seat was clear, deceptively slender and frail, an accompanying silhouette of a shotgun in his hands. As he emerged, Bruce might’ve been carved from granite, his intense grip on his youngest’s shoulder the only sign of the internal distress she knew he was feeling. Damian himself was twitching with fear and anger, knuckles tight on the hilt of his sword.

Then, much to her surprise, a second boy in a Robin suit emerged from the backseat. The boy looked around nervously until his gaze finally landed on her, then started.

“Holy shit. You’re Oracle? Hey, um, wow. I’ve heard some very cool things about you, but I’m still not sure you should be out here while you’re...”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Um...you know.”

He gestured vaguely at her midsection.

“...Do you wanna know some deep breathing techniques?”

“I already asked her that,” Tim muttered, looking somewhat less anxious. “No dice.”

“That’s because for all your experience, your Lamaze techniques are still faulty, Drake.”

“For your information, I was an amazing birthing coach, thank you very much.”

“Heh, and four years later, that’s still the closest you’ve ever gotten to seeing another human’s
“Do I need to read you the dictionary definition of ‘asexual,’ Jason?”

“Bruce,” Kate interrupted while the new boy furrowed his brows at the others, “why is there another kid here? Did you adopt another one in the ten seconds since my back was turned?”

Bruce grunted.

“I did not adopt Duke, no. But he has nowhere to go, and he...”

“Out-stubborned you?” Steph asked innocently.

“That’s not a word.”

“And that’s a yes.”

She cleared her throat, and the entire family fell silent. One by one, they turned to face her. Clad in black, clad in dark reds or yellows or purples, their eyes hidden behind the lenses of their masks and cowls, their nervous banter ground to a halt, and they all stood at attention.

Firstly, she rolled over to Duke. The boy took a cautious step back.

“You’re not ready for frontline duty yet,” she decided. “You’ll be staying behind with Alfred.”

He started in shock.

“Then what was the point of me even coming?” he protested. Bruce shot him a warning look, which he grimaced at, but didn’t stop talking. “Why am I even here?”

She lifted her chin to meet his eyes. Under the intensity of her stare, he cut himself off, then took a step back.

“Staying behind won’t make you useless.” Her voice wasn’t very loud, but it carried. Under the dirty velvet curtain of the Gotham night, the flickering lights of the avenue, she felt her black-clad body melt into the shadows while her face and hair stood out in stark tandem.

While the Bats listened to her.

Alfred rolled down the window, and her audience became fully attentive.

“My plan involves all of you, all working together. And so I’m going to need all of you to listen to me very carefully, and to do exactly as I say.”

She glanced down at her chair’s hidden compartment.

“But first things first.”

She pulled out the tablet, and tapped it a few times. Before her, a wall of green code sprang to life, the binary numbers simultaneously a brand new challenge, and as familiar as an old friend.

Python didn’t know it. But he’d accidentally given her the last of what she’d needed to fully take him down.

The family waited breathlessly as she found her way in, as her calloused fingers danced across the screen. The code flashed before her eyes, but now that she knew how Python operated, his passcode,
tapping into the system he’d been using was easy. Within a few minutes, she had found the
frequency she’d been looking for, disabling the security in a heartbeat.

The wall of numbers blinked at her, almost in welcome.

Before they broke to reveal to her the images she’d needed, playing across the screen.

The smile that grew across her face was half vicious and entirely joyful.

Barbara then tapped the screen a few more times, forcing the live feed of her newfound information
to download directly onto her tablet, instead of where it had originally been going.

Halfway through her next process, she paused.

“Bruce, is the computer in the Batmobile still linked to the GCPD’s system?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now, do you have a spare com for Duke here?”

Bruce wordlessly produced one, before dropping it into the boy’s hand.

“Right, now Duke, when I give the word, you tap the computer screen three times and tell it
‘Gotham City Police headquarters.’ And when I tell you to, you’ll have to tap it three times again to
end the transmission. You’ll still be connected to the police, though, so be ready to answer any
questions they might have. You got that?”

Nods.

“Good. Now, one more thing...”

She finished linking her system to Bruce’s, then slipped back into the foreign code. Just to top things
off, just for a little extra bite in her execution, inputted an algorithm very similar to one Python had
previously used.

Poetic justice and all that, she thought, her smile returning.

Jason cleared his throat, bringing her back to the present.

“So what are the rest of us going to be doing?”

She lifted her head. At first, instead of replying, she lifted the Oracle mask and slipped it on, her
vision going the same green as her code. The scarf went on next, securing the mask in place,
wrapping around her head until her hair was completely obscured.

“Alright.” The modulator in the mask switched on, and her voice turned to robotic, thrumming, only
vaguely female or even human. “Gather close, all of you.”

They did. Surrounded by the family, their love and their willingness to fight and avenge clear, she
felt her smile grow, and perhaps even soften a little bit around the edges.

Not that Python would be able to tell.

“So here’s the plan...”
Drew lounged easily in the former meeting room. Despite the fact that it was nearly eleven o’clock and his excitement more than prevented him from feeling any fatigue, he still sipped at the cup of sludgy instant coffee in his hand. Mostly just to have something to do, but he hoped it would also persuade his captive of his calmness, of his ease in possessing another person’s life.

Nightwing refused to look at him. His lip was split, and he must’ve bitten his cheek during one of the blows to his face, because his mouth and chin were streaked with dark blood. Fastened to the wall like a dead butterfly in a display case, hatred and stubborn resolution were twisted across his sculpted features and full lips. To Drew, such expressions looked out of place on someone, that, to him, seemed so feminine.

He checked the time, then stood and walked back over to the wall.

“Her deadline is in fifteen minutes,” he told Nightwing almost cheerfully. “I doubt you’ve lived even three decades, but you’re not going to live much longer.”

Nightwing spat in his face.

With his free hand, Drew slowly wiped the mixture of blood and saliva from his cheeks. Then he lifted his cup of coffee, and in return, threw it in his captive’s face.

Unfortunately, it had cooled enough that it wouldn’t give him any worse than a mild scald, but he still relished the other man’s gasp of pain.

Drew immediately then pulled a thin stiletto blade from the inside of his white jacket, pushing it to the hitching throat.

“I’m trying not to get any more of your dirty blood on me until I cut your jugular open, so I wouldn’t recommend doing that again.”

Nightwing still scoffed and rolled his eyes, even with the hot liquid dripping from his cheeks and a knife to his throat.

“Go fuck yourself with a dildo-shaped cactus. And, speaking of which, if either of our blood is dirty, it’s probably more likely the guy who has to pay anyone, especially the women he hates so much, to give him the time of day.”

Drew tried to keep his calm facade from slipping, but it was difficult.

“Do I have to tell you again to shut the fuck up?”

“Ohhh.” Nightwing actually chuckled. “Y’see, here’s the thing about giving me an exact time and method of death: you can’t intimidate me. I’m not scared of pain. I’m not scared of insults or psychological torture. And I’m certainly not scared of how smart you are; you’re still much less than she is.”

The knife pressed harder against his skin, just a twitch of the hand away from drawing blood.

“Tell me something. Are you even a man at all? Or are you just Oracle’s whore?”

Nightwing didn’t answer. Just smirked at him; a smirk of knowledge, of security in himself, tinted at the edges with bitter hate.
The time stretched on. For what could’ve been seconds or minutes, the two were locked in silence, in a kind of standoff.

Then the door burst open.

“Damn it Ward, how many times have I told you to knock!?”

“Sorry sir,” the man gasped. He looked like he’d just run up the entire flight of stairs, but his bland face was still lit with eagerness. “She’s here. She came.”

The familiar swell of sadistic happiness began to build in Drew’s chest; his heart pounding with anticipation.

He took a brief moment to compose himself, then put the knife away. For the moment.

“You join the others guarding our guest here. I must go to the rendezvous point.”

“Yeah, cool, but um...” Ward rubbed the back of his neck. “Two things, sir.”

“...What.” His voice was dangerously flat.

“Uh, well, she has Batgirl and Black Bat with her.”

Drew exhaled.

“I knew she wouldn’t come alone. She thinks she can outwit or overpower me by bringing along the other Bats.”

Nightwing chuckled darkly. Drew ignored him.

“Continue and keep in contact as planned, Ward. The Bats will be a minor issue.”

“Yeah, okay, and the other thing is totally good news, sir. I think it’ll be even easier to overpower her.”

Now Drew was actually curious.

“She’s a cripple —”

That...was delightful. And a power trip just to think about. He inhaled long and sweet, but Ward wasn’t done.

“— and you’re never going to believe this, but what’s more, she’s pregnant.”

He went still for a few moments.

Before he turned back to his captive, bursting into cold laughter.

“It’s yours, isn’t it?”

Nightwing went silent for once, which was as good as a yes.

“My god.” He drew one hand through his tufty hair. “What a family.” His cold voice became high and mocking. “That presumptive frigid cunt, a cripple, knocked up by her gypsy whore. I wonder how you even managed it, barely a man as you are. Good thing your half-blood bastard won’t see the light of day, yes?”
“You don’t know shit about my family, Drew.” His voice was low with his hatred.

And Drew was so drunk on power and delight he didn’t stop to wonder how one of the Bats knew enough about him to know his name.

“I do know none of you will last the night. Ward, keep vigilant for sneak attacks and messages from the others. If any other Bats do show up, kill them.”

Ward licked his lips and nodded, shuffling out to guard the door.

Drew, meanwhile, adjusted his white linen outfit to perfection, inhaling and squaring his shoulders. A slow lazy smile traced its way across his lips.

“Still think she’s going to beat me?”

“I don’t think. I know.”

He contemplated striking his prisoner one last time, but decided not to waste the time.

Instead, he strolled through the doors, buoyed by power and triumph, heart hammering in his throat as he went to wait for his enemy.

The second floor opened up into a massive foyer, most likely for entertaining businessmen back while the building was operational. But nobody would’ve wanted to use it for guests now. The room was almost totally dark, only the barely-functioning lights cutting a weak glow through the night. The welcome desk suffered gashes and holes from where his bored employees had thrown knives or shot rounds into it. The walls were caving in on themselves, leaving the skeleton of the building exposed like it’d suffered a great wound. Two thugs lurked near the entrance to the staircase.

Reveling in it all, Drew strode into the ruined foyer with the confidence of a peacock; laptop bag slung over his shoulder, the stiletto knife a comforting weight against his torso.

He took his place in the center of the room, sitting primly behind the welcome desk. His pulse still racing with excitement, he steepled his fingers, unable to stop the smug smirk upon his lips.

The elevator dinged.

The thugs stood at attention.

He held his breath.

The first thing he saw were the two young women in black, the familiar symbol etched across their chests. Black Bat, impassive, but with her shoulders taut as a bowstring. Batgirl, bristling, with obvious loathing etched across her face. Their chins lifted in proud defiance, they stood like an honor guard on either side of —

Leaning in slightly, Drew took in his enemy for the very first time.

Under different circumstances, he decided that he could’ve easily mistaken her for harmless, even attractive, as weakened as she was. She sat up rigidly in her chair; her shoulders and arms surprisingly toned, her belly heavily swollen. A peridot-green mask in the shape of that hated symbol
hid her face. Like the girls beside her, she was clad all in black; her head was wrapped up in a wide scarf, her loose cotton skirt reminiscent of a priestess of old.

Only her hands, pale and strong with long calloused fingers, the hands that had undone empires, that had commanded untold knowledge and power, remained uncovered, holding the pushrims of her wheels in a white-knuckled grip.

Though he’d never met his rival face-to-face before, he could’ve sworn something about her seemed familiar.

She refused to speak at first. Instead, she rolled to the very center of the foyer, the two girls following at her side.

“Python.” Her words echoed with the mechanical tone of a voice modulator. “This ends tonight.”

He leaned back again, his smile growing even wider.

“Yes. Yes it does.”

Batgirl focused her look of loathing directly at him. Stupid girl.

“You know...” Hands still steepled, he looked directly into the mask. “I’ve been wondering about you for a long time. A barrier to my goals, a challenge, someone so presumptive as to have reached for so much power...especially when I found out you were just a woman. Especially now, that I see you’re crippled, both by your body and your feelings. But you were both proud and foolish enough to think you could claim that power, regardless.”

She didn’t respond.

“And so both your body and your feelings have betrayed you. You cannot win, you must know that now. You are not strong enough. You could not bear it if the person you love were to die, could you? And you cannot beat my men in a fight. So what are you now?” He paused, then all his vitriol began to pour into his voice. “I’ve stopped wondering. You’re nothing you claim to be. You’re just another woman, a crippled woman at that, surrendering to a man.

You’re Batman’s lapdog, you’re a product of law enforcement and its delusions. Held down by your own body. Blinkered and shackled by the man who fucks you and his family and his bastard that you carry. And now, here before me, you’re not queenly or powerful. You’re not the voice in the ear of all those so-called heroes. You’re not the great and all-knowing Oracle. You’re nothing at all.”

She inhaled deeply, and the girls at her side tensed. But she only let it out in a long, shuddering breath.

“I’ve made it clear I’m giving up to you. You don’t...you don’t have to make it worse.”

“I don’t?” He tilted his head to the side. “You’ve been a thorn in the side of everyone with greater ambitions for years. Without you, I would’ve owned Gotham City years ago. Without you, I will not be seen as a monster...” He spread his arms. “...But as the king that I am.”

She was quiet for a moment more.

“So kill me if you will, Python.” Her voice was still low. “But I...I surrender to you now. I abided by your terms...so...” It looked like it was difficult for her to say. “Please. Please, I ask you. Keep your word. Spare Nightwing. Spare the man I love. And at least let me deliver my child safely before you kill me. I...” She swallowed hard. “I couldn’t bear to lose our baby any more that I could bear to lose
him.”

He could hear a ring of truth in her words. She really did love him. Really did love their offspring, really did believe in the laughable idea of them as a couple, as a family.

He could also hear the pain and desperation that he had so craved from her.

For almost a minute, he deliberated, letting her anxiety build to a crescendo, keeping her in suspense.

Then his phone beeped.

He checked the messages from his men...and smiled.

Exactly what he had hoped for.

He turned back to the women before him.

“No.”

The girls stiffened.

“No!” Oracle’s voice was plaintive, almost strangled. “We had a deal!” Her hands rose to her chest, clenched in terror. “We had a deal — I surrendered to you —!”

“I told you no tricks. No attempts to save him on your own.” He shook his finger at her like she was a naughty child. “My men have just found the other Bats you brought with you, trying to sneak in through the roof.”

Her chest hitched, her breaths almost like sobs. Black Bat put a hand on her shoulder.

“Everyone who you don’t see here and who’s not guarding your precious Nightwing is fighting your pathetic little rescue attempt. They’ll be kept busy until long after he’s dead.” He paused, breathless with malice, vision almost swimming with joy. “Of all the backup you could’ve picked...Batman, Batwoman, and Catwoman, really? He’s an impressive target, but the other two are hardly even worth the effort.”

She was definitely sobbing now, her hands clawing the front of her shirt. It grew too much for Batgirl, who started forward —

— And the two thugs were over in a heartbeat, wrapping both girls in a vice grip.

“You didn’t keep your word. So I have no reason to keep mine.” He leaned forward, breaths heavy. “So instead of sparing him...” He drew the knife, the blade flashing silver in the dim light. “…I’m going to have him brought here, and I’m going to cut his throat in front of you. But don’t worry, at least you and your little bastard will join him right after that.”

Oracle collapsed forward, shaking, her hands clenched over her heart. She whispered something he couldn’t quite catch, except for the word “now.”

“So...” Her voice was choked with tears. “Everything you’ve done...just to kill me and ruin my family.”

“Yes.” He spread his arms wide, the knife held loosely. “And it was worth all the effort. Killing that woman to spread discord and fear in Wayne Enterprises, beating that stupid kid to death to get to Batman —”
“Robbing Lucius Fox.”

“Hardly. Robbing Lucius Fox was easy! Releasing fake files on him, then hacking into the dirty history of the GCPD and robbing them too, that was easy.”

“How about trying to kill the Foxes?”

“Trying to kill the Foxes and your little sidekicks was worth the effort too, even if it is a shame the wrong people died in my bombing.”

“Black Canary. My right-hand woman.”

“Black Canary? My only regret about all this is that though I tried, I couldn’t get that worthless slut dead. But on the other hand, it’s kept the Justice League out of my affairs, so, silver lining. And another silver lining...Nightwing will die tonight by my hand, and sooner or later, the Bats will fall.”

Oracle exhaled long and soft, murmuring something else, something that ended in “stop now.” Then she bowed her head, clasping her hands in supplication; her breaths still shook. He regarded her with nothing less than proud, sadistic joy.

“Please. Please.” Her words had become quiet, plaintive. “I...shouldn’t have...I’m sorry.”

“Sorry won’t save him.” He lifted his cell phone, and typed in the command: Bring him to me.

He could hear her crying.

“Please. I...I beg of you.” Her head bent further. “I’ll do anything for you, but please, please, spare him. He’s the most beautiful, wonderful man; he’s my partner, my friend, the love of my life, please, god help me, please spare him.”

He drank in her pleas like a fine whiskey, savoring her anguish.

“Anything?” He toyed with the knife.

“Anything,” she promised.

“Hmm...”

She lifted her head. A few more seconds passed.

“No.”

She collapsed back into body-shaking sobs while he laughed cruelly, the sounds echoing around the ruined foyer. Batgirl and Black Bat looked at each other, and then to her with pity on their faces.

When he was done laughing, he checked his phone again for a response.

Nothing.

He frowned slightly, then sent it again, waiting.

Still nothing.

Growling in frustration — damn the help, those idiots were ruining his moment — he dialed the number and raised the phone to his ear.
It rang ten times before it went to voicemail.

He tried all four of the other men guarding Nightwing. Not a single one picked up.

“Damn it, where are they?” The words slipped out before he could stop them. “Why isn’t anyone responding?”

The thugs exchanged confused looks.

Batgirl and Black Bat exchanged smiles.

Smiles?

But why? It was over for them, Oracle was ruined, she was even still crying...

No...her sobs...the noises racking through her body...they weren’t sobs anymore, they had changed. Lower, louder, less desperate and more...amused.

She was laughing now.

She was laughing.

She couldn’t be laughing.

Barbara was laughing.

At first, still bent over, they were only soft chuckles, but they slowly increased in volume until she was throwing her head back, her face split open with glee. Her laughs, full-bodied and rich and carrying, echoed loud and strong with every bit of the power and triumph that she felt.

Drew was all but frozen with shock and confusion.

Barbara’s arms spread out as she laughed, as she relished her moment, as everyone stared at her but only her beloved protégées smiled.

Even as her laughs wound down, behind the mask, her own smile remained on her lips.

If all of Drew’s men had flocked to Kate, Selina, and Bruce, her decoy had worked. If none of the guards were responding, her real mission had worked.

And if those noises she heard in the distance really were police sirens...her playing for time had worked. That footage she had had Duke send to her father certainly hadn’t hurt either.

She turned and nodded to the girls.

In a heartbeat, before anyone could react, Cass had extracted herself and, with minimal effort, knocked out both thugs. She and Steph stood free, ready to continue.

Barbara regarded them both with pride, and with trust.

“Batgirl...lead the charge. You know what to do.”
Stephanie started.

“Me? Lead?”

“Yes, you. Lead.”

She only hesitated a moment. Before Cass rested a hand on her shoulder and nodded to her.

Then her smile grew impossibly wide. She offered a hand to her girlfriend.

“Shall we?”

She then spun around and ran up the stairs, Cass following at her heels.

Barbara barely had time to feel her pride swell before Drew unfroze, pointing his knife in her direction. His face slowly filled with blood, color finally breaking up his monochrome palette.

“What have you done, you bitch?” he roared.

She shrugged, her smile not dimming.


“You fucking bitch!” His grip tightened. “You couldn’t have, that’s not possible!”

“Isn’t it?” She suddenly became serious. “Isn’t it possible, Avery Drew?”

He froze again.

“I recovered the footage of you going into Kelly Nolan’s apartment to kill her. Red Robin found the crowbar you used to kill Pedro Di Nero, with your fingerprints all over it. I recovered the emails you sent to orchestrate the bombing and Canary’s attempted murder. And I have you on record confessing to all that, along with you confessing to robbing Lucius Fox, releasing fake files on him, hacking the GCPD, and attempting to rob them as well.” She nodded up to the room’s cameras.

“No.” He shook slightly. “The cameras run to my computer —”

“Which you shouldn’t have told me.” She reached down to one of her chair’s hidden compartments, and patted the tablet safe within. “Because I needed that confession. It all but guarantees a conviction. So what did I do? I hacked into the cameras and redirected them to my system...I recorded your entire confession before I sent it to Batman’s system, which, in turn, went over to the police.” She chuckled nastily. “And you didn’t notice my presence at all. None of your security was tripped. Because I’m a better hacker than you. Because I know exactly who you are and what you’ve done, Avery. And now, so does everyone else.”

His hands slammed down on the desk.

“Nightwing was going to die rather painlessly. But now I think I’m going to beat him, gut him in front of you!”

He started towards the exit to the staircase.

Her voice hurtled across the room.

“You’re not going to lay a finger on him. You’re not going to so much as touch the man I love ever again. Why do you think none of your guards were responding to you?”
He stopped halfway to the door.

“I gotta say,” Tim remarked, “I’m impressed. Every single one of Python’s reserve men fell for the fake rescue attempt.”

The three brothers crept along the hallways. Barbara, after scouring the cameras inside the building, had informed them precisely where Dick was being imprisoned, as well as how many guards had been posted. But they’d still been bracing themselves for something to go wrong.

“I’m not surprised,” Damian huffed. “If stupidity were a crime, those steroid-munching gorillas would make up the entirety of the Public Enemies list.”

Jason chuckled despite himself. Who better to have by his side rescuing their biggest brother than his biggest fans, two of the family’s most refined fighters: the maniacal demon baby and the neurotic depressed geek in need of a haircut.

“Hope Dickhead’s okay,” he said aloud. His younger brothers looked at him. “I haven’t even scratched the surface of all the teasing I need to do to him.”

“Whatever you need to tell yourself, Jay.”

Jason would’ve retorted, except at the end of the hallway, he spotted the door...and the quintet of guards.

He pulled out one of his Sig Sauers and clicked off the safety. At the look he got from his second-youngest brother: “It’s loaded with rubber bullets, Timbo. You think I want to get a sanctimonious Bat-lecture now of all times?”

“Fair enough.”

Tim pulled his bo staff off his back and expanded it to full length. Damian drew his sword, the blade flashing in the flickering lights.

“Ready?”

They all nodded.

Then, not bothering to be stealthy, they strode right down the hallway at the guards, weapons hefted, their gaits almost casual.

While the guards were so preoccupied with their conversation, they didn’t notice the brothers for an astonishingly long time.

“You may have brought him Nightwing now, Degrassi, but I brought him the information that made him pick the guy in the first place,” one man was arguing.

“Which wouldn’t have done shit if I hadn’t brought him the real thing.” Degrassi sneered.

“All your effort wouldn’t have done shit if you hadn’t known which Bat to nab!”

“What does it matter?” scoffed a third. “Soon the boss is gonna kill him. Shouldn’t we be celebrating
that, ‘stead of fussing about who’s gonna get the biggest pat on the head?”

“Spoken like someone who didn’t do anything special, Ward.”

Ward looked like he was going to say something else when Jason cleared his throat. All five men whipped around.

“Say fellas, you wouldn’t happen to have seen a guy we know? Five foot ten, overly white teeth, wears a lot of black and blue, smells like those soaps you get at Lush? We think we might have lost him around here.”

“And we kinda need him back now,” Tim added. “So if you could be gentlemen and tell us where he is —”

All five of them drew their guns.

“So, is that a no on being gentlemen?”

“You made a mistake coming back here, little birds,” Degrassi hissed. “Especially you, you psychotic brat.” He gestured to Damian, then smiled nastily. “After we shoot you full of holes, the boss is gonna cut Nightwing’s throat, and while Oracle’s crying over him, he’s gonna kill her too. It’s gonna be so good.”

The three brothers looked at each other.

“Five of you against three of us?” Damian remarked. “While two of us don’t have guns and we are all so young. Well. This is quite unfair.”

“Hey, we’re not totally cruel,” the first man said. “Just doing our jobs.” He aimed the gun. “So we’ll make this mostly painless.”

With two guns pointed at his face, the kid bared his teeth in a truly vicious smile. Jason felt an odd swell of pride.

“Hmm, you misunderstand...It’s not us I’m worried about.”

Degrassi clicked off the safety, jabbing the muzzle in closer, matching the boy for cruel amusement. The only difference: their family members were quicker than the cheap muscle, and far better.

When Damian lunged, the men’s shots went wide; he struck the flat of his sword against Ward’s temple and hit Degrassi in the face with impossible strength; the man’s nose cracked and both went down like trees being felled, a look on the latter’s face like Not again.

In the meantime, Tim wove gracefully around his opponents’ bullets and whipped his bo staff like gray light; quick taps to the two other men’s heads and they collapsed like discarded puppets.

Jason, for his part, simply pointed his gun at the last man, the one who’d delivered Drew information on Nightwing, and shot him in the chest. The rubber bullet didn’t kill him, unfortunately, but it did knock him down; he wheezed pathetically and clutched his chest, most likely nursing broken ribs. So Jason kicked him viciously in the head, and he fell unconscious.

The entire fight took about thirty seconds.

Damian stood up.

“Ha, that was fun.”
“We’re not done yet,” Tim reminded him, observing the keypad to the door. “We still need to get in. I should be able to figure out the passcode, but it’ll take me a few minutes —”

Jason aimed his gun and shot the keypad. The door clicked.

“Or we could do that.”

They pushed the door open, bursting through into the abandoned meeting room.

But not totally abandoned. Shackled to the wall like a kind of crucifix, their brother breathed heavy. His mouth and chin were wet with blood, he had bruises blossoming on one cheek and the other eye, and his face had taken on a slightly pink tinge like he’d been standing under an overly hot shower.

Despite all that, when he looked up and saw them, he smiled.

“Hey guys.”

Damian raced forward and jabbed the point of his sword into each of the locks; when Dick pulled his arms and legs free, the boy tackled him around the waist. Tim immediately joined them.

“Richard, don’t ever run off like that again. If you do, and if you die, I’m going to kill you.”

“For once, I agree with the devil spawn.”

Chuckling softly, Dick knelt and wrapped an arm around each of them, holding them close. The kids held on tight and nestled into him, drinking in his presence, like his hugs mattered more than anything else, while Jason stood in the doorway and watched. But after a few moments, Dick looked up at him and nodded.

“You can c’mere too, Little Wing.”

He hesitated.

“Oh, fine. But just this once. And don’t tell anyone.”

All four of them hugging at once was more than a little awkward, but they were willing to ignore that. In the moment, all that mattered was that Dick Grayson, as chattery and optimistic and generally annoying as he could be, was alive.

Jason pulled off first, clearing his throat, grateful that his helmet hid his blushing.

“Hey, uh, we should stick to the plan. Get out as quickly as possible and all that.”

Nodding, Tim and Damian each slung one of Dick’s arms around their shoulders to support him. Jason took point with his gun at the ready, and the brothers started forward to the escape point.

Dick’s breaths were level, measured.

“You guys knew where to find me.” There was an odd inflection in his voice that Jason couldn’t quite place. “Barbara...Barbara sent you. She’s here. She saved me.”

“Yes, that woman is quite ferocious.” Damian sounded impressed. “And quite stubborn.”

“She would’ve come to save you even if we hadn’t gone with,” Tim agreed. “I swear, she would’ve
done it. Taken on dozens of guys singlehandedly, while paraplegic and two weeks from giving birth...

“Told ya she’s got balls.”

“I think you mean ovaries, Todd, but I agree with your sentiment.”

“Fair enough,” Jason acknowledged. “And actually, I’m pretty sure having ovaries makes you tough on principle.”

Damian looked up at Dick.

“Anyway, as it is, her plan was quite brilliant. We all realized that we had to support her, especially as her goal was to save you.”

The familiar look of awe had entered their brother’s face now. He glanced upwards, the love they all knew he was feeling starkly evident on his face.

“Drew was wrong,” he said softly, “I know her, I know what she’s like...I knew that if anyone was going to make a plan that would get the bad guy and have everyone, including herself, out alive...it would be her. She’s so smart, so brave...I knew that she’d do it.”

Jason couldn’t help but grin, shaking his head a bit.

“You got your problems, Dickhead, but damn. Do you have a hell of a lot of faith in the people you love,”

Tim and Damian nodded in unprecedented agreement. The smile grew for a moment, then flickered.

“I don’t think she knows just how much faith I have in her, though.”

All three of them goggled at him. A flicker of unease entered Jason’s chest.

“...What the hell are you talking about?”

“Dick, even with everything else aside, she called you the love of her life,” Tim pointed out. “In front of, like, all of us.”

Something blossomed in his face.

“She did?”

“That’s what I heard.”

The look of love returned to his face, almost unbelieving. Definitely happy, definitely disgustingly smitten. Just like normal, just like it should be, as far as Jason was concerned. Not that he’d tell his brother that.

“Well then. I guess there’s hope after all,” Dick murmured.

Duke hadn’t even seen combat and he was breathless.
The wails of the sirens were definitely getting closer. He’d seen that confession, that Python had been tricked into admitting that he’d committed and orchestrated all those crimes. In mere minutes, the rest of the family would arrive and they would speed off into the night.

In the meantime, the commissioner’s voice echoed from the dashboard.

“Detective Allen and the SWAT team will be there momentarily with the arrest warrant; we already had quite a bit of evidence against Drew. But this confession...the prosecution’s going to love this.”

“It was no problem,” Duke said cheerfully. “I’ll be happy to do it again. Maybe even get in on the action sometime soon.”

“Hmmm. So, are you going to be staying? Batman taking you under his wing — um, so to speak — doesn’t mean that you have to be a Bat yourself.”

Duke paused.

Did he want that? The death, the pain, the heartbreak, the long nights fraught with difficulty and danger? All for a chance, just a chance that he might be able to do some good in the shithole that he lived in? Was it worth it?

“Yeah. I think I’m gonna be staying.”

“Hmmm.” Gordon sounded like he was torn between concern and pride. Duke couldn’t help but grin wider.

“Hey, I’ve always liked the sidekicks. And your daughter — your daughter is a badass.”

Gordon gave in and actually chuckled.

“That she is. Good luck, kid.”

The connection ended. Duke leaned back in the passenger seat, thrilled with the future possibilities opening up before him, glancing over to the left.

On his other side, Alfred looked remarkably at ease for someone with a shotgun in hand, surveying him in return.

“I was wondering. Do you seriously even know how to use that thing?”

The old man raised an eyebrow at him like he’d had a lot of practice raising his eyebrows.

“Young sir, if you must know, I was in the British S.A.S. I have been operating firearms and fighting in hand-to-hand combat since before your parents were born. Master Bruce may dislike their use, but I have no such qualms against using these, or any of my other skills, to any degree of forcefulness.”

Maybe he’d expected Duke to be scared. Instead, he nodded and said:

“Good to know you’re watching our backs then. So...what, did they base Kingsman off of you or something?”

Once he got over his surprise, Alfred actually smiled.

“Well, I must say, young sir, you certainly have the right attitude for this line of work.”

Duke grinned proudly.
“But I would still brace yourself for Master Jason and all his — rather distasteful, I think — jokes about his death.”

The grin slipped off.

The top three floors were unreachable by the elevator, so Stephanie’s feet hammered against the staircase, ascending through the office building at record speed. She barely felt the burn in her lungs or the ache in her legs as she climbed, listening for the sounds of combat.

Beside her was Cass, her constant companion, silently loyal. Steph loved her, and loved Barbara for entrusting them with being her honor guard, with being her backup, and most importantly, with getting to save Bruce and then lord it over him.

“When we get up there —” Steph yelled between gasps. “Follow my lead! And — get the others to.”

Cass only nodded. She might’ve seemed inexpressive to most, but Steph knew her, and knew how eager she was to fight, her confidence in their ability to win.

And damn if that all wasn’t flowing through her as well.

The two of them burst into the top floor, a triumphant grin on Stephanie’s face.

Around them, the fighting paused. Men lay unconscious or groaning on the floor, but there were still at least two dozen left. Selina had her claws an inch away from one’s face. Another had Kate in a vice while she was clearly about to smash the back of her head into his nose. Bruce froze the most plainly, staring at the two of them while one particularly ugly fellow blinked blithely with his knife raised above the Batman’s back.

Steph wasted no time.

She pointed, and in a blink the man with the knife was kicked across the room while the one Selina had been about to claw doubled over in agony. The black blur that was Cass was indomitable, and Steph laughed with pride and fierce delight.

“To me!” she cried.

Kate and Selina were at her side in an instant, and the quartet of women moved as one ferocious force, all but unstoppable.

The fists met with her face, her chest, someone kicked her roughly in the shins while another tried to stab her in the throat. But Stephanie ripped and smashed, striking people with her head, her batarangs, with crumbling bits of wall, with anything —

— While Kate literally knocked a man’s teeth in, while Selina slashed four lines across another’s face, while Cass felled two with a single blow.

She was only shocked when Batman appeared at her side, knocking aside a man who’d been coming at her with a switchblade.

“Not bad,” he said.
Her mouth fell open.

“Not bad at all.”

It took a second for Steph to recover.

But recover she did, screaming with renewed confidence and joy. Her fist connected with another man’s face; no amount of physical pain able to stop her as she, Stephanie Brown, led the Bats in combat in the name of her all-powerful mentor.

Who else could claim that kind of honor?

Drew stood rooted to the drab, dirty carpet, staring in disbelief and horror.

“Did you really think I’d only bring five of the Bats with me? Nightwing’s long gone by now. With Black Bat and Batgirl backing them up, Catwoman, Batwoman, and Batman will be gone soon too. The police are on their way. I meant it when I said this ends tonight.”

His hands shook.

“You thought that I’d put up some pathetic excuse of a fight, or that I’d roll over and surrender to you, or that I’d be willing to beg to you. But I bring everything to a fight. I don’t surrender. And I don’t beg for anything from men. Especially not men like you.”

“There are no men like me!” he roared, his face turning red again. “And you’re not as smart as you think! You got yourself on the GCPD’s tape too, you stupid bitch! By coming here, you revealed yourself!”

She shook her head.

“No, Avery. I erased myself from the footage I sent to the police. I got the idea from you, but my total erasure was, I must say, far better than your clumsy cover-up from Nolan’s building’s footage. To everyone else, it’ll just look like you’re ranting to the Bats you have in your custody. Classic villain move.” She shrugged. “I, on the other hand...I was never here.”

“But you were here,” he snarled. He was shaking so hard, he looked like he was suffering under a strong wind. “Your corpse will prove that.” He started forward, almost predatory, a mad glint in his cold gray eyes. “I’m going to split you open from your mouth to your cunt —” The knife arm swung up, “— and while you’re bleeding out, stab you in the gut so the brat in your womb dies first —”

But when the knife came down, it was met by the iron-hard wood of her chosen weapons.

“Haven’t you learned anything, Drew?” Her voice came out in a snarl, her crossed escrima holding firm against his pressure. “Never — ever — threaten me or the people I love.”

He pulled free and tried to strike again, but she struck him in the chest, he lunged and drew a stripe across her arm, tearing the fabric, revealing a thin stream of blood —

— before she hit him across the jaw, twice in succession. Her escrima struck his kneecap with vicious force, nearly shattering it.
While he howled in pain, she lunged in —
— He grabbed at her head, but only succeeded in ripping her scarf off, destabilizing her mask and exposing her hair.

For a moment, he appeared dazzled by the color.

During which she jabbed him in the neck.

He gagged, swiping his knife blindly; she mostly dodged it but was caught across the knuckles and dropped one of her escrima.

He took the opportunity, lunging in and shoving her wheelchair over. She toppled out, rolling across the floor, clutching her abdomen protectively and momentarily forgetting about her mask as she half-lay prone.

It had gone flying to the other side of the room.

Drew stalked over and grabbed her by her hair.

“Out of tricks, are you?” He yanked roughly. “If I’m going to prison, after all you’ve done, after ruining me, like hell am I going to let you live, you fucking bitch —”

She turned around.

His grip and expression went slack as he took in her face. Letting go of her, he stumbled back.

“...Barbara Gordon?”

Even lying back, propped up on her hands, very pregnant as she was, she still looked down her nose at him with every ounce of disgust she felt.

“Barbara Gordon.” It was barely more than a whisper. “But you...you were so beautifully broken...so perfect...I...I didn’t know...”

“Would it have mattered, Drew?”

With her remaining escrima, she struck hard.

A resounding crack echoed across the room as she connected with his other kneecap. He fell to the floor, wailing and moaning in agony.

“And I’m never out of tricks.”

She shuffled back to her chair, hauling herself into her seat, letting out a long breath, looking back down at the defeated man before her.

Clutching his broken knees, he rolled over, staring at her. The hatred and sadism had fallen away, left with...confusion.

“How?”

She tilted her head to the side.

“How were you able to do all that? How did you claim that kind of power? How...how did you feel like you could have that kind of power? How...when you’re broken. When you should be pitied. Not
confident, not happy, not self-possessed.” He shook his head slowly. “Not victorious.”

As she sat there, Barbara felt a kind of peace begin to settle in on her.

“I have never, ever, in my entire life, been broken.”

He remained there with his mouth slightly open in bemusement, brows screwed up in pain, in loss.

“I have never in my life been worth less than anyone else. I’ve been working and fighting tooth and nail since I was fresh out of my childhood. I earned my power. I warred and commanded, seized every opportunity, suffered and grew, won and lost and loved. I am a woman, yes. A traumatized, mentally ill, war-scarred, disabled woman.”

She lifted her head.

“And I am proud of that. I am proud to associate with, to have fight for and with me, to love and protect and nurture other people like me. I am disabled, and I am a woman, and I am brilliant and proud and funny and strong and determined and fierce and warm and loving and selfish and fearful and courageous and far far smarter and more skilled than you. I am proud of who I am.”

Maybe it was her imagination, but the flickering lights seemed to grow stronger, brighter, as she spoke.

“You said there are no men like you. The world is full of men like you. You hate women, you think you’re better than everyone else, you only can express yourself through violence, you’re a dime a dozen. You have nothing to be proud of. Men like my friends and my family, men who are kind, who are compassionate, who do good and expect nothing in return, those are far rarer than and worth a hundred of you.”

Avery Drew seemed to shrink before her eyes. Not an unconquerable monster, not a mysterious screen presence. A man, and not even a special one at that. Just one with special circumstances.

“And so you hate me because you felt entitled to everything I’ve worked for. You thought that you could oust me, steal my power. Prove yourself the best at what I do.”

She rolled forward, towering over him, shrouded in the shadows that her beloved family lived in, her face bathed in the honesty of light.

“But I was Batgirl. I am Oracle. I am Barbara Gordon. And I am the best at what I do.”

Prone and defeated before her, Drew didn’t cry. He didn’t beg. Instead, his face slowly began to fill with hatred again. Like it probably always would be.

“I’ll tell everyone who you are. I’ll come back. I’ll kill you.”

“No, you won’t. It’s over now. It’s over for good. And for what it’s worth...” She leaned down, her hair falling over her shoulders. “Nobody will believe you. Your word is worth what you are: nothing.”

His eyes just had time to grow wide in that one last revelation.

She struck him one last time on the temple, and he collapsed, unconscious.

Finally beaten.

Barbara sat all the way up, tucking her escrima away, towering over his body from within her chair.
as she relaxed. Her heart beat slow and steady. Her breaths were soft and strong. Her long-awaited peace settled all the way into her body as she took in all that she had done.

There was only one more truth she needed to speak.

“I win.”

The mask had been hidden safely away. For all intents and purposes, she looked like just another curious civilian.

So she watched the swarming police and their convicts serenely from behind the yellow tape, about twenty feet away. The beaten-up thugs were all clearly babbling, eager to sell out the boss that had gotten them beaten up by kids and girls, especially when they’d found out that he’d been about to stiff them on their final payments. Avery Drew himself was silent, his gait a broken limp, being loaded into the police van in handcuffs. Processing. Unbelieving that he had lost to his hated enemy, to someone he’d lusted over, to someone he dehumanized and had plotted to kill, to a woman.

Barbara watched as Crispus commanded the SWAT team, as he looked like he’d won the lottery when the call about the confession tape came through.

Bruce called just as the police began to drive away.

“We’ll be at the Batcave for the rest of the night,” he informed her gruffly. “Everyone made it out with minimal injuries, but I still think it would be best if we all rested now.”

“I agree.” The wind ruffled through her hair.

Bruce paused.

“And Barbara...thank you.” His voice was still rough, but she heard softness in it as well. “Thank you for taking down Drew. But more than that. Thank you for saving my son.”

His son.

The leaden weight of guilt returned to her stomach. But for the moment, the relief that he was alive, that she had managed to save him, that still counted for something.

“Of course.” Her voice softened too. “Goodnight, Bruce.”

For a few moments, she sat alone, letting the night play on around her. She’d just been about to turn around and head back to the Hummer when a pair of familiar figures, who’d since she’d last seen them gotten changed into civvies, emerged from the shadows.

“Cass? Steph?”

“Babs!”

The three women embraced, all of Barbara’s love and pride and relief pouring out as she held them.

“What are you two doing here?”
“Stayed to watch Drew get taken away, that bitch. And to see if there was anything else we could do for you.”

“You just want...more thugs to beat up,” Cass teased.

“And you don’t?” Steph nudged her.

“Perhaps. But, to be serious...you were good. Commanded well.” She faced Barbara. “Led with confidence.”

“I have no doubts.” One hand still on each of their shoulders, she felt warmed by both of their beaming faces. “I hope you know, I love you both so much. And I’m so, so proud of both of you.”

They beamed, and she smiled softly.

“But for now, I’m not going to ask anything more of you, except to get a good night’s rest. Let’s go home.”

They started down the sidewalk. The girls’ uniforms folded neatly under their arms, Barbara’s weapons tucked innocuously into her wheelchair. Their hair was swept by the breeze, they were bathed in the midnight shadows and lights of the city. For a moment, all was well.

Then Barbara gasped; ground to a halt.

The girls stopped. Cass doubled back, Steph following immediately.

“Babs? What’s wrong?”

For a moment, she was frozen with shock, her eyes blown wide behind her glasses.

“Babs? Come on, what is it?”

She exhaled sharply and sat up. She brushed her hand through her hair, trying to level out her breathing, trying hard to get herself together, trying not to overreact —

“Babs?”

She looked up. She faced the girls before her.

“I — I think my water just broke.”
My longest chapter yet, and it’s the penultimate one. I can’t believe we’re already almost
at the end, it’s been a really, really good ride.

Also, you may notice some comic references! The identity of the future Robin and his
suit are a direct shoutout to Earth-2 Society, which is where he originates. (Though I
may note that this universe is considerably kinder to him and his family.) And three lines
were borrowed directly from Nightwing/Oracle Convergence, aka the comic that saved
my life, because you can’t really improve upon perfection.

(Warnings: descriptions of labor and childbirth)

**Death (Tarot):** Upright — Endings, beginnings, change, transformation, transition. Reversed — Resistance to change, unable to move on.

Under the midnight street lamps, under neon signs blinking in the windows of two bodegas and a
strip club, with a few stragglng cars roaring faintly in the distance, Stephanie was caught in a panic.

Cass was helping Barbara into the Hummer while she stood dumbly to the side, trying not to visibly
freak out.

She knew that Barbara had scheduled the C-section, *which wasn’t even supposed to be for another
two weeks for god’s sake*, because the doctors had decided that with her paralyzed lower half, giving
birth naturally was out of the question. What was more, they had mentioned that it was dangerous for
her to go into normal labor, especially the more advanced stages, because of the risk of damaging her
spine further.

Stephanie couldn’t help it. Her brain played back the agony of her own labor, of lying on that
stretcher under too-bright lights in unimaginable pain, listening vaguely to the doctors talking about
*complications*, hating herself for her self-inflicted pain and consequences. The old stretch marks and
the scar from her own C-section still trailed across her belly, starkly pale against her skin.

She couldn’t let Barbara be put at risk by her body, by *complications*. But she couldn’t move, rooted
to the spot by her memories, wanting to scream in frustration at herself.

Meanwhile, Cass clambered into the backseat and pulled the wheelchair ramp up, sitting next to the
older woman. She pulled her close, stroking her hair, murmuring something unintelligible while
Barbara took deep breaths.
“It’s fine, Cassandra,” she said. “This is just the early stages of labor, I’m totally fine. It’s still under control, we just need to get to the hospital —”

She interrupted herself with a noise that combined a gasp and a shriek. One hand suddenly clutched her abdomen while the other took a white-knuckled grip on the underside of the seat.

“Fuck.” It was soft, almost disbelieving. It also snapped Stephanie out of her trance.

Shaking her head in anger, she marched forward to the Hummer, wrenching open the door and climbing into the driver’s seat.

She had no time to hate herself, no time to let her regrets or insecurities win. No time to worry or deliberate. She had to do what she did best: take action.

The noise of the engine starting up caused both women in the backseat to lift their heads.

“Babs, tell me how to drive this thing. I mean, obviously there’re no gas or brake pedals.”

Barbara took a deep breath, and her voice steadied again.

“The brake and gas are both linked to the joystick; you just have to press one button or the other to get it into gas or brake mode. The rest you should be able to figure out. But don’t you dare change my radio presets.”

Stephanie was encouraged.

Less so when she finally got the dashboard figured out a few minutes later and Barbara suddenly wailed in pain again. Steph was so shocked that she accidentally hit the brake instead of putting it into gear and the entire car jerked violently. Cass nearly fell out of her seat.

“Those were way too close together, especially for this early in labor,” she realized. “Not only is this happening too early, it’s happening too quickly.”

“Never mind that,” Barbara groaned, trying to hoist herself back upright. “My doctor will reschedule the surgery, just get me to Martha Wayne Memorial Hospital as fast as you can, and when you get to the front desk, you have to ask for —”

Pulling out of the parking spot, Steph turned around and pointed fiercely at the older woman.

“Nope. Shut up.”

“Stephanie —”

“Shush. Stop giving orders for five milliseconds. Look, Martha Wayne Memorial is nearly an hour away with traffic, all the way over on the other side of the city, and quite frankly, at the rate you’re going already, we don’t have the time. We’re going to have to go to Leslie’s clinic instead.”

Barbara drew back.

“What? You want me to have my baby most likely surrounded by beaten-up vigilantes and in the hands of a woman who disapproves of my entire lifestyle?”


“Oh yeah.” Steph pulled the car into the road, and pushed down the joystick. The car roared, and leapt down the lane, the neon lights becoming a white-and-magenta blur. “Look, Barbara, I know
this is a total diversion from your plans and that you hate that shit, but I know what’s happening to you.” She glanced up into the rearview mirror, meeting the older woman’s green gaze. “And you’re going to have to trust me.”

For a few moments, the two of them stared at each other. Then Barbara sighed.

“Fine. But at the very least you still have to call the guys.”

Steph cursed, almost running a red light. Three different people honked at her, and she flipped them off.

“Shit, I forgot about the guys. Jesus, we need them here for this too, don’t we?”

“Don’t know...if they will come in time,” Cass fretted. “Happening...too soon. Might miss it.”

Barbara’s eyes were still clear in the rearview, and they all but blazed with stubbornness. Stephanie felt a sense of camaraderie with her.

“Not if I have anything to say about it.”

Bruce ignored his phone ringing.

“Sir,” Alfred said for the eighth time in the last fifteen minutes, “it’s Miss Stephanie again.”

“Can’t she take a hint?” Bruce grumbled. “I’m busy. Whatever she wants, it can wait.”

In light of the raid on Python, the Batcave had been transformed into a temporary infirmary, a hub of sluggish activity. He and Kate had stripped off the tops of their uniforms, leaving him bare-chested and her in a sports bra; she dabbed witch hazel on her bruises while he applied butterfly bandages to a cut on his shoulder. Selina, who wore leather instead of body armor, had fared slightly worse, and he occasionally snuck concerned looks at her while Alfred stitched her up.

But his own injuries paled considerably against the importance of the five young men assembled nearby, dressed in their civvies, chattering and joking with each other. Four of them had gotten off completely uninjured, completely safe; he felt so proud of his sons, so impressed with Duke’s potential, so relieved they were all alright.

That relief was tenfold with Dick. His eldest, lounging between Tim and Damian, alive. Bruce’s stomach twisted with hate at the bruises on his cheek and eye, the slight redness of the scald he’d gotten on his face, the bruise he’d seen under his ribs when he’d been getting changed. But what mattered, what outweighed all that, was that his son was alive.

“No need to come back to me, Alfie,” he was saying. “A shower and some sleep and I’ll be just fine. Selina’s more important.”

“No, Master Richard, by all means, play down your near-death experience,” Alfred said dryly. “It’s not as if I’m not irritated enough, what with Miss Stephanie’s — as the kids say — blowing up your father’s phone.” The words were barely out of his mouth when said phone chimed loudly. “Lovely. Now she’s gone back to texting.”

“What does this one say?” Tim asked.
“‘Bruce, answer me now, god fucking damn it,’” Alfred read. Stephanie’s words sounded almost funny in a dry, prim British man’s voice.

“Maybe you should answer her now,” Duke suggested.

“Whatever internet joke she wants to show me can wait until tomorrow.” Bruce finished dressing his wounds and slipped on a black turtleneck. Selina made a noise of annoyance as he did — although that could’ve been because of her stitches being pulled closed. “I’m going to bed.”

“But’s it’s not even one in the morning.” Jason sounded shocked. “You going to bed before five, that’s like putting the cereal in before the milk.”

All the other boys gave him matching looks of horror and disgust.

“You don’t put the cereal in before the milk?”

“Why would I?”

“You’re a soulless heathen,” Damian decided.

“Hey, I was brutally murdered at a tender age, I don’t deserve this from you.”

“Cass died and came back too. Twice. You don’t hear her throwing it around all the time,” Tim said blithely.

“What?” Duke’s eyes nearly bulged out of his head. “Twice? What — wait, how many of you have died and come back?”

They all looked at each other.

“Does that include fake deaths?”

“It shouldn’t have to!”

“It shouldn’t,” Jason agreed. “I patented that shit; Bruce and Steph are just fake.”

“I don’t think I want to know the stories here.”

As though she’d been summoned by mention of her name, the phone chimed again.

“Master Bruce, I’m afraid this one is...”

“What.”

“A very important message for you, of the greatest urgency.” He paused for drama, then deadpanned: “‘Where are you, you bastard.’”

Bruce groaned loudly while his sons, cousin, and girlfriend all laughed. Even Duke chuckled nervously.

“Fine. Give me the damn thing.”

Stephanie picked up on the first ring.

“Bruce,” she greeted him brightly, “I am going to fucking kill you.” Then exploded: “Why are you so hard to get to!? What do you have against communication, besides the goddamn obvious!?”
He yanked his phone away while Jason laughed again.

I really need to remember to turn off speakerphone.

“...I mean really, how hard is it to send a text? To pick up your fucking phone — pick a damn lane you moron — and call me back? Do you just hate all forms of human connection that much?”

“Stephanie, it’s been fifteen minutes.”

“It’s metaphorical! For your issues — yeah, fuck you, lady with the ‘Vote Lex Luthor’ bumper sticker — in general!” she shouted. “I thought that was obvious!”

Bruce felt his face slip into a pained expression while Jason nearly fell off his chair in hysteric, Kate cackled, Tim hid a smile, and though Dick’s face and chest were in bad shape and it had to hurt to laugh, even he was making no secret of his amusement.

“B, I think you should listen to her,” he chortled, eyes crinkled in the way that had made it hard to get mad at him when he was little. “Road rage aside, she’s making a good point.”

“Oh. Dick.” All of a sudden, the yelling evaporated, and she just sounded...awkward? “Yes. Dick. I kind of needed to reach you too.”

Everyone looked at him in unison. He shrugged, tilting his head slightly to the side.

“Why do you need to talk to me, Steph?”

“Um...” Bruce pictured her shrinking behind the wheel, casting her eyes to the side shiftily. “Um...oh hell. Cassie, help me out here.”

“Can’t help.” Cass’s voice echoed in the background. “Bit busy. Another one’s coming.”

“Another one what —?” Bruce started to demand.

He was cut off by a very feminine shriek of pain, nearly dropping his phone in shock, just managing to get his grip back on it as that same voice started swearing loudly and profusely. Dick’s eyes went wide with fear.

“Stephanie Crystal Brown,” she shouted, “Fuck this. I am already in a lot of pain, and I swear to crucified fucking Christ, get to your fucking point, or give me the goddamn fucking phone!”

“You know, it’s a good thing I sympathize with you right now, or I’d be pretty pissed at you too,” Stephanie decided. “Don’t glare at me! Alright fine, give me a second —”

“What’s going on?” Dick demanded, walking over and leaning in over the phone’s speaker.

“Stephanie? Why was she screaming? Is something wrong? What’s going on?”

Steph was quiet for a few moments, the only sounds from her end Cass murmuring something unintelligible while Barbara breathed heavily. Bruce felt his chest tighten further with worry.

“...Well...let’s just say you’re going to be stamping that dad card a little sooner than you thought.”

This time, Bruce really did drop the phone.

The rest of the cave went completely silent for almost a whole minute; blinking very slowly, eyes huge with shock. Then Kate voiced what everyone was thinking:
“Oh shit.”

Damian leapt to his feet, waving his arms frantically.

“What are you morons standing around for? We have to go! Go! Go now!”

“Be quiet, Damian!” came Steph’s voice from the floor, “If there’s going to be any drama, it’ll come from me!”

“STEPHANIE!”

“Barbara, shut up! Also, you’re doing great and I think you’re a badass. Cassie, you’re doing great too. The rest of you, meet us at Leslie’s clinic ASAP. Everything should be okay, but to be sure, they’re going to be starting surgery pretty much as soon as we get there, and you do not want to miss seeing this kid.”

The line went dead, and nearly everyone sprang into action at once.

“I’ve never gone to a birth before,” Duke said, excitement and nerves alike in his voice as Kate pulled on her shirt and Selina her jacket. “Let alone one right after a battle.”

“I have,” Tim replied. “One can, uh, hope that this one will go better though.”

While Jason laced up his boots, Damian clapped his hands and shouted up at his brother.

“Hurry up, you oaf! Hurry up! We don’t have all night! I have been preparing for this for months, and I refuse for it to go wrong!”

“Y’know, most people your age wait a decade or two before they start freaking out about this kind of thing.”

“I am not most people my age. I am extraordinary. Now hurry up, you big galoot!”

“Well hell, kid, you don’t have to shout; I want this to go smoothly too, you know.”

As the others bustled around him, Bruce realized that the fear, the worry that this was too soon, that the circumstances weren’t right, hadn’t left, but had made way for a sense of determination as well. This was happening, no matter what. Whether the circumstances were exactly right mattered less. They were his family. This was his grandson. He had to be there for it.

He looked to the side at his eldest...and almost laughed.

Dick had completely frozen. His eyes still wide, mouth slightly open, like he still couldn’t quite process what was happening. Bruce had gotten to know that feeling well recently.

Tim glanced over at his brother, and concern bloomed in his expression.

“Uh, guys?” He snapped his fingers, then waved his hand a few times, in front of Dick’s face. No response. “...I think he’s stopped breathing.”

“Really?” Jason walked over and peered at him. “Well, Dick’s broken. Heh, Dick’s broken, that makes it sound like we need Viagra or something. Should I slap him? I already filled my quota of being nice to him tonight, so I could totally slap him.”

“No slapping any Dicks, there are children present.”
“Oh, for the love of god — move aside, you’re taking all night about it,” Damian snapped, marching forward and shoving Tim and Jason out of the way. He then backed up a pace or two, before roughly kicking his favorite sibling in the ankle.

Dick snapped out of his trance; grabbing his ankle, hopping up and down and cursing.

“I was going to suggest giving him the Heimlich, but that works too.”

Once he recovered, a kind of burning light entered Dick’s eyes. Something that, despite the situation, brought renewed pride to Bruce’s chest.

“Right.” Resting his weight gingerly on his ankle, he stood up straight, facing his family as they finished getting ready to go. His shoulders had lifted, his eyes blazed with determination. “Let’s do this.”

Cass had read unimaginable pain in other people many times before, physical and emotional alike. But before, there had always been something one could do about it.

Being helpless as someone she loved moaned and wailed in agony was a relatively novel experience for her, and she hated it. She hated being able to all but feel Barbara’s pain along with her, but not being able to do anything about it.

She caught a glimpse of Steph’s grimace in the rearview mirror, and understood. Steph knew the pain Barbara was experiencing as acutely as Cass did — albeit for a very different reason.

Despite it being the wee hours of the morning, they had gotten stuck in a bout of traffic a couple miles from Leslie’s clinic, and the strongest woman Cass knew was being reduced to alternate bouts of cursing and tears.

Steph pounded the horn and let out a long string of violent blasphemy, while Barbara curled up in Cass’s arms like she was the child, and she the mother.

“I can’t do this, Cassandra,” she gasped. “I’m too scared, I’m not ready, I’m not going to be good enough —”

“Shh.” She stroked her hair. “That is...the pain talking.”

“But I am scared.” She looked up, her face blotchy and red and streaked with tears. “I’ve been scared since I found out I was pregnant; scared that I’ll mess up, that I’ll do something wrong, that I’ll ruin my son like I ruin my other relationships —”

“You do not,” Cass said firmly.

“I do.” She ducked her head. “You know I do.”

Shame rolled off her like dry waves of heat, shame and anger and regret —

— And that was the moment Cass understood.

After making sure Steph was too busy to listen in, she lowered her voice.
“You...and my brother. You had a big fight.”

Barbara started. Then she seemed to fall in on herself further; her hair obscuring her eyes, the shame intensifying.

“Something he wanted terrified me...so I panicked and lashed out at him. I kicked him out of our home, Cass. I left him vulnerable to Drew. He nearly died because of me, and my selfishness, and my goddamn fear.” She let out a shuddering breath. “I keep hurting him just because I’m scared. What kind of partner am I? What kind of mother will I be?”

Cass understood that shame. Understood that fear of change, of faulting herself for the pain of someone she loved, of not feeling able to escape that cycle of terror and contrition and self-blame.

But she knew that if she could overcome all that, then so could the strongest woman she knew. Barbara, like Cass, just couldn’t do it alone.

“No. Nearly died because of Drew. You saved him.”

Barbara went still in her arms. Cass took a deep breath, and summoned up the rest of the words. Syntax was hard, but she knew her well enough that it didn’t have to be very good, or even good at all.

“You will not be perfect,” she said. “You...never perfect. Make mistakes. Things get...out of control.” With one hand, she guided Barbara’s head back up until they were eye-to-eye. “But you are more. More than...what you regret. Like you told me. You...make the choice to change. To get better. And so you will.”

For a moment more, she was still. Then something in her body softened, and Cass read hope. And of course, the older woman’s trademark determination.

“He needs to be here,” Barbara decided. “No matter what the doctors say, the surgery has to wait until he gets to me. He can’t miss this.”

“Don’t think...he wants to, either.”

Barbara chuckled shyly, before cutting herself off with another gasp and earsplitting yell.

“Jesus, I’m going as fast as I can with this asshole blocking my turn!” Steph protested from the front. “God, I hate people who drive SUVs.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Barbara panted. “You’re doing great, Stephanie.”

Steph met her gaze in the rearview mirror, looking encouraged.

“Seriously?”

“You both are.”

Steph grinned with renewed vigor, and Barbara looked calmer for a few moments.

“Wait, why aren’t you using the turn signal?”

“I don’t need it, it’s an emergency.”

“Stephanie...”
“No.”

“Put on your goddamn turn signal!”

“Make me!”

“For the love of Christ, put on the fucking turn signal Stephanie, or I’ll come up there and do it myself!”

*She’s going to be such a good mother.*

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The drive from the Manor to downtown was all but a haze.

With his three brothers crowded into his car, Dick focused entirely on his driving. No chatter, no jokes. Leaning slightly into the wheel, he muscled his way through late night traffic, jaw set, shoulders tight.

His brothers seemed to have picked up on his mood. Their excitement and nervousness almost totally silenced them through the drive; the only interruptions being Damian scrolling frantically through his frequently-visited childbirth sites, and occasionally reminding him to “drive better, Richard, I have no intention of being stopped by the police and derailed further tonight.” He and Jason didn’t even complain about Tim getting the passenger seat.

Dick breathed deep and quick as he approached the clinic. His bruises ached; his heart seemed to be trying to lift its way free of his chest.

When he finally parked, his brothers took off like shots, disappearing through the doors with almost comical franticness.

In the meantime, he tried taking a slow breath, which instead shuddered on its way out. He thought of all that had happened in the last few months, of all his waiting for his child to be born. All that excitement and impending joy that had been building up warred with anxiety and a sick sense of dread as he lingered before the entrance.

For he also thought of all the horrible complications that could arise.

What if something had gone wrong? What if she’d been in untold agony, while he’d been ignorant and unable to do anything about it? What if — his heart twisted — what if under any sort of circumstances, she still didn’t want him around?

But he still knew that even if it hurt him, he still had to be there for her. For their child.

He let out another breath in a huff, then squared his shoulders and pushed the doors open.

Inside, the lobby and waiting room were a flurry of frenetic energy. An unfamiliar man in scrubs with a bleeding nose pouted miserably beside a cluster of terrified-looking nurses, James Gordon in full police getup was yelling at the annoyed desk clerk, Bruce stood at his friend’s side about two seconds from yelling himself, his brothers huddled together with their worry painted across their faces. While all that was happening, Cassandra and Stephanie sat together in the waiting room, arms wrapped around each others’ shoulders, looking off towards the surgical department.
“— what do you mean I can’t see my daughter?” Jim was shouting. “And more importantly, what the hell do you mean you don’t know what’s going on?”

“Sir, it’s Dr. Thompkins who’s monitoring your daughter, not me.” The desk clerk readjusted her glasses, still looking very fed up and not one whit intimidated. “Besides, the rules are, only the significant others of people in labor are allowed in the delivery room. No expecting mother wants a whole circus crowding her space.” She eyed the Waynes. “Which I suspect is what you have here.”

“But why did she send out the nurses and crew?” Bruce asked sharply. “Does that indicate that something’s wrong?”

“Sir, would you like me to wear a shirt that says ‘I don’t know’? Because that answer really isn’t going to be changing any time soon.”

Both fathers opened their mouths.

Before a throat was loudly cleared in the waiting room doorway.

Dick hadn’t seen Leslie since the fiasco that was Gotham’s city-wide gang war, since Stephanie had been presumed dead. She looked much the same in her white scrubs, wire-rimmed glasses, and short silver hair, albeit more tired, her jaw more tightly set, with more lines in her forehead.

Her piercing gaze met Dick all the way across the room, and she pointed a slender finger at him.

“You...” The doctor’s quiet voice carried all the way across the room, and everyone fell silent as she spoke, “You, young man, have a lot to answer for.”

Every eye in the room turned to him. Something inside Dick twisted up and threatened to choke him.

“What’s wrong?” he managed to say. “Is she alright? Where is she? Where’s my kid?”

“Not here yet.” Leslie took off her glasses and polished them. “It’s been nearly forty minutes since she went into labor, and we still haven’t been able to start the surgery.”

A moment of silence.

“What!”? Damian screeched, his voice going up a whole octave. “Why not!? Woman, this level of incompetence —”

“Don’t you dare call my professionalism into question,” Leslie snapped. “We haven’t started the surgery because she won’t let us.”

Cass and Steph exchanged looks.

“She won’t let you?” Tim echoed.

“She won’t even let us touch her. She’s already threatened and cursed at me multiple times, slapped three nurses, and punched out the anesthesiologist when he tried injecting her.”

Across the room, the man with the bloody nose looked, if possible, even more miserable.

“Thah woman isth a nightmare,” he said thickly. Jason looked like he was fighting back snickers — and doing a bad job of it. “She thwears like a pirate, an’ a mean drunk one, thoo. An’ she’th got handth like a lumberjack that got hith armth replaced wit’ grizzly bear pawth.” He moaned and clutched his face. “Aughh, fug. Doc, ah thig she brog mah node.”
“I’m sure you deserved it,” Selina said blithely while Jason and Kate lost control of themselves and howled with near-frantic laughter. Damian drew himself up to his full height of four foot ten, looking like he was going to burst with anger.

“This is not funny, you imbeciles!” he raged.

“The boy’s right,” Leslie said grimly. “Barbara shouldn’t even be in labor, let alone have let it progressed this long. The contractions risk damaging her spinal cord more, and they’re happening far too close together, especially with that risk hanging over her head. I wouldn’t have worried too much had she had the surgery as soon as she came in, but the longer she puts it off, the higher the risk grows. We need to operate now.”

“Then what the hell’s stopping you?” Jim’s voice was almost histrionic.

Leslie nodded back to Dick. The sense of being choked intensified, his heart beating frantically.

“She won’t do it without him.”

Everything seemed to stop at once.

He could only stand there dumbly as the doctor kept talking.

“She’s insisting that he be there to see his child born in person, or she won’t do it. Didn’t take that lightly either; threw a forceps at my head when I told her she was being unreasonable —”

Dick didn’t hear the rest of it. The people and the clinic became a blur as he ran, only stopping once to ask a passing assistant which room she was in.

When he burst in, he was greeted by another overwhelming slap to the face of sensations.

Though the small crowd of nurses and medical assistants were gathered around the bed in the middle of the room, they still gave it a wide berth while its occupant roared like a wounded lioness. Wearing nothing but a hospital gown, her red hair was a wild tangle, her face sweaty and flushed with pain, dried tear tracks on her cheeks, superficial cuts on her arm and knuckles that he realized must’ve come from Python.

At the sound of the door opening, her voice raised even further.

“Leslie, I swear to god, if you try to change my mind again I’m going to throw the scissors —”

She finally made eye contact with her visitor, and the anger died in her mouth. Before his eyes, her shoulders relaxed, her face loosened. There was something vulnerable in it now — something imploring.

Dick’s knees buckled, and he fell to the floor in front of her.

“Barbara —” The words fell out, “— I knew, I knew that you would rescue me. I want you to know that I believed in you. The faith I have in you —”

“Dick.”

Though her breathing was still heavy, the way she said it was soft, almost sorrowful. He looked up, meeting her gaze again, almost surprised by the raw need in her eyes.

“Come here.”
The others parted around him, until he could almost believe they were alone by the time he reached her bedside. She lay back down, and he reached out, almost tentatively, for her hand, still fearing she would withdraw.

But she let him take it, and in that moment, no gesture could matter more.

Her strong fingers wrapped around his, and she kept her eyes level with his.

“Maybe I should’ve been more afraid while I was in there. And of course I didn’t want to die, but I knew that you could save me, you could win. I knew you could beat Python, that you could do it all.”

“How could you have known that?”

“Because I know you. And I trust you.”

Her eyes flickered.

“But what I don’t know: why did you make them wait for me? Why did you put yourself in all that pain, risk yourself again like this?”

She inclined her head slightly.

“Because I can’t do this alone, and I want you to be with me while I do.”

All the air left his lungs in a rush.

“I thought that having you with me would make all this pain and effort easier, make me braver, more confident maybe, having my partner and my friend by my side.” She took a deep breath; her fingers tightened slightly. “And it did.”

Hot tears began to prickle at his eyes. His hands trembled.

“Besides, I didn’t want you to miss the birth of your child. It’s not exactly delivering any magical moments yet, mostly very upsetting and irritating ones, but...” She almost smiled. “You still should get to be the first to meet him.”

Wordless, he bent down and pressed his lips to her hand, his eyes blurring.

The trance was only broken when Leslie cleared her throat again, right above him, albeit gentler than before.

“Dick, you have to back up and give us space to work. We really do need to start now.”

He met Barbara’s gaze again, just as the anesthesiologist very carefully began lowering the needle.

She nodded.

He backed up, watching the seconds pass and her slip into unconsciousness. The crowd in scrubs descended like a fog; he pressed a hand to his mouth, trying to keep it together as he watched it happen.

All there was to do now was wait.
She knew that she was dreaming. She knew that it was just the anesthesia making the time stretch on, that the surgery would only be minutes long, that it was only the drugs making her vision swim from black into streams of color —

But she still caught her breath.

Like a frieze of the gods, she saw a sunny field, a cloudless day, and her loved ones before her. Zinda, Helena, Ted, all dressed in the blue of the summer sky, Dinah crowned with sunlight like a divine queen and laughing without worry. Cass, Jason, Steph, Tim, and Damian with glossy wings springing from their backs, playing tag across the sky, flowers entwining their bodies, which she realized were growing from their wounds and their scars. Kate napped peacefully in the sun in a vibrant red dress. Bruce and Selina sat together under the well-water-cool shade of a tree, asleep, looking years younger and less tired, the branches wrapping around them like blankets. Her father and Sarah, happy and careless, chasing each other like children across the field.

She looked down at herself.

She was still seated on a tripod, but her black dress fluttered in sunlight and balmy wind instead of cave vapors, dark and warm and rich as a Hawaiian beach, or a June night. An odd tugging sensation came from her old bullet scar; she lifted aside a fold of fabric to see her own symbol glowing bright against her skin, obscuring the ugly pucker, tendrils of green suffused into her skin like the power of Delphi hadn’t begun in some cave, but within the Oracle herself.

The green grew until it filled her vision, before the scene changed.

She was still seated, but on a throne of chrome and leather and emeralds. Her dress was the same vivid green that had filled her eyesight, patterned with the silver dots and lines of a circuit board, the hem sweeping down over the floor. She felt the weight of a crown upon her head, which, when she removed to look at, she saw was a silver circlet etched with binary code.

When she looked to the side, she saw that there was a throne next to her, slightly smaller, and empty. Like it was waiting for someone.

From across the expanse of the throne room, a shape fluttered through the great doorway. A female raptor, a bird of prey, with white-gold feathers and the blue eyes of a woman.

She stretched out her hand and the bird alighted, fluttering her wings, cocking her head to the side with knowledge in her human eyes.

You know, the bird said in Dinah’s voice, despite what they say, no queen really needs a king. But it wouldn’t hurt this queen to have a consort.

She let out a twittering chuckle, before taking flight again, not giving her time to respond. As the bird flew away, the sunlight of the room seemed to bend and shimmer beside her, as if it were trying to twist itself into a glowing human shape.
The very air of the waiting room had tensed, as if the atmosphere sensed how many people within were holding their breath.

Bruce looked over at his friend, who looked nearly sick with apprehension, hands wrung together in his lap. Alfred looked as put-together as always, but Bruce could still see the worry radiating from the man who’d raised him. The boys were clustered together, ignoring old rivalries and grudges, even Duke huddled in as they waited, as if he were already one of the family too. Kate rested her elbows on her knees and chewed her nails. Selina glanced over at him; even she looked worried, and she and Barbara weren’t particularly close.

Nearby, Stephanie held his daughter close. The girls leaned into each other, comforting each other with their presence, Cassandra softened even as she worried for her mentor and mother-figure. Despite everything, Bruce felt a surge of gratitude and warmth for Stephanie, for what she provided to his kids, especially his girl.

For the second time that night, they had all come together. The pettiness and anger and hurt of the past had been secondary in the name of something greater, in the name of their family member’s life.

Lives, in this case. For on top of what Barbara obviously meant to Cassandra, Stephanie and the boys, even Damian now, all loved her like a sister, and she was already a daughter to him in all but a marriage license.

Family had meant something to them all tonight. For the first time, they were finally united, finally whole, and with luck, set to grow as well.

Even as he worried, Bruce began to feel something he didn’t consciously dare to indulge in very often.

Hope.

A pair of chittering she-bats circled a silver moon, growing until by the time they alighted on the roof beneath them, they were a pair of women. Stephanie and Cassandra, their hair cut short, with new cuts and callouses on what little skin was exposed. They were in their early thirties or so, and they were wearing something very like Kate’s outfit with purple highlights instead of red, and, most strikingly, an all-new Bat suit, tailored for Bruce’s daughter instead of for him.

Under the shadows of the night, Batwoman and Batman smiled at each other, happy, at peace. Their scars now invisible under each others’ gazes and the forgiving warmth of the dark.

Shall we?

They dissolved into shadows, one with the night, and she knew that the city was in the best of hands.

Then the dark parted to reveal an entire array of women. Dinah as alone and without direction she’d been when they’d become partners, Cass and Steph as young girls beaten down by misfortune and abuse, Wendy Harris angry and sad, Charlie Gage-Radcliffe naive and daydreaming, Helena a solitary loose cannon, Zinda lost and drunk, and every other member of the Birds of Prey suspicious and concerned.

Under a single bright light, they looked at her. Then before her eyes, their forms shimmered, and she
watched them become who they were now.

Healing, assured, driven. Teammates, lovers, friends. They glowed with the very strength of their being.

Facing her, Dinah and the Batgirls nodded, acknowledging what they and the others had become. Like stars, like a constellation, each woman was more proud and strong and self-possessed. Her heart swelled with joy until all she could see was their light.

But eventually, out of the light emerged patterns. Stretching before her were endless pathways, constructed of wires and code. Among the infinity of the internet and the connected systems of every single computer system on the planet, she didn’t need legs. She didn’t need to wear someone else’s symbol.

Floating suspended in that infinity, she watched the lights flicker around her, listened to the computers hum, a chorus of welcome.

Her power. What had turned a prophet into a queen.

What was more, when she listened, the hum and click of a thousand keyboards sounded like the soft voices of everyone she loved. She may have ruled, but she was not, and never would be, alone.

She closed her eyes, and felt everything spiral back to black.

Dick kept his hand clenched over his mouth, waiting.

Despite being on the other side of the curtain, facing Barbara’s head instead of where the doctors were working, he could still hear everything that was happening. Leslie and her team murmuring to each other, the metallic sound of the tools clicking and flesh slicing open.

She still breathed deep under the anesthesia, her hair bound up in a net, the cheerful floral print of her gown at odds with the mood of the room.

Minutes passed. Each one felt like hours.

He closed his eyes, silently begging, praying.

The ticking of the wall clock grew oppressive.

Then someone exclaimed in triumph —

— and a baby’s cries filled the room.

His eyes flew open.

The darkness parted one last time to reveal the daunting expanse of Gotham beneath her.
Upon a rooftop, the twisted miles of city sprawled at her feet, the sun began to rise in the distance; the sky turning from indigo to rich shades of violet and rose, the last of the occasional pollution-braving stars dotting the very top of the cloud cover.

On the next rooftop was a boy.

Only ten feet away, just a quick jump for a vigilante, a skinny black-haired kid of about fourteen dressed in the Robin colors smiled at her, offering a quick little wave as she met his mask-clad gaze.

For a moment, she thought it was Dick.

But no. He had Dick’s nose and lips and eyebrows and cheekbones and endearingly sweet smile, but it wasn’t him. The costume was all wrong; dark pants and practical boots, the cape arrayed differently, the tunic striped down the front with a deeper shade of red, the mask green instead of black. He was taller, his hair done differently. His skin was darker. His jaw was more square instead of streamlined. And a little sprinkle of brown freckles dotted his nose and cheekbones, just like hers.

As she felt her mouth fall open, his smile grew. Nodding to her, he leapt backwards, landing neatly on his hands.

He continued to backflip all the way to the opposite side of the rooftop, offering her a jaunty little wave just before he tipped backwards over the edge.

Distance seemed to dissolve until she was sitting at the place where he’d fallen. But instead of falling further, the boy glided effortlessly on a grapple line over the city streets, laughing and whooping as he flew like he was born for it.

She knew she was dreaming. But something in her called it a vision too, like she, the Oracle, really was able to see the future.

So as she watched him fly free over his home city, she couldn’t stop the tears of joy from falling down her cheeks.

Dick was stricken.

He stood frozen in place as the team bustled around, cutting the cord and suctioning away amniotic fluid and stitching up the incision and beginning the measurements and running a bath, all while the high-pitched wails echoed around the room.

His knees felt like they were about to buckle. His hands were shaking so badly, when Leslie finished drying off the baby and wrapped him in a blanket, beginning to walk over, he was terrified that he might drop him.

The doctor looked younger and gentler as she regarded the crying infant. It took her a few seconds before she finally looked Dick in the eye and extended the precious bundle.

“Been a long time since I first saw you in your Robin days, Dick Grayson.”

He barely heard her, only felt the delicate warm weight as the baby was passed over, as he held him
close and soothed him. The cries slowly began to peter out the longer the baby rested in his father’s arms.

Dick couldn’t take his eyes off him. He was tiny, breathtakingly so, but every feature was perfectly formed. His downy black hair stuck up in short tufts. His skin was warm brown, flushed through with red. His face was still scrunched up, but his mouth was open in curiosity instead of displeasure and occasionally making soft noises, extending impossibly small hands out towards the unfamiliar new world. His eyes, a gentle gray-blue, blinked wide open in wonder, before finally coming to rest upon his father.

An endless stream of tears fell as Dick held his son, and he made no attempt to stop them.

It had been almost an hour.

All his reading, all his desperate attempts to become educated and do good for his eldest brother, did not feel like enough. Not even caring that he was leaning into his father in front of everyone and letting him stroke his hair, desperate as he was for comfort, Damian fisted his hands in his shirt and tried not to scream or curse with worry.

Everything that could go wrong played on loop through his mind. Everything that he feared seemed terribly, viscerally possible.

So that he almost didn’t see when Dick reentered the waiting room, only looked up when his sister gasped out loud.

At first, he only saw that Dick was crying, and his heart leapt into his throat. But then he registered the smile, almost too big to be possible, splitting his face, and what he was holding in his arms.

“Allahu akbar,” Damian gasped.

Everyone leapt to their feet, looks of disbelief and wonder spreading across their faces as they came near. The baby, wearing a fuzzy Batman onesie and looking so much like Dick, made eager little noises at them, stretching out his tiny hands.

Damian could feel something in his chest crumbling.

“Everyone...” Dick’s voice was hoarse with emotion. “I’d like you to meet my son.”

Bruce made a loud choked noise, raising a hand to his mouth. For a long few moments, all the others were frozen.

Until Cassandra leaned in, almost disbelieving, raising her hand. Tentatively, she stroked her hard, calloused fingers through the tufts of dark hair, lifting her hand up again —

— until the baby clutched her by the finger. Cass’s shoulders shook, their impossibly tough sister bare with emotion as she met his eyes.

The dam broke. The rest of the family moved forward as one, staring in awe, reaching out and watching as the baby reached back to all of them.

“God, he’s tiny.”
“He is.” Dick nodded, still transfixed by the infant in his arms. “Six pounds even.”

“Holy shit.”

“Are they supposed to be that small?” Duke murmured, inclining his head to the side.

“He was born a little early.” Their eldest brother chuckled slightly, caressing his child’s face. “But the doctors say it’s not worryingly so, and that...well, he’s completely healthy. Besides, we Graysons tend to be small. Me, my dad, my uncle, my cousin...”

Damian finally managed to squeeze through while they were talking, heart beating fast, meeting the infant’s gaze. Still reaching his hands out, he stared back in fascination.

He thought back to his initial reaction to Barbara’s pregnancy. How selfish he had been. How foolish. Nothing in the world mattered more now than the newborn before him. His kin, his eldest brother’s own precious child, more than worth guarding with his life.

Damian extended his own hand and touched it to the baby’s.

“Hello, habibi,” he said quietly. Jason, who, thanks to his time with the al Ghuls, knew Arabic better than any of the others, ducked his head, hiding a small smile. “I spoke to and in front of you often while you were still inside your mother, but it is good to meet you face-to-face at last. How are you tonight?”

The baby cooed and giggled at him, and Damian felt like his heart was about to shatter.

Beside him, Stephanie was openly crying. Tim had a comforting hand on her shoulder, but as he looked at her, he realized that like Dick, hers were really tears of joy.

“Excuse me,” piped a female voice, and everyone looked around to see a nurse wielding a birth certificate. “Mr. Grayson? I have your son’s date and time of birth, but I need his name. Or would you rather wait until his mother wakes up to discuss it with her?”

Dick sniffed, raising a hand to wipe his eyes, the smile not dimming.

“No, it’s okay, Babs and I agreed on a name a while ago.”

“Well?” Gordon prompted in a rather choked voice. “What is his name?”

Dick glanced back down at the baby.

“He’s named after my first father, and after the father of the man who changed our lives, in their memories. His name is John Thomas —”

Bruce jerked back in shock, staring.

“— Gordon-Grayson.”

“Born April 25th, 2017 at 2:13 a.m.,” the nurse finished, scribbling down the name on the birth certificate. When she was done, she lifted her head, a smile of her own on her lips. “Interesting that he came during the night. That seems to be quite a theme in this city.”

“And in this family,” Tim agreed, wiping his eyes.

“You don’t say.”
Dr. Thompkins had reappeared. Wearing a new clean outfit, she regarded the scene before her with a soft expression at first. But then she hardened, and Damian automatically bristled.

“Bruce.”

“Leslie.” Bruce moved a bit in front of Dick as if to shield his son and grandson. “Is Barbara alright?”

She was quiet for a moment.

“Barbara’s still under, but the danger’s over, and she’s fine. No additional damage.”

Everyone sighed with relief. Gordon slumped over. But the nurse, perhaps sensing danger in the way Bruce and the doctor were looking at each other, wisely made her exeunt.

“But apparently, she went right into great physical danger in her last month of pregnancy to confront a villain. I take you all know about that.”

“Well, she sure as hell wasn’t going to stay home and risk anyone else who went without her,” Steph spoke up. “She knew that if she stayed, someone was gonna die. At least one someone.”

There was a chorus of agreement.

“Stephanie —”

“Yeah, maybe it sounds like I’m advocating for the reckless option, what I would’ve done,” she continued. “But maybe it’s cause it screams ‘me’ that it was the right choice. I got her back here, I led the charge, and I trusted her faith in me.”

“We all trusted her,” Tim agreed. “And she trusted us, then got us all out safely. So I think the risk was worth it. We have our brother standing here now, don’t we?”

More agreement. The rather odd, vulnerable expression returned to Dick’s face.

“She was unwilling to let Grayson die,” Damian finished. “She refused to accept it. I respect that; it was a great deal of why she finished the battle herself, and why she won.”

Something changed in the doctor’s expression.

“Honestly, I’m surprised. Considering that she commands others and usually risks their lives and feelings.”

“But we rely on her because she knows the stakes and the game and the value of who she’s risking, Leslie,” Bruce said gruffly.

“Which is why she was willing to risk herself to get that back,” Stephanie said triumphantly, “And how she knows when her risks are worth it —”

“For all...who she fights for,” Cass finished quietly.

The doctor exhaled long and loud, her shoulders slumping.

“Commissioner, I’m obviously not going to get any support from you, am I?” she said half-facetiously.

“Absolutely not,” Jim said firmly. “Words cannot express how proud I am of my daughter, especially
tonight. Even if she did scare the hell out of me.”

“That’s fatherhood for you,” Bruce replied, a small smile returning.

“Wait, really?” Dick suddenly looked nervous again, clutching John closer to him. “I mean, based on what having younger siblings is like, I can’t say I’m surprised, but...”

“Don’t worry, Richard. Your son will be quite safe. If anyone threatens him, I will rip them limb from limb and stuff their arms down their own throat.”

“Thank you Damian, I feel so much better now.”

Though his brother’s words were sarcastic, and though he was no Cassandra, Damian still noted the warm affection obvious in his eyes and his posture. Whether it was brought on by their family, the newborn, Barbara’s show of her love, or all of it, to him, that was a victory.

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When Barbara began to stir, blinking the last of the drug from her eyes and her body, the first thing her half-asleep brain registered was the soreness, and more importantly, the emptiness in her lower belly.

She whisked the blankets and her hospital gown up, staring at the red, stitched mark low between her hips. It wasn’t very large, but still drew the eye, curving across her skin like some kind of secretive smile, evidence of what she had done, the final culmination of all those months.

She ran her fingers over the mark. Just inches away from the ugly twisted bullet scar, the two brought on by very different circumstances, but both indicative that her life was going to change forever.

There was a knock at the door. Her heart leaping in her throat, she let the blankets fall back down.

But it was Jason and Cass that emerged, not their brother. Both relief and a strange sense of disappointment swept through her.

“Hey Barbie,” Jason said gently. “You okay?”

She leaned back into the bed.

“Tired, mostly. It’s been a long night.”

“And it ain’t even over yet.” Big as he was, when he shifted from foot to foot, she saw a little bit of the sweet little boy still in him. Or rather, the sweetness surviving into another body, another time. “Dickie’s filling out paperwork and we finally managed to wrestle your kid away from the demon, so we thought you might want to see him.”

It was only then that she saw that Cass was carrying the baby in her arms, a look of tenderness on the young woman’s face. Cass, who’d thought herself a monster for so long, holding something so precious and delicate with such love. Warmth swiftly poured into Barbara’s chest, until her heart felt dangerously close to bursting.

“If you can aggressively cuddle...Damian was,” she informed her, smiling. Then, to the baby: “John, it is your mother. You want to...?”
The baby made soft noises, squirming.

“I will...take that as a yes.”

He was passed into her hands with the utmost care, and, almost unconsciously, she shifted him until he was propped up with the right support, nestled to her chest. The older kids watched breathlessly as Barbara looked into her son’s eyes, awe in both expressions as they saw each other.

Her fingertips stroked through his hair. His little hands moved upwards, stretching towards her face.

The heat in her chest began to build further until it shouldn’t have been possible to exist, melting through her like lava, like her ribcage was the earth splitting open because it couldn’t contain the outpour of pure emotion from her heart. She felt as though she were crumbling and solidifying at the same time; she knew love well, she had felt love this overpowering before, but it had never come all at once before, never known from a first meeting before just how much she felt for someone, how she would feel this much for the rest of her life.

The tears that fell from her eyes were hot too, and her breaths came out in shudders. Cass gently laid a hand on her shoulder, kissing her temple, and Jason smiled, wide and affectionate, without a trace of self-consciousness.

Those hands that had toppled empires cradled her son, and brought him close so he could touch his mother’s face, so she could press kisses to his head. His skin was satiny and warm; he let out the softest noise of content as she pulled him close.

It was some moments before either of the others spoke again.

“I’m not one to criticize — well, I’m not one to criticize you — but doesn’t it seem like bad provenance to name your kid after dead people?”

“You wanted her to...name him after you.”

“What does that have to do with —” Jason suddenly realized and threw his head back laughing. “I love you, Cassandra.”

Cass giggled, and Barbara let out a watery chuckle.

“Something I didn’t quite understand when I was younger...you can honor the past, even as you live in the present or look to the future. Make peace with it. And I intend to do that and look to the future.” She looked back down at John. “I thought it apt, since my child is part of my future.”

The two siblings briefly looked at each other, smiles still on their faces.

“What else...will be part of your future?” Cass finally asked.

“Well...”

The door opened again; her heart stuttered.

For this time, it was Dick. Wearing unassuming jeans and a blue t-shirt, his face was bruised and scalded, he walked with a slight limp, and it was clearly painful for him to breathe. But he still looked at the scene before him with wonder in his expression.

Something inside her ached.

His two siblings looked at each other again.
“We’re gonna go home with the others,” Jason decided. He kissed Barbara on the forehead, then started out, actually patting his older brother on the shoulder along the way. “You made something good, Dickie. You made something really good.”

Cass stretched on her tiptoes to kiss each of them on the cheek in turn, then whispered something in Dick’s ear that sounded suspiciously like “go get her.”

Then they closed the door behind them, leaving the newly forged family alone together.

Dick walked forward, kneeling beside the bed. He folded his arms on the sheets, resting his head on them. That sappy affectionate look she knew so well directed at their child, beautiful eyes soft with love.

“He’s perfect,” he murmured. “All those months, and now he’s here before me. I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s a lot that still needs to be said, Dick.”

He looked at her.

The baby stirred, letting out a fussy keening noise. She began to pull aside her gown.

“But right now, that can wait. I’m pretty sure he’s hungry.”

“I’m willing to wait for that.”

She was beginning to realize that she had been unconscious for a long time.

By the time John had been fed and had gone to sleep, lying peacefully in the bassinet next to her bed, the sky through the window was beginning to lighten. In the distance, traces of light began to poke through the shadows and smog, the neon and searchlights growing slightly fainter.

“The family must’ve enjoyed those few hours with their nephew and grandson.”

“They really did,” Dick said wistfully. “They all love him so much.”

“How could they not?” She looked to the side, where he slept. It still didn’t feel quite real, something so beautiful she was almost afraid to believe in, that she had a son with the man beside her. That she had felt such love for them both, that she knew what she had believed in all those months ago was true: there was nobody she would rather have, nobody better, to be a father for her child.

But something was still tainting her happiness.

She looked back at Dick. Something must’ve shown in her face, because he suddenly looked concerned. Her words momentarily stuck in her throat.

“Dick, I...I’m sorry.”

He sat up straight.

“I was cruel to you, and I am so, so sorry. You were right. I let my fear rule me, I panicked and
withdrew from you, I pushed you away, like before. It wasn’t your fault, what happened to us before. It was mine.” She swallowed. “But I don’t want that to happen again. I don’t want to lose you again.”

“You’re not going to lose me.” He took her hand. “Barbara, I’m sorry too. I lashed out at you. I shouldn’t have pressured you. I shouldn’t have dredged all that up.”

“You weren’t the only one. What I said, what I’ve done to you...”

He chuckled a little sadly.

“With all our years between us, there’s no way we wouldn’t have had times when we made mistakes with each other. With how well we know each other...I should’ve known to try to understand what you were thinking and feeling, instead of assuming you’d want what I want.”

They were both quiet for a while. As she lay there, Barbara came to a realization.

She was already aware that the safest and most obvious route would be to finish the conversation with another apology, and so let things go back to the way they were. But she began to see that, in light of her feelings and everything else that had happened that night, there was something else she could do. And maybe it was something she needed to do.

So instead, her sense of resolve filled her chest, her courage all coming back and letting her words go free.

“But that’s the thing, Dick.” She took a deep breath. “Maybe...maybe you knew a little better than you think. Because my problem wasn’t that I didn’t want it...it was that I did want it. I told you all those months ago that I was afraid to still have feelings for you. I told you all those months ago that I was afraid to still have feelings for you. Now I’m afraid that I think you may be it for me. Even with our mistakes and hard times and when we weren’t together and everything, I’ve kept loving you and coming back to you. So I’ve been starting to think that I’m always going to love you.”

His eyes grew as round as moons.

“And that’s something that’s so good, so powerful, I’m never going to be able to get a handle on it. If I give in, I’m always going to be lost to that. The homeostasis, the stability, the control I fought for will be lost. And that does terrify me. But I still shouldn’t have let that come between us. Because you know what?”

She made an expansive gesture; as the first rays of sunrise began to touch through the window, she continued.

“There’s a lot about this life I’m never going to be able to control. Our lives are always going to be changing, and as the girl who lost her old life to the Joker’s bullet and became the woman who spoke to the world and commanded gods, maybe that might not be so bad after all. Look at the last few months alone, look what’s happened to our family! We’ve come together. We’ve grown. We’ve gotten better. I’m never going to be able to account for everything, stop every catastrophe. Look what happened tonight!”

“But you stepped up.” His voice was soft. “You brought everything, and you beat the bad guy in every way. You won.”

“Exactly.” She reached in and touched his face, gently stroking over his bruises. “The faith I know you have in me...maybe that’s not about whether I can prevent my best-laid plans from changing, how I can bend the world to my desire. Maybe it’s about how well I can adapt, how wise I am when
it comes down to it, how brave I can be when I’ve lost all control. How I can keep getting better.

I know how brave I can be, that I have vast amounts of intelligence and power. So I can do this. After all that I’ve done, all that I am, I know I can keep adapting and getting better, with everyone I love at my side.”

Her heart was pounding. Dick was staring at her like he couldn’t quite believe this either, but she still saw that spark of hope in his eyes.

“As well as I know you, I really don’t know what you’re going to do now,” he remarked. Then: “But I trust you.”

She held him for a moment more.

Then she bent over the side of the bed, grabbing the side of her wheelchair. In one of the hidden compartments, stored away in the dark because she hadn’t been able to throw it away, was the little jewelry box.

Shaking, she took one of his hands...pressing the box back into it.

It took him a second.

Then he gasped, blinking rapidly.

“Everyone I love at my side.” Closing his fingers around it, she took his face in both hands. “I’m listening to you now. I’m trying to be brave. And so I’m telling you...this is what I want. You are what I want. So...”

His eyes were shining with tears, and with love.

“I was wondering if you might ask me again. After you kiss me.”

“You sure?” His voice was rough with emotion. “I don’t look my best, and my entire face is banged sideways.”

“Yeah?” She leaned in. “I think I can make the sacrifice.”

The first rays of spring sun pierced through the window as they kissed. Caught in their light, caught in all the warmth of her family, feeling that she must be shining too with all the joy she felt. All the love.

The winter had gone. The night was drawing to a close. But this was only the beginning. There was still so much yet to come.

She woke up the morning she was to go home with one black head and two blond only inches from her face.

She yelped and started backwards, nearly whacking her head on the backboard.

“She’s awake,” Zinda said rather unnecessarily. Then: “Hey, Skipper. Cute kid.”
John had been liberated from the bassinet, nestled in Dinah’s arms and apparently very happy about it, burbling and drooling down the front of his godmother’s dress. But Dinah, who was gazing down at him with the kind of look she usually reserved for her stepchildren, Sin, and Lian, didn’t seem to mind at all.

After reaching for her glasses, well aware that she was wearing just a hospital gown and her hair was a disaster — it wasn’t the first time she’d been like this in front of her friends — Barbara folded her arms across her chest with affectionate exasperation.

“You three couldn’t have waited to surprise me at home?”

“Who has time for that?” Helena scoffed. “Besides, we wanted to see your kid. We’ve been playing with him for half an hour while we waited for you; I think he likes me best.”

“Horseshit,” Dinah said cheerfully, rocking the delighted baby. “He clearly inherited his mother’s good taste — Babs, do you have something on your hand?”

Barbara folded her left hand under her arm.

“No.”

Dinah raised an eyebrow, but didn’t seem inclined to pursue it further.

“Anyway, the others are excited to see you and him too; I think they got a bit jealous when the doctor wouldn’t let them in. Apparently you can only have three visitors at a time.”

“Yeah, Leslie’s pretty strict about — wait, what others?”

After she’d gotten showered and dressed, she rolled out into the waiting room — — and was met by a surge of cheering.

The waiting room was completely clogged; it hadn’t just been her best friends, or even just her friends, who’d shown up. Leslie was fending off at least three dozen superheroes, half a dozen police officers, a small collection of very excited children, and Alfred in what looked like a chauffeur’s outfit.

“Apparently, the butler doubles as a limo driver.”

Dick materialized at her side and kissed her cheek. It had been only four days; the thought that all this had happened and she was engaged to him still felt utterly surreal.

“Hi.” He beamed at her.

But it didn’t feel bad. Not bad at all.

“Hi yourself.” She smiled back, then looked around, shaking her head with faux exasperation.

“Richard, what did you do? This looks like half of New Jersey managed to squeeze itself in here.”

“Hey, don’t blame me. You know how heroes gossip.”

Over the last four days his burns had healed and his bruises faded, and he practically glowed with happiness. At his heels trailed his best friends’ kids, bobbing and chirping like songbirds.

“Uncle Dick, wait up!”
“I wanna see the baby. Where’s the baby?”

“He’s right here, guys.”

Dinah was almost instantly surrounded by Lian, Jai, Irey, Robbie, and even little Cerdian (who was being carried by Jai) all at once, kneeling down so they could see better.

“Awww, Jason was right,” Lian exclaimed. “He is cute.”

“He’s squishy-looking,” was Irey’s opinion.

“I love him,” squealed an enraptured Robbie, leaning over to hug John and getting his hair drooled on for his efforts.

In almost a mirror image, Donna appeared from the crowd and wrapped her arms around her best friend. Dick immediately hugged her back and Wally soon joined them, openly sniffling.

Before long, nearly everyone had crowded around them, staring and murmuring in awe. Cass and Steph leaned into each other, beaming with joy, without a trace of pain or reservation. Tim stood near Ted, Renee, and Crispus, smiling as wide as his sister. Jason stood beside Kori and Raven, leaning into Roy’s shoulder, looking unusually vulnerable. Bruce smiled without his usual mixed worry or caution. Jim had tears in his eyes, wielding his phone and trying to take pictures even with his aversion to technology. Damian looked fiercely proud, occasionally smacking back a person who got a little too into their personal space. Dinah, still cradling her godson, like a bodyguard even in her turquoise dress and black heeled boots, stood at Barbara’s side with nothing but joy on her face.

“Oh, he is perfect,” Kori exclaimed, pressing a hand to her chest. “What a beautiful child. You should both be very proud.”

“That’s good genetics for you,” Kendra agreed, leaning in and dodging Damian’s slap.

“That’s my man for you,” Wally bragged, patting his best friend on the chest. “He couldn’t make anything less than a great kid.”


“But at least he helped with the most important part,” Helena grinned.

There were a great deal of snickers, during which Bruce stopped smiling. The little kids all gave each other bemused looks.

“Yeah, nobody will tell me either,” Lian told her compatriots.

“Jokes aside, Babs does deserve the credit here,” Dick decided, wriggling free of his friends and standing at her other side, his smile not faltering. She met him with equal pride and happiness. “She kicked some serious ass these last few months.”

“That I did.” She faced the room. “But it was good to have all of you standing behind me as I did.”

Her father wiped at his eyes discreetly. Dinah stood up, one hand moving to Barbara’s shoulder.

“Hey, that’s what you do for the rest of us, isn’t it?” her best friend said gently. Then, in a louder voice: “And it’s gonna be good when you tell me everything about that night, too.”

“Rescued my fi — Dick, defeated the bad guy, had a baby...” Barbara shrugged. “It was an eventful
night."

“You don’t say.”

“That cannot possibly be all there is to it.”

She met Dick’s eyes again, ducking away and blushing like a schoolgirl, still keeping her hand hidden. For his part, the look he was giving her somehow grew softer.

“We’re gonna tell you everything on the way to the Tower, it was badass,” Steph piped up.

“Well, I do believe that.”

The crowd finally began to part, allowing her to wheel through. She first met Steph and Cass, bringing both girls down for a hug.

Her girls. Her heirs. She felt nothing but pride for them, and she recognized that kind of love in their arms.

“Thank you. For everything.”

The younger male Robins were next. Jason, Tim, Damian, even Duke all bent down, embracing her.

Then Sarah and her father, who never seemed to want to let her go.

Then Bruce — already as good as a second father in many ways — who quickly overcame his reservation and hugged her back.

“I’m so proud of you,” he said quietly. “I love you.”

“I might not always say so either, but I love you too, B.”

Selina appeared beside him, smiling, an unexpected sparkle of affection in her eyes.

“Good thing too.” Her eyes flicked downward, her voice low. “Nice rock. I always did have good taste.”

“What did...?”

“I stole that ring.”

“And I went back and paid for it...” His eyes suddenly went very large. “Wait...you’re wearing...you...”

Barbara rolled her eyes and smacked herself on the forehead.

“Are you telling me that I was proposed to with a stolen ring, that Bruce had to beg for forgiveness with his billions, then gave to his son —”

“Which his other kids then squabbled over,” Selina agreed.

“Which then went with me through a major fight with a homicidal egomaniac.” Shaking her head, Barbara folded her arms, her smile becoming wry. “Well isn’t that just typical.”

Bruce was still stammering, his breathing very shallow.

“What are you guys talking about over there?” Dinah called over, her voice very deliberately casual.
“Nothing. Don’t worry, your turn’s next, I’m coming.”

John was given to his father, and for a moment, after all that had happened, being in her best friend’s arms, everything in the world felt right.

That is, until Dinah grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her left arm up. Barbara couldn’t even find it in her to get mad, even if her happiness did become tinged with exasperation for a moment.

_I really should’ve seen that coming._

_Oh well. Here goes._

“Don’t you try to hide things from _me_, Gordon, you cannot _ever_ fool your best friend —”

That must’ve been when Dinah’s eyes finally connected with her brain, because that was when she went dead silent. She looked up, and the other woman had completely frozen, eyes blown huge, absolutely locked on Barbara’s hand.

The rest of the room went equally quiet, and she realized that she was still surrounded by a crowd of fifty.

But instead of panicked, she felt peaceful.

“You...” It was barely more than a whisper.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“And he...”

“Yes.”

The biggest smile split Dick’s face; the ring on her hand sparkling in plain view of everyone while their son cooed in his arms.

“You did...you finally...” Slightly hyperventilating, looking close to tears, Dinah pressed a hand to her chest, the smile on her face nearly as wide as Dick’s. “Well...” Her voice rose to a shout. “It’s about damn time!”

The room exploded with noise.

Friends and relatives pressed around them like a tide as she finally continued her journey to the door, filling the air with questions and more congratulations. Someone — probably Donna, but most likely Wally — started crying. Clark and Diana squashed Bruce in a hug. Tim, Steph, and Cass bounced around like excited puppies while Jason and Damian looked shocked — and unusually openly affectionate.

Amid the noise and crowd, she felt Dick reach down and take her hand. She looked up at him, standing at her side with John happy and safe in his arms, his expression shining with love.

Heading out into the spring day, ready to head home, all those months of chasing Drew, of relationship difficulties, of hope warring with fear, all felt worth it. She had done it. Those victories were hers to keep, to take pride in, to inspire her in all the long years and battles yet to come.

With everyone standing at her back, at her side, after what she’d just done, she felt her intelligence and her capability. She felt brave.
She felt ready for another new beginning.
It’s official, everybody. We’ve finally arrived at the conclusion of this story.

It’s hard to believe. This fic has been a labor of love for over a year, the product of so much stress and happiness alike. When I posted the first chapter, I was a junior in high school, and now I’m graduating. All that’s happened along the way has been incredible.

But it’s an end, not the end. I’ll keep writing, and I even have a couple more short sequels to this in the works. Keep an eye out in the next few weeks, but in the meantime:

Thank you, thank you to all of you who gave this a chance, who read it. Thank you to all of you who liked it, who bookmarked it, who went out of their way to tell me how much they loved each chapter or to start up a conversation. Your appreciation has meant the world to me.

Even more so because of our shared love for these characters. Particularly for our heroine.

Thank you for loving Oracle, for loving Barbara Gordon, along with me.

(Warnings: brief allusions to having to give up a child and past child abuse)

**The Wheel of Fortune** (Tarot): Upright — Good luck, karma, life cycles, destiny, a turning point. Reversed — Bad luck, negative external forces, out of control.

*June*

Summer had returned at last, and the day had dawned hot. While the smog sucked down the warmth, wrapping Gotham in a smoky layer of sauna steam, the sun poked its fingers through the dirty clouds, offering the city below a blanket of gray light.

Barbara had been awake long before that light had come.
“I still can’t believe he woke you up at three in the morning just because you forgot to put one of his superhero plushies in his crib. He must really miss his Aunt Donna.”

“What I can’t believe is that this kind of thing still surprises you after seven weeks...and that you managed to sleep through it. Those night shifts must be hell.”

The Clock Tower had been permeated with the scents of brewing coffee and a frittata frying on the stove; her family gathered near the source of it. Light washed the somewhat chaotic kitchen in a sense of almost serenity.

For though she attempted to monitor the stove while keeping an eye on the time, the world still felt as close to in place as it could get.

“That why you insisted on a two-week honeymoon?” Seated at the kitchen island in his police uniform, resting his chin on his hand, he watched her work with John propped up in his lap. The baby, for his part, had gotten ahold of his father’s badge and inserted a third of it into his mouth — and Dick still had yet to notice. “Trying to coerce me into taking a break?”

“With you, I don’t have to resort to coercion,” she deadpanned, scooping the frittata off the stove. “But after everything that’s happened this year, it’ll be good to rest a while...after we finish the last bits of wedding arrangements.”

“Can you at least let me help you with said wedding arrangements before you don’t-coerce me into resting?”

“Well that I expect you to do.”

Dick sighed, smiling a bit crookedly.

“What would I do without you?”

“You don’t want to know. But you should know your badge has a little something on it.”

He glanced down, then groaned and pried it out of the baby’s mouth, John giggling as he looked at it in mild exasperation.

“Well, on the bright side, I’m certainly going to be the only one at the precinct whose badge is covered in baby drool.”

“There you go,” she smirked, sliding into the kitchen island across from him, serving them both breakfast and coffee. “He’s lucky he’s so cute.”

“No kidding.” Pinning his badge back on one-handed, the other arm still holding their son, he looked back at her. Thoughtfulness bloomed in his expression.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Well...I can’t believe it’s already been a year since all this started.” He dropped his hand back down, resting his weight against the island’s surface. “It’s strange to think about where we all were a year ago. We had a bad guy on the loose that we knew nothing about. We’d only just taken a risk. Taken the chance that we might be able to build and repair our relationships, and ourselves, all while we had a new rogue trying to tear us down.”

She met his gaze with her coffee cup at her lips, watching him through the steam that clouded her glasses.
"But just look where we ended up. And where he ended up, for that matter."

Sitting so close to her fiancé and child, Barbara smiled.

"I knew it was a good idea to go to his trial. Did you see his face when he saw us sitting in the audience?"

"And when you waved at him!" Dick threw his head back laughing. "I wish I’d had a camera."

She laughed too, her hand curling in front of her mouth.

"It was very satisfying. Let’s be honest, he’s probably still reeling from my being able to beat him, so having me watch him get convicted was just adding insult to injury."

"Whereas the rest of us knew you could from the start."

"Hmmm." Still smiling, she met his gaze again. "Yeah. Lot’s happened in a year."

They sat in peaceful quiet for a few minutes, enjoying each others’ company, the only sounds being the clink of the silverware and John burbling as he attempted to chew on his own fist.

It was almost too much to process, just how gentle a moment could be in such an unpredictable, difficult life. But maybe that was it. Maybe they were able to have this because of their unpredictable, difficult lives, to offset the frustration and pain that had come with it all.

Barbara didn’t believe in fate or karma or that people were made for each other, meant to be together. But she did believe that after all that finding each other and getting to where they were, that family, and the rest of their extended family, were right to be together.

Besides, they had struggled and fought constantly through their lives, just trying to do what they thought was right. Too many times the world had spat that back in their faces. Even with all the darkness in their lives, all the darkness that they simultaneously dwelt in and tried to beat back, didn’t heroes deserve to find, to keep even, their own love and happiness?

The beep of the phone’s alarm startled her out of her thoughts.

"Oh damn. I’m gonna be late for work," Dick fretted, pushing aside the remnants of breakfast.

"And I have errands to run." She downed the rest of her coffee, then extended her arms. Getting to his feet, Dick pressed a kiss to the top of John’s soft hair before handing him over.

"Be good for your mama. I’ll see you this afternoon, okay?"

He cooed.

Holding him in one arm, Barbara guided her fiancé down with the other, giving him a quick kiss.

"I’ll see you this afternoon too."

"And then on to the party." His eyes sparkled. "I can’t wait."
In the crooked gray light of day, a boy in his late teens stood beside a man in his early forties, vivid yellow bright beside ebony.

“This will be your first patrol, Signal,” Batman said at last. His rumbling bass could easily be mistaken for unfriendly, but nearly two months in his company had taught the boy beside him the difference between standoffish and both-proud-and-nervous-but-trying-not-to-show-either. “Are you sure you’re ready for it?”

Beneath the helmet, Duke grinned.

“C’mon, B. I know I’ve only been training for two months, but it’s not like I was never out of shape…or never knew how to defend myself.”

“Kill the cockiness,” Bruce admonished. “Cockiness is ignorance. You’re only so sure of yourself because you’re inexperienced.”

“But I’ll never get experience if I keep putting this off,” he countered.

Bruce huffed, exhaling through his nose in a drawn-out way that reminded Duke of a tired dragon.

“Signal, you know there’s no shame in waiting longer. All the others got more practice and training before their first officially sanctioned patrol, even with me supervising.”

“Barbara — uh, the first Batgirl didn’t.”

“No. She didn’t.” Bruce looked over the rooftops for a few moments. “If you’re certain...”

“I am, B.” Duke shifted in place, feeling nerves and excitement surge in his chest. “Crazy as it is, I really do want to do this.”

He did. Hundreds of feet above the ground, everything felt good. Thousands of people moving along below them, the patterns of their movements like illuminated jetstreams, the summer sun warming him to the bone. The bat on his chest, officially marking him for the first time as one of them, was a badge of honor. Even wearing heavy body armor and loaded down further with gear, he felt almost light.

Batman’s lips twitched in a way that might’ve been a smile.

“Hmm. Very well then.”

His grapple gun fired, and he flew off the rooftop in a great swoop of black.

Taking a deep breath, Duke followed suit — — swinging high over the city streets, the cars a blur below his feet, laughing with unadulterated joy.

He was one of them now. He belonged.

It was a good morning so far.

Tim took a few minutes’ break from his paperwork, his newly-emptied meds case sitting beside his
half-drunk cup of coffee, staring contentedly at his framed photo of himself with the other Titans — and at an older photo of himself with Steph, Cass, Bruce, Barbara, and Dick; he’d only just dug it up and put it back on his desk a month ago.

Someday, he might put up a picture of his family that included Jason and Damian too. Someday.

He touched his fingertips to his friends’ and boyfriend’s frozen expressions of joy, letting a smile of his own take shape.

“Hey, man.”

He looked up, and his smile grew.

Tam stood in his doorway in her pencil skirt and pink blouse, grinning with pride.

“I take it the meeting went well?”

“Oh yeah. I think I really won over those investors, so thanks to me, Ambassador Luke’s got a meeting next week with them and our reps in London.” She sauntered over and sat on his desk, swinging her legs cheerfully. “But he made sure that it’s not till after the wedding, don’t worry.”

“I’m kind of surprised. But then again, even your dad’s taking time off for the wedding.” Tim moved his messy stack of papers, offering her more room. “I’m glad Batman Inc’s doing well again though.”

She raised her eyebrows at him.

“...But I’m more glad that you’re doing well.”

“He’s learning,” Tam laughed. She glanced down at his photographs. “Are your Teen Titans buddies doing well too?”

“You know, you can ask them yourself tonight at the party.”

“For real?” Her eyes grew wide. “Man, all these super-people in one place, including your crazy family...”

“You think that’s gonna be a good thing or a bad thing?”

She inclined her head to the side.

“You know them better than me. What do you think?”

Tim didn’t hesitate.

“I think it’s gonna be awesome.”

Tam grinned broader. This time, when she offered him her fist, he managed to tap it without fumbling, his own smile just as wide.

“That’s what I thought.”
Barbara could’ve chosen to take the Hummer, huge and impregnable as it was.

Instead, she rode public from the Clock Tower into downtown, her purse on her lap, her son in a sling strapped to her chest, a large plastic bag tucked under her chair. It was a little strange to be so vulnerable, so surrounded by strangers, but her only spot of trouble was a brief argument with a man sitting in the priority area whose ankles were a little sore, during which time three strangers yelled at him to “give her that spot you selfish asshole.” Afterwards two more, both older women, apologized for the man and exclaimed delightedly over the baby.

John stared around in astonishment as she steadily maneuvered through Gotham, peering quizzically at the buildings and vehicles and pedestrians, fingers curling in his mouth.

“I know, it’s a bit much. Even for me sometimes. I’m glad you have so many aunts and uncles to protect you.”

He made a noise that might’ve been his own version of agreement.

En route, she made quick calls to the baker and the florist to make sure everything was progressing on schedule, and then they arrived at the library.

Louis sat at the front desk as usual, talking with a pair of young women she recognized from when she’d met them a few months ago — Frankie and Alysia.

“No, Orlando’s a great book, I agree,” Alysia was saying, “but I still think that the LGBT section should have more books by trans authors.”

“I agree with y’all,” he replied. “But it ain’t me who’s in charge of all our files, and who places our orders. I’ll email Barbara, or whenever she gets back, I’ll talk to her for y’all.”

“No need, I agree with her too.”

All three of them whipped around. Frankie stumbled a bit on her crutches. Louis’s mouth fell open, and it was a few moments before he responded.

“Well I guess now I know why I haven’t seen y’all in person for a few months.”

“Yeah, I’ve been a little busy.”

He grinned, returning to his work, but still kept an eye on the scene before him.

At the same time, the two women moved forward in unison, kneeling and gasping in unabashed delight.

“Oh my god!”

“Is he yours?”

“First time anyone’s asked that, but yes.”

“He’s precious.”

Clearly reveling in the attention, John smiled at them and extended his hands. Both of the younger women bent closer; Frankie murmured endearments, Alysia pressed her hands to her chest, her own smile huge.

“Damn, I’m getting baby fever and I don’t even have a uterus,” she blurted. Then, realizing what
she’d said, clapped a hand to her mouth, eyes growing wide. “Um, I mean…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Barbara said gently. “I’m not going to judge you; I wouldn’t even if I weren’t sitting here in a wheelchair with my biracial child.”

Alysia’s expression softened. Her shoulders relaxed.

“So…can I ask you to try to stock some books by trans authors?” she said hopefully.

“Sure. I’ve been meaning to further diversify our selection anyway. Everyone deserves to have media that represents who they are in a way that makes them happy.”

“You said it, sister,” Frankie grinned.

The three of them launched into a discussion about books they’d recently read, the cool peace of the library settling over them like water. Through the high windows, pale streams of sunlight illuminated the dust motes in the air, and the women’s faces.

“No offense to the boss, but um…why did he take us to a bar at ten-thirty in the morning?”

“Pretty sure it’s because you told him it’s too early for lunch.”

Jason hopped up onto a bar stool, taking off his helmet. He then turned around and faced the puzzled crowd of men and women who’d come with him. Thugs and enforcers. Double agents and spies for rival crime lords and drug dealers. Ready to deal out hurt in an instant. The employees of the Red Hood, most of whom were objectively pretty bad people.

But they were loyal. And for the last couple years, all the people standing before him had been good to him, even though he had been an angry teenager with a grudge — or several grudges. He’d been objectively a pretty bad person.

The red bat on his chest felt glaringly obvious, almost palpable, as he took his first sip of beer, waiting for his gang to order their own drinks. He’d only been incorporating it into his uniform for a year. What was more, it had been ironic, a way to mock the more conventional methods and moral compasses of the rest of his family at first.

But now?

“So,” Jason drawled as his employees settled in, “I suppose you’re all wondering why I called you here today.”

Always wanted to say that.

“Well, I got several pieces of news. First of all, next week, those morons who raised me, the Bats, are becoming a little more tightly knit. Nightwing, my dumb big brother, is getting married.”

There was a round of polite, but surprised, applause. Most of the women and a couple men looked disappointed.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t have seen this coming either, but damn if I’m not pretty happy about it.” He hid a smile in the rim of his beer bottle. “So we’re all coming together anyway…which I guess makes it the
ideal time to do something I’ve been meaning to do for a while anyway.”

“Boss, what are you talking about?” one man asked.

Jason took a deep breath.

“I’m quitting being a crime lord, and dismantling my empire.”

His employees all sat up. Several people gasped, many eyes grew wide. The bartender dropped the glass he’d been polishing.

“But I’m also going to be taking the GED. Isn’t that good? I really do want that high school diploma, I was fucking *robbed* of being able to go to college.”

“But...but...” a different man spluttered.

“It’s mercenary and vigilante work only from here on out,” Jason said firmly. “I still need the money that comes from taking jobs, of course, but working as a crime lord’s distracted me from doing what I should be...fighting the people who deserve justice, doing what others can’t. That’s what I was really meant to do.”

“But what about us?” a woman spoke up. “What’s gonna happen to us? No other boss is gonna treat us as fair as you did, or pay us what you did, neither.”

Startled, he let slip a genuine smile.

“I was getting to that. See, I gotta do something with all that money this is gonna come to, right? Well, I’ve decided to do what I will with half of it, and split the rest between the lot of you.”

Everyone gasped. Once liquidated, his empire was worth literal millions in total. Even with taxes, even split between more than three dozen people, every single one of them would be carried far above the poverty line.

He had plans for where to invest the rest of the money too, such as local shelters, Roy’s inventions, food for poor kids, Lian’s college fund. And maybe also a bomb or two.

“So you can all get better jobs, won’t have to be poor, won’t have to rely on crime lords and psychos for a living. Won’t have to worry about the cops or the Bats breathing down your neck anymore. Maybe you’ll keep living the way you do. I can’t stop you from doing that. But I hope you won’t. I hope you’ll change your minds, make something good for yourselves. Like I did.”

They were all still dumbstruck.

Jason swept up his helmet and beer, dropping a few hundred dollar bills on the bar.

“Their drinks are on me. Keep the change,” he told the bartender. Then, to his former employees: “You’ll all be seeing the money in your bank accounts in a few days. Good luck, and don’t fuck this up and become those rich assholes who abuse other people, or I’ll shoot you.”

Putting his helmet back on, he sauntered out into the light of late June. He had a growing family to attend to that night. And until then, he had a lover and friends to scheme with.

He was still, well, an outlaw. But he could run with the good guys if he so chose. He was free again to do the right thing, even if the right thing wasn’t necessarily something another Bat would do. And Jason, bearing the symbol of his family on his chest, decided he preferred it that way.
She passed by Robinson Park on her way back from checking in with the caterers, and stopped to take a breather.

The air steamed; she bought an enormous helping of mint-chocolate-chip ice cream from a local vendor and ate it surrounded by waves of leaves and grass in impossibly vivid greens. Dandelions and weeds poked up everywhere; dogs and kids ran around at top volume, barely restrained by their respective adults.

She spotted a group of teenagers lounging about on the grass, engrossed in discussing their respective summer jobs. To her surprise, she could’ve sworn Paulette was one of them, her green hair blending in with the park, tentatively smiling over the rim of her sweating can of soda. One of the other girls put a hand on her shoulder.

She knew she saw Cherry and Fatima with their daughters, and Annabelle with her son, taking their lunch breaks together on a bench across the way. Making eye contact, they waved at each other, genuinely enthusiastic.

John stuck his tiny hand in her ice cream, blinking in puzzlement when it turned to liquid on his fingers. She took a bit on her finger, tapping him on the nose with it; he giggled hysterically and smeared his hand on her shirt in response.

Seizing a packet of wet wipes from her purse, she cleaned them both off, repeatedly kissing her son’s forehead as she did. He giggled more, his vocal delight mingling with that of everyone else around them.

In a surprising turn of events, Dick, sitting at his desk and doing paperwork, hadn’t expected the hug when it came.

The paperwork went flying; the chair squeaked in protest as he tried to turn around.

His former coworker grinned an inch from his face. Dick immediately felt a matching grin spread across his own face.

“Gannon?” Getting to his feet, he returned the hug.

“The one and only.”

“Oh my god! What are you doing here?”

“I hope that ‘you’ is plural, rookie.”

“Amy!”

She smiled and clapped a hand on his shoulder as he and Gannon broke apart.

“Malloy wanted to personally thank you for inviting us to your wedding, and it is my lunch break.”
“And it’s my day off,” Gannon finished, his face still lit up. “Can’t believe I’m spending it in another precinct. But what I really can’t believe is that yours is way better than our old one.”

Several other cops, none of whom were working now, exchanged grins.

“You can’t believe that more than you can’t believe you’re invited to my wedding?”

“I don’t think Malloy ever thought you were ever going to get married in the first place,” Amy smirked.

“Not true!” Gannon paused. “I just hoped it would be to a man.”

“So you could try to meet some of my and my theoretical husband’s gay and bi friends?”

“Something like that.”


The other man blushed, and several people tittered. Trying to recover, he cleared his throat and said:

“But what I can believe is that the bride is that woman you were with back the first time you were a cop. The woman you never shut up about.”

“He never shuts up about her now either,” Ayesha called over from her desk, which was greeted by more laughter. Dick rolled his eyes at her.

“Speaking of your fiancée, I’ve been meaning to ask,” Amy said, hiding a smile, “can I see a picture of that kid of yours?”

He perked up.

“No, now you’re gonna get him started,” Shawndra cried out. Jeffrey let out an exaggerated groan.

Ignoring them, Dick rifled around in his overcrowded wallet until he found the newest photograph. Amy and Gannon both leaned in, peering at the photograph.

Tim had taken it a couple weeks prior, when their whole family had taken the night off and gathered at the Manor for a movie marathon. Between work, vigilantism, and their infant, the two of them hadn’t slept in four days, and neither even made it to the first movie. The picture displayed a bird’s-eye view of them and their baby snuggled up asleep on the couch; John lay on his father’s chest with his thumb in his mouth, Barbara’s glasses were crooked, and Dick was holding both of them in his sleep.

He owed Tim big-time for that picture.

“I admit it, Grayson,” Amy said at last, “that’s a great-looking kid.”

“You should see him when he’s awake, he’s the friendliest little guy ever.” He stared happily at the picture. “God I’m so lucky.”

“Wow, we didn’t know,” someone called across the room. “I mean, you didn’t say anything.”

“Hang on, he might’ve said something once —”

“Twice —”
“A million times —”

“The entirety of the last few weeks —”

“Shut up,” Dick said good-naturedly while the other cops laughed. It wasn’t like he couldn’t handle the ribbing. After all, he had his police job again, he had being Nightwing, he had his family all together for the first time ever, he had his friends alive and content, he was only a week away from marrying the woman he loved.

For the first time in a long time, things weren’t fragile or unstable, nor did he worry about his loved ones. He didn’t feel soul-weary, and didn’t feel like he had to surrender his own happiness. For he was happy.

“You know, I think I kind of preferred paperwork.” He scooped the aforementioned paperwork off the floor, knocking it back into order.

“As long as you’re still getting it done, Grayson.” Amy’s eyes sparkled.

He saluted to her half-jokingly with two fingers, sweeping it into a binder. Gannon headed over to introduce himself to Ayesha, Jeffrey and Shawndra prepared to hit the streets again, Rachel bent her head over her desk while the men around her went to eat their sandwiches in the rec room.

“Since I just finished, want to grab some lunch, Captain Rohrbach?”

“Only if you pay for your own share, Officer Groom-To-Be.”

He grinned and headed off at his friend’s side.

When Barbara entered the dressmaker’s shop, the others didn’t notice her at first.

Even with their hems pinned up and their zippers partially undone, they all looked stunning. Cass, Steph, Helena, and Zinda wore matching dresses with strapless black bodices and green skirts, while Dinah was resplendent in her individual sweeping emerald silk — although it was offset by the mess of food and femininity around them.

The five women had apparently decided to make a lunchtime party of getting the last adjustments done to their dresses; bottles of red wine and boxes of thin-crust pepperoni pizza littered the table before them. The threat of grease stains was imminent and the dressmaker, a stout middle-aged woman with flyaway brown hair, was glaring at Stephanie as she held her pizza slice dangerously close to her pretty dress and talked with her mouth full.

“Too bad the others are all done getting fitted,” she said, swallowing. “Can you imagine how fun it’d be to have all the bridesmaids hanging out here together?”

“Considering how many bridesmaids there are, that’d be a very special kind of fun,” Helena grinned, knocking back a swallow of wine. “Us — excluding the resident maid of honor, of course — plus —” She started counting off on her fingers, “— Renee, Selina, Kendra, Mari, Barda, Karen, Sonia, Kori, Cindy, Dawn, Tatsu, Lori, Kate — Kate Spencer, that is — and Diana.”

“I can’t believe there are so many women who’ve been or who still are on this team,” Dinah mused.
She glanced at the dressmaker, who was now looking revolted at Cass’s nonexistent table manners. “Uh, I mean, book club.”

“What I can’t believe is that she put two of Dick’s exes in her bridal party,” Zinda exclaimed. Stephanie cracked up laughing.

“I know, right? Talk about a power move!”

Helena sighed.

“How many times...? First of all, I know Kori’s over it. Second of all, Dick and I aren’t exes. ‘Exes’ would imply that we did anything friendly together with clothes on.”

“You did nearly...give Bruce a stroke,” Cass said mischievously. “Because you...had sex with his precious eldest. Does that count?”

“It should; among his sidekicks, Bruce disapproving at at least one point is pretty much a requirement for a romantic relationship,” Steph smirked. “But seriously, I can’t get over that you and Dick fucked. Did that ever make things weird or what?”

“Did it ever!” Dinah groaned. “Among many other occasions, the first time she and I visited the Clock Tower simultaneously...and then in the middle of the night, both woke up to loud sex noises from across the way. I’ll tell you what, it wasn’t vanilla either. We both realized since it obviously wasn’t either of us, there was only one woman that could be responsible for that. I mean, at the time I was proud of her for getting some, but then the next morning, after he struts out of her bedroom like he’s the king of the world, he just stops dead when he sees the two of us.

He and Hel staring at each other in disbelief, and then looking like they’d rather be anywhere else but there. Then Babs comes out too, and I swear to god, that was all-time the most awkward four-way staring contest I’ve ever been in, and that includes the time Roy and Connor walked in on me and Ollie.” She took an exaggerated long-suffering swig from her wine glass. “And I just wanted some breakfast.”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to be drinking until tonight.”

Dinah choked on her wine, and all of them whipped around to face Barbara and her unimpressed expression — that they didn’t know was hiding the urge to groan and laugh at the same time.

The baby, in his blissful ignorance, perked up when he saw his aunts, even with the embarrassed looks on the three oldest women’s faces.

“So...how much of the part of our conversation vis-à-vis sex with your fiancé did you hear?”

“Oh, I heard all of it.”

“Right. Right.”

Cass and Steph did a poor job hiding their snickers. Rolling her eyes fondly, Barbara started to unclip the baby carrier from over her chest.

“So, discussions about how Helena once slept with my fiancé aside —”

“Are you going by occasions or rounds? Because if it’s the second, then it was not once.”

Barbara ignored that.
“— how’s the fitting going?”

“It would be better if Marge here would stop throwing passive-aggressive looks and clearing her throat in disapproval every time someone dares to mention that they’ve had sex.” Stephanie raised her eyebrows at the dressmaker, who scowled at her in response before turning to Barbara.

“I take it you’re the bride?” she grumbled. “The bride that won’t get fitted for a wedding dress?”

“Yes, and the bride who didn’t much like your selection or appreciate your constant insistence that I needed a veil, so decided to take matters into more knowledgeable hands,” Barbara said airily. Marge bristled. “Stephanie, will you hold John, please?”

The girl happily swept up the baby, bouncing him in her arms as he gurgled in delight and tried to eat her hair.

“What do you mean by ‘more knowledgeable hands’?” Zinda asked.

“I mean I sewed my wedding dress myself.”

“Of course you did,” Dinah grinned while the others’ mouths all fell open. “I remember, you sewed your first Batgirl suit — um, Halloween costume — yourself.”

“And the second ‘costume,’ which then became the third. All Bruce did to contribute was add the body armor later.”

Dinah’s grin grew wider.

“Why didn’t you...want a veil?” Cass asked, wiggling her fingers over John’s face and letting him try to grab for them.

“It represents some patriarchal idealism for brides. Also why, much as I love him, my father’s not going to be giving me away. I’m not property or livestock.”

“Patriarchal traditions behind wedding traditions are not something brides in my day would’ve known about,” Zinda remarked, folding her pizza slice like a taco and stuffing it in her face. “Out of curiosity, what does it represent?”

“The untouched purity and modesty of the bride.”

All five of them looked at her silently for a moment. Stephanie glanced down at the baby in her arms. Then they all immediately burst out into hysterical laughter.

“You see, that’s why I don’t want a veil!”

They kept laughing.

Rolling her eyes again, Barbara wheeled slightly away.

“Well now I have half a mind to not let you evil harpies see me try on my wedding dress.”

“No no, let us see, let us see,” Dinah begged, sobering up. The others followed suit, their pleading intensifying.

“You have to do it, Babs,” Helena cajoled, which was rather bold of her considering the conversation’s circumstances. “C’mon. Your kid wants you to do it. How can you say no to that
sweet face?"

“...That being said, I’m going to go get changed into my wedding dress now.”

Cass clapped eagerly; Steph giggled in anticipation and pressed her cheek to the baby’s.

“So what, you can say no to Dick, but you can’t say no to me?” Dinah teased.

“No.”

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Damian nestled into the couch with his sketchbook propped up on his knees, his cat curled up at his side and his earbuds in. One of Dick’s Spotify playlists thrummed through the speakers — not that he’d admit to listening to that kind of thing. Or any of his siblings’ music for that matter.

The cat slept on, his tail curled over his nose, fur fluttering gently as he breathed. Damian’s pencil moved in soft strokes across the page.

The dark lines steadily formed a portrait of a beautiful woman in her late thirties; long black hair fell across one shoulder, almond-shaped eyes were framed by thick lashes, a strong nose and elegantly arched eyebrows were centered in fine bone structure.

He hadn’t seen her in person in over a year. But he remembered her well.

“Is that your mom?”

He started, turning around.

Having changed into civilian clothes for the afternoon, Duke leaned over the back of the couch. The older boy had put on weight over the last couple months, looking much healthier and more content since he’d started living at the Manor. He peered down at the sketchbook with genuine curiosity, and Damian did not immediately snap it shut.

“Yes. It is.”

They both gazed at the picture for a few moments.

“You don’t talk about her much, I notice. I mean, I know she’s a supervillain’s daughter, a big deal in the League of Assassins, but...”

“I love her,” Damian said, almost quietly. “Of course I do, she is my mother, but I can never live with her again. She has good in her heart, and she’s nowhere near as extreme as my grandfather, but I can’t share her ideals or her vision for the world. Or continue to excuse all that she’s done.”

Duke was quiet for a while.

“All that she’s done in general? Or all that she’s done to you?”
Damian shut the sketchbook.

“It is past now, Thomas. I am no longer defined by that life. I may never recover the first ten-and-a-half years of my life, but the last two, living here, with these people, are more than worth those first years.”

“I know what you mean. I hated living in the foster system, I hate that my parents might never be themselves again...” He paused. “But I’m glad that at least I got the opportunity to do what’s right, and got another family. And that’s what you feel too, right? That you’re glad you got the others, especially Dick, and now his kid, out of it?”

“Tt. Perhaps.”

Damian allowed himself a small smile, before turning back to his foster brother with a glare.

“Remember, I know literally thousands of ways to kill and hurt people. Do not tell anyone what I said.”

Duke lifted his hands.

“Hey, I’m not a snitch.”

“Hmmm.”

He glared for a few more seconds before he was satisfied.

“...Perhaps though, I would be willing to admit that I’m excited to see Grayson and his child at the party tonight.”

“And I’m willing to admit that I’m not surprised,” Duke grinned. “But until then, you wanna play some video games?”

“Tt, you’re supposed to be smart, Thomas. Why do you think you even have to ask?”

Still grinning, he vaulted over the back of the couch, and the two of them settled in together like they’d known each other for years.

When Bruce passed by on his way out of the Cave and saw them bickering good-naturedly over the game, he couldn’t help but smile.

Barbara took a deep breath before she emerged from the changing room.

Immediately, the other women’s chatter ground to a halt. Zinda pressed a hand to her mouth.

She swept her hair out of her face, sitting up straight to let her dress be on full display.

White silk, the strapless neckline showing off her arms and shoulders, the bodice clung to her torso but the skirt swept free down from her hips, loose around her legs. A rather classic, no-frills wedding dress.

But she had added a personal touch, a pattern embroidered across the skirt: geometric silver lines and
circles, just like a circuit board.

There were a few more moments of silence. The dressmaker huffed and stalked out of the room.

“You are beautiful,” Cass said softly. Helena pointed at her.

“What the kid said.”

The silence effectively broken, Dinah set down her wine glass and ran over, bending to wrap her arms around her best friend’s shoulders. Barbara rested her hands on Dinah’s forearms and leaned into the hug, relishing her touch.

“It’s not like it’s news that I’m getting married, you know.”

“No, but it’s happening so soon...in just a week! Just one week...and seeing you in that dress, it feels so much more real.”

“Yeah,” Helena said wistfully. “Never thought that the day would ever come.”

“...Gee, thanks.”

Even Dinah laughed a little at that, before resting her cheek on Barbara’s hair.

“But for real...honey, I’m so happy for you.”

Barbara felt a huge smile begin to spread over her lips.

“And I’m happy you’re here with me for this.”

When Dinah finally let go, she rolled over and joined the others on the couches. Helping herself to pizza and wine, she settled in next to Stephanie.

“So, speaking of milestones, you feel ready to start your third year of college?”

She scoffed, smiling crookedly. Cass peered at her.

“Ready? Nah. But I’m still doing it. I mean, the last one was eventful enough, but this one’s gonna be a red-letter year for us Batgirls.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

All three of them did, in unison.

Dinah sat down on Barbara’s other side, leaning into her shoulder. Stephanie leaned back into her seat as she cradled John one-armed, then began flapping her wallet open and shut over his head to his delight; Cass focused her attention and gazed at the two of them with obvious affection. Helena turned to Zinda and lapsed into a story about how Hal Jordan left his car keys in his plane, and Barbara centered on her best friend.

“Thanks,” she said quietly.

“For what?”

“Everything.”

“C’mon Babs, of course I was gonna be here and love the hell out of your dress. I am your maid of
honor.”

“I didn’t just mean that.”

Dinah stilled. The two of them faced each other, the others’ conversations seeming to fade.

“I meant all of this last year. And all the time before that; the missions, the fights, our difficulties. I know it hasn’t been easy, getting through all that. Thanks for being there for me, for all that you’ve done. Like I said. Everything.”

The older woman looked over at her, smiling.

“Of course I did. And honestly, I’d do it all again to get here. Yeah, maybe I’ve hurt, maybe it’s been hard sometimes, but this is worth it. Because I love you.”

Affection surged in Barbara’s chest, so that she couldn’t speak for a moment. She rested her head on Dinah’s shoulder, her own smile growing.

“I love you too.”

“You don’t have to tell me, honey. I know you do.”

It had only been a few weeks since he’d been convicted, and he was already worn by life in Blackgate; a constant stream of danger.

He wasn’t big or strong, and there were many men who were, and who were just as ruthless as he was to boot. Nobody respected his intelligence. He had no computers, not even a cell phone, so there was no way for him to prove himself.

Unavoidable decades awaited him. Decades of trying to survive, of having to be quicker, of more killing.

Because he hadn’t been smart enough. Because he’d been beaten at his own game. Because she was better.

It was galling. It was humiliating. It was true.

Alone in his cell, he sat and stared at the wall. He could think of no alternatives, no way out. No plans or strategies. He was stuck in prison for the rest of his life, stuck in this tiny cell, and she had won. He was not who he’d thought he was. And there was nothing he could do about it.

His hands clenched into fists. His hatred for that woman knew no bounds.

“Hey, Drew.”

He turned.

One of the enormous prison guards had manifested at his doorway.

“ Aren’t you going to visiting hours?”
“No. Go away.”

“You sure?” The guard tilted his head to the side. “Your mom and sisters are here. Said something about there being ways to turn your life around —”

“I said go away!”

He flung a chunk of rock at the guard, who ducked it easily and laughed.

“Alright, just stay here then. Not like I care.”

He turned away and shut the door. Leaving Avery Drew to continue rotting alone in his cell, stagnant bitterness and hatred like acid slowly eating him away.

After lunch, Barbara temporarily said goodbye to her friends and watched Stephanie escort Cassandra off to ballet practice, the girls' fingers locked together as they meandered down the sidewalk.

Though the fog seemed to sizzle in the air, Barbara focused her attention on the rare streams of sun through the clouds, and the light weight of her son against her chest. She rode the subway home with her heart unburdened, and her baby reaching out and making excited noises at anyone who came near.

Her Tower welcomed her back with a gust of cool air as she wheeled inside and shut the door behind her. Afternoon light poured through the windows and the clock face, her home completely illuminated.

She set aside her purse and the bag containing her wedding dress, then made her way to the nursery just before John started fussing and squirming in her arms; she lifted the hem of her shirt and fed him between the green walls, under the gentle light from the windows.

Right on cue, he was yawning for a nap by the time he was done. She set him down in his crib, this time making sure that he was surrounded by all his plushies of the Birds and Titans.

As he snuffled off to sleep, clutching the little Troia effigy, Barbara stayed a few minutes just to watch him. After all those months of conflicting emotions; worry, panic, anticipation, exhaustion, happiness. Of feeling her body change, of feeling his kicks in her belly. He had forced her to reconsider so much. He had been the catalyst to really kickstarting her relationship with his father, to helping her overcome a lot of her fear.

Her anxiety about losing her friends and family, about failing, about being a bad partner and an incompetent mother hadn’t left. But Dinah was right. The worry, the effort, all of it and more was worth it for hers and her loved ones' sakes.

She reached a hand into the crib and pushed a tuft of downy black hair out of his face. He made a soft noise in his sleep, holding his plushie tighter, and her heart swelled.

“I thought I might find you here.”

She turned around.
Dick had arrived home early. Coming in from the doorway in his uniform, he took in the scene before him, face shining with affection. He came to a halt at her side and gazed into the crib, resting his hand on her shoulder.

“You know the party doesn’t start until eight. It’s not even three.”

“Yeah I know, but I wanted to see you two again. Got all my paperwork done early. My hand’s still kind of cramping, but it’s worth it.”

Her heart seemed to swell even more.

“Well, I’m afraid you didn’t catch us in a very exciting moment. One of us is even asleep.”

“Heh, yeah, for once.” He bent over the low edge of the crib and kissed John on the forehead. Then he withdrew and kissed her on the forehead. “I guess that means I’m going to have to lavish my attention on only one of you for the moment.”

“Well, I’m definitely not going to complain about that.”

Before she knew it, they’d moved from the nursery to their bedroom; he scooped her up and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, raining kisses upon his lips.

He fell to the bed upon his back, her tumbling down on top of him, deftly unbuttoning his shirt.

“You know we only have as long as he stays asleep.”

“Then we’d better make it count.”

She peeled off her own shirt, leaning back down over him. Their next kiss was much slower; she felt his hand tangle in her hair, the other fiddling with the clasp of her bra.

When they pulled away, she paused, glasses slipping down her nose, looking into his eyes for what felt like a long time.

“What?”

“Nothing bad,” she said truthfully. Almost shy for a moment, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m just happy to have...all of this.”

His smile returned.

“Me too.”

She beamed, letting herself fall back down to him.

The baby slept a miraculously long time, so that afterwards, they lay together side by side as the afternoon continued on. The window was open, the drapes fluttering in the warm summer wind, the sheets tangled around their feet slightly displaced with each new gust.

“So he faked an emergency just so that the League would let him fly to Taiwan to get his car keys out of that plane?”
“Yeah, but here’s the thing: J’onn insisted on coming with him for backup, and was very confused when they got to Taiwan and there was no emergency. So Hal had to give him the whole truth: that he had lied to Superman’s face because he was so distracted by that random woman on his plane, and then so distracted by flirting with her after she got off that flight, that he left his car keys on said plane, and then didn’t realize that he’d left his keys until an hour after it had already been taken by another pilot all the way across the world.”

Barbara rolled over onto her stomach, propping herself up on her forearms as she continued.

“What’s more, you know J’onn is pretty much incapable of lying, and so the whole League knew the truth by the next meeting. According to Helena, the other Green Lanterns are still making fun of him for it a week later, Bruce’s already made about a dozen snide comments, and Carol’s so pissed even though they’re still technically on a break.”

Dick laughed, covering his face with his hand.

“That’s the nice thing about being monogamous: you’re the only woman I can make a fool of myself in front of like that.”

“Oh yeah honey, I’ve seen it all from you at this point,” she smirked. “Anything you can do to make a fool of yourself in the future, I’m fully prepared for.”

“You’re not supposed to agree with me!”

“Maybe not, but those old outfits of yours were definitely foolish.”

“I still stand firmly by my first Nightwing outfit. It was a bold fashion move.”

“So will be be me figuratively standing firmly by a bonfire of your old clothes with a can of accelerant in hand.”

Dick pouted at her.

“I hate that you’ve never worn anything that I can tease you about. You always look incredible; it’s not fair.”

“If it makes you feel any better, you always look incredible even with those terrible outfits.” She reached over and patted him on his bare chest. “But this is an especially good look for you.”

“I could say the same thing to you.” He rolled over on his side.

“You’re going to love our honeymoon, then.”

“Mmm. Two weeks in Costa Rica, complete with blue waters, sandy beaches, actual sunshine, you in a bikini, you naked...that does sound perfect.”

“Then back to live out the rest of our lives together in one of the worst cities in America, continuously wrangling our friends and family while saving other people from weirdos in cosplay.”

“We have such a good take on love.”

She laughed, ducking her head.

“Yeah, all those years, and we’ve finally gotten there.”

“We have though, haven’t we?”
The next look she gave him was a serious one, before she moved closer. He opened his arms invitingly, and she slipped inside, letting him hold her.

“Yeah,” she said quietly. “We have.”

Dick sighed softly.

“I can still hardly believe it. A couple years ago I’d lost so much, and now I have everything I ever wanted. And you...you’ve done so much. You’ve come so far. In just a year, too.” He held her a little tighter. “I’m so proud of you.”

She smiled, for he was right. A year ago, she never would’ve dreamed that the family would be where they were. But she especially never would’ve dreamed that she would be where she was. She had done so much to be proud of. All that change, all that fear and uncertainty, and now she had won, she was happy. With her circumstances, and with herself.

Warmth spilling through her chest, she moved slightly upwards and braced her hand on the back of his head, kissing him again. He hummed against her lips, his hand firm against her back. The kiss deepened, she opened her mouth and pressed his face closer, wrapping her other arm around his shoulders —

— until the cry from the next room startled them apart.

Barbara sighed, then poked him in the chest.

“Your turn.”

“That’s fair.”

He rolled off the bed, grabbing a clean pair of underwear and stepping into them on his way out. A minute later, she heard him again from across the hall.

“It’s okay, little buddy, it’s okay. Daddy’s got you. I know, you don’t like being alone. But I’m here now. I got you.”

Barbara rolled over and buried her face in the heat he’d left lingering on the sheets. She knew that the party was drawing near, she’d soon have to get up and shower and get dressed. But for the moment, she let herself be still and listen to them for a little while longer.

Cass watched her brothers with amusement, taking in their high-spirited wave of emotions. Perched on the arm of the couch, she had already gotten changed into her black dress and done her hair and makeup, but her feet were still bare. Meanwhile, her brothers were scattered around her in a mess.

“Unhand me, Todd!” Damian squawked as Jason had him in a headlock, laughing at the boy’s indignation. Jason’s bow tie was undone, his cuffs rolled up, but Damian was the picture of youthful elegance in his suit...or at least he had been until he’d called his older brother an undone slob. Now his gelled hair looked like a porcupine that’d been struck by lightning.

Duke looked mildly disturbed as they tussled, Tim looked completely unperturbed. Though maybe Tim should’ve been more perturbed; his suit was impeccable, but his Nightwing socks were clearly
visible over his dress shoes and his own hair was hanging in his eyes again. Duke, for his part, looked excellent all around, even as he was clearly having trouble focusing on reading *Return of the King* as they waited.

“You guys really wanna look all messed up at your brother’s engagement party?” he asked.

“I’m just glad Jason’s on as good behavior as he is, to be honest.”

“Sweet of you, Timbo,” Jason grinned, ruffling his hand through Damian’s hair again and making him spit curses. “And you know, it’s Dick. He’ll be happy just by me showing up.”

Tim grinned a little bit too.

“Nice to know our happiness matters to you.”

“Save the teasing, Tim, you’re not good enough at it yet.” Despite the disparaging words, Cass noticed a slight blush appear on Jason’s cheeks — and knew perfectly well that Tim had struck a nerve.

“Boys, settle down.”

Bruce had appeared. Their father wore a crisp, elegant tuxedo that could’ve paid the first year of someone’s college tuition, and diamond cufflinks that could’ve paid a good chunk of the second year. Despite the stiff opulence of his outfit, he regarded his five youngest children with gruff warmth, and Cass could easily see the affection radiating off him.

What was more, the boys actually listened to him; Duke and Tim sat up straight while Jason and Damian disentangled from each other. Cass hid a smile.

“The guests are going to arrive soon. We should go wait in the ballroom.”

“What about the lovebats?”

“Dick just texted me, so, they’ll be here in about half an hour.”

The boys all ran off as one, eager to go join Alfred in the ballroom waiting for everyone. Cass lingered, walking slowly at her father’s side. He offered her his arm; she smiled and took it, feeling unusually like a debutante or a princess.

He didn’t say anything at first, but she could still tell how much he enjoyed escorting her, having her as his daughter.

“Ready to dance? Take the night off?” she inquired.

“Hmm. Maybe not the whole night.” The corners of his mouth twitched. “But a few hours, yes.”

“Me too. Good to see her...and my brothers happy.”

He looked down, a real smile crossing his face.

“Yes. And it’s good to see you happy too.”

*I love you*, radiated from his stance and expression.

She returned both the silence and the sentiment, offering him her right hand raised, the middle and ring fingers folded down.
The feeling from him magnified. He took his arm from hers and wrapped it around her shoulders instead; as they walked into the ballroom, she leaned into her father’s touch. Her younger brothers scampered about, trying and failing to grab hors d’oeuvres from under Alfred’s gaze, Jason laughing as Tim tried to pour champagne on Damian’s head and got it on Duke’s sleeve instead.

Bruce sighed deeply, rubbing his forehead at them. But the feeling of love from him didn’t decrease.

Neither did Cass’s happiness. With her family before her, the thought of work, of needing to escape, never even crossed her mind.

As it was a party with actually interesting people, it was already in full swing as soon as everyone was through the door, much to Stephanie’s delight.

No stuffy rich folks at this Wayne gala. The entire wedding guest list had turned up...in other words, the ballroom was packed with superheroes. The only people who weren’t were the Foxes, several of the GCPD and a couple of the BHPD, one or two civilian friends, baby John in his bib and mini tux, and Alfred, who was carrying the baby, and practically a superhero anyway.

Most of the handful of cops looked uncomfortably apprehensive at being surrounded by so many metahumans. Or maybe it was because they were all so attractive. Either way, it must’ve been odd getting used to one’s city having no meta heroes, and then to show up at one’s friend’s or boss’s daughter’s engagement party and Hawkgirl’s stretching her wings over the bar. At least those particular cops had already known — or at least suspected — there was something up with the Waynes anyway.

In the meantime, Kendra was indeed taking the rare opportunity to stretch her wings as she chatted with Mari and Diana. Karen introduced herself to Bette, Gavin, and Onyx. Donna caught up with the Wilson siblings while Zinda talked to Ted. Over in the corner, Garfield and Victor laughed uproariously at something a grinning Helena told them. A whole cluster of Tim’s Titans had gathered by the desserts while Jason hung out next to his fellow Outlaws. The tables, groaning with food, were being thoroughly raided, as was the bar; music from truly massive speakers swelled over the whole crowd.

“I think I may optimistically state that this is still going well.”

She turned and was greeted by the groom-to-be himself, cutting a fine figure in his tux, his hair swept back stylishly. Grinning, Steph set aside the glass of champagne she’d been sipping from, alternating her attention between just him and her food.

“Hey, if it isn’t my favorite Batman.”

“Coming from you, that’s not saying much.” But he was still smiling. “Steph, I wanted to say thanks. I’m glad you offered to stay here too while we’re on our honeymoon, help the family watch John.”

“Yeah, well, you know.” She shrugged. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Clark and Lois slow-dancing under the great glass chandelier, Wally attempting to maneuver around them with four plates of snacks balanced on his arms. “Your family’s a scream. And your kid’s cute. Much cuter than you. It wasn’t a particularly difficult decision.”

For a moment, Dick chuckled, then looked concerned.
“Stephanie...are you sure, though? You don’t have to watch my baby if it’s going to bring up anything painful for you. I know you and I weren’t close when you had your daughter, and maybe I should’ve done more then, but —”

Steph stuffed a mini éclair in his mouth.

“Buddy, shut up. Don’t start on that self-blame shit or you’re gonna spiral; I’m an expert in spiraling, thanks to your brother.” She nodded to Tim, who was occupied with introducing Tam to Kon, Bart, and Cassie. “Look, bad things have happened to all of us. We’ve all made painful decisions. And y’know, some things are always gonna hurt, always gonna affect us. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be happy again.”

She looked back out at the ballroom. Bruce and Cass were smiling as they father-daughter danced, Tim was laughing at something his friends had said, Damian was trying to convince Alfred to let him hold the baby, Duke was eagerly getting to know some of the younger heroes, Jason was beaming without a trace of mockery or sarcasm as he talked to Kori and Artemis.

“And you know who taught me that? Your future wife.”

Wiping éclair crumbs off his lips, he seemed visibly touched by what she’d said.

“I notice you said ‘us’ quite a lot.”

“Did I?” She tilted her head to the side.

“Yeah.” His smile returned. “You’re one of us, Steph. You’re a part of this family.”

Something caught in her chest, something clicked into place, like she’d been waiting a long time for someone else to say that. To finally acknowledge the truth for what it was.

“You know what?” She put her hands on her hips. “You’re damn right I am. And as fucking weird and messed-up as this family is, I’m glad. I’m glad your fiancée’s my mentor, and that I’m going to spend two weeks living here, watching you guys’ kid. And right now, I’m glad I’m able to go dance with your sister, and to get your brother and his boyfriend to join us.”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder, giving her a quick hug. They were both still smiling when she darted across the ballroom, coming to a halt in front of Bruce and tapping him on the shoulder.

“Bruce, I’m stealing your kids again.”

“Hm.”

He let go of his daughter’s hands, and she grabbed them, wheeling her across the dance floor just as a new song began, only stopping to snatch Tim by the arm, Kon following.

The two couples spun slowly across the ballroom, and all Stephanie knew was the music, the people she loved surrounding her, and the untainted warmth of joy bubbling up inside her chest.
with Anissa Pierce, Anissa resting her head on her partner’s shoulder. Helena and Karen had headed back to each other, talking in unusually quiet voices over their champagne. Tam and Cassie Sandsmark, who could not have had less in common, seemed to be hitting it off to the degree that between them and Tim and Kon, Bart Allen was obliviously turning into a fifth wheel.

Sitting a bit off to the side, finishing her drink, she was startled when Bruce’s and Lucius’ walk took them near enough to her that she could hear them.

“— and tell Luke good luck from me for when he goes to London,” Bruce said. “But as Tam’s already done a good job with all her interacting with our British Batman Inc reps and investors, I don’t doubt that her brother’s meetings will go well.”

“Yeah. My kids...all three of them have been doing so well. And it’s not just that, the company’s been on a one-way trip upwards for the last few months.”

“You might be able to get some sleep for once.”

Lucius chuckled, rubbing his forehead.

“Maybe. Or maybe now I’ll just be worrying about what to wear to your son’s wedding so that it I won’t ruin the occasion.”

“I always recommend Yves Saint Laurent; Armani’s good too.” Bruce paused. “But in all seriousness, I do want it to go off without a hitch, Lucius.”

“For your boy’s sake.”

“And for his bride’s. Barbara matters just as much to me as my children; she deserves to be happy.”

Her breath hitched.

“I actually...do think it’ll go well though. That it’ll work out. I used to be so afraid she’d break my boy’s heart again. But she didn’t. And she’s accomplished so much, for herself, for us...I...I owe her so much.”

“We all do, Bruce. Trust me, I know.”

“Yes.” Bruce looked up and out one of the ballroom windows. The moon hung high above the manor grounds, the early night turning a rich shade of blue. They were far enough out of the city that through the darkness, she could actually see the stars. “She’s invaluable to us all. As Oracle, and as Barbara Gordon.”

Barbara curled her hand over her heart as the two men walked away. Her fingers tightened further when she saw them heading over to where the rest of the Wayne family was clustering together, her father and Dinah drifting among them.

Lucius parted ways with his friend, heading across the ballroom towards his daughter and the Titans, Kon following. But Bruce stood beside her father and his children again, talking with Duke, resting a hand on Damian’s shoulder while the boy held John in his arms. Jason had struck up a conversation with Stephanie, both of whom laughed and chatted beside the others, and Tim had settled in contentedly with a smiling Cass.

Barbara’s own child cooed happily, reaching out a hand to his uncle’s face, while though Damian stood with his back ramrod straight, he held him with the utmost care. Dinah said something to Bruce, before turning down, her face shining with love and joy, stroking her finger along her
godson’s cheek, letting him hold her finger.

Ducking her head, smiling, Barbara realized that there was no need for her to interfere, or even to supervise. Instead, she wheeled herself out to the balcony, leaning her forearms against the handrail, gazing up at the night sky.

The pinpricks of faraway stars clustered into thousands of patterns, the blue-black shadows soft and gentle as they blanketed the grounds. The moon washed the trees and topiaries in silver, the brutal heat of the day eased into a comforting warmth.

Her hair felt like satin on her shoulders and back. Her severed column of vertebrae like steel. Her skin, shoulders and arms exposed by her dress, almost caressed by the night air.

“Hey, love.”

She didn’t need to turn to see Dick, as he meandered over and joined her at the balcony, sitting down at her right side, lit from behind by the rich golds and reds of the activity within the ballroom. Instead, she reached down and took his hand, letting their fingers interlock.

“Needed a break?”

“No. Just a moment to appreciate it all.”

Beyond the manor grounds, the familiar silhouette of Gotham stretched on in the distance. The crooked skyline, the blinking electricity. The night, with its forgiving shadows and its honest light.

“It is beautiful, isn’t it?”

It wasn’t clear what, specifically, about their circumstances he meant. So she chose to reply to all possibilities.

“Yes. It is.”

He squeezed her hand, momentarily bringing it down to his lips.

The future seemed very near, all that was stretching before her practically tangible. But she thought of it and felt no fear. And that moment, with all that was happening then, a joyful love song swelling through the ballroom behind them and pulling it all together, was more vivid than ever. She could almost feel everything lifting up around her, almost taste the sweetness of her life.

The entirety of the last year seemed to have been leading her to this point.

Just as she thought that, an alert on her tablet beeped, startling her out of her reverie.

“What is it?”

Reaching around, she drew the tablet out of her hidden compartment, clicking it back to life. She read the alert, pushing her glasses up her nose with one finger.

“There’s been an attempted breach on the Wayne Enterprises main computer system,” she told Dick. He got to his feet, peering intently over her shoulder. “They didn’t manage to bypass the firewall, but they got close. I’ll bet anything LexCorp is trying to steal our developmental plans again, but I should be able to trace the signal back to them and prove malevolence this time if I start...”

She trailed off, glancing back up and around to Dick. He looked at her.
“...I’m sorry. I should start as soon as possible, and this might...take a little while for me to get it done. I don’t — I don’t want to bail on our engagement party —”

“Hey.”

He knelt so that their faces were inches apart, not breaking his gaze, as beautiful as ever.

“Don’t worry about it. This —” He nodded to the computer in her hand, “— is what you do. That, who you are, it’s why I love you. Why we’re having an engagement party.” He smiled a bit.

She finally smiled again in return. He kissed her.

“You are a complete badass, and you’re phenomenal at what you do.”

“Okay, to the first point, I knew that; to the second, you’re wrong.” Her smile grew. “I’m the best at what I do.”

He laughed a bit, eyes crinkling.

“That’s my future wife.”

He kissed her again, prolonging it a bit.

“I love you so much,” she said softly. Then lifted her head, raising her eyebrows. “But that being said, go hang out with your friends and the rest of your family for a while. It’s time for me to go back to work.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He was still smiling as he turned around and headed back into the ballroom, rejoining the rest of the family, his happiness all but shining from him.

Barbara smiled too as she set her hand to the tablet screen. In seconds, the rows and columns of binary glowed before her, offering her entrance to her world. Her calloused fingers danced across the screen with renowned skill, falling back into the work that had become so familiar.

In the darkness, the computer code gleamed. In relatively short time, another man, this time a LexCorp employee sitting at his desk in Metropolis, with little more to distinguish him from countless others, saw the infamous symbol cross his screen and realized that he’d been found out.

At the same time, Barbara’s symbol emblazoned itself across her screen too. A reminder, that Oracle had succeeded yet again. Of who she was, who she had made herself into, and of how great she had become. Not that she needed the reminder.

Light spilled through her chest, pride gleamed through her grinning teeth, as she began sending the evidence to the Metropolis police department. She truly had never felt less fear or more happiness.

As the symbol, the representation of all her power, shone through the darkness, bold and bright and unmistakable, the woman to whom it belonged sat proud in her wheelchair, ready to face whatever was yet to come.

As long as she lived, she would keep adapting, keep improving, keep winning.

For that was what she did, and after all...

She had been Batgirl. She was Oracle. She was Barbara Gordon.
And Barbara Gordon was the *best* at what she did.

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