The Way Back

by Dragonbat

Summary

Sequel to Lost to the Night. Bruce Wayne has been released from Arkham, but he—and Gotham—have changed. Can he become Batman once more? Does he want to?

Notes

I'll find a way back to the higher ground,
And see the view I saw before!
I'll search the world
Until the answer's found -
Turn my despair around
Forevermore!

Somehow I've got to rebuild
All the dreams that the winds have scattered,
From what fate has shattered -
I'll retrieve what mattered!

Somehow I've got to go on,
Till the evil has been defeated -
Till my works completed…

—Leslie Bricusse, "The Way Back"

Disclaimer: DC owns the characters. I only play with them. Sometimes, not all that nicely.

A/N: Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Aiyokusama for the beta! This fic is a sequel to two of my earlier stories, Locked Inside the Façade and Lost to the Night. I started writing this series in the summer of 2005, during the buildup to Infinite Crisis. From the end of the "Sacrifice" Arc in Superman onward, this story veers away from established continuity. If you missed the first two parts, you might want to read them first, if only to stop wondering why Maggie Sawyer is now the police commissioner and Tim's in San Francisco…

In the middle of the night, I go walking in my sleep
Through the jungle of doubt, to a river so deep
I know I'm searching for something, something so undefined
That it can only be seen, by the eyes of the blind
In the middle of the night.
I'm not sure about life after this
God knows I've never been a spiritual man

Billy Joel, "River of Dreams"

Bruce reached for the cord and pulled the vertical blinds closed. Perhaps, without the moonlight shining in, he would finally be able to sleep. He closed his eyes again. When he opened them, the digital clock told him that a mere four minutes had passed since the last time he'd checked the display.

This was ridiculous. He was going home tomorrow. There was no reason to be apprehensive. It wasn't as though he was venturing into the unknown. It wasn't even as though he'd never been alone at the manor. Besides the occasional vacation, there had been more than one time when Alfred had resigned his post and gone his own way. This was the first time, though, that Bruce knew that his oldest friend wasn't coming back. Or, he reflected, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he would never leave again. They'd buried him on the grounds.

He closed his eyes again. The last four days had been… good. There was no better way to describe them. He'd been staying with Dick and Barbara since the hearing. It was still hard for him to accept that this was real, that he was truly out. He wasn't going back to the hospital, nor to Arkham. That was behind him now. And yet… there were moments when the last two years felt as though they had been a dream.

Of course, Bruce knew better. It had all happened. Alfred and Jason were dead. He'd been arrested, unmasked, and bound over to Arkham. His old life was gone for good. In some ways, this was a relief. Although it had been necessary as a cover, he'd never really enjoyed playing the vapid socialite. Now, he no longer had to. He didn't need excuses to get out of board meetings, either. His company had moved on without him.

He sat up in bed angrily. Was this what it came down to, now? He was not, absolutely not, going to lie here and give in to defeatism. He didn't think that Dick would be back from patrol yet, but Barbara had to be up. And if there was one person on whom he could count to kick him off the pity pot…

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. His bare feet sank into the pile carpet. He found his slippers with little difficulty and crossed to the door. Instead of the brass knob, however, his hand closed on Turkish cotton. He grimaced. Time was when he wouldn't have needed the reminder, but bathrobes weren't standard issue at Arkham.

He slid into the robe and stepped out into the hallway, shielding his eyes against the stronger illumination.
Nightwing fired his decel cable and stepped off the rooftop. He would never tire of the exhilaration of falling. The roaring in his ears, the sudden surge of adrenaline, the way the wind whipped through his hair—oh, how had he not realized how much he'd missed that? When he was less than two stories above the ground, he released his jumpline and turned three perfect somersaults, to land in a half-crouch between the two rival gangs.

"Sorry, guys," he quipped. "Tonight's fight is cancelled on account of scattered shuriken." With that, he let fly a shower of nightarangs with one hand, while extracting several more from a compartment in his opposite boot with the other.

"Argh!" One of the thugs clapped a hand to his suddenly-bleeding wrist. "Who the frag are you?"

"You don't recognize me?" Nightwing asked, tossing more of his patented throwing knives. "I'm wounded." He ducked as another youth swung a length of chain toward his head. "Well," he amended, "not literally." He fired off a new grapnel, which snagged on the railing of a third-floor balcony, and launched himself into the air. "'Scuse me if I'd like to keep it that way." He pulled his legs up and wrapped them around the jumpline, so that he was hanging upside-down. From that position, he continued to rain shuriken on the toughs.

"Uh-uh-uh," he said, as he leaped from the cable, landed piggy-back on one thug's shoulders, bearing the young man to the ground. He quickly lashed out with his escrima at another. The second man yelped and dropped his gun. "It's all fun and games until someone pulls a Glock," the vigilante continued affably, "but once someone does…"

Nightwing's voice dropped an octave. His lips curled into a menacing snarl, "…fun's over!"

With that, he rolled clear of the man he was perched upon. Bracing both hands on the asphalt, he delivered a fluid, twisting split-kick into one thug's midsection. The youth fell back into two of his fellows.

At that point, about half of them took to their heels and started running. Nightwing directed his attention to the eight who remained. He moved through their ranks like mercury, blocking blows—which grew progressively more frantic—and countering with kicks and punches of his own. When he couldn't block, he evaded. When he couldn't evade, he rolled. Finally, his opponents lay on the pavement in varying states of consciousness. Nightwing didn't have a visible mark on him, although it wouldn't surprise him if he'd find fresh bruises later tonight, when he peeled off the suit.

"O., let GCPD know that the Hellcats and the Loboys won't be having that mixer tonight, after all," he said into his commlink. "I've got a few here who started partying early in the evening—I think they could use a lift to where they're going. I saw some others heading west on Flanagan."

"Done," Barbara's voice acknowledged. "How does it feel being back in the black-and-blue?"

Nightwing winced, thinking about the evidence of the past week's altercations. "I'm not sure I ever left," he said.

"Poor baby," she replied with mock-sympathy. "You want to make an early night of it, or can you stop at the jewelry buffet on Roussos on your way home? Apparently, Burnley's is having an all-you-can-stuff special on gold and precious stones. Or, at least, a couple of people seem to think so."

"You are an evil, evil woman," Nightwing said with feeling. "I'm on my way over there. N. out."

Barbara was carrying on a conversation with Wonder Girl. "Kid Devil did what?" She gasped. She sobered quickly. "Alright. Leave it with me. I'll pull what I have on Neron. Eddie's underage. Maybe
that's a loophole. Oracle out." She closed the channel. "Missing the fine print I get," she muttered, "but how does anyone ignore a clause in twenty-four-point Arial Bold?"

She started punching buttons on her console. "Hi, Bruce," she said without turning around. "Gimme a sec." She sighed. "Come on, Kyle… answer the page." She took a deep breath and let it out. "I hope he isn't off-planet," she added, finally rolling her chair away from her systems.

"Sorry about that," she smiled wearily. "You know, when I was a teenager, my biggest problems were an overprotective father and the police academy's minimum height requirement. Today…” She let her voice trail off as she indicated a nearby swivel chair. "Have a seat."

Bruce complied.

"What's up? I though you'd be asleep by now."

"So did I," Bruce admitted.

"Oh." She thought for a moment. "Make yourself comfortable. I'm just finishing up a few things before Dick gets back." She hesitated. "Did you just want some company? Or…” She glanced at him. If he hadn't been gripping the chair arms so tightly, she might have thought that he was relaxed. "Are you," she paused, "okay with tomorrow?"

The Bruce of two years ago might have either taken offense at the question or changed the subject. The man who sat before her now closed his eyes. "I suppose I was being somewhat obvious," he admitted. He settled back into the chair. "I should be fine," he said lightly.

Barbara wasn't fooled. "But you aren't."

He didn't need to confirm it. "It's… home," he said. "I shouldn't be this apprehensive about returning."

"After Joker," Barbara said quietly, "after I started to come to terms with the… ramifications of what he'd done, I thought I had it all together. Until they told me I was almost ready to leave the hospital. Then, I had a panic attack." She grimaced. "They had to sedate me and keep me a couple of days longer for observation." She lifted her hand and carefully, making sure that Bruce could see what she was doing, placed it gently over his.

Bruce tensed for an instant. Then he brought his other hand over, covering hers.

"It was hard," Barbara continued. "Because everything was so familiar that it was easy to forget what had changed. And then, when I remembered, it was like a slap in the face. I'd be watching one of my favorite shows on TV, and I'd be laughing at all the punch lines. Then they'd cut to commercial and I'd decide to go walk into the kitchen and fix myself a sandwich… and realize I couldn't. Or I'd read about some show at the planetarium and think about driving up there—this was before I got my custom van." She sighed. "When I was in the hospital, I never had a chance to forget that things had changed. And once I got out, half the time people treated me like I was made of glass, and half the time they treated me like they expected me to just pick up where I was before I opened the front door." She grimaced. "I know they meant well."

Her hand was sweating, and it wasn't just because it was warm, sandwiched, as it was, between both of Bruce's. She didn't usually think back on that period of her life. The shooting itself, yes. She had mentally replayed the fifteen seconds from the time she'd heard the knock on the door to the instant that she'd heard the gunshot and felt herself flying—or falling—backwards, full-force, into the coffee table, hundreds of times. And she remembered later, taking the computer classes, learning escrima,
and making her first fumbling advances toward rejoining the hero community. But her time in the hospital, and later, those weeks she'd spent huddled in her room, mourning her loss and dreading the idea of going outside and facing other people's pitying looks... Well, she was mostly past that now. Thankfully.

Her discomfort didn't go unnoticed. Bruce squeezed her hand once, then released it. "You rarely speak about those days," he said.

Barbara looked away. "There's usually not much to mention." She forced herself to shrug. "It was rough. It got better. In time."

Bruce nodded. "I should have been there more than I was," he said awkwardly.

"The one time you showed up after that first night," she winced, "I probably made you wish you'd stayed away. Look. It's water under the bridge." A small smile flitted across her face. "Besides, you probably would have just loomed there trying to find the right words, and I probably would have thrown something at you." She took a deep breath. "There were no right words. Not then. And you've never been big on words, anyway." She smiled. "Besides, I know you stopped by my window more than a few nights, while you were on patrol. I was just faking sleep because I didn't feel like talking."

She almost laughed at his expression.

After a moment, he smiled faintly and rose to his feet with a yawn. "I'm going back to bed," he said. He hesitated. "Thanks."

"Anytime."

He was almost out the door when she called after him.

"Bruce? If you... if..." she took a breath. "You know I can help out with more than just the... costumed business, if you needed to ask me something. Or... or tell me something."

He turned to face her once more. "I know that, Barbara. Good night."

She watched him leave, her expression unreadable. Then, she opened a new connection. She was pleasantly surprised when a deep voice acknowledged her communication. "Jason Blood."

"Jason, this is Oracle. I need your advice on how to break a contract with the devil..."

Sometimes, Dick thought that the reason Babs had waited for so long before she allowed him into her life was that she hated the notion of anyone seeing her at a vulnerable moment. He understood that. Hell, it wasn't as though he hadn't spent half his life with someone similar. He knew the signs.

So, when he came in from patrol and she didn't wheel around to face him, he realized immediately that she was in a bad mood. When he told her that he'd stopped the burglary, she mumbled something that sounded halfway positive, but didn't ask him for any further details. From that, he deduced that, while something was bothering her, it wasn't anything he'd done. And when he stole over and began to massage her shoulders, and she let her head fall forward, and took a slow, shuddering breath, he finally asked her, "Rough night?"

Babs took another deep breath. "Not really," she admitted. "Actually, it was pretty run-of-the-mill. Cass found out that Penguin's working with the Triads under duress—we might be able to use that. Huntress and Zinda had to make an emergency landing in Pueblo, thanks to an impending hailstorm."
I've got them settled at the Trumpeter Inn, overnight..." She gasped as she felt Dick undo a tension knot. "Kid Devil... ah! Don't stop! Kid Devil sold his soul to Neron. I got a frantic call from Wonder Girl about it." She reached her right hand over her left shoulder and squeezed his fingers. "Bruce came up here a couple of hours ago."

Dick stopped. "Is he okay?"

"He thinks so." She hesitated. "Right now, he's just... in a spot I wouldn't want to be. But I had to go back there tonight, anyway. No," she added as Dick stopped massaging her and gently brushed his fingers along her cheek. "I'm alright, really. Well, as much as I'll ever be," she amended. Despite her best efforts, she could feel tears well up. She squeezed her eyes shut. "Damn." She pulled the chair forward forcibly.

Dick knew better than to follow. When Barbara got this worked up, he'd learned that the best thing to do, was give her space.

After a few moments, she wheeled back, visibly more composed. "I can't help thinking that his going home tomorrow is premature."

Dick looked at her. "Did you want me to ask him if he'd like to stay longer?"

Barbara shook her head. "It's not that easy. And part of me wants to say 'yes', but..." She hesitated. "I think he needs to try going back. If he doesn't do it soon, it's not going to get any easier."

"Does it need to be tomorrow?"

There was a long pause. "I think it does," Barbara said finally. "For better or for worse, that was what I told him, and he accepted it. He's... prepared to go back tomorrow. If I change things last minute, I think it's going to make it that much harder later. We have to do this."

Dick nodded, unconvinced. "And if he can't cope?"

"Then there are other options besides his moving in permanently with us. But he'll probably be more amenable to them if he figures them out."

Dick sighed. "I'm just glad your father's already gotten settled in."

"Me too."

Selina Kyle cuddled her fifteen-month-old daughter close. She could do this. She had to. The problem was that what she felt she had to do varied with each passing moment. It had all seemed so easy when Bruce was in Arkham. She had helped Nightwing watch over Gotham, and passed whatever intel came her way over to Oracle.

When Bruce had finally been granted weekend passes from the asylum, she had been there to welcome him, and to introduce him to her daughter—who might well be his.

You never thought about the other possible father while Bruce was 'away'.

No, she'd wanted to forget about that night, two years back, when Bruce was lying in a hospital bed under round-the-clock police surveillance, and she'd been lonely and angry and miserable and bloody well not thinking clearly. She'd had a bit to drink—not so much that she hadn't known what she was doing, though it would have been nice to have had the excuse—but enough that she hadn't cared about the possible ramifications. No birth control method was failsafe, after all. She hadn't
known the man's name, only that he'd had black hair, blue eyes, and rugged features. She'd been drunk enough to pretend that he was someone much more significant to her—someone she'd been with less than a week earlier.

When the test results had come in, her second thought had been that she was carrying Bruce's child. (Her first thought had been, 'but I was always careful! How…') How hadn't mattered. She might not have planned on having a child, but she had definitely wanted this one. And she'd wanted to believe that the child was Bruce’s, but she'd never checked. And now…

Now that he's out, Helena is one more way that someone with a score to settle can hurt him. It won't matter whether she's biologically his—if she's in his life, she's in danger.

So, Selina reflected, was she, but she was a grown woman and capable of choosing which risks she would take. To willingly expose Helena to that kind of danger, though, was another story.

And you're only figuring this out now? Why did you come back into his life last year? Didn't you know that this would be an issue? Now he knows about her, and you've certainly given him every reason to think that you'll stand by him…

And she wanted to stand by him. But she needed her baby to be safe.

Nobody's safe. You learned that early enough. Wealth isn't a protection. Poverty isn't a protection. Intelligence, stupidity, action, passivity… NOBODY is safe. All you can do is minimize the risks and take your chances.

Unfortunately, minimizing the risks at this moment meant only one thing.

Her hand shook as she braced Helena against her shoulder with one hand and pushed the Sandicast ocelot bookends apart with the other. She twirled the combination lock on the wall-safe that the bookends had concealed. From within, she extracted a small address book. Oracle could do this properly, Selina knew, but there was no way that she could ask her. She couldn't go to Calculator either. Noah wasn't talking, but some way, somehow, Oracle had found something to hold over him. If Barbara asked him a few pointed questions, he might reveal all. Penguin would help, but the Bats had him under surveillance. Not that Cobblepot realized it, of course—Oracle was subtle. Still, if Cobblepot sneezed in the afternoon, she wouldn't be at all surprised if Nightwing would leave a thermos of chicken soup behind later that evening, after he'd finished interrogating the man. If she went to the Iceberg, the Bats would know. And they'd try to talk her out of it. Maybe, she should let them.

She sat down heavily in the armchair. Helena started squirming. Selina lowered her gently to the carpet. Helena toddled off a few steps and gleefully knocked over a small tower of blocks. A moment later, she was tugging on Selina's pant-leg, and trying to climb back up.

Selina scooped her up with a smile and a kiss. She sobered. She didn't know what to do, but she knew she needed time to think—without feeling pressured for a decision. After a moment, she picked up the phone and punched in a number.

"It's me," she said quietly. "I need to disappear for a little while…"

Calvin ducked into the shadows. He didn't know where the others were. They'd split up as soon as they'd hightailed it out of the alley where that crazy devil with the ninja stars had been laying the beatdown on their buddies. Oh, man, if he got out of this, he was going to go straight. He'd quit the Hellcats, get his GED, get a job, anything… just…
Nobody seemed to be following him now. Calvin leaned against the wall and tried to catch his breath. Had he really gotten away? He hardly dared to peer around the corner of the alley. If he did, then a cop, or worse, that black-and-blue demon would be peering right back at him. Finally, his heart still pounding, he forced his feet to take those two steps. He snaked his head out to the street. Nobody seemed to be paying him the least attention.

Calvin started to smile. He'd actually done it. He'd gotten away! Oh, man, wait 'til the gang found out he'd gone face-to-face with one of the pajama-boys and stayed free to tell about it! Now they'd respect him more. His street cred was made! He started to laugh long and hard, not caring who heard him.

That was when a Louisville Slugger swung forcefully into the back of his head and he went sprawling.


Calvin stirred weakly. "Who?" he mumbled groggily, "who are you?"

All at once, he was looking at a pair of Converse sneakers and the bottoms of a pair of blue jeans. He hadn't even heard his attacker scoot around him.

The child gave a low triumphant laugh. "Batman's newest partner."
1. Giving In

Chapter Summary

It's been nearly two years since Bruce last set foot in Wayne Manor. It's a bittersweet homecoming. Meanwhile, Batman finds out he's got a new partner. News to him...

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Aiyokusama for the beta! Thanks to Dungeonwriter and Komikbookvixen for advice!

"Not Today" written by Gary Burr and Steve Wilkinson. Performed by The Wilkinsons on their Highway album (Open Road, 2005).

To all Selina fans (and Bruce/Selina fans): Please be patient. As much as I love Bruce and Selina together, when I was writing this fic, I had one canon fact fresh in my mind. This is a woman who gave up her daughter for adoption when she realized that keeping her would be too dangerous—and had Bruce fix it so she wouldn't be able to change her mind and get her back. For her to immediately run to Bruce—a Bruce who is now publiclyouted as Batman—AND keep Helena—felt way too OOC at the time. Please bear with me. There's a Bruce/Selina tag on this fic for a reason. They will be together later in the fic, but for now, she's distancing herself.

I get advice from all my friends
How to get back on my feet again
And it will happen, I know when
Someday, someday
But not today
Today is for missing the way you laughed
Sitting with a stack of old photographs
While the black and white movie plays
I'm giving in
It's a little self-indulgent
But right now that's okay...

-Gary Burr, Steve Wilkinson, "Not Today"
Chapter 1: Giving In

Barbara opened her eyes and immediately closed them again. The sun was bright, she realized. She must have overslept. She became aware of the light pressure of an arm draped across her torso. If the sun was that high in the sky, then…

"Hey." She nudged Dick gently. "Hey, wake up. You overslept."

Dick stirred. "Wha?" He rolled over. "'Nother few minutes, Babs. Tired."

"I know," she said, elbowing him a little harder. "But you just started in a new department last week, and even though it is in risk management, if you could manage to not jeopardize it…"

A groan emanated from under the blankets. "I'm the only one around here who's supposed to be able to toss off quips like that." He pushed back the quilt. "What time is it, anyw—agh! Babs!"

She pressed a hand to her eyes, trying to block the light that stabbed at them. "That bad?" She asked worriedly.

"Terrible," Dick groaned again. "It's 4:40."

"What?" Barbara sat bolt upright. "We actually slept the whole day away?"

"Four-forty A.M., Babs. We didn't even finish sleeping the night away." His expression hardened. With one swift motion, he reached for the cord and pulled up the window blind. He sighed. "Just as well you woke me."

"I'm the only one around here who's supposed to be able to toss off quips like that." He pushed back the quilt. "What time is it, anyw—agh! Babs!"

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"Four-forty A.M., Babs. We didn't even finish sleeping the night away." His expression hardened. With one swift motion, he reached for the cord and pulled up the window blind. He sighed. "Just as well you woke me."

"I'm the only one around here who's supposed to be able to toss off quips like that." He pointed to the bat-symbol illuminating the night sky. It couldn't be more than twenty minutes to dawn, from the look of things. "I'll suit up. Again."

Barbara carefully maneuvered herself toward the edge of the mattress closest to the wheelchair. "I'll get coffee on."

"No time," Dick said. He was already opening the hidden door at the back of the walk-in closet. "Gotta run."

"Who said I'm making it for you?" Barbara retorted. "If that floodlight goes up, it means I have to, also." She shook her head. "Grab something for the office, too, in case you can't get back here before work. Your lunch is on the top shelf of the 'fridge, and there's a box of muffins on the bottom. The banana chocolate chip one is mine."

Dick grinned. "As long as I have another choice besides carrot oat-bran." He zipped the Nightwing suit into a garment bag and grabbed a navy-blue double-breasted, still in the drycleaner's plastic. "No time to stop at the cave—I'll get changed in the car." He blew Barbara a kiss, and raced out of the room.

"Sorry to bother you this late," Detective Captain Renee Montoya said as she switched off the signal. "I needed to check something with you." She blinked. "Old costume?"

Nightwing sighed. "You know what the judge said at the hearing. Bruce has enough to deal with now without having a black-and-white driving up to his door every time there's a Batman sighting, just to make sure it's not him in the suit."

The police captain shook her head. "I'd like to assure you that we have more important things to worry about," she said, "but you're right. I can't explicitly order my people not to look into something like that. And if there's a patrol car in his neighborhood…" She let out a breath. "Tell him that if
things get out of hand, he can threaten a harassment suit. That'll give me grounds to call them off without making it look like we're turning a blind eye."

"Thought you cops hate that kind of thing."

Montoya rolled her eyes. "Most of the time, they slow us down. In a case like this?" A small smile came and went. "We both know it won't be him under the cowl. That means that every time a couple of my people go to confirm that, they're taking time away from solving a real crime. Which slows us down more."

Nightwing grinned. "Nice mental gymnastics. And here I thought I was the acrobat." The smile broadened. "Sounds believable enough to me." He sobered then. "So, what's the emergency?"

Renee hesitated. All at once, she looked unsure. "Actually… there isn't one. I was hoping you could clear something up to my satisfaction."

Under the mask, Nightwing felt his eyebrows rise. "Hit me."

After a minute dragged by with no further conversation, he ventured, "Captain?"

Montoya took a deep breath. "Were you patrolling alone tonight?"

He blinked. "Yeah. Why?"

"You haven't taken on any new recruits?"

A headshake. "No," Nightwing said quietly. "It's mainly me and Batgirl, with sporadic assistance from Catwoman, Huntress, and a few other friends of mine, mostly from my days on the Titans. What's this about?"

"Well," Montoya said, relaxing, "in one way, I guess that's what I wanted to hear from you. Because frankly? I don't want to have to bring you in on a child endangerment charge." At Nightwing's confused expression, she continued.

"A member of the Hellcats gang was taken to Wayne Memorial in Park Row about three hours ago. Someone found him bleeding in an alley and called 911. When he came to, he said that he was assaulted by a child, who identified himself as, I quote, 'Batman's newest partner'."

Nightwing absorbed that, knowing that Montoya was watching him carefully, gauging his reaction. "At the moment, Captain," he said quietly, "there is no Batman. And my 'newest' partner is Catwoman. We've been working together, off and on, for almost a year, now." He turned around. "Thanks for the tip. I'll look into it.

"Kid said he wasn't positive if it was a boy or a girl. And he didn't see his attacker's face."

Nightwing stopped. "Got it. Thanks."

"Good night."

He turned around with a half-smile and waved a hand in the direction of the rising sun. "It was. Get some rest, Captain. Someone should."

Then he was gone.

Barbara was smiling as she hung up the telephone. "That was Dick. He's meeting us at the manor,
after all," she said. "So we'll head out around two?"

Bruce helped himself to more salad. "I know I've been postponing this," he said, "but he doesn't need to leave work early. I can manage."

"He's not." She buttered a slice of rye bread. "The signal went up again, a little before five. After Dick went to check it out, he continued to the office. He has to give them eight hours a day, but they're pretty flexible on which eight." She smiled. "There've been a few times when he's gone into the office directly from patrol, then come home around one or two in the afternoon to sleep."

"Ah." He finished his plate in silence.

"Too bad Tim had to go back to San Francisco."

"The Titans need him," Bruce said. "It happens."

*Particularly when Deathstroke comes to town*, Barbara thought darkly. "I'll get that for you," she said, reaching for the plate as Bruce pushed his chair away.

Bruce shook his head. "There's been enough of that over the last two years. I need to get back to managing on my own." So saying, he deposited his plate in the sink.

Barbara shook her head. "It doesn't clean itself, you know," she said with some amusement as he turned around.

Bruce glowered. Then he turned back to the sink and ran the hot water. He *knew* that.

Dick wasn't the only one waiting as they drove up the gravel path to the front door of the manor. Cass was standing next to him. And so was…

"I was in the neighborhood," Gordon smiled as Bruce opened the car door. "Hope you don't mind."

Bruce shook his head. "I still don't know where you found a place in Bristol," he admitted. "I mean…" He stopped. It was none of his business whether Gordon had won the lottery, or gotten a mortgage. Somehow or other, the former police commissioner had found a place to live in one of Gotham's swankiest suburbs.

"The rent was too good to pass up," Jim said. "Besides, you stuck a crime lab in my basement. I didn't need one, and it turned out to be cheaper to move than renovate." He shrugged. "And this way, it's still there if your people need it."

That made sense. Although Bruce had his doubts as to whether living in Bristol could really be cheaper. The thought that Jim might have put himself in debt to live here bothered him. If Jim had, Bruce knew that it was only out of concern for his own well being. He'd have to see whether there might be a discreet way to help Jim financially—if need be.

Caught up in his thoughts, he barely noticed Dick typing the security code on the touch-pad.

"Ready?" Dick asked, as he pulled open the door.

Bruce took a deep breath, squared his shoulders and crossed the threshold.

He didn't know what he'd been expecting. Ghosts, perhaps. Not ghosts in the sense of chain-rattling, moaning phantoms. He'd known since he was eight that there were different kinds of haunting. He
supposed that he'd expected to walk through the door and be nearly physically bowled over by memories.

Instead… instead, it was like walking through any other vestibule. He recognized the carpets and the paneling. As he stepped into the front hall, he knew instantly where each room was situated, but where was the tide of nostalgia that he'd thought would overwhelm him? This was a homecoming, yes, but his return felt ordinary. As though he'd been away for hours, instead of years.

There was something else, too. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. The manor was as spotless as it had ever been. The woodwork gleamed, and the air even had a faint trace of the lemon polish that Alfred had always used. But despite the sights and the smells, the place was empty and sterile in a way that it had never been. Not even those times when Alfred had left for awhile.

He wasn't coming back. Bruce had understood this for two years. But until now, a part of him had somehow refused to accept it. Alfred was gone.

"Managing?" Dick asked.

Bruce nodded, forcing a smile. "Of course."

It wasn't as bad as Bruce had been anticipating. Nobody offered to give him a tour of the manor or offered to "be there for him" if he wanted to go down to the cave or up to Alfred's room. They didn't have to. He knew. But, at the moment, he wasn't interested in either area. And if he had been, the last thing he would have wanted was an audience.

So, Bruce ushered them into the den, and they sat and talked. Well, Dick kept up more than his share of the conversation. And if he and Barbara monopolized it, that wasn't surprising. Cass and Jim generally didn't speak when they had nothing to say, and Bruce wasn't in the mood for small talk.

Around 4:30, Jim suggested firing up the grill and having barbecue for supper. Everyone was amenable, although for Bruce, it was the first reminder that the others would be leaving soon enough.

"You stay," Bruce overheard Cass telling Dick after dinner. "I can look after Gotham, okay? Instead of tomorrow, you take tonight off."

As appealing as the idea was, Bruce wasn't in the mood for handholding. He was going to have to make the adjustment to living alone, and he'd rather start tonight. Before Dick had a chance to reply, Bruce had taken a few steps closer to the two, making it obvious that he'd been listening. "That really won't be necessary, Cassandra," he said, trying to sound sincere.

Cass met his eyes directly. "You're sure? I could stay."

Bruce shook his head. "If you're seen, at best, the papers will be wondering why a woman young enough to be my daughter was seen leaving the manor late at night. At worst, they'll start to speculate as to which costumed vigilante you might be."

She shrugged. "Then, they won't see. I'm careful."

The look he gave her might have come from behind the cowl. "No. I'll be fine."

The others exchanged looks. "Well," Dick said slowly, "if you're sure, then I need to get ready for patrol."

Bruce nodded. "Go on. Who's off tonight?"
"Selina."

"Ah," Bruce wondered why she hadn't come with them. He turned to Cass. "You're with him, then."
At her reluctant nod, his expression hardened even further. "Go."

She went.

"I guess," Barbara said, "I need to head back to Delphi." She grinned at his puzzled expression. "I had to call my new HQ something. Dick pinned that name on it, and it stuck."

That figured.

"Want me to drop you off on the way, Daddy?"

Jim demurred. "There's still enough light for me to get where I'm going. See you tomorrow?" He bent down to kiss her.

Barbara hugged him back. "Around noon."

Then they trooped off, leaving Bruce alone.

And, for the first time in two years, he was alone. There wasn't another soul in the manor. There were no guards within earshot. There would be nobody peering into his room every quarter hour to check up on him. If he chose to, he could, quite literally, sit here in this armchair for hours, perhaps for days, and nobody would notice. He frowned. Considering that of all the hardships he'd undergone in Arkham, it had been the loss of his privacy that he'd felt most keenly, he ought to be pleased to finally be free from observation.

Well, if Selina was off tonight, perhaps the two of them could get together. He was halfway to the garage before he remembered: his driver's license had expired while he'd been away. Normally, he wouldn't have cared about that. Retaking the test was nothing more than an annoying formality. But, so soon after his release, he wasn't deluding himself. For every Renee Montoya on the force, there was probably a Romy Chandler—someone who had been only too happy to see him shut away, and would leap at an opportunity to send him back. Flouting the law—at any stage—would be sheer stupidity. Especially when he could just telephone her.

There was no answer at Selina's apartment. For a moment, Bruce debated asking Oracle to check up on her, but he dismissed the notion. She could be asleep. She could have spotted a crime in progress and opted to handle the matter herself. She could be trying to get Helena to settle down. She could have unplugged the phone. The number might have changed—there'd been no voice mail. Bruce sighed. Then he went upstairs to take a shower.

…At least, he'd been planning on a shower. He'd generally preferred them to baths. However, when he actually got to the bathroom, faced with a choice for the first time in far too long, he ran the tub. He'd rarely allowed himself the luxury of a long hot soak. Before Arkham, if he'd had the time for such an indulgence, he'd usually spent it working out or extending his patrol. And at Arkham, even long showers could not be taken for granted, unless one preferred them ice-cold with minimal water pressure. It had taken him nearly three months to determine the optimal time of day to take his and avoid such problems.

Nearly an hour later, he emerged, feeling a bit more human. This wasn't so bad. It was going to be difficult making the transition back to normal life, but if he'd adjusted to living in a monastery in Nepal and later, in a rundown apartment in Sao Paulo, he could do this.
The best place to start, he surmised, was to catch up on current events. While Dick hadn't yet restored the Crays in the cave, there was still the computer in the study. He spent nearly two hours reading various newspapers online before he realized that he needed to get ready for bed before they turned the lights out.

It wasn't until he was at the top of the stairs that he remembered that there was no "they". Of all the crazy, stupid… he punched the wall hard enough to knock the portrait of his parents askew. Horrified, he straightened it. This had been the last picture they'd taken together, nearly a month before that night. And, Bruce remembered with a pang, it would have been a picture of the three of them, had he not stubbornly refused to sit for it. His father had tried persuasion, then compulsion, but he'd had none of it. Dragged in front of the backdrop, eight-year-old Bruce had sulked, fidgeted, and made faces, until finally, and with some persuasion from his mother, Thomas Wayne had relented. "There'll be other photos," Martha had said. Except that there hadn't been.

Miserably, Bruce pushed open the door to his bedroom. It was exactly the way he remembered it, down to the folded quilt at the foot of the bed and the robe draped over the wooden desk chair. It didn't take him long to get ready for bed, and, despite it only being a little bit after nine, he was tired.

Sleep refused to come, though. Try as he might, he couldn't get comfortable. The mattress was too firm, the pillows too soft, the manor too quiet. This from a man who once slept on a concrete ledge, sixty stories up, he thought with disgust. He closed his eyes and tried a relaxation technique. He tried it again. He tried a different technique. Finally, he gave up and padded downstairs to the study. If he couldn't sleep upstairs…

He hadn't intended to go down to the Cave tonight, but the truth was he'd slept more nights there than he had in the master bedroom. In some ways, the world beneath the manor had been more of a home to him.

He was glad to discover that Dick hadn't changed the combination code on the clock. The door opened as it always had, and a whoosh of cool dank air surged forward to envelop him. He headed down the stairs. The Batmobile bays were empty. Dick must have moved the cars to the satellite Caves. Bruce sighed. Then he summoned the elevator and took it down to the command center.

Not that there was anything down there to command, of course. He hadn't realized how vast the area was without the Crays taking up space. Now, their empty bays gaped at him. He'd need to see if Dick could move the machines from one of the satellite caves over here. For what purpose? He isn't using this base of operations. Do you really need to divert them here? He shook his head. Batman needed the Crays. Bruce's computer needs could be more than met with the PC in the study.

He glanced over to his right, where the medical bay was located, and froze. Someone had gone to the trouble to make up a cot here, too. Don't jump to conclusions, he told himself. It could have been like this when you left. He doubted it, though. When he moved closer to the cot, he made out a note propped against the pillow:

Thought you might be more comfortable, down here. Power's been restored, if you want coffee in the morning.

Bruce smiled faintly. He didn't deserve his family. He lay down on the cot. Much better. Except that he wasn't at all sleepy, now. It figured. The relaxation techniques hadn't helped before. Perhaps, reading might. That would mean another trip upstairs, to the library, this time. Bruce thought about that. After a moment, he got up and headed, once more, for the elevator.

He'd forgotten how many books he had in that room. Had he read them all? His eyes panned the
shelves carefully, moving up and down along one bookcase, then past the casement window to the
next section, then… then they snapped back. Bruce stared in disbelief.

There was a light on in one of the outbuildings.

"Sorry, Bruce," Oracle's voice replied. "I've checked it out. I'm not detecting any intruder on the
premises."

Bruce's eyes narrowed. "Are you positive? You know that the security devices I have here are—"

"Good, but not good enough to keep me out." The computerized mask fell away. Barbara grinned.
"Dick gave me the codes to tap into your systems after Akins outed you. It was the easiest way to
make sure the manor would still be standing when you got back. Nice robe, by the way. Italian?"

"Never mind that," Bruce said with a frown. "What about the light in the groundskeeper's cottage?"

Barbara shrugged. "You know that Dick got in a bunch of friends to help tidy the house and
grounds, after the hearing. Maybe somebody went in there for something and forgot to close up."

"Or someone might be shielded from your scanners."

"I guess." Her voice was dubious. "I could contact the police… see if Montoya can send someone to
check it out for you."

Yes. And when it turns out to be a false alarm, we can all have ourselves a laugh or two at my
expense. "That won't be necessary, Barbara," he said abruptly. "I'll look into it on my own."

Barbara leaned closer. "Are you sure, Bruce? I mean, if you're right and it's really something,
then…"

"Then we'll discover whether I still remember my hand-to-hand combat skills. Bruce out."

Barbara switched off the interface and hit the first number on her speed-dial. "He'll probably be there
in a minute. No, all he saw was the light. Good luck."

It had taken years before Cassandra Cain had finally realized that being Batgirl was more than
atoning for a crime committed when she had been too young to fully appreciate what she was doing.
It was more than making a difference. It was even more than making sure that justice was served.
No, what she had never dared to tell another living soul, was that being Batgirl was fun.

Tonight, she had interrupted the Ghost Dragons, as they were unloading a shipment from a docked
cargo ship. It had come in under cover of darkness and, according to Oracle, cloaked from the Coast
Guard's radar systems. Whatever it was carrying had to be valuable… and illegal.

She wasn't thinking about that now. Instead, she was dancing. Gracefully, she leaped high into the
air her feet moving apart in a split-kick, which left two of her attackers staggering. Without a break in
momentum, she dropped down and rolled forward, evading another young Dragon's swipe. She
swept his legs out from under him, surged up and administered a nerve strike to the next assailant.

She loved this. Every move, every counter was precisely timed and planned. And yet, there was a
certain unpredictability to the ballet which intrigued her. True, she could read her opponents' body
language to determine how best to counter their attacks. There was still the instant of anticipation, as
she waited to see what move they would try next. Sometimes, she even tried to guess, and nearly
laughed if her prediction was accurate.

One of the Ghost Dragons was charging her from behind. She waited until he was too committed to change course before she leaped to one side. Then, she seized his arm, half-turned and neatly flipped him over her shoulder and into the side of one of the containers. It must not have been properly sealed, because it opened, spilling its contents to the dock. Cass blinked. Ice chips? They'd been carrying ice chips?

"Mung caa caa!" One young woman shouted angrily in Cantonese. Although Cass didn't understand the language, the snarling tone spoke volumes.

Most of the gang dropped to their knees and began pawing at the chips. Now why, Cass wondered, would they do that? She could think about that in a moment. There were still two of them left standing, but they were moving like seasoned fighters—less anger, more purpose. One suddenly whipped a small sphere at her.

She evaded it, of course. But suddenly, there was a loud bang and a flash of light. Startled, Cass cried out. Blind and deaf. She'd gotten careless. Suppressing a groan of disgust, she held herself very still, probing. Going by the vibrations she was picking up from the pier, her targets should be…

She ruthlessly suppressed a wave of dizziness. Quickly, smoothly, she hurled two batarangs. She didn't hear them connect, but she felt the intensity of the vibrations change. She flung two more and was gratified when the quivering of the planks told her that her targets were moving away. In fact, from what she could tell, the rest of the gang was clearing out too.

A sudden instinct made her duck. Something was whistling toward her. All at once, she sensed another presence standing barely a foot away. But she had felt no footsteps! How was that possible?

"…DOWN!" Someone said, loud enough for even her recovering ears to pick up. There was a CRA-A-ACK, and the whistling object went flying in the opposite direction. Even in her current state, she could hear a loud hissing as a cloud of steam began to rise.

Through the spots in front of her eyes, she saw a mass of bright orange and she smelled smoke. Whoever this person was, he obviously hadn't planned this well. "You…" She struggled to keep her anger under control. Nobody was screaming. That meant that the incendiary probably hadn't hit anyone on its way into the ice chips.

"No nee… than' me… 't-girl." Her hearing was coming back. "Par'ners gotta loo' ou' for each other."

What? Her partner? She'd never met this person before in her life! She was about to open her mouth to say so when the slight figure near her side giggled. "Later!" he sang out. And then, quite suddenly, she was alone. The Ghost Dragons had fled, and her unknown 'partner' had vanished as well. She hadn't even heard him leave.

Cass waited for more of her vision to return before she moved forward to inspect the open container. Her dizziness was fading as her hearing came back. She bent down for a closer look. That was strange. In the puddles of melted ice, there were some chips which seemed to be completely unaffected. She stooped to pick up a few. As she examined them, she inhaled sharply.

"Oracle. You there?" She waited for the acknowledgement. "Reporting. Ghost dragons are gone. The shipment was… diamonds. Hidden in ice."

There was a moment's pause. Then, "I'll notify the authorities. Good work, Batgirl." It took another moment for Oracle to realize that the channel was still open. "Batgirl? Is there anything else?"
"Yes. I had… help."

With a sense of satisfaction, Dick turned a subdued Jervis Tetch over to a pair of grim-faced GCPD officers. Earlier today, The Mad Hatter had stolen onto the grounds of a local elementary school and abducted seven-year-old Alicia Dodgson. Finding Hatter had been the easy part. Getting him to reveal where he'd hidden the girl had taken Nightwing nearly three hours. Mostly spent staying out of sight until Tetch was convinced that the vigilante was no longer tailing him.

"We'll get her back to her parents," Officer Sook said. "They're probably frantic."

Nightwing nodded. He looked down at the blonde girl. "You're going to be alright?" he asked with a smile.

She nodded gravely and put the tip of one of her braids into her mouth.

"Don't do that," he said absently.

She pulled it out with a guilty start.

The vigilante grinned. "Well, I guess I'm off then. Stay safe."

He was only a few blocks away from Selina's apartment. Normally, he wouldn't have bothered her on her night off, but he'd been expecting her at the manor today. He hoped that everything was alright with her.

He wasn't that surprised to find her windows dark. It was nearly three o'clock in the morning, a time when even a costumed vigilante might turn in, if the night was slow. But taped to the outside window sill, there was a small purple envelope. Curious, Nightwing swung over and picked it up. His name was inscribed on it in black ink. He tore it open carefully and extracted a piece of matching notepaper.

Nightwing, he read slowly, I'm putting you on the spot by sending this to you instead of to Bruce. I don't know how to do this without hurting him, and the last thing I want to do is that, especially now. There are some things going on with me that I have to work through, and I don't know how long it'll take me. If you try to find me, you probably will eventually. Please don't. Give me the time I need.

I know that leaves you shorthanded. If you haven't already heard this from him, Tim will be back later this week, at least until the new term starts at SFU.

Tell Bruce (here, she had written and scribbled out several words) I still love him and I wish I'd been there today. It's not fair of me to ask him to wait when I can't tell him how long he might have to, so I won't. I guess that's everything. She'd crossed out the next bit, but not so thoroughly as to obliterate it: I do love him, Dick. I just wish I knew that was enough.

Dick closed his eyes. Bruce did not need this now.

Bruce hurriedly pulled on his shoes. It occurred to him after he'd started walking the quarter-mile to the cottage that he might have gotten dressed first. He debated turning back, but decided against it. In all likelihood, Barbara was right, and someone had just forgotten to switch off a light. And if there was actually somebody out there, Bruce mused, the odds of it being a hostile were low. If it was an old foe out to settle a score, chances were they'd either have been clever enough not to announce their presence or daring enough to have tried breaking into the manor proper. Even more likely, they would have been in the house already this afternoon, waiting for him to arrive.
If it wasn't a hostile, though, Bruce wondered who it could be. Bristol wasn't the sort of neighborhood where transients passed often. And the odds of one of them homing in on his property and breaking into one of the outbuildings... Something didn't add up.

At least, not until he saw a familiar Volvo parked next to the cottage. He couldn't believe it. Steady. Assume nothing. He may have been intercepted leaving the grounds. It could be a hostage situation. As he cautiously approached the cottage door, however, it swung open and a familiar figure stepped out.

"Jim?" A mix of incredulity, relief, and irritation rose within him. "What are you...?"

The former police commissioner chuckled. "I was wondering when you'd come this way." He held up a legal-sized white envelope. "Here. This will explain. You may as well come inside where you can read it."

Bruce accepted the envelope and stepped, bemused, into the cottage.

"I'll be in the back," Jim gestured toward one of the doors at the far wall of the main room. "Take your time."

Bruce looked around. This wasn't the furniture he'd moved in here when he'd rebuilt after the No Man's Land. It did, however, look suspiciously like the sofa and chairs that had graced Jim's former apartment.

The envelope was unsealed and contained a thin sheaf of pages, stapled together. Bruce's eyebrows shot up. This was a lease agreement. Now he knew where Jim had managed to find an affordable place in Bristol. How much was Dick charging him? He skimmed down. Well, five hundred was beyond reasonable for this area, but... He frowned and reread the line. No. He'd missed a decimal point. Dick wasn't charging five hundred dollars. He was charging five. Bruce shook his head.

He got up and went through the door that Jim had exited moments ago.

"Finished already?"

Bruce took a deep breath. "It's not that I don't appreciate the thought," he said quietly, "but I can't let you do this."

"You're not letting me do anything," Jim pointed out. "This was my idea." He held up a hand. "Barbara worries about me more than she should. You know what that's like. I'm not quite ready for some seniors' residence." He smiled placatingly. "Look. I can meddle in their lives or I can meddle in yours. I thought you'd demonstrate your customary nobility and make the sacrifice."

"Jim..."

The older man shook his head. "I've been stubborn a lot longer than you've been," he reminded Bruce. "Listen. If this doesn't work out, then we don't have to renew the lease. Meanwhile, I've paid for a year, up front, and I mean to get my money's worth. You want your privacy? I'll respect it. You want to pretend I'm not around? Shouldn't be too hard. I'm willing to bet that you didn't even remember this cottage was here until you saw my light. But if—no, don't turn around, Bruce. Look at me. Listen to what I'm saying. I have been through something similar to what you're going through now. Maybe I can help you with it. Maybe that's the worst idea in the world, and the last thing you want to do is rehash things with me. That's your call; I won't push. But if I can help, I will. And if I can't," he smiled wearily, "I still think Barbara won't mother-hen me as much if she knows you're around in case of emergency."
This had to be Jim's revenge for all the times that Batman had left him hanging in mid-sentence, unable to get the last word in. Bruce tried to think of some argument against the whole idea, but his mind was blank. It occurred to him that, really, he didn't have a good reason to refuse, only a series of excuses. Weak ones. And there was one point that Jim hadn't brought up: a lease was a binding contract, and one that Bruce would likely need a lawyer's help to break. Bruce looked at the agreement again. Rachel Green's work. His own attorney had gone behind his back to…

Jim watched the interplay of emotions. "Bruce?"

Bruce exhaled. "Mind if I just… sit in the other room for a minute?"

"Take your time. You want anything?"

"No."

Bruce shut the door behind him but the walls were thin. Jim heard the sofa creak as Bruce sat down. A few minutes later, when it creaked again, Jim was ready.

"You don't have to," Bruce said when it was obvious that Jim was going to walk with him.

"I know. I could just use some fresh air."

The two men walked the quarter mile in silence. Bruce pressed down on the door handle. "Thanks," he said finally. "I can manage from here."

Jim nodded. "I meant it. I won't come by uninvited. But you have my cell phone number. Use it. I don't care how late it is—if I don't want to take calls, I'll turn it off. Got it?"

Bruce ducked his head once. "Good night, Jim."

"And to you."

Bruce waited until he was inside and Jim was out of earshot before he allowed himself to smile. "It is, now," he admitted. He yawned, stretched, and without thinking, headed upstairs for the bedroom. He was asleep almost the instant his head hit the pillow.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please fasten your seatbelts. We will be landing at Augusta Airport in approximately fifteen minutes."

Selina looked at the sleeping bundle in the car seat next to her. "Almost there, baby," she whispered. "And then, it's just about another half hour to Wiscasset."
Chapter Summary

Bruce realizes that having a neighbor isn't such a bad thing. He also finds out that there's a difference between being released from Arkham and being free. Meanwhile, Dick has a few tensions he needs to unbottle...

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Debbie and Kathy for the beta! Thanks to Sara for being a sounding board!

A/N: Doctor Doom appeared in Detective Comics 158, "The Thousand and One Trophies of Batman". This is not the Marvel character. Diamond appeared in Detective Comics 186, "The Flying Batcave". Thomas Wayne's Batman costume is from Detective Comics 235, "The First Batman". Moon rocks are from Bizarro Comics 2001, "Inside the Batcave".


How long does it take
How long will it last
Till it feels like my whole world's not torn in half
If [I] remember what [I was]
Remember what [I] had
It won't be that hard to get it back
-Amanda Wilkinson, Steve Wilkinson and Shaye Smith, "The Art of Letting Go"

Chapter 2: Torn In Half

When Jim woke up the next morning, he still wasn't sure how well the previous night had gone. True, Bruce hadn't lost his temper, tried to order him off the property, or threatened to contest the lease agreement. But to say that Bruce had been delighted by the turn of events was pushing things. Bruce disliked being manipulated, and he didn't always take kindly to the assistance of others. No, Jim reflected, this could go either way. And should Bruce opt to ignore his new tenant, Jim admitted to himself that it would be difficult for him to keep his word not to interfere.
The former police commissioner sighed. Bruce knew where things stood now; the next step was up to him. Meanwhile, Jim thought as he stood up, he wasn't going to sit around all day waiting for a knock on the door. He reached for his cane. It was a beautiful day for a walk around the grounds.

He was pleasantly surprised to see Bruce coming up the walk as he opened the front door. The younger man seemed more apprehensive than he had been the night before. Interesting—especially when one considered that, last night, Bruce hadn't had any idea whom he would encounter. Then again, perhaps it wasn't so surprising. Batman kept his friends at arm's length. When it came to his enemies? That was when he got up close and personal.

Jim took a deep breath. "Good morning, Bruce."

Bruce didn't respond immediately. He just stopped, roughly three feet away, and stood silently.

Jim waited. "Is there... something I can help you with?"

Bruce nodded. "Living here," he said hesitantly, "is your idea, correct? There was no... You weren't... pressured?"

"Just the opposite," Jim smiled. "I had to do some pretty fast talking to convince Dick."

Bruce closed his eyes and nodded again. When he opened them once more, Jim could see a resolution that hadn't been there a moment ago. "Alright," he said firmly. He reached into his pocket. "This is the key to the patio door. This one is for the kitchen. I've reset the front door code to Barbara's birthday-month first, and then day." He took a deep breath. "I do think that this is unnecessary. But, if I'm wrong, then it would be... foolish for you not to have access to the house if there was a situation where your presence might be..."

"Appreciated?" Jim asked.

Bruce shook his head. "Required." Seeing Jim's frown, Bruce clarified. "I do appreciate your being here."

"Even though it's not needed?"

Bruce started to respond before he registered the teasing note in his old friend's voice. He turned away, though not before his lips pulled into a cautious smile. "I suppose," he ventured, "it would be helpful if I were to give you a tour of the estate. The manor, in particular, can be confusing at times."

Jim nodded to himself, satisfied. He took a few steps forward. "Lead on."

"We should start with the house," Bruce said, as he slid open the patio doors. "It's heading into the hottest part of the day, so it's better to be indoors."


"You'll have to tell me if I'm walking too fast," Bruce added. "Alfred usually does—did—this kind of thing." He shied away as Jim tried to put a hand on his shoulder. "It would be better if you avoided that," he said flatly. "I need to deal with things on my own."

Jim stifled a retort. "Okay."

Bruce was already moving. "I know you've seen the study," he said. "We'll skip it for now. The dining room is this way. Through here is the kitchen." He paused. "That path you can see out the
window runs past the side of your cottage. If you follow it further, it will lead you to the kitchen gardens. I haven't looked in on those yet," he added, "but if you wanted to... I remember during the No Man's Land that you grew some vegetables."

"I might just take you up on that offer," Jim said, "even if it's a bit late in the year to start planting. I may need a bit of help at the outset, though. My back," he added apologetically, "isn't what it was."

Bruce smiled. "That can be arranged." He opened up another door to reveal a flight of stairs. "It's mostly storage down here. Wine cellars, meat freezers," he stopped, embarrassed. "I probably haven't been down there since I was a child," he admitted.

"Ah," Jim said sagely. "So that isn't the access to that cave I've heard Dick mention a few times." His lips twitched.

Bruce blinked. "No." He took a deep breath. "I can show you where that is, if you'd like."

Jim raised an eyebrow. Bruce's tone was almost nonchalant, but the undercurrent of tension was unmistakable. "Well," Jim admitted, "I am curious. I won't deny that. But I wouldn't want to intrude if..."

"No," Bruce interrupted. "It's fine. I... if you choose to come over here, that's probably the first place you should look." He smiled guardedly. "Actually, I think I'd rather you did see it."

"Ah." Without another word, Jim followed him to the study and watched as Bruce turned the hands on the grandfather clock to 8:25. He held an appreciative silence as Bruce led him down a flight of stairs, and showed him the hangars for the 'copter and plane. Then they took the elevator down one level to the trophy room.

"I remember that one," he said softly, as his gaze fell on an Egyptian sarcophagus. "Doctor Doom?"

Bruce nodded. "That was how many years ago?"

"Too many," Jim said. "Now what in the...?" He chuckled softly. "'Parachutes used to escape from Bat-Cave', eh?" he said, indicating the sign. "Don't tell me. That was when Diamond blackmailed you into not setting foot in Gotham for a week..."

"I kept my end of the bargain," Bruce pointed out, "even if it did require a certain amount of improvisation to do it."

"A flying cave?"

Bruce released an exaggerated sigh. "Technically it was a state-of-the-art lab in a hovercraft. Dick had another name for it."

"And he made the sign, I take it?"

Bruce didn't reply, but a small smile played on his lips. "I think that this suit might have been my original inspiration," he said, pointing to a glass display case. "Although I'd forgotten about it until years later, when it turned up in a trunk in the attic. My father wore it to a costume party one night."

Jim nodded. "Thank you," he said simply. "I'm honored that you're showing me... this."

Bruce shook his head. "If you're willing to become part of... all of this, I've no objections," he said. "Quite the contrary, in fact." He met Jim's gaze cautiously. This time, he didn't flinch when the older man placed a steadying hand on his shoulder. "There's a bit more to see," Bruce said, walking
forward briskly. His tension was gone. "These moon rocks..."

"So, that's how it stands," Dick said. "We know that the Ghost Dragons are involved in diamond smuggling. My first thought was conflict diamonds, but so far, there's been nothing to link the 'Dragons with UNITA or any of the other insurgency movements that we typically hear about in connection with that kind of thing."

"Yakuza?" Black Canary asked.

"Maybe," Dick frowned. "But the 'Dragons originate from Hong Kong, not Japan. That usually means the Triads. Now, if they're converting their cash assets to diamonds..."

Green Arrow nodded. "Money laundering concerns aside, stones are a better investment than cash, these days." He poured another cup of coffee and leaned back against the sofa cushions.

"Normally," Dick said, "I wouldn't be asking this, but with Selina away and Roy on a League mission-"

Dinah shook her head. "No problem. I'm the one who sent him on that mission. We're here."

"Talk to Batgirl," Dick said seriously. "She fought them last night. I've heard her report, but she might have some other details."

"We will. Is Babs upstairs? I just want to say, 'hi'."

Dick nodded. "She's been up there all afternoon."

"I'll wait down here," Ollie said. "Hurry back, Pretty Bird."

Once Dinah left, Ollie took a deep breath. "How's Bruce doing?"

Dick started to collect the empty cake plates. "Do you really care?" He asked quietly.

The archer's face reddened, though it was hard to tell whether it was from anger or embarrassment. "What the hell kind of question is that?"

Dick stacked the Corelle plates noisily, one atop the other. Then he reached for the cutlery and slammed each piece, one at a time, on the topmost plate. "I'm curious, Oliver." He carried the plates into the kitchen and dropped them into the sink with a clatter. "You were aware of what happened. I know for a fact that Roy told you about it within a week of the arrest. And in all this time, you haven't set foot in Gotham. You haven't asked after him. Now that he's out, you're suddenly Mr. Concerned?"

Ollie's expression hardened. "I don't think I care for your tone, Dick. Let me ask you, do you honestly believe he would have wanted me to see him like that?"

"No," Dick admitted. "He wouldn't have. And you wouldn't have gotten in anyway. I'm not really upset that you didn't try. But in two years, this is the first time you've ever shown an interest."

"This may come as a shock to you," Ollie drawled, "but I do talk to Roy and Dinah on occasion. They gave me updates. You and I both know that he wouldn't have liked the idea of me encroaching on his turf after..." his voice trailed off. "Well... you know why he quit the League."

"Yeah," Dick snarled. "Because the people he thought he could count on turned around and stabbed him in the back. Tell, me Ollie: did it get any easier the second time?"
Oliver Queen's mouth dropped open. "Why, you little punk..." he said softly, but with venom. He lunged forward, fist upraised.

Dick was ready for him. The next thing Ollie knew, he was on the floor, and Dick was twisting his arms behind his back.

"You care to try that again?" he asked. "C'mon, Ollie. Anytime you want to. It won't change the fact that when people need you, you either shove them away or you cut and run."

"Look who's talking!" Ollie snapped. "Listen, 'Pot! You want to say Bruce needed you? Fine. Dandy! But while you were being a good little boy and protecting Gotham, the rest of us were trying to save the damned universe!" He struggled to break loose, but Dick's hold was firm. "Everyone knows you're one of the best people to have on hand in a crisis. If Bruce couldn't be there, you were our next best hope." He twisted his head back as far as he was able, and glared at his captor. "Well, this time, you weren't around, and it cost Kon his life. I almost lost Roy and Mia—would have, if Dinah hadn't gotten there in time to shriek Alexander Luthor's blaster to high-tech shards. As it was, they were both in ICU for weeks. Maybe if you'd bothered to show up, you would've concocted a better plan, but you didn't. So we did what we could."

"And I almost watched two of the people I care for the most die in front of me. And you know something, Dick? That kind of risk comes with the territory. So do sacrifices for the greater good. Which don't include you bat-brats wimping out and staying in your own little corner of the globe. And Bruce would have told you the same thing!"

"Yeah? Well with Bruce, it wasn't almost! You know something, Ollie?" Abruptly, Dick released him. "You pegged it." He gave a quick, bitter laugh. "That's exactly what Bruce would've told me. But here's the thing. If I'd been in the kind of bind he was in, he would've dropped everything and stood by me. Which is more than you did for him, when you could've spoken out at the Watchtower after what happened with Dr. Light. Not to mention," he added acidly, "it's more than you ever did for Roy when he needed you."

Ollie stood up, rubbing his wrists. "Is that so? Well, if you and Bruce were Opie and Andy, then where was Daddy of the Year when Joker shot you? Or when your wedding to Starfire turned out to be a real blast? How about after you joined the mob, Renegade?" He blocked Dick's swing and countered with one of his own. Dick grabbed his wrist. The two men glowered at each other. "Stop acting so self-righteous, Richard. Or should I say, 'Dick'? People screw up. You. Me. Him. If I had my life to live over, maybe I'd do a few things differently—but I don't. And if you're expecting me to start weeping and wailing about how horrible I was for not being there for you and yours, when you basically left us high and dry? It won't happen. I made my choices and I'll stand by them."

Dick shook his head. "You know what? You're right." He saw the fury in Ollie's eyes give way to shock. "You're right," he repeated with a slight smile. "You had to make a tough choice and you did. And maybe, if Bruce or I had been in your shoes, we would have even made the same one. But once the... crisis was over, we would have touched base to make sure that everything worked out; and if it hadn't... we would have been there. Even if it was too little, too late. We would have done something."

"Yeah? What?"

"I don't know," Dick admitted. "But I don't think it would have involved ignoring you for two years. And if I'm wrong, and it had, I do know this: we wouldn't have shrugged off your reproaches with a 'them's the breaks'. Seriously, Queen, that was cold." He shook his head. "I'm going up to check on Babs. Try to be gone when I get back."

He pulled the door open to reveal Dinah, her hand extended as though she was reaching for the
"Is everything okay?" she asked uncertainly.

Oliver nodded. "We're fine. I was just waiting for you, Pretty Bird. Let's go get some air." He forced a smile. "Be seeing you, Dick."

"Later, Queen," Dick said, just as coolly. "Stay classy."

He waited until he knew that they were gone, and until he was sure that he had a handle on his temper. Then he went up to Barbara.

"They're off?" Barbara asked without turning around.

"Just a minute ago." He sighed. "Was it your idea to bring Ollie in?"

Barbara's ponytail swung back and forth as she shook her head. "I called Dinah. She asked if he could tag along." She turned her chair slowly. "Seems like it's been hard for them to find time together, what with one or the other always running off to take care of business."

"Whoa." Dick held his hands up. "Was that a dig? It sounded like a dig." He flashed a smile. "I'm not in the doghouse again, am I?"

Barbara sighed. "Not you, no. I'm sorry. Just... you know I was supposed to meet Daddy for lunch." When Dick nodded, she shut her eyes, lifted her glasses, and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "He didn't show up. After I'd been waiting nearly a half-hour, I called him. I thought..." She shook her head. "I know you weren't in Gotham when it happened. You probably heard anyhow, but just in case Bruce never told you... Daddy had a heart attack a few years ago. Call me an alarmist, but when I didn't hear from him, that was the first thing going through my mind." She opened her eyes. "He was down in the cave with Bruce. Perfectly fine. He'd just lost track of the time."

Dick pulled up a chair next to her. "Well, at least he was okay."

"I know. And this is why he's up in Bristol, anyway-so Bruce has someone." She sighed. "The lunch date just totally slipped his mind. I think he was more upset about it than I was. Compared to everything else we deal with in a typical week, a missed rendezvous isn't all that serious, but still... I don't see him that often. And," she waved a hand at the multiple visual arrays that surrounded her, "I can't always drop everything. That was supposed to be our time, damn it." She leaned forward as she felt Dick's hands lightly grip her upper arms. "I'm not really angry," she said, gazing down at her lap. "But I was looking forward to it."

"I understand."

She nodded. Then her eyes snapped up and bored, full-force, into his. "We're still on for tonight, right? Dinner, and then a stroll through the botanical gardens?"

Dick grinned. "You know it. Unless..." He frowned. "Pam's still in custody, right?"

Barbara rolled backward and, without looking, tapped a button on her console. She turned around. Dick heard her typing a short, quick staccato on the keyboard. "There's the visual," she said. "Doesn't look like Blackgate agrees with her," she added a trifle sadly. "At Arkham, they always let her keep one plant in the cell."

"Blackgate deals with the sane ones," Dick pointed out with a sigh. "Arkham's inmates spook them.
The prison administration doesn't want trouble so they crack down on 'em harder. It stinks, but they're really not equipped to deal with her." He motioned to Barbara to kill the display. "I'm just glad Bruce isn't there, too."

"Uh-huh." Barbara was silent for a moment. "So," she said, facing him again, "I get you all to myself tonight."

Dick smiled. "That's what was on your mind," he said with a note of triumph.

"Well," she said, flushing, "after getting stood up by my own dad... I mean..." She took a deep breath. "I know that just because Bruce is out now, doesn't mean you're going to stop seeing him; but it's just..." She exhaled. "I don't want you to have to choose between Bruce and me," she began, "but by the same token, I don't want to worry that if you did have to choose..." She shook her head. "I'm being selfish, aren't I?"

"No," Dick said gently. "You're being honest. And you're right. The last two years haven't been easy for any of us." His expression turned serious. "I think we both know that Bruce is still going to be a major part of our lives."

"Well, of course," Barbara interrupted.

"But," Dick continued, "that doesn't mean that he's going to be running our lives. Right now, I'm playing things by ear, letting him settle in. If he calls and wants me to go over, assuming we don't already have plans, I will. Meanwhile, for the next little while, I'll use the phone. If he doesn't pick up... just do me a favor, and make sure your dad's seen him?" He grinned. "If Bruce isn't in the mood to talk, he'll usually let it go to voicemail."

"And after 'the next little while'?"

"To be honest, I'm not thinking that far ahead at the moment. Probably, I'll stop by and see him before or after patrol. Or we'll both go up together and visit with your father, too. But my nights off?" He grinned. "You get first crack at them."

Barbara smiled back. A signal somewhere overhead started beeping. She sighed. "JSA. I really need to take this one."

"Go ahead," Dick said, as she turned back to the monitor array. "I'm going to get a workout in and shower before we head out. See you downstairs."

"A kid?" Dinah asked, incredulous.

Cassandra nodded. "Voice was... too light to be adult. The way the deck vibrated, I think he weighed maybe..." she frowned. "Less than I do. Maybe..." she crossed over to the rack where she kept her free weights. She lifted one ten-pound dumbbell. "Eight of these. Maybe nine. Not more. And I think," she raised her other hand to shoulder height and held it, palm downward, "this high."

"You said 'he'," Oliver pointed out. "If the voice was light, couldn't it have been a girl?"

"Maybe," Cassandra said. "But I don't think so."

"Mind clueing me in as to why?"

Cass lifted an eyebrow. "He came in, made a mess, and acted like I should be... pleased to clean up." She shrugged. "I... haven't met any women who would think that way."
Dinah burst out laughing. Ollie winced.

"Did you have any trouble getting here?" Alex asked the next day.

Bruce sat down on the couch with a sigh. "Not as such. Though my business with the DMV took longer than anticipated."

Alex smiled. "Those lines can be long, I know. Do you have to take the test over?"

"Had the license expired more than three years ago, it would be a requirement," Bruce said, shaking his head. "Thankfully, it's been under six months."

"And you're settling in alright?"

"Yes," Bruce stated quickly.

Alex took a deep breath. "Good." He leaned forward in his chair and steepled his fingers. "Mr. Wayne," he began, "Bruce. Before we pick up from where we left off, there are a few formalities we need to take care of. I figured we'd spend this first session dealing with those, and then start fresh, next time." He waited for Bruce's acknowledgement. "For instance," he continued, "you do understand that going back to your home is a significant adjustment? Under normal circumstances, you would have transitioned to a halfway house first-

"We've been over that before," Bruce interrupted. "The risk that my presence would pose to the other residents-not to mention to the staff-is unacceptable. At least, the manor security systems are properly equipped to deal with an intruder."

"I concur," Alex said calmly. "So did the judge. However, I have to say that I'm extremely concerned about your living essentially alone, on seven hundred fifty acres, give or take." When Bruce looked up, the psychiatrist shrugged. "I did my research. In any case, I can tell you now that safety concerns did have a role in securing your release when it did." His eyes crinkled at the corners, though his voice stayed serious. "Technically speaking, especially since you didn't go the halfway house route, you wouldn't have been able to leave the Saint Swithin Psych ward until we could locate a suitable companion."

"Companion." Bruce's brow furrowed. "You mean... a nurse?"

"In most circumstances, yes," Alex nodded. "Everything would have had to have been arranged prior to your release, or there might well have been no release. However, in your specific case, the judge had to consider both your security, and that of the hospital. The Saint Swithin's administration did voice their concerns about your presence. I can tell you that now." He smiled. "Also, you have an aggressive lawyer in your court. That helped. However, even though ideally, prior to the hearing the Gotham Mental Health Authority should have made arrangements for a live-in companion to be assigned to you, well, bureaucracy being what it is -"

Bruce took a deep breath. He knew that one of the terms of his release was compliance with Alex's instructions, but surely... "I'd prefer not to deal with outsiders. Is there no way to avoid it?" That was all he needed: one more interfering interloper. It wasn't so much that he craved isolation-far from it-but he valued his privacy. He didn't want a stranger dogging his heels, and he definitely didn't want to allow said stranger access to the areas of the manor where he felt most at ease. Inviting Jim into his world was one thing, but... but... there was an idea... "Does the companion need to be an outsider?"

he asked.

Alex thought for a moment. "Not really. It needs to be someone acceptable to the GMHA, of course."
And it would have to be someone able to be with you twenty-four-seven, for a period of sixty to ninety days. Usually, that would mean a trained nurse, but it's not essential.

Bruce breathed in again. "Could it mean a retired police commissioner?"

Alex smiled. "I think we can explore that possibility." He thought for a moment. "Before we meet again, next week, discuss it with him." He rummaged in his desk and pulled out a thin booklet. "Make sure that he reads this over carefully. It outlines the eligibility criteria, duties, and responsibilities. If he qualifies, and if he's willing, I'll need to set up an interview and arrange the necessary approvals, but I don't perceive a problem. If he isn't willing, then we will need to explore other avenues."

Bruce nodded.

"Okay. We'll consider that subject conditionally resolved. The next thing I need to bring up with you isn't a requirement, so much as a strong recommendation. It's proven therapeutic for many people in your circumstances and I would encourage you to consider..."

"Fish?" Dick wasn't sure that he was hearing correctly. "He wants you to keep fish?"

Bruce sighed. "If this conversation is meant to encourage me to maintain open lines of communication, it's failing miserably," he stated dryly.

"Sorry," Dick said, instantly contrite. "Still..." He broke off, hearing Bruce's irritation, loud and clear, through the telephone. "Okay, so... fish. Well, at least none of our... friends-at-large has any affinity for using them as an MO. Not like birds, or rats, or plants... or mustard."

"Dick," Bruce's voice was pained, "I'd like to believe that even in my current state, I could handle Condiment King!"

"I don't doubt it," Dick said hastily. "Did Alex make any suggestion on what kind you should get?"

"Beyond starting with a lower-maintenance variety, no. Jim vetoed piranha, however."

"Ah. Well, maybe he'll come around. One of my friends in college kept a couple in his room. One or two can't really do that much damage-it's when you've got a whole school of," he listened for a moment. "Okay... um... yeah, putting fifty of them in the swimming pool might be going a little overboard. Well, for starters, are you sure you can get every trace of chlorine out of the pool tiles? Not to mention that fish sometimes jump... and, well, that would cause splashing. Which would make the area around the pool a bit slippery and, you know what? Start with the aquarium. Maybe give Orin a call-he might have some ideas. Okay, it was just a suggestion." He sighed. "Fine, consider it dropped. What else is doing?"

Bruce ignored the question. "Are you working tonight?"

"Yep. Got a practice spar with Cass in about an hour and then, I'm suiting up."

"Ah." Bruce thought for a moment. "Which... suit?" He heard Dick exhale on the other end of the line. "It doesn't disturb me that you've taken to wearing the cowl," he said softly. "You might find it gives you a certain advantage with the criminal element."

"I know," Dick admitted. "But it gives me a certain disadvantage dealing with the GCPD."

For a moment, Bruce frowned in confusion. Then, "Which one of us has the greater disadvantage if
you wear the suit?"

Silence.

"I see," Bruce said after a moment. "Alright. Nightwing patrols tonight. Tomorrow, however, I want you to wear the other suit. Call me before you head downstairs to change, and leave the rest to me."

"Okay," Dick said dubiously. "But you know that if they do send a car up to the manor and you're not there, it's only going to make them more-"

"Dick!" Bruce said sharply. "I'm out of practice, not stupid. Trust me." He sighed. "I know what I'm doing."

This time, the pause seemed to go on longer than it actually did. "I do trust you," Dick said finally. "I always have. Just..." he caught himself. "Nothing. I'll call you tomorrow."

When Dick phoned the following night, Bruce was ready. "It'll be dark in an hour. In seventy-five minutes, I want you in the vicinity of GCPD headquarters. Do not approach unless the signal goes up, but make sure you're spotted. I'll handle the rest." He hung up before Dick could respond.

"Want some company?" Jim asked.

Bruce shook his head. "Not this time." He hesitated. "Thanks for calling Alex. You didn't ha-"

"Enough with the 'didn't have to' already!" Jim said irritably. "If your doctor thinks this is necessary, and you'd prefer me over someone you don't know, I'm fine with it." He smiled then. "I'd be lying if I told you I hadn't suspected something like this might be needed when I suggested settling in here. I though maybe you'd find it easier to ask me if I was already on the grounds."

Bruce smiled back, but then a troubled look came into his eyes. "It's just... I'm not an easy person to know. I hope you won't regret this."

Jim chuckled. "I've regretted a few things before. I doubt one more is really going to make that big of a difference. Anyway, you're not telling me anything I don't already know." He shook his head sadly. "I'm not sure how you missed the obvious clues, but I'm not perfect either. I can cope if you can."

Bruce smiled. "I believe I can manage that." Abruptly, he headed for the front door. "I need to get moving." As Jim started to say something, he held up one hand. "I know. Once the paperwork is approved, I'll... abide by the terms." He sighed. "If I'm supposed to have someone with me 'round the clock, then," his lips twitched. "I trust you'll be able to manage... completing your sentences?"

That prompted a genuine laugh. "Now that's something I'm looking forward to."

Bruce's smile grew wider, then fell away. "I'd just like one night out, by myself, before everything is finalized. Surely that's a reasonable request."

Jim put a hand on his shoulder, shaking his head. "Go on, then. Do what you need to. I'll see you later... or in the morning. Depending."

Bruce nodded and headed for the garage.

Nearly forty minutes later, he was walking through the front entrance of the central branch of the
Gotham City Police Department. The building hadn't changed much, Bruce thought, as he walked through the lobby and approached the front desk.

"Would you please tell Renee Montoya that Bruce Wayne is here to see her?" He asked, making it sound as thought he was keeping an appointment.

The ruse worked. The receptionist made the call, and, a moment later, waved him to a seat. "She'll be with you in a minute."

It was closer to ten minutes before Captain Montoya came downstairs. "Ba-Mr. Wayne!" She greeted him warmly. "This is a surprise. I'm glad you stopped by." She extended her hand. As Bruce moved to shake it, she gave a self-conscious laugh and clapped him on the back with her other hand. "We can talk in my office," she said. "Follow me."

Upstairs, Bruce politely declined a cup of coffee. Renee shrugged and poured one for herself. "It really is good to see you. I'm sorry I couldn't make the hearing," she rolled her eyes. "Paperwork. I still can't believe how much more of it there is, these days."

Bruce nodded understanding. "You never told me you'd made captain. Congratulations."

She nodded. "I guess it just... never came up. So, what brings you out here?"

Bruce took a deep breath. "I wanted to thank you for your support," he said quietly. "It meant a lot. I wanted you to know."

Montoya tried to hide her surprise. "You're welcome," she managed. "You didn't have to come by in person, just to tell me that, you know. Not that I'm not happy to see you again, but..." Her eyes opened wide. "I... did you want to continue helping us with the cold case files? Or possibly, some of the ones that aren't so cold? Because we're frankly swamped, and I could use your expertise."

"I'd like that," Bruce admitted. "I'm still adjusting to my current situation, Captain, but perhaps in a week or so?"

"Whenever you're ready. And my name's Renee."

He nodded. "In that case, I'm Bruce."

She smiled. "I'll try to remember that, but it's going to take some getting used to."

"I understand."

There was a silence then, which stretched on. After more than a full minute had elapsed, Renee cleared her throat. "Was there anything else? Or can I see you to the lobby?"

Bruce shook his head. "Nothing else, but I can't leave just yet."

"I-I don't understand," Renee said with a frown.

Just then, the office door burst open. "I'm sorry, Captain," a young officer said, stepping in. "We've just spotted Batman in the vicinity, and I was wondering whether you wanted us to send a car out to Bristol, just to be sure that..." He stopped as Bruce twisted about in his chair to meet the policeman's eyes squarely. "Uh, never mind," the young man mumbled. "Sorry to have disturbed you. Have a good night, Mr. Wayne." He exited hastily.

Bruce rose to his feet. "Now, I can leave," he said, satisfied.
Renee winced. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Your people have to consider the possibility. However, *my* people need to operate under optimal conditions. That includes wearing the proper uniform." He waited for her to come around from behind her desk. "I'll make a point of stopping by around this time, for the next few nights. I don't believe it should be necessary after a week or so." He turned the doorknob.

Renee followed him out. "It's not fair."

Bruce smiled sadly. "After all the years you've lived here, Captain, do you honestly expect fairness? We'd like there to be. We try to operate as though there were, but we know better. Have a good night, Renee." He pressed the button to summon the elevator.

"Mr. Wayne?"

Bruce and Renee turned as one, as Commissioner Maggie Sawyer strode briskly toward them. "I didn't know you were in the neighborhood."

Bruce nodded. "I was just leaving."

"Ah." Sawyer nodded. "Then I won't keep you. However, I'd appreciate it if you'd give me a call sometime during the next week. There's something I'd like to go over with you at your convenience."

Bruce's eyes darted to Renee's, but she seemed as mystified as he was.

"I believe that I might be able to come by tomorrow evening, around nine," he considered. It would give him an excuse, as well as cement his alibi.

"Fine. I'll see you then." Her gaze moved on. "Captain, I'll need that report on my desk before you come off shift."

Renee nodded. "I think I mentioned the paperwork?" she commented ruefully to Bruce. To Sawyer, she said only, "I'll finish it up after I see Mr. Wayne downstairs."

The elevator came then, cutting the conversation short.

"So, what are we doing here, again?" Green Arrow asked, as Batman knelt on the pier, evidence kit in hand.

"Well, I'm looking for clues," Batman said, without turning toward his companion. "You're watching my back."

"About yesterday."

Dick sighed. "Ever since Arkham burned down, between patrol, Bruce's medical complications, the hearing, and..." He let his voice trail off. "I've been on a short fuse," he continued evenly. "You lit it."

The archer grunted in acknowledgement. "I've been told I'm good at that. Next time, just let me know when you're looking for a target. I'll set up a bulls-eye and we can take turns firing trick arrows."

Batman glanced up. Ollie was smiling. After a moment, the younger man turned back to his task. "Thanks."
"So. Turn anything up?"

Dick shook his head. "No, and it bothers me. Not so much about the diamonds-I wasn't expecting anything new on that front. The kid."

"We didn't see him, last night," Ollie rumbled. "And I think Batgirl may have spooked the 'Dragons."

"Maybe, but they'll have to make a move sooner or later," Batman said as he ran a scanner over the pier. "Either they'll try to unload the diamonds they got away with the other night, or they'll have to meet a new shipment. Probably both. Damn!"

"What?"

"Nothing. Or at least..." He looked up. "Cass had the presence of mind to take photographs of the area where the kid showed up. We have two clear footprints and... nothing."


Batman sighed. "Meaning that whoever the person is, he didn't approach. There are no tracks leading to or from the site. Now, according to the pictures, there were a bunch of crates stacked over there," he pointed to a section of the dock that was presently vacant. "I guess the person could have climbed up and leaped down-the way the prints looked, he landed heavily... but he'd have had to get a running start to end up in this spot-and he's lucky he didn't break an ankle doing it. Thing is, even if, by some fluke, it worked-which explains why there were no tracks bringing him to this point, there are no tracks to show him leaving the site, either. Basically, our... helper... appeared out of nowhere, got in a good toss, and vanished."

"Sounds like we have a meta on our hands."

Dick nodded. "Sounds like we have someone who thinks that all it takes to be a hero is to pop in and start throwing things. After listening to what Montoya and Batgirl both had to say, it doesn't sound like this person has had anything in the way of formal training. He seems to be making it up as he goes along." He grimaced. "Much as it's a good thing to think on your feet, that's just the kind of inexperience that can get a guy killed."

"Not if you teach me."

Both men whirled as one, startled to see a slight figure in a baseball uniform standing behind them.

"Not if you give me a chance."
3. Hurting

Chapter Summary

Dick doesn't want a new partner, particularly not an untrained kid who won't take no for an answer! Meanwhile, Maggie has a proposition for Bruce. And Bruce finds out exactly what empowering Jim to keep an eye on him is going to entail...

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie and Aiyokusama for the beta. Thanks to Sara for brainstorming. "It Gets Better" written by Jo Dee Messina. Recorded by Jo Dee Messina on her Delicious Surprise album (Curb, 2005).

Time is a healer but we can't see how
When you're caught in the moment
And the hurting is now
We don't want to see that maybe some things
Weren't meant to figure out

-Jo Dee Messina, "It Gets Better"

Chapter 3-Hurting

Batman took a quick angry step toward the newcomer. "Who are you?" he demanded. "What are you doing here?"

The slightly-built boy blinked. "I... I want to help you fight crime."

Beneath the cowl, Dick rolled his eyes-although he wasn't sure whether it was in response to the stranger's reply, or to his own stupidity in asking the question. What other answer had he expected? When he spoke again, his tone was harsh. "Out of the question. What I do is way too dangerous to risk anyone else's safety."

The boy stood his ground. "You haven't had a Robin in almost a year. I could be him." There was a plaintive note in his voice.

Batman appeared to consider. "A couple of nights ago, some punk-kid got taken out by a boy half his size, or so he told the cops. Your doing?"

The blond youth's eyes crinkled at the corners as he nodded. "Uh-huh. He never even knew what hit him!"

"And you took on the Ghost Dragons with Batgirl, too?"
Beneath the dark scarf that obscured the lower part of the boy's face, the smile seemed to grow broader. Or at least, his cheeks puffed out more as he snapped out an enthusiastic, "Yes, sir!"

Batman's cape swirled as he spun on his heel. "Out of the question," he repeated. "First, you're too young. Second, you're too reckless. And third, you don't have the trai-" He blinked. The boy was suddenly standing in front of him.

The boy took a deep breath. "First, I'm older than the first Robin was when he started. Second, I knew they wouldn't be able to touch me. That's why I got in close. Third, you can teach me."

Batman took an unconscious step backwards, thinking. The boy could teleport. That changed matters somewhat-the last thing he needed was a half-trained meta running loose in Gotham. "You knew that they wouldn't be able to touch you," he repeated flatly.

An energetic nod was the immediate reply. "All I have to do is this..." He touched a control on his belt and promptly vanished. "...And I'm home free," he finished triumphantly. He was now standing some twenty feet away.

Behind him, Batman heard Green Arrow draw in his breath sharply.

"G-A," he said in a tone too low for Dodge to overhear, "I need something to distract him for a second. Got anything in that quiver that'll do the job?"

Ollie chuckled. "Is Stewart a tightass?"

Dick's lips twitched. "I'll take that as a 'yes'. Wait for my signal." He took four quick strides towards the boy.

"You've got my attention," he said quietly. "Look... um..."

"Dodge," the youth supplied eagerly.

"Dodge." He couldn't believe he'd missed the obvious. The kid was wearing a Dodgers uniform, with the last two letters of the team name removed. "One thing that I've learned the hard way is that if you rely on any one thing too much, it has a way of letting you down when you need it. The belt's a gimmick." He held up one hand as Dodge opened his mouth to protest. "It's a great gimmick. But it's no match for skill and planning. Especially because this line of work is full of," he raised his voice suddenly, "surprises!"

An arrow hissed toward them. Batman braced himself for whatever Ollie was sending their way. Dodge, unprepared, let out a startled yelp as the missile exploded, making a sound like the firing of a starter's pistol. As the youth's hands flew instinctively to shield his ears, Batman moved.

Before Dodge realized what was happening, the Caped Crusader slammed into the boy, knocking him to the ground.

"Hey!" Dodge protested. "What are you...?" He struggled in earnest as he felt a tug at his waist.

"No! Don't..."

"'Arrow! Catch!'" Batman tossed the belt overhand. Then he got up and, keeping hold of Dodge's shirtfront and his left arm, hauled the boy to his feet.

"And this," he continued, as he held on to the struggling boy, "is why relying on a gimmick is a mistake."
"Give that back!" Dodge lunged for the belt, but Batman's grip was unyielding. "Please. My..." He gulped. "My dad's gonna kill me."

Dick placed both hands on Dodge's shoulders. "He doesn't know you took it, does he?"

Dodge shook his head. "He made it at S.T.A.R. Labs. I was just borrowing it so I could fight crime. I was going to give it back."

Batman tightened his grip. When he spoke, though, his voice had lost some of its harshness. "Let's do that together, shall we? Where do you live?"

Dodge clenched his teeth and met the vigilante's gaze angrily.

Batman's shoulders lifted in a half-shrug. "Fine. S.T.A.R Labs doesn't close. We might as well take the belt there directly. Someone there should be able to check the records and see who's involved with that project. Of course, it might bring your father's security measures under scrutiny, seeing as they're apparently lax enough for a twelve-year-old boy to-"

"I'm almost fourteen!" Dodge snapped. His bravado dropped away. "You can't do that. My dad didn't know. It's not his fault; why do you want to get him in trouble?"

Beneath the cowl, Dick frowned. "I don't," he said shortly. "But if you're going to clam up, I don't see much of a choice. One way or another, I'm going to see that the belt goes back where it belongs tonight. It's up to you whether that's your home or S.T.A.R Labs. Now, you can be a scared kid and bring more people down with you, or you can act like an adult and tell me your address. What's it going to be?"

Resigned, Dodge gave him the address.

A moment later, Dick was escorting him to the Batmobile. "Keep an eye on the city," he told Green Arrow, as he took back the belt.

As the door closed behind him, the blond boy squeezed his eyes shut in misery. For weeks, he'd been dreaming about riding into the night at Batman's side, but this wasn't at all the way he'd envisioned it.

Even through the electronic voice scrambler, Batman could hear the incredulity in her tone. "Did you just ask me to hack S.T.A.R Labs?"

"Not exactly," he replied, hoping that his young passenger didn't think that he was wheedling. "I'm asking you to check whether there's been any mention of a working prototype for a gadget like that's been published in any recent scientific journal. If there hasn't been, then I want you to hack S.T.A.R Labs."

Exasperated snarls always sounded weird over the voder. "I'll get back to you. Anything unusual about the belt's appearance?"

Batman thought for a moment. "I can't pull it out to examine while I'm driving, but it looks like one of those web belts with a slide buckle. From the glimpse I caught of it, it seems like the front of the buckle acts as a lid for the control panel." He glanced at the boy seated next to him. "That about right, Michael?"

Dodge turned away from the window, gave him a disgusted look, and then immediately went back to the scenery flying past.
"I don't think your camper is very happy," Oracle remarked.

Dick saw the slight shoulders tense. "Do you blame him?" He asked quietly.

There was an electronic sigh. "No, I suppose not. I guess he feels about the same way I did when I took a dive off Wayne Tower and he sliced my cable. Remember?"

"How could I forget?" Dick grinned. "That was the first time I ever held you in my arms."

"Can the mushy stuff, Current Bat-Wonder. You're going to gross out your passenger," Oracle shot back. "I'll check back with you when I have something. Over and out."

"Who was that?" Dodge asked. He was still staring pointedly out the window.

Batman considered for a moment. "Once upon a time, Batgirl."

"Yeah?" Dodge turned to face him. "So, what happened? Did she retire, or something?"

"Or something," Batman said. "It was a bit more permanent than retirement. When I told you that this was a dangerous line of work? I didn't just mean for amateurs. Sometimes, you can have the best training and the right moves... and something still happens to you that can have permanent repercussions. It's happened too many times to too many good people. Don't be one of them."

Dodge turned back to the window. They'd entered Battergate already and his ride was nearly over. "Looks like I haven't got much choice, have I?"

"No," Batman made a left turn onto a tree-lined side street and parked before an unassuming townhouse. "Come on, Michael."

Michael Lasky hesitated. "I can get in by myself," he started to say, but a stern look from the vigilante silenced him. With a loud sigh, he resigned himself to his escort.

"Well?" Barbara asked him later over coffee. "How'd it go?"

Dick grimaced. "His parents seem like good people. They said all the right things. Dad was absolutely horrified that junior was off gallivanting with the belt."

"But?"

"But the kid... Michael, Dodge, whatever his name is, he's been out three nights in a row that we know of, and they didn't notice a thing."

Barbara nodded. "Mind you, if he has that belt, I'm guessing that sneaking out of the house wouldn't be too difficult."

"You're right. It still doesn't excuse them not realizing that he was gone, though."

Barbara sighed. "Look, in most households, the kid isn't a trained acrobat and the parents assume that if he went up to bed, the reason they're not hearing anything is because he's asleep, not because he climbed out the window and shimmied down the elm tree!"

"And they never looked in?"

"Parents don't al..." She stopped. In point of fact, her father had done precisely that as part of his routine upon returning home from the station. For the first time, she wondered whether that had been
the thing that had given her away when she'd started going out as Batgirl. She sighed. "Are you having second thoughts about teaching him?"

Dick shook his head emphatically. "No way. I haven't got the time to train a total beginner. More importantly, Montoya knows who I am, and she knows where I live, and she's already warned me about taking on an underage partner." He grimaced. "She's also right. Gotham was always dangerous. I just didn't appreciate how dangerous when I was Dodge's age. Unfortunately, it's not something he should learn the hard way." He drained the cup. "So, that was my night. Nobody shooting at me, but I wouldn't exactly call it a pleasant evening. How about yours?"

Barbara frowned. "What were you expecting that I'd discover about the belt?"

"For starters?" Dick asked. "A design flaw. The thing is too useful. If there weren't a problem with it, it'd be in production by now. Possibly standard issue for Checkmate, or some such." He smiled tensely. "You did find something, didn't you?"

"Yes."

He sighed. "Then I might have done the kid a bigger favor than he knows. Okay," he said. "Hit me. Was there one clinical test showing a miniscule possibility that the belt could possibly drive the wearer insane and give him superpowers? Over time, the belt takes over and causes the wearer to lose control of when he teleports? What cliches am I missing?"

"If anything happens to the control panel while the belt is being worn, there's a good chance that the wearer would vanish permanently. You know how, when Raven teleports, she travels from point A to point B via the Astral plane? It looks like S.T.A.R Labs was using what they knew of her ability when they were designing the belt. If something goes wrong, it could leave the wearer stuck there permanently."

Dick blanched. "Too close," he said slowly. "I wasn't sure whether to neutralize the belt by getting it off the kid... or using a batarang to knock out the controls. In the end, I didn't want to take a chance of my aim being off. If your information is right," he shuddered, "I could've worse than killed him tonight."

Barbara reached for his hand and squeezed it. "You made the right call. Don't go beating yourself up over what could have happened if you hadn't."

"I'm not. I just..." He shook his head. "Nothing. I think it's just as well I didn't know how much was riding on my decision tonight. Heard from Bruce?"

"No. But Daddy said he came home, safe and sound, a little after eleven."

"Good." He yawned. "Coming to bed?"

"In a little while. I just need to do one last check on the monitors." She wheeled toward the door. "I shouldn't be too much longer."

"Okay. I'll... keep the pillow cool for you."

"You do that." She kissed him briefly and headed off.

"They still haven't fixed that scratch on the counter, I see," Jim rumbled.

The desk sergeant looked up. "Commi... I mean, um, Mr. Gordon!" The balding man's lips curved in
a welcoming smile. "What brings you here, tonight?"

Jim smiled. "Call it nostalgia. I decided it was about time for a visit."

"Well, it's good to see you, sir." The officer looked at the man standing to Jim's left. "Mr. Wayne, if you'll just take a seat, I'll tell Commissioner Sawyer you're here."

"No need, Burleigh," a woman's voice said crisply. "Thank you for coming back tonight, Mr. Wayne. If you'll follow me?"

Bruce lifted an eyebrow as Maggie Sawyer held the door to the inner office open for him. "This way," she said, turning around and striding forward. Bruce followed.

"I... beg your pardon?"

Maggie frowned. "I think you heard me, Mr. Wayne. I'd like to know whether you'd be interested in helping us with training some of our special units. We're certainly prepared to recompense you for your time..."

"Not meaning to be rude, Commissioner," Bruce interrupted, "but do you honestly think that financial remuneration would factor into my decision?" It occurred to him then that Sawyer might know something about the state of his net worth that he didn't. He made a mental note to verify the state of his capital with Dick at the first opportunity.

Maggie was already shaking her head. "Not at all. But that doesn't mean that this department is expecting a free ride, either. The way I see it, even if you can't be out there yourself, you can pass on your expertise to those who can be." She focused her gaze directly on him. "I'm being completely serious when I tell you that you might be able to do as much-or more-for this city in a classroom than you ever did in a costume."

Bruce's gut reaction was to dismiss the proposal out of hand. A nagging voice at the back of his mind reminded him that, even if he did return to the costume one year from now, he wasn't getting any younger. How much longer could it be, realistically speaking, before he'd have to give up the suit permanently? Sawyer wasn't offering him this option because she felt sorry for him. And much as he felt like she was tossing him a crumb, he knew that wasn't her intention. Could he do it? Could he teach his skills to a group, not with the aim of making them his partners, but with the goal of seeing them go out and on... without him? To relegate himself to the sidelines... He clenched his jaw.

"I'll give the matter my consideration," he said finally. "When do you need to know?"

"There's no deadline, but if you're willing, I'd like to submit the proposal to the Board so that we can implement this as soon as possible."

Bruce nodded. "I'll notify you of my decision shortly."

In a small café located between Alex's downtown office and Wayne Tower, Bruce waited and nursed a cup of herbal tea. They hadn't allowed him coffee in Arkham, and he found that he'd lost his taste for the drink. The plan was to meet Dick for lunch here, while Alex briefed Jim on the finer points of the companion program.

Bruce was fairly sure that he was imagining the stares from the other patrons. He hadn't been out in public since the arrest. For the occasion, he'd taken a leaf from Clark's book and donned a pair of eyeglasses. Those, combined with far more casual clothing than he'd usually worn in the past,
ensured that he no longer fit the mental image that most Gotham residents had of 'Bruce Wayne, socialite'. Despite his precautions, however, he couldn't help feeling a bit exposed.

The door opened and a young man in a business suit walked in. He flashed a quick smile to the barrista and placed an order. Bruce blinked. It was Dick. At first, he thought he just wasn't used to seeing his son dressed like a junior executive, but there was more to it than that. Dick's walk, his stance, his bearing, even the cadence of his speech were different. It wasn't exactly that he was putting on a show, Bruce realized. Dick looked and acted like an up-and-coming young executive because, during the daylight hours, that was precisely who and what he was.

Dick spotted him and instantly his demeanor changed back to the young man Bruce would have recognized anywhere. He waved, got his drink and headed for Bruce's table. "Waiting long?"

Bruce shook his head. "I just got here. You look... well," he said.

Dick grinned. "Earlier night than usual, last night. You ordered yet?"

"No," Bruce shook his head again. "I was waiting for you."

"Sorry I kept you." Dick sat down and took a sip from his drink. Bruce followed suit with his own. "I have to ask once," he said apologetically, "and that's it: how are you managing back at the manor?"

Bruce sighed. "I'll adjust." He took a deep breath. "Now, I have to ask something."

"Shoot."

"What are you hiding?"

Dick nearly choked on his drink. "Ex-c-use me?"

Bruce's eyes seemed to bore into his. "I've known for some time that there've been things you've kept from me while I was away. I understand. But now, I need to know the rest of it. If the rules have changed, then I need you to explain the newest version to me before I enter the playing field."

Without waiting for an answer, he plunged on. "So. Let's deal with the easier matters first. How..." he hesitated, then forced a smile. "Well. Bluntly speaking, do I have any financial worries at the moment?"

Dick grinned, relaxing. "Not really. There was a lawsuit we settled out of court a year ago, last June, for three-quarters of a billion. You'd probably have recouped most of that by now, but the way the economy's going..." he placed a sympathetic hand on Bruce's shoulder. "Sorry, Bruce. Forbes has spoken and you're only the fifteenth richest man in the world this year." He shook his head, still smiling. "Can you live with the disgrace?"

"I believe so," Bruce nodded, completely straight-faced. "Is there anything else?"

"Um," Dick bit his lip. "Yeah, actually. I'm... well... About the company. You see, I actually just met with Lucius this morning, hoping I'd have some good news, but..."

"The name change was a bit of foreshadowing," Bruce guessed. "They don't want me back." He was rather proud that his voice stayed calm, betraying nothing of his inner turmoil.

Dick winced. "It was a little more emphatic than that," he admitted. "Technically, you still are the majority shareholder. You own the company. But if you try to actually exercise that clout..." he bit his lower lip. "Bruce, I'm sorry," he said. "The board will try to challenge your competence to return
to any position of power within the company. They'll find some doctor to testify that you aren't fit. We can fight them, but it'll mean another hearing, maybe an appeal, and..." He gave Bruce's shoulder a squeeze. "Look. If you want to take them on, I will back you. One hundred per cent, no questions asked. You know that. But it could take months, or years, and the media will be salivating over every damned minute of it."

Bruce nodded, but his frown deepened. "As long as Lucius is running the company," he stated, slowly, "there's no need to force the issue. Should that condition alter for any reason, I want to be informed."

"You got it."

"Fine. Next," Bruce said briskly, "I would presume that, after my arrest, I achieved a certain notoriety. How great is that impact today?"

The Grayson Grin immediately reappeared. "It's not as bad as it could be. In a nutshell: there are a very few people who know everything-about you, me, the cowl, the Nightwing suit and so on. There's the family, of course. Besides that, it's the League, the Titans, and for sure, Gordon, Montoya, and Sawyer. There might be some other cops who are in on it, I don't know. Unfortunately, Joker's aware, too. At least, when we've fought, he's talked like he knows exactly who I am. So, those are the definites. Next up, we've got the folks who saw the press conference or read the papers, or logged in to, whatever. They believe what they were told. But," he added, "it's old news and not really that important to them. I think most people just consider it a bit of trivia, like an actor's birth name, or something." His eyes grew somber. "I'm not downplaying things. There are people out there who would like to settle old scores. Thing is, I've been racking up some new scores with them. Hopefully, by the time they make their move, you'll be ready. Either way," he smirked. Then, his eyes went flat and his voice dropped an octave in fair imitation of Bruce's own 'Bat-tone' as he continued, "I'll be watching."

Dick caught the appreciative glint in Bruce's eyes, but he waited for the nod before he went on. "Okay. There are also a lot of people who bought into the playboy image you worked so hard on. To the point where they're sure that GCPD railroaded you, and the 'real' Batman is still at large." Dick placed one hand on his stomach and the other behind his back, and, still seated, took a bow. "And of course there's a whole bunch who believe that you cracked... but not quite the way it really happened." His voice shot up an octave. "That poor Mr. Wayne," he mock-sobbed. "Flipped his lid, he did. Actually thought he was Batman, the sorry soul. They had to pack him off to Arkham. Hopefully, one day, he'll be cured..."

"Enough," Bruce snapped. But Dick saw the fleeting answering grin, just before it faded. "Thanks," he said quietly. "The measures you took to manage the situation appear to have borne fruit."

Dick nodded. "I'm glad. So, is that everything?"

"I believe so. Unless you've heard anything from Selina," he smiled.

"S-Selina?" Dick gasped.

Bruce nodded. "She rarely includes others in her plans, so..." he frowned. "You do know something."

Dick sighed. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded envelope. "I found this on her windowsill, night before last," he admitted. "I was meaning to give it to you earlier." He handed it across the table. "I'm... sorry."
Bruce carefully extracted the page inside and read the message. He let out a long, slow breath. "Well," he said. "I can't fault her reasoning."

"She loves you."

"I know." Bruce grimaced. "That's why she didn't stay." He placed a twenty-dollar bill on the table. "I've lost my appetite," he said. "That should cover the meal, when it comes." He got up from his chair.

"Bruce!"

"I'll be fine."

"We haven't even ordered yet!"

"Order," Bruce shrugged. "On me."

"But..."

Bruce spun to face him. "Later," he said. "I just need to be... outside. Somewhere. I can do that now." He left as quickly as dignity would permit.

Dick watched him go. Selina, he thought to himself, I hope you know what you're doing.

Nearly four hundred miles away, in Wiscasset, Maine, Selina was wondering the same thing. She'd chosen the town precisely because it was the last place anyone would think to look for her. Catwoman had always exuded a certain level of sophistication which would have fit nicely into New York, Rome, Paris, or the French Rivera. A small village on Maine's mid-coast didn't fit her profile. In a way, of course, it did; legend had it that the first Maine coon cats had been bred in this village. That bit of trivia had helped her decide on her destination. Now that she was here, however, she didn't have a clue what her next move would be.

For now, she and Helena were staying at a bed-and-breakfast. On her first day, the wife had taken her aside discreetly. "It's none of my business," she'd said with a friendly smile, "and you don't have to tell me anything. But you look like you're trying to get away from someone. I'm sure you've got good reason. If you need any kind of help, don't be afraid to ask." She put out finger and brushed Helena's cheek. "She is such a doll."

Selina had forced herself to smile. "It's not like that," she'd replied with some embarrassment. "I'm just... taking a breather."

The woman had smiled knowingly. "That's fine, dear. You know where to find me if that ever changes. I'll just leave you to get settled."

Now it was three days later, and, true to her word, the hostess hadn't pried. Still, Selina worried. The village population was only about 3,600. Once the tourist season ended and the vacationers went home, she'd stand out like a Persian in a room full of Devon Rexes.

She'd already been trying to find work, but the only positions open were seasonal. And even if it was for the short-term, Selina couldn't see herself waiting tables or punching a cash register. At least she still had five thousand in cash, in her purse, and a small velvet bag, containing three dozen top-quality rubies, emeralds and sapphires. Each was valued at a minimum of ten thousand dollars. They wouldn't last forever, but they should hold her for awhile. Long enough for her to know where she wanted to be with Bruce, anyway.
Selina closed her eyes. She had no doubt that Bruce understood her reasons. Had she talked to him about her fears, he might well have encouraged her to leave. But that didn't mean that he'd welcome her back.

_of course, she did. She loved him no matter what he was wearing. Only... the thrill of the hunt and the lure of the night had always formed a backdrop to their relationship. Without those elements, could it be as..._

If that's all there ever was to the relationship, then it never was a real relationship.

Was it? Wasn't it? Selina sighed. She'd gone away to have time to think, but she couldn't say that she cared much for these thoughts.

She pushed open the door to her room. Someone had been in to tidy up, she realized. All at once, she frowned. Someone had been in here, alright, but not to clean. Her room had been searched.

By the time Bruce reached Alex's office, he'd managed to calm his inner turmoil. He had a session scheduled for the hour after Jim's meeting, but he didn't think it mattered if he was a bit early.

As before, there was no receptionist behind the desk in the waiting room, but the door to the inner office was closed. Bruce was alone in the room. After a moment he took a seat and settled back to wait.

Ten minutes later, the door opened and Jim stepped out wearing a thunderous expression. He tried to banish it when he realized that he wasn't alone, but Bruce was already on his feet, his face slack. "You can't...?" He asked, as he felt the floor dissolve out from beneath him. He couldn't, wouldn't open his life to a total stranger, he thought, even as he knew that he would have to. It was that, a group home, or a return to inpatient status. Neither of the two latter choices were options he was prepared to consider.

Jim's face darkened. "I can and I will, but this is..." He shook his head. "Do you know what's involved here?"

Bruce blinked. "I know that you'll need to ensure that I'm managing, and that you'll need to monitor my behavior."

"Did you know that you can't be out of my sight for more than fifteen minutes at a time?"

He was in freefall... without a parachute. As Jim continued to clarify the terms of the arrangement, Bruce's thoughts flickered to the dozen zebra danios, now ensconced in a fifty-gallon tank. Perhaps he should have the manor reconstructed, this time entirely out of glass, since it appeared that he was going to have to get used to living in a fish bowl for the foreseeable future.

"A long time ago," he said bitterly, "you told me that you didn't want to be my jailer."

"That hasn't changed," Jim shot back. "If you'd rather go with a trained nurse, I understand."

"I didn't mean..."

"I know," Jim said more gently. "But this is going to put more of a strain on our friendship than I'd
realized. It's your call, Bruce. You might find it easier going with someone who doesn't have a
history with you. I've never acted as a companion in this—or any other-program. That means I'm
probably going to go by the book, at least initially—because if I make a mess of this, I'm not the only
one who's going to suffer for it." He sighed. "I can use your security cameras to keep tabs on you
some of the time. I asked about that. And I can still sleep in the guest cottage. Also, if Dick is around,
I don't have to be. Since he's your guardian, when you're with him, he's responsible."

Bruce let out a long breath. "It's still the best option. I... we have to try it."

"Fine," Jim said. "I'll be waiting for you out here when you're done."

Right on cue, the office door opened again and Alex stuck his head into the waiting room. "Bruce? If
you'll come in, we can get started."

"It sounds like you've had a busy few days," Alex remarked.

Bruce's eyebrows drew together. "You're surprised that I'm coping as well as I am. You're
impressed. However, you intend to warn me not to take on too much too fast, and you're concerned
that I'm ignoring certain issues as opposed to dealing with them." He sat up even straighter and
focused his eyes directly upon Alex's. "Am I leaving anything out?"

"If you don't feel up to talking today," Alex said mildly, "I haven't started the daily crossword, yet."

Bruce looked away. "The terms of my release," he said in a softer tone, "mandate my cooperation at
these sessions."

"Given your habits prior to our meetings at Arkham," Alex said, "at the moment, I consider it a
positive thing that you're keeping the appointments at all."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Don't you?" At Bruce's puzzled frown, Alex continued. "You have vast amounts of capital at your
disposal. You're a master of disguise, and you have connections beyond what most people dream of.
If you truly didn't want to be here, I can't see that you would be."

Bruce sighed. "There's your answer. Just because I accept the necessity doesn't mean that I have to
enjoy it."

"I think you've expressed similar sentiments regarding your earlier physical training," Alex said,
leaning back in his chair.

Bruce grimaced. "Precisely. If you think that I enjoyed being thrown onto a mat or slammed against
a wall, day after day, merely because I returned each morning for additional punishment," his lips
twitched, "you couldn't be further from the mark."

"Ah." Alex nodded. "So you have thought this through."

"Did you doubt it?"

"Yes, to be honest," Alex admitted. "I wasn't sure whether your desire to leave Arkham was strong
enough to blind you to other factors." He smiled to mitigate the sting in his words. "It wouldn't be the
first time I've seen it happen."

Bruce considered that. After a moment, he nodded and settled back in his own seat. "A reasonable, if
"You realize," Alex said seriously, "that increased freedom isn't necessarily going to make this next phase easier for you."

"So I've just been told," Bruce stated. "But then, I'm not looking for easy. Let's start."

When the plane from San Francisco landed the next morning and Tim disembarked, Cass was in the arrivals area to meet him.

"Tired from flight?" She asked, as he smothered a yawn.

Tim shook his head. "Tired from going toe-to-toe with the Terror Titans, being too zonked to sleep on the plane, and finally dozing off about twenty minutes before landing." He rubbed his eyes. "I'm up tonight, aren't I?"

"Not like that," Cass said.

"I'll be-"

"Sloppy." She was smiling, but her eyes were deadly serious. "Liability in field."

"Oh, come on," Tim protested, as they started walking toward the parking garage. "I just need a few hours sleep, and I'll be fine."

"Yes. Tomorrow."

"Cass..."

"Maybe longer. Hard to fight with broken wrist."

Tim blinked. "What are you talking about? My wrist isn't broke-"

Cass seized hold of his arm, none too gently. "So far. Keep arguing and things change."

Tim started to laugh, but something about the look in Cass' eyes checked him. "So," he said, "what's up with Selina?"

She blinked. "She didn't say?"

"No, it was weird. She emailed me saying she had to get away for awhile, and could I come back to Gotham to fill in. I accepted-at least until September when the new term starts, and asked her what was up. All I got back was a 'thank you'. No further contact." He registered her troubled expression. "What?"

Cass sighed. "She left."

"Yeah, I know. I just told you what she wrote to me about-"

"No!" Cass pushed open the door that connected the main airport to the parking facility. "She. Left. Like... like you left. Car is... there," she pointed.

"Like I..." Tim went white. "Oh... man."

Cass ignored him. She was already approaching the car. That was something of a surprise. "You
"Carefully. Not really supposed to. Got learner's permit right before Arkham fire."

If anything, Tim went even paler. "Not really sup-Cass! For crying out loud! I could've just taken a taxi." It occurred to him as she took the keys out of her pocket, that she was actually going to get behind the wheel. Maybe he should duck back into the terminal, find a men's room, and get his costume on. The Kevlar might provide an extra level of protection, and the close-fitting hood incorporated a metal plate that would better protect his skull. The Arkham fire had been... what? Two months ago? Maybe three? Not quite three—he'd just finished his April finals at the time.

He almost missed her tossing the keys to him, but caught them on reflex. A grin split her face from ear to ear. "I took bus, Tim. Dick parked car here last night and went home with Barbara. You drive us." Her smile grew wider. "Sucker."

Tim started to smile. "Why, you..."

"I do have permit. But can't drive alone." She shook her head. "Not stupid."

"Believe me," Tim said, "I know." He sighed. "Maybe you'd better tell me the rest about Selina before I start driving. I mean I left because I-" He took a deep breath. "Because I was scared and the situation sucked and I couldn't deal so I twisted things around in my head until I could find a way to blame Bruce for the whole business. In other words, I was an idiot."

"You needed to be away," Cass said finally. At first, Tim thought that she was trying to console him, but she continued. "Selina too. Only you told us before. She... contacted you and left..." she frowned. "Told you less than us, just told you... sooner. Tim? What is 'Dear John letter'?"

Tim's eyebrows lifted. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Black Canary spoke to Green Arrow. Barbara told her that was why they were in Gotham. Because Selina left one."

Tim shook his head. "Damn."

Arthur Lasky held the belt carefully in his hands and sighed. He never should have brought the thing home, but Colleen had been annoyed by the long hours he'd been putting in on the project. Somehow, he'd rationalized that bringing his work back with him would be an improvement.

"Everything okay, Dad?"

Arthur looked up. "Michael! I didn't hear you come in." He shook his head. "I think we're about to see five years of research go down the drain."

"What?"

He smiled ruefully at his son. "There's a problem with the belt that we can't fix no matter what we try. Basically, it's too unstable to use in the field. I think I've known that for a few months now, but I was hoping I was wrong."

"What are you talking about? The belt worked great!"

"Michael..." The doorbell rang.

"I'll get that," Colleen called,
Arthur sighed and laid the belt down on his workbench. "We'll talk after," he said. He placed an arm around his son's shoulders. "Come on."

His hand was on the doorknob, the workroom door slightly ajar, when they heard the shouting. Father and son froze when Colleen Lasky shrieked.

"RORY!" Her cry rent the air and seemed to pierce clear through them. A second later, a new, harsher voice was heard.

"Maybe that'll tell you we ain't foolin' around, lady! Now where's your husband?"

"Let my son go!"

Rory's muffled screams and whimpers were carrying clearly as well. They choked off abruptly, after an ominous thud. Michael shot his father a horrified look. Had someone just slammed his little brother's head into the wall?

The harsh voice spoke again. "The next words out of your mouth had better be your husband's location, or the next move out of my hand is gonna be squeezing this trigger. Now where the f-"

The next thing Michael knew, his father had flung him back against the worktable, rushed out of the room and slammed the door behind him. "Colleen! What are you...?"

Shaking, Michael eased the door open a crack. They men were asking about the belt. He heard his father say shakily that it had been returned to S.T.A.R. Labs.

"By now, they've almost certainly destroyed it," he continued. "You've just terrorized my wife and son..."

"Yeah," the harsh voice said. "Sorry about that. Long as you cooperate, I don't think we'll need to do it again. Of course, if you don't cooperate." There was a click.

"Yes," Arthur said heavily. "Yes, I understand."

The voice chuckled. "Good. The way I see it, if you could create that belt once, you can do it again. I've got a special facility where you can work. Your family comes along as insurance. If you complete the belt, you all get to go home in peace. If you try anything... well... don't try anything. I don't think your kid's head is that hard." The voice turned silky. "Technically, we only need one hostage. If you so much as look at one of us crosswise, I promise you that we will only keep one hostage. Maybe you'll get to pick." The voice turned businesslike. "Check the house. He's supposed to have another son."

"He's out," Arthur said. "On a camping trip for the next few days. Go ahead. Search all you like. Just like the belt, he isn't here."

Michael bit his lip. "I'll get you out, Dad. I swear it," he whispered. Then, he buckled the belt on and programmed the controls. He had to get back to the docks. He had to find Batman.
4. Keeping Afloat

Chapter Summary

Dodge's family has been kidnapped and only the Batfamily can help them now! Bruce is still adjusting to the new reality. And Maine isn't exactly the quiet away time that Selina had planned...

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Juliet for the beta. Thanks to Huffy for being a consultant and a sounding board. "40 Days and 40 Nights" written by Tommy Barnes. Recorded by Tim McGraw on his Not a Moment Too Soon album (Curb, 1994).

Well its been rainin' on and on
Ever since you've been gone
Those dark clouds keep rollin' in
And every time I think I might catch myself a glimpse of sunlight
The bottom falls out again
Well I can barely keep afloat

Tommy Barnes, "40 Days and 40 Nights"

Chapter 4—Keeping Afloat

The silence covered the room like a thick blanket. It wasn't unpleasant, or even necessarily uncomfortable, Jim reflected—at least, not until he allowed himself to realize that it hadn't been broken in nearly four hours.

After Bruce's session with Alex, the two had returned to the manor in Bruce's car, as planned. By mutual agreement, Jim had taken the bus into Gotham earlier. He hadn't anticipated Bruce's stony silence on the way back, even though he understood it. After a few unsuccessful attempts at small talk, he'd given up. Bruce would talk in his own time, and there was little that could be done to rush that.

Once inside the manor, Bruce had bolted for the den. He sat now, in a low-backed leather armchair, facing one of the bow windows. He hadn't moved from that seat since he'd come in. He'd barely even shifted position.

Jim settled back in his own armchair and exhaled. It wasn't a sigh, though in the near-palpable quiet of the room, it was almost as loud as one. Finally, he ventured, "I'm going to fix myself a cup of coffee. As long as I'm up, can I get you anything?"

He didn't expect an answer, so much as hope for one. When one wasn't forthcoming, he reached for
his cane, and rose carefully to his feet. "I'll just be a minute." He waited, thinking that even a sarcastic 'Don't hurry back on my account', or 'Are you sure you wouldn't rather take the whole fifteen?' might be better than this pointed ignoring. Then, stifling a sigh, he headed for the door.

His hand was on the knob when Bruce spoke.

"What was that?" he asked, retracing a few steps.

"I said," Bruce repeated, still only slightly louder than a whisper, "that I will get used to this. Until I do, though..." he turned to face Jim and shook his head. "I never was good company. This situation isn't helping."

Jim nodded. "Anytime you want me to switch to remote, just say. I don't want to crowd you." As if to gainsay his words, he took another few steps closer.

Bruce watched his approach. "I know." His shoulders slumped. "It's not that I don't appreciate your being here. It's just..." he looked down. "I don't do well with other people's rules. I never have. The fact that I've agreed to abide by the restrictions imposed doesn't mean anything's changed on that front."

"I understand. If it helps, your doctor means to review the setup every couple of weeks. If you're coping, some of these regulations can be eased a bit."

There was no reply.

Jim hesitated. Then, he drew even nearer. Cautiously, he reached out and placed a hand on Bruce's shoulder. As he did, he felt the muscles beneath his hand tense and then relax. "You'll get through this," he said.

Bruce nodded. "I know. But until I do..."

"Hey," Jim waited for him to look up. Then he smiled. "For about fifteen years, I dealt with your walking out on me in mid-sentence. I put up with weeks and months on end when I didn't hear from you. I managed to survive a parade of imposters under your cape..." He shook his head. "And then... these last two years. Bruce, if you're worried that I'll call this whole thing off because you aren't deliriously happy at the prospect of losing your privacy... stop." He stooped to Bruce's eye level. "I mean that. I'm here. I'm not going to up and quit the program just because you don't feel like shooting the breeze with me. And if you don't want me around, there're your cameras. There's me going into another room and looking in once every quarter-hour-"

"I got used to that in Arkham," Bruce said softly. "I was... looking forward to... no longer being used to it." He let out a long slow breath. "Well," he continued, "what I can't avoid, I'll have to endure." He shook his head. "You're not going to have an easy time."

Jim shrugged. "When have I ever?" He sighed. "If I didn't like a challenge, I'd have turned down the post of commissioner back when it was offered to me. And if you weren't ready to give this a go, you'd have bolted, locked yourself up in the cave, or turned yourself in by now. So can we please just cut the crap and presume that you're going to try this and I'm going to stand by you?" So saying, he thrust out his hand.

A moment later, Bruce took it. And his grip was strong.

The docks were quiet tonight. The Harbor Patrol had three boats out in close proximity. The supply boats moored at the pier were dark, the area silent. Dodge hugged himself and shivered. The cotton
T-shirt and jeans that had been perfectly suited for daytime wear did not afford enough protection against the chill night air. There were goose bumps on his arms, and his nose was running. His eyes were watering too. He hadn't realized that it was still allergy season. (The other explanation for tears and sniffles galled him. He was no baby! He had to have allergies—new ones he'd never been diagnosed with. Lousy, stupid, polluted city... it was all because of the smog!)

More for reassurance than for anything else, Dodge ran his index finger over the belt buckle. If he got into any trouble, he just had to hit the controls. He tried to banish his curiosity regarding the "design flaw" his father had mentioned. The belt had worked perfectly. He sure hadn't noticed any kind of problem. Whatever it was had to be pretty bad if his father was prepared to scrap years of research because of it, though. He shivered again. Maybe he should get rid of the belt. That way, even if the creeps who'd kidnapped his family found him, they wouldn't get it. Except that, if someone else found it, they'd be in danger and they wouldn't even know it.

Why weren't there any gangs at the docks tonight? The Bats weren't going to come here if there wasn't any trouble! Weren't there anymore diamonds to sneak into the city? Dodge sniffled. The Bats would only be where there was trouble. Maybe he could... No, he couldn't cause trouble. First, it would be as bad as pulling a fire alarm; it would take them away from a real problem. Second, if they caught him at it, they'd probably throw him in Juvie. Then how...?

All at once, he snapped his fingers. Pulling a fire alarm! Of course! What was the simplest way to attract a Bat's attention? In an instant, he vanished.

...He braced himself against the chain-link fence. For some reason, it neither surprised nor concerned him that he was covered in fur. He tried to call out, but his voice refused to obey him. He flung himself again and again at the fence. It didn't hurt when the wire dug into his paw-pads. There was only a blunted resistance. It was like running full-tilt into a large pillow. Oddly, it didn't faze him.

Without warning, the fence lifted like a portcullis, leaving him free to exit the kennel. Tentatively, he took a few steps out, and then, when he realized that nobody was coming to stop him, broke into a run. The ground flew beneath his feet as the grass and trees blurred. With a surge of joy he leaped into the air—and a sharp tug on his neck brought him crashing down to the ground. He gasped, and clawed at the air as he went down. Then, he brought his hands—and they were hands and not paws, now—to his throat in an attempt to ease the sudden ring of pressure that cut into his air supply.

He felt another hard yank from behind as he began to slide back. His fingers—and he was not surprised to discover that he now had fingers—found a thick metal band about his throat. No. No, he wasn't free at all! He'd just been given a bit more space, but he was as much a captive as before. They were hauling him back now, and struggle though he might, the ground began to slide away from him. No. They'd let him loose. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair! It...

"Bruce! Bruce, wake up. Bruce!" Jim looked on, alarmed, as the younger man continued to thrash about. "Bruce," he said softly, "it's time to get up. Easy, now. Easy..." Only the memory of what had happened the last time kept the former commissioner from gently shaking Bruce awake. "You're having a nightmare, son. It's alright. I'm sitting right here. It's okay. Easy."

Something must have penetrated through to the younger man's consciousness, for a moment later, Bruce slumped in his seat, spent. Cautiously, his eyelids fluttered open. "J-Jim?"

"Right here."
Bruce took a deep shuddering breath. He looked around. They were still in the den—he seemed to have dozed off in the armchair—and the sky outside was darkening. "What time is it?" he mumbled.

"A bit after nine," Jim replied. "You okay? That sounded like one hell of a..."

Bruce brought the back of his hand to his forehead. "I've had worse," he said. He grimaced. The details were already fading, however, Bruce didn't believe that he needed a book on dream interpretation to guess at the driving force behind this flight of the subconscious. "I believe that my mind was attempting to put my current... situation into its proper perspective." He got up, somewhat stiffly, and stretched. "I'm fine," he added in response to Jim's frown.

"Good to hear." Even if he had his doubts. He reached for his cane. "Bruce? I was just thinking. From ten PM to seven AM, I'm technically off-duty..." He paused.


Jim bit down on the inside of his lower lip. "Which means," he continued, "that what I'm about to suggest is completely voluntary. I'm only mentioning because," he locked his eyes on Bruce's, took a deep breath, and barreled on, "because after I lost Sarah, for me the hardest time was... was coming home to an empty house. G-d knows you aren't me. And I don't blame you if you want me out of your hair after putting up with this idiotic business all day. On the other hand," he went on, "I don't have to leave, if you'd rather I didn't."

"I don't want your pity." The statement was very nearly a reflex, with no real heat behind it.

"That's good," Jim shot back, "because that's not what I'm offering. Tell me something: did you put that suit on all those years ago because you felt sorry for the poor overworked police force? Or was it because you saw that certain actions were necessary, and decided that it was up to you to undertake them?" He didn't give Bruce an opportunity to answer. "Well, what goes around comes around. And if it's necessary, I, for one, will be glad to stick around."

Bruce regarded him for a moment, nonplussed. When he spoke again, though, his voice was stronger than it had been since Jim had dropped the bombshell earlier. "If you turn left at the top of the stairs, the last door before the east wing is—was—Alfred's. The room two doors down from mine is Dick's, in the event that he needs to sleep here. You can take your pick of any of the others." He looked away, smiling faintly. "I wouldn't expect you to stay, should the situation become... untenable."

"I'll keep that in mind." He chuckled. "Now that you're in a better frame of mind, I was meaning to mention: keeping this place clean is going to be one hell of a job. I think, particularly in view of the fact that someone from Mental Health will be conducting surprise spot-checks—"

The sound coming from Bruce's throat sounded suspiciously like a growl.

"That won't scare them off," Jim remarked dryly. "Anyway, I think we need to hire a cleaning crew for the upstairs part of the house. I've been narrowing down the options in the Yellow pages, asked Barbara to dig a little deeper. I've got six on a shortlist."

Bruce glowered. "I don't want—"

"The place has to be spotless," Jim snapped. "For reasons that escape me, they seem to think that a messed-up living space signifies a messed-up mind. We either hire someone, or we spend the better part of the day doing it ourselves."

"What would a vacant living space signify?" At Jim's look, Bruce sighed. "Fine. Whatever. I'll look it over in the morning. Anything else?"
"I was thinking of checking out your gardens tomorrow." He grimaced. "If nobody's tended them in
the last two years, I'm almost afraid to. Mind keeping me company?"

"Not at all," Bruce shook his head. "I'll show you where the equipment is in the morning."

"Fine."

Dodge eyed the padlocked glass lid that covered the signal's on-switch with a mix of anger and
anguish. The belt was supposed to mean he didn't have to worry about locks and bolts. But
teleporting wasn't going to get him any closer to that freaking control lever! Now what?

Behind him, he heard a door creak open. Quickly, almost on instinct, he 'ported one rooftop over
and crouched lower than the concrete parapet, praying that nobody spotted him. He couldn't be sure.
Voices didn't travel that far. A moment later, though, Dodge realized that someone had done his
work for him: the signal lit up the sky. He smiled to himself and settled down to wait. Despite
himself, he felt his eyelids growing heavy. He hadn't had time to really stop and think for hours. It
was actually kind of nice to just sit here and...

He couldn't believe he'd dozed off! He must have been sleeping for hours! He cast a glance at the
sky. The signal was still on. As he watched, though, it winked out. Dodge hoped that didn't mean
that the police had given up. Cautiously, he braced his hands on the edge of the parapet and raised
himself just high enough to peer across to the roof of GCPD Central. He grinned as he saw a
slightly-built figure in a black cape standing opposite a woman in police blues. All he had to do was
wait until they were finished and...

Batgirl moved. Swiftly, before Dodge realized what she was doing, she'd switched the signal back
on, spun it about, and angled it down toward the parapet. Blinded, he cried out. A moment later, a
hand gripped his arm.

"Owed you from other night," she said. "Even now." She called over her shoulder, "Okay to turn
off. Situation under control"

The signal went dark. "Who is it?" a voice—probably that lady cop's—called. "Do you know him?"


"It's not that kid I warned Batman about, is it?" the officer asked sharply.

The cowled figure hesitated.

"No!" Dodge whispered. "Please, you have to help me. It's my dad. They got him."

Batgirl sighed. She loomed over him for a moment, thinking. "Say nothing. Let me handle." She
turned around.

"Batgirl, I'm only going to ask this one: is there a new Robin?"

Batgirl stood up, pulling Dodge with her. "No," she said. "He wanted. We said... no."

Dodge felt his face grow hot. He started to reach for the belt control, then jerked angrily as the
vigilante slapped his hand away.

"Don't," she said. "I told you. Let me handle." She leaned closer. "Your father. Who... got him?"

Dodge felt himself starting to shake again. "I don't know. But they want the belt. They took my mom
and brother, too and they knew about me. Dad told them that I wasn't home, but I didn't want to wait around in case they started looking."

Batgirl nodded. "Smart. Okay. Stay here." She turned as if to go, then glanced back over her shoulder at him. "Mean it," she said. She took a running leap off the rooftop and fired off her grapnel, snagging a nearby gargoyle. She retracted the line, letting it pull her higher, then let go and somersaulted onto the top of the GCPD building.

Dodge watched as she spoke again with the lady cop.

The officer didn't look at all happy. Finally, she threw her hands up in the air. Dodge heard her saying, "fine! Help him! Do what you have to, but I'm warning you. If he's injured in any way, shape, or form, I never thought I'd say this, but mark me: I will finish what Akins started. What you do isn't something for civilians or kids, and especially not for civilian kids. Keep him out of it!" She opened the door leading back into the building and slammed it behind her.

Batgirl returned a moment later. "Batman told me about last night," she said quietly. "Belt."

"What?"

"We'll help," Batgirl explained. "But you won't." Her head jerked back to the other rooftop. "You heard her. Too risky. She's right. Give me your belt."

Dodge backed away. "I can't do that."

"Michael..."

Dodge vanished.

Cass grimaced under her cowl. She spun as she heard, "BATGIRL!" The boy was standing atop the roof access of the GCPD building.

"Batgirl," he repeated, "they knew about the belt and they knew how many people are in my family. Start with S.T.A.R Labs! Tell Batman!" Then he disappeared once more.

Cass waited a few minutes, half-hoping that Dodge would rematerialize. Then, resigned, she opened her commlink. "You will not like this," she began.

"Well," Jim said dubiously, "Maybe this is a 'sorry you're out' gift from Poison Ivy?" The entrance to the garden was blocked by grass and weeds which rose higher than their waists.

"Doubtful," Bruce remarked. "I think this is just normal growth."

"I'll get the mower," Jim said, turning. Bruce held him back.

"I think it may be too choked up for that. And there's no way to tell if there are any rocks or branches underneath it all." He considered. "Before I do something unwise," he began, "did Alex mention to you whether there are any items..." he made a face. "Is it a violation of my parole for me to be wielding a machete, or not?"

"For you?" Jim scoffed. "The way I see it, either Batman doesn't kill—in which case, I wouldn't care if someone handed you a list of missile launch codes, or he does—in which case, you could manage it with your bare hands." He smiled. "In the interest of full disclosure, I did happen to mention that I was looking forward to doing some gardening and might need an extra pair of hands. He seemed to
think you might find the physical labor therapeutic." He coughed. "Keep in mind that I wasn't entirely sure of the state of the greenery at the time, but if he had an objection to your using hedge-clippers, I think he would have said. Shouldn't imagine another big blade would be any greater cause for concern."

Bruce absorbed that. "Machete it is." He gestured toward the small garden shed several yards away. "There'll be gloves in there, too."

"Bug repellent?"

Bruce frowned. "I'll need to check. It should be there, but I'm not sure if it has a shelf-life." He smiled. "Alex might be right about the exercise. After Bane, in order to come back to what I was, in addition to relearning my combat techniques, I spent a lot of time chopping wood."

"Mmm," Jim grunted. "Not much call for that in July, but I guess we can start piling up for winter if you're so inclined. He chuckled. After a moment, Bruce followed suit.

"So," Jim asked as Bruce unlocked the shed, "any chance of your relearning combat techniques after this?"

The younger man tensed. "I'm not thinking that far ahead right now."

He didn't speak again until they'd spent the better part of an hour trying to clear a path through the undergrowth.

When Cassandra cautiously opened the door of the condemned building that concealed the entrance to her underground cave, she discovered that she had a visitor waiting across the street. As she looked both ways for oncoming traffic, Dodge got up from the bus stop bench and started toward her. "Don't bother," he said. An instant later, he was standing next to her.

Cassandra frowned. "Discretion," she said sharply. "Too many people here for that." She caught her breath then. She wasn't in costume. By starting toward him, by not pretending to be startled when he teleported, by not playing... stupid, she realized that she'd just given herself away. Oracle was going to be furious.

Dodge nodded. "I followed Batgirl last night," he said with a half-smile. "I saw her run in here hours ago. Now, you're coming out."

Cass shrugged. "So. What now? You tell everyone I'm... Batgirl? Who cares?" She smirked. "No birth certificate. Until four years ago, no name. No family, no school records, no friends besides... Bats." She pointed to him. "Not a threat."

The boy reddened. "We'll see about that!" He snapped.

"See." She sighed. "Or don't. Not in mood to fight until after breakfast." She looked at him. "You waited... all night?"

"I didn't have anywhere else to go."

"You're hungry." It wasn't a question. She'd seen his physiological reaction when she'd mentioned food.

"I'm okay." He looked embarrassed. "Did... did you tell Batman about my dad?"
Cass nodded. "He knows. We're checking." She met his eyes. "With the belt... you could have... got food and left store. Even without money."

"Hey! I'm not a thief!"

"Except for taking belt in first place."

That caused his face to contort in fury. "That's different and you know it! I was going to give it back." He turned away and kicked at an uneven bit of sidewalk. "Besides, this time, my dad told me to take it. He knew it was the only way to stop the creeps from getting it. And me." He took a deep breath. "I'm holding on to it."

To Cass' ears, it sounded as though the boy was striving for a defiant tone. Instead, his words sounded more like a plea. She sighed again. "Fine." She held open the door to her home. "You wait for me," she said. "I bring food. Then we... decide next step. Batman said he might need to talk to you. Don't leave." She followed him inside and showed him the elevator. Then, she punched in the proper access code on the keypad, taking care to shield her fingers with her other hand. "I don't keep much food here," she said. "Just energy bars and water mostly. Take if you like. I'll bring better. The doors parted and she ushered him into the cave. "Okay to watch TV." She thought. "Bathroom through there. Can shower if you want." A new concern occurred to her and her face grew warm. "Dodge. Sorry, but... I have to." She turned to the computer array and pulled down a lever.

"Oracle, are you there?"

A digital image appeared on the screen behind her. "Batgirl," the electronic voice acknowledged. "I see you have a guest."

"Yes. Tell Batman. Also... can you... protect my system?"

She could never be sure with computerized voices, the way she could be standing face to face with somebody, but she thought she could detect a note of amusement.

"Someone needs a crash course in computer security. We'll need to set that up. Meanwhile, consider it done."

"Acknowledged." She turned back to Dodge. "Back soon," she began, then broke off.

Her guest had fallen asleep.

Selina surveyed the disarray. She became aware that she was trembling, but not in fear. Someone had been in here, pawing through her personal effects! She shoved the top dresser drawer shut with a slam. Someone had been rummaging through her undergarments! Her papers! Her... she practically hissed. She felt so violated. At least her valuables were on her person. True it might look suspicious for her to be carrying a small fortune in unset gemstones, but she had expertly forged credentials to attest that she had inherited them. It was still unusual enough to carry them around that Selina was strongly considering renting a safety deposit box.

She grimaced. That would be a clear indicator that she was planning on settling down here for awhile. She still wasn't ready to take that step. Coastal Maine was a beautiful place to relax and catch her breath, but she doubted that settling down here permanently was in the cards. She loved the hustle and bustle of the big city too much. To say nothing of the impossibility of 'disappearing' into a small village where everyone knew everyone else. Cities were far more impersonal. Here, it was just a matter of time before someone started asking questions.
Not for the first time, she considered calling Holly or Slam, just to let them know that she was okay. More importantly, she wanted to get a message to Bruce, but she didn't trust herself not to leave him some sort of clue to her location. She tried to tell herself that this was what came of spending too much time talking with Nigma—this compulsion to tip off the other side—but the truth was that Batman had always had that affect on her. Any other cape she could avoid without even trying. She'd given Superman the slip on more than one occasion—compensating for his X-ray vision had given her pause initially, but she'd managed to pull it off in her own inimitable style. The junior bats could give her a run for her money, but Batman was the only one to consistently catch up with her. It had taken her some time to realize that she was letting him. Now, she couldn't afford to. It wasn't only that her daughter's safety was at stake, or that if Bruce crossed state lines chasing after her, he might be putting his parole in jeopardy. If she saw him face-to-face, if he asked her to come back now... she probably would. He opened himself up so rarely that when he ever did ask for something, there was a part of her that wanted to give in. Oh, sure, she could tease and banter and bargain and mock—but ultimately, she knew that if he asked her to come back to Gotham, she would.

She bit her lip. It didn't help matters that right now, she wanted, more than just about anything, to be back in Gotham. She hated herself for running out on him. But how could she gamble Helena's safety? She froze. If the person who'd broken in had been armed... and she and Helena had been in the room... yes, Wiscasset had a far lower crime rate than Gotham. That by no means rendered it safe.

There was a knock on her door. She opened it to find a uniformed police officer standing outside. "Ma'am, if you'll come downstairs, I have a few questions I'd like to ask you."

"Wait," Tim exclaimed. "How come I get stuck with him?"

Dick grinned evilly. "So far, he's confronted Cass, me, and Ollie. It's your turn." He sobered. "Look, it's a fact that you've been teaching yourself a lot of science—and not just biology—over the last year or so," he shook his head sadly as Tim flushed. "I know Kon was a friend of yours. I don't blame you for trying. The fact is, you're a bit more current on your scientific literature than I am at the moment. If you and Dodge can locate his father's notes, chances are, you'll be able to interpret them faster than I could. Keep Oracle and me in the loop, though."

Tim nodded. "I can do that. Where does the kid come in, though?"

Dick's eyebrow shot up. "It's his family."

"I get that, sure," Tim countered. "When it was mine, I wanted to go, too. Bruce didn't let me, though."

"Bruce trusted you to follow orders," Dick said wearily. "Plus, to find your parents, he had to go hunting in the Caribbean. Dodge's family is probably still in Gotham." He grimaced. "The kid has a way of sticking his nose in where it's least wanted, and at the worst time. I know it looks like I'm rewarding bad behavior," he smothered a yawn, "but, I'm hoping that if we do make him a part of this," he winced, "a very small, extremely supervised part of this, maybe he won't do something stupid that'll get people killed."

Tim mulled that over. Finally, he looked up. "You're right," he admitted. "It does sound like you're rewarding bad behavior."

Dick started to say something. Tim shook his head. "You're the boss. I'll take him along with me when we go to check for leads at his house. When it comes down to the actual rescue, though..."
"When it comes down to that," Dick said, "you're not going in alone. Batgirl or I will be with you. The hostiles have three hostages, including a toddler. We can't rush in without a plan."

"So, this 'Dodge' kid..."

"...Either stays with whoever's off-duty, or we ask Montoya to stick him in holding 'til we're done." Dick's tone was light but his expression stayed serious. "She'll do it, too, I'm sure." He sighed. "Just, go easy on him. He's got brains and heart. He just lacking in skills and experience."

Tim nodded. "And he gets them...?"

"Outside of Gotham or training under someone else." Dick sighed again and rubbed his eyes. "I honestly don't want another Robin. Having my identity known to the cops is just a little extra insurance against me changing my mind. Sawyer and Montoya are willing to overlook a lot, but endangering kids..."

"Yeah," Tim nodded again. "I remember the headlines when Joker shot you and..."

"Did Robin die tonight?" Dick smiled. "Yeah, the press was all over that." He turned pensive. "Come to think of it, I wonder if that wasn't a big part of why Bruce fired me. Ah, well," he shrugged. "No point going back there now. Let me brief you on what we know regarding that belt..."

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"Sure. I'll put him on." Tim handed the phone to Dick, who immediately broke into a broad smile.

"Hi, Bruce! How's it going?"

Tim wondered how the elder vigilante could sound so... natural after everything that the family had been through. He'd barely been back in Gotham for twenty-four hours, and he'd already witnessed some of the effects of the stress that Dick was under. When it came down to it, Tim had always believed that he and Bruce were the better actors. Dick could—and did—keep a lot bottled up. When it came to feigning an emotional state, as opposed to hiding one, however, Tim would have sworn that Dick wasn't up to the task.

At the moment, however, Tim was ready to nominate him for a People's Choice award—or any other acting honor that accepted write-in candidates.

"Sure," Dick was saying, "I get that. But maybe on the weekend—ah. Okay, fine. Dinner on Monday, it is. Did you want to make it like a potluck? No, I didn't mean it like... okay. Yeah, she's right here, I'll ask. Hang on."

He covered the mouthpiece with one hand and glanced at Barbara. "Can we swing Monday night at the manor?"

Barbara nodded. "Just you, me and Bruce?"

"And your dad."

Barbara nodded again. "Sure. Or," she winced, "as sure as anything can be, given what we do."

Relief flooded across his face. He grinned, then went back to the telephone. "We're on. See you Monday." All at once, the smile dropped to be replaced by a stunned expression. "No, I figured that," he said faintly. "Well... yeah, okay, I was looking forward to it, but I knew that letter threw you for a... No. No, seriously, it's fine. Yeah, Monday. Later."
"What was that about?" Tim asked as Dick returned the cellphone to his pocket.

Dick looked at Barbara. "Remember when I told you how he cut our lunch short the other day?" He still looked flabbergasted. "He just... apologized."

"See anything?" Dodge asked as they walked through the kitchen and into the front room. "I don't know why we couldn't come in the front door."

"Because," Harrier said curtly, "that's how the kidnappers came in. We're not going to spoil the crime scene."

"Got it." His eyes grew wide as he watched the vigilante bend down to the carpet with a pair of tweezers. "You found a clue?"

Harrier exhaled. "Possibly." He held the tweezers aloft, now gripping a clod of soil. "If we're lucky, this isn't any kind of soil from around here."

"So, you'll be able to find their lair?" Dodge exclaimed, perking up.

Beneath his silver hood, Tim shook his head. "It's not that simple, Michael," he said as he deposited the clod into a sterile vial and capped it. "This isn't really all that much to go on. It's a small sample, and odds are that it could come from one of a dozen or more places." He bent again to examine the carpet. From within the folds of his cape, he removed a small camera.

"What'd you find?"

"Shoe imprints," Harrier said, without looking up. "There were about six people in here." He spun about on his knees and scooted to the vestibule. "Can I get some more light?" Then, sharply, "Careful where you step!"

Dodge froze, one foot in mid-air. "Sorry." He withdrew hastily. "The switch is just up there behind the chandelier."

It was a wall sconce, not a chandelier, but Tim didn't bother correcting him. "Thanks." He pressed the button and was rewarded when the light flickered on. It didn't help a great deal—there was too much dark wood paneling surrounding—but it was better than nothing. "What size shoe does your father wear?"

"I dunno."

"Your mother?"

"I d-"

Harrier cut him off. "Why don't you go check their closets? I'd like to know which of these prints are theirs and which were made by the kidnappers."

Dodge raced off to comply. Tim took a deep breath and set out to make the most of his evidence-gathering. His eyes widened as he spied something on the floor. When Dodge returned, he shot out "what color hair does your mother have?"

"Blonde, why?"

He held up the fallen hairpin. "Because it looks like at least one of the kidnappers is a woman. These," he pointed to the strands caught within the wire clip, "are black."
Dodge had been expecting that when they rendezvoused at Batgirl's home (apparently the only place that anyone was willing to let him see), they'd run a few tests on the evidence and go streaking off in search of the kidnappers, guns—or maybe batarangs—blazing.

Instead, he'd had to listen to Batgirl brief Harrier on the Ghost Dragons and on the conflict diamonds—and why the heck did she have such a weird way of talking? It would have been one thing if she'd had a foreign accent, but her intonations were pure Uptown Gotham. Like at that private school he'd flunked out of last year. What was her deal? It had taken her nearly an hour to give over what Dodge would have relayed in two minutes. And when she finally finished, had Harrier gone back to the computers to check the analysis? No, it would be at least twenty-four hours before they knew anything, he said!

Dodge couldn't understand it. It always took so much less time on the cop shows on TV! He walked cautiously over to the machines. "Hey," he called, "some of the blood work's ready!"

Harrier glanced up for a moment. "That's good, but it's probably from your brother," he said. "Since, from what you were telling me, nobody fought the kidnappers."

He felt his temper rising. "The creeps had Rory. What did you expect?"

"Exactly what happened," Harrier countered calmly. "Your folks went quietly and tried to protect you. Now, we're going to find them, but we can't run off half-cocked. The data is running. Meanwhile, we can either sit here and twiddle our thumbs, or start dealing with some of the other matters at hand." He took a deep breath. "Look. I know it's hard. When I was younger than you, my parents were kidnapped. And even though I wanted to be out tracking down the ones responsible, I didn't have the experience, so Batman handled it while I worked on one of his other cases. You have to trust us."

Dodge blinked. Then he nodded slowly. "Okay." He hesitated. "Um... Harrier? Batman saved your folks, right?"

Harrier tugged his hood forward, shrouding his face further in shadow. "He caught the kidnappers. And he saved my dad." He pushed back the hood. He was wearing a gray domino mask over his eyes, but although it obscured most of the upper part of his face, Dodge didn't think that the vigilante was much older than he was. "Sometimes..." He shook his head. "I wish I could give you a one hundred per cent guarantee that everything was going to be fine. I can't. But, we're doing everything we can to increase the odds in our favor. Now, I need you to sit tight and keep an eye on things here while Batgirl and I go on patrol."

"I'll keep you company," a dulcet voice chimed from one of the computers. "Just so you don't get bored."

Dodge got up hurriedly. "Who...?"

"Oracle," Batgirl supplied. "She'll watch to make sure you're... okay."

So he was alone, but under surveillance. "Great," he muttered as the two exited the cave.

"So," Oracle asked, "are you at all into computer games?"

"Do you have Global Thermonuclear War?"

There was a chuckle. "Wouldn't you prefer a nice game of chess?"
Dodge sighed and smiled bleakly. "Whatever."

Three hours later, Dodge was bored. And Oracle seemed to have forgotten all about making her next move. "Um... are you there?" He asked, finally.

"Dodge!" The voice sounded harried. "I'm sorry. I'm dealing with a crisis at the moment. Can you hold on a little longer?

"Yeah, sure. Take your time." Tentatively, half-expecting that he'd trigger an alarm or give himself an electric zap, he hit the 'print' command. There was no reaction. Not from the computer, and not from his electronic "guard". That was promising. Dodge thought for a moment. "I'm just going to see if I can scrounge up something to eat."

"Uh huh," the voice sounded distracted.

Seizing his opportunity-and the printout-the young man made his way toward the lair's exit. "I'll just grab something at Burger Barn and come back." Under his breath, and out of range of the speakers, he added, "...after I find my folks."
5. Patterns

Chapter Summary

Dodge is done with sitting around waiting for Batman to rescue his family—he's going himself! Meanwhile, his father gets an idea that just might turn the tables...

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Juliet for the beta! Thanks to Billymack at the ask_a_cop community on Livejournal for help with police procedures!

Bruce's memory of his first night out is taken from Batman: Year One. Written by Frank Miller (DC Comics, 1988).

"Patterns" written by Richard Maltby, Jr. Originally recorded by Beth Fowler on the Baby soundtrack (Warner Chappell, Jay, 1983, 1999)

Patterns that begin as I walk though a door
Patrons in the curtains and the kitchen floor
Patterns in the days, routines I must arrange
Patterns in the ways I try... but never change
Just look, as I'm thrown a curve—again
I leap. Then I lose my nerve—again
In tears
Running home I go
Secretly relieved
Safe with what I know
Again...
And yet I know I am not the same...
-Richard Maltby Jr, "Patterns"

Chapter 5—Patterns

"Are you planning on staying here long, Ms... er...?"
Selina smiled disarmingly, and ruthlessly suppressed her nervousness. She hadn't broken any laws here, she reminded herself, and there was no reason for anyone to connect her with Catwoman. "Selkirk," she supplied. "Burmilla Selkirk. To tell you the truth, Officer, I really haven't given the idea much thought." She leaned back a bit in the sitting-room chair. "Or should that be ‘deputy’?"

The man—Selina judged him to be in his mid-40s if he was a day—coughed. "Officer Paul Little. I'm a detective with the Maine State Police. I've been assigned here to investigate a series of recent break-ins that have been taking place up and down the coast."

"I see." She crossed her ankles together and shifted Helena to her other shoulder.

Helena chose that moment to start whimpering and fidgeting.

Little smiled. "You can put her down, if you want to." He looked around. "I don't think she can get into too much mischief."

"Do you have a lot of experience with fifteen-month-olds, Officer Little?"

"Enough," the detective said shortly. "Two sons, a niece and three nephews of mine have passed through that stage. I don't mean to keep you long, but we'll probably get done even faster if we aren't trying to have a conversation over her crying."

Helena crowed as her feet touched the ground. She tottered, landed seat-first on the carpet, and looked at her audience as though gauging its reaction. When nobody made a fuss or tried to snatch her back up, she crawled over to an end table and used one of its spindly legs to pull herself up. Selina felt herself relax. Her daughter was fine. "Very well, Officer," she said, leaning forward slightly. "I'm at your disposal."

"As I said, Ma'am," Little cleared his throat, "we're here assisting the local police forces in their investigations into a series of burglaries taking place in tourist towns along the coastline. A fair number of them have been taking place right here in Lincoln County."

"I see." But she didn't understand what it had to do with her. Wouldn't it be ironic, she thought, if they tried pinning this one on Catwoman? No, it wouldn't be. She was innocent this time. And... and, oh G-d, what about Helena? She wouldn't see her daughter go into the care of CPS. She'd have to call... She blinked, and focused her attention on the brooch that the officer was holding out to her in a plastic evidence bag. "I'm sorry?"

"As I said, Ma'am," Little repeated, "one of the other guests here saw a suspicious character exiting your room earlier today. We found this on her person. She said it was hers, but we were wondering if you recognized it."

Selina's eyes grew wide as they took in the small black onyx cat. It had two green emeralds for eyes, and a gold collar set with three diamond chips about its neck. She caught her breath, but when she spoke, her voice was steady. "If you turn it over and examine the back, there should be an engraving of the letters "B" and "S" intertwined. If so, it's mine."

She'd deliberately kept those initials in mind when she'd chosen her alias. In retrospect, she should have dropped the brooch in a safety deposit box somewhere; it was too memorable to keep with her when she was trying to maintain a low profile. Still, something within her had balked at leaving it behind. She was paying for that sentimentality now.

Little nodded. "So there is. Well, I've photographed it as evidence, so if you'll just sign and date this," he handed her a flimsy sheet of paper, "I can release the item back to you. The DA's office
may be in touch with you, if they need the piece for the trial." He must have seen the nervousness in her eyes as he added, "I doubt they will, though. Seeing as we caught the perpetrator red-handed."

Selina nodded. "I understand," she agreed automatically. But her thoughts were in turmoil. This place wasn't as safe as she'd thought. If the local papers got a description of the brooch, hell, if the thief talked, someone might well speculate as to the ownership of such a piece of jewelry. Sure, it was probably paranoia. That didn't alter the fact that the police still had a few outstanding warrants on Catwoman. She didn't want the attention.

Little, apparently unaware of her discomfiture, smiled apologetically. "I really do hope that this experience hasn't soured you on our state," he added. "The thief isn't a local, by the way—they rarely are in these parts," he remarked. "It's not like the big cities where folks barely recognize their neighbors. Around here, everyone knows everyone else, and it's harder to keep criminal activity hidden." He sighed. "Of course, exceptions happen. Well, we caught her, so hopefully, that's an end to it." He rose to his feet. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Ms. Selkirk."

After the officer had gone, Selina scooped up her daughter and headed for her room. Mechanically, she began to pack.

"You're not leaving us, dear, surely?" Her hostess stood in the doorway. "I can assure you that nothing like this has ever happened before."

Selina nodded brusquely. "I understand, but I don't think I'm safe here anymore," she said. She knew that the woman would think that she was referring to the bed-and-breakfast, and she was sorry for giving that impression, but she could think of no way to allay the woman's distress without having to explain more fully about her situation. And there was no way that she would risk Helena's safety by providing any additional information that might point back toward Gotham.

She knew that no place was truly safe. She still didn't care. She'd settle for the illusion, for now.

"I'll be downstairs shortly to settle my account with you." And then, then she'd figure out where to go next.

"Alright," Dick said grimly. "Did anyone think to stick a tracer on him?"

On the split screen before him, Batgirl shook her head. Harrier looked like he could have kicked himself.

Dick sighed. "I knew I should have hung around with him," he said wearily.

The screen wavered, then split once again. Now, it resembled nothing so much as a vertical envelope, with a triangular screen at the top-like a pointed flap. While Batgirl and Harrier remained on opposite sides of the lower half of the display, a familiar redhead appeared above. "It wasn't your fault," Oracle—no, Barbara—stated.

"Whose, then?" Dick asked. "And don't say yours." He raised his index and middle fingers to his temples and rubbed gently, trying to fend off a tension headache. "The cave isn't shielded against teleporting. Hell, there's a JLA transporter in the closet. I know I asked you to keep an eye on him, but seriously, once he decided to leave, there was no way you could have stopped him."

Barbara smiled sadly. "I hope you're listening to yourself, Mister, because the same holds true for you."
"Sorry, Babs," Dick said, straightening his stance. "Leaders don't get that luxury." He took a deep breath. "Okay. He left. We have no idea where he was going or how big a head start he has. Once we find him, he's going to be pretty darn hard to corner..."

Harrier snapped his fingers. "Hold that thought. One second. I think I know—"

Dick's eyes grew wide. "Oh for..." He slapped himself across the forehead. "I am such an idiot! If S.T.A.R. Labs was using Raven's abilities for their template..."

Harrier grinned. "Took the words right out of my mouth. Problem is, I don't know where she is at the moment. She left the Titans a couple of months back."

"If that belt's tapping into the Astral plane," Dick said, "she probably knows about it already. Babs, can you...?"

Oracle nodded. "I'll put out some feelers."

"I'll keep my commlink open."

"Harrier and I... keep eyes on Gotham," Batgirl said. "Crime... still out there. So we are too."

"Okay," Dick said. "But if you do spot Dodge, even if you're otherwise engaged, try to get a tracer on him. He grimaced. "So far, he's been trying to help us every time he sees us. That might still be true."

"He'll be in way."

"I know. But it won't be the first time you've had civilians in the crossfire. Deal with it." He locked eyes with each of the three faces on the display. "You know your assignments. Let's get cracking."

Two of the screens went dark. "Dick," Oracle ventured, "you're not going out tonight, are you?"

Dick shook his head. "I want to," he admitted. "More than anything. But I can't. This 'two-nights-on, one-night-off' business might be the only thing keeping me in the saddle these days." He exhaled. "I'm just going to stick something in the microwave, and then I'll probably make an early night of it."

Babs considered. "If you're still up in an hour... maybe I'll head downstairs myself and join you." She sighed. "We both know that Raven's only going to respond five minutes after I turn in. No matter when I turn in." She lowered her eyelids and smiled. "Sooooo..."

Dick grinned appreciatively. "Hey, you need a night off too, once in awhile."

"That I do," she agreed. "Pity it means I'll be making you work, though." She closed the screen on his laughter.

Contrary to Oracle's belief, Raven replied almost instantly.

"I was wondering about that," the hooded figure stated as Barbara filled her in on the details. "It does explain the lack of finesse in the patterns that I've been sensing."

Barbara blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"The passages through the Astral plane," Raven clarified. "As you surmised, I've noticed them. They've been extremely choppy, even crude." She shook her head soberly. "These scientists who created the device you mention have no idea of the forces they seek to emulate. The Astral plane
calls to its own. The more the device is used, the greater the chance that the user will become trapped there."

Barbara absorbed that. "Is there something you can do to help?"

"I'm not certain. But I will come to Gotham to find out."

"I'm feeding you coordinates now," Barbara said, her fingers flying across her console. "Do you need a place to stay?" She paused. "We don't know when he's going to use the belt again. It could be a little while."

"Perhaps," Raven considered. Then, slowly, she pushed back her hood. "I don't want to put you to any trouble."

"You won't. We've got the room." Seeing Raven start to shake her head, she added quickly, "We've also got a few safe-houses scattered through the city. Did you want something central or waterfront?" She grinned and barreled on. "Above ground or subterranean? Near a pizza parlor or a Korean takeout?"

Three nights later, there was still no sign of Dodge nor of the Lasky family. Dick resolved to push all thought of that business aside as he and Barbara made the drive to the manor. Tim and Cass knew what they were doing. Raven was as seasoned a veteran as he himself was. Not to mention that, according to Barbara, there were no fewer than eight costumed heroes operating within the Greater Gotham Area tonight. The others would be fine.

"Looking forward to seeing your dad?" he asked.

Barbara smiled. "As much as you are to be seeing Bruce."

Dick smiled back, but he couldn't help noticing a slight strain in her voice. "Is everything alright?"

Barbara sighed. "Kinda yes, kinda no. I..." she let out a long breath. "The night before he moved back to the manor, I told you we talked. I told him he could talk to me about..." She hesitated. "Well, I thought some of what he's facing now is the same sort of stuff I had to deal with after the shooting."

"Uh-huh," Dick nodded. "I remember you mentioned that."

"Problem is," she admitted, "I hope he doesn't. Want to discuss things with me, I mean. I... I told you a long time ago that the only way I was able to move on with my life was by accepting that the past was... gone. I'm not saying I did the best job of it," she continued at a rush. "Some days, I'm still back there, but Bruce..." She drew another breath and let it out. "Moving on isn't one of his strong points, you know?" In a softer voice, she continued, "And patience isn't one of mine."

Dick nodded again, encouraging but saying nothing.

"We both know he isn't much of a talker to start with, but if he does open up," she bit her lip, "I don't want to push him off. And I realize I shouldn't have volunteered for something I wasn't up for, but..."

"You know," Dick deadpanned, "those gyms we have set up in the satellite caves? The ones Bruce made sure were wheelchair accessible? Every single one of them is soundproof. They're also fully equipped with punching bags and dartboards. Let me know if you need any photos to pin up in the center. Plus, if you need a sparring partner... or a sounding board..." He grinned. "Look, if what you've had to deal with from me over the last couple of years didn't test your patience, I don't know what else would. And you came through. I know it wasn't easy, but you managed. As far as Bruce is
concerned, try. It's all you can do. And if it's not enough... well, try to stay cool until you get out of there, and then let 'er rip." He took one hand off the wheel long enough to quickly squeeze her arm. "I got your back, Babs."

"That's not actually my best side," she retorted. A moment later, she added, "Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Dick was only mildly surprised to find chicken and mushroom rice on the dinner menu. It was one of the first things that Barbara had taught Bruce to prepare and, perhaps, the only main dish he had managed to make three times without setting off the smoke alarms. Dick smiled. He'd been half-prepared for takeout. Conversation at the table was minimal, but Bruce seemed a good deal more relaxed than he had been over a week ago, when he'd returned to the manor.

"If you ever get to the point where you want your own garden," Jim was saying, "I would think long and hard before I planted chicory."

"Chicory?" Dick repeated. "Isn't that some sort of salad green? Or a coffee substitute?"

"It's both," Jim agreed. "It's also extremely difficult to uproot."

Dick blinked. "You don't have some sort of tool for it?"

"We were trying to avoid carrying too much in with us," the older man explained. "Most of the weeds are high enough and thick enough that if we were to drop a spade or a hoe, there's no guarantee we'd find it again. First order of business is clearing a path-and we've got the machetes for that. Weeding is getting done the old-fashioned way."

"Apart from the chicory," Barbara asked curiously, "is there anything salvageable? I mean from what would have been planted that spring, not weeds. I know you can eat dandelion greens."

"Believe me," Jim said, making a face, "Sarah and I tried during the No Man's Land, before you," he turned his head toward Bruce, "got Ivy to open up the Robinson Park greenhouses. Until then, well, let's just say that a lot of books on edible weeds in the northeastern US mysteriously disappeared from the library shelves." In response to the raised eyebrows greeting his last statement, he snapped, "If you recall, that was just around the time that people discovered that paper was one of the easiest things around if you had to fuel a fire. I salvaged what I could. Anyway, getting back to what I was saying, we tried eating a lot of plants we'd never considered edible before. I don't think you realize how hungry I'll have to be before I try dandelion again." He smiled. "Now, if you want to discuss the state of the mint and the rhubarb..."

After supper, Bruce pushed his chair away and rose abruptly. "Dick," he said in a firm tone, "walk with me. They need time to catch up."

When Jim and Barbara failed to protest, Dick fell into step behind him and they made their way to the patio doors. "Where are we headed?" He asked.

"It doesn't matter," Bruce replied. "I just want to be outside." He waited until he'd slid the glass doors shut behind them before adding, "I don't go out at night much anymore."

"Miss it?"

"More than you can possibly imagine."
"So...

Bruce sighed. "I have enough memories to confront me at every turn." He stopped and faced the younger man. "Don't misunderstand. I don't wish to dwell on the past. Unfortunately, it isn't by choice."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"You are."

They followed the path around the perimeter of the stables and headed for the orchard. "I imagine this will be the next project after the gardens," Bruce said.

"At least you know what the weeds are here," Dick grinned. "Just about anything not a tree." A faint breeze was blowing, carrying the sound of the crickets to their ears.

Bruce grunted and swatted absently at a mosquito. "How's work?"

"Which work?"

"Do you really need to ask?"

Dick shook his head. "No, I guess not. It was pretty much the usual until last week." He explained quickly about Dodge. "Hopefully, we'll find him before he finds trouble. The fact that the cops knew about him before we did, well, if anything happens to him in Gotham, it's not going to look good for us." He sighed. "I know. Wearing the suit isn't about PR. But keeping the GCPD on-side helps things."

"Agreed."

Dick swatted another mosquito away. "Pesky little vampire," he muttered. He shot Bruce a sidelong glance. "My turn to ask you: how's work?"

"Difficult." Bruce admitted.

"But you're dealing."

"Yes."

"Good. If there's any—"

"—thing you can do," Bruce finished, "I only have to ask. I know." He paused for a moment. The crickets' song seemed to grow louder. "Coordinate with Jim."

"Sorry?"

"This situation is... trying for me. I believe that holds true for him as well, for all that he doesn't complain. Your coming by more often would give us both a break from each other."

Dick nodded. "I can arrange that. When's your next session with Alex?"

"Monday. Four o'clock."

"I'll meet you after."

"I'd appreciate that."
It took them nearly an hour to cut through the orchard, skirt the meadow beyond, and make their way back to the manor. By then, Barbara was ready to call it a night.

As they drove back to the city, Barbara leaned back wearily and closed her eyes. "That actually went pretty well," she said.

Dick smiled, but his thoughts were worried. He realized that, at the back of his mind, he'd always thought that once out of Arkham, Bruce would soon return to his old self. It was only now dawning on him that it might be a significantly longer period of time before that happened. He tried to ignore the persistent small voice in his mind, which added, "If it ever does..."

Arthur Lasky examined the design specs once more. It was hopeless. He knew it was hopeless. There was simply no way to compensate for the inherent failings of the prototype. His protests, however, had fallen on deaf ears. His abductors had been clear: if he did not produce a working model, Colleen and Rory would suffer.

He punched the keyboard angrily, pounding out his frustrations. It would serve them right if he did give them another prototype—and got them all lost on the Astral Plane!

All at once, he froze. And he began to smile. *It would indeed...*

He had to be careful. For his family's sake, he had to make sure that what he was planning would look like nothing more than a terrible accident. But, it should work. After all, it wasn't as though he hadn't been *warning* them...

"You seem a bit more in control than you did last session," Alex said with a smile.

Bruce snorted. "I trust that wasn't an attempt at subtlety."

"Just calling it like I see it. You're more relaxed today."

Bruce leaned back on the sofa and let his hands rest on the brown-and-gold jacquard upholstery. "I've spent the last week gardening. It's been satisfying."

"Ah," Alex smiled. "The benefits of physical exercise. Not that I need to sell you on those. Have you been away from the manor at all?"

"I'm here," Bruce pointed out. He rolled his eyes as Alex shifted in his chair. "And I'm meeting Dick for dinner after this session," he said. "Dine-in. During the supper rush. Happy?"

"Should I be?" Alex lifted his eyebrows. "Bruce, your progress doesn't run according to any kind of timetable. If you push yourself too hard before you're ready—"

"I may suffer a setback. If I don't push myself at all..." He grimaced. "I can look back on my first eleven months at Arkham to complete that sentence."

"I gather the memories aren't exactly fond ones."

Bruce frowned. "It's odd that they bother me as much as they do." His tone grew thoughtful. "It's not as though I was unfamiliar with the asylum, or even that my placement there was entirely unexpected." He smiled bitterly. "You see, I'd always expected to be found out, one day. If I hadn't fully understood the consequences of discovery before I embarked on my... mission, my first night on the town should have made them clear." He hadn't even thought about a costume, that first time,
he related—at least, not a real one. He described to Alex how he'd simply put on nondescript clothing, applied a phony scar, and gone walking in Crime Alley. Before the night was half-over, he'd been stabbed, shot, handcuffed and shoved—still bleeding—into the back of a squad car. His words grew more hesitant as he described how he'd caused that car to crash in his bid to escape, but still managed to pull the arresting officers clear of the wreckage. How he'd barely made it home before he bled to death. "It was not," he concluded, "an auspicious start."

"No, I think a lot people would have quit on the spot after a night like that," Alex agreed. "Yet you kept at it."

"I think," Bruce said slowly, "that if they had read me my rights... called an ambulance... followed due process... I might have surrendered to what most people would have considered 'the inevitable'. I had no previous criminal record. I had the resources to hire a good lawyer. The DA's office at that time would have been much less-inclined to prosecute once my identity became known." He grimaced. "Instead, I witnessed first-hand how law enforcement 'served and protected'. They were hardly a force for justice. Batman filled that void. By the time Gordon became the police commissioner and things began to change, I'd become more comfortable with the double life. Also," he said seriously, "Gotham had already become home to certain... menaces, against whom conventional police tactics came up lacking."

"Joker."

"Joker," Bruce confirmed. "And Scarecrow, Two-Face, Hatter... there was an extensive list over a decade ago, and it hasn't grown shorter." He sighed. "The law of averages told me that I couldn't keep the life up forever. Inevitably, the road I was traveling could only lead to my arrest... or my death. I understood that years ago. I accepted it, and I moved on."

"Did you?" Alex asked.

Bruce blinked. "Yes. I certainly didn't dwell on it."

"But did you truly accept it? Or did you push the thought aside, because it was too difficult to deal with?"

He fought the sudden anger that surged within him. "It was not difficult," he gritted through clenched teeth.

"How many scenarios did you envision?"

"Excuse me?"

"How many scenarios," Alex continued, "did you envision? In our previous sessions, you've told me that for every course of action, you ordinarily have five contingencies, and five back-ups for each contingency. One would assume that, following your arrest, your... people would have immediately engaged one of those plans. Yet from what you've told me earlier, that didn't happen."

"I never intended for them to continue on my path!" Then, why hadn't he been the least bit surprised to discover that Dick had, in fact, donned the suit? He shied from the question.

If Alex noticed his hesitancy, he refrained from commenting, asking only, "Did you tell them that?"

Bruce looked daggers at him.

"From what you've told me, you had contingencies in place in the event of plague, famine, fire, earthquake, the JLA going rogue... and yet, although you say that you fully expected to be found out
one day..." Alex shook his head. "What was the plan, Bruce?"

For a moment, there was silence. Then, slowly, Bruce nodded. "You've made your point," he said finally. "Planning for a situation is, in part, an attempt to control it."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"Not as such. However, because I failed to plan adequately for the... scenario which has brought me... here," he let out a long breath. "That's why I haven't been able to recover as easily from this setback. Isn't it?" He felt his lips pull up in a smile. "I haven't been in control. I haven't had more than the barest semblance of control. And I... loathe it."

"It scares you."

"It perturbs me," Bruce corrected pedantically. "Naturally. These are uncharted waters."

Alex nodded. "Are you ready to start mapping?"

S.T.A.R Labs was never truly empty. Security was there around the clock, and besides that, there were always researchers working late. Even so, in the hours that stretched between midnight and dawn, the long, white corridors were nearly silent. Any experiments that might have been running this evening were taking place behind closed doors. And nobody stepped forward to challenge Dodge as he cautiously made his way to his father's laboratory.

Please, he thought to himself. Please, please, please... The word kept repeating in his mind. He wasn't sure what he was pleading for. That his father had somehow escaped and was hiding out here? That there'd be a clue he could follow that would lead him to the kidnappers? That Batman or one of his people would be here, looking for evidence? Actually, any of the above scenarios would be just fine by him.

The door was locked, but that wasn't a problem. Not with the belt. For a moment Dodge hesitated, worried that he might rematerialize around a solid object. So far, the belt always seemed to know not to do that. At least, he'd 'ported blind without mishap quite a few times before he'd gotten the hang of the directional controls. Still, he didn't know if it was luck or programming that had protected him so far. He took a deep breath, crossed his fingers, and tapped the control.

He materialized within the lab, on the other side of the door. He was about to flick on the lights when he realized that doing so would alert security. Instead, he waited for a few moments, giving his eyes time to adjust. Although there wasn't much illumination, he could make out the furnishings well enough to avoid bumping into things.

Unfortunately, the computers were dark. When he carefully moved one of the mouses, the screen lit up instantly, but it prompted him for a password to unlock the terminal. He had no clue what to type. He didn't even know if the UserID that had logged on last belonged to his father, or to one of the other workers. He groaned. Why hadn't he brought a flashlight? Or a fingerprint kit? Or bought The Complete Idiot's Guide to Crime Scene Investigation? No, all he had was this belt! And it wasn't like he could tell it, "Take me to Dad." He could program the controls to lock onto certain coordinates—like his bedroom, for example. And he seemed to be able to do short hops within visual range. He hadn't yet managed to figure out how to do much more than that.

Slowly, he moved toward his father's private office. His hand was on the knob when he heard the lab door open again behind him. Acting on pure reflex, Dodge hit the belt control and teleported—not into the smaller confines of the office—but instead, into the shadows at the far end of the room. He
crouched low and darted under one of the counters as the lights flickered on.

He relaxed as he saw who walked in. He knew Vera Klarner. She was interning at S.T.A.R Labs as part of a university co-op program. His father had her doing data entry. Once his parents had found out that she was from some town in the Midwest and didn't know a soul in Gotham, they'd made a point of inviting her to supper every few weeks. She'd been shy, at first, but she'd quickly warmed up. Started joking about the karate classes she'd taken before coming to Gotham. She'd even shown Dodge a few moves. He was about to stand up when he realized that she was yanking on drawer handles frantically, one by one, as though hoping that one would open. Didn't she have a key? Unless... Unless she did have a key for her own drawer. But why was she here, late at night, trying the others?

Vera rattled the office door and uttered a stream of profanity. Her hair was spilling loose from its bun, as it so often did, and as Dodge watched, she absently tucked back a stray lock of dark hair and secured it with a pin.

He felt his heart thundering in his chest as he remembered the bobby pin and black hairs that Robin had found earlier. Vera hadn't been invited to the house for nearly a month. And while she couldn't be the only person in the world with long dark hair, her behavior tonight convinced him that she'd come by uninvited extremely recently.

He waited until she left the lab, then followed her, keeping to the shadows. Once, she retraced her steps toward his position. He teleported to another position, close by. When she found nobody behind her she frowned, shrugged, and continued on.

Dodge didn't use the belt again until Vera was unlocking her car door. This time, he materialized just next to the rear passenger door. He bent down quickly. As she got in, he teleported onto the floor in the back seat. She never noticed.

As she turned the key in the ignition, he lay as flat as he could across the uneven floor. Nervously, he crossed his fingers, thought a quick prayer, and tried to get as comfortable as possible.

His departure did not go unobserved.

"He was at S.T.A.R Labs," Raven reported without preamble. "Unfortunately, he has since moved on. I saw him teleport into a car, immediately before it pulled away, and judged it unwise to reveal my presence at that time."

"Good call." Oracle sighed. "Well, we're closing in. I don't suppose you have some way of tracking the car?"

"I thought that you might," Raven deadpanned, "once I provide you with a description of the vehicle and its license plate number." She permitted herself the smallest of smiles at the startled laugh on the other side of her comm-link. "I trust that will be helpful?" she added.

"And how! Hit me."

Raven took a breath. "Brown Chevrolet Impala, some scratches on rear bumper, dent in front passenger door, New Jersey plates. License B2E..."

"Here," Arthur said resignedly, as he pushed the belt across the table. "It's the best I can do."

His captor nodded. Under the balaclava mask, the man's eyebrows lifted as his eyes lit up.
"Excellent. How does one control it?"

Arthur lifted the buckle and showed him the directional buttons. "Of course, you can also lock in a homing beacon, so that you can always return to base. But I have to warn you," he added, "that this is only a prototype. I've tried to iron out the bugs-

"That's good," the masked man rumbled. He gestured over his shoulder to the guards standing at the door. "Bring her." There was a smile in his voice as he addressed Arthur, once more. "I think we need a live test-subject, to make sure the model works before we have you make a few more."

"Wh-what?" Arthur stammered as an awful suspicion began to grow. "I told you, I didn't know if it was safe!"

"That's why we need to test it, Doctor Lasky," his captor said soothingly as two other masked men entered the room dragging a frightened Colleen between them. He tipped an imaginary hat in her direction. "Ma'am."

Colleen glanced around the room in confusion. "What's going on? Arthur...

Arthur gulped. "Colleen, I—"

"Hate to break this up, Doc, but I promise I'll give the two of you time to talk later." There was a warning note in his voice as he continued, "After we have your wife try taking this belt for a spin."
6. Chasing Demons

Chapter Summary

Dodge confronts his family's kidnappers, with devastating results! Meanwhile, Bruce's situation begins to put a strain on Dick and Barbara...

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, Juliet, and Aiyokusama for the beta!


There's things that I can't leave alone
'Cause they won't leave me alone
What I want ain't what I need
Still I reach for the things I crave
Then try to run away
Am I afraid of being free
'Cause when I'm not chasing demons
There's demons chasing me

—Bill Anderson and Jon Randall, "Demons"

Chapter 6—Chasing Demons

Once the car stopped, Dodge waited for Vera to get out and lock the door behind her before he cautiously lifted his head. He was in a parking lot, outside a nondescript three-story box of a building. A loud roar made him duck once more, and he caught a glimpse of an airplane flying so low it seemed to be only a few feet overhead. He counted to ten slowly, and then teleported out of the car.

There were two other cars in the lot, as well as a large van. The building itself appeared to be dark and deserted.

Despite himself, he tensed and flattened himself against the side of the car as he heard another roar. This time, the plane was coming from the other direction and gaining altitude rapidly. He had to be on the mainland, and practically right next door to the airport. He smiled. At least, if he could get to a phone, he could tell the Bats where he was. The smile faded. He could, if they'd given him a
number! Or a bat-signal. Or something. Well, he could still call the cops... He shook his head with a
glower. If he did that, it was as good as saying that they were right and he wasn't cut out to join their
little club. No, the only way he'd ever prove himself to them would be if he saved his family on his
own. Then they'd beg him to join them, and he'd laugh right in their faces. Well... maybe if they
begged and if they were really sorry for doubting him, and they apologized. Yeah, maybe then he'd
join them—but they'd have to ask him nicely, first. He smiled. Very nicely.

Still caught up in his daydream, Dodge strode across the parking lot and tugged open the heavy front
door. It creaked a little bit, but not too much. He pulled it carefully shut behind him. Ahead stretched
a long corridor. The lights overhead were dim, but the floodlights from outside filtered in through a
barred window at the opposite wall. At intervals, emergency lights sent their reflections down to the
gray-tiled floor. The hall smelled like his school did when the janitor had just finished mopping-of
strong chemical disinfectant with an almost-cloying scent of lemon mixed in. His running shoes
squeaked slightly as he started walking. He winced and rose to his tiptoes. He didn't think anyone
could hear him...

A hand clapped itself over the kerchief covering his mouth as an arm pulled his wrists roughly
behind his back. He struggled, fighting to reach his belt buckle, even though he had no idea whether
he'd be able to teleport out of his attacker's grip. Suddenly, a young woman's voice whispered
incredulously, "Michael?"

Dodge struggled harder.

"Michael!" Vera's voice remained low, and somewhat muffled, but there was an authoritative edge to
it that he'd never heard before. "Michael, a few doors down from here is a laboratory and it is not
soundproof. If you yell, you're going to have a dozen people running out. Now, I'm going to take my
hand off of your mouth, but I'm warning you, keep your voice down. Do you understand?"

Dodge fought once more, but he couldn't break free. Grudgingly, he nodded.

"Good," Vera sounded relieved. She spun him around to face her. "What are you doing here?"

Dodge realized that she was wearing a knitted mask that covered her hair and the lower portion of
her face. He glowered but didn't answer.

"Michael? How did you know to come—"

"I followed you!" He nearly spat the words. "You... my dad trusted you and you..." He nearly hissed
the next word. "Traitor!"

Vera winced. "What gave me away?" she asked.

Dodge blinked. Vera didn't sound the least bit smug or defensive. If anything, her tone was friendly,
even curious. An instant later, his anger reasserted itself. "I saw you at Dad's office tonight. And..."
He stopped. No point mentioning the hairpin. "Nothing."

Vera sighed. "I know what that must have looked like, but I was hoping to find your father's notes."

"What?" Dodge couldn't see how that was supposed to make things better.

Vera sighed once more. "Look, I wish I could explain, but I can't right now. I need you to come with
me. You can either trust me and come willingly, or not trust me and I'll... raise my voice, but one
way or another, you're coming. I promise you, I won't hurt you."

Dodge shot her a furious look. Then he allowed his shoulders to slump in defeat, and he forced
himself to nod. Robin was still analyzing the evidence taken from the Lasky home. Maybe he'd even finished by now. There had to be some clue that would lead the Bats here. All Dodge had to do was hold out until they showed up. Feigning resignation, he allowed Vera to escort him, hoping all the while that she wouldn't look too closely at his belt.

"Arthur?" Colleen Lasky asked, as one of their masked captors fastened the belt around her waist.

Arthur Lasky placed his hand over his eyes. "I'm sorry, Colleen," he whispered. Shaking, he forced himself to lower his hand and look directly into the eyes of the man who seemed to be in charge. "It won't work," he confessed. "I... I sabotaged the controls."

The leader considered that for a moment. "Did you?" he asked.

Arthur nodded.

"How... foolhardy." He paused, thinking. "This is an interesting development," he said finally. "You see, up until now, you've been trying to create a working prototype without success. Now, if I'm to believe you, you deliberately set out to create one that works poorly." His eyes crinkled at the corners. "You know, Doctor Lasky, it's just barely possible that your sabotage has inadvertently brought about the goal you've been trying to achieve all along." His voice hardened. "Either that, or your attempt to subvert your research deserves severe consequences." He twisted his hands in mock despair. "What to do, what to do?" All at once, he snapped his fingers. "I have it! We'll proceed with the test. If the belt works, well, that's cause for celebration—or at least for allowing your pitiful act of rebellion to slide. After all, it's the results that count. On the other hand," his voice took on an edge, "if your sabotage was successful," he was smiling again beneath the mask, "I can't think of a more fitting penalty for you than watching us proceed with the experiment." He gestured toward the two guards holding Colleen. "Tie her hands," he ordered briskly. "And set the controls for a short trip... say... three yards to the right."

"Stop!" Arthur said desperately. "It was my idea. Let me be your test subject."

The leader shook his head. "Tempting, but no. If this fails, we're still going to need someone to create a properly working model. You're the scientist, not your wife." He sighed. "I suppose it's a good thing we do have your son as a spare guinea pig." He waited until the first guard was finished binding Colleen and had stepped away before nodding toward the second one. "Activate the belt."

As the second guard bent down to do so, several things occurred in short order. Vera entered the room, took in the situation, and shoved Dodge to one side. At the same moment, Arthur Lasky, with a desperate cry, lunged toward Colleen's guard.

"Stay back!" The leader shouted, pulling a pistol out of his belt holster.

Simultaneously, one of the door sentries sprang forward. "Freeze!" He shouted as he sprinted several yards toward them.

"CBI!" Vera chimed in, a badge in her left hand and a drawn gun in her right. She drove her left elbow into the solar plexus of the second door sentry, even as she stomped down on his instep.

Colleen's guard crumpled, but as he did, he managed to press one of the buttons on the belt control panel. The belt began to hum. Dodge stared, horrified, as his mother started to vanish.

Unlike his own teleportation, which happened in the virtual blink of an eye, Colleen Lasky began to grow slowly but steadily more ethereal. Her mouth opened in a soundless shriek.
"MOM!" Dodge yelled, hitting his own belt controls. And then... did he teleport to her position, or did the belt simply pull him there, like iron to a magnet? He felt an odd sensation, as though he was falling through Jell-O, and he thought he heard a loud bang as his fingers closed on her sleeve.

And then, Colleen Lasky and her son disappeared.

This jump was different. Usually when Dodge used the belt, he felt a momentary, and not altogether unpleasant, shock. It reminded him of the summers he'd spent at camp, and when he'd go diving into the lake in the early mornings—that quick icy discomfort which passed almost as soon as he registered it.

Similarly, the sensations he generally felt in mid-teleport were mildly disconcerting and mercifully fleeting. He never thought about where he was when he transitioned, because it all happened so quickly—or at least it was supposed to.

Now, though, something was wrong. He sensed—in a way that transcended his senses—that his mother was with him, although he could not see or hear her. He couldn't see or hear anything. It wasn't blindness—even a blind person could see darkness, he supposed. At least, if he screwed his eyes shut, he could still see "dark". This was worse. It was like trying to see with a shoulder—or hear with a knee. "Mom?" He thought he whispered, but he couldn't even hear his own voice.

And then, there was an abrupt change in the atmosphere, and they were no longer alone. Something else was here with them... something hungry.

Dodge screamed without screaming. All at once, it didn't matter that he couldn't discern where his mother was, all he knew was that he had somehow placed himself in front of her, directly in the path of whatever was here with them. He wanted to shout to her to run, but she wouldn't hear him. And anyway, how could you run if you couldn't see where you were going? Never mind. They were going to die here, and nobody would ever know. Never mind.

He imagined that he squared his shoulders and his scream became a yell of defiance. "Come and get us!" he raged. "I hope you choke!"

And suddenly, there was a new presence with them: bright, glorious, and yet seeming to carry a weight he could just barely begin to fathom. And he sensed the predator draw back, as though taking the newcomer's measure.

Dodge fought down his frustration. He could almost see what was going on, he could nearly understand what to do. Instead of emptiness and silence, it was as though he was now at the other extreme—too many sights and sounds—colors he couldn't give names to, noise beyond cacophony. It was a different kind of blindness and a different kind of deafness, but the result was the same: he couldn't make much sense of his surroundings. But he could tell that a battle was raging between the Hungry one and the Bright one. Those names, he guessed, were as good as any.

For a time, he waited, and tried to focus on his surroundings as his senses began to clear. This was not his fight—even he could see that, and the Bright one was doing well. And then, the Bright one faltered and the Hungry one lunged. And Dodge didn't care whose fight it was anymore, he had to do something!

He charged headlong into the fray, fists raised—and found himself lying flat on his back, the wind knocked out of him. There was a paw with nails like knives descending toward his chest, and he tried to twist, but he was slow... so... slow...

He felt a sharp, stabbing pain and opened his mouth to scream. A bright bolt of energy slammed into
the creature, forcing it back, and Dodge felt something grab hold of him with fingers like hot steel and yank him through a wall. There was another icy shock. Then, his eyes and ears started to tingle—as though they had been asleep. He frowned. That didn't sound exactly right, but he couldn't think of a better way to describe it. He was back in the room he'd just left, and it seemed as though only moments had passed in his absence. Except that almost all of the masked men were sitting on the floor with their hands behind their backs. One man stood over them, with Vera at his side.

Another person, cloaked and hooded, was bending over his father's prone figure. "Oracle," a woman's weary voice emanated from the cloak, "we need an ambulance. There is a man in critical condition, and I have only strength enough to ease his pain."

Dodge heard as if through a barrier. Something was wrong. It wasn't just the puddle of blood pooling beneath his father, though that was horrific enough. Somehow, Dodge felt as though he hadn't fully returned. As though a part of him still remained in that 'other space'.

He looked over his shoulder. His mother stood behind him, blinking in confusion. All at once, she screamed, "ARTHUR!"

As Colleen Lasky ran to her husband, Dodge reached out to her, but drew back in horror as his hand passed right through her arm. What was happening? And where... where was the belt that he'd seen her wearing? Almost automatically, he looked at his own waist. He still had his, but a second one was tangled up with it. He tried to work it free to no avail. It occurred to him that it might be easier to manage if he took off his own belt, first. When he tried to do so, however, he was horrified to discover that the buckle was smashed. Try as he might, he couldn't unjam it. The belt wouldn't come off.

He was stuck.

And then, the room seemed to be filled with paramedics and police and his father was on a stretcher and the woman in the cloak had moved away from Dad to stand next to him. She was saying something that sounded reassuring, only Dodge wasn't quite processing it.

Dodge blinked when the woman motioned to him with her hands, guiding him toward the fire door and out to one of the waiting ambulances. He shook his head, trying desperately to explain that he couldn't solidify, couldn't climb the steps into the vehicle without sinking through them.

I can compensate for that, her voice rang through his mind. Be at ease, Michael. In time, you will learn to do this yourself.

She knew his name. He barely had time to register that fact when he realized that there was a glowing field surrounding him, enveloping him from head to toe, like a second skin.

Walk, Michael. I can maintain the Armor of Ila for a considerable time without strain. Come.

Dodge obeyed. The 'armor' maintained a buffer between his feet and the floor tiles, keeping him from sinking. He brushed the doorframe as he left the building and felt its solidity even through the energy field. As the cloaked woman urged him along, he saw another ambulance pulling away, sirens blaring, and guessed his father was in that one. Dodge began to shake. Was Dad going to be okay? And, he wondered, what the heck had the belt done to him?

Please, the refrain in his mind started up again. Please, please, please...

Bruce's eyebrows shot up as Dick pulled into the parking spot. "You made the reservations here?"
Dick nodded. "Babs and I have come in a few times. The food's great." He got out and went around to the passenger door. Bruce already had one foot on the sidewalk.

"And, of course, we're less likely to be recognized." Bruce said with a frown.

Dick shrugged. "You want the paparazzi snapping photos? Next time we'll go to that revolving glass restaurant on top of the Marriott."

"No, I..." Bruce stopped. He *didn't* want the media reporting on his every action. Despite what he'd said to Alex, he hadn't been looking forward to being out in public. But he'd prepared himself mentally for this evening out. He'd planned for it with the same meticulous attention to detail he'd once devoted to his protocols. For Dick to single-handedly remove the need for those preparations... He took a deep breath. "I'm not asking for you to make things easy for me."

Dick turned around then and gave him a hard stare. "Not everything's about you, you know?" he snapped. "Maybe *I'd* like to be able to have a bite out once in a while without reading about it in the society pages the next morning. You coming? I'm hungry."

"No, I..." Bruce stopped. He *didn't* want the media reporting on his every action. Despite what he'd said to Alex, he hadn't been looking forward to being out in public. But he'd prepared himself mentally for this evening out. He'd planned for it with the same meticulous attention to detail he'd once devoted to his protocols. For Dick to single-handedly remove the need for those preparations... He took a deep breath. "I'm not asking for you to make things easy for me."

Bruce shook his head. "No," he said, placing a hand on Dick's shoulder. He was shocked to feel tension under the suit jacket. "No, this is fine. I was..." He stopped. The last two years had certainly taken a toll on him, but what, he wondered for the first time, had they done to Dick? "This is fine," he repeated, meaning it. "Let's go in."

Raven waited until she knew Dodge was being looked after before she quietly exited the metahuman ICU. She still didn't feel strong enough to chance teleportation, so rather than report face-to-face, she needed to find a quiet spot to contact Oracle and fill her in on the evening's events. She paused to study a floor directory, and then, after a moment's deliberation, headed toward the chapel. Part of her wanted to wait until the doctors had completed their examinations, but she suspected that such would be mere procrastination. She had been on the Astral Plane. She had seen the *gulo* and she knew its power. She knew what had to have happened. The only thing missing was the official confirmation.

She pulled open the chapel door to a startled "Oh!" Mrs. Lasky had clearly been in the act of exiting the small room.

"Forgive me," Raven said quickly. "I didn't mean to disturb you. You're..." She hesitated. Nobody who had just been abducted, nearly killed, and returned to find half her family in critical condition could conceivably be "all right". "You are unhurt?"

Colleen nodded. "You startled me is all." She laughed, a fraction too loudly. "Oh. You meant from... before. Yes, I'm fine." She leaned heavily against the wall. "No, I'm not. My husband's in a coma, fighting for his life, and nobody will tell me about my son's condition." She looked up. "You were with him, weren't you?"

Raven nodded uneasily. She didn't enjoy raw, primal emotions such as those now surging beneath Colleen's brittle façade.

"Do you know what's wrong with him?"

Faced with the direct inquiry, Raven could only nod once more. "I believe I do, although I hope I'm wrong."

"What?" It was nearly a sob. "Please. I need to know. Good or bad, you have to tell me!"
Raven took a deep breath. "The belts that your husband created were designed to travel the Astral Plane. The Plane, however, has an affinity for certain components within the belt-elements that have come from the Plane and remained in this world only under specifically controlled circumstances. The Plane, however... calls to these elements. So long as their concentration is small, the risk is negligible."

"Risk?" Colleen repeated, turning paler.

"Of remaining trapped upon that plane of existence. When your son teleported the last time, he was holding fast to your belt. In effect, he teleported it away from you in the same instant that you both arrived upon the Astral Plane. At that moment, he was carrying double the normal concentration of those elements I'd mentioned. It was still only a small amount, but it was sufficient to awaken a *gulo*.

"*Gulo?* Colleen wrinkled her forehead. That... *thing* that attacked us?"

"You were in no danger from it," Raven stated. "You had nothing to attract it. Your son was another matter. I had hoped to engage the beast on my own and return you both here, unharmed. I do not know now whether I would have succeeded. However, the *gulo* was able to... mark your son. As a result, he is now tethered to the Astral Plane by a bond we dare not sever, lest he be lost to us permanently."

Colleen sagged against the wall, ashen-faced. "You said a moment ago that this... Astral Plane... calls to its own. You're saying that if we... if we break this... tether..." she stared at Raven. "The tether isn't keeping him bound to the Astral Plane, is it? It's holding him *here*. Whatever that thing did to him, it's as if it made it Michael's natural state to be... to be... Astral?"

Raven nodded. "As good a term as any."

"Can the doctors help him?"

Raven shook her head. "I fear not." Seeing the despondency in the other woman's eyes, she added softly, "but, perhaps, I can. I warn you," she continued, "I cannot change your son's condition. But I know much of the Astral Plane. I can teach this to your son. I can help him to resist the currents which pull him towards it. It will be a... treatment for his condition, but it cannot be a cure."

Colleen absorbed that. "Do what you can," she said finally. "Help my son."

In another part of the hospital, Police Captain Renee Montoya could feel a tension headache coming on. She needed a smoke, badly. *As soon as she was back in her unmarked,* she promised herself. She placed one hand on her hip and felt the comforting outline of the pack of Duchesses. One day, she'd quit—hopefully long before the habit caused her any permanent damage. Right now, though? She could be dead from a gunshot wound or an overdose of Smileyx tomorrow. Long-term health hazards were a far more abstract danger to her mind. Besides, even if she tossed the pack away, she knew that she was probably still getting the equivalent of six to eight cigarettes worth of second-hand smoke every time she walked up the front steps to GCPD headquarters and strode past her colleagues.

*Methinks the lady-cop doth protest too much...*

She winced. It was getting harder to suppress that small voice of reason as she got older. She fought to return her attention to Vera Klarner, who was calmly explaining the situation. Much as she disliked having an organization like the CBI or the CIA encroaching on GCPD turf, she knew better
"Terrorists," Vera supplied. "Yes. They decided to plant me in STAR Labs to keep abreast of Dr. Lasky's progress. From that point on, I shared my information both with the cell and with CBI. The abduction happened sooner than was anticipated. Unfortunately, nobody had planned on the device being used before it had been thoroughly tested. That forced our hand."

Renee frowned. "So, as I understand it, there are two people currently in critical condition because one of them couldn't keep his toys locked up and the other couldn't resist playing with them."

Vera's lips twitched. "That's about the size of it, Captain." Her expression quickly grew serious. "I hope they both pull through."

"What happened again?"

Vera sighed. "I was too damned slow. Dr. Lasky tried to stop the test. They shot him once. At the same time, Michael dove in. I'd speculate that he was hoping to teleport them both to safety, though that's something we can ask him later. He and his mother vanished for... less than a minute, I'd say. When they reappeared, the boy was," she frowned, "intangible. And that Titan—Raven—was there with him."

Montoya absorbed that. "She teleports," she said quietly. Her headache was suddenly much worse. "Via the Astral plane. Just like the belt."

"Damn." She was going to apply for a job with a precinct in a small town, where she'd only ever have to deal with jaywalkers and an occasional drunk-and-disorderly.

"By the way," Vera added, "I do have regards for you from a former associate. That's if you're the same Renee Montoya who was a detective a couple years back..."
grunted. "Well. At least you're keeping it livable." He pulled out his Blackberry again. "Now, I understand your doctor has recommended you purchase some fish. Has this been done?"

Bruce nodded. "They're in the den," he said evenly. "This way." I am a mountain. I am solid. Unchanging. The winds blow, the sun beats down, the rains fall but I am unaffected. I am serene. I want to lift Krait up by the collar of his shirt and the seat of his pants and throw him through the bay win—He caught himself. "Just through here," he beckoned.

I am a mountain...

When the Signal went up the next night, Batman wasn't entirely sure he wasn't being set up. After hearing Raven's report, he wouldn't blame Montoya for holding him accountable. Sure, he'd done everything he could to dissuade Michael from taking up the costume. At the back of his mind, though, he wondered whether his own actions, night after night, had provided all the incentive the boy had needed. It was the old debate about violence on TV and in video games and the impact they might have on impressionable minds. No, the creators weren't directly responsible. And not everyone who played Castle Wolfenstein... he stopped. He was dating himself. Not everyone who played Silent Hill 2 got the urge to find a semi-automatic and go on a killing spree. But if playing games like that caused one person to go on a murderous rampage, it was one person too many.

Careful, Dick. Not everything that happens is your fault or your responsibility.

Yeah, but would Montoya see things the same way his inner voice did? Especially after what she'd said to Batgirl the other night?

When he was still a half-block away, he drew deeper into the shadows, the better to take a surreptitious view of his destination. He spotted no officers crouching beside chimneys, no SWAT skulking by stairway accesses, and no police helicopters circling. There was only Renee Montoya standing by the floodlight and a stylized bat insignia lighting up the night sky.

Batman lifted his binoculars to his eyelets. Montoya seemed tense to him, but not angry. He took a deep breath. Then slowly, deliberately, he broke cover. Bruce would have sneaked up and startled her, Dick knew. It was probably the closest Batman ever came to playing a practical joke. Dick had to wonder at the wisdom in that sort of approach. He had worn a police uniform himself at one point, and the one thing he was sure of was that trying to surprise a person with strong combat reflexes and a loaded weapon was damned stupid. Maybe it had worked for Bruce with Gordon, but Dick wouldn't chance it with Montoya.

The police captain's eyes widened and she took an involuntary step backward when she realized how close he'd been to her position. Before she could say anything, however, Dick cut her off. "I didn't want to show myself until I had a better idea of the reception I'd be getting."

Montoya sighed. "You're clear. We still haven't been able to talk to the kid, but we know you didn't try to recruit him."

Batman nodded.

Her expression turned shrewd. "You're still second-guessing yourself, though."

"It shows that much?"

She smiled then. For one instant, Batman seemed almost boyish in his chagrin. "Actually," she chuckled, "that cowl covers a multitude of sins. However, " she raised her index finger, "by your own admission, you weren't sure how we were going to react, which would imply that you weren't
"It happened on my watch, Captain," Batman said quietly. "And it might not have, had I not been... active."

Montoya sniffed. "You know, I think there's a Frank Capra movie that goes into what the world would be like if the hero of the film never existed. You should rent it." She sighed. "The kid disregarded every warning he got. He doesn't deserve what happened—nobody does—but he's only got himself to blame for... What did happen, anyway?"

Batman considered for a moment. "The best explanation so far is that instead of just passing through the Astral Plane on his way from point A to point B, something went wrong and he's partly stuck there."

"How do you unstick him?"

"That's the problem. I'm not sure if we can." He sighed. "This is more Raven's area of expertise. If Michael's condition ends up being permanent, and he's turned meta on us, then she'll need to work with him on controlling what he can and can't do." He grimaced. "Sorry. I've been thinking about this all day."

"No, it's fine," Montoya said. "So... he might end up... one of you after all."

Batman shook his head. "That's for down the road. Maybe. Years down the road. Right now the focus has to be on finding out the extent of his abilities and making sure he only uses them when he intends to. I'm not the best person to oversee his training in any case."

"That's Raven?"

"That's Raven."

Montoya nodded. "By the way, Romy sends regards."

"Romy?" Batman blinked. "Romy Chandler?"

"The same. She's working with CBI now. Doing well."

Dick smiled broadly. "That's great to hear."

"Yeah. So..."

"So Raven's spoken with the kid's mother. She understands the situation pretty well, and she's all for getting him the help he needs. That makes it easier. It's never ideal when we have to go behind the parents' backs. Just one more layer of stress. When it comes to untrained metas, stress is what you don't want."

"I can imagine." She took a deep breath. "How's... Batm—I mean, Bruce?"

The smile fell away. "It's an adjustment. But he'll deal. He always does."

"Tell him the instructor position is open for him if he wants it." She waited for his nod. "Now, about the Triads... You say Cobblepot's working with them?"

"I don't have any solid evidence yet. Nothing that'll stand up in court or convince a jury. But yes. He is."
Montoya absorbed that. "Sounds like you've got some work to do, then." She smiled. "I'd suggest you snap to it."

Dick raised his fingers to his forehead in a mock-salute. "Aye, aye, Captain! Snapping to."

Renee laughed. "Get out of here."

"What's on the agenda for Monday?" Barbara asked a week later.

Dick finished the last of his fries. "Bruce has his session with Alex, so I'm meeting him after it again. We'll probably have an early supper and then, he asked if I could give him a hand with a few things at the manor. I'll patrol from there."

Barbara picked up her plate and wheeled over to the sink. "Oh."

"Something wrong?"

"Nothing." She slammed the plate into the sink and hurled the cutlery down on top of it. "Absolutely nothing."

She wheeled back, grabbed the ketchup and mustard and rolled over to the fridge.

"Hey." Dick jumped up and intercepted her on her way back.

"Out of my way, FBW."

"Hey, talk to me." She hadn't used that nickname since he'd admitted to her that he actually disliked it. Considering that Barbara had a photographic memory, this was not a good sign. He, however, did not have a photographic memory. Which left him at a disadvantage here and now. "What am I...?"

Not her birthday. That's not for another two months. And our first anniversary living together isn't until October. It's barely July. So why was this Monday so impor... Oh. "Monday," he said softly, "is the second anniversary of our getting back together."

"Bingo."

Dick winced. "I'm sorry, Babs. It totally slipped my mind."

"Obviously."

"Babs..."

"It's fine, Dick," she said wearily. "I know. Are you planning on making a routine of this? Getting together after his sessions?"

"They take a lot out of him," Dick's tone was placating. "He tries to hide it, but I can tell. I just want him to know that he's not going through it alone."

Barbara choked off a laugh. "Not going through it alone? Dick, between you and my dad, when's the last time he was alone? He knows he can count on you—on us. But that doesn't mean that you have to spend every free minute at the manor!" She turned away. "I knew going into the relationship that with the kind of lives we both lead, there'd have to be a bit of give and take. I just... wasn't planning on it being me doing most of the giving," she sighed, "and you doing some of the giving, and..."

"And Bruce doing all of the taking?" Dick's voice was suddenly colder.
"I don't mean it like that."

"Actually, I think you do. Babs, he's been through."

"I know what he's been through. What he's going through. And it's hard and it's hell and it stinks, but you can't always be there for him just because, for once, he's letting you!"

For a long moment, Dick just looked at her. Then, "You're wrong Babs." He took a ragged breath. "You're..." He exhaled. "I'm going out for some fresh air."

"Dick, I—"

"Save it for later," he cut her off. "I need some air." He started to leave, then spun around. "And something else to think about? All this time, one of our biggest issues with him was that he wouldn't talk things out. Well, Babs, he's trying. And I'll be damned if I'm going to tell him I don't want to hear it."

Barbara flinched. "But you'll say it to me," she said softly.

The barb hit home. Dick winced. "I—"

Barbara turned her back. "Go ahead, Dick. Get your fresh air. You'll probably have to drive up to Bristol to get away from the city smog anyway. But things can't go on like this forever. Sooner or—"

"Later," Dick cut her off. He stepped out quickly and pulled the door shut after him.

Barbara lowered her head as her hands clenched to fists in her lap. What was this situation doing to them?

In a diner on the outskirts of Sanford, Selina Kyle nearly spit her coffee out all over her copy of the Maine Daily News. "Feline Fatale at large," she read the headline in disbelief "The notorious Catwoman, late of Gotham City, paid a visit to Lincoln County this week..."

According to the article, the police had dusted the all rooms at the bed and breakfast for fingerprints. Crap. Her prints were in the FBI database. Why hadn't Oracle caught this? If she had, she'd know where you were. For a moment, she wondered whether Barbara had let the query get by out of petty revenge. No, she decided. She knew Barbara better than that. Somehow, this had just slipped through... Oh, no. She read further. The thief confessed to being my accomplice? I don't work with... Damn those lazy bastards and their crazy imaginations. They must have built a theory and then invented the 'facts' to fit it. Terrific! Now, there was an all-points bulletin out for her. They'd be combing the area for her. And Sanford wasn't anywhere near far enough away from Wiscasset.

Helena began to fuss then, drawing unwanted attention her way. The article mentioned she had a child with her. At least it didn't say they suspected her of kidnapping her.

Forcing herself to stay calm, Selina got up, lifted her daughter out of the high chair, and carried her outside to the car. It was less than an hour to the New Hampshire border, but she wouldn't feel safe again until she'd put considerably more distance between herself and the Maine state line.

How long could she keep this up? She wondered.

"Da!" Helena exclaimed.

Selina felt a pang. "He's not here, Baby," she whispered. But I wish he were..."
Dodge was sitting up in bed and listening as Raven explained a basic meditation technique when Colleen Lasky walked in.

"Mom!" he exclaimed, the lesson forgotten. "Where've you been? I though you were coming after breakfast. Did you bring me ice cream?" He blinked innocently at Raven. "When I'm sick, I always get ice cream."

"But you are not sick, Michael," Raven reminded him. "You are changed."

"Not when it comes to loving ice cr—" He broke off suddenly as Colleen stifled a sob. "Mom? What's...?" His fair skin grew paler. "It's not... Dad?"

His mother sagged. "When I came in this morning, he was... they said he didn't suffer. He never r-regained con-cons..." She leaned forward to embrace him. Her arms passed through his torso.

"No," Dodge whispered in a voice nobody could hear. "No. Not Dad. It's not fair."

"Michael," Raven began softly.

Dodge turned toward her, his eyes hard, as his body regained its substance. "You'd better start teaching me everything I need to do to get out of here," he said tersely. "Because once I do, I'm going to find the person who killed him and I'm going to take him to the Astral plane and feed him to the gulo!"
Chapter Summary

As Selina's problems rise, the Teen Titans consider a move, Dick and Barbara talk things out, and Bruce finds an unexpected advocate.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kathy, Sara, Debbie, Juliet, and Aiyokusama for the beta!

Thanks to Lucius Complex of the multilingual community on livejournal for Cantonese help (a translation appears at the end of the chapter).

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"Brand New Me" written by Kris Bergsnes and Lee Thomas Miller. Recorded by John Michael Montgomery on his Brand New Me album (Atlantic, 2000).

There's a warrior and a victim living deep
Inside all of us.
We have to choose to fight or surrender
When the world beats us up.
I know where my weakness lies,
but I know it's a fight that I can win.
I may get broken trying to get up
But I can't wait to start again.

—Kris Bergsnes, Lee Thomas Miller, "Brand New Me"

Chapter 7—Where My Weakness Lies

Bruce had seen Alex serious, apologetic, stubborn, and—very occasionally—irritated. This was the first time that he had ever seen him outraged. "Confirm that for me, once more, please," he said evenly. "Krait appeared at your door without prior warning, and without a preliminary meeting in a more neutral setting."

Bruce nodded, even as he felt his face grow hot. He wasn't used to having other people fight these battles for him, and he wasn't sure he liked it.

Alex pursed his lips. "Excuse me one moment, please." He picked up the telephone on his desk and punched in a number. "Sylvia Mackay's office, please." He waited a moment in silence. "Yes, I'm calling for Sylvia Mackay. This is Dr. Morgenstern. Well, have her call me back as soon as she comes in." Whatever the person on the other end of the connection was saying didn't seem to please him. He took a deep breath. "Then page her. My cell phone is…"
After he'd given his contact information and hung up, he turned back to Bruce. "I don't know what to say," he said simply. "What Krait did was completely out of line. It shouldn't have happened. Period. I'll be looking for an explanation when the extended care co-ordinator calls me back."

Bruce leaned forward. "Krait's behaviour was atypical, then."

"Absolutely. The first meeting should have either been back at St. Swithin's when you were on the ward, or at Krait's office. You are supposed to be meeting with him on a weekly basis, but those meetings are meant to take place in a more professional setting, at least initially. Home visits come later."

Bruce felt a smile spread across his face. Then, a moment later, a frown replaced it. "Is there a way to prevent home visits altogether?"

Alex started to nod, then reconsidered. "Well. No, not to eliminate them completely, but certainly there's a way to reduce them. And you already know it, I suspect. Cooperate. No matter how tedious and inane you may find his suggestions during your meetings, don't let it show. Fall back on your acting abilities if you have to. Go back to—"

"To being 'affable easygoing Brucie'," Bruce interrupted with a scowl. "I thought that one of your goals was to reintegrate the different parts of my psyche. Instead, it sounds like you mean me to perpetuate the schism."

"Acting out a role," Alex pointed out, "isn't so much pretending to be what you aren't, as it is finding those elements within yourself best suited to the task at hand and bringing them to the fore. On a personal note," he added, "I could easily point out to you that I act somewhat differently at a board meeting than I do in session here; and differently again when my workday is over and I go home to my family. Playing a role doesn't necessarily have to mean changing—or suppressing—your personality."

Bruce mulled that over. "Suppose," he said slowly, "that I don't follow his suggestions? I don't mean," he hastened to add, "that I would deliberately provoke him. But suppose, hypothetically, that he were to once more arrive unexpectedly and I simply… don't wish to accommodate his visit at that time?"

Alex's eyebrows drew together. "That's another thing," he said. "Krait should be calling to set up these visits, not popping in unannounced. However, to answer your question directly, Bruce, even though you're out of Arkham, the old paradigm still applies. In other words, the more you work with us… the less you’ll have to. We're coming up on 30 days since your release. At 60, we can re-evaluate and possibly extend your unsupervised time."

Bruce looked up. "You mean to extend the intervals between… checks," Bruce surmised. "Twenty minutes instead of fifteen?"

"That's one option," Alex agreed. He ignored the sarcasm in Bruce's tone. "We can also look at scaling back the hours that you need to spend under supervision. Say, 8 AM to 9 PM, as opposed to 7 to 10. Continue to make progress, and we can think about a full day free."

Bruce started to smile. Then, abruptly, the scowl returned. "And if I don't," he finished, "I could lose whatever little I've gained back. I can't believe this." He made no attempt to conceal his anger "You're saying I have no choice but to work with him, or…"

"You always have a choice," Alex said. "The same one you've had all along. You need to decide for yourself whether staying out of Arkham is worth the cost." He paused a beat. "I do know that
different options have different… prices," he added, shooting Bruce a meaningful look. "You just need to decide for yourself which bundle works best for you."

Bruce nodded, still frowning, as he considered Alex's words. There were a few possibilities that sprang to mind. He could turn fugitive and spend the foreseeable future hiding under a new identity. He could take off in his private jet and retire to some island in the Caribbean. He could return to inpatient status. Or… he could deal with Krait, and therapy, and near-constant surveillance… and the hope of getting back some semblance of his old life. He grimaced. Lying low for a time was one thing, but he wasn't about to cut and run. He didn't think he could live with himself if he tried it. The Caribbean would lose its appeal for him inside of a month—and that, too, would be a coward's choice. Either way, his life—and his family—would be gone. In that light, neither option was acceptable. In no way was he prepared to go back to Arkham or to a hospital psych ward, or even to some quiet rest home upstate. True, in some ways, his life had been easier in Arkham than it was now; but then, since when had he ever wanted things easy? He shook his head slowly. It would be giving up. Worse. It would be failing a course that some of his enemies had stayed. That, he set his jaw grimly, was unacceptable.

Alex was right. He did have options. No, he didn't like any of them much, but there was still some comfort in having the ability to choose one. And putting up with Krait was his best choice. At least it was for now. Bruce closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and reminded himself once more of how far he'd come in the last year. He wasn't about to throw everything away because he had a personality conflict with some jumped-up bureaucrat. The courts may have given him control over my circumstances. Only I can give him control over me. And I refuse to give that up.

He opened his eyes and settled back into his chair. "Last week," he began, "if memory serves, we had begun to discuss one of my blind spots."

"Particularly," Bruce said, "when dwelling on the condition is counterproductive…"

"On three," Batman said between clenched teeth, as he deliberately took out his jumpline and held it before him with his thumb extended, trusting that the woman behind him would understand. "One…"

He and Batgirl moved simultaneously. As the grapnel on the end of his cable wrapped itself around a fire escape, he pressed the release button and rose into the air, flinging batarangs as he ascended. Batgirl crouched low and let fly with several of her own.

Several of the Triad members broke and ran. Their leader, however, stood his ground. "There's only two of 'em!" He snapped. "We can take 'em!"

"Your banter's improving," Batman shot back, tossing more batarangs. "Been practicing?" He ducked a flying kick, grabbed on to the banister railing with both hands, and swung both feet into her opponent's mid-section. He screamed and crashed heavily down on one knee.

"Have condo downtown, fancy car, jet, yacht, two… copters and five caves?" Batgirl asked. She swung to another balcony, then leaped, and caught the railing one story lower. "Hmmm…" He eyed an aluminium-frame lawn-chair speculatively. Then he quickly scaled the balcony, grabbed the chair, and climbed back over. He fired off another cable and then, gripping it between his ankles, dangled upside down. He swung the lawn-chair directly into the head of one of the punks below. The young
man dropped. That worked well, he thought. Let's do it again. He could and did—twice more. The last to fall was the leader. The remaining Triad members bolted.

Batman somersaulted down from his perch. "Don't forget to frisk 'em," he said, as he and Batgirl fastened plastic bindings on the wrists and ankles of the fallen.

"Not amateur." She sounded miffed.

"Hey. Even pros can have off-nights," he said. "Remind me to tell you someday about the time I forgot to make a back-up copy of a crooked ADA's confession. And speaking of confessions…"

One of the unconscious gangsters was starting to come to. Batman seized him by the shoulders and pulled him upright into a sitting position.

The young man—Dick didn't think he was much older than twenty—opened bleary eyes which snapped wider instantly at the sight of the cowled visage, scant inches away.

"How much is Cobblepot offering you?"

The captive gulped and let out a strangled cry. "Mng Sik Ying Mun!"

Batman grimaced. He hadn't spoken Cantonese in a long time. Still, there was always the chance that the punk was telling him the truth, and he really didn't speak English. He doubted it, though. "Moh Ngak Ngo!" he spat out the syllables. "Lei Sik Meh Yeh?"

If anything, the man looked even more terrified. "Moh Yeh! Moh Yeh!" he whimpered.

You don't know anything, huh? Well, we'll just make sure of that. Batman leaned in even closer. "Moh Ngak Ngo!" He repeated in a harsh whisper.

The youth squeezed his eyes shut. "Kau Mang!" He was sobbing now. "Ngo Mng Sik Yeh! Ngo Mng Sik Yeh!*"

He hesitated. It was just barely possible that the young man didn't have the answers he wanted. And since he and Cass did have a backup plan…

The black-and-whites picked that moment to show up. Two squad cars sealed off the alley and four officers approached.

"They're all yours," Batman announced, letting his prisoner drop to the asphalt. "Let's go, Batgirl."

Two cables snaked upwards. A moment later, both vigilantes rose into the air. The officers watched them go.

Once up on the rooftop, Batman turned to face his companion. "You got a tracer on one of the ones who cut out?"

Batgirl nodded.

Batman smiled. "Good. Let's hope it pans out, then." He'd tagged three of his own, but then, he'd had more practice. "Night's still young. You take the downtown core. I'll swing over to Tricorner. We'll rendezvous at Wayne Tower at midnight."

"Oracle said you wanted to see me?"

Raven looked up from the writing desk at the costumed vigilante perched on her windowsill.
Come in, Timothy, she projected. I've left the balcony door unlocked.

A moment later, she heard his boots land on the concrete flooring outside. He entered the hotel room quickly and shut the door behind him. Once inside, he looked around appreciatively. "Nice place."

It was of Barbara's choosing. But it is more than acceptable, she added.

Harrier massaged his temples. "Can we switch to voice?" He asked. "I've got a headache."

Raven nodded. "As you wish. Michael's mother met with me today."

"Regarding?"

Raven hesitated. "You asked me some months ago to assist you in training the newer members of the Teen Titans. Michael's mother is reluctant to allow him to relocate to San Francisco. I concur with her decision, although my reasoning is not hers: she does not wish to be parted from her son at this juncture, while I do not believe that the move would be good for the boy at this time."

Harrier shifted from one foot to the other. "Look, if you're backing out—"

"I do not wish to do so. Nor do I consider it advisable. The current Teen Titans roster is lacking in both discipline and cohesion. Timothy," she added, "I do not mean this to reflect on your ability to lead the team. However your ability to train the team, to enable them to function as a team, falls short of my own. It is not advisable for me to leave Gotham. Therefore, I would propose that the Titans relocate here."

Harrier blinked. "Here," he repeated. "To Gotham."

"The Astral plane has grown turbulent, of late. I would not chance its tides for casual travel. And journey by more conventional means would soon tire the team."

A polite way to point out that jetsetting across three time zones was going to take it toll sooner rather than later, Harrier reflected. With Selina out of the picture, Dick could use the backup. And Raven's points about the Titans were painfully accurate. They were a gang, right now. But they weren't a team. He and Cassie, as veteran members, had been trying their level best to create one. The problem was that the two of them didn't always see eye-to-eye either. It was a lot easier to lead when your friends cheerfully deferred to your expertise. The new recruits didn't know him, didn't have a history with him, and seemed as eager to exploit his own weaknesses as they were a mutual foe's. Or, he wondered glumly, was he the mutual foe?"

But coming back to Gotham also meant coming back to his past. He'd made enough of a mess of things to want to just put it all behind him and not look back. It wasn't going to be easy facing it at every turn. Careful, Tim. That line of reasoning is not only selfish, it's childish. You think running away from the past is going to solve anything? More to the point, if his own leadership skills were lacking, by returning to Gotham, he'd be in close proximity to the best leader the Titans ever had. Not that Dick didn't have other things on his mind, right now. But maybe, Tim reflected, he could pick up a few tips through observation and analysis. And maybe our being here will help take some of the pressure off him, too.

He nodded slowly. "I'll talk to Cassie about it in the morning. If she agrees, the rest of the team will follow."

Raven permitted herself the tiniest of smiles. "Then let us hope that her meeting with Wonder Woman has gone as well as mine with you."
On Wednesday morning, they finally broke through to the cast-iron park bench in the centre of the garden. Gordon smiled. "Bet you forgot this was here."

Bruce took a long knife to a clump of Canada thistle. "Actually," he countered, as he stooped to loosen the soil around the roots, "I've been hoping to uncover it for the last few days." He wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his sleeve. "It's the mid-point," he explained, as he inserted the tip of the knife beneath the plant and levered it out of the ground. "We've cleared off half the lawn area." He looked behind him critically. "We'll need to resod when this is done, though." The ground that they had been clearing was pockmarked with bare spots where weeds had overcome grass. They'd been no match for a good set of gardening tools, though. Bruce sighed inwardly. It was a far cry from the "Astroturf effect" Dick had joked about, once upon a time.

"If you'd asked my opinion when we began this little project," Jim interrupted Bruce's reverie, as he swept aside the majority of the dust and debris on the bench with the back of his hand, "I would have told you to get a barrel of Nature's Avenger, or Round Up. Better yet, one of those industrial herbicides like White K. Then I would have suggested you apply the contents liberally to everything within these stone walls, and start fresh." He observed his handiwork critically, then sat down on the bench and leaned back.

"You could have said something."

"And spoil your fun?"

Bruce blinked. It hadn't occurred to him to view the work in quite that light until now. But yes, he was enjoying himself. There was something immensely cathartic about this labor. Tearing away the unwanted foliage, he was able to banish his sense of helplessness over his current situation. His loss of autonomy didn't chafe him as closely. He permitted himself a small half-smile as he joined Jim on the bench.

"I was meaning to ask you," Jim ventured after a moment. "Before I moved into the cottage, I did finally go through Barbara's things. My ex-wife," he clarified. "I wrote her. Asked if she wanted any of it back after all this time. She didn't, but she asked if I wouldn't mind hanging onto it until Christmas, in case Jimmy wants to look through it." He shook his head. "I can't believe that boy's nearly eighteen, now. I didn't fight her when she asked for sole custody—the way I was making enemies at the time of the divorce, I didn't want to risk making my son a target. Still..." He sighed. "I wish I'd at least tried to be part of his life." He took a deep breath. "I hope he does come in for Christmas, but I wouldn't blame him if he doesn't."

Bruce nodded. It occurred to him that he should say something. It wasn't as though having estranged children was a foreign concept to him. And yet, it was, he realised. He'd definitely had his disagreements with his boys. Some had been heated. Some had gone on simply because neither party had wanted to be the one to back down first. In some cases, he'd messed up royally and compounded things by refusing to admit his errors. But there was 'estranged' and there was 'estranged'. At least he knew his children.

Jim must have felt Bruce's eyes on him, because he looked at him, smiled a bit self-consciously, and turned away. "I'm getting sentimental in my old age," he muttered. "What I was meaning to ask you before I went off on that tangent was whether you'd mind... helping me," his voice dropped a few decibels, "when I go through Sarah's things." He closed his eyes. "I think it's time. I just don't know if I can."

Bruce looked down and studied his fingers. One day, and soon, he would need to do the same himself— with Alfred's effects. He wasn't looking forward to the task. But as difficult as he would find it, it was heartening to know that if he needed to, there were people who would help him with it.
And he did know it—even if he wasn't ready to ask it of anyone yet. But Jim was…

"Of course," he said quickly. "Whenever you're... prepared."

Catwoman waited tensely as the balding middle-aged man with the long delicate fingers surveyed the contents of the pouch. He held one of the gemstones up to the light, then examined it more closely beneath a jewelers glass. He let out a low whistle.

Although she knew that she was taking a risk, appearing in costume, she was nearly at her wit's end. The jewelry stores she'd tried as soon as she'd arrived in Manchester had taken one look at the stones that she was attempting to sell and demanded proof of ownership. She'd had the same problem at the six pawnshops she'd visited. Each clerk had insisted on seeing ID. That in itself wasn't a problem. Selina had driver's licenses, credit cards and birth certificates under several cover IDs. The difficulty was that they were all New York and New Jersey-issue. Once they'd seen that, nobody had wanted to deal with her. In desperation, she'd gone downtown and made a few inquiries. There were ways to find less legitimate channels if a person knew the proper way to ask. Asking had brought her to a nondescript storefront on Second Street in Manchester's West Side. She knew that she would be lucky to get a fraction of what the gems were worth, but she needed cash.

She'd worn the suit to establish her bona fides. Catwoman didn't have to show ID, and the fences were less likely to ask difficult questions this way.

As the man set down his glass, however, she saw regret in his eyes. "It's like this, Catwoman," he said regretfully. "I'm tempted. Seriously. But if you carried these beauties across state lines and they're hot, I'm looking at federal time if I handle them." He carefully poured the stones back into the pouch and handed it back to her. "With what these babies are worth, that's over forty years. Sorry. No deal."

She wanted to scream. She was carrying hundreds of thousands of dollars and she couldn't exchange them for a cup of coffee. "What do you suggest I do?" She nearly spat out.

The fence shrugged eloquently. "Find someone in Jersey to take them off your hands."

"I haven't got enough for the gas to get there," she shot back. She'd spent a good portion of her cash reserves for a hotel with a babysitting service, figuring that it would be worth the extra expense if she could sell the gemstones. It had been a gamble, but she hadn't been able to think of a safer place to leave Helena. She focused pleading eyes on the man seated before her. "Isn't there something you can do for me?"

He thought for a moment. "I could give you a hundred for the bullwhip," he said slowly. "We don't get a lot of celebrities in these parts. I can mark it up enough to make it worth my while to take it off your hands."

Selina's nostrils flared. She had a good mind to let him have it—though not in the way he meant. "Forget it!" she snapped, and spun on her heel, slamming the door on her way out.

She'd never had problems like these in Gotham.

"I've spoken with Krait's supervisor," Alex said the following Monday. "As it turns out, he admitted to her that he might have overstepped." Alex's lips twitched at Bruce's expression. "Yes, I know. 'Might have'. To be fair, he's just recently completed a tour with the military. He's still adjusting to some of the differences in his duties now that he's performing them in civilian life."
Bruce's eyebrows drew together. "And if I told you that I would prefer to deal with someone else?"

Alex stroked his beard. "You can make a request, and it will be reviewed. In the interim, however, you would need to continue working with the professional to whom you've already been assigned. Also, the request is more likely to be favourably looked upon if you've at least made an effort to work with him. I have to tell you, though, Bruce, the odds of having your request approved are minuscule." He steepled his hands. "It would have been difficult enough to change caseworkers had your commitment been voluntary. Seeing as it wasn't..." He made a face. "Even assuming an exception could be made, cutbacks are hitting everyone, Bruce. It could be months before another social worker has a vacant slot. There's no way we can leave the situation that long." He sighed. "I've asked Krait to come by this afternoon."

Bruce clamped his hands onto the armrests of his chair. "You what?"

"This place was the closest thing to neutral ground I could come up with," Alex said. "We've established that his coming to your home was an intrusion. I didn't think you'd care much to call on him at his office."

"And you didn't warn me ahead of time, because you thought I'd bolt?"

"Actually, that wasn't a concern," Alex said. He leaned forward fractionally in his chair. "Suppose," he said softly, "that I had notified you and then, for completely legitimate reasons, you had to cancel this session. Due to illness, for example? If Krait is coming into this situation presupposing that you'll be uncooperative—"

"Jim would vouch for me."

"He would," Alex agreed. "And that could lead to a whole inquiry into whether his past friendship with you is leading him to compromise his judgement and cover for you." Alex sighed. "Thinking it over again, now, I probably should have called you during the week, and for that I am sorry. I was weighing the potential risks against the potential benefits, and I couldn't come up with a perfect result. Choosing the lesser of two evils, is still choosing evil, though."

Bruce said nothing, either to absolve Alex or to blame him. He did, however, relax once more in his seat.

Alex took a deep breath. "I've asked him to come in to apologize," he clarified. "Things couldn't have got off to a worse start and he should have realized it." In a quieter voice, he added, "but you're right, too. I should have taken into greater account the fact that you haven't missed a session yet—and I know that some of the ground we've been covering together hasn't been the easiest." He placed his hand on his phone. "I can still call him," he said, softly. "I can advise him not to come today, and set up an appointment for you at his office later in the week. It's just around the corner from here," he added as an afterthought.

Bruce shook his head slowly. "No," he said. "If I have to deal with him then, I suppose I should get this over with. I would prefer a different caseworker, however, if at all possible."

"Noted." Alex took his hand off the receiver and picked up his pen. "Now, where were we?"

The smell of fresh bread greeted Dick when he got home. Fresh bread and, he concentrated for a moment, something involving apples and cinnamon. He walked into the dining room to find the table set with a white cloth. Two navy blue taper candles rose sentinel-like from silver holders.

"I know you probably had supper with Bruce," Barbara said quietly, "but I was hoping maybe we
could have a bite together after you come in from patrol." She smiled, trying to mask her tension. "It'll all keep until later. The microwave…"

He crossed the distance between them in two quick strides, knelt to her level and grasped her hand. She encircled his shoulders with her free arm and closed her eyes as he pulled her closer. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I know he needs you too, but I don't want to lose you…"

"Sh…" He caressed her cheek. "You won't. You know you won't."

"I do—it's just, all of this… sometimes it seems like I saw more of you when…" She squeezed her eyes tightly shut. "Damn. I don't mean to be a shrew."

"And I don't mean to freeze you out, it's just… Look. If you've been cooped up with me for a few hours and you need to get away for a bit, you can go off by yourself or you can check who's in Gotham and just call and get together. With Bruce, it's your dad or it's me. And he's with your dad most of the time. They both need a break from each other; even if neither one usually admits it. But," he kissed the top of her head, "I never wanted you to think that it's got to come down to my choosing between you and Bruce. It doesn't have to be either-or."

"If you're thinking of having him over here for dinner more often-"

"Well, I was thinking more along the lines of—"

"…I don't mind. Not every week, but—"

"…Your joining us Monday afternoons for an early—you don't? But I thought—"

Barbara shook her head, but she was smiling. "Let's see how it goes, alright? I'm not promising that I'll be okay with it indefinitely, and," she hugged him once more, then loosened her arms, "I don't want to get locked into a schedule or a routine. Let's take things one week at a time."

Dick nodded. "You got it."

"I love you."

"Enough not to stick me with the dishes later?"

Barbara made a face. "You wash. I'll dry. I'll get done in—"

A soft but insistent beeping broke into their conversation. "What in…?" Barbara set her jaw grimly. "Something's on the news. Turn on the TV?"

"Got it."

It didn't take long to find the right station.

"What was she doing in Maine?" Dick wondered aloud.

"Besides getting away from us? No clue. But I'll tell you one thing," Barbara stated with conviction, "she wasn't—Damn!" She sucked in her breath. "I did not just hear… Kidnapping?" She exhaled noisily. "Of course," One would have had to possess the perception of a pebble to miss the sarcasm in her tone. "I mean that's the only possible explanation for her having a kid with her, isn't it?"

Dick shook his head. "Anything you can do?"

"Yeah. But I need to get upstairs to my systems in order to do it."
The timer went off. "Go on," Dick said. "I'll get the…"

"Pie," Barbara supplied.

"…Pie out of the oven and then," he glanced out the window and sighed. "It looks like I've got my own alarm to answer." He pointed to the night sky, newly illuminated by the light of the Bat-signal. "Catch you later."

"Go." She let out an exaggerated sigh, then smiled. "I'll be here when you get back."

Catwoman forcefully suppressed the blind unadulterated rage that had been pulsing through her veins ever since she'd turned on the TV and caught the segment. Did nobody research anymore? She was used to taking certain sensationalist newsmagazines with a grain of salt, but this had been CNN!

_I do not use accomplices and I am not a kidnapper!_ Still seething, she carefully disabled the security alarm and eased the apartment door open. Again, she forced herself to remain calm. She wasn't used to operating in broad daylight, but it was after nine o'clock. Most people were working. She'd also made sure that the hallway was clear before she'd taken out her lock-picks.

It had been relatively easy for her to track the fence to his home—a fifth-floor walk-up. The first evening, she'd found out his apartment number. The second, she'd stood with binoculars on a nearby rooftop and watched him long enough to case the interior. The man lived alone. As she'd half-expected, he kept his assets where they wouldn't be frozen: in a wall-safe. By night three, she had the combination. All that remained for her to do this morning was to go in, grab the cash, and get out.

Ten minutes later, and—by her best estimate—eighty thousand dollars richer, she was back in her rental car, driving toward the hotel, and cursing the media anew. The news came on and she listened, dreading what she was about to hear, but somehow powerless to turn the dial.

"It is now reported that the notorious Catwoman has been seen with a young child. Police are currently combing missing persons reports, in the hope of verifying whether the toddler was abducted. It is unknown at this time whether any ransom demands have been made. Officer Paul Little had this to say…"

With an angry cry, she turned off the radio. This was trouble. This was real trouble. Now they knew to look for a woman with a child—and there was no way that she could leave Helena somewhere! She was going to have to lie low, live cautiously…

_And only steal when you have to?_

She bit down on the inside of her lip. She'd given up stealing years ago.

_But it's like riding a bike, isn't it? You never really forget._

She tried to silence the voice, but its whisper was relentless.

_First, you put the suit back on. Then you seek out the underworld. Then, you start stealing… just a little, from someone who probably deserves it. What next?_

Selina took a deep breath. Enough was enough. She was tired of running, tired of not having a set goal, tired of coasting minute-to-minute. Living for the chase had been fun, once—and, yes, it had felt good to discover that she hadn't lost her skills as a cat burglar. The thing was, she had other responsibilities, now; one of which was sixteen months old with black hair and blue eyes. And it wasn't fair to drag _her_ from pillar to post, either.
She exhaled slowly. When she'd left Gotham, she'd agonized over her decision for weeks. It seemed odd that she'd made up her mind to return in a split-second. And yet, she had. She didn't know whether she was ready to have Bruce back in her life—or, if Bruce even wanted her back in his. She wouldn't blame him if he didn't. But she couldn't go on like this. And if her luck had run out and she was going to go down, she'd rather it be on her home turf, with people that she could trust to look after Helena close by.

Less than an hour later, Selina cast a smiling look over her shoulder at her daughter, who was babbling to herself in the car seat. "Just sit back, kiddo," she said as she turned her key in the ignition. "We're going home."

Translation of Cantonese dialogue:

"I don't know any English!"
"Don't lie to me! How much do you know?"
"Nothing, nothing!"
"Don't lie to me!"
"Please! I don't know anything!"
8. Pulled to Pieces

Chapter Summary

The Teen Titans' first night in Gotham could have gone better... Dick has a job for Barbara that may force her to confront some old demons. And Bruce's new restrictions are getting harder to bear every day.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm using the following TT roster: Harrier, Wonder Girl, Ravager, Kid Devil, and Miss Martian. Failure to include other team members should not necessarily be interpreted as dislike of said team members. I might not have a good enough handle on their voices, abilities, etc; or their inclusion may unbalance the story.

A/N: Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, Jules, and Aiyokusama for the beta!

A/N: "Natural High" written by Nancy Ford and Gretchen Cryer, from the I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It On the Road soundtrack (Fynsworth Alley, 1978).

"I feel all pulled to pieces

Can't find inspiration anymore

There's so many people leaning on me

I'm getting run into the ground

Everyone's wanting something from me

And there's not enough of me to go around..."

Gretchen Cryer, "Natural High"

Chapter 8-Pulled to Pieces

Wonder Girl stifled a curse as she lassoed an oversized Venus flytrap, pinning its fronds together. "Explain it to me again, Harrier," she snapped, as her companion continued to hurl "R"-shaped throwing knives in all directions. "Lexcorp Aviation—Luthor's company—is responsible for adding a few metric tonnes of pollutants to the atmosphere... Is that just in Gotham, or overall?"

"What she's trying to ask," Ravager swatted at an intruding Bengal clockvine with her bo staff, "is why the frak are we busting our chops to protect Luthor from Poison Ivy? Hey!" The vine wrapped itself several times around the bo staff and jerked it out of the startled teen's hand. Another length of vegetation writhed toward her and she quickly drew her sword and sliced through the leafy tendril. It recoiled, leaking a trail of green sap.
Harrier planted his own staff, vaulted out of the way of a cloud of needles and delivered a whack to
the base of a large sundew. Its flypaper-like leaves receded, twitching and waiting. "First," he said,
"it's not Lexcorp anymore, it's Davenport. They bought it out."

"Same difference," Kid Devil shot back. "They're both almost as bad as Ivy. Since when did the
Teen Titans start rescuing bad guys from other bad guys?" His eye fell on a nearby barrel of jet fuel.
"Guys... I think I see a way to end this quickly!"

"Second," Harrier continued, "Davenport Aviation employs over 500 people at this facility. They've
all got families to support. We're doing it for them." He slashed at the clockvine, severing the tendril
that held Ravager's staff. "Here," he kicked it across the ground to her.

"Wait," Miss Martian spoke softly, but her voice carried. "Wouldn't cold neutralize the vegetation?"

Wonder Girl began to smile. "Yes. Yes, it would. Harrier, doesn't Batman have one of Mr. Freeze's
guns around here?"

"Batcave Three," Harrier nodded. "It's about a half-mile away. It's also locked down but I can
compensate for that," he thought aloud. He glanced at Wonder Girl. "I'm going to need a lift to get
there. Can you handle things here, if Miss Martian flies me?" His gaze flickered to M'Gann. "You
can do that, right?"

Miss Martian nodded.

So did Wonder Girl. "We'll be fine. Go."

As the two left, Wonder Girl frowned. It was now three Titans against an army of predatory plants.
And, she winced, that included Kid Devil, who had recently lost his metagenic abilities. She'd
completely forgotten that salient point in the heat of the moment. This worsened their odds. She
considered: the building was empty now, save for the Titans. The night staff had long since escaped.
And although the plants could definitely destroy the concrete and glassteel construction, they
wouldn't be able to do much damage in the twenty minutes or so that it would take for the others to
return. She bit her lip. She might have grown up in Georgetown, but her tactical training was pure
Themiscyra. The very idea of calling a retreat rankled her. In this case, however, it was the only
smart ploy.

"Fall back!" she snapped. "Let's get out of here!" Ravager shot her a look as if to say 'you must be
joking'. But she took her bo staff in both hands in a defensive posture and slowly backed up, edging
toward Wonder Girl, and the exit.

"Aw!" Kid Devil groaned. "No, I know how to beat them! I just need a lighter."

Ravager glanced at him. "What are...?"

Just then, he spotted a bucket of signal flares. "Never mind. I found something." So saying, he
knocked the fuel barrel over.

Ravager's eyes bulged. "Eddie! NO!"

But it was too late. Kid Devil had already lit the flare and tossed it into the expanding puddle.

"Zeus!" Wonder Girl swore. "Rose, get out of here. Now!"

"But he'll..."
"DO IT! Damn it! Doesn't anyone listen anymore?" She leaped into the air. Super strength and durability weren't the same thing as invulnerability. While she could survive falls from great heights and take heavy blows without flinching, she had no idea whether she could fly through-it didn't matter. Kid Devil was counting on her.

Kid Devil had barely begun to realize his mistake when Wonder Girl's lariat slipped over his shoulders and arms. The blonde girl yanked it tight and jerked him into the air, above the rising flames.

"Got you!" Wonder Girl exclaimed. "Brace yourself!"

"Wha—?" the youth sputtered as he saw that she was soaring for the ceiling. Instead of slowing down, she forced her way through and up to the second floor. From there, it was an easy matter to knock out a window and reach the outside.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Harrier and Miss Martian returned.

"Well," Kid Devil said weakly, "on the plus side we stopped the plants."

Harrier didn't answer. Instead, he shot his teammate a hard look, readied the cold gun and raced to assist the Gotham City fire department in containing the blaze.

Wonder Girl, however, spun about, her eyes flashing. "Yes, and destroyed the building, too!" she flung back. "Exactly what we didn't want!" She spun around as if to go, then pivoted back.

"Congratulations, Eddie. You just finished Ivy's work for her." With that, she turned her back. "Harrier!" she shouted, as she took once more to the air. "Need another hand?"

Miss Martian gave him a sympathetic look. "I know you didn't want things to happen like that," she said. "It was an accident."

Kid Devil was not consoled. "Yeah, but I should've seen it coming."

The young alien placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, but she didn't protest his words.

"Well," Ravager quipped bitterly, "looks like our first night in Gotham's going to be in the news for awhile."

The others winced.

"I know 'I'm sorry' won't cut it," Tim told Dick later that evening, but I should probably say it anyway." He put a hand to his forehead and massaged the area just below his hairline. "It just hasn't been the same without Conner and Bart." He shook his head as Dick opened his mouth. "I know, I know. I've got to work with the team I've got. Cassie and I do alright, but Rose is jockeying for power and M'Gann and Eddie are new... Kara quit and Jaime-Blue Beetle," he corrected, seeing Dick's blank look, "not Kord. This is a new one, is still having second thoughts." He sighed. "It was so much easier when YJ started out. We were all around the same level and we... sort of grew into ourselves, as individuals and as a team. Cassie and I still have that to build on, at least, but the others..." He let the sentence hang unfinished. "How did you do it, Dick?"

Dick pulled on his T-shirt. He shook his head. "I wish I knew." He picked up his soiled costume, dropped it into the waiting washing machine, and walked back. "The first team started out the way YJ did. Bruce's lessons in planning and strategy came in handy, and it wasn't long before the others started listening. I don't think I ever stepped up and said 'I'll be the leader', it just happened." He thought for a moment. "Do you think it would help if I gave you a hand in building up the new
gang? At least until Raven's ready to step in?” He winced. Leadership—at least the kind that the team seemed to require—had never been Raven's forte. He went on. "You and Wonder Girl would continue to lead in the field, but I could help you work on teamwork behind the scenes."

For a moment Tim smiled so broadly that his eyes lit up. Then the smile fell away. "Dick... don't you have enough to do already? Unless there's some way of getting another four hours into a day, you're going to pound yourself into the ground. We'll manage."

"Tim." Dick tried to laugh. "C'mon, you know who you're talking to. My sleep cycle is worse than a med intern's. I can find the time. Actually, I can find it easily. That two-nights-on, one-night-off rotation? Well..."

"Don't make me ask Barbara for the knockout spray." Tim's voice was soft, but there was steel behind it. "We moved here—or I agreed to move the team here—partly to give you some breathing space." He looked away. "There. I admitted it. You probably figured it out anyhow. Last night, we messed up royally. I'm not trying to make excuses for it. It happened. I understand how it happened, and why it happened, which means that we're that much closer to stopping anything like it from ever happening again, but bottom line is, it happened. The thing is, it's our mess. If you want to help clean it up," he took a deep breath, "your trust fund is deeper than mine. If you want to smooth things over with Davenport that way, I don't think there's a word invented yet to describe the level of gratitude I'll have, but you don't have to. I meant what I said about this being our mess." He grimaced. "Besides, we both know J. Devlin Davenport will be able to get the whole thing taken care of as a tax writeoff, but use the cost of rebuilding as an excuse to cancel employee merit raises next year."

"This is true," Dick grimaced. "I should call Rae in the morning and find out whether she has any thoughts on what Davenport might come up with." He sighed. "If he can't sue the Titans, he might try to see if he can implicate Nightwing somehow." He smiled. "I'm not sure if that would be a nuisance lawsuit or just a nuisance." He let out a long breath. "I'm used to dealing with mob bosses and fear gas. Angry businessmen with lawyers? Whole new set of rules—which, I might add, I'm still learning." He sighed once more. "It would be so much easier if it turned out that he was fronting Penguin's operations, or something. Then we'd be back to the standard instruction booklet."

"You could always run the data," Tim ventured. "See where it leads you."

Dick clapped him on the shoulder. "No point. Life won't ever let it be that easy. Okay. So, I'll see if I can find out a dollar amount on last night's..."

"...fiasco," Tim supplied.

"As good a word as any. And, for now, I won't interfere with the Titans. But, Tim?" His expression hardened, "I've never thought of Gotham as "my" city—not the way Bruce does. I still don't. Be that as it may, if your team can't get its act together soon, either I step in... or your team steps out. Get it?"

"Got it."

"Good." He yawned. "I'd suggest you get some sleep while you can. We'll talk more tomorrow."

Tim nodded. "Actually," he said slowly, "I could use some pointers on one thing." He took a deep breath. "You'd think it would be an easy one, all things considered, but..." He exhaled. "Kid Devil. He was a meta. Now, he isn't. I've been trying to teach him martial arts, stick fighting, things that I do, but it's not working out so well. Maybe it would've been different if he'd joined the Titans without powers, but now that he's had them and lost them, he's..."

"So desperate to prove that he has a place on the team that he's proving the opposite?"
Tim winced. "Pretty much, yeah. I just... I don't want to turf him from the team. If metapowers were a requirement, well, I wouldn't make the grade either. But if he can't hack it as a Titan," he closed his eyes. "Tonight-what he did? If she'd been there, Steph would've done the same thing. If Eddie was coasting on his powers, then maybe he shouldn't be a Titan." He looked up with a wan smile. "Times like this, I wish I wasn't team leader. Then it wouldn't be my call."

Dick placed both hands on Tim's shoulders. "Times like these are when you have to be a leader. And despite what you're thinking right now, you're a good one."

"So, you think I should cut him."

"I think you're looking at the whole picture and thinking things out before you make any hasty decisions." He nudged Tim's chin up, forcing the younger man to meet his eyes. "From what you've told me, the whole team is having growing pains at the moment. So, the real question is..."

"...Whether Eddie's behavior is a symptom of the whole 'new class' business and we're all trying to prove stuff, or whether he really can't hack it." He inhaled. "Okay. As a more experienced leader, what would you do in this situation?"

"Probably ask someone more experienced than I was to step in and assess the situation."

Tim smiled, but he shook his head. "I still think you have too much on your plate," he said unconvincingly.

"I didn't say it was going to be me..."

"You want me to what?"

Dick raised his eyebrows. "What? You used to teach."

"I was a TA."

"You tutored Jason."

"For half a year, and I have no idea how effective I was, because every time I asked to see his homework, his reply was, and I quote, 'the cave-bats ate it!'"

Dick burst out laughing.

"It's not funny." Barbara's lips twitched. "Okay, it's a little funny." She giggled. "Alright, pretty darned funny," she gave in. A moment later, she sobered. "Still... that was all academic. You're asking me to train a Titan for active duty. I'm not sure I'm up for that."

"You may have a point," Dick admitted. "I mean, you've only tried coaching Cass and Helena to my Danny, Tad and Catali—"

"That's enough," Barbara cut him short. "With Cass, I was trying to teach her more about technology... well, reading. Helena was..." Rehabilitation? She winced. That was harsh. "My point is, you're asking me to teach him how to hold his own on a team. Are you really going to stand there and tell me you don't see a bit of a contradiction? Look. Even when I was Batgirl, it was just as often a solo gig. Since then, my team involvement has been leading from behind the scenes. Is that what Eddie needs?"

"It isn't," Dick said flatly. "As far as teamwork goes, that's something the Titans need to grow into
together.” He held out a hand to her. "Do you really think I'd ask you to work one-on-one with somebody on teamwork?"

Barbara blinked. "Then...?"

"Until now, from what Tim's told me, Eddie has pretty much defined himself by his affiliation with Blue Devil, by his powers, and by his membership on the Titans. Cripes, he literally sold his soul to become a meta. And then, over the course of a year, he lost his mentor, he lost his powers, and the only chance he has of staying with the Titans is if he stops dwelling on what he's lost and starts looking at what he still has, and how he can use that going forward, regardless of whether he decides to put on a costume again. And Babs, if there is one person I know who can relate to having most of what she thought made her her taken away in one fell swoop and went on to redefine herself and her talents in ways she'd probably never considered before..." He broke off.

Barbara sat rigidly before him, her hands tightly gripping the armrests of her wheelchair. Her mouth was slightly open, and her cheeks were flushed a dark pink. Her eyes were glistening.

Dick swiftly bent down and kissed her. "That's you, Babs," he finished softly. "I can't think of anyone I'd rather have helping him. Please?"

She nodded slowly. Then, with a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob, she pulled him in for another kiss.

"He's in the study," Gordon said when he opened the front door to the manor. "You might want to brace yourself."

"For...?" Dick could hear Bruce shouting down the hall, although he couldn't make out any words from his distance.

The older man shook his head. "Let's just say... No. There are enough people now who know his business without his approval. I think it's better if—"

Dick blinked. "Strangers, sure, but..." He shook his head. "Would Bruce really be that upset if you tell me what's going on?"

"No," Jim replied. "Not at all." He sighed. "I'm not an expert by any stretch, but you can't work your way up from beat cop to detective without learning a little bit about how people think. Put yourself in his shoes: he's built most of his adult life around being in control, and now, every day, it's being brought home to him that... he isn't. And every day it chafes him more." He let out a long slow breath. "Maybe this is just a spit in the ocean, but I'd like for there to be one more person who knows what's going on in his life because he chooses to disclose it. Does that make any sense?"

Dick waited until he trusted his voice not to falter. "A lot," he said finally. "Thanks for the heads up. And thanks for..." He smiled wearily. "Thanks."

Bruce was still shouting. Dick winced and took a step down the hall toward the voice.

"You could wait until he's off the phone."

He considered it for a moment. Then he sighed. "No, I think I'd better go in." He blinked. "Sir..."

"You know something, Dick? After all these years, I think you can call me 'Jim'."

That prompted a genuine, if apologetic, smile. "After all these years, it feels... disrespectful,
somehow. I mean, you've known me since I was a kid. I don't really feel that much older."

Jim nodded tolerantly. "Well, maybe down the road, then. What was it you wanted to ask me?"

"Just... are you okay, here? I mean..." His head jerked meaningfully toward the study.

"Would you believe me if I told you that this was less stressful than my last full-time job?" His face grew serious. "It's not a perfect situation, by any means. I won't pretend otherwise. But to answer your question: yes. If I had it to do over again, knowing fully what I was letting myself in for, I'd still call you down here to haggle over the cottage lease. Now isn't an easy time, but I'm managing. We both are." He glanced at his watch and sighed. "And if you aren't heading down that hallway, I have to check in on him in about a minute and a half."

"I'm on my way."

Bruce hadn't felt this helpless since he'd been forced to watch congress sign the edict that had turned Gotham City into No Man's Land. "I can't believe that," he was saying into the receiver. "You're telling me that there is nothing I can do?"

He heard familiar footsteps coming down the hall, but he was so engrossed in his conversation that he didn't quite register whose steps they were. "That is not an option!" Without turning around, he waved at the doorway, hoping that Jim would take the hint and leave, now that he'd confirmed that Bruce had managed to go another fifteen minutes without endangering himself. For a horrifying instant, he actually did wish he were back in Arkham so that he could scream his frustrations out where nobody would care. Then he realized what he was thinking and checked himself. "Rae," he forced a measure of control back into his voice, "there has to be another way." He felt his face grow warm as he heard the pleading note in his tone." That's why I hired you. To find ways." Then, sharply, "That's not what I want to hear!"

Angrily, he banged the receiver down. Then, in one swift motion, he snatched up the telephone and hurled it away, heedless of what lay in its trajectory. It wasn't until he heard the sound of breaking glass that he realized that it had collided with the full-length portrait of his father that stood over the mantel. The canvas now hung unprotected in its wooden frame, while the mantel, and the hearth below, were covered in a carpet of shards. What had he done?

Without waiting for an answer, Dick continued, "I'll sweep, you dust-pan. I don't think any of it got on the carpet, so it shouldn't be too much work."

Bruce stood nearly immobile, struggling for composure and hating the fact that his breath was coming raggedly. He tensed, but didn't shy away when Dick tentatively stretched out a hand toward him and then laid it gently on his shoulder. He struggled to find something to say that wouldn't make him sound as helpless as he felt. Despite his relief at Dick's presence, and more so with his matter-of-fact reaction to the situation, there was a part of Bruce that reflexively bristled. He was Batman. He didn't need compassion or understanding or a hand on his shoulder. He needed...

He needed to erase the last two years of his life and go back to the way things had been. He needed
the old days back, when he could give an order and know that it would be carried out, when he could write a check and irritating people would get out of his hair. And if he was frustrated, a full-workout, whether in the cave or in the field, usually took care of that problem. That was what he needed now—not people bending over backwards to be nice to him!

Except... except he was grateful for the support. And as much as he'd felt himself tense up at the physical contact, he realized that he didn't want Dick to take his hand away. What was wrong with him? He almost laughed. What wasn't wrong with him?

Dick squeezed his shoulder. "Should I get the broom?" he asked.

Bruce blinked. Then he nodded slowly.

"I'll be right back."

Bruce watched him leave. Then, slowly, he turned back to the fireplace and gazed up at the portrait, thinking. He was standing in the same spot when Dick returned a moment later.

"Here." Dick held out the dustpan. Bruce made no move to take it. "Bruce?"

Without taking his eyes off the picture, Bruce softly asked, "Do you realize that I'm older now than my father was when he posed for this portrait?"

Dick wasn't sure what to say to that. After a moment, Bruce reached for the dustpan. Dick carefully whisked the broken glass off the mantel, and then reached for the larger broom to tackle the floor. When the job was done and the shards properly disposed of, Bruce went back to the portrait.

"Do you want me to look into getting the glass replaced when I'm downtown tomorrow?"

Bruce considered. "All this time," he said slowly, "I've sat here," he gestured behind him at the desk, "looking up at him. If he somehow came out of the picture today, looking now as he did then... I wonder. What would I say to him? Would he have the answers I've always assumed he must have, or would he seem to me young, even inexperienced?"

Dick cleared his throat. "Um... well, being younger doesn't always make you naïve, you know."

"No," Bruce agreed, "but my life has been a good deal less-sheltered than his could have been." He looked harder at the portrait, trying to see for the first time the man behind the image. Thomas Wayne's expression was stern, his mouth faintly disapproving, his bearing imperious, and yet, there was something about the eyes, some hint of insecurity, or uncertainty, as though he wasn't entirely sure what he was doing. Or perhaps, Bruce considered, he was seeing his own doubts reflected in the portrait's subject.

Slowly he advanced until he stood just below the mantle, and reached out to touch the canvas. Just for a moment, he felt as though he really was connecting with his father. I hope you don't mind, Dad, he thought, or think that what I'm about to do is intended as some sort of slight to your memory. Although I don't believe that you do, any more than I truly believe that you would have wanted me to let your memories haunt me all this time. He closed his eyes. Could he do this? Did he want to? I'm sorry, Dad, but I think, perhaps, you'll understand why I have to try to take this next step. He realized that both of his hands were sweating and he quickly pulled back from the canvas. He was conscious of Dick hovering near him.

"Are you...?"

"I'm fine, Dick," he said, amazed to discover that it was somehow possible to feel like he had just
gone fifteen rounds with Bane and still be fine. "And yes. If you could look into replacing the glass, it would be appreciated." That was all he needed to say, he knew. He didn't need to go on. And yet, he heard his voice saying, "For now, though, help me take it off the wall."

"Sure." This time, Dick wasn't able to completely stifle the note of surprise. "Where do you want it?"

_Not here, but not the attic either. That's still too far._ "Alfred's room," he said finally. "Just... just stand it up against the wall."

"You're sure you're okay?"

_Yes. And no. But better._ Bruce nodded. "I'm sorry you saw," he sighed. "Well. I'm not in the mood to discuss it at the moment, but suffice it to say that my frustrations got the better of me briefly. I don't plan on it happening again."

Dick nodded and took hold of one corner of the picture frame. "Can you get the other side?"

Bruce moved into position. _Mstkwzmzhlwrkr,_ he mumbled.

"Pardon?"

Bruce sighed. "I'm stuck with my social worker," he said. "For at least another two months, at any rate. That's what... before was. I," he coloured slightly, "you know that I rarely used my... influence for personal benefit."

Dick nodded. Bruce had never been averse to using his name when it came to promoting charity events, or his connections if doing so would help Gotham. When the No Man's Land had first been brought up, Bruce had even demonstrated that he wasn't above what amounted to legalized bribery in order to try to keep his city afloat. He would do any and all of that for Gotham and her residents. But, if it came to his own needs, Dick was hard-pressed to come up with a single instance when Bruce had called in a favor or stood on his family name.

"I tried today," Bruce admitted. "It didn't work."

"Oh."

"Well. What can't be cured must be endured. I'll manage."

"I know."

Together, they lifted the heavy frame off the wall. Bruce glanced at him "Dick? Was there a reason you came today?"

"Yeah, kind of," Dick admitted. "Commissioner Sawyer wanted me to ask you about what you'd discussed."

"Ah." Bruce considered. "Tell her that it's premature at the moment. But you can advise Captain Montoya that I would be willing to examine some of her cold case files as I've done in the past."

"Will do." A moment later, Dick asked, "Bruce? If you're going back to that kind of work, do you want me to start disassembling some of the crays in the satellite caves? I can start moving them back here slowly a few components at a time."

Bruce blinked. Then, slowly, tentatively, he smiled. "That would be... yes. Thank you."
"Wow." Barbara realized that her mouth was still gaping. "Tell me you didn't ask him about the cave after that."

"Give me a little credit, Babs. I'm not *that* thick." Dick pushed his hair out of his eyes. "I was able to get him to agree to move the crays back in, at least. As far as the Titans go, we can always *try* using one of the other caves for now—and Vic would let us use the Outsiders' base, I'm sure." He sighed. "That means commuting to Brooklyn, though. Ah, well. Using the main cave was probably a stupid idea, anyway."

"It most certainly was not!" Barbara shot back. "Listen to me, Dick. He has to decide for himself if he plans on getting back into costume one day down the road. And knowing Bruce, he's not going to put up with our repeatedly telling him," her green eyes went wide and her lips curved in a beatific smile as she clasped her hands in her lap and said earnestly, "We love you and we're here for you, no matter what." She shook her head. "As Rose might say, 'gag me'. But," she grinned as she held her hand aloft, palm facing out, "if you can get him to let you use the cave for training, maybe it'll start him thinking about it again. Besides, you were right about what you said before: the team needs a place to work out. And with meta powers in the mix, they need a place away from a heavily-populated area. The training area under the manor is about 50 feet below ground. As long as nobody shoots a fireball straight up, you can all cut loose down there without so much as vibrating the good crystal in the china cabinet. Seriously, hands down, it's the ideal spot."

Dick nodded. "Yeah. But after what happened this afternoon..."

"The timing was all wrong for broaching the idea," Barbara nodded. "Agreed." She leaned forward in her chair. "He really took the picture down?"

"For now. It might be hanging back up the next time I visit, but he took it down." A troubled look came onto his face. "I hope he did it because he was ready, and not because he thought he had something to... prove."

That reminded him. "How did things go with Eddie?"

"Too early to know for sure, but I think we're off to a good start." She sighed. "If he buckles down and starts paying attention." She pointed to the table where two sets of escrima lay neatly. "I whacked him on the knuckles so many times I started wondering if he had a latent masochistic streak. He started to get the hang of it near the end, though." She wheeled over to him and slipped her hand into his. "You were right," she said softly. "I think I *can* do this. Maybe."

"I know you can." He glanced out the window. "It's about an hour to sunset, I think."

Barbara immediately gave his hand a squeeze. "I'll get supper started, then." She headed for the kitchen.

Dick knew better than to inquire if she needed help. It didn't matter if he would have posed the question to anyone else without a moment's hesitation. There was a part of her that would always assume that he was asking because he didn't think she could manage on her own. And rather than spend the next little while fighting to convince her that he hadn't meant anything of the sort, it was easier just to train himself not to ask.

Instead, he opened the silverware drawer and began to set the table. His thoughts strayed back to the afternoon. Bruce wasn't having an easy time, not at all. But, Dick smiled slowly, he knew what he'd seen and he knew what it meant. Bruce was starting to fight back.
Of course as soon as Selina passed the state line into New Jersey, Barbara knew it. By the time her car had crossed the Vincefinkel Bridge onto Gotham's South Island, Oracle had received no fewer than nine alerts. Still, she held off contacting the other woman. She'd made a single phone call to her father that night, in case he thought it advisable to let Bruce know. He'd thanked her, but Barbara didn't yet know whether he'd passed on the intel.

It was four days before Selina called. "Should I be thanking you?" she asked without preamble.

Barbara was about to turn on the Oracle voder when she changed her mind and replied in her own voice, "I've only been able to purge the computer records, thus far. I'm sending Dinah up to Maine next week to deal with the hardcopies."

Selina made a rude noise. "Right. You're sending a bird to do a cat-burglar's work."

"Hey!" Barbara laughed, despite herself. "Dinah's been doing this for years. She's extremely good-"

"And I'm better. Or are you telling me that you wouldn't be slightly miffed if I were to go running to Cyborg the next time I needed a system hacked?"

"Cyborg is..." Babs swallowed, "extremely... good."

"And you're better."

"And you just left Maine."

Selina sighed. "I know. But let's face it: this is my problem. I'll solve it."

Barbara turned on the voder. "No offense, but if you could solve it, why didn't you when you were actually in the state?"

"I had another responsibility," Selina said testily. "And I didn't have anyone I trusted to look after her. Gotham's different."

Barbara debated whether to drag the matter out a bit longer, or whether it was wiser to give in now. She wanted to ask about Bruce, too, but she had a strong feeling that if she did, Selina's response would be to swear and hang up-and likely hightail it back to Maine without assistance. "Alright," she said finally. "We'll do it your way. Come over tonight after dark and I'll give you the details. Just... do me one favor?"

"Which would be?"

"Take Dinah along as backup. If this were any other stealth mission, I would be sending her solo, and I'd like your honest assessment of how she performs in the field."

Selina let out an exasperated breath. "Fine. But she'd better be good. Or I might just have to join your little outfit to teach your operatives how it's done."

As Barbara closed the communications channel, she grinned. "Selina," she said aloud, "I'm counting on it."

"Rough session?" Jim asked as Bruce got into the passenger seat and fastened his seatbelt. He didn't expect a reply and didn't get one. He hoped that Bruce might open up at some point on the drive home, but it wasn't until he'd parked the car in the garage and they'd gone into the house that Bruce finally broke his silence.
"I want to check something in the cave." He took a deep breath. "You can come down if you like." Without waiting for a reply, he strode off in the direction of the study.

Jim nodded slowly after Bruce's retreating figure. Of course, it went without saying that in a few minutes time, Jim would have to go after him. He could see no reason not to let Bruce have those few minutes of privacy, however. He went as far as the study and settled back in one of the armchairs to wait.

Scarcely five minutes later, Bruce emerged from the cave, looking considerably more at ease. "Are you any good at installing computers?" he asked.

Jim laughed. "Who, me? No. But I suppose if you need someone to pass you tools, I can go down there with you." Absently, he reached for his cane. "Dick did mention that he was going to be dropping a few things off. I guess this means there's more room in my basement?"

"Actually, he destroyed the original crays as a precaution," Bruce related, as he waited at the top of the stairs for Jim to catch up. "He brought these from one of my..." he caught himself, "from one of the other bases."

If Jim noticed the slip, he ignored it. "Ah." A thought occurred to him. "About tomorrow evening..."

Bruce nodded. "The arrangements are sound. Dick will be coming by shortly after supper, and remain in the manor until at least ten o'clock. He'll start patrol a bit late, but should be back here well before seven, the following morning. I'll see you at noon." He smiled. "I'll be fine. You and Barbara enjoy Chicago."

"Thanks." Jim sighed. "I don't know why it should surprise me that my former partner's daughter is old enough to be married now. Just because the last time I saw her, she was in kindergarten doesn't mean she hasn't grown up in the interim." He chuckled.

"We can both use the break," Bruce said. "Have a good trip."

Jim smiled. "I haven't left yet. Let's see about those super-computers of yours, downstairs."

Bruce followed, protesting, "they're called crays..."

Dick returned from patrol shortly before four a.m. It had felt weird not having Babs on the other side of his comm-link. Still, he'd managed to foil a number of break-and-enters, thwart three muggings, and break up a turf war. Not bad for a bit over five-hours work.

He parked the Batmobile in the bay and took the elevator down to the command center to log his report while his memory of the night's events was still fresh in his mind. As he stepped out of the elevator, however, he stopped short at the sight of the crumpled figure lying on the floor. Then he broke into a run.

"Bruce?!"
Chapter Summary

Bruce and Dick have had their rocky points in the past, but matters are about to come to a new head.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Kathy, Debbie and Juliet for the beta. Thanks to Huffy and Aiyokusama for technical advice.

"The Cowboy in Me" written by Al Anderson, Craig Wiseman, and Jeffrey Steele. Recorded by Tim McGraw on his Set This Circus Down album (Curb, 2001).

I don't know why I act the way I do.
Like I ain't got a single thing to lose.
Sometimes I'm my own worst enemy.
I guess that's just the cowboy in me...
The urge to run, the restlessness,
The heart of stone I sometimes get.
The things I've done for foolish pride...

Al Anderson, Craig Wiseman, Jeffrey Steele, "The Cowboy in Me".

Chapter 9—Foolish Pride

"Bruce!" Dick nearly stumbled in his haste to reach the other man. One hand automatically pushed his cowl up and back, even as he slid to a kneeling position, slipped his other hand behind Bruce's shoulder blades and gently pulled him into a sitting position.

Bruce's eyes were closed, and, although he was wearing only a short-sleeved top and cotton slacks, his forehead was beaded with perspiration. His breath came shallowly.

"Here," Dick struggled to keep his voice steady. "Easy. It's okay. I've got you. I've got you. It's okay." Bruce had been fine when he'd left. What the hell had happened? Even as he murmured reassurances, he was mentally reviewing the possibilities.

The doctors still hadn't ascertained whether Bruce had fully recovered from the injuries he'd suffered when Arkham burned down. They'd done everything they could, but they had stressed that only time would tell whether he'd fully recover his previous lung capacity. Dick was sure someone had told
him the symptoms to look for, but right at the moment, he couldn't remember what they were...or where the inhalers were if Bruce needed one.

On the plus side, Bruce's heart rate was elevated, but steady. Dick figured that they could probably rule out a heart attack.

He was trying not to think of the most worrisome—and most likely—possibility. Wayne Manor's location was hardly secret. Anyone with a score to settle with the original Batman didn't exactly have to look hard to find him. Could someone have broken in tonight?

Bruce stirred in his arms and emitted a low groan.

"I've got you," Dick repeated again, tightening his grip. "C'mon. Let's get you up off the floor."

"Dick?" Bruce's voice was a ragged whisper.

"Right here. It's okay. I'm home. I've got you."

Bruce opened his eyes then. "Dick," he whispered again, his voice stronger this time, "I... knew you'd come."

Dick bit his lip. "I-I've got to get you to the medical bay to see if I can find out what's wrong. Can you walk?"

"Unnecessary," Bruce said.

Dick blinked. Was Bruce—no, he wasn't asking Dick to carry him, so much as presuming that he would. But then Bruce continued speaking.

"Get... antidote... for fear toxin."

"What?"

"Fear toxin an-ti-dote," Bruce repeated weakly. "I tried. But... caught me... unprepared. No time to..." Suddenly he tensed and struggled to sit up straighter. "Dick!"

"I'm right here," Dick said quickly. "I'm just going to get you settled and then I'm going to look for the antidote." He got his other arm under Bruce's knees and rose shakily, grunting a bit at the exertion. Bruce offered no resistance. His head lolled against Dick's chin. Dick noted almost clinically that his skin was cold and clammy. "It's just a few yards," he reassured. "Almost there."

He carefully deposited Bruce on the waiting cot. "Okay," he said. "Just take it easy and I'll be back with the-"

Two massive hands suddenly clamped about his forearm.

"How about I stay here for a bit?"

Bruce relaxed visibly.

Dick hesitated a moment before he spoke again. "Your call," he said finally. "You already know that the fear toxin will wear off by itself about four hours from the time you felt the first symptoms. It won't be a picnic until it does, but once that junk's out of your system, you'll start to feel a lot better a lot faster. Or," he continued, "I can give you the antidote and you'll start to recover in minutes, but the side effects will annoy you for the better part of a day." There was no point in adding that, right at the moment, Bruce probably wasn't up to employing any biofeedback techniques that might
suppress the worst of the nausea and the dizzy spells.

For answer, Bruce's grip tightened.

"You got it." Dick glanced about quickly and, spying a low stool a few feet away, hooked one foot around it to pull it closer. "I'm going to love finding out how Scarecrow got in," he muttered. "Almost as much as I'm going to love teaching him why breaking in here falls under the heading of 'very bad ideas'."

Bruce's eyes snapped open. For a moment, Dick thought that there was something he was struggling to say. As he leaned in closer, however, Bruce's eyes screwed shut once more and a tremor seized him.

"Bruce!" With his free hand, he opened one of the pouches of his utility belt, fumbled inside for a moment, extracted a small piece of foil-backed blister sheet and punched two pills carefully into a paper cup on a nearby stand. He then turned the cold-water tap on the sink behind him and partly filled a second cup. "Here," he said holding out the cup with the pills. Bruce's eyes opened a fraction. "It's just antihistamine," Dick said quickly. "It'll help you sleep the worst of this off."

The older man frowned and started to shake his head.

"Do me a favor," Dick said wearily. "Don't argue. Just... please. Take them. It'll make both of us feel better."

Bruce eyed him searchingly for a moment. Then, reluctantly, he took one hand off of Dick's arm and reached for the cup. The water followed.

It was almost an hour before deep regular breaths told Dick that Bruce had finally fallen asleep. And it was almost another twenty minutes before Dick carefully pried Bruce's other hand off his arm and wheeled the cot into the 'secret' elevator that they'd installed when the manor had been rebuilt following the Cataclysm. It took him a few seconds before he remembered the access code that would bring the elevator car up to the master bedroom.

Once Bruce was back in his own bed, and Dick was sure that he was still resting comfortably, he took the elevator back down to the cave, his mouth set in a hard line. When he got his gauntlets on Crane...

He steeled his mind to the task at hand. The first thing he had to do was ascertain that the Scarecrow was no longer in the cave. Then he could try to find out how the man had got in, and whether he'd done anything else besides attack Bruce.

An hour later, Dick was still frowning but for a different reason entirely. He hadn't detected any sign that Crane was still in the cave. In fact, he hadn't detected any sign that Crane had ever been in the cave. He'd turned up a broken syringe on the floor, not far from where he'd found Bruce. An analysis of the spilled contents had revealed that it was one of the standard antidotes. Dick imagined that Bruce had been trying to give himself the shot but dropped the needle in his panic. A careful search of the cave had turned up another used syringe in the medical area. That was odd. Crane usually preferred to administer his concoctions either by inhalation or skin absorption. Injection wasn't usually his MO. Maybe, Dick thought, it hadn't been Crane, after all. Injections were more Hugo Strange's shtick. But if it had been Strange, then Dick doubted that he would have come home to find Bruce by himself in the cave. Strange would have concealed him somewhere and tried to replace him.
Dick felt his heart begin to pound. What if the man upstairs wasn't Bruce after all? What if the real Bruce was somewhere else and Hugo was faking panic in order to keep Dick from penetrating the disguise? Any out-of-character behaviour could then be explained away, either as a result of the fear toxin or of its lingering after-effects.

He raced back upstairs to the master bedroom. A quick examination was enough to convince him that the man lying on the bed was the genuine article. When Dick gently pulled back the comforter, he could recognize more than a few of the scars on Bruce's arms and hands. He doubted that Hugo would be that thorough. He stopped, frowning at the small red pinpoint on the back of Bruce's left forearm. He was no doctor, but that looked fresh. He pulled the blanket back up and returned to the cave.

There was something wrong with the whole scenario. Actually, it was more than one thing. First, there was no sign of forced entry or exit; in fact there was no sign that anyone had been in the cave tonight besides himself and Bruce. Second, Dick knew what he'd brought back to the cave and what had been unpacked. And he hadn't brought back any of the medical supplies. So where had Bruce managed to get his hands on the antidote? More than that: if the fear toxin had been injected, it would have started to work almost immediately. So how was it that the antidote had been close at hand? And why hadn't he noticed any fresh bruises or contusions? Bruce would have struggled like hell before allowing anyone to hold him long enough to find a good vein. Unless...

A nasty suspicion began to form at the back of Dick's mind. No. Oh, no. He didn't... Dick squelched the thought and picked up the fear toxin syringe once more, hoping against hope that he wouldn't see what he now expected.

Awareness returned slowly, several hours later. First, Bruce became cognizant that he was lying on Egyptian cotton, and that there was a flat sheet made of the same fabric covering him. Tentatively, he worked one hand loose from under the covers and let it rest on the satin comforter. He was in his own bed. He could feel sunlight on his face and hear the birds chirping outside. There was a breeze coming in from outside, bringing with it the scent of hydrangea to mingle with the aroma of freshly brewed apple cinnamon herbal tea.

He didn't want to open his eyes. If he kept them shut, he could imagine, for just a while longer, that the nightmare of the last two years hadn't happened. If he didn't open his eyes, then he could let himself believe that Alfred had brought the tea—even though, the traitorous, pedantic part of his mind pointed out, Alfred would have brought coffee—Blue Mountain Arabica, most likely. And with that thought, his mind came back, reluctantly, to the present. Despite his best efforts, his eyes opened slowly to reveal Dick straddling his desk chair. "Hi," he said faintly.

"Hey." Dick smiled, but there was an odd tightness underlying his expression. "Feeling better?"

Bruce nodded. "Much." He levered himself into a sitting position and reached for the teapot.

Dick immediately started forward. "I've got it." He poured him a cup. "I hope cottage cheese with fruit is okay," he said with a gesture toward the plate on the tray. "I would've done pancakes but they don't reheat so well."

"That's fine," Bruce said as he reached for the tea. "Thanks. I'm... well aware that finding me in that state couldn't have been pleasant for you."

Dick thrust the plate at him. "You weren't exactly living it up either," he said.

Bruce frowned. Just like the smile, there was a faint undercurrent of tension in Dick's voice. Most
likely, he reflected, due to earlier events. "Thanks," he said again, as he picked up the spoon.

Dick nodded. "You know," he said quietly, "after I got you to bed, I went over the cave with a figurative microscope and fine-tooth comb. I checked and rechecked the security arrays. Now, I know they've been tampered with before, which would explain why they didn't register any intruder... but I found something downstairs that's," he reached into his pocket, "not so easy to explain. Namely this." He drew out the syringe. "Any idea what was in it?"

Bruce set the spoon down. He seemed to sink back into the mattress. "I presume you ran the necessary tests."

Dick's voice stayed steady, but the tension strayed closer to anger. "Yes. But I asked you. Do you know what was in it?"

Bruce eyed him searchingly for a moment. "In all likelihood? Fear toxin."

Dick nodded. "Exactly. At first," he continued in a monotone, "I figured it was Crane, or Strange, or someone else with a grudge. Then I found this." He lifted a clear plastic bag from the desk. The remains of a second syringe were inside. "That's the antidote. The really odd thing is... both syringes are from the same manufacturer: Hamilton Technologies. That's high-end, top of the line, and, more importantly, the interiors are coated with a special preservative that retards deterioration. So whatever's inside has a significantly longer shelf life. Also, unlike a lot of the ones being manufactured today, they're glass, not plastic—which explains why the one with the antidote shattered. But then, I'm not sure why I'm telling you all this—considering that HamTech is a Wayne subsidiary and one that you're very familiar with. Seeing as they provide the bulk of the apparatus you've stocked in the cave labs." He shook his head. "There was no intruder last night, was there?"

Bruce let out a long breath. "The easiest way," he murmured, "to work rationally through Crane's attacks has always been to acknowledge my fears and to move on. It occurred to me that in recent months, I might have been dealing with a fear which I refused to admit or acknowledge, not even to myself. In order to determine whether this was, in fact, the case, I decided to expose myself to the serum. I did take precautions," he continued. "I had the antidote nearby, in case my tolerance for the substance had deteriorated over time. I also timed the experiment to coincide with Jim's absence as, in the event that the experiment did not proceed as intended, I deemed it wiser that he not be the one to discover me. I also waited until you radioed that you had finished patrol and were on your way home, so—"

"So that I could be the one to discover you," Dick cut him off. He struggled to keep his temper. "What was this big fear anyway?"

"I'd suspected," Bruce whispered, "that it would be returning to Arkham—"

"So you decided to set things up so you'd face it one way or another?" Dick interrupted again. "Because you know that if it had been anyone else who found you and heard that story, then—"

Bruce leaned forward. "That's why I made sure that it would be you who found me."

"You made sure," Dick stood up and took two quick furious strides to stand at the foot of the bed. "You. Made. Sure!? I came home and found you lying on the... I thought for a minute that you were d... You trust me enough not to turn you in, but not enough to fucking tell me what you were planning? You... My G-d. You fucking planned the whole thing. You let me put myself through hell wondering if I'd missed some blind spot in the security systems. Kicking myself for not calling in someone to keep an eye on the grounds. And it turns out you just wanted me out of the house so you could pull this shit?" In a sudden rage he lifted the desk chair and held it high over his head.
Bruce said nothing. Instead, he closed his eyes, gave a faint nod, and sank back against the pillows.

For a moment, Dick stood, nearly frozen. His arms were trembling and there was a horrifying burning feeling in his eyes. "Fuck," he said, slamming the chair down with enough force to set it rocking as it landed. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!" His voice grew rougher with each expletive until the last came out sounding like a sob. He spun around and bolted from the bedroom slamming the door behind him.

Bruce watched him go, fighting a stinging sensation in his own eyes.

Dick didn't stop running until he was in the elevator heading down to the training area of the bat-cave. As soon as the doors parted, he sprang through them and, with an inarticulate cry, launched himself at the leather heavy bag that hung from the cave ceiling. The bag swung out as Dick first tackled it, then pummelled it for all he was worth. Bruce. Bruce had... he had... "Arrrgh!" He swung again. "Fuuuuucccck!" He continued to rain blows, punctuating each jab with another f-bomb. Bruce. Always Bruce. This was for every night he'd spent sitting outside the cell in Arkham while Bruce had turned his face to the wall and ignored him. This was for every activity he'd turned down because it would cut into visiting hours. This was for letting himself get sucked into working for WE—pardon—Patrick Morgan Wayne Enterprises in order to keep an eye on Bruce's company. This was for every argument he'd had with Babs. This was for everything he'd let slide rather than risk a confrontation with Bruce or Babs or Tim or... This was for every pleading conversation he'd had with Rae, begging her to find some loophole, some justification to push for a hearing date. None of it mattered. Bruce was ready to throw everything away and drug himself, just so he could find out what he was afraid of! Dick swore again, drew back, and took another running tackle at the bag.

He checked himself. How long had he been down here, now? He stole a quick look at his watch, cursed once more, and took the elevator back up to the parking bays. Dick took a deep breath, rubbed his eyes, and dashed up the stairs, through the study, and down the hall. He darted quickly into the bathroom enroute to splash water on his face. Then he ran back up the stairs to the master bedroom and flung open the door.

Bruce was still lying in bed. As the door opened, he made a visible effort to rouse himself.

Dick looked at Bruce without speaking for about ten seconds. Then he turned on his heel, shut the door, and stalked back to the cave, ignoring the sudden flare of hope he'd seen on the other man's face.

As the door closed, Bruce nodded miserably to himself. Then he rolled over and rammed his fist down into the softness of the pillow. A moment later, he righted himself and got out of bed, reaching for his robe and slippers.

This time, Dick was able to lose himself in the rhythm of his pounding. With every punch he threw, he felt a bit more of his anger cool. Although his jabs still connected forcefully, he became aware that his pulse was slower, his breathing steadier. At the end of fifteen minutes, he gave one last swing, grabbed a bottle of water from the supply locker in the corner, and turned around to go back upstairs.

Bruce was sitting on the edge of the leather couch in the study, waiting for him.

Dick sighed. Then, surrendering to the inevitable, he took a seat—not on the couch, but on the nearby ottoman. Without saying a word, he uncapped the water and took a long swig.

Bruce watched him. Then, "Jim called. They... there's been a delay."
Dick nodded. "I know. Babs phoned earlier." He sighed. "I already let the office know I'll be telecommuting for the next day or two." He kept his tone flat. He knew that he couldn't stay angry forever, and in truth, he didn't want to. After the stunt Bruce had pulled, though, Dick wasn't quite ready to act as though all was forgiven. If you act like it's nothing, he'll treat it the same way. And what just happened? Was not 'nothing'. Roy had given him that advice long ago, in reference to a different matter. It felt equally appropriate today, though. He kept talking. "Batgirl and the Titans can handle the city." At least, Harrier and Wonder Girl could.

Bruce exhaled. "Then," the relief was plain on his face, "you... you aren't..."

Dick smiled, unsmiling. "I'm here for the duration."

If Bruce noted the coolness of his tone, he chose to ignore it. "Good."

The silence stretched awkwardly between them. At last, Bruce cleared his throat. "I was in the attic the other day." He studied his fingernails with apparent interest. "I... well. The incident with the portrait set me to thinking about the past. In my teens I'd asked Alfred to pack away most of the old photo albums. Actually," he admitted, "I'd instructed him to burn them. Thankfully, he refused."

Despite Dick's resolve to remain aloof, he found himself nodding. "And?"

"I didn't find the albums. I did, however, locate a box containing some of the books I'd read—or had read to me—as a child. Thinking back now, there was one volume whose message I... perhaps... should internalize a bit more thoroughly. I think that you may have already outgrown it by the time you came to live here, but, are you familiar with... with..."

Dick leaned forward unconsciously. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought that Bruce was embarrassed.

"...Bartholomew and the Oobleck?" Bruce finished.

Dick nearly burst out laughing. "I may have read it a time or two," he finally deadpanned.

Bruce closed his eyes. "While I doubt that an apology from me will achieve dramatic results on the level of that of the King of Didd, I'd have to be wilfully blind to not realize that you're entitled to one." He took a deep breath. "I made a foolish error in judgement. I further compounded it by not considering the effect that my action would have on you. You didn't deserve to find me as I was... earlier. The fact that I engineered matters so that you would was..." he broke off. "Saying 'I'm sorry' really won't be enough," he choked out. "I know that. It's just that I don't know what will."

Dick got up from the ottoman, walked over to Bruce and placed one hand on each of his shoulders. "When I got back this morning and saw you lying there," he said softly, "I thought I'd lost you. I don't ever want to face that again." He pulled Bruce toward him fiercely. "You hear me? Not ever. And especially not because of some stupid experiment." He relaxed his grip and crouched down to Bruce's eye level. "Don't pull this kind of garbage anymore, Bruce. I mean that. I don't think I can take it."

Bruce hugged him back. "I know. And... I was wrong."

"You got that right," Dick sniffed.

"No. Not... well, yes, the experiment. But I was wrong about the results, too. Look at me." He waited for Dick to comply. "I don't want to return to Arkham under any circumstances, but that isn't my greatest fear. My greatest fear," he pulled Dick closer, "was one I thought I would see realized when you stormed out of my room earlier." One day, perhaps, he would appreciate the irony. Not
today, though. "I... was unsure whether you would consider the cave to be sufficient distance between us..."

Dick's embrace tightened. "For crying out loud, Bruce, what's it going to take before you finally accept it? I'm here. You haven't lost me. You won't. Sure, I'll get angry sometimes, and once in a while, it might even be for a stupid reason... or for no reason at all. I may curse you out. I might even take a swing at you outside a training session one day, though I'll probably apologize for it later. But you will not lose me."

Bruce nodded even as his own embrace tightened in turn. "I think that these results may be dramatic enough after all," he murmured.

Dick couldn't help it. He started to laugh. The effect proved contagious.

"So. You and Bruce haven't killed each other yet?" Barbara inquired cheerfully.

Dick grinned, even though he knew she couldn't see it. "We're surviving. Missing you, though."

Barbara chuckled. "Ditto." Her tone turned apologetic. "I wish I knew when we'd be back, but...

"You couldn't have predicted this."

"Oh really?" There came another chuckle. "When do things ever go smoothly for folks like us? It's like, choose to wear a mask one day, and give up forever the ability to go down a street without spotting a robbery-in-progress. Date someone outside the spandex set and they're either part of a criminal empire or on the run from one. Date someone within the spandex set and you're probably setting yourself up to be taken hostage—"

"Hey!" Dick protested. "You're not exactly Lois Lane, here."

"Darned right, Buster, and I've got the escrima to prove it. My point is, I should have known that, just like JB Fletcher ought to be used to stumbling over a new murder mystery every time she goes four steps outside her front door, I shouldn't be surprised when I fly into Chicago for a wedding and someone kidnaps the best man!" She groaned. "Oh my gosh! Kid Devil!"

"Eddie? What about him?"

"He and I were supposed to have another training session tonight!" Consternation flooded her voice. "Crud! It totally slipped my mind. Could you...?"

"Sure," Dick said easily. "I'll explain it to him."

"Could you do one better?" Barbara asked hesitantly. "Could you meet with him? He's really down on himself right now. I think he needs someone to put him through his paces, even if it can't be me."

Dick hesitated. "He'd have to come here," he said, thinking out loud. No way in hell was he leaving the manor tonight. "I'll see if I can clear that with Bruce. Barring that, maybe Vic can drive in from New York." He took a deep breath. "I'll work something out, Babs. Leave it with me."

"Will do." Then, hurriedly, "Daddy just walked in and he looks serious. I have to go. Love you."

"Love you too," Dick whispered to the dial tone. He walked into the next room.

Bruce was sitting at the computer, a manila case folder open before him. He glanced up as Dick
Dick's eyebrows shot up. Coming from Bruce, that was practically a hearty handshake and a slap on the back. "How goes it?" he asked.

Bruce sighed. "Do you recall the Lucia Agostini case?"

"No," Dick said with a frown. "Should I?"

"Not really. She disappeared seventeen years ago. They found her remains washed up on the riverbank about six weeks later. The evidence suggested foul play, but no suspect was ever charged."

"Mmmm..." Dick read over his shoulder. "Twenty years old... they're sure the bruising couldn't have happened some other way?"

"That's part of what I'm trying to determine," Bruce said, as he made a notation in the file. "The coroner's report was inconclusive as to the estimated time of death. Apparently, the water temperature..." He looked up. "Also, the person who filed the report failed to mention that around that time, she'd been seen on the town with Tony Bressi, but she'd terminated the relationship only a week before she vanished. That could be because he wasn't a suspect."

"Or it could be because Tough Tony had his hands in a lot of cops' pockets at the time," Dick nodded. "It's worth following up. Um... I wanted to ask you..." He hesitated. "Around eleven tonight," he said, "I need to use the cave."

Bruce frowned. "You don't need permission for that."

"I need to use the cave to train someone else." The words came out at a rush. Dick explained briefly about Kid Devil. "Just the training area. And the showers, afterward, of course."

Bruce nodded slowly. "Based on the news report, I would agree that the boy needs some instruction. Again," he shook his head, "you don't need my permission."

Dick sighed. "For crying out loud, Bruce," he said softly. "This is still your house. I wouldn't bring anyone into it—especially not on costumed business—without your okay." They'd never actually discussed it, but Dick had, at times, wondered whether Bruce had ever realized that legally, Dick was now his guardian. He could stop wondering now. He paused. Then, seeing that Bruce wasn't going to reply, he went on. "Okay. If you're alright with it, I'll give Eddie a call, then."

Bruce nodded. "Fine."

Bruce made a point of going upstairs precisely at ten that evening. He wasn't in any mood to greet company, not after the day he'd had. To put it bluntly, he felt exhausted and was looking forward to getting some rest. Unfortunately, sleep refused to come to him. Perhaps he was overtired. Perhaps the events of the day still weighed heavily upon him. Perhaps he just wasn't comfortable knowing that there was a virtual stranger in the cave. His cave. Or... Batman's cave. And he wasn't Batman anymore. The problem was, he didn't really know how to be anyone else.

He'd shut that part of him away, even before coming to Arkham. Batman would have escaped months earlier, after all. In the state he'd been in, Bruce had believed that Arkham was what he deserved. As such, it had been necessary to suppress Batman. The thing was... Bruce minus Batman... did not equal Bruce.
He froze.

Take Batman away from Bruce... and the result was... less than Bruce. Batman wasn't a costume or a set of toys. He was a mindset. As soon as the notion entered his consciousness, he knew he was on to something. Yes, he, Bruce had created Batman—but not out of whole cloth.

Who had he been when he'd taken that vow? Who had he been when he'd started his training?

Not Batman—not yet, anyway. But the skills, the determination, the resourcefulness he'd employed to locate and convince his training masters... they'd gone into Batman, but they had come from Bruce.

Alex had mentioned bringing different character traits to the forefront, depending on the situation. He'd been right. And... and, no wonder Bruce had been feeling so empty inside for so long. The court had ordered him to refrain from dressing as Batman. He'd interpreted it as an order to stop being Batman. It had been like forcing himself to stop using his right arm. No—his lips twitched, as he realized that, if the situation demanded it, he probably could manage that. It had been like forcing himself to walk with one leg. The result—he could see it now—was an inability to walk, period.

Excitement seized him. He knew... he knew that this wasn't a 'cure', any more than talking to Alex about his childhood had been a cure. But it was a step, and one that he could feel carrying him higher than he'd been before. He couldn't possibly sleep now. He got up and reached for his robe. He had to get down to the cave.

As soon as the elevator doors parted, Bruce could see that the two hadn't finished their session yet. Rather than disturb them, Bruce opted to head for the surveillance center around the corner. He could watch from there until the area was free.

It didn't take Bruce long to see the flaws in the youth's technique. Dick had the boy—Eddie—using a wooden practice sword, as long as a katana but twice as heavy.

"It's not a baseball bat, Kid Devil," Dick was saying. He held a practice sword of his own as he stood facing the youth. "Right hand on the hilt, left hand on the butt-plate."

There was an audible gulp. "Sorry, Di-I mean, Batman."

"Don't apologize," Dick said. "Just practice. Again." Then, "Too much force. You're swinging it like a club. If this were a real blade, you'd never cut anything this way."

The two sparred without speaking for several minutes. First Dick thrust and Eddie blocked, then they switched off. Then...

"Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiihi!" Eddie jumped, and charged forward, sword extended.

Dick immediately stepped to one side. As Eddie's momentum carried him forward, Dick delivered a stinging swat to the youth's posterior with the flat of his blade. Overbalanced, the younger fighter let out a yelp as he fell face-first to the mat.

Dick took a step forward, stooped slightly, and set the blunted point of his sword against Eddie's neck. "I told you not to rush things," he said mildly.

"I thought I had it," the teen responded.

Dick withdrew the point. "Really?" He chuckled, but there was no malice in it. "Eddie, this is your first lesson. You've only been at this for an hour. Save the martial arts movie stunts for when you
know what you're doing."

Eddie winced. "I thought I did know." He stumbled to his feet.

"Yeah, I figured."

A small answering smile played around the teenager's lips. "Sorry I messed up."

Dick cuffed his shoulder. "It happens to the best of us and it happens to the rest of us. Shall we pick this up the night after tomorrow?"

Eddie blinked. "You mean it? But... I can't even hold the sword right."

"Hence the need for practice." Dick sighed. "Look. Nobody expects you to nail everything from day one. Except maybe you—and that's a bit unrealistic. But if you're willing to work at this, then I'm willing to work with you."

"And if I keep messing up...?"

"That's what training is for. Down here, there's always a second chance. Out in the field, not so much. But I have a feeling you already knew that." He waited for the youth to nod. "Okay." He opened the locker and pulled out two bottles of water. He tossed one to Eddie. "Rehydrate," he ordered. "Then, hit the showers. I'll show you out once you've changed back to civvies. Slowly!" He cautioned, as Eddie began gulping the water down.

"Sorry." He finished the water and trotted off in the direction that Dick had pointed. Dick shook his head and sipped at his own. He hadn't exerted himself nearly as much. He smiled to himself and turned. He nearly choked on the liquid in his mouth when he came face to face with Bruce. He swallowed hastily.

Bruce had changed into training togs: track pants and a T-shirt. His eyes met Dick's, mutely questioning.

Dick took a deep breath. "Down here," he said softly, "There's always a second chance."

Bruce exhaled noisily. Dick fought to keep his own expression serious as he continued, "Nobody expects you to nail everything from day one. Except maybe—"

"No," Bruce interrupted, "Not even me."

"Okay," Dick said. "Good. But you're willing to work at this?"

"Yes."

"Great," Dick grinned. "Then I'm ready to work with you. But... first thing in the morning, okay? I'm a bit wiped out..."

Trailing the Ghost Dragons had been the easy part. Although the gang was able to move swiftly and silently, leaving scant evidence of their passing, they proved no more adept at detecting Batgirl's presence than had a host of other quarries that she had tracked in the past.

The Dragons led her to a large warehouse near Gotham Central Station. She had to move quickly to slide under the closing overhead door, but she made it inside without incident and immediately darted into the shadows. She was standing in a large cargo bay, its walls lined with reinforced wooden crates. As she debated whether or not to explore, she heard a loud click. She frowned. Maybe it was
nothing, but her instincts told her otherwise. Frowning a bit under her cowl, she switched to infra-red vision and was rewarded with a grid of red light, made suddenly visible scant inches above the floor. The cross-hatch pattern stretched before her from wall to wall. Rather than risk disrupting it, she reasoned, it was better to hold her position. Sooner or later, they would have to turn off the grid if only to get to the crates. Then she could make her move. For now, though, it was better to wait and observe and... what was that loud stamping?

Batgirl sucked in her breath as a door she hadn't noticed opened and eight metallic constructs tramped inside. Although humanoid in appearance, she could tell instantly that these were no humans in armored suits. She couldn't read their movements at all. Which meant, she realized with consternation, that these sentries were mechanical in nature.

She watched as the robots slowly advanced, walking down the aisles between the packing crates. All at once, one of the constructs stopped in its tracks, roughly five yards away from her. It raised a nasty-looking firearm. Batgirl saw a small bead of red light, not much bigger than a pinpoint. As the weapon moved, the bead followed, proclaiming the robot's target for any and all to see.

Then she froze. The bead was on her chest. It wasn't moving. And she could hear a soft whine emanating from the gun as the robot prepared to fire.
10. Learning, Reaching, and Dreaming

Chapter Summary

Bruce has asked Dick to help train him, but it may be more than he can take.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Juliet for the beta. Special thanks to Sara for technical advice.

A/N: "Dreaming My Dreams" written by Allen Reynolds. Recorded by Patty Loveless on her Dreamin' My Dreams album (Epic, 2005).

I hope that I won't be that wrong anymore
Maybe I've learned this time
I hope that I find what I'm reaching for
The way that it is in my mind

Someday I'll get over you
I'll live to see it all through
But I'll always miss dreaming my dreams with you

—Allen Reynolds, "Dreaming My Dreams"

Chapter 10—Learning, Reaching and Dreaming

In a split-second, Batgirl's thoughts seemed to scatter. Reading her opponents was a skill that came to her as automatically as breathing but, faced with an enemy with moves she couldn't predict, she felt a wave of panic. The last time she'd been this confused by an adversary had been back when Jeffers had first rewired her thoughts so that she could understand spoken language. It had taken him only a moment's work, but it had taken her long weeks before she'd regained her fluency in physical language. And the first time she faced down an opponent after the change, she'd...

She was suddenly moving, her body reacting with a speed born of years of combat drills. She dropped low, and then leaped up, launching her grapnel and snagging a steel rafter. She retracted the cable, letting it draw her upwards, and then leaped off to catch onto the side of one of the crate towers. The panel was recessed, giving her a ledge approximately six inches deep on which to stand. There was also a thick iron handle set against one edge. She rested a hand on it.

She waited. The robots—there were three of them approaching now—trained weapons on her, but no beads of red light appeared on her costume. And their weapons gave no indication that they were readying to discharge. Under her cowl, she smiled. Clearly, they had been programmed not to do anything that might damage the cargo. She felt a laugh bubble up within her. Just because she couldn't read their kinetics didn't mean that she couldn't predict their actions! They were here to protect whatever was in these crates. Alright, she thought to herself. She could use this.
Could they read her actions? She wondered. Curiously, she feinted to her right, and was rewarded by three muzzle tips immediately repositioning. When she failed to follow through on her action, however, they swung back.

Batgirl frowned. Quickly, she assessed the situation. So long as she held her position, she was in no danger from the robots. As soon as she left the safety of the crates, however, it was likely that they would resume their attack. Could she defeat them? Beneath her cowl, she felt her frown deepen. These constructs weren't fast, but they did have her outnumbered. She had no idea where their vulnerable spots might be. And given their numbers, it seemed likely that one of them might be able to drop her while she was taking care of another. Alright, she acknowledged. She probably couldn't beat them all. She also couldn't remain here indefinitely. Sooner or later, the Ghost Dragons would return. They, unlike many of the typical gangs she encountered on a regular basis, knew something of unarmed combat. She could still probably take them alone, but not if the robots were also involved.

She considered. Then, slowly, she reached into one of the pouches of her utility belt and pulled out a small camera. The robots observed, but held their position. Carefully, she took aim and snapped several shots. Gripping the crate handle tighter, she set the camera down on the recessed ledge, reached into another pouch and pulled out a handful of tracers. She pressed one against the inside of the handle, knowing that the magnet on the tracer would keep it there. Then, somewhat daringly, she tossed another one directly onto the head of one of the robots. It didn't react.

She reached into one more pouch and drew out a flare gun. This she aimed at the skylight.

There was a loud crash, followed by the tinkling sound of broken glass. A gust of cool air blew in, and for a moment, the night sky overhead showed bright as day. Quickly she bent to retrieve the camera. Then she fired her grappel again, catching a steel beam directly below the skylight. She leaped off, flinging more tracers as she sailed.

The robots attempted to lock onto her position, but between the speed of her retracting line, her knowledge of evasive maneuvers, and the fact that she had deliberately snagged the beam above another stack of crates, no guns fired after her. A moment later, she was out the skylight and gone.

Several blocks away, Batgirl smiled. She would show the pictures to the rest of the team, in the hope that they would be able to detect design weaknesses that she had not. She had no doubt that after tonight, the Ghost Dragons would move their cargo, but with the tracers in position, she would easily be able to locate it again. True, she hadn't made a collar tonight, but she had, in Barbara's words, gathered data, and she had come away unscathed. On the whole, she thought with satisfaction, this had proven to be a good night's work.

"Maheu Airfield," Zinda announced. "No longer in use, but still a good spot for a landing. I'm going to start our descent now, ladies, so fasten your seatbelts."

"Roger that, Lady B!" Dinah replied. She, like Selina, was already seated, but she quickly snapped the two pieces of the safety belt together. Selina followed suit. "Penny for your thoughts," she ventured.

Selina blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Worried?"

Selina shook her head, bewildered. "It's a standard B and E," she pointed out. "I've done thousands of them."
"On your home turf."

"I've worked outside it." She sighed.

"Missing Helena?" Dinah asked sagely.

Selina nodded. "Holly's taking good care of her. I just need to get this one loose end tied up. Then..."

Her voice trailed off.

Dinah turned her head to face her. "Then...?"

"Then I go back to Gotham," she said lightly, hoping that the other woman would leave it at that.

She didn't. "And Bruce?"

"When did this become your business, Blondie?"

"It didn't," Dinah admitted. "It's just, well, I thought you went to Maine in the first place to get away from Bruce." In response to Selina's furious glare she held up her hands in a defensive posture. "Babs told me, okay? And now, you're back in Gotham, supposedly, so—"

Selina jerked her face away. "So, I'm back in Gotham." Her shoulders slumped. "Red was only partly right. I went away from Gotham because I needed time to think. Instead, I got the usual problems without the usual allies and resources. I figured if I was going to be set up, framed, falsely accused, and hunted, I might as well be back in Gotham."

"Somehow, her voice sounded more self-pitying than flippant to her ears. "Look. I love Bruce. I have for a long time. I probably always will. But the concerns I had in the first place haven't changed: Helena's a baby, and he's got enemies who would hurt her to get to him. I do too," she admitted, "but there's less risk if he's out of the picture."

"Okay," Dinah said dubiously. "If that's all it is..."

"Isn't that enough?"

Dinah nodded. "More than. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to come out like that. It's just," she hesitated, "you know Ollie and I were together for a long time. And then... he died. And I moved on. And he came back. And we weren't the same anymore."

"But you got back together."

"Sure," Dinah sniffed. "After a long time spent getting to know each other again, and a few false starts. And it's still not the same as it was. I don't mean," she continued, "that it's not as good. Or that it's better. But if you had asked me a few years ago how I saw us developing, well, this wasn't it. I changed. He changed. You don't go through something like dying without changing." She paused. "I took a dip in a Lazarus pit once." At Selina's incredulous look, she continued, "not that I really remember it much. But it did kind of divide things into 'before' and 'after'. And I was only... dead... for a minute or two. For Ollie, it was a bit longer. Anyway, Arkham may not exactly be dying, but I guess I thought, maybe, if you..."

"If I thought he was different, now that he's out?" Selina made an irritated swipe with her hand. "I know he is. I've known since his first weekend pass. But we were working things out. We were... good." She bit her lip. "As long as we kept the conversation light and the focus on Helena. G-d, I've been ducking the whole issue. I haven't even tried to understand what..." She fixed Dinah with a hard stare.

The other woman's hand, which had been about to settle on her arm, froze in mid-air. "I'm sorry. I..."
"I know. Don't."

Dinah dropped her hand back to her lap. "Okay. So...?"

"So, we land, we drive to Augusta, we break into Maine State Police HQ, we swipe their evidence file on me and we hightail it back to Gotham. I'll... figure out what to do next once I'm there." She lifted her eyebrows. "Is this the point where you smile in a sisterly fashion and promise me you'll be there if I ever need to talk?"

"No," Dinah sighed. "If you ever need to talk, the odds are that I'll either be in Star City or on a Birds mission. Nature of the job, and all. Besides, Bruce isn't Ollie, so I don't know what kind of advice I'd be able to give you. But sometimes, it just helps knowing that you're not alone out there, you know?"

"Yeah." She did know. "Just as well you're not offering. I'm not really great at spilling my guts to casual acquaintances." She and Bruce had that much in common. She paused. "Thanks, though."

"Sure."

"You're looking well, today," Alex said, as Bruce took his seat.

"I feel well," Bruce rejoined. "Well, better, anyway."

Alex smiled. "Glad to hear it. So," he continued seriously, "I'm guessing that would mean you had a difficult week?"

Bruce blinked. "I meant I was feeling better than I had at our last session."

"I know," Alex said. "However, I would like to point out that, for the most part, you've come to these sessions with a certain degree of frustration and resignation."

Bruce lifted an eyebrow. "What would you expect? I'm out of Arkham, but for every step I try to take toward reclaiming my previous life, I find a new stumbling block to thwart me. At Arkham, privacy was an illusion, true. Outside, I lack even that much. The... rules by which I am... compelled," he spit the word out as though recoiling from a bad taste, "to abide leave me more vulnerable and..." he broke off suddenly, furious with his own whining. "You needn't worry," he said in a measured tone. "I'm not thinking of violating the terms of my release."

"Now that concerns me," Alex admitted. "I'd have thought that by now those restrictions would be chafing." He smiled slowly. "As long as you're abiding by the actual terms of your release: no costumed heroics, taking any medications I might prescribe—which, for the moment, I don't believe to be necessary, you're certainly able to make use of any coping strategies you might have utilized in the past."

Bruce hesitated. "Well, there was a situation," he admitted, "but I was able to resolve it. Dick helped."

Alex lifted his eyebrows. "That's rather general," he observed.

"You'll forgive me," Bruce retorted, "if I don't choose to elaborate on every detail." He looked down. "I made an error in judgment. It led to something stupid. I don't want to discuss it further."
That wasn't the exact truth, he realized with a start. He actually did want to go over the finer details of his lapse of judgment with somebody other than Dick. Telling Alex the whole story though might well be another such lapse. Even if a return to Arkham wasn't his greatest fear, it wasn't a prospect he could greet with equanimity. He shouldn't broach the topic. Not with Alex, anyway. There were other people he could rely on who would be only too happy to know that he wanted to open up.

Why was he even considering talking about that evening? Bruce considered the question seriously, and, a moment later, believed that he had a semblance of an answer. Simply put, he'd never been one to do anything by half-measures. Once forced to acknowledge that he did have various psychological shortcomings in need of resolution, he'd set about attacking them as he would any other challenge: head on. At least, that was the idea. The problem was that he seemed to have far too many blind spots and barriers in this one area. Alex had thus far proven exceptionally adept at breaking through those barriers—or at least making Bruce aware of them so that he could surmount them himself. He watched curiously now for the psychiatrist's reaction to his stonewalling.

Alex steepled his hands on the desk before him, thumbs up, fingertips pointing outward. "This is a learning curve," he said slowly. "There are bound to be wrong turns and false starts. I think that I'd be a lot more concerned about whatever it is you're debating telling me had you walked in here and immediately blurted it out as though you didn't see anything wrong with it. That's about as much as I can say without knowing the specifics of the situation—apart from affirming that I'm not looking for excuses to send you back to inpatient care."

Bruce nodded. "That's helpful." But not concrete enough for him to risk discussing the matter. Alex was waiting for him to speak, now. Quickly, he cast about for another topic. "As you may know," he began, "my father kept a collection of antique firearms in his study. When I returned from abroad, I had the case moved. The weapons aren't loaded, of course," he added quickly. "I disposed of the ammunition years ago. Still, I suppose I wanted to determine whether I had an actual distaste for the weapons, or whether it went a bit deeper than that..." It was still discussing a fear, Bruce told himself, but one which would not present Alex with an ethical dilemma. It would do.

He emerged from the session feeling like he'd just finished a wrestling match with Killer Croc. If he hadn't known that this was helping him...

But he did know. As difficult as it was for him to examine his actions, both past and present, he needed this.

It helped when he compared the process to the training he'd inflicted upon himself years earlier, when he'd decided to become a crime-fighter. Then, he'd suffered sore muscles, torn ligaments, broken bones at times, and always the voices of his classmates jeering at the 'soft, privileged American'. Then, he'd endured it all stoically. He'd buried memories he'd been sure would destroy him—or worse, interfere with his mission—if he allowed them to surface.

Now he was confronting those memories, drawing them out, holding them to the light, at times shoving them away again, but never as far away as he'd stored them previously.

There was the irony. They'd never really been as far away from him as he'd thought. They'd emerged in his dreams, they'd emerged under fear gas, and they'd emerged in quiet moments of introspection. He'd countered by reducing his sleep-time, routinely dosing himself with the fear antidote, and avoiding quiet moments of introspection as much as humanly possible. In short, he'd been a coward—no matter what spin Alex had tried to put on it. He 'acknowledged what fears he had and moved on'. That was a laugh. He'd moved away for extended periods of time. But he'd never moved on. When he was eight, 'moving on' had seemed to imply that, in time, he would forget the shooting, forget his parents, and be... happy. At eight, that had seemed to him the worst sort of disloyalty
possible. He'd locked his pain away, but he'd never really gotten rid of it.

Well, he wasn't eight anymore. The problem was, he'd grown used to his emotional burden. So used to it, in fact, that he had come to see its weight as an honor and as a responsibility, rather than as a millstone. Intellectually, he understood that the time had come to shed that weight. And yet, something within him still clung stubbornly to the load.

Irrationally, Bruce felt a sudden surge of anger toward Alex. He'd never had to face these truths before the psychiatrist had become involved. He'd been... well... not happy, exactly, but satisfied with the status quo. Before Alex had come in and started shaking things up, anyway. Bruce frowned. The status quo, the former status quo, had been a copout. As much as he hated being put through the wringer at these sessions, despite the stress and the discomfort, they were helping. For proof, he only had to reflect that it had been weeks since he'd dreamed about the shooting.

Ironically, he missed those dreams. They were the sharpest memories he had of Thomas and Martha Wayne. Perhaps, he should try to find the albums again. There had to be better ways to remember his parents. There had to.

Dick looked at the digital images he'd blown up on the computer monitor and let out a low whistle. "Those robots don't look cheap," he said softly. "It'd be worthwhile to find out who can bankroll that kind of hardware. The Ghost Dragons tend to operate on more of a shoestring budget from what I've seen."


"Not his M.O.," Dick shook his head. "He doesn't usually go for heavy machinery. They do look pretty heavy," he mused aloud. "I bet they can't move all that fast."

"Can't," Cass agreed. "Strong, but slow."

"We can work with that," Tim said. He'd been silent until now. "They're tough; not unbeatable. Not if we take them as a team, anyway." He looked at Cass. "You, Ravager and I can probably take on the Ghost Dragons and King Snake. Wonder Girl and Ms. Martian can take the robots. We'll need to do a bit more research first, though," he added. "I'd like to know what kind of weak points that shielding has, and what other defenses and weaponry we'll be contending with—"

Cass, however, was staring at him. "You want me... with Titans?" Her eyes opened very wide. "But... I don't... I fight alone. Always. Batman never..." She didn't have to finish her sentence. While she had occasionally worked in tandem with the rest of the Bats, she'd never been part of the Titans, or Young Justice, or the Birds of Prey or any of a dozen other teams. Bruce had never encouraged such affiliations, and, Cass had to admit, she'd never seriously considered them anyway.

"It's time you learned to adapt," Dick said seriously. "Last night, you recognized for yourself that you'd got yourself into a situation you couldn't handle alone. Right now, you have two options: you can pass the whole thing on to someone else—or a few someones in this case, or you can stick with it and follow through."

"You've already faced them," Tim pointed out. "You've got a pretty good idea what we can expect. Agreed?"

Cass nodded, as a smile spread slowly across her face.

Tim turned back to Dick. "Any idea when Oracle's coming back?"
"She's on a case," Dick sighed. "She's in Chicago 'til it's over." And as of last night's conversation, said case was still far from 'over'.

"Okay. In that case, it looks like we'll have to research the tech ourselves." He looked up. "Think I should bring Eddie in?"

"Good thinking. You'll probably make better progress with two heads working on it."

"Plus he's part of the team. He might not be ready for the 'Dragons or the mechs, but he's ready for this."

"Spoken like a leader." Dick nodded approval. "Okay. I'm off to pick up Bruce. You two keep talking. I expect a preliminary game-plan before tonight's patrol."

Tim snapped to with a mock-salute. "Sir! Yes, Sir!"

Cass rolled her eyes. "Brown-noser."

Jim frowned as Bruce finished speaking. For a long moment, he said nothing, but simply sat, holding tightly to the telephone receiver. "Why are you telling me this?"

On the other end of the line, Bruce blinked. "I thought everyone wanted me to stop keeping things in," he said, somewhat taken aback.

"Granted... but," Jim took a deep breath. "Look. There were things I knew about long before you came clean on them. Or fate intervened, or something, whatever. Let's just say that long before Akins called that press conference, I knew who you were under that cowl. The thing was, as long as that fact remained unspoken between us, I had this thing going for me called 'plausible deniability'. You're familiar with that?" He didn't wait for an answer. "If, at any time during our working relationship, you'd actually come out and said something, the next time the mayor declared open season on vigilantes, I would have been risking a lot more than my badge by not coming forward with what I knew." He waited for his words to sink in before continuing. "Try to appreciate that there are a few parallels we can draw here."

Bruce closed his eyes and willed his hands to stop sweating. He didn't think that his experiment was something that Jim was obliged to report. However, if he had miscalculated... It occurred to him that he'd presupposed a good deal of tolerance for his behavior on Jim's part. Thus far, such trust had been well-deserved. Still, there was a chance that he had pushed too far.

If he reports this and they send me back, I'll... What would he do? Escape? Probably. Which would lead him right back to the situation he'd faced almost a year ago: he'd spend the rest of his life in hiding, looking over his shoulder, cut off from most of his support network. If not all of it. Remaining in Gotham would put every other vigilante operative under increased surveillance and scrutiny. He wasn't going to have the others suffer on his account.

If not to escape, then to endure? For how long? And how much more of his self-respect would he have to sacrifice, toeing their line, proving to them that he was ready to leave, that...

He bit down firmly on the inside of his lower lip. Why had he divulged this information? Was it because he trusted Jim? Or was the pressure getting to him to the extent that, on some level, he did want to—no. No, he did not want to surrender his hard-won freedom. Not under any circumstances. The entire idea was preposterous... wasn't it?
He'd probably dismiss the notion more easily if he couldn't have pointed to other times in his life where he'd chosen to retreat into familiar patterns rather than risk the unknown. It was one thing if he wanted to learn a new martial art or scientific formula. But ideas that seemed to zero in on more sensitive points, like his interpersonal relations? Challenges to his worldview? How many times had he recognized his weaknesses there, resolved to overcome them, and immediately reverted back to type?

"Well," Jim said slowly, "It sounds like you were luckier than you could have been."

Bruce nodded. "I hadn't considered all the ramifications. Which," he added, "is also somewhat disturbing. It's already been brought home to me that the risks I took were not... acceptable."

Jim grunted. "And you're taking another one now."

Bruce winced, mentally conceding the point. "Necessary," he said, "if I'm to obtain the desired outcome."

Jim made a small non-committal sound. "Which is what, again?"

"Come on, Jim," Bruce said, "you know exactly what it is."

"Humor me," Jim said, deadly serious. "Please."

Bruce sighed. "Ultimately, an end to the sessions," he stated bluntly. "An end to court-mandated supervision. Possibly, a return to the cowl, although that's less-assured."

"That's all?" Jim asked sadly. "Nothing else?"

Bruce's thought about that for a moment. "Do you really just want things to go back to the way they were before?"

Bruce took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "No," he admitted. "I think I can do better than that."

"I do too," Jim replied. "You do realize that, after what you just told me, if they ask me how I think you're progressing, I'm going to have to suggest that they don't make any changes to your level of supervision. That's if they ask." His tone was apologetic. "I realize that you timed your... test to coincide with when Dick was due back from patrol, but if he'd been delayed, things could have been worse." As Bruce opened his mouth to protest, Jim continued, "Let's say someone didn't have to be with you at the manor by seven am that next morning. In your opinion, mightn't Dick have chosen to sleep elsewhere and stop by later in the day?"

Bruce frowned. That was a possibility he should have considered. "He cut patrol short that night," he admitted. "He said he wanted to be sure he wouldn't be... tied up and running late." His lips twitched. "In our... in his line of work, that's more than a figure of speech."

Jim chuckled. "True enough. And knowing that he had to be back earlier led him to be even more conscientious than usual."

"Yes."

Jim took a deep breath. "Alright. I'll buy that you didn't intend to have that reaction to the fear toxin and that this was probably a one-time error." His voice turned hard. "It was only this one time, right?"
"Yes."

"Fine. If it were up to me, I'd say you were entitled to one mess-up. It's not up to me, but unless someone with the proper authority asks me outright if I had any knowledge of this incident—and I can't think why anyone would unless you suddenly become a lot less close-mouthed than usual—I won't mention it in my reports. As long as this is the first and last time you pull anything that asinine. Fair?"


Jim smiled. "So," he said, "sounds like you actually faced your biggest fear twice in one day. Once hallucinated and once real. I hope you noticed that the illusion was worse, hmm?"

"Well, they both felt real enough at the time," Bruce pointed out. "However..."

"You're sure about this?" Dick asked the next night. Although he and Bruce had initially planned to start training several nights ago, things hadn't quite worked out that way. The morning after their conversation in the cave, Dick had limped in wheezing from patrol after an encounter with Poison Ivy, an enthralled henchman with a piece of ironwood, and some out-of-season hay fever. That had postponed things for a few days. It hadn't helped matters any that over the last two years, Arkham's regimen had forced Bruce to adapt more conventional sleep patterns. Simply put, last night, when Dick had returned ready to begin, Bruce had already been asleep.

That had been then, however. Now, Bruce regarded the young man standing before him and nodded impatiently. "Drills and meditation can only take me so far on my own. I," he winced, "I need your help to get further."

"You need help," Dick agreed. "I've been thinking about that."

"If you've changed your mind..."

"I haven't," Dick said quickly. "But you might, after you hear this. I've been trying to put myself in your place, think about things from your perspective and," he grimaced, "we're both going to have our work cut out for us. Look, when I spent that semester at Hudson, I took a course in basic Japanese. I thought it would probably be something that could come in handy if I did end up going into business. The thing is, when they'd give us writing assignments, there was one thing I found frustrating about the whole thing."

"I taught you Japanese," Bruce cut in sharply.

"Got it in one," Dick smiled. "You gave me a crash course in case we ever needed to deal with an issue over there. Basically, 'How to interrogate a Shateigashira and Book Your Return Flight to Gotham in Twelve Easy Lessons'. I went in to that class with a pretty extensive vocabulary—very little of it overlapping with what was actually being taught in class. I knew just about enough to feel like I could ace the class, but cracking the textbook was frustrating because every time I tried, I pushed the book away, thinking that I already knew it all. Problem was... I didn't. It was more like around forty-five per cent. At least that was my final grade for the term," he admitted, as his cheeks took on a faint tinge of pink.

"And you're bringing this up because...?"

"Because as soon as I start giving you exercises, you're going to be like me with the Japanese textbook," Dick said bluntly. "It's not exactly the same thing. Mentally," he smiled, "it's going to start coming back to you almost as soon as we start. The problem is physically, your body isn't going to
be nearly at that level. You're... well, I'll have to see you go through a few drills to be sure, but I'd be very surprised if you're at forty-five per cent right now."

"Which is why I'm asking for your help."

"I know. And I'm willing. But... are you?" Seeing Bruce's confusion, Dick continued. "Think about it, Bruce. You taught me when I didn't know the first thing about martial arts. You're asking me to bring you back, and I'll try. But the only way that this is going to work is if you can somehow forget that you used to be my sensei. If you're looking for a cheerleader, I can do that. Easily. But if you want a teacher," Dick looked away for a moment, "I know this is going to sound like I'm fourteen again, but I'll say it anyway: you're going to have to respect me and you're going to have to trust me."

"I do—" Bruce started to say.

Dick kept talking, "I know you do; as a fellow crime-fighter, a detective, a leader, maybe even a teacher. But I'm asking you to respect me as your teacher. That's not going to be easy. I'm not sure I could do it if I were in your place asking Tim to help me back. Look. Gotham's always been 'your city, your rules'. Think of this as me establishing an embassy in the gym area. Those 1600 or so square feet? My rules apply." He felt his face redden. "If you'd rather, I could set up 'Graysonland' in one of the other caves, instead. But if our sessions are going to start with me demonstrating one move and you saying 'got it' and running off to do your own thing... this isn't going to work. If you can do better on your own, fine. If you can't work with me, we'll look at other options. There's the JSA, for one; I know you got some training from Wildcat a long time back."

He watched Bruce carefully, looking for signs that his words were penetrating. "I can tell you right now that we're going to start off working with my strengths, not yours. And that's for two reasons. One, I think I want to ease into this, and I'm going to be much more comfortable helping you find your way around a trapeze than getting you back to fifth degree black-belt level in American Kenpo."

"It should be eighth degree," Bruce muttered.

"Well I'm only a fifth," Dick grinned. "Get back up there and we'll talk."

"What's the second reason?"

"Think of this as me testing your deductive reasoning," Dick said, still grinning. "When you think you've got the answer, let me know."

His smile fell away. "Whatever you decide, I'm fine with it. Seriously. So, what's it going to be, Bruce? Teacher or cheerleader?"

Bruce took a deep breath. "Both. When do we start?"

Dick's eyes danced. "As soon as you drop and give me twenty push-ups."

Bruce scoffed. "Twenty? I'm a bit more advanced than..."

"Twenty," Dick's voice was firm, his face carefully blank. "Not nineteen. Not twenty-one. Twenty."

Bruce's automatic protest died on his lips. He'd no sooner agreed to Dick's being in charge than he was questioning the younger man's instructions. He suspected that this was, in all likelihood, Dick's way of testing his resolution. If Bruce was already debating him within thirty seconds of agreeing who would be in charge... Dick was right to be concerned. And Bruce had no intention of failing the
"Twenty," he acknowledged lowering himself to the mat. "One..."

Outside Krait's office, Bruce steeled himself for the meeting ahead. Forty-five minutes, he reminded himself. He could be amiable for forty-five minutes. He did his best to ignore his aching muscles—the push-ups had only been the first of many exercises Dick had put him through last night—knocked smartly and entered.

Krait was examining a paperweight—a travertine globe set on a low flat base. "Have a seat, Bruce," he said as he set the globe down. He picked up a pen. "How has your week been?"

Bruce settled back in the padded armchair and smothered a groan. He hadn't realized exactly how out of shape he was until he'd been halfway through Dick's workout. "Fine, thanks, and yours?"

"Mmm?" Krait seemed surprised by the question. He recovered quickly. "Oh, it's been fine. Thank you for asking."

"Not at all." He was laying it on a bit thick, he realized. Affable Brucie, he thought. Just like old times. You can do this. He sat back patiently.

"So, how are you?"

"Good, thanks, and you?"

"Oh, fine. So. Has anything interesting happened recently?"

Years ago, Bruce had taken an eleven-year-old Dick to the Gotham Science Center. One of the exhibits had been an early foray into the realm of AI—a computer program designed to mimic human conversation. End a sentence with a question mark, and the computer would respond with "why do you ask?" Include the word "might", and it came back with "why aren't you sure?" The 'conversation' had been almost as annoying as one of his rare encounters with Superman's foe, Mr. Mxylptlk. Krait, he reflected, was nearly as bad.

"Not really," he replied blandly.

"Um." Krait thought for a moment. "How are your fish?"

Bruce managed not to roll his eyes. "They're good." He decided to toss the man a crumb. "One died the other day."

As expected, Krait practically jumped at the revelation. "That's too bad. How do you feel about that?"

Well, actually, I'm VERY distraught. He was my favourite, after all. Always swimming up to the surface as soon as I came into the room. I was trying to teach him how to fight other fish—in case Aquaman was looking for another sidekick, you understand. He was getting to be quite deadly with a swizzle stick. You don't think I over-trained the little guy, do you? It was tempting, but Bruce opted against that answer. There was always a chance that Krait would take him seriously. Instead, he shrugged—even as his trapezius muscles made their dissatisfaction known—and said carefully, "I'm fine. I'm sorry it's gone, of course. But I wouldn't exactly say I'm broken up over its loss."

Krait made a notation on his pad. "I see. Were you planning to replace it?"
"I don't know," Bruce returned. "Is that something you'd recommend?"

"Hmmm. Well..." Krait scribbled something else down.

Bruce regarded him, waiting, a polite smile on his lips as he mentally counted down toward the end of the session.

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Once outside the office, Bruce headed for the coffee shop across the street, where Dick was waiting. Dick immediately got to his feet as Bruce entered. "All set?"

Bruce nodded.

"Great. I called the airport and the flight's on schedule and due to land in an hour."

"Then, if you're done here?" He waited for Dick to nod before he went on, "Let's leave now and try to beat the rush hour." He turned on his heel and walked back out to the street. It had been six days, but the Gordons were finally on their way back from Chicago.

Dick followed a half-step behind.

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The domestic arrivals area wasn't too crowded when they got there. When they checked the overhead display, they saw that their flight wouldn't be in for another twenty minutes. Dick groaned audibly.

Bruce fought back a smile at the younger man's impatience. "They'll be here," he murmured. "Relax."

"I know, I know. It's just been almost a week and the phone just doesn't cut it."

"You've waited six days—"

"—Four hours, seventeen min—"

"—you can wait a little longer," Bruce finished.

Just then, the doors parted and three women walked out. Bruce recognized them all: Dinah Lance, Zinda Blake, and...

The dark-haired woman met his eyes and froze. "Bruce?"

It was Selina.
11. Wanting to Share

Chapter Summary

Selina and Helena are back in Gotham. But after the way they left, Bruce isn't sure that he wants to let them back into his life. Dodge moves in with the Teen Titans. And Bruce finds out that Jim is more perceptive than he'd bargained for!

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Juliet for the beta! "Being Alive" written by Steven Sondheim. Recorded by Dean Jones on the Company Original Broadway Cast recording (Columbia, 1970).

Someone to need you too much,
Someone to know you too well,
Someone to pull you up short
And put you through hell.

Someone you have to let in,
Someone whose feelings you spare,
Someone who, like it or not,
Will want you to share
A little, a lot.

—Stephen Sondheim, "Being Alive"

Chapter 11—Wanting to Share

Bruce took a half-step toward her before his smile fell away. "Selina," he said quietly.

Selina turned to the other two women. "Go on ahead. I'll catch up." She turned back to Bruce. "We were just going to grab something to eat at Lanning's," she said, with a vague gesture down the hallway. "Beats spending another forty-five minutes or so in rush hour traffic trying to get downtown."

Bruce nodded. "Don't let me keep you, then."

She flinched. "Alright," she said slowly. "Fine." She took a deep breath. "I'd like to come by later, though. I'll bring Helena. You haven't seen her since before the fire."

He almost nodded again, but he caught himself in time. "Do you honestly think that's a good idea?" He'd been trying to keep his tone neutral, even somewhat regretful at the necessity, but the words came forth more roughly than he'd intended.

Selina tensed, unconsciously shifting to a fighting stance. "Excuse me?"
Bruce lifted his eyebrows. "You left because you had concerns for her safety," he said tersely. "They weren't unfounded."

"Well, there has to be a solution," she insisted.

"There is. Your initial one," he turned away. "Keep her safe, Selina. Keep her away." He took two quick angry strides back toward the velvet rope barrier that blocked off the arrivals gate.

Selina started to follow, then thought better of it. There were more people around now—and the last thing Bruce probably wanted was to have any attention drawn to himself in the middle of a crowded terminal. "Alright," she said, finally. "We'll talk about this later."

Bruce turned around. "I'd really rather we didn't, Selina," he said flatly. "Good day."

"I wanted to say something," Dick told Barbara later. "But, seriously, what?"

Barbara shook her head. "Nothing that either one would have listened to. Butting in would have only gotten them both mad at you."

"Well, at least they'd have been united..."

"...For about two minutes." She patted his hand and continued speaking. "Then Bruce would have just pushed her away again, anyway."

Dick sighed. "I know. You're right. I just..."

"Hero mentality," Barbara grinned. "They were in trouble and you just about ripped open your shirt to reveal a big red 'S'—and that reminds me, have you heard from Clark, lately?"

"No," he immediately became serious. "Not since a couple of months after he flew into Rao." Dick shook his head. "He called to ask me for some pointers on how to... work... without enhanced powers. I think he was asking everyone."

"Don't sell yourself short, Handsome."

"I'm not. I know for a fact I wasn't the only one he approached. Anyway, I gave him a condensed version, told him to call me if he needed to know more, he said he would, and..."

"Nothing," Barbara nodded. "He's been off my radar, too." She winced. "I left him a message ages ago, but..." She sighed. "So much for keeping up with friends, huh?"

"We've been busy," Dick pointed out. "You're right, though." He frowned. "Not so long ago, I jumped on Ollie for basically ignoring what was going on... here..."

"Oh, so that's what Dinah meant by..." Barbara broke off. "Never mind. Go on."

"Nothing. Just... I should call him."

"Ollie or Clark?"

"Both. Either. I don't know." He squeezed her shoulder. "I'm glad you're back."

Barbara covered his hand with her own. "I missed you, too." She let out a long breath. "Daddy told
me what happened with Bruce."

"Oh." Dick tensed, waiting for her to continue.

"I guess we should have seen it coming. I should have seen it coming," she amended. "Once he started fighting again, something like this was bound to happen." She gave him a tremulous smile. "Guess I can see why you didn't want to hash it out with me."

"No, it wasn't that," Dick said, as he brushed the fingers of his free hand against her hair. "When I found out about what he did, I wasn't in a mood to talk about it to anyone. And after I calmed down, well, you were on a working vacation."

Barbara made a face. "Believe me, if I'd known that the best man was going to stage his own kidnapping to delay the wedding until the groom's ex-girlfriend had a chance to fly in and declare her undying love for... forget it. I can't believe we wasted almost an entire week on something so stupid." She made a disgusted sound. "Daddy thought it might've been someone he and Zahovic—sorry, the bride's father-sent away years ago, come back for revenge, or something."

"So... hours spent going over old case logs?"

"Days," she nodded. "I think when the creep finally turned up safe and sound, there were at least five people looking to kill him, from the wedding party alone."

Dick nodded. "I know that feeling." He caught himself almost instantly, but Barbara was nodding again.

"Yeah, I can believe it. So." She looked up at him. "Daddy tells me you're going to be training him?"

Dick winced. "Yeah. It means I'll be spending more time up at the manor, I know, but..."

"Actually," Barbara said, "we should coordinate. You work with Bruce and I'll schedule my sessions with Eddie for the same time." She smiled at Dick's surprised expression.

"Look. We've both got a lot going on in our lives. We're going to have to do a lot of juggling in order to make things work out." She grinned. "Luckily, I happen to be dating this former circus star..."

Dick grinned. "Babs," he said gently, "I was a flyer."

Barbara laughed. "Hold it right there, Mister. On that note, I have something to show you." So saying, she wheeled into the bedroom. She returned a moment later, holding a cylindrical plastic tube. With a smile, she twisted the lid off and shook five small leather balls into her lap. "I haven't been practicing very long," she admitted as she scooped up one ball, "but..." she tossed the ball from one hand to the other, back and forth, finding her rhythm. Without slowing her pace, she picked up a second ball and began tossing that one as well. Her smile matched Dick's as she added the third. The next part was trickier. She'd been planning this for a little while, but there hadn't been anyone to practice with. It was now or never, she told herself firmly and tossed one of the balls toward Dick. Without waiting to see if he would catch it, she scooped up a fourth ball.

Dick grinned and passed the ball back, even as another one came his way. He returned that one as well. "I'm impressed," he laughed as he sent back the next. "You're good at this."

"So are you," she smiled. "For a flyer." Her gaze flickered to the last ball in her lap. "I've never tried five, before," she admitted. "Game?"
"If you are."

"Okay," Barbara said softly. "Here we go—oh sh-!"

The pattern fell apart. Dick grabbed two balls out of mid-air. Barbara caught the third. The fourth dropped into her lap and rolled down her leg, while the fifth hit the floor.

"Looks like I'm not exactly a natural at this," she admitted.

"I'll get 'em," Dick said, as he handed her the two he was already holding. "And you were doing fine up until you threw in that last one. You just need a little more practice."

"Thanks," Barbara said, taking the balls. "I'm just... not used to having so many... balls in the air at once. And until I am, if I drop a couple," she cocked her head and gave him a meaningful look, "no matter how frustrated I get, I don't want you to think I'm going to quit."

"Understood." Dick dropped the last two balls into her lap with a broad smile, placed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her into an embrace.

The juggling balls rolled to the floor in all directions, but nobody noticed.

"Sorry," Eddie said. "I didn't realize anyone was in here." He'd been sure that Robin had told him that this room was his. Then he realized that there was a second bed, set up at a right angle to the upper bunk.

The blond boy seated on the top bed glanced down at him for a moment, then looked away. "It's okay." Softly, the boy added, "I'm Dodge, by the way."

"Eddie. Or Kid Devil. At least, I was." He frowned. "Is 'Dodge' your real name or your code name?"

"Both." He turned back to face the older boy. "So, like, does every cape in Gotham live in some kind of cave?"

Eddie hefted his valise, walked hesitantly into the room and stood, leaning against one of the rough stone walls. "I don't know. I haven't met every cape yet."

Dodge thought about that for a moment. Then he shrugged and went back to kicking the air. There was an awkward silence.

Finally, Eddie set the valise down at the foot of the lower bunk. "Guess I'll see you later," he mumbled, and beat a hasty retreat.

Dodge almost called after him.

Eddie found Tim in the conference room. "Who is that kid?" He demanded.

Tim glanced up for a moment, and then went back to setting up the chairs around a long oval table. "Unless you've got another place to crash," he said, "your roommate."

"My what?"

Tim sighed. "Look. After what happened at Lexcorp Aviation—and no, I'm not saying this is your fault—I just don't think it's a good idea for us to have our team headquarters in one of the regular..."
Bat-caves. They're all in the city proper, and if anything were to go wrong..."

"Like a fire."

"Or some out-of-control meta powers. Or a chemistry experiment gone totally wrong—it's not like I've got an immunity to spectacular screw-ups," Tim pointed out. "This place was the HQ for the original Teen Titans. It's a half-hour away from downtown Gotham; close enough that we can get into the city every night, but far enough that we can get a little wild without the neighbors complaining.

"Thing is," he went on, "there are only five bedrooms. And one of them was Aqualad's, so it's more of a wall-to-wall saltwater pool. Four bedrooms, five Teen Titans, one mentor-in-residence—"

"Where does Dodge come in?" The youth frowned. "Is he joining the team?"

Tim started to shake his head, but reconsidered. "He's Raven's protégé. He goes where she does." Tim paused. "If anything, he's a... a probationary Titan, but I'm not sure I'd even go that far."

"Oh." Eddie's frown deepened. "So... wait. Me and Dodge have one room and..."

"Rose and Megan have one, and Raven and Cassie. I've got an apartment in Chelsea," he added. "All the rooms are about the same size. It's only fair to double up. As far as the extra room is concerned, we'll discuss it and decide as a team. I'm thinking of maybe expanding the research lab. Or we could leave it in case we get a couple of new members. You never know. But that's something to figure out later." He shrugged. "I guess if a couple of other people decide to rent in Gotham, the ones staying behind might end up with rooms to themselves, after all."

"I suppose."

Tim sighed. "Listen, I know it's not ideal, but could you give it a try? Seriously, I think Dodge needs someone to talk to."

"Why not you?"

Tim looked pained. "Because," he said, dropping his voice to a bare whisper, "I might end up killing him. I think you're probably going to be a bit more understanding."

"Huh?"

Tim had the grace to blush. "Call it a personality clash. We haven't hit it off, yet."

He gestured toward a wide passageway. "This way." He took a deep breath. "About Dodge. You remember what you told us about how far you went to make the team?"

"Um... yeah," Eddie felt his face flushing. It hadn't exactly been one of his brighter moments. "Where are we going?"

"Just through here. This is the records room," Tim said, as they rounded a bend. "Technically, you can pull up the files on any terminal in the complex, but the rest of the team will be arriving soon and it's quieter in this part of the cave." He tapped a few commands onto one of the consoles. "This is Dodge's folder. Read it over and come see me when you're done." He smiled. "I was thinking of inaugurating our new base of operations with a pizza lunch and I know this great spot, just off the interstate. Besides, I'm going to need to show you a bit more of how the main systems work if you're going to be co-ordinating our venture against the Ghost Dragons later."
Eddie couldn't quite hold back a laugh. "Sure." He sat down with the file as Tim headed back down the passageway.

A moment later, he was no longer laughing.

Jim trudged resolutely down the stairs into the cave. "They're gone," he remarked. "You can come out now."

Bruce grunted—whether in acknowledgement or from exertion, Gordon didn't know—and raised himself for another chin-up. "I'm not," he gasped as he relaxed his arms, "unh!" He pulled himself up once more, "...hiding. I'm... unh! ...staying... out... of... unh! ...their way." He released the bar and dropped to the mat with a slight stagger, turned and braced his hands against the cave wall to stretch.

"Ah," Jim said. "You're not running away from the cleaning staff."

"They have a job to do," Bruce said tersely. "I don't imagine they'll work comfortably if they have to deal with Batman watching their every move. Or haven't you notice how they react when I walk into the room?"

"To tell you the truth, I hadn't," Jim replied. "You sure you aren't imagining things?"

Bruce made a face and positioned himself on the back extension machine. "Like the way they jump a foot in the air, practically slam the knickknacks down and squeak that they were just moving them in order to dust?" He grimaced as he leaned back and started a set of reps. "I'm sure."

Jim waited, watching to make sure that Bruce was sticking to the regimen that Dick had laid out for him. Not that there was much he could do—short of telling Dick—if Bruce wasn't. Thus far, however, all seemed well.

After he'd finished three sets, Bruce pulled on a pair of boxing gloves and stalked over to the speed bag. "The truth is," he said, as he jabbed first with his left hand, then with his right, "I couldn't care less if they did make off with a few things. Everything I'm... attached to is in a secure location. As for the rest, if they want it that badly..." he intensified the rhythm of his blows, "they can have it. If I haven't needed it for two years, I don't need it at all."

"Mmm." Jim waited until he'd finished throwing punches and moved on to batarangs. "That's..." he caught himself. "Well, maybe I shouldn't find it as surprising as I do, to hear that coming from you. I guess, at the end of the day, you're a pragmatist."

"Not really." He tossed the batarang out once more. "You heard me. It sailed about thirty feet, then arced back toward its starting point. Bruce caught it in a gloved hand. "But it's foolish to rely on something that can be taken away from you."

"Ah." All at once, Jim's eyebrows drew together. "Something..." he repeated softly, "or someone?"

"Excuse me?" He hurled the batarang out once more.

"You heard me." He watched as Bruce reached out again to snag the missile on its return path.

"I'm right, aren't I?" he demanded. "That's why, every time things get tough for you, right when you actually need—not just want, but need—backup, that's when you get scared and chase everyone away."

This time, the batarang flew wide and skittered into the cave wall. "I get enough of this with Alex,"
Bruce muttered. "I wasn't expecting it from you."

"Pardon?"

Was Jim being deliberately obtuse? "Stop trying to analyze me!" he snapped.

"Why? Am I getting close?"

For answer, Bruce flung the batarang to the floor in disgust and stalked back toward the weight machines. Jim followed. Bruce did nothing, either to encourage him or to warn him off. He just sat down at the pectoral fly, set the weight level, and positioned his arms on the pads.

"It's why your favourite toy is modeled on a boomerang," Jim needled. "So it'll come back."

Bruce sighed. "There's a practical reason for that," he muttered. "I have to craft each one of them myself. It's time-consuming. The longer it takes for me to go through them, the less often I need to make more. They even have transmitters built in to them for easy location."

"Still and all, they're something you rely on that you've made it very hard to take from you. And in light of what you just said..."

Bruce grunted noncommittally. Then, almost in a whisper, he said, "early on, there was one night when Two-Face... beat Dick... nearly to death. I decided that having him for a partner was a mistake. I nearly called social services to find a different placement for him altogether, but Alfred intervened."

And Dick ran away in a fit of rage, and the prospect of losing him brought home to me exactly how much I'd come to care for him already in just a few short months. I thought if I taught him enough, that he would be safe. That illusion lasted years. And then Joker shot him and I realized that a stray bullet could still take him away from me if I didn't... if I didn't send him away first. And after Jason...

"Suppose you're right," he said finally, as he started a second set of reps. "I can give you a list of the people and... and objects I've relied on in the past. And lost in the end. Are you going to try to tell me that my concerns are baseless?"

"Are you going to try to tell me that your life would have been better without having those people in it?"

Bruce drew a choking breath as he forced himself to complete the reps. It wasn't until he'd finished the third set that he said, "I've tried to tell me. Every time I've lost someone else. Or come close."

"And?"

"It doesn't work. I know it doesn't work. I promise myself each time I'm reminded that it doesn't work, that going forward, I won't fall back into the same pattern. And each time..." He shook his head. "You realize that it would serve me right if you all just stayed away."

"You don't want that."

"No," Bruce admitted. "But since when has that had anything to do with it?"

He finished the rest of his weights routine in silence, save for occasional grunts, then strode off to shower. When he returned, Jim was still in the cave, waiting for him.

"It's just about lunchtime," the former commissioner said, his tone deliberately casual. "You've probably worked up an appetite. Ready to head upstairs?"
"Alright," Bruce matched him for nonchalance.

"You okay?"

Bruce nodded. "I'm just... thinking about what you said."

"Ah." Jim couldn't miss Bruce's palpable relief at his failure to question him further.

"I think... I'm glad you brought it up now. As opposed to Alex bringing it up in session." He continued quickly, "It is something that should be taken up with him, I know, but I'd prefer to be more at ease with the topic before that happens."

"I understand. Well," Jim rumbled, "any time you want to go over the subject in greater detail, it's not like I have anything else interfering with my availability. I... eh?"

"That's the main gate," Bruce blinked. A few quick steps brought him to the security camera arrays. He frowned. "I told her not to come," he muttered. "I told her not to bring her. What is she doing here?"

Jim considered for a moment. Then, he looked down at the neatly-labeled buttons and deliberately pressed the one that would open the main gate, ignoring Bruce's angry look. "Only one way to find out." He gestured toward the elevator. "After you."

"I'll be down the hall," Jim said, as Bruce stalked into the vestibule. Bruce nodded, one hand on the door handle, waiting for the bell-tone. When it came, he opened the door but, instead of inviting Selina in, stepped outside and shut it firmly behind him.

"Why are you here?" He demanded.

Selina took a step back. "We have a few things to discuss," she said. She smiled down at the toddler, who held fast to her hand.

"Look who it is, Helena," she said, giving her daughter a slight push forward.

Helena, however, spun about and wrapped both arms around her mother's leg with a whimper of protest.

"Helena!" Selina gave a little laugh. "She just needs to get to know you again," she said.

"Not a good idea," Bruce said flatly. "There's nothing to discuss." He shook his head. "If she's forgotten me, it's for the best. Given my current circumstances, you'd be wise to do the same."

"What?" Selena blinked. "No. Listen to me, you've got every reason to be upset—"

"I'm not," Bruce interrupted. He smiled sadly. "I, of all people, should understand the need to step away for someone else's safety. Your only mistake is in trying to reverse the move."

"That's funny," Selina shot back. "I was just thinking that 'stepping away' is about the only mistake you make that you don't learn from."

"Selina," he said in a pained voice, "when people get close to me, they get hurt. Or worse."

"It's not exactly inevitable, you know. Look, it would be one thing if I didn't understand the risks, but..."
"Vesper Fairchild," Bruce snapped. "David Cain murdered her because Luthor wanted me alive but out of the picture. Barbara Gordon. Shot through the spine in order to prove a point—not only to me, but to Jim. The point failed. The damage was done. Alfred. Jason. Stephanie." He turned away. "How many more names do you need? How many—before you do whatever you have to, in order to make sure that you and Helena are never on that list?"

"If I thought it was a guarantee," Selina retorted, "I'd be on some island in Micronesia right now. What do you want me to do? Lock us both in some fallout shelter where no one can find us? You're not the only one with enemies. And sometimes... sometimes you don't need enemies. You, of all people, should know that." She bit her lip, and mentally added, "Sometimes, you just need to take a shortcut through the wrong alley." She winced. That was the line to save as a parting shot if she was hell-bent on getting thrown off the grounds and ending any chance at a relationship. "Look, stuff happens. Life is risk. We can wrap ourselves in cotton batting or we can do our best to street-proof."

She bit her lip. "I knew when I left you that letter that maybe I was destroying any hope you'd ever let me back in your life. I came here to see if maybe there was still a chance. If there isn't, I'll live with that, but I'm asking you not to turn your back on your daughter."

"I don't even..." Bruce saw her gambit before he finished the sentence. She was giving him an opportunity, leaving herself wide open for an attack. As though analyzing a chess problem, he recognized her intent and knew what would happen if he made the next obvious move—the only effective move he could make, he reflected, if he wanted to maintain the usual pattern.

I say 'I don't even know she's mine.' She calls me a bastard. I wait a moment without speaking. She slaps me across the face and drives off. Our paths never cross again. A trifle melodramatic, true, but no less effective for that. She gives me what I want: for both of them to walk out of my life. And all I have to do is follow the script. Except...

Other voices rose in his memories.

"You can yell at me. You can call me every name in the book. You can disown me. Hell, you can even train a platoon of Robins. But don't you ever... ever tell me I don't have to come by here. You owe me better than that!"

"You don't have to go through this alone. Can you honestly say you want to?"

"Do you want me to leave... and not come back?"

"You will not lose me."

Hadn't he just been talking to Jim about not wanting to perpetuate the same cycles? The pattern was safe. It was familiar. It was a devil he knew all too well. But... Do you want me to leave... and not come back? Bruce took a deep breath. "I don't even know why you still want to know me." He said softly. "I'm not... whoever it was you think you fell in love with."

Selina's shocked expression gave way to a tremulous smile. "I beg to differ."

Bruce's lips twitched. "Come on, Selina," he said, "face it. I'm no Dark Knight. Not now. Maybe not ever again."

Selina shook her head. "And you still don't get it. Bruce, you and I were together long before I found out about the mask. Maybe cozying up to you started out as a ploy to case the manor," a smirk came and went, "but by the second date, there was a lot more to it than that." She hoisted Helena into her arms and took a step forward.
"Look. Maybe you're right. Maybe our relationship missed the boat, or my leaving scuttled it. Maybe I'm wrong, and you really are too different. I don't know. But can we at least try to find out?" She bent slightly forward and tried to pass Helena over. As Bruce reached for the toddler, though, she twisted away and stretched her arms out toward Selina.

Bruce raised his eyebrows.

That was when Helena looked back at him over her shoulder, gave him a broad smile and crowed.

"Maybe all it takes is a little time to get reacquainted," Selina whispered.

For a moment, that seemed to take a lifetime, Bruce regarded the two of them. Then he turned and opened the front door. "Would you... would you like to come in?" he asked quietly.

Selina exhaled with a glad laugh. "I thought you'd never ask."

This time, he barely hesitated before he responded, "So did I."

"Okay, Eddie," Ravager spoke into her comm-link with a broad smile, "we are ready!"

Kid Devil grinned and punched instructions rapidly into his console. It beeped as he hit the wrong key, and his cheerful expression vanished as he muttered a curse and slapped the table. His juice bottle wobbled and he reached out to stabilize it.

"Keep it steady." Oracle smiled from her seat at the main computer array.

The youth blinked. "Er... nothing got... wettie," he said.

Oracle winced. "That was an... interesting rhyme," she said.

"English isn't exactly my best subject." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he wanted to take them back. Now, she was probably going to want to tutor him in that, too! Sure enough, she was eyeing him with a thoughtful expression."

"We're in position," Harrier's voice cut in. "What are we facing?"

Oracle smiled. "You want to take this one?"

Kid Devil smiled. "Sure. Um... okay. Security cameras at all doors and windows."

"We can take those out," Harrier said confidently. "What else?"

"Hold on," the youth frowned. "If you do that, they'll know you're there." He looked at Oracle. "Can we trick the cameras? Maybe make a loop tape of an empty scene?"

The red-haired woman smiled. "Not for all of them; it would take too long. But we can hack into whichever one is set up at the team's point of entry." She raised her voice. "You got that, Harrier?"

"Loud and clear. Hold on a sec." There was a whispered confrontation. Then, "Those of us who can fly are taking the skylight. Those of us who can't are using the side access on the west."

"Which one are you, again?"

"Cute, Oracle. I'm taking ground, at least for tonight. How long will it take you to set up?"
"Ten minutes. Fifteen tops."

"Cool." There was a pause. "Kid Devil? Good thinking."

Eddie beamed. "Thanks."

The link disengaged. Oracle started typing. "Keep your eyes on your screen, Kid Devil," she said. "I'm showing you how I'm going to hack into the surveillance system for the ground access. It's a bit more complicated than anything you've tried yet, so go slow. Let's see you try the roof."

Eddie chewed on his lower lip. "Okay. Got a pad so I can take notes?"

"Check the right-hand drawer. Set?"

"Go."

"Don't execute until I check your work," she warned. "I mean it."

For a few minutes, it was quiet. Kid Devil asked a quick question every so often, but for the most part, the two worked independently. Then, "How do I cover my tracks again?"

"Subroutine epsilon."

"Okay." A moment later, "Did I do it?"

"Let me see..." Oracle skimmed the lines of code quickly, watching for anything that might tip off their quarry. "Beautiful work, Eddie. We'll make a hacker of you yet. Let's raise the Titans." She grinned. "You want to do first honors?"

For answer, Eddie grinned back. "Air team, acknowledge."

"Air team, here," Wonder Girl said instantly. "Are we good to go?"

"Go ahead. You're clear."

"My turn," Oracle said. "Ground team, acknowledge." There was a pause. "Ground team?"

A loud bang exploded over the speakers. Then there was silence.

Kid Devil and Oracle looked at one another in horror.

"What the hell just happened?"
Chapter Summary

Cass and the Teen Titans are outnumbered in a firefight. Bruce has a few issues with Dick's training methods. Surprisingly enough, Jim does too...

Chapter Notes

A/N: Bruce's list taken from Conversations with Yourself by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin (NY, Artscroll, 2007).

"This Is Me Leaving You" lyrics by Mary Chapin Carpenter and John Jennings. Performed by Mary Chapin Carpenter on her Time* Sex* Love* album (Columbia, 2001).

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, Juliet, and Aiyokusama for the beta!

Chapter 12—Pride and Grace

Harrier saw the flare land under the parked Honda and realized in an instant what was about to happen.

"Ravager, MOVE!" He didn't wait for her to react to his order. He sprang forward, caught her about the waist, and flung her down, shielding her body with his own. There was a horrific bang and the two teens felt a blast of heat pass over them.

Beneath him, Ravager struggled to turn her face toward his. "You know, if you wanted to kiss me, you didn't have to be this dramatic about it," she teased.

Harrier flinched. If I tell her I didn't... How sword-resistant is this Kevlar, again? Groaning was the only safe response he could come up with, under the circumstances.

An instant later, Batgirl was crouching next to them. "Okay?"

"Agh! Get off me, you creep!" Ravager struggled to break loose. "I'm fine except for having all this
muscle slam into my back."
"Better muscle than shrapnel," Harrier shot back. "What happened?"

Batgirl extended her hands to help her new teammates to their feet. "Lookout." Her voice was disgusted. She gestured toward the top story. "There." Her finger pointed to the window on the far left. "Fired flare gun. Missed you." She pointed toward the remains of a parked car. "Went under."

Ravager began to swear. "Does every lousy crook in this city like fire and explosions?"

"No," Batgirl said shortly. "Joker and Scarecrow like... gas."

"We would've noticed if the motor was on," Ravager snapped, ignoring the comment. "How the hell did it blow up?"

Harrier glanced over his shoulder at the car. "It's an old Prelude," he muttered. "I remember reading about those. There was a design flaw with the fuel tank in the early 80s—it rusts out. Open flame under the body would be enough to cause the blast."

"You can tell all that from the wreckage?"

"No," Harrier said tersely. "I took note of the make and model when we got here. I just didn't plan on its being the Ghost Dragons' security system, or I would have paid closer attention."


"Ground team, come in! Are you there?"

Harrier activated his comm-link. "Here, Oracle. Sorry. We hit a snag. We're fine."

"Then get in there!" Kid Devil's voice came over the channel, fast and excited. "Wonder Girl just sent out a distress call—they're outnumbered and pinned down!"

"On it," Batgirl called, taking a running leap at the door. It splintered at her kick.

Harrier and Ravager exchanged a quick glance. "Well," Ravager said, unsheathing her swords, "it's not like they didn't already know we were coming. Let's move."

They hurried after their companion.

Wonder Girl peered over the wall of crates and ducked as a laser gun fired. "You okay?" she asked the green-skinned girl next to her.

Miss Martian nodded. "I should be." She sounded disgusted. "It's just..." she closed her eyes, "wearing a force field might protect me from fire, but not from my fear of it. I can smell the smoke from outside."

"You were fine when we had the cookout, our last night in San Francisco," Wonder Girl said thoughtfully. "I mean, you weren't sitting near the grill, but the smoke didn't really faze you." She rose again, cried out in surprise, and held up her forearms to deflect an incoming blast.

"That fire was under control," M'gann protested as Cassie slid back down.

"I know. But can't you pretend this smoke is also from a barbecue? A big one?"
Miss Martian seemed to think it over. Her jaw hardened. "I can do something about the lasers, at least," she said grimly. Her eyes glowed red. She spun about, rose, and targeted one of the large robots. "Match them in kind!"

Wonder Girl smiled. "Well, alright!" she whispered. Then louder, "Cover me!" as she took to the air.

She hoped the ground team would arrive shortly, but the situation was nowhere near as dire as it had appeared a moment ago.

One floor below, Harrier, Batgirl and Ravager found themselves facing eight angry youths in Ghost Dragon garb and face paint.

"Watch out," Harrier cautioned, as a shower of shuriken came toward them. "Our costumes should shield us, but make sure none of those blades hit your face."

Batgirl nodded. " Might be poisoned." Her voice was dispassionate, as though the matter was purely one for academic discussion.

Ravager scowled. Her costume was the only one without a full face-mask. "Well, he won't throw them my way if he'll risk hitting his friends," she snapped. So saying, she charged the 'Dragons' ranks, blades extended.

Harrier let loose with a salvo of his own. In the old days, his throwing knives would have been R-shaped. Now, they were stylized "H"s, the down-strokes razor-sharp half-circles, linked by a flat horizontal bar. There were shouts of dismay as the blades sank into arms, legs, and torsos.

Batgirl took a running leap and catapulted into their midst. Without missing a beat, she lashed out at her adversaries with her feet and fists.

The Ghost Dragons fought back, but the outcome of the battle was never in doubt as the three vigilantes pummelled and pounded them into submission.

As Harrier delivered an uppercut to the last 'Dragon standing, however, a rolling steel door set in the far wall inched slowly upwards.

Batgirl saw a row of heavy mechanical feet behind it. "Uh oh," she whispered.

"Harrier! Come in! What's going on?" Oracle slammed her hand down on her desk in frustration. "Air Team's secured their position and is able to lend a hand. Do you need it? Answer!"

She shook her head. "No cameras I can interface with inside the building," she muttered. "I hate this."

"I should be out there with them," Kid Devil said. "I could even the odds." Then he grimaced. "I mean, if I still had my powers. Only I don't. So I guess I have to keep helping them this way instead." He gestured toward his work station. "It's not the same."

"Hey," Oracle was smiling. "At least you'll probably be back out there with them, one night. That's more than I can say."

Eddie blinked. He'd never thought about it before, but somehow he had a feeling that… "You haven't always been… support personnel, have you?"
"I used to be Batgirl." Seeing his stunned expression, she shook her head, still smiling. "It was a long time ago. I'm past that, now." Her smile dimmed. "Mostly. When I'm not stuck here, wondering what the heck is happening, feeling blind as a…" She flipped open the channel again.

"Ground team, can anyone read? Answer, damn it!"

"Maybe they're just in the middle of a fight and can't answer," Kid Devil pointed out.

Oracle sighed. "I know that's probably it," she agreed. Her shoulders slumped. "But I hate not being sure." She turned to face him. "And yes, like you, I do want to just go barrelling in there and save the day like I used to, but instead I'm back here, running data and—"

"Oracle! Now would be a great time to get the Air Team down to the second floor!" Harrier's voice broke in.

"Relaying," Oracle responded smoothly, all business. Once done, she closed the channel. "If he comes back from this in one piece, I may kill him."

Eddie shook his head. "The team's unbalanced enough, as it is. You kill him, that makes me the only guy with three gi…" he stopped. "Three… gorgeous… girls." He cleared his throat. "Did you know he's allergic to mugwort?"

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Ravager deflected a laser blast with the flat of her sword. "You fought these things?" she demanded.

"No. Met." Batgirl cast her grapnel, looping it about one robot's gun arm. That wouldn't hold, she knew. She needed...

Something whipped by her in a blur. Harrier had looped a line of his own around the same wrist. "Back up," Harrier told her. Then, in a louder voice, he bellowed, "Ravager! NOW!"

Ravager saw the opportunity immediately. White hair flying, she charged in and thrust her blade into the joint between the robot's arm and torso. There was a harsh, grating creak. The robot wobbled and then fell forward, its full weight supported precariously by its immobilized arm.

"Nice," Ravager approved. Then, "Harrier! Behind you!"

The young man whirled and flung himself to one side. "Time to even these odds," he muttered. "Batgirl, Ravager, plastique, now. Ravager, tell me you use EBWs for blasting caps."

"Yeah," the white-haired teen said dubiously. "But what are we going to do for..." Wonder Girl and Ms. Martian burst into the room. "Ohhhh..."

Harrier reached into one of his belt compartments and pulled out a glob of plastique. "You'd better get this," he told Batgirl as he divided it in two. "You're faster. Don't use too much," he warned as he handed it to her. "We've taken out enough buildings already."

Batgirl nodded.

"What're we doing?" Wonder Girl asked as she looped her lariat around one of the constructs' legs and gave a yank. "I mean, besides taking out these Robby-the-robot rejects?"

"That's pretty much it," Harrier admitted as he slapped the rest of the plastique into her hand. "Help Batgirl. Then fall back and let Ms. Martian take it from there."

Their green-skinned teammate blinked. "What do you want me to do?"
"Focus on the blasting caps Ravager's jamming into the plastique. You're going to have to concentrate your force blasts into a thin beam hot enough to ignite the explosive. Up for it?"

"Just cover me," M'gann said grimly.

"Hang on," Wonder Girl said as she turned to Harrier in confusion. "If she's susceptible to fire, then how...?"

Ms. Martian had heard. "Flames are the problem," she said, as she selected a target. "Not heat."
Then, more loudly, "Everyone! Get clear!"

A few moments later, there was nothing left of their adversaries but slag and twisted metal.

"How'd it go with Bruce tonight?" Barbara asked later.


"He's second-guessing you?" Barbara shook her head sympathetically.

"Not exactly. But he wants to. And you want to know something?" Dick closed his eyes. "Part of me really wishes he would. As much as I told him this would only—could only work if we agreed that I was in charge, the fact that he's going along with it just feels..." He sighed again. "I think I miss..." He broke off. "No. That's not it. I don't miss fighting with him. But I'm used to it. It's... I keep bracing myself for one of his controlled explosions or... or..."

"Sulks?"

That got a faint smile. "You make him sound like a five-year-old."

"When he's not in control," Barbara pointed out, "that's how he acts sometimes."

"And he's deliberately given me control." He frowned. "Does that mean that he's controlling the fact that he isn't in..." He exhaled. "I'm giving myself a headache."


"I hope so," he said sleepily.

"I know so." Her smile broadened. "Titans did good tonight. So did Cass."

"They made the collar?"

"They recovered the diamonds, and the Ghost Dragons are cooling their heels down at Central. Still need to nail whoever's been managing their operations, though."

Dick nodded. "Still..." he stifled a yawn.

"Get some sleep," Barbara ordered good-naturedly. "I'll be there in a little bit."

He was about to argue, when another yawn seized him—one he couldn't suppress. "Okay. 'Night."

Barbara watched him go. Then, she turned on her interface with the main Bat cave. As she'd expected, Bruce was there, doing push-ups. His face was set in a fixed grimace and perspiration beaded his brow and darkened his singlet. As she watched, his arms buckled and he fell to the floor
with a gasp.

"Get some rest, Bruce," she whispered sympathetically, knowing that he couldn't hear her. "Rome wasn't built in a day."

"Better," Dick grinned up from the mat. "O Goshi, Osoto Gari, Ashi Guruma... how about we leave aside the judo throws for now and move on to grapples?"

"You're still holding back," Bruce said tersely.

Dick blinked. "Well, yeah," he said. "If I weren't, I'd mop the floor with you."

The older man shook his head. "I expect that," he said. "I don't need you to mollycoddle me. I know these moves; I just have to remember them." His eyes seemed to bore into Dick's. "I'm not some green recruit, like Kid Devil, whom you have to build up. The only way I'll do this is if I keep losing to you... until I start winning."

"Like chess," Dick nodded after a moment's thought. "It doesn't matter how many books you read on winning. The only way to become a good player is to lose match after match..."

"...until you master the techniques." Bruce's lips twitched. "It's not quite the same thing, but it's close."

"I hear you." Dick took a deep breath. "Okay. We'll try it your way. Prepare to eat mat."

"Today." The twitch became a smile. "But don't be overly surprised if you find yourself sharing my meal tomorrow."

"Bruce... I've had your roast beef. The mat's going to be an improvement."

Bruce had had enough banter. He charged, Dick sidestepped, and the match was on.

"You're in a good mood, today," Alex remarked as Bruce sat down.

Bruce nodded. "I've been working out. It's been relaxing."

"Understandable," Alex nodded back. "I was going to suggest it, myself, except..." he paused, then added candidly, "I've noticed that suggesting you try something usually has you looking for reasons not to."

Bruce frowned at that, but mentally conceded the point. "How long do you expect me to keep the fish?"

Alex blinked. "Well, there's no set time limit on it. How are they doing, anyway?" he asked.

Bruce shrugged. "I lost one. The others are fine, I suppose. I just don't see how keeping them is supposed to be helping me. And before you start," he added, "I'm familiar with the theories behind the therapy. I just don't see how they apply to me in this case."

Alex thought for a moment. "Keep the fish, for the moment," he said. "You don't have to replace them if they die off, as long as you have... it's still zebra danios, right?" At Bruce's nod, he went on. "You told me you have a 60-gallon tank... Alright. There's no harm in letting the fish have more space than they strictly require. As long as you have a minimum of six of them at any time, that's fine. We can review this again, down the road."
Bruce nodded, impressed despite himself. Alex was clearly familiar with the species and its requirements. Of course, he reminded himself, zebra danios were a common enough species, and one of the hardier tropical fish. Alex probably had many patients who had opted for them. He wished he hadn't let Dick and Jim talk him out of the piranhas.

"For now," Alex said, "I'd like to try something a bit different. If you'll indulge me..."

Jim waited in the cafe across the street, watching the door. When Dick walked in, he got up, straightened his jacket, and reached for his cane. "Let's walk," he said firmly as Dick approached him.

Dick said nothing until they reached the plaza of One Gotham Center and sat down on one of the benches that lined the square. "Okay," he said, finally. "We're not being followed, and nobody's listening. What's up?"

Jim smiled. "Thanks for the confirmation. Keep your eye on the time; we need to head back before Bruce is done. I just wanted to ask you a few things without his overhearing."

"Okay. Did you want a coffee or anything?" He gestured toward a pushcart set up near the Center's main entrance.

"I had one before you showed up. I just wanted to voice a concern about what the two of you are doing in the basement. Or rather," he fixed Dick with a meaningful stare, "I have a concern about what he's doing down there when you aren't around."

Dick smiled slowly. "You think he's overdoing."

"I know he is. I've... been listening in remotely," he admitted.

He'd thought as much. "Any particular reason?"

"I'm not trying to catch him breaking the terms of his release, if that's what you're thinking," Jim snapped. "When I saw him working out downstairs, he seemed to be," he hesitated, "driven. He told me you'd agreed to... work with him."

"He's not allowed to wear the suit," Dick pointed out. "The judge never said anything about his not being allowed to train. Besides," he added, "if you want to get technical, he's never legally been allowed to wear the suit, anyhow. It's just that now, the consequences of his getting caught aren't quite so hypothetical, anymore."

"I realize that," Jim said testily. "Let's leave aside, for the moment, the idea that he might read your willingness to train him as though you were condoning a return to the suit. If you are, I don't want to find out about it—"

"I'm not."

"Good." Jim smiled for the first time. "That's a load off. I listened in because I wanted to find out how much of his new regimen was set up by you, and how much of it he's embellished."


"He's doing at least three times what you've been asking of him."

Dick's smile broadened. "Really?"
Jim frowned at him. "You're taking this awfully calmly."

Dick said nothing. He simply regarded the older man and waited, still smiling.

After a moment, Jim let loose a small chuckle. "You were expecting him to go beyond your program."

"You got it."

"So, when you assigned him those reps..."

"I told him to do about a quarter of what I figured he'd actually do. He's on-target. Maybe even slightly behind."

Jim punched his arm. "You conniving... you knew I was going to call you out on this, and you've been standing here, laughing at..."

"I've been standing here waiting for you to figure it out. You don't think I've wanted to tell someone about this?"

Jim shook his head, fighting back his laughter. "I ought to..." His voice trailed off. "Fine. Maybe you do know what you're doing, after all." He got up. "We might as well head back, now."

"So, what's wrong with that?" Selina wanted to know.

Bruce stared at her. "It's the most ridiculous, asinine, juvenile... pap... I've ever heard of."

"Spoken like someone who's never browsed the New Age or self-help sections of Boundaries or Shedds & Kingly." She smirked for a moment, then sobered. "Seriously, Bruce, how bad can it be?"

Bruce sighed. "Here," he fished the list out of his inner pocket. "See for yourself."

She took it. "Keep an eye on Helena," she warned. "You wouldn't believe the kind of mischief she can get into if you don't watch her."

"She's over by the fish," Bruce said absently.

"I see her. That doesn't mean that in the next five minutes she won't be trying to catch them, eating their food, or exploring the rest of the... manor. Close the door, please, Bruce, before she starts wandering." She unfolded the paper.

"Nine principles to master happiness and joy?" she read aloud.

"You see?" Bruce shut the door firmly. "It's idiotic."

She looked up at him, her expression enigmatic. "Did you actually read it over?"

Bruce scowled.

Selina sighed. "Look. Just try it. I promise I won't tell the paparazzi. Here. The first one is 'I think appreciatively and gratefully. What am I grateful for now?'" She cocked her head. "Bruce?" After a moment's silence, she took a deep breath. "Okay. I'm grateful you're out. I'm grateful to be back in Gotham. I'm grateful that you're still willing to have me in your life." She smiled. "Your turn."

"This is pointless."
"Do it anyway."

Bruce sighed. "I'm... grateful that my family has stood by me all this time. I'm grateful that some of the people who... left... have come back. I..." his voice trailed off. "What's the next item?"

"This one is just an affirmation, no question attached: 'I speak and act joyfully and kindly'."

Bruce snorted.

"Don't sell yourself short, Handsome. I admit it hasn't happened that often, but it has happened." Her eyes moved down the list. "I assume there is a benefit. What's good about this?"

"Well," Bruce said slowly, "at least you seem to be enjoying it. I wouldn't call that 'bad'." At her raised eyebrow, he sighed. "I suppose it's not that different from various techniques I've employed for meditation or stress management. I can see that a list like this may have applications relevant to problem-solving..."

"Fish!" came a delighted squeal. "Hi, fish! Hi!" A pudgy hand slapped the glass of the aquarium. "Fishy! Lookame!"

"Helena!" Selina thrust the list into his hand and raced to scoop up her daughter. "No. Don't scare the fish, Honey. Here, look." Her voice softened. "Look, don't touch. One fish, two fish..."

"Re' fish! B'u fish!"

"Very good!" Selina laughed. "Except these are blaaaack, and sil-ver. Can you say 'black'?"

"Back."

"Good! And 'sil-ver'?"

Bruce smiled and glanced back to the sheet of paper in his hand. 'I strive for meaningful goals. What's my goal for now? To finish this exercise. To get one attack past Dick's guard and know that he didn't simply allow it. To eliminate the need for constant supervision. No. That would be a long-term goal. To increase my unsupervised time. He walked over to the desk to get a pen and paper. He needed to write some of this down...

That night, Bruce dreamed that he was standing in the center of a ring of people. He knew them all: his parents, Tommy Elliot, Alfred, Silver, Jason, Julie, Vesper... there seemed to be no end to them.

"The purpose of this exercise," Alex's voice intoned slowly, "is to build trust. Close your eyes, keep your arms by your sides, and sway. The people around you will catch you and push you back toward the center."

If he closed his eyes, he wouldn't know when he was falling until it was too late! Before he could get the words out, Alex continued, "Someone will be there to catch you before you fall. Begin."

He wanted to protest, but all at once, the world went dark. He couldn't see a thing. He tried to reach out before him, but his arms wouldn't move. He struggled to take a step, but he stumbled and fell forward. All at once, he felt the pressure of two hands on his chest, and caught a whiff of Quintana Valore blended with Chanel No. 5 before Vesper pushed him backward—against another pair of hands. Nimble, surgeon's hands—Tommy's hands—pushed him off again, this time toward his mother. This was... not so bad. He was beginning to relax when Alfred pushed him back toward Tommy... and he careened into empty space. He twisted, tried to break his fall with his hands, but
his arms wouldn't move. The ground seemed to be farther away... was he on the edge of a trench? But then, a new pair of hands reached out, sending him back to the middle of the circle.

"Got you!" Dick's voice trailed behind him, and then he was hurtling toward his father, once more.

His father pushed him into Jason, who sent him back toward his mother. This time, when her hands weren't there, it was Alfred who caught him. The rhythm picked up, more people fell away—at times he was sure that he was going to hit the ground- but new hands always caught him.

"You don't actually think we're going to let you fall, do you?" Jim sounded exasperated.

"Won't." Cass. More hands. Barbara, Tim, Selina…

"We're in this together," Dick's voice seemed to grow fainter as Bruce felt himself rise. He was floating out of the circle, hovering above it, but the others remained, their fingers—he knew, without knowing how he knew—meeting, lacing together, and forming a net. "All of us…"

Jim closed the master bedroom door with a feeling of satisfaction. He'd grown used to hearing Bruce talk in his sleep, or, more correctly, to hearing Bruce moan and cry out in his sleep. Tonight, though, it was different. For the first time since he'd moved into the manor, Jim reflected, Bruce's dream didn't appear to be a nightmare. He smiled to himself, and padded down to the kitchen for a pot of herbal tea.

"Well," Jim cocked his head to look up at Bruce. "this is a switch. The other day, you were looking for a way to rehome the fish—at least, that would be the kinder route—and today..."

"I can ask Dick to come with me, if you'd rather," Bruce said as he adjusted the curly brown wig and examined his reflection. A soul patch followed. As he studied the effect, he saw Jim making a face behind him. His lips twitched. "Do you have something to say?"

"Will it make a difference?"

Bruce turned around. "If it helps, I don't enjoy dressing up like this, but I'd rather not run the risk of someone recognizing me."

Jim grunted. "Don't worry. The Bruce Wayne I know wouldn't be caught dead looking like that."

Bruce smiled.

"It wasn't a compliment."

"I know." He pulled on a ratty tweed jacket. "Are you coming?"

Jim sighed and shifted his weight onto his cane. "It's not like I have anything else to do today."

"Sir! Sir, wait! What did I say?"

Bruce didn't look back. He simply jerked his head toward the door. "We're leaving," he said to Jim. Out on the street, Jim turned to him. "What was that about?"

Bruce was livid. "I don't have to stand there while some jo... clown..." He broke off abruptly, "while some comedian thinks he can get away with making subtle digs at... Never mind. There's another pet
supply store a few doors down."

Jim sighed. "You want to tell me exactly what he said to you?"

"It's not important."

"I'd tend to agree," Jim said as he leaned against a storefront, "if this wasn't the third shop you'd stormed out of. Are you sure you weren't reading too much into things?"

Bruce shook his head.

"I don't suppose the persona you're adopting is supposed to be a jerk?" His eyes narrowed.

"No!" Bruce blinked. "Wait. That... that can't be right."

Jim waited for elaboration. It didn't take long.

"There is no way that all three of them saw through the disguise. I might accept one—if he had a good ear for voices—but all three... It doesn't add up."

The former police commissioner sighed. "You sure you don't want to talk about it?"

Bruce shook his head. "I'm not sure what there is to talk about." He took a deep breath. "Fine. I found an attendant. I told him I was looking for fish that would be compatible with the zebra danios I already have. He asked me about the temperature of the tank, the ph-level, the water chemistry..."

"So far, so good," Jim nodded. "And?"

"And he suggested harlequins and clown loaches!"

Jim's eyebrows shot up. All at once, he smiled. "And you thought that meant... Oh, no!" He chuckled. The chuckle became a full-blown laugh. "Oh, this is..." He took a deep breath and tried to regain his composure. "Bruce, they're common community fish. Trust me. Your secret is safe."

Bruce felt his face grow hot. "I thought..." he mumbled, embarrassed.

"I know what you thought. Come on. Let's go to that other store you haven't been in, yet. Try not to scare the staff, this time." He clapped a hand to the younger man's shoulder. "Look. Even smart people make silly mistakes, sometimes." He took a deep breath. "If you ever mention this in Barbara's presence, she will know how you found out and things will not bode well for either of us."

They walked a few steps in silence before Bruce prompted him. "Jim?"

"When Barbara was about twelve, she was invited to a classmate's birthday party. Now when you're twelve, at least, this was true for Barbara, it's an age where you want to appear rather... grown up. So, when she went to pick out a birthday present, she took herself down to Killinger's and bypassed the toy department entirely, in favour of the main floor."

Bruce knew the layout. "Jewelry, ladies' handbags and accessories, perfumes, bath... I'm... not seeing the problem."

Jim sighed. "I dropped her off at the main doors and told her I'd be back to pick her up. When she got back into the car, I knew something was wrong. She... well, your performance in the last store reminded me of her, just then. See... she'd gone to the perfume counter to ask about a suitable birthday present for a twelve-year-old." He smiled. "And the saleswoman suggested toilet water."
He couldn't stop his guffaw. "Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes!"

"So…” Dick prompted, still smiling.

"So I went with golden barbs and several varieties of tetras.” He stepped back into the calf-raise machine and began another set of repetitions.

"Ah.”

Bruce smiled faintly. "I thought that it might help Helena become more familiar with her colors, if there was a greater variety in the aquarium. The zebra fish are rather drab.”

"So that's it!" Dick laughed. "We were wondering." Then, all business, he added, "when you finish the next set of reps, we're going to start on escrima."

"Noted," Bruce grunted. For the next few moments, the cave was silent, but for Bruce's breathing and the soft clink of the weights.

"You know," Bruce said as he stepped away from the machine and picked up his pair of sticks, "I think I've… figured out the reasoning behind your training curriculum."

"Oh?" Dick held one escrima in each hand in the open high position.

Bruce lunged. Dick blocked. "When you began wearing the costume, you kept your own fighting style." He blocked Dick's thrust and came back with one of his own. "It didn't matter, since enough people knew that you weren't… me. But if… when I return to the costume, it will be imperative that I maintain your style, at least initially, so that nobody connects the end of my," he made a face, "probation with the emergence of a new Batman."

Dick grinned. "When you're hot, you're hot." Without warning, he surged forward and attacked.

A sharp clack, a smarting wrist, and Bruce's escrima clattered to the ground.

"And when you're not, you're not. Pick 'em up, and I'll walk you through a couple of drills before I head off. Raven asked me to watch the Titans work out before I start patrol tonight."

Six hours later, Barbara squinted at the unfamiliar shape in the night sky. The oval was the same size as the bat-signal, but instead of the familiar logo, it looked… it looked like there was something covering up most of the bat. As she watched, the light went out.

She frowned. Had something got stuck on the symbol? All at once, she went cold. Or did someone get caught inside it? Years ago, Bruce had fought a fourth-stringer named Signalman, who had somehow gained the upper hand, and he'd… Oh, she had to see what was going on at GCPD fast!

It took her a few attempts for her to access the roof cameras atop Central. Panic bred typos… and frustration bred more. When she finally got through, it was to see group of officers gathered around the signal. Montoya and Sawyer were there, too, their expressions inscrutable.

As Barbara watched, someone pried open the signal. There was someone inside. He was wearing the remains of a bat-costume. And he didn't appear to be breathing.
Risk

Chapter Summary

Reconciliation time! Bruce and Selina try to start over, while Tim pays a long-overdue visit to the manor. Meanwhile, Dick is sure that Penguin knows more about a recent murder than he's letting on.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Juliet for the beta! Thanks to Aiyokusama, Huffy, little_details, and ask_a_cop for technical advice!

Possible squicks/triggers this chapter: graphic death (not involving a major character)


What if there's a little girl
With your blue eyes
A wall that marks just how time flies
One minute bouncin' on my knee
Next she's askin' for the keys
Maybe I should just surrender
To the hope of things we might remember
I'll tell my heart I think it's worth the risk
If that's what I'd miss

Liz Rose, Mark Narmore, Carol Ann Brown, "What I'd Miss"

Chapter 13—Risk

"It's not me." Dick's voice came through crisply over the comm-link. Dick's voice—not Batman's. "I'm heading over there now."

Barbara felt the relief course over her shoulders like a cool wave. A moment later, though, her relief turned to outrage. "Of all the..."

"What?"

"Not you, "Barbara said quickly. "Some voyeur with a camera must be in one of the apartments overlooking GCPD. You know those systems I have to let me know when certain keywords get used? A metube clip titled 'Batman... Baked?' just got posted. And it's not a film of a novelty cake."

Dick started swearing. He took a deep breath. "Tell Bruce I'm alright. If he doesn't pick up, leave a message. And see if you can track down the guy responsible. Sawyer's people might have a few
"things to discuss with him."

"Sure you don't want a few words, yourself?"

"Ohhhh, I do," Dick shot back. "That's why it's better to let GCPD handle it. Call Bruce." His voice dropped to a harsh gravelly whisper. "Batman out."

The line went dead.

Barbara's hand moved toward the speed-dial button for the manor, but something made her wait to place the call until she saw Batman land on the roof of the GCPD building. Maybe, she thought to herself ruefully, seeing really was believing. Then, finally convinced, she hit the button.

The first thing Batman noticed when he touched down on the roof was how the nauseating odor of burnt plastic mingled with the aroma of roasted meat. Knowing where the cooking smell was coming from made it worse. Not that he was squeamish—he wouldn't have lasted long in his work if he were—but there were some thoughts on which he preferred not to dwell. The area around the signal was marked off by yellow crime scene tape. As he looked on, he saw two figures in CSI jackets wrapping the signal in brown paper, while a third secured the paper with red evidence tape.

Montoya smiled her relief at his arrival. "I didn't think it was you in there," she remarked, gesturing at the floodlight for emphasis, "but it's nice to know for sure. Someone dressed the victim in a cheap Halloween knockoff of your suit—that's why you're smelling plastic—synthetic fibres melted when the signal heated up. As you can see, CSI's still going over the area—photos are done but the sketch artist is still busy." She lowered her voice. "If it's any consolation, I took a close-up look before the experts got busy. In my opinion, the guy was already dead when someone stuffed him inside. Gunshot wound to the head. That's not official, of course. ME hasn't had a chance to examine anything yet."

He nodded. "They're carting the signal down to the morgue, I take it?"

"Easier to extract the body there." Her eyes narrowed. "Dressing the corpse in a bat-suit does seem to be shouting out to you. Any idea who'd do this?"

Batman sighed. "If you're asking whether I have any enemies, Captain..."

"Unless they meant him."

"Not likely," Dick grimaced. "I could be reading too much into it, but," he took a deep breath. "Captain, they killed an impostor in a knockoff costume. Who would you think they're alluding to?"

He shrugged. "They're entitled to their opinion." A faint smile flickered on his face. "If it makes them underestimate me, I'm not in that big a hurry to disillusion them." He lowered his voice ominously. "Yet."

Montoya snorted. "Right. And better bat-suits are available off-the-rack and at all fine menswear establishments. How's he doing, anyway?"

"He's good. By the way, you might not be able to keep this thing quiet. Be prepared if the media comes calling." Briefly, he relayed what Oracle had told him.

"iMaldita sea!" She felt, rather than saw, the looks from her fellow officers. While she was just as likely to curse as the next person, outbursts in Spanish were rare for her. Batman didn't seem fazed, though.
"That was my reaction, too," he said. "When we find the shutterbug, you want him? Or her?" he amended.

"Unfortunately, since the creep hasn't done anything illegal, our hands are tied." She smiled crookedly. "Doesn't mean yours are, of course."

Batman pulled out his jump line. "It'll have to wait." He gestured toward the bat-signal, which four investigators were now straining to lift. "There are other priorities."

His cable snagged a fire escape railing and he swung off into the night.

Montoya watched him leave. Then she turned around to watch the CSI crew. "Careful with that!" she warned, as they tried to maneuver through the door. "Take it slow..."

"Who was he, Ozzie?"

Oswald Cobblepot nearly leaped three feet into the air. "I've asked you to use the tradesman's entrance!" he snapped.

"And I've just asked you a question." He mentally counted five seconds. "I'm waiting."

Penguin scowled. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Then you're overpaying Lonerghan." He shook his head. "I thought he was supposed to be your eyes and ears down at Central."

'Supposed to be' was, of course, the operative phrase. Eight months ago, Lonerghan had been the subject of an Internal Affairs probe when a streetwalker had come forward claiming that he had offered not to charge her with prostitution—provided that she did not charge him for prostitution. The investigation had run for weeks and, although the charge had eventually been dismissed for lack of evidence, the once-promising officer had found himself ostracized in both his private and professional life. Broken and depressed, he'd taken to drowning his sorrows at the Iceberg, sharing his bitterness with anyone who would listen.

It hadn't been long before Penguin had made him an offer.

In point of fact, the whole thing had been a setup. Yes, Lonerghan was a mole—but he took his orders from Kowalski at the Vice desk. For over three months, he had been earning Penguin's trust, passing on such intelligence as his superiors deemed appropriate. At the same time, he'd been keeping a close eye on the comings, goings, and conversations taking place around him. Maybe he'd been keeping too close an eye. Some of the regulars had become suspicious...

At the mention of Lonerghan's name, Cobblepot started visibly. Still, he tried to brazen it out. "That name means nothing to me," he snapped, as he made a show of shuffling papers. "Really, Batman, I'd think by now you'd know better than to burst in here flinging blind accusations and hoping to catch me off-guard."

Angrily, Batman slammed one hand down on the pile of papers, as he thrust his face into Cobblepot's. When a scant inch was all that separated their noses, he snarled, "Someone stuffed a body in the bat-signal tonight. I want to know if it was one of your flunkies..." He grabbed him by the front of his shirt with one hand, even as he slipped a small listening device under the mahogany phone stand. "...or one of your patrons." He flung the little man back into his padded desk chair. "Well?"
Cobblepot slumped and mopped at his forehead with a linen handkerchief. "I... I have no idea."

"Wrong answer," Batman snapped. "I hope you have a better one by the time I come back." He swept out of the office.

As the door closed behind him, Penguin bolted up from the chair and ran after him. He yanked the door back open, only to find that Batman had vanished.

Furious, he stormed into the lounge area. Several of his hostesses were gathered at one of the private booths. "What's going on here?" he demanded irritably. The young women moved aside at his approach. In the booth before him sat one bloody and battered Lonerghan. "What happened to you?"

The officer shook his head. "I didn't tell him anything, Mr. Cobblepot," he said, holding an ice cube to a split lip. "I swear."

Penguin regarded him for a moment, thinking. Then he nodded. "Someone get him patched up. We can't have the man bleeding all over the upholstery." He patted Lonerghan's arm. "Lie low for a few days, officer. I'm sure he'll have a nice jaywalker or two to distract him from our affairs before too long."

The driver of the unmarked police car cruised slowly around the perimeter of Robinson Park. The two passengers in the back seat were oblivious to the scenery; their focus was on the conversation. "Well," Kowalski smiled, "you're officially off the force pending an investigation. He said to tell you he was sorry if he hit you too hard."

Lonerghan grinned back. "This mean I can go back to taking my supplements?" At his supervisor's puzzled look, he went on. "Guess you didn't see my medical report. I'm mildly anemic. I've been cutting back on my iron content since I knew what we were cooking up. Figured I'd bruise better."

"That was stupid," Kowalski shot back. "You could do yourself some real damage that way."

"I've been careful. Mild anemia really isn't that big a deal. But getting roughed up enough to fool the Iceberg crowd, while avoiding serious injury? That's a pretty big deal." He smiled. "Hollywood actors beef up and slim down for a shot at an Oscar. All I had to do was stop taking a couple of pills for a few weeks."

He shrugged. "Anyway, I've gone toe-to-toe with Batman, now, and I've got the bruises and scalp cut to prove it. Penguin's bought it. To the point that he warned me not to report back to GCPD because Batman's probably told you all about me by now."

Kowalski's frown-lines eased, but didn't vanish entirely. "Watch yourself. From here on in, you're not going to be able to report back so easily." He leaned forward. "That being said, the minute you have something concrete we can show the DA's office, I want you to get word to us. Someone will be in touch periodically."

Lonerghan frowned. 'This 'someone' won't be an officer, will he?"

Kowalski sniffed. "You catch on fast. Might want to get some padding under your shirt. And get back on the supplements, Lonerghan. We can't afford to have you feeling rundown." He held up a hand to stifle the protest he could see forming. "That's an order. Follow it, or I'll have your badge for real."

He raised his voice. "Stop the car. Our passenger's getting out here."
"And this is a cardinal tetra," Bruce started to say. "Here, no, here, no..." he shook his head. "He keeps moving," he murmured.

"I think he's afraid of your finger," Selina smiled.

Helena squirmed. When Bruce let her go, she squealed and ran to the center of the room, arms outstretched, as though she were trying to catch the sunlight that streamed in through the bay window.

Bruce shook his head. "I thought she was interested in the fish."

"Well, she was," Selina replied, "last week." She shook her head. "You really don't have a lot of experience with toddlers, do you?"

Bruce exhaled. "I used to be one. Or so I'm told." But the children he'd taken into his life had always been well past that stage.

Selina giggled. Then, seeing the look on his face, she sighed and took pity on him. "Okay, here's the rundown. They're curious, mischievous little bundles of energy. And childproof locks? Aren't necessarily. Don't let them out of your sight for an instant, or you'll find yourself wondering how they made a mess that big that fast. Oh, and they have very short attention spans... except when they don't." She grinned. "Seriously. I've seen her watch a screensaver for more than an hour, almost mesmerized. But try reading to her and it's a toss-up whether she'll sit still and listen, try to turn the pages before you're finished, eat the book, or try to get down and run around." She grinned again. "She'll get interested in the fish again. Probably right when you're trying to show her something else. I'd suggest letting her pick the activity. You can present—but don't push. She's got a real stubborn streak—I can't think where she gets it from."

"I can."

"Well, you're working on it."

"I wasn't thinking of me."

"I'm not stubborn, darling, I'm persistent." They were standing closer, now, and there was an undercurrent to the banter that hadn't been there for a very long time.

"Determined, exasperating..."

Her face was suddenly in his as she laced her fingers together behind his neck. "You forgot insatiable."

Bruce didn't think anymore, he just reacted—by pulling her toward him and locking his lips to hers...
Tim winced. Catwoman had done him a bigger favor by asking him to come back than he'd done her by replacing her on patrol. And thanking her would be too awkward for both of them. The truth was...

The truth was he'd been scared. When Bruce had been arrested, when he'd shut himself down before Arkham's doors had closed behind him, Tim had been scared. Because the last time he'd seen Bruce anywhere near that shattered had been right after Bane had broken him. The man had never been perfect—not as Bruce and not as Batman—but Tim had never seen him beaten before. He'd never wanted to again.

After Bane, Bruce had been—at least mentally—on the road to recovery within 48 hours. All he'd needed, it seemed, had been a good night's sleep, a pep talk, and a crisis. Mostly, Tim reflected without bitterness, the crisis. Bruce hadn't even had the courtesy to let Tim know face-to-face that he was leaving to track down the people who'd kidnapped his father.

Would I have wanted to go off who-knows-where with a wet-behind-the-ears thirteen-year-old tagging along? Especially one who had every reason to go running off half-cocked despite his... my training? It wasn't that much earlier that he flew off the handle when I did something... I can't even remember what, now. But he over-reacted because it was reckless and, Dick told me later, it was something Jason might have done. Tim frowned. Heck. Forget Jason. Look at what happened two months ago, when I was checking out the Lasky kidnapping with Dodge looking over my shoulder. Sure, he's a lot more impulsive than I ever was—but if it were my Dad...

His thoughts flew back to the past, once more. When it was my Dad, let's not forget that he was barely out of the hospital and still needed an oxygen mask half the time. If Bruce had told me everything before he left, I would have freaked. Not only because it was my Dad. One of the first things I learned when Bruce started training me was that even Batman couldn't win them all. If Jason wasn't lesson enough for me, the Obeah Man was.

He realized that his hands were sweating. That was... uncharacteristic. He scoffed inwardly. The only thing 'uncharacteristic' about it was that his bio-control techniques usually kept him from displaying such obvious emotional tells in public. Then again, he was in the privacy of his own car, so this didn't really count as 'public'... did it?

If he had any smarts, he'd turn the car around. He hadn't seen Bruce in almost three months. Not since the hearing. Yes, he should have stopped by as soon as he'd gotten back to Gotham. Except that Cass and Dick had insisted he rest first. He'd given in, planning just to lie down for an hour or so—but he'd fallen asleep. He'd had every intention of stopping by the manor the next day, but then, he'd realized that if he were to patrol that night, he needed to head downtown on reconnaissance—to find out whether his usual patrol routes had been compromised. There was always some new construction going on in Gotham. Or destruction. Old buildings were godsend, with their cornices, parapets, and blind-arcading affording easy purchase for grapnels. The newer edifices, sleek glass-steel constructs, were more challenging. And all he needed was to be trying to make a quick getaway on a rooftop and find out that the building he'd been meaning to latch on to had suffered a chance encounter with the business end of a wrecking ball. No, he'd needed to note any changes in the Gotham skyline before going out that night. It was exactly what Bruce would have expected of him. He'd decided to wait one more day.

And one day had become two, then three, then... Then the whole business with Dodge, and the belt, and the conflict diamonds had broken, and the Titans had come to town and... It had now been more almost three months. Tim wouldn't blame Bruce for slamming the manor door in his face.
You got hurt. You got scared. You blamed him for a lot of it, fairly or unfairly. So, you hurt him
back. Sure, you made up with him, but then, now, you've been ignoring him for weeks. You really
think it's fair to jerk him around like that?

No, it wasn't fair. But the longer he delayed this, the harder it was going to be, and the less-likely that
Bruce would want to see him. Maybe it was already too late, but he still had to try. He took the
turnoff for Crest Hill. He was coming to Knebworth Boulevard. After that would come San Rafael
Drive, Webb Avenue, and then a left on Glen Cove Way that would take him practically to the
Manor gates at 1007 Mountain Drive. The closer he got, the more he had to fight the urge to turn
around. His hands seemed to be locked on the wheel, though, steering with a mind of their own.

He should have taken the back road and gone in through the cave access. But then, he'd have to look
around the cave and notice how much had changed. At least, topside, he could keep his illusions.
Maybe.

He rolled down his window to punch in the access code for the gate. Bruce knew he was here, now
—if he hadn't before. The driveway suddenly didn't seem long enough. He sat in the car for a minute
to steady his thoughts. Then, he got out, walked up the steps, and rang the bell. He waited a moment.
Then two. Maybe Bruce was out. But then, the door opened. And a familiar voice said, "Tim?"

He took a deep breath and walked forward.

"And Bruce just welcomed him back," Barbara snapped. "Like it was nothing."

Dick sighed. "The more people you lose, the tighter you hold on to whoever you have left. You've
done it. I've done it." He smiled ruefully. "Actually, I'm just as glad this happened. It means that I
don't have to walk on eggshells telling Bruce about how the Titans are managing." At Barbara's
questioning look, he went on. "If they weren't speaking, I'd be... hesitant mentioning Tim's name in
his presence." He chuckled. "Overprotective, huh?"

"Your S is showing," Barbara smirked. A moment later she let fly a shriek of laughter as Dick
clapped both hands to his rear, his face a picture of exaggerated embarrassment. "S! Not ass, you..."
She doubled over, shoulders shaking. She took a deep breath. "Thanks. For... not bringing pots and
kettles into this."

Dick frowned in confusion. "Huh?"

"Before all this. After... when I... after Haley's..." She bit her lip. "I'm just glad we had a chance to
work things out. But still." She shook her head. "It took us a long time to really get things aired out; I
don't think we fully did until right before the hearing. If then."

"I guess we just have to remember a few things. One: Bruce can make his own decisions. Two: as
much as we want to make it our business, it isn't. Three: Bruce has always had trust issues. He's
working on them. You want to be the one to bolster his paranoia? Four..."

"Tim didn't mean to hurt him," Barbara said quietly. "He did. But he didn't mean to. I'm... not so
good at looking at motivation when someone jerks me around; I either hit back or raise shields. That
doesn't mean Bruce is the same way."

"He is," Dick said quietly, "when it's someone he doesn't care about." His expression hardened.
"Mind you, if Tim messes this up now, I'll kick him clear back to 'Frisco."

"I'll order you the boots."
Alex smiled as he looked up from the report. "This looks good," he said, turning first to one man and then to the other. "I think we're ready to move on. Effective immediately, I'm increasing the intervals between checks to thirty minutes, and," he added, as Jim clapped Bruce on the shoulder, "your hours of supervision will be between eight A.M. and nine P.M." His smile widened. "Congratulations. Let's see if we can't make it once an hour by December."

Bruce nodded brusquely, trying to conceal his elation, but it was no use. He met Alex's grin with one of his own.

"I should be back about midnight," Jim said as he reached for his cane. "Just figured I'd drop in on Barbara for a bit."

"Now that you can."

"Now that I can." His eyes narrowed. "You'll be alright?"

Bruce nodded. "I'm going to head downstairs for a bit." He tilted his head in the direction of the study. "I'll probably be finished around the time you come back."

"If you get tired, don't wait up. I'll let myself in."

"Noted."

He watched on the security camera until Jim's car cleared the main gate. Then he went down to the cave.

He was halfway through his warm-up stretches when he became aware of a prickling sensation at the back of his neck and he heard a faint breath behind him.

Somebody was in the cave with him.
Chapter Summary

He's faced the Joker, Hush, Hugo Strange, and Rupert Thorne. But nothing could have prepared him for babysitting a toddler! Meanwhile, Dick investigates the Bat-signal murder and Cass comes to a decision.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Aiyokusama, Debbie, Juliet, and Kathy for the beta! Thanks to Aiyokusama for technical expertise. Thanks to Wendy for locating and quoting the Aristocats storybook to me!

"You Can't Count Me Out Yet" written by Travis Tritt. Recorded by Travis Tritt on his Strong Enough album (Columbia, 2001)

Lines read aloud are from Walt Disney's The Aristocats (Little Golden Books, 1970); Page 3.

Took some time to clear my head
I wasn't lost and I'm not dead
I'm feeling good as good can get
So you can't count me out yet

Been knocked down a time or two
From blows I didn't see
But I'm up off the canvas...

Travis Tritt, "You Can't Count Me Out Yet"

Chapter 14—Off the Canvas

Bruce whirled about, sliding into a fighting crouch. Slow. He was too slow by far. If it was a hostile... if it were a hostile, I wouldn't be considering my options right now. I'd be on the ground. A lithe figure clad from head to toe in black Kevlar stepped stiffly out of the shadows and he relaxed.

"Batgirl," he said flatly, hiding his surprise. "Is there a reason you're here?"

She didn't speak. Instead, her hands rose slowly to her throat. As he watched, she peeled back her cowl, millimetre by millimetre.

"Cassandra?"

She flinched. "Batman?" she whispered, sounding like a small child.

Bruce took a step toward her. "Are you hurt?" Almost unconsciously, he stretched out his hand. "Do
you need..."

Her eyes went flat as she lunged for him.

Bruce barely managed to dodge the blow in time. "Cassand..." He stopped. Clearly, she wasn't going to listen to anything he might say.

She snarled and charged him again, her outstretched fingers reaching for his throat.

Bruce didn't think, he reacted—throwing himself low and bracing his hands; he pivoted on the toes of one foot, his other leg extended in a reverse sweep.

She leapt back and kicked out hard, catching him on the chin.

He reeled, but recovered faster than he might have a month ago.

Cass came at him again, her hand extended for a pressure point strike.

Bruce registered the positions of her digits—index and middle extended, the others tucked down—and he felt his blood run cold. He'd seen that technique before! This was no practice spar—Cass was trying to kill him! He had to move... to move... muscle memory took over, and he pivoted to avoid the attack. As Cass adjusted to his new position and came at him a second time, Bruce dropped to the ground, rolled onto his back and rammed both feet into her stomach. She grunted and reeled, but managed to avoid falling.

She came at him a third time, her fists flying as she went for his mid-section.

As Bruce scrambled out of her path, he felt something slide over him like a cool wave. It was as though he was watching Cass move in slow motion. And all at once, he had it. He knew. He saw what he had to do now.

As her momentum carried her toward him, he brought his hands down hard on her shoulders. Then, bearing down on her as though her upper back were a springboard, his powerful leg muscles propelled him upwards, and he flipped over and landed behind her.

Cass braced her hands on the ground and kicked out, but Bruce was ready for her. He dodged, seized her ankle, and swung, tossing her to the ground. Exhilaration coursed through him. He hadn't felt this way since... never mind. He couldn't afford to let a stray thought distract him now. Before Cass could rise again, he was on top of her, yanking her arms behind her back and using his body weight to hold her down. Tapping into experience he'd all-but-forgotten he possessed, Bruce's hands torqued her arms further up her back, adding to the stress in the young woman's shoulders. Then Bruce hauled her to her feet and slammed her into the wall.

"Cassandra," he said firmly, still keeping her pinned. "Stop. Think. You don't want to do this. Think. See where you are. Remember who I am. Stand down."

She struggled against him, probing for a weakness to exploit. Finally, not finding one, she relaxed. "Okay." She said calmly.

Bruce blinked. One eyebrow shot up.

Cass turned her head, struggling to meet his gaze. The eye that faced him sparkled. "I... never forgot," she smirked. "But you did... Batman." The smirk became a smile. "Welcome back."
"What. Were. You. Thinking?"

The heavyset man let out a startled cry and spun around. From within the shadows, he saw a bat symbol glow eerily in mid-air. As he watched, the symbol came closer and he heard boot-soles padding on the dusty floorboards.

Batman emerged from the shadows. "Well?"

The man retreated several steps. "C 'mon, man. I didn't do nothin'."

Batman strode forward to close the gap between them. "Batman... baked?" He demanded harshly.

"I just..."

"Why?" His voice dropped to a growl. "Do you have any idea how irresponsible that was?" He seized hold of the man's sleeve and half dragged him to the balcony. With one swift motion, he jerked the door open and pulled him outside. "Look!" He ordered. He hauled him several off the ground and thrust him forward so that his head and torso extended over the railing. "Tell me what you see!"

The man struggled frantically. "G-Gotham!" he blurted finally.

"Exactly. What you can't see from this high up is a carpet of shattered glass about a hundred yards long. And you probably couldn't hear the burglar alarms twenty stories down, when a crowd of looters went smashing windows and grabbing merchandise, last night. And do you know why they thought they could get away with it?"

"NO!"

Abruptly, Batman pulled him off the railing, hauled him back indoors, and slammed him against the wall. "I'll tell you then," he said softly, letting go.

The man slid to the floor, hardly daring to breathe.

"They thought that they could go looting because they were under the impression that Batman was dead. Now I can't think where they would have got that idea. Can you?" His voice was deceptively mild. "Maybe? Think hard." He smiled then, a thin, tight smile.

The man flinched.

"Maybe, because some idiot uploaded a home movie to metube!" He bent down, seized his captive by the front of his shirt and jerked him upright. "So, let me ask you again what I asked at the beginning. Why did you do it? What were you thinking?"

"I... I just wanted to get hits." He drew in his breath sharply and tried to raise his arms to protect his head. "No! Don't hurt me! I just wanted people to click on it! That's all! I didn't mean to set off a riot! I didn't..."

Batman turned away in disgust. "You didn't mean to. I'm sure that will be a comfort to the store owners who were affected. How many cameras do you own?" He spun back to face him.

"J-just my smart-phone. I swear!"

Batman held out a hand.

The man hesitated, but finally reached into his pocket, pulled it out, and handed it over.
Batman opened the phone and turned it over in his hand several times, weighing it experimentally. Then he reached into his utility belt and extracted a small straight-edge screwdriver.

The man winced as he watched Batman set the screwdriver against the camera lens. He closed his eyes, but winced again as he heard the lens break. Then Batman held it out to him.

"It would be in your best interest to keep this phone and not replace it," the cowled figure stated. "I'd hate to have to come back here to continue our conversation." He brought his face close to the other man's. "And when I have to do something I hate, it puts me in a very bad mood." He smiled again, this time in a manner that seemed almost friendly. "You wouldn't really want to see me in a bad mood... would you?"

As the man shook his head, he felt Batman take his hand, press the phone into it, and curve his fingers around it. "Well," the vigilante continued affably, "as long as you don't upload any more problematic videos, you probably won't."

He swept past him toward the balcony, his cape sending a gust of cool air into the man's face as he did.

For several long moments, the man sat trembling on the floor of his apartment. Then he got up, went to the balcony, and looked out. There was no sign of Batman.

For a moment, he thought he might have imagined the encounter. It had seemed almost surreal. Then he looked down at the cracked lens of his camera phone and knew that he had not.

He'd never upload another video again.

"Face it, Eddie," Ravager smirked, as she expertly parried his thrust. "You're not going to beat me."

"I know," Kid Devil said, as he blocked high. "But I bet I can beat my best time."

"Which is what? Three seconds?" Her white hair, twisted into a long tight braid, whipped behind her. "And no," she said, as she pivoted left, "you aren't going to karate chop my wrist. My precognition is working just fine, thanks! Hey!" One arm flew up instinctively to shield her eyes from the sudden burst of light that flared from Kid Devil's costume.

"If you had retro-cognition," Eddie replied, "you'd remember that this old armour carries a built-in weapons system."

"Keep talking, Eddie," Rose snarled. "It'll help me target—you wouldn't dare!"

"Just because you know what I'm planning doesn't mean you can stop it," he said, as he released a stream of something that looked like soap bubbles from a launcher built into the suit's armour.

Rose blinked. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me," she snapped as she swung her two energy katana, to deflect the small spheres. It wasn't until they started to explode that she realized she'd erred in her choice of action.

"Creep! I'm gonna..."

"Now," Kid Devil said, startling her with the nearness of his voice, "I'll tae kwan do chop your wrist."

"Argh!" One blade skittered to the ground.
She lunged forward with the other, but he blocked her attack with his own blade, grunting slightly at the exertion.

That was when Ravager raised the butt of her sword, allowing the weapon's tip to drop. The minor change of angle redirected the force of Kid Devil's effort to overpower her, forcing his blade to slide down the length of her katana. She rode the momentum of the maneuver as she swung the blade around and up to rest at the back of her opponent's neck. "You lose," she said. "Unless you think you can get your blade up before I dig mine in." She smiled. "Give?"

He nodded reluctantly. "Yeah, I give. You okay?"

"Yeah. Just still seeing a few spots from that light show of yours. Good fight."

He exhaled. "You're not mad about...?"

Ravager waved him off. "Nah. I fight to win, Eddie, and I hate to lose. But the spar's over, now." She glanced up as Cassie entered the training area. "Hey. What's up?"

"After what we did to the Ghost Dragons, word is that some of the local gangs are intent on carving up their turf."

Ravager and Kid Devil exchanged a look. "So, we're going to try to stop them?" Ravager hazarded a guess.

"Not exactly," Cassie said, shaking her head. "When we took out the 'Dragons, we basically got rid of hired muscle. We still don't know who hired them. And one way that we can find out—and maybe put an even bigger dent in their operations—is by sending one of ours to infiltrate."

Ravager nodded. "So you want me to—"

"No, not you." Cassie smiled apologetically. "Between your hair and your eyepatch, you're going to be too conspicuous." She turned to Kid Devil. "You, on the other hand..."

"You mean... a mission? Like a team mission?"

She nodded. "Welcome back to active duty."

"I suppose Cassandra's visit last night was your doing?"

Dick's shoulders tensed. He took a deep breath and turned around. "You know me too well." He frowned. "That may have been what was holding you back." He braced himself for an angry response.

Bruce did frown, but he didn't appear cross. He just stood, waiting.

"You hit a barrier," Dick said finally. "You knew it, I knew it. We just... weren't getting beyond combat drills. And I think," he sighed. "I think... you were afraid that if you suddenly did remember it all, well, I never could take you down—not even when I was giving everything I had. I didn't know if your skills had hit a plateau or if you were subconsciously keeping them in check because you were afraid that if you did cut loose with everything and I wasn't prepared, then..."

"So you conducted an experiment."

"Of all the people I could have involved, Cass had the best chance of convincing you it wasn't a test. She moves like an assassin. One look in her eyes when she's on the offensive, and even though you
know that taking another life is anathema to her, she makes you doubt it. I did have a concern that
you'd catch on to it all being a test—because she was going to have to hold back a little. But..."

"She acted as though she was under someone else's control." Bruce nodded. "Very convincingly,
too. Under that misapprehension, I presumed that whatever hesitation I noticed on her part was due
to her struggles to shake free. As you planned, I suspect."

"Yeah." He smiled. "You're not angry."

Bruce shook his head. "I... You may have been right about my holding back without realizing it. I
wish I'd shared your optimism." He made a face. "My own theory was a bit grimmer: I'd been
coming to the conclusion that I'd gone as far as I could on the training front." He smiled sadly. "I'm
not twenty years old, after all. It wouldn't be surprising if I just... couldn't come back this time." Dick
laid a hand on his shoulder. He covered it with his own. "If you hadn't arranged what you did, when
you did, I might have succeeded in convincing myself that it was too late for me."

Dick nodded. "I thought about that too," he admitted. "But I figured it wouldn't hurt to test out my
other hypothesis first." He paused. "So... since you've got your old moves back..."

Bruce's lips twitched. "Suit up. I'll wait."

"I won't be long." He smirked. "After all, you're not getting any younger."

Barbara looked up, startled, as a shadow fell across her monitor. "Batgirl! I'm sorry, I didn't see you
come in."

Cassandra shrugged.

"You don't do social calls," she said after a moment. "What's up?"

Cass took a deep breath. "A long time ago," she said, "when I fought without... um... my mask, you
told me that meant I could only be... Batgirl. Remember?"

Barbara deliberately turned her wheelchair away from the console. "Yeah, I do. Why?"

She twisted her hands together nervously. "You can't do... something? About the records?"

Barbara took off her eyeglasses and reached for a chamois cloth. "I can," she said slowly. "Once.
But if you're going to get yourself photographed out of costume on a regular basis... Look. Hacking
into federal databases is tricky. They've got some of the most sophisticated systems on the planet.
Getting in is a challenge. Not that I haven't done it before, but most of the time, it's a question of
searching for the information I need, and then getting out. What you need me to do is actively seek
out every reference they have for you—which will be complicated by the fact that, since they don't
know who you are, there won't be a file under your name. Next, I have to go in and delete all those
references." She spoke slowly, weighing her words. "All references," she repeated, "in every
database they have." She waited for Cass to nod. "Finally, I need to cover my tracks as much as
possible—and they might still know that somebody broke in. The best I could hope for would be to
get out without leaving a trail they can trace back to me... I can get away with it once. Maybe even
twice. They'd still probably realize someone hacked them—they just won't be able to tell who. But
the more often I go in, the more alert they'll be. Eventually..." She put her glasses back on. "Why are
you asking about this after so long?"

Cass hesitated. "When I went out then... I... didn't care."
"Yeah. I noticed."

"No," Cass smiled sadly. "I... I don't know if I have um... the right words. Um... Before I came to Gotham, something happened. I did something... bad." She took a deep breath. "Do... do you know already?"

Barbara nodded slowly. "If this is about Cain teaching you to kill," she said gently, "yes. He sent Bruce a tape of the whole thing."

Cass sucked in her breath. "Bastard!"

"No argument. But Bruce knew you had no idea what you were doing. He should have told you, but..."

"He doesn't talk," Cass smiled sadly. "I know. But then I... I wanted to... make up for what I did. Sometimes, I wanted to die too. Sometimes, I wanted to stop people from dying. When you made me... Batgirl, I thought... I could do both: save people for awhile but one day... probably soon..." She shook her head. "I really never thought I would be anything except Batgirl."

"And now?"

Cass hesitated. "I don't know. If you say to me 'too late' and I can only be Batgirl, okay. No point thinking about other... um... possibilities. But if I can be... more... Can I?" She frowned. "Um... may I?"

Barbara smiled. "Leave it with me for a few days. I'll see what I can do."

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"Selina!" Bruce exclaimed sharply. "You can't leave her with me for six hours! What am I supposed to do? I..."

Selina smiled beatifically. "You're a smart man, Bruce. You'll figure it out."

"But..."

"Bruce. Listen to me. Batgirl and I are on patrol, tonight. Tim is off with the Titans—and just because I trust those kids to save the planet doesn't mean I trust them to mind a toddler. Holly has the flu. Dick and Barbara have both told me separately how much they've been looking forward to just having a quiet night out on the town. You, on the other hand..."

"Momma?" a small voice piped up.

Selina scooped up her daughter and handed her to Bruce. "Here. And," she hung a tote bag on his half-extended arm, "here. She can have a snack at seven. Put the juice box in the 'fridge for her. There are a couple of diapers, she'll probably need at least one change—"

"Now, Selina, I..."

"You'll do fine. Put her to bed at eight. Read her one of the storybooks first. I'll be back around midnight..." She clasped Helena's outstretched hands.

"Now," she said softly, "you're not going to give your daddy any trouble, are you?"

"Momma?"

She gave Bruce a quick peck on the cheek. "Have fun, you two." She smirked. "Bond."
She darted outside and pulled the door shut behind her, ordering herself not to laugh until she was back in her car.

She never had been good at following orders.

On the other side of the door, Bruce looked nervously at his daughter. "Well," he said, "I guess you're stuck with me, tonight."

Helena tilted her head up at him. Then she squeezed her eyes shut, opened her mouth and let out a loud wail.

"No, no, don't cry," he said quickly. "It's alright. It's alright."

Helena screamed harder.

Now, what was he supposed to do?

Ten minutes later, Bruce still didn't have an answer. When he'd set Helena down, she had immediately gone to the front door, screaming for her mother. Once it had become clear that Selina wasn't returning, she'd poked her fingers through the mail slot, still crying.

When Bruce, concerned that she might catch her fingers, had carried her away, she'd protested both vocally and physically, until Bruce released her. It occurred to him to take her upstairs into another room with the door closed, but he decided against it. If she was trying to get away from him now, forcibly confining her was only going to make matters worse. At the moment, the mail flap didn't seem pose a danger, and her screams had died down to whimpers. Bruce seated himself on the cushioned bench facing the vestibule to wait until she calmed down.

Another five minutes passed. Wasn't Jim supposed to be checking on him about now? He glanced up at one of the surveillance cameras. "I suppose you're enjoying this?" he mouthed. There was no reply.

He considered. As long as he kept his distance, Helena was content to sniffle quietly. However, the moment he approached her, she shrieked 'NO!' and went back to poking her fingers through the mail flap. That concerned him more than the fact that she was keeping her distance.

Bruce sighed inwardly and decided that letting her stay in the vestibule was the best course of action. Still keeping an eye on her, he opened the tote bag that Selina had pressed upon him, hoping against hope that there might be something inside that he could use. He pulled out a plush leopard. "Helena," he called softly. "Look."

She turned around. "No!" she bellowed, and began to pound on the door.

Bruce tossed the toy lightly, so that it landed at her feet. Maybe she'd think it had got there on its own. Children couldn't always tell fantasy from reality.

"No!" Helena shrieked again. She picked up the leopard, carried it to Bruce, dropped it at his feet and went back to the door.

Bruce watched her and sadly shook his head. He turned his attention back to the tote bag. There were three books in it—one with solid cardboard stock pages, one of vinyl, and one—Bruce's lips twitched—was a storybook adaptation of Disney's *The Aristocats*. "Hel..." he stopped. He thought he had an idea.
He opened the storybook and looked at the first page with a fascinated expression. He took his time analyzing the composition of the page, reading each word of the publication data without skimming, giving every impression of being engrossed in the book. He mentally counted down two minutes before he turned the page. *If it had worked for Alex...*

Three minutes in, he realized that Helena had stopped whimpering. He glanced up surreptitiously and saw her observing him quizzically. He returned to the book.

As he reached the mid-point of the volume, he felt a light tug on his pant-leg. He looked down. "Hello," he said softly.

Helena tapped the book. "Read?"

"You want me to read this to you?"

"Ya."

"Did you... did you want to come up here?" He tapped the bench.

"No, no." But she was smiling as she said it. She tapped the book again. "Read."

Bruce shrugged, flipped back to the first page of the story and began again, this time reading aloud. "In Madame Bonfamille's fine home in Paris, all was peaceful. Well almost..." He took a deep breath and tried to raise the pitch of his voice. "'Me first!' kitten Marie shouted."

Helena giggled. Bruce continued reading.

Halfway through page two, he felt the bench cushion give way slightly as Helena pressed down and laboriously climbed up. She settled and sat down slightly over a foot away from him. "Read," she ordered imperiously.

Smothering a smile, Bruce obeyed. Another page. Two. Thr—Helena wormed her way under his arm. Bruce stopped reading and watched as she tentatively touched the pages. Then she snuggled closer and whispered. "Read."

"Well," Montoya said, one night later as she switched off the newly-restored bat-signal, "the cause of death was that gunshot wound to the head. ME guesses the guy was dead maybe a half-hour before getting stuffed in there. They found ligature-marks on his wrists and ankles, also bruising—it looks like he put up a fight."

"Were any bindings found on the body?" Batman asked.

Montoya shook her head. "And since he was stuffed in the signal before rigor mortis set in..."

"The shooting must have happened nearby." He doubted that anyone would commit the murder in another city and then fly the corpse into Gotham to stash on the very roof of Gotham Central. "Nobody saw him take the body up?"

"No," she returned curtly. "We're checking into that."

"Ah. If it's Signalman, he used to carry an electronic jammer. That could've affected your cameras."

Montoya frowned. "Maybe. But it still doesn't explain how he carried the body up there. I think we'd have noticed a helicopter touchng down. So either he carried the corpse through the building..."
"...Or scaled it from the outside." Abruptly, he walked over to the parapet that encircled the roof perimeter and dropped to his knees to examine the low wall.

"What are you...?"

Intent on his work, he murmured only, "Checking to see if..."

Montoya frowned, but she waited, feigning patience until, some ten minutes later, he looked back over his shoulder, and beckoned her over. "There are a couple of fresh gouges in the concrete," he remarked. "Here and... here. And no," he added. "They aren't mine."

"No offence," Montoya remarked, "but how can you tell?"

"I never come up here before you light the signal," Batman explained. "If I need to initiate contact with you, I'll swing by your office, but your window isn't on this side of the building."

"Okay, point," Montoya said. "But do you always remember the side you arrive from? I don't."

"Well, neither do I, to be honest," Batman said. "But if you'll put the signal back on for a second, I think you'll see the problem."

The police captain obeyed. A moment later, she burst into laughter. "You win," she conceded. "There's no way you'd approach from this side if there're a thousand or so watts shining straight at you."

"At the sky," Batman corrected. "Remember, though: I swoop in from above. If I had to climb up, it would destroy the effect."

"Once a performer..."

"Who stopped?" Then in a more serious tone, "Pity our shutterbug didn't get a shot of the guy."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." He grimaced. "You got an ID on the victim, yet?"

She lowered her voice. "This is off the record. We're still trying to reach his family to notify them."

"Understood. I'll be discreet."

"Frank d'Amato. He used to work for Aquista."

"Thanks. I'll look into it."

"Any idea why they'd dress him in your suit?"

"That's one of the things I'll be looking into," he remarked, readying his grappling gun.

"Aren't you concerned about damaging that parapet?" she asked suddenly.

Batman half-turned to her and grinned. "Not really," he admitted. "I own that one. Or, at least, he does. Have a good night, Captain."

He wasn't sure what made him hesitate as he approached the Batmobile. The car didn't look any different. It was exactly where he'd parked it. But something about the scene seemed somehow... off.
Frowning, he drew closer, his senses alert for... whatever it was that was setting off his internal alarms. Could someone have set an explosive under the car?

Cautiously, he bent down to peer under the chassis.

All at once, he heard a faint clink. It was immediately followed by a hissing sound, as a cloud of gas billowed toward him.

_Gas!_

A paroxysm of coughing seized him as his thoughts started to grow dim.
15. Something Foolish

Chapter Summary

Dick enlists Bruce's help on his current case. Kid Devil and Miss Martian go undercover to try to stop the Ghost Dragons. And Cass makes another big choice.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Debbie, Kathy and Juliet for the beta. Thanks to Aiyokusama for help with action sequences. Thanks to Komikbookvixen for medical advice.

"Is there Life Out There" written by Susan Longacre and Rick Giles. Recorded by Reba McEntire on her For My Broken Heart album (MCA, 1991).

She's always lived for tomorrow
She's never learned how
To live for today
She's dyin' to try something foolish
Do something crazy
Or just get away
Oh, Something for herself for a change

(Susan Longacre, Rick Giles, "Is There Life Out There")

Chapter 15—Something Foolish

Batman reeled, bringing his cape over his nose and mouth with one hand as he fumbled in his belt for a breathing mask with the other. Fighting every instinct that screamed at him to get away from the car, he forced himself to stagger toward it and slump over the hood. With any luck, the sight of him lying there would flush out whoever had set this trap.

"FBW? What's going on?"

Dick quickly finished positioning the mask over his nose and mouth. Can't talk, Oracle, he responded, tapping his finger lightly along the edge of his radio in Morse code. Situation under control.

There was a brief pause. Then, "I'll be monitoring if you need anything. Oracle out."

Batman signalled an acknowledgement. Then he coughed once more, settled his position, and waited. It wasn't long before he heard cautious footsteps approaching. A hand tentatively touched his shoulder. Batman held still, drawing on the meditation techniques that Bruce had drilled into him years ago to regulate his bio-functions, slowing his breathing and heart-rate in order to appear more affected by the gas than he actually was.
The hand moved to his neck, checking for a pulse. Judging by the way the newcomer was breathing, he—or she—was nervous.

Batman forced himself not to react. There was always the possibility that he'd been discovered by some Good Samaritan who was looking to assess his condition. Maybe... but he doubted it. Sure enough, a moment later he heard a faint metallic jingle and felt a band lock tightly around his wrist. As the newcomer reached for his other wrist, Batman surged up and grabbed hold of his would-be captor.

"This looks like police-issue," he said conversationally, glancing at the handcuff. "Here. Try one of mine on for size."

His captive—a youth in his late teens from the look of him—was too panicked to resist as Batman cuffed him.

"About the murder," Batman continued, his voice taking on a more ominous tone. "Any particular reason for the way you set it up?"

All at once, the young man's head jerked up. "What?"

Under the cowl, Dick blinked. But no hint of uncertainty carried over into his tone. "Two nights ago. Roof of GCPD. The signal? Memory coming back to you?"

"M-murder? You trippin' balls, man? I never!"

He was telling the truth, Batman judged. At least about this. "And just now? You always carry handcuffs with you, just in case you find me unconscious?"

"N-no," he said...

"Who?"

But the thug was shaking his head. "I can't, man. He-he'll kill me."

"I'll do worse. I'll keep you alive," Batman replied, as he pulled out a batarang. He held it up for a moment, and then brought it up to the kid's face. He drew its edge lightly against the kid's cheek, using just enough pressure to leave a long pink scratch.

The youth gulped. "Look. I don't know. I... " He dropped his voice. "It's an initiation, okay?"

"What?"

"I... I'm trying to get into the 'Dragons. They told me I'd find you here, a-and they wanted me to snap the cuffs on you, then go to the drugstore across the street, call a number and hang up. They'd take care of the rest. But I didn't kill anyone! You gotta believe me."

Batman nodded. "I do. Or at least... I will. Once you prove it to me."

"Wha-what?"

Batman nodded. "You're going to go dial that number. And we'll see who comes running."

"But they'll kill me!"

Dick rolled his eyes. "Didn't we just go through this?" He paused, considering his options. "Fine," he said. "Give me the number."
The youth struggled unsuccessfully to get one cuffed hand into his jeans pocket. Finally Batman reached over and extracted the slip of paper. "If I let you go," he said slowly, "and I bust some gang or other a few nights from now... I won't see you sporting one of their jackets, will I?"

The thug shook his head vigorously.

"How about a year from now?"

"N-never. I swear it."

Batman waited another moment. Then he unlocked the cuffs. "Get out of here," he growled.

The punk fled.

"Oracle," Batman spoke quietly into his comm-link. "I want you to trace a number for me..."

Cassandra sidestepped Bruce's attack and countered with a pressure-point strike. At least, she tried to.

At the last second, Bruce dodged and surged forward once more to pin her arm. Swiftly, he drew her over his shoulder and flipped her to the mat.

Cass grinned up at him. "Now... this is... challenge," she remarked. "Maybe time for... level two?"

Bruce blinked. Was she trying to say that this was level one? He suppressed his dismay as he assumed a fighting stance once more. He still wasn't used to being quite this active again, and he was starting to feel a bit winded. Cassandra seemed tireless.

"You think too hard," she commented as she tossed him. "No time to analyze. React. Don't think about next move. Know."

When had she turned into a chatterbox? He was used to it from Dick, but coming from Cass, it was unnerving. No. It was distracting. And she wasn't saying anything he hadn't already learned.

He settled into his stance, tuned out her voice and focused on her actions.

Barbara sighed. "You probably already know part of it," she said, as she poured herself a cup of coffee at breakfast the next morning.

Dick reached for the platter of eggs. "Yeah, I thought there were a few extra digits in that phone number. Hong Kong or Mainland China?"

"Mainland, Guangzhou. It's pretty close to Hong Kong." She made a face. "The problem is, it's not going to be so easy to pinpoint the owner."

Dick nodded understanding. "Too many identical last names?"

"That's part of it. The thing is, even if I had a name, it wouldn't mean anything to me. Your punk from last night was trying to join the Ghost Dragons. They're originally based out of Hong Kong—but if they've expanded here, who's to say they haven't branched out a bit closer to home?" She took a few sips from her mug. "Two problems with that: first, they usually use aliases. Second, I tend to focus my attention on two fronts: Gotham, and JLA-level threats. Gang activity halfway around the world is usually off my radar." She made a face. "Though in this case, I'm willing to make an exception."
"And we still don't know how any of this connects with the body in the bat-signal." Dick frowned and buttered a slice of toast.

"Or if." Barbara shrugged. "The signal went up last night. Someone could have spotted you parking the Bat-mobile. If they had a gas grenade on them..." She broke off as she saw Dick's sceptical expression. "I admit it would have been pretty spur-of-the-moment, but maybe the reason we can't pinpoint a connection with Signalman is because there isn't one."

"That's another thing bugging me," Dick said, as he slathered peanut butter over the butter. "Phil Cobb, or as we know him, Signalman, is dead. Supposedly, anyway. The report could be exaggerated. Or we could be dealing with a copycat..."

"...Or he might have nothing to do with it." Barbara slid a portion of scrambled eggs from the earthenware platter onto her own plate. "The only thing this killer has in common with Signalman, now that I think of it, is that he trapped someone inside the signal. And unlike the real McCoy, he trapped a dead body."

Dick nodded. "I tried dialling that number the kid gave me, but nobody showed up." He sighed. "Oh well. At least, the Titans have Kid Devil trying to infiltrate the 'Dragons. Talk to Tim and Cassie. See if they know anything we should." He yawned. "I'm going to have another cup of coffee and head out."

Bruce frowned as Dick finished speaking. "If it's not Signalman," he said slowly, "who else might have an MO that fits?"

"I asked you first, 'World's Greatest Detective,'" Dick grinned. "Or did you think I was going to be satisfied with getting you back up to snuff on the physical front alone?"

"My work on the GCPD's cold case files should prove—"

"...that when you're bored, you'll putter around until you find a challenge you can sink your teeth into. You've solved what... eight cases since you started?" Dick rolled his eyes. "I did that much in an hour one afternoon when I was laid up with a back injury and watching America's Most Wanted." Dick sighed. "Come on. Gimme what you got."

Bruce bit back an angry retort, spun on his heel, and stalked over to the main computer.

Dick sighed. The last time he and Bruce had been sniping at each other this much, he'd been in his teens. And, he reflected, Bruce had been the one doing the needling while he'd been the one storming off in a huff. He shook his head. Then he waited a few minutes and followed.

"Truce?" he asked softly.

Bruce looked up. "You said earlier that the Ghost Dragons were involved," he stated flatly. "There was something." He was still frowning, but it was from concentration, not anger. "Tim encountered them initially, when he went to train abroad," he said slowly. "Shortly after they commenced operations in Gotham," he grimaced, "Gordon contacted me. Told me to meet him at the morgue. There were two bodies waiting there. One was a thug I'd been interrogating earlier." He shook his head. "I should have foreseen that, arranged for some sort of protective custody." His expression hardened. "It's the second one that I think is more... relevant under the circumstances. They chose to send me a message by dressing a second corpse in a tattered Robin suit."

Dick winced. "Pointed." Then he smiled slowly. "Just about as pointed as delivering a dead thug in a Batman outfit. And after the dent I... we've been putting in their operations..." He exhaled slowly. "I
think that's it. I got so hung up on a detail I didn't see the whole picture."

"You would have seen it eventually," Bruce said mildly, turning back to the computer—but not before Dick saw the pleased look in his eyes.

"I'm not sure how," Dick admitted. "I wasn't in Gotham when you and Tim faced the Ghost Dragons that time. Thanks."

Bruce grunted. "After you've worked out a plan of action," he ventured, "if you wanted a second pair of eyes, I would be willing to look at it."

"Okay," Dick said slowly.

Bruce placed a hand on Dick's forearm. "You'll be careful."

Dick noted that Bruce was doing his utmost to make it sound like a given rather than a question. He grinned. "Always."

Dick didn't usually find himself at a loss for words. Not usually. Today, however, was an exception. He blinked at the young woman standing in his living room. "You want to what?"

Cass took a deep breath. "I want to... to train for... work. In hospitals."

Dick took a deep breath. Please, he thought, don't let her take this the wrong way. "You mean like a... a doctor?"

Cass frowned. "I... no. Do I have to?" She thought for a moment. "I don't know if I need that. When... when Batman was sick... the man who helped him after was a... a..." she fought to remember the words, "a res-pra-to-ree ther-pist? Is that... a doctor?"

"Not usually," Dick replied. "I mean, a therapist can be, but it's not actually required. Is that what you want?" He realized suddenly that the young woman was shaking. "You okay?"

She nodded. "I just... I don't like to not know things. Mostly I... find out from watching. But for this... not enough. I have to... ask to know."

"Hey," Dick said reassuringly. "Sit down. Relax. And just tell me slowly, as best you can. If I misunderstand, tell me. What brought this on?"

Cass hesitated. Then, slowly, she sank onto the sofa. "You aren't always Batman. Nightwing. Not always... in costume." Her brow furrowed as she looked down at her own jeans and T-shirt.

Dick watched. "Are you telling me you want a... a secret identity?"

"No. I want to be... more than Batgirl."


She took in a deep breath, held it for a count of five, and released it. "I... know how far to... to push people. Always. Part of... reading people, I think. I taught Black Canary. You told me: teach Bruce. It... It was..." she smiled faintly, "fun. I... I'm good at it." She took another breath and exhaled again. "What happened to Batman was... hard. For everyone. Us. Him. But now... with us helping... with him trying..." she struggled to find the words. "I want to do this. For more people. Help them get better. I don't know if that means 'be doctor'. Does it?"
Dick hesitated. "Well," he said slowly, "it's definitely part of the job description. But there are other careers along those lines that you don't need a medical degree for." He looked at her. "You could always teach, you know. Open a private gym? Maybe work as a personal trainer."

Cass nodded. "I know. But... I think I want this... more."

"Okay," Dick said. "In that case, you have one really big problem. It's not insurmountable, but," it was best to come right out with it, "you have to go to school for it. How long depends on what you decide you want to do, but to become a doctor takes at least eight years studying full-time. And the work-load is intense." He gave her a penetrating look. "It would probably take you a bit longer. And, Cass, I'm sorry, but I don't think you'd have time to go to class, study and... still be Batgirl."

"Oh." Cass' face fell. She nodded softly. "I... didn't realize. Okay."

But it wasn't okay, Dick realized. She wanted this badly enough to risk her halting English to ask about it. He knew how much she hated to admit to ignorance on any subject. And yet... "Cass," he murmured, "I'm not telling you that you can't do something like this, but I think you need more information before you decide."

"That's why I came," she said plaintively.

"Yeah, but I'm not an expert," Dick smiled. "Look, there've got to be dozens of careers in health-related fields. They aren't all as demanding. I think you need to do some research—at least try to narrow down the area a little bit. I'll help you in any way I can," he added, "but you've got to come to me with a more specific goal."

"How?" she asked, dismayed. "Research how?"

Finally, Dick felt himself on more solid ground. "My suggestion: go to a hospital. Find the volunteer office and tell them that you're thinking of a career in a health profession. Ask them if they can assign you to a position that will involve helping patients." He sighed. "I don't know how much they can let you do legally. I mean if you don't know what you're doing and you accidentally hurt a patient, the hospital could get sued. Don't be surprised if all they ask you to do is wheel patients to and from different departments. But it'll be an experience. And it might help you figure out what you want. Sound good?"

Cass nodded again. "The hospital where Bruce was after... after the fire. I could try there."

"Saint-Swithins," Dick agreed. "That'd be a good choice. They've got one of the best rehab centres in the States."

"Okay," Cass said with a small guarded smile. "I'll... go tomorrow morning. After patrol."

"Sleep first," Dick suggested. "You'll make a better first impression."

"Okay."

"And Cass?" Dick grinned. "Good luck."

Being recruited had been the easy part. The Titans had figured that the Ghost Dragons would be looking to swell their ranks with new fighters, first and foremost. Consequently, when they'd encountered Eddie on his own, defeating all comers in the middle of a gang-war, they'd made him an offer. Following the instructions Wonder Girl and Harrier had given him, he hadn't appeared overly eager, but after the Ghost Dragons had promised to make it 'worth his while', he'd gone with them.
It had turned out to be a good thing that he'd stopped wearing his old armour when he'd joined the Titans. The suit—while distinctive—wasn't easily recognizable to the average Gothamite. Heck, even in his native California, Kid Devil had never exactly been high-profile. So wearing it again now, for the first time in over a year, he seemed like one more wannabe hiding behind a gimmick—at least to the 'Dragons. Actually, Eddie reflected, thinking back on his early days as a crime-fighter, maybe that was all he had been.

After a quick speech that Eddie could only think of as an orientation, he and his fellow stooges had been issued bats, clubs, and nun-chuks, and placed on guard detail at a warehouse. Now, Kid Devil held his baseball bat low across his chest and tried to think menacingly.

"Heads up," a harsh voice grated over his radio. "You're about to prove your value to us. An invasion force is headed toward your position. Prisoners are neither wanted nor expected. Take them down."

Kid Devil swallowed. *I think I've just moved on to the hard part...* 

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Cass sat at a small table in the volunteer office and frowned at the application before her. After five minutes, she'd still only filled in her name. She thought for a moment longer and then under address, painstakingly wrote, 'Gabrych + Puckett'. She hesitated another moment and added, 'basement'. She left the zip code field blank, hoping it wouldn't matter. It wasn't like she expected them to actually mail her anything. Had she known that they were going to ask for this, she would have gotten Dick to write down his for her.

"Having trouble?" the desk clerk asked her.

She looked up. "Yes," she sighed. "What is... zip code?"

The man behind the desk smiled sympathetically. "You're newly arrived, I take it," he said. "I'm guessing English isn't your first language?"

Cass shook her head.

The man considered. "Well, I probably shouldn't... but it's not like there's anyone else waiting. And we do need people. Alright. Don't worry about the zip for now—but bring it in as soon as you know. What's the next question... phone number?"

"Yes." At least she knew that.

"What's your level of education?"

Cass flushed. "I... I didn't go to school," she admitted.

"Can you read?"

"Yes," Cass whispered. "I read manga."

"Oh really?" the clerk suddenly sounded more interested. "Any titles in particular?"

Cass nodded. "Good Luck," she said. "And Gimmick... Dragon Drive... S.A..."

"Dragon Drive is a good one," the clerk smiled. "I don't know the other titles. What volume are you up to?"

"Two," she said, relaxing. "I just started last week."
"Nice." He cleared his throat. "Getting back to business, is there a reason why you wanted to volunteer at this hospital?"

"Yes." She'd anticipated the question and mentally rehearsed her answer beforehand. "A friend was... hurt. He needed to be in here. I... I visited. When he came out, I helped him. I want to learn to do more. As... pro-fession-nal. But I don't know what kind."

"I understand. Do you have any idea where you'd want to start?"

She didn't. Not really. But if she had to name an area, then, "Respiratory therapy."

The clerk frowned. "I understand you don't have any experience in a health-care field?"

She sighed. "No." Then, more hopefully, "Not... yet."

"I like your attitude." The clerk thought for a moment. "Okay. I'm going to write down a few things and I want you to read them back to me, okay?"

Cass nodded.

The clerk picked up a felt-tip marker and quickly jotted down a few lines. "Here."


"Not bad," the clerk smiled back. "Not bad at all. Now, how's your sense of direction? Think you can find your way around here?"

"Yes." She still relied on landmarks far more easily than on written signposts.

"Alright," the clerk said. "We'll try. I won't deny that we have some staffing issues at the moment. As it happens, we need someone who can transport patients from their therapy sessions back to their rooms. How many days were you thinking to volunteer?"

"How many do you need?"

"Well, we'll start with three. I'm assigning you to respiratory therapy, but if necessary, you may find yourself doing the same thing for physio and maybe a few other departments. If you're game, I can take you up right now, and introduce you to the person you'll be reporting to."

Cass nodded, hardly daring to trust her ears. "I'm... game," she said as she fell into step behind him.

Kid Devil was exhausted. He estimated that he'd been on his feet now for over sixteen hours. Sunrise had been spectacular—and at least four hours earlier. Last night, after they'd fought off one of the local street gangs—he'd been careful not to permanently injure anyone, but his companions hadn't shared his scruples—he'd been put back on guard detail. To his semi-trained eye, the warehouse he was watching over was pretty similar to the one that the rest of the team had raided a couple of weeks back. If he got inside, he reminded himself, he'd have to check for anything resembling those clunky robots. Between the team's account of that evening and Batgirl's photos, he had a pretty good idea what to look for.

Harrier's instructions had been explicit, though. Do nothing to call attention to yourself. Do nothing to make them believe that your IQ is greater than your shoe-size. Do nothing that requires you to
come up with a cover story to explain your presence in an off-limits area—even if they buy it, if anything goes wrong later, you'll be the first person they suspect.

That didn't mean that he couldn't look around, of course, only that he shouldn't go poking into any restricted zones. Oracle had been drilling him on basic detective procedures. He wished he had his comm-link open and a little privacy, so that he could talk to her now. A psi-link with M'Gann or Raven would also have been welcome right about now. Heck, at this point, he would settle for something happening—guard detail was boring! Particularly since he was partnered with a burly youth who had responded to his friendly greeting with a glower and a finger raised to his lips. After that, Eddie had given up and focused on looking imposing. The Devil-suit helped.

The door behind him opened swiftly—swiftly enough that had he been leaning against it, instead of against the wall beside it, he would have fallen into the room behind. "Hey. Armour Boy," one of the Ghost Dragons beckoned to him.

"It's Devilbane," he snapped back. Someone had actually recognized the suit last night. When confronted, Eddie had blurted the first thought that had come into his head—that he had killed the original Kid Devil and taken the costume. They'd believed him. At least, he hoped they had. If not, he might be in real trouble.

"Shut up. Come." He gestured behind him to a minivan with tinted windows. There were five or six other 'Dragons spread out around the vehicle. All were looking right at him, their faces expressionless. "Here." He passed something to Eddie.

Eddie glanced at the object. It was a flame-thrower. He swallowed. Why were they singling him out, he wondered. His escort led him to the back of the van. At a nod, two of them pulled the rear doors open.

Kid Devil blinked. Lying on the floor was a bound and gagged Miss Martian.

"Initiation time," his escort said softly. "Kill her."

Cassandra Cain wondered how it was possible for ice-cold hands to sweat. Oh, she'd done fine at the interview, and she'd aptly demonstrated that she could find her way around the hospital—but she just knew that they were going to send her to a part of the building that she hadn't seen yesterday. She was going to misread an A for an R. A doctor was going to write out instructions for her. Everyone knew that doctors had terrible handwriting—she'd learned that on TV. The patients would hate her. The staff would laugh at the way she talked. Coming here to volunteer had to be one of the stupidest...

"Cassandra! Wait up!"

She spun to find the clerk from yesterday sprinting toward her. "Um..." She felt her lips pull into a smile. "Hello."

"Hey, glad to see you made it in okay. You remember where to go?"

She nodded. "West elevator to seven, then left. Third corridor turn left again and Ar-Tee is at end of hall. Report to Nurse McCutcheon."

"Excellent. Um," he looked away for a moment. "I... ah... was going through some old books at home and I realized I," he held out a small paperback he'd had tucked under his arm, "I actually have Dragon Drive volume three. You can borrow it, if you want to."
She blinked. "Um... thanks. Finishing may um... take while." The cover was still glossy, the corners crisp. It looked as though someone had taken a new book and deliberately bent it in half in the center, and then folded the front cover like, she frowned, like a paper fan.

"No rush," the clerk said. "My name's Doug, by the way. Doug Sherman."

She nodded. "Okay. Thanks. I... can't be late."

Doug smiled. "No problem. Stop by the Volunteer Office when you've got time. I'd like to know what you think of the series."

"Okay," she said again, smiling just a little. Then she ran for the elevator.

"Oh, there you are, Cassandra," a cheerful voice called to her. "Right on time, good. Okay, first thing you can do is take Jerry," she pointed to a waiting area where a slight figure sat slumped in a wheelchair, "back to his room—the number's on the back of his chair. Do you have any experience getting a patient in and out of a chair?"

"No, I—"

"Well, that's one thing we'll need to teach you, then. For today, just tell them at the nurse's station when you get back to his floor, and they'll take care of it. Come with me. Do they call you 'Cassie' for short?"

"Cass."

Nurse McCutcheon smiled. "Come with me," she repeated, "I'll introduce you." Without looking to see whether Cass was following, she strode over to the patient. "Jerry, this is Cass. She's going to take you back to your room now."

Cass took a deep breath. "Hello, Jerry."

The figure in the chair stirred slightly. Two steely grey eyes peered up at her.

Her jaw dropped. Despite the weight loss, the pallor, and the breathing apparatus that all-but-dwarfed him, she knew this man. "Doctor Arkham?"
16. Shoot the Lights and Curse the Dark

Chapter Summary

Kid Devil is undercover, but he's just been ordered to murder a teammate in cold blood! Meanwhile, as Bruce and Selina rekindle their relationship, Jim has a few concerns.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Telepathic communication is written in italics, but with quotation marks. Internal monologue is in italics with no quotes.

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Jules for the beta. Special thanks to HBThomas for being a great writing buddy!

"It Ain't Easy Bein' Me" written by Chris Knight and Craig Wiseman. Recorded by Blake Shelton on his Pure BS Album (Warner Bros. Nashville, 2007).

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There ought to be a bridge somewhere
They could dedicate to me.
I'd probably come to the ceremony
With a can of gasoline;
Walk on over to the other side
And there I'd light a match
And sit and stare through the smoke and the flames
Wonderin' how I'm ever gonna get back.

Why do I do the things I do?
Was I born this way? Am I a self-made fool?
I shoot the lights and curse the dark;
I need your love but I break your heart;
And I know the words that'll bring you back,
But I don't say nothin' as I watch you pack.
I had to work to be the jerk I've come to be;
It ain't easy bein' me.

—Chris Knight, Craig Wiseman, "It Ain't Easy Bein' Me"

Chapter 16—Shoot the Lights and Curse the Dark

The flamethrower felt like lead in his hands. "Kill her?" he asked in disbelief, as two other Ghost Dragons dragged M'Gann out of the van and flung her to the ground. "Shouldn't we find out what she knows first?"

He hadn't stammered. He was proud of that.
The thug standing next to him gestured dismissively. "Orders are you kill her, Armor Boy." He smirked. "After all, word is, you've already wasted one teen hero to get that suit you're wearing. Do her, and maybe we let you keep her cape."

*Fat chance of that,* Eddie thought. The Ghost Dragons had no way of knowing that M'Gann's clothing was actually a part of her, created by her shape-shifting abilities. *Her shape-shifting...* Under the full face-mask, he broke into a smile. *"I hope you know how to make this look good,"* he thought, praying that she was reading his mind.

"Harrier didn't think you'd figure it out," came the delighted response. *"I'm ready. And they've just given me an idea."* Had she been communicating with him verbally, Eddie guessed that she'd be speaking in a conspirational whisper now. *"After you pull that trigger and I convince them that you've killed me, you will see my cape on the floor. Pick it up. Tell them it must be fireproof, or something. And wear it. I think that will work better than simply turning myself invisible, especially in close quarters."

"What's the matter, Armor Boy?" his companion sneered. "Going soft on us?"

Eddie tried to suppress his fury, then decided the hell with it. "It's Devilbane!" He shouted. In one swift motion, he pointed the flamethrower at the green-skinned girl and activated it.

Ms Martian choked out a scream that was muffled by the gag. For a moment, Eddie and the others saw her twisting, bathed in flames. In a few seconds, all that remained was a blue cape, seemingly unaffected by the fire, and a faint greyish smear on the floor.

Eddie bent down to retrieve the fabric. "I accept your offer," he said coldly as he draped it over his shoulders. "This is mine."

He stalked away and nobody tried to stop him. "You okay?" he thought.

"Fine." There was a pause. "*But you might want to see about some sort of padding for the exterior of your suit.*"

"Huh?"

*I don't want to complain, but my trip here was kind of bumpy. Lying over your armour now isn't helping matters."

"Oh. I'll see what I can do."

Steely grey eyes met shocked brown. Doctor Arkham was barely recognizable. He'd never looked particularly robust, but he now appeared to be at least twenty years older. He'd lost a good deal of weight, and his skin stretched taut over sunken cheekbones. The hospital-issue pajamas looked at least two sizes two large.

He frowned and opened his mouth to speak, but only a harsh wheeze escaped. A flash of irritation showed in his eyes as he fumbled for the pen and pad on a tray attached to the arm of his wheelchair. Angrily, he scrawled a few words and thrust the pad to her.

Cass looked at it and shook her head. "I... I'm sorry," she said as she felt her face grow hot. "Your writing is..."

Arkham tore the sheet off. He started on a fresh piece, this time more slowly. Then he handed it to her.
The writing was smudged in several places. She still wasn't sure. "I can't," she said with regret. "I'm..."

Arkham started on a third sheet. When he showed that one to her, she flinched. In bold blue ink, he'd printed in block capitals:

CANT YOU READ GIRL? He'd underlined it three times for emphasis.

He might just as well have slapped her. She recoiled as though he had. She'd been an idiot to think that she was ready for anything like this. She could leave now. She honestly wanted to. But... but Arkham wasn't trying to trap her into showing her weakness. He was trying to communicate with her in the only way he could. She took a deep breath. "I'm... learning," she said. Her voice caught a bit. She hoped he hadn't noticed. "Can't you... talk?"

Arkham's eyebrows drew together. He studied her face, now with greater intensity. Abruptly he turned to a fresh page and wrote:

IM LEARNING. Then, on a new line, AGAIN.

Cass dared to take another breath. "It should be... easier for you," she said. "Since it's 'again'."

He cocked his head at that. Then, abruptly, he nodded. A new line appeared on the pad:

NAME? CASS?

"Yes. And you... you want to be... 'Jerry'?"

This time, she could read the reply even though it was barely better than a scrawl.

NO!

He'd pressed the pen down so hard when he'd underlined the word that he'd torn through the page.

DOCTOR

DOCTOR ARKHAM NOT JERRY


Arkham slumped back with a sigh.

"I can... take you to your room now, okay?" She hesitated. "Doctor."

He nodded, closing his eyes.

Cass located the chair brake, flipped it off and started pushing. She hoped he wasn't going to keep writing her notes their whole way back.

"I've been thinking about those exercises you've told me to try," Bruce began, as Alex turned to a fresh page on his notepad.

Alex set the pen down. "Just thinking?" he asked with a hint of good humour.

"No, I've been trying them. Well, trying to incorporate some of the lessons they're meant to impart."
Alex nodded. "I'm guessing that you're bringing it up for a reason," he said mildly.

"Are we back to this again?" Bruce snapped. "One of the things I most respected about your methods was that you didn't try to... to..."

"Use 'shrink-speak'?" Alex smiled. "It's a habit I'm trying to overcome. Some days are better than others. So, you've been doing the exercises on gratitude."

"I've been reading them," Bruce corrected. "They just feel so... Look. I know I have a lot to be grateful for. Do you think that a day goes by when I don't realize just what my family has..." He broke off. "But then, I wouldn't take them for granted as much as I do, and I wouldn't constantly feel the need to apologize to them or... or push them away." He slumped. "I've tried your suggestion about finding five things daily to be grateful for. But when it comes to the next stage—to telling someone why I appreciate them," he shook his head. "I spent ten minutes just now in the coffee shop across the street trying to tell Dick I appreciated his leaving work early to meet me there. And the best I could do was to thank him for coming."

"That's a start," Alex pointed out.

"It's also not a challenge. It's something you say to board members who come in for an emergency meeting at eight in the morning or take time off from their golf games. It's..." He took a deep breath. "Alright. Why is it difficult for me to tell him? Or tell anyone? It's easier for me to apologize for my actions than to admit to appreciating someone else's."

Alex had been scribbling something down on the notepad but he looked up sharply at Bruce's last statement. "Now that's interesting," he remarked. "I would have guessed the opposite."

Bruce waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "You aren't helping."

"You're right. I'm sorry." Alex leaned forward. "We can certainly look to explore some possible answers. Have you got any theories of your own? I know you said you'd been giving the matter some thought."

"I normally prefer," Bruce said slowly, "not to present a hypothesis without having more objective data to back it up."

"That's fair," Alex began.

"In this case, however," Bruce continued, not giving Alex a chance to finish, "I don't think that's going to be possible. I'm... too involved in the situation to view it objectively."

"It's easier to find your way out of a maze when you're overlooking it, than it is when you're inside it."

Bruce looked up. "Exactly."

"Alright." Alex leaned back. "Do you feel comfortable discussing your thoughts on this?"

Bruce made a face. "Not particularly. Which," his lips twitched, "almost always indicates that I should try, regardless." He took a deep breath, then let it out.

Alex waited. The silence seemed to stretch for an eternity, though it was actually less than a minute before Bruce spoke again. "I think it keeps coming back to what we've been working on since Arkham." He didn't hesitate to speak the name of the place this time. His lips twitched again. "My uncontrollable need for control." He registered Alex's slight frown, but continued. "When I
apologize, it means that, by definition, I am admitting that something that I said or did caused an undesirable result. In effect, my actions caused or... or controlled the environment in which such a result could transpire. It's not so much that I'm comfortable admitting when I'm wrong. I'm not. But it's still easier than admitting to gratitude."

"I think I'm following you, so far," Alex nodded. "It sounds like you'd prefer to err... than to owe."

Bruce winced. "Thanks. For phrasing it that way. As opposed to saying that I would prefer hurting people over being beholden to them." He exhaled. "I think this would be why I've resisted therapy in the past. There are some... corners I'd rather not expose to bright light."

"It may shock you to know that you aren't the only one," Alex replied. "Are you saying you'd prefer to terminate these sessions?"

Bruce frowned. "You know I can't."

"I do. But if you could, would you?"

Bruce shook his head. "I've trained physically until my muscles screamed in protest. Then, too, part of me wanted to forget about the goal, book the first ticket back to Gotham and stay... safe in the life that was familiar to me. What we're doing is... unpleasant. But that doesn't make it unnecessary."

Alex nodded, smiling. "On that note, I'd like to give you another couple of exercises on appreciation."

"I suppose I left myself open for that one," Bruce replied. "All right. I'm listening."

"What's for dinner?" Bruce asked, coming into the kitchen.

Jim looked up from the newspaper. "I ate a little while ago," he said. "There's stuff in the freezer, or you can fix something fast if you want to."

Bruce blinked. "I... I'd thought that we were going to eat together."

"We were," Jim returned. "Before you got sidetracked downstairs."

"Oh," Bruce said. "I just wanted to reach four hundred push-ups before I came up."

Jim nodded. "And then you decided to throw a few more batarangs around—"

"My accuracy is almost back to what it was."

"And you gave yourself a blind... um... fragrance test of twenty different aftershaves."

"Twelve."

"Whatever," Jim sighed. "I got hungry, so I came upstairs."

"Is there anything left?"

Jim shook his head. "I just fixed myself a sandwich and coffee. There's some of that left in the pot," he gestured toward the percolator on the counter and smiled. "I think you can probably slap a couple of pieces of meat between two slices of bread just as well as I can."

Bruce nodded, still looking somewhat upset.
"Well, I'll be heading upstairs, I guess."

Bruce studied the older man for a moment. Then, "Have I... done anything?"

Jim shook his head once more, still smiling. "No, no. I'm just feeling a bit tired tonight. And since you're officially on your own time as of about fifteen minutes ago," he pointed to the clock that registered a quarter past nine, "I'm just going to turn in early."

"Oh." Bruce nodded again. "I... Rear Window is coming on at ten. I'd thought maybe you'd want to watch."

"Another time," Jim said firmly. "But thanks for the invite."

Bruce started to say something else, then stopped. Abruptly, he walked over to the kitchen cabinet and pulled out a plate. Then he took an apple from the fruit bowl, opened the bread box and took out a hamburger roll.

"Is that all you're taking?"

Bruce sighed. "I'm not that hungry. I think I finally got my fill of eating alone during those two years."

"Alright."

Bruce set the plate down on the counter with a clatter.

Jim raised an eyebrow. "I suppose you can be grateful that wasn't the bone china." He did a double-take at the sudden fury evident on Bruce's face. "What?"

"Yes," Bruce practically spat the word out. "That is one more thing that I have in my life that I can be GRATEFUL for!"

Despite himself, Jim shrank back a step.

Bruce slumped, his anger dissipating almost as quickly as it had surged up. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "That... that was uncalled for."

Jim nodded slowly. "Apology accepted. Is there... do you want to..."

"To talk?" Bruce shook his head. "I think I've probably said enough already. I'll be fine."

Jim regarded him for a moment, sizing up the situation. Then deliberately, he got up from the table, reached for his cane and crossed to where Bruce was standing. "I know," he said simply, clapping him on the shoulder. "But are you now?"

Bruce forced a smile. "Close enough," he said. "You're sure you don't want to watch?"

"Tell you what," Jim smiled back. "you rent it tomorrow and we can watch it then. I really am tired tonight."

"I understand." Bruce took a deep breath. "Alfred... no matter how late I'd return to the manor, he was always awake. I took it for granted, I suppose."

"Mmmm," Jim grunted. "You do realize that... that Alfred is irreplaceable, I hope?"

"I should," Bruce said. "But sometimes..."
"I'll take that as a compliment. Good night."

Upstairs in his room, Jim frowned in the darkness. As much as he wanted to be there for Bruce, he suspected that things might be getting a bit out of hand. He was going to have to give the matter more serious thought, but maybe his living here in the manor wasn't such a good idea, after all.

It was a considerably smaller group that assembled in the loading bay, Eddie noticed. They'd been nearly twenty when the Ghost Dragons had first brought them here. Now, seven were left. One of the veteran gang members got up and stood before them.

"Congratulations," he said with a broad smile as he surveyed them. "You are among the very few who have clearly demonstrated that you are worthy of joining the ranks of the Ghost Dragons. You are strong. You are brave. You are ruthless."

Eddie noticed that he didn't mention anything about brains being required. *Hope that doesn't make me overqualified.*

"Well, I know that I am," M'Gann's amused voice remarked in his mind.

"Ha-ha."

The gang member was still speaking. Eddie forced his focus back.

"So now," he continued, "it's time for you to meet the other members of our organization. If you'll all board that van," he pointed to a non-descript SUV, "we're going to take a trip downtown, where you'll be assigned to your new duties. You will answer to us, but you will be working for our current employer. So if you ladies and gentlemen would be so good as to get inside?"

"I didn't realize that they were working for anyone other than themselves," M'Gann remarked as Eddie automatically snapped the seat-belt closed.

"Me either... but I guess it makes sense. I mean, there's not much money or job security in just beating people up. If they're working for someone else..."

"As bodyguards, do you think?"

Eddie considered. "Maybe. Bodyguards, bouncers, enforcers, assassins. Maybe they're teaching karate to gangsters' kids, I dunno. But whatever it is, I guess we'll find out."

He thought that he could almost feel M'Gann nod in his thoughts. "I agree. We shouldn't be trying to explore on our own, not when they're practically escorting us to where we want to go." All at once, he caught a surge of distress from her. "Oh, Eddie, I'm so sorry! I hadn't meant to pry into your thoughts, they just came to me."

Truth be told, he was feeling a bit uncomfortable right now. And it had nothing to do with the fact that he couldn't scratch his back in his armour. "I guess I leak," he managed. "My thoughts, I mean."

"You do, but I still should try to tune it out. Do you want me to stop 'talking'?"

He did and he didn't. It was good to be able to bounce ideas off of someone he could trust. At the same time, he couldn't deny that he didn't like the notion of his mind being laid open to her.

"I guess you just caught THAT too?" He tried not to sound irritated.
"But you are irritated, and I don't blame you. I'm going to withdraw, Eddie. But I'm going to keep a small thread of my consciousness linked to yours. It won't be enough to pick up more than an extreme emotional burst, unless you actually reach out to me. I'm sorry I... No, don't tell me it's 'okay' when it isn't," she ordered. That's the thing about telepathy, Eddie. You can't reassure me when you don't really mean it."

The communication terminated abruptly.

Eddie sat silently, thinking. "M'Gann... Just because I don't like you poking around in my head doesn't mean I blame you. You know that, right?"

She didn't respond.

Eddie gave up and turned his face to the van window, trying to get his bearings. They were heading into the downtown area. Suddenly, his eyes widened. He knew this area from Tim's briefing when they'd first relocated here. If they were going where he thought they were going, then they should be turning left... here!

The van continued on.

...Or maybe not.

He realized his mistake a moment later. The van pulled into the employee parking lot at the rear of the building and stopped. A moment later, the driver got out and came over to open the passenger side door. "This is it, folks. This way." They followed their guide as he led them up to the door, which sported a large sign that read: The Iceberg Lounge—Tradesmen's Entrance Only.

Krait looked up as Bruce took his seat. "Is everything still 'fine'?” he asked.

Bruce glanced briefly at the man, noting that the green-grey tie really didn't fit with his tweed sports jacket and royal blue shirt. "Absolutely," he said flatly.

"That's good," Krait said. "A lot of the people I deal with tell me that their social lives tend to suffer in their situation."

Bruce frowned. "I'm not exactly in a position to have a serious relationship right now," he said. "Even I know that." He and Selina were not currently in a 'relationship', he told himself fiercely. It had been one kiss that had left them both somewhat breathless, but he hadn't repeated it. If it weren't for Helena, he certainly wouldn't be seeing as much of her as he was, but it wasn't a 'relationship'. They were simply old friends, good friends, who knew each other inside and out, and had had a child together. So... there was something serious between them, but it wasn't a relationship, per se. It couldn't be, not if he had any hope of returning to the cowl, and not if there was any chance that she was going to resume stealing. If he thought for one moment that there was more to what was between them than deep mutual understanding, he... he'd have to end things. He didn't have so many friends in his life right now that he was ready to lose any of them. No, he and Selina were friends.

Krait, however, was still talking. "I didn't mean romantic attachments," he said. "What about society affairs? Have you attended any charity balls lately?"

"It's not the season for them," Bruce said quickly. Funny how he hadn't noticed the absence of those invitations. It briefly occurred to him that Jim might be screening his mail—but if that were the case, he wouldn't have expected to see the grocery store flyers, credit card applications, or gym memberships in the stack. Not to mention that the envelopes were always sitting on his desk unopened. If he was getting his junk mail, and if Jim wasn't reading his correspondence, then he was
getting everything else too. Which meant that there hadn't been any invitations in a good long while.

"There've been a couple," Krait remarked. "I've seen the write-ups in the society pages. It might actually be a good thing if you did accept some of the invitations—I'm just saying."

Bruce nodded. "Thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

It didn't matter that he wasn't getting asked. He'd found the overwhelming majority of those affairs tiresome. Most nights, he'd been ready to cheer when the signal went up and he could cut the evening short. And yet, it surprised him that he was feeling a bit hurt at the realization that he wasn't being invited.

\textit{You didn't miss it until right now when Krait made his point.}

'Missing' was too strong a word for it.

\textit{To 'miss' is to perceive a lack. You've just spotted one.}

He'd been through this before, this... shunning, he supposed it was. It had taken almost an entire year after he'd been cleared of Vesper's murder before high society had welcomed him back. But they'd still invited him, if only to whisper behind his back. Apparently, things had changed.

\textit{And again, why do you care? You should be happy you aren't being bothered by that coterie.}

He was, he was. He didn't care. He was simply perturbed by the sudden shift in behavioral patterns.

\textit{Did you ever notice that your vocabulary always improves when you're trying to pretend you haven't been dealt a non-physical blow?}

Shut up.

"Mr. Wayne?" Krait looked concerned. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

\textit{Liar.}

Bruce stalked into the cave, barely acknowledging when Jim told him he'd be down in a few minutes. It was just as well that the former police commissioner could tell when Bruce wanted to be alone. Because right now, he \textit{definitely} wanted to be alone.

\textit{We fall so we can pick ourselves up again.}

What if he couldn't? What if this was all that the future held for him from now on—to spend the rest of his life watched, guarded... chipping away at ground that he had thought solid for over thirty years. And what if there wasn't anything beneath that ground but a bottomless abyss?

He picked up a tray of batarangs and began hurling them methodically at a stalagmite some thirty paces away. By now, most could connect—he was striving to knock chips out of the formation—something that was just starting to happen regularly. He wouldn't be satisfied, though, until he could do so consistently, with each throw.

He finished the tray and whirled around to get another one, when a sharp intake of breath made him look to his left. "What are \textit{you} doing here?"
Tim took a step back. "I didn't mean to spy," he said quickly. "I came in to get a couple of extra cables and you came downstairs, and I was around the corner," he gestured toward the supply vaults. "I didn't want to disturb you, so I thought I'd wait, and..."

Bruce nodded. "I understand. I came down here for some privacy."

"That's why I was trying to stay out of sight—but then I realized if you knew you weren't alone down here, you might figure it was someone else, so I..."

"Smart," Bruce admitted.

"You're getting be..." Tim reddened. "I mean... I think if we faced off against each other, you'd probably beat me at this point."

"I should," Bruce said. "The shape of the batarang is more aerodynamic than one of your R-knives."

"I don't use those anymore," Tim replied. "I switched to these."

"H's instead of R's," Bruce noted. "Those probably have a better range."

Tim nodded. "I've been taking physics as an elective. My academic adviser thinks I'm setting myself up for a fall, but I'm designing my own stuff here. I need to figure out what works best. And for that, I have to understand about mass and distance vectors."

"Wind currents, gravity..."

"And any other forces that might impact the missile." Tim nodded.

Bruce smiled fleetingly. "That makes sense." He couldn't help noticing that Tim was more relaxed talking about scientific principles, grades, anything that would keep the conversation from moving onto a more... personal level. After the week he'd been having, this was a relief. "Let's see what they can do."

Tim glanced up sharply. "What... you mean like a competition? My 'harrying knives' against your 'rangs'?

Yes, but... "Let's put a new twist in. You use the 'rangs. I'll try your knives."

"What? But I'm used to my knives."

"And I'm used to improvising with whatever's at hand."

"You know, you're not my teacher anymore," Tim said, matching Bruce's banter with his own.

"Irrelevant," Bruce shot back. "Or are you afraid that you might still learn something?"

Tim blinked. "I think I'm learning that you've been hanging around Dick too long, if you're actually cracking jokes."

"You say that as though it were negative. Now are you going to waste your breath talking, or are you going to get that other tray of batarangs?"

Tim hesitated for a moment, then reached into one of his belt pouches and pulled out a small stack of harrying knives. "You blunt 'em, you sharpen 'em," he warned.

"I'll expect the same courtesy."
"You're on."

"And Tim," Bruce hesitated. *Don't treat me like I'm some novice in need of praise. I can see when I'm hitting my target just as well as you can.* But then, why was he choosing to use Tim's own weapon if not to try to impress him, on some level? *No. I'm trying to impress me. But it wouldn't be terrible if he noticed as well... as long as he doesn't patronize..."

"Bruce?"

Bruce shook his head. "Nothing. Good luck."

"Well," Selina remarked as she settled down on the sofa in the den, "this is cozy." Then more sharply, "Helena, come here."

She got up and scooped up the toddler before Helena could reach the hearth. "No. Hot."

"I should have realized," Bruce murmured. "There's an artificial one in one of the ballrooms. We could..."

"One?" Selina's eyes danced. "Just how many ballrooms do you have?"

"Three," Bruce admitted. "Though they actually adjoin each other, and the walls are retractable."

"So depending on how you look at it, you have one or three," Selina smiled.

"Exactly."

"Let's not get up," Selina said, as she settled her daughter on her lap, leaned back, and rested her head against Bruce's shoulder. "I like this. Quiet evening, roaring fire... I don't suppose there's any mulled cider?"

Bruce shook his head. "I believe I have the spice mix somewhere—at least, Alfred usually had some on-hand for winter entertaining. But as far as cider goes, there's only apple juice at the moment," he glanced down at Helena, whose ears seemed to perk up.

"Juice?" she asked.

"Yes," Bruce said softly. "Juice. You want some juice, Helena?"

She smiled. "You want some juice, Helena."

"I," Bruce corrected, smiling back. "I want juice."

She laughed.

"I," Bruce repeated.

Helena touched her eyelid. "Eye!"

Selina giggled.

"She needs to speak properly," Bruce stated.

"And she will. But Bruce, she's barely nineteen months old. For her age, this is *advanced.* She's just not sophisticated enough to realize the difference between 'you' and 'I.' She grinned. "The
pronouns, I mean. I'd like to think there are some rather significant differences," she leaned in closer, "between you," she kissed him lightly on the cheek, "and I."

"Profound differences," Bruce agreed, working his arm free and draping it over her shoulder.

"Want juice, Helena!" Helena piped up.

Bruce sighed. "I'll be right back. As far as cider... I guess putting the juice in the microwave isn't a good idea?"

Selina made a face.

"Bad idea," Bruce nodded. "Understood."

"Oh, yeah."

"You don't mind?" Selina asked. "I doubt it'll be for more than a couple of days."

"I don't," Bruce said slowly. "But she might."

"I love my daughter, Bruce," Selina remarked, "but she doesn't get to call the shots on this one. The Birds need me—yes, I know—the Birds need Catwoman, I must've had that same look on my face when Barbara asked me for my help. Holly and Karon are great for an evening, but the truth is, if anything out-of-the-ordinary were going to happen, as soon as I found out about it, my second reaction would be to call you. My first would be to kick myself for not leaving her here in the first place—danger or no danger, your security is a hell of a lot better than mine."

Bruce raised his eyebrows. "You've changed your thinking somewhat from a few months ago."

"I have and I haven't," Selina replied. "My thinking was always to keep her safe. What's changed is my opinion of the best way to do that. You're not the only one in this relationship who's got enemies, and some of mine are just as deadly as some of yours. Actually, some of mine are some of yours, too. You know how to deal with them. My friends don't."

"Point." Bruce smiled down at the small child curled up on the couch. "Your going," he said with forced casualness, "it's only because you're needed elsewhere. I..." he looked down, feeling almost like he was a child again, unsure whether his mother's snappishness had been caused by something he'd done, or whether she'd just been having a bad day. "It's not..." He felt his shoulders slump.

"Bruce?"

He studied his fingernails, preferring not to meet her eyes, in case they reflected what he feared. "My current situation can be... irksome," he said finally. "I'm managing. Mostly. I have to. No other alternative is acceptable. But sometimes, it becomes difficult."

"And sometimes, you become difficult?"

He heard the smile in her voice and risked a quick glance in her direction. "Basically. When the going gets tough... I suppose I prefer that everyone around me... get going. As far as possible."

Thinking about Jim made him add, "except when I don't. Old behaviours die hard, I suppose. Look. I'm trying to say that if I've inadvertently done something to... to push you away—"

"No," Selina said with a throaty chuckle. "This is just a mission, I promise. But if you do need your space, Bruce, I have a suggestion for you."
"Yes?"

She laughed then. "Tell me, you big goof! Do you really think I can't understand that sometimes you just might not want me around?" She took his arm. "Or did you just never hear the expression about absence making the heart grow fonder?" Her smile broadened. "And the same goes if you want me around more. Sometimes, I need my space, too... but other times, I'm just trying to give you yours. You have got to learn to communicate more. Seriously."

Bruce nodded. "I know," he admitted, covering her hand with his own. "There are times I think Cass is better at this than I am."

"No kidding."

He squeezed her hand. She brushed her fingers lightly against his cheek and leaned over to rest her head against his chest.

Eddie glanced around the night club quickly, trying to make note of all available entrances, exits, and areas of concealment. At a booth along the far wall, he saw Tim and Cassie seated, ostensibly examining their menus. Both were formally dressed. Tim looked up, frowned at him, and went back to the bill of fare. Right. He shouldn't be staring. Still, it was good to know that he and M'Gann had reinforcements.

"She's not for you," his guide said quietly, with a good-humoured note of warning.

"Huh?"

"The blonde. Don't go eying that type—they never go for costumed freaks."

If you only knew, Eddie smiled under his face mask.

He heard a bubbling laugh in his mind, followed by a quick apology.

"It's okay, M'Gann. Have you picked anything up?"

"No, and that's bothering me. Don't let this place fool you. Besides the bouncers, the alarms, and the security cameras, there's something in here that's interfering with my telepathy. I can talk to you, but I'm not able to pick up anything more than a couple of yards away. That's not exactly typical for this planet."

Before Eddie could reply, his guide took hold of his arm and steered him firmly off of the main floor and into a side office. The other recruits, he noted, were being similarly herded. "You all sit," the lead Ghost Dragon said, indicating three long benches positioned in front of a mahogany desk.

They obeyed.

A moment later, the door on the far wall opened and a short rotund figure with a monocle and a steel-tipped ebony cane sauntered through. He was wearing a black tuxedo with a white carnation in the buttonhole. He took the chair behind the desk, steepled his fingers, and regarded them speculatively.

"So, Xie," the Penguin smiled toothily, "these are your best, are they?"

"They've passed our initiation," the Ghost Dragon, whose name, apparently, was 'Xie' stated. "They'll do what you want them to."
"Let's hope so," Penguin said with a hint of steel in his voice. "I don't suffer fools or incompetents gladly. Nor those who waste my time with them." He waited for Xie to take a nervous step back before he beamed at Eddie and the others. "Welcome. Welcome to the Iceberg, and to my employ. I'm sure that this will be the start of a mutually profitable relationship."
17. Opening Doors

Chapter Summary

Kid Devil finds out more about his new boss. Dick finds out more about Cass's volunteer work. Bruce finds out more about his social worker's previous attitude. And Bruce finds out that sometimes when people leave, they don't go far.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Juliet for the beta. Thanks to Sara for technical assistance!

"More Than You'll Ever Know" written by Travis Tritt. Recorded by Travis Tritt on his The Restless Kind album (Warner Bros., 1996).

I'm sure you've heard it said hearts have windows
But mine has doors a painful past has closed
Unless someday they open wide revealing feelings locked inside
I'll love you more than you'll ever know

*Travis Tritt, "More Than You'll Ever Know"

Chapter 17—Opening Doors

Eddie felt his palms begin to sweat. So Penguin was behind the Ghost Dragons and, most likely the attack-bots the Titans had faced earlier. If Penguin had a whole army of those things...

"Then we'll take them down," M'Gann reassured him. "That's what we do, isn't it?"

Eddie smiled under his mask. "I know, I know, it's just... this is the big time. And Penguin... nobody's ever been able to pin anything on him."

"Yet."

"Yet," Eddie agreed. "Seriously, though, he covers his tracks well, and he pays off all the right people. Harrier's shown us the file—Batman knows he's got his finger on the pulse of the Gotham underworld. He's as dirty as they come. And he runs a nightclub as a hangout for every creep out on parole... or just plain 'out,' and the cops can't find a damned thing to pin on him."

"One's here, you know," M'Gann remarked casually.

"What?"

"There's an officer here undercover, looking for something he can use to get this place shut down. He must be just on the other side of the wall, or I'd never have picked it up with all the psi-baffles in here. I'll point him out when we see him."
"Excuse me, my dear young sir." Penguin's balding head suddenly loomed close before him. "I do hope you've been paying close attention to what I've been telling you, hmmm?"

Eddie gulped. "Um..."

"We're bouncers. And we don't discuss anything we see, hear, or think within these walls, once we're outside them."

"You bet I have," he shot back, duly repeating M'Gann's words.

Penguin moved back, clucking a bit. "That's a gift you have there, my good man," he smiled thinly. "If you can manage to pay close attention whilst appearing to be daydreaming..." he stroked his chin thoughtfully. "You may find yourself advancing rapidly within this organization."

"Um, thanks," Eddie managed. "Seriously. Thanks."

"Anytime. Darn."

"What?"

M'Gann sighed mentally. "Harrier and Wonder Girl are patrolling tonight. Tim just radioed me that they're heading off now, since it looks like we have things under control for now. It might've been more fun going with them."

"Oh. You're going to have to explain to me how that earpiece stays attached when you shape-change, one of these days." He tensed. "Wait, so we're here without backup, now?"

His companion giggled. "No, Eddie. You're here. And I'm your backup. If things turn ugly, we can always signal and they'll turn around."

Penguin leaned forward with an irritated expression. "Well?"

"Grilled cheese and a Zesti. He wanted to know if he could offer you a light refreshment. And, he hasn't actually said it, but he means to deduct the cost of it from your pay." The Martian girl sounded irritated. "And he's not planning on paying you much."

"Sure, I'll have a grilled cheese and a Soder lite," he responded.

Penguin nodded amiably. "That should be ready shortly. So," he took out a small notebook from a desk drawer, "with your employee discount, that will be twelve dollars and eighty-nine cents, to be deducted from your first pay—unless, of course, you carry your wallet in that suit?"

"No, Sir," Eddie replied.

"Yep. Told you so."

Dick stared at Cass for almost a moment before he spoke. "That's... wow," he said finally. "Talk about..." he frowned. When he saw that Cass was still waiting expectantly, he let out a long breath. "You know, Bruce asked me to check up on him from time to time."

"You didn't?"

"Well, I did for awhile," Dick replied. "But he was in ICU for a long time. You remember the way it was when Bruce was in there after the fire—very few visitors, nobody inside without a mask and gown... I didn't want to sneak in without scrubbing down; any germs I might have brought in with
me could have killed him. And scrubbing down without anyone spotting me wasn't exactly feasible most of the time."

Cass frowned. "Ok. No sneaking. But... asking?"

Dick shook his head. "Ever heard of HIPAA?"

"Big animal, likes water? Looks like rhinoceros with flat face, no horn?" Cass frowned. "How is... relevant?" Then, more angrily, "What's funny?"

"Not a hippo!" Dick finally gasped. "HIPAA! It's..." he took a deep breath and forced himself to stifle his laughter. "Basically, it's a law that says that the hospital can't talk about a patient's condition with just anyone, unless the patient gives the okay. Since Arkham couldn't do that, legally, the hospital couldn't tell me. Babs ran a few checks at first, but it's been months," he fought down a wave of guilt. "And once Bruce got out, and then Dodge, and this thing going on now with the Ghost Dragons," he sighed. "Basically, we've got lives—and no, that's not a good excuse. More of an explanation."

Cass nodded. "I know. It's... he's so... angry. And sad. And... and... he," she shook her head. "When Bruce... when he started to get better, he got angry too. But not like... this. He had... us to... to listen to him. No. To know what he wanted, even if he didn't say. Like," she looked down. "I know I can't always explain."

Dick touched her shoulder. "Hey. You're doing fine. Take another breath."

She obeyed. "Thanks. Okay. When I go... out, and... and fight, I know what moves to make. How to act. Nobody tells me. But I understand fighting, so I just... know. Bruce is... like that. He never tells you. But if you understand..." she grimaced. "I think I understand fighting better."

Dick laughed. "You've known that longer than you've known him. And you're right. Bruce won't usually tell you what's going on—he just expects you to figure it out. But what's that got to do with Arkham?"

Cass smiled sadly. "Understanding Bruce is... hard sometimes. Frustrating."

Dick nodded. "Sure, but that's Bruce."

"So you try. And if you can't... you don't give up." She smiled. "Not really. Even if you walk away, you don't really... give up. Me sometimes," She grimaced. "Need to stop that. But you... never."

Dick knew he was blushing. "That's right," he said carefully. "And...?"

"At the hospital, when Dr. Arkham's nurses don't understand, they give up. They... okay. You know that, before, I talked... worse. Much worse than now." She barely waited for his nod. "At least, when you didn't understand, you told me. You apologized. Maybe you said you didn't have time to try to guess sometimes. If busy. Or... or crisis. But one thing you didn't do was... pretend you understood. Pretend I said something. And then... then ignore me when I tried to tell you that you were wrong." She shook her head. "That's what they do with Dr. Arkham. He hates it. But he can't make them stop."

Dick nodded again. "Yeah, they tried that with Bruce at Arkham, during that first year. Especially when he had one doctor who was less interested in helping him and more interested in doping him to the gills so he wouldn't, and I quote, 'turn violent'." He made a face. "Believe me, Bruce wasn't the one she had to worry about." Dick thought for a moment. "When Bruce was there, I was actually impressed by the level of nursing care. I guess you run into a few bad apples wherever you go."
"Yes," Cass said, soberly. "I remember that. But these... I just... I want to... to shake them. To make them see. But they won't and... and I don't think Dr. Arkham really wants that." Her expression turned almost petulant. "I hate that I can't change things."

Dick let out a long breath. "I can relate. Seriously. You know, Cass... if this is too hard for you, you can always walk away. When I was in high school, I had a friend, Mitchell Winthorp. He wanted to be a doctor more than anything. More specifically, he wanted to be a pediatrician—that's a children's doctor," he clarified, seeing her blank stare. "He was sure that was going to be his career. He got into medical school, and everything was great for the first two years. Third year was when he actually got out of the classroom and onto the wards." Dick sighed. "So, there he was, a third-year medical student, finally dealing with patients. His second assignment was the children's ward at GUMC. And in his first week, two kids died." He shook his head. "They were pretty sick. It happens, unfortunately. Mitch took it hard. He tried to deal, but eventually, he ended up changing gears and going into medical research instead—he didn't think he'd be able to handle losing patients on an ongoing basis. Sadly," he added soberly, "that's one of the realities of the medical profession: just like with what we do, you can't save everyone. You can try, but if you focus too much on the ones you couldn't help, it'll just eat you up inside. What I'm getting at is, if what you're doing is too hard for you..."

"No!" Cass exclaimed. "It isn't. I can do this. I just wish I could make things different!" She smiled ruefully. "But I guess, maybe, it's enough to make things... better. And I think I am." She locked her eyes on his. "Dick, he's... alone. And... and frustrated. Angry. Tired. But..." she sighed, "he has no one." She shook her head. "He told me. Wrote me. Seven months, no... longer... and no visitors. I can't even... I'm going back on Friday. I have to."

Dick nodded. "I understand." He glanced at the clock. "Feel like getting a spar in before patrol?"

Cass nodded back, smiling a bit.

"Okay. Just give me a minute to get changed and I'll meet you in the cave. And Cass, if you want to vent or just talk, you know you can come to me, right?"

"Yes. Thanks," She frowned, remembering that she'd had a second reason for coming by today. "Dick? Hospital volunteer office needs my... zip code. What do I tell them?"

Bruce squared his shoulders and walked into Krait's office. Despite himself, he was starting to admire the man's tenacity. In all this time, he hadn't pushed for more than Bruce was willing to give, but he hadn't given up, either. That suited Bruce fine. He didn't really mind one hour of superficial chitchat per week—at least he hadn't until the previous session, when Krait had unexpectedly brought up those damned society affairs.

Today, Krait looked somewhat nervous as he greeted Bruce. Bruce returned the pleasantry and took his usual chair.

"You realize," Krait began, that it's already been five months since the hearing?"

Four months, twenty-seven days, and approximately three hours, he corrected mentally. "Has it?" he asked aloud.

Krait nodded. "I know we got off on the wrong foot from the start—and I take full responsibility for that. I'm required to pay you a minimum of five home visits before the next hearing convenes." He brought a hand to his temple and absently finger-combed his hair back. "I'd figured to get the first one out of the way initially, and then space the others out at even intervals. I'd meant to call you to
"Then why didn't you?" Bruce rapped out harshly.

"Actually," Krait replied, "I did. Or at least, I thought I did. There was a typo in your file. Several, in fact, but the relevant one... transposed the last two digits of your contact telephone number. If the number that I actually dialled had been out of service, I would have investigated more fully. Had the voicemail message given me the name of the party I was calling, that would have been a tip-off as well. Unfortunately, it was an electronic voice recording that confirmed the number that I'd reached and asked me to leave a message at the tone. Your home telephone number is unlisted—understandably enough, of course. That is to say that if I were in your... circumstances, mine would be as well." He picked up a paperclip from his desk caddy and rubbed it between thumb and forefinger.

"I called that number every day for two weeks, morning and evening. I never reached a live person and nobody ever called me back. Met with that sort of reaction, I concluded that you were avoiding me."

"So you decided to confront me at home." Bruce considered. What Krait was saying made altogether too much sense. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"I'm an ex-military man, Mr. Wayne. One thing that we learn early on is the phrase 'no excuse, sir'. To put it plainly, when Alex arranged that conference in his office, how would you have reacted if I'd tried to justify my actions?"

Bruce grunted, conceding the point. "And now?"

"I'm still not trying to give you excuses. I'm giving you a bit of background, because I fervently hope that we can start making some progress. If my explanation helps to clear the air, fine. If not, I'm ready to step aside if another caseworker can be found—although I don't know what that's going to do to your hearing date."

Bruce could barely believe his ears. "Are you threatening—"

"No, damn it!" Krait shot back. "I'm trying to make you see! There are a limited number of caseworkers on the city's payroll, and it could be weeks or even months before any one of them has a spot available. Before the hearing reconvenes to determine whether to end your..." He thought for a moment before he continued. "... Your court-ordered supervision, you have to have those four additional home visits and they can't all be lumped together in the final month. If it takes six months for you to be assigned a new case worker, that will push back the date for your hearing."

Bruce frowned as Krait's words sank in. Then, slowly, he nodded and sat back.

Krait took a deep breath. "I had hoped that over the course of these last few months, we would have developed some sort of a rapport. It hasn't happened, and maybe I'm to blame for not giving you an explanation until now. For that, I'm sorry. But if you want the hearing to have a chance of going in your favor, then over the course of the next seven months, I need to make another four home visits."

"I'm listening," Bruce said flatly.

"I'll take that as encouragement." Krait kept his focus on Bruce as he opened his desk drawer and pulled out a manila folder. "Now, had we met prior to that first... home visit—"

"Home invasion," Bruce corrected, straight-faced.
Krait chuckled at that. "Fine. I don't think I can disagree with you, there. As I was saying," he sobered quickly, "had we met under better circumstances, I would have given you this checklist at our first session. I realize that it looks exten—"

Bruce pulled the sheaf of papers of the caseworker's hand and began leafing through it. There were a lot of items on the list, but as he skimmed them, he realized that most of them were already handled by the cleaning staff that Jim had hired. As for the rest... He looked up. "I'll study it further this evening," he said finally.

"Fair enough. When we meet next week, I would like to set up a mutually acceptable time for the second visit, though."

Bruce folded the papers and tucked them into the inside pocket of his suit jacket. "I'll keep that in mind."

Krait nodded. "Moving right along, then," he said, "how have you been keeping since our last meeting?"

Bruce lifted both eyebrows and smiled faintly, more than a little relieved to be back on familiar ground. "Fine."

Lonerghan left the Iceberg, walking rapidly toward his car.

"In a hurry?" a cold voice emanated from the shadows.

The disgraced former police officer turned around slowly, his expression resigned. "You again, Batman? Don't you have a Bingo game to crash or something?"

The vigilante seemed to explode out of the darkness, charging forward in barely-controlled fury. "You're pathetic, Lonerghan!" he snarled. "How much did Penguin pay you to try to lead your squad into an ambush? What kind of sorry excuse for a man-?"

Lonerghan had his revolver out in record time. "D-don't come any closer," he warned. "Aaah!" The gun fell to the ground, and he found himself rubbing his hand, which was now bleeding where the batarang had slashed it.

"Wrong move, Lonerghan. And the wrong person to try it with. Now are you going to talk or...?"

The ex-cop turned tail and tried to run. Batman was quicker. He fired his grappling cable low, looping it around the fleeing man's ankles. Lonerghan fell heavily to the pavement.

"Hope you've got a good head for heights," Batman said. His tone was almost friendly as he hoisted his captive over one shoulder and fired off another cable, snagging the cornice of a low-rise several yards away.

"Oh my G-d, what are you doing?" Lonerghan gasped. "No! Please!"

"You have something to say to me?" Batman demanded.

"Oh my G... Look, man, what do you want from me? I don't know anything! What do you want me to do? Make something up?"

Batman shifted his grip. "Sorry. Wrong answer. Now if I were the Big Blue Boy Scout, this would be the perfect time for me to say, 'up, up and away!'" He retracted the cable, letting it pull them both
slowly upwards.

Lonerghan screamed.

A moment later, Batman dumped him unceremoniously down onto the roof of the building. Then he sprang lightly down from the low parapet. "You okay?"

Lonerghan took a few deep breaths as he dusted himself off. "Heights are fine," he said finally. "Dangling upside-down over some grandstander's shoulder, with one thin rope the only thing keeping me from being a wet spot on the pavement? Not so much."

Batman looked away. "Sorry about that," he said sheepishly. "In case you were being watched, I wanted to make it look convincing."

"Well, you half-convinced me!" Lonerghan shot back. "Sheesh, if you treat your allies like this, I'd hate to see what you do to your enemies!"

"That's right," Batman said seriously. "You would. So. You said you wanted to meet with me."

Lonerghan nodded. "I've been doing some thinking, and what I'm thinking is, I'm not going to find one shred of evidence to link Penguin to the Gotham Underworld."

Batman started to say something. Lonerghan cut him off.

"No, seriously. He covers those tracks too well. And if he does slip up, he's got a team of sharp attorneys who know all the angles. He pays off the right people for protection. If we try to bring him in on racketeering, extortion, money laundering, anything at all like that, we'll fail."

The cowled figure loomed high over the prone figure. "Did you seriously interrupt my patrol to tell me that?"

Lonerghan flinched. "I... no, wait!" he called. when Batman would have stalked to the edge of the roof. "We won't get him that way, but we can do it a different way."

Batman paused. "Keep talking."

"You know how the feds finally got smart and nailed Capone on tax evasion when they couldn't make anything else stick?"

Behind the cowl, Batman's eyes eyebrows shot up. "You have proof that Penguin's been cooking his books?"

"No, not that. But I've got something just as good."

The vigilante shifted his stance. "I'm listening."

As Lonerghan explained, Batman's lips pulled up into a tight smile. "I believe I'm beginning to like the way you think," he said slowly. "I'll be in touch."

He bent down. "For now, though," Batman continued, "cross your wrists behind your back and put your ankles together." He held out a pair of plastic zip-ties. "Penguin knows what usually happens to his stooges once I haul 'em off. Best to keep up appearances." Seeing Lonerghan's expression, he continued. "Cobblepot will probably have you bailed out first thing in the morning. He figures the sooner you're out of custody, the less likely you'll be to spill what you know."

The undercover officer sighed. "Do it."
"This is terrific," Barbara said as she set the teapot back down. "How is it that you never learned how to cook, but you can brew bancha like a tea master?"

Bruce shrugged. "It was considered an honor for a Qwan Ki Do novice to be asked to wait upon his master," he replied. "One of the standard duties was preparing and serving tea."

"So, wait. In between splitting boards with your bare hands and meditation, they taught you this?"

"Actually," Bruce said, "the meditation came first, then the tea. Then, as I recall, there was language instruction—Master Nguyen didn't speak a word of English, so those of us who came from abroad had to master Vietnamese."

Barbara blinked. "How long did it take you before he actually taught you how to fight?"

Bruce thought for a moment. "If I'm remembering right, it was probably about six months."

"I don't know what shocks me more," Barbara said, shaking her head slowly. "That you spent half a year training to brew tea, or that you learned Vietnamese in six months!"

"Well, it was a controlled vocabulary," Bruce pointed out. His expression turned serious. "I do appreciate your coming here today," he said. It was easier to say it this time. He cupped one hand and brought it to his mouth. "I don't know if your father is able to lip-read," he continued. "And I'm not sure whether he's observing us from the cave at the moment. I hope you don't mind that I'm not taking the chance."

Barbara frowned. "It's fine with me if you want to cover your lips," she said dubiously, but what's this all about? Did you, she hesitated. Just where were the cameras in here? "Is everything okay?"

Bruce relaxed slightly. "I'm not sure," he admitted. "I was wondering. Has your father mentioned anything to you about... being here out of duty?" His shoulders slumped. "I thought that he chose to come here because he wanted to, but now, I'm beginning to have my doubts."

Barbara took a gulp of tea, wincing as she scalded her tongue. "Have you asked him?"

Bruce shook his head. "I'm asking you. I thought he might have told you if there was an issue."

"Well, he hasn't," Barbara returned. "But here's the thing... he's here night and day. I mean, seriously, Bruce, don't you like the idea of having more time alone?"

That checked him. "Solitude... wasn't an option for a long time," he said softly. He sighed. "First I endured the lack of it, but now... I think I may have come to prefer the company." His voice dropped to a whisper. "And maybe that's one area where I shouldn't be trying to restore the old status quo."

Barbara smiled at that. "Still, think about it. He wants to be here for you, but for more than twelve hours every day, he has to be, like it or not. Sheesh, Bruce, I loved school when I was a kid, but even I couldn't wait to get out once the bell rang." She reached out to cover his hand with her own. "You never really did get to be alone before," she pointed out. "I mean, not unless you wanted to be. Alfred gave you your space, but if you needed him, he was there. And if you'd called and said you needed any one of the rest of us, we'd—"

"—have assumed that Tetch had hatted me and I was leading you into a trap?"

Barbara laughed. "Well, that too." She sighed. "Look, from what you're saying, you like it when we're around, but you also like having your own space once in awhile. Daddy's the same way. With
the current set-up, even when he's off-duty, he's still on call—and you do have a way of..."

"Of calling," Bruce finished. He shook his head. "I'd thought it would be easier for both of us if he
moved into the manor."

"It was," Jim said quietly from behind, startling them both. "At the time, anyway." He walked over
to the sofa and sat down. "Believe me, Bruce, I know what it's like coming home to an empty house
that wasn't so empty just a short while ago. If you recall, I spend a few months in Europe because I
couldn't adjust."

"How much did you hear?" Bruce asked.

"Enough." He smiled sadly. "I'm moving back into the cottage tomorrow night. You don't need me
around as much as you think you do," he held up a hand as Bruce opened his mouth to respond.
"You don't. Not if you're spending all those hours downstairs."

"If you're still angry about that—"

"I wasn't angry in the first place," Jim replied. "But it shows me that you can manage on your own
for a bit." He smiled. "I just think it's going to be better for both of us, this way. And besides," he
smiled, "I have a feeling that if I invite you over for supper occasionally, as a guest, you might make
a little more effort to show up on time."

Bruce cautiously returned the smile.

Cass walked into the volunteer office two days later. "Zip code," she said, smiling as she thrust the
small slip of paper forward. "Okay?"

Doug grinned back. "Thanks, Cass. How are things working out?"

"Okay," she said guardedly.

"Well, I haven't heard any complaints yet, so no news is good news, right?"

She wasn't sure she understood what the words meant, but his body language was relaxed and he
was smiling. After a moment she smiled back.

According to the clock on the side wall, she had to be upstairs in another five minutes, so... "Bye,"
she said, turning to leave.

"Cass? Wait a second?"

She stopped and turned back. "Yes?"

"I was wondering... Sunday afternoon, I know you're not scheduled to work, but we're going to be
showing a movie in the patients' dining hall. Normally, it's not hard to get volunteers in on the
weekend to help with setup and transportation, but most of our people are students in the middle of
exams. Is there any chance that you'd be free from noon to about six?"

"Movie?" Cass repeated.

"Yes. We'd need you to set up the chairs for the patients who are ambulatory, wheel down the ones
who aren't—oh, and take them back up once it's over—and a few other minor things, like pushing a
snack cart every so often. The rest of the time, you can just sit back and enjoy the show. Think you
might be up for it?"
She considered. She didn't have to patrol until eight that night. "Which movie?"

Doug grinned. "My Fair Lady. It's a musical. Long one—almost three hours. We're figuring it'll take about an hour and a half to set up, and the same for cleaning up. So, what do you say?"

The title meant nothing to her, but that didn't matter. If the hospital needed her, then, "Yes. Okay. Sunday." She pointed to the clock. "Got to go now." She bolted, almost before Doug could thank her.

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Krait checked his day planner and shook his head. "I do have a slot free next Wednesday at two, but I have a one o'clock appointment down in Tri-Corner, and a three o'clock in Chinatown. I don't think it's feasible. How about Thursday at ten?"

"Not acceptable," Bruce said after thinking for a moment. The cleaning staff never finished before noon. "One o'clock?"

Krait sighed. "My entire Thursday afternoon is solidly booked, and Friday morning we're driving into Vermont to spend the weekend in Stowe. I'll be back on Monday night. Tuesday? Four o'clock?"

Bruce considered. It seemed that there something problematic about the day, but he couldn't remember what. Most likely, he and Dick were meeting for coffee. If so, the time could be moved forward or pushed back. "Very well."

It wasn't until Bruce was back in the car and pulling his own appointment calendar out of the glove compartment, that realized what he'd arranged. Tuesday morning, Selina was flying to Sienna with the Birds. Which meant that when Krait showed up on Tuesday afternoon, Bruce would be trying to entertain his nineteen-month-old daughter—who had already demonstrated that she did not always like meeting new people. In fact, she could be quite vocal about it. Couple that with her natural curiosity, and this had all the potential to emerge as a full-blown disaster...
Chapter Summary

Bruce has family worries and a home visit on his horizon. And Jim runs into a mutual foe...

Chapter Notes

A/N: For details on the falling out between Batman and Superman, please refer to Adventures of Superman #643 or the Sacrifice TPB.

A/N: Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, Juliet, and Sara for the beta!

A/N: "Scars are Beautiful" written and recorded by Paul Brandt on his Risk album (Giantfoothillbilly, 2006)

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Each scar is living proof and they tell the truth
About places that you've been
They're all roadmaps to life's lessons made
By sacrifice and sin
And you can let them bring you down
Or you can hold your head up high
Don't let the chance you took to fall
Keep you from the chance you take to try

—Paul Brandt, "Scars are Beautiful"

Chapter 18—A Chance to Fall, A Chance to Try

Bruce inspected the nursery for the fifteenth time. Every edge and corner of the traditional wood furniture had been covered with foam cushioned padding. Safety straps held the book-cases and toy shelves fast to the walls. Three days ago, he'd painstakingly inventoried and Googled each plaything, verifying that it was suitable for children under the age of three. Everything that hadn't met that criteria had gone up to the attic. Looking around now, Bruce had to admit that the room looked rather bare—like a furniture store showroom display. There were a few stuffed animals, some dog-eared picture books, and an antique rocking horse. Most of his own toys had been given away once he'd outgrown them. True, Helena would be bringing some of her own toys with her, but Bruce suspected that a visit to Ferris Wheelers, Bristol's answer to the legendary FAO Schwartz store, might be warranted.

When Jim came up after breakfast, he'd be sure to suggest it.

He smiled wistfully. He still wasn't entirely sure Jim's moving back to the guest cottage was a good thing, but Bruce had to admit that spending the last few evenings alone hadn't been anywhere near as difficult as his first night back at the manor had been.
Last night, he'd gone for a walk in the garden. By the time they'd restored it to some semblance of order, it had been far too late in the season to plant anything, but the mint and rhubarb planted in years past had survived, along with the bramble bushes and random pockets of pumpkins and onions. It had taken them all summer, but after spending most of the last two years indoors and virtually sedentary, it had been exactly what he'd needed.

On his way back, he'd seen a light on in the cottage and paused, unsure whether to continue on his way or look in on Jim. Eventually, Jim had come to the door and invited him in, but he'd been in a robe and slippers, and it had been obvious that he'd been planning to turn in.

Bruce shook his head. He'd been through this enough to recognize the signs. Every so often, he pushed himself too hard, too far, and for too long, and had to deal with the consequences. A broken spirit, a broken back, a city left to rot... each time, he'd needed to go somewhere to lick his wounds and take stock. At first, there would be exhaustion, self-loathing, perhaps even self-pity. The next stage would be a desire to simply... let it all go, decide that maybe the latest crisis should serve as a wake-up call, and that he should try to find something else to do with his life—while he still had one. Now, though, his inactivity was starting to chafe. He was bored, he was restless, he felt incomplete. And at the back of his mind, the Bat was waking up.

Only this time, it wasn't going to just be a matter of getting back up to peak physical performance. Thanks to Dick, he was nearly there already. Mentally, emotionally, it was a different story. He wanted to be Batman, but it was as though part of him had forgotten how. He'd often thought of Batman as his true persona and Bruce Wayne the mask. Somehow, it felt to him as if, over the last two and a half years, the two aspects had changed places—and he had no idea how to change them back.

"No disguise?" Jim asked, as Bruce took a set of car keys down from the hook.

Bruce shook his head. "We're just headed into Bristol town center, not Gotham. I don't think it's necessary. Besides," he added, thinking about what Krait had said two weeks earlier, "maybe it's time I started re-establishing some old acquaintances."

Jim tensed. "Oh?"

Bruce frowned. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"You understand," Jim said slowly, "I try not to confuse gossip with gospel. And when I do my grocery shopping, I usually drive into the city, where the prices aren't tantamount to legalized highway robbery. But sometimes, if I just need an item or two, I'll go here. And on occasion, I do overhear a certain amount of talk."

Bruce shrugged. "A level of cattiness is only to be expected in these circles. Most people around here have too much leisure time, so they spend it inventing ways to make themselves feel superior."

"I'm sorry," Jim retorted. "You must have me confused with someone who spent the last twenty years living under a rock. I know idle chatter when I hear it. I also have an ear for when people are just running their mouths for the pleasure of hearing themselves talk, and when there's more under the surface."

"And?"

Jim sighed. "You've been out for nearly six months, and in all that time, nobody has called to see how you are, to welcome you back, or even to try to sell you a box of Girl Scout cookies. You do..."
"I have been," Bruce admitted. "Be that as it may, I don't plan to spend the rest of my days holed up here, afraid to show my face in public. Sooner or later, I'm going to have to deal. It may as well be today."

The toddler section at Ferris Wheeler's was blessedly quiet. Bruce took his time. He'd been planning to purchase a few stuffed animals, educational toys, and perhaps a playhouse, but with eight aisles dedicated to the 12-to-24 month range alone, Bruce was finding it a daunting task. Was seven hundred dollars for a four-foot-tall Steiff bear money well spent on a quality product? Or was most of that price tag simply mark-up for a designer name? He remembered that, at her birthday party, Helena had been just as entertained by the boxes and wrapping paper as she had been by the gifts themselves. Possibly even more so. Five hundred for the "story book cottage" play house, two hundred fifty for the "country cottage" model; he frowned, trying to determine what—apart from color scheme—set the two apart. Maybe he could just buy out the store—or better yet, buy the store and bring Helena here to play.

"It is him, I tell you!"

"Shh! Don't let him hear!"

The voices quickly dropped lower, but Bruce still caught the words 'Arkham' and 'dangerous'. He looked around quickly, but the only two people within earshot were suddenly very preoccupied with a double slide and climber.

"I think Madison would adore this," the woman said loudly.

"I think I saw another one two aisles back," the man replied, speaking at the same volume, in exaggeratedly slow, clear tones. "Why don't we go look at it together?"

They moved off quickly. Bruce frowned and went back to the play sets, but from that moment on, he began to hear footsteps approaching and then retreating. He glanced at Jim.

"I did try to warn you," he replied.

Bruce shrugged. "I went through something similar after I was cleared of murder. It will pass. Do you think Helena would like this?" He indicated a stuffed giraffe activity center.

Gordon smiled. "I can't think why she wouldn't. She might not get much mileage out of the teethers, as such..."

"...But she still likes to put things in her mouth."

"That's true."

"Bruce?" A new voice exclaimed. "Is that you?"

Bruce spun about, a smile already forming on his lips. "Don? Good to see you. My G-d, how long has it been?" He and Donavan Andrews went back a long time. They'd attended the same boarding school, been invited to the same parties, and often found themselves seated at the same table. He absolutely should have called Don months earlier.

Andrews took a deep breath. "Not long enough," he said with uncharacteristic seriousness. "I... maybe I shouldn't have assumed, but I'd always been under the impression that we were friends."
"We were—are friends," Bruce said quickly. "Why would you think otherwise?"

"Oh, I don't know," Andrews said. The tips of his ears were turning bright pink. "Maybe I resent your using me as bait to catch a killer."

"What?"

"Three years ago," Andrews said, with a deep frown, "there was a murderer targeting the top execs at Powers Technology. Do you recall that? Or do they all blur into each other after awhile?"

"I re—"

"doesn't matter," Andrews cut him off. "What matters is that you set me up. You, Bruce. You talked me into making a very public appearance where, surprise, surprise, a lone gunman nearly took me out."

"But I saved—"

"Yeah, Bruce. Batman saved me." His ears were crimson and the flush was spreading to his cheeks even as Bruce watched. "But I guess you'll pardon my not falling over in gratitude, seeing as how he—you—practically painted a bulls-eye on my back and invited the guy over to take a pot-shot."

"It wasn't like that!"

"No?" He took a step closer. "Did you, or did you not, ask me to make that appearance hoping to flush the killer out?"

"I," Bruce looked down. He'd been on the alert from the start. Don had never been in any real danger. Unless the killer hadn't acted according to plan. Or unless some floozy had waylaid Bruce while he was slipping off to change into costume and he'd been a few seconds slower on the scene. Or unless the crowd had panicked and he hadn't been able to get through them to reach Donovan. "You're right," he admitted. "But I had my eye on you."

"I would've felt better if you'd had a police bodyguard around me." He turned around. "I'd say I'll see you around, but I don't plan to. Congratulations on your release." He strode off.

"Don..." Bruce called softly.

If the other man heard him, he kept right on walking.

Bruce covered his eyes with his hand. Then, abruptly, he grabbed one of the playhouses. He trotted to the next aisle and grabbed two stuffed animals off the shelf at random. He turned to Jim. "I'm done. Let's just pay and get out of here."

Alex listened closely, a pen poised between thumb and index finger, but he made no move to write anything down. When Bruce finished speaking, he set down the pen and steepled his fingers, tips facing across the desk. "I think a slap across the face would have been kinder," he said finally.

Bruce blinked. Then, slowly, he nodded and felt a wave of relief wash over him. He'd expected Alex to either ask him how the incident had made him feel, or to tell him what he 'must' have felt, as if everyone in the world would have the same reaction to the circumstances. "Perhaps," he allowed. "I'm not entirely sure he was wrong."

"Well, in his mind, he wasn't," Alex replied. He picked up the pen. "It's amazing how easy it is to
fall back into old habits," he said. "We've been working on your drive for control, on your readiness to take responsibility for virtually everything that can possibly go awry, and no sooner do you start to make real progress than something comes along that pushes you back a step."

Bruce jerked his head up. "Are you saying that you think I was right to put a civilian in harm's way?"

"Did you?" Alex countered. "Or was he already a target?"

"I don't know for certain," Bruce said. "If he wasn't, then I ensured that he became one." He shook his head. "Look. I appreciate what you're trying to do, but from my perspective, allowing myself the luxury of excuses could lead me to a point where I would start to see collateral losses as... acceptable." He took a deep breath. "My choice to operate outside the law led me to adopt more... stringencies, not less. At times, the temptation to cross the line, to become that which I fought against, became almost overwhelming."

"You hone your reflexes, but you don't give them free reign."

"Yes. Exactly."

Alex smiled sadly. "While I can definitely understand your rationale, I hope that you, in turn, can understand that holding yourself personally accountable for the fate of every casualty on your... watch is just as flawed a belief as one which posits that nobody becomes a victim without doing something to deserve their fate."

Bruce half-rose from his chair, his mouth open to deliver a blistering retort.

"To my thinking," Alex continued, "the truth usually lies between two extremes."

Bruce sank back down, his jaw still working furiously. Finally, he relaxed. "Let's accept for the moment that you could be right," he rapped out. "How am I supposed to know when I'm being too... hard on myself, and when I'm letting myself off too easily?"

"With your permission," Alex said hesitantly, "if you'd like to explore that, I can start by presenting a few scenarios that we can look at together. Eventually, you may feel comfortable bringing up some personal examples for exploration, or you might choose to take the tools we're going to be working with in session and apply them on your own."

Bruce frowned. "What are you implying, Doctor?" His jaw clenched. "If you think that I'm planning to violate the terms of my release by—"

Alex shook his head. "No, Bruce, I trust you. You know yourself better than anyone. If you feel you have done something or are doing something that could potentially put your freedom and our relationship in jeopardy, then I trust you to talk it over with me first so I can help. If I find out on my own after the fact, legally and ethically my hands will be tied."

Bruce nodded, but inwardly he was seething. He was trying to play by the rules set forth by the court. As much as he loathed adhering to other people's rules, he was trying. And now, to get a lecture like this from Alex...! As much as he considered the psychiatrist to be a friend, every so often it became clear that he wasn't.

"Bruce?" Alex asked, drawing his eyebrows together in a worried frown.

Bruce blinked. "Nothing."
Alex was looking sceptical, damn him. Well, what the hell was he supposed to say, now? *I thought we were friends?* Pathetic. If he didn't come up with something fast, Alex was probably going to suspect that Bruce was already putting his freedom 'at risk'. His mind worked quickly. Well, there was something he'd wanted to know for some time now, but he'd been hesitant to ask. In point of fact, he wasn't sure whether he'd accept an answer other than the one he wanted to hear. If he wasn't prepared for a real answer, he probably shouldn't even broach the subject, but he was curious as to how Alex would react. More to the point, this particular question appeared to display just enough vulnerability to justify his seeming reticence. He took a deep breath. "Suppose," he said slowly, "that you... that we... succeed. We eliminate my issues with control, vanquish my inner demons, and determine that these sessions are... no longer warranted. What then? Will I still... will I want to be Batman?"

"Will you?" Alex countered. "I can't answer that."

Except that he just had, hadn't he? Bruce fought to suppress the smile he felt forming on his lips, in case he'd misunderstood. "Then it is possible for me to be, for want of a better word, 'cured', and still be..."

Alex chuckled. "Are you asking me whether a person has to be, if you'll pardon me, in need of therapy to wear a costume? Forgive me, Bruce, but don't you think that your firsthand experience might make you a better judge than I on that one?" His lips twitched. "Or are you saying that the rest of the JLA should be engaging my services?"

Bruce let the smile break free. "Touché," he acknowledged. "Touché."

"By the way," Alex continued, "you know I'm supposed to check up on your home situation, as well. I understand that Bryan Krait is visiting you this week. Would you prefer that I tag along, or would you rather that we set up a different time?"

Bruce considered. He wasn't thrilled about having to deal with both Alex and Krait at once—though, on the whole, if he had to deal with either, he would have preferred Alex. On the other hand, he knew that both of them were going to be putting his home situation under a microscope, even if they might try to pretend otherwise. Best to get both visits over at once. "You're welcome to come, if you like," Bruce feigned nonchalance. It was getting easier. "I don't mind."

"Okay," Dick said, looking at Bruce and Cass. "Tonight, we're going to start looking at explosives; how to handle them, when to use them, and—if we get that far this session, how to defuse them. If it's stuff you already know, take it as a refresher. If it's new, pay attention." He stopped, disbelief bringing a frown to his features. Was somebody... humming? "Cass?"

She looked up, startled. "Sorry."

Dick nodded. "Okay. Bruce," he caught himself. He was sounding too much like a drill sergeant, and it felt disrespectful, even if Bruce was taking it. "I know that a few years back, you started adding C-4 to your utility belt arsenal. Since it's something Cass is probably going to have to carry on her one of these days, how about a quick rundown of why you chose that substance over, say, nitroglycerine or TNT?"

Bruce smiled. "First and foremost, C-4 is stable. I could drop it from a rooftop, fall on it, or carry it past a microwave motion detector. It cannot be detonated by fire or gunshot—in fact, I could use it as a heating fuel in an emergency—although not in close quarters; the fumes are toxic."

Dick nodded. "Okay. Anything else?"
Bruce nodded. "It's malleable. It can be pressed into gaps and crevices, or used to fill a designated blasting case. Furthermore—"

Dick held up his hand. "Hang on a second, Bruce. Cass, you're not paying attention."


He thought he recognized it too. It was old. Something about it made him think of a rainy day at the manor. Bruce had been busy, he’d been bored, and Alfred... Alfred had played some records—cast albums of shows in which he’d performed, in his younger days. He cocked his head. "When did you hear 'Show Me'?"

Cass beamed. "Sunday. They showed the movie at Saint Swithins." Her grin grew wider. "Best song. Trying to remember words." Her face fell as she remembered the reason why she was here. "Sorry."

Bruce, however, nodded. "I believe that there should be a recording of the soundtrack in the attic, packed away with the rest of Alfred's belongings."

Cass' eyes grew wide. "You have it? So... after this, we can look?"

"Um, Cass," Dick cut in. "I don't know if that's such a good—"

"It's alright," Bruce interrupted. "We’ll need to sort through it eventually." To Cass, he said, "Not tonight, but soon."

She eyed him for a moment. Then, "Bruce, if you want to keep... I-I can buy another. It's okay."

Bruce took a deep breath. "Actually, Cassandra, I think that if Alfred was here today, and if he'd overheard this conversation, you would have found the recording waiting for you when you came upstairs. I'm not likely to listen to it. I think he would have been pleased at your interest."

Dick exhaled. "Okay. Getting back to business, Cass. What can you tell me about C-4, either from your own experience or from what Bruce was just saying?"

The lesson lasted nearly an hour and a half. Then Cass left to patrol and Bruce moved to the trapeze ladder. Dick followed.

"Listo?" he called.

Bruce nodded.

"Hep!"

Bruce leaped from the platform and swung forward. As he sailed, he brought his legs up, hooked them over the bar, and released his grip so that he hung upside down.

Dick reached for his arms, bracing himself for the extra weight. "Gotcha!" he exclaimed, as they swung across. On the return, Dick swung him forward and let go. Bruce twisted in mid-air and caught the fly-bar. They’d been doing this for a few weeks now. "Ready for something new?"

Bruce flipped onto the board. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Okay. We're going to try a heels-off." It was a fairly straightforward move. "What I want you to do when your feet leave the board is, at the end of the first swing, bring your knees up between your
arms. At the same time, rest your heels on the bar, keep your hips up and your body compact. You should be facing your board. Look for me. And when I call the hep, I want you to cut loose with everything you've got. Basically explode out to the catch. Got it?"

Bruce nodded.

The first time, he left the bar too soon. The second, he waited an instant longer than he should have. The third time, he felt Dick's hands lock onto his forearms and they flew forward once more.

"Gotcha!"

Bruce almost laughed at the sheer exhilaration. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to keep doing this until he knew he had the move down, or if it was simply that he was having fun. He just knew that he didn't want to stop.

After a half hour, though, Dick called a halt. "You need to get some rest, and so do I."

Bruce was about to protest. Then he remembered. He was picking up Helena in the morning, and Krait was coming in the afternoon. He sighed.

"I'll try to stop by before patrol, tomorrow night."

Bruce nodded.

Dick hesitated. "Um... you remember when you decided to tell Selina who you were, and I suggested you shave first, and you ignored me?"

"I know," Bruce said, fighting a wave of irritation. He didn't need anyone telling him what to do—not even Dick.

"I know you know. Just... listen, if Krait is going to show up tomorrow looking for a reason to fail you, I don't want him to find one."

Bruce rolled his eyes. "I'll shave immediately after lunch. Will that satisfy you?"

Dick grinned. As Bruce turned to go upstairs, though, his smile faded.

"I could have brought her to the manor," Selina protested when Bruce arrived at her apartment early the next morning.

"I know," Bruce said lightly, "but I wanted to give the cleaning staff a chance to get things organized."

"Oh? Did you throw a party last night and forget to invite me?"

A few years ago, asking that question in that tone might have earned her a social smile and a too-hearty laugh. Now, the smile was more wistful, and the laughter non-existent, but there was a glimmer in his blue eyes that had never been present with the foppish persona. Bruce shook his head. "Never that. I'm... expecting company later."

Selina frowned. "Look, if I'm asking you to take her at a bad time, all you have to do is say so. I can make other arrange—"

"No," Bruce said shortly. "It's fine." And they should be back at the manor well before Jim came
over at nine.

"Okay," Selina said dubiously. "If you're sure. If you have any problems, any questions, Barbara will know how to reach me. The pediatrician's phone number is in the front pocket of the diaper bag. Um..." She tried to think if there was something she was leaving out.

"Daddy!" Helena darted past her mother and wrapped her arms around Bruce's shins.

Selina laughed. "Looks like somebody warmed up to you in a hurry!"

Bruce smiled down at his daughter. "Well, hello there," he said softly. For a moment, his face looked almost boyish. When he looked up at Selina, his expression didn't dim. "I think we'll be fine," he said firmly.

"Oh, I know you will be. But try to stay in touch." She leaned forward and kissed him. "I'm going to be thinking about both of you."

"Looks like you could have saved yourself some shopping," Jim rumbled, as he watched Helena bouncing gleefully up and down on the old wooden rocking horse. "Usually, the old standbys are best."

Bruce shrugged, not really caring. "If she gets bored with it, at least there are alternatives," he remarked, as he pried the lid off of the drum of alphabet blocks.

Helena slid off the horse and toddled over to investigate. Obviously, she knew about blocks. With a glad cry, she pushed the drum over, pouring a good part of the contents onto the floor with a muted crash. She picked up a block in each hand and clapped them together, smiling at the sound.

Bruce lowered himself to the ground. "Here," he said with a smile. "Let me show you what you can do with these." Carefully he began stacking them, one on top of the other. When he had a column five high, Helena reached out and knocked it over with a laugh. Bruce smiled. "Well, yes," he said. "A narrow column is easy to topple. But if you start with a base," he arranged four cubes on the floor in a square and set a fifth one atop them in the center, "and then build it up in a pyramid," he widened the base and second layer, "then it becomes more..." As he began a third layer, Helena, giggling, sent the new structure flying.

Bruce cocked his head to one side. "Have you ever wanted to operate a wrecking crane?" he asked.

Helena giggled again. Then she started pushing the blocks back toward Bruce. Once she'd finished, she sat back and waited, jiggling a bit in place.

"What's this?" Bruce asked. "You want me to build you another tower?"

She nodded.

"Are you going to let it stand or knock it over?"

She nodded again.

Bruce smiled wearily. "We shall see."

This time, she waited until he was halfway through the third layer before she toppled it. Again, she sat back and waited for him to start building.

After the pattern had repeated itself a few more times, Jim cleared his throat. "I really hate to spoil
your fun, but you asked me to let you know when it was time for lunch."

Helena looked up sharply. "Lunch?"

Bruce nodded. "Are you hungry? Then let's put these away, and we can go eat." He started packing the blocks back into the drum. After a moment, Helena decided that she liked the new game and began to fling them in willy-nilly. Bruce smiled tolerantly. He could always arrange them more neatly later.

"I never knew you had an artistic side," Jim remarked, as he looked over Bruce's shoulder.

"I'm not sure I did either," Bruce replied as he carefully arranged the cooked spinach at the top edge of the plate. Two small spoonfuls of black beans were arranged below it with a carrot stick between them. A chickpea smile completed the food face.

The timer sounded and Jim moved over toward the stove. "I'll drain the macaroni and make the cheese sauce. Wait for it to cool off before you let her have any."

Bruce nodded and carried the plate over to the high chair. Helena took one look at the plate and broke into a broad smile. Then, a swipe of her hand sent the beans and chickpeas rolling. She grabbed a chickpea, and gleefully popped it into her mouth. Then she reached for the carrot.

Bruce's lips twitched. It appeared that the child development website had known what it was talking about when it had suggested this.

After lunch, Bruce settled Helena in the nursery crib for a nap. He remembered to turn on the baby monitor before he left the room and closed the door behind him. Then he returned to the kitchen to have a meal that wouldn't be interrupted by dropped cutlery and impromptu finger-painting with vanilla pudding. ("No wonder she appreciated your 'plate art'," had been Jim's amused comment. "Takes an artist to recognize one.")

Bruce wasn't sure about that. He was realizing, however, that looking after a toddler was a full-time job. He hadn't had a moment to himself from the time that he'd picked her up from Selina until now. He sank down into the kitchen chair with a sigh.

Jim smiled. "You really don't have a lot of experience with toddlers, do you?" he asked.

Bruce spooned some macaroni onto his plate. It was stone-cold, but he didn't care. "I suppose you do?" he asked wearily.

Jim shook his head. "Not much, I'll admit. Then again, I'm not the one who needs it." He reached out and squeezed Bruce's arm. Bruce looked up, startled. Jim smiled again. "Believe it or not, you're doing fine.

Bruce took a forkful of pasta, chewed and swallowed. "If she were a little more articulate..."

"...Had a longer attention span, didn't need diapers, could play quietly without supervision... But then," Jim continued, "she wouldn't be a toddler. And you'd be missing out on a lot."

"I know," Bruce admitted. "Had Selina introduced her to me a decade from now, I'd be sorry at not having been there for these milestones. Still. This isn't exactly something I've gone through with the others." He sighed. "I'm not complaining."
"You could have fooled me."

Bruce shook his head. "No. I'm really not complaining. I'm just..."

"Scared out of your mind that you're going to mess up?"

To his credit, Bruce managed to avoid choking on his milk. "I'd hoped it wasn't that obvious."

"It wasn't," Jim assured him. "I'm just damned if I can think of any decent father who hasn't had the same concern. I didn't really think you'd be an exception."

Bruce smiled ruefully. "It would have been nice," he sighed. "And please, don't tell me it just proves I'm human."

"It doesn't. I'd lay odds that, on this particular issue, metas are in the same boat. And," he reiterated, "you're doing fine."

"Thanks." He finished the macaroni. "I'd better shave. Then, I think I'm going to lie down for an hour or so until Alex and Krait get here."

Jim nodded. "The nursery monitor is..."

"...on the counter. I'll remember to take it with me and set it up in my room."

He didn't realize he'd fallen asleep until a loud crash jolted him awake. Startled, he leaped from the bed. It took him a moment to realize that the sound had come from the baby monitor on the night table. "Helena?" He said. There was no response. "Helena!" She'd been fine when he'd put her into the crib. Heart pounding, he nearly flung open his bedroom door.

Jim met him at the top of the stairs. "What in the...?"

Bruce didn't slow. "Nursery!" he called behind him. It took Jim a moment to unlatch the child safety gate and follow.

As Bruce rounded the corner of the hallway, he could see that the door was opened wider than he'd left it. "Hel..." Bruce's voice trailed away. The nursery looked like Red Tornado had paid a visit. The alphabet blocks were strewn across the carpet, along with every single picture book. There wasn't a toy left on the shelves. A child-sized stool lay on its side. The crib was empty. Helena was gone.

"You left the door open?" Jim said softly behind him.

Bruce froze. "Only a crack," he admitted. "I can't believe she got out of the crib on her own."

"Oh, really?" Jim asked. "Her mother's a cat burglar, her father rappels down skyscrapers for fun, and you're shocked she managed to scale an obstacle less than three feet high?"

"According to the child-development website, she shouldn't have been able to climb out for another three months!"

"And I don't suppose you were reading on a first-grade level until you got to first grade?" Seeing the look on Bruce's face, he relented. "If you just heard her a minute ago, she can't have gone far. We know she's on this floor because the safety gate was still latched—and don't worry, I closed it behind me. How many rooms are on this floor?"

Bruce thought for a moment. "Sixteen that would be accessible. I keep the doors to the east and west
"wings locked."

"That helps. Alright. This hallway runs the full perimeter of the bedrooms. You go left, I'll go right, and we'll meet in the middle."

Bruce took a deep breath. Then he went off in the direction Jim had indicated. As he strode away, he was mentally cataloguing potential hazards. Most of the rooms on this floor were spare bedrooms. She could catch her fingers in dresser drawers. Cedar closets might be airtight. Or she could pull down the old clothing hanging in them and be buried beneath them... His heart lurched. _Camphor!_ Those old clothes were preserved in mothballs. If she were to bite into...

He stopped, noticing a slight bulge behind one of the heavy window drapes. "Helena?"

There was a muffled giggle.

Relief washed over him like a cool wave. He strode over to the window and pushed away the drapery.

Two wide blue eyes peered up at him. "Daddy!" Helena exclaimed flinging her arms around his shin.

Bruce exhaled. "I have her," he called to Jim as the doorbell rang. _And not a moment too soon_, he added mentally, as he scooped up his daughter and headed downstairs to admit his visitors.

"Let's start with the bedrooms and work our way down," Krait remarked, once the meaningless pleasantries were out of the way. He sent a friendly wave in Helena's direction. Helena beamed. _Traitor_, Bruce thought, with some amusement. Actually, it probably wouldn't hurt matters any if Helena did manage to charm the other man.

"Where does this lead?" Krait asked, stopping before the forbidding oak door. "East wing," Bruce replied shortly. "It's not currently in use."

Krait nodded and walked on. Bruce was about to follow suit when Alex stopped him. "Would it be alright if I had a look?" He asked. Bruce shrugged and turned the brass key in the lock. The door opened with a faint creak. Once past, Alex ran a finger absently along a bit of moulding that ran the length of the hallway. It came away clean. After a cursory inspection, he turned back the way they'd come, Bruce close behind.

As they entered the nursery, Bruce's face fell. Jim was still straightening up, but the room wasn't anywhere near as tidy as it had been that morning.

Helena struggled to get down, her arms extended toward the rocking horse. "Want!" she declared imperiously. "Want!"

"You can put her down," Krait smiled, as he ran his hand approvingly along a foam-padded table edge. "Let her play if she wants to."

"She was before," Bruce said cautiously, lowering her to the ground. "That's why some of the toys are..."

"The window is clean, the carpet was recently vacuumed, and the room has been aired not very long ago," Krait interrupted. "Children play. Toys get used. Messes happen. What's in the next room?"
Bruce felt himself relax. "Just a spare bedroom. I'll show you."

"Oh, if you're not using it, there's no need," Krait said. "But if you could show me your bedroom, and," he coughed, "I'll need to use your bathroom, as well."

*And inspect it too, no doubt,* Bruce thought acidly. It was a good thing he'd been using an electric shaver for years—he didn't know what Krait would infer if he found a razor blade. "Of course," he said mildly. "Coming, Doctor?"

Alex waved him off. "You go on," he said. "I'd like to have a few words with Mr. Gordon, first.

"Is there a reason why the nursery is so far from your bedroom?" Krait asked Bruce led him down the hallway.

Bruce frowned. "It's always been like that," he said slowly. "If I had to venture a guess, children don't always play quietly. One of my forbears may have enjoyed sleeping late."

"Mmmm. So, you've just kept the nursery where it's always been."

Bruce shrugged. "Until now, it's never been an issue. My sons were scarcely babies when I adopted them." Of course, had the nursery been closer to his bedroom, he might have got there before Helena had started exploring.

Krait nodded and jotted something down in his notebook. Bruce clenched his jaw, wishing he knew what it was.

The social worker made no further comment until they opened the door to Bruce's bedroom. "I'd thought that the master bedroom would be down at the end of the hall," he said then, with some surprise.

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "I'm the master of the house, and this is my bedroom," he stated with forced innocence. Seeing Krait's expression, he sighed. "I've slept in this room since I was a child. What you would consider the master bedroom belonged to my parents."

Krait nodded and made another notation. "Are there any other rooms you spend a lot of time in on this level?"

"Not enough time to be worth mentioning," Bruce replied.

"I see. Well, then," he said brightly, "I believe we're done upstairs. If you don't mind, I'd like to see your living room, next."

*And if I do?* Bruce bit back the question and ushered Krait downstairs.

"Well," Krait said nearly an hour later, "in most areas, I'd have to say I'm pleasantly surprised." He took a sip of coffee and moved one of the biscuits from the central plate onto his own.

Bruce smiled and raised his own cup. Alex did the same.

"I do have one concern, though," Krait continued.

"Oh?"

Krait's expression grew serious. "You realize that my visits here are meant to determine that you're
able to live and function adequately on your own. Delegating your household chores to a cleaning staff would seem to defeat the purpose."

Bruce frowned. "I would have thought," he looked at Alex, "that the two of you might have compared notes enough to realize that it was a reluctance to delegate and a tendency to take too much onto my own shoulders that contributed to the circumstances leading to my initial commitment."

"And when we arrived today, it was Mr. Gordon who was straightening up."

Bruce took a deep breath and willed himself to remain calm. "Immediately prior to your arrival, I discovered the state of the nursery. When the doorbell rang, I went to let you in. He opted to tidy the room."

"Nevertheless, I think you might be letting things go to the other extreme. If your staff quit en masse tomorrow, would you be able to maintain this place?"

"It depends on what you mean by 'maintain'," Bruce shot back. "I can't keep one hundred and forty-seven rooms immaculate on a daily basis. I..." I doubt even Alfred managed that. Not that I would have noticed if he hadn't, as long as my work area in the cave was kept clean, and my meals were ready when I wanted them."

Krait nodded at that. "By all means, allow the staff to deal with the rooms you aren't using frequently. However, as far as your sleeping quarters, the kitchen, the living room, the nursery, and whichever bathrooms you're currently using, you need to demonstrate to my satisfaction that you can maintain your principal living space." He met Bruce's glower impassively. "Prove that you can do this, and, once I've completed my report, you can go back to the way things are now."

Bruce clenched his jaw to still an angry retort. "Would there be anything else?" he asked with forced calm. He was acutely aware of Helena observing from her high chair. Even if she couldn't understand what was going on, he knew that she would be able to pick up on the tone and volume of his voice.

"Not from me," Krait said. "Alex?"

"Well," Alex said slowly, "while the two of you were down here, I looked around briefly upstairs. I'm concerned that you seem to be maintaining two... shrines in the bedrooms closest to your own..."

"I'm guessing that my telling you that he didn't have much choice won't help," Jim said after Alex and Krait had gone.

Bruce looked up stonily for an instant, before he lowered his gaze once more. He was seething. The fact that Jim was right had no bearing on his emotional state. All this time, all these months, he'd considered Krait to be the bigger thorn in his side, but he'd been wrong! Krait, at least, had been upfront about where he'd be nosing around. Oh, he'd known that Alex was entitled to inspect the premises, but he'd thought that it was to make sure that he wasn't stockpiling old newspapers or drowning his troubles in 150-year-old scotch! He'd never dreamed that Alex would take issue with those bedrooms! If he had...

You'd have what? Told him to ship you back to Arkham? Agreed to be monitored for the rest of your natural life?

He was letting his thoughts run away from him. Doubtless, the consequences of non-compliance wouldn't be anywhere near that drastic.
"...Failure to comply with any of the directives of your therapist or failure to comply with the orders of the court, you will be returned to inpatient care immediately."

Any of the directives. He groaned inwardly. This wasn't going to stop. If he was going to get through this without cutting and running, he had to put up with this. He looked up again. Jim was watching him carefully. His expression was concerned, but it held none of the fear or pity that Bruce had been dreading.

"He caught you off-guard, didn't he?" Jim said.

"I should have anticipated something like this," Bruce replied softly. "He didn't come to pay a social call."

"But you've been so used to those rooms being left intact that it never even occurred to you that anyone would take issue with them."

Bruce nodded. "Did you?"

"Not for Alfred's room," Jim replied. "I don't think you ever really had a chance to work through your grief on that one, what with everything else that was happening at the time. Your parents' room, on the other hand... well, I didn't think it was my place to say anything." He leaned forward. "Not to you, and not to Dr. Morgenstern—I want you to be clear on that. But it did bother me."

Bruce nodded again. "At first," he said haltingly, "when I was still trying to come to terms with the shooting, I used to go in there because with so much of... them... remaining there, it was easier for me to imagine that they were just away on an extended trip. Later on, when my memories of them began to fade, going into the room helped me recall their faces." He looked away. "It's not that I've set foot in there more than a handful of times since I came back. It's just—reassuring—to know that the room is there if I need it to be."

"I understand." He smiled sadly. "There are boxes of memories from my first marriage sitting under the stairs in my house in Tricorner. I haven't looked at them in years, but can't stand to throw them away."

"Yes, but you haven't been ordered to clear them out."

"True."

Bruce got up from the table, released Helena from the high chair and walked toward the back door, carrying her. "I'll be back shortly."

Jim nodded, hoping that Bruce would be back before he had to go looking for him. It had been only two weeks ago that Alex had agreed that Bruce could go one hour between checks. Jim just wasn't sure if that would be long enough today.

They returned nearly forty-five minutes later. Helena was holding a scarlet oak leaf in both hands, examining it with interest. Bruce was still holding her, but he seemed more relaxed. "I've been thinking," he said.

"Oh?" Then, more seriously, "don't let her put that in her mouth."

"I'm watching," Bruce said. He took a deep breath. "If Helena is going to be visiting more often, it makes sense for the nursery to be closer to my room. Particularly in light of what happened earlier. With different furniture and carpets... and perhaps, some new wallpaper, Alfred's room will be hardly recognizable."
Jim looked at him searchingly for a moment. Then, without a word, he got up and placed his hand on Bruce's shoulder.

Bruce closed his eyes and exhaled slowly, feeling some of his tension drain away as he did.

"She's mobile now, isn't she?" Barbara asked, the following morning. "My place isn't exactly childproof."

"I was reading that a playpen can be used until a child is two. Helena is only nineteen months."

Barbara sighed. "Do you even have a playpen? I mean one of the modern ones—not the one you had when you were a kid. Child safety's come a long way since then." She shook her head. "That's not really the issue, though. Bruce, it's one thing to leave a small child in a playpen if you're in the room, watching; or even if you're coming in periodically to check on her. But it's not fair to keep her in one for hours at a stretch. My workspace right now isn't as extensive as it used to be at the Clocktower. I'm trying to think of where there might be room to put one of those, and the fact is, a lot of my machinery is pretty delicate. If she starts throwing toys and one of them connects—"

"From what I was reading," Bruce said, "she shouldn't start throwing overhand for another few months."

"Yeah, but from what you've told me before, physically, she's ahead of the curve. Remember a few weeks ago when she climbed onto that bench by herself? That's something she's not supposed to be able to do until twenty-one months. Those guidelines are... guidelines. Not laws set in stone." She sighed. "Once they can get out of a crib, a playpen is no big deal, and from the sound of it, she might be ready to do that any day."

Bruce shifted guiltily in his seat.

"She did already?" Barbara demanded. "Forget the playpen."

She sighed again. "As much as I wish I could take myself offline this morning and help you out," she continued, "the Birds just landed in Tasmania a couple of hours ago—they're going to be checking in and needing me to run intel very soon. The League has been," she hesitated, "requesting my services a lot more often since you and Superman have been absent. And when they do need me, it's usually pretty urgent." She shook her head. "Bruce, your daughter is adorable, and I love her, but if you need me to babysit, I need someone else here—either to keep an eye on my systems and alert me if things start to head south, or to keep an eye on her while I'm working—which would kind of defeat the purpose." She smiled brightly. "How about Thursday night, if the team isn't back by then? It's Dick's night off, and as far as I know, we haven't made any plans, yet. If he's okay with it...?"

Bruce sighed. "I really wanted to get out today. I'll need to try to make other arrangements. Thanks, Barbara." He frowned. "Barbara? Why hasn't Superman rejoined the League?"

She blinked. "You mean you don't know? I guess, when it happened, it was during your first year in Arkham. And afterwards, we were all used to it, so it didn't feel like news." She winced. "Sorry for babbling. It's a good thing that you're already sitting down..."

"Was that fair?" Jim asked as got into the passenger seat.

Bruce's eyebrows shot up. "Tim said to call if there was anything he could do to help. I called."

"And you think he meant babysitting?"
"He meant help. I asked him to help." He turned guileless blue eyes toward Jim. "It's actually getting easier to do that each time. I think I'm making real progress."

"If you weren't smirking right now, I'd almost believe you," Jim retorted.

Bruce smiled at that. Then the smile dimmed. "Did you know about Superman?" he asked quietly.

Jim shook his head. "Not as such, no. I mean," he shrugged, "I don't really keep track of 'cape' sightings outside of Gotham. When someone like Superman saves the world, our local papers report it. If he gets a cat out of a tree, not so much. His not making headlines could mean anything from 'off in space' to 'not doing anything newsworthy' to 'vanished', but I don't spend my time trying to figure out which one."

Bruce nodded. "I haven't had contact with the rest of the League since this all started," he said, as he started the car. "Understandable, really; in times past, I'd made it clear that they were to stay out of Gotham. It's not surprising that most would continue to respect that."

"But not him?" Jim guessed.

Bruce took a deep breath. "The last time Superman and I spoke, we said," he broke off. "I said," he amended, "some things that I later regretted. Things that I thought might have been sufficient cause for him to choose to avoid me from that point onward. And maybe my words did have that effect, but maybe..."

Jim waited for Bruce to finish. When no further elaboration was forthcoming, he continued, "Maybe he had enough things going on in his own life that whatever argument the two of you had didn't remotely factor into anything."

Bruce sighed. "I think we can agree that I don't like to leave myself vulnerable. When he didn't contact me, I concluded that either he was still... hurt, by what transpired shortly before my arrest, or that he was uncomfortable with talking to me because of my arrest—or more to the point, where I ended up subsequently."

"Like those whispering idiots in Ferris Wheeler's the other day."

Bruce glanced at him sharply, and then back to the road. "With one difference," he said. "Those were idiots. Yes, they were irritating, but I wasn't expecting anything better of them, to be honest. With Superman..."

"Part of you wanted to make the first move, part of you thought he should, and part of you was getting annoyed that he wasn't?" Jim smiled. "Doesn't that just make you nostalgic for No Man's Land?"

Bruce actually laughed at that. "Point taken. I'll give him a call this week. But first, let's deal with the remodelling. If memory serves, there's a hardware big-box at one end of the Midtown Mall?"

Jim nodded. "Great selection, but they seemed a bit understaffed the last time I was inside. You may need to hunt down an employee."

"I think I'm up for that," Bruce said lightly as he made the turn onto the Aparo Expressway.

"How about balloons?" Jim turned to the next swatch in the book of wallpaper samples.

Bruce nodded. "It has possibilities. I just don't want something she'll think is too babyish in a few
Jim sighed. "Bruce, you could wallpaper the room with movie stars and sport heroes, and I can just about guarantee you that when she's seven or eight, she'll think that they're too juvenile. It's not that balloons are babyish; it's that she'll have had balloons on her wall since she was a baby." He turned the page. "How about zoo animals?"

Bruce shook his head. "Selina would kill both of us."

"Oh, right. Wildlife conservation. I forgot she was into that, too." His lips twitched. "Juggling tigers?"


"Introducing culture at a young age, are we?" Jim chuckled.

"Well," Bruce admitted, "it can't hurt." He paused for a beat. "It's not like I'm going to be piping Mozart into the nursery twenty-four seven, or having her fluent in four languages before her third birthday. But if it's a choice between letting her possibly learn a little bit about a classic ballet through osmosis, or giving her juggling tigers, I'd rather it be ballet."

"Totally understandable." He smiled, but the smile quickly turned to a grimace. "I think we may be in for some rain," he muttered. "My leg just started acting up." He waved off Bruce's gestures of assistance. "I'll be fine—I just need to rest for a couple of minutes." He took a few short steps to the nearest wall and leaned against it. "You go look for a salesperson... sales associate... whatever the term is, these days. I'll wait here and make sure nobody walks off with the sample book."

Bruce nodded and trotted off. Jim settled back to wait.

A few moments later, he realized that three men were walking purposefully toward him. The one in the middle was easily six-foot-six, if not taller, large-boned, and heavy-set. The man on his left was a head shorter, with a wiry build and an aura about him that warned people not to mess with him. The third man was an inch or two shorter than Jim, wearing a loose overcoat over a beefy frame.

"Excuse me," the man in the middle said pleasantly. "Aren't you James Gordon?"


"Actually, yeah," the man replied. "Our boss is a big admirer of yours. He'd really like for you to pay him a visit. Matter of fact, we'd be happy to escort you to him right now."

Jim's eyes flicked quickly left and right. There was no sign of Bruce. In fact, there was nobody else in sight. Jim licked his dry lips. He didn't like the look of this. "Actually," he said calmly, "I'm meeting someone here in a minute. Maybe some other time."

That was when he felt something small and hard poking him just below his ribcage. He didn't have to look to realize that the wiry man had to be carrying a revolver under his jacket—and was currently menacing him with it.

"Oh, we insist," the largest man said, draping what looked like a friendly arm around Jim's shoulders and steering him toward the exit. Simultaneously, the third man came up on Jim's other side, sandwiching the former commissioner between them.

"Now don't try anything stupid," the wiry man said, as he followed a half-pace behind.
Chapter 19—No Choice

Not for the first time, Bruce wished he'd come into the store in a $2000 suit, exuding money and charm. As much as he hated being fawned over by obsequious sales clerks when he wanted to browse, when the time came to actually conclude the sale, he'd always known he could look up to find one hovering at hand. You decided to put on the army fatigues, this time out. Nobody else suggested it to you. Maybe, he thought grimly as he trotted up and down the aisles, somebody should have. He might even have listened. Spying a manned service desk, he quickened his pace. "Hi," he said. "I'm looking for some help in wallpaper."

The man behind the counter smiled apologetically. "Sorry, this is flooring. I'll have to page someone."
Bruce sighed inwardly as the clerk picked up the phone and made the announcement. "Should I wait here?"

The man shook his head. "No, they'll meet up with you in wallpaper. Anything else I can help with today, sir?"

"I guess not." He turned on his heel and headed back the way he'd come.

From some distance away, he could see that Jim had apparently run into some old friends. There were three men clustered around him, apparently happy to see him. He frowned. Something about their body language rang false. Trouble. Even as the thought crystallized, he saw Jim head off with the other men toward the exit without so much as a backward glance. Now Bruce knew something was wrong. Jim wouldn't leave without him. And one of the men... the way he kept his hand in his jacket pocket... gun.

Bruce assessed the situation automatically. As far as he knew, Jim wasn't wearing any sort of tracer. He reached into his pocket for his cell phone. Barbara could... Barbara would be hard-put to track a car if it didn't have a GPS transponder. Running plates would only tell her who the vehicle's owner was, not where to find the car. Besides, if he called her, there was every chance that he would be distracted long enough to lose sight of his quarry. And if she knew that he was following, she'd try to talk him out of it. Or, he smiled faintly, since it was her father, she might actually encourage him. His jaw set. Jim was in trouble, and he was the closest help available. He couldn't allow himself to be deterred and he didn't need a pep talk. He took his hand out of his pocket and made his way carefully to the parking lot.

Tailing the other car was proving to be a challenge. It wasn't that the car was hard to follow, but doing so without the driver being aware of him was trickier. So far, his knowledge of the city was working in his favor. He was sticking mostly to parallel streets and making educated guesses as to where the other car might turn off. Once they got out of Midtown, however, he was going to have to risk moving behind them. The other vehicle was headed directly for Old Gotham, a maze of dead ends, twisting side streets, and signs prohibiting left or right turns. If he lost them there, he'd never locate them again.

Despite the gravity of the situation, as the last red vestiges of sunset gave way to a November evening, Bruce felt a smile form on his lips. It had been far too long since he had last sat behind the wheel of a car, speeding into the night in response to a crisis. And as much as he tried to focus on the car and remind himself that this was anything but a game, he couldn't quite keep himself from feeling a small surge of excitement as a long-buried part of him woke up with a start.

The two men on either side of him started involuntarily when his cell-phone went off. In retrospect, keeping the 'Bad boys' ring-tone might not have been the best idea. He turned to the captor with the handgun. "Mind if I get that?" He asked calmly. "It's probably my daughter. She'll worry."

"No funny business," the thug warned. "Or..."

"You'll put a bullet in me that, depending on your ammo, will likely nail your friend on my left, too." He hit the 'speak' button before he had the phone out of his pocket. "Got it."

The thug on the left froze for a moment. Then, angrily "Put it down, you moron! He's right!"

"Daddy?" Barbara asked in some confusion, "is everything okay?"
Gordon thought fast. He had to communicate his circumstances quickly, and in a way that his captors probably wouldn't pick up. "Same-old, same-old," he said heartily. "Now to what, pray tell, do I owe the honor?"

Barbara paused for a moment. Then, cautiously, "I didn't mean to catch you at a bad time. Are you... alone?"

Damn. Was she asking if Bruce was with him, or if people were listening in? Bruce. The very fact that he was resorting to oblique phrasing was enough to tell her he wasn't alone. "I was until I ran into some friends." The thug on the left nudged him and made a 'hurry up' gesture. "I'll call you later. Don't wait," he paused for a fraction of a second longer than he had to, "up." He ended the call before she had a chance to say good-bye. I just hope your hi-tech tracking doohickeys let you get a fix on that call, Babs. These people mean trouble. Send your team in. Don't wait.

At Delphi, Oracle fixed her attention on the small dot on the computer map, moving toward Old Gotham at twenty-five miles per hour. "Maybe I can't tell the Birds of Prey, Daddy," she said softly, "but there are a few other winged creatures I can call..."

Tim held his nose as he gingerly dropped a soiled diaper into the attendant bucket. It wasn't exactly a pleasant task, but if you considered that a night's work in Gotham might include anything from a dip in the Finger River to wading through several miles of raw sewage while chasing down Killer Croc or the Rat King, changing one dirty diaper barely warranted an entry on the grossness scale.

Pinning on a fresh one, however, was proving to be far more challenging. Why couldn't Selina have gone for Pampers like anyone else? There was such a thing as being too environmentally conscious!

Yeah, and it's called Poison Ivy on the warpath. This is easier to deal with.

Or was it? On any given night, he could probably take down Ivy. He wasn't so sure about pinning the diaper. And Helena was growing restless. He could hear the phone ringing from the table in the outside hallway. He ignored it. Then his cell went off. "Oh man!" He pulled the phone out one-handed and looked at the caller ID display. "Oracle, this is kind of a bad time," he said hurriedly.

"Can't help that," she said, almost as quickly. "My father's in trouble and Dick's not currently reachable."

Tim reached down and scooped up Helena as her bare feet touched the carpet, depositing her back on the bed. "Better give me the details," he said, "but unless you know where I can leave Helena, the best I can do is pass the word on to the Titans."

Barbara sighed. "I'm feeding you co-ordinates now. I don't suppose Rose could look after her? She has experience." She took a deep breath. "I'd really like you on this one."

"As soon as Bruce comes in, I'll..." Tim stopped. "Bruce was with your dad."

"Yes."

"Is he still?"

"Not according to Daddy."

Tim hesitated. "You think he's gone after him."
"Do you think he didn't?" Barbara suddenly sounded tired. "Look. If Cass had better detective skills, I'd be briefing her, but she doesn't, and it could be my father's life at stake, and I hate being stuck here trying to arrange things while wondering why the hell Bruce hasn't called in and—hold on!"

"Huh?" A giggle brought his attention back to his surroundings. "Helena!" He wedged the phone between his cheek and shoulder as he dashed for the door. Helena, naked from the waist down, scampered into the hallway. "Get back here!"

He sprinted after her, caught her at safety gate at the top of the stairs, and hauled her unceremoniously back to the bedroom. "Stay!" He ordered. Then he winced. *Going to tell her to sit up and beg, next? It's a good thing neither of her parents just heard you.*

Oracle came back on the line. "You're off the hook. Dick just called in; he's on it."

"Good." Then, "If you want me out there, and you can get over here..."

"Trying to distract me?" The smile in her voice sounded forced. "No. I need to stay on top of this. If we're wrong and Bruce does come back, call me."

"Will do. Um... Babs? Do you know how to pin a cloth diaper?"

Bruce stole cautiously around the perimeter of the lot, keeping as much to the shadows as possible. He noted the two guards at the main gate. There didn't seem to be any others. The eight-foot high chain-link fence didn't appear to be electrified, but climbing wasn't an option. Not when those eight feet were capped by an additional twelve rows of barbed razor wire at two inch intervals. There had to be another way inside.

A moment later, he smiled and went back to where he'd parked his car. So it wasn't titanium alloy, he thought, as he opened the trunk and flipped open the lid of his emergency roadside kit. A grappling hook at the end of a seventy-five foot nylon tow rope would still do in a pinch. He'd learned early in his career that little things—such as carrying longer-than-standard cables, brighter flares, and deluxe first aid kits—could make a huge difference, should he find himself in an emergency situation and cut off from his 'professional' equipment. Those lessons were coming into play now. Bruce slipped the loose coils around his arm and made his way back to tall oak tree with low-hanging branches. It was a good thing that it was already dark, he thought wryly. His army jacket and camouflage pants would have stood out starkly against bare trees and dead leaves. At night, it was a different story.

It didn't take him long to reach the higher branches and then to crawl out onto a broad limb that extended several feet over the adjacent lot. From his vantage point, he had an unobstructed view of the rear of the unfinished high-rise—little more than iron girders and safety rails after the first three stories. The area appeared to be deserted. Didn't they have any backup at all? Someone was extremely overconfident, extremely short-sighted... or extremely mistrustful. Bruce smiled. He could use this.

He slid the coil off his arm. He didn't have a launcher. He'd have to compensate for that. He paused. Barbara had to be frantic by now. Well, with any luck, in a matter of minutes...

*And without any luck, did anybody have a clue where to find them?*

He could do this. There was no need to involve anyone else. Who needed backup?

*Anyone who wasn't overconfident, short-sighted, mistrustful...*

Bruce closed his eyes. Then, he took a deep breath and pulled out his cell phone. "Barbara. I can't
talk long, in case this signal is being traced. Your father—"

"I know," Barbara cut him off. "I... I'm glad you're on this. Dick is still about forty minutes from your position. There's nobody closer."

Bruce nodded. "Understood." That made it easier. Once inside, he wasn't going to blow anybody else's cover. As long as he had her on the line. "Do you have intel?"

"Just on the current owner of the building."

As she spoke the name, Bruce's jaw hardened. "That clarifies more than it doesn't."

"Bruce?"

Don't ask me if I'm sure I'm up for this. Don't give me a reason to doubt. I've had too many of those, and I have to banish them all or I am going to fail.

She must have intuited some of what was going through his mind, for all she said was, "Good luck." Then the line disconnected.

Bruce nodded, a slight smile on his face. Then he took several coils of slack rope in his left hand and the end, with the grappling hook attached, in his right. He whirled the hook as he would a lariat, faster and faster, feeding it more slack, waiting for the right moment to make the cast. When the moment came, it came with the clarity of a thunderclap. The hook soared, straight and true, to loop around a third-story girder. He tugged it taut.

Listo? He seemed to hear Dick's call. Bruce smiled.

Yes. I'm ready.

Hep!

And for the first time in nearly two and a half years, he sailed through the night sky.

Eddie took up his post next to the book case by the door. Someone had told him once that undercover work was 99 per cent boredom and one per cent adrenaline, and whichever one you had, you wished it was the other. So far, he was waiting for the adrenaline. Actually, he was longing for it. All Penguin seemed to want him to do was stand in a corner and look dangerous. For the past few nights, he'd stood in corners of the Iceberg Lounge and looked dangerous when it seemed that a brawl might break out. He'd stood in corners and looked dangerous when the bartender was informing some low-rent mobster—the kind that they'd have normally left for the police to deal with as a goodwill gesture—that she was cutting him off for the evening. Now he was standing in a corner and looking dangerous while a never-ending line of humanity shuffled past him to approach the imposing pedestal desk.

Some carried attaché cases, others small velvet pouches or bulging manila envelopes. Some came empty-handed, asking for favors or investment capital. Most were middle-aged men with flannel shirts hanging over worn jeans, or suits that had seen better years. He'd seen two women, one clearly terrified to be there, the other moving with the sinewy grace and serene confidence of an experienced fighter. Some of the others in the room had leered openly at the first woman, but not the second.

Penguin was sitting next to him in a padded armchair. At first glance, it appeared that he had scant interest in the proceedings, as he focused his attention on the table before him. Seven rows of seven overlapping playing cards were arrayed face-up. To the left of the piles, three jacks lay in a vertical
line. His eyes, however, darted periodically up from the solitaire game to lock with those of the clerk behind the pedestal desk. A slight smile, a faint frown, the shake of his head, the maneuvering of his monocle... Each gesture conveyed to the clerk whether to grant a loan or extend the repayment time on an existing one. They signalled whether a payoff was in keeping with the agreed-upon terms, or whether someone was attempting to short him—and what consequences would be exacted in that case.

Meanwhile, Eddie was discovering that his armor hadn't been designed to be worn sixteen hours per day. He was sure that he was getting blisters from the metal boots. He guessed that his discomfort was helping him to stay awake, but it was hard to concentrate on anything beyond how heavy the suit felt, and how much his feet ached, and the fact that he couldn't scratch an itch—and now, he couldn't stop thinking about that itch, no matter how hard he tried!

He wondered where Megan was. She'd said that she was going to try doing her own sleuthing while he was busy here. He envied her.

Finally, Penguin smothered a yawn. The clerk behind the desk nodded. "That's it for today, people. Those of you who have debts to settle, please note that the terms of your contract state that all payments are due by seven p.m. It is now seven-thirty. We will accept your contributions tomorrow, along with the fifteen per cent surcharge for delinquency."

There were moans of protest. "We've been standing here for six hours, man! Cut us some slack!"

"Sorry, folks, but if you're going to leave things 'til the last minute, it's a risk you take. We'll be open again tomorrow at noon."

The protests grew louder. The clerk nodded in Eddie's direction. "Devilbane, if you please..."

Eddie wasn't sure what he was supposed to do, but he squared his shoulders and took a step forward, trying to think menacing thoughts. The protests died down to angry mutters as the people nervously stepped back.

"See you tomorrow," the clerk repeated. "Come early."

After they left, Cobblepot took a linen handkerchief from his breast pocket and mopped his brow theatrically. "Well. That was invigorating," he said, with a supercilious smile. "In fact, between that excitement and the thrill of my game," he pointed to the solitaire setup, "I think I'm going to head off into the lounge for some refreshment." He looked at Eddie. "I don't suppose you're familiar with Penguin solitaire?" he demanded.

Eddie shook his head. "It looks a little like Freecell," he said hesitantly.

Penguin sniffed. "Freecell is entertaining enough for the masses," he said, "but those of some degree of breeding prefer something with a bit more challenge. Aha!" He quickly moved his remaining cards to the foundation piles. Did you see that?"

"Yes, sir," Eddie said. "But I'm not sure how you did it."

Penguin inspected his monocle. "Be in my office in thirty minutes and we'll see whether you're capable of grasping the fundamentals. For now, the lounge awaits me."

Eddie sighed. He was tired of standing up and he didn't think he'd be able to rise again, once he sat down. There were chairs in the office, however. And Penguin hadn't told him he couldn't get there early. He headed off in that direction. After spending the day on his feet, he had to have earned a chance to sit down by now!
As he pulled open the door to Penguin's office, he stopped short. Someone was in there ahead of him, and from the way he was rifling through the contents of the desk drawers, it didn't look like he was there on sanctioned business. "Wh-what are you doing in here?"

Bruce moved carefully down the stairs, making as little noise as possible. The stairwell wasn't particularly clean or well-lit. He held the small flashlight before him with one hand as he brushed the stucco walls with the other.

He wasn't at all sure that he was going in the right direction. The upper levels probably weren't safe for anyone—construction had been stalled since Cataclysm. Nobody had done any work on the site in ages. Still, if the kidnappers were looking for a place to keep Jim, it might make sense to use an area that wasn't so easy to walk away from—particularly if the person behind this was short on manpower.

Bruce shook his head slightly. If the man whom Barbara had mentioned was behind the abduction, there was no way he'd be risking his own neck up on the girders. And he wouldn't want to miss a chance to gloat, either. No, wherever Jim was, it would be someplace comparatively safe. Bruce was sure of it.

It occurred to him that his life seemed to be coming full circle again. He'd started his career in this same get-up, feigning a confidence he nearly felt, sure of his training, but not entirely certain what he was doing with it. He hadn't had much of a plan then, either—just an ideal. *Fight injustice.* He had to smile. Had he ever been that... *young*? Well, this time, he had something a bit less abstract: *Save Jim.* But much like that first time, tonight he didn't have much of a plan beyond accomplishing his goal.

He reached the bottom step and pushed open the stairwell door cautiously. He looked to his right. The corridor was clear. He peered around the door.

"Hey! How did you get in?"

Bruce darted back into the stairwell. The door slammed shut behind him as he dashed up the stairs. If he could make it to the landing before the thug came in after him, that would give him some cover and the few crucial seconds he needed to plan his next move. If he could find something to which he could anchor his grapnel, a tripwire might be just the tick-

"Hold it." The voice came from the flight of stairs above.

Bruce looked up... and into the barrel of a gun aimed directly at his forehead. His eyes traveled past the gun to a face he hadn't seen in nearly six years—but one he had no difficulty recognizing. He froze for a moment, calculating his options, before he grudgingly raised his hands. Behind him, he heard the door open again and hurried footfalls drew closer.

"Oh," came the voice he'd heard a moment earlier. "I didn't realize you had things under control, Mr. Flass."

Arnold John Flass smiled grimly. "Well, now you do." He took two steps closer. His gun didn't waver.

"You!" he barked at Bruce. "Turn around and follow my... associate. And keep your hands where I can see them."

Bruce obeyed with a mental sigh. *Come to think of it, that first night out had been a disaster, too...*
The man looked up, startled. "I," then he seemed to make up his mind. "The hell with it." All at once, a gun seemed to materialize in his hand. "Keep your mouth shut and come over here."

"Dude!" Eddie was too incredulous to be scared. "I'm wearing armor. Besides, you fire that thing, you'll have a whole lot more of us in here before you can turn around." He was gratified to see the intruder's expression fall. "How many shots do you have in that thing anyway?"

The intruder didn't answer.

"What were you looking for in here?"

That was when the parrot-handled umbrella in the corner said, "Relax, both of you. You're... we're... on the same side." An instant later, the umbrella vanished and Ms. Martian stood in its place. "Kid Devil, this is Detective Jonathan Lonerghan, the person I was telling you about before."

Lonerghan blinked. "You're one of the Teen Titans, aren't you?"


Lonerghan glanced from the umbrella to Eddie. Then he nodded and moved toward the door Eddie had come through. "Excuse me."

Eddie moved aside. "I thought your telepathy wasn't working," he thought at Ms. Martian.

"Mostly, it isn't. But there are a few spots where the defenses are weaker. This corner is one of them. Do you suppose Penguin might employ telepaths to listen in on his meetings?"

The door to the lounge opened, and Penguin walked in, interrupting the silent conversation. "So, my little solitaire game intrigued you, did it?"

Bruce grunted as Flass drove a fist into his abdomen. Even though he'd tensed his muscles in preparation for the blow, the punch hurt. He didn't have much opportunity to roll with it—not while Flass's henchman held his arms twisted behind his back. He noted clinically, however, that Flass was holding back from doing any real harm. He seemed more focused on inflicting pain than on causing damage.

"Who are you?"

Bruce raised his head, gave Flass a withering look, and turned away.

Flass took a swing at Bruce's jaw. Bruce lowered his head quickly and the blow glanced off his forehead instead.

"Going by the jacket, you're a sergeant—or you were. Me too. Except I was in the Green Berets, while you probably had some cushy desk job, right?"

Bruce ignored him.

"Hey! I'm asking you a question, goldbricker!"

Silence.

"What's your name?" When Bruce failed to reply a third time, Flass laughed nastily. "Oh, come on,
goldbricker! You know you're allowed to give out name, rank, and serial number."

Bruce slowly lifted his head and spat full in Flass's face.

Flass reached into his pocket for a tissue and calmly wiped it off. "Now that," he said softly, "was a big mistake." He pulled out his gun. Instead of aiming it, however, he held it by the barrel and whipped the handle toward Bruce's temple.

Bruce lowered his head, barely managing to dodge the blow as he stamped down hard on his captor's instep. The thug howled and Bruce felt the grip on his arms suddenly loosen. He sprang free and threw himself quickly to one side, just as the gun handle hit the other man in the throat. The thug fell back with a gasp.

"Idiot!" Flass exclaimed, turning once more toward Bruce.

Bruce didn't hesitate. Lunging forward, he seized hold of Flass's gun and wrenched it away with his left hand as he brought the heel of his other hand down on the bridge of Flass's nose, angling carefully to avoid a killing blow. He paused for the barest second before switching the gun to his dominant hand, and delivering a hard kick to Flass' knee.

Flass reeled back with a howl. Bruce pressed his advantage, striking Flass across the face with the butt of the gun. Flass's eyes rolled back in his head and then closed.

The scuff of a rubber shoe on the floor behind him was all the warning Bruce needed. He spun and greeted his former captor by ramming the side of his hand into the thug's throat. As the man reeled back, choking, Bruce punched him in the stomach. Then, for good measure, he took the man by both shoulders and swung him into the wall head-first with a satisfying thud. The thug slumped, unconscious. Bruce took a moment to frisk him and relieve him of his firearm. He quickly unloaded both weapons and shoved the ammunition into his jacket pocket. Much as he loathed the idea of carrying the guns with him, he wasn't about to leave them for the two men to use when they recovered.

Jim took in his surroundings for the fiftieth time. It wasn't hard. The room he was in was completely empty, apart from a thick coating of dust. He was leaning against the wall next to the door, only because he knew that if he sat on the floor, he was going to need help to get back up. He didn't intend to ask his abductors for any assistance, if he could manage it.

The bastards had taken away his cane before shoving him in here. Without it, he could still walk, but he wouldn't get far. They had his cell phone, too.

The door handle turned. Jim flattened himself against the wall. He didn't really think that he'd be able to fight his way out, but he had a bad feeling about the situation. The people who had taken him hadn't worn masks; they hadn't blindfolded him; and when Barbara had called, they hadn't taken away the phone and told her to expect ransom demands—all of which implied that his abductors had no intention of letting him get away alive. Jim set his jaw firmly. If it was his time to go, he was going out swinging.

The door opened. Jim tensed, ready to spring, until he saw who it was.

Bruce had an arm out, ready to check anyone planning to jump him from behind. When he whirled
about and saw Jim, his features relaxed in a smile. "I figured you might be planning something like that. Let's get out of here."

"They took my cane."

Bruce frowned. "Can you move on your own? Or do you need..."

"You'd better," Jim sighed. "My dignity's endured worse."

Bruce nodded. Without another word, he lifted Jim up and slung him over his shoulder. "Reinforcements are coming, but might be delayed."

"I wouldn't wait."

"Agreed."

Bruce didn't say anything further until they'd made it up the stairs to the first floor. Then, "We're going out the side door, but the only way off the property is through the main gate. We'll never make it together."

"Fine. Take care of the guards. I'll wait here."

Bruce nodded. "If anything happens, take advantage of the distraction and get out." He pressed a key ring into Jim's hand. "I parked the car two blocks west on Morales. If you get there before I do, don't wait."

"I won't leave y—"

Bruce's expression turned stony. "Yes. You will. They're not getting both of us."

Jim glowered back, but he swallowed whatever retort he'd been about to make.

At first, Jim thought that they might have a chance. There were only the two guards outside. Armed or unarmed, Bruce ought to be more than a match for them. Then he heard a startled grunt, the impact of metal on flesh and bone, and an all-too-familiar voice saying, "Looks like you're not the only one who can play 'possum, goldbricker." Then, "Wait a minute. Don't I know...?"

Jim's heart lurched as he heard Flass's next words.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the man I've most wanted to kill after old Jimbo. Gentlemen, take the Bat inside. And make sure he doesn't go anywhere for awhile."
Chapter Summary

Bruce is in a bind and Jim runs into problems getting help! It's time for quick blows and straight talk.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Juliet for the beta. Thanks to the Little_Details community on Livejournal for escapology tips.


Every now and then I get a little lost
My strings all get tangled, my wires all get crossed
Every now and then I'm right up on the edge
Dangling my toes out over the ledge
I just thank God you're here

'Cause when I'm a bullet shot out of a gun
'Cause when I'm a firecracker comin' undone
Or when I'm a fugitive ready to run, all wild-eyed and crazy
No matter where my reckless soul takes me
Baby you save me

-Brett James, Troy Verges, "You Save Me"

Chapter 20—Tangled Strings and Crossed Wires

Consciousness returned slowly. Bruce realized that he was lying on his stomach with his hands bound behind his back. He was in his stocking feet—they seemed to be resting on someone's lap, as a cord wound tightly about his ankles. His head hurt.

"I don't get it," a voice spoke up from behind him.

Bruce felt someone—almost definitely the speaker—give the cord a final jerk before securing it.

"What don't you get, Shaughnessy? Frap his ankles, too." Bruce recognized that voice. Flas.

"If we're going to off him anyway, why not just do it?"

Bruce heard the click of a revolver being cocked.

"His ankles," Flas repeated. "And the answer's simple. I own this albatross of a building. And while
it could be months before anybody finds the body, if it turns up here—or if we move it and forensics finds something, the cops will start asking questions. I'm not going back to Blackgate because they found one of his hairs stuck in the mud on the bottom of my shoe! Now, put the gun down and finish up. We'll wait until around two, three in the morning, when there aren't so many cars on the road. Then we shove him into the trunk of the Olds. You and Macklin are going to drive out to the Scott Creek Bridge. Cooper and I'll follow in the Chevy. We shoot him at the bridge and toss him over. Then we head along the coast road until we hit those cliffs near where the Gotham River meets the Atlantic. Shove the Olds into the drink and we all drive back in the Chevy."

Bruce felt the cords dig deeper around his ankles as Shaughnessy looped a second rope around the bindings. "I guess," Shaughnessy said dubiously, "But why not just drive to the cliffs, shoot him there, and leave him in the car when we send it over? I mean, if anyone's coming over the bridge, we might have some serious explaining to do."

"I think our guest's waking up," Flass smirked. "And you're right, Shaughnessy. That makes even more sense. But for reasons best-known to the Bat, and to myself, the Scott Creek's much more appropriate." He snapped his fingers obnoxiously a scant inch from Bruce's eye. "Ain't that right, Goldbricker?"

Bruce kept his eyes shut, pretending that he was still out. He felt a light pressure on his cheek, followed by a soft twang and a stinging sensation. Blearily, he opened his eyes.

"Aw, did I interrupt your beauty sleep, Bat?"

Another twang. Another sting. His fake scar. Flass was pressing the bottom end of it against his cheek, stretching it taut, and letting go.

"It came off in the scuffle, Bat," Flass said softly. "I had my suspicions before, but that clinched it." He pulled the scar away, rose to his feet and flung the piece of rubber on the floor, directly in front of Bruce.

Bruce glowered as Flass moved behind him to examine the cords. "This is good," Flass said, sounding pleased. "This is very good. It just needs a couple of extra touches."

All at once, Bruce felt a sharp jerk as Flass tugged at the frap cord on his ankles. It was complemented almost immediately by a similar tug at his wrists as Flass knotted the two cords together, effectively hogtying him. More footsteps, and Flass stood before him once more, holding another length of cord. "This," he said with relish as he fashioned a slipknot noose at one end, "is just in case you have any ideas about escaping." He placed the noose around Bruce's neck and moved behind him once more. "I'm going to tie the other end of this to your ankles. If you don't struggle, you'll be fine. If you do..." Flass chuckled unpleasantly. "Well, don't. Despite what you might have overheard, I'm not that disturbed at the thought of you dying here. This is an abandoned site. Doesn't get a lot of visitors, and I mean to be long gone by the time any turn up. There we go," he patted the back of Bruce's head as he walked back. "All secured. We'll be getting this show on the road in about six hours, give or take, so you've got plenty of time to reflect. See you in a bit."

With that, he and Shaughnessy exited, pulling the door closed behind them.

Bruce watched them go, his eyes blazing with fury. Then he gripped the cord connecting wrists to ankles, reeled his feet in closer, and set to work on the knots. The noose didn't worry him nearly as much as the thought of losing circulation in his hands. He was going to have to work quickly, but calmly, to get out of this one.
Jim waited until the yard was deserted before making his move. The idea of leaving Bruce behind didn't sit well with him, but the order had been clear. He sighed. There wasn't much room for debate. If he went back inside, he'd likely succeed only in getting himself recaptured, rendering the entire rescue attempt pointless. He had to get out of here, call the police and...

No. If the police found Bruce here, it could lead to questions about the circumstances. It would have been one thing, had their positions been reversed. If Bruce had been the one abducted, and Jim had been the one to follow the thugs to their destination, it wouldn't have been a problem. But he couldn't be sure whether Bruce's rescue attempt could be counted as vigilante activity, and he wasn't going to be responsible for Bruce going back to Arkham. Not a second time. Not for something like this. He had to reach Barbara.

Resolutely, he pulled himself up and forced himself to walk to the gate as quickly as he could. The guards hadn't returned yet, but they might at any moment. He nearly stumbled over a heavy tree branch. About to step over it, Jim suddenly had a better idea. As he stooped to pick it up, he realized that it was a bit longer than his usual cane, but it would serve the same purpose. He continued walking, more steadily than before. He felt a quick surge of triumph as he stepped off the property, but he knew he wasn't home-free yet. The street was deserted. No witnesses if his captors came after him, and he was too visible out here. He slipped his hand into his pocket, feeling the reassuring shape of the key chain. Bruce had parked the car two blocks away, he'd said. He could manage two blocks.

Raucous cheers startled him as an open convertible barrelled down the road. His first thought was that there seemed to be far more people in it than the manufacturer had intended.

"Take that, ya bum!"

Something hurtled into his shin and sent him falling heavily to the sidewalk. Liquid trickled out of the missile, wetting his pant-leg. A familiar smell rose up from the puddle forming on the pavement. Beer. They'd chucked a beer bottle at him.

"You got him, Darren! But watch this!" One of the men—boys, really—stood up in the back seat and drew back his arm to throw another bottle as the car drove past.

That was when the drunken yells turned to screams, as an inky shadow slammed heavily onto the hood of the car.

"Hey! Get off! I can't see where we're going! We're—"

Batman braced his boots on the hood, seized hold of one of the two youths in the passenger seat and yanked him forward, half over the windshield. "Drunk, and no seatbelt?" He asked in disbelief. "You're even a bigger idiot than I thought." With that, he shoved the young man partway into the back seat. His friends pulled him further to safety. The second youth paled, opened the passenger door and rolled to the pavement. He lay on the ground, groaning for a few seconds. Then he staggered to his feet and ran without a backward glance. A moment later, Batman occupied his seat. "Pull over," he told the driver. "Now!"

Jim watched as the car squealed to a stop and Batman hauled the protesting passengers out of the vehicle.

"Aw, man! We were just having a little fun!" The driver was the last one out. Batman turned to him with a cold glare.

"Then I hope you find breathalyser tests and paying a visit to the GCPD lockup entertaining," he
said, spinning the driver around and locking zip-ties on his wrists. The others were already similarly restrained. There were eight altogether.

"Come on," one of them protested. "I didn't throw any bottle. It was Darren!" He jerked his head toward one of the others.

Batman advanced a step toward Darren. "Is that true?"

The youth's face blanched. "Ohgodohgod, don't hurt me. I didn't mean..."

Batman paused for a moment, considering. Then he steered Darren over to a nearby streetlamp and pushed him down. He approached a second youth. "You. You were about to throw the other one," he snarled. "Get over here!" He placed him against the same streetlamp, his back to Darren's and used two more zip-ties to bind them together at their upper arms.

He reached into the front of the car and pulled the keys from the ignition. "I don't think any of you are fit to drive, and I have business elsewhere. So. I presume that at least one of you has a cell and enough money to pay for a taxi?" He did a mental head-count. "Or two?"

The young men looked at each other. They nodded nervously. "Yeah. Yeah, man, we got it," one of them mumbled.

"Okay. That's how you're getting home tonight. The car's likely to be impounded, but you'll have the keys back in the morning. I wouldn't stick around here much longer. When the police show up, they're bound to start asking questions. And I definitely wouldn't get any ideas in my head about cutting your friends loose. Clear enough?"

There were muttered 'yeah's. "Wait, man." It was the driver. "How do you know where I live?"

Batman's expression grew positively murderous. "I know. Stay under your legal drinking limit before you get behind the wheel again." His voice dropped to a low growl. "Think of your health and wellbeing."

The driver gulped and tore off down the sidewalk. The others followed suit.

Dick turned to Jim. "You okay?"

"Yes, but they have Bruce."

"Think he can get out of it on his own?"

Jim knew why he was asking. "In a word," he shook his head, "no."

Dick nodded. "Alright. I'm going in, then. Um... Are you..."

"The car's parked on Morales. I have the keys. Unfortunately, my night vision isn't what it once was. I'm not going to be able to drive."

"Morales is only a block or so away," Dick remarked. "I'll walk you. You can bring me up to speed on the situation at the same time."

Jim nodded. "The man behind this is Lt. Flass, late of the GCPD, and probably the dirtiest cop I ever had the displeasure of meeting. He's had it in for both me and Batman for a very long time. And he knows who it is he's captured."

"Damn."
As Bruce painstakingly worked away at his bindings, his thoughts flew back to the last time he'd encountered Flass. It had been at the bridge, of course. For the second time, Flass had orchestrated the abduction of Gordon's son. The first time, he hadn't been the actual kidnapper, but he'd chosen the site and made the arrangements—as the man who'd actually committed the deed later confessed. The second time, though, Flass had taken a more hands-on approach. He'd gone clear to Chicago to steal the boy away... And he'd brought him to that same bridge. And both times, Batman had saved the boy and seen to it that Flass was apprehended. Yes, of course, Flass would want to take him to the Scott Creek Bridge. But Bruce didn't mean to wait around passively for that to happen.

He felt a surge of relief as the knot that connected his wrists to his ankles finally parted, and he felt the pressure on his quadriceps ease. Slowly, he started to lower his feet. Constriction at his throat made him freeze as he realized his mistake. You forgot about the noose, you idiot! His ankles were no longer bound to his wrists, but they were still connected to his neck! It was a good thing he hadn't just dropped his legs at once, or he'd be gasping out his last by now. As it was, despite his increased discomfort, he could still breathe freely.

Bruce willed himself to remain calm. He just had to get the other end of the noose-line untied. Just get that done, and the rest would be a cakewalk. Flass wouldn't have tied it directly to his ankles, but rather, over the frap-cord that was wrapped around the bindings. His fingers brushed the ropes, probing. Yes, there were two knots. And since the noose had been tied last, its knot should be the outermost. His fingers were growing stiff. Just get this one unfastened and then you can work on getting your hands in front of you. Then you can use your teeth. It's coming. Just a little bit more... more... He felt the cord slacken. Carefully, cautiously, he moved his head forward, prepared to freeze again at the first sign that the noose was tightening. It didn't tighten. Slowly, hardly daring to breathe, he straightened his legs, bringing his feet to the floor. He let out a long breath. He'd done it! He wasn't free, not yet, but he soon would be.

"What the hell?"

Flass. Damn it! Another five minutes and he would have had it!

The burly ex-cop took in the situation at a glance. "Shaughnessy, you idiot! Get in here! And get me a tarp!" He flipped Bruce heavily onto his back, so that he was lying on top of his numbed hands. An instant later, Flass was on top of him, pinning him down. "Shaughnessy!"

Bruce kicked upward, knowing that it was futile. He caught Flass in the side, but it was only a glancing blow. Flass seized hold of the free end of the noose. "Stop struggling or I end this right now!" He shouted.

Bruce froze. It wasn't over for him yet—but it would be if he didn't bide his time and wait for a better opportunity. Reluctantly, he complied. Approaching footsteps told him that Shaughnessy had returned.

"That's better," Flass snapped.

"Here's the tarp, boss," Shaughnessy announced.

"Wrap him up," Flass snapped. "Then toss him in the trunk. He can wait there until we're ready to leave."

The thug nodded grimly. He walked toward Bruce, unfolding the heavy fabric as he advanced.

And then, Dick was there. No. Not Dick. _Batman_. Bruce hadn't even heard him enter, but suddenly
the air seemed to explode with a flurry of punches and high kicks. He'd seen Dick in action before, but never like this: no quips; no grandstanding; no flourishes—just fluid movement and white-hot determination. Flass and Shaughnessy never knew what hit them before they were both lying on the floor, out cold, with plastic zip-ties on their wrists and ankles.

And then, as quickly as Batman had burst onto the scene, he was gone, and it was Dick untying him, asking if he was alright. Just Dick, wearing the costume, acting a part—except at that moment, it hadn't been an act.

"Did you find Jim?" he asked, rubbing at his wrists to stimulate the circulation.

Dick nodded. "He's fine. I ran into a couple of other guys in the front. Took care of them, too. Are you okay?"

"Yes. See if you can find my shoes," he said. "And Jim's cane."

"Alright. You're..." He stopped. "If you say you're okay, you're okay. I'll be back in a few minutes. Hang in there."

It took closer to a half-hour for Dick to locate the items. By the time he returned, Bruce was nowhere to be found. And Shaughnessy was in his stocking feet.

Dick sighed. Then he headed back toward Morales Street. Best thing to do was probably to drive Jim back to the manor in the Batmobile. If the other car was still parked here when he got back, there'd be plenty of time to go looking for Bruce then.

"Somehow, I thought you might end up here," Dick said softly, several hours later.

Bruce didn't turn around. "I'm not planning to jump," he replied. He was sitting on a narrow spur that jutted outward from the base of the domed roof of Gotham Tower, his feet dangling one hundred twenty stories above street level.

Dick grinned. "I know that," he said. "I just wanted to make sure you were alright. I can go, if you —"

"Stay, if you like," Bruce cut him off. "I don't mind."

"Okay." He walked out along the next spur—there were a dozen of them radiating out from the top of the tower, like a spiked crown. "Best view in town," he grinned, taking a seat.

Bruce nodded. "I passed my final test here," he said. "The night before I put on the suit for the first time, I... walked out to the tip of this spur, cast my line—"

Behind the cowl, Dick's eyes widened. "From a standing position?" On a perch this narrow, with no safety net below... if there'd been a wind...if there had been a wet or slippery spot... "Whoa." He shivered—and not only because he could feel the cold concrete of the spur seeping through his insulated costume. "You warm enough up here?" He asked, as he reached for the cape fastenings.

"I'm fine." Bruce shook his head. "Keep it on." He grimaced. "I was younger then. More foolhardy than brave, I can see now. Still, taking that leap did manage to wipe away any vestigial fear of heights I might have still held. I looped the line around the neck of that gargoyle," he pointed to an office tower across the street, "and leaped to that ledge... there... detaching the line as I landed."

Dick blinked. "That one? It can't be more than thirty inches wide. I..." He could probably do it... if
he had to, but it wasn't exactly a stunt to pull for the fun of it. In fact, he would have bet money that
Bruce would have chewed him out unmercifully had he attempted it without a valid reason.

"Two feet," Bruce corrected. "It was reckless. I didn't see it that way at the time, though."

"Ah."

"After that," Bruce continued, "I often came up here when I wanted to think things through without
interference. Sometimes, even in the cave, that was... difficult."

Which, Dick reflected, was probably about as close as Bruce would ever come to criticizing Alfred's
penchant for dry sarcasm. "I understand," he said.

Silence. Then, softly, "Thanks."

For understanding? For... earlier? "Uh... You're welcome." It was the safest response.

Bruce smiled faintly. "I don't just mean for tonight, although that's part of it." The smile became a
grimace. "Alex wants me to work on expressing gratitude. It... it doesn't come as easily for me as it
should."

Dick's face suddenly felt warm. "Bruce, it's—"

"No. It's not alright," Bruce cut him off. "Thanks," he said again, this time in a voice that dripped
sarcasm. "That's something to say when the cashier hands you your change, or someone holds the
door open for you. In this case, it's... woefully inadequate."

"You don't have to say—"

"I've always told you that actions speak louder than words. That... that doesn't excuse not saying the
words in the first place." Bruce looked at him. "I was in over my head tonight. Maybe I could have
gotten out on my own—it's possible. But it was by no means a sure thing."

"I should have been there sooner," Dick protested. "Would have been, if I hadn't been coming from
Sommerset General. Lucius wanted me along to evaluate a medical research project for a possible
Wayne Foundation grant. The nickel tour and presentation ran long—we didn't leave until after
seven."

Moving north and east from Gotham, Sommerset was the next township after Bristol. It would have
taken Dick a half-hour just to get from the hospital to the bridge into Gotham. "And in a hospital,
your cell phone would have been off," Bruce nodded. He lifted his head and waited for Dick to meet
his eyes. He took a deep breath. "Thank you for saving my life. I don't just mean tonight. I... there is
no way that I would have survived the last two and a half years without your support. Jim's and
Barbara's as well—and I do mean to tell them as much later—but yours in particular. It couldn't have
been easy. In fact, we both know that there were times when I went out of my way to make it
difficult. I honestly don't know how the rest of you stuck it out. I'm not sure whether I could have."

He held up a hand as Dick opened his mouth to say something. Bruce wasn't the only one with something he'd been wanting to say for awhile. "Some of
us even love you." The words came out at a rush. "One of them's me." He grinned. "Deal."

He pulled a key ring out of his utility belt pouch and tossed it gently across the space between them. It landed on the spur, next to Bruce. "Car's where you left it. I'll call you tomorrow. Try to get streetside before you freak out some poor window washer." He pulled up to a handstand, flipped to his feet, turned, and cast his line—not around the gargoyle that Bruce had indicated before—but rather around one of the balusters of a nearby roof railing. A second later, he was gone in the night, leaving Bruce alone with his thoughts.

"You can go home, Tim," Gordon said for the fifth time. "I'll look after Helena."

"It's okay. I'll just wait until Bruce gets in." He gave an exasperated sigh. "It's been almost four hours since Dick called. Why isn't he home?"

Gordon got up and poured another two cups of coffee. "Here." He watched as Tim added two spoonfuls of sugar. "My guess is, he just needs some time alone—and he knows he won't have that walking in here. Now, until ten o'clock tomo..." he broke off. "Until ten o'clock *this* morning, he can be alone, if that's what he wants."

"What if he's not back by then?"

Jim sighed. "Then we start looking."

A key turned in the front door lock. Jim smiled. "Of course, that's moot, now."

A moment later, Bruce walked into the kitchen. "Hi," he said softly.

"Coffee's brewed if you want it," Jim said. "Pull up a chair."

Bruce sank down onto the kitchen chair with a sigh. "I'll pass on the coffee." He smothered a yawn. Turning to Tim, he asked, "Were you alright with Helena?"

Tim blinked. "Yeah, sure. She went to sleep around eight or so. You okay?"

Bruce actually seemed to be considering his response. "I don't know," he said finally, "but I think I might be getting there." His eyes narrowed. "Shouldn't you have gone home by now?"

"Um," Tim looked away. "Yeah, I guess so. I just wanted..." he hesitated. "Never mind."

Instead of the irritation that Tim had half been expecting, Bruce simply nodded. "You look exhausted. I... should have anticipated that." He smiled wearily. "You're welcome to take one of the spare rooms upstairs. Get some sleep. You can drive home in the morning."

"Good advice," Jim said dryly, as Tim rose to his feet. "About getting some sleep. Were you planning on taking it, too?"

Bruce smiled. "In a few minutes. There's just... something I need to do first. It won't take long."

It wasn't that Dick was exactly a light sleeper. He could doze off at a club with the music pulsating from a speaker two yards away—and had done so on more than one occasion. Certain sounds, however, could always rouse him: a door opening, the sound of his name, the sound of a gun going off—with or without a silencer—and, of course, the telephone. He'd turned off the ringer in the bedroom before turning in, but not the kitchen extension. Dick looked at the digital clock on the
night-table and groaned. It was slightly after four. Voicemail can answer that one. If I pick up, I'm not exactly going to be Mr. Friendly at this hour.

To his surprise, though, the ring cut off in mid-tone and he heard Barbara's voice carry indistinctly from down the hall. A moment later, the bedroom door opened. "Are you still up?"

Dick rubbed his eyes. "Yeah," he mumbled. She didn't sound tense enough for it to be an emergency. "Who's on the phone?"

"Bruce. He specifically told me not to wake you if you were asleep."

Dick reached for the phone. "Too late for that now. I got it." He lifted the receiver. "Hello?"

"I know it's late," Bruce said quietly, without preamble. "I won't keep you. I just... thought I should let you know that I made it home."

Dick blinked. "Good," he said, careful not to let his shock come through in his voice. "I'm glad. Are you alright?"

"Everyone keeps asking me that," Bruce said dryly. "And yes," a glint of humour stole into his voice, "I do understand that the reason likely has something to do with a certain point you brought up earlier. I'm fine. Or at least, I think I will be, after a hot shower and a few hours sleep."

"Sleep sounds good," Dick agreed. "Very good. See you later?"

"Later," Bruce agreed. "Good night."

"Night." Dick hung up the phone, smiling. Would wonders never cease...?

Dr. Arkham's door was open, but Cass rapped on the wall as usual.

"Come."

The voice sounded thin and wheezy, but there was something of the old authority in it. Cass obeyed, pushing the wheelchair forward with a smile. "Ready?"

Arkham nodded, waving her off when she came forward to assist him. "You... talk now?" She asked.

He froze for a moment and gave her a penetrating stare. Then, "Have we met outside this hos... hos...?" he began to cough violently."Puffer!" he gasped between coughs. "Nightstand. Puffer!"

Cass grabbed for it and pressed the device into his hand. He raised it toward his lips and pressed down, releasing a quick burst of medication. He didn't resist when Cass gently, as she'd been shown on her first day at Saint Swithen's, eased him into the wheelchair.

Arkham exhaled slowly. "When I try to talk, I cough," he said irritably.

"Oh. Then..." Don't try, she started to say, but then thought better of it. "Practice, but... slow." She reached into the pocket that hung from the wheelchair arm and pulled out the pad and pen that she knew he kept there. "Too much," she struggled to find the words to articulate what she was thinking, "and too little... both bad." She looked away, her cheeks burning. She sounded stupid, she knew. And she hated it.

She heard his pen scratching on the paper, and then the sound of a sheet being torn from the notepad.
"Cass."

She turned and took the page from him. He had printed the words in block capitals this time. As she read them, her eyes widened. She went over the letters again, even though she was sure that she knew what words they formed:

**I THINK THAT IF I TALK, IT WILL BE EASIER FOR YOU. YES?**

"Oh," she said softly, handing him back the sheet. "But... no. If it... hurts you..." Dick would have told her she was being... dip-lo-ma-tic, if he were here. She had read Arkham's body language a moment ago. He hadn't been hurt. He'd been scared.

In response, Arkham held the paper up, stabbing his finger beneath each word for emphasis.

"I..."

He indicated the 'yes' again, angrily.

"Yes," she admitted. "Easier. But..."

"No buts," he rasped. "They tell me that I need to," his breath caught and he reached, reflexively for the puffer. This time, though, the coughs didn't come, and he relaxed. "I need to practice talking," he continued. "Not much, to start with. A few minutes daily. And since you obviously find my," he coughed, "find my speech easier to grasp than my handwriting, I think that on the days that you come, I should—"

"But I..." She needed to practice her reading as badly as Arkham needed to work on his speech. But he wasn't here to help her. It was the other way around. "Alright," she said softly. "What... what did you want to talk about?"

Jeremiah Arkham fixed her with a penetrating gaze. "Perhaps, young woman," he rasped, "you might be able to explain why it is that I find you so familiar. I don't meet many young people. I should be able to place you, yet I cannot." He coughed again. "So, perhaps you can enlighten me. How do we know each other?"

Chapter End Notes

Note: The term 'frapping' refers to wrapping a second cord around the existing bindings, passing it between the wrists and/or ankles in order to make the bindings more secure.
21. No Good Deed

Chapter Summary

To rescue Jim, Bruce had to break a few rules. Now there are consequences that must be faced, but not everyone's willing to let him.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Juliet for the beta. Special thanks to Charlene Edwards, Hotspur, and Will44 for patiently answering my legal questions. Thanks to Sara for insight into mental health issues.

"No Good Deed" lyrics written by Stephen Schwartz. Performed by Idina Menzel on the Wicked soundtrack, Broadway Original Cast recording (Decca Broadway, 2003).

No good deed goes unpunished
All helpful urges should be circumvented
No good deed goes unpunished
Sure, I meant well -
Well, look at what well-meant did

-Stephen Schwartz, "No Good Deed"

Chapter 21—No Good Deed

Earlier

Jim hadn't expected Bruce to be up when he returned to the manor at eight that same morning, but Bruce was already awake and speaking on the telephone.

"So, that's it, then," he was saying. "Those are my options." Then, sharply, "you know better than that, Barbara. Do not, repeat, do not involve Waller in this. Not on either side."

Jim blinked. "Waller? Amanda Waller? What's going on?"

Bruce held up a hand. "Is Dick awake? No. Just wake him. Have him meet me in the cave. Let me tell him. Now, about Helena. Is there any way..." He smiled. "I appreciate that. Alright. Keep monitoring police band and GPS. Let me know if a squad car gets within five miles of here." He hung up the phone, walked over to the kitchen table, and slumped into a chair.

Jim drew closer. "Bruce? What's going on?"

Bruce sighed. "The others will be here shortly. I'm just going to wake Tim and look in on Helena." He smiled wearily. "I came to some conclusions last night. I'd hoped that they were flawed. They weren't. I'll explain downstairs."
"Bruce..."

He smiled again, more warmly this time. "If it helps, even knowing then what I do now, I think I'd still have done things more or less the same. Put another pot of coffee on? We'll need it."

Dick pulled into the cave and all but flew out of the car. Bruce moved to intercept and shoved a child's car seat at him. "Make sure you install it correctly," he demanded.

"What?" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cass kneeling on a blanket next to Helena. The tiny girl was happily lobbing beanbags into a nearby basket. Tim was seated before the security camera array, while Gordon occupied a swivel chair off to one side.

"If the police arrive, all of you get out. Seal the study access. And, Dick," he looked intently into the younger man's eyes, "I want you to take Helena with you in the car. I'm not going to have CPS involved in this. Barbara's looking into other arrangements until Selina comes back."

Dick accepted the seat, but made no move to put it in his car. "Police? CPS? Bruce... what's going on?"

For a moment, Bruce was silent. Then, "I want you to be clear on two things. First, you and I have both seen too many hostage situations that resulted in unnecessary casualties when SWAT team personnel turned trigger-happy. Second, SWAT wasn't on the scene last night. I was. I tailed Flass's people to their hideout, scoped out the grounds, took note of their defenses—all before I contacted Oracle for assistance." He closed his eyes. "In retrospect... my call should have been to 911."

Dick set the car seat down on the floor. "Oh... shit—but we don't... I mean, it's so not part of how we handle crises that—"

Bruce nodded. "The thought of calling didn't even occur to me until hours later." His lips twitched. "What did you think I was doing atop Gotham Tower, last night?" He asked. "Kicking myself because I let Flass get the drop on me?"

"Um..."

Bruce shook his head sadly. "I was trying to see if there was some angle I'd overlooked, some way in which my actions wouldn't be deemed a violation of the terms of my release."

"But the extenuating circumstances..."

"I thought about those. It's why I discussed this with Barbara before calling you all here. Perhaps if my case were less public," he sighed. "At best, I'm probably looking at thirty days in a private facility—if Rae can cut a deal. I'm fairly sure she can, though I wanted to get Barbara's thoughts before I brought her in. And... I thought you each deserved to know first."

"How about worst case?" Tim asked softly.

A shadow seemed to pass over Bruce's face. "Given that Arkham hasn't reopened yet," he said in a dull monotone, "Blackgate. Indefinitely."

"No." Dick's voice was barely louder than a whisper. "No," he continued, his voice gaining both volume and intensity. "We are not going through this again. You aren't doing this."

"If I don't, then Flass walks free."
"What?"

"You left him and his flunkies tied up for the police, but without someone coming forward to accuse him of a crime, they have to release him no more than forty-eight hours after taking him into custody. The only reason they haven't let him go yet, is because they know that you wouldn't have taken him out without a reason." Bruce clenched his fist. "Flass knew he had me last night. The terms of my probation are public knowledge. If Jim's the only one who comes forward, I'm almost positive that Flass will voluntarily confess to trying to kill me, if only to ensure that he takes me down with him."

"I know I don't say this often," Tim said, "but what if we just... let the clock run out on this one? Let Flass go, and 'encourage' him to hightail it out of Gotham?"

"Then he'll know that he has us running scared," Jim said. "Believe me, he'll use that. Look. A few years back, he tried to scare me off. I did what he least expected. I went public with the very information he was trying to blackmail me into hushing up—even though it nearly killed me. Flass is many things-a coward and a bully, sure. But he's also greedy and vindictive. And he covers himself. Back when Bruce and I first started cleaning up Gotham, Flass was one of the first cops we were able to convict. Less than three weeks later, he handed over the evidence the DA's office needed to end Loeb's tenure as commissioner. He didn't try to cut any deals—he just decided that if he was going down, he was going to take as many people as he could with him." He sighed. "I wouldn't put it past Flass to go public just to show us that we can't intimidate him."

"His... associates?" Cass ventured. "Maybe easier to scare them? Get them to say Flass only had," she nodded at Gordon, "you? Not Bruce?"

"Except that they did have me," Bruce pointed out. "It's one thing to browbeat a guilty party into admitting their guilt. But to get them to confess to something we know is false? I won't condone that."


"Forget it, Cass," Tim said with a sad smile. "You're talking to the guy who stopped Joker's execution because it turned out that the creep wasn't guilty of the one crime he was getting sentenced for."

Bruce nodded. "If I don't deal with this, then Flass will either attempt to blackmail me or report me. Neither option is acceptable. So, I have to pull his teeth. If Rae can get me the 30 days, it will be... uncomfortable, but I'll manage."

"No," Dick said. "There has to be some other way." He paused. "Give me a rundown of the sequence of events." He glanced from Bruce to Jim. "The two of you were at the store..."

Bruce frowned. Dick sounded exhausted. More than that-under the harsh overhead lighting, he looked haggard. How long had those dark circles been under his eyes? He winced. "I went to look for some assistance with my purchase," he began. "When I returned, it was to find Jim being escorted out of the store—at gunpoint. I followed the car, and broke into the building where Flass and his crew were holed up. They caught me, I broke free, got Jim out and then got recaptured. You know the rest."

Dick thought for a moment. "How did you get into the building?"

Bruce told him about the tree. "After you went to look for my shoes, I went back up and retrieved my grapnel. It came in handy for scaling Gotham Tower."
Dick nodded. "Were you wearing gloves?"

Bruce's forehead furrowed. He must have been—it was SOP. But he hadn't had them when he came home. So when had he lost them? "For the first part of the night," he said after a moment. "Flass must have removed them after I got Jim out."

Dick reached into his jacket pocket. "I guess these are the ones. They were lying next to your shoes. Not exactly one of your usual designer labels, so I wasn't positive, but I grabbed them to be on the safe side." He passed Bruce a familiar pair of worn, brown leather gloves. "In other words, you wouldn't have left any fingerprints in any of the rooms or corridors, other than where I found you, or along the route you took to leave."

"Correct."

"So," Dick continued, "to the best of your knowledge, if you were to claim that Flass had abducted you together with Gordon, would there one shred of evidence against that statement... or would it come down to your word against Flass's?"

Bruce's eyes opened wide. "The car they used only had room for three in the back seat," he said slowly.

"So they stuck you in the trunk."

"Possible witnesses in the parking lot or looking out the store windows. They might not have seen the gun—I would have missed it if I hadn't been looking at the right angle, but someone would have noticed a man being forced into the trunk."

"Maybe," Tim ventured, "but if the cops start looking for witnesses, how many people do you think they'd find who would admit to seeing anything? Most people don't want to get involved."

Dick nodded. "It was one of the more annoying parts of my work in Bludhaven," he said, remembering. "Just trying to get a witness to give over what they saw at the scene of a traffic accident was a major deal. I don't think anybody's going to come forward to say that they watched you get behind the wheel of a totally different car and drive off."

For the first time since he'd entered the cave, Dick saw Bruce relax. "The security cameras in the store," he said. But it didn't sound like he was protesting, so much as considering a factor. "They would have seen..."

"I can tell you right now," Jim broke in, "that if Flass hasn't been charged yet, nobody will have thought to go back to the store to look for evidence. One of you could go in tonight, after hours, and..."

"Okay," Dick said. "So now, we need to figure out why you've waited this long to make a statement. And why you didn't wait around last night for the cops."

Jim shrugged. "There's not much to tell. Bruce got me out. I was looking for a payphone—Flass had my cell. Next thing I knew, a carload of drunken frat boys were chucking bottles at me. You intervened. At that point, I just wanted to get home—especially when you said you'd handle things."

Bruce's smile grew slightly wider. "Flass was talking about how, even if I somehow managed to get away, he was going to accuse me of violating the terms of my release. I panicked." He made a face. "Once I calmed down, I spoke with my lawyer and decided to come forward, since I have nothing to hide, after all."
"You filling Rae in on the whole story?"

Bruce hesitated. "It's not something I'm looking forward to," he admitted, "but if what you're suggesting now doesn't work, for whatever reason, she's going to need the real facts in order to craft the best possible defense. Under the circumstances, anything less than full disclosure would be akin to shooting myself in the foot."

Dick nodded. "Okay. I think we have something we can all live with now. Tim, tonight you're going to get the footage from the store security tapes. Montoya's going to be expecting me to show, so that I can explain why they're holding onto Flass. After I fill her in, I'll head out to that construction site and take another look around. I'll ask Babs if she can find out what's already in Evidence, and where the DA is going to go with this. Questions or suggestions, anyone?"

There were none.

"Back to you, Bruce."

Bruce hesitated. Then he hit a switch on the main computer. "Oracle, report."

The screen came to life. "All's quiet on the GCPD front," Barbara said. "Waller's repeated her usual offer. I've given your usual answer. If this does come to trial, I think you can expect her to become a little more persuasive, though."

Bruce's eyes went flat. "I'll be ready for her." He took a deep breath. "Meeting adjourned. Dick, stay a moment?"


Bruce started to protest, but caught himself. "If the police arrive on the grounds," he ordered, "Bring her back downstairs before they reach the front door." He looked at Dick. "What I said before stands. Get the car seat installed."

Dick nodded, picked up the seat and went back to his car. It took him a few minutes to secure the safety straps. He returned to find that Bruce hadn't moved from the console chair.

"Okay," Dick said, after he'd waited a few moments for Bruce to speak. "It's done."

Bruce gave a slight nod. He started to say something, but seemed to think better of it. He turned to face the opposite wall. Dick waited.

After a few moments of silence, Dick cleared his throat. "Did you just want me to put the seat in, or was there something else?"

Silence.

"Bruce? Are you all right?" He was starting to feel like a broken record.

Bruce turned back to face him. "I'm doing a bit better than I was an hour ago," he said quietly. "Well enough to realize a few things I should have caught earlier."

Dick grinned. "Sometimes, two heads are just better than one. It probably would have hit you sooner or later."

Bruce shook his head. "After turning myself in, it would have been too late. But that's not what I meant." He took a deep breath. "Dick?" He asked hesitantly. "Are you all right?"
The younger man blinked. "Sure," he said, surprised. "I'm fine..."

Bruce placed his hands on Dick's shoulders and frowned. "How long have you been this tense?"

"I..." The truth was, he'd gotten so used to the pressure he could barely remember a time when he hadn't felt it.

"I realize I'm to blame for this morning, but how much sleep are you getting these days?"

"I'm dealing," Dick said, looking away.

"That wasn't what I asked," Bruce said sharply. "I never meant for you to take this much on," his voice softened. "But I should have realized that you would."

"I'm managing," Dick said, wondering why he suddenly felt like he was waist-deep in Jell-O.

"Dick." Bruce shook his head again. "You aren't a sixteen-year-old with something to prove anymore. I know what you can do. I'm just... honestly not sure how you've been doing it. And... I wish that I could tell you that you didn't have to keep doing it anymore."

"Yeah," Dick gave him a watery smile. "I know. But right now? You need me. Gotham needs me. Lucius is trying to convince me that the Wayne Foundation needs me—Boswell retired in August, and Lucius has been pushing me to sit in on the meetings ever since. It's actually pretty interesting stuff."

Bruce nodded. "You'll do well... if that's what you want. If it isn't, that's also fine." He placed his hands once more on Dick's shoulders and took a step back. "Look at me."

Dick hesitated for a moment, before he reluctantly complied.

Bruce's grip tightened. "I do need you. Especially now. But I also need you to tell me when I'm taking you for granted." As Dick started to shake his head, Bruce continued forcefully, "And we both know that I have been." His eyes seemed to bore into Dick's. "I realize that I've... written the book on how to spread yourself too thin and run yourself into the ground. I don't want you adding your own chapter." It was a softer version of the Bat-Glare, but it was still, unmistakably, the Glare. "Clear?"

"Clear," Dick nodded. He brought his own hands up to Bruce's shoulders. For a moment, the two stood silently, locked together in mutual support. Then Dick looked up, took a deep breath, and asked, "Now what does Amanda Waller want with you?"

Bruce sighed. "She knows better than to approach me directly, at least at this juncture. She's been advising Barbara that, in the event that I should wish to shorten my... probation, she's prepared to offer me the opportunity."

"As field leader, yes." He grimaced. "She's tenacious. But I'm not that desperate."

"Glad to hear it." He took a deep breath. "So, what's next on the agenda?"

Bruce winced. "I'd better call Rae."

"Good luck."

"I probably need it."
Cassandra's verbal skills picked that moment to desert her. What would Dick or Tim do in this situation? *Deflect suspicion. Create a plausible explanation.* Easier said than done. She didn't think, 'I have an identical twin sister' would be enough. She should have listened to Barbara and watched more crime dramas and fewer sitcoms. "Do... do we... know each other?" She stalled.

Arkham fixed her with a penetrating stare. "As I recall, young woman, you identified me at..." Another paroxysm of coughing seized him. "...at our first meeting." He coughed again.

"Don't," Cass started forward. "Don't fight so hard. Let coughs... pass." She hesitated. "I recognized your face from newspapers. After fire. Your picture on first page."

Arkham considered her words for a moment. Then he squared himself more solidly in the wheelchair. "Perhaps," he said grudgingly, "I was mistaken. Although I," he coughed again, "must congratulate you on your powers of perception."

She blinked. "Why?"

He smiled ironically. "I've seen my reflection. There's scant resemblance between any photograph you could have seen, and the way I look today."

Cass smiled. "Not... that bad," she fibbed. Actually, it was. She'd recognized him from the way his steely grey eyes looked when they peered over wire-rimmed spectacles, and from the way he'd held himself in the chair—identical to the way he'd looked on the asylum footage she'd watched with Barbara when Bruce had been incarcerated. She started to relax, then thought better of it. Arkham had to be hoping to catch her off-guard, waiting for her to make another slip. It occurred to her that if she quit the hospital now, he would continue to suspect her. And, she realized, she actually enjoyed coming to work here. She didn't want to stop.

"RT now?"

Arkham nodded.

Better, Cass decided, to talk to Barbara about this tonight. Barbara would probably be able to tell if the situation could be salvaged. *She hoped.*

Rae Green listened to Bruce's story without comment. From time to time she frowned and jotted something down on a large notepad. Finally, she set the pen down. "Is that everything?" she asked calmly.

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "Isn't it sufficient?"

"I told you," Rae snapped. "If you want my help, I need full disclosure. Now is that everything, or are you keeping anything else back?"

Bruce shook his head. "That's all."

Rae nodded once. As her head came back up, Bruce could see a small vein pulse pink at her temple. "I just don't understand how someone so intelligent can do something so stupid!" she lashed out. "Do you have any idea what you're looking at if the whole story comes out?"

Bruce nodded back. "Jim was in trouble," he repeated stubbornly.
"That's what the police are there for," she shot back. "You can always dial 911, even if your phone service has been cut off—did you know that?"

"I told you. In a hostage situation, the police can be—"

"Damn it, Bruce! Do you have NO friends left in the JLA? The Titans aren't currently based in Gotham? Captain Comet can't teleport?"

Bruce took a deep breath. "Are you able to help me?"

"Are you planning to pull any more crap like this?"

He hadn't planned his activities last night, not that Rae appeared to be in any mood to split semantic hairs with him. "Absolutely not."

"Damned right. Because if I even suspect that you have—"

"I know. I'll need to find a new lawyer."

"That too," Rae said evenly.

Bruce blinked.

"Cross me again, and I'm going to find out if Two-Face needs a partner. Believe me, if you think I can make trouble for you now..."

Bruce started to laugh. Then he took another look at her expression and the smile died on his lips. He'd observed Rae in action before. If she used her considerable talents to assist his enemies... "You have my word."

"Excellent." She smiled. "You realize that since I can't have you perjure yourself, there's no way that we can get you on the witness stand claiming that Flass kidnapped you."

Bruce nodded. "I thought, perhaps, the fact that he recaptured me after I got Jim out—"

"If you'd got clear off the property, maybe, but you were still on the grounds at the time. Gordon's testimony should be enough to get Flass convicted, but we need a plausible explanation—beyond the real one—for your not testifying."

Bruce thought for a moment. "I could prevail upon Alex to say that getting me up on the stand could be detrimental to my condition."

"If you tell him everything that you just told me," Rae frowned, "he's going to have to report it. Doctor-patient privilege only goes so far." She sighed. "I'm not saying involving him is a bad idea, but I'd recommend that you think of him as you would a probation officer when you're deciding what to disclose to him." She looked at her watch. "Where's Gordon now?"

"In the waiting room—unless he went to get a coffee."

She lifted her telephone receiver and hit two buttons. "Kelly, cancel my three o'clock and ask Mr. Gordon to step inside, will you?" She hung up. A moment later, Jim walked in.

Rae smiled. "Grab your coats, gentlemen. We're heading downtown now and you're both going to give your statements to the police. We'll take my car; I'll brief you on the way."

She turned to Jim. "Call my office tomorrow for an appointment. As I was telling Bruce, Flass's
"So, that's the story," Lonerghan said quietly. He passed the plate of sandwiches across the table to Eddie and M'Gann. The three of them were sitting in the front room of Lonerghan's small apartment.

Getting away from the Iceberg hadn't been too difficult. M'Gann had used her abilities to disguise herself as an attractive young woman and professed herself to be quite taken with Lonerghan.

When Lonerghan had suggested to her that they go back to his place, Penguin had been more than willing to allow Eddie to escort them. "After all, if Batman is singling you out for special attention, you probably do need a bodyguard," he'd remarked jovially. It had been a profitable night and he was in a good mood. It seemed that many of the Iceberg's bouncers and security personnel supplemented their income by accompanying nervous patrons home—although Eddie couldn't really see the point of it. It wasn't like Batman was going to be intimidated by an escort. Nor most of the crime syndicates, for that matter. Still, Eddie wasn't about to complain about a means that allowed him to get away from the Iceberg to talk to Lonerghan without arousing suspicion.

"We can't get Penguin on extortion or racketeering. And the interest he charges on his loans is just barely legal under the usury laws. But if I can find proof that the enforcers on his payroll are in the US illegally..."

The two Titans nodded. "I thought," Eddie said hesitantly, "that you figured it was better to let Penguin stay in business and use him to catch other crooks."

"We did," Lonerghan said, with a wry smile. "Then our new mayor decided that he was going to do something to show that he isn't soft on crime. He's not suicidal enough to take on Cosa Nostra," he glanced at M'Gann, "sorry. The mob—"

"It's okay. You don't have to translate," M'Gann smiled back.

"Oh good. Anyway, it comes down to politics. GCPD needs to make a major collar in order to help the mayor's image. The mob is too strong at the present time—although, if you capes keep putting dents in their operations, that can change. Cracking down on the small fry might help morale, but it doesn't help Mayor Houghton's re-election campaign." He shrugged. "Bringing in Penguin is just going to push the criminal elements further underground and hurt us in the long run. Right now? If they go underground, it means they won't be as visible."

"It sounds short-sighted," Eddie remarked dubiously.

Lonerghan's lips twitched. "Yeah, that's because it is. But Houghton's fixated on the idea of bringing Penguin down. Suggest anything else and run the risk of tomorrow's headlines screaming about how the police endorse letting criminals run free."

Eddie and M'Gann exchanged a glance. "Then," Eddie said, "we'll help you. Or at least, Ms. Martian will. If Penguin does have illegal workers, he's going to have another set of payroll files somewhere." He turned to M'Gann. "If you manage to hang around inconspicuously, you'll find it."

*You have another idea about this situation, don't you?* The Martian girl projected.

*I don't know,* Eddie thought back. *But what if the mayor isn't after Penguin because he's cracking down on crime?*
What other reason do you think there might be?

I don’t know, Eddie admitted. But I know who I can ask about it...

Cass finished speaking and waited. Barbara sighed. "It could be trouble," she admitted. "Jeremiah's met Batgirl. He might recognize the way you speak."

Cass nodded. She’d suspected as much. "So... so I should leave."

"That's one possibility," Barbara agreed. "Of course, if you disappear, it might just make Jeremiah positive that he was onto something. People in rehab usually have a lot of time to think," she added. "Believe me, I know."

"So... what do I do?"

Barbara considered. "For now? Nothing. Give it a month. Then ask if they can move you to another area. Tell them... tell them you'd like a chance to pick up a few new skills. Don't be too insistent; you don't want to make it look like you're bored or you have an attitude problem, or anything. Just mention that you'd like a change. If worse comes to worse, I might be able to pull a few computer strings to get you reassigned, but I think you can probably handle this on your—"

A burst of static suddenly blared over the speakers and a woman's voice with a southern accent said "Skipper... you copy?"

Barbara snapped back to her consoles. "Sorry, Cass." Then, in a businesslike tone, "I copy, Zinda. Go ahead."

More static. Then, "...Turbulence. Can't get... bearings... South Pacific... fuel low... 'ricane on the way. We've lost... engines."

"Damn!" Barbara's fingers danced over her consoles as she tried to boost the signal. "Zinda! I missed that! How many of your engines are working?"

More static was the only response.

"Zinda!" She hit another button. "Dinah, can you read me? Catwoman? Huntress?" She looked at Cass, her green eyes wide. "I'm not reading any of them."
22. Precipice

Chapter Summary

An AWOL hero puts in an appearance and the Bat-family starts cementing Bruce's defense in the Flass matter.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Just a reminder for context's sake. I started this AU during the 'Countdown to Infinite Crisis' back in 2005. Shortly before Locked Inside the Facade began, Superman, under Maxwell Lord's influence, had very nearly killed Batman. Also, Zatanna's mindwipe wore off.

A/N: Thanks to Kathy, Debbie and Juliet for the beta. Thanks to the Little_Details community on Livejournal for confirming the rules on deputizing civilians. Thanks to Will44 for general advice.

"Iceland" written and performed by Mary Chapin Carpenter. From her album, The Age of Miracles (Zoe, 2010).

Standing on the precipice
I leaned to see just where the edge would take me
The wind came up, I closed my eyes
I heard a shout and to my surprise
A hand reached out and pulled me back to safety

What's a hand, what's a dream
Who can say what it means
When everything that you know
Can disappear
Don't look back, the spirits cry
Just be glad to be alive
Everything that you love is right here

-Mary Chapin Carpenter, "Iceland"

Chapter 22—Precipice

Cassandra's instinctive reaction to a perilous situation was to face it head-on, with feet and fists flying. It wasn't so much that she struck first and asked questions later—more that she had been trained to assess a situation at a glance and react accordingly. In a physical altercation, she had few equals. Situations that required her to sit back and bide her time were more difficult. She hated to feel helpless—a sentiment she shared with the first woman who had worn her costume and borne her codename.
"Are they..." She hesitated. There had been no response from the Citation X aircraft in nearly five minutes.

Barbara did not glance up from her consoles. "I won't believe that until I have to," she snapped. Her fingers danced over a row of consoles, causing varicolored keys to light up like a disco floor. "This is Oracle calling any operatives in the vicinity of lat-two-seven-point-two-niner-three-six-eight-niner-South; long-one-seven-six-point-eight-one-three-niner-six-five-West. Can anyone read?"

A moment later, an unfamiliar face in an all-too-familiar costume appeared on her left vid-screen. "I copy, Oracle. Unfortunately," the central vid-screen suddenly brought up an image of an underwater fleet converging on Atlantis, "I have a crisis a bit closer to home to deal with. I'm afraid you're on your own for the moment. I'm sorry. Aquaman out." The right screen darkened on the visage of Arthur Joseph Curry. A moment later, the central one winked out as well.

"Damn," Oracle muttered. "I was counting on him." She hit more keys. "This is Oracle. Can anyone read me? I have a missing aircraft at lat-two-seven-poi..."

"I read, Oracle."

Barbara blinked. She knew that voice, even if she hadn't heard it in almost three years. "Superman?"

"I'm en route to your coordinates, now. I'll let you know when I've located your plane."

Barbara let out a long breath and turned to Cass with a weary smile. "I think our odds just got a whole lot better..."

"Hold still, Zinda," Selina ordered. "This is going to sting." She fought down a wave of dizziness. Her head was still throbbing from where she'd banged it on the exit hatch when they'd evacuated the plane. What she wanted to do most of all was curl up in a corner of the life-raft and sleep for a few hours. Careful, kiddo. If you hit your head, and on top of it hurting, you're feeling dizzy and drowsy, you've probably got a concussion. Better get it checked out. She would. Just as soon as a doctor popped up on the high seas...

It was starting to rain harder, and the wind was picking up. They'd been trying to get out of the area well in advance of the anticipated hurricane. Instead, if no ships happened upon them within the next few hours, it looked like they were going to meet up with it head-on.

Next to Selina, Lady Blackhawk grimaced. Then she leaned back against the side of the raft, clenched her good hand around one of the oars and nodded. Selina dipped one end of a tarp into the ocean, folded the damp part several times, and pressed it against the deep gash in her companion's arm.

"Aagh! Mary, mother of—!"

Selina sighed. "I warned you. Keep applying the pressure. What you probably need," she admitted, "are stitches, but I didn't see the equipment in the first aid kit."

Zinda closed her eyes. "Actually, Kitty," she replied, "I'm glad you didn't."

Her skin looked pale, Catwoman noted with alarm. "Um... Zinda? Do you need another blanket?"

The pilot opened her eyes in confusion. "No... it's not time to sleep, yet," she said in seeming bewilderment. She looked down at her shivering hands in surprise. "Is... is it really that cold?"
Selina caught her breath. They were all cold, but Zinda had been in the choppy waters the longest before making it aboard the life-raft. And her current symptoms seemed to bear all the earmarks of moderate hypothermia. It was only going to get worse. Selina bit her lip and looked over her shoulder to her other two companions. "Any luck reaching Oracle?"

Black Canary shook her head. "I think the storm's jamming the signal. That or the equipment shorted when we fell into the drink." She shivered. "Guys, I don't want to be a killjoy, but our communications equipment didn't survive splashdown and we're nowhere near land."

"How about shipping lanes?" Huntress asked. "We're probably not alone out here."

"We're in the South Pacific," Lady Blackhawk reminded her sleepily. "We were on course for Tonga, 'bout forty-five minutes west of it when we ran into trouble. Based on the last readings I got from the flight instruments, I'd say that... right now? We're probably somewhere between Tonga and Norfolk Island."

"So, that's good, right?"

Dinah shook her head. "They're two small islands, nearly twelve hundred miles apart, with not much between them but open sea." She waited for that to sink in. "We've got five flares on this raft. Problem is, until the weather dies down, visibility's going to be lousy. I don't want to fire any if there's nobody out there to see 'em, but if we don't, there's a chance of a ship passing right by without spotting us."

Lady Blackhawk swore under her breath. "That does it. I'm telling the skipper our next assignment's going to be in Gibraltar. At least, if we go down, it'll be where folks can find us."

Catwoman grinned. "I'll back you on that, sister." She looked over her shoulder. "Someone hand me another tarp. We've got to keep her warm." Huntress obeyed wordlessly. "That goes for all of us, by the way," Catwoman continued. "Lady B might be in worse shape, but our suits aren't going to protect us for long, in this weather."

"Here," Huntress passed her a rain slicker and lifebelt. "I found them in one of the supply packs."

"Thanks." She glanced at Dinah. "Are the flares in working condition?" she asked.

"Looks like it."

Catwoman took a deep breath. "Then set one off. Lady B needs a hospital, and the sooner we're out of this, the better. If it doesn't work, we still have four to use later." She glanced up at the darkening clouds. "If there is a later."

Black Canary nodded. "You've got a point. Anyone object?"

Silence was the only response.

"Then cross your fingers, ladies." And she fired the flare.

For a few moments, Catwoman, Black Canary and Huntress scanned the horizon anxiously in all directions. Finally, Selina sighed. "It was worth a shot, anyway."

"Hey, gals," Zinda said weakly, "don't give up until you take a gander at who's flyin' right for us!"

Disbelieving, the other three followed her gaze, as a red-and-blue blur abruptly changed course and headed toward them. "Well, well," Selina nearly purred, "if that isn't the quintessential sight for sore
"It didn't look like there were any serious injuries," Superman relayed, a few minutes later, "but I dropped them off at St. Vincent's in Greenwich Village, to get checked out."

Oracle grinned into her webcam. The staff at St. Vincent's had a longstanding unwritten policy to treat costumed vigilantes without compromising their civilian identities. With Leslie Thomkins gone, it was, far and away, the best option. "Thanks. You know, you couldn't have picked a better time to return to action. What happened? Last anyone's heard, you've been... um..." she hesitated, "more 'just plain folks' than usual."

"As the peasant said in the Monty Python movie, 'I got better'."

Caught off-guard, she laughed. "You're quoting Monty Python, Clark? You?"

There was a cough on the other end. "I never realized how much I relied on my... um... other activities to give me stories for my day job. When I lost that edge, Perry put me on the entertainment beat for awhile. Conventions, film festivals, that kind of thing." His voice turned serious. "Speaking of people getting better, I remember a Gotham story we picked up from Reuters about five months ago. Care to comment?"

Oracle thought for a moment. "He's... he's been turning down interview requests so far. But he might take one, if it's coming from an old friend."

There was a pause. "Are we friends?" he asked. "After what happened the last time we met, I'm not sure. He told me to stay away from him. And, after what I did to him, I don't know if he was wrong."

She sighed. "Clark, that was almost three years ago. Believe me, he's had other things on his mind."

Another pause. "I did go to visit once, you know. Before the... crisis."

"I know. He was pretty out of it, then." She bit her lip. "It was hard for all of us." Then, "thanks for coming. There weren't enough who did." Her hands were shaking, but it wasn't because she was remembering what it had been like seeing Bruce near-catatonic. She was thinking about her own experiences, years earlier—when good friends had suddenly stopped calling. When conversations had ground to a halt when she'd rolled up. When 'if you need anything, just call' had really meant 'I'll be happy to stop by, if you're feeling happy, and I'm bored, but don't you dare actually talk about what you're going through'.

"Oracle?"

She took a deep breath. "Use your own judgment, Clark. Come, or don't. I won't push you. Just... please... don't ask me to send him your regards. Either send them yourself, or just let it be." She closed the channel abruptly, wheeled around, and flinched. She'd forgotten that she wasn't alone. She slumped in her chair.

Cass took a step closer, her eyes brimming, not with sympathy, but with quiet approval. She placed an understanding hand on Barbara's shoulder and jerked her head in the direction of the now-darkened vid-screen. "Good."

It took Harrier nearly twenty minutes to disable the burglar alarm and cautiously ease open the back door to House Depot. "I'm inside," he reported in a low tone. "Are you linked up to their security
"Negative," came Oracle's reply. "It doesn't look like there's any kind of external setup. You're on your own."

"Roger that." He wasn't exactly surprised. There was no reason for their security systems to be relaying images to an offsite location. He looked up at an imposing camera with a blinking red light, which hung overhead from a ceiling mount. Oracle's intel said that the store didn't employ any night watch staff. He hoped she was right, or things were about to get extremely awkward. He didn't feel like duking it out with folks who were just doing their jobs, while he was in the middle of a break-and-enter. He listened intently for a few moments, but no footsteps approached. He was alone.

Not trusting the light fixtures to take his weight, he spied a six-foot aluminum stepladder, and pulled it over to the camera. He didn't see any electrical wires leading from the device. If it was running on batteries, that could be a lucky break. There had to be something in this place that he could use to drain the power quickly. He could switch the footage for blank recording, leave the dead batteries in the camera, and nobody would be the wiser. He climbed the ladder and held up his flashlight, looking for the power source. He grinned. His hunch had been right. It was running on batteries. Now, he just needed to get the film. He hoped that nobody had come around to collect the footage since yesterday.

A moment later, his jaw dropped. He could barely believe what he was seeing. It wasn't possible—except... except...

Harrier put the two double-A batteries back where he'd found them and closed the hatch. He climbed down the ladder and moved it back to where it had been—against the wall. Then, leaning against one of the shelving units, he did something he rarely did on patrol, unless he was unfortunate enough to walk into one of Joker's traps. He laughed. He laughed long and hard. He laughed as though he'd been channel surfing between a Red Dwarf marathon and a Marx Brothers double feature. Finally, he pulled himself together and contacted Oracle.

He took a deep breath. "There are no cameras, Oracle." He could feel the laughter starting again. "No cameras," he repeated. "Just some dummies to scare off shoplifters. I'm going to cover my tracks, and then I'm heading back on patrol. Harrier out."

Batman hesitated for the barest moment before he stood, balancing on the tree limb. He sent off his grappling hook, deliberately overshooting the girder. Then he retracted the line, letting the hook gently scrape against the steel I-beam before it gained purchase. He swung over.

"Beautiful," he smiled, as he examined the metal under the beam of his flashlight. Wind and rain had taken their toll on the metal, as had time and temperature. Exposure to the elements had led to pits, scars, and scratches. Maybe a forensics team could, after careful analysis, point to one scrape or gouge-mark as the most recent, but as far as he could see, there was nothing to directly tie Bruce to the site.

He walked along the concrete wall, completing a semi-circuit of the perimeter before he fired off the grappling hook again and soared into the night.

He changed course for GCPD when the signal flared up.

Montoya was waiting for him. "How's he doing?" she asked, as she switched off the signal.
Batman thought for a moment. If Bruce was serious about pretending to be too traumatised by the incident to take the witness stand, it wouldn't hurt to start laying the groundwork early. "He doesn't like getting caught off-guard," he said, finally. "I think it threw him."

The shift commander nodded. "Off the record," she said quietly, "when we read Flass his charges, he insisted that it was only one kidnapping. I... I know it's not my place, but how... accurate... is that?"

Batman shook his head. "Bruce isn't talking much. All I can tell you is, when I arrived on the scene, Flass had him tied up and was a few seconds away from stuffing him into the trunk of a Firenza. Given that Gordon is legally required to check up on Bruce every hour or so, and they were at the store together," he hesitated. "Flass could be right, but there's more than one plausible scenario."

Montoya nodded again. "If the DA's office moves to prosecute, do you need an advance wa—"

"We have our sources," Batman cut her off with a frown. "It's not that I... that we... don't appreciate your support. However, it's for that reason that I wouldn't want you risking your badge."

She knew he was right. "I just wanted to let you know that..." Her voice trailed off.

Batman smiled. "Yeah. You're on our side. You have no idea how big a help that is." Although his face remained cowled, something about the bat-persona seemed to fall away. "Seriously. Unless you've tried doing what we do, you can't know how invaluable the kind of support you're offering is. But Detective, we know where you stand. You don't have to risk your career trying to prove it again." His smile grew warmer. "Now, was this meeting just to bring me up to date, or...?"

Montoya drew herself up, all-business, once more. "I wish. There's been a spate of burglaries in the East End. Fourteen in the last eighteen days. In each case, there's been no sign of forced entry, leading us to believe that the burglars knew their targets well enough to know where they kept their keys. However, we haven't been able to find anything to connect the victims, beyond their zip code."

Batman pulled out a handheld PC. "Details?" He inquired, fingers poised to start typing.

Alex looked up from his notepad. "But you got Gordon out," he repeated.

Bruce nodded. "That was about the only thing that went right." He sighed. "You don't have to say it; I know. Going out in broad daylight, there's always a chance of being recognized. I was off my game. It cost me." He let the admission fall reluctantly from his lips. So far, so good. As long as he kept his thoughts focused on the side points: his annoyance at his capture, his fury at not having been in control of the situation—as long as he made sure not to mention anything that would lead Alex to infer that he and Jim had not been taken together, he should be fine. "I suppose," he continued dully, "I should have waited for the police to arrive and made my statement right then and there."

"Well, it might have made things easier," Alex agreed, "for your own peace of mind, at any rate."

Bruce glanced up. "Pardon?"

"I think you've heard the phrase, 'innocent until proven guilty'? From what you're telling me, as much as Flass might want to make it sound like you were violating the terms of your release, it doesn't really look like he has a leg to stand on, unless he has something to corroborate his story."

"Yes," Bruce agreed, "but what would have been my... situation, until it was verified that he had no proof?" At Alex's frown, he continued. "When I was arrested initially, the circumstances were a bit different. I was in shock. I had an injury that required immediate medical attention. In short, the
chances of my sharing a holding cell with ten or twenty other people when I wasn't in a condition to fight them were virtually nil." He looked away and took a deep breath. "If I couldn't hold my own against Flass and his cronies, I didn't think I'd have better odds in custody, if the police opted to hold me while they verified my story."

Alex nodded. "How are you coping?"

Bruce calculated the precise split-second at which to make eye contact and carefully allow some vulnerability to show. "Can they send me back? I mean, if Flass is somehow able to persuade them that his version of events is accurate?"

"It's a pretty big 'if'," Alex remarked. "Unless there's something you aren't telling me."

"I won't go back," Bruce said quietly. "It was hard enough when I... withdrew. To..." He looked down at his hands, and realized, to his disbelief, that they were sweating. He forced his eyes to meet Alex's. "I've done nothing wrong. I refuse to return because an old foe with a grudge is willing to claim that I—"

"Take it easy," Alex said. "Have you been in touch with your lawyer?"

Bruce nodded. "I called her the next day. We've... Jim and I... we've made our statements already."

"Good. Has Flass had a bail hearing, yet?"

"Last Thursday," Bruce said, smiling faintly. "It was denied."

"I'm not surprised." He looked seriously at Bruce. "You know, it's likely to be at least a year before this comes to trial."

Bruce took another deep breath. "I can wait," he said simply. "By then, it might be possible for me to see myself testifying against him. Right now, though..." And his hands were still sweating, he noticed. It would have been a nice touch—if it were part of the act. He decided that, for the moment, it was wiser not to say anything to Alex about not wanting to take the witness stand. With a trial date so far away, bringing it up today would only appear suspicious. There would be plenty of time to build to that in the months to come.

"I understand," Alex said quietly. "Now, on another subject, how are you and your daughter getting along?"

"Docs finally gave us all a clean bill of health," Selina said cheerfully, that evening. It had been four days since Superman had flown them to New York. "We should be home tomorrow. Sorry it took a little longer than expected."

Bruce shifted Helena to his other arm. "I'm just glad you're alright. Did you want to speak to Helena?"

"Sure, put her on!"

Bruce pressed the receiver against Helena's ear, but his squirming daughter was having none of it. "Helena, say 'hi' to Mommy. Helena! Hel..." Resigned, Bruce set her down and came back on the line. "Sorry. She's about had it with staying still."

Selina laughed. "Running you ragged, is she?"
"Do you remember when Bane broke everyone out of Arkham and I spent over a week chasing them down? I think that may have been easier. Where does she store all that energy?"

Selina laughed again. "I'll see you both tomorrow. Love you." The call terminated.

"I love you too, Selina," Bruce whispered to the telephone. A loud clatter told him that Helena had discovered that pots and pans were kept in the lower kitchen cabinets.

"Helena!" he yelped, sprinting forward. He'd installed child safety locks on the cleaning supply closets, but he hadn't thought the cookware needed them. *Live and learn*, he thought ruefully, as he scooped up the little girl. She wriggled in his arms, stretching her hands toward the saucepans. "Look!" he exclaimed, sitting her down on the counter and placing one spoon in each chubby fist. Before she could release them, he brought her hands together. At the sound of wood on wood, Helena stopped struggling. A pleased smile came to her face as she clacked the spoons together once more.

"Everything alright?" Jim asked, entering the room.

Bruce didn't turn around. "We're fine. Although I think Helena might be thinking of taking up drums."

Jim winced. "If you expose her to heavy metal, I quit. I'm warning you, now."

Bruce gestured toward the cast iron skillet on the kitchen floor. "Actually, I gave her the spoons to keep her away from heavy metal," he deadpanned.

Jim looked to the cookware on the floor, and then back to Helena, still gleefully clacking the spoons. "I guess that's slightly better," he grunted.

The doorbell rang. Bruce frowned. "I'm not expecting anyone. Are you?"

Jim shook his head. "If it's all the same to you," he said, walking toward the front door, "I'll check the peephole. Faster than running down to the cave to look at the vid-feed."

"Go ahead," Bruce said. "I think I may have my hands full, at the moment."

A moment later, Bruce heard the front door open. "Well," he heard Jim say, "this is a surprise... Commissioner."

Bruce swept Helena into his arms and walked quickly toward the vestibule.

"Hello, Jim," Maggie Sawyer was saying. "You're looking well. How's... ah! Mr. Wayne," she smiled. "Good to see you again. I was wondering whether I could take up a few minutes of your time."

It wasn't a question. Bruce forced himself to smile back. "Won't you come in, Commissioner Sawyer?"

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They moved into the living room, Jim and Maggie chatting idly about mutual colleagues while Helena struggled to run around. It wasn't until she started banging the spoons again that Jim smiled apologetically and took her back to the nursery.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Maggie got to the reason for her visit. "Don't say anything before I say my piece," she said firmly. "Please, just hear me out. First, I wanted to let you know, in
person, that the DA's office concluded this morning that there are no grounds to investigate Flass's allegations."

Bruce allowed a faint smile to surface. "That's g—"

"I said, hear me out," she interrupted. "Look. Off the record, I don't give a damn whether you were in violation or not. I don't know. I don't need to know. But I will say this: if, hypothetically speaking, Flass's version of the facts was accurate, and if, hypothetically speaking, you had contacted us before you went in, I could have deputized you on the spot. If you had been closer to the scene than any of our units, I would have, without hesitation." She gazed levelly into his blue eyes. "You did good work out there, not so long ago. I know that if you want to, you can again. And," she smiled ruefully, "if you decide that fieldwork is over for you, I really hope that you'll still consider the instructor position I offered you months ago. Think about it." The smile became a grin. "I just had to get that out once. Now, that I've said what I came here to say," she added, reaching down to pick her purse up from the floor, "I'll be off. Tell Jim, it was good to see him again, and please do be in touch."

So saying, she rose to her feet. "I can let myself out," she said, as Bruce started to get up from his own seat. "Thanks for listening."

Bruce took a deep breath. "Commissioner?"

She turned.

"I appreciate your coming by. And... I know I haven't given you an answer yet, as far as your first proposal, but I am still considering it."

She nodded. "Do you have any concerns you'd like to bring up, that I could try to allay?"

Bruce shook his head. "Not at the present time, but thank you, again." He smiled. "I'll see you to the door."

He had just moved from the vestibule back to the front hallway, when he heard a knock on the front door, behind him. Bruce smiled, gave a mental sigh, and turned around. "Did you for—?" His query died on his lips. Bruce cursed himself for ten different kinds of fool. He knew better than to pull the door open without looking to see who was outside. If nothing else, he should have learned that lesson once and for all, the night that Joker had shot Barbara. And yet, here he was, making the same stupid, amateurish mistake that she had on that night. He could have kicked himself. It would have served him right if he had found Joker on his doorstep, instead of...

"Clark? What are you doing here?"
23. Letting Go

Chapter Summary

Clark and Bruce reconnect and Bruce takes care of an unpleasant duty.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Debbie, Kathy, and Juliet for the beta. Thanks to Hotspur for advice.

A/N: Just a quick reminder that this AU diverged from DC canon during the Countdown to Infinite Crisis. After that, some canon events happened exactly as written in the DCU, some happened a bit differently, and some never happened at all.

A/N: Bruce's appointment with Shondra Kinsolving occurred all the way back in Batman 489.

A/N: The Starfish Story is adapted from "The Star Thrower" by Loren Eiseley. The original version appeared in his anthology, The Unexpected Universe (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969).


*It was so right*
It was so wrong
Almost at the same time
The pain and ache
A heart can take
No one really knows
When the memories cling
And keep you there
'Til you no longer care
And you can let go now

-Michael McDonald, "I Can Let Go Now"

Chapter 23—Letting Go

"I was in the area," Clark said hesitantly. "I thought I'd drop by."

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "If you're here because Dick or Barbara guilted you into it, then..."

Clark shook his head. "They didn't have to. The last thing you told me, before things went south, was to stay out of your city. At first, I thought that honoring your wishes was the best thing to do, so I kept away."
The other eyebrow shot up. "And now?"

Clark shifted uncomfortably on the doorstep. "I thought it might be about time I checked to see if that was still what you wanted."

Bruce's lips twitched. "You could have called."

"Would you have picked up?"

Bruce thought about that for a moment. "No."

Clark's shoulders slumped. "I was afraid of that," he admitted, starting to turn away. "If you ever reconsider—"

"Clark!" Bruce snapped irritably, "stop acting like I just ..." Uncharacteristically, words failed him. "Just... stop," he finished wearily. "Come in."

As the other man turned back, dejection giving way to incredulity, Bruce nodded and gave him a faint smile. "Come in," he repeated.

Bruce had just shown Clark into the living room, when Jim entered and placed the nursery monitor deliberately on the coffee table. "She's asleep," he rumbled. "It took five rounds of 'Puff, the Magic Dragon', but she's asleep." His eyes narrowed as he looked at the newcomer.

"I'll be heading downstairs," he said finally. "One of those cold cases Montoya dropped off for you looked familiar." He turned as if to go, then paused. "I'll be looking at the security arrays while I'm downstairs, if time... mandates it," he said slowly, without turning back to face them. "It's only fair to tell you that I can read lips moderately well. So... if there's anything you'd prefer I didn't find out, consider this a warning."

Clark frowned.

Bruce shrugged.

"I'm..."

"An old friend of Bruce's," Jim said firmly. "That's all I need to know. If you gentlemen will excuse me..."

He closed the door behind him, oblivious to Clark's appreciative smile.

The smile fell away as Clark settled back onto the sofa. "Are we friends?" he asked seriously. "You'd think a friend would have come to see you more than once, during those two years."

Bruce started to say something, then caught himself with a puzzled frown. "More than once? You were there?"

"About two months after you were admitted to Arkham. You were pretty out of it."

Bruce shook his head. "I don't remember."

"They had you under some heavy sedation at the time," Clark said. "I'm not surprised."

Bruce was, though. He could have sworn that he'd been aware of what was going on around him, for all he'd pretended otherwise. "Barbara told me that you were going through difficulties of your
Clark nodded. "It hasn't been an easy two years," he admitted. "Longer for you, I know."

Bruce made an irritated sound. "I'm not quite so egocentric that I can't understand how other people might be facing challenges. I'm used to living without metapowers. You aren't."

"Wasn't," Clark corrected. "They've been coming back slowly over the last few months. Maybe, if they'd returned sooner, I could have made a difference for Pa, I don't know, but I..."

Bruce leaned forward. "Your father? What do you mean?" He demanded sharply. Clark's silence told him everything he needed to know. Bruce shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said in a far softer tone.

"I thought you knew."

"No. Barbara only told me about the other matter. When...?"

"About six months after the League disbanded. Heart attack. Docs said it was quick. I..." His voice trailed off. "He had a good life. A full one. I know..."

Bruce got up from the armchair, crossed to the sofa, and slowly, deliberately, placed his hand on Clark's shoulder. "Children expect to outlive their parents," he murmured. "But we don't expect it to happen so soon."

Clark nodded. Then, wordlessly, he clasped Bruce's forearm in return.

As Cass passed by the volunteer office, Doug waved at her to enter. "I don't suppose you know anything about physio?" he asked.

She frowned and thought for a moment. It wasn't a word that she'd heard before... but she'd heard words that sounded similar. "Um... physical? Like exercise?"

Doug grinned. "Close enough. They're short-staffed today, and RT said they can spare you, so, if you'll follow me, I'll take you there now."

"By the way," he added, as Cass fell into step behind him, "did you like the manga?"

"Didn't start," she admitted. "Still reading mine. But... soon."

"No hurry." He took her past the elevators and toward a set of wide double doors, which parted as they drew nearer. "Welcome to E-Wing," he said, with a sweeping gesture.

As Doug led her down the corridor, Cass smiled as she saw the sign-plates on the doors they passed. Gym-na-si-um A... Gymnasium B... Lockers... Swimming Pool...

She saw a game of wheelchair basketball in full swing in Gymnasium C. In another room, a young woman was laboriously performing chin-ups while a hospital staff member whooped encouragement.

Cass's eyes lit up. She was going to enjoy this.

Clark tiptoed out of the nursery, Bruce close behind. "She's perfect," he whispered, as Bruce pulled the door shut after them.
Although Bruce smiled at the compliment, he sobered almost immediately. "I'm out of my depth, Kent. I have no experience with toddlers. None."

"It looks to me like you're doing fine."

Bruce sighed. "Appearances can be deceiving." He took a deep breath. "Clark... was it..." he stopped. Of course it must have been difficult. "How long did you wait before going through your father's... effects?"

He was half-hoping that Clark would tell him that he hadn't started yet. He knew better, though. Of course he would have already done it long ago. Super-coping, or some such.

Clark looked pensive. "A couple of weeks after the funeral, the neighbors came around. They took care of packing up most of it while Ma and I were downstairs, in the kitchen. They didn't throw anything away. They just loaded it all up in boxes, labelled the contents, and left. Maybe a month or so after that, someone asked Ma if she'd consider making a donation to the local clothing drive. She gave them most of Pa's clothes." He sighed. "It's not like anyone else was going to be using them." He hesitated. "I think it was easier for Ma, once it was all gotten rid of," he admitted. "She kept back a few things, of course—I have some, too. But it's not..."

"...Not a constant reminder," Bruce finished, nodding. "I..." he took another breath. "I need to do something similar. And 'having the neighbors come round' is... not going to be an option."

"How about your family?"

Bruce hesitated. "They would," he admitted. "But they aren't here, now. And, later... I might..." He looked away. "This isn't easy for me, Kent," he admitted. "Today, right now, I'm ready to start. If I called the others, arranged a time... I'd spend so much time preparing myself mentally for that hour, that when it arrived, it would loom larger in my imagination than the situation truly warranted."

It wasn't an irrational concern. He remembered his first meeting with Shondra Kinsolving, years earlier. He'd been stressed, frazzled, verging on burnout. And, inside of fifteen minutes, she'd put him totally at ease. He'd actually been willing to try opening up to her—until she'd suggested revisiting the night of his parents' murder. True, that had been scant days before Bane had made his opening gambit. The truth was, though—Bruce could admit it now—if he had truly wanted to, even in the middle of the mayhem that Bane had unleashed, Bruce could have made time to keep those appointments. Huntress had been operating in Gotham, even then. Dick would have returned. Not turning to the JLA had been a decision forged mostly by ego... but partly by unwillingness to confront the past. Because, had he continued the sessions, he likely would have been discussing with Shondra many of the same issues that he'd been forced to deal with in his sessions with Alex. He'd had less emotional baggage back then. He turned to Clark, who was still waiting for his explanation. "I've been delaying this for thirty years," he said finally. "It's time. But I'd prefer not to work alone..." He turned away before he added wryly, "For once."

He took a step toward his parents' bedroom, but paused, waiting.

Clark fell into step behind him. "I'm in."

Bruce exhaled noisily. "Good. This way, then."

Just inside the bedroom, Bruce hesitated. Slowly, he let his gaze pan over the furnishings, the knickknacks, the artwork that he had painstakingly restored and re-hung following the earthquake that had nearly levelled the manor. He'd visited more than one art auction in a quest to recreate the
room exactly as it had been. He closed his eyes. If he had been able to recall each detail so accurately, then he didn’t need the physical reminders.

Clark was asking something.

"Sorry?"

"Boxes," Clark repeated. "We're going to need some."

"Oh." He nodded. "In the attic. I'll show you."

"Bruce," Clark ventured, as they walked down the hall, "I don't know if you were listening before, but I didn't sort through Pa's things, myself. And it... it wasn't just because Ma needed company. If you'd prefer, I can coordinate with Dick and the others and we can go through things when you're not here."

"You won't know what to keep and what to throw away," Bruce retorted. He pulled open a solid oak door to reveal a service staircase. "There should be some collapsed boxes stacked up in the northwest corner."

In a way, Bruce supposed, it was a good thing that he hadn't made a practice of coming in here that often. When he did, it had been always to look and never to touch. He could have told at a glance when an item was out of place, or missing, but to state that he had cherished memories of the thing was taking it a bit too far.

Clark held up a bottle of Charlie perfume.

Bruce glanced at it. "Toss it. In fact, toss everything but the Vetiver Guerlain and the L'Air du Temps," he sighed. He pulled open a nightstand drawer, and found a pile of old photographs. He picked them up, carefully. They appeared to have been taken at his eighth birthday. Almost reverently, he laid them in the 'keep' box.

"Storage," he said when Clark picked up the Lladro figurine.

Clark nodded and added it to the growing assortment. "About Arkham," he shifted uncomfortably, but didn't continue.

Bruce waited. "What about it?" he asked finally, and with some irritation.

"The... circumstances that sent you there." Clark looked away, studying a fixed point on the carpet. "I don't... none of your people were exactly forthcoming with what they were."

Bruce shut the drawer with slightly more force than he needed to. "Is it a slow news day?" he demanded. "Is there some gaping hole on page three that you're looking to fill?"

"Not that slow," Clark replied. "And," he mumbled, "I think the story I submitted this morning is going to make the front page tomorrow, actually." The tips of his ears were bright pink.

"Congratulations." Bruce shook his head. "It's old news, Kent. I can't see how it could possibly be of interest to anyone but me."

"Some people," Clark said, "were wondering about extenuating circumstances."

"Exten..." Bruce blinked. "What are you talking about?" When Clark didn't respond immediately, he picked a paperweight up from the night table and dropped it into the 'toss' box. "I got hurt in an
explosion that killed Alfred and Jason. GCPD arrested me. While I was in custody, someone was able to...
 influence me into attacking a close friend. After that, I..." his lips twitched. "In addition to gaining some appreciation for the...
 difficulties involved in having to take responsibility for the... pain one inadvertently causes while not... not being in control, I...
" he shook his head and continued in a softer tone. "I was too close to the situation, Clark. I wasn't thinking clearly. I blamed you when I
should have blamed Lord. And then I blamed me, when I should have blamed Elliot." "Elliot?" Clark asked blankly, trying to sort out Bruce's words. "Wait. Did you just apologize?"

Bruce's lips twitched again. "I suppose I did." His tone grew serious. "My overreaction might have been understandable under the circumstances, but that doesn't change the fact that it was an
overreaction." He smiled then. "So, to answer your earlier question, yes, we are—at least, I hope we are—still...friends."

"I'm not so sure," Clark countered. "What I mean is, if it were only... that part, it would be one thing, but..."

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "But...?"

Clark was back to studying the carpet. "I'm not the only one who wondered whether... extenuating circumstances... were at least partly responsible for your stay in Arkham," he said. "It's something that a few of us have been discussing. People like Ollie... Dinah... Zatanna..."

"Hold on," Bruce exclaimed sharply. "Are you asking whether it was the mindwipe that made me snap? Don't flatter yourselves. Besides," he added, "you had nothing to do with that."

"I don't believe this," Clark replied. "You'll hold me responsible for my actions when a telepath turns me into his puppet..."

"I told you. I was wrong."

"But," Clark barrelled on, "when it comes to wilful blindness, you're practically falling over yourself to excuse me? Bruce, I led the Justice League. I may not be a detective of your caliber, but you don't
become an investigative reporter at a prestigious paper if you don't have a few skills along those lines. I should have known about all of it. Sue. Dr. Light. Zatanna. If I didn't, it was because I didn't want
to, and for that, any apology would be an insult. I'm sorry I was too much of a spineless jerk to voice one word of censure after they did that? I'm sorry I lacked the moral strength to quit an organization that showed itself to be little better than the people they were fighting against?" He shook his head. "Maybe you did 'overreact', as you put it, to Lord's shenanigans, but I can't believe you're even willing to stay on speaking terms with me, after..."

Bruce shook his head. "It wasn't as big a deal as you're..."

"Don't even try to mitigate it," Clark snapped. "It was. And if it wasn't, you wouldn't have protested in the first place, when they pulled it on Dr. Light."

Bruce angrily opened another drawer and pulled out his father's pipe collection. He set aside a wood-
and-vulcanite Bernstein, with bronze accents for the 'keep' box and dumped the rest. "Zatanna's actions had no bearing on my situation," he stated. "As for the other matter, I could forgive you.
Easily. But I know from personal experience that it won't mean anything unless you can manage to forgive yourself."

Clark let out a long breath. "That's the crux, isn't it? I'm not sure how I can."

Bruce hesitated. Then, for the second time that day, he walked over and placed a hand on Clark's
"I think this is the last of it," Clark said, nearly two hours later.

Bruce nodded. "Thanks. I mean that."

Clark fought not to show surprise. "What about Alfred's room?"

"Already taken care of. During Arkham."

"Ah." He glanced out the window. "Is that... snow?"

"Gotham is a bit north of Metropolis," Bruce pointed out.

"Not that far." He hesitated. "Did you know that Christmas is only a month or so away?"

Bruce looked up sharply. "Yes."

Clark walked over to the window and looked out at the slowly drifting flakes. "Sometimes," he said softly, "the holidays can be... it's a time when you... when I... Look. Last year, we'd made plans to spend it in Smallville. I figured Ma could use the company. One day later, we were back in Metropolis. It was... I don't know about Lois, but Ma and I were half-expecting Pa to walk in at any moment. I know you and I aren't... wired the same way, but you're welcome to spend the holidays with us. I mean, if you don't want to be here."

Bruce was silent for a moment. "That's actually a tempting offer," he admitted. "But our situations aren't comparable. Duty might intervene, but I know that Dick and Barbara are planning something. And," he moved out of range of the closed-circuit camera, "this time of year is going to be harder on Jim than it is on me. His wife was murdered on Christmas Eve."

"Misery loves company?"

"More like a sorrow shared is a sorrow ha—" He caught himself. "Lessened," he amended.

"I understand." He heard Bruce behind him, shifting his weight slightly from one foot to the next, caught the almost-imperceptible increase in his heart rate, the intake of breath that was just a shade louder than it should have been.

"So, you come," Bruce said in a voice scarcely louder than a whisper.

"What?"

"You. Lois. Your mother. Any idiot could see I have enough room. You come here."

Clark turned around to face him. "We could do that," he said slowly. A small smile played on his lips. "I'll need to check with the others, but actually... we could." His eyes narrowed. "This isn't some ploy to get Ma to whip you up a home-cooked meal, is it? Because this is a vacation for her, too. She doesn't need to spend it in the kitchen."

Bruce fought back a smile of his own. "Don't worry, Kent. I'll be taking care of that aspect." It was worth it to see the Man of Steel's face blanch.

"That's um... a very generous offer, Bruce, but I couldn't let you go to all that trouble..."

Bruce stopped fighting the smile.
Selina let out a long-suffering sigh as Oracle brought the debriefing to a close the next morning. "Sorry, Red," she muttered as she picked up her purse from the floor, "but I haven't seen my daughter in over a week."

"Or Bruce," Dinah teased.

"Yeah, him too." She grinned. "Can't wait to catch up." She reached for her jacket.

"Say, Skipper?" Zinda asked. "I don't s'pose you have any newspapers lying around? I need to know what's going on with Mary Worth."

Barbara laughed. "I guess the strip's distribution's fallen off a bit, recently. Though I'm surprised you couldn't find a New York paper to carry it."

"The only paper the hospital got was the New York Times," Zinda smiled. "No funnies at all. Sad."

Barbara grinned. "I've been saving them for you. They're just on the storage bench. Um... Selina, could you pass them? They're right by your elbow."

"No problem," Selina grinned, reaching for the stack. Zinda grabbed for them.

"Whoops!" she exclaimed as several sections fell out of the bottom-most paper.

"I'll get them. Hey!" Selina exclaimed, seeing the picture on the bottom half of the front page. "I remember that guy. Ex-cop. Idiot. What's he doing back in the..." her voice trailed off as she saw the headline. She grabbed the paper back from Zinda and hastily scanned the article. "I'll kill him," she said, rising to her feet. "I am just going to kill him!"

"Selina!" Bruce exclaimed, opening the front door with a smile. "It's... good to..."

"Out of my way," Selina snarled, pushing past him. "Where is she?"

"What's...?"

"WHERE IS HELENA?"

Bruce blinked. "She's upstairs with Jim. Selina, what's the matter?"

She had already reached the foot of the stairs, but now she spun to face him. "You know, I could have asked Holly to mind her. She's done it before. Or Karon. But I honestly thought she'd be better off with you."

"What? Sel—"

"Don't even start. Damn it. I thought I could trust you not to go tearing off into the night when you had a small child to think about. What if I'd come home to find you in jail and her in foster care?"

She waved a rumpled newspaper at him. "You painted a target on my daughter's back!"

"Our dau—"

"My responsibility! I left her in your care because I thought she'd be safe!"

"She. WAS!"
"Then why wasn't she with you?"

"It's a good thing she wasn't!" Bruce shot back. "Jim and I had to go out. I left Tim in charge—"

"Now you've started delegating?"

"And I saw Flass's cronies escorting Jim off at gunpoint! I..." he looked away. "I tried to follow and got nabbed, too. Would you care to imagine what they might have done to any child who'd been with me?"

Selina took a moment to consider that. Then, slowly, sadly, she replied, "Would you have tried to follow if she'd been with you?" She waited for his answer. When he lowered his eyes, she sighed. "That's what I thought."

"Selina," he took a step after her. "Wait. Please. You're right. If she had been with me, I... I probably would have done things differently. I know I would have. But it's not like I left her unattended. What would you have had me do? Leave Jim?"

Selina shook her head. "No. I know you couldn't have done that. But Bruce? Suppose for a moment that she wasn't my daughter, but she was yours. And you'd entrusted her to my care. And then you'd come back to find out that I'd gone out to take care of some... business and very nearly got myself arrested. What would your reaction have been?"

"Selina... whether I should have taken Helena with us or not, the fact is, she was safe and Jim wasn't. What else should I have done?"

"Something." She turned away. "I... understand why you did what you did, Bruce," she said heavily. "That doesn't mean it's okay. I'm... I'm going up to pack up Helena's things and we'll be... off."

Bruce let out a long breath. "Will you be leaving Gotham again?"

"No." She kept her back to him, but Bruce saw her hand come up to wipe at her eyes.

"Will you... will you let me see you again? Both of you?"

"I... I need time to think." She turned back to face him, eyes glistening. "Please, Bruce, give me that time."

Bruce exhaled slowly. "Take as long as you need," he said tonelessly. "You've always had that prerogative."

Now, the tears in her eyes did threaten to overflow. "I know," she whispered, and made her way up the stairs.

When she descended fifteen minutes later, Helena in one arm and a valise in the other, she was half-hoping that Bruce would be waiting in the vestibule. If he had been, if he'd said one more word, she might have stayed, but he had disappeared behind one of the many closed doors that lined both sides of the hallway.

"Mama?" Helena asked, snuggling closer.

"I'm right here, Baby." She bit her lip and pulled the front door open. "I'm right here."

As he entered Penguin's inner office, Lonerghan noted irritably that his palms were sweating. This was silly. Penguin was down the hall supervising his loan repayments with Devilbane. Ms. Martian
was standing guard, ready to alert him if anyone was headed his way.

The two teens had offered to obtain the information for him, but he'd balked. For all their abilities, at the end of the day, they were a couple of kids—and if anything were to go wrong, Internal Affairs would take a dim view of his enlisting minors to do his legwork. Besides, the Bats and their allies stuck their oars into police business often enough. The GCPD could still handle a few things without caped interference.

Cautiously, he shifted the wall painting, looking for a safe. There wasn't one. He straightened the picture and stepped back with a frown. Right. It had actually been slightly crooked. He went back and readjusted it.

The lock on the antique desk yielded easily to a piece of bent wire, but the drawers contained only Cobblepot's legitimate records.

Lonerghan thought hard. The evidence had to be somewhere! His eye fell upon the book case. Cobblepot had quite the collection of old ornithology texts. He scanned the titles: Neighbors to the Birds; A History of Bird Watching in America, Popular British Ornithology... Suddenly his eyes widened. "I wonder..." he said aloud. Carefully, he pulled on a medium-sized volume labelled Our Summer Migrants; An Account of the Migratory Birds Which Pass the Summer in the British Isles. His face fell when it turned out to be an ordinary copy. A moment later, however, he let out a low whistle. "Paydirt!"

"Hey! What are you doing in he—oh!" The angry security guard fell back, flustered. "I'm sorry, Mr. Cobblepot! I didn't know you were here, too."

"Not at all, my good Sir," Penguin chortled. "I simply required something from my nest." He waved a negligent hand. "Your diligence is appreciated, but unnecessary." He removed his monocle and wiped it absently with a soft cloth. "You may leave us," he added in a bored drawl.

"Sure thing, Mr. Cobblepot." The guard backed out, closing the office door softly behind him.

Cobblepot replaced his monocle. Then, slowly, his portly figure began to elongate, his bulk melting to feminine curves. His tuxedo transformed into a short-sleeved white top, blue miniskirt, and matching blue cape. Auburn hair spouted from the crown of his head and his skin turned a brilliant shade of green.

"You found it?" Ms Martian asked eagerly.


"So now...?"

"Now, I leave this here and come back when I have a warrant. Which will hopefully be within twenty-four hours." He thought for a moment. "Um... say. Do you think you can keep an eye on things for me here? Let me know if anyone moves the evidence?"

Ms Martian smiled. "Absolutely."

"Daddy?" Helena asked for the fifth time in what felt like as many minutes.

Selina sighed. "You miss him already, don't you, honey?" She shook her head. "Well, so do I."
Again, she considered her options. If she chose the one that looked most attractive to her at that precise moment, in all likelihood, Bruce wouldn't want her back in his life, if he found out. Then again, after today, that could be a moot point. She didn't mean to waltz in and out of his life repeatedly, and she wouldn't blame him if he decided that it was more than he was prepared to deal with.

The truth was that she was jerking him around. Just because it wasn't intended didn't mean that it wasn't hurtful. She reached for the telephone, but halfway there, her hand froze. She hadn't been wrong about the risks to Helena, either. Getting into Bruce's sphere of influence was dangerous for both of them. Selina was willing to take the risk herself, but she would be damned if she would chance her daughter's safety. *His daughter, too.*

She reached for the phone again, but this time, it was to call a different number. She keyed the first six digits, and then stopped. If Bruce found out... And besides, Flass was only one in a very long line. She couldn't stop everybody.

Unbidden, a story she'd seen once on a wall plaque in someone's office came into her mind:

*A man was walking along a beach, when he saw a young boy ahead of him. Every few steps, the boy would stop, bend down, pick something up, and toss it into the waves. The man asked the boy what he was doing.*

"*When the tide went out,*" the boy explained, "*it left all of these starfish trapped on the sand. I'm throwing them back in the ocean.*"

*The man looked at the boy in disbelief. "That's ridiculous!" He exclaimed. "There are miles of beach and thousands of starfish. What you're doing right now cannot possibly make a difference!"*

*The boy looked at the man. Then he looked at the beach. Then he bent down, picked up a starfish, and threw it back into the ocean. He looked at the man once more. "It made a difference for that one."*

Selina bit down on her lip, welcoming the pain. It galvanised her. She knew that she'd never be able to keep her daughter safe from everything—nobody could. But she could deal with the immediate threat.

An incessant beeping came from the phone, and she hit the end button and started over. It rang twice before a voice disguised by an electronic voder picked up. "*Yes?*

"I'm presuming you've already traced this call and know who this is, Calculator," she said, with a calm that belied her inner turmoil.

"Of course. And how are you this fine evening, Selina?"

She took a deep breath. "*I need a favor.*"
24. Rights and Wrongs

Chapter Summary

Selina is ready to go to any lengths to protect her daughter. Would than include murder? Meanwhile, Oracle has a few more demons to exorcise—and maybe a bat to exercise...

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Aiyokusama for the beta. "Waiting for the End" lyrics by Mike Shinoda. Recorded by Linkin Park on their A Thousand Suns album (Warner Bros., 2010)

I thought it felt right but that right was wrong
All caught up in the eye of the storm
And trying to figure out what it's like moving on
And I don't even know what kind of things I've said

—Mike Shinoda, "Waiting for the End"

Chapter 24—Rights and Wrongs

"Flass?" Calculator sounded surprised. "Forgive me, Selina, but isn't he a bit beneath your concern?"

Selina rolled her eyes. If he thought that using her first name would intimidate her, then... "I have my reasons, Noah. Can you find out what I need to know?"

"Of course, of course. But why come to me in the first place? From what I hear, you've, ah, been scouting the competition lately, hmm?"

There was no way that she was going to involve Oracle in this one. Not given the measures she might need to take. "The competition can get a little nosier than I'd like," she said glibly. "And confidentiality isn't always up for sale."

There was a delighted laugh on the other end of the phone. "So, playing with the other team has its drawbacks, does it?" Calculator smirked. "Oh, of course. The redoubtable Mr. Flass has quite the mad-on for your... friend, doesn't he?"

"My friend can handle himself just fine," Selina shot back. "But we all know that some people have very long, very skinny arms. Arms that can reach out and touch someone, even through prison bars. You aren't the only one who knows about my past relationships. I'm asking you to find out whether Flass has any allies or associates that I need to worry about—"

"Done."
"And," Selina added, "whether he's made any enemies or bad decisions that could come up to haunt him."

There was a pause. "You understand that, given his history, if such things exist, the ramifications could be rather... extreme."

"That's why I'm calling you, and not my other associates."

"Ah. There will be a cost involved."

"If it's financial, you can name your price. Anything else, tell me before you initiate."

Calculator laughed merrily. "I think we understand one another. I should be in touch with you shortly. Always a pleasure chatting with you, Selina." The call terminated.

Selina set the phone down on the sofa cushion beside her, hoping that she hadn't just made the biggest mistake of her life.

Oracle looked up from her computer array with an excited smile. "Congratulations, Eddie," she said warmly. "Looks like your little hunch was right."

Kid Devil was sure that the chinstrap under his helmet was the only thing keeping his jaw from hitting the ground. "Houghton's dirty?"

"In a few senses of the word," Barbara confirmed. "Seems Penguin caught him in a... compromising situation with one of his," she coughed, "hostesses. Ever since then, Houghton's been paying him hush money."

"Wow. So then, why try to nail Penguin? I mean, wouldn't that just make him go public with the information?"

Oracle nodded. "Very likely, though I doubt it'll come to that. See, Eddie, if the police find clear evidence of illegal activity, it puts Houghton in a stronger position. I'm speculating, but it seems to me that if the DA's office has an airtight case, Houghton could easily tell Penguin that there's nothing he can do to help... unless he turns over the photos. The other thing to remember is that appearances to the contrary, Penguin isn't stupid. He doesn't really want to end the blackmail by spilling what he knows. He does that and he derails his gravy train. He just wants to have Houghton on a string. Before he starts flapping his beak about anything, he's going to make very sure that he's squeezed every drop of leverage and every red cent he can out of our illustrious mayor. Houghton knows this. All he's doing is trying to get Penguin over a barrel and break his hold. Given a choice between surrendering the photos or prison time? Penguin's going to play ball."

"I hear you." He thought of something. "Wait. Penguin doesn't own a computer, right? I mean, not one I've seen. Where are you getting this from?"

Barbara hesitated. "Have you covered Watergate yet in history?"

It was hard to shrug in armor. "The basics, sure."

"So, you know that some of the most damning evidence came directly from the Whitehouse tapes."

"Yeah." He blinked. "Hold it. You mean, Houghton's recorded the evidence?"

"He's writing his memoirs in Goggle docs," she said wryly. "Password-protected, but the password's
an obvious one. He's being deliberately vague on some of the details, but not the amounts he's
paying out. I've found evidence of those exact funds leaving his accounts and going into Penguin's.
The timing matches. Yeah, it's recorded. Matter of fact," she smiled, "I've just made a backup copy I
can download-in case anything were to happen to the original, you understand."

Eddie gulped theatrically. "Um... Oracle? If I ever did anything to tick you off, you'd tell me, right?
Give me a chance to try to apologize?"

"Probably. Unless I was really ticked off." She chuckled. "You'd best be heading back to the
Iceberg, now. Oracle out."

Barbara was still smiling as she closed the channel and wheeled around to greet Dick. The smile died
when she saw the expression on his face. "What's happened?" She asked, feeling her good mood
drain away

"Selina."

As she listened to Dick's story, Barbara gripped the arms of her wheelchair so tightly that she was
sure the imprints of her fingers would be permanently indented in the leather padding.

"I knew Selina was upset when she stormed out of here," she said slowly. "But if I'd..." Abruptly,
she wheeled away from him and rolled toward the window. After a moment, she heard a light step
and knew that he was standing behind her. "I was afraid of this," she whispered.

"You mean, you knew she'd—"

"No." She lifted her hand for Dick to clasp. When he did, she squeezed back. "I meant me. Every
time Bruce tries..." she thought for a moment. "Tried? Tries. Every time he tries to push us away, I
hate it. I'll join in with the rest of you, rolling my eyes and swearing, and so on. But the thing is, I
understand it." She took a deep breath. "After Joker, it took a long time... and a lot of therapy for me
to get to... to where I am now. And one thing that made it easier," she exhaled, then breathed in
again, "was making my peace with the idea that... that someone like me might have a hard time
finding someone who would want to share my life with me." She closed her eyes. "Actually, I made
my peace with the idea that I probably wouldn't find that person. And then you came along. And
when we were together, sometimes you made me think that I'd been wrong. That I was being silly.
And then the doorbell would ring and I'd get a panic attack. Or I'd get a phantom pain—and yes,
looking back now, in hindsight, I can guess that it was probably psychosomatic, but when I was
going through it, I wasn't exactly thinking along those lines. And then I'd ask myself whether it was
fair to ask you to put up with my... issues. And from there, it didn't take much to convince me that
the only reason you still hung around was because you didn't fully understand those issues."

"I don't fully understand them," Dick pointed out. "And unless I'm ever in your place, I probably
never will. But that doesn't mean I'm not willing to try."

"I know that... now," Barbara said. "I think I knew it then, too. But I was afraid to take that chance.
Because if I had opened up to you then... really opened up... and then you'd decided it was too much
and walked out... I don't know if it would have 'destroyed' me. But it would have come close."

She gripped his hand more tightly. "Sorry. Just thinking about... How's Bruce taking it?"

"Badly," Dick replied simply. "At least, that's what your father told me when I went by the manor
earlier. Bruce was holed up in the study. He didn't want to see anyone and I didn't want to push it."

Barbara nodded. "As much as he's been trying to reach out lately, his... default setting is to try to deal
with everything on his own. Giving him a little time to do that isn't a bad thing." She exhaled noisily. "I'm sorry. It's just... thinking about... what Selina pulled on Bruce, no matter what her reasoning, is..."

"...What you were dreading someone would pull on you."

She nodded. "And this isn't about me. Not really. It's about Bruce. I know that. But thinking about what you just told me, my mind keeps going back..."

Dick gently unclasped Barbara's fingers with his free hand. Then he crossed in front of her wheelchair, dropped to one knee, and placed both hands on her shoulders.

"It's okay," he said soothingly. "Hey, it's okay. I'm right here. And I love you, Barbara Gordon. Warts and all. Chair and all."

Barbara drew herself up straighter in the chair. "I do not have warts!" she said with mock indignation.

Dick was able to stifle the first burst of laughter, but not the second. Barbara joined in.

"It's not that funny!" she managed to gasp.

"I know."

"It's not!"

But it was cathartic, though neither of them said it. When their laughter passed, Barbara took a deep breath. "I'll call on Bruce tomorrow, while you're at work. Maybe I'll be able to get somewhere."

"Are you going to be okay with that?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "But it... helps knowing that you'll be here when I get back."

"Ditto."

The next morning, when Bruce came downstairs it was to find Barbara seated at the dining room table, chatting with her father.

"Oh, hi, Bruce," she greeted him.

Bruce's lips twitched. "I suppose you came to cheer me up," he said sarcastically.

"Now, when has that ever worked?" she grinned. "I came to visit my father. Oh, and to challenge you to an escrima match, if you want to hit something."

"That's subtle."

"I didn't think you'd appreciate 'subtle'," Barbara shot back. "If you're anything like me, you probably find it patronizing." She reached into her bag and tossed him a set of escrima. He caught them.

"Well?"

Bruce considered. "If you're looking for a sparring partner," he said, "maybe I could use the distraction. But if this is all some ploy to try to get me to talk about her, you can save your breath."
"Better save yours," Barbara retorted. "You're going to need it for the spar."

It took a few rounds before Bruce really started to cut loose. Until then, he'd been steeling himself for a well-meaning pep talk. Once he realized that he wasn't getting one, he could afford to concentrate on the task at hand. Either Barbara had improved or Dick was still going easy on him in their training bouts, because it didn't take him long to build up a sweat. Seeing this, Barbara flashed him a broad smile. It wasn't an encouraging one. It was the same amused, slightly cocky grin that he'd first seen on her face when, as Batgirl, she had taken down five armed bank-robbers single-handed. The memory had stayed with him exactly because it had been the first time that she'd actually seemed to be having fun.

"You're finding something funny in this?" He asked.

"Funny? No. Fun? Definitely."

"Fun." He met her high strike with his left baton and thrust low with his right. Her stick met his with a loud cla-a-ack.

"You're one of the few people out there who not only can give me a run for my money with these things, but actually does it."

"You aren't holding back." He lunged forward, whipping the stick down toward her wrist while flicking it back and forth in a fanning motion.

"Neither are you." She blocked, hooked the shorter end of his stick under his wrist and forced his arm up, trying to disarm him.

The move had to hurt, but Bruce only grunted as he swung his second stick and struck her arm a painful blow.

Barbara winced. "Case... in... point," she gritted through clenched teeth. She thrust the butt of her left stick toward the nerve point on his right arm. He grunted again as the weapon found its target and he felt his hand go numb.

An instant later, the stick flew from his grasp.

"You okay?"

Bruce nodded.

"Sure?"

There it was. An opportunity to unload... or to pretend that she was only asking about the nerve strike. "I can't feel my fingers, at the moment," he admitted. "It'll wear off."

"I got lucky."

He shook his head. "No, you didn't."

Barbara took a deep breath. "Actually, I think I did. Last night, I... spent a lot of time thinking about when I broke up with Dick. Or more to the point, thinking about how he was willing for us to get... back together, afterward."

Bruce gave her a hard look and then turned away. "The two situations are hardly comparable."
"I got scared by a situation, overreacted, lashed out at the wrong person, and came close to ending a relationship with someone I really cared about. Yeah. Not seeing any parallels."

Bruce's shoulders tensed. "All right. Since you brought it up, you were wrong. I'm not convinced that you can say the same thing about Selina."

"Bruce—"

"Helena is a baby. And a couple of nights ago, I nearly left her half-orphaned. In slightly more than six months, I will be facing another hearing. After which I mean to return to the suit, one way or another." It was the first time that he'd said it out loud. "Things will only get more dangerous from there," he continued flatly. "Which means that the smartest course for all concerned is to get her out of my life while she's still young enough to forget me."

"Bull."

Bruce spun back to face her. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." She rolled toward him, green eyes gazing unflinchingly ahead. "The Birds crash-landed in the South Pacific, a couple of hours ahead of a hurricane. If Clark hadn't been back in action, the whole team could have been lost. You think maybe she might have been consoling herself with the fact that she'd left Helena in good hands?"

"That's a matter of opinion."

"More like consensus. So she comes back, finds out that you ran into a situation here on the home front—and by the way, thanks for getting Daddy out—and rather than think, 'Stuff happens; at least he had the sense to make sure Helena was safe before he went charging in,' she went to 'If he'd stayed home with her, this never would have happened.' Well, Bruce, if you'd stayed home with her, my father might not be here, right now. And no matter how many precautions you take, and how much you minimize the risks, are you going to tell me that the manor is unassailable?"

"Barbara..."

"R'as. Talia. David Cain." She grimaced. "Aaron Langstrom. Or maybe just another 'mad scientist' with an earthquake machine. Yes, something could have happened to Helena. But leaving her at home for what amounted to a quick trip to the store, leaving her in the care of the leader of the Teen Titans was not a mistake, no matter what Selina told you." She let out a long breath. "And once she calms down, if she hasn't already, she'll see that, too."

Bruce's expression hardened. "And then what? We try to patch things up again for Helena's sake, until the next time someone takes a pot shot at me? Or someone notices that we've been in each other's company for awhile and attacks her to get to me?"

"I..." Barbara stopped. "I don't know," she admitted.

Bruce nodded. "Unfortunately, I do. It's foolish to rely on things that can be taken from you. To depend on people who, demonstrably, aren't there when you need them the most," his voice dropped to a bare whisper, "... borders on the masochistic." He smiled bitterly. "Thanks for the spar, Barbara," he continued in a normal tone of voice, as he bent down to retrieve his fallen stick. "We'll have a rematch some time. Come. I'll show you to the front door."

When Barbara got home, Dick was downing a mug of coffee. He was still in his robe and slippers.
"Sleep well?" She asked.

Dick nodded. "How did it go with Bruce?"

"Pretty much like we were expecting," she said, making a face.

Dick set the mug down on the table. "That bad," he stated.

"I beat him at escrima." She shook her head. "That's never happened before. He took it well, at least."

Dick placed his hands gently on her shoulders.

"Really well." She leaned forward and wrapped her arms about his torso. He hugged her back. "I wasn't thinking," she whispered.

"What?"

"After Halley's. After the fire. I..."

"Babs, I keep trying to tell you—it's water under the bridge. Look at me." He waited for her to obey before he continued. "Every single one of us has messed up in a major way at one time or other. Now, if you want to track down Rip Hunter and see if you can get a 'do-over', go for it. Otherwise, we can either spend the rest of our lives beating ourselves up for whatever, or we can go on." He kissed her forehead. "Consider this payback for your getting me past Blockbuster, okay?"

"Bruce doesn't think he can trust her again, you know," she said wearily. "And I can't blame him. But it's like someone's holding a mirror in front of me and saying 'this was you, three years ago.' And..."

"And we've had three years to work on us. We've had some rough patches, sure, but we're still together. I don't know if the same will be true for Bruce and Selina. And," he admitted, "there's a part of me that hopes it isn't. I don't think he deserved what she did, either. But that has nothing to do with us, okay?"

She nodded. "O-okay."

"Okay..."

She picked up on the first ring. Part of her wanted it to be Bruce. Part of her was relieved when it wasn't. "Hello, Noah. What have you found?"

Calculator was in a good mood. "Well, it seems that little Arnie Flass has had many troubles in his fifty-odd years on this planet," he began. "High debts, gambling woes... the small matter of how he financed that building of his, downtown."

"I'm listening."

"The smartest thing he did on that one was not use his real name," Calculator said. "He befriended a lonely, wealthy woman, got her to invest large sums of money with him, which he then used to buy up that prime piece of real estate and start building. Then, after he'd got as much as he could out of her, he dropped her."

"I see," Selina said. "And the building?"
"Survived Cataclysm. Flass left Gotham before No Man's Land was declared. Went to Chicago, got himself into a bit of trouble, got sentenced to two years for promoting gambling. He got out in one, but by the time he made it back to Gotham, the NML had been over for almost nine months. The redevelopment funds had pretty much been allocated, and Flass found himself with a half-finished eyesore in the downtown core. He tried to sell it, but couldn't get his price."

"So it's still his." Why was Calculator being so cheerful? Flass was scum, but this wasn't exactly a surprise revelation. "That's all? What about his connections?"

"Dead, in prison, or want nothing to do with him, for the most part." He chuckled. "The guy's not just a dirty cop, he's inept. Most people these days prefer not to admit to knowing him."

"Most?"

"Ah, well," Calculator sighed mockingly. "There's the matter of the jilted heiress. She could probably have suffered the blow to her finances, but her pride, well that's another matter. She has certain connections. And talents in her own right. All she needs is Flass's real name, and I can pretty much guarantee that he'll be out of your hair—and your friend's hair, for good. Deal?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to say 'yes'. Bruce would never admit it, but she would be doing him a favor. And she and Helena would be safe. Safer, anyway—somehow. And it would take so little to set this in motion. But... Come on, Selina. Get with the program! Flass kidnapped Gordon's kid. You really think he'd balk at trying for yours, if it meant getting to Bruce? One word. All she had to do was tell Calculator...

"No deal."

"What?"

"No deal," she repeated, feeling a great weight roll off of her. "I'm sorry, Noah. I shouldn't have bothered you in the first place. How much do I owe you?"

"Huh? Oh. Don't worry about it. Most of the stuff was public record. Easy to locate, if you know where to look. You sure you don't want to know who the woman was, at least?"

"I'm sure. Thanks again." She ended the call and replaced the phone in its cradle, feeling oddly free.

"Daddy?" Helena piped up.

Selina swept her daughter up into her arms and kissed her. "Not yet, Helena. But maybe soon. We'll see."

"Oh, Cass, would you heat the paraffin bath for Mrs. Carling's session? She'll be down in a half hour."

Cass nodded and trotted to the supply closet to obtain a six-pound brick of paraffin wax, which she placed in the heating tank of the bath. She set the temperature control to 125 degrees and waited for the hum that told her that the machine was warming up. She smiled at her supervisor. "Next?"

Erica Beecham smiled back. "You can wipe down the weight machines in 147," she replied. "Don't forget to dry them."

"Won't." Cass nodded. She headed out of the room at a brisk pace, nearly colliding with Doug on his way in. "Sorry," she grinned. "Busy."
"I can see that." He smiled back at her. "Don't let me keep you then. This Sunday, though, are you free for another movie afternoon?"

Cass nodded once more. "Which?" Not that it mattered to her, but the others might ask.

"Lili. Be here at one."

"Okay. Bye." She sped off toward room 147.

Doug watched her go. "She's doing well?" He asked Erica.

"If we had the budget, I'd want her on-staff." Her expression turned thoughtful. "What's her background, anyway?"

He shrugged. "She left that part of the form blank. Same with the section on formal education." He paused. "She's good?"

"Extremely."

You know," Doug said slowly, "in order to be considered as a PT Aide, she'd need to finish high school, or get a GED. If she did, by the time she did, it's possible that our hiring freeze could be over."

Erica smiled. "And if it isn't, I can't see how having a formal credential could hurt her in any way. Just the opposite, really." She nodded to herself. "Thanks for the suggestion, Doug. I'll sound her out in a bit, and see what she thinks of the idea."

Calculator looked at the time. Selina Kyle was one of his preferred clients. For that reason, he had decided that he would allow twenty-four hours for her to change her mind. It was only good business. He didn't want to jeopardize their relationship unnecessarily. On the other hand, his trade was information. And if he located an item for a customer, and the customer subsequently cancelled the order, he was certainly free to look for another buyer. After all, Selina had only asked him how much she owed for his work on her behalf—not how much it would cost for him to sit on the results of his search.

He checked the clock once more. It was now twenty-four hours and three minutes since Selina had cancelled their arrangement. Smiling, he called up the contact number he'd located when he'd first realized the significance of his findings on Flas

"Do I have the pleasure of addressing Ms Vanessa Devereaux? Ms Devereaux, I believe that I may have some information that might interest you, viz a viz the whereabouts of a man you once knew rather well..."
Chapter Summary

The Bats and Titans finally have Penguin where they want him! ...Or do they? Flass finds out that he may have double-crossed the wrong party. And Cass gets an offer that might change her life.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Kathy and Debbie for the beta! Thanks to Komikbookvixen for patiently answering my questions about Ms. Devereux's preferred weapon.

A/N: "Revenge of a Middle-Aged Woman" written by Annie Tate, Sam Tate, and Dave Berg. Recorded by Tracy Byrd on his Greatest Hits album (BNA, 2005).

"It was a classic case of woman scorned
She'll make that man wish he had never been born
She's a 40 something year old judge and jury
Hell hath no fury..."

(Annie Tate, Sam Tate, Dave Berg, "Revenge of a Middle-Aged Woman")

Chapter 25—Hell Hath No Fury

Vanessa Devereux waited until Calculator was finished before she laughed. "West Gotham Correctional Facility? So he's already in prison?" she demanded scornfully.

"Jail, actually," Calculator corrected. "He hasn't been convicted of anything yet. Meaning he might still walk."

"And what could possibly make you believe that your information has any value for me? I mean, apart from the fact that I don't mind hearing some good news, every now and then?"

Calculator smiled. "Perhaps nothing," he admitted. "On the other hand, there was the sad matter of Tanner Walker, some months ago."

There was a long silence on the other end.

His smile broadened. Tanner Walker had been one of Wall Street's rising stars—until he'd made off with several million dollars of investment funds, entrusted to him by his wealthy clients. At one time, he'd boasted about having his fingers in many pies. Someone had taken the time to make that boast a reality—and nearly driven a local bakery into bankruptcy. The rest of his body had later turned up in Brighton Beach. An autopsy had been unable to determine conclusively whether the actual cause of death had been blood loss from the amputations, asphyxiation due to drowning, or the blue-ringed octopus venom in his bloodstream. Clearly, though, someone had taken great pains to ensure his
demise. "You're lucky that the officer heading up the investigation was susceptible to bribery," he added.

"What do you want?"

Calculator leaned back into his cushioned desk chair. "I'm in the business of selling information, ma'am. I find data that I believe to be relevant to certain parties, and I offer it to them... for a price, of course."

"Of course." There was a pause. "As much as I would dearly love to get my hands on... Flass, you say his real name is? Getting close to him might not be feasible. There is the other matter, however." Her voice hardened. "What would it cost to ensure that you do not pass along any data regarding me to certain parties?"

Calculator laughed out loud. "Ms Devereux, it's a genuine pleasure to deal with someone as farsighted as yourself. In fact, if the idea amuses you, I may have several clients interested in doing business with a woman of your... creativity."

"Enough flattery." There was no trace of feigned disinterest now. "Name your price."

He did, and was pleasantly surprised when she accepted it without haggling. It almost made up for Selina backing out of their agreement. Of course, he'd need to be on his guard with Ms Devereux. She had an established history of tying up loose ends in an extremely permanent fashion. Then again, given his usual clientele, being on constant guard was merely part of his work environment.

On the whole, his day was going rather well.

"I don't like either option," Dick said seriously. "If I had something concrete to pin on Penguin, I would have done it long ago. It's more... I don't look too hard, and he doesn't test my tolerance. But if something were to drop in my lap..." He shook his head. "And it's not like he's being framed for blackmail. Even if bringing him in is going to send the rest of the underworld digging in deeper..."

"I know," Barbara agreed. "Stopping him is the right thing to do." She sighed. "Even if I do owe him for that whole business with Calculator, last year." She took a sip of coffee and set the mug down on the stand by her work station. "And yes, I do know that he was just trying to get back at Calculator for double-crossing him. I still owe him." She grimaced. "And, considering that I finance my own operations by," she lowered her voice conspiratorially, "skimming the proceeds of organized crime, I... I just can't take the moral high ground on this one."

Dick nodded. "And his intel has always been good. I mean, he could have sent us on wild goose chases, or tried to run me into a trap... well, he's done that, but not by feeding us the wrong information. If he tells me that the smuggled goods will be at wharf four, that's where they are. True, he might neglect to mention that the guard detail knows the Vulcan death-grip—"

"There's no such thing as the Vulcan death-grip."


Barbara brightened. "You're sure?"

"Yeah," he sighed. "Warn him. Once. But, if he doesn't believe you, he's on his own."

Alex steepled his fingers and looked across his desk to Bruce. "It sounds like you're planning to
leave things that way," he said finally.

Bruce sighed. "It's for the best. I know that. It doesn't really have anything to do with what happened that night. I have enemies and they aren't going to go away. If someone takes it into their head to burn down the manor, or bomb my car, I doubt whether they'll care if my daughter is with me."

"You know, Bruce," Alex said slowly, "many high-profile individuals do have families."

"Among them, Charles Lindbergh."

"Bruce," Alex said firmly, "I did some homework after our last session. In 2001 there were over 800,000 missing juveniles in the United States. Of those, roughly 400,000 were runaways, 200,000 were classed as 'family' abductions, custody issues and so on and so forth. Less than one hundred were, what's generally termed 'stereotypical' abductions—that is to say, kidnappings by strangers. One hundred out of eight hundred thousand, Bruce. Point-zero-one-two-five per cent. And keep in mind that most people don't have your security measures. With those in place, I'd say her odds are even better." He glanced at his desk blotter and picked up a sheet of paper. "And homicide ranks a distant fourth among leading causes of child death, behind unintentional injuries," he held the sheet out to Bruce, still reciting, "congenital malformations, and certain types of cancer."

Bruce accepted the page, shaking his head. "I know the statistics, Alex. I'm not going to risk her being one of them. Is that so wrong?"

"No," Alex admitted. "But, forgive me, Bruce. If her mother hadn't burst in on you in a fury and whisked her away, would you still be trying to convince yourself that she was better off without you?"

"This is the second time it's happened," Bruce pointed out.

"I'm aware of that. Which begs the question," Alex pressed. "Are you accepting the situation in order to protect Helena, or yourself?"

Bruce felt his temper ignite. "What if it is me?" He snapped, barely realizing what he was saying. 
"Aren't I allowed to look out for me, once in a while?" One hand flew to his mouth in horror. "Oh my God—" His heart seemed to thud, rather than thump. His eyes stung and he squeezed them shut. He wasn't going to cry. Not now. Not for this. He had to be strong. He had to keep himself together until he got back to the manor. Until he could go down to the Cave and scream and rage to his heart's content. Until then, he just had to stay calm. He could do that.

"Yes," Alex said softly. "Absolutely."

Bruce let out a long shuddering breath and fought for control.

"Hands," the guard ordered. Flass half-turned to allow him to undo the cuffs at his wrists. "I'll be outside," he announced. Flass nodded impatiently. He didn't turn when the iron door clanged shut behind him.

"Mr. Flass?" A heavy-set man with thinning red hair greeted him with a tight-lipped smile. "I'm Matt Walters. I'd like to represent you."

"Oh?" Flass smiled back guardedly as he extended his hand. "Hey. What's with...?" He gestured toward the latex glove Walters was sporting on his right hand.

"It's cold and flu season, Mr. Flass. I'm trying to avoid germs." Walters spoke calmly, even slightly
apologetically. "And you do seem to be sniffling a bit, sir."

Flass made a face, but he grasped the gloved hand and pumped it once. "It's the damned heating system in this place," he growled. "If it's not sniffles, it's cracked skin, or watery eyes, or... anyway, enough about me. You probably aren't going to want my case when I tell you what I intend to do."

"Oh?"

Flass wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "I'm going down. I know that. I did the crime, I'll do the time. But if I have to go away, it'll be worth it if I can bring the Bat down with me."

"The Bat?" Walters asked. "Clarify?"

"Not the new one. The original. Wayne. Yeah, I was holding Jimbo... um... Gordon. That's what they're charging me with, and it's the truth. But it's only part of it. See, what they aren't saying is that Wayne paid me a visit that night. He broke into my building. And he also," Flass smiled nastily, "broke his probation. He's saying I kidnapped him, well that's a lie. He came onto my property of his own free will. Yeah, I wanted to kill him. Would have, if the new Bat hadn't put in an appearance. Doesn't change the fact that he's looking at more time in Arkham if they find out he turned vidge again."

"Which means that in order to... bring him down with you, you need to go into full details, which are only going to hurt your own case."

"Told you you wouldn't want to take me on. That's fine. I've been expecting to represent myself, anyway."

"It would be tantamount to suicide."

"It's worth it."

Walters did a slow blink. "I... see. Well, if you're that bent on killing yourself..."

Flass looked up sharply. "You still want the case?"

The lawyer nodded. "I think I can help you." He extended his gloved hand for Flass to shake again. Flass did, with considerably more enthusiasm this time.

"What's your plan?"

"For now, nothing. We've got months before the trial. I'm going to start cracking the books, of course, but I also mean to sit back, observe, and see what unfolds." He smiled. "We've got a ways to go, but I think you'll be finding your prospects taking a dramatic change in the very near future."

Flass turned away to sneeze.

Walters flinched.

"Sorry about that." He wiped his nose on the back of his hand again. "Heating system. We done?"

"We are."

Flass nodded and moved to the door by which he'd entered. "Guess I'll be seeing you." He gave the door a hard rap. "Guard!"
Walters was whistling as he left the building and made his way back to his car. In the parking lot, he reached his clean hand into the front seat of the car where he'd placed a large plastic grocery bag. Slipping that hand into the bag, he removed the glove, taking care that none of his exposed skin touched the latex. Then, just as he'd practiced a dozen times in preparation for today, he slipped a second shopping bag onto his right hand, took a large clear Ziploc bag out of the glove compartment and dropped the glove into it. The shopping bag on his left hand followed. Only then did he start to breathe more easily. He pulled out his cell phone and punched in a number from memory.

"This is Matheson," he said when the answering machine came on. "It's done."

The office door opened and one of the Ghost Dragons—Eddie thought his name was Yun—exited, looking upset. The guard at the door cleared his throat and Penguin looked up.

"Ah, Devilbane." Penguin gestured for Eddie to come in and approach the desk. "Have I been working you too hard, my good man?"

Beneath his armor, Eddie blinked. "Um..."

"I thought as much. I'll tell you what: why don't you take the rest of the month off?" He scribbled something on a piece of note paper and handed it to him. "Things are expected to slow down quite a bit. If you do find that you need some remuneration, call that number and ask for Rennie. He'll likely have something to tide you over. Otherwise, I'll certainly be in touch once business picks up again." He ended the audience with a quick wave of his hand.

Eddie walked out of the office clutching the paper. The guard at the door motioned to another youth to go inside. Eddie vaguely remembered him from the Ghost Dragons' 'recruitment drive'. Was everyone getting the chop?

As he made his way out of the Iceberg, trying hard not to jostle anyone in the crowd of customers, he couldn't help but wonder whether Penguin suspected that he was a spy. If so, his temporary apartment wasn't going to be safe enough.

"...So," he radioed Wonder Girl a few minutes later, "I think I'd better head back to base tonight."

"Absolutely," Cassie said. "Not because he suspects you, though. Because the mission's over."

"What? But Penguin is—"

"I'll explain at the debriefing. M'Gann's on her way, too," she added. There was a warm smile in her voice. "Good work." She cut the signal.

Eddie frowned. How could he have done good work when he didn't think he'd done much of anything? Unless... He started to grin. Somehow, he didn't think that Mayor Houghton was going to see Penguin behind bars anytime soon.

"Dr. Arkham!" Cass looked up in surprise as an orderly wheeled him up to the front desk. "Here, too?"

"I don't plan on leaving this building in a wheelchair," Arkham rasped tartly. "Is this where you're working, now?"

"Short-staffed," Cass nodded. Then, remembering that Erica had told her to be friendly, she smiled. "Welcome."
A man in his late thirties, wearing a white lab coat over green scrubs bounded up. He carried a clipboard under one arm. "Jerry? Hi, I'm Craig. Is this your first time in PT?"

"Dr. Arkham," Cass corrected softly.

"Sorry?"

"It's Dr. Arkham. Not... Jerry."

Craig blinked, but he raised the clipboard and made a note on the attached chart. "Are you able to walk, Doctor?" He asked.

Arkham nodded. "For short distances."

"Good! Let's see if you can make it to the end of the hall and back. Cass? Would you follow behind with the wheelchair?"

For answer, Cass took position behind the chair and waited for Arkham to rise.

"Craig?" Erica Beecham emerged from Gymnasium A. "Will you need her for long?"

"Well, if you can spare me another volunteer to trail behind," he gestured toward Arkham, who was still slowly lifting himself out of the chair, "you can have her now. Otherwise..." he thought for a moment. "Say, twenty minutes?"

"That's fine. Cass, come find me when you're done."

"Okay." She smiled behind Erica's retreating back. She had no idea why the department head wanted to meet with her, but going by her body language, it didn't look like Erica was in any way upset with her.

"Cass," Craig broke into her thoughts, "wait until Dr. Arkham takes about three steps forward, and then start pushing the chair slowly."

Cass nodded. "Understood."

"I guess the real question," Alex said, long moment later, "is whether you do want them in your life, either singly or together."

Bruce slumped. "Sometimes," he ventured, "I wonder whether I push people away, only because I trust them to come back. I don't know if Selina will."

"And you didn't push her away."

"Not this time." Bruce hesitated. "But I have before, and I might again." He looked up cautiously, gauging Alex's reaction.

Alex only nodded. "It's good that you're being realistic about that. Old patterns are hard to break. Frankly, I'd be concerned if you'd tried to convince me that you would never do such a thing again, if you had another opportunity."

"So, you don't think I can avoid it."

"I didn't say that, either. Bruce, 'never' is a very long time. I'm not sure how much you know about addiction counselling. It's not something I've had to do to any significant extent since my internship
days, but one thing that still stays with me is that we try not to think in terms of 'never' relapsing. It isn't about getting the patient to promise to never take the next bottle, the next hit. It's about staying on-track for the present. Just for today, they're going to stay sober. Sometimes, it's more like 'just for the next hour'."

"And sometimes they fail."

"And sometimes they succeed. And sometimes, they relapse and then call their sponsors, go to that next meeting, resolve to try again—"

"But fail anyway."

"What do you want me to tell you, Bruce? I saw people who came in committed to getting better, who made it. I saw people who treated the whole thing like a joke and relapsed. And I saw people who came in gung-ho and committed to sobriety drop out of the program, and people I was sure would be using again as soon as they left the hospital stay the course. I work on the assumption that every patient I have has the potential to get better, and I do my best to help them along—but ninety-eight per cent of the cure doesn't come from me. All I do is try to guide you to the solutions you likely already know, but haven't allowed yourself to see."

Bruce frowned. "There is a part of me that wants them both in my life," he admitted. "But... no matter what you say, bringing Helena into my—my sphere of influence will put her in danger. The smartest thing to do would be to let them both go... and rebuff any future attempts at contact. Except..."

"Except...?"

Bruce sighed. "I... can't. It may be the wisest choice, but it's also the coward's choice. If I try to keep them in my life, I know I'll make a mess of things... the same way I have in the past." He smiled bitterly. "Well, maybe not the exact same way. But my... track record leaves something to be desired."

"But you still want to try."

"I have to. If Selina will let me. But I don't know if I can."

Alex nodded. "If that's your decision, you're going to have your work cut out for you. You do realize, I hope, that it's not something you'll need to handle alone?"

Bruce gave him a wan smile. That, at least, was one thing about which he had no doubt whatsoever.

"Are you happy here, Cassandra?" Erica asked. "Is this something you can see yourself doing regularly?"

Cass frowned. "Maybe. But... is it all... what I do now? Or... more challenge?" Mistake! The word hissed through her thoughts. What if they thought she wanted to go somewhere else? "I am," she said firmly. "Happy."

Erica smiled. "I can tell. You seem to have a real instinct for when to have the chair ready, and when the patient is doing fine without it." She gave Cass a direct look. "As far as challenge goes, there are limits to the duties that we can assign you, if you don't have the proper training."

Cass nodded, thinking she knew where this was going. "Can I... train here?"
Erica motioned her to a chair. "Possibly," she said, once Cass was seated. "Now, I've been speaking with Doug. He told me that you left the education section on your application blank. Have you never been to school?"

Cass shook her head. "No."

"All right. If you want a career in PT, at the very least, you need a high school diploma, or a GED." At Cass' perplexed frown, she clarified, "it's a test that you can take to show that you have high-school level academic skills. It's an alternative to a formal classroom. With a GED, you would qualify for our Physical Therapist Aide program—am I going too fast?"

She shook her head again.

"Okay," Erica took a deep breath and continued briskly. "I'd say about half of the program is what you're doing now: escorting patients to and from therapy and cleaning the equipment. You'll also learn more about the different machines and apparatuses we use, and how to set up for each individual's session and clean up afterwards."

Cass nodded.

Erica smiled encouragingly. "The next level up from an aide," she went on, "would be a Physical Therapy Assistant. Now that's a two-year diploma program, involving both academics and clinical field work. You would learn what sort of exercises a patient needs to do to regain function after an illness or injury." She thought for a moment. "Massage techniques, electrical stimulation... ultrasound..."

Cass realized that she was smiling. That sounded a good deal more interesting than what she was doing now. But she could tell that Erica wasn't quite finished yet. "And... after assistant?" she asked.

Erica hesitated for a moment. "Well, that's going to be the hardest. If you actually want to become a full-fledged physical therapist, you're looking at minimum six years of training—a four year undergraduate degree, and then a two-year masters. Most of our staff members have doctorates in the field. That's full-time," she added. "I'm not saying this to discourage you. I think that, if you want to go that route, you should. But it will take a good deal of time and money."

"Oh."

Erica smiled kindly. "My advice to you is to get the GED. With that, once we get our hiring budget, you'd be a prime candidate for the Aide program. Also, if you're a paid full-time staff member, you would qualify for our tuition reimbursement program." Seeing Cass frown again, she explained, "if you're taking courses that will teach you job-related skills, the hospital will pay for them. It's another thing to consider, if you wanted to train as an aide initially and then upgrade your skills."

"I... see." She remembered what Dick had told her before she'd come to volunteer in the first place. She knew that she shouldn't get her hopes up. If it came to a choice between tests and study and Batgirl, then... Two nights on patrol and one night off. I can make time. And if it takes me longer, so what? Not a race. Erica liked her work, Cass reminded herself. Erica thought that she could do more than she already was, if she had more training. Erica didn't care if Cass talked funny, or if it took her five times as long to read the instructions. Erica didn't think she was stupid, just because she had trouble communicating.

She smiled. "I'll think, okay?"

Erica beamed back. "Absolutely." She walked over to her filing cabinet and pulled open the top
drawer. "I believe I have some pamphlets... here we go!" She returned, holding the three booklets extended fanlike before her. "Take your time. Look them over. And when you think you know what you want to do, come back and see me." Her eyes twinkled. "Meanwhile, you can heat up three paraffin baths. We're going to need them in a little while."

Two days later, Flass woke up in his cell with a sore throat and aching limbs. He groaned and brushed a hand against his forehead. He thought it felt warm.

The klaxon sounded, announcing the dawn of a new day. He stumbled to his feet and made his way to the cell door. When it slid open, he took a few seconds longer than normal to step through.

After what felt like an eternity, but was probably no more than a few minutes, a guard approached. His eyes slid past Flass as he made a notation on his roster. Then they snapped back. "You feeling okay, Flass?"

Flass tried to appear stoic. "Just the usual with this damned building," he muttered. It wasn't easy being a former cop in here. He couldn't afford to demonstrate any weakness.

The guard, however, had other ideas. "Report to the infirmary after breakfast," he ordered. Then he continued down the line of prisoners.

Flass watched him go, willing the inspection to pass quickly. If he had to remain standing here much longer, he knew that he was going to keel over.

"What," Kowalski said slowly, "do you mean... nothing?"

The officer tugged at his jacket collar. "Just what I said, sir. We went over the place with a fine-toothed comb. We brought the dogs in, just in case he'd gotten sloppy and there were drugs on the premises. Palmer spent six hours going over the account books, and they all seem to check out. Hell, we couldn't even find a dirty cleaning rag on a food surface in the kitchen! We have nothing."

Lonerghan's jaw dropped. "But the bird books on the shelf... ?"

"We checked them out. Page by page. They're just books."

"But... but I saw those records with my own eyes! I even took photos!"

"I saw them," Kowalski growled. "They're not admissible in court." He made a fist and smacked it into his palm. "Three months of undercover work down the tubes. Damn."

Lonerghan let out a long breath. "So, what happens now?"

"Now? Now you go home, get some rest, and report back to the office on Monday." Kowalski smiled wearily. "I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up. Not where Cobblepot is concerned. Nice try, officer."

Lonerghan nodded dejectedly and headed for his Camaro.

Five minutes later, he was back, and clutching a bulky envelope to his chest. "Sir... you... you might want to have a look at this..."

Since Penguin never had cared for computers, it fell to Savant to initiate contact with Oracle later that evening.
They did indeed have a warrant, he messaged. You have my employer's gratitude.

Barbara allowed herself a small smile. I guess that makes us even for your help with Calculator last year.

A new line of text appeared and Barbara's eyes widened.

Actually, my employer rather thinks he likes the idea of the Oracle continuing to owe him. So, here's some new intel. As you're aware, he runs the sort of establishment where people tend to speak freely. One such individual was in there two days ago. He was not local. He paid with a credit card under the name Walter Matheson. And he spoke about something that might be of interest to your organization.

As the lines of text continued to appear, Barbara let loose with a loud expletive. "Batman!" She hit the comm-link frantically. "You've got to get to the jail, right now! You have to tell them that..."

"They've transported him to Evanstown General," Dick said tersely, twenty minutes later. "It looked like he just had a bad case of flu until he started showing symptoms of meningitis."

"Docs told you that?"

"Trustee in the infirmary. He seemed a bit rattled over how fast Flass deteriorated. My showing up just spooked him more."

Oracle nodded. "I'll interface with the Evanstown systems and try to make sure the right links come up first if anyone tries an online search for symptoms. Thing is, they might try to treat the symptoms first and wait until he's stable to run full diagnostic tests. And given that once meningitis develops, death usually occurs within 24 to 36 hours, and the odds of survival fall with each hour—"

"You want me to head for the hospital," Batman finished. "I'm on it." He paused. "I... I made it down here in record time tonight. I don't think it even crossed my mind until now that if Flass doesn't make it..."

"Bruce's life gets a lot easier. I know. And I suspect Penguin did too, when he asked Savant to pass this bit of news on to me." Her voice hardened. "He's trying to convince us that we're no better than he is. Showing us how easy it is to cross over to—"

"The dark side of the force?"

"The murky side."

"Did you debate whether to call me when you found out?"

"No. But once I had, I have to admit, there was a part of me that wanted to kick myself."

She heard the grin in his voice when he replied, "I can't blame you for that. But you did right. Got to go; I'll call you from the hospital."

"Hurry."

"I love you." They both said it at the same time. Then Dick clicked off his comm-link and Barbara set about hacking into the Evanstown General Hospital computer network.

Kowalski held the photographs as though they were a stick of live dynamite. "Well," he said slowly,
we can nail Cobblepot with these—but the mayor's going to have to answer a lot of questions, too. You say they were in your car?"

Lonerghan nodded. "You saw what was sealing the envelope?"

"Oh yes." He peeled the bat-shaped sticker off of the flap. It stuck to his index finger. A second later, the bottom began to curl upwards. "These pics do shed a whole new light on why Houghton's been after us to get to Cobblepot, don't they?"

"So, what happens now?"

"Now?" Kowalski tucked the envelope into his jacket. "Now, I hold on to these until first thing tomorrow morning and find out how the commish wants this played. We thought we had Penguin and right now, he's pointing and laughing at us. We think we have Houghton, but if we're wrong about that too, he's not going to be laughing. We're going to have to play this one very carefully." He smiled. "I wonder if there are any job openings at City Hall you might want to put in an application for. Something that might give you a chance to snoop around outside of normal work hours, maybe..."

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Batman made the fifteen minute drive from West Gotham to Evanstown in record time. He spent nearly as long looking for a parking spot that wouldn't block the ambulance zones. Finally, he burst through the doors of the ER and dashed to the reception area. "I have some information about a patient arrived from West Gotham Correctional," he said in a low voice.

The man swallowed hard. He took in Batman's determined expression, swallowed again, and got up. "I'll be right back," he said as he opened the door behind him that led into the emergency room proper.

Batman waited. Hesitantly, he looked around the waiting area, noting the apprehension in the eyes of most of the other patients.

"It's okay," he said reassuringly. "I'm here to try to save someone's life. Nothing more, nothing less."

"So, Joker isn't on the loose?" one man asked from the corner.

Batman shook his head. "No. I'm sorry if I startled you." He felt a light but insistent tug on his cape and forced himself to react slowly. He looked down at the face of a boy of about seven, his hand clasped tightly in that of a girl a few years older.

"Are you really Batman?" the boy asked, wide-eyed.

Dick bent down almost to eye level. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"Can we have your autograph?" The girl blurted. Then, as if horrified by her daring, she clapped her free hand to her mouth.

"Um..."

"Batman?" A petite dark-skinned woman in surgical scrubs approached. A surgical mask hung loosely around her neck by its lower straps. She had a stethoscope too. "I'm Dr. Dubois. And while I don't mean to be rude, I really can't spare more than a moment or two. We have a lot of sick people in here."

Batman nodded. "Can we talk somewhere we won't be overheard?"
Her eyes narrowed. "This way." She took led him into the Emergency wing and steered him toward a small kitchenette. "Quickly, if you please."

Batman took a deep breath. "Less than an hour ago, you took in a patient who appeared to be suffering from meningitis," he said evenly. "I've been advised that you might want to examine him a bit more closely." He dropped his voice to a low whisper. "I have reason to believe that he's been exposed to anthrax."
Chapter 26—Building Back and Tearing Down

Dr. Dubois' eyes widened. "How do you... Never mind." She took a deep breath. "I don't suppose you know how long ago the patient was exposed?"

Batman nodded. "My sources tell me it's been between three and four days."

"That's what I was afraid of." She exhaled. "Anthrax, thankfully, isn't communicable to anyone who hasn't been directly exposed to its spores. In other words, this isn't Outbreak, and we aren't facing anything remotely like an epidemic. Unfortunately, once the symptoms progress beyond a certain point, the..." she caught herself. "Thank you for your information," she said formally. "Unless there's anything else you think I should know, I need to go and communicate this to my staff, stat."

Batman nodded again. "I'll see myself out then."

She smiled wearily. "I don't suppose you'd know how he contracted it?"

"I'm looking into it."

"If you find out," she warned, "and if there's even a remote possibility that you've been similarly..."
exposed, seek medical attention, stat. If we had any of the vaccine on hand, I'd use it on you as a precaution, but anthrax infection is uncommon enough that we currently don't." She frowned. "I can't stress enough, though, that once the symptoms start to show, the chances of survival drop. If you're exposed, don't wait. Get treated."

"I'll keep that in mind."

His cape swished as he turned and exited the room. The two kids were still in the waiting room. They looked up expectantly. Dick smiled apologetically. "I don't give autographs," he said softly, "but here," he reached into one of his belt compartments and extracted a small block notepad. He tore off the two topmost squares. "Best I can do."

The children's eyes lit up as they saw the bat-insignia at the bottom of the pages. "Thank you!" the girl exclaimed. The boy was quiet, but his smile spoke volumes.

Dick grinned back.

The smile fell away as he stepped outside and the cold night air hit his face. "Message communicated, Oracle," he reported. "Now, what the heck is going on?"

Barbara spoke into her Bluetooth as she rapidly diced a stalk of celery. "Penguin came through with some intel," she said. "The guy who did it isn't local. He's from New York. His name is Walter Matthew Whitelock, but he usually goes by Matthew Walters or Walter Matheson. Anyway, from the way he was talking after a few beers, when he visited Flax, he'd had the anthrax spores on a latex glove. So, once Whitelock shook hands with him..."

"I thought it had to enter the body through an open cut," Dick protested.

"You're thinking of cutaneous anthrax," Barbara agreed, reaching for another celery stalk. "Thing is, when meningitis occurs in anthrax victims, it's usually caused by inhaling the spores. Now, I think the guards would have stepped in if Whitelock clamped his hand over Flax's nose, but if, after shaking hands with him, Flax had... She drew in her breath. "That's got to be it. He wiped his nose with that hand," she said firmly. "West Gotham's HVAC system is old—it seems like all of the inmates come down with colds or runny noses. If he wiped his nose before he washed that hand off..."

"Are you sure that's how it went down?" Dick asked. "I don't doubt that's how Flax contracted anthrax, but what I mean is, to pull something like this off it would almost have to take a professional. And professionals don't usually get drunk and spill their guts in a bar."

Barbara tossed a handful of diced celery into the wok. "They do when Penguin decides that the best way to find out what a new face in town is doing in his establishment is to mix him up a very special drink."

"He can't do that with all his patrons," Dick protested.

"No," Barbara added some sliced carrots. "I doubt he does. But you know yourself that after a while, you start to develop a sixth sense about people."

Dick thought about that. "Yeah. It doesn't always kick in, but when it does, there's usually a reason. Okay, so Whitelock gives off that vibe, Penguin gets him talking... and he blabs to you?"

Barbara sighed. "And now I still owe him. What he told me wasn't all that significant to him—so a
stranger offs an ex-cop awaiting trial. It's relatively small potatoes—except that since this guy had a mad-on for Bruce—"

"He knows it's significant to us."

She gave the wok a stir. "No idea what the motive was, mind you."

Dick nodded. "Guess I'll find that out when I'm done asking him," he said grimly. "Let's see if I can get him to open up to me without slipping him a roofie."

"Bruce?" Gordon knocked once on the bedroom door. "Are you just about ready?"

Bruce didn't turn around. "I suppose," he said tonelessly.

Jim took a step into the room. "Are you all right?"

Bruce sighed. "I suppose," he repeated. "I guess, there's no real way to avoid this."

"Well, you could tell them you aren't up to it. They'll understand."

"They'll be concerned. If you go without me, they'll ask questions. If you don't, they'll think I'm in worse shape than I am."

"And if you go and act like you're doing now, they're still going to ask, and they're still going to think it."

Bruce took a deep breath. Then he turned to face Jim and flashed him a broad society smile. "Better?"

"No."

The smile fell away. "Look, I've been working on this. I know how much I have to be thankful for. But right now? I just... I don't want to hear everyone saying, 'I'm thankful you're out of Arkham and back with us' over and over and over again. I know they are. I'm thankful too. But..."

Jim put a hand on his shoulder. "She hasn't returned your calls?"

That was another reason he didn't feel like going. "I haven't called," Bruce replied. "I've thought about it. Except that I can't guarantee that the same thing won't happen again." He met Jim's concerned gaze squarely. "The truth is, if I had that day to do over again, there are a few things I'd do differently. Following Flass's people to get you out wouldn't be one of them. So. If I'm not prepared to put Helena first, then maybe Selina's doing the right thing." He forced a smile. "I just... need to accept that and move on."

"Bruce..."

"Call Dick. Tell him we're running a bit late." He took a deep breath. "A few meditation exercises and I'll be fine. They won't take me more than twenty minutes, tops. His smile became more genuine. "They should do the trick. I mean, I can't put a damper on Thanksgiving, after all."

Bruce knocked on the apartment door and smiled warmly as Dick opened it. When Dick moved aside to allow him and Gordon to enter, however, the smile froze. His jaw dropped. One step... two steps... and he was kneeling on the carpet next to... "Helena?"
The toddler looked up from her shape-sorter. "Hi, Daddy!" she beamed, and passed him a green plastic triangle.

Disbelieving, Bruce accepted it. "For me?" he asked seriously.

"I know," a familiar voice interrupted. "I shouldn't have." Selina shook her head. "I really, really shouldn't have." She extended a hand to Bruce. "Please. Let's... talk," she continued, gesturing down the hallway. "Privately."

Bruce closed the bedroom door behind them and waited.

Selina stood facing him silently.

After a few moments, Bruce raised a quizzical eyebrow.

Selina closed her eyes and nodded. "I was out of line," she admitted. "I was feeling... guilty about going off on a mission. I missed Helena. And then, things went horribly... horribly wrong. And in between wondering if I was ever going to see my daughter again, I kept telling myself that at least, she was with you. Whatever happened to me, at least, she was safe."

"She was safe," Bruce pointed out.

"But she wasn't with you. And when I saw the article about Flass, about what happened..." She opened her eyes wide. "Bruce, after my parents died, I lived on the streets for a time, before I was sent to Seagate Juvenile Detention Center. There was no hearing, no trial—no attempt at placing me in foster care."

"That would never have happened to Helena," Bruce said, reaching for her.

Selina shied away. "I know. But... when I got back, I was still... shaky over splashing down in the south Pacific. And finding out about what happened to you was one more shock on top of everything else. All I could think was, that if I hadn't made it back and you were in Blackgate... or Arkham... or whatever... I pictured Helena in Seagate and I panicked." She looked down at the ground. "I overreacted. I know I did. The truth is," she screwed her eyes tightly shut, "the truth is, she's safer with you than she is with me."

"I wouldn't go that far."

Selina shook her head wearily. "Bruce. Your security is better than mine. And... If something happened to you while she was in your care, tell me that she wouldn't be under the protection of the JLA, JSA, Outsiders, Titans..."

"Shadowpact," Bruce added.

"Shadowpact? Seriously?" She smiled, but an instant later, she sobered once more.

"If something were to happen to me, on the other hand," she sighed, "I love Holly and Karon... but I don't think they're up to raising her."

"I'd look after her," Bruce said. "You know that."

She nodded. "So... tell me," she said slowly, "did you mean 'you', or did you mean 'we'?" Before Bruce could reply, she continued, "I guess, what I really mean is, did I completely blow any chance..."
of our... being an 'us'? Or is there still hope?"

Bruce hesitated. "I don't know," he admitted finally. "I... I do understand why you did what you did. And... it's not as if I haven't behaved similarly in the past."

"But I've walked away from you twice, now."

Bruce nodded.

Selina closed her eyes again. "Maybe there's more," she said softly. "I mean, before all of this... you've got to admit we both lived and... and loved... on the edge. As much as we tried to make things work outside of the costume, I think—even though we never admitted it—we both knew that if the signal went up, you'd be off like a shot. And if I had a job to do... well, the best I could hope for from you in the way of support was a five second head start. I mean, we were serious about each other... but it was still almost a game. I don't think we really let ourselves get beyond a certain point. I think we both knew that there was too much in the way. Only now..."

"There isn't," Bruce finished, nodding again.

"And with Helena in the picture, it can't be a game anymore."

"No," Bruce agreed. "If you take her away now, she's young enough. She'll... forget me."

"I don't want her to forget you!" Selina exclaimed. "If I did, I wouldn't be here tonight! Look. I..." she took a deep breath. "Harley's out. On probation. And she's got a few problems—none of which are currently packing Smilex, by the way. But they are the kind that... that I can help her with and your people can't. She called me a couple of days ago, asking if I could meet her. I agreed. Don't worry; the kind of help I'm giving her won't cross any of the lines you're always concerned about. The thing is, I really... I consider Harley a friend. That doesn't mean I have any illusions that, if it came down to a question of loyalty, she wouldn't pick Joker over me any day of the week. I don't want her to know I have a child. I especially don't want her to start speculating as to who the father might be."

"You want me to look after Helena."

"Until Harley's issue is resolved," Selina admitted. "We're meeting later tonight. I don't want Helena nearby when we do. If taking her is a problem for you, I'll ask Karon. She should be fine with it. But I wasn't kidding about your security. I just don't want to give the impression that I only want you for a babysitter."

"It's fine," Bruce cut her off.

Selina smiled. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure." He took a deep breath. "As far as the other matter goes, I..." he took a deep breath. "I don't know."

"I understand." She placed a hand on his shoulder. "I want you to realize, though... even if it turns out that there is no... us, I won't keep Helena from you."

Bruce absorbed that with a faint smile. "I... appreciate that. I think we'd best rejoin the others."

"I'm not staying for dinner," Selina said. "But I'll stick around for a few more minutes before I say my goodbyes. Call me later?"
Bruce took a deep breath. "If you want to stop by the manor," he said, "you don't need to call ahead."

Her face broke into a surprised smile. "I'll keep that in mind."

Helena was starting to fuss in her highchair when Barbara came downstairs. "Sorry I'm late," she said, looking somewhat dazed. "I was trying to wrap up some work when I got an alert. And then it took me a little longer to confirm it." She pulled off her glasses and wiped them absently. "I'm not sure I'm comfortable calling this one 'good news'," she said solemnly, but approximately forty-five minutes ago, Flass died of anthrax poisoning.

There was a moment's silence. Then Bruce spoke heavily. "I didn't want this."

Tim cleared his throat. "Considering the way Flass was talking, up until he got sick," he looked around, "sorry to bring it up, but it's something to consider. To put it bluntly, if you start asking yourself, 'who benefits?' well, do we need to be worried about being brought in for questioning?"

"I doubt it," Barbara said. "I mean, considering that the DA's office wasn't interested in going after Bruce on Flass's say-so, Batman's reputation for not killing, and the fact that bio-warfare isn't exactly anyone's MO, here... I mean, I guess it's possible someone might be a little overzealous..."

"I'll gauge Montoya's mood the next time the signal goes up," Dick said.

Barbara nodded and continued, "...but I really don't see anybody tying us into it, though. No."

"Okay. Just checking."


A wail from Helena punctuated the two statements.

Jim took a deep breath. "Why don't we all sit down and get started," he suggested. "We can talk about this over dinner. When we discuss what we're all thankful for—no, don't everyone go looking at me like that. We aren't going to have that trial dangling over us," he glanced at Bruce, "you don't have to worry about how you're going to avoid testifying, and I don't have to worry about slipping up under cross-examination. Look, I didn't want Flass dead, but I'm not planning to shed tears at his funeral either. Now I can smell that turkey out here in the hallway. Let's not wait until it dries out."

With that, he stalked into the dining room. After a rapid exchange of glances, the others followed suit.

"Well, who wants to start?" Dick looked around the table.

Cass sighed. "Do now. Get over." She smiled. "Thankful you all understand me when I talk. Thankful they like me at hospital. Thankful can read now. A little." She glanced at Bruce. "Thankful lost fight to you in cave."

Bruce gave her a fleeting smile. "It was a training exercise," he said in response to the others' questioning glances.

Cass wasn't finished though. "Thankful to have family that helps. Because... because I'll need. When studying for Gee-eee-dee."
There was a stunned silence. Then everyone started speaking at once.

"Cass! Congratulations! When did you decide! You go, girl! You can do it!"

Cass's eyes met Bruce's. A small smile played on her lips as she gave him a quick wink.

For a moment, Bruce frowned in confusion. Then understanding dawned. The constant refrain that he had been dreading tonight, the way everyone was going to repeat *ad nauseum* how thankful they were that he was back—Cass had just preempted it. By waiting until now to reveal her news, she had effectively replaced him as the center of attention. Of course, the others were still going to express their gratitude that he was free, but after Cass' bombshell, it would be almost anticlimactic.

He smiled. "Well done."

Cass beamed back in perfect comprehension.

"Well, that's fortuitous," Alex remarked at their session, the following week.

Bruce's eyebrows drew together ominously. "If you're implying that I had anything to do with—"

"Far from it," Alex interrupted smoothly. "Direct—or even indirect—murder isn't your style. It never has been, and frankly, I'd be hard-put to envision a circumstance where it ever would be, although I'd concede that possibility."

"You would," Bruce stated flatly.

"Only inasmuch as I acknowledge that there is a certain breaking point beyond which any one of us could become a killer. I wouldn't begin to speculate on where yours might be. I would only say that it almost certainly exists."

Bruce thought about that for a moment before he gave Alex a grudging nod. "There have been moments when I was," his shoulders slumped, "angry enough. Until now, something has always intervened. Fate, friendship," he shook his head, "or... I don't know what to call it. Cowardice, perhaps."

Alex steepled his fingers. "Cowardice," he repeated. "I'm surprised to hear you use that term to describe your actions."

"As I said," Bruce repeated, "I don't know what I should call it. It was only the one time. When Jim retired. I know it's public record that he was shot, that a suspect was in custody, and that he was released due to lack of evidence. The case against him was circumstantial—it would have required a full confession on his part to stand up in court. GCPD kept him in custody as long as they could to try to obtain that confession. When they failed, I stepped in." As he started telling the story to Alex, he realized that he could still recall every detail vividly, as though he were standing there now, watching the scene unfold before his eyes.

*It had been in the alley next to GCPD Headquarters. That shouldn't have surprised him. Too many of his failures seemed to take place in alleys. He'd lost his parents in one, found his second, doomed Robin in one. And that night, he had discovered the man who had nearly murdered Jim Gordon in another. His jaw set as he swung down from above and kicked the suspect—the culprit—into the pile of trash bags.*

"You shot James Gordon." His voice was a harsh rasp.
Officer Jordan Rich cringed away from him. "Y-yes," he whimpered. "Yes, I did!" Then, under his breath, he mumbled, "oh, god, you're going to kill me."

For the barest moment, he felt a bittersweet pleasure. True, Jim was still in the hospital, but the killer would face justice. There was no hint of that relief in the intensity of his tone, however. "Go back inside. Confess to the police."

All at once, Rich blinked. "Confess...?" His voice trailed off in disbelief. "You're not going to kill me? You need a confession?"

Something was wrong. He realized it even as he replied, "I'll beat it out of you if I have to." Rich was still scared. Terrified, in fact. But he wasn't cringing anymore. He wasn't pleading. Instead, the look he returned was resigned.

"Go ahead," he said dully. "It can't hurt any more than losing everything. Gordon did enough damage to last a lifetime. And now I've done the same to him."

Batman spun about. And then, barely aware of what he was doing, he fired off his grapnel and soared into the night. Part of him wanted to test Rich's resolve—to pummel Jordan to a bloody pulp and then see whether he was still determined to not confess. Instead he ran like a coward into the darkness...

Alex was looking at him and shaking his head, not in disappointment, but in naked empathy. "He twisted your own moral code and used it against you? And you still held firm to that code?"

"And Jim stepped down. Yes, I kept to that code, but I sacrificed a partner and working relationship on that altar." He shook his head. "I could probably make a case that in so doing, I laid the groundwork for my current circumstances. Jim would never have sanctioned my arrest and subsequent... disposition."

"I doubt it," Alex said mildly. "You do realize that, after you were admitted to the hospital, Atkins had no voice in ordering your competency hearing? That it was a decision made by a medical board?"

Bruce blinked. Of course, Alex was right. Atkins could no more have sentenced him to Arkham than bound him over to Blackgate without a trial. But somehow, he'd never made that connection. He took a ragged breath. "I ran," he whispered. "I could have beaten that confession out of him. I honestly wanted to."

"But...?"

Bruce closed his eyes. "I wanted to do worse than beat him. And this time, I had no reason to expect that anybody would hold me back."

Clark had stopped him killing Joker, after Jason. Jim had too, first after Joker had shot Barbara, and then later when Hush had staged his own murder. Even Shondra had prevented him from murdering Benedict Asp. Dick had been there when he might have crossed that line with Two-Face. With David Cain, it had been Barbara... with the rest of the family within earshot. But on that night, there had been nobody. And rather than trust someone to show up at the last minute, rather than trust himself to maintain control...

"I could have become a murderer that night."

"But you chose not to."
Bruce screwed his eyes tightly shut and nodded.

"Even though Rich had nearly killed one of your closest friends."

"The last time Jim stopped me from killing Joker," Bruce said raggedly, "I flat-out asked him how many more lives we were expected to let that clown ruin."

"I don't care," Jim had replied. "I won't let him ruin yours."

Alex nodded.

"If I could have asked him about Rich, I have no doubt that he would have expressed the same sentiment."

"So, you didn't kill him," Alex ventured, "because Gordon wouldn't have approved?"

"No. Partly. No. I didn't kill him because I'm... better than that." He hesitated. "Or worse. I had a friend in Intensive Care, and I let his attempted killer go free. And Jim retired."

"Which he wouldn't have done, had you brought Rich to justice."

"No, I think he still would have," Bruce said dully. "But I would have felt..."

"Better? Or worse?"

"I don't know! I wish I did," he admitted. "I'm not... proud... of the way I handled that situation, but I don't know what else I could have done."

His eyes were burning. He clenched his fists in his lap and screwed his eyelids even more tightly closed.

"It sounds to me," Alex ventured, "as though two of your integral values, namely your moral code and your sense of loyalty, came into direct conflict. Given the nature of the circumstances, one had to give way to the other. Frankly, I'm not sure you could have handled things better."

A small amount of moisture broke past his eyelashes and his shoulders shook as he fought for control.

___

Selina drove back from her meeting with Harley shaking her head in disbelief. This was worse than an Abbott and Costello routine. Not that she didn't like Abbott and Costello—she did. They were comic geniuses. But they weren't people she would have enjoyed talking to in real life. It had been her own fault, of course. Harley had seemed so together tonight that Selina had bitten the bullet and asked...

"Harley, why do you stay with him? You've got brains, looks, an education... You know you can do so much better."

"But I don't wanna do better. I want Mistah J!"

She'd taken the other woman's wrist and deliberately rolled up her sleeve. "Don't tell me. You walked into a carpenter's vise."

"He... he just don't know his own strength."

"Yes, he does."
"You don't understand."

It had been all Selina could do not to lash out at her. She didn't understand abuse? She'd barely known a day without it until she'd escaped from Seagate. She'd been almost tempted to reveal that, but even after all these years, the scars were still too fresh. Besides, if Harley ever betrayed that confidence to Joker, Selina didn't know what she would do, but it would be something unpleasant and memorable.

"I understand more than you know," she'd said finally. "Look. We both know that the contacts I gave you, you could have picked up from plenty of other sources. What's the real reason you begged me to meet with you tonight?"

Harley sighed. "Pammy kicked me out. She said she didn't wanna hear me talkin' about my puddin' no more. I need a place to crash, Kitty. Help a friend out?"

Selina clenched her teeth. She should have guessed it was something like this. Damn it. She couldn't bring her back to her apartment. But she couldn't leave Harley to fend for herself on the street, either.

"Where are your hyenas?" she asked with a calmness she didn't feel.

"Oh, they're at the zoo. I'm gonna get them out tomorrow." Her face took on a doting look. "They miss their mommy so."

Selina sighed. "Leave them there until you're back on your feet." She opened her wallet and pulled out a wad of bills. "Look, you know the Nyberg Inn on Carlton Street? They've got room. Just tell them you're a friend of mine."

"But..."

"I have an arrangement with them. They'll put up anyone I vouch for, no questions asked." She smiled apologetically. "My place is small, and my sofa is lumpy, okay? You'll be more comfortable there."

Harley thought about that for a moment. Then, her hand reached forward and scooped up the bills. "Sure, why not? Thanks, Catty."

She'd been so relieved to have that problem solved that she hadn't even bothered to take issue with the nickname.

She parked the car in front of her building, headed upstairs and fumbled wearily with her apartment key.

Joker was sitting on her sofa, his left foot resting casually on his right knee. He was holding a baby rattle. "Selina! Babe!" He exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell anyone you had a rugrat? Now where is that sweet little kitten hiding?"
27. More Than Any Man Can Take

Chapter Summary

Selina needs Bruce to keep Helena safe... but who's going to protect Bruce from Helena?

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Aiyokusama for the beta! "Mr Mom" lyrics written by Ron Harbin, Richie McDonald and Don Pfrimmer. Recorded by Lonestar on their Let's Be Us Again album (BNA, 2004).

Football, soccer and ballet
Squeeze in Scouts and PTA
And there's that shopping list she left
That's seven pages long
How much smoke can one stove make
The kids won't eat my charcoal cake
It's more than any man can take
Being Mr. Mom

Well
Pampers melt in a Maytag dryer
Crayons go up one drawer higher
Rewind Barney for the sixteenth time
Breakfast six, naps at nine
There's bubble gum in the baby's hair
Sweet potatoes in my lazy chair
Been crazy

all day long and it's only Monday

(Ron Harbin, Richie McDonald, Don Pfrimmer, "Mr. Mom")

Chapter 27—More Than Any Man Can Take

Selina took an immediate step backward. Joker waggled a gentle finger.

"Ah-ah-ah, Catty. Mustn't walk out on your old pal. Or," he gestured toward the occupant of the overstuffed armchair, whom she hadn't noticed in her shock at finding Joker on her couch, "maybe that should be pals."

"Holly!" The younger woman's face was almost unrecognizable beneath a layer of heavy white greasepaint. Above the white cloth gag, her eyes were wide with terror. Over the gag, Joker had scrawled a bold red smile, using one of Selina's lipsticks. The corners of the grin extended sloppily
past the gag, smearing the oily makeup on her cheeks. Her hands were bound before her and further coils of rope held her arms fast to her sides.

Selina's upper lip curled back. "Joker, if you've hurt her..."

Joker giggled. "Does she look hurt to you yet, Catty? I gotta say, you're a hard woman to track down these days. A man might even think you were trying to avoid him." A note of menace crept into his voice on his last sentence.

"What do you want?"

His eyes gleamed. "Just wanted to meet your little darling," he cooed. "I love making babies smile."

Her heart thudded. "She... she's not mine," she said steadily. "I've been looking after my neighbor's little girl a couple of afternoons a week."

"Oh, really?" Joker's smile took on a more sinister cast. "Do tell."

"There's nothing else to tell," Selina retorted. "I wasn't exactly equipped for a toddler, so I bought a few things, my neighbor gave me a few things and..." she shrugged feebly, "here we are. And why are you here again?"

"Just looking for my poor lost little harlequin," Joker said deprecatingly. "I know she was going to meet with you tonight. I came by to surprise her, but the only person I found was your little friend here." He bounded over to Holly, danced behind the armchair and brought both hands down hard on the bound woman's shoulders. "SURPRISE!" Holly flinched.

"Harley's not with me." Selina was amazed at how calm she sounded. "We did have coffee, but I don't know where she went after that."

Joker sighed. "Well, that's too bad. You see, I sent her off to Pammy to get something for me. She never came back. And I'm just dying to know what's keeping her. In fact," the menace was back in his voice, "if she doesn't put in an appearance shortly, there will be quite a bit of dying going on around here." He picked up a letter opener from the coffee table, bounded back to Holly and set the point experimentally against her throat. "How about it, Cookie?" he said. "Aren't you dying to know where my partner is? Well, you will be, soon..."

Dick hated to admit it, but he was stumped. He'd been trying to figure out who was behind the East End burglaries for nearly two weeks, but he'd failed to turn up a single lead. Even if Montoya had been wrong about there being a hidden connection between the victims, even if the burglar was targeting the East End because he—or she—happened to live conveniently nearby, Dick thought that he should have been able to uncover something that might point to a suspect.

He sighed, and turned to begin another patrol of the area. Then he stopped. Maybe he'd been scrutinizing the situation too closely and gotten to a point where he couldn't see the forest for the trees. Selina lived in this neighborhood. And she had probably finished whatever business she'd had with Harley. At any rate, it couldn't hurt to drop by her window and see if she had any ideas.

He fired off his jumpline and headed off in the direction of her apartment.

Joker's grin was absolutely malevolent. "Here's how it's going to work, Catty," he chuckled. "You're going to look for Harls. I'm going to begin... entertaining... your friend." He walked in front of the chair and looked at Holly. "You're looking forward to that, huh, Toots? I can tell by the size of the
grin on your face."

All at once, Holly's eyes flashed fire, and her foot shot up toward Joker's groin. Unfortunately, he was too far away for her to connect. Mockingly, the clown danced even further out of her range. "Uh uh uh," he giggled. "There'll be time to play 'This Little Piggy' while we wait for Harls to make her entr—"

A bullwhip snaked through the air and coiled around Joker's wrist. Selina shifted her weight, braced herself and tugged hard, yanking Joker away from Holly. As the clown reeled toward her, instead of fighting the momentum, he brought up his other hand, still holding the letter opener and lunged. 

Selina had a split second to realize what was about to happen. Then her bedroom door burst open, and a batarang flew out and clipped Joker's hand. The letter opener dropped. An instant later, Batman sprang out and lunged to clamp one hand around Joker's wrist and wrap his other arm around Joker's throat, yanking him away. 

Without pausing a beat, Selina leaped forward and raked her fingers down the immobilized clown's cheek.  "Aaaagh!" Joker screamed. "You've maimed me for life! You... you... huh?" 

Selina made a disgusted noise. "I knew getting a manicure yesterday was a mistake." She kicked Joker in the shins. "Mind you, the pedicure doesn't seem to be cramping my style too badly."

Batman smiled. "You ladies okay?"

Selina looked past him to Holly and nodded. "I think so. " She took a deep breath. "Come back when you're done taking out the trash. I need to talk to you."

"Thanks," Selina said, when Dick returned, nearly an hour later. "That was closer than I liked."

"How's Holly?"

Selina walked to the counter and poured herself some coffee. "Want?" At his nod, she took a second mug out of the cabinet. "She's showering," Selina said, with a nod toward the opposite wall, where they could both hear the sound of running water, "trying to wash off that clown paint. Among other things."

Dick nodded again. "Is she going to be...?"

"I hope so," She shook her head. "He knows. About Helena. Oh, I told him I was babysitting for a friend, but I don't know if he believed me." She carried the two mugs to the table and passed one to Dick. He thanked her.

"So..."

Selina took a gulp of coffee and winced as she scalded her tongue. "That's what I've been trying to figure out." She took a deep breath. "Unpredictability is part of Joker's... charm. But if there's something that he can do to affect Bruce... he will. That's about the only constant when he's involved."

"He hasn't tried anything so far," Dick pointed out.

"I meant Batman. But **Bruce** as Batman, not you."
Dick considered that for a moment. "Okay," he said. "I'll give you that. At least, it makes sense—which probably means that we're barking up the wrong tree." Seeing the misery on her face, he corrected himself. "Meowing?"

She smiled wanly. "No matter how I try to slice it, I keep coming back to this: sooner or later, Joker is going to get tired of waiting for Bruce to put the cowl back on. He'll try to force things. He... might have meant to do that tonight, I don't know. He said he wanted me to find Harley. If you want to find a missing person... you call in a detective. I'm just saying."

"But given your history..."

"Yeah. I'm a target." Her voice was oddly calm. "Much as I hate being in that position, I can handle it. But if he finds out about Helena—if he even suspects that Bruce cares about her, then..."

Dick nodded. "What are you going to do?"

Selina's face seemed to crumple. "The only thing I can. I just hope it'll be enough..."

"Selina?"

She shook her head. "Look. Tell Bruce I'm okay, but I think it would be best if I stayed away for the next little while. If he needs to reach me, he can contact me through Oracle. I'll get in touch with him the same way, once I have a better idea of how to cope with this."

Bruce clenched his fist and rapped it angrily against the leather armrest.

"She's right," Dick said. "Isn't she?"

Bruce's head snapped up. "Of course," he nearly snarled. "I should have seen this coming a mile away. I should have—"

"Daddy?"

Startled, Bruce glanced down into his daughter's wide blue eyes. His expression softened as he scooped her up and settled her on his lap.

"Even if you had," Dick said quietly, "we'd be in the same situation we're in now: me doing the legwork, and you and Oracle analyzing his moves—hoping that, for once, he'll actually follow a logical plan."

"He will," Bruce said bleakly. "Selina called it. He'll go after her... or you... or one of the others, to get to me."

Dick's expression hardened. "We'll be careful. But Bruce, if he somehow does get the upper hand..."

He lowered his eyes. "Please, don't make me finish the sentence."

Bruce smiled wearily and shook his head. "I know," he said. "There will be no repetition of my earlier actions."

Dick's frown gave way to a relieved smile. "Well, that's one more load off my mind." He leaned forward. "Look, there's still a chance he really was just trying to get to Harley, not you."

"You don't believe that anymore than I do."

"No. But it's still a possibility." Dick clapped one hand on Bruce's shoulder and chucked Helena
under the chin with the other. "I'm going to head out on patrol. Call me tomorrow."

Bruce nodded. After Dick headed down to the cave, Bruce looked fondly down at his daughter. Dick was right. His first priorities were to keep her safe—and himself free to look after her. There could be no repeating the events of last month. Balancing Helena on his hip, Bruce walked over to his desk and turned on the computer. It only took him a moment to bring up the rough costume sketches he'd been tinkering with a few days earlier. *If he needed to take a more hands-on approach, he had no intention of being recognized this time!*

Cass read the sample text for what felt like the tenth time.

*Dear Ms Bowring,*

(A)

(1) I would like to apply for the front desk reception position advertised in the Monday, October 4th edition of the Northanger Free Press. (2) My work experience and education combined with your need for an experienced front desk receptionist have resulted in a relationship that...

For what felt like the tenth time, her eyes glazed over. "Why not just say, 'I want a job'?" she asked aloud. "Too many words." Her gaze dipped below the letter to the multiple choice questions.

Which correction should be made to sentence 2?

Her face fell. "Add comma to...? Change 'have resulted' to 'would result'?" She shook her head. "Hopeless." She was never going to get this right.

She turned over several pages and looked at the social studies section and found a short passage on immigration. These questions were worse than the first ones in the language arts section.

When she turned to the science part, though, she was pleasantly surprised. The text—something about soil characteristics—was clear and concise. The questions that followed also seemed to be more straightforward. It was... She smiled. *If this was training exercise, she thought, and Dick was explaining terrain and what to expect... it would be almost like this.* That was an idea. *Pretend it's a mission. Me. Alone in wilderness. There are different kinds of soil nearby. So... if I want to use as... as lining to stop water from leaking out... then I want soil that is more clay than sand. Yes. Okay. That makes sense.* Not to mention that understanding soil characteristics was probably more useful than knowing where to put a comma!

"How's it going?"

Cass started as Tim's face appeared on her monitor. She shrugged. "Science is okay." She set the test aside with a mental sigh. "You need something?"

"No," Tim shook his head. "I was just wondering... I saved my high school text books. If you want to review them, I can drop them off for you this evening, before patrol."

She made a face. "Hard enough to get through sample questions. Reading textbooks would take me... forever."

Tim's eyes widened. "Hold on. You mean you're just reading the practice exam? You haven't actually looked at the subject matter?"

"I have." She countered. "On the test." She made a face. "I have to pass it all? Not just... science? I
don't need so-social studies for PT."

"It doesn't work like that," Tim said with an apologetic smile. "But Cass... the GED is a test you pass

to show that you've pretty much learned everything most students have to cover in four years of high

school. You... it's like you're so intent on getting your black belt that you're only studying the

advanced techniques without covering basic drills first."

She knew what he was getting at. Still, "I learned stick fighting in one day."

"Yeah. After you'd covered about a million other combat skills. But do you think you could have

picked it up in one day if you'd never learned any kind of fighting before? Because, correct me if I'm

wrong, but I don't think you've ever really tried studying before."

"But..." He was right, she realized with some consternation. She took a deep breath. "Help me?" She

asked.

Tim grinned. "Sure. I can be by in an hour or so with the textbooks. Just sit tight until then."

Cass shook her head. "Been sitting all day. Time to work out now. Until you come."

"Oh. Is an hour going to be enough time for you?"

Cass thought about that for a moment. "Yes," she said reluctantly. "I need to learn... this."

"Okay. I'll see you in a little while."

"Mommy?" Helena tugged at his pants leg.

Bruce shook his head. "She's not here." He reached down to pick her up.

She shook her head right back at him. "Mommy!"

"She's not here," Bruce repeated. "I'm sorry."

Helena threw back her head and began to howl.

Bruce bent down to her level and placed his hands on her shoulders. "No, don't cry," he murmured.

"It's o-OW!" He fell back rubbing his nose. Toddlers weren't supposed to be able to punch that

hard... were they?

He moved back to the computer and tried to ignore her wails, even as they grew in pitch and

intensity. It was impossible to focus. Finally, he sighed. "I think you need a nap," he said gravely, as

he hoisted her over his shoulder.

In answer, Helena shrieked and pounded his back with her small fists. Bruce winced, but carried her

firmly out of the study and into her new bedroom.

She was still screaming when he pulled the door shut behind him.

Jim found him in the cave an hour later. "Helena's crying."

Bruce didn't look up from the computer. "Still?" he asked wearily. "I thought she'd have tired herself

out by now." He looked up sharply. "She's not hurt, is she?"
Jim shook his head. "No, I think she just misses her father."

"Her mother," Bruce corrected. "That was what set her off in the first place."

"Ah." Jim nodded. "I guess we can't fault her for that. You should probably go up to her."

"Soon." Bruce brought up a new file. "I'm working on something down here."

Jim looked over his shoulder and frowned. "Grounds security? I thought that was under control."

"If Joker is trying anything—"

"Joker's in custody."

"At the moment," Bruce conceded. "I can't count on that state of affairs lasting. And Quinn is still at large. While she might not be a match for my systems on her own, I can't discount the possibility that she could enlist the assistance of an individual who does have the capability to neutralize them."

"Meanwhile, Helena is crying."

Bruce gave an exasperated grunt. "She'll have to wait." He leaned further over the console, a clear indication that he considered the conversation over.

Jim waited for a moment. "Bruce..."

"She's fine." Bruce gave his attention to the security grid, wilfully closing his ears to any further entreaties. He was aware that Jim was murmuring something—likely something uncomplimentary—under his breath. He paid it no mind. Jim meant well, but at this moment, the safety systems were of paramount importance. Before he did anything else, he needed to know that the manor was secure!

He wheeled the swivel chair closer... and the entire array went dark. "What in...?"

"Do I have your attention now?" Jim demanded. He was slapping a doubled length of heavy black cord lightly into the palm of his hand. It took Bruce a moment to recognize it.

"You unplugged the Crays?" He asked in disbelief.

"You weren't exactly leaving the other avenues of communication open. It was this, or ask Barbara to hijack your systems. I figured if I was going to infuriate you anyway, I might as well hog all the blame for myself. Now. Your daughter is crying. She needs you. Go."

"The systems—"

"—will keep," Jim cut him off. "She's a baby. She doesn't understand 'in a little while'. She needs you now."

"If the manor is attacked..."

"Then, according to what Barbara just told me, you'll get a perimeter warning before anyone gets within a mile of the property line. You want your daughter in your life? Start acting like a father."

Bruce glowered. Jim glared back. Without breaking eye contact, Bruce stalked over to an intercom situated several yards away from the darkened consoles and pressed a button.

Helena was still crying, but her screams had subsided to ragged whimpers. As the sound carried over the cave speakers, Bruce's face seemed to crumple.
"I'm on it," he said softly.

Then he ran for the elevator.

A few minutes later, he returned to the cave, balancing a sniffling Helena on his hip. "Do you think," he asked slowly, "that we could secure a play area in that corner?" He gestured toward an area bordered by cabinets and a large sink. "A couple of exercise mats would block the chill from the floor, there aren't any stray electrical wires..."

"And you can keep an eye on her first hand, instead of via the vid-cams," Jim nodded. "Which means that if she does manage to get into mischief—and she will—you're right there. Only, how do you intend to keep her in just that one part of the cave?"

"A safety gate between a couple of filing cabinets ought to work."

Jim nodded. "It should. So, I guess you'll train physically while she's sleeping?"

"No, she'll..." He stopped. The training area was two levels down from the computer arrays. "It might be possible to set up a zone for her there, as well. I'll see. I... don't suppose you could...?"

Jim took a deep breath. "Bruce... I'm not the one who needs to bond with her. If you want to get technical, *you* are the only person I'm here to look after. Now, I don't mind keeping an eye on her for a few minutes if you need to answer the phone, or get up for a stretch, or something, but I'm not going to turn around one day and find out that I've somehow become groundskeeper, cook and nanny, all rolled into one. I didn't sign on for that."

Bruce blinked. Then, slowly, he nodded. "I don't mean to..."

Jim sighed. "I know you don't. And I'm sorry. But I'm *not* Alfred. And I'm not about to try acting like it."

Helena began to stir then, and Bruce shifted his hold. "It looks like we have some... things that need to be addressed, then," he said softly. He was speaking to Jim, but his eyes were focused on the dark-haired little girl in his arms.

"I see a big difference," Alex said, as he shut the door to the master bedroom behind them.

Bruce said nothing in return. As much as he knew that Alex was simply doing his job, this inspection still irritated him.

It was odd, he reflected. Krait had come by three days earlier, and Bruce hadn't resented that visit nearly as much. Krait had gone through the checklist, scratching off each item as he went, and had little else to say beyond 'keep up the good work'. But then, Krait hadn't seemed interested in forcing Bruce to step outside his comfort zone.

Bruce couldn't say the same for Alex. The psychiatrist seemed to delight in setting newer, higher expectations. Come to think of it, Bruce wasn't sure why that bothered him as much as it did. Certainly, Bruce had never been one to rest on his own laurels before. It didn't make sense that he'd want to walk away from a challenge now. And yet, the truth was, he did.

"How long did you spend on this?" Alex asked.

Bruce shrugged. "The better part of an afternoon."
"Alone?"

"No."

Alex waited. When Bruce failed to elaborate further, he took a few steps down the hall. "And the other room?" he asked, as he turned the knob to Alfred's door. He blinked when he saw the new railing on the bed and the nursery rhyme artwork on the walls. "You've moved the nursery?"

"Not exactly," Bruce replied. "Helena sleeps here now. Most of her toys are still in the other room." He forced himself to sound nonchalant. "If she needs me in the night, my room is right next door."

Alex nodded approval. "She's with you full-time, now?"

"For now. Her mother's work forces her to travel a great deal." He barely had to think before adding that statement.

"I see. How's that working out?"

Bruce hesitated, finally opting to be candid without sounding as out of his depth as he felt. "You could say, it's a learning curve," he said. "We're managing."

Alex smiled. "I'm glad to hear that. I think we're ready to make a change to your supervised hours. From what I've seen, you should be ready to go down to weekdays only."

That brought a genuine smile in response.

'Managing' turned out to be an unrealistically optimistic assessment. As the days wore on, it seemed that Helena was every bit as stubborn, willful, and unpredictable as her mother. And Bruce's methods for dealing with adolescent temper outbursts were effectively useless against a toddler. Helena couldn't be reasoned with, she couldn't be threatened with loss of privilege. Ignoring her was feasible for brief periods of time—or it would have been—except that all Helena needed to do was scream, and he would come running.

As difficult as it was for him to accept, he was being played—by a twenty-month old. He had to respond when she shrieked, if he didn't, if just that one time, it were to turn out that the reason she was screaming was because Scarecrow had penetrated the manor and invaded the nursery, he would never be able to forgive himself. So... she screamed, and he ran. He tried to make it appear that he was playing the doting father, but he—and Helena—both knew better.

Still, things continued in this vein for nearly three weeks. And then, one day, Bruce realized that it was five days before Christmas, that the Kents would be arriving within four, and that nothing was prepared...

Three years ago, Bruce reflected, he would have known better. If Alfred had been away, assuming that the butler hadn't prepared and frozen Christmas dinner far in advance, Bruce would have availed himself of one of four options: he would have ordered in, he would have gone into Chinatown, or some other area of Gotham that didn't close down on the twenty-fifth of December, he would have volunteered for JLA monitor duty, or he would have fixed himself a sandwich and spent the night out on patrol.

If he hadn't impulsively invited Clark and his family, Bruce still might have gone for the last option—although after nearly two years of sandwiches at Arkham, twice—sometimes three times-daily, every day, he had to admit the notion held less appeal for him than ever before.
If Clark hadn’t exhibited such... trepidation at the thought of Bruce cooking, Bruce probably would have arranged matters with a caterer. So what if Clark... and Martha Kent... were used to home-cooked meals? Lois would probably understand. But after that reaction... now Bruce had something to prove—if not to the Kents, then to himself!

He could serve chicken and rice, again, he knew. He had added a couple of basic vegetable soups to his repertoire, by now. Fresh fruit and sorbet would suffice for dessert... but none of this would be traditional.

With a sigh, he reached for the pad Jim kept by the telephone to jot down messages, turned to a blank sheet, and wrote:

*Smoked Duck and Walnuts with Winter Greens*

*Roast Beef*

*Cranberry Chutney* (It hadn't originally been part of Alfred's menu, but nine-year-old Dick had fallen in love with the condiment at his first Thanksgiving at the manor, and prevailed on the butler to include it for Christmas as well. Even after Dick moved out, Alfred had continued to serve it.)

*Yorkshire Pudding*

*Roasted Potatoes*

*Roasted Brussels Sprouts*

*Trifle*

He thought for a moment. It seemed to him that there was something wrong, something he needed to remember. He frowned. Then, he added, *Christmas Pudding.* He hadn't had it in ages. Alfred had made it, served it, and subsequently converted it into an ice cream dish and presented it at the first Wayne Manor gala of the New Year. *That particular tradition would need to change, seeing as he had no idea when he'd host another gala...*

Bruce pulled the cookbooks down from the shelf. Thoughtfully, he selected the one with the most-creased spine and opened it to the index at the back. Sure enough, he quickly located four of the dishes he meant to prepare. Bruce took a new sheet of paper and began to make up a shopping list, still unable to shake the feeling that he was forgetting something important.

"How can you be sold out?" Bruce demanded, trying hard to keep his voice level. "No, Helena!" He scooped up his daughter before she could open the lower cabinets and resolved once more to find a childproof lock that he could install on those doors. He had liked the customized knobs when Alfred had suggested them, however, their unique design kept them from accommodating the safety locks he had attempted to install so far. He was nearly at the point of setting up electronic keypads—although the cleaning staff would likely resign *en masse* if he expected them to start memorizing codes, on top of their normal duties.

"Sorry," he said into the phone. "So, you're telling me you have no smoked duck, no dried fruit, and your drivers are completely booked until tomorrow." He sighed. "Fine. Put what you have aside for me. I'll be there to pick it up. Bruce Wayne."

There was an audible gasp on the other end. Bruce kicked himself. He knew he should have given an alias. He was about to hang up when the party on the other end timidly asked a question.
"Yes," Bruce replied, somewhat bemused. "I suppose I am... the Bruce Wayne."

The response was a flood of apologies. Bruce began to smile as the realization hit him. The grocer's reaction had nothing to do with Batman or Arkham, and everything to do with the family name.

"It's alright," he said when he could get a word in edgewise. "You didn't know. You don't have to do that," he said sharply. "Just tell me where... are you sure?" He shook his head in disbelief. "You're actually willing to scout around for two and a half pounds of raisins and currants and drive my entire order up here yourself if you can't get it on a truck? Um... that would be... fine." He smiled. "No, don't worry about the duck. I should have realized that with the bird flu epidemic, there'd be a shortage this year. I'll just have to have something else as a first course." His eyebrows shot up. "Well, I have to admit that does sound good— are you sure your sister-in-law won't mind parting with the recipe? Well, thank you. Yes, I'll expect you before five. Thank you."

He was still shaking his head as he ended the call. So much for the traditional Wayne Christmas dinner, unless he wanted—he grinned—to send Superman on a wild goose chase for smoked duck. With a sudden pang, he wondered whether Alfred had ever been forced to run from grocer to grocer in search of elusive menu items. He'd never thought much about it before; gourmet dishes had routinely appeared on the table, as though by magic. And how many of them had Alfred taken away, untouched, with only an occasional word of reproach? He closed his eyes.

Almost immediately, small fingers began probing his eyelids. Bruce waited a moment, before opening them. "Let's get you into your high chair, Helena. It's almost lunchtime."

The groceries were there at three. By four-thirty, Bruce was ready to check the Kents into a hotel with a restaurant that would be open on Christmas day.

The Yorkshire puddings hadn't puffed up the first time. Bruce had half-expected that when he'd forgotten to preheat the oven. The second time, they at least looked like they were supposed to. They'd even tasted right—perhaps a bit too right, since he'd finished three of them before he'd realized what he was doing. That had left nine—grounds for another batch. He'd just slid them into the oven, when he'd been alerted to an odor he remembered all too well from his earlier rare attempts at cooking. He got to the dutch oven just as the smoke alarm went off. He'd forgotten to turn the meat so that it could brown on all sides. One side was now black and stuck to the cast iron pot. The roast was probably still salvageable, though, if he sliced off the burned part.

He'd turned around to discover that Helena had somehow managed to bump her high chair a few inches closer to the kitchen table—near enough that she was just able to stretch for a handful of raisins. She knew raisins. She liked raisins. And under most circumstances, Bruce would have been delighted to give her raisins. Unfortunately, the raisins that she was reaching for were the only ones he currently had in the manor, and they were intended for the Christmas pudding.

"Helena!" Bruce pulled the highchair away, staving off a howl of protest with a Yorkshire pudding.

There came a hiss and a spattering noise from the stove. Bruce turned to see that the cranberries were boiling over. He grabbed a potholder and removed the pan from the heat, setting it down on the counter.

The timer went off, signalling that the roasted potatoes were ready to come out of the oven—and the Brussels sprouts were ready to go in. He supposed he could have cooked them at the same time, but it had occurred to him that if something were to go wrong with the vegetables, he'd rather ruin one recipe than both. Did Kent like Brussels sprouts? Bruce smiled. It would be ironic if he were preparing the one vegetable that the vegetarian wouldn't eat.
Bruce felt the blood drain from his face. *That* was what he'd been trying to remember before! Clark was a vegetarian! His eyes flicked to the pot roast on the stove top, and then to the smoked trout that the grocer had urged him to substitute for smoked duck. Wait. Was he vegan? *Eggs in the Yorkshire pudding, whipped cream and vanilla pudding in the trifle*...

*Great going, Bruce. You've just stumbled into the one area where you never anticipated needing a contingency plan!* But he would have bet half his fortune that Alfred would have had one...

A loud crash startled him, and he whirled to discover that Helena had gotten herself back to the table—and to the glass mixing bowl filled with dried fruit—which she had just managed to knock to the floor, leaving two and a half pounds of raisins and currants scattered in a minefield of broken glass.

That was when the smoke alarm went off again.

Helena began to wail. Bruce contemplated joining her.

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It got dark early in Gotham in December. Dick was just as happy that he wasn't patrolling tonight—it meant that he and Barbara could sit down to supper at six, instead of four. It beat scarfing energy bars on the run by a long shot.

They'd just started digging in to the baked ziti, when the intercom sounded. Barbara frowned, but she wheeled over to the panel and pressed the button. "Hello?"

"Barbara? Can we come up?"

"We?"

There was a pause. "Helena is with me."

Barbara hit the buzzer. "So much for our quiet dinner for two," she said ruefully.

Dick nodded. "I hope everything's okay. This is the first time he's ever stopped by without our dropping him an invitation first."

Barbara nodded back.

Bruce came in with Helena sleeping on his shoulder. "I..." He hesitated. "She was crying. I thought, perhaps, she might calm down faster in the car." He took in the barely-started meal on the table. "I'm interrupting," he said, consternation on his face. "I should have thought."

Dick half-rose from his chair. "Bruce?" He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen him so uncertain. "Are you all right?"

Bruce took a deep breath. "What if I told you that I wasn't?" He asked softly. "What if I told you," his voice rose, "that some nights, I've awakened in a cold sweat, not because of the old familiar nightmares, but because I dream that I'm back in Arkham, so sure that I deserved to be there that I forced myself into a box to make sure that I wouldn't try to break out? What if I told you that some days, I feel myself falling back into my old thought patterns and wonder if Alex or Krait will see past the act and send me back there?"

Helena began to stir, and Bruce immediately started stroking her back, as he rocked her gently back and forth. "And what if sometimes, part of me actually... thinks it might be easier for everyone if they d—"
All at once, Dick was pulling him forward into a tight embrace. "It wouldn't be easier for me," he said harshly. "And you are not going back. Not to Arkham, and for damned sure not back to that... that block of wood I spent a year talking to."

Bruce closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I did say 'what if'," he pointed out with a wan smile. He hadn't fought the hug, though, Dick noticed.

Bruce sighed. "I actually didn't plan to say all of that," he admitted. "Anymore than I planned to drop in on you. I was just... driving, hoping she'd fall asleep, and when I noticed that she had, I realized that I was only minutes away from here, and..." He stopped. "I should have called."

"So next time you will," Barbara broke in. "If you remember. And if you don't... well, I guess you'll just have to run the risk of our not being home." She grinned. "I think I'd better set another place at the table." She started to wheel away, but then she stopped and rolled back. "Bruce... look, it may be hard to admit, but after two years at Arkham, it's not that off-base to say you got used to the routine. And now, you're out, and a lot has changed."

Bruce frowned and shrugged off Dick's embrace. "If you're implying that I've become institutionalized..."

Barbara waited for him to finish.

"No. You didn't imply it. I've seen it myself." He slumped. "Actually, I encouraged it in myself. After what happened with Ji—with your father," he said, "I came to believe that Arkham was... the right place for me. If it was... then I had no reason to want to leave. So I did everything I could to avoid discharge."

"Which meant becoming a block of wood," Dick said, tightening his grip on Bruce's shoulder.

Bruce nodded. "And resisting therapy, ignoring—and eventually losing—privileges. I wasn't there to be comfortable, you understand. I was there because it was the only way I could be sure that I wouldn't... hurt people." He shook his head miserably. "Physically, at least. I... It didn't occur to me that... that..."

Dick wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "The main thing is, you're out now. And that's past. And you're not exactly living in a vacuum. Or in isolation."

Barbara placed a hand on his wrist. "If there are things you want to deal with on your own, fine. But if there's any way that we can help..."

"Actually," Bruce admitted, "Since you asked, if you're truly willing, there is."

"Name it," Dick grinned.

Easier said than done. Bruce took a deep breath, willing himself to speak the words. "Co... Calinda," he said. "I need to practice with a partner." He did, but that wasn't what he'd meant to say.


Bruce nodded slowly. "C-cooking. I... I've been trying to prepare Christmas Dinner and... I think I've... no. I know I've taken on more than I'm able to do on my own. I..." Closer, but still not what he'd intended.

"Sure," Barbara grinned. "No problem. Is that it, or is there more?"
Just say it, already! Bruce took another breath. "Coping." It was nearly a whisper, but once he got that word out, the rest was easier. "I... am not coping as well as I need to be. I don't know what—if anything—you can do, but..."

The grips on his wrist and shoulders tightened almost simultaneously.

"Sure," Dick said.

Barbara chimed in. "No problem."
Chapter Summary

Bruce comes to new understandings regarding Helena, Selina, and Christmas dinner. Meanwhile, Dick isn't about to let ANYONE get away with murder.

Chapter Notes

A/N: "Leatherwinged Bat" appears to be an old English folk song of unknown authorship. The lyrics quoted were recorded by Peter, Paul and Mary on their Peter, Paul and Mommy album (Warner Bros, 1969). Other versions may (and probably do!) exist.


"Love This Pain" written by Marv Green and Jason Sellers. Recorded by Lady Antebellum on their Need You Now album (Capitol Nashville, 2009).

She's got a restlessness
A beautifulness, a thing about her
But here I am again calling her back
Letting her drive me crazy

It's like I love this pain a little too much
Love my heart all busted up
Something 'bout her, we just don't work
But I can't walk away

-Marv Green, Jason Sellers, "Love This Pain"

Chapter 28—Can't Walk Away

Why had it taken him this long to talk to them? Bruce grimaced as a list surfaced in his mind. He hadn't wanted to admit the extent to which Arkham had affected him. He hadn't wanted to worry them. He'd thought that, if he told himself often enough that he was managing on his own, it would ultimately become true. His hands tightened on the steering wheel as he drove back to the manor. Alex had called it, well over a year ago.

"Admitting to vulnerabilities is not something to which I am accustomed."

"Well, it would be surprising if, before you went into a physical fight, you took a moment to tell your sparring partner exactly where your weakest points were …"

Not that he and Dick had been fighting. Far from it. But old instincts and disciplines ran deep.
He hadn't wanted to burden them. Even if they were willing to help him shoulder his load, his stresses were his to deal with. They had enough on their plates already. Somehow, he'd gotten it into his head that opening up to them would be as disturbing as... as... as remaining in the room when Jim turned around to finish his sentences—and somehow the Earth was still spinning on its axis, even though he'd started doing that too!

Actually, Bruce reflected, he hadn't had to elaborate much further. Once he'd admitted that there was a problem, once he'd secured their willingness to help, he hadn't known what else to say. Instead, he'd attacked two helpings of baked ziti with dogged determination, barely looking up, except to pass the water pitcher, or to ask for it to be passed back to him.

And they'd left him alone. They hadn't badgered him to open up, but at the same time, their body language had made it clear that, if he'd chosen to, they would have listened. He'd always known that this was true, but somehow, he'd never fully believed it before. Strangely, although there'd been almost no conversation at all during the meal, the silence hadn't been awkward. When had Dick gotten over his inclination to fill every lull in a conversation with small talk?

After dinner, he and Barbara had gone over the Christmas menu. He was going to have to make a few changes, but it didn't look as though he'd wrecked anything beyond repair yet—except for the mixing bowl. Barbara had even had a supply of raisins on hand, although he was debating whether to go through to work of making the pudding. Maybe he should stick to the trifle. If he was feeling adventurous, he could always make a fruitcake. Nobody expected those to be good.

His lips twitched. Wouldn't it be ironic if, despite his best efforts, his were to turn out edible? They'd never let him live that one down.

That night, he dreamed that he was back in Arkham. It was a blistering inferno, and he was caught in the middle of it. Dick was calling to him, telling him that he had to leave, but someone was trapped inside. He pressed onward, into the conflagration, ignoring Dick's cries.

Then the ceiling collapsed, burying him under beams and plaster. He felt no pain—in fact, the fire wasn't even hot—but he was pinned under the debris, unable to move.

He felt someone tugging on his ankle, and he struggled. He knew he had to keep moving, keep pushing forward, but there was that pull again. No... There was someone he had to get to. He had to get out from under the plaster, and...

"Hi, Daddy!"

He wasn't pinned under debris, he was tangled up in the bedclothes. That was probably the only thing that had stopped him from kicking... His eyes flew open and he became wide awake in an instant. "Helena!" His heart began to race. If he hadn't woken up when he did, if he hadn't been a restless sleeper, he could have... he'd almost...

He sat bolt upright, fear quickly yielding to rage. "What are you doing in here?" he yelled. "GET OUT!"

Helena's lower lip began to wobble. Hurt and confusion warred briefly in her large blue eyes. Then the tears started.

At her first whimper, Bruce felt his anger utterly drain away. "Helena..." He got out of bed and approached her.
Helena flung herself to the ground in a shuddering heap, her back to him, still crying. It wasn't a tantrum. She wasn't kicking. She wasn't screaming. She wasn't even wailing. Instead, the sobs were closer to hiccups.

Bruce knelt next to her and stroked her back. "Helena, I..." he took a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

Helena snuffled, but she didn't pull away.

Bruce kept stroking her back. "You can't pull on me when I'm sleeping," he said softly, knowing that she probably wouldn't understand what he was saying, but hoping anyway. "I could have hurt you without meaning to." He winced. It appeared that he already had. He scooped her up in his arms, holding her close and making soothing noises. After a moment, he felt small arms wrap about his neck. She was still teary-eyed, but at least, she didn't seem to be afraid of him now.

Softly, he began to sing an old song he hadn't thought about in years.

"I" said the little leatherwinged bat  
"I'll tell to you the reason that  
The reason that I fly by night  
Is because I've lost my heart's delight."

*Howdy dowdy diddle-dum day*  
*Howdy dowdy diddle-dum day*  
*Howdy dowdy diddle-dum day*...

Jim found them there some time later. Bruce was sitting cross-legged on the floor, with Helena asleep in his arms. She was sucking her thumb.

"I didn't want to wake her," Bruce said in a low tone. Then, firmly, "We need another safety gate."

"Another one?" Jim's eyebrows shot up. "What's happened now?"

Bruce told him. "I think you can appreciate the necessity," he added.

Jim nodded understanding. "You'll need to make sure she has a few more toys in the bedroom, though, if you mean to keep her confined there while you're sleeping. That, or move her bed down the hall to the nursery."

"Quiet toys," Bruce agreed. He smiled fondly down at his daughter. Then he glanced up. "Is that the phone?"

"I'll get it," Jim smiled.

He was back a few minutes later, holding out the cordless. "It's Barbara. She's got a message for you from Selina."

She'd chosen the restaurant well. It wasn't a dive, but neither was it a place likely to attract anyone who would recognize Bruce Wayne *or* Selina Kyle well enough to identify them. Her hair was now chestnut brown, and worn in a tousled bob. Hazel contact lenses covered her green eyes. Bruce noted approvingly that she had not only altered her skin tone with liquid foundation, she'd remembered to also use the coloring on her hands and wrists. He recognized her, though, by the way she crossed her right ankle over the opposite knee when she sat, by her smile, which he would know anywhere, and by the way her eyes lit up when she saw him walk in.
"Brewster?" she called.

Bruce frowned. Dick had had his reasons for registering him under that name when he'd been in the hospital. Bruce could even admit that they'd been good ones. It didn't change the fact that he thoroughly detested the name 'Brewster'.

"Brewster, don't you know me?" she continued, getting up from the table. "Irena! From the retreat."

He eyed her as if trying to place where he'd seen her last. So this was how she was playing it. He fought not to let his annoyance show. They should have just sat down together without fanfare. Or met at a bar later, where he could have bought her a drink. However, if she was going to play the 'long lost acquaintances' card, he could as well.

"Irena?" He exclaimed in his best 'Brucie' voice. "My gosh, it is you! How long has it been? You look amazing."

Selina let an uncharacteristic giggle leak into her voice. "You always did have a way with words, Brewster." Then, in an undertone that only reached his ears, "Vapid enough for you?" Still smiling, she continued, "Come on, sit down, we've got hours of catching up to do!" She grabbed his hand and half-led, half-dragged him back to her table.

"Well, Bruce said dryly, "you're nothing like the person I was expecting to meet here."

Selina grinned. "Thank you," she said in her own voice. The smile faded. "How is she?"

"Mischievous," Bruce replied. "Learning new things every day." He sighed. "Running me ragged."

"Poor dear."

"She seems happy enough."

"I didn't mean her."

Bruce shook his head. "I haven't heard otherwise, so I'd presume Harley is still at large?"

"She didn't break out," Selina pointed out. "She got released. So far, she seems to be keeping her nose clean." She took a sip of water. "If I thought she'd found someone new to get hooked up with, or at least got Joker out of her system, I'd have a lot fewer worries."

"Yes," Bruce said heavily. "So... nothing has changed."

Selina leaned forward as though she were about to say something. Then she seemed to think better of it. "Nothing."

"I see." He pushed his chair back from the table. "It was good running into you, Irena. I need to be on my way, though."

He was halfway to the door when he heard footsteps behind him. "Brewster, wait. I'll walk with you partway if you're heading west on Neville."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say that he was going east instead, but he shrugged. "Suit yourself."

They'd been walking for half a block, when Selina moved in closer to him. "Something has changed," she admitted. "I... It would serve me right if, after all this, you pulled a Rhett Butler on me, but... what we talked about at Thanksgiving? About how much of what we were to each other involved—"
"I remember the conversation," Bruce said quietly.

"Okay. Well, the answer depends a lot on who you are." She took a deep breath. "If, every time we start getting close, you pull away, one of these days, I'm not going to wait for you to show up with a dozen roses, an apology, and an offer to take me out to Santorini's that gets pre-empted by a big spotlight over the skyline." She bit her lip. "I never cared about the playboy image, Bruce. I get the need for cover, and I'd be lying if I told you I hadn't flirted with handsome men for the same reason. Sometimes, I even enjoyed it. But if I ever believed for one moment that it was more than an image thing with you, I'd be long gone." She was studiously avoiding eye contact. "It's probably not fair to drop this on you at a point when we can't be seen openly together. Maybe I'm doing it this way so that if I really have burned this bridge, or if you need more time to know where you stand—"

"I know where I stand," Bruce cut her off. "But I don't know if it's... healthy. For either of us. Irena, up until very recently, I'd made my peace with the idea that I wouldn't have any long-term relationships. It had nothing to do with my feelings and everything to do with my work." He half-turned toward her. "Seriously, Irena, would you be comfortable with waiting up for me every night, wondering if this is the one where I don't make it home? I wouldn't wish that on anyone."

"Except..." She let her voice trail off.

"Don't think I didn't go through periods where I tried to encourage him to quit, too." He sighed. "Well, honestly? Thank your lucky stars he didn't. Anyway, who says I'd be waiting up for you? I don't know if you noticed, but you aren't the only card-carrying member of the spandex set around here."

Bruce glanced about to ensure that nobody was in earshot. Selina caught him at it.

"Please," she scoffed. "I'm not that much of an amateur. Now seriously, where did you get the idea that I'd stay home and hold down the fort?"

Bruce blinked. "I would have thought with Helena..."

"That's where babysitters come in. Or Dick's 'two-nights-on, one-night-off' policy." She gave him a hard stare. "If you've gone over the reports, you've seen it for yourself. The city hasn't been suffering. Neither have we."

"I know," Bruce admitted. It was his turn to look away. "The problem is, old habits... old attitudes... die hard. And my knee-jerk reaction—"

"Now how did I know there was going to be a jerk involved?"

"It's not funny, Sel-Irena. I want you to be safe. I want you to be alive. And since even you acknowledge the danger in being seen with me, the wisest course of action would be to make this meeting the first and last one of its kind. At this moment, there are only two things preventing me from following that course of action."

Selina blinked. "I hope one of them is Helena."

Bruce nodded. "Of course, it is. I'd never dream of keeping you away from her."

"What's the other one?"

Bruce didn't answer.
"Bruce?"

He turned to her. And then, remembering what she'd said earlier, he placed both hands on her shoulders and took a half-step closer. "It is... the most sensible decision," he said haltingly. "I know it is. But..."

She tilted her head up to meet his eyes. "But?"

It was almost like watching a mask slide away as he pulled her closer to him. A rueful smile spread across his face. "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

Barbara came by later that afternoon, armed with a number of cookbooks. "If nothing in here appeals to you, we can go online," she said, "but I find it a lot easier to lose a printout then an actual book, once we start messing up the table and counters." She grinned. "First thing to remember: Clark is vegan. Your other guests aren't. But a lot of what you're serving is either already vegan-friendly, or can be made so. The smoked trout salad, for example... there's other stuff to it than fish, right?"

Bruce nodded. "It's served on a bed of mesclun." He thought. "Garnished with capers."

"Yeah, that sounds like the version I was thinking of. Ok. So the way I see it, you can still serve Clark the greens without the fish. Maybe put some toasted nuts in it—or candied nuts."

"I don't..."

"Drop 'em in sugar-water and toast them in the oven. The water evaporates, the sugar sticks. I can do it myself at home, later. Anyway, that can be prepared last minute, so leave it for now. The dressing... is it that one with the crème fraîche?"

"How did you know?"

Barbara grinned. "Bruce, maybe I haven't gone to anywhere near as many gala dinners as you have, but I've had smoked trout salad a few times, and liked it enough to want to look up the recipe." The grin became a grimace. "It's just a good thing we all get enough exercise—that stuff is deadly."

The smile returned. "Of course, you could substitute vegan sour cream, if you want to cut back on the calories and turn it into something Clark will eat. Or just make sure you have a vinaigrette onhand, if you do want to go all out."

Bruce looked stricken. "I should have considered the calories."

"Bruce, it's Christmas. We can indulge. And if it turns out the next day that I can't button my jeans and I'm looking to hit the person who did it to me, I know you'll agree to a spar. Now. What kind of shape did the roast end up in?"

Bruce relaxed. "It's fine. I've put it in the freezer for now. I had to cut away the burned bit, but the sauce should hide that."

"Exactly." She frowned. "You said you already did the Brussels sprouts and potatoes?" At his nod, she shook her head sadly. "It would be fine if they were in gravy, but roasted? You might want to eat what you already made and prepare a fresh batch of each a couple of hours or so before you plan on serving them."

He sighed. "And they actually came out well."

She shook her head as her frown gave way to an amused smile. "Bruce. Three years ago, if you'd
had to make Christmas dinner on your own, you would have hired a caterer or served up cold cereal and toast."

"I'm not sure I could have managed toast."

"State rests, your honor. So now, you're serving up stuff that's..." she lifted the glass dome off the cake plate, took a Yorkshire pudding, bit into it, and grinned "...actually pretty darned good, even at room temperature, but you're still a little fuzzy on what can be made ahead and what really shouldn't be. Relax."

Bruce covered his eyes with one hand. "I'm serving Christmas dinner in four days. To company. While trying to manage a toddler. I don't think 'relaxing' is on the agenda."

Barbara's smile vanished. "That's the problem," she said quietly. "You're doing it again."

"It," he repeated blankly.

"You're taking it all on yourself, and you're not giving yourself any downtime. It's worse now, because you can't even kid yourself that you can relax once you take off the costume. Bruce... what would happen if you ran on the treadmill for six hours at five miles per, without a break?"

"It would overheat between hours three and four," Bruce replied. "I know from experience."

"Bruce..."

He sighed. "I'd probably end up with muscle cramps—if I was lucky. More likely, ankle injuries, such as overpronation. Depending on how much water I was drinking during that time, dehydration could be an issue." His voice dropped. "Heart problems."

Barbara nodded seriously. "Hit the pause button. Get off the treadmill, do some stretches. Give yourself a break. Hell, take it off hill-mode." She smiled. "Bruce, this is a dinner. With friends. You think they're coming because they're expecting cordon bleu? You want to do something elegant, by all means. Let me introduce you to puff pastry dough, wonton wrappers, and mini muffin cups; you won't believe how little effort goes into making some of those party canapés. But seriously? Don't stress."

"Helena..."

"When she's awake, we can take turns minding her."

Right on cue, the nursery monitor on the table emitted a joyous squeal. Barbara pushed the stack of cookbooks across the counter toward him.

"I'll take my first turn now, while you check out the cookbooks. Look for recipes that freeze well, or for the kind where it says right in the description that you can make it a few days ahead. And unless you want to spend about two hours constantly stirring the same pot, avoid anything with risotto or béchamel. Particularly, avoid risotto in béchamel. I'll be back in a few minutes."

She wheeled out of the kitchen, leaving Bruce alone to come up with a more realistic menu.
armed cartwheels and dives, to culminate in an aerial cartwheel. After that, he began to work elements he’d seen in various Olympic routines with moves he’d learned in the circus and various maneuvers he’d developed during his years with the Titans. He’d just come out of a triple salto and into a punch-front, when he became aware that his monitor was beeping.

With a sigh, he did a double back-flip to reach the edge of the mat. Then he grabbed a towel and a bottle of room-temperature water and trotted over to the console.

"Go ahead, Vic," he said with a slight frown. His former teammate usually didn't call on him for anything less than a major crisis. "Everything okay with the Outsiders?"

Cyborg nodded. "Just getting back to you on that business you asked me to look into a month ago."

The frown deepened. "I'm listening."

"Walters, or if you prefer, Matheson is in the employ of Vanessa Devereaux. She's a fixture on the Manhattan social scene. Owner of Devereaux Designs—"

"Clothing?"

"Small line but high-end. Word on the street, though, is that people who cross her don't usually live to boast about it. Some guy defrauded her out of some investments. He ended up, um..."

"Not only merely dead, but really most sincerely dead?"

"Exactly. There's never any evidence that she's involved, but when you start asking 'who benefits?' Her name keeps coming up."

Dick nodded. He'd seen the type before. "And her connection with Flass?"

"She dated him. He dumped her, after he got what he wanted. Dick? Is there any reason you haven't asked Oracle to find this out for you?"

Trust Vic to think of asking it. "Hey, if I do end up coming to New York to deal with this, I'll be needing you guys for back up anyway, right?"

Cyborg blinked. "For one middle-aged non-meta and maybe a few bodyguards? Dick, what's going on?"

He closed his eyes and stalled for a few moments. Then, "It's complicated." He hesitated. "It's complicated," he repeated, "because I know that this is something I need to do. As much as there's this part of me that wants to let this one slide, I can't let Devereaux get away with murder. Even if, by taking Flass out of the game, she ended up doing us a huge favor. Barbara's father said as much, and I didn't hear her disagree. Then or later. So, if I tell her what I'm planning..."

"You think she'll try to talk you out of it?"

"Not exactly. I think on this one, she'd leave it up to me. But if I tell her what I'm planning, she might, *might*, mind you, ask me if I'm positive it's a good idea. And I'm just ambivalent enough that maybe I'll decide not to bother after all." He shook his head. "Bruce taught me better."

Cyborg nodded. "Ironic, isn't it?" he asked. "You planning to take down the person who basically saved Bruce's hash, and all because you don't want to let him down."

Dick blinked. "No, that's not it," he said quietly. "That would have been true once, I agree."
"Then?"

Dick squared his shoulders and met Cyborg's penetrating gaze with one of his own. "I don't want to let me down." He gave his former teammate a wry smile. "I'll be in New York in about two weeks."

"We'll expect you."

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"Interjections (Aw!) show excitement (Darn!) or emotion (Hurray!). They're generally set apart from a sentence by an exclamation point, or by a comma when the feeling’s not as strong."

Cass focused on the words as she watched the animated sequence on Metube. It had been Tim's idea.

"One thing I've noticed, Cass. You usually don't need people to tell you things more than once. I know you learned the alphabet in the first place using kinetic methodology—um... by handling 3-D models of the letters..."

"I know... kinetics," she said testily. "So?"

"So, maybe if this doesn't work, we can try making punctuation models, too."

Cass opened her desk drawer and pulled out a number of pieces of shaped polymer clay. "Tried. But comma and apostrophe look same. Exclamation point? Or hyphen on side with period underneath? Colon? Semi-colon? Everything... repeats. She held up one of the two parentheses pieces sideways above her eyes, so that the curve of the upper bracket faced upward like angry eyebrows. The other, she held before her lips, like an upside down smile. "Confusing."

"Okay," Tim said, grinning. "Maybe auditory?"

"You mean... books on disc?"

"Well, not exactly." He walked over to her console and typed a few terms into Giggle. "This used to be on TV-a bit before my time, but...

Now, while Tim sat in another corner of the cave writing a criminology paper, she watched the clips and struggled to absorb the words. She had no problem memorizing the song lyrics, any more than she'd had difficulty remembering the materials that made up the letters of her kinetic alphabet. The hard part had always been remembering the name of the letter. If the GED had just asked her to list six punctuation marks, she could have done it. Unfortunately, it expected her to use them.

With a sigh, she looked at the worksheet that Tim had prepared for her.

"No I can't believe you're going without me", she read aloud. She frowned. Tim had told her that some of the sentences had more than one right answer. She needed to figure out the correct punctuation.

She took a deep breath and picked up the pen. 'No' was an interjection, but should it be an exclamation point or a comma? She decided to come back to it later. A 't' on its own wasn't a word. It needed to connect to 'can'. Hesitantly, she marked an apostrophe in the empty space between the word and the letter. She added another one between 'you' and 're'.

"How strong is the feeling?" She whispered. It was almost five minutes before she lifted her pen again. Her eyes cautiously slid down the page. He'd given her ten? With a mental groan, she moved on to the next.
"We won we re the best." Cass blinked. She did know this one. Exclamation point, apostrophe, exclamation point, and on to the third.

Some time later, Cass stalked, cat-like, to where Tim sat. His eyes seemed practically glued to the monitor as his fingers typed line after line of text. He nearly jumped as Cass placed the sheet, face down, next to the keyboard. "Done. Taking break," she said. "Groceries now. Then science."

Tim grinned. "Sure. And then, grammar."

Cass sighed. "Okay. Later."

Tim waited until he'd finished fleshing out one of his key arguments before he put his essay aside and turned over Cass' sheet. As he went down the sentences, he began to smile. She was getting it. It wasn't until he'd checked the last example he'd given her that he realized that there was another line remaining.

In block letters, Cass had penned, "Gah! I can't believe you made me do ten!"

Tim laughed out loud. Then, at the top, he wrote, "11/10. Good work!"

Bruce hung up the phone. "Let's go," he said. "Kent's flight is on schedule to arrive in forty-five minutes."

Dick nodded. "Listo?" He asked with a broad grin.

A shadow of an answering smile flickered over Bruce's lips in response. He nodded. He was ready.

"Hup." The two men made their way down to the garage together.

Dick surveyed the vehicles before them. "DTS or Crown Vic?" he asked.

"Limo," Bruce replied, already striding toward it. "They'll need the room."

"I could get the car seat for Helena."

Bruce shook his head. "She'll be fine with Jim. If she gets restless, the drive could be difficult."

"Got it."

Bruce didn't say anything else until they passed the first road sign for the Mooney Bridge. Then, "About the other night—"

Dick grinned. "You said it yourself, right before the hearing. You know we're here when you need us."

Bruce nodded. "Knowing that I can depend on you has never been the problem. Allowing myself the luxury, on the other hand—"

Dick opened his eyes wide in exaggerated innocence. "You live on a twenty-five-acre estate. You own forty cars—fifteen of them valued at over $100,000 new, I might add—and we're not even including the Batmobiles. You are the only person I know who owns eleven Armani tuxedos—"

"It used to be an even dozen until I attempted to do my own laundry," Bruce muttered.

"Is that supposed to be helping your case? Bruce... besides reaching out to us once in awhile, can
you list off any luxuries you don't allow yourself? I mean without going into the excesses that marked the last days of the Roman Empire?"

He'd already opened his mouth to reply, but at Dick's last sentence, he closed it firmly.

"Bruce," Dick continued, "Treat yourself. Trust us."

"Trust isn't the issue," Bruce replied pensively. "Maybe I just... have to know that I can ask for your assistance, even if I choose not to. Maybe the other night, I needed the reminder."

Dick nodded slowly. "Okay. I can get how we're your safety net, and you want to make sure we're in position before you take the leap... But maybe there's something you're overlooking."

"Oh?"

"I mean besides the fact that that's our exit in 200 feet."

Bruce swerved across four empty traffic lanes to make it into the right one mere inches before the broken white line turned solid.

Dick grinned. "Bruce, you don't just set up the net when it's the main event. It's even more important to have it in place when you're practicing!"

Silence.

"Bruce?"

Bruce kept his eyes on the road, intent on the signs ahead. "Arrivals," he said under his breath. "What gate are they...?"

"Clearfleet Airlines, gate seventeen. Keep going."

Bruce nodded. "There's the parking garage, on the left," he said, activating the turn signal."

"Yeah." He wasn't that surprised at the change of subject, but something made him try one more time. "Um... Bruce? About..."

Bruce's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "I... haven't entertained in nearly three years," he said slowly. "I... it's possible that I may need," he forced a smile, "all the help I can get."

Dick grinned back. "You'll get it."

"I kn—" He stopped. "I mean... thanks."

The flight from Kansas was showing ten minutes behind schedule when they checked the arrivals board. A moment later, however, the updated display indicated that its ETA was now three minutes ahead of schedule.

"Think Clark got out and pushed?" Dick whispered.

"Unlikely. Exhaling with sufficient force would achieve comparable results without his having to leave the cabin."

Dick laughed. Bruce elbowed him in the ribs. People were looking pointedly in their direction.
It was maybe another half hour before Clark, Lois, and Martha entered the arrivals lounge. Dick flashed a broad smile, which Clark and his mother returned in kind. Lois' was more reserved, but the warmth with which she greeted them more than made up for it.

"You're looking well, Bruce," she said easily. "You too, Dick. Sorry it's taken us this long to get together."

Bruce blinked. Lois was absolutely serious. Bemused, he jerked his head in the direction of the exit. "I'm parked across the road," he said. "Shall we?"

Bruce was glad that he hadn't suggested getting takeout on the way home. While they were out, Jim had set up an array of cold cuts, cheeses, and sliced vegetables on the dining room table, along with a tossed vegetable salad, a container of hummus, and a basket of sliced white and rye breads. "I figured we'd keep things simple tonight," he said, trying to make himself heard over Helena's gleeful squeal. As soon as Jim set her down on the floor, she launched herself at Bruce, wrapping arms and legs around his shin.

"Looks like someone's gotten attached to you," Lois smiled. She bent down and reached out a hand for Helena.

Helena immediately darted behind Bruce, still hugging his pants-leg.

"She'll warm up to you," Bruce said tolerantly. "It just takes her a little time."

"We're not sure if it's heredity or environment," Dick added.

Bruce shot him a look that promised future repercussions.

Lois laughed.

Bruce had every intention of keeping Martha Kent out of the kitchen. He had been completely sincere when he had promised Clark that he hadn't invited her to the manor to spend her vacation cooking. After dinner, he had shown the Kents upstairs to the two guest rooms that the staff had made ready for them, and gone back downstairs to work on the Dinner. (It was impossible for him to think of Christmas Dinner without capitalizing the 'd'.)

He hadn't expected Martha to walk into the kitchen as if she owned it, don an apron, and start dicing onions. And when Clark had come downstairs and found the two of them hard at work, Bruce certainly hadn't expected her to thrust a bowl of potatoes and a peeler at her son and inform him that if he meant to remain in the kitchen, he would need to pitch in as well.

"I did try to dissuade her," he said later, after Martha had finally gone upstairs.

"I know. I should have warned you. When Ma gets a notion that she wants to do something, it... usually gets done." He smiled wearily. "Rao help us both if she ever decides to go the cape-and-mask route."

The sound Bruce made was suspiciously close to a laugh.

Batman hated it when they ran. He was tempted to just let the guy get away. He'd snatched a purse—it wasn't as though he'd killed anyone.
He hasn't killed anyone tonight, you mean. For all you know, he's the prime suspect in some ongoing investigation. Or, you let him go tonight and tomorrow, maybe he won't be satisfied with slamming his victim into a building. Maybe next time, he shoves her out into traffic instead.

He kept up his pursuit. Still, he groaned when the youth dashed up a flight of rickety wooden stairs and climbed onto the second-story balcony of a condemned building. Those structures were fire hazards waiting for sparks, more often than not, and he wasn't about to risk swinging onto a window ledge. The force of his landing might well be enough to cause the overhang to crumble.

Behind the cowl, his eyes narrowed. Someone had pried the boards off one of the first-floor windows, leaving a hole large enough for him to get through.

He stepped inside the building cautiously. The floorboards creaked as he walked. He moved forward, and then hastily pulled his foot back. The wood had given slightly beneath his boot. Damn. If the floor was rotting, this whole building was a minefield. Batman moved gingerly toward the stair case in the far corner.

All at once, there was a commotion upstairs.

"You little punk!" he heard a voice bellow. "I'll teach you to come onto Loboys turf!"

The next minute, the kid he'd been chasing charged down the stairs in a panic. Batman leaped out of the way.

"Hey! We got a Bat in here!"

At the thug's shout, footsteps sounded overhead.

"Rush him!" Someone shouted.

"Yeah, he can't take all of us!"

We'll just see about that, Batman thought, as he sidestepped the first attacker.

"Hey, Bat!" Several of the men on the upper level were brandishing brickbats and cinder blocks. "Catch!"

Batman leaped out of the way as a cinder block landed where he had stood a moment earlier.

One foot broke through a floor-board, trapping his ankle. Off-balance, he fell to one knee as a second cinder block hit the ground, mere inches from his position.

The entire building seemed to shake.

Then more boards gave way, and Batman plunged into the darkness below.
Chapter Summary

Jim Gordon and Martha Kent have both lost loved ones. Sometimes talking to someone who understands can really help. Dick and Barbara investigate Flass's killer. And the Waynes, Graysons, and Kents settle in for a holiday dinner.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Debbie and Robin for the beta!

A/N: "I've Seen Enough to Know" written by Pam Tillis and Rodney Foster. Recorded by Pam Tillis on her Put Yourself in My Place album (Arista, 1991)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I've seen enough to know, a chance worth takin'
Enough to know, a heart worth savin'
Even though you're tryin' not to let it show
There's a part of you that's dyin', dyin' to let go
I've seen enough to know,
I've seen enough to know

- Pam Tillis, Rodney Foster, "I've Seen Enough to Know"

Chapter 29—Chances Worth Taking

He had his grapnel out and in his right hand almost before the floor collapsed. He reached out instinctively as he fell and seized hold of a horizontal pipe in his left hand. At the instant that he caught the pipe, he fired the grapnel toward the ceiling lamp and swung his legs up. He retracted the line, letting it pull him upwards. The planks that had held his foot fell away as they impacted the edge of the hole in the floor. As Batman rose over the second story railing, he kicked out toward the stunned youths who fell back quickly. He let go the line, caught the railing in both hands, pulled up to a handstand, and back-flipped to the ground, half-twisting as he went. As soon as his feet touched the worn carpet on the second floor, he slid effortlessly into a rapid succession of Yurchenko vaults, which plowed through the panicked thugs in short order. While they were still reeling from his assault, he stepped over to the door, shut it, and stood blocking it. He looked at his assailants and smiled. They were moaning and nursing injured limbs. He was unscathed, apart from a few superficial scratches. They were panting from fear and exertion. Two seemed to be close to hyperventilating. He, on the other hand, wasn't even breathing hard.

"That was fun," he said calmly, ignoring the throbbing in his ankle. "So, do you want to surrender, or do you want to start the real fight, now that I'm warmed up?"

The thugs glanced at one another. Then one after another, they slowly raised their hands.
Batman nodded in satisfaction. "I was hoping you'd take the smart way out."

Jim waited until Bruce went upstairs to bed before he turned out the light in the kitchen and headed for the front door. The house was quiet now, but somehow, knowing that there were three more people under the roof tonight made it feel less empty—even if he could neither see nor hear the guests.

Smiling to himself, he walked down the hallway, heading for his coat in the vestibule. As he walked past the front room, however, he realized that not everyone had gone upstairs.

He cleared his throat and Martha Kent's eyelids fluttered. "Mmmm?" She asked sleepily. Her eyes opened. "Oh." Slowly, she took in her surroundings. "Oh, my goodness."

"I didn't mean to startle you," he said quietly. "I just thought you might be more comfortable upstairs."

Martha gave him an embarrassed smile. "I was just admiring the tree," she said. "And the next thing I knew..." She looked down and realized for the first time that there was a blanket covering her. She shook her head, still smiling. "I guess Clark didn't want to wake me."

"Ah." Without another word, he sat down in the armchair next to hers.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"About a quarter to midnight, I think." He noted that the fire was nearly down to embers. "I could put another log on before I go, if you mean to be down here a bit longer."

Martha shook her head. "As much as I do love watching a roaring fire, I think it must have been the flames put me to sleep in the first place." She smiled again. "I'm not usually awake this late. Though, I would imagine that as the former police commissioner, you would be."

Gordon nodded. "Guilty as charged, ma'am. Not so much because of the job, mind you, but because most of our toughest cases to crack tended to get solved between dusk and dawn."

"Oh?" Realization dawned a moment later. Martha shot a significant look at the ceiling. "I can't imagine the last few years have been good to you either, his being your friend and all."

He shook his head. "They could have been better. For all concerned." He sighed.

"It is quite a tree," he said a few minutes later.

"Well, it's big enough," Martha agreed. "But it's not at all..." she looked away, and even in the dim light, Jim was sure she was blushing. "Never mind," she said. "I'm being silly."

"Oh?"

Martha was still smiling. "I suppose, when I found out that we were coming here, I imagined that there'd be a tree that stood four stories tall, covered in gold and diamonds, or something equally ostentatious. Instead of a perfectly respectable eight-foot evergreen, with the kind of hand-made ornaments I grew up with."

"If it helps," Jim rumbled, "some of them are probably rare antiques. I wish Sarah were here," he said softly. "She would have loved this kind of thing, too."

"Sarah?"
"My wife," he said bleakly. "Late wife."

Martha leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "How long...?"

"Five years tomorrow." It was hard to get the words past the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat.

"I'm sorry. Do you... did you... want to talk about her?"

Jim sighed. "I suppose I wouldn't have brought her up if I didn't," he admitted. "I guess I've been thinking about her off-and-on as we got closer to Christmas. As much as you try to bury yourself in the season, it's..."

"The elephant in the room," Martha interjected.

"I've never really liked that poem," Jim admitted. "Probably because 'Barbara' happens to be the name of both my daughter and my first wife. You're right, though."

Martha nodded.

"I think I will put that other log on," Jim said after a moment. "It's starting to get chilly in here."

"It is, isn't it?"

Martha waited until he'd returned to his seat before she said, "Jonathan's been gone almost two years, now."

"I'm sorry," Jim said, meaning it. "Was it... sudden?"

"Yes. And no. He'd... the doctor warned him about his heart. He was trying to follow the guidelines for diet and exercise. And then, one day... he just..." She shook her head and smiled sadly. "And your Sarah?"

"It was sudden," Jim allowed. "We didn't even have as much warning as you did. Although looking at it from a different perspective, maybe we shouldn't have been surprised. This is Gotham, after all." He closed his eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm not usually this... cryptic. My wife was a police officer. A member of my team at Central. We stayed on during the No Man's Land—I imagine you heard about that." At her nod, he continued. "That Christmas Eve, just before Gotham was repatriated... or whatever you want to call it... Joker kidnapped every infant in the city and threatened to kill them if we didn't find them in time. Sarah... found them. And Joker shot her." His shoulders slumped. "There was no autopsy. I couldn't see a point to it. But from what I know of bullet wounds, in all likelihood, she never felt a thing."

Martha exhaled. "I can't even begin to imagine."

"I have," Jim said. "Too many times to count."

She stretched out a hand to him. Without really thinking about it, he squeezed it.

They sat for a time in companionable silence. Finally, Jim got up. "I should try to get some sleep before dawn," he said, sighing. "Are you going to be all right?"

"Oh, yes," Martha smiled. "I suppose I should head upstairs myself. I guess I'll see you tomorrow..." she stopped. "...A bit later today, rather."

"I imagine so," Jim smiled back. "Pleasant dreams, Mrs. Kent."
"And to you."

The smile drooped. "We can hope, I suppose. Good night, Mrs. Kent."

"My name is Martha."

"My friends call me Jim. Good night."

"Good thing you can walk on hands," Cass said as she eased his boot off.

Dick sucked in his breath.

"Bad?"

"Well, it wasn't as long as the boot was on," he muttered through clenched teeth. "And as long as I didn't try to put weight on it."

"How did you..." she frowned. "...Win?"

Dick made a face. "Adrenaline, I guess. Plus, it got worse as it got later. Good thing I'm off tomorrow."

"Barbara knows," Cass stated.

"No, I haven't checked in with her—"

"Barbara knows," she repeated. "Called ten minutes before you came here."

"Barbara knows," Dick echoed. "Got it. He could have sworn he'd managed to hide the limp. He grimaced when Cass returned with the gauze and tape. "You sure you know how to do this?"

"No. But think I can."

"Swell." He'd do it himself, but he'd be working at an awkward angle. Best to let Cass try and then get Barbara to check her handiwork later.

"Too bad first aid not on GED. I'd be studying," Cass said with a grimace.

"You know," Dick started to say, "even if..." He stopped.

"If?"

He'd been about to tell her that even if she failed the GED, it wouldn't lessen her standing in his eyes, but instinct told him that if he told it to her now, instead of being reassured, she'd think that he doubted her capabilities. He thought fast.

"Even if this isn't something you've had a lot of practice with, I think you're doing okay."

Cass smiled.

"I can't believe you decided to finish patrol after that," Barbara exclaimed when Dick got home. By then, his ankle was throbbing and he actually was contemplating walking on his hands. It almost beat hobbling. Almost.

"I was fine as long at the boot was supporting me," he said wearily. "And until I ran out people to
fight."

Barbara shook her head, but she was smiling. "There's a cold compress waiting for you in the freezer and boiling water on the stove for a hot one."

Dick grinned back. "Have I told you lately that I love you?"

"Mmm... not since you got back from work this afternoon."

Despite his pain, Dick chuckled. "By the way," he said casually, "I think I'll be heading to New York next month for a day or so."

"Oh?" Barbara leaned forward. "PMWE business, or Outsiders?"

"Neither, actually," he admitted. "Well, I mean, I'm going to involve the Outsiders, but it's not their issue, it's mine." He took a deep breath. "I asked Cyborg to look into Matheson... or Whitelock, if you prefer. He came up with something."

Barbara raised an eyebrow. "You asked... Never mind. What did he find out?"

"He works for a woman who used to date Flass. Scuttlebutt is that she's not a person to cross."

"So, you're going to cross her."

Dick sighed. "I have to."

Barbara nodded. "Yeah, I guess you do." She pouted. "I'm a little hurt that you didn't come to me first. Did you think I wouldn't understand?"

"Not for a minute," he replied. "I... Look. Sometimes, you know what you have to do, but there's a part of you that fights it and tries to rationalize. It's like, okay. If Flass had died of natural causes, I probably would have broken out the champagne. If it turned out that he got beaten up in jail and the ones that did it were caught, I wouldn't lose sleep. And maybe," he admitted, "even if the ones who did it weren't caught, I'd let it go, seeing as they'd already be locked up. I'd like to think I wouldn't, but I can't really know..." His expression hardened. "But I don't care if Flass was scum of the earth. I can't let someone literally get away with murder. For the last month, there's a part of me that's been trying to rationalize, or trying to put off doing something about it." He closed his eyes. "I've been second-guessing myself enough. Until I knew, really knew, that I was going to deal with this," he sighed. "I know this is going to sound stupid, Babs, but I just didn't want anyone asking me if I was sure about this until I knew I was. Because maybe I'd rethink. Again."

Barbara placed her hand on his elbow. "It doesn't sound stupid," she said. "No, I get why you didn't want to discuss it in the first place. But you went to Vic because..."

"Because mentally, he's not as close to the situation as we are. I told you I'm going to New York in two weeks. But if, just when I'm ready to go, things start heating up in Gotham..." He shrugged. "Well, obviously, I'll deal with trouble at home first. But once that's handled, if I still postpone the other business..." He winced. "I think Vic will start needling me to stop putting it off and get my butt down to NYC before you will."

Barbara considered that for a moment. Then she smiled slowly. "I guess I can't really be angry if what you're saying is that you don't think of me as a nag," she said.

Dick grinned. "Of course, now that you know what I'm planning, I could use whatever intel you can turn up on a certain Vanessa Devereux. From what Vic says, she's a socialite. She dabbles a bit in
fashion design, but her brand isn't a household name or anything. Still, that doesn't exactly sound to me like a person who uses bio-weapons to take down an ex-boyfriend. So my first interest is in knowing the source of the anthrax she used to kill Flass. Maybe see what you can dig up on that Whitelock guy who actually administered the spores, too." He frowned. "I mean, I suppose it's possible that she just told him to be creative in eliminating Flass, and he somehow procured the spores. I doubt it, but let's cover all bases."

Barbara nodded. "Are you going to ask Vic to do the same thing?" she teased.

Dick blinked innocently. "Why? You'll find it faster, you'll find it easier, and you'll find it all."

Barbara kissed him. "Just for that? Sit down. I'll get you that cold compress myself." She grinned. "And then I'll type a few keywords into a search program, leave it to run overnight, and see what comes up."

Lois came down to breakfast the next morning with an apologetic expression. "Perry just called. I'm on a story. I'm sorry, Martha," she turned to her mother-in-law. "I know we were going to hit the natural history museum today, but I think they'd close early on Christmas Eve."

Martha nodded. "That's all right. I didn't get to bed until fairly late last night."

"I didn't know that," Clark said, concerned.

Martha smiled. "Don't fret yourself, Clark. I just lost track of time is all, and now I'm a mite stiff. It's not serious. I suppose, you're on assignment, too?"

"Um... well... that is..."

She laughed. "Go, go! I'll just relax today, maybe walk around the grounds a bit—that's if it's all right with you, Bruce?" she asked, smiling at him.

Bruce nodded. "I've no objection. Maybe Helena and I will join you later. And Jim," he added, almost as an afterthought.

A slight frown creased his features. Was Martha Kent blushing?

"Well, isn't this interesting," Barbara said.

"You found something?" Dick asked, walking over. His ankle felt much better after a hot soak and a good morning's sleep.

"And how." Barbara patted the swivel chair next to her. Dick sat down. "Okay," she began. "The records state that Vanessa Devereux, nee Sinclair, was born in Chicago. She married Martin Devereux in '95. He died five years later in a boating accident—"

"Suspicious?"

"Not according to the report. It looks like he had a habit of mixing cocaine and vodka martinis. Autopsy report confirmed overdose as the cause of death."

"Still doesn't prove it was accidental, but go on. What about Vanessa?"

"Well," Barbara said, "that's the thing. The bio she gives out gives her current age as fifty-five, she lists degrees from a couple of universities, claims to have attended boarding schools abroad..."
"And?"

"The degrees are honorary, the boarding schools don't seem to exist... and there was no Vanessa Sinclair born fifty-five years ago." Barbara typed in a few more commands. "But," she continued, "there was a Heloise V. Sinclair born forty-eight years ago. Dr. Heloise Sinclair is an infectious disease specialist—or at least she was. Now, if you look at her library records," she pointed to a list of titles, "it appears she also had interests in both toxicology and chemical pathology. If you check the dates they were signed out, they tie in with vacation periods—during the academic year, it was strictly course material, from the look of things."

Dick rapidly scanned the library data. "If that's what she read for fun..." His eyes widened.

"More like independent study, I'd say. Still circumstantial—I mean, I'm pretty sure if I accessed Bruce's reading list from a couple of decades ago, I'd be speculating that he was some sort of master criminal... or terrorist, maybe. The thing is, in 1991, Heloise dropped completely off the grid."

"What?"

"She quit her job, moved out of her apartment, and just up and disappeared. 1994, though? That's the first year that I was able to find any concrete reference to Vanessa Sinclair Devereux. I bet you can guess what Heloise's middle name is."

"What about a birth certificate?" Dick asked. "I mean, the ages don't add up."

"No, they don't," Barbara agreed. "I did find two of them; one for Heloise Vanessa, and one for Vanessa, no middle name. However," Barbara continued, "I don't show a hardcopy scan anywhere in the system for Vanessa, just an e-copy. And while it's not the easiest thing in the world to hack into a government system and plant a fake record, give me an hour and I can probably find you about two thousand computer experts who could do it." She smiled. "The other thing? I know it's an old cliché, but usually, if a person is going to lie about their birth year, they'll go in the other direction—younger, not older. I'm thinking she was trying to be clever by aging up." Her smile widened, then vanished entirely as she returned to her display.

"Okay, now going back a couple of years, in 1989, her father, Simon Sinclair died of food poisoning. V. Cholerae."

"Don't tell me," Dick said. "Bivalve shellfish?"

"You got it." She grimaced. "I know what you're thinking, and the answer is... maybe. Four days before his death, he was at a gala dinner at an upscale restaurant. He ordered scallops, as did about 30 other patrons. Twenty-eight of them lived. Owners were fined for negligence. There's a civil suit filed by the victims, which was settled out of court. Restaurant went bankrupt in early '90. Heloise was Simon's sole heir."

"So she waits a reasonable amount of time, disappears, and comes back as the independently wealthy Vanessa—who marries into more money—"

"Which she inherits when her husband passes on..."

"And then...?"

"And then, there's never anything to tie her in directly... but it seems like anyone who crosses her ends up dead. And the method of death has usually involves something which plays into that reading list I showed you. I show six deaths by food poisoning—keep in mind again that there's nothing concrete to connect her with any of them. I mean, food poisoning happens without its being..."
deliberate. Six people who got on her bad side, all dying the same way, though? It's a pretty big coincidence. Then there was the case of Jordan Tanner, an investment adviser who conned her out of three million dollars. She wasn't the only one, mind you—guy was another Warren White. Anyway, they found blue-ring octopus venom in his system."

Dick read the rest of the report and let out a low whistle. "Did the bakery cross her, too?"

"I don't think so," Barbara said. "I mean, I don't know, but if the food poisoning at the restaurant was her... it looks like the only thing they did wrong was give her an opportunity to taint the shellfish. It doesn't look like she had any real reason to want to harm them. However, since Tanner used to boast about having a finger in every pie..."

"She's sick."

"And dangerous. Especially if our hunch is right and Heloise and Vanessa are the same person. Heloise worked at some of the top disease research labs in the US." She sucked in her breath and gripped Dick's arm tightly as she continued, "Including the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta!"

Dick blinked. "So she knows her stuff," he said, glancing down at the hand on his arm and then at Barbara's face. His flippancy died. "Is there something special about Atlanta I'm missing?"

Barbara lowered her chin once and jerked it up again quickly. "Yeah, but don't kick yourself for not knowing. It's not exactly something they pay promoters to advertise." She took a long slow breath. "The CDC happens to be one of only two known places in the world where they store live samples of smallpox."

Dick whistled again. "All of a sudden, I'm really glad Bruce insisted on giving me the vaccine when I was a kid, even though it hurt like hell, and even though, by that time, about the only people getting the shot were the researchers who actually handled the stuff."

Barbara relaxed visibly. Then her expression turned worried once more. "How about anthrax? Are you protected against that?"

"Right now? No, I'm not," he admitted. "Working on it, though. I checked out what was involved after Flass, and it turns out that I need to get five shots over eighteen months. It took a lot of fast-talking at S.T.A.R. Labs—there can be some pretty nasty side effects, so they usually don't give it out unless there's a real need—but I convinced them to give me the first one last week." He grinned. "And so far, I haven't noticed anything major or minor. Anyway, I can't let this sit for a year and a half. But what I will do when I'm in New York, is stop by St. Vincent's in Greenwich Village. They're pretty cape-friendly. Odds are, I'll find someone to give me some Cipro if I explain why I need it."

Barbara nodded. "And S.T.A.R. Labs is right there, if you do run into trouble." She frowned. "Okay. I know you need to deal with her, but I don't have to like it. And I am going to worry until you come home-safe, sound and without so much as a common cold."

Dick grinned. "Believe me, before I take her on, I'm going to be taking full-spectrum immunizations, and stocking my first aid kit with every anti-toxin, antivenin, and anti-biotic known to humankind."

Barbara shook her head. "Now I'm really getting worried," she admitted. "About your risk factor for hernia. That kit's going to be too heavy for you to lift!"

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Bruce spent the better part of the morning working on Christmas dinner while Martha kept Helena occupied. After lunch, they switched off: he carried Helena back to the nursery, while Martha took
over the kitchen.

As soon as they reached the nursery, Helena struggled to get down from Bruce's arms and made a bee-line for the blocks. Bruce watched her fondly for a moment. Then, he left for a moment and returned with a laptop, switched it on, and pulled up his notes on one of the cold cases that Renee had left him months ago. He was nearly halfway through the material when Helena wormed her way under his arm.

"You build me a tower?" Helena asked.

Bruce blinked. "What?"

Helena seized his hand in both of hers and tugged, as though she intended to tow him over to the blocks. "You build me a tower!"

Bruce's lips twitched. "If I build it, are you going to knock it over?"

Helena giggled. "You build me a tower."

Bruce sighed. He built the tower. Helena knocked it over with a shout of glee. Then she clamored for another one.

"How about you build me a tower?" he suggested.

Helena beamed. "Okay!" she said and immediately began gathering blocks.

Bruce watched her, observing, with some satisfaction, that she had already discovered that a wider base would allow for a higher tower. The final result was a triangle that stood five blocks block high with a five block base.

Bruce smiled. "Good work," he said. "Now," he said as Helena smiled back, "what should I do next?"

All at once, Helena's smile disappeared. "No," she protested.

Bruce blinked. "But what do you do when I build one for you?" he asked.

Helena shook her head. "No, don't break."

Bruce regarded her thoughtfully. After a moment, he rocked back on his heels. "I guess it's too nice to break," he said. "Right?"

Helena giggled. "No. I break!" she exclaimed, demolishing it with a sweep of her hand.

Bruce fought down a laugh and went back to his laptop.

"Please, tell me you aren't going to hover," Jim said that evening, after the supper dishes had been dried.

Bruce shook his head. "No. But this time of year can be lonely, even if tonight weren't..."

Jim placed a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Your concern is appreciated. I think I just want to sit in the front room for a bit." He smiled wearily. "And no, I'm not dead set on being alone. I just don't feel much like holding up my end of a conversation tonight."
"I understand," Bruce nodded. He walked to the high chair to scoop up Helena. "I'm going to put her to bed," he said, bouncing her gently, "and then, maybe I'll come back down for awhile."

Jim grunted a response and headed for the front room.

He wasn't surprised to see Martha there already. Bruce had lit another fire earlier, and it was still going strong. She rose immediately to her feet as he entered. "No need for that," he said wearily, sinking back into the same armchair he'd occupied the night before. "I don't mind company if you don't mind quiet."

"I don't mind it a bit," Martha said. Without another word, she resumed her seat and went back to her crocheting.

Jim watched her for a moment. Then, he hunched forward, watched the flames, and let his thoughts drift. He hadn't really come in here to think about Sarah. He didn't need a special room—or a special night—for that. But there was something comforting about the fire. Or perhaps, it took him back to that one year of hell that had been the No Man's Land. Hell... and yet there had been small bits of Heaven mixed in with it; the amazement at discovering what he could live without, the pride he'd felt at coaxing a few cubic feet of soil in some garden boxes to yield up carrots and tomatoes. Love for the woman he'd married, and astonishment that she had supported his decision to remain in Gotham after the No Man's Land bill had been passed into law. The discovery that an old dog like himself could learn the new tricks needed for survival when the rules changed. He watched the flames, and he remembered...

He wasn't sure exactly when he dozed off, but he woke when he felt something soft drape over him, to find the fire not yet gone out. The blanket that had been spread out over Martha's lap now covered him—that must have been what had roused him...

"I'm sorry," Martha apologized. "I was... hoping that might wake you. I did have half a mind to slip out, but, well, it just didn't seem right, your taking time to make sure I didn't sleep last night away sitting up, and then me not showing you the same courtesy."

Jim smiled. "I'm obliged." He glanced at his watch. "Did Bruce come down?"

"He looked in, yes, but he didn't want to disturb you either."

"Ah." He reached for his cane and pulled himself up with a groan. "I guess I'll be go—" He looked out the window. "Good L-rd. How long has that been coming down?"

Martha followed his gaze. "Land sakes! I can't see the path at all."

Jim sighed. "Well, the snow's a foot deep, if it's an inch, now, and I'm not about to try clearing it tonight when there's any number of unoccupied bedrooms upstairs."

"You mean you clear the snow?" Martha asked.

Jim shook his head. "Not as a rule, no. As a matter of fact, I think Bruce would be even more horrified than you, if I suggested it. However, the only way for me to get back to the cottage tonight would be if someone clears a path, and I'm not about to wake anyone else up to do it." He frowned. "The room directly across the hall from Bruce's... Would you know if anybody's using it?"

Martha shook her head. "None of us. Why?"

Jim smiled. "When Bruce and I first came back here, that was my room, for a bit. I didn't think it
would be currently occupied, but I figured it would be better to ask than surprise someone." If memory served, he'd left a change of clothes and some toiletries behind, just in case an emergency did come up. He glanced at the clock. "Well, I may be jumping the gun by about ten minutes, but seeing as it's already December 25th in most of the Caribbean, may I wish you a Merry Christmas?"

Martha smiled back. "You may, indeed. And to you, Mr. Gor—Jim," she amended.

"I'll see you in the morning, Martha. And thank you."

"Well, what do you know?" Barbara said softly, as she wheeled away from her console.

"You found something?"

"A walk down memory lane, believe it or not. Do you remember MAZE?"

Dick blinked. "The international spy ring? I thought we put them out of business years ago."

"Well, maybe it's under new management," Barbara allowed, "but they're definitely active. Only it looks like they've stepped up their operations—at least in one area."

Dick had a feeling he wasn't going to like what came next. "Okay, hit me."

Barbara took a deep breath. "Well, their usual MO was to steal weapons and technology to sell to the highest bidder..."

Dick nodded. "Yeah, I remember. So?"

"So, they're still doing it. Except it looks like they're also trying to create their own. Specifically, they're trying to create bio-weapons."

"Devereux." It wasn't a question.

"I found their offshore accounts," Barbara nodded. "And I'm showing several cash transfers in the mid-seven digits, flowing indirectly into her coffers. The funds are being filtered through dummy companies on both sides—that's why it's taken this long to pinpoint the trail—but they are funding her research—and planning to auction off her results, if their old MO holds true. It looks like the fashion line is just a cover. She owns it, but she isn't actually running it. The other thing is, she has an industrial complex about an hour north of NYC. No tenants listed, mind you."

"What else is in the general vicinity?" Dick asked.

"Nothing. It's three thousand hectares of privately-owned land in the middle of nowhere, basically."

"So, it's away from major population centers."

"Exactly."

Dick nodded. "Sounds like a good place to start looking."

"Uh huh." She took another breath. "The search program turned up something else, too," she said. "You... might want to let Raven know about this one. That's if you think..."

Dick frowned when he saw the notation. "No ifs. I'll contact her tomorrow. But first," he smiled, "I think we need to get dressed for dinner."
Dinner had been called for six, but the snow removal crews still hadn't made much of a dent in the blizzard of the night before. Dick and Barbara didn't arrive until nearly seven. It might have taken them even longer, had Tim not been snowblowing the path from the manor gates to the parking garage.

"You're not late!" He hollered over the noise of the machine. "I'm going to pick up Cass when I finish!"

They smiled and headed for the already-cleared ramp to the front door.

To their surprise, Selina was sitting next to Bruce on the couch, while Helena played noisily nearby.

"I still think she's safer here," Selina was saying, "but that doesn't mean I don't want to be part of her—your—lives."

Bruce was smiling. "I'm sure we can work something out." He got up to greet them.

It was too bad Cass wasn't there yet, Dick thought wryly. He wasn't quite as much an expert at reading body language as she was, but he recognized Bruce's 'politician' voice when he heard it. It was the one he usually reserved for social gatherings when he was actually expected to demonstrate a certain degree of intellect—one step up from 'affable fop'. He was trying, Dick reflected. He was still keeping his walls up, but... he was leaving Selina some handholds. And knowing Selina's talents, those handholds would probably be all she needed to work her way in.

Nearly another hour passed before Tim and Cass returned and they finally sat down to dinner.

It wasn't a traditional Wayne Manor Christmas dinner. Perhaps one could make a case for traditional fusion. The roast beef was still there, and it was still delicious, even if it was slightly tougher than Alfred's had been in years past. There was cranberry chutney and Yorkshire puddings, but there the old standbys ceased.

Dick had never cared much for smoked trout, but there was more than enough reserved mesclun on hand to provide a portion for him as well as for Clark. Barbara and the others, however, fell on the fish with gusto.

They'd never served a soup course before. The previous night's snowfall and attendant drop in temperature, however, had made Bruce think that a pot of it might be in order. At Martha's suggestion, he'd used minimal salt and pepper.

"You'll never get it just right for everyone," she'd said. "So leave the shakers on the table, and folks'll season to their own taste."

It was good advice. And baby spinach left over from the salad had put a festive accent in the tomato soup.

Clark put his fork down with a smile. "I'm not sure which of the two of you I should thank," he said, looking from Bruce to his mother, "but this tempeh is great!"

Martha and Bruce exchanged knowing glances. The recipe had actually been a joint effort, with Martha doing a lot of the directing and stirring, Bruce doing a lot of the measuring and chopping. Bruce debated whether to ascribe Clark's comment to diplomacy, or whether to take it as an indication that Clark's detective skills were improving.

Tim took a third helping of roasted beets. Barbara had been right on that one, too: nobody actually
liked the traditional Brussels sprouts.

Bruce smiled.

"Yeah," Dick said, in a voice that carried no farther than Bruce's ear. "It is going well."

"Not that," Bruce replied. "I mean, yes. It is, but I was actually thinking about when we rebuilt after the No Man's Land. If you recall, I wanted to retain the old traditions then, too."

"There's nothing wrong with that," Dick grinned.

"No. But it's occurred to me that while there isn't anything wrong with doing the same thing year after year, there isn't anything wrong with trying something new, either." He stood up. "Help me clear the table, Dick, and we'll bring out dessert. And then," he smiled once more, "I think it'll be time to go into the front room and start that other new tradition I mentioned to you last week."

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The tradition to which Bruce had referred was the exchanging of gifts after dinner, when everyone had arrived. In years past, Dick had risen early, run downstairs, and opened his gifts. His loud whoops of delight—and later, the loud electronic beeps and simulated explosions of his videogames—would rouse the others, and after all the gifts were opened, they would go to breakfast. After Dick moved out, Bruce had treated Christmas as one more day to sleep late after a long night's patrol. He'd made it clear that he didn't need gifts from others, and what gifts he gave tended to be large cash transfers—generous, but impersonal.

"I wasn't sure what to buy you," Selina said, as she passed over a small, wrapped parcel, "but..."

Bruce accepted it with a raised eyebrow. "You came back," he said. "It didn't occur to me to expect more." He reached under the tree. "But I was hoping that you would be here tonight," he added, as he handed her a gift of his own.

He'd resigned himself to Cross pens and after shave; Clark and Lois didn't disappoint him on that score. Martha, however, came through with a tin of home-baked Kansas sunflower cookies.

A sweater from Jim, a cookbook from Barbara—he should have expected that one.

"Mine sort of goes with hers," Dick grinned, as Bruce pulled several seed packages out of the gift bag. "I figure, I provide the raw materials, and she tells you what to do with them, once they're ready for harvest." He'd included a book of gardening tips, as well.

Tim's gift was a squash racket. "Note," Tim deadpanned, "this one includes twelve sessions with a partner—you call, I come. Barring the usual emergencies, of course."

"Of course," Bruce smiled.

He was strangely silent after unwrapping Cassandra's. The watercolor sketch depicted the Gotham skyline—but the skyline as it had looked after Cataclysm. The artist—whoever it was—had focused on a pile of rubble in the foreground. And poking out, among the debris, the shattered glass, and the broken bricks and beams, were a number of small wildflowers—pink and purple, yellow and white. It was his city; even in its darkest hour, there were still signs of hope and of the potential for rebirth, if a person—like this artist—knew where to look for it. He took a deep breath. "It's... beautiful," he managed. Then, hesitantly, "Did you paint it?"

Cass smiled. "No. One of the patients at Saint Swithin's. Found in gift shop. Thought you would like."
"You thought right." He smiled back.

There was a commotion near the back of the room.

"No, Helena," Selina was saying. "Helena! Put that down."

His daughter had discovered the fireplace tools. As Selina uncurled tiny fingers from the poker, Helena let out a wail.

"Someone sounds overtired."

Bruce had to admit she had a point. "She did nap this afternoon," he said, coming forward. "It's probably the excitement."

"Most likely," Selina agreed. She smiled wearily up at Bruce. "I guess I'd better put her to bed, then."

"I'll show you where her room is now," Bruce said, extending a hand to help her up. He looked at the others. "Why don't you keep exchanging gifts without us," he suggested, "and we'll rejoin you shortly?"

Another six inches of snow fell overnight, but it didn't stop Cass from making it to the hospital in time for her shift. She felt a bit odd wearing her costume in broad daylight, but she suspected she would have felt stranger swinging from building to building in her winter coat. Besides, after the lengths that Barbara had gone through to purge her likeness from the government databases, she wasn't about to let herself get captured on film in anything other than her costume.

She stopped on the roof of an apartment building two blocks away from the hospital, doffed mask and gloves, and hastily pulled civilian clothing out of her backpack. A sweater and cargo pants went over the costume. She doubted that her black boots would invite suspicion if the rest of her costume was concealed. She zipped her mask into the inner pocket of her lightweight down jacket and, after a moment's hesitation, added her gloves as well. Then she clambered down the fire escape and walked the rest of the way to Saint Swithin's.

A glance at the clock told her that she was more than an hour early. Cass considered for a moment. Then she shouldered her backpack and headed for the solarium, glad that she had decided to bring her GED preparation guide with her, after all.

She was surprised to find Dr. Arkham in the solarium, reading a newspaper. He grunted in response to her cheerful 'good morning', and turned the page over.

Cass shrugged and tackled her preparation guide.

Which sentence below would be a better way to begin paragraph B?

She frowned and looked at the choices. A was definitely wrong, and so was C... at least, she thought so. But B and D? It was hopel—no. No, it wasn't hopeless. Because one month ago, she hadn't been able to narrow down any of her choices. One year ago, she had still been trying to memorize the alphabet. She eyed the paragraph again. "I will beat you," she said under her breath.

"What are you doing?"

She jerked her head up at Dr. Arkham's rasp. Then she lowered it with a sigh. "Studying."
He held out a hand. "Show me."

Cass hesitated. Arkham stretched his hand further. Dubiously, Cass handed over the study guide. He scanned the page rapidly.

"You mean to take this test?"

She nodded.

"You're writing your answers on paper, not in the book."

"Yes. Easier to do over."

He held out his hand again for the paper. She passed it over with greater reluctance.

"Two. In ten minutes."


Dr. Arkham frowned. Then he looked at the book again. "Cass. With your permission, I would like to try an experiment."

She blinked. "O... Kay." She wasn't entirely sure she understood his meaning. Experiments, in her experience, involved test tubes and chemicals, and usually took place in the Cave.

"I am going to read you a passage," he rasped. "Slowly. And then, I will ask you the accompanying questions."

She frowned. "But... your voice..."

"Young woman," Dr. Arkham snapped, "I am in this facility in order to learn to speak again. Allow me to practice."

He was right. Cass nodded. "Okay."

Arkham fixed her with a steely gaze. Then he flipped several pages ahead. "This passage is an employee code of conduct," he said. "I will read each sentence slowly, and," he wheezed, "let us hope, clearly." He gave her a thin smile. "You may ask me to repeat myself at any time. If there is something that you do not understand, you may ask. If you have no questions, I will continue. Clear?"

Cass nodded again. "Clear."

"Very well." He cleared his throat. "Guidelines for conducting business with those outside our company. Our employees are the most efficient..."

Cass listened intently. The phrasing was a bit more formal than she usually encountered, but she had no difficulty understanding the meaning of the text. The telepath who had rewired her brain to allow her to understand verbal language had also imparted to her the meanings of virtually every word he knew. Colloquialisms and context sometimes gave her pause, but it was rare for her to come across a word where she couldn't grasp its simple definition.

"First question," Arkham began. "And if you know the answer before you hear the choices, you may state it. Based only on the passage that I just read, what would be this company's policy on accepting gifts or entertainment from competitors?"
Cass hesitated. "Not to," she replied.

Arkham nodded. "Would accepting such gifts be deemed, a: impractical, b: inappropriate, c: unobjectionable, d: dangerous, or e: strictly prohibited?"

She thought for a moment. "Not unobjectionable," she said. "Not... impractical. Dangerous? Maybe if only three choices, but not best word here. So... inappropriate or strictly prohibited." She frowned. "Both are right... but... strictly prohibited is best fit." She took a deep breath. "E."

Arkham nodded.

"Based on the information in this excerpt, when may one give money which may be termed a bribe or a tip to a government official or financial officer, for the purpose of circumventing existing legislation or otherwise facilitating operations?"

She didn't need to hear the choices. "Never."

Arkham asked her another six questions. She answered them all. When she finished, he handed her back the book.

"There is an audio version of this material available," he said, wheezing a bit. "Get it."

Cass frowned. "But the test is... writing," she said.

"My dear young woman," Arkham said, pinning her with a steely eye, "the GED does make provision for students with reading disabilities."

"What?"

"The test assesses whether you have learned the material. If you have difficulty reading it, they will allow you to have the examination read to you. If circumstances warrant, they will provide you a scribe, who will write down the answers you dictate."

She couldn't believe it. "How?"

"The first step," Arkham said, "would be to get your doctor to write a letter attesting to your situation."

Cass frowned. "I... have no doctor." Her eye fell on the clock. "Oh! Late!" She stuffed the book into her backpack. "Bye."

Arkham watched her leave. Then, shaking his head, he went back to his newspaper.

Clark found Bruce in the nursery, reading to Helena. "I think we may need to stay another few days," he said quietly. "I'm not sure if you heard, but the same weather system that dumped two feet of snow over Gotham dropped five in the Midwest. There won't be any flights leaving Gotham until tomorrow at the earliest—but there's no telling when Wichita will have its runways cleared."

He waited for Bruce to point out that a few seconds of heat vision could solve the problems with both airports. He'd thought about it. The problem was, when his powers had returned, he'd found that he needed to relearn their control. He could melt the snow, yes. But there was a good possibility that he'd tear up the runways while he did it. He couldn't simply fly his mother back home; the neighbors would wonder how she had returned with the airport closed.

Bruce only nodded. "So, you need to extend your stay."
"We can look into a hotel—"

"They'll be booked," Bruce said. "Not only is it the holidays, but if Goodwin is closed, then the airlines will be scrambling to find rooms for stranded passengers. Besides," he deadpanned, "you've been helping with the dishes." His lips twitched. "Stay as long as you need to."

"We didn't want to impose—"

"You aren't," Bruce smiled. "Although, if you're so inclined, there is a..." he hesitated, "...a favor I'd like to ask."

Actually, he didn't want to ask it, but he'd promised Alex he'd _try—at least once, over the holidays—to request someone's help when he didn't actually think he needed it.

Clark blinked. "What kind of favor?"

Bruce hesitated again. "I was thinking that Helena might enjoy sledding," he said, "if there was a large enough hill of snow. And if the course was cleared of rocks and other hazards." He took another breath. "It's too much for me to do alone, but if you were to lend a hand...?"

Clark smiled. "I used to love sledding, as a kid. Actually, I'm not sure anyone really outgrows that kind of fun." He thought for a moment. "The horse meadow would probably be the best spot. We'll need to make sure that the snow is banked against the fence, in case the sled ends up going faster than expected."

"I concur." Bruce nodded. "Thanks. I... appreciate it." It _was_ getting easier to say. He looked out the window. "I think there's maybe another hour to go before dusk."

"Did you want to start now? Or would you prefer tomorrow morning?"

Bruce considered. "Tomorrow. After breakfast." And thanks for knowing that when I said 'we', _I didn't only mean 'you'."

He started to look down to the book again, but hesitated. The circumstances seemed to call for a bit more. He took a deep breath. "I'm going to warm supper in a few minutes. I don't know what you had planned, but you and yours are welcome to join me."

"Actually," Clark said, "if there's any more of the tomato soup from last night..."

"There is," Bruce said. "The tempeh's finished, but I was planning on pasta and marinara sauce in any case." He could leave out the sausage this one time.

"Throw in some canned beans, and I'm sold. Lois is working on her story, but I think Ma might come downstairs and join us."

That was easy enough. "Done." Bruce went back to the storybook.

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If Raven was surprised by Dick's revelation, there was no hint of it on her face. "I can see why you're bringing this to my attention. When were you planning to leave?"

"Next week, some time." He paused. "I'd like your opinion. Is he ready?"

"His skills are," she hedged. "Emotionally, he's made great strides, but the only way to be certain would be..."
"To see how he performs in the field." Dick sighed. "Okay. The Outsiders will be around, in case things get out of hand. At the end of the day, I think he deserves to confront her." His expression hardened. "But not if he's going to go running off half-cocked—I don't care what immunity his condition gives him; I have to be able to trust him to follow instructions, and I have to be able to trust him not to kill her. In your estimation, can I do that?"

Raven considered. "I believe so."

Dick let out a breath. "All right. Tell Dodge we've found one of the people responsible for his father's kidnapping."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This chapter contains a reference to the poem, "The Elephant in the Room" by Terry Kettering. The full text of the work, as found in Bereavement Magazine (Date unknown) reads as follows:

There's an elephant in the room.
It is large and squatting,
So it is hard to get around it.
Yet we squeeze by with "How are you?" And "I'm Fine."
And a thousand other forms of trivial chatter.

We talk about the weather.
We talk about work.
We talk about everything - except the elephant in the room.

There's an elephant in the room.
We all know it is there.
We are thinking about the elephant as we talk together.
It is constantly on our minds.

For you see, it is a very big elephant.
It has hurt us all.
But we do not talk about the elephant in the room.

Oh, please say her name.
Oh, please, say "Barbara" again.
Oh, please, let's talk about the elephant in the room.
For if we talk about her death,
Perhaps we can talk about her life?

Can I say, "Barbara" to you and not have you look away?
For if I cannot, then you are leaving me

Alone...

In a room...

With an elephant...
Chapter 30—One Ride Around the Sun

Helena took to sledding like a duck to water. The course was safe enough—Bruce had made sure that he and Clark had banked plenty of snow at the bottom of the hill and piled it into a low wall that would keep the sled from shooting into the hedges bordering the meadow. It wasn't the best packing snow, and they'd had to make the wall a good two feet thick to be effective. On the other hand, it was excellent for landing—soft and powdery. Helena had plunged in face-first, and then picked herself up laughing—and completely covered in snow. Then she had grabbed hold of the wooden sled and tried to drag it back up to the top of the hill.
Bruce went forward to help her. Halfway up, a thought occurred to him. "Watch her?" he asked Jim. Without waiting for an answer, he strode off toward a nearby shed.

He wasn't entirely sure of the condition he'd find it in. He'd packed it away and hadn't thought about it in years. It would serve him right if the wood had rotted or warped by now. When he pulled away the drop-cloth, however, he could see that the sled appeared to be in fine condition.

It was wooden pull sled with stainless steel runners, designed to carry an adult's weight. Bruce examined it more closely, making sure that all the screws were intact, and that none of the slats were cracked or splintered. Satisfied, he lifted it up and made his way back to the hill, just in time to see Helena coming down.

She let out a squeal of delight when she saw what Bruce was holding. "Big sled!" She exclaimed. "I want!"

Bruce smiled. "I thought you might. Come on. We'll use it together."

Jim wrapped his scarf around the lower part of his face. "I'm going to head back now," he said. "The two of you might be too active to feel the cold, but I'm starting to freeze out here."

Bruce frowned. "We could go in with you—"

"And spoil her fun?" Jim shook his head, smiling. "I'm fine. Be back in an hour, and I'll have some cocoa ready."

"Well, if you're sure..." Bruce smiled down at his daughter, who was tugging impatiently at his hand.

"Positive. See you in a bit."

Martha was making up a casserole when Jim came in through the kitchen. 'Making up' seemed to be entirely accurate, as there was no cookbook in evidence. She greeted the former commissioner cheerfully, turned on the sink, and began scrubbing a carrot.

Jim picked up a peeler from the table. "How many potatoes do you need?"

Martha considered. "Start with four, I suppose. We can always add more if we need to."

Jim nodded. "This isn't much of a vacation for you, is it?"

She laughed. "I haven't been to Gotham since I was a girl; and even though my son has been running off on assignment at all hours, I've seen more of him these last few days than I generally do in a year." She reached for another carrot. "I like to cook, Jim. I always have. Mercifully, I haven't needed to do any cleaning beyond washing up after myself." She smiled. "Actually, I think this is the first real vacation I've had in years."

Jim didn't say anything for a few minutes. He finished peeling the potatoes, cut them into chunks, and placed them in a small mixing bowl. "Celery?" he asked, seeing it on the table.

"Three stalks in two-inch pieces, on the diagonal, if you don't mind." She paused. "Thank you."

"A pleasure." He took a breath. "Martha... I...I was wondering whether you wanted to go into the city a bit later. I'm told that City Hall outdid itself decorating Old Gotham this year. It might be worth seeing."

Martha set down the carrots. "Are you... asking me out?"
Jim hesitated. "If it's too soon, I understand. And if it's not too soon, but it's not me," he snorted, "I suppose I can understand that, too. But the way I see it, if we can sit up and talk 'til all hours, and not run out of things to say... and if we can also sit up 'til all hours and not feel that we need to have anything to say at all, well, it seems to me that there might be a relationship worth exploring." He paused. "Or maybe it's just wishful thinking on my part," he said, looking away.

"We could head off around three," Martha said softly. "That should give us enough time for a bit of sightseeing before dinner."

Slowly, Jim turned back to face her.

Her smile was almost shy. "Maybe it's wishful thinking and maybe it isn't," she admitted. "We've only just met, and of course I don't really know you well. But talking to you feels like talking to a friend I've had forever, and there're not very many people I can say that about." She took a deep breath. "Right now, I can't say whether that friendship stands a chance at becoming anything more... but I'm willing to take the opportunity to find out."

Apprehension gave way to relief as Jim smiled back. "Well, then. I'll bring my car around to the front at three."

"I'll be ready." She reached for the parsley and began chopping it absently. She was still smiling.

Barbara was hard at work at her console. Something was bothering her. The trail that Dick had asked her to explore had seemed to end with MAZE, but for some reason she couldn't quite put her finger on, it felt to her like there was something she'd overlooked. Only the security alert jerked her out of her thoughts.

She looked at the window behind her and smiled. "Cass! Come in." She took in the younger woman's expression. "What's the matter?"

Cass took a deep breath. "GED. Why..." She hesitated. "Why didn't you tell me I could have... help?"

Barbara blinked. "I thought we were helping you," she said in confusion. "Tim tells me you've been showing a lot of improvement with the language arts part. If you're not getting the math, I could—"

"No. Help when I... take the test." Haltingly she explained what Dr. Arkham had told her earlier. "He's right?"

Barbara nodded.

"Why not tell me?"

Barbara thought for a moment. "I don't know," she admitted finally. "I guess, partly because you didn't ask... but I should have suggested it."

Cass shook her head. "Wouldn't have listened," she said with a twisted half-smile. "Afraid you'd think... I was too stupid to... um... write test without help."

Barbara took a deep breath. "Do you think that I'm too stupid to walk?" she asked quietly.

"What?"

She repeated the question. "I mean, most people my age can handle it. Heck, Helena can walk, and
she's not even two, yet. So, if babies can walk, and I can't, does that mean I'm not bright enough?"

"No! You can't walk because your legs don't work. Nothing... stupid. Only stupid is if you... believe that!"

Barbara grinned. "And you have trouble reading because there's a part of your brain that doesn't process information the way other people's do. And just like I have ways to get around my paralysis—like this chair, or like my customized van—you're finding ways to get around your reading problem."

"I do read. Slowly."

"And I can get around with the chair, within limits. My point is that the problems you have with reading are completely separate from your level of intelligence. That being said, if you need extra help to take the test, I'll make sure you get it."


"I'll put in a call to Dr. McLeod in the morning."

"Dr. McLeod?" She'd almost forgotten him.

"Hey, he's the one who assessed you in the first place." Her smile grew wider. "Bet he'll be thrilled when he hears how far you've come in such a short time."

Slowly, Cass smiled back.

"MAZE is an international espionage agency, Dodge," Batman explained. "Mostly, they trade in information, although they've also been known to serve other functions, such as smear campaigns and assassinations."

The blond boy nodded. In the bright lamplight, the flickering nimbus of mystic power that kept him from being pulled to the Astral Plane was barely visible.

"Recently," Batman continued, "we've uncovered evidence that they've taken an interest in hi-tech as well. From what we can tell, they had a mole in S.T.A.R. Labs, who passed on the specs of your father's research—among other things."

Dodge's head jerked up at that.

Batman nodded. "What I presume happened was that they shopped that information around until they found a potential buyer who offered them a certain sum for a working prototype. Since there wasn't one—at least not one that they knew of..."

"They kidnapped my Dad," Dodge finished. His jaw set stubbornly. "I want them."

"I thought you'd think that way," Batman nodded. "Word is that they're also behind a bio-weapons lab in upstate New York. That's where I'm headed tomorrow." He leaned forward, his expression serious. "If you're going to come with me, there are a few things that I need you to understand. First: there is no proof whatsoever that the people we're going to fight are the ones who were involved in your father's murder. MAZE is a multinational organization with an estimated eight thousand members. I'd say the odds are frankly against it. Second: I'm not offering to take you with me because I approve of you wanting revenge. I don't. In fact, if you forget yourself and run off half-cocked, this will be the first and last time that you ever accompany me on a mission. I'm inviting you
to come with me primarily because, with your physical form residing mainly on the Astral Plane, you should be immune to any viruses or other biological weapons that we might encounter. If facing the organization that turned your life upside-down gives you some sort of closure, that's great—but I'd be asking you to come along, regardless."

"Then, how come you're making such a big deal over who they are?"

Batman's lips set in a grim line. "Because if Yoda had told Luke that Darth Vader was his father in the first place, odds are that Luke wouldn't have lost his hand in that fight."

"What?"

"How about, 'if you found out about it later, and then discovered I'd deliberately kept it from you, you'd go ballistic'?” His expression softened. "Raven tells me you've made a lot of progress. A long time ago, you said you wanted to join me. She thinks you're ready. Are you?"

Dodge nodded. "Let's roll."

A tiny smile played on Batman's face. "Get some sleep first. We're heading for the Outsiders' HQ first thing in the morning."

If Dick had entertained any notion that Dodge had grown calmer in the past few months, he was quickly disabused of the idea the next day. The younger boy was practically dancing on his feet when they approached the entrance to the Outsiders' base of operations. "If you ask Cyborg for his autograph," he deadpanned, "I will never bring you here again."

Dodge wilted for a moment. Then, with a mischievous smirk, he asked, "How about Halo's?"

Dick's lips twitched—which spoiled his glower.

"Please place your right hand on the glass for identification."

Dick blinked, but after a moment, he obeyed.

"I am unable to obtain a clear reading. Please remove any material that may be obstructing my scan."

Under his cowl, Dick rolled his eyes, but he pulled off his glove and set his bare hand on the glass plate.

"Batman. Your identity has been confirmed. Please wait."

A moment later, the vid-screen located just above the panel blinked on and Cyborg appeared on the monitor.

"No retinal scan?" Dick asked.

"We're an interplanetary team," Cyborg said hoarsely. "Not all of us have retinas. Palm scan picks up a lot more than fingerprints—" Cyborg coughed violently. One metallic hand flew to cover his mouth.

"You okay?" Dick asked with some concern.

Cyborg shook his head. "There's a flu bug going around. Thunder caught it and decided to share it with the rest of us. I thought it missed me, but," he covered his mouth again as another paroxysm of
coughing seized him, "I woke up like this." He put a hand to his forehead. "I was hoping it was one of those things where you feel lousy when you get up and then better as the day wears on, but no luck. Sorry, Batman," he spared a glance for the other person standing outside, "Dodge. I didn't mean for you to come out here for nothing, but I guess you two are going to have to tackle this one on your own."

Dick pulled his glove back on and nodded understanding. "Take care of yourselves. We'll be back before you know it."

Their first stop was the Devereux mansion in nearby Sands Point. "Well, this is a break for us," Dick said with a low whistle.

"What?"

"She's relying on electronics to keep trespassers out."

"But that's bad," Dodge protested. "Isn't it?"

Dick shook his head. "*Only* electronics." He grinned. "Well, let's see." He hit his comm-link. "O? Do we do this the easy way, or the fun way?"

There was a chuckle on the other end. "Your 'easy' is my 'fun'. Give me five minutes. And I probably don't have to mention it, but I'd do a quick spot check on your position and make sure that there aren't any cameras pointing your way."

"On it." He looked around, frowned suddenly, and tossed a batarang over one shoulder. There was a muffled crack. "So much for the lens," he muttered. "Let's just hope she doesn't have an army on the grounds checking the feed." They waited tensely, but there was no activity from the mansion. It was nearly ten minutes before Oracle gave them the 'all-clear'.

"So, what are we looking for, anyway?" Dodge asked.

Dick turned to him slowly. "We left Gotham over four hours ago, and you're only now thinking to ask that?"

"Sorry."

He sighed. "We can't just bring her in without evidence," he said, relenting. "I doubt we'll find an accounting entry that reads, 'paid to John Doe for the murder of Todd Smith, one million dollars', but I hope we can come up with something. Can you teleport us in?"

Dodge hesitated. "It'll probably be safer if I go in and then unlock the door," he admitted.

"Okay. Commence when ready."

A few seconds later, he was stepping into the foyer.

A cursory search of the first floor yielded nothing worth mentioning. The same held true for the bedrooms on the second floor. It was when they entered her private study that they hit paydirt—in a padlocked display case.

"A menu from... um... Fruits De Mur... an empty bottle of vermouth, a lock of hair, an earring, a fountain pen, a check book... I don't get it," Dodge protested. "Why put this junk in the case?" All at once, his face twisted with revulsion. "Ugh. Is that a finger? I'm gonna puke."
"On the Astral Plane, if you don't mind," Dick rejoined. "And to answer your question, they're
trophies. Oracle's done her homework. *Fruits de Mer* was where her father ate his last meal. Her
husband died after a few too many drug-and-alcohol cocktails. The hair is from Leroi Tomas, a
fashion model who tried to walk out on his contract. That's a nose-ring, not an earring—from Sean
Rossiter. She was having an affair with him, until he decided to go back to his wife. The pen—"

"Okay, I get it. Everyone she killed, she keeps something. So... do we call the cops?"

"Close. We can't go running to them with a story about how a respected fashion designer keeps stuff
like this in her den. This isn't Gotham. They won't get a warrant based on our say-so." He pulled a
clear plastic bag out of his utility belt and a pair of tweezers. "Here. Reach through the glass to get
that stuff out of there, but since I'm not sure whether your Astral form will leave fingerprints, don't
use your bare hands. We'll stop by JSA Headquarters—they've got more cred with NYPD than we
do. Then? We're going to take a drive to upstate New York and intercept Devereux at her work,
before she has a chance to realize what we're up to and make a break for it."

Dodge hesitated.

"Dodge? Get the stuff in the bag, and let's get out of here."

The boy stood unmoving for a moment. Then, slowly, he began to comply. Dick noted that,
although he left the finger for last, he didn't utter a word of protest.

Barbara stared at her display for another moment. She knew what she was seeing, but she magnified
the photograph another notch, just to be positive. Then she opened a channel to Dick. "B? It's O. I
think I found something."

An instant later, Dick acknowledged. "Hit me."

"I'm sending an old photo to the Batmobile's onboard computer. Are you driving?"

There was a pause. "Yeah, hang on. I'd better pull over to have a look. Rest stop in three miles; I'll
park there."

It was less than five minutes before Dick's voice came over her channel again, but it seemed like
longer. "Okay," he said. "I'm opening the file." There was a pause. "Cyrillic lettering on the sign in
the background, so I'm guessing it's either Russia or, at the very least, the people in the photo are
Russian..." His voice hardened. "Hold on. The woman on the far end... that's Heloise Sinclair, isn't
it?"

"Yes. That photo is from 1991. It was taken in Haeju, North Korea. That is Russian equipment. The
guy with the moustache just to the right of center is Doctor Arkady Nikolaev. In 1990, he was a
leading virologist, affiliated with the Zagorsk Virological Center, just outside Moscow. When the
Soviet Union collapsed, he disappeared."

"And ended up in North Korea?"

"Looks like." Barbara frowned. He had to have spotted the other emblem by now.

"Okay," Dick said. "So, we have a Russian virologist, an American infectious disease specialist, and
two apparent members of the League of Assassins caught on film while meeting in North Korea in
1991. My Russian is rusty, but I recognize the words for 'caution' and 'danger', especially when
they're in bold red letters." He took a deep breath. "Biological warfare." There was no hint of
uncertainty in his tone.
He had spotted the LOA emblem. Barbara nodded. Then she remembered that they weren't on a vidphone and Dick couldn't see it. "In 1989, Zagorsk was home to a stockpile of over twenty tons of weapons-grade smallpox. Russia maintains that, after it abandoned its bio-weapons program, all of that was either destroyed or transferred to the VECTOR institute in Koltsovo." She let out a long breath. "And no, there's no outside confirmation on either point—not whether they've abandoned that line of research, and not whether they did actually consolidate all their smallpox stores at VECTOR. But in 1991? Right when the Soviet Union fell? If you want to know how plausible it is that some of those stores made their way out of the country, the simplest response is 'very'."

Dick was silent for a moment. Then, "If you want me to speculate about R'as's involvement, all I can say is that this photo was taken about fifteen years before the Clench hit Gotham. When you take his longevity into consideration, fifteen years is probably nothing to him. I'm guessing that he thought about using smallpox, but at some point decided to go with something else entirely." He let out a slow breath. "So, Dr. Sinclair has a connection with the League of Assassins."

"There's more," Barbara swallowed hard. "The LOA is bankrolling MAZE." She waited for it to sink in.

After a moment, Dick said shakily, "Then I guess it's probably a good thing that I have a biohazard suit in the trunk and a smallpox immunization in my medical file. I think Bruce even gave me a booster when I was in high school. Yeah, he did—I remember now; my arm was sore for a week." He took a breath. "Thanks for the heads-up, O. We'll be careful."

Dodge eyed the chain-link fence dubiously. "I thought there'd be guards patrolling or something."

"If the League of Assassins is involved," Batman replied, "we might not necessarily see them." At his companion's puzzled look, he continued, "They can hide in plain sight."

"Cool. So they're like ninjas?" There was no reply. Dodge looked around. Now, where had Batman got to...?

"Thank you for not comparing them to Bats."

Dodge gave a start. Batman seemed to have materialized out of thin air. "How did you do that?"

"Years of practice. I know you did it earlier to get into the mansion, but how comfortable are you with teleporting blind?"

The youth blinked.

Batman sighed. "If we have to fight our way in, we'll risk alerting the researchers that we're here. We're outnumbered. Probably outgunned, too. I'd rather not waste our strength on the flunkies and give the real top brass time to get away—or destroy the evidence. Your teleportation gives us an edge. So, I repeat: how safely can you teleport to a location you don't know?"

Dodge considered. "I guess I could do it that way," he said slowly, "but it might be better if I go to the Astral Plane, case the place, and then come back for you."

Dick smiled. He'd been debating whether to make that suggestion, and was glad that he hadn't. The boy was beginning to think. "That's an idea," he said. "How much time do you need?"

"I don't know. Maybe twenty minutes?"

"Take an hour. Locate Devereux and take note of how many people are working with her, and
whether they appear armed. Then find a spot nearby where you can teleport me. I'm thinking of something like a storeroom... maybe even a supply closet. Don't worry so much if the door is locked—I can take care of that. The main thing is that I don't want to push open that door and find fifty armed people surrounding the entrance." He sighed. "Okay. While you're off doing that, I guess I'd better get the hazmat suit out of the trunk and suit up."

On his return to the Batmobile, Dodge took one look at the hazmat suit and fought back a laugh. "You have bat-ears on your space helmet?" he managed.

Dick pursed his lips. "One day," he said shortly, "you may take a marketing class. They'll teach you all about product branding. We're not going in undercover—we want them to know who we are. I can either wear a nametag, or I can modify the helmet. You tell me what works better. Besides," he muttered under his breath, "it's the only way the thing fits over the cowl."

"What's in the pouches?" Dodge pointed to the two bags strapped securely to his waist and anchored by additional straps to his thighs.

"Everything I could transfer from my utility belt for easy access. Report."

"Okay, okay. I found her. There's a lab two levels underground. She's in charge, but she has four people helping her. They're all wearing hazmat suits," he smirked, "with no pointy ears," he sobered instantly, "but they've got that same emblem you showed me before, so I guess they're ninja scientists?"

"Take a breath, Dodge," Batman said dryly. "And not necessarily. It's likely that they are, but it's also possible that they're just using R'as al Ghul's surplus. I'd bet a hazmat suit isn't something she can pass off as next spring's hot new look. Did you get close enough to find out what she's working on?"

"I saw a label on a file drawer. I think it said... orth...orthopox virus! That was it. What is that?"

Batman felt a chill pass over him. "It's the scientific classification of a specific genus, or 'family' of pox viruses—one of which happens to be smallpox."

Dodge blinked. "But nobody gets that anymore!"

"That's the problem right there," Batman explained. "The reason nobody gets it anymore is because they managed to vaccinate most of the world's population against the disease. But, because it doesn't occur naturally now, they stopped the vaccination programs decades ago. Which means that, if someone were to let it loose today..."

Dodge went white. "How... how bad would it be?"

"The most common strain had a forty per cent mortality rate. There were two other—much rarer—forms that were virtually one hundred per cent fatal. And let's just hope she isn't working on mutating a strain to make it vaccine-resistant."

"But... wait. You said smallpox is only one of the viruses in that group, right?"

"Yeah. But it might be the only one that can wipe out humans. Ever heard of anyone getting camelpox?"

"Chickenpox."
"Good comeback, but that one's actually part of a completely different genus. Anyway, I doubt she'd need a hazmat suit for any of the orthopoxes except smallpox. So unless we find out otherwise, we need to assume that's what we're dealing with. Raven tells me your tether to the Astral Plane makes you immune; given that you're incorporeal on Earth, the virus has nothing to hook into. Since I don't have that advantage, I need you to tell me if you notice anything breaching my suit."

"Thought you had the vaccine."

"Yeah, but if she's trying to engineer a resistant strain, that might not help me."

Dodge swallowed.

"You ready?"

He managed a jerky nod.

"Okay," he said, "Let's do this."

At first, it was relatively easy. A chokehold dispatched one of the two Assassins guarding the lab. Dodge disappeared into a portal with the second. When both emerged a moment later, the guard was white-faced, shaking, and offering no resistance whatsoever.

"Do we lock 'em up?" Dodge asked as he tightened a second set of plasti-cuffs on his captive.

"No time. Leave 'em for the cops. Or R'as. He doesn't like it when they fail." The guard went even paler at that. Batman smiled grimly. "Let's go."

They passed through a shower room and a suit room before coming to a steel door with a red biohazard symbol on it. Batman swallowed. "There should be a decontamination shower past this point," he said. "Use it. If there's the slightest chance that you aren't totally immune, this might help. And my suit isn't exactly sterile at the moment—I don't want to bring anything else in with me."

Dodge nodded. "First time I ever took a shower in my clothes," he said gamely.

Batman ignored that. "Dodge, before we enter decon, I'm going to pull down my face-shield and seal the suit. It'll muffle my voice, so if you have any questions, now's the time."

Dodge pointed to the steel door at the opposite wall. This one had a black biohazard symbol on it. "Is that...?"

"Yep."

"Do you need to put those on?" He gestured toward the row of galoshes on the shelf next to the door.

"No. The lab workers put them on to protect their feet, in case their normal shoes have holes in them." Batman replied. "If I even suspected mine did, I'd switch 'em out for a pair, but mine are all right." He took a deep breath. "Okay. If anything hits the fan, Devereux is your target. If you get a clear shot at her, you get her to the Astral Plane and..." He broke off. "Do you have a way of confining her there?"

Dodge nodded. "I just make a protective field, like I do for me when I go there. Except I anchor it and don't put in a door."

"Okay. Do that and bring in Raven. I'll take care of the League. Also, if you see them trying to shred
files or wipe data, grab what you can. Make a few trips if you have to—we need to know exactly what they've been doing here. And if you see anyone leave—Dodge, this is important—intercept them before they get outside." His jaw set. "Normal procedure is to take a second decon shower when leaving the lab—to make sure nothing leaves with you. If they're trying to run, odds are extremely high that they won't."

"Got it."

"Okay." Batman pulled down his face plate and closed the front seal. It snapped shut automatically. Then he entered one of the shower stalls and activated the spray.

Dodge was waiting for him outside. Dick tilted his head to one side in a questioning gesture. Dodge nodded. He was ready. Batman took a last deep breath and pulled open the door.

The screaming was the first thing they registered—shrill and ear-splitting. An instant later, they understood why. The lab was made up of three large rooms, which led into each other. The first room contained fresh equipment—Petri dishes, test tubes, droppers and slides, among other things. However, the walls of the second room were lined from floor to ceiling with cages. Each cage housed at least one monkey. Batman was able to identify over a dozen species without trying. Some were alert, some were listless, and some were extremely active. Many seemed to be healthy enough, but others—particularly the listless ones—appeared to be in pain, and some bore evidence of lesions and pustules on their skin.

Through the entrance to the third room, they could see several people in hazmat suits, hard at work. Either they found it hard to hear through their helmets, or they were used to the noise from the cages, for not one of them looked up.

Batman gestured to Dodge to move slowly. Whatever it was that the scientists were working on, he didn't think it was a good idea for any of it to spill.

One of the monkeys, a large macaque, was hurling himself at the bars. Batman halted his advance for a moment to regard it. Enraged, the monkey flung himself more forcefully against the cage door. Dick gestured to Dodge to keep moving.

A heavy steel sheet suddenly slammed down, blocking the way into the innermost lab. At the same time, a second sheet sealed off the way they'd just come. Then, as Dick watched in horror, the door of each cage slowly began to open.

Many of the monkeys ignored them completely, but the big macaque was not one of them. Neither were several large chimpanzees. They were on him in an instant, clawing at his suit, tearing at his helmet. He saw a gash appear in his sleeve—the chimp had torn through the first protective layer, but hadn't breached the Kevlar core. That extra protection was yet another reason that he'd insisted on using the customized suits; had this been a standard issue suit, a breach like this could have been deadly.

"Dodge!" Batman yelled as the macaque leaped for him, "Get us into the inner lab!" He hoped the boy could hear him.


Wonderful. Well, even if he could have done it in the suit, he doubted he could out-acrobat a dozen aggressive monkeys. He did his best to fight them off, but they were swarming him. He didn't know how much the suit could take. His gloved hand fumbled at the pouch fasteners, and as soon as they
came loose, he reached in and pulled out a handful of smooth small balls. "Close your eyes and stop your ears!" He yelled. Then he screwed his own eyelids tightly shut and tossed the flash-bangs.

The suit protected his ears from the worst of the blast. The monkeys weren't as lucky. As one, they jumped away and retreated to the far corners of the room, shrieking and whimpering. Someone grabbed his arm and he looked down to see that it was Dodge. The boy was holding onto him with one hand, while tapping his head with the other.

*Thanks for the vote of sanity, kid,* he thought, fixing Dodge with a scowl. Dodge pointed first to the door by which they'd entered, and then to the door ahead. Batman's scowl deepened as he pointed to the innermost door. Dodge shrugged. An instant later, they were standing on the other side of the steel plate.

The researchers started as they materialized. Four of them laid down their equipment and advanced. They carried no weapons. They needed none.

The other researcher spared them a glance, then immediately went back to the computer. Batman's eyes narrowed. He gestured to Dodge. Even if it wasn't Devereux, he'd lay odds that whoever this person was, they were attempting to purge the records of their experiments.

Dodge didn't hesitate. As one of the Assassins charged him, he vanished—only to reappear several yards away, next to the last researcher. He seized the scientist's arm in both hands. An instant later, Batman was alone with the League of Assassins.

They advanced toward him in unison, surrounding him in a semi-circle, backing him against the steel door. Batman considered his options. He wasn't carrying batarangs on him, nor any other sharp objects. He hadn't wanted to risk nicking a suit. Of course, that was one more disadvantage: the Assassins would have no compunction about nicking *his* No gas—the suits had their own air regulators. He'd used his flash-bangs on the monkeys... Wait! He'd been carrying two canisters of the stuff, even though each had been almost too long to fit into the pouches. Of course!

Batman twisted away from a wicked kick aimed at his mid-section, caught his assailant's leg, and spun, smashing the Assassin into one of his companions.

Then he pulled out a canister of sticky foam and sprayed the contents over the two prone men. The other two tried to rush him, but he rammed the butt end of the empty canister into the solar plexus of one, and drove an elbow into the gut of the other. Two well-flung bolas later, they, too were out of action.

"O? Can you hear me?"

There was only static in response. With all the shielding around the lab, he wasn't overly surprised. With a mental shrug, he unplugged the computer and turned the tower on its side on the lab table. He took a small screwdriver out of one of his pouches, and unscrewed the side access panel. It took him less than a minute to remove the hard drive and deposit it into one of the pouches in an airtight, sterile plastic bag. Now how was he going to get out of here with the monkeys roaming free in the next room? He scanned the walls quickly, looking for another way out. He smiled as his eye lit upon a door sealed with brown duct tape. Above it was a sign that read 'Crash Door'. He had just found the fire exit. He took a running dash at the portal and slammed into it with his shoulder. The tape gave, and he found himself standing in a long hallway. There was an arrow pointing him toward another decontamination shower room. He sprinted in the direction it indicated. He'd done it. He and Dodge had shut down a bio-weapons lab while bringing in a known murderer. They had done it with no deaths and no injuries. It had gone off without a hitch.
He was smiling as he stepped into the shower and a mix of water and Lysol poured over the suit. The smile froze, and then vanished entirely when he became aware of a trickle of moisture streaming down his face. Horrified, he turned the handle to shut off the flow and, with shaking hands, unsealed his helmet.

One of the bat-ears was missing—doubtless wrenched off by one of the monkeys. There was a small hole in the helmet where the ear had been. So, that was what Dodge had been trying to tell him, back in the monkey room. Dick pulled off one of his gloves and reached up to touch the cowl ear. His hand came down on a second hole—and his own hair. He heard his heart thud in his chest. What exactly had he been exposed to?

His heart was still pounding as he changed into one of the clean suits hanging in the next room. The Batmobile was a sealed environment, but he wasn't going to risk contaminating anyone on the way with who-knew-what.

Alone in the car, Dick took a slow breath. "O? Are you there?"

"Hiya B," Babs greeted him cheerfully. "In case you're interested, the New York County DA's office has just issued an arrest warrant for Heloise Vanessa Devereux. And I imagine that there are some other counties that are going to want jurisdiction."

"Babs," Dick said hollowly, "I need to know what she was working on. I..." He took another breath. "I had a breach in my containment suit. Send Dodge or Raven over and I'll send you her hard-drive. Just make sure you put it through decontamination first."

There was a sharp intake of breath. "Acknowledged. Are you...?"

"I'm fine, so far."

Dodge materialized in the front seat. Dick handed him the hard drive wordlessly. Dodge took it and vanished.

"I have it," Barbara said. Her voice was steady. "I'll let you know when I have an answer."

"I'll wait."

It was nearly two hours before Barbara contacted him again.

"Don't tell me," Dick forced a smile into his voice. "You have good news and you have bad news."

Silence.

"Babs?"

"I... okay. Yes. Sort of."

"Babs, whatever it is, I can take it. Just..." He swallowed. "Just tell me."

"Okay. She was working with three different pox viruses: smallpox, monkeypox, and cowpox."

"Wait," Dick said. "Cowpox? That's the vaccine, isn't it?"

"The original. The one in use up until general vaccination was discontinued was a variant called kinepox, but close enough."
"And it was ordinary smallpox? Not a mutated strain?"

"As far as I can tell."

Dick brightened. "Babs, that's good news! I told you before: I've had the vaccine. I'm fine."

He waited to hear her relief. Instead, he heard a sob. "Dick, when did you have your last booster?"

Dick thought for a moment. "It was right before high school, so... I guess, fourteen years ago. Why?"

Then, alarmed, "Babs? Are you... crying?"

"Dick." He heard her fighting for control in every word. "The smallpox vaccination only lasts five years. After that, the protection starts to fade. After fourteen years... Dick," her voice faltered, "you... you're back to square one."

As her words sank in, Dick slumped back against the cushioned seat of the Batmobile. He closed his eyes. There was a roaring in his ears as his heart started to pound again.

"Dick?"

He took a deep breath. "It... sounds like I'd better drive to the nearest hospital, then," he said faintly.

That was when a new, familiar voice broke into their conversation.

"No," Bruce was emphatic. "Dick, come home."
31. The Deepest Wound

Chapter Summary

Bruce prepares for Dick's return. Optimism isn't his strong point, but the reverse is nearly unthinkable.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and Robin for the beta!

A/N: Primary source for smallpox info: The Demon in the Freezer, by Richard Preston (Ballantine, 2002).

A/N: PCR (Polymerase chain reaction) is a technique used in medical and biological research to isolate and copy a specific section of a DNA strand. This has a number of applications, particularly in cloning, and in the diagnosis and detection of infectious diseases. PCR primers are used short pieces of known DNA that stick to the sample DNA, essentially marking the sequence to copy and initializing the process. Different primers bind to different sequences, and some are more specific than others. (For example, some primers may bind to all pox viruses, and some specifically to smallpox.)

A/N "The One You Love" Written by Gary Burr and Terri Clark. Recorded by Terri Clark on her Pain to Kill album (Mercury, 2003).

You wanna scream, you wanna cry.
You want someone to tell you why,
All the hope that's in your heart is not enough.
You hit your knees, you shake your fists,
Oh, it's the deepest wound there is,
When you can't help the one you love.

-Gary Burr, Terri Clark, "The One You Love"

Chapter 31—The Deepest Wound

5:48 PM

Bruce had driven the Kents to the airport earlier that morning. He stopped at Barbara's on his way home to drop Helena off for a few hours. As much as he loved his daughter, he was looking forward to having an afternoon to himself for the first time in far too long.

When he returned to pick her up, slightly before six, he knew instantly that something was wrong. First, Barbara buzzed him up without a greeting. Then when he got upstairs, he found her hunched over a small console, her fingers clenched around the edge of her desk, oblivious to anything but the data scrolling past her eyes. Helena was lying on the floor, watching something on the preschool
channel. When she saw Bruce, she beamed and held out her arms.

Bruce scooped her up with a smile, which vanished almost immediately. "Barbara?"

She looked up then, and something about her expression made his blood run cold. Dick. Or Jim. Part of him wanted to run out of the room before she could tell him what was going on, but even as he considered it, he heard his own voice asking what had happened.

She told him.

He was back on the Watchtower—on monitor duty—on the day Superman burst through the lift doors and nearly beat him to death. Again, he felt the air whoosh out of his lungs as his friend's first blow caught him in the chest. He opened his mouth to speak, but it felt as though the words were strangling him. Still holding Helena, he dropped heavily into a nearby chair. "One of the ears on the helmet," he repeated dully.

Barbara closed her eyes. "According to Dodge. I... I have to call him. Dick. He's been waiting almost two hours."

Bruce didn't answer. Even though he knew that it was foolish, for a brief instant, he thought that Dick might have somehow kept up with the booster regimen. It was ridiculous. Even he hadn't bothered after a while. He still clung to that hope—until Dick confirmed what he'd expected. Bruce slumped in his chair. And then he sat up straighter as he remembered something.

"No," he broke in when Dick declared that he was driving to the hospital. "Dick, come home."

"Bruce?" Dick sounded startled. "What are you doing...? Never mind," he said tersely. "I can't come back to the manor. If I've been infected, then I need a doctor. A real one."

"Dick," Bruce said urgently, "Listen to me. At this precise moment, you are not contagious. You won't be until—unless—you start to show symptoms, which won't happen for seven to seventeen days. If you receive the vaccine within four days of infection, there's still a good chance that you'll only have a mild case of the disease, if you get it at all."

"Optimism?" Dick was incredulous. "From you? Bruce, when I get to the hospital, they'll—"

"—have to contact the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta to obtain a dose of the vaccine. And you're presuming that they'll believe you, when you walk up to the front desk and tell them that you've possibly contracted a disease which hasn't existed in nature since 1977."

"Blood work would—"

"The last case on US soil was in 1949. How many doctors still practicing today would even know what they were looking at? Listen to me, Dick, I still have the vaccine." He took another breath. "I will inoculate myself and the others as soon as this call ends. Smallpox is airborne. If the doctors don't accept what you tell them—if they do, but their requisition to the CDC gets caught up in bureaucracy—if the people who can release the vaccine don't credit what you tell them, you could end up infecting everyone in the hospital. Standard operating procedure before smallpox was eradicated was to send the patient home, to be looked after by family members who had already been vaccinated. Believe me, Dick, this is the best course of action. Come home."

Dick was silent for a moment. Then, "if it's airborne, we need to make sure it can't travel out of the manor—or the cave. There are cracks and fissures that lead to the surface."

"I'll situate a quarantine area accordingly."
"Do you know how to calculate the right dosage of vaccine for Helena?"

Bruce looked down at the little girl in his arms and squeezed her tighter for a moment. "No. I'll make sure she's gone by the time you come home."

There was another pause. "Okay," Dick sounded almost relieved. "I'm still in upstate New York, so figure I'll be at the manor in about six to eight hours, depending on traffic."

Bruce exhaled. "Use the cave entrance. I'll be ready."

The instant the connection terminated, Barbara wheeled over to him and clasped his hand in hers. He squeezed it. Then he took a deep breath. "I'm going back now," he said. "I have work to do."

6:30 PM

He made one stop on his way home—to Jim's old house. Bruce had bought the place nearly four years ago, after Jim had followed Barbara to Metropolis. He'd wasted little time in converting the basement into a full-fledged crime lab. He had also installed several industrial freezers.

As Bruce started down the stairs, it occurred to him that someone might have rearranged, or worse, cleaned out the freezers in his absence. If that were the case... Bruce's jaw set. If that were the case, he would be on the next flight to Atlanta, with a set of burglar's tools shielded in his hand luggage and the CDC building schematics in his front pocket. He unlocked the middle freezer and relaxed. The cardboard box was still filled with vaccine ampoules, each safely cushioned in Styrofoam. A second, smaller box, kept next to it for convenience, held his supply of bifurcated needles.

On his way back to the manor, he drove with both boxes beside him in the front passenger seat.

9:15 PM

Over the next two hours, Bruce set to work expanding the quarantine area in the Cave's sickbay. By the time that he was done, it included a fair-sized exercise area, complete with fitness machines, weights, and a trapeze, as well as an entertainment center, a computer with internet hook-up, and a large assortment of books.

"What in...?"

Bruce jumped. He'd been so intent on his work that he hadn't noticed Jim coming up behind him.

"Bruce? What the hell are you doing?"

Bruce set down the box and began unloading another shelf of books. "Smallpox has an incubation period of up to two and a half weeks before the first symptoms hit," he said tersely. "Do you have any idea how... tedious... he's going to find that?" He paused. "Did you just come down here to check on me, or was there something else?"

"Selina's here," Jim replied. "I thought you might want to come upstairs for a minute."

Bruce nodded. Then with a sigh, he slid the last book onto the shelf, and walked out of the quarantine unit. Before he went upstairs, he turned to give his handiwork a last look. He smiled. Apart from the clear Plexiglas walls and ceiling, and the medical machinery off in one corner, the area now looked like a well-stocked bachelor pad...
"Instead of what it really was.

The smile died.

9:20 PM

"There's no preset limit," Bruce said, as he passed her a credit card. "Charge too much too fast, and it's possible the bank will block the card until they confirm the transactions with me. I don't anticipate rejecting them."

Selina's eyes widened as she accepted the plastic. "It's in my name," she said, as she slipped it into the pocket of her pantsuit and buttoned her winter coat over it hurriedly. "Did you only just add...?"

"No, I requested it a number of years ago." Bruce admitted, "There was a time when I thought things might be..." He checked himself. "The timing wasn't right. Now it is." Bruce looked down. "Go somewhere safe. I..." He handed her a folded sheet of paper. "I own an island in the Caymans. There's a cabin, fully-equipped, with enough non-perishable food to last six weeks. I'm not telling you to go there, but it's an option. Co-ordinates are on that sheet, and if you call the number at the top with about 45 minutes advance notice, they'll have my jet fuelled and waiting for you at Goodwin. You'll need to hire a pilot, unless you can fly it, though I shouldn't think that would be a problem."

"No," Selina agreed. The paper went into her purse. "Bruce, I..." She touched his cheek. "I'll call you later."

Bruce nodded. Then he pulled her tightly toward him. "If for some reason, the vaccine doesn't work, if I..."

Selina shook her head. "Bruce, don't. We'll see each other again. All of us. Dick included. Trust me."

Bruce closed his eyes. "If the vaccine doesn't work, the Caymans won't be far enough away from the spread of the disease. Find someplace remote that doesn't have a lot of tourism right now—Micronesia, maybe—and go there. Don't wait too long; if full-blown panic ensues, countries like that will probably start closing their borders. You need to be inside long before that happens." As Selina opened her mouth again to protest, Bruce barrelled on. "Please, don't argue with me. Just go."

"Okay." She kissed him lightly on the lips. Then she smiled. "Hang on," she said shakily. "If this is the last time we ever see each other, we have to do better than that."

This time, the kiss lasted a great deal longer. When they pulled apart, Bruce stooped down to his daughter's eye level.

"Bye, Helena," he said, forcing himself to sound cheerful. "I'll see you soon, okay?"

Helena wasn't sure she was buying it. "Bye bye?" she asked uncertainly.

"Yes, Helena," Bruce nodded, still smiling. "Bye bye. For now."

His daughter still looked dubious, but when Bruce hugged her, she hugged him back. Then Selina took her by the hand and led her to the car.

Bruce watched as Selina settled her into the safety seat, then got behind the wheel and started the car. He waited until they rounded the bend and drove out of sight before he went back inside. As he closed the door behind him, he sighed. There was still more work to do.
There had been many times over the years when Bruce had wanted to confide in Lucius Fox about his night activities. As much as he'd tried to play the fool when it came to the day-to-day running of Wayne Enterprises, he'd been forced to demonstrate a certain amount of business savvy in order to make sure that Lucius was handling things the way he wanted them handled. Lucius had figured that much out long ago. He'd just never been able to fathom why.

Unconsciously, Bruce straightened his shoulders as he picked up the phone and punched in Lucius' private cell number from memory. For once, he honestly had no idea what reception he was about to get.

He picked up on the third ring. "Lucius Fox."

"Lucius. It's Bruce."

There was an awkward silence. Then, "How are you?"

He'd been prepared for the silence. It was the unexpected warmth that nearly undid him. "I... Lucius, I need a favor."

This time, the pause was shorter. "I'm listening."

Bruce told him what he was looking for. Lucius heard him out without interruption. "You realize, Bruce, that some of the material you're requesting predates both of us, right?"

"I've kept myself aware of what we had in storage and what we dumped. Unless HamTech did a major housecleaning in the last three years, it should still be there."

"Bruce? Um... on the one hand, I know it's not any of my business, but, is there... something you can tell me about why you need this stuff?"

Bruce hesitated. "In case Dick doesn't call, he... he needs to use some of his sick time. At least seven to seventeen days." He closed his eyes. "Hopefully, not longer than that, but the... the possibility..."

"My... G-d," Lucius breathed. "You think he's been... all right. It's nearly ten now. I'm not sure if I can get hold of Susan tonight, but I'll try. Whether I do or don't, I'll drive over to HamTech first thing in the morning. If the material is there, I'll bring it myself. And if there's anything else I can do..."

"You're doing it," Bruce said. "Thanks."

"I'd say 'anytime', but the truth is, I don't want to be asked about this again. I'll call you as soon as I know something. And Bruce? Don't be a stranger."

The connection ended.

Bruce replaced the receiver in its cradle. That was it. He'd done almost everything he could. There was only one thing left now.

"Excuse me?" Jim asked softly.

Bruce winced, but stood firm. "I can't give you the vaccine, Jim. It's contraindicated for anyone with
a heart condition."

"So... what? I have to stay out of the cave while," he gestured toward the pillow and blanket Bruce had tossed haphazardly on a cot in a corner of the medical lab, "you practically move down here?"

Bruce shook his head. "The quarantine area is secure. As long as you don't go inside, you should be fine. I'd still recommend, though, that you check up on me remotely—or that you wear a hazmat suit in the cave as a precaution."

Jim sighed. "You do have a couple without those danged Spock ears on top, right?"

A shadow passed over Bruce's face as he nodded. "Going forward," he said heavily, "none of the helmets will be carrying that... embellishment."

11:15 PM

"You called." Cass stepped into Barbara's office via the open window.

"Thanks for coming, Cass. Yeah. I need you to do something." She grimaced. "Bruce gave you the vaccine already, right?"

Cass nodded. "Hurt."

Barbara clucked sympathetically. "I'm not surprised. I've heard it leaves an interesting scar, too. I asked you to come by because I need you to check something for me. Not everyone can have the vaccine, you know."

Cass nodded. "Your father angry. Still."

Barbara sighed. "He'll get over it. Anyway, I've been able to rule out a lot of the factors that could stop me from getting the shot, but there's one I can't tell on my own." She grimaced. "I can't get it if I have eczema. There are a few other skin conditions on the problem list, but that's the major one. The trouble is," she sighed, "I don't know if I do."

"You can't tell?"

"Well, not if it's on the back of my legs. That's what I need you to check. If you see anything there like a rash, or a sore, I need to know."

"Oh. Okay." She considered. "If I see something," she hesitated, "if... if I don't know the right words... should I take picture?"

"No!" she snapped, more forcefully than she should have. "Sorry, Cass," she apologized more calmly. "No. No photos. If there's anything, I'll get it looked into at the clinic first."

"Fine."

Barbara smiled wanly. "I'll just go into the other room and lie down, so you can have a look. Give me a few minutes to get out of this skirt. I really didn't mean to snap," she apologized again. "I just... don't like cameras."

"Okay," Cass said, not really understanding.

Fifteen minutes later, Cass smiled. "You're fine," she said confidently. Then, hesitantly, "Dick will be too."
Barbara let out a long breath. "I really hope you're right. Thanks, Cass."

5:05 AM

It was after five when Dick pulled into the cave. "Sorry I'm late," he said, with a shadow of his customary smile. "I had to see Babs first. And I wanted to take a drive around the city."

"I know. She called a little while ago," Bruce had to struggle to keep his voice steady. "I've expanded the quarantine area," he said, leading Dick toward the Plexiglas enclosure.

"Hey!" Dick brightened. "It's like a studio apartment."

Bruce nodded. "Given that you might not experience any ill effects for days..."

"If I do at all," Dick interjected.

"Exactly. At this stage, quarantine is just a precaution. Again, if you've been exposed to classic smallpox—and from the information you retrieved from Devereux's lab, that strain—variola major—was the only strain she was working with—you aren't contagious until symptoms manifest. We just need to keep you isolated until the maximum incubation timeframe has passed. Here." He gestured Dick toward an examination table, which was covered by a long piece of thin white paper, and motioned for him to sit down. "You'll need to either take off your shirt or roll up your sleeve."

Dick pulled off his jacket. He was wearing a short-sleeve cotton t-shirt underneath.

"Okay," Bruce said. "The first thing I'm going to do is draw a blood sample from you for baseline comparison. At this point, there shouldn't be enough virus cells in your system to show, or I'd have a better idea of how serious things are."

Dick nodded and braced as Bruce located a vein in his arm and inserted the needle. He noticed that, compared with earlier blood tests, Bruce seemed to take more care than usual with the procedure.

Once Bruce had finished, he approached again, this time with one of the bifurcated needles and a glass vaccine ampule, which had already been broken open.

"I think you remember this," he said dryly, as Dick's hand unconsciously flew to his arm.

"I think I had it blanked out until now," Dick shot back. "You're going to poke that into me about fifty times, aren't you?"

"Fifteen would be more accurate," Bruce corrected. He shook his head. "I'm sorry. If it makes you feel any better, I had to give myself the injections earlier. This is probably one of the few downsides to the eradication of smallpox: there's been no need to upgrade the vaccination process in well over thirty years."

He dipped the needle into the vaccine and made the first jab. "It may be crude by today's standards," he added as he continued to administer the injections, "but it should have the desired effect."

He hoped.

Dick nodded. "Okay," he said, when Bruce finally moved the needle away. "Is that it?" He ignored the small trail of blood oozing slowly down his arm. "There seems to be a lot left in that thing."

Bruce nodded and began to unroll a length of gauze bandage. "Each ampule contains enough vaccine for twenty people. I've already used it to inoculate myself and the others. That reminds me," he added, "I haven't called Tim yet. As for the needles," he dropped the one he was holding into the nearby sterilizer, "I can't order more like this. Fortunately, what I have is reusable."
"Got it. Bruce?" He frowned. "We're sure that I'm not contagious right at this moment?"

"Are you feeling at all ill? Achy? Tired? Feverish?"

Dick shook his head.

"Then you aren't contagious."

Dick took a deep breath. "In that case... before I go into quarantine, would you mind if I just took a walk outside for an hour or so? It might be my last chance to get some fresh air."

Bruce flinched.

"I meant, for the next three weeks!" Dick amended hastily.

Bruce turned around and braced one hand on the cave wall. "Of course you can," he said in a voice scarcely louder than a whisper. "Come back when you're ready."

6:42 AM

"I guess I was hoping you'd come out here if I waited long enough," Dick said. He was leaning against a tree, looking out past the cliffs to the harbor. He shook his head. "It really is a gorgeous sunrise," he said. The sky was a glowing lake of pink and lavender. "And on any other day, I'd just walk right past it..."

"I know what you mean," Bruce said quietly. "In Arkham, I had numerous opportunities to realize how much I had... walked past. When I was able to. If I could have somehow known what was coming..." He shook his head. "If it were me standing where you are now, I'd like to believe that I'd be reacting much as you are—except I think I'd probably have put on a body suit and gone back to work until I collapsed." He placed a hand on Dick's shoulder. "To clarify, that's a criticism of me, not you."

"Considering I got into this bind because of a suit breach," Dick covered Bruce's hand with his own, "I don't think I'd really want to consider that option."

"Point." Bruce took a deep breath. "Okay," he said. "This is what we have to work with. In the 60s and 70s, Hamilton Technologies was one of the leaders in smallpox research. When the disease was eradicated, the research stopped. Lucius is coming by later today with all the data we retained from that project. His grip tightened on Dick's shoulder. "I gave you the vaccine. There's a very good chance that's all you need—but if it's not, I'm not going to rest until every avenue has been exhausted."

Dick frowned. "You'd better not mean that literally," he said. "Seriously, you start going without sleep and after a day or two, you could be staring a cure in the face and you'll be too zoned out to recognize it." He grinned. "Look. I get it. You're not giving up yet, and that's great. But at the end of the day, you aren't a doctor, much less a virologist. If you can't come up with a cure in two weeks for a disease that was decimating humanity for millennia, that's not you being lazy; that's life pitching you a spit ball when the umpire isn't watching." He turned around to face him. "If I don't beat this, it won't be because you didn't do enough, okay?"

Bruce managed to nod.

"Okay. Let's just wait for the sun to get a little higher, and then we can head back."
Dick paused on the threshold of the Plexiglas corridor that led into quarantine unit proper. "I... I guess this is it," he said. There was a small catch in his voice.

"Almost," Bruce nodded. "There's just one more thing..."

"Vaccine, blood work, rundown of symptoms to watch out for..." Dick frowned. "What did I miss?"

It was now or... now. Bruce wasn't going to finish that statement any other way tonight. "This." And with that, he wrapped one arm around Dick's upper back, placed the other on Dick's shoulder, and drew him close.

After one disbelieving instant, Dick hugged back, just as fiercely.

"You're going to beat this," Bruce whispered.

"From your mouth, in..."

"If you need anything..."

"I know. Just call." They moved apart. Dick tried to smile. "Okay. I'm ready."

Bruce nodded. When he hit the button, the panel fell into place almost soundlessly. Dick turned, walked down the corridor, past the decon shower and stepped into the main area. "Close 'er up."

The second panel slid down.

Dick let out a long breath. "Bruce?" He called without turning. "I haven't slept in over a day. I think I'm going to try. Could you maybe send out for pizza around lunchtime?" He yawned. "Luigi's will probably sound great about then."

There was no answer. Funny. Bruce hadn't mentioned the unit being soundproof. He turned around. Bruce was gone.

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The realization didn't hit Bruce until the panels came down, but when it did, it hit with a vengeance. He had spent most of last night building a prison cell. It didn't matter how large it was, or what amenities he'd put in, it didn't matter what the reasons were. He had just spent hours building a cage where Dick might well have to spend the rest of his life. And as the second panel slid shut, he ran. It felt like he was choking. He couldn't breathe, he could barely think.

But he ran as fast and as far from the quarantine unit as his legs could take him.

Bruce knew that he was being ridiculous—that everything he'd done had been necessary under the circumstances. At most, he could have delayed the inevitable for a few days. He would have, if Dick had asked. From a safety standpoint, from a medical standpoint, from a logical standpoint, he'd done nothing wrong.

He'd just shut his son in a cage.

Bruce reared back and punched the metal shielding on the cave wall. His fist came down hard on the rivets that connected the metal panels, breaking the skin on his knuckles. It didn't matter. It didn't equal one iota of the pain that he was feeling inside. He drew back his fist again. Then he caught
himself. If he injured his hands, it might slow him down when he was working in the lab. He had to concentrate on the big picture. Dick was counting on him to... to...

His eyes blurred and he groped his way to the nearest console, slumped into the chair, and buried his face in his hands. Jim found him there a few minutes later.

"Lucius called," he said quietly as he walked up behind the chair. "He's just heading over to HamTech now and should be at the gate with your package before noon."

"Fine," Bruce said dully.

Jim regarded him for a moment. Then, wordlessly, he laid a hand on Bruce's shoulder.

Bruce inhaled noisily.

"It's been... one hell of a day," Jim said softly.

There was a sharp explosion of breath. "That is an understatement."

"I know."

"This is the point where you tell me that you know he's going to beat it, right?"

Jim sighed. "No. Maybe you've met a few clairvoyants in the circles you've moved in. I'm not pretending to be one of them. This is the point where I tell you that if the vaccine did its work, there might not be anything there for him to beat. Don't go looking for trouble unless you have to."

"And if I examine him later and I do see the virus in his bloodstream?"

Jim sighed. "All right. We'll go there if you insist. If that's what you see, then you tell yourself two things: one, thanks to the vaccine, you're probably going to be looking at a mild case." His eyebrows drew together. "Come to think of it, the vaccine is also a pox virus, right? Are you sure you can tell them apart?"

Bruce frowned. "And the second thing?"

Jim walked to the front of the chair and placed both of his hands on Bruce's shoulders. When Bruce looked up, he smiled. "That a forty per cent mortality rate is still a sixty per cent survival rate. Are you going to sit there and tell me that both of you haven't faced worse odds on more than one occasion?"

Bruce shook his head, but there was the barest hint of a smile on his lips. "Lucius is on his way, you said?"

"That's right."

Bruce sighed. "I guess I should go upstairs to wait for him, then. After I check up on Dick."

Jim caught him as he struggled to rise. Bruce shook his head. "No, I can manage." Then, more softly, "Thanks."

"Anytime."

7:45 AM
Dick hung suspended, his hands in the gymnastic rings, arms wide, figure stretched parallel to the ground, when Bruce approached the quarantine unit. As he watched, the younger man pulled out of the Maltese cross position by raising his legs and dropping his upper body so that he was hanging upside down. From there, he swung into a half-dozen Jonassons—bringing his legs up and over his head, and then continuing to rotate in a circle while still holding onto the rings.

Bruce watched him move through the routine, performing more and more difficult swings and flips, and allowed himself to smile. Dick was a picture of perfect health. Any idiot could tell that much. Then his eye fell on the gauze bandage covering the injection site, and the smile faded.

Dick spotted Bruce, pulled into a double flyaway and dismounted with a triple salto.

"Hey," he said, coming over.

"You," Bruce forced himself to smile again, "you looked pretty good up there."

"Thanks. I thought I was going to sleep, but I guess I'm still too keyed up. Figured working out might help." He pressed one hand lightly against the shielding. "It feels like a decade since I got up yesterday."

"I'm not surprised. Are... do you need anything?"

"Well," Dick said, "I was going to ask if we could get a pizza, but that's okay."

"No, I'll order it." He pressed his hand to the other side of the shielding, directly opposite Dick's. "I didn't mean to leave that abruptly. I..."

"Don't worry," Dick grinned. "I'm sort of used to it."

Bruce winced.

"Oh, jeez..." Dick said. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know," Bruce said heavily. "I need to go upstairs. Lucius should be here soon, with the supplies I asked for. I'll be back when the pizza comes. Four-cheese, sausage and pepperoni?"

"How about we split a four-pounder?"

Bruce considered.

"I bet you haven't eaten since Babs gave me the bad news. Which means, you're probably starving too."

Bruce nodded slowly. The door chime sounded upstairs, echoing over the cave speakers. "That would be Lucius," he said. "I'll place the order when he leaves."

"Sounds good."

After Bruce went upstairs, Dick walked over to the computer center and opened a Giggle session. With some trepidation, he typed in a keyword search on smallpox. The results made him wish he hadn't.

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7:51 A.M.

It wasn't Lucius. "Mind telling me why I had to find out from Oracle half an hour ago?" Tim
demanded.

Bruce moved aside to let him enter. "I..." He shook his head. "I'm sorry. You're right."

Tim blinked. "How is he?" he asked in a more subdued tone.

"When I came upstairs, he was fine. I'm waiting on Lucius, but since you haven't been vaccinated yet, we'll take care of that now."

"Lucius?"

He explained quickly about HamTech's earlier research. Tim frowned.

"So... what? You think you can just whip up a cure overnight?"

Bruce fought down an angry retort. He knew the odds. He didn't need to be reminded of them. "I have to try. I can't just sit there and watch-"

Tim nodded. "Okay. How can I help?"

Bruce hadn't expected that response. "Excuse me?"

Tim took a deep breath. "I guess by now you heard about Conner dying a couple of years ago."

Bruce frowned. "Yes."

"I spent months trying to reclone him. Or clone another him. Whatever."

"I never knew..."

"Yeah, well, it wasn't something I went around telling people. I mean, a seventeen-year-old kid trying to make a Kryptonian-Human hybrid clone in the basement? Cripes, just saying it out loud sounds dumb."

Bruce sighed. "If you're implying that this cause is... is..."

Tim shook his head. "No, I don't think it's hopeless; if I did, I wouldn't be volunteering to help. But I think I can actually bring something else to the table. See, since I was dealing with cloning, I had to do a lot of DNA work. Which means, I built up a decent supply of PCR primers. Now, I was mostly using them to check for genetic anomalies, and I'm not sure if the ones I have will be any use trying to map out the smallpox DNA, but if you need them, they're yours."

Bruce's eyes widened. "PCR primers," he repeated. "With those, we just might... Where?"

"In San Francisco, under Titans Tower. I think for something like this, Roy would let me use the JLA teleporter to get there and back in a hurry."

Bruce started to smile. At the very least, those primers should be able to tell him whether Dick actually had the disease in his bloodstream. If he didn't, the quarantine was unnecessary. If he did... Bruce took a deep breath. "I may have another job for you. If the PCR results aren't ideal," he fought to keep his voice even, "I'll need you to go to the CDC in Atlanta. I know that they were conducting experiments with the stored virus a decade ago. Perhaps they learned something that we can use."

"No offense, Bruce," Tim said, frowning, "but I'm not exactly recognizable away from my usual stomping grounds. Wouldn't Superman be a better choice?"
Bruce didn't answer.

"You aren't going to tell him," Tim said slowly. "Or anyone."

"I have work to do," Bruce replied. "I don't have time to waste making phone calls." He looked down. "Tim... Come downstairs now. I'll give you the vaccine and you can see Dick. After that... do what you want to. I'll be starting to work as soon as Lucius drops off the material."

"Okay," Tim said dubiously. "But I really think that..."

"As I said," Bruce repeated deliberately, "once you've been vaccinated, you can do what you want." Without another word, he strode off in the direction of the cave.

Tim's jaw dropped. Bruce wasn't giving him a brush off at all—he was giving him permission. Which meant he really was scared. Tim swallowed hard and fell into step behind Bruce.

8:20 A.M.

"Bruce actually said that?" Dick repeated in disbelief.

"Twice," Tim confirmed. He could hear Bruce setting up lab equipment in the background. "Once, I could have misunderstood him, but not when he repeated it."

"Yeah." Dick was still shaking his head. "So, have you called anyone yet?"

"No. I figured since this is about you, I ought to get your take on it first."

"Thanks," Dick said, meaning it. "If I have to deal with a constant stream of people asking me how I am every few minutes, I'm going to lose it. Then I'll feel guilty for lashing out at the people who care, and..." He shook his head. "Okay. How did you and Bruce get on the subject in the first place?"

Tim thought back. "He wanted me to go to Atlanta to try to find someone who'd been working with smallpox. I pointed out that outside of Gotham or maybe San Francisco, Harrier is just some guy in a mask, and he should send Clark instead—"

"Only he hasn't told him, yet."

"Yeah. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised, but I thought he would have called out the cavalry—"

Dick took a deep breath. "It sounds to me like he's trying to. Okay. Yes, tell Clark. Tell Roy, but also tell him that for now, I want him to keep it quiet. He's welcome to contact me to confirm it—I've got wi-fi in here." He frowned. "Raven probably already knows. I trust her discretion."

"I wish her healing power did more than just stop pain."

"Yeah. Or the Themiscyran purple ray worked on diseases as well as injuries."

"Or that someone had heard from Zatanna in the last year."

"What?"

Bruce had stolen up on them without their realizing.

Dick sighed. "I keep forgetting you've been out of the loop on a lot of things. You know the League
disbanded right before everything went... south. When they reassembled, I wasn't there, but Roy told me that there was a lot of talk about what happened before—with the mindwiping."

"Go on," Bruce urged.

"Well, Carter decided he didn't need the grief. He turned down membership. Ollie and Dinah decided to rejoin as reserves only. Hal... again, I wasn't there, but from what I heard, most people felt that the time he spent as the Spectre earned him a second chance."

"Zatanna?" Bruce prompted impatiently.

Dick shook his head. "Seven people might have voted on whether to carry out the 'wipes, but Zatanna was the one who actually did them. A lot of the people who were approached to join the new incarnation of the League had a problem with her. She tried to deal, but in the end, she just couldn't take it. She resigned almost a year ago and nobody's seen her since. Hal went by her house a few times. She wasn't there. She's given up her magic act. It's like she just dropped off the planet."

Bruce closed his eyes. "Damn." His jaw worked furiously as he struggled for control. After a moment, he opened his eyes and took a deep breath. "Tim, get the primers. When you return, assuming you haven't slept yet, grab whatever shuteye you can." He looked at his watch. "The time is now 8:27. I want you back downstairs at 1 p.m. sharp, and we'll get started." His face fell. "I'm sorry. I never did order the pizza. I'll do that now."

"I'd tell you not to bother, but I am pretty hungry."

"I'm glad you still have an appetite. Contact Barbara," he added, nearly as an afterthought. "She called when you were outside."

"I will." He winced. He'd turned off his comm-link after their last conversation. "Thanks."

Bruce nodded. "I'll be back shortly."

9:55 AM

Luigi's delivered the pizza at 9:55. Lucius Fox arrived ten minutes later. "Here it is," he said, handing over a thumb drive. "I'm sorry we don't have any of the tissue samples, but after all this time—"

"It's more than I had yesterday," Bruce said. "Thanks."

"How's he doing?"

Bruce rubbed his eyes. "It's too soon to know. Except..."

"Except?"

A shadow passed over his face. "I was reading up on smallpox earlier. Apparently, there's one symptom that manifests somewhat sooner than the others—something referred to as 'the anxious face of smallpox'."

Lucius frowned. "Does that mean what it sounds like? That people who've been infected tend to look... nervous?" When Bruce nodded, Lucius let out a short laugh. "Bruce, he knows what he's been exposed to. If he didn't look nervous about it, I'd have to guess he was in denial." He sobered. "Do yourself a favor. Run some real tests before you start jumping to conclusions. Before you do that," he frowned, "as much as I know you must want to roll up your sleeves and dive in, you look
like you haven't slept in over a day. Adrenaline will only take you so far before exhaustion has you making sloppy mistakes."

Bruce sighed. "Dick said as much earlier."

"Yes, that would be in keeping with the good judgment I've observed in him over the last three years," Lucius said dryly. "Get some rest. And let me know if there's anything else you need."

Bruce watched him go. Then he nodded. Lucius and Dick were right. And since Tim wasn't due back for another three hours, he did have enough time for a nap.

But he was going to take it in the cave, in case Dick needed anything... or Tim arrived early.

5:40 PM

"Well?" Dick asked when Bruce approached the quarantine area some eight hours later. He frowned. He'd thought that he was good at reading Bruce's poker faces, but he was drawing a blank on this one.

Bruce was silent.

Dick closed his eyes and swallowed hard. "Just tell me," he said. "I can take it."

Bruce pressed one hand against the Plexiglas, roughly at the level of Dick's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "There is... something in your bloodstream," he broke off, "that is..."

"Bruce?"

Bruce seemed to deflate. "There is something in your bloodstream," Bruce repeated haltingly. "It wasn't showing in the sample I took when you arrived. It is now."

Dick slumped. "Okay. At least, now we know."

Bruce shook his head. "No. No, we don't. That's what makes it so frustrating." He'd hoped that Jim's earlier concern had been unfounded. He looked at the floor. "The preliminary tests are inconclusive. There are two similar—not identical—strains of pox DNA in your bloodstream. At this point, I... I can't tell whether I'm looking at two variants of variola, or one of variola... and one of vaccinia."

It took a moment for the meaning to sink in. "You're telling me that you can't tell the disease from the vaccine."

"Not at this stage. We... hit a snag with the PCR analysis. Tim was able to provide primers—markers," he clarified at Dick's puzzled expression, "which bind to pox sequences. Unfortunately, they're not specialized enough to distinguish between the different variations. And the tests that we're doing are far from routine. It's taking longer to isolate the DNA sequences we need." Bruce let out a long breath. "Factor in that this procedure didn't exist until the early 80s and," he sighed, "we're working as fast as we can, but some things can't be rushed. It may be over a week before we can identify the correct virus."

"And by then, we might know regardless."

"I wish I had better news."

Dick shook his head, smiling. "I'm glad it's not worse. You're telling me that we're still where we were yesterday: I might have it. I might not. And all we can really do is wait and see, right?"
Bruce nodded slowly. "I need to check some other test results, but I will be back in a bit."

"Sure."

After Bruce left, Dick's smile dropped away. This time, the rings did little to relieve his tension.

6:55 PM

Barbara came by shortly afterwards. She stayed for nearly an hour before she had to go, pleading a heavy task list. "Bruce has me working to locate Zatanna," she said ruefully. "Unfortunately, she's pretty good at covering her tracks."

"She vanishes into thin air, you mean," Dick grinned.

"Well, almost." Barbara made a face. "If she actually said 'Tnod tel Elcaro dnif em'," her tongue stumbled over the unfamiliar syllables, "we can forget it. I won't find her. If she didn't do that, I can probably get a fix on her if she leaves any kind of electronic imprint. If she uses a bank card, gets pulled over for speeding, has to show her health insurance card, I'll have her. But if she's using cash only, not driving, healing herself... if she's off the grid, there's not much I can do besides interface with security videos and hope I luck out."

Dick nodded. "Babs? Have you given any thought to what this whole... thing could mean long-term?"

She blinked at him. "Sorry?"

He took a deep breath. "We've been looking at this like it's 'either I have it and that's it for me, or I don't and I'm fine'. It's not that cut-and-dried." He looked away. "I was looking at pictures online. Of people who survived. They... were pretty bad. Are you sure you'll be able to handle being around me if... if that happens to me?"

Barbara shook her head, disbelieving. "Dick, I'll admit that when we started dating, your looks were a selling point, but if that was all you ever had going for you, we wouldn't be together now. I'm not saying it won't take me a little time to adjust, but it's going to take more than a few pockmarks to scare me away." She brought her lips to the Plexiglas. "I'll be back tomorrow."

Dick brought his lips to the same spot. "The sooner the better," he said with feeling.

As she rolled away, however, Dick was thinking about how often Barbara had insisted that he had blinded himself to the reality of her wheelchair. It made no difference how many times he had insisted that it didn't matter—she'd decided that he was in denial. The big question in his mind now was whether he was being just as blind as he'd once thought she was... or whether all those times that Barbara had insisted that he'd been mixing up love with pity, she'd been projecting her own biases.

1:11 A.M.

Dick woke up feeling as though his mind was wrapped in cotton. It was hot in the quarantine unit. He got up shakily and stumbled toward the screen that walled off the bathroom from the rest of the area. His vision was blurry and he rubbed at his eyes. That was when he froze. Something was wrong. His hand felt... lumpy. And his face...

With dawning horror, he moved toward the bathroom mirror as fast as his unsteady legs could take him. He turned on the light and beheld a face so covered in pustules it no longer looked human. He
couldn't see his eyes at all, only black, cavernous sockets.

Dick screamed.

"It's all right," a voice said gently. "It's all right. I'm here. I've got you." An arm wrapped around his back, pulling him up.

Dick tried to curl into a ball. "Bruce. P-please, go away," he moaned. "Don't see me like this."

There was a pause. "Like what?"

How dense did Bruce think he was? "I saw my reflection," he snarled. "I know what I look like. So stop trying to pretend like nothing's wrong, when—"

All at once, he felt Bruce's other hand close on his wrist. "Dick, I'm going to move your hand and I want you to tell me what you feel."

"What?" Dick demanded. "You think this is some kind of game?"

"If you like." Before he could utter another word of protest, Bruce was already pulling at his wrist. "Now. What do you feel under your hand?"

"If I answer you, will you go?"

"Report."

"I'm touching the blanket, okay?"

Bruce pulled at his wrist again. "And now?"

The stubble was rough against his palm. "You haven't shaved in two days."

"How about now?"

Dick made a disgusted sound. "Well, of course, that's my own face." He stopped. The skin was smooth. Not entirely smooth—he had a day's growth of stubble, though it wasn't as bad as Bruce's. But there were no lumps. No... pustules. He opened his eyes. He was sitting up in bed. Bruce still had an arm around him. "I was dreaming," he whispered.

"Yes."

"I was," he tried to remember. "Before I turned in, I was accessing some web pages on smallpox. Some of them had... pictures."

"I know," Bruce squeezed his shoulders. "You left your browser open. But what you saw was an old file photo. And what you experienced was a nightmare."

Dick nodded. "Thanks for not saying 'only' a nightmare." He shuddered. "I guess this is a good time to be grateful I don't have precognition."

"Yes." Bruce let go of his wrist but kept his arm around Dick's shoulders. "Are you feeling better now?"

"I guess so." He lolled his head against Bruce's shoulder. "At least well enough to try to get back to sleep." He winced. "I must've overdone it with the rings. My arms are killing me."
"Take it easier tomorrow then," Bruce said, as he gently eased him down to the mattress. He smiled reassuringly. "All right. Rest. I'm going to do the same—I have more tests running, but I won't have any results for another four hours."

Dick nodded. He wanted to ask if Bruce had made any headway, but he had a feeling that Bruce would have told him immediately if he had. "Okay," he smothered a yawn. "See you later."

7:21 A.M.

This time he slept without dreaming. When he opened his eyes again, he didn't feel any better rested. His body still ached, his nose was stuffy, and although he was sweating profusely, he felt cold.

Tim approached the unit carrying a tray of food. He took one look at Dick, set the tray hurriedly down on a nearby counter and ran back toward the lab, hollering for Bruce.

Bruce was there in seconds, his expression worried.

"I told you, 'no news was good news'." Dick coughed. It was a feeble joke at best.

Bruce didn't smile. "It hasn't even been three days," he said, sounding stunned. "Smallpox doesn't progress this quickly."

The three men looked at each other with mounting horror. It fell to Tim to voice what they were all thinking.

"Unless it mutated..."
Chapter Summary

Bats rarely make good patients... or doctors.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Kathy and Debbie for the beta! "Will the Sun Ever Shine Again" written by Alan Menken and Glenn Slater. Recorded by Bonnie Raitt on the Home on the Range album (Walt Disney, 2004). I am indebted to Robert Preston's The Demon in the Freezer, D.A. Henderson's Smallpox: The Death of a Disease, and the Centers for Disease Control's web page for data on smallpox.

Feels like it's been years since
it started to thunder.
Clouds are campin' out in the valley
and glen.
How do you go on, when you can't help
but wonder.
Will the sun ever shine again?

Alan Menken, Glenn Slater, "Will the Sun Ever Shine Again."

Chapter 32—Clouds in the Valley

Dick took a deep breath, and was almost immediately overcome by a coughing fit. When it passed, he fell back to the cot, exhausted. "So," he said dully, "what now?"

Tim shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the next.

Bruce looked away. "I don't... from what I've read, smallpox symptoms invariably follow a pattern. They just do not manifest until—at the earliest—seven days after exposure. Twelve to fourteen is more typical. Had you started showing symptoms at that point," Bruce took refuge in dispassion, "then you could expect your current condition to last two to four days. After that, the next stage would be a rash, which gradually hardens to... to..."

Dick closed his eyes. "To pustules," he finished.

Bruce let out a breath. "Usually five days later," he confirmed. "But, Dick... You're young. You're strong. You've been vaccinated. There's an excellent chance that you'll..."

"...blitz through the stages at more than four times the normal rate? Because that's what it looks like." He started to cough again, and furiously turned his face to the wall. "Go." He waved his arm in their general direction. "Just go. Stop looking at me like you're waiting to see if the rash is already starting. Just leave me alone!"
"Dick, I..."

Dick closed his eyes. "Bruce. I need to work on beating this. I can't do that if you're hovering here like you're expecting me to breathe my last at any second." He forced himself to smile. "Don't you get it? If you're here instead of working in the lab, it means you think it's hopeless, and if I start believing that..."

"Oh for the love of..." A new voice broke over the cave speakers. "You know, for two smart people, you can both be incredibly dense sometimes."

"Jim?" Bruce called, startled.

"You did invite me to check up on you remotely, if you recall." A note of humor stole into his voice. "You even showed me how to use the audio."

Dick turned his face to where he knew the camera was located. "What do you mean... dense?"

Jim chuckled. "Well, maybe that was a poor choice of words. Though it is one that Bruce has used with me, on more than one occasion, for more or less the same reason."

Bruce frowned. "What?"

There was a pause. "I'm trying to recall the names. John Roddy was one. Then there was Martin Salgado, Therese Latendresse, Sam Yeong..."

Dick blinked in confusion. "The names sound familiar, but..."

"They're all people who were convicted—or nearly convicted—of crimes they never committed," Bruce said quietly.

"That's right," Jim said. "And each time, the officers who were assigned to the case were sure that they had solid evidence—and each time, you accused them of being so desperate to close the case that they were letting the evidence show what they wanted to see." He paused. "Or maybe they went into the case expecting the murderer to be the spouse, or the lover, or the recently-fired employee, because in the overwhelming majority of cases, that's who it is. Bruce, I'll be the first to admit I had a lot of bad apples serving under me when I took over as commissioner. I also had some damned good officers who—every now and again—messed up." The humor was back. "I'm not condoning the mistakes by any stretch of the imagination. Some of those mistakes could have been fatal." His voice turned bleak. "One was. But there are times when people go into a situation expecting things to follow a particular pattern. And sometimes, they're so convinced that they're seeing that pattern that they somehow disregard anything that doesn't quite fit."

"Is there a point to this?" Dick asked irritably.

"You tell me," Jim said. "Either of you. Any of you."

Silence.

"What are the early symptoms of smallpox?" Jim prompted.

Dick let out an exasperated groan. "Fever, aching muscles, exhaustion, headache... I've got all that."

"I don't doubt it. Only..."

All at once, Bruce's expression changed. "Those symptoms," he said slowly, "do manifest in the
early stages of smallpox, but..."

"But...?" Jim prompted.

"But their presence alone doesn't confirm the presence of smallpox!" Bruce nearly shouted the realization. He took a step closer to the quarantine unit. "Dick, we know that you were exposed to smallpox, so we've been watching for those symptoms. But if they're showing up this quickly, then it may not be a mutation."

"It may not be smallpox!" Tim exclaimed. He frowned, as if embarrassed by his outburst.

"The vaccine has been known to cause similar symptoms," Bruce said, nodding, "but since you didn't experience them the last two times I gave you the inoculation, I didn't think it was likely now. It is a possibility, though."

"Okay," Tim said, all-business once more. "That's one idea. I guess our next step is to check what other conditions manifest flu-like symptoms. Dick, smallpox has a seven-to-seventeen day incubation period, but if it's something else, you might have been exposed to it even before you crashed that bio-weapons lab."

"Oh, I bet I was," Dick said, sitting bolt upright in bed. "Like maybe a few hours before."

Bruce blinked. "What?"

Dick coughed. "Hang on." He tottered to the bathroom. They heard water running. A moment later, Dick returned, sipping from a styrofoam cup. "Sorry. Dry throat." He took another gulp and set the cup on the stand next to the bed before he sat back down on the mattress. "The Outsiders' security system uses palm recognition technology." He shook his head and raised his hand to his brow. "And more than half the team is currently down with..." His cracked lips twitched. "You want me to name you a condition that can manifest flu-like symptoms after two days?" He paused a beat. "The flu."

"Which," Jim said softly, but with an unmistakable note of triumph, "I'll bet none of you even bothered to test for."

The three men exchanged rueful glances. Nobody said a word.

Jim's chuckle came clearly over the intercom. "That's what I thought. Sloppy work, there."

Bruce let out a long breath. "It's possible," he admitted. "Even likely. Unfortunately, even if we can confirm it, we can't rule smallpox out either."

"Oh for..." Jim's disgust was nearly drowned out by Tim's angry protest.

Dick held up his hands. "No. He's right." He sighed. "Even if it does turn out to be the flu, it doesn't mean I don't have smallpox. It just means we'll find out in sev—" He frowned, "in five to fifteen days, right?"

Bruce nodded reluctantly. "I'm hoping that the PCR analysis will give us an answer sooner than that, but it could take that long, yes."

Dick sighed. "Okay. So what now?"

"Now?" Bruce smiled faintly. "We test for flu..."

Forty-five minutes later, Bruce returned to the quarantine unit. "I have the results," he said softly.
Dick looked up. "Well?"

"Given the circumstances," Bruce deadpanned, "it's good news. The flu test was positive."

The two men shared a smile.

"How's the PCR doing?" Dick asked, a few minutes later.

Bruce made a face. "If my goal were to create a Kryptonian-human hybrid, I'd be closer to it. I'm sorry. I still can't tell the virus from the vaccine."

A harsh ring interrupted the conversation.

"Who's at the door?" Dick asked, as Bruce walked over to a nearby console.

"Clark," Bruce replied.

"Is he alone?"

Bruce nodded.

The doorbell rang again.

"I'll get that," Tim said. He was already running for the elevator.

Bruce nodded an acknowledgement before turning his attention back to Dick. "You know this isn't going to stay quiet for long. Do you..." He stopped. "Confinement is... difficult," he said, slowly. "In my case, having visitors helped. But your current situation is not necessarily comparable to my previous one." He took another breath. "If you would prefer not to have company, that's fine. Just tell me."

Dick smiled wearily. "Clark and Roy are fine. They're friends. And if I'm not up for visitors, they won't push it. Actually, any of the Teen Titans are welcome, unless I tell you differently. As far as the others..." He coughed violently and reached for the water on his night-stand. "...Ask me first, okay?"

Bruce nodded again. "If someone overstays..." he ventured.

"I'll let you practice your glower; no problem." He looked past Bruce as another figure walked into view. "Hi, Clark. Long time no see."

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Once Clark and Dick were talking comfortably with each other, Bruce retreated to the lab to check the latest PCR results. His scowl deepened.
"Again?" Tim said, shaking his head.

Bruce sighed. "The viruses are too similar," he said for what felt like the hundredth time. "It is possible that we'll be able to differentiate between them after a few more tests, but it's by no means guaranteed."

"I know," Tim said, with a sigh of his own. "I forgot how frustrating this whole thing was last time." He pulled up a blank lab report template on his computer. "I guess we've still got it better than the WHO did, back in the old days."

Bruce was silent for a moment. "Keep in mind," he said heavily, "that the World Health Organization's focus was on preventing the spread of the disease, not curing it. We're venturing into territory that is—by and large—uncharted."

Tim looked up. "Honestly, Bruce? I'm trying not to keep that in mind. It'll only discourage me. Okay," he took a deep breath. "What if PCR analysis isn't the best diagnostic tool in this case? What's the alternative? Tissue culture?"

"No," Bruce said, frowning. "With PCR, if we had the right primers—"

"—which we don't..."

"—which we don't," Bruce admitted, "but if we did, we would be able to distinguish variola from vaccinia. In tissue culture, it's impossible to tell them apart. They used to grow the specimens on fertilized hens' eggs instead," he continued, "but I don't see how—" He broke off, startled, at a sudden burst of cacophony. It sounded suspiciously like squawking. His eyebrows lifted. Clark was standing before him holding what appeared to be a wooden chicken coop aloft in both hands.

"There are fifteen," he said. "Plus one rooster—so if the eggs aren't fertile yet, they should be by tomorrow." He thought for a moment. "I guess you have a heater? If you don't, I can go back—Ma said..."

"Ma... Clark, did you just...?" Bruce's eyes narrowed. "Clark, why are you here in street clothes?"

"Huh? I didn't want to be conspicuous. Besides, as fast as I was moving, nobody saw anything. Why?"

"Because," Bruce nearly snarled, "the security cameras are on, and Jim may be watching now!" Pride be damned, he should have explained the reality of his situation to Clark in the first place.

Clark only shrugged. "If you need fertile hens, and I can supply them..." He shrugged again. "I was going to have to deal with it sooner or later. If he saw me, I guess now's as good a time as any."

"What?"

Clark set the coop down against one of the walls. "Look," he said softly, keeping his face pointed toward the ground, "you know Mr. Gordon and Ma were together a lot all last month. Well... a few months ago, Ma and I had a talk about... well, about how if she ever met someone new, I didn't want... certain things to keep her from getting a second chance at happiness. I may not spend as much time at the farm as I used to, but anyone Ma decides to share her life with would have to know about who I am. Gordon's not stupid. He probably has his suspicions already."

"He'll never tell you," Bruce's lips twitched.

"Probably not, but at least Ma won't have to worry about accidentally letting something slip."
"They've known each other less than a month."

"And this past month is the happiest I've seen Ma since Pa passed." He looked up.

"If you are listening," he said quietly, "I'm guessing that if you kept Bruce's secret all those years, you'll be discreet about mine too. If you aren't listening, well, we're getting worked up over nothing, aren't we?"

The speakers were silent.

"I told you," Bruce smirked, "he'll never tell you."

"I can live with that." His smile grew more sombre. "Especially if Dick lives, too."

Bruce swallowed hard. "It... it may make a difference," he admitted.

Clark nodded. Then, all at once, he frowned. "There's a bank holdup happening in Robinson Heights as we speak. Mind if I handle it?"

"Go. And Clar..." He blinked. Where Clark had been standing a second ago, there was nothing but empty space. He looked toward one of the cameras. "All right," he said softly. "That is annoying." He turned back to his work.

"Tim, get a heater. And then, let's set up for one more round of PCR. If that doesn't work, we'll start with the eggs tomorrow..."

---

Roy arrived an hour later with Wally and Donna in tow. They didn't stay long—it was clear that Dick wasn't in any shape to be sociable. As Bruce showed them to the door, it was Donna who asked if there was anything that they could do to help.

Bruce was about to refuse, when he realized what he was doing. "Gotham," he said finally. "I need Tim here. Catwoman is unavailable. It may be too much for Batgirl—especially with the Teen Titans in New York helping the Outsiders. If you want to be of assistance, keep an eye on my city."

The three exchanged glances. "We were thinking of that," Wally admitted, "but we weren't sure..." His voice trailed off.

Roy elbowed him in the ribs. "Way to get one of those fleet feet stuck in your mouth," he laughed. "What Twinkletoes was going to say was that we didn't know whether you'd be madder if we stepped in against your orders than if we just barged in without checking with you."

"Ah," Bruce said drily. "Well. Thank you for the courtesy." He should have expected the shocked looks, but he still felt his face grow hot.

"Bruce," Donna ventured, "if there's any change... you'll let us know?"

Bruce started to nod, but caught himself. "Dick has the final say on that one, for as long as he's able to make the call. With that caveat, yes."

Donna nodded. Then, impulsively, she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Don't forget to take care of yourself, too," she whispered. "We'll be in touch."

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"Do you feel up for some tomato soup?"
Dick roused himself at the sound of Bruce's voice. "Depends. Is it anything like what happened when you tried making chicken soup for Alfred?"

Bruce's lips twitched. "I considered the possibility, but discounted it when Tim asked for seconds."

"You gave him some of my soup?"

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "House rule: family members who are ill are entitled to royal treatment. That includes the service of a food taster."

Dick sat up in bed. "House rule? Since when?"

Bruce smirked. "My house. My rules. Subject to change without notice."

Dick burst out laughing.

Bruce's smirk became a smile. "Of course, had the quarantine unit been situated in... I believe you referred to it as Graysonland..."

"What? I would have had to taste my own soup? Speaking of which..."

"I'll bring it down." He glanced at the corridor that connected the unit with the rest of the cave. "It should be safe to bring it in without a hazmat suit—"

"Don't risk it," Dick shook his head. "If I start showing smallpox symptoms now," he frowned. "Is that even possible—having both at once?"

"I don't know," Bruce admitted. "Hopefully, in a day or so, we'll have a better idea of where things stand. You see..." he related his conversation with Clark.

Dick grinned. "Wait. You're telling me that there are chickens in the Bat-cave, right now?"

"I'm afraid so."

Dick thought for a moment. "Tell me the reason you didn't make chicken soup wasn't because you were afraid of traumatizing them!"

"We need the eggs," Bruce deadpanned. "Stressing the hens may impact production."

"Uh-huh. Suurre."

"Did you want toast or crackers?"

"Surprise me.

"I'm... sorry about yesterday," Dick said when Barbara came by.

"No, don't be. I..." she flushed. "I'd probably be asking the same thing in your place."

Dick nodded. "Hope you haven't changed your answer," he said lightly.

Barbara looked down. "I've been thinking about it—really thinking about—it all last night," she said. "I mean, it's one thing to say it wouldn't matter to me, but," she bit her lip, "I know what it's like to have people tell you that something doesn't make a difference, only to find out that, when push comes to shove, it does. I... I wouldn't want to lead you on that way." Her voice lowered. "It's worse
than someone admitting upfront that there's a problem. So I spent most of last night trying to imagine what that kind of life would be like."

"I... see," Dick said heavily. He half-turned away from the Plexiglas, but kept one hand resting on the wall.

"Hang on," Barbara said sharply. "You didn't hear my answer."

Dick froze.

Encouraged, Barbara took another breath. "The answer is... I don't—yes. The answer is yes. It might mean we both have to get some sort of help to adjust, but we'll do that."

"Help. You're talking therapy."

"I needed it after Joker stuck me in this," she pointed out. "And maybe if I'd stuck with my therapist longer instead of stressing over how Daddy was going to be able to pay for it," she broke off. "I could have asked Bruce—I know that, but I was... angry. At him. At me. At life. I didn't want to be... weak. And Bruce was one of the strongest people I knew—and all I saw was that he did it all himself, so how could I ask him for help and not have him see it as weakness?" She smiled bitterly. "You don't have to tell me I should have known better. And don't think I never figured out that he was the one who set me up with my first escrima instructor—among other things. Anyway. Enough about me. Dick, I love you—and I will see you through whatever you might have to face, but I know that I might need some help to understand what's going on. I think we both will. Say the word and I'll call my psychotherapist in a heartbeat if we need to go that route." She smiled. "I'm not giving you up without a fight, CBW."

Dick turned back to face her, a ghost of a smile hovering on his lips. "Right back at'cha, Red. So," he said, turning serious again, "when did you find out that my booster wore off?"

Barbara sighed. "About an hour after you and Dodge left Manhattan. I was stressing a little—even though you told me you'd had the vaccine, so I did some checking and..."

"...and you didn't tell me?"

"Would you have turned the car around and come back if I had?"

Dick thought about that. "No."

"That's what I figured. I mean, it wasn't like you weren't taking precautions. You had the suit. You knew about biohazard protocols. And if I'd told you..."

"I would have had one more worry to distract me," Dick was nodding. "I'm just as glad you didn't—I had enough on my mind already, going in."

Barbara nodded back. "Do you need anything from home?"

"No, I think I'm good here. I'm just going to rest for a bit."

"Okay." She put her lips to the Plexiglas. "Barring the unforeseen, I'll be back tomorrow."

Dick smiled at the pink lipstick smear remaining on the wall. "See you then."

As Barbara wheeled her way toward the elevator, she cast a nervous glance at the lab area. Bruce's back was to her as he called instructions to Tim. Was it only her imagination, or was his voice too
measured, too controlled? She bit her lip and rolled on, hoping that he hadn't overheard what she had said.

Bruce found Dick lying in bed staring at the ceiling. "Do you have a preference for supper?"

Dick turned on his side to face him. "I don't really have much of an appetite right now," he said.

"Still, if you aren't nauseous, you should try to get something into you."

"I know," Dick sighed, "but I'm not hungry."

"The latest PCR results are inconclusive," Bruce said. "I'm sorry. I'm not used to feeling this helpless—or at least not in this area. It's..."

Dick rolled over. "Look, Bruce? No offense? I'm sorry you're feeling helpless and you're feeling frustrated, and I don't want to sound ungrateful or anything, but you aren't stuck in bed, sick as a dog and waiting to find out if it's going to get worse, and you aren't wondering how many people are going to drop you if you end up disfigured for life, and yeah, I get that you're here and you're trying to do what you can but... I'm sorry. I can't lie here and feel bad for you because you're feeling helpless right now!"

As soon as the words left his mouth, Dick knew that he shouldn't have said them. For a moment, he lay facing the opposite wall, before he nervously rolled back to face Bruce.

He wasn't overly surprised to find Bruce gone.

Dick closed his eyes. He only had himself to blame this time.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw a tray on his nightstand. On closer inspection, he found eight saltine crackers, spread with peanut butter, a banana, and a bowl of orange Jell-o. A tall glass of ginger ale stood next to it.

He looked around. Bruce was sitting at a nearby console, his fingers tapping away at the keyboard. As though he couldn't have done that from any terminal. Dick sighed. "Hey. Thanks."

Bruce swivelled around. "If you need anything else..."

"Not now. But thanks for picking stuff that still tastes decent at room temperature—it might have to sit here for awhile."

"There's no rush," Bruce said. "Just try to eat what you can."

Dick nodded. "Sorry I went off on you before. I know you're trying to..."

"Don't apologize," Bruce said wearily. "It's not as though you didn't have a point."

Dick reached for a cracker. "Bruce? How did you stand it? Arkham."

There was a long pause.

"It's okay," Dick said finally. "You don't have to answer."

"No," Bruce replied. "It's all right. I was just... thinking." He frowned. "I suppose the easiest answer to your question is that I... stopped. Thinking. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have stood it." He winced. "I...
wouldn't recommend you try it."

"No worries. I don't think I'm planning to go that far. Just, what you were saying before about knowing what it's like being stuck in here. I don't want to do much more than lie down most of the time and it's rough on me after three days. I was just..."

"I understand." Bruce sighed. "It's not something I've wanted to discuss."

"It's okay," Dick repeated. "You don't have to."

"I haven't wanted to discuss it," Bruce continued, "because it's... not an easy thing to face. I'm sure you know the reason I didn't fight the decision to send me to Arkham. However, the fact remains: I... lost two years of my life. And I have myself to blame for at least half of that."

"Bruce..."

"One year," Bruce continued, "where I deliberately chose to withdraw. I'm aware that if I'd behaved differently at the outset, my release wouldn't have been immediate—but it would have been sooner. And then six months because... once I started thinking again, all I could think of was leaving—with or without court approval."

Dick sighed. "Bruce, you're a master escape artist, to say the least. Of course once you started... waking up, you were going to try to bust out. The only real shock was that you went back."

"I think," Bruce said slowly, "that might have been the reason I left. I... it was only when I escaped that I realized my confinement wasn't only me... punishing myself. I needed help. I'm not convinced that it needed to be as an in-patient, although since we both know that I wouldn't have sought help voluntarily, perhaps..." He shook his head. "I suppose I should be discussing this with Alex. Among other things. No, not everything," he said in response to Dick's unasked question. "I know we're doing everything properly. However, my actions could also be interpreted as preventing you from seeking medical care, my need for control running rampant, my..."

"So have Mid-Nite check me out," Dick shrugged. "He's a doctor. He can't cure me, but at least if Alex asks, you can tell him that someone's looked me over."

Bruce nodded slowly. "Hopefully, though," he said, "by the time I'm scheduled to meet with him, two days from now, you'll be on the road to recovery." He smiled and stood up with a sigh. "I'm going to get some sleep, myself. Do you need anything before I do?"

Dick shook his head. "No... yeah. I'm probably going to try to take a shower in the morning—I'm feeling kind of grungy. Could I maybe get some fresh sheets?"

Bruce nodded. "I washed some when I became aware of your circumstances. They're on the bottom shelf of the closet. Are you able to change the bedding yourself?" He asked apologetically. "It's not going to be that easy in the hazmat suit."

"Oh yeah," Dick smiled. "I think I can handle it. Where do you want the old ones?"

"Just leave them in the corner by the door. I'll collect them when I bring in your breakfast."

"Fine." He frowned then. Bruce was getting better at housekeeping, but... "Bruce? The sheets I'm lying on right now? You did wash them, right? I mean, they're not the same ones that have been on this cot for over three years?"

Bruce blinked. "They haven't been used in over three years. Why would—?"
Dick groaned. "Bruce sometimes... Never mind." He pushed himself off of the cot and stripped off the blanket. "What's done's done. Just don't do it again. I'll fix it now. Good night!"

Doctor Mid-Nite frowned as Bruce finished talking. "How is he today?"

"I'll let you examine him," Bruce said. "His fever was lower this morning. I've started growing the cultures on the eggs."

The doctor nodded. "There's something to be said for the old ways at times," he remarked. His frown deepened. "There's no evidence of a rash yet, is there?"

Bruce shook his head. "I know, Pieter" he said, closing his eyes. "Sometimes, the temperature drops and the patient feels better just when the disease enters the next phase. I'm... hoping that's not the case here."

"I'll add my prayers to yours, then," Mid-Nite said. "All right. Take me to him, please Bruce? I'll have a look."

"This way." Bruce extended his bent arm to Mid-Nite. Mid-Nite took hold and allowed Bruce to lead him toward the quarantine unit. "Dick?" Bruce drew in his breath sharply. There were raised red welts clearly visible on Dick's face, neck and hands. They appeared to extend beneath the collar and sleeves of his pajamas, too.

"Hey," Dick said softly. "Hi, Doc."

The cave floor seemed to dissolve beneath Bruce's feet as his mind began to scream.
33. Cries in the Night

Chapter Summary

They say it's always darkest before the dawn...

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Kathy and Debbie for the beta! Thanks to Bluejay and Aiyokusama for helping me figure out what an attack might sound like to someone who couldn't see it coming.

A/N: Zanamivir and Hydroxizine are generic drugs. They are also marketed under the brand names Relenza and Atarax/Vistaril, respectively.

Quick clarification: Smallpox does not naturally occur in any species other than the human race. In 2001, US researchers conducted an experiment in which they injected monkeys with the disease in a concentration many times greater than would be found in nature. The monkeys subsequently developed smallpox. There has never been a recorded instance of a monkey in its natural environment contracting smallpox or transmitting it to humans.

"Unsettled Scores" written by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Jim Steinman. Recorded by Marcus Lovett on the Whistle Down the Wind original cast album (Universal, 1999).

There's a prayer for the living and the dying
There's a prayer to soothe the savage sea
There's a prayer it seems for almost everything
But you, you haven't got a prayer for me
And I, I haven't got a prayer

So many cries in the night

That you try to ignore
Why didn't I do this?

Why didn't I do that?
So many unbroken chains,

So many unsettled scores

—Andrew Lloyd Webber, Jim Steinman, "Unsettled Scores"

Chapter 33—Cries in the Night

Bruce had come close to death often enough to know that the cliché about one's entire life passing
before one's eyes was not always true. And he wasn't close to death now. But seeing the red rash on his son's exposed skin, he was definitely having flashbacks: to an eight-year-old boy sobbing in the center ring, even as other members of the circus surrounded him, trying to block his view of the tragedy; to carrying Dick's battered figure into the cave after Two-Face had worked him over; to the night a bullet from Joker's pistol had entered Dick's shoulder, its momentum sending the teen plummeting over the edge of a 50-story building; to the day he'd received a telephone call from the Bludhaven PD. "Mr. Wayne, Officer Grayson has listed you as his next of kin. Sir, I need to tell you that he's been shot..."

His heart lurched. He was losing his son and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it.

"Do you hear me?"

Bruce blinked. "What?" Dimly, he realized that Mid-Nite was trying to get his attention.

"Bruce," the doctor said, "I'm blind at this light-level, remember? I need you to describe his symptoms to me."

Technically, that wasn't true. Dick could answer the question just as well; probably better. Mid-Nite's request did have the effect of bringing Bruce back to the present, though. "His fever was at 102.4 last night," Bruce said, fighting to keep his voice even. "This morning, it was down to 101. I checked when I brought in his breakfast, about an hour ago. As of right now, all visible skin is covered with red blotches."

Mid-Nite nodded. "But you say the flu test was positive."

"It was." Bruce grimaced. "Perhaps I should have run a second one to be sure."

A soft cluck made both men turn. A speckled hen ambled by, pecking at the cave floor with apparent irritation. Mid-Nite tilted his head. "Did I just hear a..."

"Chicken," Bruce said. "Yes. I told you, we've had little luck with PCR so—"

Mid-Nite shook his head. "You do know that you have to wait eleven days before trying to grow a virus culture in a hen's egg, right?"

"Eight to eleven," Bruce admitted. "I'm starting it earlier, hoping I might get some indication."

The doctor frowned but let it pass. "Can you call Superman, or shall I?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Mid-Nite sighed. "Bruce, from what you've described, it really doesn't sound like smallpox. I'm willing to concede that we could be dealing with a mutated strain. The odds are against it, but I'll agree that there's still a risk. The thing is, there is one simple clinical test that we can conduct, which should determine what we're looking at—but it can't be done from inside a hazmat suit. Since smallpox can't naturally infect native animal life, it's a safe bet that, as an extra-terrestrial, he'd be immune, too." As Mid-Nite explained, Bruce started shaking his head.

"You don't know whether his senses will perceive things the same way."

"No, but I'll lay odds he'll detect something different."

"Unless, just as some people are genetically incapable of smelling freesia, he'll—"
"Bruce!" Mid-Nite sounded exasperated. "So far, he's been on Earth for some... what... forty-odd years, give or take? In all that time, we haven't found a single instance where we were able to detect something he couldn't and a number of instances where the reverse held true. Now are you going to call him, or am I?" In a softer tone, he added, "Or we could just wait another day or so, to see what happens."

Bruce shook his head. He didn't think he could handle two more days, although he knew that he might have to. He turned back to the computer console and manipulated a few controls. "Clark," he said, "I need your help."

He wore the costume this time. "You need me to go in there to see whether I can smell the disease?" he asked.

Bruce nodded, but it was Mid-Nite who spoke. "Not the disease precisely—the cytokines." When Superman didn't reply, he continued. "Cytokines are protein molecules, secreted by—among other things—certain cells of the immune system. They act as messengers to white blood cells for the body's defenses. As smallpox progresses, it interferes with the cytokine's routine drifting and the body's defenses begin to fail. The immune cells react by creating more cytokines, which sends the body's immune system into overdrive, in what we call a cytokine storm. Essentially, because the body is creating too many cytokines, it then activates more immune cells, creating a feedback loop—which creates even more strain on the body. Plus, when the immune cells and fluids build up in the lungs, they block vital oxygen from getting through. Most doctors now believe that the majority of flu deaths occur when that happens." His tone was mild, but his expression was deadly serious as he continued.

"The term 'cytokine storm' has only been used within the last two decades, but the condition is one of the hallmarks of smallpox. The storms cause the patient's skin to secrete certain gases, which lead to a sickly-sweet smell—what used to be called 'the foetor of smallpox'."

Superman frowned. "And you need me to check for that."

"As the disease progresses, the odor intensifies," Mid-Night explained, "but even in early stages, doctors were able to detect it by smelling the patient's wrists and forehead. It's doubtful that you would need to get in that close."

"But you need someone who can enter the unit without wearing a helmet and face-mask, and I'm immune." Superman nodded as he spoke. "All right. Let's do this."

"For the record," Dick called out, "I've been showering."

Superman turned and smiled. "Good to know."

"You'll need to shower too," Bruce gestured toward the decon shower stall he'd set up midway down the passage that led to the quarantine unit proper. "You may be immune, but you could still carry something out with you."

"Believe it or not, Bruce," Clark said drily, "I do know a little bit about biohazard safety protocols. For what it's worth, I'm not picking up any sort of unusual odor from out here." He wrinkled his nose, "Except for those chickens," he added, as he advanced toward the mouth of the passage. "This should only take a minute."

As Superman headed into the quarantine unit, Mid-Nite drew Bruce aside. "Just so you know," he
said sternly, "if I can detect the difference in your breathing, there's a good chance he can too. He just might not know what it means. How long have you been experiencing symptoms?"

Bruce glowered.

Mid-Nite cocked his head. "Bruce, if you're trying to intimidate me, it works better when I can see it."

Bruce sighed. "Variola isn't contagious until first symptoms manifest," he said, for what felt like the twentieth time. "Unfortunately, the flu virus isn't so obliging. Between ibuprofen, meditation, and biofeedback, I'm managing."

The doctor frowned. "And less than a year ago, you were in the ICU for smoke inhalation." He pulled out a device that was roughly the same size and shape as a cell phone. "That places you in a higher risk category for respiratory ailments. I'm putting you on Zanamivir—ten milligrams, twice daily—for the next five days."

"I've taken it before," Bruce snapped. "It interferes with my concentration; right now, I can't afford that."

"Most flu meds have that potential side effect—"

"—which is why I'm not taking them."

"Bruce, forgive me but from what you've been telling me, you've spent the last few days trying to diagnose Dick's condition. Time will make that clear in any case, and likely fairly soon. The only thing your tests might accomplish is your knowing the diagnosis a day or two earlier. Even if you were close to a cure, I'd be extremely reluctant to let you hold off on taking the medication, under those circumstances, but that's not the case here. Bruce, everything you're doing now is—"

"Don't," Bruce snarled. "Do not say it."

"I'm sorry, Bruce." Mid-Nite's voice was soft but firm. "You may not want to face it, but all you've been doing down here is no better than busywork." He heard the sudden intake of breath, the scuff-squeak of a rubber-soled shoe on metal deck plating, the rustle of fabric, and the change in air pressure as Bruce's arm came up, but the JLA doctor stood his ground. "Go ahead, Bruce," he said quickly. "Hit me if it helps. But fill the prescription." He braced for a blow which never fell. Instead, he heard ragged breathing, which was quickly followed by a dry coughing fit. "Thanks for turning around to cough," he said, when Bruce had finished.

Bruce waited until his voice and his breathing were both under control before he replied. "I can't just sit and watch," he said hollowly. "Patrolling is... not an option. I have a meeting with my, he grimaced, "my court-appointed psychiatrist, tomorrow afternoon, which was going to serve as a break—if only because I didn't see a way to avoid that..."

"You could have just asked me for a doctor's note, you know. It's not like you're faking being sick to get out of the appointment."

Bruce nodded, feeling some of his tension drain away as he did. It was quickly replaced by a great weariness, as the full weight of the symptoms he'd been struggling to control came crashing over him.

The sound of a throat clearing behind the two men caused them to turn as one to find Superman standing before them. "The only thing I picked up beyond normal cave smells, pheromones, and perspiration was disinfectant. If there is any cytokine build-up, it's not something I can detect."
Bruce exhaled. Another cough escaped him.

"Bruce?"

"It's under control," Bruce snapped back irritably. "Or at least, it will be after Pieter transmits a prescription to the Florgreens at Webb and Glen Cove Way."

"Transmitting now," Mid-Nite said, hitting a button on the device in his hand. "And," he smiled, "well, since it's not smallpox, there's no real reason I can't go into the unit myself to see what's behind that rash."

"Is quarantine even warranted?" Superman wanted to know.

Mid-Nite considered. "Probably not, but fighting the flu can take a lot out of a person. If Dick is comfortable where he is, there's no pressing need to move him if he doesn't feel up to it. You'd best get that prescription filled."

"In street clothes," Bruce added, seeing that Superman was about to leave.

"Oh, right."
The Man of Steel had the grace to look sheepish as he headed into another part of the cave to change.

After he'd gone, Mid-Nite placed a hand on Bruce's shoulder. "I'll check on Dick. As for you, call your doctor. Take the Zanamivir. And get some rest. In that order." He sighed. "Give your body a little time to heal now, or you'll find that your body will take a longer time down the road. And Bruce? You do know that you don't have to go through any of this alone, correct?"

Bruce closed his eyes as he nodded slowly. "Pieter... thanks."

Mid-Nite smiled. "You're welcome. Now go make that call. Oh. Kill the cave lights first? At least in this area? It'll make things easier. Better yet, show me the controls so that I can turn them back on when I finish."

There was no point in mentioning that if he was mistaken and Dick did turn out to have smallpox after all, Bruce's symptoms almost certainly indicated the same diagnosis. If they were dealing with a vaccine-resistant strain of the disease, their only recourse now was to seal up the manor—and pray.

Mid-Nite ran a finger gently over Dick's arm. "Does that hurt?"

"They sting when you touch them," Dick replied. "But they're more itchy than painful. I've been trying not to scratch..."

"Good idea," Mid-Nite said with approval. "Have you noticed whether the rash is worse in any specific area? For example, your torso, or your extremities?"

"Not really," Dick grimaced. He had to admit it was weird to be examined in total darkness. Even though he knew he wasn't alone, hearing another voice so close and being touched by someone he couldn't see was a bit unnerving.

"And it was like this when you woke up?"

Dick closed his eyes and thought for a moment. "I... no. Bruce brought in breakfast, checked my temperature, and took a blood sample. After that, I didn't feel much like eating, so I took a shower and changed into a fresh pair of PJs." He frowned. "Actually, I think I thought my hands were a little
red, but they also felt like I'd been sleeping on them."

"Ah. Give me your hand, please?"

Dick held out his hand palm down. Mid-Nite grasped it.

"No rash or inflammation on the palms. Was there anything earlier?"

"No," Dick said, shaking his head. Keeping his eyes closed seemed to help restore his equilibrium. Maybe it was because that way, he didn't feel like he ought to be able to see.

"How about on the soles of your feet?"

"I haven't noticed... hang on," he kicked the bedclothes away. "Hide your eyes," he said, as he tapped a stud on his watch, illuminating the bed with a faint green light. "No. Plenty on the upper part, though."

Mid-Nite waited until the light was off. "Unsurprising," he nodded. "And—I know what it looks and feels like to me, but confirm, please—in your opinion, would you say that the rash has more the appearance of pimples, or welts?"

Dick didn't hesitate. "Welts. Definitely."

Mid-Nite nodded. "I suppose you've been expecting this one," he said with a smile, as he took out a tongue depressor. "No medical examination is ever complete without your doctor asking you to stick out your tongue and say 'ah'."

Dick chuckled in response before complying.

"You haven't noticed any sign of the rash inside your mouth, have you?" Mid-Nite asked, as he moved the implement away.

"No."

"Not on your tongue?"

"No!" Dick shuddered at the thought. "Ack! That sounds horrible."

Mid-Nite nodded soberly. "It does. But that's fairly typical for variola—or, if you prefer—smallpox."

His smile returned. "Okay. Let's add it all up. You have a rash that resembles welts. It stings and it itches, but it's not particularly painful. There's no sign of it inside your mouth. It's fairly evenly spread out over your body, with the exception of your palms and soles. Does that sum it up well?"

"Yeah, that sounds about right."

"Good. Now let me share a few facts about a smallpox rash with you. A smallpox rash begins with redness on the face and arms. The red areas spread together and become blotches. Within hours, pimples erupt from the blotches. People who have experienced the symptom describe these pimples as being 'sharp' rather than 'itchy'—that's evidently how they feel subjectively to the patient, rather than their being objectively 'sharp to the touch'. A smallpox rash spreads over the entire body, but favors the face and extremities. It seldom spares the palms or soles either. And, as mentioned, it extends to within the mouth, as well. So. Taking all of that into consideration, and adding in that neither Superman nor I found any evidence of cytokine storm activity, I'm forced to conclude..." His smile grew wider. "You don't have smallpox."
Dick let out a long slow breath. "Then... what is this? Do you know?"

Mid-Nite frowned. "Yes and no. I do know what it is, but I'm not entirely sure what's causing it in your case. It's nothing life-threatening, though, for all I don't doubt it's making you miserable."

"Doc?"

Mid-Nite smiled again. "It's hives, Dick. They could be caused by an allergic reaction, or an infection, or a rapid change in temperature. Sometimes there is no apparent cause. But what you've described—and my examination corroborates it—is virtually a textbook description. Now, if you've introduced any new food into your diet recently or... or tried some new cologne or aftershave, I'd eliminate it for the time being and see if it helps. If the hives don't clear up in the next day or so, call me. But unless this rash changes markedly and starts taking on the characteristics I've mentioned, it's not smallpox."

He got up from his stool. "None of that alters the fact that you're still fighting the flu, you're still feverish, and," he frowned, "Bruce mentioned some of the pressures you've been under lately. They aren't helping your condition. For now, the best advice I can give you is, 'relax'. It's not smallpox. But it could still be dangerous if you try to push your recovery too fast. Just rest up and let this run its course. I'm putting you on Hydroxyzine for the hives—that's an antihistamine, so don't be surprised if it knocks you out. If that's not enough, Calamine lotion should help too. You're over the hump with the flu, so I think we can let nature take its course on that one. I am going to leave you with a prescription for Zanamivir, but only take it if your fever spikes again. If this doesn't clear up in the next two days, contact me and we'll re-evaluate. Any questions?"


Bruce bent over a Petrie dish and tried to ignore his aching muscles. He was so close, he knew he was. Just a few more tests... a few more... He was startled out of his work by loud voices.

"Hey! You can't just..."

That had been Jim's voice. Bruce looked up as he heard heavy feet pounding on the floor plates. They reached him in moments. He blinked and felt himself settle automatically into a combat stance. There had to be at least 30 strangers in the cave, all wearing hazmat suits and toting riot gear.

"I tried to stop them," Jim said, "but they have—"

"Orders," one of the men in front interrupted. "Due to the infectious nature of the disease, the threat must be contained by any means necessary." At a gesture, half of the team headed down the passage toward the quarantine unit.

Bruce started. The weapons were out and clearly ready for use. "No!" he gasped. He tried to stop them, but four men sprang forward to seize hold him. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Jim was similarly restrained. He couldn't see Tim, but he could hear him cursing.

"Get them out of here!"

As they frog-marched him out of the cave, he could hear Dick screaming hoarsely. He fought to break loose, and was able to turn his head enough to see flickering patterns on the cave walls. Flamethrowers! They weren't moving Dick to some secure facility. They were...!

He smelled smoke. Dick was coughing now. Bruce struggled against his captors, as they hauled him out of the cave, out of the manor, and shoved him unceremoniously into the back of a squad car. The
door slammed behind him. He didn't see Jim or Tim anywhere, but he pounded on the window for all he was worth. There was a metal grate dividing the front and back seat, but the front window was open.

"He's really agitated," Bruce heard a voice say.

"Yeah, better get him to Arkham for observation."

No, not Arkham! Dick needed him! As the motor started, he heard Tim screaming his name.

"Bruce! Bruce!"

"...Bruce! Bruce!"

Bruce coughed. "No. You can't! Dick..."

"Bruce." Tim was beaming and waving a printout. "Bruce, wake up! The last PCR worked!"

Bruce's eyes opened. "What?" He asked in momentary confusion. He was on the cot in the cave. In the lab. He wrinkled his nose as an acrid odor reached him. He looked around and grimaced. This was going to be the last time he tried to heat up leftovers over a Bunsen burner when he was too tired to see straight. No need to wonder what had prompted that nightmare, he thought ruefully. Between the smell of his burning lunch and his very real fears... All at once, he realized what Tim was trying to tell him. "You got the primers to bond?"

"They bonded," Tim nodded, thrusting the printout at him. "See for yourself. Quarantine's over. It's not variola, it's vaccinia!"

Dick was sitting up in bed and watching TV when Bruce unsealed the inner door of the quarantine unit. The sound made him turn. "No hazmat suit?" he asked.

Bruce shook his head, smiling. "No variola. The last round of PCR confirmed Mid-Nite's diagnosis. It's not smallpox. Just a combination of flu and hives." Bruce spun around and coughed into his sleeve. He turned back to see Dick staring at him in horror. "Don't blame yourself for this one," he said wearily. "I insisted that you come here, when you would have gone to a hospital. I," he winced, "postponed getting a flu shot, even though I knew it was advisable." He sighed. "I realize that your old bedroom has considerably fewer amenities," he ventured, his gaze taking in the athletic and entertainment facilities that he'd incorporated into the unit, "but I think Jim will find it easier to look in on both of us if he doesn't have to navigate quite as many stairs and elevators."

"Both of..."

Bruce's expression hardened. "You were wearing yourself out before this happened. You're not leaving here at less than one hundred per cent." He looked down. "And since," he mumbled, "I've never intentionally demanded more from you than I demanded from myself, it would smack of hypocrisy to start now."

A broad grin spread across Dick's face. "Oh, I'll stick around," Dick said, wincing as his dry lips started to bleed. "Nobody will ever believe you followed doctor's orders without a credible eyewitness!"

Bruce winced. "I wasn't exactly planning to publicize the fact," he said, covering another cough.

Dick started to laugh.
"After all," Bruce said as he beat a dignified retreat from the quarantine unit, "I do have a reputation to rebuild..."

It took a supreme effort not to reseal the door on the sound of Dick's laughter.

There was an email waiting for him when he got back to the console. He recognized the encryption instantly.

*Just wanted to let you know we've been in the Solomons for two days. We checked into the Kaolo Sunset Resort on San Jorge. It's been almost 90 degrees here. Went to Savo early this morning to see the dolphins. Helena was more interested in the other tourists than the marine life. She misses you, though. Just like her mommy. How's Dick? How are you? I've been checking the Gazette online, and so far I guess it's too early, but I suppose, no news is good news? It's beautiful here. I'd like to come back and visit again someday. But for now, well, it's not really much of a vacation, though I'm trying to make it one. By the way, they have this dessert here. Indigenous. Bananas mixed with other exotic fruits, wrapped in pearl cassavas, and topped with whipped cream. I think I've seen it served with caramel, too. I have no idea what it's called, but Helena loves it! Anyway, it might be worth seeing if there's anywhere to get some in Gotham. Hope to be back soon.

Selina*

Bruce closed his eyes for a moment, thinking. Then, he hit 'reply'.


That was all he needed to say. It was safe to come back to Gotham, but not to see him. He'd never been one for writing long letters. His emails read more like telegrams. Still, he hesitated, staring at the screen for several long moments, before finally typing:

*Miss you both too.*

*Bruce*

He clicked the 'send' button. Then he went upstairs to call Alex.

Alex took Bruce's declaration of illness at face value.

"There is a lot of that going around at this time of year," he said mildly. "Two of my youngest are down with it right now. So, I'll see you next week, then?"

Bruce confirmed it, fighting down a wave of irritation. If he was going through the trouble of jumping through court-ordered hoops, the least Alex could do was demand that he fax over the doctor's note!

"By the way, Bruce, if anything does come up between now and next week, please feel free to call. Some of my clients see these sessions as a chance to unwind, and find themselves under more stress if they have to miss a meeting—particularly if they hadn't been expecting to."

"I'll do that," Bruce said. He mentally added, *When the Earth becomes a burned-out cinder orbiting a dead sun.* Then he quickly shifted the mouthpiece away, as the urge to cough overwhelmed him.

"That sounded nasty," Alex said. "Just take it easy for a few days. And much as I know you resent it, I will need a doctor's note for your file. You can bring it next week."
"Finally! "Not a problem. I can fax it—"

"No, just bring it when you come. My machine's been acting up. It can wait until you come in. See you next Monday."

As Bruce hung up the phone, he felt his strength ebb away. Putting up a stoic front before others was still instinctive, even when it better served his purpose not to—but now, with nobody to impress or to be strong for, Bruce knew he had to look as ill as he felt. His head, arms, neck and shoulders were aching as he dragged himself upstairs and into bed.

Two days later, Dick's temperature was back to normal. The hives, however, remained. If the antihistamine weren't keeping him drowsy, he would have divided his downtime between checking up on Bruce and working out in the cave. As it was, getting out of bed for the thirty-foot walk to the bathroom seemed to involve long minutes of internal debate as to whether he should get up now, or wait a few minutes longer. Walking to Bruce's room, fifteen feet in the opposite direction, felt like a major hike. Still, whenever Dick did have to get up, he tried to force himself to look in on him.

Late that night, when the itchiness kept him half-awake, he was jolted alert when his door creaked open. Automatically, he fumbled for his escrima, before he remembered that they were down in the cave, and not wedged between the box springs and the bed frame, the way they were at home.

"At ease," a hoarse voice rumbled.

"Bruce?" Dick struggled to sit up. "Is everything okay?" He fumbled for the small reading lamp, keeping his eyes closed against the sudden change in illumination. He waited another moment before he cautiously opened them.

Bruce was leaning against the doorframe.

"You look like hell," Dick said bluntly.

Bruce's lips twitched. "So do you."

Dick sank back against the pillow. "I called Mid-Nite this afternoon. He told me to give it another couple of days, and if they still haven't gone away, he'll run an allergy test. He said that some allergies only develop in adulthood."

"I know." He smiled wearily. "Sorry I disturbed you. This last week has been... stressful. I woke up and I just wanted to... that is to say..."

Dick grinned. "It's okay, Bruce. Half the time I've been lying here—the half I've been awake, anyway—I've been trying to let myself believe it's really over."

Bruce took a half step into the room. He paused, waiting.

"Come in, already," Dick said, motioning Bruce toward the desk chair.

Bruce sat down with a muffled sigh. "I can't believe I mistook—"

"Hey," Dick held up a hand. "We mistook. Jim was right. We knew I was exposed to smallpox, so when I got the flu, we assumed it was the early stages. We knew the next stage was a rash, and rather than actually look at what kind of a rash we were dealing with, we jumped to conclusions. It happens."
"I should have looked," Bruce said.

"And?" Dick sighed. "Bruce, you said it yourself. There hasn't been an actual case of smallpox on U.S. soil in over 70 years. The last natural manifestation on the planet was before I was born. So if, as you pointed out, medical professionals might not have recognized the symptoms for what they were, is it that unbelievable that we messed up too?" He closed his eyes. "I'm just glad it's over. Mostly over."

Bruce nodded. "I seem to be recovering as well. Which," he added, his tone lightening, "would appear to suggest that my lungs weren't permanently damaged last May."

"About time we had a little good news," Dick mumbled sleepily.

"Yes."

Dick closed his eyes. "The Hydroxizine is kicking in again. I think I'm done fighting it, unless there was anything else?"

"No." Bruce placed a hand on Dick's forehead. It was cool to the touch. "Your fever's still gone," he said, absently pushing a stray lock of hair out of his son's eyes. "At least, I think it is. Mine is... lower."

Dick's eyelids inched open again. "But you still have one? And you're up and moving around?" He rolled his eyes, smiling ruefully. "I thought you were trying to set a good example for me. Go back to bed, Bruce. I'll see you in the morning."

Bruce squeezed his shoulder. "Rest well."

"You too." He hesitated. "Hey. Thanks for checking up on me."

"It's no more than you've been doing for me. Good night."

"'Night."

Barbara came over the next morning, armed with a large picnic hamper. "I really wish you'd let the League know you're not going to run them out of Gotham on a rail if they set foot within city limits," she said, as she set the basket down on the vestibule bench. "I must've fielded about 30 calls in the last 72 hours."

Bruce frowned. He didn't think the Zanamivir was bothering him as much now as it had for the first day or so, but it felt like he was missing something. "Barbara?"

She sighed. "Looks like Mid-Nite got the word out about the two of you being sick, but Clark kept mum about your finally learning to cook! You've got chili from Ollie, pomegranate cookies from Diana, rhubarb pie from Clark—his mother baked it, so make sure Daddy gets some..."

"What?" He must have taken a double dose by accident.

Barbara sighed. "Thanks to J'onn—he sent Chocos, by the way—I now have a JLA transporter in my workroom. Just in case you run out of food. And why is everyone always worried about tripping your security?" she demanded in mock annoyance. "I've got systems, too, you know!" When Bruce still looked puzzled, she grinned. "The JLA sent you a care package, but even after three years, they still won't enter Gotham without your okay. And since you've actually been on bed-rest and not checking your messages, they've been going through me. Here."

She gestured toward the picnic
basket. "Enjoy. Or at least pretend you did when they ask you. How are you feeling?"

Bruce's confusion gave way to shock. "They sent—"

"Yes, Bruce. For both of you. And if you're not up for any of it yet..." She reached into the tote bag that hung on the arm of her wheelchair and extracted a large thermos, "I made this. It's chicken soup. How's Dick doing?"

"Apart from the hives?" Bruce smiled. "Much better."

"But his skin still hasn't cleared up." She sighed. "Is he awake? Can I go see him?"

"Yes and yes." He was still eyeing the basket disbelievingly.

Barbara smiled. "You can pick it up, Bruce. It won't explode." Her smile widened. "Even if I did have to do some rearranging to get everything packed down enough so I could close the lid. I'll see you in a bit."

"It's been lonely without you," Barbara said, as she helped herself to a Choco. Bruce had brought the package in a few moments after she'd gone upstairs.

Dick followed suit. "I've missed you too, Red." He carefully removed the upper cookie wafer, popped it into his mouth, chewed and swallowed. "If I knew for sure what was causing this, and that it wasn't contagious, I'd be home already. It's just... we messed up big time assuming we were dealing with smallpox, but at least we messed up on the cautious side. I don't want to make the reverse mistake, assume we're dealing with something minor, and..."

"Should I leave, then?" Barbara asked archly.

"No way." He reached for another Choco, and removed the top wafer again. "I don't honestly think this is anything serious. Just, trust me: you don't want me sharing it." He looked at the two Chocos on his plate and pressed them together, combining the vanilla crème frostings. He grimaced. "You have no idea how badly I itch. All over."

"I thought the antihistamine was helping!"

Dick nodded. "It is. So imagine what I'd feel like without it."

Barbara sighed. "Maybe I'll go online later and see if I can come up with any proven home remedies. Are you using the Calamine, too?"

"Yes. It helps some. Until it wears off," he grimaced. "Not that I'm seriously wishing I could switch back, but I think I was in better shape when I thought I was in worse shape."

Barbara clucked sympathetically. All at once, she smiled.

"What?"

"Sorry, I was just thinking. You and Bruce really are a lot alike. When you're moaning this badly about the minor things, it's a sure sign you're nearly better. And you weren't complaining anywhere near this much when you had the flu."

"Give me a break, Babs. I was scared!"

"I know. And now you aren't. So you have time to be miserable." She giggled. "I should get back.
Ollie probably whipped up another batch of chili."

Dick moaned. "I thought the idea was for me to get better."

"So use it to power your 'cycle. It's oily enough." They shared a laugh. "I'm just going to check in on Bruce for a minute. Do you need anything?"

Dick shook his head. "No. Yeah... actually. The robe hanging in the bathroom—I've been wearing it since quarantine. Could you just drop it off in the laundry room? The cleaning staff comes in tomorrow and they'll take care of it."

"Not a problem."

Bruce met her outside Dick's room.

"Well, at least he's in good spirits," Barbara said. "Think he'll be home anytime soon?"

"He is ho—" Bruce caught himself. "I'm sorry. If he wants to leave now, I won't stop him."

"He doesn't. Not until the hives clear up." She smiled wearily. "Guess it's been like old times, his being back here."

Bruce forced himself to smile back. "I know he has to leave eventually. I suppose, even if I invited you to—"

Barbara shook her head sadly. "It wouldn't work, Bruce, and you know it. Not only because we'd get on each other's nerves after awhile." She smiled, but looked away from the cameras. "I moved out of Daddy's house long before I moved in with Dick. Part of it was that I had to hide my computer setup, but a lot of it was... I love my father, but I need my space. So. With him in and out, you and me walking on eggshells to avoid getting in each other's hair—and, Bruce, this is your home. You shouldn't have to do that on your own turf."

"I can deal with that."

"Famous last words. I know you mean them, but you'll change your tune pretty fast. Anyway, sooner or later, we'd have a fight. Or Daddy and I would. Or Dick and I would. And stuff we'd normally work out for ourselves... someone would step in and make things worse. Or they wouldn't step in and they'd get blamed if things got worse and..." she sighed. "Bruce. Trust me on this. As big as the manor is, it wouldn't be big enough."

Bruce pursed his lips, but he didn't contradict her.

"Well," Barbara said brightly, "at least both of you are on the road to recovery. And neither of you need to be quarantined."

A shadow passed over Bruce's face, as he said, "I can't believe I had to put him through that."

"You were doing what you thought was right. Nobody can fault you for that." Her lips twitched. "Even if you want to fault yourself. Bruce, is it that important for there to be someone to blame in this? I mean, I guess you can blame those monkeys who tore his suit, but the latest word is they had to euth them anyway." She looked down at the robe in her hands. "Where's your laundry room?"

Bruce's eyebrows lifted. "You don't know?"

"Hey, I only used to access your security grid to keep tabs on you. Before all of this, when was the
last time you did laundry?"

He had the grace to smile at that. "There are facilities in the Cave," he said, beckoning her toward the elevator.

"Oh. Dick said to leave it for the cleaning staff."

Bruce shook his head. "I still have the bedding from the lab and quarantine unit to wash, and the staff have enough to do with the general household cleaning." He grimaced. "Besides, it keeps Alex off my back."

"Ah, I see." The doors parted on the first level and the two headed into the study.

Bruce turned the clock aside.

As they headed down the ramp to the cave elevator, Bruce paused for a moment.

Barbara nearly rolled into him. "You okay?"

Bruce nodded, but he held up one hand, while he braced himself against the cave wall with the other.

"Bruce, why don't you go back to bed? I can take care of this."

"You just said," he wheezed, "you didn't know where the laundry room was. I'm fine."

They stopped by the quarantine unit to collect the bedding, before Bruce led Barbara to a small alcove situated partway between the Crays and the main security array.

"Okay, we're here," Barbara said. "Now will you please go back upstairs?"

Bruce was about to agree, but he caught himself. "I forgot about the lab cot. Wait here."

When he came back, it was to see Barbara looking at the shelf above the washing machine with a bemused expression. "Bruce... what I said earlier about you not being to blame for any of this? I... I may have been wrong."
34. Choosing What to Dream

Chapter Summary

One crisis averted, but new challenges loom for Bruce and Cass.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Kathy and Debbie for the beta. Thanks to Scraplove and Majrgnrl8 for reviewing Cass's essay. And thanks to PJ Zatken for being a sounding board and helping me figure out how to set up a few things for the next arc of this story.

A/N: GED instructions are taken from "GED Essay Topics." (UNM website, accessed on January 16, 2012)

Thank you all for the feedback! I do my best to answer questions (so long as they don't involve spoiling plot developments early), but I can't reply if the review is unsigned!

"I Believe" written by Steve Mac and Wayne Hector. Recorded by Stephen Gately on the Billy Elliot motion picture soundtrack (Polydor 2000).

Sometimes we win, sometimes we fall
But that's no reason just to give it up, cause after all
If you can't choose what to be
You can choose what to dream
And I believe...

—Steve Mac, Wayne Hector, "I Believe"

Chapter 34: Choosing What to Dream

As Barbara explained what she meant, Bruce's jaw dropped. Then his expression hardened. He opened the dryer, lifted out an armload of clothes and dropped them unceremoniously back into the washing machine. "The bedding," he muttered, as he added detergent. "I've probably washed all of the bedding at least once since I've been back. The infirmary cot was the only..." he slammed the lid of the washer down, set the controls and tore out of the laundry alcove at a run.

"Bruce," Barbara called after him, as she hurried to keep up. "Wait! Where are you going?"

"The spare bedrooms in the east wing," he called back, without turning around. "Or the west—it doesn't matter. They may not have been washed in years, but given the circumstances..."

"Hold up," Barbara panted, pushing her chair hard. "We don't know for sure, I mean, just because I'm allergic to that brand of fabric softener doesn't mean he is."

"Which is why I'm looking for bedding that hasn't been through the dryer cycle with the stuff,"
Bruce shot back. "If you're right, we should know soon." He barely held the elevator doors long enough for her to roll inside.

As they entered the study, Barbara turned to him. "Do you want me to get them?" she asked. "You don't look so hot." She winced. "Or rather, you do. In the feverish sense."

Bruce winced. "That would be a help," he admitted. "I'll get Dick settled on the couch in the meanwhile, and as soon as that wash I put in is done, I'll have him change."

"You're going to tell him right now?"

Bruce hesitated. "We've had enough false hopes and false alarms in the last few days. For now, let's keep our hypothesis to ourselves. If it turns out not to be the fabric softener, he'll be no worse off than he is now, and Mid-Nite can still run that test. And if it is, we should get confirmation in short order."

The laundry took an hour and a half. Two hours after he'd changed into a fresh pair of pajamas, Dick stopped itching. Two hours after that, his hives had faded noticeably. Forty-five minutes later, Bruce walked into the den, apprehension visible on his face as he sat down in the armchair next to the sofa on which Dick was reclining.

"I'm guessing I'm allergic to your laundry soap?" Dick asked.

Bruce let out a long breath. "Fabric softener. You can thank Barbara for catching it; it seems that she has a similar issue with that brand." He closed his eyes. "If you want to hit me, I won't blame you in the slightest."

"Now I know you're still feeling sick," Dick grinned. "Look, unless you deliberately used that fabric softener to try to keep me here..." His eyes narrowed. "You didn't, did you?"

Bruce shook his head.

"Okay, just checking. As I was saying, you didn't know I was allergic, because this is the first time you've ever done my laundry. I didn't know I was allergic, because Babs never buys that fabric softener. Even Babs didn't know, since we weren't living together when she found out that she shouldn't be using it."

"And," Jim said, walking into the den, "I had no idea of any of this because I never buy fabric softener in the first place."

"Right," Dick nodded. "So, seriously, Bruce, you're off the hook on this one."

"I should have suspected..."

"Right. Between the flu knocking you out on your feet and the flu meds interfering with your concentration..." He broke off, hearing a knock on the open den door.

Tim was standing in the doorway, smiling wearily. "Does anyone need anything before I grab a nap? Cass and I are patrolling tonight, so I thought I'd get a few hours of shuteye before dark."

The three men exchanged glances.

"Let's blame him!" Dick whispered. His eyes took on a mischievous gleam.

Jim guffawed.
Bruce smiled.

Tim swallowed theatrically as Dick tossed a sofa cushion at the open doorway. Then he fired it back.

Three more pillows converged on him as he fled, laughing down the hall.

"If the cameras caught this," Jim rumbled, "I want a copy."

The next evening, Dick went down to the cave. This time, he gave the quarantine area a wide berth and headed directly to the main workout space. When he looked at the ceiling, however, he blinked in surprise. The rings and trapeze were gone. A quick survey of his surroundings told him that the other gymnastics equipment wasn't where it belonged either.

"I haven't had a chance to move them back yet," Bruce said from behind.

Dick sighed. "Well, I'm not going back into sickbay so fast; not even for a workout. Guess I'll stick to floor work. Unless," he smiled hopefully, "you're not up for a spar yet, are you?"

Bruce hesitated. Then he gave a regretful sigh. "Ask me again in a day or so," he said.

Dick nodded. "I shouldn't have even suggested it. Okay..." he ran at the mat, planted his hands firmly and turned a cartwheel. He did a series of flips before he kicked out from a handstand, twisted, and fell to the mat.

"Are you all right?" Bruce asked.

Dick nodded. "Maybe I should just keep to the basics for a little longer," he admitted. "And forget about patrol for a few days."

Bruce nodded back. "It's difficult," he said. "Finding your way back. Even if, in your case, it's only been a slight detour."

"Guess you'd know about that," Dick said, getting up from the mat. "This isn't the first time something like this has happened. For either of us."

Bruce frowned.

"Blockbuster."

"Ah."

Dick sighed. "Okay. Current standings of today's bout are, Mat: one, Grayson: zero. Guess I'll head upstairs and see if maybe they'll be showing a *Happy Days* rerun I haven't seen."

"You know," Bruce said slowly, "if you'd care to look over some of the cold cases that Montoya's been bringing over, I can shift part of the pile your way. Of course, if you'd rather watch television..."

"How big is this pile?"

"At present? Thirty-two cases, excluding the three that I was making some headway with before all of this happened."

Dick grinned. "That should be good for an afternoon or two."
They worked side by side in relative silence. Dick was used to that. Bruce never had been one for conversation, preferring to wait for all the evidence to be in before sharing his conclusions—if then. And Dick had eventually tired of trying to carry a conversation on his own. Now, however, the silence had a different quality. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Bruce lay down his pen several times and look at him, as if he were about to say something. Each time, though, he seemed to stop himself and go back to whatever he was working on. Finally, Dick set down his own pen and turned to Bruce with raised eyebrows.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Bruce grimaced. "There was a time when people seemed to think they were worth more than that," he said dryly. His shoulders slumped. "Now, I wonder if they even rank that highly."

Dick frowned. Bruce hadn't sounded this low since right after he'd come home. "Did Krait call up with some new stipulation?"

Bruce laid down his pen. "We were fortunate," he said softly.

"Yeah," Dick blinked. "So...?"

"Fortunate that Lucius was willing to send over the materials I wanted when I asked for them," he clarified. "I realize that ultimately, they weren't essential. However, next time, they might be. And next time, Lucius could be unavailable."

Dick set aside the case that he was working on. "Well... I mean, wouldn't the League's files have a lot of what you need?"

"A lot," Bruce nodded. "Not all." He took a deep breath. "Initially, I didn't protest when the Wayne Enterprises—excuse me," he winced. "...when the Patrick Morgan Wayne Enterprises board of directors made it clear that I was no longer welcome on the premises. I had other—more pressing—matters to deal with. I still do. But I think it might be time to revisit the situation. A day might well arise when I would need some prototype or other, and I'd prefer not to have to break into my own company," His eyebrows drew together. "Or to have to beg Lucius for a favor that could get him fired, if the board found out."

Dick frowned. "I meant what I said before about backing you," he said. "But shouldn't we wait until your hearing before we start rocking that boat?"

"Absolutely," Bruce nodded. "But before that, I think it's time to test the waters. I never had time to read the society pages before, and I'm willing to admit that having been out of the loop for so long, some things may have changed, but..." he squared his shoulders. "I know that 'President Emeritus' is just an empty title the board bestowed on me to soften the blow. Notwithstanding that, I don't believe it would be completely unwarranted for me to put in an appearance at the next fundraiser. It might be time to come out of retirement from," he coughed, "civilian life."

Dick grinned. "Somerset General needs a better CT scanner. The Wayne Foundation is going to host a gala dinner, with a commitment to match whatever's raised through private donations. I think the invites were mailed this week, but there should also be full-page ads in the Post and Herald. Watch for them. Now, I'll have to double-check the date and get back to you, but I believe it'll be the first week of March. What do you think?"

Bruce considered. The first week of March was more than six weeks away. That was plenty of time to prepare. He smiled. "Perfect."
By Wednesday morning, Dick was ready to go home. Bruce too was well on the road to recovery, although Mid-Nite insisted that he finish out his prescription. By mutual agreement, Dick consented to wait another few days before attempting to patrol.

On Thursday, the ads for the gala were in the morning papers. Bruce waited two weeks before he called Lucius' direct line.

He shouldn't have been surprised to find Lucius in his office at 8:15. He'd hand-picked him years ago, impressed by his abilities, his work ethic, and above all, his dedication. Still, there was no reason why the current CEO had to be in the office before nine. And Lucius certainly didn't have to take his calls.

"I'm glad Dick's back at work," Lucius said. "You don't know the scare I—check that. Of course you do. Is there anything further you need?"

Bruce told him.

There was a long silence.

"Lucius?"

"Are you sure," the CEO ventured, "that you realize what you're letting yourself in for? If the board even suspects that you're—"

"There's nothing to suspect," Bruce said quietly. "Somerset General is a fine institution, and I'd like to show my support. I can either do so as an honorary officer of the company, or I can purchase a ticket privately."

Lucius let out an explosive breath, which was almost a laugh. "After all the fanfare with which we announced your current title after your release, do you seriously believe we want the media reporting that you couldn't get a seat at one of the Foundation's tables?"

Bruce smiled. "Actually, Lucius, I don't believe that anyone wants that. Not PMWE," he didn't stumble over the company name, "not you personally, and certainly not me. Somerset General needs that scanner, and I mean to see that they get it, but the last thing I want to do is be a source of embarrassment to the company."

There was a smile in Lucius Fox's voice as he replied, "You know, you could just send a donation. The board might wonder why you're opting not to."

"They might," Bruce agreed. "They'd have a point, too. Well, Lucius, I think we both know that I have more money than I know what to do with. Seriously, if the board prefers that I not associate my name with the company, I have no problem shelling out the $5,000 for my own plate. But if they'd prefer I make a private donation, well, I can accommodate that as well. That scanner you're looking to purchase retails for... what? About two million?" He pretended to think it over. "I can have one delivered to their door by tomorrow. That would seem to obviate the need for a fundraiser, though." He paused for a moment. "Which would be a pity. Especially now that the invitations have gone out and the RSVPs must be starting to trickle in."

"No doubt, no doubt," Lucius confirmed. "Of course, we can still hold the gala. I mean, the hospital must need funding for other projects."

"Yes, but you know Gotham high society almost as well as I do," Bruce said. "Certain causes command higher capital. A concrete goal like raising two million dollars to buy a top-of-the-line medical imager? That's something many of Gotham's elite will be happy to get behind. But saying
that you want to raise the money for 'research'? It's not fair, and it's not right, but when it comes to more nebulous goals, in general, it's harder to raise those funds." He forced a note of nonchalance into his tone. "The fact is, I'm personally committed to investing two million dollars in Somerset General, this year. One way or another, the hospital will get its scanner. It's up to the board whether they also get their research funding. What do you say?"

Lucius chuckled. "I believe that the Foundation will be reserving eleven tables that evening, instead of our anticipated ten. At eight to a table..." his voice turned firm. "All right. My wife and daughters will be attending the gala with me. That's half a table right there. You, Dick, and two others will comprise the other four. Do you have names for me?"

Bruce barely hesitated. "James Gordon and his daughter, Barbara."

"Dick's invitation went out two weeks ago. I imagine he'll be listing Barbara on his reply card. Check that with him. I'll have a local courier deliver the other two to the manor tomorrow, before noon. Good luck, Bruce."

"Thanks, Lucius. It's been a pleasure chatting with you."

"Likewise. See you on March third."

Cass looked at the list of sample essay topics again. She reread the instructions. Then she looked up from the recreation room computer helplessly.

Dr. Jeremiah Arkham frowned. "Is there a problem, young woman?"

Cass pointed to the page. "How much?"

"Did you read the instructions?" Arkham asked. He stopped. "Do you require me to read them to you?"

Another time, she might have bristled at the implication. However, when she wrote the real test, the testing center would provide similar assistance. Knowing that made his offer somewhat more palatable. At any rate, that wasn't the issue. "No. I read them," Cass said. "But... it says 'I have 45 minutes to write'. How much is that..." she tapped her sheet, "on paper?"

"Ah." He frowned and bent over her screen. "You're quite right," he admitted. "That information is absent from the test instructions. So..." he nudged her aside, opened a new tab on the web browser and began typing words into a search box. "GED essay..." he murmured, "word count. Ahhhh." He turned back to Cass. "There is no longer a mandatory word count. It does seem to state that your essay cannot comprise more than one double-sided page. I've seen that your handwriting is large, but since you will be dictating your answers to a scribe?" He looked to her for confirmation.

Cass nodded.

"Well then. We'll assume that the essay should not exceed 500 words. They are more concerned with the quality of your work than the quantity of your words."

Cass sighed. "Trouble, then."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. It may surprise you to realize that you already have one advantage over many people who will be taking the test."

Cass blinked at him. "Yes?"
"There are two common errors associated with writing essays under this sort of pressure. Either the writer has so much to say about the topic that they waste the allocated space on their introduction and never develop their key points, or they have no idea what to write but know that they need to write," he rolled his eyes, "something... anything. The result is an incoherent mess. Your speech is unsophisticated," he admitted baldly, "but you do make your points clearly. If you can write the same way, you will have something."

Cass mulled that over. She thought about her patrol two nights ago, when she'd happened on a lone burglar with a gun. In a fit of panic, he'd fired on her. Cass hadn't even bothered to try to evade the bullets. She was garbed from head to toe in Kevlar. The bullets had stung a bit, but she was used to that. The barrage had barely slowed her down. Instead of revising his strategy, the youth had continued to fire blindly, hoping that some of his shots would somehow connect. When she'd apprehended him, he'd been frantically trying to reload.

*He hadn't known how to fight. He'd just kept shooting, hoping something would connect, until he ran out of time.*

Cass grimaced. She wasn't about to make that mistake if she could help it. She looked at the instructions again.

**You must write on the assigned topic ONLY.**

She knew that much. She chewed on her pencil as she skimmed past the instructions to only write in her answer booklet. She ignored the time constraint and focused on the marking criteria.

**The evaluation will be based on the following features:**

- Well-focused main points
- Clear organization
- Specific development of your ideas
- Control of sentence structure, punctuation, grammar, word choice and spelling

Cass frowned and looked at the topics. One caught her eye.

*How do you define courage?*

*In your essay, describe what it means to be courageous. Give specific details to explain your views. Use your personal observations, experience, and knowledge.*

Cass thought about that. Then, she took a deep breath and picked up her pencil.

*Courage,* she wrote. Then she crossed that out and wrote, *How I define courage is.* She stopped. *Courage was... was...*

*Courage is being brave. Courage means to not fear.*

She stopped. That wasn't an essay—not the way Barbara had explained it. She looked at the instructions again. Main points. Clear organization. Specific development. She crossed out what she had written.

*Courage means doing what is right. Sometimes this is hard. Sometimes you do not want to. But you know what is right and so you make yourself do it. Sometimes you fail. Sometimes you only think you
will fail but thinking that you will fail makes you afraid to try. When you have courage you do it anyway.

Sometimes when you fail you need courage to keep trying. Sometimes you need courage to stop trying if people want you to keep doing it and you hate it. You don't want to do it anymore but you are afraid to hurt them. To say no I don't want to do this takes courage.

Sometimes it takes the most courage to say that you need help because to say you need help is to say that you can not do something on your own. If people keep telling you that if you want something done you should do it yourself and make you feel like a baby when you say you can't then it makes you afraid to ask for help when you really need it. But if you do not ask for help then you will not always know how to do things right. Sometimes you make things hard for yourself because you are afraid to ask if there is an easier way.

I am afraid that people will think I am stupid. I was afraid to ask if this test could be made easier for me to write. I did not want to be different. I am not stupid but I do need help. When Doctor Arkham told me that I could get help I was still afraid to ask but I did. I do not know if I can pass this test but I do know that because I have help I will do better. And I know that if I do not ask for help I will write again and again until I pass. I am afraid to fail. But I am also afraid to give in. I have problems. But with courage I can face them.

She looked at her work. Including the lines that she had crossed out, she had nearly one and three-quarter pages. She set down her pencil. "Done," she said.

"Are you?" Arkham sniffed. "We shall see." He picked up her page and pulled out a pen. Then, frowning, he began to read.

Cass watched him apprehensively. His hand seemed to blur as it flew over the paper. His frown deepened. From time to time, a sigh emanated from his lips. "Bad?" She asked finally.

Jeremiah looked up. "My assessment?" he sniffed. "Well. Let's see. You need to review your commas and apostrophes, as they are sadly absent. You have far too many run-on sentences, particularly for such a short piece. When writing a paper of this nature, it is preferable to use 'a person' or 'one' or 'people' rather than 'you'—as in, 'Sometimes one does not want to.'"

Cass flushed. "I never knew!"

"I realize that," Arkham said testily. "Unfortunately, the testing center will not take that into consideration. Your sentences are trite and repetitive. Here," he stabbed his pen down on the sheet, "one is fragmented. Your concluding paragraph is meant to summarize your thoughts, not introduce new ones. Your example is valid, but it belongs in the body of the essay, not the final paragraph..." He smiled thinly. "On the whole, though," he said, "for a first attempt," a note of warmth crept into his voice, "I find this surprisingly good. You express your thoughts clearly, and your overall analysis is sound. Your spelling and grammar are quite competent. You have a great deal to say. Where you need to improve is in how you say it."

"How?" Cass asked, still trying to process what he was telling her. Had she done well or not?

There was no mockery in Arkham's smile. "Practice."

"Ah, come in, Derek." Les Paxton smiled at his protégé. "What can I do for you?"

Derek ran a hand through his short blond hair and drew closer to the wide oak desk. "You told me to keep you abreast of certain developments," he said in a conspirational tone. "There's been an
amendment to the number of Foundation tables at the Somerset gala."

Paxton's eyebrows shot up. "You're keeping tabs on that too? I would have thought you'd have your hands full with the company. Anyway, I'm not sure I see the relevance."

"I volunteer for the Foundation in my spare time," Derek explained smoothly. "It helps. Anyway, besides the extra table, there's been a new name added to the guest list. I thought you might find that to be of interest, too."

When Derek gave him the name, Paxton's expression hardened. "Thank you, Derek. I'll take it from here. But please, keep me informed of your observations."

He waited until Derek was out of the office before he picked up his phone. "Mike? Les. There may be a situation developing—a potentially serious one. No, I don't think we need to convene the entire board, and certainly not on company property. Are you familiar with my cottage near Hamburg? Yes, that's right, just a stone's throw from Mountain Creek. I think some of us should head out there this Saturday to check out the slopes. I believe that one of them may prove to be somewhat... slippery. Excellent. I have a few more calls to make. I'll see you then if not sooner. And Mike? This conversation stays between us. Pleasure."

He smiled to himself. This was the second time that Derek Powers had come through for him. The young man was a real tiger, but he would bear careful watching. Tigers had been known to turn on their handlers before.

Bruce hated it when the phone rang during mealtimes. He had just slid his scrambled eggs onto his plate when he heard the long-distance tone. Sighing he picked up. "Hello?"

"Bruce?"

All thoughts of breakfast fled. "Selina? Is that you?"

There was a theatrical groan on the other end. "I think so. After 38 hours in transit, it's hard to tell." Her tone sharpened. "Helena! Come here! Don't go running off." Then, softly, "You sound good. Really good."

"So do you," Bruce returned. "When did you get back to Gotham?"

"I didn't," Selina replied. "We're stuck at LAX for another three hours, waiting for a connecting flight. Could you meet us at Goodwin around 5-ish?" She let out a long breath. "Why are 'remote locations' so far away?"

Bruce smiled. "I'll be there."

"Purrfect," a sultry note crept into her voice. "We'll see you then."

The plane got in at 5:45, but it was nearly 6:30 before Selina emerged from the baggage claim area, pushing a luggage cart with one hand, while her other clasped Helena's. As Bruce gave Selina a one-armed hug, Helena wrapped both arms about his calf and buried her face in his pants-leg.

"Help me get her bundled up before we go outside?" Selina asked. She indicated the snowsuit, hat, boots, and mittens that lay atop the two suitcases on the cart. "She wouldn't let me dress her on the plane, and I didn't feel like causing a scene."
"I'm parked underground," Bruce said. "She should be warm enough. He lowered his voice. "The reason that she was staying with me in the first place hasn't changed. If the two of you come back to the manor, we'll be going from one indoor garage to another. That might be wisest. If you'd prefer to take her home with you," he gave a long-suffering sigh, "I think I still have a few pairs of earplugs in the glove compartment. We may need them before we try getting her into that ensemble."

Selina arched an eyebrow. "Earplugs?"

"Dick has... interesting taste in music. I choose my battles."

She laughed. "Think you can walk with a 34-pound weight clamped around your shin?"

In answer, Bruce bent down, gently loosened his daughter's arms, and scooped her up. She immediately transferred her grip to his neck.

Selina sighed. "If there are any problems at home," she admitted, "after over 46 hours in transit, I'm probably not ready to deal with them." She started to push the luggage cart. Bruce followed a half-pace behind. "... Fine. If you're positive we won't be imposing, Bruce, maybe it would be best if we both spent tonight at the manor. We can figure out what we're doing in the morning."

Bruce looked down at the little girl in his arms, and then to the beautiful woman walking beside him. "It's no imposition," he whispered. "Quite the opposite, in fact."

Selina blinked. Then she let go of the luggage cart, wrapped an arm around Bruce's shoulder, and rose to her tiptoes to give him a peck on the cheek. "In that case, handsome, it's a date."

"Maybe we're reading too much into this, Les." Ron Chester normally fussed with his tie. Today, however, he wasn't wearing one, so he fiddled with the buttons on his cardigan instead. "Maybe Wayne is just... bored."

"You don't honestly believe that any more than I do," Paxton snapped. "No, he's planning a return. This is just a reminder that he's out there. First he puts in appearances at social events. Then he starts talking things over with Fox, providing input. Next thing you know, he's running things behind the scenes."

"That's the thing, though," Ross Hendricks said, frowning. "Even before his... troubles, he was letting Fox run the show. Why should we worry that anything would change?"

"And what about your source?" Michael Abbot questioned. "Is he trustworthy?"

Paxton smiled. "Who, Derek? I think so. I've mentored him since his college days. He named his kid after me. He's also the one who found out about Grayson's little creative accounting trick. But getting back to the matter at hand," he leaned forward. "Okay. At the end of the day, Wayne is still the majority shareholder. There's nothing we can do about that at the moment, but in the grand scheme of things, it's not really that significant. I mean, frankly, I don't mind if he wants to show up at our parties with a beautiful woman or two and swill down some of our scotch. Hell, I don't even care if he has to leave to answer that spotlight in the sky. However, if there's even a chance that he means to slip back into the CEO's office—officially or otherwise—we need to stop it now. Before he has a chance to move further. Are we agreed?"

He looked at the other six people in the room.

Sonja Arnold nodded first. She was quickly followed by Ron Chester, Michael Abbott, Theresa Korning, and Sean Vansickle. Finally Hendricks nodded too. "All right, Les," he said heavily.
"Maybe you're right. So. Assuming you are, do you have any suggestions on how we deal with this?"

Paxton smiled. "As a matter of fact, I do."
Chapter Summary

Bruce's company has been doing fine without him. Not everyone wants him back. And how far will Bruce go to become Batman once more?

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Kathy and Debbie for the beta! Thanks to PJ for information on Police Academy protocols and procedures!

A/N: Line in Bruce's dream sequence is a quote from Gotham Knights #24, "The Devil You Know," by Devin Grayson.

"Holding Up the Sky" lyrics by Mary Chapin Carpenter. Performed by Mary Chapin Carpenter on her The Age of Miracles album (Zoe, 2010).

Disclaimer: All members of the PMWE board of directors referenced in this chapter are my own creation. If I have somehow chosen a canon name for a particular executive, it is purely coincidental. Sharon Ryerson was last seen in Lost to the Night. She too is an original character.

I found myself between two lifetimes
The sunset and the dawn
I reached out and took the lifeline offered up to me
between here and gone

—Mary Chapin Carpenter, "Holding Up the Sky"

Chapter 35: Lifeline

"Batman's always had his enemies," Paxton began. "Many of them haven't let the old grudges die just because the old bat stepped down."

Vansickle blinked. "You're crazy."

Arnold raised and lowered her eyeglasses. "Sorry, Les, but I have to concur. You don't seriously mean to go to the likes of the Scarecrow or the Joker for help. I mean... let's pretend for one moment that we somehow managed to arrange a hearing and get one of them released. What's to stop them from killing us after they're done with Wayne?" She took a breath. "Or before, for that matter? You're walking into a powder room with a lighted match and kicking over a jar of kerosene."

Paxton chuckled. "Relax, Sonja. You too, Mike. No, I'm not talking about criminals. I don't know if you remember all the details about what was going on in Gotham just before Wayne was arrested, but if you were following the hearing last summer, then I think you'll recall that there was a little
excitement right before the judge announced his decision."

Chester blinked. "You're talking about Sharon Ryerson."

"You've got a good memory, Ron," Paxton nodded. "Yes, exactly. Cop's widow, lost her husband in the gang war after Wayne commandeered the police force and got a lot of good men killed. We get her an invitation to the gala. I don't care how. Tell her we pulled her name out of a hat and that's her prize. Or Hendricks, you're single, ask her to be your da—"

"I'm practically engaged!"

"Practicality is overrated. Chat her up, ask her out. I don't care, who, how, or what you need to do it, just someone figure out a way to get her to the benefit. Wayne's coming out to show that he's recovered and getting ready to take back the reins. I want the press remembering how many people died on his watch, which means we want the poster-girl... lady... for vigilante disasters there to confront him."

Vansickle smiled slowly. "The press will eat it up. Then they'll eat Wayne alive."

Arnold nodded. "Whether one or the other actually causes a scene, or whether they just see each other in passing, it's going to be reported."

"Hero cop's widow confronts husband's killer at PMWE gala," Korning crowed.

"It sends a message," Paxton nodded. His voice hardened. "It makes sure that Wayne knows that some things aren't going to be forgotten and left to slide. He's looking to the gala to demonstrate that he's ready to face whatever comes his way. We're going to test that." He smiled. "The company has managed just fine without him for going on three years." The smile twisted into a smirk. "Longer, when you consider how few hours he actually logged in the CEO's chair, even when he was officially involved. We don't need him back. We don't want him back. And I think that's something we'll need to make very clear, if we're to maintain the status quo. Right, Ross?"

Hendricks nodded reluctantly. "You win, Les. I'll..." He shook his head as though he couldn't believe what he was saying. "I'll do some homework tonight... see if I can come up with a contest angle that won't look rigged or phony or whatever. Barring that, I'll see whether I can turn up any data on her interests. Maybe we have something in common."

"It's not like you have to marry her, Ross."

"I know." Although if Paxton thought that proposing to Sharon Ryerson would accomplish his goals, Ross suspected that Les would pop the question himself.

Batman watched as Kid Devil and Ms. Martian squared off. The alien girl morphed into a gelatinous mass which threatened to engulf her teammate. Kid Devil countered by rolling out of her direct path and firing off a flurry of bubbles.

When they began to explode, Ms. Martian quickly shifted to some sort of extra-terrestrial animal form and leapt high. Suction pads on her feet helped her to adhere fly-like to the ceiling. She crawled until she was directly over Kid Devil's head. Then, suddenly, she dropped. As she did, her form condensed, becoming smaller and denser, picking up momentum. For a moment, Kid Devil watched, fascinated. Then training took over and he jumped left, just as Ms. Martian expanded into a large green blanket.

Had he still been in his original position, she would have engulfed him. Instead her edge half-draped
over his shoulders. Kid Devil tried to shrug her off, but tiny hooks embedded themselves into his armor.

Kid Devil kept one hand free and touched a control on his gauntlet. A low surge of electricity emanated from the suit.

Ms. Martian cried out, more in surprise than in pain, and let go... only to morph into a cage and surround him.

Kid Devil launched himself at one wall of bars. Ms. Martian waited until he was committed to his course before she retracted that side of the cage. Kid Devil hurtled forward, his eyes widening as he realized that he was about to crash full-tilt into a stone wall. He braced for pain, which never came. Instead, he landed against a large fluffy pillow... which had him wrapped up like a sausage roll before he realized what was happening.

"Give up?" Ms. Martian asked cheerfully.

Kid Devil tried to trigger the electric surge again, but his teammate had his arms pinned too closely to his side. He struggled, but the armor wasn't nearly as flexible as cloth would have been. "Yeah," he muttered disgustedly. "I give. Again."

Ms. Martian released him and helped him rise. Batman advanced a few steps in his direction. Kid Devil sighed. "Go on and say it," he said, steeling himself.

Batman clapped him on the shoulder. "I think this is the longest you've held your own against her," he grinned.

"Yeah, but I still lost."

"Yeah, but you were fighting a meta. The odds are always going to be skewed in her favor. Look... I've seen Batman... Bru... Batman," he said firmly, "take down Superman with careful planning, preparation, and the advantage of surprise. The thing is, if he can't win in the first five seconds or so, chances are that he's not going to. That's when he's at the top of his form, after years of experience, as a fighter, as a strategist, as..."

"You mean you can't beat her either?"

Batman hesitated. "Well, let's just say it would be a challenge. However, M'Gann... if you're willing?"

The green-skinned girl frowned. "I don't mind... but, how should I put this? Doesn't making a seasoned instructor look like a novice violate some sort of cultural taboo?"

"Oh, now you're asking for it," Batman said with a menacing smile. "Take the mat, M'orzz. You're going down."

She recognized the teasing note in his voice. "If I do, it'll be because I'm pinning you," she retorted.

"We'll see."

It took him twenty seconds to drop her the first time. She rallied and fought back harder, first changing her shape, then shifting back to humanoid form to body-check him, then retreating, only to leap forward once more. Batman countered her every move using a combination of acrobatics, martial arts, and various weapons contained in the pouches of his utility belt, or elsewhere on his person. Ninety seconds later, she was face down on the mat, completely encased in quick-hardening
chemical foam.

"I'll take surrender by telepathy," Batman said calmly. He looked to the sidelines. "Raven, did she hear that? Can you... oh, never mind. I just got a response. Okay, M'Gann, hold still. Uh... no, actually, I guess you don't have a choice," he said with some amusement as he extracted something that looked like a tuning fork from his belt. "I'm just going to vibrate that shell off you. It might be uncomfortable for a moment, but my other option would be a blowtorch so... yeah, I thought you'd prefer sonics."

There was a faint ululating tone which seemed to go on for several seconds. Then the foam disintegrated and a smiling M'Gann arose.

"Next time," she said, "I want a rematch."

"You'll get one. By the way," he grinned, "did either of you see today's headlines?"

The two teens looked at each other and shook their heads.

Batman smiled. "It seems our old friend, Lonerghan's been busy. The mayor resigned today amid allegations of corruption. So far nobody's giving official details, but word is he was in deep with Penguin. Here."

"Really?" Kid Devil took the paper and he and Ms. Martian scanned the article avidly.

"Um... Batman?"

Batman turned. "Hi, Dodge. How's it going?"

The boy gulped. "I'm okay. I... I'm sorry I didn't... I mean... look, next time, maybe I should take a pad and pen with me so I can write down what I want to say."

"Sure. You'll always find the time to do that in the middle of a monkey fight." Batman sighed. "Look, bottom line? I had to guess at what you were trying to tell me in the lab and I guessed wrong. It might have been better if you'd been able to explain yourself using standardized signing, like in ASL." He smiled. "There's an idea: the Gotham School for the Deaf holds ASL classes during the year. That's how I learned." His eyes opened wider. "Come to think of it, BSL and FSL might be good choices too, if you can find an instructor." At Dodge's confused look, he clarified. "Almost every country has its own sign language. ASL is derived from FSL—French Sign Language. Most sign languages in use today started out as variations of that one or BSL—British Sign Language. Learning ASL would definitely help to avoid our earlier miscommunication, but its biggest advantage is also its biggest disadvantage." He paused for a beat. "Because it's also the most commonly used sign language in this country, there's a better chance that someone else could understand what you're saying. Security cameras usually have zoom lenses. Besides, it's not like the Titans don't get to go on international missions. You never know when another language will come in handy."

Dodge nodded, wide-eyed. "I didn't realize there was more than one sign language," he murmured. He blinked. "Oh! I meant to give this to you earlier," he said, passing Batman a lumpy sealed envelope. "I thought it might be an improvement for the hazmat suits."

Batman accepted the packet with a quizzical expression.

"Hey!" Kid Devil looked up. "There's no mention of Lonerghan in the article."

"No," Batman smiled, "but word is he's been undercover at City Hall ever since the Iceberg fiasco."
Ms. Martian grinned. "And of course, your word—I mean that word—is reliable."

Batman winked. "You could say so." He turned back to Dodge, only to discover that the youngster had disappeared. He shrugged, opened the envelope, and pulled out the contents. He was holding a small pile of rectangular stickers, perhaps four inches by six. Stencilled neatly on each one was the legend, 'Hi, my name is' followed by a bat-insignia.

Dick laughed aloud.

Bruce was puzzling over another cold case in the Cave, while Helena banged blocks together in a fenced-off corner. After the first fifteen minutes, he'd discovered that he could work through the noise. Periodically, he looked to the enclosure. Then, reassured of his daughter's safety and well-being, he went back to his work.

"Hey." Selina called from the entrance way. "Can we talk for a few minutes?"

Bruce laid aside the file with a sigh. "I cleaned that area thoroughly," he said. "I've laid flooring. There are no sharp corners, or choking hazards. I..."

"I know," Selina smiled and held up a hand to stave off any further protests. "That's not why I came down here. But I did want to talk about us," she met his gaze squarely. "All of us. I think we need to be clear on a few things. First, once this whole thing is over, hopefully in July, are you planning to go back to the cowl?" Before Bruce could answer, her expression hardened. "And Bruce, you know what I'm asking. Please don't tell me 'no,' when what you really mean is that you intend to change the costume."

Bruce nodded. "No, it's a fair question. And it's fair to say that it's something I've been considering. Sometimes, I'm sure I'll be able to just slip back into the suit and pick up where I left off—after a reasonable transition period, you understand." His face fell. "And sometimes, I remind myself that I've been out of commission for more than two years. By the time the hearing comes around, it'll be more than three. I've been away for long periods before, but never this long. Physically, I may be fit... but I'm not getting any younger. I just don't know."

Selina sat down. "Okay. Then we really do need to have this conversation, and sooner rather than later." She took a deep breath. "I tried to retire after she was born. Suddenly the risks I was taking weren't worth it. I didn't want to give her up, and I didn't want her to grow up with a mother who was in and out of prison." She sighed. "And then one night, I looked out my window and realized that I was living next door to Scarecrow's latest hideout and Robin and Huntress had just stumbled into a trap. And I... couldn't turn away." She winced. "Oh, I told myself it was only for that one time, because there wasn't anyone else in the area, but I loved being out there again! And..." She stopped and smiled self-consciously, "Well, you know... When Dick came to ask if I could help out on a more regular basis, he was ready to drop the whole idea when he saw Helena. I'm the one who convinced him." Her expression hardened. "And if something had happened to me on one of those patrols..." She took a deep breath. "I know what the night meant to you once, and maybe it still does, or will. I couldn't stay away from it myself, and I guess you probably won't either, but the risks aren't going to go away."

Bruce shook his head. "So," he said heavily. "Are you asking me to choose between...?"

She gave him a weary smile. "No. I'm looking to see how we can make this whole thing less risky. I don't mean the night work exactly. You're not reckless, you don't take stupid chances. Neither do I... much." She shook her head. "And there's the thing. If I'm doing the same stuff you are, I really don't have the right to ask you to give anything up. But I don't want Helena to grow up an orphan, either.
And, when she gets older and starts asking questions about how we can call ourselves the 'good guys' when the police sometimes have orders to arrest us on sight..."

Bruce took a deep breath. "Don't think I haven't thought about all of that too."

"And?"

"There are solutions. They aren't perfect, but they are acceptable. And... realistic, I suppose." He closed his eyes. "The first aspect does involve a bit of sacrifice on both of our parts, but I think we can live with it." He winced. "Most of it."

"Okay..."

Bruce sighed. "Obviously, this is operating on the assumption that I am able to return to the cowl one day, and that I choose to do so. If we accept that we both have a dangerous vocation, and that we aren't likely to give that up, we can, at least, ensure that both of us aren't working at the same time."

"Dick's 'two-nights-on, one-night-off' rule?"

Bruce nodded. "Or a variation. And I don't see any reason why the one of us staying home can't be reviewing data, or some such. However, we don't deliberately put ourselves in danger on the same night."

"Have you thought about hiring bodyguards?"

Bruce shook his head. "I'd end up protecting them more than they would me, and we both know it."

"Point taken. Actually, though, I meant for Helena. In a few years, when she's ready to start school."

Bruce nodded slowly. "You're right. I... it wouldn't be fair to keep her confined to the estate grounds. In time, she would come to resent it."

"Not to mention that children need to be socialized," Selina reminded him.

"There is that." He nodded a third time. "At any rate, we can save that point for a future discussion. Getting back to the topic at hand, if we're agreed to a patrol rotation, it would mean an end to our rooftop... meetings."

"And now, the truth comes out," Selina grinned. "You did get off on the chase."

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "Of course. But we need to stop. I think that might be the easier part."

"I'm not going to like the hard part, am I?"

Bruce let out a long breath. "All I know is I hate it. There's always the likelihood that one of us could be captured, used as bait to catch the other. Unfortunately, even if I ultimately choose to give up the cowl... even if you were to give up your costume... with my identity a matter of record, we need to be aware of the possibility. For that matter, Helena could be a target."

"Which is why I'm suggesting bodyguards."

"I know. But in the situation I'm describing—where one of us is held hostage for the other," he frowned, "if we're clear that we don't want Helena to lose both of us in one night, if that situation should ever arise, we need to agree to call in outside help and stay clear." He closed his eyes. "And no, I don't know if I could actually do it. And if things were to go... wrong in that scenario, either because I stepped in or because I sent in others who... who failed..." He took a deep breath. "I don't
think I'd ever forgive myself. But that's what I'll... we'll... have to do."

He sighed. "And from a more practical standpoint, I suppose we should update our wills. Make custody provisions. Dick and Barbara would be my obvious choices. Unless you have others?"

Selina shook her head. "Nobody... secure enough," she admitted, relaxing somewhat.

"I'll call Rae then, and set things in motion. As far as the patrol issue, though, are we agreed?"

Selina nodded slowly. "For now. I don't like it, but I don't have a better plan."

"We're on the same page." He smiled for a moment. "As for the other matter, I think we both need to," his lips twitched, "go legit. To a point, anyway. You should have the easier time," he admitted. "There are companies that pay safecrackers to test their security systems. It's something you might want to consider. As for me," he took a deep breath.

His smile died. "I lost my UN sanction shortly after my arrest. If I rejoined the League, I could probably have it restored, but otherwise I'd need the support of local law enforcement." He took another breath. "Well, that or join the Suicide Squad, but I'll be damned if I'll take orders from the likes of Waller."

"I don't blame you."

This time, Bruce's smile was even more fleeting. "There is a way to get that support... and it might give me a leg to stand on if I need to engage in certain activities even before the hearing." He made a face. "Again, this isn't an ideal decision. However, it will ensure that I'll only have to worry about criminals, and not law enforcement. And for Helena's sake..." he let his voice trail off. "I just... wish it didn't involve gun handling."

Selina's eyes widened. By the time Bruce finished explaining himself, her jaw hung slightly open. "Are you serious?"

Bruce nodded. "It's only short-term," he said. "Just until the hearing. But if I go this route, it's contingent on you going legit as well. It isn't tit-for-tat. If I do this, there are certain activities I won't be able to turn a blind eye to, anymore. Not if I don't want to lose the sanction. You need to understand that from the outset."

"You're talking about the way we met," Selina said carefully, "not about things that I might do on patrol, or on one of Oracle's missions."

"Correct."

Selina let out a slow breath. "In that case," she said, "you don't have anything to worry about." She paused for a moment. "Bruce, are you absolutely sure? I mean have you considered the...?"

"The danger? Compared to what I was doing before Arkham?"

"Yeah, in full-body Kevlar. Are bullet-proof vests even standard issue for the GCPD?"

"If they aren't, they will be," Bruce stated. "If I have to buy them for every cop in the city."

"You won't have your usual toys."

"That's not necessarily the case. Perhaps something can be worked out." His expression soured. "I really don't want to carry a gun, much less use it." He shook his head. "No sanction is worth that."
He looked over to the play area. "But she is."

Selina followed his gaze. Then slowly, she nodded.

Bruce took a deep breath. "All right," he said heavily. "Then let's initiate the process." He reached behind him for the telephone. "I hope the private number hasn't changed since Jim's days in that office," he muttered. A moment later, he smiled. "Commissioner Sawyer, this is Bruce Wayne. Some time ago, we'd discussed, in general terms, the possibility of my being deputized to act under certain extreme circumstances." He took another breath. "I want to hear the specifics."

Alex set down his pen with an unreadable expression. Slowly, he smiled. "I think it could be a good idea," he said. "The potential is there." His smile faded. "If you're sure that's what you want."

Bruce sighed. "It's not entirely what I want, no. But I want to be a part of my daughter's life. I'd like to see her grow up. And I think we both know that I can't just... just retire to some island and play golf all day."

"You know," Alex ventured, "there are options beyond those extremes."

"I realize that," Bruce said with some heat. "Look. I've never done this before... tried to raise a small child. I never... trained for it," his lips twitched, 'never had a contingency for it beyond 'if something like this happens, try to settle out of court and without a media spotlight. Should that last part fail, let the scandal sheets have their fun until the next story comes along and never contest the amount of child support.' Do you think I expected to have a toddler in my life? Particularly with someone I," he took a deep breath, "with someone I care for?" He closed his eyes. "Look, I'm no monk. There were women. Not as many as the tabloids made it seem, but there were a few. I took... precautions, but no method is ever failsafe. I knew that, and I wouldn't have tried to evade my responsibilities had it come to that. But I would have..."

"Thrown money at the situation until it went away?"

Bruce let out a longer sigh. "There really isn't a better way to paint that, is there?"

"There are prettier words, I suppose, but the meaning would be the same."

"Being involved with me is dangerous. It would have been dangerous even if I'd never put on the cowl. Probably more so." He took a deep breath. "I wouldn't have wanted a child to come into my life, only to... to likely lose their father at a young age." He sighed. "Realistically, doing what I did, a long life wasn't really in the cards. But there was more." He studied his hands and took another breath. "Look, we both know wearing the suit gave me an outlet for my anger. I think you've seen the statistics on professional sports players who turn abusive when they retire... theoretically because they're accustomed to playing out their aggression on the field and no longer have that as a safety valve. Let's just say that my mission wasn't the only reason I shied away from serious relationships."

Alex nodded. "I can understand that line of thinking. For what it's worth though, like with just about anything else, statistics don't tell the whole story. It's as valid to call all retired athletes likely abusers as it is to paint all underprivileged children as likely criminals."

Bruce's lips twitched. "Please. Do you have any idea how many 'upper crust' politicians I've brought down? And not just for white collar crime?"

"I can guess. My point is, if you were afraid that retirement would cause you to unleash your anger at others, then..."
"I know," Bruce said. "But then something else happened a few months ago. I didn't bring it up at the time, but Helena woke me up and my reflexes kicked in." He saw Alex lean forward. "She pulled on my foot. No, I didn't hurt her. But I panicked because I could have. Like I hurt Jim when he tried to wake me, right before Arkham."

"When you were under the influence of Desoxyn."

"I'm sure that would have been a great comfort to Barbara if I'd injured him more severely. His daughter," Bruce clarified when Alex frowned.

"Ah, yes. I should have remembered. So when Helena startled you awake...?"

"I'd been dreaming. Nightmare, I think. I don't remember now, but I was tangled up in the blankets. That probably saved me from striking out. I yelled at her, she cried, I comforted her, and later that day, I installed a safety gate in the doorway of her bedroom."

"Sensible," Alex nodded. His expression turned serious. "Do you remember what you yelled?"

"Not word for word. I think I told her to get out of the room. Or maybe not to come near me when I was sleeping..."

"But you didn't call her names, did you? Or curse at her?"

"What?" Bruce half-rose from his chair. "No, of course not! She's a baby. And even if she were older, it wouldn't be an excuse to..."

Alex nodded. "Exactly. So you panicked because she could have been hurt and you reacted in a way—which I'm not condoning, mind you—which I would call extremely... understandable." He chuckled. "I'd say that most parents, if they saw a child—particularly one your daughter's age—about to touch a hot stove, or bolt out into traffic would have behaved in a similar fashion." He waited for Bruce to look up. "Because the typical reaction is to yell 'No!' as forcefully as possible, to make sure the child gets the message. It's almost universal: if a child's safety is at stake, voices get raised, tempers get lost every now and then... and children get scared and cry." He smiled. "Not all yelling is necessarily abusive, Bruce. And children are more resilient than we generally think."

Bruce frowned.

"Look, if you're making a habit of shouting at her, then I'd say there's cause for concern. But under the circumstances you just described? I wouldn't say there's nothing wrong with it, but I would be inclined to excuse it." Alex smiled.

"Getting back to our earlier topic," he continued, "I do think that signing up as a reserve officer has the potential to be a good thing for you. You do realize, however, that you'll need to pass a psych profile. You've made progress with me, but the academy assessment is probably going to be a bit different. Still, that's not likely to be an issue for a few months. You have time." He pulled out a smart-phone and pressed a few buttons. "Now I see that Bryan Krait is due to visit you a week from tomorrow. Did you want me to come along then, or would you prefer I make another appointment?"

Bruce suppressed a sigh. "I suppose you may as well come with him," he said. Best to get it over with. And best not to mention that Sawyer had told him that he might be able to finish the curriculum quite a bit earlier than Alex thought.

Dick let out a low whistle. "You're serious? You're actually going to go through the police academy?"
Bruce sighed. "I need the sanction. It's more than five months until the hearing. I need to set things up so that if I need to take the sort of... steps I did when Jim was abducted, I can do what I need to without risking a return to Arkham." He shook his head. "I don't want this, Dick. But it's the lesser evil." He sighed again. "Commissioner Sawyer has sent me a list of the courses and requirements. If I can pass the exams, I don't have to take the courses. And she told me we could arrange the testing dates to our mutual satisfaction, rather than have me wait until the regular testing period."

Dick helped himself to a cookie. "Yours or Selina's?" he asked, holding it aloft.

"Saltridge Farms," Bruce answered. "I'm curious to know your thoughts on the matter."

Dick shrugged. "They make a pretty good double chocolate chip." He laughed at Bruce's annoyed expression. "Okay, okay." His face turned serious. "Passing the exams should be the easy part. Most of them you could probably take blindfolded, with an off-key marching band rehearsing under the testing room window. The hard part comes after—when some hard-case who wasn't on the scene gives you an order you know is dead wrong, and you still have to follow it." He waited for it to sink in. "You really will have to follow it."

"Commissioner Sawyer said that she would give me as much leeway as possible," Bruce began.

"And sometimes that won't be enough." Dick sighed. "Look, I'm not trying to talk you out of it. I was a cop once, too, remember? I know what it's like out there, and there are some things you're honestly going to hate." He hesitated. "Does she know your thoughts about guns?"

Bruce closed his eyes for a moment. "She's aware. Unfortunately, in order to qualify as a reserve officer, I will need to pass every course requirement including gun handling. After that... there's room for discussion."

"Are you okay with that?"

"I..." Bruce shook his head. "Not really. It's something I'll need to work on."

"Talk to Gordon," Dick suggested. "He's probably going to be a better coach for you than I will."

"I was planning to. As far as other procedures though," Bruce hesitated, "I think the material might be fresher for you. I'm not concerned about the combat training, of course. There are other aspects of the curriculum, however, which I haven't had occasion to review in quite some time. The laws pertaining to search and seizure, for example."

Dick grinned. "Yeah, I can see how you might be a little rusty there. Tomorrow night sound okay?"

"Seven-thirty. Helena should be in bed by then."

"You got it."

Commissioner Sawyer looked up at the knock on the upper pane of her double-hung window. "So, you're Nightwing, tonight?" she asked. Her smile of greeting gave way to a sigh. She'd left the window open for a reason. "I suspected you'd be paying me a visit soon." Her tone was resigned. "Come in. Have a seat."

Dick obeyed the first instruction, slipping easily through the open window. He avoided the padded armchair in front of the desk, however, and chose instead to lean against a book case. "I guess, my first question to you," he asked, unsmiling, "is whether you expect me to enroll in the academy, too."
Sawyer studied him for a moment before she looked at the papers on her desk. "If you want to," she said, unruffled, "although word has it you passed the program long ago. We had a few good officers transfer over after Bludhaven exploded. Most of them have been assets to the force."

Dick blinked. "Good to know," he said. "But let's assume for the moment that I don't. What you're setting up... Don't think I can't see the advantages for you and for Bruce. But what happens when the signal goes up and Batman responds? Are you going to be checking ID?"

Maggie picked up her pen and added some notes to the file she was reading. "I really think that's going to be counter-productive, don't you?" She set down the paper. "I'm not an idiot, Nightwing. I'm trying to clear a path for him, not get in his way." She sighed. "And—as I explained to him when we spoke earlier—I wouldn't recommend that he attempt to go out as Batman. I'm trying to work within the parameters of his release, not countermand them. If he fails to act on that recommendation, depending on the circumstances, I might be willing to stick my neck out for him—but it would be up to a judge to determine whether he could be released until the hearing."

She shook her head. "Bottom line? If I see someone in a GCPD uniform, I assume it's one of my people. If I see someone in a Bat-suit, I'm going to assume it's you. As long as I have no evidence to the contrary, that's where things stand." Her tone hardened. "Don't misunderstand me, Nightwing. I value our working relationship. And Jim Gordon is one of the best cops I've ever had the pleasure to meet. You earned his trust. That gets you farther in my book than any sanction that you or Mr. Wayne might acquire. But I don't like being played for a fool. You have my trust. So does your mentor. Don't abuse it and you won't have to worry."

Nightwing nodded. "That's clear enough. Thank you, Commissioner." He headed for the window. "If you need me, you know how to contact me."

"Stay safe, Nightwing."

That night, Bruce dreamed that he was sitting down to breakfast with Sasha when the phone rang.

He picked up the receiver.

"Mr. Wayne, this is Eric from Felker Firearms. I'm just calling to let you know that your gun is ready to be picked up."

Bruce's blood ran cold. He looked across the kitchen to Sasha... only he wasn't seeing Sasha and he wasn't in the kitchen anymore. He was in the foyer after patrol and Vesper's bullet-riddled body lay in an undignified sprawl on the marble floor. Riddled with bullets from his gun.

He tried to run toward her, but the distance between them expanded. And no matter how quickly he tried to bridge that distance, it was as though he was moving through molasses. No matter what he did, he couldn't reach her. But he could reach the gun. It flew toward him, as though on a collision course.

Some instinct made him veer away from it.

All at once, it was in his path again. Was the thing tracking him?

When it was mere inches from his head, the gun turned so that its muzzle was pointed directly at the space between his eyes. The trigger moved, as though manipulated by an invisible hand. He could see the bullet as it emerged from the chamber. At this range, it couldn't possibly miss. It was coming for him in slow motion, and he was powerless to turn aside as...
He woke up in a cold sweat. Dream. That was a dream. The product of an overactive subconscious. It was over. It didn't mean anything.

But it was nearly an hour before he fell back asleep.
Chapter Summary

Conquering fear is the first step. Some might call it the hardest.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, and PJ for the beta! Thanks to Tom and Bluejay for help with firearms. Reference is made to Gotham Knights No. 24 and Nightwing Vol. 2 No. 33.

A/N: "Fragile" written and recorded by Sting on his Nothing Like the Sun album (A&M, 1987).

_If blood will flow when flesh and steel are one_
Drying in the colour of the evening sun
Tomorrow's rain will wash the stains away
But something in our minds will always stay

—Sting, "Fragile"

**Chapter 36—Stains**

Krait was smiling slightly as he made a notation on his clipboard. "I think we're done," he announced. "Alex?"

The psychiatrist nodded. "There's definitely room for work," he said, "but nothing that I feel warrants additional visits at this time."

Bruce nodded back impassively. By now, he had a fairly good idea of how to play the game—although he resented having to play it. Show them a good deal of what they wanted to see, while deliberately allowing some minor details to fall short—some crayoning on the nursery walls that hadn't been totally eradicated; an upper cabinet door that was ever-so-slightly ajar, and could be shut with a mumbled apology and mildly mortified expression, followed by an, "Oh... did you want to see what was inside?" Demonstrate enough insecurity over the little things that they really didn't care about and they stopped looking for capes, cowls, and batarangs in the front closet. Not that he was fool enough to leave anything that incriminating lying around, of course, but Bruce knew that if he acted _too_ open and accommodating, his guests would only be more convinced that he was hiding something. It was better to let them think that he was worried that they'd blow some minor shortcoming out of proportion than to behave as though he was positive that they'd find nothing amiss and make them look harder.

"All right, then." Krait tucked his clipboard under his arm. "So, I'll see you in my office on Thursday, Bruce?"
"I believe so. And I suppose you'll be back here in another six weeks?"

Krait shook his head. "No, we're done." At Bruce's surprised expression, he nodded. "There's no need for further home visits unless something happens to warrant them."

Bruce frowned. "I thought you told me that you required five visits."

Krait nodded. "After our first meeting, I suspected it would take that many, but," he smiled, "you only needed to pass three. Since you have, I see no need for further home inspections. Good day, Bruce. I'll see you Thursday."

Bruce waited until the door closed behind the two men before he allowed himself a real smile. For the first time in a long time, it felt like things were looking up.

Later that day, as he sat in the Cave, things didn't seem quite so rosy. On the table before him lay a Beretta M9 semi-automatic. It was unloaded. Bruce let his gaze travel over the gun to the magazine and box of ammunition lying next to it.

The exercise that he had set for himself was simple. Place fifteen rounds of ammunition in the magazine and load the magazine into the gun. Then, unload the magazine and remove the ammunition. Check the gun, and put it away. He'd shown Dick the loading protocols for numerous firearms years ago, early in their partnership.

"Are you sure about this?" Dick's voice rang with incredulity as he stared at the piece. "I thought you hated guns."

"But," he heard himself tell the ten-year-old. "I don't fear them. There's a big difference."

He scowled at the equipment on the table and reached for the box of rounds.

His hand froze.

What was wrong with him? He could do this. He'd taught Dick, hadn't he? True, that time it had been a Colt Anaconda, but it was still a gun. Back then, handling one hadn't been a problem. For a moment, Bruce considered unpacking the Colt and seeing whether that would be easier. He rejected the idea. The Colt was a revolver; the Beretta, a semi-automatic. He had to get comfortable—he cringed mentally—using a semi-automatic. He would need to demonstrate proficiency with one in order to pass the exam. And then the department would issue him one; to carry with him at all times. He took deep breath and looked at the Beretta once more. The Beretta, he couldn't help thinking, that David Cain had used to kill Vesper Fairchild. He never should have bought the thing in the first place, but worse, he never should have kept it afterwards. That night in the alley, the gun had also been a semi-automatic, although he hadn't realized it until years afterwards when he'd recognized it from a series of pictures of different firearms. The shape of the weapon that had taken his parents from him had been indelibly burned into his memory: a Beretta M1951.

He forced his attention back to the task at hand.

Load the rounds into the magazine. Load. The rounds. Into. The magazine.

His hand seemed to have a mind of his own. It hovered over the box of ammunition, but it would not lower.

With a snarl, he pushed his chair away from the table and turned to find Jim standing there." I suppose you've been watching me," he snapped.
"Not for long. What are you doing anyway?"

"What does it...?" He stopped. "Nothing."

Jim sighed. "It's not for everyone, you know." He shook his head. "If you can't... then you can't. I've seen plenty of recruits ace everything else and wash out of the academy over this. It's not something to be ashamed of."

"I used to be able to do this," Bruce growled.

Jim nodded. "I've seen that too. Some officers—scratch that—some people are fine with handling a weapon, until they actually have to use it. Or until someone close to them gets—" He stopped. "I guess I don't have to finish that sentence."

No, but it occurred to Bruce that Jim might be onto something. He tried to pinpoint when his revulsion for firearms had crystallised into fear. He was on the wrong track. He'd had a fear of guns since that night in the alley, but he'd managed to keep it under control until... No. As a young man, he'd tried to join the CIA. He'd passed every test except gun handling. But he'd taught Dick how to...

"Bruce?" Jim hesitated. "That exercise you seem to be attempting... Have you... have you tried doing it in... in your old... uniform?"

Bruce blinked.

"It might help you to focus." He waited. When Bruce didn't answer, he continued with a slight smile. "I know what the judge said, but I don't believe it's an issue if you wear it indoors. At least, I don't have a problem with it." He sighed. "Bruce, I've seen this before. It's really not uncommon. Put some officers in street clothes, and they slip up. Stick 'em in blue and they smarten. Put 'em in dress whites and it's like seeing a totally different person. Bruce, no offense, but in the past, you've worn civvies when you wanted to appear... um... less-than-competent. Now, you're trying to handle a weapon—something that demands a higher level of respect than, say, a pencil. It's less forgiving of... incompetence. Maybe wearing something more formal will help."

As Bruce listened, it occurred to him that Jim had a point. He was more focused in the suit. At least he had been. But... "There's not much point then." His shoulders slumped. "I won't be able to wear the suit to take the examination. Or afterwards."

"I bet you never had training wheels on your two-wheeler either."

Bruce blinked at the change in topic. "No. Why?"

Jim sighed. "Bruce. Humor me. Look, think of it as testing a theory. We both know that you can do this. If you need to dress for the occasion, at least for the first couple of times, go ahead." He crossed the few yards that separated them and laid a hand on the younger man's upper arm. "Or don't. Like I said before, if you can't, you can't—and that's fine too. Nobody's trying to force you into doing this."

Bruce closed his eyes.

Jim noticed that, although he could feel the tension in Bruce's arm, the younger man wasn't trying to pull free. "I'm going upstairs," he said finally, squeezing the arm before he released it. "Take your time."

Bruce stood unmoving for several long minutes after Jim left. Then he took a deep breath, went back to the table and tried once more to reach for the ammunition.
In a satellite Bat-Cave near Robinson Park, Tim stopped short, whirled, and launched a signal flare upwards toward the ropes and rafters. For a moment, the shadows evaporated. There was nobody there. Tim frowned. He was sure he'd heard—

A cable pulled taut, yanking his ankles together. He tumbled, remembering to slap the ground to break his fall. "Curses," he muttered, "decoyed again."

Dick dropped next to him. "You know I started learning the fair art of misdirection when I was five, right?" he grinned. "One of my best friends in the circus did a magic act. I picked up a few things about diversion and sleight of hand."

Tim bent forward and started working on the cable. "Wish I could snap my fingers and make this cord disappear," he said. "What did you do, anyway?"

"Tossed a batarang into one of those sandbags with enough force that it rocked a bit. Those things are heavy enough that, when they sway, they sound like someone's moving up there."

"And I fell for it." Tim made a face.

"Well, yeah. That was the idea." Dick grinned. "Look, 95 times out of a hundred, things are pretty predictable. You see what you expect. A farmer in the heart of the Midwest who looks out the window and sees a shadow that looks like it belongs to a horse? Is probably looking at a horse. A farmer on the Serengeti Plain who sees that same shadow? Is probably looking at a zebra. But once in a blue moon, someone leaves a gate unlocked at the local zoo and our Midwestern farmer actually does have a stray zebra in the pasture."

Tim sighed. "If you're trying to tell me to expect the unexpected, I hear you. I'm not sure I'll ever get there, but..."

"I'm not sure any of us ever get there. After that smallpox scare we had a couple of weeks ago, I'm definitely including Bruce in that assessment."

"Is he okay?" Tim asked seriously. He kicked the last loop of cable off and pulled himself up.

"What do you mean?" asked Dick, standing as well.

Tim sighed. "I know he's not much of a talker, but I called and asked him how he was doing and... he didn't exactly bite my head off, but he really got off the phone fast. Is something going on?"

Dick hesitated.

Tim slumped. "There is, isn't there?"

"It depends on how you look at it."

"But you won't tell me." He nodded. "I get it. I can't walk out on you guys when there's a crisis and waltz back in once things are looking up. I just wish I could turn the clock back and..."

Dick blinked. "I had no idea you were still feeling guilty over that. Tim, it's not..." he took a deep breath. "If you could turn back the clock, you'd be missing the life experience you got that made you realize you'd made the wrong decision. Not that I always take this advice, but let it go and move on." He looked away. "Try to do it before something major happens to give you perspective."

Tim raised an eyebrow. "You?"
"It took Bruce getting arrested to get me off the pity-pot."

They shared a smile.

Dick's expression turned serious once more. "I'll talk to Bruce for you," he said. "I'll ask him to tell you what's going on. It's nothing bad—I wouldn't keep it from you if it was. It's just... something he's going through that's not easy and he..." He sighed. "I guess you could say he's coping the way he used to: by clamping up and shutting us out."

"But you know."

"Well, yeah." He smiled apologetically. "I'm not saying he's right to keep it from you. I'm just saying I don't think it's my place to fill you in. Not this time. But it's not because he doesn't trust you. It's more like he doesn't want to discuss it, and I don't want to go behind his back."

Tim let out a long breath. "Ok. I guess I get that." He sighed. "I'm just going to grab a shower and then I'll head back to Titans HQ. We've got a meeting in a couple of hours."

"Up for patrol later?"

Tim blinked. "I thought Cass was..."

"She got a lungful of fear gas last night. Concentrated dose of Crane's newest recipe. You know that even with the antidote..."

Tim's eyes opened wide. "Yeesh! Yeah, those hallucinations can be a problem for up to 24 hours. She okay?"

"She seems to be," Dick nodded. "But she's sitting this one out to be safe. So, how about it?"

Tim grinned. "Sure. I'll meet you across from GCPD at seven?"

"Sounds good."

He'd been staring at the gun for over an hour. It was scant inches away from him, but that wasn't a problem. As long as it was unloaded, it was only a shaped hunk of metal. It didn't look much different from the hair dryer that Selina had left in the main bathroom that morning.

He took a deep breath and reached for the box of rounds. This time, he managed to get one out, but it immediately slipped through his fingers and landed on the edge of the box. It teetered for a moment, before it fell to the table with a clink.

Bruce sucked in his breath as a footfall sounded behind him.

"I thought you might want to know," Jim said heavily. "Joker's loose."

Bruce turned around.

"Barbara called about five minutes before they announced it on the news. She's already told everyone else who needs to know."

Bruce nodded. "Stay here tonight," he said. "If he somehow gets onto the grounds, it wouldn't be hard for him to break into the cottage. The manor's systems are another matter."

"I was going to suggest it," Jim said with relief. "Do you think we have any cause for concern?"
Bruce let out a long breath. "With the Joker," he said, "it's hard to tell."

Jim grunted his agreement. "How's that coming?" He asked, gesturing toward the table.

"The clip isn't loaded," Bruce said heavily. "I..." He closed his eyes. "I'm beginning to think it won't be." He closed his eyes when the hand came down on his shoulder.

"Maybe the costume would..."

"No," Bruce said.

"Or a different kind of gun. One that doesn't have the same associations for you?"

Bruce spun around in the chair, breaking free of Jim's grip. "What?"

"Look, just because I was in Europe when you were accused of murder and went on the run didn't mean I wasn't watching the news. Did you really expect something like that to stay local?" His eyes narrowed. "As I recall, the reports said you'd recently bought a handgun which turned out to be the murder weapon. I'm guessing that's it?"

Bruce nodded slowly.

"So maybe it's too big a step for you—jumping immediately to a handgun. Ease into it. Try a rifle—I noticed you had a few on display when you showed me around the trophy room, months ago. Maybe it'll help you get comfortable with—"

"And maybe I don't want to get comfortable with handling a gun!" Bruce snapped back. His eyes widened. "I... don't," he whispered. "I..." He closed his eyes again. "I can't. I just... can't."

The hand was back on his shoulder, along with the slight pressure of an arm around the back of his neck.

For a few moments, the only audible sounds in the cave came from Bruce's ragged breath as he fought for control. Finally, he reached up and covered Jim's hand with his own. "Let's go upstairs," he said dully. "I'll just... the gun goes back in the trophy room."

"I'll wait for you," Jim said.

Bruce nodded. "I'll call Sawyer in the morning."

"She's probably there now."

"I know. I'll call her in the morning," he repeated.

Then he stood up and unhesitatingly picked up gun, clip, and ammo and carried them back to the trophy room.

Sharon Ryerson looked up at the cough behind her. "Oh," she said, coloring slightly. "Is it five already, Judy?"

The young woman nodded. "Ten past, actually. I'm sorry, I got caught in traffic. I know you—"

"Oh my gosh!" She opened the cash register and lifted out her till, nearly spilling some of the quarters. "If I don't catch the bus...!" She didn't finish the sentence, but raced instead down the short hallway that led to the manager's office. Two minutes later, she was dashing out the door, her coat
half-buttoned, and buttoned wrong, hat askew, and hands rapidly digging into her purse. She raced to the bus stop just in time to see the number 29 pulling away. "Wait!" she gasped futilely. "Wait!" She stared after the vanishing vehicle, already more than halfway to the next stop. "Please wait," she whispered.

A car pulled up to the stop. The passenger window rolled down. "Ma'am. I just saw what happened. Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

Sharon took a step away from the curb. "I'll be fine," she said firmly. "Thank you."

"Are you sure? It's more than 20 minutes for the next one and, I hope you don't mind me saying that this isn't the best part of town for a woman to be alone after dark."

She rolled her eyes, taking in the Town Car for the first time. The man's voice was polished, professional. With the kind of money he likely had to be able to buy that car, this working class neighborhood probably appeared to him to be the worst kind of slum. She found herself bristling as she imagined what he had to be thinking.

"I'll grant you it's not the suburbs," she snapped, "but it's nowhere near as dangerous as you seem to think. Look, Mister, I don't know you. You seem like a nice guy, but so do a lot of people. I'm sure you understand."

"But..."

"Good night." With that, she turned on her heel and went back into the coffee shop she'd left a few moments earlier.

"Sharon?"

"I missed the bus, Judy. I'm just going to wait in here for the next one. Mind if I use the phone for a sec?"

For answer, Judy placed the telephone on the counter. While Sharon made the call, she went back to drying cups. She stopped when a well-dressed customer walked into the shop and started looking at the price board.

"B-but I can't!" Sharon was saying. "It's more than fifteen minutes before the next bus comes, and I have to transfer twice. There's no way I can be there in an hour! But..." She hung up with a sigh.

The customer turned to her sympathetically. "Ma'am, I give you my word, I'm not an axe murderer. Look. Here's my business card." He handed one to her and a second to Judy. "My name and phone number are on it. I can show you my ID. Please. Let me drive you where you're going."

Her expression softened. She was about to relent, when she recognized the name of the company. "No thank you, Mr. Chester. And you can tell your boss for me that stunts like this aren't going to make up for what he took from me."

"Wh-what?"

She made an effort to keep her voice steady. "Tell Bruce Wayne that there is no way for him to get into my good graces, and if he thinks that by telling his flunkies to look for chances to do me a good turn, I'll forget what happened to my husband, he's got another thing coming. A man like that doesn't deserve to be free, and we both know it's just a matter of time until the city forgets all the harm he did and gives him back everything. And I will fight until my last breath to protest it."
Ron Chester blinked. "First of all, Ms. Ryerson, Mr. Wayne isn't my boss. Second of all, I... " He took a deep breath. "I owe you an apology. I did have an ulterior motive in offering you a lift. The offer still stands by the way, whether you accept or not. To put it simply, Ms. Ryerson, there are a number of people on the PMWE board who feel very much like you do about our former CEO," he put a deliberate stress on the word 'former'. "We're very much trying to curtail any influence he may try to exert. And," he took a deep breath. "We'd like you to help us."

Sharon absorbed that. "Let me hear more," she said finally, "while you're driving me to Sheldon Park."

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Jim Gordon was a light sleeper. He had been for most of his adult life. As a police officer in Chicago, he'd lain awake listening for the sound of someone breaking into his house to plant evidence when he'd been close to breaking a corruption scandal at his precinct. Later, as a new father, he'd listened for the sound of his infant son crying. The fears of evidence being planted on him never really went away, although they did fade over time. Later on, he had lain awake listening for Barbara to sneak in and pretend to be asleep. Later still, he had listened for the sound of her getting out of bed and into the chair. Once he'd made the mistake of getting up to offer to help her. He'd been met with a polite refusal and a flood of apologies for waking him up. After that, he still heard her moving around, but far more quietly, and for far longer periods of time. It hadn't been long before she'd moved out on her own.

Now, when he awoke to find that it was still dark, he turned bleary eyes to the digital alarm clock on the night table and found that it was nearly half-past two. At the same time, he registered soft footfalls tiptoeing down the staircase. He sat up in bed, mentally counting. It would take about twenty steps to the front door—no, Bruce wasn't going out. More likely, he was headed into the cave. Jim frowned. Or was he? He reached for his eyeglasses and cane and walked over to the bedroom window. Bruce wasn't going out the front door—Jim would have heard that open by now. So while that meant that he was probably going into the cave, there was one more possibility. He padded over to his window and looked down.

He sighed when he saw a figure plodding methodically through the snow in the backyard. Well, at least he put on a coat and boots instead of going outside in a bathrobe.

Jim debated the situation for a few minutes. Then, with another sigh, he turned on the light and began to get dressed. He figured that it would be about ten to fifteen minutes before he got outside. Walking in the snow would slow him down—even with the cane—and he was in no hurry to catch up. Particularly not if Bruce was headed where Jim suspected he was.

Let Bruce have his half-hour or so. With any luck, by the time Jim got outside, he'd find Bruce on his way back to the manor anyway.

But Jim was going after him, just in case.

He found Bruce sitting cross-legged in the snow before the large granite tombstone. He approached carefully, feet crunching on the frozen ground.

Bruce didn't turn. "If I'd realized it would wake you, I would have stayed indoors," he said. "There's no reason that this couldn't have waited until morning."

"I wasn't asleep," Jim lied.

Bruce acknowledged the statement with a grunt.
"I can go back to the house, if you'd prefer to be alone."

Bruce shook his head. "I'm not alone," he whispered. "Not here." He paused for a moment. "I've been... trying to sort everything out," he said, still whispering. "I thought coming here might help me get some answers."

"Ah."

Bruce looked up at him. "I don't mean I expect answers from them," he scoffed, gesturing toward the tombstone. "I know better. But the guns in the trophy room... except for the one I've been... the one that I bought myself, the others were purchased by my ancestors. Some by my father. I have to wonder what he would think of this... situation."

"Does it matter?"

Bruce slumped. "I suppose not. Carrying a gun goes against everything I thought I stood for, and yet," his lips twitched, "I can't deny that nearly everyone I've welcomed into my life has, at one time or another, carried one... used one. So. Does that make me a coward or a hypocrite?"

"Can I have a few more choices?" Jim shot back. He let out a long breath. "I'm not making fun of you. I hope you don't think otherwise. But until now, there have been some damned good reasons why you shouldn't be carrying a gun. Not the least of which has been, that if you had ever used one out there, friend or no friend, I would have had to take steps neither of us would have wanted." His voice hardened. "If you'd gone that route, I would have had no choice but to bring you in, one way or another. And that would have been a hell of a way to tell you that I'd figured out a few things." He sighed. "Not that the way it actually happened was so much better, mind you."

Bruce nodded. "If you're trying to tell me," he said, "that it's not that I fear guns, but that I'm afraid of what might happen if I actually used one, I wish I could believe that. I told myself I hated them but didn't fear them. I believed that until the day an employee pulled one on me at the office, and I..." he closed his eyes. "I froze. I was eight years old again, in the alley, facing a gun, and I couldn't move. All I knew was that my parents were lying at my feet and that the next time the gun went off, it would be my turn." He flinched as Jim laid a hand on his shoulder.

"What happened next?"

"Security came, subdued the man, took him away. And I... went to Felker's Firearms and filled out the paperwork for a handgun."

Jim grunted. "For some people, that would be a normal reaction. For you, on the other hand..."

"I know," Bruce said slowly. "After I placed the order, I... it was... I blacked the whole thing out of my head until they called to tell me that the paperwork was approved. And when they did call, I couldn't believe I'd done it. Not... the way most people mean it." Bruce's eyes widened. "I had absolutely no recollection of ever..." His expression hardened. "Something's wrong. Really wrong. I would have recognized it much earlier, if I hadn't been already coming apart... and then the conversation in the cave with the..."

"Bruce." Jim wasn't sure whether to be excited or unnerved. "Slow down. I can't follow you."

Bruce hesitated. "I'm not sure I can myself. The pieces of the puzzle are right here in front of me, but I can't make them fit! I'm missing something... I..." Abruptly, he got to his feet, ignoring the hand Jim stretched out to assist him.

"Something happened," Bruce continued, a note of anger coming into his voice. "I'd handled guns
before, both as Bruce and as Batman. I found it... distasteful, but not frightening. But somehow, that
distaste changed into a full-blown phobia." His agitation seemed to lessen as he said the words. "I
can see it now. I can deal with it. The suit," he smiled ruefully, "did help—you were right about that.
I still need to manage without it. But first, I need to know what brought me to that point, and whether
there's anything I can do to stop it from happening again."

So saying, he turned on his heel and began walking back toward the manor.

Jim struggled to keep up. "First," he panted, "I thought phobias were irrational fears. I'm not sure fear
of guns qualifies. But let's assume for a minute that it does. Second," he leaned one hand against a
tree, "isn't it possible, that your fear developed because that guy pulled a gun on you? You wouldn't
be the first person."

Bruce stopped. "My fear that day might have been a catalyst," he replied, "possibly. But my running
out to buy a gun that would be used to frame me for murder less than three weeks later? That timing
is a bit too convenient." He took a breath. "Let's get back to the house. I'll call Dick and ask him to
swing by after patrol. He may even be done by now—"

"And just when do you expect him to sleep? For that matter," Jim's voice hardened, "when do you
plan on sleeping? You beat the flu. You want to fight pneumonia on top of that?"

"You know that being out in the cold doesn't actually cause pneumonia, right?"

Jim glowered. "No, but stress and fatigue aren't exactly going to bolster your immune system. This
can keep until later. Rest now. Deal with the situation after the sun comes up. At least let Dick catch
some shuteye tonight."

Bruce nodded reluctantly.

"It's almost dawn," Harrier said, struggling not to yawn over the comm-link, "and still no sign of
Joker."

Batman responded almost immediately. "I haven't found anything either." He sighed. "Guess we'd
better clock out, bro. I've still got a job to get to in a few hours, and you've still got classes."

"And Joker's still out there."

Oracle broke into the conversation. "He is, but I don't think you're going to find him tonight. It
stinks, but you can spend the next few hours tearing the city apart brick by brick looking for him, or
you can head home, recharge, and face him tomorrow." There was a sigh, and Barbara's natural
voice replaced the electronic voder. "Call it a night, boys. It's late and you're both tired."

"Roger that," Batman said a moment later. "I'm coming in."

"Me t—Oh my G-d!"

"Rob-Harrier?"

Tim's voice was agitated over the comm-link. "Hit and run. Woman came out of nowhere and a car
just plowed into her and kept going... north on Van Sciver. Oracle, can you get a fix? It must've been
going about 45 miles per hour."

"No traffic cams in that area," Oracle cut in. "And radar isn't picking up anything at that speed in
your vicinity at the moment. Did you get a license?"
"Too fast. Anyway, moot. I'm dropping down to check the victim, but it doesn't look good."

He was already swinging down as he switched off the comm-link. The victim was lying on the pavement, body twisted at an odd angle. Tim stooped next to her and tentatively placed a hand on her neck, looking for a pulse.

That was when the head swivelled around, showing a blood-red grin on a painted face.

It cost Tim one instant too many to process that he was looking at some sort of mannequin. By the time he reacted, it was too late. A cloud of mist spewed from the mannequin's mouth, catching him full in the face.

As he greyed out, he couldn't help thinking of his earlier practice bout with Dick.

*Curses. Decoyed again...*
Chapter Summary

Bruce's issues with guns threaten to override his new decision... until a crisis hits.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie and PJ for the beta! Reference is made to Gotham Knights 24 and Bruce Wayne: Murderer.

TW: Violence, mild torture, restraint, implied domestic abuse.

"No One Hurts Me More Than Me" written by Chris Cummings and Rod Lewis. Recorded by Chris Cummings on his Lonesomeville album (Warner, 2000).

I've laid blame everywhere that I could
It's finally ending up where it should
It's hard to swallow and tough to believe
But no one hurts me more than me

—Chris Cummings, Rod Lewis, "No One Hurts Me More Than Me"

Chapter 37—Hard to Swallow and Tough to Believe

It almost felt like old times, Dick reflected. Almost. He and the others had come in response to Bruce's summons, and while there were a few faces who wouldn't have been included in the past, Dick couldn't deny their right to be here. He glanced around the Cave. Bruce was seated, as always, at the main computer console, as much in command as any captain on the bridge of his ship. Dick was sitting in the nearest chair to Bruce's right. Then, continuing clockwise around the area, Dick saw Cass standing against one wall, passing the time with isometric exercises. Next to her, Selina sat reading a story book softly to a rapt Helena. At a side monitor, the Oracle mask glowed pale green on an emerald background. Jim occupied the only chair between that monitor and Bruce, closing the circle. Tim was late.

Bruce looked at him. "Was he tired last night? Could he have overslept?"

Dick shrugged. "We both were. I know he's been putting in some long study time too; it wouldn't be the first time he's conked out over his books."

Bruce frowned. "He hasn't responded to my page, either." He sighed. "I suppose we should start. One of you can fill him in later." He took a deep breath.

Selina held up one finger with a smile. Then she rose and carried Helena over to the play area,
lowering her gently over the safety gate. Bruce waited until she had retaken her chair before he began speaking again.

"Some of this, you already know, but I'll start with that. Shortly before I was accused of murder, I purchased a handgun. My reasons for doing so were not clear at the time." He took another breath. "Unfortunately, years later, they still aren't."

"We did some digging after you were arrested," Oracle spoke up. "I'm sure you can understand why we thought the gun had been planted at the manor."

Bruce shook his head. "A reasonable assumption, but no. I did purchase it... as I'm positive you confirmed from the gun shop's video surveillance."

"Yes." The computer image fragmented and Barbara's face appeared on the screen. "Was it..." She hesitated. "Okay, I'll ask it. Were you trying to cope with your..." she broke off, discomfort plain on her features. "Look, it's not exactly a secret that you don't have good... feelings about guns."

Bruce's lips twitched. "If you're trying to ask whether I was trying to confront a fear..." he shook his head slowly. "That's only part of it."


A ghost of a smile flashed across his face. "That's another part. There is one final piece, though, and when I tell you about it, I think you'll understand why I haven't discussed this until now." He noted with satisfaction that he had everyone's full attention.

"It's fair to say that at the time that I bought the gun, I was not... coping well. He glanced at Jim. "I was dealing with changes to my status quo from all corners." He took a few more deep breaths. "You're retired. Lucius had suffered a stroke. I had broken up with Vesper for her own good, but," he glanced guiltily at Selina, "it was one more factor."

If Selina was at all disconcerted by his mention of Vesper, it didn't show in her encouraging nod. Helena crowed from the play area then, drawing both of their attention. Bruce smiled and, assured that his daughter was fine, he continued.

"A few days after Lucius' stroke, an employee pulled a gun on me. I froze. To be clear, this was not a case of my realizing that security was just outside the door, even as I calculated the best way to disarm the man while making it look as though I'd somehow been lucky. I... panicked." He paused a beat. "Approximately 30 days later, I received a call that my handgun was ready for pickup."

"Wait," Selina said. "Did you order one, or didn't you?"

"I did," Bruce confirmed. "Then I promptly forgot about doing so."

"I think I see the problem."

Bruce shook his head. "You don't. Not all of it. Although, I can imagine you have some idea of my reaction to getting that call."

Cass frowned. "So you went to get gun? Why? Couldn't just say... changed mind?"

Bruce shook his head. "I came down here to try to sort out what had happened. And," he looked down. "I..." He brought his right hand up to his forehead and massaged his left temple. "I had a conversation with the cowl."
"Excuse me?" Dick breathed.

He'd been dreading this part. He studied the table, deliberately avoiding eye contact with any of the others. His voice, however, remained steady. "Now you know why I didn't mention it at the time. The costume was hanging in its case, and I heard it speak to me. It told me that I needed to buy the gun to overcome my fear of it." He colored. "I know what that sounds like, and I won't deny that, had I heard that story, I would have been recommending that the person telling it get therapy. Of course, since I have spent close to two years in Arkham..." His lips twitched. "The thing is," he said, looking around, "as Dick just pointed out, I've never had a fear of guns. I loathe them. I respect them. But fear?"

"You do handle things better in the suit," Oracle pointed out. "Speaking from personal experience, though, I can tell you that it took me almost a year before I could be in the same room with a gun after Joker shot me. Is it possible that you're okay dealing with guns when you expect them... like at night, in costume? But if you encounter them when you don't expect them, like when you're in civilian life...?"

Bruce nodded, relieved that everyone seemed to be reacting with concern, but not with the horror he'd been dreading. "It's a possibility. Actually, it's a probable factor. However, when you consider that three weeks before Vesper was murdered, I purchased the murder weapon—this despite my feelings for firearms... As I was telling Jim last night, the timing was a bit too fortuitous."

Jim cleared his throat. "So... what? You're claiming post-hypnotic suggestion?"

Bruce shook his head. "Not... precisely, but you're close. I have been... influenced... in the past. And while I don't know the precise instant when Harold turned, by the time I bought the gun, he'd been gone for months. Which means that everything he would have needed to do had already been achieved by then."

Dick leaned forward. "Harold? You think...?" His expression hardened. "You could be right. I'll check into it." He smiled suddenly. "I haven't broken into Blackgate since No Man's Land. I can use the practice."

"Just so you know," Barbara said, "I tried to reach Tim a couple more times. He's not picking up."

Bruce nodded. "If we don't hear from him within the hour," he glanced at Cass, "Batgirl will check on him."

After the others had gone upstairs, Jim approached Bruce. "You realize that whether this issue developed on its own or whether it had help, it's there now, right? Does knowing how it got there really make that big of a difference?"

Bruce nodded. "Post-hypnotic suggestions generally don't last more than six months. If something was done to me years ago, and I'm still feeling the effects..."

"Then you won't be the first or last person to be scarred by an experience. Say the fear was engineered? Do you think it'll magically go away just because you can confirm it?"

"No," Bruce said slowly. "Not magically." He sighed. "Knowing how this happened won't help me fight it," he admitted. "You're right about that. And if it came about through something outside my control, I'll... need to live with that. But if it was something that I could have prevented, I need to know. In case whoever did this to me ever cares to make another attempt."

Harrier woke up slowly to the sensation that something feathery was tickling his chin. He groaned.
His head was throbbing. It was hot. The last thing he remembered was swooping down to attend to the hit-and-run victim, and then... He tried to move, but found that his arms were tight against his sides. He still had his gloves, but—a quick check revealed—his utility belt was gone. He opened his eyes and saw only an opaque greyne. The air he was breathing was musty, but he didn't think he was running out of it—although the way his head was throbbing, it was hard for him to be sure he was thinking straight. He was upside down, he realized. Tied with up something feathery—feather boas? He flexed his arms experimentally. There was nearly no give. The outer layer might be feathers, but his bonds seemed to have a wire core. Going by the feel of the fabric on his cheek, there was a burlap bag over his head, and it appeared as though a band of something else had been wrapped around the outside of the sack, over his eyes—ensuring that he could not make out a glimmer of his surroundings.

He willed himself not to panic. There had to be a way out of this. There was always a way out.

"Oh, good!" a high-pitched voice sang out. "You're still here. Sorry to leave you hangin' around like that, but it's so hard to know when Mistah J's gonna show."

Great. Fighting the panic had just gotten a little harder.

Someone gave him a hard shove from behind, and he swung helplessly back and forth. The pounding in his head got worse.

"I oughta have roughed you up more," Harley said conversationally. "It wasn't easy for me setting that bat-trap. When I saw I'd bagged a Titan instead, I almost offed ya on the spot. But then I figured, hey, a cape in the hand was worth two in the bush and Mistah J might need ya anyway."

Tim held himself very still, not willing to give her the satisfaction of watching him struggle. Besides, he had no idea how high up he was, and falling headfirst to an unknown surface was never a good idea. Meanwhile, maybe the fact that Harley hadn't recognized him as a former Robin could work to his advantage. Somehow.

"That's right," Harley said. "Just relax. There's no slack in those restraints, I checked. 'Sides, by now, all that blood rushing to your head probably means your feet are too numb to stand on, much less fight on, even if you can get loose."

He cursed his luck, remembering that psychiatrists were medical doctors too. Harley Quinn would have studied general medicine. She likely knew the effects of hanging upside down on the human body. And since she was also a clinical psychiatrist, no doubt she was hoping he'd start questioning her, so she could analyze everything he said. Tim resolved to not utter a word.

"You're breathing faster," she said nonchalantly. "Blood pooling in your lungs?" She sighed. "Guess I'd better get you down, in case Mistah J has a use for you. If he doesn't," she giggled in an oddly friendly fashion, "he can always off ya later, right?"

There was a clattering sound as something rolled toward him over a stone floor. Then there came an abrupt jolt as he dropped several inches.

"That's it, easy now," Harley said. She had one hand supporting his shoulders as she eased him down and he found himself lying on a mattress. Going by what he'd heard before, he had to be on a gurney.

"Now where are the... ah! Here we go!" He felt a pressure around his hips, as she brought two straps together and buckled them tightly. She performed the same operation at his chest and knees.
Talk about overkill, he thought. She hadn't bothered to remove any of the previous restraints, either.

He heard footsteps circling him. Maybe, he thought without much hope, she was going to take off the blindfold.

Instead, he felt a pinching sensation on his wrist. The pressure eased as the wire fell away. A moment of relief was succeeded by a groan as a handcuff clicked shut. He checked the range automatically. About four inches—the other cuff had to be locked around the bed rail, he deduced. A minute later, his other wrist was similarly secured.

"Nothing personal," Harley said, "but I really need to make sure you don't go anywhere. But to prove I got no hard feelin's," she added with a smile in her voice, "I'm going to get breakfast on. How about I make a batch of pancakes, just for you?"

"What?" The syllable slipped out involuntarily and was partly muffled by the burlap.

Evidently, though, Harley had heard. "Sure. You can even have 'em with syrup. After all," she said, as Tim heard her walking away, "Ain't every condemned soul entitled to one decent last meal?"

"Hope you like the private accommodations." Batman spoke from the shadows.

There was a sudden intake of breath, followed by a slow chuckle. "So that was your doing. I wondered."

"You looked out for him in Arkham. I just returned the favor."

"You didn't give me much choice."

"I know. Thanks anyway." He paused. "So," he said nonchalantly, "why would a man with a gun phobia buy a Beretta?"

Silence. Then, unexpectedly, Thomas Elliott laughed. "Have you been talking to Riddler?"

"This once," Batman said, "I'm going to the source. You've used subliminal suggestion to get to him before. I want to know what you did this time."

Thomas Elliott leaned back against the cell wall. "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know," he smirked.

Batman noted with interest that Elliot hadn't continued with Iago's next line: From this time forth I never will speak word. He snorted. "You're citing Shakespeare, now? Did Aristotle not have a decent quote for the occasion?" When Elliott failed to respond, he sighed. "Fine. I guess it doesn't really matter. Either you had something to do with it and you're sitting here laughing about it, or you didn't and you're playing head games. I guess that's about the only hobby you've got left." He shrugged. "Suit yourself, Hush. I can live with an unsatisfied curiosity." He moved deeper into the shadows. "Enjoy your private digs... for as long as they last."

"Hold it."

Batman paused, smiling—although the darkness concealed his expression.

"Not that I believe for one second that you'd get me tossed into general population," Hush said, "but I suppose if you came all this way... I can toss you a bone or two."

"I'm listening."
Hush smirked. "Let me give you a hypothetical. Let us suppose that a wealthy philanthropist devotes time and money into rebuilding a city laid waste by a disastrous earthquake. Riding on the wave of positive publicity, he enters the political arena... and at every turn, he finds his initiatives stymied by one man. At first, he tries to laugh it off, but this person is a real thorn in his side. He has enough money that he can't be bought off. He can't be won over. And, even after our philanthropist reaches the pinnacle of success, he knows that this person is still looking for a chance to topple him."

Batman nodded. "Go on."

"The philanthropist decides that the best way to remove the thorn from his side is to publicly discredit him. It's no more than what said thorn has been trying to do to him, of course. He has money and power, but he can't have it look like a vendetta. So he casts about for ideas. He even contacts a few trusted friends and advisors—perhaps people he's met in college; a doctor who'd used unconventional treatment methods to heal him when it turned out that he'd been slowly poisoning himself for years... it's amazing the kind of contacts one makes."

Batman grunted. So Lex Luthor had been another of Dr. Elliot's patients.

Hush sighed. "I don't recall which of us first suggested framing the philanthropist's opponent for murder. Whoever it was, one thing was clear: the evidence found implicating him at the scene would need to be positively damning. Incontrovertible. Beyond a reasonable doubt. And hey, if a few members of the general public started harassing his lawyers into stepping down, so much the better."

Hush shrugged. "Sometimes, things don't work out as well as hoped, but eh... what can you do? It was at about this time that the doctor became acquainted with a mechanical genius who was prepared to offer his services... for the right price, of course. A bargain was struck. And slowly, carefully, the mechanic constructed his trap."

"Which was?"

Silence. Hush regarded him for a few moments, his expression unreadable. "Subliminal suggestion has never been very reliable," he said finally. "I had such hopes for Harold's programming. If Bruce had been influenced to not only purchase the gun, but actually use it on the Fairchild woman, I doubt that Sionis would ever have needed to capture Mr. Pennyworth, some years later. But from the start, Bruce was a most unwilling subject. It took weeks just to get him to purchase the gun, and even then, he refused to buy the bullets to go with it. With time, perhaps we could have nudged him further."

His voice hardened. "But my employer lost patience. He thanked me for what I'd accomplished, gave me more than adequate compensation for my troubles... and decided to take a cruder approach."

He smiled. "I think you can guess the rest."

Batman nodded. Luthor had hired David Cain to murder Vesper with the gun that Bruce had bought. Dick could easily believe that Cain would have had the correct ammunition—it wasn't like a Beretta took anything fancy. When the police showed up at the manor, they'd found the gun—registered in Bruce's name, with Bruce's fingerprints all over it. That had been more than enough reason to arrest him on suspicion of murder. But... He frowned. "There's one thing that makes no sense," he said. "If your... employer's goal was to frame him for murder, what point was there in giving him a fear of guns? Wouldn't that sabotage the whole thing?"

Hush blinked. "I was trying to get him past it. That's what was taking so bloody long in the first place!" His eyes widened. "Wait. Do you mean to say that he hasn't always been afraid of guns?"

There was no answer.

"Hello?"
"You still need to review your comma placement," Dr. Arkham said with a frown.


"It is better," Arkham said. "However, if you wish to do well on the test..."

Cass let out another sigh. "Again," she said.

Arkham set the paper down. "I believe that if you compare this work to your earlier attempts, you will see your progression." A thin smile spread his lips. "Really, this section seems to be your only real sticking point, now that we're reading the questions aloud."

"And it still... counts?" Cass asked for the umpteenth time. "As reading? For sure?"

"With medical attestation of your difficulties, yes," Arkham replied. "I would spend more time reviewing the social studies section, particularly those questions pertaining to civics and economics. You're scoring well enough on the practice tests, but you routinely miss more answers in those areas."

"I know," Cass said miserably. "So... boring." She winced, bracing herself for his reply. Bruce would have told her that she could quit at any time, if she wasn't willing to put in the work. Dick would have heard her out and tried not to discourage her. She appreciated that, but she was already feeling discouraged. Was that what it had been like for Bruce, all those months ago, when Dick had asked her to spar with him in the cave? She knew it must have been.

Arkham merely fixed her with a piercing stare. "It is my understanding that you will be graded on how well you learn the material; not on how well you like it," he said. "If you mean to use this test as a stepping stone toward higher education, you may find the ability to assimilate dry material to be a marketable skill."

Cass blinked. His tone was dispassionate, but from the way he held himself... was he joking with her? She flashed him a guarded smile and was relieved to see her expression mirrored on his own face.

"By the way," Arkham continued, "you should know that I'm being released in three days time."

It took her a moment to process what he was saying. "You... won't be here... after Monday." She felt a pang. Then, remembering a gesture that she had seen others make, she held out her hand.

"Goodbye," she said with a forced smile.

"If you still need assistance preparing for your examinations..." Arkham said, "Are you familiar with the Gotham Public Library Main Branch?"

She knew it. She hadn't been inside it since the night when her inability to read had nearly cost her two lives: her own, and that of a librarian caught in the crossfire. "Yes," she said softly.

"I'm told that it will be close to three months before I'm able to return to work. At least," he sighed, "that is the estimate that the building contractors have given the city for when the asylum will be ready to reopen." He looked away, as though unwilling to see her reaction to what he was about to say next. "Until then, if you should need assistance, I," his voice lowered to a mumble. "I shall make
an effort to spend the noon hour in the periodicals room, catching up on my reading. You may approach me there."

Cass blinked. "You... you want to?" She asked. "I thought... I mean..." She took another breath. "I'm so... slow. When we met, you had to write short words so I could read. You like," she gestured toward the pile of reference material and the laptop, now gone to screensaver mode, "this?"

Arkham colored. "Yes, well," he harrumphed. "I suppose I could spout some platitude about admiring your determination, but the truth of the matter is that the next three months look to me to be nearly as dull as you seem to find your social studies practice tests. Helping you will at least go some way toward alleviating that boredom. Assuming you still wish to review the material with me?"

This had to be what Tim had once called 'reading between the lines.' Because as much as Arkham tried to couch his words in dispassion, his body language told a different story.


They shared another smile.

Bruce absorbed Dick's information with a raised eyebrow. "So," he deadpanned, "I really am my own worst enemy."

"I don't know if I'd go that far," Dick grinned, "but you have to admit it does fit."

"Yes. I was slowly being... steered... into committing murder. Harold's programming was beginning to erode my natural distaste for firearms, without my conscious knowledge."

"So your subconscious fought back," Dick said, "by... what? Ramping up your negativity to the power of ten?"

"I would have said one hundred," Bruce countered. "My... sleeping difficulties increased during that time. I'd blamed it on Jim's retirement." He looked away. "I kept dreaming that I was watching Jordan Rich shoot him. And then..."

*It happened in slow motion. The three bullets creeping closer and closer to Jim's unprotected back. Bruce wanted to yell to him to get down, wanted to push him out of the way, anything. Instead, he was rooted to the pavement, unable to utter a sound. He saw Jim drop, pale and unmoving to the ground. Then Rich sauntered up and handed him his gun.*

"*Here.* He said. "*Go ahead. Pull the trigger. You know you want to.*"

*Bruce froze, shaking his head. He couldn't kill.*

"*It's the only way justice can be served. Kill me or watch me walk.*"

*No.*

*But the offer was tempting. And if Rich had gone to trial, surely he would have been facing the death penalty anyway. Probably.*

*NO. NO!*

"That was usually the point at which I'd wake up," Bruce concluded. "Certainly, I'd been angry enough to... to strangle him with my bare hands—or at least to fantasize about it. But in my dreams, I never saw that as an option. It was always a gun." He'd had flashbacks to the night in the alley, too.
His parents had replaced Jim Gordon, and it had been the thug who’d shot them handing Bruce his gun and egging him on. The result had been the same.

He'd never feared guns. He'd feared what using one might turn him into. Only now...

"In order for me to fight the subliminal suggestions, I had to make the very idea of handling a gun anathema to me,” Bruce said slowly. "Push myself to the opposite extreme and trust that I would stay centered between the two forces."

"Tightrope walkers figure that one out early," Dick agreed. "So, it looks like you miscalculated. But as Batman... you're okay with guns. I mean," he caught himself, "not okay okay, but I never noticed you panicking."

"There are different ways to deal with fear," Bruce pointed out. "Some people freeze; some run; some bluster. And then there are the people who lash out in anger."

Dick's eyes widened. Sure, Batman had always been tough on crime, but his temper had been flaring out of control, even before Gordon's retirement. His hand flew absent to the corner of his mouth. Jim's getting shot hadn't helped matters, but perhaps the ramifications had only accelerated the process. If Bruce had been trying to implant a fear of guns into his subconscious to counter Harold's programming, while at the same time, he'd been consciously trying to overcome that very fear...

"You were at war with yourself, and it nearly tore you apart."

Bruce nodded. "As I believe my subconscious tried to tell me, when I," his lips twitched, "had that 'conversation' with my costume." He let out a long breath. "Well. This is illuminating."

"Yeah," Dick smiled. "So, I guess, now that you know..."

Bruce sighed. "If you're implying that I should be able to snap out of this, it's not that simple, Dick. If it were, I would have done it by now. Remember, I pushed myself to an extreme. And without the subliminal programming to pull me in the other direction, I have nothing to balance against it." His expression turned bleak. "In fact," he said quietly, "there's no reason to believe that I would behave any differently were I to reassume the cowl today, than I did while I was fighting Harold's programming." He let out a long slow breath. "If I can't find a way to deal with this," he closed his eyes, "given my current... situation, I... cannot risk becoming Batman again."

This time, Dick thought as he drove away from the Manor, he couldn't fault Bruce for his actions. It wasn't like the time that Bruce had injected himself with fear toxin to test a theory. This had been the last-ditch effort of a man who was prepared to cripple himself, rather than take a life.

He only hoped that Bruce could work through it.

He'd just crossed the Kane Bridge when Barbara's voice came over the hands-free.

"Better take the fastest way home, Current Bat Wonder," she said, with an undercurrent of tension belying her flippant words. "We have a situation. Tim's missing. When I sent Cass to check on him, she said it looked like he never made it back from patrol last night."

Dick frowned. Cass's detective skills weren't bad, but... "How sure is she?"

"She's with me now. You can listen to her report when you get in."

The service road seemed to be moving faster than the expressway at the moment. He signalled to change lanes. "I should be there in about 20 minutes," he said. "Over and out."
Tim forced himself to remain calm when he heard Joker's voice. The clown didn't sound pleased.

"No, Harley, I told you, I wanted tall dark and borrrrrrrrrring." There was a pause. "Okay, I'll grant you this one has the right color scheme—it's not like you bagged one of the birdies—and why couldn't you, huh?"

There was a nervous laugh. "Sorry, Puddin'! I was using your bait for the trap. Maybe it's like when you put out birdseed and get squirrels."

Joker sighed. "Harley, how many times do I have to tell you? I make the jokes, you feed me the lines. That's the way the act goes! Now get me some of those pancakes while I take a look at our guest."

"R-right away, Mistah J!"

One set of footsteps hurried off, while another, more heavily-set moved purposefully toward him. Tim willed himself to look dangerous—or at least look like he wasn't scared.

The bandage around the burlap bag unwound, and then, almost gently, the bag lifted. The visage of a grinning clown filled his line of sight.

"So..." Joker drawled, "you're the random idiot who ruined our little setup." He giggled. "I like random..." A gun seemed to materialize in his hand, and he jammed the muzzle under Tim's chin.

Tim froze, not daring to twitch a muscle as Joker kept talking.

"...except when it doesn't work my way!" The muzzle dug in, forcing his jaw up. "Who the hell...?" All at once, the pressure eased. The gun dropped to the ground as Joker rubbed his hands together, cackling. "Oh my. Ohhhh, my! Oh, Harley..." he sang.

"Yeah, Pudding?"

"I'm a genius!"

Harley laughed. "That ain't news to me, Puddin'."

Joker chortled. "Do you know who my trap caught?"

"Sure. That's Harrier. He's been leading the Teen Titans since Robin disappeared."

Joker sighed. "So close... and yet so far." He reached into his pocket, took out a grenade and removed the pin. "Here... catch," he said, lobbing it over his shoulder.

Harley shrieked and fled, slamming a door behind her. The bomb rolled in the opposite direction. There was a loud explosion.

"Hey, Harls, after you clean that mess up, get back out here."

There was a muffled giggle. "Sure, Mistah J!"

Joker advanced on Tim, shaking his head mournfully. "I can't believe you messed up this badly," he said.

Tim blinked. That made two of them.
He bent down slowly to pick something up. Tim barely had a moment to register the baseball bat before the clown lunged for the gurney and brought the weapon down hard across his mid-section.

Tim stifled a groan. Joker hit him again.

"You! Were! Supposed! To! Be! NIGHTWING! When! You! Grew! Up!" Joker screamed, punctuating each word with another blow.

Pain control techniques only went so far. Tim was whimpering by the time the beating was over.

Joker regarded him with no trace of the frenzy he'd shown seconds earlier. "Robins become Nightwings. Nightwings become Bats. That's the natural order, don't you get that?" His hands closed around Tim's throat. "WELL? DON'T YOU?"

Tim was choking. Instinctively, he tried to grab Joker's wrists, but only managed to raise his hands a couple of inches before the cuffs held him back.

Abruptly, Joker let him fall, bruised and battered, back to the gurney mattress. "Now let me think," he mused aloud. "Let me..." His grin turned savage. "Oh yeah. This is gonna be good..."

Les Paxton was in his private office when the phone rang. "Paxton."

"Hi, Les, it's Ron. I'm just calling with a status update on that project you assigned me to."

Paxton made sure that the door was closed. "Go ahead."

"Looks like it's not going to be as complicated as we thought to secure that backing. The other party is very much on board with our objectives."

Paxton smiled. "Excellent news, Ron. Keep me posted on any further developments, will you?" He hung up the phone, still smiling. "Excellent," he repeated.

The gun was on the table again, the clip and ammunition sitting next to it. Bruce had been staring at it for nearly a solid hour. He didn't have any problem removing the piece from the trophy room, nor replacing it afterwards. It was only when he set about the process of changing it from a crafted work of metal to weapon that he froze. He'd been pistol-whipped enough to know intellectually that the gun was a weapon, with or without bullets. Somehow, it didn't feel that way, though.

*Put the rounds into the magazine. Put. The rounds. Into. The magazine. This is not rocket science. Load the damned thing.*

His hand hovered over the box of ammo. Was this really a good idea? Considering that he was about to launch a bid to retake his company, was it even wise for him to take the police psych evaluation when, as matters stood, there was a good chance that he wouldn't pass it?

*The rounds. Put them into the magazine. Now.*

His palm was sweating. He managed to lower it into the box. The rounds were cold and smooth to his touch. He lifted one out. This time, he nearly got it to the clip before it slipped from his grasp to roll off the table. Bruce closed his eyes. He was a fool. And it was time to end the charade.

He reached for the phone, telling himself that he wasn't giving up, that he wasn't a quitter, that it was merely a question of timing, but in his heart of hearts, he wasn't so sure. His fear was a barrier...
holding him back, but it was also a safety rail preventing him from becoming a killer. Maybe he couldn't get past it because he truly didn't want to? All at once, he felt tired—no, exhausted. It was going to be a relief to put this all behind him. He had to focus on the two things that he was sure he could handle right now: taking back the company and passing the hearing. He could worry about the rest later.

He dialed the commissioner's office.

"I've been waiting for your call since the broadcast started airing, Mr. Wayne. Given the circumstances, I'm prepared to give you considerable latitude. On the understanding that you follow through on what we've discussed previously, of course."

Bruce blinked in confusion. "I'm... sorry?"

There was a moment's pause. Then Commissioner Sawyer took a deep breath. "Turn on your television, Mr. Wayne. I believe that all the local stations are carrying the story. I'll hold."

Still puzzled, Bruce walked over to the computer array and pressed several buttons. He started as a blast of maniacal laughter shattered the quiet of the cave. Then his jaw dropped in angry disbelief as Joker's face gave way to the image of Harley Quinn standing next to a bound, bruised, and barely conscious Harrier. She was grinning broadly, both arms pointing toward the captive in a "ta-dah!" gesture.

"...That's right, folks!" Joker was saying, "I'll accept no substitutes. Unless the one real, original Bat-boob shows up within the next... oh... let's pick a number at random, say... forty-two hours, I'll wring this little bird's neck. HAHAHAHAHA!"

Bruce sucked in his breath. Tim. Joker had Tim.
Chapter Summary

To save Tim's life, Batman must do the unthinkable.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kathy, Debbie, PJ, and Aiyokusama for the beta. Thanks to Elle and Blue for creative consulting. This story is over, but not the AU. I'll be posting a fourth installment soon.

"Holding Up the Sky" and "We Traveled So Far" written and performed by Mary Chapin Carpenter on her Age of Miracles album (Zoe, 2010), "Cabaret" original lyrics by Fred Ebb. Recorded by Jill Hayworth on the Cabaret original cast album (CBS, 1966) and by Liza Minnelli on the Cabaret motion picture soundtrack album (Hip-O, 1972, 1996). Some lyrics have been improvised from the original.

I found myself between two lifetimes
The sunset and the dawn
I reached out and took the lifeline offered up to me
between here and gone... here and gone

—Mary Chapin Carpenter, "Holding Up the Sky"

Chapter 38—Between Two Lifetimes

Bruce picked up the phone again. "I have to get there," he said tersely. "If anyone else tries—"

"No bat suit," Maggie replied crisply. "At least, nothing with an obvious bat insignia. I can't countermand the terms of your release. I can testify on your behalf at a hearing, but that won't keep you out of a holding cell until it convenes. Car and gadgets weren't mentioned in the judge's ruling last summer. Use what equipment you're comfortable with. And within ten days time," a hint of steel crept into her voice, "you will present yourself at the police academy, to take the required tests. If you fail any of them, you will enrol in the necessary courses. Classes begin the last week of February—contingent on your passing a psych evaluation, of course."

Something about Maggie's unruffled self-assurance rankled with him. As much as he wanted to agree and end the call, he heard himself counter, "And if I don't pass the psych eval?"

Maggie took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. "Then tonight is the last time that you will operate in this city with my sanction. I can't have a loose cannon on these streets. And I can't knowingly turn a blind eye to one going forward, either." As Bruce opened his mouth to reply, she continued, "Would you? If you were sitting behind my desk?"
That checked him. If he were trying to give someone a chance to do what they had done in the past, knowing all the while how badly it would reflect on him if things were to go wrong... And if the last time things went wrong, that same person had got thirty of my colleagues killed... He closed his eyes. Even if Sawyer's sole motivation in placing these stipulations was to cover her own... backside, it was reason enough. She wasn't his enemy. She was going as far as she could to help him, but he had to meet her the rest of the way.

He brought a hand to his forehead. The police academy. Testing. A psych profile. Guns... He pressed his lips together firmly. Enough. Tim needed him. He let out a long breath. "I accept your terms. Now, what information have your people garnered so far?"

"Barbara, have you got a fix on the origin point of Joker's broadcast?"

There was a moment's hesitation. "Not yet. Looks like he's done the cyber jamming equivalent of putting chewing gum in a lock; crude but very effective." She sounded annoyed. "I can break through, but it'll take time."

Bruce nodded to the monitor. "Acknowledged. Barbara, on the footage, just when he specifies that it's me he wants—that noise in the background... could it be a subway train?"

"Yeah, maybe," Barbara said, "but even if it is, you're still going to be looking for a needle in a haystack. It's just going to be a slightly smaller haystack."

She was right. With fifteen subway routes crisscrossing the city and trains stopping every two to seven minutes, depending on the time of day, Joker's hideout could be anywhere in that underground labyrinth. Bruce glowered. "Acknowledged. Keep me informed."

Barbara didn't close the channel. "You're going after him."

"I have to."

There was a long silence. "Now I understand about the deputization order in the GCPD system. And why you brought up that whole gun business this morning."

Bruce tensed, clenching his fist involuntarily. But all he said was, "Sawyer works fast. I need to do the same."

"Bruce." The monitor screen split vertically and Dick's image filled the second half. "You don't have to do this. I can wear the suit."

"He'll know it's you."

"Not necessarily," Dick said. "Up until now, I haven't really tried to be you in the suit. Actually, it was important enough that everyone know that I wasn't you. But that doesn't mean I can't change tactics." His expression hardened. "Besides, we have no reason to believe that Joker will let either of you go, even if you do follow his instructions."

Bruce shook his head. "He recognized Tim. He'll recognize you."

"Bruce..."

"Dick. Trap or no trap, it has to be me. There's no other..." He stopped. "He has to see me," Bruce said slowly. "But that doesn't mean I have to go alone."
Dick blinked. Then a slow smile spread across his face. Bruce returned it briefly before he sobered once more. "Meanwhile, we still need to narrow down where he's holed up. How long will it take you to get over here?"

Bruce saw Dick punch a button and his image on the screen receded slightly, revealing that he was currently seated behind a steering wheel. "Put it this way," Dick said, still smiling. "When your perimeter alert goes off in a minute or two, don't be too surprised."

They watched the broadcast again for the twelfth time. Dick nodded, "it's a subway train, all right," he said with a frown, "but they don't usually squeal like that."

"The older ones do when they decelerate," Bruce said. "Wait," he leaned forward with narrowed eyes. "The train is decelerating, but it's not stopping. Rewind a few seconds... stop. Playback." As the sound of the passing train burst from the speakers again, Bruce nodded. "The brakes squeal a bit, but that's not a sudden deceleration. The driver was anticipating it."

"What would you say," Dick asked. "About 35 miles per hour?"

"In that range, yes."

"So, too fast to stop comfortably, but slower than..." Dick snapped his fingers. "The number six train."

Bruce nodded sharply. "The double-hairpin turn between Kiley and Oxoloff Stations."

"Orpheus's old turf. He's in the Hill."

Bruce's fingers flew over his console keyboard. "It would be helpful to know if that train was headed east or west, but this still narrows it down considerably." He paused, thinking aloud. "The Hill was hit hard during the quake. The old tunnels weren't salvageable, so the city sealed them off and laid down new tracks in some of the existing catacombs during the rebuild. Joker must have found a way inside that maze." He opened a comm-link. "Barbara, I need the locations and access codes for any supply rooms, maintenance tunnels, or anything of that nature in either of these two locations." He highlighted the relevant sections of the subway map.

"I'm on it. I guess you're taking the coaster car?"

Bruce shot Dick a sharp glance. Dick shrugged. "I haven't used it since you've been away, but it should be operational."

"He'll be expecting the Batmobile," Bruce said thoughtfully. "Does the six train still go on reduced service at one AM?"

Dick nodded. "But watch out for hikers."

"Hikers?"

Dick made a face. "Local idiots who get their thrills by tramping through the subway tunnels during the downtime. If the city ever settles, I'll drop them a friendly warning one night."

Bruce's lips twitched. "Before or after you ride the top of the monorail blindfolded?"

"Hey. You showed me how to do that."

"After you nearly got yourself killed doing it the wrong way."
"After you thought I was going to get myself killed doing it my way." He made an exasperated sound. "You're modifying one of the suits for tonight?"

Bruce nodded. "I can't wear the symbol, but I need the Kevlar."

"Well, since I've been wearing your costume for the last few years, you could always..."

"I'm not wearing the Nightwing suit, Dick."

"Hey, turnabout is..."

"No." Bruce turned back to the city map. "Bring me up to speed," he ordered. "What's changed in the Hill over the last three years?"

Bruce had never approved of the rail car with its gleaming bat-symbol painted over the hood, so like—and yet so different from—the stylised image he'd adopted. It hadn't been his idea. Years ago, when Bane had put him out of commission, he'd entrusted the city to Jean Paul Valley, and it had been Valley who had created the car so that he could get around the city without worrying about traffic congestion. The design had been something which—as Dick had aptly pointed out—closely resembled a roller coaster car. It was designed for travel on either the subway rails or the elevated monorail. In addition to being a timesaver, the car also afforded a greater element of surprise—the Batmobile was somewhat conspicuous. Still, despite those advantages, Bruce had never cared for it. While the coaster car was faster, it also made it far too easy to miss criminal activity taking place above ground. Besides, although Bruce rarely admitted it, he loved driving through Gotham at night.

Tonight, though, the coaster car was simply the quickest way to Joker's hideout.

Bruce took a deep breath. Then he donned a black motorcycle helmet. He was wearing the Kevlar suit, minus—as Sawyer had stipulated—the bat-insignia. He'd left off the cape as well, but kept the gloves, boots, and utility belt. He'd thought about leaving the helmet off, but it just felt strange going into action with nothing covering his face. He pulled down the silver-mirrored face shield and turned to Dick. "Ready?" He asked, vaulting into the driver's seat.

Nightwing followed suit on the passenger side. "Set." He looked at the ensemble a moment longer than was absolutely necessary.

Bruce tensed. "Well?" He barked.

Dick shrugged. "Nothing. Just thinking that if you do get in with the department, you might want to propose that suit design for the SWAT team."

Any response Bruce might have made was cut short when Selina approached them. Helena was clinging to her leg. "Hope you two weren't going to leave without saying goodbye."

Bruce swung out of the car and pushed up his visor. "We'll be back soon, I hope." He placed both hands on Selina's shoulders. "We'll be fine."

"I'm not worried." She smiled wearily. "Well, okay, yes I am, but I know you can handle it."

"That makes one of us. He suppressed the thought and bent down to his daughter's eye level. "Good night, Helena," he said gently. "I'll see you in the morning."

Helena smiled. "Night."
"Hey," Dick stooped down, pulling off his mask in a swift motion. "Got a goodbye hug for your big brother?"

Helena's smile grew bigger as she flung her arms around his neck. "Bye bye."

Dick grinned at Selina. "You, I'm not hugging."

She laughed. "Just get him back in one piece, will you?"

Bruce whirled and started back toward the coaster car. "Let's go."

All at once, Helena let out a wail. "Nooooo! Daddy!"

Bruce stopped. "Helena? What..." She was already running forward and crashed full tilt into his leg. Undaunted, she seized his hand in both of hers and began to tug. "No!"

"Helena!" Too sharp, he thought guiltily. "Helena..." he bent down again and gently caressed her hair. "Helena, I'm sorry, but I do have to go."

In answer, Helena pressed her forehead into the back of his hand and kept pulling. "No..."

"Come on," Selina scooped her up then. "Daddy has work to do. He'll be home in the morning." She looked at Bruce. "You'd better leave. She's not going to calm down until you're gone now."

Bruce nodded. "If Tim weren't..."

"I know. We'll be fine."

They got into the car. As Bruce turned on the ignition, Helena let out another wail. "Daddy! DAAAAAAADDDEEEEEEEEEE!"

"There are maintenance rooms on either side of the double hairpin," Oracle said. "But there's been a construction order filed with the mayor's office to shore up the walls in the west tunnel only."

"Meaning that the walls are weaker there, giving Joker a better chance to break through," Bruce nodded. "Good work, Oracle."

"Hey, I learned from the best, B."

Bruce's lips twitched. Without missing a beat, he replied, "Keep us informed of anything further, O. Over and out."

"ETA seventeen minutes," Dick said. "We're going to have to switch tracks in about twelve seconds, eleven..."

"On it. Triggering now." One section of track shifted and the coaster car shot off down a different tunnel.

As Bruce steered the car, he realized that something had changed. He was focused. He was alert. Sights, sounds, smells, all felt clearer and sharper. He noted every crack in the crumbling mortar, every new bolt that hadn't yet had the chance to dull with grime and dust. Beneath the mirrored visor, a slow smile spread across his face. He was back. It was about time...

As they approached the double-hairpin curve, Bruce reduced the car speed to 10 miles per hour.
There was a track switch almost immediately after the second curve, which would move the car onto a side rail, out of the way of any Gotham Transit trains that might happen along, should the rescue mission take longer than anticipated.

Slowing down was the only thing that allowed him to slam the brakes in time, when they saw a figure with a long walking stick a few hundred yards ahead of them.

The walker whirled, his eyes widening in fear as the coaster car bore down, screeching to a halt six inches away from him.

Bruce vaulted out of the car, an LED flashlight in one hand. Fear and fury were uppermost in his mind as he flicked it on, catching the walker—or 'hiker', from what Dick had described earlier—full in the face. "These tunnels are off limits to pedestrians," he said in an ominously calm voice.

Blinded, the hiker took a hasty step back. His heel caught on a bit of uneven ground and he fell on his posterior. "I... I was ju-just..."

"Nearly run over," Bruce said, in the same flat tone.

Still seated, the hiker tried to scuttle backwards.

"You'll make better speed if you stand up," Bruce stated. "In five hundred yards, there's a ladder to the surface. You'll come out on McCarthy, just north of Joudrey. It should take you less than five minutes if you go now."

The hiker blinked. Then, slowly, he pushed himself up.

"Now..." Bruce said menacingly.

The hiker ran.

Bruce stalked back to the car and got in. "Well?" He demanded, seeing Nightwing smirking.

"Nothing. Just... this is really starting to feel like old times."

Bruce brought the coaster car to a halt several yards past the maintenance door. "There should be a tarp in the trunk," he said. "Give me a hand covering this."

Dick nodded.

"You know what to do once we're inside?"

Dick sighed. "Stay in the shadows. If it's a choice between tailing you and finding Harrier, find Harrier. Leave Joker to you, but try to take down Harley before she can back him up while you walk right into his trap. Have I mentioned how much I hate that part of it?"

"It's not something I'm looking forward to either," Bruce pointed out. If you do find Harrier, signal me."

"And if you're in over your head, signal me." When Bruce didn't answer, Dick sighed. "I'm not nine anymore. You don't have to keep protecting me."

"I might say something similar to you."

Dick winced. "You do realize that if you go through with what you're planning, you'll be expected to
"Have backup that actually covers you, as opposed to going off to do their own thing?"

"Probably," Bruce admitted, "but let's take this one goal at a time." They were at the maintenance door now. He opened a channel to Barbara. "Oracle, do you have that access code?"

"Affirmative, B." A moment later, she rattled off five numbers.

"Got it." He turned to Dick and took a deep breath. "Listo?"

Dick shook his head, but he was smiling. "Hep."

Bruce punched in the code and a green bar lit up over the keypad. The door slid open. "Let's go."

Inside the maintenance room, they found that the bricks and mortar of one of the walls was crumbling, leaving a fissure wide enough for a grown man to easily fit through. Bruce stooped down and picked up something from the dust. "Quinn passed here," he said.

Dick looked at the grimy white pompom and nodded. "We're on the right track, all right."

"Wait five minutes," Bruce said. "Then come in, but stay out of sight. Let me keep Joker occupied."

"Got it. Still hate it, but got it."

"You didn't have to tag along, you know."

"I could always turn back."

Bruce stopped. "Actually, I'd prefer you didn't."

For a moment, Dick wasn't sure he believed his own ears. In a more subdued tone, he said, "Then I won't."

Bruce nodded curtly and stepped through the crack. "Be careful," he said. Then he was gone.

"I will be," Dick said to the empty room. His expression hardened. "Careful you don't notice me following you." He activated his comm-link. "Oracle, are you picking up that transponder?"

"So far," Barbara said. "But he's going to kill you when he finds out you tagged his belt."

"Hey, he told me to tail him. I'm just making sure I don't lose track."

"And he used to do it to you."

"Well, there is that..." he admitted with a grin. Dick waited five minutes. Then he took off after Bruce.

As Bruce made his way cautiously through the catacombs, he tried not to think about a night nearly three years earlier when another of his enemies had captured someone he cared for. His jaw hardened. He had failed Alfred, but he wasn't going to fail Tim.

Harley had left a clear trail on the dusty floor. No somersaults or cartwheels—at least, not recently. Judging from her footprints, she'd been carrying something roughly her own body weight with her.

He followed the trail around the bend and saw a thin beam of light coming from a crack under a
door. He frowned. There were two doors directly ahead of him and, unlike the path he'd been following, the entire area from where he was standing to those doors had been swept clean. As he drew closer, he realized that there were two more doors; one on the right-hand wall and one on the left.

*You knew it was a trap going in. Don't go whining about it now.*

He took a deep breath. Then he took a handheld device out of one of the pockets of his utility belt and placed it against the door on the left wall. Over his comm-link, he heard raucous laughter, punctuated by a breathy, "Aw, Mistah J! You're such a kidder!"

He frowned, removed the device, and set it against the next door. The sound of heavy blows and muffled groans greeted him. White hot rage boiled within him and he took a few steps back in preparation for a flying leap.

*If Joker is beating someone up right now, who is Harley talking to in the other room?*

He froze. Joker could have a henchman doing the beating... But then, he'd still want to be in the room *watching*.

Bruce moved on to the third door; the one with the light shining under it. Now he heard slow, ragged breaths, punctuated by sporadic moans.

There was no sound at all from the last door.

He nodded to himself. No matter how he sliced it, no matter which door he opened, Joker had a surprise rigged. However, if he was right, there was nothing of interest to him behind the first two doors. Tim was behind the third door—evenl those sounds were pre-recorded. The only question was whether Joker and Harley would be too. He frowned. Or all the sounds might be pre-recorded and they'd mined this place with booby traps and left the premises entirely.

He thought for a moment before he removed a lump of C-4 from another pouch of his utility belt. Carefully, he tore the lump in half and in half again, and flattened the smaller piece against the first door. It didn't take long to prepare and insert the blasting cap. He did the same with the other three doors. Then he set the timers and stood back.

When all four doors blew off their hinges a moment later, he fired a flare gun into the pitch blackness of the last room and was rewarded by a high-pitched squeal. With grim determination, he took a step forward.

That was when a boxing glove on an extending arm crashed into his abdomen, propelling him back into corridor.

"Batsy!" Joker exclaimed, leaping out of the room, "How positively smashing to see you after all this time!"

"Okay, CBW. There's a rotating security camera around the next bend. It sweeps 180 degrees every twenty-five seconds."

"Roger that," Dick nodded. While it didn't really matter if the City discovered their presence in the tunnels, they couldn't discount the possibility that Joker had hacked the grid. Bruce didn't care about being spotted. He wanted Joker to know that he was coming. Dick, however, was operating under a different imperative. "How many seconds to the start of the next sweep?"
There was a moment's pause. "Eleven... ten... nine..."

"Thanks! Got it."

He timed it perfectly, snagging his grapnel around one of the ceiling rafters and swinging above the camera's range before it could catch him. He was just rounding the next bend when he heard the explosions. Don't panic, he told himself firmly. Until you know whether that was Joker or Bruce, do not panic and do not break cover. Stick to the plan. Still he quickened his pace through the rafters. That blast had sounded close...

Had Bruce been a fraction of a second slower, or a few inches closer, the punch he took would have cracked ribs. Instead, it merely knocked him backwards several feet. As he stumbled, he let fly two batarangs.

Joker laughed and twisted out of the way. "Predictable as ever. But seriously, Bats, it's been a dull couple of years without you. How ya been? Pull up a chair. Let's have tea. I forget," he giggled, raising the glove again, "do you want one lump, or two?"

Bruce glanced quickly down the corridor, his eyes panning from floor to ceiling. Dick was holding position, perched on one of the rafters—he'd never have spotted him, were it not for the infra-red scanner built into his helmet.

"Harrier," he snarled.

Dick frowned. "You sure?" he said softly into the comm-link.

"Oh, now Batsy, if I gave away the top draw so early in the evening, nobody would want to stick around. Why, Harley hasn't even given you your door prize yet."

"Harrier!" Bruce snapped, as a raucous voice giggled.

"Heeeeeeereal it comes, B-Man!"

Bruce dodged and the heavy wooden board passed over him and continued toward Joker.

"Harley!" Joker snapped, flinging himself to one side "WATCH where you throw that thing!"

"Sorry, Mistah J. I thought fer sure he wouldn't duck in time. Aaah!" She cartwheeled away from the extending boxing glove.

Bruce noted with satisfaction that Dick was no longer in the hallway. He must have slipped by in the confusion. "Where..." he snarled, "is... Harrier?"

"Someone's got a one-track mind," Joker taunted. "Harrier. Harrier. Always Harrier. What about me? What about my needs, huh? You know what your problem is, Batsy? You're selfish. I mean, look, I invite you down here for a little reunion, and you don't even dress for the occasion. Even for some two-bit punk, you wear the suit. What's the matter, Batsy? Don't I rate?" His eyes narrowed. "Hmmm... come to think of it, I did demand the one true Batman. Now, if Dent were here, he'd probably flip a coin to decide whether it counts if you treat this like a come-as-you-are." His smile grew more menacing. "That's what Dent would do... but I'm not Dent. So, maybe I oughta just snuff the kid anyway."

A metal shield slid down, cutting them off from the four open doors.
Bruce launched himself at Joker. To the untrained eye, it looked like a clumsy charge, born out of uncontrolled rage and poor judgment. Joker giggled, his body already moving to evade the attack, even as he readied the extending arm.

That was when Bruce fired his grapnel, snagged a ceiling rafter, and rose into the air, delivering a high, stinging kick square to Joker's chin.

Joker merely laughed. "So, it really IS you, Batsy!" He calmly wiped the blood off his chin. "I thought for sure, someone would have done you in by now." He blinked his eyes rapidly. "Think of it, Batsy. Someone else taking my rightful role and, hee hee, punching your ticket for you. Think of the injustice! But that's what I love about you: you'll do anything to make sure justice is served for all. But not quite yet. First... How about a little appetizer, before you get your just desserts?"

In one swift motion, he released the boxing glove once more.

This time, it plowed into his solar plexus.

Even as Bruce groaned, his body was already reacting, rolling with the blow as much as possible, twisting in mid-air and swinging out with the grapnel again.

He raised his lower body, caught one of the rafters between his ankles, swung over and up into a handstand, somersaulted, landed in a half-crouch on the rafter, and stopped short. Harley was seated cross-legged on the floor calmly training a rifle on him.

"Oh, hey, B-Man. Fancy meetin' you here."

Dick froze when the shield came down, but the faint hissing sound spurred him to action. When you were dealing with Joker, hissing usually meant gas, and gas usually meant Smilex. Automatically, he pulled a gas mask out of one of his boot compartments and quickly fastened it in place. Then, holding another mask at the ready, he went in search of Tim.

Even as his mind was processing the situation, Bruce's hands were reaching toward his belt.

"Helmet," he whispered, "sound-proof mode."

There was a faint electronic beep. Then his world went silent.

From what he could read of Harley's lips, she was telling him to keep his hands visible. That was fine. He didn't actually need anything in the pouches, but she would have been suspicious if he hadn't made the attempt. He raised his hands calmly, waiting for Joker to move into position. There was no way that the clown was going to give Harley the honor of finishing him off. He'd claim that prize for himself. Bruce's gauntleted thumb found the remote control button at the base of his index finger and he waited. A little closer... more... yes, perfect. He pressed the button and the heel of his boot retracted, releasing a small disc.

Harley saw the device fall and whipped the gun around, firing before it hit the ground. That only ensured the desired effect a split-second earlier as the disc emitted a 170-decibel sound blast. Harley dropped the gun, pressing her hands tightly to her ears. Joker followed suit. Although the noise only lasted 20 seconds, that was time enough for Bruce to restrain them with plastic zip-ties. Incapacitated by the sonic grenade, the pair was in no shape to resist.

"Helmet," he commanded, "normal mode." Now he heard the faint hum of an electric generator, groans from his two captives, and various other ambient sounds. He activated his comm-link. "O. Do
you read?"

"Loud and clear, B. Status?"

"Alert GCPD: two for pickup. When did you last hear from Nightwing?"

"He checked in about ten minutes ago. Want me to raise him?"

Bruce considered. That had been before he'd slipped past him. "Negative." He eyed the metal shield that cut him off from the rest of the hideout. He'd used up his C-4 on the doors earlier. A quick check of Joker's pockets revealed a remote control device, but as none of the buttons were labelled, he wasn't going to risk blowing up the place. "I need you to raise something else."

A feeble giggle made him look down.

"It doesn't matter, Bat-Boob," Joker smirked. "On the other side of that wall, your former birdie's been breathing in a nice unhealthy dose of Smilex. By the time you get through, it'll be too late for you to do more than bury the kid." He giggled again and sang softly, but menacingly,

"But when you've got him decked out so serene

He'll be the happiest corpse you've ever seen.


Joker was still going strong. "Hey, come on, Batsy. Wasn't that old butler of yours a music hall actor? You've got to know the words! C'mon, sing it with me. Bet you've got a great baritone!

"What good is sitting, alone in your room?

Come hear the music play

Li—"

That was all he got out before Bruce's fist sent him painfully into oblivion.

"Oracle! NOW!"

Barbara's voice came crisply over the speakers in the helmet. "Hang on. I've almost got it. And Nightwing just checked in. He said to tell you that Harrier's hurt... badly, but his breathing is okay."

Bruce exhaled slowly. It wasn't the same situation. Then, he'd been hungry, exhausted, feeling the effects of over three days on high alert. Now, nearly three years later, he might not yet be fully back to where he had once been, but he was doing better than he had that night. And he wasn't alone. And Tim was alive. He closed his eyes. "Understood."

"And I've got that shielding under control now," she added, as the metal wall slid up.

Nightwing was on the other side of it, wheeling a gurney. Tim was lying on it. "It's bad," Nightwing said grimly. "Someone worked him over pretty well with a blunt instrument; he's almost definitely got a few cracked ribs. I can't tell about internal injuries but the suit armor and his restraints deflected some of the impact. Oh, don't panic when the breathing mask comes off. I gave him the Smilex antidote, but his facial muscles are still a bit stiff."

Bruce nodded. "Harrier?" He asked, looking at Tim for confirmation.
Tim lifted his hand and gave Bruce a weak thumbs-up.

"Let's get home." He looked at Nightwing. "We'll have to move him into the back seat of the car. Carefully. Radio ahead to Raven. Have her meet us in the cave. Her healing talents will be helpful."

Dick blinked. Of course, it made sense—he'd been about to suggest dropping Tim off with the Titans, so that he could avail himself of just that opportunity. But for Bruce to request it... he really had come a long way.

"You got it," he grinned.

Although Dick couldn't see it through the mirrored visor, Bruce was smiling too as he took the other end of the gurney, steadying it for the trip back to the coaster car.

**Epilogue**

Bruce was sitting in the cave again, the gun and ammunition on the table before him. He stared at the items through hooded eyes. He had to do this. He'd done it years ago. He'd hated it then too, but he'd still done it.

The elevator door whooshed open and Dick emerged. He took in the scene at a glance. "Tim's asleep," he said. "Raven's just left. You've been down here for awhile," he added. "I was just coming to make sure..."

"I'm all right," Bruce said quickly. He shook his head. "No. I'm not. I don't like being strong-armed into things; even when I recognize the necessity. I don't like taking other people's orders. I don't like guns. And I'm about to be thrust into a situation that will force me to endure all three factors."

Dick let out a low whistle. "What are you going to do?"

Bruce fixed him with a piercing gaze. "Manage. Somehow."

Dick hesitated for a moment. Then he got another chair, pushed it next to the table and sat down. "It's not going to be easy for you," he said bluntly, "but when have you ever let something like that stop you?"

Bruce grunted. "Are you speaking from experience?"

"A bit, I guess," Dick shrugged. "I wasn't a cop for very long." He made a face. "And the truth is I was pretty lousy at it. Or at least, I probably would have done better if I hadn't been spending my off-duty hours doing what I'd been doing since I was nine. High-stress day and night jobs take their toll. Especially when your C.O. wants to know why you keep falling asleep in briefing and you can't exactly be honest about it, but the regular lies make you look even worse than usual. Not that you're going to have that particular issue."

"Point," Bruce admitted.

Dick shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "You're going to have one other big advantage over me in this." He looked down. "Look, before I tell you what it is, I want you to know, I'm past it all now. And even when I wasn't, I understood where you were coming from. That doesn't mean it didn't affect me—that's why I know how big a deal it really is, or I wouldn't bring it up."

Bruce looked at him, his face expressionless, waiting.

Dick's lips quirked up in a half-smile. "Sorry if this comes out sappy. I figure, every few months or
so, I'm allowed. Okay." His smile faded as his eyes locked on Bruce's. "Having a strong support network makes a huge difference. You'll have that. I didn't. Not only will you have that, you'll have people in it who really have been out there, doing what you're going to be doing. If a situation comes up that you think it might help to discuss, we're going to get where you're coming from."

Bruce blinked. "I didn't want you to be an officer," he said slowly, "but I hadn't realized that—"

"Yeah, well, it wasn't something I brought up all that much. Bruce, leave it. What's past is past. You can keep beating yourself up over it, or you can chalk it up to experience and move on." He shrugged. "Personally, I'd vote for moving on. Fewer ulcers that way, but hey, your call."

Bruce sighed. "If I can just..." his eyes flicked toward the gun.

Dick nodded. "Yeah, Hush did a number on you. Not the first time, either."

"If this is some sort of attempt at reverse psychology..."

Dick shook his head. "It's not. Seriously, Joker likes to think he's your arch enemy, but he's not the one who manipulated Black Mask, stuck you in Arkham, and messed with your head until you thought you belonged there. Look. Sometimes, like it or not..." He let out a slow breath, "the bad guys win. And we both know it. Maybe this is just one of those times."

Bruce frowned. Then slowly, deliberately, he reached into the box of ammunition. Almost at once, his hand began to sweat. He couldn't do this. He couldn't use a gun. What was he thinking? Walk away, then. Give Hush that victory. What's one more? His frown deepened. One more would be one more too many. Go ahead then. Jump through Sawyer's hoops like some performing poodle. This is a perfect excuse for you to back out. He stopped. He wasn't looking for excuses. And following orders wasn't necessarily a sign of weakness; some of the strongest people he knew respected the chain of command...

There was a barely audible click.

His eyes widened. Had he just done it? There was one less round in the box. It wasn't on the table. It hadn't rolled to the floor. It was in the magazine.

Slowly, carefully, he reached back into the box.

The second one was easier, but it was still an effort. His feelings were still present, still prominent in his mind, but they weren't in control anymore. He hated guns, and much as he tried to suppress it, he remained somewhat afraid of them and likely always would. But the fear didn't rule him. Hush didn't rule him. And even if he was going to take orders from Maggie Sawyer, that didn't mean that she was going to be ruling him either.

With a sigh, he slid the fifteenth round into the magazine and picked up the gun. He flipped the safety catch down, lifted the magazine, and slid it unerringly into the pistol grip bottom.

As Dick started to smile, Bruce shook his head. "I'm not sure this is cause for celebration," he said wearily. "But at least we know one thing now."

Dick waited.

"Hush hasn't won. And he won't. Not now. Not yet. Not ever."
Dick grinned. "Not with us around. So." He flexed his fingers and leaned back. "Ready for the academy?"

Bruce shook his head. "Absolutely not."

Dick sighed. "Well," he said brightening once more, "we've got more than a week to change that. And besides," he added, smiling more broadly, "I don't think they're going to be ready for you, either."

It's worth it all learning at last
The future begins with the past
Step out of the shadow it casts
And let the sun shine on your shoes
Kick 'em off in the rain if you choose
There's nothing like nothing to lose...

—Mary Chapin Carpenter, "We Traveled So Far"

Chapter End Notes

Bruce's story will continue in Unrehearsable, Installment #4 of the Locked-verse!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!