**Buttercup**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Batman - All Media Types, Batman (Movies - Nolan), Batman (Comics), DCU (Comics), Marvel (Comics), Injustice 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>The Joker, Batman, Harley Quinn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Adopted Children, Children, Hiding in Plain Sight, Growing Up, Parenthood, Maturation Process, Traumatic Outbursts, Loving Parent, Insanity, Mental Health Issues, Single Father, Fluffy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 1 of Wildcard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-05-18 Completed: 2017-05-21 Chapters: 30/30 Words: 48785</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Buttercup**

by Kyn

**Summary**

It's the first day of Kindergarten, and a very unlikely parent is throwing a temper tantrum. His five-year-old looks on, bewildered but not exactly afraid. His psychological state leaves him ill-equipped for fatherhood, but this loud display of separation anxiety *does* suggest he's emotionally attached to his child. Hmm. Well, good luck Joker. And, uh, good luck to your poor kid...

"Ha! I have a surprisingly tender parent for someone who lobs knives and lit sticks of dynamite my way, don't I?"

**Notes**

Five Guesses who 'Mr. Adams' is.
Marcy Adams was five years old. It was the first day of kindergarten, and her father was a mess. He stalked back and forward across the floor of their home, his hands shaking, mumbling incoherently to himself. Now and then he would twitch violently, or unleash a curse. Mercy covered her ears whenever he did this, just as he'd instructed her.

Their 'house' was built within the shell of an old warehouse, with each room spaced from all the others, each like an individual set for a movie. Their kitchen was cuddled up gently under an overhang, which gave it the feeling of safety, and it served as the center or nexus of the home. Marcy knew this entire arrangement was unusual only because she had seen no similar homes on the television set, just as she knew it was unusual that she possessed no mother, and no siblings.

The family kitchen had an islet with bar stools drawn up to it. Marcy was sitting on one, her legs dangling high above the floor. She was all dressed up for school in a new jean jacket with pink flowers embroidered around the hems. Her flower-printed backpack was perched colorfully on her back. A new lunch pail, emblazoned with the colors of her favorite cartoon superhero, Spider-Man, lay open upon the kitchen islet.

Halfway through making her lunch, her father had thrown a fit. And her father's fits were... special.

As Mercy watched, her father stalked back over to the kitchen, picked up the knife rack, and proceeded to hurl kitchen knife after kitchen knife at a dart board conveniently placed within throwing distance. He never missed. He ruined one of his good knives by splitting its handle with the thrown blade of another. He swore. Marcy dutifully covered her ears, and waited quietly, and watched each knife as it flew.

She hoped that would be the end, but when he threw the last knife, her father screamed a deep primal scream, like the scream of an animal. Things got worse. He seized onto a pile of dishes and sent them crashing to the ground, shattering into countless pieces. He threw the microwave, and every pot and pan he could find, and screamed, and then just stood there, breathing heavily, his shoulders bowed and his head lowered. He was still shaking.

A long moment passed in this fashion. Marcy thought that she had never seen him so upset. Not for the first time, she wished she could sense her father the way she sensed other people. She wanted to know what was wrong, and she wanted to understand what might happen next.

"We could move," he said suddenly, and she could tell by the tone of his voice that he was very, very sick: It was a quiet voice, a high and child-like voice, cute and pouting, laughing and demented. Bad. "We could move again, lie about your age, another change of name, another change of face..."

Marcy frowned. While she had never been particularly fond of her most recent name (Her favorite last name had been Calypso), she had been looking forward to the first day of kindergarten for what seemed like forever.

"It wouldn't be hard," he purred, trilled. "You could stay home a few more years..." He slowly turned to look at her, acid eyes glinting. His voice dropped in volume and shot up even further in pitch, into an almost fearful, uncertain whine. "Couldn't you, little Buttercup?"

Marcy Adams hesitated, trying to decide what to do. Her father had never hit her, or cursed at her, or thrown anything at her; but that didn't mean his fits were any less scary. After a moment, she pushed her way out of her stool and carefully approached him. He turned to meet her. His quivering didn't
"Or," he cooed, hoping to find a solution, "I could blow up the school!" That of course didn't make any sense. "I could, you know, it would be easy." He knelt down as she reached him, with twitchy not-smiles curling his scarred cheeks. He licked his lower lip, nervous, and reached forward to touch her. "What do you say, Buttercup?"

Marcy touched her father's face. Her fingers brushed over the familiar scars in his cheeks, and traced up slightly into his curling yellow hair. She looked him in the eyes, leaned towards him, and pressed her forehead to his. He grimaced, lips pressing into a thin line. "Buttercup," he whined on realizing that he wasn't going to get his way. His eyelids lowered to a half-closed state, and he nuzzled gently against her.

"It'll be okay, daddy," she promised him. Yellow-green eyes opened again. His forehead creased in an expression of pain. Then he darted forward, wrapping his arms tightly around her and clutching her against him. He smothered his face into her hair, and he breathed deeply. Marcy was pretty sure her father smelt her when he did that, and she always found it funny. She couldn't help but giggle slightly, and hugged him back as tight as she could.

When he spoke again, his voice had dropped an octave, into a natural, warm, rumbling baritone: "Alright, squirt. You win."

*Squirt.* That was what her father called her, always. Not 'Buttercup.' Not any of her other names. Marcy knew she was 'Squirt' more than she'd ever be anyone else, and she liked that.

He pulled back and while his eyes were somewhat pained, his face was smiling. "Geez, your first day of school. There you go, making me feel old."

"You're not old, daddy," she told him happily, but then recalled the fit he'd just had: "Although... you did scare me... And you broke a lot of stuff." Yup, and he'd have to fix it and clean it all, too.

Her father glanced around them, looking at the shattered plates, dented pots, and broken kitchen appliances scattered around them. "I'm a terrible parent," he murmured thoughtfully, as if having forgotten them, and she protested his assessment with a *gasp!* He evaluated the unfortunate condition of his kitchen and then looked back to Marcy, an apologetic expression on his face. "I'm sorry, squirt. I-I didn't mean for you to see that..."

"It's okay daddy," she shrugged, having already forgiven him.

"No, it's actually not. You were right to be afraid. You'll... understand when you're older..." He trailed off for a moment, but then ruffled her hair. "But look at you! Don't you look snazzy, all dressed up for school?" He slipped into an effeminate lisp that had nothing to do with insanity. "That jacket, those shoes, those pants! They just look fa-a-bulous!" She broke out laughing. "But this hair!"

"Da-ddy!" she laughed in protest, play-fighting against him. "You've got to make my lunch." He dropped the act and scooped her off the ground with one arm, giving a deep laugh as he did so. She squealed in delight. "Ah, that's right. You caught me, squirt; I was stalling for time!" He plopped her back in one of the stools and then slipped gracefully around the table, settling back to work on her lunch pail. "Alright, now, where was I?"

He picked up the butter knife and went back to smoothing mayonnaise over her turkey sandwich. "Mayonnaise- check! Lettuce..." he spun around and threw open the refrigerator, and conducted a head of lettuce back to the kitchen islet by tossing it into the air and keeping it afloat through a
mixture of juggling and sleight of hand. He bounced it against his boot heel, knee, and shoulder until it finally came to rest on his cutting board. He pulled one of his ubiquitous knives out of his back pocket, and quickly cut off a layer of lettuce. "Check!" Marcy clapped.

He cooked like a show chef, tossing his vegetables nimbly through the air, and catching them on his utensils. Her sandwich was assembled in no time, and was soon followed by fruit, vegetables, a bottle of chocolate milk and a pack of fruit gelatin for dessert. He packed the articles carefully into her lunch pail, closed it, and then slid it in front of her and planted his hands on his hips. "Tada!" He beamed.

She laughed and held the pail to her chest (it was kinda big to carry comfortably). "Thanks daddy," she said. "I should go to the bus stop, the bus will come soon."

"That's right," he said, and he quickly hopped around the islet to help her out of the chair. "I'll walk you there." She nodded with a smile and placed her little hand in one of his much larger, calloused ones. At the door he paused to study her one more time. "Do you have your lucky card?" he asked.

Marcy nodded, "Of course!" and pulled the card out of her pocket to show him. Then she tucked it away again. Her father licked his thumb and smoothed back some of her stray hair so that it lay neatly behind her ears. After straightening her jacket and favoring her with a beaming smile, he rested a hand on her shoulder and guided her out of the warehouse doors, out to the bus stop.

He waited beside her, and squeezed her shoulder affectionately when the bus arrived. She felt his personality crack slightly as she slipped free of his arms and boarded the vehicle. His smile became a mask, and the rest of him plummeted. He waved to her as the bus shifted into drive and slowly sped away. She waved back, because she already missed him, because she was nervous about her first day, and because she knew he needed it.
Marcy hopped along beside her father as they walked through the mall. They were on a winter shopping trip. Every time they moved, Marcy and her father left the majority of their possessions behind them. The little family required new holiday decorations, and more winter clothing.

It was a dazzling time of year for Marcy. She loved being at the mall, seeing so many people and wondering at so many interesting items. The reflections of the future were everywhere and baffling and exciting.

"I love shopping trips!" she chirped happily. Her father chuckled at her enthusiasm.

"More than school?" he asked. Marcy didn't pick up that there were ulterior reasons for his questions. He kept his voice appropriately jovial to hide them.

"School's great!" she cheered. "But I like shopping more, it's special!" *Because I am spending time with you outside! And look at all the people!*

Her father grinned at her.

Marcy had always thought her father looked a little odd without scars. Whenever the duo left home, he hid the tell-tale markings with bits of false skin and makeup. He was quite an artist with makeup, actually. Marcy studied the edges of his mouth as he laughed, but could not detect so much as a hint of damaged flesh. So perfect!

"Right now it's decorated for Halloween," her father told her with a mischievous look. "But we'll come back near Christmas. They'll have a gargantuan tree here, tall as that ceiling up there!" He stooped to point for her benefit.

"No!" she cooed in delighted disbelief. *So tall?*

"Really," he ruffled her hair.

Marcy smiled up at where the tree would be. She could feel the shade of its presence already, see the edges of its ghostly shape. Her father paused what he'd been doing to quickly take her hand, and watched her carefully, but she did not see or feel much. She was mesmerized.

Marcy found crowds amazing, but also incredibly disorienting. She could sense the hundreds of people around her, could feel the reverberations of their inner natures, could feel each moved object and each potential drop of bad luck. Everything brushed against the everything else in kaleidoscopic ripples, each a branching thread in a vast potential future. The future. The future walked around her, and hid nothing.

Mr. Adams waited patiently, in the way one might be patient in booting an old computer, watching his daughter's dazed expression. When they had first entered the premises, she'd been overwhelmed, and her father had held her tight against him for a moment and covered her eyes to steady her. This time he waited to see if she might recover on her own.

She did not disappoint him, blinking rapidly after a moment and then turning to smile at him. He grinned back and ruffled her hair again. Still he didn't release her hand just yet; she was likely off a step and would be for another minute or so, slightly confused about whether events about her were transpiring in the present or in the future.
"Hey squirt, welcome back." He winked when she looked bashful, to let her know it had been no big deal. "Let's head over to that store, we need to get some new coats."

"Kay!"

Oh dear. What a very nice coat. Marcy's eyes lit up the moment she laid eyes on it. With a delighted gasp she hopped over to where it was, feeling the soft material of its exterior, kneading the underlying goose down. It was love at first sight.

"What do you have there, squirt?" her father asked, pushing past several rows of bloated, garish, cotton-stuffed winter garments

"I want this one!" she cried delightedly, and ran her fingers over the coat's beautiful floral embroidery work. It reminded her of her autumn jacket, of which she was also particularly fond.

She didn't see her father wince, but she heard the hesitation in his voice. "That one's a little expensive, kiddo," he told her with a glance at the price tag.

"But can I have it? I really like it!" she cooed happily, studying the coat and struggling to get it off its hanger. She wanted to try it on. "I love it! Help me, Daddy? I want to try it!"

Her father glanced around the store. When he didn't immediately leap to her assistance, Marcy turned an inquisitive look back at him. He had a cautiously worried look on his face. "Daddy?" she asked, hushing her voice even though she couldn't see the cause for concern.

He blinked, turning wide hazel eyes back to her almost as if in surprise. He tilted his head to the side for a moment, but then came up, and helped her pull the coat off the hanger. He unzipped it, helped her get each of her little arms through its sleeves, zipped it back up, and straightened it a little. Marcy laughed and hugged herself; it was a very warm coat.

Her father stood back and told her to spin around. By the time she'd made a complete circle, he was wearing a conspiratorial grin. "Oh, alright," he laughed. "Give me a second."

"Yay!" she cried in glee as he knelt down and reached into one of his boots. A moment later he pulled free a few one-hundred dollar bills, and passed them to her.

"There you go. But no more big purchases, okay?" he admonished.

Marcy laughed (cackled, honestly, though she was too tiny for a proper cackle) and hugged him. "Thank you! Thank you, you're the best!"

He laughed, hugging her back and momentarily pressing his face into her hair. "So are you, squirt," he told her. Then he tapped her nose, and kissed the top of her head, and sent her off to pay for the new coat.

That was when she saw the bunny in the pet store window across the hall, and went lightning-rod-straight in amazement.

Mr. Smith looked down at her in surprise. Then he squinted across the mall and set eyes on what she'd just been stupefied by. *Oh no. His expression flattened wryly. So much for 'no more big purchases'
Two problems plagued the Adams household. Firstly, Marcy Adams did not know what she wanted
to be for Halloween. Secondly, Mr. Adams was getting desperate for more attention from his only
child.

He had gone out and bought no less than seven enormous pumpkins, and he set them down proudly
in front of her soon after she returned home from school.

"Daddy! she exclaimed. *There are an amazing number of ways those two syllables can be
inflected*, her father thought. She'd been practicing her letters for school in the morning, but she
dropped everything to come over and appraise the giant orange gourds. She pat their swollen sides
and then laughed delightedly. "Why did you buy so many?" she asked him.

"Two of them are for carving, the others are for pies," her father cooed in explanation. "I thought
you could take off school tomorrow! We can carve pumpkins, bake pumpkin pie, maybe work on
your costume a little..."

Marcy blinked in surprised. "But I don't want to miss school. I like to play with the other kids, and
we're doing crafts tomorrow."

His face dropped almost immediately, and he flinched slightly without quite meaning to. "Oh," he
murmured, and then looked dejectedly down at his pumpkins.

Marcy blinked and straightened up a little. She took a moment to study her father, who seemed too
lost in thought to hide his own disappointment. The expression on his face seemed very unusual,
very *haunted*. Marcy frowned. She quickly hurried around the pumpkins and came up to hug his
legs. When he didn't immediately stoop to hug her, she knew that something was not quite right.

"Daddy?" she asked. Yellowed eyes drifted up to her face, but didn't focus on her. "Daddy, I heard
Mrs. Evans talking. Mrs. Evans is my teacher, remember? I heard her talking with Mrs. Kauffman
about... about how the grown ups are trying to plan the Kindergarten Halloween party. Mrs.
Kauffman said it wasn't going very well. She said the P... The... P... The P... T... something didn't
have enough people in it!"

Her father had slowly come back to himself as she spoke, and now his eyes widened in thoughtful
curiosity. "The PTA?" he asked.

"I think so," she cooed, happy to see that he had come out of his malaise. "Daddy, could you help
them with the Halloween party? We could make pumpkin pie for it, and... and carve pumpkins with
my friends!"

Mr. Adams stared at her in blatant wonderment. He had no idea what to say for the longest time. The
idea of joining a Parent-Teacher Association had never once crossed his mind. It simply hadn't
entered into his understanding of the realm of possibilities.

"Please, Daddy?" she begged. "Please, please, please, please, please, please?"

"That would be okay?" he asked her slowly, uncertainly. "Me coming to your school... that would
be okay?" Most people would have wanted him far away from all locations of *public assembly*, to
say nothing of large gatherings of children.

But his daughter exclaimed a delighted, "Yes!" and then went on to babble about all the reasons this
was a good idea: "Then you can meet all my friends! They all get jealous when they see my lunch and I told them about how great a cook you are! But a mean girl named Julie, she didn't believe me! She said guys can't cook! I told her she didn't know what she was talking about, but now the other kids aren't sure who to believe. You can come and make pies for them and then they're sure to know!"

Mr. Adams fidgeted, and then slowly knelt down. He took his daughter's little hands in his own and rubbed them gently with his thumbs a moment. Then he looked up at her.

Marcy didn't understand why he looked so frightened, so stunned, so overwhelmed.

"You brag about my cooking?" he asked, and his voice cracked.

"Of course!" she laughed hesitantly, but then worried creased her forehead, and she peered at her father uncertainly. "Was that wrong? What's wrong? Did I do something wrong?"

He laughed and then shuddered, dropping his head for a moment and breathing heavily. Marcy realized with a start that he was on the verge of crying. Her eyes went wide and she pushed forward into his arms and hugged him tightly. "What's wrong?" she exclaimed, alarmed. "What's wrong!?"

Her father hugged her against him then, pressing his face firmly into her hair. He really was crying! She could feel the sobs, even if he was keeping them quiet. Why? Marcy didn't understand, but she did know her dad would usually calm down if he hugged her. She smothered her face into his shoulder and hugged him tightly about the neck. After a moment he sat down with her and pulled her into his lap, rocking her and clutching her tightly to his chest.

"Nothing's wrong." he whispered at long last. But his voice cracked slightly, so he licked his lips and repeated himself. "Nothing's wrong. I'm only happy."

"Then why are you crying?" she whimpered, still very alarmed.

"I'm happy," he promised her, his voice stronger now. "Sometimes people cry when they are happy."

"Happy... tears...?" she asked, lifting her head to frown at him. "Why do that do that?"

"Because... because laughing and crying aren't so different," he admitted hoarsely. "One's just a little more damp." After a moment he lifted his face and wiped his nose and eyes with a shirt sleeve, and then kissed her cheek and cuddled her to him again. "I love you, squirt."

"I love you, too, only more," she mumbled honestly. An idea occurred to her, and she tried to look up at his face again. "Did you forget?"

He didn't answer, but he squeezed her a little tighter.

Marcy frowned. She wormed an arm free, and lifted it up to touch his face. He pulled back a little so that he could look at her. For a moment, Marcy just dabbed at his tears in confusion. "I love you more than all the schools in the whole world, Daddy," she promised him, because a lot of things suddenly felt as if they made a sort of sense.

And maybe she was proven right, because her father choked, sputtered, and then laughed and hugged her to him almost crushingly, as tight as he ever had.

"I'll do it," he told her with a laugh that was half sob. Apparently they two weren't so different. "I'll help with the Halloween party. I'll call the school tonight, and get hold of your t-teacher..."
Marcy was still very much concerned about his tears, but this was fantastic news. "You will?" she beamed. "You will? Yes! We're going to have the best Halloween party ever! All my friends are going to be so jealous that I have the best daddy at all. And I can show you my artwork that the teacher hung up on the classroom walls! And where my chair and desk are, and the class pet... he's a chinchilla!"

Her father didn't speak, but a gentle smile worked over his face. He listened to her list all the things that she would show him, before she suddenly cut off with a realization:

"Can we bring Nibbles?" she asked thoughtfully. "We can dress him up in a costume!"

Mr. Adams looked over her head, at the rabbit cage he'd built beside their kitchen. He smiled and nuzzled into his daughter's hair. His eyes were still a little reddened. "Maybe," he told her. "I'll ask." She smiled happily and hugged him back for awhile, glad to see that he was feeling much better.

"I'm thinking about my costume," she told him. "I thought about being a superhero, but then I thought I want to do something with lots of makeup because I think it will look really cool! So maybe I should be a zombie!"

He laughed. "Which superhero were you thinking of?" he asked. "Did you want to Bunny Woman?"

"Daddy, there's no such person!" she told him with a smile.

"But you have to dress up Nibbles to be your trusty crime-fighting partner!" he cooed.

"Oh yeah!" she exclaimed. "I think he'd make a good ghost, if I was a zombie. I was thinking... I like Spider Girl... but then I thought maybe if I wanted to be really scary, I could be a supervillain!"

"Supervillain? But you need a trusty sidekick! Are you going to be Black Cat and dress Nibbles up as a Kitty? The poor bunny would be terrified of his own reflection!"

"I wouldn't want to be Black Cat!" she cried. "She tries to hurt Spider-Man!"

"Ooh, so you have a crush on Spider-Man and wanted to be his giiirrlfriend?" he trilled happily. "I dunno, I'm gonna have to have a talk with that boy..."

"Daadddy!" she laughed and stuck out her tongue. "Grossss! Everyone dresses up like those supervillains, I want my costume to be really... all mine! Maybe I could be... could be... Poison Ivy?"

Her father seemed to jump slightly at her choice, but then he burst out laughing "You'll make the cutest Poison Ivy ever," he crooned delightedly, ruffling her hair. "I won't know how to make you scary, I'll just braid all sorts of flowers in your hair!"

She laughed and play-fought against him to make him stop mussing her hair. "Nnnnooo, I want to be scary!"

"But you'd make such an adorable Poison Ivy!" he protested. "We can dress Nibbles up as a sunflower!"

"I'm being a zombie!" she announced. "I'm being a scary zombie with sharp teeth, rawr, rawr!" He laughed and picked her up over his head. She squealed in delight and lifted out her arms, pretending she was flying. "I'm a zombie dragon!" she called, and made airplane noises and roars.

"Oh no, the zombie dragon!" he mock-screamed, and then jumped up and flew her all around the
kitchen. He set her down atop a counter and playfully cringed away "Aaahh! Help meeeeee!"

She laughed and pounced on his back. He caught her and let her crawl all over his shoulders as he pretended once to fall down, and then lifted her back up to fly around again. "Rawr, rawr! Vrrrrrooom!"
A zombie. A zombie. He could do a zombie. He had a good idea for how to get the makeup to simulate torn flesh.

Mr. Adams knelt down beside the bathroom sink and rummaged around within. He pulled out a few boxes of high-grade makeup, spirit gum, and other accessories. As he looked at his supplies, he drummed his fingers on the top of one box. The PTA! He almost laughed. Such a life he lived! They couldn't have guessed, not in their wildest imaginings.

He smiled warmly, thinking about how he planned to do his daughter's costume. He had to make sure her zombie self wasn't too ugly, or she might get picked on. Ha! What a thing to worry about. He enjoyed worrying about it. His life was funny that way.

The TV rattled off the news of the day. The most alarming story was that Dr. Octopus had been spotted near a very sensitive science facility; other than that, the news was fairly dry for a big city like New York. Of course, the weather was colder than it ought to have been that year, and a big cold front was coming in from the west. He was glad he'd bought Marcy that new coat.

"I've just been told," exclaimed the news man suddenly, in an alarmed voice, "that a warehouse in northern New Jersey burst into flames at approximately eleven thirty this afternoon. Our source says typical crime syndicates in the area were not involved."

Mr. Adams lifted his head and gave something of an absurd and condescending smile. The warehouse owner in question had been trying to transport some black diamonds in secret. Apparently he hadn't wanted to pay off the correct people in the underground.

"The cause of the explosion is uncertain, but police authorities are flocking to the scene. Witnesses say that a strange woman dressed up like a cat in black leather was present at the location, but fled before she could be apprehended. Our reporter on the ground says that the woman's description did not fit with Black Cat's. It is possible that this elusive woman was Catwoman. This would be the seventh citing of either Catwoman or the Penguin outside of Gotham in a six month period. Noticeably absent from the scene was evidence of Jersey's gangs, which are typically known to mark scenes of violence with Japanese Kanji."

Mr. Adams' mouth compressed into a thin line. He grasped the edge of his makeup box tightly, and then stood up and slowly walked to the bathroom door and peered out into his home. The TV was displaying images of a fiery warehouse taken by smart phone from the scene of the incident; The studio's helicopter crew hadn't arrived on scene yet. In one image a black-clad woman was clearly outlined against the blaze, her full red lips and shiny leather glistening in the orange light.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously, and he quickly ran through everything he knew about the warehouse in question. Did it have sister warehouses in New York? Was there any reason to believe this kind of trouble would strike closer to home? The archvillainess's grand robberies weren't of much interest to him, but New Jersey was a little too close for comfort. What temptation had those diamonds presented that something in Gotham couldn't offer? Gotham was so large, so corrupt, so vast that it could have succeeded and formed into its own, self-governing, hell-hole of a country. Surely someone like Catwoman had plenty of opportunities to steal trinkets closer to home.

He was probably being a little paranoid, reading into these events far too deeply, but he couldn't help it. His nervousness had paid off many times already. For a moment he considered pulling Marcy out of school, but then decided that doing so would be a gross overreaction. Still, one could never be too
careful. He'd go and pick her up personally from class at the end of the day.

Then he remembered he'd been working on her zombie costume, and he quickly looked down at the makeup box in his hand. It was not the box he remembered picking up. Mr. Adam's jumped, staring at the box with wide eyes. He opened it almost without thinking and reached in, drawing out a can of green hairspray. He looked at it for a long moment, a smile working its way over his face.

There was an ancient jewelry collection being moved to Pittsburgh that night, and he would bet a hefty sum that Catwoman was even now on her way to obtain it. He could probably beat her to it. Maybe blow the gems to pieces just to get a good long laugh at her pointless greed. On the other hand, he did admit a fondness for her internal anarchy. Perhaps he'd go and help her out; her odd mixture of apathy and fire was both liberating and delicious. She flung herself around from passion to passion with utter zeal and yet invested in nothing longer than a moment.

He could do it. A can of hairspray, a jar of white face paint, a splash of black mascara and a tube of red lipstick. It would be fun. He licked it lips, a strange high overcoming him as adrenaline rushed out to tingle in his fingertips, His muscles clenched and unclenched. Just do it! Have a (literal, if possible) blast.

Have... have...

He had pumpkin pies to bake.

Mr. Adams dropped the makeup box with a clatter, and stumbled backwards, covering his mouth with his hands. He look wide-eyed at the choice he had almost made, and how it had sneaked up on him. He stared at it, at the deceitful way in which it had presented itself, in the way he had almost failed to notice it

He was alone with it. It was him and the choice. There was no time to be weak, no time to cry. Marcy wasn't going to be back for hours; he needed to remind it who was in charge.

"No!" he told it forcefully, his voice a deep growl, tearing his hands away from his face and glaring angrily down at the makeup. "No. We don't need money," he hissed. "We're set, I made sure of that in Los Angeles. We haven't had a proper home since then. I'm not interested—Not even for the usual shits and giggles!"

His own words smacked him back in the face; they were the wrong thing to say, and the Choice knew it. He cringed and then his face contorted into a vicious, lupine snarl. Damn 'the choice' and damn what it had to say about him. He was the only noun present whose thoughts, words, or selections meant anything. And he had already chosen. His decision stood. He made the choice again, firmly, aggressively. He was not allowing or forbidding the actions of an outside force; he was human and he had selected his own route: to laugh at the laws of nature.

He did laugh. He laughed and sputtered, "I have a pie to bake! Shoo, shoo! I don't have time to argue philosophy with a personified metaphor for cosmic order." He smirked ironically, and licked his lips and the edges of his facial scars. "You could never beat an avatar of chaos anyway." He grinned smugly, victoriously, and looked back towards the kitchen, where his pies were laid out. He'd turned on the oven before going to check out his makeup kits. He ought to get to baking, or at least turn the oven off if he was going to spend some more time considering Marcy's costume.

He walked towards the oven. The makeup kit lie forgotten on the floor. As he picked up a carving knife, the choice made one more bid for his attention, and for a moment he imagined Marcy with the carving knife buried up to the hilt between her eyes. He just laughed and set to cutting up the pumpkins with a relish. "I never deliberately intended to be masochistic..." he cooed smugly. A curl
of his blond hair dripped down in front of his eyes, interrupting him, and he paused only for a moment to blow it out of his face; then he brought the carving knife down with a careful slash, cleaving the pumpkin in twain. "But I've got to say: this is all actually quite funny!"

Mr. Adams lifted up the carving knife and licked pumpkin juice from the edge. The taste was good; the pumpkin was perfectly ripe. He was a good judge of ingredients, now wasn't he? *Bragged about my cooking.*

He set to baking with a happy little smirk.
Getting involved in the PTA had taken some craft. To begin with, the parents and teachers were happy but somewhat suspicious about why a previously unknown and uninvolved single father was suddenly interested in throwing his all into the planning process. Didn't he have a job? Didn't he have other commitments? Why the sudden interest in their elementary school? Despite their misgivings, their massive dearth of human and material resources had gotten him a spot in the decision making process.

He stole the party out from under the PTA's fingertips. Soon he was delegating the organization of countless little games and activities, and had an entire kindergarten's class worth of soccer moms on baking duty.

Apparently a number of single moms had been impressed, Marcy would tell him later. Mr. Adams made a face at the news. Marcy laughed.

Mr. Adams found himself bouncing from grocery store to Halloween shop to party plaza, searching for all the necessary ingredients. Usually, Mr. Adams was frugal with his finances, out of the fear that a seemingly unemployed man with a lot of disposable cash might attract unwanted attention. But for Marcy's Halloween party, he decided to go all-out. Party hats, plats and cups, decorations, tomb stones, spiders, face makeup, capes, monstrous gloves, apples, cinnamon, and loads of flower and sugar were just some of the ingredients on the list.

And then the party came. Many of the children hadn't been able to procure good costumes for the party, and arrived dismayed and embarrassed to a realm of orange and black decorations and glowing spiders. But Mr. Adams, having thought of this contingency, was prepared. He provided each child with monstrous gloves, a party hat, and a cape. Then he had them stand in line, and one by one he carefully applied makeup to their little faces, turning them into cats, zombies, skeletons, and faeries.

The whole time, Marcy had been beaming at him.

The feeling of her approval—her pride—had been addicting. Was still addicting.

After the Halloween party he chose to stay with the PTA and proceeded to lead the organization and implementation of every activity from then on out. He helped plan school assemblies and field trips, bring in speakers, and even cheered the sports teams.

Mr. Adams was one of those goofy parents that was always waving excitedly at their child from behind the PTA counter. He thought, laughingly, that he was lucky Buttercup was only in Kindergarten, where such behavior was still acceptable from him.

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The news played on in the background: The feud between Mutant Rights Activists and Anti-Super Activists caught fire on social media today, after an iPhone video of a bizarre incident went viral. The video appears to depict an—at times questionably sane—Mutant 'Superhero' known publically as 'Deadpool' barging into an adoption agency. He is seen holding a young girl who looks to be no older than eleven and shouting loudly that he intends to adopt. The video then shows the child
stabbing him repeatedly and shooting him in the head with a gun taken from his own waistband, at which point the apparently unfazed Mutant merely responds, 'This is the best child ever.'

After reviewing the video, several Super watchdog agencies began to speculate about her identity and released that she might be the infamous Mindy McCready. The viewing audience may better recognize McCready by the name 'Hit-Girl,' whose experiences inspired the fictional movie 'Kick-Ass.' Witnesses say that whomever she was, she proceeded to confuse the entire terrified agency by consenting to the adoption.

The situation escalated when it was discovered that Deadpool actually lingered around the premises and given an interview to a Reuters' reporter who was on the ground and sharing tweets with him. When presented with a tweet that said 'Mutants should not be able to adopt,' Deadpool responded with incredulity, shouting, 'What is this, the 1950s? It's not like I'm a gay couple!' Before pausing and leaning forward to ask, 'Or am I? GASP! Find out next time on the next episode! [sic]' His taunt was seen as championing LGBTQ rights, bringing gender-rights activists and opponents into the conversation.

"Daddy?" Marcy asked him, utterly oblivious to the exciting stories blaring on the television behind her. "Can you teach me how to ice skate?"

Mr. Adams blinked. Then he laughed. "I don't know how," he confessed. "I could get you lessons, would that work?"

Her face brightened in delight. "Only if you take them too," she told him.

Mr. Adams imagined blundering around on a strip of ice in white-laced skates with a bicycle helmet on, clinging desperately to the walls while his child skated circles around him. The image was hilarious. "I'm in," he laughed. "Why ice skates?" he inquired. "Did you take a liking to the figure skating competitions on TV or something?"

"No," she told him matter-of-factly, "I would like to learn to play ice hockey."

What? He looked concerned for only a moment, but then broke out laughing and scooped her up, hugging her and tumbling her over and up onto his shoulders. "Ice hockey!" he cried. "That's dangerous, you'll knock out all your teeth!"

"Nuh-uh!" she disagreed. "I'll be too tough for that!

He grinned up at her as she latched onto his hair and settled down on his shoulders. "But don't you want to be a delicate little princess and learn ballet? I thought you liked pink?"

"No, I'm too tough!" she squealed happily "And I do like pink. I'll be tough AND wear pink! Really light baby pink too! And then scary people will try to laugh at me, but BAM, I'll fight them off with my martial arts! Huuahhh!" She did her best Jackie-Chan imitation. Then she leaned near his ear and whispered to him sagaciously, "They will never see it coming!"

Mr. Adams reasoned that a significant subset of the world's funniest conversations were held between himself and his daughter. Or maybe that was just his paternal instinct speaking. He grinned broadly and took several long strides towards the cabinet where they kept a book of yellow pages. He was going to have a look at any ice skating rinks in the area. "So," he laughed, "you're going to be a tough, little, pink, tomboyish, kung-fu mastering, ice hockey-playing princess?"

"I am! I'm a zombie, and a rock star, and a race car driver, and an astronaut!" she roared. "I'm Chuckalina Norris!"
He didn't make it to the yellow pages because he nearly died on the spot laughing.
"Career day," Mr. Adams said slowly, tasting the words on his lips. It wasn't the first time he'd tasted them—he'd repeated them aloud many times that week—but he still could not decide what he thought of their flavor.

"Like navigating a minefield," he rambled aloud, amused. "They all want to know what I do. When I avoid the question, they get curious. If I acknowledge I am unemployed, they get even more curious. This makes it preferable to simply lie about my occupation. But what am I, then? Still haven't decided. Such a procrastinator. Am I a retired chef? Banker? Lawyer? Stock trader?"

Mr. Adams paged through his mind for a humorous choice. "I'm an Architect." Ha! Nope, nope, nope. The Seinfeld reference was too strong with that one.

"What about: Clown...?" he drawled, titillated by the idea. But as tempting as it might have been to launch into a mock introduction of himself right there in the car using his actual credentials, even if just for his own private amusement, the idea of doing so almost... spooked him. Best to refrain.

Hmm, the difficulty wasn't in successfully deceiving his listener as to his career choices, he knew; he was very multi-talented and had the knowledge and vocabulary to masquerade as any of his possible 'professions.' No, the difficulty was in selecting a job so subtly ironic that it would not give away the truth, but at the same time be truthful. Without provoking him into fits of laughter every time he uttered it, preferably.

Well, might as well be long-winded, then. He decided he had once been the assistant creative director for a small Gotham firm that did freelance work for Wayne Enterprises, in the public relations department. Because that was as true and funny as it got without actually having a snicker-inducing punchline.

The moment his daughter's school came into view, he knew something was wrong. There were cars lining the streets for miles around. Camera crews were present, and that was definitely not a good sign. A chill swept over him, but he pushed it aside. Easy now. This didn't mean Marcy was in any danger. Mr. Adams drove as close as he could and was relieved to find that the PTA had been able to hold a spot open for him close to the school.

But when he got out of his car, the sense of dread only worsened. His gaze swept over the field of cars, marking license plates by their state and county.

"Mr. Adams!" called one of the prominent PTA members, a round-faced woman with a sort of ugly but gentle smile. "We tried to reach you last night, but Marcy said the two of you had been at the movies, and we weren't able to get through to your phone! You'll never believe this! At about five last night, we got a call from a very prominent business man who said he was willing to come speak at our school today! It was so last minute that we barely had time to accommodate him— but it looks like you taught all of use old ladies a thing or two about management!"

Mr. Adams looked to her as if peering through a mist. He felt quietly confused.

"Ah! There's Ms. Terrence, I've got to tell her. But Mr. Adams, you'll never believe who it is! Go look!"
He watched the woman go, blinking slowly after her, unfeeling. Then he looked back at the crowd ahead of him, thronging around the school's outdoor play area, lined with picnic tables and crowned by a distant stage.

Where was Buttercup?

He took one step forward, hesitantly, uncertainly. Then panic wrapped greedy fingers through the whole of his internals. Desperation flushed out his thoughts. He shot into the grounds, pushing and pressing and shoving through reporters, bystanders, parents, and children alike. Several people tried to talk to them. He shouldered past them mercilessly.

*Where is she? Where is she!?*

He bumped into a plump woman and her drink spilled on her shirt. He did not stop to recognize her, or to apologize, or to notice at all. One or two persons glanced his way; the rest ignored the minor commotion. He pushed past a eighth-grade basketball player, and then the boiling panic stirring up his insides turned to ice.

Mr. Wayne glanced curiously in the direction of the spilled drink. The intelligent and rational part of Mr. Wayne had already decided there was no threat to be found; but an instinctive, intuitive, hair-trigger part had mandated that he look because something very important had just happened. And with very little to obscure their lines of sight, Wayne and Adams saw each other immediately.

Mr. Adams took in a sharp, hard breath.

*WHERE IS SHE?!*

Predatory ruthlessness ripped his gaze away from the problem, and sent it hunting for his prize. He darted back into the walls of the crowd, vanishing from enemy sight. He was no trickster or coyote in that moment; just a bloodhound.

Mr. Wayne stiffened, craning and looking frantically back and forward. Had he imagined that? No. No he had not. But that was impossible for very obvious reasons, not the least of which being that Arkham's most notorious inmate had been dead for nearly half a decade. But Bruce Wayne did not simply imagine things. Which meant he needed to move, now. He backed up, coughing a polite apology as he scanned for his adversary. *He suddenly felt ill, he'd have to retire early, he-*

There! That familiar frame, quick as an acrobat and simultaneously brutish like an animal, rippled through the crowd. It swooped down, pounced upon a small blonde child, hoisted her off the ground, and then darted away.

MOVE. NOW. The Bat had his own way of disappearing into crowds.

"Daddy!" Marcy cried, clutching at her father. He was holding her under her arms about her torso. His grip was tight, and something horrible had clearly just happened. "What are you doing? Where are we going?" she cried.

"No time!" he answered, throwing open the door to their car and sliding quickly into the seat. He didn't release her or place her into the seat beside him. He jammed the key into the ignition and turned it, and closed the door at the same time he shifted the car out of park.
"Why!?" she cried as he hit the accelerator and their car went screaming out of the parking lot. She clutched against her father as their car went sliding chaotically out into the street, wheels squealing and rubber smoking. A car swerved out of their way, honking loudly. Her father shifted gears and they shot down the road.

"Dad!" she squeaked, eyes widening. "Daddy, you're scaring me!"

Usually, such a plea would have snapped her eccentric father out of his mood, especially with her hugged close against him. But this time, he only temporarily released the stick shift and pressed her even more tightly to his chest. "Don't let go of me," he told her. "We need to run again."

Run! Running meant leaving behind school, and friends, and home! "But why?!" she begged him to explain

"We don't have much time, we have to get back and away before we're caught."

"Caught? Who wants to catch us?!!" Her father passed a car by driving on the center line of the road, and merged back into their lane just before a semi truck could smash them into pieces. Marcy hadn't known that cars could travel so fast as they were presently going. Confused, frustrated, and frightened, the only thing she could think to do was to start crying. *Tell me what is happening! Dad?*

"Hush for me Buttercup," he implored her, squeezing her and then grabbing again for the stick shift. She shuddered, smothering her face into his shirt, afraid because it didn't seem she could call him back from wherever it was he'd gone to.

It seemed to her that they were jumping out of the car before the vehicle had even come to a complete and final stop. Her father threw open the warehouse door, stepped in, and slammed it closed behind him. He set her down and turned to lock the heavy metal frame shut.

"We have to move away to someplace new again, don't we?" she asked sadly.

He nodded sharply. "Run to your room and gather up your favorite things as fast as you can. Don't be any longer than a minute."

"What about Nibbles?" she asked.

"Go, Buttercup!"

She winced but nodded and turned, fleeing towards her room. Her father turned from the door and quickly flew across the kitchen, throwing open every cupboard and pulling out the quickest and most accessible snacks he could find. He grabbed a first aid kit, and stuffed all of these things into a plain plastic bag.

*Why did I even come back here?* his mind snarled at him as he gathered up a few other effects, and stuffed a leather box into his coat. *He'll have records from the school. This place is a target. I should have left town directly.*

Marcy’s father looked to the side, and his eyes alighted on Nibbles' enclosure. The rabbit was sitting up with its long ears perked up curiously, nose twitching. Adams recalled his daughter's face, recalled watching her pick up this rabbit from amidst all the rabbits at the mall. The portly little creature had shown little skittishness, and had been open to hugs immediately. The whole event had clearly been love at first sight.
Without even realizing it, Mr. Adams had drawn a knife. He was holding it with his elbow cocked backwards before his thinking mind came to wakefulness, and he sucked in a surprised breath. Nibbles had gone very still, beady eyes staring at him, almost as if sensing the acute danger.

Marcy's father shuddered. His face contorted in pain. He snickered gently, laughed, and then covered his mouth. His shoulders quivered violently with barely-repressed laughs. His green eyes closed in mirth, in irony, in delight, in fury, and then opened again. He looked to Marcy's room. What passed through his mind in that moment was grotesque, bloody, and horrific. The temptation roared in his veins: A constant and never ending decision begged to be made differently, to be made in a way more truthful to his nature.

He felt Marcy's reflections then, as he always felt them. He saw the future, saw what he would do, what it was his nature to do. He saw the end result of his beautiful maelstrom, spelled out before him in intricate, delicious detail. Because he lived in a world where a choice needed to be made, at every moment, with every breath, because the decision he had made was to postpone submission. He saw what he could and would do to his daughter, in his most effortless and glorious moment of chaos.

Except that chaos could not, should not, refused to be foreseen. So those outcomes he saw in those reflections could not truly be chaotic. Chaos had be chosen. It could not be predictable. Random had to be selected, the outcome had to be rendered unknown. Which made his own chaos a perverse act of self defiance, then, didn't it?

He had decided to chose her, in complete and laughing defiance of everything the future could have ever possibly predicted he would do.

Do it. Do it any way you please. Taste it.

His daughter found him on his knees, screaming repeatedly and incoherently, rocking back and forward with his fingers curled in front of himself. He sat there, utterly useless and raving, until he felt her hands wiping away his tears. Internal silence hit him, like some slow mudslide might utterly bury and quench a fire. He finally registered that she was there in front of him, and then clawed his arms around her so he could hoard her.

She was so small. Her arms were so small as she wrapped them about his neck, and her kiss was so small as she pushed it into his cheek. He breathed in deeply against her hair, as spots and hysteria faded. There was no law and there was no chaos. No wars, no struggles, no greater truth, no greater lies. There was only Buttercup, his daughter, his. He took in one last a deep breath and then pulled calmly back from her embrace. "Do you have everything?" he asked her.

She nodded.

He gave her shoulder a squeeze and then quickly moved to extract Nibbles from his cage. The bunny only put up a minor fuss as he placed the animal in their pet carrier. He reached out to his child, and pulled her gently towards the escape hatch.

"Daddy?" she pled for information as he lowered her down into the secret passageway. "Who's after us?"

"At the moment?" her father asked, thoughtfully. He glanced backwards at the rest of the warehouse, and at the roof in particular. "Fortunately only a flying rodent," he answered as he climbed down after her. He pulled the trap door shut behind them just as a black form exploded through the warehouse's windowpanes.
Veronica Peterson

Veronica Peterson was six years old, and first grade was turning out to be difficult.

Sure, her teacher was nice. As usual, her 'ability' permitted her to traverse social obstacles with grace. And yeah, the environment in which she lived was rather the same shade and color and flavor as it had ever been.

But Veronica had jumped so rapidly from school district to school district, elementary school to elementary school, and kindergarten to kindergarten, that some of her basic foundation skills were sub par. When she brought home her first poor grade on a homework assignment, her father took an interest in rectifying the situation. Mr. Peterson inspected her handiwork, and listened to her vent her troubles, and realized he'd done a gross disservice in moving her around so much. So it happened that he set to tutoring her.

"That's good," he encouraged. "V-e-r... now do the 'o'..."

Veronica concentrated hard on her lined paper, on which she had been practicing her letters. She carefully sketched out the n-i-c-a that concluded her name, and earned a loving squeeze from her parent. He'd paid close attention to her reading and writing, which were the areas in which she had suffered the most, and her numbers, where she had suffered the least. The two of them would read her school books together.

One thing Veronica liked about the current state of affairs was that her father would take her out to visit the state metro-parks on the weekends. There, he would tutor her in science and ensure she received plenty of exercise. He brought her to see caves, canoe in rivers, catch frogs, play jump rope, ride bicycles, hopscotch, collect leaves, watch birds, and enjoy the flowers. When the rain trapped them inside their house instead, he put playing cards into her hands and taught her to do little magic tricks and sleight of hand. Now of course Veronica had always been close with her father, but these new activities gave her a lot to look forward to and helped balm the sting of so many moves.

For the first time since Marcy Adams, Veronica Peterson's life felt like it was at peace. Her only regret was that, this time, her father didn't seem as interested in getting involved with the school. But why? Perhaps he had invested too much of himself in Marcy Adam's educational institution, and couldn't bring himself to conjure a repeat performance. Instead, he occasionally showed up near the school to keep an eye on her, particularly during recess and gym.

Veronica never liked it when her father came; He watched her with dark eyes, neither smiling nor waving. If she smiled or waved at him, he would usually duck out of sight. She knew the other kids found him creepy. The whole experience unsettled her. She asked her father about this habit one evening, but he cleverly steered her out of the subject over and over again. He was good at changing topics. Veronica learned from him and experimented on her classmates and teachers; it turned out she was good at changing topics, too, if she practiced at it.

She didn't like her father's unrest, though. She felt like someone other than her father came to watch her on the school playground. And in those times, the school fences felt like prison walls, only she couldn't tell who they were trying to contain. The thought of that scared her, but she didn't tell him so. She was more afraid of what might happen if he didn't come. There was a part of Veronica that suspected her dad really needed her.

Collaboration Tables were neat inventions. An enormous touch pad of sorts, they were designed for
the meeting rooms of large, paperless, corporate enterprises. Twenty pairs of hands—or more, depending on the size—could engage with the surface all at once, whether to call up digital documents from the cloud, or collaborate on a large 3D projections. A well-designed table had no set '3D sweet spot' meaning that the surface appeared three dimensional no matter where a person was sitting or standing.

Mr. Wayne's collaboration table had cost him a pretty penny. It was larger than his grand dining table, and had more computational power than some ISPs.

Of course he didn't really need the collaboration aspect of it, because fewer than five people had ever touched it. And sometimes the 3D illusion was a bit of a distraction—especially to a man who was so good at detecting illusions and seeing through them. But the real reason for owning such a fantastic table was that he could splay out the whole of the digital domain on a physical surface, draw relationships between it's elements, and manipulate data and documents by hand without ever printing them out. That table was for one man and one man only (well, okay, Fox used it, too), and he presently had countless bits of information strewn across the whole of it.

Bruce stormed around the table, throwing documents violently back and forward, drawing relationships and then striking them from existence, pulling up files and websites and documents only to smack his hands in frustration down against the glass a moment later. He needed a clue. This sudden disappearance act had been unnervingly perfect; the 'Adams household' had simply disappeared into thin air. Or, more accurately, into an escape tunnel leading into the sewers. Bruce thought back across the whole of the last year, once again scraping through memories he had already scoured religiously for hide or hair of his quarry. Left bereft of lead, he started dwelling on even older and more violent times.

"You're making yourself sick over this," Alfred protested softly. Bruce glanced up and found himself wondering if his old butler had aged at all, or if the man were simply immortal. Alfred had been old when Bruce was a child, and he seemed precisely the same as ever now. "Master Wayne," he pleaded.

"It's here, I know it is," Bruce told him with a sigh. "I'm not looking for it right, but it's here."

"What, sir?"

Bruce said nothing, gritting his teeth and shaking his head with irritation.

"A clue on where to find your long dead nemesis?"

"I know what I saw, Alfred. And everything since has proved me right." In one light.

Alfred frowned, taken aback at this stretch of the truth. "You are looking for the Joker. That unfortunate character perished five years ago, sir. You watched it with your own eyes, you did."

"I've watched him 'die' many times before that, only for him to show up again soon afterward," Bruce Wayne muttered.

"For God's sake, Bruce. He was buried. You and Commissioner Gordon had the body tested, and had a positive DNA identification. That was the Joker—what was left of him. And you believe that a couple of."

"It was just another trick," the bat disagreed with a raised voice. "One of millions, and no stranger than any!"

Alfred was silent a very long moment.
Bruce glanced at him and then winced slightly, because the look on Alfred's face told him that he sounded possessed and irrational. But that face had been unmistakable, even without the tell-tale scars, and 'Mr. Adam's' reaction to seeing him had been proof enough in its own right. Well, Alfred had put up with worse obsessions before, and he'd put up with this one.

"I see, sir," said Alfred at last, his tone making it very clear that he disapproved. Then, surprisingly, he did not leave. "Do you remember the movie, 'A Beautiful Mind,' sir?"

Bruce lifted a brow, slightly amused. "Ready to turn me in to the men in white coats, Alfred?" he asked with a wry smirk.

"Here you stand with newspapers plastered over your table tops and walls, drawing lines between every missing child case in the country, circling phrases in articles as 'clues,' chasing blind correlations through countless unrelated bank accounts..."

"The Joker was one of the most dangerous and destructive creatures I ever faced. He was a danger to Gotham, to the country, to everything and every one he came in contact with. Even though the circumstances of his reappearance are bizarre, it is still my duty to follow any lead I find, to find him and put a stop to him."

"...And yet your foundation claim for this wild goose chase, sir," the butler continued, and it seemed as if he was holding back tears of frustration and concern, "is that your infamously destructive Joker... has lived out the last five years quietly and harmlessly... posing as an average man, a father, and a fervent contributor to a Parent-Teacher Association."

Bruce held Alfred's distressed stare for a very long moment. He let the insane sound of these claims sink into him, down to his bones. But, all the same, he calmly nodded.

"Alfred, I'm not doing this because the story sounds plausible," he said as evenly as he could. "If I was, I would have killed myself following a thousand leads that came out right after his 'death.'"

Bruce leaned back from the table. "I'm doing this because I made eye contact with my mirrored opposite, with the Joker, and we knew each other instantaneously. There was no doubt. I hadn't any real uncertainty. I saw him there that day, and he fled with a little girl, and now I need to figure out why."

"But-"

"Think about it. Why did he run if he didn't recognize me? Why did his 'house' have an escape tunnel into the sewers? Among the possessions I found in the warehouse were explosives, knives, makeup kits, and unusual quantities of green glitter. The Joker found out that Batman and Bruce Wayne were one and the same, and the only reason he never revealed that information was because he enjoyed 'playing' with me too much. But he would have easily recognized me and known I'd recognized him, and that is exactly why he ran. It was him."

Alfred looked at him. And Alfred thought to himself: 'You will never settle down and just be happy, will you? You stand there still so strong and young, so sure of yourself, but possessed of such a terrible dark flame.' The old butler let out a resigned sigh. "Very well, Master Wayne. But perhaps if your 'Mr. Adams' is going to continue behaving so contrary to regular expectations, you might try and ascribe a motive to him."

Wayne looked back to the table. "I'll ask him when I find him."

"Not what I meant, sir. You are looking for an effect in those papers, but you haven't guessed at a cause."
"All I know is that he's managing to hold on to some money, and that he stole a girl."

"That's not quite true, sir." Bruce glanced back at him. "You know he stole a girl he was sending to elementary school."

"I've already run ten thousand school picture databases against the girl's face. She isn't showing up."

"Sir, education here in America is mandatory. If a child goes missing from a school, now that's a big thing. It attracts attention. People put their faces on walls and milk cartons. If he runs away at the toss if a dime... but he doesn't want to leave behind a string of missing child claims... Then he has to call back and formally withdraw her within a reasonable time-frame. It's not a lightning-fast process, either. Might even have to fax in some forms, sir."

Bruce hesitated. He looked down at his table, eyes wide. How the devil had he missed that?

Well, Alfred was the only one of them who had raised a child.

He leaped back to the table with renewed vigor.
I Knew It

How many times had Bruce Wayne ever felt helpless? Many, ironically.

As a child he had known powerlessness over the death of his parents. Even as a multi-billionaire and armored bat-ninja, it was common for his night time occupation to throw him into very dangerous scenarios. Often he was able to save himself; but at other times, he relied on the ingenuity of those around him. He'd been poisoned, stabbed, thrown, gassed, and concussed enough times to know just how much he depended on Fox and Alfred. And in the awkward period between college life and genuine adulthood, when Bruce had disappeared into the gloom of the world, he had even been confronted by mundane forms of helplessness. Things like lacking a job, lacking money, lacking food, lacking the proper passport or paperwork to be somewhere, being accused of thievery...

Now-a-days, in most 'mundane' situations, his tab or even his name were enough to get him anything: equipment, service, a date, coffee, a change of TV station, a five star hotel, a fleet of color-coded Ferraris... etc. His current predicament had left him in a baffled, confused temper: He was having trouble tracking a single five-year-old girl. Now he knew how parents of abducted children felt, how helpless they felt, waiting on some random busybody in some unknown town to smell something amiss and send an anonymous tip to their local police. Something like 'strange father raising child in old warehouse.'

Batman had managed to keep a vague tab on 'Marcy Adam's' whereabouts since Alfred's tip about school transfer records... but each time he came close to pinpointing the girl, she had suddenly vanished. Each time it was another flustering and irritable adventure to get a lead on her again, and soon after word she would, again, vanish. And as for information about her father? Nothing. He hadn't shown up on the radar at all. His daughter's spotty reappearances were the only means Bruce had of tracking him, and that left tremendous room for speculation as to his intentions.

Batman was not particularly fond of relying on luck, time, and speculation for matters such as these. It was driving him mad. He hadn't slept or eaten properly in months. The problem was probably giving him gray hair, but he hadn't bothered with his reflection recently.

"Looking a little rough around the edges, old man."

Bruce grit his teeth as the cocksure voice grated on his nerves. He turned around to glare down at his protege—for lack of a better word, as 'partner' surely didn't work and 'nuisance' was unfair—and saw Robin was entering the lair in full costume, with arms crossed over his chest and a smirk on his face. Hmm. That posture was interesting. Had he found something?

Bruce swallowed back his irritability and responded with a curt and business-like, "Robin."

"Bats," the boy responded tartly.

Bruce scowled. "What, if anything, do you have to say?"

"Found him."

The vigilante knight stepped forward, grasping a railing tightly and leaning over it to peer at the younger man intently. "Where?"

"Hold up, Bats. Don't think it's who you're looking for. Arkham inmates don't suddenly settle down to raise babies, and this guy checks out as boringly normal. You can't just barge in and-"
"I am capable of ascertaining that for myself. I am not about to mistakenly drop in on an innocent single father and put a batarang in his skull," the Bat responded exasperatedly. "I am on the trail of a mass-murdering criminal; I have not suddenly turned into a lunatic!"

The younger man sat back on his heels, pursing his lips. "Alfred might beg to differ."

Bruce laughed darkly. "Alfred would beg to differ about a lot of my choices. He would very much like, for instance, that I settle down with a randomly selected woman and produce offspring. But that is not your concern. Robin. Now what have you found?"

His protégé considered the question for a moment, before at last pulling out a data stick, sauntering up, and tossing it to the older vigilante. "Everything you need to know. Don't make me regret it, old man."

"Regret it." Robin said, as if this brazen upstart were somehow the adult of the family. Bruce snatched the stick out of the air and shook his head irritably. "Does she know?"

"Pfft," Robin made a sound of annoyance. "She was in Florida the whole time, running errands you sent her on. Or have you forgotten?"

"That woman has more ears than two, kid," the Bat growled back. "Does she know?"

"No! I was careful. You're letting this really get to you, old man. Don't appreciate being called 'kid'."

Bruce took in a measured breath, particularly since his protege had just called him 'old man'. "Keep her busy, Robin. She must not learn anything about this yet, and you are well aware of why."

"Whatever. Takes more than a crazy girl in a clown outfit to get past me."

The bat pressed his lips into a grim line and stared directly at the younger man. "You are going to regret those words," he noted, "as am I. Then he turned back towards his computer with the data stick in hand. Robin made a face at his back.

Veronica Peterson was learning about empathy. During lunch recess, another student had accidentally kicked a ball near where several other children were playing. Due to her ability, Veronica had been able to side-step the projectile. The ball had bounced past Veronica and collided with a second girl, who had been knocked to the pavement and had her knees badly scraped up.

This had been quite a crisis for Veronica Peterson.

For you see, Veronica had knowingly moved out of the way of the ball. This meant (at least in Veronica's head) it was her fault the other girl had been hit. Looking back, Veronica realized she had never been in any danger of being knocked to the pavement. The kickball would have been somewhat uncomfortable and perhaps left a bruise, but surely no skin would have been broken. And worse, Veronica had also known- due to her ability- that sidestepping would cause the other girl to be hit and knocked down.

In a way, she had caused the other girl to be injured. She could have blocked the blow and protected her classmate. Instead she now watched as the other girl screamed and wailed for her mother, clutching her bloody knees.

But surely this could not all be laid to rest on Veronica's shoulders? After all, she had not kicked the ball, and it was quite natural to avoid getting hit. The other girl should have dodged, as well. It was
not Veronica's fault, and it was not her responsibility to take painful kickball hits for other people. But, well, couldn't she have tried to catch the ball instead? Maybe.

Veronica's face bunched up into a sad and upset expression, and before she knew it she was crying too.

Apparently there actually was one thing that could bring Mr. Peterson back into an elementary school. Though, if he'd been able to, he might have spontaneously transformed into Darth Vadar and force-choked the school secretary to death over the phone.

What did she mean, Veronica was in the nurse's office? How was that possible? Was she hurt? How could they let this happen? What had they done? Who had harmed her?

Ordinarily a calm and careful driver, Mr. Peterson had flown down the city streets at grossly inadvisable speeds, cutting off slow and speedy drivers alike, and at one point driving on the wrong side of the road. He was at the school within five minutes of the call, half-sprinting and half-stomping his way into the nurse's outfit as duel emotions of terror and fury coursed through him. The secretary tried to call out to him. He was simultaneously glad and bitter that she didn't approach him, as he surely would have put her head through a wall.

Where is she?! Where is-!?

As he rounded the corner into the nurse's room, his daughter's tearstained face looked up to him. She and her new friend (Suzanne, the girl who had scraped her knees) were sitting side by side licking lolly pops. Veronica was completely unharmed as the secretary had promised. Mr. Peterson didn't care that the other girl had scraped knees.

"Buttercup!" he gasped, eyes widening from slits into a round and helpless shape.

Veronica looked up with a slight gape, likely stricken by the usage of her name. Then she gasped 'Daddy!' and hopped off of the bed, rushing into her father's crushing hug. He lifted her off the ground and held her tightly to his shoulder.

"Daddy! I'm okay!" she promised him, feeling his terrified agony through the lines of his coat, in the way he trembled.

"You're not hurt?" he whispered back.

"Like I was saying, Mr. Peterson," the secretary said behind them. "Veronica is quite alright. We just have a policy of informing parents any time students come to the nursing room, whether its for scrapes, a simple lice examination, or just some emotional distress."

Rage. Mr. Peterson whirled towards the woman. Veronica sensed the change and yanked sharply on his hair. He winced, blinked several times, and then looked to his daughter. Veronica shook her head solemnly. He grimaced and pressed his forehead into her.

No more school, he wanted to announce. He'd school her himself. He'd take care of her himself. But he couldn't say it aloud, not with the teacher in hearing distance. Besides, Veronica would never let him get away with it, and a voice in the back of his head told him: School is an important pillar of stabilization in her life, and that's the reason you ever enrolled her in the first place. Children go to school. That's that. It was the right thing to do. You still know it was the right thing to do. Or did he? Please, he wanted to beg his daughter all the same. Please no more school. Please, let me just take you home.
I'm okay Daddy," Veronica told him with happy pluck. "I met a new friend! And I'm not hurt at all. I was just sad cause... cause I thought maybe I should have been able to catch the ball. Then Suzanne wouldn't have gotten hurt. Daddy? Hey?"

The secretary, slightly estranged, nevertheless imagined that Mr. Peterson had suffered some great trauma in the past. Perhaps concerning Veronica's mother. That might explain why he had overreacted so badly concerning Veronica. She'd need to make a note of this. Would it be possible to send Veronica to talk to the school counselor? Was everything alright in her home life? It certainly didn't seem like the man was abusive, so perhaps it would be better if they merely scheduled a parent-teacher conference and had a heart-to-heart with him. Then they could help him alleviate his fears and do whatever was necessary to ensure he knew Veronica was well cared for at the school.

"Daddy?" Veronica asked, concerned.

"You're okay?" he asked her quietly.

She nodded enthusiastically. "Please meet my new friend Suzanne!" she pointed behind her and turned around a little in her father's hold. "Suzanne got hit by a ball, I thought maybe I should have been able to catch it and she was crying a lot and I felt bad..."

Her father blinked at her, baffled. As she squirmed to get down he was obliged to let her, but then he followed quickly as she skipped up to the injured girl. "Suzanne!" Veronica announced delightedly, "this is my dad! Daddy, this is Suzanne."

The other little girl smiled shyly, looking up at the slightly intimidating looking man with his acid-green eyes and unruly hair. "Hello."

Mr. Peterson looked back at her in disoriented confusion for a moment, clutching his daughter's shoulder protectively as if giant cockroach monsters could leap out at any time and try to consume her. Veronica made a prompting noise at him and gently tugged on his hand. "Daddy?" she asked softly.

Her father gave her a long, quiet, distant, and needing look. His eyes fluttered shut for a moment. When they opened again, he was the father Marcy Adams remembered. He smiled down at Suzanne Bigley for a moment and then knelt.

"Those are quite the scrapes you have there," he noted about her knees. "You're going to look like a well-traveled adventurer with bandages like those."

Suzanne blinked and blushed happily. "They hurt a lot at first and they still sting, but Veronica made me feel better. She walked me all the way to the nurse's office! And she talked to me when they were putting on the band aids."

"Is that so?" Mr. Peterson queried, looking up at his daughter. "That's mighty responsible of you," he praised. Veronica beamed, delighted at the sudden change. It was like something in her father had come back to life. This wasn't just another mask... He was putting aside whatever ugly sick thing had kept him running for over a year. She nodded enthusiastically.

"Daddy, Suzanne's birthday is next week and-"

"Can Veronica comeee?" Suzanne interrupted eagerly. "Pleeaaaaasssse? It is going to be a party at my house. I'm sure my parents will say yes!"

"Wellll," Mr. Peterson considered, and considered also that he'd most likely be able to accompany his daughter and help out with the party if he so chose.
"Veronica?" came a voice like soft honey. Mr. Peterson froze, all paternal gentleness gone. He lifted his head and looked up with wolf eyes at the nurse who stood in the office doorway.

Nurse Quinn smiled smugly, joyfully, even ecstatically at him.

"I knew it," she cooed rapturously.

Mr. Peterson stared back at her blankly, eyes dark, for several long moments. When he spoke again, his voice was melodious and polite. "Well," he noted as he stood up, "I'll have to consider the birthday party miss Suzanne. I've decided to take Veronica out of school for the rest of the day. I'm concerned this might have been a little too much excitement for her."

The secretary standing behind him blinked. "That's hardly necessary, I'm sure," she observed. "School's only an hour longer and Veronica's unharmed, I don't see any reason why she can't go back to class."

"I understand your concerns," Mr. Peterson responded, his gaze never leaving the school nurse, "but as the parent I have an understanding of my own child that you do not. I will be taking her out of school for the day. Please bring up the requisite form for me to sign," he responded neatly. The secretary blinked, but perhaps something in his voice triggered her innate survival instincts, because she backed up and went to do as she was instruction.

Harley smiled at him. Mr. Peterson fingered the shiv tucked into the back of his waistband, and kept his daughter tight against his leg.
I have no interest in sticking to any particular canon, but I will tell you how I visualize the characters as I write them. I most certainly visualize Heath Ledger's Joker. And when I picture Harley Quinn, I picture her in her traditional black/red characterization, and not in the newer 'pigtails' look. I also assume that, since the characters are older in this story and several have retired, that some of them have 'spiritual successors' running about Gotham, who have taken their names and become the 'next generation' of villain/hero.

When Harley Quinn entered the warehouse, she found him sitting alone on a crate. The masks and pretenses she'd seen when he'd visited the school were gone. He was wearing his true face: white greasepaint and tangled green hair, blackened eyes, mouth a chaotic seam of red. He was back in his element, his body conveying complete and violent control; his clothing and hair disheveled, chaotic. His shirt sleeves were rolled up and his posture conveyed that he'd been waiting for her. Her eyes glittered with barely contained awe and adoration.

She had had something of a speech prepared, one she'd been rehearsing and refining for years if—no, when she ultimately discovered that he had survived. But instead of delivering this speech, what came out of her mouth was: "You're alive."

"Candid of you," he responded mockingly. "And you soon won't be."

Harley reflexively pouted at his hostility, but held back on the urge to run forward and throw her arms about him. Instead she kept her hands stuffed into the pockets of her leather coat, and firmly reminded herself to keep a handle on the conversation: "Is that any way to say hello after all this time? Everyone thought you were dead. You were buried."

"That was, as you appear to misunderstand, the point," he noted. "To disappear."

"From them, yeah, but from me?" she protested. "I was your partner!"

"Oh from you most of all," he answered, crossing his arms over his chest and smiling, a vicious expression on his face. "You were the hardest to shirk; Worse even than the damn Bat. 'Partner' wasn't exactly the word I'd use for you. Perhaps leech? Pawn? Expendable fanatic? I might have made you, sugarplum, but that hardly meant I'd grown attached."

Harley glowered. The rush of emotions she felt at that moment—relief, pain, love, frustration, affection, idolization, stress, disbelief, resignation, begrudged acknowledgement, and hurt—barreled through her in a blurred rush. For a short while she was incapacitated by familiar patterns which no longer felt appropriate; In truth she was feeling too many things to enumerate them all. She hadn't expected to be so conflicted at this meeting, that was for certain.

"Oh, what's wrong, Harleen?" he drawled, lazily drawing himself up to a standing position. "Usually you're so chipper."

Harley. 'Harleen' still feels unnatural. She closed her eyes. Even after all these years, even
She took in a long, slow breath. When she opened her eyes, she found him just a foot away from her. He towered over her still, but the look on his face was unexpectedly curious. And perhaps nothing could have surprised him more than how she suddenly backhanded him. He was so tremendously unbalanced by it, in fact, that he stumbled backwards a step and grabbed at his face. He looked at his hand, and then back to her, and then tilted his head to the side in puzzlement.

Well that's new, he thought. It was no secret to anyone that he had used Harleen from the moment he'd first met the young therapist. He knew it, Bats knew it, and odds were Harley deep down knew it too. He'd carefully, joyfully twisted her from a well-intentioned sweetling into a psychotic anarchist. Sure, he'd liked what she symbolized and sure, he knew she was loyal and useful... But, truthfully, Joker would have been more willing to sacrifice Harley than to kill Batman; at least the latter still posed a challenge. Harley was easy. She was infatuated, she was malleable, and it was not within her power to hate him. He could drop her off a bridge a thousand times, and she'd walk right into letting him drop her off one all over again. So, in thinking back, he was rather certain that he'd thrown Harley into harm's way plenty of times (and always made up for it by mockingly fawning over her when he'd wanted her help again), but she had actually never hit him back before.

"You bastard," Harley snapped. "I never stopped believing you were alive! I cried at your 'funeral' but I never stopped looking! I knew you were alive and I never gave up on you!"

"How touching! Mind you that it's about to go very unfortunately for you," he observed, drawing his shiv out from the waistband of his pants and flicking it between all five fingers of his left hand.

Harley narrowed her eyes at him, which was quite different from her usual pout. Her fists balled up tightly at her sides. He watched her with perplexed amusement, noting the new body language that had worked its way into her character. A few years had certainly done much to miss, "Harley Quinn," though he didn't imagine it was more than skin deep.

"You abandoned me!" she burst out. "What was I supposed to do without you!? I would have followed you to the end of the earth! I've nearly died to save you a hundred times! Why didn't you tell me you were alive!? What couldn't I know?!"

He lifted his brows. "Pretty girl, whatever made you believe I gave a rat's ass about what happened to you?" He advanced on her. "You are broken, Harleen Quinzel. You live in a fantasy world. It let me use you like a loyal dog for a decade; and now it's going to win you a Darwin Award this very evening."

His words seemed to have an effect on her because her jaws clenched and the skin around her eyes tightened like she was in pain. "You'd really kill me?" she asked him. "Just for finding you? You wouldn't. You never have. There's no game in it. And we are partners."

No game in it? Her words stirred a sleeping part of himself, a powerful part of himself, a part that threw laughter out from between his lips before he'd even registered its awakening. Images flashed through his mind. He felt his daughter's reflections like shock of lighting.

"No game?!" he wheezed, laughing hard and without control. "No game!" He whirled about, throwing his arms to gesture to the warehouse he'd chosen as his New York City home. "No game!" he called delightedly to it. An echo reverberated back as his eyes locked on the adjacent room where he had hidden his most precious possession. The reflections beat out of that room like waves, allowing him to experience a thousand alternate scenarios, a thousand alternate bloodbaths, a broad prediction of who and what he was, a statement on what he was capable of and what his limitations were.
Ha. He was completely unlimited.

"No game, indeed," he whispered to himself, licking imaginary blood from his shiv. He turned a maddened gaze on Harley and grinned broadly. "Harleyyyy... Sweet, pretty, pluuuccckyyyy haaaarlequinnnnn..." he cooed to her. "Before I kill you, tell me this: What did happen to you, Harley-Girl? Been clowning around in Gotham without me? Have you hitched yourself to some other star? Ivy? You never did like being alone... But who else, I wonder, would want you? Who is going to cry when you don't come home tonight? Someone is, aren't they? You have someone..."

Her fists clenched and he grinned.

"What costume are you hiding from me under that coat, dear Harley? Who has the honor of your allegiance this time?"

Harley lifted her chin and gave him a long and angry look tempered at the edges with things like grief. "What did they do to you in those last days?" she asked. "What is this you're doing here...? What's-what's that... that kid to you?"

Mention of Buttercup improved neither his mood nor Harleen Quinzel's survival odds. "I'm waaaaaaiting, cloowwnnn giiiirlll..." he drawled impatiently taking a step towards her and easing another knife free from his person.

Harley scowled.

He grinned, made as if to turn away and, with the subtle sort flick she had never been good enough to register, sent a knife flying her way. Its tip sunk into her coat and she gave a small exclamation of surprise. The look of shock on her face had everything to do with betrayal and nothing to do with pain. He laughed.

"Show me," he cooed at her. "Show me your stripes, won't you?"

"I don't have to listen to you!" she snarled, grabbing for a pistol holstered at her side. "I don't have to listen to what you say about me!" she pointed the gun at him, and he blinked in pleasant surprise. "I know what you are, I know what you've done to me, I'm not some dog! I know exactly what I'm worth, and I still love you anyway and only came here to talk to you!"

"Well that's a funny way of showing it," he laughed, peering between the folds of her coat now that she wasn't holding it closed. A new costume was just visible, and on the chest a broad copper oval frame the black silhouette of a very familiar animal. "What's your call sign...? Bat Girl?"

"Fruit Bat," she chirped back, her saccharine violence matching his own. "And it's sure the better job, boyo."

"I'm not going to fault you on your choice in employer, Harley-Girl. I'll grant you that you picked someone safe, something secure, someone who at least won't intentionally leave you to die. Look at that fancy armor... probably worth a million in cash, ain't it? If the Bat could be said to have only one soft point, its his belief in redemption."

Harley pursed her lips together, not sure if she ought to be offended, and also uncertain what point he was getting to.

"In fact, the thing that will kill you tonight is forgetting how great you've got it working for him, giving into the temptation of chaos, and tracking down me. That's very self-destructive of you, you know."
"As if that's fair of you!" she told him, angry. "I've only been looking for you to tell you that-!"

"And look it where your 'looking' has led you," he rumbled, stepping towards her and reaching down perhaps to draw another knife.

"I have a gun," she warned him fairly, and she was relieved her voice didn't tremble. She'd smacked him once already, and she wasn't such a lovesick puppy that she couldn't pull the trigger if he'd forgotten— or if it was really and irrevocably true that she had never meant anything to him.

At the threat of the gun he gave her a flat look and raised an eyebrow. "You've got something on your shirt, sugar plum," he noted, pulling out a small device like a lighter and flicking open the head. Harley momentarily looked down, to the throwing knife with its tip still embedded in the outer material of her armor.

Too late, she noticed it had an explosive head.

In her room, Veronica heard the opening explosion. There were tears running down her face and her cheeks were red and puffy. She had Mr. Nibbles in both arms and was petting him reassuringly. He was startled at the loud noise. Veronica gave a sob and lifted him up to her face, burying herself in his soft and fluffy coat.

Daddy, come back... Please come back... I didn't cry the nights you left, but I saw them. I know bad things happened. I know you went to protect me. I know sometimes you went to protect me from you. But I love you and I need you, and I never cried. Please come back. Please come back. Please come back!

She heard gunshots and pops, crashes and explosions. A fight was going on outside; a fight like she'd only seen in cartoons and action movies. Only someone was going to get hurt. Someone was going to die. Was it that 'Nurse Quinn' who was chasing them now? Dad had reacted very badly to the sight of her. Was this all Veronica's fault? Was she after him or were they after her? That nurse had seemed so nice.

Veronica heard a scream, shouting, and loud yelling. Her bunny wriggled and then darted out of her arms and bounded into his cage. She cried out in alarm and reached out after him, but then just sat there with tears on her face when she realized he only wanted to feel safe. She could sympathize. She wanted to feel safe. She wanted her dad.

Another scream. Another explosion. A long and pregnant silence broken occasionally by shuffling noises and moving furniture Veronica couldn't take it. Too much had happened recently. She couldn't hide like her father had told her. She couldn't pretend not to hear anymore. She needed something, just like Mr. Nibbles did. With her heart bursting out of her chest, she ran up to the doorway, threw open the lock, and bolted outside.

She screamed for her father.
Erratic

She'd known.

Damn it, Quinn. Damn Robin for being such a cocksure fool. Bruce had warned him.

The Joker now had Harley pinned on the floor, sitting on top of her with one of her arms wrenched under a heavy piece of furniture. The handle of a long knife jut out of her thigh. He'd both hands around her throat, thumbs depressing the trachea, and Harley's erratic twitching suggested little time remained to act. Still, Batman gauged the distance carefully, knowing that the situation left no room for error. The Joker had uncannily fast reflexes, access to numerous weapons, and good leverage for snapping her neck; If he detected Batman's arrival an instant too early, there was little doubt he'd have enough time to kill her.

Now-

"DAD-DY!" pierced shrill through the warehouse, echoing off of every surface. It was a lot louder in sound than she or anyone else realized it could be. She saw her father react instantaneously to her sound: his whole body jerked violently, and he turned head and shoulders to stare at her. Acid eyes gleamed, flamed, from dark and sunken caves in dead white skin. A mouth of blood smiled eternally.

Veronica stood there with her face and eyes all hot, heavy, and sticky with tears. Her nose was running and she was trying to stop it on her sleeve. She was helpless. There was nothing she could do. There wasn't even anything to think. She was a tiny lump of stress and tears and misery, and she needed help.

The Joker remained coiled over top his suffocating victim, posture feral, fingers buried in the flesh of her neck, calculating eyes misted in predatory blood lust. He still felt the cathartic pleasure of struggles growing more irregular, more frantic under his pin, but the spectacle of the moment was no longer this Fruit Bat. Instead, a red-faced baby sniffled and hiccuped, standing there in little Spider-Man tennis shoes and a Mulan T-shirt, and raised little arms up towards him as if he wasn't some complete and ineffable stranger. Small children didn't do that in an effort to solicit hugs; They did that to signal they wanted to be picked up. Carried. Reassured.

The Clown slowly raised a brow; He blinked slowly at her, curious, interested. Then he felt Harley pawing vainly at him, in a plea for him to release her. He turned his gaze back down to her, to see her face was losing its coloration and her eyes were starting to gloss over. The look she was giving him was almost forlorn, daring to suggest that he ought to feel anything. He did: a wave of delighted loathing washed over him. His fingers tightened and his upper lip curled in a sneer to match against the smile on his cheeks.

"D-daadd-dd-dy!" The Joker jumped slightly, attention once more stolen by a child who tottered closer to him and warbled incoherently. Scary didn't matter; Paint didn't matter; Evil didn't matter. He was Daddy: the one and only human being in the world imbued with the mystic powers necessary to make the world okay again.

The Clown cocked his head to the experienced a moment of intense, peculiar, loyal fondness; and then entertained the idea that killing a woman in front of his tear-streaked daughter was probably bad parenting. A retaliatory wave of violent need crested through him, and he released Harley's throat involuntarily as pangs of anguish and delight fluttered through his stomach. The throttled woman sucked in a hard, wet, bruised breath of air, sputtering coughs. His hands curled of their own accord
in front of him, but it was no longer Harleen Quinzel they wanted to strangle.

_Hhhaaa. Hahaha... H-hello. Hello my little buttercup._ A wide grin split in his face. He beheld his daughter's tear-irritated face for a moment, and then quickly turned, wrenched the knife out of Harley's leg, and whipped the blunt end down across the gasping woman's temple. His child jumped at the violence of the impact. Harley crumpled. Without a second glance backwards, the Joker got off his prey and hurried over to his daughter. He knelt into her outstretched arms and gathered her up, and placed a hand on the back of her head so he could tuck her face into his shoulder instead of letting her look over it to see his handiwork. He stood with her in arm, and pressed a wide, red kiss into her. *Mine. Hah.*

The little girl could scarcely breathe she was crying so much; and perhaps he was hugging her a little too tightly to boot. She stammered a question into his shirt, a muddled eddy of syllables containing at least one 'daddy' and perhaps concern for the life of 'Nurse Quinn.' That was cute. That was _fine._ Good parents did not murder people in front of their children anyway, even if that was never something ever specified in parenting handbooks (and it ought to have been).

"She's just sleeping," the Joker crooned in a giggling promise. "Hush-hush, nnh?" He nuzzled his face into his daughter's hair and temple, drawing in everything—every lovely, mundane detail—of the thing to which he had arbitrarily committed the wholeness of his life. He had the urge to gut her, to smell the metallic heat of her spilled entrails, to watch horror and betrayal and desperate fear fill up her eyes. He had the simultaneous urge to kiss her and play airplane with her, and laughingly twirl her about. The future was filled with images of gore and intestinal drippage and death; the line between reality, imagination, and reflection blurred and he could barely tell which world he was currently standing in.

His daughter smelled of peaches. That must have been because he'd bought her a shampoo that smelled of peaches, no? Yes, that sounded familiar. He'd given her a bath the night before, and could recall the crisp, clean aroma of soap as he'd sponged her clean. She'd splashed half a tub of water at him. Hadn't he painted her fingernails afterwards? He had. The Clown looked about and found his daughter's little fingertips where they clenched tightly against his dirty shirt. Each nail was coated in a fine layer of pink. *Sparkly* pink, of course. He wondered at them, at their simplicity, at their small size, at their delicate appearance. He had not realized his shoulders were tense until he felt the lines of them slowly collapse. He sighed and rested his cheek against the top of her head.

"It's okay," he murmured, voice once more low and level. "Someone will come for her soon. We need to go."

His child only nodded miserably into him; Veronica Peterson did not protest the way she had as Marcy Adams. "Daddy..." she mumbled to herself, to him. "Daddy..."

"I'm sorry," he whispered truthfully, bundling her to him before taking his first slow steps towards the exit. "I'm sorry. It will be okay."

Her fingertips touched his face, pressing firmly against his skin almost as if to anchor her tiny self in him. _Aw._ Her fingers came away white. The Joker paused, staring at the greasepaint caked around her nails.

"Honey," he whimpered suddenly, remembering a Halloween one year past. His daughter had asked to dress up as Poison Ivy. Was it possible that she now would know the truth? Did she know what the makeup meant? The colors? Had she ever seen a picture of... _Shit._

Something moved behind him. The Joker spun around and drew three knives between the fingers of his unoccupied hand, all without needing to think. At first, it appeared he'd been mistaken and that
there was no one new in the warehouse. Ah, but the lighting was currently poor, and the Joker knew better. He watched the space directly above Harley's collapsed form. A moment later, the pregnant darkness suddenly unfolded, and a black silhouette dropped quietly down beside her.

Hello Bats.

Perhaps it was the stillness that kept Joker from acting. Batman stood defensively in front of his fallen 'Fruit Bat.' Frozen silence passed between the two men, each apparently poised to attack if only the other should take hostile action first. When no violence occurred, the Bat slowly took a knee and reached behind him to feel for Harley's pulse. The Joker took the opportunity to back slowly away, and Batman did not immediately pursue. Bats waited a moment to ensure the pulse he felt was strong and stable, and then stood again.

"You are very close to home for a dead man on the run," he said to the Clown.

Joker said nothing, considering his best route of retreat. Veronica, who until that moment had been oblivious to the appearance of a newcomer, nearly jumped out of her skin. She blinked sleepily and twisted about in her father's hold, trying to get a look at the speaker. When she did, her jaw dropped a little and her eyes widened.

"Are you alright, kid?" Batman asked her.

"Hey!" The Joker stiffened and bared teeth in a hateful smile; but, before he could actually throw anything, his daughter spun back towards him and hugged him. *Oops.* Furious energy rebounded and coagulating into something more complex, more verbal: "Not yer business, Bats. Now take Sleeping Beauty here and skedaddle!" (His daughter looked quickly up, startled by the lilting whine of his voice.)

The dark knight's eyes narrowed as if he found this absurd. "I'm pretty sure whatever Arkham's Joker does is my business."

"Daddy?" Veronica pleaded. Acid green eyes flashed to her and rounded out some. When he looked back at the Batman, his voice had dropped back into its low baritone octave:

"You think so? I think I deserve at least a little credit for my good behavior," Joker growled with slight joviality. "I've been playin' it nice, Bats, but I don't wanna be found. Be grateful I didn't kill Harley and go. I'll slink back into a hole and you won't hear a peep from me." Batman studied him silently for a long moment, body language obscured by a black cloak and a stick up the ass. Then he said the worst thing possible:

"That is not your daughter."

The Joker slowly gaped, eyes shuttering. He stared so utterly that he did not so much as twitch or smile. Then he straightened, and blinked with a rapid flutter to clear his head. "Well." He steadied himself with a deep breath, and then turned to the side and slowly set Veronica down. "Hey sweet pea," he reassured, "ya mind just staying right here for a second? Daddy needs to have a 'chat' with an old friend," he said. The little girl looked up at him with round eyes, looking staggered by all the horrible things that could maybe go wrong in her absence. His mouth twisted slightly at the side and he nearly found himself promising to behave himself (sorta) when she abruptly shook her head and mumbled that of course she'd stay. "'Atta girl, and cover your ears, kay?" he praised, ruffling her hair before turning away and sauntering back towards the Batman.

Veronica obediently put her hands over her ears and peered wondrously after him.
"Hey," Joker hissed, walking up slightly tangent to the bat till he was within easy speaking distance, and then beckoning. "*You.* Come here."

Perplexed, but wary of trickery, Batman did not move. He watched the Joker suspiciously.

The latter man sneered and then took an aggressive step closer and gestured backwards towards his child. "The *fuck* is the matter with you?" he growled in an angry whisper. "You can't just walk around telling kids they're adopted!"
I attempted to mix classic comic book Joker speech patterns with Ledger's body language for this scene as he cools down from the elevated hyper-violent state he started off last chapter in. Ledger's Joker doesn't get angry or even particularly upset across the whole of the film, and certainly has nothing he cares about or fears losing. His character is always in almost complete control of every situation. Here, that control partially comes back. Batman is something he knows how to handle.

The Bat was somewhat taken aback by the sudden twist this conversation had taken. It was not precisely how he'd expected his first meeting with the 'dead' Joker to go after six years of silence.

"You can't just do that!" the green-haired man was lecturing, his voice fluttering through a wide and expressive range of pitches and tones. "That's a private matter between parents and their kids! You can't just say something like that Bats, that's a complete taboo, a huuugggee no-no! I mean, hell, you don't have be a childhood psychology expert to figure that one out! You don't even have to be that bright! When's the last time you watched a soap on TV?! You can't just do that! Don't you ever get out of your little castle and look out at the world? Hello!?!"

The Batman studied him quietly, eyes narrowed, trying to decide what trick the man was trying to pull; but as usual, it was never clear where acting began and seriousness ended with the Joker. Ordinarily he would have interpreted this as a manic outburst covering up some attempt to get near a bomb, tripwire, lever, or other situational advantage, but that didn't seem to be the Joker's intent; the man was currently almost pacing, as if honestly trying to figure out the answer to something.

"What the hell am I supposed to tell her now!?!" Joker demanded with an agitated lick of one mouth-scar. "What do I do when she asks me what happened to her parents, or why they gave her up, or whether or not they loved her!?! She's six years old! What am I supposed to say? 'No, honey, don't worry, the nice lady and man who made you loved you very much, its just that daddy wasn't that nice of a person back then. He and his associates killed your old mommy and daddy and... well... oops? Fuck you, Bats! I was expecting another ten years to figure this out!"

It wasn't like the Joker to rant or speak at length unless he was trying to stall for something or manipulate a reaction. Batman obviously could not take him at face value, and so was left to try and pull apart his words.

Joker paused on seeing that Batman was paying more attention to shivs and environmental hazards than to what he was saying. Recognizing what had to be going through Bats' head had a sobering effect on him. Rather than pout, he clenched his fists and took an aggressive step in his adversary's direction. Bold, that. Bats had always been stronger than him. "Hey!" he growled low. "I am talking to you!"

'Low' was a pitch at which Batman had rarely heard him before. The Joker normally spoke in a childishly mezzo croon or an airy rasp. Now he was almost tempted to say that 'low' might have been his normal speaking octave.

"The hell am I supposed to tell her now? Hyello! Earth to Bats! Wow. Can you even hear me?!"
"You've just highlighted exactly why you have no claim to this child," Bruce responded.

"Oh-ho, wrong on that count," Joker drawled, rocking back on the balls of his feet and sneering up at the Bat's face victoriously. "She's one hundred percent mine. I did it all the 'legal' way, just to iron out any unforeseen problems. You've got nothing on me there."

"Then you supplied fallacious or incomplete information," the Bat noted dismissively. "You have just admitted to the murder of her parents, and your long history of violence and mental instability speaks for itself, to say the very least. You will be coming back to Arkham. There is no child services or legal professional who would permit you to keep a child."

The Joker's eyes narrowed, both at this and at the implied 'and neither will I I append on the end. But his voice did not lift from its low pitch as he licked his lower lip and responded: "You're talkin' bold for a man in your position, you know. The Inquirer just featured a small article where eyewitnesses saw your butler toting around a child carrier. Did an old friend leave a kitten on your pillow in the night some time recently?"

_That_ got the other man's attention. Everything about the Bat's posture made a subtle change, and Joker knew the vigilante had just readied a smoke bomb or other weapon behind his cape. Good, at least he was paying attention. Although... Quite suddenly, the Joker realized just how far behind him his daughter was. The Bat had a clear line of vision to her. Joker backed up a pace and flicked a shiv out from his waistband.

"If you touch her..." Joker warned with all the violent and acrid hatred of a rabid dog.
"If you so much as lay a hand on-!" the Bat growled simultaneously, about a different child.

There was a moment of silence as both men realized the queer little jinx they'd just made. A long and hostile quite passed between them, as they sized one-another up.

Veronica, who yet stood some distance from them, slowly uncovered her ears and peered in wonder from one of them to another. _Huh_. She tottered forward uncertainly, wanting to learn more about this.

The Joker heard her approach and shot a worried glance backwards. "Squirt, c'mon!" he warned, gesturing with a knife that she should get behind him. She did so.

Batman frowned. "Are you alright?" he asked her.

Veronica paused, startled by the question, and looked from her father to the stranger. She mumbled a confused, "What?"

Batman gestured to her father. "Has he hurt you?"

Veronica's eyes widened. "No!" she exclaimed, baffled and horrified as to how this could even possibly be a question. Sure her father could be scary sometimes, but he was dangerous to kitchen utensils, not to her! A glance showed her that her father's knuckles tightened about his throwing knives and his eyes narrowed to slits. "Never!"

"Has he asked you to do anything bad for him?" the Bat prodded.

"No!" she exclaimed, tears threatening at the corners of her eyes that anyone would assume such a thing. "He teaches me and makes lunch and bought me a rabbit and apologizes when he's wrong and tells me to say please and thank you and is the best daddy ever!"

"Baaattnn," her father growled, low and angry instead of reedy or whining. "Leave my kid alone. If
you tracked me down all this way to slap me in irons then you deal with me, not her."

Batman shook his head and made to answer, "She is not your-"

Joker stepped aggressively towards him, knives raised. There was a moment of intense and violent tension, every fiber of the Joker's gritted body daring him to utter those unforgivable words again. For a long sixty seconds, there was silence between them as Batman contemplated what to do and Joker waited to have the last straw broken. Veronica, abruptly, broke the still with:

"Are you Batman?"

Both men turned to see the little girl was hovering very close to her father's leg. She was squinting up at the black-garbed vigilante and trying to get a good look at him in the dim warehouse lighting. She didn't seem close to crying anymore. The Joker and the Bat were both surprised by the sudden interruption, but after a moment, the latter nodded.

Veronica fidgeted and then asked hopefully: "Can I have your autograph?"

The Joker twisted about in startlement to fix her with a wide-eyed, baffled, possibly thrilled, and entirely disbelieving expression. Batman blinked. A long and awkward pause seemed to hang in the air, as the six-year-old's baffling words completely altered the feel of the hostile meeting. A moment ago, the Batman had been assessing his adversary and probing for information about what the arch-villain had been up to for the last six years. Because while it wasn't beyond the Joker to spend a significant amount of time on building up an elegant scheme, it was more typically his nature to play with ad hoc manipulations. Now, in the light of Veronica's innocent request, the world seemed to turn itself on its head. Quite suddenly she was the center of the spectacle, not the Joker or the Bat.

Slowly, wary of the Joker, Batman eased aside his cape and revealed that he was already holding one of his specialty cut throwing stars. A batarang. He gave it a gentle toss to the ground at her feet. Delighted, Veronica pounced on the gift and picked it up, feeling over the shape with the care of a little girl whose father tended to leave one too many knives lying around the house, and who therefore knew to be careful with sharp objects. She smiled up at the masked vigilante with childish awe, and she said: "I want to be a superhero too when I grow up!"

The Joker made a strangled noise in the back of his throat, and then jumped in place when his daughter looked up at him in confusion. Joker stood up straight, looked at the Bat, looked down at his daughter, looked out at the warehouse, and then slapped a hand over his face and broke out laughing. Veronica blinked in alarm at the reaction and quickly tugged on her father's shirt sleeve. The Bat blinked in surprise.

"Daddy? Did you go crazy again?" she pleaded for him to respond. The Joker continued to laugh for a moment, squeezing the bridge of his nose and thumbing gently through his daughter's hair to reassure her he hadn't just gone crazy (again). When he could talk again his eyes twinkled mischievously and he grinned down at her.

"I thought you wanted to be a princess, race car driver, and hockey player?" he recalled.

"Of course. I need a secret identity after all," she told him sagely.

"Oh I see, you've got this all figured out," he continued, voice dripping into a harmless pout, "and what about my autograph? Don't you want that?"

His child blinked at him incredulously, and then reached into her pants' pocket and drew out her lucky card. Aged and dog-eared at the corners, the card was unmistakably a joker. Her father winced
initially at the sudden realization that his daughter did know, and *had* guessed for quite some time exactly what he was. "Ah-" he managed. Then cold panic was replaced by warm paternal affection at her brilliance. He hummed in the back of his throat, pleased, and pulled her tightly against him. "I see. Well then. Did you hear that, Bats? She wants to be a superhero! Boy, do I have my work cut out for me..."

"Joker," the Bat growled, drawing the green-haired man's attention back to the situation at hand. "What have you done?"

"Something really random let me tell you," the clown joked. "I mean I thought some of my old stuff was pretty damn random, but this? Man this would blow minds. It's hilarious. Could you imagine the expressions I'd get? Look Bats I don't mean to cut this short—nice seein' ya and all—but it is way past little Buttercup's bedtime. Imma have ta' let ya go."

The Bat took a step forward. "Do you know how many men and women are dead because of you?" he asked. "I came here to find where you were hiding, and to bring you back to Arkham so that no one else has to suffer because of you."

"Pft! So let me get this straight, after six years of me not bothering a soul, your plan is to 'stop' me from bothering souls by... lighting a fire in my house and flushing me out in the open?"

Batman frowned. "Those people deserve justice. And to know that you're behind bars and in a strait jacket."

"That's a valid perspective," the Joker agreed patiently. "Though I think 'deserve' is a strong word, maybe we should just say they 'want' it and you're willing to go out and nab it for them. Say Bats, what do you prefer: Justice for dead folk, or to keep living people alive?"

"You're not getting out of this by twisting words with me, Joker; I don't lose sleep wondering if you're right or wrong."

"Bats!" the green-haired man snapped, and then eyed his long-time adversary with disappointment and resignation. Bruce frowned, regarding the clown uncertainly, before at last the other man explained himself: "I have a kid," the Joker intoned carefully, laying weight on the words. "I'm guessing by the Inquirer story that you also suddenly find yourself knowing what that's like?" He paused to study the other man's face before continuing. "Then you should get it. You should understand. Just leave me alone. Take Harley and go. And I'll keep outta yer hair."
Kitten

Flashback.

The masks always stayed on. Even as they kissed and tumbled, and clothing was shifted aside, the majority of each costume remained. Was that odd? They both knew the other's real name. But perhaps if they pretended, it was easier to keep each other safe that way. What they didn't know, they couldn't use against the other.

They always tried to minimize potential conflicts. Their love-hate dance had mellowed out into something warmer and more stable. They had an unspoken agreement. As long as she picked her targets carefully and focused on corrupt businessmen and mob lords, Batman turned a blind eye to her antics.

Shades of gray were a little difficult for Batman. His personal code nagged for him to see the world in black and white, often a necessary polarization when lives of over a million persons, the population of Gotham, was in his hands. Gray made for hesitation. But for Catwoman, they were something he had learned to live with.

True, the two of them often fought, each arguing their definition of the word 'corrupt.' Was a man who lied on his tax returns corrupt? A billionaire who had been caught in a single fraud? But somehow even after all the arguing, they kept meeting. They kept arguing. And as the years passed by, they had stopped trying to outwit one another; Their ideas started to converge on some kind of compromise.

They were informants to one another; they traded information on Gotham's inhabitants. When she was closing in on a mark, he'd know because she'd forward him a great deal of condemning information on a man.

At first, those times had been very difficult; it was hard not to stop her. Usually he would go and watch from the shadows, and he always felt a great fear about what he would do if one day she messed up. If it were a mobster or villain she was robbing, he'd intervene to protect her. But a dishonest politician or factory owner? What if she resisted arrest? What if they called in him to try and stop her? But every time she walked away from a juicy target because she could find no validation for the crime was almost a demonstration of loyalty.

The more they met, the more they argued, the more they needed one another, the less he knew what he'd do with himself if she suddenly threw morality to the winds and went on a nation-wide burgling spree. His head said that he'd do his duty and bring her to justice. But then his head was still confused about why every time he saw the Cat, it seemed to end up with him losing some important articles of clothing.

The longer they kissed, the less his mind could wonder Why am I holding you? Why am I doing this? Why do I bend for you? Why do I need you? and the more he found his fingers roving hungrily over her flesh. When he felt her glove's sharp talons pierce his side, he didn't think much of it. She was often a little too rough. In answer he just grabbed her wrist gently but firmly, pulled it from his skin, and tugged off the glove. They intertwined, nibbled, groped, touched. But then he started feeling... dizzy. Lightheaded. He persisted in kissing her for a moment but then pulled back and looked confused into her eyes.

"What did you do?" he asked in a low voice. Not condemnatory, but extremely firm. She still winced, and a weight seemed to settle in on her, an age and weariness that she'd been repressing.
"It'll wear off in an hour," she promised him.

He frowned. "And where and in whose custody will I be waking up?"

"It's not like that," she hastily explained without explaining anything.

"Selina," he warned. He rarely ever used her name. At the sound of it, she winced again and then pushed towards him and wrapped her arms around his neck. He tried to stop her but nearly fell over. His mind was clouding fast. His arms gave out, but she held him up. When she didn't supply an answer, he grimaced and pressed his face into her shoulder. Then abruptly, and much to her surprise, he said, "I trust you." A pause. "You should try... trusting... me..."

She didn't get time to answer him before the sleeping poison took hold and knocked him unconscious.

When Bruce woke up, he was exactly where she'd left him. He was unharmed, and the articles of clothing he'd lost had been laid out neatly beside him. What was the point of that? He grimaced and tried to sit up, but there was a weight on his cape and against his back. It wasn't much, just a few pounds... But something instinctive told him to roll over and have a better look first. He did so hazily, shifting his weight onto his side and peering uncertainly at the weight. Then his eyes widened.

Wrapped in an old shirt with a letter beside her, and snuggled up against his back, a diminutive pink sausage was staring up at him with baffled blue eyes. Bruce stared. The baby stared back, mumbling a little.

Oh. What in... Selina... What... what in the hell...?

The letter. He carefully moved about till he could partially sit up without touching the kid or sending it flying. Then with trembling hands, he reached over to pick up the letter. On it Selina has scrawled only a few words: "She's yours. I need you need to handle this. I can't. - Cat."

Though the letter was short and to the point, Batman stared at it for a very long moment. His 'daughter's' unhappy mumbling drew him out of his paralysis. With horrified fascination, he eased himself up to his hands and knees, and then pulled his cape and the child into his arms.

Babies were not supposed to be this small. This was too small. Curled up, her little frame fit entirely within the cup of his hands. Uncertain what to do, he'd held her helplessly for a long moment before transferring her into just one arm, cape still supporting her like a hammock. With the other hand, he tried to examine her for injuries. She gummed at his gloved fingertips and wiggled a little. She seemed okay... Weren't babies supposed to cry? She made an unhappy mewling noise and he pulled her close against his chest to keep her from the night air.

"Alfred..." he muttered, and then looked in the direction of home.

He needed help. Now.

Still Flashbacking.

He paged Alfred to be waiting for him, signaled it was an emergency, but did not place a call to tell the old man what he was bringing. He wasn't certain he could say it aloud. When Bruce entered the cave he found the butler already waiting for him, with Robin and Harley out on other tasks. The old man was of course quite worried; Bruce had sent him an 'emergency' ping after all, and that usually meant a serious injury.
"Bruce?" Alfred breathed, looking over the young man for wounds and then pausing when he realized the bat was carrying something. The look on the young Master Wayne's face was dumbstruck, somewhere between awe and horror. "What's wrong, Bruce?"

For a long moment the Bat could not respond, just looking quietly down at the bundle in his arms. Then he hesitantly turned and adjusted his cape so that Alfred could see. "Selina," he murmured helplessly. The butler's eyes flew open wide and he stood so straight that for a moment Bruce wondered if he would fall over backwards and faint dead away. Then he seemed to snap to animation again a moment later and strode quickly forward, disentangling the tiny child from the masked vigilante's cape.

"So tiny," Alfred mumbled worriedly. "I'm calling the family doctor, he'll be discrete as always. Get dressed quickly now." Alfred paused, and then his voice leveled out as he noticed the younger man hadn't taken his eyes off the little girl. "Don't worry, Bruce. I've got her."

Bruce nodded and quickly stripped out of his armor. He had fresh clothing on in record time, and was pacing nervously as Alfred made a temporary diaper and then tucked the little one into some clean towels in a spare decorative basket. Robin arrived home first, as he had been alerted by Alfred that there might be an emergency, and no one had remembered to contact him again later. At first he tried to get answers from Alfred, who shooed him and told him to go get work done in the cave or something. Then he noticed how Bruce was staring at the basket like a dingo. He put two and two together and then quietly backed off to a corner of the room to observe.

The family doctor, a nearly mute and highly scrupulous man, arrived within the half hour upon being told that there was a baby related emergency, and quickly began to examine the little girl. They chose the kitchen as the setting for the examination because of its bright lighting. He took her pulse, listened to her lungs and heart, examined her arms and legs. "No signs of rashes, respiratory illnesses, or heart murmurs," he described his examination softly to them. "Everything is fully formed. Possibility of impaired eyesight. Is her mother available?"

Alfred cleared her throat. "No, I'm afraid not. She's going to need some formula. That's possible, right?"

The doctor nodded and wrote down the name of a very high grade, nutrition rich formula specifically for premature babies. Then he produced a sample of the same concoction and a spare baby bottle. Alfred moved over to the sink to warm it up. Alfred naturally expected he'd be the one caring for the tiny infant. Robin expected something similar. Bruce had probably also expected something similar. But within seconds of leaving her side, Alfred had been replaced by an extraordinarily anxious father, who scooped up the baby girl as carefully as if she were made of glass and rice paper. When Alfred came back to them, and without prompting or instruction, the young Wayne took the bottle from Alfred's hand, and brought the tip to his daughter's mouth.

The rest of the room looked on in surprised amazement. No one was about to interrupt.

It took five days for him to remember he was on the Joker's tail and ought to be doing some reconnaissance.

Okay, Back to the Present. Tehe.

Robin remembered that less than a week ago, Bruce Wayne had snidely remarked that Alfred wished a great many things about his life were different. At the time, Robin hadn't thought much of it; he knew settling down was the last thing from Batman's mind. Sometimes, Robin thought, a man was possessed of action, not needs. Bruce and Robin were both that type of man. They had to be doing
something; making, fighting, investigating, overturning; and simply *experiencing* life and satisfying personal needs didn't interest them at all.

But something else had happened in that time period, something that had delayed Bruce's first reconnaissance mission on the Joker until just that morning. Something big. Something ironic. Something that was currently shrieking its tiny lungs off.

Robin stood in the doorway of the kitchen, staring dismayed and helpless as Alfred desperately tried to reassure the little girl. He bounced her and rocked her, and by all accounts Alfred was simply phenomenal with children. But no matter the tactic he employed, the little girl continued to scream. She was as resilient to his nurturing as he was resilient to her screams. The only non-resilient person in the room was Robin, who winced and cringed at every caterwaul, and who desperately wished he knew some means of helping.

"What's wrong with her?" he asked. "Is she sick?"

Alfred was clearly perplexed by the infant's behavior. Until a certain age, all babies were more or less the same as all other babies. They had a couple quirks here and there, and some were more temperamental than others, but rare was the child who refused all offers of ceasefire and affection and who chose instead to shriek ceaselessly to the heavens. "The doctor gave her a very thorough examination," Alfred reminded him. "And-"

"Yeah yeah, great. Then what's she so pissed off about?" Robin grimaced. "She's never done this before!"

Alfred sighed, looking over the child with a practiced eye. But try as he might, he couldn't determine what was upsetting her. She didn't have a cold, a fever, or any pain that he could localize. She had no rash. She was currently naked on the off-chance that her diaper had been upsetting her. At first he was ready to tell Robin that children didn't simply get 'pissed off' and that to ascribe malicious intent to a baby was ridiculous. Babies were babies were...

But then a thought occurred to him. A rash of memories sifted through his mind, cherry picked from many different times in his life. Possessed of a sudden curiosity, Alfred tucked the screaming babe against his shoulder and headed for the laundry room. Robin followed, pained but curious. As he watched, the old butler sifted through the bins, pulled out an unwashed but still relatively clean shirt, and then draped it gently over the little girl's face.

The baby shrieked, hiccuped, sniffled, and then mumbled softly. She reached out with pudgy little fingers that wavered uncoordinated through the air, brushing against the fabric. Then she put her fingers in her mouth. Within moment, she was fast asleep on Alfred's shoulder.

Robin's face screwed up in baffled realization. "You gave her one of his shirts?" he asked in a whisper. He now knew (from experience) that babies rarely remained asleep for very long, and that if he were particularly quiet it might be a full hour before *this* one would wake up again.

Alfred rocked the little girl worriedly. "I think she can smell him on it," he explained.

Robin fidgeted. "Is that... normal for a baby?"

Alfred hesitated. "Not *exactly*..." He sighed. "But then we really don't know much about her unique circumstances... Or her mother's." Bruce had always been of the opinion that something preternatural was amiss with Selina Kyle, and had once confessed it aloud to the butler.

"So she'll chill out when he comes back?"
Alfred looked up at the clock, knowing full well that Bruce was very late and had obviously spent the entire night stalking some unsuspecting runaway PTA father. Neither he nor Robin had gotten much sleep that night, nor any hour of the day afterward.

When they heard the study door open, Alfred and Robin both turned quickly to face it. Bruce stepped through, dressed in his regulars. At his side was a dazed looking Harley. She was still partially in costume and leaning heavily on his shoulder for support while he pressed an ice pack gently to the side of her head. Her leg was bandaged and one arm was in a sling.

Robin jumped at the sight of her and then swore when he realized it meant. Harley had found out. Oh man, was he in for an earful. Especially since it looked like she'd gotten hurt. "What happened?!" he asked, hoping to divert the Bat's attention from his failure. "It wasn't him was it?"

Harley laughed and it made her head hurt. She moaned feebly and Bruce gave Robin a deathly glare. "Help me get her to the couch, John," he ordered. Robin grimaced and nodded, coming up to take her other arm. Together the two of them got Harley safely to the couch and laid her down. Bruce had already tended to her down in the caves it seemed, as she had bandages on her head, chest, arms, and throat. He must have left the costume on because she was too dazed to properly dress herself.

"Well?" Robin asked after Harley was situated and Bruce had made sure she was comfortable. "What happened?" Bruce shot him another dark look.

"He'll already have disappeared again by now," Bruce told him. Then he caught sight of Alfred who was wearing a curious expression. He noticed both the old man and Robin had circles under his eyes. Then he noticed that the little girl was once more draped in an old shirt. "Alfred, what happened? Laundry machine break?"

Alfred blinked and looked to the little girl. He smiled slightly and then slowly pulled the shirt from around her and held it off to his left side. Within moment the little girl had perked up and was making fussing noises. Robin cringed, and then sighed when the baby burst into a full-blown wail. Harley moaned at the sound. Bruce jumped to his feet in surprise. Amused, Alfred placed the child directly into her father's arms. The little girl squirmed momentarily, blinked hazily, and then cooed and smeared her face into her father's chest, rooting for sustenance.

Bruce stared down at her in surprise, then lifted his head to look at Alfred.

Alfred beamed. "She just missed her daddy, Bruce."

Thinking back on the events of the evening before, and of the week before that, Batman closed his eyes and gave a heavy sigh.

"What about the mission?" Robin prompted again, leaning over Harley and adjusting her ice pack to make sure she was benefiting from it. "What happened? Was it him? Did you even see him? Did you lose him? Who hurt Harley?"

"It was him," Harley croaked. Robin jumped. Alfred paled and looked first to her, then questioningly to Master Wayne.

Bruce opened his eyes and looked back to the injured woman. Harley was looking up at him desperately, eyes round.

"It was him," she repeated morosely. "He t-ried to k-ill me..."
"Easy Harleen. We can talk later."

"Why would he... why would he..."

"Hold up," Robin grasped, "that guy really was the Joker? The hell has he been doing?!"

"Hiding," the Bat answered cryptically. "Get a hold of Fox. The girl's name is 'Buttercup' and I need him to ransack our databases trying to find out who she is and where she came from. Harleen, please rest. We'll talk once you've recovered from your concussion."

"But if it's the Joker we need to go after him!" Robin protested. "You should have called me, I-"

"No one is going after him!" Bruce said loudly, firmly, and Harleen quivered. He winced and looked apologetically after her, before taking in her and Robin both. "This situation is delicate. No one is to track him down alone. Don't drop his name to anyone, don't tip anyone else off that he might be alive. This stays secret, and no one moves to find him except exactly as I say so."

Robin blinked in surprise, hesitated, but then nodded and went to call Fox. Harley sighed miserably and rolled her face into the rear of the couch. Alfred still looked at Bruce questioningly. The Bat noticed his gaze, took in a slow breath, and then gestured for Alfred to follow him out of the room. When they were beyond Harley's earshot and a door had been closed between them, Bruce turned back towards the butler.

"Alfred, did you bring a baby carrier into the house recently?" he asked.

He had, even though they'd no occasion to use it. "I did, sir. Just about three days ago. Why?"

Bruce nodded; the Joker hadn't been bluffing. "Someone noticed," he told him. "And the Joker's been watching us extremely carefully these whole six years."

Alfred straightened. "You mean... he knows about Helena?" Then he frowned. "But if he's been watching us, why hasn't he ever done anything?"

Bruce looked down at the little girl who had fallen asleep against his chest. Then he shrugged and shook his head at Alfred. "Alfred... He's not hiding himself exactly. He's hiding the girl."

That was perplexing. "The same girl he stole?"

"And he says he legally adopted her."

Alfred frowned. "That doesn't sound like the 'Joker' you're familiar with. That unfortunate person had no empathy for anything, man, woman, or child."

"When I asked him what he was doing, or why he believed I would just leave her with him and look the other way, he told me as a new father I should 'get it.'"

Alfred was quiet a long moment, regarding the young Master Wayne with new eyes. After a moment, he nodded. "I think you need to know a great deal about a little girl named 'Buttercup.' There has to be someone in specific after her, and there must be a compelling reason for their interest..."

"You believe me now?" Bruce asked, slightly surprised.

"Of course."

"Why?"
"Because this sort of story is so insane, even you couldn't be making it up now could you?"
Terra Smith

Chapter Notes

Buttercup isn't the only one getting older and more mature...

It was nine o'clock in the evening, and an hour past Terra Smith's bedtime, but she was still awake. She had tiptoed to the bathroom door, and now watched as her father smeared black greasepaint over his face. He caught sight of her in the reflection, and slanted green eyes looked back at her in surprise. There was a predatory look to him as the Father waned and the Clown Prince waxed.

Terra frowned curiously. "That's not your costume," she noted, observing the modest and carefully wrapped black stealth outfit that her father was wearing. The clown hesitated for a moment.

"No," he answered in a slightly reedy tenor. "Not here. Too much trouble for a face like that." He considered his makeup and then gave a languid, "You should be in bed, you know."

Instead of responding to that, Terra stepped into the bathroom. She felt her father tense up in a peculiar way, as if he were both interested and afraid. Concerned, but emboldened now that a line had been crossed, Terra came up to the man and put her arms about his waist, hugging him tightly. A moment of mute conflict passed. Then the clown hugged her; tightly and without any disdain or further hesitation.

"Something on your mind?" he asked her, his voice stronger. The earthy tone reassured her; she'd never approached him while he was getting ready to 'go out' before.

"I don't think you're raising me right," she blurted boldly.

Her father flinched like she'd struck him. "What?"

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Her father flinched like she'd struck him. "What?"

Terra lifted her head, looking up at him with frustrated eyes. His eyes were wide with surprise and some trepidation. "I don't get to be normal," she told him. "I don't get to have friends for very long, or even keep the same name or eye color. Every time I look in the mirror, my reflection is different. I like school, I like other people... but... but..."

Her father swallowed hard. "But...?"

"... I do want to learn some normal things... But if you try to raise me like I'm normal everywhere we go... I just feel like something's missing."

"I..." the clown's face went through a gamut of uncertain expressions. Like any other parent, he'd been confronted with the moods and temperament of a growing child. He knew better than to let his entire emotional state hinge on his daughter's words anymore. After a moment he rubbed her back. "What do you want?" he asked her sincerely.

She seemed to think, grabbing hold of whatever idea it was that had urged her to approach him. Her eyes lowered for a moment, then returned to his face. "If I have to be abnormal, maybe I need lessons in abnormality."
Clown and father were both uncertain where this was going, although they each marveled at the way their daughter's vocabulary was rapidly expanding. "Like... what, exactly?"

"If we're going to be a family of ninjas, then I think you have to teach me to be a ninja," she decided, poking his clothing.

"No," he answered, paternal fierceness overwhelming anything else. "You shouldn't have to be a part of any of that."

She frowned. "I'm a ninja whether you teach me or not, aren't I? You can't teach a ninja only how to be a princess and expect it to work out well. Do we ever get to be normal? Ever? One day I'm gonna grow up and I need to know what to do."

Her father's expression had become more pained as she spoke, and now there was a note of panic in it. "You can't-" he began, then broke off and bit his lip. "Not tonight, you... " he shook his head and then buried her in a tight hug, smearing some black paint on her.

"Dad...?"

He took in a long, shuddering breath, and then nodded into her hair. "Slowly," he told her. She hugged him tighter immediately. "Not by bringing you with me. Not tonight. Not like so quickly. Slowly."

There weren't words for how grateful that made her. Terra snuggled close to her father, listening to his rapid heartbeat. He was the strongest and most capable person she knew, in every way she knew of. His fear always made her feel vulnerable and helpless; helpless to understand the way they flit about the country or hid their faces from the world.

"What's been eating you?" he asked in a more level tone after a moment, though she could feel his heart rate had not yet settled. "Something at school?"

Terra pulled back a little from his embrace. After a moment of consideration, she picked up his greasepaint kit, dabbed some black up, and began applying it to his face. The clown blinked in surprise but held still for her, closing his eyes so she could make sure the application was thorough.

"Squirt?" he asked.

"You're going to get a letter from the school asking for a parent-teacher conference," Terra said at last. Mr. Smith perked up and blinked at her in confusion. Although the two of them rarely discussed Terra's gift, she ought to have foreseen any trouble with the teachers long before she'd stumbled into a parent-teacher conference scenario.

"What happened?" he asked.

"We were doing an assignment today about Halloween. The subject had to do with costumes. We drew pictures, and wrote about who we wanted to dress as and why. When I realized I was going to get in trouble, I wanted to know why. I didn't realize how much trouble till it was too late for me to fix without lying. And I don't lie just cause other people are dumb."

He furrowed his brow at first, then smirked. "What did you do...?" he teased.

"Thing's are different here. The teachers in New York didn't mind if I dressed up as the Green Goblin. Well, I said I wanted to go as the Joker," she told him. "She said I was 'disturbed'. I had to look up what she meant in a dictionary. Weirdo lady."
He brought out laughing almost hysterically and then hugged his daughter tightly and ruffled her hair. "I'm going to find that conversation hilarious."

"I don't want to move again!" Terra protested, dabbing his chin with the paint. "I'm just starting to make some friends!" He laughed again. "I'll behave. Promise. No moving for a bit." He tweaked her nose.

"You're not doing anything bad tonight?" she asked hopefully.

"When men sneak around in black ninja outfits, something risky is going on," he joked. "But don't worry. I'll be watching, not fighting. The parent-teacher conference... that's what made you ask about 'abnormality'?"

"I guess I did it to myself," she confessed, "even though I knew better, my teacher made me frustrated, so I argued anyway. I guess what bothered me was when I realized how afraid she was of anything strange. Then suddenly I understood: I'm just different from her. I need to know more about hero and villain stuff than she does. She just wants to hide from it, heroes included."

Mr. Smith looked off at nothing as she spoke, and then slowly looked back to her, his gaze thoughtful and sympathetic. "I didn't mean to make your life like this. Abnormal. Hiding."

Terra looked up at him in surprise. "I don't want to be like her. She's just a control freak. She needs everything to be normal, or she has a temper tantrum. And I'm supposed to be the kid! What's she going to do in an emergency or disaster, like a tornado? Yell the tornado to death? She's crazy, she just doesn't know it."

The clown smirked appreciatively. "Well, I certainly can't let your only education come from crazy people. We'll start 'special' lessons after school. Deal?"

"Deal." She kissed his cheek where the paint was already dry from his earlier application. "There, you're done. Be safe?" He took a look in the mirror, examining himself before grunting in approval and tugging up a scarf over his mouth and nose.

"Honeybee, I'm on my turf. Really, I'm as safe as can be."

"Then don't make a dumb mess up," she teased the adult. He ruffled her hair and then headed for the bedroom window and off into the night. "I love you!"

He blinked and peered back at her, almost completely hidden against the dark sky. At eight years old, Terra Smith was much taller and more mature than the little girl he'd first adopted. But her face was still round, her limbs like little string beans, and her baby teeth no more than minute white beads. She was still so small, so vulnerable. He had to go. He had to go, to make sure things were in place to keep them safe hidden. Still his heart clenched at the sudden realization that he was leaving her alone and defenseless for the night. "I love you," he echoed her softly, and then turned off into the darkness.

Maybe it was for the best that he taught her a few things.

When Mr. Smith entered the kitchen the next morning, he set about his usual routine. He grabbed his various cooking components as he walked past; the skillet, a spatula, a jug of orange juice, five eggs and an onion- he shut the refrigerator door with his foot- and an apron. He was juggling all of these materials quite admirably and was midway through heating up the skillet and stirring up an omelet when he noticed his daughter was already up. She was seated at the kitchen table, her chin hovering
over steepled fingers, elbows over a newspaper, a stern expression on her face.

Mr. Smith gulped. *What did I do?*

"Um... Goodmorning?" he hazarded.

Terra gave him a look to end all looks. She rolled up the newspaper, sauntered up to him, and offered it to him like a scroll. Mr. Smith blinked and settled down the omelet bowl, taking the newspaper in both hands.

**SUSPICIOUS MAN IN BLACK; RESPONSIBLE FOR MISSING FORTUNE?**

Mr. Smith looked up at his daughter. "Don't worry," he tried to reassure. "No one traced this back to us. We don't have to move. I-"

"I want a pony."

Mr. Smith paused. "New hockey gear," he haggled.

"New hockey gear AND a pony."

Not fair, she was cheating. "New hockey gear and another rabbit," he protested.

Terra eyed him with wisdom beyond her years, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. "A sugar glider," she counter offered.

"A what?" Terra reached into her back jeans pocket and pulled out a folded color picture she’d printed at the school library. Depicted were baby flying squirrels with attached phone numbers and birth dates. Mr. Smith blinked at the pictures and then looked at Terra in amazement. "How long did you hold on to this hand?" he asked the mischievous-looking eight year old.

Terra giggled. "I was waiting for the ace, Daddy. *Obviously!*"

"Then you're not mad at me?"

"Ni! You will atone for your crimes," she said with the aire of a decadent princess, "with my new baby sugar glider, serf!"

Mr. Smith broke out laughing and heaved her off the ground, tossing her gently into the air and catching her again. "Where'd that come from?!" he laughed. "Have you been watching the history channel again?"

"Your mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries!"

"I leave you alone with screens too frequently," he decided. "How is that possible when I home-school you on the weekends, and have no job?"

"I have a brain the size of a planet! And a Time-Turner! Now fetch me a shrubbery, or I shall say 'Ni' at you a second time!"
Second Time Was Easier

'Super' was an interesting word, thought Mr. Smith. Coming from Latin, it most directly meant 'over' or 'above.' In English, the world tended to sound slightly phony and plastic. It reeked of an earlier and more naive time in history, of plastered smiles over teetering catastrophe. So it was that the compound word 'super hero' tended to feel phony on his lips. It was an absurd word, as impressive as a roll of cellophane, and so was 'super villain.' Still, one supposed both compounds were necessary distinctions.

After all a 'hero' was merely a fireman, a mother, or a stalwart police officer. The world 'super hero' was necessary for that certain class of people who went far beyond mundane heroism, people who could not live normal human lives. These 'super heroes' were the Spartans of modern underworld combat; their profession was (in a manner of speaking) war. Likewise, where 'villain' was a word to describe dramatically compelling antagonists, their profession could be banker, assassin, teacher, or step mother. But a super villain-

TCHK-flp.

Terra frowned at the largely unblemished target in disappointment. "I missed again," she complained, dismayed by the array of metal scattered about the target's base. Mr. Smith grinned, brought back to reality by the high-pitched whine of his daughter's voice. He leaned over her and slipped another throwing knife gently into her fingers. His own hand closed about her, carefully positioning her fingertips and knuckles.

"It's not about thinking," he told her, "it's not deduction, it doesn't use your brain. It's feeling. You do it long enough and you get a feel for it." He grasped her shoulders tightly, turning her a bit. "Your fingers start doing the thinking for you. And then you just keep challenging them, giving goals just a little farther, a little farther..."

"But I can't even get a knife to stick!" she complained. "What am I doing wrong?

"Don't worry so much, squirt," he teased, ducking to kiss the top of her head. "D'ya have any idea how long it took you to learn your first word? Well. The second word was easier."

She glanced at him hopefully and then took a deep breath.

"Not so much mental preparation and build up. Just guide it through the first few paces of the journey. Let it go, see what it does. Watch it the whole way. Watch its shape when it strikes. You're going for something like this." He moved her body through the motions, her arms, her legs.

Terra nodded and came back to her starting position. She gave it another try, casting the next knife in her best mimicry of her father's motions. The hilt of the blade struck the target, and the weapon bounced harmlessly off. She swore.

"Whoa!" Alarmed, Mr. Smith grabbed her cheeks and tilted her head back up to look at him. "None of that," he chastised, patting her cheek sternly.

Terra blushed, frustrated. "How do you do it?"

"Learned the same way you did, kid: throwing a knife and failing over and over and over again. Now throw the rest, clean up, stab the target a couple times till you feel better, and then it's time for something completely different."
"Blah, I'm never going to be able to focus," She complained. "Is it math? I'm never going to be able to focus."

"No worries. I have ice-cream ready. Once more?"

Terra perked up at the mention of a light at the end of her tunnel. She nodded and carefully reached for the next knife. This time, the weapon stuck.

"Yesss!"

"Ha! Very good. Now don't get mad when the next one doesn't stick; we've got fun things to do later!"

"Are we making fire today?" Terra asked eagerly, looking back at her father and grabbing another knife.

Mr. Smith lifted a brow. "I'm sorry, who are you talking to? Me? Of course we're making fire today. I went to all the trouble to set up that workplace, didn't I? I want to show you how sawmills can explode! Then we'll make bismuth crystals and turn them into cosmetics and gastrointestinal medications."

Terra looked up at him, as if waiting for something.

Her father tapped his chin, feeling like he was forgetting something. "Oh yes!" it suddenly occurred to him. "How could I forget? Pyrotechnics! Bismuth is wonderful for making dragon's eggs pyrotechnics stars..."

"Where are we going to shoot off fireworks!?" Terra asked in alarm.

"Alas, but I shall not reveal my master plan so early! Now, aim!"

Most 'supers' were loners; they worked together only when necessary, and avoided interpersonal relationships with laymen like the plague. At worse they were antisocial, and at best they couldn't be everywhere at once and lacked the omnipresence necessary to protect the people they cared for. If-and it was rare- they tried to start a family, they usually had to vanish. Certain 'supers' like Bats and Ra's could train underlings, companions, and replacements. They were used to sharing what they knew, whether it was with blooming 'supers' or hand-picked goons.

But truth be told, the Joker had never shared his craft with much of anyone. Harley had learned through observation; his goons he had left as unaware and incapable as possible. Teaching his craft, his profession, war, to anyone was strange to him. Teaching Terra was strangest of all. He thought of some of the things he had done to the world; some of the ways he'd taken lives or convinced brainless goons to swallow explosives for him.

"Elbow," he called, prompting her to make a small correction.

As Terra's next knife struck home on the target, Mr. Smith couldn't suppress a shiver. She was right: anyone who could predict the future (and predict it she could, based on how she was now hitting every knife successfully into the target) was never going to be able to live a normal life. Still, the more he shared with her, the more he remembered there was a whole lot of ugly he didn't really want her to see.

She's going to see it eventually. She'll get on the internet and read old police files; if I don't end up killing someone in front of her first.
What says she'll mind? She could end up like me. She did ask to go as the Joker for Halloween.

The Clown made a face of displeasure. He would rather another Bats than another Harley. At least the former would make for years of fun dramatic tension. And as for her being like the Joker? Hmph. There could only be one.

"He really gave us the slip," Robin noted. "Makes sense, he's been perfecting the art for... how long now?"

Bruce was quiet, making a paper airplane out of the bill for his new Lamborghini. He was anticipating the delivery of the vehicle with the same excitement as he might anticipate a good cup of coffee. It was expected of him to indulge, and so he did; buying the four million dollar vehicle off the cuff. He attended many functions and one of them had featured a high end auto show. There, compared to the latest Dolorian-esque Ferrari and Pagani, the black Lamborghini Veneno had an angular, aggressive shape to it that reminded him of a certain roof-jumping tank. He'd liked it. He threw the paper airplane.

"You don't seem very concerned," his second noticed, folding his arms over his chest.

"Hmm?" Bruce glanced at him.

Robin scowled. "Don't give me that, I'm not your adoring public. You haven't seem very invested in tracking down you-know-who for awhile now. Big change for a guy who was obsessed over this for years."

Bruce shrugged.

"Like I said, that act doesn't work on me."

Mr. Wayne eyed Robin for a moment. Then he sat forward on his desk and leaned his elbows on the wood top, interlacing his fingers. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"That's what I'm asking you," Robin retorted. "It's like you've lost the heart for fighting. Ever since-" he trailed off.

"Ever since... what, Robin?"

The younger man scowled.

"Ever since... Helena was born?"

Robin said nothing.

Bruce smirked. "Ever since Helena was born it's like I've settled down? I've tended to the business, moved around assets, secured financial holdings. It's like Batman's been on the decline and... I'm only Bruce Wayne? Like suddenly now that there's a child, I'm worried about mundane things instead of my real job. Instead of the real villains out there."

His second sneered, pouted, then shrugged. "Well you said it."

Mr. Wayne smirked. "Do you want to take over, then?"

"No! I want the Dark Knight to fight!" Robin protested. "What's wrong with you? Is it really the kid? You haven't gotten off your ass for a week!"
"Bold claim. Not without some evidence to support it, I suppose, but one that could get you in a lot of trouble if you start trying to prove something to me." He tapped his lips with his pointer fingers splayed as Robin grimaced, annoyed with the patronizing tone he perceived in the older man’s words. "How about this," he said at last, sitting up and then leaning confidently back into his chair. "If I prove to you I haven't lost my edge, you drop the matter. And you definitely drop blaming Helena." His voice suddenly had a hard edge at that last point.

Robin grimaced but shrugged. "You're on, Bats."

Bruce smiled. He reached into his breast pocket, pulled out three photographs, and tossed them across the table. The younger man blinked and picked the closer one up, looking at it uncertainly. "A kid? What-" He frowned and, not wanting to look like a fool, he picked up the second photograph. This one was a duplicate of the first, but it had been edited. The hair had been swapped out and the eye color changed. Listed around the picture were notes like a brand of eye contact or prosthetic skin. Unmistakably, the second photograph was of Veronica Peterson. Robin blinked and then grabbed the third photograph. This one had been tailored into the shape of Marcy Adams.

Robin lifted his head and looked at Bruce- Batman- in surprise and alarm.

"The kid—Buttercup—You know where she is," he exclaimed. "Where is she?"

"Not exactly. But she's staying put well enough that I can keep an eye on her," the Batman said with a smirk, reaching into his desk to pull out a fine brand of cigar and a golden lighter. "Smoke?" he offered one to the younger man.

"And... and him?" the boy pressed, ignoring the offer.

"Well, probably best for your health that you didn't start," he decided, and it only took a split second for Robin to realize he wasn't just talking about smoking cigars. His face blushed with anger and embarrassment at this subtle jab at his accidental leak to Fruit Bat on the Joker's whereabouts.

"You're just letting him walk around!?" the younger man stammered. "I could help you! Is this seriously about Harley? That was over a year ago! Or are you worried you'll fail and he'll come after Helena? That's ridiculous, one of us could watch over her while the others-!

"We had a deal," the Batman noted. "Firstly for you to drop the matter, and secondly to stop bringing Helena into the conversation."

"But-!"

"Didn't I hold up my end of the bargain?" Bruce asked. "Didn't I prove to you I'm still who you signed up to follow?"

Robin hesitated.

"Then maybe you should just trust that I know what I'm doing. It would be a nice start, you know. My household trusting me. You know like trusting me not to be lazy... Not to be insane... Not to see imaginary Jokers..."

The younger man sighed. He had just been completely played into a trap of obedient silence; his own personal form of hell. Clearly, whether he was Batman or Bruce Wayne, a certain dark-haired billionaire had not lost his game. With a defeated slump of his shoulders, Robin sank down into the chair opposite Batman, a begrudging respect working its way over his face.

"One day you're going to get killed because you didn't trust anyone enough to not die while helping
you," the younger man muttered.

Batman shrugged. "Maybe I would if you'd all stop nearly dying while helping me." He grinned, because he was mostly teasing.

Robin made a face.

"I think I'm going to start reading Helena The Hobbit." Bruce mused aloud. "Plenty of good lessons on heroism in there. And ones in stupidity. And a good depiction of the dangers involved when provoking sleeping dragons..."

Robin made another face.
NYC: Daily Bugle Announces Merger With Channel Six News, read an innocuous article at the bottom her morning news feed:

Readers may remember the unexpected success of New York's Daily Bugle under new CEO, Robbie Roberston, after the newspaper nearly declare bankruptcy in 2002. Now after over a year of intense negotiations with the recently privatized Channel Six News station, Roberston and O'Neil have agreed to a merger of their companies, calling it a 'natural and mutually beneficial result.' Critics of masked vigilantism were on sight to protest both companies at the negotiations, claiming that the news groups turn a favorable spin on alleged 'superheros,' and claim the rise of such sensationalized journalism is contributing to increased lawlessness across North America. However, skyrocketing ratings and market shares have spoken louder, and perhaps this merger marks the end of an era in which-

The ghosts of future movement rocketed abruptly through Terra Smith's vision. The eleven-year-old girl quickly pocketed her phone, and stared expectantly out past old, brick apartment buildings that glowed orange in the coming sunset. Her book bag and hockey gear were not so heavy across her back. She had been exercising daily for half of her life. Hmm. She dipped a hand into her hoodie, and began fiddling with her switchblade, repeatedly latching and unlatching it.

Gotham City was a beautiful place, sometimes. The dirt gave it character.

A moment passed in silence before six boys emerged from the alleyway ahead of her. Most of them looked older than her by a few years. One was balancing a ball, and the others had cigarettes pinched between their lips. By the packets they were sharing between one another, they hadn't been smoking tobacco. Not that it particularly mattered; No one much minded what slum kids so long as they weren't breaking anything.

"Hey, that's her," one said in elbowing the other. "That's the warehouse brat."

"The fuck you on about?" Terra glanced between them, and then slowly stepped off to the side to let the group past. "Oh. She's cute. The hell old is she?"

"Hey, hey girl," the one with the ball protested. "Residence zone's behind you. You stupid or something? You shouldn't be wandering out around here, might get in trouble...!"

"Might see something you're not supposed to," one of them sneered. "She a snitch?"

"She ain't bad; mostly hangs around the skate park. Knows how to keep her head low. Bumped into her before. She does neat card tricks sometimes."

"Heard she's an orphan," one of them leered playfully close as the group drew near. "She gets placed like two years ahead in math, but I don't know about that. Probably just knows the teacher." He reached out to flick her nose, and Terra batted his hand away. "Ho! Too stupid to run, aren't you bitch? Think you're all that?"

"Leave her alone, Mitch, she's not a problem."

"She thinks she's a little fighter!" the nose-flicker laughed. "That how it is, when you ain't got a dad to run home too, eh, you gotta be a fighter? Little hockey player, mn? You know, maybe you just need one of us to be your daddy."
Terra raised both brows and stared at him for a moment. "You don't want to meet my father," she informed him flatly, because that was the honest-to-god truth. "You're very lucky I'm all you need to deal with today."

Her nose-flicker must have seen something in her eyes that warned him off, because he stepped back with a strained laugh. Another of the boys rounded unexpected on her, however. "I don't think this kid knows how to behave herself. Do you, girl? You realize what we'll do to you if you try to get one over on us?"

"Don't touch me," Terra warned preemptively. "I can do worse to you."

His eyes narrowed and he lunged down at her. She had her switchblade out and had slit open his hand before he'd so much as reached her. The howl he made spooked the other boys, and then drew them all together in an angry little bunch.

"Grab her! It's just one knife-!"

So Terra plucked four throwing spikes from her sleeve, and flicked them upright between her knuckles; each a sharp dart of metal. "I will take out your eyes," she spat in as vicious and snakelike a manner as she could manage. Her halo of startled, pubescent male harassers stumbled backwards to give her more space. "Don't ever bully me," she told them. "Ever. Got it?!"

"Got it!" the ball-player mumbled, tugging his friends back as another said:

"Come on, she's cornered and scared and could seriously hurt you just by stabbing like crazy. Come on. She's not worth it!"

"Got it, got it!" the ball-player repeated as the whole group of boys retreated. They left, some more slowly than others, and she heard one of them shout 'freak' over his shoulder. Terra slipped her pocket knife away, and tucked each of her darts back where they belonged.

A long shadow fell over her, and she looked up to see her father standing just inches behind her. Terra Smith straightened. "Were you there the whole time?" she squawked, startled.

"Figured you had it handled," he growled, his posture stiff and his gaze sharpened on where the boys had disappeared to. "Probably best you did. You're the nice one."

Terra planted her hands on her hips. "I appreciate your attempts to mitigate the psychological impact of your helicopter parenting," she answered at last.

He grunted, and then reached out to ruffle her hair affectionately. "It's harder than it looks. So: Italian tonight?"

"Fettuccini Alfredo?"

"Tch, your palette is so limited," he lamented dramatically with a flourish of his hands. "When I think about that rack of lamb with mint you so callously spurned..."

Terra sighed equally dramatically. "That had no cheese. Dad, I think you need a girlfriend," she confessed.

He nearly leaped out of his skin, and looked at her with his arms and one leg cringed up against him and a look of astounded confusion on his face. "What?!" he demanded.

"You get lonely," she informed him matter-of-factly. "We need someone who is going to spend..."
every second of every day with you and watch sappy movies and always have time for big exotic dinners and wants lots of presents and likes listening to jokes. I think that's what girlfriends are for. " Her father was still gaping at her. "I can put out a classified ad: Only Child Needs Backup For Dealing With Deluge of Single Father's Fatherly Love."

A little mumble snuck out of him. Then a snicker. Then a laugh. Then he was bent double, hackling like a hyena, laughing so hard that he could scarcely breathe. Terra grinned from ear to ear, and threw herself into him. He unwrapped his arms from his middle, picked her up under the arms, and tossed her up before catching her in a big hug.

"N-n-no girlfriends! Ha!" he sputtered. "No! Never! Not interested! Y-you th-think-? HA! You don't get to—hehe!—date! Ever! Never ever!"

"I don't have to date? Thank goodness," Terra exclaimed in relief as he carried her off. "That takes a big burden off my schedule, I'll have you know." He squeaked. "Now, what about you? Does that mean you want a boyfriend?" she suspicioned. "Because, if so, I totally support you."

"Snerk! No! I—hehe!—I don't want any-!"

"Dad, is this about Batman?"

Her father didn't make it any farther down the street, and his high-pitched, chattering howls of laughter were surely loud enough to wake the dead.
In hindsight, the fact that this chapter references Michael Bay negatively gets even funnier when Buttercup eventually meets her BFF in the sequel to this story. Another Note about the fake movie referenced in this chapter: Suicide Squad hadn't been released yet when I was originally writing this story. Later, when I was editing chapters, I decided to keep the fake movie 'In the Cards' so that I could actually make Suicide Squad's Joker and Harley as real things in-universe, as 'spiritual successors' to the original villains, who emerge when Wildcard is older and form a 'new generation' of villains.

"Hey Nibbles!" Terra called to her fat and elderly rabbit as she entered her bedroom. She tossed her hockey gear off to the side, dropped her backpack, extracted her sugar glider from his secret hiding place under her shirt, scooped up Nibbles, and then spun about and flopped her back down onto her bed. Nibbles waddled about on top of her, and then curled up to sleep on her belly. Mumu, her sugar glider, scurried up to sleep on top of Nibbles.

Terra sighed contentedly, petting both of her animals and staring up at nothing in particular. Her muscles were a little sore from practice, but it was a good sort of sore, she hardly thought about the knife-and-bully incident. Her vision slid about across her many hockey, anime, super hero, and movie posters, and she felt safe in this space of her own.

"It's been four years," she reminisced with her bunny. "I haven't needed to change my friends, or my home, or my reflection. For four years." She could barely remember having been anyone else, or having lived anywhere other than Gotham city. She remembered something of New York, and of Tampa and Los Angeles and Star. After awhile, it all blended together. "I never want to move again. Ever. You don't either, huh, do ya Nibbles?" She played with his nose.

It wasn't that Gotham was an ideal place to live; the city was scruffy and dirty and dangerous, even after years of improvements and reforms. But everyone needed someplace to call home.

The TV downstairs began to hum; her father liked to listen to the news as background noise while he cooked. Soon the smell of cheese and herbs was flooding through the house, and Terra's belly rumbled. Hockey could give one quite an appetite.

"Hey Squirt!" her father called up the stairs. "Your Americanized Italian dinner is done, complete with extra cheese!"

"Best part!" she called back down to him, and hurriedly returned Nibbles to his abode. "You want to starve me? I'm a growing girl and play sports, I need my calories!"

"Starch, kid, you need starch, not cheese! We scienced this, remember?! Three fires were involved! Grains, cereals, potatoes, yams, vegetables-!"

"All delicious! Bah! Why do you bother me with these details? Details-Shmeetails!" She pish-poshed as she quickly slid down the stair railing. He caught her at the bottom and bundled her in a hug.
"Oh, I'll 'Details' you!" he laughed, nuzzling into her hair. "I loaded it up with mushrooms and onions, and you better eat every one of them!"

"Not onions!" she squealed.

"You love onions, you little liar! C'mon squirt," he chuckled, dropping her to the ground. "At least if you're going to eat so much fat, make sure you eat your vegetables with it."

... 

"Are you headed out tonight?" Terra asked through forkfuls of cheesy noodles. Her father glanced up at her in surprise.

"Just to observe, but yeah," he agreed. "How did you guess?"

"You did the laundry early. Can I come?"

He winced, settled his fork down, and then bridged his hands thoughtfully under his chin and looked evasively off at nothing.

"You've been teaching me the basics of this for years, and I'll be extra special careful," Terra offered, seeing that he was actually considering it. "I don't think I'm all tough and invincible just cause I scared off some bullies today. I'll be really careful, and hide from anything and everything...!"

Green eyes slid hesitantly back over to her, intrigued by her dearth of cocky grandstanding. Terra smiled wide.

"You're thinnnnkinnn about itttt," she teased and did a little dance in her seat. "I knowww you arreee!"

"Nnnhhhh," he affected displeasure, and looked off evasively at nothing again. Terra widened her eyes and made herself very small, and gave him the most sincere pout she knew how to manage. He pretended he couldn't see her.

"These noodles are a little al dente," she chirped a deceptive complaint.

He looked quickly back at her pasta in alarm, only to see that she had laid a cunning trap for him. Not only were her noodles perfectly cooked, but she was still gazing up at him with puppy-dog eyes and a trembling lower lip. "That," he pointed at her with a fork, "should be illegal in all fifty states."

"Big-eyed looks?" she asked. "Or pretending your cooking skills are anything other than legendary?"

"Yes," he answered as he twisted up some pasta on his fork. "Promise me not to get shot or fall off any roofs." He leaned over and took a bite.

Terra squeaked, glowed as bright as the sun, and clapped her hands rapidly. "Cross my heart! Cross my heart, cross my heart, cross my heart!"

... 

The father-daughter duo cleaned up their dishes with their standard family acrobatics that evening, and the plates, forks, glasses, and knives all traveled to the sink through a wide variety of under and
over-handed tosses. "Go long!" Terra called over the salad bowl, as the television droned on behind them:

"Thousands have gathered around the Mayor's Office today, protesting the decision to allow Hollywood's Greenlight Cinema access to Gotham's streets and historical sites for the filming of the highly controversial 'Cards Dilemma,' movie. Cards Dilemma is set for release next year at Halloween, and bills itself as an action thriller, but critics worldwide say it is a glorification of supervillians and insensitive to the true damage caused by escaped Arkham Asylum inmates. Citizens are offended at what they call the 'presumption' of a Hollywood filmmakers to profit from the suffering of Gotham's citizens."

Mr. Smith was nearly pinioned through the head by Terra's next thrown object. He dropped the bowl he'd been holding, with a clatter, and turned to look at the screen. Terra twisted about to see it.

"These incidents are not even a decade past, and to some extent still happening today," a college professor spoke gravely into the camera from where reporters had accosted her on the street. "This is like barging into a traumatized veteran's bedroom to film a documentary on World War II."

They switched interviewees to a plump soccer mom. "Look it's not even like all the inmates are- were- ever accounted for. Right? I mean, is the government insane? Do they want to rile these crazies up? Anyone on the loose- they can see the movies, don't you realize? The same as anyone! What if it reminds them of their glory days, or if they just don't like it?"

"Maybe if it was a documentary," a frowning hipster told them with his latte in hand, "I could see that. Or a psychological thriller. Guillermo Del Toro, and you could get some deep insight and ask big questions about what makes people do these kinds of things. But Michael Bay? You're telling me this movie is going to be good for anyone but Hollywood when it's directed by Michael Bay?"

"I'd have preferred Christopher Nolan," complained a protester. "He at least tried at instilling a moral."

"It has a reference in the name," a scowling hobo informed them over his trash can. "Nothin' cute or coy about that!"

"The protesters have shown no sign of being willing to return home," the reporter continued, "and many have erected tents, saying they will not be leaving until the government has given them more satisfying answers, so we will be covering this issue as it evolves over the coming days."

Terra looked back to her father, who was worrying his hands together and staring uncomfortably at the screen.

"Dad?"

He winced and glanced at her with a thin smile. "Yeah, squirt?" he asked faintly.

"I've never felt unloved one moment of my life," she told him. His brows drew upward in the middle. "So, everything else that isn't perfect, no matter what it is, I'll always be able to figure out how to handle it." She paused. "But they're right, Michael Bay is a terrible choice. Except for the explosions. The explosions will be glorious."
Terra wondered how she'd never seen the world vertically before the first time her father had taught her how to climb up to a rooftop. The city was filled with toe and finger holds, all blooming with possibilities. Why worry about what road to avoid bullies on, when one could simply go over the buildings? And the night air was fresh up there, fresh and cool.

"Da?" she chirped as she spidered down the shingles to his perch at the pier.

He reached over to touch her almost unconsciously, as if each muscle had yet to forget the first time she nearly slipped free from a gutter. That had been so long ago, now, but he always worried. "What's eatin ya squirt?"

"I'm gonna quit hockey."

Acid green eyes flit quickly to her, brows peaked in exaggerated curiosity. Her father was still there at night, but something else was too: something that was also-her-father-but-different. The latter was easily identifiable, because its presence always accompanied a dramatic increase in the pitch and color of his voice. "Well that's troublesome to hear," the mostly-Joker drawled. "What's provoked this, hmm? Meanie-faces at school again? Need a few heads pushed in toilets, by chance? Anything exciting?"

Terra shook her head. "Nuh-uh, just can't handle the pressure of two physically demanding extracurricular hobbies at the same time. Also I've kinda lost enthusiasm for it."

A little more of Household-Father slipped into those eyes, temporarily eclipsing Manic-Father as he stared nervously out into the distance and, somehow, found a way to blame himself for something. "We are cutting into your sleeping hours. Always have," he chattered.

Terra grabbed his shoulder and gave him a little shake so that he'd come back out of his own head. Acid eyes flickered so mournfully hopeful that she had to stick out her tongue at him. "Hockey's not fun enough anymore! I like this better!"

Sly eyes dripped back down to her as each Father-Half melded into one wry whole. "This? Becoming a respectable family burglar, arsonist, misfit and mischief-maker?"

"No, I'm totally normal and sporty! 'Parkour' is in the same street-born taxonomical family as hockey and skateboarding! Totally kosher for normality, normal as normal can be! See?" She tossed her head with a fabulous flourish and struck a pose better befitting a Miss America than an Olympic Queen. "And and and and and-" she raised a finger to temporarily hold off her father's tide of snickers and/or arguments, ",-wait a second! Mischief? Yes, what you said, that. I insist on making excessive amounts of mischief! What's next!?"

He liked that so much he cooed his reply in sing-song: "Ooh silly little But~ter~cup, you know just how to crack~me~up...!" She leaned into her da's shoulder, and he ruffled her hair. "But I say: No. Hmm. Well, maybe maybe maybe. Okay, look, we'll talk." He raised his hands to gesticulate. "Later. Now's for quiet time, mm?" He tapped her nose.

Terra made a silent gesture of zipping her mouth shut.

He kissed the top of her head.

Then she followed her father gingerly down into the pier, and from shadow to shadow, as they went
to find out who exactly was involved with a not-so-legal cargo ship that had slid unimpeded into port that evening.

After a moment, Terra whispered: "Don't you dare be thinking about the movie *Inside Out*. This is *nothing like that at all*, mister father sir...!"

"Rest assured," her father whispered back, "Your mind is most assuredly staffed by *Joy*, but mine is filled with dice, tarot, and-

"-and a bunch of cats walking all over the control panels?"

"I am not such a *spaz*...!"
The Comic Warehouse Fire

Chapter Notes

In which Terra has gotten a smart phone, and is fast on her way to becoming as informed about the world as her father... But first! Are her favorite super hero comics okay!?

GTH: Comic Book Warehouse Burns, read a flaming article at the top of her morning newsfeed:

A major storage and distribution center owned by international printing company Quad/Graphics burned last night, with the fire starting at approximately ten o’clock eastern. The warehouse is reported to have contained several billion newly printed comic books, including the newest issue of the highly popular ‘Justice League’ comics, which broke preordering records last Thursday. Seven arrests have already been made. Anti-super and anti-mutant activists across the nation have already praised the arson, claiming that comic books have ‘romanticized’ a serious threat facing the nation, ‘rewritten history,’ downplayed serious urban disasters, and serve as social and cultural propaganda designed to brainwash readers, especially ‘troubled men’ and young children.

Thirteen-year-old Terra grew a little pale, and panic rose up in her belly in waves. She didn’t particularly care about the Justice League! But, as the stacks of comic books under her bed would attest, she had every reason to be concerned about what else might have been burned in that poor warehouse! Was Alan Moore set to release anything soon? Oh god, and then there was the newest issue of-! Arg! Research, research research, what had burned!?

-Justice League is loosely based on the lives of-
-afflicted publishers, Marvel and DC, have yet to release press-
-also destroyed thousands of copies of bestselling graphic novel Attack on-

-A list of all affected publications had not yet been released by Quad/Graphics.

No! She needed to know! THESE WERE IMPORTANT MATTERS! She quickly closed out of her newfeed and opened up Twitter, and navigated to Nickelodeon. Anything? No, nothing. She navigated to IDW Publishing. Yes! There was the #GothamComicWarehouseFire she’d been looking for! Oh God above, had anything burned?

"Just checked w/ distribution and we are unaffected by comic book fire. Issue 22 of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles still scheduled to ship on Monday."

WHOOOP WHOOOP! Terra did her own personal little fist-pump. Nothing would be standing between her and her fix! Not even crazy anti-super-power-and-mutant arsonists! Buahahah!

And speaking of arsonists and other nere-do-wells... Terra glanced at the collection of thugs as she crossed the gas station. They didn't notice her, and she smiled to herself. Been following these guys all week. She'd seen them take a job, and she was waiting to see what came of it. Today looked to be the day, though she was surprised they'd picked to do this in the morning hours. Whatever it was. As she entered the gas station she briefly pocketed her phone, and went up to the refrigerators to pick out a drink. Gatorade or Coca Cola? Mnnn, the decision was a struggle, it really was. She begrudgingly grabbed the healthier option and fished a few dollars out of her pocket.
As she went up the cashier, her phone rang. An unlisted number? Hmm. She answered.

"Hello?"

"You're not in math class," the Joker cooed in sing-song through what sounded like a mouthful of snacks.

Terra pulled the phone away from her ear, covered the receiver, and slowly swore. The gas station attendant looked amused with her. "Shouldn't you be in school?" he asked though, by the look of him, he hadn't any right to judge. He couldn't be more than eighteen and had more piercings than looked entirely healthy on a person. It was kinda neat, though obviously not her style. She gave a martyred sigh.

"Yeah. Dad just found me out. Mind if I use the bathroom?"

"Nah, it's slow this time of day." Least he was a nice guy.

She took her change and her Gatorade and gratefully retired to the stinky bathroom with its two stalls and a window that had been painted over with green to forestall peeping toms. She checked the stalls and raised the phone to her ear. "How did you figure this out?" she demanded of him.

"Your teacher called," her father tittered wryly. He was definitely eating something. Popcorn? "Said this has been the fourth unexcused absence this month, and mentioned you'd been falling asleep in class. Now what's that about?"

"I'm too busy being awesome for school," she hissed, looking to see if the window could be opened because she needed an ear on her targets.

"You're going to have to do better than that..." sang a father who was definitely not calm or collected at the moment. "Spill the beans!"

"I'm on the trail of something."

"Something serious, or something fun?"

"Not sure yet, that's why I'm still on the trail."

"Did you bring a mask?"

"Yup. In my special backpack with the smoke grenades, darts, and Wakizashi." She pulled back the edge of her jacket and glanced down at where she was also wearing her black catsuit.

"Oh? On your own? What... exactly have you been doing, squirt?"

"Where are you and what are you doing?" she abruptly demanded of him and his popcorn munching.

"The theater across the street from you. Watching a nice chick flick. You still have me on speed dial, right?"

Terra drew back her phone and glared at it. She'd turned off GPS tracking for the day which meant he'd figured out her location by some alternative means. After a long moment of controlling her stupid hormonal teenage temper, and taking a few deep breaths, she managed to compose herself and lifted the phone back up to talk to him again. "Yeah. Thank you for attempting to mitigate the negative psychological effects of what would otherwise be stifling helicopter parenting."
"Hey now," his voice was settling back into a normal range now that he'd gotten hold of her, "you're the sneaky little booger playing hooky... and apparently playing hero. Without permission. Without warning. Using live weapons..."

She cut to the chase: "I guess I'm in trouble then."

"Not yet, but only because I don't want to impair your focus... Well! Call me if you need me. Love ya."

"Love you, too, dad," she grumbled, and hung up the call. He'd better not help her...

And that's when she heard tires squealing and knew showtime had come.
Little Miss Independent

Chapter Notes

I think we can all agree Joker handled this better than we'd have expected.

Mr. Smith took his popcorn with him as he moseyed down the theater, disabled the emergency exit, and eased the door open. He stepped out into the back parking lot of the building, which was largely deserted, and then leaned back against the brick wall of the theater to eat popcorn and watch.

An pipe bomb detonated, and there was a thunderous crash as black-painted, mafia Lincolns collided. Men shouted as they stumbled from the seats into a fog of smoke bombs. Guns chattered, and a razor-sharp tinkle of blade weapons went ringing theatrically off the sides and barrels of guns. One weapon misfired with a loud and messy crack. One men tried to flee and was followed by a small, bouncing concussive grenade whose explosion threw him to the pavement and kept him there. The gas grew thick, obscuring the vehicles. Bystanders hurried away to call first responders from positions of safety—or not at all; this was the slums, after all.

Nom nom nom nom nom.

He was glad to have paid extra for the large popcorn.

A silence fell upon the scene and then out from the smoke hurried a young woman dressed in her very appropriate black costume, and looking like a dark, hooded and mildly-armored little ninja, straight out of an action movie. He raised his arms to plead for his innocence as she came up to him. "I didn't help," he attested with all the conviction of a toddler, because he hadn't!

"I need your help!" she quickly explained (much to his surprise) and grabbed his arm.

"You do?" She hauled him along so swiftly he nearly tripped over himself. He tossed the popcorn behind him and pulled out a bandanna from his breast pocket to cover his mouth with. "This potassium chlorate, lachrymator, fentanyl...?" he listed possible gasses. Maybe they needed to color-code them, for family convenience...

"Knock out gas," Terra mumbled urgently as she lead him into the crowd and he idly calculated by its dissolution how much of it a man his size could breathe in before getting woozy. Terra must have brought herself proper filter.

"Tch. What have I told you about overusing the opiiods?" he chastised anyway and then fell silent, because he was stepping over what was indisputably a corpse—the throwing dagger in the chest and unblinking eyes were something of a giveaway. He quickly glanced at his daughter in the expectation that she would show some sort of negative emotional reaction to having killed another person. But if the body bothered Terra at all, she didn't show it; she didn't even glance down at it.

"I went a little overboard on the gas," she was apologizing, instead, "cause I wanted to make sure I didn't get hit. You'd have held it over me for ages, admit it, I'd have never heard the end of it. 'Blah blah blah and remember that time you got shot, Terra'..."

"Oh I see..." He squinted at her through the smoke, thinking. "And what did you need me for, then,
Little Miss Independent, seeing as you seem to have successfully incapacitated, sedated, or otherwised everyone in your way—Oh? Oh!” She'd paused before the side of the car, and he now realized what the problem was. "Oh dear."
"Dunno what it is," Robin admitted over the Ferrari speakerphone as they discussed a new string of crimes, "just got this completely different thematic sense to it."

"I know what you mean. Has an unusual influx of Japanese martial arts paraphernalia showing up in odd places, at least for what we're used to," Bruce agreed as he sped along in the fast lane, not in costume or towards any stakeout or combat arena that morning, but rather on his way to Wayne Enterprises. There were more ways than one to fight societal decline and even Ra's al ghul had once indirectly admitted philanthropy and economic success had a means of 'galvanizing' a city into saving itself. "But you have to take into account that stuff is big in popular culture though, now. Doesn't mean it's international"

"Still thinkin we could call around. Fruit's gotta point: it might be we're inheriting someone else's mess."

Beep.

"Alfred's on the other line," Bruce told him. "Do what you think you ought. You're getting good at this." Then, without waiting to see what Robin made of the compliment (and because compliments tended to make the boy stupid), he switched to call to Alfred. "This is Bruce."

"Bruce," the old butler said, and in just the shaken utterance of the name it was audibly clear something terrible was wrong. "The Montessori school called. There was an armed break-in this morning, and the men came straight in and targeted the students."

SCREECH. Tires screamed and horns howled as Bruce spun out the Ferrari, drifting it into the median and orienting the nose pointed in the opposite direction. He hit the accelerator, and the car screamed back the way he'd come.

"They took Helena. Only Helena. They must have known she was a Wayne."
Awkward Phone Call

Chapter Notes

Cannot tell if Barbara Gordan has merely taken over for her retired father, or if she may also end up being Bat Girl... Or a Robin... It's not my fault the comics have so many different canons!

The commissioner's phone rang, and she lifted it to her ear. "This is-"

"Commissioner Gordon," the lilting voice on the other side completed. "You sound so cute, Barbara! Tell me, is Batman there with you?"

Barbara Gordon's eyes narrowed over the table of photographic evidence. "Who is this?"

"Be a dear and hand him the phone, would you?"

Barbara glared at the wall for a moment, quietly repressing her utter loathing for such unabashedly patronizing tones of voice. Then she turned and bitterly offered the phone to to the black-suited man perched in the window. "It's for you."

Batman was fortunately much too angry and tunnel-visioned to make any attempt at reassuring her. He lifted up the phone. "Who is this?" he repeated her demand in a stabbing growl.

"Why hello Bats!"

"Where is the child?" Batman demand.

"You mean your daughterrr?" the clown drawled. "You know, funniest thing, would you believe I wasn't actually there and had absolutely nothing to do with it?"

"Don't play games with me. You wouldn't be calling me now otherwise."

"I~wasn't~therree~! Accept that first, or I'll say nothing else!"

It took everything in him not to crush the phone. "But you know something."

"I know the men who took her were ambushed at the corner of Creece and Baywild about six hours ago, and that she was apparently abducted by someone else after that."

"Who?" he demanded.

"You know, you seem really unsurprised to hear I'm back in Gotham. Oh dear. Did you know? You mustn't have snuck very near to take any peeps, or I'd have known... Or am I getting rusty? Which is it: am I losing my touch, or are you losing yours?"

"I'll rectify that now. Either talk, or hang up laughing already."

"You're going to laugh." The Joker glanced over from the newspaper stand where he'd just purchased a cheap prepaid phone card to ward off police tracers. On the curb rested his modest green hatchback. Terra perched over the shoulder and headrest of the passenger seat, entertaining a grumpy
and tear-streaked Helena Wayne with a deck of cards and sleight of hand. The little girl had a bandage snugly over her head from where she'd taken a bump in the accident, and her leg was scraped and bruised, but the nurses at poison control had reassured him there'd been no concussion. "She took a pretty mean shot of Fentalyn while I pried her out of the wreckage, so I took her to the ER. But she's up and shouting at me for daddy already."

Batman was silent.

"I'm going to take her to the McDonald's on the I-403 turnoff. It's incredibly mundane. You can pick her up there."

"What do you want?" the Bat asked him hoarsely.

"Nothing. I want you to take her back off my hands, now, please. Nicely and quickly. Come alone, please, and in plain clothes, and you may have her back as easily as if she had been attending a sleepover."

"The last time you sent me anywhere to 'pick someone up'—"

"Look Bats, like I said, I had nothing to do with this. Someone else waylaid those thugs, and I just dug the girl out in the aftermath. I didn't even know who she was at the time."

"Mighty altruistic of you."

"I had my daughter with me. She suckers me into things: Good deeds, leaving out cookies for Santa, the whole rigmarole. I'll hang around at the McDonalds for about thirty minutes, but any longer than that and I'll be assuming our little 'truce' is broken and that you plan to arrive in force."

"That you'd put a timer on this suggests you intend to ambush our expose me."

The Joker sneered. "I'm not going to take her; if you aren't there, I'll just abandon her at the joint. At worst, you'll suffer a publicity hit when the cashiers call the cops, but I'm sure you can bribe off any judge that Social Services tries to slap you with." He took a deep breath. "My intent was to fly under the radar and now I am being forced to talk to you, so that gives me two choices: Either I can uproot my daughter again and drag her cross-country again and down another rabbit hole, or I can... trust you not to ambush or expose me. Pick your poison."
Awkward Meeting

Chapter Notes

Newsflash Buttercup, you've grown up and now Helena is so much cuter than you!

The neighborhood at I-403 was old and crumbled, but not necessarily run down. It had a single street light at the turn off, and gas stations and restaurant units perched on the corners, and it was flanked by a cozy lower-middle class neighborhood of cookie-cutter houses.

The specified McDonalds was plain, in need of a fresh coat of paint, and craved a thorough repaving of the weed-lined parking lot. Still there was no trash about on the ground, and the building’s windows were free of grime, which suggested the people who lived and worked here took some pride in themselves, their lives, and their possessions.

The parking lot was deserted aside from the employee's vehicles and an equally plain, green hatchback that had a towel artfully draped over the license plate. So it was that the Ferrari of Bruce Wayne looked incredibly out of place, but he had not had the time to switch cars.

He hurried across the parking lot, and carefully entered the double-doors.

Mr. Smith sat alone at a table for four, nestled up alongside the wall which helped divide the dining space from the cashier queue. The environment was extremely mundane: cheap but durable plastic chairs, table tops that pretended unconvincingly at being made of wood. There were two, already-opened Happy Meals scattered out on the brown trays across from him, and he was leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed and his brows raised. The McDonald's was deserted aside from the cashier and fry cook, who were talking to one another and looked wholly absorbed in their conversation.

"Hello," Mr. Smith greeted, simultaneously amused, tense, and subdued. This had every chance of going poorly. "How's the fam?"

"Where is she?" Mr. Wayne demanded of him.

Mr. Smith jerked his head at the play-place, from which an enthusiastic young eight year old sprung in a fury: "Daddy!" Helena squealed excitedly as she tackled her father at the hip. He dropped to his knees, quickly, to have a look at her.

"I got kidnapped!" the child announced with an angry and wide-eyed flail of her arms. "I have bandages!"

Mr. Smith said nothing, and waited politely as Bruce drew out some new-fangled high-technology device and scanned his daughter. This was an understandable precaution: 'Mr. Smith' had smuggled some crazy things past security, more than once, off by planting them inside pawns.

Best to give him time. Best not to spook him. Mr. Smith just stayed where he was, in a dusty jacket and with a few tears in his jeans; normal, boring, and unremarkable. Aside from the fact that the Bat could recognize him even without his usual trappings.

Apparently satisfied with his findings, Mr. Wayne finally hugged his jabbering child, and pet her hair...
until she'd calmed down a few notches. Terra jogged out of the play-place, and then—seeing as their immaculately dressed guest had arrived—swung around to come up behind her father's back rather than try to squeeze past the Waynes. And Mr. Smith had to admit he was thankful for that.

"Thank you," the Man who was Batman said to him after another moment, "I think."

"You are welcome," the Man who was the Joker agreed, "I think?"

Bruce stood slowly, holding his daughter's arm.

"Are we going? I need my toy," Helena announced, but when she turned about her father did not allow her to move towards the table.

Terra, sifting through the future, realized she was the best neutral party available to fix this dilemma. She wove around her father, fetched two plastic Barbie Princess toys from the table and then hesitantly came forward and leaned over to present them as peace offerings to Princess Wayne. "Uh, here, you can have mine too," she told Helena.

"Really? Thanks! Dad, this is Terra. We like the same cartoons." Helena alone seemed oblivious to the tension in the McDonald's, which was thick enough that anyone might have cut it with a knife. She was a boisterous child; a regular little extrovert, more ready to take on the world than to observe it. She was adorable. "Like Spider-Man and Ninja Turtles and My Little Pony and-and-!"

Terra grinned but then straightened to see Bruce Wayne inspected her, now that she was closer, and his stare had an intense and cunning weight to it that she never saw in anyone else, never anyone but her own father. This man picked up on details, she thought, and he was smart, and she wondered what her own expression said and whether she'd successfully gotten all traces of combat off her face.

Suddenly a little intimidated—and she wasn't prone to feeling cowed by anyone—Terra scurried back to her father's side and heard her Da breathe a little easier as she touched his shoulder. His expression didn't change much (still an amused and thoughtful *pout* of sorts) but she remembered in that moment just how... protective he really was of her, and that sitting still while she'd returned the toys had probably set his heart to pounding.

"We should head out, too," Mr. Smith decided then, wiping his hands of french fry salt with a napkin and then standing up and pushing his chair back. "It was nice seeing ya, *Bats.*"

"Wait."

The Joker paused, though now he was standing over Terra and the balance of power in the room seemed more equal, with neither father particularly far from their respective child. He raised a brow.

"Thank you," Bruce repeated, but the words were nothing like their first intonation. This time they were much more dark and yet somehow also more earnest.

The Joker thought about this and then inclined his head. "Ditto." He reached out to Terra and put an arm about her shoulders. "C'mon squirt." She leaned into him slightly as they went.
Is it My Fault?

Her father pulled out a shiv as they neared the car, and then knelt beneath the rear bumper. He stood up with what appeared to be a newly placed tracking beacon in hand, courtesy a Batman, and casually flicked it away. Then he resecreted the knife, and pulled open the front door to take his seat. She climbed into the passenger, and was quiet as he started the engine, disengaged, the parking break, and then twisted about to watch the rear window as he backed up.

Soon they were on the road, but he didn't take the highway back, opting instead to head off through the suburbs and into the twisting back roads. She was quiet through the mundane sounds of turn signals and wind, and through the quiet break and acceleration mandated by every stop sign and light. She waited to see if he'd floor the gas and drive them both squealing home, but he didn't.

"Do we have to run again?" she asked, not looking up at him.

He glanced at her as he wiggled the stick shift, and didn't immediately answer.

She didn't have as many friends anymore, or play hockey, and she didn't quite fit in anywhere, or much like any of her teachers. But Gotham was her home, and she knew all its grease stains and pot holes and people, and she felt so routinely challenged and yet strangely safe in its ugly streets. She didn't want a new name, or a new face. "Is it my fault?"

He breathed in thoughtfully and then decided: "Odd question."

"What's odd?"

"Well, what exactly do you feel guilty about? You might have saved her life. Or his. At the very least, you helped resolve the dilemma quicker. That's a pretty high-level heroic escapade for a thirteen year old who was just skipping school in the hopes of finding some, ah, trouble. And you've left him confused about me, which I would have previously assumed was impossible, and which is actually quite funny if I do say so myself."

She wondered: "Did you tell him it was me who did it?"

"Oh I don't want anyone knowing anything about you, squirt." He turned the car onto yet another street, and glanced at the rearview even though no one was following them. "Last thing I want them to hear is that you're wandering around alone by rooftop at night after you think I've gone to sleep. Whether you 'do good deeds' or 'make mischief' with that time is not yet his to judge."

She realized her father had been on to her for quite some time. She swallowed past a lump in her throat and heat in her eyes and asked, "Are you mad at me?"

"For what?" he asked almost rhetorically, but then drawled: "The 'D' I've just learned you're getting in Language Arts? Yes, Terra-girl, I'm a bit miffed."

"For..." She didn't know how to say everything. For this. For exposing us. For playing hero. For getting in a live gunfight for no good reason. For wanting to be anything at all like everything you weren't even though you're still a hero to me. She threw up her arms and looked out the window. "For how I don't care about or want to be normal?"

A laugh cracked out of him, and then he cleared his throat. His answer was lilting and wry, "Have you forgotten who are you talking to? I raised you, so whose fault are you if not mine?" Then, when her shoulders stayed tense. "You can be whatever you want to be. I... just wish you'd do it a little
slower." His voice faltered. "To me it was still yesterday that you were Helena's size. And betimes 'tomorrow' comes, you'll be tall and twenty and won't need me anymore. So watching you cut me out of your decision-making process even earlier than that does carry its sting."

She looked back to her father as they came to a stop at a red light. Then she threw herself over the middle of the car, and hugged him tightly and smothered her tears into him. "I'll always need you, Dad."

He turned and bundled an arm around her, tightly, and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. When the light turned green he reached out for the steering wheel, and then deeply regretted his lack of automatic transmission. But Terra stayed where she was, clearly exhausted by the day. He played with hair.

"I want you to lift your grades," he told her after a bit. "I've seen how you text, and your comprehension of when to use contractions is appalling. No one can be in this family and make trivial grammar mistakes when writing ironic messages to our enemies."

She sniffed and smiled. She had a counter-request. "I want to wander the city at night and refine my parkour. I like exploring."

"When do you intend to sleep?" Hmm. He'd think about this, though. "Nevermind. We'll talk later."

"Are we going to run?" she asked him again.

"I haven't decided," he admitted.

"Can I pick our next name? We could pass for Scots-Irish, if you curled my hair to match yours. We could use a really good name for a pub, like the McKeehans or the McAllisters."

"Hmm! You know, I probably am Scots-Irish," he reflected. She blinked at him. "Last name was Napier." She twisted about and looked at him with a startled and almost awed expression.

"You have a name?" she realized, looking horrified that she'd never previously supposed at such a thing.

He glanced at his daughter in bafflement and then broke out into a wide grin. "Jack," he told her on the realization that he wanted her and her alone to know. "But don't you dare ever actually use it, squirt. I haven't had to hear it in a long, long, long time, and I'd like to keep it that way."

She sat back heavily, as if stunned by an earth-shattering revelation. Then she said: "The Pumpkin King's name is Jack. Jack Skellington. I personally like the name Jack."

"Ooh, I'm warning you Buttercup, this is going to get you on the losing end of a tickle fight. And I'm driving, so that could go badly on two counts. Seriously, we'd probably crash; Don't do it...!"

"Well it's a much better name than 'Bruce,'" she notified him with a grimace. "Or Buttercup. Is that my name?" He hesitated. "Well, what does my adoption certificate say?" she settled for.

"Buttercup Matilda Napier." He stressed the last few syllables almost as if the surname displeased him, paused, and then added: "To make sure it was water-tight."

She wrinkled her nose and thought to ask him more questions, such as where 'Matilda' had come from, but then slowly realized that this name had gone on public record somewhere. If her father's signature hadn't triggered off warning bells from New York to Los Angeles, that mean none one knew it. Not Batman. Not anyone working at Arkham Asylum. Nobody at all. Nobody knew the Joker
had been human, or that he'd once had a name. The Joker was a mythological force of Chaos, an idea, with dozens of would-be copycats and spiritual successors spread out over the whole city; a ghost of mayhem to everyone but her.

Struck by the notion she'd been entrusted with something precious, she promised herself to wrap up the secrets of both their names in a tight little bundle and to tuck them down in a safety deposit box at the bottom of her memory, where she'd not bring them out again. Not even for curiosity's sake. Certainly the two of them had plenty of aliases to choose from instead.

"Well," she decided, "I want a really illustrious and queenly name next time to hide my gutter-stalking nature. Something with at least three syllables. Victoria. Elizabeth. Katherine. What do you think?"

"Hmm. How about: Chuckalina?"

"Why do I feel like this is an inside joke I don't remember...?"

Her father cracked up laughing. Then he asked: "H-how is M-my Little Pony, by the way?"

"Ya know I'm not gonna lie or play coy here, it's absolutely fantastic. It's the pink and purple I've always needed to complement my red and blue. True story. Though I'm starting to get more into anime and cult classic films these days..."

Her father just kept laughing.
Wanted to write a note about the last chapter, about Buttercup's full name: 'Buttercup Matilda Napier.' You see, Matilda Ledger, Heath's younger sister, gave me the middle name. I assume in-universe this means 'Jack' may have had a sister once.

Dinner was quiet affair at their kitchen table. Her father had grilled shish-kebabs, with beef, peppers, onions, and mushrooms. She complimented them, and he murmured a thanks, but then they ate in near silence.


"Homeopathic remedy," her father explained conversationally. "When you're looking for people on the run, you assume they've run far and hidden clever. You don't expect they're outside your house on the back porch, living in your trash can." He picked up a kebab. "Do you like living here?"

"I love Gotham," she said as she poked her food. "It's like an old, stinky, flee-bitten rat."

A smirk curled upon his mouth. "And you like that?"

She gave a big shrug. "I have peculiar taste, I know; most people prefer their flee-bitten rats to smell of flowers."

He grinned down into his food. Terra grinned, too, matching him. Banter was making her feel better, at least.

"It's home. It feels like home. I like the dirt and the weeds and the graffiti and the wide range of colorful bums and working moms, and all the potholes, and the people who play guitar by the street for quarters, and all the kids who play basketball and parkour and who skate, and the boors who try to bully me until I threaten to stab them. I always have somewhere new to explore."

Mr. Smith thought about that for a while as he ate. Gotham's slums—these days—were less like a terminal cancer patient on life support, and more like a lopsided, speckled mutt-puppy with its tail a-wagging. Morale, not money, seemed to change the face of poverty. Gotham wasn't despairing or rioting. Gotham was still poor, and Gotham was still corrupt, and Gotham was still ugly and filled with thugs, cut-throats, and gangs; but somehow at the same time Gotham exuded this faint and dirty orange aura of hope (the same color as sunrise in heavy smog, doubtless).

Some might even say that if Batman had wanted to save the city, he'd succeeded—at least for one generation. Most of his enemies had pivoted on bleak views towards human nature and the forces of entropy; he'd won by even temporarily proving them wrong. This was Batman's happy ending: not a utopia, but a Pax Augustus. One his successors would have to prolong or earn back once he grew too old to fight.

"Are we lingering to see if we get attacked?" Terra finally wondered aloud. "As some kind of test?"
Her father took a glance up towards the warehouse ceiling as if expecting a bat to crash through the windows at just that moment, for the purposes of irony. "I'm more curious to see whether we don't get attacked. It's not like Bats to let bygones be bygones. Has an overdeveloped sense of justice."

"Well he is... older now. Maybe he's mellowed?" Her father glanced at her, and Terra shrugged. "What? You know, a certain someone else is also a teensy-tiny-itty-bitty little bit different than he once used to be."

"Hmm." He flicked the tip of a kebab her way like a lecturer's wand. "Point," he acknowledged, but then backtracked and lifted up a hand with the thumb and pointer finger separated by a hairsbreadth and squinted. "Just a bit."

"Of course, hardly noticeable," she agreed brusquely, "minuscule, really. Do you think he knows where we live? I saw the tracker you found. How did you know it was there?"

"That? He couldn't help that, he's predictable. I thought it rather half-hearted there was only one." He picked up a new kebab, having finished the last. "But I think he's had a ballpark guess as to where we were for awhile. By the sound of his voice, he'd been fearing and expecting to hear from me just as soon as she went missing."

"What, does no one else know Bruce Wayne is Batman?" she wondered. "No suspects other than laymen?"

"You. Possibly Catwoman, but she wouldn't hire thugs to steal her own daughter."

Helena was Catwoman's? How could her father possibly know that? Maybe he'd just deduced it?

"You've never told anyone who he is?" she finally wondered aloud, and starting in on her own kebabs again.

"Tch, no. Where's the game? Names have power. Especially if you're curious to see how far you can push someone. The Joker liked to set up contradictions and ethical dilemmas and watch people break themselves. Especially idealists." His expression faltered a bit as he spoke, almost growing bittersweet. "Maybe I don't want to talk about that." He lifted his chin. "I wanted to ask you something, squirt."

"What about?" The kebabs were juicy and delicious. Her father really was a fantastic artisan.

"Today. I wanted to ask you why you thought it was 'okay' to get involved with mob business and lethal combat scenarios, and why you wanted to do it alone. You didn't even seem to have an objective."

Terra fell quiet, and then looked down at her food and braced herself.

"You are worrying me. You skipped school. Your grades have been dropping. You don't seem to enjoy making friends anymore, and you're not involved in any sports. You keep shrinking your own social life, and then come home to exercise for hours. I know you love prowling with me on the chance I go out at night... But I didn't expect you to suddenly cut me out of the loop and go off on your own."

She ground her teeth.

"You specifically picked to do this in the middle of the day so that I would not be there to help or protect you, and I don't understand. You targeted organized criminals. You caused a car wreck. You used a pipe bomb. You waltzed into a live gun fight. You gassed eight adult men. And most telling of all: you didn't even know what they were up to—if anything—much less that they'd kidnapped..."
someone."

She was silent.

"I am not yelling at you, squirt. Please uncoil, and loosen that choke-hold you've clamped about your brain. Terra? Buttercup. What was your motive?" he softly coaxed her to explain.

"I had to prove I could do it," she muttered through clenched teeth, her fists curled tightly in her lap. "I didn't want you to freak out and intervene when they opened fire."

"Why?"

"Because you're always scared for me," she said. "You've always been scared for me, my whole life. I wanted to learn everything I could, everything, to make sure no one could ever take me from you, or hurt me when your back was turned, or steal me out of a school playground. If I'd been Helena, even at eight, I'd have killed three people and escaped out a window. You wouldn't have lost me like that."

The Joker sat back slowly.

"Do you think you were a bad parent?" she growled, angry. "You weren't. I can foresee gunshots. I can dodge death. I was amazing."

"Yes. You were." That seemed to disarm her. "I had another question: You killed someone," he murmured, "did that bother you?"

The question surprised her. She fell quiet and thought about her answer, and then her shoulders fell and she took a deep breath. "It's weird," she fumbled. "Everything's always a cloud of reflections, but when I can knock someone down and keep them there, it makes a white space because there's only one possible future for awhile, for them. It's so easy for me to find what I have to do to limit their future to just one because the result is so different from what it looks like if they stay on their feet.

"So I aimed for their guns, or tripped them till the gas worked, whatever I had to do to cut out swathes of white space. I whittled down all the possibilities group by group, fast as can be, with every throw, to get rid of all those blurry choices and make just one clean canvas. I could basically see through the smoke, dad. But then I had one guy left, and the only white space I saw was to throw a full blade for the chest. I couldn't have done anything else; it wouldn't have worked, and I knew that ahead of time, so I just threw, and then he was white space too."

She lifted a hand, and rubbed her neck and cheek. "I didn't feel anything," she admitted. "I didn't even realize he was dead at first, but then I knew I'd meant to kill him, and I still didn't feel anything." She looked up at her father. "Is something wrong with me?"

He opened his mouth and took in a breath to respond, but then didn't say anything for the longest moment. Then he let out the breath between pursed lips and gestured to himself demonstratively. "My typical reaction is to feel giddy."

"But you wanted me to be normal," she reflected, feeling as though she shouldn't be excused just because he was worse. Her father had raised her better than to randomly murder people in the street and then feel nothing.

"I... want you to be happy," he corrected. "Authentically happy, not merely 'giddy,' mind you, and certainly not scared. And you are the one whose bedroom is stuffed full of superhero comics you somehow don't think I've seen, even despite how I am routinely forced to collect your discarded
clothing articles from every inch of it to ever get the laundry done."

She blushed. "Do you not feel contempt for heroes?"

"I feel contempt for a lot of people," he admitted, a smirk threatening at his face despite how serious the topic was. "Especially boring people."

"Well the first thing you said, on the way home, was to remind me Helena and Batman were all okay because of me. But..." she struggled for words.

"...but altruism's not remotely how I lived my own life." He paused. "I suppose I have never given you any consistent moral example, have I? Here I've read you Aesop fables; but then snuck out at nights to steal, foil, and detonate things; but then smiled when you enthused about BBC's 'Robinhood;' but then mocked Gotham's prime hero; but then showed no aversion at all to you poring over tales of mutant do-gooders. I suppose, on reflection, that all would be confusing..."

"What would make you..." she looked up at him with round eyes and with her little brows worried up into her forehead, "...proud of me?"

He hesitated. "I..." Wow, what a question. "You want to make me proud?" So had Harley, but that had annoyed him rather than humbled him. "Punch a few more bullies who've tried to grope you in an alleyway. I was laughing for days last time; That boy couldn't see straight for a week, and nearly bowed in terrified deference every time he saw you afterwards."

She blushed a little, but seemed slightly relieved, and he got the strangest impression she somehow feared rejection, which of course was absurd. Wasn't it? Hmm. Apparently he'd never said so to her.

"If you end up hating your own life, I will be disappointed," he decided he ought to explain. "So be careful not to get too wrapped up in 'proving' yourself. Find something you love, little Buttercup," he purred. "Your predilection for violence supplies a wide variety of career options: you are not a meek girl, and you'd make just as frightening a burglar as you would a lawyer." He reflected on this advice, and then hastily added: "But please keep out of organized crime and/or politics as both give me indigestion."

His girl thought about this for a time, quietly eating her kebabs. She seemed to have calmed down a bit, and to be ruminating on his words. He hoped he'd picked good ones. Words, that was, for of course he'd picked good ingredients for the kebabs. At long last she gave a huff and flopped her arms down on the table and laid her cheek on her elbows. "Why did you adopt me?"

The question spooked him more than it had any right too, and he jumped a little and winced. His mouth thinned to a line, and then rubbed a hand awkwardly along the back of his neck (unknowingly mirroring her) as years and years of practiced speeches dissolved away. "I sort of fell in love with you, squirt. It took a few months." He shrugged. "My feelings on the matter went through... stages of development. You were probably three before I admitted I loved listening to your tiny voice. You were a talker. You know-" he smirked to himself, "it never occurred to me to try and get you to talk—or else your first word obviously would have been 'boom'—but one day you babbled something that sounded like 'dada,' and I must have looked at you, because you caught on immediately and began using those syllables to summon my attention all the time, to wherever you'd crawled your little butt off to. Which was good; it helped me get stray knives away from you... And after that, I was a confirmed 'Dada,' and strangely flattered to be so."

Terra didn't ask any more questions about that, or about him. He was thankful. Instead she breathed a big sigh and said almost fearfully: "I don't want to go crazy one day and become evil."
He raised his brows, and then snickered, and then laughed. "I-I somehow d-don't think that's going to *happen* squirt...! You've a little heart of gold buried under all that pre-teen angst!"

She smiled a little bit, bashfully, and looked reassured. "I'm not a pre-teen. I'm thirteen."

"Aye, *but!*" he leaned forward again, and placed a hand on her arm. "Listen to me, squirt. Thirteen is too young for anyone to be working out what they ought to feel while *killing people*. Unless we were in Russia or mid zombie-apocalypse; then it's okay, I checked the rule-book. But since we're not, let off steam on punching bags; get your thrills from roller coasters; be smug knowing you've proven yourself... but don't be so eager to grow up. I don't want you doing this. Not now, not yet."

Her face grew somber, and she heard him clearly. "Okay," she accepted.

"Thank you." He tapped her chin. "I wish to open negotiations with you on a related topic," he leaned back.

"What about?"

"I want you to lift your grades," he explained. "And I want to hear again what you want in exchange."

"I want to roam at night," she repeated her earlier request, but then stammered and fought to explain: "I-I mean...! I really like exploring the city. I kinda like being alone sometimes. I won't get in serious trouble anymore, I promise...!"

"Mnhmm. I'm going to hold it to you that, squirt. Here's my proposition: I want to temporarily leave Gotham while I lay out feelers to see if news of our whereabouts crops up in places it shouldn't. Instead of forcing you to adapt to yet another inner-city school, I will pull you out and home-school you. I will let you set your own sleeping hours—though I expect them to be consistent—and I will up the frequency of your 'extracurricular lessons' in hand-to-hand combat, obstacle traversal, and explosives. *And* I will let you move about freely at night or whenever, and give you some of this 'space' you are asking for. But you are to keep me in the loop of any and all interesting happenings, you are to stay clear of gangs and avoid needless fights, and you are to seriously reapply yourself to your coursework."

She thought about these terms. "I want to be Anastasia Hamilton," she said, and extended a hand for him to take. "You can be Andrew Hamilton."

"Deal," The Joker agreed, and they shook on it.
"Train Ride"

"What can I take?" she called as she sifted through her things. They'd never had much time to pack before.

"No more than you can carry," her father called back.

"Plus Nibbles, right?"

The Joker's lips flattened and he shook his head in amusement as he rummaged through their cabinets and extracted a few crucial items. "This child can do twenty pull-ups without breaking a sweat, but still wants me to carry her rabbit. Lazy, lazy, lazy," he muttered to himself, and pocketed a leather box, before raising his voice. "Pack a clean change of clothing."

She folded up her catsuit carefully and scoured her room for evidence she was anything other than a normal teenager. Knives? Oops, there was a smoke bomb rolled under her bed. She put them in a box to hide them somewhere else; if someone raided the house, they'd not learn anything incriminating about her. She leafed through her comics, quickly, to find a few favorites. Would the PlayStation fit? That wouldn't give her much room for anything else...

She leaned out of the door. "Do we have to go through a metal detector?"

"Hmm." He seemed to contemplate whether he'd be bribing anyone. "Why don't you limit yourself to a switchblade," he answered. "You can practice getting it past."

A challenge! She gave him a big 'Okay!' sign with her fingers.

Her father paused at the sidewalk, to wait for her to catch up. She pulled up her hood against the evening mist and hurried up beside him. He was still so much taller than her, and she had to take two steps to one of his. They walked together in companionable silence, with Nibbles fast asleep in his pet carrier and much too old and desensitized to worry about things like moving from place to place.

They disappeared into the maze of buildings and alleys as the city grew dark in places and stayed bright with nightlife in others. They paused at a point to critique some nice street art.

"Any friends you'll miss?" her father prompted after a bit.

"I don't think I strongly identify with other kids my age anymore," his daughter assessed with an eloquence that suggested she'd been googling herself into a WebMD psychology degree.

"No?"

"Everything they talk about is stale, and the more they irritate me, the less I feel like I belong." She sighed at the dilemma. "It doesn't help that half my teachers are nice-ish, but the other half are deadbeats. Gym is bad; the girls stand around gossiping, and the teacher keeps telling me to 'take it down a notch.' I told him to shove it where the sun don't shine. He gave me a lunchtime detention and then held me after class to tell me no one would ever recruit me with an attitude like that, as if I cared."

"Ouch. You'd think he'd recognize a competitive spirit."

"Maybe he power trips. Our girls' volleyball team is obscenely bad for how large the student body is,"
and it's not like many people have an ace out of the school system aside from sports."

"Well, good-riddance. But sounds like you've been experiencing symptoms associated with a classically hot temper, eh?"

"Dad, girls my age are stupid boring and stupid touchy. I used to not say things I thought would make them upset. Now I'm just in such disbelief of their reactions, I want to see them firsthand instead of just in the future 'cause I just can't believe they're real." She paused. He raised a brow. "And then I laugh at them, in the face. I think that makes me mean."

"Snerk. That definitely makes you 'mean.' Hehe...!"

"If this is a result of puberty," she complained, "I don't understand why it won't make me taller."

"Patience, patience...!" He switched the carrier from one hand to another, and ruffled her hair. "These things take time!"

"Maybe Anastasia Hamilton should be a red-head," she speculated. "That might be truth in advertising.

He started laughing for real this time.

The bought the cheapest train tickets, hard seats instead of a compartment bench or sleeper. His daughter turned around and got up on her knees to watch the world fly past as the train started moving. She'd past her metal detector test, passing the switchblade from one hand and into her hood with a fluff of her hair and the grace of a master.

"Which stop are we getting off at?"

"Jersey City," he said as he unfolded his newspaper.

"We're going back to New York?" They'd lived there once, for a significant chunk of her life, but she didn't really remember any of it.

"Not New York. Jersey."

"What's the difference? They're both on the Hudson."

"Aside from the fact that they are separated by a river, require toll bridges and tunnels to cross between, and have different names? Hmm." He turned a page of his paper. "Jersey's roads look like a drunk toddler was in the City Planning office with red crayon the night before the plans were proposed, and everyone was too busy being a suck-up the next day to admit the result was decidedly unhinged. Whoever was in charge of posting road signs then just gave up and retired, and the next-in-line is either inattentive and lazy or else has a wicked sense of humor. By the way, allow me compliment you on just how well you know your geography."

His daughter turned about and sat back down normally beside them, which greatly relieved the pump woman sitting beside them. "Where are we staying tonight?"

"Hotel. Waiting for payment to clear on the house."

"House? House? We're going to have a normal house?!!" She'd never been privy to why they'd always lived in unconventional housing, but she suspected it had something to do with peace, quiet, and the ability to set off explosives in the middle of the floor without alarming any neighbors.
"Well, thought we'd do something new for a change. If you don't like it, I have an abandoned building in mind."

"I love it and I haven't even seen it yet!"

He was filling in the Crossword puzzle of the newspaper. After some practice they grew rather trivial and there were only so many clues one didn't recognize, but this one was comic book themed and he was being forced to exercise some intense powers of interpolation to suppose at how various heroes and villains had been transformed (sometimes quite hilariously) by the authors' and artists' imaginations.

"Hey dad?" his daughter asked sleepily into his shoulder. Cabin lights were dim and most everyone was attempting to nod off despite the discomfort of their seats. The plump woman on their right had sagged down into a pudding of herself and was clearly unconscious.

"Yeah squirt?"

"You know how you were asking me to be more up-front about my life with you?" she asked quietly. "I... I do sorta have one friend. But she's not from school. I found her while I was exploring abandoned buildings at the Narrows. Can I tell you about her?"

He looked to the crown of her head, and raised his brows. Then he glanced around to make sure no one was listening to them. Which direction was this going? It sounded interesting. "What's her name?"

"Willow. She's not like me. She's not allowed to leave home, ever. She's not even allowed to go out with her mom. It's like she's Rapunzel, only without the hair. She doesn't go to school, or get to play outside, or to go anywhere; she's just stuck there. I sneak her fantasy novels through a sewer grate. She's a really big Harry Potter fan. She cries all the time, at the slightest thing, but I feel bad for her because I know it's not her fault. She's so lonely."

"They live underground?"

"Well. I haven't asked her about her mom. But seeing that she lives in a giant underground garden, and her name is Weeping Willow, I thought the implications were pretty obvious."

He straightened. "You found... Ivy...?"

"No, I found Weeping Willow. We laughed that her name was almost as bad as 'Moaning Myrtle.' She says she's scared what her mom would do if she ever learned about me, so I don't go often. Sometimes I don't even get to see her, I just leave the books and maybe a letter under a clump of leaves and skedaddle."

Her father was quiet.

"Is... is something wrong?"

"I'm... just awed to learn Ivy's still around, much less that she managed to tolerate the male gender for long enough to successfully reproduce. Unless this was some kind of mother nature themed parthenogenesis... Which would actually make a form of sense."

His child giggled and relaxed a little. "If, hypothetically speaking, Willow's mom ever caught me... what should I do? Should I mention you?"
"Harley?" His daughter looked up at him in surprise but kept her voice low. "Harley Quinn?

"She's calling herself Fruit Bat now. Assuming there was never any kind of fallout, Harley's name is the only one which could get Ivy to bat an eyelash before tearing you in half or turning you into a vegetable. They were best friends. Get Ivy to hand you over to Harley, and drop enough teasers to get Harley to take you. Because while I'd be the last person to vouch for clown-girl's character to you, your odds of survival will improve dramatically with the change of hands."

"I am restructuring my worldview of what the word 'safe' means," she reported after a moment. "Does this mean you trust Harley?"

"Not by a long-shot and definitely not with you. And if you ever meet her, try not to make her jealous; She's an odd cookie that way."

"Oh. Do you trust Batman?"

The Joker tilted his head to the side, because this question was bizarre and unexpected and interesting. He looked about at ceiling and floor, thoughtfully. "Well, never come straight home after talking to him," he advised. "And you don't want him interested in you, because he's a control freak. But the one and only 'hero' you can trust in this whole gritty world is most probably Batman. And he's had the acid test to prove that." He winked.

His daughter yawned and bundled back into his shoulder. "I think you like him," she sprung on him.

"What?"

"Batman. You're both lifelong bachelors, aren't you? Very suspicious."

"Ayaiai..." He sighed exasperatedly and went back to his crossword puzzle with a grin. There were certain advantages to being nocturnal on long trips. "Stop trying to set me up with people, squirt."

She grinned and pulled her hood low over her face. "You're just lucky my OTP is already TMNT's Leo x Karai, or this would get really funny in a big hurry."

"I don't even know what that means."

She snickered.
Anastasia Hamilton was thirteen years old, and for the first time in her life she actually had a house.

The shabby A-Frame had been handsome once, as had all the houses around it. Now it sagged into the broken pavement of its driveway, it's yellow paint curling, its paltry front lawn overgrown and sun-spotted and littered with trash. But Anya, who had grown up calling rust-melted and dilapidated old warehouses home, thought she'd never seen anything so perfect. After her things were dropped off, she ran back outside to circle the domicile and admire it in its little cookie-cutter square of land.

She asked her father if they could fix it up a bit, and he'd liked the project idea. 'Enough to be modest; Not enough to be proud,' he'd said to himself as he'd dreamt up ideas. That was, after a fashion, how they'd always lived. Poor, but never poor. *Rationed.* Her father had enough money hidden away in enough places to buy them—essentially—anything they needed; but to onlookers they were only two gray fish in a school of gray fish.

It was something of a game they played, using public resources to their fullest and stretching pennies into dimes. Invisibility through obscurity. And Anastasia understood the objective, and liked playing. She liked her worn jeans, and her favorite old T-shirt with its flaking *Spiderman* icon and threadbare hem, and her tired-looking house, and the colorful pink graffiti on the road out front. Everything worked fine—or would, with a little tune up—and everything was comfortable and interesting to look at, and a little uneven.

Anastasia beamed, for these and for another reason: Her father was usually best grounded when he had a hobby or objective other than *herself* to focus on, and their decision to pull her out of school and increase her extracurricular activities meant he'd be spending a lot more time with her already. He needed a house—or anything new, really—to grab a nice pie slice of his attention away from her if she was to get any time to herself without leaving him a nervous wreck.

She hurried back inside, where her father had set out their phones on the kitchen table and was switching SIM cards. "You should get your photos onto an external drive," he suggested as he switched the phone back on and passed it to her.

"I need to upgrade to a larger external," she agreed as unpacked her Playstation and Dance Dance Revolution controllers. Expensive things ought'n't be treated like they were disposable. "I can pick one up and then head to the library and see if they've a spare computer."

"Here," he turned and passed her a surprisingly heavy little pack, and she opened it to find it filled with objects sharp and pointy. Huzzah! He'd gotten more through security than she had, it seemed! "Use them sparingly until I can get a fresh supply here."

"Roger that!" she saluted as she eagerly picked out knives. The interior of her favorite blue jacket was lined with small leather-padded sheathes, all sewn in to make room for sleight of hand and rapidly accessible ammo. Of course he wouldn't have left her with just a switchblade, he was as overprotective as the sun was old! In a good way, though. Not like Willow's mom.

Hmm.

"You can do the library tomorrow, and I'll hit a builders' supply store for new locks and Nibbles' cage," her father called to her. "We'll head up to Walmart for now and call a taxi for the trip back. Help me make a shopping list?"
She whipped up a note-taking app. "Ready!"

"Cereal, milk, canned food for about two days or till I've cleaned the stove top out, silverware, extension cords, bowls and plates, cream cheese, sour cream, springform pan-"

Anastasia nearly dropped her phone in surprised. "Are you making a cheesecake!?"

"Well we can't *not* celebrate a new house," he exclaimed. "And the oven interior is unexpectedly clean, so I thought this a natural conclusion." Anastasia zoned out and salivated at the prospect. "Now where was I? Oh yes. Ammonium Nitrate-"

"Er! I think we skipped a few steps in the middle if you're already at bomb production."

He glanced back at her with an innocent expression and a gleam of a smile. "This is supposed to be a list of things I can find at Walmart, right?"

She pointed her phone at him. "Touche." She went back to note-taking.

They walked along to where the highway had bisected their once-long-ago-not-urban neighborhood, demolished the south-eastern side, and plopped down high-rises, shopping arcades, and blocky chain stores. The asphalt and concrete were chunky in places, where fresh pavement or even tar was too expensive to make the city council priority list.

They took note of the terrain. Of the people. Of the boys smoking out by the gas station, and the regular people just trying to get some shopping done, and the little old lady pushing a shopping cart she'd apparently manhandled out of a Target parking lot long before the era of anti-theft protections.

"What do you think?" her father asked her.

"Well, I'll miss home, but this'll do." She grinned up at him. "Can we get my hair done if we past a studio?"

"Very well! What color would you like to be this time, Anastasia?"

"Shockingly bright green!" she bluffed.

"Ew, *no*. Wouldn't look good on you, trust me."

"I was actually thinking I'd like to make it *curly*," she explained. "I almost look like you; we both have the same hair color and hazel eyes. But my hair's also straight and flat as, like, a *sheet*. Could I get a perm?"

"Oh I *see*. You want to go without colored contacts, too, then? Hmm, hmm, hmm. I suppose there aren't any school pictures anymore, so that works just fine."

"Yes!" she lifted her hands about her head, as if visualizing herself. "Cut it short... make it curly... and add some thick streaks of bright red?"

"Ooh. What about a bold metallic *copper* instead of red?"

"Hmm. Well, I'll trust you, you're the artistic one."

He temporarily paused to curtsy, and she laughed.
Anastasia's hair had been kept a darker color during the life and times of Terra Smith, and it needed to be thoroughly washed and assailed with treatments to bring it back to the natural blonde color she wanted—she asked them to match her roots—much less prior to perming anything.

Her father didn't say anything about her desire for a more 'natural' look, simply because the objective in coloring her hair and eyes had always been that she swiftly appear different from one life to the next; she grew fast enough that 'repeating' a color combination after a few years was perfectly safe. And now she was getting older, even if in his mind she still looked so vulnerable and small. Her explanation about wanting to prove herself, so as never to be scared, seemed to make this a dare to the universe—or, perhaps, a coming of age.

The hairdresser gave them a fairly lengthy estimate of time for all the work they'd chartered, and so he told Anastasia he'd get a little bit of shopping done ahead of time at the electronics shop down the street, and perhaps pick up that new external hard drive she'd wanted.

Betimes he'd returned she was—predictably—nearly in tears.

"I'm so bored," she pleaded meekly from her seat, squirming slowly back and forward and trying not to leap out of her skin lest she terrify the hairdresser and splatter chemicals everywhere. A few older woman glanced at her in annoyance, as they were perfectly happy with the selection of gossip and fashion rags laid out over the salon.

"I think I may be able to help," Mr. Hamilton chuckled, coming up to her and pulling a very different sort of magazine out from under his arm. "This is the newest issue, right?"

The moment her eyes caught sight of that orange Nickelodeon logo, she nearly lunged out of her chair and (again, nearly) toppled her poor hairdresser. She reached out with a delighted cackle of, "Yes!" and he fed her newest 'TMNT' comic into her hands. "How did you know!?" Well he'd seen her comics, and she knew that now, and so she supplementary-demanded, "How did you know it came out today!?"

"The child asks how her father knows about her favorite things in the world?" He shrugged wistfully. "Tis a mystery."

"III looveee youuu!" she sank back into her chair, greedily opening to the first page.

Mr. Hamilton smirked, and then went to have a look at those gossip rags that he might entertain himself during the wait. He was not as picky as someone.

"Single father?" one of the hair dressers asked him with a grin.

"Is it obvious?" he asked rhetorically as he found an Enquirer beneath the sparser drivel and sat back to enjoy himself.

"Thanks for bringing her in here," she said, which he might have thought odd if he'd not heard it before. Apparently very few male parents could be seen bringing children in for hair coloring and perms, which seemed unfortunate because the atmosphere was not exactly terrible.

Anastasia would remain entertained for several hours so-enthralled by her comics; he'd caught her reading them before, and he suspected she studied each panel slowly so as not to 'accidentally' glimpse too far into the future and spoil the plot twists.
She had a similar issue with normal books, but that was further complicated by how her foresight gave her a mild dyslexia. Word-order might switch around in her mind if she tried to read too fast. She'd told him once that it was easier to follow movies or speaking voices because (firstly) her ability was more visual than auditory and (secondly) contextual clues, flowing movement, and inflections helped link everything together into a seamless, easy-to-follow whole.

"You let her read comics?" a woman from the hair drying chair suddenly blurted, and he glanced up to see she looked stricken, appalled, and disbelieving. "Oh my God. That's so unchristian of you."

The Joker blinked slowly, vacantly.

"Comics are the Devil's work. You're putting Satan right in her ear. Cussing, drugged up thugs and trollops, terrorists, that's the future you should be scared of and you've put her right on the path to him. To the Devil."

*Don't. Laugh.*

But by the way his arms were trembling and his mouth was teasing up at both corners, it was already much too late for that. The first snickers drew out a look of indignant *rage* on her face, and then when he started *bawling* with laughter, she stood up and began screaming at him about how he was going to burn in hell and his daughter was going to be a whore possessed by Lilith, and he was probably a fag because only fags would be in here and God hated fags.

He was still laughing (and cowering down into his chair from her a little, as she'd marched up to him all in curlers, still, now steaming like a bull), when he was rescued by an extraordinarily offended-looking, plump, African American woman, who *decked* the lady clear across the face.

...  

He was still breaking into occasional giggles, a half hour later, when he and his newly curled, blonde-ified, and copper-streaked daughter where back on the road, walking to Walmart.

A police cruiser sat on the block behind them, as a very overworked man with dark circles beneath his eyes attempted to figure out whose side he was one amidst a field of quibbling women. The only one of them who had taken a punch to the face was clearly outnumbered but also shouting wild and outlandish accusations and repeatedly asking 'how long do they put people in jail for that?' By the looks of things, she was about to be cited for disturbing the peace, and afterwards would go on to write a long Facebook rant on the topic.

"I have a sneaking suspicion I know why you leaned over to glance at her car while we were going past," Anastasia began without looking up from her comic. "But were you looking for her license plate or for something else?"

"She has a sticker for a 'church' on her bumper!" Mr. Hamilton squeaked, giddy, and clapped his hands.

"Oh I see. Well. Hmmm. Ya know, maybe I'm just fishing here, but would you happen to be thinking of all that Nitrate fertilizer you plan on buying at Walmart?"

"It...! It would be my first and most saintly act of community service!" he proclaimed, and then sputtered, and then nearly bent over laughing again.

"Dad, I think we have to have a talk about the scope and severity of your revenge pranks."
"I can't help it...!" he whimpered breathlessly as she pulled him along by the elbow (and out of the way of a car). "I can't help it...!"
We're getting to the end of the story, and Buttercup is getting to the point where she's taking over the job of being the story's protagonist from her father. Don't panic! Notice there's already a sequel...!

Anastasia Hamilton was about to win a race. Not an ordinary race, either. This was a race across a cityscape, and had required the two of them to sneak out onto the Recreation Center roof after a good warm up down below. She hunkered down, fingertips against the ledge, muscles bunched and eager.

"Pick a finish line," her father called as he settled in beside her, a laughing acid gleam in his eyes.

"Distance?" she prompted as she surveyed the gray dusk about them; the pipes, the concrete, the ledges and antennas. They'd only been in Jersey a week.

"How's two hundred yards sound?"

She squinted at the nearest building "St. Mary's steeple," she suggested.

"Oh-ho! You're going to try over the reservoir again! Better stick that jump, squirt."

She crossed her fingers and shoot a gleam of teeth his way. "Won't make it if it'll be anything less than sure."

"Holding you to it, little daredevil. Ready? I'll count down from three. Three! Two... One."

They bolted from their marks, sprinting across the Rec Center's concrete rooftop. He was faster on open ground, but when they hit the stark, nine-foot concrete wall that partitioned the roof into a split level, she showed off once more that her wall run was better, and she could get higher faster. Because her father was stronger, yes, and taller, yes; but she was lighter and had been practicing every day after school for years while watching parkour boys at the skate park.

They each got enough height to grab the ledge, but she pulled herself up first and rolled under the guard railing. Time to shake his tail! She ran, vaulted the air conditioners, and went for the first jump: Foot on the ground, heel on the ledge, toe on the edge, push...! *Airborn*. Feet raised to remove drag; feeling like a mantis in the air.

She reached the concrete edge of the reservoir maintainable building, toed past it, and hit the hard ground at a roll. The momentum propelled her forward and she dashed for the first set of gutter pipes leading upwards. Wa-bam! Who'd 'stuck' that landing!? Uh-huh: Her!

Time to shimmy!

She swung herself up onto the roof, ran, picked where she planned to cross to the perimeter ground, slid halfway down the wall and pushed off to land more gently. She teetered, found her balance, and grinned as she changed directions. What would it be liked to be a superhero with the ability of flight? Or, like Spiderman, the ability to fling oneself incredible distances and somehow land without injury,
and stick to surfaces on reaching them? Must have been amazing.

She found a street light, crossed to a fire escape, and climbed. She used the door knob of the service door at the top as a toe hold, swung herself up onto the roof, crossed the concrete, and slid down to walk along the window ledges on the other side. There was the church ahead.

Anastasia arrived, climbing up onto the old wood singles with heavy pants and a victorious grin. "I think I've won!" she crowed to herself. "I'm first, I'm fiirst, nah-nah-nah-nah-!

She paused. Propped up against the steeple was a foam prop: A gravestone, with flowers laid below it, that had in permanent marker written upon it: Here lies Andrew Hamilton. Die of old age while waiting for daughter to get here.

Anastasia sat back on her heels, and squinted at it. The corners of her mouth twitched. Then she pointed at the foam gravestone, fell back against the spine of the roof, and broke out sobbing like a hyena. Her father, who had been hiding in the steeple shadow, did essentially likewise.

"H-how...!?" she demanded, wheezing through her laughs. "Daadd! Ha-HA! Aren't you getting a little old to be winning races?! Aren't you supposed to be slowing down, giving the younger generations a chance!?!"

"W-with all the e-exercise you p-put me through?" he sputtered, cackled. "You're going to h-have to do better than that, squirt!"

She groaned, and waved a hand dismissively at him, and kept laughing and panting for air. But then, only a few seconds later, she propped herself up in alarm at the realization that something was about to happen. No sooner had she turned to see better, than a streak of red and blue went zooming past distant buildings at breakneck speeds.

"Whoa," Anastasia murmured. "Was that-?"

"Hmm!" her father both reflected curiously and confirmed. "I guess you were right: New York, Jersey City, same thing!"

"That was Spider-Man," she gushed with a happy grin. "Wonder what he's chasing...?"

"Today is not the day to find out," her father retorted, and a little sharply at that. She looked to him in surprise because the thought hadn't occurred to her, and she wondered what he'd been thinking. Her father reminded her: "You promised me, squirt."

Anastasia hesitated. "Well I promised not to get in any more dangerous situations," she evaded. "I didn't promise not to look from a safe distance." He scowled, and shot her a grudging look. She picked herself up and came over to sit beside him, to mollify him.

"I'm sorry," she apologized immediately.

He reached over and pushed his fingers through her curls for a moment, his thumb firmly tracing down the muscles in the back of her neck. Then he reached around, squeezed her far shoulder, and gave her a tight one-armed hug. "If you try to spy on anyone, no matter their affiliation, keep your head low," he told her, which was a compromise; but the growl in his voice told her not to push him any farther than that unless she wanted to end up grounded. "Do not ever get caught."

She nodded curtly.

"Come on. Let's get back to the Rec." He kissed her temple. "You need to re-hydrate, and then I
"Think they have bars?" she asked, curiosity piqued. "Or just the balance beam?" Her old school's gymnastics equipment had given her something difficult to play with during Gym class, especially once she'd quit hockey. (And he'd always quietly regretted letting her quit; She'd been unfairly good at it). But a little spot of gymnastics had clearly reminded her of outdoor obstacle traversal, and let her train some of the same muscle groups and balance control while still indoors and under adult supervision.

"Not sure. I thought I spied a pommel horse; That might make a fun alternative to the chin up bar for you."

"Ooh. I've never seen one. Think I can handle it?"

He pinched her little biceps. "Hmm, let's see." His daughter had been athletic and competitive since she was six years old, and despite quitting hockey it seemed she'd only redoubled her interest in physical activity. She'd always been a hard child to keep still. "Well there will be boys for you to intimidate and girls for you to upset, so regardless of your initial skill I am positive you will find a way to pull it off."

"Hehe! I should practice some quiet, diabolically evil laughter while I'm at it..."
"What is that?" Anastasia—whom they'd decided could tolerate her illustrious and queenly name being shortened to 'Ana' when such plebeian brevity grew unpleasantly necessary—inquired of the aluminium tin her father had returned from the grocery store with.

"Protein and supplement mix," he explained as he settled down a blender beside it. "We need to put more muscle on you, but all you ever want to eat is cheese."

She rapidly crossed herself and demanded: "What's wrong with cheese?! Cheese has plenty of protein!" she argued. "And calcium! It's dairy. Also it is good for the soul."

"Well then you shall be pleased to hear this protein is a dairy byproduct, and thus shall probably appease your highly limited palette. Especially when I blend fruit in."

"My interest has suddenly been piqued...!"

"That's the spirit," he laughed. "Give me a moment, I'll give you some to try right now. If you don't like the flavor, you can pick out the next tin; but you're finishing this one."

Mr. Hamilton's daughter was casually lobbing daggers backwards over her shoulder to see if she could get them to stick in the target boards they'd set up on the side of the living room. The A-Frame had only two bedrooms, and the kitchen opened into the living room, giving them a large central space to work with.

"Ooh. Nice, it works." He sat up rom his table and then turned about. "Hey squirt! Catch!" He lobbed the package.

"What-?" She jumped and caught the device in both arms, and then picked up and held it out. "This is dynamite," she informed him. "Five pounds of it. What are you trying to do to our poor house?!"

"It's on a timer! Diffuse it."

"Dad!"

"I was testing a new detonator! Give it a shot!"

She glared at him but then turned over the package and reached for the wires. She paused and wrinkled her nose. "Wait." She turned the device over and over, touching the wires and stick. "How...?" Normally her foresight would have highlighted what wire needed to be cut, to the point where her father didn't even need to color-code anything he asked her to practice at diffusing. Now all she could see was a grisly blank future should she cut anything. The bomb seemed rigged to explode if it was tampered with in any way.
"Ha! Well if it's stumped you, I think that means it's a sound design decision!"

"First of all, why is this much dynamite in the house!??" Anastasia demanded. "This is not what I meant by redecorating! And—second of all!—how do I diffuse it!?"

Anastasia couldn't use her foresight to cheat at everything in life. Her own deck of future possibilities was limited by what actions she could imagine performing. Ergo she couldn't throw knives successfully just because she knew what would hit and what wouldn't; she had to be able to make a near-perfect guess about where to throw, and then possess the skill to accurately put her weapons into motion. Likewise, if a bomb couldn't be diffused by cutting wires, she was at a loss where to begin because she knew of no other ways of tampering with the device.

Her father cackled and got up out of his chair to join her. "You honest-to-God only need to slip the corner of a playing card into the blasting cap. Here," he offered her one. "It's a safety. Then you can diffuse it for the long term."

"Oh. Well that's unexpectedly easy."

"Of course! You always need an easy way to avoid blowing yourself up. The important thing is to make it entirely unintuitive so that no one else figures it out!"

She was impressed. Still: "Dad, I don't think you're allowed to have dynamite until your feelings towards the Whatever-Whatever-Whatever-Church have subsided. That lady was clearly suffering from some kind of psychosis and her issues are her own."

"Well..." he took the bomb back and spun it thoughtfully about as he thoughtfully pursed his lips. "I guess you're probably right. Probably. Maybe."

"You'll blow our cover," she reminded him.

He pouted. "I liked that pun," he admitted. "By virtue of being a pun, it has convinced me, but only because of that."

"Go store that safely," she reproached him affectionately. "It's far too heavy a payload to be putting in our basement."

"Oookkaayyy..." he sighed dramatically, defeated.

Anastasia always looked so fierce when sparring with him, with her brows tight together. He wondered if he ought to buy her a mouth guard specifically to keep her from grinding or shattering any teeth.

"Show me how high you can kick," Mr. Hamilton encouraged, backing across the living room with the training cushion in hand. His daughter whirled and bent to an acute angle as the pivoted to bring her other foot up high.

He felt he could only teach her so much when it came to hand-to-hand. What he knew was patently undisciplined and based entirely on fast reflexes, good instincts, and lots of experience. It was ugly, old-fashioned, american street-fighting. Dirty fighting. He could teach her to throw a bunch, to shoulder out of the way of a punch, to stab someone, to grab someone's hand to foil a stab, to steal something, to back off and gain the high-ground, and he could teach her basic throws and trips.

However he was also a rather strong, adult man. Ana was still petite and, while strong for her size, lacked the same sort of momentum in a punch which a person might required to break noses or jaws.
She needed to be quick, and she needed good footwork; and if she was going to pick up fighting, he might want to look for lessons into something more refined for her.

Of course that put him in a bit of position; Anastasia was a ruthlessly fast learner when it came to moving her body, and wouldn't stay patient with being one-of-thirty students when she had so many other things she'd rather be doing. On the other hand, if he booked her a private tutor, he risked someone taking too much of an interest in her. In general, he liked people not to notice his daughter.

"You thought of picking up iceskating again?" Mr. Hamilton suggested as he paged through a catalog of house paints, power tools, and a wide variety of bits and sanders. Anastasia wrapped her hands in preparation for the gymnastics bars.

"I don't have time for hockey. Or for any sport," she disagreed.

"Different type of skate, squirt. Figure skating."

"What for? It's girly," said the girl with the bouncy blonde and copper curls.

"Spins," he explained. "It's hard to get an opportunity to enjoy G-forces like that without mechanical aid, except during ice-skating. I've been thinking that you handle disorientation and vertigo very well," he explained. "Maybe you can do make something interesting of that."

She thought about this. "Like what?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not the one who thinks she's a ninja. It was just an idea. Besides, you seem to like getting exposure to a little bit of everything to round out your options."

"Huh." She entertained the notion as she approached the bar and waved away well-meaning attempts to help her up. She jumped from the bar, and swiftly began swinging herself. Doubtless she was imagining it to be a clothesline or antenna or fence she needed to surmount.

"Is that your daughter?" an unexpectedly well-muscled and sun-weathered woman of about forty-eight or fifty asked him. "Has she ever competed?"

"The loud blonde one?" he asked without looking up from his catalog. "She's fairly new at it."

"Seriously? She's sure taking it to like a fish to water. I've never seen a kid so gun-ho about being upside down before while being 'new.' Have you considered signing her up for lessons?"

"She's imagining the floor is littered with the bodies of her enemies."

"Pardon?"

"Hmm? Oh, say, do you know if they have any martial arts courses here?"

"...Yeahhh... Some boxing, mixed, wrestling, karate, judo, taiji, and aikido. Usually about two rooms over. You can usually use the space in between lessons, too."

"Why thank you, that's very informative." He pointedly turned another page.

She didn't take the hint. "I'm a teach here. For the bars, the beam, yoga, Pilates, pole fitness-"

"Pole Fitness. Well, if the child tells me she wants to start up a side job at Hooters-"

"It's a completely valid, non-sexual form of exercise that's currently in vogue all over the nation.
You're a bit of a judgmental ass, aren't you?"

He looked up in surprise to find the woman's expression was more wry than angry. "Well... that's not usually the vice people accuse me of," he decided, feeling ever so slightly guilty for being a bad human being. Ever so slightly. Had a reputation to maintain, after all.

But the exercise-woman thankfully absolved him with an amused eye-roll, and went off to assist some girls on the balance beam, and he didn't break out laughing at anyone.

Mr. Hamilton paused at his daughter's door, listening and slowly leaning into the drywall. She was being very quiet. He caught the whispered ghosts of fabric, and the click of ceramic scales and metal ammunition. She was donning her catsuit and hood.

He closed his eyes. Well... he'd kept solid tabs on her for as long as he could, but it had been obvious each day that a slow agitation was growing and buzzing under her skin. She needed to get out. Not just out of the house—that was easy—but out from under his wing for a few hours. She didn't resent him; she just needed... air.

He'd need to gather pieces for a new outfit. She already had a light weave of dragonscale bullet-resistant armor sewn into the upper chest and back, and it at least gave him some minor peace of mind, but he could do better. Much better. She'd outgrow her current size soon enough, and focusing on compositing an upgrade would give him some indirect means of protecting her.

She was still so small. She insisted she was a teenager, but to him she was his child. Unwise, vulnerable, adorable, and not even particularly sure of who she was or what she wanted.

But now the decisions behind her safety and upbringing weren't wholly his anymore. She was too old; she could fight him. Part of those decisions were now hers, and she'd proven it the day she'd thrown him for a loop and walked into gunfire in broad daylight. If he didn't keep teaching her how to move, how to think, how to fight... if he didn't find some method of slowly letting go... she'd learn it all on her own, by whatever means she could find, and be at ten times the risk for mistakes.

It was strange to think how much of this 'parenthood' thing rested not on making the right choices—as people so naively presumed—but on earning the privilege of having children continue to be honest even whilst they were making the wrong choices. And then so much more depended on not betraying their trust. Mitigation, encouragement, support, sternness... none of these things were so straightforward or easy or detangled from one another. There were no right answers; only colors. Maybe that made it better. Yes. It probably did.

It had always been the case that Buttercup would some day come to wear a proper tabard, whether it displayed stripes of one bearing or another. Why? Who knew. Maybe it was his fault. Maybe it was Batman's. Maybe it was the media and comic books and video games. More likely, it was just how estranged her ability made her feel from reality; she'd seemed to have known this was what she'd wanted at an absurdly early age, and clung to it long after normal children gave up dreams of being astronauts and race car drivers. She seemed stricken by wanderlust. He couldn't take it from her, so he had to give it to her; had to get her to that goal safely and strongly and in full color. Somehow. Easier said than done. It's what made her—raising her—challenging. And nerve-wracking.

He smiled to himself, wryly. Almost Joker's smile, because parenthood was weird. Weird and hard. No one had ever mentioned parenthood was hard. Not seriously hard. Oh sure, people complained went gone on Dr. Phil to blame everything but themselves, but now that he was in these shoes it was a little clearer why so many people failed so terribly at it: it was a bit like trying to find the top stair of an M C Escher painting; which was to say, there wasn't one, depending on perspective, and valid
choices looked to be everywhere, far-between, and mutually-exclusive.

His daughter's door cracked open, and it did his heart good to realize she no longer felt the need to escape out windows. She came out with a hoodie on over her outfit and with no mask, suggesting she really did just mean to roam about and get a sense for the city at night, and only wanted weapons (and a bit of armor) in the event she was accosted by thieves or bullies.

"Hey," she was a little surprised to see him so close to her door.

He smiled reassuringly. "Be safe."

She gave him a thumbs-up and then hopped over to squeeze him about the middle. He hugged her back, and then let her go.

"Any idea when you'll be back?"

"Maybe about one?" she decided. "We can start shifting my sleeping hours back incrementally." She waved, and then hurried off to go figure out her own peculiar little life.

He watched her go, fondly, sadly, scared.

Well. This was as good a time as any for him to get some creeping done as well...
Sometimes I wish I didn't have so many chapters with Joker acting strangely before Buttercup got old enough to start psycho-analyzing him. It sure would make the premise of the story an easier sell.

It had never occurred to Anastasia to wonder if her foresight worked while she was sleeping. In retrospect, nothing particularly interesting had ever gone on over her head while she'd been asleep before. The room basically stayed exactly the same, all the time, all around her, with nothing moving, for hours.

But this time something had happened. Something was wrong, and the compounded, time-stretched stress of it was enough to drag her out of slumber. She had a nerve-wracking moment of full-body sleep-paralysis on waking (she'd read about that!) before her brain disengaged 'sleep' mode and allowed her to move again. Then she floundered out of bed and tried to make sense of her feelings.

She looked to Mumu's little bird cage, where the sugar glider was wide awake and appeared agitated. Then she looked to Nibbles' big cage and—suddenly—she knew. She could feel the blank space. She drew slowly up to the bars to see the fat and elderly rabbit on his side in an unusual position, nose quivering. She reached out to touch the tip of his ear.

It ended only a few seconds later, too quickly to call for help, too quickly to do anything.

Mr. Hamilton's first reaction upon waking up was to reach for a knife under his pillow, which was exactly why he no longer slept with knives under his pillow. The last thing any four-year-old with a bad stomach flu, who was vomiting all over the floor at three in the morning, needed was for him to brandish a knife at her... He propped himself up in surprise, blinking back surprise.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," he attempted to establish some vague awareness of what was going on, reaching out to his daughter as she attacked his blankets. "What's up? What's wrong?"

He was certainly startled when she abruptly climbed into bed with him and snuggled up against him. He blinked back sleep.

"Well this hasn't happened in quite a few years," he remarked, peering down at her in confusion. "Did you watch a scary movie before bed or something?"

"Nibbles is dead," she whimpered.

"...Oh. Oh, Buttercup..." Egads. What was the correct procedure for this? Surely he'd read something on the topic. He'd never had the proper attitude for funerals, that was for sure. "I'll go handle it."

"No," she pleaded, clinging to him and desperately soliciting a hug. "No, I-I'll do it in the morning, I don't... I don't..." He got both arms around her, and squeezed her. She burrowed in under his chin.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, squirt. Shh, shh, shh... It's okay."
It took her a bit, but she did eventually start crying. That definitively put to rest any lingering fears she might have harbored about maybe being sociopathic. He pulled the blankets up around her and pet her hair until she managed to calm down and slowly drift back to sleep.

Maybe it was a little selfish of him, or maybe it was a normal parent sensation, but teenagers were notoriously prickly and tended to make annoyed grimaces when their parents tried to snuggle on them, so he did treasure this rare opportunity to again be Dad The Ultimate Source of Comfort for a short while.

In the morning, they came to the mutual and equally black-humored decision that Nibbles required a burial at sea. Or, well, at the Hudson. Since most sea-burials were supposed to be conducted with a pyre of some kind, they decided to use a small explosive and a remote-detonator. After Nibbles had sailed proudly off into the sunrise, Ana depressed the detonator. The resulting *bam* turned Nibbles into fish chow, and thus his body was returned to Mother Earth.

"Poison Ivy would be proud," Anastasia decided, sadly.

"I'm sure we made some carbon emissions with the bomb," he observed, "but given that we're amateurs and that I'm a clown, and presuming she was in a good mood at the time, I think she'd agree we'd done the best we knew how."

"This... This is incredibly morbid," she said with a sniffle that was half-giggle. "So why am I laughing and crying at the same time?"

"That's the best way to cry," he suspected. "Takes the edge off."

She leaned into him and he patted her shoulder.

"What do you want to do with his cage?"

"Maybe put it in the basement for now," she decided. "I don't think I need another rabbit. He was my one and only. He was the most tolerant rabbit ever. The way he started pooping uncontrollably if I tried to sing along to Adele is what made me realize I could never be a rock star."

"An important revelation that was; everyone knows it's *absurd* and *naive* to want to be a rock star."

He patted her, and she cried and laughed some more. "Why don't we go have breakfast in a restaurant for once, eh? Pancakes with a scoop of ice cream and blueberry syrup sound good about now. We can toast chocolate milk in honor of the fallen."

"Okay."

Someone tried to rob them at knife point in the Perkins' parking lot. This was unacceptable on several counts.

First of all, it was *incredibly rude*. It was a *Perkins* for God's sake. Who robs people going to Perkins? As if the restaurant didn't have enough problems with WaffleHouse and iHop creeping up from the South; now it had robbers.

Second of all, it was obvious they had walked to the Perkins, and nobody walked anywhere who had any money; people who had money drove cars. That made this a bad judgement call.

Third of all, Anastasia was clearly distraught, and while that might have seemed to make her an easier target, it made robbing her at a breakfast restaurant all the more rude.
And lastly, the man (or boy, really) had no idea what he was dealing with. No sooner had he stepped towards them than the Joker had pounced on him, grabbed the knife-holding arm, and rammed an elbow into the man's face. Their assailant crumpled hard and fast, nose bleeding, and began to scream in pain and fear. The Joker got the knife away from him, and then stood over him with curiously intense eyes and a twitching grin.

Anastasia, surprised at how her father had somehow seen this coming faster than she had, was very impressed. For a moment. Then she realized her father was trying to decide what to do with their assailant, and that at least seven of the possibilities he was entertaining were—while surely poetically ironic and maybe even a little funny—probably lethal.

After a moment, she grabbed Joker by the elbow and simply led him away. He didn't resist her pull, but she felt his anger subside a bit just in how the hair along his skin stopped standing on end. They left their attacker crying in the parking lot, cradling a bruised face and trying to stem a copiously bleeding nose. The Joker watched him like a hungry jaguar till they got in the door. She had to order their food, and her father remained agitated until his 'meal' arrived and he found she'd ordered him an apple pie. He blinked down at it, and then tilted it to the side as if inspecting the underside for wires.

Anastasia raised a brow at him.

A smile teased over the Joker's face as he entertained the idea of throwing the pie at her. *Just because.* Then he shrugged, and neatly cut her a slice to share with him. "Oh lit~tle~But~ter~cup you never fail to crack~me~up," he hummed whimsically.

And by halfway through their breakfast, he was back to normal.

Ana took this time to wonder if protective instinct had actually been the first 'positive' emotion her father might had ever felt towards her. Nowadays, 'danger to Buttercup' was the number-one thing that put him into an altered state of mind, and that seemed too coincidental to dismiss as being anything other than highly informative about his character. Protective instinct was a very raw, primitive, animal, and even violent emotion. While nothing she'd read had ever suggested 'The Joker' had previously shown a protective instinct towards anyone, it was possible that it just hadn't ever been triggered before. Or, maybe, it had been repressed.

The might explain why he got so coldly lethal and unexpectedly quiet if she was in danger, instead of laughing things off or leaving her to fend for herself.
Resignation

Chapter Notes

This is the LAST chapter. After this you must go to the sequel. Ironically, this chapter is about Buttercup becoming resigned to loneliness, and the sequel kicks off with her meeting her future best friend forever. If you're wondering why the series is called 'The Wildcard series,' Buttercup's about to pick a super hero name for herself...!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Anastasia was slightly estranged by her foresight. It showed her so many ghosts of the future, but none of the past. She couldn't put her thumb on exactly why, but it felt weird and uncomfortable, not to see anything of the rabbit. Not to be haunted by him, even. She lit out of the house soon after homeschooling had finished on most days, and sometimes even forgot she ought to turn around and make sure her dad was staying calm. She got lucky: he took to repainting the house and replacing the gutters and broken shingles, and kept busy. He seemed to have some vague idea of why she was so moody.

Anastasia never really said so aloud, but she'd lived her whole life watching herself die. Was that creepy? Sometimes when she stopped at a crosswalk, she could see in full detail what would happen were she to become distracted and step out into traffic. Her foresight could show her her future options, and sometimes that included stupid options; so she'd seen herself die, a lot. It occurred to her that she might have grown desensitized to the look of death without ever being confronted with living through the repercussions of it.

Even when she'd killed that thug, she hadn't needed to stick around for his funeral; she hadn't known him or been forced to live in a world where he suddenly didn't exist. By contrast, Nibbles' absence was very nearly freaking her out. Well, it was food for thought.

She needed a distraction.

"Hey I know that girl. Her family just moved into Canfor's place," an Afro-sporting boy with a thick Jersey twang ruminated aloud from his group of friends. "Hey! Girl!"

Anastasia paused, conducting a mental evaluation to determine if the speaker might be dangerous. A few representatives of his circle of relaxing comrades were presently smoking, and by the smell it was probably Cannabis, but the array of skateboards and basketballs scattered about their feet around suggested they already had a decent outlet for excess energy, and probably didn't want to mess with her for the fun of it. This holler was a friendly entreaty.

What should she do? Lately, she avoided people. Did she want to make friends? No, not really.

Friends took up time and energy. They got more curious about her than she ever got curious about them, and asked questions about her and where she was from and what her dad did and why she didn't want to hang out with them all the time (and do nothing worth doing for ninety percent of the time). Friends were nosy. Friends talked and talked and talked. Maybe if she just presented herself as having a strict father, she could slide away.
"Hey come over here!" Well, he was friendly-sounding and... to be honest, Anastasia had never really had an opportunity to be friends with boys before.

She turned and surveyed the little crowd—and stared just long enough to be slightly cold, to make it slightly awkward—but the Afro boy waved her closer a third time and so she strode up to them all with her hands still stuffed in her pockets and her jean hood low.

"Hey!" He greeted again. "You're new here, right?"

"Yeah," she grunted, agitatedly fingering the switchblade in her pocket despite knowing she was in no danger.

"I'm Jeremy! What's up?" he stood to actually shake her hand of all things. She warily shook back. This group was entirely male, which made her leery as to whether or not one of them thought her 'cute.' But as she looked about (and stretched the silence), she finally noticed at least two of the older boys were wearing hoodies padded down about the arms with duct tape, and that was a telltale badge of a northeastern, inner city kid who did obstacle traversal.

Huh. This was the sort of group she'd previously preferred to watch from afar. They'd always been older than her. Most of them still were older than her. Always boys, for some reason, maybe with a token girl or two. She frowned and glanced up at Jeremy. "I'm Anastasia," she decided to give him.

"Nice to meet you!" Jeremy would be a good salesman or actor in the future. He had a big, winning smile, and an inability to be deflated by awkward pauses.

One of the others asked: "She Autistic or somethin?"

Would that it was so easy as that. She'd certainly felt autistic as a young child, walking into a mall and being absolutely overwhelmed by stimuli from the future.

"Maybe she's scared," someone else supposed. "That house is haunted as fuck."

Those weren't the sorts of ghosts she saw, sadly.

"What do you want her to do, natter on like a chick in a shoe store? Let her go."

"Naw, you got me wrong, she's not girly, I've seen her at the Rec," Jeremy explained, making Ana unexpectedly curious about what sorts of people watched her that she'd never know about.

"So she's sporty? Who-"

"She does the rock wall. Why don't you show her some of your moves, Ang?"

"I like parkour," she growled noncommittally, "and street dancing." They paused, glanced at each other, and then... took the bait! Perhaps, being boys, they'd show off for just about anyone; Two got to their feet, looking half shy but half already in-the-zone as they studied their surroundings and considering their options. Inwardly, she applauded herself, because it was a lot easier to learn new moves by watching a real person, one with many possible futures, twisting and pushing their body to pull off stunts. Videos always ended the same way.

They asked her to watch, and she sat gladly and quietly and slightly apart from the rest to do just that. She committed to a minimum of conversation with curious Jeremy. It wasn't that anything was wrong with him, she reflected, it was just that she didn't really want to like him. That would take energy and go nowhere; he'd ask a thousand questions, and she'd feint, feint, feint, feint, feint...
"Where you from?" *Gotham, but she couldn't say it. Besides, they'd probably think less of her.* "What do you do?" *Stab kidnappers. What's your dad do?* *Stab everyone else.* There were no real answers she could give, but eventually one of the other boys shook Jeremy loose from her and just let her walk. Maybe they liked how quiet and attentive she was, and the way her eyes followed the action instead of drifting down to her phone.

When her 'teachers' had finished showing off, she praised their best maneuvers by name, and learned a few regional variants to how one talked about the art. Then she bluffed that it was 'time' for her to go, and she told them that maybe she'd come around to watch them again sometime, and they seemed happy with that.

And so that had been interesting; a sort of ghostly friendship without any of the real commitment. Was 'quickly making acquaintances' a skill, she wondered? 'Sudden social chameleon!' It sounded like a useful ability to have, like, if one was running from the cops. Just poof: suddenly I am part of this group of old men roasting marshmallows over a barrel fire. Totally innocent, aside from the illegal barrel fire of course, your quarry must have run off some other direction.

She didn't glance back towards the boys, but she rolled over the small handful of names she'd learned in her mind, and she felt a little wistful, resentful, and uncomfortable all in one. She ruminated on that, as she wove through alleys and parking lots, and it occurred to her that her problem wasn't that she didn't *want* friends, but rather that 'friends' were supposed to be trustworthy. And Anastasia couldn't trust anyone: not with her deep secrets, not with the odd nature of her behavior, and not with why she trained so heavily without trying to compete in anything. She'd never know how to explain these things to a satisfactory level, and she'd always resent peoples' questions, and she'd always secretly want to blurt out everything.

The only person who'd come closest to being 'her friend' in that sense was Weeping Willow, but truthfully Anastasia rarely saw her and couldn't even tell her much. Her mom was too dangerous, and Willow was too weak; There was no guarantee she'd never blab anything. So even Willow wasn't really her friend. Though, Anastasia realized, *she* was *Willow's* friend. Which was close; at least someone needed her and liked her.

But no, Anastasia would *never* have true friends, and she suddenly understood. That And that... that was sort of sad. But maybe if she really was resigned to that fact, then it made sense to learn how to have acquaintances. Maybe that would help her feel less alone. Maybe. If she was careful and didn't ever give into the temptation to *say everything*. She didn't want to be the one to expose her family ever again.

After sometime, a smile quirked at Anastasia's lips, and she shook her head thoughtfully. How was it possible that she *wanted* to be entirely alone, with no questions and no oversight, but simultaneously felt lonely? Teenagerhood was frustrating and weird.

Chapter End Notes

Again! Last chapter! Remember to go onto the sequel! The next work in the Wildcard series!

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