Summary

SEQUEL TO THE GREAT PRETENDER
One year after The Great Pretender, Jason Todd is in the groove again, looking for Talia al Ghul, but with a heavy heart after losing a friend. When a man comes to Gotham looking to assassinate the next president and pin it on him, even if it’s Lex Luthor, Jason Todd doesn’t take credit for someone else killing a criminal. He prefers to do the job himself.

Notes

SEQUEL TO THE GREAT PRETENDER
ONE YEAR LATER

ONE YEAR LATER

Ryker Heights, when construction began, was going to be the future of Gotham. A concrete jungle with the rich and famous financing towers of steel and prosperity, the neighborhood was unlivable for those without the stomach to make some cash. But for a company like LexCorp, guts came in spades.

Since Lex Luthor declared he was running for President, his company’s new building in Ryker Heights had halted expansion into the city to reallocate funds towards the campaign. The daring, pushy CEO had made Gotham City the last city on the campaign trail for a reason, but that reason was going to get him killed.

Late on an October night, the LexCorp building received a loud reawakening. The cool night air huddled people tighter into their clothes, and thank God. When the blast shattered the windows on the forty-second floor, glass rained down like a shower of knives. Two bodies followed. One hit a car parked along the sidewalk, but the other wasn’t as fortunate. Three people were hurt by the glass, two dead at the scene, and Jim Gordon didn’t think he’d ever lost this much sleep over the eyewitness testimony of the secretary of that floor.

She was Laura Brinkley, secretary to Mercedes Graves - a cutthroat business exec and Luthor’s righthand woman. Gordon wrapped a shock blanket around her, because she was shaking, her hands twitched around a cup of tea from the Starbucks across the street.

“You said you saw who?” He asked, bushy eyebrows knitted in confusion. He couldn’t have heard her right.

“The kid from Star City, y-you know…” She said, and her eyes squeezed shut. Her short hair had her draw the blanket over her head like a shawl. “...The one that used to follow Green Arrow around.”

Gordon nodded, and rubbed his thumb across his forehead. “I know who you’re talking about...can’t think of his name. My memory…”

“Speedy,” She licked her lips. “I’m from Star City...That guy saved my life once, but...he’s been missing for three years. There were rumors...that Green Arrow cut him off. Kicked him out,
but...there were other rumors that he switched sides.”

“...Switched sides?”

“Yeah…” Laura nodded, “Like tonight. He kicks the door open, points an arrow at me, and tells me that if I move, he’ll put it through my eye...Told me if I told anyone that I’d seen him, he’d come after my family. I watched as he fitted something square and black…” She put the teacup on the hood of the squad car and held her hands out, indicating the size. “About this big, and this wide...looked like a bomb if you ask me.”

“A bomb?” Gordon asked, “So this was an assassination attempt on Lex Luthor?”

“Looked like it.”

“What’d he look like?” Jim wished arthritis hadn’t taken hold of his fingers, so he could write faster. He sighed.

“Ginger hair about shoulder length, green tattoos on right arm from the shoulder to the forearm...He dressed in red leather, almost head to toe. Wore a Star City baseball cap, I have one just like it.” Laura bit her lip as she hung her head, clearing her throat. “He was young. Twenty-one, twenty-two.”

“Good, you’re doing great, Laura.” Jim patted her shoulder, “What else happened?”

“The Red Hood showed up,” She said, pulling her blanket around herself. “He was just...he looked like hell. Like he’d been running all night, he was breathing hard. Maybe he’d been chasing Speedy all over before they got there, I don’t know. But...he didn’t seem interested in a fight.”

“There’s a surprise.”

Laura shook her head. “I know it sounds weird, sir, but I’m telling you the truth. His hands were empty. He held them up like he was surrendering. He said he just wanted to talk. Speedy, he…”

“He what?”
“At first, I thought it was sweat on his face,” She whispered, “But I realized that it wasn’t sweat. He was crying. He said he had to plant the bomb.”

“What?”

“Because if he didn’t, someone was going to kill his daughter.”

Gordon grew very still, and his pen stopped scribbling. He met her eyes, and she wasn’t lying. No darting of pupils, no dilation. Just steady. Looking left as suspects do when they were trying to remember. Remember something true to begin with. “...What did the Red Hood tell him?”

Laura’s face became gaunt, the shadows deeper. “...That if Speedy didn’t leave with him now, he had no chance of seeing his daughter again...And then he pulled me out from behind my desk, pushed me through the doors, and then a shot rang out...the bomb exploded. The two men you found, those were bodyguards...they were proofing the building for Mr. Luthor.”

“...I think that’ll do it, Miss Brinkley.” Gordon’s mouth was a grim line as he closed his notebook, and pushed it into his breast pocket. “I’ll arrange for a car to take you home and inform your boss of what’s taken place here tonight.”

“...Commissioner Gordon?”

Jim half-turned, and pushed his hands into his pockets. Laura’s eyes were nervous, worried. “...What do you think is happening?”

“...I think someone wants Lex Luthor dead.” Gordon said after a moment’s pause, “...and I plan to find out who.”

Before I tell you this story, let me preface it by saying that I take it all back.
A broken neck would be better than this.
The Butcher's Floor

“*They are knocking now upon your door*

*They measure the room, they know the score*

They're mopping up **the butcher's floor**

Of your broken little hearts”

- **Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, “O Children”**

**TWELVE HOURS EARLIER - GOTHAM JUNIOR/SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL**

If there’s one thing I know about teenagers, it’s that they’re absolutely terrifying when they want something. At the moment, it was the bag of Starbursts I dangled from my hand like a carrot before a horse.

“I leaned against the desk, restrained in a straitjacket other people called a business suit and tie. The bandage on my branded cheek itched like the slow crawling of time towards lunch, and I gave the bag another teasing shake. ‘Who can tell me what ‘The Cask of Amontillado’ by Edgar Allan Poe was about?’

“I’d only been subbing this class for a week, but I could already tell that these kids were about to frenzy over these Starbursts like sharks. The minute the question was out of my mouth, hands sprouted into the air. One extra hand caught my attention. Jonas in the back, was a kid that was a lot like me - loved to read, didn’t much like other people knowing it. He hadn’t talked before in regular class, but he was in detention with me often enough. He knew I wouldn’t judge him for reading the literary anthologies I gave him.

“Jonas, what’ve you got?”

The boy was tall, knobby-kneed, and dark. I could only just see his eyes under the afro. “It’s about revenge, sir. Montresor-” He said the name like it was spelled ‘mon-dresser’. “He thinks that Fortunato screwed him over somehow, it ain’t explained or nothin’. But he thinks that he screwed him over, so he’s trying to get him into the basement to kill him.”

And that’s the power of teaching and Starbursts. Even the street kids learn Poe. I tossed him a pink...
Starburst, and winked. “Great job, Jonas. Alright, that’s what I’m talking about...Show of hands, who knew what the Latin at the end meant?” I lifted my hand, scanning for others. “Nobody knew?”

I put the bag of Starbursts down on the desk, and explained. “Well, it’s sometimes translated into Italian, but it means ‘rest in peace’. See, the ending of the story was about revenge, but it’s also about penance. Kinda goes with the good and evil unit that your usual teacher is assigning you, having you read stories about moral problems. These problems are in our everyday lives.” I pointed to each kid and let the silence ring out. “All of you have choices to make. Hard choices. And only you can make ‘em. What kind of person are you going to be?”

I turned and came around the desk. I grabbed a piece of chalk and wrote ‘Montresor’ and ‘Fortunato’ on the board. “A lot of people automatically assume that Fortunato’s innocent. He’s simply lucky, hence the name. Fortunato, in Italian, means ‘fortunate one.’ Take someone like Superman.”

I drew an ‘S’ in between Montresor and Fortunato on the board. “Who do you think Superman is more like, Monty or Fortunato?”

I heard mostly Fortunato, until one person said Montresor. It was Jonas again, in the back. I quirked a smile. “Jonas, why do you say Montresor?”

“’Cause Superman could kill, he just don’t.”

Another student, a redhead girl in the front, scolded him. “How could you say that? Superman’s a good guy. He saves a bunch of people, and he’s standing up to that dickhead Lex Luthor. He couldn’t kill.”

“Watch your fuckin’ language, Marissa,” I said, the class erupting in snickers. I tucked the stick of chalk behind my ear and crossed my arms. “Well, Jonas, what’s your response?”

Jonas’s cheeks flushed with all of the eyes on him, but he scratched his hair and then said, looking at his pencils. “Well, he’s got laser vision, X-Ray vision, super strength, and can fly - I’m preeeeeetty sure he could kill Lex in a second if he got mad enough. And he’s an alien, not a saint. He’s been livin’ here forever, or so he says, so he must’ve picked up something. Plenty of people do stupid things, mean things, even kill people. Even if he’s a good guy now, don’t mean he can’t be a bad guy later.”

“Exactly,” I looked at the class, and offered a smile. “None of us are all one thing or all another. If
you do a bad thing, there’s consequences. Yeah, Montresor buried a former friend alive over an insult that he never identifies, if one ever happened. Bitch might have made it up for all we know.” The class laughed and I knew I had them hanging on my every word. “But it’s the choices that define you. The heroes we put up on a pedestal have done great things, I won’t dispute that. But they’ve made mistakes. Same with the villains. They’re human - well, most of them. The good things don’t erase the bad, and the bad shouldn’t overpower the good. It’s a balance. Your job as young people is to recognize those mistakes and learn from them, improve yourselves. Everybody can have a second chance if they want one, and if they work for it.”

I flinched when the bell rang, and the scraping and sliding of chairs ended the class for me. I gathered my papers, and called out, “Alright, alright, push your chairs in and enjoy your lunch.”

Jonas was about to go by, but I stopped him on his way out. I leaned against the desk, “Good job today. Great participation. See? Told you they wouldn’t judge you. If you know what you’re talking about, they have no choice but to take you seriously.”

His eyes grew three sizes when I handed him the bag of Starbursts. He held them in his hands, and I recognized the tremble. He was a street kid. A street thief. Might have something to do with how skinny he was. “You sure, sir?”

“Yeah, I'm sure. But share - give everybody the yellow ones.”

And off he went into the hall. I stared out at the sea of empty chairs and sighed. I erased the chalkboard, loosened my tie and rolled my sleeves up. The scars shone silvery against my skin, but most of their black magic was gone. I had to cover them for the kids, but I didn't have to cover them against myself anymore.

“Never would have thought you'd be good at this.”

I knew the voice, and heard the door shut as he came into my room. I sat behind the desk and started sorting homework between the classes. “Alfred was teaching me Keats when you were still wetting the bed, Replacement.”

Tim’s three-piece put my cheap slacks and button-down to shame, with Ray-Ban sunglasses and a pair of gloves covering a metal hand straight from Victor Stone. He had even grown his hair out, into a military cut that still kept him from looking entirely businesslike. The nickname I had for him didn’t phase him anymore. “I never wet the bed…” He watched me sort homework for a second, and then asked, “You sure you don’t want a better job? I know you wanted to support yourself with something other than laundered blood money after you sold the tanks, but…”
“If I wanted a better job,” I stood with a stack of homework in my hand and walked to the folders in the back. “I’d have one. I’m overqualified for Wayne Enterprises, and Lucius already has one too many survivor’s guilt poster boys, Tim, he doesn’t need me.”

“My job is merely advisory, to look after Bruce’s interests and occasionally to close deals. You know that,” Tim shrugged, and reached into his coat. “Not why I’m here, though. I’m here about our rooftop ventures.”

“Find that asshole that nearly plugged you in last week?” I walked over, hands on my hips to check out the Wayne Enterprises envelope he was unfolding.

“Actually no, but I will,” Tim opened the envelope to take out pictures of what looked like a scope to a sniper rifle, and manufacturing schematics for bullets I didn’t recognize. Not a good sign. “These were stolen from Wayne Enterprises late last week. The scope is comparable to Deathstroke’s, but the lenses are made from alien metals, which enables them to see through bulletproof and even bombproof walls.”

He pointed to the tip of the bullets, which had a symbol scrawled next to it. “Recognize that?”

I squinted, and lifted Tim’s hands to see closer. “...Is that a Red Lantern symbol?”

“Yeah,” Tim said, and I could hear the apprehension in his voice. “The bullets’ tips are made from the same material that goes into a Red Lantern ring. I talked to John Stewart to confirm. He said that Red Lantern rings are specifically designed to penetrate any barrier with enough hate and anger...whoever stole these bullets is out for blood.”

I scrubbed a hand down my face. “...Jesus. What the hell are these things doing in Wayne Enterprises? I was under the impression that it wasn’t a weapons company.”

“Really? You wanna go there? Have you forgotten where the Batsuits and Batmobile that turns into a tank come from?” I didn’t appreciate Tim getting snippy with me, but he had a point. “There are tracers on the bullets and the scope, they haven’t left Gotham. They’ve actually been moved to Founders Island.”

“Why there?”
“...because those bullets are the only things strong enough to penetrate the walls around Lex Luthor’s office,” Tim said, putting away the pictures and the envelope. He crossed his arms. “With election day next month, he doesn’t have much time to waste on Gotham, but he knows that the Red Hood hangs his hat here.”

I grumbled, and the suitcase of guns I kept by my desk looked really good about now. “He’s right to take precaution in my city...no wonder construction’s taking so long. So let me guess. You want me to be Wayne Enterprises’ errand boy and get it all back for you?”

“I mean, unless you’re too busy discussing Shakespeare…” Tim teased, “I’ve even got a few ideas of sweeteners for the deal. I know a favor from you doesn’t come cheap.”

“Civility doesn’t come cheap from me, my dear Replacement,” I leaned against the desk and ran a hand through my hair, white streak sprayed black. “I’m listening.”

“I’ll throw in a penthouse in Miagani Island.”

“Keep dreaming.”

Tim took off his sunglasses, and hung them from his breast pocket. “Jason, that place is barely holding itself together. You still haven’t fixed that hole in the engine bay.”

“I like my firehouse,” I said. Something tightened in my chest as I added, “It’s got something cozy about it. And I’ve been meaning to fix the hole, it’s just I haven’t had enough spare sheet metal to fix it with.”

“You’ve been meaning to fix it for a year,” Tim said, “Let me do that on top of the sweeteners.”

Business meant sometimes getting what you don’t want. Some say the same thing about compromise. “Fine. What else do you have?”

“You get to keep the scope,” Tim wasn’t going to let me anywhere near bullets fueled by anger. “And depending on who it is, do what you want with the thief. The police don’t have eyes on this.”
“Scope and the bullets or no deal.” Hardball.

“Like hell I’m going to let you have those bullets.”

I smirked. “Seem to have no problem with me near enough to steal them back for you. Five bullets. For special occasions.”

“Two.” Tim sometimes thought about the estimated number of people I hate the most. He still counted Bruce.

“Four.” I countered. He estimated wrong. “You keep forgetting Harley and Scarecrow. The old man isn’t on that list anymore.”

“Fine.” Tim sighed, rubbing his forehead. “I’m probably going to regret this, but...I suppose I know where you live, so there’s that. Four bullets are yours by the end of it. And I patch the hole.”

“And I do what I want with the perp.”

“Right.”

I grabbed my lunch bag from beside my suitcase and sat down at the desk. I unrolled the top of the brown paper, and started pulling out tupperware. “Nice doin’ business with you. Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

He slipped his sunglasses back on, and moved to leave. I was about to crack open the orange soda when I heard him ask, “Who’s the fourth? The fourth person you’d use a bullet on?”

“Talia,” I drank a long swig of orange soda and let it fizz in the back of my mouth before I swallowed. “She took precious memories from me while I was held by Falcone...made me feel like I was going to lose the one person who believed in me. I plan to make her feel the same before I kill her.”
“You suck at this game.”

I rolled my eyes, the gravel on the rooftop digging into my stomach. Stakeouts were a lot like long road trips: if you didn’t have a game to play, you were bored out of your skull real fast. And I’d already blasted through my limited library of audiobooks. So what must I resort to?

“Can we play something else?” I asked, my mask fixed on a thermal scan of the top five floors of the LexCorp tower. “Six Levels of Separation is fun, but it gets old fast.”

Barbara usually suggested a different game, but tonight, she had been quieter. I was about to find out why. “...Actually, I need your thoughts on something.”

“Work or personal?” I scanned the other rooftops surrounding the tower. Nothing. I slid a hand down my side to my snack pouch, and fished out the whole grain crackers I’d been saving.

“Personal,” Barbara said, and there was a long pause.

I furrowed my brows, tearing open the pack of crackers. I tapped the side of my mask, and the front pushed forward about an inch so I could eat and do surveillance at the same time. New modification I’d fixed. “Babs, just tell me...Whatever it is, we can handle it.”

“Even if it involves Dick and Tim?”

I stopped mid-chew. I picked a piece of cracker out of my teeth. “...This about your feelings for Dick and not knowing where you stand with Tim? Y’know, that thing you should resolve real soon.”

“I...actually resolved it ages ago.”

“...What?” I squinted into the mask, checking the floors. Nothing. “Define ‘ages ago.’”

“About a year. It was...before the final push against Falcone.”
“Why am I only hearing about this now?”

“Hello pot, this is kettle.” Barbara sighed into the comms line. “Listen, I’m just going to say it out loud...Dick and me, we...we kissed. It was right before the battle, right after you’d called in to say that you were on your way to Gotham. And...he was about to leave. He said that he couldn’t promise that all of you boys would make it. That any one of you could die that day...”

Something tightened in my chest as she was talking, and I did my best not to think of dawn. “...You kissed?”

“Yes...”

“Have you told Tim?” I had to ask.

“No, I-”

“Barbara. It’s been a year.” Barbara Gordon was a genius in every other aspect of her life, but...with relationships, she and I were in the same boat. I hunted for words in my head. “...Barb, you have to tell him. You guys have been off and on for a long time. He’s been waiting. For you.”

“But what would it solve?” Barbara asked, exasperation in her voice. “This is what I needed your opinion on. What would it serve if I told Tim? Dick and Starfire are still inseparable, and they’re in Bludhaven together. Attached at the hip. It’s not like Dick would leave her for me.”

“He’d know the truth, for one thing,” I pointed out. “...He’s an irritating little shit to me, but he deserves that much from you for how he’s treated you. He’s been there. You wouldn’t have anything to hide from him, and you could be honest with him...Do you care about Tim?”

“...Yes, but...” I heard a tapping that I assumed to be her nail against a key. “I care about him like that ex you still think about sometimes and know he’ll always be there, but he isn’t...the one, you know? You know you could be with him, and you know you could be happy. It’s just that there isn’t the absolute...it isn’t like it is with Dick.”

“I know, Barb...” I rubbed the back of my neck, which was starting to ache from the position. “I
know it isn’t. I’ve known you and Dick since I was a kid, and…” I had to ask the hard questions now. “…Has anything happened between you and Dick since then?”

“...We talked about the kiss. It was a month later, at that victory party we threw.”

I didn’t go. There wasn’t much to celebrate. Falcone might be dead, but Talia was still alive. And the cost had been too greedy for my liking. I stayed home and drank myself stupid. “What’d he say?”

“ That it was a ‘heat of the moment’ type of thing, and that if we were happy with other people, we should stay that way. He asked me if I was happy with Tim, like...like he might change his mind if I said no. ” She sounded so tired. I made a mental note to swing by the Clocktower before I went home. “ I didn’t answer him. I said that I was sick of lying, and he agreed. He was too. He looked at me, really hard. Like he might explode if he didn’t kiss me. You know?” I grunted. I’d felt something similar, once. “ And just when I thought he might, I said I was happy. I didn’t say with Tim, but...I said I was happy that he and I were still talking, that the four of us were a team, and that you’re better.”


“ He smiled,” She sighed into the comms line. “ That smile that just…”

“Lets you know you’ll be okay?” I offered, and felt myself smiling as I remembered the time that Dick spent with me after I got back from the airport that night. “Like no matter who or what hurt you, that it was going to be okay because even if there were a thousand pieces to the puzzle, he’d help you put them back together? Didn’t matter if it stayed. Because Dick Grayson had your back.”

“ Yeah,” She said, “ Then he left. And I cried.”

“Why didn’t you call me, Babs?”

“ You were hurting enough, Jason.” Her voice was soft, gentle as her hands. “ I didn’t want to set you back.”

I searched for activity. Nothing. “…I could’ve used the company. I could’ve taken care of you. The way you took care of me. I would’ve dropped everything and gone to you.”
“My hero.” She said, and I heard the begrudging grin from her. “But..that’s enough of my troubles. How are you doing?”

“Staying busy.” I said. Something caught my eye on the top of the Queen Industries building across from LexCorp, a bit of movement. Oliver, that better not be you. “Trying to keep the crates closed.”

“When was the last time you listened to her records?”

“Last week.” I brought up my gauntlet, and hacked into the Queen Industries rooftop surveillance. Someone was up there, keeping to the shadows. And something metal glinted off the lights as it turned. “When was the last time you checked on her?”

“This morning,” Barbara said, and there was something heavy in her voice, but I wasn’t paying much attention. I had my eyes on a possible bogey. “She had coffee with Lois, and was given an assignment by White regarding the Metallo attack two days ago. She was safe, don’t worry, but she’s been taking the tougher stories since she’s been promoted.”

“Good for her,” I meant it. I was happy that she was succeeding in Metropolis. The more ties she made there, the less of a chance she’d come here.

“Jason. I know you miss her-”

“I don’t.” A lie. “She distracted me, jeopardized our entire enterprise last time, and honestly, I got too attached.” A lie, a lie, and the truth. A truth I didn’t regret, but still a truth.

“Her leaving hurt you, I get that, but don’t you think you’re being a little too hard on yourself?”

“Her leaving was the best thing that could have happened, for both of us,” A pair of red eyes peeked out of the Queen surveillance cameras, and I recognized them. Infrared binoculars. They were pointed at LexCorp.

“You fell in love, Jason, it’s not a fault.”
“I did not fall in love with her,” Another lie, a fatter one that made me shiver. “And she wasn’t in
love with me. We became friends, that’s it. Good friends that got too close and dangerous. She was
helpful in getting rid of Falcone, that’s it.”

“That’s the excuse you’ve been giving me for the past year, but I know you, Jay. You loved that girl
and don’t try to deny it.” I hated it when she was right sometimes. I really did. I wanted to rip my
helmet off and throw it away. Chuck it in a dumpster. “You were hung up for weeks after she left.
You fought every night and didn’t bother to patch yourself up after, Alfred found you crying. I can’t
even remember the last time I saw you really cry. You’d cry her name out in your sleep. Jason. You
loved that girl. You loved her so much. It’s normal and okay to be heartbroken.”

“Fine! So maybe you're right.” I let out a groan of frustration that was half the realization that the guy
I watched was readying a grapple gun, and half the realization that Barbara was onto me. I got to my
feet, and got out my line-launcher. “But this ain't the time to discuss this, Barb. Possible suspect on
the move.”

“Alive, Jason. Alive.”

“Whatever,” I said, and fired the launcher. I saw something like a spider's web glint in the light as it
stretched to the tower. I kept a hand on the launcher as I zoomed the binocular function on my
tactical hood. “...The hell?”

The guy hung from what looked like a bow, zipping along the line into the tower. I braced my legs
as my boots impacted the window, and shattered when I rolled to a stop. He was just down the hall,
and I saw what held the line. An arrow.

“Oliver?” I called out as I got to my feet.

Something shuddered in him, and his hand reached back in a flash, before I ducked behind a desk to
avoid arrows. Not Oliver. My fingers found my guns, and I shot back at him, smell of gunpowder
coming in through the mask’s vents. More arrows whizzed through the air, and one landed an inch
by my foot. The arrows were red.

I'd heard about Oliver’s archer prodigy, only through rumor among co-workers in crime. Apparently,
the guy had been trained by native Americans...I suppose some truth could be lent to the idea. I tried
to peek and get a better look, but the arrows he kept firing kept me dug down behind the desk.
“Listen, dude, why are you after Lex Luthor? I might be on your side.”
“Shut up!” He shouted back, and his voice sounded...young. Maybe just older than Tim.

An arrow thrummed with vibration as it stuck to the wall above my head, but then it started to whir, a ticking noise before I had to move. I holstered my guns. I kicked the desk on its side and used it as a shield as ran at him. Arrows punctured the wood centimeters from my hood, but something thudded against the desk. I tackled him to the ground with the desk on top as the arrow he'd shot exploded. A chunk of the wall tore out, and a weird part of my brain reveled in the mental picture of Lex Luthor writing a check for reparations.

I drew my fist back and punched through the wood, splintering the desk. I found a fistful of his gear, a deep crimson leathery material, and pulled him through the hole. Long loose strands of ginger hair and a few dreadlocks fell over his face, and against his pale skin, a green tattoo trailed down his right arm in a sleeve. Blood ran down his nose onto his lip as he seemed unconscious.

Seemed.

His head lifted, and I caught his green eyes filled with amusement as he reached back for an arrow, and stuck it in my chest armor. He pushed away from me and backtracked. I stared down at the arrow wedged in my armor, and then back at him flatly. “...You done, Robin of Locksley? Doesn't work.”

The edge of a smile curled his mouth. “Wait for it…”

And then he bolted down the hall. Before I could pursue him, the crackling started and I felt the armor get bone-chilling cold. I wheezed as it constricted my chest, my hands clawing at it. I saw it freeze over, and start to spread to my arm before I peeled the chest plate off. His laughter echoed off the walls as he rounded a corner, and I tore after him. “Get back here, you little shit!”

My zip-kick nailed the wall ahead of me and threw me round the corner, catching his ginger hair as he glanced over his shoulder. He notched an arrow and shot at me, the fletching brushing past my shoulder as I dodged. He called back, “Give up, you won't stop me!”

“You even know who you're talking to?” I reached to my belt and flung shuriken at him, which missed and dug into the wall as he turned. I didn't slow down as I grabbed them from the wall and threw again, banking the corner.

He yelped as two nailed his shoulder, and his hand clawing at his skin. There was a ding, and I saw
the elevator at the very end of the hall open. He dove inside, rapid-firing arrows through the opening so I had to take cover behind a table in the hall. I peeked around the corner when the arrows stopped, and saw him wave when the doors closed.

“Son of a…” I jogged to the door, and took a breath. I checked the hall behind me to make sure it was empty before I crammed my fingertips into the seam of the elevator doors, and my arms sang as I finally felt some give. The dark elevator shaft opened up, and I pushed the doors wider. The lip of the other door across the gaping shaft was at least eight, nine feet away. A bead of sweat slithered down my face.

No time for hesitation. I hooked my fingers over the doors, and thrust myself across the gap, tapping the button on my gauntlet. I drove the spikes into the metal shaft with both forearms, and sparks ricocheted off the tactical hood as I slowed to a stop. I looked up, and scanned the elevator going up in X-Ray. He was moving, but there was a shimmer to his form, like the gear my men wore over a year and a half ago to block detective vision. Someone did his homework.

I unhooked a gauntlet from the wall and reached for my grappler, nailing the floor of the elevator. I zipped up to it, and clipped the line to my belt, slipping my knife out of its sheath on my thigh. I dug it into the floor and cut a hole, sawing the metal. My arm burned, and when the patch fell through the shaft, I unhooked the grappler, put it back on my belt to climb through. The guy had his back to the corner of the elevator, his brows together and his mouth screwed into a frown.

“I'll admit, you are one determined dumbass,” He said as I took the second to catch my breath.

I still had the knife in my hand. “A dumbass that isn't gonna let you get on with whatever you're doing without knowing why.”

There was a flicker of something behind his eyes. He pressed a button on his bow, and it straightened, the string disappearing. He put it in his quiver like it was any other arrow. Instead, he reached for his own knife he kept in his boot. He held it with the knife pointing out.

“Don't tell me you like Luthor,” He said, but I already knew it wasn't animosity that drove this. I could hear it in the shake with the name.

“I don't,” I said as we circled each other, “Odds are, I might want in if you tell me what you're really doing this for.”
“You wouldn't understand.” His jaw was tight.

I smirked. “What? He steal your comb?”

He shook like he might charge, but at that, he snorted and busted up laughing. He reverberated off the walls, his back against the side with his knife in his hand as he wiped the tears from his eyes. Soon, his giggles infected me and I found myself chuckling. “Did you like that one?”

“That was freakin’ great,” He said, and then lowered into a stance. He was still grinning, “Did he steal your comb? ’ Jesus Christ.”

We lunged at the same time, our metal clanging as we went at each other like wolves. My knife tried to swipe him in the same arc his just missed my neck, and I had to admit. I hadn't seen someone this good since sparring with Deathstroke. He fought like a native, like he was trained by a plainsman. Maybe he was.

He snuck his blade under the strap that held the thinner layer of kevlar beneath my chestplate, twisted it to bring me closer so he could knee me in the gut. I doubled over, but used my grip on his shoulder to pull one of the two shuriken out and stab him with it in the thigh. He groaned, before he sliced the armor strap and I barely had time to catch the light flashing off the metal before it drove into the side of my tactical mask.

The display went dark.

I sheathed the knife and patted my hood, trying to find the release. I heard the doors swoosh open, and him calling, “You're alright, man, but I can't have you following me.”

When I finally found the release button and thrust my hood off, I whirled to see him at the end of the hall beyond the open elevator doors. His bow raised, an arrow notched. “Nothing personal.”

A lie.

He loosed it, the arrow singing until it struck the wall behind me before the elevator doors shut. I tried to jam my fingertips in the door like before, but then the arrow started to whir as three beeps sounded.
Roy Harper felt the blast before he heard it. He felt the vibration in the floor, just a moment before the boom. A brief wash of regret chilled him; he didn't know the Red Hood from shit, but he'd been nice enough, even funny. But he couldn't let that distract him. He approached the offices, and let her face flood his mind, his ginger hair bouncing as he jogged.

He couldn't stop. His lungs heaved from all the running he had done, from all the running he had yet to do, and the quiver bumped against his shoulder blades all too like a baby carrier. He wondered what she was doing at his cousin's, whether she was drawing or playing with her toy dinosaurs.

When he got to the offices, kicked down the door and told the secretary that if she moved, he'd put an arrow in her eyes, he wasn't just making an empty threat because it's what any other crook said. He was making a plan for himself if they hurt his daughter. When he said that if she told anyone she'd seen him, that he'd kill her family, he wasn't going to make good on that promise. He was repeating a threat made to him about a year earlier, when he held his crying girl to his chest as her mother was killed before his eyes.

He knelt by Lex's desk beyond the secretary lobby, pulled out the bomb from inside his quiver and began to arm it. He had memorized the code when he couldn't sleep. He could have armed the device drunk with time to spare. But before he could input the final digit, he heard a voice from the door. Heavy breathing.

“Listen…I just want to talk.”

A shock of black hair with one bloodied white streak matted to his head, the Red Hood was pale and filthy, half his shirt blasted off his body and his bare hands raised, palms out. He didn't look impaired or injured at all, but he did favor his side as he stepped forward. His blue eyes pierced Roy something deep.

Even if his hands were raised, Roy knew a cowboy when he saw one. Hood’s hand would be on that gun the second he touched the keypad. He straightened and faced him, readied his bow. He saw the blue eyes widen as Red Hood saw more of his face.

“What do they have on you, man?”
It was then that something cold dripped down his cheek. He said through his teeth, tears clouding his vision. “I don't have a choice, okay?”

“Let me help,” Hood said, and he stepped into the office beyond the secretary lobby.

Roy knew what he was doing. He was protecting the secretary. It was noble.

“I know the look of a guy with no choice,” Hood was saying, and when Roy lifted his bow, he stopped. “Okay, okay, I'll stay right here.” Roy nodded, sniffing. “I know the look of a guy with no choice, y’know why? Because I used to be that guy. I thought I had no choice and I did, and I didn't know it until it was too late to take it back...Let me help you avoid that, alright?”

“I can't.” Roy repeated, his fingers trembling on the bow. “Don't you get it, I don't have a choice! They're gonna kill her if I don't!”

Hood’s eyes got even wider, and a muscle tensed in his neck. “Who? Who's gonna kill her?”

“I can't say. It's my daughter,” Roy bit his lip, and took a haggard breath. “They're gonna kill my daughter if I don't blow the roof off this place.”

“Listen to me carefully,” said the Red Hood, his shoulders squared. He dropped his voice so only they could hear, “The only security cameras in this office are the ones in the hall outside. The ones in here haven't been installed yet. You have to blow this bomb for them to know you've done your job, right?”

Roy stared at him, and swallowed. He nodded. “It has to be done. It's a message to Luthor, a kill card for what's to come and a frame job.”

“...For who?”

Roy’s eyes never left the Red Hood. “For you. They knew if anyone made a go for this place, it'd eventually attract your attention. But I'm blocked from your detective vision and the security cameras will be replaced. But they'd recognize you. The idea was to frame you for the assassination attempt, to pit you and Luthor against each other. If I did that, I'd get my daughter back.”
“Okay, let's start with this: I hate Lex Luthor as much as the next guy, but I refuse to be pegged for the assassination of a guy I don't like if I wasn't the one who planned it,” Red Hood seethed, and Roy saw the guy's hands fidget for his gun. “Second, you'll never see your daughter again if you don't follow my instructions. You're gonna leave the office with the secretary, and take her into the hall. You're gonna go to your employers when the office goes boom, you're gonna get your daughter back, and then they'll ask you to wait for further instruction, right? Just to hunker down?“

Roy nodded, his face stark at what this guy was going to do. Hood went on. “You're going to go to the apartment buildings in Bleake Island, the one on 9th street facing the Clocktower, room four-one-nine with your daughter and whatever you need. You'll find a key above the doorframe. Wait there for me...or are you still going to shoot me full of arrows like an asshole?”

Roy lowered his bow slowly, and his eyes searched the other man for falsehood, pity, even a lie. “Why are you helping me? I just tried to frame you.”

“Got a soft spot for clueless kids, dumbasses, lost causes, and gingers.” Red Hood marched back into the secretary lobby and wrangled the woman out into the hall. He snatched the detonator out of Roy’s pocket, and fell to his knees by the bomb. He studied the wiring, then asked, “What's the last digit to arm the explosive?”

“Seven,” Roy said, “...What's your name?”

“What are you still doing here?” Hood said, glaring up at him. “Get going.”

Roy huffed, going to the door but still turning to ask again once his hand was on the knob.

“What's your name?”

Red Hood smirked over his shoulder as he armed the bomb and stepped to the window.

“Rumplestiltskin.”
Nothing to Hide

“We had time on our side
In the beginning we
We had **nothing to hide**
In the beginning you
You blame me but
It's not fair when you say that I didn't try
I just don't want to hear it anymore”

- Three Days Grace, “Let it Die”

Moving the Harpers from the safehouse on Bleake to my firehouse was simple. Roy, and an admittedly adorable little three-year-old named Lian, only had a couple of duffel bags between them. The hard part was that they only had a couple of duffel bags between them. This was a single father, on the run and being blackmailed by criminals, carrying around his whole world on his hip.

My hands were elbow deep in the blanket closet in the dorms of the firehouse, trying to find softer ones in the back, when I heard them talk in lower whispers by one of the beds. Roy crouched, his ear bent to his girl, and when I walked over with the blankets, he had his hands on her shoulders. “Go on. Go ask him, see what he says.”

Lian Harper looked up at me with doe eyes, black pigtails, and removed her thumb from her mouth to ask, “Uhm…” She turned to her dad, whispered, “What’s his name?”

“Jason,” Roy said, and I fought a smile as Lian tried again.

“Uh, hi Jason,” She started, and when I got on one knee, her nose flushed pink. “Do you know what that is?”

She pointed at the hammock I set up at the back of the room. I stood up, and took her hand to lead her to it. “It’s a hammock, you sleep in it.”
Roy picked her up to hold her on his hip as I maneuvered into the hammock, and swung back and forth. Lian’s eyes got big, and she whispered something to Roy in his ear, hiding her face in his hair.

“Does she wanna try it?”

“Yeah,” He said, and smirked. “But she wants you out of the hammock.”

I squinted at Lian, a wry smile on my face, and slipped out. Kids. First you get them away from blackmailers and murderers, and then nothing is sacred.

Roy laid her in the hammock, his hands I was sure were as rough as mine from fighting, but he treated her like glass. He rocked her, his eyes crinkled at the corners, and she giggled. After a minute of rocking, Lian’s eyes were on her father before she finally let them close. I grabbed one of the softer blankets, and tucked it in around her in the hammock.

“Where’s her mom?” I asked Roy when we started to move away so she could sleep.

“Dead,” Roy frowned, and looked away from me, his jaw tight. “They killed her the first time I said no to helping them.”

I grabbed his forearm and stopped him. “Anytime you wanna tell me who ‘they’ are, the sooner they’ll be dead.”

“I never saw their faces, okay? It was always an older woman,” He said, his voice strained with discomfort. “She said she had a son-”

“-did you ever see her son?” Too easy. Talia wasn’t even hiding her tracks. She was taunting me. I led him to the bathroom, and got out the duffel bag of medical supplies. “How old was he?”

“Couldn’t be more than twelve.” He stripped off his shirt, pale freckled skin, green tattoos down both arms, and thin scars around his torso. I had him turn around so I can fix up the gash my shuriken left on his shoulder. “Do you know who he is?”

I tore open a packet of sterilized needles for stitching with a little more force. “How much do you
Roy stared at my reflection in the mirror. “Not much...I know you were a Robin, that you died a while back, and now you’re here. That’s it.”

That’s all the more anybody who ever worked with the Justice League was allowed to know. Oliver may have been closer to Bruce than say, Martian Manhunter, but that doesn’t mean that he knew about what I did when I was supposed to be dead.

I threaded the needle, unscrewed the antibacterial cream jar and had him hold it while I stitched. Years of practice allowed me to do it relatively quickly, though it was still a long gash. “Oliver ever tell you who Batman was?”

“He didn’t have to,” His muscles tensed when I said his mentor’s name. There was still some bad blood, maybe, but I didn’t care about that. “I saw you once, y’know.”

My hands stopped on the thread, and I looked at him in the mirror. “What?”

“Oliver took me to a Wayne Foundation gala right after I became Speedy,” Roy said, something old and boyish in his voice. Like he was looking through his younger self’s eyes. “I didn’t talk to anybody really, but it wasn’t much of a stretch to figure out that the people Ollie was shaking hands with were Leaguers. Clark, Diana...all of them. I recognized their eyes, their voices. And then Oliver walked to the main table where you and Bruce were. You were talking to him, you were smiling. And he was smiling back. I knew he was Batman and you were Robin. Partners. In all the ways Oliver and I just weren’t.”

I tore my eyes from him, forced myself to stare at the wound in his back with my shoulders tense. Anxiety bubbled in my gut as I sighed. “...We’re not partners anymore. Far from it. That punk kid that’s glued to Talia’s side? That’s her son. With him.”

Roy’s ginger eyebrows knitted in the mirror. “What? They’ve got a son. Like...a blood son?”

“Punches like him, too,” I remembered, and something festered in me as I said, “Yeah, that little brat is his. Talia put something in his drink the last time he was in Metropolis, years ago. Date-raped the Batman. She talked like it was some romantic night of passion, but no...” I tied off the end of the stitch, my forearms flexing. “Right after it happened, I wanted to go get revenge for him, but...he said that she’d be long gone. And that it wasn’t much use because nobody would believe him.” The
“You talk about him like Batman’s still alive.” Roy didn’t say it like an accusation or with skepticism, just as an observation.

“He is.”

Roy didn’t gasp, or say ‘oh my god’, or anything like that. He barely reacted, just nodded.

“You don’t seem surprised,” I said, taking swipes of antibacterial cream and dabbing it over the stitch. Didn’t want to get infected with a little girl around.

“He’s Batman,” Roy said, as if it explained everything.

“And now she’s got a son that she can hold over his head,” I took the jar from him, and he turned around. “I’ll rip her head off for what she’s done.” To him, to you, to me, to everyone.

I went to move past him to zip up the duffel, but he blocked my way. “Shirt up, you’ve been holding your side all day,” When I tried to move anyway, he pushed me back. “Nope. You’re giving my daughter a roof over her head, let me at least help you. With your injuries and with the League of Assassins.”

Roy didn’t budge. I shook my head, lifted my eyes to ceiling to lament quietly as I started to shrug my shirt off. He took the hair-tie off his wrist and combed his hair back until he could put it into a bun. “What about you? Where’d you go all that time?”

What is it with me and inviting nosy people to live with me? Although, if I had to bet money, I’d say he was asking because he wanted to know the kind of guy he had his daughter around. I figured it was best to be honest. “...Fear Halloween.”

“What about it?” He studied the purplish splotches that darkened my ribs, and retrieved one of the cooling pads from the duffel, along with the plastic wrap. I hesitated, and he looked up at me, “Dude, I had a kid with a supercriminal, and told Oliver Queen to kiss my ass if he didn’t like it. There’s zero judgment on my end.”
“I’m... was the Arkham Knight.”

Roy’s eyebrows lifted so high I thought his forehead might disappear. I waited for all the reactions I’d received from other people, all the possible reactions. Bruce’s second, fighting chance. Dick’s skepticism. Barbara’s absolution and concern. Tim’s anger and distrust. Abigail’s anger. Or maybe a mix of all of them. I expected a punch, maybe. Or him to just start shouting. Or to leave the room and grab his bow and his daughter and leave. Maybe grab his bow, shoot me, then grab Lian and leave. Something in that order.

But Roy Harper surprised me.

He straightened, pushed a cooling pad against the bruises, and put my finger on the end of the plastic wrap. “Pirouette.”

“What?”

“Pirouette,” he said again, turning me until I got the idea. Every pass I made as I spun, he still wasn’t fazed.

“Did you hear what I said?”

His lips popped on the ‘p’. “Yep.”

I waited until he stopped me, taped the plastic wrap to my side and handed my shirt back. His silence was beginning to unnerve me. I carefully put my shirt back on, and zipped the duffel bag to put it away. “You don’t mind that I was the Arkham Knight.”

“‘Was’ being the important word in that sentence,” Roy pointed out. He opened the door, then met my eye and opened his arms. “Look man, I don’t agree with what you did, but I’m not gonna be a hypocrite and act like I was the perfect sidekick either. Whatever drove you to do what you do had to be pretty bad, and I’m sure it has somethin’ to do with the level of scar tissue on you.”

My chest burned as he said that. I hadn’t even noticed that in taking my shirt off to deal with my injuries, I had shown him my scars. A year ago, I would have refused outright. “It does, and it’s a big part of why bringing Talia al Ghul down is important.”
“Then whatever you need, ask,” Roy lifted a hand, and walked out of the bathroom to the dorms. “I’ll try to keep Lian out of the ammo.”

………………………………

“You sure it’s alright for me to drop by like this?”

The armchair he’d corralled me into the moment I walked in had nearly swallowed me in softness. I curled my fingers around the cup of tea he gave me, the heat licking the cold from my fingers. Gotham never failed to take the earliest possible moment to freeze everybody solid, but the moment I was in Alfred’s place at the Clocktower, I was surrounded with warmth.

“I told you the first time, Master Jason,” He said, his sweater not hanging on him like last time. He was eating better, and I knew his eyes were checking me for the same thing. “You’re always welcome here.”

He sat in the chair opposite me in his small sitting room, coffee table sculpted to look like a clock face between us. It felt so much like our midnight talks at Wayne Manor that I smiled in thinking the clock had actually gone back years. Alfred wasn’t talking about the first time since I’d arrived...he was talking about the first time we met. The first question I’d ever asked him is if I’d really be living at Wayne Manor, if the big bed was really mine. It was the same answer, every time I’d asked. You’re always welcome here. And after my conversation with Bruce when I stole his watch, I believed it.

“So...I just did something that’s either gonna go exactly how it went last time when I took someone in, or it’s gonna gonna a bit better.” I said, my eyes on my tea. I sipped.

I loved and hated looking at Alfred. I loved seeing him, knowing he still walked the earth and cared and worked so damn hard and deserved more. But seeing the extra lines that hadn’t been there, the new gray hairs. I hated being reminded that time had gone where I wasn’t with him.

I could sense his amusement. “Alright. What did you do?”

“Roy Harper, Oliver Queen’s ex-ward...well, Talia pressed into him by using his young daughter as leverage to pin an assassination attempt on me,” I met his gaze, briefly. Just enough to see if he disapproved. “I helped him out of the building and he got his daughter back unscathed. They’re both
at the firehouse, I’m letting them stay there until I can work out a next move.”

Alfred drank from his teacup and looked at me. He took off his glasses, which he set on the coffee table. “Master Jason, you never tell me what you’re up to unless you’ve already figured out the next ten steps. You only need a second opinion on those steps, correct?”

“Right.”

“What’s your plan?”

I sipped my tea and launched into my proposed course of action. “I play it out like Roy had succeeded, I let Lex point the finger at me. He won’t take an assassination attempt lying down, not the man with a Kryptonite-powered warsuit in his closet. He’ll put out a hit, a bounty, something with some heavy money behind it. He’s got enough to lose to make a point.”

“And as for his political gain?” Alfred asked, waving a hand. “He’s running for President, mind you. America votes next month. I’m no politician, Master Jason, but I know there is a sentiment that those in your line of work are nothing more than criminals for acting outside the law, however altruistic your intentions may be.”

“I know that,” I said, “I tried to drill it into Tim’s head after the old man disappeared. If Lex tries to spin it that way, there’s gonna be a lot of backlash, regardless of sentiment. We may have acted outside the law, but we did a lot of good. I mean, not really me, but you get my point.”

“Master Jason…” Alfred opened his mouth to say more, but decided better of it.

He’d already made the argument a thousand times since coming back to Gotham that I was a force for good, not for some twisted form of vengeance of my own making. I understood where he was coming from, but the word ‘hero’ was still a four-letter word.

“He may try to put American people against heroes,” Alfred sounded worried, the same concern in his voice with warning me about storms and serial killers. “And if that day comes, I don’t want you distancing yourself from us. I don’t want you throwing yourself into the fire to save us.” I started to protest, but he shut me down. “I know you couldn’t if you tried, Master Jason… I just don’t want you to try anyway, for our sakes.”
“What makes you think I would?” My voice didn’t sound like mine when it was that quiet.

Alfred leaned forward, and took one of my hands from my cup. I couldn’t avoid looking at him then, and it hurt. His voice cut into me when he said, “I only got you back, Master Jason. I watched Master Bruce throw himself into the flame to keep the rest of you anonymous, so the public wouldn’t heave you up on crosses for ridicule or pedantry or slaughter...I think what you’re doing for that little family is outstanding, keep doing it. That’s the kind of work you should be doing, and I know - in my soul - that if Master Bruce could be here to see you...”

I looked down at my scarred fingers between his hands. “He’d be disappointed. That I’m still killing.”

“I was with Bruce when you reemerged as the Red Hood,” Alfred’s grip on my hand tightened. “He’s slowly making his peace with it. He understands that one cannot come from what you did and not be changed, not in some way.”

Guilt swirled in me, and I felt it around my neck, constricting and keeping me from taking full breaths. I removed my hands from his. “Alfred, I kill because they deserve it. I kill because I’m good at it...it isn’t because of J...because of him. I don’t like that it’s changed me in Bruce’s eyes.” Something in my chest cinched closed when I said his name. “But I know the change is irreversible. If...if he’s hoping to try to change me back to who I was when I was Robin, Alfred...” I met his eyes and held the gaze. I shook my head minutely. “...I’m telling you, right now, it won’t happen. I’ll look you in the eye, so you can vouch and tell him that I mean it when I say I kill because it feels good to put a sick, twisted person that just wants blood out of their misery.”

Alfred’s eyes widened. He looked like he wanted to throttle me for a moment, just a moment. And the way the light of the lamp made his graying hair lighter reminded me of her, how she looked before she punched me when she found out my secret. But instead of punching me, Alfred said, quietly, “Did I ever tell you what I did before I worked for the Waynes?”

I shook my head. Alfred, when I was Robin, was always far too focused on me to talk about himself. Even down to how he was doing.

“I was a spy, employed from the time I turned legal age, until the time my parents retired from the Waynes’ service and told me it was my turn. The Pennyworths have always been in service of others,” He smiled, the old pride that he exuded in everything he did. “Before the Justice League or the Justice Society, I served through the Cold War, gathering intelligence on Russia for the UN. I’ve had to look evil in the eye, Master Jason, and I did what you do because I was ordered to.”
“That’s not the same as-”

“...I know it isn’t,” Alfred sighed a long breath, “But at times, I would have done it regardless of orders. So I will make you a promise, Master Jason. If Master Bruce stays away for much longer, I will drag him back here myself…” I let out a low chuckle, and he shared it. “...and I will make him understand. But I must tell you that I do not think he will put up a fight. The letters I wrote to you are more than enough proof that even when you’re well and truly lost, that he would move heaven and earth to find you again.”

When I returned to the firehouse that night after visiting Alfred, the place was more alive than it’d felt in months. The massive Walmart bags knocked against my legs as I walked to the source of the noise: the kitchen. Roy was in sweats and a tank top, a baby carrier he must have brought with him strapped to his back with Lian braiding his hair in her tiny hands. A pan of scrambled eggs was being drowned in peppers under his spatula, and when he caught sight of me, his eyes went straight to the bags after plating their dinner.

“Listen, if you want me to reimburse you for whatever you got-” He tried to say, but I put the bags on the table and lifted a hand for him to zip it.

“Don’t sweat it. These aren’t even all for you,” I said, and looked over his shoulder to Lian, who hid in her dad’s hair, peeking at me. “These are for the lady.”

I opened up the bags and pulled out a box for a booster seat. Both Harpers’ eyes only got bigger when I produced puzzles, blankets, clothes for both of them, a play tent, a bag of plastic dinosaurs, and ten kids’ books.

I looked between them, father and daughter, and waited for some reaction. After a full minute of silence, little Lian’s hand shot out for the bag of dinosaurs. “Daddy, daddy, look. Look, dinos! Can I have one?”

I tore into the bag and handed her a pterodactyl figure. “Here’s this one, but they’re all yours.”

Roy still hadn’t said anything, and I was getting antsy. His hair in his face, he bent to install the booster seat into one of my kitchen chairs. He then unstrapped the carrier from his back, carefully placing Lian into the booster seat with her toy dinosaur. He moved to the kitchen counter, no doubt
feeling my stare on his head, and cut up Lian’s dinner, the non-pepper plate of eggs. He spent twenty seconds blowing on it, testing it over and over with his finger until it was cool enough.

When Roy placed it in front of her, Lian was looking up at her father and asked, in the tiniest voice, “Daddy, are you alright?”

“I’m fine, baby,” He said, and bent to kiss her forehead. He glanced at me, just once, just long enough for me to see how his eyes were full of tears, and then spun on his heel to leave the room.

I followed him into the hall, and turned him around. “Talk to me. What’d I do?”

Roy pressed his back to the wall and exhaled a shaky breath. A tear rolled down his cheek. “You did great. You did what I should be doing. You’re providing for her...I’m barely able to keep us alive and afloat...You’ve been in her life a handful of hours and you’re already a better dad than I am.”

“Dude,” I felt something like shame pull my shoulders down. “I didn’t mean to make you feel like you weren’t a dad, I…” I sighed, and ran a hand through my hair. “...I’ve been alone in here, for a goddamn year. The last person in here was...the best friend I ever had. And it’s been hell in here, alone without her and I don’t think she’s coming back. So...I want to help.”

“Jade, my wife- well…” I glanced down and saw that he was wearing a ring on his left hand. He furrowed his eyebrows and said, bitterness in his voice, “Oliver said it isn’t marriage if it there’s no wedding, that it wouldn’t last, but...We were going to support our daughter. She was going to do one last heist, one last score to set us up for life. We were going to go somewhere warm, where Lian could see the sun. We were gonna make it work. Stupid in love, I guess…” Roy looked away, rubbed the back of his neck. “...But then she got killed, and now I’m alone too. Same as you. Here without my partner, raising a daughter that looks just like her.”

I heard her voice when he said that, that last time we were just people in this firehouse, when she brought me home bags I never opened. *Let me take care of you this time. Let me help you.*

I swallowed hard. Even if it hurt to think about, she had taught me how valuable it was to have a friend when you’re alone. And Roy was as alone right now as I was. I lifted a hand and placed it on his shoulder. “You ain’t alone, Roy.”

He met my gaze out of the corner of his eye, studying me. After a pause, I suppose he figured out that I meant it. And then he cracked a grin. “Don’t tell me the hardass Red Hood is getting
sentimental.”

“Oh please,” I took my hand back and rolled my eyes, voice dripping with sarcasm. “If I were getting sentimental, I’d put forth a lot more effort. Flowers, letters in the sky, the whole damn thing. Maybe we’d slowdance and you’d put your head on my shoulder.”

“You see, I know you’re joking, but somehow I can picture it.” He followed me back into the kitchen, kneeling to pick up a dinosaur Lian had thrown onto the floor. “Would there be poetry?”

“I mean, I am an English sub teacher by day.” I said, and he laughed, head thrown back as he sat by his daughter.

“Can you recite Lord Byron?”

I was glad my back was turned, my hand braced on the fridge door for a beer. The hours of reading with her echoed in my ears, and how she flushed when I recited ‘She Walks in Beauty’ smirking at her.

Even so, my mouth quirked a smile. “By heart.”
“I found out about you
Street lights blink on through the car window
I get the time too often on AM radio
Well you know it's all I think about
I write your name, drive past your house
Your boyfriend's over, I watch your lights go out”

- Gin Blossoms, “Found Out About You”

If there was one thing I hated about how I lived now, scourge of the underworld by night and teacher by day - the classes, the grading, the lesson plans, the late night stakeouts on school nights, the times I’ve come to work with blood spatters on my collar, shifting bodies, killing a lot of people, living on forty percent of what I make, nights with the family at the Clocktower - it was how much I hated the car I picked up for the commute.

It was a simple four-door Ford, black, and absolutely spotless. There was nothing mechanical wrong with the damn car. I even put on undercoating so it wouldn’t rust, but I still hated it. I hated the empty passenger seat. I hated the empty backseat.

I needed to drop by the Clocktower before I punched in for afternoon classes at Gotham High, so the slacks and button-down ensemble, the shiny shoes, the sprayed black white streak combed, clean-shaven and tie hanging over the rear view, would all have to come with me. I turned on the sound system while I was stuck in traffic, and as I was sifting through my CD binder, I caught some news about my exploits on the radio.

“-ed Hood, vigilante and mass murderer, has been identified as a lead suspect in what will be the most interesting assassination attempt in East Coast political history.” I advanced another thirty feet down the street with a wry smirk on my face.

“Lex Luthor, presidential candidate and business tycoon, is now in Gotham City as part of the campaign trail leading into voting next month, but two nights ago, a bomb was placed in his office in LexCorp Tower and detonated hours before it was intended to kill Luthor himself.”
I snorted and tossed the binder onto the passenger seat without taking a disc out. “Oops. Sorry, Lex.”

“While security cameras have been erased on the night in question, Luthor is insistent that Red Hood is the sole culprit. Despite the fact that a secretary filed a police report saying that there was a second assailant, these allegations are the only ones Lex Luthor seems to care about.”

“Course it is.” I took a sip from the protein shake I barely had time to make that morning.

Then Luthor’s voice came through the radio, probably a clip from the public statement he made yesterday about what happened. I slept through it. “The Red Hood, whether he worked alone or not, is a delinquent, a murderer, an enemy of the state and a sick individual.”

Why thank you, Lex. It would take one to know one, wouldn’t it?

“This month, I will be focusing on exposing these so-called heroes for what they are: criminals.”

I clicked the radio off and fished my phone out of my pocket. I dialed and put it to my ear, “You paying attention to the radio? We’re public enemy number one.”

I heard Roy’s light footsteps, and a high laugh. “Hitting the big time! What else did he say?”

“Called me a sick individual.”

Roy’s theatrical gasp had me chuckling. “Sick? You? How could he say such a thing? Surely he doesn’t see the real you. The sweet, kind, bubbly-”

I rolled my eyes, but I was grinning, laughing. “-dude, last week I cut a rapist’s balls off and played hacky-sack with them.”

“That’s just poetic justice, friend.”

“Thanks,” I saw the Clocktower peek around a skyscraper. “How’s Lian? She still sleeping?”
“Baby girl’s up and fussing a storm,” I heard a pattering noise from the other end. “Listen babycakes, you can’t throw cereal on Jason’s floor. We gotta be nice to the floor, mmkay?”

“Aww, c’mon,” I said, and then made my voice louder. “Lian, if you can hear me, throw as much cereal as you want. It’s all on me. You make the biggest mess you can, little lady.”

A delighted squeal answered me, and Roy’s scowl echoed through the line. “...Watch yourself, Todd. You turn into a bad influence on my daughter and I’m gonna have to call an intervention.”

“Okay, okay, you’re the dad,” I leaned forward to check the clearance on my roof as I drove into the Clocktower garage. “So...when’s her birthday?”

“You get my daughter a pony and I’ll turn you over to Lex myself.”

“Hey, who said anything about a pony?” I cleared my throat. “Alright, man, I gotta let you go. Need to brief the family on what’s going on with you.”

“Yeah...about that. Can you promise me something?”

I swung into my parking spot, and shut the car off. Roy didn’t seem the type to ask favors often. Or at all. And he had that quiver to his voice I got sometimes when I talked about the old man. “...Sure. What is it?”

I realized that ‘quiver’ was exactly the right word. “...If they decide to call anybody in Star City to let them know I’m not dead...make sure it’s not Oliver.”

Maybe it was overstepping my bounds to say it, maybe he didn’t want to have to deal with Oliver in general. Maybe he didn’t feel about Oliver the way I felt about Bruce, maybe it wasn’t returned. Still. I had to try. “...Y’know, maybe he’ll want to know. That you’re alive. Might come as a relief.”

“Wanna put money on it?” He was half-laughing and half-scoffing. I could hear the harsh smile filtering his words. I did the same thing sometimes. “Two-hundred-and-fifty grand says that he’ll say ‘Roy who?’ if you told him I was alive. Two hundred dollar bonus if he isn’t even around and you have to leave a message.”
My brows lifted. Damn. No Oliver, then. “...Anybody over there you’d rather get a message out to then?”

There was a long silence on the other end, and then a short, defeated sigh. “Diggle. John Diggle. Works security over there. And I suppose you can tell Dinah. She can tell Oliver if she must. But if the Queen Industries jet shows up at Gotham International, then I’m out.”

……………………………………………

“Roy Harper?” Dick sat backwards on a chair, his hair disheveled and even in just a wife beater and jeans, he still seemed to be the leader of this team. Of every team. “I haven’t seen him in years… When he disappeared, Dinah showed up at the Tower in a state...Don’t think I’ve ever seen her like that.”

“Him and his daughter, Lian, are at my place,” I crossed my arms over my chest, looking from Dick to Tim, and then to Barbara at the back of the room, wheelchair by her keyboards. The big blue holographic screens washed blue lights over us. We were in one of the lower computer labs. “Talia was using him to pin the Luthor assassination on me, holding his little girl as leverage. And he really doesn’t want us to contact Oliver about him being alive.”

“Talia,” Tim spat the name, his metal hand tapping fingers against each other. He sighed. “But if she’s contacting Roy with instructions, then we can use that to find her. How is she contacting him?”

“He says that he’ll wake up and find Lian gone, even if she was sleeping in his arms.” I said, my lips twisting. I could relate to waking up to find the most precious person gone. “He gets a phone call shortly after, different number each time. They meet somewhere dark, he receives his instructions, and the understanding is that if he doesn’t comply, they’ll kill Lian.”

Barbara put her hand over her mouth, her hair fighting its way out of her bun. She took off her glasses, cleaning them on the edge of her shirt. “Well, it’s the best lead on Talia we’ve had in a year.”

“And I don’t think we’re gonna get another one,” Dick said, “I hate using a family for business, but…”

“He said he was willing to do whatever necessary to put Talia’s head on a pike,” I shrugged. “We
could use another set of hands on this job. He can stick with me.”

“Does he have a suit?” Tim asked, the blue of the screens shining off the finer threads of his business suit. When I nodded, he said, “Good...Moving forward, one thing we could do is try to induce an assignment.”

I hummed in agreement, and pushed my thumb against my lip. “Try to produce a possible situation where the League might want Roy to go in. Maybe we could plant a chip on Lian?”

“Would Roy allow that kind of thing?” Barbara’s eyebrows were together and I could tell just from how she asked the question that she wasn’t a fan of the idea.

Dick shook his head. “I don’t see how.”

“I can pitch the idea to him,” I offered, and my stomach clenched. I didn’t much like the idea of the League searching Lian for trackers, or coming into my firehouse to kidnap her. “The League knows that the firehouse is where I live...if they come for Lian, the only hope we have of protecting her is capturing the kidnappers, learning where they plan to take her, and taking their places.”

“For now, that’s the plan we’ll use, then.” Dick said, getting up from the chair. He asked, a half-smile curling his face, “How’s your Arabic?”

I smirked, and shot back a couple of words that translated roughly to ‘better than yours’. But in truth, I was rusty, and there was no argument that I’d need to brush up. “With all the practice I’ve been getting fighting ninjas, I should fit right in...There is one problem, though.”

“What’s that?” Tim glanced sideways at me.

“There’s no way in hell that we’re involving his daughter in a plan without Roy going in with me,” It was the plain truth, and I wouldn’t want to ask Roy to stay home. To put his daughter’s life in my hands. “He’d sooner kill me than let me to use his daughter as bait.”

“We don’t have much time - Luthor leaves Gotham soon,” Barbara rubbed her palms against her thighs, a nervous habit. She kept trying not to look at Dick. “Teach Roy as much as you can, and involve him in the planning.” I nodded, and she clapped her hands together. “Alright. Till then, we have to keep pressing where we can.”
“I'll see what the GCPD knows about Lex’s security measures when he does speeches.” Dick said.

Tim adjusted his cuffs. “Wayne Enterprises is deflecting another of Luthor’s attempts to secure the Applied Science division this week. I'll use that to figure out just how much Lex knows about the League. For all we know, they're working together.”

“Even if they'd be stooping, asking that geek for help,” I joked, and cracked my neck.

“Good luck, boys,” Barbara said as the three of us ex-Robins got ready to leave, but before Tim could get on the lift, she called him back.

I caught her eye and I knew. She was going to tell him about what happened with her and Dick.

And then Grayson had to be the good guy. “We’ll wait for you, Tim. It's a long way back up for the elevator.”

“Thanks, man,” Tim’s smile was genuine, but I could see the fuse about to ignite.

I took Dick down the hall from the lab, checking over my shoulder. There were about fifteen paces between the door to the lab and where we were by the lift. I tilted my head back, letting the light burn my eyes to clarity.

“What's wrong?” A corner of Dick’s mouth curled up. “What're you covering today in English class with Mr. Z. Hombie?” He laughed, “I still can't believe you took that damn alias.”

“Not the stupidest thing I've done,” I glanced over my shoulder at the door to the labs. No Tim. “...I've got senior literature to teach today. Covering Othello.”

“Yeah?” Dick ran his fingers through his hair. “Isn't that the one about the mercenary who thought his girl was screwing someone el-”

“-You son of a bitch!” The snarl echoed off the walls, and Tim had his sport coat off as he power-
walked down the hall. His cheeks flushed red, his arms flexed, and Barbara was frantically pumping at the wheels of her chair calling his name.

“Tim?” Dick sounded worried, but any concern he might have had was gone when Tim reared his metal fist back.

I slid between them, deflecting the punch with my forearm. The metal fist nailed a chunk of the wall, the rubble clattering to the ground. I had both of my hands on Tim's chest as he tried to swing around me at Dick, who was pinned between my back and the lift.

Tim muttered curses under his breath, and Barbara tugged at his waist as I tried to get his attention. “Whoah, Tim, back it up, what are you trying to do, huh?”

“Tim, what's going on?” Dick demanded, raising his voice. “Why are you trying to hit me? Barbara, what'd you say to him?”

“Don't talk to her, you backstabbing-” Tim shoved me back with his next lunge, and this time his fist flew true, knuckles rapping Dick’s cheek.

Dick recoiled and I managed to wrangle Tim backward. “Man, you better relax while I have time to deal with you. What the hell is going on?”

I knew the answer. I knew Barbara would play along like I had no clue. It was better if I didn't. Tim seethed, his eyes on Dick as he responded to my question. “...They've been having an affair.”

“Not an affair,” Barbara was irate, her eyes shining and her hair a mess. “And it wasn't like that. We just kissed, that's it. A year ago. Nothing since and in a moment where it could have been the last time I saw any of you.”

“Barbara, no…” Dick whispered over my shoulder, and I glanced at him. He held his bleeding cheek, a hand braced against the wall. His eyes met hers, and I saw a sigh leave him. Although if it was relief or defeat, I couldn't tell.

“Then why?” Tim whirled around and glared at her. He didn't seem to have heard Dick. “He left. All those years back, he left and I was there to pick up the pieces.” He jabbed a finger into his chest, “Me. You told me you were in love with me before Joker shot you. You told me you wanted to be
together. He was gone when you were recovering, and you know who never left your side? You
know who always had the shred of hope that you'd walk again, even if you didn't see it yourself?
You know who still keeps an eye on spinal research so when a possible operation comes up, it might
be a viable option to give you back your cape? Me.”

It felt like my back had fused with the wall behind me, and I was a wallflower. I was a witness. Not
a participant. But when I saw the first tears roll down Barbara’s cheeks, I couldn't stand by. I
unhitched from just watching, and moved to stand by her side, slightly in front of her.

“Tim, I didn't do it to hurt you.” She choked out.

“You kissed him,” Tim said, and looked from her to Dick. “Didn't kiss me.”

Something in me reached for Tim as I stood with my arms to my sides. He was as young as I was
when I was broken. And physical torture rendered the same expression that was on his face right
now. Anger, hurt, betrayal.

“Tim, you're my brother,” Dick tried to step towards him, but Tim's stare made him rethink it. He
held his hands out, “Tim, you know I wouldn't hurt you. I didn't do it to spite you and neither did
Barbara. It was a…” His eyes darted to her for a moment. “Brother, you've known all the time
you've been in the family how I feel about Barbara. I stepped aside when I came home from being
with the Titans. I moved on.”

“Don't lie to me,” Tim's voice was quiet, a reed vibrating with rage. “It's clear you haven't moved
on…” He shook his head in disgust. “Or was Kori a rebound girl?”

Dick flinched, but he didn't reply with shame. He did with anger, and I slipped around Dick to hold
them apart. Grayson was making it hard as he growled at Tim, “Are you kidding me, Tim? A
‘rebound girl’, how dare you!”

Tim shouted back, “Don't try to tell me you didn't just let me be with Barbara. You knew how I felt,
every damn day I looked at her and I knew it wasn't me she was thinking about-”

“-maybe it's because you can't take a goddamn hint!” Dick fired, and that's when I'd had about
enough. I wasn't alone.
Barbara reached under the footbar of her chair for escrima sticks, screwing them into a staff. Tears on her cheeks and her nose pink, she whacked both of them in the ribs. "That's enough!"

I forced them apart, and glared from one to the other. "I agree, that is e-fucking-nough. I half-decently like you people, and I'm about to say this out of love, but I'm running so damn late right now thanks to you two punks, working a stupid job because y'all didn't like me having blood money sitting around and kept secrets from me. So I think I'm entitled to be a little pissed right now." I pointed a finger at both Tim and Dick. "You two ratchet-jawing fucks better count your damn blessings you've got people. I had a somebody but the damn mission took her away. And I know you must be tired of hearing me bitch about it-"

Dick opened his mouth to protest, but I cut him off. "You got to say your piece, lemme say mine. You should've opened your mouth and said something, or just not left in the first place because the old man looked over your shoulder. I understand wanting to get out of someone's shadow, being your own man, but what are you, three? 'Oh, Dad's not giving me my independence, so I'm gonna go on a two year galactic expedition with a bunch of hyperactive teenagers to fight parademons and screw the first woman I see.' Not your best plan, Grayson."

Just when I caught Tim looking smug, I turned my sights on him. "Before you bust a nut smirking over there, Richard's got a point. Take a hint. I'm saying this as a guy that can't take one himself, so I can recognize the symptoms. If the girl is off and on with you for five years? Dude, she's just not that into you. She called it off because the mission's important, and y'know, she's not wrong. It is kind of important that we worry more about what's going on out there where people are in danger," I jerked my chin to the windows at the end of the hall. "And less about whether or not you're gonna be fat and lonely come Valentine's Day."

I turned to Barbara next, and I sighed. I wanted to brush her tears away, maybe scoop her up, call in sick for work, and hold her into the next millennium. But there was a lesson here for her too. "Barb, you can't keep two men in your back pocket. It isn't fair to either of them, and only creates fights like this. You have to make a decision and stick to it. If you don't, it won't be me that inevitably tears the family apart. Got me?"

She nodded, and wiped her cheeks. She sniffed, and looked across the room at them. I scanned their faces, all three. "Can this therapy session be done now? Can you guys keep it together until I get back? Or do I have to force a timeout?"

"We're fine," Tim cleared his throat and straightened his waistcoat. "I don't want either of you asking me for a single damn thing." He stepped forward and pushed the doors open for the staircase.

Dick frowned after him, and caught Barbara's gaze for a second before he turned for the lift. "I'll see you guys later."
He saw me stay where I was by Barbara, and he pulled the cage closed, pushed the button, and the lift began to descend.

When he was out of sight, I heard Barbara’s voice beside me. “...They're never going to forgive me, are they?”

“I don't think Dick will hold it against you for telling the truth. At all. I’d worry about Starfire, though. Tim? I...think it's gonna take time.” I rubbed my forehead before I crouched in front of her. I clasped my hands around hers, and told her something I’d only ever confessed in daydreams, in a voice I hadn't used since I was sixteen. “...Do you know what's funny? If I hadn't been kidnapped by Joker, I'd probably be taking them both on for the chance to be with you. The guy I used to be, the...whole, bright kid that smiled more, would've fallen in love with you too.”

Barbara flashed a begrudging smile on her face, and she smacked my forearm. She shook her head. A silent laugh spread her lips, “I hate it when you do that.”

“Make you laugh when you don't want to?” She nodded, and I smiled as she turned to roll her wheelchair back up the hall. “Isn't that what big brothers do?”

“Have a good day at work, Jay.”

I heard the lift coming back up, and I watched her disappear into the lab. I knew that this wasn't her smartest move, and it wasn't fair to Tim or Dick. But she still deserved a break from it all, same as any of us. To be cut some slack.

Compared to what was coming, this was going to feel like a cakewalk. If what Talia said was true, and if she wasn't lying about what she did with the memories she took from me, it was going to get a lot worse.

It was going to be a nightmare.
Wish You'd Hold Me

“I wish you'd hold me when I turn my back
The less I give, the more I get back
Oh, your hands can heal, your hands can bruise
I don't have a choice, but I still choose you”

- The Civil Wars, “Poison and Wine”

MIDNIGHT

We were all asleep when the firehouse got even more crowded. It was a week after the fallout in the family. I swayed in the hammock, while Roy slept on the floor by his daughter, who took the bed nestled into a mattress I’d stolen for her. But when I heard a car stop outside the engine bay, yanking me from sleep, my hand was already on my gun and I was out of the dorms by the time Roy groggily sat up. He reached under Lian’s bed for his bow and followed me down the staircase with a yawn, the paint chips stuck to our bare feet at the bottom.

The hole in the engine bay that Tim still owed me a fix job for allowed in a chilling breeze that made Roy shiver next to me. But I smacked his arm to be quiet as I listened to the footsteps. I squinted into the dark, and when they reached the door, they didn’t halt like any burglar or arson might when they found it locked. The metal knocking of a key into the lock had me straighten from my stance.

When a toned, pale man with black hair and blue eyes rounded the door, I almost unloaded it on him. But then I saw the smile lines on either side of a frowning mouth and realized it wasn’t the old man.

“Dick?” I shook my head, and Roy stiffened beside me. “What’re you doing here?”

Dick Grayson shifted a duffel higher on his shoulder, and sighed. “Kori threw me out. Literally. Didn’t feel right sleeping in the Clocktower, so...I figured this was neutral territory.” He glanced at the ginger at my side, and waved. “Hey Roy.”

“Nightwing,” Roy muttered, and my eyes flashed over to him at the code name. Dick looked even more uncomfortable. The archer turned and went back up the stairs. “Checking on Lian and then heading back to bed. Night, Jay.”
“Night…”

I put the safety on my gun and tucked it into the waistband of my lounge pants. I crossed my arms, and began the interrogation, my eyes feeling sticky with sleep. “Kori threw you out?”

“Yeah.” Dick clutched the strap of his duffel with white hands, white knuckles. “Broke up with me. Said that betrayal on her world is met with an execution and I was being let off easy.” He glanced up at me, and then reached into his back pocket for his wallet. “Listen, if rent’s going to be a problem, I can compensate you for what I use and-”

I took the wallet from him mid-sentence, and chucked it across the engine bay. “Don’t want your money.” I scrubbed a hand down my face, and felt the stubble pick at my palm. “You’re my brother. My couch is technically half yours, anyway. Joint custody, I believe you put it...You’re always welcome here.”

Dick forced a smile, which signalled to me that he really was out of it. He nodded, and started to walk past me to go upstairs, but my hand went to his forearm to stop him. He glanced sideways at me, and I remembered the morning after she learned I was the Arkham Knight. I remembered what he said when he came by, how he called me ‘Jaybird’ and how tight he hugged me - a time when I’d forgotten what a hug felt like.

His eyes were darker up close, and so were the hollows beneath them. He hadn’t taken a bus or flown here from Bludhaven. He drove. He kept himself awake, and he was so tired. I remembered thinking, that morning over a year ago, that while I couldn’t hide my fatigue, he hid his perfectly, but right now, it was written all over his face.

“If you go to bed right now, are you really going to sleep?”

He pressed his lips together at my question, and then he shook his head.

I checked the roof of the engine bay to make sure the vent at the very apex of the ceiling was open, and it was. I held up a finger for him to wait. I went to grab the rusted barrel I used for quenching forged metal, and dragged it to just under that vent. I had newspaper and wood stacked in the corner to make fires, and I’d been on the street enough as a kid to know how to make a quick hobo fire.

I grabbed a couple of lawn chairs and put them to one side of the fire. When I looked back to Dick, I
saw his cheeks red and the fire played off his eyes as they welled with tears. I’d forgotten how to do my impression of his million watt grin, but I did my best.

“Wanna get shitfaced and talk about girls?”

3 AM

“And then,” Dick’s bare feet slipped out of his shoes to warm themselves as he lifted them, giggling with the red cup in his hand. “Barb puts her feet out on either side of her cycle, right? I’m holding on for dear life, and she just cranks back the throttle so hard, I thought I was gonna lose my lunch right on her cape.”

“Jesus,” I sipped from my cup around my smile, sitting sideways in my chair with a leg over the other arm. I took one of Roy’s spare arrows and stoked the fire, “You two were somethin’ else.”

“What about you and Abigail, huh?” Dick was drunk, but I was just reaching the buzzed zone, and it still hurt to hear her name.

“What about us?” I sat up in the chair, and stretched out my arms, felt my shoulders click. I shot back the rest of my cup and refilled it with whiskey from the bottle at my feet.

“You know what…” He said, nudging me with his elbow. “...Year ago, I’d helped you through the...raw period, but you didn’t actually talk about her, y’know? You never really talked, just drank and slept. I understood what she meant t’you, always did, but I never heard from your p’ective. And it isn’t like you’re playing the field.”

I shrugged, and rubbed the back of my neck. I drank my alcohol, all of that liquid courage nonsense running through the back of my mind. And maybe it was courage that led me to finally concede. “W-Well, y’know those novels that Alfred had us read when we were Robins? Those Austen novels and the books by the Bronte sisters?”

“She was like those…” I hummed, and tilted my head back. I watched the smoke swirl higher and higher until it escaped through the vent. “That first morning you picked me up from her place, I was already convincin’ myself that I shouldn’t be her friend, her anything really. And every time I’d need to talk to her or I’d run into her, or she’d run into me…it was like that. The whole time we were apart, I was dead-set on never seeing her again and really being somewhat okay with that. Because we barely knew each other, y’know?”

“Yeah, man…” Dick searched my face as I spoke, listened to me with a big smile on his face. He loved this, even if he might not remember it in the morning.

“But when I did see her…” I shook my head, and whistled. I could see a little strip of sky through the vent, the stars. “…I completely forgot whatever excuse I made, and just... was , with her. Half of the time I didn’t know what to say or what to do, and I almost always did it wrong, whatever I decided might be right. And I got to know her, and Jesus Christ, I...After she found out who I’d been, who I still sort of was, and she left? I realized I didn’t like goodbyes much if I was saying goodbye to her.”

“Jason…” Dick said it so softly that I turned my eyes to him, and when I did, the tear slipped out to roll down my cheek. He reached out and swiped it away. He smiled again. “I’m not hurtin’ alone, am I?”

“Hell no,” I sniffed, and rose my cup in a toast. “Women.”

“Women.” He tapped his cup against mine, and this time, the whiskey tasted bitter instead of warm. He put his cup on the ground, and then drew his arms back into his hoodie out of his sleeves. He wrapped them around himself, and then asked me, “…She ever know how you feel?”

“Sort of…” I croaked, and cleared my throat. It took a few tries before I could speak again. “…I didn’t say it in person, I...wrote it down. I wrote her a letter. Something she’d find if I ever...died, or if the fight with Falcone finished up. When I wrote it, it was just after she’d fallen asleep on me. We were laying in the room upstairs that has all of her records, and I was sitting up, her head on my lap. She fell asleep and I started composing this letter in my head. Wrote it out later. Told her I wanted to be a…” I sighed, a shaky crooked sound. “…I wanted to be a better man for her, Dick. A better person. How did I put it? It went something like…’ If I’m half the man that deserves you when I finally die, it’ll be worth it.’”

He pushed his arms into his sleeves, his hand clasped around my shoulder, and he stood. He tugged me out of my seat and wrapped his arms around me as tight as that first time. But I didn’t hug him back. I tried to push him off, sniffing, and protesting. “H-Hello, no, no, I’m sorry. I did this for you,
you’re the one who just got dumped. I’m here bitching about a girl I didn’t even date, and shit, I’m such a fucking asshole. I’m sorry, man—"

"-shut up and hug me,” He ordered, and only closed his grip on me. “Maybe I need one too.”

Something buzzed in the back of my mind, something she said about my honesty about my feelings only coming when no one can watch my face. I curled my fists in his shirt, and asked him, “...Do you love Barbara?”

He pulled back, his arms still around me, to look at me with eyes full of questions. I repeated mine, shaking him in an attempt to dislodge some answers. Dick’s hair fell in his eyes as he said, his chin tucked. “I’ve loved her since I was thirteen, Jay.”

Over a decade. He’d loved her for over a decade, from afar. I nodded, staring at him hard. “Then love her.”

“But Tim…” Dick sighed, pushing his palm against his eye. “Jason, I hate that I hurt them both. I don’t regret kissing Barbara, Lord knows I don’t, but…”

“You wish it hadn’t happened like it did.” I turned and collapsed back into the lawn chair. He stayed standing. “Sure, she waited a year to do it, but...the truth was eating Babs alive. She couldn’t hold that in for much longer, even I could see it. Alfred was worried about her too. He told me that she forgets to eat sometimes...Dick, she forgets to eat.”

Dick lowered into his chair and put his head in his hands. A memory floated to the top of my inebriated mind. His car parked here, us in the front seats, his head against the steering wheel. He was beating himself up over not believing in Bruce. I wouldn’t let him do it then, and I won’t let him do it now.

“It’s not your fault…” I poured myself another glass of whiskey and shot it back, the alcohol warming its way to my stomach. “...Girl’s been through a lot. Remember those first few months I rejoined the family? She called me every morning to check on me, but the truth? She was scared that I was going to disappear again, she told me so. She thought I was a dream, that I was still dead and one day she’d wake up and I’d be gone. Dead or disappeared.” I leaned forward and pulled his hands away, until I saw the blue eyes. “She cares. She fights, she cares, and she saves us all…But when her heart’s involved, her first instinct is to analyze and overthink. And that isn’t always the best way to do it.”
I shrugged, and refilled his glass too. “You want my advice? Wait it out a month, and then go see her. Be honest and clear. It’s going to be okay.”

“And if it isn’t?” I saw that one coming. You’re nothing if not consistent, Grayson.

“There’s always eHarmony.”

That earned me the laugh I’d been waiting for all night.

………………………………………………………………………………

3 AM - SOMEWHERE ELSE

“Master Timothy?”

Alfred’s voice reverberated in the small apartment as he shut the door behind him. The dim stove light was the only illumination, and something told the old butler that the walls hadn’t seen the sun in days. Four coats hung over the back of the couch as he moved past the kitchenette, the coffee table drowned in a swamp of papers, towers of books, and a map of Gotham was pinned to the bare wall in front of it, red threads connecting dots across the districts.

It wasn’t until he moved closer to the couch that he found Tim at last. Bare-chested and wearing only a pair of Gotham U sweats, Tim was draped across the cushions face-down. He snored softly into the corner of the armrest, his hair was messy from the growth and because it looked like he hadn’t combed it in days. Alfred sighed, relief washing over him. He put the slow cooker meal he had brought over on the kitchen counter; he had a feeling Tim wasn’t taking care of himself after the fallout between he and Richard. His instincts, as they had been with all the Robins, Barbara and Bruce, weren’t wrong.

“Let’s go, Master Timothy…” He muttered as he sat on the edge of the couch, using the metal hand as an anchor around his shoulder. The butler was not the youngest of gentlemen, but he still held the muscles of his prime. He hoisted Tim to standing gently, all the care of a father coaxing his son into bed.

The young man stiffened as he was righted, and he mumbled, blinking into the darkness. “Alfred?”
“When was the last time you got sleep?” Alfred asked, a scolding note in his voice but one of affection, same as if any of the others were in Tim’s position.

“’proximately, ten seconds ago.”

“Timothy Jackson Drake, I am perfectly serious. You were drooling, your living quarters look a mess,” Alfred’s nose wrinkled, leading the stumbling boy into his bedroom across the way. “And your personal hygiene leaves something to be desired.”

“Sorry…” He coughed, turning his head away. “Before that nap, I hadn’t gotten sleep in fifty hours.”

“Is it safe to assume that this has something to do with Miss Gordon?” Alfred hated to inquire, and rather was disappointed in himself that he hadn’t been present to quell the discord. “Master Timothy, I have never seen you in such a state and to be frank, it worries me, sir.”

Tim managed to gain his footing, and unwrapped his arm from the butler’s shoulders. He stood, bracing a hand against his bedroom door. He kept his eyes on the floor. “I’m alright...I am. Really. Wasn’t like I hadn’t seen this coming. I always...knew, you know?”

He rose his gaze to Alfred’s, his dark circles hollowed. “Like when you know something bad’s going to happen, deep in your gut and you go on like nothing’s wrong. You try to convince yourself every time you wake up and every time you go to sleep that it’s going to work out, that the girl you’ve been thinking about for years is thinking about you too. But inside, where you know so much better than to ignore coincidence and instinct, you know that the unpleasant thing is true. And you prepare yourself to deal with it after a while. You prepare for everything, really…”

Alfred understood. He understood perfectly. He had a similar feeling when Bruce first told him about what he wanted to do with his family’s fortune and what exactly they were going to do with the caves beneath Wayne Manor.

“Is that what...all this is?” Alfred swept his arm to indicate the books, papers, and the annotated map. “Preparation?”

“Some of it, yes,” Tim admitted. “Most of it is just work. Burying myself in it helps. Keeps me distracted.”
Alfred sighed with a huff and moved to the piles. He stripped off his coat and added it to the collection on the back of the couch. He rolled up his sleeves, and produced his reading glasses from his breast pocket.

“What are you doing?”

“Keeping an eye on you, and keeping you company. I brought you food.”

“How?” Tim didn’t ask it like an accusation, but with more genuine curiosity. He was rubbing the back of his neck when Alfred glanced at him with a flat look.

“You’re acting far too much like Master Bruce.”

I pulled the chain curtain back on the lift and stepped into Barbara’s personal living space in the Clocktower. It was midday, right after my morning English class, and autumn showers were introducing a level of damp cold that Gotham hadn’t seen in over a year. I shook the rain out of my hair, and when the quiet finally got to me, I called out for her.

“Barb?” No answer. “Barbara?”

As with pretty much every other room in the top four floors of the Clocktower, there was a computer in the corner. On the screen was a paused video from the news and the headline made me roll my eyes.

**LEX LUTHOR PLACES BOUNTY ON RED HOOD’S CAPTURE**

“How.” I didn’t bother to wait for the price on my head. Didn’t matter what it was- it’d be too cheap.

I reached out to shut off the monitor so it wouldn’t be kept burning there. I called her name again to no answer, but it wasn’t until I rounded the corner and came to her bedroom that I heard it. Harsh
sniffs, watery coughs, and sounds I hadn’t heard Barbara make in a long time.

Her back was to me when I entered her bedroom, and the headphones over her ears were probably why she didn’t hear me. Her wheelchair sat by her bed, her hair damp, and she had her blanket tugged tightly around herself like a cocoon. A bundle to keep her warm and safe.

I shrugged off my raincoat and hung it on the back of her wheelchair. I closed the bedroom door. I knew she liked to be enclosed, protected by walls and shut doors and latched windows. It’s the only thing that unwound the spring between her shoulders, the one she kept ready in case someone might once again come to her door with a gun.

Her sobs ate at me, the noises she was making were the kind that only came from nightmares and heartache. I understood the type. It wasn’t just Dick, it wasn’t just Tim. Barbara hurt just as badly as the other two, if not more. There was no fallback plan for ruined relationships, not at first.

I sat on the edge of her bed, and she jumped, her hand under her pillow, but when she saw it was me, she froze. No glasses. Her tears glittered on her cheeks, and she flushed, ashamed. I frowned, and met her eyes. She took off the headphones. Nothing had been playing on them. Maybe she wanted the silence.

After a minute of stiff limbs and looking at me without barriers, she groaned a weak noise and crawled her way to me. I shifted closer, and put my arms around her, a hand rubbing her back and the other holding her shoulder. She tangled her fingers in my shirt, and she cried even harder.

I remembered the first time I saw Barbara cry. The sheer frustration of a failed mission can bring out the emotions you never thought could be reached, or amplified. The cool, level-headed Batgirl that helped train me reduced to angry tears and a utility belt chucked across the floor. I remembered how she paced in circles; walking had always helped in those days, until eventually she fell to her knees and I walked up to her.

I had asked her if she wanted to go for a run, promised her that I’d buy us hot dogs. Suggested that maybe we could catch that new horror flick and make fun of the teenagers that made the stupid choices, ran towards the danger, and ended up dead or deranged. And in the subtext, we promised to ignore how autobiographical those horror flicks were with us. And not to tell Bruce a word. I remembered how she smiled through the tears. Running had always helped her not to think, as did movies and food.

But now, she couldn’t run. She didn’t have time for movies, and I knew food would make her sick.
All I had to make her feel better was me.

I breathed in that crisp smell of her hair, kissed her forehead. I let her go to stand, and scooped her up, blanket and all. I cradled her against my chest as I carried her to the living room.

“Jason,” She croaked, “What are you doing?”

“My job.”

I laid her down on the couch, and positioned the ottoman under her feet. I grabbed the remote and sat next to her. She snuggled into the blanket as I flipped through Netflix to the horror category. Technically, the account was Alfred’s, because the man was a sucker for a good period drama, but we all used it.

Barbara poked my elbow with a blanket paw. “Jay, my glasses…”

She slid them onto her face once I fetched them, and then scooted over once I sat back down. Her fingers wedged under my arm until I lifted it, and she settled into my side, her head on my chest. This wasn’t like with Gail. There was no fluttering in my ribcage, no hot skin, and her hand snaking down my forearm to hold mine. No distraction in wondering if she was as nervous as I was, or if she was at home with me as I was with her.

Watching shitty horror movies with Barbara was as natural as water. She just laid against me, her hands tucked under her arms, one of my own draped over her shoulders. Nothing but shared company. Which was probably what we needed the most right now. Something familiar. Something simple. No unnecessary complications. No calculations either.

After a while, and about halfway through the snooze fest that was Evil Dead 2, Barbara’s eyes closed and she fell asleep. I watched her chest rise and fall, her glasses askew as her face rested on me. I shifted her, slow and careful, and took her glasses off. I folded them up and set them next to me.

Somewhere between the end of the movie that came on next, one of the shittier Saw movies that was an insult to professional murderers like myself, and falling asleep, I came to a conclusion that had been eluding me for a while. Before I ever bled out in a parking garage, I had something already that I would have been completely content to have for the rest of my life: a family.
If I'd never have met the one person that ever made me want to hang up the hood, being with my family would have been enough. It's broken up right now, and everything's raw, but I guess it's when things fall apart that you realize what you had when everything held together. Barbara, my sister. Dick and Tim, my brothers. Even Alfred and if he'd have me, the old man.

I was okay before the heartbreak. I'll be okay again someday. I thought about what will be possible as I began to doze off, my eyes half-lidded as I listened to Babs breathe.

One day, the sunshine won't feel so cold. I'll be able to drive through Otisburg at a reasonable speed, and I won't be so eager to leave. I'll look Harvey Bullock in the eyes again. I'll stop visiting the cemetery, stop taking naps with my back against my epitaph or staring across the way to her mother's headstone.

I'll stop smoking, once and for all, and drinking, something that started when she left. Maybe when I put my mouth to the lips of the bottle, I won't cut myself on the sharp daydream of what hers might feel like. Someday it won't hurt to say her name. It won't hurt to think about her at all. I'll be able to look back, somewhere down the line - maybe when I'm gray, and see her for what she really was: the person I needed to heal, to teach me how to heal others, and the very best friend I ever had.

Someday, I'd go to Metropolis and see her again. From afar, just close enough to see her hair shine or hear her laugh. And that would be enough for me to go to my grave without any regrets about love.
Counting Sheep

“I'm having trouble trying to sleep
I'm counting sheep but running out
As time ticks by
And still I try
No rest for crosstops in my mind”

- Green Day, “Brain Stew”

............................................................

ONE WEEK LATER

It was a Sunday when Lex Luthor finally entered Gotham City, and it was almost the reverse of Fear Halloween. Instead of mass evacuation swelling the streets, it was protestors and that meant Dick had to assist the GCPD with crowd control.

I watched him get ready, leaning against the doorframe as he fastened his bulletproof vest. He knew I was there, but focused on the task at hand, and for once, he wasn’t smiling. Many cops didn’t like this part of the job, if they didn’t outright hate it. Dick was no different. I knew it was the looting that really bothered him; the people that took advantage of the chaos to break into stores, vandalize buildings and cars, and sometimes, lives were stolen along with the peace of mind.

I watched him button his uniform and arm his duty belt. Watched him holster a gun, two sets of cuffs and a handful of my strongest zipties, mace spray, taser, a flashlight, and a pouch strapped to his hip with first aid equipment. In Gotham, there’s a fine line between protest and riots, and when enough people crossed that line, it was impossible to tell there’d been one in the first place. I offered to go with him, to park my car near the protests in case things got hairy, but Dick reminded me that half the police force had seen my face. If someone recognized me, it wouldn’t be the protestors in handcuffs.

It was always in the back of my mind when I thought about Dick as a cop. My big brother, who knew eleven different ways to break someone’s arm, could be picked off on his day job by some no-name thug with a gun, or stabbed with a knife and die bleeding out. Everytime he shined his badge and went out the door, he took the same chance he did when he dove off rooftops as Nightwing.

Sure, I disrespected the law on a daily basis by being a murdering vigilante, but I got that. I understood that risk, and I hated it all the same. It’s easy to threaten a cop if you haven’t got family
on the force. Supercriminals were easy. Having to sit at home out of uniform when your brother’s in harm’s way downtown, in the heart of a potential riot, that’s hard.

So when he left with a smile after I told him to be careful, I got to work cleaning my guns downstairs. I knew the cleaner fumes wouldn’t be kosher for Lian to inhale, and she had a mid-morning nap that went smoothly. Roy came down to the engine bay with me while she slept, sharpening arrows and shooting the shit with me in hushed tones. He still wouldn’t tell me what his beef with Dick was, but there was plenty of time to find out.

Lunch came, and when Lian woke up, she was adamant to have her lunch protocols observed. Spongebob played on the small twenty-two inch TV monitor I installed on top of the microwave, Lian in her high chair with her father’s black bean hummus in a bowl with carrot sticks, celery and pita chips, and no bib. Because bibs were the devil, apparently. Roy joked that the defiance over bibs and anything that resembled one came right from her mother.

About halfway through Spongebob, which I dutifully ignored in favor of inhaling a bowl of leftover pasta, I noticed Lian’s big eyes watching me over her pita chips. I smirked, and asked her, “Something wrong, little lady?”

She loved when I called her that, and her cheeks got even chubbier when she smiled. “Nooo…”

I exchanged a glance with Roy, who snorted into his cup of noodles. He slurped down the rest of the broth and then got up to throw the cup away. “I’m gonna go use the john, keep an eye on her for me, will you?”

This was the first time I’d be left alone with his daughter, and a moment’s hesitation hit me in the face about how much he trusted me. He trusted me with his daughter. Me. Mass-murdering psychopath. With his daughter, a breakable smoosh-ball. He trusted me with her. Okay, Todd. Chill. Be cool. Don’t fuck it up. It’s just for a few minutes. “Yeah, man. I got her.”

Roy waved a hand as he left the room, and as soon as he was gone, Spongebob was entirely ignored for favor of a staring contest. Lian dipped her carrot sticks in hummus, and sometimes missed her mouth because all of her attention was on me. I picked my fork through the reheated rigatoni, and winked at her as I chewed. Every rewarded cherub-cheeked grin was worth it.

“Want one?” She asked after a minute, and held out a pita chip slathered with hummus.
I lifted an eyebrow, and when I realized she was gonna cry if I didn’t, I leaned in and opened my mouth. She stretched her little arm out and pushed it inside. She giggled when I closed, kissing her fingertips. The hummus was good, and so was this.

“Can I ask some-fin’?” Her voice was soft, and she talked behind her hands, so careful. I could see the captivity on Lian, the times she’s had to ask the people keeping her from her daddy for things she should never have to ask for at three years old. But now, she asked for something I never thought possible. “…Can I call you my uncle Jay?”

“Your what?” Blood rushed to my cheek, and I recovered. “I mean, are you sure? I’m just...a friend of your dad’s.”

“Dad says that you’re a good guy,” Lian said, reciting Roy’s words with confidence. “And you’re really nice to me. I asked Dad what that means, what you call people like that, and he said that the best word is ‘uncle’.”

She didn’t struggle with the last syllable, but she did have an odd lilt that could only have been inherited from learning to speak from her mother. Roy told me that Cheshire was teaching Lian her native Vietnamese before she died, little words and phrases. I had no idea if Roy kept up with it.

“Sure…” I said at last. “Sure, little lady. I’m your uncle Jay.”

Lian reached out to me again, and patted her hand on the high chair after a few seconds. She held it out, and looked at me, all eyes and chubby cheeks. I watched a scarred hand stretch out to her, and she smacked her hand onto my palm, before she held my thumb. And then she didn’t let go, shoving more carrot sticks into the hummus to eat.

I continued eating as my eyes stung, and forced myself to stare at my pasta. Her grip on my thumb was insistent. Like a don’t you dare let go kind of insistence I only learned from the women in my life.

I heard the toilet flush and when Roy walked back in, saw her holding my hand, and caught my eye, I tried not to look at him.

“You and Jason holding hands, baby?” Roy was grinning, and leaned down to kiss her forehead. The girl yawned, her eyes getting the specific brand of sleepy that came after a meal.
“Uncle Jay, Daddy... Uncle Jay.” She corrected him, and I tried to pull my hand back but she only gripped tighter. She leaned over, and put her head on my rough knuckles, her soft eyelids closing. My scars looked so wrong against skin that young, and a weird flash of deja vu shivered down my spine.

“Looks like she doesn’t wanna let you go,” Roy said, and put his hands on the back of her chair. “You can put her to bed if you want.”

I swallowed hard when he said that and boy, did my heart pound. She’s a baby, so tiny and fragile and breakable and precious. Nevermind Roy, I liked this kid too much to risk anything. But when I looked up at Roy through my lashes with a pale face, his smile fell and he sighed.

“It’s easy, man.” Roy had me stand up, and hold my fingers like knife-hands. “Now poke out your thumbs.” I did. “Now slide your hands a few inches from under her armpits, and lift her gently until her head is on your shoulder, chest-to-chest.”

I have held live bombs set to explode seconds after I touched them. I have held bombs that did not detonate, expectant that they might explode anyways and take me with them. I have held wounds closed knowing that if I let up pressure for one second, my brothers would die with the blood. I have held Barbara to keep her together. I have held a woman that made me want nothing between us but music and air, made me think bombs would have been too subtle a way to die.

But dear God, I have never held anything so small. I bent, and thought about my form rather than the girl I was lifting. I thought about keeping my back straight, as if I was lifting something heavy and delicate. Lifting with my thighs. But when she opened her eyes and looked at me, I couldn’t try to cast my gaze over her head. She held me there, insistent upon being carried. Her thumb in her mouth, and her other, reaching to my face. I brought her in, cradled her to my chest, holding her back with one hand and supporting her with my other arm.

She touched my cheek, the branded one, and I watched as she traced the outline of the ‘J’ with her finger. She didn’t know what happened, she didn’t care. She cared about sleep, food, and her father. But she hung her head forward when the cheek didn’t keep her attention and I was thankful to let her rest on my shoulder, her face against my neck.

Roy led me to the dormitories, opening doors for me. After I laid her in the bed, cuddled up in a nest of blankets and pillows to ensure she didn’t fall off either side, I found my hands tucking her in before I knew what I was doing. I tucked the blankets around her, and my pinky finger brushed her hair.
Roy moved to the other side to kiss her nose, and bid her sweet dreams. I wanted to do the same, but my throat was dry. Roy said he was going to do calisthenics a couple of rooms over and asked if I wanted to join him.

I didn’t want to go. There was something in me that didn’t want to let her out of my sight, and I understood Roy completely in that moment.

I shook my head, and under my breath, admitted I wanted to stay with her. Roy repressed a laugh, managing to whisper over, “She’s got you wrapped around her finger.” He snorted. “Whipped.”

“Says the guy who asked me if I could fit a heater by her because she shivered in her sleep,” I whispered back, rolling my eyes as I fixed a chair at the end of her bed. “Yeah, I’m the whipped one here.”

And there I was, spread out and slouched in the chair with my head in my hand, watching her sleep. The light from the window, which peeked out as the cloudy day finally cleared up, crept across her and even that I stood to stop, closing the curtains so she could sleep in peace.

There was a daydream I had when someone else slept in that bed. The daydream was rare and brief, but I remembered it because when the image flashed across my mind, it was like her sun. The sun she burned images and words and her voice into my mind, bleached the thing white so that nothing else remained but her. The daydream was her, laying across that bed completely asleep as she had been so many times when she lived with me. Just sleeping, and then after a while, she woke up and looked at me. But instead of an idle smile, she kissed me. I would disappear, and we would become one thing.

And I knew it was an impossible dream, but here, looking at Lian, I couldn’t think of anything else. A dream my life was so, so far removed from coming true, with the nature of my work, and my need to finish the mission that Bruce gave up his life for. I was destined to follow that line. The way I was going, there were only two ways my life could end: at the end of a barrel in enemy hands, or when my body had given up on me altogether.

It was against the fuckwit’s interests, the fuckwit that threw a rope down the vent in the roof of my engine bay, whose feet I heard smack the concrete, that I was thinking about death to begin with. And that I was committed to keeping Lian asleep.

I reached under my chair for my gun, screwed on a silencer. Roy glided down the hall on the balls of his feet, bow in hand before he flattened against the wall to avoid thrown knives. They stuck to the door at the far end, Roy notching an arrow as I prepared to fire. I peeked out to the hall as Roy fired,
and saw the shadow shrink to the corner to dodge the arrow. A League ninja, their new sort with the knives and armored gauntlets, and trained to move without sound.

Roy covered me with more arrows as I charged the ninja and dug my shoulder into his chest, my hand clamped over his mouth over the headwrap. I pinned him to the wall with that hand, hammered the other into his gut. He thrashed, grunted under my fingers, but I muffled every noise he made. A flash of ginger hair came to my peripheral vision, and he replaced my hand, but the switch-off gave the ninja the opportunity. He nailed the crooked bridge of my nose hard with his forehead. I recoiled, stuck on the first syllable of a four-letter word as blood spurted onto my upper lip. Roy jammed his elbow into the guy’s mouth, blood soaking the headwrap and dripping onto the floor.

I pushed my nose back into place just in time to turn and see the ninja’s shins off the ground, his arms around Roy’s head. His legs wrapped around my neck, and I toppled backwards with the downforce. My shoulders hit the floor with a dull thud, and my head lashed back outside the dorms. His calf muscles cranked down on my neck, and I attempted to turn my head, but what I saw harrowed me with dread. Another ninja, with Lian in their arms.

“Roy, Lian!” I shouted, and almost immediately, Lian shot awake in the ninja’s grasp. A high wail pierced the room.

I never imagined Roy could scream like that, but he did and it gave me the extra bit of grit that I needed. I put the muzzle of my gun against the point where the ninja’s ankles lined up, and pulled the trigger. The bullet shattered the bones, and he released us. The ninja hastily moved to lift the window as Roy staggered to his feet with his bow, his eyes feral and his skin red. He struggled with the second ninja who had his daughter as I threw my gun aside, punched the newly paraplegic ninja again.

I scrambled back to the dorms, nailed the fucker in the jaw over Roy’s shoulder. Lian cried and squirmed in the ninja’s other arm, his hand on Roy’s armor to hold him back. I tried to stand on a bed, my hands reaching for her. The League ninja bent his arm to elbow my face and exploited the broken nose. I bowed back, just in time to see the ninja in the hall had my gun and pointed it at Roy. I rammed my shoulder into him, a white-hot pain ripped through my arm and I felt the bullet ricochet against bone. I hadn’t realized it hit the ninja in front of me until he slumped to the floor, and I hadn’t realized that Lian had slipped from his hands until Roy’s feet were disappearing through the window after her.

Through the pain, instinct pushed me out of the driver’s seat. Through the fog, I caught sight of Roy’s ginger hair just below the fire escape across the alley, and Lian’s pink shirt to his chest. He had her, but he couldn’t hold on forever and he certainly couldn’t fire a grappler line with one arm.

High on adrenaline, I searched just outside my window for the sturdy metal pipes that crawled up the
side of my firehouse and caught a firm hold. I stretched my leg to barely get a foothold on the top of
the fire escape, and I dug my nails into the pipe as I reached down for him. Another bullet went into
me, this time through my thigh. Blood was running down my chin from my rebroken nose. Roy
stared up at me with wide eyes, his face white as to what he was seeing.

“Give me Lian!” I ordered, my teeth stained. I put my other foot on a fire escape rail just by where
his hand was gripping for dear life.

He hesitated, like anyone would. Then, the hand he had on Lian slid to the knife he kept in the upper
limb on his bow. He hoisted her higher to stick it between his teeth. I reached for his face, and
knicked myself on the razor sharp edge as a third bullet lodged itself through my hand between the
bones. I groaned, my eyes watering and my body singing. I switched my grip, fingers slick with the
fresh cut as I lifted myself up and threw the knife at the ninja with my gun. The blade buried into his
eye, far enough to take the light from the other.

Only then did he heave Lian into my arms, and her shirt tinged red as her crying slowed down. Roy
kipped himself onto the fire escape. Dazed, I was about ready to give when he pulled me against the
railing, and helped me to safety. I couldn’t let Lian go, even as she smacked her hands at my face.

“Uncle Jay!” She coughed, mouth drooling as she sobbed. The alley began to spin, warmth on my
cheeks and neck. Her face lifted to Roy, and she begged him, panicked. “Daddy, help!”

“Hold onto him, Lian.” Those were the last words I heard before I slipped away, but I never let go of
the three-year-old in my arms. His voice, and Harper hands on my face.

I came to in the dorms, inhaling the smell of blood and antiseptic. Air chilled my skin, and I was
cold, despite a blanket thrown over me. Roy sat where I was in the chair, Lian fast asleep on his lap.
I blinked away the blurry lights and focused on them. He was unscathed, save for a few bruises on
his chest and jaw. She was spotless. The only indication her life had ever been in danger was dark
spots on her fresh shirt where she must have been crying.

My lips, chapped and cracked, pulled a frown. I hated the idea of that little girl worrying herself sick
over me, but the way Roy’s eyes shined under his lower lashes, she wasn’t the only one. Those
lower lashes fluttered, and Roy’s body came alert. He did his best not to jostle Lian as our eyes met,
and I tried to sit up, but my upper body, and my thigh - old and new wounds protesting - weren’t
having it.
“Don’t move…” Roy whispered, “I could only get two of the bullets out. The one in your thigh I couldn’t get…”

I tried not to think of the last time my thigh had been injured like that and I’d woken up in bloodstained sheets. “Don’t worry about it. Add it to the four other bullets I’m stuck with.”

Roy’s teeth gritted. “…Only one of them’s dead. The one that took my daughter is downstairs, tied to a chair with salt in the chest wound.”

“How the bullet didn’t kill him?”

“I was disappointed too,” He mused, his arm tightened around Lian. “His partner I took care of.”

I raised an eyebrow, smirking. “Yeah? Pieces or wholesale?”

His teeth were pink when he smiled, and I noticed his lower lip was split. “Pieces.” He nodded down to his daughter. “She insisted on guarding you while I did it, said you might get nightmares.”

“Aww,” I cooed, my eyes on the little nugget in his arms. I sighed after a moment, and then shifted my gaze to his. “...The minute I can walk, we’re interrogating that rotten piece of...” He shot me a stern look, his eyes darting to Lian, and I amended, grumbling. “...you know.”

“Yeah, I do.” Roy’s mouth curled into a sinister grin. “But I’m going first.”
A Hell of His Own

“The devil in hell we're told was chained
a thousand years he there remained
He neither complain nor did he groan
but was determined to start a hell of his own”
Johnny Cash, “Mean as Hell”

My mother's killer's name is heroin, and I've seen him a lot since, but in different disguises. I couldn't stand, and I now had five bullets buried in my bones that will never come out. I've got so much lead in me that I could become something shot out of a gun. While Roy dealt with a Lian-related activity called a potty break, I made a move to the trunk that held my last resort.

I threw the sheets back, my shot hand ached in its bandages, and I swung my legs over the edge of the bed. I teetered as I stood, like a too-tall skyscraper in high wind. I gritted my teeth hard enough to make me dizzy with ache, and struggled with every step to walk. I bargained every gait, from the bed frame to the next place I could lean against, and got good at it. Diplomacy’s a foil of war, and negotiations with my body to work with me was routine by now. Ever since the Asylum.

The stairs, contrary to what you might think, weren't that hard. I gripped the banister and let my feet down the stairs, leaning back to relieve some of the downward stress.

The engine bay was thick with sunlight peeping in from the door, the vent, but that wasn't my target. The dead ninja’s rope was now tied around the survivor. He hung over, blood dripping from his chin and still unconscious. He wasn't my target either.

I did the combination on the lock with slippery fingers, and the lid on the trunk was heavier than last time, before the Wayne Foundation gala. The Arkham Knight helmet was wrapped in three layers of bubble wrap in the corner of the trunk so I wouldn’t have to look at the cracks and think about how hard the old man punched sense into me.

The metal canister was cold to the touch, down here to freeze as October temperatures chilled the blood inside. I tore off the top, pulled out the syringes and rubber band for the tourniquet. One was empty. Five left. The Red Lantern bullets were in here too, the ones Tim promised me. Hate and healing in one compact space. I took a syringe, wrapped the rubber around my arm, and waited for a vein to pop out. Pinpointed needle scars compacted the other elbow, the thousands of times I needed
blood or the clown wanted to try out a new narcotic on me.

I didn’t care. I heard Roy calling my name upstairs, and I didn’t care. I put the needle in, felt the warm prick and pressed the plunger until it was all the way down. I heard him coming down the steps, and I didn’t care. My nerves and blood vessels lit on fire as the healing began, weeks of pain and irritation coming at me inside of a minute. I heard him stop halfway down the steps, call my name again, and I didn’t answer. I gasped, my forehead against the front of the workbench I kept the trunk under. I pulled the syringe out, tore an antiseptic pad to wipe over it. I put everything away, with jittery, nervous hands and it took me four tries to get the lock back on the trunk just in time for Roy’s heavy feet to smack the concrete floor of the engine bay.

“Jason?” His voice sounded urgent, and as I collapsed over onto the floor, shaking and sweating with the doctor drug in me. I flinched hard when he picked me up as best he could, shuffled an open lawn chair with his foot closer to drop me into it.

I tilted my head back, and one look at my eyes and he knew I’d taken something. He knew I was on something. My eyes were probably bloodshot. I felt his hands on the bullet wound on my thigh, and my skin almost closed on his finger. “Howdy.”

“The hell did you take?” Roy took two handfuls of my shirt, shook me. “What’d you take? Why are your wounds closing? How are you doing it?”

“Magic,” I cackled hoarsely, and swiped a rough hand down my face. I pushed myself out of the chair, my legs strong and my muscles vibrated with the aftershocks of the drug. When I started to pick at the bandages on my hand, Roy tried to swat my fingers away but I turned to miss him. “No, no, watch. Watch this.”

Roy’s cheeks pinched in that unsure, distrusting way as I unwrapped my hand. The bindings fell off, and I tossed them into a trash bin, flexed my hand. The bloody hole that had been there was gone, only a bullseye scar in the center of my palm. “See? All healed.”

“But how?” And then he asked the question. “Is it safe?”

I’d tried not to think about the research done into the drug, the research Deathstroke gave me in a little packet before he sold me the small supply in the trunk. I didn’t like to think about the price tag put on double-edged swords. Roy saw me hesitate and he stepped closer. I saw the anger behind the concern. “Jason, answer me. Is it safe? I’m going to call Barbara in three seconds if I don’t get an answer.”
“Alright, alright,” I caved. Barbara had already asked the question, and I shrugged it off, saying I’d never use it because I doubted the situation would get dire. Two doses in, and here we were. If she heard that I’d taken it, and that two doses were missing from my supply, there’d only be one person she could point to. And that would be me.

I licked my dry lips, and drew in a deep breath. “Alright...The drug’s supposed to heal you rapidly, but it hurts. One minute, you’ll feel all of the pain that you’d feel if you let it heal naturally over weeks or months. You can’t use it too often...because if your body develops an immunity to it, the potency falters. And...well. It’s hell on your kidneys.”

I remembered the swelling limbs, the nausea, the tightness in my chest, the tiredness after the gala - and trying to hide all of it from the most curious woman I’d ever met in my life.

“How many times have you used it?” He asked, quiet as anything. When I hesitated, his nose crinkled into a snarl. “How many times, Jason?”

“Y’know, Roy,” I started, crossing my arms. “I’m a big boy. I can do my own laces and everything-”

Roy cut me off, tutting his tongue. “-That’s not the friggin’ point and you know that. You saved my life today, you saved my daughter’s life today from that lowlife.” He jerked a finger at the scumbag tied to the chair. “And not to get sappy right now, but you’re the best thing that’s come our way since Jade died, all things considered. We can have freedom because of you. Speaking for Lian and me, we don’t want to lose our best chance. And if that means keeping you clean, then...” He trailed off, and I squinted at him.

“It isn’t addictive, man,” I bent forward, my knuckles getting hot. “You think it’s just another drug to get high or doped up on? I’ve only taken this twice, if you’re so desperate to know, and both times - then and now - it’s so that we can get a job done. When that fuckface wakes up and we interrogate him, we’re going to go back to Talia in his place and kill every person in pajamas in a three-mile radius. We’re going to fix this.”

“I don’t want to rely on you if you’re putting your life at risk,” Roy shook his head, ginger hair bouncing. His eyes were insistent, unwavering. The look of a father. “What if it becomes a crutch? What if we fail tonight and barely scrape out- you gonna take it again? You think I’m gonna be able to look Lian in the eyes if I let you take it again? You’re her uncle Jay now.”
“Hey,” I didn’t think he’d try to guilt me with Lian, and I didn’t like how thinking about her reacting to my death twisted my insides. “I didn’t ask for that.”

“I know that,” Roy shoved his hands into his pockets, and looked down at the floor. “But that girl hasn’t had anything solid for a long time. Anything that sticks, and I know it’s gonna be harder later for her to commit to anything. It’s how I was, being jerked between homes and then with Oliver, being jerked between cities instead of just… staying in one place. She needs stability, and so do I.” He lifted his eyes to mine. “I can’t do anything about this time, you’ve already taken it. And I won’t order you around under your own roof. I’m asking here, dude. You take that shit again, need it or not, I’m going to tell your family. Because you’ve already become part of mine, and I care enough to keep you honest with yours.”

I stared at him, eyes wide and mouth open to reply but with nothing to retaliate with. I had no ammo. I had nothing I could refute. As much as I wanted to fire back, I couldn’t. He was right. I hadn’t been honest with my family. I couldn’t deny that. There were things they kept from me too. Something Barbara, Tim and Dick knew that I didn’t, that they purposefully withheld. Things that I couldn’t be told yet. Part of me knew that I only kept the drug from them because I ran on spite like I ran on gunpowder, coffee, guilt, and longing.

Rustling from the chair behind us broke our thoughts, and I was thankful for it. I had just been wanting to hit something. There’s my opportunity, coming out of his gun-induced nap. He coughed blood as we walked to him, spat into his headwrap, which I tore away. He was young, couldn’t be older than I was, and his eyes were slanted, sharp cheekbones. He regarded us with suspicion, but no fear. He held his chin high as he blinked.

“Do you know who we are?” Roy crouched in front of him, and smacked his cheek. The ninja didn’t look awake enough for him.

“Like I give a damn,” The ninja sneered in Mandarin, “You don’t know what I’m saying. Stupid ingrates.”

Roy glanced at me, lifted his eyebrows. I smirked, and took his place, standing with my arms crossed. I responded in rusty Mandarin I hadn’t used in years. “That’s Professor Ingrate to you.”

I got a sick thrill out of watching his face pale. “Yeah, I speak Mandarin. Helps when you take a trip to China to train in the Himalayas.”

“Talia al Ghul,” Roy tied his hair back with a band he kept on his wrist. I knew why. “Where does she expect you tonight?”
“Up your mother’s ass,” The ninja said, his teeth blood-stained and he was missing a few.

Roy shrugged and stood. We shared a look. “Not that I know who my mom is, but…”

Another tooth flew between the ninja’s lips as Roy nailed him in the mouth with a heavy fist. He barely had time to breathe when I said to Roy, “And not that I know who your mom is, dude, but…” I dug a heel into the floor and spun, my heel cracking off his nose. I knelt, and grabbed his jaw with a tight grip, making him look at me. “Locations, pal. Your chances of living, and our choices of ending your life, depend on location.”

The ninja squirmed in the chair, fought his bindings - which for the special occasion, I used the red zipties. I let my eyes scan him, search for any part he was favoring. I squinted at his shoulders, an odd line pressed against his clothes. Roy tossed me a knife to slice the fabric and what do you know - a line of stitches where his deltoid met his bicep. Fresh. Couldn’t have been there longer than a few days. No sign of distressed tissue that might indicate an injury. The guy shook his head, and started mumbling in Mandarin, too slurred to translate.

“Say, what would I find if I tear these open?” I tapped the tip of the knife at the line, slipped the end under the thread and gave a little tug to make him sweat. It beaded at his temples, slicked his clothes to him and the scum on him - the stench that seemed to come off every assassin that killed for something as trivial as money - stunk worse.

“What do you say, partner?” I asked the archer as I tore the sleeve down to get a better look at the stitches. “Wanna play Operation with him?”

Roy slouched on his hip. “Do you think his eyes would light up if we scraped the sides?”

“That’s right over the funny bone,” I cooed, and the edge of the blade, which I sharpened almost compulsively, sliced through the first two stitches. “What’s in here, huh? What’re you hiding under your skin? You hiding a monster, or are you simply that pathetic on the inside too?”

Behind his eyes, filled to the brim with tears, was defiance. He wouldn’t give up Talia. I’ll have to take the information by force. My patience ran out. I sliced through the rest of the stitches, and dug my fingers into the opening. Roy held him still, his arm around the guy’s neck so he didn’t bite me. I jammed my fingers deeper, and found a pill-sized piece of metal. I yanked it out none-too-gently, and as I studied it, I heard the light hum of the mechanism inside. I put it to my ear, and listened to it, the ninja retching with his pain.
“Tracker,” I said, handing it to Roy. “Transmit it to Oracle. Red Robin is in Metropolis at the moment, and Nightwing will be home soon… As soon as we have coordinates, we’re moving out.”

Roy held the tracker in his fist, as if he couldn’t bear to lose it. He eyed me, and the ninja whose arm was bleeding with renewed gusto onto my nice clean floor. “…Only two of us can go, you know. Only two assassins showed up here.”

I moved to the workbench that my tools laid on, and ran my hands over the crowbar. “Which is why you’re staying put with your daughter.”

“Like hell am I going to sit here and…”

“-would you like to accompany Dick?” I didn’t care about the codenames anymore. The guy wasn’t going to last long to rat anybody out. “Or would you like to come with me and leave Dick with your daughter?”

Roy pressed his lips together, opened them like he was going to retort, and then closed again. He sighed, and pulled out the tie, shook out his hair before he combed a terse hand through it. “I hate this idea.”

“No, you don’t,” I patted his shoulder, “You just hate being left out of the fun part. I can relate.”

“Don’t worry.” I smiled, and grabbed the bonesaw instead of the crowbar. I started to walk towards the ninja, who thrashed harder than ever before. “I’ll send pictures.”

…………………………………………

“Will you quit looking at me like that?” I muttered to Dick beside me, both of us swathed in League armor with headwraps to shroud our faces. “I washed them.”

The parking garage made the back of my neck prickle with conditioned paranoia, too many dark corners and too little illumination, and Dick and I were standing high enough to feel the frigid autumn breeze through the fabrics.
“You hacked someone to death right where we were drinking the other night,” Dick whispered, his hands clasped behind his back. He’d taken off the housing on his escrima sticks to fit inside the katana sheaths, but I knew it wasn’t the fact that in a few minutes, we’ll be face-to-face with Talia. It had to do with the plastique I was hiding in the baby carrier strapped to my chest.

“He tried to take Roy’s daughter from him, and broke into my house, might I add.” I glanced at him sideways, a hand on the carrier like I was supporting a baby’s head. Lian was at the Clocktower with Roy, and they had Alfred and Barbara with them. I didn’t want them at my place tonight, should we be found out. “What’s your deal with him?”

He looked like he’d been waiting for me to ask. To get curious enough. “Remember when I said I hadn’t seen him in years, since he was a Titan?”

I nodded, another gust of cool air brought up goosebumps on me.

“He told me that he was quitting before he told Oliver. He wanted my advice, on what to do when you want to leave your mentor and go your own way. Considering I’d set the precedent.” That made sense. Dick would be the logical candidate. “I asked him what way he was planning to go if he quit, and he told me about his relationship with Cheshire, how she was pregnant. I… didn’t react like a friend. I reacted like the leader of the Teen Titans, liaison to the Justice League.”

I bit my lip beneath the headwrap. “What’d you do?”

“I told him that I couldn’t be complicit to it, that if he went off with a supercriminal - father of her child or not - I had to treat him as a criminal as well,” The sound of his sigh was tight, like his chest contracted on him. “I hated saying that to him. Just as I hated fighting with you when you came back.” I still had the chips in my teeth from that night. “But what could I say? ‘I’m going to lie to Dinah Lance when she asks me if I help you disappear’?”

“You made a tough decision,” I shrugged. “Do you think he hates you for that?”

“For turning my back on him? I’d be surprised if he didn’t.” Dick and I both looked up as we heard the approaching noise of motors, saw headlights wind up the parking garage. He adjusted his headwrap, and straightened. “But still… this is the least I can do. Let me do the talking. My Arabic’s better.”
Three jet black SUVs rounded the bend, and came to meet us. Blacked-out windows, likely bulletproof glass, and the tires had to be the impenetrable Amertek D-80s Dick had on his motorcycle. Two of them pulled in front of us, and a third behind, formed a triangle with us at the center. We couldn’t run without facing resistance. Maybe they already suspected me.

I kept both hands on the baby carrier, but a corner of the explosives jabbed into my ribs. The SUVs parked for a solid minute, like the people inside debated whether or not to get out. When doors opened and the ninjas went to the rear doors, the wind pulled my clothes tight against me. Two hooded figures stepped out of the car, one taller and one only half a head shorter, both in black robes but the shorter one had an Al Ghul stiff collar.

Hands gloved in black satin poked from the sleeves to lay the hood down, dark hair blowing with the breeze and regal shadowy eyes green as poison regarded us with scrutiny. Talia’s collar kissed her cheek as she laced her fingers together in front of her. The taller figure simply paced around us to join the pair of ninjas standing five feet behind us, but didn’t take down his hood.

Talia spoke first in Arabic, asked if we had the child, but her eyes were on me, the baby carrier. She could see that we had the ‘child’.

Dick curled his hand into a fist, pressed it against his heart and did a bow like every ninja in the League was programmed to. I did the same gesture around the ‘baby’. Dick said something along the lines of ‘by your wish’.

She asked next if the orders had been delivered to the archer, obviously meaning Roy. Dick affirmed again, his accent invisible. Talia hadn’t looked at Dick once, her eyes were on me. I took one hand off the carrier, and stared back.

She pursed her lips, and asked if there was anything wrong with me. I responded in gruff Arabic that I was fine, made my voice hoarse to throw her off my identity. She’d heard me talk before.

All of these things I had expected. All of these things I had known beforehand. I knew that Dick would be nervous about this trip, I knew that he would feel obligated to come. I knew that if Talia did not recognize me by my stature or my voice, she would recognize me by my eyes. I knew that if the baby failed to serve as a decoy, I could tell Dick to run and hug Talia, explode the baby between us and end it all. I knew that if the baby failed to serve as a bomb, I could run with Dick and then throw it in the air to Talia, blow her head off with the gun at my ankle. I knew that if we both died here, Barbara, Alfred, Kori, Tim, and Roy would seek to avenge us. I knew that if it was just Dick that died here, I’d eradicate the world of the League of Assassins, and anyone who would seek to usurp control of it, exile myself away from Gotham forever until I accomplished that goal. I knew that if I died here, Dick would bring them to the old man’s justice and I’d finally get the dirt nap I was denied for a year. Maybe she’d come to my funeral. Maybe the old man would too.
All of these things I had expected. All of these things I had known beforehand. All of these things were planned for, bought and paid for.

When the laughing started, a great blackboard eraser wiped my mind of these calculations and plans, and painted the entire thing red. My body constricted, my shoulders hunched to my ears, my hair stood on end, and I wanted to be violently sick. Every scar on my body lashed white-hot and seared into me just like when they were created, and I looked past Talia to see the tall hooded figure doubled over, convulsing with laughter. A lock of green hair fell past the hem of the hood. Dick didn’t exist. The parking garage didn’t exist, the explosives strapped to me didn’t exist, Talia didn’t exist, the wind didn’t exist, my clothes didn’t exist, but the uniform did. The uniform existed, the ‘R’ on my chest existed, I was a foot shorter, my ankle throbbed, and he was there with the branding iron. Oh God, there he was.

Oh God, there he was. Oh God. There he was. Oh God, there he was, oh God, there he was, OH GOD THERE HE IS. And just when the red fell from my mind, and weaved to the edges of my vision, I took control. I heard Arabic, the words rubbing together in my clean head and becoming nonsense.

“What’s so funny?” It was Talia talking, her eyes back on him.

Talia advanced on me, my eyes wide, my body numb as I took off the bomb. And then one of Dick’s hands came on my chest, pushed back, and everything rushed into me at once. With a feral sound that razed my throat, I lifted off the ground to crash my heels with Talia’s torso in a drop-kick. She toppled backwards, eyes wide in surprise. Her hands disappeared, and Dick shoved me back, forced me to the opening between the SUVs. I fought him, tried to push past him as the laughing got louder, but he had his fingers in my clothes, he had his hand on the detonator for the bomb. My cheeks stung and my eyes were wet. I didn’t realize I was screaming until I gasped the breath to say the words I’d handpicked for this moment.

“ I’M COMING FOR YOU. ”

Someone put their hands on me, someone who wasn’t Dick, and my eyes never left him as I dug my fingernails into the man’s neck and ripped out the jugular vein. I reached down with slippery, bloody hands for my gun, and I aimed it at him. I targeted him, in every way I daydreamed since I was sixteen years old, but before I could, the parking garage was engulfed in flame and Dick tackled me over the concrete guard rail and emptiness swallowed us as we fell.

He held me tight and pulled out a grappler, but I still shot at the parking garage, aiming at his face my mind etched into the night sky until the magazine dried up.
I refused to let go of the gun until we landed.
Broken Tired Hands

“Time has had it's way with me.

*My broken tired hands* cant build a thing.

The wires that have held me still embedded now in flesh to find my will.

The idle of my days is won, the empty I have fed has made me numb,

Despite what you will find in me.”

- Demon Hunter, “Deteriorate”

Dick kept a firm hand on my back the entire way to the Clocktower, and I wanted to hurt him and hug him at the same time for it. When we landed through the skylight opening, Dick walked me to a chair and the sounds blurred into each other. Barbara was there, her blue eyes wide and her face whiter as he told her what happened, who we saw.

Roy and Alfred walked in, Lian strapped to the archer’s back fast asleep. I didn’t feel his hands when he shook me, nor did I hear the butler calling my name. Calls were placed, I faintly made out Tim’s smudged face on one of the holographic monitors. No yelling. Just talking. Something shifted in my chest, and told me that was a good sign.

I sat in that chair for hours, maybe days. My nails clawed into the armrests, my leg bouncing like a jackhammer, and my eyes seeing into nothing. Unfocused images, their lines molded together to create something shapeless. My breathing was rapid, too shallow to be called inhales and too fast to be called exhales. I had no idea how fast my heart was going, but if I had a pacemaker, it wouldn’t be pleased with me.

The closest thing I had to a pacemaker rolled her wheelchair in front of me, and the rest of them formed a circle as she put her hands on my face to take off the headwrap. She cupped my cheeks in her palms, her thumbs brushed under my eyelashes and I finally found something to draw my eye, a tear on her face rolling down pale skin.

The ringing in my ears faded and her voice clarified like a radio being tuned. “…Jason. It’s okay. It’s me…It’s Barbara.”

I tilted my head back, the defense mechanism doing its job, but I didn’t want to pull away from her. I fought my body, fought the boa constrictor that came out of my subconscious to devour me in my worst nightmares, and pressed my face into her hands. I looked at her, pleading for her to understand.

*I’m here, Barb. I’m here.*

Alfred knelt beside her, and with gentle, sure fingers, pried my fingernails from the leather armrests. He held my hand between both of his. “Jason. We’re going to move you now, alright? We’re going to take off the uniform and get you into more comfortable clothes.”

Somewhere in me found the whole enterprise of being herded places like I was made of glass degrading. I was the man who had all of Gotham running scared, that was me, and now I was being
helped by three men to change clothes. They were surgical, careful not to touch my scars. They had me in an oversize sweater, soft on my skin, and sweats. They let me go barefoot, but Alfred insisted on wrapping my bad ankle.

When they sat me down again, my tongue stopped choking me and I managed to stutter. “J-J-Juh… I s-s-saw him. He was… there.”

“We know…” Barbara said, and her hand on my forearm squeezed. “Tim’s on his way here. We’re going to figure all of this out.”

Roy stood back, his eyes searched mine for something like an explanation. He didn’t know about my torture. He knew about the scars, but he didn’t know the torture. He knew I’d been killed by the clown. He didn’t know about what happened before that. He was finding out.

“Dead…” I forced out. “Dead… He’s… dead?”

My eyes were on Dick. I had been senseless from the laugh till now. Dick’s eyebrows came together and I knew he couldn’t give me the answer I was begging him to give me. “…I’m not sure. It’s possible he’s dead, but we’ve been wrong before. I’m sorry, Jason.”

I hung my head over my lap, and my chest shook with things I just didn’t do in front of people if I could help it. “…Dead. I’m d-dead.”

“The hell you are,” Alfred said, his lower lip quivering.

I almost asked him where that had gotten me the first time. I almost said it, and that’s what broke me. I hunched over in my chair, laced my fingers behind my neck with my hair in my face, and I cried. I heard Barbara put her head next to mine, her arms around my shoulders and a ginger curtain of hair cut me off from the rest of the world. Dick fell to his knees in front of me, his hands on my knees. Alfred touched his forehead to the hands I had behind my neck.

I remembered holding her in my arms, in that vent where I thought we’d die of heat prostration. I remembered promising her that death wasn’t that bad, that the way we were going out was definitely preferable to the first time. I had thought I’d been so lucky to die with her, and maybe the next life would be kinder to us. This might seem odd, but dear God, do I wish I could go back to that moment - holding her.

Because this felt like that kind of hopeless.

……………………………………

It was a day later that I finally reemerged from Barbara’s couch, and found Roy in the kitchen. He danced on the balls of his feet, Lian in his arms, and he was rocking her to sleep, humming something low. His eyebrows shot up when I went to the fridge, and did my best to keep my hands away from Barbara’s wine in the back. I grabbed a water bottle, and chugged it down.

Roy watched as I moved onto food. I inhaled two straight bowls of cereal, the cinnamon cathartic to my nose after a day of huffing the lavender smell of the Febreeze Barbara sprayed her couch with. I wanted to shower, but I was still too tired.

When I met Roy’s eye, the shame came on like a heavy blanket. “Hi.”

“Hey.” He whispered back, tall and unassuming. “…Are you okay?”
“No.” The answer was immediate, honest.

“Do you need anything?” I’d expected different questions, but I’ll take these over what I thought he’d ask.

“Besides…” I pushed the words off my tongue like a traitor walking the plank. “No judgment…No, not really. Just…takes time.”

A crease formed in Roy’s forehead. “I’d never judge you for this. I’d known about you…What happened, I just…” He sighed. “Alfred filled me in. He didn’t go too in-depth, but I’d seen you. He didn’t have to.”

Just like that, a step forward - a step back. When he mentioned seeing my scars, the edges of the chest scars itched like an infected bite. “Be thankful he never does.”

“Oh…they wanted me to tell you, when you woke up, that Dick and Barbara want to see you upstairs,” Roy said, tipping his head towards the door. “The new kid…what’s-his-face, he’s here too.”

A muscle in my cheek pulled at his failure to remember Tim’s name, and I wanted to thank him. It was likely the closest I’d get to smiling for the next week. I considered showering before I went up, fatigue be damned, but something in my gut told me that a shower could wait. I needed to hear what they had to say.

I padded barefoot to the top level, appreciated the simple exercise of climbing stairs. I slid my hand through my hair, tried to get it out of my face to no avail. I sighed when I reached the top, paused with my hand on the doorknob.

When I went into the command center, the carpet felt colder than the metal of the stairwell had been. Three pairs of eyes immediately snapped over to survey me, check my wrists and my elbows, count the bloodshot veins in my eyes, and the shadows under them for sleep. If there was any tension between Dick and Tim, I didn’t sense it. They seemed as collaborative as they’d been before the fallout, but there’s always the possibility that they called a truce for me. Tim came over, and to my surprise, he took my hand and wrapped his free arm around me, saying something about how worried he was.

Dick I expected a hug from, but he didn’t. He stayed by the computers, and that was my first sign that something was wrong. I looked past Barbara to him, and asked, “So what’s so important? Any news on Talia?”

“Not a peep,” Barbara answered my latter question, and her eyes glanced to Dick for the former. “Before I tell you any of this, I want you to promise that you won’t say anything until I’ve finished talking.” Dick prefaced, and his eyes said everything for him. This was the big secret. This was the big thing he’d kept from me throughout the whole business with Falcone up till now, the thing he conveniently forgot to let me in on after the gala, the thing I hadn’t given much of a damn about till my paranoia set in late at night.

“Fine.” I crossed my arms, and ignored how the barbed wire scars stung as I did that.

Dick took a deep breath, which I assumed he needed, and started to break it all down for me. “Remember when I went to the Manor when Bruce told us he was alive?” I nodded. “And I told you he basically bequeathed me the armory he had under there, made an offer for me to be Batman and all that?” I nodded again, and he bit his lip before confession. “That wasn’t all there was.”
I figured something else was hidden in there. He only started acting suspicious after that trip. I gnawed at the inside of my cheek to keep myself from interjecting.

“Bruce told me in an encrypted video message dated to just before he left Gotham… that if we were going to stop his return,” Dick added extra emphasis but believe me, I understood who he meant. “…That we’d need the master file from the BatComputer.”

Okay. I knew about the master file. I had flipped through it sometimes when I was Robin, bored out of my mind and grounded. I couldn’t stay quiet. “…Alright. Makes sense. What’s the point?”

“There was something new added.” Dick cleared his throat. “Something that Bruce considered forbidden for you to know. He asked me to keep you from it at all costs, Barbara and Tim could know, but you couldn’t.”

“What was it?” I asked, the back of my neck tingling.

Dick tilted his head, and his tone was warning. “It…has to do with him.”

“I’ll ask again.” This scared me, something in his eyes was scaring me about this, and still, I took a step closer and dropped my arms. “What was it?”

“The Joker’s name.”

The heavy thing that had been thrust into my chest when I saw him the other night fell out of me. I was hollow, and my own words felt like toll bells in my head. “What the hell did you just say?”

“You…told me what Talia took from you, what you saw,” Barbara said softly, and moved to the keyboard. The file was brought up on the screen, unopened but there. “…What she told you. Bruce figured it out before all of us, that the demon that possessed Ra’s al Ghul for so long had passed on to Talia and corrupted her as it had her father. The ‘head of the demon’ part is literal. She took your memories and implanted them into a John Doe from northern California. And he looks exactly like Joker. A true doppleganger.”

“The name that Bruce inputted to the BatComputer isn’t the original Joker’s name, but the name found in the John Doe’s personal effects,” Tim brought up a driver’s license with a blurred photo. “It wasn’t his name, he created this fake ID with a forger in Sacramento. His real name remains unknown, but before the playing card was dropped off at Arkham with the Platters song…he’d been in a coma for five years.”

I felt each word scrape at the walls of my torso from the inside, along the scars. It hurt to swallow, and my head swam. I clenched my fists at my sides.

“The name he chose was Jack White, the alias he used to blackmail Dr. Penelope Young to creating the Titan formula that ultimately killed the original Joker.” Barbara said, “And it was six months with Doe in the coma that Joker pulled the stunt in Arkham, and there’s only one reason that he could have chosen that alias.”

Somehow, in my dizzy head, pieces pushed together. “…They had contact before Arkham Asylum. The original Joker must have used him as a plant, a failsafe.”

“Yes.” Dick said, his voice low and hoarse. “Before I left with Alfred, Bruce told me that he was close to finding out how Talia knew about Joker’s plan, and that if we were going to get through this with you safe, if we were going to win, we had to keep you in the dark until the very end.”

I stepped back like I’d been slapped, heat rushing to my head. All this time I spent, thinking that the
old man had faith in me. I lifted my eyes to the ceiling, and a cruel, harsh laugh bubbled up my throat. “That son of a bitch…”

“He kept it from you to protect you…” Dick tried, and even when I glared at him, he continued. “If you go after the new Joker now, we’ll never know how he did it. We’ll never know how he pulled it all off, and if he had any others. We’ll never get Talia, we’ll never get Bruce’s son out of there, and we’ll never be free of this.”

“Do I look like I’ll ever be free of it?” I seethed at him, my shoulders twitching. I stepped closer to him, and to my surprise, Tim moved to Dick’s side. “You all kept this from me. You kept this from me for that son of a bitch, and didn’t fuckin’ care how I felt about it, did you?”

Barbara tried to grab my hand but I wrenched it free as she said, “We also told you about it, against Bruce’s wishes, because of what happened the other night. You deserved to know.”

“I deserved to know a YEAR AGO!” I shouted. My lungs sang as I ranted, my hands and my head on fire. “Here I was a week ago, feeling sorry because the four of us couldn’t get along. And I was thinking, ‘boy, won’t it be great in a year or so to look back and make fun of ourselves, crying over all this’, but stupid Jason.” I shook my head, a too-big grin on my face as I looked between their tight eyebrows and downturned mouths. “Stupid Jason had no idea that the biggest fucking problem in this family wasn’t the fact that we can’t communicate about personal stuff, we can’t communicate about IMPORTANT THINGS like the details pertaining to the resurrection of the man who tortured, starved, violated, and victimized me for over a fucking year!”

I breathed hard, and as my voice broke into that fifteen year old’s shout that hadn’t shown his face since I pointed a gun at Bruce to tell him I was the Arkham Knight, angry tears sprang to my eyes. I wheezed, and pointed at them. “I kept things from you too, because I thought there was a genuinely good reason for doing so. Like how I really felt about Abigail—” I paused, felt my stomach buckle like I’d just been punched. “—because if I did that, then I had to admit how really far down the hole I was with recovering. And I kept other things from you, stuff Gail didn’t even know - stuff that’s dangerous for me, but I did it because while it posed a risk to me, it’d help Gotham. I thought…” I hiccuped, and I saw Barb crying now, Dick was close, and Tim stared at the ground, ashamed. Good.

“I really thought you guys would be there when I was ready. Because I thought, of all the things you’d keep from me, that’d be the one thing you would tell me about.” I wiped my hand against my eyes to get the blur out of them. “Alfred couldn’t tell me because he wasn’t here. He couldn’t tell me a damn thing because he had to take care of the old man, that son of a bitch that don’t deserve it.”

“…He t-ried to…” Dick attempted to say. He pushed a hand against the back of Barbara’s chair for support, she reached back to hold him, and he said, his eyes red and raw. “He was trying to keep you from tearing this city apart again, he didn’t want you to fall down the hole again…he thought you’d destroy yourself to kill the Joker.”

“He was right.” I said, and Barbara gasped, before she shook with more tears. “He was fucking right about that one. Why’s he got to be right?” I flattened my palms against my eyes until I saw stars. “I mean, what have I got left? The woman I love is in another city, probably forgotten all about me. My family lies to me and schemes to keep important things from me. The man who tortured me has escaped death to haunt me once again. And the only friend I’ve got is Roy Harper and a three-year-old girl. This job is going to kill me sooner or later, why shouldn’t it be sooner?”

A metal clattering made me jump, and I turned to see Alfred staring at me from the elevator, the tea tray in his hands on the floor. The china teapot was broken at his feet, and he didn’t seem to care. His eyes were hidden by the glare of the glasses, but his hands trembled at his sides.
I felt like a preteen again, caught red-handed with a Bulgari watch that wasn’t mine. My face stung with tears, and I swiped my forearm against my cheeks. “Alfred…”

“Master Jason,” He whispered. “I don’t want to hear that come out of your mouth again. I don’t want you to think it either.”

“Fatherly affection aside, I.”

“-Not on your life,” Alfred said, louder and his shoe crunched the broken glass as he came closer. “I will not sit idly by and listen to you say that without a fight. I take it they told you?”

I nodded, and he stared up at me, probably hated how much taller I was same as me. How much time had gone by, how we changed. He pointed a finger behind me at them. “These three made the hardest sacrifice they could possibly make for you. They didn’t do it for Master Bruce. Of course, he asked them to do it, but believe me, Master Jason, they weren’t doing it out of courtesy. They didn’t do it to deceive you or to hurt you. Did it never occur to you that they might have done it because they love you?”

Barbara’s words came back to me, from all those months ago in the militia compound. *Come back to the Manor. Let us help you. Don’t let Joker win.*

“It did…” I admitted, and shoved my hands into my pockets, which felt better than them hanging dumbly by me. “I just need a little understanding here.” I leveled my eyes with Alfred’s. “That monster killed me, took me away from my family. I don’t want to give him the chance to hurt somebody else like he hurt me, Bruce, or Barbara. Bruce still hasn’t come back because of him, and he might never come back. And I hate Joker for all of it.”

“So do we.” Tim said, and finally lifted his eyes from the floor to look at me. “He’s hurt all of us. We kept the file from you so we can make sure he stays gone, and that Talia can’t bring him back again.”

Barbara rolled her chair forward, her glasses on top of her head. “Nobody wants that man dead more than you and I do,” She stared at me hard, and when she took my hand this time, I didn’t tear away. “I’m going to help you put him down for good, but you have to understand that we didn’t do this maliciously.”

“Master Richard had a long argument for the better part of an hour because Master Bruce had put him up to deceiving you.” Alfred said.

I met Dick’s eyes at last, and he stayed silent. He gazed back at me, frowning and I knew he thought I hated him now. I knew he thought I’d never forgive him.

“I swear to God, this time it’s permanent.” I said, and he nodded. “This time, it isn’t natural causes or an accident. Bruce doesn’t just let him die, this time - I kill him. This time, no secrets about blood or files. No secrets at all. We do this one by the book, everything disclosed. We have no secrets.”

Left to right, the corners of Dick’s mouth turned up.

“No secrets.”

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

That evening, Roy drove Lian and I back to the firehouse. He fed her, bathed her, and shortly after putting her to sleep for the night, he crashed himself into a chair by her bed.
From the moment his snores signaled that he was asleep, I went to the crates in the spare room. The record player was still there, perched on top of a crate like a canary awaited its master. Without allowing time to talk myself out of it, I lifted the crate into my arms and carried it to the bathroom. I stuck it in the corner, far way from the tub.

I fished out a record from the crate under the player, a smooth Sinatra something that she had hummed while cleaning. I put it on, turned the volume low enough to where the song would stay contained in the walls of the bathroom. A weird surge of courage filled me up as the song came on, and I got the nerve to peek under the bathroom sink. Still stapled shut from where I’d put them there, the bags she’d gotten me a year ago - the last afternoon we were roommates - were stashed there in a neat row.

I sat on the toilet as I tore open the first bag, and found citrus-smelling bath salts, the kind I sometimes bought to soothe muscle ache and my scar tissue. I dragged them over to the tub as I switched the hot water on, my fingers in the stream until I got the water hot enough. The citrus scent cut through the fog that had been in my head all week, and as the tub filled up, I stripped off my shirt. Her voice echoed in my ears, humming along with the Sinatra song, but instead of just hurting, I breathed and dragged the tip of my finger over the surface of the water.

The moment the tub was full, I scooped bath salts in and tore away the rest of my clothes. I lowered myself in, sighing at the temperature and how it seemed to hold me in steaming warmth. It was like standing in the sun, truly soaking it up. I craned my head, the lip of the tub against the nape of my neck, and closed my eyes.

His laughing was still there, in the very back of my mind where the mounds of skeletons were kept. Lock and key didn’t mean he couldn’t shout through the bars. But this little glimpse of how it felt to be with her, to hear her humming in my ears as clear as the water, it drowned everything out.

Some nights, I woke up and I could feel that she was anxious. Over what, I didn’t know, but I knew. Miles away and I knew what she was feeling. Some nights, I wondered what she did to remedy it. Did she still wake up like she did a year ago, and go put water on for tea if it was close to dawn? If it was closer to midnight, did she simply lie awake and think about possibilities? Maybe she did what I did some nights. Maybe she drank.

Tonight, I wondered if she could feel that I was afraid.
Nowhere Left to Hide

“You, you know gotta assert yourself
Leave what you need for now
It's not the time or place your searching for
All I can give them is my worst of intentions
You're nothing to me and everyone can see that
Your life's a lie
There's nowhere left to hide”

- A Day to Remember, “My Life For Hire

I had to give it to Roy, the guy doesn’t give up. Even with a year and a half to prepare myself to see the clown again, I did not sleep any better now than the night Barbara told me about the breakout at Arkham with the playing card. I still expected to wake up hanging from a meat hook, I left the firehouse armed to the teeth. The reminders were carved into my body. I left the shower with my scars red and raw, and these days I didn’t even notice how hard I scrubbed them. I texted my family, Barbara, Dick, Alfred, Tim, all of them, every hour. If they didn’t answer within that hour, I showed up and I wasn’t playing. I didn’t want to be told to calm down. I wanted blood.

Roy suggested the usual things. Drinking, comfort food, getting a puppy - which I almost accepted, but there wasn't much he could do for me, save allowing time to pass.

It was about halfway through a bottle of Scotch that I decided that what I wanted was to annoy Lex Luthor.

I planted myself in front of a TV and turned on the news, something I never did unless I was on the headline. He was about to give his last speech before America voted, and I was going to steal it away out of spite.

I took out my phone, my untraceable phone, and texted Barbara. You wouldn't happen to have Luthor’s number by chance?

It had never surprised Lex, his success and rise to power. He knew from the time he was a boy that he was destined for greatness and why shouldn’t he believe it? His father had beaten the idea into him enough times. When the first curve ball of his life was thrown in Kryptonian packaging, Lex was left with nothing to say. No words of self-congratulation, no prepared acceptance speech. Only the silence, and the silence was always followed by the scheme.

Here, backstage at Gotham City’s biggest convention center where a record-breaking crowd awaited
him, Lex was silent and kept his hands clasped behind his back. A vibration in his pocket. His fingers fished for his phone. A text from a restricted number.

**A bounty on my head, is that the best you can do?**

Luthor moved to the edge of the curtain, and looked past it to the cameras, the corner of a smile on his face.

.....................

He didn't type for long, from what I could see on the feed, but when the reply came, I suppressed a harsh laugh.

**Blowing up my office, is that the best you can do?**

From what I'd heard, Luthor was petty enough. Let's see if he was crazy enough. I tapped out another text.

**It isn't the worst I can do, and it won't be the last thing I do to you. That's conservative compared to what I'll do if you don't answer a simple question.**

He had waited, staring at the screen until my answer popped up. His reply was short.

**Listening.**

He seemed cooperative, but I smelled a stone wall coming, even as I typed out the question.

**Talia al Ghul. Has she contacted you in any way over the last year and a half?**

Lex pushed an eyebrow higher, and took his other hand out of his pocket to type. His smile didn't fade.
What does that matter to you? The woman was killed in Arkham City, that's public record. What would she want with me?

Ah, there would be the stone wall. Time to get out the catapults. I sighed, scratched my scruff, and texted back.

You're a public figure with a lot of political capital, a solid base, and you're attempting to link two cities. You've moved into Gotham almost without a fight, and the man sent to blow up your office before I got there was under League of Assassins employ. Claimed to have eyes on Talia.

Lex’s smile grew, and it was a smarmy grin, the kind that breathed warm sticky air down your neck.

Thank God! It's a miracle. Can you believe it? Men can FLY and people can be raised from the dead. A true leap for mankind. Shall I tell the American people?

Okay, didn’t know how I could have expected anything less. I still needed my answer.

Has she contacted you or not?

He stared at the text for a full ten seconds before he replied.

How else do you dismantle a legend? How else do you kill a knight?

I squinted hard at the text, and the words, even as I typed them, did horrible things to my stomach.

Bruce Wayne is dead.

One mystery solved. He had been contacted by Talia, but why does he want Bruce? I understood that the old man had been stiffing him out of his Applied Sciences division, but that’s business. Luthor had been given the cold shoulder on business deals before, and only came out of it even more filthy stupid rich. He hadn’t gone to kill them.
Or was it simply the old vendetta? Every time Batman set foot in Metropolis, it was either to put down Lex Luthor or to bust Superman’s chops. Sometimes, he managed both.

He read my answer, and pocketed his phone. He ignored the camera to finally step out on the stage, hand waving at the crowd. I could only guess at what his advisors told him. Express condolences for those affected by the Battle of Gotham, the official designation for our final fight with Falcone a year ago, and to encourage those watching to donate to the relief fund that Tim and I put together. Deny any involvement with the Metallo robbery weeks ago, although he was working under Luthor’s orders and said so. Deny any involvement with a Russian business transaction between supercriminals from around the world and the mafia. Deny any affiliation with Deathstroke, despite the fact that he was Slade’s supplier of the serum that cut my recovery time in half. Reaffirm the position that vigilantes acted outside the law and should be treated as no-good criminals. Reaffirm that the only god the American people worship is the Christian, capital ‘G’ God, not an alien in the sky. Reaffirm that if he were to enter office, that his first act would be to place Superman under government sanction. Say “we have nuclear codes, but we do not have Superman codes” five thousand times. Appeal to his Democrat voters, talk about the hirings across racial and secular boundaries within Lexcorp. Appeal to liberal values of tolerance and peace, despite his crossed fingers and figurative nose lengthening with each and every lie.

For a businessman, Lex took to politics like a fish to water. Every perfect lie combed its hair before it left his mouth, triple-knotted its shoes so it wouldn’t trip. I’d never bothered with politics. I figured that whoever was in charge wanted me dead, no matter who they were - president, mayor, commissioner, hot dog vendor, they wanted me dead and that’s all I needed to know to keep my hide intact. Wanting me dead was the face of bipartisanship.

Lex wasn’t crazy like me. He’s obsessed with getting some kind of one-up on Superman, and apparently the presidency was a stepping stone to that end. Or maybe he wanted that government sanction just to get Clark to bring him his coffee. Either way, if he wants the old man dead, he had his work cut out for him.

He went right down the list in his speech. Metallo to Deathstroke, vigilantes to government control, and back. I kept nursing the alcohol, knocking glasses back until the glare off his head started to blur.

“Mr. Luthor. Before you arrived tonight, your staff presented us with an interesting memorandum that you would be talking about a domestic terrorism threat tonight.”

“Yes, Ms. Lang, I do want to address a threat that has been lingering right under our noses.” There he was with that smarmy grin again. “In many ways, Fear Halloween was a terrorist attack like none other and although the outcome of that night was unmasking Batman as Bruce Wayne, along with his unfortunate death, there is another unmasking that must take place.”
Holy shit. He’s onto Tim! My drunk fingers fumbled with my phone, and it slid under my chair. I swore, but as I reached down to feel for it, I heard Lex write a very different death sentence.

“The Arkham Knight was in charge of training, managing, and strategizing for the entire campaign in Gotham City. Every tank, every squadron, every soldier was under his command. Scarecrow could not have done half of what he did without the Arkham Knight. And how fortuitous that today, almost the exact anniversary of that fateful and terrible night, that the Arkham Knight is unmasked.”

I straightened slow, my eyes glaring hard into the TV, at his neck. I imagined the crunch of the vertebrae under my fingers, how the light would go off in his eyes, and he’d stop struggling, he’d stop breathing, he’d stop being. And I would kill him.

“And I know what you all are thinking,” He spread his arms. “How do I know this? How could I possibly know the identity of the Arkham Knight? Who was he? He hasn’t been seen since Fear Halloween, no word. The only man who knew his identity, possibly, was Bruce Wayne and we know how that ended. But there is someone who knows who the Arkham Knight, and that’s the Red Hood.” He looked into the camera, and smiled, wide and wicked. “And that’s because they’re the same man.”

I didn’t feel the glass bite into my hand as I punched the TV, punched the pixel Lex right in his loose jaw. I thrust it back out, and grabbed the thing, still bleeding around my right hand. I lifted it, and threw it back down. I stormed through the firehouse, Roy appearing with confusion on his face. “Jason, the hell?”

“No, not now.”

I returned to the broken TV with a crowbar.

I spent the next fifteen minutes abusing the TV with that crowbar until it was nothing but black pieces of glass, metal, and plastic. Roy watched, eyes bright with shock. I belted out a shout at the bits, my back against the wall as I slumped against it. The anger was draining me, but I wasn’t done. I ran downstairs, Roy on my heels. He tried to grab at me, apparently deluded that I was going to kill myself or him or someone. I pushed him off me, my eyes hot as I dragged the trunk out from under the workbench in the engine bay.

The armor hadn’t been stolen, the helmet still shattered but untouched. Nobody had broken into this trunk. I took the serum out, and then dumped the contents of the trunk onto my engine bay. I used to
do this for those soldiers I trained, anytime I found disloyalty or laziness. I threw the offending things throughout the place, and then beat the shit out of them.

This was no different. I started with the helmet. I jammed the sharp end of the crowbar and cracked the crown open like an egg. I smashed each half. Roy got between me and the helmet, almost hitting him with the crowbar. But he didn’t stop me. He knelt, and tossed the pieces into the air. I switched grips on the crowbar, and hit home runs with the pieces into the engine bay wall.

When it came to the chest plate, I told him to get out of my way. I smashed everything, I smashed each shoulder plate, the shin guards, the elbow reinforcements, the ankle brace worn under the leg armor. I didn’t give a damn. I shouldn’t have ever kept it. I shouldn’t have tried to punish myself with it. It had cost me. All of it had cost me.

I javelined the crowbar into the wall, and it stuck. I heaved every breath, my fingers itchy.

He wasn’t trying to kill Batman’s legend.

He was trying to kill mine.

THE NEXT MORNING - METROPOLIS

Clark Kent waited for a half hour, cup of coffee placed in front of him as he made notes on the newest article assignment from White. His time was precious, anyone who knew him knew that, but he never thought of it that way. His time was public property, and he would always be of service.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Clark flashed a smile, and sipped his coffee. The waitress raised an eyebrow, but smirked at the charm, trotting away.

Clark had been in contact with Barbara since the news broke about Lex Luthor declaring that he had evidence of the Red Hood and the Arkham Knight being the same man. It baffled him and yet, didn’t surprise him at the same time. Luthor lived for attention, recognition of his efforts and successes. It was entirely like him to declare something that big, but keep the proof close to his chest. Clark considered that maybe that was because Lex didn’t have any proof. Whatever the case, he was determined to get to the truth. No capes, no blue tights. Just good ol’ fashioned journalistic methods.

Speaking of journalistic methods, he was about to execute one. He heard her heartbeat a block away,
the click of her heels, which she never quite seemed comfortable walking in. She popped her knuckles, hoping to relieve pressure from her fingers. It was an echo, a crackle in the sound, but he knew her hands had been broken before.

She was talking on the phone to someone, a brief smile in her voice. The other voice on the line was male, too jumbled in the commotion of Metropolis to make distinctions. But he knew that when she told him she loved him, her heartbeat shifted with the sad toll of a dented truth. She clicked to end the call, and sighed, a breath to center herself, Clark figured. She entered the cafe, and he looked up to wave her over.

“Miss Byron,” Clark greeted, and stood to pull her chair out, seat her across from him. “Great of you to come.”

Abigail Byron, Clark had to admit, gave Bruce a run for his money in mystery. He knew virtually nothing about her, and when Lois hired her out of the blue, saying Jason called in that favor, he hadn’t known what to think. He had given Jason because he worried about him, not so he could score his friend a job. He tried to approach Barbara with his questions, but he spun his wheels. He decided to put his investigation on hold when Lex declared his run for president, and had forgotten it until the night before, when he declared his campaign against Red Hood.

She pulled off her scarf and righted her spray of bangs across her forehead, the rest of her now shoulder-length hair pulled to a knot at the back of her head. Her blouse was polished, her pencil skirt tailored, but under the table, Clark heard her slip out of her heels and rest her feet against the floor. Her eyes, which reminded him of the exact color of Kansas thunderclouds, blinked back at him. “Well, Mr. Kent, you did say it was urgent.”

“Please. You work with my fiance,” Clark flipped to a fresh sheet of notes. “It’s Clark.”

“In that case, call me Gail.” She paused to order a cup of chai tea, and started to pull off her gloves.

“Surely you saw the announcement last night.”

Gail’s hands tightened on the gloves, and he heard her teeth grind in her mouth before she said, “Yes, I did. I imagine you’re asking me here because of the fine print in my resume where I knew Jason Todd.”

Clark’s shifted his broad frame in the small chair, and he managed to look sheepish. “I apologize if
I’ve made you uncomfortable in asking you here to talk about him. From what I understand, it wasn’t a pleasant transition from Gotham to Metropolis.”

“On the contrary, it was fine…” Gail said, and thanked the waitress as her chai tea arrived. She blew on it, sipped and looked down at her reflection in the cup. “The roommate keeps me in lighter spirits, I suppose, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t think about Gotham City. I was raised there.” The corner of her mouth curled up. “Is it weird to say that I miss Gotham City?”

Clark sipped his coffee around a pensive smile. He had never heard Bruce say so, expressly, but he knew that you could take the Batman out of Gotham, the reverse is impossible. “Not at all. I called you here because I need to collect information about both parties before I go to Gotham myself to cover the last days of the Luthor campaign trail. As you know, I’m quite familiar with Lex.” He pushed his glasses higher on his nose, and Gail held amusement in her eyes as she drank her tea. “I need a read on Jason Todd.”

Gail’s smile slid off her face like water. “And you thought because I knew him, that I would be the most apt to give you the information?”

“…He hasn’t contacted you?” The question left Clark with wide eyes.

“Not once.” Gail’s eyebrows knitted, and the clatter of the teacup against her nails was thunderous in his ears. “The last words he spoke to me were in Bernard Kane airport a year ago. If he’s talking to anyone, listening to anyone, it isn’t me.”

“I…” The air wheezed out of Clark, the hand on his pen tense. “I thought the two of you were close.”

Her eyes dropped to her tea again, a frown bowed in her lips. “You thought wrong. We might’ve been close, once, but if we were to pass each other in the street, he wouldn’t see me. I’d be a stranger to him.”

“Well…” Clark recovered, and tapped his pen against his finger. “Perry’s assigned Lois and I the Luthor campaign. She’s covering his businesses here, how they’re doing while he’s on the trail. I’m covering the Gotham City leg of his trail. Lois has given me the green light to invite you to accompany me, with the added bonus that if you can collect information for me - you have a foot in the door to become a full-time reporter.”
Gail’s eyes grew three sizes when they snapped back to his. “What?”

“We talked it over last night, and you’ve come a long way in the last year.” Clark lifted a hand to count on his fingers. “There was the Metallo incident that you dug into for Lois, providing her with exactly the proof she needed to do the story. The column you’ve run with Olsen on the ethics of heroes has been one of my favorite pieces to read since you started it in March. You’ve done a lot of good work for Lois and I.”

“Then how on earth could you expect me to just run to Gotham with you?” Gail said, her voice hushed but breaking. He heard her heartbeat pick up as she said, “I couldn’t leave Lois at a time like this. She’ll need me for Luthor business deals here, to run interference.”

“I’ve already talked it over with Lois. It was her idea for you to come with me.”

“What about my rent? I can’t just abandon my roommate to pay for it all.”

“I’ll compensate you.” Clark leaned back in his chair with a grin. “This is a dynamic campaign, Gail, full of surprises.”

“You’re going to compensate me?” Gail narrowed her eyes at him, skepticism smeared across her face. “On a reporter’s salary? Right.”

“I’ll call in a favor with the owner,” Clark shrugged, “He owes me, anyhow.”

Gail shook her head, smiling. “I will admit that I want to go back home more than anything, but...there’s still the original problem.”

“Whatever happened between the two of you, Gail,” Clark pointed his coffee at her, and leaned in, blue eyes bright. “I’m sure he’ll at least be more civil with you than he ever would be with me.”

He knew she couldn’t dispute that, and she didn’t try to. She tuck a lock of hair, a new piercing twinkled at the top of her ear. She bit the inside of her lip. “Civility isn’t the trouble, Clark.”

“Just know that no matter what happens on this assignment, Gail,” Clark said, voice gentle as his
expression. “You can always come to me with anything. Lois made me promise to take care of you, or I’m on the couch for a month, her words.”

“Precisely how much time do I have to think about this?” He didn’t expect anything less from a Gothamite, bargaining for time.

Clark finished his coffee, and checked his watch. “Not much. If you’re coming, we leave tonight.”

He heard her curse under her breath, hidden by the commotion of the cafe. Her eyes drifted around as Clark made notes. He tracked her heart rate, doodling in the margin of his notes. Sometimes when the three of them, Lois, Gail, and himself, were in the Daily Planet editor’s office, he made a game out of tracking heart rates and pinpointing the exact moment they made a decision.

Her gaze fell on the news feed above the cashier’s register, and Clark glanced at it. A side-by-side view of the choppy, grainy picture of Red Hood during the City Hall debacle next to a police surveillance still photo of the Arkham Knight.

The headline ran: **WHO IS THE MYSTERY MAN?**

Gail’s heart rate skipped a beat. Clark fought a smile. She’d made her decision.
“Keep ya head away from windows
Keep your arms inside the ride
Trust me with ya body, trust me with ya life
Banging on the windows, baby come inside
Certainly in trouble, maybe you should hide”

- Donnie Trumpet and the Social Experiment, “Surf”

“Certainly in Trouble”

“You scare me, you know.”

I worked the nerve to look Roy in the eye when he said that, his gaze on my hand as he stitched the
skin back together. The glass from the TV laid bloody on a towel splayed out over the counter, and
I'd been staring at that when he spoke.

He said, his hair hanging in his face, “Not just in the ‘I'm worried about you’ kind of way. Though
I'm still pretty damn worried about what's going on with you. You scare me in the traditional way,
too.”

Guilt twisted in my side like a corkscrew. “Sorry.”

“I'm not your housewife, y’know,” Roy joked, turning my hand under his. “It's bullshit I have to
worry like I am, baby on my hip and all.”

“That mean I'm in the doghouse?” I rolled my eyes. “America is now gunning for my head and
you're worried about me beating the fuck out of my old armor with a crowbar?”

He opened his mouth to retort, but my phone started to blare Metallica. Roy got up, retrieved it for
me. “Barbara.”

I pressed it to my ear with my free hand, my eyes watching Roy thread the needle through my flesh.
“Yeah?”
“What are we going to do about this?” She panted down the line. “How could Lex possibly know that you were the Arkham Knight?”

“He didn’t say it outright, but he didn’t deny having been contacted by Talia,” Something dark in my chest shifted, like a parasite clicking its maws. “And she could have easily riddled it out from what she took from me.”

“This is bad, Jay...This is really bad.”

“I know...Put Dick on the line.” Roy finished the stitch, and stood by the doorframe, his shoulder leant against it. He could hear them talking on the line; the firehouse was too quiet for him not to.

“What do you mean? Dick isn’t here -”

“He hasn’t been here since yesterday, Barbara...Didn’t say where he was going.” A low laugh escaped me, and I failed to keep the smile off my face. I liked being right, especially on days where everything else felt wrong. “I know he’s with you.”

She sighed, and I could practically hear her cheeks reddening. “I’ll get him.”

“No need ,” His distant voice seemed cheerier than I’d seen in weeks. “I’m here. What’s the plan about Luthor?”

“I think he should continue patrolling business as usual ,” Barbara suggested. “If he falls off the face of the earth, it’ll only affirm what Lex is saying.”

“Sounds like a better plan than I had.”

“You can’t assassinate a presidential candidate, Jason ,” Dick said, in that older brother voice when I got less-than-civil ideas about people I didn’t like.

“People always say it can’t be done until it’s done,” I scratched my stubble, ran a hand through my hair. “Last time I was seen in public, I was clean-shaven and my hair was dyed black, no white streak.”
“Grow a beard,” Dick said, “Worked fine with Bruce. It’s like...step one for going underground.”

I thought I was underground before. I rubbed the back of my neck. The dye had washed out, and my stubborn white streak was still in my hair, only to be sprayed when I needed to go to work. I frowned. “I’ll have to quit my day job, though. I won’t have those kids put in danger by a bounty hunter gunning for me.”

“I’ll talk to the administration for you,” Barbara offered, her voice soft. She knew how I felt about that job, helping those kids. I thought about Jonas, the little street kid that loved stories. “And the rest of us will pitch in to keep your head above water.”

“Okay, now I’m not so sure about that,” My shoulders tensed. “I’m not living off you guys because of Lex Luthor.”

“Tim’s already got an off-shore account set up, and we’ve been saving it for this kind of thing,” Barbara was getting as bad as the old man with her contingency plans. “Don’t argue with me, Jason. Just take the money and patrol. You kept complaining that you hated the commute to Gotham High anyway.”

I rested my back against the toilet’s water tank, and said, “So...I get scruffy, wear sunglasses, rarely go outside, live off you guys, patrol at night, and what? Twiddle my thumbs?”

“It’ll take about a week for the proper surveillance to be set up,” Barbara sounded optimistic. “If you have any stops you need to make beforehand, I’d make them today.”

.....................

“I know you can’t hear me,” I cleared the space in front of his headstone of leaves, and planted myself on it, legs stretched out. “But I don’t care...I needed to talk to someone, old man. Might as well be you.”

I pushed my back against the cold granite, the warmth leeched out of me only to be replaced by the flask I pulled out of my jacket. The whiskey filled the empty space in my chest, and I swirled the aftertaste on my tongue.
“You told me, ages ago, that you knew what it was like to have...him inside you,” I propped my palm against my branded cheek, hiding it. The cemetery was empty as the grave I sat on, but I didn't want to take any chances. I bit my lower lip, before I spat the bitterness out. “You let us know months ago that he was really back, but I think on some level I needed him to be dead and on that level, I didn’t believe you. But now I can’t lie to myself anymore. He's back, Bruce. I saw him. Heard him laughing...It's really him. I know he’s some doppleganger with my memories implanted in his head like an organ, but that's him. I know him.”

I ran my thumbnail against the metal trim of the flask, pushed it in till it hurt. The autumn shivered me into my coat, and I tugged my hood over my head. I drank again, the last sip, and put the flask away. “You ever feel like...like he's in this little spot in the back of your head? He keeps your nightmares as pets, scratches their backs as he cackles through the bars? Even if he's in a cage, you still have him there. He's still present. You can still see him. Ever feel like that? Like your head is one big nuthouse, and he's in solitary, screaming for a bathroom break. So...so he goes right there, and after a while, you have to go in there to clean it because the smell leaks to everywhere else. But there's no guarantee he's gonna let you back out.” My throat constricted, and I had to swallow twice to speak again. “I've got to clean, Bruce. I'm forced...to share space with him again after so long, and…”

I covered my mouth with my hand, and I'd never say this to his face. I'd never say this to him, or out loud to anyone else. The burning in my eyes got worse till it dripped down my cheeks. “I'm scared to be in a room with him again, Bruce. I'm scared to death of it. I've killed a lot of people, created horrors and put them down, but he's worse. He's so much worse, and I don't think I'm ready for this. I'm still scared of him.”

I tried to imagine what he'd say, or how his face would pinch with anger, but it'd been two years since I saw the old man. His memory blurred in my midnight mind, and I never thought I'd ever pray to see his face again. I knew the edges. Sharp cheekbones, black brows, the downturn to his mouth, blue eyes that searched and scanned for emotion.

“This doesn't change anything between us, Bruce,” I said through my teeth, my cheeks hurt from crying. “I still hate you for making them hide that file from me. I forgave you for my year in hell, and I hate you for that damn file...But…” I laughed, humorless and harsh. “That's my part, isn't it? Roguish shithead kid that slams the door on his father and then regrets it by the end of the movie? I'm laughing now, but it's actually kinda sad how true that is.”

I wished I had more whiskey. It'd been a while since being declared a public menace, and drunkenness was a far lighter crime than domestic terrorism, worked better at what I wanted it to do than anaesthetic. I wanted to wipe myself clean, and feel nothing for a while. Work my two jobs, help Roy raise Lian, love my family, hate Bruce for that one thing, and pine after something that only was for a little while.
“I hate you, old man,” And then I admitted to something I've needed to for years. One of those million things that should never have gone unsaid before I was kidnapped. “But right now, I could use my father. I need stability, someone I can...rely on, to be there. To ground me. Because right now, I'm in freefall. Everything in my life is in freefall - my health, my mind, my temper, my impulses...it's a wonder of medical science how I'm not fucking dead.”

“I guess...what I'm trying to say is,” I paused to get to my feet. “My second life's been weird, but the best part of my first one was you and Alfred.” I pressed my palm over the engraving of his first name, chilled by the stone. “Wherever you are, Bruce...I hope you know that. And as much as I could use my father, from what Alfred tells me? You could use a son.”

I stepped back, eyes on the tombstone before I turned to head back to my commute car. My night shift clothes were inside, helmet and all. The last skies of day were fading, and within minutes night would fall. There was something warm about the air, though, a rare evening when I wouldn't freeze on the higher skyscrapers.

When I got the call, something told me I'd found the reason. Dick on the caller ID.

“Jason, Clark just called Barbara .”

I stopped in my tracks. “Is everything okay?”

“Better than that,” Dick was running, and his glee barely contained in the line. “He's here, in Gotham. And you'll never guess who came with him.”

He said her full name, the alias, slow and wonderful. My heart, long in hibernation, sprang to life and pounded in my chest. A hand came up to cover my mouth, because the smile beneath it held out just that tiny flicker of hope.

She hadn't forgotten about me. Against my warnings, against my instructions, the sun was out in Gotham City. I hung up on Dick, and sprinted for my car, which had never looked so good.

It took me three tries to get my key in the lock, my hands trembled from the jittering in my veins. I slid into the driver's seat and my tiles squealed as I raced out of the cemetery. I already had my armored pants on, I just needed to change into my chest armor, the jacket, gloves and hood. My fist slammed into the knob for the radio, a wild grin on my face.
All of my previous consternation about the whole enterprise evaporated in seconds, and all I could think about was the florist I needed to find in Chinatown. I was on the phone halfway between Jason Todd and Red Hood, shrugging off my black hoodie and trying to fasten my chest armor while driving.

I ordered sunflowers and roses and daisies, and at some point in the order, I said, “Fuck it. Get me four arrangements and throw everything in it.”

I gave my name, the alias, and threw my phone into the back when I was finished. I clipped on my chest armor at last, armed my utility belts and holsters from a briefcase I kept in the car for night shift. I yanked on my jacket driving with my knee, did the clasps on the forearm guards, and pulled my gloves on with my teeth. I zipped it up to hide the red bat over my pounding heart as I entered the drive-through window in Chinatown.

My car was smelling floral as hell crammed to the brim with flowers, and I was singing Phil Collins at the top of my lungs on my way to Otisburg. For once, I drove at a reasonable speed and took in the neighborhood. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t freaking believe it. She hadn’t forgotten about me. She came back. Dear God, she came back.

I checked my phone and Dick told me that she was staying at a hotel. In my haste to get to her, it hadn’t dawned on me that she wouldn’t be at her old apartment. He texted me the address and the room number Clark passed along. I changed course, my heart in my throat through every intersection. I felt nauseous, nervosa wringing me out like a wet rag. One foot on the gas pedal, the other bouncing beside it. I leaned forward, cursing at every red light.

I parked down a back alley away from the hotel, keen to avoid security cameras, and took a single daisy from the arrangement. If I was lucky, she’d see all of them tonight. If she wanted to stay in, it wouldn’t matter. She’d see them in the morning. I didn’t care. How could I?

Gail was home, and soon, I would be too.

I slipped my helmet on, tapped the side for the front to come down. I tucked the daisy into my utility belt, and grappled onto the building left of the alley. I spotted the hotel, breaking into a sprint. Aching limbs, be damned. Shattered sleep cycle, be damned. Drinking problem, be damned. Dark psyche, be damned.

My helmet isolated the balcony I needed to jump to, and the grappler propelled me up to it the same rate my hopes rose to the sky. I rolled over the banister and my boots met the ground soundlessly. I could hear music from inside, and nostalgia hit me like a wave of the times I’d hear records played
out of her window.

The screen door was left unlatched, maybe she’d expected me to come. I pushed it aside and moved in. Two beds, two suitcases I assumed to be hers side-by-side by the hotel TV. The nightstand between the beds was on, as was the main bathroom light which crept out into the small kitchenette.

She stepped out of the bathroom with that Gotham U jersey, the holey one she’d worn when we met, a pair of shorts, and massaging a towel through her hair. A new piercing glittered at the top of her ear, dancing on the balls of her bare feet. The music was loud enough to drown out her soft singing, something by Nina Simone, and she came to the bedroom. She took off the towel from her hair, flipped it to hang in a damp tangle of gold down her back, and that’s when she looked up to see me against the twilight outside her window.

Gail dropped the towel, a gasp trapped on her tongue with her eyes wide. I reached up and tapped the side of my mask, the front coming away and I saw her with my own eyes. I looked and breathed deeper than I had in a year.

“Jason?”

I sighed, my lips curled in a crooked smile. “Hey sunshine.”

And then she climbed onto the bed to jump into my arms, her own around my neck as I twirled her in a circle. We laughed, tears came to our eyes and smeared between our cheeks pressed together, my heart soaring and searing in my chest. I put her down, my back to the bathroom, and touched my forehead to hers, laughing.

We were anxious kids again, like in the car before she got on that plane, whispering between us. “When Dick told me you were in town, I just...I couldn’t stop myself. I know I’d told you that we couldn’t, that I couldn’t talk to you or...or anything, but...I-I couldn’t stay away. I had to see you. I had to see you, Gail.”

“Jason, breathe,” She whispered, her hands on my face and I turned to kiss her palm. She smiled, her thumbs on my cheekbones. “I’m glad you came, but-”

“Hey babe, if you want to, we can-” The voice came from the bathroom, and I jerked my hands away from Gail like she’d burned me.

My spine straightened, and the smile fell off my face. I looked into her eyes, and I knew. A hole
punched into me as I understood. She hadn’t come back alone. I gritted my teeth, her frown a plunged knife into my side. My hand lifted slow, slow enough so she’d feel the depths as I removed her hands from my face. I tapped the side of my helmet, and the front came down. I turned and surveyed the wires of the bomb wedged into the hole in my chest.

He was my age, maybe a year younger. Lean, slender, broad shouldered, with the kind of swept over business haircut that Tim might wish for. His eyes were green, squinting at me as he held a towel around his waist and with the other hand, reached for her.

“Abby, who is this?” He said, and good Lord, did his Metropolis accent lay on him like a coat.

My fists balled at my sides. Her name was not Abby. Who the hell was Abby?

Gail walked around me, a hand on my chest that I stepped back from. “Frederick, this is...well…” She looked back at me, and I could see the wheels turning in her head. “This is…”

I grumbled, and unzipped my jacket to show him the red bat. I walked forward and held out my hand. Civility was my best option, even if all I wanted to do was throw him out the balcony. “Red Hood. I see Gail neglected to mention that she was bringing a tag-along.”

“You’re the Red Hood?” Frederick’s mouth twisted to a smile, his shoulders sideways. He didn’t believe me. “Prove it.”

I smirked under the helmet, my hand falling to my side and I felt the familiar grip of my gun. “You don’t want me to do that.”

“Hood,” Gail walked to his side, and I crossed my arms to avoid getting ideas as he draped his arm over her. “This is Frederick Roscoe.”

“Her boyfriend,” He strained to mention, pronouncing every syllable. “So if you’re here to threaten her into not following the Luthor story, I won’t allow-”

“-you think I’m here to threaten her?” If she weren’t here, I probably would’ve thrown him over the balcony for insinuating what he just did. I laughed and shook my head, “I could never hurt her. I am incapable of it.”
I turned my gaze on Gail and she stared at me. She knew what the rest of that statement was supposed to say. I was incapable of hurting her, but the reverse was far more likely.

“I was actually here to point her in the right direction,” I said tightly, “Look into Luthor’s investors. There’s an alias to the investor from Egypt.” Frederick bristled as I said, “Maybe you could fetch her coffee while she does that.”

“I appreciate you coming here to tell me,” She said, and her boyfriend looked between us, trying to get a read on our association. He’d be reading for a long time.

I wanted to tell her I didn’t do it for her, but lying to her within five minutes of her return would be imprudent. I needed to get out of here. My mind thrummed, a stress headache circling my head like a painful crown too heavy.

“I’d better go,” I said, and opened the screen door to the balcony. “While I’m in here with you two, crimes are being committed.” I shot a glance at Gail over my shoulder, “Try to keep warm. It’s going to be a cold night.”

Gail squirmed, her cheeks red and her brows together. She followed me, slammed the door behind her, and a tense hand on my forearm had me stop, a leg over the railing. “Stop, you don’t have to go because he’s-”

“-what? Yours?” I said, keeping my voice low for her sake. I could see her boyfriend goggling us through the window. When she opened her mouth I cut her off, “You don’t have to apologize for him. You moved on. I got it.” I took my forearm out of her grip. “I told you we’d always be friends, it’s just that now we’re going to be just friends.”

“Jason…” Her eyes were that stormy color, like Gotham Bay at midnight. She hugged her arms around herself, that lonely way that made me want to hold her. “Be careful.”

“I will.” I didn’t have to force the smile, even if she couldn’t see it. “...Good to see you.”

“Good to see you too, mystery man,” She had a hand on the doorknob.
I dove off her balcony, and right before I grappled to another building to head back to my car, I took
the daisy out of my belt. I crushed it in my hand and left it in the gravel of a rooftop.
Don't Lose Sight

“And I'll use you as a warning sign
That if you talk enough sense then you'll lose your mind
And I'll use you as a focal point
So I don't lose sight of what I want
And I've moved further than I thought I could
But I missed you more than I thought I would
And I'll use you as a warning sign
That if you talk enough sense then you'll lose your mind”

- Amber Run, “I Found”

The thunder overhead was nothing compared to the thunder in my chest. I ran and ran, fought and fought, reaped the city clean under my hands and at the end of a bullet. It was all a blur, with nothing but the feeling of my phone buzzing against my ankle with texts I wouldn’t open to determine the passage of time.

Be careful. Be careful. Be careful. Her words, more now than they ever had in the year apart, rang in my head like they were tattooed, and all I wanted was to be the opposite. I didn’t want to be careful. I wanted to run into Joker and Talia head-on, finish my last business before I go into exile myself. Bruce had the right idea. Sometimes enough was enough and you had to get away.

The church in old Gotham came up as the rain started to pour, and I took refuge under the wings of a gargoyle, my back against the cold granite. I pried my helmet off, tugged my hood up around my face and curled up to the wall. There were three texts from Barbara and Roy, and a voicemail from an unknown number.

Barbara’s were everything I expected. Clark just told us about Gail. Oh Jason, I’m so sorry. I would’ve stopped Dick from telling you if I’d known.

Another. If you need someone, you know where to find me. I’ll have Alfred make hot cocoa, just how you like it. With the marshmallows.

That almost won her a smile. I was tempted, but there were other things I needed to take care of first before I hung it up for the night.

Roy’s was simple. Be careful tonight, JT. Lian’s super fussy and she’s wantin her Uncle Jay.
I’ll keep the light on for you and there’ll be leftovers in the fridge.

Although I’d never say so because I wouldn’t hear the end of it, but Roy’s been exactly what I needed. There if I need him, but when I need him, not before. He and that little girl of his have been something to hold on to. And something told me that they felt the same about me. They were part of my family.

The voicemail I was wary of, and my shaking thumb hovered over the call for a full minute before I pressed it, put the phone to my ear. When her voice started, my eyes began to burn.

“Jason, I know you’re working right now, but I have to tell you. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry...I wish I’d told you sooner, warned you before you came. I wish Clark would’ve told you all sooner. I know I shouldn’t apologize, but I feel like I should. If you want to talk everything over or talk about anything, grab coffee together or lunch or just hang out, call me back.”

I ended the voicemail recording, and I rested the phone on the stone next to me. I hugged my knees to my chest, and rubbed my palms into my eyes to stem the tears.

I knew I didn’t want Gail out of my life. I didn’t want her gone. She was a part of me, one of the good parts. She was my best friend, even after all this time. She was my best friend, but Jesus Christ, how could I stand to be in the same room with her now? How could I look her in the eye and say I only saw her as a friend?

I froze into the gargoyle of that church, water pattering onto my toes. I had to figure this out. I had to make some sense out of this. I never planned on falling in love with her. It started as a friendship, the most reluctant kind. Then a partnership. And then...I sighed, took my phone and sifted through the contacts. Roy.

Flowers made good kindling. The car was driven into the warehouse on fortieth and King, Roy with Lian in a rain slicker beside him as the flowers elbowed each other for room in my little commute car. I had finished rigging it with explosives, and stepped back, controller in my hand as Roy hoisted his daughter on his hip.

“So why are we blowing up your car?” He asked, a wry look on his face. He bounced Lian on his hip, the little girl sucking her thumb and looking at the flowers with wide eyes.
I walked back to the car, broke the glass with my elbow to pull out a fresh sunflower and brought it back to Lian. Her face lit up, and she held it to her nose, inhaling deeply. I said, “Not like I need it anymore. I’ll be out of a job here soon since I’m going underground.”

“And the flowers?”

“Remember that friend I told you about? The one that used to live at the house before you?” I had trouble forcing the word ‘friend’ out of my mouth, and cleared my throat as I started the rundown for detonation.

“Yeah.”

“She came back,” I said, “And...it didn’t go well.”

Roy was quiet for a moment before he touched his shoulder to mine, his eyes on my raw knuckles. “I know it ain’t my business, but I’m pretty sure you don’t get flowers for just your friend.”

“You had it right the first time. It ain’t your business.” I could still feel her palm against my mouth, her hands on my face. “Cover Lian.”

He turned his back, and wrapped his arms around her. The explosives were planted just under the back seat, right under the flower arrangements. Petals blasted out of the windows and fell to the ground like colorful snow, still flaming as my ears rang. I didn’t care. The second wave was in the engine, which I’d bled dry of gas before I rigged it. The hood blew off and landed behind it, headlights busted and bumped mangled by the time the smoke cleared and started to waft up to the open windows of the warehouse by the high ceiling.

Maybe Gail coming back with someone else was a blessing in disguise. Maybe now I could focus on what mattered. I had a chance to win my peace of mind back. I could kill the new clown, kill Talia al Ghul, and leave.

I mean, who the hell was I trying to kid? I grabbed the hot dogs from the grocery bags Roy brought with him, stuck one on the end of my knife and held them over the fire billowing out of my back window. I tucked the dog in the bun and broke it in half.

I had what I needed right here. Family. The Harpers I was feeding hot dogs too, Barbara, Dick, Tim,
Bruce, and Alfred. All I needed. All I would need.

She was my friend, but I wasn’t going to fool myself into thinking I could keep my hopes down around her. I’d be civil, but I wouldn’t be okay.

I’d have to accept it. She moved on. Time for me to do the same.

.............................................................

**LATER THAT WEEK**

Her return brought the rain, or maybe that was just Gotham City offering its half-assed condolences. This month had already taken so much from me, and I was more than ready for it to end. November was just around the corner, but there was one thing I’d picked up in the summers here that I didn’t want to let go of just yet, and that was running.

It doesn’t need saying, but I knew it was a bad idea. I was supposed to be underground, waiting for Joker-like crime or any word on Lex or Talia, but as much of a homebody as I was, I couldn’t stand staying in that firehouse doing nothing but sharpening weapons and playing peek-a-boo with Lian, as much as I loved the latter. So once a week, I tried to deck myself out in sweats, put in earbuds synced to my phone, strap a gun to my ankle, and go running for an hour or two.

The rain wasn’t cold this morning. It was actually somewhat refreshing. I’d spent the night halfway between a nightmare and misery, and it was like a cool shower, drenching my hair to the hood. After about twenty minutes I unzipped my hoodie to let the rainwater fall onto my scarred chest, and the downpour was so thick I doubted anyone would notice.

I turned onto a back street, passed a couple huddled in the bus stop, and the sloshing of Gotham Bay kicked up sea spray onto me. The salt stung my calves. It wasn’t so bad. Solitary existence had suited me well before. I could return to this.

Which meant it shouldn’t have surprised me when a Subaru turned onto my street, and I recognized the style, the license plate. I didn’t think she’d still have it stashed somewhere in the city, but there it was. I stopped, turned and started to go back the way I came, more of a sprint than a jog. My lungs were already burnt out, but this wouldn’t be the first time I pushed them beyond their limits.
The Subaru slunk into the park lane, and the window rolled down. I tried to ignore it. “Jason!”

“Drive on, Gail,” I shouted back, without looking at her. She wove around a truck to keep pace with me and it went on for another block before I gave up.

I put my hands on my head, blinked through the rain at her leaned over in her car. “Jason, get in the car. You’ll catch a cold.”

“Maybe I want to catch one,” I said, but still took the few steps needed to get in the car, slid into the passenger’s seat.

I rolled up the window and made it my mission to glare through it. I unzipped my hoodie fully, knowing she wouldn’t care and put a hand against my wet stomach. I took my earbuds out, shut off the music. She hadn’t moved yet, and the only sound in the car was my attempt to catch my breath, knowing it was no use with her.

I could see her reflection in the window. Hair up in a bun, a spray of bangs across her forehead, and she was in business attire. Her new journalist job was dressing her far better than she had in Gotham, and it made it easier, in a way, to say, “You remember where I live, right?”

“Yes…” She said, quiet and as she sent a quick text, to her boyfriend surely, she tossed the statement between us like a bridge. “I called you. Left you a voicemail.”

I burned that bridge. “Did you want me to call you back? I’m underground after Lex’s announcement…until further notice.”

“My phone is secure,” Gail said. “Still could’ve called, if you wanted to talk.”

“Traditionally, that could be taken as a hint that I don’t want to talk,” The pang of regret hit me full-force after I said that, and she glanced at me sharply.

“You know how I knew it was you on the street?” She asked, and I shrugged. She said, “You turned and ran as soon as you saw me. What a refreshing change of pace for Jason Todd.”
Damn her. I missed her so much, and damn her. Anyone else and I would’ve forcefed them the steering wheel, but I was biting my tongue to keep from smirking. I sighed. “What do you want from me, Abigail?”

“You were so happy to see me back at the hotel, and now you’re treating me like a stranger,” Gail said, and reached over for my hand on the console, which I took back. “I wanted to know if something happened. How’ve you been?”

“Where’d you even meet him?” I countered, my mouth curled in a grin I didn’t mean as I looked at her.

I looked at her face, her bare neck where her hair didn’t rest, and I wondered how much he’s seen that I had. Did he look at the soft space behind her ear like he wanted to kiss it too? Had he kissed it already? Had he kissed her everywhere yet?

“What does that have to do with—”

I wasn’t about to play games with this, and every smug, sarcastic word made her wince deepen as she gripped the wheel with white knuckles. “What, did he just appear? Was it the day you arrived in Metropolis? Did he handle your baggage to the apartment? Was it a week after? Office romance? Come on, Gail. Being your friend implies that I get the hot deets about your new boytoy.”

“...Office romance,” She said, and briefly met my eye out of the corner of hers. She was doing her best not to look at me. “He’s in law school in Metropolis, took a break to accompany me because he knew this would be difficult for me. Going back home.”

A break. From law school. Yeah. Not terribly committed to his studies, then, but committed to her.

“Now are you going to tell me what you’ve been up to?” She asked.

“My mother’s dead, don’t need another one,” I said under my breath, my hand rubbing hard at the back of my neck. “Well Gail, are you happy with Freddy? And be honest.”

“Be honest with you?” Gail said, her manicured fingernails drumming against the steering wheel. “You’re demanding I answer your questions but you haven’t answered a single one of mine.”
“Fine, I’ve been spending my time killing criminals. Brutally, violently, sometimes I put my finger on the murder button for a bit too long and there’s less to dispose of. Maybe a femur at most. Juicy juicy shit, Gail. You want pictures, I’ve got pictures.” A vein on my neck popped out as I reverted back to my earlier question. “Now, are you happy with him?”

“Something I don’t know, Jason. I know you kill criminals and describing it doesn’t scare me away,” Her jaw tensed as she turned a little harder than normal, throwing me into the door with the momentum. “Frederick and I are perfectly happy, Jason, and also none of your business.”

“Apparently it’s enough my business to where you feel the need to apologize for him,” I shot back, cracking my knuckles to keep from bailing out of the car. Road rash would be less painful than this. “And leave me voicemails saying you want to talk. Thing is, I don’t feel like talking. I never feel like talking.”

“Y’know what, Jay,” She wrenched the car into a back alley, locked the doors and turned the car off. Gail turned to me, her arm on the console as she laced her fingers business-like. Like she was in a negotiation. “You told me, before I left, that you didn’t care if I didn’t end up with you. And then you put me on a plane with a note that said you were in love with me. Head over heels, ass over teacups.” My eyes widened and I shrunk into the chair as she kept going, her eyes bright and I could tell she knew she was right. “You want to deny that, too? You want to deny that when you put me down at the hotel and then heard Frederick come out of the bathroom, that the first thought that ran through your mind was the note you wrote me? You want to deny those ten seconds and the mountains of evidence to the contrary? Because this is all looking incredibly familiar, Jason...It’s called running away. Like I said...refreshing change of pace for you.”

She stared at me, and I stared back, deer in headlights. My chest rose, her chest fell. Her chest rose, my chest fell. Before long, we breathed together. My heart in my ears, hers on her sleeve. For the first time, I glanced at her left hand and sighed when I didn’t see a ring.

“Has it ever occurred to you that I’m trying to run away for you?” I asked her, the first civil word I had said all morning. “So you can do normal. So you can have normal, but that can’t happen if you keep trying to hold onto me. Because I’m anything but normal.”

“What in the world makes you think I want normal?”

I countered, my eyes hard on her. “How long have you and him been together?”
“Six months,” She admitted, and she said it like an admission. Like admitting to smoking or stealing an old lady’s wallet.

“I thought being shot at and nearly dying would’ve taught you that I can’t give you normal,” I whispered, “I thought being shot at and nearly dying would’ve taught you that I can barely keep you alive, and how do you repay me? You dive back into Gotham City the first chance you get, right back to where we started..”

“Maybe if you would’ve called me while I was in Metropolis, I wouldn’t have a reason to come back,” Gail said, and I hated to notice it, but I’d forgotten just how beautiful she was. “I was so worried about you, all the time. Wondering if you were okay, if you were alone and sad.”

“I was,” I confessed. And although ‘alone and sad’ certainly fit the bill, I clarified. “I was okay. I didn’t get hurt too bad while you were gone. Worst I got was a broken finger back in February.” I looked away from her, just for the pain to stop a little while, and fixed my gaze on my hands. “Take me home, Gail.”

“I thought you had to get rid of the firehouse,” She said, turning the car back on. “To go underground.”

I didn’t want to tell her that I found it hard to leave the place after she left, like it was something I grew with her that I couldn’t bear to part with. “I’d waste too much time moving it, and something’s bound to go missing if I did.”

She nodded, and drove us out of the alley. If it’d put her mind at ease, I also told her another piece of news. “...Past month, I’ve had a young father and his daughter living with me. Speedy, from Star City, and his three-year-old Lian.”

“Isn’t he the one suspected for the attempt on Luthor?”

“Yep,” I said, “...He was being blackmailed by Talia, and I took them in. Helped him break their grip on him, saved his daughter.”

Gail flashed a smile, patted my arm and I ignored how my skin went up in goosebumps. “Jason, that’s amazing.”
I wanted to tell her about seeing the clown. I wanted to tell her so much about what had happened, but it was that rabbit hole. The one rabbit hole I didn’t want her to fall into the way I had. If I told her, she’d want to help. And the cycle would begin.

“Have you listened to the records at all?” She asked, desperate to fill the car with anything but silence.

“You can have them back,” I said. I didn’t want to tell her that they filled my firehouse with anything but silence, as much as they hurt me to do so. “I can bring them to your hotel room.”

“...That wasn’t what I asked.”

“You can listen to them with him,” I whispered, my eyes burning and I pointed them out of the window as we got onto my street. “Maybe slowdance with him late at night. Does he know about your nightmares? I imagine you’re living together already, he has to know about them.”

She parked in front of the engine bay door, which I’d hastily patched after she returned. The welding job wasn’t my best work, but it was sufficient. The hole felt ten times bigger after she came back, like a hole in my walls. I needed it shut, I needed it closed. And then I’d sleep at night.

“He doesn’t know about them,” Her voice trembled, her eyes on her hands. “I don’t wake him up when I have them.”

I looked at her, slow and incredulous. My brows knitted and the water on my body chilled, felt cold for the first time. “...Abigail. What do you mean he doesn’t know?”

“If I told him about my nightmares, I’d have to tell him everything else.” She pried her fingers off the wheel and rested back against her seat, her head in her hand propped on the window. Even in business attire, she looked ragged and I saw the thousands of sleepless nights in the shadows under her eyes that she tried to cover up with concealer. “...He doesn’t know anything about...who I was, what I did. He caught me in the middle of one once, screaming in my sleep and crying so hard I couldn’t see,” She bit her lip, squeezed her eyes tight. “...I lied and said it was something else, anxiety or some bullshit about a rough day.”

“I don’t think you need me to tell you that isn’t healthy,” I wanted to reach out and touch her, but I didn’t think I’d be able to take my hand back. “I mean, Jesus, Gail, I’m hardly an authority for what’s healthy and what isn’t, but...I thought you’d want to come clean with someone if you…”
trailed off.

Gail lifted her head out of her hand and shot a glare at me. “Admitting to killing someone twice isn’t exactly something you can get into a conversation on a first date, let alone saying that you watched your mother die. I can’t be as nonchalant about death as you can.”

“I never said you had to be,” I leaned forward, the rain growing louder with the tension. “Just said you should be honest with the guy if you’re serious about him.”

“What makes you think-”

“Well shit, I was gonna give Freddy more credit, but I guess I shouldn’t-”

“Stop, let me finish,” Her hands up and waving. “I am serious about him, it’s just that…”

“It’s just what?” I asked, shrugging and scanning her for any kind of sign as to which it was. I smirked at her, retreated to sarcasm where it was safe. “Don’t tell me he ain’t your type, sunshine. Prim and proper straight arrow guy like that, he’s ten kinds of your type.”

“The hell are you talking about?” Her nose scrunched up in the cute way I liked and I decided this wasn’t worth it.

“Whatever, forget I said anything. Have fun with Freddy, and have a great life, Gail.” I got out of the car, strolled down the alley to my door, and when I heard her get out, I went faster.

Her heels clicked until they were right behind me, her hand grabbing the back of my jacket as I opened my door. She pushed me through, shut the door and shoved me back against it, hand on my chest. My hood fell off, water dripping from my hair and she was drenched with that short stint in the rain, her blouse slicked to her and her pencil skirt clung to her like a second skin.

“You’re not going anywhere until you explain what you just said, Jason,” She demanded, and when I tried to slip out of her view, she planted a hand against the door to prevent me.

“Funny,” I shoved my hands into my hoodie and leaned in close enough to smell her perfume
amplified by the rainwater. “You aren’t too sure about being serious with him, but you’re deadly serious with me.”

“Because you keep making snide remarks and then running away before I can get you back for them,” Gail said hotly, but didn’t back down. “And I don’t take you for a coward, Jason, but if you keep doing this, I just might.”

A throat clearing behind her had me looking over her shoulder, and Roy was sitting in a lawn chair by the fire barrel, a sandwich between his hands. His eyes were full of amusement as he smiled and said, “You must be Gail.” He waved. “I’m Roy.”

Gail turned, straightened her clothes and smiled. “Pleasure to meet you, Roy. I believe it’s Harper?”

“That’s me,” Roy glanced between us, “Need me to give you kids some privacy?”

What I wouldn’t give to strangle him. Behind Gail’s back, I dragged the tip of my finger across my throat and shook my head. “Actually, Gail was just leaving. I’m sure there’s some scoop she needs to get for the *Daily Planet*.”

“I’m actually hours ahead of schedule, I was just driving around the old neighborhood,” Gail said to me through gritted teeth, “So if you don’t mind giving us a minute, Roy, that’d be great. Maybe we can get to know each other sometime.”

“That won’t be necess-” I tried but Roy cut me off, standing to his full height and saluting Gail as he jogged to the stairs.

“I’m sure Jason can get you my number,” Roy winked and I flipped him off as he started up the stairs.

“Add a peculiar non-platonic desire to be alone to the list of reasons I don’t think you’re really all that serious about Freddy,” I noted, and whipped off my hoodie. The air of the engine bay hit my bare chest, comfortable and warm.

Gail glued her eyes to mine, her hands on her hips. “His name is Frederick, and I’m very serious about him.”
“And how you practically threw yourself at me when I showed up in your hotel room.”

Gail scoffed. “I hadn’t seen you for a freakin’ year, what do you expect me to do?”

I snorted, and my lips spread in a grin. “Did you just say ‘freakin’? Jesus, does your Gotham City swearing make his hairspray part? Do you even remember how to swear?”

“Fuck off, Jason,” She narrowed her eyes at me, and when I clapped, she rolled her eyes.

“There’s the Gail I know,” My grin never faltered. “I meant what I said the other night. It is good to see you.” It wasn’t like before, when I raked my eyes down her form to make her hate me. I was really looking this time. “...You look good. In that ‘Yeah, I clean up nice’ kind of way.”

“Shut up,” Her cheeks were flushed and shining from the rain.

“Spent all this effort trying to get me to talk and now you want to shut me up. Awful rude, sunshine,” I padded over to hang my hoodie on the rack, and I felt her eyes on my backside.

“What do you want?” She asked. “What do you want me to say? How can I fix this? I’ve obviously hurt you.”

“You haven’t,” So much for holding back the lies, but I could guess that she couldn’t tell if my back was turned. I faced her. “You just opened my eyes. We’re just friends. We were just friends before...I just didn’t have the gall to be a hypocrite, to say that I’ll protect you and then throw you into the fire.”

“Hypocrisy has nothing to do with it.” Gail said, “If anyone’s the hypocrite, it’s me. I condemned you, for waging a one-man war against Bruce Wayne, and I did the same thing...just in a different way and on a smaller scale...”

“You forgave me.”
“I did,” She looked down at her hands, fiddling with them in front of her. “And I don’t regret a moment I spent with you a year ago.”

“Only one moment I regret, but for the most part, nothin’.” I moved to the door, and looked her in the eyes. “...I was stupid enough to let you go, and I knew you’d do exactly what I said. You’d fall in love with someone else, get serious - even if you don’t want to admit it,” She bit her lip at that, “...I couldn’t have expected you to do any different. I mean, look at you, Gail. I knew I couldn’t have been the only one with eyes, right?”

Gail fought a smile and sighed again. “Shut up.”

I restrained myself from saying ‘make me’, and opened the door for her. I took an umbrella and handed it to her, “Keep it.”

She stayed rooted to the spot. “Will you answer when I call?”

We looked at each other for a while, and at last, I said. “I’ll think about it.”

She accepted the umbrella, passed me and headed out into the rain again. I closed the door behind her, pressed my forehead against the metal, and whispered her name like it’d make the bad magic go away.
“But you’ll feel better when you wake up
Swear to god I’ll make up
Everything and more when I get back someday
This is more than just a phase, love
Shooting stars all break up
And even though it seems like half the world away”

- EDEN, “Wake Up”

The first thing Barbara did when she woke up, the same thing she’d done every day since she and Dick got together, was reach for him. She stretched her hand across the sheets, warm and dripping sunbeams, and feel for the planes of his back. She searched for the dip between his shoulders, the way his muscles dented his skin, and the soft curls at the back of his neck that he could never comb straight.

But today, when she felt nothing but fabric next to her, she flinched awake. She knocked her glasses onto the floor when she scrambled for them, and almost fell from the bed reaching. She put them out, the world clarifying as she checked the entire bed. Her breath came faster, and she pinched herself hard on the arm. The understanding that she wasn’t dreaming drowned her, and her voice sounded small to her own ears as she called out to the Clocktower.

“Dick, where are you?”

And her sigh was louder when she got a reply from the kitchen.

“But Barbara?” His head leaned back into view down the hallway, a shock of black hair over his pale forehead. There was a clatter as he put something down, and jogged back to the bedroom.

She buried her face in the pillows a second too late when he asked, “Hey, are you alright?”

Barbara tried everything, biting her lip and the inside of her cheek, even her tongue. The tears came anyway, and she sucked in a breath. “I-It’s nothing. It’s fine. I’m okay.”

Tim trusted her word. He hadn’t been around long enough to understand not to when it came to questions like “are you okay?”. Dick had been around from the beginning. He knew better.
His fingers held her hair back to kiss her temple. “Can’t lie to me, Babs. Never could.”

She finally lifted her head, and dragged her freckled forearm across her eyes. “I shouldn’t...freak out like that, but...I woke up. And you were gone, and I thought…”

She didn’t have to look at him. It was all over his voice, the furrowed brow and the frown. “You thought what? That I’d left you?”

Barbara turned her face, just the smallest amount so he could see younger eyes out of the red, scrubbed skin around them. She didn’t answer him.

It felt like when she was sixteen, him fifteen and shorter than her, and she had sprained her wrist knocking a criminal outcold. She’d only been there three months, in the Batgirl costume and giving both he and Bruce a run for their money. He had asked if she wanted ice, and she didn’t answer him. She held her arm and let the breeze blow past their capes, before she told him to mind his own business.

He hadn’t, and she never forgave him for it, or forgot it. She could feel the ice against her wrist, the gentle pressure, but never felt the cold. She was too busy looking at him. Now, he took the same wrist, and pressed her palm against his cheek.

“She’s still in Bludhaven, last I heard,” Was all she said, barely above a whisper.

Dick shook his head under her hand. He’d avoided talking about Starfire from the moment he showed up at her door a few days back, and she had thought it was because it hurt. Now, she knew it was because there wasn’t much to say. “Garfield shot me a text this morning, said that Kori left the condo...to go where, I don’t know. The fight we had before she kicked me out wasn’t really a fight more than a realization. She knew. The entire time.”

“Knew what?”

“How I feel about you,” He closed his eyes, and gathered her against him, laid back on the bed with her folded to his side. She listened to his heartbeat, and felt the vibration of his skin as he spoke, “...What I felt for her was serious, sure. We care about each other, and probably won’t ever stop, in some way. But what I feel for you, Barb...it’s been there years, since we were stupid kids in capes...”
“Really stupid kids in capes.” She agreed, her smile tucked into his chest like a lovenote. He ran his fingertips up and down her spine, and he never went beyond the point she couldn’t feel his touch. After a moment, he settled to cradle her head in that hand, her hair spread on him.

“Remember when I found you in the chapel after the gala?” His voice was so soft and his warm breath fell down her neck in a wave. “...And you asked me when the last time I prayed was? I lied...I told you it was after Jason, and though I did pray for him, it wasn’t the last time...I...”

“Dick, tell me,” She propped herself on her elbow, dug into the mattress by his shoulder. His blue eyes were shining, and he bit his lip, that unsure way that he never escaped when he hit sixteen.

“It was after you,” He said, and kept her gaze as she paled. “I went to see you, right after I returned from space with the Titans. As soon as I touched the ground, I was running for you. It was like I’d been shot too, it hurt so bad when I saw you...You were still asleep, but breathing heavy and like you were in a nightmare. I sat by you that night...all night, and held your hand,” He took her hand again, and kissed her fingers, “...I prayed all night into you, prayed that you’d be okay.”

“Dick...”

“Kori demanded to know why now, why I chose now to tell her about kissing you instead of telling her a year ago,” Dick said, and he shifted to touch his forehead to hers. “I told her about that night I stayed by your side, prayed and listened to you sleep, and knew that someone else was going to take you home, take care of you. I told her that I cared for her, as much as I could while still loving you. I told her that I never meant to hurt her or you, but if I’m to be an honest man, I should own up to everything.”

Barbara let go of a sigh and bowed her head. His fingers bent under her chin and led her mouth to his. She didn’t cry often, but she refused to fight them anymore, not when he was smiling into the kiss, tugged her in tighter.

“I hate you,” She whispered into his lips, something she told him a thousand times when they were stupid kids in capes. Dick swept her frozen legs over his lap and kissed her.

And he replied in turn, swiping her tears away. “No, you don’t.”
I hated doing this, but when the pain was about the nicest thing I’ve felt all week, I didn’t mind so much. I put a stool in front of the mirror, got out the whiskey and the pens, and started about straightening my nose, still in my armor from night shift.

I stuck the stiffest pen up my nose, my eyes watering with the aftershocks radiating down my sinus. Roy watched from the door, styrofoam cup of ramen in his hands. He slurped his noodles as I made the first adjustment, pulling the pen out of my face.

“There a reason why you’re watching me do this?” I wiped the snot off the pen, and lined up a clean one with my nose, seeing where the next one needed to be done.

“You’re not handling it well, are you?”

I glared at him, and returned to the mirror. My fingertips tested the ginger skin around the re-broken bones. “Handling what well? Having my nose bashed in for the zillionth time by freakin’ Deadshot?”

Roy laughed, had another mouthful of ramen. “You know what I’m talking about. You just don’t wanna talk about it...Seeing Joker the same week Gail comes back. Whole hurricane of emotions just hittin’ you at once.”

“You charge by the hour there, counsellor?” I mumbled, inching the pen up my nose before I held my breath and jerked it to the side. A loud crack sent shockwaves up and down my face. I tossed the cap off the whiskey and drank until I needed air. “Fuck…”

He sighed, and set his ramen on the counter. He spun me around to face him, and after a second of pushing my hands away, pushed his thumbs on either side of my nose. “Thing is, Joker’s a fixed grief. You can put him to rest with your own two hands and make sure he doesn’t come back. You do it yourself.”

Trauma aside, he was mostly right. If I did it, Joker stayed dead. It’d be permanent, and with him in the ground, all would be right with the world. I hissed as he pushed on a sharper bone. “Okay. Yeah. So?”

“Gail’s different. You can’t do much to stop how you feel about her, and there isn’t any use denying it because I’ve been texting her.”
I leaned back out of his hands and stared at him. “You’ve been texting her?”

“I’m not your housewife, but I am basically your home nurse,” Roy said, and checked my nose for straightness, tilted my head to see up. “I’m your go-between with everybody else, pretty much. Since you went to see Talia.”

“Gonna dress up for me? Little flouncy skirt and heels, stethoscope, sponge baths and chicken soup?” I smirked, and he rolled his eyes.

“You ain’t that lucky, Todd.” He adjusted another bone with a sharp crack that had me tensed all over, my nails digging into my thigh. “And don’t change the subject. Yeah, I’ve been texting Gail and she told me everything you aren’t saying. How you guys used to be.”

“What’d she tell you?” I tried not to let it show in my voice how much I wanted the answer, but it was his turn to smirk. I squeezed my eyes tight as he straightened more bones.

“You guys were thick as thieves,” Roy said. “She didn’t tell me a lot, to be honest with you, but what she did tell me…” He whistled. “Never took you for the slowdancing type.”

My cheeks were traitorous bastards, and when he finished off my nose, about as straight as it was going to get, I stood up and turned away from him. “It was a long time ago.”

“It was a year ago. Not exactly a long time.” He washed off his hands and picked his ramen back up. I tore off my armor, and peeled off my undershirt, sighing as cool air hit my bare chest.

“A year can be a decade if you forget about the clock.” I rubbed my thumb over a whipping scar on my arm, fought a shiver. I moved past him, and he followed me into my room. The tank top felt normal, but somehow, talking about her made me tense about leaving my neck exposed. The ghosts of her hands ran up and down my back. “She isn’t the kind of girl you just...get over.”

Roy’s eyebrows lifted, and he chewed noodles, pointing his fork at me. “So she and you were...?”

“Not together. We were just friends.”
He twirled his noodles around his fork, slow and pensive. “Good friends? Friendly friends?” His grin was getting bigger and bigger, and I reached into the fridge for water, mostly to cool off my face. “Friends with ben-”

“- just friends, Harper.”

I straightened and screwed off the top of the water bottle before chugging half of it. He grinned into his cup as he drank the broth. “Uh-huh.”

“...Well.”

“Well what?”

“I didn’t wanna be friends…” I sipped my water, and the corners of my mouth were tugging. “I, uh…”

“Yes?” I could tell he was about to explode.

“It started innocent, just helping each other out and we became friends, covered for each other, that kind of thing,” It was sweet, looking back on it like a storybook. My toes worried at a crease in the floor, and my gaze wandered to the patch of floor where we had slowdanced together, where I had kissed her neck. “And then it just...blew up into something we couldn’t pack back together. For a while there, we were okay with that. We didn’t touch it, really, but...we thought about it.”

Roy was quiet when he said, “She told me you guys were pretty much inseparable.”

“Yeah...we were.”

“Why didn’t you guys get together?”

“I think it’s a bit like how you put it earlier…” I met his eyes as I passed him, “I wouldn’t have handled it well. I would’ve been the death of her, and she would’ve been the death of me.” I paused by the door, and looked at him. “...And the sad part is? I think we were okay with that.”
Most wouldn’t have heard her footsteps two floors down in the beachside cottage, but he heard everything, even in the deepest of sleep. His eyes opened and while they adjusted to the darkness, Bruce let his memory guide him to the door of his bedroom. He pressed his ear to the crack in the door, tuned out the waves crashing into the shore outside his window.

Her feet were light, but too light. He didn’t know who it was yet, who had found him. There were thirteen steps from his bedroom door to the staircase, where he estimated her to be now. That is, if he were her target. He turned his doorknob, the click loud in the near-silence.

Bruce sprang from the bedroom, and someone leapt for him in return, a small fist nailing his jaw. He spun on his heel, rammed her into the wall behind him. A grunt embedded into his side, and she kneed him there, hard, before she smacked him in the mouth.

The crown of his head impacted the wall, arrows of pain ricocheting in his head. Nails raked down his chest, and weird nostalgia raced down his spine as the scratches ran over old scars. He seized her wrist and tugged her close, before he lifted her off her feet and slammed her onto the floor. She wheezed out a breath. “S-Son of a…”

And then the heel of her hand jammed into his chin, forced him to bite on his tongue. The hand he had in her hair to control her head pulled. They struggled for a better position, her legs over his and his arms weaving around hers. Bodies rolled over each other until his back met the window at the end of the hall, and as she planted herself on his lap, pushed his shoulders to the wall, he finally caught her face. Moonlight gleamed off her green eyes and the familiar scars over her cheek, eyebrow, and the side of her lip turned the gears in his mind until they locked.

“Selina?” He tried to sit taller, but she held him down.

“Careful,” Her mouth spread into a Cheshire’s grin. “I think I chipped a nail back there.”
Blowin' Through the Jasmine

“See the curtains hangin’ in the window
In the evening on a Friday night
A little light shinin’ through the window
Lets me know every-everything’s all right
Summer breeze makes me feel fine
Blowin’ through the jasmine in my mind”

- The Isley Brothers, “Summer Breeze”

Darkness spotted my vision with sleep-deprivation and the blue-white of the computer screen bleached into my head. I didn’t mind Barbara doing my hacking for me, but something about the phrase ‘peeping on Lex Luthor’ demanded I keep mum on the whole thing. My personal computer, the one I dumped every inch of my life into, was decrepit and probably in desperate need of an upgrade, but it did the job and right now, that’s all I cared about. I knocked back the last mouthful of whiskey, let it burn the road down to my stomach and threaten to come back up. I tossed the bottle into the bin, ignored the glass breaking inside.

It’d been three weeks since I saw the clown, two since she returned, and Roy was right. Alcohol was about my only coping mechanism at this point, that and night shift. Night shift was about the only time I was really myself, leaping from rooftop to rooftop with nothing but wind in my hood and miles below my feet. I didn’t care about anything or anyone, except those I murdered and those I saved. It didn’t matter that there seemed to be a gap in my walls, about the size of the one I’d patched in the engine bay downstairs. Through this hole, things plundered in to take advantage and fought their way to freedom, but it didn’t feel like it’d close anytime soon. The edges of this hole eroded with every day, getting bigger and sucking stuff through it like a breach in a ship’s hull.

My family couldn’t be handymen anymore, trying to fix the hole for me. I had recovered, from the torture and the brainwashing. I got rid of that, but the issues were the battering ram that made that hole. The trust issues, the abandonment issues, the commitment issues, the phrase “worth the trouble”, the term “lost cause”, the most idiotic piece of relationship advice ever “if you love someone, let them go”, and taking the cake was her and the clown. She who was the cake, the sweetest and best thing that ever put me back together. And him, who threatened to take all that progress I made, the recovery, and flush it all out.

The worst part was that I couldn’t help how I felt about her any more than I could kill him. I buried my elbows into the desk, and knotted my fingers in my hair. I couldn’t do a damn thing about either of them.

As if my own problems weren’t enough, my phone buzzed in my pocket. A text from Roy.

Come to the kitchen, don’t make a sound.

Okay. Odd. I reached back into my training for the sound drills I did with Bruce, moving without any bounce so the record wouldn’t skip on the turntable and rolling from shadow to shadow like they were my permanent cloak. The noise from the kitchen grew louder, and it was a wonder I didn’t hear it from my computer room. Slurping, like an obnoxious teen sucking back on a straw from an
obviously empty drink.

Roy was by the door, eyes wide and his bow in hand, but he didn’t reach back for any arrows, didn’t have one notched and ready to fire. He was just watching, his bow hanging by his side like he had decided against attack. The fridge’s light crept into the hallway. I switched the grip on my knife, stood by him before he pointed to what he was staring at and my eyes followed, then grew wider than his.

All I saw was the hair at first, halfway between red and gold and from the crown almost to the thighs of the tall thing. The legs were long and muscular, ended in bare feet with painted purple toenails. I followed the hair to a pair of cutoff shorts, and a long-sleeve black shirt, and when she turned her head, a pair of pupil-less green glowing eyes stared back at me. She pushed her mane over one shoulder and lowered the mustard she was drinking from her lips.

“Starfire?” I turned on the light.

She blinked and startled as the fixture came on, but she kept the mustard as she raced over to lift me off the ground in a one-armed hug. “Jason! How good it is to see you! I apologize for dropping by like this. And taking your mustard! I will replace it, I promise, but I am here to make you a proposition.”

I patted her shoulder weakly with the only hand that wasn’t being crushed against her, and when she put me down, I caught my breath. I glanced at Roy by the door and Kori searched him, like she was solving a puzzle.

Roy walked in and put the bow on the table. “I don’t believe it. Kori? Koriand’r?”

Kori gasped when she heard his voice, finally handed me my mustard before she held out a hand to him. “Roy, I haven’t seen you in…”

“…forever,” He finished. “…Since I left the Titans.”

“You two met at the Tower?” I asked and leaned against the counter, arms crossed. I didn’t know they’d met before, let alone at the Titans. I knew the tension between Roy and Dick was over Cheshire, and that my brother made a difficult call that he regretted, but it hadn’t occurred to me that Starfire might know him.

“We did. I met him shortly after taking refuge on Earth,” She said, “…Dick told me about your daughter, and when I learned of Cheshire’s death, I…”

The archer stiffened, a muscle near his temple shifting. I knew for Starfire, it was a piece of news through the grapevine, but for him, it was a grief of mere weeks ago. “Don’t. I have my daughter, and I’m lucky to have her, let alone a roof over her head. Jason’s been great.”

Kori nodded, and drew her hair down one side, her fingers braiding through the strands. “Which brings me to my proposition.”

“Besides a solid pinky-swear that you won’t show up at 3AM again to raid my fridge without at least a warning to stock up on mustard?”

“Of course.” Her red lips spread into a bashful smile. She held the end of her hair, and looked between us. “Do either one of you have a hair tie?”

I scraped a hand over my own hair, which Roy had taken scissors to yesterday and was now cut with the top longer than the sides. He flicked his off his wrist and tossed it to her with a wary glance. She
tied her hair, and played with the end of the braid. “The separation between myself and Dick is final, and I have moved out of his dwelling in Bludhaven.”

“Why not return to the Titans?” Roy asked her, though it sounded more like an accusation. His damp copper hair fell around his face, the cords of muscle in his shoulders flexed in the way it got when he was torn. He wanted to treat her like he treated Dick, with a bitter frustration, but I knew some part of him recognized that she could barely order takeout with the right verb tense when it happened. She was hardly at fault, even if she used to be with Dick.

Starfire was the picture of grace, or obliviousness, perhaps. Her eyes casted down, to her hands and her nails were bitten back to the beds. “If I returned there without him, it would not feel right. I love my friends, I love them dearly and I miss them, but it is all too…fresh. Too raw. Yes. Raw is the right word.”

“Join the club.” I cut through the background and guessed at her proposition. “…You need somewhere to stay.”

“Yes, but I will earn my mustard, I swear to you.” I didn’t have the heart to laugh at her; she seemed so serious, with her eyebrows together and every ounce of alien princess within her beaming. “I want to help you on your mission to bring the evil clown to justice.”

“You want to patrol with me?” I saw the merits of having a Tamaranian as my help from above, but I needed a low profile. After the Battle for Gotham left me with ringing in my ears from her starbolts, something told me having her with me would bring the opposite effect. “Kori, I don’t care if you stay here, but there’s a bounty on my head from the President and I…”

I trailed off. Between the blank expression and how she blinked like a newborn, I didn’t think she understood the gravity yet. Made sense, considering she defied gravity as well as Kent. “Listen, pick a bed and I’ll hunt you a mattress. I’ll see what I can give you in the way of work.”

Roy shrugged, and took his bow from the table. I imagined he didn’t see his need for being there, and he told us so. “I’m going back to bed, now that I’m not needed. If you two are going to be up for a while, keep it down.” He combed a hand through his hair, and shot a glance at Starfire. “My daughter is sleeping.”

He padded out of the kitchen and disappeared into the shadows of the hall, the sound of the floorboards creaking under his feet stopping after he closed the dormitory doors behind him. Kori pushed out her lower lip, her hands clasped in front of her. She sighed, a lock of her hair blowing out. “He does not want me here.”

“Relax,” I turned around and pulled out a couple of glasses from the cabinet. “He’s in the same situation you are, just in a different sense. Theoretically, you can get Dick back, he can’t have Cheshire back.”

“We are not different at all.” She said, her hip against the counter as she watched me retrieve the carton of eggnog from the fridge. It was early for it, really early, but I’d just picked it up and it seemed like a good way to welcome her into Jason’s House of Lost Strays. “…I cannot have him again, any more than Roy Harper can have Cheshire returned to him.”

“…What do you mean?” I squinted at her, my fingers paused on the eggnog cap. “Dick’s alive.”

“When our relationship was ending,” She wrinkled her nose at the eggnog, confused as to what it was, but did not argue when I filled her glass. “He told me that he was in love with Barbara Gordon and had been for several years. He said that he would care about me as long as he lived, but love…
he would love her forever, something I knew he had reservations about when he promised to be with me for the same length of time.”

She drank from her eggnog, a tentative sip at first but then longer and deeper as she got accustomed to the taste. I watched her over my glass as I drank. I knew the odd jealousy of wanting someone, but gritting your teeth as they were happy with someone else, usually when the former did not pan out. In my case, it was a grief of choice and a mistake I could not undo, even if it was a correct mistake - as oximoronic as that sounded. The same decision weighed on her, I knew the look. She had shadows under her eyes too, the raw nail beds I saw, and the bare feet. She flew here, and behind her, tucked by the window, were the few possessions she had to start with packed in a messenger bag. A refugee, from her people and her heart.

“You let him go.”

She nodded. I walked to my spice cupboard, pulled out the nutmeg and added a pinch to each glass. She drank again and hummed. “Thank you, Jason…I do not know Earth’s customs well, but I understand that appearing like this was untoward and unacceptable.”

“Harsh word for it, ‘unacceptable’.” Earnest smiles were out of my capability, but I could manage a half-assed smirk. “I’d say ‘surprising, but not entirely unwelcome’. You saved my brother’s life last year, getting him to the Tower as fast as you did after he was injured.” The tiniest wince registered at her eyes at the memory. “Letting you stay as long as you need under my roof is easy.”

“Forever?” She said into her glass, her green gaze on me.

I lifted a shoulder. “Sure.”

Starfire drank the rest of her eggnog, wiped the remainder off her lips and pushed the glass towards me to refill it. She stared at me, the proud brow of a princess leveled.

“And how long is forever?”

I wish I had an answer.

………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………..

She loved to touch him and had dreamed of it in the years they danced around each other, apart and together and apart again, but never more than when he was presumed dead.

Selina never thought a dead man would ever make her feel such relief that she felt the need to push it down where he couldn’t sense it, but she also never thought a dead man would complain so much about being put back together. He sat in a stool, face pale in the kitchen’s light, staring at her back as she laid out what she’d need from the first aide kit. Her catsuit was peeled down to her hips, and Calvin Klein had never steered her wrong in showing just enough skin, but something about the way his eyes searched for hers when she turned back around left her feeling naked all the same. Maybe it was time apart. Maybe it was something else, or the new scratches over his chest.

“Who told you I was here?” It wasn’t an interrogation, like many of the other times they crossed paths. It was soft, and some hopeful part of her was reminded of the few nights they took the masks off, let themselves be human.

“Your eldest told me,” She said and moved to stand between his knees.
Without looking at him, she cleaned the scratches while her own cheek bruised and his jaw colored
darker. His eyes stayed on hers, the magnetic pull hard to resist. Bruce never moved so much in the
suit, but here, where his mortality was painted on him, she finally felt him breathe. “Your family has
been so worried about you. I’ve been doing what I can for Barbara and your boys, for Alfred, but…
they need you.”

“Selina…” He said her name in a sigh that brushed through her hair, and she met his eye for the
briefest moment. “Thank you for taking care of them.”

“I don’t need you to thank me. I didn’t do it for you. What I need is for you to come back to Gotham
City with me.”

He stiffened, moved away from her hands to look at her. His brows knit, and the blue of his eyes
were even icier. “Was that your only reason for coming to Anguilla? To rush me north to stop
Talia?”

“I know this may be hard for you to take in,” Selina leaned in until their noses almost touched.
“Don’t take it personally, Bruce.” She returned to her work, ignoring his glare. “Your beloved Talia
is wreaking havoc on Gotham, brought the Joker back from the dead, the cremated kind of dead, and
your boys need you. And if Alfred can’t get you off your broody ass to stop it, I will drag you back
to Gotham by my whip if I have to.”

“I’m not taking an early retirement vacation.” He watched her dress his scratches, his nails digging
into the seat of the stool. “This is exile. I may have saved the city, but I’m compromised. Batman’s
dead.”

“Bring him back,” She said, as if it were that simple. “I hear coming back from the dead is all the
rage these days.”

“This is not funny.”

Selina’s nose wrinkled and her lip curled as she glared back at him. “Faking your death wasn’t
either. Not all of us were in on your vanishing act. I destroyed Riddler’s lab and left Gotham City
thinking you were dead.” She set the bandages, pressed in with her fingers with more force than
necessary and she pushed even harder when he didn’t wince, kept his eyes on her. “Figured hey, at
least I did something he might have been proud of me for. I went everywhere, staying in the rough
part of town and I don’t like to keep attachments, Bruce. Still don’t. But I couldn’t do anything about
you-”

“Selina, I’m s-” He started to say, but she snarled at him.

“-I’m not finished yet, Batman.”

Bruce set his lips into a hard line as she continued, fixing an ice pack for his jaw, “And then the Red
Hood shows up on my doorstep, tracked me down to tell me that the Joker was back, the son of a
bitch that hurt you and your kids, brings me back to Gotham only to find out that you’re alive. I did
my best all that time to suck it up, be a big girl, be the master jewel thief, but there I was, in the heart
of the righteous and broody, because of a man that couldn’t let me know he wasn’t dead!”

She shoved the ice pack to his jaw and stepped away as he held it there. Her hands on her hips, she
squeezed her eyes tight. She felt his eyes on her back, she always could after she said something
witty or did something rash. It was the closest they got sometimes to touching, just the dark gaze over
her neck and her shoulders. She heard him leave the stool, take one tentative stride to her like he
wanted to take another but was waiting on her permission.
“I don’t like to keep attachments,” She repeated. “But that doesn’t mean that it’s impossible. Mourning you wasn’t a lot of crying, really, wasn’t as pathetic as visiting your grave to pour my guts over the grass, but…it was a lot of walking. Not running after a heist, or falling off a building. Just walking. Like I didn’t care if I was caught, because you wouldn’t be the one chasing me. It wasn’t any fun on the rooftops anymore, not without you. It was never cold up there till you left.” He took another stride and she half-turned, a hand out to stop him. “I’m not saying this to get a reaction out of you. I’m saying it for me. To get it off my chest. Nobody told me to come down here. I came because it’s the right thing to do…if I recall, you often said that even if I didn’t buy it, you thought I was still capable of doing the right thing.”

Bruce put down the ice pack and took the hand she used to ward him off. “I didn’t think it. I knew it.”

His eyes were sadder than she remembered. The tip of her thumb ran long the edge of his mouth. He whispered, “I’m not ready. I need more time. I’m sorry…I’m not the man you mourned.”

Her gaze fell to the scars on his collarbones. She tried her best not to think about the briefcase that Alfred had given her after she told him where she was going, and after she’d made him swear not to tell a soul. Shadows cast over Bruce’s face as his lips touched her forehead.

“I’ll help you find him,” She promised.
Do That Voodoo

“Do something to me
Something that simply mystifies me
Tell me, why should it be
You have the power to hypnotize me?
Let me live 'neath your spell
Do- do that voodoo that you do so well
’Cause you do something to me
That nobody else could do”
- Paul Weller, “You Do Something To Me”

The funny thing about Gotham City was that it was easier to disappear into than you think.

Everybody thought that the Batman’s hideout would scream out at you in the concrete jungle of lead and shadows, and now, plenty of people were breathing down Lex’s neck to find me. The shadows in Gotham were big enough to swallow elephants, the gravity too heavy to escape, and blending in with the homeless wasn’t hard. I would know.

Sundays were my grocery run days, and after two weeks with three adults and a toddler getting over a cold in one house, I was in desperate need of some fresh air. I woke early enough to hear Roy snore and threw a leather jacket over a hoodie, jeans, and boots. Bathroom was open, so I stopped in there to throw a bandage over the brand and strap a gun to my boot, another inside my jacket. When I left there, Starfire was just leaving the kitchen with tea in hand.

“Groceries?” She whispered as she offered me the first sip of tea, which I took.

Mint tea which wasn’t exactly my favorite but it opened up my stuffy sinuses back up. Lian’s cold must have found its way to me. I returned her cup and nodded, zipping up my jacket. “I’ll be back before the kids wake up.”

“Be careful,” Kori smiled, and turned to go to the room with the vinyl crates and books.

Starfire had been quiet since she moved in, helped with Lian where she could - fetching bottles of milk, diapers, blankets, whatever the little lady needed. Roy had allowed her to hold Lian a couple of times when I was out on patrol and he needed to shower or use the bathroom, and truth be told, she was great with her. The tiny quiver in Roy’s voice when he told me verified it. She taught her how to braid her hair, read to her if she wanted. Lian had told Roy that it was like having an older sister, and Kori didn’t argue with it. She told me later that it was a relief, that she was a better older sister to someone than her own had been to her.

One playful morning, I’d joked that if she kept it up, I’d get jealous and have to reassert my position as Lian’s favorite, but it fell through. Kori hadn’t been listening, her eyes cast out the window and it took several times calling her name before she heard me. Her hands were tense on her drink. She shook her head and gave the kind of reflexive smile Dick did sometimes. I’d asked what was on her mind and she didn’t budge. I told her that when she wanted to talk, she could talk to me. She didn’t have to, though. I’d been lonely enough times to feel it on a person.

I set off for my walk to the corner store, thankful that it wasn’t still raining. The thunderstorm from
the night before swelled the drains with water, left puddles on the uneven parts of the sidewalk and the humidity hung in the air like cobwebs. I slipped down a back alley shortcut, let my fingers drag over the bricks. I knew these streets better than just about anyone. I’d learned them before I learned manners, learned hunger before I learned what a full stomach feels like, learned homelessness before I learned stability, learned how to steal before I learned what ownership felt like, and I learned spite long, long before I learned about love or friendship.

I rounded a corner and stopped in my tracks, gravel crunched under my feet.

A man crammed into a doorway to stay out of the rain, scrappy blanket thrown over him and in his arms, held tight like his own child, was a floppy-eared puppy fast asleep on his chest. The man’s trucker cap was over the puppy like its own blanket, baby teeth clamped on the bill. The puppy couldn’t have been more than a handful of months old, and the guy looked about thirty, with a year’s worth of grief etched into his face that aged him further.

Not everyone had Bruce Wayne in the next alley to catch you stealing his hubcaps, waiting to lift you above the poverty line. My eleven-year-old ghost dried my mouth, and it hollowed my ribs, made me feel my hunger. I felt that first bath I took at Wayne Manor again, the brown of the dark water by the time it was over darkened the puddles in the alley.

My fingers reached into my back pocket for my wallet, and the left of the trifold was full of gift cards I kept for these moments. I grabbed a spare coupon for dog food and a supermarket card. Years of pickpocketing allowed me the slight of hand to tuck them into his breast pocket without waking him, but the puppy started to squirm as soon as I finished my charity work. I jogged away, hid behind a dumpster like the street kid I’d been.

The man woke up, mumbled to his puppy about his pocket being open. He yawned, and I heard the click of his nails against the supermarket card, then his gasp. A grin smeared across my face. He was crying and scrambled to his feet, and I slipped away from that alley, walked a little faster.

The corner store was open, the windows streaked with condensation and a flier was stuck to the door. A wanted poster for yours truly issued by the mayor’s office, with a blurry photo from a year ago during the Battle for Gotham, only somebody had drawn the Arkham symbol over the bat on my chest and added ears to my helmet. A dark, hungry thing coiled in my stomach. I tore it down and stuffed it into my pocket. The flimsy paper slicked to my hand, forced me to smear it off on the inside of my pocket to get my hand out clean. The chilly air froze my wet fingers.

The cashier didn’t look up from her magazine when I walked in, and I turned down the first aisle, collecting bread and bagels. The list said I needed crunchy peanut butter, avocados, raw honey for Kori’s tea, and a bunch of other shit that I sure as hell didn’t need, so I went back to the front and grabbed a basket. The things I did for my favorite free-loaders. I didn’t mind, really. The baby carrots and pita chips, black bean hummus ingredients because it was about the only thing Lian liked enough not to throw on the floor. I needed electrolyte juice for her cold, too. Roy had the longest section out of the list, and it included melatonin to help him sleep, granola clusters in a big green bag, a six-pack of cran-grape juice, and lottery tickets (kill me now). Kori wanted the honey and chapstick. The basket was filled to the handle by the time I was done.

While the cashier rolled out the lottos, I checked out the magazine rack. Today’s Daily Planet headline was visible at the top, and I tried. I really did. I tried not to look at the bylines. Keeping a recent paper was necessary for possible maneuvering, still. The old man read them over breakfast every day, combing for more conventional leads. I added it to the transaction, paid with the new card Barbara fixed me.
Hands full of bags, I walked home as the city started to wake up. Church bells tolled in the distance, St. Luke’s and the orphanage. Diners and barber shops and retail stores flipped the signs as I passed, closed to open. I rounded a corner and light finally started to climb that gloomy lighthouse the rest of them called Wayne Tower. I squinted through the sunbeams, the glares off the sidewalk puddles and the icy wind beating on my face.

I ducked down an alley to get out of it, back to the shade. The water from the soaked flier had gotten to my bare stomach through the hoodie, chilled me from the inside out like an unwanted, frozen hand. I walked faster yet, and was halfway to sprinting by the time I saw my firehouse again.

Roy was awake, and took my groceries upstairs to be unloaded. He was saying something about Lian fussing and how happy she’ll be to have her electrolyte juice, start getting over her cold. I wasn’t listening. I’d kept the newspaper. I said that I’d be in the shower, even though he’d already gone to the kitchen, and ducked into the bathroom.

I sat on the toilet seat, peeling off my jacket and hoodie to toss in the hamper. I unfolded the gray pages, and that invisible hand was on my skin, but it was warmer. Like a lifetime ago when a friend had soothed my nightmares with a fresh rag on my face, my back. I’d found her name.

She wrote columns now. I sometimes read snippets from them while checking out on my Sunday grocery runs. She bounced off that Olsen kid over at the Planet, talked about the ethics of heroes and put that master’s in philosophy to good use. I’d never bought a newspaper till now. I’d always felt that they were sort of my window into her new life in Metropolis, something I could do to see how she was doing. Of course, her ferocious defense of heroes told me nothing about how much sleep she got, how she was - really, but it was enough. It was the amount I’d allow myself.

I sat on the toilet seat, peeling off my fear and anxiety to toss in the bathtub. I flipped to her column, second page. She was writing about me. My heart gave an uneasy thunk at the subject. Olsen was going for the throat, saying that I was nothing more than a maniac with delusions of grandeur and a lot of guns. In some ways, he was right. In others, he can eat a curb.

She said that I saved Batman, said I’d shot off his restraints in Arkham and if the Red Hood was the same man, I was on the side of figures like Nightwing, Robin. That was as far as she teased the connection, though. She switched almost immediately to talk of the new age of heroism, brought forth by a new brand of criminal.

I propped my head on my hand and read the whole fucking thing, my eyes glued to her words. I’d always been a closeted bookworm, but she dragged me out and baked me in the sun with every paragraph. She reached through the gray pages and shook me by the shoulders, appealed to my better angels. I never read her thesis and I’d never wanted to, lest I turn my alcohol issue into a true problem, but now, my whole body ached to read more by the time I finished the column. I sifted back to the beginning, and her name printed under the title.

**WHAT HAPPENED TO HEROES?**

I’d been wondering the same thing. The Justice League was dead. I sighed, rubbed my thumb over her name to feel the imprint into the page.

Where can a guy buy some hope around here?
Gail didn’t love him.

Most of the time, Gail found herself in the warm spot in the circle of Frederick’s arm at paper events and drinks with his co-workers. She introduced herself over and over so much it became a put-on, like the clean blouse and pencil skirt, the heels, the briefcase. He was a good man, Frederick, and she knew that if she were someone else, some other girl without a closet big enough for skeletons, she would love him. He was smart, the middleground between street business and studying that only came with law school’s cutthroat competition. He was even handsome, something that - along with the ability to quote whatever book she brought with her - had worn away her harder edges the days they ran into one another as interns for other people - her for Lois, him for the deputy attorney.

She thought she’d kiss him less in Gotham, but she was wrong. She never stopped, but true Gothamites learned the penalties of doing anything with their eyes closed. Tonight, she kissed him as means of apology. They’d gotten into another argument, a trend that started on the plane here, and he’d stormed off to work running late, the make-up part of the process forgotten. He pressed his forehead to hers after, the yearning in his eyes she ignored most nights she was aware of the fact she didn’t love him.

“I’ve…been an ass to you,” He said finally, the first he’d spoken to her since the argument. “First about the Red Hood thing, and then today about the Luthor case. I know you can’t discuss a story you’re investigating and I should’ve respected that. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” She turned away from him, drawing her hair on one shoulder to braid it for bed. “You were right. I need to open up more.”

“You don’t need to, really.” A lie. It always put her off, how quickly a lawyer - even a budding one - lied. “You’ve always been private. I knew that entering the relationship.”

She jumped as her phone beeped on her nightstand, and halfway to answer it, he caught her shoulders. He slid one of her hands to his neck and took her waist, pretending to dance. His smile was so white and perfect, his hair in his eyes in that way she used to think made him look unlike a professional shark. “Ignore it. Come on. I’ve got a lot of making up to do for tonight.”

“What if it’s work?”

“If it isn’t important, ignore it.”

“If it’s work, it’s bound to be important. Could be a lead.”

Frederick sighed, a hint of contempt in how his arms dropped fast. A would-be lawyer and a would-be journalist were practiced in the art of mingling contempt with affection, but the impatience in him made her turn to half-face him when she answered the text. Clark.

“Luthor’s available right now for conference with me,” She said, and tore her pajama bottoms down without hesitation, reaching for her dark jeans. As Frederick flustered, she muttered under her breath
the way she did before every interview, working angles.

“He thinks if he sets it late, I won’t show. He thinks the Planet cares more for a convenient narrative than the truth, that we’ll just buy that he knows what he says he does. I have to get the truth. I have to get answers.”

“It’s almost eleven, Abby,” She resisted the flinch at the nickname she didn’t ask for.

“It’ll go to someone else if I don’t accept,” She paused pulling up her pants, nothing on top but a black bra, to text Clark that she’ll take the interview. “And I won’t disappoint Mr. Kent or Lois.”

“You’re joking. You’re willing to put your co-workers over your…” He trailed off, and she fixed him with a flat glare. Frederick threw his hands in the air, turned away from her. “I mean, come on. I wanted to talk about us, have a night about us. Christmas is coming, and I have ideas for what we can do.”

Gail was doing up the buttons of her shirt as she said, “Christmas will still come if I take tonight to work.”

“Is it really with Lex? Or is it with the Red Hood? Is it about him? Is that what you’re going to talk about in this interview?”

Her hands froze on her belt, looking up. His eyes were steely, pulling a shirt on and smeared his hair out of his face to look at her. She scowled, rolled her eyes.

“Come on, Frederick, we aren’t doing this again.” She got up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek, swiped her keys from the table by the hotel room door, and her jacket and scarf from the stand. “I’ll see you later, and we’ll talk all you like.”

Lex’s office was smaller than she thought, and the same could be said of the man himself, she mused.

She clicked her pen, crossed her legs to form a surface for her notepad. She dated the margin, made a quick note of the demeanor and state of Lex himself. He had his overcoat off, sleeves rolled to his elbows and his tie loosened like he was just another businessman working overtime. Bald head glared off the green light off his desk, and Gail wrinkled her nose at the imposing way he stood staring through the window at Ryker Heights, hands clasped behind his back. She put her pen in her teeth to tighten her ponytail, straighten her bangs, and cleared her throat. She would be taking notes, but her phone was also recording the entirety of the conversation in case she missed anything or Luthor had a “taken out of context” claim.

“Let’s start with something simple,” Gail worked hard to keep the sarcasm out of her voice as she said, “How are you today, Mr. Luthor?”
“Please, call me Lex.” He didn’t react at the drop that leaked through. “I’m well. Despite the Red Hood’s obvious attempt to kill me, I remain breathing and that’s something to be thankful for.”

Gail chewed the urge to say that gratitude for such a thing was a matter of perspective, as was what he meant by ‘obvious’. She wrote his reply down in shorthand, and said, “Alright, Lex. You’re a high-profile, very public presidential candidate. You have an international corporation that has their fingers in everything from hair gel,” She smirked, “to investments that other journalists have deemed ‘questionable’ and ‘below-the-table’.”

“Are you here to question me about what other journalists have said, Miss Byron?” He let his own amusement show. “Or have you come to ask questions you yourself have come up with?”

Gail fixed her eyes on the white spot on the back of his hairless head. “It is a matter of public record that money was wired from a LexCorp account to Metallo for the incident in Metropolis. Anyone involved with that account and all of the witnesses brought forth by federal court have been unavailable to comment thanks to mysterious disappearances and murders made to look like suicide. To make matters worse, evidence has been recently uncovered, FBI investigation pending, about you staging your own assassination attempt by way of enticing a known terrorist organization, run by a woman who - until recently - the Gotham Police Department, the Metropolis Police Department, and the Department for Homeland Security thought to be dead. This presidential campaign you have run is one of the most obvious debacles ever run by a blue candidate in recent memory, and yet you think you can win the American people over by taking on a local vigilante and exposing him on the promise of your word alone? You are many things, Lex, but a stupid man, you are not.”

“To say so means that you are smart enough to know that what I am saying about the Arkham Knight and the Red Hood is more than accurate, and not confined to believability on my word alone,” Lex said, his fingers drumming against the palm of the other hand. For a man under federal scrutiny, Gail had to say he seemed rather calm. “You must be behind, Miss Byron, so I will catch you up. The tank he used last year to drive into City Hall is a Cobra class armored vehicle, a manned tank, that is identical to the very unique breed of heavy tank utilized by the Arkham Knight on the terrible night we call Fear Halloween now. His armor is reminiscent of the Arkham Knight’s, and the moment the Arkham Knight disappears, less than a month, a new vigilante never before seen appears with a red bat on his chest as if that erases any and all objections to his methods by the mere invocation of the Batman.”

A snapping sound came from Gail’s fingers, and ink spread out from the shattered pen over her notepad. She coughed, looked up at Lex. “Do you have another pen, Lex? This one just died on me.”

Lex turned around, reached to his desk and tossed her another one. It was cold metal in her hand, engraved with the LexCorp logo, and she hated how the corner of his mouth pricked up. It was the smile a cat grew when a mouse was wedged under one of its paws.

He looked at her now as she said, “I admit that the evidence is compelling and warrants further
study, but the problem with you using it to further your campaign is that is does not erase what faces you legally. A man under investigation for turning a Kryptonite-crazed madman like Metallo loose on Metropolis to cause twenty-two counts of murder and collusion with a terrorist organization cannot be president, no matter how many capes he hangs from the gallows while getting to Pennsylvania Avenue. I want to know how thick the wool you have over the media’s eyes is. I want to know why every media outlet is singing your praises to the high heavens when every American with a newspaper and half a brain knows you belong under this building, not with your name on it.”

“For someone who aspires to be a journalist, your bias is quite obviously in favor of the Arkham Knight.”

She kept her chin high, but he could not have said it softer if he had really slapped her with the simple sentence. Gail smiled. “My bias is in favor of truth, justice, and the American way, Lex. The Arkham Knight can go to hell.”

They hadn’t been the same man in almost two years, though they were. Gail had to sell it. She’d practiced for days, waiting for this interview, talking to her mirror and telling her reflection that she loved her boyfriend and didn’t love the Red Hood either. Maybe she should’ve considered a career as an attorney.

“And if the Arkham Knight proves to be the Red Hood and sent to rot in prison as the fraud he is, what will you do then?” He asked, his own smile widening. “If I am found guilty of what I’m accused, I will hang with Nixon and Clinton, but what on Earth will you do if heroes prove to be the public menaces that they are, Miss Byron? What will you do if your heroes are made to be murderers?”

Gail kept her eyes on him as she flipped to a fresh page. “What the rest of us do. Report the news. News here is that you don’t care if you’re caught, you don’t care at all, as long as the Red Hood hangs. Is that fair to say, Lex?”

“Your concept of fairness is awfully skewed, Miss Byron.”

“As is your stance on the legality of your campaign.” Gail jotted down a few more notes, and then asked, “I have one more concluding question and then I’ll be off: what is the central message of your platform, Mr. Luthor?”

Lex gave a second’s pause before he said, “The central message of my platform is to give the true American heroes their due benefits and recognition. We have been raising false idols in these vigilantes and mass murderers in tights, granting them jurisdiction and full police support in exchange for our safety. I say we should take our safety into our own hands, and those who truly give us our safety, the police and our armed forces, should be hailed as true American heroes. We need to expose these vigilantes for what they are: criminals.”

“In what way do you believe that domestic safety has been threatened by vigilantes?”
“Do you own a gun, Miss Byron?” Lex asked, his gaze drifting to her bag at her feet.

“I do.”

“Why?”

Gail exhaled through her nose, and a glint of steel flashed on his desk. A letter opener. She ground her teeth, forced herself to take her eyes off it. He was fishing, and she wasn’t going to let him catch anything. “Personal defense. I’m from Gotham, Mr. Luthor. It comes with the territory.”

“A territory with more vigilantes than any other city on the east coast, but yet you feel the need to carry a firearm.”

“The market on battlesuits hasn’t quite launched yet,” She saw his expression sour for the short moment before she said, “To suggest that Gothamites put all their faith in police departments that, until the appointment of James W. Gordon, had been a hotbed of corruption and abuse of power is short-sighted. The legality of vigilantes is not up for debate, Mr. Luthor. It’s understood that they act outside the law, but to so in order to improve the overall quality of life. The Justice League, for example, existed so that when something bigger from beyond the Solar System comes knocking, we have people that can help. That is not up for debate. The subject matter is whether the American people can put a man under investigation for a list of felonies as long as my arm in the White House on the merit of being the moral equivalent of a sharply dressed dog catcher. If Floyd Lawton, infamous hitman, were to run for office saying that he could hand-deliver Superman to the Justice Department, would you vote for him?”

“Your point has been made, Miss Byron. This is becoming less of an interview and more of an interrogation, I am seeing that by the minute. You have your statement.” Lex moved to sit behind his desk, and Gail did not waste time.

She gave him his pen back, stood and smoothed out her clothes. “Goodnight, Mr. Luthor.”

He said nothing. At least, not until she was out of the room. He tapped a button on his watch, spoke into it.

“Mercy, I need you to do something for me.”

Gail shut her car door and shrugged off her coat. She checked the back seat to find it empty, glared out into the parking garage of LexCorp. Lex’s Italian sports car sat in the corner closest to the elevator to go upstairs. Her eyebrows flicked up. She never took him for a man that drove himself to work without an armed guard, and certainly not a presidential candidate to do so. She slipped out of her heels, sighed as the arches of her feet rested on the rubber floormat.

She hummed and tossed her bag into the passenger’s side seat. Lex Luthor was full of surprises.
The key was in her fingers when her window broke and a hand burst through it to grab her by the throat. She jammed the key into the forearm attached to the vice grip on her windpipe,braceleted her other hand around the assailant’s wrist. She twisted in her seat,coiled both legs around the arm and threw herself into the footwell,her knee driving into the elbow with a sharp crack. Gail was lifting, out through the broken window. Her attacker was tall, male, dressed in a security uniform, but it wasn’t Lex as she expected. Gail managed to loosen the grip on her neck by stabbing the key into the man’s arm, but the air whooshed out of her as the man slammed her onto the hood of her car. She dropped the key, wheezing as he raised her again for another one.
The oblique muscles in her sides contracted hard as she leapt from his arm to his back, wrapping her arms and legs around him. Her foot knocked against something solid on his hip, and she went slack to hang between his shoulder blades, a frantic hand racing down to the holster. The man spun, tried to throw her off, but she pulled herself up to jam the heel of her hand against his ear. He yelped, before his fingers found the gun for her. A metallic click as the safety came off and one shot, two shots rang her ears as the bullets missed her head.

“Abby, hang on!”

She knew that voice, and her heart wrung in her chest, dread and adrenaline weighing down her limbs. As the man whirled to find the source, Gail caught sight of a black figure at the end of the garage running towards them. She slid his tie backwards and took a fistful in each hand and yanked back as hard as she could. His aim went higher, but not high enough.

She shouted and kicked off his back to throw a leg over his shoulder, “Get down!”

Gail tried to scratch at his eyes as his gun fired this time, and the figure fell to the ground with a cry. She gasped, and a big hand clamped over her chest, forcing her off his body to the ground. Gail’s back smacked the pavement hard, her head whiplashed to streak white bolts across her vision. She rolled out of the way of another shot and kipped herself up to her feet as he charged, soaked through the pantyhose. He was a big man, brute strength was in his ballpark - not hers.
You’re small and quick, sunshine. Make them remember that.

Her skirt split up the side of her thigh as she kicked in his knee, the gun clattering to the ground. She shoveled him into the bend in her door, one of his arms in her footwell and she scrambled forward, widened her stance. She closed the door on him once, twice, three times, her nails chipping the paint, she closed the door on him before one of his huge legs nailed her squarely in the chest. She wheezed, staggering back, before she dodged another lunge. She dove for her bag, fingers finding the cold steel of her mother’s gun. She struggled to her back as the man came at her again. Gail flicked the safety, aimed, and squeezed the trigger till it clicked. He collapsed on top of her, bleeding and clawing at her seats. She dropped her gun onto the car floor, her eyes stinging as she pushed him off of her. His body slid across hers, slumped to the ground in a hulking heap. Gail felt the blood in her clothes drying, a great dark red smear ruined her from her neck to past the hem of her skirt.

She tore her bun out of her hair and sprinted on the balls of her feet to Frederick, who knelt with a hand over his ribs. His shirt, the same he’d thrown on before she left, stained with blood between his fingers and the stain was only growing. He fell backwards when he saw her running to him, covered in blood. “Wait, hold on - get back! You just killed that guy!”
“Frederick,” She cleared her throat a few times and coughed. “Honey, you’ve been shot, I need to get you somewhere safe where I can fix that.”

“You just killed someone, Abigail-”

“-Saving your ass, yes,” Gail swatted away his protesting hands, and helped him to stand, an arm thrown over her shoulders. A nudge, somewhere behind her teeth, demanded some gratitude from him, but she ignored it.

He was weak already, the stain on his shirt having reached his hips. She fought to keep him upright. He mumbled, eyes wide and flittering everywhere, “H-How’d you learn to fight like that?”

“Why were you following me?” She asked and wedged her toes under the handle of the back seat’s door. She kicked back, opening the door.

Frederick hacked and coughed climbing into the seat, “I thought you were going to see the Red Hood.”

Gail glared at him as he rolled flat on his back and it didn’t disappear until she was turning the car on, a hand flaring to grab the shoulder of the other seat. She backed up, the wheels thumping over the security guard’s body. She sighed and smeared the hair out of her face as she shifted into drive. “Then you’re really not gonna like where I’m taking you.”
December nights meant colder patrols, long johns under the armored pants and handwarmers built into my gloves. Under the red hood, insulated plates kept my face from freezing. A whole three degrees on these rooftops and I remained toasty, if a bit sweaty along my spine.

I used to think “be careful what you wish for” was stupid because it never applied to me. Wishing for anything was for people who could have what they wanted. I didn't think in terms of “I wish”, I thought in terms of “I need”. I never waited around for what I needed to fall into my lap, either. I went out and got it.

Out here, all I needed was a spot of warmth.

One heavy boot on the edge, I was seconds away from firing my grappler into my kitchen window when her Subaru zoomed around the corner and screeched to a halt in front of my engine bay. Gail scrambled out of the driver’s side, her breath a misty halo around her head. She had someone in the back, but it was the blood drenched into the front of her shirt, the deep crimson caught by the streetlight, that lurched my heart into my throat. I tapped a button on my gauntlet, the emergency pre-programmed text sent to Roy’s phone to have Kori take Lian into the dorms and to bring medical supplies to my workbench.

I switched aim to the corner of my firehouse, and stepped off the ledge. I swung around front, disengaged the grappler and landed rough by the patched hole in the engine bay.
“Gail, what-”

I didn't see her back seat until her boyfriend, bleeding from his ribs and didn't look like it'd stopped yet. His skin was clammy, pale, and Gail shivered as she tried to help him out.

I bit back a thousand snide comments and moved her out of the way, crouched to slide my arms under his legs and back. I gritted my teeth, sucked in a breath and exhaled sharply lifting him into my arms. “Get the door.”

Gail slammed her car door shut and ran ahead of me, teeth chattering in the cold, to the side entrance. Frederick wasn't any big labor to lift, but he didn't appreciate looking at my tactical mask when he opened his eyes to see who carried him.

“Th’ hell?” He said, squirming as I got him inside. Roy was setting up a cot, eyeing Gail and Frederick before rolling out the medical kits.

“Shut it and you'll live.” I laid him on the cot, and Gail started to work his shirt off. Frederick clung to her forearms, tried to hold her hand but she swatted him away, said something low.

Roy whispered to me as he pried open packs of curved stitching needles, “Is it cool if he sees me?”

I shook my head and told him to get upstairs. I've got this. Roy nodded, but patted my back, looked at me as if he could see through the mask and read between the teeth I had clamped on my lower lip. He jogged upstairs and out of sight.

I turned back to Gail and Frederick with a pair of tweezers. She already had the wound cleaned as best she could, and given him a towel to bite down on. I resisted the urge to cheer.

“What happened?” I sat on a stool, switched on detective vision. The bullet was a round consistent with the usual suspects: mercenaries and hired hitmen. I stripped off my gloves and rolled on a pair of rubber ones for sterility’s sake.

“Went to interview Lex Luthor, probably pissed him off and when I got the my car afterward, one of his security guards attempted to give me a facial with my shattered car window,” Gail said and I tried
to focus on the bullet wound as she finally held his hand. “I was dealing with the guard when he pulled a gun and shot Frederick trying to help me.”

He glared at me over the towel as I felt into the bullet wound to get the dimensions of the entry wound. It's close to his rib. “The hell was he doing there?”

“He followed me.” Gail tightened her grip on his hand. “He thought I was actually coming to see you.”

Oh, this was hilarious. He thought she'd make up an appointment with Lex Luthor just to come see me. Goodness gracious, Freddy. Despite the stupid-ass grin concealed by the helmet, I cleared my throat and gave him the verdict on his boo-boo. “Bullet ricocheted off bone but it's not lodged in bone. I can get it out for you but it's not gonna tickle.”

“Is there any kind of painkiller he can take?” Gail asked.

“Yeah, some goddamn sense,” I said and a flat look from her prompted me to elaborate, “If anyone needed help in that situation, if I know you, it was the guard.”

I went in with the tweezers, followed the metal through the hole to the bullet. Frederick twitched with every centimeter, groaned into the towel and she whispered to him, gripping his hand. I grumbled, “Can you keep him still? Only gonna do more damage if you squirm.”

He flexed under my hands with the effort, and as much as I wanted to hammer the point home that flexing didn’t help matters, I was tired of this. I pinched the bullet in the tweezers and pulled it out. I dropped it in his open hand, a souvenir from Gotham City.

The stitches weren’t exactly necessary. The wound wasn’t wide enough to warrant them and an airtight occlusive bandage would have done the job just as well, but a gut feeling warned me that he’d be an unruly patient. I sutured him anyways, to make sure they healed and Gail wouldn’t be back in a week begging me to stitch him up again.

He relaxed by the time I was done, eyes boring into the front of my mask and his hand between both of hers. He spit out the towel, licked dry lips and asked, “Would anyone like to tell me why Lex Luthor tried to kill my girlfriend?”
I was closing the last stitch, twirling the thread over the needlenose scissors and pulled it tight. “It’s called politics. Gail ruffled the wrong feathers in the right way, and he wasn’t about to take it lying down.”

“Only now I can’t use a bit of that interview,” Gail sighed, mouth drooped in a frown. “I killed one of his guards. If I dare to use the interview, he’ll blow the whistle on me.”

I looked up from Frederick’s wound, snipping the excess thread and chewing my lip. “He knew. He knew you’d kill the guard. He knew you’d be a better fighter.”

“About that,” Frederick said, glaring between us. “How in the hell did you do that? How do you know how to fight?”

Fat stretched silence spread out in the engine bay to the walls. I stood up, peeled off the gloves into the trash. Stifled in my coat, I took it off and stripped down to my wife beater and my armored pants and boots. I felt both their eyes on the whipping scars on my arms.

When she spoke again, it was with the same voice she used to tell me how long they’d been together. Like an admission to smoking in the girls’ room or theft. “He trained me.”

I didn’t take off the tactical mask, but I turned to see her face. She watched him take his hand out of hers and he sat up in his cot against her protests, wincing as he sputtered, “You taught her how to fight?”

“You heard her,” I said. “She was being targeted by the Falcone family, so she spent months here with me while I dealt with them. She asked for training and I gave it to her.”

Frederick looked from me to her, and her eyes confirmed it in avoiding his. “Is that true? Is that why you...have nightmares? Abigail. Look at me.”

When she did, his eyebrows lifted. Her mouth a hard line, one corner curled down. Her hair hung around her face in damp gold, and at the same time, they looked down to her hands. The pink-red bruises around her knuckles.

“Yeah,” She said. “It’s true.”
“And why am I hearing this from a mass murderer instead of from you?” He demanded, and I crossed my arms.

Gail’s jaw tightened, standing. “Because you ask questions like that. You don’t care about the answer. You’ve already determined what it should be.” She asked me without looking. “Do you have clothes we can borrow for the night?”

I took no pleasure in this, none whatsoever. She deserved better than this back in Gotham, back where she was raised. “Yeah, I’ll set some clothes out and find you somewhere to sleep while they’re in the machine.”

From the duffel I kept my emergency clothes for unforeseen stakeouts away from home, I pulled out a pair of sweats and a Gotham Knights tee for spite. Metropolis boy in a Gotham shirt, be still my beating heart. I tossed them to her.

She threw her hair up into a messy bun. “I’ll get him out of these clothes and cleaned up. Then I’ll shower.”

I nodded and left them alone. I heard raised voices halfway up the stairs but didn't turn back.

My heart rattled in my chest, a hollow thumping to remind me I had one or maybe to turn around. Roy peeked out at me from the dorms down the hall as I tapped my mask and took it off on the landing.

“Jason,” His voice was quiet. Worried. “Everything okay?”

I bit my lip hard and shrugged. “I don't know, man. Guy's gonna be fine. But she's not.”

“Why?” Roy left the dorms and jogged down to me.

“She killed somebody tonight, defending her own life and his, and all he can ask her is how and why I trained her to fight. He doesn't ask her if she's okay,” My hands balled to fists, growling through my teeth, “He doesn't ask if she needs anything, he doesn't thank her for saving his life bringing him here...He doesn't care. Roy, it was all I could do to just...focus on the wound instead of throttling an
apology and a thank you out of him.”

“He’s probably mad that she kept secrets from him,” Roy said, maybe trying to figure out where Frederick was coming from but even he scoffed. “And so what if she did at this point? She saved him and got out in one piece. It isn’t like she was never going to tell him. A little patience, and—”

“She’s keeping a lot more than her training from him, but that’s not the issue,” He followed me as I walked to the bathroom to tidy it up for her shower. I put my mask on the counter and switched the towels. “She killed someone in front of him in self-defense, and he’s looking at her like she did it in cold blood.”

“That sucks, dude. I want to say I hope they work it out, but...yeah, no,” Roy shook his head, unhitching from the doorframe. “Hey, uh...I’ll ask Kori if she’s got clothes Gail can borrow.”

“Do that. And set up the washer for a load of darks,” I grumbled, mask under my arm. “I’m on laundry duty.”

......

I waited in the laundry room for twenty minutes with Kori’s clothes on the washer before Gail came up with Frederick’s.

She wiped her hand under her eyelashes walking in, and handed me the bloody bundle of fabric without looking at me. Her hand shook before she faintly smiled at the clothes I handed her.

“Thank you.”

I started flipping his shirt the right way, shrugging. “Don’t thank me. Kori’s down the hall.”

Her fingers moved to the silvery buttons of her blood-soaked shirt and I turned my back. She asked, voice detached and distant. “Kori’s here?”

“Dick and her broke up a month ago. She’s been bunking here with Roy and me, helping out with the job.” I tossed his shirt in the washer and started emptying his jacket onto the top. Keys and
chapstick.

She hummed, and I heard her clothes drop one by one to the floor. The soft rustling of sweats prompted my question.

“You two okay?” I didn't want to pry because of where it might lead but I needed to know she'll be alright. “I...didn't like the way he looked at you.”

“Never you mind how he looks at me,” She said it quick, a harsh inflection on her voice. The hot, angry kind. “We're fine.”

“Don't sound fine,” I unrolled his socks, and after I heard the hoodie zip, I asked, “Can I turn around?”

“Yeah.”

I did and leaned against the front of the washer, his jeans at my feet yet to go in. Kori’s clothes were big on her, too much length on the sweats and her hoodie hit the top of Gail’s thighs, but she was in clean clothes. Her bloody ones went to the wash. No blood on her but she rubbed the back of her neck with pain twisting on her features.

“Are you okay?” I've wanted to ask her that since she got here. “I mean, do I need to look you over too?”

“Guard slammed me into the asphalt,” She said, “Think I got a bit of whiplash.”

“That'll do it.” I crossed the room and cupped her jaw on my hands, eyes focused on her neck. “Tell me when it hurts.”

Her range of motion was impaired more to the front and back, not to the sides. After I got her ice for it, she asked me, “Why did you agree to help us?”

“I didn't,” I said, hips against the front of the washer. Still needed to load his jeans but I milked the seconds with her for all they were worth. “I saw you and reacted. What did you expect me to do?
Hand you a bandaid and tell you to get lost?"

Gail’s lips pursed, switching hands on the ice. “After the way our last conversation went, yeah...sort of.”

“You never called me,” I said, arms crossed. “We're not strangers. If you would've called me, I…” I trailed off and then started again, my heart in my throat. “If you would've called me, any time of day, I would have answered. Even if you were just calling to talk about him.”

“Really?” She asked, unconvinced.

I tutted my tongue, “I wouldn't have been thrilled but...I’d bear it.”

“I wouldn't, for the record.” She pointed her toes in and looked down at them, her bangs shielding her eyes. “I wouldn't call you to talk about him.”

“I appreciate it. I know you two are serious.”

“Will you stop with that?” Her eyes snapped up to me, her hands bunched in her pockets. “Just stop. We just had a fight and I came up here to talk to you.”

“Fine, fine,” I conceded. She'd had a rough night. “I won't bring it up. I just…” I scrubbed a hand down my face, “I hate how he looks at you. How he talks to you. You don't get so much as a thank you for dragging his ass here. I don't even care if I get one, but the way he talks to you, Gail…”

“I've kept a lot from him and it's a lot to find out at once about who you're dating,” Gail said, stern and steely.

“Don't defend him to me. That's bullshit. Yeah, you kept a lot from him. Probably to protect him, probably so you wouldn't freak him out. But you don't deserve that. Killing someone in self-defense? That's small shit.”

“And what about the other times, Jason?” She asked, the heated inflection in her voice again and she stepped closer, a finger pointed to herself. “With Falcone? What am I supposed to tell him? How?”
“The way you told me,” I said, “Open and honest. No matter how it hurts.”

“I can't,” She sucked in a breath, a hand against her chest. “Jason, I'm scared.”

“Do you love him?” I asked, low and soft and wishing I hadn't. Maybe as a last resort so she didn't have to answer, I added, “If you do, you have to tell him.”

Gail's eyes panned to meet mine, and I couldn't read them. Some things never changed. She read me like a book but I couldn't read a page of her.

She sighed, and her gaze fell to the laundry piles I put on hold for her. “When did it all get so damn hard?”

A peal of laughter rang from the cage in my head, and I shook it to quiet the clown. I gave her a more prudent version of the right answer. “Nobody said any of this was easy. I knew it wasn't for me.”

“Jason,” She whispered my name, “I'm not in love with him...I care, and for the most part, we've been happy, but...I'm not in love with him.”

I swallowed, hard, and looked away. My heart wouldn't go down. I didn't want to get any ideas. She stared at my back, the hairs on the nape of my neck tingling.

The jeans in my floor still needed to be put in the washer. I went through the pockets and found his wallet, packed full of cards. Something stiff in his other pocket, the tiny coin one. I jammed a finger in and pulled it out.

My eyes burned. It couldn't have been too expensive. Simple silver band, single diamond. Probably something passed down. Sentimental. I held it in my palm and showed her, gaze hot on her face.

“Does he know that?”
Gail was pale already, but her skin turned even whiter before an angry flush filled her back in. She’d had no clue.

“He probably hoped to win you over with this, and said he’d only marry you if you opened up to him. Or maybe he wanted to wait until you did and then propose,” I dropped the engagement ring into her hand. “Either way, it’s sweet.”

I spun on my heel and chucked the jeans into the washer, the metal button clanging loud off the inside. I slammed the front and started it. “You know where the blankets are. Goodni-”

“-Jay, stop,” I tried to move past her but she stopped me, the ring in her pocket and hands on my chest. “Jason, dammit, stop.”

I flinched away like she’d electrocuted me, and the pain registered in her face as her arms fell numbly to her sides. A crease between her brows, her freckles muted under the red in her cheeks.

“What’s wrong?” She demanded, “It’s more than this, I know it is. You’ve been off since I came back and I know it’s more than what’s happening here;” A finger jerked in a circle between us. “You look like you’re on the verge of tears half the time, and the other half, vibrating with rage. And none of that’s at me, so Jason Peter Todd, unless you tell me right now what is going on I will call Barbara and find out myself.”

I clenched my fists so tight my nails split my palms. The laughter got louder from the cage, my back and chest tingling, the ghosts of the lashes on my arms. It felt like a year hadn’t elapsed, it felt like the bad magic never left. I didn’t want to say it out loud. “Call Barbara then.”

“She doesn’t have to.”

Gail and I both turned to the doorway. Roy Harper, with his hair back and pulled through a Star City cap, stood with his shoulder against the hinge. He stared at me, light eyes humorless. “You lie plenty to yourself. I won’t let you lie to her.”

“If I tell her, she’ll get wrapped up in this again and that’s the last thing I want.”

“I’m already wrapped up in this, Jason,” Gail slouched on a hip. “Luthor tried to kill me over an *interview*. He’s evidently got something to hide and he knows Clark and I can find it. And by the
They were both right. I knew they were, but the fire in my ankle and the jackhammer headache having a field day didn’t make me enthused to admit it. I waved a hand, ground my teeth. “Roy, you tell her. I’m going to bed.”

Gail tried to stop me, but Roy shook his head at her as I passed him and stormed down the hall. Kori poked her head out of the dorms, Lian on her hip. Kori frowned, reached out to touch my shoulder. I avoided her hand without thinking, and Lian whined around her pacifier.

My hand was on the knob to my room when I heard my precious niece crying, and I stopped. Air heaved through my nose, my chest working. I shut my eyes tight.

“Juh...Juh...Jaaaay!” She squealed as she squirmed in Kori’s arms. Gail and Roy were in the hall, his sad eyes on his daughter. Hers were on me, and watered at how, when Kori put Lian down, the little girl ran to wrap her chubby toddler’s arms around my leg.

“Be okay, be okay, be okay…” The little girl chanted into my leg, like a spell. I let go of the knob and pried her off to swoop her up into my arms.

She drooled and wailed, baby hands out to me, to fist in my hair when I cradled her to my chest. The way her father showed me. I finger-combed her hair, the same slow strokes administered after nightmares and spiders. My own tears were restrained by biting my tongue hard enough to taste blood.

“I’m okay, little lady,” I whispered to her, “You’ve got me.”

Roy walked up, hands laced in front of him. He waited until she released on her own, when she was sure. Her doe eyes brightened with my brief smile. I never had to force them for Lian.

She held onto my finger, even when I transferred her to her daddy’s arms. I waggled my finger, and she held on, eyes puffy. She wasn’t attuned to Kori yet, but she wasn’t stupid. Lian knew whenever her father and I were upset, and did her best to calm us, make us feel better. She wouldn’t let go of me until she was sure I was okay. Gail put her hand over her mouth in the corner of my eye.

“I’m okay, Li,” I leaned in to kiss her forehead.
With every reluctance and no trace of comfort, she freed my finger. Roy bounced her as he walked away, her hair jostling as she looked over his shoulder. He and Kori both moved back into the dorms. Gail and I were alone in the hall.

I didn’t look at her, kept my eyes ahead. I turned to my room, opened the door and heard her take a step before I closed it behind me.

A knock on my door at three in the morning didn’t wake me. For hours I laid in my hammock, sleepless, gaze unfocused into the ceiling and counting the miniature stalactites in the plaster. A leg over the side, shirtless to let my scars breathe and no blanket so I could breathe.

A second knock told me who it was. Roy knocked once and if I didn’t answer he left to try again later. Kori walked in without so much as a ‘hello’ or a reason.

“Come in,” My throat was dry and hoarse. Talking hurt.

The door opened, and the expensive perfume she usually wore was drowned out by my own shampoo in her hair. She’d showered. The latch locked behind her.

“I called Barbara after all. I know.”

My toe rocked me, as if we were outside in the breeze. My branded cheek swayed in and out of the moonlight slanting in from the window. One hand on my stomach, and the other, which I kept on the gun under my back when I slept, moved to rest behind my head.

“About Joker.” His name seared the knife scar on my chest.

“Yes,” She said, “And Roy told me about how you were...after.”

The wind beat against the window, howls whirred and rattled the panes. The tigers were out tonight,
ravenous and stalking. We all knew what they planned now. The wool was pulled back and the curtain drawn. The show was starting.

“His daughter really loves you.” She stepped closer, bare feet on a concrete floor. She should be careful. Could get sick. “He told me how you saved her, when someone got in. Told me how you planted yourself between two brick walls, hand down to reach for her and kept your foothold as three bullets went into you. He told me how you walked off a plastique arrow in the confines of an elevator. He told me how you walked into a trap with Dick, Talia and Joker right there, and how you had to be guided back to the Clocktower.” Her voice was thick with tears, quiet and crumpled. “Barbara told me...how you found out they’d been keeping a secret from you. She didn’t tell me what it was, just that it hurt you. Badly.”

Badly. It was a great word, ‘badly’. I was hurt badly. I was hurting bad. I was hurting bad people. Bad people hurt me. Bad people hurt others. Bad people hurt others bad.

“She told me what you said, too. That the job was going to kill you sooner or later, and that...you thought there was no reason why it shouldn’t be sooner. She told me you said you were dead. You thought you were dead.” Her sobs well and truly came. Her reflection in the windows showed the silhouette of her face. Hand over her mouth, eyes hidden under her bangs and her clothes shook with the force of her crying. She gasped a deep breath. “I understand now, Jason. You don’t want to let me in because you’re afraid. You don’t want him to get anyone...like he got you.”

Strangled air fought its way out of my lungs. Cold spilled onto the tingling branded skin, slid down the other cheek. The rays of moonlight blurred and my whispers barely hit the octave she could hear, “I want you to be happy...and healthy...and alive. Even if it means you end up with someone else. Even if it means you end up with that ungrateful, arrogant, self-important...”

“I don’t want to talk about him.” She said, and approached my hammock, slow and cautious. As if I could ever be capable of hurting her, even in a fit of blind rage. “Please, just...let me be here with you.”

I rolled away from her, the light on my whipped back. “Might be best if we don’t...” My head felt floaty and dazed. Feverish. “Abigail, I appreciate you...coming in here. But if you come near me, I don’t think I’ll be able to stop in the morning. You’ll go back to him and it’s better if it stays that way.”

“No, it isn’t.” Gail said. “You said you’d never let me walk away. You’d never let anyone hurt us. Well neither will I. I’m not letting you push me away again.”
“Watch me.” She padded a step closer still, and I scrambled out of my hammock, gun clattering to the floor with the sudden shift. I rose to my full height, scraped my forearms at my wet face. I held my hands out, warning her. “You know why I’m pushing you away now. You know why.”

“And where would I be pushed to?” Gail asked, stormy gaze on me. “I have spent a year suffocating in Metropolis, away from everything I know, for you. So that you can do the work I believe you can do and protect my home.”

I closed the space and put my hands on her shoulders, my shaking seeped into hers. “What do you plan to do if the Joker does get his hands on you, Gail? What am I going to do if he kills you?”

“I came for you when you were captured,” she said, indignant and brave as she ever was. “Maybe it would be damn time you returned the favor. Maybe I could lead you right to the Joker, two birds - one stone.”

“You’re speaking in hypotheticals, Abigail-”

“My potential kidnapping and-or torture is also hypothetical,” Gail snapped, shrugging out of my hands. “Look. I don’t have to go through you to be a part of this fight. I’d rather I do it on good terms, but I am not above going to the Clocktower and asking Barbara and Dick to let me in the loop. Or Clark.”

I straightened, nostrils flared and jaw tight. “I will sabotage any attempt you make in the direction of becoming a vigilante if necessary to get through your thick, idealistic head that you will not be another of his victims. I won’t have it, Wednesday Winters. It will not happen as long as I breathe.” I leaned in, shoulders flexed and nose-to-nose, snarling, “You so much as smell spandex and kevlar, and I’ll be there to ziptie you to a pipe to keep you out of this, all winter if that’s what it takes.”

“You may try,” Gail pressed her forehead to mine, pushing back. “But I’m not above fighting you for it either, Jason Todd.”

“You know you can’t beat me.”

“And you know you can’t stop me.”

I turned away, hands combing through my hair in frustration. “Get out. I’m done having this
conversation with you. Like talking to a brick wall.”

“Oh, this conversation is over because you say it is?” Gail crossed her arms, narrowed her eyes. “Where have I heard that before? About a year ago, I remember perfectly.”

“You done, sunshine?” I jerked my chin to the far wall. “Door’s that way. So’s your boyfriend.”

“He’s not my goddamned boyfriend,” She growled, nose wrinkled.

My tirade yanked back to a burnt-rubber stop. My heart started to pound again, and the sweat collecting at the small of my back ran cold. “...Come again?”

Gail didn’t tear up. Her voice didn’t quiver. Rather, she sounded tired, like she’d just come inside from a long day working in the winter freeze. “I was just down there, made him explain the ring. Said he planned to give me that if I ever opened up, then...in the same breath, gave me an ultimatum. Either I tell him everything right that minute, or the relationship wasn’t going to continue on false pretenses. I asked him to give me time and he refused.”

I blinked, gears folding over each other in my head. My hands itched. It was like seeing her for the gala, what felt like a lifetime ago. Red dress exchanged for sweats and an oversize hoodie that fell off one shoulder. Curled hair switched out for freshly showered dark gold pulled back and a line of bangs above her eyebrows, and her makeup was gone.

Abigail was still every bit as beautiful, but there was something different now. A hardness in soft features, titanium in storm-blue eyes. My training didn’t give her that. I didn’t do a thing. She did it all on her own, under her own power which was by no means in short supply.

Lex Luthor felt threatened by her in an interview, and decided that she couldn’t leave the building alive. She never let me believe for one second she wasn’t capable of destroying me, and over time, I’d grown to think I might like it. And I never let her believe she was alone.

“Like I said,” She put her hands on her hips. “I was already planning to expose Luthor and keep your neck out of prison, but now that he’s tried to kill me? I’m going to rain down on him. Whether you help me in that pursuit is beside the point, but at least I don’t need to explain myself to anyone. Not anymore.”
My hands slid into my pockets. “Let me guess. You plan to tell Clark that you’ll be reporting out of my firehouse, he’s going to put my track record in flashing neon lights for you, you’ll tell him to suck it and Frederick too, and then you’ll give me frequent, ridiculous heart attacks by putting on a costume and running around on rooftops with the rest of us by night.”

“Sums it up, yeah,” Gail rubbed the back of her neck, peeking up at me through her eyelashes. “Look...I don’t feel right leaving you, period, let alone this new business with Joker. I want to stay with you. I’m done with the bullshit...The safest place I can be is with you. As partners.”

“You’re…” My mouth ran dry and the corners tugged back. I was fighting one hell of a grin. “You’re serious? You completely understand what you’re asking for here?”

“Jason,” Gail sighed, and then said with a bored look, “A year ago we were nearly tortured to death, blackmailed, shot at, hunted and fought in a city-wide gang war. If anyone gets the dangers of this job, it’s you and me.”

“And there’s no way I can talk you out of this?”

“You keep trying and I’ll really start throwing punches.”

I stepped closer to her. “My nose still aches from the last time you popped me during training.”

She nodded, eyes down and smiling. After a moment, she reached out to take my hand and I let her. I squeezed her fingers, and she had the same strong grip. I made my way up her arm, lean with muscle, to her shoulder. Her collarbones and the base of her throat flushed, her pulse quickening under her porcelain skin. Her lips, the lower fuller than the top and knicked by a thin scar in the corner, parted to sigh again.

“It’s late, Gail,” I glanced at the clock. “It’s nearly four...you’ve got work in the morning.”

“First appointment isn't till two in the afternoon, Clark has been doing the morning running. He likes to go back to Lois in the evenings and I'm more than comfortable with night shift,” She said, “Besides, where am I going to sleep?”

“I'll find you a mattress tomorrow and you can pick a bed in the dorms.”
“Tonight, I mean,” Gail ran the tip of her thumb along mine.

“There's a recliner in the records room, warm and sometimes it's even comfortable,” I said. Her smile made me wish night was longer.

“Okay, Jason,” She started to turn away, and our joined hands stretched between us, the connection unbroken. “Thank you.”

“Wait…”

She kept my hand a second longer and she hummed in reply, looking at me sideways. I knew she was fresh off a breakup. I knew that. My heart coursed in my ears and warmth spread out from the center of my bare chest, the first spot of it I'd felt all winter. December first, and the sun was out.

It finally hit me, all at once like a great flood. She came back here. I pushed her away and let her go and told her to leave, and she kept coming back. No matter how many layers of facade I threw over my feelings to obscure their depth or smother their size, she ripped every one. Gail was here, and she seemed determined to stay here.

My eyes burned again, hotter than last time and I bit my lip. I bridged the gap in a second, tucked her hair behind her ear. I bent and pressed my lips to her cheek, inhaled a strong waft of soap and mint toothpaste from her breath.

Her cheek inverted into mine, our noses touching. The dark enveloped us, the same way it had in what should have been our first kiss. When we teetered on the brink of death by heat stroke and our only comfort came with the idea of dying together.

She rose up on her tiptoes, which melted something I thought long dead inside me. A whole network of thoughts, rusted with disuse, raced to life as her hands came to my hips. Lightheaded and brimmed with wild hope, I whispered to her, “What are you thinking about, sunshine?”

Her mouth touched mine with her shy smile, and she leaned away, eyes to her toes. “Sorry. It's bad timing. I came in here to comfort you, let you know I'm not going anywhere...not to…”
She trailed off, and headed to the door. Gail paused, before glancing over her shoulder to say, “Goodnight, Jason.”

The fever broke. “Abigail.”

I crossed the room in a second and she saw me coming. She closed the door from where she'd slightly opened it, planted her back to it. My hand braced to the door with a hard smack, the other slipped around her waist. I'd only ever seen this done in the movies, but something more than patchy memory guided me. I loved her.

Her arms looped around my neck, and her forehead touched mine. Our gaze met. I moved the hand braced to the door to cup her jaw, thumb on her lower lip. Her lazy eyelashes fluttered. A hot blush hit my cheeks as she stole the first peck on my lips, eyes open and impulsive. My bravado crumbled and the only thought crackling through my short-circuited brain was this: dear God, here comes trouble.

I stole one back, mirrored her and she returned my flushed shock to the nervous system. Her lips were so soft, vanilla chapstick smoothed them into a red-pink velvet I'd dreamed about a thousand times.

The third one stuck, and our eyes closed. My fingers tightened on her jaw as the seam of her lips moved against mine, cold fingers carding into my hair. A shiver dripped down my spine as she closed her hand, the light tugs on the strands. A low ‘mmm’ vibrated at the back of my throat, and the intimate noise of her lips leaving mine made me lean into her without thinking.

We gasped together, her cheek against my neck. I wanted to pinch myself, to make sure I was real and she was real and the moment was real. Jesus Christ. Her hand on my face confirmed it. I kissed the inside of her wrist, high on her.

She strained on her tiptoes, least I could do was oblige. I squatted to clamp my hands under her thighs, pinning her to the wall with my hips and lifting her till our mouths leveled.

“Jason!” She squeaked, eyes wide and I laughed.

“What?” I kissed her nose. “Not my fault you're so tiny, sunshine.”
She rubbed her thumb over the stubble on my jaw, a sleepy smile smeared on her face. “Jay, put me down.”

I froze, and did as she asked, a note of worry behind my teeth. The words needed to call it off ready, she unzipped her hoodie and underneath was a tank top-bra hybrid that had to be Kori’s. It was black and fit her torso in the ways I thought about alone.

“G-Gail, you…” I stuttered, and forgot the rest of the sentence as her fingers touched my lower stomach. The fine strip of hair under her palms going to the thicker scars left me grasping for words made of smoke.

Her mouth peppered kisses on my chest. The sensitive, raised scars shuddered under her touch as she guided me, and my breath hitched as my hammock swept my shoulder blades.

Wordlessly, I got in and flopped onto my back. I held the side down, helped her lay on top of me. She climbed her way up to kiss me again, bangs tickling my face. My hand followed her spine to slide my fingers into her hair, the other draped over her waist. She tasted like vanilla and toothpaste, Gail consuming every sense and I drowned. She wrought the pain out of my body leftover from patrol, kissed the scars on my face and I made noises I’ve never shared with anyone else as they migrated to my neck.

“Gail,” I panted, blowing her hair with every breath. “H-Hold on.”

She looked up from my neck, and folded her arms on my chest, propped her chin on them. “Too much?”

“N-No, God no , I'm just…” I licked my lips and tasted chapstick. “This is all new.”

“N-No, God no , I'm just…” I licked my lips and tasted chapstick. “This is all new.”

“Kissing or...the other stuff?” She said, unable to resist the cocky glint to her eyes.

I squinted at her, “I've kissed before, but I…” I twirled a strand of her hair over a finger, blush only reddening at the thought. “I've never trusted anyone this much. I've never trusted anyone with my body like that before. For obvious reasons.”

Gail’s cockiness evaporated. Her brows knitted and her voice was so steady, so earnest. “Jason, you're beautiful to me.”
Anyone else and I'd have scoffed. Something about how she said it, how she'd kissed my scars moments before, made me believe she meant it.

“You're too beautiful, that's your problem,” I whispered, throat thick, and watched her freckles disappear in another feverish flush. “I don't want to rush this.”

“Me neither,” Gail agreed. She locked our hands together over my chest and part of me felt like crying in disbelief. “We made it here. We just have to stay together.”

“I'm tired of fighting you, Gail. I want it to be you and me against the world. I...want to treat you how you should be, and…”

“What, Jay?” She asked.

I flipped us on our sides, her in the circle of my arms with her head on my bicep like a pillow. Her leg thrown over my hip, I kissed her but wasted no time repaying the favor on her neck. The tip of my tongue traced the hollow at the bottom of her throat. She sucked air through her teeth, and her fingers curled at my side.

“I know we're both exhausted…” Her nail bit into my ribs as my breath washed over her skin. “But I've spent two years having vivid dreams about kissing you like this and...I don't want to stop yet.”

She lined her body up with mine, her nails sliding to my lower back. “Then don't.”

Chapter End Notes

And with that, I leave you for a little over a month to finish another project. I've been writing a book and quite close to finishing it. So you will not have another TRO chapter for a little over a month until I finish that book. I hope you all understand and I wish you the best month in the time in between! I appreciate you all and your comments are what keeps me writing, so let me know how you found this chapter! TRO only goes up from here, folks! I know what you're all thinking...FINALLY, JASON, GOD!

My very best,
TheStudyInRed
When You Feel Like Flying

“Hold on to me
’Cause I'm a little unsteady
A little unsteady
Mother
I know
That you're tired of being alone
Dad I know you're trying
To fight when you feel like flying”

- X Ambassadors, “Unsteady”

Dick Grayson came home from night shift to a chilly, quiet Clocktower and saw his woman through an open door, nestled in deep sleep.

He disarmed himself at the kitchen table, removed layers of fatigue and the weight of duty from his shoulders. He'd seen death tonight, as Gotham cops did every week. He was fulfilled in his work with Gordon, even through the awkward period of first learning that Dick was dating his daughter. After the adjustment, Gordon sought his opinion on matters of security and Dick appreciated the moments he felt a fatherly gaze on his back. He'd spent enough years fighting beside Bruce to look up to Jim.

Stripped down to his boxers and a white tank, Dick strode into their bedroom. He glanced at her with warm thoughts of joining her in that bed, falling asleep with his arms around her, and pulled on a pair of lounge pants from the dresser. He sat on the edge of the bed, looking down at her.

Barbara laid scooped up on her side, blanket balled against her chest and her hair splayed over the pillow in a ginger fan. She smiled in her sleep, and after a minute, her face turned into the pillow with a sleepy noise before she sighed. Dick might have died of joy if he wasn't so determined to let her sleep. He returned her smile and then moved to the adjoining bathroom to brush his teeth.

Minutes later, blankets pulled back to slide in behind Barbara, Dick heard the lightest footstep come from the living room. His whole body flared to alert, his blue eyes fixed on the strip he could see through the open door. He moved to the wall by the door and pressed himself against it.
He was no mood for a fight.

………………………………………

She got up around nine to call her ex a cab to find him gone. A text he sent to her phone said that he’d gone back to Metropolis, had no intention of telling anyone about me or what Gail did to save his life - more because no one would believe him than anything else, and wished her luck in, and I quote, “whatever the hell you actually want to do in your life.”

Charming fucker, wasn’t he?

She stood there after reading it out to me for over a minute, checking her other messages. Two from Clark. I sat shirtless at my computer desk, checking the progress on hacking LexCorp’s investors and reminding myself I wasn’t Barbara Gordon. I’d gotten precisely nowhere with the progress and I had a sneaking suspicion this computer was done for.

I looked back to her, the stern set of her mouth, and reached out for her.

“Hey, what’s with the face?” I asked her after she gave me her hand, her lips softening as I kissed her knuckles.

“Nothing, it’s just…Clark sent me this,” Her brows came together as she read out the text, “‘Lex wants a press conference about the ongoing criminal investigations directed at him and his company. Looks like you rustled the right feathers, be there when it starts at 8 and get us a couple of seats up front. Gonna need that interview you did with him. ’ And then another one. ‘Barbara told me what happened to you, are you alright? Text me ASAP.’”

“You said the likely reason he sent his guard after you was because of that interview,” I glanced back at the hack progress: four minutes. “What exactly did you ask him?”

She finished her replies back to Clark and tossed her phone onto my desk. Gail perched herself on it, and tilted her head back, hand behind her sore neck. “I’ll send you the full audio recording of it, I already sent it to Barbara in case we can use it…but he kept grilling me about you. The connections he was making to the media between the Arkham Knight and the Red Hood, and I was saying that while it’s a compelling comparison,” Something cold slipped into my chest as she continued, “it didn’t erase the problems still facing him. We couldn’t elect a President on his ability to chase
“Yeah, I can’t imagine he liked that,” I pulled out a drawer to my desk and pulled out a tube of Icy-Hot. I stood and had her put her forehead on my chest, slathering some of it on her whiplashed neck. “I’m glad Colonel Slanders is holding a press conference—”

“-did you just call him ‘Colonel Slanders’?” Gail pressed a hand on my hip, her shoulders shaking with laughter. “That’s perfect.”

“Nah, you’re perfect,” I said, straightening her neck and throwing the tube back in the drawer. “And you can quote me. But Lex knew you’d be able to take the guard. We need to find out how he knew. Nobody outside the family and the League of Assassins knew you were at the Battle for Gotham a year ago. None of us told anyone, so it must be them. We have to assume they’re working together.”

“Which makes sense,” She said, holding my hands on her lap. “You gave us the Egyptian investor into LexCorp and it checked out to be a front business for one Talia Head.”

“Head of the demon,” I kissed her forehead. “You’re a genius.”

“You provided the lead, we just followed it,” Her eyes averted down. Her phone buzzed again, and she checked it, sighing at the text. “Well, I did tell Clark I was here with you.”

“Oh, lemme see,” She flipped the phone around for me to read. One text from Clark sent at nine twenty-two in the morning.

**Oh. Are you sure that was the best thing to do? You could’ve gone to Barbara instead, she had Alfred there at the Clocktower - she could’ve taken care of you. He’s dangerous, Abigail, I’m worried about what he might do since he knows you were attacked.**

My brows lifted and I tutted my tongue. “Well, he’s got a point. If you hadn’t killed the guard, I would’ve gone and done it myself for laying a hand on you. Still have half a mind to put Lex through a meat grinder for ordering it.”

“Hey,” Gail put her phone down and a sunbeam stealing in from the window lightened the edges of her eyes as she touched my cheek. “I’m okay. I’m with you.”
“That isn’t the point,” My jaw wanted to set but her palm against it didn’t allow any hardness in my face. “You could’ve been seriously hurt. He was ordered to kill you, and he might’ve succeeded, thanks to your idiot ex boyfriend.”

“You’ll have to get used to it, if I’m joining the team,” She said gently. “Are you ever going to be okay with this?”

I stepped in and she scooted closer to the edge of the desk to wrap her legs around my bare waist. I closed my eyes as her hand slid into my hair. “I’ll never like the idea of you in danger, sunshine, but I respect the hell out of you for making your own decisions. I’ve warned you against just about every part of this life, including being with me, but you did it anyway. And I’ve got to live with that.”

“You’re still okay with…” She trailed off, her hand out of my hair and she slid back on the desk, away from me. “I mean, are you still okay with us...being together?”

I blinked at her, my arms hanging at my sides and my hands cold and empty. “Are you?”

“Me?” She asked, eyes wide. “Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, I was...thinking, before I kissed you last night, that maybe you’d want time to yourself, after you broke up with him,” I moved away to sit in my chair, arm thrown over the back. “If last night was too much, too soon, if you wanted to hold off so you can relax...I get it, y’know?”

“Christ, no,” Gail’s brows came together and combed her fingers through her hair on her shoulder. “Being with him was like being in bed wearing a mask. He didn’t know me. He never did. I couldn’t be who I really was, and I spent months telling myself I didn’t have feelings for you...so I wouldn’t waste the chance you’d given me to be normal.”

“But you didn’t want it,” I said, my eyes on her bitten nails. “Did you?”

“Not for a second,” She said, and her stormy eyes rose from the floor to meet mine. “I know the real dangers of this job just as well as you do by now. I could die on any night, at any time if I’m not fast enough... or strong enough... or even smart enough. But if it saves one life, I’ll do it. I’ll do it all day long and never get tired of it. Jason, I didn’t choose this job to be with you...I chose this job to be myself.”
Her mom would be proud of her. A smile curled the edge of my mouth.

She sighed and propped her hands up behind her as she leaned back. “And as for love, I don’t want what I had with him. I don’t want to lie to the man I sleep next to every night. I don’t want to lie to myself, either. I know what I need out of love. I need...the sleepless nights I just hold on because I’m too scared to go to sleep, the nights I need to vent and the nights I don’t want to talk at all...I need patience and companionship, someone to tell me what I don’t want to hear when I need most to hear it. I need someone to tell me how quiet I am. To fill up the silence when I’ve forgotten how long it’s stretched out.”

I remembered, months ago, when we’d call out to each other in this place, just to make sure the other person was still there. Maybe that’s why I fell in love with her. It’s what I needed, too.

“And somehow, you think I can give you that?” I asked, no doubt but just curiosity. I wanted to hear her say it. I wanted to taste the words.

“Based on the note you wrote me before I left?” Gail got off the desk and kept my gaze hostage as she planted herself on my lap, legs on either side of my torso. Her arms looped around my neck, hanging off the back of the chair. “Yeah.”

My head started to swim as my hands slid up her thighs to her lower back, and Kori’s shirt rode up, a strip of skin under my fingertips. The nerve it took to touch her sent butterflies beating against my ribcage. “I’m amazed you kept it, after spilling my guts when it was too late for you to reply.”

“How could I get rid of it?” Gail’s hair hung to frame her face, sunshine caught in the gold strands and the freckles covering her cheeks. “It was the last gift you gave me, besides that CD. I have the whole damn thing memorized, I read it so many times.” She started to quote me, and the inflection in her voice made my skin warm. “‘I wanted to make sure you got a ring and a wedding someday with people to show up, enough people to fill the room. I wanted to make damn sure you were okay. Believe me, sunshine, I did and do want that. I’ll want it for the rest of my life.’”

“I mean,” The reddening in my skin, her slight weight balanced on my thighs, her breath on my bare neck made it almost impossible to think. “That was a stupid daydream I had. I wouldn’t dare, I mean, if you wanted to - that’d be another thing, and I wasn’t lying at all in that note, b-but, well... I thought I wasn’t going to see you again.”

Gail’s brows lifted in that lazy way when I knew my flustering amused her far too much. “But I
came back.”

“You did, and I’m over the fucking moon about it, but…” I licked my dry lips, and my gaze drifted to her mouth before it came back to her eyes. “What could I possibly offer you? I’m relying on an offshore brokered account Barb set up to support myself. I’m keeping a single father and his daughter, along with an alien princess, afloat. This place is barely holding itself together. I’m barely holding myself together, Gail.”

“Then let me help you,” She said, an echo of a conversation ages ago. “Working as the right hand of The Daily Planet’s top reporters pays and pays well. So far, you’ve taken care of me and everyone else, let me take care of you. As far as what you could offer me, shove it…Give me you . You’re enough for me.”

The blood rushed to my face and I sighed, my forehead against her cheek. I never got used to her saying things like that and I was sure I never would be.

“Allright. You got it,” I said, voice hoarse with the morning and my fingertips drawing circles in the soft down at her lower back. “On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“Much as I love that hammock, it isn’t big enough for both of us,” One of my hands ventured north, rough palm sliding at her side. “When I get your mattress today, I’m gonna move a bed in here and put it where the hammock’s at. That way, if you have a nightmare, I can hold you like you showed me.”

“We’ll be sleeping together…in the same bed?” She asked, goosebumps raising on her under my hands.

The smirk on my face was instant. “Got a problem, sunshine?”

“No, it’s just…you said you wanted to take things slow.”

The way she shivered in my arms, her eyes fluttering, reminded me of how sweet revenge could be. My hands left her sides and slid them into my pockets. I pecked the button of her nose. “I still want to take it slow.”
I put an arm around her waist to steady her as I stood up from the chair and set her down. “Do we have a deal, Gail?”

She squinted, but her smile betrayed her frustration. “We do.”

“I can keep my hands to myself,” I leaned in to kiss her cheek and kissed to her hairline, her skin warming as my nose brushed the top of her ear. Can you?

“You’re impossible,” She said, hands balled into fists as she crouched to pick up her borrowed hoodie. She zipped it up as I moved to the door, waiting for her with my hand on the knob. Gail threw me the shirt I’d worn the night before.

I put it on, my face hurting from the smiles and smirks to tease her with. We looked at each other for a second, and I knew. We were both thinking about the odds. What were the odds of us getting back to this place? From miles away, minefields of issues and problems, madmen and maniacs, we found our way back here. We found our way back to each other. Jesus, I didn’t deserve her.

“Come on, Jason,” She said, and took my hand. “We should get some breakfast.”

A sharp tug and she was close enough. It was a quick, gentle kiss, and too short to persuade me to forgo food. She blinked, flushed with surprise. “What was that for?”

I held the door open for her to go first. “Nothin’.”

……………………………………………………………

Dick saw the sword first, catching moonlight coming in from Barbara’s big windows in the living room. It was a katana, easily distinguished by how the wielder held it, and considering the sword was only five feet off the ground, he could guess who the assailant’s height.

Without a sound, Dick slipped into the closet outside Barbara’s room and got to the bo staff tucked inside the door. He kept it parallel to the ground as he pushed the button beneath the lightswitch to the closet. If the intruder tried to escape after Dick made his move, he’d fail. The Clocktower was now locked down. No one in, and no one out.
Dick flattened against the hall and edged himself towards the living room as the assailant moved towards the kitchen. Something cold slipped into his stomach as he remembered the LexCorp accounts he and Barbara had poured over before he went to work, open on the kitchen island. She said to leave them as they were so they could pick it up again in the morning.

He moved from the wall to the knife block by the kitchen lightswitch, and took a paring knife from the block. As the intruder, wrapped in black, caught the first glance at the accounts, Dick threw the knife on the table to keep the papers in place and flicked on the lights.

The assailant was no bigger than Dick had been when he was Robin, slight athletic limbs and black hair peeking out of the headwrap. An open patch of the wrap big enough for his ice blue eyes and the top of the boy’s nose wrinkled with anger as Dick brandished his staff.

“The Lunchables are in the downstairs fridge, junior,” Dick said, “But we do have juiceboxes.”

A sharp cry ripped out of the boy as he lunged for Dick over the island, and the first katana slash parried off the metal staff, the second dinged off the marble counters. The boy was trained and trained well, fast as he was and - Dick hated to admit - more mobile with his small stature in getting around Barbara’s apartment with weapons.

Dick followed him, vaulting over the couch as the boy tore into his staff with the katana. A dart missed the boy’s arm by centimeters, and Dick glanced to see Barbara in the hallway, gauntlets over her forearms and escrima sticks in her hands. The controls on her wheelchair switched to her feet, and it rolled forward to bring her to the fight, deflecting the boy’s confused swings at her with ease.

Metallic twangs as the katana bounced off her gauntlets gave Dick the opening to pick the boy up by the scruff of the neck with one arm, and tossed him unceremoniously into the couch. The boy yelped, face red with frustration, and tried to flip himself onto his back, but Barbara leapt from her wheelchair to put her weight down on him. He threw her off, grabbed his katana and tried to slash at her neck on the floor, but she was pulled out of his reach.

Dick slid Barbara under him between his legs, and used the staff to pole-vault over the boy’s head. A katana slash over his head was avoided with a lean, but the sound of wheels made Dick grin. The boy pulled a blunt dagger from his belt and fought both of them with a hand each, head on a swivel as he maneuvered them to his front.

“He’s an al Ghul, alright,” Barbara grunted, before a sharp kick to the side of her wheelchair spun
her around. Her feet worked to turn her back, but Dick had to jab at a katana slash at her head to
point it away.

He kicked the dagger out of the boy’s hand, and Barbara caught the other wrist as he missed a katana
stab, throwing the other elbow into the boy’s hand to disable it. She bent it until she felt resistance,
and Dick swept his legs out from under him, a hand thrown out before the boy’s face smacked off
the floor.

The boy thrashed and growled in Arabic at them as she kept his hand while Dick took out the string
from his lounge pants, a knee between the assassin’s shoulder blades. He twisted it and tied the boy’s
wrists behind his back.

Something particularly venomous from the boy made Barbara’s eyebrows knit. “You kiss your
mother with that mouth?”

Dick lifted him to his feet and walked him to where his stash of Jason’s heavy-duty zipties were
tucked into his officer’s belt. Dick was panting, and that was something to behold after so long
without a fight that challenged him. He smiled as the boy wrestled his arms in the restraints. “Hey, if
you stop cussing at my girlfriend, I’ll get you a juicebox before we interrogate you. Deal?”

The boy’s eyes narrowed to slits.

…………………………………………………………………………………

“What makes you think I know what happened?” My hand wiped down my face, my cheeks heating
up as I explained it to him, “She was gonna go to bed and sleep on that stiff recliner in the crate room
and I didn’t want her to go, so I just…”

“You what?” Roy ate another spoonful of cereal, holding the bowl where we stood outside the
kitchen. The girls were chatting and eating inside, the sounds of Spongebob from Lian’s little TV by
her high chair.

“I kissed her,” It sounded more ridiculous in my head, and I sighed as his eyes doubled in size. “Stop
it, okay? Nothing happened beyond that. We kissed, and we fell asleep together in my hammock, but
nothing happened .”
“You guys got together, that’s what happened.” Roy grinned as much as he could around a mouthful of Lucky Charms. “Didn’t you?”

“Fine,” He squealed and my eyes narrowed at him until he finished, “Shut up, Jesus. Fine, yes. We got together, but we’re figuring things out. And she’s helping with the mission. I can’t keep her from it anymore and quite frankly, I think she’s tired of me trying to. So…” I bit my lip. “She’s helping.”

“You’re not happy about it,” Roy observed, brows together.

“It was the whole point of sending her to Metropolis, so she’d be safe and have normal, but I can’t stop her anymore. She’s a part of it now and it’s who she is. Not for me, not for anybody else, she wants to do it because it’s in her to do it. She wants to protect people.” I scratched at the scruff on my jaw. “She doesn’t want normal.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Roy slurped back the milk and held his empty bowl, placing a hand on my shoulder. “There are people who want normal and easy and safe, and that’s fine. Good for them, but people like us? The very few of us left? We want to do it because we don’t know anything else. Sure, I was a criminal by associating with Cheshire for a while, but I loved being a hero. I know you did too. And from what she’s told me, Gail got a taste of that a year ago. And she’s already as addicted to it as we are. Saving lives and making terrible fashion choices, that’s our gig.”

“We’re not heroes anymore, Roy,” I said, “Dick, Tim, Barbara, Clark, they’re heroes. They’ve never done what we’ve done. And liked it.”

“Boys?”

It was Kori, standing in the doorway of the kitchen with Gail by her side. Lian was chowing down at her high chair, oblivious to us.

Kori braided her hair absentmindedly as she looked between us with her pupilless green eyes, her tone regal and serious, “We’ve been listening to your conversation, and we agree. I left my homeworld a fugitive and a slave. I am wanted in eleven star systems for high treason. I may have saved lives alongside the Titans, but I killed to get away from my captors, people just following orders. I am no better than anyone here.”

“And I’m not much of a saint either,” Gail rested her back against the door jamb, her hair screwed up in a bun. “I’ve killed. I’ve lied. But I still want to do some good, even if it doesn’t cancel out what
I’ve done.”

I wanted to protest, to tell her that what she’s done was in self-defense and she was a goddamn saint if I had any say in the matter. But I knew she had a pit in her stomach like mine, something she threw her morality into when threatened. Something her logic had no power over that shined like her mother’s gun.

“Where does that leave us, then?” I asked. “This power struggle is only going to get worse. We have Lex Luthor, Talia, Joker, and all of their soldiers aiming at us. Gotham’s tearing itself into pieces and if we don’t stop it, it’ll spread. We can’t do this individually. The four of us, Dick, Barbara, Alfred, Tim, Clark...We’re still outnumbered.”

“We were outnumbered last time,” Gail smiled, her eyes on me and I beamed back as she said, “And barring injuries, we whooped their asses. We can win.”

I nodded. “We’re not heroes, but even the best of heroes are made out to be outlaws.”

Tim Drake liked statistics, but not tonight.

He had gone over the numbers, uncooked the books again and again for weeks. Barbara had stripped them from LexCorp and sent them to him. He was better with math, had the mind for the forensic accounting necessary. The floor of his apartment was cold but cluttered with papers on top of papers, the walls layered with clear sheet plastic and littered with dry-erase marker he’d used for scratch work.

Alfred brought him food and sometimes he needed a break and made it himself. He had been working almost around the clock, allowing himself five hours of sleep every night to maintain cognitive function. Barbara had come over a couple of times to bring new books, new information and news about the family. He’d appreciated the distraction, though hearing that Abigail Byron was in town unnerved him less than he thought it would. Maybe it was the respect he had for her since receiving his Red Robin suit, or maybe he simply didn’t care.

Since his split with Barbara, he was finally able to focus. He was dedicated to the task at hand, he was able to return to that absolute commitment to the job and the work he was doing. He found it refreshing, if a bit lonely. But he was not lonely for long tonight.
He was accompanied by an older companion: success.

He held the papers in his hand, the final calculations. What was coming was already here. What Talia had stashed away inside LexCorp’s inner workings already, waiting to be used.

“Christ.”

Tim’s hand began to scatter over the floor for his phone.
Where I've Been:
- writing a book
- finishing a book
- revising that book four times
- starting another book
- working on a master's degree
- maintaining a 4.0 in that master's degree
- applying to a writing program
- getting accepted into said writing program

FAQ:
1. Are you done with Jason Todd?
   Nope.
2. When can we expect the next chapter?
   Soon is all I can say for sure, but likely within the month of November.
3. Will you finish The Red Outlaw?
   Definitely.
4. How can we support you?
   Leave a comment! Recommend it to your local JT fan! Anything helps! I'm also on Twitter. @HHKnowsNothing
   Come hang out!

“Wine or water, death, dishonor baby pick your poison
These little demons
Living underneath my bed creeping
Know the real monster lives above them all sleeping
That subtle breathing in your closet every single evening
Thought you'd never see me again, looks can be deceiving
When they hear the sound of the drum
They'll be saying oh lord here they come”

- The Seige, “The Drum”

“Hey Damian, can I come in?”
The boy didn’t move from his bed, a tiny slab of metal covered in blankets across from a thick sheet of glass and a chair. His first solo mission, straight from his mother’s hands, and he failed.

He laid with his back to the glass, both hands over his mouth and his eyes fighting angry, disappointed tears. His shame knew no depths. Or at least that’s how he felt before Dick Grayson sat down in the chair, opened up the locked slot and pushed a juicebox to his side of the glass.

“There’s the juicebox, as promised.” Dick said. “I have food here too if you’re hungry.”

“Come to feed your prisoner, then?” Damian forced himself to keep his voice even, not to let a single leak through. “I’m a child trapped in a prison cell by my sperm donor’s minions.”

Dick winced and sat back in his chair, crossing an ankle over his knee. “Ouch. Well, you did try to assassinate my girlfriend and I.”

“I wasn’t there to assassinate you.” Damian rolled onto his back, eyes to the ceiling hardened to his situation. The ignorance of others always helped him calm down. “I was there to observe you. To stow myself away among you and observe your movements to report them back to my mother. I was to be the perfect spy, given my size and stealth.”

“That so?” Dick said softly. “You didn’t pack supplies. No food, water... Was that by design or did you figure you could steal food from our fridge?”

Damian’s teeth ground together. “That was not the lesson the mission was supposed to teach me. Self-preservation had to come second to the intelligence. Even if I had to wait four days for a scrap, I would complete the mission.”

“You’re twelve.” Dick watched the boy’s hands clenched in his pockets across the glass. The crime fighter left his body and settling like a stone-faced, light-voiced ghost was Officer Grayson, the protector without a mask. “Was her own son not important enough for provisions on a highly dangerous mission or did she not give a damn as long as she could kill his father?”

Damian was across the floor and had the juicebox in his hand within a couple of seconds. He launched it at the glass - apple juice spraying across the surface. Dick didn’t even flinch as the boy shouted, “Do not speak a word against my mother!”
“Or what? You’ll intimidate me with the sound of your stomach growling?” Dick asked, calm as anything. He stood, towering over Damian. “Don’t deny it. I could hear it when I carried you in. You’re starving. Your own mother is starving you because she wanted to spy on us. Think about that for a moment.”

“She isn’t starving me.” Damian snarled back, his limbs throbbing with anger and fatigue. “You could never understand. Your parents are dead.”

He waited for Batman’s righteous son to react, to throttle him or maybe do some shouting of his own. Instead, Dick smiled. “My biological parents, yes. They are dead. But my adopted father, your father, is still alive. You have brothers, kiddo. Your bravado can’t outrun hunger.” He kept his eyes on Damian as he opened the glass slot and pushed a tray of hot breakfast through. “And when that happens, you’ll realize the only family you’ve got is the one that bothers to feed you.”

Dick shrugged and turned to walk away. When he had his hand on the doorknob to leave, he paused. “I’ll get you another juicebox.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Tough.” Dick winked and closed the door behind him.

Damian curled up in the corner of his bed, pushed the blankets away until it was only cold metal under him. He felt it leech the warmth from his body.

The growl of his stomach made him pull his legs to his chest, as if he could muffle the noise.

Train by day, fight by night. Selina never thought she would have kept to the mantra as closely as she had.

He swayed an inch and missed a scratch, leaned the other way to avoid a kick. A fist pounded into his cheekbone, rocking him back on his heels. The morning sun crept toward their shady proving ground. Seagulls crowed the hour in the distance.
It had been a month since she broke in. She mused to herself that she never stayed at a mark’s house so long. Somehow she always found a reason to stay a little longer, always forgot what she came for in the first place.

On the floor in the next instant, she wrapped both legs around his neck, held her ankle as she squeezed on his windpipe. His core muscles contracted hard to ball himself up to loosen the hold, and when she relinquished her grip, he took his by pinning her hands behind her back.

This was a game. If she had feeling in her fingers, he was playing games.

She jerked her head back hard, the crown cracking against his nose. He grunted, and one hand broke free. She twisted her body around to drive a knee into his chest. It was her turn to pin him down.

She caught both hands he brought up to fight, knowing he wasn't about to use them. “You’d better start fighting back, Bruce.”

“Or what?” His blue eyes were nearly black in the dim light.

Selina’s breath fluttered his bangs, her nails broken and a bead of sweat dropped from the end of her nose onto his cheek. His cheekbone was red, lips parted, looking up at her with his sleek brows furrowed.

A tiny slice on his jawline from shaving his beard, not deep enough to draw blood. She hadn’t done much better and she was just as sharp.

She let him go. She stood, her feet on either side of his torso.

“We have been at this for weeks.” She said. “I have tried just about everything. I don’t know why Alfred thought I would’ve been any better at this than he was. I’m tired.”

Bruce propped himself up on his hands, his thumb by her toes. “You’re leaving.”
“I guess I am.”

She stepped away to her bag on the table they’d pushed aside, a nail picking at the handwraps until they started to unravel. He got to his feet behind her, and his eyes on her back made her shiver. The rolled-up handwraps went into the bag, along with her water, fake ID, and when she was finished with that room, she moved on to the rest of his place to collect her things.

He waited by her bag, hip braced against the wall, as she returned with her arms full of borrowed possessions. “Where will you go? Back to Gotham?”

“Maybe. I told Alfred I’d come back if this was a bust.” She shrugged. “I don’t like making promises, but your boys need help. They need your help.”

“It’s not like you to keep attachments.”

Selina’s jaw tensed. “When I told you I’d help you find your way back, I thought it was because the man I knew was still in there, somewhere.”

“I meant it when I said Batman was dead, Selina.” He had the nerve to take a step closer, close enough to feel his warmth - even when he was stone cold. “If I go back with Joker in Gotham, there’s a chance I’ll be corrupted again. I refuse to take that chance.”

The briefcase locked tight was under her suitcase, the teeth of the key poking out of her passport. She tried not to look at it. “You were corrupted the first time because you refused to let anyone in to help you, Bruce.” He opened his mouth, but she cut him off, “Don’t tell me you were trying to protect us. You were trying to protect half of Gotham with Joker inside you and kept it to yourself, we won’t congratulate you for that. You didn’t even tell Alfred.”

“And what do you suppose might have happened if I had told someone?” Bruce asked, his fists clenched at his sides. “I was losing my grip as it was, barely held on long enough to help Ivy stop the Cloudburst.” Her eyes welled up at the name, but he didn’t let her turn away, he took her shoulders. His eyes were insistent, pleading, two things she never expected from him. “Selina, I wanted to say something. I wanted to tell Alfred or Jim or someone. Joker was stronger than I was then. I lost Talia and I know you hate her.”

Selina narrowed her raw eyes at him, and her lip curled. “I hate her because she raped you, Bruce. I understand you cared about her, but she still violated you and in a way, Joker did too.”
His eyes averted from hers, his mouth in a line. The shaving cut stood out even more, with all the other scars criss-crossed over his body. His hands slid off her shoulders.

““I thought distance would help, but it hasn’t. I used to plan and plan and plan because I knew I wasn’t indestructible. I knew if I couldn’t overpower someone, I could at least outsmart them, but that’s almost impossible with a madman in your head. Doing the right thing is made so difficult if doing the bad thing almost looks easier. He would create these hallucinations. Snapping Scarecrow’s neck, for example. Or snapping his. He made me watch Barbara and Jason die. Made me see Jason’s torture through his eyes.” Bruce sucked in a harsh breath and put a hand over his eyes. “If any of this has taught me anything, it’s that I can’t pretend I’m not bleeding inside anymore.”

*So that’s why he never said anything*, Selina thought. *He didn’t want us to stop him from doing his job.*

She took his hand, loose so that he knew he could pull away. Her gaze traced his history of scars up to his face, then glanced to her open suitcase.

“If you want to go, Selina, you can.” He said, and she could feel his effort to pull himself together through his fingers. “I’ve never stopped you before.”

“And I’ve never left you and not regretted it.” She pushed her luggage away, off the briefcase. “I’ve a confession to make. I haven’t stolen a thing since I found out you were alive and the drive to steal isn’t there anymore. I did it before because I needed to, and the added bonus of being chased by you was fun. But now I’ve stolen enough to live comfortably and I know you’re not going to live forever.”

“What are you trying to say?”

She took the key out of her passport and he watched her unlock the briefcase.

“You have always said I could be good. I might not have believed you then, but I do now. I came down here thinking I could do something good. I could show you I’ve changed. I thought maybe we could…” Her voice trailed off, and she shook her head, smiling faintly. “That’s not the point.”

She opened the briefcase, the black outline of the Bat symbol caught the gold light.
“The point is, the man I mourned isn’t dead. I refuse to believe he is. He isn’t this damn suit. He sure as hell isn’t some idiot jumping off rooftops. He’s not Batman. He’s you.” She poked her finger into his chest. “When you left us, the Bruce Wayne mask died, not you. All that’s left is you. I want to know who you are. Who you are, without this suit.”

Bruce did his best not to look into the briefcase. He knew what was there. He looked at her instead. “Who do you think I am?”

There was no hesitation in her. “I think you’re a father who wants to go home to his kids, but doesn’t think he can, or should. You love them.” The slightest hint of a smile on her mouth. “Your weakness has never been your principles, your mortality...it certainly isn’t me. It’s those kids of yours. They hurt, you hurt. One of them doesn’t come home, part of you doesn’t come home. Well, your kids are all home now, Bruce. It’s time you joined them.”

“Do you see it?” Tim waved his hand over the diagram drawn on a dry-erase board in one of Barb’s computer rooms. “It’s so obvious. Neon sign kind of obvious.”

I squinted at the chickenscratch, the notes scribbled on the side and the jagged arrows pointing at rows and rows of numbers stacked four columns deep. “None of that is obvious, man.”

Dick tilted his head to the side in his chair and Barbara’s mouth was moving as if checking his math in her head. I snatched up the last grilled cheese from the platter Alfred brought down.

“Okay, let me explain this one last time.” Tim sighed, and erased the notes on the sides, the arrows, leaving the columns be. “So I ran the numbers and the listings to Lex’s accounts, cross-referencing what Abigail gave us from Talia’s share with what’s on official record. Basic forensic accounting. I cook the books and what do I find? Two million, one hundred and fifty-three thousand, four hundred and seventy four dollars, fifteen cents. Gone. Into thin air.”

“And I asked this the first time you explained it: where’d it go?” I said through a mouthful of grilled cheese. “Think this is where I lost you earlier.”

“Same here.” Dick rested his forearms on the back of his chair.
Tim nodded, and uncapped his marker. He wrote the big number up top, and drew arrows to different entries in the columns. “Well, he redistributed the money. The money was a transfer to his account, not from it.”

“He had to launder it.” Dick deduced.

“Exactly. So I ran the investors connected to LexCorp, the off-shore shareholders, the departments, and it's all there. Distributed through his company as bonus money, which proves the tax evasion claims the press has been making and accepting money from known terrorist organizations.”

“Like Gail said in her interview.” I bit my lip. “So what's the plan?”

“We hacked LexCorp, we can't just give it to Abigail and tell her to give it to Clark to bury Lex.” Barbara shook her head.

I wiped the crumbs off my lap and leaned forward, a hand over my mouth. I told Gail she could join the team but I didn't want her in danger on two fronts of her life. I was barely comfortable with one.

I glanced at Dick and his eyes were bright, brows lifted.

“You thinking what I'm thinking?”

Tim apparently had been thinking it too. “Please don’t tell me you're thinking about anonymously leaking it to the Internet. Lex will think Gail put it up.”

“Not anonymously.” Barbara said, a half-eaten grilled cheese in her hand. “Tim's right, Lex will blame Gail if it goes up anonymously. But I could just...leave it on a CIA server. Put a memo for Amanda Waller. File it through the system.”

“And bury Lex with the government he wanted to take over.” I finished, my skin tingling from the poetry in the idea. Gail might squeal.

“I might be able to get Waller’s number through my contact at Blackgate. Let her know what she's looking at.” Dick brushed the crumbs off his fingers and stood.
“What do we do about any future skirmishes with the League in the meantime?” Tim tucked his hands under his armpits, his eyes to the whiteboard.

I glanced between Tim and Dick with an edge in my throat. I knew they’d formed some sort of truce after I saw Joker, but I didn't know how long that was supposed to last.

Dick picked his teeth with his thumbnail. “I'm following a lead that dropped into Barb and I’s laps last night.”

Barbara gave a snort from her computer. “Not the word I'd use.”

“What happened?” I squinted. Tim didn't seem surprised, resigned to erase the whiteboard.

“Remember the squirt we fought last year with Talia? Her son with Bruce?”

My jaw twinged, my mouth souring. “How could I forget? Twerp took my tank from me and nearly blew up Gail inside it.”

“We have him in a holding cell downstairs.” Barbara said, nonchalantly. She related the entire ordeal of finding the grandson of the Demon in her Clocktower despite the ridiculous security on the place.

My teeth ground hard enough to make my jaw ache. “He could've killed you both.” I shot up from my chair and cracked my neck. “Well, have you gotten anything out of him?”

“Nothing yet.” Dick sighed. “I think it'll take him trusting us first. I'm working on it.”

“Fine. Probably better you're doing it anyway.” I turned and started for the elevator. “Send the file to Waller. I'll handle any further problems with Talia or Lex.”

“By yourself?” Barbara never liked the idea of any of us going it alone. Especially against an al Ghul.
“There's nothing to worry about. I've got backup.”

Gail’s first patrol was a breeze. Somewhere in my gut, I knew it would be, but with her, nothing’s
certain.

Gearing up was fine. After almost a decade of doing the tights and rights dance on the rooftops,
clamping armor and weapons on myself was natural. There was no complication of ‘should I’s and
‘can I’s, just the giddy knowledge that I'd be in danger soon. And the giddy knowledge that I'd be
the danger soon, but seeing Gail put on the black metal made me want to send her to the other side of
the world. Even if I knew I never would.

Her eyes followed every movement and I waited for her to say she wasn’t ready, that she needed
more time. I waited for the “Jay, I’m gonna say this and you’re not allowed to say ‘I told you so’”, or
“Jay, any chance I could sit this one out, I don’t feel so good”. I glanced at her, tried to see if I could
predict the words before they came out.

They never did. We left the firehouse together, racing each other rooftop to rooftop. She still hated
heights, but by the fifth jump over an alleyway, she started to take jumps faster until I was the one
trying to keep up.

I knew it’d happen at some point, but we ran into trouble coming out of the Bowery. No ninjas. No
supervillains. Not that there’s such a thing as a ‘perfect crime’, but watching from the rooftops as
Gail dove onto a mugger, delivered an ass-kicking, ziptied him to a streetlight, and threw the wallet
back was considerably easier to stomach than a murder or a burglary or something messy.

Simple. Textbook.

She muttered for the victims, a couple of girls on their way home presumably, to call GCPD, and
fired the grappler back up to me. Their eyes followed the tail of Gail’s French braid into the
darkness, one of them smiling and the other shaking her head.

I helped her over the edge, lungs constricted in my chest. “Couldn’t have handled it better myself.”

Her face pulled under the carbon fiber half-mask covering her nose and mouth. Her voice was
deeper through the ventilation, the voice modulator. “You weren’t worried about me, were you?”
I deconstructed the transformer pistols locked into a sniper rifle with a huff. “Nope.”

She squinted as I holstered both of them. I’d made sure she was armed to the teeth before we left, every piece of armor clasped tight to her. No mistakes. No oversights. A three-eighty strapped to each hip, thighs strapped up with plenty of ammo, a knife on her shin and barbs in the knuckles of her gloves. Mines strapped to her belt to be dropped or thrown if she needed to escape.

Gail and I ran and ran and ran but didn’t encounter anything on our end. Kori and Roy had ended their shifts already, likely at the Clocktower to pick up Lian by now. We had another three hours to go until 5AM.

It may as well have been three minutes, because running with Gail was more fun than I allowed myself to think it’d be. We played tag across three neighborhoods, the height of her laughter higher than we were from the ground. My heart pulsed in my ears, my lungs singing showtunes.

At last, she managed to disappear entirely. She led me into a narrow stretch of rooftop between two buildings, protected by a catwalk a few feet above my head. The building to the right was a church, stone gargoyles dripping from the roof. Stained glass filtering colored light out into the shadows.

I slowed to a stop and looked around, panting. “Where’d you go?”

Her voice floated out of the darkness. “Lift the front of your helmet and close your eyes.”

I grinned. The chill air sent my breath in mist as I tapped the side of my helmet. The front came up. I wiped the sweat off my face, but not the smile. Scanning the shadows before I did, I closed my eyes as I was told.

Her persistent hands were first. Leather gloves on my jacket, pulling me down to her. I reached and found her hips. The smell of smoke caught in her hair from the windows of strangers, mixed with the Gotham salt and her sweat. Her cheek bumped into mine, her mask was off. I felt it knock against my collarbone, hanging off her armor.

She led me backwards, till my shoulder blades met bricks. My weapons banged against her weapons on our belts as she pressed against me. Armed to the teeth and light in the head, she kissed me. Gail tasted like chapstick and the smoothie she’d had before we left, strawberries in the big city. Her hands on my face, my neck. Mine were under her jaw, the tension there made me flip us around so
my broad back could keep her out of the wind.

“Jay-”

I corrected her with a hard kiss. “Codenames out here, sunshine.”

“What do you call me, then?”

I laughed into her ear. “Depends on how you kiss me.”

A hard nip on my lower lip sent shivers down my spine, my fingers curling against her neck. Her warm body melted into mine, caught between her and the cold of the wind. Gail was small but strong, her arm under my jacket across my back to pull me even closer. As if we could get any closer. As if we’d just discovered what close meant and wanted to shrink the negative space between us indefinitely.

We passed gasps to each other through our mouths like notes in the rooftop class I’d been teaching her through most of our time spent together. Her tongue brushed mine and it was all I could do not to devour her.

I’d kissed people before, idle flirtations and whimsical dares. Making out and kissing were interchangeable, but fifteen stories up, the wind blowing through us as if begging these two ghosts to stop making out on the roof, we took on a whole other definition.

I’d never been in love before her. I’d never held my hands under a girl’s thighs and picked her up because I needed to kiss her that badly. Gail didn’t tell me to put her down this time. She didn’t want to come down to anything that resembled solid ground.

Solid ground didn’t want anything to do with us.

Her legs wound around my hips, her hair coming out of her braid and wisping soft against my neck. I’d never wanted to know the kind of madness driving people to do stupid things, and God knows I turned out batshit anyway, but I was a different kind of crazy for Gail. The stay up all night type of crazy.
We were dropping a jacket covered in grenades and ammo to the ground like a piece of trash in the heat of a makeout kind of crazy. Dropping a self-destructing helmet with a thunk kind of crazy. Not sure whose tongue was whose kind of crazy.

Dead already kind of crazy.

The longer I kissed her, the closer it grew to 5AM, the more I understood.

I pressed my forehead to hers after we broke apart the twelfth time. “Got an idea for your codename.”

“Yeah?” She was breathing hard, hot breath on my lips. “What is it?”

“Ghost.”
Life of Death

“Needlework the way, never you betray
Life of death becoming clearer
Pain monopoly, ritual misery
Chop your breakfast on a mirror.”

- Metallica, “Master of Puppets”

Those last few days before November came and went. The campaign seemed more solid than ever, foundations laid and promises made, but all it took was an email to ruin what might have been a historic occasion.

The address in her inbox gave Amanda Waller pause, but what she had been working on was quickly cast aside. The letter was signed ‘an oracle’. Waller knew which one. It was the same one that asked her to look into Talia Head, Luthor’s private backer. It was the same one she debated with for six hours straight over something the recipient happened upon in her files, related to a squad of supercriminals. This oracle needed only a minute to delete every scrap of information she - and the rest of the CIA for that matter - had on the Arkham Knight and his militia.

And now the one erased was Lex Luthor.

The federal agents broke it to him at a rally. His red face, inhuman anger creasing his forehead, was immortalized on the Daily Planet front page under the headline - “LUTHOR FALLS APART”, byline Lois Lane and Clark Kent. Their most crucial informant, who claimed her life was threatened by one of Luthor’s bodyguards, maintained her anonymity, but backed up her evidence with hard facts corroborated by one Amanda Waller, head of the CIA.

The LexCorp armada of lawyers kept him out of prison, but Gotham City braced itself for the inevitable backlash, holding hands with Metropolis while that other great city did the same.

November flashed by in an icy fog of paranoia. My outlaws and I patrolled by night, but as the month passed, Gail and Barbara convinced me that my only option was to go underground, stay in the firehouse. The last thing any of my housemates needed was federal agents looking into them.

Luthor would have only had a harder time coming after me as President. Now he didn't have to worry about image. His first proclamation after leaving the courthouse was that the presidency may
not be his, but my head belonged to the American people. This was just the beginning.

Call it cabin fever all you want, but it got old and painful real damn fast, watching my girl put on weapons and armor to head out alone. I kept busy, fixed up most of the firehouse with Lian on my hip while they were all out. Being her babysitter was a rewarding distraction, but it didn’t keep me from practically vibrating like my veins were pumping volts instead of blood.

They were out there fighting in my place. My family, my friends, and my girl were out there fighting my battles. My war. The war that's been tearing me apart from the inside since I escaped the clown so long ago.

I did terrible things as the Arkham Knight. I still believed I should pay for it, but not through loss. Not again. Not my family. They weren’t the ones who deserved to hurt.

For now, they believed they could protect me from the world. From Gotham’s people, who I tortured into giving me their Dark Knight. From Luthor and the government.

For now, maybe they were right, but I refused to sit on my ass while they fight for me. So I worked. I perfected armor. I sharpened weapons. I made an arsenal. I ordered ammunition, kevlar, carbon fiber, steel, gunpowder and gasoline. While my family was out there taking my punches and bullets and shrapnel, I was in my firehouse working well in December.

Christmas morning, Gail and I had the place to ourselves. Roy and Lian were staying at the Clocktower and Kori wasn't due back from Titans Tower for another week. Considering her sister was a Tamaranian curse word I couldn't pronounce, that bunch of kids were the only family she had.

At first, waking up alone made me shivery and my first task was always searching for where she went, but now, I knew where to look depending on the state of her side of our bed.

She’d made her side this morning, the socks on the floor gone. Her hair tie missing from her nightstand. I grabbed my shirt off the bedpost and threw it over my shoulder. I yawned, rubbing an eye as I made my way through my firehouse on memory alone. I checked the heating systems, the boilers. Hell would freeze over before my girl would.

Heading back up the stairs, the smell of eggs woke my stomach, coffee coaxing the smile to my lips. Gail stood in front of the stove, hair piled into a bun on the top of her head. She wore one of my Disturbed t-shirts and pajama bottoms, sprinkling pepper over an omelette.
She leaned back once she saw me. I pecked her cheek, pulling her to my chest. “Merry Christmas, sunshine.”

She laced her fingers with mine over her stomach. “Merry Christmas. Sure I can't change your mind?”

I rolled my eyes, kissing her temple before I moved to the fridge for her coffee creamer. “You just don't quit, do you?”

“Not recently or anytime soon. Please? Would it be so hard to accept one gift from me?”

I stole a glance at her from the corner of my eye. So headstrong, so indignant. Bare feet padding on the wood as she swayed. In this rare moment alone with her, I sighed. Even after a couple of months in the same city, it still felt like a dream. One moment or maybe the next, I’d stub my toe in my sleep or fall off the bed and I’d wake up alone.

“It's only fair considering you won't let me get you anything.” I said, shifting to the coffeemaker.

“For the exact same reason, no less.” She smiled as I fixed her coffee how she liked it. Half a spoonful of sugar, splash of hazelnut creamer.

I smirked at her. “Look at us, on the same page. How cute.”

“Adorable.” Gail accepted her coffee and traded me for my omelette - green peppers, bacon, and cheese, with a generous amount of pepper. She was halfway through her plate already, and while I sat at the little table, she propped her hip against the counter. “You've given me so much already.”

If it wasn't eight in the morning and Roy had made the food, I would've scoffed. Some gifts I'd given her. A world of problems and hurt. Scars, traumatic memories, and so much neither of us wanted to back out on. As often as I told her to let go of how Falcone died, I understood where it came from. Sometimes I wasn't sure if I'd ever forgive myself for letting her be with me, or for falling in love with her.

Either way, I needed to take my own advice and lay in the bed I made. It wasn't like I could unlove
her. It wasn’t like I’d ever want to.

My own coffee, black with no cream or sugar, was bitterer now than it’d ever been. “There’s so much I still want to give you. That I should give you.”

Gail softened, her voice smooth and easy. “Jason. I told you what you could offer me, the only thing I’d accept.”

Yeah, I remembered. I ran a hand through my hair. “Guy that’s caused nothing but trouble for you from the minute we met.”

“Haven’t I caused trouble for you too?” Her mouth quirked a smile. “Is that the problem? Am I not difficult enough for you? I can get difficult.”

“Tell me about it.” I joked, shaking my head. “I’m serious. We’re each other’s deathwish.”

Her smirk died on her lips and straightened. A year ago, I looked into this face and knew nothing about her. Somehow, that would’ve been easier than knowing her kind of cold. Knowing what put it there when she said, “Look me in the eye and tell me neither of us haven’t wished for death at one point or another. I dare you.”

I continued eating, eyes locked on her. I finished my food and downed the rest of my coffee. The dishes went to the sink. My hands braced on the counter to either side of her. She turned in my arms till we were nose-to-nose.

“It’s the point,” I said, with a swift kiss to her forehead. “is that, to my knowledge, neither of us wish for it anymore. I don’t leave this firehouse wishing someone was good enough to kill me. That someone hated me enough to do it. You don’t go through life under false pretenses and alone, feeling like a ghost in your own skin. We’re better. I think that’s worth celebrating.”

Gail smiled, proud and quiet. She put a hand over my heart. “It is.”

“Glad you agree.”
“I’m still not letting you buy me anything.”

“Course not.” I shook my head again and bent to kiss her.

She tasted like peppers, which made me lean into her mouth further, but she pulled back sharply.
“That reminds me. I have to go.”

My brows lifted. “Go? Go where?”

“Cemetery.” She looked apologetic, her hands on my hips. “Listen, I know you don’t want to go there because it’s where Bruce’s headstone is. Sure, he’s not even dead, but I know you don’t like to talk about him. I still want to go because...Christmas is my mom’s birthday, and I want to visit her.”

I curled my finger under her chin. “Hey. It’s your mom. I’ll go with you.”

She bit her lip. “Are you sure it’s safe for you to be out? Luthor’s still hunting you, Jay.”

“Let me worry about that.” I tapped the edge of her plate. “Finish your food and get dressed. I’ll get the car ready.”

Dick prided himself on being a good host at a party, but there was something to be said about a host who made a special Christmas visit to an uninvited houseguest who nearly killed him a month prior.

It started hours before. Dick and Barbara had left the yearly viewing of *It's a Wonderful Life* Alfred had in his study with a nonnegotiable platter of cookies and a tight hug from the butler, who promised to look after his new guests. The guests, of course, being Roy fast asleep on the sofa with Lian cuddled up on his chest.

The couple retired to the top of the Clocktower, exchanging gifts and kisses by the fireplace. They watched the snow float past their windows in each other’s arms, easy time punctuated with warm hands and bodies under the covers.
Dick reached up to touch his neck as he prepared the extra tray of food. The ghosts of Barbara’s mouth made him shiver, his own curled into a content grin. His thighs ached. That had never happened before. Somehow, it seemed as if this was a runaway train on an endless, unobstructed track, but for once, not in a bad way. Not in any way that had him scrambling for his suit. For once, a runaway train he didn't mind speeding out of control. A runaway train he had no intention of stopping.

After all, it had been building speed for a long time.

He pulled out a notebook from a kitchen drawer and flipped to this week’s log. He knew what he'd find - a steady three week long period of three meals a day, eating every last morsel given, but he wanted to make sure before taking the next plunge. Of course, the ultimate test was waiting for his food. He ran a hand through his hair, snatched a napkin from the table, and delivered his continual peace offering to his houseguest.

Two floors down, he opened the holding cell and assessed the situation. Damian was no longer a slender boy who looked more like his sword than a swordsman. He glanced over from his push-ups and then continued his count into the upper seventies. Thicker black hair, skin with more color than veins, it appeared the frequent supervised trips to the rooftop to train hand-to-hand were helping his complexion as well as his mood. The boy was clean, thanks to the successful attempt to coax him to bathe instead of trying to escape through the bathroom window thirty stories up.

Damian was ten times healthier than he'd been when he broke in.

Dick simply knelt and slid the tray through like any other day. The last piece he kept in his pocket, for the bargain. “Merry Christmas, Damian.”

“I do not celebrate it, but I appreciate the sentiment, Grayson.” The boy finished his set and sat up. He peeled his shirt off his torso, borrowed from Dick, and wiped his forehead. At last, he sunk into a pretzel before the tray. “Ham, green bean casserole, potato mash and gravy. Perfectly adequate. Well done.”

Dick wrinkled his nose. “Glad it's up to your standards. Like your mother used to make?”

“My mother made corpses, not casserole.” Damian corrected through a mouthful of food. Although Dick knew he abhorred a lapse in manners, etiquette often went to hell when you were starving. The boy chewed with the grace of a prince, holding his fork like it was made of gold instead of plastic. “My experience with Christmas is limited, but from what Mother has told me, it surrounds the exchange of gifts and is based on a pagan holiday to scare children into behaving for once in their
“Gift-giving is a part of it, but no matter what it's based on, where I grew up - it was about helping those less fortunate and growing closer with your family. Mending burned bridges and hugging your loved ones a little harder.”

Damian sliced his ham deftly, and considered it on the end of his fork for a moment. “Seems like a waste of time for people in our position.”

“How do you figure?” Dick figured he'd humor the kid, but knew it was retaliation.

“Your parents are dead. Most of your family is hiding from Lex Luthor. Our beloved father cannot be bothered to look after you or the blood son his eldest has locked in a cage. My mother chose a mission over her son, and has yet to rescue me.” Damian explained, his voice tight and formal even for one so young.

Dick smiled. “Is that what you think you're sitting in, Damian? A cage?”

“All you're sitting in is a room where we're sure you won't kill us while we're putting things in place to try and help you.” Dick leaned back and propped his hands on the floor. “Which brings me back to Christmas. I have a gift for you, but only if you give me one in return.”

Damian paused with a hunk of casserole in his mouth, clear blue eyes staring the smiling man down. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“I want to give you your freedom and a choice.” Dick reached into his pocket to take out a bag of Alfred’s cookies and the key to the cell. “You can have time to think on this if you want but here’s what I'm offering. My Christmas gift to you is this key at the cost of eating a cookie. You can have your freedom and the choice before you isn't easy to make. You can return to Talia if you want, back to your League of Assassins that starved you into stealing information and attempted murder. Or you can join us. We’ll help you establish yourself and train you the way your father trained us, but I won't lie to you, Damian. If you join us, you'll likely be helping us take down your mother and ruin her plot to kill Bruce Wayne and everything he built. Including me and our brothers. It's your choice.”
He waited for some kind of reaction, though unsure which he expected. Maybe he expected Damian to feel anger or betrayal. He’d been locked in this cell, which to his reluctance did resemble a cage, only to be given a chance at gilded freedom.

How could a boy turn on the woman who gave birth to him?

Damian ate his food, wiped his mouth on the napkin and drank every last drop of eggnog from the plastic cup. He pushed the tray back and Dick, certain that he’d asked far too much for a young boy to think about, took it. He stood for the door, shaking his head in shame.

“Grayson.”

Dick froze. He turned to watch the boy lift his hand and beckon him back toward the glass. His features were unreadable.

Dick returned to his position on the other side of the glass, an enlarged reflection of the boy. “What do you need?”

“If I’m to earn my freedom, I have to eat a Christmas cookie, do I not?” Damian laced his fingers together on his lap, businesslike and with perfect posture. “Hand it over.”

Dick didn’t hesitate. He pushed the bag of cookies through the hatch.

The boy studied them through the plastic, holding the bag by the top like it was a dead rat. Then he opened the bag and pulled out a sugar cookie shaped like a church bell, decorated in red and green icing. He took a small bite, icing stuck to his upper lip.

Dick thanked God for Alfred’s superb baking skills. Damian chewed and then took a far larger bite, crumbs tumbling down his shirt. He licked his lips, searched the bag for all the church bell cookies like his. He ate every single one, a ravenous sweet-toothed boy with no thought of sharing. Once he was done, he licked his fingers and let out a satisfied hum.

“Good?” Dick asked with a wide grin. “I’ll pass your compliments to Alfred.”

“Do so. These are masterpieces of culinary excellence.” Damian moved on to the cookies shaped like Christmas trees, nibbling through them to make them last longer. Dick remembered the
technique. The boy was halfway through a mistletoe cookie when he eyed his elder brother. “My key?”

Dick’s smile crumpled only slightly. He stood and unlocked the cell for him. He slid the glass away and turned his body to give Damian space to leave.

The cookie bag was stashed into the boy’s pockets as he left the cell. “My swords?”

“Third closet on your left.”

He tailed the young assassin as he exited the holding chamber, retrieved his swords and rearmed himself. Dick folded his arms and watched him put his armor back on.

“Damian.”

The boy glanced at him as he fastened his shin guards. “Yes?”

“I need your answer.”

Damian scoffed, moving on to his gauntlets. The serrated spikes glittered under the dim light. “You didn’t earn my trust by simply feeding me. I trusted that you wouldn’t poison the food, but that’s the end of it. That being said, I understood one thing you were trying to get across perfectly.” He leveled Bruce’s eyes at Dick. “My mother died a year after I was born. I was raised by her Loyalist assassins and my grandfather, even as he lay dying a slow, mortal death. I had no way to tell that the Talia al Ghul the Lazarus Pit returned to me was what she was really like, or if she had been better before and the Pit had warped her. Stupidity and ignorance made me choose the first possibility.”

“I’m sorry, Dami-”

“I’m not finished.” The boy held up a hand. “Food in the League is earned. Earned with blood. The more you kill, the better you eat. My mother only called upon me to give me assignments, and even then, in the shelter and protection of a place like that, I knew something should have clicked inside me that she was my mother. But all I saw was another handler. Someone to give me assignments. I’ve read more than I’ve experienced about a mother’s love. You helped me fully acknowledge this and for that, I thank you.”
Dick wanted to hug him, get him more cookies, something. He knew the boy had a thousand different ways to gut him, but that didn’t negate the idea at all. He wanted Damian to trust him, the way he had wanted Jason to trust him when he had gotten his fallen brother back.

After a moment, he said, “You’re welcome. I just want to understand you, Damian. Not to control you, not to tame or domesticate you. You’re my brother. I want to help you. That’s it.”

Damian plucked his sword from the rack and studied the Arabic engraved into the fuller. He pressed a bare fingertip to the engraving, like a blind boy reading Braille. He whispered the Arabic first, but translated it again in English, though he knew his brother knew what he’d said. “‘Fear nothing. Know everything.’ A larger version of this blade belonged to my grandfather, but to fear nothing is to fear the feeling itself. To know everything is impossible. That’s not something al Ghuls entertain, but from what I hear, my father took this lesson to heart.”

“He did.”

Damian’s blue eyes glinted in the dark, like a stray cat stalking a mouse. “To know everything, I cannot rely solely on the League perspective, and now that I know my mother does not care enough to send others to rescue me, her only son, I have no intention of returning there.”

Even as Dick registered the thought, it seemed so far-fetched, to think his wild hope to do for Damian what Bruce had done for him, might have succeeded. “You’re not leaving?”

“I don’t trust you.”

“I know that.” Dick waved a hand. “That comes with time. I think, for now, perhaps you understand I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Your intentions were clear from the minute you stepped into the cell the first time.” Damian said, testing his tiny thumb against the blade’s edge. “I just didn’t know why you wanted me to believe you. Now I do. You want me to help you bring down my mother.”

Dick shook his head. “Not just that. I want to induct you into the family. Show you what a proper one looks like. I saw you a year ago and what was lunging at me wasn’t a son, it was Talia’s pedigree attack dog. I never want to see that out of someone I should be treating like a brother. Yes, it’s a lot to risk on a boy who tried to kill me, but you actually wouldn’t be the first psychopath I’ve
taken in.” He smiled. “I was hoping you’d stay so you can meet him. You’re a lot alike and I think he can help you, too. If you aren’t leaving, that is...Are you?”

Damian sheathed his sword. A long breath left his nose, eyes closed. It wasn’t easy to leave home for good and spit in the face of those who gave it to you, Dick would know. Only Damian’s home life might come to gut him if he switched sides.

Dick didn’t care. No one should be treated like a dog by their parents, or kept from one parent or the other.

“No.” Damian said at last. “No, I’m not leaving.”

It was still dark when we left, morning snow tinted light blue under the moon.

We bundled up to brave the twenty-two degree weather. Canvas insulated jacket for me over a thick hoodie, red scarf to cover my nose and mouth and brand, jeans with ice boots and cabin socks. My gloves went to Gail, who wore long johns under two sweaters and a bulletproof vest. A knit hat covered her braids, knee-high snowboots that kept clumping snow under the soles.

Both of us were strapped. I wasn’t about to let Gail drive herself to the cemetery with ice on the roads. Not a chance. If Lex’s goons wanted to come at her or me, we were going to be prepared for them.

We got into her Subaru a few blocks down from the firehouse. It’d take a bit to get the defrosters to clear the windshield and the vents to blow warm instead of cold, so she stayed in the car while I knocked the ice off, checked everything. I slid back into the car and pulled my scarf down.

Gail’s breath puffed as she patted my arm. “Your fingers must be cold. If you stop, I can get you another pair of gloves.”

“Best to keep moving. There and back. I’ll be fine.” I pulled out my phone to send a text Roy to let him know where we were going, just in case. “Cold’s never really bothered me.” I smirked at her sideways. “I was wearing Robin shorts in single digit weather, remember?”
She tugged a glove off and laced her bare hand with mine. “Jeez, you’re frozen. Here. Put this on the other hand.” She pushed the glove onto my free hand. “There. Now your hands will be warm at least until we get to the cemetery.”

The blood rushed to my cheeks and ears, thawing me out from the inside. My dry lips fought a smile. The heat was good and warm now, and I pointed all the vents to her.

I got us on the road, content to hold her hand while I drove. I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye, swiping the fog off the window to see our frozen city outside. Eternally grateful for four-wheel drive, I didn’t worry about ice too much, but I did watch the rooftops for movement. Nothing so far.

“Oh, look at the lights.” Gail squeezed my hand and pointed.

The shops had been decked out weeks ago, I bet, but this was the first time I’d been out of the firehouse since mid-November. Casting color onto the glittering snow were light displays spiderwebbed across stores, houses, miniature parks for dogs and neon bars.

I whistled, drove a little slower to get a better look. “You wanna take a picture?”

We stopped in front of a library dressed up in icicle lights dripping from the gargoyles and I leaned back, rolled down the window while Gail took a quick picture with her phone.

I rolled the window back up and drove into a Starbucks drive-thru line for something warm for her to drink. I dug out my wallet and pulled my scarf back up over the lower half of my face. “Getting a hot chocolate, you want something different?”

“Nah, Jay, hot chocolate’s fine.” Her mouth was pursed, her cheeks pink with chill. She was staring at the picture of the Christmas lights, zoomed in on the narrow line of my face still visible in the shot.

“Do you want to go back and get a better one?” I said, fishing out a twenty. “Loads of time.”

“No, this one’s perfect. Look.” Gail leaned over the console and showed me the tuft of white and black hair visible under my hood, the corner of a grin on my face in the picture. “I’m making this my wallpaper.”
I ordered us two hot chocolates and pulled the car forward. “Why?”

“It’s proof. Technically this is the first time we’ve ever been out together doing legal activities instead of vigilante work.” She took off her hat, her hair crackling with static. She tried to comb her bangs down, her nose scrunched up and her toes pointing in without realizing. She blew them out of her face, before she drew the overhead mirror down to fix it. “And naturally, I look messy as hell.”

I resisted the urge to laugh while she fought with her hair, resorting at last to lick her fingers to flatten her bangs down. I scratched my scruff and scanned the rooftops again. On an apartment building on the other side of the street, at least sixty feet in the air, something moved - maybe a head ducking down. I stared at it.

“What is it?” She asked, leaning over to try and see.

“Thought I saw someone.” I secured my scarf a little better over my mouth. “Stay sharp.”

Her mother’s gun poked out of her sweater where it was holstered on her hip. I knew I didn’t have to tell her twice. I didn’t have to tell her at all.

Once we had our hot chocolates, the drive to the cemetery was more of a straight line. We’d be there in forty minutes, tops. Although I didn’t want to rush Gail, I knew we couldn’t be there long if what I saw really was someone tailing us.

I sipped my hot chocolate, burning my tongue and swearing. She took the top off her cup and blew on hers, glancing at me with concern in her eyes.

I sighed, putting it in the cupholder to cool off in front of the console and stole her hand in mine. Kissing her knuckles sent warmth back into her fingers. “You know, this was probably all the gift I’d ever need. Spending Christmas with you.”

“What’d you do last year?”

“Honestly?” Odd question. I assumed it had to be curiosity but I hoped the answer wasn't too pathetic for her.
“Yeah.”

“Slept through it. Hell of a hangover.”

Gail’s eyebrows shot up and her gaze snapped over to me. “Hangover?”

“Yeah.” I looked away, cracking my neck. “Drank a lot after you left.” She was quiet for a minute. “You seem surprised.”

Gail pushed her thumb around the rim of her cup, her breath ripping the drink. She sat quiet for a few minutes while I drove, before she spoke again. “I always figured I couldn’t have been alone here, hurting about something that only sort of was when we were together, but...drinking? I didn’t expect that.”

My thoughts turned to that dark trunk in the engine bay. The one she’d never seen me open. Deathstroke’s cure-all with the nasty side effects. My stomach twisted tighter and tighter. The ice in the air bit harder than it had all morning. One of the only secrets left between us. I was sure she had some of her own, but...not like that.

We came to a stop light and I took the chance to really look at her. She seemed so small, packed to the side of her seat nearest to me. Her hand dwarfed by mine on the console, scarred fingers locked together. I loosened my grip, anticipating her breaking away, but she didn’t.

I tugged my scarf down. She watched me lean over the console, a silent reassurance that my confession wasn’t going to drive her away. I kissed her quickly on the mouth, my finger brushing the soft skin under her jaw. Her breath warmed my neck, until she dragged me closer by my scarf for another kiss. A longer, wetter one that made me want to park.

We broke apart, panting like teenagers at the drive-in. I sat back in my seat, thankful the light hadn’t changed from red to green yet. I listened to her breathe for a moment, before it came pouring out of me. “When you were in Metropolis, it was the kind of pain that didn’t show on the skin, but the moments I had with you got me through it. Yeah, I wasn’t sure if I’d ever see you again. The only comfort I had were the memories. Like that picture you just took is proof we were here, those memories were proof that I found someone really, really special.”

Gail turned her eyes to the window, but I saw her reflection. Her lip was quivering, her voice refused to. “Those moments were all I had too. Like the Christmases I spent with my mom. Even if memory
is so fluid, we can also remember everything completely wrong someday, but that doesn’t matter because we have the memories in the first place. We spent that time together. We were in the same place at the same time, and I wager we might have even been thinking the same thing.”

My throat grew thick. I wanted to hold her hand again, but an irrational fear that she’d pull away first made the console grow three times its size. “How in love with you I was, and still am. How I would’ve gotten waterboarded over and over again if it meant they never touched you. And even with how many arguments we got into about your safety and the final one - about sending you to Metropolis, how adamant I was? If you had said the word, I would’ve done anything for you. And above all of that, I thought about how I adore someone for looking me in the eye and telling me she wished she hadn’t started to care whether I lived or died.”

“I came to Gotham last year for Christmas Day.”

My grip tightened on the wheel. “What?”

“One-day trip to see my mom. I didn’t trust myself to drive, so Clark agreed to fly me out for the day because he needed to do some business here anyway. It wasn’t a big deal. I already knew his secret. He already knew mine.” She shrugged. Her eyes searched the side of my face. “He had asked me if I wanted to see you, and I said I wasn’t sure if I should. I wasn’t...”

“What?” I repeated, my thumb digging into the seam of her steering wheel cover.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d want to see me. You were so hell-bent on me leaving, even after the note and everything, that...some part of me rationalized that you wrote it as a release. You wanted to get rid of your feelings for me so you could do your job without worrying, and wrote that to cut ties. To get it off your chest.” She rubbed her gloves on her thighs, nervous strokes. “I know that’s not true now, obviously, but it’s a large part of why I got with Frederick. I thought you didn’t care about me. I was still in love with you. The entire time, I was as hung up on you sober as you were on me drunk, but I didn’t know.”

The cemetery was just a few more blocks and a lefthand turn away. We parked along the adjacent street and I secured my scarf better around my face before I got out. Another second and she left the car too, both of us scanning the sidewalks and shadowy rooftops. The sky was lightening, but it’d be an hour before sunrise still.

I wanted to say something. I knew I should, but what could I say? ‘You should’ve come to see me’. A little late and useless to say. ‘It’s alright, you didn’t know’. Didn’t change the cruel fucking irony of it all. How I was a ten minute drive from her a year ago and never knew it.
Not that it would’ve mattered. The drunk that she would’ve seen a year ago wasn’t fit to be in the same room as her. I barely deserved to be in the same room as her now. Not with what I hid behind my teeth when we kissed. Guilt was so far behind me now, but I knew I had to tell her at some point about Deathstroke’s serum. I knew I had to tell her at some point that I wasn’t going to let her die for me, that I’d inject myself even after she found out if it meant we’d get out the other side.

The tombstone was dark granite, letters in stark contrast, and stuck out among the others in the deep snow. I remembered how it peeked at me from behind its neighbors the last time I was here, when I’d first heard that Gail was back in town.

She stopped once we got to the right row, her chest moving so slightly it’d be hard to tell she was breathing at all if you couldn’t see it. I took her other hand and drew our locked hands into my pocket. She clung to me and I wrapped her up in my arms, my broad back protecting her from the wind.

Gail started walking again, slower now. I rubbed her thumb with mine, a gentle reminder to keep moving. We drew closer, her face whiter and whiter with every foot. Our breath puffed past us, the air even colder as it huddled us together that once we reached the plot, I unzipped my coat and let her slide her arms over my back.

Her pulse rose in her throat. “Hey, Mom.”

People had this odd claim that pain, trauma, and loss were all things that healed with time. As if distance had a temporal aspect too, that if you got enough distance between the present you and the past you that went through it - it’d be so small at the horizon you might just overlook it. For some, that might be true.

But well-adjusted people like that with healthy coping mechanisms and stable mental health didn’t put on capes. Even Dick Grayson had screaming nightmares he’d give anything to stop.

Gail spilled her pain over the frost, let it thaw out the spiders frozen to the snow. She talked about recent events and things that happened years ago. She talked about everything and nothing. She never shouted, but she wanted to, I could feel it in her fingertips.

She held onto me as she vomited her worries onto the headstone, no matter how it hurt. It was confession after confession, things she hadn’t mentioned on her last visit and things she never wanted to mention at all. A few confessions, like that she had seen her father before she came to live with me.
last year, I didn’t know. She even admitted to pulling her mother’s gun on him for suggesting she betray me.

She kept her voice low, halfway between the urgency of a whisper and the desperation of a prayer. Her eyes closed. Her cold fingers sapping warmth through my clothes. There was something sweet, earnest, and endearing about how she spoke to her mother as if no time had passed, nothing had happened. As if she were simply a girl confessing to her mother all the things she’d experienced since the last time they sat down for Sunday morning breakfast.

She swallowed and opened her eyes. She searched the graveyard, maybe for a glimpse of her favorite ghost. Maybe for herself. Her gaze returned to the headstone. Gail let me go only to kneel and swipe the frost and dead leaves from the epitaph.

“I love you, Mom.” She kissed her mother’s name, Juniper, and stood. “I’ll try to visit more, now that I’m back in town, okay? Merry Christmas.”

She put her hand on the cold marble angel overlooking her mother’s grave, over its eyes. I half-turned away, to give her a moment alone as much as I could. I scanned the little hills of the cemetery, the trees that blocked the view of the road except for the gate we came through. The rooftops were bare, but it was still dark, with only the faintest peek of blue dawn to the east.

The only sound was the howling wind and my heartbeat.

“Jason-”

Gail’s foot shuffled and I went to look at her, but then I heard the shot. Her hands planted into my chest and toppled us backwards. She gasped, recoiling as soon as she fell on top of me. My chest strangled and compressed, as more shots fired across the tops of the graves and ricocheted near my head.

Something slick oozed onto my hands from her back. My heart leapt to my throat. I covered her with my body and pressed us into the ground. She struggled under me, tears in her eyes as her hand clamped over the top of her shoulder. Wild heat flooded my body with another shot fired to the side of her mother’s headstone.

I knew where the shooter was. “Four o’clock.”
Gail crawled out from under me, blood soaking her front through two sweaters. The bullet wound was just above her collarbone. Through and through. She planted her back against her mother’s headstone and took her mother’s gun from the holster. She cocked it and took the safety off.

I already had my guns out. I deconstructed them both and linked them together, a scope from my boot screwed into the end. I hadn’t used the function in two years. Not since I shot Bruce’s restraints off in Arkham.

I glared at Gail hard, but she snarled back, “If you’re waiting for an apology for saving your life, shove it. If you don’t kill this son of a bitch, he’s mine. I’ll distract him. Don’t miss or you’re on the couch.”

And before I could finish setting up my rifle, before I could snap at her, she darted out from behind her mother’s grave and ran towards the sharpshooter’s building.
A Crack In the Floor

“I swore to God that I'm never coming back. Kept my faith when I was clapped
Staring at the wall through a crack in the floor. And these metal doors, they've got me trapped
I gotta remind myself that my mind is strong so that I won't lose my head
I've got my demons that I fight with, every little thought in every breath
I wear my heart upon my sleeve so my soul's exposed”

- Falling in Reverse, “It's Over When It's Over”

The scream jolted Harley out of frozen sleep.

She stubbed her toe on the concrete wall across her cramped cell. She'd have sworn if it was warm
enough to feel her toes, her nose, her fingers. She clutched her thin blanket around herself and stood
up uneasily as the barge rocked on the bay.

“H-Hey!” She shouted through the bars, her teeth chattering. “What's goin’ on? Talia? Kid? Puh-
Puddin’?”

It had been a month since Joker, or whatever nobody Talia had acting like him, had been to see her.
At first, Talia had believed Harley to be the key to unlocking the savage part of Joker - the one that
starved for death and fame in equal portions, but once she learned that all this new Joker wanted
from Harley was the pale silk of her skin marked in every possible fashion, she was discarded. The
two were separated, like incompatible crocodiles in captivity that were supposed to mate instead of
tear each other apart.

The scars had healed, the bruises yellowed, the teeth had stopped bleeding, but Harley was right
back to where she'd started. Halfway in, halfway out, nailed to the floor and chained to the wall.

She was a prisoner again, but whose exactly, she wasn't sure.

Twice she had attempted to end her sentence, once with her bed sheets wrapped around her neck and
the second time by attempting to chew a blue vein open, but like any other plan Harley had cooked
up, she was stopped before she could even hope to see success. They wanted her alive.

Now, it seemed someone had come to tell her what for. At least, that's what she had thought before
the bones of her usual guard were crunched out of her view, a slash across stone.
“Hello?” She whimpered into the darkness. She took a pigtail in each hand and yanked hard, her knees to her chest. “Somebody help me!”

Fists pummeled into more guards, shouts and the firecracker laughter of gunfire. The metallic hiss of sharp edge on sharp edge. Someone was thrown into the side of her cell hard enough to rattle the stone, dirt raining onto Harley’s toes.

She waited through the swelling silence. She held her fingers over her mouth, bargained with the shadows to keep quiet. Harley was no snitch.

Then the door to her cell opened, the hinge broken. Light flooded her cage, the silhouette of a woman with cat ears. She hooked a leather snake onto her hip and knelt before Harley, “Come on, I'm here to bust you out.”

Harley took the clawed hand offered to her. “Selina?”

Luminous green eyes glinted in the dim lights. A white Cheshire smile spread over her old friend’s face. “In the flesh. We're gonna get you out of here.”

Harley was helped to her feet, her legs sore and wobbly. The room spun, her head a bird in a tumbling wire cage. She fell back, but Selina caught her again.

“Help me,” Selina said over her shoulder, and Harley was scooped into a pair of strong, thick arms. The blanket encased her as if she were a swaddling baby, tucked into the arms of a firefighter being saved from a burning house. Groggy, she looked up at who carried her.

A pale face uninterrupted by a beard, the chin with a scar dipping under the jaw. Eyes blue as cobalt. Harley gasped.

“Buh...Buh…”

“Shhh.” He said, ducking behind a wall. “We’re getting you out of here, Harleen.”
Harley fell against the Dark Knight’s chest, her head bobbing against a cowl-less neck.

Gail and I took off in opposite directions, her toward the sniper and I to the top of the hill. I flattened myself against the snowy crust on the ground, ice melting into my clothes. I propped the rifle and blew on my freezing hands until they stopped shaking.

Gail was swift, even with a bullet in her shoulder. So much for the fucking bulletproof vest I gave her. So fucking much for that. Whoever was shooting at us was a pro. Not some run of the mill idiot with a clean rifle. This guy’s gun was dirty, not fully zeroed. This was probably the best Luthor could find.

A bullet whizzed through the ice near my elbow. I bit my tongue, tasting blood as I winked down the scope.

Shadows, one of them hunched on a mattress atop a law firm building, hugged the pockets between the skyscrapers. I took a preliminary shot, gathering data. The hunched shadow flinched and I caught a glint of light, maybe sunglasses. Gail shot in the same direction, knicking the edge through the stone.

She stopped, ducked behind a tombstone, and I took another shot, this time in the shadow’s center mass. He didn’t seem to notice.

I glanced back at Gail and noticed a spot of movement to the right, the flash of a knife. I shot the tombstone next to her, a flick of the crosshair. She jolted, but saw the assailant in time to raise her gun and dispatch him.

One look back to the rooftop where the sniper had been and he was gone.

But not gone enough to send a bullet through my elbow. He was missing on purpose.

I recoiled, rolling away from my rifle as more bullets buzzed past my head and my back. Bright hot pain busted open my vision in white spots. Red spilled from my arm into the snow but I couldn’t stop. Against the pain, I dug my fingers into my wound and found the smashed piece of shrapnel. The bullet wasn’t completely obliterated, but the profile was obvious enough.
I snatched the rifle to me and stared at the shooter where he'd moved, dodging Gail’s bullets. The cold scope seared against my skin, my blood boiling.

Yeah. I knew who shot my girlfriend, and I haven't seen him since we left Arkham together. We had walked barefoot out of hell, and now, I may kill him moments from now.

I placed the crosshair over his kneecap, my finger snug to the trigger.

“Long time, no see, Slade.”

Gail was almost to the base of his building. I shot at him, every chance I thought he might peek. He didn't reemerge, but with the brick wall behind him, he had no escape.

She stopped at the car for a second to grab something from the backseat. I didn't have time to shout before she fired the grappler to the ledge.

I covered her with my face hot, gunfire deafening me. I replaced the clip, but not fast enough.

She was up there with Slade and now I was the one running.

Alfred had tea at three every afternoon, on the dot.

It was a habit left over from boarding school, what felt like four lifetimes ago. His mentor, a graceful old lady who was more of a mother to him than his own, would put tea on at two-thirty, and if he didn’t show up in time, she drank it alone. He dreaded the days he didn't make it, but that only ensured that when he did arrive, he came with a dandelion - the best gift he could think of for her. She kept every one, pressed into an album behind a sheet of plastic. She was buried with it.

These days, Alfred put the tea on at two-thirty, and one of them would appear by the time it was ready. Dick came down with Barbara most days, the three of them full of stories and laughter, but with everything happening, the visits grew infrequent.
Tim still slept in the next room. His own apartment sat vacant across town, but Alfred was more than happy to oblige him a quiet place to work, a few homecooked meals, and a second opinion when possible. It was a welcome distraction. In this studious young man, he saw his eldest son, wayward in the Caribbean.

Roy and Lian had left an hour before, happy to spend the morning making cookies and watching movies with the butler.

Alfred wavered as he poured the sugar into the first cup, alone. How he wished everyone was home.

He sighed.

He hadn’t seen Jason in weeks. Every other day, his name would appear on Alfred’s phone.

He would enthusiastically reply, arthritic fingers crowding the keyboard:

“Jason, are you alright?”

“How is everything?”

“If you need a place to get away, I’m here.”

“Be careful, Jason. Be safe. If you need anything, anything at all, I’m here.”

He knew what he’d desperately wanted to say, but it was too large for Jason’s small stability so he always thought better of it. The words wiped away with a key marked delete.

His new housemates must keep him busy, Alfred imagined. A true smile spread his lips. Ah, how it is to be in love. To taste friendship, even when one has many friends, for the very first time with someone new. To taste love truly for the first time. To take care of others.

Alfred had only heard about Abigail’s return through the grapevine. Barbara and Dick raced down to tell him soon after she received the text from Clark.
He sighed and smiled at the chair he’d been sitting in when he almost burst into tears at the news. He wasn’t sure what had happened at first. He never broke down, no matter how many times Bruce broke in his hands as he put his son back together.

But it was quite the occasion. A son. A brother. An avenging angel with more blood than wind on his wings. In love.

Alfred was exceedingly proud of him.

Alfred sat in that same chair, a torn corduroy armchair near a fireless hearth. He sipped his tea and breathed in the silence.

The curtain shifted and he stiffened.

He took a longer sip of his tea, let it warm its way to his stomach. “If you’ve come to kill me, you’ll have to wait till I finish this cup.”

She didn’t bother being quiet. Her heels clicked away from the window, around his chair, and her face came to the light on the other side. Her dark hair fell to her waist, her sword gleaming at her hip. She lowered into the chair opposite him, green eyes fixed on him.

Her Arabic lilted her words, even if they were sharpened to a razor’s edge. “I’m not here to kill you, unless you make any move to let them know I’m here.”

“Why would I do that?” asked Alfred. “Odd. You’re capable of entering here, bypassing dozens of security measures and motion sensors, but yet, you choose me as your company.”

“They learned from Bruce. Bruce never learned. You cannot hide from me.”

Alfred let out a terse breath through his nose. “You surprise me, Talia. You accuse us of trying to hide, but you’re down here while your son is upstairs. A miscalculation of priorities, I presume.”
She unclipped her sword from her hip and laid it across the table. Alfred reached across it, his eyes locked on hers, for another spoonful of sugar.


“Goodness, you’re really going to force me to ask.” Alfred wiped his mouth. “Why are you here? Why aren’t you trying to talk with your son? He thinks you’ve abandoned him. Have you?”

“He abandoned me.” She said it with resignation, eyes averted to the engraving on the side of her sword.

“You say it like he made his choice without your considerable encouragement. Or lack thereof.”

Talia twitched, from head to toe. A jolt, straight to her core, and with a flash of her hand, she struck Alfred on the cheek. “Dick Grayson brainwashed him. He suggested that I didn’t send backup after him because I’d given up. That I didn’t care.”

Alfred reacted with surprise, but nothing more. He glared at her as he sipped his tea, her handprint reddening on his face. “You don’t. Let’s get on with it. You have until I finish my tea to explain to me why you’re here.”

Talia rolled her eyes. She rose from her chair and brandished her sword before sheathing it back on her hip. “I’ve put pressure on everyone. I have broken his children. I have broken his lovers. I have broken his friends. I have broken his soul. His mind.”

The butler shook with a short laugh. “Do you plan to use me to get to Bruce? Is that the plan here?”

“Hardly.” Talia shook her head. “His children aren’t defenseless. You squeeze them, they get denser and harder to break. They band together. Bruce simply doesn’t love them the way he loves you, old man.”

Alfred swirled the last of his tea in the cup. “I would offer you advice if I knew you would take it, so instead I offer a warning.”

Talia kept a hand on her sword as the butler finished his tea. He wiped his mouth on his napkin and stood. Alfred smoothed his waistcoat, straightened his tie.
He removed his glasses. “If by now you haven’t discovered that any attempt to threaten his children will be met with hell on earth, you did not spend enough time in the man’s sober company while you were trying to drug him.” The edge of his waistcoat was rubbed over one lens, then the other. “Damian abandoned you because he finally understands what kind of demon you purport to be the head of: you’re a succubus. You seduce powerful men to pass on your evil in hopes they might join you. You’ve failed. Spectacularly.”

Alfred folded the glasses and placed them in the breast pocket of his waistcoat. His unobstructed eyes pierced into Talia’s as he rolled back his sleeves. “I am the man who will exorcize you from this family, even if it kills me. While I know you wouldn’t dare kill me, lest you bring that hell on earth to your doorstep, but know this, Head of the Demon…” The butler stepped toe-to-toe with Talia al Ghul. “If you lay a hand on me, you will have far more than the Batman breathing down your neck.”

The only response from Talia was a sour smirk and the drawing of her sword.

______________________________

Their grunts echoed down the side of the building as I scaled it with a short-range grappler. When I got to the top, Gail was coated in blood but on her feet, trading blows with eyepatched, silver-headed, orange and black kevlar-sealed Slade fucking Wilson.

His good eye widened when he spotted me, the ‘J’ on my cheek. He nailed Gail hard in the ribs and shoved her aside. He stalked up to me, slowly, so that I took in every glint in his armor, every bullet on the belts he wound across his chest. “Jason Todd, as I live and breathe.”

We circled each other. My elbow was on fire, the bullet wound sucking the frigid air. I pulled the knife from my boot and flipped the grip, point facing out. “How much did Luthor pay you this time? Four mil? Five?”

Slade laughed, white puffs escaping from his mask. “Like I need Luthor’s money after what you paid me. I will kill you for nothing.”

So that’s what this was about. I took down my red hood and straightened out of my crouch until Slade and I were eye-to-eye. I planted myself between him and Gail. “You okay back there?”

Gail spat a patch of red next to my shoe. “Still alive.”
Slade pressed a button on his belt and the gauntlets on his arm sprouted four-inch long serrated spikes. He shook his head, the strands of orange cloth at the back of his helmet trailing in the frozen morning wind. “The Arkham Knight grew a heart. Strange, I thought that would come before you abandoned your men and left me to pick up the pieces, not after.”

I asked him as my elbow continued to leak blood, “Hired guns, mercenaries, well-used to unfulfilled promises. That’s the life of a soldier. I learned it from Batman. You learned it from special forces. Tell me, Slade, how did your own fight with Bruce go?” The wind howled between us, answered the question he didn’t. “That’s what I thought. Gail, get out of here.”

She came to my side, stained hands holding her shoulder. “Not a chance.”

“This isn’t a conversation.” I lowered into my stance and tightened my grip on my knife.

Slade lunged for her, but I intercepted him with both my arms around his broad back. I lifted us both onto my toes, threw him over me into a suplex further away from the light of the ledge. We rolled over the gravel, grappling and failing for the upper hand, a better grip on the other. I connected the edge of my knife with his leg and he yelped, jamming his knuckles into my cheekbone.

“Jason!” Gail found Slade’s back, wrapping both legs and arms around him. She locked around his neck in a sleeper, the muscles in her arms cranking down on him. He retched and coughed, his neck flushed.

I stole one of his arms from his clawing at her, coiled both legs around and jerked back hard. The bones crunched in my hold and Slade screamed. One yank of his arm and the spikes in his gauntlet dug into my ribs.

I pried myself away, groaning. My hand pushed in as tight as I could, white lightning racing up and down my body.

Slade got to his feet, Gail still on his back. His eye locked onto the red bricks to his left. My heart lurched to my throat.

With a great shout, he spun and bashed Gail into the bricks. I heard the air wheeze out of her, her eyes roll into her head. She slipped off him into a pile of blood and blond hair.
I was on one knee as he stormed over, one arm limp at his side. A stiff soccer kick into my injured ribs sent streaks across my eyes, my lungs scraping for breath.

“‘You disgust me, Jason Todd.’” Slade growled into my ear. His hand slid into my hair and pulled me onto my feet only to knock me back down with his fist. “All of your work, the plans we made, the tactics you developed on how to kill the Batman all went to waste because Daddy told you he looked for you. How sweet.”

The world spun under his boot as he cut a slice of my back open, through the kevlar, through the hoodie, through my flesh and bones and muscle. Gail screamed and I heard them fight, her shouting like a vengeful spirit and him laughing as if she’d told him the best joke he’d ever heard.

“Are you in love with this girl, Jason?” He called as I bled. “Is that why she fights for you? Does she know you’ll abandon her if she disobeys you? Another good little soldier for the Arkham Knight to lead to dea-”

She grunted, and something heavy landed next to me. Her fists punctuated her speech, Slade’s blood spraying on my face. “DON’T - FUCKING - TALK - TO - HIM.”

I wiped my eyes free of blood, spat more onto the gravel. The pain was numbing me, my body freezing in the wind. My open wound licked up the salt in the air.

Slade headbutted Gail off him. He caught my foot and tripped me before I could kick him, staggering onto my side.

Red from head to toe, she kept coming at him. Up and down and up and down. Slade subdued her each time. A lazy backhand. A sloppy fist. A bored knee. He was toying with her. I was his target, but she was an annoyance.

“Where do you get this energy, girl?” He asked her, checking her onto her back.

Her chest worked to fight asthma, pain, and blood loss all at once, but she couldn’t outrun exhaustion. She glared at him through angry tears, mouth open to speak. The words wouldn’t come. My brave girl.
At last, Slade left her and came to me. His hand planted under my chin and forced me to look at him. “Your girlfriend’s devotion to you is precious, no matter how sorely misplaced. I did not expect to fight you in earnest, but here you are. Merry Christmas to me.” He leaned in, lowered his voice so Gail wouldn’t hear. “I’m here to deliver a message, Jason. Talia has decided to take on the Bat and leave ruining you to Luthor. I’ve been instructed not to destroy you yet, because, in their words, you may just destroy yourself first. I want you to know that I’m not killing you right now, though I want to, because I want to see your self-destruction firsthand. I want to see you implode.”

I dug my nails into his hand, fought his grip, but he didn’t seem to feel it. I growled through bloody teeth, “And how the fuck does he think I’ll destroy myself?”

Slade glanced at the bleeding girl propped against the bricks and grinned. “Enthusiastically, Jason. He thinks you’ll destroy yourself as if you’ve never wanted anything else. He thinks you’ll beg for it.”

I tried to get on all fours, but the slash in my back made flexing my spine excruciating. I shouted at my body, forced myself to look him steadily in the eyes. “If you lay a finger on her, Slade, the only one begging for death will be you.”

Slade busted up, crows feet deep and firecracker laughter loud. He let me go, face planted into the gravel. He stood up, shook his head as he looked between us. He hacked up a wad of bloody spit onto my hand, wiped his mouth, and cracked his shoulder back into place against the bricks. He groaned, sighing. “I wish that were possible, but you and I both know that we cannot be killed so long as we have our elixirs to rejuvenate us again. Keep that serum handy, Arkham Knight. You will need it.”
Comfort in Pain

I wish that I could say this to your face
Something different, something brave
Wish I would, but I never could
I feel you slowly pulling me in
I try to help, but it's sink or swim
And you're a weight - there's comfort in pain

- A Day To Remember, “Forgive and Forget”

Tim found Alfred in his armchair with a sword through his chest. He was alive, but in a dazed state, covered in blood, muttering under his breath as he clutched a handful of long brown hair. In his palm was a bloody clump of Talia’s scalp.

When Tim listened to what he was saying, after carrying him to the infirmary, he heard one word - repeated over and over.

“Proof...P-Proof.”

Two days later, I watched him from my bed, between his and Gail's. The slash wounds were stitched, the elbow sealed closed over the bullet hole, but sleeping on my back wasn't happening for a long, long time.

I peeked at Alfred over my pillow. His glasses gleamed from his bedside stand, eyelids shut and dreaming. His breathing, his monitors, blood pressure, everything was normal, but I knew I could've lost him today. So, for that, I thought of nothing but Alfred all night.

The clump of scalp was confirmed to be Talia’s. With the surprising cooperation of her son, who Dick had expertly kept away from me, they ran the DNA tests.

Our best guess was that she originally planned to kill Alfred but decided better of it after he ripped her hair out. It was hard to bury a bat-shaped ghost if every major intelligence agency was after you. Barbara forwarded their findings to Amanda Waller and let the rest take its course. Within the week, Talia al Ghul would be on every most wanted page on the planet.

Not even Lex Luthor could hide her now.
Gail should be over the moon, but from the moment we were placed in these beds and left alone to rest, all she'd seemed to do to celebrate was glare into the back of my head.

I glanced at the clock. Half past two in the morning, few days after Christmas. I'd told Roy and Kori, once they finished fussing over Gail and I, to fortify the firehouse and lay low for a while. I'd already asked Roy to deliver Gail and I’s gear to the armory four floors down. That included Deathstroke’s serum.

Gail had seen the trunk when Roy brought it up, took one look at me and knew what was inside.

I listened to her exhale through her nose. Her voice was quiet, steady. “I've slept beside you long enough to know when you're awake.”

I hugged the pillow under my chest a little tighter. “Ask your questions.”

“How do you know Deathstroke?”

I furrowed my brow. Didn't think that'd be first. That one was easy. “He was the one who helped me break out of Arkham. We trained the militia together, but when Bruce told me it wasn't too late, I left without a single shit given to him.”

“You left with a serum of his. What does it do?”

My throat went dry. I nibbled my thumbnail, thought of the best way to phrase it. “Accelerates healing. Mends wounds in seconds, but with a price. You feel every healing pain amplified by a hundred. And with this version, every time you use it your body builds a resistance. The more you use it, the less effective it is.”

“Why haven't you used it yet? You're in bad shape.” She baited the hook, hoped to God I didn't bite.

But I did. “I'd rather not inject myself in front of you.”
“Why not?” Her voice quivered, the way it did when she was fighting the urge to shout or cry. “Is it addictive?”

“No, it's not.” I knew what she was getting at. “What are you thinking?”

“Could ask you the same question. Tim knows. I asked him about it when he took me aside to fix my shoulder. He said…” She sucked in a harsh breath and finished her sentence. “He said it was made from Clark's blood. Luthor held Superman captive and ran tests. Experimented on him before he had the chance to escape. He manufactured the serum and sold it to Deathstroke. How…” No, Gail. Honey, please, don't ask me. “How many times have you used Clark's blood to heal yourself?”

I attempted to deflect. I knew it was a bad idea, but I needed her to understand that it wasn't what she thought it was. “Tim begged to use some himself after he lost his hand. It doesn't regenerate whole limbs, just—”

Gail's bandages crinkled as her fists tightened. “I didn't ask you what it could and couldn't do. How many fucking times did you use Clark's blood to heal yourself, Jason?” I hesitated and she gripped the side of her bed. She growled under her breath. “Look at me.”

My eyes stung as I pushed my palms into the bed and shifted around to look at her. Fire blazed up and down my back. I craned my neck up and drank her in.

Gail's hair was freshly washed and braided, thanks to Barbara. No hospital gown to wear over her corset of bandages and gauze over her chest and torso, a sling on her shoulder. Pink fingerprints were all over her, but it was the bloodshot watery eyes, the hard line of her mouth that my eyes locked onto.

“How many times?” She repeated.

“Twice.” I said slowly and told her the truth I often denied myself. “Before the Wayne Foundation gala the first time. So I could go and torture myself with what I did to Bruce and everyone else. Second time was after three bullets went into me while I was saving Lian.”

She always knew how to cut me, where to make it hurt and go as deep as she could go. It’s what I expected. It’s what I fell in love with her for. It’s how we worked.
It’s also how we fell apart.

She licked her cracked lips and attempted to take a deep breath, wincing. “I stayed in your place for months...slept in your bed next to you after spending so long working with Clark.” Gail cleared her throat. “First time I met him, he knew about me. He saw right through me without ever using his X-Ray vision. The first time he brought you up, I asked him - almost before could finish talking - if he knew you were in Arkham Asylum, back then. If he had heard you but done nothing. I was so prepared to hate him if the answer was yes. I would have held it against him forever, even if I had no choice but to work with him. The answer was no because he was abducted and experimented on with kryptonite to the point where he had to spend a year in the Fortress of Solitude to regain his abilities. Guess who had him, Jason?”

My lips twisted. “Lex Luthor.”

“Bingo.” Gail pressed a hand to her chest. “I’m no saint. I’m not, but my flaw isn’t hubris. It’s empathy. I sat on the floor on my childhood home looking at Falcone’s carcass knowing that I killed someone’s father. Even after I walked out on you last year...you, the Arkham Knight responsible for ripping this city apart. I took a beating from the man who killed my mother for you.” She hooked a finger at the top of her bandages. “I’m a murderer. I have to live with that, but you, your problem is that even as you sit there a survivor of torture - have no problem using the product of someone else’s torture to keep your sorry ass alive.”

“Are you talking as my partner in crime or my girlfriend?” I pushed myself to the edge of my bed and painfully sat up, hunched over my lap.

“I’m talking as the person who had enough nerve to punch you in the nose last year for what you did to Gotham. Much as I love your family, I’m not them.” Gail narrowed her eyes. “I have no qualms about telling you exactly what I think, to your face. If you don’t like it, that’s on you. Using Clark’s blood as your reset button is fucking wrong.”

“What do you want me to do, Gail? Really, I’d love to know how you plan to get us back on the rooftops as soon as possible.”

“Rest and rehabilitation. Easy.”

I smeared my hands over my face and hair. This girl, I swear to God. “You don’t get it, do you? If Talia al Ghul walked through that door, what would you do? What could you do? Nothing, that’s what. Flat dead nothing.”
“Murder is one thing, benefitting off someone else’s torture?” She waved her hand. “I don’t think I need to connect the dots there for you.”

I flinched as if she’d slapped me. My lungs hitched. Every muscle in my body tensed. I staggered over and sat on her bed. I braced myself on the railing, leaning in. My gaze darkened, nose wrinkling. “If you entered this relationship thinking I was some sort of straight-laced hero, I hate to break it to you. I’m not. I thought you understood that about me. I’ve always been honest with you and I’m not gonna stop now. I understand you’ve got some sort of father thing with Clark, but I don’t care that I used the serum. If I hadn’t, I would’ve never known for sure that the Joker was still alive. Lian and Roy wouldn’t be alive. I’m not going to apologize to you for that. Most other things, I would, but not this.”

“You don’t care.”

“No. I really don’t. I’m not Superman. He’s not me. If he breaks, he recovers in a year no sweat. I’m still broken, Gail. I’m not gonna be fixed.”

“I’m not here to fix you.” She squinted at me, her hand capturing my wrist. “What are you so afraid of? What are you so afraid of that you’d resort to the serum? And I know you’re still pissed at me about saving your life. Just tell me what’s wrong so I can help you.”

She needed to hear it from me. Before I said anything else, I ducked closer to kiss her. Even as my spine blazed with pain, I held the position to stay close to her. Both of us kept our eyes open. I pulled back only slightly, our lips still touching.

“What really scares me is that someday you may realize that all your best-laid plans can end up with you dead. Sometimes the
cavalry doesn’t come. Sometimes you can’t or won’t win. I know you’re smart and I would lay down my life to keep you alive, but you flirt with death the way I do. I speak from experience when I say that death hates a tease.”

Gail cupped my face in her hands. Her stormy eyes narrowed and for the first time, she was anything but sunshine. “You say all this like I’m afraid to die. I’m just as afraid of losing you as you are of me, but I’m not deluded. Just driven. You just don’t want to believe that I have no fear of dying because I don’t care if I do. If it was for Gotham or an innocent or a friend or for you? I wouldn’t think twice.”

I wanted to look her in the eye and feel anger. I knew she was right. I knew she really felt like that, but I couldn’t hear her say that without my throat closing up, my chest shaking, my teeth locked so hard my jaw ached. I wanted to feel anger, but looking at her was all love.

The only pain I knew with her was the knowledge that we’d die for each other.

So I reached back, face contorted with pain, to open up the back of my hospital gown. I pulled the fabric off my front. “You’re the only person who knows my body. You should remember these.”

I led her palm to the marred, serrated scar tissue spanning my chest. I kept her gaze as she faltered. Her mouth twisted and eyes welled. I brushed her hand over the rougher edges under my collarbones. The tears leapt to my eyes but I refused to let them leak.

I pushed my forehead to meet hers. “I won’t let this be you. You’re right. A bullet shouldn’t mean so much, but it’s a door to worse. I’ve never told you how my scars were made, but honey, if you fight me on this and you get caught, you will find out.”

I loathed this lesson but it was one I hoped to God she never learned the hard way. Gail closed her eyes, the first fat tear sliding down her cheek. She fought to sit forward. Her lips touched the mangled skin over my heart. “You’re gonna go downstairs and use that serum, aren’t you?”

“Deathstroke’s still out there. So is Talia. So is Lex. So is Joker.”

“Does Barbara know what you’re about to do?”

I wiped her tears away. “I told her while she was stitching my back. She doesn’t like it either, but the best way to catch Lex may be for him to chase me. Just me. He got sidetracked trying to kill you and it cost him the election. He’s going to have his eyes on the prize from now on. Slade’s just a mercenary but he’s not dumb. I think I know how to get them to turn on each other.”
“How?” Gail rubbed her thumb over my collarbone.

“I got to know Slade real well. He has a daughter. I’ve never met her, but from what he told me, wherever he goes - she’s not far behind. She’s in the city somewhere. I just need to lure her out with Slade and Lex will have no choice but to come at me himself. He’ll get frustrated and self-important. And that’s where we’ll get him to squirm.”

She nodded. “Dick told me about Damian. The kid has a few ideas on how to keep Talia distracted from Bruce.”

My stomach churned. I remembered the heat from my tank when the brat blew it up, not fondly either. “Well, I’m just glad Dick’s in charge of him. He wanted me to meet Damian, but with me going on my own with little contact after this, I think I’ll pass.”

“Wait…” Gail shook her head, eyes wide as she registered what would come after I injected myself a third time with Deathstroke’s serum. “You’re going alone? That’s it. No Roy? No Kory? No one?”

“Barbara’s going to keep me informed through a one-way burner phone. Just texts. My helmet’s are linked into her mainframe. If I’m in trouble, she’ll know it.” I captured her hands and pressed my mouth to her knuckles. “I asking you to be okay with this. Last time, it was your business that needed finishing. I helped you finish it. If I’m going to let you help me with anything this time, when it’s my business, It’s being okay with me doing this the way I know how.”

She narrowed her eyes. Maybe I was in for a longer night, but in the end, she sighed. Her lips bowed into a frown. “Fine. I’ll do it. I’ll stay here. I’ll keep Alfred safe. I’ll help Barbara with whatever she needs. I’ll lie to Clark. I’ll fill in your spot with the Outlaws.”

“I’m sensing a stipulation coming on.”

The corner of her mouth curled. “Yeah. Be fucking careful, Jason. I know you’re capable enough on your own, but as you pointed out a minute ago, you’re not indestructible. I want you to know that if you call the cavalry, I’m coming to get you. Like I did last time. And don’t bother taking your helmet off and going with just the domino mask. At this point, I can feel when you’re in trouble.”

The bones of her hands were so slight in my fingers. She looked like a bird with glittering eyes, peaking out of the dark. “Take my crutches. You can barely stand on your own, and you’ll need
“something to prop yourself on in the elevator.”

I blinked. “You’re really okay with this?”

She smiled and shrugged. “Does it matter? You never wanted me to be a vigilante in the first place. I never wanted you to be alone, even for a second. We’ve had this argument dozens of times. We both know we can’t have what we want. No matter what you do, I’m in this foxhole with you. No matter what I do, you’re convinced that you have to go it alone like it’ll somehow lessen the pain it causes the rest of us to see you hurt. As if I don’t love you.”

My lungs refused to work. I froze. She reached out to cup the back of my neck and pull me in for one last, long kiss. I tried to say it back, but she didn’t let me. She didn’t give me enough air to say it. When she finally let me go, I was panting into her mouth and fighting tears. Pain lanced up and down my spine, the stitches tugged.

Her eyes stormed under thick lashes. “Sometimes being heroes means neither of us look heroic.”

She laid back into her pillows, blond hair splayed over her shoulders. Her eyes panned to Alfred’s bed, where his monitor beeped out a steady rhythm. “You don’t have to worry. Nobody will touch him as long as I’m here. Or any of the others. I’ll hold down the fort.”

I forced myself to stand, to take the first step away from her. I faltered and turned to her again. The pale crescent of her cheek in the moonlight faded into the dark as she laid on her side.

“Abigail…”

“Go, Jason.” said Gail. “Be careful.”

I rounded her bed in a few clumsy steps, my body still asleep. I thought about touching her shoulders, kissing her forehead like I did sometimes before I slid into bed next to her, but I didn’t. I knew if I did I wouldn’t be able to leave.

In the end, I said nothing. I took her crutches, propped myself on them and left the room. I made it down the long hallway to the elevator, heavier with every swing of my legs. I hit the elevator button.
I got in. Mashed the button for the third floor. When the doors closed, it took every ounce of effort not to throw my hand in between the steel to stop it all.

Harley stirred on her pillows, but when she opened her eyes, the body on the couch next to her bed jolted her.

He looked different without the cowl and even more bizarre when asleep.

Selina stood at the foot of her bed and rushed to her side as Harley fluttered her lashes. A warm, wet hand towel pressed to her chilly forehead. “How are you feeling?”

Harley tried to move, but two sharp pains in her stomach sent her back into the mattress. “Horrible.”

Her eyes didn’t move from the couch, but Selina was doing her best not to look at him. She dabbed the sweat and dirt from Harley’s face, neck, and chest. “Yeah. It’s really him.”

Harley shook her head, pigtails batting at her cheeks. “No way.”

“He stayed up all night to watch over you. Had to get you as far away from the League of Assassins as possible, but he was still worried about them finding us. Bottom line is, you’re safe with us.”

She covered her mouth with her hand and stared at him.

Bruce Wayne sprawled across the couch, legs up on the armrest. His arms crossed, his body was pinned to the corduroy back. Disheveled black hair hung on his forehead, but the streaks of gray suggested he hadn’t dyed it in a long time. Selina must have thrown the quilt over him, but at some point in the night, he had pulled it over his shoulders.

Harley never would’ve thought the Batman could look so calm.

“What’s next?” It seemed to be the best question at the time.
Selina ran her hand through her black curls. “We’re going to Gotham soon, but before that, Bruce needs you to identify the new Joker. He’s going to blow up the Lazarus Pit used to resurrect him and see if he can capture the Joker so we can prove he’s still alive to the world. You’re going to kill the guys who kept you captive.”

“I can do that.” Harley swallowed hard. “What about you?”

She looked up into the cold, green eyes of the Catwoman as she said, with a Cheshire’s grin:

“I’m going to kill Talia al Ghul. And I’m going to enjoy it.”
More Scars Than Skin

Each day they get a bit closer; between them I am caught
I stare in amazement
I can't believe this is where I live

Every breath I take, I feel my lungs seal
This breeze feels more like shards of glass
I'm more scars than skin

- Alexisonfire, “This Could Be Anywhere in the World

About gunshot wounds, public defamation of character, and heartbreak, people often said the first twenty-four hours were the hardest.

Barbara would expand that to seventy-two.

She woke up with Dick as her blanket, his head on her chest, his arms curled underneath her back. The warm puffs of his breath told her about how well he’d slept. She combed her fingers through his soft black hair, listened to him breathe.

His watch on the bed table read that it was nearly nine in the morning. She smiled. It was the first time he’d slept in with her in a long while. Since the night he came to her in the pouring rain, drenched and cold, and after confessing what he felt, what had been stirring in his head for nearly ten years, they spent the night warming again the old way. That time, it was pure exhaustion that kept them both in bed till noon.

This time, it was because she knew if Dick woke up too early, he might convince himself to reel Jason back in.

Her fingertips drifted to the thick scar over his left trapezius muscle, a souvenir from his fight with Jason when he joined the family. She remembered how he had shaken as she stitched the wound closed. How he put his head in his hands, trembling so much sweat flew off the ends of his hair. It had hurt him to fight Jason so hard, so long. Four hours was an eternity out on the rooftops.

Dick had confessed that night that he thought Jason had fought so hard because he didn’t want to be helped. The truth he learned that night ripped him apart and Barbara too: Jason had fought so hard
because he believed he didn’t deserve their help after what he’d done.

Now, the entire world wanted to punish him exactly how Jason himself would.

Jason had only said goodbye to Barbara before he left, though the plan had - reluctantly - been Dick’s. He had pulled a similar stunt when he led the Titans, even went the extra mile of masquerading as Deathstroke’s apprentice.

Jason had reeked of the serum as he hugged her tight, his eyes dilated and his right arm stronger than the left. She kissed his forehead and adjusted the front of his armor for the second time.

He let her look in every pocket, tighten the straps and check the guns. She slipped the tracker between two plates on his back without his notice. “Run it through for me again. Who are you meeting?”

Jason sighed at the old exercise they had played as Robin and Batgirl, but obliged all the same. “Amanda Waller.”

“Where?”

“An off-site Pentagon winter home near Mount Vernon, Virginia.”

“When?”

“In a week.”

“What are you doing in the meantime?”

He slipped his gloves on. “Finding Rose Wilson and reporting her location to you. Then I dig up dirt on Waller, her division, and her Suicide Squad. Starting with how she got that job in the first place, her CADMUS experiments, and her involvement in Lex Luthor’s little pet project before she pulled the plug on him.”
“Your end objective?”

“Bring down Lex Luthor, and hopefully by extension, Talia al Ghul.”

Barbara couldn’t think of another thing to check, her throat dry. She rolled around to his front. “When’s your first check-in?”

Jason frowned and swiped a hand over his face. He tucked his helmet under one arm. “After I meet with Waller, I’m to report back and then it’s radio silence for a month while I dig further. The only contact we’ll have will be the intelligence I’ll send you and the texts you’ll send back telling me where to go next.”

“What will be the most difficult aspect of the coming mission?” She hated this question, though she understood the merit of acknowledging the obstacles keeping you from success.

Moonlight stole in from the parted curtains, gleaming off the weapons and metal in the room.

His eyes darted to the door where, five rooms down, Abigail was still asleep or pretending to be. “Everywhere I need to go is heavily guarded with state-of-the-art security. The tiniest wrong move and I’ll never see Gotham again.”

“What can you do now to improve your chances?” She pushed the sleeves of her hoodie back down.

“Leave now before go back to the infirmary and just...” He trailed off with his eyes closed, his mouth twisted.

He looked at Barbara and let out a breath. She nodded. Jason took a second to glance out the window, to Wayne Tower beyond the wintry glass, and restarted his sentence. “Leave. I should leave now. Get used to sleeping alone.”

Barbara took his hand. Even through the leather gloves, he was cold as death. She rubbed his forearm with both hands to get warmth back into him. Ignored tears fell onto his leather until he wiped them off her cheeks.
Jason knelt on both knees, put his helmet on the floor and gathered Barbara into the warmest hug he could manage. She cried a silent, sobless thing into his neck. “Be safe, Jason. Come home.”

He hiccuped and pulled back with shine in his eyes, lit by the moon. “I’ll try. I’m gonna try my hardest.”

Barbara swiped his own tears away with her thumb. “I didn’t get through to you in that militia compound for you not to come home in the end. And you haven’t come home yet. Not really.” She spread out her fingers over the red bat symbol on his chest. “The Arkham Knight’s been fighting inside you so damn long, but it’s time to let him out. Let him help you fight this. He wanted Batman dead, but now you know that what he really wants is to get you the justice you deserve. To tell everyone what happened to you so that it never, ever happens again.”

Jason covered her hands on his chest. His head tilted just enough for the moonlight to catch the outline of his brand. “I want to kill the Joker for what he did to me. I want the world to know that evil won’t go unpunished. I won’t let it happen. It’ll be a permanent solution. It’ll be a forever kind of solution. I’m through pretending to be okay with how Bruce handled it. I understand why, but now I have the chance to do it my way. So I am, for me. For you. For Bruce.”

“Go do it then.” Barbara leaned in to kiss his cheek. “Stop talking about it.”

Rose’s elbows were conditioned to perfection. She beat my nose in, then slammed my forehead on the porcelain sink. I hated how it pinged, white hot pain spreading out over my skull and racing down my back.

“You think you could just walk in here and take me?” She hissed in my ear.

I coughed up a wad of blood and cheek where I’d bitten it. I spat it on her shoe. “Yeah, kinda.”

She didn’t like that answer. Ash blonde hair flapped by my cheek as she swooped under my arms and wrapped around me. I beat on her back, tried to collapse onto my ass but whatever Slade was feeding this girl, she was strong for it.

She grunted and my feet left the floor.
I left the bathroom airborne.

My back crashed onto the glass coffee table, shards crunching under the back armor. Before she could come at me with more, I raised one heavy boot and introduced it to her nose.

Her head snapped back, her hands up to hold her face. I grabbed an ankle and yanked it out from under her. My hand found my gun, rolling over broken glass to her scrambling form, but Rose caught me.

Her fingers met my wrist and the rest of her coated my arm like magnetized fluid. A body of leather and metal, trained by Deathstroke and fighting like him.

Rose cranked both legs down on my neck, my windpipe fighting to stay open. I curled and rolled until she was under me. I wrapped both my arms around hers, propped up on the balls of my feet. I started to lift her, my eyes locking onto every ninety degree angle of furniture in her apartment.

I heaved her up enough to see the first semblance of panic in her eyes and dropped her onto the kitchen counter first, the worst part hitting across her shoulder blades.

Her eyes rolled into her head as I let her go, but the minute I put my hand on her throat, she jerked to life. She punched into my front teeth, whipping my head to the side. A flash of the firepoker sent me into overdrive.

I smacked it out of her hands, pinned her down. She glared up at me, and something hot seared into my side.

A blade hidden into the plates of her shin protruded out of her knee and sliced into my torso. I stared down at it, gears turning. Red oozed through the armor. Pain. Slippery rage.

I snatched her ankle, held her knee down with mine and twisted her leg hard. A sharp crack made her scream, and that was my cue to get to work.

She wasn’t going anywhere. I needed her alive. Careful to move enough to avoid her rabid scrapes for my wound, I slumped down into a tired heap.
I coughed and hacked up more blood. “Fuck.”

I stood and fired a tooth into the bloody sink. “Fantastic.”

While Rose cursed me out in every language onto the floor, I fished out the burner phone from my boot.

“My father’s gonna gut you for this, mark my words.”

“Let him try it, Rosie.” I crashed against the ratty couch and flipped through screens. Barbara’s number was the only one in the contacts list.

**Drescher. First and tenth. Fourth floor, room fourteen. Immobilized but hostile. Whoever you’re sending, send them fast.**

---

**A WEEK LATER**

Lex Luthor waited for the office door to slam shut before he dared to loosen his jaw.

He did not fully slacken, that never came when he waited for it, but he tugged at the choke of his tie. He folded his sleeves back over themselves, a snake peeling back his skin to reveal what he took so much care to hide. He bore the crook of his elbow to his floor-to-ceiling windows in his forty-story office in Ryker Heights. The needle scars were few, but there were enough to make the business of choosing an injection site interesting.

He swallowed the dry taste of risk and picked the vial out of his desk. The green glow never worried him, but the sludgy way the serum moved behind the glass did. He pulled out a fresh packet, took out the syringe and fixed it full of kryptonite.

Steel kissed the back of his neck. A steady female voice tickled his ear. “Put down the needle.”
He hesitated. A click vibrated against his skin from the gun. He dropped the syringe on his desk. Her dainty, gloved hand swiped it away. For the first time in years, Lex’s heart throbbed in his chest.

He licked his lips and asked, “What did you do with Mercy?”

“If she had backed off when I asked, I would have done nothing to her.”

“Whoever you are, if you’ve killed Mercy-”

An irritated noise from behind him. “She’s unconscious. Killing girls in parking garages is your evening pastime, not mine.”

Lex’s face split into a wide grin. He turned around. Golden braid draped on her shoulder, decked head to toe in black armor, a half-mask over her nose and mouth, and as she reached up to the pull the glass shield from her eyes, her gun pressed to Lex’s chest.

He let out a surprised laugh. “Abigail Byron. You’re Gotham’s Ghost.”

Stormy eyes under spidery lashes batted at him. “Among other things.”

“What do you want?” Lex glanced down at her gun. “The blackmail material we’ve collected on each other could blow up at any moment, so I must say your visit here tonight is unexpected to be sure.”

“Kryptonite in your bloodstream may save you from bleeding out after a gunshot to the chest.” She leaned in and moved the muzzle of her gun from his chest to under his chin. “But I’m here to teach a lesson on mutually assured destruction. You come after me, fine, but you move a toe out of line and I’ll disappear you.”

“What would ‘out of line’ look like?”

“Jason Todd. Bruce Wayne. You get the picture.”
Lex sucked his teeth. “I’ll take you with me.”

“We’ll go down together, then.” She lowered her voice to a coo. “You and me. Two incredibly dangerous people behind bars. Maybe we’ll even be cellmates. What a fun afternoon that’d be for me. I might finally learn to vein crochet.”

“Threaten me all you like, girl. What stops me from starting this tea party early?”

“Rose Wilson is missing. Haven’t you been wondering why Slade isn’t returning your calls? You have no attack dog to hunt me with.”

Lex took a step closer to Abigail until he could almost put his chin on her head, until he towered over her and made her small. “All this effort for a man who has turned his back on you. Left you to fight for yourself.”

“I have no problem fighting for myself, Lex.” Her eyes narrowed.

“It’s all over your face and you don’t have a clue.” Lex laughed cruelly, lowly so her bangs fluttered with his breath. “Stop me if this sounds too familiar. A young woman with a rough background shacks up with the first man who seems up to the task of making her forget she’s not more than one generation from the scum of the earth. He’s the first man who presents her with a challenge instead of a pike to stick her on, though part of her feared he might do it anyway. As she works through the challenge, she sees him naked or close enough and she cannot bear the idea of separation, much as both claim it’s for the best. When she comes back home to him, he pats his monster till she purrs and waits. He waits as she curls up with him, loves him, and at the slightest sign he’s in distress, the monster responds. The caring comes later, the endless apologizing to him for being what he made her: a lovesick monster. He leaves, or sends her away, it doesn’t really matter which.”

Lex leaned into her until their foreheads almost touched. “And she thinks of little else but using her monstrous love to split the skull of anyone who thinks of getting to him. Before she does.”

Her face twisted in disgust, a step away taken with a huff. “Where the hell are you getting this?”

Lex so loved to be right. He tilted his head back with a grin. “It’s the story of Talia al Ghul and Bruce Wayne, from what she’s told me.”
“I don’t want the Red Hood dead.”

“No?” He asked, his lips pursed. “Then it’s love. I can smell it on you.”

She didn’t move, didn’t speak, barely reacted. Her finger merely played with the trigger. She and Lex regarded each other for a full minute before he lifted a hand to touch her chin.

“That’s the mistake you don’t see. You’re not one of them, Abigail. They’re angels. Drag them through the mud and they come out pristine, but you?” He shook his head. “Everything sticks to you. I did my homework on you. You understand Old Testament revenge. That doesn’t turn you into one of them, it makes you like me.”

Her face pinched beneath the mask. “You’re right. I’m not like them, but here’s the mistake you don’t see. I don’t want to be them. They’re better than me, yeah, but there’s one thing I’m better at.”

Lex laughed with a short huff through his nose. “And what’s that?”

She dug the muzzle of her gun into his chest. “This. Way I see it, we’ve got a choice. Option A or Option B.”

“Option A?”

She backed up to sit on his desk. “We go to the press together. I tell the world that you tried to kill me for unfavorable press, about your addiction to kryptonite-derived drugs, and you tell the world whatever you like about my relationship with the Red Hood and my nightly activities. We wait to see who gets crucified first. I’ll bring the chips.”

Lex considered it. This wasn’t the first time he’d done damage control for something like this, but after a chain of problems, it would spill everything over. He’d lose. And with Slade missing-in-action he would lose far more than his position, his image, and even his company. “And Option B?”

“We keep our jobs and our closets locked, but I’ll add a concession.”
His face tightened into a smile. “Smart business sense. What do you propose?”

“I know Talia didn’t get you sitting on her lap on merit.” She said, an innocent tilt to her voice. “She’s holding CADMUS over your head, threatening to leak the experiments. I offer information on how to break her hold on you.”

“I heard Talia’s son was captured.” That was well worth any price she could put on it. No reason to suspect she couldn’t grant him the information, with Damian on her side. “Done. What do you want in return?”

She pushed the gun into his chest a little more and smirked. “Three million dollars. I want the transaction done right here, right now, where I can see what you’re doing.”

“Is that it?” Lex waited for her to get off his desk. He sat at the chair and rolled it in. His accounts were secure, off the books. His accountants would cut their tongues out before they’d talk.

“Account number?” He asked.

She twitched, torn between wanting to type it in herself and wanting to keep the gun on him. In the end, the Ghost pushed his face to look away with the gun and quickly typed the number in, hit submit.

Lex cleared his throat. “Subtle.” He rose from his chair. “There. Go ahead and check your account. It’s all there.”

A link flashed on her mask and she tapped her ear. She listened, eyes and gun trained on him as she finished the call. “Thank you, Oracle. I’ll be there soon.”

He clasped his hands behind his back. “I’m a man of my word.”

“So you are.” She made a show of holstering her gun, proving he was in no danger.

“Now, for your end of the bargain.” He said. “What advice do you have?”
She was silent, almost a statue if not for her breath. She searched him, up and down. At last, she stepped back toward the windows. “Three-oh-one.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s the room I left Mercy Graves in.” Abigail’s brows furrowed. “You want my advice? Act surprised when you discover Rose Wilson there, too. Deathstroke should be here any minute.”

Lex stiffened as if he’d been tased where he stood, electrocuted. His blood thrummed under his skin, his bones shaking. “You set Deathstroke on me? You double-crossed me.” He came closer, but held his hands up when she rose her gun to him again. He seethed, spit flying from his teeth. “You cannot betray me without a price! I will ruin you and your psychopath.”

Abigail opened the window with one arm. “You tried to kill me. Here I stand, trying to kill you. Old Testament revenge. The final proof I’m just like you.”

“I’ll drag you through the streets of Gotham, Abigail Byron, I swear it!” Lex shouted as she sat on the windowsill.

Maybe as a challenge, maybe as a deathwish, she blew him a kiss. “Come and get me, Lex.”

And she disappeared through the window.

Wonder City was quiet, but the longer Selina looked around, the longer she suspected the three of them were being watched. Harley shook at her side, her hands trembling around the grip of her painted baseball bat. Bruce, even in full cape and cowl, was on high alert, moving so still she might have mistaken him for a statue.

“You’re sure this is where they said Talia was?”

Harley pressed her lips together. “They were real clear. Wonder City, where her old man had his last full resurrection in Arkham City.”
The gilded tunnel was dim, gold light streaking over dusty shop windows and neglected automatons. Green fabric and liquid dripped from the walls. A rusty intercom rattled out a low tune.

“This world is doomed.” it said, but the voice was low, warped like a ruined vinyl record.

Bruce stiffened at Selina’s side. His head tilted, his eyes lighting up as detective vision came online. Towards the ancient door, on the left side was a section of unblemished bricks. He stepped forward, pressed his hands to the right bricks and slid the panel upwards.

The diamond shape hole was narrow, but he still remembered how to unlock it. From his hip, he drew the sword Ra’s al Ghul impaled himself with as they fell together from Wonder Tower. Damascus steel, gold embossed guard and grip, and with a curved sharp edge still stained with the blood of the Demon. He slid the sword into the hole, turned it like a key.

“You told me Talia said someone else had survived the trials.” Selina said, eyeing the automatons warily. “She ever tell you who?”

Harley glanced between them as the door groaned open, revealing a descending bent tunnel of dirt and cracked concrete.

Bruce hesitated to answer. “No, but I have a few guesses.”

He took point, Harley behind him, and Selina brought up the rear. Although their key was no longer required, Bruce kept the sword in his hand - point forward. Detective vision stayed on too. Even if he could detect League ninjas without it, Selina and Harley couldn’t. It was the only way to warn them with enough time to brace themselves.

They came to a ladder. After scanning the tunnel’s tributaries for heat signatures, Bruce went up the ladder and through the manhole cover. The League’s great carven doors awaited him on the far end of the crossed halls, like a cruciform church. Those didn’t have heat signatures either, or at least not at first.

He helped Harley and Selina up the ladder.
The first ninja came from the torn down scaffolding beside one of the doors, three more from the shadows dripping from the ceiling. The first, Bruce dealt with alone. Six moves he had to dodge before he had the chance to strike. One swift shot between the eyes to disorient, then to smash her face onto the floor.

Selina wasn’t used to fighting ninjas, but Harley was the one struggling with two until she got hold of one’s arm. The sword hand she bit. She wound the ninja’s arm around hers and twisted. The ninja’s face contorted and reddened, before she belted a word at the top of her lungs.

The Arabic curse was a call for what League tactical instructors referred to as “the flood”. From the walls, it seemed, came dozens of ninjas. Swords and daggers and rope-darts wailed at them, sang through the air with metal gilded gold. Each of these warriors could easily cleave someone in two with a single slash.

And Bruce had seen it coming.

He tapped the side of his cowl, whistled for the other two to put their gas masks on. Once both ladies were protected, he threw the can from his belt high in the air and cut it in half with Ra’s al Ghul’s sword. The cloud dispersed and the gas rushed to the walls faster than the ninjas could flee. Many struggled to get to the great doors, even more attempted to rally strength to fight their invaders but were dispatched quickly.

In a matter of seconds, a hundred warriors fell straight into a day’s sleep at Batman’s feet.

Selina stepped over a snoring ninja and crouched to check under the eyelids. “Huh. Forgive me for hounding you about the chemicals on the counter.”

Bruce moved past her for the doors. “Let’s keep moving. We need to get to T.”

Harley squeaked from behind them and as both Bruce and Selina whirled around, she raised her bat high over a ninja’s head.

Bruce caught it and yanked it out of her hands. She covered her mouth. “Sorry - I thought I saw that one’s eyes open. Are you sure they’re really asleep? This is weirding me out, Bats.”

He coaxed Harley away and resisted the urge to correct her on the name she called him. He passed
her the bat back. “They’re asleep. If they weren’t, we’d know.”

He led them to the doors and held them open. There was no getting around it. Complete stealth in a League stronghold was impossible. He knew it was better to make sure that when they did learn of your presence, it was too late for them to run.

He knew assassins. When they came in force, they tended to exhaust more ninjas than they needed. The escalation of force was always overcompensating, especially with him.

Bruce knew damn well when it all felt too easy and why that might be.

Talia was home.
“All the good girls go to hell”

‘Cause even God herself has enemies
And once the water starts to rise
And heaven’s out of sight
She’ll want the devil on her team”

- Billie Eilish, “All the Good Girls Go to Hell”

“She’s worse than Jason.”

An exasperated sigh floated through thin walls. “She is not worse than Jason.”

“Barb, we need to realize the level of screwed-to-hell we are and the first step is realizing that we are, in fact, screwed-to-hell.”

Abigail rolled her eyes. She sprawled on a spare tatami mat, not exactly eavesdropping, but not exactly uninterested in the next room’s conversation between the remaining members of the family. According to Tim, it was probably better she had not come back at all than to come back with news that she’d double-crossed Lex Luthor and to, “keep your unhelpful suggestions to yourself.”

Jason’s voice echoed back to her: \textit{If they can put up with me, they can put up with you. No problem}.

Dick had been pacing back and forth for ten minutes. She recognized his gait, but now he stopped to say, “Tim, that’s enough. The damage is done. We need to plan our next move, not bicker like children about whose fault it is.”

Abigail imagined Tim throwing his hands in the air with the frustrated noise he made. “I don’t understand how you two can be so nonchalant about this. We had a foolproof plan. Set Waller on Lex and let him selfimplode. Bruce goes after Joker, we handle Talia. Now, we don’t know if Deathstroke will believe Lex kidnapped his daughter, a dangerous gamble Gail made \textit{for us}, and if Slade stays his hand, they’ll focus on us instead of Jason.”
“If I know Slade,” Dick paused to add, “and I do, he’ll kill anyone who lays a hand on Rose. But Lex’s not a fool. Gail took out Mercy, too. That’s more than enough to put reasonable doubt in Lex’s corner with Slade. You’re right, but if they decide to focus on us, so be it. At least it gives Jay room to move.”

Abigail was fine with that. Her shoulder burned and she gritted her teeth. She’d been dying to face Slade again after he shot her. If turning Slade’s attention on her took the pressure off Jay, all the better. He needed all the help he could get.

Tim tutted his tongue. “In case you two haven’t noticed, we don’t exactly have the kind of numbers to go after Talia, Lex, and Deathstroke. It’s just the three of us and Gail.”

“And the Outlaws.” Barb reminded him.

“The Outlaws?” He sounded incredulous she would even bring it up. “Yeah, sure. An ex-criminal, his toddler, and an alien princess--and an intergalactic fugitive, by the way. The only way we could trust them before was because Jason had a leash on them.”

Dick rose his voice, a sharp lash of sound in a small room. “Starfire is only a fugitive for killing the people who massacred her homeworld. They wanted to turn her into a slave. I know where you’re getting your information, but if Hal Jordan can’t see that he needs to get Lanterns in the Tamaranian sector, tell him to shove it.”

Tim was quiet for a few seconds. “I’m sorry, Dick. I’m just trying to--”

“I know,” Dick said. “He taught us to weigh the risk factors. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have . . . whatever. Roy’s not a problem either. We need to use our resources. Kate said she’s available if we need her. I can call Victor, and the Titans would be here in a heartbeat. Clark’s in town. It’s not like the three of us are all there is.”

“And we’re not Bruce,” Barbara said. “We know to *use* our resources instead of isolating them. Jason needs us to stand firm here. He’d want us to look after her.”

Abigail got up and left the room quietly as she could. She was about to throw up.
Barbara waited by his Pontiac for a few minutes, pulling her coat tighter around herself. Barbara’s burner phone buzzed.

**On site with Waller.**

Her heart leapt to her throat. She chewed her lip as she replied. *Copy that. I’m on standby. Be careful.*

Dick’s steady gait echoed from the distant elevator. He walked up and unlocked his car. “Where’d she go?”

She dropped the phone onto her lap to wheel herself to the passenger’s side. “Firehouse..”

Dick opened up the passenger door. With a swift kiss to her cheek, he wedged his arms under her legs and behind her back to move her to the car seat. Her wheelchair he collapsed and placed in the back seat.

When he slid into the driver’s seat, she put a hand on his arm before he could start it. “You can stay in the car when we get there . . . if you don’t want to come in.”

He raised a sleek black eyebrow. “Kory and I are civil.”

“Not who I’m talking about.” She sighed as he started the car and worked his way out of the garage.

Gotham was quiet this morning under a deep-blue sky, not yet time for the sun to rise. Barbara put on the heaters and crossed her arms.

“Roy understands we’re on the same team.” Dick said carefully.

“Doesn’t change the fact he still hates you.”
He beckoned for her hand and once she gave it, he kissed the skinny bones on the back. “Don’t you worry about it, okay? Just focus on Gail. I’m a big boy.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever you say, Richard.”

Dick maneuvered through traffic, nothing but his low humming to break the silence. After ten minutes, they reached Old Gotham, the buildings duller in color and the shattered concrete dustier.

“Are you sure Gail’s gonna want to hear this from you?” He asked, glancing at her from the corner of his eye.

“Do I think it’d mean more coming from me? More than Tim, I’ll tell you that.” She said, thumb rubbing against his knuckles. “She’s dealing with a lot more than Lex Luthor.”

“I know she is.” Dick came to a stop light, wrist propped on the steering wheel. “I miss him, too. I forgot how much missing him hurts.”

“Me too.” Barbara squeezed his hand and he squeezed in return, but weaker.

She glanced to his shoulder, under which laid the scar from his four-hour fight with Jason. Her cheeks pinched.

Dick’s brows knit at the sight. “Hey. Barb? What’s wrong?”

Barbara hesitated, but one look at his bright blue eyes coaxed the confession out of her. She held his hand between both of hers. “Do you remember those first few months he was home? That fight you two had? I stayed up I don’t know how many nights with him. Listened to him breathe.”

“I remember how exhausted you were, how worried. I didn’t even care that he nearly killed us both. Still don’t.” He admitted, his eyes on the red light. His lips twisted in that awful way when she knew he was trying hard not to break. “I couldn’t help thinking it was my fault, you know? If I had been here, if I had been a brother to him before he went missing, maybe he wouldn’t be so messed up.”

“It’s not your fault, honey.” She said, and he let out a sharp breath. “You couldn’t have known what
"He tried to break my brother. He failed." Dick sniffed hard and straightened in his seat. "Jason got himself out. He’s always been self-made. That’s something the Joker can’t touch."

The red light turned green. Two blocks and Dick wheeled the car into the narrow alley beside the firehouse. By the time Dick had Barbara out of the car and the two of them were in front of the firehouse’s door, the sun was rising between the buildings.

Gail answered the door herself, morning sun in her eyes and turning her hair white. Her face pinched with confusion. "Oh. I expected Tim. Come on in."

Dick rolled Barbara inside and stretched out in the engine bay were the ministrations of building armor. The only empty space of floor was where Gail had been sitting, surrounded by tools and metal. Gail herself didn’t seem out of spirits, more concentrated and tired than worried.

Dick immediately crouched over the armor with the hint of a smile. Barbara remembered how he and Jason used to bounce ideas off each other, on mission objectives and what to have for lunch.

"I was just . . . building." Gail returned to her spot and sat cross-legged. "Lian is entertaining Roy and Kory at her weekly tea party. They’re indisposed."

Barbara’s eyes wandered the curve of Gail’s spine, knowing she must be sore from sitting like that for so long. She pushed her glasses up on her nose. "Good. I wanted to talk with you."

"We both did," Dick added, inspecting a grappler.

"I don’t know how to say this." Barbara licked her lips.

Gail shrugged. "Just say it, Barb."

“I heard what you said to Luthor. The gear is made with microphone surveillance, for search and rescue purposes.” She laced her fingers on her lap, businesslike. “I know you were trying to help
when you stole Rose Wilson from our lockup and left her at Luthor’s for Deathstroke to find. But what we do demands communication. We need to be in on every plan.”

Dick stayed quiet while Barbara was talking, only nodding. It was clear he was there for support, but Barbara appreciated having him here to get through to Gail. If anyone in the family loved Jason as much as Barbara, Alfred, or Gail, it was Dick.

Gail chewed her lip. She’d changed into one of Jason’s black shirts, holes in the chest from bullets and burns. “I apologize for not keeping you in the loop, but what I won’t apologize for is my initiative. We’re all here for a reason.”

“That reason isn’t to undo all the work we’ve already done to bring them down.”

“I get it.” Gail raised a hand and Barbara gasped as she watched it shake. Dick looked up, his brows together.

“Gail, why are you shaking?” He asked.

She closed her eyes tight, her lips pressed in a line. She pulled his shirt over her nose and breathed deeply. Gail let it fall again, sighing. “I was in that bed for a week, had plenty of time to think. Somehow, somewhere inside me, I knew he had to go. He’s so fucking set on doing everything himself, doing it all alone.”

Dick and Barbara shared a look behind Gail’s back. Where had they heard that before?

Barbara pushed herself forward and held her shoulder. Gail reached up to hold her hand as she continued. “I had spent a year without him. Even when I was with someone else, I could wake up and I’d just know he wasn’t asleep. He wasn’t okay and I’d want more than anything to calm him down. And then when I came back and we just . . . fell into each other, I just—” She squeezed Barbara’s hand. “We’ve been so inseparable and a week ago, I told him I loved him. And he didn’t say anything back.”

Dick smiled for a moment but hid it behind his hand. When Barbara trusted her voice enough, she whispered, “He wanted to.”

Dick waded through the twisted hunks of metal and collapsed beside them. “He probably wanted
nothing more than to stay there with you.”

“I wish he had,” Gail admitted. “He’d be safe. He’d be here. We’d fight this together.”

Barbara brushed the younger woman’s blonde hair out of her face. “This is something Jason has to face alone. It’s been chasing him since he left Arkham. Now it’s time for him to chase it. His brush with the Joker made that very clear.”

Dick nodded, sniffing. “I was there. He was scared half to death. Jason reacts to fear with anger. I think that’s how he survived his torture.”

Gail smelled the shirt again. “Pissed off beats scared every time.”

“That’s why you went after Luthor.” Barbara said. “And why he went after you. You made him afraid, so he tried to kill you. He made you afraid, so you tried to kill him. It’s cyclical.”

Gail’s stormy eyes fell dead. “I wasn’t afraid of him. When he threatened to put Jason’s head on a spike in front of America, I was afraid he just might do it.” The corner of her mouth perked up. “But then I remembered that he’s one man and so is Deathstroke. If I can successfully blackmail and kill Carmine Falcone, I can play Lex Luthor and Slade Wilson into destroying each other.”

“But Mercy Graves happened upon you.” Dick found the last piece of the puzzle.

Barbara’s spine hurt. “Sometimes random chance is the thing that breaks the plan. Clausewitz called it the fog of war.”

Gail bit her lip. At first, Barb thought she was trying not to grimace, but then her mouth spread into a smile. “Lex has a massive stash of kryptonite in his office. He injects himself with it as a performance enhancer and, I suspect, to prepare for the coming battle. Slade must know about Lex’s injections since they’re in business together. Lex is where Slade gets his serum, so . . .”

“Christ.” Dick tutted his tongue. “This is good information, Gail. Excellent recon.”

“Oh, it’s more than recon.” Gail pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.
“I stole the syringe he was about to inject himself with. It has his fingerprints on it.”

Barbara raised her eyebrows, unable to force the words in her head onto her tongue. Jason said he’d trained her, but Barb had no clue how well. She’d seen her fight at the Battle for Gotham, but . . . this was a whole other sphere of knowledge.

She couldn’t resist the question. “Where is this syringe now?”

Gail winked. “Mount Vernon, Virginia.”

NEAR MOUNT VERNON, VIRGINIA -- GOOD SHEPHERD CATHOLIC CHURCH

I never pegged Waller as a church goer. With a team like the Suicide Squad on your payroll, who would?

I installed myself in the area two days ago and familiarized myself with her routine. Here’s what I knew so far:

She took about two weeks worth of vacation days just to come down here for Christmas, but decided to stay longer and work from the Pentagon winter home. Not a bad decision, considering the roads have been blocked for weeks.

Waller’s fifty-three. There’s grey in her hair and crow’s feet have settled in, but she’s active. There’s a home gym with an elliptical that keeps her heart healthy. Of the last four times she’s used it, she watched soaps the first three times and spent the last one on the phone with Rick Flagg. Apparently Dr. Moone had a hard time adjusting to Russian winters. Made sense. Swamp demons hated the cold.

She had a security detail. Two ex-Secret Service guys who never noticed me in the trees.

Today, a Sunday, she went to church bright and early. This was one trip she chose to make without her security. Her best clothes braved the cold, but she never shivered. She stayed long enough for the sermon, so I pulled out my costume in the bathroom.
I’d pulled a Bruce and grown a beard. Nothing major, just a layer of scruff long enough to cover the scars on my jawline that would identify me a mile away. They were clear enough in the mugshot Lex had plastered across America. A black hairspray to cover the white streak, and a white collar to fix around my neck. A red sash over my shoulders, a rosary around my fist. No use to disguise the brand, so I snuck into the confessional and waited with the ‘ready’ light on.

Two others came in before she did. One was an old lady wishing for me to look after her grown daughters as she reached the end of her life. I’d spent the previous week inhaling Bible verses in preparation for this, so I did my best impression of a good man. I told her I’d look after them. I wrote a note and tucked it into the seat of the confessional for the real priest who would come in later. The second was a nervous teenager admitting to the sin of skepticism. I gave him the Catholic answer to dissent, but softened it. Yeah, I was pretending to be a priest, but I didn’t really need to act like one.

Then Waller trudged in, closed the curtain. She sat down and waited a full ten minutes before she cleared her throat. “Todd.”

“Waller.”

“You smell like cigarette smoke.”

I dug dirt from under my nails. The old man always said to keep track of what you lose on long-term undercover missions. My commitment to staying smokeless was first. My meditation kept the nicotine withdrawal at bay, but I knew quitting would be the first order of business if I ever got home. “You smell like atheism.”

She didn’t seem amused. “I was raised Catholic. Only started to question it when I became a government employee and saw what we really do to protect people.”

“Didn’t like what you had to do? Keep secrets?”

Waller let out a laugh. “I liked keeping secrets too much. Husband left, but Uncle Sam stayed faithful. Enough about me. Let us get to business.”

Fine with me. “Oracle wants everything you have on CADMUS. It isn’t a request.”

Waller was quiet for a moment. “If she needs me to cooperate on bringing down Luthor, fine. He
provides a great deal of off-the-books funding, but he’s gotten too loud. Too unpredictable. We knew that entering the deal, but what arrived on my doorstep this morning did not put me in a forgiving mood.”

She rummaged in her leather purse for a small black bag. The kryptonite glowed green through the veil as she poked the end of the vial out of the back. “Compliments of Gotham’s Ghost.”

My heart leapt to my throat. My hands closed into fists, the rosary threatening to break. I sighed through my nose and willed my voice to stay low. “I haven’t been in touch with the Ghost. What’s that?”

“Kryptonite-derived performance enhancer with Lex Luthor’s fingerprints all over.” She put the bag away. “In an hour, I will hand it over to the Department of Justice and he’ll be seized. He’s had time to prepare, so he may try to flee the country. I need reassurance that his European contacts cannot assist him.”

“Namely, Talia al Ghul.”

“I have also been in touch with Mr. Wayne.” She said it so informally for a man who once broke into her house just to say he was annoyed she knew his secret. And to say it as a woman who didn’t mind. “Since I didn’t blow the whistle on him for so many years, he’s agreed to do me a favor in time. Unfortunately, I need the favor called in sooner and he is indisposed.”

What a guy. I cracked my neck. “I’m not indisposed. What do you need, Waller?”

“My Suicide Squad has Luthor’s European contacts under control. In the event he does not flee the country, I need you to investigate a possible threat to public safety he poses. His main enemies, Superman and your family, are too powerful to face head-on.” Waller dropped her voice. “It doesn’t matter to me who else you have in your ranks, but the key here is that the no-contact rule be maintained in the interest of maintaining cover. Remember, the microscope is on you. You get anywhere near them and you instantly put them in danger of public crucifixion.”

“I understand.” My chest tightened. No chance to see her. Not that I wanted her to see me like this. Smoking, exhausted from constant surveillance, but singularly focused on revenge.

Whatever Waller needed me to do, I had to get through it fast. Luthor wasn’t my endgame. He was one step closer to the Joker.
“I have a plan. It will require you to follow it to the letter, but it ends with Lex Luthor and Slade Wilson behind bars. When we’re done, you’ll be vindicated. Your name will be cleared and you’ll be free to face the Joker.”

My brows came together. A stress headache behind my eyes formed. “I don’t give a fuck about my name, Waller. I don’t care what they call me. I want the Joker dead.”

“I don’t care about your name either. It will be a side effect, but the sweet part about it is that you will be in the perfect position to kill as many criminals as you please.”

I stared at the scars over my knuckles. “What’s the catch?”

“This plan is for you, Barbara Gordon, Bruce Wayne, and I to know. You can’t tell anyone. The fewer people who know, the better our chances will be. No one, Todd. Mark my words.” She held up a finger. “First, you go to Gotham and set yourself up as a shadow for Lex Luthor’s prime target.”

Following people was easy. I loosened my collar and played with the rosary between my fingers. “Who’s the target?”

“The reporter who began elevated the investigation. Clark Kent and his assistant.”

I almost broke the rosary. “Abigail Byron. Do you . . .”

“Know she’s the Gotham Ghost? Yes. Do I know you two are involved? Yes. Are you to have any contact with her until the Wayne Foundation gala in three months? No.”

The beads thrummed with tension. My nails bit into my palms. “Why are you doing this?”

“To gauge your commitment. You do exactly as I tell you and you will have your revenge on the Joker, your city, your family, and your lady friend completely safe. You deviate from the plan, and you can kiss a safe, happy life goodbye.” Waller crossed her arms. “I have been doing this a very, very long time. I’m well-used to playing puppeteer, Jason Todd. I will bet my retirement on this: in one year, all of this will either have been for the best, or come to nothing.”
She leaned closer to the veil. “Now, how good are you at playing the villain?”

I scrubbed both hands down my face and looked to the roof of the confessional. Her stormy eyes flashed in the back of my mind, the day I told her I was the Arkham Knight. She sat on my tank, furious and hurt. I could only imagine how much worse this was about to become, for both of us.

“You said until the gala.” I’d always been good with loopholes.

“You will have that night and that night alone to say goodbye.”

My voice threatened to shatter. “Goodbye?”

“For now. Not forever.”

Okay. I scratched my jaw. My nerves were in knots, my chest an angry drum trying to talk me out of it. I knew they’d do it for me. All of them. They’ve lied before to protect me. They’ll lie again without question.

Barbara will know. Through all of this, she will know. Somehow, that’s the biggest comfort. Even as Gail—it hurt to think about—patrols and fights and forgets to eat and forgets to sleep and overthinks every move Barb will know. She’ll help my girl. She’ll be there. And maybe, Gail won’t hate me by the end of it.

I sighed. Please, sunshine, don’t hate me.

“What do I have to do?”
“When my time comes around
Lay me gently in the cold dark earth
No grave can hold my body down
I'll crawl home to her”

- Hozier, “Work Song”

Selina drew breath in this cavern for what seemed like an eternity.

The bloody sword in her hand gained weight faster than she could swing it, but she was thankful the bitch had decided on stealth. She dragged the sword behind her. Sure, she was giving away her position, but what did she care? She wasn’t hiding. Not anymore.

“Come out, Talia.” She shouted into the darkness, the rock room dimly lit by oil lamps and the veins of Lazarus pulsating along the walls. “Come here so I can hit you again.”

Laughter continued to echo from further up on the platforms. She glanced up, catching a glimpse of Bruce’s broad form as he grappled with a green-haired ghost. Harley was wrapped around its neck.

A flash of red eyes to her left and she barely had time to lift the sword. Metal clashed on metal as the seething Head of the Demon hissed at her. Forked tongue licking over painted lips, Talia was the demon incarnate. The runes woven into her armor coursed over her body as she and Selina locked into close combat, half with swords and half with fury.

The sword Talia had so generously provided her was soon chopped from her hand. It made a sharp metallic noise as it stuck into the far wall beneath a vein of Lazarus. Selina didn’t mind being relieved of a sword. She dug her claws deep into Talia’s forearm and forced her against that wall.

Talia dropped the sword into the free hand, and a hot slice touched her ribs. Selina whipped her foot up to kick it out of her grip, then stabbed the heel through Talia’s hand. The Head of the Demon screamed, thrust forward in an attempt to bite her throat.
Selina leaned back, elbowed her across the face. “Not a chance.”

She pent up her energy, then stretched her leg close to the staked sword. Talia thrashed as her wrist inched closer to the blade. Selina fought her, their bodies almost touching, and managed to pin Talia’s free hand to her chest. Selina headbutted her once, twice. Her vision blurred, but she felt her heel rap the sword and she knew she was close.

There was a moment where both women stared at the sword, but then Talia pulled her hand back along the length of Selina’s heel. She gritted her teeth, sweat gathering on her chin and forehead. Once she was free, she shifted against Selina, pushed her hip underneath and heaved.

Selina tumbled flat on her back without enough time to roll. The hiss of the sword came from the wall, and another hot slice hit Selina below the hip, only this one went all the way through.

A shout came from the top of the cavern and one mustered from her to answer it. It was a howl, like a wounded animal’s cry. The Catwoman groped at her own leathery form. The chest, the stomach, she found her hipbone, but while she found flesh continued on one side, the other was nothing but blood, flesh, lightning-bolts across her eyes.

Talia leaned over her, almost nose-to-nose. In a beautiful whisper, she said to Selina, “He will never love you as he loves me. He needs to protect you because all you can do is run. Try running now, Selina. You try running.”

TEN YEARS AGO

It started as a gag. Yeah, Batman chased after many a pretty bad girl, but he only ever fell into bed with Catwoman. The others, he chased because that was the job. He chased her because he wanted her. In between baths of diamonds, Selina mused over the idea with a laugh.

That first night together, the first of many, was everything she thought it’d be. Masks on, heels on, costumes off—mostly, he didn’t wait long enough for her to learn how to work his suit. He took care of it, and her.

As she waited for him to finish his shower, her fresh from hers, she pulled on her costume. It’s still sweaty, a reminder of how much she’d wanted him back. The goggles all steamed up. The zipper looked broken.
Her hair was short then. She combed it against her head with her fingers and tugged the headpiece on, straightened the cat ears in the mirror.

She ran through the last two hours in her head. He hadn’t said much. She’d lived for his gasp and his sigh, but she’d done most of the talking. The more she thought about it, the more her slightly swollen lips looked in the mirror.

He finally stepped out as she touched up her lipstick, cowl on. He rearmed himself quietly, his broad and scarred back to her. She didn’t comment, but she touched him, the first scar she could reach. A wide and raised mark, maybe a knife wound. He sucked in a breath through his nose and turned around.

“I’m not returning the jewel.” She said, as if inventing the reason he might have done this at all.

Another first for them, the Batman gave a short huff—his version of a laugh in the field. “That’s not why I came here with you.”

It was the way his voice lowered as he said ‘with you’ that made her look away from him. She wasn’t embarrassed, certainly not. Selina wondered if he was, though. That he’d stooped so low as to take a cat burglar to bed.

So she reached down to do up his pants for him, let him feel her fingers on his skin again but in reverse order. He shivered.

Selina bent to pick up her whip and sat on the windowsill, her hands braced on the sides.

He stood there, bare-chested. His head slightly tilted back and his hands open.

She smiled before she fell back into the open night air. “See you around.”

She didn’t know he was Bruce then. Two weeks later, she will notice the bruises on his calves from her heels in a tabloid and calculate the odds in her head.
EIGHT YEARS AGO

Two years was the longest period Selina had ever spent sleeping with anyone, official or otherwise. Which did nothing but make her paranoid.

She didn’t like leaving ties. It made her feel hooked. Caught.

She left Gotham for a while. A few months in Europe replenished her bank account enough to sate her appetite for stylish theft, the best term for cat burglary she could think of.

Bruce did not know yet that she knew, but when she found tabloids of Wayne Enterprise’s eligible bachelor of a CEO cozying up to a new investor, her nights were occupied with sharpening claws. Talia al Ghul began as a fling, then a charity case wrapped in a thin veil of “I can fix her” Selina saw from a mile away.

As she and Bruce unveiled themselves, she understood that he felt Talia could be brought to the lighter side of the world. Away from her father.

Selina could relate to the daddy issues, but not the phony accent, not the phony pet names, and the way she said his name with a rolled ‘r’. Like it was something only she could do. Something only she could bring out in him.

The Catwoman was not in love, nor even jealous of Talia. The longer she stared at Bruce from three rooftops out, knowing that before Talia they would be in bed somewhere, the more her own loneliness weighed her down. Men. She tutted her tongue. Diamonds would have never treated her like that.

Not for the first time, she reminded herself that he was a single man she had dallied with. He had his life. She had hers. If they entangled again, it’d be as single people. She had to take what she could get.

Even if she wanted to take him all in one go and never give anything back.

A year later, when Bruce and Talia had their first falling-out over Ra’s, the Batman showed up at her window.
She had half a mind to slap him for pulling her in, but the way he breathed her name in between ragged gasps, curled his fingers in her bathrobe, made her forget all about her anger, her loneliness, herself.

She nipped his lower lip, pushed him away fighting for air. Selina and Bruce both panted, and stared at each other.

“Get bored?” Selina asked him, her nose wrinkled.

She watched it hit him, the fact that they each knew the person under the mask. He wiped a hand down his face, a smear of her chapstick on his cowl.

His whisper came as a surprise. “I’m sorry.”

He bled from a wound on his thigh, something that had happened before he decided to come over. Selina bandaged him up as he wallowed, neither saying a damn word.

“Don’t be.” She finally said back. “I’m just someone you spend your time with. Wasted time.”

He kissed her, but she didn’t let him linger long enough to persuade herself. He left. She let him.

The Catwoman did not fall in love. She took. That’s what she did. She took a piece of him and stored it away.

Over the next four years, she dangled it in front of him. More stolen kisses occurred in alleyways, more stolen moments with and without clothes, but it’s not nearly as sweet. He’ll be as gentle as he can, but she pushed him. She dragged her nails down his back and he loved it. He squeezed her, hard, and she loved it.

But no mark she ever left stayed for long. And nights with him were never guaranteed for the future.

She woke up one summer morning on the fourth year in tears and drenched in sweat. It was the first time she dreamed him dead. Truly dead. And it was the moment she realized she couldn’t live without him.
Most nights, if she was lucky, he showed up with his head tilted back just like that first time. The Batman was nothing if not confident. Most nights, he surprised the Catwoman with a kiss and melted the layers of bravado until she was Selina in his arms. She peeled back the layers of anger and issues until the name she whispered was Bruce.

They spent hours together, the longest stint lasted a day and a half, but it was never anything with a ‘forever’ tacked on the end. Even if they could never say it out loud, it was in every look, every touch, every shirtless stack of pancakes he cooked for her, and in every towel-dress cup of black coffee.

But one night he came to her, she would never forget. He’d said he was going to Metropolis, not why or who he was going to see.

He came to her front door, not her balcony. He was dressed as Bruce Wayne, not as Batman. It was eight in the morning, not in a double-digit evening. Selina was barely awake, but at the sight of him--swaying on the spot, dark circles, his eyes red, his hair a mess, his clothes shifted out of their normal sleek order.

He smelled of women’s perfume, but his breath hinted at something that yanked Selina right back to her teenage years on the street.

She let him in and pushed her bangs out of her eyes. He collapsed on her couch, both hands over his face. She brought him water and made him drink it.

Selina sat beside him. She knew not to touch him. “Bruce. Who drugged you?”

He croaked the name with a grimace. “Talia.”

Selina hardened from head to toe. The Catwoman pulled back his collar to see the purple marks along his carotid. Suck-bruises, hickies as plain as day and cheap as the men who had left them on her as a young woman.
She bathed him in her shower. She stripped with him, so they would be equal. The sight of his body in that shower harrowed her from the inside out. And till the day she died, Selina had never hated anyone more than Talia al Ghul.

And yet, he still found a way to love her.

FEAR HALLOWEEN - AN HOUR AFTER WAYNE MANOR BURNED

Selina knew he wouldn’t call her, simply because he preferred to do things in person, but she refused to believe he would leave altogether.

The news hit her in stages. The first was a planting of her feet in the floor in Bludhaven, one of many safehouses. A cat was light on her feet because she had to be. This was one instance she couldn't afford to chance stability. The second stage was anger, disbelief. Why would the news lie like that? Burned with him inside?

Not a chance. Not Bruce. Not Bruce.

The third was out loud. “Not Bruce. Not him. Not him.”

The fourth was the scream. From her crown to her soles to her soul. The man she loved was dead.

NOW

The man she loved glided down the cavern, a bat in the star-streaked night. Selina dazzled herself with the stars of pain across her vision, the lightning in her bones. The smile on her face stretched wider into a scream.

His hands, strong but frantic, on her body. A ripping noise and something being tied around her. Her
eyes glide closed, but Harley’s voice cuts through the pain as she slapped Selina.

“Wakey wakey, don’t you leave on me, okay? We’re gonna getcha out.”

“Tuh...Tuh...” She stuttered, her nails in his armor to anchor herself.

“Talia’s gone.” Bruce said. “Save your strength. You’re alright.”

Harley’s hands clasped around one of hers and she started to mumble under her breath. Selina’s eyes watered as she realized Harley was praying.

A flash of black swallowed her consciousness, their voices dipping in and out of her ears.

“Don’t you give up now, dammit.” He shouted, loud enough to echo in her mind as she slipped lower.

“SELINA !”

At the earliest opportunity, Alfred relocated his recovery to his quarters. The family had done a marvelous job of cleaning up the blood, but the smell of disinfectant and lemon hung heavy in the room, like a bad omen.

“I could try doing the place over again, if you like.” Gail offered from her seat in his kitchenette. “It’d give me something to do.”

Alfred waved her off. “Don’t you mind it. It’ll fade with time. I’m merely impressed you got it out of the rug.”

“The magic of seltzer-water.” She joked and sipped her tea. Her stormy eyes had that faraway quality that reminded the butler much of his master, never sure what she might be thinking. When she spoke again, she looked almost embarrassed. “Thank you again for inviting me for tea, Alfred. After what I did, I’m surprised you’d even see me.”
Alfred lifted his gray brows. “It was the first thing on my mind when I heard of it, actually. I knew Master Tim would give you grief.”

He threw another few lumps of sugar into his tea. Much as he loved the natural flavors, he was indulging his sweet tooth today. It was not every day someone made an attempt on your life. It encouraged a certain level of appreciation toward the little pleasures.

“He certainly did. Mind if I ask why you aren’t?”

“Simple. I raised the Batman.”

Her laugh was a wonderful sight. Her eyes disappeared and her lower set of teeth were slightly crooked, which endeared her to him greatly. What didn’t was the sound of his phone.

“I am dreadfully sorry,” he said as he pulled it out. “I should have silenced it the moment I-...”

“Alfred?”

A voicemail from a phone traced to the Caribbean. Alfred’s throat cinched closed, as if Talia’s hand on him had never left. He pushed the button to listen to them and cleared his throat as he raised it to his ear. His chest pitched with pain at his injury.

Bruce’s voice, with more panic than Alfred had heard in a long time.

“Alfred. I know you told me not to contact you until I stopped wallowing, but-” A sharp inhale and a low groan of pure desperation. “- I need your help. I really need your help. Please come quick. It’s Selina. Please help me.”

The line went dead in Alfred’s ear. Gail was wide-eyed on the armchair, but her expression paled as he snatched his cane off the table between them. He jammed it into the floor and ignored the burning in his legs.
“If you don’t mind, Gail. I will need some assistance to the Batwing launch bay.”
“My baby lives in **shades of blue**

Blue eyes and jazz and attitude

He lives in California too

He drives a Chevy Malibu

And when he calls

He calls for me, and not for you

He lives for love, he loves his drugs

He loves his baby too”

- Lana Del Ray, “Shades of Cool”

.................................................................

For once in her life, Gail experienced true, persistent apprehension. “I’m sorry, what?”

She helped Alfred to the helm and lowered him to the chair. The butler was still heavily bandaged beneath the open shirt, but he still managed to activate the startup protocol.

He let her strap him in. “We are going to Master Bruce.”

Gail sat down herself, fumbling on the buckles. “Shouldn’t we tell Dick and Barbara before we go anywhere? Shouldn’t we make this a group decision? I mean, it’s the man who trained them, raised them--”

“--And I am the closest Bruce has to a living father.” Alfred’s mustache twitched as he set his mouth in a hard line. He twinged reaching a higher button, but swatted Gail’s hand away when she tried to help him. “I am quite all right, Abigail. If you must, send them a message. Tell them we will be back tomorrow or the next day and not to worry.”

“Why not?” Gail said under her breath. Her stomach knotted, as if the mere thought of being in the same room as Bruce Wayne sent every muscle in her entire body to seize.
The entire Batwing shifted underneath her and a surge of bile sent acid into her mouth. Her nails dug into the armrests as Alfred sent them into the air. The course was set for the Caribbean.

Once she had her phone out, Gail’s thumbs trembled on the keys. She put Dick in the recipient line, unsure of how much to say. “Do I tell them we’re going for Bruce?”

Alfred shook his head. “Leave that out. If it were certain he was coming home with us, I’d tell them, but . . .” From behind, the butler seemed to almost sag where he sat. “We don’t know that.”

She bit her lip and typed that she and Alfred had to tend to a pressing matter, nothing serious. They would be gone for a day or two. She shoved her phone back into her pocket and pulled her hair into a bun.

Alfred hit auto-pilot and slowly pivoted his chair towards her. The old butler looked as drained as he had for the past month while they both recovered, but now there was a life in his eyes, something she had never seen there before. He had more color in his cheeks, his dark circles from a painkiller-afflicted sleep cycle were gone, but perhaps the most noticeable change was his chest. Through the open shirt, Gail could see the bandages tight over his ribs. She had never seen him eat in excess, but he seemed strong.

“He’s my family,” Alfred said, “Even if he loses his way and doubts himself, he cannot afford to have an ounce of that doubt trickle from me. I have unshakable faith that Master Bruce, when he sees fit, will return to us–his promises of exile be damned.”

Gail hid her mouth behind her hand, embarrassed that was the first reason that popped into his head as to why she might hesitate. She looked down at her pigeon-toed shoes. “I know you feel like that. I’m not questioning why we’re going at all, I’m . . . I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Why?” His lips drew into a smile. “You walk into Lex’s shining tower, rob him blind, and walk out without batting an eyelash, but yet hesitate to help an old man fly a plane.”

“I have no issue helping you, Alfred. I’m more than happy to.” She tried to return his smile, but only tilted her mouth for a brief moment. “My problem is seeing the Batman. In the flesh.”

Alfred’s smile grew. “He’s not nearly as imposing as everyone makes him out to be.”
She wrinkled her nose. “You saw him in diapers, tied his shoes, and drove him to school. I watched him from around my mother’s legs when he came to GCPD.” She leaned back in her chair. “I thought he was the coolest thing I had ever seen. And I felt safer, knowing him and Mom were out there, stopping the bad guys . . .”

“What?” He asked.

Gail sighed. “What kept me silent for so many years of my life wasn’t just fear. I knew Batman punished and hated criminals. I . . . assume they must have told you about me, everybody else. Barb’s got a file on me.”

Alfred nodded. “Dick told me a little about you on the way back to Gotham. He and Barbara reassured me that your greatest crime was loving your family far too much.”

Gail rolled her eyes and blew her bangs out of her eyes. “Dick and Barbara are far too nice.”

“Well tell me yourself, then.” Alfred gestured to her with an incline of his head. “What’s your greatest crime? Or crimes, plural?”

Gail stretched out her legs and crossed them under her chair. She knew Alfred had been told her story by someone else, whether it was Dick or Barbara made no difference. She rubbed the back of her neck. “I killed Carmine Falcone. Twice. The first when I was eighteen, in a botched blackmail attempt. I wanted him to face justice for my mother’s death, but he got too close and I panicked. I shot him with her gun. The second time was over a year ago at the Battle for Gotham, as you know. And that time . . .” The wet thumps of Falcone’s flesh echoed in her mind. “I meant to kill him. I wanted nothing more than to snuff out his life personally. And I liked it. A lot.”

She glanced up at Alfred, sheepish in her confession. She expected disgust or at the very least, disapproval, but his expression stayed unreadable and attentive. Gail continued, “I spent the next year, after I went to Metropolis, thinking about that moment. I played it every night in my mind before I fell asleep. How I didn’t want to wash his blood off. The first time, it was an accident. I regretted it for years, that first time, but not because I didn’t want to do it. I’d fought with myself against it. I knew I shouldn’t kill him. He should pay for his crimes, but not by me. When he finally did, I regretted that it was an accident.”

Gail moved the straps of the seat enough to take off her jacket. She closed her eyes for a second before she peeled her shirt off her stomach to show him the scars over her stomach from Falcone. “I wanted to get my anger out on him, let him feel for a moment, what I felt for so many years. My first thought at knowing he wasn’t dead was relief.” She put her shirt back down with a huff. “I had a
chance to kill him properly. Sure, Jason wanted to do it, but when the time came, neither of us argued. Or hesitated. He stood by and let me kill him right. Gordon called me a monster. And to some degree, I am.”

“I don’t share Bruce’s hatred of killing--”

“--I know you don’t. But I understand it does something to you. Taking a life changes you, no matter what that person did. You see threats everywhere, which makes me glad for Jason.” Even if she tried not to react to his name, her chest tightened like a rag being twisted between two strong hands. “He showed me so much more than how to defend myself. But right now, my worst fear is that Bruce takes one long look in my direction and decides I’m not good for Jason. Or the family, for that matter. You guys are my family too at this point, and I’m . . .” Her lower lip puckered as she did her best to keep it together. “I’m scared he’s right. I’m one of the bad guys.”

Alfred’s unflappable smile faltered. Gail looked away, her eyes averted to the ceiling. What did it matter if Jason wanted her? If one word from Bruce could break Joker’s brainwashing, could the slightest inclination of disapproval shake his feelings for her? As much as Jason liked to drag Bruce, she knew he loved the closest he’d had to a father. He loved Bruce.

She shook her head. If it came to that, she wouldn’t stick around. Family came first.

Alfred reached out for her and though she knew it wouldn’t help her sleep at night, she took his hand.

“The solution is quite simple then, I believe,” Alfred said. “Prove to him that you’re not.”

She didn’t have the heart to discourage his faith in her.

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………….

Bruce had done everything he could.

He had wrapped the point of severance. Harley had given up her shirt and undershirt for the cause, both blood-soaked now. She had scarcely lifted her head from Selina’s hand, her lips moving at a feverish pace as she prayed.
He wanted, more than anything, to move her from this horrible place, but he knew that was out of the question. His cowl was discarded to act as a homing beacon, the eyes illuminating the cavern. Three empty canisters of painkillers and blood clotting drugs laid nearby, exhausted to save Selina’s life. Bruce knew better than to think she was out of danger. Her eyes moved beneath her eyelids as if dreaming, but as comforting as the thought was that she was feeling little to no pain, he knew she could go.

One leg completely severed. He had three of Mr. Freeze’s grenades attached to the larger muscles, but he doubted he could save it for reattachment. One leg was cut deep, but not severed. The bone was left intact, it’s likely he could save that leg at least. He had his cape tied around it in a tourniquet, both hands clamped over her thigh.

Her blood continued to flow. And he had no way of knowing what internal injuries she had. Her ribs bruised. Internal bleeding seemed to be the cause.

Sweat leaked into his eyes. God dammit. “Selina,” He tried, “Selina, can you hear me?”

She gave a vague moan, but he could safely assume it was disorientation, confusion, maybe a plea.

Harley lifted her head, her makeup smeared over her cheeks with tears. Her lower lip pouted out, but her eyes were full of murder if he spat out the wrong answer to her question. “Is she going to be okay?”

Bruce wished he could lie to her like he did everyone else that Halloween. How easy it had been, but not anymore. He remembered telling Alfred so many weeks ago that it was now impossible to hide that he was bleeding inside. With his hands covered in Selina, it was again impossible to hide that he, once again, was bleeding inside.

“I don’t know,” He told her, the closest to the truth as he could get.

“What can I do?”

“If Alfred’s coming, he’ll need someone to lead him here. Stay alert. Cuban gang activity’s high.”
Bruce figured it would be difficult not to spot a shirtless blood-stained Harley Quinn waving frantically from the ground. She jumped up and climbed the cavern.

He shouted to her, “Be careful! You fall, I can’t haul both of you out!”

“Don’t worry, Brucie,” she called, “I’m a gymnast!”

And she was gone, and he was alone with Selina. There were words he wanted to say, things he’d never said to anyone. Things he would have given anything not to say in this moment, along with things and organs he would have given gladly for this moment to have never happened at all.

Her words came back to him, clear as if she’d said them now in her dazed state. “I’ve never left you and not regretted it.”

Bruce could not afford to hide his internal bleeding anymore.

“D-Do you remember,” He began, “that morning all those years ago after our first night together? You said you weren’t going to return the Cataran jewel and I told you it’s not why I was there. I know you remember it. You still have the damn thing.”

Selina gave a weak groan and her features pinched. Whatever pain-induced fever dream she was in, it wasn’t pleasant. He leaned down, his hands still clamped over her wounds, to kiss her navel.

“I couldn’t care less about a museum piece you stole. It made tourist revenue by catching the light. I cared that you stole it because its former owners were trying to extort the museum for it. It was going to be pawned off to fund organized crime. I cared that you did it to keep it out of the wrong hands.” He shook his head. “I thought I was chasing you because you were a brilliant cat burglar playing a far more dangerous game than the one you signed up for. Even when we took the masks off, I was convinced I meant nothing to you and vice versa. But the minute I see you throw yourself back into this horrible game, every instinct and memory of you in my head urges me to follow you into the dark.”

Bruce sucked in a haggard breath. “I would follow you anywhere. And that means you have a family, Cat. More family than just me, but there’s no one who loves you as much. I hope, I dearly hope, that you don’t think this is the first time it’s occurred to me. I hope it’s not the first time it’s occurred to you, too.”

“You have a family, dammit.” He hung his head. The bleeding had finally stopped under his hands.
“You didn’t come here for me. You came back to remind me that I had one too and to stop being a rotten coward. I need to talk to my sons, but I refuse to go back to Gotham without you. Not without you. No, no…”

It didn’t matter how fast Gail was, he was faster. Gail and Bruce stayed on the floating stretcher through levels of cavern, taking turns performing CPR on Selina’s stubborn heart.

She remembered the old saying. Cats came to you when they wanted, not when they were told.

He didn’t waste time asking who she was, or where Alfred was. Gail knew the interrogation was due once they were back on the Batwing. Maybe it wouldn’t come at all, but she couldn’t let herself dwell on that. She kept her mind on her timing and Bruce’s breaths to Selina’s lungs.

He could sense when she was tiring out and it took one look to signal a switch. A whoosh of metallic scent rushed her face as she switched places. Every fourth compression, a breath.

The Batwing hovered between two buildings and consumed the stretcher into its belly.

Alfred limped back from the cockpit, dragging the CPR machine over Selina’s chest. An oxygen mask was tugged over her face. He turned his back to assess the partially severed leg, inspecting the slice.

The Batman--Gail could scarcely say the name, let alone think it--towered over the butler, broad shoulders almost completely blocking her view of Selina. “Can it be reattached?”

Alfred shook his head, his lips in a hard line. “Those swords are enchanted. What’s worse is that she sawed. Selina might not have felt it for the shock, but I’m afraid her body would reject it if I reattached it so crudely.”

The Batman ran a hand over his scruffy, bare face. Gail, in her light black gear, seemed so small next to him. It reminded her of Jason’s strong, confident stature. His fists throbbed at his sides, like he would explode at the slightest movement.

She was well-used to playing with explosives. Gail asked Alfred, “What can I do, Alfred?”
Alfred worked fast to set the monitors up, wrap the wounds, but he waved a hand at her. “Plot the course for Gotham and set it to autopilot. Take a rest. You have certainly earned it.”

Gail maneuvered around the taller man, so as not to touch him. She entered the course quickly and tapped the autopilot function. The Batwing shifted underneath, but for the rest of the ride, they may as well have been sitting still for how smooth it was.

She sunk into her seat and pushed her palms into her eyes, elbows dug into her thighs. As she had done every time she’d treated Jason, when she’d helped in Tim’s surgery last year, when she’d helped Alfred frantically sew Dick’s organs back into his body, she waited till after the horror to feel it.

Selina had been the one to cut the Jason’s zip ties and release her from the pipe. She had listened to Gail say she planned to kill Carmine Falcone and smiled. She was probably the only one out of the family who might understand what she was dealing with right now, how much she wanted Jason home.

Her eyes stung no matter how hard she pushed. She refused to cry in front of the Batman. She refused to be that pathetic. She could hear him and Alfred whispering behind her, but she didn’t care.

If he threw her out of his plane now, she’d be thankful. Gotham felt too close to her heart, like shrapnel. Maybe she’d be closer to Jason if he threw her out. God only knew where the mystery man was.

A cold hand touched her shoulder. She jumped, but when she looked up to see Bruce Wayne in a suit of bat-crested armor. His half-mask of facial hair was crusted with blood. His red, exhausted eyes blinked several times, as if he was trying to focus a well-scrubbed lens on her.

“Af A friend of Jason’s. It might have to be true, now. Just a friend. When she closed her eyes, she could almost picture the way his rolled to the back of his head when she kissed his neck. His gasp as she pulled him in. The cocky tilt of his lips with his hands under her thighs.
Yeah, just a friend.

Gail shook her head hard. “I have a file in your system.”

“I’ve read it. That’s a lot of aliases for one person.”

Gail wrinkled her nose. “Abigail Byron’s the most recent one. Gail, for short.”

“And Ghost for nights.” He spread his legs, crossed and un-crossed them, dying to get comfortable, but failing. He settled to lean forward like her. “It suits you.”

“Jason chose it.” She said, the name hot as an iron to her lips. “It does suit me.”

“If I ask you a few questions, will you promise to answer them honestly?”

She finally raised her gaze to his. Her arms trembled from CPR. “I figured you’d have far more than a few questions to ask me, Mr. Wayne.”

He bristled at the formality, but at least the boundary was established. “Would I be correct to assume you have far more than a few for me, too?”

Gail leaned back in her chair. She knew the way she sat, the way his eyes dipped to her hip, he could see her gun. So she moved her arms onto the rests so he could see both of them, tilted her shoe sideways for the third. “Mmmh.”

“How was he, when you saw him last?” He asked. “Jason. How was he?”

The blood rushed to her face, but she didn’t move. Her breath pulled to a central point in her chest until it hurt. She wanted to scream at him.

Her entire education of Jason flashed behind her eyes. She remembered their conversation, Jason’s
hesitation to confront his father. How he flinched when he heard the bats move over the firehouse, heard their cries as they dove one another in the night. She remembered every dark, bleak moment he had ever cried in front of her. She remembered how helpless she had felt, how much she had hated Bruce for it.

She remembered Dick Grayson. And Tim Drake. And Barbara Gordon. And Selina Kyle, who now lay half-dead behind her. And Jim Gordon. Harvey Bullock. Lucius Fox. So many others. So many and so much had looked into the light blue eyes she glared into now and thought there was loyalty, love. Not that she doubted Bruce felt it. Not that she doubted he loved his family. Not that she doubted the Joker had really gotten to him the way Falcone had gotten to her.

Not that she doubted he had been unfolded by a madman and left to count the creases and corners alone.

No, she didn’t doubt the Batman’s history, but like she had told a madman earlier that week, she was different. She wasn’t the family. She wouldn’t sit there like she hadn’t held his family and loved them and lied to them like he did.

She wouldn’t sit there and let him ask her that question.

“With all due respect, and believe me, I have it by the buckets for you--” She preambled, “Go fuck yourself, Bruce.”

He nodded, probably knowing he deserved it. His eyes shined, but his mouth stayed calm. “So. It’s that bad.”

Gail reached under her seat for the bottle of whiskey hidden there, something Dick had told her about. She unscrewed the cap. “Yeah. It is.” She took a long drink, let it burn her out before she offered it to him. There was a smear of blood on the neck. “You want a drink?”

Bruce studied her for a long moment, looked like he might decline, but accepted the bottle from her. He sniffed the mouth. “This is the closest I’ve gotten to alcohol in twenty years.”

“You might need it for what’s ahead. Ginger ale won’t cut it.”

He sipped it, pulling a deep frown once he swallowed.
Gail grinned. “Lightweight.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!