The Island

by FabulaRasa

Summary

The Justice League goes on vacation to Bruce's South Pacific island. Interesting events ensue. I have called this the "orgy fic" in talking about it, but there is something of a plot and (of course) plenty of angst. There is a dominant pairing that frames the story, but since that's evident in the first chapter, I won't belabor it here.

I am marking all of this as explicit, because it gets extremely graphic, even though individual chapters may not have that much overt sexing. I am trying to keep proportion of angst to sexing within reasonable limits here.

Finally, my usual caveat: this work is completed, so no fears of a WIP languishing. It will be posted by chapter over the next few days.
He arrived on the Wednesday, when the island was dark and quiet. He had told Hal the 28th, which was Thursday, but he had wanted the time to unwind his jetlag and enjoy some solitude. The contractor was scheduled to fly into the airstrip Friday, take specs for a day, rough out some ideas for expanding the house, then fly out again that evening. That would still leave them Saturday and most of Sunday.

Them.

He stared into the bottom of his mostly-empty wineglass and considered the ridiculousness of that word, "them." There was no them. There was him, and there was Hal. Two people with massively underserviced libidos who had just happened to fuck each other's brains out for a period of four days a few weeks ago. While drugged to the gills, it should be pointed out.

But Christ, what fucking it had been.

He shut his eyes and tipped his head against the back of his chair, letting the ocean breeze from all the open doors wash over him, ruffling his hair. His hair, which he had not cut for the past three weeks, even though he had been due for a haircut when they had first come to the island.

And why's that, Bruce, he asked himself. Why don't we talk about that one, you pathetic embarrassment? Why don't you acknowledge to yourself that you didn't cut it because he had liked it, or seemed to—because he had dug his fingers into your hair while you were plowing his sweet ass?

He took another sip off his wine without opening his eyes, and considered the possibility that he was drunk.

"What did you expect," he said aloud. He hadn't spoken all day. The contractor—a pleasant older man, with an extensive knowledge of the architecture of the Indo-Saracenic Revival—had left last night, and Bruce had not. Like an idiot, Bruce had not. No, he had waited. Here. On a deserted island. For some tryst that was obviously not happening. Because he was pathetic.

"No, really," he continued, still aloud. Drunk was not a possibility but a certainty, as it turned out. "I'm curious to know what your reasoning was. I'm curious to know what the fuck else you expected. Did you really think—"

He broke off, and shut his eyes again.

He could call Clark, see if he'd like to come hang out on the island. But he might have plans with Diana. Well, bring her then. A pause while Clark covered the phone. He says for you to come too. Bruce imagined the arch of her brow. Really? Can't you get out of it? I don't know, Clark would say. He sounds strange. Maybe I should go check on him. Are you sure? He's probably fine. This is Bruce, after all. But if I say no, he'll think I don't want to hang out with him. I don't want to hurt his feelings.

So that was a no on Clark.

He grabbed his wine bottle by the neck along with his glass, and shuffled into the kitchen. There was about two fingers of wine left in the bottle. There were no lights on in the house. He should maybe turn some on. Because why, because that seemed mildly less pathetic than "alone in a darkened
house on a deserted island waiting for someone who obviously forgot he was going to meet you if he ever even intended to come at all?"

But no, see. The house wasn't dark. He switched on a single light in the kitchen. "That's better," he said. He looked at the light. "No it's not," he said, and switched it off.

He should walk to the airstrip and fly out tonight, except excellent work there, he was now too drunk to fly. "Well done," he said to his reflection in the kitchen window.

_Tell me what you expected_, said that insistent voice again.

"I don't know," he said.

_No, tell me. Did you expect he would walk in here and do what, kiss you? Pull you into his arms? Did you expect him to say, Bruce, I know we did nothing three weeks ago but fuck until our brains ran out our ears, and I realize we have about zero in common, not to mention the fact we actually can't stand each other, but darling, I've lived for this moment, come make love to me with your eyes?_"

_Did you expect he would really want the things you secretly want?_

_Did you expect he would really want you?_

"Shut up," he said to the voice. He was staring into the spotless sink. That was the funny thing about pretending to drink for a number of decades—you got out of practice when it came to actual drinking. And then you drank one bottle of wine (admittedly in a fairly short time) and you were hallucinating voices.

_No one can want you. You're not want-able. You are fucked-up beyond the capacity of human belief. Tell me what masochist would actually be interested in you._

"Shut up," he whispered again, tightening his grip on the sink.

_These are home truths, my friend. You've made a fool of yourself. He never intended to be here. Poor sad Bruce—he shared thirty-six hours of orgasm with another human being and now he thinks it means something, like some middle-school girl. Like some attention-starved dog at the park._

With a vicious oath, Bruce reached for the wine bottle and poured the remainder down the sink. He watched its purply residue swirl down the drain and disappear.

"Bruce," said the voice at the door, and Bruce didn't turn around.

"Lantern," he said casually. "What are you doing here?"

"I...you..."

Bruce turned and saw the tall figure silhouetted in the doorway, standing with his arms crossed. There was confusion in Jordan's voice, which was pleasant to hear. In another second he would be stuttering something about some invitation, and Bruce would look politely mystified, and then perhaps something like, _Oh. You thought I was serious?_"}

But then the clouds over the ocean shifted, and a shaft of moonlight illumined Jordan's face, with the bright blossom of bruise across his cheekbone. There was worse than bruise, along his upper collar. "You're injured," Bruce said.

"It's fine," he said, but his voice was tight. "Just a bit of... trouble. I tried to get back sooner, I—"
And he took a step forward, but stopped. Bruce knew the way you moved when you were masking serious injury.

"Idiot," he said. "Sit down."

"Well," Hal said. "I'm not sure that I..." His arms weren't crossed. Bruce had been wrong. He was holding his hands to his side and trying to make it look like he wasn't. And now he had pulled his hand away, and was looking at his hand, and the sheen of dark wet was plainly visible, and Jesus Christ. In two steps Bruce was beside him, and then Hal was sliding down to the floor, Bruce's arms bracing him.

"Hal," he said roughly. "What the hell were you thinking, you need medical attention."

"No," he gasped. "It will be fine."

It was manifestly not fine, and Bruce began quick calculations. Hal had flown here, but could he fly out? Could Bruce get them both to his plane? Could they make it to Majuro? "You're an even bigger moron than I thought," Bruce said. "You used your last reserves of strength to fly yourself to a remote desert island in the South Pacific while hemorrhaging. Congratulations, you've just killed yourself."

"Well, it was bound to happen sometime," Hal said. "Just... you know, see if you can... bandage me up a little bit. Whatever you've got. It's all right, I just got clipped. I used my ring to seal the wound, it... it should be fine."

"Can you re-seal it?"

There was a faint green pulse, but then it died. "Guess not," Hal said. "Must be... weaker than I thought."

"Idiot," Bruce said, more angrily. There was spreading warmth on his legs, where Hal was leaning. Entry and exit wound, then, which was not good news.

"Wasn't gonna miss this," Hal said, with a grin in the corner of his mouth. "A deserted island with the guy of my dreams? Like I was not gonna show for that."

"The guy of your dreams?"

"Oversold it, huh. Should have just said hot-as-fuck billionaire stud and left it at that." He coughed, and Bruce tried to hoist him, get his arm looped about Bruce's shoulder for the long walk to the airstrip. But it was no good, he was going to have to try to slow that bleeding before they went anywhere, or Hal wasn't going to make it out the front door, much less the half-mile to the airstrip and the two and a half hours to the hospital on Majuro.

"Hey," Hal said, slurring as Bruce worked. Bruce had him stretched on his side on the kitchen floor, every light trained on him. "So it appears I might have fucked up."

"You think?" He concentrated only on the movement of his hands, willing them faster, their touch surer. Thank God for the fully stocked medical supplies on the island. He remembered smiling when he had opened the closet where Alfred had stored everything. This is a playboy's retreat, not a vigilante's lair, he had said at the time. A bit overkill, since a jellyfish sting is the worst injury this place is likely to see.

Not considering the crowd you run with, sir, was all Alfred had said.
He was grateful now, and lesson learned. He pulled out the industrial wrapping tape and started in on Hal's legs, winding the tape around them, binding him. "Hey," Hal said, raising his bleary head. "What... what are you... stop that."

"Fireman's carry. Only way I'm getting you to the plane. Easiest if I strap you up."

"This is getting... kinkier by the minute."

"Okay, let's go. This is going to hurt."

"You and the foreplay."

Bruce was as careful in hoisting him as he could be, but he caught the strangled, choking breath in Hal's throat, and knew he was biting back the groan. About halfway to the airstrip he felt the shift in Hal's body that told him Hal had finally passed out. He strapped him in the plane, and Hal roused briefly, eyelids fluttering open, then shut. The lashes were too long, for a man's face. *Too pretty*, had been Bruce's thought on first meeting him.

"Sorry," Hal whispered. He was trying to do something with his hand, reach for Bruce, maybe, so Bruce grabbed the hand and squeezed it, hard, but Hal had passed out again.

Bruce got them in the air and flew like demons were on his tail, and didn't look over once to see if Hal was still breathing; he didn't want to know the probable truth before he had to.

"No," Bruce said brusquely.

"Come on," Clark tried again. "It's a really good idea."

"It's a terrible idea, is what it is."

"You know that's not so. You know what I think? I think you're just upset you didn't think of it yourself." That got him a lifted head from the electron microscope, and an incredulous glare. And then the head resettled over the eyepiece.

"Yes, Clark, that's my problem. I'm mad I didn't think of it myself."

"Look," Clark said, shifting tactics. "You didn't want to expand the League in the first place, because of the risk of messing with our team dynamics."

"That wasn't why."

"You said that was why."

"Did I?" The head lifted again, squinted at him, then re-submerged. "Well, what I meant was, I didn't want the risk of messing with other people. New names to learn."

"Very mature. My point is, I am conceding that you may have been right."

A snort. "That will be on your tombstone."

"My point is," Clark said more loudly, and Nightwing over at the consoles was glancing at them now, "my point is, this is a way we can help our team dynamics. We will work better together as a team, if we do this."

Bruce was staring at him now. "A team vacation. This is really what you think is a good idea."
"I do. And you will too."

"And this sounds fun to you. Going on vacation with the people you work with."

"Not so much fun as. . . useful."

"Useful. A root canal, that's useful. Enemas are useful. What you are describing is just gratuitous torture."

"Bruce," he said, and he tried his most earnest gaze. "Please. This is important to me. I think it can be important to all of us." Bruce was still just looking at him. "And I will take care of all Watchtower repairs for the next six months."

The eyes narrowed. "Keep talking."

"Seven months."

"I'm listening."

"Eight—come on."

Bruce crossed his arms. "Nine months, and no trust games or team-building exercises or any of that other mindless shit. You will not utter the words Bruce, come join us or Bruce, put that book away, or Bruce, come play water volleyball with us. I will not rub lotion on anyone's back, I will not grill hot dogs on the beach, I will not eat hot dogs on the beach, I will not share stories about my high school girlfriend. In fact, it's probably best if you don't address me at all. I will speak to no one. Any questions?"

"Wow. A lot, yeah. Did you have a high school girlfriend?"

"Clark. . ."

He grinned. "Water volleyball?"

"It was a metaphor."

"Metaphorical volleyball?"

"Hand me that file. And stop grinning like a jackass. You're just happy because you probably won a lame bet with Diana about whether you could make me go or not."

He suppressed his grin. "It's not lame, per se."

"Any bet under five hundred is lame."

"Well, this was a little less than that."

"Fifty?"

"Twenty."

Bruce shook his head. "Remind me to raise your salary."

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Dinah Lance stepped off the plane onto the thin strip of tarmac and lowered her shades. The South Pacific sun gilded the tops of the palms; they had arrived just at sunset. The others were still
staggering off the plane, yawning, stretching. "Oh, wow," she said. "Bruce. Seriously, this is beautiful. This whole island is yours?"

"It is."

Behind her, Oliver Queen made a whuffing noise. "It's not really an island," he said. "More of an atoll. I was thinking about getting one."

She rolled her eyes and hoisted her bag over her shoulder. "No, seriously," Oliver continued. "Maybe you could help me look for one."

"Talk about remote," Barry was saying, as he emerged. "This is amazing. Like Gilligan's Island. A TV show," he said, to Bruce's puzzled glance. "Never mind."

"The house is around the other side of the island," Bruce said. "Follow that path."

Zatanna was muttering something to her luggage, levitating it behind her. Clark and Diana emerged from the plane, Clark looking positively refreshed. "I have no idea why you took the plane," Bruce said in irritation. "There was no reason for you to. Diana either."

"Team bonding," he replied with a smile. "There's nothing like a seventeen-hour flight to really pull us together. It's too bad about Vic and Shazam, though."

"No it isn't. I don't see why they should get out of it, if I couldn't."

"You know why you can't. And you're going into this weekend with a bad attitude. You won't have a good time with an attitude like that."

"Clark, this is not going to be a good time, as I think I've pointed out before. Where the hell is Lantern?"

Diana was shaking out her hair, so dark it shimmered almost bluish, in the strong evening sun. "Still asleep, I believe. In the back of the plane."

"For God's sake," Bruce muttered. "Why couldn't he have had an excuse, too? If I had seriously thought Lantern was going to come, I never would have agreed to this."

"Bruce," Clark said. "The point is team bonding. If you and Hal are at each other's throats all weekend, no one is going to have a good time."

"For the last time, Clark, no one is going to have a good time."

"Look," Diana said, pointing to a stand of trees. A flock of birds of paradise erupted, a riot of reds and golds and greens, squawking and cawing. "Gorgeous," she said. "I can almost imagine myself home on Themyscira. Thank you for this," and she leaned over and kissed Bruce's cheek. "Stop baiting him, Kal."

They headed off down the path together, and Bruce watched them go. Clark wouldn't put his hand on Diana's waist, not in front of everybody, but she was leaning back to hear something he was saying, and laughing. Probably saying something about him. He sighed and climbed back up the stairs into the cabin.

"Lantern," he said. The six-foot slug in the back of the plane didn't even shift. "For God's sake," he sighed again. He walked back and kicked his ankle. "Get the hell off my plane. If I have to be conscious for this, so do you."
Jordan stretched and yawned, regarding Bruce under half-closed eyes. "Is this over yet?"

"It's barely begun. You will get off this plane and paste some enthusiasm on your face and give Clark some support, or I'll paste it on there for you."

"I'd like to see you try," he said lazily.

"You're a delusional twelve-year-old. Get off my plane."

Moving slowly, Jordan grabbed his jacket and stretched some more. Of course it was a douchebag leather flight jacket. "Fifty bucks for you to fire this baby back up and fly us out of here," he said.

"For fifteen I'd dump your ass in the ocean. Come on," and he tossed Jordan's bag at his face, which he caught easily. Though he did, of course, consider it, as he closed up the plane after Jordan had finally set off at a lazy saunter for the house. He could just fly out of here, but then there would be Clark to face. Clark would probably fly off after him, grab the plane and carry it back here. Worse, he would give him his best *I'm disappointed in you* puppy-dog stare for the whole weekend, and Bruce might actually have to pretend to be nice in order to make up for it. If only he had an obscure medical condition and could contrive to pass out. Something to make Clark feel guilty.

"Hey Wayne," Jordan was calling from the path. He was staring at a small sand crater. "Your island has a hole in it."

"Christ give me strength," Bruce muttered, shouldering his own bag.
"Never have I ever," Dinah began, with a wicked smile, to general groans. They were sprawled on the floor, most of them: Oliver next to Dinah, of course, Barry cross-legged against the sofa, Clark, Diana, and Hal in a half-hearted game of Kings on the floor next to the window. Zatanna sat on Dinah's other side, pouring her another beer. Bruce, from his chair on the opposite side of the room, had an excellent view of everyone else, and had amused himself most of the day watching them. There had been plenty of opportunity, of course, because of the rain: a steady pounding gray drizzle which had begun in the early dawn hours and carried on through most of the day.

"You planned this," Clark said miserably.

"Yes, Clark, I now control the weather."

"But you knew it was going to rain when you agreed to this particular weekend."

He had looked up from his tablet. "This is the South Pacific. It rains every other day. You think I wanted it to rain? So I could have all of them stuck in the house with me? You have revealed my evil plot."

Clark had sighed and stared out the window, hands on his hips. Even money said he was calculating if he could whip up enough wind force to blow the line of storms away from the island, versus the risk of typhoon to neighboring land mass. "Tell you what," Bruce said, softening his tone of voice. "Why don't we do this. There's no point in torturing everybody; these storms are going to last for days. Why don't we send everyone home, and you, me, and Diana can relax and enjoy ourselves."

Clark crossed his arms. "That's not the point. The point is for you to bond with your team."

"My team," Bruce snorted. "We work together. Outside of work, the only people I can stand to be around are you and Diana."

"You like Barry."

"He's all right."

"And Zatanna," Clark said shrewdly—not so shrewdly, as far as Bruce was concerned.

"She is proving a valuable addition to the team," he said.

"As are Oliver and Dinah."

"Dinah I'll grant you. Her combat skills are almost as good as mine."

"You don't like Oliver? You've known Oliver since you were ten!"

"Plenty of time to form my opinion of him. And you're wrong if you think he's committed to the League. He's committed to getting into Dinah's pants. Beyond that, Oliver Queen's commitment is to Oliver Queen. And please, if you're about to mention Hal Jordan, keep in mind I just finished my breakfast, such as it is."

"I've seen the two of you work like a well-oiled machine, out in the field."

"I didn't say he wasn't good at what he does. I'm saying every time he opens his mouth, I want to stab myself with something."
Clark crossed his arms, silhouetted against the gray water-streaked window of Bruce's room. A heavy gust of wind rattled the pane and bent the tops of the palms behind him. His glower was as stern as the weather. "You, my friend, are this close to being forced into a trust game. I think you and Lantern could benefit from some trust work together."

"I agree. There's a good-size cliff on the southwest side of the island, we can practice trust falls from there."

"You can't fly."

"Whoops."

Clark had picked a pillow off his bed and aimed it at him. "Drinking games. Tonight."

"Never," Bruce said, and Clark smiled.

"If you insist. Though I'm more of a Beer Pong man myself."

"You know very well I meant—" But Clark was already out the door, headed back to the common room. Leaving his door open, of course. Bruce had had to get up to shut it. Which he did, loudly. Now, watching Dinah corral them all closer for her ridiculous game, he glared at Clark, knowing full well who had put her up to it. Clark wore only an expression of studied innocence. "Never have I ever," she repeated, trailing off with a look of mischievous contemplation. Clark was whispering something to Diana—probably explaining the rules to her. Something in the small intimacy of the gesture made Bruce wonder—not for the first time—what they must look like having sex. Normally he had no trouble squashing the image; his fierce sex drive and fiercer imagination were well controlled at all times. But for some reason, tonight—perhaps because of the change of venue, perhaps because of the beers he had been sipping this evening—the images were especially vivid, especially hard to ignore. Their fucking would be something to see, of that he was certain.

"Bruce has to play too," Zatanna announced, and that was probably more of Clark's machination there, but Bruce closed the book with a sigh, though he didn't move any closer. The room was a puddle of warm lamplight as a fresh round of storms battered the glass doors, darkening the island even more than the impending dusk.

"All right," Dinah said. "I'm the new kid here, and I need to get to know everybody, and if memory serves, there's no better way to do that than a good old-fashioned round of I Never. So. I'll run the game, unless someone wants to stage a coup. Never have I ever kissed Superman," she declared. Diana dutifully drank, and then Barry did too—to general shrieks.

"What? Are we—oh for God's sake, I was thirsty!" he said. "I wasn't paying attention! I didn't know we'd started!"

"Pay attention, Flash," Dinah reprimanded. "All right. Never have I ever kissed Wonder Woman." Clark drank, of course. He saw Clark's eyes skitter to him, but Bruce stayed still and did not drink. His life was no one else's business.

"Congratulations," Jordan said, still sprawled full-length on the floor. "You've exposed the world's most monogamous couple."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Dinah said.

"It's not bad, just boring."
"Monogamy is boring?"

"Monogamy is unnatural."

"You think you can do better?"

"I know I can. Consider this your coup."

"I get one last question," she said, "and then it's all yours, big man. Never have I ever kissed Batman." This with a small arch of her brow in his direction, and if he didn't know better, he would think she was angling for confirmation of something she already suspected.

Diana drank, in a suddenly still room, like she had never heard of the concept of lying. He caught the tightening of Clark's jaw, but it was water under the bridge, it was long before the two of them, and Clark was trying to turn his tight jaw into a tight little smile to show he was fine. Things like that either made you want to punch Clark in the face or make him your best friend for life, and most days it was both.

There was a twitch of movement at the other end of the circle, and—dear God, no. But he did. He did, all right. Oliver drank. Bruce gave him a murderous look, but Ollie wasn't even looking in his direction. For fuck's sake.

"We were really young," he was saying, laughing. Like it was a joke. Bruce's grip on his book became deadly, white-knuckled, and he knew Clark at least could track his sudden spike of heartrate. His sexual history—his orientation, for that matter—on display for the amusement of the League, the careful walls of his privacy crumbling around him, and he had never felt more naked—more enraged—in his life. Clark's eyes on him were anxious. But Lantern—

Lantern was rolling on the floor, laughing, holding his sides like the giant loon he was. "Oh my God," he was gasping. "I knew it, I fucking knew it. Those movies about boarding school are all completely fucking true, aren't they. Oh man, that is fucking perfect. So Bats, are you like 100 percent bi, or was that a lesbian-until-graduation sort of deal, or—"

"Shut up, Jordan," he snarled. He was going to wring Oliver's neck. "Stop taking it out on the world that Barry is never going to fuck you."

If he had thought the room was quiet before, that was nothing to its stillness now. The only sound was Clark's whispered "Bruce," in that tone that told Bruce he had crossed a line, but he didn't care.

"You're a pissy little bitch when you get outed, aren't you?" Jordan had propped his head up now, and was looking at him. "What are you going to do now, stomp out of the room? Go sulk somewhere until everybody feels sorry for you?"

Stomping out had been exactly his plan, but of course he couldn't do it now. He tossed his book aside. He narrowed his eyes at Jordan.

"Let's play," he said.
Hal assumed the reins of the game, after that. He dispensed with the "I Never" and went straight for "Truth or Dare"—and what was more, he announced there would be no cheating.

"Everyone always says no cheating," Zatanna pointed out.

"But not everyone can enforce it," he said. "Diana, would you do the honors?" And with a smirk she had pulled out her lasso.

"Sorry I'm late," came Arthur's voice from the side door. A gust of wind and rain blew in with him, tousling the blond mane even further. "There was a situation near the Trench I couldn't leave. I tried to get here yesterday. Did I miss anything?"

"Sit down, your majesty, and prepare to get owned," Jordan said. "Here is how it's going to go down, if you'll pardon the expression. This bottle—" and he picked up one of Dinah's empty beers—"will point to the person whose turn it is. I'm the one who spins, and no, I will not be cheating. When it's your turn, you can choose truth, or you can choose a dare. If you choose truth, you get the lasso. Questions will be as humiliating as possible; dares will be even more so. Choose wisely. Any questions?"

"So what about when it's your turn?" Barry asked.

"Hal's questions will be decided by committee," Clark said. "Diana, Bruce and I will be the committee. Something you might want to keep in mind."

"So, maybe I missed a lot," Arthur said, settling in with a beer and pushing his hair off his face. He was still wet, which granted Arthur was a lot of the time.

"We need a neutral spinner," Barry said. "I'll spin."

"Why you?" Jordan said, with evident irritation.

"Because everybody likes me, and no one likes you."

They all stared at mild-mannered Barry, who glanced down. "Shit," he said, flinching back from where Diana's lasso was touching his thigh. Bruce's laugh wasn't loud, but it was long, and Jordan's glare over at him vicious.

"Spin then, Mr. Congeniality," he said, and Barry gave the bottle a whirl. It landed on Clark. "Truth, I guess," he sighed. With a smile Diana looped the lasso about him.

"True or false, your dick is bigger than anyone else's in this room," Jordan said, because evidently high school gym class was his preferred model of interaction.

Clark looked flustered. "I... don't know," he said. "I haven't seen every man in this room naked. What sort of question is that?"

"All right, re-phrase. Who have you seen naked, in this room?"

"Diana and Bruce."

"And between you and Bruce—"
"That was your question," Dinah cut in. "You asked him who he'd seen naked, and he told you. You wasted your question, dumb-ass."

"Fine, spin."

Barry gave the bottle another turn. It landed on Zatanna. "Dare," she said with a slow smile. Jordan echoed it.

"Use a spell to remove one article of clothing from one person in this room," he said. "Try not to be boring."

"If you insist," she said. "Ekat eht trihs ffo Ecurb." Bruce's T-shirt was tugged as if by invisible, inexorable hands over his head, and he had no choice but to lift his arms. The shirt landed in a puddle on the floor. He felt Zatanna's appreciative gaze. He also felt himself hardening beneath it, and wished he hadn't tossed aside his book quite so soon.

Oliver's turn next, and he chose truth. "Or I could just take off my shirt," he said, and Dinah said, "Feel free." He gave her a startled look that made it clear he wasn't accustomed to being flirted back at, and then the golden loop expertly encircled his wrist. "It's not like I was going to lie," he said.

Jordan crossed his arms and took his time. It was like watching a train wreck in slow unavoidable motion. "Tell us about the time you and Bruce kissed," he said. The tightness was back in Bruce's chest, but he focused all his mental energy on the pleasing sound Jordan's intestines would make when he sliced through them with the sharpest knife in the kitchen. A wet, slithering sound, and then a splat on the tile floor beneath him.

"We kissed a lot," Oliver was saying, and there was that tightness to the muscles of his face that meant he was trying to resist the lasso's pull. That was only going to end up causing him pain. "We fucked a lot. It was when we were at Groton together. We were never roommates, because I was a year older, but I bribed his roomie when I had to, or we would just fuck in the lacrosse sheds. I was pretty in love with him, but it was basically just sex for Bruce. It was some goddamn awesome sex, though."

Diana twitched the lasso back before he said any more. The room was quiet. "We're done with this game," Bruce said.

"I'm sorry," Oliver mumbled.

"You have nothing to apologize for."

"You're welcome to run away at any time, Bats." The smirk on Jordan's face was unrepentant, and Bruce itched to smack it.

"Spin the goddamn bottle," he said, through gritted teeth. Fortunately the next up was Arthur, who chose Truth, and had to answer ridiculous questions about underwater sex. It was almost like Jordan had never had sex in a pool before. After Arthur came Dinah, who chose Dare.

"It appears the women here have more stones than the guys," Jordan said.

"Or that they have less patience for your ridiculously intrusive questions," Bruce pointed out.

"Fine. Dinah, let's have a little tongue action. With the lady of your choice."

Dinah took another swig off her beer. "Tongue action," she said. "You're going to have to be more specific." Oliver's swallow was audible, at that.
"Ah. I see your point. Mouth on mouth only, for now."

"Fine by me." And she pulled Zatanna over, tilted her face up, and began a kiss that went on for at least four minutes and drained most of the oxygen out of the room. Bruce was reasonably sure his was not the only pair of uncomfortably tight pants in the circle. Every male was watching with drool practically dribbling from the side of his mouth. Not that Diana was unappreciative, either. Bruce caught her eye, and the hint of smile in the corner of her mouth. As much as she enjoyed sex with men, he knew where her true preference lay—if she even thought in those terms—and he suspected Clark did too. You couldn't grow up where she had, and how she had, and find the straight world a comfortable fit, after that.

The next spin of the bottle was squarely on Bruce. He met Jordan's eyes with a level stare. "Truth," he said. He didn't flinch at the lasso, which Diana pulled tighter than she needed to.

"This question has two parts," Jordan said. "And a subset of each question. Enough of this beginner's level shit. Do you accept that, or do you opt for Dare?"

"I accept your terms."

"Then who is the most beautiful woman in this room?"

"Diana," he said.

"But which woman in this room would you most like to fuck?"

"Dinah," he said, though he had opened his mouth to say Zatanna, and damn. Damn the man.

"Good," Jordan was saying. As soon as his hand was free of this lasso, he was going to punch Jordan in the mouth, right on those smirking lips. "And who is the most beautiful man?"

"Clark."

"Granted. But which man would you most like to fuck?"

"You," he choked out, practically gagging on his tongue. Jordan gave a lazy smile. "Ditto, Bats," and he looked to Barry for the next spin.

"I loathe and despise you," Bruce said, enunciating carefully, with the lasso still on his wrist. Jordan's smile was still lazy.

"Like I said—ditto. Come on, Barry, next spin."

The lasso was tugged off his wrist, and the bottle pointed to Diana. "Hmm," Jordan said. "Can the lasso affect you?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "In theory, it is possible, if wielded by someone else. Though Amazons do not lie, so it does not matter."

"Bullshit. Anyone can say what they think is the truth, but they might not be aware of the unconscious truth. Tell you what, toss the lasso here and I'll give it a try."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "No."

"Fine, princess, choose someone else to wield it then."

She tossed the golden coil at Bruce. He wondered if anyone else in the room knew what she had just
done, consenting to be bound by a man. For those few seconds, she would be powerless. He acknowledged her trust with a level gaze, and reached across the circle to loop the rope gently around both wrists. He didn't have her skill with the lasso, and wouldn't pretend he did. "I'm ready," she said. "Do your worst."

"Don't worry, princess, this is an easy one. Best kisser: Clark or Bruce?"

She appeared to be considering. "That would depend on how soon you wished to achieve climax."

"Better and better," Jordan said. "Explain."

"They are both excellent kissers. But Kal's kissing is better if you have a long time in front of you, and you want a long slow build. His kisses progress, if you see what I mean, in a most tantalizing fashion. His slow loss of control is delicious. Bruce's kissing is better if you want your pleasure soon, and hard. It's like nothing I've ever felt. I don't know how to describe it except to say that his kissing can make you so wet so fast, it is difficult to believe. You would almost think you could climax from that alone."

"Pretty sure I just did," Jordan said. "All right, fair enough. Next up."

"Oh, wait, I almost forgot." Arthur reached into a pocket and pulled out a small leather bag, holding it up. "I brought an offering, if anyone's interested."

A silence fell. "Dude, please tell me you are not offering illegal substances to the Justice League," Oliver finally said. "Because I am totally down with that, but I'm pretty sure most of the other stiffs in here—"

"What? Tsing-hahth is not illegal, what do you mean?" Arthur looked genuinely offended. "This is—for heaven's sake, it's not anything like that. Small children enjoy tsing-hahth, don't be ridiculous. It's just a plant. I know you don't have it on the surface world, but I thought surely you must have read about it. We harvest it in Atlantis. You chew the leaves, which have a very mild, sweet flavor. It's perfectly harmless." He was spreading the contents of the bag on top of a hassock: a few bunches of dried, innocuous-looking leaf.

Bruce leaned forward and plucked a small amount, rubbing it in his fingers. Barry did the same, sniffing his fingers and frowning. "Tsing. . .hahth?" Bruce said.

"Well, that's the best I can render it, anyway. It's Atlantean, so the language isn't designed for air-breathers, but that's close enough. Go on, try some, it's excellent. An entire bushel of tsing-hahth is less intoxicating than a single beer, I promise."

Diana shrugged and inserted a leaf in her mouth, chewing thoughtfully. She smiled. "You are correct, this is very pleasant. A kind offering, Arthur, thank you." The leather bag went around, everyone dipping at least a little—except Jordan, Bruce noted, who silently passed the bag on to Dinah.

"Nice," Barry said, nodding. "All right, next spin, here we go." But the spin went awry, and skittered off a nearby hassock, pointing at nowhere. Jordan sighed. "Nice one, Bar. High school All Star infielder, really?"

"It's spinning a bottle, what the hell does that have to do with baseball?"

"You never played spin-the-bottle after a big game with the team, just you and your bros, getting all relaxed and shirtless together?"
"Hal. You have got to stop acquiring ninety percent of your ideas about what goes on in the world from porn. I'll spin again."

"No!" Jordan stopped him with a hand on his wrist. "You can't do that, it's against the rules."

"What rules?"

"Come on, everybody knows this rule. If the bottle points at no one, everybody has to remove one article of clothing."

Barry was looking at him dubiously. "I'm not at all sure that's a genuine rule."

"What are you talking about, of course it is. Shirts or pants, come on, let's go people."

"Well... okay, I guess," Clark said, and dutifully tugged off his shirt. Bruce enjoyed watching the entire room subtly check out Clark's chest — or not so subtly, in some cases. There were two kinds of people in the world, he had found: those who thought Superman was beautiful, and liars.

The guys opted for removing their shirts, of course, and Diana, Zatanna, and Dinah slipped off their jeans. "Turquoise hearts, nice," Jordan said, with a grin at Dinah's crotch. The smack on the back of his head was loud enough to echo off the terrazzo floor.

"Shut up and play," she said.

"Can't," he answered. "We can't resume play until everyone has followed the rules. Bruce is still wearing his pants."

Dinah arched a brow in his direction. "Bruce? Come on, everyone else did."

"Everyone else didn't already lose a shirt."

Barry was leaning back against the sofa now, and rolled his head toward Bruce. "Aw, c'mon," he said. "Be a good sport."

"I'm not opposed, in principle," Bruce said. "It's just that... I'm on vacation."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Oh," Clark said, because obviously he had just used a little illicit x-ray vision, and wasn't that annoying. "Well... maybe we should give Bruce a pass on this one."

"What? Why?" Jordan said indignantly. "No special treatment for Bats. Drop trou, or you're out of the game."

"Fine," he said, and stood. He slipped out of his loose-fitting pants. He wouldn't have minded, truly he wouldn't have, if he had just put on underwear today. But he was on vacation. Why would he have bothered with underwear? He sat down with as much dignity as he could scrape together. There was a substantial silence.

And then Oliver started laughing. Started laughing and was clearly not going to stop. "I think this is the happiest day of my life," he said. "I am going to remember this one forever. The day Bruce was the only one naked in Truth or Dare."

"For God's sake," Bruce sighed. The rest of the room was quiet, and a little wide-eyed. No one seemed to be looking anywhere but at him. And no one was looking at his chest.
"Do you... want a towel to sit on?" Barry asked.

"It's my goddamn house. I will sit naked on the sofa if I want to." This just sent Oliver into fresh gales of guffawing. In another second Bruce was going to pick up that bottle and aim it at his head.

"How is he?" Clark's voice was quiet, but it was still undeniably a shade or two louder than a human voice. Not louder, just... more resonant. You could hear its rich timbre more in this small room, with its orange plastic chairs and linoleum floor. It had a window that looked out on the lagoon. Everything was very hospital-like, just on a smaller scale. There was even a vending machine in the corner of the room.

"Better," Bruce said. "I had a time explaining what sort of weapon it could have been that literally burned through his internal organs like that. The surgeon's not an idiot, she's got to know there aren't any weapons on this planet that could do that."

"But he's out of surgery?"

"Yeah, and conscious a little. Off and on." He was still looking out at the lagoon, his hands in his pockets.

"I notice how you're not saying he's going to be all right."

Bruce took a sip of the metallic-tasting coffee. They worked hard to get all the hospital details right. There was a framed copy of the official seal of the Marshall Islands, on the wall next to him. Accomplishment Through Joint Effort, it read. One of the orderlies had translated it for him, when he had gotten tired of staring at it and wondering what it said. Well, this coffee was certainly some sort of accomplishment.

"The blood flow to his right side was obstructed for about forty-five minutes," he said. "The flight here took a long time. Time he didn't have. There is significant nerve damage to his right arm and his upper right leg."

Clark was silent. "If I had been here, I could have gotten him there," he said. "I should have been here. I should have been in communicator range."

"Yes you should have," Bruce said viciously. He tossed the styrofoam cup at a wastebasket. "But you weren't. You were off-world playing your favorite party game, intergalactic policeman. Which no one asked you to do, but Superman just likes to help out, I guess. He's a helpful guy." He turned back to the lagoon.

"Is he in pain," Clark asked, after a long silence, and Bruce almost felt remorse at how lacerated that beautiful voice sounded. But right now he could give a fuck about Clark and his beautiful voice.

"Yes," he said tersely.

"Will he... is there any possibility of improvement in..."

"They don't know. That sort of thing is impossible to tell. They want to transfer him to the Air Force Hospital on Okinawa."

"I think... surely the Watchtower's a better option, for Hal."

Bruce shut his eyes. He didn't remember sleeping. He didn't remember waking. He didn't remember anything beyond the orange plastic chairs. "Yes," he agreed. "But in truth I'm not sure how to get
him there. Getting him to a zeta tube is problematic at best. And we would need another Lantern to __"

"Let me take care of it. I can do that much. I'll figure something out."

"All right," Bruce said. He kept looking at the lagoon. Beyond the little waiting room he could hear the noise of the shift change. "I should go," he said. He headed to the door, and paused. "It's not your fault," he said. "I... apologize, for what I said."

"It's fine," Clark said. "Don't worry about it. I just don't understand, is all. If he was wounded, why did he fly to the island? Why was he headed to a rock in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, instead of somewhere he could get help?"

Bruce tapped his finger on the doorframe. "I should get back," he said, and he headed to Hal's room without answering Clark's question, or looking at him again.
To say the game degenerated from there was something of an understatement. It was inevitable the bottle would go awry again, and soon Bruce was not the only one sitting around without a stitch on. It was remarkable how little he cared. There was a certain freeing aspect to it, he had to admit.

"Dare," he said, when the bottle pointed to him again. Jordan was stretched full-length on the floor now, cock as lazy as he, flopped over on his belly. Quite a bit thicker than he would have thought, to tell the truth.

"Getting bold, aren't you, Bats."

"Easy, when there's nothing to be frightened of."

Barry laughed, and Jordan grimaced at him. "Whose side are you on, anyway. Fine, Spooky, enough of this chicken shit. Public orgasm. Your jizz, right here, right now. A little liquid protein donation. Oh, what's the matter? That a little too rich for your blood? Or are you afraid you won't be able to get it up?"

Seven pairs of curious eyes were watching him. "Not a problem," he said.

"You're allowed an assistant," Jordan offered. "You know, so we don't have to spend the rest of the evening watching you beat the Bat-meat into submission. Someone is allowed to lend you a hand, so to speak. The floor is open to volunteers. Or you could pick someone."

The room was silent, and Barry reached for the bottle. "There should be a spin for that," he said.

"Rule-follower. Don't you want to see who he'd pick?"

"He wouldn't pick anyone. He would just. . ." The bottle rested squarely at Clark. Bruce flushed.

"Don't be ridiculous. No one has to do anything. I don't need help. What I need is a stiff drink, and to forget this whole ridiculous game ever—"

"You don't have to do this," Bruce said, in a voice that was just for him.

"What if I wanted to," he answered, as quietly.

Clark's hand on his cock—and wasn't that just the phrase he never thought would exist in his brain or any part of the universe, Clark's hand on his cock—was firm and warm. Clark's eyes were questioning. Bruce brushed his hand against the side of Clark's face, where he knelt. "Let's see some action," Jordan said, a flicker of menace in his voice.

It wasn't the most expert hand job of his life, but it was the most interesting. Clark pumped him with more enthusiasm than skill, but those hands were just a shade defter than human hands, just a shade faster. Bruce was full hard and breathing fast almost before thirty seconds had gone by. He glanced
up and saw Zatanna's dark eyes watching them intently, her mouth slightly open. And Dinah. . .
Ollie's hand was rubbing slowly on Dinah's abdomen, then dipping lower, lower. . . his finger was
circling her clit now, and she was watching him—timing her release to his, he could tell.

"Clark," he panted, letting his head fall back against the cushions.

"Hands only," Jordan said harshly. Like he could read Bruce's mind, and knew what he really
wanted.

Bruce gripped the pillows. He was going to come in front of all these people, they were all going to
watch him. . . he should care, why couldn't he care. Clark's hand, it was doing things to him. . .

There was a slight hitch in movement, and then it carried on as before. Bruce opened his eyes and
saw that Clark's left hand was jacking him now, just as smoothly. Clark's right was. . . holy hell, he
was jacking himself as he worked Bruce. Bruce kept his eyes open, and they watched each other. "Is
this okay," Clark whispered.

"Fuck yes," Bruce managed. And then—too soon, too soon—he felt the coil in his belly, in his balls.
With a shuddering grunt, he spattered Clark's hand and his own chest. He could feel the motion of
Clark's right hand speed up. And Diana. . . in his blissed-out haze he saw her rubbing her own clit,
with more vigor than he would have thought comfortable, but that was Amazons for you. . . was
everyone in the room getting off to this? Pretty much, it appeared. Everyone except Jordan, who was
still stretched on the floor, watching them intently.

Clark groaned, rested his head on Bruce's knee, and then Bruce felt a hot splatter of wet on his leg. It
figured that Clark's cum would run about ten degrees hotter than human ejaculate. This was probably
not the time to point that out.

"Congratulations," Jordan was drawling. "Looks like you found everyone's secret kink: Supes and
Bats getting it on. Who isn't hard for that one, huh?"

Diana crawled over to Clark and tipped his mouth into hers. They kissed messily, hungrily. Bruce
stroked her hair while they kissed. "Care to make it a threesome?" Jordan asked.

"Better idea," Bruce said. His shirt was somewhere on the floor, and he used it to wipe himself up as
best he could. Then he reached for the bottle still sitting in the middle of their circle, and gave it a
quarter-spin with his hand on it, only releasing it when it was pointing directly at Jordan.

"That's cheating," he pointed out.

"So is persuading your best friend, the one with enough speed force and motion control to vibrate
through walls, to somehow make sure the bottle never lands on you."

"Hey," Barry protested weakly. "He . . . That's not exactly how it. . . I didn't really control . . ."

"Those are some pretty wild accusations everybody's favorite Sith Lord is throwing around there.
Okay, fine, do your worst. I'll even let you pick for me. Truth or dare, I'm good either way."

Bruce sat back, arms crossed, and narrowed his eyes to ice-flints. He glanced at Diana, at Clark.
They were smiling wickedly, and looking at him. He read the same thought in their eyes.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "we were thinking something a little different. We were thinking. . .
punishment."
The morning after the infamous game, Bruce rose early to find the rain dissipated, but not gone. The world was still gray, but the rain had become a fine mist that came and went. He decided to take a run around the island's perimeter, a little more than six miles. No serious hills or challenging terrain, but it would have to do.

He kept to the beach for his run, aiming for the hard-packed sand. He doubled back over one area to give himself more mileage, but eventually followed the shoreline back to the house. The house itself rested on a bluff of sorts, from which stairs led a winding track through heavy foliage down to the surf. The bottom of the stairs was not visible from the house, and there Lantern reclined, watching him, sipping at a bottle of orange juice.

"Even on vacation, huh?" He squinted up at him.

Bruce snorted. The man's lack of discipline was annoying at all times, but doubly so today. "Well, at least you get to feel more self-righteous than everybody else for the rest of the day. Oh wait, that's every day. Never mind. Anyway, thought you might be thirsty."

And he handed up the other bottle he had with him—one of Bruce's more expensive lagers. Not exactly what he wanted first thing after a run, but Jordan wasn't wrong, he was thirsty, so he twisted off the top and took a few swigs. He sat down on the step beside him, and looked out at the thin gray line of surf, blending with the gray of the sky. "Fun times last night," Jordan observed.

Bruce grunted, and continued to contemplate the water. "I'm thinking we ought to interrogate Arthur a little more closely about that tsing-whats-it and its exact ingredients," Jordan continued. "He has a lot to answer for."

"You didn't seem to be having a bad time."

Hal snorted into his orange juice. "Not by half, I'll give you that. Say."

"Just for the sake of wondering, that was you, right? At the end there? Things are kind of a blur, to be honest."

"That was me."

Jordan nodded, went back to his OJ. The images flashed in his mind: Hal naked and tied to the grand piano with Diana's lasso, head thrown back, groaning. Arching and writhing, cock slick with the juices of eight mouths. God, somebody finish me, please. Bruce gave him a narrow glance. "It wasn't Arthur's tsing-hahth that was the problem," he said. "For one thing, that ridiculous game was well underway before Arthur even showed up. For another, you never touched any."

The small smile disappeared from Jordan's face. "And how would you know that?"

"Because observing is what I do. The mental component of training is more important than the physical component, which you would know if you had ever attempted either. And I observed that you didn't drink any alcohol last night, or touch the tsing-hahth, and I notice that you bring me a beer this morning but not one for yourself."

Jordan made no response, and Bruce didn't look for one. There was another line of storms out there, some miles away still. A darker gray line, just visible among the light grays smudging the horizon. Bruce took another swig off his beer. "Was it heroin?" he said.

"Cocaine," Jordan said. "Anything to give me an edge. I was a kid, but I was flying billion-dollar planes and shooting things out of the sky. I thought it improved my concentration."

"Until?"
"Until it didn't. So I got clean. End of story."

"How long?"

"How long did I use, or how long have I been clean?"

"The latter."

"Thirteen years."

"When will you hit fourteen years?"

"November seventeenth. At four thirty-eight a.m."

The storms on the horizon were moving in faster than he had thought. It was lucky he had gone for his run early, because it was going to be another wet, miserable day. Clark was going to be apoplectic. "So you don't touch anything," Bruce said. "No alcohol, ever?"

"I don't tempt fate."

Bruce said nothing to that. "Who knows?"

Jordan shrugged. "I go to meetings, when I can."

"I meant, who knows apart from the people who attend your meetings."

A fleeting grimace, almost a wince. "No one. But I don't lie, that's something the program emphasizes a lot. If I'm asked, I tell the truth. But you're the first person to ask. You probably have contempt for programs like that. People like that. What the hell would you know."

"Barry doesn't know?"

"It's never really come up. He knows I don't drink, but he's never asked why. Barry's good about things like that, about leaving other people alone. I realize this is a foreign concept."

Bruce finished his beer in silence, and set the bottle on the step below them. "So now you have it, motherfucker," Jordan said. "You have the thing you've been looking for. The next time I disagree with you in a League meeting—in other words, the next time I attend a League meeting—you just have to say we're not taking strategic advice from some piece of shit white trash junkie fuck-up, and you can shut down anything I say. Congratulations."

Bruce stretched his legs out in front of him, letting the heel of his shoes dig into the sand, lengthening his calf muscles. He hadn't stretched adequately before running, because he hadn't wanted to miss his window of no rain. He leaned back and propped his elbows on the stair behind him. The wind was picking up now.

"Out of curiosity," he said, after a while. "Is that really what you think of me?"

Jordan was staring at his orange juice. "No," he said. "But in your head."

"I'm pretty sure those are the words in your head, not in mine. Getting clean after a drug like that, and staying clean for that amount of time — that takes an extraordinary amount of . . . discipline. It actually inclines me to listen to what you say a bit more, rather than less. If anything but drivel ever emerged from your mouth, I mean. I'll let you know when it does."

"Aren't you a sweetheart."
Bruce hid his smile at the drawl of that *sweetheart*. It wasn't often you could hear any Kentucky in Jordan's voice—he suspected the man had worked hard to flatten any twang out of that voice his first year at the Academy. But every now and then, you would catch an echo of it, if you knew what you were listening for. Jordan was standing now, stretching.

"Speaking of my mouth," he said. "I'm not a man who likes to be in debt."

Bruce blinked, but found nothing to say to that. "My point is," Jordan continued. "If you'd like my mouth, it's yours. You object so much to what comes out of it, maybe you'd rather put something in it."

"That's a terrible line."

"Maybe. But it's getting you hard."

"And how would you know that?"

"Because that cock is too fucking big to hide it, that's how." And Jordan crouched lightly between his knees. "Come on, lift up a bit."

"What, out here?"

"No one can see us from the house. And if anyone starts down this way, I'll see them long before they see us."

"So this plan relies on your ability — and willingness — to be discreet."

Jordan rolled his eyes. "Yeah, Bats, 'cause it's the dream of my life for someone to find me with your cock stuffed down my throat. Come on, lift up."

He complied, and Jordan tugged the running shorts down to his knees. He stayed there, just looking for a minute. Bruce was uncomfortably aware that his cock was unfurling under that gaze. "I didn't get to touch last night," Jordan said.

"Be my guest," Bruce said, pleased his voice was only a little hoarse.

Jordan ran his hands up his chest, rucking up his T shirt. They were cool, firm hands. They found the scars and notches under his T shirt. He tried not to flinch at that, but Jordan's eyes flicked up at him. "They bother you," he said. Bruce just tightened his jaw. "Interesting."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, it's always interesting to me when a beautiful person is unaware they're beautiful. There aren't that many of you. The unaware ones, I mean." His thumb was rubbing at a circular patch of scar, circling the shiny half-dollar of a bullet entry wound. "Those of us who're aware, we're a dime a dozen."

There was some rejoinder to that, but Bruce couldn't find it. His tongue felt thick in his mouth. He didn't recall anyone touching him like this, and for a second he couldn't locate the strangeness until he realized he was being touched — not some mask he was wearing, but him, the parts that were both Bruce and Batman. By someone who knew both sides of the mask. He felt so painfully naked that for a minute he wanted to snatch Jordan's hand off his chest, pull up his shorts, and leave. But then Jordan's hand grazed his inner thigh, and his breathing hitched.

"Easy," Jordan whispered, like he was soothing a skittish horse. "Easy, beautiful, I got you."
Still some strange constriction in his throat, and now—worse—a rhythmic trembling, for some reason, in his arms. Jordan brushed a kiss on the top of his thigh. "Let me," he said, and then lowered his mouth to the cock that had not stopped thickening—stupid, traitor cock.

"Please stop," Bruce said, and Jordan did, immediately, looking at him with grave eyes, poised there between his knees.

"Okay," he said. Bruce looked at him, unable to figure out why he wasn't doing anything.

"No," Bruce said. "I didn't mean—please don't stop. I meant don't stop."

An arch of brow. "Someone's feeling conflicted today," he smirked, and that was enough to focus Bruce, pull him out of that strange mineshift of terror he had slipped down for a second.

"Shut up and suck me," he said.

"Always the soul of courtesy," was Jordan's answer, and that was the last thing he said for a while, because he was too busy deep-throating Bruce's cock with wicked, inhuman skill. Bruce tipped his head back and gave himself over to it.

"God," he gasped, or maybe not even a word, just a small groan bracketed by consonants, but it made Jordan dig fingers into this thighs and suck even harder. Jordan liked noise, then. Bruce stopped holding back. He reached, wanting to touch, something to grab onto, but his hand fell back. Jordan grabbed the hand and put it on his head. Bruce dug his fingers into that lush, unbelievable hair. He didn't want to push Jordan's mouth down on him further, he just wanted to anchor himself. He let his hand drift down onto the broad shoulders.

"So good," he panted, but he meant as much the feel of the muscled back beneath his fingers as the demonic suction quivering his groin. He had forgotten how good this felt, the firmness of maleness underneath him, God how he loved it. How he had missed it. He pushed his fingers into those muscles, and that got him a groan from Hal's throat.

After a minute Hal raised his head. "Does it take you a while?"

"I—yes. I suppose. You can stop."

"I didn't say I was going to stop. Just wanted to make sure I wasn't doing something wrong."

"You—you're not doing anything wrong. I—please," he said, because he had been close, why had that glorious mouth stopped. "Unless you're—getting tired."

"I'm not tired. Besides, what the hell else do I have to do with my day?" This time, when the mouth sank back on him—Bruce cringed at how loud his own groan was—there was a hand toying at his balls, a finger brushing near his perineum.

"Oh God," Bruce panted. "I. . ." He stopped trying to pretend he wasn't thrusting. He fucked Hal's throat. He had never been this rough when getting sucked. He twined all his fingers in that hair, tight. "Fuck," he gasped, and then inarticulate noises as he arched up and spurted into Jordan's mouth, down his throat. His thighs shook with it.

He reclined on the steps and waited for the horizon to right itself again. He watched Jordan wipe his mouth. He let Jordan pull his T shirt back down, pull his shorts back up. He was still limp and flooded with pleasure that had stung his eyes. Jordan was leaning against the driftwood banister, that same smart-ass smirk on his face. "Come here," Bruce said.
"Why's that?"

"Because there's something I need to take care of."

"I'm fine." But he let Bruce tug him back down onto the steps. He let Bruce plunge a hand in his own shorts. Bruce closed a hand around his cock: thick and warm, like he remembered it from last night. A nice fit in the hand. But apparently it was some sort of magic lever, because all of a sudden Jordan wasn't saying he was fine anymore. He was arching up into Bruce's hand. "God, come on, yes," he panted. "Just get me off."

"You're kind of a mess before you come, you know that."

"Yeah, just do it."

"Self-control," Bruce murmured. He had one arm around Hal, bracing him, and one hand down his shorts, and no kidding, the man was close to losing it. Bruce tried to get closer but couldn't, tried to touch more but couldn't.

"You're one to... talk." There was a small whimpering sound in Jordan's throat. "God, that feels..."

And then his body, bowstring-bent and taut in Bruce's arms, collapsed. Bruce was breathing as fast as he, almost. Jordan's neck arched back. "Bru-u-uce," he choked, just a thin exhalation of sound, but the vowels took forever, a gust of air against Bruce's face, and Bruce swallowed the air, swallowed the vowels, ate Jordan's mouth with his.

There was hot cum coating his hand and Jordan's groan in his mouth, but they didn't stop kissing, somehow his tongue couldn't stop tasting. He was aware they were still kissing, when Jordan's orgasm was long over. There was a hand on the back of his neck—arms entangled where he hadn't looked for them to be.

"Soooo, is this a no-swimming area, or have I just stumbled on the hand-jobs-only part of the beach? Because if so..."

"Oliver!" Bruce said angrily, moving to cover Jordan's body with his own.

"Ollie, you dickbag," Jordan said, the lazy smirk back in place again. He stood and pulled his clothes back together, no shame at all. "Come on, let's go get some actual breakfast. Not that I'm ungrateful for the morning milkshake, I just like solids occasionally too."

Bruce stalked up the stairs, the grating sound of Oliver's laugh behind him. Jordan was taking the steps two at a time, whistling. Of all the things to say, in front of Oliver—Oliver who never met a sexual innuendo he wouldn't happily widen with a backhoe, and whose breezy assumption of intimacy made Bruce's spine stiffen, who because of some adolescent fumbling thought he knew him.

"That pissed you off, that I let Ollie know I'd been sucking you," Jordan observed. "How come?"

"Because my business is my business," he snapped.

"Fair enough, but I'm not the guy who sat balls to the breeze on his sofa last night."

"No, you're just the guy who rutted like a cat in heat all over my—"

They stood at the open door of the villa. The side facing the beach was almost all glass, and the doors were slid back, the wind playing with the curtains. On one corner of the sectional sofa, Clark
had his face buried in Diana's crotch, his jaw slick with her juices, her moans loud enough to be heard from the kitchen, where Arthur was making pancakes. In the nude, it should be pointed out, whistling cheerily.

"Well," Jordan said, after a minute of taking in the scene. "Guess we could have worried a little less about being discreet."
Chapter 5

Barry arrived on Majuro shortly after Clark left, and Bruce held his peace while Barry spoke loudly with the doctors, and yelled at the nurses, and paced in the hallways, and muttered angrily to himself. It was a relief for the hospital staff to have someone else to focus on, and besides, it was clear they were already doing everything possible. There was nothing more to be learned, and he could see, as Barry could not, that it was a waiting game from here on out. Which wasn't to say there weren't problems.

"May I have a word?" Bruce asked one morning, after the young doctor had given them a fresh and meaningless briefing on Hal's condition.

"Of course," she said, leading him into the hall. It was the surgeon who had first worked on him, and Bruce liked her brusque competence. She was also about four feet tall but looked at him like he was a recalcitrant third grader, and he liked that too.

"What is it?" Barry asked, looking anxious. "What is it you don't want me to hear?"

"It's nothing," Bruce said, inwardly cursing the man.

"Then if it's nothing why can't I hear? If it's about Hal, I have a right to know." He looked angry, but it was plain to see the anger was his coping mechanism—one Bruce didn't have patience for. He ignored him.

"I'm concerned about his level of pain," Bruce said, to Dr. Cojuangco.

"The morphine pump administers the maximum amount of safe medication within a given time frame," she said with a frown. "Any more than that, and—"

"Yes, I understand. But my concern is, he's not using the morphine pump. There are... addiction issues. Right now he's refusing almost all pain medication."

"Addiction issues," Barry said. "Hal doesn't have any addiction issues, what are you talking about?"

She was flipping through her chart, checking the levels of morphine usage. "I see what you mean," she said. "And I understand the problem. There are some alternative painkillers we can try, after this first week or so. For now, the morphine is the easiest on his system. I'll talk to him, if you think it will help."

"It won't," Bruce said. "He's more stubborn than that. But thank you."

Of course, stubborn wasn't the half of it.

"You need the meds," Bruce said softly. Hal had been awake for some time, but looking out the too-bright window, like he did. Like he was concentrating on something. Bruce knew he was concentrating on not crying out with the pain.

"Please listen to me. Your body can't heal if it's fighting the pain. Hal. You have to take the meds."

"I can't," he managed, through gritted teeth.

"Hal." He rubbed at his forehead, temporarily defeated. At least the seventh time they had had this conversation, to no avail. Instead, he had to watch Hal school his breathing against the pain. He had
to watch him stiffen his body against the pain's grip.

"Please, please listen to me." He rested his head on the metal side rail. Hal turned his head to look at him.

"Try to understand," Hal whispered.

"I do. I am. But can you also try to understand that—" Hal turned his head away again. "Just. . . please," he said. "Can I just. . ."

Bruce gripped Hal's left hand. "Hold onto me," Bruce murmured, and Hal tightened his hold in a death grip. Bruce almost gasped at it, forgetting Hal's extraordinary strength. But he could take it. He gripped back, as tight as he could. "Just. . . hold on."

That was his life, that first week. Hal's sleep was fitful and short, his waking hours a torment. The nights were the worst. Bruce slept on the naugahyde recliner in the room, but at nights would move it closer to the bed, so Hal had something to grip when the pain got too bad. Once or twice he was so tired he didn't even wake when Hal was wringing his hand. And once he woke to see Hal staring at the ceiling, his face streaked with tears.

"Enough," he said savagely, and reached for the dial on the morphine pump.

"I swear to God I will rip this IV out of my arm if you fucking touch that dial," Hal snarled, and Bruce dropped his hand, because not for a moment did he doubt Hal had both the strength and the resolve to do it.

They didn't talk much, in that bleak little vomit-colored room on Majuro. Talking was painful, so Hal's waking hours were spent gripping Bruce's arm and staring fixedly out the window. When it was worse than bad, he would stare fixedly at Bruce, who would stare back, pouring whatever strength he had into his eyes for Hal. But this couldn't continue—soon enough, Hal's physical therapy would begin in earnest, and he would make no progress with the therapy, and thus no progress toward regaining use of his right side, if he was in too much pain to move. They didn't talk about that, either. If Bruce avoided the subject, it was because he knew that faced with the choice of permanent disability versus drug use, Hal would take the disability. There was little doubt in his mind, on that score.

"I'm sorry," Hal said once, in the middle of the night.

"Hush," Bruce said. "For what."

"Going to the island. My own fault. I just. . . don't remember it."

"I know."

"I think I had this idea. . . that if I could see you. . ."

"I'm here now." And Bruce brushed a knuckle against his hair. It would need a good washing, that thick chestnut mane.

But it was funny, because all the things he had thought maybe they could begin to explore if it were just the two of them on the island—all the careful circling and negotiation and testing, extending possibly over weeks and months—were worked out in that bleak little room, in five minutes. He knew what Hal felt, when he gripped his arm silently, and Hal knew what Bruce felt, when he drew the strength he needed from his eyes. It turned out things were much simpler than he had thought
they were. Maybe life was a hell of a lot simpler than he had ever thought it was.

There were honestly parts of that weekend that were a blur for him. He could recognize, in retrospect, his move into a profoundly altered state—the way everything began to seem normal to him, the way he stopped questioning anything. Arthur making pancakes naked was just the beginning of it. People having sex over every available surface of the house began to feel perfectly normal, too. A matter for mild comment or amusement, nothing more.

The sex was the most vivid part of the weekend. After that first day, the times between the sex faded into a kind of background gray, as hazy as the sky. He wouldn't always remember how the part before the sex had happened, or how they had got to that point. But the sex itself was stop-motion vivid, a technicolor bloom of sound and sensation. He could remember every detail of it, with unusually sharpened recall, even for his eidetic memory. Even at the time he had thought, I am going to beat off to this for years, knowing it would re-play in his brain with all the shocking immediacy of Imax 3-D.

There was the time on his bed, buried to the balls in Hal's ass, fucking face-to-face—in itself a thing he had never done before. Hal's legs were encircling him, that tanned, beautifully flexible body curled around him.

"Oh, fuuuuck," Hal moaned, and every noise he made just drove Bruce more wild, just made him fuck him harder. "Jesus Christ, your cock, what are you doing to me. . ."

"Is it good, tell me it's good," because he was frantic for Hal's pleasure, he wanted to see that lean throat tipped back and grunting for him.

"So good, baby."

Dimly he was aware there were people in the doorway, or a person. The door wasn't closed, because that was another thing that began to seem normal—open doors everywhere. Sitting at the kitchen table eating cereal, and watching Dinah ride Oliver on the bed in the adjacent room. Calmly continuing to eat your cereal.

"Ah—God—Bruce—" His name, always it was his name that unstrung him. Hearing it from Hal's lips, and he wasn't entirely sure when Jordan had become Hal, or why. "Oh God, slow it down, I'm gonna—"

And Hal had opened astonished eyes. Hal's cock, stiff and curved, dribbled white sticky strings onto his belly. Hal's whole breathing was labored. "Fucking—God," he grunted, as his cock kept up its agonizing dribbles, as it jerked toward his chest. Bruce gripped his hips and spurted in him, holding himself still for the long shudders of ecstasy. Hal had maybe ceased to breathe, and then with a groan they could probably hear down on the beach, he fell back.

"You just. . . that. . . I've never had that happen before," Hal said, his lips sounding thick and numb. "Nnn. Ahh. I need you out, can you—"

"Yeah," and Bruce slowly withdrew, rubbing at Hal's thighs as he did. He glanced at Hal's hole, and what he wanted was to put his mouth there and lick his own cum out, clean Hal with his mouth.

"Christ," Hal panted, grinning now. "For real, I've never come hands-free before. That was awesome. It was like it was being pulled out of me, like I was being fucking milked. What the hell." He rolled over and rubbed at the sweat on Bruce's brow. "You just don't stop, do you."

"I want to lick you," Bruce said, not even caring what it sounded like. "Can I, can I please." He took
the lift of Hal's brows for consent, and flipped him over, sealing his mouth to that swollen hole and scooping out the cum, pushing it back in, tasting, licking, consuming. Hal was doing nothing but making this long low moaning sound, so he was going to assume it was okay.

How or why they had ended up in the kitchen he had no idea, but that was another distinct memory, fucking on the kitchen counter. With other people in the kitchen, he also remembered that. At some point Dinah had leaned over and given his ass a little pat and said, "Can you scooch over? I need a spoon." And he had obliged.

"You ever bottomed?" Hal asked him one night, stretched on the bed with the wind blowing the curtains. Bruce shook his head.

"That a general preference issue, or a trust issue?"

Bruce considered. "I'm not sure," he answered honestly.

"You liked it when I had my fingers up you when I was sucking you."

"I did. But everybody likes that."

Hal raised an eyebrow. "Trufax, genius detective, no they don't. I'm just saying, you like that, you might like something a little more substantial up there. You might not, there's no law that says you have to like it. But I would love to fuck you."

Bruce considered some more. It was Hal's face while he was being fucked that made him seriously think about it. The look on the man's face was like all his internal circuitry was being pulled out and re-wired. He came apart when he was being fucked, and he made it look delicious. "I'm a good size for it," Hal said, knocking a knee against Bruce's. "Substantial without being terrifyingly huge. Excellent for beginners. I mean, I wouldn't try Clark your first time out of the barn, is what I mean."

"I'm not actually sleeping with Clark," he pointed out.

"Uh huh. Well, he'd sure as hell like to sleep with you."

"That's. . . not true."

"Which you know it is, so we'll leave it there. You'd be nuts to turn it down, is all I'm saying. Especially if it came with a side of Amazon, if you're as bi as I think you are."

"This goes better when you don't talk," Bruce said, turning toward him. He lowered his mouth to Hal's.

"Mmm," Hal sighed into his mouth. "Shzrrhтурmммзngkssr."

Bruce pulled off. "Can you never stop talking?"

"I was just saying, she was right, you are an amazing kisser. Come here."

Somehow the kissing felt dirtier and more intimate than anything else they did, by far. His tongue up Hal's ass didn't feel as intimate as their tongues wrapped around each other, Hal's arms snaked around his neck, stroking his back. He didn't recall kissing being so eventful. But when he kissed Hal, things happened—things were said, made and unmade. He was used to kissing as the overly damp prelude to more interesting activities. But kissing Hal was a strenuous activity in itself.

"Tell me something," Hal said one night. His eyes were black-circled pits.
"Tell you what?"


So he scrubbed a hand over his tired face and started talking. It was more talking than he was used to doing, but Hal was holding onto it like a lifeline. He didn't know what he said, or didn't say. He told Hal about his first year at Groton, and how much he had hated it. About the time Alfred had found weed in his sock drawer, about the first time Dick had hugged him, about the time Jason had gotten hold of his spring-loaded cross-bow and fired it in the pool, shattering the pool's underwater floodlamps into geysers of glass and metal that had festooned surrounding trees for months.

He gripped Hal's hand while he talked, wondering at himself. It was more talking than he'd ever done at one stretch, probably, and he stumbled from story to story with the ineptitude of one long-unused to talking about himself—throwing open doors without really knowing what was behind them, piles of discarded furniture or old newspapers or cherished photographs. He wondered, too, at this strangest of all things, that he should have become friends with Hal Jordan. Or had they always been friends, and he had simply failed to notice?

"Please, take the medication," he whispered at the end of one of his stories, because he couldn't stop saying it.

"Can't." Hal answered, in his standard response.

"Listen to me. You are being not only ridiculous, but ignorant. Morphine is an opium derivative. Opium and coca are completely unrelated, one has nothing to do with the other."

"Wow, you really know nothing about addiction, do you."

"Hal—"

"Nah, that's not the reason, I was just shitting you. The thing is, if I hit fourteen years I get the 60-inch HDTV."

"Can you never stop being a smart ass?"

"Apparently not. Tell me another story, please."

~

That first night, at the end of the game, was the clearest in his head. Diana had used her lasso to secure Hal to the top of the grand piano that sat by the glass doors onto the terrace. *This is a tropical island*, Bruce had said to Alfred when he had first seen it. *What the hell do I need a piano for?* Alfred had looked puzzled. *I had thought, sir, that with the lack of television, other sources of entertainment would be called for, when you have guests visiting here.* Bruce had grimaced, because he was pretty sure most of the moguls and celebrities Wayne Enterprises would be wining and dining on this island would not find Broadway show tunes an acceptable form of entertainment, but as a rule he didn't contradict Alfred.

*You used to play quite well, sir*, Alfred had remarked, with seeming innocence, and Bruce had shut the piano, firmly. *That was a long time ago*, he had said.

But Alfred, as it turned out, had been completely right about the piano, because it had been very useful indeed. It was just the right size and height for spreading Lantern out on top of it, lashed spread-eagled and helpless while they all took their revenge. And what sweet revenge it was.
"Subject secured," Diana had said. "Now what?"

Clark had looked at Bruce, and Bruce had looked at Clark, and Bruce had smiled. "Death by a thousand cuts," he said, and Hal had squirmed and whined.

"Come on, give me a break, Batman is over here talking about 'death' and 'cuts' and I don't know enough about his kinks to know if he's being metaphorical or what, but come on guys, enough, loosen this just a little, goddammit—"

Bruce had gone first, lowering his mouth to Hal's cock—stiffening already, for all his protestations—and given him maybe three good sucks before pulling off. Enough so that Hal's whines had settled to a whimper. And without conferring about it further, everyone seemed to get the idea, as they crowded around the piano, eager to make Hal pay. One after the other, in quick succession, eight mouths sucked him, never steadily enough to get him anywhere, always pulling off right when he began to pant and arch in earnest, always keeping him right on the knife-edge.

"Oh God—fuck—come on—please," Hal kept moaning, like the whiner he was, but they just kept at it: Barry, who seemed to take especially malicious pleasure in it, Arthur, whose ineptitude at sucking cock just tormented Hal even more, Zatanna, whose wicked tongue curls had Hal practically screaming for more, before she coyly withdrew. Oliver, Dinah, Clark, Diana. . . Bruce stood and watched them all, and relished Hal's increasing torture. The pleasure had probably long since become pain, after close to an hour of that sort of play. Hal was close to screaming, and his cries were now hoarse.

"God—somebody finish me, please," was all he had been able to croak out, and Bruce had finally leaned over and closed his mouth on that spit-slicked, swollen cock and given him the hard, steady sucking he needed. Deep-throated him and swallowed, and Hal had definitely screamed then.

"Fuck I'm coming, God—fuck help me—" Hal had shot long and hard, and Bruce had swallowed that, too.
Chapter 6

How long it would have gone on if Clark hadn't snapped, there was no way of knowing.

Clark was definitely the most affected of any of them, though Bruce didn't see it until afterward, of course. It was there in his physicality, for one thing. Clark was just more physical than he was by nature, but there was still something always... leashed, if that was the word, in his physicality. The man would hug you, but even in the middle of the embrace, you would feel the carefulness. There would be a hand on your shoulder, but you could still feel the restraint, the sheer concentration of it. As though Clark were always policing the boundaries of his body, keeping careful watch on himself.

That weekend, those boundaries began to erode.

Obviously, Diana could take it, no matter how rough he got. Just as obviously, that was a reason—the reason?—they were together. Neither of them had to keep any sort of leash on themselves, when they were fucking each other, and Bruce could only imagine what that must feel like. But even so, that weekend, Clark was getting rough. Even for Diana, Clark was getting rough. He could see it because for one thing Clark had long since stopped worrying about being in a bedroom, or even a remotely private location, for fucking. He could see it in the thin line of bruises around Diana's jaw.

"Good Christ," he said, putting down the pear he was absently chewing on, when she strode naked into the kitchen. None of them wore clothes, after that first day.

"It's fine," she said. "I don't feel it at all."

Bruce blinked at her. He hadn't even known Diana could bruise. He couldn't imagine the amount of force necessary to bruise Diana. That had been fingers crushing her windpipe while fucking her.

"Diana," he said. "You have to stop him."

She plucked a pear from the bowl next to him. "How?" she said. "Besides, I didn't mind."

She walked out again before he could answer. But it wasn't just Clark getting too rough during fucking. Clark never got angry, and all of a sudden he was yelling at people. Yelling at them for leaving a dirty fork in the sink, or for taking the last beer (and for another thing, since when was Clark that interested in alcohol), or for standing too close to him.

Or standing too close to Bruce, for that matter. It wasn't like he was unaware Clark's aggression toward Hal was rising. Hal would lean over and make some remark to Bruce, and Clark would glare at him. Once Hal's hand slid from Bruce's shoulder down to his waist, and Clark knocked his hand away. Hal just looked at him.

"Bruce doesn't like to be touched," Clark said.

"Really," Hal said. "Well maybe he does, how would you know. Maybe he's a person who's standing right here who can damn well tell me to stop if he wants me to."

"Oh yeah? Well maybe I'm gonna—"

"Clark," Bruce said sharply, and Clark stopped dead, like an invisible chokehold had tightened on his neck. The muscle in his jaw kept twitching, though, and he kept glaring at Hal, all afternoon.

Bruce didn't think anything more of it. Everything had begun to seem normal. Probably would have continued to, if it hadn't been for Hal.
They were fucking in his room later that day, after the incident with Hal's hand on his waist. And because Hal had wanted him to try it, Hal was the one fucking him. They were face-to-face, because clearly Hal liked it that way, and also because Hal had said he wanted to see his face, to see what he liked and how he liked it.

There wasn't a single "what" or "how" to the whole thing he didn't like.

"Oh, Christ," he moaned, and he knew he was loud, but he didn't care.

"Yeah?"

"God yes."

"I can... here, shift your leg."

The improved angle wrenched another groan from Bruce, louder still. Hal was fucking him faster now. "Jesus Christ," he was panting. "I knew... you would feel like this, God... how are you this fucking gorgeous..."

"Hal,"Bruce murmured.

"Yeah, say my name, say it," and he could feel, he could feel the shudder in Hal's body at the sound of his name.

"You boys are being very loud," Diana said, and the bed dipped as she stretched out beside him. He turned his head to her. She fiddled with a lock of his hair. "I was trying to take a nap, but you're making it very hard to sleep. You were making me so wet, listening to you." She slid a hand down, rubbing at her groin, and the noise Hal made was not human. He began fucking even faster.

"So wet," she mused, running a finger around the wet lips of her cunt, slipping it inside, circling her clit. "Diana," Bruce said, his voice shattered and broken. Her tongue was in his mouth, and he had forgotten the sharp taste of her.

"Get me off while you're getting off, can you do that?"

"Yeah," Bruce said, and he slid his fingers next to hers, and circled and rubbed—God, she was wet —while Hal groaned louder and pushed in further. He jerked his hips upward at the knife-sharp pleasure of Hal's fucking, the hungry pace of it, the feel of his fingers buried in the sweet heat of Diana's cunt.

"Can't stop it now," she whispered, and he slid two fingers inside her to feel the throb and clench of her coming, and all that juice running down his fingers, his hand—he'd forgotten that too, how much there was of it, almost as much as male ejaculate. "Come on, come with me, Bruce, yes—"

"Fuck... God!" And Bruce arched back, because Hal's hand was stroking his cock now with a shaking grip, and it was too much for him to take. His cum pulsed out of him with every heavy tug of Hal's hand, stripping his own chest and Diana's hair.

"You beautiful goddamn—bastard," Hal grunted, and he felt the shiver of Hal's orgasm, the quaking in the thighs up against his ass, and then—then there was nothing but a rush of air and pain and a roar of sound.

"Get off of him!"

"Smack," went Hal's back against the wall, and there were confused shouts: Kal, stop and what the hell
and get him away and other, indeterminate things he could not hear because his world had narrowed to pain.

Pain, because he was grabbed by the neck and thrown against a wall, and there was Clark's vise-like grip on his jaw, Clark's face in his. Clark's eyes were ice-blue chips of molten rage. "Mine," he growled, low in his throat. "You are *mine*. You will *not* let him touch you again."

He had one chance, and that chance was Clark hearing his voice. "Clark," he tried, clutching at the hand that was lifting him, cutting off breath. "You're . . . hurting . . . me."

"You're *mine*," Clark insisted. "*Mine*."

"Clark," he tried again, desperate now, but a louder voice cut through his choked whisper.

"Kal-el!" The golden lasso caught him around the neck, but it was an annoyance to Clark, something to be shrugged off. "Kal-el, release him at once! Listen to me!" She followed it up with a punch to the side of his head, and then another, but Clark just growled at her.

"Please," Bruce whispered, and whether it was the thin sound of his voice or something else, Bruce never knew, but Clark dropped him. Dropped him and stood there, looking dazed and uncertain, like he did not entirely know where he was.

"Kal," Diana murmured. They were all standing in the doorway now, looking at them—Bruce could hear Oliver's "what the ever-living hell, man," over the thud of his own heartbeats. He slid to the floor, still shaking. Clark was looking at his hands like they weren't attached to his body.

"Bruce," he said, and it was his own voice again, it was Clark.

He found the strength to struggle up, and that was when he saw Hal: slumped against the wall, white under his tan, his shoulder at the wrong angle entirely. Hal was looking at Clark with hate in his eyes. "Your shoulder," Bruce said.

"It's fine."

"It's dislocated."

"Really, you fucking think?" Bruce watched him stand, unsteadily. His arm hung useless, and Bruce reached for him.

"We're going to have to—"

But Hal was too fast for him, and hurled his shoulder at the wall with an angry roar. He could hear the joint snap back into place with a nauseating sound. Hal stayed leaning against the wall for a minute, his legs shaking.

"Hal," Clark said weakly. "I'm so . . . I didn't know what I . . ."

"Save it," Hal muttered, and pushed past him, past Dinah in the doorway who also reached for him, past Barry who had just come in from outside and was standing there confused. He couldn't look at Clark, who was the only one of them who had any clothes on but somehow looked more naked than anyone there.

"Bruce," he said again, pleading, but Bruce just looked away.

"Get the hell out of my room," he said.
It was close to nightfall before Hal returned, and Bruce was beginning to think about being worried. He had had enough dislocated shoulders to know that the soreness persisted for days, sometimes weeks, and if Hal had tried flying off somewhere, he might have gotten himself in trouble. Since when do you worry about Lantern's well-being, he scoffed at himself, but the nagging unease persisted all day.

So he was, he was willing to admit, relieved, when he spotted Hal walking up the bluff from the beach, a thoughtful expression on his face. He was in his Green Lantern uniform, and when he caught sight of Bruce standing at the windows, he quickened his step. Everyone else was in the kitchen, because Clark had become suddenly extra-friendly, and had volunteered to cook for everyone—which of course meant everyone had to pitch in and help, if dinner was going to be edible.

"Hey Bruce," Zatanna called. "We're on veggie chopping. Come grab a cutting board and help me out."

"Be right there," he said. Hal came quietly through the half-open door. "Come here a second," Hal said, guiding him out onto the terrace.

"What's wrong?"

"How's Clark?"

"What do you mean, he's fine. How should he be?"

Hal was looking at him intently. "He just attacked us. He tried to kill, well, at least one of us. That doesn't seem at all strange to you?"

"I didn't say it was usual. But I don't see why you're making such a big deal out of it, no."

Hal frowned and rubbed at the back of his neck, like he was uncertain how to proceed. "Okay," he said, finally. "So I was... a little rattled, and I went for a short flight, just to clear my head. But you know what was odd? All this rain and gray skies—you get clear of the island, and it's blue skies all around, as far as you can see."

"Okay," Bruce said.

"What I'm saying is, the cloud cover, it's just covering the island, and nothing else. I do a lot of flying, and I know weather patterns, and trust me, this is not a normal weather pattern. Literally fifty feet outside the cloud, there's no other rain on the horizon anywhere. It's just sitting on top of us, not moving. Tell me you don't think that's strange."

Bruce crossed his arms. "I'm listening," he said.

"So I started to do a little looking around, and I find strange thing number two—an unmarked carrier sitting about twenty leagues off, just parked there. American, from the construction, but literally not a single marking anywhere on it. I'll tell you who uses unmarked ships, that's CIA, that's Black Ops, that's NSA shit."

"They were there the whole time you were watching?"

"The whole time. Did not move. Like they were monitoring something, you want my private opinion. So I decide I'm going to take the risk and move in closer, because I can see there's a chopper on deck, and maybe I can read its markings, right? So I use the ring to make me a high-powered scope, and I lurk just low enough to the waterline that radar's going to read me like some really over-
confident dolphin or something. Turns out this chopper's almost as scrubbed as the ship, except for one tiny mark near the tail: NS1."


"I know. So you tell me what the hell Amanda Waller is doing on an unmarked aircraft carrier in the middle of goddamn nowhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, that just happens to be near Bruce Wayne's private island, where it just so happens the entire Justice League is vacationing."

"Suspicious," Bruce admitted. "But I still don't see what—"

"Bruce. I realize I am going to kick my own ass for saying this, but please, just think about this for a second. Think back to last week. Remember last week? Or the week before, or the week before that. Did you want to sleep with me before you got to this island?"

Bruce hesitated. It was not the easy question it appeared to be. "You're arguing that our mental states have been altered," he said.

"I am. So help me, I am. Don't get me wrong, Bats, you're a lay and a half, and I've had the time of my life, but let's think about this for a goddamn minute, all right? This is you and me. Since when is fucking each other high on our list of mutual priorities?"

Bruce frowned, trying to piece together the logic that would resist Hal's argument. Because his argument was crazy, it should make no sense, except for the fact that at every point, it seemed to. Hal appeared to sense his hesitation.

"Look at them," he said, gesturing through the windows. Arthur and Zatanna and Barry had drifted into the living room from the kitchen and were laughing uproariously at something. Barry gave Zatanna a playful shove, and she shoved back. Arthur pulled Barry close and kissed him hard enough to suck the air out of his lungs. They were all naked as the day they were born. "Look," Hal repeated. "Does that look normal to you? Is this what we do?"

He frowned, watching them. "You think there's something... that we're being affected by something."

"I do. I am. Look, I know how crazy this sounds, but I'm military, and I know the crazy shit our government is capable of pouring research money into, believe me I know it. Remember when everybody was pissing themselves laughing a few years ago, when the whole 'gay bomb' research got leaked? Sure, that shit was cracked out, but the point is, I know for a fact we have chemicals in our military arsenal with mind-altering capacities, and I know for a further fact we have the ability to aerosolize them and disperse them over a limited area."

"That's insane. That's paranoid."

"Really? Then what's your explanation? Go on, hit me with it."

"Explanation for what?"

"For this! For all of this. For you and me, for Clark, for... for them." And he spun Bruce around to face the living room, where the kissing was rapidly progressing into mutual humping.

"I..." Bruce shook his head. "I'm not sure I have one."

"Well, I do, and it's spelled Amanda Waller. Face it Bruce, we all know she knows your identity, and she's been looking to get some leverage on you for years, and this? This is the fucking jackpot.
What do you want to bet your island's security system has been tampered with, since the last time you were here?"

"But...to what end? Why would Waller have any desire to..." He trailed off, because he could answer his own question. Why would Waller want them to look like fools, and surveille them doing it? A better question was, why wouldn't she?

"Dammit," he said. Hal was looking at him, like he was trying to figure out if he had convinced him or not. "Dammit," he said again, and pushed the door into the living room open.

"Hey Bruce, c'mere," Barry said, and grabbed at his arm, pulling him into a messy embrace. "You've been hogging Hal all weekend, and I oughta be so pissed at you. I oughta punish you, a lot. Hey, 'Tanna, how 'bout you give me a hand here."

Zatanna's hands were caressing his backside, and his body's involuntary response was about to derail his brain's imperative. There was something he needed to do, but couldn't it wait just a few more minutes?

"No," he said gruffly, pushing away from them. A drunk, handsy, and very, very altered Flash was probably not something he could resist for too many more minutes. Especially if no one was wearing any clothes. He saw his phone on the table behind the sofa and made a grab for it, quickly scrolling through his contacts until he arrived at the one he was looking for. He went into his room and shut the door, locking it behind him.

"Waller," he said, when she answered.

"Bruce," she said pleasantly. "How are you enjoying your vacation?"

Any doubts he had were erased by the slow, rich warmth of the smile in her voice. He put his head in his hands and sat down on the edge of his bed, his chest too choked with rage to speak.

The tenth morning on Majuro, he pushed back the door to find Hal sitting on the edge of the bed, and the physical therapist crouching in front of him. Bruce quietly set his coffee down and made himself unobtrusive. He had spent the night at the incredibly seedy motor lodge across from the hospital, because for once Hal had actually appeared to be in deep sleep, and he wasn't sure he could take another night curled in that naugahyde nightmare of a chair. Evidently Hal had indeed gotten some real sleep, because while his eyes were still gray pits in the middle of his face, some of the redness circling them was gone, and the eyes in the center of those pits were something approaching Hal's eyes.

Hal was squeezing a ball in his right hand—or trying to. In silence Bruce watched the hand struggle to contract around the fist-sized rubber ball, the fingers shaky and dangling from the wrist. His grip on his coffee tightened.

"Just fifteen seconds more," the therapist said. He was a young man with a wide, kind face, who looked about thirteen years old. "You can do it."

Hal's jaw tightened in concentration. He gasped, and the ball fell to the floor. "That's okay, you're doing great, good job," the therapist said. He patted Hal's knee. "Let's try a little bit of walking now," and he gestured to the walking frame set up by the bed: parallel bars with a small track between them.

"Slight problem," Hal said, and Bruce could hear the tautness of pain in his voice. "Not sure I can grip the right bar enough to support me."
"That's okay," said the relentlessly cheery young man. Pretty soon Bruce was going to get up and punch him right in the smiling face. "I'll be next to you here, so you won't fall."

He could read Hal's skepticism in the glance he gave the therapist, and his concern was probably warranted. The therapist was maybe five-three, and looked like he would weigh about eighty pounds soaking wet. How he was going to support six feet of sturdy muscle—and Hal was powerfully built, no doubt about it—collapsing on top of him, Bruce had no idea. "Maybe I could be on that side," Bruce said quietly, but Hal's "No," was sharp and quick.

So he watched as Hal made his agonizing way through the bars, step by dragging step. He could move the right leg, but didn't seem to be able to lift it, or control when it was going to give underneath him. It tended to drag along beside him, but worse to watch was Hal struggling to suppress the pain. His left arm, which was doing most of the work in holding him up, had begun to shake by the third step, and there was no sound in the room but his labored breathing. Bruce bit the side of his mouth to the blood.

"That's great," cooed the therapist, "that's fantastic." Just then Hal's leg betrayed him, and he fell with a grunt of pain. But the young man was clearly stronger than he looked—he caught him immediately, completely unfazed by shoring up 200 pounds of solid muscle.

"Fuck," Hal gasped. "Goddammit." Bruce's fingernails dug white crescents into his palm. He forced himself to stay motionless as Hal slowly, excruciatingly righted himself, and completed the last two steps.

He fell back on the bed, with help, his limbs still shaking. There was a thin trickle of sweat down the side of his face. The therapist kept up his inane happy patter of talk—half encouragement, half infantilization. Bruce stayed silent until he left. He kept his hands jammed in his pockets, because otherwise he would do things with them that would probably make Hal want to slice them off at the wrists.

"That will get easier," Bruce finally said, after a while, his voice gone a bit hoarse. Hal just opened his eyes and looked at him, and Bruce was quiet again.
Chapter 7

On the last morning on the island, there was very little talking. Or eye contact, for that matter. Everyone packed their things in silence, speaking only when spoken to, and the pall that hung over the island was as palpable as the rain had been before. The sunny skies that suddenly appeared were like some harbinger of gloom that had settled on them all, and there was no suggestion of finally getting to enjoy some swimming, or time on the beach.

*So much for improving our team dynamics,* he thought. It was going to be months before anyone on the team would be able to sustain eye contact, much less work together productively. Waller had done her job well.

He would have said as much to Clark, but Clark was the worst off of any of them. He wouldn't even so much as glance in Bruce's direction. He was up and packed before anyone else was even awake, and he had hiked to the plane to throw his bag in before Bruce had arrived at the airstrip. He left a note on Bruce's bedroom door: *Think I'm going to fly back on my own, if that's okay.* And down at the bottom of the post-it, in Clark's execrable handwriting, was what might have been the single word *Sorry.*

It was going to be weeks before Clark would look him in the eye, probably. Whatever Waller had hit them with, its effect on Clark's physiology had been devastating. Not that Clark would see it that way; as usual he would find a way to make it all about himself—all his fault, all his responsibility. He would point that out to Clark, as soon as he agreed to talk to him, and Clark would probably roll his eyes. *You're describing yourself,* he would no doubt say.

Only in this instance, of course, the description would be accurate.

Because whose fault was it, if it wasn't his own? He had led the entire League here, and had presumptuously, arrogantly assured their safety. He had led them right into a trap. They had trusted him, and their trust had been misplaced. They had been vulnerable, and isolated, and his one job—protect the League at all costs—he had neglected to do. He had failed them all. He ought to be voted out of the League. If it had been someone else, he would have voted them out.

He was the one who ought to be crawling on his knees to Clark, begging his forgiveness. Well. There was something to be said for a best friend whose default position was to assume everything you did wrong was his fault.

About half an hour before they were supposed to take off, he realized he hadn't seen Lantern all morning. A quick check of his room showed nothing but a bed folded with military corners, and a duffel sitting on top of it. So he was around here somewhere. Part of Bruce had thought he would fly out with Clark. Maybe another part of him had been hoping he would.

He was pretty sure he knew where to find him, so he headed down to the beach. The morning sun was already hot, the surface of the ocean like a bright blue stone. There was a breeze that cut the heat, but by midafternoon it would be baking out here. Hal stood on the little promontory of rock behind the curve of the lagoon, watching the gentler waves break on this side of the island. He was as still as one of the porous boulders under his feet, his eyes impassive behind his sunglasses.

Bruce stood beside him in silence a few minutes, watching the small line of waves. "I'll give you this," Hal said. "You sure know how to throw a vacation."

Bruce sighed. There were several retorts he could make, but all of them landed him in dangerous
territory, so he said nothing.

"It really is beautiful, though," Hal said.

"Yes, it is," Bruce said.

"I mean it. I'm what you might call a well-traveled guy, and along with most of the galaxy's better-known shitholes, I have seen some of the most beautiful places in this neck of the universe. And this—this is definitely one of them."

Bruce looked out on the lagoon, trying to see it with fresh eyes. It wasn't that any part of the seascape that stretched in front of him was so unusual, or spectacular. It was the sense of peace, the utter quiet and serenity that enfolded it all. The island was a small gem moored in a setting of lapis and pearl.

"Well," Bruce said, considering. "You can always come back. The place is yours, if you'd like to visit."

"Oh, hell yeah."

A silence fell again. *We need to get to the plane*, was what he had come out here to say. But somehow that was not what he found himself saying. "The house is too small, though," Bruce said. "It mainly gets used for executive retreats for the company, or fund-raising parties, things like that."

"Well, I don't take up much room."

"I mention it because Alfred has been pointing out to me for some time that the house needs expanding. There's a contractor supposed to come out here in a few weeks' time, to talk about adding onto it in a way that wouldn't disturb the rest of the island too much. I was thinking I would fly out and meet him here, on the twenty-eighth."

"Mm," said Hal.

"My point was... you don't need to worry about no one being on the island, when you come. You're... welcome anytime."

"So you're saying even if you've got some super-glam house party going on, the Green Lantern should feel free just to zoom on by."

"I trust you to be discreet."

"Should never do that," he said, with a flash of teeth.

"Well," Bruce said. "We need to make our flight time."

"Right," Hal said. They were still watching the water together. Hal had his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket. "The twenty-eighth, huh," he said.

"Yes," Bruce said, meeting his eyes. "My point was—"

"I got your point," Hal said, with that shark-like grin. "And like I said, Bats. Oh *hell* yeah." He turned and trudged up the beach, cutting across to the little scrub path that led toward the airstrip. Bruce fell in behind him, trying to ignore the strange, unsettling thing that hammered in his chest. About halfway down the path Hal stopped and turned around.

"I'd feel better if you went first," he said. "I keep feeling like you're checking out my ass."
"For God's sake," Bruce muttered, shoudering roughly past him. He kept hearing that irritating chortle behind him all the rest of the way to the airstrip.

Bruce went to scrounge dinner from the vending machines, and when he came back, Hal was sitting on the edge of the bed. He was looking at his leg, rubbing it with his left hand absently. "I was thinking," Bruce said, tossing a granola bar on the table. "There are options available, other than narcotic painkillers. Acupuncture is something you ought to explore, and if you were on the Watchtower, I could make sure that—"

"Forget it. Some freaky Tibetan bullshit designed to torture me by sticking me even more full of needles, who would have guessed that would be your idea."

"Acupuncture is Chinese, not Tibetan."

"I know that, I said Tibetan to irritate you."

"Well done."

He watched as Hal struggled to stand. He was breathing hard. "I don't guess I've got any actual clothes around here, do I?"

"I bought a few things at one of the shops down the road. Some T shirts, mainly beach gear. What do you need to—"

"Any kind of bag? One of those hospital plastic things?"

"What the hell are you doing," Bruce said.

"Getting packed, what does it look like I'm doing?"

"Right now it looks like you're balancing precariously on your left leg and struggling to stand upright without vomiting."

"Fuck you." Hal eased himself to the edge of the bed, still breathing hard. "I'm getting out of here, is what I'm doing."

"Are you now. And where exactly do you plan on going?"

"Oa," Hal said, and Bruce was stunned into silence. Hal was watching him. "The Guardians got in touch with me, last night. I'm supposed to go to Oa, to recover. It makes sense. The technology available there makes what we have here look fucking medieval. If anyone can fix me up, it would be the physicians on Oa."

"What exactly did they say?"

"Who, the Guardians? Oh, they're a super sympathetic bunch. You'd like 'em. You wouldn't believe how much empathy they can muster for a Lantern idiotic enough to get himself shot to hell in a firefight he should've been able to see coming a mile away. But what the hell do I care, I've never given a fuck what they thought about me before. And they'll do right by me."

"Define right," Bruce said quietly.

"They'll be monitoring my progress, if I'm on Oa. And if I don't recover—or recover only partially, which let's face it is the fucking probability here—they'll take the Ring back."
"They can't do that."

"Well, add the Guardians to the list of things you know jack shit about." He was tugging with his good arm at the ties of his hospital gown, in increasing frustration. "Are you going to help me or not?"

"No. This is the stupidest idea I've heard from you yet, and that's saying something. There are any number of possible places you can go for rehab, beginning with the Watchtower. Or if not there, then an East Coast hospital with state of the art facilities, like—"

"It wasn't my idea!" Hal snapped. "Or weren't you listening to that part? This is an order. I don't have any choice. But you wouldn't know about being under orders, would you? The Batman is a law unto himself. He does whatever the hell he wants, because that's what his money can buy him, and he's too fucking badass to understand what it means to be under someone's command, to be part of something larger than his own planetary-sized ego."

Bruce released his grip on the remaining granola bar, and sat in the chair opposite Hal. He stayed quiet for a few seconds, schooling his anger down, knowing he was being baited, knowing why Hal was doing it. That didn't make him any less angry. He crossed his legs, smoothed the rumpled fabric of his khakis over his thighs. Hal had collapsed back on the bed and was watching the ceiling.

That was when he saw what he should have seen before: the official-looking letter on the table beside Hal's bed. It had been opened and stuffed back in the envelope, and the edge of the letter was crumpled. He could see the seal on the letter, and could read the header: United States Department of Defense.

"You were discharged," Bruce said softly.

"It's standard procedure," Hal said. Bruce had nothing to say. He ought to be saying something. Something like, after you recover, I'm sure you can turn active-duty again. Some mindless assurance. Something that would erase the painful reality settling over this room, that Hal Jordan would never fly again.

"It's not so bad," Hal was saying. "If they can't fix me, it's not like the Guardians will totally cut me loose. There are probably things I can do. Help train new Lanterns, for one thing. Diplomatic missions, to corners of the galaxy where the Guardians don't have outposts yet. They'll find something for me to do."

"You're not coming back," Bruce said with hollow certainty. Hal said nothing, and Bruce looked at the stupid granola bar. You can't leave, I brought you dinner, was all he could think to say. He looked up to find Hal's eyes on him, watchful, quiet.

"Six months," Hal said. "I'm giving it six months, on Oa. One way or the other, I'll be back in six months."

Bruce nodded, and Hal just kept watching him. "What are you thinking," Hal said.

"I'm thinking. . . I'm thinking you and I have some truly terrible timing."

"The worst," Hal said with a faint smile. "But you just wait. I'll make it to that goddamn island yet, one way or the other. Six months."

Bruce echoed his smile, just a twitch of his lips. "Six months," he said.

He's never coming back, said the voice of truth inside him, the one he had long ago stopped listening
They sat in a silent room, and said nothing for the rest of the evening.

"Are you getting off my plane or not," Bruce said irritably.

The plane was in the hangar, and he was switching off the cockpit controls, shutting her down. It had been a chastened group for the long flight home. Clark was of course absent, Diana was abstracted and had barely spoken four words, and everyone else had been absorbed in their suddenly fascinating reading material. Oliver and Dinah had de-planed together, however, and unless he was mistaken that had been an awkward dinner invitation extended and accepted in the corner of the hangar. Arthur, obviously, had taken the ocean route home. Barry had only looked up from his book twice, and had blushed furiously both times. Zatanna had been lost in a speculative funk that had been almost more disturbing than Barry's continual squirm of shame. As for Hal, he had slept the whole way, clearly as unembarrassed by anything that had happened in the last few days as he was unconcerned.

"We here already?" He was stretching out his feet and yawning.

"Do you do nothing but sleep?"

"I try to sleep on flights so I don't get up and wrestle the controls from incompetent pilots. Watching other people fly makes my brain bleed out my ears. You could have been worse, though."

"You're too kind. Get up."

Hal tugged his bag out of the overhead compartment and shouldered it, looking at him curiously. "Hell of a ride, Bats," he said.

"I'm not responsible for turbulence."

"I wasn't talking about the flight," he said with a cock-eyed grin. Bruce just glared at him.

"Off the plane," he said. "Now."

"I'm going, I'm going." He went down the stairs with a tuneless whistle, and flipped his shades down. At the bottom of the stairs he leaned back, so he could still see Bruce standing in the hatch. "What was that date again? The twenty-ninth? Twenty-sixth? Refresh my memory."

"Out," Bruce repeated. Hal just laughed harder, and strode off down the hangar, that same irritating whistle carrying back to the plane. "Just messing with you, Bats," he called, and then he was gone, a slim line of black out into the blinding sun, until Bruce couldn't see him any more.
Dear Bruce,

The truth is, there's about a fucking snowball's chance in fucking hell you'll ever read this, so it doesn't really matter what the fuck I say here. Jesus. Maybe I could swear a little less, even in my own head? Anyway, I didn't mean snowball's chance. More like, a pathetically slim possibility that interference in the sub-space transmissions between Oa and Earth will allow anything I write to ever make it through—and honestly, that's what I'm banking on here. If I really thought you were reading this, would I keep writing? Doubtful.

It's possible I take back everything I said about physical therapy on Earth being medieval. These assholes working on me here make the Spanish Inquisition look cutting edge. Bet no one expected that. Buh dum bum.

Oans are not known for their bedside manner, mainly because they don't register emotion. Seriously, it's considered rude to even acknowledge it. I was only half kidding when I said you would love these guys. I have a feeling you would get along like a house afire. All this emotional repression, how could you not feel at home? All their stoicism and blank faces drive me batshit (no offense), but on the upside, there's no one here who gives a shit when the pain gets too bad and I have to yell. It's like they don't even hear you. And it hurts, way the hell worse than anything back in the hospital. It fucking hurts like a motherfucker.

Anyway, I don't want to talk about boring shit like that. If I don't talk about it in my letters, it's because I'm living it every day. Talking to you is when I get to forget about it. Except I was going to say, about the Stoicism thing, that I did a paper my sophomore year at the Academy on Roman Stoicism, and for like a solid three weeks I was convinced I was a Stoic. Like a conversion experience sort of thing. But then I realized admiring a thing was not the same as wanting to be a thing, and in fact repression gives you intestinal distress. And probably cancer. Of course, I'm crippled now, so I'm really not the one to be dispensing medical advice.

Look at that, I somehow managed to bring it back to me and my health. Invalids are self-centered bastards, you ever notice that?

So I've been doing some thinking. I can brood just about as well as you can now. I'm perfecting it, I think. Wish I could send you some selfies, you'd be impressed. My brood looks even better these days because pretty much all I do is throw up—turns out I was wrong about those Oan alternative painkillers, because pain? Who feels pain? Little blue motherfuckers, I swear to Jesus. Anyway, I've lost a few more kilos, and my jaw looks as broody and angular as yours now. I would be pissed about it, if I seriously thought I was going to need to be in shape again. I'm not sure it matters anymore, though.

Fuck, I'm doing it again.

The thinking, that's what I was talking about.

Here's what I think: I think I've done a hell of a lot of fucking in my life. For some of it, I even convinced myself I was in love. You ever done that? Thought you were in love with someone when in fact you were just fucking? That's the title of my autobiography. 'Actually I Was Just Fucking Around,' a novel by Hal Jordan. Bet you've fucked around a hell of a lot more than I have, though.

Anyway, here's another thing I think: I don't actually hate you. Surprise, right? What was your first
clue? Was it when my lips were wrapped around your cock, or when I was moaning your name while coming my fucking brains out? I'm just kidding, I never hated you. And I've wanted to fuck you ever since you took your cowl off. You have any memory of that? In that first battle, right after we met? You told me about your parents, and you told me your name, and you took your cowl off. You showed me your face.

Why'd you do that?

No, I'm serious about that part. Why did you?

That's one of the questions I wish I had had the chance to ask you. Maybe someday I will, who knows.

I need to take a break and try to sleep again. It's the middle of the night here, but I don't sleep much. Too fucking quiet. I used to think I liked quiet, until I spent a few uninterrupted weeks on Oa. But I need to stop, because this shit is exhausting. You ever tried typing with your left hand? Next time I'm going to try the voice recognition software on this thing. But this feels more like writing to you, even if it takes for fucking ever.

H.

P.S. Now I'm thinking I shouldn't have used your name at the beginning of this. I mean, I know this isn't making it to Earth, but it could possibly get intercepted in some asteroid belt along the way, and someone might figure out your identity, which... okay, I guess that makes no sense. Intergalactic space villains are unlikely to care who Batman is.

H. (again)

P.P.S. Am I just inventing reasons not to end this letter? Possibly. I feel a little less alone, sitting here writing to you. I didn't realize before how alone I feel here, all the time. But now I do. Realize it. Okay. Well, thanks, you've cheered me right up.

Fuck you, Bats.

Bruce stared at the screen in silence. He read it through twice before moving. The transmission was a weak one, and it was hard to believe it had even gotten through—there must have been a tiny window of minimal stellar flares on the path of transmission. Even so there were places where the text was interspersed with strange symbols and static, and he had to tease out the meaning. If he hadn't been on the Watchtower, he might never have received it at all.

"Everything okay?" Clark's face was concerned, as he watched Bruce staring at his pad.

"Fine," Bruce said, tucking the pad out of sight. Clark was still looking at him.

"So, you'll tell me when you can?"

"Leave it," Bruce said, and strode out from the monitor deck toward his quarters.

"Isn't that what we do these days?" Clark murmured behind him, but he pretended to ignore it, because that was also what they did.

Dear Hal,

If you could at least send your letter thinking there was a chance, however small, it would be read, I
have not even that comfort. There is no technology available to us here, even on the Watchtower, that could transmit a signal all the way to Oa. So I'm afraid my reply must be written for myself alone—which is another kind of comfort, I suppose.

You asked me a question, and I have been thinking about the answer.

Why did I reveal myself to you, and tell you the story I did, when we first met?

Even after the past few days of thinking about it, I'm not sure I have an answer for you. Or rather, I have several answers, and little hope of finding the right one. I stand by what I said at the time: that you and I are in some way alike. Alike in our humanity, though I think on reflection that was an inadequate answer. Is not Barry as human as the rest of us, despite whatever changes the speed has worked to his metabolism? Is not Clark, for that matter, more human than any of us, despite his ability to shift the orbit of our planet, if he so desired?

So I think the better answer is, I found us to be alike in some other, indefinable way. We are both accustomed to command, for one thing, and to doing things in our own way. You reproached me not too long ago with not knowing how to take orders, and that is probably true, as far as it goes. But despite a life lived under the orders of the Air Force and the Guardians, you have cherished your autonomy every bit as much as I have. There is also a bluntness and directness to you that I recognized, when I saw it, because I have it myself—an inability to say what people expect me to say. I believe that is called discourtesy, I can hear Alfred saying.

Again, none of these answers feel exactly right. It could be I will not be able to give you the answer you're looking for. Like you, I sometimes respond to impulse, and at the most unexpected times. I believed you would understand me, and so I took the risk, and said words I would never have said to anyone else—words I don't say to people, stories I don't tell them. Maybe the simple answer is, because I trusted you. What the sources of human trust are, who can tell? Those roots lie buried in instincts we can never hope to unravel.

Strange, that I should have trusted a person I also—and just as instinctively—disliked.

Foolish to deny that we have disliked each other—do dislike each other, perhaps. You have challenged my authority in the League at every turn. And the truth is, I have been the better for that challenge, and the sharper for it, much as it has irritated me. I did tell you that, I know. I can remember the pleasure of saying 'I loathe and despise you,' even as I knew it was only a partial truth. The lasso allows partial truths, did you know that? It requires skill to manipulate, if you want the entire truth out of someone, and since she unquestionably has that skill, I suspect Diana let me off the hook.

Is there a question lurking behind your question, one you won't voice, even to yourself? Do you wonder, perhaps, if I extended my trust so quickly because I found you desirable? It's not a foolish question. I have spent much of my life suppressing my sexual desires—not because I found them shameful, but because I found them inconvenient. My sex drive is, I confess, higher than normal. I am also, as you pointed out, deeply bisexual. This has made my body my frequent enemy, and has required discipline to overcome. Whether my body responded to your beauty—I can imagine your self-satisfied smile at that, but never mind, as you once pointed out, you know you are beautiful—but whether my body responded in ways I was not aware of or in control of, I cannot say. It's possible, though I do not think that is the true reason either.

I will give this some more thought. Write when you can.

Yours,
B.W.
"It doesn't make any sense," Clark said. "Going to Oa, instead of staying on Earth, or going to the
Watchtower? That's as demented as flying to the middle of the Pacific Ocean when you're
hemorrhaging. There's something wrong with Hal, I'm convinced of it. Something is off."

"Oa wasn't his decision," Bruce pointed out. They were in the cave, and the analysis he was running
allowed his back to be to Clark, for which he was grateful. "The Guardians ordered him there, and
he obeyed."

Clark snorted. "Which has to be the first time he's obeyed a direct order in his life."

"That's not entirely fair."

He could feel the weight of Clark's frown. "I'm sorry, did you just defend GL? Now I know
something is off. I feel like if we could figure out why he went to the island that night, we would
know the answer to whatever's going on with him."

"There's nothing going on with him."

"But why did he go there in the first place? What was the point? Because I can't believe he would
make a mistake like that, even as wounded as he was. I've seen Hal keep it together through worse
than that. Is there something we ought to be investigating? What could he possibly have been hoping
to find?"

"Me," Bruce snapped. "For heaven's sake. He was hoping to find me. Can we drop this now?"

"That doesn't answer anything," Clark said quietly. "It's just as crazy that he would have been
hoping to find you in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Why on earth would he—"

"Because I invited him. Are we done now?"

Clark was silent a few minutes. Bruce didn't turn around from his screen. He disliked it intensely
when Clark was trying to be quiet, because the man was so damned successful at it. He could still
even his breathing, if he chose. "You invited him," he said finally. "Because . . . why?"

He did turn at that, because enough was enough. "Why do you think, Clark?"

"Because . . . you wanted to continue to have sex with him? Why would you need to go to a deserted
island for that?"

"That isn't—"

"Tell me it wasn't more than that, because then I really will know something's wrong. I mean, are
you telling me you and Lantern had some sort of tryst agreed on, that you had invited him to be there
so you could—"

"I don't know, Clark, what do you want me to say? What is the answer that isn't going to get me
thrown against a wall and choked out?"

The white that washed Clark's face was everything the anger in him had hoped to see. Bruce turned
back to his analysis. "I'm sorry," Clark whispered. "I know I have no right to say anything."

Bruce pushed his cowl back and rubbed at his eyes. "You . . . have a right to say whatever you want,
to me. What happened on the island wasn't—"

"My fault," Clark said. "You've said that. And we both know how far that's true, and how far it
isn't." He sat down heavily on a nearby chair, his arms on his knees, studying the floor. "Bruce. If you and Lantern. . . if you found that he. . . if a relationship with Hal. . ."

"It isn't like that," Bruce said quickly. But Clark didn't ask him what it was like, and he didn't attempt an answer.

~

Dear Bruce,

Okay, so, problem. As in, I am having a problem. Here is my problem.

You ever tried jacking off with your left hand?

Yeah, I thought so.

I've never had any problem with sex. I have it when I feel like it, and jerk off on the regular, like any guy. Only, not really being able to jerk off has made me so fucking horny I'm going insane. I mean, I can get off, it's just. . . so goddamn frustrating, you can't even imagine. It takes forever, with my left hand, when all I want to do is just come, and I can't quite get there, you know? I've had more success humping the bed than using my hand, recently. I do better if I can fantasize more, which normally I don't bother doing, because getting off is just getting off—the sooner it's over, the sooner you can get on with your life. But now I have to have some major fantasies, if me and my left hand are going to get there at all.

What I would not fucking give for your mouth right now. Or your giant dick in me, with your hand jacking me. God, I would come so hard, you have no idea. Fuck, I'm just getting myself more turned on. Okay, another topic of conversation. Talk about something else. Think about something else. Anything else.

What was I talking about last time? Oh right, about the fucking around. Well, today's letter appears to have a theme, so let's just go with it. But what I was saying before was, it's pretty funny to think about all the times I thought I was making love, and I was actually just fucking. And then with you, I thought I was just fucking, but it turns out I may have been. . . doing the other thing. Is that possible? Share your thoughts, when you can.

Actually, I'm glad you're not here. Because I would want to fuck, but then I would be too embarrassed to. I wouldn't want you to see me like this. My body, like this. Broken, misshapen. I can't imagine you, in bed with me, like this. My hand that wouldn't do the things I wanted it to, that couldn't touch you the way I want to. And my leg—that would just be awkward, and pretty much all I could do would be to lie there, and no, just no no no.

At some point I'm going to have to come to grips with this. There isn't much progress, is the thing. Maybe a little increase in lateral motion, in the leg. That's it, as far as I can see. You said, when I told you I was going to Oa, that I wouldn't be coming back. I thought you were being ridiculous at the time, just paranoid gloom-and-doom Bats. Now, I'm not so sure. I can't imagine being around people I know, around my old life, like this.

Maybe I'm just having a bad day. There are some good days, believe it or not. I'm going to have to remember to write on the good days too, and not just the bad ones. Wouldn't want you thinking the worst. After all, if you're writing imaginary letters, it's best to do the thing right.

H.
Selina coiled around him like a lithe snake, breathing hard from their chase over half the rooftops of Gotham. He kept his grip on her arms. Years ago, in his early designs of the Batsuit, he hadn't given himself much room, in the jock. Somehow it had never occurred to him he might be getting hard while in the suit. He was older and wiser now, and knew his body better—or knew Selina better, and his body's always-treacherous response to her presence.

"That was fun," she cooed against his ear, her voice a low tremolo. "You're really on your game tonight, aren't you?"

"This is not a game, Selina," he rasped. The stiff wind blew his cape around them both, and the smattering of chilly rain slicked her suit.

"Maybe not," she said. "But I know how to make it one." Her fingers were hot pressure points he could feel, even through the armor of the suit, sliding around to the curve of his ass. He knew from experience he could pop open his groin armor with one hand and slide down the zipper of her suit with the other, and then they could be rutting against the wall here. Everything about her told him she was good to go.

"Come on, Batman," she said, and her voice was almost taunting. "Let's play a little bit." Her lips were brushing the side of his face, and in another second he would—

"No," he said, gripping her wrist.

"Something the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter. But not tonight." And he slipped sideways, arcing off the rooftop before he had a chance to change his mind. Why the hell did I do that, he thought, as he swung around the cornice of the Ty-Con building. That wasn't at all what he had meant to do.

He was so angry with himself that later that night he almost went out and found her, made up some excuse for his behavior earlier. Hal's recent letter, and the pictures it invoked, had been rocketing in his head all day. He wanted release, needed release. But when it had come to it, with Selina, something in him had said no. The no had been out of his mouth before he had been aware he was going to say it.

Well, that was easily remedied. The next day he showed up at Jason Blood's. Jason had never asked him any questions, never placed any demands on him. He knew Jason would be up for it whenever he was. Plus, the edge of danger, the constant threat of the presence of the demon, gave sex with Jason an added thrill.

"Greetings," he said equably, as Bruce pushed open the door of the little curio shop. The shop's dim and dusty corners held mysteries that normally Bruce loved to explore—especially if Jason had treasures in the back he was holding onto to share with Bruce, or artifacts he was puzzling over. But today Bruce had something else in mind, and Jason seemed to sense it.

"Been a while since you've dropped in," he said. Jason's handsome, somber face creased in a smile.

"Yes," Bruce said, his hands in his pockets.

"Anything specific you're interested in today?" Jason's eyes said he knew what Bruce was looking for. Bruce dropped his gaze.

"Actually... actually I need to get going," Bruce said, and he was pushing open the door of the shop, with its little tinkling bell, and was out on the street without another word. He hadn't even apologized, any more than he had to Selina.
What an idiot he was.

What was his plan, to avoid sex for the next few months? Years? What was it, that would not let him take his pleasure when he wanted it?

That night, his body's demands would no longer be ignored, and he rolled over and took himself in hand. He shut his eyes and let the flood of images take him. The things Hal had said in his letter, the things he wanted...

He rolled the other direction, and shifted to his left hand. Hal was right, this was unbelievably awkward. His hand couldn't move quite fast enough to get him there. He rubbed himself on the sheets, trying to get more friction. "Oh God," he panted, and that too made him angry with himself. Moaning as he jacked himself? But in his head, it wasn't his hand, or rather it was his hand, but Hal's body. He saw himself, slipping into Hal's room on Oa, sliding into bed beside him, putting his hands on Hal's hungry, quivering body, bringing him so much pleasure.

It was taking too long with his left, so he tried both hands, a grip like fucking, and in his head he was fucking Hal now. He could hear the string of obscenities Hal let loose when he was being fucked. He mouthed them, whispered Hal's name the way Hal had said his just before he came, sloppy and wet, over Bruce's hand. "Fuck—Hal," he groaned, forgetting to keep his voice down. His sheets were a mess of cum.

He rolled the other direction and wiped himself.

Dear Hal,

A few years before I met you, I suffered an injury not unlike yours. My back was broken—because I was young, because I was overmatched, because I was arrogant enough to believe my skill could overpower brute strength, for all those reasons and more. I was paralyzed, for long weeks that became months, during which I despaired that I would ever know what it was to walk again. The pain was unimaginable. Unimaginable to most, I should say. I think you can imagine it well enough.

The point is, I know what it is to be powerless. To wake up each day and re-inhabit the body you wish you did not. To feel shamed by your body. Humiliated by its brokenness. If I could have found a way to leave the planet, I would have. If I could have found a way not to see the concern and caring on the faces of those I loved, to never see them again, I would have done it.

It would have been useless for Dick or Clark or Alfred to say to me, you are loved and wanted and needed no matter what your body looks like. I'm sure they did say that to me. I just have no memory of it, because I remember nothing but my own shame, my own rage, my own frustration and pain. The self-centered nature of the invalid, as you so rightly said earlier. Looking back, I believe I was close to killing myself. Perhaps I did not go through with it because suicide did not fit the image I had of myself; perhaps my own pride stayed my hand, when no more profound considerations would.

So in a way, the fact that you will never read this makes no difference, since you would not hear these words even if you were in the room when I spoke them. But for what it's worth, I will say them. You are loved. You are wanted. You are needed, no matter what your body looks like. You are larger than your body. We are all more than the sum of our parts.

I think there is an unspoken assumption among all of us in the League that we will have the dignity of a clean death in battle. Not a one of us—possibly not even Clark—believes we will see old age. We believe in our death the way we could never believe in our injury, and yet, injury is a far likelier
outcome. For me, most especially. I walk among gods. Any one of you could end me, and I do not
forget it. The likelihood that I will see fifty grows slimmer with each battle.

So if you are the first of us to suffer permanent injury, rest assured you will not be the last. I suppose
no one should be surprised if you were the first. You were always the most impetuous of us—
excepting Shazam, maybe. And he has his invulnerability and strength to protect him. You have had
only the force of your will. Do you remember when I tried to stop you from going to your death, in
that first battle? And if you die, I asked you. Then I die, you said to me. Maybe that's the answer to
your earlier question, when you asked how we were alike.

Even in a letter to myself, I cannot quite say the things to you I want to say.

On a personal note—and if this is the sort of thing that makes a difference to you—I will find your
body beautiful, in whatever form.

Yours,
B.W.

Dear Bruce,

Okay, so you know what I was thinking about today? I was thinking about some of the stories you
told me when I was in the hospital. About some of the shit your boys pulled, about you when you
were younger. I remember them all, and I was thinking it's not fair you told me all those stories and I
didn't tell you any. Except for the one about using, which you knew before, and that's not really a
story, because I didn't tell you any of the details of that, either.

Not going to, actually. Not because I mind you knowing, but because it's kind of trigger-y, to talk
about using. At least for me it is.

I can tell you this, though. If I were on Earth right now, you have no fucking idea how fucking high I
would be right now. Seriously, fuck this sober shit. How's that for some triggering, huh? None of this
pansy-ass lines on a mirror shit, either. Injectable solution, that's the only way to go. Damn right I
would be high right now, and anyone who tried to stop me, I would jam the needle right in their
fucking eyeball. If I had your money, your entire net worth would be up my veins inside a week.

Oa's starting to look like a better decision every day.

Anyway, stories. Let's see. It's probably best to pick one I would never tell you in actual life. I should
have plenty to choose from. What's that line about all happy lives being alike, but all unhappy lives
being unhappy in their own unique way? Yeah, I know, that's not the line. Tolstoy said families, but I
said lives. Same thing, because what is a life if not the story of all the lives around it that help to fuck
it up?

Yes, fuck you, I have read Anna Karenina. Bet you didn't see that one coming. I didn't either, until I
was at the Academy. Man, I thought I was the shit. Until I attended my first classes, and realized I
was some hick white trash kid from the sticks of Kentucky who knew less than nothing and who
needed to fix that by reading everything I could get my hands on.

I swear most of my classmates at the Academy probably thought I was a mute, because until I
learned how to get rid of that accent I didn't want to open my mouth. I used to sneak to the commons
room after lights-out (yes, you better believe we had lights-out at the Academy, they regulated how
often you could take a shit in that place) and I would turn the TV on really low volume and just listen
to it for hours, in the middle of the night. Infomercials, who the hell cared. Just to memorize the
voices. Just to practice sounding like something other than what I was. Leo Tolstoy and the OxiClean guy — they made me who I am today. No lie. Also I read a lot of Kierkegaard, but that's a dark place we don't talk about.

I took Russian for a while, my first two years. We had to take a modern language and I thought Russian sounded bad-ass. Actually, the truth is I thought Russian would mask my Kentucky accent better than, say, French, and the further advantage of Russian is that all Americans have terrible Russian accents, so no one could make fun of me. Fun fact: Count Vronsky's name, in Anna Karenina, is meant to remind the reader of voron, which means lie. Such an asshole. I never liked him, not from the first. He was nothing but bad news for Anna, and he never deserved her. Hey, how come that's a Buzzfeed quiz you never see—which Tolstoy character are you? I would rock the shit out of that quiz. Jesus, that's another thing I'm going to be behind on, if I ever get back to Earth, are those stupid quizzes. Now I'll never know which internal organ I am most likely to be.

My stories are for shit.

How come you never write?

H.

"Do you hear anything from Hal?"

Bruce looked up, startled. "He's half a galaxy away. What would I be likely to hear?"

"Nothing. I just meant, maybe someone coming from that direction had brought a message, or something like that. I just thought maybe he would communicate with us a little."

Bruce just grunted. But he knew Clark could hear—had heard—the astonished skip of his heart, at the mention of communication from Hal. It would be obvious to Clark that he was hiding something. And there was no reason to hide it, really. It would be the most natural thing in the world to say, As it turns out, a few transmissions can get through, on Oan frequencies. I've had a couple of messages from him, he seems to be doing fine.

Only then, Hal's letters would be for someone else. They were only for him, and it would be a violation to tell Clark about them, to mention them. They were his, and his alone.

Clark sat beside him on the sofa, handed him his beer—chilled, artisanal because Clark thought it made sense to spend money on ridiculous things like that—and settled beside him on the sofa. He flipped on the game, which neither of them cared about.

"I'm going to ask your forgiveness," Clark said, and Bruce sighed.

"Not again," he said. "Clark, you ask my forgiveness at least once a week. It's exhausting."

"No," Clark said. "Not for that. Not for anything I did on the island. I wasn't in control of that, I know."

"Thank Christ. Now may we watch the game?"  

"Not yet." Clark's hand hovered on the mute button. "I'm going to ask your forgiveness for being a bad friend."

That silenced him. "A bad friend," he said, after a minute. "Clark... I can't imagine a single time you have been a bad friend."
"Then you don't have much imagination," Clark said with a thin smile. "Look, just let me say this, okay?" Bruce gave a resigned gesture, and settled back with his beer.

"I'm not apologizing for the things I did on the island. But I am apologizing for everything I felt that made my actions on the island possible. Because all the island—well, all Waller's little experiment did, was bring out what was already there, in all of us. It dramatically lowered our inhibitions. It didn't create anything new. It didn't make us do things we didn't secretly want to do, anyway."

Bruce studied the label on his beer. "My point is," Clark said quietly, "I'm not the great friend you think I am. Too often I want you all to myself. I get angry at everything and everyone who has a piece of you, sometimes. This might surprise you to hear, but I've never really had a lot of close friends, in my life."

"You don't say."

Clark nudged him with his knee. "Shut up and listen. And because I'm not the best with the friendship thing, I get... possessive. Really possessive. And that's not being a great friend. For that, I'm apologizing. I am going to try to be better about that part."

"Okay," Bruce said, warily.

"And when it comes to Hal—"

"Please," Bruce said. "Don't. I understand what you are trying to do, and I'm asking you not to."

"Okay. But if you need someone to talk to, I just want you to know that—"

"I'm sorry. Hal cannot be this thing that I talk about with you. He just... can't."

"Okay," Clark said. "Okay." Bruce caught the shadow of disappointment on his face, and its quick suppression. Clark flipped the mute button on the TV, and the game was back on. Bruce looked for a way to say thank you or you actually are a good friend or any of the things normal people should be able to say, but he couldn't find how to say them. So he drank all of his beer, even though it was wretched, and watched the whole game, even though Dick had told him the outcome last night.

——

Dear Hal,

It's been a few weeks since I've had a letter. The probability is, the window of communications between Earth and Oa has closed, and the conditions that were allowing your messages to make it through have shifted, and that will be that. It's curious, how dependent I have become on your letters, and how important they have become to me. I read them and refer to them frequently. I don't give up hope easily, though. It is still possible I will hear from you again.

I have been thinking about the Tolstoy question. I'm going to assume you know as much about War and Peace as you do about Anna Karenina. Do you remember Natasha? Natasha was convinced her life was a tragedy, when in fact it was... whatever the opposite of a tragedy is. A divina commedia. I think that's true of many of us, and of me as well. We cling to our tragedies, believing they define us, when all along our lives are defined by the thousand things we brush aside as of no consequence. Or the loves we brush aside. I wouldn't know, about that last. Love has not come to me often enough for me to take its appearance lightly.

Natasha believed her happiness was an affront to her grief, to her particular way of seeing herself. I'm not suggesting I am Natasha, or that you are. I just find the story resonant, is all. Tolstoy resists
that sort of easy stereotyping of his characters, because he doesn't write characters, he writes people, in all their unrepeatable imperfection. I am not Natasha, and you are not Natasha, because only Natasha is Natasha.

Your Russian is probably better than mine. I find that irritating.

It is harder to talk into the silence, without hearing from you. Of course, it was silence before, but I could fool myself into believing we were talking.

The months drag on, and you are not here. I don't believe you will forget your promise, though.

I think I will continue to write to you, even if I don't hear from you. In some dimension of the universe, our letters might intersect. In some even stranger dimension, you and I might yet intersect.

Yours,
B.W.

P.S. I wonder which would surprise you more: that I am in love with you, or that I can acknowledge it? If you are equally shocked by both—well, you're not the only one.

Dear Bruce,

I had this cracked-out dream last night, which I thought I would tell you about because it took place on your island. That's about the extent of your involvement in it, sorry to say—you own the property it took place on. For some reason we were living on your island, is all.

The we being Amber and Buck and me. Also my middle school friend Len, but to be honest he didn't really advance the plot much. Amber is my mother, but I haven't called her that for a lot of years. The last I heard—this was a Christmas card year before last, a legitimate Christmas card with one of those 'hello I'm a scented douchebag' newsletters inside it—she had gotten married to some guy with a decent amount of money and a huge car dealership in Knoxville, and was now a Christian. Or at least, she talked about 'their church' a lot in the newsletter. There was a picture of her and this guy inside, standing in front of their big stone fireplace, and she had on this kickin little red cocktail dress and had obviously had some serious work done, so the dealership must make good money.

Let's just say her house did not look like any of the roach-infested shitholes we lived in while I was growing up.

Looking back over this, it reads like I am a bad son, or maybe an emotionally detached sociopath. Maybe both of those are accurate. Emotional detachment was kind of a survival mechanism, where she was concerned.

You've got all this info in a file somewhere, I'm pretty sure. I'm betting you've done deep background work on all the League members, and if I asked you, you'd say it was for our own protection, in case anybody ever came after any of us. Who died and made you East Germany, huh? Yeah yeah, I know. We all have our survival mechanisms.

So, who's got the most surprising dirt in their file? Come on, you can tell me.

Anyway, in my dream we were living on your island, and Buck was there—he was Amber's boyfriend for a while, on and off. He lived with us from time to time, whenever he got evicted or was just out of jail or was looking for a cheap way to score meth. In other words, he stayed with us a lot. I haven't thought about Buck for a lot of years, so the dream was. . . unsettling.
Look at that, two lies in one sentence. A record even for me. The truth is, if I haven't thought about Buck it's because I've worked hard not to think about him, so seeing him in my dream was not so much unsettling as fucking terrifying. How come in my dreams I'm never the Green Lantern? Why am I not the avenging finger of the universe come to flick evildoers off the face of the planet, instead of some scared twelve-year-old kid trying to make himself small while he's getting the shit beat out of him? It's funny, I've never thought to ask anyone else in the League if they have powers in their dreams. In your dreams, are you Batman?

Never mind, I know the answer to that one.

You know what, I don't want to talk about my dream any more.

My friend Kilowogg stopped by to see me yesterday. He would drive you insane — he has zero sense of personal space. But it was good to see him. It was mainly business though. There's this diplomatic posting he's hoping I'll accept in his sector, and I keep putting him off.

I feel like hell. Didn't sleep much, after that dream.

It gets a bit discouraging, all this talking to someone who can't hear me. It's also borderline pathetic. Well, who gives a shit. Not me, and not today.

H.

Dear Hal,

You were right, obviously. I am not Batman, in my dreams. Or if I am, I am an ineffectual one. I will dream that I am at a party, and Bane is there, and I have to find him before he hurts anyone else, and I reach inside my tux for a batarang but it's only a toy, I was only ever fooling myself.

I never wanted marriage or children because I never wanted to sit in another pool of blood and wonder what I could have done differently to protect the ones I love. I never wanted to experience loss, or the pain of that kind of failure again. Pretty ironic, considering the course of my life, and its string of loss and failures more profound than I could ever have imagined.

Do you know the old story about the man in the marketplace at Baghdad who sees Death? In terror he borrows a horse and flees like the wind, riding hard through the night all the way to Samarra in order to escape Death. When Death finds him the next day, she says, I'm sorry I looked so startled when we met in Baghdad—you see, I had an appointment to meet you the next day in Samarra.

My point being, we can't run from our destiny. I never meant to have a family, I never meant to have people around me I would give my life for a thousand times over, I never meant to be vulnerable at so many points. The more I attempted to shut myself off, the more love tore at the shell of my armor to let in the light. We can never run from who we were meant to be.

Your letters are infrequent now, at best. I have no way of knowing if that is because you have given up writing, or if your letters are not making it through. And if you have given it up, is it because you are ill? In pain? I'm a tiresome correspondent, I know. I lack your narrative gift, your lightheartedness, your ability to find the wry humor in everything. You make me feel cloddish and dour, some sad grim-faced Eeyore to your... well, I think I'll leave that metaphor there.

Your recent letter reminds me there are worse things than losing one's parents at a young age. The tragedy of your childhood was not a single catastrophic night in an alley, but a long slow spiral of ugliness that threatened to pull you down and destroy you at every turn. (Yes, I know the broad outlines.) But somehow you emerged from that wreckage full of not bitterness and rot, but integrity
and determination and humor and strength. I don't know why that should be. I don't know why it should be that so many of the criminals I've encountered over the years come from good and loving homes, with families that gave them everything they should have. The only answer I can find is one I gave you earlier: we are larger than the sum of our parts. Evil arises in the most unexpected places, and so does beauty. We are who we were meant to be.

I await your reply.

Yours,
B.W.

He knew it was ridiculous, but he did it anyway: six months to the day after Hal had left for Oa, Bruce arrived on the island. There was nothing that suggested to him he should do it. Hal had never said he should. His last letter from Hal had been seven weeks ago. There was no reason for him to go to the island.

But he went, six months to the day. He sat on the beach, and looked at the view Hal had found so beautiful. He cooked a light supper, and had a glass of wine, and watched the sunset from the terrace. And then he watched the night drape the ocean, and the stars dot the sky, so close and densely layered they looked like you could brush your finger against them, out here.

He went inside and sat on the edge of the bed, and folded his clothes in a chair, and curled naked in the sheets.

He knew it had been ridiculous. To a normal person, "six months" did not mean six months to the exact day and hour from the moment I am speaking. It was a rough estimate, a general timeframe. There was nothing to say Hal wouldn't show up tomorrow, or the next day, or the week after. And there was even less to suggest he would show up here, on the island. It was perfectly reasonable to assume he would go back to his apartment, or the Watchtower, or any number of places before he would come here. And if he thought to look for Bruce—which it was far from certain he would—he would go first to Gotham, not here. So the fact that he hadn't shown up on the island, on the exact day and hour, was meaningless, really. He had not expected anything different.

This date meant nothing. He knew that for a fact. He also knew, just as certainly, that he would not see him again.

Strange, the hollowness in his core, at the thought of that.

He fell asleep in the small hours, lulled by the window open to the surf. It was impossible ever to feel completely safe here again; impossible to believe there was a single place on the face of the planet Batman could go where he could relax his guard completely. He had learned that lesson too well. But he drifted off nonetheless, though he had not thought he would, and awoke to the creak of a floorboard.

His head shot up, but there was a hand on his shoulder, pushing him back down. "I was going to try to do this suave thing where I got in bed beside you," the voice whispered, the impossible voice, "but getting the drop on Batman was probably too ambitious for—"

Bruce's arms seized him, wrapped him, Bruce's mouth found him, Bruce's body enfolded him. He tried to say words but they were caught in Hal's mouth, tried to feel every part of him with shaking hands but Hal's hands were over him first. "So I guess that's a no," Hal said softly, "on my taking the sofa. I was going to be a gentleman—"
"Stop talking," Bruce murmured, and Hal laughed, into Bruce's mouth, which didn't stop kissing him. "Never stop talking."

"Still conflicted, I see," Hal whispered back. "God, Bruce—" He was rolling them, his hands were everywhere.

"You—" Bruce thought to pull back to look at him, and he took in the longer, shaggier edges of hair, the overly sharp jaw, the eyes that were larger and more haunted than he remembered. His fingers brushed Hal's face. The smile that crinkled the corner of his mouth, though, it was Hal's smile. "How are you, are you—"

"Well I don't know," he said, in that slow drawl. "Why don't you take me for a test drive and find out?"

"Do you say lines like that because they have worked for you in the past? Or because you are genetically incapable of stopping yourself?"

Hal had him pinned by his shoulders. Somehow Hal had gotten half out of his clothes already, probably because Bruce had been all but ripping them off him. Hal's eyes were somber. They were terrifying eyes, and they saw too much. Hal was rubbing his cock on Bruce's, slowly.

"God, you sleep naked," he said. "I knew you would."

They were still whispering, who knew why. "Hal," Bruce said, and he watched Hal's eyes flutter shut at the sound of it, so he said it again: Hal, Hal, Hal. Hal was working all the way out of his pants now, pulling off his shirt, they were naked together now, and their grappling was clumsy and hungry. He didn't need to know anything but Hal's body up against his, didn't need to taste anything but Hal's mouth. He was painfully, rigidly hard, and Hal had a hand wrapped around his cock, just slowly caressing him, but it was too much, too—

"God," he choked, convulsing, and Hal's hand didn't stop, just didn't stop. "Sorry," he panted, when it was over, when he could breathe again. "Sorry, I—"

"Don't ever apologize for that," Hal was saying, his voice rough. He licked a dribble of cum off Bruce's cock, licked down and swallowed more. "All that for me?"

"Yes," Bruce said.

"What happened to Mr. Long Slow Fuse?"

"I—it's been a while."

Hal stopped his licking to raise his head. "A dry spell huh? How long of one?"

"Six months," he said, and the smile was wiped from Hal's face.

"Is that for me too?" his voice even quieter, and Bruce nodded, and Hal made a noise like a groan in his throat before wrapping himself tight around Bruce, his body shaking. "Get me off, baby, come on, I need it too," he whispered, and Bruce got a hand around him, jerked as rough as he knew Hal liked it. And because they were naked he could get a grip on Hal's ass, could push with his fingers at Hal's perineum, could quest back beyond that until Hal was grunting—forward into Bruce's fingers, back onto the pressure of Bruce's fingers, mouth slack in pleasure.

"Oh Jesus—gonna come—"
"Good boy," Bruce said, and Hal bent like a bow—God, he was flexible as ever—and spurted thick streams of cum that landed on Bruce's face and chest and belly. He shook like he was being electrocuted, and Bruce gentled him through it, licked his fingers when he was done.

"You made a mess," Bruce said, and Hal grinned, eyes still not clearly focused on anything, collapsing on top of him. Bruce wiped them as best he could and pulled the sheets around them. He stroked Hal's back, trying to find any scars, any sign of damage, checking to make sure he was here and whole and real, trying to memorize the skin under his fingers.

"I'm not going anywhere," Hal murmured, against his chest, and Bruce had to turn his face away because it was too much, it was like Hal's hand on his cock before. "It's okay," Hal said, and turned Bruce's face back to his, kissing him with lazy, messy kisses.

"Tell me you're not in pain," Bruce said. "Just tell me that."

"Beautiful," Hal said, knotting fingers in his hair, "I am not in pain. They fixed me up right. Can we talk in the morning? Because right now I really just need to sleep, if that's okay."

"Yes," Bruce said.

"We're cool if I pass out and drool on your chest?"

"We're cool."

He had some idea he would stay awake the rest of the night, Hal's head heavy on his chest, but he was asleep before his third breath, too.

He woke to searing light, because highly-skilled and merciless assassins had clearly sneaked onto his island in the night and ruthlessly pulled back the curtains. Who pulled back the curtains on bright sunlight? Probably the same people who thought whistling from the kitchen was a good idea. He stumbled up and pulled something on—his eyes weren't open enough to see what it was, really—and dragged into the kitchen.

Hal was standing at the stove, with that same irritating whistle, working on what appeared to be bacon and eggs. The smell assaulted Bruce's stomach, and he wrenched his face into a deeper grimace, staggering in the direction of the coffee maker, which was... empty.

"Wow," Hal said. "Really not a morning person, huh. Maybe I'm not either, I can't tell. Military life does this to you, after a while. Your coffee maker looked too complicated, so I just made instant. Here you go. You want to drink this, or should I just open a vein?"

"Shut up," Bruce croaked. He tipped the swill down his throat, struggling to control his gag at the taste. At least his eyes were clearing enough for him to focus on stationary objects now, and he began to fumble with the coffee maker.

"I looked to see if maybe there was an instruction manual in one of the drawers," Hal said, sounding apologetic. "Why does a fucking coffeemaker have to be so complicated?"

"You fly F-18's," Bruce rasped.

"Hey, that was a whole sentence, good job."

On his way out of the kitchen he landed a satisfying smack on Hal's head, but all it got him was a laugh. He stuck his head under the tap in the bathroom, brushed his teeth, and then stuck his head
under the tap again for good measure. He pulled on actual clothes—he appeared to be wearing Hal's boxers—and re-appeared in the kitchen, looking (he hoped) closer to human. Hal was decanting the bacon and eggs onto plates, and showed every evidence of producing sausage as well, with possibly biscuits.

"I don't actually eat breakfast," Bruce said.

"You'll eat breakfast," Hal said, so Bruce sat, and tried to pick at his eggs, which looked the least nauseating. Hal was watching him.

"So do you not eat breakfast because you don't like breakfast food, because you don't like mornings, or because you don't like food?"

"Possibly all three. And mornings are all right, just not quite this early."

"It's eleven."

The coffeemaker pinged, and Bruce put a mug underneath it, figuring that in deference to his guest he would not do what he wanted, which was just to stick his mouth under the cool metal spigot.

"You're quite the cook," Bruce remarked.

"You do what you have to do. Breakfast is pretty much my one meal, but yeah, I like cooking. Most of what I make is more on the functional end, however. Not exactly what you're used to."

"Hang on," Bruce said, because he had just remembered. He went back to his room and dug through the suitcase until he found it. He returned and put the box in front of Hal. "Welcome home," he said tersely.

"You seriously got me a present?"

"Before I knew what a sadist you are in the mornings. Just open it."

Hal grinned and lifted the lid of the small but heavy box. The smile on his face slowly died. Bruce's chest was pounding as Hal lifted out the book.

"It's a first edition," Bruce said. Hal wasn't looking at him, but at the leather cover of his book. Bruce was beginning to be nervous.

"It's..." Bruce began, but trailed off. He wasn't sure what to say, because he couldn't read Hal's face. Hal was just looking at the book: a first edition Anna Karenina, in Russian. He hadn't opened the book lid, but inside the first page was a small inscription that read To H.W.J. from B.W. If Hal would say something, anything, he would feel much less worried.

Finally Hal looked up. "You read my letters," he said.

"I did."

Hal put his head in his hands. Bruce got up and went back to the bedroom, and dug around in his suitcase some more. He found the packet of letters and brought them back to the kitchen, put them on the table beside the book. "I wrote you back," he said. If only he could tell what Hal was thinking.

Hal ran a finger over the packet of letters, over the cover of the book. He looked at Bruce. And then he picked up the book, and the letters, and set them on the kitchen counter.

"You don't have to read them if you—"
Bruce was swept in a crushing green vise and spread on his back on the kitchen table, powerless. "You," Hal said. Bruce gave up trying to struggle, because when you were under the power of the Green Lantern, what could you really do?

"Look out," Hal said. "You're about to get kissed." Hal climbed on top of him, on the table. He gave the table an assessing nudge with his knee. "How sturdy is this thing, anyway?"

"Let's find out," Bruce said, and pulled Hal's mouth down to his.

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