Exhibition[ist]

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Summary

When one of Raven’s newer abilities manifests in a way she never could have expected, the empath unwittingly ends up dragging one of her teammates into a peculiar situation that might just alter the state of their relationship forever…COMPLETE.
Robin meant well, she knew that deep down. Nonetheless, Raven couldn’t help but feel slighted by his lack of faith. The exchange of a sympathetic smile and an equally shy glance from just beyond his mask had not gone unnoticed by her.

Raven furrowed her brows, knowing that she shouldn’t become emotional about something so insignificant, and yet…

She wanted to prove him wrong.

It was almost like an innate desire — something selfish that urged her to make an impression and catch him off guard, perhaps. Afterall, it was always him coming to her rescue. Maybe it was about time that changed. She was perfectly competent, he’d even assured her of that on many an occasion.

Overthinking it, she figured. Robin wasn’t the type to let his ego dictate his actions — one of the many feats Raven had come to admire and respect in their steadfast leader. Knowing him, he was merely taking on the heavier burden, just so she didn’t have to carry any of it herself. Selfless and brave. Starfire was lucky to have somehow found his love and affection beyond the mask as well. The entire team was very well aware that only Koriand’r knew the man behind the costume, and judging by the nature of their slowly blossoming romance, it had seemed more fitting than insulting to the others.
As she contemplated this, Raven observed the boy wonder struggling against his restraints, trying to reach the utility belt Slade had no doubt intentionally left just a smidge out of reach. He was gritting his teeth from the effort, groaning as his gloved fingers waggled a mere few inches away from the silver tray next to him. If she was being honest, he looked ridiculous in the moment, not heroic. Sometimes, she needed to remember that Robin was only human, with human capabilities. It was so often they were left starstruck by his impressive skills that even she’d forget how powerless he truly was without all his gadgets and acrobatics.

All the smarts in the world, and it had seemed that Slade had won this round.

Then again, it was always in the masked man’s best interest to make Robin appear incompetent to his team — for them to lose faith in his skills and bring him down to a level beyond their recognition. As Raven struggled against her own mental and physical bindings, she realized that the bastard was going to get away with it, too.

“Damn it!” she heard Robin cry out in frustration. He was breathing hard and fast, the vein in his temple throbbing from the exertion. His voice almost carried in the empty, dark basement, bouncing off the concrete walls.

After more helpless writhing against the tight, leather straps that held him down, Robin seemed to finally pause to catch his breath, beads of sweat running down the sides of his face. She hated seeing him so angry with himself; hated watching him fail and realize that he was failing both of them. For the upteenth time that night, Raven tried yet again to call forth her own strength. Concentrate, focus…

“Azarath, metrion, zinthos!” For a brief moment, the buckle of the straps twitched to life, her eyes flashing an opaque white as she called forth her power. Clenching her teeth, she tried to keep it going, but the amount of effort it took to maintain even the weakest variation of her soul self, was exhausting her beyond her usual limits.

Unable to do anything more than barely wiggle her own restraints, Raven finally let go and collapsed her head onto the hard, cold metal of the stretcher she was laid on. Her own breathing came fast and laboured, like she’d just run a forty kilometer marathon, and the room around her seemed to spin. Her fingers were numb and tingling, and her head was still swimming from whatever drug Slade had doped her with when she’d been knocked unconscious.

After she had caught her breath again, she squeezed her eyes shut, swallowed her pride, and admitted to the futility of the situation. “It’s no use,” she told Robin with a shake of her head, “I
can’t seem to...to focus at all.”

“It’s alright, Raven,” he reassured her, mustering up a half-hearted smile for her benefit. “Don’t overdo it. You’ll need to save your strength for when we get out of here.”

*When.* Wasn’t *he* the optimist.

Raven wasn’t going to kid herself; the other Titans had no clue where they were, and Slade had been meticulous in his cunning to ensure that they never would. Ever the careful assassin, he’d taken every precaution not to leave behind even a trace or a hint of his diabolical plan — whatever that was. The only way the other Titans stood a chance at getting back the rest of their teammates was if they opted to deal with Slade himself, and give him exactly what he wanted.

The big question of the night was, of course, *what* precisely that entailed.

As per usual, the Titans had more or less reacted to Slade’s appearance rather than strategizing. When the call had come in, Robin’s immediate retaliation was unquestioned, and the gang had departed after him in a hurry, worried about their obsessive leader first and Slade’s museum heist second. Wherever Deathstroke was concerned, Robin became a different person, often endangering himself more than anyone else. Of this, every Titan was painfully aware.

Despite all of her best efforts to quell his addled mind, Raven had never been as successful as Starfire in getting through to the troubled youth when he was at his absolute worst. Their mental bond had always been strong, it was true, but the emotional bond he’d naturally built with Kory over the years had obviously been...*stronger.* Such was the nature and compulsive power of one of the most terrifying, untamed emotions Raven had ever come to learn of: love. It might have sounded corny and sappy, like something out of a really bad harlequin romance novel, but Raven was well aware that certain emotions were *not* to be trifled with.

If anything, she was sort of hoping the powerful affections Starfire held for Robin would be enough to help the fearsome warrior in tracking down and rescuing them from Slade’s clutches. After all, not much got in the way of a very angry, vengeful, and passionate Tamaranean, or so Raven had learned throughout the years.

“They’ll find us,” Robin interrupted her thoughts, his voice cool and distant now that he was rested. “We have to believe in the others. They *have* to find us, I know they will.” His faith in his team was always unquestionable, and it echoed in the resolve of his voice.
It was like Robin was in her head, reading her very thoughts, always knowing just the right thing to say to ease her nerves. It was uncanny, but also highly appreciated. Raven tried to muster up a small smile, but even her lips were numb and disobedient.

And that was when it hit her; the idea springing forth from her own thoughts, and facilitated by Robin’s words.

Her eyes widened, and her heart panged and fluttered in her chest. There were butterflies in her stomach.

*Could* she do it?

Was she even capable?

“I’ve got an idea, I think…,” she confessed aloud, unable to hold back her excitement at the thought. The words bubbled out of her in a giddy panic, and she was all the more glad it was Robin she kept for company and not the other Titans, who may have judged her for such an uncanny outburst.

Robin, now facing the empath, was studying her curiously, a brow raised. She’d evidently piqued his interest and he was patiently awaiting her plan with a hint of skepticism in the tight lines around his mouth.

Raven licked her dry lips and said, “I know that they might find us eventually, but I really don’t want to lay around here and wait for Slade to figure out what he wants to do with us in the meantime. It’s a long shot, but, in the off chance it *does* work, it can help them get here faster.”

Robin’s expression remained unchanged; he was still having trouble understanding where she was going with this. Raven took in a deep breath through her nose, impatience wearing at her mind, before she expanded further with a mildly annoyed tone, “Lillith and I went through some training exercises together the last time I visited Titans East. Her powers are telepathic while mine rely on empathy, but we both shared the ability to create a mental bond, like I did with you all those years ago.”

“However, she was able to project more than *thoughts* to me, even without an established connection. Easily enough, Lillith was able to send me vivid images from her mind; whatever she willed me to receive. Her magic was so potent, they felt real enough to touch, like they were
happening right in front of me.”

Raven paused, waiting for the dawn of understanding to grace Robin’s handsome features. She knew that he would figure out what she was getting at eventually. He’d always been the best Titan to glean her intentions, if only because they both had a very similar line of thinking, especially in dire situations like the one they were currently in.

“So, you think you can project our whereabouts to the others?” Robin asked.

Raven frowned. “I can try to. Lillith said there was no reason I shouldn’t be able to perform the same skill, using my most powerful emotion to connect to an individual, since emotions are the source of my strength. But…,” she paused, breaking eye contact.

“You’ve never really done it before, have you?” Robin finished for her.

Raven shook her head. “Not successfully, no. Until that moment, I didn’t even think that I could. Lillith is leagues better than me, and doesn’t require the aid of emotions to do the things she does.”

“Hmm, there’s no harm in trying, I suppose, so long as you don’t wear yourself out. What image were you thinking of sending them?” Robin looked around the dimly lit, windowless basement, and its eerie, concrete walls that surrounded them. “This place isn’t exactly thriving with scenic views.”

“Slade’s poison took some time to run its course. He’d left me paralyzed, but not unconscious right away. I caught glimpses of street names and landmarks before it took hold of my mind, too.” It gave her a bit of a headache trying to recall the images, but she knew she had to hold onto them for the sake of both their lives. When all she had had were her eyes, she’d strained against the dark blanket of night, and done her best to take note of where Slade was dragging them. However, it had been only a matter of time before the poison had worked its way to her brainstem, and toyed with her consciousness as well. She’d come to next to a fidgeting Robin, and feeling like she was experiencing a form of sleep paralysis.

Robin smirked at her keen observation. “Useful,” he complimented her. “Do your thing, Raven. If Slade comes down to play, I’ll do my best to keep him distracted.”

If she was being brutally honest, Raven didn’t really have a clue as to what she was even attempting. Lillith had made it all look so easy, but of course it was easy when telepathy was her forte. She could invade the mind and thoughts of anyone she chose, whereas Raven required an
emotional attachment of sorts, among other things. After all, there were still some parts of her powers that she was continuously learning — exploring. Always mindful of the borders that crossed into the territory of her evil father.

Not wanting to waste anymore precious time, Raven cast her doubts aside briefly and focused on the task at hand. Taking in a deep breath and exhaling through her nose, Raven closed her eyes and thought of each of her teammates.

Cyborg.

Beast Boy.

Starfire.

They were her friends, her newfound family. Over the years, she’d come to care deeply for them, and form meaningful bonds with each. All she had to do was find the strongest emotion attached to one of them, and hope against all odds that they received the images in her mind. Sort of like a telepathic fax machine, if she was lucky.

Azarath. Metrion. Zinthos…

Not wishing to risk it, Raven thought of a specific, suitable emotion for each Titan, and used it to focus and channel the information to their mind's eye. Three was always better than one.

For Cyborg, she thought of camaraderie and trust. Raven had never been keen on ever changing the leadership of the team, but if Victor took over for whatever reason, she’d have gladly followed him off the edge of the world. She trusted him with her life, as she had so many times before, and he trusted her with his.

For Beast Boy, the emotion most prominent was that of loyalty. It was true the two of them had had their fair share of ups and downs in their complex relationship, but ultimately, they both knew that they could always count on one another. Through thick and thin, Garfield had her back, even when the odds were stacked against her, and she would return the favor.

Last but not least was Starfire, and that emotion was perhaps the most obvious to Raven. Kindness. The princess inspired it out of everyone around her, most infectious even to her empathic friend.
Koriand’r made Raven strive to be better — to be the person she believed her to be; good and kind. No one else on the planet was as pure in intention as the Tamaranean princess.

Raven channeled all the energy she had, trying to look past the poison that clouded her mind like a thick smoke and left her body paralyzed. Robin granted her the silence she needed to concentrate, and it was as if she was no longer in a dank, musty, cold basement anymore. Nothing existed. Time stilled, and in her mind, she was alone. She thought of them each, once more.

Cyborg, trust.

Beast Boy, loyalty.

Starfire, kindness.

She could see them there before her, could recount the familiar, friendly faces that often gave her comfort in her time of need. Reaching out, Raven tried to connect to them — one at a time — drawing up the images and senses with as much clarity as she could muster under the influence of the toxin.

An abandoned building, falling apart.

The sound of waves, gently swaying to the summer night breeze.

The taste of salt on her tongue from the air.

A barn, now turned into a warehouse.

The dead silence of night, and the gravel of the pavement, with a streak of yellow paint.

It wasn’t much to go by, she knew that, but it had been all she could remember before passing out.

She relayed each and every one of these items to her teammates in hopes of reaching them, careful to follow all the instruction Lillith had bestowed on her.
Once she was done, expending every iota of energy she had left on the mental action, Raven snapped out of her trance, only to wipe out just as Slade’s burgeoning shadow hung over her still form…
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Somewhere in the back of her mind, Raven could still hear Robin's calming voice echoing instruction to her.

'Don't over do it. You'll need to save your strength for when we get out of here.'

It was slower than she remembered, with him enunciating every word, every syllable, like her mental capacity itself was lagging. Or had time actually come to a crawl? It was always so hard to tell whenever her body would shut itself down to heal. Even now, she could feel the way the poison was being expelled from her body, evaporating like a mist from her pores. It was a painstakingly slow procedure, but the damage she'd sustained had obviously done enough of a number on her that Raven was forced into autopilot. Call it a natural survival instinct, or something of that ilk.

It didn't happen often, but when it did, she knew that she'd overexerted herself to the point just past exhaustion. Her existence was so fine-tuned, that even if she'd been standing and the built-in mechanism had kicked in, she'd faint and never hit the ground, hovering just an inch above the floor so as to not cause further harm.

The only downside to it all was, of course, the waking up part.

It was always the worst.

The only way she could think to describe it was like being in a pleasant dream one moment, without the vaguest hint that she was dreaming, only to awaken to reality abruptly, like a bucket of ice water had been thrown at her face. It was like coming up for air without realizing she'd been drowning, and all her senses would immediately return so that she felt everything. All at once.

Her body was playing catch-up but without granting her mind the time to adjust as well.

So, when Raven finally did come out of her self-induced coma, she'd hoped that she would be in her bed, or in the least, the med-bay, greeted by the familiar buzzing of Victor's state-of-the-art medical equipment and some friendly faces.

Instead, she found that she was resting on the cold, hard ground of the basement where Slade had taken her, one side of her body almost numb, like she'd been laying there for hours. From what she could tell when her eyes shot open, Raven was in a dark corner, facing the concrete wall, but behind her, she could now hear her friends engaged in ferocious combat. Her auditory senses came back full throttle, and a rush of air entered her lungs as she remembered to was like her lungs were burning for oxygen. In the background, there was the familiar skree of Starfire's flaming hot starbolts and her warriors roar as she went on the offensive. Victor loading up shot after shot of his blaster cannon and firing. Beast Boy growling in the form of a green cougar seconds from pouncing on its prey. The whoosh of Robin's Bo staff slicing through air as he swung it around at his enemies.
The room spun when Raven tried to sit up, feeling like someone had taken a sledgehammer to her skull.

"Ugh," she groaned, her eyes forcefully squeezing shut from the pressure building between her temples. In time, the vertigo would pass.

The poison that had left her weak and paralyzed was gone without much of a trace, but Raven didn't dare call upon her powers just yet. It angered her that she would most likely be forced to sit this one out. A petty part of her wanted to exact some much needed vengeance on Slade and his Slade-bots for what he'd done to her and Robin. But mostly, she was glad to see that her teammates had come to their rescue, just in the nick of time from the looks of it, too.

Raven slowly stumbled to her feet, wavering as she watched the dark room light up with the Titans' explosive powers, their bright colours almost blinding her and making her stomach twist.

Blue.

Green.

Red.

The Titans moved quickly and in perfect unison, eliminating the remaining bots efficiently as Slade had already made his getaway. Her vision was still blurry and every muscle in her body ached like it would have after one of Robin's intense physical training sessions. Even her thighs quivered from the effort it took to remain upright.

The feeling wouldn't last long, but it still hurt like a bitch.

When Raven managed to take in some of her surroundings, she saw that the basement itself was in shambles, concrete laying in crumbling chunks where Starfire had blasted through. One could only imagine the rage of the Tamaranean when she'd found her friends in the state they were in. The straps that had once held Robin and Raven down were singed to a crisp, and the metal sheets they'd been rested on were now crooked and misshapen.

It brought a ghost of a smile to Raven's lips; Starfire hadn't even hesitated.

When the last of the Slade-bots lay on the floor, torn from its torso and still twitching and sparking, Beast Boy morphed back into his human form and stood over them like he was just daring it to come back to life. The dust seemed to settle and Starfire dropped back to the ground. The eerie blue light from Cyborg's blaster wound down and he lowered his weapon. Robin sheathed his staff. They hung around the carnage for a moment or two before the Titans leader turned to acknowledge Raven — an afterthought he'd only just remembered. His expression was akin to that of leaving the oven on at the Tower and only just realizing.

Robin was at her side in seconds, noting the way she was limping and hanging on to whatever was now left of the metal beds that Slade had strapped them to earlier.

Helping her to her feet, Robin had her arm draped over his shoulders for support. He hoisted her carefully, so as to not injure her, but Raven noted the damage he'd taken himself. His infamous suit was ripped and torn in a few spots where the Slade-bots had nicked him, and the skin beneath was cut and bloody. Raven had no doubt that beneath the uniform itself would be an impressive display of blue and purple bruises, too.

"You alright, Rae?" Cyborg was already scanning her via the sensor in his arm, his features taut and serious.
"I'm fine for now, I think…," she replied, her voice thick and strange from lack of use. Raven swallowed to wet her hoarse throat, and then let go of Robin so that she could stand tall without any assistance.

She swayed but did not lose her balance. Brushing her sweat-matted hair out of her eyes, she tried to give her concerned teammates a reassuring smile. "You guys found us. Did...did it work?"

Primarily she looked to Robin for an answer, but the boy wonder shrugged his shoulders. "We haven't really had the time to debrief."

Raven glanced at the other three. Cyborg shook his head. Beast Boy appeared sheepish, and Starfire was perplexed.

Still feeling lightheaded, Raven sighed, and tried to keep the explanation short. "I tried something new with my powers earlier, only I have no idea if it even had any effect."

"Is that why you were doing the trance-hypnosis thing again when we found you?" asked Beast Boy.

Raven nodded. "It took more out of me than I anticipated. But I don't imagine whatever Slade dosed me with made it any easier." She had to pause to catch her breath, but the Titans leader seemed to sense her exhaustion, and decided to fill in the blanks so that she could take the moment to rest.

"From what I understand, Raven tried to mentally project familiar landmarks that she'd seen before going unconscious. To help you find our location quicker," added Robin.

Cyborg folded his arms over his chest, and a corner of his mouth tilted upwards in a smirk. "We know."

A beat.

"However, only one of us had received the message," Starfire clarified.

Raven and Robin exchanged puzzled looks.

Cyborg raised his hands in defense. "Don't look at me."

Beast Boy was shuffling his feet, finding something to stare at on the ground. Starfire watched him pointedly, raising her brows. When the green-skinned boy remained silent and ignored the way her luminescent gaze was glued to him, Kory sighed dejectedly. She turned her attention back to Raven and Robin. "It was friend Beast Boy that relayed your message to us, Raven."

Starfire had meant it more as a fact, but temporary surprise still coloured the empath's normally stoic features. Her eyes widened and then immediately snapped to the sheepish shapeshifter doing everything in his power to avoid her stare. Beast Boy kept his head down, his unruly hair obscuring most of his face.

"Beast Boy?!!" Raven repeated, startled by this new information.

Of all the emotions...*that* had been the strongest?

Victor nodded, still wearing a bemused expression. "You bet. We'd split up searching for clues when he paged us on the comms, freaking out about some weird vision."
Beast Boy ran a shaky, gloved hand through his hair, fidgeting on the spot. Robin was observing him with a similar attitude that mirrored Cyborg's. The raven-haired boy couldn't keep the amusement out of his pitch when he spoke. "Interesting...at least it worked, right Raven? A minute later and Slade might have done some real damage..."

Starfire smiled, clasping her hands together below her chin. "I am glad that you two are unharmed!" She didn't wait for permission; Kory then immediately pulled the both of them into a furiously tight hug, knocking the air out of her friends with her impressive strength.

Raven, still mildly reeling about the Garfield revelation, was too preoccupied to have braced herself for the attack.

"Star, I think they're turning blue...," Victor informed her with a grimace after realizing neither of them could speak properly, let alone breathe.

"Oh!" She immediately let go and grinned in apology. "Woops."

Robin cleared his throat and adjusted his suit and belt. "Uh, thanks, Star," he said, mustering up a genuine smile in her direction. The alien princess blushed.

"If you guys are done here, can we head back now?" Beast Boy interrupted, looking flustered and impatient.

"That's a good idea," Robin agreed, returning to his more serious nature now that he wasn't being strangled. "I'd like to look into Slade's activities at the museum. I'm sure there's something in the security footage."

Starfire frowned but kept any protests or comments to herself, even as Robin went to inspect what was left of the Slade-bots.

"Why're you in such a rush anyways, grass stain?" Victor asked Beast Boy with a raised brow.

The changeling appeared caught off guard by his friend's question, and racked his brain for what ultimately sounded like an excuse. "N-nothing! I'm not! I'm just, uh, tired. Yeah, tired. " He rotated his left shoulder in a stretch and cracked his neck. "Those Slade-bots sure pack a punch, huh?"

Beast Boy laughed nervously, and it convinced no one. Raven was still catching her breath, but in the back of her mind, there was a nagging discomfort regarding her green teammate. However, judging by the way he was doing his damndest to pretend she didn't exist, Raven figured she would meditate on the feeling before pursuing any conversation with him. Besides, she probably needed to sort out her own thoughts on the matter first. Things were confusing enough as they were, what with discovering a new facet to her abilities and how they affected her. She couldn't bring Beast Boy's feelings into the mix just yet.

Nonetheless, it was still mildly concerning seeing the most exuberant Titan act so strangely, even giving Raven the uncharacteristic cold shoulder.

Somehow, she managed to ignore the pestering unease in exchange for the deep aching — and more pressing matter — of her sore body. "I wouldn't mind a bed myself," she found herself agreeing with Beast Boy.

It was the first time that night he'd chanced a brief glance at her, more out of surprise than anything, but her chest squeezed nonetheless and she couldn't, for her life, discern why.

Was it relief? And if it was, what did she have to be relieved about?
Maybe it was just heartburn.

He flinched and looked away the moment their eyes locked, suddenly uncomfortable again. Raven pursed her lips in frustration but didn't dare to press his response.

Knowing Garfield, he'd probably forget about the whole ordeal by the next morning anyways, and maybe by then, so would she...

Starfire had always had her own form of relaxation methods post battle, but the only ones Raven could tolerate were the activities that avoided having to actually eat any of her remedies.

Simply meditating on the rooftop underneath a starry, clear sky was always guaranteed to help clear Raven's mind, but when her physical body was weary, she was forced to seek out alternative methods.

After a very unsuccessful sparring session with Robin the following day — where Raven had her butt handed to her even more than usual — Starfire had taken pity on the bruised and battered female Titan and offered for her to join her in a much needed nightly soak in the Tower's heated pool. At first, Raven had been hesitant. The idea of shimmying down to her underthings and wading around in a glorified bathtub that stunk of chlorine was not entirely appealing to the empath. Especially since the pungent odour would often cling to her skin for days later. Yet, she was having some trouble doing things like lifting her arms above waist level without feeling as if they'd been attached to four tonnes of concrete. Despite her strength in her abilities, if there was ever to be close-range combat in a fight, Raven knew that she'd become a handicap to the rest of the team. Given the circumstances, Raven had to, in the least, consider the exercise, or else try and survive yet another brutal takedown by her more physically competent teammates. Or worse; her enemies.

So, later that evening, when the Tower was quiet, Raven steeled her nerves and teleported to the indoor pool at the time Starfire had suggested, sporting nothing more than a simple black bikini and a matching towel.

It was a well know fact that Kory loved swimming. The invite she'd extended to the empath was more of a request to join her in the activity, since the flame-haired girl made a habit of visiting the pool almost on a nightly basis. She claimed that she got a decent workout from it, and that it was also relaxing after sweating all day in the gym, or after a battle. Whether Raven had opted to show or not, chances were Starfire would already be there, taking full advantage of the newest part of the Tower. However, what Raven hadn't anticipated was walking into an awkward situation.

She was quick to learn that Starfire — perhaps not expecting her friend to agree to the nightly excursion in the first place — might have failed to mention that she'd also extended the invite to Robin. The two of them were currently busy canoodling in the pool, completely oblivious to her presence. Robin had his back to Raven, pressed against the edge of the pool, with his arms stretched out on either side of him along the ledge. His black hair was matted with water, and the rivulets dripped down the strong, toned muscles of his back and shoulders. Just out of his reach, laying in a small puddle of water and forgotten, was his mask. Starfire was giggling softly, her arms draped around his neck, and Raven could swear she saw the alien girl's pink tongue dart out to lick at a water droplet hanging on the lobe of his ear. The heat of the intimate action sent a shiver down Raven's spine, and it was all the empath could do to shut out their lustful affections before they consumed her.

Raven quickly spun around on her heel, and tucked the towel around her tighter, rigid and embarrassed. Not knowing what else to do, she stared down at her bare toes and tried to regulate
her breathing while she thought of a plan. Somewhere behind her, she heard Robin purr in content, and the sound was so foreign to her that she hadn't even realized it had come from his throat. Starfire hummed, and there was the subtle movement of water, the noise echoing in the otherwise empty and quiet room.

After a moment, as Raven stood there, quiet as a mouse and trying to decide whether or not she ought to flee to save herself the mortification, there was a louder, heavier splash followed by Starfire's elated voice. "Raven! You decided to join us!"

Caught, and knowing she no longer had a choice, Raven reluctantly turned to face her friends. Starfire was still embracing Robin, and the boy wonder seemed to have moved so that his arms had disappeared into the water. He'd also found time to don his mask, despite Raven already having an inkling as to his true identity via their mental connection. Most likely out of a panicked habit than anything else.

Upon learning that they'd been caught fooling around, Robin's mouth was left hanging open and his cheeks were flushed. There were purple and red bruises all along his neck and collarbone, not quite matching the more gruesome ones he'd earned recently in a different kind of battle. Some might have even included teeth marks, but Raven didn't look closely enough to find out for certain. Instead, she blanched and tried not to think about what the couple had gotten up to when they'd been alone together.

Starfire was smiling from her position in the pool, and when she moved away from Robin, it became quickly apparent that she'd somehow forgone a top. Raven gulped and kept her gaze focused on the clear, blue water. "I-I can come back later," she croaked, clutching her towel to her chest.

Starfire dismissed her concerns with a wave of her hand. "Of course not! You are most welcome to join us, Raven. The water is pleasantly warm."

"I, uh, I was actually just leaving…," Robin quickly interjected, looking shyly between the two girls. "I still have some, um, case files to review. On the, uh, thing Batman wanted me to look into."

Starfire furrowed her brows in question, tilting her head to the side. "What thing, Robin?"

He scratched the back of his head nervously. "You know — the thing? It's-it's confidential, so I can't divulge too many details, but uh, I'll see you two later."

Robin proceeded to hoist himself up out of the pool and only paused when Starfire snickered at him. "What?" he asked her.

Starfire continued to giggle behind her hand, her blazing green eyes narrowing at him. "Perhaps you've forgotten something?" she teased.

He followed her gaze and, upon realization, immediately plopped back down into the water with a splash. "Uh, Raven, would you mind if you, uhm, turned around for a minute?"

Robin's voice was an octave higher than usual, and it didn't require a genius to figure out that, like Starfire, he too had forgone a piece of important swimwear. As if on cue, the accused bright blue swimming trunks seemed to stand out now from their spot on a beach chair nearby. Raven felt the heat creep up her neck all the way to the very tips of her ears. She didn't hesitate to follow his instruction, and immediately gave the pair her back, squeezing her eyes shut too, just in case.
The nudity itself wasn't what bothered Raven — she was far from a prude. Rather, it was the uncomfortable emotions coming off her friends that affected her most. She knew that if she were to see Robin naked, he'd never be able to look her in the eye again, always conscious of the fact that she'd seen everything. It would taint their friendship and, in turn, make her uncomfortable as well. With Starfire, it was different. The lovely, orange-skinned alien had no qualms with being stark naked in public, that much was apparent. It was her sexual appeal, and the confidence she exuded in the matter that made the empath nervous. Raven couldn't help but stare. She was like a work of art to marvel at, the gleam of her skin perfect under any lighting. She was like one of those sculptures in the art museums come to life. The impressive height, the muscles of her arms and legs toned and defined, her core flat and strong. It was hard not to ogle Kory when she was clothed, much less when she was naked.

"You can turn back now, Raven."

The empath opened an eye, only to feel Robin quickly brush past her, his blue shorts now sitting at his hips and his white towel slung over his shoulder. She could see the wet footprints he left behind on the ceramic tiles as he padded towards the change rooms in a hurry.

Raven turned to look back at Starfire, who had now swum up to the edge of the pool and was resting her arms underneath her chin, admiring her with those eerie, glittering jade eyes. "Are you coming in?"

Once she heard the door close behind Robin, Raven released a shaky breath she'd been holding and slowly removed her towel to place it on a chair nearby. She then walked up to the edge, dipped a single pale toe in the water to test the temperature, and slipped into the shallow end with as little of a splash as possible.

It was pleasantly warm, and almost immediately, Raven's tired and aching body was grateful for the reprieve as she swam to join Starfire. She took in a deep breath and dunked her head in to wet her hair. When she came back up, she wiped the water from her lashes and saw Kory swimming just ahead.

"I was trying to convince Robin to install a hot tub. He prefers the sauna, but I do not like the feeling of all that sweat," Starfire said after she did a full lap.

"Kory." Raven started, licking the water from her lips, "you aren't wearing any bottoms."

"No, I am not. We were doing the skinny dipping, I believe it's called. You should try it, Raven! It is quite liberating." Starfire giggled, floating on her back now, her large breasts on brazen display.

Raven swallowed and tried not to focus on the swollen, wet buds of her darker nipples.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Star."

The pool was in a room with a glass ceiling, granting the two of them a lovely view of the stars from between the forestry of the island. This far from the city lights, they twinkled brightly against the inky backdrop of the night sky.

"Why not? None of the boys are here to stare at you. It's just us girls."

She had a point.

Raven considered it briefly, chewing on her bottom lip as she postulated the consequences. Cyborg was busy tinkering with the T-Car, Robin was out, and Beast Boy was probably marathoning a video game on his channel. All three were very unlikely to pop by the pool for a quick dip before
bed. Before she could come up with any reasons *not to*, Raven reached back and undid the knot at her neck, and then the one at her back, until the strings came loose and the bikini top fell off. It floated on the surface of the water, and Raven inhaled sharply at the cool air brushing against the more sensitive, wet skin of her chest. Her breasts were covered in goosebumps, the buds of her nipples hard and erect beneath the water.

"How does it feel?" Starfire asked her after Raven had also shirked off her bottoms and tossed them poolside.

"It feels...nice." Raven replied honestly, mildly surprised.

It was like having a bubble bath, but somehow better because she had the whole pool to swim in. The warm water rushed delightfully between her thighs, while also kissing and lapping at her breasts. It was not unlike a lover's gentle attention. There were no clothes to restrict her connection to the water, or to weigh her down, and her nerves would tingle wherever it would touch.

Starfire had been correct in her statement; it *was* liberating. Now feeling more confident, Raven swam slowly to the other side of the pool, enjoying the way it brushed against her skin. It was almost euphoric — *exhilarating* even.

The two young women stayed in the pool for just over an hour, until the skin of their fingers and toes had turned pruney. They did a few laps for a workout, and then spent the time in between talking and laughing. When they'd finally both decided to call it a night, Raven could hardly recall any of the soreness from earlier, her body feeling light and refreshed. Her face might have ached from smiling so much, but that was a good thing, right? Victor might have teased that it was because she rarely ever used those facial muscles, but much to her relief, he wasn't around.

They both clambered out of the pool, naked and soaking wet, their skin glistening under the dim lighting of the room. After drying off, Raven slipped a loose white t-shirt over her head, the material sheer enough to be indecent. It was part of her sleepwear, so she didn't really care to wear a bra. Starfire was busy toweling her impressive mane of red curls — a tedious process Raven never did envy. When she was done, she dried off as well and wrapped her towel around her. Raven dug through her bag, searching for the pair of small gym shorts she'd packed away earlier.

"You are most lovely, friend Raven."

Taken somewhat off guard by the softness in her friend's tone, the sorceress paused and glanced up to find Kory admiring her full form, and most notably, her naked lower half. Raven felt her face burn despite having swum naked with her friend only just recently. She gingerly brushed a few short strands of her dark wet hair behind her ear, suddenly feeling a bit self-conscious. "Thanks, Star...I guess."

"Why do you guess?" Starfire cocked her head to the side. "Your shape is definitely pleasing to the eye. Your future partner will be very appreciative, and very fortunate." Starfire winked.

Raven tugged at the hem of her shirt, wishing it were longer. Where were those damn shorts when she needed them?

"Especially your posterior — it's very-"

"Starfire, *please,*" Raven pleaded, silencing her friend with a desperate display. She was going to die of embarrassment if Kory kept going like that. Compliments, especially ones about her appearance, were always best handled in *small* doses. Too much attention and it was like she was drowning, choking on her own emotions. Upon seeing the brief flash of hurt that crossed the alien
girl's features, Raven sighed and amended her previous reaction, "Thank you. Really, I...appreciate your kindness. I just...I need to get used to it myself."

"Do you not think of yourself as desirable, Raven?"

The empath shrugged, pretending to be nonchalant on the matter. "I can't say I've put much thought into it, if that's what you're asking me."

Starfire was giving her a look of disbelief, pursing her bottom lip. "Forgive me, but I find that difficult to believe, for someone as attractive as yourself."

If it weren't for the fact that Starfire was completely honest in her observations, stating them more like facts than forms of flattery, Raven might have stopped blushing. She'd also finally found her shorts, and was hastily slipping them on while trying to avoid the puddle of water at her feet.

"I don't know. I guess I just don't sit there and admire myself in the mirror, but I'll take your word for it."

"Do you not pleasure yourself?"

Raven nearly slipped and fell, bum first, onto the wet floor. To save herself, her immediate reflex was to quickly use the nearest chair to maintain her balance, and thus prevent what would have otherwise been a nasty tumble. Raven then snapped her head towards Starfire, her eyes growing wide, brows shooting upwards, and her mouth becoming a tight line. "Do I what?"

"Er, or is it referred to as masturbation?" Starfire clarified uncertainly, a finger on her chin as she racked her brain for the English word.

Raven felt the blood drain from her face. She closed her eyes, inhaled through her nose, and rubbed her thumb and forefinger against her temple. "Yeah, no, I got that bit. Why are you asking me such a question?"

"Because it is a healthy, natural expression, and a form of self-love that everyone should participate in on occasion. Also, is this not part of the girl talk and bonding?" She was smiling cheekily, her eyes begging the other girl to go along with it.

Raven had squished her damp bikini back into her bag, along with her towel, and was slinging it over her shoulder, preparing to leave. She sighed heavily and rolled her eyes, knowing that she wouldn't get out of the conversation unless she subjected to Starfire's whims. "Yes, I...guess you can say that I have. No need to worry about me in that department, Star. Now, please tell me that's all."

Starfire folded her arms over her chest like she'd been gauging Raven's honesty on the matter. Her expression then changed from contemplative to smug, obviously content with the answer she received. "Fine, but we will be continuing this conversation at our next swimming session. I have some more urgent questions that need answering, to fully alleviate the rest of my concerns."

"Only if I don't have to find you and Robin necking in the pool beforehand," Raven teased.

Starfire giggled, sticking out her hand to shake on it. "No promises, but I shall give you ample warning as a compromise?"

Raven smirked. "Deal."

They shook hands, and retired to their bedrooms for the remainder of the night.
The internet was a horrifying place. Raven typically did everything in her power to avoid it. The other Titans on the other hand, didn’t seem to mind it as much. Beast Boy, for one, loved it. He interacted with his fans, streamed video games, and did a whole slew of other things Raven could hardly keep up with. Starfire used it for research purposes, and streaming shows and movies Victor and Garfield felt mandatory she see. Robin was always connected, using the internet to dig up leads and keep an eye on the news outlets for any sign or hint of Slade.

Raven, unlike the rest of her tech-savvy friends, had no reason whatsoever to wander into the void, except maybe to order a book that might have been difficult to track down in stores. But that was seldom, if ever, and besides, Raven often enjoyed the hunt. Jump City was full of a variety of book shops, obscure and of the standard fare, and she had no qualms with exploring a new treasure trove of musty old texts.

She would probably never admit to it, but the sorceress was perhaps a wee bit curious about the social media platforms she frequently found Beast Boy perusing. Whenever the changeling grew bored during a team event, like movie night where he didn’t get to pick the flick, he’d soon whip out his phone and scroll through the posts on his feed. Raven couldn’t tell if he ever noticed or just didn’t care that she’d steal glances from over his shoulder every now and again. Either way, he never said anything, or stopped to question her. It led to Raven being less discreet with her observations, almost like she was testing her limits. Usually, they were just pictures of other people, memes, or videos, in which case she’d grow bored and go back to minding her own business — usually stuffing her nose back into her book. But Beast Boy also followed a few interesting women, too — beautiful enough to be models — and it was this type of photography that tended to catch Raven’s eye.

The photos were always appealing, if a little bit risque, with filters that automatically would catch any casual browser’s attention. Garfield usually seemed disinterested, often scrolling past after little more than a gander, and Raven couldn’t understand why. They were so beautiful, and the images so erotic and sensual; she could have stared at them for much longer, taking in every detail, like a work of art hanging in a gallery.

She found herself thinking about those images in the shower after her swim with Kory, and wondering why Beast Boy was so unfazed by such erotic photography; the girls were often clad in only their intimates, or sometimes, even less. Was he simply unperturbed? Or had he grown desensitized because of his usage of the internet? After all, free pornography these days was
always just a click away.

Starfire’s words about pleasure echoed in her mind, as if in answer to her string of questions. ‘It is a healthy, natural expression, and a form of self-love that everyone should participate in on occasion…’

Azar, was she seriously considering Beast Boy’s masturbation habits of all things?!

The thought had to go. She ushered it out almost as quickly as it had formed, ignoring the way her stomach tightened and coiled taut, blaming the steam from the shower for the flushing of her skin.

To help take her mind off her suddenly intrusive thoughts, Raven scrubbed her body raw with her luffa until she was gleaming pink, desperate to remove any remnants of chlorine from her earlier swim with Kory. After having taken a dip naked in a pool, a shower somehow felt inadequate. Her body missed and craved the feeling of being submerged in the warm water. Even with the stench of chlorine, Raven didn’t mind the idea of doing it again sometime.

Once she’d removed as much of the smell — and her skin — as she possibly could, she turned off the shower nozzle, toweled off for the second time that night, and tiptoed down the empty hall to her room. The tower was dark and quiet, every other Titan most likely already tuckered out in bed by now, with the exception of Robin who was probably still pouring over some paperwork in his office.

She flicked on the dim lights of her quarters, closed her door, and let the towel drop to the carpeted floor. Meandering towards her onyx stained wardrobe, Raven then dug through the drawers for a clean pair of underwear, and her pajamas. Greys, blacks, whites, the occasional purple or navy-blue, Raven knew that her tastes in clothing were nowhere near as colourful as Starfire’s. It was also a well-known fact that Kory owned a wide array of sexy and cute sleepwear, while Raven simply put on whatever was comfortable. That often consisted of a baggy t-shirt and a pair of black sporty shorts or leggings, but it never really bothered her, until…

‘Do you not think of yourself as desirable, Raven?’

She’d pulled on the t-shirt already, and was wearing a simple black cotton thong when Starfire’s voice echoed in the back of her mind. It made her hesitate ever so briefly as her hand hovered over the neatly folded leggings she was prepared to don.
Raven paused in her attempt at getting dressed to glance down at her own bare legs; long, pale and shapely. It was like she was noticing them for the first time — or in the least, in a different light, anyways. They had always been there, of course. Afterall, legs were meant to be functional; for walking, running, jumping, kicking. The empath had never before considered their... other implications. Or rather, the obsession and sexualization of them.

She then took a step back and carefully lifted the hem of her white t-shirt so that it sat along her waist, holding it there before walking towards the floor-length mirror in her room. It had originally belonged to Robin, but he’d recently upgraded his bedroom furniture and, being the only Titan without a decent mirror, Raven had opted to take it before it was put in a spare storage room instead. Not one normally for narcissism, she never even figured she’d put it to much use. At the time, it had just seemed like a waste, and besides, certain rituals and spells did require the use of a mirror as a portalway.

Tonight, it was there for an entirely more human purpose, and Raven couldn’t help her insatiable curiosity — perhaps to her own detriment. The girl staring back in the reflection had short, wet, violet hair that was only just beginning to dry at the roots, and Raven tucked one part of it behind her ear. Her skin was pale and clammy, her cheeks still rosy from her hot shower. Raven licked her lips, and watched the girl in the mirror do the same, her pink tongue darting out in what some might have considered an erotic fashion. Steadily, her gaze wandered down her body, her bottom lip jutting out in consternation as she examined herself in a studious nature — like an artist would scrutinize their model.

She had small breasts — barely more than a good handful — and the buds were hardened beneath the soft material of the shirt, the shadows immediately noticeable against the white fabric. She was still adjusting to the cooler temperature of her room versus the hot shower, and her skin looked to be glowing from the scrub.

Her waist was narrow, and there was a faint outline of muscle just beneath the skin of her abdomen, but her hips and legs were thick, the curves of her thighs impressive with definition. In nothing but her underwear and t-shirt, Raven was slowly coming to terms with Starfire’s earlier observations. In fact — if she could ever admit it aloud — her feminine shape, coupled with the nature of her outfit, was almost reminiscent of the photos of the women she’d stare at on Beast Boy’s phone. All she was missing was the filter, and maybe some better lighting.

Azar, was that even possible?

Her heart was hammering in her chest, going a mile a minute, at the realization. Nervousness? Excitement? Perhaps both, in a strange and new combination she’d never quite experienced before. She brought her hand up to her sternum, resting it between her breasts, still examining the young woman staring back at her, conveying startled wide eyes and mild panic. Swallowing the lump in her throat, Raven turned around slowly, her pouting eyes never leaving the mirror. There was
something that felt almost *shameful* about what she was doing, but she couldn’t pinpoint why or how. Her jumbled emotions didn’t make much sense, and she couldn’t figure out why she was so overcome with anxiety, as if she was being watched and judged.

No one else was in the room with her, even when she triple checked; not even Silkie.

The thong straps rode high on her sides, right against her prominent hip bones, and as she observed her pose and all of her exposed skin, she couldn’t help the way her breath caught in her throat.

That was... *her*?

It was like she was gazing at a photograph. A magazine scan. One of those social media posts. Trying to believe that it was her *own* body — her *own* curves — was hard to accept.

She reached back and gingerly grazed her fingers along the part of her leg where it met her back, nearly disappearing in the shadow of the heavy curvature. Her bum, so brazenly on display in the thong, was perfectly round, shapely, and thick. Not unlike all the pretty fitness models in those magazines Starfire bought. The squat workouts Robin would insist she endure until completion had apparently paid off, but like hell she would ever tell *him* that. Some days, she could barely sit afterwards, let alone walk.

Raven blinked in surprise a few times at the weighted feel of her exposed backside and reflection, still overwhelmed by the myriad of new, conflicting emotions, as well as the realization of what she looked like beneath her cloak. Her heart continued to pound in her chest, like she was doing something *naughty* and was about to be caught red-handed. Of course, she knew in her mind that logically, none of that was true — she was merely standing in front of a mirror admiring her form while in her underthings. Was that *really* considered unusual behaviour? Should she be embarrassed by her own body?

Even now, she could just envision Starfire’s protests to that sort of mindset, and it eased some of her more urgent worries.

Later that night, Raven did something even *more* inconceivable than going to bed in just her underwear and t-shirt; she took out the cellphone Victor had long since given her, along with all the other Titans, and for the first time in her life, created an anonymous social media account.

Raven didn't often sleep in, and on the mornings she did, the others would typically assume that she'd spent the time meditating. Mostly, that was true.
This time, she woke up with one side of her face stuck onto the screen of her cell phone, and her head resting near the end of the bed with her feet propped up on her pillows. Her blankets and sheets were a tangled mess beneath her, and she slowly came to realize that she'd passed out at some point while scrolling through the endless blogs and photos she'd discovered online. Her arm was cramped and sore from laying on it, with the numbness coming to life when she moved, like pins and needles. She was also suddenly aware that she was cold, when a draft filtered in through her window and made her hyper aware of her nudity. She sat up and shivered, wiping the sleep from her eyes and trying to unsuccessfully fight the heavy yawn that slipped out anyways.

She examined her bare toes against the floor; they were almost blue with cold. The night must have been a chilly one, but she'd been so wiped from her swim with Kory, that she'd fallen into a dreamless sleep without any recollection of how or when. On the other hand, aside from the temporary aches and pains of sleeping awkwardly, Raven's body felt completely rejuvenated. The late night adventure had proven effective, and she was actually seriously considering joining Starfire more often. Maybe they could both convince Robin of that hot tub…

Once she was dressed appropriately, and the blood was circulating to her extremities again, Raven made to join the other Titans for a late breakfast.

Still yawning, she seemingly floated into the kitchen without anyone really batting an eye in her direction. Starfire was preoccupied trying to convince Robin that mustard on pancake was a good thing, Robin was busy trying to politely decline, Cyborg was currently frying up the leftover batter, and Beast Boy was eagerly hovering over him, practically drooling.

"But you must give it a try before you say no! It's wonderful on the taste buds!" Starfire persisted. She waved a piece of mustard-soaked pancake on a fork as she spoke, shoving it in Robin's face.

Robin backed away warily from the offending food item, his hands up in defense. "I'm starting to think that maybe we have... different taste buds, Star."

Kory paused, contemplating his words. "Like how Beast Boy does not eat meat?"

"Sort of?" Robin replied with a grimace.

Raven ignored their banter and headed towards the kettle to fill it with water for her morning tea. If anyone was curious as to her unusually late arrival, not one of the Titans bothered to mention it.
"Is it ready yet?" Beast Boy chirped from over Victor's shoulder excitedly.

"No! What's with the rush?!" Cyborg huffed.

It was when Garfield was just about to retaliate that the changeling seemed to catch Raven's eye in that moment. His expression went from one of elation to complete dread. He paled considerably, his eyes widening, and it was as if he had stopped breathing. Beast Boy's normally vibrant, green irises became thin halos around his dilated pupils, and his jaw was hanging open, like he was ready to say something but was effectively robbed of his voice. Raven quirked up a brow at his curious expression.

"Earth to Beast Boy? You alive over there?" Victor nudged his now stagnant green friend, who then gulped and somehow snapped out of his trance with a quick shake of his head.

"Me? I'm f-fine! Just fine!" he squeaked.

He seemed to be backing away from both Raven and Cyborg, like they'd contracted a deadly disease, and his eyes would nervously dart to the empath, only to find her staring pointedly at him. However, Beast Boy couldn't maintain eye contact with her, and so he'd glance back at the comforting — and confused — visage of Victor Stone. He then licked his lips and nearly knocked into Starfire and Robin on his way out of the kitchen. His demeanour was not unlike that of a wary and frightened animal.

"Oh, boy! Would you look at the time? I'm gonna be so late!" Garfield glanced down at his wrist in exaggeration — notably missing a watch — and ran a shaky hand through the front of his dark green hair. "Wow, I'm gonna be in a lot of trouble! Better fly, I guess! I'll see all you guys later!" He added a nervous laugh and a forced, crooked smile for reassurance, but it fooled no one. It was like he was out of breath, the way his chest would puff out.

Beast Boy was talking fast, tripping over his own tongue, and the skin of his temple was clammy with sweat that hadn't been there moments before. Not to mention, he seemed to be doing everything in his power not to acknowledge that Raven was in the room. Starfire moved out of his way as Beast Boy grabbed at the grey, single-strap shoulder bag from the nearby counter, and then hastily made his way out of the tower.

"Hey! What about your pancakes?!” Victor called out after him, but he was too late; the changeling was already out of earshot. Cyborg sighed exasperatedly and then muttered under his breath,
"Made me use extra batter, and for what?"

Once the elevator doors finally dinged shut from the foyer, the kitchen was suddenly enveloped in an eerie silence, save for the pop and sizzle of oil in the frying pan.

"Uhm...what just happened?" Raven asked, looking around at her equally perplexed teammates.

Cyborg shrugged, brushing it off and going back to flipping the final pancake. "He's been acting weird ever since he signed up for those photography classes."

During the confusion — and Starfire's lack of attention — Robin had cleverly disposed of the mustard-rich dough she had almost managed to feed him. He then turned the stove on for Raven's kettle. "He's really taking it seriously, I think."

Raven had to scoff at that. "Since when is Gar a photographer?"

None of the others seemed to find this tidbit as amusing as the empath, and instead, she was met with a tone of seriousness she hardly expected.

"Since Robin here," Victor emphasized their leader's name, "was in one of his bad moods, and decided to ride his ass for being lazy around the tower," he continued in an shrewd tone.

Robin scowled and protested the accusation immediately; "I wasn't trying to give him a hard time! He mentioned being bored and I brought up how he doesn't have any actual productive hobbies. Besides, it all turned out for the best, didn't it?"

"You can be such a clorbag sometimes, Robin," Starfire frowned, her eyes narrowing. She folded her arms over her chest in disapproval.

Robin floundered for some sort of excuse, sputtering on the spot, but Starfire didn't look like she was going to buy any of it. He then slumped his shoulders in defeat and sighed. "Alright, fine. Maybe...it wasn't the nicest thing to say, but he's still enjoying the classes, so I'm taking it as a win."
Cyborg simply shook his head and pointed his spatula at his leader. "Do you know how expensive cameras and lenses can get? This is way worse than the time he wanted a moped!"

"I'm...still trying to process the fact that Beast Boy, of all people, is interested in photography," Raven mused aloud, rubbing at her temples as emotions flared among her teammates.

"Have you not heard? He has become quite famous on the internet!" added Starfire enthusiastically.

It hit Raven like a tonne of bricks. The social media accounts, the streaming, the youtube channel. She'd always figured it had just been something he'd do when he was bored. Not once had she considered the notion that he was actually good at it. Now that Starfire put it in perspective, it became abundantly clear; he was a Teen Titan, afterall. They were renowned heroes, and thus, a bit like celebrities in Jump City. It shouldn't have been surprising, knowing that Beast Boy was the one who interacted most with the fans, and loved the attention he received. It also — embarrassingly enough for Raven — explained his interest in all those photos of beautiful women in boudoir photoshoots. The demoness couldn't help the colour that rose to her cheeks as she realized her horrible blunder. She'd thought he was simply being a typical pervert; maybe just a red-blooded young male. Azar, she'd even speculated on his masturbation habits! Suddenly, Raven wanted nothing more than for the floor to open up and swallow her whole.

"Like I said; he's taking it seriously, and if it's a hobby he's enjoying, I figured the money spent is worth it," Robin declared somewhat proudly.

Cyborg rolled his human eye. "You're only sayin' that because it means Gar can maintain the social media status of the Titans so that you don't have to."

Starfire gasped, her hands covering her mouth as she turned her attention to Robin once more.

"What? No! I mean, not really...." Robin reluctantly admitted. He scratched at the nape of his neck, feeling guilty under the scrutiny of Starfire's emerald gaze.

Raven groaned, irritation making her head throb. The flux of the unstable emotional atmosphere radiating off her teammates was overwhelming; she couldn't take it anymore. "Why is everyone arguing about this, anyways?" she finally snapped. Her outburst seemed to temporarily stun the other three Titans in the room. "If it's good for Beast Boy, that's all that matters. It isn't like he doesn't enjoy doing it."
The boys looked down at the floor sheepishly, Raven's chastising tone making them feel embarrassed for their behaviour. Starfire was the first to verbalize her agreement on the matter. "Friend Raven is correct; Beast Boy's happiness is what matters most. I am more than delighted to hear that he has a new, healthy interest, and wish him much success!"

Feeling the discomfort in the room slowly ebb away, Raven sighed and said, "He's still acting really weird, even for Beast Boy."

Cyborg shrugged his shoulders. "It's Gar. He's always been a little weird. Give him time. Whatever it is, I'm sure he'll come around eventually."

Robin stole an apple from the nearby fruit basket. "Victor's right; I think he's just really trying to prove himself in this, so he's completely committed right now. Once he gets bored, he'll be back playing video games on the couch before you know it. Like that time he insisted on taking German language classes to impress that girl."

Victor chuckled at that, a glint in his inorganic eye. "I remember that. Pretty sure she was a porn star."

Robin sniggered behind a bite of his apple.

"Azar, can we not talk about this?" Raven blanched, her brows knitting in irritation.

"Sure, Rae," Victor continued to laugh, "In fact, you can have Gar's portion of pancakes since he just up and left anyways." He started plating the stack, being sure to butter each piece before adding some syrup. "They ain't waffles, but still pretty damn delicious, if I do say so myself." He licked a dab of sugary maple goodness from his finger and smiled.

Raven chewed her bottom lip, glad to have neatly folded away the issue with Beast Boy for now. It was true that she still hadn't had the chance to speak to him about what had transpired between them on the night of the kidnapping. In fact, now that she thought about it, the pair hadn't actually spoken much at all in the last few days. She would have chalked it up to him being super busy with his new-found hobbies, except for his abrupt departure and seedy mannerisms this morning. It led Raven to conclude that — coupled with his odd behaviour — it was possible the shapeshifter was avoiding her for some reason. This new and alarming realization nagged at her like a pestering child, but she still wasn't sure if she was ready to smooth things over just yet. The truth was, Raven was terrified to even attempt the new ability again, much less discuss what had happened. She feared that she would somehow worsen things with how little control she had over it. Besides, she'd much sooner discuss it with Lillith first before confronting Beast Boy on the
At least, that was her plan, but even in her head, it sounded awfully a lot like an excuse. Maybe Raven hadn't thought to question Beast Boy's evasion of her because, much like the verdant skinchanger himself, she too didn't want to deal with the consequences of that night. This notion both confounded her and left her feeling even worse about the ordeal, but with Garfield currently out of the tower, there wasn't much she could do about it, anyways. So instead, she focused on the other daunting task at hand; asking Cyborg to upgrade the camera on her phone without drawing too much attention.

At the mere prospect of embarrassing herself in front of the others, Raven was fidgeting on the spot. Lying had never been her strong suit, and the more people around, the harder it was. Especially with Robin, who had an uncanny penchant for picking up on all her tells.

Keeping secrets about her heritage was one thing, but Raven had stayed up almost all night going through endless profiles and pictures, accidentally inspiring emotions that were oddly ambitious. She had an idea, and once it had rooted itself in her mind, she simply couldn't get it out.

The dirty feeling of doing something shameful made her skin itch, and was only further aggravated by the fact that she'd now have to lie to her teammate, too.

"Would you like some mustard with your pancakes, Raven?" Starfire asked earnestly, breaking Raven's blank, pointed stare and contemplative demeanour. Kory was currently holding up the treasured yellow condiment bottle in offering, and the familiar label stared Raven in the face.

The empath quickly recoiled at the suggestion. "Uh, no thanks, Star. I think I'll pass this time."

Unlike with Robin, Kory took Raven's refusal at face value and didn't push the subject. Instead, she squirted an extra helping onto her own plate and floated out towards the common room.

Raven eyed Robin and took in a deep, shaky breath.

One down, one more to go.

"Still working that case, Robin?"
The dark-haired boy appeared to be caught off guard by her question. "What case?"

"The one you said you were working on for Batman…?"

He seemed to be racking his brain for the memory, and then it hit him, like a lightbulb going off. "Oh! Yeah, right. Uh, the Batman case, er... That's still in progress. I was going to dig into more of the surveillance footage of Slade first, though. Figured there may be a hint as to why he kidnapped us and what he's been planning."

"You should...probably get to doing that, then. I'd like to know what he's up to myself, before he tries it again," Raven told him, suppressing a shiver that ran down the length of her spine.

Robin seemed to perk up at her suggestion, just as the tea kettle whistled to life. He was all serious leader again, and also a very concerned friend, having probably picked up on the subtle cues of apprehension and fear in Raven's body language. The boy wonder nodded his head curtly, and left the kitchen with apple still in hand, walking past the foyer to get to his office. There was determination in his step, and too in his hunched, broad shoulders. Raven still remembered all the scars that littered his back from the pool, and wondered what Kory's reaction had been the first time she'd seen them.

As the kettle's hum grew louder, the demoness finally went to pour herself a cup of tea, and tried not to feel like a villain for what she was about to do.

"I, uhm, figured after the incident with Slade, that a phone might actually be handy after all," she started, steeping the tea bag until the steaming water browned.

Victor was busy doing the dishes now that the pancakes were done and breakfast was served. "Rae, in case you didn't notice, he tampered with your communicators and made them untraceable. I doubt a phone would have been much help that night, either," Cyborg reminded her, his tone sympathetic.

"Probably not, but I got to thinking. It still isn't a bad idea, having a backup method of contacting you guys."

He didn't say anything to that, so, with a deep breath, she turned and faced him. "But, the camera quality on the one you gave me is terrible; it's old and blurry. Any way you can maybe enhance it?"
"Sure, why not?" Cyborg appeared surprisingly nonchalant on the matter. "Thinking about taking some selfies, Rae?" he then teased, but Raven's face flushed and the fine hairs on her arms stood on end.

"I-I was thinking more along the lines of evidence," she coughed, trying to mask her blush with her cloak.

"That image thing you did with Beast Boy seemed to work like a charm, no?"

Raven tensed up. hugging her bare arms beneath her cloak. "It's...it's still a new power and I'm not entirely sure I know how to use it properly. Until I do, the phone camera should suffice," she answered. At least she was telling the truth there.

Victor grinned. "Looks like we'll be getting another photographer in the house. Maybe you and Beastie can exchange tips and stuff."

Raven groaned and tapped her foot against the ceramic tiles of the kitchen rather impatiently. "Can you do it or not, Vic?"

He merely chuckled. "Of course I can. Welcome to the world of technology, Rae."

Mother of Azarath, he had no idea.
Frustration was a motivator unlike any other. It was a writer staring down a blank page with a deadline, or an impatient student unable to focus on the required readings that had no end in sight. Raven knew what it was like to feel both, except she’d never figured how irritating and powerful the emotions could be when left unchecked. Naturally, she chose to distract herself from them instead.

At the top of her list were the nude swimming sessions with Kory, who had honoured her promise about Robin. Those evenings tended to be most relaxing, and the best of all the daily distractions she often sought. However, they were not a nightly thing, and so, when Kory opted to spend some of her free time with Robin instead, Raven had to find another outlet.

Of course, petty crimes in Jump City also had to be handled, and normally, Raven would opt out of the small-time field excursions. Robin wasn’t like to send out the entire team for a mere bank heist, unless the perpetrators were of the nefarious variety. He’d learned that lesson the hard way when Brother Blood had used small-time crime as a distraction from more heinous activities. Micro-managing the team this way kept the other Titans on reserve, in the event of multiple attacks, while also allowing them to cover more ground. Raven suddenly found herself volunteering to join the boy wonder on some of these missions and, although it raised some mild suspicion, no one bothered to question her. Not even Robin himself.

Meditation was also one of her many distractions, as it always had been. Except, lately, she struggled to concentrate or focus whenever the emotions themselves flared up and nagged at her subconscious. Like the tip of a red-hot blade slowly pressing against her skin until it burned. She couldn’t ignore them or will them away enough to ease her mind, and so meditating became more of a chore than a calming activity.

The simplest and most effective way to have ended her own personal torment was, of course, to confront her cybernetic friend directly. Raven wanted nothing more than to barge into Victor’s room and demand progress on the update to her phone, but in hindsight, she knew that that sort of behaviour would have been equivalent to a child’s temper tantrum. She was not a child anymore, and such feelings needed to be inhibited. Controlled. If she were to act on her impatience and frustration now, it would only draw unnecessary attention to herself, and Cyborg would be further inclined to investigate her...odd new habits. Something she wasn’t quite yet sure to divulge, even to herself.
So Raven waited, often with bated breath, and the thoughts and feelings swirled within her like a growing storm cloud, dark and ominous the more she tried to ignore it.

On the nights it was the worst, Raven buried herself into books. Endless novels, stories she’d already read ten times over, even books she normally wouldn’t have glanced at twice under normal circumstances. Anything just to take her mind off the teeth-gnashing, endless wait. During training exercises, her body was as tight as a coiled spring, tension so obvious in her muscles and bones that she could just barely perform to the standard required of her. Often, she’d brush off any of her teammates’ concerns in her standard abrasive tone that easily indicated to them backing off and dropping it were better alternatives to getting on her last nerve.

It didn’t help much that Beast Boy was still awkwardly avoiding her. Although, truth be told, she didn’t mind it entirely when he wasn’t in the tower as much. Raven had enough stressors to contend with while not having to deal with her shape-changing teammate’s insecurities as well. However, whenever the two did cross paths, the increasing discomfort that emanated from him, as well as the lengths he’d go to in order to steer clear of her, often brought the pressing issue to the forefront of her mind.

To put it mildly, it was annoying. Whereas Victor’s presence often made her feel excited, nervous, apprehensive and frustratingly impatient, Beast Boy merely aggravated her. The truth was, she was dreading the exchange, and she knew that if she didn’t deal with it soon, it was only a matter of time before the other Titans intervened. That was the very last thing she needed.

Regardless, it was always easier to anticipate than to confront any problem, and so Raven did what she knew would later come back to haunt her; she ignored him, too. If Beast Boy didn’t wish to speak to her or acknowledge her existence, then she would grant him a similar courtesy, until she was ready. It might have come off as petty, sure, but when Raven was already overburdened with new, blossoming emotions she could hardly make sense of, trying to tackle other tedious and stressful events would only further overwhelm her. Knowing that her powers and soul-self heavily relied on her emotional status, keeping calm for the empath was critical. Otherwise, the tower’s complete and utter annihilation would be almost certain.

So Raven continued to wait against what seemed like a ticking time bomb, constantly in an emotional flux. No matter what, she always felt as if she were on the very edge of her seat, or just teetering on the tip of a roller coaster, ready to take the first plunge. She’d even started biting her nails again; a gross habit she’d long since kicked after Kory had insisted on painting them during their obligatory monthly girls night. Nail polish tasted awful.

“Rae, I got somethin’ for you.”

_movie night_ was the night it finally happened. Or, as it should have been more aptly named, force-
Starfire-to-binge-an-old-sci-fi-television-series night. It was the title Raven preferred, anyways. Way more accurate.

The whole team was there for the occasion, including Beast Boy, who had come home late from one of his photography classes, as had been of habit lately. Normally, the changeling liked to canoodle close to Raven on the couch, with no distinct understanding or concept of personal space, much to the empath’s chagrin. He claimed to like being squeezed between the two prettiest ladies in the tower — to which Starfire would remind him that they were the only two ladies in the tower — so there was something mildly unsettling about watching him plop down on the opposite end of the couch this time around.

Raven raised a curious brow in the verdant boy’s direction, making a mental note of the event and bookmarking it to analyze later when there were less distractors; perhaps during meditation. She remained silent otherwise, and returned her attention to Victor, who had nonchalantly flung a small, rectangular device onto her lap. It had taken her by surprise, and she jumped a little at the sudden movement, staring down at the cellphone like it had offended her in the worst manner. Once she recognized it as her own, her face grew hot. She didn’t need to look around her to know that she was easily the centre of attention now.

“That’s as up to date as it’ll get without overkilling the battery,” he added before claiming his spot in the living room.

“You’re using the cellphone now, Raven?” inquired Robin.

Raven quickly tucked the incriminating device into her cloak, trying to play it cool despite the frantic beating of her heart. Her fingers were shaking, so she hid them, too.

“I mean, that’s good. I’m glad you decided to keep it. After our latest run-in with Slade, it’s probably wise to have another method of communication.” Robin scratched at the back of his head sheepishly, like he’d realized that he’d accidentally put Raven on the spot.

It was almost frightening how in-sync their minds were at times, with Robin gleaning the very ‘intention’ she’d used to lie to Cyborg in regards to wanting a cellphone.

“Does this mean you will be joining us on the social media, Raven?” Starfire queried delightfully. The alien girl was already pulling out her own phone, to be at the ready.
“No! Absolutely not!” Raven immediately protested. Her sudden — and fervent — declaration seemed to catch everyone off guard, with Starfire letting out a squeak of surprise and bouncing subtly in her seat.

Raven immediately clamped her mouth shut with her hand, her eyes wide, and growing more flustered by the second. The silence in the room was choking, and Raven was acutely aware of everyone’s concerned emotions.

Concern for her.

It wasn’t like her to react without thinking, and in that moment, the demoness wanted nothing more than to vanish into a portal that led to her room. Skipping movie night always came with consequences though, and if Raven were to ever have a moment’s peace for the night, she was better off staying put and hoping everyone simply...forgot.

“Can we just get on with the movie already?” exclaimed Raven with a growl, her brows knitting in frustration. She slumped back into the couch and folded her arms over her chest, clutching her phone tightly in her hand.

Maybe if she ignored them enough, they’d let it go.

Beast Boy then cleared his throat and stood to his feet, effectively nulling the charged tension in the room. “I’ll, uh, I’ll get the snacks.”

After that, it was as if someone had hit the resume button on a controller; the team fell back into their natural groove, and the incident with Raven’s newly acquired cellphone was but a distant memory. Cyborg dimmed the lights, popcorn went around, and Starfire and Robin snuggled on the sofa.

While everyone quickly became engrossed with the film on screen, Raven’s anxiety got the better of her. She was practically itching to be alone in her room again, and played out in her head the multiple ways she could sneak away early without repercussion.

Of course, she was far too cowardly to actually try it. Instead, Raven forced herself to pay attention to the movie, and not the million and one rampant thoughts going through her head. A feat proving to be more and more difficult once she gleaned that it was the popular seventies sci-fi trilogy playing. The same one the boys liked to marathon at least once a month, Raven recalled in
disgruntlement. She could have rolled her eyes in Beast Boy and Cyborg’s general direction that very moment, but both boys had that signature dumb look on their faces whenever they would be completely absorbed by something. The catatonic reaction wasn’t too different from Mad Mod’s hypnosis effect.

Sighing deeply, Raven sunk further into the couch, reluctantly resigning to her fate. She glared daggers at the television screen and silently wished it would implode without anyone suspecting her as the assailant. Maybe she ought to ask Lillith how to go about doing that, solely for research purposes of course…

“You did great today, Raven!”

Robin patted her sweaty back encouragingly, and Raven tried to pretend it wasn’t as forceful as it felt.

She was still panting, trying to catch her breath, even as she attempted a smile for her beaming, proud leader. After all, it wasn’t every day that she managed to impress him in a sparring match. Competency in physical prowess was definitely one of the empath’s greatest weaknesses when compared to the other Titans, and everyone knew it, especially Robin. Still, Raven remained in a tripod position, staring down at the floor as sweat blurred her vision and her heartbeat pounded in her ears. She clutched at her knees and tried to breathe. It felt as if there wasn’t enough oxygen in the world to sate her burning lungs in that moment.

Despite being coated in a sheen of sweat, having her butt kicked by Robin, and every muscle in her body sore and throbbing, Raven felt...good. The feeling was actually quite foreign to her in such a context, and she puzzled over it for some time before accepting it at all. Normally, the mere idea of training sessions had her feeling anxious and dreadful the entire day, especially when the focus for her was physical endurance. Robin would never go easy on her in this department because he was adamant she receive the training necessary to bring her to their level. Obstacle courses designed for her, on the other hand, were no problem; her powers and level-headed thinking allowed her to breeze through those with ease. But giving her a pair of boxing gloves and gym shorts was equivalent to forcing her to endure a marathon of one of Starfire’s favourite soap operas or reality TV shows. In other words, she loathed it.

Not only would her pride become wounded because she was easily proven to be the weakest of her team, but she also hated how out of breath and exhausted she’d be after such a brutal punishment. She often left believing herself to be a failure, with nothing gained.
This time, however, Raven had felt good. In fact, she felt better than just good. She was energized and, at a more baser level...happy? Her body felt strong, and the pain that normally burdened her body became more of a symbol of progress and strength instead. Now she knew what Victor meant whenever he’d tell them all to get pumped before a arduous workout. Raven was almost unnaturally giddy with the emotion. The adrenaline and endorphins probably helped, too.

“Robin has told me that you have done superb in combat today, Raven!” Starfire proclaimed after she’d jogged up next to her on the track. She was still running on the spot even as she paused to talk.

The alien princess glowed, as she so often did during any test of physical exertion. The tall, strong woman was practically created for glory in the battlefield ; it was in her genetics as a Tamaranean. Unlike Raven, Kory revelled in the face of such challenges, and more often than not, overcame them within quick succession.

Finally managing to catch her breath somewhat, the empath stood up and acknowledged her friend with a hint of a smile. “I feel...better,” she confessed, her tone almost lilting into a question. She brought her arm up before her and squeezed her hand until her fingers were a tight fist. Raw energy seemed to be coursing through her body, and she wasn’t entirely sure it was purely adrenaline.

Starfire broke into a grin. “You look very healthy! The heat emanating from you is strong!”

Raven quirked up an eyebrow, not entirely sure what to make of the Tamaranean’s observations.

Starfire then giggled awkwardly, realizing the other girl’s confusion. “What I mean is, you’re sweating and it looks good on you! You do not appear to be broken of spirit as you normally do, like those who have lost in a fight. Instead, you appear as a victor despite Robin winning the challenge.”

“Right,” Raven said dryly, “I’m guessing that’s a compliment.”

Starfire nodded her head vigorously in agreement, still bearing a cheerful smile. “It is!” Then, leaning in towards the empath, she added somewhat quietly, “Tell me, what is it you are doing differently? Have you been...pleasuring yourself more often, as we discussed?”

Raven’s pupils flared at Starfire’s lewd insinuation, and her pale complexion immediately turned a bright scarlet. One quick glance around the gym and it was obvious none of the boys had
overheard, but Raven couldn’t shake the feeling that someone had. Her heart was racing.

“Starfire!” she seethed in a whisper, glaring at her unsuspecting friend. “Can we...not discuss this sort of stuff here?! Please?”

Swim nights were one thing, but in the gym where the others were always nearby and within earshot, the last conversation Raven wanted to have was concerning...that subject.

Starfire only appeared smug at her friend’s reaction, and slightly mischievous, like she was playing poker and was just about to reveal her winning hand. There was something very cat-like about her features whenever she’d appear so sly in her convictions. “You have been taking our conversations to heart, I see,” she noted with a hint of satisfaction. “Very well, I will not push for more information for now, but do expect to give me all the juicy details at our next night of swimming.”

With a playful wink and smile at the now gaping empath, she then continued her jog around the track that circled the facilities, and left Raven to be consumed with her own thoughts.

Not that Raven would ever be able to tell Starfire the actual truth.

Chewing her bottom lip, she scrambled for her water bottle, trying to distract her mind from the memory of what she’d done the previous night. What she’d done a series of nights in a row, actually, ever since Victor had granted her an upgraded phone.

Just thinking about it made her blush all the way from her toes to her hair follicles.

Not only had she taken some rather character incriminating photos, but Raven had, by some miracle, found the nerve to post them anonymously, too.

Taking body selfies was actually a lot harder than she’d anticipated, and Raven had to give props to Starfire for being able to do so effortlessly. Unlike Raven’s own new — and rather empty — social media account, Starfire’s was bustling with photos, likes, comments, and follows. Like the princess herself, it was a myriad of colours, and she had a knack for using as many filters as she could. There were tons of selfies, but there were also pictures of her taken at a distance. There were a few where she was laying on a beach in a white, string bikini and sunglasses, admiring the view of the sun over rippling waves. No doubt, taken by Robin on one of their more private excursions at her behest. There were other photos of that ilk, obviously taken by someone else, and Raven had wondered at the relationship she might have had with the person behind the camera.
In Starfire’s case, it was either a fan she’d been earnestly stopped by, or Robin — most especially Robin if the photos were a little more personal. Some of the more tame snaps might even have been taken perhaps by other Titans, honorary and otherwise. With the boudoir models, however, the relationship with the camera man seemed...somehow more intimate. They almost mirrored the charged emotions evoked in the photos of Kory taken by Robin. Each set and each shoot with the same model were sensual but different, the angles always changing, with the perception of beauty unique to each photographer.

To undress for someone in such a manner, to allow them that close while being so vulnerable and exposed…

Raven couldn’t even imagine the level of confidence and trust needed for such a venture.

The very idea was both terrifying and...something else she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

Not one to be easily deterred, Raven managed to take a few simple photos, a bit too shy at first to go the full mile she’d intended. She kept her face out of frame — for anonymity, of course — added a black and white filter, and hit the post button so fast, she never had the time to doubt herself. With eyes squeezed shut, and bated breath, she’d patiently waited for the response the great, wide internet had in store for her.

Initially, it had been tedious, having to go through the multiple photos she’d taken on the laptop. With every one, she managed to find something — no matter how minor — to gripe about, save for the four she’d finally posted. She’d also been quite clumsy with working the phone’s camera, and had stayed awake well into the wee hours of morning many times trying to properly angle the shots she wanted.

Her outfits were simple. A basic crop top tank, her favourite pair of black, cotton underwear, a black string necklace with a silver crescent moon gifted to her by Victor for her birthday, and a dark burgundy nail polish. Courtesy of Kory. Although it was true the photos themselves were slightly suggestive in nature — the crop top was fairly low cut, and the underwear was a size too small — there was still something left to be desired. However, without a third party observer, it was near impossible to tease the camera the way she’d originally wanted to. The way the other models seemed to do so captivatingly well.

Not wishing to linger on it any further for fear that she’d just scrap the whole thing instead, Raven put her new hobby in the back of her mind for the time being. After days of radio silence, she’d almost forgotten about the photos completely, until late last night, when she’d received her first like and follow.
It had excited her beyond belief, and she’d worn a stupid smile to bed that night, her skin tingling at the prospect of success.

That was why she’d been in such good spirits, even at the gym, and why her body felt alive with magic, fueled by her positive emotions.

Raven was still fighting the blush that coloured her cheeks — and the smile that lingered from her happier memory — on her way to watch Beast Boy and Cyborg’s obstacle course outcomes. It was a good thing she was so sweaty and gross. Chances were good that her teammates would mistake her rosy complexion as the result of the rigorous exercise she’d just endured, rather than the alternative.

The empath had meandered over just as Cyborg achieved a perfect score, and let out a resounding ‘Booyah!’ for his success.

Beast Boy, on the other hand didn’t seem to be having such a good day.

“You gave up too quickly this time.”

Raven found Robin chiding the boy, who was currently slumped against the brick wall, butt on the floor. He held a pack of ice to what looked like a growing lump on the side of his head, and his nose was bleeding, drying just over his lip.

“I don’t understand what happened out there,” continued Robin, but Beast Boy didn’t appear to be listening. He was staring mindlessly at a point in the distance, his usually vibrant green eyes glazed over and drooping. “You’ve done this course numerous times before, and suddenly you can’t even complete it at its most basic level? Is there something else going on, Beast Boy?”

Robin crouched down, his shadow looming overhead and forcing Garfield’s gaze to flicker in his direction. “You know you can talk to me, right? I’m here to help.”

Beast Boy sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand. Whether from annoyance or to stop the bleeding, it was anyone’s guess. “I’m...fine.”
Robin scrunched up his face. “No, you’re not. You just got your ass handed to you by a bunch of low level robots. Talk to me.”

Beast Boy sniffled, his nose stuck with dried blood. Every one of his actions seemed slow and deliberate, like he was running out of energy to move and had to choose wisely. “It’s the class, okay? I guess it takes a lot out of me, and I haven’t been getting much sleep. There’s so much homework and studying, dude. On top of playing hero twenty-four-seven, I guess I’m just exhausted.”

Raven sighed, and rolled her eyes. She wanted to keep to her word — to avoid Garfield the way he was avoiding her. But she also felt sorry for the kid, and overhearing their conversation almost made her obligated to say something. Reluctantly, she walked over and examined him with a scrutinizing gaze before he could think about fleeing her shadow.

Beast Boy’s expression changed from that of tired irritability to distinguished awe. Not giving him the luxury of time to protest, Raven easily removed his hand holding the bag of ice, and healed the wound beneath.

“Azarath, metrion, zinthos.” Her eyes glowed to life, and warm, iridescent light flooded from her palm to help bring down the swelling of the bump and knit the flesh back together where there was a cut. The yellow and purple bruising also seemed to vanish, her healing touch mending any burst capillaries.

After an uncomfortable silence settled amongst the three teammates, Raven stated; “Can’t really help you with the bloody nose. You’re just going to have to stick to the old fashioned method of rolled up napkins, I’m afraid.”

Beast Boy blinked at her, his jaw hanging open, as if he were only just noticing her existence.

“I believe the word you’re looking for is thanks, by the way,” Robin teased him lightly. “Raven just saved you a week’s worth of headaches and Victor’s needles.”

Beast Boy gulped, swallowing the lump in his throat, and immediately looked away. “Th-thanks, but I didn’t really need it,” he muttered under his breath. He then stood to his feet and, without looking at either of them, said; “I’ve still got some homework left to do…”

With that, he sprinted towards the boys change room, not bothering to glance back.
“Well, that was certainly odd,” Robin stated, hands on his hips as he watched his teammate vanish beyond a door. “Hasn’t he begged you to heal a papercut before?”

Raven shrugged. “He’s been acting weirder than usual ever since he started taking that class.”

“I’ve got Cyborg investigating, but it’s a slower process now that Garfield’s never at the Tower anymore.”

Raven had to fix him with a look. “Investigating?”

Robin rolled his shoulders in a stretch. “I’m worried about him. He’s been getting thrashed on the battlefield by small time crooks like Control Freak, and two mornings in a row I found him passed out face first in his cereal.”

The empath gave Robin an observant, but curious, look. “Sounds like he probably just isn’t getting much sleep.”

“Maybe,” Robin postulated, “But I can’t help but feel like there’s something more going on that he isn’t telling us. Call it a hunch, I guess.”

He began to walk away to examine the settings on the course Beast Boy had failed. “Besides, we all know Gar likes to keep things to himself, especially when he’s hurting. He thinks he’ll be a burden to us by opening up, and we’ve probably got Mento to thank for that.”

Once again, Raven chose to ignore that familiar, panging urgency in the back of her mind...

All she was trying to do was finally catch up on some much needed sleep after so many restless, long nights. It was true she’d gone to bed early in a vain attempt at this, but she was still gnashing her teeth together in growing aggravation at her teammate’s selfishness. No matter which way she positioned her pillows over her head and ears, nothing could drown out the loud noise filtering into her room from just down the hall. By the time Raven had decided that she’d had enough, and restlessly kicked her covers off in a huff, she was seething with barely contained rage. Knowing who her prime suspect was, she threw her door open and marched right up to Beast Boy’s room;
the source of all the racket. She was like a woman possessed, clad in only her pajamas but still fiercely intimidating despite her size and appearance. When she reached his door, she raised her fist and banged loud and hard three times against the metal frame.

The obnoxious music slowly decreased in volume until it was but soft background noise. Moments later, she found herself glowering at a single green eye visible from the crack of the now opened door.

“What the hell!!” Raven fumed, gritting her. “Is there any good reason you’re blasting this ridiculous amount of noise in the tower at this hour?”

Beast Boy seemed to be recovering from the shock of seeing her at his door, and didn't immediately respond to her questions. Raven’s eyes felt like they were going to pop out of her skull from the pressure building behind them.

“Are you ever going to answer me or are you still busy ignoring me?”

It was a low blow, and probably not the right way she’d wanted to broach the subject, but her lack of sleep coupled with exhaustion from a physically strenuous day had taken its toll on her mood. Not to mention, she still hadn’t forgotten his cold brush-off at the gym after she’d healed him.

A familiar glimmer of emotion fired up behind tired, emerald eyes and Beast Boy seemed to find his voice. “Raven, it’s not even eight thirty yet, chill out.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth became a tight line, nostrils flaring. “I’m asking you not to blast your music so loudly, Beast Boy.” Raven’s voice was quiet, but the menacing danger was still clear in her tone.

“And I’m telling you that Robin’s noise rule doesn’t kick in until nine thirty.”

They glared at each other, neither backing down. Raven’s hands were balled into fists at her sides.

“What the heck is your problem these days, anyways? You’ve been acting like a total jerk!” she finally snapped, unable to hold back her anger any longer.
“My problem?! You’re the one with the problem!” Garfield retaliated with equal venom.

“You’re like an overgrown child!”

“Like you’ve been any better than me? Tell me, Rae. Have you even bothered to look into this...this mind link thing you did to me?!”

Raven was taken off guard by his sudden abrasiveness — and the boldness he had in bringing up what she’d only been dreading. Her anger dissipated, replaced with the worrying, nagging feeling she’d tried so hard to ignore for the longest time. Something was very, very wrong, and the female Titan was almost in a panic about it. In a foreboding sign, her skin broke out into goosebumps she could not explain, and a chill ran up her spine. She suddenly couldn’t remember how to breathe, and it was like air was being filtered in through a straw to her lungs.

Taking her uncanny silence as permission to proceed, Garfield continued to berate her in the hallway, his expression one of cold steel. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. You didn’t even bother to look into how it’s been affecting me. How I can’t sleep or focus or do anything anymore! My mind is just full of…,” he tapered off, clutching at his hair in frustration, “it’s full of you!”

“I can’t get you out!” He shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut as if from an excruciating migraine. “I thought they were just dreams at first. Inappropriate, sure, but it’s not exactly something I can control, y’know? Except, these ones don’t stop, Rae! Every single night, like clockwork, it’s like I’m in your room with you, and there’s nothing I can do to turn it off!”

It poured out of him, all of it, like a dam broken through at last. Raven didn’t need to use her empathic abilities to realize that he was shaken with fright. Surprisingly enough, the fear wasn’t entirely due to what had been happening to him, but primarily stemmed from the guilty conscience he had nurtured for keeping this secret to himself for so long. He was terrified of what she would think of him after she knew. He was terrified that their friendship would be ruined forever.

Raven’s own impending guilt came sweeping in as sudden and angry as a hurricane, and she took a few hesitant steps back, a million fleeting thoughts and questions abuzz in her head.

How much had he seen?

How much did he know?
What had she been subjecting him to all this time?

How did it even start and, more importantly, how could she make it stop?

Sweet, merciful Azar, what had she done?
The most crucial and initial logical step Raven had to take in order to properly recover, was to remember to breathe.

For the first time in a little while, her mantra brought her a sense of calm and comfort as she chanted it with a shaky breath, eyes closed in deep concentration. It allowed her to clear her head enough to think.

In turn, it led her to the second most logical step — which did not include hiding out in her room for the rest of eternity, no matter how tempting the notion. What lay predominantly at the heart of the situation was the fact that Raven needed answers to her most pressing questions. Answers she was not going to find by sulking about or being consistently paranoid.

Inhale. Azarath metrion zinthos. And exhale.

She repeated this until her nerves settled, because she knew exactly what her next step had to be, and in order to do be successful in her venture, she had to remain perfectly stoic. Anything that would betray the discombobulated mess that was her current state of mind would no doubt bring about questions Raven wasn’t entirely prepared to answer.

And with a powerful telepath like Lillith, there was no doubt she would easily discern even a flicker of unrest in the empath’s demeanour.

“All right?” came her honeyed voice through the communicator, almost in a sing-song tune.

The young woman smiled cordially through the small screen, and Raven had to remember that she was pretending to be normal. Taking in a deep, steady breath through her mouth, she said, “I have a few questions regarding the, er, thing we discussed. I hope I didn’t disturb you, or that this is a bad time.”
Lillith shrugged and shook her head, her long, wavy, auburn hair shifting with her delicate movements. “Not at all! I quite enjoy our talks, Raven.” Another reassuring smile. “How can I help?”

She appeared to be alone in her room, and Raven was silently grateful that the other woman had the forethought to answer her calls in private, away from other potentially nosy Titans.

Raven’s fingers dug into her knees as she formulated the words she meant to say. Her nerves were making her feel lightheaded and anxious. She had to reassure herself over and over that she could do this.

“I think...I think I was able to create a link, as you had instructed.”

Lillith nodded curtly, a somewhat proud assent whilst also encouraging Raven to continue by remaining silent.

“Well, it worked out fine at first...but there were...complications.” Raven had to look away, too embarrassed to maintain eye contact.

“I don’t even know when it’s even happening, and I can’t seem to...turn it off,” she confessed, her voice small. “How do I turn it off?”

It was all she could do to keep her desperation out of her inflection, but she also wanted Lillith to have an answer for her, because the alternative terrified her. She was also hoping that the other Titan would be forgiving of the transgressions — because that was what Raven had felt they’d become — she’d committed with a skill she had been kind enough to teach her. Raven was reeling with embarrassment, clenching her jaw as she tried to keep her emotions in check. A small voice in her head refused to make it an easy task. It continued asking her the same question with increasing panic;

*How much had he seen?*

“Well,” Lillith started, pondering the situation with an impatient finger tapping on her chin. “I’d imagine, with you, emotion fuels the link. We understood that much the last time we tested it.”
Raven shook her head in disagreement. “I’ve been in Robin’s head before. I’ve looked through his eyes. It’s never happened like...this.”

Calm. She had to stay calm, no matter how erratic her heartbeat became. Still, her words sounded practiced. Like she’d had this conversation with herself many times now.

“Well then, maybe this is different?” Lillith tried to rationalize. “I mean, this time around, you invited someone else into your mind. The rules might have been altered.” She shrugged, seemingly just as puzzled as Raven. “All I’m saying is, the process is different with the image projecting, and, unlike your previous bond, it’s new for you. Think of a maze, with multiple twists and turns and possibilities, each leading to a different exit, but an exit nonetheless. You’re used to taking the same route to achieve a known goal, and with a mutual assurance from the other party. You know where it starts, and you know how it ends.”

“With this, you took a whole new route. Maybe you started at the same place, but you diverged from the path most trodden, and headed into unfamiliar territory, in a direction unknown. It’s harder to tell where the connection begins and where it stops. The mind is nothing if not a labyrinth, and I think you know that pretty well, Raven.”

Lillith must have noted a new nervous tick in the empath’s clench jaw and the throbbing vein at her temple, because her expression became sympathetic and her tone less cryptic. “Maybe, your emotions charge the images you’re sending out, and you’re having a hard time keeping them under control.”

Raven’s breath caught in her throat. “I do have them under control, Lillith. I always do. If I didn’t...” Surely, Lillith was mistaken. The empath shook her head quickly, squeezing her eyes shut in fierce denial. “It’s not possible, it’s just not...”

“I don’t doubt that, Raven,” the red-haired girl attested. “Which is why I have to ask...have there maybe been any...new, conflicting emotions you’ve been experiencing? Usually stronger than the others, perhaps more...demanding.”

Lillith hesitated at the contemplative look on Raven’s face. She then took in a deep breath and added, “Often, if I’m having new, strong, and troubling thoughts, I can bleed them out to my teammates accidentally via the mental links I’ve established for communication. I’d guess it may be similar for you, but with feelings instead?”

Mother of Azarath. Raven’s eyes widened, petrifying fear rendering her suddenly cold and shivering.
“Uh, look, I’m sure it’s nothing some meditation can’t help fix, right? In the meantime, you can explain yourself to Robin. He’ll understand, and maybe he can help find a reasonable solution.” Lillith had gone on and tried to reassure the other girl, who had no doubt paled considerably as the gears in her mind turned.

*If only it had been Robin…,* Raven mused longingly. The situation would have been much easier to handle if it were Robin. She *knew* Robin. She was familiar with the tracks of his mind. But Beast Boy? Even if she tried to comprehend, she’d barely be scratching the surface, and Garfield was *a lot* of surface to scratch.

“Yeah, thanks, Lillith,” Raven gulped after some time, realizing that the other Titan had been waiting for a response of sorts. “I’ll try that.” She forced a small smile, but she was fairly certain it looked more like a grimace.

“If you need anything else, please, don’t hesitate to call. Even if it’s just to talk. Sometimes it helps gaining a different perspective.” Lillith smiled sweetly, but there was still concern in her azure gaze.

“Oh, of course. Thank you.”

Once the call disconnected, Raven let out the breath she’d been holding, and fell back onto her bed. She stared up at her ceiling, her mind racing. The next logical step had been realized, thanks to Lillith’s advice — although unintentional from the telepath — but that didn’t mean that it was going to be easy. In fact, it was perhaps the final step in what was going to be a long, tedious healing process. The one she’d been dreading, and wasn’t entirely certain she could even manage.

Raven *had* to confront Beast Boy again.

Raven couldn’t confront Beast Boy.

In fact, it was like her body had a will of its own — one that defied her mind at every opportunity — and did the *exact opposite* of what she knew in her heart to be right. She interacted with Beast Boy as little as required, and left her room very seldom. Being an early bird, it was easy enough to
dodge most of the Titans in the morning, and with Beast Boy’s classes, even easier to miss the changeling entirely. She timed her schedule around his, and spent most of the day in her room, sulking and pacing and meditating, trying to build up the courage needed to approach him.

She played out several scenarios in her head, practiced what she’d say, tried her damndest to prepare for nearly every possible outcome and question, and still had cold feet. Raven had gotten as far as leaving her room, marching down the hall, and standing outside of his door before turning tail and running back. One time, she’d almost knocked.

During the week, the others would come by to check in on her, worried about her sudden seclusion and reluctance to join them in social activities. Raven had stopped attending the swim nights with Kory. She stopped volunteering for small, late night missions with Robin. She no longer hung out in the garage, watching Victor work on the T-Car while he hummed along to the radio and she read her book, occasionally handing him the tools he needed. Raven hadn’t even touched her cellphone in days, completely ignoring the subtle chime of notifications she received from the social media account she’d brazenly created. She’d turned it to silent, and quickly stuffed it beneath the mattress so she didn’t have to acknowledge it again.

In fact, things had gotten so unbearable as of late, that Raven had rarely taken off her cloak. She could barely work up the nerve to unclasp it, let alone leave it open in public. The only exception, of course, was when she was in dire need of a hot shower. Even then, she was quick about the washing process. Normally, she’d much prefer to enjoy a languid, warm soak, and take her time until the skin of her fingers and toes were pruney. However, the last thing — the very last thing — she wanted to do was to burden Garfield with any more...images. Or thoughts. Or whatever the heck that was filtering through to him, unbeknownst to her. It was this exact, perpetual fear that was keeping her from going about her day in a typical fashion.

It was just as Lillith had said; their connection was akin to a labyrinth. Unlike how Raven’s mental link with Robin had progressed, the empath had no idea what channel she’d unlocked between herself and Beast Boy. With Robin, the connection had long since been severed, and only ever opened again with consent from their strong-willed leader in pressing situations, as had been their agreement. But a purely mundane link? One she had thought closed after the debacle with Slade was concluded? Raven had no words to adequately describe it, nor the emotions that came with such a concept. She did, however, have an inkling that her new, exhilarating feelings stemming from her unique, recently acquired hobby were most likely the culprit.

Just thinking about it made her skin flush with embarrassment, prickling into gooseflesh, like a set of eyes were watching her even then.

*How much had he seen?* The little voice nagged again, ever present in the back of her mind.
Raven knew deep down that she had to settle things with Beast Boy sooner than later, or else risk an intervention from her other teammates. Besides that, without his input, she’d never be able to sever the tie, and there was no way in hell she’d be able to adequately explain herself to her friends. Raven also couldn’t continue living this way — it was uncomfortable and steadily driving her insane.

She knew this, and yet…

She still hesitated. The residual thoughts and feelings were keeping her up even into the wee hours of morning.

Raven tossed and turned in her bed throughout the night, and was lucky if she managed to catch even a few hours of dreamless, blissful sleep. Keeping her cloak on, even in bed with her blankets, had increased her restlessness at night. She often woke up in a sweat, her clothes sticking to her clammy skin beneath the sheets. One glance at the alarm clock on her nightstand would show her that it was just ten past four in the morning, the scene outside her window pitch black, save for the twinkling of stars and distant city lights. Normally, she’d squeeze her eyes shut and try to fake it for another hour in the least, but there eventually came a night where she couldn’t take it anymore.

Her throat was parched, her mouth as dry as a desert, and her tongue felt like a wad of sandpaper stuck to the roof of her mouth. Not to mention, she was dying from heat. As her digital clock signalled the passing of another minute, Raven sighed heavily and threw the blankets off of her in a single, swift motion. The cool breeze against her sweaty skin was like a blessing, and further invigorated her resolve.

Water.

She needed water, she realized, licking her dry lips in a vain attempt to moisten them.

Waking up so early in the morning meant that the entire tower was still asleep, including the earliest bird of the group; Robin. It was certainly going against Raven’s new routine schedule, but she didn’t figure it was serious enough to affect anything; no one else would be awake at such an ungodly hour.

Raven then meandered her way out of her room and to the kitchen, still drowsy and tired despite her inability to remain asleep while in bed.
She flickered on the kitchen lights, and poured herself a cool, refreshing glass of water from the tap. As she gulped it all down, she thought she heard a subtle noise coming from the dining area. A rustle of papers, or something just as minute. She moved closer to investigate, and noticed a small bit of synthetic light filtering in from the other room. Raven put the glass away, and slowly crept into the dining area where she found a dozing Beast Boy snoring softly into the open pages of a textbook. The eerie, luminescent glow was coming from the animated screensaver of the northern lights on his expensive laptop. Next to it was his equally fancy camera equipment.

Raven was rooted to the spot, taking in the way his cheek was pressed flat against the pale pages of the book, the crook of his arm supporting his forehead. She quickly deduced that he must have passed out while finishing a last-minute assignment, and judging by the half-eaten bowl of cereal on the table — now turned to a chocolatey mush in the soy milk — he’d been out for a while.

She felt a little sorry for him — she’d never quite seen Beast Boy losing sleep over something like homework. Video games? All the time. But while studying? It was certainly unusual behaviour for the changeling. Unless, of course, Cyborg had been correct in his assessment of his friend all along; Garfield had certainly taken Robin’s words to heart, and was looking to prove himself to the others. As if on cue, the bulky, new, shiny lens sitting across from his textbook caught the empath’s eye just then — proof of his newfound determination.

Raven lingered in the threshold of the two rooms, torn between wanting to wake him so that he could at least get a few hours decent sleep in his own bed, or turning tail and fleeing to her own room. The latter was the easier of the two choices, but also more cowardly. Even though asleep — and completely harmless — Raven didn’t think she could handle speaking to him alone just yet.

Since the last time they’d argued outside his room, Beast Boy had been obvious about giving Raven her space, despite the expression he often wore in the rare instances that their eyes would meet. It reminded her of a sad puppy, kicked to the curb by their cruel, heartless owner. It was clear that he had something to say to her — he wanted to speak to her, it was evident in the furrow of his brow, and the taut lines around his mouth — but he was holding back for her sake. Beast Boy would immediately hang his head low and make himself scarce if they were ever in the same environment. It was as if he were perfectly in-tune with her discomfort around him, and she didn’t fully comprehend why that made her feel so...guilty.

Maybe that was what had caused her to linger for a fraction of a second too long — the guilt that made her heart squeeze at the sight of him.

When he stirred against the pages, Raven tensed. She thought about opening a portal and disappearing, but the sudden noise from her cloak would no doubt alert his sensitive ears, and she’d be caught regardless. Slowly, she turned around and tried to tiptoe back into the kitchen before he spotted her. She thought she was just about in the clear when he called out her name, his husky voice still laden with sleep.
“Rae-Raven? Is that you?”

He rubbed at his tired eyes, and his chair scraped against the wooden tiles as he sat upright.

Taking in a deep breath to help steady her nerves, Raven turned to acknowledge him. She tried not to fidget too much before he noticed her nervous cues. “I-I was just getting some...water,” she croaked, her tone sounding sticky from lack of use.

Garfield’s pupils adjusted to the light coming from the kitchen, and he stopped gazing at her like he’d just woken from a dream. He blinked twice, and then quickly glanced down at his lap, abashed, and scratched at the lobe of his ear. “Yeah, that’s cool...,” he replied unceremoniously, clearing his throat.

The awkward, budding tension was thick between them, and the deafening silence was going to drive Raven out of her skull. Part of her was screaming to get it over with already. To just tell him everything, come clean, and finally talk things out while she had him all alone. But her voice seemed to be broken, and all she could do was stand there with her lips slightly parted and her mind a hazy mess of questions and fears.

Judging by his following sentence, the changeling was obviously having similar thoughts, only, he was far more courageous when it came to acting on them. It was Victor who had once told them all how often Beast Boy wore his heart on his sleeve. Raven chose to remember his keen observation in that precise moment, knowing it to be an unnervingly accurate depiction the more she observed Beast Boy’s mannerisms. “Uhm, now that I’ve...got you here, actually,” Garfield started, still looking everywhere but directly at her, “I-I think I owe you an apology.” More throat clearing and fidgeting in his seat. His knee was bouncing. He didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands. Folded in his lap, running down the length of his thighs to his knees, scratching absentmindedly at a spot on his forehead or the nape of his neck.

Raven couldn’t breathe. Her instincts were telling her to run, and her heart was pounding in her chest. With a deep gulp of air, she quickly interrupted him before he could say anything else. Her words came out so hastily, they sounded jumbled even to her own ears, “It’s four in the morning, Beast Boy. I’m going to bed.”

*He* was apologizing to *her*. After...everything that had transpired between them, *he* was the one apologizing! It had caught Raven off guard, and of all the scenarios she’d prepared for, it was, perhaps, the only one she hadn’t even considered. In her own guilt-ridden self conscience, if there was anyone at fault, she knew that it was *her*. 
With Robin, their bond had always been consensual. With Garfield, she hadn’t even given him much choice in the matter. To breach Beast Boy’s mind in such a way, even by accident? It made her feel sick to the pits of her stomach.

The room was starting to spin, and Raven quickly turned on her heel to get away before she threw up on the kitchen floor. She knew she’d sounded cold and terse with him, but she couldn’t afford to make more of a fool of herself than she already had. It was going to shatter her pride completely.

“Rae, please, I just want to help…,” Beast Boy pleaded desperately, scraping back his chair to stand to his feet. He could no longer keep his composure, and the hurt etched into his features was the very last image that burned in Raven’s mind, even as she turned and fled the scene, her eyes squeezed shut in a miserable effort to drown him out.

She never did hear the rest of what he had to say, and she was too afraid to care to…
“Titans, go!”

Raven could have rolled her eyes at the standard scene playing out before her. The team had been called in to help maintain an outbreak in Gotham City, where Dr. Strange had been experimenting on Clayface clones — an obscenity that offended the legacy that had once been Basil Karlo, reformed villain. Batman and his team were busy dealing with the sudden increase of innocent civilians afflicted with such a horror, as well as their lack of control with their newly acquired abilities. Not to mention, the strain of any reopened, emotional wounds that were affecting Basil’s former comrades and friends. They may not have verbalized their pain, but Raven could feel it, as visceral as if it were her own.

Among the chaos and confusion, Batman himself had given the Titans a small enough task; help evacuate civilians while he hunted down Strange, before more people died in the carnage.

“Is Gotham always...like this?” Beast Boy mused aloud. He then shifted into a green rhino, and charged at a muck-covered monster chasing the fleeing crowd.

Robin was busy ushering people to safety, away from the boundaries of which Batwoman and Batwing had helped establish in order to contain the damage.

Raven used her powers to shield oncoming civilians from an attack perpetrated by a second Clayface menace that had recently joined them in the vicinity. She grimaced as the dirt and mud met her forcefield, holding her ground, but just barely. The creature let out an unearthly, shrill cry as it moved towards her.

Just before it could reach her, a series of searing green starbolts were shot through it’s sludge-like body, and Starfire whizzed on by, her eyes ablaze with a ferocious, emerald glow. She circled back, gearing up for her second assault while the creature screamed it's sky-shattering cry, full of anger and hurt.
“Just your standard Sunday night attraction in Gotham, I’m guessing?” Cyborg grunted, forcing a grin through sweat and exertion. They’d been at this for hours. “Hey, Rob! Know any good hotdog places ’round these parts?” he queried in between blaster cannon shots. “I got a feelin’ we’re gonna need some serious grub after this!”

The Clayface clone he’d cornered with Beast Boy was getting ready for another attack, but this time, it fixed its beady gaze on the now mud-covered green gorilla. Beast Boy shifted back quickly and tried to kick the sludge off of him, oblivious to its intent. “Dude! This is...way gross!”

“They do not appear to be taking any damage, Robin!” Starfire shouted to their leader. Her jaw was clenched in determination and battle rage. She powered up another starbolt, and watched as it burned its way up the destroyed road towards the Clayface still trying to break through Raven’s shield. Although not sustaining any serious damage from her onslaught, Starfire had managed to stagger it back into a pile of steaming, wet clay.

While it was down for the moment, and Robin rescued the civilians Raven had shielded, the empath took the time to glance over at the other Clayface currently keeping Garfield and Victor busy.

The sludge-formed creature was aiming its next attack at a completely defenseless Beast Boy, who, yet again, seemed none the wiser to it.

“Gar! Heads up!” Cyborg tried to warn him, aiming his cannon at the monster, and charging it up.

Victor shot it down just as it let out a mighty roar and sent a disfigured arm flying towards Beast Boy. He dodged just narrowly before Cyborg’s blast disintegrated it. Garfield looked down at the pile of clay before breaking out into a victory grin. Like a confident fool, he jumped and pumped his fist in the air, exclaiming, “Hah! Take that, you shrivelled up pile of dust!”

“Beast Boy!” Raven shouted in wide-eyed panic. The Clayface clone Starfire had turned to mush, had silently crept along the cracks of cement, and was now beginning to reform from behind the unsuspecting changeling. The thick brown substance was bubbling and pooling together in an ominous shadow only Raven had bothered to notice.

Time seemed to still. Starfire gasped, Robin was running, but he would be too slow, and Victor’s cannon would need to charge before he could load another round. Beast Boy himself had barely realized the looming monster regaling him just overhead. By the time he’d turned around, wild-
eyed and petrified, it was already building up its attack, a battle cry growing in crescendo, fueled by its fury and hatred. Its mud-like maw stretched open wide enough that it could have easily devoured the lithe shapeshifter instead.

Raven was the closest in proximity to Garfield, and she had to act quick. She closed her eyes, uttered her mantra, and vanished in a wisp of black smoke before reappearing where Beast Boy stood. She shoved him aside just as the creature brought its angry fists down.

The empath quickly tried to summon up an energy shield to defend herself, but she was short on time and already exhausted from using so much of her powers consecutively. The creature smashed through her defenses easily enough, and the dark matter dispersed in a crackle of static energy. The ground shook and broke beneath her feet as the pressure in her head exploded from the impact. The last thing Raven heard before her vision went totally dark and her mind shut down, was the echo of Robin’s voice, calling out her name in vain...

Pain was a concept very familiar to Raven. In fact, she liked to think that she had a fairly high tolerance to it. Being a healer also meant that she had to absorb the other’s wounds — make them her own, where her healing factor was about to quickly make amends. So, whenever her mind would require shutting down entirely in order to repair her body, Raven knew that the damage she’d sustained was enough to leave her sore and miserable for weeks to come.

It came in nauseating waves from the moment she opened her eyes, and the next thing she knew, she was vomiting by the side of her bed, mostly a green, clear liquid with some notable chunks of the meager breakfast she’d had. Her stomach cramped miserably, rolling around within her like it was jello. The sour, metallic taste in her mouth was enough to bring more bile to the back of her throat, and it was all she could do to wipe the spittle from her parched lips and fight her own gag reflex.

She saw him then, from the corner of her eye. He was hard to miss, as always. Being green was a disadvantage, but she knew that he loved the attention. In the blur of grey and dull whites surrounding her vision, he was the splash of colour that added life to the environment. A sunlit forest in the middle of a pristine, monochromatic hospital. Or, a plant on a windowsill in a drab office. Somehow unnatural in such a habitat, but still a welcome sight for sore eyes. He was familiar.

His outstretched hand caught her attention then, his fingers clutching a tin cup, perspiration sliding down his knuckles from the ice cool water inside. Raven was hesitant, and she paused as she remained bent over the side of what she finally realized was a stretcher. She clung to the bedrails, weak, feverish, and unbearably warm beneath the suffocating, paper-thin sheets. Her body was in a state of pure punishment, and it was unforgiving upon waking. She was painfully dehydrated.
Eventually, her thirst won out over her stubbornness, and she took the cup from him.

Raven gulped down all the contents in few seconds, her skin cooling off as an immediate reaction. It didn’t hurt to swallow now that her throat no longer felt coarse and dry, and her tongue didn’t stick to the roof of her mouth. Nearby, she could hear him wringing out a towel in a bowl, but she still couldn’t look him in the eyes. Instead, she stared at the small rivulets of water that dripped down the length of his strong forearms, lining his veins, before disappearing into the folds of his sleeves at his elbows.

Raven licked her lips. She stared down at her lap and fought off the second bout of nausea that threatened to consume her. “Sorry about the mess,” she told him, her voice meek. It was embarrassing, and it was only a matter of time before the sour smell assaulted their nostrils.

“Dogs eat their own puke, you know.”

Raven raised an eyebrow, unable to keep the disgust from scrunching up her nose.

He laughed softly, still wringing the towel. “It’s okay. It’s mostly water, and there’s hardly much there,” he reassured her. Emerald strands of his hair fell before his eyes and he blew at them exasperatedly.

“The dog thing,” he clarified as he scooted his chair closer to her, “is completely true, by the way.”

“Are you implying that you’re going to lick vomit?”

Beast Boy shuddered, sticking out his pink tongue at her just as he slipped the cup out of her cold, pale hands. The brief contact of his wet fingers against her own sent a shiver down her spine, but she convinced herself it was just the fever working through her.

“No, dear God, no. I was implying that Damian Wayne has a pet dog, and if we happen to let him wander in here, he’ll probably…,”

“Stop, please.” Raven gagged, having to bring her hand up to her mouth as she felt hot, burning bile tickle the back of her throat again. “No more.”
He chuckled at her reaction before leaning in close with his wet hands, and brushing her bangs away from her forehead. The contact oddly felt almost improper between them — intimate, even — and Raven had to force herself to look away. Beast Boy then placed the damp towel against her flushed skin, while Raven felt a blush creep up her neck at all his innocent yet tender touches. It was...almost alarming having him take care of her in such a way, but Raven — even through her pulsating headache — distinctly recalled taking the hit while trying to save him, and his doting on her suddenly made more sense.

As she tried to recall more of the memory, her head pulsed to the beat of her own heart, the pain throbbing along the top of her skull, and the sides. She grimaced, and knew the minute he’d caught her flinching, he would be pitying her.

“Why’s Damian Wayne’s dog in our Tower, anyways?” she mustered, ignoring the way he watched her with concern.

Beast Boy blinked in confusion once or twice before realization dawned on him. He then motioned to their surroundings with a lopsided smirk, and explained, “We’re not at the Tower, Rae.”

Raven then glanced about, confounded, and finding it difficult to focus much at all through her ear-splitting headache. It was true though; the medbay was far too different to be the same one at Titans Tower. Her features pinched in question, the familiar, soft whirring and buzzing of nearby machines having fooled her into thinking she was at home. Only, this tech was far more advanced, and bore none of the typical additions that Cyborg would have installed. It was also bigger — way bigger. The colour drained from her face as she’d gleaned her lapse in judgement.

*Gotham.*

They were still in Gotham.

“What happened?” she then asked him, panic lacing her tone. “Why am I here? Why are you here? Where is everyone else?”

It was Beast Boy’s turn to appear bashful. He rubbed at the nape of his neck and shifted his gaze away from her. “You got hit pretty bad, Rae. The shield you made took the brunt of the damage, but Clayface still wiped you out. We all saw you go down, and...it was terrifying, to be honest.”

She remembered *that* much. Her body felt destroyed, and her psyche was in tatters. It would be a
day, at least, before she could call on the full strength of her powers, and only with some much needed meditation first.

“Are they still fighting?” Raven asked feebly, feeling oddly small and fragile in such a spacious, intimidating room. The cleanliness, the white walls, the fluorescent lighting, and the lack of decor reminded her of an asylum.

Beast Boy nodded solemnly in reply. “Things got hairy fast, and they’re still working on containing the outbreak. Batman found Strange, but the damage has been done.” He shook his head, gaze focused on the tiled floor, and his hands balled into angry fists from atop his legs. “I don’t know how he does it in a city like this...The tragedy, the death...it’s a constant battle.”

“Why aren’t you with them, then?”

Garfield tensed, obviously looking to dodge the question by switching conversation topics, but he didn’t know how to. Raven watched him expectantly, but she knew any intimidation factor was lost with her current, sickly appearance — she also felt pretty silly with a towel on her head. Beast Boy took in a deep breath, his shoulders moving upwards and his nostrils flaring. She caught a muscle twitching at his jaw, and then he opened his mouth, ready to say something, when the pair were suddenly interrupted.

“Because Master Richard requested that he stay with you, Miss Raven.”

The door to the room had swung open to reveal a prim-looking, elderly gentleman that looked like he belonged in a castle rather than a covert medbay full of expensive toys and knickknacks. He was dressed in a crisp, black tailored suit, a pair of white gloves, and fancy, polished black dress shoes that probably hadn’t seen a stain all their existence. In his hand, he balanced a serving dish with a silver cover, and everything about his expression remained both unfortelling and regal. Even his movements were dripping with careful elegance, as if he planned every motion to have a purpose. “Alfred Pennyworth, at your service,” he bowed. His English accent and cool tone of voice was oddly soothing to Raven’s ears. She barely knew him, and yet, somehow, she felt as if she could tell him her entire life story in a single sitting over a cup of tea.

“Well, yeah, but I was going to stay anyways!” Beast Boy bumbled, sheepish. The harshness of his tone immediately broke the spell the butler had weaved with his entrance. “She got hurt protecting me!”

Raven didn’t know why the way he said that made her stomach flutter. Perhaps she was still nauseous…
Alfred seemed unperturbed by Garfield’s brazen attitude. Instead, he fixed him with a look that conveyed a mix of curiosity and indifference, and then went about his duties anyways. Ignoring the green changeling, he gently placed the platter onto a table that wheeled over the stretcher and hovered above Raven’s lap. “Yes, we are all perfectly aware of your...heroics, Mister Logan,” he then conceded.

Raven couldn’t help but snicker at the way Alfred teased Beast Boy, stifling the giggle with the back of her hand. The shapeshifter paled — as much as someone with a green complexion could, anyways — and immediately lowered his head in shame, glaring at a spot on the perfectly clean floor.

“Heroics, huh?” Raven pressed, still wearing a small smile. Alfred was removing the lid from the hot plate of food he’d brought in, and then proceeded to pour her a fresh glass of water from a pitcher nearby.

“Oh, yes. Has he not told you? I would have rather figured that a true gentleman, such as Mister Logan, would have immediately taken the opportunity to gloat,” Alfred explained calmly.

This earned the changeling a puzzled look from his teammate, her smile fading. Garfield was innocently staring at the ceiling, tapping his feet nervously against the tiled floor and whistling some indiscernible tune.

“He hasn’t,” Raven answered, still staring at Beast Boy curiously.

“He was originally brought here for a serum concoction from our Doctor October, more potent than Mister Stone’s. It appears that Mister Logan, in his fit of rage, morphed into a rather...heinous creature, not of the normal animal variety.”

Raven’s eyes widened.

*The beast?*

Alfred continued, placing the utensils carefully and perfectly next to her plate. “He then attacked the monster that had caused you harm and, as Victor so eloquently put it, ‘beat it to a muddy pulp’.”
Beast Boy winced, his incessant foot tapping growing more rambunctious as the butler of Wayne Manor told his story.

“I thought you had the beast under control?” Raven poised her question to Garfield.

He grinned nervously, his sharp canines gleaming in the eerie light of the medbay. With a shrug, he said, “I did. I do. Doc October gave me something a little...stronger, is all.”

Raven frowned.

“He was...quite cooperative with the doctor. Once the clay-afflicted creature was neutralized, Master Richard claims Mister Logan was docile. He did, however, seem oddly concerned about you. It was him that carried you here, Miss Raven.” Even Alfred appeared to be in disbelief at the turn of events, a shred of doubt colouring his calm, even voice.

“Stop calling me Mister Logan! It’s weird!” Garfield growled, huffing out his cheeks in embarrassed frustration.

“I...see.” Raven was looking at the plate of food, examining the contents as if she cared for them at all. Delicious, no doubt; chicken parmesan, Italian dressed salad, a slice of fresh lemon. All it did was make her stomach turn. She could barely handle the smell, but not wishing to be rude, she forced a small smile up at Alfred. “Thank you for the food, Mister Pennyworth, but if you don’t mind...could we have a moment alone, please?”

He nodded briskly before bowing and turning on his heel to leave the room. As he reached the doorway, he added, “I’ll be sure to knock before I come by to disinfect the floor,” he instructed, forcing Raven to heatedly stare down at her own fingers as she recalled the mess she’d made upon waking. Without another word, Alfred departed. Raven immediately covered the plate of food again, before she started to build up another cold sweat and add to the contents already by her bed. She knew she was hungry and that she ought to eat, but her appetite would be vanquished until she was fully healed.

“So.” Beast Boy wasn’t tapping his foot any more.

“So,” Raven replied, her fingers playing with the thin fabric of the sheets draped over her legs.
A moment of silence lingered between them, filled with the soft hum of the medical equipment in the room. The tension was back, although Raven noted that, despite everything, she wasn’t as uncomfortable around him as she had been before. Why that was, she couldn’t quite understand...

“I’m sorry about the whole beast thing,” Beast Boy started, his voice a little shaky. “It’s just, like I said, seeing that thing take you out like that…” He rolled his shoulders and stretched out his fingers against his kneecaps, whispering; “It scared me…”

Raven’s features softened and, for the moment, she forgot the more pressing issue at hand. “Gar, this is what we do. It’s the risk we take every day,” she reminded him gently.

His ears looked to perk up affectionately — like a cat’s — when he heard his nickname roll off her tongue. It was rare she ever did use it, and mostly because he always made a big deal about whenever she did, embarrassing her by taking it to mean more than it should have. This time, he didn’t verbalize his feelings on it, but seemed to visibly relax in his chair.

“I know. I just...if anyone gets hurt because of my stupidity on the battlefield, it ought to be me. Not you, or Starfire, or Cy, or Robin. Me.”

Now, this was a side of Beast Boy that Raven had never really seen before; vulnerable, scared, painfully honest. Even after the events with Terra, Garfield had chosen to carry that hurt all on his own, locking himself in his room whenever the wound was reopened and refusing to adequately deal with his pain among his peers. The empath couldn’t help but think that, maybe, at some point in time, she’d scratched past all that surface after all...

“I’ve been a real jerk to you lately, and you...,” he hesitated, biting his tongue. There was a pained look to his expression, and it may as well have been him who had suffered the blow from the Clayface clone. Both of them were aware that, had it been him, without Raven’s shield to absorb most of the damage, the blow to the head would have been lethal. The thought alone — unpleasant and terribly frightening — made Raven’s fingers quiver in her lap.

Garfield took in a deep breath through his mouth, steeling his nerves for what he was going to say next. “What I’m trying to say is, I-I want to help you.”

He looked up at her earnestly, his eyes glittering like jade stones in the pale light. There was also a slight colour to his cheeks, and it took Raven to discern that he was blushing. “I can help, Rae.”
“I don’t...I don’t understand, Gar.” Raven shook her head, perplexed. His overbearing nervousness surrounding the subject matter was bleeding into her though, and for some reason, she was also filling with a sudden sense of dread.

His gaze darted about, and he chewed at his bottom lip. “I-I...I have a camera, that I know how to use...I can...help.”

Raven clutched at the blankets, her fingers digging into the fabric until her knuckles paled. She tried to maintain a stoic expression, and bit the inside of her cheek to help her control the rampant emotions roiling within her like a whirling hurricane. She stayed silent, and Beast Boy took it as permission to continue explaining his stance while he still could. “I won’t tell anyone, of course. I’d never tell anyone, I swear on my life, Rae. You have my permission to damn me to hell if you want if I ever do. But, we’ve got a few studios at school, and no one really uses them after hours, y’know. There’s no one even in the building after class, except maybe the custodian, but Kurt is a nice guy. He won’t ask questions. He’ll just think you’re a student or something.”

Beast Boy was rambling, and slowly, Raven was beginning to piece together exactly what it was that he was proposing, much to her horror.

“It doesn’t have to be anything wild! Whatever you’re comfortable with, of course. I’ll delete anything you don’t like and send you the ones you do. We can use the editing program together at the school. I’ve got it downloaded on my laptop, too.”

“Mother of Azarath, Beast Boy!” Raven shouted suddenly, cutting him off and taking him by complete surprise. He paused, blinking as if rousing from a stupor. Unable to contain her emotions any longer, she clutched at her hair like a madwoman, the damp towel slipping off to land in her lap. “How much thought have you put into this...this...crazy idea?!”

He gulped. “Well...since-since you, uh...since the first time you took the photos. Right before you posted them online...”

*How much had he seen?*

*How much had he seen?*

*How much had he seen?*
How much had he SEEN?

Raven was mortified, and even that felt like an understatement. She felt like peeling off her skin and turning into someone completely unrecognizable, just so she could forever escape the conversation she was currently — and unfortunately — tethered to. “This isn’t happening,” she muttered under her breath.

“I’m not upset! I’m not! I know I said some...harsh things, but really, I was just scared you’d think I was some kind of gross creep. I didn’t even know what...they were at first.” Beast Boy had brought his hands up in defense, obviously trying to allay Raven’s worst fears.”I thought they were just...dreams.” He flushed, and if he wasn’t already green, he’d have been crimson.

“Oh, Azar.” Raven felt faint, and she fell back into her pillow.

“I’m making this worse, aren’t I?”

“I need you to leave, Beast Boy.”

“Rae, I...I swear, I just want to help.”

“Help me now by leaving me alone, please,” she pleaded, resting the dorsal part of her hand against her warm, damp forehead.

She could sense the way he had to hold back, the room abuzz with the friction as he clenched his jaw and ground his teeth. Then, Beast Boy pulled out his chair, and stood up with a heavy sigh. Raven kept her eyes closed, too afraid of what she might find if she dared to look up at him then.

She could hear him moving away, the soft footfalls of his sneakers echoing in the otherwise empty room. Even without looking, she could pick up on the prickle of disheartened confusion coming off of him; it was evident in the way he walked, shoulders slumped and head hung low. Raven could almost visualize it in the hunch of his back and the tension between the blades of his shoulders.

When he reached the door, he paused, and before he departed, he told her, “Just...think about it at least.”
And then he was gone. Raven immediately threw the covers over her head, trying to regulate her breathing so she didn’t go into a panic attack.

Nothing — absolutely no amount of thought or meditation — could have ever adequately prepared her for *that*.

Nonetheless, she was now left with a lot to think on.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, when she didn’t have an ear-splitting headache, and her skull didn’t feel like exploding from the pressure contained within it. Tomorrow, after a good night’s rest and a clear head, maybe…

Maybe, she’d *think* about it…
"Why him?"

The question was meant to sound intimidating, but it came out of Raven's mouth sounding like genuine curiosity instead.

Robin didn't turn around. He didn't so much as flinch. Instead, he poured two fresh glasses of water and made his way towards the foot of her bed. "Why who?"

Raven sighed and rolled her eyes in exasperation. So that was how he was going to be. "Don't play coy; you know exactly what I mean."

Robin handed her one of the glasses before taking a seat next to her on the edge of her bed. "You mean Beast Boy?"

She gave him a deadpan stare in response but took the beverage from him anyways. Robin then proceeded to ignore her, taking a sip of water from his cup and staring into the bottom of it like it held all the answers to the universe. Raven waited, the muscles around her eyes twitching with impatience, and her mouth becoming a tight line.

"He was already there." Robin finally shrugged, avoiding her penetrating stare. "A matter of convenience."

Raven opened her mouth to retaliate, but Robin cut her off, "Besides, he'd already made up his mind about you."
That gave her pause, catching her off guard. She closed her mouth, blinked a few times in surprise, mulling over what he’d so brazenly stated as common knowledge. Like Beast Boy's resolve concerning her was some kind of stone cold fact.

Raven gulped at the lump lodged in her throat. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means he was going to stay whether I told him to or not. Cyborg and Starfire had to keep the afflicted at bay while we got you to Wayne Manor safely. He's also...a little difficult to argue with when he's in that form."

"You realize you revealed your true identity to Beast Boy, right?" Raven tried changing the subject; the less focus on her, the better. It was embarrassing, noting how dedicated the changeling had been after she'd saved his skin. There was no doubt that Robin would pick up on her discomfort and further probe her about it if she allowed him the chance. A conversation she was not all too keen on having at the moment.

A small smile then betrayed Robin's otherwise stoic features. "I know."

Raven raised her brows in surprise. "You're...okay with this?"

He ran a hand through his thick crop of onyx-coloured hair, and chuckled. "Oddly enough...yeah. Yeah, I think I am. I trust you all with my life. It's about time I trusted you with who I am, too. To be honest, it's kind of a relief. I feel like a great weight's been lifted..."

Robin gave her a warm, comforting smile. "Besides, saving my teammates will always be a top priority in situations like these."

Raven couldn't argue with that logic — she felt the exact same way on the matter. Her friends — her family — always came first. Her life was inconsequential without them. That was why she'd rescued Beast Boy without a moment's hesitation, regardless of any injuries she knew she would sustain. Waking up to a world empty of one of them...the thought alone sent a shiver down her spine, and she brushed it aside before she could gauge the familiar, gut-wrenching feeling of emptiness budding within her.

"That's it, then?" she queried, her amethyst gaze soft — contemplative, even — as she regarded him.
"Well, I came to check in on you, too. I was worried when you skipped breakfast, and I understand you've been cooping yourself up in here even before the events in Gotham," Robin admitted. "I took advantage of the opportunity, I guess. Two birds, one stone." He smirked sheepishly, the delicate youthfulness of the boy behind the mask becoming visible, but fleeting.

Raven stared down at her lap where she focused her gaze on the open pages of an ancient tome and its faded scrawlings. She'd been looking for a hint on how to sever her connection with Garfield to no avail. At least, nothing that wouldn't require a substantial sacrifice first, anyways. Raven sighed and closed the heavy book, running the pads of her fingers over the aged, scarlet cover.

"I'm fine, I promise," she then reassured the boy wonder, forcing the best genuine-not-quite-genuine cheerful demeanor that she could under such pretenses.

Robin appeared skeptical — as he should have, being one of the world's top detectives. He also knew Raven well. Arguably better than any of the other Titans. He could see through all her carefully built walls and fibs, like they were made of glass and paper. Raven tried not to sweat under the heat of his scrutinizing gaze.

He then drummed his fingers along her mattress, and said, "Somehow, I get the feeling that isn't entirely true." Before Raven could even consider a rebuttal, Robin gave her pause; "But I won't press. I assume you and Garfield have made some progress, because you both appear to be a little more...relaxed around one another now. I don't want to jeopardize whatever it is that's working between the two of you."

Raven quickly shook her head, fingers subconsciously digging into the fabric of her mattress, "What? No! I-it's nothing like that!"

Robin chuckled before his free hand found hers on the bed, and eased her grip on the sheets. "Raven, it's okay. I'm not getting involved — unless I'm specifically asked to, of course. That, or it comes to blows," he laughed, especially when Raven paled at his light jibe. "We're not kids anymore, and I have to trust that you two will work this out, in your own way."

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze then, the warmth emanating from him matching his earnest tone and trusting visage. "But I'll always be here if you ever need to talk." It was always easy confiding in Robin. After a brief moment of comfortable silence, Raven conceded the point.

"...Thanks, I think," she mumbled under her breath, having to break eye contact.
Robin let go of her hand and then stood up to leave. "Thank Starfire. If it weren't for her and all the patience she's taught me, I'd probably still be the same arrogant kid I was when I first started out."

They both laughed a little at that, like a secret inside joke kept between two old friends.

"So, am I setting you up a plate for dinner after all?" he asked her just before he stepped out of her room.

Feeling a bit lighter — and in significantly better spirits — Raven smiled and nodded once. "Count me in."

Things between Beast Boy and Raven had probably first begun to shift on a crazy, windy day that had taken Jump City by surprise. The team was dispatched to assist in all the mass collisions and accidents befalling the city due to record breaking winds. Objects were flying onto roads, construction sites were a hazard, and people were ending up in the hospital. Raven wondered when her life as a superhero had become so...mundane. Robin was sure to remind them all that, as Jump City's resident heroes, it was their job to ensure the safety of the citizens. From supervillains, to weather disasters, and absolutely everything in between. Unfortunately for Raven, that included securing a city currently being ravaged by blustering wind.

Thinking back on it afterwards, she should have figured that it was a recipe for disaster. Wind plus cloak plus a curious shapeshifter would never have equaled to something good. Having grown more comfortable around her teammates again, including Beast Boy, she'd almost paid it no mind when the wind decided to lift up the fabric of her cloak and whisk it about her silhouette in an angry fury. Raven had been in the middle of helping Garfield clear some debris from a massive ten-car accident when it had happened. At first, she'd ignored it, more annoyed with the wind whipping her hair about and getting in her eyes than anything else. She'd been trying to focus on keeping the cars afloat with her magic while Beast Boy was helping the people still trapped inside one of the vehicles that had been sandwiched between them.

By the time he'd gotten them out and into the safety of an ambulance, Raven's cloak sat completely askew around her leotard, with the wind constantly rummaging it even after she'd tried to adjust it multiple times. In fact, when she landed on the pavement nearby, she was angrily fussing with it, just short of losing her temper and removing it completely.

"Azar, this wind is beginning to test my patience!" she growled, her fingers no longer working diligently enough against the wind's own diabolical plans.
When Beast Boy didn't say anything, Raven glanced up at their surroundings, only to discover a desolate highway, metal carnage, and a very curious look on the shapeshifter's face. "What?" she asked him pointedly, taking a momentary pause from her struggle with her clothing.

His eyes darted down the length of her body, very briefly, before snapping back to attention to her face. He scratched behind his ear and tried to appear nonchalant. "N-nothing."

It hit her then, like a freight train, and she felt like a complete idiot for not noticing before. *How could she even forget?*

Beast Boy must have clued in to her reaction, because he quickly changed from apprehension to mild concern and panic. "So, uhm, crazy weather we're having, huh?"

Raven felt numb, like she couldn't move. Like she couldn't *breathe*.

The look on his face the moment his verdant gaze had swept over her figure, it was as if he'd known her body in ways only a lover could have…Raven would likely never forget it — in fact, the notion sent an involuntary shiver down her spine, and one that was not entirely unwelcome.

Despite already being accustomed to her uniform and shape, Beast Boy looked like a man who was seeing her for the very first time. The way his lips had parted, and the awe in his expression, made Raven feel utterly *naked* to his gaze.

The most intriguing part of all of it was that, despite realizing this, she couldn't get her hands to obey her anymore. Raven couldn't close her cloak, no matter how much she knew she should have. It frightened her, having to note that a part of her *didn't even want to*.

Beast Boy then turned to stare out at the skyline, just as the last ambulance whizzed past overhead on the highway, the sound of its siren unmatched by the powerful, blowing winds. The sun was beginning to set, colouring the sky in pink and purple hues, and it was poetic the way nature remained beautiful even when overlooking nothing but concrete arches. The flicker of gold cast in Garfield's luminescent, emerald eyes whenever they caught the orange rays of light, forced a frazzled Raven to look away. By some miracle, it was just what she needed to finally find the strength to fasten her cloak about her shoulders while the wind had temporarily stilled. Her heart thumped madly in her chest, and she stared down at her feet, still holding her hands to her throat self-consciously.
"You given it any thought?"

He didn't look at her when he spoke. She didn't quite know why. Maybe he was feeling as embarrassed as she was, and knew that he'd turn to mush the minute he addressed her properly, especially concerning the sensitive subject he'd brought up. Either way, Raven found herself grateful. It made looking at him a whole lot easier. She twirled a single lock of lavender hair by her ear.

"I...I don't know." And that was the truth.

Part of her knew she ought to have outright rejected his offer. The other part of her — the one she'd been denying as of late, and the same one that was responsible for the shiver his ogling had caused — so desperately wanted to say yes. There was an unbidden excitement at the prospect, and Raven would have been a bold-faced liar if she said she hadn't given his proposition any thought at all.

In fact, some nights, it was all she could think about.

In her mind, she went back and forth.

It was wrong, obviously. Beast Boy was her friend, her teammate. He was never supposed to have been privy to this side of her life. The correct answer was to cut her ties and move on, pretending this little hiccup had never happened in the first place.

On the other hand…

She'd pulled her phone out from beneath her bed in what she'd thought was a moment of weakness; a flaw in her character.

Raven had scrolled through the likes, the comments, and all the notifications she'd received on the device. She had followers now. Not many — only four — but that didn't deter her from obsessively checking in for more almost every day. It didn't even make any sense; why would she even care for the opinions of the scummiest people on the internet? There was no doubt, judging by the comments and private messages, that the users who'd liked and followed her blog were of the gross variety. She'd wondered how the girls on Beast Boy's phone fared with those types, and how they ended up so mainstream, that even neutral people like Garfield were perusing their photos so casually.
It probably helped having a professional photographer, taking professional photos, she imagined. Raven recalled the expensive camera on the dining room table while Beast Boy had slept. She couldn't yet personally attest to his skill, but he was taking classes to get better and prove something to the others.

Besides, Beast Boy knew her. He'd already seen...everything he was going to see anyways, and although that ought to have unnerved her, at this point in her internal debate, it was more likely a boon or a blessing.

The question was, could she trust him with something so...intimate?

"Well, it's not like the offer has an expiration date, Rae." He smiled at her, the lines around his mouth pressing into faint dimples she'd never really noticed before. "Just let me know if you decide you're interested."

Right. Of course. He hadn't been joking or teasing when he'd told her he would take the photos for her. Free of charge. In the privacy of a closed studio he'd book from his school.

Any of the models starting out would have probably jumped at the opportunity, but for Raven, knowing that it would be Beast Boy on the opposite end of the camera was the very thing she couldn't fully wrap her head around.

It was what made her hesitate, even now.

When her audience was a group of strangers online, she was oddly a little more at ease, but it was a whole different can of worms when her unusual hobby directly implicated someone she worked closely with every day.

Someone she lived with, and would have to face her the very next morning.

Raven wasn't quite sure she had the confidence to do that just yet, and so when Starfire finally rendezvoused at their location, she couldn't have been more grateful for the reprieve ...
As she stared up at the old community college building, Raven couldn't say precisely what she was doing there. Her feet had a mind of their own, it seemed, and before she knew it, she'd left the Tower in search of Beast Boy. Young adults moved past her like she wasn't even there, chattering excitedly to one another regarding their prospective weekend plans. It was early in the evening, and school was out for most, with most of the classes winding down. Robin had asked if someone could go and give Beast Boy a hand with hauling over some camera equipment he needed for a future presentation.

The logical Titan would have been Cyborg. Or Starfire. Or even Robin himself. Really, any Titan other than Raven. But the empath, surprising everyone in an uncharacteristic display of selflessness, had volunteered.

Normally, Raven was of the think-before-you-speak mentality, but for some inexplicable reason she was still trying to formulate, she'd blurted out that she'd like to be the one to go before anyone else was even able to get a word in.

Blessedly, no one thought to question her decision, despite the exchanged doubtful glances among her peers.

So, knowing she had only herself to thank for the predicament she was in, Raven took in a deep breath, steeled her nerves, and pushed her way through the crowd towards the entrance. With her civvies on, and her hood up, no one was going to recognize her, and she took some comfort in that. Instead, she focused on the information Robin had provided her regarding Beast Boy's precise location on campus. She could still recall the question on the tip of his tongue, and the way Robin had visibly held back from inquiring about her unprecedented behavior. Even Starfire had given her a look that said there would be much to discuss by the time she got back. Meanwhile, Victor was most likely postulating clever ways to get the details out of his best friend.

Raven had swallowed her pride and ignored them all. This was something she had to do, for her own sanity if nothing else.

She found Garfield in the lone classroom at the back end of the hall on the third floor. The door was partially opened, and no one else was there with him when she'd peeked in through the skinny, grid-lined window. Class had been dismissed over ten minutes ago, and everyone was in a hurry to get home early on a Friday night. Even the lockers from across the hall were left unattended by students. Raven could see the shapeshifter packing up a few tripods to stack among his other nameless items currently stored in a series of black travel bags. He didn't seem to notice her there, even when she'd slipped in through the crack of the doorway and removed her hood.
"You really need to brush up on your sensing skills, Beast Boy. Everyone's been able to sneak up on you lately," she commented, folding her arms over her chest as she surveyed him. He'd practically jumped out of his skin at the sound of her chilling voice in the otherwise silent room.

"Raven?!" he said her name incredulously, turning to appraise her like he was seeing her ghost instead.

She would have lied if she said she didn't notice the way his eyes scanned her body again, in a less blatant manner than when they'd been on the highway. This time, he appeared to be more taken with the civvies she was wearing rather than what was underneath. It made her a bit self-conscious, and she hugged her arms tighter about herself.

"Why did you come?" he gulped.

She glared at him, offended by his tone. "Do you want me to leave?" she snipped.

Beast Boy shook his head, grimacing. "Not what I meant! It's just…," he trailed off and cast his gaze to the side.

Raven sighed before moving to examine the items he needed help carrying back to the Tower. "Robin said you needed a hand. So, here I am. Is that going to be a problem?"

Much to her surprise, he followed the short silence with a light chuckle. "No, it isn't. Thanks for coming, Rae."

Satisfied with his response, Raven then began using her magic to rearrange some of his things according to size against the wall. "Whatever you think is sturdy and less likely to break, I can simply send back to the Tower through a portal," she instructed. "Everything else, we'll personally carry through."

"Sure thing, but wouldn't you like a tour of the facilities first?"

There was something almost giddy about his tone, and it carried through his body language when he came up behind her. She turned and nearly smacked face first into his chest, he was so close. Personal space had always been of little consequence to the shapeshanger, for as long as Raven had known him.
"Uhm, don't you need to get back to start your assignment? Besides, it's taco Friday, and you never miss taco Fridays." Raven was flustered by his forward behaviour, but like hell she'd let him know that.

Beast Boy shrugged his shoulders, his hands slipping into the pocket of his beige slacks. "Come on, Rae. Everyone knows you don't do homework on a Friday night. As for tacos, it's not like anyone else eats the meat substitute filling, anyways. I'm not worried."

He gave her a signature cheeky grin, fangs and all. "Did you have plans tonight or something?"

Her eyes were amethyst slits. The nerve of him sometimes…

"Maybe I do. What's it to you?"

"Secret date we don't know about?" He waggled his eyebrows suggestively, earning him a glare and a menacing snarl.

Raven still flushed visibly, despite her annoyance, and Beast Boy threw his head back in laughter. "And you say I'm the easy mark."

"Do you want my help or not?!"

"I want to show you the studio."

She backed off a little, her heart skipping a beat, only to feel like it had lodged itself in her throat instead. His meaning was not lost to her. It was written all over his face, his expression darkening in a way that made her stomach twist and her loins ache.

He leaned in closer, forcing her back until her fingers brushed along the cold brick wall. In a careful whisper, he said, "I know you've avoided taking any new photos. I know you want to, and I hate that I'm the reason you won't."
Raven swallowed and tried her best to maintain her slipping composure. "Why do you even care so much about this?"

Beast Boy, reading her body language, finally eased off a little with downcast eyes and guilt furrowing his brow. "Because it's my fault," he confessed gruffly. "You...you looked so happy, and then I had to open my mouth and take that away from you, like I always do."

"You're seriously blaming yourself for the fact that I've invaded your mind and can't turn it off? That's hardly your fault, Beast Boy."

It was pouring out of her now. In a classroom that looked more high school than college, with dim lighting and an ancient projector situated in the middle of a series of askew desks and chairs. Pandora's box was opened, and, like a flood wave she could no longer control, it submerged them both. Bile stung the back of her throat and tears burned behind her eyes, the emotions within her so raw and volatile that she couldn't not feel them, no matter how hard she tried.

"I don't know how I got into your head, Garfield, and I sure as hell don't know how to get out!"

He gripped her by the shoulders then, steadying her and eliciting a small gasp from her lips. Then, he searched her eyes with his own for what felt like forever. He was so close now, she could practically taste the spice of his soap on her tongue. Raven's breathing was laboured and ragged as she fought back the emotional anguish ready to consume her. Somewhere nearby, a lightbulb or two flickered.

"You're not in my head, Rae, and I'm not in yours. When I first told you that, I was just...confused, frustrated, and a little angry." He finally had her undivided attention, and he licked his lips carefully before pressing on. "It's just, sometimes, I get these...images projected from you. I think, usually, when your emotions are strongest. Like with Slade, when you and Robin were in danger. I saw snapshots of streets and buildings, still images. I happened to recognize one on a hunch and we found you guys." He shook his head and then appeared crestfallen, letting his grip slip from her shoulders and his hands fall to his sides. "There's no thoughts, no voices, just...images."

His eyes were darting about, like the next part was going to be difficult to admit to. "It's not unlike looking through a camera lens, actually...Only, you're the muse..."

Raven bit down on her bottom lip and held her breath.
The moment felt frozen between them, with Raven's heartbeat the only signature movement of time. The heavy, canvas curtains of the building's windows were drawn, filtering out any evening rays of light. The projector had turned on at some point — probably as a result of Raven's palpable emotional spectrum — and the light coloured the smallest specs of dust floating precariously throughout the classroom.

Raven dropped her pack, letting it fall to the floor, all the while keeping her eyes fixated on his — a clash of stone violet and lush viridescent.

She took in a steady breath through her mouth and, in what was barely more than a shuddering whisper, asked, "You're sure you want to do this?"

With a firm resolve, Beast Boy nodded once. "I do, only if you want to, of course."

Raven's limbs were shaking and she was afraid to try and move, worried they might have given out and she'd have stumbled into him.

She gulped, reassessing the situation in her rattled mind. He was still watching her, anticipating, knowing it would have to be her to make the next move. The tension was building around them, wedging them closer together in ways neither could have ever anticipated.

She took a deep breath, stood firmly on her feet, and made sure she looked him square in the eye when she finally said, "Okay."

The facilities, as Beast Boy had so put it, were actually rather cramped and uninteresting. Maybe that was why the changeling hadn't even bothered with most of the school grounds and, instead, dragged Raven immediately to the studio rooms.

The grin that had split his face the moment she'd conceded to his request had been the happiest she'd seen him in a long while. Almost immediately, he'd thrown his camera case strap around his neck, grabbed some extra lenses and equipment, and tugged her hand along in his. However, all the while he rambled on like an excited schoolboy, leading her around the hallways and stairs, Raven was too focused on his touch to really pay any attention to the words leaving his mouth. She would look to the ground and shyly tuck her hair behind her ear whenever she caught a fellow student glance down at their clasped hands. Raven was extremely self-conscious of it, and knew very well the implications of such an intimate gesture on campus grounds.
"I've actually been booking a room every day for an hour. Just in case," Beast Boy told her when she tuned back in. They'd reached a quiet section in the basement of the school, where only a handful of students remained by their lockers. On the concrete wall next to a set of doors, there was a clipboard with a sign-in sheet and pen. Garfield hurriedly signed his name next to the handwritten version he'd obviously scribbled down earlier on in the day. "Hardly anyone books this one, anyways," he said with a shrug, opening the doors with a gentle push on the metal bars.

"Why? What's wrong with this room?"

Raven looked around as Beast Boy flicked on the lights, and they came on one at a time with an echoing thud. It looked about as cozy as an abandoned warehouse, and just as empty and desolate.

"Nothing, really. But sometimes, the students like to use it for hooking up, so no one ever books it because they don't want to walk in on that," he explained casually.

Raven sneered in disgust after gauging how much dust covered some of the surfaces. "That can't be hygienic," she noted, sliding a finger down a dusty ledge.

Beast Boy chuckled. "I imagine they use the dark room." He pointed to a door off to the side she hadn't noticed earlier. "Gives you a chance to put your pants back on if a teacher comes poking around."

"Do I even want to know how you know that?"

Beast Boy flushed and tried to laugh it off. "Probably...not."

Her expression soured, but Garfield was plowing on ahead, clearing his throat and obviously hoping she wouldn't pry any further.

"I was thinking of doing a practice shoot first, you know? Nothing crazy." He was setting up in the back end of the room where a white backdrop was situated, along with some extra lighting.

"Wait, you never said anything about shooting today," Raven protested, self-consciously glancing down at her attire.
Some ripped up leggings, a high-waisted, black denim skirt with silver buttons down the middle, and a royal blue, off the shoulder blouse. Paired with her favourite black boots and trademark hoodie. She was hardly anything anyone would consider special. Beast Boy waved off her concerns. "It doesn't matter. This is just a test run. You can delete all the pictures if you want."

He then ushered her over to where the backdrop was and made her stand in the centre, taking her bag from her to place it on the floor next to him.

"I-I don't know what I'm supposed to do," she confessed, feeling nervous and out of place.

Beast Boy appeared to ponder that as well, tapping a finger to his chin. He then looked around the room until he spotted a rusty stool in the back corner, and Raven watched as he ran towards it and proceeded to drag it over to where she was. She pulled a dubious look when he indicated for her to sit. "How's this any better?" she frowned.

"It's a bit less awkward if you're sitting. Just act natural, look into the camera like you were looking at your mirror," he said. Garfield then jogged back to the edge of the white screen, and steadied his camera in Raven's direction.

The stool wobbled as the suddenly graceless empath tried to prop herself onto it, and the truth was, she was still feeling out of place and uncertain. Beast Boy had promised a tour, and she wasn't quite ready to take photos. It felt like she'd been blindsided.

Just then, she heard him take a few snaps, and her head jerked in his direction, eyes widening in crazed panic. "Are you taking pictures now?!" The uncharacteristically high pitch of her voice echoed in the empty room.

She hadn't even gotten around to sitting on the stool properly yet, and Beast Boy was already taking candids for practice.

The changeling then erupted into a cheeky grin from behind his camera lens, proud of himself for the reaction he'd gotten from her. "They always say the best shots are the ones that come naturally."

"No one says that." Raven glowered at him. "I look like an idiot."
"You're not an idiot."

"Well, you're making me feel like one," she snapped, growing more irritable with every passing second. She then groaned in agitation as she made up her mind. "This is ridiculous, and it was a terrible idea. Let's just go home." Raven hopped off of the stool in a huff, causing it to almost tip over in her haste.

"Wait, Rae," Beast Boy pleaded, blocking her path towards her bag. He looked genuinely apologetic for his crassness, but Raven was not impressed.

His puppy dog eyes routine wasn't going to work on her this time, despite being nearly foolproof with Starfire. She folded her arms over her chest and waited for his defense, already certain she wasn't going to give his plight any thought.

"Okay, maybe this wasn't such a good idea. It's cold and dank in here, you're clearly uncomfortable and out of your element, and...it probably doesn't help knowing what the students actually use this room for...," Beast Boy admitted, scratching nervously along his jaw.

Raven scoffed and rolled her eyes. "That's putting it mildly."

"But, that doesn't mean we can't do this...on your terms," he continued, ignoring her jibe.

Azar help her, she was listening now. Raven lifted her brows in suspicion, and Beast Boy took in a deep breath, the muscles of his chest expanding with the effort. "Obviously, you're more comfortable in your bedroom. I can...try and figure out how to make this place a little more bearable, and in the meantime, we can take some pictures in your room instead. When you feel ready, that is."

Raven squinted up at him and leaned in towards his face, making him stumble a bit backwards as she gauged his sincerity. For the second time that day, she found herself posing the same question to him. "Why are you so adamant about this? What do you get out of it?" She jabbed him in the chest with the point of her index finger.

"Your friendship and trust?" he answered humbly, pretending to be unfazed by her nearness.
"Gar," she sighed, rubbing her fingers over her temples in mild irritation. She'd used his nickname affectionately on purpose, to help further stress her next point. "You already do."

"I know, but...not in the same way the others do. Face it, Rae; we're not the closest of friends on the team, and we never have been. If you had the choice, you'd sooner trust anyone else with this secret than me, and you know it." There was a hint of bitterness in his tone, but his shoulders slumped and his ears drooped like they often would whenever he felt defeated and disheartened.

Raven opened her mouth to retaliate, but couldn't find the words adequate enough to smooth over the situation. That, or she was too proud to confess to how she really felt. Which, in itself, served as further evidence that his observation was accurate. When he met her silence and guilt-ridden eyes, his gaze dropped down to the camera in his hands, and his fingers fiddled with the various buttons and knobs in distraction. "That's why...that's why I want to help. I want to prove to you that I can be a good, trustworthy friend. This is important to you, it makes you happy, and I want you to know that it matters to me."

She knew he was being genuine. Raven didn't really have to use her empathy around Beast Boy to know when he was wearing his heart on his sleeve. She pointed at the camera in his hands. "Is that why you're taking these classes? Because you feel like you need to prove yourself to us?"

He shrugged, avoiding her penetrating stare. "That, and I actually really like photography. But Robin said this thing, about how I always have these new hobbies every week, and that I end up ditching them for video games and never actually following through with anything. I guess, he kind of got to me."

"So, this is some kind of pissing contest then?" Raven asked, pursing her lips in disapproval.

"What? No! We're on good terms, Robin even apologized after. Gave me this whole pep talk about how I'm a valuable member of the team, yada yada. You know how he is." He rubbed his hand along his shoulder towards the back of his neck, and appeared to be reminiscing the moment.

"You do know he's right. You have to acknowledge that. We prove our worth on this team every day we take the fight to the streets of Jump City, or anywhere else in the world that needs it. You, me, we risk our lives, and that's more than enough to show you're exactly where you ought to be," Raven told him, trying to sound diplomatic about everything.

He shook his head and chided her with a small laugh and half-hearted smirk. "You sound just like him, Rae."
Beast Boy was right, of course, but that didn't stop her from feeling embarrassed about the way he'd said it. She may as well have been Robin's parrot, but she really didn't know how else to reassure him without being overly emotional. Thankfully, he didn't give her much of a chance to refute it. "It's fine. I get it. But this is still something I have to do, for myself, if no one else. Let me show you what I can do, if you'll have me," he encouraged somewhat shyly, picking up her bag for her and handing it to her.

Raven stared at it — the familiar army green fabric that Kory had told her would only clash with the majority of her outfits, and thus spurred her to purchase it in defiance — and considered her place in all of this.

He needed this — maybe just as much as she did. They both did, and Raven felt like she was at a fork in the road with the decision she was facing. She bit down on her lip and tried — without success — to resist the puppy dog look on Garfield's face. Sometimes, she could swear he didn't even realize he was doing it.

"Maybe you're right," she agreed with a deep exhale, absent-mindedly tucking some loose hair behind her ear before taking the bag from his outstretched hand. "Maybe it's just this place. It gives me the creeps, and it smells like a sewer."

He laughed, the sound rich and genuine, echoing in the dark chamber that was to be their studio. "It kind of does, doesn't it?" He wrinkled his nose in distaste.

Raven couldn't help the tilt of the corner of her mouth; his happiness was infectious. It was the whole heart-on-his-sleeve thing, she surmised. "I can lend you some candles to help spruce it up a bit."

His eyes lit up at her suggestion, and if he had a tail, she was sure he would have been wagging it. "Gee, candles really get you going, huh?" she teased.

Beast Boy chuckled at that. "Depends on the scent. Some smell like bathroom soap, which isn't exactly appealing. So, should we, uh, maybe head back now?"

"And miss out on the rest of your tour? I don't think so. You haven't even shown me the cafeteria or the gymnasium yet."
He raised an eyebrow, asking her without words if she was serious.

"I'm kidding," she then added, her inflection void of emotion.

He decided to play along and, with a shrug, reminded her; "I would, but it's taco Friday, and I'm starving."

Raven rolled her eyes in exasperation, slung the strap of her bag over her shoulder, and walked past him. In an intentionally judgmental voice, she said, "What is it with boys and tacos, anyways?"
Raven was, by far, not a neat freak, despite what some of her teammates would have argued. She liked her things organized in a way that allowed her to find them easily enough without necessarily ripping her room apart, but that didn’t mean she was obsessed with cleanliness and order. Things like dusting, sweeping, and other meticulous chores, she often saved for when it was time for the routine tower clean-up. Thankfully, Robin kept those mandatory cleaning sessions to roughly about once every two weeks, so they weren’t always subjected to the horridness that came with so much cleanliness and attention to detail in a home the size of Titan’s Tower. Mostly, it was for Beast Boy and Starfire’s sakes, who were evidently the team’s slobs.

Robin was perhaps the neatest of them all, followed closely by Cyborg, and then Raven as a trailing third. Between Kory and Garfield, it was anyone’s guess.

Despite this, Raven had become quite self-conscious of the state of her room. Or, perhaps it merely kept her mind preoccupied because it was always easier to stress about something trivial — like a bit of dust on her wardrobe — rather than any pressing issue at hand.

For example, her last thought concerning her lithe shapeshifter teammate at the most inopportune time possible — a late night swimming session with Starfire the previous evening.

“Someone’s in the pool already,” she’d heard Kory state in a quiet tone.

They were in the girls’ change room, and Raven was busy tying back her hair with the help of a mirror and a borrowed elastic band, when Starfire had padded over on bare feet towards the door and cracked it open a peep.

“Maybe it’s Robin?” Raven casually speculated, not bothering to pause in her vain efforts of taming her short, violet hair that was too soft and too straight to stop slipping from her fingers.

It wasn’t unusual for the boy wonder to do a few laps as part of his rigorous workout routine. Not
one to cut corners, even if unplanned interruptions cropped up — like crime — Robin could be found right where he’d left off in his training regimen shortly after, regardless of the time of day. Rock hard abs always did come at a price, after all.

“There is more than one splashing.” Starfire shook her head, trying to get a better, stealthy angled look at the new pool occupants.

Raven heard it, too; the unmistakable sounds of water spattering, and an inkling of voices. She tried her best to pick up on the words they were saying, but failed. Too many walls and distractions in the way.

“I think...I think I see Beast Boy,” Starfire confessed, squinting through the doorway as Raven joined her.

Her curiosity grew in a crescendo, and Raven’s eyes widened, heart thumping involuntarily for reasons she couldn’t possibly decipher. “Beast Boy?” Even her pitch came out higher than usual. “What’s he doing in the pool? Is he transformed, maybe?”

Thankfully, Starfire either didn’t seem to detect her strained panic, or she didn’t deem it important enough to point out, obviously too distracted by the bigger mystery going on just beyond the door. “I believe he is in his human form,” she answered under her breath, as if afraid they’d be caught. “But he is under the water, I cannot see him all too well.”

Raven needed to calm down. After all, it wasn’t uncommon behaviour for the other Titans to use the facilities of the tower. Yet, she somehow couldn’t help but feel exposed — as if Starfire would somehow glean everything scandalous that had been transpiring between Raven and Beast Boy all this time. The taller female Titan had already been suspicious enough when the empath had volunteered to go to his school campus, and after Raven had finally agreed to Beast Boy’s most impromptu proposition, she knew it was only a matter of time before the interrogation would begin. As a result, her nerves were on edge, worried about any dead giveaway of her secret new hobby — intentional or otherwise.

“Good.” Raven heard Robin’s voice when she leaned in closer to her Tamaranean friend, placing a hand on her shoulder as she peered over her impressive height, even whilst crouched in hiding. “Now let’s try it with the weights.”

There was a lull in the splashing, and Starfire gasped. “It is definitely Beast Boy!” she squealed excitedly.
“Seriously? Did I like, piss you off in a previous life or something?” Beast Boy groaned, dunking himself back into the pool water in exhaustion.

“You’re lazy, but fit. Your lap record is only a fraction of a second behind mine. Consider me impressed. So, why the act?” Robin asked, folding his arms over his own bare chest.

“What act?” the younger man challenged rather cheekily.

“Come on, Gar,” Robin sighed. “We’ve known each other long enough by now. Deflecting me isn’t going to work, no matter how well you’ve perfected it.”

Raven could spot Beast Boy now, floating on his back and staring at the glass-domed ceiling as he waded in the pool. “Just trying to make you laugh, boy wonder. But I see Star has her work cut out for her.”

Exasperated with his teammate, Robin pinched the developing crease between his brow and shook his head. “Fine. Put on the weights and let’s take it from the top.”

“You got it, bossman.”

He got out of the water, his wet feet padding softly against the ceramic tiles of the pool’s edge.

“Should we reveal ourselves?” Starfire whispered, biting her lip anxiously, the way she normally did whenever her morals were called into question.

Not that she had that problem often, but the guilt of spying was written all over her face.

Raven took in a deep, shaky breath and nodded once. She was practically crouching behind the taller woman’s form, intimidated by Azar knew what. Her body was experiencing a fight or flight response, but she steeled her nerves, using logic to counter such juvenile instincts. So long as Beast Boy kept his word, the others would have no reason to speculate, and she wouldn’t need to scramble to make up a lie.
Starfire then pushed open the change room door, immediately drawing Robin’s attention, and said with a big smile, “Good evening, friends!”

Beast Boy’s head popped out of the pool, green floating in azure blue, and he blinked the water from his eyes to help investigate the developing interruption. Shaking his head to work out the sopping mop of dark green hair obscuring most of his face, he then used his fingers to push the tousled strands back, causing them to stick up haphazardly in multiple directions due to the wetness.

Raven gulped when his gaze flickered to her — like magnets, his emerald stare lingered, puzzled but curious. Despite her towel wrapped about her body, she still felt as if he could see right through all her clothes, and the thought alone sent her heart lurching into her throat, and an involuntary shiver down her spine. Heat flushed her face and she was forced to break her own gaze away.

“Oh, we didn’t realize you were using the pool today,” Robin said. “We can leave.”

Beast Boy cheered, “Yes!”

Robin shot him a dirty look, making the shapeshifter bashfully sink most of his head back into the pool so that only his eyes and the bridge of his nose were visible.

“Don’t think you’re getting out of this, Beast Boy. Whatever we don’t finish today will be added on for tomorrow,” threatened Robin.

Beast Boy rolled his eyes, and a few bubbles rose up to the surface just under his nose.

“It isn’t a problem! We may share the pool. It is big enough for all of us,” Starfire cheerily stated.

Raven’s head snapped towards her female friend, eyes wide in disbelief. ‘Share?’ she reiterated, wondering if she’d heard her right.

Robin’s expression became lax, and a soft smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he looked upon his girlfriend’s pretty, smiling face. Starfire’s joy was infectious, but Robin was always the most susceptible to her wiles these days. Beast Boy was busy spouting out water from his mouth like he was a fountain, while Raven watched on in horrified disgust.
“Can we get on with the torture already? This weight isn’t getting any lighter, y’know,” he reminded their leader a few moments later.

Robin cleared his throat, snapping out of whatever had bewitched him. Starfire was already clad in her frilly, white bikini, and had scampered over to place her towel on a nearby beach chair, motioning for Raven to join her. Still clinging to her own towel, the empath waited until the boys were once again preoccupied with their workout routine — and Garfield’s incessant splashing resumed — before shuffling quickly over to where Kory beckoned.

She then cast cautious glances towards the boys, ensuring both were too absorbed into their activity to pay any mind to her. Robin had his back to her as he observed Beast Boy’s posture in the water, a yellow stopwatch in his hand. Meanwhile, the shapeshifter was submerged, his arms making long, strong strokes beneath the surface of the pool as he swam its entire length and then back again.

“Guess we’ll be keeping the swimsuits on, then,” Raven grumpily muttered under her breath before removing her towel with great precision.

Starfire had a nervous bubble of laughter leave her throat, and shrugged. “I would not have a problem with skinny dipping, either way,” she informed her friend.

Raven paled at her insinuation. “You’d be okay with getting naked in front of Beast Boy?”

Although it was no secret that Robin and Starfire were...intimate with one another in their blossoming relationship, Raven couldn’t wrap her head around how Garfield factored into it at all.

“We have done the skinny dipping before, Raven. He is most respectful of boundaries.”

“You what?!” Raven had grabbed Kory by the upper arm, forcing her to look at her in seriousness, although it escaped the princess as to why the other Titan was taking it so hard. “How? Why? When?!” Raven sputtered, blinking in surprise.

“A communal hot springs in Japan,” Kory told her, nonchalant, before prying the empath’s fingers loose from her arm. “We were both very much wishing to go after such a long battle, and neither of us minded the nudity. I’d call it a bonding moment between Beast Boy and I, of the non-sexual variety.”
“So, you see,” she continued, a sparkling smile returning to her handsome features, “I would not be opposed to it, if you would like, Raven.”

The empath felt a flush creep up her neck just thinking about the prospect of being naked in front of both Beast Boy and Robin simultaneously. “I, uh...I don’t think I’m ready for that, Starfire”

Strangers on the internet were one thing; two of her male teammates were another. Starfire appeared lax, as if having expected such a response, and merely shrugged before padding over to the pool’s edge, where Garfield continued to swim at the instruction of Robin and his stopwatch.

Raven chose to stare at him in the water, transfixed by the movement of his muscles — both in his back and his arms — rolling beneath smooth, green skin, because it was easier than dwelling on what Starfire had just told her.

It wasn’t like the Titans had never had a beach day before, but Raven often opted for a sheer cover-up, more so for the safety of her easily burned, pale skin than her modesty. Neither Robin, Beast Boy, or Cyborg ogled the girls shamelessly, or acted in a perverted manner towards them just because of their state of dress. The opposite, in fact — they were quite respectful, outside of perhaps an occasional shy glance at Starfire’s impressive model physique, which no one could fault them for — it was hard not to stare at Kory in a swimsuit. Nonetheless, the day would go as planned — beach fun, bonding, and sand in all the worst, most unexpected places. Raven would get a lot of reading done until one of her teammates would decide it was time she join them in the water.

Innocent.

Fun.

An overall good day. A fond memory she stored away to think on whenever she had a lonely or sad spell.

But bathing naked? With Garfield?

There was no way she could visualize such a scenario, even if she tried. Not unless it was a joke — like when he’d transformed whilst in normal swimming trunks, only to have them tear as a result. All the Titans had laughed then — except for Beast Boy, who was flushing with embarrassment —
but he’d remained submerged in the water, so nothing *private* had been visible. Eventually, Starfire had fetched him a new pair of shorts, and everything had returned to normal. Raven hadn’t even thought of it again until now.

“Fascinating,” Robin breathed, staring down at the time on the device in the palm of his hand and breaking Raven out of an impromptu reverie. Their fearless leader then burst into a genuine grin just as Beast Boy stopped swimming and popped his head out of the water, his breathing ragged.

“My muscles are burning, dude!” he cried out. “My arms feel like jelly.” As if to emphasize his point, he lifted one of his arms and allowed it to flop back into the water with a heavy, loud slap.

It was an odd time for the new, sudden realization to dawn on Raven, and there were hardly any preconceived notions that led her to such a conclusion, but she felt the thought burn in the back of her mind before surfacing. A cold sweat ran down the length of her spine, like someone had slipped an ice cube down along her skin until she was covered in goosebumps.

Beast Boy *knew* about her naked swimming sessions with Starfire.

Not only did he know, he’d more than likely *seen* them both via their accidental mental connection. How she had failed to glean this bit of information earlier was so unlike her. At the cost of not causing her further embarrassment, Beast Boy had obviously neglected mentioning it to her.

Raven’s heart seemed to sink in her chest, and she could feel the colour draining from her face.

“Uh, Rae? Are you okay over there? You don’t look so good,” Garfield observed from where his head floated above the surface of the water. His features were crossed with worry, and Raven felt the room spin — something about how when a state of being is brought into question, it becomes a reality — even as Robin and Starfire both turned to investigate their teammate’s current state.

“Woah, Beast Boy’s right. You look paler than usual,” Robin commented in surprise before walking over to steady her in the event she collapsed.

“I-I’m fine,” she reassured them. “Just stood up too fast.”

Raven clutched her head and Robin eased off, but he didn’t look entirely appeased. “You sure you’re up for a swim?”
She nodded vigorously and immediately regretted it when it worsened her oncoming headache. “I’ll just hang poolside and read,” she decided last-minute.

Raven pulled out a worn in novel from her light beach bag, and ignored the three sets of eyes that followed her every movement.

The truth was, she still felt tense and uneasy, her stomach flip flopping within her. If Beast Boy wasn’t going to make a stink of it, then maybe Starfire was right in her assessment of their teammate — that he was being respectful of boundaries, just like he’d tried to convince her of back at the school. It was this thought that helped calm her and ease her fired up nerves; the least she could do was grant him a similar courtesy for invading his mind in such a distracting manner. So, Raven took her book, sat at the edge of the pool and dipped her feet into the cool water before flipping open the novel to where her bookmark was left, hoping the tension among her teammates would eventually dissipate.

“It needs ambiance.”

“Excuse me?” Raven wasn’t sure if she was more surprised by the knowledge that Beast Boy utilized such words in his vocabulary, or that her room — of all the rooms in the tower — was the one in need of ambiance.

The changeling ignored her incredulous stare, and walked about the small space, as if scrutinizing it like those interior designers he often watched on TV. “Y’know...” He waved his hands about in the air, in search of the words on the tip of his tongue, and hoping to find them in his environment instead. “Like, more of a mood setting.”

Raven stared at him, unblinking. “What sort of mood were you thinking about?”

He was staring at the stack of books on her shelves now, squinting to read the old, cursive text, the golden letters faded from age. “Well, you’ve got candles, but none of them are lit.”

“Okay.” Raven folded her arms over her chest, her eyes following him as he moved.
“And the lighting in here isn’t the greatest,” he continued, picking up a candle and sniffing it.

“Okay…”

“You’re also way too tense and nervous right now, which’ll make your poses look forced and stiff.”

At this, she lifted a brow. “How would you even know that?”

“Easy,” he stated, turning to face her now. Pointing at her posture, he said, “Your body language is all closed off, and you’re not dressed for the shoot yet.”

“What the heck do you expect me to be wearing?” Raven glanced down at her plain, civilian clothes that consisted of a simple black skirt and a loose, dark blue hoodie.

“Less,” he confessed rather bluntly before realizing his error.

Raven clenched her jaw, and Beast Boy immediately fumbled to fix his mistake, panic settling in his features. “I-I don’t mean it like that! I just mean, you look all bundled up in your hoodie, instead of something...relaxed.”

“Like?” Her patience was wearing thin, and it was evident in her strained tone of voice, flared nostrils, and twitching temple.

“I don’t know, whatever it is girls wear to feel comfortable in their skin. Your favourite tank-top, maybe?” He was taking shots in the dark, she could tell, but it was obvious he was trying to make the best out of the situation without putting any pressure on her.

“A tank top? Like the one I sleep in?”

He turned on his heel abruptly, and studied her now — his eyes roaming from head to toe — in a way that almost unnerved her. There was a funny look about his face as he left his mouth open and
regarded her with squinted eyes. “Rae...Raven...Please, please tell me that you have a wardrobe for the shoot…”

“I have clothes,” she snapped defensively, but her neck was flushed due to his heavy implication. She was no Starfire, and therefore spent most days in either borrowed clothes, her uniform, or a mash-up of the several outfits she actually owned. No one had even noticed — until now, it seemed.

Beast Boy groaned audibly, his eyes rolling to the ceiling as he ran the palm of his hand down his face. “You have got to be kidding me,” he whined before sighing deeply. “Alright, fine. We’ll do a quick shoot today with…,” he paused and motioned at her ensemble with a wave of his hand, “whatever you want to wear, but tomorrow, we’re going to the mall, and if you complain, I’m telling Starfire all about your clothing malfunction.”

Raven blanched. “You wouldn’t dare.”

He broke out into a cheeky grin, his dimples pronounced and his eyes glimmering with mischief, like a cat up to no good. “It’s still not a risk you’re willing to take, I bet.”

Her hands were fists at her sides, and she may as well have been caught between a rock and a hard place. With jaw clenched, and teeth grinding, she slowly said, “You, of all people, cannot possibly pick out my wardrobe. First of all, where would you even get the money, and second, why in the name of Azar would I ever wear those clothes?”

If she had meant to dissuade him at all, Raven had failed in her venture, for the cheshire grin only grew with deviousness. “Money’s not an issue,” he dismissed apathetically. “And it’s not like you don’t get any input. The clothes can be strictly for the photos; no one says you have to wear them all the time.”

She was dubious, even in how her dark eyes lingered on him, but Beast Boy’s resolve was unshakeable. It was a staring contest Raven wasn’t going to win, so with a roll of her eyes and an audible exhale, she unzipped her hoodie and flung it onto her bed. “Fine. We do it your way for now.”

A corner of his mouth twitched into half a smirk, and he lifted the expensive camera that was hanging off a strap around his neck. “How about a few practice shots for today? Robin and Starfire are on a date, and Cyborg’s doing the volunteering thing he usually does on weekends. The whole tower is ours, and it’d be a shame to waste it.”
“May as well,” she replied dryly, as if the prospect itself were tedious, even though there was something almost thrilling in regards to their precarious situation. Raven shoved the feeling aside — like she were swallowing a wad of gum — shook off her shoes, and crawled onto her bed, reaching for the sleepwear she’d left over her pillows in the morning.

“Hold that pose!” She heard Beast Boy quickly clamor before running behind her. Raven froze, unsure of what to do.

She turned her head back to catch a look at him, but her hair fell before her eyes and she heard the undeniable click of the camera shutter. Raven sat up on her bed quickly, brushing strands of deep violet out of her face to blink at the boy behind the lens. “What the heck, Beast Boy?!”

But he wasn’t listening to her. Instead, he’d stood up to his full height and looked down at the photo he’d just taken via the screen of his camera. “Nice,” he admonished with a nod and an equally confident smile. Before Raven could open her mouth to protest his actions via a sling of angry, unladylike profanities that’d have made the priests of Azar blush, he’d come up right next to her and shown her the shot.

The sorceress gulped, and closed her mouth, all previous sentiment lost as she stared, wide-eyed, at the photo. “That’s...that’s me?” she asked, almost subconsciously, in obvious disbelief.

The angle was suggestive, what with her skirt and her bare legs on prominent display, and thanks to her hair obscuring most of her face, she remained anonymous. Tinkering with it by using the pads of his fingers to tap on the screen, Beast Boy managed to edit the shot to make it appear in black and white.

“Well, I know it’s you, and you know it’s you, but your...audience won’t,” Beast Boy answered.

“It...it looks really good like that,” she admitted, taking the camera from him to ogle the photo after the manipulation.

She couldn’t quite place why, but the black and white made her look more...appealing. There was an undeniable allure about the photo, and it made Raven’s heart soar. She licked her lips, her mouth dry with anticipation. “Really Gar, this looks amazing.”

The changeling chuckled nervously, scratching at the side of his neck. ‘Please, that’s nothin’. Wait
until I upload the picture to my laptop and actually use the editing program. It’ll look even better.”

She glanced up at him, unable to mask the soft admiration conveyed in her gaze. “You can do that?”

Something in the way they locked eyes made him break contact hastily and clear his throat. “Sure. Of course. It’s what we’ve been using for class.”

He snagged the camera from her fragile grip abruptly and moved away, giving her his back as he fiddled with the settings with sweaty fingers.

Raven sat up and stared at the muscles of his back through the thin, white shirt he had on. She recalled the pool, and Robin’s conversation. Tucking her legs beneath her, she opened her mouth before she could think to stop herself. “Why did you lie to Robin?”

“Huh?” he called over his shoulder, still too distracted to really catch on to her meaning.

Raven licked her lips and tried again. “At the pool. Robin said you lied to him about your...strength.”

Beast Boy turned his head, and she could see that, this time, there was no glamour of a smile or false cheer to hide behind. “I didn’t lie. He just never asked,” he told her, his voice quiet. Then, he seemed to take a deep breath before amending his words. “Well, I didn’t _not_ lie, I guess, since I didn’t exactly _tell_ him, either. I grew up with Mento, Rae. Everything with him was like a military drill. No jokes, no fun, every potential screw-up could cost lives, and he was sure to remind me of that.”

He dipped his chin, finding a point of the floor to stare at instead, his fingers absent-mindedly toying with the various knobs of his camera. “With the Teen Titans, I was given a reprieve. A chance to just...be a kid, surrounded by other kids.”

“We’re not kids anymore, Gar,” Raven reminded him, but not without gentleness. She reached out one of her hands and spread her fingers across the silken covers of her bed, as if to somehow bridge the distance between them and touch him, knowing that she never could. With his back to her, he never even noticed the subtle motion.
“I know that. I guess I just never had much of a childhood to begin with.”

A flashback memory, something faded in the back of her mind, but ever present. It had been in his casefile, littered on Robin’s desk one night, and she’d caught a small glimpse whilst their leader and Victor argued over something trivial in his office.

**DECEASED.**

One word, in capital, bold letters, hanging heavy on the paper. She hadn’t thought much of it back then, but Raven had felt like she’d always known that Garfield was an orphan. Although, at the time, the sadness and reality of it all had not struck her quite the way it did in this tender moment between them. The emotion therefore felt equivocal to being sucker punched in the gut.

“I guess, what I mean to say is, I like goofing off and being the silly guy on the team. Sure, Robin can be super intense, but everyone’s a little easier on me when they aren’t expecting as much. Growing up with Mento and the Doom Patrol, serious was all I ever knew.” He was fiddling with the lens cap on the camera, not sure what else to do with his hands as he came clean to Raven about things he likely hadn’t told anyone.

“Maybe it is a bit of a lie. Maybe, I can beat his stupid swimming record if I wanted to. Maybe, I could even be a team leader on a mission, or match Star in hand-to-hand combat. But...I don’t really want to. I just want to...be me, for once, you know? Without everyone breathing down my neck with their own expectations and personal agenda.”

Raven nodded curtly, trying to communicate her empathy on the subject. “I understand that, Gar. I don’t know if I agree, but I do get it.”

He looked at her then, and flashed her a weak smile. “Daughter of a demon and all, can’t imagine that’s ever been easy.”

Raven furrowed her brow and pursed her lips. “Not just my father; the monks of Azarath. My...mother, even. They all had their own ideas for me. Their own plans. I was practically *groomed* by them all.”

Metallic bitterness rose to her throat like bile, and a fresh wave of guilt and deep betrayal made her stomach sink and twist. “I...didn’t tell you all the truth because I thought...I thought I could be *normal* around you. For once, no one looked at me with pity, or mistrust. The Teen Titans
welcomed me, and Jump City made me a hero. My powers were celebrated, not feared. My father, Azarath — none of it mattered. At least, not until the inevitable happened. I could live the rest of my life how I wanted, until…until I couldn’t.”

Strangely, her confession was met with an uncharacteristic but solemn silence. She glanced up at him, too tempted for some sign of life and affection — starved for it, almost.

“Raven,” he called out her name tenderly when their eyes locked, although his pitch fell oddly flat and remained undefinable. “You never planned on living past Trigon…did you?”

His question was posed more accusatory than anything else, and it gave Raven pause. Of all the Titans, Garfield being the one to leave her speechless had never been a skill she’d figured he’d possess. “I…” She struggled to answer him, knowing that she’d already betrayed the truth to him with her visible, palpable shock. She couldn’t hold his gaze, and in an uncharacteristic display of weakness, she averted her eyes and stared down into her lap.

The silence that followed was as tense as a taut rubber band, Raven’s implication at an answer hanging heavy over both their heads. She didn’t move until she felt her mattress shift with his added weight. Beast Boy sat on the edge, cradling his jaw in the palms of his hands. He appeared to be deep in thought, his expression — and his emotions — unreadable.

Something in the back of her mind screeched at her for him to just say something! To give her a reaction — anything at all, just to give her some sort of inkling as to what he thought of her now. Was she weak? Pathetic and cowardly, maybe? Did he pity her? Raven herself was having a troubled time trying to come up with a reason for why she cared so much what he thought in the first place.

“Y’know, I didn’t even think about it at all — the possibility that you wouldn’t make it. Never crossed my mind even once.”

She stared at him, noting everything about him in the moment, like a memory she’d have forever engrained into her very soul.

“But now, I feel pretty stupid for never noticing it before, how obvious it actually was — how you pushed us all away, or kept us at arm’s length all the time. I just assumed you were being difficult because that was who you were. That maybe, you didn’t really like us or something.”
Raven gulped at the growing lump in her throat, but her eyes were burning. He pressed on, staring off unblinking at a point on the floor without conscious thought. “Still, I never wanted to lose you, no matter how cold or distant you were, and maybe, that was why I couldn’t accept the idea of Trigon winning.”

Finally — finally, he turned to look at her, and Raven was still as sculpted stone, wavering precariously between aloof and becoming a quivering, sobbing mess. She didn’t dare blink. She didn’t dare breathe. She’d be damned if she looked away, knowing all too well that the tears, scalding hot against her cheek, might escape and betray her completely.

But kindness emanated from the shapeshifter, unwavering and warm like the sun’s rays beaming down on her on a summer day; it drowned out everything else. It surrounded her, squeezing tightly so that she couldn’t escape it.

“I’m glad he didn’t. Win, I mean. I can’t speak for all of the Titans, but I’m pretty sure we’re all happy to have you around, Rae. And...I’m sorry.”

“For what?” she blurted out, her voice trembling.

He looked dubious for a moment. “For going through that alone, of course. I can’t imagine what it’s like thinking that your life would be over in a few years, and not telling anyone about it. I mean, we could have at least made you a bucket list, and done all the boring — uh, fun stuff you’ve always wanted to do. Not that we’d have ever let Trigon get to you in the first place, but any excuse to have a good time, right?”

His smile was lax and easy-going. Infectious, just like Starfire’s.

Raven took in a deep breath, feeling the unsteady quake of her resolve as emotions overwhelmed her in a tidal wave of abundance. She shook her head slowly. “It’s not your fault, Beast Boy. It’s not anyone’s fault, really It’s my fate...or, was my fate, anyways. I came to terms with it at a very young age.”

“Yeah, well. You’re here, years later, which is basically like telling everyone who didn’t believe in you to kiss your a-”

“Garfield,” she interjected. Appreciating his candor, she could do without the vulgarity, especially when geared towards the elders of Azarath.
The smile was difficult to contain, so she flashed him one because it was easier than breaking down into a pitiful mess. “Thank you. For believing in me, too.”

Like a child enamored with an idol, he beamed at her. “About that bucket list…” He licked his lips — still smirking — and glanced down at the camera hanging about his neck. “Would *this* be considered something that might’ve been on it? ’Cause if so, maybe you’re not as boring as I thought,” he teased.

Raven rolled her eyes. “I don’t know. It’s...kind of a recent development. I’m about as new to it as you are.”

He shot up abruptly then, like he’d just realized he’d left the stove on all this time. “Right, right. Enough with the sentimental touchy-feely stuff, why don’t we get this show on the road?”

It was odd how Raven somehow felt like a great and heavy burden had been lifted. She’d never opened up to anyone — let alone Beast Boy — in this way before. Sure, they’d had their moments, but discussing such an intimate and delicate detail that had more or less defined a huge portion of her life? It was unexpected, to say the least. Not even Robin had broached the topic with her, despite probably having suspected it all along.

But Beast Boy was not Robin, and sometimes, the tact and reservation their great and fearless leader exhibited, was not always the *only* manner of which to resolve an issue. His silence, at the time, had been a welcome reprieve, but Raven had continued feeling weighed down and anxious, not really knowing what to do with herself. It ate away at her conscience — isolated her from the others, and although Robin’s meaning may have been well and in her best interests, it was, shockingly, Beast Boy’s forward and unabashed nature that had alleviated her darker concerns.

And he hadn’t even really done *anything*.

Nonetheless, Raven felt lighter — both in spirit and in mind — and she couldn’t deny Beast Boy’s involvement with her improved mood.

Newly determined, she lay back on the bed, and gave him a sultry look, biting her bottom lip in a bubble of nervous excitement. “I think, for once, that I agree with you, Beast Boy.”

Something caught the light when she moved and, briefly, her gaze flickered to just over his
shoulder. Realizing it was a peculiar object she’d kept, Raven then wondered if Beast Boy had ever caught the dull glint from the old, dusty, bronze penny still sitting on one of the shelves that he’d been inspecting earlier...
It’s not her style.

But they’d walked past it — once, twice, three times, maybe more if she counted the trips with Starfire.

It’s never been her style.

Raven needed to reassure herself of that. Then again, going to the mall for a wardrobe update with Beast Boy, of all people, was also not typical of her behaviour, either.

“Okay,” the shapeshifter stated exasperatedly, drawing her out of her own thoughts. “We’ve gone around the mall like, seven times. There’s got to be a few stores that have caught your eye by now, Rae!”

Beast Boy had stopped just as they’d circled by a fourth time. Truth be told, Raven was surprised at the endurance of his patience with her. Still, she couldn’t mask the glimmer of amusement that tugged at a corner of her mouth as she watched him try to keep it together.

“I mean, there has to be something you like!”

Perhaps it was fate — or sheer dumb luck — that they’d paused right by the very thing she’d tried ignoring for the past little while.

It just wasn’t her.
Nothing about it made sense, or belonged, but it tugged at her conscience like an omnipotent presence she just couldn’t ignore. Raven bit her bottom lip, but she knew that he’d caught the way her gaze had slipped briefly in its direction, as if in silent answer of his very question.

Garfield followed her line of vision, and he seemed to stagger backwards in surprise, eyes widening in alarm as he came to a steady realization. He almost didn’t believe her, shaking his head and blinking rapidly between her and the store, as if his own eyes were deceiving him.

Like she could even blame him; Raven could hardly believe any of it herself.

“Uhm, you-you wanna…,” he paused to gulp, “go in there?”

Raven coloured, realizing that her teammate had paled at the prospect — emerald green fading into a lighter, minty shade. Stammering, she lied, “N-no! I don’t even go in there with Kory most of the time. What makes you think that I’d go in with you?”

There was an icy bite to her tone, and Garfield physically recoiled from the chill, looking like a pouting puppy that had been kicked to the curb by an ice monster. Raven immediately regretted her defensive wording when witnessing the obvious hurt that was deteriorating in his features, but even that wasn’t going to be enough to get her to relent.

To think, how far they’d come together, working on their often strained relationship over the past few weeks, and yet, Raven still struggled with being anything short of fierce whenever it was her pride that was at stake.

A bad habit — she knew that — but one that had, unfortunately, stuck.

“I don’t mind. Going in, I mean.” He was sheepish when he spoke, his voice as soft as his honest eyes, and it might have taken her by surprise if it hadn’t had been Beast Boy who’d said it. “If...if you really want to.” He still had to clear his throat, as if worried it would unexpectedly crack like it used to during his awkward phase of puberty when they’d been younger.

Raven continued to feel flush — people being kind to her was still a bit of a foreign concept, especially when she’d felt especially undeserving of it — but she was rendered speechless, torn between wanting to give into her curiosity or to tend to her otherwise bruised ego.
Knowing she was very red in the face, she huffed, lowered her head, and quickly beelined past Beast Boy towards the store before she could reconsider her decision. Keeping her head down, shuffling her footsteps as quick as they could go, she thought she might be inconspicuous — blending in amongst the other women shopping inside, despite the ominous, oversized black hoodie she donned that oddly resembled her cloak.

The very last thing she wanted was to be confronted by an all too eager salesperson in a store like this. The idea of the encounter alone was enough to leave her feeling mortified and nervous, the palms of her hands already moist with sweat.

After all, there was only one item in question that had drawn her in there to begin with, and it was currently residing on the body of a female mannequin in the shop window.

Stuffing her hands into the deep pockets of her sweater, Raven eyed it cautiously. Beast Boy eventually bumped into her accidentally, and threw her off focus — and balance. He still looked rather pale — like a zucchini left out in the sun too long — otherwise she might have scolded him for his callousness. However, he seemed to be mirroring her own internal dilemma when she’d first been dragged into the shop by Starfire; when the older woman hadn’t taken no for an answer.

Dazed, confused, lost, a little bit intimidated but still mesmerized, and probably overwhelmed by the smell of a fragrant, pungent perfume that could make anyone’s eyes water, spritzed all over the store.

“Have you never been in a lingerie store before, Gar?” she whispered through clenched teeth, hoping no one overheard them.

The boy gulped, shaking his head slowly, still staring up at various scantily clad mannequins like they were about to come to life, step down their displays and walk towards him in a sultry manner.

Raven couldn’t help but be amused by this. “Really? You? So, all that bragging about dating lingerie models was a lie?” She gasped, pretending to be shocked by the revelation of his farce. “How could you?!”

Beast Boy frowned, brows furrowing as he narrowed his gaze at the empath. “When did you…” But before he could finish his train of thought, the pair were immediately interrupted by Raven’s one worst fear; a sales associate.
“Hi there!” the girl chirped cheerily next to them, making Raven almost jump out of her skin. “Was there anything I could help you with today?”

Raven averted her gaze, hoping that by not making any eye contact, she could be ignored — or that, somehow, she’d blend with the background. Her lips becoming a tight line, and her face going as white as a sheet, she stared helplessly at Garfield, and waited for him to do the talking. Only, the changeling was looking right back at her expectantly, eyebrow quirked. That was when Raven realized that the woman was speaking to her.

It was a woman’s lingerie store, after all.

As if to fill the awkward, budding silence that enveloped them, the salesperson pressed on somewhat forcefully. “We’re having a sale today on underwear. All the underwear and thongs over here are five for twenty-five dollars, and if you spend more than seventy-five dollars, we throw in a free tote and complimentary body spray! If you need help with a size, or a bra-fitting, just let me know! My name’s Jenny.” All that, and with a smile.

“Uh yeah, th-thanks,” Raven stuttered under her breath, self-consciously tucking her hair behind her ear.

She didn’t want to be rude, but there was nothing more in the world that she wanted in that moment than for the other woman to simply go away. Politely, of course.

Thankfully, she never had to wait long when Beast Boy was around. He always did have an uncanny knack for stealing the spotlight and enjoying every second of it, while Raven would be free to skulk away into the shadows before anyone noticed.

“We’re just browsing! Thanks, though!” It was like he could sense her immediate unease and had decided to chime in before she could phase through a portal back to her room. Raven couldn’t tell if it was the awkward connection she’d unintentionally created between them, or something else entirely that had clued him in to her plea for help. Either way, she was always silently grateful for how good Beast Boy could be in most social situations, no matter how estranged or tense. It made her life of having to deal with the press that much easier.

“No problem! If you change your mind, just let me know!” The saleswoman smiled at them both before turning her attention back to a messy display of push-up bras that was in dire need of fixing.
Beast Boy and Raven locked eyes again, and it was a silent, mutual agreement of relief being conveyed from them both. Beast Boy then glanced up at the mannequin Raven had been transfixed with, and then back at her, his lips forming the most curious of quizzical smiles.

“Shut up,” she snapped, her cheeks reddening.

This was met with a chuckle. “I didn’t even say anything.”

“You didn’t have to. I know what you’re thinking.”

“Are you telepathic now, too?” Beast Boy might have been jesting, but there was serious consideration in the question he’d posed.

She smirked, teasing him without answering directly.

“Raven? Seriously...are you...oh God, are you reading my mind right now?!”

She ignored him, and turned her attention to the hanging article of clothing she’d been drawn to instead — if one could even call it that, what with the limited amount of actual fabric — to look for her size and a price tag.

“If you are, just so you know, I can’t help it if I’m surrounded by pictures of half-naked beautiful women, okay? Everything in here looks so delicate and expensive, and my claws can get super sharp! It’s a totally valid concern!”

Raven had tuned him out, too busy gawking at the ridiculous numbers beside the dollar sign symbol to pay attention to his muddled attempt at preserving character. She then spun on her heel, put up her hoodie and stiffened, colour draining from her face.

“Nevermind. We should leave. I forgot how overpriced this place was,” Raven urged in a hissing whisper, meaning to leave before any other associate asked her if she wanted a bra-fitting.

Beast Boy blocked her path, and she nearly collided into him. “Woah, ease up. What’s something like that even cost?”
Raven glared up at him, desperate to get moving. “It doesn't matter. No way we can afford it on the Titan’s budget. Robin would kill us both, and like hell am I explaining to him why I spent so much on...undergarments, of all things.” Trying to visualize how that conversation would go was making her toes curl.

Raven then attempted to go around him but he sidestepped and got in her way again, this time bringing his hands to rest atop her slender shoulders. “Rae, chill. Who said anything about using the team money, anyways?”

She lifted her brows at that. “Do you have another job that none of us are aware of? I could swear you quit working at that burger joint.”

Beast Boy ignored her jibe and went to examine the strappy lingerie top Raven had been transfixed with. “Aw, it’s not even that bad,” he told her. “What, er, size are you?”

He was making it a point not to stare brazenly at her chest, but the notion was lost to no one. Although the decorative, black straps and lace choker harness combination did not come with a cup size, it was still required for Raven to admit to being either an extra small, small, medium, large, or extra large. She glanced down self-consciously at her own humble breasts, currently obscured by the baggy attire of her hoodie.

Finally, she glared at him with a newfound resolve. “You’re not buying me lingerie, Gar.” Raven was very much flustered by the entire ordeal, but she wasn’t going to show it. Not even Starfire had ever attempted to purchase her any new intimates. Suggestions were one thing, but gifts? Kory knew better.

“It’s not...technically lingerie,” he commented with a shrug of shoulders, pulling out one of the bra harnesses up into the light to examine. “Besides, you clearly liked it enough to brave this store.” He paused and sniffed the air before making a jarred, repulsed face. “Not to mention, the perfume. It’s like a sexy unicorn took a dump all over this place.”

The truth was Raven didn’t know which part of his statement to pick apart first — almost all of it was unnerving. Beast Boy scrunched up his nose and waved his hand before his face, as if to magically dilute the spicy ardour wafting into his sensitive nostrils.

“Fine. You can buy it, but only if you tell me how the heck you can afford it first,” bargained Raven, arms folded protectively over her chest. Curiosity somehow won out over her common
sense sometimes, and right now, she was far more interested in her mysterious teammate than the act of him purchasing her sexy clothes.

Beast Boy sighed, but otherwise, he was fairly compliant with her demands. “Inheritance...Just don’t tell anyone, please?”

“An inheritance?”

He nodded, but instead of gloating — which was partly what Raven may have been expecting — Beast Boy appeared almost ashamed.

“I came into it when I turned nineteen. Well, some of it, anyways. I’ll get more when I’m twenty-five, but basically, I have an allowance I can use.”

Raven wanted to make light of the situation, because it was difficult to believe that Beast Boy didn’t like the notion that he was coming into a lot of money. “What? You mean you haven’t blown it all already on videogames and junk food?”

Her playful smile vanished when Beast Boy said, “Not at all. I don’t want to use it and risk having the others ask questions...Being entitled to a lot of money has caused me a world of trouble before. There are...people who’d love to exploit that, and in the process, they’ll hurt anyone who gets in their way, too.”

She didn’t need to be a telepath to understand his meaning; something awful and traumatic had obviously transpired before in his life due to his fortune, and Beast Boy was speaking directly from that experience. This was another one of those moments that left Raven feeling like she’d only every scratched the surface when it came to Garfield Logan. And to think, she was supposed to be the mysterious one with all the secrets.

Softer now, she said, “Why waste it on me?” And she meant it — Raven hardly considered her nonsense hobby worth stirring up any trouble for her teammates. There was also a much quieter, smaller, cruel voice that whispered to her, telling her that she wasn’t worth it and that she never would be, either.

“Waste?” Beast Boy perked up at this, and chuckled at how preposterous he found her sentiment. “I don’t consider it a waste at all. I’m building up my photography skills, and you get some nice clothes and pictures out of it. I’d call it even.”
“Now, if you don’t tell me your size, I’m going to have to guess and I’m pretty sure neither of us want that.”

Strangely enough, Raven didn’t feel any embarrassment or timidity about divulging that particular information. At least, not around Garfield. The sales associate was a stranger who would know her face, but Beast Boy?

Beast Boy was her teammate.

No — Beast Boy was her friend, and no matter how much she tried to search within her for a hint of discomfort or self doubt, she found no trace of it.

“I’m not sure. A small or a medium, I’d think.” Her fingers shrank into the sleeves of her oversized sweater, but other than that, Raven didn’t bother with any obvious tells of bashfulness.

“Oh. Did you...did you want to try it on?”

“I probably should, since it costs a small fortune and isn’t refundable,” she replied with a shrug. “Unless there’s somewhere else you need to be.” She gave him a cautious glance from beneath heavy lashes, and knew that her misgivings were for naught. Still, she had to be certain. Or maybe she just really needed the comfort of security.

Beast Boy shook his head before turning around to dig out two hangers with her aforementioned sizes. “Nope! My schedule is pretty open these days after I broke it off with the underwear model girlfriend. Actually, there’s probably a poster of her in here somewhere, but don’t ask me to point it out. Wounds are still a bit raw.”

He was grinning toothily as he spoke, dimples more profound in his genuine, happy nature. Raven scoffed and rolled her eyes, but as she grabbed the two articles of clothing from his outstretched hand, she couldn’t help but let out the smallest of chortles. “Alright, alright. I overheard you bragging to Cyborg about it. Not to mention, it’s all over your social media.”

Beast Boy’s smile somehow grew wider. “You’ve been on my social media pages? Rae, I’m flattered, but also kind of offended that you didn’t add me!” He clutched at his chest where his heart was, feigning a look of utter betrayal and hurt.
It didn’t take Raven long to understand that she wasn’t the only one growing more comfortable in their developing relationship — Beast Boy’s relaxed and joking attitude resembled the more jovial behaviour he exhibited around Starfire and Victor; the two Titans on the team he was always more open with. With Robin and Raven, every exchange he’d had felt a lot more superficial somehow. Forced, even. Probably because they were the only Titans who were not as receptive to his one-liners. Maybe that was why she hadn’t found most of his jokes funny half the time — he wasn’t really ever trying. Either that, or he’d matured enough to understand her sense of humor better than he’d had when they’d been younger.

“I’m picky about who I follow,” she stated dryly, and then turned to go find the changerooms, leaving him with jaw dropped and a million more questions.

Overall, Raven would have said that the shopping trip was, predominantly, a success — more so than most of the ones she’d had with Starfire. Although, that probably had more to do with Kory being the one in want of new clothes while Raven had just been grateful for the brief reprieve it gave her from all the testosterone in the building. Whereas with Beast Boy, she was the centre of attention, no matter how much she grumbled or protested along the way.

After the lingerie store — where he’d certainly whipped out a fancy looking credit card to purchase the sexy harness bra and choker combo — Beast Boy had insisted on visiting a few other designer stores to look for photoshoot worthy clothing. As it stood, neither of them had the courage to broach the giant, looming elephant between them — the boudoir shoot Raven had obviously wanted and had in mind. Instead, Garfield had suggested summer dresses, carefully glossing over any hint of conversation regarding when she’d want to model her newest piece of underwear for him for fear of sounding lecherous. Which was just as well for the empath; she wasn’t entirely sure she was ready for it yet herself.

“I was thinking something flowery, y’know? Colourful.” He eyed a lemon-yellow halter dress, with a cute ribbon on the front, and poofy pleats that would have reached her shins. There was white lace detailing and trimming that added to its spring-like charm. “I know how much you don’t care for pants.”

Raven had staggered at his bold assumption, blinking in surprise before narrowing her eyes at the changeling in suspicion. “Whatever gave you that idea…?”

Beast Boy flicked through the hangers before finding an appropriate size, and swiftly freed one of the dresses from the middle of the rack. “Um, the fact that you never wear any? Leggings don’t count, so don’t even bother with that lame excuse.”
She opened her mouth to retaliate — or in the least, defend herself — but quickly realized that there was no point in denying an inarguable fact no matter how good she was with words. It was true; Raven certainly opposed pants, and avoided wearing any if and whenever possible. She often went to sleep in just a sheer spaghetti-strapped tank top, and her underwear. By the time she was required to leave her room, she was typically in uniform.

The fact that Beast Boy had actually been observant enough to pick up on such a small detail about her had both slightly unnerved her and caught her off guard, although not entirely in an unpleasant way. The more she thought about it, the quicker she realized that this wasn’t the first time he’d been surprising her lately. Still, his keen attention to detail was difficult to get used to. She’d never warranted such information about herself to be worth knowing, anyways.

“What do you think?” He held up the dress after fluffing the skirt a bit and straightening the wrinkles in the tapered waist.

With tongue in cheek, Raven tried not to overtly expose her feelings on it. “It looks more like a Starfire dress, if you ask me.”

Beast Boy frowned, and gave the sundress another hard once-over. “You don’t like yellow?”

She shook her head. “That’s not it. I just mean I probably wouldn’t look good in dresses like that.”

“You can’t say that for sure until you try it on, Rae. Who knows? You might like it!”

“Is that what you told yourself when you bought those small, leopard print swim shorts?”

“Ha ha, very funny,” he mocked, but Raven couldn’t stifle the slight giggle that slipped from her lips. Those had been the backup trunks Starfire had grabbed for him when he’d ripped the others via transformation. None of the other Titans had ever let him live it down, and Raven figured the moment was as good as any to shift the focus away from herself. “Just try on the dress, please? And while you’re in the fitting room, I can grab a few more things for you!”

Raven had extended her arm towards him in a vain effort to stop him, but the changeling was already zipping down aisles, his eyes having already scanned for a few designs and patterns he had liked. Raven sighed defeatedly and took the yellow dress to the change room.
It should have been a weird environment, showcasing individual outfits to Beast Boy one at a time while the sales representatives at each store had mistaken him for her boyfriend on several occasions. They’d both grown flustered and awkwardly denied it at each interval it had happened, but for some reason, Raven wasn’t entirely sure the staff were always convinced. After all, this was typical behaviour of a couple, what with Beast Boy picking out lovely clothes to try on and gushing about how great they all looked on her.

“You aren’t lying just to spare my feelings on this, are you, Gar?”

Truthfully speaking, she didn’t think he was the type, but ever since Malchior had lied and used her in the worst of ways, Raven had become skeptical of genuine compliments from the opposite sex. The first boy to have ever called her beautiful used it as a way to exploit her weakness via her insecurities and desire to be loved. It was no wonder she had intimacy issues now as an adult.

“What? No!” Beast Boy cried out in protest. “I’ve got nothing to gain by lying to you! Not only would the pictures come out terrible, but I’d have wasted money on expensive clothes that don’t look good. Besides all that, why would you think I’d do that to you, Rae?”

Raven unfolded her arms and tried to steady herself in the strappy, black felt, open-toe heels she was trying on with a high waisted, fitted denim skirt that reached her knees, and a thin, cropped tank top in the shade of a dark plum. Of all the outfits she’d tried on and bought, it was probably her favourite, so she knew that it was her genuine mistrusting nature that had so apathetically posed the question to Beast Boy. The salesperson had even approved genuinely, and a few other customers had offered her compliments on the look, with one girl suggesting she add dark shades and a dark, ruby lipstick to match.

Beast Boy had been right; she did look good, and she had no idea why she’d doubted him in the first place. Perhaps it was merely a defense mechanism she no longer knew how to turn off.

“Nevermind,” she said under her breath with a brief shake of her head, feeling somewhat silly for her juvenile behaviour. She absent-mindedly picked at the fabric of the sheer, new top — anything but having to look directly at him in that moment.

“It shouldn’t even matter what I think, Rae. What matters is how you feel in it. The truth is, I could dress you up in everything in here and think you pull it off, but if you don’t feel good in the clothes, then what’s the point?”
He was right, she knew that deep down, but her pride always did get the better of her. “Look, are we done here? I’m pretty sure you’re about to max out that card.”

Beast Boy frowned. For a moment, it appeared like he was about to put up a fight, but eventually he sighed and nodded in agreement. “Sure. If you want to go. I think we’ve got plenty of outfits for the next few shoots anyways.”

Just as he went to hail down the salesgirl and Raven was going to usher back into her dressing room to don her familiar clothes, she caught the eyes of another man waiting in the lobby area of the fitting rooms. He was sitting on the couch, surrounded by various shopping bags — not unlike Beast Boy had been while Raven was trying on various outfits, she imagined — except, unlike Garfield, he did not appear too happy to be in the predicament he was currently in, and had spent most of his time focused on the screen of his phone rather than his poor girlfriend.

Except for now, that is.

He was busy ogling Raven instead of his phone, his jaw dropped and expression insatiable, and he didn’t seem to care in the slightest that she’d caught him in the act. Raven narrowed her eyes at him, a muscle in her jaw twitching as anger roiled beneath her very skin. But her intimidation factor seemed to be lost in the appealing clothes she was wearing, and the man remained undeterred, like a starved wolf on the prowl for his prey.

“Take a picture, it’ll last longer,” she barked venomously.

The man — who appeared to be in his early thirties with sandy brown hair, crows-feet wrinkles around his eyes, and a tan that said he spent a little too much time on vacation — only smiled at her reaction. “I swear I think I’ve seen you before.”

Raven blanched.

She was a Teen Titan; it was natural of her to be recognized, especially when hanging out with Beast Boy, who had a knack for forgetting his holo-ring at home. In fact, they’d already been stopped a few times for idle chatter, selfies, and some autographs, most of which Raven had left Garfield in charge of. It was hard not to notice a green-skinned boy wandering around a mall, no matter who he was.

But somehow, Raven didn’t think that this man was that sort of fan. Not with the way he was
shamelessly staring at her body, like a pervert studying a pornographic image. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and she got chills all over, forcing her to fold her arms over her chest as she shivered.

“I’m sorry, I can’t say the same,” she quickly told him before shutting the door and locking it behind her. Raven’s heart was racing, and she was having trouble controlling her breathing. The walls around her felt like they were closing in, and the small, confined room seemed to spin around her.

There was no way he recognized her from the blog. No way. She didn’t even have that many followers the last she’d checked, and she’d been so careful with the pictures. What were the chances of something like that even happening?

A gentle rap on the door sent her nearly jumping and reeling from her thoughts, only Beast Boy’s voice filtered through moments later, and Raven found herself easing up at his familiar tone. “Rae? I already paid for the stuff if you want to keep it on.”

She leaned her forehead against the cold wood — as if it would somehow keep her grounded to reality — and rested the palms of her hands on either side of her as she tried to steady her breathing by focusing and repeating her mantra. The panic attack was mild, and seemed to be subsiding with the comforting presence of her teammate just on the opposite side. One of the reasons Raven had stayed with the Titans at all was because of the deep, calming solace she found when around them. They had a strange way of pacifying her very soul, unknowingly, and ever since the events with Trigon...she’d never felt safer with anyone else. Even now, as the panic seemed to leave her body — albeit shaken — she knew it was true.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” she told him after taking in a deep breath to mask the jitters in her voice.

“Alright, I’ll wait for you outside.”

“Wait!” The fear that undoubtedly laced her tone made her plea almost come off as a shriek; high pitched and desperate. She already knew that the sound alone would cause Beast Boy to hesitate. She could already see the shadow of his shoes just beyond the opening on the floor. Raven took a minute to calm her anxious, erratic heart before she had to face his impending concerns.

“Everything okay, Raven?”
She gulped. “I’m fine. I’ll come out now.”

Originally, she didn’t want to leave the mall in such an outfit, but given the circumstances — and her insufferable pride — she’d make the smaller sacrifice if it meant less questions from her green-skinned accomplice.

Carefully, she undid the lock on her door, and slowly opened it. She looked past Beast Boy, her heart in her throat and her mouth dry, but found the couch across from her room no longer occupied. Both the man and all of his girlfriend’s shopping bags, had vanished. A sigh of relief left her lips, and Raven visibly slumped from her previous, tense posturing. The walls were no longer closing in, and her fingers weren’t shaking as much, but the adrenaline continued to course through her veins, leaving her still on edge.

“Uhm. Raven, did something happen? You look like you just saw your dad’s ghost or reflection or something. Or maybe just your dad in general, actually.” Beast Boy was trying to catch her attention but her eyes were darting about, scanning the vicinity for a glimpse of brown hair and a baby-blue shirt anywhere nearby, just in case.

“Earth to Raven?”

She snapped her gaze in Beast Boy’s direction then, blinking like a deer caught in headlights. “Yeah, I’m okay. Everything’s okay,” she finally reassured him, but wasn’t convincing in appearance whatsoever. The words fell from her lips in a way that was practiced, but Beast Boy never got a chance to fully investigate.

By the time he’d opened his mouth to say something, Raven had already grabbed her clothes and shoes, stuffed them into a nearby shopping bag, and strutted towards the exit somewhat awkwardly in her brand new heels.

“What the heck was that all about?”

Raven should have known better than to assume that Beast Boy would let go of the day’s strange events, no matter how quiet he’d been on the way home. “Nothing.”
“You do know I have a great sense of smell, right? So, do you really think that I wouldn’t pick up on bullshit when I smell it?” He tapped the side of his nose with an index finger to help emphasize his point.

Raven groaned, removing the pinching shoes the minute they’d walked back into the Tower, and rubbing her aching, swollen feet. “I saw a spider, that’s all,” she lied after taking a moment to relish in the cold, flat ground beneath her aching toes.

Beast Boy scoffed. “Wow. Really? Since when were you afraid of spiders?”

“Who made you the expert on all of my fears suddenly, anyways?”

The shapeshifter opened and closed his mouth a few times, obviously recalling the events of the night of horror he’d helped inspire when he’d forced Raven to watch a scary movie with the others. “Okay, fine. I’m not an expert,” he admitted finally. “But, you’re a demon. How can a demon be afraid of spiders, of all things?”

“I just am, drop it already!”

But Beast Boy didn’t seem to have heard her as he continued to speak over her. “I mean, every movie I’ve watched that has demons as the main baddy usually involves a creepy spider scene, or cockroaches, or maggots. Sometimes all three. So, I just figured bugs and demons kind of go hand in hand, kind of like ghosts and dolls. Besides, you never had an issue taking out Kitty’s creepy spider boyfriend, and I’m pretty sure you’ve squished one for Starfire before-”

“Sweet merciful mother of Azar, I was having a panic attack, okay?!”

The silence that followed was unnatural, and Raven could almost feel the beginnings of a new fear settling in. She took in a deep breath through her nose, and exhaled through her mouth, retaining her calm after her small outburst. “Some creep might have recognized me, and I didn’t know what to do. Maybe...maybe I’m having second thoughts. Maybe, I’m not cut out for this sort of attention. Happy now?”

“Rae, you’re a Titan. People are going to recognize you because you’re a hero.”

“That’s not how he knew me.” She shook her head, closing her eyes, too embarrassed to admit to
what they both already knew.

“...oh.”

Another brief moment of silence, and Raven couldn’t find the strength to look her friend in the face.

“But I thought you were being careful…,” Garfield cooed, trying to be gentle in his attempt to console her.

“I was! But you weren’t there! You didn’t see the way he...looked at me.” It was enough to send her skin crawling all over again, and she hugged her bare arms just as goosebumps trailed her pale skin.

“Shit. I’m sorry, Rae. I really am. We can take the photos if you still want, but you don’t have to post them anywhere.”

Raven wanted nothing more than to indulge in a moment of weakness; she wanted to be held by a friend, comforted even. The warmth of another person, and the intimate closeness of bodies, would have calmed her fears and temporarily drove away all the negative thoughts already swirling in her catastrophic mind. More than once, she’d exhibited this feeling of deep, unsatiated wanting. Even as a child, she’d longed for her mother’s touch, or a friend’s embrace, and all throughout her life, she was always denied such a luxury. To the priests, it conveyed nothing but cowardice, and it only served to enslave her to emotion, therefore making any and all possible human connections Raven formed dangerous. This had been instilled in her mind from the day she’d been born and, despite all the Titans efforts to persuade her otherwise, remained a very difficult mentality to alter.

So, instead, Raven did what she did best when confronted with such overwhelming emotion — she closed herself off. “You don’t have anything to apologize for, Beast Boy. I just need some time to...think.”

The changeling looked a little crestfallen by her change in tone — back to her staple, gravelly, emotionless tenure — but did not argue or push the point. Instead, he nodded once. “Right. Cool. Yeah. Meditation, of course. Take all the time you need. Shopping can, uh...it can take a real toll, and you’ve been through a lot today. I’m pretty starved myself, heh.” He patted his abdomen as a low gurgle emanated from his bowels just in time.
Raven, not knowing what else to say for fear of betraying her emotions, simply turned on her heel and picked up the various shopping bags that they’d strewn all along the floor.

“If you change your mind, or need to talk or anything...you know where to find me. I’ll be here,” he added quickly before she was out of earshot.

She knew he wanted her to open up to him — to use him as a shoulder to lean on, a soul to confide in. It was important to him that she realize he could be a serious friend when she needed one, too.

But Raven needed to rethink things on her own, first. She also needed to get out of the unfamiliar clothes, too, and spend some time figuring out what she wanted to do.

Nonetheless, it seemed rather...cruel to leave Garfield hanging, probably already assuming that it was his fault somehow.

Raven turned to give him an apprehensive glance. “Thank you,” she started somewhat demurely, looking away when their eyes locked. “For both the nice clothes...and the company.”

“You...had fun? Y’know, before that creep ruined everything, of course.” There was a smidge of muted hope in his features despite the bit of displeasure that creeped in at the mention of the stranger from the fitting rooms.

Raven paused, as if to carefully mull over her answer before giving it. “Yeah, I guess I kind of did. It was no opera or ballet, or trip to a museum or old bookstore, but...I think it was pretty okay as far as mall outings go.” And she actually meant it.

Beast Boy whooped — literally jumped into the air, fist extended over his head, and cheered resoundingly, his voice carrying throughout the Tower. The sudden movement startled Raven, but she figured it was better not to take away from the moment. Instead, she shook her head at his shenanigans, brandishing a secret smile as she took her bags and disappeared down the corridor towards her bedroom, all the while still listening for the happy echoes of her skinchanging friend’s elated cries...
“Surprise!”

Few things often pleasantly coloured the empath’s rather temperamental mood so early in the day, but the sight of her emerald-clad, auburn-haired, freckled friend was certainly a sight for sore eyes. Raven couldn’t help the gentle lift of the corners of her mouth as she greeted her — and the rest of Titans East — at the elevators of the Tower.

Lillith Clay gently probed the folds of their isolated mental channel, testing for permission before Raven relented her own barriers and greeted the other girl affectionately.

‘Greetings,’ the psychic echoed back jovially, all the while the other Titans — oblivious to the two girls’ secret — drifted in to say hello to their fellow comrades.

‘We weren’t expecting you,’ Raven added as she was pulled into a tight hug before being clapped affectionately on the shoulder by Speedy.

Lillith shrugged, still smiling. ‘The boys really missed Robin, but they’ll probably lie and say it’s because of their tri-annual barbeque videogame cook-off challenge to mask their affections.’

Raven couldn’t help her sardonic smirk at the unironic truth in her friend’s assessment. They’d shared many a conversation in regards to Raven’s empathic abilities, and Lillith’s curiosity regarding her teammates’ true feelings regarding one another — without actually mentally prying — were a frequent topic she’d broach around her emotion-sensitive friend. Of course, just like with Lillith’s ability to read thoughts, Raven was always careful with her empathy, so as to respect the privacy of the other Titans. That being said, it didn’t really stop them both from gossiping a little.

“Y’all ready to get your asses handed to you tonight?” Cyborg teased uproariously, wiggling his brows at Aqualad and Bumblebee.
“In your dreams, tough guy.” Karen scoffed back, punching his metal exterior playfully. “I’m ready to take home pure gold tonight, tin can!” She flexed her impressive biceps for emphasis, earning her an appreciative glance from Starfire as the alien princess floated over to examine her muscles.

“I have always wondered if physical prowess would help in these video game challenges,” Starfire mused aloud.

“They don’t. Just ask Beast Boy,” Garth replied smugly as he pointed his thumb in the changeling’s direction.

“Hey!” The accused Titan pricked at the insult, even as the others around him chuckled to themselves. “What the heck is that supposed to mean, huh?”

It was no competition when it came to musculature among the boys — Garth was lean and defined, smaller only when compared to Victor’s more robust, mechanical size. Even Robin — for all his effort and training — was but a trailing third in the physique department. Between Roy and Garfield, it was anyone’s guess. Nonetheless, Raven couldn’t help but recall the previous conversations she’d overheard between Beast Boy and Robin regarding the changeling’s lack of effort in the battle department. She also — by default — couldn’t shake the mental image of him swimming in the pool…

‘Not a bad view, I take it?’ asked Lillith coyly, watching the empath carefully with her curious, azure stare.

Raven nearly jumped out of her skin, having forgotten all about the mental link that had still been open between them when her thoughts had trailed. She bristled and panicked, closing herself off immediately as the flustered emotions coloured her face and sped up her heartbeat. In truth, her reaction was more of a defense mechanism, and she immediately felt terrible for shutting out her friend in such an abrupt manner. Not only was it rude, but it was also jolting when least expected. She knew she was going to owe Lillith an explanation — and potentially an apology — but Raven herself was having a hard time coming to grips with the betrayal of her own thoughts.

This was Beast Boy she was thinking about. Sure, they’d grown a lot closer ever since the accidental image bond, but she’d always surmised the attraction was merely platonic. It was...a bit of a peculiar wake up call, realizing that she was rather defensive of the changeling when it came to comparisons among the other male Titans. Maybe it was because she, too, wasn’t exactly the most physically strong member on the team, and had somehow identified with him on that account when he’d opened up to her a little about it.
Raven chanced a shy glance at him then, feeling like a piece of bland wallpaper as Garfield and Garth had decided to duke it out in an arm-wrestling match at a nearby bench, refereed by Cyborg and Speedy. She couldn’t help the way heat bloomed in her chest, and danced all the way to the tips of her tingling fingers and toes. Was it embarrassment?

Just as she had begun pondering her feelings, Raven felt Lillith’s gentle touch on her shoulder before anything else — so absorbed in her own conflicting thoughts, she’d barely noticed her friend’s presence, or earthy perfume. The girl gave her a soft smile. “I was hoping we could do some meditating on the roof while we wait for dinner to be ready? If you’d like.”

Karen and Kory were busy articulating proper arguments about who would win in both the upcoming videogame match and armwrestling, while Robin was trying to be subjective among all the yelling from Cyborg and Speedy. No one seemed to be paying Lillith or Raven any mind and, as curious as Raven may have been regarding the outcome between Aqualad and Beast Boy, an escape from all the loud noise and rambunctious hormones was far more appealing.

She nodded once at Lillith, and the two girls easily slipped away unnoticed to the rooftop of Titans Tower.

“Sorry...about before,” Raven finally apologized after a few minutes of deep meditation. Lillith had been extremely respectful regarding the matter, not having brought it up or even probing for another chance at their private, mental channel.

It had given Raven time to breathe, gather her thoughts and emotions, and formulate an adequate response to her uncharacteristic behaviour. One of the many reasons the two of them got on so well. “I didn’t mean to cut you out like that. I suppose I was caught off guard.” Even now, she couldn’t help the way her cheeks went aflame, merely recalling the reason for her unsolicited rudeness.

A fleeting moment of weakness. It was the understatement of the year.

Lillith smiled reassuringly, but there was still a glint of playful knowledge held in her infinite gaze. “Don’t worry about it. If anything, it was my fault for prying when I shouldn’t have.”

Raven adjusted her cape. “I was the one being...inappropriate,” she gulped, her face growing hot.
“What you were being,” Lillith began to correct her, “is a normal human girl, and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

The mortification made Raven roll her eyes and scoff, trying to play off her embarrassment as nonchalance. “You can’t be serious about having this lecture with me of all things, Lillith. Just come out and say what we both know you’re thinking.” The wrinkle in her cloak, no matter her efforts, would not straighten. Her fingers were shaking.

“I’m not sure what you mean?” Lillith’s curiosity was genuine, but that only served to further annoy the empath.

“I mean, this is Beast Boy we’re talking about!” she finally hissed, unable to stand the budding tension growing within her. “Of all people! Beast Boy!”

When Lillith said nothing and remained impassive, Raven pressed on, heart thumping desperately against her ribcage. “How can you not have something to say about that? Everyone else would have something to say about that!”

“Why? What’s wrong with Beast Boy?”

Raven laughed emptily, the sound devoid of any actual humor. “Right now, he’s probably downstairs thinking of ten different, ridiculous ways to challenge Garth to a show of strength after losing in armwrestling, all the while glowering at him while stuffing his face with cheetos.”

“He didn’t lose,” Lillith stated simply, shaking her head.

Raven blinked at her, caught off guard by this new information. “What?”

“I said, he didn’t lose. They’re currently doing a best three out of five, and only because Garth is convinced it was a fluke.”

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not. It seems he’s impressed everyone. Even Roy’s bidding on him now. Do you guys always
have such little faith in Garfield?”

The question probably hadn’t meant to slip off Lillith’s tongue in the way that it did, but Raven couldn’t help the immediate guilt and resulting shame that had accompanied her words, almost chastising in their nature despite her neutral tone. The empath bowed her head, humbled and unsure of what to say to rectify the situation.

“My apologies. I didn’t mean to sound so harsh. I guess I just feel sorry for him sometimes,” Lillith sighed, wrapping her cloak about herself as the afternoon wind picked up.

Raven shook her head. “No, you’re right. Gar’s been nothing short of accommodating these days. I shouldn’t have expected so much judgement.”

At this, Lillith lifted a single, auburn brow, a corner of her mouth quirking in a half-smile. “So, it’s true then. It’s Beast Boy you’ve developed the image link with.”

Raven blanched, but when she opened her mouth, she found no words to deny the accusation. Lillith giggled.

“Raven, it’s okay. I’m not going to tell anyone. In fact, I’ve been looking into ways of closing it off permanently.”

“How?” Raven asked, panic lacing her tone.

“Well, outside of my standard methods, I’m not sure yet. I’ve been practising on animals and insects, but...I haven’t quite deciphered it yet. I’ll let you know if I do,” Lillith replied, tapping a finger at the point of her chin.

The idea of being rid of the link was enough to send Raven reeling, but it also reminded her of the deal she’d worked out with Beast Boy as a result. “Thanks,” she mouthed, but there was a bit of unexpected apprehension in her voice.

If Lillith had noted her hesitance, she made no mention of it, and the two girls drifted back into a peaceful, deep meditation once again.
Raven had wanted to put off going back into the Tower after her accidental slip-up. Mostly because she wanted to avoid Beast Boy — at no fault of his own, for once. She knew she was likely being paranoid, but the feeling of unease and queasiness had made itself at home in her stomach, and she couldn’t shake it, no matter what. Nonetheless, it was inevitable, and eventually, the girls were called down to join everyone for dinner. The irony in trying to avoid someone was that, for some reason, they were suddenly always painfully visible, as Raven was quickly coming to learn.

“I grabbed you a veggie dog, Rae.” Beast Boy was so close, she could smell the spice of his pine-scented soap mingling with both his deodorant and sweat. “Any particular toppings?”

They were both lined up at the table where the condiments and food had been plated, and it was just her luck that he’d sidled on next to her. Having been in front of her — and in direct access of the food — he’d grabbed her a bun and hotdog and was now prepared to scoop toppings for her, too. Raven was embarrassed. Even though she knew Lillith wasn’t paying her any attention, she couldn’t help feeling like her response would be scrutinized by everyone in the immediate vicinity.

“I am perfectly capable of getting my own hot dogs, Beast Boy,” she informed him quite dryly, grabbing the bun and moving it to her paper plate.

“Uh, okay?” Beast Boy appeared genuinely confused by her brashness, and he scratched at the nape of his neck absent-mindedly while he observed the other Titan angrily dump relish and onions onto her bun.

“Aha! A hotdog eating competition! I bet I could kick your butt in that!” Garth suddenly exclaimed, pushing his way between Raven and Beast Boy.

Cyborg threw his head back and laughed. “You’re really barkin’ up the wrong tree there, fish boy. Gar’s stomach is like a bottomless pit when it comes to tofu.”

“Are you seriously still bitter about losing to this string-bean in armwrestling?” Roy chuckled, shaking his head.

“I don’t see you jumping up at the opportunity for a challenge!” Garth barked back. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were scared of looking bad in front of the girls!”
Roy immediately grew flustered, his freckled face flushing crimson. “Shut up, fish breath!”

“For the record, this string-bean could easily take you both on with his eyes closed, fellas,” Garfield bragged, earning him menacing glares from both the other Titans.

“Azar,” Raven sighed dejectedly, closing her eyes and massaging her temples, as if to will them out of her head. “You’re all giving me a migraine.”

It was true; all the yelling and emotional imbalance was beginning to grate on Raven’s carefully placed defenses, and it didn’t help that she was still self-conscious around Garfield for whatever reason. He stood out to her, more so than usual. The colour green was having a myriad of effects on her, and she couldn’t ignore it when he was somehow always in the corner of her eye.

“So sorry, Rae,” Beast Boy apologized bashfully, but he was easily drowned out by the heated bickering between Aqualad and Speedy.

Raven, annoyed, merely grabbed a drink and stalked off to the living room, away from the growing tension, and most notably, away from a very persistent changeling.

Except, of course, that he followed after her like a lost puppy. She didn’t need to use her empathic abilities to sense that he was worried about something. Presumably, her.

“Why are you following me?” she asked exasperatedly. She’d sat down on the couch only to have Beast Boy take the seat directly next to her, even though most other spots were free. In fact, he was so close, his leg and shoulder brushed against hers in what could only be described as an acutely intimate fashion. The heat returned, full force.

“I’m not? What’s up with you today?” Beast Boy was getting ready to bite into one of his tofu dogs as Raven squirmed against the armchair, suddenly very aware of how much body warmth he exhumed compared to her.

“Nothing’s up with me. What’s up with you?” she snapped back.

Beast Boy grinned cheekily before gloating, “Well, in case you didn’t hear, I kicked pretty boy’s
butt earlier today. He’s not taking it too well.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Beast Boy flexed his biceps, still grinning from ear to ear. “I know.”

Raven couldn’t help it. Her gaze was reflexively drawn to the curved line of muscle just beneath the taut material of his shirt, right where the fabric dug into the clearly defined groove. Her face burned, and she forcefully tore her eyes away.

“You’re still scrawnier than him,” she noted, growing irritable with his cockiness and trying to mask her flustered state with impromptu rudeness.

Beast Boy stopped flexing. “Everyone knows it’s not about the size of the muscles, Rae. It’s how you use them! And face it; you’re just upset because I’m officially stronger than your beady-eyed boyfriend, fishsticks.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” she growled more defensively than she’d have liked to.

“Yeah, well. I still kicked his butt more than once.”

“Who cares? Strength isn’t the only thing that makes someone attractive, Beast Boy.”

It was like she was giving herself the pep talk. So what if the changeling had filled out nicely over the years? So what if she’d come to admire that? Like Lillith had said, it was a perfectly normal reaction to have. Even Raven’s mother had been seduced by such shallow ideals once upon a time. The key was to not act on them. Being attracted to someone physically had no bearing on pursuing an actual relationship with them.

Just like with Aqualad. Sure, he was certainly a good-looking young man, even Kory would agree. But ultimately, Raven much preferred their professional relationship and friendship over the idea of romance.

“And exactly what do you find attractive, Rae?” He wiggled his eyebrows at her suggestively, and
once again she became painfully aware of the lack of space between them. His thigh — even through the rough material of his faded jeans — was warm and hard against her bare leg.

She squirmed, trying to create some space, but there was nowhere to go. There was also something in the back of her mind that told her that, maybe, she liked the touching. In fact, she craved it. Her heart sped up, her palms grew sweaty, and something carnal, deep in her loins, ached for more of it.

Raven clenched her jaw and tried to focus on the conversation instead. “Personality. Someone cultured, smart. Holding an interesting conversation so that talking comes naturally, but that silence isn’t awkward, either. Having a lot in common, I think, could help facilitate that.”

Beast Boy nodded, taking it all in like he was mentally jotting down notes.

“So, basically, you want to date yourself?” he then surmised.

Raven blinked, somewhat startled by his bold assessment. “What’s so terrible about wanting to have similar hobbies and interests? That’s what makes a healthy relationship.”

He shrugged and leaned back into the sofa, his paper plate settling in his lap. “Nothing, I guess.” It was obviously a lie judging by his body language and the way he avoided eye contact.

“No. You don’t agree. Why?” Raven couldn’t help her curiosity, but mostly she wanted to defend her disposition.

“It just sounds so…,” he paused, clearly searching for the most accurate, but inoffensive, word, “...boring. If all you ever do is the same things, or agree on everything all the time, how do you ever grow as a person? Don’t you want to try new things? Explore? Learn? Maybe find something different to enjoy? Y’know, gain a perspective you never thought of before.”

Raven gawked at Beast Boy openly. “Boring?” she queried incredulously. Shaking her head in disagreement, she said, “Two vastly different people couldn’t possibly have a lasting relationship.” Even to her own ears, her argument sounded weak. But the shapeshifter had certainly caught her off guard with his heavy response, and she was unprepared with an adequate defense.

Beast Boy then took a bite of his hotdog, swallowed, and shrugged. “There’s got to be balance, of course. You need to have enough in common that you don’t murder each other, like morals, but
having different interests or hobbies isn’t the end of the world, so long as you’re willing to try and make it work.”

“Since when did you become a relationship guru?” Raven quipped, raising both brows in genuine surprise.

It earned her a small smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “I’m not. Take one look at my track record and you’ll see I’m pretty horrible at them.”

Even though it was light-hearted, there was still a hint of pain in his expression. Like a small, stinging wince, barely noticeable, but there nonetheless if you looked close enough.

“Come to think of it, probably best you don’t take dating advice from me; chances are I’m dead wrong….” he noted forlornly, realizing the hypocrisy in his own testament while staring down at the crumbs on his plate.

“Hm, I don’t think you are,” Raven conceded, and she found that she wasn’t just saying it to cheer him up. “I think every individual should experience romance the way they perceive it. If you feel strongly about it, then that’s what you should pursue.”

Beast Boy managed to grin in between mouthfuls of food — having stuffed his face in an effort to mask his pain. It always amazed Raven how quick he could be when it came to shifting moods.

“So, does that mean you think the two of us would ever work out, Rae?” There was more waggling of eyebrows at this, and a closing of space between them as Garfield leaned in to give her a sultry stare, obviously teasing.

Raven shoved him lightly by the shoulder. “Don’t push your luck, salad head.”

He shrugged and chortled at her unsurprising reaction. “Worth a shot.”

Raven folded her arms over her chest and tried not to think about what it would be like to date Beast Boy. Craving physical intimacy was one thing, but an actual relationship with anyone intimidated the empath into an almost panic attack.
Still...dating Garfield would probably include an unhealthy dose of late night junk food and evenings of staying in marathoning videogames or cheesy sci-fi movies. Nothing particularly thrilling, adventurous, or exciting about any of that, she surmised.

Then again, Robin and Starfire had been together for a few years now, and even they preferred the quiet nights together over any fancy events or outings. Truth be told, Raven really didn’t know much about the dating scene or what it consisted of, as her experience in that department had been...lax, to say the least. Sure, she’d hung out with Goth Boy a few times in the past, but even then, her interest grew stale. It didn’t help any that their supposed ‘dates’ only ever consisted of grabbing a tea at the nearest cafe, or heading to a poetry slam.

And Malchior…

She’d sooner not think about him at all. Even now, his name alone incited a horrible, twisting feeling in her gut, and her heart panged mercilessly in response, the wound he’d left her still raw and festering somehow.

As Raven silently mused to herself, and Beast Boy ate while watching television, the room had slowly begun to fill with other chatty Titans. Garth still wore a deep-set scowl, even as he picked at the food on his plate with little enthusiasm. Karen and Starfire were giggling over a shared joke, and Roy and Richard were engaged in a heated discussion about who had the more effective gadgets. Cyborg had piled up his plate and was gearing to set up the game station while Lillith took her place next to Garth, giving Raven a friendly smile as she did so.

Gently, the telepath probed their mental link, and Raven happily granted her access. It would do her some good to think on things that didn’t involve romance or intimacy. She was still in disbelief that she’d even managed to carry out such a delicate topic of conversation with Beast Boy.

‘I think he’s a little sweet on you, Raven.’

The empath’s eyes widened, even as she locked eyes with Lillith, who appeared genuinely pleased by her rather astute observation. ‘It’s really rather adorable.’

‘What in Azar’s name are you talking about?’ But Raven knew perfectly well who Lillith meant. She was merely doing her damndest to ignore the green changeling sitting uncomfortably close beside her while feigning ignorance.
‘Beast Boy, of course! Why don’t you ask him out? Robin can’t possibly have any rules about dating a teammate now that he’s with Starfire.’

‘Merciful Azar, Lillith, I am not crushing on Beast Boy, nor am I going to ask him out. He’s my friend, who I’ve accidentally dragged into a mess I don’t know how to fix. That’s all there is to it. Attraction or not, I need to figure out how to end things and move on.’

Lillith merely giggled, unphased by the threat in Raven’s tone. ‘Okay, okay. I was just teasing. Still, he’s kind of a cutie. I can see what you mean…’

The chestnut-haired Titan gave an otherwise oblivious Garfield an appreciative once over, biting her bottom lip in contemplation. Raven stiffened, and an emotion — sharp and a lot like jealousy — overcame her before she could stop it.

‘Whatever.’ Raven sat back in the couch and pretended not to care. What was it to her who liked Beast Boy, anyways?

‘Oh, Raven. You are such an easy mark. Don’t fret, I have my eyes set on someone else these days…,’ Lillith confessed, gleaning her discomfort quite easily.

As the sorceress furtively glanced in her direction, she saw her staring longingly at Garth, who was too busy being irritated and glaring heatedly at his untouched food to notice. A wave of relief washed over Raven, and she visibly eased up, but thought better than to question her motives. She then did something entirely involuntary and without conscious effort — she sidled even closer to Garfield.

Something in her stomach fluttered when they touched in new places, and Raven nearly recoiled when she’d realized what she’d done. Yet, for some reason, she couldn’t bring herself to pull away.

Azar help her, she was enjoying the warmth and the way he felt, right down to the coarse hairs on his arm bristling against her bare skin. It made her tongue stick to the roof of her suddenly parched mouth and her pulse race and the ache in her belly stronger still.

‘I’m glad that Beast Boy is being really mature about the whole thing,’ Lillith commented, dragging Raven back into conversation. She secretly hoped and prayed the other girl hadn’t noted her feelings this time around.
'He’s been...very understanding,’ she replied, licking her dry lips and fighting the urge to recall her earlier conversations with Beast Boy regarding her newest hobby. The last thing Raven needed was having to deal with one more person becoming aware of her latest, uncharacteristic activity. Explaining *that one* to Lillith would have been far worse than anything else involving her emotions that they’d abysmally tried to discuss. She wasn’t exactly forthcoming to begin with.

‘That’s good! I bet it’s made this conundrum a lot easier to deal with.’ Lillith piped up.

‘Yeah, I suppose it could be worse.’ Although Raven didn’t really know how.

Just then, Beast Boy’s knee brushed hers and stayed there, making the empath flush and stiffen notably. Lillith seemed to have caught her friend’s wide-eyed shock at the movement, because she giggled behind her hand, like a preteen who knew a secret.

*That* was the final straw. “Beast Boy, have you ever considered the idea of personal space?” Raven seethed through gritted teeth, barely loud enough for only the changeling to hear.

“Oh! Uh...sorry, Rae,” he apologized sheepishly before finally scooting over. She’d never admit it, but she already missed the warmth he exuded, as well as the fluttery, tingling feeling in her belly that he’d also helped inspire.

Azar, she needed to get a hold of herself. The photos were one thing, but her *feelings* were another matter entirely, and she simply didn’t have the capacity to entertain them at the moment. Not especially with Lillith in her head.

“Just...stay on your side of the couch,” she sighed feebly, feeling a twinge of remorse at her coldness.

A little while later, Mas y Menos also joined the fray, and thankfully preoccupied Beast Boy and the others. The two younger boys had been busy trying to apprehend Mumbo Jumbo during a bank heist, and it had taken them a bit longer than anticipated to join the party. Still, with such a full house, it was easy for Raven to finally distract herself from her previous, rebellious thoughts. Everything eventually fell into a natural groove among the Titans again, and the early morning events were but a distant fever dream.
Her nighttime visitor could have been anyone, if she was being honest to herself. After the games were over — and Karen was declared champion, much to the devastation of the boys — most of the Titans East had said their goodbyes and called it a night. Via their mental channel, Lillith had bid the empath an affectionate farewell even after they’d embraced, no hard feelings having ever lingered between them.

‘You know you can reach out to me anytime about anything, Raven,’ she’d told her, ardent in her plight and smiling sweetly so that it lit up the soft blues of her eyes.

Which ultimately begged the question; was it Starfire at her door, perhaps requesting an impromptu, last minute swimming session? One glance at the clock on her nightstand told Raven that the alien princess was likely snuggled up with both Silkie and her boyfriend at this time of night.

Perhaps it was Robin, if he was in need of another sleeping spell from the nightmares that often plagued him and worried his girlfriend to no end. Although, they’d seemed to have subsided somewhat ever since he’d allowed Kory more and more into his heart, and Raven couldn’t recall the last time he’d come to her for an episode.

That left Cyborg and Beast Boy, both of which…

The knocking came again, more incessant now, and effectively cut off her train of thought, which was admittedly heading into sleep-mode again. The day had been long, exhausting, and certainly emotionally taxing for the young Titan, and she’d been looking forward to bed. Raven groaned and clambered out of her warm sheets very reluctantly.

“I’m coming, I’m coming, relax,” she grumbled, nearly stumbling on her way..

Sauntering over to her door on bare feet, she sighed, adjusted her bedhead hair, and cautiously slid it open.

“Cyborg?” she queried, somewhat surprised by his presence so late in the night.

Truth be told, she’d half expected it to be Beast Boy just based on their most recent interactions,
probably there to arrange their next photoshoot. In some small way she’d never admit to, she was almost a little disappointed that it wasn’t.

“What’s going on?” she asked, her tone serious. Had there been an emergency and she hadn’t realized? Was there something wrong with the Tower facilities?

“Hey, Rae. Nothin’s up. Just wanted to drop by and, uh...have some words, I guess. Do you mind?” Victor indicated coming in for some privacy.

Raven nodded, a bit taken off guard, but moved out of the way so that he could enter. She closed the door behind him.

“Place hasn’t changed much over the years, I see,” he chuckled, observing her unique, dark decor. She was still a bit prickly when it came to uninvited visitors to her bedroom, especially after the incident with Nevermore. It was enough to make her shudder.

“Skip the small talk, Victor. What did you want to discuss?” Raven folded her arms over her chest, her expression stoic. She liked to think that she knew the cybernetic man well enough by now that she could tell when he was at unease.

As if on cue, Cyborg’s smile shrank and he took a seat on the edge of her bed, tapping the spot next to him when she didn’t immediately join him.

Once she did — somewhat hesitant — he averted his gaze to the rug on her floor. “It’s about Beast Boy.”

Raven’s heart dropped in a mild panic, but she maintained her composure in front of the eldest Titan.

“What about him?” She played it cool.

Cyborg sighed heavily and ran his cool, robotic palm over his face. His shoulders slumped forward. “He’s been acting...weird, don’t you think?”
Raven shook her head. “He was pretty much his usual self all day today with the other Titans.”

“Not what I meant, Rae.” He gave her a deadpan look. “What I mean is...how he’s never home these days, and when he is, he spends all his time locked up in his room, plotting. Do you think...do you think maybe, he has a girlfriend he just ain’t tellin’ us about? I mean, I figured he’d eventually move on from Terra, but last I checked, he’s still beat up about her, and it ain’t like him to not tell me — his best bud-”

“Slow down,” Raven interjected with a raise of her hand. “You’re making a lot of hypothetical assumptions here, Cyborg,” she warned, not unkindly.

“You’re right,” he agreed, after a momentary pause. “Guess I’m just a bit worried, and I don’t know who else to talk to about it. I thought that maybe, what with your empathy and all....” he trailed off, embarrassed by his own suggestion.

“You want me to sense if he’s...having any conflicting feelings?” Raven finished for him.

Cyborg shrugged, still staring at the floor. “I just mean, if you had any idea, or if there’s some special lady...I don’t mean to nose around, y’know? Just like, if you already knew somethin’...”

Well, that was easy. Raven shook her head. “There’s no secret girlfriend. He’s just swamped with his photography class, I think. He mentioned something about wanting to make an impression, too, so maybe that’s why he’s been different. He believes he has something to prove, like you mentioned.”

A brief flicker of relief flashed over the cybernetic Titan’s human features, but it was obvious he wasn’t entirely convinced. “You two do seem to be spending a lot of time together...You wouldn’t mind just, keeping an eye out for him, would you?”

Raven gulped — had they been that obvious? “If by time together, you mean hovering near me at every inconvenient opportunity, then sure. Why not? But really. I think you’re asking the wrong person here, and that you should probably just go talk to him yourself.”

Victor shook his head in disagreement. “No, I mean actually hanging out, like volunteering to go to his photography class, spending time at the Tower...You guys seem closer these days. Not that it’s a bad thing, but I’m thinkin’ that maybe I do have the best person for the job.”
Raven scoffed, but mostly because she had no other way of refuting his claim. Also, his smile was contagious.

“And what about you?” Cyborg asked.

“What about me?” She lifted an inky brow.

Victor smiled, genuinely this time. “New phone, new friends, just figured I ought to check in.”

Raven averted her guilt ridden gaze to her lap, afraid she would give too much away otherwise. “It’s...fine. Everything’s fine. Just don’t expect me to be super active in the group chat or anything,” she mumbled, picking at her pajama shorts.

He chuckled at this before draping his strong, heavy arm over her shoulder and pulling her in for a reluctant, surprise hug. “Wouldn’t dream of it. Just so long as you know I’m always here to talk if you need it. Totally confidential, I promise.” Cyborg winked.

He then patted her back gently, digital fingers still rough despite his effort to mute some of his impressive strength.

“I know. But I’m fine. Really. You don’t need to worry about me, Victor.” She mustered up a gentle smile — small and only a barely discernible lilt at the corners of her mouth — if only for his sake.

It appeared to suffice and, with one last exchanged look of mutual understanding and camaraderie, Cyborg left her bedroom.

Being checked in on by Victor was by far, not the most oddest occurrence at the Tower for Raven. In fact, it was par for the course. Along with playing the resident physician, Cyborg also liked to be a bit of a guidance counselor for his teammates, too. He’d often joke and tease Raven that he was just warming it up for her, since she would be far better suited for the role due to her natural abilities. But the empath was still struggling with her own inner demons at the time. She wasn’t yet sure she was up to the daunting task of speaking to the others about their own. Maybe, one day…
Still, Victor’s visit was rather ominous in that it had been late. Which meant that he’d likely waited until all the other visiting Titans had left, and that the resident Titans were therefore too preoccupied to care about what he’d been up to. Which made sense, especially if his primary concern was Beast Boy, who would have no doubt felt his best friend’s absence most of all.

The thought lingered in the back of Raven’s mind, like a relentless pitter patter of a bird’s delicate pecking against her window pane.

By the time she’d realized that the bird was indeed actually at her window, and not some figment of her imagination, Raven caught the familiar glint of deep emerald wings, feathers flapping away beneath the steady weight of an early dawn rainshower. She propped open a single eye from where she lay her head, took one look at the bedside clock, and sighed. Raven took a moment to bury her face into the plush softness of her pillows before finally giving in to wakefulness. She hadn’t exactly had a restful slumber anyways, what with her mind abuzz from the previous evening’s commotions, and thus, wasn’t as vexed by the early hour as she may have been.

For a moment, she could have sworn that the bird was indeed a part of some hallucination, as Beast Boy was unlikely to be awake so early in the day for anything, let alone to just tap away at her windows. Feeling a bit self-conscious, she’d be hard pressed to deny that he hadn’t been on her mind most of the night, but she’d merely chalked it up to getting more than her usual dosage of the changeling rather than some feeble, awakening attraction she may have still been in denial of

In fact, it wasn’t even until she’d spotted the crumpled up piece of paper from beneath her door that she started to doubt herself yet again. Once opening it, there was no shadow of a doubt — judging by Garfield’s obvious, messy script — that the bird had indeed been real.

Meet me in the kitchen when you’re dressed.

-BB ;)

Raven shook her head, trying to find a shred of annoyance at her all too eager teammate — maybe even a spelling error — but she was only curious, regardless of the circumstances. She was quick to drape her cloak about her bare shoulders — almost methodically — before heading over to the destination as so marked by the peculiar, crumpled up note still in her grasp. What on Earth was so important that Beast Boy couldn’t wait to tell her about it at a more reasonable hour? And why was it that he’d gone through such lengths to get her alone?
The lights to the Tower were mostly out, what with the resident heroes normally still in bed at this unforgivable hour, but as Raven neared the dining quarters, she could tell that one particular Titan was currently preoccupied making breakfast.

Raven froze when he came into her line of view, and she became rooted to the spot just outside the hall.

He didn’t notice her at first. In fact, he hardly seemed to be aware of anything whatsoever, his eyes half-lidded in an almost dream-like state as he whisked up his tofu omelette in a robotic fashion. Beast Boy stared off at the tiled floor, lost in thought, and it — unfortunately — did not escape the empath that he was also sans a shirt.

Of all the times for her hormones to act up involuntarily, and all Raven could do was wish that she could return to some semblance of normal again. But after her conversations — and begrudging realizations — with Lillith, it was impossible to switch it all off. Like a leaky faucet, her emotions were uncooperative.

“Why aren’t you dressed?” she blurted out, knowing that she’d be caught staring at his stark, green nudity no matter what she said.

“Hm?” Beast Boy seemed to finally realize he wasn’t alone in the room, and he glanced up in her direction — albeit, slow as a turtle — and blinked twice, as if to ensure he wasn’t sleepwalking, or daydreaming her existence. “Oh, you’re awake,” he noted, a lazy smile crawling onto his sleepy features. It was as if he’d never even heard her question in the first place.

He paused in his incessant churning of eggs and soy milk, only to set down the bowl on the counter so that he could stretch out a long-winded yawn, arms raised over his head in a wide arc. The sudden motion made his already low-riding, fleece pajama bottoms slip even lower. Raven’s eyes widened as she visually traced the trail of soft, dark hairs that started at his navel, traveled the length of his toned abdomen, and then disappeared beyond his waistband.

She immediately snapped her attention back to his face before he caught her lingering gaze. All that junk food, and yet the younger boy was as fit and limber as a marathon swimmer. It was like he was an enigma — some sort of optical illusion, or magician’s trick.

“I was gonna make some breakfast to go before heading out,” he added casually.
Raven raised an eyebrow at that. “Heading out? Heading out *where*?”

The lazy smile then turned into a shit-eating grin — one the empath would recognize easily enough. He was up to something mischievous and *she* was highkey involved in whatever ludicrous masterplan he’d concocted.

“Oh, Azar,” she sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose with thumb and forefinger, knowing she’d resigned to her fate the moment she’d read his letter.

“It’s just for the weekend, I swear! I already told Rob and the others that we’d be busy with a photography project for my class, and they’re all cool with it!”

“You *what*!?”

He looked remorseful when her tone had shifted to annoyance.

“It’s just…that dude had you really grossed out, and it got me thinking…”

“What? To do a boudoir shoot at some questionable motel with stained wallpaper and sheets from the seventies? No thanks, Beast Boy. I didn’t sign up to film some cheap pornography,” she hissed, feeling disgusted.

“Dude! Of course not! It’s nothing like that at all!” He blushed at her heavy insinuation. Then, sheepishly, he added, “It’ll be way more private and the location is stunning, and you can bring…*whatever* clothes you want, including the new ones we picked up. Just…just trust me, Rae, will you? This once. *Please.* If you end up hating it, nothing’s stopping you from teleporting back, and I swear I’ll never mention it again.”

He was being earnest, and his longing to please her was steadily chipping away at her resolve. He also had a point about the teleportation…

“You’re not giving up on this, are you?” Raven fixed her cloak tighter about herself, but she was already warming up to the idea of actually trusting him. Her initial judgement had been crass, and she knew it, but she couldn’t help her defensiveness.
“Would you agree if I let you pick the music for the road trip?” He batted his eyelashes at her.

“Road trip? Where the heck are we going?”

“It’s a surprise. Now go pack up, or we’ll never get there on time!”

And just like that, he ushered a very confused Titan out of the kitchen.

A/N: That was long, huh? Anyways, sorry for the delay in update. Health concerns are still preventing me from doing much. Thanks to everyone following and reviewing! You guys motivate me so much with your words, you have no idea. Now that I’m in a routine, maybe I can find an updating groove, but I am still in the middle of a move, so. Please bear with me! Hopefully the updates are worth the wait. p
Exhibition[ist]

Art was in everything. It was in the gentle strokes of a paint brush against a blank canvas surface; in the delicate tendrils of a flower petal, right down to the small, deep veins, so bright and colourful. It could be found often in the simplest of things, the most minor of details, but also in a masterpiece framed in an art gallery. Garfield Logan — through his lens and the aid of his photography lessons — was truly beginning to learn how individualistic the experience could be in the eye of the beholder.

But no one had warned him of the most obvious muse.

The one in front of him, so stark in contrast to her otherwise comparatively bland surroundings, how he'd missed it at all made him feel like an amateur at his craft once more.

An artist always found his muse in their most unsuspecting environment, and no amount of carefully planned poses or scenic shoots would be able to compare to something so natural. Exquisite, even amongst the gorgeous, lush underbrush of nature herself. Garfield had seen his fair share of models and fashion photography, and even studied them at length until his eyes would droop with sleep and he'd dream of them, but none were as organic as Raven.

He licked his lips, mouth dry and fingers sweaty, even as he gripped the sturdy body of his camera hanging around his neck. The weather was warm, the lazy, late afternoon sun beating down on them both from just over the clearing of tall, old trees. She was humming to herself, something off tune but soft and that carried with the chirping of the birds scuttling in the branches nearby. The golden yellow of her dress rivaled the bright dandelion she twirled between her fingertips, and he couldn't help but stare at how the loose, skinny, yellow strap slipped off the curve of her creamy shoulder absentmindedly.

The rest of the canary-gold material pooled about her legs like a lilypad, her bare feet safely tucked beneath her as she sat by the edge of the rushing water, too preoccupied with her peaceful surroundings to notice him yet. Somewhere buried in the unkempt, evergreen field nearby, her sandals were left forgotten.

Beast Boy wished, more than anything, that he could be the small blade of grass, pressed up against the folds of her dress. Or the beads of sweat just budding over the swell of her breasts or brow.

He could have shifted into something small and inconspicuous A grasshopper. An ant, maybe. Anything to keep watching her at peace, undisturbed and from afar, committing the sight to memory. But more so, he wanted her to see herself the way he saw her then. As selfish as Garfield ached to be in that moment, he knew how important it was to her. Beast Boy clutched his camera, lifting it to his face with a careful but shaky breath inward. She heard the shutter click before she turned to appraise him, the glare of the sunlight catching the amethyst in her eyes and forcing her to squint beneath the shade of her palm in surprise.

He caught her at the perfect angle, her violet hair wind-struck by a gentle breeze that had picked up with her sudden motion. The shot — and all the colours in it — blended beautifully, and would
rightfully leave him feeling light-headed. But he'd never know — or he was too apprehensive to admit — if it was the picture, or the source herself that had made his knees feel suddenly so weak, and like the air had been sucked right out of his lungs...

[Earlier...]

"You rented a car?"

"Cy wouldn't give up the T-Car," Garfield shrugged in-between hardy attempts of squeezing their luggage into the small trunk. It wasn't that it was heavy, but the sheer size of the suitcases versus the size of the car had been something of an oversight for the changeling. Only, he wasn't likely to let the empath be privy to that embarrassing mistake just yet, so he kept her sidetracked with a different line of conversation.

"Besides, it'll be more fun this way! Now we don't have to worry about all his dumb rules and," he paused to sarcastically air quote his next words with a roll of his eyes, "damage his baby."

"Yeah, but," Raven furrowed her brows in contemplation as she thought of how to properly phrase her next question. "How did you rent us a car?"

Beast Boy shoved the suitcase with all his strength, straining until he'd bit his bottom lip and squeezed his eyes shut from the exertion. With a final grunt, and a push of his back and legs against it, the luggage finally popped inside.

"Phew!" he exhaled loudly, trying to play off how tired and flushed he was in front of the empath. Mopping at the sweat of his brow, he turned to give her an accomplished grin. "See? Nothing to it!"

Raven remained impassive. "You didn't answer me, Beast Boy."

The smile he wore wilted a little when he replied in a small voice and with downcast eyes. "I used up some savings…"

Raven couldn't deny that she was overcome with the automatic sense to chastise him on the matter, but, after observing the way he wore his guilt on the matter, thought better of it instead. Afterall, he was doing all this for her, and she promised that she'd trust him. So, Raven reigned in her original response, took in a deep breath through her nose, and resigned herself to his whims. "Alright, fine. I won't ask any more questions," she conceded.

He seemed to brighten a bit at this, the tips of his pointed ears twitching. Beast Boy then rushed over to the passenger-side door, and opened it for her before she had the chance. She shook her head, but took her seat anyways, trying not to be amused by his attempt at being a gentleman.

"Although, if I could make a suggestion? Maybe, next time, get a bigger car," she teased before closing her door behind her.

Beast Boy's ears visibly drooped from beyond the closed window, and Raven smirked to herself.

The car ride out of the city itself went smoothly enough for the most part, although Raven did end up falling asleep despite her desperate attempts to stay awake.

Garfield had packed them a light breakfast — including a hot travel mug of her favourite brand of peppermint tea. Unfortunately, not even that, or the strong scent of a tofu egg sandwich filling the car, could help keep her from drifting off. The events of the previous evening had prevented her
from an adequate sleep cycle, and it was hitting her like a brick in the morning. The soft lull of her instrumental music playing in the background from the stereo, as well as the gradual, gentle stretch of empty highway ahead, hadn't helped matters any. Once they'd gotten far enough away from Jump City, it was really easy for Raven to nod off, with Garfield too busy stuffing his face with his homemade meal to offer much in way of conversation, other than if she'd wanted some, of course. A few crumbs had slipped down his chin when he had, and Raven had tried not to openly grimace when she'd suggested a napkin.

"Did you want me to stop at a breakfast place or something? It's kind of a long ride, Rae," he'd told her, showing genuine concern once his mouth wasn't full.

Raven waved her hand dismissively. "I think I'll be fine, thanks. I'm not terribly hungry in the mornings." The scent in the car was making her queasy if anything, and she'd rolled down her window to aerate the small space.

With the wind in her hair, and fresh air in her lungs, it had felt like she'd only just blinked. However, by the time she'd opened her eyes again — for what felt like but a fraction of a second — the roads and scenery had drastically changed. Less cement, buildings, cars, and now there were only two lanes rather than the several that often cluttered a city as busy as Jump. At either side of her, there were forests and trees, heavy and hanging, with the early morning sunlight finally peeking through the leaves and branches, casting a warm, orange glow through their shadows.

Beast Boy was drumming his fingers to the music against the steering wheel, but he remained staring at the empty stretch of road, tiredness tugging at his heavy lids. Raven tried to play it cool, but she was a touch embarrassed for checking out so soon in the trip. She stretched and couldn't fight the yawn that made her eyes water. He noted her movement and seemed to come to life again.

"Feeling rested?" he asked, a bit of life returning to his features.

Raven didn't miss the sandwich wrapped in foil sitting on the car rest between them, nor the fresh refilled beverage in the cupholder, and small paper bag with dessert. Somewhere along the way, he'd stopped to pick her up food to eat anyways, and it took the smell of freshly baked bread to help her realize just how famished she really was. Her stomach then grumbled aloud in what was a mortifying quiet spell in the car, as if to testify to her hunger. She clutched at her abdomen self-consciously and Beast Boy chuckled, his fangs gleaming in the early light.

"Go ahead and dig in, it's for you. We've also still got a ways to go, anyways."

Her pride was mildly damaged, but her hunger was too powerful, so Raven used the guise of conversation to distract him from her meek gratefulness for the meal. She picked at the sandwich foil first. "Still?" she repeated. "How far are we going?"

"You've been out for almost two hours. But the place is three hours away, with good traffic."

"I thought we were just doing some photoshoot in a more private setting." She took a tiny bite of bread, and the immediate relief to her aching belly felt like a divine intervention; he'd stopped at one of her most favourite bakeries, which meant that the bag contained a cherry cheese danish that she'd been obsessed with everytime the Titans would make a trip there. It mingled with her mint tea in a way that made her taste buds explode. Raven all but rolled her eyes back in bliss.

"We are," he answered. "But the really nice places are kind of far out from the city. Which is why it's a weekend event!"

She took a more healthy bite of the sandwich now, convinced he was sufficiently too distracted to care about gloating. "So, we are staying at a hotel, then."
He shook his head curtly. "I never said that. You'll just have to wait and see." Beast Boy looked quite pleased with himself, despite his efforts to keep his focus on the empty, winding road.

Raven groaned and slumped in her seat. "Why are you making this such a big deal?"

"Don't you like surprises, Rae?"

"No," she dead-panned with finality. "I hate surprises."

Beast Boy chuckled at her childishness. "Take a load off. Enjoy the scenic view. Finish your sandwich. Just...relax a bit, will you?"

"I'm plenty relaxed."

He pulled a face that told her he was unconvinced, but before she could even think to refute it, he added with a sigh, "Whatever you say."

Then, he pulled over at the side of the road and turned off the car's engine. "What are you doing?" Raven mouthed in a small panic, taking in her surroundings with wide eyes. Nothing had changed. There was no clearing or sign of life outside of the hanging forestry about them, and the quiet of isolated nature so early in the day. Morning dew clung to the leaves and grass of the plant life nearby, and somewhere overhead, birds were chirping.

"There's no pit-stop from here to our destination, and I really got to use the bathroom," he explained, looking antsy even as he opened the car door.

"What about me?" she gulped.

He lingered outside of the open driver's side. "Uh...there's plenty of bushes you can try."

"Azar," she exhaled, closing her aching eyes in frustration.

"Just watch for any poison ivy plants. They've got three leaves, and the last thing you want is an itchy butt on a long car ride." Beast Boy smiled and then closed the car door, leisurely walking around the parked vehicle only to have Raven watch his back disappear beyond the thick brush of woods to her side.

"Great," she whispered to herself before begrudgingly undoing her belt buckle and setting her half-eaten sandwich to the side. Small dust particles danced before her eyes in the bright beams of sunlight, and the car was notably growing more stuffy with the air condition turned off.

It was amazing how a full bladder could take so much precedence, even in the most unconventional circumstances. Raven eventually got out of the unbearably warm car and took in a deep, long breath of the clear, crisp morning air as she stretched out her stiff legs. The strong odour of pine and lush grass was subtle but refreshing to her nostrils. The earthy scent reminded her — oddly enough — of Beast Boy, and in a way, it gave her some comfort. If she hadn't been alone, she might have blushed at realizing such an intimate detail about her teammate.

Tucking her hair behind her ear, Raven steeled her nerves and went about finding a decent...bush, as he'd so eloquently put it, to relieve herself in. One without three leaves, of course. She tried to recall the path her teammate had taken so that she could head in the opposite direction, but the shrubbery all looked the same to her. Knowing her efforts would be futile, she meandered far enough into the eerily silent underbrush, and listened keenly for any hint of foot-crunching leaves, twigs, and pine needles that were not her own.
A branch whacked her in the forehead as she tried to walk beneath the thick forestry, and she cursed under her breath irritably while rubbing the newly reddened spot, seriously considering uprooting the whole tree and sending it flying in her rage. Eventually, she found a quiet spot, and went about her business when she was sure she was completely alone.

At first, the only sound was the gentle splash of her breaking water, with the occasional distant caw of a bird of prey circling overhead, no doubt searching for food. But then, there was something else.

Raven paused, growing paranoid at the prospect of Beast Boy having found her, and quickly did up her skirt, the urgency to urinate overcome by her flight response instead. "Garfield?" she called out after she was decent again, and the panic had somewhat quelled.

She was greeted with silence for a moment, and then movement among the trees shortly after. Heavier each time.

Raven swallowed at the nervous knot in her throat, but stood her ground nonetheless. She couldn't yet decide if it was fear that immobilized her, or sheer stubbornness. When no more sounds came, Raven surmised that it had probably been nothing; maybe only a small animal trying to get away from her. Just an overreaction, she convinced herself, especially after seconds passed without a trace of motion.

And then her careful resolve was completely shattered when she heard the low pitched groan echo nearby, picking up in a crescendo like it was right by her ear. Wildlife seemed to scatter, bird wings flapping violently overhead. "Beast Boy, this isn't funny," Raven warned aloud in a last ditch effort to keep her wits about her, but goosebumps covered her arms and legs and a cold chill ran down her spine. She grit her teeth and her hands were fists at her sides, but somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew it wasn't Garfield. Dark energy was summoned about her wrists, yet she remained shaking as she heard the heavy creature draw closer through the trees before her.

The ground almost shook beneath the brown bear's oversized paws as it appeared through the clearing to confront Raven, and the empath couldn't help the sharp gasp that escaped her dry lips as its massive snout sniffed at the air. It groaned again from its open, impressively large maw, sharp teeth on display, and Raven took an involuntary step back.

Not wishing to let the animal have the upper hand, the empath was quick to summon her powers.

"Azarath, metrion, zin-"

"Don't!" She was interrupted in her spell, the glow of her dark magic fading as a winded Beast Boy entered the fray in a tumbling mess. The bear didn't seem too keen on the surprise ambush and stood to its full, impressive height on its hind legs, finding its new target in the shapeshifter instead.

It then let out a mighty growl of challenge, spittle stretching in its grotesque, wide mouth. Beast Boy had his arms stretched out, as if to keep Raven from making any sudden movements.

"You've upset it!" she told him over the bear's snarling. A mistake, she'd realized, when it then trained its beady, black eyes on her, sending her heart lurching.

"Shh," Garfield warned, stepping closer to the bear and obstructing its path to Raven. "I've got this. When I make the move, you go back to the car. Don't even think about fighting." Raven couldn't even bring herself to question his logic, let alone conjure up a combat strategy. She did linger to watch as Beast Boy carefully shifted into a green-furred bear cub, his civilian clothing shredding in
the process.

It was a puzzling choice, but she didn't have the luxury of time to investigate further; her window to escape was closing as he distracted the now confused bear, so Raven turned and fled before she could figure out Beast Boy's plan.

By the time she found the road again, she was out of breath and her heart was hammering in her ears from the adrenaline pumping in her blood. She slumped into the passenger's seat and waited, her clammy skin cooling as her breathing slowly returned to normal.

She had her eyes closed until she'd heard the trunk pop open. Before she'd realized what was happening, it jolted her awake again. Checking the rearview mirrors, she caught sight of a flash of green fur, and then Beast Boy's head as he shifted back into his human form. He was completely naked, but thankfully, the car trunk masked his nudity below the waist as he quickly threw on some new clothes. Raven felt her ears grow hot, and she forcefully averted her gaze, slouching in her seat so as to avoid any temptation to stare. The next few minutes dragged on like agonizing hours, and it was all she could do to distract her mind until Garfield reunited with her in the driver's seat.

She made it a point not to even look at him, not quite trusting herself enough to do so yet.

"I guess I forgot to mention, maybe don't go into the berry bushes where bears like to snack, either," he teased, wiping the mop of his thick, green hair from his eyes. He was sweating, and a sheen of it coated his emerald skin, with some of his bangs having stuck to his forehead.

"Can we go before it comes back, please?" Raven asked, paranoid and peeking out her window for any sign of brown fur in the distance. She found nothing but trees, and a black squirrel scrambling up the trunk of an ancient weeping willow.

"Oh, she's gone. We startled her is all, and she knew her cub was somewhere around, so she got defensive. It's not like she was hunting you or anything." He paused when he saw the colour drain from the empath's face.

Within seconds, Beast Boy had gotten them back on the road again, and Raven felt relief at drawing distance between herself and the animal, regardless of Garfield's reassurances. But he wasn't quite done with tormenting her, it seemed.

"If she'd been hunting, believe me, we'd know," he added.

"We? Please don't tell me this whole thing was your fault, Gar."

Every single Titan — honourary or otherwise — knew of Beast Boy's affinity to animals. Even the more dangerous kinds. It had landed him in hot water on more than one occasion and, as a result, his teammates, too.

"I'd say it was a combined effort," he shrugged innocently, but he was grinning from ear to ear, obviously still pumped from the encounter. He looked charmingly boyish in his excitement, and Raven's stomach did that thing again she'd been ignoring. "She was gorgeous, wasn't she? I only wish I'd had my camera!"

"Beast Boy!"

"What? A shot like that would've had me ace the course, easy! Not to mention, officially make me teacher's pet." He gave her a knowing look, waiting for her to grasp his pun. Raven just rolled her
eyes, holding onto the dashboard in front of her and closing her eyes to help calm her spinning head.

"Please, just watch the road, Gar."

"Aw, you're no fun. She wasn't going to hurt you, y'know."

Raven sighed, opening her eyes to fix him with a blank stare. "I can handle myself just fine. In fact, I was perfectly fine even before you came barging in."

"I don't know, you still seem pretty spooked to me, and besides, violence isn't always the answer, Rae."

"Forgive me for not being completely aloof around a nine-hundred pound bear!" she stressed. "Not all of us have the ability to shapeshift and become animal whisperers."

He laughed at that, the sound rich and loud. "I think, mostly, I just get lucky. Or unlucky. Depends on how you want to see it, but I've always been a glass half full kind of guy."

The rest of the trip went without much of a hitch. Raven finished her sandwich, and took her time with the danish, savouring its tart sweetness with her cooling tea. She let Beast Boy take over the music in the final stretch, so long as he didn't play anything overtly obnoxious, which he'd graciously complied with. He did hum along to the radio though, and still drummed his fingertips along the steering wheel.

Neither of them brought up the bear incident again, much to Raven's relief. In fact, conversation at all was sparse after some time, but the silence was oddly comforting. Being far from the city, enjoying the scenic roadside view — and, by default, one another's company — had been...relaxing.

Nature and the outdoors had truthfully never been a concept Raven often willingly took part in. Sure, the Titans had gone camping plenty, but it didn't mean that she would jump at the opportunity to plan a trip. Too many bugs, too much sun, and not enough books to prevent her from participating in the dreaded socializing and team bonding exercises.

There were the charms, of course. Like the crisp, clean air, the solitary views, and meditation was always more successful away from the hustle and bustle of city life. Raven often found herself with a clearer mind and a more refreshed outlook by the time they'd all return to their daily, regular grind.

So, when Beast Boy finally turned the car into what looked more like a small, summer, getaway town full of scattered little cottages and a lot of forestry in between, Raven had been more than surprised. The roads changed from pavement to hilly grass and rocks, the car bumping as he maneuvered them past elaborate, wood cabins that looked like they belonged in magazine spreads instead of out her passenger window. She ogled them dreamily, imagining what decor they harboured inside, and almost wondering if the place Garfield had taken them was even real.

"We're here by the way," Beast Boy boasted, briefly pulling her out of her hypnotic state.

"You're kidding, right?" she asked him, turning her head to stare at him with obvious misgivings. "This place is like...is like..." She couldn't even formulate an adequate word to use to describe what she was seeing, Raven was at such a loss for vocabulary.

Beast Boy grinned at her reaction, his unbridled joy making the tips of his ears flick. "I know,
"How did you—when did you…” Words seemed to fail her again as they appeared to drive through the quaint, small town—all of the campgrounds. Little shops with big windows, fancy, golden lettering, and a woody motif lined either side of them as they drove down the gravelly road, and a few people were already out and about doing their early morning shopping for the essentials. There were bakeries, cafes, gift shops, butcher shops, clothing stores, antiques, and so many more. The scene could have played out of a movie, it was so surreal to witness when among so much nature.

"I know," Beast Boy reiterated, and the smile could be heard in his voice. "Wait until you actually see the place we're staying at."

Raven scrutinized him with narrowed eyes, but she couldn't deny the way her heart soared within her chest at the prospect of exploring all the quaint community had to offer. Nonetheless, her head was abuzz with endless questions and thoughts, but all she could say to him was; "I've got a lot of questions for you, Logan."

He nodded, skipping over the way she'd used his surname. "I'm sure you do, and we'll get to that, I promise, but first; chateau Beast Boy!"

Once they'd driven a couple minutes out of town, it was as if the stores hadn't even existed amongst all the thick forestry at all. The cabin Garfield had indicated only came into view from beyond the trees, sitting in isolation atop a green hill. It almost looked eerie, the way the morning fog swelled around the structure with its big windows and mass, overgrown bushes, but that only further endeared it to the empath. The building itself was simple in design; a bungalow, but it kept in the spirit of the other homes in that its exterior was all logged wood, and the concept itself was quite modern. Even unkempt, the yard was bristling with carefully placed stonework, lights, as well as various colourful flowers and plants.

Garfield parked the car on the rocky driveway, and the two of them both got out. Raven hadn't realized how much sitting had cramped her legs, and she was more than grateful for the opportunity to stretch out all her aching limbs.

They then grabbed their luggage in silence and headed over to the doors, where Beast Boy fiddled with some keys and Raven took in all her lush surroundings, feeling at peace.

The inside of the place was even more spectacular and impressive than the outside, as Raven would come to learn. It was obvious that the changeling was more than familiar with it already, as he stepped in completely unphased by the home's beauty. Raven, on the other hand, paused at the entrance, dropping her bags to the floor as she took it all in.

It boasted top of the line appliances, the interior design complementing the cabin motif. There was even a massive, brick, chimney fireplace, and the living room decor could have been part of a showroom with how untouched and matching it all was. Everything was tidy and clean, and the big windows overlooking the front of the house let in plenty of light as well as granting a serene view of the yard. The kitchen was an open concept with an island bar, and came fully furnished with wood cabinets and drawers, plus expensive-looking granite countertops.

"Woah, this is...this is all yours?" Raven asked breathily, in slight disbelief as she took in the high ceilings and hanging chandeliers, feeling a bit woozy.

Beast Boy had slung her bags over his shoulder, prepared to take them to her room when she'd given him pause with her question. He was unable to meet her eyes, appearing a mite bashful. "Yes and no," he finally answered with a roll of his shoulders.
Her eyes widened in alarm as she swiveled to stare at him. "Azar, tell me we aren't breaking and entering!"

"No, no!" He was quick to the defensive. "It's not like that...Not like that at all. I'm allowed to use this place. In fact, I've used it plenty before, after I turned sixteen."

Raven cocked her head to the side, squinting in thought as she tried to recall the events where Garfield might have disappeared without the others knowing where he'd gone. She, embarrassingly, came up blank.

"It's...my father's. One of many, so believe me when I say he wouldn't care that we're here." Beast Boy hung his head low so that his unruly mop of green hair obscured most of his face. His voice sounded heavy, like lead, and Raven didn't miss the baritone of maturity in the way he spoke, like he'd been masking it this whole time.

"Mento?" she queried softly, taking an unsure step towards him.

He nodded once in agreement, but there was no pride in the matter. "He doesn't use it at all, and he's got way better ones like you wouldn't believe. As part of my inheritance though, I do get to own some of them one day..."

Beast Boy looked at her then, an impish smile returning to his youthful features, but it was clear to her it was forced. "But don't tell anyone that. I'd like girls to want me for me, and not just for the luxury lifestyle." He winked playfully, but there was still something empty in his tone — something missing. Like he'd done this song and dance before, in a hollow, clapping monkey sort of way.

Before Raven could work up the nerve to place her hand on his shoulder in an attempt to console him, he was already back to his old self, shrugging beneath the weight of her bags. "I'll go drop these off to your room if you wanna make yourself at home."

Beast Boy then vanished beyond the hall, leaving his teammate alone in the foyer of the cabin in the woods, with nothing but her darkening thoughts and the soft ticking of the old grandfather clock in the background...

Unpacking had proven to be more of a chore than Raven had anticipated. In a hurry, she'd grabbed nearly her entire wardrobe and cleaned out most of her dressers. Not that she had much to begin with, but it still made her question Garfield's plans for the weekend when he'd insisted that she make haste and just grab everything; more was better than less, as he'd informed her.

Being that it was currently off-season for the cottage lifestyle yet, the camp was even emptier than usual, and its newly appointed adults-only rule made it more rural still. Raven knew that whatever photoshoots Beast Boy had planned, it meant they'd likely have a huge expanse of land to themselves.

She bit her bottom lip nervously when she spotted the bra harness she'd bought with Garfield during their mall trip, peeking out from its buried spot beneath a few of the other still new pieces they'd picked up on the same day. Its accusation was not lost to her, and she picked it up tentatively, dangling it by the straps as she wondered how she'd look in it, and if maybe she could brave it around her teammate for a photo or two. In fact, imagining the awe in his expression at the sight of her in it made her whole body tingle with a strange sensation; a mixture of both excitement and, perhaps, taboo flattery, too.
A brief knock on her door sent Raven jumping out of her skin like a panicked animal, and she quickly tossed the offensive garment back onto the piled mess that were her clothes on the bed. Sweating, she then quickly rummaged her hands in the clothes so that the bra was no longer in plain sight.

"You almost ready, Rae? We got some exploring to do!" Beast Boy's muffled voice came from beyond her locked door.

She'd still been deciding on what to wear, and so was predominantly walking around in nothing more than her sheer panties at the moment. Quickly, she threw on a thin, blue tank top and one of her form-fitting, favourite cotton black skirts. One glance through her open curtains where the blaring sun beat down through the glass was evidence enough of the hot, scorching day they were bound to have.

"In a minute!" she shouted back, desperate to fix her frazzled, short hair after the static of her top had set it awry. She worked her fingers through it meticulously, having misplaced her comb while attempting to sort through her luggage.

Growing exceedingly more paranoid, the flustered empath quickly hid the visible, pink shopping tags of the harness bra when she'd spotted them from beneath her clothes. What would Garfield have thought of her if he knew she'd willingly brought it along; that she wanted to gauge his reaction of her in it — and in turn, caused her skin to prickle in gooseflesh at the mere thought of his emerald gaze darkening when he'd take in the sight?

She shivered involuntarily, and shook the idea from her head before it led to a more dangerous line of thinking.

Once satisfied with her appearance in the foot-length mirror of the cozy bedroom — probably only a few square feet bigger than her own — Raven opened her door to find Beast Boy lounging against the wall across from her, arms folded over his chest in boredom.

He looked up and smiled lazily at her, appraising her look from head to toe with a stare that might have made her blush to her hairline if she wasn't careful. "Cute," he acknowledged, gaze lingering in a few spots, like her exposed, shapely legs. When it came to her breasts, he defected his line of vision immediately to her face, but Raven had known she'd left out any form of bra intentionally. It was hot, the straps of her top were short and would have openly displayed the lingerie from unflattering angles, and, not to mention, there was always something *liberating* about forgoing the contraption whenever she could. Garfield's reaction was, if anything, merely a bonus point she could deconstruct later on her own.

Besides, Raven found herself less and less self conscious around him now, especially when they were alone together, and even though she couldn't quite place *why*, it was soothing nonetheless.

Beast Boy on the other hand, bristled noticeably, and was going out of his way to avoid glancing at her chest in general, looking adorably sheepish as he did so. Raven slung her purse over her shoulder and walked past him, pretending not to notice the way his tongue tied suddenly.

"Are you going to just stand there and gawk?" she asked exasperatedly once he'd lagged behind her long enough to have wasted precious time.

Beast Boy blushed, like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "No! No gawking, just standing-I mean, no standing, just staring-wait, no, that's worse. Hang on-"

Raven couldn't help but snicker privately at his flustered state. It was kind of...*cute*. 
With a shake of her head — because she didn't want him to catch her so easily amused by his antics — Raven said, "Forget it. Let's just go. We're already running late."

"Okay, yeah. Just, uh, one second."

He didn't wait for her response. Instead, he was a green blur as he dashed down the hallway into his room, sliding on his socks against the wooden floorboards and rivaling Kid Flash in his haste. He'd left his bedroom door open a crack and Raven would have been a poor liar if she said she wasn't curious about what the master-suite looked like in a house like this. She slowly crept down the hall after him, gradually building up the nerve to spy as her curiosity got the better of her.

Unfortunately, she wasn't quick enough — Beast Boy slid back into view of the entrance, now with camera in hand. "Just in case!"

"In case of what? Another bear?" Raven fought the shiver that ran down her spine, blaming the air condition for the goosebumps forming on her naked arms.

"Well...yes? Kind of, but no, not really what I have planned." Beast Boy fidgeted on the spot, his fingers nervously tampering with the knobs of the camera. "Candid shots can be nice, too. And the setting and scenery...I just think...you look really pretty."

Azar, he was blushing hotly, right to the tips of his pointed ears. "But I'm not even wearing any of the new clothes," Raven then blurted out, staring down at her rather simple attire. She was doing everything in her power not to fixate on him calling her pretty.

The last boy she'd allowed so easily to manipulate her emotions with such flattery had used her horribly, leaving behind emotional scars that hadn't yet healed entirely. The compliment had since lost its charm with her, regardless of how sincere Beast Boy was in the moment.

"It's not about the clothes." He shook his head before awkwardly clearing his throat. "Anyways, you have final say on all photos, so it really doesn't matter. We should go, right? I think we should go."

Beast Boy then made haste to brush past her with his head bowed while Raven stood by with her mouth slightly ajar, not truly knowing how to respond.

Eventually, she settled for silence and followed after him.

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It's not about the clothes.

What did that even mean?

She'd spent most of their outing thinking about it, too distracted to really take in the quaint town and its little shoppes as they explored. They'd gone around almost twice now, with Garfield excitedly snapping shots of trinkets and unique storefront displays until he'd run out of space on his memory stick.

Raven took a dainty sip of her mint chai latte, and watched him panic in the cafe, finally pulling herself away from the thoughts of analyzing his precarious wording from earlier in the day.

"Aw, come on! I swear I deleted, like, two hundred photos already!" he whined when she tuned back in.

"Just go back to the cabin and unload the photos," Raven told him dryly, in-between blowing cool
air at the steam from her drink. She didn't entirely mind calling it a day; shopping had never been her strong suit, and she was already tired out. There had been a few snacks and souvenirs she had purchased — forever a victim of a cursed sweet tooth — and she carried a small paper bag from the store as a result, but nothing in comparison to what Starfire might have bought had she tagged along on the excursion. Beast Boy himself had mostly splurged on sweets too, being an expert on which candies and chocolate treats were the best of the best after frequenting many of the shops during his previous visits. They'd both gotten a candy apple each, covered in a thick layer of chocolate, caramel drizzle, and a sprinkling of walnuts, at his insistence.

Beast Boy pouted. "But...I didn't even take any of you."

Raven shrugged. "We can go back and I can change, then maybe we can find a nice spot for a small shoot?"

"Yeah?" His eyes lit up at her unsuspected offer. "Yeah, that sounds great! I can use a shower anyways. I can't help but feel like I smell like bear dung, and that's why the black flies are eating me alive." He sniffed at his own armpit and wrinkled his nose in distaste.

"I'll say," Raven agreed with a playful curl of her lips. "At least you're keeping them all away from me, though."

"Hey!" He narrowed his eyes at her and it only made her snicker behind her hand.

Eventually, his expression softened into a smile, and he relaxed, almost taken with her good mood as he watched her try to control the fit of laughter. "Alright, fine, I'll let you have that one," Beast Boy conceded. "But only because I get to pick the dress you change into, and I'm picking the yellow one."


"Aw, come on! If you do, I'll do your chores for a week."

"A month."

"Ten days, that's my final offer."

"Two weeks."

"Fine! Two weeks!" He stuck out his hand, his mouth a tight line. "Shake on it!"

Raven stared at his outstretched hand with mild suspicion, like it was going to grow extra fingers or something. Finally, she took it — albeit tentatively. "Deal."

"Deal," he repeated, shaking her hand vigorously.

"Ugh, why are you so sweaty?" Raven pulled her hand back and wiped it against the material of her skirt while wearing a look of disgust.

"It's warm out!" he griped, self-conscious enough to wipe his own hands along his jeans. "You should be one to talk, miss frigid fingers."

Beast Boy wore a scowl when he gave her aforementioned digits a mean glance before they left the store.

She wasn't supposed to be there.
The plan had been simple enough — go home, change, upload the photos onto a USB stick, and leave.

Mostly, Raven just had to change. Technically, it was Beast Boy who had to do the rest.

But even her small, inconsequential part was proving to be difficult. She'd shimmied out of her day clothes and stared at the bright yellow dress laying on her bed abhorrently, biting her bottom lip in hesitation as she paced the room.

The whole ordeal at the mall felt like it had happened forever ago, and her faded memory of even agreeing to try on the thing was barely more than a distant dream in her mind. Garfield had picked out so many outfits for her to try that day that Raven had simply resorted to behaving the same way when she was out shopping with Starfire — block out the vivid details and go along with it like a drone on autopilot.

The damn thing even had a bow on the back of it. A bow! How did she even agree to that?

Eventually, Raven had groaned and put the dress on with only a bit of a struggle. She then appraised herself in the mirror but couldn't determine if she looked good in it or not, too jaded by the sight of the dress at this point to tell. Beast Boy had certainly deemed her to look spectacular in it, she thought sourly.

It's not about the clothes…

She shook his voice out of her head and tried not to dwell on his meaning any further. The best thing she could do was get a fresh set of eyes for a more accurate opinion on the look.

That was how Raven had ended up where she really, really didn't belong.

She had initially found the living room empty, the laptop's screensaver of infinite stars in an inky black sky playing on loop. The USB was still plugged in, but the camera was left alone on the coffee table, the thick, black neck strap still attached.

No sign of the green changeling anywhere, however.

"Beast Boy?" she called out softly, still scanning the room for any sign of life. "Gar?" she tried again, louder now, like the use of his nickname would somehow be more likely to draw him out.

Raven was met with nothing but the soft chime of the clock as it ticked.

Finally, she decided to check his room and walked back down the hall. As she got closer, she heard it — the faint pitter patter of a shower nozzle spray.

Raven's curiosity got the better of her, and like a cat, she crept along on the base of her bare toes ever closer. Either it was merely in her inquisitive nature, or she just really wanted to be certain that it was in fact Beast Boy taking the shower, due to her irrational paranoia ever since the event in the woods. The noise was coming from his bedroom after all. She figured he had his own private bathroom in the master-suite since the one across from her room had none of his things on display — most notably, his toothbrush.

Still, he'd left his bedroom door ajar and Raven couldn't determine what had possessed her to slowly walk in on quiet, steady feet.

The room was just about as fancy as the rest of the cabin and about twice the size of her own room. The bed came with a king sized mattress and an elaborate, velvet canopy that hung overhead.
and cascaded down on four cherry wood posts. Raven couldn't help walking up to it to touch the crimson, silken sheets, to see if they were as soft as they looked.

The moan that echoed from the slightly open bathroom door had Raven whip her head in its direction, heart in her throat as she pulled her hand away and almost jumped out of her skin. She was startled, fear of being caught temporarily rootting her to the spot before worry and her sense of heroism had her acting. She crossed towards the bathroom door in a few long strides just as another low groan rumbled from the shower.

Raven then peered inside somewhat hesitantly, knowing that Beast Boy could be indecent and that they could both fall victim to what would otherwise be a very uncomfortable situation if she wasn't cautious.

One quick peek, just to ensure he was okay, and she'd leave. That had been the plan, but then again, things rarely had a habit of going according to plan.

The steam seemed to seep out of the room, its long, warm, wispy tendrils smelling like the sharp spice of bath soaps as they wafted upwards. It tickled Raven's nose and made her cheeks flush a pretty pink. She blinked as she strained to adjust to the thicker clouds hovering inside where the shower was loudest.

Raven could see his silhouette there, just beyond the foggy shower glass— how could she not? — a green shadow against the porcelain tiling of the bathroom walls. Beast Boy didn't appear to notice her glancing in from the narrow opening of the door. In fact, his eyes were closed, she noted, with his head thrown back and his lips slightly parted in what could only be described as pained ecstasy. The muscles of his upper arm twitched vigorously, but she couldn't quite see why or what he was-

Raven's eyes widened and her face flushed hotly — and not from the steam this time — just as a creeping realization finally dawned on her — Beast Boy was masturbating in the shower.

Her heart felt like it had sunk to the confines of her stomach, but she couldn't dare pull her eyes away, not even as another soft sigh escaped his lips, the shower water pouring onto his strong chest and abdomen before cascading down to the thick, corded muscles of his thighs.

Raven gulped and licked her chapped lips. Her heart was racing, her mouth going dry. She knew she ought to leave, she had no right to be there, spying on such a private, personal moment. But there was a familiar ache in her loins, deep, panging, and only growing in intensity. She clenched her thighs reflexively and her breath hitched in her throat as she watched him pump himself faster, the white, frothing soap suds covering most of his proudly erect member.

Beast Boy used his free hand to steady himself against the tiled shower wall, slowing down enough to squeeze the swollen head of his penis.

Raven's own hand moved instinctively to the spot between her legs, her fingers clutching at the multitude of folds of her yellow dress, fighting the overwhelming urge to slip a finger beyond her panty line and find sweet release herself. Azar, he was arousing her and she had no idea to do with that fact.

She had to get out of there. She didn't belong. Raven never should have gone into his room to begin with, but try as she might, she couldn't get her feet to obey her. Instead, she was helpless to the whims of her cursed hormones, her bare toes sinking into the plush carpet beneath her.

Another shallow gasp and quick squeeze from the changeling before it finally appeared he'd
finished. Beast Boy's breathing was laboured and he still used the wall to steady himself. He'd bent his head down now though so that the water from the shower-head wet his hair, bringing the thick, deep-green strands forward as he caught his breath.

Raven took this opportunity to sneak away at last, finally regaining control of her feet again now that he was done. She moved to hide behind the wall just outside the bathroom, shocked to find her own heart was erratic within her chest and that she, too, felt dizzy from the lack of oxygen. Not to mention, her face — and other parts of her — were burning hotly from her own unresolved tension. The pulsing ache in the secret spot between her thighs was like an ebb and flow, matching the rhythm of her crazed pulse, and the small, hard nubs of her own nipples were erect and visible through the soft cotton of her dress. Even the material of her clothes rubbing against the sensitive skin was enough to make her have to suppress a tortured moan.

Raven then heard the undeniable squeak of the shower shutting down followed shortly by the water flow coming to a dripping halt. She gasped quietly behind her hand at the prospect of being caught red-handed, and decided immediately that she had to leave before he found her there.

She had to get away. In fact, she was in dire need of some fresh air, to help calm her down and take her mind off what she'd just witnessed. Maybe even some silent meditation would be helpful. The temptation to slip into her room and find sexual relief for herself was a strong one, but there was no time for that without running into the strong possibility of being found in a state of embarrassing disarray.

Raven was barely more than a flurry of yellow skirts and a blur of violet hair as she quickly dashed past the small opening of the washroom door and then out of Beast Boy's bedroom, being careful to leave the door open exactly the way she'd found it.

Without looking back, she walked briskly down the hall towards the foyer. A deep breath through her nose and an exhale out of her mouth, Raven grabbed her purse — including her Titans communicator — and was out the main entrance without a second thought.

The truth was, she had no idea where she was even going, but bears be damned, she didn't care. She needed to get those fresh images out of her mind and, more distressingly important, those feelings.

Garfield could swear he could smell her. In fact, he couldn't help but think someone else had been in there with him the whole time. Her undeniable scent and subtle perfume — minty gardenia honeysuckle — lingered pungently in his sensitive nose, even stronger still than the fresh scent of his own soap and shampoo.

He stepped out of the bathroom with a towel around his waist, drying his hair with another one, and half expected to find her standing there in front of him. Naturally, he found the room was empty.

By the time he was dressed and ready to go, he figured it had all been in his head. What the heck would Raven be doing in his room anyways? The notion alone was absurd, and nearly brought a chuckle to his lips.

What was alarming — he later discovered — was that Raven wasn't in the cabin at all.

"Rae?" Beast Boy went around room to room looking for her and calling out her name to no avail; there was no sign of the empath, other than the remnants of her luggage and clothes still left somewhat unpacked and unkempt on her bed.
But even the skirt and top she'd worn throughout the course of the day had been abandoned on the wooden floor.

"Weird…," he mused to himself, closing the door to her room when he was done searching.

Growing worried when he found the main door unlocked, Beast Boy changed into his spare uniform, strapped his camera and extra clothes into a small backpack, and morphed into a glorious, dark green eagle. He then soared into the air with a mighty flap of his strong wings, and took off into the clear skies, backpack hanging from his beak by the straps as he began his search for a familiar head of purple hair among the wooded area below him.

Only when he started thinking like the empath did he realize where to look. That, and the fact that she'd triggered their image link again by accident, meaning something had happened to make her emotions react strongly.

She was sitting by a stream in a clearing, a bunch of various flowers and herbs sitting in her bright yellow lap as she picked them with shaking fingers. The image didn't last long — only a brief flicker this time — but it was enough to clue the shapeshifter to where she could be and what she was wearing, too. He could have smiled smugly through his eagle shape if he didn't have the bag with his camera in it dangling from his beak. Beast Boy figured he could always celebrate the spoils of his victory after the shoot anyways; he really did love that dress on her.

Having left without using her powers — something Raven avoided whenever her emotions were too unstable — meant that the other Titan couldn't have gotten too far on her feet alone. Truth be told, Beast Boy was tempted to use the communicator to find her, but that might have led the other Titans into thinking that something was wrong, and they'd no doubt come to investigate, ruining what was supposed to be a peaceful getaway trip. Neither Raven nor Beast Boy wanted that. Besides that, he was certain that he recognized the stream she was sitting at, having explored most of the woods nearby in animal form during his previous visits to the cabin.

Beast Boy swooped in low towards the suspected location, and found her there, a dot of purple encircled in bright yellow, resembling an exotic flower of sorts, but not one that quite that belonged in this part of the world. He flew down to the ground a few feet away from her so that she didn't yet spot him, and shifted back to his normal form just as he landed, gently dropping the bag out of his beak into a nearby bush just prior.

Quickly, Garfield changed into his civvies, using the thick trees and underbrush for cover and protection from the scathing sunlight. He then took out his camera and stuffed the bag into a hole in a nearby tree, followed by a few dead leaves on the ground nearby, to help mask its location.

Then — after wiping away the sweat on his forehead from all the exertion — he finally made his way towards the clearing — to Raven.
Normally, the sound of tiny water droplets was a comfortable distraction, but for Raven, it had become agonizing torture. The quiet in the room only seemed to magnify the noise to her ears, so that it was like an echoing drumbeat playing in her head. Not even the gentle pattering of rain outside could drown it out, and Raven wasn't too sure if she wanted it to.

The cursed drops came from the moisture accumulated in Beast Boy's thick hair, namely his unkempt fringe, and all it did was remind her of having spied on him in the shower the previous day.

Her face felt flush at the memory, and she knew she was going to go scarlet if she made eye contact from across the chessboard table, but her guilt-addled mind was cruel and wouldn't let the image leave. It was burned into the backs of her eyes, and as a result, she was tapping her foot nervously while pretending the heat from the fireplace was what was making her sweat.

"Is it hot in here, Rae?" His voice broke through her mental blockade, and she was back in the present, attention irrevocably focused on him.

Beast Boy had been caught in the rain earlier. He'd gone out to fetch them dinner and had come home drenched and shivering. Raven had amped up the heat despite his initial protests, citing the time he'd gotten deathly ill due to being out in bad weather as a viable excuse. Like she would ever confess that his general well-being mattered to her.

Raven then lifted her gaze slowly to the changeling's face, hoping her voice would not betray her. "It's fine. You're still not dry yet," she noted, lips pursed in an effort to keep her teeth from chattering due to nerves. Her knee, however, continued to bounce, seemingly having a mind of its own.

"Are you sure? It's never taken you this long to kick my butt before," he teased, a corner of his mouth twitching with amusement when he casually alluded to their game of chess.

It was true that he was terrible at it, and that Raven was likely the most skilled out of all the Titans. Growing up on Azarath with no other children her age, she'd often play against herself out of boredom, and had somehow become a bit of a master compared to the others.

Wanting to change the subject — and seizing the opportunity when it presented itself — Raven asked with a quirk of an eyebrow, "Why do you want to play when you know I'll just win anyways?"
Beast Boy shrugged, a roll of his shoulders — had they always been so broad? — and he picked up one of the ivory rooks from his side of the board to examine while he spoke. "I like playing with you."

Raven stopped bouncing her knee subconsciously. She stayed quiet, choosing to study the chessboard when he continued. "Mento would use it as a way to get in my head. He'd force me to play, and tell me I needed to win without letting him read my next move. It made me hate chess."

She didn't need the power of empathy to know that it was a difficult subject for him to discuss, but Raven did ponder at what point he'd felt trusting enough to open up to her about it, of all people.

Something like a snarl made his lips curl — an almost wry smile that bared his teeth in a menacing fashion, nothing quite like the jovial Titan she'd come to know. "He made me hate a lot of things, actually..."

She wondered at what sort of person Garfield had been under Mento's thumb. But, more concerning was the sort of man he would have become had he stayed.

Raven finally decided on what obsidian piece to move, and she danced one of her knights precariously over, inching closer to his side of the board with a calculated confidence. "I wasn't exactly a fan either when we met, to be completely honest."

She remembered the sour man, and the way he'd treated both the Titans and his adopted son. It had left her with unresolved contempt for his character, but she was too polite to word her dislike until now. If she recalled correctly, he'd been especially cruel to Beast Boy, and it had been difficult to watch their exchanges, what with Garfield so passive against Mento’s aggressive disposition.

Having been a victim herself of similar confrontations while on Azarath, Raven felt sorrow for the changeling. And maybe, perhaps, a bit like a kindred spirit.

"Can't blame you. Steve's never been good at first impressions."

He was angry, and the emotion caused him to make moves that were both hasty and rash, like his head was no longer in the game. Raven overtook one of his pieces easily enough. She added it to her growing stock of an ivory army.

"Did you ever manage to block him out?"

Beast Boy nodded. "I had to. Eventually, having him in my head all the time became overbearing. Of course, he did it on purpose. He'd tell everyone what I was thinking to embarrass me, just to teach me a lesson. To him, it was imperative we all had the skill to block out a telepath, just in case the wrong people got their hands on his helmet."

"I guess, in a way, I'm no better..." she drifted off, staring into her lap, feeling a fresh wave of guilt wash over her again. She really needed to work on severing the connection. Putting it off in favor of a selfish distraction wasn't fair to her comrade, who'd asked for none of this, especially when he had dealt with so much similar trauma with Mento.

Beast Boy, blinking in disbelief and his jaw slack, hadn't made his move yet on the chessboard, too stunned by her comparison to acknowledge the game.

"What?" His brows knit incredulously before he came up with a rebuttal. "Rae, what's going on between us, that's leagues different," he reassured her sincerely. "Your intentions are nothing like Mento's, and besides...I'm the one that let you in, I think. We were desperate to save you two from Slade, I couldn't just ignore it."
She lifted her gaze from her lap apprehensively, only to find his unwavering stare lingering on her, a soft smile pulling at the corners of his lips.

"I still wish I knew how to turn it off," she said, barely containing her own anger with herself. Raven's hands were shaking, even as she curled them into fists against her thighs, nails digging into her palms hard enough to leave marks.

Beast Boy shook his head however, not sharing her sentiments. "Don't take this the wrong way, Rae, but...I really don't mind."

The demoness' eyebrows shot up, but before she could accuse him of anything, he was quick to clarify, "I know it's...strange, but it also brought us closer together. Like, now there's a secret only you and I know, and for once, I've got something on the others." He didn't need to tell her that he meant the other Titans, whom Raven had developed a deep, personalized connection with each one in some way or another. It was evident that Beast Boy was hurt when he'd realized that he was the only Titan left out of such a category. Raven herself had barely noticed it until he'd brought it up, but now...Now, things were different between them, and he wasn't entirely wrong in pointing it out.

Beast Boy continued, "This is our thing, and yeah, maybe it's not perfect and maybe it is a little weird, but I'm okay with it if it means I get to spend more time with you."

Not able to meet her eyes when he spoke, the green-skinned teen scratched at the nape of his neck and stared off out the window they were both seated by. "I've got an excuse to talk to you now, to hang out away from the others...and work on our friendship. So, I guess it's more of a blessing than a curse."

Raven remained stunned in her seat, heat blossoming on her face while she took in every word, committing his confession to heart because it was truly the kindest thing he'd ever said to her. Garfield had always been rather forward with her, ever since she'd met him. Blunt, honest, and rarely with a filter, he often admitted to whatever he was thinking — and feeling — when around her; a discernible quality she certainly lacked. In fact, Raven could barely admit her own feelings to herself, let alone someone else. It really shouldn't have surprised her that he'd taken such a positive spin on their special situation, and yet...

"Does it mean that much to you?" Her voice was small, somehow distant in such a vast room, easily lost in the echo of the ticking clock.

*Do I mean that much to you?*

The real question lay heavy on the tip of her tongue, unspoken and accusatory, betraying her deepest desires.

She could hardly believe how much he cared for her, and she knew that her negative disposition stemmed from the way she'd been brought up on Azarath — devoid of love, devoid of human connection, save for perhaps the somewhat maternal bond she'd formed with Azar herself. Otherwise, her whole life, people had always wanted to use her for their own selfish gain, kill her out of fear of what she was likely to become, or keep her at an arm's length for their own safety — or, in her birth mother's case, *Raven's* safety. Never had she met someone so fervently selfless and genuine in their longing to be with her. The realization made her skin tingle with a warmth that budded from within her chest, and Raven wanted so badly to believe in him.

But after Malchior, *could* she even make such a bold attempt? Wouldn't he hurt her, just like the others who had come along and promised her the same thing? Wouldn't he use her, too? It was true that Raven trusted all the Titans implicitly with her life, but going deeper than friendship


with *anyone* still terrified her, and she'd only just gotten her feet wet. Still, she caught the way he regarded her from across the table — verdant eyes shining, a serene expression on his face, like she was the only thing in the room. Her heart betrayed her mind, thumping loudly at the way he could so easily disarm her with words and a look alone.

Licking his lips, he answered, "Probably more than you can ever know."

Her heart panged in reaction — involuntary. How such a mere sentence could overwhelm her so easily, she'd never understand. He knew exactly what to say — exactly what she longed to hear — to get her strung, like the words were an ancient incantation that spilled from his lips, designed for her implicitly. Even his tone and delivery were in perfect harmony with her desires. She was itching to reach over and hold him, touch him — *anything*, just like she had the time he'd comforted her after Malchior had irrevocably broken her heart. This need to reach out was innate, and Raven's whole body trembled with it.

Instead, all she could do was stare at him from across the chessboard, their game long forgotten. They both knew she'd win anyways; there really had been no point. Beast Boy had merely suggested it because she'd taken an interest in the expensive-looking set Steve had purchased to furnish his lavish cottage. Also, the rain had been relentless all day, putting a damper on their outdoor plans for the weekend. Playing chess had been something to do to help pass the time and, for Raven, a way to forget what she'd seen the other day. Not that it had worked, of course.

She gulped, tried not to think about how hot her ears felt, and changed the subject again. "Did you get around to editing the photos we took yesterday?"

Beast Boy had found her by the stream after he'd finished his shower the previous afternoon — and she'd had some time to cool off from what she'd witnessed. Naturally, he'd insisted on a photoshoot, mesmerized by how good she'd looked in the dress he'd picked out, but it wasn't long before thick, heavy clouds rolled in, followed by the inevitable downpour. They'd been caught in it then, too, and Beast Boy snapped a few pretty shots of a drenched Raven beneath the trees in the wooded area they'd taken temporary shelter. She'd gone to bed that night somewhat giddy, her pillows and sheets feeling cool, crisp, and welcoming against her wet, flushed skin.

In nature, Raven had felt more like herself. Being outside, isolated from everything else, had oddly been a liberating experience, despite the fact that she normally hated being out in the rain. In the woods — and by the stream — she was untethered to the reality of superhero work. To the camera, she was just a girl in a pretty dress having a good time. The contrast of the bright yellow of her outfit against the murky backdrop of green forestry in the gloomy weather, made the photos pop even before Beast Boy would edit them.

"Don't you want to finish this game first? Or are you worried I might actually dethrone you as chess guru?" Beast Boy grinned, leaning in to waggle his eyebrows at her.

Raven sighed, rolled her eyes, and made a series of quick moves before finally taking his queen. "Checkmate."

The changeling's smile immediately frayed at the edges. He glanced down at the chessboard, then back at his opponent, his expression incredulous and his eyes wide in disbelief. "Aw, come on! I swear I had you this time!"

"In your dreams," Raven stated plainly, but not without a hint of pride in her tone.

"How the heck did you get to be so good at this stupid game anyways?" His bottom lip was jutting out in a pout, his arms crossed over his chest as he slumped back in his chair.
Raven's cheeks coloured, and she tucked some hair behind her ear. "I played chess fairly often as a child..."

It wasn't a lie. Merely a half truth.

"Bet the other kids hated you," he joked, but Raven didn't smile back. Instead, she stared out the window, and seemed transfixed by the droplets falling off the tip of a nearby leaf, twice the size of the flowers it sprung. "There were no other kids."

Raven then shrugged, correcting her statement. "Or at least, if there were, I never met them."

"Oh." It was all Beast Boy could think to say, and an impregnable silence hung heavy between them. "Azarath doesn't sound like it was a lot of fun," he commented, trying to fill the uncomfortable quiet of the room.

"It has its charms. After all, it's still my home, in some ways."

"So, was it Azar who taught you to play?" Beast Boy asked, somewhat uneasy. She was mildly surprised he remembered Azar at all, given that Raven divulged so little of her childhood.

Something like an ironic smile tugged at the corners of her lips before she replied, like she was visiting a far-off memory. "No, Azar did not play chess with me, Gar." She stated this information as if it were the most obvious fact, and then recalled how shut off she'd been in telling anyone — least of all Beast Boy — about her relationship with the old woman.

"Azar's lessons consisted of...other things. I taught myself how to play, by reading books on the subject when I was left to my own devices."

Beast Boy's sunny disposition turned into sympathy, and he tapped his fingers nervously along the edge of the table, carefully considering his next words. "Well, it paid off. You're the reigning champ, after all."

Unsure of how else to comfort Raven, he attempted to lighten the mood — just as he was reputable for doing in tragic or serious situations such as these. But it was the sorceress who decided to end the discussion regarding her isolated upbringing. "Maybe so, but I'm still terrible at that board game you love so much, Betrayal, or whatever. So don't go getting any ideas."

"You should know that you'll only get better by playing, Rae." His easy-going nature returned, eyes like glass jade twinkling.

"And you should know that you still didn't answer my question."

"What question?"

"Editing the pictures from yesterday," she reminded him exasperatedly.

Beast Boy sighed, then glanced back out the massive window overlooking the backyard, staring at the evening showers as the rain continued to drizzle down into the garden and onto the patio furniture.

"We can go over the photos, I guess...It's not like doing anything outside is really an option at this point." Beast Boy was clearly not invested in the idea much, and Raven could tell he was unhappy with this outcome by his disheartened tone.

"We don't have to if you don't want to."
He groaned and sat up straight. "It's just that, we can always do that sort of stuff back at the Tower. But we're only here for a few days, and I really wanted to go swimming."

Raven had to raise an eyebrow at that. He'd piqued her interest, intentional or otherwise. "Swimming?" she parroted him. "First of all, you were complaining about swimming only the other day because Robin made you do laps. Second of all, you have an indoor, heated pool." Not to mention, a hot tub, but Raven wasn't like to bring that up just in case it gave the changeling any ideas. There was something oddly intimate about sharing a Jacuzzi, and the female Titan wasn't entirely sure she was ready for its implications.

Beast Boy ran a hand through the front of his hair — which, she'd noted, had mostly dried — and said, "Okay, the first part was because Robin's a hard ass, and as for the indoor pool, it's no fun when you have an entire playground just outside! In fact, there's a waterfall not too far from here. It's mostly secluded, being on our property, so no one else really knows about it. And since you and Star like to go for swims lately, I thought it'd be nice to show it to you one night."

"Gar, I didn't even bring a bathing suit," Raven told him, her voice carrying genuine disappointment.

The idea of outdoor swimming sounded remarkably appealing, and it being private only seemed to add to the allure. As much as Raven enjoyed her swimming nights with Kory, the stench of chlorine often stuck on her skin for days, and felt like it would never wash out of her hair no matter how much shampoo and conditioner she used. There was just something indescribably enticing about taking a soak in mother nature's pools — away from the prying eyes of strangers — that Raven could not entirely describe. Why, oh why had she forgotten her swimsuit, of all things?

"You could always just...swim in your underwear," Beast Boy offered sheepishly.

Raven balked at his suggestion, blinking dubiously. "Like, as in, my bra and panties?"

She could swear he had started to blush.

Beast Boy shrugged his shoulders and rubbed one side of the muscles of his neck with his opposite hand. "Back in Tokyo, Starfire and I went to a hot springs...and they don't always let you in with clothes."

He was definitely blushing. Raven cleared her throat, already understanding where he was going with this topic, having discussed it with Kory in private before.

"You guys never told anyone you were going," she stated pointedly, trying to mask her mild irritation at being left out. It was true she'd have likely turned them down at the time, but it still hurt knowing they hadn't even bothered to ask.

"Well, it was mostly Starfire's idea. She wanted us all to go, but there simply wasn't any time, so we just kind of went on a whim. It was really relaxing, and, uhm...I didn't really see anything once we were both in the water, but you know Kory; she didn't care either way. I guess, what I'm trying to say is, I won't look when you ask me not to," he prattled on, embarrassed by his confession.

Raven took in a sharp breath through her nose and sighed deeply. "I know. I trust you," she replied candidly.

And she truly did. They hadn't come this far for her to doubt his intentions. Weeks had gone by since Beast Boy had become aware of her secret hobby, and it was clear to her that he wasn't likely
to take advantage of her — or any precarious situation, for that matter. Even Kory had vouched for him regarding Japan. "Besides," Raven started with a little lilt of a smile, "underwear is just like a bikini, really. Only not as flattering when wet."

Beast Boy visibly relaxed at her calm demeanour, feeding off her emotions for a change. "Okay, yeah. Sounds like a plan." He returned the smile, his anticipation stapled in the way he rubbed his palms together.

Meanwhile, Raven's lax expression changed into a frown as soon as she glanced out the window to the pouring rain and the bleak skies overhead. It was the sort of dreary weather that she suspected would last all day, and possibly even bleed into the next. Crestfallen, she added, "Too bad the weather won't cooperate any time soon."

Beast Boy followed her amethyst stare before adding nonchalantly, "It's just a little rain, Raven. It's hardly spitting."

When she glanced in his direction, she found him grinning and already pulling back on his chair, the legs grinding loudly against the wood tiles. "Grab an umbrella and a raincoat, and let's go!"

He was racing down the hall and out of earshot before she could tell him that she didn't own a raincoat, either.

Surprisingly, the rain had let up into a steady drizzle by the time they'd both left, in what Raven could only assume was a stroke of pure luck. Beast Boy had lent her his oversized raincoat so that she didn't have to summon her soul-self for cover the whole trek to the waterfall. The changeling himself had settled for shifting into the form of a green bullfrog, while she carried his swim shorts in her pack. At first, his small, amphibian disguise was a bit difficult to distinguish amongst all the green grass, shrubbery, and mud of the forest trail, especially with the additional blur of rain and gloomy, grey weather. But the path was well-trodden and thus, easy to follow, so it was never a challenge to catch up to him again.

The clearing he eventually led Raven to was far too breathtaking for words, even in such cloudy, atrocious weather. She could only imagine the magnitude of its beauty on a typically warm, sunny day.

Ancient trees, massive and heavy with their overarching branches, hung overhead, like a sky of green leaves protecting a sacred place. They were thicker here than the rest of the woods, and swayed gently in the breeze, surrounding the edges of the water, where their shadows danced among the ripples. The waterfall itself was a small, quiet one, gently pouring down a valley of rocks and stones in a thin, steady stream. The woods themselves were still and peaceful, save for the chirping of crickets, the occasional scurrying of a squirrel as it clambered up a tree trunk, and the flapping of a bird's wings as it sought shelter from the rain. Everything about the place was tranquil and ethereal, and Raven hardly noticed that her jaw had dropped while taking in all its splendor.

Beast Boy, on the other hand, had shifted into a monkey and was now racing past her towards the edge of the body of water, where it lapped against the rocks. He jumped into the air, changed into a bird to gain altitude, and was back as a chimpanzee mid-flight, huddled like a cannonball before making a giant splash in the lake. Some of it hit Raven, and she gasped aloud, shielding herself with her arm only a fraction of a second too late.
Garfield's head then popped out from the surface — human again — and he shook the water out of his hair, wiping it out of his eyes, too.

"Was that entirely necessary?" Raven groaned, flicking water off her fingers with a scowl besetting her features.

He merely chuckled at her reaction. "The water's nice and cool, Rae. You should come on in."

Thanks to the lingering storm — despite the temporary lull — the moisture in the air was almost unbearable when coupled with the heat of summer. The murky, dark water, in contrast, looked rather revitalizing and inviting, and the fact that Beast Boy was completely and utterly naked in there had absolutely nothing to do with it. Or so Raven told herself.

"Don't you want your shorts first?" She proceeded to pull them out of her bag — more likely for her own benefit than his — but Beast Boy was back under the water, swimming up towards the edge — a green blur just beneath the surface. He made his way towards a series of large, moss-covered rocks that protruded along the shore, only partially submerged.

She sighed when he didn't come back up, dropped the bag close enough to the water so that it was within reach, and began shimmying out of her own clothes.

Raven realized too late that her panties and bra didn't match, and she mentally slapped herself for forgetting about the minor detail, hoping that Beast Boy wouldn't comment on her choice of lingerie. Once she was mostly naked, she bent down to neatly pack away her day outfit into the bag, to keep her clothes mostly dry. Beast Boy, in the meanwhile, had re-emerged, and was watching her intently from a rocky ledge, his arms supporting him as he floated in the deep waters. Raven could feel the heat of his gaze burrowing into her — taking in the delicate curve of her spine, maybe counting the knots of her vertebrae. Or, a more likely scenario, checking out her ass in her small underwear.

She brushed that thought aside quickly — along with the foreign emotion that came with it — and ignored him, even as she carefully dipped her feet into the cool water, her toes finding leverage in the vast, slippery grooves of the rocks. The water was so cold against her warm skin, she broke out into goosebumps by the time she was only thigh deep, inhaling sharply at its biting chill.

Beast Boy swam closer towards her, making a loud number of splashes on his way until the water was no longer deep enough. He stood up in the shallow end, the water only coming to his hips and hiding everything below. "Cute bra," he commented, eyeing the vibrant straps with interest.

It was one of her older ones, black with a few glittery, silver stars that were somewhat faded now. Starfire had helped her pick it out, and at the time, Raven did not have the heart to say no. Eventually, its simple design had grown on her. Nonetheless, it didn't prevent the empath from colouring at his taking notice of it. She almost fixed him with a scathing glare for the remark, only to pause at the way the shining rivulets of water slid down the many ripples of Beast Boy's hard torso; a sight familiar to Raven after she'd so brazenly caught him in the shower. It took all her self control to keep the image at bay so that it didn't dominate her mind once again.

"Bet you say that to all the girls," she teased with a roll of her eyes, pretending not to care for his stark, wet nudity. She was finally about shoulder deep in the water, and slowly acclimating to its frigid temperature.

"Hah! I'm pretty sure it's Robin they throw their bras at, Rae." Beast Boy waded back to the deep end, submerged up to his neck. She drew closer to join him.
"You know you're naked, right?" Raven boldly reminded him.

He remained unfazed by this bit of information. "You've already seen me naked before, and I'd probably only have shredded a good pair of swimming shorts when I'd shift, anyways. I like to experience the water as different sea creatures sometimes."

Raven blanched and felt her heart drop to the pits of her stomach in paranoia, immediately assuming that he'd somehow referenced the shower incident. Had he seen her then? Or perhaps smelled her? Dare she even risk asking for clarification? But if Beast Boy was at all bothered by this, he didn't seem to care much, which led Raven to believe that he'd likely been thinking of something else. Instead, the green Titan drifted onto his back, taking in the view of the quickly darkening heavens, and already forgetting about her question. "On a clear night, you can see all the stars out here. And when the water's totally still, they reflect on the surface. Almost like you can touch them, or like you're floating along the sky."

There was a whimsical expression on his face as he gazed longingly up above, seeing something else and existing somewhere else, like he was experiencing a completely different time.

"You come here often?" Raven asked, peering up at the sky herself and trying to envision what he'd described.

"When I can afford to get away, yeah. After Terra…," he paused, his voice almost breaking. He'd said her name so casually, as if she were still around — like they were still friends, or maybe even more…Beast Boy cleared his throat and tried again. "After all that stuff that went down with Slade, I asked Robin if I could take a small break, come up here to clear my head and be alone for a bit. He covered for me, and that was when Kid Flash joined up to help out. You remember?"

Raven nodded. All the Titans had figured Garfield would need some time to mend, and no one had asked any questions when he'd vanished for a bit, with Wally showing up to provide temporary aid in his place. Raven had assumed he'd gone back to the Doom Patrol — to his mother, Rita. But isolating himself among nature? It reminded Raven an awful lot of how she'd handled heartbreak herself, after Malchior had betrayed her and used her so horribly; locking herself in her room, away from everyone.

"I can see why. This place is beautiful," she admitted, taking in the sight of the lush forestry that surrounded them. She swallowed at the developing knot in her throat and tried not to think of the past. The water — now no longer as icy cold — felt as if it were lightening her body, and if there were any remaining aches or pains from the previous week's activities, there certainly wouldn't be tomorrow.

"I wanted to bring her here, y'know…." Beast Boy wavered in his speech, nervous about opening up to Raven about what he'd kept to himself for so many years. It made her heart ache to witness just how much the events with Terra had taken their toll on him, and she could understand his pain on a visceral level. She, too, hadn't forgotten what Malchior had done to her, either. Nor did she believe she ever would.

Beast Boy breathed in, licked his lips, and pressed on. "We talked about the cabin a lot, and she said she wanted to see it. But I guess things don't always go according to plan." He was still floating along, too far away now for Raven to decipher the expression on his face. Thankfully, his male parts were submerged just enough so that he wouldn't flash her, but he was getting dangerously close to the possibility. The empath didn't know what was more alarming; Beast Boy's apathetic attitude regarding his nudity, or his suddenly somber tone when he spoke of Terra.

"We all miss her, you know…." she told him not without feeling. "Not a day goes by that I don't
wonder, if we'd just done things differently... If I'd done things differently, maybe, she'd have stayed..."

Beast Boy planted his feet back down and regarded his teammate from across the water. The small lake was without a single ripple now, its surface like a mossy green mirror, just like he'd stated earlier. With the sky starting to lose the light of day, the clouds appeared to float along the water. Raven couldn't stand the intensity of Beast Boy's gaze, so she locked eyes with her own melancholy reflection below her chin.

"I think about it, too, Rae. Play it over and over in my head, all the different scenarios, even changing some of the things I'd said to her... You know she got me into photography in the first place?" It was gushing out of him now, the pressure finally relieved on what he'd kept bottled up for so many years. A small laugh and a genuine smile graced his lips as he seemed to recall the events fondly. "She loved taking selfies with my phone, and I ended up snapping a bunch of pictures of her whenever we'd hang out. By the lake, or on a stroll through the park. Usually just silly poses, sometimes when she wasn't looking... She ended up really liking them, so I wanted to get better, buy a real camera, and actually take professional photos. It was the least I could do, after the life she'd had."

A pause, and his smile fell before he shyly glanced in her direction. "After...after everything, losing her, I swore I wouldn't take pictures of people anymore. Just landscapes and animals and plants. But then, you gave me an opportunity, and it was like I didn't even think twice about it."

Raven felt the water tickle the ends of her short hair, and she didn't remember when she'd waded over closer towards him, in the deeper end of the lake. Licking her lips, she said, "She was right. You do take pretty good photos."

He responded with a cheeky smile. "Thanks. I'm glad you like them, but let's be real; I've got some incredible source material to work with." Beast Boy winked at her, a few droplets of water that had been caught in his fringe of lashes trickling down his cheek.

Raven's underwear was not meant as swimwear, and when the fabric was soaked and burdened with the weight of the water, the hem of her panties slipped down her thighs. She tugged annoyingly at the threadbare material in a vain effort to preserve at least some of her modesty.

"Alright there, Romeo. If you think your honeyed words are going to work on me, think again," she scoffed, trying not to put too much stock in his attempts at flattery.

Beast Boy grinned, flashing her his set of pearly white teeth, sharp canines included. "I'm not Malchior, Rae. I actually mean what I say."

He probably hadn't intended for his words to sting as much as they did, and yet Raven couldn't help but feel like she'd been slapped in the face. Beast Boy was likely only trying to tease her some more, but the truth was, she simply wasn't ready for it yet. At least, not when it concerned Malchior, or her wounded pride. Her features contorted in barely contained anger, her jaw locked tight in a grimace as her entire body quivered. Heat bloomed in her face, and unshed tears seared the backs of her eyes while her throat burned and constricted from the effort it took to not let him see her cry.

Beast Boy's laughter ceased abruptly once he'd become aware of her shaking form in the water, his amusement unraveling when he came to terms with the magnitude of what he'd said, and his lack of foresight. He then smacked himself on the forehead with the palm of his hand, irritated with himself for how careless he'd been. "Me and my stupid, idiot mouth! I'm so sorry, Rae. I really didn't mean it like that, I swear... Malchior was a total jerk, and he didn't deserve you."
She pushed away from him roughly, water splashing about, but her arms were weak, and tears were shining in her eyes. Beast Boy gripped her bare shoulders with wet hands, her bra straps having slipped down along her arms, and the water-laden cups being pulled off by the ebb and flow of the gentle waves. The pads of his fingers were cold where they pressed into her flesh, all the while Raven tried to maintain her composure. She steadily looked up into his face, leering at him, knowing that he could see the tears pooling in her eyes, like the traitors they were. Her bottom lip quivered, and she bit down on it to maintain some semblance of control. Beast Boy appeared guilt-ridden, his gaze soft as he searched the planes of her face desperately. He was waiting for some sort of response, but Raven remained silent in her grief and anger.

"Please, talk to me, Rae," he begged her. "Yell at me, hit me, whatever you need to do, just don't...shut off again." Beast Boy leaned in so close, Raven could trace the water trickling down the curved bridge of his nose.

But she didn't trust her voice — didn't trust it not to break, or for the waterworks not to start the moment she'd open her mouth. However, when she did manage to find the courage to speak at last, Raven discovered that it wasn't rage she felt anymore — only a deep and inconsolable emptiness that poured out from the very bottom of her heart. "He...he hurt me...so much," she sobbed dryly, her teeth chattering as old wounds reopened and festered. She had to turn her head and look away, squeezing her eyes shut as tears threatened to spill, hot and searing. Raven would not cry again, not for him. She'd already spent too many sleepless nights doing just that. Malchior did not deserve any more of her tears.

"I know he did," Beast Boy cooed, his brows furrowed in gentle concern. "I know he did, Rae." Then, before she could even think to protest, he pulled her in for an embrace, his fingers combing through her mess of violet hair tenderly. Garfield's chest was coated in moisture but still warm against her cheek, his free arm then slipping down to wrap around her back until his fingers grazed the delicate curve of her spine, soothing even beneath the water. One side of Raven's face was flush against the muscles of his torso, where she could hear the steady and strong beating of his heart. It seemed to pick up its pace the longer he held her. "That bastard," he spat, venom in his voice. "Should have killed him twice over." A low, menacing growl emanated from within the shapeshifter's throat, the rumble making his chest vibrate beneath her ear.

Raven was trembling in his arms, not knowing what else to do, but also not wanting to pull away from him, either. Beast Boy had been there for her in the aftermath with Malchior and his deception, and he was here for her now, too. Garfield was something familiar — familiar, warm, and safe, and being in his arms somehow felt right. Having him finally hold her in such an intimate manner, close and tight, was making Raven feel things she'd been denying for a long, long time. Once she quieted against him — her eyes mostly dry — she couldn't help but pull away enough if only to meet his eyes. The two of them floated aimlessly in the water, limbs entangled as they drifted along. They were entirely weightless, moving among a sky of clouds reflected on the undisturbed surface of the small lake. Raven had unknowingly clung to him when they'd somehow gravitated towards the deepest part of the water, their feet no longer on the ground. Her hands held onto the thick, corded muscles of his arms, knowing that if she let go, she might drown.

The heady musk of Beast Boy's scent was magnified when he was wet, until it was all Raven could smell, blending in with their surroundings like he was a part of nature itself.

At some point, Raven had become shockingly aware that her underwear had slipped off, kicked away by the gentle, rocking waves. Cold water rushed between the warmth of her thighs, and she could feel Beast Boy rub against her belly every now and again whenever the lake — mischievous in its nature — brought them closer together. Despite his size, he remained flaccid and soft in the
chilling pool, but a small, devious voice in the back of Raven's mind told her she could change that easily if she wanted to.

It had taken her a moment to realize what exactly it was that had touched her, its presence so fleeting — like the tendrils of a ghost — but once she had, her mind was a conflict of emotions. The sensation sparked an ache from deep within her loins, not unlike when she'd witnessed him pleasuring himself in the shower. And yet, *Beast Boy's manhood was rubbing against her under the water.* She felt like she ought to be doing something about that but couldn't really focus past the haze of her own curiosity.

Instead, Raven found herself transfixed with the way the small droplets of water ran down along the curves of his mouth, tracing a path over the fullness of his lips before meeting at the point of his chin, and then coalescing with the rest of the lake. She wanted to taste them, to know what they'd feel like against her own mouth, and how pliant his would be beneath her own. It was as if something otherworldly had possessed her when she'd allowed herself to become vulnerable, and there was nothing she could do to fight it. Part of her didn't even want to.

Raven had spent far too long depriving herself of the things she'd once been told she'd never possess. Out of force of habit, she'd denied herself any form of affection, choosing to blend into the background rather than be the girl at the centre of attention. After Malchior, she'd understood why that had been so important on Azarath, and she'd personally vowed that she'd never allow someone to get that close again.

And yet, Garfield's lips were only a hairsbreadth away from her own, tantalizingly soft, parted in invitation, his breath sweet and warm against her face. Raven's eyes fell closed as she was pulled in by an unforeseeable force — gravity she didn't know existed.

Just as Beast Boy had cupped her face to draw her nearer, the rain started up again.

Heavy droplets fell onto her eyelids — slow at first. She tried to blink them away, but more splattered her cheek, and just like that, the spell was broken. Raven recoiled with a splash and a shake of her head as the rain picked up in momentum. Beast Boy appeared to do the same. It poured down into the lake and surrounding wildlife, its steady drizzle the only sound for miles.

A series of angry, dark clouds had rolled in overhead when the two Titans had otherwise been preoccupied, and now, both Raven and Beast Boy desperately swam away to get out of the water. Raven forgot her underwear, and Beast Boy shifted into a dolphin just beneath her, taking her by surprise when he rose to the surface to carry her on his back. She clutched at his green fin while he swam towards the shore, only shifting back to his human form when she'd clambered off and scampered up the nearby ledge. Somewhere in the distance, thunder roared.

Raven nearly slipped numerous times trying to climb over the dangerously slick rocks, painfully aware of how naked she was from the waist down, and what sort of view she was giving the changeling as a result. After grabbing her bag, she sprinted towards the trees for cover, her dark hair already sopping wet. Quickly, she threw on her skirt just as she heard the wet echo of Beast Boy's bare footfalls behind her. He was hunched over, covering his crotch with his hands, and trying to shake the water from his hair and eyes. "You have my shorts!" he cried, his voice carrying over the sound of heavy rain.

Rummaging through her bag, she found his clothes and threw them at him. His quick reflexes enabled him to catch them quickly, and he turned around so that he could put them on. Raven must have gone fifteen shades of crimson at the sight of his bare buttocks, but she couldn't tear her gaze away until he'd slipped on his shorts. When he faced her again, she pretended to have been busy looking for her own shirt. Adjusting her bra straps, Raven then quickly threw on a top, and then
backed up against the thick, old tree trunk for more shelter, clutching her bag to her breast. Beast Boy joined her, oddly out of breath.

"Great, looks like we'll have to wait it out," he surmised, staring into the distance as lightning cracked the darkening sky like a golden whip.

Raven shook her head, licking the moisture on her lips. "No way, this thing's going to go on all night." She then opened a black portal using her magic, and the both of them disappeared through it, popping out on the other side just outside Mento's cabin. They made a break for it and were in the foyer within moments, dripping water all over the wooden tiles and huffing and puffing to catch their breath.

Neither dared mention what had almost transpired back at the waterfall.

As Beast Boy squeezed the water out of his shorts, Raven was acutely aware that she wasn't wearing any underwear beneath her already short skirt. "I should probably shower," she mumbled, feeling both indecent and dirty. Mud marred her ivory skin in brown splotches.

"Yeah, uhm, me, too," agreed Beast Boy.

He followed her down the corridor in what became an awkward and tense silence. Raven didn't dare look back at him, the nape of her neck hot and itchy where she could feel his eyes boring into her. It was likely eating him alive, not knowing how to discuss what he'd almost done — what she'd almost done.

Raven had wanted to kiss Beast Boy, and apparently, he'd returned the sentiment. She'd read enough bad romance novels to know what unrealistic expectations of a first kiss consisted of. But this was supposed to have been a weekend getaway between friends. Not some kind of romantic rendezvous where Raven kissed Beast Boy.

Gracefully, she came to a halt outside of the bathroom door and inhaled deeply through her mouth before facing him. "Well, this is me."

"Meet you at the chess table for another round?" Beast Boy asked hopefully, forcing a smile.

"I'll uhm, let you know," she hesitated.

Beast Boy's shoulders slumped. Droplets of rain still glimmered against his jade skin, like crystal freckles. "Alright," he conceded. "If you decide not to, have a good night, Rae. I'll see you in the morning..."

"Good night, Gar."

And they both parted ways for the remainder of the evening...
"I want to know everything," Rita Farr folded her hands under her chin, regarding her son from across the dining table with deep intrigue and a charming smile.

It was the same trademark smile that often rendered many hopeless and blubbering, and would in part, help her gain the role of highly coveted actress. In a starlet's arsenal, it was crucial to possess a smile that could render both men and women alike into swift compliance. Not only did it win her favors with directors and coworkers alike, it also worked wonders on her audience.

Only, Rita Farr also had had a little too much to drink today, and the lax, dreamy mannerisms that often accompanied intoxication were also affecting her amiable disposition. Normally, the added shine to her eyes and husk to her already sultry voice only increased her charm, but Beast Boy knew the reason for her drinking and was therefore immune to all of it.

Garfield groaned, rolling his eyes. "There's really nothing to tell, mom."

"You always say that." She frowned, pulling back in her seat and swirling her glass so that the amber liquid and ice cubes it contained danced with the movement. "And it's always a lie, Garfield."

He slid down the back of his chair, staring off at an irrelevant point in the distance because it helped take his mind off how itchy and uncomfortable his form-fitting suit was. "I took up photography," he relented glumly.

In contrast to his more somber mood, Rita squealed aloud, clapping her hands in earnest. "Oh, that's fantastic, Gar! You should tell Steve when he comes by."

Garfield scowled, defiantly using his fingers to muss up the fringe of his perfectly coiffed hair. "Yeah, as if he'd even care."

"Garfield Mark Logan," Rita enunciated sternly, slamming her knife and fork against the table. Her expression had soured, lines appearing on her face that hadn't been there before. She looked older, but as Beast Boy shrunk away from her impenetrable, icy blue stare, she slowly eased off, guilty.

Sighing deeply, she then said in a more softer tone, "You know he means well. He wants what's best for you, as do I. But it's a two way street. You have to meet him halfway."

The changeling chortled sardonically. "The last time I met him halfway, he told me it was my fault in the first place," Beast Boy growled back. "He blamed me for everything that had happened with Terra after I opened up to him! We got into a huge fight about it, and that's when you started drinking!"

Rita appeared jilted by Beast Boy's rebuttal, blinking in surprise and sobering up for a spell after being chastised for her increased alcohol consumption. Then, her remorseful gaze slid down to
focus on the glass she'd nearly drained — the same one that so clearly implicated her problem. It was her fourth of the evening.

The next Beast Boy spoke, his voice was less harsh, having immediately regretted taking out his frustrations with Steve on Rita. "You deserve better than this, mom," he cooed, verdant stare unblinking. "It's just...easier this way."

He reached out across the table and took her hand in his. Rita squeezed her fingers tightly in his grip, and mustered up a smile that did not reach her eyes. "I love the both of you. I just...I just want you to be happy. I want us to be happy, all of us."

"I know. I know you do." Beast Boy wanted it, just as much as she did, but Steve was a cold, unfeeling man and no matter how hard he tried bridging that gap, some things simply weren't meant to be. Not that he'd ever have the heart to tell Rita that. For her sake — if no one else's — he'd continue on trying, no matter how much it hurt his pride.

Tears glimmered in her eyes, threatening to spill, and she dabbed at them with a handkerchief, being careful not to smudge her mascara or eyeliner. "You're a good son, Garfield," she said through a whimper, her voice sounding sticky and hoarse, choking on tears.

"What's all this?"

Steve's baritone voice made Beast Boy retract his hand immediately, stuffing it under the table and over his lap. Rita was trying her best to stifle her emotions as the burly man looked between the both of them, a glint of suspicion in his beady eyes. The navy suit jacket and contrasting, soft lilac dress shirt he wore both appeared ready to burst at the seams. With arms corded with thick muscle from years of training stretching the fabric of his sleeves, and his wide chest tugging at the ivory buttons of his delicate shirt, it was no wonder the man was an intimidating presence wherever he went.

Steve then lingered for a moment on Rita — who had downcast eyes but still sniffled — before fixing a cold, azure glare onto the changeling boy. "What did you say to her?" he seethed through a locked jaw. "I leave you alone for all of two minutes, and you've already made your mother cry."

"Steve, please, you're making a scene," Rita pleaded, forcing pleasantries at the other patrons around them. She'd then shot a tentative glance in Garfield's direction, watching the anger bloom in his face helplessly. Some of the other restaurant guests were staring at the family and whispering. Steve puffed out his chest, his hands balling into fists at his sides as him and Garfield narrowed unblinking stares at one another.

Just as Beast Boy opened his mouth to retaliate, Rita spoke up first; "Garfield was just telling me about his photography. I got emotional just watching him get so excited about something again."

The brunette coerced a most charming smiled through her tears at her son, and it was like the rays of sunshine peeking through dark, stormy clouds. "Isn't that right, Gar?"

With his anger tempered for the time being — held at bay only by the graceful woman sitting across from him — Garfield broke his stare first and nodded curtly, his lips a thin line all the while he could feel Steve's eyes boring into him. Rita fanned her face, sloped nose still red and her gaze a shimmering blue mess. "Sit, Steve. The waiter will be around shortly with our order," she fussed, pulling up the chair next to her and patting the seat cushion.

Steve gave Garfield one last lingering look, squinting his eyes as if he had his helmet on and could perceive his thoughts through sheer will alone. The changeling tried to maintain eye contact, but as usual with Mento, he eventually cast his gaze aside, unable to match his ferocity and unwillingly
backing down. It made his fists shake and tears burn the backs of his eyes, teeth grinding in frustration. One day, he'd be the alpha.

"Is that what you were doing at the cottage this weekend?" Steve had sat down, reaching over for a bun and the small porcelain container of butter. The pep had returned to his voice now that any threat had been neutralized — always in the military mindset. Nonetheless, he kept his watchful eyes fixed on Garfield, unblinking and still scrutinizing. "Taking photographs?"

Beast Boy felt heat rise from his toes all the way to his hairline. "I...You were spying on me?"

Steve sliced into the bun with his knife, indifferent to the accusation. Rita took a long, exaggerated gulp of wine from her glass.

"I have eyes and ears everywhere, Garfield. Do you truly believe that I am unaware of the goings on at my own properties?" Steve scoffed, raising an eyebrow as he buttered one half of the bun he'd cut. Taking a humble bite, he added, "Like, say for instance, how you bring strange women over with you to spend the weekend?"

Garfield's stomach dropped, unable to mask the surprise and embarrassment that presented itself in his features. His jaw went slack and his eyes widened, nostrils flaring as he desperately tried to cook up a lie good enough to convince even Mento. Rita herself also seemed caught off guard by this astute observation, and was giving Garfield a disconcerting look.

It happened then, just as Beast Boy took a breath, ready to explain himself. The most inopportune moment during the dinner, and his mind was suddenly assaulted with images that left him sputtering. He opened and closed his mouth in shock, blinking rapidly as if his eyes were the shutter of a camera. Not sure if he was trying to study the images, or shoo them away, Garfield was feeling uncomfortably hot in the expensive suit Rita had bought for him and tugged at his sweaty collar. For in his mind, he caught images of his friend and teammate, Raven, in an extremely lewd situation.

"Oh, God...," he gulped, immediately recognizing her ivory skin, supple and soft in the dim light of her bedroom. "Not now, please, not now!"

"Garfield? Are you alright?" Rita's voice resounded in the distance, as if she were calling to him from somewhere miles away. Meanwhile, the changeling fumbled with his desire to linger on the mental snapshot, and the equally conflicting urgency to abandon what he was seeing before anyone else grew suspect.

Mento sat back in his chair wearing a smug smile, calm and collected while Beast Boy grabbed fistfuls of his own hair like a madman.

"Don't bother helping him out of this one, Rita. Let the boy talk." It was obvious he was assuming that the changeling's reaction could be attributed to the precarious position Steve had put him in.

But Beast Boy floundered like a fish out of water, his surroundings a haze compared to the vivid snapshots happening before his very eyes.

\textit{Raven was naked.}

Completely this time. Every inch of her was on brazen display as she pleasured herself, moaning softly with whatever toy she'd stuffed between her creamy thighs.

Garfield couldn't help the thought, \textit{I could do better than that vibrator. I could make her really scream.}
"Ugh…," he moaned, the crotch of his dress pants gradually becoming uncomfortably tight. His hands instinctively moved over his lap, trying to hide the growing bulge as he shifted awkwardly in his seat. "I-I have to go!"

He shot up, smacking his knee right against the table and nearly keeling over from the pain. Grabbing his leg, he hobbled along on one foot, and until he stumbled into a waiter who had been busy serving another table. He sent the poor, unsuspecting man — and his tray — crashing to the ground, spilling everything on the plates and in the glasses, and smashing much of them in the process too.

Guests gasped and watched in disgust and horror as Garfield frantically apologized, still wincing in pain as he shimmied past all the damage he'd caused. Hopping along towards the bathrooms, he came close to knocking into more unsuspecting waiters and guests while Rita and Steve stared after him, perplexed by his uncharacteristic behaviour. When Beast Boy was out of sight, Steve let out a long breath, adjusted the buttons of his tight jacket, and cast a few menacing side glances at the many judging eyes on the couple. Rita, in the meantime, prepared to use her arsenal of charms to help lessen the growing contempt in the room.

It had taken Raven some time to learn about loving herself. Growing accustomed to her body, and her more human nature, becoming more accepting of her...urges. Back when she'd thought that her sole purpose in life was to bring about the end of the world via becoming Trigon's portal, it had been hard for her to acknowledge anything else. Despite Azar's tough love throughout her childhood, Raven had never been immune to the distrustful looks she'd often received on Azarath. They tainted everything she'd do, every thought that occupied her mind, from her teachings, to her own misguided image of herself. Raven had thus grown to detest everything that made her who she was.

How could she ever learn to look in the mirror and not see exactly what everyone else saw? How could she ever learn to accept her most natural self when all it did was remind her of the terrible things she was destined to do?

Raven had spent most of her life in denial of what she was, human and otherwise, and — perhaps most alarming — she'd liked it that way.

Maybe if she, too, lived in constant fear of herself, then her imminent death would seem like a blessing. Maybe, if she'd hated what she was as much as everyone around her did, they'd be more accepting of her. Except, of course, she'd been a fool to assume such a thing in the first place, clinging to the ridiculous, childish notion because nothing else would suffice. Because the alternative was depressing and hurtful, like a sore spot she refused to touch. Nonetheless, Raven had been terrified of the prospect of hurting anyone, and so, she'd embraced her isolation with little fuss.

Until the Teen Titans had been formed, anyways.

Even when she'd given up on herself, even after they'd discovered her true purpose, they'd never stopped believing in her. They'd all accepted her, loved her unconditionally, considered her family.

After Trigon's defeat, Raven was finally free.

The Titans had all helped liberate her — influenced her. Taught her to love parts of herself she never thought she'd be capable of.

Robin had shown her how to accept her demonic side, told her that it didn't have to define her.
Cyborg had helped her see that she still had her humanity, and that Trigon's influence wasn't as powerful as her own.

With Beast Boy, he'd taught her to embrace the weird, the different. That, just because she didn't always fit in, didn't necessarily mean that she was alone, either.

And then there was Starfire.

Kory had taught her many things, being the only other female on the team. Not to mention, an alien — a quality Raven found herself relating to more and more over the years. The two had naturally bonded over time, even with Raven's initial hesitancy.

Most recently, in regards to sex.

Raven sat on her bed, quivering. In her mind, she tried to recall the many things the woman with the flame-red hair had explained to her — the many conversations they'd had in regards to emotions, and healthy release.

But none contained the answers she was looking for.

Trembling, Raven couldn't bring herself to leave her sheets, her toes digging into the fabric of her mattress cover. She was naked from the waist down, with nothing but her comforter thrown lazily over her more private parts. Even now, the moisture was slick between her thighs, going cold against her skin after she'd realized what it was she'd done.

Starfire had explained that the act itself was normal. Loving herself, that's what she'd called it. An expression of self care, embracing a more human aspect of herself.

But Raven's thoughts had...wandered. And where she'd ended up had been a surprise even to herself.

Physical attraction was hardly ever at the forefront of her mind, even after she'd witnessed Garfield pleasuring himself in the shower.

Instead, she found herself recounting the events at the cottage.

Like a movie on rewind, her memories worked backwards on all the small, intimate moments they'd shared.

The way she'd felt with his arms encircling her waist, floating in an endless sea of stars. How his breath had felt against her wet skin. The casual brush of his calloused thumb along the dip of her spine beneath the water.

Before that, the accidental touches.

His arm against hers, the bristle of his hairs rubbing along her bare skin. The heat through his jeans every time his knee brushed her leg.

And then, the even more minute exchanges. A touch of hands, an unwarranted embrace.

Before Raven knew it, his name had died on her lips, her hips bucking as her orgasm came fast and hard. The crashing of violent wave after wave, matching the erratic beating of her heart.

Almost as soon as she'd whimpered into the emptiness of her bedroom, Raven had clasped her free hand over her mouth, as if scared she'd be discovered. In a way, she knew that it was likely
she had.

Emotions.

The stronger they were, the more likely she'd project to him. And nothing was stronger than when she was in the thrall of her orgasms.

Raven sat up, back flush against the headboard of her bed, chewing on her bottom lip as she tried to decipher and sort her feelings before they consumed her.

No doubt about it, Garfield had seen, maybe even heard what she'd just done. Her climax had left her shuddering, powerful enough to leave her ivory skin gleaming in a sheen of sweat. All she'd seen was green. Green, until the colour itself represented her sensuality, covering her like the cool touch of silk against her naked skin. Her toes curled all over again just at the memory.

Starfire had told her that desire was natural. That, sometimes, it was alright to fantasize. It was no secret that Raven had been frustrated. Where Starfire had Robin, Raven had...her fingers and her imagination. She'd tried it the usual way at first; tried thinking about all the things that ought to have turned her on, only none of them had worked.

Not as efficiently as thoughts of him. And penetration had been the furthest from her mind. She'd gone numb, the lust unsated and painful, until he'd entered her mind; a flash of jade, and with it, a desperate, fiery lurch reignited in her loins — one she couldn't fight even if she wanted to. Suddenly, even the moments where they'd shared the same space had become unbearable.

What would Starfire say if she knew what her fantasy had consisted of?

Worse yet, what would Beast Boy think of her now?

Had she crossed a line? Would it be detrimental to their newly strengthened friendship?

The car ride home they'd shared from the cottage had been a quiet one, with Garfield granting her the space she'd needed after what had almost happened between them by the waterfall. Not pushing, like she'd half expected him to — maybe even hoped that he would. Words were left unspoken between them, the tension as taut as an elastic band. She'd figured it'd be easy to go back to normal, and it nearly had, their almost kiss hardly more than an afterthought.

Until now.

Raven found herself thinking about all of him. Of the space they shared, and the longing when they were even slightly apart. She thought about the air they breathed, the way her eyes always found his in a room, and she found that she didn't mind. All her earlier hesitancy had somehow evaporated, replaced with a newfound, eerie calm.

Somewhere along the way, she'd started accepting the way she'd felt, and Beast Boy had taught her something new.

Raven was no longer shaking.

Beast Boy's reflection was something he'd ought to have gotten used to.

The ragged, green face that stared back at him — now dripping wet from the cool tap water he'd splashed onto it — was both familiar and foreign at the same time.
The young man looking back at him heaved, square, broad shoulders rising and falling in time with his breaths, like he'd just run a marathon. Only his emotions were the roller coaster. Briefly, his thoughts flickered to his empathic friend, wondering if this was what it felt like for her — to feel so implicitly. The minute Raven had re-entered his mind however, he flashed back to the rather compromising images she'd inadvertently projected to him. Panic — and a feeling a lot more carnal — caused his pupils to dilate. Beast Boy shook his head, his shaggy hair becoming more of a mess from its initial, gelled style, and tried to get rid of the images as soon as they came.

Even if it was unintentional, he couldn't help but feel like a dirty, peeping tom. Turning on the faucet again, he splashed more icy cold water against his face, rubbing at his eyes as if that would wipe away what he'd seen.

This was Raven he was thinking about. No matter how he felt about her, she was his friend...right?

The bathroom door could be heard creaking open, and Beast Boy snapped out of his train of thought before he could revisit his conflicted feelings regarding his dark haired teammate. Inhaling, he steadied himself, and stood up straight, drying off his hands before adjusting his fitted, twill suit jacket.

Now that he was relatively more calm, and his pants felt a little less constricting, Garfield prepared himself — both mentally and emotionally — to deal with the rest of his family dinner.

He patted his face dry with a paper towel, took one last lingering look at his haggard reflection in the bathroom mirror, and headed out to rejoin Steve and Rita.

Just as he was about to turn the bend to reach their table, he heard Steve talking. "I don't understand why you continue to smother the kid, Rita."

Beast Boy paused mid step, straining to hear more of the conversation while he remained partially hidden just past the divider that separated the dining room from the foyer of the restaurant.

"It's not smothering to let Garfield live his life. As parents, we need to be encouraging of his hobbies and interests. That includes the people he surrounds himself with." He could hear Rita pause to take a long sip of her alcoholic beverage. "Besides, I hardly think we have the luxury to judge."

"Remember the last girl, Rita? He's still broken up about her and it's been years. That's how damaging the relationship has been for him. Is it so wrong to want him to live a long and fruitful life? All this stress these Titans bring with them will only shorten his lifespan. That is, if the villains don't get to him first."

Beast Boy's hands clenched into fists at his sides, fingernails digging into his palms and his jaw locking in a barely contained grimace.

"An arranged marriage will do wonders for him."

The world around him stilled for a moment, like reality itself was bending in on itself, flickering around his own constant projection.

"I don't know, Steve. When it comes to love, I believe that choice is best for Garfield."

"And look what it's done to him so far." Steve clucked his tongue and Beast Boy could hear the judgement in his voice when he spoke. "You know I don't like to say it, but sometimes it needs to be said. The fact is, the physical affliction the boy suffers from will always be a...problem for any
girl he brings home. Let alone the potential for children."

"Steve-," Rita warned before her husband interjected.

"What? You know it's true. They'll either use him for money, fame, or whatever other selfish gain." Steve dismissed Rita with a wave of his hand. "An arranged marriage will prevent any of that, and heirs will be a must."

"You want Garfield to have children, but you haven't even asked him how he feels about that!"

"Why? Because he's afraid of what they'll look like? Rita, Garfield is still human. If we find him a normal girlfriend, at least one of their offspring is bound to be less of a freak."

A chair scraped along the wooden tiles. "Freak? Freak?! Is that what you think of me? Cliff? Larry? Are we all just freaks to you, too?"

"Rita, that isn't what I meant-"

The apology in his tone was ignored and Beast Boy decided it was about time he made his appearance, too. Tears burned the backs of his eyes and his jaw hurt from clenching his teeth so hard, but his heart was hammering with pure adrenaline.

"Don't you dare call her a freak, old man!" Beast Boy snarled with lips curling back to reveal sharp canines, his eyes flashing hues of a dangerous amber gold.

Both Rita and Steve turned to look at him, surprise colouring their features at his unexpected entrance. By now, many of the dining guests were also attuned to their family drama, but Garfield didn't care, too busy shaking in silent rage, fixating it all onto one man. Rita was standing, having gotten worked up over Steve's accusation, but both adults were clearly wondering exactly how much Beast Boy had overheard. Like they'd been caught in a most heinous act.

He stood before them, seeing nothing but red. Rita trembled and Steve's gaze was downcast in guilt. "You weren't supposed to hear any of that…"

"Yeah, no shit!" Beast Boy's teeth chattered, the animals within him at war as he tried to keep his primal instincts in check.

"Gar, it's simply an observation. I-," Mento paused to clear his throat and passed a tentative, quick glance in Rita's direction. She ignored him, and he suddenly appeared much the part of a kicked puppy; humbled, confused, and hurt. "We want what's best for you," he amended anyways.

"Since when is my love life any of your business?" Garfield snapped back.

Mento's expression hardened, and he stared at the changeling, his unblinking eyes beady and cold. "Since the last girl you loved made it her mission to kill you."

Steve may as well have slapped him, the way his words stung, ringing in Garfield's ears and tearing through his flesh like he was made of paper. An old wound reopened, festering immediately while bile rose to the back of his throat. "You didn't know her. You didn't know anything about her!"

His voice cracked, forcing him to gulp at the growing lump in his throat. The edge and menace was swiftly replaced with a deep sadness he'd thought buried for years now.

Mento shook his head slowly. "I didn't need to. All of them have only hurt you, Garfield. They seek
to use you for their own benefit in some way. Is it really wrong to seek an alternative method? One day, Dayton Industries will be yours and in the near future, your children's. I only want to ensure that life for you and yours."

"You mean a bunch of freaks?!" Garfield laughed in mockery. "No thanks. I don't want any of it! Not your stupid business, and definitely not your idea of a future, either!"

Rita, noting the way her son was beginning to quiver, teeth chattering with rage and inconsolable misery, took a tentative step towards him. With pity and remorse, she reached towards him. "Garfield, you don't mean that…” She spoke softly, trying to calm him with a mother's concern in her tone.

Pulling back from her, he averted his gaze to the floor and backed away, shaking his head. Tears slipped down his cheeks, scalding hot, and they only fueled his anger. Repulsed, he tried to hide them in shame, using the heels of his hands to angrily wipe them away.

When he realized it was futile, Beast Boy turned and bolted out of the restaurant, knowing that he could no longer hide his feelings from Steve, his pride hurting over the fact he'd allowed him to see his weakness at all.

Rita gave him chase, and he could hear her heels clicking maddeningly against the tiled floors behind him in a flurry. Nonetheless, he didn't give pause, nor did he slow down, only coming to a stop when he was outside the building.

He was hardly out of breath, but the cool air against his flushed face was a relief. The sounds of city life bustling about him helped to temporarily take his mind off of his troubles. It reminded Garfield that, no matter how absorbed he was with his own dilemmas, the world continued to turn. Outside, he was just another person going through the motions — an insignificant speck on the surface of the universe.

With a flurry of fingers, he quickly undid his tie from around his neck, freeing himself from its constraints in what he deemed a liberating motion. Suddenly, the air felt as if it was a lot cleaner, and his lungs could expand unrestricted.

He took in a deep breath through his nose, and closed his eyes, letting the tears dry, salty streaks on his skin.

"Garfield, please…” Rita huffed from behind him, slightly out of breath.

Just like that, he was pulled back into it. Feeling guilty at the pleading tone of his mother's voice, he turned to spare her a sympathetic look.

"You know Steve is just...he's just trying to do what he thinks is right. Please, don't hate him," Rita pleaded.

Beast Boy shook his head solemnly. "I don't hate him. At least, I don't think I do. But bringing up Terra like that, turning you to alcohol...I don't think I can do this dinner right now. I've got enough on my plate already."

Rita stood up tall, still wearing a sorrowful look as she regarded the young man before her. "He's doing his best, Gar, and I'll try better next time, too."

Incredulous, he snapped, "Rita, these family reunions are killing you, don't you see that?! I know how much they mean to you, but I can't stand seeing you like this. I can't handle having him control everything in my life! I'm done being a yes man!"
For some reason, this earned him one of her proud smiles, even though her eyes conveyed the sorrow of loss — of losing him. "You've grown so much, and I will always be proud of you, Garfield. *Always.* Even if you won't see eye to eye, one day, the two of you will find some common ground, I know it. But it's important that you go off and be your own man, too. I love you, Garfield. I always will."

Beast Boy's bottom lip quivered, and before Rita could pull him into a much needed embrace, he changed into the form of a hawk and took flight, pieces of his suit falling away in tatters, like feathers carried by the wind. Rita watched him go, tears shining in her eyes, her lips a tight line…

"He ain't here."

Raven paused, her knuckles inches away from rapping against Beast Boy's bedroom door. Feeling like a thief caught red handed, she turned her head to acknowledge the intruder, only to find Cyborg appraising her curiously with his single human eye. "Said somethin' about a family dinner," he added when she remained silent.

Raven blanched, her hand falling away to rest at her side immediately. "A-a...family dinner? As in...*the Doom Patrol?*" she stammered, eyes wide.

Cyborg leaned his shoulder against the wall and shrugged. "He left lookin' all doom and gloom." Pausing to chuckle to himself, he then shook his head at the memory, his chest heaving from the effort. "Never thought I'd see the kid that gussied up. I mean, Beast Boy, in a tie?! He even borrowed some of Robin's hair gel! You shoulda seen him, Rae. You'd probably never let him live it down, either. Should have gotten a picture."

Raven blinked at him, feeling a sense of cold dread trickle down her spine, like a melting cube of ice. When she didn't laugh, Victor gave her a befuddled stare, his smile dying on his lips. "What? Did you need him for somethin'?"

"I, uh…" She struggled for the words, her mind preoccupied with the notion of what she'd done while Beast Boy had been spending time with his family. The mortification of it left her stunned and speechless, quivering on the spot and fearful that her knees would give way at any second.

"He borrowed my headphones. I was just going to ask to get them back," she lied, her tongue feeling thick and fuzzy in her mouth.

Cyborg seemed to buy into her fib easily enough, though, and Raven wasn't sure if that ought to have made her feel better or worse. "Really? Did he break another pair already?" He groaned in exasperation and rubbed the palm of his robotic hand down the front of his face. "I swear I got him those only last week. Kid goes through 'em the way Rob goes through gel."

Forcing a smile, Raven tried to muster up a genuine laugh, only for her voice to crack with uncertainty.

"You okay, Rae?" Cyborg centred his stare at her, studying her from head to toe. "You're lookin' a little...*pale.* Well, paler than usual, anyways."

"I'm fine, I just...I guess I'll wait for him to get back, it isn't urgent," she lied again, nearly tripping over her words, her voice thick and gravelly.

Self-consciously, she pulled up her hood, the movement instinctual at this point in her life. It was ridiculous, even to her, how an action so simple could make her feel so safe. In this specific scenario, it protected her from betraying her emotions to her perceptive, cybernetic teammate by
quite literally obscuring most of her face.

Traces of disappointment resounded in his tone when he answered her. "Alright. Well, you let me know if you wanna talk. You know I'm here for you, and for Beast Boy, too."

The colour drained from the empath's youthful features, and she was yet again grateful for the comfort of her hood. Somehow, she couldn't shake the panic born from the idea that Victor was aware of her relationship with a certain green-skinned changeling boy. As if Beast Boy had told him all about their secret little getaway and what had almost transpired between them while there. But she knew Garfield better now, and didn't think he'd betray her trust so easily. He'd more than proven that to her over the last couple of weeks, and the least she could do was give him the benefit of the doubt. It was likely that Raven was merely paranoid.

"I think I'm going to go for a swim. Clear my head." She gulped, turning on her heel before Victor could continue to pester her on the subject. She felt a bit of guilt at giving Victor a cold brush-off, but she didn't think she could handle lying to him anymore, and telling the truth would have been even harder.

Thankfully, he did not give her any chase, much to her relief, and Raven could breathe a bit easier once she'd turned the corner.

She hadn't lied about needing a distraction though — especially after discovering what she'd done while Beast Boy was at a family dinner — and, as if on cue, her eyes immediately befell Starfire's bedroom door from across the way. For once, she found that could certainly use another girl's company. Simple conversation with Kory would likely help alleviate most of her anxiety — at least, until she could gain clarification from Beast Boy whenever he returned. Being left alone with her thoughts could sometimes be detrimental to her mental well-being, not that Raven would ever admit that to her more vibrant teammates.

With little hesitation, she knocked gingerly on Starfire's bedroom door, chewing on her bottom lip in apprehension. Raven was a bundle of nerves, fidgeting on the spot as if she was being watched by a thousand judging eyes. The seconds it took for Starfire to answer felt a lot longer to the antsy empath, and she felt a heavy weight lift off her chest when she heard the other young woman scrambling from beyond the door.

"Coming!" came the girl's sing-song voice moments before she appeared before her.

Raven was used to Kory's baffling beauty by now, but what she witnessed standing in the doorway had caught her by surprise nonetheless. Starfire was positively glowing, her golden skin radiant even in the dim lighting of the hall. The subtle makeup she'd used brought out her natural, shimmering sheen. Her unruly red hair was pulled back and tied into a ponytail, only a few stray curls — and her fringe — escaping to frame her face. She blinked in surprise when she spotted Raven, obviously having been expecting someone else. Guessing by her outfit and makeup, Robin would have been a good guess.

"Friend Raven. It is you," she noted, her smile smudging in barely concealed disappointment. The black mascara she'd applied framed her glowing green eyes and made the colour pop even more than usual, alighting her expressions a bit more vividly.

"Friend Raven. It is you," she noted, her smile smudging in barely concealed disappointment. The black mascara she'd applied framed her glowing green eyes and made the colour pop even more than usual, alighting her expressions a bit more vividly.

It was a wonder, the subtle differences in eye colour shade between Starfire and Garfield, but Raven caught herself making the comparison nonetheless.

"Uh, yeah. Is...is this a bad time, Kory?" Raven tried to discreetly peer past her into the room, wondering if she'd interrupted something with her intrusion. She found nothing but the gently
sleeping form of Silkie laying on her made-up bed.

An emotion a lot like guilt marred Starfire's features, the hallway lighting catching the shiny, glittery makeup on her golden face. "Is everything alright, Raven?"

"Yeah. I mean, yes. Everything is fine. I was just going for a swim and was wondering if maybe you wanted to join." Raven tried to keep her voice steady, knowing she was treading on eggshells with her currently erratic emotions.

She cleared her throat and pointed her thumb over her shoulder, indicating the elevators to the pool, but Starfire's expression remained unchanged. "I wish I could, Raven. But I've already made date arrangements with Robin for the evening. Perhaps later…?"

"Oh! No. No, that's fine. I-I'm sorry for bothering you," Raven stuttered, feeling heat creep up to her cheeks. "I didn't realize. I mean, I should have guessed you two would be busy-..."

"Raven," Starfire interjected, placing a hand of comfort on her friend's shoulder and drawing a small gasp from the moderately frazzled young woman's mouth. She then squeezed lightly and gave her a sympathetic look, her eerie eyes a jade, pulsing glow of light. "There is something troubling you."

It was stated as a fact and not a question, and was thus not something Raven was in any position to refute. Instead, she found herself staring down at the tips of her own boots in a heated silence, ears ringing.

"It must be something most intimate if it is affecting you so," Starfire noted softly, placing her other hand on Raven's free shoulder.

"How...how can you know that?" Raven looked up tentatively, feeling smaller than usual around Kory.

Starfire smiled, the lines around her mouth folding in familiar fashion. "Because I, too, have suffered these things with Robin."

Raven's eyes widened in panic, and she immediately went on the defensive. "Kory, this is hardly anything like that! I don't, I mean, I can't... You don't understand. It's impossible for me."

"Perhaps it is not quite the same, that's true," Starfire acknowledged, tilting her head to the side in thought. "However, I do believe you've grown more confident these past few weeks and less ashamed of your desires.

Raven opened her mouth to rebuttal, but Kory cut her off with a raise of her hand. "Do not argue it, you know it is true. And most importantly, I think that we are both certain that it is friend Beast Boy who is also a part of this inner conflict you're experiencing."

"Beast Boy and I are just friends, Kory."

Another lie?

Pouting, Starfire sighed dejectedly. "It is as if you are trying to convince yourself of this truth more than anyone else. I, of all people, understand that friendship is most important. Robin is my best friend, after all." She paused, smiling fondly and involuntarily at the mention of the man she had come to love so deeply. "But Raven, you've been liberated of Trigon's influence for years now. You deserve both happiness and love, and to experience them all fully. Surely, more than just friendship."
"But, Azar's teachings-," Raven tried to rebuttal, but Kory cut her off.

"Do not matter as much anymore because you are no longer on Azarath."

Starfire refused to put up with any of Raven's excuses, but the empath was still not entirely assured, always wary when it concerned her emotions. "They especially matter now, Kory. You've seen what I can do, what happens when I let slip for even one moment. My nature — my father's nature — it doesn't just go away!" Tears burned the backs of her eyes despite herself, but Raven remained somewhat composed.

The fear and anxiety was tugging at the back of her conscience, however, chipping away at her will bit by bit, like it had years ago when her pretold destiny had almost come to fruition.

"Yes, it is true that your father is part of who you are and there is nothing you, or anyone else can do to change that," Starfire admonished, the sullen expression on her face somehow aging her. "But you are also human. It is wise to remember that, Raven. And often. You are your mother's daughter, too."

Raven quivered, desperate to contain the urge to fall down and sob into Starfire's open embrace. She was right, of course. On Azarath, Raven had been frequently reminded of who her father was, of what he'd done to her mother. Of the unspeakable horrors he did to innocent worlds — innocent people — and what he promised to do through her. She'd been feared, raised far away from the other children, and had been lied to about it as well. She'd been told that it had been for her own safety, when the reality was that it was her they'd been afraid of all along.

Even on Earth, she'd spent her years as a teenager hyper aware of her otherness, even among the Titans.

But Starfire was right. The social media, the photography, the shopping spree, even how she felt about Beast Boy. All of that was inexplicably human. And wasn't it about time she embrace that side of her, too? Hadn't she given too much of her life to Trigon already?

Sniffing back her unshed tears, Raven lifted her chin and stared defiantly into Starfire's eyes. "Thank you, Kory. I think...I really needed to hear that."

A warm, sunny smile blossomed onto Starfire's lips, the comeliness of her features more prominent with the joy she so brazenly wore for all to see. "I am always here for you to do the girl talk! Your happiness is important to us all, Raven. I do not know exactly what is going on between you and Beast Boy, and I won't pry, but I have the intuition that you will figure things out, and that everything will turn out just fine!"

For the first time that day, Raven found herself genuinely smiling — like a great burden had been lifted off her shoulders, her heart undoing all the knots within her, and she was as light as a cloud. "I still think I'm going to go for that swim, and then maybe...when Gar gets back..." An uncharacteristic shyness overcame her before she could finish her sentence, but Kory already understood.

Starfire pulled her into a tight embrace then, her flowery perfume pungent and assaulting Raven's nose immediately. The alien princess was a good few inches taller than Raven and thus, the empath's face was flush against her ample chest. "Kory, I can't...breathe," Raven wheezed, feeling tiny in the stronger woman's grip. She'd practically lifted her off her feet and Raven's toes barely skinned the ground.

"Oh!" Starfire exclaimed as she gently settled her friend back down to the ground. "I apologize.
Robin has said that I can be...quite enthusiastic sometimes." She giggled nervously as Raven's lungs remembered how to expand properly once again. "It's fine." Raven coughed, trying to muster up a reassuring smile. "I appreciate your...candor."

"I wish you the best of luck." Starfire beamed with a playful wink to match. She clasped her hands excitedly and Raven felt a rush of heat bloom in her cheeks for a reason she wasn't entirely sure of. It wasn't quite embarrassment she felt, but more a sense of urgency and anticipation.

As she waved and turned her back to her friend, Raven decided that maybe, it was about time she had a long talk with Beast Boy. Maybe she'd even come clean to him about everything.. And, in the process, to herself, too.

"What's that?"

Robin was nothing if not nosy at times, and Beast Boy knew he shouldn't be blaming the Boy Wonder for giving a damn or, in this case, being a natural detective of sorts. Even so, the very last thing Garfield wanted to do in this particular moment was to have a personal one-on-one exchange with the leader of the Titans.

His hair was a dishevelled mess and he was still covered in a sheen of sweat from the exertion it had taken to fly all the way back to the tower in such a haste. Getting away from his family had taken top priority, and the adrenaline had blinded him to the exhaustion that had come along with beating his wings relentlessly against the powerful wind.

Not to mention, Garfield's head was also in a haze of anger and hurt, reliving the encounter with him and Steve over and over in his head. A self inflicted torturous cycle he couldn't shake. His heart ached every time Rita's face swam in his vision, and no matter how hard he tried to wipe at his eyes, he couldn't escape the shame that came with it. Angry, he'd wanted nothing more than to be alone, but after he'd thrown on a pair of sweatpants and a raggedy, discoloured, loose shirt, he'd found the small slip of paper folded neatly just underneath his bedroom door. In his emotional state, he'd flown in through his open window and hadn't cared enough to notice it. Not until he'd opened his door with the intent of washing his face in the bathroom, and fixing his hair before any Titan thought to ask questions did it catch his eye.

Too bad Robin found him first. Even with the mask obscuring his eyes, it was obvious he was giving Garfield a very careful once-over, making mental notes of his appearance with a deep set frown and a tight line between his brows.

"I don't know," Beast Boy admitted, not without a hint of annoyance. He was hoping he'd take the hint and go away, but as Garfield carefully unfolded the paper, Robin lingered closer, curious.

Raven's neat handwriting was easy enough to discern, and Beast Boy read over her simple message over and over because it didn't seem like his brain was wanting to work.

Need to talk. Meet me at the poolside.

-R.R.

He scrutinized the note, squinting as if it would help him understand it better.

"A note? What's it say? Who's it from?"

Without thinking, Beast Boy answered honestly, as if he weren't entirely sure himself. "Raven, I think."
"Raven?"

"Yeah, she wants me to meet her...she wants to talk." He shook his head, puzzled by her reasonings.

"With you?" Robin quirked up an eyebrow.

Beast Boy shot him a dirty look, his previous agitation with Steve resurfacing.
"What's that supposed to mean?"

Immediately, Robin appeared defensive. "Nothing, I didn't mean it like that. It's just...you two seem to be spending a lot of time together. I just hope this isn't going to be another fight or anything. Is everything okay?"

Beast Boy crumpled up the paper angrily in his fist, gritting his teeth so his fangs were on prominent display while he glared at his teammate. "Why do you always assume we'll be fighting?"

"Gar, relax. I'm not looking to start an argument. I know you've just had dinner with Rita and Steve-"

"Then how about you start using your mighty fine detective skills to figure out that I want to be left alone?" Garfield snapped.

"I was going to say that maybe speaking to Raven alone while you're this volatile wouldn't be such a good idea since she's an empath," Robin stated sternly.

"I know that. Do you think I don't know that?" His voice was rising, the barely contained anger like a bubble on the verge of popping.

"Beast Boy," Robin warned tersely. He stood his ground, placid and calm among the storm that was Garfield's rage. "I lost my parents, too."

This sudden and jarring information stilled the changeling, catching him off guard. He blinked at the team leader, trying to read him and failing miserably.

Robin sighed heavily, and it was like the mask slipped off a little. "I know what it's like...not getting along with the people who take you in after that kind of trauma. I know what it's like not seeing eye to eye, even though you feel like you owe them the world...your world." Robin ran a shaking hand through his hair and he couldn't even make eye contact Beast Boy through the mesh lenses of his mask.

"What I'm trying to say is, in those situations, it's best to not let them get to you. You don't owe your entire life to either of them. Don't let him bully you, either, but know that acting out will only give him more leverage against you."

Robin was opening up, showing his teammate a more vulnerable side of him to help relate. It was refreshing, but it also humbled Beast Boy a little. "So, Batman isn't the perfect father after all, huh?" Garfield said with a flicker of cold amusement, his arms folded over his chest.

Robin scoffed. "Not even close. You should hear some of the things he tried telling me about Starfire." A flash of anger curled his lips into a sneer.

"Clearly, you didn't listen to what he had to say, then?"
Robin shook his head tersely. "I let him talk. Tried arguing it, got angry, only it never worked. So I stayed quiet when he'd bring it up, and dated her anyways."

They both grinned at each other, chuckling at the fact Robin had duped his own father. "Dang. And here I thought you'd never have the balls to stick it to the man," Beast Boy said through a smile.

"I value Batman's opinions, and he's taught me so much, but when it comes to Kory...He doesn't get a say." The finality in Robin's voice echoed the deep love and admiration he held for the lovely alien girl.

Garfield nodded his head once in subtle agreement. Kory was sunshine and rainbows and everything that was right in the world. Anyone would have been more than lucky to have her. Robin seemed to finally realize this after years of uncertainty. In fact, when he had made his decision regarding his love for Kory, he'd never been more sure of anything else before in his life.

"Uh, listen...uhm," Beast Boy stammered nervously, tapping his foot anxiously and tucking his hands into his deep pockets. "About earlier, I shouldn't have snapped like that."

Robin raised his hand to stop him from apologizing. "Already forgiven. Like I said, I understand the anger and, besides that, better to take it out on me than Raven."

Beast Boy pouted, shaking his head and looking like a kicked puppy. "Raven? You should know that I'd never...Not to her of all people. Hurting her is the last thing I'd ever want to do…"

"Good." Robin's expression softened at this and the boy wonder graced his friend with a rare smirk. "Strange, huh? How that works? It's how I feel about Starfire, too…"

An awkward silence filled the gap between the two, with Robin's subtle accusation leaving Beast Boy speechless.

"I should probably not keep her waiting too long," Garfield finally said, looking a mite sheepish. "You know Raven…"

Robin chuckled at that. "Yeah, I do."

Beast Boy's mouth twitched into a small smile, and he unwrinkled the piece of paper in his hand, feeling a bit bad for having taken his anger out on her note.

"Oh, and Gar?"

"Hm?"

"I, uh...I know it may not seem like it, and I'm sure I'm not anywhere near your first choice, but I promise that you can always talk to me. A lot's changed since we were all just kids. I'm not the same person I used to be. You can trust me, I promise. I'll always have your back."

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind." Garfield nodded. Before he took off down the hallway towards the elevator, he paused and turned back to stare at Robin's form in the distance. He glanced down at the paper in his hand, and then back at the Titans leader before admitting with a hint of empathy, "It...might take me some time, though."

"I'll be patient," Robin stated.
Normally, Raven would be a bundle of nerves. With Malchior, she'd always been on the verge of confessing. But she never could. Maybe that had been for the best. As if conscious of the ghost of a man who no longer existed, the empath submerged herself up to the bridge of her nose in the pool water. Its warmth felt protective, its stagnant surface somehow impenetrable. She was hiding. From herself more than anyone else, but she couldn't help the way her eyes danced nervously towards the entrance of the pool room.

How would she face him? How would he look at her, having seen what he'd seen? Would he be angry? Embarrassed? Annoyed? Worse yet...would he reject her?

Raven didn't have the luxury of time to unpack that just yet. She heard him before she saw him, the doors creaking loudly as he entered. Raven sunk a little lower, a few small bubbles rising to the surface on her reflection against the clear waters. She was oddly calm, prepared. For what, she wasn't entirely certain, but maybe this time, she'd get it right.

Except the minute he was close enough, Raven knew something was wrong.

Beast Boy looked tired, ragged around the edges like he'd just survived a hurricane. His hair was a thick wavy mess and there were bags under his eyes. The sclera of his eyes were red, and he looked like he hadn't slept for days. Even his clothes seemed to sit askew on his lean frame, both shirt and sweatpants baggy enough to make it look like he was swimming in the outfit. His hands were tucked into the deep pockets of his grey bottoms, and he seemed almost indifferent to her head floating over the surface of the clear blue water.

"Hey." He tilted his chin upwards in her direction before sitting nearby the edge, rolling up the legs of his pants and dipping his feet into the water.

"Hey," she gurgled back, droplets sliding down her nose and lips.

"You wanted to talk?" Beast Boy kicked his legs, splashing lightly.

He hadn't even noticed her. Not really, anyways. The dinner seemed to be furthest from his mind, and Raven's immediate concern for his well-being overshadowed all of what had happened in her bedroom.

If only he'd just...look at her. Maybe she could replicate the feeling he sparked within her when his gaze would linger just a touch too long, or the way the warmth touched the golden hues in his verdant irises every time she mesmerized him.

But this boy was but a shell. In fact, the only other time she'd ever seen him so battered and bruised was after the whole ordeal regarding Terra...

"Is everything okay, Gar?" Raven floated on a little bit closer with every syllable.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm fine. Just...," he paused and gingerly lifted his gaze to her, as if to be contemplating his next words carefully. The look on his face was a sad one, the pout in his lips making her heart ache involuntarily with the emotion. She couldn't tell if that was him bleeding into her or not, and it scared her to know that she wasn't sure.

Pained, Beast Boy looked away, his bangs spilling into his eyes. "Dinner with Steve, it's never what I expect it to be. The man...he blindsided me. Like he always does."

Self-consciously, Raven tucked her arms over her chest, even underneath the protection of the water. Beast Boy's jaw twitched as he clenched his teeth in contempt. "And Rita...well, she just takes it. She just takes his bullshit. Over and over again."
The splashing of his feet became a bit more aggressive until he just stopped altogether. Defeated, Beast Boy's shoulders sagged as he sighed and ran his hands over his tired face.

A feeling of uneasiness overcame the empath, worried the boy was in such a fragile state that he was about to break while she was compromised and ill equipped to handle it. Instinctively, she reached out to him, ready to make contact and perhaps absolve some of his pain. Only before she could, he dropped his arms and a trademark Logan smile was suddenly miraculously plastered onto his face. "Anyways, we're not here for me. You said you wanted to talk to me about something, right? Or is it just my charming company?" He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

However, Raven was unfazed by his flirtatious defense mechanism. Having spent enough time with him by now, she was growing accustomed to his habits, including the way he deflected a conversation he didn't want to have. Instead, the female Titan blinked and jutted out her bottom lip in what slowly grew into a deep-set frown. "I…" Raven faltered, unsure of how to tread.

All of her confidence and self assurance seemed to have dissipated. Although she wanted nothing more than to push and probe the subject, she knew better than to pester the changeling when he didn't want to talk about something. Especially concerning the people he loved most.

But somehow, everything else seemed inconsequential. Maybe even inappropriate in regards to timing. Mentally, she berated herself for being so selfish in the moment.

She hated it — hated herself for stalling — but Raven bit back anyways. Chewing on her bottom lip, she racked her brain for a lie she knew he'd believe immediately.

"I was going to ask you about the photoshoot."

"The shoot?" He studied her curiously. "Which one?"

"The one you promised me, at the studio. I think...I think I'm ready. That is, if you are."

He scratched his head, staring up at the glass ceiling — mirroring the starry evening sky — as if to be lost in thought. When it came to him, his eyes widened and he snapped his fingers in realization. "Oh! Right!"

Beast Boy then immediately looked dubious again, raising a single brow. "Wait — is that why you wanted to speak to me by the pool?"

Raven squeezed her arms tighter about herself and stared down at the water beneath her chin. "I didn't know how else to get you alone…"

"Duh, I knew that," he was quick to add, rolling his eyes to help add to his lie.

An awkward silence then settled between the two. Beast Boy paddled his feet gently beneath the water so as not to splash Raven, while the empath's head floated precariously just over the still surface, like she was hiding something. Water dripped down the slope of her nose to connect to the pool.

"So, uh, I guess I should leave you to your swimming, huh…" Beast Boy cleared his throat, scratching the back of his head.

"You probably should, yeah." The truth was, Raven felt a bit of a fool, and out of place considering
that Beast Boy refused to open up to her.

The green-skinned changeling seemed a little taken aback by her icy brush-off, but proceeded to remove himself from the situation anyways.

Before he did, he paused and quirked up an eyebrow. "So, does tomorrow sound good then?"

"Tomorrow?" Raven queried, perplexed.

"For the photoshoot."

Right. Raven nodded once, but couldn't help gulping at the idea of it being sooner than she'd anticipated. "Yes, I think that should be fine. So long as we aren't called away for any reason."

Beast Boy smirked at that, a single corner of his mouth lifting in amusement and flashing a dimple in her direction. "Hopefully crime in Jump City takes a mini vacation then. Even if the villains don't though, I'm sure it won't be anything that Starfire, Cyborg, and Robin can't handle on their own for a couple of hours."

He'd gotten out of the water and had rolled down the legs of his sweatpants again, but seemed to hesitate and glance around the empty, quiet pool with a pinched expression. "Speaking of which...no Starfire today? Could swear this was a girls night thing you two did."

Raven couldn't help but feel intimidated by his implication for reasons unbeknownst to her. She then subconsciously sank further into the water to hide the colour in her otherwise pale cheeks, shrinking right before his eyes. Maybe her reaction was due in part to what Starfire knew, and their previous conversation was currently replaying in Raven's head. She was hoping he wouldn't somehow catch wind of it, what with their connection.

"It's date night," Raven mumbled, her gaze drifting to the side so that she didn't have to look Garfield in the eye. "Besides, like I said, I wanted to be...alone."

A flicker of emotion moved over the sweep of Beast Boy's brow. He tucked his hands into his pockets again. "Alone? Or...alone with me?"

Raven inhaled sharply. She hadn't been prepared for his subtle ambush and couldn't formulate a decent enough lie in such a short time without being obvious of her intentions. For a boy who seemed so daft in not noticing the simple hints she'd laid out visually before him, he certainly had a terribly good habit of reading between the lines of everything she said.

She stared at him, eyes wide, knowing her time to answer had long since passed, and not knowing what else to say. Raven wasn't ever particularly good with words. She was hardly even any good with body language, but instinct was telling her to rise out of the water then and there. Not because she knew what she was doing — Azar help her, she had no idea how to proceed even after the fact — but because she somehow felt it in her nerves that it was the bold, correct action to take.

Only before she could work up the courage to move a muscle, Beast Boy broke into a grin. "I'm just teasing, Rae. We already had our swimming session, remember? I'll leave you to it." He added a playful wink, but Raven knew better now; she knew him well enough to know when he was being genuine and when he was putting up his personal defenses.

The only question was if he was trying to keep her out, or keep himself in…

_I did it on purpose, you know._
She wanted to tell him. She wanted to stand up so that he could see that she was completely naked beneath the water, and tell him what he refused to acknowledge — the images she’d sent him when she’d ridden a powerful orgasm, thinking about him.

Only Raven couldn't do it. No matter how she willed her body to obey, nothing happened, like she was paralyzed by fear. *Fear of rejection*. A feeling she had known all too well her whole life, and she wasn't entirely sure she could face it again. Not from Beast Boy, too.

So instead, she settled for watching him walk away, a hunch in the muscles of his shoulders as he went. All the while, she sulked even deeper into the warm embrace of the water...
Raven didn't do jealousy. It wasn't in her limited emotional repertoire. But Garfield Logan was starting to become an exception to nearly every one of her self-imposed rules. He was an enigma, one she couldn't solve, and much like a muse inspired their artist, he appeared to inspire her feelings, too.

"Uhm, Raven? You okay?" It was Cyborg's voice that snapped her out of her train of thought.

Raven blinked, the cybernetic man's concerned visage swimming in her vision, blocking the view of what she'd been asphyxiated with moments before.

"I'm fine. Why?" she replied, tone gravelly and stoic.

"Oh, nothin'. Just, you've been glaring daggers in grass stain's direction for the past ten minutes," jibed Cyborg, shrugging.

Raven's face flushed hotly. "I-I was?"

On cue, they both looked at the currently amicable changeling, happily conversing with the media about the team's current takedown. He was laying his charm on thick with a petite, blonde reporter, and although Raven ought to have been used to Garfield's designated role as social media mogul, she couldn't help the sharp stab of envy in her gut every time the two seemed to flirt.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Raven confessed, overcome with nausea when the reporter touched Beast Boy's shoulder, squeezing the firm muscle beneath the thin, form-fitting material of his tunic.

The smaller, fair-haired woman then blinked a set of pretty, heavily mascaraed, baby blues up at him and snickered at one of his jokes with girlish delight.

"Yeah, it's unnerving. Grass stain flirting." Cyborg gagged, his expression souring, and Raven felt a small bit of validation.

It helped her remember what she was supposed to be doing before she'd noticed the man she'd developed feelings for casually hitting on another girl. A young woman whom, she noted, looked, looked and acted absolutely nothing like her. Maybe she'd been all wrong about his intentions, and suddenly Raven was a mite grateful that she hadn't been a fool and confessed to him the other evening after all.

Not only had the timing been all wrong, but there was something different about the green shapeshifter that the empath couldn't quite place. Like a dark, clouded shadow followed in his every step and clung to him in a ghostly veil. The truth was, he'd been fogged up ever since the dinner with Steve and Rita, and every Titan knew it. For the empath, even his emotions were a lot harder to read, whereas he typically wore them on his sleeve.
Another wave of nausea hit Raven, making her break out into a cold sweat, and she looked to Victor to help take her mind off her own destructive thoughts. "Any injuries?" she mouthed, examining him with skilled hands and a healer's gaze, purposely avoiding any eye contact with the older man in the event he read her like the open book she had apparently become. Raven worked diligently while simultaneously trying to block out the vibrant shade of green from the corner of her eye — a feat far more difficult now that she was helplessly affixed to the skin changer like a magnet, always conscious of his every move.

"Nah, I'm good. Nothing mortal you can fix, anyways. Thanks, though. I did catch Robin gettin' scraped up by Cinderblock if you wanted something to do." Victor gave her an appreciative half smile before nodding in their leader's direction.

True enough, the boy wonder was doing his damndest to hide a tight grimace, one of his arms wrapped tightly around his torso where his gloved hand applied pressure to the side of his ribs. He was looking a lot paler than usual, and his skin was clammy with sweat. Mask or no, it was obvious he'd been nursing his wound for a while now.

Raven floated over to him just as Starfire moved past her to interrupt Beast Boy's interview.

"Show me where it hurts," Raven demanded of the boy wonder, trying to take her mind off what was going on behind her.

Robin mustered up a weak smile. "Nothing gets past you, does it?"

"You're one to talk, detective," she jibed, her hands finding the wound easy enough. She pried his grip away, and a fresh, steady stream of crimson oozed from the gaping cut. The dried blood around the area that clung to pieces of shredded fabric was evidence that the injury was not a more recent one. He winced, but otherwise, Robin remained the stoic, brave man she'd come to know over the years. Besides that, she'd seen him suffer far worse, and some of his more damaging scars weren't even the physical kind.

From behind them, Starfire cleared her throat and spoke up sternly. "Excuse me, but I believe Beast Boy has done enough interviewing for one day. If you'd like to converse with the other Titans, we'd be happy to oblige."

Robin peered past Raven's shoulder with a raised brow. "Uh...what's Starfire doing?"

"I don't know. Now hold still," Raven replied, exasperated. Her eyes then glowed, cascaded in a bright white light as her healing aura left her fingertips and slowly knit his flesh back together. "Azarath, metrion, zinthos." Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do for the torn Robin suit.

"Star, it's fine," Beast Boy assured the alien princess, still forcing a strained smile, jaw muscles twitching. "I can handle a few questions with the press." He sounded like he was speaking through gritted teeth — with barely contained annoyance.

But Kory did not look pleased, nor was she deterred. "No. You've done enough flirting, Beast Boy," she seethed, green eyes aglow as she yanked the mic out of the reporter's hands — who let out a small, surprised yelp at the action — and incinerated it in her grip with a flaming starbolt.

"Holy shit, Star!" Garfield exclaimed in bewilderment, clutching at his hair as he watched the ashes vanish in thin air.

Kory ignored him. "No more questions. You can leave now." Smiling forcibly, she dismissed the disgruntled reporter and her crew away with a wave of her hand. They left the vicinity with a
mumbled string of curses that Starfire pretended not to hear.

"Kory, what the heck?" Garfield stammered, narrowing his eyes at the taller woman and getting up in her face, unfazed by her menacing stature.

"Uh..." Robin had become too preoccupied with watching the scenario unfold to answer Raven's lingering question about pain, even forgetting to thank the empath for her work.

Meanwhile, Starfire's smile had evaporated, her mouth becoming a thin line as she glared sharply at the changeling. "You were being a clorbag. Again," she snapped with added emphasis.

Beast Boy blinked at her rapidly before engaging in his more typical hysterics. "I was what?! How was I being a clorbag?! Robin always leaves the reporters to me!"

"If I must spell it out for you, then truly you are being a clorbag!" Starfire jabbed the point of her finger accusingly into his chest.

"Why are the two of you arguing?" Robin had pushed past Raven to address the escalating situation.

"Starfire doesn't seem to like how I handle the press!" Beast Boy shouted, folding his arms over his chest, looking positively irritable.

"He was-" Starfire caught herself in the middle of her rebuttal and shot a tentative — and guilty — glance in the empath's direction before exhaling in defeat and dejectedly adding, "Never mind."

She then floated past everyone, shoulders slumped, in the direction of the tower, not glancing back once.

Robin stared after her, just as perplexed as he'd been moments earlier. He scratched at the back of his head, evidently conflicted in giving chase or letting his girlfriend take some time for herself first. "Well, that was weird."

"Hm..." Victor eyed the changeling, the ominous red light of his robotic lens lingering long enough to be unnerving. His expression was difficult to interpret, but the tension among the Titans was palpable, thick enough to cut with a knife.

Shockingly, Garfield couldn't meet his friend's inquisitive stare, like he was too ashamed to do so. That, or he was too distracted trying to gauge Raven, because it was her that he was focused on. "I just don't know what I did wrong." Beast Boy's voice was almost pleading, and the hurt look in his honest expression made Raven have a hard time swallowing. It was as if he were looking to her for the answers. As if she could somehow explain away Starfire's overreaction, or validate what everyone else already suspected.

Or maybe, he'd known exactly what it was that he'd done and was seeking some sort of forgiveness for his actions from the teammate he'd intentionally hurt. Garfield may have been oblivious to many things, but Raven had an inkling that the changeling was, at least in some form, aware of her budding feelings for him, making his behaviour even more unwarranted and atypical.

Either way, in the end, she did nothing to respond, opting instead to lift her hood over her head and hide away.

"I'm sure it's nothing serious, Gar," Robin reassured him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder and giving his comrade a light squeeze.
Raven gulped and turned her back on the three men. "I should go check on Kory." Her voice was barely an octave higher than a whisper. She could feel his eyes boring into her — through her.

More of a reason for her to flee the scene. Opening a dark portal, the empath vanished through it, not a remnant of hers — not even a shadow — left behind…

"Is this a bad time? You look...troubled." Lillith's fair complexion appeared grainy in the screen of Raven's computer.

"What? No, I'm...I'm fine." She cleared her throat, doing her best to mimic her usual tone. "What's going on?"

Lillith didn't appear entirely convinced by the charade but pressed on anyways, probably too excited to share her news to unpack any of Raven's current dilemmas — ones she seemed to find herself in quite often as of late. "I'm calling you to tell you that I think I may have found a way to sever the connection."

This information hit Raven with the weight of a freight train, and all of a sudden, everything else going on became inconsequential. "You what?" Raven couldn't mask the desperation in her voice, her eyes widening as she stared at the clever, triumphant telepath in the small screen. The auburn-haired woman wore a smug little smirk, a corner of her mouth upturned in pride, pronouncing a single dimple on that side of her cheek.

"I can't believe it took me this long, truth be told. I suppose it's because I've always figured your abilities worked differently than mine, but you said you've been in Robin's mind before, too, and that got me thinking."

Raven's heart was racing, and she bit down on her bottom lip. It was a good thing she was sitting down on her bed; she wasn't too sure that her knees wouldn't give out the way she was shaking; a by-product of her frazzled nerves. With bated breath, she awaited Lillith's explanation.

"Why did you get stuck with Gar's mind but not with Robin's? Even with my own teammates, I've never had a breach like yours with any of my connections."

Raven shook her head, puzzled, and the tiny camera capture in the corner reflected her movements. "This isn't the same thing, Lillith. I explained that to you."

The powerful telepath only smiled wider. "Exactly, and we both don't quite understand it still. But what if...you made it similar?"

"Come again?" Raven blinked rapidly, dubious.

Lillith seemed to take in a deep breath before continuing, "You need to let him into your mind and he needs to let you into his. Then, you should be able to turn it off, like you did with Robin."

The idea was so simple, so blatantly obvious, that it almost sounded too good to be true. Raven felt foolish for not having thought of it sooner, once the idea took root in her head.

Of course.

Of course.

The ability to project images must have been but a hyper-focused fraction of what she'd done when she'd established a mind connection with Robin. Between the two bird Titans, it had been mutual,
and thus, Raven had no trouble ending it when they no longer needed it. If she merely let Garfield into her head, too, then she could shut off all the channels, because she already knew how to do that.

Ironically, that also was part of the problem; letting Beast Boy into her mind would not only mean that he'd officially become aware of her developing and complex feelings for him, but also learn the finer details of her dark upbringing and unconventional childhood. It had been one thing with Robin; he'd already known much about her even before the mind link she'd established all those years ago. Being a detective putting a new team together, he couldn't help but look into each of his new partners, and the fact that he'd left it unspoken between them while still respecting her trauma had actually been a blessing in disguise for Raven. Garfield Logan, however, was none the wiser to some of her more morbid memories, and Raven wasn't too sure about how he might feel when he learned the entire truth...

The empath gulped, swallowing at the nervous lump in her throat. "That sounds...easy enough, I think," she half-lied.

Her friend pouted, bottom lip jutting out. "You don't sound so thrilled, Raven." Concern pulled at Lillith's youthful features, her shapely brows drawn together.

"I... I am, I just...I need to speak to him first." Raven's eyes darted about her room and she tucked her silken hair behind her ear. "Thank you, Lillith. Truly. For everything you've done. You've been a great help." She mustered up a quivering smile to the best of her abilities and then closed the laptop before she fell apart completely. Maybe later, when she was less of an emotional mess, she'd apologize for hanging up on Lillith. For now, she needed to deal with other pressing matters.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, and allowing for her facade to slip back into a more neutral, cool exterior, she figured she'd given Starfire enough time to cool off before confronting her. Raven gathered her swimming bag — which reeked of chlorine now — and took one last lingering gander at the full-length mirror in an attempt to fix her appearance. It was late at the Tower, and she'd slipped into some of her comfier lounge-wear — a strappy tank-top, and some sweat shorts — since she hadn't really planned to interact with the other Titans after the mission. Some strands of her dark, straight hair sat askew, and she quickly ran through them with her fingers until smooth. Not that she'd ever really tell anyone, but her natural hair actually had some wave to it, and Raven often had to straighten it after it would get wet to maintain the illusion of perfectly straight hair. If the other Titans had noticed it when it had grown down the length of her back that one time around her birthday, they'd never truly made a note of it.

Satisfied with her look, and with the strap of her canvas bag flung over her shoulder, Raven then left the safety of her room to hunt down Kory, being sure to avoid any other Titans if they were around. Thankfully, she found the hallways dark, empty and quiet. Somewhere in the distance, she could swear she heard the television in the common room, but Kory's bedroom lay in the opposite direction, much to her relief.

When Raven reached Kory's door, she found it slightly ajar, and light spilled out, illuminating the otherwise dark corridor.

She glanced inside and saw the other woman sitting atop her bed, stroking Silkie's back as he lay snoozing comfortably and perfectly content in her lap, none the wiser to his mistress' emotional distress.

"Hey, you," Raven called out, peeking in from the crack of her open door.

The other Titan raised her melancholy green gaze towards her friend and replied solemnly,
"Hello."

Taking it as her queue to come inside, the empath floated in, giving a quick once over of the princess' room. Aside from a few more recent photos of her and Robin together taped around her vanity mirror, and a few new toys and trinkets likely from their dates and adventures, not much else had changed since the last time Raven had been in there. "Are you...okay?" the empath queried, taking a spot next to the alien woman on the bed, and placing her swimming bag at her feet.

"Are you?" Starfire clipped back, sharp enough to leave her fiend bristling from the accusation in her tone.

When Raven didn't answer, Starfire sighed, her eerie jade eyes a faded glow in her brightly lit room. "I am sorry. Perhaps I was too forward today. It's just...I know that he feels something for you, and that you feel something for him, and I recall the events with Robin and Kitten and how that had made me feel-"

"Kory, slow down. It's okay." Raven touched her shoulder in comfort, purposely ignoring how Kory had somehow discerned Garfield's own emotional turmoil in regard to the demoness. "I'm not upset. Not with you, and not with Gar," she explained calmly.

Starfire shook her head, tendrils of long, flame-red curls moving with her. "It doesn't make sense. Why push you away? Why try to hurt you? Beast Boy is not supposed to be cruel."

Raven shrugged passively, even though she wanted nothing more than to parrot her friend's sentiment. But she was already used to consoling herself most of her own life, so it was never a stretch to do the same for her friends. "Gar's always been...a flirt. That's nothing new, really. He'll take attention from anywhere he can get it. I don't think he was trying to hurt anyone."

"Then why?"

"I don't know. Maybe because he's so busy trying to cover up his own hurt, that he just...drowns himself in everything else to avoid dealing with it..."

Starfire quieted down, and the two girls shared a moment of silence, thinking on the mystery that was their green shapeshifting friend.

Then, in a smaller voice, Kory asked, "Do you think that maybe something has happened with Steve again?"

Raven leaned forward and ran her pale fingers along her bare knees, carefully considering everything. It was clear that Beast Boy been acting strange ever since the dinner; all the Titans knew it, but so far, none of them had really approached the elephant in the room just yet. Garfield was behaving somehow colder — uncharacteristic of his usual sunny disposition — and like he was trying to keep everyone at arm's length by pretending to be a husk of his old, chipper self. It wasn't working very well at all. Once upon a time, maybe he'd have had Raven fooled, but with the dynamic of their relationship shifting, she found herself paying more and more attention to him. So much so, that she was about as sensitive to his emotional spectrum as a river was to a subtle wave.

Now that Raven also knew how to sever their connection, she was realizing the real reason she'd been less than enthused when Lillith had spoken to her about a prospective solution — that, not only would it likely offend the changeling, but, maybe, it would also mean they'd have one less reason to spend time together.
Like it was a death sentence for their blossoming relationship. Like, without it, they'd have nothing in common any more, and they'd go back to being teammates and friends in the loosest sense of the term.

More frightening still, perhaps, was that Raven was looking for any excuse, any reason, *not* to go through with it.

She couldn't break his heart even *more*. And, after everything with Malchior, she was even less inclined to break her *own*.

"I don't know, Kory. But I mean to find out…"

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Raven found Beast Boy soaking in a metal tub full of ice water in the infirmary.

It was really, really late now and all the other Titans were likely in bed, save for perhaps Robin. She'd only just parted ways with Kory herself after their rejuvenating swim, pool water still clinging to chunks of her hair and dripping down her long, pale legs. Raven's towel was still draped over her arm and her bare feet felt good against the carpeted plush of the floor. It was pure coincidence that she'd had to walk by the infirmary on her way to the bathrooms where she'd planned to wring out the rest of her clothes and hair, but her own morbid curiosity had gotten the better of her.

She'd heard him first before she'd bothered to pry; the sound of moving water and ice as he shifted uncomfortably inside the metal tub. He hadn't noticed her presence when she'd wandered in, having thrown his head back and closing his eyes, his features pinched into a permanent grimace.

"You're wounded." Immediately, Raven was at his side, kneeling on the floor next to him to assess the damage, and not caring for where she threw her things in the meantime. The clattering noise they made when they hit the tiled floor seemed to echo throughout the room, but Raven was overcome with concern when she got a good look at the injuries Beast Boy had sustained. Bruises, cuts, all of varying sizes, discolored his emerald skin in wide, ugly, purple and red gashes.

"I'm fine, really." He winced through a smile, in pain even moving his arm over the ledge of the tub, the curved muscles of his biceps shaking with the effort.

She huffed, annoyed, blowing a piece of her hair that had slid before her face. "You're *not* fine. You haven't been fine this whole time. Why didn't you say anything?" Raven couldn't keep herself composed and it conveyed through her tone and facial expressions. She had no patience for formalities at this point, and her own insecurities would need to take a back seat for the time being. Her teammate — *Beast Boy* — was hurt.

"I didn't want to worry any of you. Besides, nothing a cold bath can't fix. I've been through worse and healed on my own just fine."

It was true that his strange genetic disposition also meant he was able to heal a lot quicker than any normal human, but Raven couldn't help and be cross with him judging by the severity of his cuts, strings of his blood floating to the watery surface like an ominous, crimson cloud.

She folded her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes at him. "You say that a lot." Raven was grateful for the thick pieces of ice that prevented her from seeing anything below the surface of the tub, other than a foggy, green blur where his naked body lay. Being distracted by the changeling's impressively lean physique was the last thing she needed in the moment, especially if he was going to take her seriously. Still, it was curious how much damage he'd endured while going through a
whole interview without so much as a limp. For the most part, she could have sworn his uniform had been intact, too. Then again, Raven been rather preoccupied with the task of looking everywhere but at him. Her face burned hotly at this realization, a pang of guilt sweeping through her upon noting her own lack of professionalism. Maybe this was partly why Robin had been so against inter-team romantic relationships before he'd started dating Starfire.

"I can take care of myself, Rae." There was a bit of underlying testiness to Beast Boy's voice, and he wouldn't meet her eyes, the muscles of his shoulders tightened like a coiled spring. Beast Boy stared down at the water, drumming his fingers gently along the icy surface of ice water. Due to his high metabolism — and the heat of his impressive core temperature — steam rose from his skin and the tub where the cold water chilled him. Small rivulets of water cascaded down his back from the matted, wet hairs at the nape of his neck, trailing a path between his shoulder blades until they reunited with the bathwater.

Raven reached out to touch him, her fingers shaking in the air. Her voice was soft and caring when she said, "Cinderblock gave you a thrashing. There could still be pieces of glass in some of those wounds from the skyscraper he threw you into. Wounds that, if left unattended, could become infected." He was cold and wet to the touch, but he didn't reject her gentle caress when she followed the edges of a more brutal gash on his back.

"You don't need to heal me every single time someone hurts me, Raven. Sometimes, there are things that even you can't fix." His tone was as chilling as the ice he lay beneath.

"This isn't about the injuries, is it?" she pushed, knowing very well that she was testing his boundaries. "This is about Steve, and whatever the hell he said to you at the dinner." Her fingers gripped the cold edge of the steel tub, squeezing until her knuckles paled as she stared him down intensely. Beast Boy stopped moving, the muscles in his jaw clenching visibly.

Look at me. Look at me, please! Raven wanted to scream, but she fought the innate urge.

Seeing Garfield tense up and pull into himself further, Raven then reeled her emotions in, realizing she'd touched on a sore spot in her desperation to reach out to him. "Talk to me, Gar," she pleaded. "You have to let me in if we're ever going to overcome this." Her thoughts, yet again, strayed to Lillith's words.

You need to let him into your mind and he needs to let you into his.

If he couldn't even talk to her, how would he ever trust her enough to let her play in his darkest memories?

Garfield suddenly slapped the surface of the water, splashing himself in the process and taking Raven out of her thoughts. "There's nothing to talk about!" he cried, his voice a low growl, but one laced with an undefinable pain. "And even if there was, there isn't a thing you, or anyone, could do about it. I just...I need to think. I need to be alone..." Garfield cradled his face in his hands, his whole body shaking, whether from the cold or something else, Raven didn't know.

What she did know was when she wasn't wanted — no matter how much it stung. Taking in a sharp breath through her nose, nostrils flaring, she bit back anything else she wanted to say to him — to scream at him — and stood to her full height with one last lingering stare in his direction. Her eyes were like a violet storm, hazy and prickled with burning tears she refused to shed. Every bone and muscle in her body — every sinew and every nerve — told her to abandon all her pride and hold him. To envelop his quivering, naked, hurt form in the warmth of her arms and chest. It was a shame she was born and raised a coward.
Still Beast Boy refused to look at her, and she could tell he wore a masked cringe from beneath his palms, shuddering in the water as he fought with his own inner demons. Reluctantly — and with a lot of anguish herself — Raven turned on her heels and left him in the room…
The Titans were all acting strangely. Raven knew her friends well enough by now to spot the unusual changes in their behaviour that indicated this. Whenever they'd exhibit these new, nervous mannerisms, it was usually because they were hiding something from her. Normally, she could let things slide. If they wanted to discuss it, she'd wait until they were ready to come to her. But, admittedly, she was in a foul mood after her tentative interactions with Beast Boy, and thus, her patience had been worn thin. That, and it soured her further when she knew every Titan was currently avoiding her in some way, the nagging thought in the back of her head distracting her from her daily routines.

The final straw had been Cyborg. Just as he let out a third consecutive yawn within the span of five minutes, Raven lifted her gaze from her book, and fixed him with a sordid stare. "That's it; what are you guys not telling me?"

Victor's cough turned into a nervous clearing of his throat, and he forcefully looked away from her. "Whatever do you mean, Raven?" Starfire asked cheerily, blinking in the empath's direction. But there were dark circles beneath her eyes, and although that could normally be attributed to her late night activities with the Boy Wonder, she was also more often left feeling refreshed afterwards rather than worn out. Something that couldn't really be said about Robin himself.

However, this Starfire had nodded off several times now during the finale of The Bachelor. Uncharacteristic of her, when typically, she'd be equating the reality show events to actual mating rituals on Tamaran. As the show had started, Raven had half-expected the alien royalty to go off on another tangent about how both men and women, should they be competing for the affections of a lover, would settle it in the warrior's way rather than the pettiness of humans. When that hadn't happened, she'd grown mildly suspicious.

Raven narrowed her eyes, not falling for Starfire's charms as easily as some of the others would have. "Don't act coy; Cyborg's lights keep flickering every time he yawns, you're falling asleep, and I'm pretty sure Robin's got his eyes closed behind the mask."

"That's...crazy talk!" Victor shouted, throwing his arms up into the air in protest. He seemed to have snapped awake only to glance down at the accused luminescent blue lights emanating from within his robot torso. They flickered twice before coming back online permanently. Raven raised a single eyebrow at the embarrassed, cybernetic man, both Titans coming to an undeniable conclusion that he was running low on juice.

He tried to smile at her to cover up his error, but Raven remained unamused, folding her arms over her chest and tapping her foot in mild annoyance.

"I cannot do this," Starfire piped up, allowing the tiredness to overcome her features, shaking her head in defeat. "I cannot lie to my friend anymore." Sighing, she turned off the TV, focusing on Raven with a solemn expression. Crestfallen and guilty, she stared right at the empath when she admitted, "It is about Beast Boy."
At the mention of his name, Raven's heart felt like it was being clenched in Cinderblock's vice-like
grip, her chest squeezing and her windpipe being crushed by some invisible force. She was finding
it hard to breathe; like someone had sucked out all the oxygen from the room.

Immediately, she was angered by the betrayal in her childish reaction, but there was nothing she
could do to control such new and fierce emotions. Closing her book, not even caring for the fact
that she'd lost her page, Raven glanced around at each one of her friends accusingly. "What
happened?" she asked icily through a clenched jaw.

Robin jolted awake after Starfire elbowed their leader in the ribs. "Huh? What I miss?"

"Tell me what's going on. What are you guys trying to cover up?" Raven pressed, anger slowly
making her voice rise. Her patience had long since dissipated.

Cyborg twiddled his fingers, appearing remorseful. "It isn't what we're hiding...it's what Beast
Boy asked us not to tell you..."

"He what?" Nostrils flaring, Raven quickly came to her feet, slamming her hardcover novel against
the coffee table in front of her.

There was a collective sigh around the room, an awkward tension settling amongst the teammates.

Victor decided to take the plunge. "Last night, his fever spiked. Turns out you were right about the
glass. His infection was so bad, he was practically delusional. Shivering even beneath several
layers of blankets. The thing is, his skin had healed over the shards, so I had to spend the night
cutting him up again just to get them all out. It...wasn't pretty," he explained with a grimace.

Raven bristled, her insipid pride making room for her impending guilt. Her stubbornness
— his stubbornness — had nearly gotten him killed. This was why Robin had always been so
against relationships in the workplace prior to dating Starfire. Emotions could lead one to make
costly mistakes if they let them. Like getting severely injured or killed. Raven had to bite the inside
of her cheek to stop her eyes from watering and her bottom lip from trembling.

"Tedious is the word I'd use, and it took just about all night," added Robin, yawning right after as if
to attest to that statement.

In a small voice, Raven asked, "How come no one bothered to wake me up?" Looking about at all
of them, it was hard to mask the hurt she felt with her teammates — most especially Beast Boy,
who had opted to nearly die rather than ask for her help.

"It was strange, that his loud, unsettling moans did not wake you, Raven. They certainly woke us,"
Starfire answered.

"Kid was practically having night terrors." Cyborg shook his head, his human eye glazed over in
memory, wearing the same troubled look he always did whenever he had to play doctor to one of
his friends.

Raven wasn't entirely sure why she hadn't woken up to the noises given that her room wasn't far
from his. But she'd slept like the dead the previous night, probably due to the amount of energy
she'd expelled healing Robin and fighting off Cinderblock. Not to mention, swimming often left
her rather drained as well.

Still, she couldn't shake the guilt that came with being intentionally left in the dark. "Again, why
didn't you come get me? I could have helped."
Starfire and Cyborg exchanged worrying glances.

"Beast Boy asked us not to bother you." It was Robin who was brave enough to tell her the truth.

"Why?"

Robin shrugged. "I guess he felt bad, having woken us all up because he didn't listen to you in the first place."

"Augh! He's such an insufferable idiot is what he is!" Raven shouted, agitated and slamming the palms of her hands against the coffee table, making it shake on its legs. "Pride? Really? He let his pride dictate the situation?! He could have died!" She was shaking with anger, miserable in ways she couldn't even begin to understand, but her rage blinded her to all of it. "Where is he now?!" she demanded, casting a steel-eyed glare at the room.

Starfire seemed to jump in her seat at the sudden, icy chill in Raven's demeanour. "He is at school, I believe, working on a project in the studio. That is what he told us, even though we advised for him not to go while in the condition he is in," she answered tentatively, giving the other girl a most concerning look. "But, Raven, it truly is not a problem, he merely wished for you to sleep-..."

"You don't understand," she interrupted, hissing through gritted teeth while her hands turned into fists at her sides. She was quivering, her nails digging into her palms hard enough to mark her skin. If Raven was being honest with herself, she didn't understand either; why did his slight offend her as much as it did? Why was he actively pushing her away? There was no denying it now — it was definitely what he was doing, she could admit that much. But there was only one way she would ever know the real truth.

"I'm going to confront him," she stated with newfound determination.

Making up her mind before any of her friends had the gall to try and stop her, Raven opened up a portal to the college and vanished through to the other side without looking back.

She appeared right outside the door to the studio he'd shown her the last time they'd attempted a photoshoot. Immediately closing the portal before anyone saw her, Raven ducked her head out to peek down the hallway, and breathed a sigh of relief when she found it empty. Then, turning around to examine the door, she made a careful note of the time schedule for the room on the attached clipboard. As luck would have it, she found Garfield's name penciled in on the sheet for most of the time slots, scribbled in what could only be his handwriting. It appeared he was the only student who ever used the room, along with someone named Jimmy Olsen. Whoever the heck that was.

Raven steeled her nerves and let out a long breath before entering, drawing on her anger from earlier while also mentally preparing the dialogue she would approach him with. It was important not to let too many emotions cloud her judgement, but with Garfield, she couldn't help but feel so intensely.

The heavy door slammed behind her, echoing throughout the empty room, and Raven took in a deep breath.

"Who's there? I have this room booked for the next couple of hours!" Garfield called out, his voice reverberating against the cement walls.

Raven's breath hitched in her throat as she took a look around at the place. He was currently busy fixing some red, silken canvas along the top of the white backdrop, making it droop like a raggedy
curtain. The floor was covered in pillows varying in shapes and sizes and colours, but all rich and velvety, like that of a sultan's home. He'd even pulled out a fancy Persian rug and added the ambiance of melted candles and burning incense. There were also rose petals scattered around, their muted fragrance covering the musk of the otherwise hollow, dank room. If Raven didn't know that this was a set in a studio, she might have believed she was in some regal palace instead.

"Raven." Her name was more of a statement on his lips rather than a question, but he was still puzzled by her appearance when he saw her.

Beast Boy had turned to look at her, blinking in surprise, his lips parted in a question he wasn't quite ready to ask. She also noted that he appeared to be out of breath from all his physical exertion, and his chest and shoulders heaved with every inhale. The shirt he wore was clinging to his torso from the sweat, and even his bare arms were covered in a sheen of moisture, the glow highlighting the curve of his biceps. His hair was doing that thing where the ends were drenched, and thus, fell annoyingly into his eyes. Before, Raven might have never cared for such casual details in regards to the shapeshifter, but nowadays, it made her heart flutter whenever she caught him in the aftermath of a good workout. She'd long since chalked it up to her ridiculous hormones. But when even the way the fine hairs of his arms sat matted and slicked forward with sweat made her mouth go dry, it was hard to blame it all on just physical attraction.

Unlike usual, Beast Boy wasn't wearing his standard uniform beneath his civilian clothes. Instead, he wore a loose, white muscle tank, revealing the bandages wrapped around his waist, as well as the lean but toned muscles of his upper body. He'd matched the top with a pair of comfortable black sweatpants and an armband, likely to hide some of the bruises he'd gotten in his fight the previous day. A grey hoodie had been tossed aside outside of the scenery block, likely removed when he'd begun to overheat. Which, judging by the wafting candles, hadn't taken too long. The room was stuffy to Raven already, and she'd only been there for a few minutes.

"What are you doing?" she queried, her voice soft as she took a few small steps forward, still mesmerized with the aesthetic of his setup and all of its finer details.

Garfield tipped his head to one side and scratched at his temple with a single finger, struggling to find the words to explain himself. "I, well, uh...I was testing out the look of the photoshoot we were planning.

Raven's eyes raked the entire room, her defenses — and anger — slipping. "You did all this...for me?"

With a shrug, he said, "You mentioned wanting it to be more comfortable, and to have an ambiance, so I took some of the lessons we've been learning about setting up a shoot, and applied it. I was actually...going to run some test shots before bringing you here officially..." He stared down at his sneakers.

Raven cast narrowed eyes at the hunched shapeshifter from over her shoulder, shaking her head and her lips forming a thin line. "You befuddle me, Gar. I just can't wrap my head around you, even when I try."

"Wait...what? Do you...do you not like it?" He was behind her, close enough that she could hear him breathing softly.

Raven shook her head. "That's not it. I do like it. In fact, I'm more than happy with everything you've done for me. I just..."

"You just what?"
She spun to face him, eyes shining when she stared him down, hugging her own arms like she'd been overcome with a chill. "One second you're hot, the next you're cold! One moment it feels like...there's more to this thing between us, and then you do a complete one-eighty and push me away! Which is it, Gar? I can't keep doing this, I can't keep up! It's stressing me out, and I'm terrified, I'm scared of being vulnerable again, only to be left in the dark, thinking about how I'm not enough. I'm never going to be enough, not for anyone.-"

"Rae, please…" He closed the distance between them in a single stride, cupping her face in his hands, his fingers trembling even as they pressed into her skin, leaving hot marks wherever he touched. "It isn't your fault, I swear. This has nothing to do with you…” There was a genuine gentleness about his gaze that made her want to pour her heart out to him.

Instead, it was apparently her turn to push him away — an endless tug-of-war between them. "It has everything to do with me, Gar. This all started because of a stupid mistake I made, with an ability I had no control over yet!"

"You did what you had to do to save yourself and Robin! If you didn't reach out, you'd both be dead!"

She scoffed, and folded her arms over her chest. "Kind of like how you almost died last night and shut me out?"

Beast Boy ran a hand through his already messy hair, strands the colour of pine sticking up haphazardly. "I didn't want to worry you…"

"That's a lie and you know it," she seethed. "You're keeping me away, and you don't even have the decency to tell me why. Then, you pull a stunt like this," she gestured to the scenic photoshoot he'd set up, "and tell me it's all been for me. Which is it, Gar?" she stammered. "Why won't you make up your mind?"

His eyes were downcast, his hands fallen away to his sides. Beast Boy's gaze swept up to her face, and guilt and sorrow crossed his features. "I was going to postpone the shoot indefinitely. "I didn't want to worry you…”

That caught her off guard. But before Raven could open her mouth to speak, he pressed on, his tone cold and his posture stiffening. He rubbed the palm of his hand up along his forehead and pushed back his bangs. "You're right. Starfire was right. I figured, if you just hate me now, it'll hurt a lot less later."

Raven's brows furrowed in puzzlement. "I don't understand. Why?"

He laughed but there was no humor in it this time. "I had a date today."

It was like someone had pierced her heart with a dagger made of ice, shattering upon impact so that the tiny, cold, crystal shards jutted out in sharp angles, splintering her. The feeling wasn't entirely unfamiliar to Raven; she'd felt this way before, once. With Malchior's betrayal.

Turns out, it hurt just as bad the second time. Maybe, it hurt even more. It felt like she was suffocating, choking on his words while they echoed in her mind.

Numb. She felt numb.

Beast Boy couldn't meet her gaze, couldn't register the pain he knew he'd inflicted, and witness it reflected in her pale, violet eyes. His fingers twitched repetitively, fiddling with the various knobs and buttons of the expensive camera dangling around his neck, like it was a Rubik's cube.
Maybe it was for the best; Raven didn't think her pride could handle having him see just how badly her heart was breaking.

"Oh," she croaked, feeling small and sounding empty, wanting nothing more than to shrink into herself and disappear for good.

The cat was out of the bag now, and Beast Boy continued on, ignorant to the knot in Raven's throat. "She's rich. Comes from a good family...normal."

_Normal._ Meaning, not like Raven. _Nothing like Raven._ She gulped hard, her mouth dry and her heart aching in ways she hadn't felt since Malchior had deceived and used her so horribly. It wasn't even fair; Garfield's intentions were nowhere near as malicious, and yet the damage remained.

Like a hungry fire that continued to spread, Garfield couldn't stop, "I was actually hoping the fever would give me a good excuse to cancel, and maybe...that's why I didn't want you there. I didn't want to get better."

"Gar…"

He grimaced and wiped at his eyes, pressing the heels of his palms into them hard enough to elicit tears. "I didn't want to wake up, Raven. I don't want what he wants, but I can't help and think that Steve's right. Fuck, what if he's right?!"

She was a little shaken by his vulgarity; swearing was not in character for the changeling whatsoever. It was worrying, thinking about what sort of hell was tormenting him, driving him to such palpable anguish.

Swallowing, Raven asked, "Right about what?"

"Everything! That I'm some _freak_ no one could love, save for Rita, that all anyone would ever want to do is _use_ me. For my money, for the fame, for the attention. I have no future, and I'm going to be alone my entire life."

There was no doubt about it; he was crying. Tears, searing hot, free flowing down his cheeks now, giving the illusion of the little boy who held back so much. The same one from the photos in Robin's manila folders, staring emptily into the camera, eyes wide and red-rimmed...

Raven could still remember some details of the tiny, neat scrawlings Robin left in the margins of his notes on Garfield Logan. The ones that stood out _most_, anyways.

_Orphan..._ _Freak_ _ish abilities; can change and manipulate his DNA to that of any animal. _Sole_ survivor of a boating accident... _Got to safety in the form of a bird... could not save_ the others at the time. _Nicholas Galtry...uncle. Stole fortune and_ _abused..._ _Experimented_ _on..._

The emotion he was experiencing was overwhelming and contagious. Raven's own eyes watered as a direct result of her empathy, a nauseating wave of sorrow engulfing all her other feelings.

Somehow, she still found the courage to speak through it without becoming a blubbering baby. Placing a gentle hand on his shoulder and giving it a reassuring squeeze, she told him, "I know the feeling, Gar. I know because I lived it, too. All my life, I was chased by people who either wanted me dead or wanted to use me for their own gain. And, even when I was with the team — with you — I still felt alone for the longest time."

His shoulders were shaking with the sobs he was trying so hard to hold back, but the tears seemed to be settling the more she comforted him. It also helped her bite back her own, so, Raven kept on
talking. "But do you remember what you told me, all those years ago? When, every time, at my lowest point, you were there — you — reminding me that...I only thought I was alone. That I'm only as alone as I choose to be."

She stepped closer to him, her legs seemingly having a mind of their own. "Well, I guess it's about time that I return the favor. No matter what Steve says, you are not alone, Garfield, and I'm going to prove it to you, just like you proved it to me, time and time again." It was strange when she found that she was nearly smiling — the fondness of the memories they shared gently washing away the melancholy that had settled between them.

Gently, she removed his hands from his face and took them in hers, rubbing small, soft circles with her thumb over the back of his palms. Raven then gazed sympathetically at the way the tears clung to his fringe of lashes, even now, as he refused to look at her through a blurry gaze.

She swayed into his space — so close she could smell the salt of his sweat drying on his skin. Her voice was sticky when she said, "Now, let me do what I should have done long ago, and I'm so sorry. I'm sorry that it took me this much time in the first place, but I'm going to fix it. I promise."

Letting go of his hands, her cold fingers moved to tap gently against either side of his temples as Raven, her own cheeks wet with tears she'd never realized she'd shed, closed her eyes and shakily uttered her mantra. "Azarath...metrion...zinthos!"

The tips of her fingernails radiated a white, glowing aura of magic, the same kind that set her eyes alight whenever she drew on her powers. The red gem in the middle of her forehead burned into her flesh — searing and pulsating in a culminating pain. Beast Boy appeared to still beneath her touch.

Under normal circumstances, she may have offered to absolve some of his grief, but as things stood, she currently had a more pressing matter to attend to, and that was the unintentional mental link she'd formed with him, tormenting him for months now.

She'd start there, work her way forward and see what she could do about Steve and the damage he'd done at the end.

Opening the mental pathways between them, willingly, was a lot like opening the floodgates, plunging into an infinite ocean, floating and submerged, while surrounded in his subconscious. Raven was skilled enough at doing this by now that she knew how to stand on the shoreline, toes sinking into wet sand as she observed the endless abyss of Garfield's mind. It waited for her, moderate waves crashing against the shore she'd created, and wetting her ankles.

Garfield trusted her — implicitly. Giving her free roam in such a way, after he'd spent years honing his mental defenses against Mento's obtrusive mental probing. It meant a lot. More than she'd ever have known, if it weren't for this moment.

The beach was a lot like an island bridging their two separate, mental pathways; as Lillith had said, she would see into his mind, but he would also get to see into hers. Raven had to push away the encroaching dread of what horrors he'd find there — and what he'd think of her after they'd part — for the time being. Instead, she focused on her task and slowly padded on bare feet into the endless blue ocean with an infinite sky looming overhead. From her viewpoint, it appeared as if the horizon and the body of water both kissed seamlessly.

By the time she was wading in the ocean, feet no longer touching the ground and only her head visibly bobbing over the surface, Raven glanced down at her reflection and took in a deep gulp of air — instinctual, as she knew she didn't need it here. Then, she closed her eyes and allowed the deep currents to carry her under...
Drowning was not the way Garfield would have exactly explained what was happening to him. One moment, he was with Raven, and within the next blink, he'd opened his eyes to a striking, dark sea of aquamarine. Floating, the ground was no longer beneath his feet, and it felt as if he were idle and weightless among the stars, what with small specks of light flitting about in the endless body of water. At first, he panicked. Where was he? What was he doing here? How was he supposed to get out? Would he run out of oxygen and die here? Garfield clutched at his throat in reaction, bubbles forming from his mouth when he parted his lips.

And then, as if to allay most if his worries, he heard the echo of a child's voice, somewhere just beyond, but close enough to draw him in.

"But why can't I see mother?"

"Because it is safer that way, child." Another voice, older and more wise, cracked with age.

"Doesn't she want to see me?" the child pleaded. "Is she scared of me, too?"

A pause, and Garfield looked around frantically, rubbing at his eyes and spinning about, trying to search for the source of the conversation. All he discovered was that he was completely alone in the darkness. It unnerved him, and he broke out into ghostly chills.

Somehow, he could still hear them in the back of his mind, though; like a conversation playing out in his memories. Except, the memory wasn't really his.

"Raven," the older woman started, more carefully this time. Garfield's eyes widened at the mention of the female Titan, and he tried to swim upwards towards the light, hoping to break the surface and find her. Raven. She would always be familiar to him, no matter where it was that he found himself. Like a mark on a compass, Raven would lead him home. "Your mother cares for you. In her own way. I promise you that. Now hurry along, we have much work to do today."

It didn't matter how much he swam; his muscles never tired, never burned, but he also never found the surface. Panicked, it took Garfield a moment yet before realizing that his lungs weren't starved for oxygen, even though he'd been submerged for well over five minutes.

He floated there, somehow impossibly, tiny dots of light flickering before his eyes from a sun that didn't exist, when an overwhelming power tugged at his eyelids. Garfield felt like he was growing tired, sleepy, and the urge to stop fighting was impossible to ignore.

Not even realizing it when it happened, he'd somehow shut his eyes and dreamt — for what else could it possibly have been that he was doing? Somehow lost in Raven's memories, like the gentle ebb and flow of the ocean waves, he succumbed to its whims…

He saw her then — a small shape, a little girl in a too big cloak. From where he stood, she appeared vulnerable and fragile. Nothing like the stoic and brilliant young woman he'd come to know throughout the years. Instead, there was a permanent sadness to her large, violet eyes, and her mouth was always pinched in a pout. Next to her stood an elderly woman, robed in bright red; a stark contrast to what the other monks — and Raven — wore. Also, unlike the simpleness of the Azarathian common-folk culture, she wore more mystical items embellishing her state of dress. Gold chunky earrings, a thick neck piece, belt, and many rings, as well as a full arm covered in gold metal plating right down to her wrist. The old woman had hair as white as snow, cascading down her shoulders in waves that had resembled Raven's when she'd once grown it out. She also walked with the aid of a simple golden staff and, like Raven, she, too, bore the mystical red chakra in the centre of her forehead.
The stairs the two stood upon were suspended in the air — as if they were floating above the ground magically — leading to a set of large, looming white doors with a backdrop of infinite stars and worlds just beyond. Both women hovered nearby, appearing somehow infinitesimal in comparison to their surroundings. Like they lived in a castle among the stars, in a private alcove where not a soul would think to find them unless they wanted them to.

_Azarath._

Or, Azarath as Raven had seen it as a little girl. Everything was so much bigger than her, exaggerated in the eyes of a young child.

Garfield was somehow present, but also not. They couldn't see him, of course, but he heard and lived it through Raven's eyes, like a secret passenger. A few of the temple's residents shuffled on past her, moving quicker at the bottom of the steps, and it had caught her attention. It made her pull up the hood of her cloak, wrapping it even tighter about her body; a motion Garfield was more than familiar with, even as he'd known Raven today.

"Will I see her tomorrow?" she asked, voice plain as she turned to quickly follow on the heels of the older woman.

"Perhaps."

The steps were steep for her shorter legs and it seemed she hadn't quite mastered the ability to levitate yet.

"She visits every one of my birthdays. Always with a gift." Raven huffed before pausing a moment to stare up at the heavy set of doors before her, entranced.

"Is it true? What they all say?" Mumbling, Raven had made the old crone stop and turn to acknowledge her charge with a set of wisened, bewitching eyes. Raven herself, however, never managed to pull her gaze from the intimidating doors of the temple. "Was I almost sent away forever?"

The old woman bowed her head in silence. Raven finally turned to acknowledge her regal companion, pressing on. "Are they right? Would it have been better if they'd succeeded? Would you all...be safer? Even mother?"

Azar tapped her scepter staff once against the step she stood on, the sound a subtle echo. "Raven, the path easiest and treaded most is often not always the correct one."

Raven nodded once, solemn. "I understand. I will do my best during the lessons, mother Azar."

Garfield watched as the scene evaporated before his very eyes, swirling away like water before melding into yet another, new vision.

There were moments shared between Raven and her mother, alone in her bedroom on Azarath. Arella appeared protective of her daughter, holding her tightly against her chest through the night, always vigilant. She sang to her, some eerie lullaby in a language Garfield didn't quite understand.

The death of Azar herself had also stood out as a more painful, vivid memory for Raven, the young girl feeling as if she'd lost more than just a life mentor, but a friend and mother figure as well. One of the few at the temple who never treated Raven with fear and mistrust. Garfield didn't think he'd ever see Raven cry, but sure enough, even with her raised hood, tears streamed down her chin that day.
Then there were the days of Trigon, for of course, he dominated so much of her life story. The destruction of Azarath was perhaps the most difficult one to witness, Azar's beloved tomb the first to be desecrated by the heinous demon lord. So much death, so much pain as Arella — tears burning her eyes — rushed to save her daughter before Trigon could find her. Raven never wanted to leave. Despite the burning and the agonizing death all around her, she'd froze in front of those same doors from earlier, shaking her head, scared like Garfield had never seen her before.

But Arella kissed her daughter's forehead, just above the curved gem of her chakra, smoothed her hair back, and stared at her face with a somber smile, like she was committing her every feature to memory, one last time. Behind them, nothing remained of the beautiful temple — nor its emerald skies — save for darkness, death curdling screams, fire, so much fire, and the pervading stench of burning flesh. Ash and blood smudged her mother's round, pale face, moonlighting her daughter's in so many ways.

He was drawing closer, it was only a matter of time, but Raven couldn't fathom leaving them all behind to die. She froze, torn between wishing to obey Arella and wanting to do more to help them. But, in the end, all she could do was stand by and watch. All of Azar's blessed teachings, and not one of them mattered if Trigon dared find her. From behind Arella, the world of Azarath all perished for her, and once again Raven found herself pondering if it was all worth it.

The heavy, large, temple doors blew open, revealing an endless starry sky, wind whistling past her as Arella ushered her daughter to go, whispering words only Raven could hear. By now, both women were sobbing, recluse to accept the cruel fate they'd been dealt. "Stay safe, little one...Stay strong."

The memory ended only when the darkness swallowed Raven whole, and the grand Azarathian doors closed forever. The final image she ever saw, that of her mother's white cloaked silhouete — her long, ebony hair caught in the wind — against a fiery backdrop of hell itself...

Garfield felt everything that Raven felt; like he was being pulled apart and rag-dolled in the middle of a fierce storm until she'd eventually landed somewhere more familiar to the both of them:

Titans Tower.

These memories were the ones most dominant in Raven's head, and were, of course, the ones in relation to her time with the Titans. Her unfortunate encounter with Slade on her birthday was branded in her mind with the most urgency, just as the marks of Scath had been sewn to her skin. It had been a most traumatizing experience for her, and it was apparent that she still held some anxiety over it, regardless of how aloof the empath had always tried to appear before her teammates.

Beast Boy could never admit it aloud, but he couldn't help the tinge of bitterness upon recalling that, of all the Titans, it had been Robin who'd been there for her during such a trying time. There was nothing more the shapeshifter had wanted to do than to take out Slade personally for the gross torture he'd subjected one of his friends to. Not enough that Slade had hurt and used Terra to accomplish his own selfish demands, the thought that the despicable man had also come after Raven had made Garfield's blood boil.

Back then, perhaps he'd been too childish, too immature, and maybe even too incompetent to provide her the same comfort and assured success that their team leader could have. Still, looking back at it all now, it stung, and he certainly didn't have the time to really unpack all the whys behind that.

At least he wasn't completely absent from her memories; giving Raven his lucky penny had stood...
out to her as a significant moment in time. A sense of warmth and pride filled his thudding chest, not quite sure anymore if the emotions stemmed from Raven or himself.

In fact, Beast Boy seemed to appear quite frequently in her thoughts and most precious memories of her life with the Titans.

Her birthday party.

Saving her from the beast.

Sitting in silence on the shoreline outside the tower.

Telling her she wasn't alone.

Nevermore.

The contrast she'd made between him and Malchior when the fictional creature had toyed with her feelings.

Even the moment he'd called her creepy when she'd closed herself off to be with Malchior — a moment he'd cringed at. Being a stupid kid, he knew he'd often been tactless and callous when he'd chosen to ignore their differences. It was embarrassing, looking back at his youth and witnessing such brash behaviour, but it only made him more appreciative of how much they'd both grown. Grateful that things between them had long since reached a mutual understanding, and how close they'd become over the last couple of years, it made Beast Boy wonder at just how much he'd changed ever since then.

Back then, Raven had been the prickly, mysterious girl he'd always wanted to help bring out of her shell. The girl who didn't seem to care to get to know him or any of the others, and it had driven Beast Boy insane. He'd just wanted to be her friend, and couldn't accept that her definition of friendship may have been a different one. Mostly, it was his immaturity and lack of experience with kids his own age, as well as Raven's overabundance of secrets and acceptance of a darker fate. But, somewhere along the line of growing up and going through so much together, things changed.

Now...now Raven meant something else to him. Something more. Something he was terrified of labelling. So he pushed it to the back of his mind and ignored his own feelings, choosing to focus instead on the dilemma Steve had posed to him, because hurting himself was a lot easier than realizing he'd hurt her.

"I wish I'd been born more like her..." Once again, Raven's voice permeated through his subconscious. "Prettier, wiser, resourceful, stronger...normal."

This time, no imagery came with the voice. No memory. Just Raven, admitting to some of her worst, most private insecurities. Garfield swallowed guiltily, squeezing his eyes shut in a desperate attempt to reach her somehow.

Me, too, Rae. But normal is overrated, anyways. Normal means never having met you, or the other Titans. So, who needs normal? I'd rather have you.

He couldn't speak where he was, drowned out by the water, but still his voice reverberated around him, having pushed it into existence.

A thousand do-overs, and I'd always pick you...
Raven had always suspected that Beast Boy was akin to an iceberg, in that he kept a lot of details to himself, hidden just beneath the surface. The parts of him often in full view were carefully selected, and were but a fragment of the entire story. The scenario could be likened to that of a game of cards, where Beast Boy always held his hand close to his chest.

Like Raven, Garfield only ever shared what he needed to share, if only so that none of his friends ever felt the need to worry about him. At least, not while there were other more pressing matters to attend to. And in the hero business, that felt like just about everything. Raven could relate to this desire — having done so herself for a time — and thus, never faulted him for it, nor outed him to the others when she had her suspicions.

For the longest time, she'd assumed nothing of it; that Garfield was just a silly kid with a bit of a tragic past, like all the other Titans she'd ever met.

However, now that she was alone in the grim, deep recesses of his mind, she quickly came to understand just how wrong she'd been. Tragic was but an understatement.

Nothing could have prepared the empath for what she encountered in his deepest, darkest memories. Not even her experience in the mind of an equally traumatized Titan: Robin.

"Do you know what it feels like to be a failure? Incompetent? Worthless? Unable to follow even the most simplest of orders?"

Voices tugged at her subconscious, and Raven closed her eyes, heeding their desire. She saw him then, an innocent child — no more than ten years old — with flaxen hair and eyes as blue as the daytime skies. Summer. He reminded her of summer.

But the little boy was not the one speaking. Instead, he stood there idly, hidden behind the wall as he spied from just beyond the railway of the stairs, overlooking the living room. Downstairs, well after midnight, a conversation was taking place between two adults in hushed voices. A conversation that, no doubt, he was not meant to hear.

"That's all the kid thinks about. How he failed his parents. How they died. Over and over again, tormenting himself. Like he could somehow go back and change things. It's interfering with everything he does, including being a member of the team."

A flicker, and the child glanced over at his reflection in the nearby mirror. A boy who looked just like him — but green all over — stared right back. Eyes wide and terrified, he ran small, stubby fingers over the side of his face, suspended in disbelief when his green reflection mimicked every move, every finite muscle twitch.

"All the more reason to be there for him. It wasn't his fault, Steve...There was nothing he could
have done. He's just a child, after all, and he needs us. Now more than ever."

The adults speaking had voices that echoed and sounded muffled; likely from the difficulty Garfield had trying to understand them in the memory. Like a dream he'd been straining to recall.

"But he will never see it that way, darling. In fact, things will only get worse as he grows older." Steve spoke somberly, in a softer tone Raven had never anticipated the aloof leader to be capable of. There was genuine sympathy for Garfield. Amid all the horrible things he said about the boy, there was a part of Steve that truly cared.

"Do you really believe that he's accepted the way he looks? That he has embraced his unique abilities?"

Another flicker and the boy changed, resembling his reflection. Green skin, green eyes, green hair, fangs, pointed ears, claws. The summer child was gone, and Beast Boy stood in his place.

"Garfield will grow into them, I'm sure of it." Even to Raven, Rita sounded nearly unconvinced.

"He's only a child, and yet he's already been dealt a life of troubles. It's naive to assume that he'll just grow out of it. This isn't a phase, Rita. This is about the future. Our future, and his."

Garfield turned then and stared right at Raven; right through her, emerald gaze piercing.

"I should have saved them...," he stated through a tight grimace, on the brink of tears. "I could have saved them all..."

The scene behind him then changed, swirling and morphing right before Raven's eyes. She watched in horror at the newer memory, helpless, as a small boat drew closer to the edge of a deadly, violent waterfall. The rapid waters pushed it along mercilessly, the wind powerful enough to whip about the sturdy leaves of various trees in the nearby jungle. Beast Boy — still only a child — remained on the edge of the waterbank, safe behind a series of trees as he turned to watch what must have been a horrifying tragedy to a boy so young.

Raven reached out reflexively, reacting to her heroic instincts in a vain effort to stop the boat, but she moved at a crawl in the memory, held back by the invisible forces of fate. From where she stood, at the shoreline of the jungle, she could just make out the form of a young couple on the boat, clinging to one another desperately with tears fresh in their eyes. They gave one final lingering look at their beautiful son — for they resembled Garfield so much — and appeared to have remorsefully accepted their ill fortune. Like they were somehow conveying their deepest regrets and apologies to the child they'd known they'd be leaving behind. The one they'd been robbed of raising, and who had been robbed of a family. Both Logans mouthed something at Garfield, drowned out by the screeching winds and rushing waters, just as the rocky edge had claimed them. But Raven knew what they had said in those precious few moments before they'd tumbled to their death.

Goodbye.

They were saying goodbye to a wide-eyed, innocent boy who had hardly understood at the time what had just happened to his parents. That he'd gone from having a loving home one moment, to being an orphan the next, all alone in the world. But it was no doubt that Garfield would later come to be haunted by this event for the rest of his life. An event so tragic had a nasty habit of poisoning every life it touched, and Garfield had been no exception.

The small red boat, now out of control in the aggressive waters, finally tumbled over the edge and
out of view, every passing second feeling like a full minute. Raven squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her hands over her ears in an attempt to drown out what she knew was coming.

Her efforts in vain, she still heard the fading screams like they were coming from within her own skull, eventually snuffed out only by the sound of rushing water as all the remaining survivors fell to their untimely demise.

The memory, it seemed, would grant her no respite, in the same way that it would not let Beast Boy forget a single, gorey detail.

Immediately, grief clutched at Raven's heart like an icy claw. She wept openly as Garfield's own emotions overwhelmed her, a terrible, gnawing sadness like she'd never known ripping her soul asunder.

I'm so sorry, Gar...

He'd never told any of the Titans what had happened to his birth parents. Robin had likely been the only one aware, and only because he'd looked into each of his teammates. Raven could only imagine what a burden it must have been, to carry so much grief and guilt all alone for so long.

When she finally opened her eyes again — after the sound of the waterfall had stilled into silence — she found that the young boy was gone without a trace.

The memories wouldn't wait for her, evidently. And like a punishing montage, she was thrust into yet another emotionally gripping episode.

"Again!"

From behind her, she heard Steve's commanding voice, gruff and jarring. Turning around, she watched on in horror as a teenaged Garfield grimaced from the floor, clutching at his head in sheer agony while Mento attacked his mind without relent.

"Stop me, Beast Boy!"

Garfield cried out — a long, whimpering moan — as tears formed in the corners of his eyes. He shut them tightly enough to hurt, like it would somehow help in keeping Steve from invading and influencing his thoughts.

"Mento! Enough! Can't you see the poor thing is in pain?!" Elastigirl rushed to the young boy's side, pulling him into the safety of her arms immediately.

Garfield clung to her like his life depended on it, stuffing his face into her chest as he hid from the world. From where Raven stood, she could see the outline of his shoulders shaking with the sobs that wracked his body, too embarrassed to let anyone witness his tear-streaked cheeks.

Mento had finally paused in his assault, and briefly, a look of guilt flashed across his hardened features. He shook his head and removed his iconic helmet.

"Rita...I'm only trying to help."

Rita was busy hushing and consoling the distraught boy in her embrace, running her fingers through his tousled hair tenderly. Mento didn't exist in that moment. Not in the safe, invisible bubble she'd somehow created around her and Garfield, rocking him gently.

"I'm right here, sweetie. You take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

Rita Farr was, perhaps, the highlight to all of Beast Boy's worst memories. Like a beacon of light
in an otherwise dark and dreary path, she always stood out, highlighted in a halo in his mind. Raven, unfortunately, hadn't gotten to know her very well over the course of the past few years, but of what she'd seen, she could tell why Beast Boy had so quickly grown attached to her.

Rita was proof that not everything was doom and gloom in Garfield's mind. Soon after the incident with Mento, Raven witnessed one of his most joyous life experiences; his adoption by Rita Farr.

Following that event were then a series of more positive memories for the changeling. Bonding with both Cliff and Larry, even some good times with Steve, and how the Doom Patrol had saved Garfield from the hands of his scheming uncle, Nicholas Galtry. It amazed Raven how, even with some of his more negative experiences, Beast Boy would find a silver lining. She could have smiled at the endearing quality; it was just like her green teammate to see the positives in everything. Like Galtry leading him to find a home with the Doom Patrol, despite the way he'd treated him. Or how Steve eventually loosened up a bit and stepped up as a sort of father figure.

Then, of course, there was Beast Boy finding the Titans, on that fateful day years ago where they'd all been drawn to Starfire's unexpected landing on Earth. Raven was curious to learn that one of Beast Boy's most treasured, memorable days had been when she'd admitted to finding him funny after he'd unknowingly cracked his first joke to her.

After she'd witnessed his memories with the Doom Patrol, she caught on that Mento would often frown upon Garfield acting childish. Whenever he'd break this protocol, he would be immediately — and harshly — reprimanded, and each time, he would reply with a prompt 'Yes, sir!' and salute, mirroring the serious integrity of a soldier.

It saddened Raven to learn that her admission to his joke was likely the first time in a long while that Beast Boy hadn't been chastised for simply behaving like a kid. It explained a lot about why he'd gladly taken on the role of jokester of the group, often choosing to downplay his capabilities as a powerhouse on the team.

Raven was learning a lot more about her friend than she'd ever have anticipated. For one thing, the Titans and Doom Patrol weren't the only relevant people in Garfield's memories. There were some strangers Raven didn't even recognize; ones that Garfield had neglected ever mentioning. Or, perhaps — she realized with a pang of regret — no one had bothered to ask.

However, a particular face stood out, having a strong presence amongst them all. It belonged to that of a youthful little girl with short, straight, platinum blonde hair, and a smile sweeter than pie, with dimples to match. It didn't take Raven long to deduce — with an undeniable sting of jealousy — that she'd likely been a childhood love for Garfield. Puzzled more than she was threatened, she'd always figured Terra had been his first love.

Raven's more petty feelings about the girl eventually eroded into complacency. All these emotions did was reaffirm how she felt about Beast Boy, like a constant reminder now that Raven was self-aware.

She cared about him, deeply, and there was no denying that anymore. She knew, deep down, that she didn't detest these other women in his life, only that she envied how close they were to Garfield, when Raven herself could barely muster the strength to tell him how she truly felt. It had taken her long enough to realize it in the first place and, by the time she had, she'd been too late.

Whoever the girl was, Beast Boy remembered her fondly, as he did Terra. What he didn't remember fondly, however, was the experimentation.

Raven had always known that Beast Boy had initially been treated as a medical phenomenon,
which explained his fear and dislike of needles and doctors in general. Regardless of this knowledge, witnessing the various tests and cruelty he endured as a child was an extremely uncomfortable task.

She found herself wincing and recoiling every time he cried out in pain, struggling against the leather restraints that bound his little arms, legs, and head. Tears pooled in his typically effervescent eyes, adding a shine to the innocent green Raven had become so familiar with. Those restraints would leave marks against his skin, bound as tightly as they were and leaving him alone for hours at a time. It bothered her knowing there was nothing she could do to help free him, as a mere bystander to his memories.

Being a hero, after all her time with the Titans, had become a habit. It was ingrained in her to jump in and aid people in need. Thus, it tore Raven apart watching the way the surgeons cut into Garfield — her friend, her teammate, someone she viewed as part of her family — over and over while she did nothing. Having to listen to his whispers and desperate pleas echoing in the dark until he grew too tired to fight them anymore, was a form of specially branded torture for the empath…

But perhaps worse than that still was when Beast Boy had wanted to give up entirely.

These were, arguably, the darkest points in his life — where he was at his absolute lowest of lows — when he was all alone, so alone, in despair so bleak that he'd start to consider ending his life. The voices that haunted his mind — plagued his memories, reminding him of all his failures — they were ugly and cunning and so vindictive…

Raven, alone in complete and total darkness now, could hear them like vapoured whispers against her skin. Ghosts of Garfield's past, faces of all the people he'd let down.

You couldn't save them...couldn't save anyone.

Worthless …

Nobody can stand you.

Can't follow simple orders...You'll just get people killed.

You're annoying. All you do is drive people away. What makes you think they'll ever like you?

They died for you, and it was always a mistake. It should have been you.

If you disappeared tomorrow, no one would care. Maybe, for a little bit, but they'll forget you sooner or later. And they'll be happier, too.

It was a jarring reality check for Raven, realizing just how severe Garfield's depression could be — that he'd thought about leaving her in a more permanent way. She had no idea how to process it at all. The cruel, despicable voices didn't make it any easier, of course. In fact, they made it nearly impossible to think at all.

None of your jokes are funny, you're just stupid.

Couldn't even save Terra, and now she wants nothing to do with you. You drove her into Slade's arms, you monster. If you'd helped her, maybe she'd still be here.

But you couldn't even save your parents after they sacrificed everything for you, just watched them die while you saved yourself.
Made Rita cry, always make her cry.

Even your teammates don't trust you, remember?

Maybe it's better that they're all dead, so they don't see the loser you've become.

Selfish.

Weak.

PATHETIC.

The voices spoke over one another, echoing and mingling louder and louder, as if fighting for the right to break him down first. But always, their message rang crystal clear: hurt the boy. The frustration with their lies made Raven gnash her teeth together, her agitation spiking and affecting her composure.

You'll never be any good for anyone, let alone her.

"No!" Raven finally screamed back at the voices, hearing them in her head even as she pressed her hands to her ears and tried to shake them out. "None of that is true, Gar. None of it!"

Worthless…

Freak…

"Shut up! Shut up! Just be quiet already!" she yelled, anger making her powers flare to life. "Leave him alone!"

Her eyes flashed in the darkness, an eerie but bright light. Driving them out one by one like shadows, Raven ensured that the voices slowly faded into the background. But the damage had been done. Falling to her knees, she trembled, sweating profusely and breathing heavily while trying to regain control over her emotions.

It was just about all she could do for him.

What else did one do when the happiest, most optimistic ball of sunshine decided that they weren't worth saving anymore? That nothing was worth it. That all the pain and tragedy they'd kept bottled up for years had nearly won, and not a soul in existence could ease their sorrow. How could their mind be changed, when they'd give up everything and then some to keep those they loved happy? At what cost had Beast Boy, time and time again, opted to be the beating heart of the team? And, more importantly, how did they all pay that forward when he'd been feeling like this for so long?

It chilled Raven to the bone, coming into contact with such awful feelings of desolation. They were like a bottomless pit, the way they sucked in their victims, and she couldn't believe just how much — and for how long — such a pure soul like Garfield had suffered in their clutches.

Thinking about it made her ache, like an insufferable itch from the inside. The very prospect of a life without him — without his stupid jokes, his infectious smile, or his constant good cheer — was so depressing, she couldn't even fathom it. Even if he would never be hers — at least, not in the way she wanted — she still valued his friendship and his company too much to live without him. Raven, submerged in the water with her eyes closed, could still feel the tears slip down her cheeks, floating before her as tiny, individual droplets before becoming lost to the sea of his subconscious.
Lost, just like Garfield felt, so often in his life. Just like she had, before she'd found a home with the Titans. This time, she cried of her own free will — separate from the influential climate of memories. She cried because she didn't want to lose him, too.

"An arranged marriage will do wonders for him." Steve's voice echoed nearby, forcing Raven into a more recent memory, Garfield's psyche not giving her any time to recuperate from what she'd bore witness to.

Mento's words popped up like they were sharply bolded, indicating the heavy impact they had on Beast Boy's already fragile composure.

This must be the dinner, Raven resolved. He's been in a foul mood ever since he'd spoken to Rita and Steve...

"The fact is, the physical affliction the boy suffers from will always be a...problem for any girl he brings home. Let alone the potential for children."

Steve only spoke, but the words felt like they were shouted at Raven, hitting her so hard in the face with their weight, like a heavy slap that left her cheeks stinging. She'd always known that Mento was a cold, calculating man — Garfield's complex childhood had proven that — but the audacity of what he'd just said left the sorceress reeling with disgust.

"He wants me to be a puppet. Yes, sir. No, sir. Thank you, sir." Garfield — from this memory — was looking directly at her when he spoke, eyes red rimmed and shining with unshed tears. His formal wear sat askew and dishevelled, the top few buttons of his crisp dress shirt ripped off in a fit of anger, and his perfectly gelled hair ruffled into messy, deep green waves. Likely from all the times he'd run his hands through it, trying to keep himself together.

"In some ways, I think I need that control. Because so far, every decision I've ever made on my own has either only hurt people or gotten them killed."

Raven wanted to reply to him, but when she opened her mouth to speak, she choked on her own words, like she was still submerged under water, and only bubbles escaped her throat. A reminder that, ultimately, she held no power here. Even though she ought to have known better, Raven couldn't help the overwhelming urge to help him see otherwise.

Too many times Raven herself had gone down that road. She'd spent most of her life believing others would take care of her or knew better than she did, and that was how Trigon had found her anyways. It wasn't until the Titans that she'd learned of a new way to stand up to her father and thus, take her fate into her own hands. If only she could find a way to tell Garfield that there was always another way.

Gripping at her throat, still trying to hurl incoherent thoughts towards him, Raven found herself suddenly floating away from him, drifting like she was being carried back by a current she could not fight.

'No!' she pleaded, 'Please, it's too soon!'

Garfield grew smaller in the distance as he watched her with sad, empty eyes, his memory quickly fading from her view and blurring into the ocean blue.

Culminating in what she presumed was the finale to this adventure, Raven then found herself in an underwater, turbulent cyclone of Garfield's thoughts and feelings regarding her.

It was peculiar, seeing herself through his eyes. But mostly, she found it embarrassing.
With a racing heart, Raven soon learned that it wasn't just his camera lens capturing her beauty in such inexplicable ways. Garfield saw her in a light no reflection could ever do justice.

Everything about the images of Raven were intimate, filtered through a haze of artistry that she'd never have thought possible. Had she not been part of his subconscious, she might have blushed at the way his feelings for her — bold and vibrant, like the yellow dress she'd worn that day by the stream — were so unabashedly present.

Unfortunately, they were also tainted by Steve's words of warning, the dark, looming grim reaper of Garfield's past, and all his failures, clenching to him in reminder.

*You'll never be any good for anyone, let alone her...*

It was her. It was all about her in the end. Raven understood this now with a clarity she could not define — nor that she knew what to do with, truthfully.

However, before she could make any more deductions, the water was pushing her out, forcing her to leave after she'd long since overstayed her welcome.

Once Raven finally broke free of the ocean's surface — throwing back her dark, wet, violet curtain of hair from her face — she recalled just how much she'd been at the forefront of Garfield's thoughts.

She gulped in newly salty air like her lungs had been deprived of oxygen, more out of instinct than anything else, and tried to gather her bearings. In her head, all that Beast Boy had shown her played fresh. Alight with questions and a new perspective on her teammate, she bobbed along the surface until she'd reached the shore once more.

Raven fought against the low crashing waves as she paddled over to the centre of the strip of beach, her clothes dripping. With feet bare and wet, they sunk into the sand and yet did not leave behind a single footprint. Picking up her cloak from where she'd left it and clasping it about her shoulders, Raven then closed her eyes and uttered her mantra. A powerful, unnatural wind picked up and whipped about her clothes, leaving her entirely dry. Then, Raven took in a deep breath, levitated, and entered a deep state of meditation...

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Beast Boy was dragged out to reality only to find that he was hovering inches above the ground. His hands were clasped with Raven's, and her forehead now pressed lightly against his, so close that he could breathe in the subtle perfume of her flowery shampoo and taste the mint on her breath. The sharpness of the red jewel situated between her brow burned his skin like hot coal, but the empath remained still, a glowing, white aura about her, pulsating to the rhythm of her heart. He'd opened his eyes first, but it only took another moment to find himself locking gazes with her lavender stare as she snapped awake. They both then drifted safely back down, feet on the floor.

Self-conscious of their closeness — among other things — Raven and Beast Boy immediately parted, reluctant and sheepishly silent, the embarrassment of what they'd both revealed to one another fresh on their minds.

Raven cleared her throat and straightened out imaginary folds on her skirt. "It's done." She'd found her voice at last, and carefully tucked her hair behind her ear, just to keep her hands busy. "The connection is severed now."

There was a hint of subtle regret caught in her voice — a stray piece of melancholy.
“Just like that?” Beast Boy mouthed. “It's...over?” Unlike Raven, he didn't bother masking his disappointment.

The empath nodded briskly, once. And then she shrugged her shoulders in uncertainty. "The ways in which we didn't understand it are gone."

Beast Boy took a step towards her, palms up and bridging that distance again, longing to touch her but too much of a coward to do so. He had so many questions on the tip of his tongue, and eyed Raven with an unwavering stare. "Meaning...?"

She huffed, feigning annoyance. "Meaning, from now on, I'll no longer intrude your mind with...images based on my emotions." Raven couldn't help but colour a bit at the memories of all he'd seen. How naked she'd been. In more ways than one. "Instead, it'll be on our terms. So...should you need me, or should I need you..."

"We can still reach out," he concluded for her, a soft smile betraying his lips.

"Exactly. Emergencies only, of course."

"That's good to hear.” In a bold move, his hand then came up to the side of her face, hovering momentarily over her cheek, and causing her to flinch at his abrupt closeness.

Raven's body language visibly softened, but Garfield moved his fingers to the glistening ruby in the centre of her forehead instead, touching the stone gingerly. "Did any of it hurt?" he asked, voice gentle.

"Only the parts that hurt you," she answered with a sharp inhale.

Beast Boy's hand fell away then, and his eyes were immediately downcast, a muscle in his jaw twitching to life. "You saw...all that, huh?"

When she didn't reply — opting to grace him with a sympathetic expression instead — he laughed off her worry uneasily. "It's really not as bad as you might think."

"Garfield-"

He cut her off with a raise of his hand. "Really, Rae. I mean, it's nothing compared to what you went through."

She bit the inside of her cheek, then stared down at her boots. "Tragedy is not a competition. Maybe...we've both just been through enough, and that's exactly what brought us here, to the Titans. I don't know about you, but I'm...grateful for everything this family has given me, and my past has only made me treasure it more."

"Raven..." Now he did cup her face, his voice like velvet when he whispered her name, eliciting a delicious shiver down her spine.

The sliver of space between their bodies vanished when he pressed against her, staring into her eyes as he pulled her closer. Had he always been so...warm?

Nervous fingers grappled with the fine strands of her hair, while his other free hand tugged at the belt loops of her skirt.

Raven knew that he meant to kiss her. Azar help her, in that moment, she felt as if she had never wanted anything more her entire life. Her eyes fell closed, lips parted in anticipation, and she
waited with bated breath for the moment when his hot mouth would crush hers in a fevered embrace.

Only, the moment never came, and like a fool, Raven felt like she'd been left out to dry. Instead, Beast Boy had withdrawn, and when Raven opened her eyes, she found that he'd turned around and given her his back. Bent over the nearby work table he'd set up, he had picked up his camera and said, "We should probably start the photoshoot before the candles burn everything down and I'm kicked out for arson."

It was meant to be a tease — a lighthearted joke to take her mind off what hadn't happened — but Raven felt as if an icy cool draft had changed the atmosphere between them, leaving her to wither away when her eyes blinked open to reality. She felt like an imbecile all over again, her pride and ego hurting, and the emotions muted her to his attempt at humor.

"Yes, of course." She swallowed, glum, her voice sticking in her throat where a lump had lodged itself between her vocal chords. The breath she'd released was shaky upon exhalation, and she didn't look at him when she turned towards the screen he'd set up. Raven then slowly walked towards it, shoulders back and posture so straight, one would think that an army of blades were poised at her spine...
Deep down, Raven had an inkling as to why Beast Boy hadn't kissed her in the end. Although it made her feel a touch better knowing that it wasn't because he didn't feel the same way, it still bothered her that there was very much a hurdle between them.

His concerns, of course, were valid. She'd gleaned that much after he'd let her pry into his memories, and she'd witnessed first hand what Steve had alluded to. Having children, a viable future at Dayton Industries, someone loving him for him and not just his fortune and fame. Even though Steve had been harsh in the execution of such advice, he also, unfortunately, hadn't been entirely...wrong. Especially since Raven had been witness to the majority of Garfield's love affairs over the last few years.

For the longest time, Raven herself had held back on many of her own feelings because of similar grievances. Like, for example, her newest obsession with nude photography. And now, her budding feelings for Beast Boy.

Azar, she'd wanted him to kiss her. And when he didn't, she was devastated, like she'd been kicked in the gut, the wind knocked right out of her. It was childish to feel so deflated by something so inconsequential, and yet she'd practically been on the verge of a tantrum.

The photoshoot itself had gone...interestingly, to say the least. After she'd left herself open to him, and vice versa, things had evidently changed in their dynamic, and Raven was unable to filter her feelings as easily as she normally would have. Raw and open, she'd grown more bold in front of Garfield's camera. Thinking back on it now, she was almost embarrassed about how forward and provocative she'd been. Almost. After all, he'd already seen her naked and far more vulnerable.

And maybe, she'd also been feeling a little bit vengeful after he'd teased her so often, intentional or otherwise. So Raven had decided to tease him back.

At first, she'd kept her clothes on while she posed, not really sure about how to behave in such an intimate setting. But as she gradually grew more accustomed to the shutter clicking of his camera, the hazy atmosphere of the environment, and his soft words of encouragement, she'd slowly started stripping.

Raven wasn't entirely sure what exactly had possessed her to do so, only that Garfield being present no longer phased her. It was just another night in her lonely bedroom, in front of her mirror. Except, the mirror was a camera, and the man behind it was the only audience Raven wanted.

Of course, it didn't take too long for Beast Boy to take notice. First, she'd unzipped her hoodie, and he'd obviously made nothing of it. Then, she removed it, claiming it was baggy and stuffy, which was not entirely untrue. But thereafter, Raven started undoing her blouse one button at a time, revealing the thin camisole underneath, and Garfield — much to her secret delight — had started to become distracted. He'd begun to exhibit all the nervous telltale signs. Licking at his lips, mouth
dry, twitching fingers, and his eyes always uncertain of where to look without fear of being caught
gawking openly.

By the time Raven's top had come off and she'd shimmied out of her skirt, leaving her in just her
underthings, Garfield's jaw had dropped, the changeling forgetting entirely what it was he was
supposed to be doing. He'd blinked rapidly, as if his eyes deceived him, and nearly fumbled the
camera several times, cursing and being vocally grateful for the strap it dangled on.

However, once Raven had found her own groove, she'd begun to pose more comfortably in front of
him, very much enjoying the way he squirmed when she'd emulate the model stances she'd seen
online. She stared at the camera like she was staring at him, toying with him the way she'd toyed
with her. As Garfield moved about, trying his damndest to focus objectively on his task —
and not on how great her thick, shapely ass looked in a thong, the pale, firm cheeks eating the thin
dark fabric of material like a shoelace — Raven only grew more bold in her advances.

When Garfield would crouch to get a new angle, Raven followed him to the floor, crawling on her
knees until her breath nearly fogged the lens of his camera, and knocking him back on his butt.
Between his legs, with her hands so dangerously close to the sensitive, growing organ before her,
she'd pose, making nothing of it and knowing that Beast Boy himself was also too much of a
coward to call her out on her forthright nature. Both her sports bra and panties were so snug, the
black material gave the illusion of straps painted onto her fair skin. She watched, with great
amusement, as Beast Boy gulped, using his camera to shield his pallid face, blood having drained
to a different region of his body.

Raven was making him want her so much, his lust practically bled off of him and, in turn, was
arousing her, too. In that moment, all she'd wanted him to do was drop his camera, push her onto
her back, and take her, right then and there, on the various, velvety pillows and blankets of the set.
Only, neither of them were brave enough to initiate anything of the sort, and what with Steve's
warning looming in the air, very much the elephant in the room, that was unlikely to change,
regardless of how naked Raven got.

In the end, all she'd managed to accomplish was to create an undeniable sexual tension between
them that pervaded in the silence when they were done. The words they did exchange were not
only minimal and to the point, but also notably weighed down with the strain it took holding back.
Raven had begrudgingly turned around to put her clothes back on in the background while Garfield
had pretended to busy himself with anything else.

The entire ordeal had, in fact, soured the empath's mood so much, to the point where Raven now
sat alone in her bedroom, staring down at the screen of her phone and deliberating over deleting
her profile on social media. She bounced her knee, chewed on her bottom lip, and skated her
fingers over the button on her screen more times than she could count, always pulling away
indecisively in the last minute.

"This is such a mess," she mused aloud, running her hand through the front of her hair while
grumbling in frustration.

As promised, Beast Boy had sent her the most recent files of photos he'd taken, only he'd kept her
face in most of the shots this time. In the accompanying text, he'd asked her if she'd like him to
send edits without her face, but Raven had declined and, in a split decision, had told him that she
was shutting down her account. Which was what had potentially forced her hand in actually
delivering on that front. As per typical Beast Boy fashion, he'd merely replied with a slew of
emojis — most of them a sad or crying face — but never said anything else on the matter.

Until today anyways.
It was one of those normal, mundane weekdays and crime was at an all-time low. Which meant that Beast Boy was in class, Starfire and Robin were likely spending some quality time together, and Victor was volunteering at the youth centre with Sarah.

Everyone had their communicators with them in case of an emergency, but Beast Boy and Raven had recently taken to texting instead. The phone buzzed to life in the sorceress’ hands, alerting her to a new text from the changeling. Raven opened it immediately, unable to sate her curiosity, heart hammering in anticipation.

*I've got something to show you later. Come by the studio tonight?*

Raven chewed nervously at the corner of her fingernail, unsure of how to respond, or what to make of the message.

She wanted to go. The prospect of spending more alone time with Garfield had never been more appealing during all the years she'd known him. Especially after the photoshoot, and, Azar, the way he’d get her blood to boil with just a single, heated look. However, realizing bitterly that nothing would likely come of it besides more unbearable tension, she was considering that, maybe, putting some distance between them instead might be a better alternative. It sucked, having to be rational about everything, and she was deeply hurting at the prospect of giving up for good, but the more she thought on it, the more she knew it was the wisest course of action. With the least amount of heartbreak.

Currently, Raven couldn't stand the thought of Beast Boy being with someone else, but she was also hyper aware that it wasn't fair of her to expect him to disobey Steve's wishes for her sake. Exactly what was so special about her, anyways? She'd just be another chapter in his life, soon to be closed and forgotten when they'd both opt to move on as friends and friends only.

Agitated and perhaps emotionally compromised, Raven hurriedly exited out of the text message and, in a snap decision, proceeded to go through with deleting her social media account for real this time. Once it was done, she annoyedly tossed the phone aside onto her pillow and glared back at all the various pieces of clothes Beast Boy had purchased for her, currently strewn about over her bed sheets. The memory felt like it had happened only yesterday, and some of the outfits she hadn't even worn outside of the fitting room.

Bearing more than just sentimental value, Raven didn't have the heart to throw them out. He'd spent a small fortune on the vast collection, and Raven had genuinely come to adore each piece, but she also needed to put all of this behind her if she was ever going to give him up.

So, until she could reach a more formal decision, Raven had decided to pack them away for good, out of sight and out of mind. Maybe one day, she'd find the strength to throw them out or return them to him. After all, she thought with a sense of melancholy while fingering the soft satin of a lovely skirt, time would heal all wounds.

Just as she'd sighed heavily to herself before beginning the tedious process of folding everything, there came a gentle knock on her door.

"Raven? Are you in there?" Kory's voice drifted into her room, muffled by the walls between them. Raven furrowed her brows — it was unlike Kory to return early from a date with Robin.

She got off her bed and opened the door, the alien princess' golden face beaming at her in greeting, arms tucked behind her back. "I was wondering if you'd like to join Robin and I for a swim this evening?"
Starfire tilted her head to get a glance at the inside of Raven's room, like she was looking for something — or someone.

When she caught sight of the clothes splayed out on her bed, the other girl gasped audibly and floated on past her friend to examine them closer. Manners be damned. "These are so beautiful! Raven, you have never worn any of these! Are they new? Did you go to the mall without me?!"

Raven closed her door and walked over in a hurry, grabbing at the pile so as to stuff it away into the bags before Kory saw any more. But it was too late. She'd already started picking them up one by one and holding them out for inspection. "Why are you putting them away?"

Raven yanked a sheer crop tank top out of Kory's hands and quickly tucked it into a bag. "Because I can't wear them," she explained warily.

"Why? Did you not buy them?"

"They were a gift."

"From whom?"

"I don't know. It was a mystery donation," Raven lied through her teeth, exasperated.

Starfire casually picked up another pair of denim shorts and Raven grabbed those from her, too. They continued this way until the bra with the harness and straps was uncovered at the bottom of the pile of clothes. Both Kory and Raven paused to acknowledge it. No doubt, the alien girl was the most curious about the article, but also a bit apprehensive after the empath had proven to be quite prickly this evening.

Meanwhile, Raven was trying everything in her power not to relive the day Garfield had insisted on purchasing the lingerie for her. At the memory, her chest suddenly felt tight, like an elephant was sitting on top of her, and a sourness rose up from the pits of her stomach, burning her esophagus with hot acid. Raven had heard of stress illness before, and wondered if this somehow was her body revolting against her hasty decision.

"I heard Beast Boy went out on a date." Starfire's voice was crisp and clear and, in a strange happenstance, void of any distinct emotion.

She chose to sit on Raven's bed and left the bra alone, but still didn't make any eye contact with the other Titan, finding fascination instead with her boots.

Raven couldn't help but wince at the sting of her words, clutching at her gurgling, accusatory stomach. "It is what it is." She mustered up her most nonchalant tone and shrugged her shoulders, trying to maintain complacency.

"Truthfully, I was going to use swimming as an excuse to see how you are doing," Starfire confessed.

"I'm fine, Kory. Really."

Starfire was ready to plead her case, passion like a burning ember in her ethereal eyes. "But you have feelings for him."

"I had feelings for Malchior, too, once upon a time." Raven sounded desperate, but even she knew that what she'd said wasn't fair to Garfield. "And look how that turned out."
Starfire looked askance, obviously thinking the same thing but carefully considering her next choice of words. "Yes, only, Beast Boy is not Malchior."

She stood up, her regal height and otherworldly posture impressive as she towered over Raven. Her eyes narrowed into glowing green slits when she added, "Malchior was a parasite, and a wretch of a creature. He used you, and hurt you deeply, and were he present before us once again, I'd smite the ground where he stood without second thought." Then, she softened, becoming the girl Raven had known most of her life, all the steel leaving her comely features. "Surely, Raven, you don't think so little of Garfield, too?"

"Of course not!" Raven immediately objected. Then, more quietly, she said, "Kory, I'm sorry, I really just can't talk about this right now." The empath appeared to withdraw into herself, hugging her bare arms like she was shivering, and directing her gaze down at the ground.

"I'm sorry, Raven. I didn't mean to upset you. I only wished to help."

Raven remained silent. She knew that Starfire's intentions were good, but having her confront her on the very topic she was still only just grappling with, made Raven feel worse. Her friend was unknowingly parroting her very conscience, currently bogged down with regret, and it didn't help any that she knew Kory was right. But what else was she supposed to do?

So what if Garfield did feel the same about her? That didn't matter much when he'd made it plenty apparent that nothing would come of their mutual attraction. Realizing the hopelessness of the situation was only breaking Raven's heart all over again, and further dampening her spirits.

A look of pity flashed across the alien beauty's features, but she made to leave Raven's room nonetheless, shoulders slumped. "Should you ever wish to talk, you know where to find me," Starfire added solemnly from the doorway before finally disappearing down the corridor.

Raven let out the breath she'd been holding and visibly relaxed from a tense stance, opting to collapse onto her bed instead of the floor. She planted, ironically, face first into the harness bra. It was still new and unworn and smelled like the pungent, feminine perfume from the shop her and Beast Boy had purchased it at. She raised her chin and glanced down at it, annoyingly remembering that, sooner or later, she'd have to reply to the changeling's text message.

I've got something to show you later.

A curious message, he'd played right to her weakness. Being naturally inquisitive, there was nothing quite like a good mystery to keep Raven on her toes. Really, she should have turned his offer down immediately. In fact, it was certainly unlike Beast Boy that he didn't have anything to say in regards to her deleting the social media account. Instead, he was behaving as if everything between them was...normal. She hadn't decided yet if this was a good thing, or problematic.

Raven bit down on the inside of her cheek before reflexively whipping out her cell phone — currently buried beneath her in a tangle of her bedsheets. When she turned it back on, the screen brightened to the text message just as she'd left it, the flashing line of where she was supposed to compose her reply a blinking reminder of the time she was wasting.

In her head, she knew the course of action she wanted to take, but in her heart, she couldn't bring herself to detach and have everything go back to the way it used to be.

He's seeing someone now.

There'd never been a more clear indicator for her to give up, but then again, everything in her life,
she'd always had to fight for.

Her freedom.

Her humanity.

Her friends.

Nothing was ever given to Raven on a silver platter. The only question that remained was if it was worth it to fight for him.

Raven knew that she'd never quite be the definition of normal, never fit into the puzzle piece society — Steve — would have liked. Every new step she'd taken towards some semblance of normalcy had been an uphill battle, and most of the time, she wasn't even sure she wanted it. How could she have expected that even this would be any different?

Raven picked up the harness bra and examined it, the satin fabric of the cups soft between her fingers. Then, in a spur of the moment decision, the empath decided to act first and think later. She picked up her phone and typed in the following message on the touchscreen, being sure to hit send before she did any second guessing:

*I've got something to show you, too. Be there soon.*

Garfield would have nodded off if he didn't manage to keep himself busy until Raven got there. He'd stayed up all night adding the final touches to the album and, somehow, it still wasn't quite good enough yet. Originally, his plan was to give her his gift when it was complete, but after their last conversation, things between them had grown awkward to say the least. Not to mention, heated.

The photoshoot had been intense, and he'd found himself thinking improper thoughts about his ridiculously attractive, suddenly naked teammate. Even if it was a beauty considered more unconventional by society standards, Beast Boy had always known that Raven was beautiful. Her leotard did little to mask that detail, hugging her curves in all the right ways, long, shapely legs exposed up to a set of hips that made his breath catch in his throat. Not to mention, her killer cheekbones, sultry bedroom eyes, and a sensual mouth were a lethal combination. However, over the years, Garfield had gradually become immune to both Starfire and Raven's charms, and had also quickly learned that they were way out of his league.

His deduction on that matter, so long ago, had been fairly accurate and final in regards to Starfire, but lately...Raven had become more of a peculiar question mark.

Getting to know her more intimately, spending alone time with her, taking note of all her little quirks and hobbies, it all just added to her undefinable allure. The photoshoot the other night had merely cemented his deep and growing attraction to her. Beast Boy's cheeks reddened remembering how hot she'd looked in that thong, bare ass raised in the air as she'd leaned forward on her knees, a perfect snapshot down her sports bra revealing such lovely, supple cleavage. *God, the things he wanted to do to her...*

"Ugh," Garfield groaned audibly, shaking his head and rubbing at his tired eyes in an attempt to stop thinking about her in nothing but that skimpy lingerie set. If he kept this up, it wouldn't be long before he worked himself up into another erection that he'd have to slip and hide into his waistband. Like he'd embarrassingly done after the shoot. If Raven had noticed it back then — and surely she had, the strained tenting of his crotch more than obvious — she'd been kind enough not
to point it out or stare.

Gradually, Beast Boy opened his eyes and blinked away the images burned into his mind in an attempt to get back to work and distract himself from inappropriate thoughts. Only, in what must have been a cruel, cosmic joke, he happened to find himself staring right down at the same naked, sexy Raven that had been consuming his tortured thoughts. The only difference was how his cameras — no matter how good or bad they were — didn't quite do her mystic beauty justice. Raven, in the flesh, was something both otherworldly and captivating, often leaving Garfield breathless.

And it didn't make any sense. By all accounts, she wasn't even his type.

Short dark hair, skin as pale as moonlight, and an evasive, icy personality to match. It was no secret that Raven was far from the bubbly and excitable type that Garfield was typically enamored with. She may as well have been the polar opposite of every girl he'd ever fantasized about or dated. Yet, there he stood, rendered immobile, transfixed by her magnetic, violet stare in a photo as she stared down the camera like an impatient lover.

"You wanted to see me?"

Raven's gravelly voice startled the shapeshifter, and he nearly jumped on the spot. For a moment, he thought she'd been in his head, like the image had obtained a voice and he'd been caught staring. Only when he turned around, he found Raven — the real Raven — standing in the entryway of the dark room.

"Yeesh, you freaked me out there," he commented once his heartbeat returned to normal.

Raven looked around the room, the eerie red glow of the lighting painting shadows on her face and the folds of her clothes. Her silhouette was obscured by her heavy, velvety cloak, and she removed her hood to better examine the place. The door — old and broken — creaked shut behind her, and she stepped in, dainty booted heels clicking against the tiled floor. Her eyes almost looked like a shade of maroon in the crimson lighting of the dark room, her hair dipped in an infinite obsidian instead of deep violet.

Garfield couldn't take his eyes off her as she walked about the cramped space, leaning over the sink to squint at the photos of her currently hanging off to dry. "You used a different camera last time, too," she casually observed, a pale, bare hand slipping out of her cloak to gently finger the edge of the picture. As usual, she was impossible to read.

"Yeah, I wanted to use traditional film. Part of our next assignment included using the dark room, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to get in some experience. Plus," he paused, turning around to pick up the album he'd made for her. "It gave me an excuse to do this." Raven glanced down at the object in his arms, narrowing her eyes, trying to make out its shape in the darkness of the room. "A photo album?"

Beast Boy nodded. "I know you wanted to keep your identity private on the website, but I felt bad cutting out your face from every picture because you looked so..." It was likely that Raven couldn't make out his blush in such terrible lighting, but he felt self-conscious nonetheless. He shook his head. "Anyways, I wanted you to get the full effect of all the pictures we took when we were together, for your own viewing pleasure."

He handed the heavy book over to her, and Raven started casually flipping through the pages.
It was arranged much like a scrapbook, and he'd clearly taken the time to add some handwritten notes along the sienna coloured paper. The binding was a royal blue — much like the colour of her cloak — and he'd tried to incorporate various items from each shoot. The cabin photos had pressed, dried wildflowers taped down next to them, and he'd written the dates of every image in a cursive she'd never thought Beast Boy would be capable of in a million years.

There were tons of photos he'd snuck of her, too. One in particular, where she'd been playing chess, deep in thought as she contemplated her next move. Next to that, he'd drawn a chess piece — a pawn — the lines crisp and inked with black pen, likely traced. Of the more risque shoot they'd recently done, he'd used various dark ribbon and lace for a border effect.

The pages felt thick and old between Raven's fingers, like he'd tea-stained them himself, and it smelled vaguely of dried herbs and flowers.

"Garfield…," she whispered his name, in awe of all the hard work he'd put into something just for her. "This is...it's beautiful."

He'd been right; the photos did look better with her face in them, and she couldn't believe how he'd managed to capture her unconventional charm so easily.

"So...you like it?" Garfield sounded uneasy and impatient as he bounced on the balls of his feet and stuffed his hands nervously into his pockets.

Raven glanced at him, a sliver of a smile gracing her lips, almost too easy to miss entirely. "I do. Thank you."

She closed the album and fondly ran her fingers down the leather cover, eyes taking in every indent and line.

"You said you had something to show me, too," Garfield casually reminded her once she'd set her gift down on a nearby chair.

Raven confirmed with a curt nod, "I do."

She turned to face him then, armed with a defiant look, her chin raised up, jutting outwards, and her eyes shining with new found determination as they locked gazes. She took in a deep breath. "But first, I want to know something."

The room was abuzz with tension so thick, it made the fine hairs on Garfield's arms stand on end. "Ask away." He gulped, but at this point, what could he possibly have to hide from the empath when she already knew the darkest secrets of his heart?

Raven took a tentative step towards him, but with the way the ends of her cloak kissed the ground, she appeared to glide forward instead. Fighting her own nerves, she managed to say, "When I was inside your memories, I saw how Galtry tried to use you."

Beast Boy's breath hitched in his throat, and he couldn't mask the wince that he tried to blink away.

Raven pressed on, not allowing him any time to recover. "I saw the helplessness you felt when you lost your parents." She moved closer. "How Steve treated you, and all the ways you overcame whatever struggles you encountered. The abuse, the experiments, the deaths, the heartbreaks."

Tears burned the backs of his eyes as Raven listed off his life struggles, ticking off each box as casually as a grocery checklist. Still she drew closer, slowly, her hands slipping out of the curtain of her cloak and coming up to the glowing red broach at her throat that held the fabric together.
Pale fingers moved in a synchronized rhythm, her eyes never leaving his face, never blinking. Garfield found himself mesmerized by the intricate motion of her hands, his heart in his throat as he waited with bated breath for her next action, hanging onto her every word like a lifeline.

"But you fought. Just like you fought Trigon, and how you fought Slade, Madame Rouge. The Brain. Mallah… So, my question for you is…" There was a faint click as she undid the clasp.

Garfield's eyes widened when her cloak hit the floor. The heavy material fell away to pool at her booted feet, and Raven stood before him in her lingerie. But not just any lingerie, Garfield noted. He swallowed, mouth gone dry, unable to help the way his eyes swept over her feminine figure cast in the red darkness of the room, lingering over the swell of her breasts in the strappy bra they'd purchased so many moons ago. She carefully stepped over the ocean blue of the cloak, her shoulders set back, her eyes daring, confident as she stared at him.

The changeling remained rooted to the spot, unable to move, his back pressed tightly against the table behind him, all the while Raven continued to close the distance between them, cornering him. When she was near enough that he could smell her heady, floral perfume, the lavender in her shampoo, and discover the subtle rising goosebumps along the tops of her breasts from the chill in the room, Beast Boy stiffened visibly. His knuckles paled where he clutched at the edge of the table, and the room suddenly felt overwhelmingly small and stuffy. Despite himself, he found his cock stirring to life beneath the fabric of his jeans, pulsing against its constraints in a vain attempt to reach out at what he desired most in that moment. Raven leaned into him, pushing her body against his and reaching to cup his jaw with cool, pale fingers, sharp-tipped nails pressing into his flesh.

As Garfield met her eyes — getting lost in an infinite red-violet pool — she whispered hotly against his mouth, her breath like cinnamon fire in his nostrils; "Is this not worth fighting for, too?"

Her gaze then undeniably flickered towards his parted lips and then back to his darkening gaze. Raven gripped his wrist in her free hand and guided it to rest at the small of her waist, his touch igniting a liquid fire beneath her skin wherever the pads of his fingers pressed. He didn't dare fight her, seemingly holding his breath in anticipation. He didn't even blink.

Pulling him closer to her still, until the tips of their noses brushed faintly, Raven then added in a husky tone, "I've already made my choice. It's about time you made yours."

And then she kissed him; a slow, soft touch of lips, light like the wisps of a feather.

Her full lips were like honey beneath his own; pliant and warm and sweetly inviting. Truth be told, she was nervous beneath his mouth, the kiss chaste and barely more than an airy graze. Raven was scared, despite all his assurances. Worried that he'd reject her, push her away, no matter how small the chances were, or how irrational she was being.

Perhaps that was why she gasped in surprise against his hotly desperate mouth when his arm, which had now snaked around her waist, pulled her in tightly, his fingers curling aggressively into her supple flesh and making her almost stumble forward in her heels. He'd caught her, of course, every curve of their bodies molding to one another perfectly. She fell right into him, pressed tightly against his chest as he deepened the kiss greedily, his tongue hungry for her taste and pushing between her teeth, demanding.

The moan she let slip out into his mouth was involuntary and made her weak in the knees, the feel of his wet tongue stirring up an insatiable storm of lust from within her loins. Already, Raven's budding orgasm grew, like the steady, quiet beat of a drum working towards crescendo. Her hand roamed the warm expanse of his taut chest beneath the thin, threadbare fabric of his t-shirt,
slipping along the grooves and expanse of his broad muscles. Meanwhile, Garfield's fingers ran
down the dip of her spine to the hem of her thong before he grabbed her bare buttccheek and
squeezed, a low rumbling growl emanating from his throat. He silenced her whimper by continuing
the exploration of the recesses of her mouth with his tongue, gliding over teeth and warring with
her own more timid tongue.

For a moment, Raven had suspected that she'd been too bold in her assumption of his attraction to
her, but Garfield met her advances with a possessiveness even more urgent than her own. His every
caress was intense. Raven could feel her breasts swell and burn every time the fabric of the bra
rubbed against her erect nipples. Her underwear was wet at the crotch already, his hard cock
drumming against her belly, just below her navel.

Azar, she wanted him to *fuck her*. To bend her over the table and drive her into that sweet, sweet
release.

She wanted to touch him. *More of him. All of him.* She was never satisfied. There was so much she
wanted to experience now that she had his permission. From the hair of his arms, to the heat rolling
off of his torso through the cotton fabric of his shirt, to the rough denim of his jeans between her
thighs when she'd ride his growing erection.

When they were finally forced to part for air in between breathy nips at Raven's parted lips, Beast
Boy nuzzled her neck, his face hot against her ear as he inhaled her scent. Raven's hand traced
down his flat abdomen towards the cold metal of his belt buckle, and then just a bit further south.
He took in a sharp breath the minute she'd touched his throbbing cock, and it pulsed with fervor in
her grip, already hard and engorged beneath his zipper, the outline of its eager head easily visible.
In turn, Garfield toyed deliciously with the satin strings of her thong, tugging back on it so that it
was like a taut rope, slipping in between the folds of her slick pussy, pushing in against the
sensitive button and building up her orgasm.

She couldn't help the soft mewls that escaped her lips, especially when his hot tongue darted out to
lick at the sweat of her neck, just over her bounding pulse. The graze of his fangs left her shivering
in bliss, and she slowly ran her hand up and down his shaft through his jeans. It grew bigger the
faster she stroked him, the tip of his hard cock pushing up against his belt buckle, as if to be
arching desperately for more of her attention. She could feel him move against her belly, his pants
obviously too tight for his impressive girth.

*More.* She wanted even *more*. More of what exactly, she wasn't too certain, but Azar save him if he
dared stop doing what he was doing to her.

"Gar!" she cried out, frustrated, her free hand a tangle in his hair, clutching the short dark green
strands in a fistful.

Still, she craved so much *more* of him. The desire was innate, primal. Something both foreign and
familiar at the same time, but an emotion she had no control over nonetheless. Normally, that might
have frightened her, but this was all-consuming, and most importantly, it felt incredible. Blissful.
Divine. Like she was tasting a piece of heaven itself. She never wanted it to stop, the way he was
building her up, that crescendo of the drum becoming louder and louder until it drowned
everything else out.

Hot and heavy, he attacked her mouth again, dragging his tongue along her bottom lip before
taking it between his teeth and tugging gently, eliciting a low moan from the empath. Garfield
groaned when she squeezed the swollen head of his manhood, her sharp nails digging in through
his jeans.
Returning the favor, he started teasing her through her soaked panties, two fingers slowly rubbing along her lips, making her buck against him wildly. Her breathing came in ragged and shallow, the movements of her own hand increasing in speed the closer he brought her to orgasm.

"Gar, please," she panted against his mouth, her brows furrowed in agonizing pleasure. Luckily, Garfield's kindness got the better of him, and he gave her exactly what she wanted. He let her ride his fingers.

Raven gasped, throwing her head back when he pushed the fabric of her underwear to the side and slid two fingers inside of her warm, wet folds, up to the second knuckles, her walls squeezing and tightening immediately around him. With her fingers curled tightly in his hair, still clutching at the soft, short strands while she stood on her tiptoes, Raven writhed in his strong grip. Garfield then ran the pad of his thumb over her clit, pushing with just enough building pressure to match the frequency that he used to plunge his two index fingers inside of her tight pussy. Her juices dripped down his flexed arm in translucent, pale rivulets, his fingers coated in a layer of her sticky cum.

"God, I want to be inside of you so badly, Rae," he whispered into her ear, in between his own ragged breathing. His cock twitched in anticipation and Raven bit down on her lip to help stifle her incessant whimpering.

She was so close, on the cusp of a powerful orgasm.

"Azar, don't stop!" she cried out, covered in a sheen of sweat from the exertion. He drove his fingers in harder, deeper, faster, in tune to her rapid breathing and erratic heartbeat, flicking her swollen clit until she came violently, gasping and screaming his name. Raven's chest heaved, her breasts overflowing the cups of her bra. The creamy mounds were a rosy flush against the straps of the black harness. Garfield bent his head down to take one of them into his all too eager mouth. Raven hummed and moved her head to grant him as much access as possible, fingers gently stroking his hair now as her thumping pulse gradually faded from within her ears. She relished in the way he caught her hard nipples between his teeth, his fangs grazing her round, supple flesh, latching on like a man starved. If he dared let go of her, she knew that her legs would not be able to support her, her climax having turned them to jello.

While Garfield continued to wetly suckle at her breasts, his face buried in her cleavage — pushed up with the help of the padded bra — and his fingers slowed down their pace from inside of her, Raven couldn't help but find that she was agreeing with Starfire's earlier sentiment. Back at the pool, during their more intimate girl talks.

The real thing was better and sweeter than plastic and batteries. She hadn't come quite like that in a long time, and she still wasn't exactly sated. Raven wanted to feel every inch of him moving inside of her, and the idea alone made her skin tingle with unbidden excitement. Eventually, he withdrew his fingers, sticky and thick with her fluids, and Raven sighed, her inner walls contracting and missing the feel of him nestled within. Garfield brought his hand to his lips and meticulously licked her clean off him, making sure she watched, unblinking, the way his tongue lapped up all her juice.

It took her a moment to remember how to breathe, becoming so aroused all over again at his darkening stare as he licked her taste off his lips.

Gulping, Raven eventually found the nerve to work on unzipping his fly, reaching into his pants to pull out his stiff, thick, warm cock. She hadn't needed to dig much; it practically bounded out for freedom, having grown too big for the confines of his jeans. The way she was feeling, it was amazing Raven hadn't started drooling at the sight of him, salivating just thinking about him wonderfully stretching her out.
His dick was as impressive as it had been back at the cabin when she'd stumbled on him in the shower. Beast Boy was both girthy and veiny, the head of his penis reaching up to just below his navel. Even though he was erect, he was still velvety soft, his emerald skin bathed with a brilliant sheen of purple in the red lighting.

As she grabbed him from the bottom of his shaft, Garfield threw his head back and groaned, eyes shut tightly in pleasure. He gripped her firm, round buttcheek and squeezed, his claws extending possessively into her flesh hard enough to leave marks. He hissed when she danced her grip up to the sensitive head of his cock. Raven took her time stroking the silken, sensitive skin, making sure to feel every ridge and detail of his penis, her inner thighs already moist with fresh cum in anticipation.

"Oh, fuck," he cussed passionately when she picked up speed, the vulgarity not phasing her in this particular circumstance. The table he was clinging to with pale knuckles moved audibly behind him as he pushed on it, its legs scraping along the tiled floor.

Not being able to withstand her relentless teasing, Garfield forcefully pulled away, panting and flushed despite his green complexion. His eyes — normally a lucid verdant — swirled with flecks of gold and amber, changing to match his powerful emotions. They glowed like a warm sunset in the unnatural red hues of the room as he regarded Raven in the same manner a predator may have gazed at their prey.

In one swift motion, he pulled down her underwear to her ankles and Raven complied by quickly stepping out of them in booted feet, the heels clicking softly against the linoleum floor. Too encumbered with lust, Garfield didn't waste another moment. He picked Raven up easily enough, his forearms becoming a shelf for her full ass, and then gently placed her onto the table. The impatient empath didn't hesitate to wrap her long, shapely legs around his hips, even when he'd started undoing his belt with fumbling fingers. She lay back on the table, never breaking eye contact with him as he hovered over her, stripping out of his boxers, his erection bobbing between them — the tip moist with pre-cum — and hard to ignore.

In his haste, he forgot about his t-shirt and didn't bother with removing Raven's bra, either. The straps at her shoulders had already slipped down, her humble but ample chest marked with tiny red teeth marks and hickeys where he'd sucked and grazed at her breasts.

Raven shimmied herself down the table so that her ass hung just off the ledge, her lovely, rosy womanhood wet and gleaming in brazen display, a small tuft of curling dark pubic hair neatly trimmed. Garfield licked his lips at the sight and Raven felt herself throbbing for him. She bucked her hips up so that his erection rubbed between her pussy lips. He hissed and Raven moaned, toes curling from behind his calves where she held onto him, the heels of her boots pressing into the muscle. Gripping either side of the table, Beast Boy then teased her entrance, pushing the head of his cock tightly along her inner folds, but never going inside of her. Instead, he moved his hips so that he continued to rub along her clit, wetting himself in her cum. And there was so much cum, she was practically dripping.

"Gar," she panted, squirming beneath him and clutching at his forearms until her nails dug into his skin.

Beast Boy growled possessively, then took hold of his erection and smacked it against her tender flesh a few times, flushed pink from the blood flow. Finally, he danced the tip down the seam, running over her sensitive clit, until he pushed it into her warm, wet folds. They both moaned in pleasure at the feeling of him finally filling her, and her walls tightening around him.

"Fuck, Rae, you feel so good, mmm," he purred once he was nestled deep inside of her, stretching
her out lovingly. The way he felt, she never wanted him to leave; she could have held onto him like this forever, hard and twitching inside of her.

Before he started moving, he bent down and nipped at her mouth, being sure to capture her bottom lip between his own in an exchange of saliva.

And then he slid out of her slowly before thrusting back in with a primal howl of pleasure escaping his throat. The table screeched backwards, but Garfield didn't stop. Instead, he picked up his pace, the sound of skin meeting skin reverberating in the otherwise quiet, isolated room as he drove himself deep into her. His cock glimmered from the coating of her cum. Raven met each of his thrusts with equal ferocity, arching her back while she gasped for air, moaning aloud each time he filled her anew. Her breasts spilled over the cups of her bra, nipples hard and bouncing to the merciless rhythm of his pounding her.

Raven's emotions were like a fever, her chakra becoming a firebrand between her brow. Sweat made strands of her hair stick to her face, and sweat also dripped down Garfield's nose the harder he worked in her. "Don't...stop!" Raven gasped, feeling her orgasm building all over again, the heat and friction between her legs becoming almost unbearable.

The whole table shook from the force of their lovemaking. They were both covered in a sheen of sweat, bodies shining in the red light and Garfield's shirt sticking to him as a result. Raven devoured the view of him with an insatiable hunger, watching the way every muscle worked, from his broad shoulders, to his straining biceps and heaving pectorals. Even the tight grimace in his jaw when he grit his teeth, and the whites of his knuckles where his fingers dug into her hips. Raven admired every single detail, of the effect she had on him. Instinctively, her hand ran down her tummy, down further towards her blushing clit where she started to rub in circular motions, her lips parted and eyes glassy as she locked eyes with him. Garfield grunted and slowed his pace to watch her finger herself while thinking of him, his fangs becoming more prominent when he bared his teeth in a hiss.

He moved his hips hypnotically, the tip of his manhood pushing along the very sensitive bundle of nerves within her. Raven's fingers worked faster, and she lifted her ass from the table, desperate to have him go deeper, touching that sweet, sweet spot. "Azar, yes!" she screamed, her heart racing.

Garfield took her breathy mewls as his cue to fuck her harder, picking up his pace but also being mindful to go in at just the right angle where he'd continue to hit her g-spot. All the while, she continued to finger her clit raw.

She was so close again. So, so close! Damn him, she'd never come twice in a row like that in her life. Raven wasn't a fool; she knew it had way less to do with his skill and much more to do with the emotions he evoked within her, but it still left her impressed with herself. Azar, she wanted him something fierce. The second orgasm came just as powerful as the first, and she cried out, her body writhing on the table as she rode wave after wave of immeasurable pleasure. Garfield's own thrusts were becoming erratic and he was driving his hips harder, moaning louder and louder, his voice reverberating in the tiny room.

"Shit, Raven, I'm gonna come!"

Raven couldn't quite say what had come over her, but she clung to him with her legs, trapping him as close to her as possible. She could feel him grow even more rigid inside of her, the muscles of his ass twitching as he thrust hard enough to move the table again, pushing himself as deep as he could go.

Raven sat up, her arm snaking around his neck where her fingers tangled in his hair. Pulling him
into her embrace, she licked and nibbled at his ears and neck, feeling his hot, shallow breathing against her shoulder as he pumped furiously. Her legs wrapped around him, as tightly as she could. A few more messy strokes and his hot seed spilled into her, with Garfield groaning against her collarbone when he came. His movements slowed as he pumped every bit of his semen deeply.

"Holy shit," he rasped, still trying to catch his breath. Raven ran her fingers through the messy tufts of his alpine green hair tenderly, affection and love the most powerful emotions she was currently experiencing. He was still nestled inside of her when he had taken notice of her bra straps. He took to fixing them while he caught his breath, so that they sat on her shoulders again. Garfield then leaned in and placed a lingering kiss on her shoulder blade. Despite her skin already flushed and her cheeks dusted red, Raven found the action weirdly intimate even after they'd just had sex.

"So?" She posed a question only once she trusted her voice, but it still sounded hoarse and more gravelly than usual.

He lifted his head to look at her, his eyes returning to a more natural green. Only a few small flecks of gold lingered. "So?" he queried, raising a single brow.

"Have I made my point?" Raven toyed with the hairs at the nape of his neck, gaze lingering on the purpling love bruises on his throat where she'd kissed him roughly just as he'd reached his orgasm.

He grinned at that, unable to help the throaty laugh that rumbled from his chest. His thick fringe — matted with sweat — fell into his eyes, and the smile made his dimples more prominent. When he met her gaze again, lips still curled back from his teeth in amusement and eyes twinkling with mirth in the low-lit room, he chuckled and said, "That's one heck of a point, Rae. Are all your arguments won like this? Because if so, I've got quite a few thoughts on books and tea you might need to convince me on."

Raven shoved him playfully, frowning even though she knew he was teasing her. He laughed lightly, and a small, coveted smile betrayed her lips.

Then, he leaned in towards her, his thick fingers shyly slipping to lace with her more nimble ones and yet fitting perfectly. Noses brushing, and his lips parted, hovering inches away from her own, he tenderly whispered, "I choose you. I'll always choose you." Without any other warning, he then captured her mouth with his...

~FIN

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'm going to keep this short and sweet. To everyone, absolutely everyone, who's been on this journey with me, thank you from the bottom of my heart. To everyone who followed and favourited, thank you for being supportive and kind (I do notice). To those who left kudos and reviews, whether a few words or an essay or everything in between, you are the reason I kept on with this, even at my lowest points and when I was demotivated beyond belief. To everyone who stuck by me with this story, who helped defend it from spite and jealousy, you all mean the world to me (and know exactly who you are)!
Thank you.

I'm truly and deeply humbled.

Until next time (because there WILL be a next time, I promise).

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