Cats Eat Birds

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org) at [http://archiveofourown.org/works/16050713](http://archiveofourown.org/works/16050713).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M, Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Batman - All Media Types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Damian Wayne/Original Character(s), Dick Grayson/Koriand'r, Clark Kent/Lois Lane, Tim Drake/Kon-El</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Damian Wayne, Jonathan Kent, Bruce Wayne, Selina Kyle, Talia al Ghul, Sandra Woosan, Original Female Character(s), Dick Grayson, Jason Todd, Clark Kent, Lois Lane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>BatCat isn't a thing because I'm a monster, Next Generation, Bruce Wayne is Batman, Damian Wayne is Robin, Action &amp; Romance, Symbolism, and I mean HELLA symbolism, Like an unhealthy amount, Action, Romance, Damian Wayne is a Little Shit, But not all the time, Original Character(s), Original Character-centric, Talia isn't a rapist because Morrison can suck dick, lots of kryptonian/alien things, Kryptonians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2018-09-21 Updated: 2019-09-22 Chapters: 19/? Words: 59862</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cats Eat Birds**

by writingtheworks

**Summary**

Batman is aging. Aging to the point where criminals can hear him in silent buildings and he, for the first time, can be found in the shadows by the naked eye. Gotham's Rogues have noticed. The Joker, in particular, has already begun to build plans and plant predecessors. Damian Wayne has observed his father's chronic exhaustion, running too deep for the truth not to be heard: his time is coming. Cristen Young has noticed too, even as a newcomer to Gotham from Fawcett City.

Damian, the (unwilling) heir to the mantle of the Batman, is distracted from his future by Selina Kyle's intriguing new associate. Familiarity has never done anything for him. But the all-new, all-good Catwoman and Catgirl are followed closely by a shadow on the wall, someone involved in the pasts of both Stray and the present Robin... and not in a good way.

Between the violent influx of missing homeless kids and the turning of close allies, Gotham's future dark knight must understand the most important rule he was taught: no one is ever what they say they are.

Cristen Young is not to be trusted, he tells himself. Because cats like her eat birds like him.
Hello, readers! My name is Ivy. I've been writing fanfiction for around 3 years now (as of Feb. 2018), and all through that time I only wrote one-shot and imagine books. I'd never fully fleshed out an entire story. So when I say that I'm proud to present this book, I truly am! I've always wanted to be a writer ever since I got into this form of media. I've been reading comics even before I knew how to read, so I felt that my first big fanfiction should honor one of my big role models from comics: Robin, the boy wonder.

This book is almost entirely pre-written, all saved in one big google doc that took me a forever to write. I hope you enjoy this book even if you don't like Damian, or Selina Kyle, or Jon Kent (I frown on you if you do, though)! This started as a brief miniseries that developed into a much bigger idea, and I can't wait to see your reactions to how I explored it. Enjoy, lovelies!

also i'm a loser born in tumblr's dumb 12 year old culture so enjoy my edits boos

Note: THIS IS THE SECOND PUBLISHED DRAFT OF THIS BOOK.
Chapter 1

| MAIN CAST |

NAOMI SCOTT as Cristen Young | Nickname: Cris | Age 17-18

—Fleetwood Mac; Dreams
ARSALAN GHASEMI as Damian Wayne | Codename: Robin (Teen Wonder/Robin v) | Age 17-18

— Sia; Kendrick Lamar: *The Greatest*
“I do care.”

(I tried to find actually TEENAGERS instead of 20-30 something-year-olds who look nothing like a highschooler - Ivy)

LEVI MILLER as JONATHAN KENT | Codename: Superboy (Jon) | Age 15-16

―Khalid; Young Dumb & Broke
"YOU DO WHAT EVERY HERO DOES... THE BEST YOU CAN."

AMANDLA STENBERG as ROSE RIED | Nickname: Bullet | Age 17-18

—Queen: You're My Best Friend
"IF YOU ARE STRONG ENOUGH, 
YOU WILL SURVIVE."

KIERNAN SHIPKA as LUCY NEWMAN | Nickname: Luce (The real Batgirl) | Age 16

—Crowded House; Don't Dream It's Over
"THAT WAS SO NOT ROMANTIC."

EIZA GONZÁLEZ as SELINA KYLE | Codename: Catwoman (Good Kitty) | Age 46

—Madonna; *Like a Virgin*
"I worry."

BEN AFFLECK as BRUCE WAYNE | Codename: Batman (Batdad) | Age 54

—AC/DC: *Highway to Hell*
"YOU'RE SAFE NOW."
NOAH CENTINEO as JASON TODD | Codename: Red Hood

NADINE NJEIM as TALIA AL GHUL | Codename: Daughter of The Demon
**PROLOGUE**

**GOTHAM CITY; SOMERSET DISTRICT; PARK ROW (CRIME ALLEY) | SEVERAL YEARS AGO | CRISTEN**

*THERE WAS SOMETHING* magical about rain. It was a natural way of healing, a lullaby to protect you when you had no other, and it couldn’t leave you. The thing about the rain is that it would always come back, even if it took an hour or a hundred years. Cristen hated things that couldn’t come back. Everything good that had ever happened to Cristen had happened in the rain, and everything good in Cristen’s life had left when the rain had dried up.

The only good thing that had yet to leave her was being held hostage, quivering hands gasping and tugging against the arm around her throat, eyes too young and too reckless to be full of so much fear. Cristen didn’t want to think about fear. She wanted to think about the rain.

“Cristen,” Laureline whimpered. It was a question abandoned by inflection, asking Cristen a dozen things at once. There was a palpable note of fear that boiled in Cristen’s stomach the moment it hit her ears. She was only eleven. Why couldn’t the attacker see that?

She had met Laureline in the rain. She could remember the pale coldness of a windowpane against her temple, clouded over with smog. Sister Persephone’s Home for Boys & Girls was more of a doghouse than an adoption center, and Cristen, who had been there since forever, had never been inclined toward the boisterous activity that the main rooms held. All of the other kids were too loud… too soft.

But that could all be simple bitterness. Cristen had learned, after years and years of rejection and observation, that she was *broken*. Something was distinctly wrong with her. Why else would she reside in Persephone's so long? Because Cristen flinched at loud noises and walked funny and broke things and was—*abnormal*. Wrong.

That was why she grew to appreciate Laureline. She entered in a cacophony, screaming up a storm, wailing and kicking all the way to the main office. Cristen’s brows had pinched at the noise. At least it had been raining that day.

How she and Laureline had gotten to where they were now was a mystery. Laureline had begun to follow Cristen, and Cristen followed the rain like she followed the questions she had about her abnormalities.

Too much of her time had been spent sobbing inside locked closets, hands clawing her ears shut, pressing herself into the floor and desperately—*desperately* trying to make the world shut up. Why was everything so loud? So fragile? So *dangerous*?

Cristen couldn’t think of any answers right now. She could only think about the blood around her mouth, the terror in her best friend’s eyes, and, ridiculously, that it *wasn’t* raining.

“C’mon,” said the mugger. The tattoo on his wrist said that he was from a gang in the Bowery, and she had to hold in a curse of frustration. It just had to be *them*. “I know it was you who took our shit, kid! You give us back the police radio you stole, and we give you back the girl.”

He gestured loosely with the pistol. The darkness rippled and two more figures appeared, charged with the same weapons and the same predatory smiles. Cristen’s eyes flickered to the pistols like one might look over a new challenge. They did not walk, but *strode* onto the scene, nothing but
arrogance and control. It made her gut stir. The idea that someone could be comfortable with that weapon, understand one so well that it became an extension of them...

Gotham was a horrible city. She ate away at her people, right down to the bone, then tossed the remains in the streets as an example for the others to cater to. And she made sure you knew it. She taught you every dirty little secret she had, from the blood in the alleys to the corpses in the dump. Examples.

“Let her go.” Cristen said. Thoughts of beating them raw, hurting them until they were incapable of hurting another, were ripe. Little kept her from opting for another approach.

“That’s cute, comin’ from you,” scoffed one, waving the pistol near Cristen’s face. She knew his name was Marco. “How old are you? Like, what, thirteen? Just hand it over. We know you took that radio!”

She looked at Laureline, “Run.”

The only good thing about Gotham was that she was a wonderful teacher, if you wanted to learn her best subject: violence.

You could say that Cristen was a teacher’s pet.

Cristen’s hands snapped outward, shoving the first’s gun-arm out of reach and slamming her knee into his stomach as hard as she could. Two shots rang out in quick succession beside her face. They were close enough where she could feel the ends of her hair burn, but late enough into her hit where she felt the familiar buzz at the base of her skull. Three against one? She could handle this.

But of course, she had spoken too soon. A pair of palms pinned her to the nearby dumpster, crushing her windpipe and pressing the air out of her like popped balloons. She could see the blur of people behind the spots growing in her vision. Maybe she wasn’t the teacher’s pet after all.

Then, all at once, it was gone. She was dropped to the damp cement of the alley floor, hitting her head hard on the rim of the bin. There wasn’t much time to register anything else but the pain in her head, the white dots across her vision—then, the incoming body thrown over her head and into the trash.

Cristen hadn’t realized it, but she’d closed her eyes and shielded her face with her arms. She just hoped she hadn’t yelped or anything.

There was a beat of silence. The cool wind of the night rolled through the alley’s mouth, sweeping over her and the ground in a darkening and unforgiving fog. Then the wind spoke, voice even and condescending and almost… boyish, somehow.

“You’re stronger than I’d assumed you’d be,” said the wind, “But you made an error. Your chin is low—towards your chest—and your elbows are tucked in when blocking. An amateur’s mistake.”

Cristen pulled her hands from her face, wondering why the fog was critiquing her block. Maybe she’d been hit too hard. “Um… thank you?”

Tsk. The wind clicked its tongue. Which made zero sense, because the wind shouldn’t have a tongue.

Maybe that was because the wind… wasn’t the wind. It looked more like a shadow. But when her vision cleared, she saw that it was actually a little boy (or at least he… looked like a little boy, almost vampiric half wrapped up in darkness like that), easily Cristen’s age or younger. He had a boot on
the thug that had manhandled Laureline, harshly binding his wrists with some kind of wire.

He wasn’t the wind, but it was easier calling him that than Robin. There was no way in hell that Robin could be here. But the wind was always there, even when the rain wasn’t.

He was the new one. It was hard not to notice the transition from gangly, broad-shouldered, bow-staff wielding supposed strategist of the Young Justice team, to—this. Cristen hadn’t met the Robin before this one…but present-Robin was… short, and she could see the tip of a sword sheath under his cape as he approached.

Different. Abnormal.

“Well?” He said, expectant, and she realized that he was holding out a hand to help her stand.

“Sorry,” Cristen rushed. Her thoughts had molded into a thick sludge that she didn’t feel like stepping through, but they seemed to be summarized pretty well when he pulled her up. “Um, wow. You’re… Robin.”

“I’m aware.” He said, an odd combination of haughty and… proud? Pleased?

Cristen wavered on her feet, and placed a hand on the wall to steady herself. (Russell had been tossed haphazardly into the bin, and she had completely forgotten if that had been her or not). She looked at him a lot like she’d look at a unicorn. Or a gargoyle come to life after falling in the radioactive Gotham River. Whatever the myth of the week was.

“Shit.” It was an odd word coming from someone so young. Cristen felt the pain unfolding, her tough skin fighting against the incoming bruises. But that didn’t matter right now. “Did you see where Laureline went?”

Robin studied her, almost as if he was about to ask her if she was alright, but turned his head away instead. “North. Meriwether street—didn’t you see all the trash she turned up in her wake?”

Cristen felt her bones relax into her muscles. That was where home was—good, she’d know to wait for her, then. In this neighborhood… calling the police just wasn’t an option.

What did you say in this situation?

She’d heard the stories. There was a feeling in the back of her mind that the Gotham vigilantes didn’t usually linger around the crime scene, and yet, here Robin was, chilling around like a rich gangster—well, maybe that was an exaggeration. All he really seemed to be doing was looking up at the sky, more silent than stone, waiting for something. (The boot on the thug didn’t really add to the effect, though).

“Um, thank you,” Cristen said. She tried not to think about how pathetic she looked, or how he probably had better places to be, “I’m… usually a lot better at this. He caught me off guard. I can handle myself. Are you—?”


He stuck her with such a piercing gaze that she was half-surprised his mask didn’t burn up. Cristen tried not to shrink under the attention—he seemed like a kid from money with how talked, and Cristen was the exact opposite. She was just a homeless, just a kid, and he was… Robin. He’d saved the world more times than she could even think to count.

It startled her to believe it, but Robin was nearly everything Cristen wanted to be.
He scoffed a little. It felt like it was his version of a laugh, though. “And you are most certainly not.”

“Oh, shaddup. I could totally kick your ass.” She laughed a bit, the sound punched out of her in a single voice-warbling note. “You just got lucky, not to mention the fancy belt.”

Robin stared at her for a long moment, trying to determine if she was serious or not. He only raised an eyebrow at her (or part of his mask had lifted like he did). She mentally checked that off: doesn’t get jokes very well.

“You’re kidding.” Robin said, flatly.

They stared at each other for another long breath.

Cristen was born in Gotham, so she knew what everyone in Gotham knew; the Batman and his companions were myths, and if they were real, they weren’t human. Even the police would report the same things. Claws as long as my arm. Bulletproof. Wingspan like a bus. The only reason Cristen has registered him as Robin at all was the circle on his breast, gleaming under the light like real gold. The jagged cut of an R winked up at her under the moonlight.

But he was… here. He didn’t have claws (a pretty big sword, maybe), he didn’t look bulletproof, and he definitely didn’t have wings. He was just… a kid. Maybe not a normal kid, but Cristen wasn’t a normal kid either. The realization that Robin was like her hit her calmly, like a secret she had already really known.

Thus, she grinned at him, all teeth and completely out of her mind. “You heard me. I could kick your ass.”

It was a little tentative, like he didn’t do it much. Just a quirk of his lip. But after considering something… Robin smiled too. “Care to test that theory?”

She’d dragged him down the corner of Meriwether and Cooke, down the street to the corner of Somerset Island and to the roof against the docks of Morrison Harbor. They reached her favorite sitting spot with the help of Robin’s grappling wire. Cristen could hear the late-night cars whizzing by on Madison Bridge if they went quiet, which was pretty easy with how little Robin spoke.

And when he did, it was nothing but smack.

“I still don’t understand your excitement,” Robin said, blandly. “I could beat you with both my hands tied behind my back and my eyes closed. You’re simply begging to be bested.”

She jumped a little bit at his voice. He wasn’t very keen to hide the smug flick of his lip that followed, but was kind enough not to comment. When she said that she’d dragged him down the street, that’d been an exaggeration; she quickly discovered that he didn’t like being out in the open, and had followed her the whole way over in the shadows.

“I thought that… you could teach me some things. And what ever,” she’d laughed, which rang a little bit louder than it usually did in the slums. “You’re gonna be needing those hands to patch up when I kick your sorry behind.”

Robin did that little scoff again. He shifted his stance, pushing his cape behind his elbows, apparently ready to teach. “Tsk.”
Cristen ignored him in favor of being taught. The second the overzealous *hit me* left her mouth, Robin punched her so hard her teeth rattled.

Cristen recoiled, but now that she had more of a chance to get into the zone, she threw one back at him. Maybe it was a little harder than she should have. He must have let it hit him out of pity or something, but whatever it was made her a bit mad, so she tried again and was blocked this time. It grew childish quickly, which went from slapping hands to a headlock just as fast.

Robin didn’t really understand why she was laughing. He set her loose, only to watch a smile blossom on her face. The confusion that registered on his was granted with an explanation.

“Sorry. Laureline and I play-fight all the time, and I guess I’m just used to that,” Cristen reached up to touch her jaw, missing Robin’s furrowed brows at the term *playfight*. “You got a mean hit though. Anything to critique about me?”

There must have been a lot of logical things he could say, but he only smiled at her, all canines. “You hit like a girl.”

“And how is that a bad thing?” Cristen frowned, an eyebrow firing.

Maybe it was just a trick of the light, but Robin’s ears seemed to pinken. “…It’s not. I never said it was.”

“Good,” Cristen turned her head, still a little at a loss for words.

The more she thought about it, the more she stepped away from the scene… Cristen and Robin just play fought on a roof (above her favorite view, no less). She was about to initiate *small talk*. With *Robin*. But she ended up saying ‘*um*’ at the same time as he went ‘*hh*’, so she politely nodded for him to go first. She wanted him to stay, but it was beginning to become clear that he was in a hurry to leave.

“Your balance is off and you focus more on your opponent than on yourself—your own footing, hand placement, etcetera. You seem to rely heavily on your strength and speed, which are formidable, but you need to put your focus to your attack style and momentum,” Robin babbled, waving his hand in a knowledgeable and dismissive way. “You would need *much* more training if you were to even *consider* surpassing me. If such a thing is possible.”

“Oh? So I’m *formidable* now, huh?” Cristen chuckled. The expression swiftly dropped, pinkenned, and she shyly rubbed her the back of her neck. “But would you mind… uh, showing me? I don’t think I really get it.”

Robin ran her through it. After feebly punching his hand and pretty much klutzing her way through things, Cristen hit in a manner that he was pleased with and blocked on time. She remembers this moment with something akin to delight.

“Uh? And that was…?”

“Work on it,” was all Robin said, but she laughed anyway. He turned his head away when she did.

“Um,” Cristen repeated, pulling her hand toward her chest, “Do you know the best places to hit people? To… um… defend yourself.”

“Aim for the head, throat, or center of the chest.”

Robin said more stuff after that, which was great and all, but Cristen lost any semblance of track
when he reached out and took her hand. She felt more than watched as he folded it into a fist and pressed her first two knuckles further forward. From then on, Cristen was uncertain if she even possessed limbs at all—there remained only Robin’s, which were rubbery and warm with the material of his gloves.

“...it will allow you to aim more specifically. If you are hitting someone with the flat of your fingers, you’re more likely to hurt yourself,” he explained. “Anything more?”

Cristen flushed. “Huh?”

Robin frowned at her, an instant stomach-dropper, and examined her face. After a beat of silence, he moved from her fist to her pulse. It was rapid enough to drum in her ears. “Are you in shock?”

“Shock?” Choked Cristen.

“Yes,” Robin rolled his eyes (mask?), “If you recall, I saved you from being beaten to death in an alleyway moments ago. I understand you may not share the same education as myself—”

Cristen ripped her hand from his and cursed at him. “I’m fine! And I have all the education I need.”

He pressed his lips together.

The decline of the conversation was obvious. He was probably going to tell her to go home soon, or call the police or something. He was in a hurry to exit anyways, and Cristen worried it was because of something she said. Robin kept looking south, across the water and at the Old Gotham Island, up above the sky—and then it clicked. Looking up at the sky. All the waiting. The Bats.

“Sorry. Uh, what exactly do you do,” Cristen awkwardly nodded at the sky, around the direction she knew the GCPD building was, “when, uh, the signal...?”

It wasn’t the Diamond District or Uptown, but there were still a lot of skyscrapers cluttered around that part of the city. Cristen could see the big neon W on the Wayne Enterprises building.

“That’s confidential.” Robin threw it into the conversation casually, but there was a note of mock-seriousness, like someone mimicking an FBI agent. That made Cristen smile for some reason. He seemed silently pleased when she did, and let out another little scoff-laugh.

“My turn,” Robin said. He crouched at the edge of the building—like Spider-Man, Cristen’s nerd-brain noted—and waited until she followed him before he spoke again. “Why were you fighting three armed men two times your size over a police communicator?”

He flashed the little radio in her direction, having turned it on to listen to the broken crackle of voices on the line as a white noise of their conversation. Cristen slouched forward, lifting a knee to put her chin on top of it and closing her eyes at the familiar sound. He must have taken it off one of the gangsters.

“I, uh. The boys. They’re from one of the bigger Bowery garage gangs. Stole that radio off of me a couple weeks ago, so I stole it back,” Cristen explained, voice hard. She turned her eyes to the city, having the sudden fear that he’d turn her in. But it would feel wrong, and be wrong, to lie to him anyway.

“I know. I’ve been tracking them.” Robin said. He stared at her face, even when she didn’t turn to look at him in return. “But why the communicator? It looks like it’s been broken and repaired with duct tape. Not exactly valuable.”
“No—it’s my turn next, only fair. You got to ask your question,” Cristen deflected. She offered him the barest of smiles, which he noted were more real than before. “Why do you hang around Crime Alley so much? I hear the stories, and you’re apparently around here—”

“Park Row,” was his only response.

She raised her brows. “Park Row?”

“That’s it’s name. Call it by it’s name,” he said, suddenly more strict than before.

She rarely heard people call the Crime Alley neighborhood by its original title. Everyone started calling it that after the Wayne murders, but she could see why judging the street on it’s history instead of the people was harsh. It seemed… personal to him, somehow, though. He softened up in the next beat, but only enough for his shoulders to loosen a thread and his chin to raise an inch.

“And this… is my patrol zone. Now, the communicator.”

Cristen’s voice was small. “I like… I like listening in. Jump in… sometimes. The cops can’t do the things that I can do. And I fixed the radio, y’know, because it was broken.”

Robin said nothing, and that was easily worse than if he’d spoken in judgement. She felt prompted to continue, and the words fell from her mouth like water from a broken dam.

“I know it’s… insane. Well, maybe not for you, but—yeah. I like helping out in anyway I can,” Cristen paused to looked down at her hands. “I want—no, need to help.”

Robin suddenly stopped. She watched him draw his cape across himself, expression grim, and turn his face skyward. “You… have potential. But this life isn’t for everyone. Especially kids.”

“I’m not a kid,” Cristen huffed. “And neither are you. The only difference is that you’re Robin and I’m sleeping on dirt.”

“You think I didn’t sleep on dirt to get here?” said Robin, who crossed the roof to crouch on her other side. “I climbed mountains. Moved them. I did everything to become what I am, to learn what I know. It’s not the dirt stopping you—it’s the belief that it is.”

The childish blanks in her mind filled the gaps in his image; the cape began to flow across his back, fluttering like leaves in autumn wind, expression cast in the shadow of the oncoming storm. It was something out of a movie. Those big movies, with the hero at the heart of the battle fighting for what they believed in.

Sometimes, Cristen imagined herself to be the man on the poster. Protecting those that he loved, but he loved everyone, and thus he saved everyone. That was what a hero was. Who treasured humanity for their capability and starve to protect it. To encase the beauty of a child, forever happy, in a still moment. To protect that moment so that others could share the love held in that child’s expression, her laugh as she told Cristen a bad joke.

To forbid the fear in her eyes to ever reveal itself.

“So you’re saying that I have a chance.” Cristen began, speaking slow and low as if not to disturb the moment. “I’m sorry to say, Robin, but you don’t know what it’s like out here. I’ve seen so many people die… lose hope…”

“I don’t know?” Robin scoffed. “Of course I know. Who do you think has been stopping those deaths? Restoring that hope?”
Cristen glanced aside. “Yeah. You.”

It was a funny thing. Robin opened his mouth to speak again, to proclaim in a voice that seemed to be permanently in italics to contrast Cristen’s boldness. But he stopped, and the words pulled back too. Unwinding into simple text.

“Not just me,” Robin said, and returned her gaze. His attention sparked something in her chest and seemed to unfurl it. “The clinic down the street will welcome anyone in need. That police officer always walks that older man home. And you, protecting the children of this neighborhood.”

Her eyes widened; and in their reflection, Robin unclasped the little metal R from his armor. Her lips parted, stricken. “You don’t even know my name.”

The cool, golden R was pressed into her hand by his gauntlet. Their fingers skidded off each other for a moment as she tried to offer it back to him—she couldn’t take this—but he won out in the end, closing her fingers around symbol in a locking sort of way.

“You don’t know mine, either,” said Robin. “There are always good people. Sometimes they are fortunate, but give their life for their city while inspired by a bat. Sometimes they’re nameless. And sometimes, with the same inspiration, they are foolish girls stealing police communicators in the rundown part of town. Do you understand?”

When it seemed that she did not, staring at him with the wide eyes of process, Robin firmly tells her: “Stop blaming the world for where you are, what it has given you. Stop running away from all that you fear—and instead run in the right direction... toward what you believe in.”

Without thinking about it, fueled only by a sudden rush of comprehension and adoration thrown onto her like coal into a furnace, Cristen threw herself at him. Robin didn’t argue. Cristen was met with unsure palms upon her back and the cool smell of kevlar, his cape a grapple bound between her fingers. Few people had ever told her she’d mattered. Fewer had ever given her the chance to show them.

“Um,” choked Robin.

“Thank you,” Cristen said, working her way past the barbed wire at her throat, “Thank you so much.”

Cristen hadn’t ever thought she was going to be worthwhile. But suddenly she and Robin had pulled apart and were simply staring at each other, red-faced and sincere, and she felt a madness take over—her life sprawled before her in a butterfly of patterns and chances and choices, and the steps she would take to get her there.

For now, the kids on the block were Cristen’s responsibility. Next would come the neighborhood. Then the other boroughs. One island. Another. Then the whole city would be hers, the whole world, and Cristen would be content with the vision she had and could watch Laureline blossom in a new Gotham. Cristen would make it her duty to protect anyone who needed it—just as Robin did, and as Laureline needed.

His form subsided into ink as he stepped back into the shadows, their eyes still met and their lives no longer parallel lines, but an angle to meet at one point. Cristen wondered where that point would be.

“It was nice meeting you,” she murmured, and laughed at how unconventional that suddenly seemed. “Maybe the police don’t always think so, but you’re my hero. You always have been.”

Robin’s face grew hot, and a grin sprawled from one cheek to the other. “You have exquisite taste.”
“But I assure you,” Robin said, stepping toward the ledge, his cape licking the drop at his heels, “it won’t be the last time. We’ll meet again—” he smiled beneath his hood, “—and I cannot wait for that utterly insufferable day.”

With a single step backward, Robin was flying. Cristen watched him launch across the street and swing in a great plume of yellow and red across the sky, wingspan as wide as a leap toward the moon would take.

When she looked up, Robin was gone... And it had begun to rain.

CRISTEN ARRIVED AT THE FRONT door of her ratty, run-down apartment that she shared with the Jefferson boys and that Moxie girl from Little Italy. Laureline met her at the door like thunder, and the following worrying embrace was lightning on Cristen’s cold skin. She’d been crying; Cristen’s fingers met a hot tear on her cheek and kissed it away.

The first thing out of her mouth came when Cristen hugged her back, sighing in relief, was, “We’re neva goin’ to Crime Alley again.”

“Park Row,” Cristen corrected, gently and without thinking about it.

Laureline shot her an odd look, “Park Row?”

“That’s its name,” Cristen said, pulling the door shut. She felt Robin’s R slip up from her pocket and pushed it back into place without seam, glowing and grinning like a freak. “Call it by it’s name.”
Gotham has been famous for her bats long before the vigilante Batman came to be recognized in the public eye, but his appearance and popularity drew attention to the ironic fact that Gotham City, New Jersey, has been vastly populated by colonies of bats millennia before it was founded in the 1600s.

In 1609, the Dutch East India Company selected English explorer Henry Hudson to chart an easterly passage to Asia. Along his journey, he surveyed the Northeastern coastal region of what would one day become the United States. Following Hudson's course, Dutch pioneers sailed for this New World and began populating the region once inhabited by the Miagani. The pioneers established themselves in two different colonies. One colony was set up along the shore where fishing was plentiful, and the other was developed further inland for the sake of mining in the plentiful caves of the Gotham countryside—where our little flying friends are introduced.

The most common among these groups of bats is the American Brown Bat (Myotis lucifugus), which can often be seen rising over the harbor at dusk, out hunting due to their carnivorous nature. But do not be afraid! These bats (and others populating Gotham's hills) rarely harm city-goers, though are known to be quite brave and swoop down to steal food or nest in your roof.

They are a model organism for the study of bats! They have been known to be capable of pack-bonding with nearly everything. Older bats have been documented 'adopting' orphaned or abandoned pups in their colony, and in domesticated terms, are friendly with other house pets like dogs, but in particular, cats...

This part of Cristen's life is called: 'copying.'
“But I assure you,” Robin said, stepping toward the ledge, his cape licking the drop at his heels, “it won’t be the last time. We’ll meet again—” he smiled beneath his hood, “—and I can’t wait for that utterly insufferable day.”

AN INSUFFERABLE DAY

GOTHAM CITY; NEW GOTHAM; GOTHAM ACADEMY FOR THE GIFTED | 6:27 PM | NOW

MAYBE IT’S A Cristen cliche, but she can’t help but look out the window and silently clasp her hands in a prayer for rain. Fall is a season for drizzling, too, and the streets swirl with leaves like gossamer skirts and the sky swells with the promise of a storm. Without it, she knows she’ll die. But this isn’t exactly the first time Cristen has faced death before.

Well, okay. Maybe a meeting with the headmaster for Cristen’s final year of high school isn’t exactly death, but it’s definitely an unoriginal way to start. We’ve all read that story; girl starts at new school, girl meets mysterious boy, girl falls in love, girl faces circumstance that makes the male lead suffer. Cristen is not that girl. She’s got other things on her mind, present company included.

(Also, excuse you, her love interest would at least be a bit more respectable.)

The man to her left: his posture is tight. Fingers are folded. Gaze is strong and proud, like an unyielding grandfather clock. It’s an image Cristen has seen a million times, because Reese Young will always be the soldier he once was, and the confidence he has when talking to the headmaster is given. Maybe it’s an adopted-father thing, but Reese has always been better at working people than her.

Headmaster Hammer. She’s been pushing down a scowl the entire conversation, but that’s nobody’s fault but his. (Cristen was raised to respect authority, but also to know who deserved it). The buzzing sensation in her chest tells all; he’s a threat, but to his luck, not an extreme one. Cristen would know. She always knows.

“Ah, yes. Ms. Young,” says Hammer, and his glasses are so far down his nose that another heavy sigh could blow them right off. He tends to do a lot of heavy sighing. “And you must be Captain Reese. You’ve been Cristen’s guardian since sometime around 2011, correct?”

He tries to deliver it without care, but it bleeds through anyway. Hammer’s the headmaster of a private school. He reads that one of the kids he’s going to be teaching is from the slums, and his lip curls.

Cristen’s fingers bunch in a similar gesture of distaste. Reese covers them, reassuring and defensive.

“That is true. Though, I’d appreciate it if you read her entire file before forming an opinion on my
daughter, Headmaster,” Reese says, icily. He seems a little more stern than usual.

If Cristen could, she’d hug him hard enough to crack a rib or two. Funny thing is that Cristen actually could. It’s a thought that stabs her in the side—half of that file is forged, all to cover up the pretty little secret that is Cristen’s heritage. Reese’s stiffness suddenly makes sense; they could be found out today. They’d kept her name off of the National Metahuman Charter with plenty of costs, lying being only one of the minor ones.

“Hn.” Hammer stares Reese down, but like a lion recognizing the stronger alpha, he bows his head and turns the page of her notes. Cristen counts the lies as he reads.

“Immediately after your adoption, you were transferred to Wisconsin in order to pursue a martial arts program. You were accepted in with a recommendation from a GCP sergeant, graduated top of your class after only a year, then continued in private lessons while attending a Fawcett City public school.”

He seems to have made an assessment already, lips tight and yet… almost keen. There is a word that he won’t say. Hammer trades it for more garbage. “At your high school, you quickly tested into a distinct category of advanced classes and excelled in them—forensic science: interesting—various technological and engineering classes… and AP physics.”

Only two? Huh, so Reese does practice what he preaches. And the best lies always have some elements of truth was the man’s bible.

The first lie wasn’t exactly untrue. Cristen had lived in Fawcett City, but she’d spent half of that time in South America and a month in Asia. The other came in the form of the private lessons. Her teacher was both a criminal and unlicensed. It’s not like Cristen’s heritage was enough to put her under a microscope, the universe just had to slap on the law-breaking, too.

He flipped the page. “Plenty of after-school activities.”

“Aren’t you s’posed to be in school, little—?” Jesper Ozenfield, a local drug source, snarled at her.

She kicked him in the chest, sending him careening into a crate with enough force to splinter the wood. If she was any other person, anyone else at all, it would be considered a hard hit. But Cristen was just getting started. The dealer agreed; he started shouting out promises, promises to stop selling to kids, promises to turn himself in.

Cristen smiled, and wheeled back her fist, “Let’s just call this a service hour.”

“Hm,” Hammer pushed his glasses up his nose. “Plenty of martial arts and engineering awards.”

Her boots skid against the gravel, but Cristen didn’t let the other girl take advantage of her surprise. Cristen rolled back over a car and launched off the metal, tearing into the air like a bullet, her knuckles almost steaming. The girl blocked it with a piece of scrap. Regardless, Cristen had dented it clear-through and sent her spiraling into the soil.

“Don’t you know what gang I’m from?” She panted, growling. The stun gun in her hands was filthy. “I’m loyal to the Coventry Tigers! The best fighters in Gotham!”

Cristen said nothing for a long beat, leaping over the back of the car and divulging in a makeshift taser crafted from an old phone. She wasn’t smiling when she spoke, “No wonder they call this place a junkyard.”

She hadn’t liked that. That special entity in Cristen’s chest jumped to attention. Before the Tiger
could even get off her feet, her legs had dropped out from underneath her, stun-gun sent spiralling by her opponents stronger gadget. Cristen knocked out her lights with a punch hard enough to rattle her teeth.

“You’re quite the character, Ms. Young, though I’m afraid that I must address the most personal part of your history,” Hammerhead said. He leaned forward and clasped his hands across the desk, and Cristen felt the sunlight drain out of the room.

Reese sat up a little straighter, and Hammerhead gave a frank sigh. “I understand that Cristen has undergone various traumas in her lifetime. It reads here that she has had alternate forms of counselling and therapy in the past because of these… events.”

She took a very sudden interest in the wind whispering through the window.

The harbor. The wail. The scream, barely halfway out of her throat by the time the gunshot goes off. Her body falls, the water opening up and swallowing her whole, without grace or even hope of serenity. Cristen dives. She’s blinded by the ice and the water and what she later realizes is blood. Darkness. Then the blue, red and white lights blur by, and a hand is on her shoulder, whispering promises that no one can keep anymore.

Laureline.

Cristen had only realized that Reese was rubbing her shoulder when he spoke, “Yes. But this is Gotham. Everyone’s seen something. I have a feeling that Cristen won’t want special treatment; she’s had enough as it is. We like to keep those matters outside of her education.”

This is Gotham. That phrase has a plethora of definitions, something more than a surplus. It makes her fists curl. What’s worse is that Reese is right. Everyone has seen something in this city that burns behind their eyelids at night, where the spots dance in their vision like the frantic pop of a distant bullet. If Cristen could wish for anything, anything at all—from Reese’s good health to meeting Wonder Woman—it would be to let at least Gotham go a night without a gun being fired.

That wish had come before Robin. But she’d never really believed… that she was capable of being the hero, even if the power and the responsibility was there. It had been him who had shown her that Cristen could be worth it if she just tried hard enough.

Hard enough to be like him.

“You’re correct—our school district handles many cases similar to Cristen’s own,” Hammer nodded. He rolled out the nearest drawer and pulled another manilla from it, offering it to Reese. “But I would still feel more comfortable if Cristen and yourself met our school councillors…”

Her arm is rubbed again. She looks at Reese, finding a supportive recognition there. He’d always been real good at that: sniffing out her anxiety a lot like she sniffed out bad-guys. “Baby, why don’t you go outside and explore the grounds? Take your schedule and find what rooms your classes are in. I’ll take care of things down here.”

“M’ not a baby,” she muttered, but was smiling.

Reese chuckled dryly. “Uh-huh.”

The conversation had reached it’s cusp, and Cristen flurled back in on herself as she left, closing the door to the office behind her and taking in a not-so-fresh inhale. This was Gotham, he says. It burns the back of her mouth like a breath of smoke. Reese and Hammer’s voices fade under the mist of her thoughts.
Why was the poverty rates in the bad neighborhoods—The Bowery, The Narrows, Park Row—spiking in the last few years? This is Gotham, say the drug-dealers and the thieves, things are always getting worse.

How come everyone from a crime lord to a petty thief were walking out of court free? This is Gotham, says the jury, the gangsters own this city.

What had caused the wash of kidnappings in the last months, with the wind sweeping up the homeless kids? More importantly, why wasn’t this case getting the attention it deserved? This is Gotham, says the news, things like this just happen here.

Well, not in her Gotham, was what Cristen said. She’d been out of town for the sake of her training, but she was back for a reason: all of the learning she could do elsewhere was over. The only thing left for her to do was return to her oldest teacher, and the city hadn’t exactly missed her, as much as Cristen had wanted her to.

This was her city, and she was going to save—

Here’s the funny thing about Cristen’s abilities. She’s always seen herself as a Captain America, but the truth was that her biology seemed to like Spider-Man more. Maybe it just liked to protect her. Maybe, because it was apart of her, it wanted to help her protect other people—that was Cristen’s driving force. Whatever it may be, the tingle behind her ribs has never been wrong: danger is afoot.

Spider-Sense isn’t the appropriate term, as accurate as it is. She’s always liked insight more.

Her foot swings around and hooks under two sets of legs like the snap of a viper’s tail. Earthy eyes descend upon the attackers in seconds, and melt into chocolate. Cristen winces, “Ah, shit.”

Rose Reid is on her feet first, because, of course she is. Saying that she shoots up like a bullet is too appropriate, considering the Flash shirt she’s sporting and the bounce of her oakwood curls. And—most obviously—her nickname.

“Bullet,” Cristen breathes, relaxing.

Rose—or Bullet, as Cristen has known her since her first year at Fawcett City Junior Highschool, flashes a giddy smile, “Well, why are you just standing there? Hug me, you total statue!”

And Cristen does, and it’s like she’s fourteen again and pulling stupid shit that Bullet was always dragging her out of, and they’re together again and it’s blissful. The anxiety is ripped off her shoulders with no regret. There are the obvious differences; Bullet’s a whole head taller than her now, and her copper cheeks are slimmer, but she’s still the best friend Cristen has had since she moved.

Of course, she’s not Cristen’s only best friend (a surprising feat). Lucy Newman stands back with her hands clasped, shoulders pulled together all giddy like—she can barely get out a squeaky hello before Cristen’s tossed her over her shoulder.

“You’ve gotten stronger,” Bullet notes, crossing her arms and surveying the act with something akin to pride.

Lucy looks over her shoulder at the two of them, grinning sheepishly, “Do I weigh anything to you?”

Cristen shrugs, and a slow smile rises against her skin. “It’s like holding a couple of grapes.”
They silence. Then, all at once like the roar of an incoming windy storm, they burst into laughter and skitter down the hall, a group of best friends walking off into the sunset at the end of a bad 80’s movie.

**BY THE TIME** Cristen sets Lucy down, they’ve reached the football field. The grass is faux and Cristen doesn’t like the way it scuffs against her shoes. She figures that she probably won’t be here often with how she clings to her... extra curriculars, and pauses to admire the beauty while she can, standing in the icy mist of a normal Gotham evening.

Gotham Academy is renowned for its prominent sports programs. Half of them are funded by Bruce Wayne, the guy who owns the Gotham Knights and the Gotham Gargoyles, so the field speaks for itself... Or maybe it’s more of a shout. It makes the sky bigger, more open and welcoming, bordered by giant bleachers and folded against the arts building. There’s a notable difference between it and the track (funded by LexCorp), as if pointedly declaring how much more regal it is.

Practice is still running, so Bullet jogs over to her coach—Coach Brownstone, who greets her with wide arms and a wider smile—and they get a volleyball out of the storage room and start playing off to the side. The normality and nostalgia of it hits Cristen a little too hard.

(Fondly, she remembers being hit in the face with a dodgeball. Lucy rushing over to apologize, noting that Cristen was faking pain, and offered to sit together at lunch—where she proceeded to make Cristen laugh so hard she spat spaghetti all over Bullet... Whom she’d first met the hour earlier, when Cristen had said ‘shit’ on the swings and Bullet corrected her, “No, you’re supposed to say *schmit*."

“I’m sorry I didn’t visit you more often,” Cristen says, slouching. “S’fine!” Lucy bumps the ball to Bullet, and the upturn of her Gotham accent is relieving. Cristen had been constantly made fun of for hers. “You were busy with your stuff. We all were.”

That doesn’t seem like a proper excuse. In truth, she’d been so wrapped up in her long-term plan that she’d barely thought of either of them. Her return to Gotham held an excitement exclusive to those activities, and suddenly the guilt was wrapping around her throat, throttling her. She sees an alley and a cape behind her eyes and beckons it toward her.

“You need absolute dedication," Robin had said, and she hadn’t strayed from that.

Cristen remembers Gotham’s constantly-cloudy sky like bubbling lead, beams of light expanding from the depths of skyscrapers and towers to graze the sky with its fingertips. She can see in the distance the signal—the only light in this darkness, a golden circle of energy and power rippling as the clouds move forward.

Reese knew about Robin. Never everything, every detail, as this was Cristen they were talking about—but he had heroes when he was a kid, too.

He’d caught her on the roof of the building the night they arrived. It took only a look and he was ordering Chinese food and tucking her under his chin, not even complaining about the little sleep they were going to get. He just watched with her. Reese was like that—just always seemed to know.

He had fallen asleep, but the sentiment that he stayed up with Cristen without her asking made her feel a little better about it. It made her feel loved.

The Batsignal had been her friend before Bullet, before Lucy, before even Laureline. She felt like a
little girl again, rolling over a stiff mattress late at night and staring up into the sky, counting until the nightmares were gone, counting until it would shut off. It was beautiful. Her own special escape, like a particular song that calms you down when sung. Cristen had learned everything she could about that beacon because of it; she could sleep best with it cast against the sky.

It wasn’t Batman and Robin’s signal anymore, it was hers, and it would be hers even after it was destroyed and the heroes were gone.

“Cristen Young,” Bullet said, stern, and set the ball over to Cristen. “Don’t you dare start ominously brooding over there. I get that you’re back in the angst capital of the world, which is definitely your town, but we’re back. It’s time to spill instead of deal.”

Her frown deepened when Cristen caught the volleyball. She didn’t like the look on Bullet’s face, she never would when it was that scowl, but she had realized a long time ago that the mission was going to become a priority. That face was going to get familiar.

Lucy tucked a string of blonde hair behind her ear, and leaned in as if exposing something big, “We know why you’re back, Cristen.”

Cristen bristled. She hadn’t even revealed much to Reese, so how would they know? Did he tell them? Even so, how would you explain that? Hello, yes, this is Captain Reese Young, Cristen has finally reached Selina Kyle’s impossible standards and is going to start crime-fighting—

“It’s been almost five years since Laureline died,” Bullet blurted, cutting her hand through the air in something that clearly read straight to the point. “You feel like you’ve finally healed over. But that’s a big scab and this whole city is like some skinny jeans, rubbing up against that wound until it cracks.”

Lucy elbowed her in a not-so-subtle way, and rested one gangly hand on Cristen’s elbow in a silent show of support. “What Bullet it is trying to say is that we think that you should wait a little longer. Laureline was very important to you, and coming back here, to the old places and seeing the old people… it’s not always healthy—”

“This isn’t about Laureline, I swear,” Cristen said. She swallowed hard.

“Cristen—” The two of them began, same tone and same gesture, but Cristen just shook her head. They were right. They were always right when it came to knowing her, but not always in the correct sense. This was about Laureline. As long as Cristen was fighting this fight it would be about Laureline, and the harbor, and—my fault my fault my fault...

Okay. No. Maybe this wasn’t about Laureline, but she was certainly the driving force. She never wanted what happened to her to happen ever again. To anyone.

(It was funny. Cristen would say that, hear Robin’s voice instead of her own, and it made her wonder who he had lost or what mistake he had made that turned him into that boy.)

“I’m serious,” Cristen said. She dropped the ball and dug her hand into her back pocket, where her lucky charm was, where it always was, and shoved the legacy into view, “I made a choice, a long time ago, and it’s time to act upon that choice. Reese finally gave and my training is done—we came back to Gotham so I could enter the field.”

Lucy and Bullet’s faces were gold in the reflection of Robin’s rusted R, sloped with the trench she’d dug in it after rubbing it for luck after so long. The talisman was hidden as quick as it came.
Arms wrap around her for the second time, and Lucy digs her nose into Cristen’s shoulder and bunches her hands in her jacket. She breathes. “Okay.”

Bullet said nothing, which was almost more unnerving than the sudden spike of anxiety in Cristen’s chest. *Shit. Insight’s going nuts.*

Well, it would have been even more unnerving, but the stupid danger-insight-power-thing had totally just saved her from an argument that wouldn’t change her mind. Arguing with Bullet would basically be like shooting each other in the foot. It would be useless and would only hurt, so Bullet quickly backed out. Cristen hoped she would do it faster; her senses were mounting like an avalanche and an earthquake in a break-dancing competition.

Public Service Announcement: superpowers suck.

She broke door knobs with her strength when she wasn’t focusing, her ears were constantly bombarded with sound… but her sixth-sense was the worst in total. It activated when something dangerous was going on nearby—nearby being a whole goddamn city—and did so very painfully. Even a stapler could trigger it, but something small like that didn’t hurt too much.

The more pain she felt the more dangerous something was… and sometimes these powers made it feel like the whole world was a time bomb.

“We’ll see you on Wednesday, okay?” She said, peeling Cristen’s hand off of Lucy’s back.

She’d expected Bullet to drop it. Of course, they were still best friends who hadn’t spoken in person for months, so she gave her hand a firm squeeze and nodded to Lucy, “C’mon. I gotta run some errands, and I’m your ride home.”

Cristen didn’t want to make things any more tense, so she gave nothing but a wave to them as Bullet started to drag Lucy off. The moment they turned around the bleachers and into the main square Cristen did what she did best; faced the danger alone, like a dumbass.

Anxiety and insight are too similar sometimes, but there’s just something that lights in her senses that let her know. Just a subtle inclination. A tilt of the head, an extra skip in her heart, the most minute twitch of muscle and—it’s too complicated to put into human words, but it’s easiest to compare it to little exclamations jumping around her head. Annoying and disruptive.

Cristen perks up and lets her eyes fall to the opposite side of the field. That same force of righteousness conquers her and she sighs, hands fistng and pulse leveling and focus honed. That feeling and those goosebumps were a call for danger. One part of her childhood she couldn’t escape.

Her gaze swivels and flickers from person to person on the other side of the field, clearing up from practice. Her abilities allow her to know when the danger is coming, but never how to react to this danger, and that was certainly what had taken the longest to fine-tune. Picking apart targets in order to separate victims was harder than it sounded…

And there he is. The odd part is that her insight shuts off the moment she sees him, snapping closed, wires curling under flame and collapsing in on one another. That’s not normal. Abnormal.

He’s casual. Leaning against the side of the bleachers, almost hidden underneath them with his arms crossed. Something about him is pure and unaltered danger, curling off of his figure like sunlight against the moon, bleeding into the world and fogging it up like rain on a hot car. A more powerful something labelled him familiar.

She blinks. He’s still there, but this time he’s staring directly at her and… almost smugly so. With this
glower, he pushes off the supporting beam, turns on his heel and disappears beneath the bleachers like a ghost. A picky ghost.

The world drew back in, settled back on Atlas’ shoulders. Sound reanimates and Cristen can hear the fizzle of two football players in quiet conference, and the softest touch of feet to Earth she’s ever heard, like a spirits tail stroking a shadow.

Every other feeling returns in earnest. She has to blink the weight of her own brain away, because he’s gone and the noise of the world is suddenly back like he’d stolen it away for himself.

Hm. Totally not concerning.

Cristen’s curiosity peaks, and she forgets about the almost-argument with Bullet, she forgets that Reese told her to be careful, and she forgets the worry in Lucy’s eyes. She strides her way across the sidelines of the field and under the uprights, eyes narrowed on the place where he’d evaporated.

He could be… No, he was a threat, because her instincts were never wrong.

She puts a hand to the cool stands, ducking beneath the metal and peering down the rows of scaffolding. She avoids stretching the tight uniform skirt the Academy issues and steps over the framework, scanning the area for the strangely attractive boy. The mental comment is followed by Cristen’s mental Laureline, saying, you sound like one of those fanfiction girls who falls for the hero on the spot.

Maybe it’s a Cristen cliche. But no… Cristen Young is the hero.

He’s gone. She’d only glanced at him for a moment, and yet his face is ingrained into her mind, buried there as if it belonged. Tanned skin, hidden hands, tall stride. Usually the first thing you notice about someone is the way they hold themself, but never the eyes… it’s what makes the green flickering behind her lids so suspicious. Cristen wants to call him familiar. Whatever she’s feeling—insight aside—is more than deja-vu… a much stronger brother, no doubt.

There was a beat of silence. The cool wind of the encroaching evening rolled through the bleacher’s mouth, sweeping over her and the metal in a darkening and unforgiving fog. The thought laid on her mind; she’d met him before. She didn’t know why this was her first thought, but she could tell his voice was even and condescending and almost… boyish, somehow.

It’s nothing, Cristen soothed. She started to walk back, arms tight. I’m probably just tired, or it’s just someone lingering from practice. It’s nothing. Just another insufferable day.

But it—or rather he—was certainly not nothing.
Cristen shoots up, grasping her throat, and breathes her way out of a nightmare and into the real world.

WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY, MICE PLAY

GOTHAM CITY; OLD GOTHAM DISTRICT; YOUNG HOUSEHOLD | 9:35 PM | AUG. 29TH | CRISTEN YOUNG.

THERE’S THE THICK silence that Cristen’s scream just couldn’t fill, and then the body hits the water and she’s running and she’s diving and she’s too damn late—

Cristen shoots up, grasping her throat, and breathes her way out of a nightmare and into the real world. Water subsides into stifling steam. Terror slips into relief.

It’s storming like hell out. It’s less of a storm and more of a calamity, innocent rain whipped up into it like ingredients into hurricane batter. She still gives it the thanks it deserves. Rain is always a good thing, even if Cristen doesn’t know how just yet.

She has to feel around her covers to confirm her thoughts; she isn’t curled up between crates at the docs, the salted, exhaust-scented air coating her skin and damp clothing; her pack isn’t used as a hard, awkwardly-shaped pillow and she isn’t hidden under the cover of cardboard. Cristen is home.

The rain has not woken her as an reminder to find Laureline. It’s woken her to welcome her home.

Cristen sighs into her taut palms, rubbing the sleep from her vision and blinking rapidly, almost stunned. Third night in a row.

She does her breathing exercises. Lucy and Bullet were right, to some degree; Cristen hasn’t had that dream since she was last in Gotham nearly six whole years ago. This city is doing something to her. But that doesn’t mean she’s abandoning it.

The clouds and the rainfall have dyed her room an aging blue, the lights of the city fractured by the rain and scattered across her carpet in miniature shattered disks of radiance. She presses herself off her mattress and steps over the box her bed came in. There’s a light curse as she tramples on something hard; a half-cooked prototype waiting for her return, among another dozen in the box she’d landed in. Powers haven’t woken up yet.

She’s hungry. It’s more in her fists than in her stomach.

The house feels like something that doesn’t belong to Cris, that she shouldn’t be there. Anyone could brush this off as her not being accustomed to the luxury. She’s been living with Reese—who was known as Reese Fox before he married Lance, and therefore apart of the most ambitious family out there—for years, though. Maybe it’s not the price tag on the fridge, but the skeletons in the closet.
The glass of water is just as cold as it is outside. But Cristen doesn’t know that, so she decides she has to find out for herself. (It’s a dumb excuse, trust me, she knows).

To study, she soothes. To greet an old teacher and tell of her adventures, to scour the territory she was raised to protect—and that legacy begins with Red Hood.

He kinda sucks. Well, he really doesn’t, and that’s the cool part. Cristen’s gone out four or five times already since they got back to Gotham two weeks ago, and every single time he’s managed to beat her to the punch. She hears a drugstore robbery down the street. Halfway across the roof, the bullet (rubber, she checked) fires and he’s gone. He’s so proficient she’s starting to think that she’s gonna have to plot out some territory for herself or something—

Territory.

Patrol zones. Of course! Robin said they had patrol zones. Red Hood must protect the financial district, where Cristen now lived. Maybe she could make a plot or a map of some kind… memorize the popular crimes in each territory… know Gotham like she knew herself. That’s what Robin would do; plot out enemy territory and go in with a plan. Why hadn’t she thought of it before?

She printed out a map of Gotham and slapped it onto a corkboard, writing clearly (in red marker) RED HOOD over the Financial District. As far as she knew, Batman and Robin wove around Park Row or maybe even the whole of the city. Then that was where she would head tonight. Even if she had to cross the biggest bridge to get to it.

The usual cover would be needed. Reese is gonna start catching on to when she leaves and when she comes back, but that’s only because of the news reports have been tattling; someone that we think is Nightwing is definitely fighting crime here. Cristen’s fine with that. The credit isn’t needed and it isn’t wanted. Especially if she’s being compared to Nightwing, but that’s a special thought kept exclusively for herself.

She drops down to her knees and drags a box out of her closet. She looks it over like she would look at a rat or something, brimming with useless wariness.

It’s just a box, Cristen reminds herself, just a box full of memories I’m almost too scared to look at… How stupid is that?

Cristen had figured that moving back to Gotham would bring back some memories, but she hadn’t expected so much. She holds her breath and plucks her childhood out of the space. Cristen doesn’t bother to admire anything, dipping her hands into the mass and beginning to search for her old jacket, movements messy and time wasted. She heaves another sigh when her fingers catch on something else metal.

Her thumb catch on the R’s outline, the red and green paint barely there anymore, and the golden metal nearly rusted over. It’s a silly thing to hope for, but she wants to see him again. That talk had been her everything.

And yet to him, it was just another good deed, another person saved. There would always be people like Cristen—so what was the point in hoping she would ever get the chance to say thank you?

The old, tattered jacket barely fits her, but it supplies warmth and simultaneously the freedom of mobility. It was perfect for fast escapes and faster fights. She slipped the R into the pocket and headed for the door.

Before she went to write Reese a note in case he woke up and she was still out, she gave her closet another look. In particular, the golden shine of one of her rings caught her eye. She needed a plan, and there it was; maybe she should ditch the jacket for something nicer. Bait.
Reese might not be happy she’s putting all of his ‘please love your new dad’ gifts into such situations, but he can be mad about it once she’s taken out a mugger or two. Or three. Cristen digs through the prototype box and reaches for a trip-sensor in progress to tinker with, then heads out.

THE KIDS IN town used to call her Sparrow.

It was a silly name, just a gimmick, but Gotham had a thing for gimmicks.

Word of her fights would slide their way down the street like sludge; something interesting to point out, but never newsworthy. That winning reputation had been useful. Of course, Cristen was a cocky little kid who thought she was a hero no one could beat, just because she had her cute little superpowers to protect her.

It was really the only reason she ever won. It was also the only reason she thought she had any skill in a fight at all.

But I’m not Sparrow anymore, Cristen thought as she started down the street. She made sure to stand tall and walk smooth once she left, ring out in the open and the label on her jacket popped, baiting fish in a very dangerous pond. Her hands rubbed along her metal gadget in search for wounds to repair. Sparrow is that kid’s name. If I ever was a kid.

By the time the broken lights of the rundown Monarch Theater look down at her, the rain had stuttered to a gentle shower. Her walk had been too occupied with thoughts of school to notice. The boy underneath the bleachers came back to her too, with his unwavering green eyes and palpable dangerousness. She wondered if he’d be at the Academy when she started. Maybe he was like her… stupidly passionate about Gotham.

Wait, why was she thinking of that? He was a threat. She’d need to seek him out, if anything, and spy until she found out what he was up to. He was probably just some punk-ass boy selling ‘designer’ weed to the rich kids. She’d need to keep an eye out for other suppliers.

Some late-night walkers are trying to move as fast as they can without being noticed. It’s dangerous to be out this late. It’s why Cristen’s here. She’s always been here, even if her body is in Fawcett and her mind is in Gotham. Her soul is always here. Can’t leave where you’re born.

It was once beautiful. All of the other buildings in Park Row are too far gone, stripped of even the barest natural beauty, down to the core belief and impossibility of it ever being luxurious. Cristen had never seen this theater in its prime. But, like an old woman admiring old pearls, there’s a forlorn allure in the happiness it had once brought.

MO AR E TER, the sign informs.

The woman is a ghost now. Every bulb behind the marquee is burst or broken, what was once a golden ripple in the puddles of rain is not even a twinkle in the eye. A ‘for sale’ sign hangs in the last non-broken door. It’s the same one from when Cristen and Laureline would walk down this same street, every year the ceiling slumped in another inch, every year another wall collapsing.

She rubs her fingers along decade-old posters and graffiti. The ink from the Mark of Zorro drags against her fingers as she passes it, and she idly paints a smiley face on what must have been the ticket booth—it’s more of a grimy, filthy, chrome mirror. Her reflection in it is freckled with dirt.

The image makes her look herself again. The face looking back reminds her of someone else, someone close that she’s never truly known, and maybe never will know. Still interesting how
mystery is familiar.

When it comes to appearances, hair, basic face-shape and skin tone are typically catalogued and noticed first. Notable additions—scars, unusual marks, uncommon characteristics in general—are added too. It’s rare to actually address someone’s eye color unless it is out of place, and not uncommon to take into account things like body language or status.

But the nuns at Persephone’s all pointed out the same thing; Cristen and her mother did not have similar eye colors, but they shared looks. Like they’d been through something words couldn’t describe.

Like they’d seen things.

Cristen pulls her hood over her rain-tangled hair and strides into the alleyway.

At its mouth, Cristen can see the very end past at least ten buildings on either side, marked by concrete steps littered with cigarette stubs and graffitied dumpsters. Cristen knows she has arrived when runny, red spray paint greets her. Welcome to Crime Alley! It shouts, accusatory and narrow. Bricks awash with phrases and tags and voices, all angry, all gone and cursed by every lingering spirit of the dead.

She takes a water bottle filled up by the rain and cleans off Crime Alley, replacing it with a chalked-in Park Row.

Cristen, for a moment, regrets wanting to come here. It was called Crime Alley for a reason. People were mugged, hurt, killed here, and for some reason in her head it was almost a good place. She’d met Robin here, which only made it special to her. This stupid, marked up alleyway, graffitied to hell with every crime ever committed here. Every scream and sign of struggle. Every last memory personified… here. A great list of sins and the names of a hundred victims.

There’s a name on the walls that isn’t included in this charter, but the introduction isn’t necessary. Even speaking it isn’t necessary. It’s almost a taboo around these parts, like even one of its names will draw a gunman from the shadows, the rain weighing down on this part of the Earth like a magnet or a dip in the crust.

It’s formally known as The Park Row Tragedy, but calling it the Wayne Murders will raise the same result.

Something in her chest stirs. A raw and whole form of misery bled into the streets, into the very heart of the city, all of it gliding down the drains and brewing into the sewer until it reaches here: ground zero. Gotham had loved the Waynes.

She doesn’t know much of the details. Wayne Enterprises is famous for its warm grip around the worlds’ hand, innovation and creation for the better of humanity, but the company that hosts the largest events for the smallest holidays does nothing on the 26th of June, the day of the murder. They even own the theater, but the land has yet to be replaced and replenished… for the better of humanity.

Reese’s brother Lucius works at Wayne Enterprises. He was a busy, busy man, to the point where Cristen rarely saw her cousins despite now living in Gotham. She and Reese were really the only (technical) Fox’s who didn’t work there. Luke did his own personal projects in the R&D department. Tiffany was the manager of the Wayne Enterprises’ ghetto drug-rehabilitation program. Tam had even been engaged to Tim Wayne once, too.
Cristen honestly didn’t know why she hadn’t met any of the Waynes, but the more she thought about it… She probably didn’t want to.

Reese’s lips would always tighten when the Fox’s had to leave a family thing for work, so maybe he was a little bitter. Okay, a lot bitter. But he really couldn’t judge: he was an ex-police Captain, and even now Cristen knew he had been violently dedicated to cleaning up the corruption. He’d told her dozens of stories about how he refused to take bribes and sacrificed everything to do the right thing. Cristen’s the same way—so it was definitely a family thing, then.

It could have also been because of Lance, who had been an avid scientist in his life, and had gotten killed for working too hard… even if the papers and the police claimed it was a suicide.

They’d been trying for years to find evidence to support the theory that Lex Luthor had killed him for prying into ‘company matters’ that didn’t involve him. Of course, Luthor’s men were snapping shut the mouth of anyone who seemed to know something; Cristen, of course, had a steel jaw.

Standing here, standing where Cristen and Robin had stood together and met for the very first time, shared the same space, made an air of freedom leak into her pores and fill her lungs. Her memories of Lance were thick with freedom and enjoyment; he had been all too stressed about Cristen’s adoption and wanted desperately for her to like him, and thus developed the ‘cool dad’ countenance that always put her at ease.

“Why is she screaming like that? It’s just a bug,” Cristen frowned at the screen, stuffing more popcorn in her face. Indiana Jones was currently inside the Temple of Doom, a place swarmed with bugs the size of her hands and cobwebs as thick as the comforter over her shoulders.

Lance had hesitantly started pushing her curls out of her face, brushing back methodically at their stubborn need to bounce back against her eyes. “It’s the 80s, so it was pretty misogynistic. They didn’t think there were girls like you out there, capable of being girls but still doing heroic stuff—you’re less of a Willie and more of an Indy.”

“Damn right,” Cristen said.

Reese flicked her on the ear and smiled at his husband, “Hey, Indiana was afraid of one thing.”

The next second she was being rolled over and tickled everywhere, across her belly and under her arms like vipers, shrieking with laughter as Reese and Lance yelled together, “Snakes!”

She was grinning to herself at the memory. Cristen can almost see Robin’s cape disappearing over the rooftops, too. The rain is reminiscent of that night, cool and soothing, so she tilts back her head to bathe in it. Feelings trade hands of cards and remain the same.

Then her eyes go wide.

This alleyway must be some sort of destiny hot-spot, or maybe a reverse Bermuda Triangle in the slums. Because when Cristen looks up, the white-hot flash of lightning carving it’s mark into the sky above her, a pair of shadows fly overhead. Shadows with wings. Shadows with capes.

Without hesitation, Cristen backs into the opposite wall of the alleyway. She takes in a swift breath, and by natural tendency her feet rush forward, her hands clasp the metal rail of a fire escape, and both work to bring her to the roof with inhuman speed and agility. She’s after those capes like the snap of a rubber band.

She didn’t like it; that was the old way, going in blind with her fist raised (and her thumbs tucked under her fingers, because she was stupid and didn’t know how to punch). In the years she spent in
Gotham’s muck she had learned how to hone it, manipulate and understand it, in the way that’s making her slow her pace. She trained with people she shouldn’t have to get these skills—she shouldn’t forget about them over an excitement.

*What would I do if I caught up with them? What would I say? Cristen asked herself. Hi, I’m Cris, and I’m a major fan of the way you beat the hell out of criminals. Sign my face? She mocked herself. (I don’t even have a pen!)*

But, again, her feet do more work than her brain, and before she has time to decipher how many rooftops she has leapt across she’s standing above the alley the shadows disappeared to. Her talisman reveals itself under the cover of a chimney.

The moonlight slants over the alley, snipped off the edge by hollow darkness. It’s quiet.

It’s quiet, like the whole world has silenced in anticipation, even the distant cars and the water slowing to a stop to listen. Then the shadows move. Little white slits glance down the alley, and like ink had been poured, the shade took a vaguely human form and skulked its way around the slender body of a car.

Like magic, a glove revealed itself from the ink and drew down upon the cars surface. What had once been a lousy Ford Pinto suddenly morphed… Panels drew back and flipped, mechanics whirred and hummed, little wires clicking and data colliding under electric eyes. The motor purred, and the Pinto was gone.

Replaced by the most *badass* vehicle Cristen had ever *seen*.

The ink hand drew back, eyes of milky white sliding over the veiled part of the space. Then he *spoke*. His voice was like rain, like thunder, and lacked the inflection a question should normally possess. It was like the automated voice on a phone-call, or the snipped words of the AI in your phone—but still somehow deeper and *human*.

“You coming,” asked the Batman.

Batman was nothing what the newspapers and witness accounts had described in the past. They said he was seven feet tall with massive, shredded black wings, claws as long as your arms and teeth to match. But like Cristen sensibly expected, he’s a man—an almost uncomfortably bulky, around-six-foot man, but a man all the same.

The word ‘man’ doesn’t seem appropriate, though. No man could move as silently as that. No man could command the dark like he did, make the night unravel into a thread to re-weave into something new. No man *talked* like that, either. Now she knows why the stories about him were so unbelievable; this man was myth, fair and square.

She just hopes he doesn’t see her. But in some way, she feels that he’ll *sense* her. He *is* Batman...

So caught up in the fact that he was *real*, Cristen stiffened. *Is he talking to me? Please don’t be talking to me. But, like, also—please?*

Behind the whirling cloud of memories and awe, there’s something almost like a rational thought, and it’s so surprising to hear in her own mind Cristen almost laughs. She is *so* going to get arrested or something.

Her wonder is met with Robin.

Again, the shadows part, ink and paint washed together into royal tones of green and maroon. A
flicker of gold winks at her from the trim of his cape and the symbol on his breast. She would have believed it was her R if she couldn’t feel the weight of it in her pocket right then and there.

In Cristen’s memory there’s a boy with round cheeks and pointy elbows, but this Robin is all new and all different. He’s built like a sports car, angular and lean and muscular and tall. If it’s anything about him that surprised her, it’s the height. He’d been nearly two whole heads shorter than her the last time she’d seen him. What in the hell happened?

He doesn’t walk. He’s doesn’t glide like Batman does, either. He seems to stalk, commanding the scene, clinging to the darkness and barely blinking under the glow of the street-lamp. The behavior is similar to what he’d done years ago. But… perfected. Smoothed down and unwrinkled, without fault or crack in composure.

His voice isn’t boyish anymore, either.

“You seem to be in no hurry, father,” Robin says, pointed. It is also disapproving.

The scars are everywhere. His collar is tall enough to protect his throat, but his chin and his nose and his eyebrow are decorated with them like medals of honor—there’s even a little bit of his ear missing, reminiscent of a stray turned K-9 unit. It gets worse the closer she looks; his lip is dimpled from being split so often, and little ones like beauty marks paint his cheeks.

On his jaw, there is a fresh, unbandaged wound like a gritty smile. The blood slips down his chin and dribbles onto his collar, but he does nothing about it.

“I need to bring the samples back to the cave.” There’s something on the end of the sentence left hanging, a reference to information Robin should already know. “I’m trusting you—”

“I know.” Robin nods. That must be enough, as Batman grunts or huffs something in return, then slips down into the car.

With a sharp, “Get that wound bandaged,” the Batman is a shadow against the warm light of the inner-city’s midnight horizon.

Cristen’s emotions are hard to decipher in the blur of it all. Exhilaration, adrenaline, nostalgia stirred into a hot soup in her mind. But Cristen knows that, above all, that fight still beats in her chest and for once she feels it in others. She can see it in the way Batman observes his surroundings, and the way Robin’s shoulders roll.

She glances down at the R; they have the reason. They have the answer to why.

Cristen almost drops the sensor she’s working on, only to realize it’s been crushed in her excited grip.

An unspoken goodbye hung between the two. If there was one thing she didn’t like about that situation, it was the lack of parting words. Robin was his son, so where was the I love you? Everytime Cristen even stood up to go into the kitchen Reese would utter the words. She didn’t know their rituals or what their relationship was like, but regardless, it still bothered her. Made her wonder. She could tell that it unnerved Robin too: the moment the car turned the corner he bowed his head and sighed, the sound thick in his throat and muddled with frustration.

Okay, Cristen thought, slipping deeper into the shadows with her ears perking and reddening in the cold, time to be rational. The rain had begun to flutter out in short and infrequent bursts. It’s fight against Cristen’s jacket lessened as the engine’s life fell away from her ears, as if beckoned away by it.
Only then does the information start to click into place, does her mind start to work (if only barely). He said cave. Oh my god—like, man cave? Secret lair? Was it an actual cave, or was it like the Fortress of Solitude where it just had a cool name? And what about—about father? Robin had called Batman father. They were father and son, through Cristen supposed it would be weirder if they weren’t.

The questions were starting to make her brain hurt.

He shakes his head at The Batman’s exit and clicks his tongue. It lights up a part of Cristen’s memory, nearly shorting it out, and she tries not to smile. It’s him. It’s… really him.

When she met Robin things had been… ineffable. Her heart was up in her throat, her hands were clammy (and bleeding), and her voice was a nervous whisper in fear of embarrassing herself in front of him. She had not quite grasped why she should be doing this, why she should be fighting and helping people, other than her natural want to be good. There was no other purpose behind it other than the win.

But she had her purpose now. This wasn’t just for the victory, the invisible medal gifted to her when another villain slid back into the sewers. This was for Laureline. For Reese and his husband Lance, for Bullet and Lucy, even mystery boy. Cristen had decided she was going to fight because the tragedies that befell them could never happen again—and she had the power to help, so why not use it?

She hates that it’s the first thing that comes to mind, but Cristen quotes it anyway. With great power comes great responsibility.

Cristen has the power to save people. It’s her responsibility, her job, her duty, to use them for that purpose.

She knew that Robin did this too, she knew he had the reason, but that didn’t stop her from feeling like she was insane. It wasn’t a normal thing. A part of her wanted to be normal, yes. But how could she ever be? At least she wasn’t alone… It was better being insane with someone else than insane by yourself.

(Well, maybe that wasn’t the proper analogy. But you get the point.)

Robin stood still. He looked up, first admiring the moon under pale lenses, then turning toward the sky on the other side of the island. Waiting. Waiting for light, and for the beautiful relief of another life saved.

He didn’t see her. He didn’t even spare her a glance, a thought, the prickling sensation on the back of a person’s neck when being watched. She was enormously lucky. With that thought in mind, Cristen sensibly pushed herself off the brick chimney and snuck away from the edge.

And then she is running, taking off into the night at full speed, trying desperately to hold in how loud she wanted to yell and whoop and holler. It’s him, it’s him, and that whole night wasn’t just a wild fever dream, she thought.

She had always imagined that there was something wrong with her. Her powers—I mean, what were they? Where did they come from? What did they mean? That part was the blatant bit, but the stupid Spider-Man quote comes back to her. She had the ability and the incentive and the advantage to help people, so why not? Batman and Robin were the same way; they had the incentive and whatever else to help. So they did.
With a great leap, she landed on her hands and flipped down into an alley, disappearing with her hood trailing behind her, giggling just loud enough for only herself to hear…

| DAMIAN |

IT WAS A beautiful night. Robin could never admit how nice it was; the cool titter of rain in his ears, the purr of distant motors, the breeze catching his cape and snapping it back all a simple serenity. He didn’t have any of this as Damian Wayne. That was only another reason why being benched was so unbelievably unbearable—he missed fighting at father’s side, he missed the view, and he couldn’t have gone another hour without justice being served. There were still too many sins on his plate.

Even if Damian was on his off hours, he was still Robin—minus the sights and tools, of course. The world’s definition is turned on to its full setting. Every small little laugh, every wave of hands, micro-expressions and too-quick reactions culminating into a thousand different stories for every person he passed. He can see it all. He can feel it all, and sometimes he still has to remind himself that teenagers make noise when they walk.

The one thing that could really trip him up, trip Robin up, was when he made a mistake. It all came down to the very first domino as it toppled. Today’s domino had been the girl on the field. She’d nearly caught him half-way out of uniform, but it was over, so the only thing he could do was assure himself (repeatedly) that she hadn’t seen him. That she forgot about him. That she didn’t know the secret.

Even if he couldn’t quite forget about her. He’s rusty—the word alone is disgraceful. Not to mention how coldly father has been treating him as of late.

There’s a little sound somewhere far off. Damian doesn’t register it at first, but his subconscious hums in a pressing sort of way. His eyes swivel around the moon just as the clouds smooth to cover it, and that was a shadow—where had it gone? No. Just a trick of the light. Just Damian on edge, because he made one stupid little mistake and he knows he’s going to pay for it. Dominos.

The grapple is produced from his cape, and there’s the split-second decision of where to fire it before it’s already shot and he’s carried into the air, the rope a lifeline in his grip. His eyes center on that alleyway and search the darkness for the millisecond in which it goes by—no one is there. No one is in Park Row.

Damian Wayne dismisses the idea, but he doesn’t dare lose it; he’s not stupid enough to brush off such a thing. This is because Damian Wayne is Robin, the heir to the mantle of Batman, and Batman and Robin have all sorts of enemies. Especially ones that lie in the shadows.
He owed her. That's all Cristen could think about.

Because, truthfully, she had encountered Robin one more time before that first day back in Gotham.

In Jersey, the land slopped southward and was therefore a perfectly crafted sun trap—everywhere but for Gotham, at least. It was almost as if there was a heavy forcefield wrapped around the island, going as far out as the harbor to prohibit any sun from passing through. The only way any of it could get in was off the water. After it baked in the light all day it washed ashore and struck that cold shield, minced into a clean stratus that rolled onto land.

Cloying heat like that never bothered Cristen. She’d thought for a long time that she was simply lucky, but experience deduced it was just another ability she had yet to understand. Thought it could hardly be deemed an ability. Cristen didn’t sweat, didn’t breathe as much, and had never seen any of her own blood before. Another thing to set her apart from everyone else, another factoid that made her a freak of nature.

It had been two months since Laureline died. After meeting Robin, Cristen’s determination to fight their local criminal elements doubled. A high had been reached after very little time, and feeling stupidly invincible, she invited Laureline to tag along on the stakeout that took her life.

Everyone in the city had something to mourn. Cristen had always felt lonely, in a innate way out of her reach, but now she was truly and wholey alone. Laureline was dead. A sudden rush of her other friends were travelling (Miles) or adapted into the system (Kendra, Colin, etcetera). For the first time in years, Cristen was that kid sitting in the corner and staring at the wall again.

Really. There was a bar called ‘The Wall’ downtown famous for housing corrupt cops, and Cristen’s mission was to sneak in through the back and get proof they were dirty. Trick was that she had to space out when and where she found and turned in the evidence. It was this that got her caught. A couple of the smarter ones connected past clues to the bar… and then to Cristen.

Nine o’ clock on a beautiful summer night, and Cristen’s getting her ass beat in an alleyway. Really was surprising to see that it had been the worst thing to happen to her that week.

Cristen really only remembered everything prior to that night because she’d saved up to see Captain
America: The First Avenger, and loved it so violently that she went through this whole stupid phase…

“Come on,” encouraged an officer, stomping on her ribs. “Get up! Not so confident now, huh, *chica*?”

Cristen, stupidly determined and most definitely depressed, stumbled to her feet and wielded the lid on a garbage can like a shield. “…I can do this all day.”

A part of her present self was still caught in that old tiredness, exhaustion so deep it ingrained itself in her DNA. Cristen was both at her most active and at her worst. She wouldn’t go down, refused to, fueled by guilt and silently standing still to take the punch that might kill her.

Pathetic, really. Pathetic and lonely. *Of course* Robin found her like that, instead of… whatever the opposite of numb was. Cristen, at the time, would have no idea.

For the hundredth time, they traded turns with her, kicking and shoving at their leisure and laughing when she wobbled harder each time. Cristen almost felt willing to give in. Almost felt ready to just get up and run, see her blood and feel it all on the same day.

*You start running they’ll never let you stop. You stand up, push back. Can’t say no forever, right?*

Stupid, stupid Captain America. Being right all the time. Hands scuffed and arms shaking, Cristen pressed off her fists and kept them coiled, wavering in the stance that Robin had taught her.

“Ooh,” hummed the second officer. “She’s got her little fists raised. Better watch out, Owens, or she might just clip ya—”

Cristen did more than *clip* him. Perhaps she’d even put too much strength into it, as he flew back…and straight into Robin’s grip.

“I understand you have a role to play—the corrupt cop—but must you be so corrupt that you combat *children*?” Robin pushed the officer’s arms back and locked them into cuffs, harshly cracking his leg behind his knee and taking him down. “Only the *weak* prey upon the innocent.”

Either Cristen knew he could handle it or was so exhausted she couldn’t care, she flopped against the brick behind her and sunk to sit. Robin dealt swiftly with the other one. He ID-ed them and reported it while Cristen caught her breath, glancing at her out of the corner of his mask.

*He won’t remember you*, a hopeless part of her mind suggested. *Robin’s too smart to waste anything on you, nevermind his memory. Nevermind his time. Why would he want to, with the things you’ve done?*

Fog filled her lungs, soothing and cool against the heated night. Cristen was not sweating, but her body produced a phantom replica that had her scrubbing her hairline and legs, only to come back with something hot and sticky. Blood.

Cristen stared at it in amazement. She was aware she’d gotten a bloody nose, but to taste the blood and see it for herself was so out-of-body and foreign—was she dying?

“I see you’ve taken my advice to heart,” chuffed Robin. He offered his gauntlet, “Can you stand?”

Humming noncommittally, she took his hand and felt herself return by a fraction. It was a small hand, as Robin was generally pretty small, nearly a whole head below her in height. To see the colors on his cape and hear his voice was to bring Cristen to a time of happiness and goodness. She
had grown more than he had, but that was unsurprising: Robin was a permanent fixture that only changed in unseeable ways. A ghost that remained the way they died.

“‘M fine,” Cristen said. “Probably don’t look like it at all, but I am.”

She was not. This was something known to both of them, and Robin loudly complained it. “You’re a horrible liar. You require bandaging and antibiotics.”

Simply allowing him to take the lead was easier than protesting, as Cristen didn’t have the capacity to come up with any argument anyway. She was in a limbo between passing out and gaining back her embarrassment. Robin had come back. This was their utterly insufferable day, and it was definitely starting to feel like it.

“So,” Cristen started. “How are you?”

Robin snorted, and began to direct them to a building across the street. They would have medical supplies and ice. “Busy.”

“Do you mean that, like, I've been pretty busy lately, or um, shut up I'm busy.”

He only grunted at her, taking her arm over his shoulder and picking up her footing to increase their speed. Cristen’s heart finally earned a brain and figured out precisely what was going on. Robin was back, helping her across the street, and he was totally touching her waist and his hair was soft and sweaty on her arm.

It had been three months, maybe, but something about him instilled silly feelings into her again. If they had even left in the first place; his R felt warmer in her pocket than usual. They were pressed close enough together where he could feel it if he wanted to—perhaps that was why he was smirking.

“Forgot how bad you’re at talking,” Cristen laughed, coughing.

Damian set her against the front of the closed establishment as if she was something heavy he was carrying, and rolled his eyes. “I forgot how astute you are with language.”

Though initially harsh, the phrase was said with mild amusement. Cristen couldn’t help but feel her heartbeat pickup. Robin remembered her. Maybe not enough to get a name, but—had she even told him her name? She wasn’t going to. If he needed to, he would turn her in, and a name would only make things easier.

Robin suddenly appeared from the inside and opened the door to allow her in. Cristen took her time and apparently shorted out his impatience mainframe, because Mr. Robot helped Cristen through and huffed as they did.

“My name’s Maria, by the way,” said Cristen.

Robin chuckled, surprising her. “No, it’s not.”

“And how do you know?”

Stepping away to lift a barrier for her, Robin said, “Your pulse changed tempo and you began to blink faster. And if I recall correctly, Maria is the main character from your favorite stage play. I’m not so easily fooled.”

It was dark enough in the space where Cristen’s spotty vision couldn’t make out what kind of
building they were in, exactly, but Robin’s mask had night vision and they cleared through to a back room regardless. She gained a steadier gait but let him help her anyway. Totally not because he smelled good. Totally not because he remembered her favorite stage play.

“As cool as it is that you figured that out or whatever,” said Cristen, “I’m not gonna say anything back to protect my pride. Just call me Maria.”

“And why should I?” asked Robin.

Cristen shrugged. “You’ll report me to some dumb shelter or whatever. I like where I am now. I’m not getting put in a foster home and messing up all that I can learn.”

Robin found the light to reveal a small office aside a wall of prizes and a case of candies. There was a bin of recycling beneath the counter full of tickets, which could only mean—

Cristen looked up and her vision rounded out, filling in dark purple shapes and neon colors in the little light she had. The floor was that silly celebration pattern and bedecked in dozens upon dozens of video games. They were in an arcade, a place Cristen had only dreamed about, and she was not going to be denied this epic chance to utterly destroy Dance Dance Revolution’s holder for the highest score.

After sweeping the back offices for a first aid kit, Robin secured one and spent the journey back to Cristen muttering about proper preparation. He returned to find the burglar alarm disabled, the register pried open by a knife, and the colorful lights and sounds of an active arcade playing avidly across the counter.

“Goddammit.”

Somehow, in the little time Robin had disappeared, Cristen had found her way to a game and was firing a blaster at badly-animated aliens. Painted hues of red and blue by the screen’s display, Cristen’s eyes were wide with excitement and her face was filled with laughter.

“I should take you into custody, you know,” Robin threatened, crossing his arms. “That’s theft.”

Cristen paused to prepare herself for the next level of the game, changing her footing and holding the suspiciously sticky gun-shaped joystick like a soldier in position. “Oh, hush. It was ten dollars in coins that I’m putting back in their machine. I’m not stealing the money. Just… moving it!”

“You’re injured—”

Robin was interrupted by Cristen’s delighted exclamation of flamethrower! as the next level began, filling her pupils with fire and animating the drying blood on her nose like she was born for battle. Still, she was smiling. It felt good to do this. To be a kid after being something else for so long, and to adjust to fake fighting instead of the real alternative.

“Come along, already. I came in here to assist you, not entertain you. Get off the game and let’s—”

Again, Cristen interrupted him, but instead with her smile, “—make a deal? Great! I go through the rest of these coins and then we patch me up.”

Before he could differ in opinion, Cristen took his hand and pulled him into her side with surprising strength. She replaced his hands on the controls and helped him aim. “Come on! We can do it together.”

Though her offer was apparently pretty tempting (obviously), Robin struggled over it. How any boy
their age struggled over whether to play video games was beyond Cristen. But to be fair, they were never normal and would never be normal, and something had clearly been stolen from both of them. For Robin to act this way meant… nothing good.

Now she had to do this, and certainly not for Cristen’s own health.

“I have business to attend to.”

“Lame,” said Cristen, suddenly welling with happiness she hadn’t felt in months. It filled her ribcage and overtook all function. “Watch out! He’s going for your face!”

Without hesitation, Robin whipped back toward the game and fired a single, perfect shot into the head of the alien diving for him. Blood sprayed across the screen and melted down to reveal a title card. Level 3! Everything flashed under the support of colorful strobe and badass music.

“Oh, Robin,” admitted Robin upon unlocking a large sword for the next level, “One more game.”

WHAT WITH THE two of them being idiot kids traumatically addicted to violence, they returned to the register a total of three more times and had swept the entire gamefloor by the end of the hour. Not to mention the water guns they’d found behind the counter.

After being decimated at skeeball (Robin’s words), Cristen decided that she would beat him at the next game they came across. But because Robin was a cheater and definitely threw when he was supposed to roll, Cristen guiltily agreed to the idea that he would choose what game. So, obviously he went for the weird one in the corner that neither of them had played yet.

“Cheese Viking,” echoed Cristen, humming. “Wait… I think I might have played this before! On a field trip or something. Prepare to get floor-wiped, Rob, because you’re going down.”

Robin snorted at her, batting at her arm playfully while she opened the menu. “Oh, please. It seems to be a game about fantasy cheeses. How simple must you be to not win a game like that?”

With pinkened ears and fluttery nerves, Cristen’s arm immediately tingled with the touch. Something is up with her powers. They’d never reacted to anyone like this before, and whether that was a product of the beating she took earlier or Robin, she was uncertain. But... it was also—probably—totally Robin.

They couldn’t stop… touching. Cristen would bump their hips together or tug on his cape, teeming with early teen anxiousness and liking, only for Robin to jokingly punch at her arm and pull her hair. Spit banter back and forth with her like she wasn’t blushing all over. Worse: he was definitely aware of it, but indefinitely interested in return.

This was happening. Robin was back, and they weren’t just talking. Between video games and contests, Cristen could feel herself like him more and more, reminded again and again of the night they met and much how it had changed her in so little time.

And how much he would hate her if he knew the truth.

“Even if—sorry, when I totally kick your ass, and you, y’know, lose, I hope you still like this game,” Cristen selected a versus mode and side-stepped to accommodate him. “I remember liking it.”

Robin opened his mouth to say something snarky, but cut it short and pressed his lips together. After a beat, he glanced at her sincerely and awkwardly. “Perhaps I will. You do, after all, have fairly
acceptable taste.”

Tenderly, Cristen touched his shoulder, but then proceeded to bust out laughing. Robin reddened like the sky at dawn.

“How sweet of you,” she heaved for breath, holding her belly. “Now, c’mon. Bring it! Winner gets the pick what we do next.”

After shoving each others shoulders and stealing joysticks and opposing buttons, the game ended in a perfect tie, which spat out a few bonus tickets as consolation. Robin snorted about how they should have a rematch. Cristen, briefly distracted by some colors behind him, dumbly shook her head.

“Or we could dance,” she said, watching the jukebox alternate between tones of teal and blue. It’s allure brought Cristen a few steps toward it. “Just for fun! We could have a dance off or something. Here, let me see what songs they have.”

Dancing. Robin echoed internally, watching Cristen skip and twirl over to the machine with incredibly low amounts of grace. Dance as in waltzing? Robin could waltz. He'd like to waltz, with Cristen even, and that feeling hollowed out his gut and wounded him.

Building up a sudden forlorn attitude, Robin held back. It was nearly time. Cristen didn’t want to admit it and neither did he, but this night would have to end at some point. They could not stay here forever. This was supposed to be an insufferable day, not days. Or years. Or eternity, as his childish crush was silently demanding.

“We should stop,” says Robin. “I will bandage you, assure that you are home safe and then be on my way. Unlike you, I am chained by responsibility.”

“Chains can be broken, Rob,” said Cristen. She strode toward him and poked the symbol on his chest. “You taught me that. Dr. Robin can check me over or whatever, but I still have two coins left—just enough for a dance, and since your choice is to bandage me, we can spend the coins on my choice! It’s perfect.”

Again, Cristen gave him little room to argue, ushering him forward and toward the register. She merrily hopped up onto the prize counter and cracked open the kit. “Here!”

For the first time, Robin found his stomach rolling with longing, wanting to remain here as Cristen desired. To stay here forever, as the children they never got to be. Making up the same silly bets and challenging each other over and over again. He’d never liked anything so repetitive. But he was starting to love this.

He said nothing as he rubbed antibiotic ointment into her scrapes. Cristen chittered away, far happier than she had been before, and Robin’s cursed emotional brain connected that happiness to himself. She continued to talk even as he wiped the blood off her face—it is more than a little endearing, annoying as that may be.

“Look here,” said Cristen, unsheathing a pamphlet from a display. “This has a full list on the jukebox songs—and it has one of my favorites! Oh, we have to dance to that one, Robin. It’s this old song about dreams and the government. I don’t really know, but I really, really like it—”

Robin did not share her enthusiasm. He had lifted her shirt to apply the same care to the bruises on her ribs, silently brooding as he did. Cristen’s whole form seem to wilt. “Something wrong?”

Slowly, Robin set down the gauze. “This night must end soon. I know you don’t want to admit it, and neither do I…”
“Hey,” Cristen murmured, touching his arm. Robin’s gaze drew up to hers. “We still have time.”

And as if to prove a point, to prove how easily they could suspend this moment between them endlessly, Cristen leaned down and kissed him.

Robin froze before he did anything else. His training was broad and masterful, but he had never been taught something like this. But perhaps that was because something like this didn’t need to be learned at all. It was innate and beautiful, innocent in ways untouched by Damian’s life. Something he was never meant to learn, never meant to seek out, and yet he was here and she was still kissing him.

Cristen pulled off first, blinking slowly and digesting what she had done. The butterflies in her belly were moving so erratically she could hardly detect them any longer.

“Sorry,” she blurted. Like she’d bumped him accidentally, instead of kissing him.

Kissing him. Cristen had kissed him. She had kissed Robin with the kind of experience-less youth that had them just hold their faces together and go stiff. But Robin’s mouth was soft, minty even, and she wanted to kiss him again. And yet it’s hard to think about stuff like that when you’re dying of embarrassment.

Supremely, from his toes to his ears, Robin reddened. “...It’s alright.”

For a moment longer they remained trapped in that exchange, slowly melting into the idea, realizing how much they’d enjoyed it but conflicting over it regardless. Robin seemed to succumb faster than she. He was leaning in again, and Cristen was panicking… closer and closer… inches apart.

His communicator goes off.

Robin swallows hard with the sound. Cristen’s knees lock together and her legs are shaking a little, because Robin is unknotting his hand from her curls and dedicating them to his gauntlets. He steps aside to answer it. With his back turned to her, she wilts and tries not to blush so hard she loses feeling in her toes. She’d never kissed anyone before. She’d never, ever, been as brave as that, and it was all Robin's fault. Making her brave. This whole teenage gig is pretty dumb.

Angry, hushed voices invade the space that has only held theirs for so long. Robin mumbles alongside them in his original dulled tone. After the call ends, Robin shrinks into his cape in silence, and closes the communicator with a snap.

“I have curfew,” he confesses. Cristen pushes off the counter and doesn’t look at him, burning with guilt and regret and overreaction, only for Robin to shyly smile in her direction. “I’m afraid I will have to raincheck on that dance.”

Cristen swallows down her excitement. “Next Saturday. Here, at ten.”

“The storage room window is easy to squeeze through. Get rid of all the evidence of our time here, if you can,” says Robin. He begins the walk back into the backroom, Cristen trailing eagerly at his feet, only to flip up onto a shelf and grin below his hood.

Cristen reaches up for no reason she can discern, every nerve in her body overwritten by this invading virus called affection. When Robin wraps their hands together, she playfully sneers at him, “Don’t you dare be late.”

He leans in, ever so briefly, his eyes flicking across every detail on her face beneath his mask. Cristen longs to see what is underneath. Maybe when she squeezes his hand, Robin likes it. A horrible misstep.
With the soft flutter of his cape on the windowsill, this is the last Cristen Young sees of Robin for several years.

The first Saturday, Cristen breaks in, aware of how he might be kept by a Riddler crisis that morning. Robin does not show. She does her best not to mourn it, and decides to come the next Saturday after that. Still, Robin does not show, and her heart burns whenever she considers why.

Why was he late?

*Maybe he’s busy,* becomes, *I’m a waste of his time.* Where Cristen’s thoughts begin with, *he has responsibilities to tend to,* they eventually end with, *he never wanted to come.* After years and years they are only ever: *I should have never kissed him. I ruined everything.*

A small insecurity that has lasted ages and ages. Snowballed into something she can’t let go of, no matter how hard Cristen tries, as insignificant as it sounds without context. Robin forgot. Cristen hasn’t forgotten, but has forgiven. Where she is just a girl beaten in an alley he is a hero, a legend, a standard to aspire to.

And maybe Cristen is not a hero because that is what she was born to be. Maybe she is not a hero because she was a good person, wanting right for those who hurt her and her family. Maybe she tries to be one because it will take away the forgotten girl, the waste of time, and turn her into something useful—something Robin might want to remember.

On the third Saturday, Cristen meets Reese Young. And Robin still owes her.
Chapter Summary

Reese is tempted.

CAT'S OUT OF THE BAG

GOTHAM CITY; OLD GOTHAM DISTRICT; YOUNG HOUSEHOLD | 11:24 AM | REESE YOUNG

REESE IS TEMPTED—very tempted—to open in on her with the whole sneaking out speech. Cristen has done this sort of thing before, so he knows the game she plays. A note is drawn up, she disappears for a couple hours, then returns and trashes the post-it like nothing ever happened. They had agreed upon a night that she would start and last night was not that night.

He’s allowed to act surprised when she clunks down the stairs, clad in quickly put on pajamas that he’s positive she didn’t even sleep in, rubbing at her eyes and yawning audibly. He knows better than to fall for her act. Her eyes didn’t hint with as much sleepiness as she usually had after a night of slumber. Her face wasn’t cutely puffed from resting for so long. She is tired, though—not I-just-woke-up tired, but more I-never-even-went-to-bed tired.

The living room is quite the scene. Despite the combined determination of Fox and Young, they hadn’t even skimmed the surface of unpacking entirely. Cristen adamantly insisted that she be the one to handle the general lifting, which was required for every part of the labor, narrowing him down to the little jobs. Reese appreciated it a lot like he appreciated her midnight-runs. It was unfair for her to do everything, even if she was a meta and he was (starting to get) old.

Mornings in the Young household consisted of Gotham’s Channel News Network and anchor Becky Marita relaying the week’s major events. The bored Jersey drawl of her voice was a murmur against the early morning traffic on the street. It was so loud that they could hear it from their upper floor, a canvas of shouts and clunky cars, thrashing water in the cement river bed of the avenue.

He nearly mistakes it for Fawcett with all the activity, but the palette’s all wrong. Fawcett is the reds and oranges and yellowed leaves of autumn, and Gotham is all rusted navy blues and washed-out greys and blacks. It’s precisely the reason why Reese moved Cristen to her home; too much sunlight isn’t good for his precious creature of the night.

“Oh, Cristen! You’re alive!” Reese cried, rejoicing with an overwhelming amount of sarcasm.

He has everything prepared for this lecture, and he’s sure that Cristen pales a shade when he looks at her narrowly. “Would you like to tell me where you were last night?”

Cristen has been taught under his roof too long to know to never make excuses. So instead, she opts for a different approach. She displayed herself, pulling up her sleeves and pant legs to prove her lack of wounds to him, “I’m sorry, Reese… I know I forgot a note or anything, but look! No injuries! I was just doing a couple rounds to get used to the layout again.”
Reese didn’t even bother to look back at the television screen, raising an eyebrow and pointing to it behind his back.

Beside Narita an image of the front steps to the GCPD appeared, on which stood a solitary statue of a lion… which had four unconscious figures tied to it. Becky smoothed her hands over her papers and delivered:

“Last night at around 11 PM, suspects Austin Welose, Noah ‘Biter’ Jone, Holly Morse, and Beatrice Gould were found at Gotham City Police headquarters.” She looked at the camera pointedly, “No cameras were able to catch the hero that delivered these infamous criminals, who have been linked to multiple break-ins and robberies in the last month.”

Now, beside the newscaster’s face, a photo of Batman and Robin was pasted. They were at an award ceremony in full costume. Cristen remembered that day; even if she lived in Fawcett at the time, there was no way she wasn’t going to keep track of her favorite heroes.

FAWCETT CITY; DOWNTOWN| THREE YEARS AGO | CRISTEN

“HE’S NOT EVEN that cool.”

With as little arrogance as possible, it can most definitely be said that Cristen Young is special. Her physical capabilities and history are something to note, sure, but she is also an endlessly good person. To put her in a crowd of farmers and call her cattle is unjust. What is more unjust, in her opinion, in that she must tolerate other special people.

Especially special people who don’t consider Batman as totally epic as she does—as he so clearly is.

“He’s not even that cool,” Cristen mocked, dramatically flopping against the house they were peering into and posing like a greaser. “Who the hell do you think you are, Batson? Do you wanna go? Right now, in some grandma’s backyard?”

Billy Batson, though very unassuming in appearance, is easily much more special than Cristen. This is something she has long accepted. But as a subconscious rule for Ms. Young, all those more special than her—more good—are deserving of absolute reverence. Not like she’d ever let him know that.

“It’s just Mrs. Olson,” Billy swats away her hand, which is trying to mimic the weird thing he does when he stuffs his hands in his pockets, “She’d probably come out and give us cookies if she caught us fighting. And… all I’m saying is that, well, Batman isn’t that cool.”

In Cristen’s attempts to generously belittle him, Billy manages to catch her wrists and mock the pissy face she makes. “He’s just some old loser, y’know. Superman, Wonder Woman—” his voice shifts, sly, “Captain Marvel; they’re all way better favorite-superhero choices.”

She scoffs. “Never said Batman was my favorite.” Cristen leans in, “Do you wanna know who is?”

Billy flushes, and she’s again reminded of how sweet he is, despite what his mom screwed him over with and all the good the foster system had done him until now. “You don’t need to suck up. Just say the word.”

Cristen giggles, shoving him, “You say the word.”

“Does this look like an emergency to you?” He brushed off the places her hands touched on him like they hadn’t been flirting all afternoon.

To Cristen, it very much was an emergency; when she heard the ad on the television end, she hoisted
herself up to Mrs. Olson’s windowsill and let Billy have fun trying to find room too. Instead he dutifully prepared for Cristen’s fall, complaining like he always did when she’d properly embarrassed him. Something warm in her belly unfurls.

“Why are we even trying to watch through her window?” Billy huffed, scrunching up his nose once her mud-streaked sneakers settle properly on his shoulders. Cristen has a dozen intrusive thoughts about kissing that nose, but then she thinks about her theories about Robin and they fade. “You have cable at your house.”

“But not a flat screen, mega-HD old lady retirement money TV.” Cristen casts a glance down at her fellow street rat, and smiles, “...And maybe I just wanted to spend some time with you.”

**GOTHAM CITY | NOW | CRISTEN**

“ACCORDING TO THE now in-custody criminals, Batman and Robin were not responsible for the arrest.” Narita glanced down at her papers and began to read, ”All four agreed that their capturer was young, about the late teens, approximately 5’10”/177 cm, possibly female, and wearing black street-clothing. Red Robin, Spoiler, and namely Batgirl have been theorized, along with the supposed new hero, Cat—”

Cristen’s smirk dropped.

Reese cut off the TV with his voice, and kept his gaze on Cristen, pinning her as a bug under his microscope. She looks like she wants to listen to the rest of Becky’s news, but Reese shakes his head so loud it makes Cristen squirm, “Does that sound like you, Cristen?”

“Yes, sir.” Cristen nodded.

Reese knew how she was. What type of things she felt. She was driven by past mistakes, whittled down to a single commandment, built upon an event and a few choice words. He respected that fight in her, but Reese couldn’t deny the fact that it got her in a whole other world of trouble. A world that he couldn’t be in to protect her anymore. No, that was Cristen’s job now, and she was damn proud to know it.

He released a sigh. It wasn’t angry, or even disappointed. Not in Cristen’s actions at least, but the ones she was going to make in the future, and the things he wouldn’t be able to do for her anymore.

Cristen had wanted to find a healthy outlet for her sense of duty. Now that she had finally found it and was preparing to make things official, Reese found himself worrying more and more with each passing hour. Cristen could certainly defend herself—but from people like Bane? Maybe. (She’d certainly attempt to take him).

Worse—the Joker? The bastard was aging, but insanity stays with you till the very end, and Reese wasn’t ready to see her battle something like... that.

With the stress-rattled sound, Cristen’s shoulders pulled tightly into her body, seizing as if hearing something that made your stomach coil. Reese swept his hand over his scalp and waved her around the couch.

Cristen padded her feet across the carpet, sinking down beside him on careful feet. There was always a respectful trust between them, especially on Cristen’s end, as he seemed to be one of few people who she valued enough to listen to. (Surprising, I know). He turned down the television, and as Becky’s voice died to a static murmur of white noise in their new home, Reese squeezed her shoulders.
“...How many more of these ‘tests’ are you going to put yourself through? Until…?” Reese asked. His frown showed on his forehead when he rubbed his eyes, “Hold on. I still don’t get this. Would you explain it to me again?”

Cristen stared at a spot on the carpet, fishing against her thigh for something that wasn’t there. When she couldn’t find it, she opted for holding her knee instead, “This is gonna sound stupid, but like, think of this in levels. Gotham is the boss. I entered into the boss-battle too early, so we went back and did all the other levels first, and now I’m returning to take her on again. Or… I just graduated from the police academy, so the Captain’s putting me on the little jobs first.”

Reese didn’t say anything. Cristen kept talking, trying to fill the silence.

"I’m almost there. I just need to… mentally prepare myself. Find a rhythm.” She then laughed, but barely. ”...I know it’s all stupid and dangerous, but you know better than anyone I’m not a normal kid. I gotta put this—” Cristen waved her hands, ”—to good use.”

Fingers bunched, Cristen’s tone was unwavering as the sun’s promise to shine, voice quiet but passionate and fierce. It gave the impression that a dangerous and important promise was being shared. Even if he didn’t like the concept, Cristen’s attitude still endeared Reese.

Sometimes he hates it. The worry bites into him when he hears that tone of hers, especially when concerning the subject of her nighttime activities. But still, as he always will, he loves it because she never talks like that about anything else—it means Cristen loves what she’s doing. And if she is happy, then he is elated… but still worried as hell.

“And it’s not about getting revenge,” Cristen said. Her eyes returned to the television, as a clip of Batman, Robin, and then seconds later, Catwoman appeared on the screen. She nodded to the street outside the window. "It’s about getting justice for them.”

“For Laureline, and Lance and—and everyone else who was taken from us in the wrong way, or had something taken from them.” Cristen said.

She pointed with great emphasis to the coffee table, which was already decorated with photos. Cristen on the day of her adoption, smiling bright between Reese and a coiled-haired man of similar age, admiring the man’s glasses while they chuckled. Another of Cristen and an Asian police-woman under the metro-line station. And a photo of Laureline, smiling big as if knowing a very sweet secret.

Laureline was with another woman in this photo. She and Cristen had never met positively before, but Cristen knew her as Laureline’s adopted mother Nancy. They’d been stupid, messing around outside a convenience store too early in the morning, and the police had been called for loitering or something—thing was, Laureline got caught. Though that hadn’t turned out to be a huge deal.

“It would be pretty nice, y’know?” Laureline had said, and her voice sounded faded and distance and… boiled with longing. “I mean, I get why you hate the adoption system. You had a reason to leave and they just couldn’t see it. No offense, Crissy, but I’m starting to realize that I just followed you because I wanted a family—and that’s what you are, still. But… still.”

Not like Cristen didn’t find her way back to her. (She always would). But by the time Cristen had, Laureline had been thrown back into the business and adopted right away. Her street story gained sympathy from Nancy, apparently, but none of that really mattered. She still hung out with Cristen after being adopted.

She still died, and that was still Cristen’s fault.
Reese could only smile brokenly at the photos, at his family and Cristen’s previous. He twists the ring around his finger against Cristen’s shoulder, and together they silence, only for a moment.

Then Reese exhaled like nothing was wrong, applying a smile to his face like he did everytime their loved ones were remembered, ”Alright, cadet. I guess it’s about time you move up in the ranks anyway.”

The edges of Cristen’s lips teased upward, ”You’re damn right it is, sir.”

Reese pat Cristen’s shoulder, then pulled something off the coffee table. He pressed a small wad of money in Cristen’s palm, a mischievous twinkle in his eye, like he knew Cristen could see it and that he was teasing the fact he knew something she didn’t. His fingers were warm on her cheek.

”Now, why don’t you start off your last days of summer by getting us some breakfast, kid?”

Cristen’s face was conquered by a grin.

GOTHAM CITY; DOWNTOWN SHOPPING DISTRICT | 12:38 | CRISTEN YOUNG

BY THE TIME Cristen reached Solomon Bridge, it had begun to rain. Even if it wasn’t the night before, she still felt at home, like she could walk the streets blind and get to any destination. Everytime a familiar sight came upon the street she walked a little slower as to remember every one of its details. She filed them all away in the special place in her mind reserved for Gotham, filed away the little things she remembered and the new things to note.

The old sign of a new establishment, a crumbling gargoyle looking down at her and welcoming her return, the light hitting the LexCorp building just the right way to temporarily blind her. The familiarity crept up on her in the oddest of ways. She had stared at a gang-sign on the substation wall, swearing up and down that she remembered it, and came to the realization that it was actually a foreign swear with quiet laughter. It felt good to be home.

The day was too late for breakfast—a cause of her late sleeping schedule—and that only meant one suitable place in town; Big Belly Burger.

Specifically, the one near Gotham’s Chinatown, on the corner of Cooke and Burton. After being to one BBB across town and one in Fawcett, Cristen had determined that this one was just better than all the others. As stupid as it is, this place is her own special safe-haven. She remembered going here with Laureline once, and several times with Reese and Lance.

Lance Young was the only person who understood exactly what was whirling through Cristen’s mind. His mom was a cop who’d fallen in the line of duty, and his philosophy in life ever since was simply persevere. He loved science and space so much they could go from burgers to Pluto’s planetary status in minutes, just like he could turn a tickle-fight into a tutoring session on chemistry.

Remembering her father and her father’s face sent a sharp ache through Cristen’s belly, but no matter how hard she tried to get the image out of her head, Lance’s words only filed over it like dialogue in a film.

“You… are the strongest person I know,” he had said, holding her hands with an urgency Cristen missed too much. “So don’t you ever let anyone think otherwise. When they’ve got you down, and they think they’ve won, play possum. Wait. Then you show them that true strength.”

Now, Cristen can only stare at the place in disdain. Or at least whatever remained of her beloved burger joint. There was no longer a symbol of red and yellow emblazoned with a burger on the glass door, nor were there red-and-white checkered floors and a permanent steam of goodness fogging the
windows. Instead, above the side of the restaurant in great, blinking lights like bleach to her vision, read the word BATBURGER.

From Cristen’s place across the street, she could see employees in Batman-themed costumes. A poorly-suited Batman tended to the front counter, while a Batgirl delivered a tray of food to a table. If Cristen had brought her lucky Robin symbol, this monstrosity would be traded for whatever they had done to her BBB. The Robin sadly sweeping up some trash inside seemed to agree.

Then the skin on the back of Cristen’s neck tingles, hair rising beneath her hood, dulled enough where she doesn’t turn around. The sensation is so familiar she can sense its every curl and tune. Her hands fist in the pockets of her sweatshirt, and she closes her eyes once the voice greets her. She has to hold down a smile.

“I know,” The accent is pure slum, all dialect and slang straight from Gotham’s underbelly, "Don’t it suck? They couldn’t have gone with somethin’ like a Taco Bell or a Burger Heaven—hell, a Starbucks!—but no, they went with Batburger, because Bats is all the rave now.”

When Cristen turns around to greet the girl, she’s no longer faced with the girl from Little Italy crammed into that stupid apartment with her and Laureline, but the college graduate with a nice coat and a nicer purse under her arm. She used to go by Roxy, for her protection. But Cristen has known Holly Robinson for a long time running. Holly envelopes her without hesitation, and Cristen delicately squeezes her around the waist.

"Or why not a store we could actually use? Why does Wayne Enterprises not step in and supply a veterinarian or something…?” Cristen agreed, smiling when Holly planted a kiss on her cheek.

She knew that they would eventually cross paths. They were, in a way, sisters. Not in the way that Cristen and Laureline were sisters, but more in the way that they were very good friends. While they had not been through everything together, Cristen came into Holly’s life just as suddenly as Holly would expect, now that she knew Cristen better. They were children of the Narrows—the silent sisterhood was clear.

Holly Robinson was a street-kid, but not the kind who gave ladies back their purses and entered fighting rings. The kind who got roped into child prostitution. Cristen knew the story and the woman who’d gotten Holly out of it, even if she didn’t approve of the way the whole thing went down. That wasn’t Holly’s fault. Regardless, she went from living in a run-down apartment with all the other runaways to living the high-life, and that’s all Cristen needed to hear.

When Holly pulled from their embrace, she cocked her head to the side, lifting her umbrella so Cristen was also beneath it. Cristen shifted so the rain was hitting the back of her neck, “Are you busy right now, babe?”

“Getting lunch for Reese and I,” Cristen jabbed her finger in the direction of the Batburger, flashing it a disdainful look over her shoulder. "Why? You wanna get something with me?”

Holly shook her head, sending a curtain of her drizzly strawberry-blonde ringlets into her face. Cristen could distinctly see her as the hip star of a classic 80s movie, with her tightly coiled curls and makeup; she looked like young Michelle Pfeiffer after being caught in a rainstorm. Holly held her chin for a moment, then pulled out her phone.

After swiftly typing out a quick message, she clasped both of Cristen’s warm hands and announced, "Tomorrow night’s the night, Cris!”

“The night for what?” Cristen questioned. The way her skin prickled excited her, like a shot of
electrified curiosity entered her body and darted down her strong arms, circulating through her hands and back up to her heart. Holly’s tone was almost a squeal.

Holly leaned in and squeezed Cristen's hands once. Cristen swore that she could feel Holly’s pulse tap-dancing through her gloves.

"The night. The night you’ve been waiting for,” Holly grinned, shoulders brought together in pure excitement. “Selina’s plane just landed; she’s got a special delivery for you.”
GOTHAM CITY; RUCKA AVENUE SUBWAY STATION | 8:07 | NOW | ROSE
“BULLET” RIED

HER.

Cristen’s feet strike the ground at a steady pace, marching into the subway platform, sneakers squeaking against the slippery and rain-washed tiles of the stairway. The only reason she isn’t running is because they’re in public, and Gotham’s main subway never seems to sleep.

Homeless sing in groups at the bottom of the stairs. A group of them, like a ragged band, strumming and drumming like they’re living the dream with their pockets empty and their hearts full. Bullet smiles; even if Cristen is in a hurry, she still pauses to drop a few bills into their cups and bid them a good evening. As quiet and reserved as the girl seemed to be in public, Bullet knew what kind of person lied beneath her reserved shell. As cliche as that was to mention.

“You didn’t have to come, y’know,” Cristen starts in.

Before she can continue, Bullet is already interrupting her with her sacred mantra, “I’m your best friend! I’m coming, whether you like it or not.”

Cristen smiles, expecting her words under a layer of relief. Bullet was a little childish in that way, Cristen thought: she had to constantly remind you how close you were. “Figured you’d say that. Now c’mon, our train is gonna be here soon.”

The station is cold but lit well, littered with lingering passengers, either waiting for their car or stepping off. Most seem to be on high alert for pickpockets and harassers, and some skeptical adults give Cristen and Bullet hidden looks. Gotham is no place for anyone after the sun sets over the smog.

Bullet would be lying if she claimed she didn’t survey the area for creeps, either. She was born in Fawcett, a place of light and hope and significantly less crime. Gotham at least shared a similar level of villain-stupidity. So maybe she’s allowed to be surprised when Cristen sticks her hands in her pockets and strides through the station, the picture of relaxation and comfort with her environment.

But then again, Bullet was also violently aware of the type of person Cristen was. She imagined it was like sitting down and having breakfast with Superman; watching Cristen be so normal, so calm despite all that she could do, just plain freaked Bullet out. It was kind of hard not to love her. Cristen was super weird and super distanced from reality, but in a cute kind of way. Like a baby who didn't know adult-stuff yet, but could also beat the shit out of you with her cute little fists.

“So, this ride and this wait are gonna be pretty long,” Bullet said. Cristen nodded, plopping down harmlessly on one of the free benches. Bullet looked it over, and after determining it was mostly germ free, she loosely settled down on it, waiting to either get sick or to miraculously survive. ”...Why don’t you tell me what’s up? I’m sort-of going in blind, here. I’ve met this lady once.”

Cristen flashed a smirk, waving another prototype in hand, “I was going to keep working on this project but...”

She was glad, at least, that the tension of Cristen’s new decision had not fractured anything between
them. Bullet could put her hand on her best friend’s shoulder and could feel her lean into the touch and relax. Lucy was a little jumpy sometimes, which was perfectly acceptable—Bullet just really enjoyed being close to people she loved. Even if they were constantly bent over some science project.

“Oh my god,” scoffed Bullet, manspreading and rolling her eyes amusedly. “You don’t have to be all mysterious and secretive with me. I got you.”

Cristen pulled a face. It had always been hard to connect with people, to open up this way for her. Bullet already knew this story. There was a chance she could have forgotten it. But why did Cristen have to relive it? She wished that night could have went a thousand other ways. That nagging part of Cristen—the Bullet part, no doubt—was urging her to loosen up a little more. Bullet is her best friend. She had always been so secretive…

“Selina—you know, that Selina—has been in Cuba doing some family stuff, which really means she was doing, y’know,” Cristen waved her hand, vaguely, and Bullet picked up the unspoken word. Bat-stuff.

Of course Selina told her about it. Things like that were on a need-to-know, given that—

“She’s your partner, Cris,” Bullet said, “Just say it.”

For all the time in her life she’d spent obsessing about Batman and Robin, Cristen’s suspicions and theories were supported exclusively by Selina Kyle. Catwoman had felt some kind of... connection to her, seeing Cristen make it alone out in Gotham. But where Cristen was only just starting to experience it, Selina had actually lived it—and wasn’t going to let even Cristen’s stubbornness keep her from having a good life. They’d made a truce after the night they met. Cristen would get on her feet with the Youngs in little ol’ Fawcett, and Selina would train her. Even if she used to be a criminal.

She insisted she was now the hero Catwoman, but Cristen still had her doubts. Reasonable, all things considered.

Bullet was provided this information on the basis that she told no one else. Everyone knew Selina was Catwoman after all her stunts at Black Gate, and given that, Cristen wasn’t exactly proud of the connection they shared. It was silly, really—she completely idolized Batman and Robin, but the only definite outlet to them had turned sour after one-too-many villainous activities were committed and discovered.

“She and I… agreed. Upon… something,” Cristen said, waving again, because she couldn’t say much when it came to Selina. It was always secrets with her, and Cristen only realized just how much until she was forced to mention her aloud. “We’re not going to be partners, exactly, but…”

“She’s gonna supervise you, but you’re mainly doing your own thing,” Bullet supplied, and Cristen nodded—where she wasn’t good with words, Bullet always filled the void.

“Like Nightwing,” Cristen explained, because that made sense.

Bullet smiled, expression very clearly stating that Cristen was a dork. “Like Nightwing.”

Cristen let the words sink in, both for herself and for Bullet, and let out a cool breath of air. She spoke again, softer this time, “She’s gonna be giving me some gear. I have a little time to test it all out, then I’m… going. Doing it.”

Bullet snorted at the term, but asked the obvious question, “Well, what code-name are you using,
then? Lucy has always said she liked Stray.”

Cristen hushed her for being so obvious, but pouted in reaction all the same. “Well, Catgirl… I would have preferred woman, but it’s clear that’s already taken. I’m stuck with ‘girl’ in the news’ eyes—Vicki Vale gave it to me, of all people. Keep in mind—I’m eighteen in a couple months, so that name’s going fast. Maybe I should use Stray instead.”

There was the gentle bounce of anxiety in her demeanor, but that was it. Overall, Cristen looked… happier than Bullet had ever seen her, to the point of her starting to question if there was more to it. Her texts had been short since the encounter on the football field. But, after one night, she suddenly seemed exhilarated and pleased.

*Maybe there’s a boy involved,* Bullet thought, jokingly.

Because this was Cristen, and she was really more interested in homicide and convenience-store robberies than boys. She pitied all those that took interest in her; Cristen’s true love was crime fighting and Robin. And no one could ever live up to the importance of either in Cristen’s eyes. Half of it, Bullet bet, wasn’t even Cristen’s doing. Her last boyfriend said a magic word and turned into an actual god. Perhaps it was fate for Cristen to be involved in this odd, odd life.

Bullet wanted to talk about something normal, the worry already eating away at her, no matter how hard she tried to smile and nod. But it was hard not to want to know and double that in wanting to ask. No one knew anything about the vigilantes in this town, and though she’d never taken an interest in the city’s crime but for mildly complaining about it, Bullet still wanted to know. Maybe even help Cristen, too. She definitely needed it.

“How *are* you and Selina?” Bullet asked, abruptly.

Cristen’s expression screwed around, trying to compute which emotion to express, before settling on exhaustion. “Better, in comparison to a couple months ago. I’m still furious with her about the whole thing, but I’m starting to forgive. She’s been trying to spoil me to make me forget about it.”

“Cristen, she hired a murderer to teach you how to fight, who literally killed your other senseis,” Bullet said, rationally, “I don’t care how skilled Lady Shiva is—Selina should have told you.”

“I know,” Cristen said, face swelling with redness. The fire in her evaporated like water had been thrown over it; she’d been grabbing the edge of the bench so hard the stone was starting to crack.

To settle herself, Cristen rubbed her eyes (in a very Reese-like fashion). In turn, Bullet squeezed her shoulder, and spoke again, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“S’ fine. I’m going to… try and not get upset about it, we’ve yelled at each other enough,” Cristen appeared between her hands, thinking. She blurted, “I wish things could go back to how they were when I first met Selina. Where it felt like I had a chance at having… something.”

“You still do,” Bullet said, sagely. That must have not been the right thing to say, as Cristen shook her head and sat back with a thick sigh. Bullet’s brows furrowed, “And what do you mean? I thought Selina had pushed you aside from the start.”

“She did,” Cristen nodded. The corner of her lip tugged in a false smile that didn’t last, “But, she did it in a way where…”

It soon became clear that Cristen’s smaller explanations wouldn’t suffice. Bullet folded her hands and leaned forward in support, and then it all spiralled down into some sort of weird story-time reminiscent of a very odd sleepover.
Technology, when in Cristen's hand, is blessed with life. She speaks with the same rhythm that she
creates. Soon the gadget hums and clicks awake under her care.

“Well, I’m a stupid thirteen-year-old kid who thinks she’s a hot shot because she’s got some police
training, and I see someone trying to steal some chemicals from a medical lab…”

GOTHAM CITY; KURIOS KITTY DINER; ROOFTOP | 2:32 AM | YEARS AGO; 2011 |

SELINA KYLE

CRISTEN LOOKED DOWN at the burger in both utter bliss and complete devastation. She
wiped at her tears for the hundredth time, trying to ignore the woman on the opposite side of the roof
as she ignored her own crying, before taking the beautiful food and beginning to pick away at it.

Selina recognized the look in her eyes and immediately determined just how long this kid had gone
without a fresh meal; a damn long time. And for someone who had been out there for almost two
decades out of the four she had now lived, Selina Kyle didn’t care how many burgers the kid
ordered. She was buying until Cristen was stuffed.

Poor girl.

A vile thing in Selina’s memory furls and unfurls, constricting around her throat. The wind is cool on
her hair, on the warmth of her cheeks, which she can’t help but embrace. Of any night… this one.
This is the time she had to get caught.

“You’re Selina Kyle,” says the girl around a mouthful of food. “I’ve seen you in the papers before.”

Every time… she’d been so good. No one, not anyone, had caught on—only Selina, Bruce, and
Holly knew the truth, and it was to Bruce’s credit that such a thing was true. Catwoman could be
anyone. Having never been pegged down before, not even by Batman… no one knew her real
name. But for Selina Kyle, Bruce Wayne, Holly Robinson…

And some kid.

Cristen licks some ketchup off her finger, inhaling every crumb. She gestured to the briefcase across
the roof and the broken vials within. “So, what’s a real rich lady like you doing stealing chemicals
like that?”

“They’re for my sister,” Selina said. She leaned forward and spoke slowly. “It’s her medicine, but
it’s so expensive… Even more expensive than I can afford. Do you understand?”

“Quit talking to me like I’m five years old,” Cristen scowled. “And quit lying. I’ll know. What that
‘medicine’ probably is, is a psychoactive drug. Truth serum. And not a good one.”

Huh. So the kid knows her stuff. Selina had been temporarily briefed by her buyer through a few
messages, but hardly ever cared what she was stealing—or at least tried not to. There were rarely any
rules that Selina was strict on. Stealing some drugs wasn’t one of them; maybe they really were
helping someone.

“And how do you know that?”

This girl gave no details. She simply slouched back and ate, as starving as any homeless child would
be, and unnervingly unharmed in comparison to Selina. Their conflict had torn them through a
couple of windows and wall or two. Selina had taken the blunt of Cristen’s force for all the harm
she’d refused to cause the girl, and she had to give Cristen credit: she hit hard and mercilessly, in all
the right spots and just the right way.
Trained.

“I’ve read books before,” explained Cristen, spitting the words. “Just because I’m homeless now doesn’t mean I have been all my life. I’m not stupid. I can read. That’s stereotypical.”

Intelligent.

After swiping one or two of Selina’s fries without her notice, she eventually gave in and just stole the whole bag. On another day Selina would have fought her over it. But the kid was starving. Smart, sure. Weirdly strong, okay. But she was still in a place that Selina knew too well and too violently to be settled with. For every thing she’d been trying to prove, Selina knew she was basically helpless—

Around a mouthful of fries, Cristen grinned like a cat. “Also, why do you keep your wallet with you as Catwoman?”

Between her fingers was Selina’s wallet. Selina’s, Grandmaster thief and senior pickpocketer, life-long pilferer and expert martial artist, olympic-level gymnast with years upon years of experience under her paws. And her wallet had been stolen by a thirteen-year-old.

With aptitude.

“Well, kitten,” Selina began, swarmed with memories of a different girl, the girl that Selina might have once been, ratty clothes and sharp teeth and all. A diamond. “There’s this family I know in Wisconsin…”
Our first fight scene, I think? let's hope it's not too shabby

CALAMITY

GOTHAM CITY; RUCKA AVENUE SUBWAY STATION | 8:34 | NOW | CRISTEN

WHEN CRISTEN FINISHED her story, Bullet released a heavy breath, “Wait, so immediately after you attacked her, she bought you a burger? Sounds like you.”

“And basically warded me,” Cristen shrugged, “That isn’t the weirdest thing that’s happened to me, though. I guess.”

There is a short period of silence in which the two girls breathe in the mucky subway air, feeling the ghostly breeze float through the tunnels and cool their already cold skin. Cristen’s deep brown eyes are deeper with the thoughts of her mentor, and somewhere in her gaze is a yearning for a different past. One where Selina was there, one where Reese and his family were there, with Bullet and Lucy too—her own world, where everyone was alive and well in her city.

Where everything was perfect. Is perfect.

It's a silly dream.

Bullet pulled an awkward face, fiddling with her hands. ”So!” She started enthusiastically, "Um, what do you… think of Robin? It’s not exactly something you bring up all the time, but I know. And now that you've got this gig, you might even meet him.”

Cristen thought it over. She couldn’t tell Bullet that she’d seen Robin—that moment in the alley where their shadows cast upon the sidewalk was her memory and her memory alone. It wasn’t something that she seemed like she could share. It was just too personal, like she’d reunited with someone special after a long time. But it still felt horribly wrong to not share this with her best friend.

It was more of a ‘for later’ story, then. Bullet already knows Cristen’s history with capes and alleyways, though it had taken a forever to get her to choke out the details of the night she received the R.

“Oh, yeah, he’s alright.” Cristen shrugged, though the surface beneath was a landscape of questions and wonder. “One hell of a glow up. From the pictures I’ve seen…”

Bullet’s face morphed into a huge grin, radiating enough smug energy to decimate a city. “So… you have a massive crush on him, still. Like you do with every guy in tights.”

“Says the person who’s in love with Flash, who wears a skin-tight—” Cristen started with red vigor, but before she could finish or Bullet could interrupt her, Cristen tensed.
She turned to face the distant, barely-there echoes in the tunnel, firing in short repetitive bursts. The sound travelled down the metal and sounded like a subway car chugging down the tracks at top-speed. But it’s not. Cristen’s cheeks burn and her stomach lurches, urgency written all over her. *Great.*

Leaping to her feet, she darting over to the yellow strip of caution paint lining the platform. Bullet followed suit. She put a hand to Cristen’s shoulder and questioned, "Dude, what’s wrong? Is the train coming?"

Then came a silence. Cristen tilted her head and searched for any bursts of light in the tunnel, down the tracks lit by glowing bulbs of industrial emergency lights, casting a red radiance over the bracketed walls. The distant bullets sounded again, further this time. It was like the pitter-patter of rain against a window, a blank white noise that no one without Cristen’s advanced hearing could catch.

"Your Cristen tingle thing," guessed Bullet.

“Gunfire.” Cristen agreed.

Bullet opened her mouth but promptly shut it, trying to tune her ears to find the sound Cristen was referencing. But when there was nothing, she looked at Cristen quizzly—it dawned on her about the same time, and she sighed, “I swear—”

Cristen shoved her phone in her pocket, glanced around behind them, and then looked at Bullet seriously, "Stay here."

“I’m gonna kill you,” Bullet cursed, “Don’t you *dare*—"

Cristen proceeded to jump down onto the rails, avoiding the electrical ones and taking off toward the sound without another thought, kicking up dust with the power of a train. Bullet almost started hollering after her, but she didn’t want to get any weird looks. Bullet could only watch uselessly as the girl disappeared into the deeper cavities of the tunnel.

With a sigh, she huffed beneath her breath, “Why do I even bother.”

Cristen’s heart was in her throat, and her fists were already balled as she began to strive for her top speed. She was no Flash, but she still whizzed past the lights, her feet flying beneath her and skidding against the metal when the gun fire sounded again.

Cristen turned her heel and began to run once more, down another tunnel. With every step the fire grew louder, but was dwindling in occurrence; what was once seconds apart now at least fifteen. Whatever was happening, she needed to be apart of it. Even if it might get her killed.

Adrenaline began to fight against her. Contrary to popular belief, it didn’t give you the ability to roundhouse kick someone in the face. It lowered your performance and urged your body to run, to escape the conflict, to stay safe. Cristen pushed back against the pressure and tried her best to calm herself. With the training and meditations she had, it worked sporadically and she found herself at the source of the gunfire; around the corner of one of the abandoned tunnels.

Even so, her heart wouldn’t stop jumping up to her throat. She needed to focus.

There was yelling that she couldn’t make out beneath the noise, and then close, echoing, ear-shattering gunfire that practically shook the air and throttled it. Every hair on her body stood on end, screaming at her as it always did when that feeling coursed through her, *run, you idiot! You’ll die!*
Not now, Cristen thought in response, trying to be cool.

“Get out of here!” A man yelled.

It was though he were speaking through a radio or a rocky cavern, for his voice was gravelly and metallic. For a moment, Cristen could only connect the sound to Batman—but he sounded younger, and ferociously less tame. (If you could call Batman tame).

Another song of bullets sliced through the air. Cristen’s breath caught when most embedded themselves in the wall opposite her.

“Go! That way!” The same man shouted.

Then, a gaggle of various children clad in street clothes stumbled around the corner, panting and leaning on each other for support. Then at once they all collectively noticed Cristen through the bare red light, the eldest of them a teenage boy with a hollow face, “Who are you?"

“A friend,” Cristen responded automatically, ushering them away from danger. She looked back to the boy as she took them out of the tunnel, seeming to be the most calm of all of them—there were maybe six or seven in total, some only a little younger than Cris, others practically toddlers. She looked to him empathetically, "I’m here to help. But I need to know what’s going on—the rest of you, get the kids out of here.”

Her voice was sturdy and commanding, and soon thin arms were scooping up tiny bodies and making a run for it. She didn't want to hold this one long.

“We’re from the East End,” he gasped.

Cristen could feel his hands shaking between hers, his eyes blown wide and his thoughts blurred by shock, "We were hanging around as a group, then this lady and her… her… partner came up in a car-car and told us they were from some... Homeless Outreach group... They drugged us with snacks, then we woke up down here! The lady and a couple others are fighting the guy in the helmet —!"

“Red Hood.” Cristen breathed to herself.

She had thought she would be meeting them in the future—due to her relationship with Selina—but in battle was never a good place. Or maybe, for her, it could be. But Red Hood was a dangerous character. Cristen believed he had been rehabilitated as everyone else did, but he was still using guns, and his past could always catch up to him. But who was Cristen to talk? She had no idea what he was going through. So maybe they had more in common than she knew… Besides the fact that Red Hood had been murdering gangsters and drug dealers a couple of years ago.

“Okay. You see that light down there?” Cristen pulled out her phone and typed and talked as quickly as she could, it’s light illuminating the faces around her in a ghostly blue glow.

He flinched at the sound of gunfire where Cristen didn't. Still, the hair on the side of her body facing the gunfire stood on end with every round. Sometimes she hated this sense of hers. It definitely needed a new name. Cristen tingle wasn't very adaptive. "My friend is down there. She’ll help you —and she’ll make sure you end up where you want to be. No police unless needed.”

Bunch of kids down here in a firefight. Sending the bystanders your way. No police unless they say. - Cris

Cristen stuffed her phone back in her jacket before she could wait for Bullet’s response (surely
something in all-caps and with several question marks), and slid her fingers over the dull warmth of the R in her pocket. Then, after assuring her informant and the children were out of range, she slipped around the corner and ducked down.

Now Cristen understood why there was caution tape over the entrance of the tunnel. This was an old substation stop, with it’s ceiling heavy and dilapidated, raised by graffiti-ed columns of concrete and tiles. It smelled of something too horrible to describe, and it momentarily blinded Cristen for her senses were on overload. With the tunnel so dark and deep into the underground’s workings, she couldn’t even see three feet in front of her. The only light came from the tunnel behind her, and even that was a pulsing, red emergency light that didn’t do much. That was until she shut her eyes and forced one of her most useful abilities into her pupils. When she reopened them, Cristen’s vision had turned a copper-aged green, and she could finally make out the details of the room.

*Cats have night vision,* she thought, *now so do I.*

Then, a beat later, *god, I’m so lame.*

Ducking under the platform, Cristen slid along the wall and crept to it’s very corner. She pushed herself up onto the platform and hid her body behind a pillar. Across from her, she could make out the form of four people; three of which were hidden behind benches and other columns, shooting back at the fourth. They only knew that Red Hood was there.

Cristen couldn’t blame them; the vigilante's presence was impossibly demanding, and her senses caught the lingering scent of something powerful and ancient on him. It made her think of a great pool of bubbling, green water with magical properties. The image was startlingly clear in her mind, as if the scent had planted it there for her, as potent and real as she was.

She shot around the pillar at her top speed, and at the sound of her footsteps, two of the men she was charging at exclaimed something foreign. But it was too late for her to contemplate, for the battle had begun and there was no time for serious calculating and observing. It was time for action, and Cristen’s fist sending one of the lenses of their night vision goggles flying only proved that.

They were good. Better than what Cristen was used to dealing with, but nothing she couldn’t handle. Besides Cristen’s own experience in her early days, Selina and Shiva had spent years training her, the majority of her teachings under Shiva. Sandra Wu-San was a ruthless assassin. Thinking back to all she had been taught, Cristen knew something had been wrong, but only learned just how right she was when it was too late. Using anything Shiva taught her after that felt like sinning herself. But soon, Cristen knew the best revenge: using all the bad Shiva had done to make something good of her training.

With its completion, Cristen had the skills of a trained assassin with very minimal experience. Gotham, she decided, was the best place for experience. And now here she was. Chasing trouble in Gotham’s underground with the Red Hood—if she wanted to remain in her father’s good graces, she seriously needed to stop getting involved with such dangerous people.

With the brief pause as the man stumbled, Cristen’s senses began to pick apart her environment and her enemies. There were two left, a man and a woman, who smelled of something faint and hard to catch. It was a large mix of energies like they had spent a long time around science labs, small things like static, and massive, infinite things like… magic.

Cristen had spent six years of her life in Fawcett City. As much as she adored Gotham (or at least liked it’s familiarity), Fawcett was her home too, whether she would admit it or not. The entire landscape was scented so intensely with magical energy that Cristen didn’t doubt the smell still clung to her even now. These people were the same; if they hadn’t been to the source recently, they were
around enough that it stuck.

Red Hood wasted no time with Cristen’s distraction, hurling what must have been an empty pistol at one of their heads. The hard material shattered and sprayed through the air like a chandelier had fallen, and so he spun around and shoved his boot into the man’s gut. It sent him tumbling, with his unconscious body hanging over the edge of the platform.

He fought swiftly and sharply, without hesitation, and Cristen found herself watching in earnest whenever he moved. She copied it one of his moves and liked how successful it was... Well, not too successful.

“Kid!” The Red Hood exclaimed, and then Cristen’s throat was being clawed shut so fast she might have passed out for a minute there. It was almost welcomed.

Her feet kicked uselessly as she was slammed into the crumbling wall of the abandoned subway, a groan of protest leaving her in a single, thick huff. The wall followed suit.

“I didn’t know you had a partner,” Observed the final attacker in a thick accent.

They were clad in tactical gear, equipped with light but powerful armor—military grade—and night vision goggles. This one was a woman, the one the children spoke of. She was too strong for someone her size, and Cristen didn’t have to guess she was being powered by something. This wasn’t like Cristen’s abilities, how she had been born with them, but rather something new that the woman was testing out. Steroids. Mutant Growth Hormones. Metagene Strengtheners.

Or something stupid like that. Maybe if she could breathe she’d be able to form a proper thought.

“I don’t,” Red Hood said harshly. Something in his voice stung with familiarity. When he spoke next, Cristen could hear the smirk in his voice, and she knew that he saw her slip the pocket knife from her jeans. He tilted his helmet to the side and chuckled, ”But I’m liking her so far.”

Cristen shoved the knife forcefully through the chink in the woman’s armor, deep into the bend under her shoulder. With a shocked roar of pain she released Cristen’s throat. Without hesitation, Cristen spun mid-air and kneed her into unconsciousness, landing on the cracked tiles with her legs sprawled out like a cat.

The woman struck the wall with a dull crack, and in the following pant-filled silence Cristen could hear the woman’s heartbeat slow. She was still alive.

Selina would be proud, Cristen thought. It was a little bitter—that had been too cruel and too rough, but she had a feeling Hood wasn’t one for talking instead of fighting. She moved out of the position as soon as she was able.

“Where are the kids?” Red Hood questioned, stomping towards her and practically choking her on aggression alone. But not without pause—he froze when they came eye to eye (or at least helmet to eye).

She pulled the knife from the woman’s shoulder and wiped the blood on her armor, passing a mournful look at the wound. Too rough—she’d have to remember that, next time.

“I sent them down the tunnel to the nearest platform. Train doesn’t come for another ten minutes, so they should be fine. A friend’s handling it.” Cristen told him.

Red Hood reminded her of someone. Someone she should know, and knew well, and yet she couldn’t put a name to his familiar form. He was tall and incredibly bulky, a wall of muscle that could
—did rival Batman. The twinge of his voice that the disrupted didn't distort was sort of young, placing him somewhere in his 20s, but his experience suggested he'd been fighting for a long time. Some had speculated he used to be a Robin. It was one of the only theories Cristen could get behind.

But there were little things about him that added to the age theory, such as his pointy elbows and arrogant stance. She couldn't see his face, since his helmet was a blank slate that made meeting his gaze uncomfortable, but she didn't doubt that it had scars like the rest of his exposed skin. Robin was scarred just as much, so Cristen could match their early recklessness and anger. He was definitely a bat—no question.

“...What friend?” Red Hood pressed, but before she could answer, the Red Hood rudely raised his hand for her to be quiet and pressed a finger to the side of his helmet.

Though the sound would be a dull crackle to anyone else, Cristen could make out a voice. She always imagined the bats had a way of communicating, but now that such an idea was confirmed she felt a sense of wonder. What other technology did they have? What systems? They had the patrol zones and the cool cars—what else?

“Red Hood, report status,” said a female voice in Red Hood’s ear, "Coms are open."

“Here, O,” Red Hood responded.

Cristen could tell that he was scrutinizing her, and by the way he stayed tense she knew that he knew she was too strong and too fast. But he didn’t turn his back on her nor raise his weapons. The ghostly glow of a screen lit up under the cracks in his helmet, and she could sense the danger on him, and she could sense that she was being scanned and identified in the darkness.

Cristen was only in a few databases, but Red Hood still managed to get her name, "I tracked the lead on the trio. Took them out with the help of—" He paused, considering, then said, “...some kid.”

After a few moments, O chirped, "Yep. Cristen Young. 17 years old, a newcomer to Gotham from Fawcett, suspected associate to Captain Marvel and a new student at Gotham Academy. She was an orphan who ran off. Adopted by Reese and Lance Young in 2011... Holy shit, I think this might be Lucius’s niece—"

Cristen’s smile dropped with an exhaled, barely audible, "Shit."

Plenty of people now knew Selina Kyle was Catwoman, but no one could know that Cristen had superpowers—not even the good guys. Not yet, anyway. She couldn’t stick around any longer: he’d seen her face. But they had certainly gotten her name. They couldn't know anything else until the time is right.

They didn't really need to know at all, actually.

And that is why, with amazing and nerve-racked clarity, does Cristen Young leap off the platform and sprint her hardest towards that light at the end of the tunnel. The Red Hood is after her in seconds, and she is just barely faster than him. He yells something as she pulls her hood over her face, and in no time she is darting into the light of the Rucka Avenue substation once more.

Bullet exclaims her name in shock, surrounded by the children, but Cristen leaps up and darts past her with an apologetic smile. I owe you, it tells her.

When Red Hood emerges after her, barking wait! Bullet’s shoulders sink. She sighed, "Why am I not surprised?"
CRISTEN FELT THAT familiar feeling again; that tingle on her skin, warning her of a nearby threat. It was too dull to be Red Hood, but Cristen couldn’t help but glance down into the alley below and the surrounding buildings. Nope. Nada. Zilch. When her senses confirmed she had not been followed, Cristen took hold of the next bar on the fire escape and hauled herself over the edge.

Upon looking inside Selina’s home, Cristen found that it was abandoned of people and the window locked. Not like that could stop her—all it took was a bit of jimmying from her pocket knife and the lock unhooked. It was easy; even Selina didn’t use a key to get in anymore. She broke into her own apartment on the regular.

Her insight told of no intruders or danger in the small apartment, but for little things, like the set of kitchen knives on the counter or any spare gear lying around. It was touchy like that. Endlessly annoying, really, for the immediate times it saved Cristen from getting her head chopped off or something.

It was clear that Selina didn’t share Reese’s love for organizing; clothes were strewn about the floor, the coffee table was a mess of papers and chinese takeout, old ‘unreturned’ paintings and artifacts left leaning against the furniture. The main area consisted of a living room and connecting kitchen shrouded in darkness, and Cristen navigated the room with the guidance of moonlight and the purple glow coming from Selina’s bedroom.

This wasn’t Selina’s main apartment: she likely didn’t trust Cristen with that information. Though that hurt, Cristen was at least gracious enough not to complain; she would complain when Selina wasn’t supporting her whole vigilante career in the first place.

Selina’s bedroom was a little better cleaning-wise, and clearly a place she frequented more often. Less dust and more valuables. The source of the pale light came from the neon sign on her wall. It read Hello There, but the o and t had been broken, leaving behind the words hell here. Ironic. Very, incredibly Selina.

Cristen remembered the night where she first met the Catwoman. After they had gotten burgers, Selina brought Cristen to this old apartment in order to make some calls. Cristen sat under the lavender light and let it soak into her skin while Selina’s voice and the chatter on the phone whirred in the background. It’s one of those memories that’s more sensory than mental.

On the unmade bed, the neon glow illuminated a box with a note upon it. Not up for stressing her abilities more than she already had, Cristen skipped her night vision and used her phone’s flashlight to view the note. She felt a shameless giddiness when she held the gift in her hands.

Holly’s words came back to her: the night you’ve been waiting for.

That was supposed to be tonight. But the note explained why Selina wasn’t sitting across from Cris, the box in her sly hands, her wise and uniquely green-yellow eyes snarkily looking down on her. A part of her wished otherwise. The other wanted the intimacy of being alone.

A dull tingle rises beneath the skin of Cristen’s palm, but before she can search for the source, Selina’s cat Gus presses his nose into her hand. The cat is a large, fat, and fluffy brown mass of fur and fangs. He instantly begins to purr when Cristen combs her fingers down his spine, affectionately meeting her palm with his nose.

At times she wished she and Gus could trade places; Cristen could be the lazy house cat that Selina spoiled, and he could become whatever was held within the box.
When Cristen turned the light of her phone onto the note, Gus’s back arches and he hisses at the light. He then bat at the phone once, and once he decided he and Cristen were safe from its blinding wrath, he threw himself off the bed and stalked out of the room with his tail flicking about.

Cristen sighed, "You and me both, bud."

_Cristen_, the note begins. (The word kitten has been erased underneath).

_I’m sorry I can’t be here to give this to you. Bats had an emergency downtown and they needed me. Duty calls, but I suppose you understand that. I figured you’d want to test it out tomorrow night on your own. Don’t get in too much trouble tomorrow at school, but don’t let anyone push you around, either. See you then_,

_Selina

_P.S: If anyone touches you without your permission, you’re dad won’t get mad at you for hitting them. Aim for the throat._

Cristen eyed the note. Maybe Selina could get rid of her name on the Bat-database? (Was that a thing?) Now that Cristen was in her life and had once aspired to be her partner, Selina said she felt like she ‘needed to be better’, and that began with cementing herself at the Batman’s side. Now she was considered more friend than foe, and even knew their secret identities. But Batman had told her on his own accord, told her the secret, so it would take Cristen a forever to reach that level of trust. She needed to earn it from him. And maybe that started by making herself into someone he could respect; a fellow vigilante.

But then again, did she need to have Batman’s approval? Yes, she saw him as something to strive toward, but there was no real reason to need to side with him. She could get her gear and everything else her own way eventually. The only thing it would really do for her was give her an ally. Which, after a moment of consideration, was probably something she was going to need if she ever needed help.

She didn’t have to lift the lid to know what was inside. It was sort of heavy, like a blanket had been folded up and tucked within. Cristen allowed her fingers to graze the lid’s cover. She didn’t care where it had come from. All that mattered was that she was finally here. Or at the very least, Cristen was at the homestretch.

It was there, coursing through her veins and beating in her heart and wrapping around her lungs. What had she been through to get here?

Everything… Laureline’s death, the streets, Robin, neon lights. Then Selina, the Youngs, her friends in Fawcett City.

Cristen Young was finally here. She was finally going to start taking back for everyone that had been taken from her. But no, this wasn’t for them. It was because of them.

_It’s time_, Cristen reminded herself as she swept over Selina’s dark bedroom. Her cat-like eyes met with the ones of the fluffy brown creature under the _Hell Here_ sign, their pupils slits, their eyes such deep colors.

Then, Gus farted. He shot under the bed when Cristen started cursing.
Chapter Summary

One thing I really, really tried to do with CEB (I won't dare to abreviate as Cats), is make sure every scene and action had some sort of purpose. This is one of those times I did that p decently. Hope you enjoy! =D

UGH. HIGHSCHOOL

GOTHAM CITY; GOTHAM ACADEMY FOR THE GIFTED | 7:32 AM | NOW | CRIS

THE ONE THING that Cristen could appreciate about the Academy was that it was chalk-full of rich people; that meant better care, better staff, better teachers, better everything. None of the parents wanted their children learning in an environment that wasn’t perfect, so every inch of the place was sparkling.

The school’s building was old but was constantly being renovated, crumbling and castle-esque but royal and sleek like a modernized Hogwarts. Cristen is pretty sure she’d be a Slytherin, but Lucy never let up on the Gryffindor argument.

Now, as Cristen stood on the sidewalk and stared up at its great spires, she felt a sudden influx of anxiety. Would her teachers like her? Would she be stressed all year? Would she befriend any of Bullet’s friends? It rushed up and consumed her, swallowing her whole. But a part of her claws at those thoughts and scoffs sternly: Don’t ever let them get to you, kitten. You’re all that matters. Don’t let them get in your head.

She knew that her first day would be rocky. According to Bullet they had received an influx of students after Wayne Enterprises funded a baseball field and agricultural building, and that meant the main office would be a mess of schedules and students, papers and printers.

But none of that mattered; the only thing on Cristen’s mind was the lightness in her stomach. After Selina had gifted the package to her last night, she had immediately protected it in the confines of her memory box. It was shoved in the back of her closet and folded like it was a queen’s robes. Every time her thoughts floated back to it her heart rate spiked like she made eye contact with a crush.

Bullet narrowed her eyes at Cristen, her skin toned grey by the rain clouds above the school. They were heavy puffs of a dirt filled snowy color, drooping in the sky with their weight, and Cristen could almost feel the way Gotham seemed to tilt with them. When Bullet’s words finally hit her ears in a sharp whisper, she doesn’t bother to hide her apologetic frown.

“—you just sent those kids with me? And then Red Hood starts chasing you! Cristen,” Bullet turned her gaze away from her, shrinking under the weight of her own thoughts.

Then, in a moment of intense seriousness, met Cristen’s eyes and adjusted her books in her arms. It was like the mini-argument on the field but worse, thickened and enforced by the genuine realization of just how dangerous this was. She’d wished she’d been paying attention; Bullet seemed… scared.
“Look, I don’t want to stress you with this on your first day, but are you… are you sure you want to do this?” Bullet delivered.

“Of course I’m sure,” Cristen said, gaze snapping to look at her like the sharp jab of a knife.

Together, they swept under the cover a campus oak tree. The shade and the privacy made her relax, oddly enough, and she felt stupidly more secure with the protection. “I’ve wanted to do this since… since Laureline passed—no, no… before that.”

Deep frown lines wove themselves into Bullet’s face at Cristen’s statement. It read sadness all over, like she was mourning a girl she had never met, and it meant Bullet pitied her. Cristen felt her face go hot with the idea; she didn’t need pity, and she certainly didn’t need it from her best friend. That was the last person on Earth who should pity you.

Cristen tensed up, and stepped away from Bullet to glare at the tree, “C’mon. Didn’t you have people for me to meet or something? We can talk about this later.”

“Nooo,” Bullet dragged out the word, gently reaching out to catch Cristen by the shoulder. She hesitated when her friend flinched, even if her eyes were still glued ahead and she had no human way of knowing Bullet was reaching for her at all. Still, she held Cristen’s shoulder, trying to ignore the fact that Cristen could probably throw her halfway across the school grounds for touching her.

Cristen’s Gotham Academy uniform was, as expected, customized to be as mobile as possible. The shirt was as unbuttoned as far as was appropriate. Her pleated skirt had been tugged up so it lay at her thighs instead of her knees, and she kept kicking to pull it back up again. At best, her jacket was only fiddled with. She was winding a thread around her finger as they talked. Worse—beneath her jacket, the muscles in her back were wild with tensity.

“We need to talk about this. We still have twenty minutes before the bell even rings.”

Cristen let out a heavy puff of air, watching it swirl up and twist around the tree’s branches before disappearing. “Look—we’ve talked about this before.”

“I know we have,” Bullet said, sharply. Wincing at her own harshness, she furrowed her brows and tilted her head to the side in concern. Her voice lowered. “But I still… I still don’t understand why.”

Cristen huffed, but the action did more to ease her anger than express it. She found herself patting her thigh in search of a pocket that wasn’t there, in search of a charm that wasn’t there, and frowned without the guidance and luck of her favorite talisman. Cristen didn’t dare bring the R anywhere but home now. She hated how much she relied on it—it was the street girl that needed a lucky charm, as had been decided with the arrival of Selina’s gift. Not who she was now. Not who she was becoming.

“I know, it’s stupid. I know, it’s ridiculous, it’s crazy, I’m probably insane and they should just throw me in Arkham—” Cristen rambled.

“I’m not saying you’re crazy, Cristen.” Bullet said.

Cristen leaned against the thick trunk of the tree and crossed her arms over her chest, observing her and searching for a lie she wasn’t telling. “Everybody in Gotham, regardless of how nuts they are, would take the chance to become a superhero if they could. Everybody in the whole world would. And you have the… stuff… to do so, it makes sense.”

“I’m asking you… why are you so willing to risk your life? I… I…” Bullet hesitated, still so unsure
about bringing up Cristen’s past, but saw the predictive hardening of Cristen across from her; she knew what Bullet was going to say.

So, she continued. ”I… I understand that you lost people, but you never talk about them. Laureline and Lance… They were wonderful. But they wouldn’t want you to avenge them…”

“Laura would,” Cristen joked, trying to put off the seriousness of the topic.

Usually it was Bullet who would do such things, but Gotham must have turned her glum. Hopefully that would change.

Cristen waved away the thought, “But this isn’t about revenge—no one seems to understand that—it’s about justice. Maybe the shooters, or the muggers, whoever they are… maybe they’re being forced to do it, or something else. They deserve a fair trial. Not an execution. But the people other criminals are harming deserve justice too. Everyone needs help. I’m going to.”

Why was that so hard to understand? Gotham was sick, and so were her people; everyone needed help. This wasn’t about hunting down every dealer just because one took Laureline away from her. She was preventing it from ever happening again—to anyone, including those who may have once done something wrong, too.

“I’m fighting for them.” Cristen summarized. Harm was a disease never meant to leave it’s box. No matter what you’ve done in the past, if you help put a little bit more back in, then you’re healing.

Bullet’s expression fought over what to show. It deviated between concern and frustration to relief, then back to relief, until it finally all tied up into a light smile. The tension in her shoulders eased. But Cristen wasn’t sure if that was real or not.

After a pause of uncertainty, she poked Cristen in the arm, “Whatever you say, Captain America. Thanks for the clarification. That’s all I… That’s all I needed.”

Cristen saw the hidden apology in her words, and extended her hand between them. “Dynamic Duo?”

The phrase was more than just a reference to Cristen’s heroes. It was a peace offering. A reminder of the days they’d run around in Cristen’s backyard in Fawcett. The phrase was more than just a stupid, cringey little reference; it was a culmination of history.

“You gotta admit, it has a good ring to it,” Bullet said. She nudged Cristen with her elbow, then spread her hands in front of them, mirroring a sign with their names upon it in great letters. She stage-whispered dramatically, “Rose Reid and Cristen Young: The NEW Dynamic Duo!”

Without hesitation, Bullet clasped Cristen’s palm, hooking their thumbs and wrapping their fingers over each other’s hands like they were going to arm-wrestle. “Dynamic Duo,” agreed Bullet.

They dropped one another and stepped back into a matching stride on the pavement, the tense atmosphere evaporating. It was at that moment that Cristen realized she didn’t need the R in her back pocket. She would always have Bullet there, a lucky talisman that she was much more than just lucky to have. Even if Bullet was still unsure as to how she felt about what Cristen was doing, she was still supportive; and that was already more than Cristen could ask for.

The mass of students trickling onto the front lawn grew steadily, their conversation one of many, like the buzzing of bees in a massive hive. Bullet elbowed her, “Wait… If we’re the ‘Dynamic Duo’, and you’re actually becoming a vigilante, does that mean you’re Batman?”
“Yes.” Cristen said, seriously. She certainly fit the part.

“Good. Then I’m Robin—blonde. girl Robin,” Bullet said.

“No Flash?” Cristen questioned, teasingly.

Bullet shook her head, tossing an arm over Cristen’s shoulders. “You know what?” She said, ”I think the sidekick gig isn’t so bad after all…”
act 1, chapter 8

Chapter Summary

...And here's Damian! After this, his appearance in the story picks up a crap ton. Hope you enjoy! =D

LEGACY

GOTHAM ACADEMY CAMPUS; OUTSIDE THE FINE ARTS BUILDING; EAST COURTYARD | 7:40 AM | CRISTEN

THROUGH THE SHIFTING mass of students spread about the school’s campus, Bullet pulled Cristen along by the edge of her sleeve and toward the main entrance of the Fine Arts building—which was a piece of art within itself. She enjoyed the ride so much her neck was starting to hurt from how much swiveling it was doing in order to catch every sight.

Gotham’s day-time sky glowed a constant shade of grayish blue, and the campus only added to the grim effect. The buildings doors were massive with hulking doorknobs and intricate carvings. The walls were neat stone bricks bleeding ivy, accented within by rosewood paneling and wide tiled floors. It breathed with ancient life, like the whole campus was alive and was an old wizard or something.

Gotham Academy gave off the air of a haunted castle covered in fine stonery. With the students walking about in navy and gray plaid uniforms, they looked like spirits haunting the damp grounds. Though it seemed that these spirits came from all over, with merchandise from out-of-town sports teams or heroes; this was, after all, a boarding school.

Beneath the engraved arches, cracked staircase, and the pathway protected from the early morning drizzle, Cristen could make out four people. These people were Bullet’s friends.

When Cristen, Lucy, and Bullet had banded together, time seemed to fly by. They were the students who were in nearly all of her classes. That lead to dozens of sleepovers, of nights staying up too late even if they softball practice, or training, or track. That lead to secrets being shared. It was ironic, really, how they of all people would come together in the same place. There was some sort of fate all tying them together, knotted so thickly there was no way they could ever fully untie each other. So when Bullet moved to Gotham—both Cristen and Lucy’s hometown—there was no way she would lose contact.

Lucy had cried and cried, flopping her arms around Cristen’s shoulders in the dramatic way she did everything, fat tears falling down her pale cheeks as she asked Cristen if she believed Bullet would forget them. Cristen scrubbed the tears off her friends face with her sleeve, pushing the platinum hair out of her eyes and shaking her head, "Ha. Do you know who you’re talking about? Bullet couldn’t forget us if she tried.”

And she didn’t. But Cristen made sure that Bullet knew she absolutely had to make friends at her
new school. There would be no lonering in the back of the class—Bullet couldn’t be like that, as lonering was Cristen’s job, and was in fact how she met Bullet and Lucy in the first place.

Lucy had followed Bullet’s lead quickly. She was closer to Bullet than she was to Cris, and even if they hung out often, the period in which Bullet had left was the most crucial part of Cristen’s training. It took only two months for Lucy to convince her Aunt to move them back to Gotham. Things only made sense that Cristen would follow. She’d relayed the same message to Lucy; keep my seat warm, but let others sit at the table, okay?

Regardless, Cristen still felt a low pull in her stomach that made her steps fall heavier. Jealousy, possibly? Regret? Guilt? She couldn’t tell the difference between anything like that anymore.

They’re still a good distance away, but Cristen’s ears find their conversation between the other murmurs of the crowd. Then, she hones in on the little ticks; the person, not the stranger.

First, there’s Lucy, and she’s a sight for sore eyes. Through a sea of unknown faces she is like the mainland. She spots them first, and waves kindly, clutching her lunch bag with both hands and rocking on her heels. Cristen's 9th grade anime phase comes alive in her.

“Well, we’re obviously going to Hogwarts,” says the boy to her left. He pushes up his glasses, fast and quick, like he’s afraid of what will happen if they fall off.

Cristen likes him because the little bits that make up him are all kind. He’s bulky and tall, all broad-shouldered and muscled; even so, there’s a lankiness to his limbs that makes him seem dorky and sweet. An oak tree with a thick trunk but skinny branches, all stretching toward the sun.

But, there’s a but. He’s got a Metropolis letterman jacket on over his uniform, something that his company keeps playfully poking and glaring at—everyone born in Gotham is a natural enemy of all Metropolites. Cristen doesn’t refrain from joining. He does have little Sailor Moon buttons on his backpack, a newspaper under his arm, and one of the keys on his belt has the Superman crest too, though. It’s cute.

Analysis: sweet jock-nerd-boy, hiding something big. Cristen was fond of him. She felt one with tall, muscled people like herself.

“Well, I think it goes without saying that I’mma Gryffindor,” nerd-jock-boy says, and that was definitely a country twang. “Viv, I think you’re a Slytherin.”

“I dunno,” says Viv, and she was a full-blooded Gotham Girl; smooth, uptown accent, bad posture, and the overall look of someone who’s been mugged recently.

Cristen’s legs stiffened. She smelled blood on this girl, strong and potent. Her lips were pinched and she was permanently toiling over her hair. Cristen got the impression she wasn’t in Gotham as often as believed; there was stuff all over her bag from Star City, softball and volleyball, and she wore a recent sweatshirt for one of these teams.

Analysis: edgy-but-not-too-edgy Gotham Girl, probably a vampire and extremely dangerous.

[Note: possibly marry her someday in the near future].

But, a third voice interjects. There’s a familiar click of the tongue. “Tsk. You're wasting your time on such comparisons, Kent.”

So many things happen in the next few precious seconds that turn the world over. Cristen and the Gotham Girl meet eyes. Brown to something forest-y. Cristen’s chest lurches like a rollercoaster, but
like, a horrible *oh-no-that-is-not-good* rollercoaster that just drops off at the big dive. Her powers kick in and basically kick her in the gut.

Gotham Girl knocks on the arm next to her, drawing the attention of the third voice. Cristen’s eyes follow the action. Then she’s looking at him—she tacks an *again* onto the phrase, because, hey.

There was nerd-jock boy. Gotham Girl. And then there was bleacher-boy, who is most definitely not the kind of mystery she would think he would be. There goes the drug dealer theory.

Cristen’s brain overloads immediately.

The posture is all luxury, owning expensive clothes and knowing how to walk in them, pristine and business-esque. The shoulders are tight and broad. Phone’s the best of it’s kind and probably custom. Hair gelled back, uniform pressed, voice smooth and deep and well manipulated—nothing like how he was at the GA game a couple days ago.

Well… then, he’d been a black turtleneck and designer jeans, but at least then he could have tried to fit in. Even in a sea of people all sporting the same attire, he sticks out; he sticks out like he did at the game, an energy of danger and excitement calling to her; he sticks out like he does among friends, polished like the supermodels in magazines. In a crowd there’s no way not to look at him.

Once you look closer, though… There’s scars under the surface, like eyelashes through a veil. Most are well tended to, but old—like, he got them when he was a kid old, sliced through his eyebrow, across his nose, even through his lip so much it’s dimpled. There’s one on his ear that seems familiar.

And on his jaw, there is a fresh, now-bandaged wound like a gritty smile. He’s shiny and bad-boy like, a sleek and expensive motorcycle scuffed up from a lot of street-racing.

He sticks out to Cristen because she’s standing right here, looking like an idiot as she struggles to stifle her reaction, trying not to blush and let her lips fall open in shock.

It’s him. He sticks out to her because he’s *Robin*.

A lot of juvenile things go through her head right about then. She tried not to think about him for a long time, tried to block out the memories, but looking at him now makes feeling this way so easy. Cristen was hardly the kind of girl to fawn over other romantically. Not that this was a bad thing—Robin made it feel like bliss. Robin made it make *sense*. Perhaps Cristen had said she tried not to think about him, but she was taught to lie, and no one ever said she was good at it when it came to him. This time, she’ll be honest: feeling and neon lights fill her to the brim.

...He doesn't ever know her. Not really. She really wants to slap herself. Cristen considers it, but then he starts looking.

For the briefest of moments, they observed each other. She wants to look everywhere else—anywhere else—but the eyes draw her in, wrapping around her like a net and tightening, forcing her to focus on them and them alone. Like they were made to do just that.

Cristen had never gotten to see those eyes. Green eyes, cheesy and real, that suit him. His eyes had been green when they talked on that roof, and they’d been green when she kissed him in the arcade.

Robin’s eyes had been green when he was late, too.

There’s a thought somewhere in the back of her mind that this was definitely some form of mind control. It’s gone before it can be addressed, and replaced by an appropriate, *oh my god shut up shut up shut up*. 
He stared at her as if to see right through her, always observing and suspicious as he was trained to be. The glance was maybe a few seconds, but she felt like she had been suspended there for an eternity. The light of a streetlamp casting two long shadows down an alleyway arises behind her eyelids. Maybe she was being dramatic… but, like, holy shit, right?

Analysis: Robin. Her hero. [Note: nothing like she'd though he'd be].

“Oh, shit,” Bullet sighed. She grabbed Cristen’s arm, shaking her out of it, “Dude! Hello!”

Never had her powers hit her so harshly. It was like she was in Fawcett again. The first few times Captain Marvel wizzed down the street she was on her entire body would jolt in response, every alarm in her head going off at top volume, screaming danger, danger, move asshole! It as if she was extra vulnerable to his abilities and their magic source.

It made her dizzy for a brief period from how fast it came and went, but this—Cristen had met Captain Marvel before, and even without the context, she’d grown used to him. This was like she was standing in the middle of a nuclear bomb, or maybe the entire Justice League as they collectively punched her into space. After the awkward show she had made in front of Robin… Cristen hoped they would.

Lucy, recognizing the situation, put her hand on Cristen’s shoulder. She saw the way the others were peering skeptically and laughed, “Cris, you okay? Stay too late at karate last night?”

Cristen winced, both at the lie and at her pain; she didn’t take karate anymore, and all of them would find that out one way or another—Robin would certainly remember. If he ever bothered to.

“Yep,” Cristen lied, feeling the way Robin’s eyes dug into her, seeing straight through her and every lie she’d ever tell. She hated how her cheeks colored at the attention. Her resolve pushed it down, and she forced herself into a meditative state. “Yeah. And not enough sleep.”

“I figured,” Bullet played along. Quickly, she changed the direction of the conversation by gesturing to Cristen with a smile, “Guys, this is our friend, Cristen.”

“You’re from Fawcett too? I have some friends there.” Said the nerd-jock boy, his smile disarming and kind. Robin flicked his shoulder at the mention.

“No, I was… I was born in Gotham,” Cristen said, squaring her shoulders and forcing the pressure of her sense down. “I moved to Fawcett, but then moved back here because of my dad’s job.”

“Makes sense,” said the girl, crossing her arms, ”Bullet never shuts up about you. You and Lucy are her favorite people, seriously.”

“I don’t blame you. I like to think I’m pretty great,” Cristen told Bullet to divert the attention. It seemed to work; the group cracked up a bit, but she was too startled to try to see what Robin’s reaction was.

“Then you’ll fit in just fine with us.” Jock-nerd boy said, pushing his glasses up his nose.

The movement made Cristen wince. So much power in one area. Was this all Robin? Or did Gotham girl and jock-nerd boy contribute to her suffering? With so much of her focus put on stifling it, she could sort of pick out what everything connected to. Thinking it over made her head hurt.

“My name is Jonathan Kent. Call me Jon.” He said. Cristen eagerly shook Jon’s hand, and found that the strategy that had always worked, worked.
She had learned the hard way that an exposure to the danger would dull it over time, but only with a single subject. It hadn’t taken long to get used to Selina—but maybe they were around one another more. Getting used to Bullet and Lucy was the easiest thing Cristen had ever done, even if their secrets were just as dangerous as the people before her.

But if she could befriend the subject, prove to her subconscious that they weren’t threats, then the ache would die down and she would only feel it if they were genuinely attempting to harm her. That would forever be the downside to her gift; if someone was truly powerful, they could hurt her by just being near her.

After shaking Jon’s hand, an open act of kindness, a good portion of the pain had dulled.

“This is Vivian ‘The Destroyer’ Blake,” Jon gestured to Gotham-girl with a cheesy grin on his face. Her name seemed appropriate due to her edgy attitude, and the nickname Cristen had given her.

Vivian gave a nod to Cristen’s bruised hands, raising her fist and smirking, “Twinsies.” She said.

Cristen bumped her own bruised knuckles against Vivian’s briefly, trying to push down her smile and that incessant blush creeping up her neck as Robin stared at her. And, of course, the incessant ache screeching at the base of her skull like a train careening off the rails.

“And this is my best friend, Damian—” Jon stopped short, his hand introducing the invisible air in which Robin had once stood. Jon pouted, shoulders slouching as his hand dropped to his side. He had left without anyone seeing or even hearing him.

"I hate it when he does that.” Jon said, which made Bullet, Lucy, and Vivian snicker.

Vivian, who Cristen would continue to refer to as Gotham Girl in her head, glanced her over and nodded to the place Robin had once been. Robin. Bleacher-boy. Did it even matter anymore? It was him, as that was what she had always known him by.

Well, now it did, because Vivian smoothly delivers, “That was Damian Wayne. He does that.”

Damian Wayne. Damian... What a beautiful name.

But, like… Lucius Fox, Wayne.

She was cursed.

Of course!

Bullet smiled guiltily at Cristen, like she wanted to say something but was forced to hold her tongue. Cristen recognized that expression too quickly and connected the dots even faster.

Did… Did Bullet know he was Robin? First Selina, refusing to give up the Bat’s secret and now Bullet? Cristen could respect Selina’s decision, in a way. She was certainly proud of her in some capacity. But Bullet? They had shared everything. Their worries. Their pasts. What they wanted for their future. Surely… maybe Bullet was going to bring it up later. But then again, maybe it wasn’t her secret to share. Regardless, that didn’t stop Cristen from knowing the truth... And figuring out even more.

Did that mean… Bruce Wayne… was...

Cristen couldn’t help herself, clapping her hand over her mouth to muffle her sudden influx of laughter. Bruce Wayne, CEO of Wayne Enterprises, playboy, billionaire, my-butler-ties-my-shoes-
for-me, a 40-something year old man was *Batman*.

Oh god, and Damian had siblings, didn’t he? This was going to make for some great research.

Maybe it was Cristen’s memory, maybe it was her advanced vision or something like that, because she honestly couldn’t believe that the entirety of Gotham didn’t know their identities. There was no other way to comprehend it. Of course, she could be wrong, but that had yet to be seen.

Bruce Wayne was Batman. Damian, his son, was Robin.

“Huh?” Jon asked, “Have you met him before?”

“Um, yes…” Cristen laughed, and it was a bittersweet sound. “But I doubt he remembers me.”
Chapter Summary

Damian's point of view. Hope I did him justice! If you think I could do something differently, or have any added suggestions, I would love to hear them! =D

Also: Talia isn't a villain in my story. She's done bad things, yes, and killed some rapists and pedophiles (how horrible ), but my continuity better aligns with the original story of Damian's birth in Batman: Son of The Demon (1987). Talia's portrayal as a bad mother and terrorist is a racist stereotype created by dumbass writers and I will not tolerate it.

ANGEL FACE

GOTHAM ACADEMY; FOOTBALL FIELD | 11:43 AM | DAMIAN WAYNE

*DAMIAN WAYNE WAS* trying very, very hard to be a normal boy. As normal as one could get with a billionaire for a father. As normal as the public expected him to be, where he used front doors instead of windows and firescapes, where he learned to drive at sixteen instead of six, and absolutely did not dream the most horrible of things—like falling and drowning at the same time, buried under the bodies he had helped to still. Drowning in the blood he spilled.

Being the murderer all over again.

Though Damian would forever refuse to latch a cause onto his nightmares, Richard—his eldest brother and previous partner during his tenure as Batman—and Doctor Leslie Thompkins agreed that they were often triggered by Damian’s high anxiety levels. Thompkins had even prescribed him medicine for such an issue. He learned better than to refuse them; the nightmares always got worse.

The paranoia wasn’t something he could escape from regardless, being that it was potently genetic, as everything about him seemed to be. He clicks his tongue. Worse is not the right word—dreaming of murdering again was not the nightmares getting ‘worse’, but more ‘vivid’.

(*His hands, no matter how tight he fists them, can still feel the blood under his fingernails and the shape of a skull bulging against his thumbs*).

Damian bids the thought away as soon as he is able. The real world bleeds back into him: the fractals of September sunlight whisper upon his cheek, a whorl of leaves at his feet moving like the skirt of a dancer, the distant sound of chatter from the heart of the campus rolling back into motion against his artificial spine. It relaxes him.

But Damian is best suited here in the dark of the bleachers. Even Jon doesn’t know of this place. It is his own form of seclusion, something he has been asking for more and more these days. Damian is safe here.
He made a mistake. Damian can admit that to himself, but admitting it to father (worse, being discovered) is exposure he cannot afford. The girl on the field and her possible discovery of Damian’s transition from Robin to Damian had been weighing on his mind since it had occurred; the secret was crucial to father, and had he learned that Damian had nearly slipped up, there would be hell to pay. Damian would likely be grounded. Childish, considering he was less than a year from adulthood and he was still treated this way.

Damian had not been a child for a very, very long time. Children did not know the things he did. Children did not act the way he did, and children certainly did not murder… as Damian had once done.

But Damian had been trying to act normal—for Richard and for father, though Damian could at least confess to needing advice from the former. The day he sought out his father for advice was the day he returned to grandfather—to the abuser. When father would finally realize how unworthy he was and send him back. In his father’s eyes, Damian needed to be perfect, for he would never allow him to be Robin if he was anything but.

(Perhaps that was only the case to Damian, but that was something he couldn’t comprehend without a sore).

Father has already been keeping Damian off of patrol for the last weeks. He had called Richard and had asked him what to do; Damian had done nothing wrong, had hurt no one, had completed his work on time, so there was no cause for father to be angry at him and banish him this way.

Richard did not have a solid answer for him. Only, “Sometimes, Bruce just wants you to be safe, Damian.”

Damian wanted the same, but for father. And how was that to be done in his old age without Damian at his side, protecting him? Surely a fresh set of eyes would help. Surely, Damian was needed and father didn’t just not want him there.

He closes his eyes and fixes his nose against the face of his sketchbook. He doesn’t eat the lunch Alfred—the Wayne family butler and bat-conduit—had packed him. There’s a note written in fine scrawl on the side of the bag, wishing him a good day, reminding him of things he already knows… treating him like a child. Damian had abandoned it at Jon’s side and expected him to clear through it just after he finished his own meal.

Damian is an adult trapped in a boys body, and adults don’t make mistakes. He needs to correct it. He needs to know that the girl on the field did not see him, which can only be done through an investigation into her and her afterschool activities. If only a brief examination.

He gathers what he knows and re-assesses. Her name is Cristen Young, Gotham-raised and back from Fawcett City, close ally to Newman and Reid, and mildly friendly if somewhat skittish or possibly hostile. She found him attractive immediately; he can use that.

There is something else he feels he is forgetting. It makes his lips bunch in distaste.

His best guess is how she connects to Jon, as Jon can always be counted on to be kind, and had likely invited her to sit at their lunch table beside the space meant to be Damian’s. Kent has been saving it for him since the beginning of time—Damian has yet to see the point of sitting and doing nothing but eating; there are other things to be done.

“What’s with you and bleachers, man?”
Damian does not startle. He whirls around, the nearest weapon in hand. The pencil bunched in his grip is dull and likely useless. He should have grabbed for the pen. Another mistake, to be corrected.

Normal boy, Damian reminds himself. This results in the pencil being slipped down his sleeve and out of sight, a sly rotation that makes it look like he just jumped. Like any other boy would had he been approached from behind.

“Don’t do that,” Damian said, sounding sour. “Whatever it is you want from me, the answer is no.”

Cristen Young is odd. Not in personality, as far as he can gather—Damian didn’t shy away from the fact that people got skittish around him for all the right reasons—but just in… general. There was something off. Something that shouldn’t be there. It makes him run over her visage about a dozen times, searching for the mystery, whether it be the reflection of light that makes her pupils look different or an extra sharp smile. He can’t find it, and that only adds to his frustrations.

Mistakes equal failure. Failure equals imperfection. Damian was meant to be perfect, and that definition was secured tightly around his observational skills… Father would want him to dig deeper. Ra’s, Damian’s grandfather, would have struck him and forced him to do it again.

So, he ventures on once more and applies each trait into a file within his mind. Cristen’s entire appearance is mild and unbothered. She seems to care very little about how she looks, like she couldn’t be bothered to try, all ruffled and rushed—like Drake preparing himself for school. If she were to be called beautiful, she was beautiful like Damian’s mother, with sharp edges and the grit of sand.

That’s what it is. He finds her pretty, but only in the sense that there are parts of her face that look like his mother’s. But where Talia al Ghul is triangles, Cristen is squares, rounded off with circular edges. He bids the thought away again. Missing his mother was one thing. Searching out things that reminded him of her was another, where both seemed taboo.

Damian is good. His mother—despite alternate claims—is a grey character, in which Damian could no longer associate himself with. He can’t miss her, and showing it only proves how unheroic he is. How he isn’t good enough.

More. Be better. Cristen’s shoulders are bulky and straight, like a board had been nailed into place to keep them constantly flat and pressed—it shows self-discipline. Her eyes are black; almost more… alien, than his. But still, there’s something not quite real about her… a pair of glasses to hide a face, a veil to shield from the cold.

A lie in plain sight. She must know.

That day on the field. She had been drawn to him, pulled across the divide by that innately human sense that you’re being watched. He remembered the way her face dropped when she didn’t find him, the suspicion in her expression, the curiosity and sharp, cut-edged stare. He remembered liking something about those eyes.

Richard had given him the ‘it’s okay to like girls or boys’ speech about a thousand times, but being attracted to someone was always something that set off alarms in his head. Attraction was useless and only wasted his time. It would get him nowhere in the end, as it had with mother and father—the only fruit born of their struggles was Damian, who seemed to be nothing but a nuisance. Not good enough.

Worse, Damian’s only experience with a girl had ended as a result of his father. And Maria… or whatever her name was, likely hated him for abandoning her. She was better off without him. Even
if she'd been kind.

Another idiotic relation: Talia and Cristen’s eyes were both jagged and deep, but his mother’s were jade and ice. Cristen had the eyes of fertile earth.

Damian tries the mind-over-matter approach. He glares at her, hard enough to make her face heat and her hands to nervously pat her pocket for something—an action he’s sure she didn’t even know she was doing—telling himself over and over: no, she doesn’t know, I couldn’t be wrong, I’m never wrong, how could such a foolish girl ever know a secret of mine...

Right now, father was probably sitting in the bunker beneath Wayne Enterprises with Lucius Fox and tinkering away. How Damian itched to be there, testing their new gear and creating it himself, presenting it to father and watching the pride warp his face. He liked seeing the final pieces come together and working. He liked seeing his father proud. Where the stage plays and art Damian took usually part in didn’t always take his attention, bat-related things certainly did.

It was better than anything he did at the academy. All it did for Damian was prove how absolutely useless those his age were, and how unlike them he was—how out of touch his childhood training had made him. Father’s claims that school would benefit Damian were clearly without proper source. Class here had taught him only one thing: that he was superior, and school was beneath him.

He pretends he hasn’t been acting up. Father is periodically asking Damian to stay home, and Damian is only becoming more vicious. He needs to be perfect. He needs to be a perfect Robin otherwise father will fire him, and this is all Damian has left—had he abandoned the role he would be abandoning father, his fate as Batman.

Bruce Wayne was getting too old. That was the cold, hard, frustrating truth of it all because their had to be someone to take his place. And that someone had to be Damian Wayne; none of his siblings had the ability, or even the want to try. That left Damian… unwilling. In the beginning, that’s all he wanted, besides having his mother and father coexist in peace. It wasn’t for the betterment of Gotham, though. It was to earn his father’s pride. To be worthy. Now, some part of him wants what his father does; he wanted to stare out over Gotham and protect it, he wanted to help those in need, whether if he had to use his fists or his words. When he had finally spilled this all out to Jon, the boy offered the usual childish garbage.

“Be nicer?” Damian had echoed incredulously, scoffing.

“Think about it,” Superboy said with a smile, “Your dad does what he does because he cares. About the people of Gotham, about criminals, about everyone. Maybe you don’t need to be nicer—you’ll scare criminals just fine with that pout, promise—but at least try being more... compassionate.”

Damian hated how he was right. But if he was being compassionate, then maybe he should say that he was… grateful… that Jon was his best friend.

“And look. Why don’t you just help from the sidelines with W.E? Hand the reins to your brother, Tim. Do art on the side.”

He could do art. But as for the Tim thing… jury’s still out. But still, he could do art… for as long as he was able, at least. As Batman needed a Robin, the same could be said that Gotham needs a Batman. Damian would have to step up to the plate eventually, regardless of who he wanted to be, regardless if he wanted to set out and be strictly something he had created for himself. Not a mantle pressed upon him at birth—not the leader of his grandfather’s criminal organization, not Batman. Just… Damian.
He swallowed down the fact that father was expecting him to be Batman, as were Jon and Richard, all those who believed in him even in the tiniest way. He swallowed down the fact that he was lying to them. Damian didn’t want to be Batman. He wanted to be Damian. But facing them with such an idea feels… traitorous.

“Sorry if I’m bugging you. But I wanted introduce myself to you, cause you’re one of Bullet’s friends and I want to get to know you all.” Cristen asked as she carefully waved her hand in front of his face.

Now that she was closer he found something familiar about her. It was something in the way she walked, like she was both stalking prey and approaching a startled wild animal. Her voice was a low Gotham-born hum that sounded familiar too.

Damian remained unintrigued. "I’m not interested.”

“Not yet, maybe,” Cristen said, easily. “I’m not saying we have to be best friends or anything. I just figured that, since we’ll be seeing a lot of each other, it would be cool if you didn’t hate me.”

Perhaps that is was does it. The easy tone. That blind, reckless determination… It’s her. As that’s the name he’s always known her to be—the girl from the docks, when Damian was first Robin.

You’re my hero. You always have been.

Damian remembered, and as he always did when he heard those words, his face grew hot.

She’d been the first to ever tell him that… and the only one for a long, long time. A part of him couldn’t help but almost latch onto her, and the air in his belly swelled outward, a cushioned feeling given when greeting an old friend. There’s a phantom pressure on his lips he can’t discern. Even if they never officially traded names or known each other long enough to ever… A stupid, vulnerable part of him felt like that night was only yesterday. A sillier version would call her a friend. The mindless part of him spawned by Grayson feels affection for her stir somewhere low in his chest, where he can still feel the matted nature of her curls in one hand.

The girl stepped over the brackets of metal that held up the benches above them. In the shade her eyes looked as dark as midnight, as if her pupils had expanded to encompass the whole of her gaze. They were shrouded with knowledge and mystery. Damian lashed out at the thought as soon as it struck him: he wanted to know more.

Thin slivers of light streaked across the grass in neat rows, human-made shadows that cast against Damian’s scars in odd but pretty ways. Cristen sat upon the piping across from him, her hands clasping the metal and her legs crossed over one another. She sat like she forgot she was wearing a skirt.

“I’m Cristen,” she greeted.

Obviously, Damian wanted to say. Instead, he stared at her like an idiot.

...So that was her name.

“And you?” She ventured, waving her hand at him. Now he was certain: those were bruises on her knuckles. Not light, accidental bruises either, but something purposeful and strong. Practiced.

He paused. “Damian.”
“Damian,” she repeated, laughing airily, “...Damian. With an A? That’s a good name.”

“It comes from the Greek word Damianos. It means, to tame,” he shared, more than he ever, ever would upon first meeting someone. Even if this was technically their second time around. Third. “Cristen. I’d assume that means a follower of Christ.”

Offhandedly, she told him, “Yeah. But I’m not very religious.”

He was thankful she didn’t extend her hand in a handshake, but rather awkwardly shifted and glanced behind her. Damian watched her hand pat her hip, searching for a pocket and an item that wasn’t there. She had done that action three times in his presence now. Another clue to solve the puzzle. Find the other details. Just because they knew each other didn’t mean she wasn’t hiding something.

After nervously staring at her, he allowed his eyes to guide Cristen’s to the hand resting on her hip. He nodded at it for emphasis, “You keep reaching for something that isn’t there. What?”

“Huh?” Asked Cristen.

“Your pocket,” said Damian, brusquely. “You keep trying to pull something out that isn’t there.”

“Oh,” Cristen flushed and immediately attempted to relax her hand on her thigh. “It’s uh... just something. Keep reaching for it out of habit. Left it at home.”

“Hhm.” Damian hummed, but didn’t prompt her to say much else... Though he couldn’t resist asserting himself.

Something she keeps or kept on her often, usually in the right side pocket—right handed—and often reached for. Small enough to fit in a pocket, and incessant enough where it was given to her at a young age. Couldn’t have been a phone, since she had it in her other pocket, and the need to touch said thing came when nervous or anxious.

“Lucky charm?” He deduced. A stressball was his second guess, but this felt more... friendly.

“Something like that,” she said, though she didn’t look as surprised as he would have hoped for. Cristen flashed him the briefest of smiles, crooked and off-put, “Lucy said you were smart. Nice one.”

“I know.” Damian shot back.

They shared a moment of silence. At least, it was likely that way to Cristen, as Damian thought of it as a moment of reprieve from this unbearable hell. School had no challenge to it and that simplicity was not limited to the classroom. The same could be said for anything but this moment, with Damian’s heart in his throat and Cristen’s words in his head.

Why couldn’t he talk?

“Alright, Damian,” Cristen said, and despite the serious nature of her tone, she pulled up her ankles and sat down like a kindergartener. “Now I get to ask you a question.”

No. He would not be swayed by a simple memory of a simpler girl, and would not fall victim to the trap of sentimentality. Damian Wayne of Gotham Academy might have to, though: he had a normal reputation to uphold.
“Fine,” Damian said, strictly, and started to snap a distracted beat against his sketchbook. He was being compassionate. He was being common, giving in to her social tendencies like any boy with eyes would. He didn’t want to face that feeling her hopeful expression gave him.

He didn’t want to sink into the guilt of leaving her behind.

Cristen’s fingers rose to the back of her neck, scratching there after the subtle show of annoyance and hostility toward her. But irritatingly she carried on, and observed him with a suddenly shy smile, “Bullet tells me you’re a good artist.”

“I’m an phenomenal artist,” Damian corrected. Then he leaned forward, tired of the game and ready for the inevitable interrogation. He needed to assure that she didn’t know about Robin.

(Would it be so bad if she did? His brain suggests slyly. Would it be so terrible for her to know, for her to remember, and for her to touch and laugh with him as she had before?)

Things only get worse in her resemblance to Talia. The swoop of hair falling against her shoulder is swept back over her ear in one neat motion, and she ignored his rebuff and carried on.

“Look… Bullet says that you’re a little… isolated. I’m the same way. I thought we could bond over that.” Cristen’s head dipped as she laughed. It was a light sound, but carried far, turning every open space into a cavern of noise. “Introverts united or whatever—her words. Trust me, I know how dumb that sounds.”

“Oh, sure,” Damian scoffed. With a huff, he stood, collected his things and hooked his uniform jacket over his shoulder, then sneered. “Now, if you’re done wasting my time…”

Cristen waved him goodbye, disconcerted on how quickly the conversation had ended. At least she’d tried. “Yeah, I guess so,” she huffed, finally—finally getting angry with him. He knew it would come eventually. It always did. “I’m sorry. Have a good day, alright?”

Damian just scoffs.

It is her goodbye that is the most unusual thing about her. He waited. Waited for her to sigh in relief, rub the sweat from her brow, thank a deity that Damian had finally left. But she seems… disappointed. Upset that he hadn’t put the effort in to talk to her in turn.

He rounds the underbelly of the bleachers and Cristen is sulking where he’d left her, her sigh only forlorn, her brow only knitted. Something curls in his stomach—he feels, stupidly, like he’s told her who Robin really is. Not the boy who’d assured her on that rooftop years ago. Not the boy she played Cheese Viking with and kissed like schoolchildren. But a bitter, unloved pretender.

She knows the secret, Damian tells himself. She knows and she’s luring you in.

Grunting in self-driven frustration, he stepped back into the shade. “What were you going to ask me on the field?”

Cristen observed him. Something in her face brightens with hope, and the grip on Damian’s stomach loosens. Normal boy. Not so normal girl; her lips pull back into a smile, and it’s a dangerous one, begging for him to remember. A part of him wished he could tell her the truth. A more realistic kin denies the idea.

“I thought you were someone I was looking for.” Cristen explained.

Damian studied her expression. “Did you find them?”
Cristen wrapped her arms around herself, wistful, and smiled something that wasn’t really complete. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, I did.”
GOTHAM CITY; YOUNG RESIDENCE | 3:54 PM | CRISTEN

RESTAURANTS ARE OFTEN defined by what type of food they serve and its quality. Cristen, accustomed to eating what she could scavenge, determined where she would go based on a number of things—safety, location, regulars… This is why Lucy makes the decision to go to a Mom and Pop diner down the road instead of sit through a checklist. One of the many reasons their relationship works.

Still, Cristen feels… safe. There is comfort in warm, fresh-scented places, where the smell of food surrounds you and the air is flavored with sweet bread. Places like this remind her of old friends.

“So?” Bullet opens, not a moment after they’re seated.

“I’ll be getting whatever’s cheapest,” Cristen says, idly glancing over the menu. She was hardly ever hungry. In all honesty, there was a part of her that didn’t need to eat like everyone else. The only reason she did was because that part scared her. “Maybe just a drink. Got food at home.”


They would never say it out loud, but Cristen wasn’t stupid. She was acting ambivalent and miserable, which automatically meant something horrible in their translations of how they viewed Cristen’s mood. Truthfully… they weren’t all that wrong.

Damian Wayne appeared in Gotham a couple of years ago, kicking his way in under his father’s scandal as the secret son of a billionaire and product of a one night stand with an unnamed woman. It had been across every media platform known to man. Unlike some of Bruce’s other known associates, it was this affiliate that delivered the worst blow to his public persona—because having a child of mixed race in the rich white people community was apparently a crime. It was because of this that the Wayne family temporarily disappeared from the public eye…

And it was also prior to the exposure of this information that Batman gained a new Robin.

It had to be him. With each new connection she had grown more and more sure, until the sureness sank Cristen and rusted her over. Damian Wayne was Robin… an arrogant, self-driven Robin she’d never even imagined meeting.

From the moment she knew, from the moment everything came down to that name, she’d been over the moon. He had a name and a face and a narrative… Robin was not just a fever dream, as Damian was the proof. It had excited Cristen so much she lost focus. She should have forced herself into a more realistic mindset: Robin—Damian is a human being, and would not be perfect.

He changed. Was different from her memory. It’s stupid how much that unsettles her gut. She was overthinking things; Robin was not some celebrity, some movie star who’s image in Cristen’s mind was now distorted. Nor was he some sort of symbol. He was a living, breathing, human being of which Cristen should have thought of more realistically.
That’s what Selina had said.

“For the last time,” sighed Selina, dragging a set of claws along a sharpening strop, “It’s not my secret to tell. I get that you want to know them, but—”

In a single jerk, Cristen hurtled her feet over her head, hands fastening on the suede layer of the balance beam. “I should know who Batman and Robin are. If we’re going to be partners, then I should know everything you do.”

“Not yet,” Selina said. “This isn’t about us being partners—it’s about your little schoolgirl crush on Robin.”

That instantly woke her up. Cristen tumbled from her perch, careening straight into the box of ice that held Selina’s favorite champagne. When she drew her head from the melted remains Selina was smirking and Cristen was spitting.

“And before you say you don’t have a crush on him, I know.” Selina said. After helping Cristen to her feet, she smoothly and confidently told her. “Don’t get your hopes up. You’re going to be disappointed.”

“Whatever you say,” Cristen saddled the balance beam again. “I don’t care. What I do care about is us being honest with each other.”

“Honest.” Selina deadpanned.

“Yeah,” said Cristen. “Honest. Because we’re partners.”

“Though you’re right, kid, you have to remember that you’re still in training,” Selina explained. She shucked the champagne free of it’s icy prison and shifted toward the bar. “Right now we’re focusing on your physicals. After… we’ll see.”

Her grip wobbled and her weight threatened to take her. Cristen’s arms were shaking with the force, sturdied only when Selina glanced up to check her form. That was the thing about Cristen—she was so eager and obsessive that Selina really had considered introducing her to Bruce. A hound mistaking it’s reflection for a friend. If she and Damian only got along, it was only because they were so much like him.

“I’ve already read through your files,” Cristen walked forward on her hands. While her brawn was impeccable and her senses were thorough, she lacked patience and respect—not to mention flexibility.

“If you could even call them ‘your’ files. ‘Probably took them from Batman and Robin; you’re not nearly paranoid enough to do that much research. Seems like they’ve… got some issues.”

“Obviously,” Selina remarked. “They’re little boys who like to dress up and play pretend.”

“What do you mean by that?” Cristen pulled herself down into a crouch, the landing soft, a mirror image of the demonstration Selina had given moments earlier.

If she were any other kid, Cristen would have probably pointed out that they were also dressing up and playing pretend, but... there it was again. This was a necessary duty to her. Not a job, or a charade, or anything phony of the sort. Like Bruce, she was unwavering and decided about how serious their act was. It would probably take her even longer to notice how crazy this all was.
Selina sighed, “I mean that Batman is… not always like that. He’s not always so… paranoid.”

Knowing she would get nothing else from her mentor, Cristen slouched back, hanging over the edge of the balance beam upside-down. Beyond the crisp gym in Selina’s penthouse was the great expanse of Gotham. Above, the signal of the bat. She heard Selina sigh without sound, Cristen’s ears sensitive and prickly in the well-padded penthouse. What she seemed to be implying was that Batman wasn’t so alien all the time. Cristen didn’t really know how to flip that switch.

“Huh,” whispered Cristen after a beat. “…Paranoid.”

In the present, Lucy called, “Cristen?”

“School was okay,” she said, coughing and shifting under the gazes of her friends. And she had thought Reese would be bad. “I liked my physics teacher.”

“Good,” commented Bullet, more so the conversation could continue than anything else. “And what about Jon, Vivian and Damian? Or your, uh, power thing?”

Cristen’s mind scrambled for purchase. “Yeah, something was wrong there. I’ve never been hit like that before. Do you think it could have been…?”

It was easy to picture. Damian was apparently good friends with Jon, so it would make sense that he was also a hero of some kind. Cristen felt like she’d seen his face somewhere before… Thoughts like that seemed to create an itch her mind, something to distract her in case she thought too deeply about it.

“What? No!” Lucy laughed, fakely.

Bullet shook her head. “They caused your powers to react? No way. Neither of them could hurt a fly.”

Cristen sat back in her chair, opening up the menu to review it, and consciously trying to work through the tightness in her throat. “Oh, okay. Must have been something else then. An emergency downtown or something.”

They're lying. They know that Damian is Robin. What else has she missed?

GOTHAM COUNTRY; WAYNE MANOR; THE BATCAVE | 10:07 PM | DAMIAN

DAMIAN STOPPED THE hiss pressing its way up his throat, resorting to clenching his teeth and tightening his hands around the edge of the operating table. Alfred Pennyworth’s nimble, aging gloves pulled a fractal of seaweed colored glass from his side. The dull clink it produced when Alfred dropped it into the petri dish rung in the cave’s ever-constant white noise.

“Report?” Father begins, and Damian steels with his voice.

He steadies himself on the arms of a nearby chair, and Damian doesn’t miss the groan he masks as a heavy breath. His father certainly looked like he’d been fighting crime for nearly 24 years of his life, but when Damian considered it in the larger picture, that never seemed right. September 23rd, 1993 was the anniversary of his father’s first night out—an unofficial Batman Day at home—but that just couldn’t be. That felt far too long. It made everything real, when Batman should have been a force of nature, like the moon. Always there. Always watching. Never dying. He supposed if you
romanticized it that Batman was just that—he lived on in the people, and all of that lame garbage. In truth… he’d live on in Damian. He was supposed to, anyway.

In the public’s mind, the Batman was an infinite thing. He was a constant that would never change. And yet, there were still numbers; Dick had been with him for 12 years. For a long time it had only been them, and for an even longer time it had only been his father. Damian had been there for only seven. How he managed to do it, Damian had no idea. The only thing he knew was that he had to have the same conviction to make his father proud.

“I was attempting to escort two overly-intoxicated teenagers home, when one pulled a broken bottle and got the drop on me,” Damian explained, ashamed. “They must have been high on something new, as they were acting... feral.”

His voice turned reluctant and quieter, not one to admit a mistake. “...One managed to cut me before they escaped.”

“I would not call this a cut, Master Damian,” Alfred said, giving Damian that I’m not taking your bullshit expression he always seemed to have. That was the best part about Alfred; Damian never had to attempt to impress him, as it was an impossible feat. He could settle for knowing Alfred was pleased Damian hadn’t complained about the attention. “You may very well need stitches.”

Bruce furrowed his eyebrows, examining the wound. He and Damian had grown together; while Damian could now rely on his weight in combat, Bruce’s hair was flecked with grey around the ears and his face had sunken a little deeper. But he was still making that annoying hrrn sound Damian knew was a sign he had made a mistake. Bruce makes it now, as expected, and folds his hands over his lap.

”Are you alright?”

“Fine.” Damian replied easily.

“Good. Now why don’t you give me a report about how today went?” Bruce pried, and Damian straightened so Alfred could have better access to his wound.

Meanwhile, Alfred shoots Bruce a look for the phrasing, mouthing sarcastically, report?

“Fine,” Damian repeated.

Bruce huffed out his nose, then said, “And?”

The invitation made Damian squirm. He could only think to shrug, as they’d been through this routine too many times and Damian was never pleased with the outcome.

Bruce prompted again, “Make any new friends?”

Damian scowl. “I’m not a child, father.”

“For five more months, yes you are,” he corrected. “Meet any new people?”

“My human geography teacher is insufferable. Reid and Newman introduced us to a girl, and Jonathan is already encouraging her to join their lunch table,” Damian said, scoffing.

He glanced between the two men, knowing that this was a... safe space to talk, but that didn’t make it any better. Damian still hated bringing up how he felt about other people; he hated the instinct that Alfred and father would reject him for it.
“She…” Damian held his tongue. “I believe she was… flirting… with me,” Damian hissed out the word in a venomous manner, turning up his nose in disgust. “No. She was manipulating me. I hated it.”

“What do you mean?” Bruce almost laughed, which made Damian’s glare heat.

“She forced her way into my company—” Damian cut himself off, and with a scowl, gripped the edges of the table. “It doesn’t matter.”

Bruce watched the body language with wise eyes, a smile quirking at the edge of his lips, “I think she was teasing you, Damian.”

“No one teases me. I am not some kindergartener being taunted by a classmate. Probably just another girl trying to worm her way into my trust fund.”

“Son—” Bruce sighs, but there’s a undertone of amusement hiding beneath it, “I think you’re looking at it the wrong way. She likes you. She was probably trying to be nice, to befriend you. Girls are nice to you when they like you—usually.”

He passed a look over the sharper pieces of Damian’s face, thinking about someone.

“I don’t need anymore friends,” Damian huffed indignantly, furious. “I can barely tolerate the ones I have now.”

“I’ll make sure to tell Master Jonathan that, sir,” Alfred remarked, and Damian huffed again, because he did more than just tolerate his best friend.

“You could be nice to her back, Damian. You never know. Maybe you have something in common,” Bruce encouraged.

He had been doing that a lot lately. If it wasn’t subtly referencing his time after Batman, then it was significant others and more friends, as Damian was sure he wanted to combine the two. Find someone who could be with him where Bruce didn’t have anyone like that.

Well, Bruce had had Damian’s mother, but that died out years ago. Now, Talia was more of a fuzzy photo in an album. It stung to think that had been all that she was reduced to, but it also felt good to rub the image out of focus.

“I’ll do no such thing,” Damian had whispered, but he doubted not even Alfred heard him.

He felt a rough-handed pat land on his shoulder, and then his father was heading down the grated ramp, into the darkness of the cave’s center platform. Damian watched him walk up the steps to the Batcomputer and greet Barbara, placing a hand on her upper back and nodding encouragingly as she began to talk about what she was working on. He was a man of few affectionate words, but Damian’s elder sister Cassandra had pointed it out to them long ago how he was always a man of action. Damian felt the place on his shoulder where his father had laid his hand, staring at the floor and wondering if he was the same way.

He knew what Jon would say: Oh please, Damian! You like to think like you’re all macho and stuff. But underneath all that biz’, you’re all heart. You’re only heart. You’re compassionate, you just won’t show it.

Damian snorted. I doubt that.
When he ventured to go on patrol later that night, father denied him and Damian escaped off to Tarbooshes for late-night soup. Maybe he had been acting more like his old self today. But his old self would have preferred to be at his father's side, too.
INCOMING

GOTHAM CITY; GOTHAM ACADEMY; MS. MACPHERSON’S HISTORY CLASS | 12:17 PM | CRISTEN

CLASSROOMS WERE LOUD. Schools were loud, even if every classroom was taking a test and was absent of voices. Shoes shuffled against the floor, pencils squeaked against paper, chalk shrieked and paper fluttered. To someone with super hearing—or at least advanced hearing in Cristen’s case—then the world is a screaming, flaming mass of noise that never ceases. The only way to silence it is to control yourself and your thoughts.

Cristen had begun honing her powers from the day she was born. But sometimes it had all gotten so intense that she could be found in a broom closet, quaking with her face in her knees and her hands over her ears. She’d sob and sob and sob until the tears and the ache in her eyes numbed out. That’s how she had gotten her isolated salvation in the past. Now was a different story.

Mornings were particularly grueling. Sleep weighed down on her conscience and concentration like a blanket put over a bird’s cage, a sudden wash of darkness that would disappear just as fast as it came. Even if it was now afternoon, it was one of the first days back at school, and people who had not seen each other over the summer were chattering incessantly all around her. It was like sitting in nature in the middle of night; alone, but very well aware of how wrong that also was.

This morning, in particular, had been harsher than usual. She’d almost woke up late to the storm outside, tripped on her way down the subway stairs, and forgot to eat breakfast. She wasn’t fast enough for the Academy’s breakfast either, and stared mournfully at the muffin a student was eating across the room. Okay, so maybe Cristen didn’t have to eat. For some reason. But that didn’t mean it wasn’t the best thing since sleep, and that Cristen wasn’t going to shove that muffin in her face given the opportunity.

To avoid her hunger, Cristen took turns on each new subject in the room, zoning in and out between them like a bee bobbing between flowers. There were two girls in the back of the class passing notes. One boy was avoiding the eye contact of the teacher, obviously lacking the answer to a question. She was talking and writing and oh—

Cristen’s gaze shot up, pencil cracking in half and flying over her shoulder. She heard it roll across the floor and land against one of her chair legs. Jon gave her an odd look, laughing quietly under his breath and taking his hand from her shoulder, “You okay?”

“Sorry. You startled me,” Cristen explained, pressing her lips together, "I was watching a lot for scary movies last night.”
Then, he nodded silently to the teacher speaking at the front of the room. She had written a couple of notes on the chalkboard—a messy thing, covered and carved with graffiti regardless if it was a nice school—but when Jon slid his notebook beside her elbow, Cristen could tell that she had only written the basics. His notebook was already 3/4ths of the way down the page, and was titled: AP HISTORY, BEGINNING OF THE YEAR PARTNER PROJECT.

Cristen held in a groan, praying that she got someone that she knew. Jon would make a great partner, as he nodded at his notes and tapped her own blank page; an indication to get what she needed. She decided in that moment that Jon was one of the good ones. A ‘true blue’ was the word Bullet had used, even if that was extremely lame. She also decided in that moment that Jon would make a good cop.

“Thanks,” Cristen whispered, before she got to work on taking down the notes Jon had given her. Her dread grew; a speech, short paper, and presentation by Monday next week? It was Thursday! Had high school always been like this, or was it worse? She could barely remember last year. It was all a blur of assignments and training and moving.

“Before I list off your partners—yes, I picked them for you, don’t groan—I would like to remind you that this is an out-of-class project, and that I would advise you and your partner to exchange numbers.” Professor Macpherson said.

The woman swiftly approached her desk, sifting through a pile of papers before finding her clipboard. The small class hummed briefly as she paged through them, eagerly writing and bumping each other in the sides. She saw a couple kids cross their fingers. Jon was cleaning his glasses while they were still on his face, a girl was jogging her legs beneath her desk, and Cristen was darting out as much of Jon’s notes as she could gather before she was forced to sit with her partner.

And by god did she suddenly wish that she hyphenated to Castillo-Young, because then her name wouldn’t be at the bottom of the list and it wouldn’t take a forever when she knew her fate. It would be worth it even if she had to share a connection with her old life. That was the last name she’d been born with; nothing about it was interesting to Cristen anymore.

When Jon was whisked away to work with someone else, she may have whined under her breath. Even if she was grateful that her insight’s strength dulled when he moved, she was instantly annoyed. Maybe she could ask to work alone. No, no, Ms. Macpherson didn’t seem like the type. And did she really want to do all of that by herself? ...But also, if Cristen was getting into vigilante life, then she’d definitely have to get used to doing a lot of things on her own. Selina wasn’t going to baby her. Cristen would hate it if she even tried.

“Ms. Young—ah, yes, welcome to the academy. You will be partnered with Mr. Wayne, in the corner there.” Ms. Macpherson distractedly waved to Cristen’s left.

Slowly, Cristen turned her head. Of all people, of all things—! She didn’t know if this was a blessing or a curse. Damian would either insult her or deflect her attempts to befriend him. And there was no way she couldn’t try and befriend him now, considering the obvious. Not like he was her childhood hero or anything. Not like they had to get to know each other even minimally to work on this project.

Damian raised his eyes from his watch. He had been twisting some sort of dial on it, the dull blue glow of it’s screen almost as startling as his eyes. They quirked with a mischief Cristen found intriguing. Childish, he flashed her a mouthful of annoyance and invited her to his side like it was some sort of honor.
Cute as… whatever that was, Cristen was infinitely more intrigued by the device. She tried to peer at it and he hid it away.

“Damian.” Cristen greeted, sending him an annoyingly friendly smile.

“Young.” Damian responded, boredly. It irked her and made her want to laugh at the same time.

“Where are your notes? I have mine, but I didn’t get a lot,” Cristen said, and slid the open page between them. He slid his chair aside in an obvious attempt to distance them; she hates how disappointing it is.

“I memorized it,” Damian began, barely glancing at her work. "And you mean Jon’s notes.”

Like that didn’t restart her heart or anything. Cristen questioned. "You were watching me?”

He pointed to the bulleted list on her paper, and to one of the main points that described the project’s core desire; is anyone in your family apart of a key point of history? Damian said, “No. Jon crosses a line through his bullets, it’s something his mother does. You copied him.”

“That’s smart. Nice one.” Cristen remarked. She hated how she failed to notice doing it, and filed it away in the back of her mind.

Damian’s eyes caught on the light in a weird way when he tilted his head, like the flash of a camera had momentarily blinded her. “I know,” he said.

With that, they both sunk into silence, Cristen cracking down on the planning worksheet and Damian messing with his watch. It only irked her a little when he left her to do it. Of course, it should have been obvious that Damian would think he is above everyone here.

Cristen bit down on her tongue. In truth, she thought that he—Robin—would be everything she’d ever hoped he’d be and more. Everyone knew the Bats were much more reserved and mysterious, but maybe he’d be brave, righteous, and loyal too: all traits she associated with the best heroes. But Damian seemed to be none of these things anymore. To Cristen, Damian was much more of a spoiled little brat than the hero he had once been.

...And speaking of spoiled little brats.

After years of honing her powers and her body, Cristen had become an astute force of nature. Information was power and eavesdropping was one of her specialties. Things became easier when it was her name being said; her brain, as cruel as ever, had trained her to catch onto those that spoke behind her back.


Real model students, thought Cristen. She forced herself to let it fly over her head. It didn't matter what they thought.

“That Freddy guy?” Laughed his companion, Rex Campbell. “Geeze, dude, didn’t know you were into those kinds of people.”

At the suggestion of being paired with a man, Bradbury scrunched his nose and swatted him off, “Fuck no! That’s gay. I meant the one… y’know, sitting behind us. With the scar on her chin, by Wayne.”
“Really? She’s seems so moody,” Rex said, casually. He tapped his pencil on his chin. “Not to mention how she probably doesn’t know a lot of English—I heard her speaking Spanish earlier. Bet she paid to get in. Then again, her family might be too poor for that. Probably had to get in with a scholarship.”

“Probably a big family, too,” commented Bradbury. “Still hot though. Think she’d let me—?”

Cristen couldn’t take it anymore. She’d lived in the Midwest long enough to know how to deal with these kinds of people, and that was usually by ignoring them. But sometimes… the desire to just knock them the hell out is impossible to deny. Her day was shitty enough as it was. Of course the universe piled on some douchebags for good measure.

“Excuse me,” she cleared her throat.

Okay. Good. Very mild, nothing extreme. Extreme for Cristen usually meant slamming their heads through a window though, which she hadn’t done since she was thirteen, so it was more of a mercy than anything else. Anger curled in her belly like hot iron. It was the first week, and Cristen was probably going to get a lot of this shit—she might as well start out on a good note.

Slowly, Bradbury first examined his partner as if to say, are you hearing this? Upon turning to look at Cristen, he sneered, “Was I talking to you?”

“All about me,” she huffed. "I'm sure you guys are nice when you aren't being racist and entitled white boys, so I'm sure you wouldn't mind shutting the hell up."

Okay, okay, reel it in, that was too much. Way too much.

Worse, Damian remained on that stupid watch. He just stood there and listened. Some Robin he turned out to be—Cristen was beginning to hate him for it, as unfair as that was. What, so he absolutely needed the costume to help someone? You never need some stupid emblem to help people. Isn’t that what he had taught her?

“So? It’s still none of your business,” agreed Rex, now glaring at her. “I—”

“Just like how it’s none of the board’s business that you cheated on the entrance exam?”

Three heads spun to Damian. Cristen, at first, was uncertain it had been him who spoke. As he had before, he was propped back in his chair and staring at that stupid watch again. Rex and Russell were just as stunned.

“How did you know about that?” Russell said, dumbly.

Damian just scoffed. “Please. I guessed. Anyone with your level of intelligence would have to in order to attend this school. If I was to be so bold, I would bet that your father bribed to get you in, too.”

This seemed to be a fair assumption; Rex and Russell paled, so it was less of an estimate and more of a statement. One that made Cristen’s heart float.

She sat back down, having half-stood in the temporary commotion, and blinked away her surprise. After a silent debate on whether to retort, the other boys retreated. Damian was most certainly Robin—but a harsher version she had never gotten to know.

Sadness washed over her, and Cristen pushed it down before it became anything else; again, she was being insensitive and over-dramatic, not to mention recovering from that bull. Cristen couldn’t just
assume the truth was in his brashness. Selina often acted differently with each alias, so maybe that was all Damian Wayne was—a mask, something to hide behind. Cristen couldn’t judge so quickly. Even if that wasn’t the case, it would be fun to actually try and get acquainted with him—he wouldn’t have a guy like Jon as his best friend if there wasn’t something good about him, as Jon was just the type that attracted other good-spirited people. And Damian had stood up for her.

...And he was likely the only one in this entire school, or the city, or the whole world, that maybe knew how she felt. They shared... life experience. A world beyond normality. Perhaps, one day, they’d be able to talk about it. And that’s what she wanted: that one conversation, just like that first night.

“Thank you,” she whispered, sounding relieved and embarrassed all at once. “Don’t usually get so worked up over that stuff, I’m sorry. I appreciate you stepping in. Nice one, with the whole entrance exam thing.”

Damian’s eyes caught on the light in a weird way when he tilted his head, lenses in an emerald mask. “I know,” he said.

Cristen faced the page again, looking over it’s details to find the first step they would have to take:

*Find a person in your family (ancestors or present) that has witnessed or been apart of a key point in history. Write an informative essay (see below) about this person, and go into detail about what they witnessed and give the event context. Present this to the class with a presentation (see below) in speech-form (see below)*...

“Can we do your family?” Cristen said.

“Hn?” Damian asked, turning the light on his watch off and raising a brow.

“Your family is a lot more interesting,” Cristen said, jumping at the opportunity to learn more. “The Waynes helped found Gotham, so I’m sure you have something cool there. It’d be easy, too—half of that stuff is on Wayne-Net... as ironic as that is.”

“My family is the obvious choice,” Damian said. He looked and sounded bored as hell.

“Well, here,” Cristen tore off the end of the page and scribbled out her number. Damian looked down at it with an even indifference, slipping the paper into his breast pocket and folding his hands professionally between them. Not like her heart was pounding or anything.

“You’re going to answer my questions.” Damian stated. Investment that would have been unnoticeable any other day leaked through.

Cristen propped an elbow on the table and flustered. What did he know about her? The association between herself and Selina hit her like a train wreck; many people still felt that Catwoman was a criminal. “This is an interrogation...?”

“It is if it has to be.” Damian retorted. Something that was not Cristen’s insight lit up in her belly. She hated it.

“No,” Cristen said flatly. Then, she returned to her notes, decided they were too messy, and got to work at fixing them. She had to bite down a grin as he stared at her in silent shock.

“Excuse me?” He scoffed, like even the smallest of answers was a felony. “How old are you?”

“Seventeen. Dude, if you want to get to know me, just ask,” Cristen shrugged. “I want to get to
know you, too. You seem sweet… and a huge asshole, but—sweet.”

He clicked his tongue, fingers drumming impatiently atop the table. “What are you after?”

Cristen smiled at Damian, almost shy and yet not quite. “This is gonna sound dumb, but I just thought it would be cool to be friends. Y’know, since our friends know each other, it would just make things less awkward when we’re with the others. There’s also this project and everything.”

“What area are you from?” Damian asked. It was almost an admission of defeat. Experimentally, he cocked his head to the side and studied her reaction, “Diamond District? New Gotham—Crime Alley?”

By some magical kind of luck or ridiculous coincidence, the bell chimed. Immediately some students were already half-running out the door. Cristen couldn’t resist herself, and pulled her bag off of the table in a single smooth pull. That wasn’t the right title.

“Park Row,” Cristen corrected, and flashed him a little smile, “That’s its name, Damian. Call it by its name.”

Cristen didn’t bother to stay to provoke Damian further, going off to regroup with Bullet and Lucy. She didn’t turn for his reaction. A part of her hoped that he got the reference; it wouldn’t hinder her identity in any way, and it definitely didn’t confirm that she knew his, either. It could have simply become a habit ever since the night they met. And honestly, it really had. Or… it would blow her cover like an atom bomb and she’d be kicked out of the city on her ass.

Even with the idea of Bullet’s incoming rants and Lucy’s silent listening, Cristen couldn’t help but reevaluate what she’d said. Had she revealed too much? Been too mean? Or had this boy, this… idiotic legend she’d created in her head, simply gotten to her?

Or forgotten her, more like.

He’d probably had dozens of girlfriends or Boyfriends, anyway. Damian could have been with someone in their circle for all she knew, which would explain Bullet and Lucy’s reactions to him. No amount of assholishness could keep some people away, especially with wealth and power like that. Really, Damian could have anyone regardless if they knew he was Robin or not. For him to dismiss Cristen as a product of a curious youth... wouldn't be outlandish. Warranted, maybe. Given what she was.

...But why did that matter, again?

Lucy saddled up at her side, Bullet in tow. “Someone looks frustrated.”

“Damian doesn’t like it when I say no to him,” Cristen said, slowing their walk to give her enough time for idle chat before the two had to separate. “Kinda funny.”

Bullet only laughed, “He’s like that—but don’t worry, after he figures out you’re not some government spy or secret agent, he’ll chill out.”

“He’s really nice when you get to know him,” Lucy added.

“Can’t wait,” Cristen said, and she was unsure if it came out dry or at least partially genuine.

Cristen saw her locker up ahead, managing to put forth some mental effort to remember her combination. Six… sixteen… twenty-five? Or was it twenty two? Too late, Bullet was already bumping their hips in goodbye and being sucked into the mass of students at a cross-hall freeway.
Lucy giggled about something and brushed her fingers against the arm of Cristen’s jacket.

Her locker wasn’t kind to her. She jerked the lock until the shackle was a little bent and the hook had been pried, but it’s not like anyone would notice. She breathed out a sigh of relief when it gave. Cristen hadn’t had time to attempt to organize her locker either. The mirror on the side and the few pictures spaced across had even been tilted in the fray, but Cristen took one look at the mess—which looked like a toddler had played Tetris with her textbooks—threw in her supplies, and grabbed her lunch.

The light reflecting against the tiles and the lockers doubled in her vision for a moment, and she had to steady herself on the door before she doubled over. Cristen’s eyes widened. Every inch of her body began to crawl with pinpricks of static, forcing her to whirl toward the south side of the building, nearly sending a lineup of freshmen toppling like dominos.

That’s when the bomb went off.
GOTHAM CITY; GOTHAM ACADEMY; LUNCHTIME | 11:39 AM | CRISTEN YOUNG

IT WAS FAR off, but Cristen’s ears had already set out for the incoming sounds. A fatal mistake. The explosion sent her ears ringing, pulsing with the telltale signs of a rupture, smashing her shoulder-first into the wall of lockers. She couldn’t see the blast from where she was, as all of it felt like a drill burrowing into her skull. Then the world began to move.

Everyone went rigid, silent and waiting for a sign of what the danger was. Then came the gunfire. And suddenly lockers were slamming, screams were echoing, people tripping and falling over each other to get out. Cristen had to crush herself against the wall to even stay upright. She didn’t have long before everyone was out, but that would be her only cover.

The sense of purpose washed over her like a cool spray after a heatwave. She didn’t have much. Whatever she did have, she stuffed it into her bag and dove into the fray.

The crowd, once Cristen entered it, was more of a terrified stampede than anything else and she was not ready to be a Mufasa. Thoughts of Bullet and Lucy surface just as fast as the school’s alarm sounds. The mass of people begin to arch toward an emergency exit. Cristen squeezed out of the mess, tripping over a boy’s sneaker, before she dodged into the nearest bathroom.

Cristen nearly tears the zipper of her backpack trying to shrug off anything that could get her recognised, pressing her jacket into the depths of the bag, tearing off her skirt and soundlessly tugging a pair of leggings up around her hips. She realizes her breathing has gone rapid. Her heart’s beating too loud in her ears.

*They need my help. The school’s being attacked,* she inhales.

She exhales, *I was trained for this. I can do this.*

Cristen fished her hand into the bag, feeling the noise get louder, but her heart steady. Her fingers wrap around cool metal and mesh. She glances down at the item. Her reflection glinted green in it, panicked and worried. Cristen exhaled, her worries leaving, and forced herself into a better mode. *No whip for me, I guess.*

GOTHAM ACADEMY; NORTHEASTERN UNDERGROUND CORRIDOR | 11:43 AM | DAMIAN

IT’S LIKE CLOCKWORK. The lockers pry themselves apart under the touch of his hand, splitting with a freshly practiced hiss in which Damian has already become accustomed too. Damian and Vivian enter the brief darkness without hesitation. The walls are old stone and carry bare lanterns for light. Their faces flicker under the fire, bobbing with the speed of their jog. These caverns have been here ever since the Academy’s beginning, connecting each building and others like Gotham City Hall and Wayne Enterprises, all of which the Robins before him had put to good use.

“Where’s Jon?” Vivian asked.

“Metallo attack in Metropolis, rushed out halfway through last period.” Damian huffed, now
sprinting. “Damn good timing...” He added, glaring suspiciously at the walls as if they held the answers to his questions.

“Why did Metallo have to attack Metropolis today of all days? Is he really that big of a villain for both Superman and Superboy to be needed? What about Conner?” Vivian hissed, matching Damian’s sprint. She gestured angrily with her hands as they ran, “Jon’s so lucky he got stuck with the B-leagues.”

“Could have been an organized attack. But what matters is if we got stuck with the B-leagues,” Damian said, pulling back his sleeve and twisting the face of his watch. A hologram appeared, which Damian used to unlock the doors up ahead.

He added half-heartedly, “To answer your other question: Superman’s getting old, Superfool is in Hawaii, and Kent’s taking his final exams in superheroeing. Soon, we’re gonna be the big leagues—well, I already am. You’ll just be stepping up near my level.”

Vivian shot him a dark look.

The doors Damian had opened remotely didn’t fit with the scenery. While the walls had practically been built when his grandfather was born (thousands of years ago, mind you), it was composed of a foot of steel and slid open automatically when the two heroes approached. But what it opened to certainly didn’t fit in.

While it was no Batcave, the space below the school was certainly a sibling. The walls were insulated with sound-proofing technology and reinforced with steel, fit with a lab area hung above a pair of teleporters and another wall set up with Robin suits and gear. While Damian flung open a display-case and got to work putting on his armor, Vivian leaped onto the platform holding one of Damian’s most precious possessions: his laptop.

“Bat-top, access emergency ID: Mockingbird,” Vivian said.

“Accessing... Welcome to the Nest, Mockingbird. How many I help you?” The Bat-top chimed, feminine but monotone like that of Oracle’s computer programs for the Batcomputer.

“Notify any nearby family-members of an attack at our current location, but leave the situation on stand-by. Who do we have knocking on our front door?” Vivian asked the computer.

The screen lit up with security footage from the main office. It was calm and normal until an explosion rocked the wall. She didn’t want to think about the casualties—but Damian already was, and processing how he could be preventing more. She had gotten used to the tortured look the Waynes would carry from the three years she had now known them. It only surfaced just before he put on the mask.

She was quick to catch the briefcase thrown at her. Damian glared out of natural tendency, already neck-deep in the role of his alter ego. He gave no order with the implication, turning around to secure his hood to his chestplate and check the stock of his belt.

The suit hadn’t changed much over the years, but for the obvious transition from 4’6” 10-year-old to a 6’3” senior. The only outward change showed in Robin’s darker colors and the length of the cape. While it had once hung to Damian’s knees it now trailed his heels, the shredded ends whispering against the floor like the flutter of a bat’s wing. He hooked the belt around his waist with a satisfying click.

“What do we got?” Damian rushed. His voice had dropped a couple of octaves.
Vivian unclipped the case, mind already miles ahead of her hands. She nodded toward the screen, undiluted hatred in her expression. Laughter echoed, sick, sick laughter, with the gunfire in the feed.

She looked away from the screen and pulled a domino mask from the case. Vivian scowled. “Take a guess.”
“THIS IS BECKY” Narita, reporting live outside Gotham Academy in Uptown Gotham. Moments ago, our crew arrived on the scene to rumors of an attack on the school by the criminal known as The Joker,” said the newscaster, much more lively and awake than she had been on the news days previously.

“Our suspicions were immediately confirmed; multiple panicked calls came from the private school’s lawn, where students had evacuated prior to an explosion in the main office building less than ten minutes ago. This marks the Joker’s first appearance since his escape from Arkham Island in March...”

Bullet had never been this attuned to her surroundings before; the air hummed with hollering and startling noises. A couple car doors slammed. Parents had already begun to arrive and collect their children, which were a large mass of shock-blankets in huddled groups, flooding the street full of police-cars with only more traffic. The lights blurred across Bullet’s vision like blended blue, red and white paints sprinkled with stars across the saddened Gotham sky. She had long since tried to dig the heels of her palms into her eyes; hearing Narita’s reports made everything that was now happening real.

There had been times in middle school where they canceled the day because of a threat, or went into lockdown, or went home early. None of her fellow students had ever really considered what this meant; it was just a story, something that they couldn’t confirm for themselves. So they went home happily and slept in. Sometimes they’d stop and watch the news with their guardians. But it had never been real then.

There’d only been one big event—an invasion—during Bullet’s lifetime, but it had been all the way in Washington. She was just a spectator. The words carried in a way where they felt like a story, even if they knew it was somehow real.

A couple parents had arrived on the scene, looking stricken and panicked; their children weren’t in the crowd. Then Narita began to read off the names of supposed hostages, and you saw officers approaching people, saw citizens sink to their knees and beg promises from those that couldn’t keep them.

Rose had yet to receive a message from either of her parents, but at least she had Reese. Lucy’s Aunt and her bodyguard had swept her up the moment she broke through the police tape; Bullet probably wouldn’t see her for some time.

Unlike many other parents with their children labeled as hostages—though both Reese and Bullet knew that it was unlikely that Cristen was a hostage at all—he wasn’t upset. He seemed… angry, and apprehensive, but not upset. He was definitely expectant. Bullet could imagine him hearing of the report and giving a great, deep sigh, "Oh, Cristen.”

“Do you think she’s alright?” Bullet asked. She interrupted before he could respond, "—well, of course she’s alright. But do you think she’s, y’know… doing a good job? With whatever she’s planning?”
Reese chuckled, though strained, “I have no goddamn idea. But if I know anything, it’s that she was meant for this sort of thing. I trust her gut.”

They exchanged a look. Just as suddenly, a wave of screams rolled over the crowd like a tsunami, great and billowing. People blew apart to make way for an incoming delivery-van. It was painted to have a clown face, laughing loud and ugly and terrifying as its driver. She thought she saw a teenage boy at the wheel. But Bullet barely got a glimpse before Reese had taken her by the shoulders and forced her further into the ambulance.

The car rocked and shrieked; forcefully, the van drove so tightly through the police formation that it broke the door off the ambulance’s hinges. Pushing themselves up, Bullet and Reese managed to peer around just in time to see the van crash through the police tape and tear down the lawn. An explosion rocked the ground as the van tumbled through an unseen wall.

As the shaken crowd began to gather themselves, Commissioner Gordon entered the scene. Forcing himself through a crowd of reporters and toward Detective Montoya and Detective Bullock, he took a megaphone from Montoya and announced, “Robin and Mockingbird have been confirmed to be inside the building. We will do our best to prepare for whatever he may throw at us. But for the time being, all we can do is wait for negotiations, ladies and gentlemen.”

Reese squeezed Bullet’s shoulder, looking down at her pale face with a pleading one, “Looks like our Cristen found her people.”

---

**Gotham Academy; Kitchens and Cafeteria | 11:57 AM | Cris**

**Crisen knew she** had found the place where Joker was holding his hostages quickly. A group of his workers were tying at least 16 or 17 people against tables and benches, and every look on each face seemed to remain among the same group; stifled, quiet terror, or shaking, most forcing down their sobs of horror. Cristen saw one or two of her classmates in the mess and felt an uncomfortable lurch in her chest.

From what she could glimpse, the attacker knew what he was doing. She knew some stuff when it came to defending groups of people, and this one was a modified version of several classics. He and his men worked in the center of the large, stone-bricked lunch room, creating a ring of hostages and a ring of tables around them in turn.

What she had noticed was that the Eastern wall was not as covered as well as the others were—he quickly ordered his men to patrol the area, but purposely kept a few to that side. She suddenly felt incredibly outnumbered and incredibly alone. But surely these people were feeling worse—and that’s when her plan began to form.

“He’s late,” says a voice.

It startles Cristen. It’s like he’s talking in her ear, curdling her blood over ice. She feels every muscle tense together, every part of her know who that voice belongs to and dread it’s every breath. She doesn’t want to listen. She doesn’t want to be near. She wants to run, and her senses agree with her.

Every hair on her body stands to attention, aimed over the counter in which the food is served to students in the lunch-line. She’s heard it before—**everyone** has watched the news or the broadcasts—and yet it still feels like the first time. No camera, no video, no image or recording of any kind could capture the rampant, unconfined **horror** that suddenly conquers her.

“Don’t tell me he’s not in the city. **Don’t tell me,**” he says. He mutters something, then with a sharp flourish, sending a wave of teachers and students flinching out of his way, he tosses his arms open
and bellowed into the hall, “C’MON, Batsy! Where are you?! Come on out! You know you NEVER have to hide from me!”

When nothing but ringing silence responded, the man paused. Cristen’s heartbeat is in her ears. The lenses over her eyes feel like they’re cutting into her skin, sweat filling her gloves. Even she jumps when the man stoms.

“Fine!” He pouts. Then, completely calm—bored, even—the man reached into his jacket, “I hate it when I have to bait you, bats. Your dramatic entrance loses it’s flair! But ah, alas, I guess you leave me no choice…”

Cristen’s eyes, which she realized she had shut as she tried to regain herself, snapped open. There’s the audible click of a gloved thumb pulling back a guns hammer and the stifled cry of a person in peril. Before Cristen can leap over the counter, a new sound enters the room.

A batarang sliced through the air, knocking the weapon out of the man’s hand. Not nearly as stunned as he should be, the man watched the gun clatter away from him, then the batarang rip through after it. There was an audible shudder of relief from the students, and a whisper spread through them. The shring! of the batarang cut off as it was caught. Cristen found herself sinking in thankful solace at the sight too.

Robin stood in the doorway, the birdarang poised in his hand and cape drawn across himself by the arm. He said nothing. He did not greet him. He only waited for him to move, observing, no doubt being fed information and devouring it for a much better plan than whatever Cristen had.

“Oh, goody.” The Joker sighed, flapping his hands in a sarcastic and enthusiastic manner of cheering, “It’s you. Don’t you have better things to do? Tend to some eggs, repair a piece of your nest? Surely you have some feathers to pluck before you perform your routine mating song! Run along, little boy, and call your daddy instead—he and I have to have a little…”

“I will give you one warning, swine.” Robin said.

He raised his head proudly, sternly, threateningly, and looked down at Joker even through the distance they stood apart. His voice was an automated rumble, and Cristen suddenly understood very fast and very quickly why no one else knew that Robin was Damian Wayne.

Damian Wayne was an asshole. Robin was… everything. While when Damian would walk in a room Cristen felt like she had to best him in some way, Robin washed away the fear that even this man’s voice had instilled. She aspired to give that level of protection to others. It was ridiculously dumb.

“Really? You will?” The Joker said.

Cristen peaked over the counter from the shadow of the dark kitchens, and watched the aging man she saw on the news place a flattered, worn hand over his heart. Regardless of how old he was, his smile, that evil, cheek-tearing grin like a fresh wound that still made flowers die and people sick with just a look.

“You know, Bats never gives a warning anymore. He’s learned that by now. I think it’s about time I give you the same lesson!”

Joker laughed, loud and high and echoing, “Actually, maybe it’s best that I don’t! Boy Blunder, I’d like you to meet your counterpart, the comedy to your tragedy, the Joker-junior to your Bats-junior —!”
With a great swing of his arms, Joker gestured toward Robin, “ACE!”

Then, he waited. Nothing happened for several moments. Robin seemed infinitely unimpressed, but Cristen had a feeling that he rarely felt differently. The crowd wormed in their bindings. The few of Jokers men remaining inside shuffled. Cristen’s ears perked to listen for incoming sounds, but there was only the startled murmurings of the hostages and then the distant clatter of the police-line.

Joker tried again, teeth sharp and attitude broken in, "ACE!"

This time, whatever Joker had planned came through. Cristen heard it first. Her mouth opened to yell, to warn him, but it was covered by tires roaring forward and the face of a car careening through the wall. Brick and glass sprayed over the floor in a rain of rocky dust, sending terrified shrieks from the hostages and a hysterical laugh from Joker. Robin barely managed to avoid it, forced forward by the hood and half-rolling over the windshield. He caught himself on the floor, layered in debris and looking more like a disgruntled dove than a robin.

“Robin, Robin,” Joker tutted, kicking two hostages out of his way.

He looked down at Robin, who swiftly forced himself upward and into a defensive stance. He looked ready to act, until Joker raised a hand and gestured to the driver of the vehicle, "Woah! Before you start punching, don’t you at least think you should meet our new guest? How rude of you! I figured Bats hadn’t taught you any manners..."

Through the now shattered glass of a vehicle came another voice. Or rather, a nervous, stuttering laugh forced out of a throat as if it had never wanted to make the sound in the first place.

Ace kicked open the door of the car and jumped out, wobbled on his feet, then mechanically approached Joker. He was a spindly, tattoo-layered young man who could have easily been in Cristen’s grade, though layered in Joker’s makeup and scarred in the same way Joker’s mouth was. He gave another mechanical chuckle. Cristen realized for a terrible moment that this was a version of the Joker gas; but instead of grinning and dying, he was grinning and being controlled.

She didn’t like looking at him. As she glanced at his wide, unblinking eyes and unflinching smile, toxic green hair and boiled-down skin, Cristen was overridden by thoughts of every one of his victims—every bombing and every kidnapping and every murder Cristen knew to be done by his hand.

“Robin, meet my sidekick, Ace,” The Joker gestured happily to his victim, “Ace, meet Batman’s sidekick, Robin,” his voice dropped and he groaned, as if the mention of his name was boring as paint drying.

While Robin glared down at the two, unusually willing to listen, Cristen observed the hostages and decided what she should do. Robin was clearly trying to distract Joker. But there were too many guards around the hostages for Cristen to risk much.

There was a few risks she could take, though. A shadow fell across the tile of the kitchen behind her, and Cristen followed it, crawling across the floor and slipping behind a counter. Two of the Joker’s men walked by. She had them stuffed into two of the cabinets a moment later, wincing as she followed the Joker’s voice back to center stage. It would be hard to try and rope other men toward her, but if it would help, she’d do anything.

Despite that goal, Cristen could only follow Robin’s lead and wait. But what for?

“Ace,” Joker called politely. "Why don’t you show Robin your best magic trick, yes? That’ll be sure
to make him laugh…”

Robin must have spotted whatever Ace held in his hand and lurched for it. Joker reacted like a gun had gone off, grabbing for him around the neck, pulling a shining blade to his throat and pressing it deep. Still, Robin barely reacted.

Joker smiled with his compliance and giggled with a wheeze like an empty spray-can, "Watch."

Before Robin could break free, Ace held an injecting device up to the light. He pressed the gun-like equipment into his arm with an encouraging nod from The Joker, and the tank of green liquid emptied quickly into his skin, bubbling maliciously. Into his veins. Into him. Cristen could see it burning inside him, glowing like acid in each muscle and spreading through every fiber of his being. Then, he began to grow.

He was no Bane, but that was only because he was more than Bane. His arms and legs became hulking, distorted masses of swollen muscle, stretching his skin and pulling it apart in places, sending pools of blood around his feet and down his limbs. The tattoos she recognised were now dyed under a permanent shade of blackened red. His ribs became claws that broke through the skin and wrapped around his blistered chest. His nails became swords as long as Cristen’s arms.

He became a monster.

Robin cursed, "No!"

Breaking free from the Joker’s grip, he turned to face the monstrosity as it began to amble toward the now screaming hostages. Joker must have expected Robin’s sudden will for action when the hostages became apart of the game.

They yelled until their throats bled and scrambled backward, trying to worm under the benches and around the tables toward freedom and safety. Joker’s men parted for the monster. That meant Ace had maintained some form of coherence in this state, and was aware of who was the enemy and who was not. He turned to look at Robin as he raced him there—Ace raised his arm—his claw came crashing down like a broken gerter—

Cristen caught the arm.

They both paused, equally startled by what she’d done. It lasted barely a second, but that was all it took—behind his gaze Cristen discovered the victim, the boy behind Ace, a high schooler losing his future. He snapped back into the thing that Joker made him in the next moment, and under the influence of pure instinct, Cristen drew her fingers into his skin and hurled him across the room as hard as she could.

Tables crashed aside, dust swirling, the earth shaking, all because of what she had done. That had never happened before.

Cristen looked down at her hands in amazement. Had she really done that—?

“Down!” Robin barked, grabbing her by the shoulder and hurling her out of the way. Joker’s men began to fire in their direction. Together, they skidded down behind a series of tables. Cristen looked toward the hostages in desperation, but found that Robin managed to draw the bullets away. Not only that—but there was someone else helping a teacher out of their binds.

The fire echoed around in Cristen’s skull, but she had not been the only one to be so rattled. It had convinced Ace to his feet, and he was slowly pushing himself up on Joker’s wild calls of command.
“Thanks,” Cristen said breathlessly. “I’m—”

“I don’t care,” Robin said, doing something on his wrist communicator, “You’re leaving. Super strength or not, I’m not babysitting some little wannabe.”

Cristen sat there, blinded temporarily by what she had just been assigned. What had ever happened to the Robin she had met? What had happened to him to transform him into this?

Robin hissed at her, “What are you waiting for? A Christmas card? Go! I’ll draw their fire!”

Cristen sat their stupidly and tried to register what she was feeling. Touching the weapons on her belt, she watched Robin enter the fight. Fists were flying, bullets were slung, and there was someone else with him, everyone yelling at each other—but it didn’t matter.

Robin didn’t matter. She was putting way too much emotion into something that required none of it. Fastening her hand around a set of taser-disks, Cristen made a plan.

...But it didn’t matter. As soon as she got up, she had been struck across the room like a baseball hurled into a home-run.
CRISTEN HAD NEVER flown before. She’d never been on an airplane. Flying wasn’t one of her powers, and she doubted that it would ever become one. But perhaps that was the error here—this didn’t feel like flying. It felt more like Cristen was the fly, swatted hard into the counter with a fly-swatter. If the counter was the kitchens of Gotham Academy, and the fly-swatter was a seven-foot-tall kid named Ace hyped up on some kind of mega-steroid.

She doesn’t remember the collision as much as she remembers the accompanied pain.

Cristen’s body had made the industrial stoves into modern art, and the same could be said of her insides; the feeling of at least three broken bones came first, white-hot and unceasing, and then the sound of monstrous footsteps approaching. One was much more startling than the other. Miraculously, the green lenses of her goggles had yet to shatter. They should’ve at the sight now approaching her.

Ace needed help. By god, Joker was more of a monster than whatever this boy had become, because he was the one who forced this transition. He was the reason that blood was leaking down his face and arms and skin, pulling his smile hard into his face as if it had been drilled and screwed there. Cristen wished that she could have tried to fight him—distract him—until whatever this was wore off.

Maybe she could avoid him, wear him out and lead him away until he was a normal kid again and they could get him to a hospital—

Or maybe, Cristen thinks as two arms like the weight on a forklift dig her blood vessels out of her skin, I shouldn’t be stupid and do the thing without any risks.

Cristen rolled backward, pushed off her arms, and forced her shoes into Ace’s painful grin. He grunted, but the sound didn’t fit the response; he stumbled backward at least half the force he hit Cristen with. She couldn’t waste any more time.

The adrenaline helped overcome the pain—she was happy to say most of the damage would be gone in a week or so, if she survived this hell—and then she was leaping up onto the counter—clasping her fists together—and bringing them down as hard as she could onto the bridge of his nose.

That one got the attention it deserved; he howled in pain, crashed backward into the wall of serving counters, and barely managed to regain his footing after hitting his head clear through the low kitchen ceiling.

Cristen saw his open position, and words rung loud and clear in her head. Do not hesitate to strike.

She shot forward. Taking one of the taser-disks, she gave a leap that broke the tile of the floor and slammed one onto the side of his neck. Cristen managed to catch herself on his massive shoulder, jump off, and then roll free of the following aggravation. He turned a table for eight into a table for none.
It was frustrating to find that she couldn’t match the amount of strength she had when saving Robin. But a ferocity came forth in knowing that innocent people could be murdered by someone who had no control. So she kept hitting until it felt like her bones were bleeding.

After attaching a pair of disks to his chest, Cristen recovered from the side-lines. Her arm began to sting. Her whole body began to sting. He’d managed to cut down the length of her forearm, and that ended it for her. While he was staggering to a stand—god, what even was in this serum?—she reached for the disk she’d kept on her belt. It was the last one she would need.

Of course, to Cristen’s luck, it wasn’t there.

Her eyes swiveled around to find it, but the crunch of metal that came as Ace stood up answered the question for her. Cristen wanted to run forward. Cristen wanted to stop him.

Suddenly paralyzed with fear, she asked herself, What would Selina do? This answer came just as quickly too.

She wouldn’t have the right amount of momentum to knock him out. Improvising felt cruel. Still. It was the good of the many over the good of the one; even if he was a kid, Joker had him now. Ace was no longer a boy. Like Cristen, they were tools.

Cristen backed away with each of his massive steps, avoiding every wild swing of his arm, ducking underneath them and jumping back when they came too close. Step by step he grew impatient. Step by step Cristen felt the regret and guilt sink into her gut—why did Joker do this to him? Why attack the school at all?

The blood on Ace came down in thick, black globs of furious ink. Cristen’s dribbled down her arm and her face and shone oddly in the sunlight, red as everyone else’s was, but lighter than it should have been. It reminded Cristen what kind of people she came from. And she would not let the size or shape or skill of her opponent stop her.

Ace brought his arm down for another harsh swing. It was practiced, now. Expecting the weight of the bludgeon, Cristen caught it—spun him by the arm—leaped up on his knee—planted her foot on one of the devices’ blue cores—and slashed her claws deeply, ferociously, across his eyes to disable him.

With a final push, he crashed through the window and crumpled on the grass. Just as Cristen landed he erupted into an arcing mass of lightning. Spasms as strong as his could shook the earth.

At once, he went slack, and the items ceased their purpose.

Cristen fell to the boy’s side. He began to shrink back down, slowly, pulling back into his own skin. The sigh of relief she gives is too heavy, but her gloves are covered in inky blood and she is unsure what will happen if she leaves him.

He didn’t deserve this. He didn’t want any of this—but the scratch had done its job in distracting him. Seeing the mark her hands had left on his face made her sick regardless. Horrified with the Joker’s actions and their result, Cristen put a shaky hand to Ace’s neck and confirmed what her insight had foretold.

So, he was alive. That’s all that mattered, right?

No more danger radiated from the building—gun danger, at least. She settled on moving Ace when she knew the paramedics needed to care for him somewhere else, and moved toward the primary threat at hand.
“He’s too risky to keep awake. Knock him,” suggested Robin’s company.

In agreement, and before Joker could argue his case, Robin swung his boot into the Joker’s horrid smile. He seemed satisfied. It unsettled Cristen, but she couldn’t lie—seeing the gun flop out of his hand made her sigh in relief. As soon as his chin met the floor, a boot planted itself upon his shoulder.

The boot belonged, to Cristen’s surprise, Mockingbird.

Cristen wasn’t familiar with many other B-list heroes or sidekicks, but she looked up to Mockingbird because she looked up to her mentor, Black Canary. She longed to be in her place; at the same time Cristen had begun Robin-worshipping, she had wanted to be Black Canary’s sidekick more than anything.

But she respected Mockingbird. Mimicking voices and sounds didn’t sound like a useful power at first, until put into the hands of someone like that. Cristen would be lying if she claimed her eyes hadn’t lingered on the symbol at the center of the white, black and blue unitard she wore.

Robin gave a nod toward the hostages as he swept for any Joker members to interrogate, and Mockingbird pulled a knife from her belt and got to work on their binds. Later, Cristen would remember how Mockingbird nodded her approval in rapture.

Now, though, heroic approval was hardly something that mattered. To feel any sort of pride in heroism then would be a lie. Looking at the kid, looking at what the Joker had done to him, Cristen didn’t feel like a hero at all.

But if anyone was going to, it was Robin.

Cristen ambled toward him, trying to focus on and follow his example instead of just passing out on the spot. He didn’t seem to care. In fact, he completely ignored her, squatted down in front of one of the hired thugs and dug through his pockets. Cristen was now too delirious to be embarrassed, and thus shamelessly looked him over.

Though she was definitely much bloodier and more battered, Robin was coated in the powdery lining of the walls, making him appear like he got into a cooking accident involving flour. It clung to the darkest parts of his armor and made him much more noticeable. Regardless, he still took up space in the room like a vacuum, the cape draped across his shoulders and spilling around his legs like ink only more to add.

Robin muttered something about wallets as he tossed a leather one over his shoulder, spilling its contents onto the floor and flicking through them with a detective’s eye. There was a focussed, unimpressed lull to his voice, “You’re staring.”

“Can you blame me?” Cristen mumbled.

She had meant it in a sort of, woah, you’re Robin (and you’re a huge ass) way, but he was much too cocky to realize. He only paused to flash a scrutinizing smirk at her over his shoulder. It tried to plant her in place, tried to make her squirm and be dazzled and awed by him, but it only gave something Cristen something to focus on and keep her awake. He didn’t like her lack of response. She didn’t feel like being inspired by him anymore.

Taking a card from the wallet, he held it up to eye-level and let someone on the other side of his mask determine its details for him. Casually, he prompted, “What’s your name?”

“You say yours first,” Cristen said, testing. Her injuries had turned her voice into something rough.
Robin reacted in the way she thought he would. Taking in a long breath, he let it roll through him, making him taller and drawing his brows together. From what she knew about Damian, she could guess that Robin shared his like for challenges. Chances to prove himself. His confidence already had him striding when he walked, clearly very pleased with Joker’s capture.

He kept looking her over under that mask too, she just knew it, trying to figure her out and who she was. Turn Joker in, save some hostages, and figure out the identity of a possible threat—Robin’s plan was obvious. Suddenly very protective of her own identity, she did not like Robin as much as she once did.

Obviously, Robin didn’t give his name. When he stood to look over the other men, she laid a hand over the injury on her arm and stated obviously, “You know this one was the only one with information, as he was the second-in-command… He wouldn’t give anything of value to his flunkies—why would he? It’s not his M.O—he’s the head of the operation, and it’s not like he’s sane enough to translate those thoughts anyway. So you don’t need to look through the others.”

Robin snorted, “Clearly, you are just as much a rookie in mind as you are in attitude.”

Cristen sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose and trying to work away her pounding headache. She could do this. Just needed to think clearly. “You’re planning to check if any of them are faking consciousness, right? They’re not, and I know that because I can hear the heartbeats.”

“You can hear their heartbeats?” Blurted Mockingbird.

Cristen flushed under the attention, and knew instantly that Robin was looking at her; he was glaring at her very hard, still scrutinizing her. Cristen gave a careful, “Yeah.”

“Are you one of Big Blue’s? Undercover or something?” Mockingbird pressed, gesturing to Cristen’s mask and cats-eye goggles, “I mean, there’s not a lot of people in Gotham City who could bench-press a guy that looked to be the size of a tank, but you did a lot more than just that. Who are you?”

Cristen stupidly opened her mouth as if to give her actual name, so used to the question and feeling more and more drowsy by the minute, but shut her lips tight together just as swiftly as she opened them. “Big Blue? Like… Superman?”

“So, the rumors are true,” Robin said, scoffing.

He sheathed his sword, but stared her down as if to take her. Regardless of their height difference—which wasn’t actually that much, as Cristen was sort of a tall girl—she realized how ridiculously brave this was. He had just witnessed her take out someone like Ace, and yet dared to scoff and order her around.

At the same time, it seemed to be working; knowing that Damian was underneath that mask made her shrink backward. Knowing she was talking to Robin gave the same effect, but stirred a fit of quiet anger within her. She had done much better in her first real superhero-gig than most others had. She felt that she deserved at least a thank you.

She found her asking herself that question again. What would Selina do? It was stupid.

Knowing that the hostages were now safe with a glance in their direction, Cristen needed to make her escape. Robin’s next goal was to find out her identity—if he could give Joker to Arkham on his own, then he would go out of his way to impress Batman with the secret identity of a possible threat, too. He gave off that air. Cristen, feeling suddenly just as cocky, decided upon what the answer to
her question was and how she was going to act upon it.

“‘You’re Catgirl,’” Robin said smartly.

Cristen considered the name. As she had said, she wasn’t going to be a girl for much longer—the name was also a direct tie to Selina, which wasn’t necessarily what their bargain had entailed. She preferred Lucy’s name. If she could get the name to someone like Robin and circulate it, then Vicki Vale would eventually swap it, and Lois Lane would pitch-in too.

“Stray,” corrected Cristen.

He smirked, raising his nose, “Very impressive. I’m going to assume you’re not just cat, are you? As Mockingbird put so elegantly, there are not many women in Gotham who can do what you just did.”

“No, there’s not,” Cristen said. She crossed her arms under her chest, looking up at him. Robin took a step forward, “You seem a little put off by that. You seem like a lot of things, actually.”

“What are you suggesting…?” Robin sneered, taken aback but somehow still intrigued.

Though his attempts to be intimidating were slowly working, Cristen realized—due to Mockingbird’s fixed up face—that his advances appeared to be something else. He was staring down at Cristen intently, something between a frustrated smile and a scowl on his face, which had come closer in an attempt to push her back. It didn’t work.

She suddenly, very badly, wanted to prove him wrong again. Wanted to trip him up, show him that he wasn’t as good as he thought he was. Wanted to embarrass him.

Forcing her vision to close into one lens, Cristen spread her hand across his breastplate, atop the Robin symbol. He made no move, only narrowing his gaze and stilling his expression. Though he could do many things, Damian was also a teenage boy. Cristen was a teenage girl of whom he had just watch pitch a hulk through a window with her bare hands. It was simple math.

(Selina math, which was cut up with odd little opinions in between, but Selina hadn’t lead her astray so far.)

When Stray neared their faces, he shifted his stance.

“‘You like to win,” Cristen said plainly, looking him over, “You’ve got a problem with authority. Very, very obviously, you are desperate for approval. Batman may be your father, but you are not the perfect son. What I’m saying is that—I know you with one look, Robin. You’re not the only detective here.”

Cristen fisted her hand where his hood and cape connected, feeling his fingers card over her waist. This had certainly done the trick. The facade lifted for only a second, and Cristen ate up every moment Robin confessed how impressed he was with his heart. He didn’t like it. But he was impressed, and so Cristen took her chance.

With one short tug on his cape her nose was against his ear, breath warm. “So, for your own sake, stop pretending you’re so superior. Take the hand—and the tracker you have in it—off of my hip, and learn some respect for your fellow vigilantes.”

Robin registered what Cristen said slowly, then pulled his glove from her waist and shut it tightly around the tracker inside. Never one to be kicked completely down, Robin put his nose in the air and replaced the device on his belt.
Cristen couldn’t believe she’d ever kissed him.

Mockingbird spoke up. “...We better get these people—”

A car door slammed. At once, the three heroes turned around. Cristen was already moving, rushing forward, but it was too late. The van that had been lodged in the wall locked. She realized at once that the Joker had faked unconsciousness. He’d faked it. He even managed to change his pulse somehow, waited until he had a chance, and ran for the car.

The Joker reversed, veered out of the wall, and exclaimed happily from the driver’s seat, “Bye-bye!”

With a jolt of speed and an uproar of fitful laughter, he was gone, kicking hot ash into Cristen’s face and stunning her out of any move toward the car. She’d missed by only inches. Inches!

There was a tense moment of silence. Mockingbird joined Cristen’s side in the opening, and extended her hand. Cristen took it. She heaved her up, and together they watched Robin race out onto the lawn and attempt at throwing another tracker. When it failed, he cursed.

There was a heavy breath. Then, Robin burst, “Why weren’t you watching him?”

Mockingbird whirled at him, skin flushed with anger and possible embarrassment, and threw her hand in Cristen’s direction. “Why were you flirting with her?”

“Flirting,” Robin scoffed, bunching his fists, “I wasn’t flirting! Couldn’t you see I was interrogating her? What if she was a Joker accomplice? What if—”

“Why would she help us if she was a Joker accomplice?” Mockingbird exclaimed, ”Hell, Rob—she saved your life! You owe her now! I owe her now! She helped us—!”

“You said they were unconscious.” Robin turned to consult Cristen, jabbing at her accusingly.

“He faked it.” Cristen said, simply. She didn’t like how defeated she sounded.

She had to accept quickly that he was gone. At the very least, no one had been really hurt besides Cristen, Robin, and Ace, leaving several people still unsure if they should go to the police-line or not. That was all she cared about. It really was—while Joker had escaped, everyone was okay. Children would go home to their parents safe, and families would reunite.

Remembering the hostages and Ace, she swiftly turned on her heel.

Robin and Mockingbird watched in panting silence as Cristen strode over, hooked her arms under the frail boy, and then turned to face the hostages.

For the first time, they turned to look at her. Looked up to her. Two women were grasping each other tight, a teacher was silently consoling students, and a huddle of first-years held tight together and conversed in softly furious whispers of relief. All at once as Cristen approached, she knew what they saw. The image settled deep in her belly and didn’t let go.

A hero.

“You’re safe now. I’m so sorry that this happened, that he’s now still out there, but the police, myself, and others are going to try our hardest to get him,” Cristen said. She felt her voice shaking a little, felt how dry her throat was when she swallowed uncertainty. “I’ll take you all down to the police line—”
“Thank you,” said one of the women, eyes wide. She pressed a hand into Cristen’s shoulder, but fluttered back like a nervous bird. She repeated, “Thank you.”

Cristen felt the words sink into her skin, pulling an awkward but gentle smile on her face, ”Any… anytime.”

She doesn’t remember much of the walk over to the police-barricade. The crowd, which had been wild with Joker’s sudden escape, grew only louder. Everyone was pushing toward the barrier now, pointing at Cristen, gesturing at her and the boy she carried like mad-men. By the time she reached the line, a pair of paramedics rushed forward to collect Ace.

Cristen deposited him onto the stretcher, feeling suddenly very, very stupid—Joker had escaped. She could reason that it was only partially her fault, but the same thoughts still rang in her head. It was still her fault—if she’d listened harder, hadn’t focused solely on Robin because of a stupid need to be better than him—god, she was such a dumbass!

Commissioner Gordon marched toward her, a small circle in the middle of dozens. Cristen watched in a daze as a freshman embraced her father, tears conquering both, and the feeling settled on her shoulders. She’d kept them together.

Reese and Bullet found her with their eyes in the crowd; Bullet looked close to tears, and Reese collapsed against her in relief. That same relief washed over her at just seeing their faces. Warm, blossoming relief, like breeze wafting over her on a cool summer night. It vanished quickly, and there was that uncomfort with being the center of attention again. Gordon’s appearance had glued her to the ground.

“You must be... Catgirl, I’m assuming?” Gordon greeted. He did not extend his hand, so neither did Cristen. It felt wrong to root them at her sides so awkwardly, but her ribs were still in need of support and cradling. His eyes flickered toward her wounds under his glasses.

“I like Stray, sir, if you don’t mind,” Cristen nodded.

She wasn’t a civilian. She wasn’t giving a presentation at school. She wasn’t a street-rat (despite the homage in the name). She was a hero, someone that was leading the hostages to safety. The vision rolled through her and she felt that it was very, very real, and she was not wrong.

Gordon’s expression made things clear; he didn’t give a rat’s ass what she called herself. There was really only one thing he needed to know.

“Are you one of the good guys?” Gordon asked, quite childishly.

Cristen gave a small smile at the phrasing, “Yes, sir, I am.”

“Good enough for me,” he smiled, but there was almost a note of warning to his voice. A lingering almost that didn’t help her anxiety one bit.

After Mockingbird gave as many details as she could to Gordon, he ordered his men to search the area in which Joker had left in. Cristen was deciding which way she was going to sneak off, when Mockingbird stopped and clasped her by the shoulder. Robin showed no sign of appearance.

“I’m glad you told him off like that, especially with how you wormed your way so close to him so quickly. Although he’s mad, he was impressed—but Robin’s mad all the time, so you don’t need to worry,” Mockingbird said. She scowled at herself, and then shook her head, “Don’t worry about Joker, either. He’s a slippery bastard.”
“I’ll help get him. I promise,” Cristen said.

Which was true. She had a goal now, something to strive toward, and that only made her ideals that much more achievable. Despite Joker’s escape, Cristen had still won. She was alive. Sort of okay. No one had died, and she had saved several people. She was sure that other heroes had done much worse their first time in the real ring. Though barely, the thought helped.

Mockingbird smirked, then pushed something into Cristen’s free hand, “I like you, Catgirl. You’ve got guts. If you ever need me, use this.”

Cristen looked down at her hand, finding a stylish and modernized breaker phone, which easily could have been mistaken as just a regular old iPhone. But Cristen flipped it over to discover the Mockingbird and Black Canary case, capturing the misty afternoon sunlight with odd shades of blue and black. When Cristen looked up to thank Mockingbird, she was gone.

Damn, Cristen thought, I really have to learn how to do that.

Cristen pulled out the other item she had hidden, trading it in for the breakerphone. She admired the golden outlining, the shape of the letter, the strength of the material and how it gleamed under the daylight. Robin would definitely want it back. And as soon as he realized it was gone, he would know exactly who took it. Then Cristen would get another chance at working her way into his world, getting as many allies as she could so that the city—and not just the commissioner—would recognize the obvious.

She was one of the good guys. Not many would believe her, as nobody trusts cats in Gotham, but she was one of the good guys. And if the phone was the key to Mockingbird, then what Stray now held in her hand was the key to Robin.

Cristen tossed Damian’s new R casually in one hand, slipping behind an ambulance and slinking off. I wonder how much this will go for on E-Bay.
Her heart punched up into her throat, taking Cristen’s head up with it. That was where that sense of loss was coming from: Reese looked worn and hollow, but accepting. Like she was holding a form letter for the draft. They were both well aware of Cristen’s abilities and how it would be a disservice to leave them as they were. The Youngs were people of action, but Reese hadn’t caught up with just the level of action Cristen desired.

Or rather, he had, but knowing and comprehending are two different things.

---

**CAT NAP**

---

**GOTHAM CITY; OLD GOTHAM DISTRICT; YOUNG HOUSEHOLD | 2:34 PM | CRISTEN**

_TO SAY THAT_ Cristen felt more like a sack of bones than a person was an understatement. She had taken hits before, so much so that a fist pummelling her face was as familiar as Reese could be. But this? Not only did it feel like she had been hit by a bus, but tied to the end of it and taken for a joyride. All she could remember past that involved Reese, her phone, and Robin. Even so, these memories took a while to put together.

There was also a portion of something from late in the night; a trio of voices talking in her hall, and a sliver of yellow light pooling along the length of the doorway and over her eyes. Something about… doctors? Bandages? Wounds? The stress gave her an instant headache—or, more accurately, added to the one pounding inside her skull. To her great relief, this was the only pain she felt. It didn’t count for the dull, heavy ache in her chest cavity, nor the way her mind seemed to be stomping through thick clots of mud as she thought. It was much better than what she had been feeling yesterday.

If she remembered one thing about her journey home, it was how aware of herself she suddenly was; while the adrenaline and the moment had blanketed the impact of her injuries and actions, everything hit her in the face the moment she snuck off. The weight of all she had done buried Cristen. (Of course, it all evaporated the moment she collapsed on her sheets—Robin was the only thing to stick).

The dizzying abyss of a dreamless sleep soon woke into consciousness. While Cristen was once thoughtlessly drifting, her feet suddenly struck the ground. Hot light coated her skin, the blankets of her bed became a sweaty straight-jacket that she hopelessly kicked in, and there was something itchy around her chest and a heavy warmth on her face. To add to the heat and sweat and general grossness, there was a circular piece of metal underneath her that burned into her arm like an iron brand. Her first response was to throw it.

Cristen waited for the eventual succeeding thud of this object hitting her carpet. Then, finally, she can return to the boiling depths of rest. She half-expected the object to steam and burn the air around it from how hot it felt. When neither sound occured, Cristen cracked open an eye to peek around her mounds of blankets, only to be met with a sharp glare of sunlight blinding her point-blank. She cursed aloud and blinked it away. The cat resting over her cheek hissed and jumped off to
investigate.

She must not have put any control into the throw, as the crest has lodged itself in her wall. Cristen would need to get up anyway, both so she could know if she was dying, to see the newscast reporting the incident, and to face a furious Reese—better now then later, right?

*Great*, Cristen scoffed internally, *another reason for him to kill me.*

With great strength, Cristen worked her way out of the death-trap. A hiss split between her teeth without her permission. When she managed to sit up, the world settled into focus. It's boiling, even with the low hum of a fan in her room. Sunlight squeezes through the tall curtains, yellow and unforgiving, indicative of a heavy Gotham heatwave. The room is messier than Cristen usually allows, with imprints of a completely different life. Sitting there between her workbench and comic-filled bookshelf felt like Cristen was staring at herself; a different version, naive and born before all of this had started.

Her cat was on the bedside table, trying to decide how she would get on top of the lamp. And the metal chunk lodged into her wall isn’t a brand—but the Robin symbol. The one she (expertly) stole off Damian Wayne.

Her bedroom door opens. Ready for the guilt-inducing look of worry on Reese’s face, Cristen bowed her head into her lap and waited for his opening words. Black heels appear in her vision instead.

“Thought you fell out of bed.” Selina said awkwardly; her clothes were ruffled and the clasp on one of her shoes was messed up, like she’d vaulted the steps just to get up here fast enough.

Cristen didn’t jump at the sound of her voice, which was a huge achievement within itself. She could walk on air in heels, quieter than the breeze, like a cat padding through the dark (if you’d forgive the expression). Her expression pinched. It was unnerving... that was one thing Cristen had yet to learn, and Selina made it look so easy. In heels, of all things. Cristen thought *hells* seemed more appropriate. She got lamer when she tired.

When Cristen offered her a weak smile, Selina shut the door and sat down. The cat ran for her and squished himself between both of them, waiting eagerly for pets.

“Woulda been fine,” Cristen lied.

“Oh, I bet,” Selina said sarcastically. She examined Cristen with a raised eyebrow, then bumped their shoulders as lightly as she could. The cat made an indignant noise. “...You gave Superman a run for his money the other day.”

“Maybe he really is my dad.” Cristen joked. She found bandages wrapped around her chest, itchy and tight like sandpaper cobras. Her fingers were itching to pick at them, but Selina was watching her like a hawk. Still, after all this time, Cristen couldn't show weakness in front of her without hating every second.

It almost made her feel better. Almost, really, until Cristen reminded herself of all the lies Selina had told. *Shiva can be trusted. Batman and Robin’s identities aren’t important. We’re partners.*

Cristen bid the thought away. “How long have I been out?”

“Two days. I called in Dr. Thompkins—haven’t seen her in a while, have you?—and she bandaged you up the night of the attack,” Selina said, “Gave you two weeks of healing, but the Academy’s shut down for repairs and such so you got your break. Reese got one of those automated voicemails,
too—you’re going back on the 18th. Still have to get your assignments done, even if you were almost killed.”

“Ugh,” Cristen said. But at Selina’s expression, added unenthusiastically, ”Yay.”

Selina smirked. “How are you feeling?”

“Pretty good. Nothing left but a bad headache and itchy bandages.” Cristen said. She perked up, and gave something close to a smile, “I’m a-go for patrols, if we’re still on. How is Gotham taking the story?”

“You are not going on patrol in the state you’re in,” Selina rolled her eyes, her lips pulling in very tightly at the following question. “And… look, we’re only just starting—I’ve only been helping the bats for a couple of months now—and because of the name, my reputation extends to you, too—”

Cristen’s shoulders seized. She’s avoiding the question. And that can’t mean anything good.

She leaned over and grabbed her phone. The cat crawled into her lap, looping his ebony tail around Cristen’s middle. The moment she swiped over to the news category, Cristen was blown over by dozens of articles. Headlines flashed along in her vision:

Gotham Gazette: NEW CATGIRL “SAVES” GOTHAM ACADEMY, by Vicky Vale.

The articles had spaced over to other cities too, even with those centered around other heroes like Superman. Though the ‘City of Tomorrow’, which Cristen hoped would at least be a little more optimistic, didn’t seem pleased either.

Daily Planet: CAT-ASTROPHE IN GOTHAM, by Lois Lane and edited by Clark Kent.

“They think I’m like you, when you were...” Cristen said softly, fixing up her expression. There was a flash of something across Selina’s face, but Cristen didn’t catch it. She closed her phone and said sourly, “Well, I don’t give a damn. I still saved people. I helped their lives. Sure, Joker’s still out there—but I’m going to catch him.”

Cristen stood up triumphantly (after putting her cat aside, who gave the feline equivalent of a huff). Having been suddenly conquered by the need to do something about her situation, her pain disappeared and was instead traded for focus. She marched over to her closet, drew open the doors, and began to dig around inside for something to wear.

“No way in hell,” Selina began, and her tone was so venomous that Cristen did jump.

She stood up and went to join Cristen’s side, making all the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. Selina’s eyes were on fire, fierce and every other synonym for the word, and she looked like she wanted to start in on something much worse; that read history all over. She’d met the Joker before. But instead of seeing that as good reason to trust Selina, Cristen only viewed it as an outlet.

“We could work it together,” she compromised, because the reaction was enough to at least spark some sense into her, “You’ve known him—we could find a pattern, old flunkies, work it from there. Badges’ got a sample of the chemical that Ace took. His blood’s all over the scene too, so I don’t doubt that I could break into GCPD and figure out who he was, get a family name—”
Selina took in the information with the snap of a whip. Cristen saw that look in her eyes every time she suggested doing something dangerous, but Selina was usually persuadable—this, though, was different. It wasn’t hard to guess why.

“No,” Selina said, softer this time. “I understand what he’s done to that kid, but the big leagues have this—you promised me you would start out with the little things.”

Cristen, so used to finding loopholes in both Selina and Reese’s rules, plucked one right out of the phrasing immediately. She had promised to find the little things. Maybe the little things were just the beginning of the trail, and once that trail got too big, she could hand things off. At least that would mean she helped. At least Cristen’d done something.

And at least, Cristen added, I’m not entirely stupid. Selina was right (admitting that was a lot like spitting acid). The Joker was… She’d planned to go in alone, with barely any semblance of a game plan, and the only reason any of it had fallen through was because of Robin and Mockingbird’s timely arrival.

She’d also played part of this game before—they would’ve had pulled Laureline’s murderer out of the river if it hadn’t been for Robin. The thought clogged up her throat. Cristen steeled herself and breathed deep; she would never kill anyone, because if watching someone die was bad enough, then being the one to pull the trigger had to be worse. Nevermind the victim.

At that moment, Cristen’s phone buzzed. She swept it up in a state of confusion. The cat leaped onto her shoulder, which was awkward and stupidly endearing, and peaked over at the bright play-thing.

The Clearing. Cafe on the Corner of Keaton Street and Finger Avenue. 8 minutes or I’m leaving. - Jackass

Oh. She and Damian still had that stupid assignment to work on. And if Damian was texting her, then it meant that the due date had not changed regardless of the days off they now had. Selina had read the message over her shoulder, and raised an eyebrow.

She smirked, but it was tighter than usual. “Who’s jackass?”

“Partner for this project I have,” Cristen said, sounding more than just annoyed. Then, without thinking, added, “His name’s Damian.”

She was aware that he was arrogant and cocky, but to someone who had saved his life? He barely even gave a thank you, and the more she reflected on it now the more she realized she disliked him. It was disappointing, almost… Robin was her hero. Damian was her hero. That was how it was meant to be, but fate had always been cruel to her.

Still, the more deflектив and meaner he grew, the more Cristen just wanted to spill entirely. The only thing that was stopping her from just shouting it in his face was the ever-present statistics. Robin had probably gone off that night and saved a dozen other people. There was no real reason at all for him to remember her.

It didn’t mean a damn thing.

She could have easily just skipped out on the project; there was a mission waiting for her, and Cristen knew where to go. Everyone knows the East End is bad—but why? Because of the drug deals, the murders, and the gangs. Cristen knew all of the old places-for-hire down there. There would definitely be ex-Joker thugs who maybe knew something. It would be good practice for later interrogations, too…
But… Reese was already probably pretty mad at her, and avoiding schoolwork would result in an instant grounding. If she dipped Damian… he probably was just like her, and didn’t give a damn about the project. His eight-minute warning was serious. This wouldn’t be his first time making everyone else do the work so he would profit from it and she knew it. Worse, this only proposed the question: why would he even bother trying?

The Bats, as everyone knew, did not waste a second. There was no way that they didn’t spend all of their free time doing this, because the sheer scale of accomplishments just didn’t match up. Either they really did have super-powers, or this was their life—their every minute, every hour, every night and day.

Damian was also infamous for not caring about his grades. The other kids would whisper and complain about him. He got in on a scholarship, didn’t do jack shit in class, but still managed to pull through as top of his year every year. As a senior, there was talk of him getting valedictorian—at this point, it was nearly just a matter of when. A lot of people speculated it was that old Wayne money. Cristen knew it was the old Wayne stubbornness, instead.

As Robin, Damian was ruthlessly clever—if not a little lacking when it came to social things—and could probably get the whole assignment done in a couple of minutes without Cristen’s help. He didn’t even have to do that. So why? Why waste precious time, when the Joker was out there? Why waste an extra hour of patrol on some idiot street rat making a joke?

“What’s his last name?” Selina asked casually.

Cristen hid the incoming tense. Selina was supposed to work with her, but she was in a hurry and telling her that she knew Robin’s identity—and by extension, Batman’s—felt… wrong. Selina already knew, of course, and she hadn’t shared this information with Cristen because Cristen herself needed to earn it.

(She thought that she had by figuring them out in the first place, but something told her that Bruce Wayne wouldn’t share her opinion. Selina had been right… it just wasn’t her secret to share.)

“I don’t remember. Something with a J, like Jacobs or Jimenez. Doesn’t matter, because he wants me there in a couple minutes.” Cristen’s haste had returned, and she quickly began tearing through her closet again. Her cat slunk around her legs, either purposefully trying to trip her or offering emotional support through leg-nuzzling.

Selina screwed up her lips in thought, trying to determine if she should let Cristen leave. Before she could get a word out, Cristen has already tugged on some suitable clothes and darted for the door.

“I’ll see you later,” Cristen said.

She opened her mouth to say something else, but flushed in embarrassment at whatever she had planned to voice and tried to dart out into the hall. Cristen leapt inside, only to bow down and pet a goodbye to her feline friend. The cat lapped at her hand in response.

Selina followed closely behind. “Stay off the leg you’re pretending isn’t hurt. I worry.”

“Well, you don’t need to,” Cristen said. She spoke stiffly, but tried to give Selina a sincere smile.

“Alright. Sta—”

The door slammed shut. Selina knew it wasn’t Cristen’s fault, that she was already getting into her mission mode and rushing about, but the stay safe still hung on the end of her tongue. It was almost three very similar words.
NOT EVEN ROBIN could stop Reese from holding her off. Still, Cristen tried, and was so very close. Prim slippers replaced the welcome mat she planned to clear and the drain quickly downed her hope of punctuality.

“Sweetheart,” Reese said. It was a known synonym to busted.

Feeling determined, Cristen dove into the front hall closet and sought out a jacket. After a lot of useless, clearly unintentioned looking, Reese reached across and pulled her favorite jacket (seemingly) out of thin air. Parents could just do that, Cristen learned.

Cristen looked at him in reverence. Reese offered her the jacket, smug and knowing. “You have your powers, I have mine.”

“...which I’m not going to be using today. At all. Because I’m resting.” Cristen stood straight and committed herself to the idea for him.

At the last second, Reese pulled the jacket from her reach and pointed up the stairs. “...in bed.”

“Damian called. We planned to finish a school project, and it’s important we finish it.” She said.

Reese looked her over himself, unintentionally projecting a sea of worry and... hopelessness. Battered as Cristen was, her insight refused to unglue from her father. It had bonded to him just as she had. That bond stirred, restless and upset, so strong on Reese’s end it practically blew Cristen’s apart.

Overwhelmed by the feeling, Cristen bowed her head and swore. “I did what I needed to do at the academy. If that’s what you’re upset about, then fine, but—”

She felt it before he moved, but stopped regardless and accepted the touch to her face. Reese poured sincerity into every word and each tip of his finger: “I’m not upset about that. When I said that I trust you, I meant it. Sometimes the law isn’t enough. I agree.”

Her heart punched up into her throat, taking Cristen’s head up with it. That was where that sense of loss was coming from: Reese looked worn and hollow, but accepting. Like she was holding a form letter for the draft. They were both well aware of Cristen’s abilities and how it would be a disservice to leave them as they were. The Youngs were people of action, but Reese hadn’t caught up with just the level of action Cristen desired.

Or rather, he had, but knowing and comprehending are two different things.

“But you are my kid,” he said, putting the jacket into her hands, “and you better damn well remember, fighting this war, that I’m not gonna bury my only daughter.”

Years of weight took Cristen’s feet out from under her. Standing there before him, noticeably taller and stronger and more grown, she understood what this was: not the giving of permission, but an admission of faith.

“Yes, sir,” Cristen whispered.

She let herself be small as she hugged him.
She was like his father, with that insane sense of moral right and wrong. Limitless compassion. Cristen was a real good person, beyond the boundaries and expectations of society. Almost like Superman or Jon, too—an ideal so strong Damian felt unworthy shifting in his chair across from her.

---

**A CAT MAY LOOK AT A KING**

**GOTHAM CITY; KEATON STREET; THE CLEARING | 2:43 PM | DAMIAN**

“You’re late.”

“Only by a minute.”

*CRISTEN HAD SPRINTERED.* Damian would have only known this if he saw her heading down the street, running without pause through the crowd, screeching to a halt at his side just as the street-sign changed. She ran without panting. She ran without any missteps or stumbles at all; professionally and balanced, so she didn’t run out of breath or sweat. If he hadn’t seen her running himself, he would have guessed she drove here. Damian hates how he notices it.

He hates how he saw her through the crowd, immediately traveling back to the day they met again. It was voiceless. There wasn’t any talking. They only saw each other, and for some terrible reason he felt like he knew her because of it. Like he’d seen her somewhere else, like the vision of her walking across the field was a familiar one, one that he knew… not through mental thought, but emotion.

He hates it.

“And you waited,” Cristen added, offering a curious smile, “Sweet of you.”

There was heavy bruising along the parts of her that he could see. Purple crawled over her shoulders like a cape, yellow sneered from her fists, green gnarled around her shins. She walked like she was wrapped in a corset, which could only mean serious bruising to her torso as well. It made her perfect run all the more strange.

“You look like shit,” Damian said, gesturing to her backside.

Cristen rubbed at a crick in her neck, sighing a deep and regret-filled, “...Thanks. I got trampled in the attack… Everyone was trying to get out, so I just got shoved down and stomped on.”

“I never asked, though that sounds pleasing.”

“I know,” Cristen said, flashing him an irritating smile. It faded as swiftly as it came, replaced instead by a heavy stare. “Where were you? Never saw you leave or get picked up.”

Damian began to lead the way down the street. In all honesty, he wasn’t pleased to be here at all.
Bruce wasn’t happy with the Joker surprise, and though it didn’t seem like he blamed Damian outwardly, he knew that his father had at least been counting on him and had since let him down. He couldn’t do it again. He needed to find Joker. He needed to know why he did what he did.

None of those things could be accomplished with Cristen, just as nothing of use could be accomplished working with her. A bad grade on one project wouldn’t kill him—he’d already expressed to Pennyworth how useless it was to attend school even privately, but the butler assured him he’d wished he’d had the experience later in life.

Damian had scoffed. But something low in his gut made him want to stay regardless.

“Careful, Young. You almost sound worried.”

Cristen scoffed, walking in tandem with him, “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“What?” Damian retorted. He pressed the crossing button on the post, then shot her a critical look as they entered the street. “And have you bothering me? I’d rather get run over—”

Cristen suddenly lurched. He was tugged backward by his arm, almost three whole seconds before a car came veering past. The wind hit his face almost as quickly as it would have barreled into him. There was a flash of white, powdered debris in his eyes, broken only by a red smile. At once, Damian brushed off her hand and his jacket in the same motion.

Hoping he came across as calm—he hated to admit that the car almost startled him—Damian added, “...by one of these homicidal drivers.”

She paused just long enough to look incredulous. Then, stepped away from him and around a bundle of people shouting at the rapidly shrinking car. “If you don’t be careful, you just might. Do you always cross the street without looking both ways?”

“Do you always sound so concerned?” Damian snapped. “The answer is yes, Young.”

Cristen’s brows fixed. “Did you just answer your own question?”

“It was rhetorical.” Damian jerked at his collar, pulling it against his cheekbones and barely stopping himself from hissing. He wished that he could compare her to someone like Drake or Brown, but she was different. Her own level of annoying. “It is a method of persuasion that is shown when you speak without expecting an answer—”

“I know what rhetoric means,” Cristen lifted the short hem of her own jacket, plucking it in the same fashion that he did against her cheeks, “Wayne.”

“You’re mocking me,” Damian scowled. It worsens; a part of him wants to smile. Why would he want to smile?

“Oh, wow. How’d you know? Wait, sorry, don’t answer that—it was rhetoric.” Cristen chuckled to herself. For some reason, she pats him on the arm. Though it was very close to being a condescending smack.

Damian turned his gaze away from her, almost having to bite down on his lip from the emotion pressing against the inside of his cheek. Why? There was no reason. No purpose. She was making fun of him, joking at him, and he despises how it’s possible to call this banter. Maybe it was. But still—it’s not like Damian wasn’t well versed in pressing down smiles. Worse: it was one of the smiles only Jon or Richard could conjure, impossible to ignore and set aside.
He wants to... get to know her.

She must have taken his expression the wrong way, bunching her brows and reining her laugher down into a guilty quirk of her lip. “Sorry. I was just kidding. You don’t really hang around with kids around your age, do you?—ah, shit, I’m so great at talking. Sorry.”

“I don’t need to.” Damian said, raising his chin and walking just a tick slower. *I suppose you don’t either*, he longs to say.

“I’ll tell that to Jon. He seems to be the only one who likes you,” Cristen commented. She cursed again. “M’ sorry. My bad—I didn’t mean...”

Damian bit back at once, “Kent is an exception. He has privileges you do not, so I recommend you don’t pry any deeper.”

“Privileges...” Cristen shot Damian a look. “Like... you pay for his lunch or something? Please tell me Jon isn’t your sugar baby.”

Damian let that vile smile flash against his shoulder, just barely, the undertone of a laugh in his voice. He hoped it sounded mocking to match the poison on his lips. “You’re horrible.”

As Damian turned back to face her, a spark of movement caught his eye. Cristen perked up a second earlier: a man was running full-speed down the cement, legs pumping like a track star, clutching a bag to his chest for dear life. Behind him, a woman was screaming for her bag to be returned. Damian recognized the situation at once.

Typical, Damian thought as he raced closer. He stuck out his foot, sighing through his nose. Typical and easy.

The mugger’s foot caught on Damian’s, sending him barrelling forward in a comical and animated fall into the street. His hands still clung tight to the purse, bruised and defeated, ready to face the pavement. All Damian had to do was observe. He watched with a haughtiness about him as the man—the thief—stumbled, but found that he never landed.

Cristen had a habit of catching people. She turned into Damian’s side, nabbed the purse-snatcher by the jacket, and gave him that annoying grin again. “I know.”

Pulling the man up by the collar, she assured him that he couldn’t escape. His feet were moving the moment they were flat on the ground—but—without skipping a beat—she fisted her hand and slammed him into the mailbox with enough force to dent it and him.

She held out a hand. Paling, he deposited the bag into her palm.

The expression on her face was hard enough to make the owner of the bag cautious to approach. Even still, Cristen handed her a bag with a polite, *one moment please*. His feet scuttled on the ground, wild eyes swiveling from the thin line of Cristen’s mouth to the white-knuckled grip she had on his shirt.

“Name?” She said.

“James,” said the mugger, bowing his head.

“I know that this is Gotham City, but really: broad daylight? You really must be desperate.” Damian said, slinging his hands into his pockets. “Then again, the worms usually are.”
Cristen bunched her lips to one side at Damian’s wording, unfurling the hand caught in the boy’s shirt—not like he’d run with the stare she pinned him with—and, ridiculously, moved to retrieve her wallet.

Damian’s lips parted to protest, but snapped shut before she could see it. Cristen handed James a twenty-dollar bill. She gently squeezed his shoulder as she passed it to him, “Take this. Please, remember: it’s never too late to do the right thing.”

James bowed his head low enough to fold him in two, nodding vigorously and repeating her words to himself. He walked slow as he disappeared, and Cristen watched him with a wary, concerned look in her eyes that turned almond to chocolate. The people around them started moving again.

Damian didn’t know if he was a junkie in need of a fix, a homeless in need of medication, or whatever else. He did know that James needed that money for something. That Cristen didn’t have to give him anything, and should have turned him into the police. And yet, she didn't. She didn’t have to be kind, she didn’t have to extend her hand with guidance… But somehow, she sounded an awful lot like Jon when she did.

“He wasn’t high or anything, I think,” provided Cristen, more certain than she should be about something like that. “I thought that things had changed in Gotham… I was right, I guess. People got...dumber.”

“Tsk.” He tilted his head to the side, finding the light now hitting Cristen Young was a shade different than he had perceived it to be. “People have always been dumb.”

GOTHAM CITY; THE EAST END | YEARS AGO | CRISTEN

IT MUST BE a common trend. You cannot be a sidekick in Gotham and avoid the ups and downs of learning, because suddenly Cristen wasn’t the only one sneering down the street, saying, “People have always been dumb.”

For a long time, Cristen had been the same:

Selina reminded Cristen of an old Hollywood star, lounging in big fur coats and expensive sunglasses. An older Audrey Hepburn, maybe, with those doe eyes and short-cropped hair. She remained that way even in costume. Selina also remained that way when crushing drug operations.

Catwoman looked into the alley, talking softly. She spoke like the women in the movies, too, cats on silk in jazz lounges. “You know what to do. Keep your mask on.”

Electric excitement lit up Cristen’s veins as one of Selina’s old cowls fit over her hair, flooding over the undercurrents of fear. This wasn’t the first time she’d been to a crime scene. It wasn’t the last time she’d see one, that she knew, but the difference between then and now was Selina: she was proof that this was a test.

They slid silently down the side of the building. Cristen watched Selina slink under the fire escape in silent rapture, frustrated with every little sound she made. Where Catwoman was soundless, on cement or rusty metal or any noisy surface, Cristen felt clumsy and loud. Still, the group down below cared very little about old pipes and the kids that climbed down them. They hardly cared about kids at all.

At 13, Cristen was a number of things. Driven. Serious. But above all else, eager to learn. Selina had watched her pour over thousands of books and files on crime and learn how flawed the system was. Cristen was a mechanic, and a good one—she didn’t like philosophical questions with imprecise
answers. If anything was asked of her the answer must be solid and logical.

Currently, the question was: “Shall we get this over with, or are you pigs going to waste my time?”

Four of the men drew their weapons and started firing when Catwoman spoke. Cristen didn’t have much time to watch, already steering ahead with Selina’s pre-meditated instructions. As soon as she was on the ground, Cristen sped off for the runner; the drug deal could still go on if the dope was recovered, and Selina was determined to cut off this certain group of sellers.

If Selina hated anything more than violence against the unprivileged, it was violence against unprivileged children. These men were selling to kids. Cristen, who had seen her fair share of ODs, shared Catwoman’s sentiments. This was her chance to show how much she’d learned.

The runner hardly lived up to his name. He was loud, and bad at his job: Cristen’s ears attuned easily to loud footsteps and louder breathing, and chased the thumping of a duffle bag down the street and around a corner. Something vicious and vile welled inside her when their eyes met.

So many men pushed these drugs onto kids, getting them hooked on the thing that would eventually hook them right back. Laureline had been closely corralled into the business a number of times. Cristen thought of her—thought of what could have happened to her and to others like her if Cristen had never stepped in—and lost it.

“Stop,” she hissed.

In one swoop, the bag was torn from the runner’s arm and thrown hard into the nearest wall. It popped the packaging and white powder blew up the length of the cement. Rough hands threw him into the mess, Cristen’s teeth grinding foam.

“They’ve been dying,” she said, breathing hard under a temporary mask, “You—you’ve been killing them. Killing fucking kids.”

“I h-had to feed my family,” he pleaded in whisper. Cristen slammed him into the wall by the hood, her fists half in his larynx, pushing words out, “Y-you don’t understand! N-no one else would hire me… I-I…”

“There’s another way,” Cristen’s fists were shaking. “There’s always another way…”

Perhaps Cristen was driven, serious, and eager to learn. But she was also entirely too severe. Her strength, regardless of how long Cristen had it, was not fully reigned in. Neither was Cristen’s anger. Any sense of empathy for criminals that she’d had before was dead, shot to death and thrown into the harbor, spraying brain matter into wood.

Six broken ribs, a fractured skull, two ruptured organs. That’s what it said in messy doctors handwriting, and that’s what was written all over Selina’s face for the week afterward.

Mercy just wasn’t in Cristen’s vocabulary anymore. Selina realized then that she had to reintroduce it, and quickly.

They started with the hospital. While Selina had taken care of the rest of the operation with a clean trip to blackgate, the runner Cristen got her hands on was sent to Gotham General instead. They fit him into a full body cast with a neat little check tucked under his broken arm. It wasn’t something he could afford, and Selina knew that.

“You’re paying,” said Cristen. Her nose was scrunched up and her arms were crossed, filled with something that could have been guilt or displeasure. Like Selina could ever get something clear out
of the kid.

Selina didn’t look at her. “Of course I’m paying. Believe me, I hate what they were doing as much as you do—but that doesn’t mean he deserves this.”

Something in Cristen’s eyes darkened. Enough time had passed that Selina knew this was a result of Laureline’s death. Cristen knew how to fight, and fight well with her powers, but she’d let go: that was the problem.

“He deserves this and more,” she soured, “intentional or not, poor or not, the kids he and his buddies were selling too are mostly dead now. He murdered them.”

“I understand this is personal—” said Selina. Be on her level. Be equals.

“Even if it wasn’t, I’m still right!” Cristen exploded, gushing outwards, slamming her foot into a doctor’s rolling table and gutting it sideways, “Don’t waste your money on pieces of shit like him that don’t deserve it—!”

Selina still looked perfectly put together even if she was angry. In one hand was the small clutch at the center of their argument, held daintily and sweetly; the other had nothing, but folded loosely against her stomach. As always, Selina was the frustrating embodiment of spring paintings and lilies drawn decades ago. If she sneezed, it would sound like a kitten. She spoke just as delicately.

“Have you ever considered,” and Selina raised the clutch, encrusted with jewels and spilling bills out of its mouth, “that this is not just for him?”

And there the two of them were, two points on a line, Cristen the A and Selina her eventual B.

“Yes, because getting the child-killer out of the hospital safe and sound will totally help all the kids he hasn’t sold to yet.” Cristen scoffed. Watching Selina kneel to pick up all that she’d knocked over didn’t make it any easier to say.

Eventually, that sweetness had to break. Selina threw a group of pens into their cup and contained herself with a sour breath. “It’s cute how you think I gave back everything I stole the moment I met you.”

At age thirteen, Cristen was the awkward point between cynical and naive. She glanced aside, not at her victim or Selina, and crossed her arms uncomfortably. “...What the hell are you doing now, then?”

From the mess on the floor, Selina picked up a singular black pen and clicked it. Oscar Carlson was the name on the clipboard. It wouldn’t be Selina’s name on his check, and it definitely wouldn’t be her money—money that had ever belonged to her, anyway. That was the point of things.

If this was her second chance, then it might as well be his, too.

“Exactly that.” Selina said. She didn’t smile, but put an arm over Cristen’s shoulder to pull her out of the room, “...It’s never too late to do the right thing.”

TWO HOURS LATER, Cristen has refused Damian’s generous offers to buy her food a total of six times, and everything afterward is easy to figure out. Her personality unravels into his hands like roughed-up silk.

Permanently stained by one too many rolls in the mud, it’s unlikely that Cristen wants to be clean
anymore. So much of her glamor, her childhood, has been lost to death, time, and privation. Damian reluctantly remembers that they are kindred spirits.

They have agreed to split the work to what they are best suited for. Where Damian dislikes inactive research, Cristen excels at entertaining herself with the boring, and where she lacks creative skill Damian makes up for in writing. They’re… a good team. A project like this would easily reflect that.

After he’d caught her staring for the third time, Damian sighed, “Yes?”

“So, uh. Jon tells me you’re in theater. They’re putting on The Little Mermaid this time of year, right?” Cristen coughed. “What, um… what character do you play?”

Something about her is… lonely. Determined down to the gene.

“I’m apart of an acting school uptown. I don’t participate in the academy’s productions,” explained Damian.

To his dismay, Cristen quickly derailed him into a conversation about acting. And he talked. A lot. Damian had taken it up in 5th grade and dissolved quickly into the hobby. Soon, it was no longer a hobby, but a profession—he got his first paid gig at fifteen, and had a smaller part in a Broadway show last year. Acting happened to involve a lot of singing, which Damian was remarkably good at —as was Jon, who only provided insentive.

Though she knew significantly less about the field, Cristen knew enough to present an honest opinion in productions Damian either enjoyed or had featured in; how she could ever favor West Side Story over Hamlet was beyond him, though. Her taste is remarkably similar to Todd's beyond this, though: perhaps all cultured ex-homeless survived on the same material.

(She’d called herself Maria. She had told all of this to him before, and he knew, yet he has said nothing.)

“Screw you,” she rolled her eyes, smiling still. “It’s good. Really good.”

Damian flicked her phone, “If you have no taste.”

This spiraled into a debate about modern media and the films being released that year, and he found himself yielding to the ten-year-old boy who picked up his first American comic book and didn’t think it was that bad. They agreed that Avengers: Infinity War was crushing. They went their separate ways when Damian favored Wolverine over Spider-Man, which Cristen found disgraceful but not completely unacceptable.

Something about her laugh made him… excited.

In turn, that circled them back to Cristen and her technological exploits. Much like Damian’s father, Cristen was well-attuned to machines and how they could benefit humanity. While it was something they both enjoyed, Damian could at least admit Cristen was more into (read as: skilled in) engineering than he was: he liked cars, but Cristen loved them. Damian bites on his tongue before he can mention the Robin-cycle or Redbird.

“I’m not surprised, you know,” Cristen told him, after they’d wrung themselves free of their passions. She seemed… endeared by it. “Yeah, your family’s rich or whatever, but you—on your own… you’re really talented, Damian. I mean, with theater and everything. I’ve heard you sing before... and, not to be weird or anything, but it's kind of amazing.”

Despite what that did not only to his confidence, but his negativity toward her, Damian near-smiled,
“And how might you know that?”

“Okay,” Cristen sighed and raised her hands in surrender, offering him a sheepish smile. “So. After our whole charade under the bleachers, I got curious and talked to Jon about you. He showed me some videos and went like, on and on about how cool you are. And I realized how we’re pretty similar.”

This was enough to make Damian scoff. Praise was definitely welcomed, but a comparison between the two of them… Well, yes. He’d noticed. (He says this like she hasn’t kissed him before). And maybe she was tolerable—tolerable enough to at least keep her in his company at school, but not at home. After today… maybe he liked her. Maybe he remembered her.

“Similar.” Damian deadpanned.

Not like he’d ever admit it.

Out of nowhere, her eyes seemed to overspill with emotion, begging him to find the hidden message there. Begging him to remember. It subsided just as soon, and Cristen hung her head and laughed in exasperation.

“Just because you’re a billionaire and I’m gutter trash doesn’t mean we can’t have anything in common,” she smiled. “Like before, with the purse-nabber. We both jumped in to help. Didn’t even think about it. Everyone else on the street just let him through.”

Cristen had done more than just jump in. She was like his father, with that insane sense of moral right and wrong. Limitless compassion. Cristen was a real good person, beyond the boundaries and expectations of society. Almost like Superman or Jon, too—an ideal so strong Damian felt unworthy shifting in his chair across from her.

“Say I indulge you. That we are so similar,” he folded his hands, “What happens then?”

She bit down a grin. “This is gonna make me sound like an idiot, but… why don’t we try being friends?”

Alfred’s text had impeccable timing, and soon Damian was packing his things as Cristen awaited his reply. For dramatic effect (and to prolong her suffering) Damian dragged out his exit for as long as possible, only to smoothly slide his bag over his shoulder and snicker at her:

“You are an idiot, Young.”

She grinned.

...And ended up walking him to his ride.

“It’s only the gentlemanly thing to do,” Cristen chuckled. “I could always carry your books for you, or your bag. Hold open a door or two.”

Damian scoffed, sarcastic. “Oh, and you’re such a gentleman. Shouldn’t that be me?”

Cristen just stared at him skeptically, making it very clear he was not.

When Alfred pulled the car to the curb and Damian opened the door, he teased, “What happened to us being similar?”

“Just get in the damn car, Damian,” she laughed, and gestured at him as if she were pushing him
inside. “It’s was good hanging out with you. See you soon, alright?”

Before he could think much of it, Damian nodded. “You as well.”

It was only when they were a block away, safe from Cristen’s eager gaze and friendly banter, did Damian realize he had replied to her prior statement instead of the latter. Maybe… he did have fun.

Maybe he even missed that.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!