Family History

by spoileralertitsme

Summary

Barbara was rescued from the streets of Gotham city; and Gotham was never the same. A history of the batfamily if Babs had never been adopted by Commissioner Gordon.

Notes

Once upon a time, I found a few chapters of this fic on my laptop when I was cleaning things up for college. Hesitantly, I brushed it off, fixed a few spelling/grammar mistakes, and decided I didn't want to just delete it. So I posted it to another site, and just kept running with it in whatever free time I've managed to find. Now it's here...so...enjoy? :)}
Dick blinked his eyes hard as he sat up in bed. His mouth tasted like sleep and bad breath. Instinctively, he checked his wrist computer with the press of a few buttons.

The room in Mount Justice had always seemed a little strange to Dick, especially when compared to his comfier bedroom back at the manor. It was smaller here, a little less decorated. The only adornments were the small queen size bed in the corner, a mirror, and a metal symbol on the blank white wall. A single silver and gold R. Not real, of course, just spray-painted steel.

The room was simply decorated, but neither Dick nor his teammates ever spent much time in their rooms anyway. Except maybe Conner and M'gann. But then, they did live there full time.

The only reason Dick had chosen to crash at the mountain was to get away. His Replacement was rooming too closely to him back at Wayne manor for his comfort. She was constantly…there. Always the smug, know-it-all grin stretched across her face, always so eager to please their—his—mentor.

The last straw had been dinner with Bruce and Alfred. He'd tried hard to ask his mentor about an upcoming mission, but the Replacement had taken over all conversation with her 'girly talk'. When he'd finally managed to catch Bruce's attention, the bat signal had activated, and they'd all rushed off to handle the emergency. The rest of the night had been spent babysitting her. Robin didn't know what had possessed Batman to take on a…girl.

M'gann had been so excited last night when she'd heard he'd be staying the night. She'd invited the rest of the team for a 'sleepover' too. And, of course, they'd all agreed, not wanting to hurt the Martian's feelings. She was still recovering from the shock of having the secret of her species revealed to the entire Justice League. They were all recovering; Vandal Savage's hostile takeover of the Watchtower was still fresh in everyone's minds. The Replacement had contacted him right before their mission to infiltrate the League's base, of course. She always felt the need to make everything about her.

So, everyone had agreed to the sleepover. It was supposed to be a great way to 'recover' after saving the world. The girls all bunked together, probably to braid each others' hair and gossip. The guys, though, had each opted to sleep alone in their own rooms, an arrangement that Dick was infinitely grateful for. He could practically hear Wally snoring down the hall.

The time on his wrist computer told him he'd slept for about eight hours. Pretty much forever. He ran a check of the weather, scanned for any messages from Batman. Usual checks.

A little notification in the corner told him that his boss had sent him a brief message.

[Robin. You missed patrol last night. I expect you to take the north end tonight, and do another sweep down by the docks.]

Dick winced. He'd been almost sure that he'd remembered to ask for a leave of absence. That was what he got for sleeping in. He went on.

[I'm bringing Batgirl to Mount Justice this morning. Please try to maintain a little bit of decorum around your teammates. I'm well aware of the contention between the two of you, but this has gone on long enough. At least try to act like you can stand each other, at least around the other protégés.]
Dick swore under his breath and put away the wrist computer. As he hurriedly pulled on his clothes and sunglasses, he hoped that he wasn't too late to warn his teammates.

Barbara stared at the bat computer's screen, absorbing all the last-minute info she'd downloaded on the Team. It was finally happening. Her training wasn't complete, per se. Bruce had made that clear enough. But it was... 'sufficient'. She'd finally be able to work with the mysterious sidekicks of the Justice League. And who knew? She might even make friends.

Not for lack of trying. She'd been secretly begging Bruce for this chance for months. When everyone in the League fell underneath Savage's control, she'd frantically contacted Robin for info on Batman. She wanted to help, to do something. He'd 'politely' suggested that she mind her own business and hunker down in the cave until the matter was resolved. And, since Batgirl didn't have the means to get herself to the Watchtower, she'd had no choice but to stay put.

Batman was typing in the coordinates for Mount Justice into the batcave's personal zeta tube. Bruce turned to Barbara and said,

"Are you ready?"

Babs cleared her throat, adjusting the strap of the gym bag that held her costume over her shoulder. "Bruce?" She asked, "Do you ever—do you think…"

He stared at her, and she felt warmth flood to her face.

"What if they hate me?" she whispered. Her eyes sank to the floor. Batman was at her side in three strides.

"What makes you think they would? If it's because Robin—"

"No," she interjected. "It's just...I'm not like them." Barbara sighed. May as well get it off her chest. "People...terrify me, Bruce. I'm too quiet and timid and...I've never fit in before. People just want to take one look at me and put me in a box, usually one I don't like. And...I've only been at this for a little while. They's all, like, professionals now. What if I screw up, and they all hate me?"

Her stomach was knotted up. There was an intense feeling of fear behind her sternum. Then, something wrapped around her shoulders and she just about fell over from pure shock. Bruce—the Batman—was hugging her.

"I know the feeling, believe me," he rumbled. "But these are good kids. You shouldn't have to worry."

"I know the feeling, believe me," he rumbled. "But these are good kids. You shouldn't have to worry."

She must have seemed unconvinced, because he paused and drew back, then smiled.

"It's alright to be nervous, Barbara. But you're a bat. People are already going to expect you to be confident. You're a leader, just by putting on that suit." He thought for a minute. "Pretend...pretend like it's another night of patrol. I've seen you with the criminals. Not one of them would ever be able to guess that you're anything but confident. The team won't know either. If you want to change
before we leave—"

"No," Barbara said. "It's fine."

Bruce smiled, then pulled up his cowl, immediately transforming from kindly mentor to stiff and calculating Batman.

The zeta tube whirred to life and scanned them.

RECOGNIZED: BATMAN A-02

BATGIRL: B-09
Artemis always seemed to be late to these things. She was late getting up, and late stumbling into the kitchen. Her feet magnetically drawn there by the tantalizing aromas wafting through the hallways. On her way, she almost tripped over a pile of dirty clothes.

Wally. *Ugh.*

Artemis could hear the sound of forks and knives clinking on ceramic plates as she reached the kitchen; the sound of breakfast in progress. Her stomach rumbled in longing as she stepped in. The Team minus Robin was congregated around the center island like they were having a war council. A war council with waffles.

They acknowledged her entrance with nods and glances, but their eyes were on the girl working the waffle iron.

A stranger. Artemis flinched and reached for a quiver that wasn't there, but M'gann's voice instantly entered her head.

*{Artemis, wait!}*

Artemis was indignant.

*{No, listen,} M'gann thought. *{She just showed up here this morning, before the rest of us were even up.}* *

*{Mmm…} Wally thought. *{Waffles…}*

Zatanna's brow wrinkled. *{She knows who we are, Artemis. All of us. Secret Identities and everything.}*

Artemis studied the intruder. She was roughly sixteen or so, about Robin's age. Rust colored hair fell in soft waves around her heart shaped face. She looked up at Artemis with big blue eyes. A smile lifted the corners of her lips.

"Artemis Crock, right? Have a waffle."

Artemis accepted the steaming plate in silence. She sent her teammates a baffled expression. Zatanna shrugged like, 'I told you so'. Roquelle nodded.

*{Be calm,} Kaldur told them. *{Wait for her to reveal herself. And her motives.}* *

*{I still don't trust her.} That was Conner.*

The waffle iron clamped shut with a hiss. The strange girl looked up and shoved another plate towards Wally. It clinked against the others he'd already licked clean.

"You know," she said, "I know you're all a little confused and everything, but don't you think it's kinda rude to leave me out of a psychic conversation?"

The team looked up, jaws agape. Then, everyone seemed to shout at once.
"Who ARE you‼"

"What?"

"She knows too much‼"

"How did you know?"

The girl latched onto that last question. Her eyebrows crept upwards.

"Um…your faces." She waved a hand over hers. "They change when you're thinking at each other. As to who I am, well-"

Just then, Robin staggered into the kitchen. Artemis couldn't see his eyes behind the dark glasses he wore when out of costume. But if she could have, Artemis was sure they would have been angry and narrow.

"What the $ &#* do you think you're doing‼?" he shouted at the girl.

The girl smiled hesitantly. "Um…making waffles?"

"You're not wearing glasses or anything! Are you trying to blow your cover?"

The girl's sweet face hardened into a glower that made everyone, even Conner, flinch backwards.

"Wow, Rob," the girl snarked. "Way to stay whelmed."

If it were possible for the jaws to be wider or the eyes to be bigger, then they would have been. It was Wally who finally gulped down his food and spoke first.

"Uhhh…what's going on?"

Robin and the girl seemed to snap out of their glaring contest.

"I'm Barbara," the girl said, "Your new teammate."

"BABS‼ Robin shouted.

She flicked a hand at him. "Oh, shut up, Pixie Boots. Batman said I could."

Wally's head was whipping back and forth like he was watching a tennis match. Zatanna giggled and muttered, "Pixie Boots?" Robin's cheeks turned an impressive shade of red.

Barbara smirked as he protested.

"Batman said you could visit." He grit his teeth. "Not that you're joining."

She laughed. "Huh. He told me something completely different. Face it, bird brain. I'm here to stay."

Zatanna was the next to speak up. "It's nice to meet you, Barbara. But, why are you here, and without a mask? I thought you Bats were really secretive about your secret identities?"

"Yeah," Conner said, "Why now?"

Robin glared at her, but she answered without hesitation.
"I've been the Bat's partner for about...eleven months now? He figured I was ready to try myself out with team members."

Robin huffed.

"And," she continued, "I don't need to worry about my ID because, technically, I don't exist."

The team stared at her, a little bit shocked. She giggled. "It's true. You can't find me in or on any record. No birth certificates, no medical records. Nothing. It doesn't matter if you see my face because I don't have a secret ID." With this, she glared at Robin.

"Well, whoop-de-doo," Rob snapped, "Doesn't mean you're ready to be one of us. What did you bribe Bats with to get him to let you visit? Info? Obeying all his rules like a good little girl?" He leaned against the counter and glowered. The Team looked on in shock.

"I don't think so. Bats can have any info he wants. So, the only other thing you could possibly bribe him with—"

Barbara slammed the spatula she'd been holding down on the counter. It hit with a loud smack that made the others jump. "Seriously?" she demanded. "Again? You already know that's not what's up. That's disgusting!"

"Prove it," Robin snarled.

"Wanna go?" Barbara shot back. "I can beat your sorry butt any time I want."

The Teams heads whipped back and forth to watch the tennis game of an argument. Kaldur opened his mouth to protest, but shut it when Robin straightened.

"You're on, Bratgirl. Training room. Now."

Barbara smirked. "Hand to hand. No gadgets."

"Fine."

Robin and the strange girl turned and stepped out of the kitchen. The Team gazed at each other with differing levels of worry. Wally laughed and swallowed down one more waffle.

"'Kay," he said, grinning, "Now this is something I gotta see!"

Robin almost got her with a flying spin kick, but Barbara hit the deck and swept her body around to trip him up on his landing.

The gathered Team members watched in shock as Robin stumbled. Unfortunately, he always recovered quickly. She jabbed at his chest, his side, his solar plexus. He dodged, kicked, and flipped easily, landing a punch to the side of her head. She took the hit, using the force behind it to roll, flipping up behind Robin and putting him in a headlock.

On the sidelines, jaws dropped.

"C'mon, man! She's a girl!" Wally pumped a fist in the air, and shoved a protein bar into his mouth.

Robin bellowed and his body contorted forward. Barbara recognized the play immediately, and let herself be flipped over her partner's head. Instead of letting herself be pinned to the ground, she curved her body and pulled Robin down along with her. He grunted as he hit the floor, and as she tried to get to her feet, he grabbed her ankle and pulled. She almost landed on top of him, but he
was able to roll out of the way. As soon as her head hit the floor, she brought her feet up…right into his nose.

"Gah!" Robin pulled back, one hand over his face. When he pulled it away, it came back bloody. Behind his glasses, Robin's eyes narrowed in rage. Barbara leapt to her feet, face to face with her partner.

"This mean I win?" She asked with a smile.

Robin sent her to the floor with a right hook to the jaw.

Blood dribbled from her lips as she got a good look at the training room floor.

"Oh, boy wonder," she snarled, "That was a big mistake…"

"Team." Batman's voice crackled over the loudspeaker. "Suit up and report to the mission briefing room."

There was a groan from Wally.

"Now." Batman said.

The team had five minutes to change into costumes and report to Batman. That was more than enough time for Barbara. Many times, during emergency alerts in Gotham, she had about a minute to change. Sometimes two. One memorable evening, she'd been given a full thirty-four seconds to suit up.

Today, it helped that her suit was lighter than she was used to. Normally, her standard patrol outfit consisted of tough, bulletproof armor and a thick fireproof cape. Perfect for protection in gang fights or against psychopathic maniacs.

But Batman had agreed that she needed something a little more lightweight for stealth missions. It was the same costume, just without a lot of the armor plating. Thinner cape. A Kevlar cowl that was a little more lightweight.

As soon as she'd slithered into the costume, Barbara felt twice as confident. She'd acted like it in front of her teammates, her new teammates, but that's all it had been. An act.

And they were all amazing! The boys were cute. And the girls were cool too. Artemis was a tough character, Roquelle was friendly, M'gann was a sweetheart. Something about Zatanna made Barbara's jaw clench, but she was nice enough. All around, the Team was well balanced and close-knit. Barbara only hoped that Batgirl would be able to fit into all of it somewhere.

It was a shame that she had to work with Dick. The guy was just so…infuriating. And arrogant. Every condescending word that came out of his mouth made her feel like an idiot. He was stubborn, and sexist, and proud, and…

He made her heart flutter every time she saw him. She hated that. Most of all.
She navigated her way to the mission room, her heels tapping softly on the tile floor. As predicted, she was one of the first there. Robin and Batman were having a heated but quiet argument by the main console. Not surprising.

"—completely irresponsible—"

"—egged me on! She—"

"—teammate whether you like—"

"—can't believe you'd do this to me!"

"Robin—"

Batgirl stepped into the room and cleared her throat and the two vigilantes looked up. "The mission?" she asked.

Batman nodded, narrowing his eyes at her, but told her to wait for the others. She took her place next to her fellow Gothamites, and was pleased to see that Robin's nose was a bit crooked. He caught her staring and glowered.

Slowly, the Team filed in.

Connor and Kaldur were silent, like they were at a funeral. Artemis shot her an encouraging smile, which she returned.

"Oh my gosh!" M'gann cried. "I love your costume!" She and Roquelle hovered around her, asking about the cape, what lipstick she used, etc. Barbara heard Wally whisper to Rob, "Dude! That's Batgirl? You didn't tell me she was hot!"

Batgirl tried very hard not to smirk at the boy wonder, who was turning an angry shade of red.

"Aqualad," Batman said slowly. "Would you care to define the word 'decorum' for me?"

The Atlantean's brow furrowed. "I believe it means conformity to a standardized and specific state of conduct. Civility. With all due respect, Batman, why are you asking me? Do you not already know?"

Wally let out a surprised snicker, which Batman silenced with a sharp look.

Beside Barbara, Robin glowered, gritting his teeth.

"Because," Batman said, his voice low, "While I know the definition, my protégés clearly do not."

He narrowed his eyes at his two young partners, and the rest of the Team turned to take in Robin's slightly off-kilter nose, and the purple bruise forming at the corner of Batgirl's mouth.

"If you don't mind, Batman," Robin snarled through his teeth, "I think we'd all like to know what the mission is."

Batman nodded, and pulled up a giant holoscreen with a hollow ping. "We've had a disruption in the Quaraci desert. Queen Bee's forces have been aided by a psychic, which leads us to believe that it is the work of Psimon. Your mission is to infiltrate Queen Bee's military compound and gather intel." Batman's eyes travelled around the room.
"Reconnaissance only. Do not engage."

The Team seemed to deflate a little, but Barbara's feeling of confidence only grew. Reconnaissance? She could definitely do that.

She only hoped that she wouldn't mess it up.

"Robin. Miss Martian. Aqualad. You're on Alpha."

The three of them nodded.


Batgirl gaped. Didn't new team members usually get assigned to Gamma? Was Batman trying to turn the rest of the Team against her? Even now, she could see Roquelle, Superboy and Artemis frowning in confusion. And, was that a little bit of anger?

"The rest of you will be Gamma. That is all."

The team relaxed as Batman left the room, and all eyes turned on her.

"Beta." Robin said, like it was an insult. Batgirl bit the side of her cheek. It was still tender from the fight.

The rest were silent as they boarded the bioship, but Barbara was almost sure she heard someone mutter, "Teacher's pet."

The sharp crackle in Barbara's forehead told her that the mental link was online. M'gann tried to explain how it worked to her, but she accidentally cut the Martian off, saying that she already knew. It was a face-palm worthy moment, especially as she saw Miss Martian glower at her. The rest of the team reacted pretty much the same way. Connor clenched his fists.

{Great, so if you already know, then you can shut the—}

{Superboy} Robin's and Aqualad's voices sounded in her head at the same instant. Batgirl sent an inquisitive glance Dick's way, but he only narrowed his eyes in response. There was a nonverbal language between them and Batman, and Barbara could decipher Dick's expression right away.

'Don't read too much into it, Bratgirl.'

But there was an undertone. It was almost like he was protecting her. In the past, she'd made a few inferences pertaining to metas and nonmetas; if a nonmeta showed weakness, then metas would lose respect for that nonmeta. It definitely explained why Batman had so much sway in the League. But it meant that there was also a lot of pressure for the bats to keep up the appearance of superiority, like the way a nerd in high school asserted his dominance by being smarter and more calculating than, say, the football team. Show weakness, and they'd eat that little nerd alive.

Batgirl realized that Robin had less cause to worry than she did; he already had friends on the football team. But she did not.

{So,} she thought, {I thought that Psimon was catatonic. What is he doing in Quarac?}

Artemis turned to face her. {Psimon's a nasty customer. He's tricked his way out of situations like this before.}

{Agreed,} Kaldur said, {There may be some other psychic working in Biyalia, but we cannot be so
Batgirl nodded and pulled up her wrist computer. She checked the weather in Biyalia, the news, and her messages. There was one from Batman.

[I'm sorry about the rocky introductions. Go and do well. –B]

Short and to the point with just a little hint of sentimentality. That was her mentor, for you.

{Alright, Team. We're, um...we're over the drop zone.} Mgann's voice was quiet and hesitant. Barbara kicked herself.

A hole opened in the bottom of the bioship, and everyone hopped out, going into a twenty-foot dive. Batgirl hit the sandy dunes and rolled like a tumbleweed. As soon as they finished shaking the sand out if their suits, everyone deferred to Robin.

{Alright.} he thought. {Gamma, take the south side. Alpha, come with me. And Beta.} Robin glowered at Batgirl. {Try not to screw up.}

{Dude!} Wally protested.

{I wasn't talking about you, KF. Okay, Team. Split up.}

Robin led the Alphas to the North, leaving Barbara, Wally, and Zatanna standing confused in the sand.

"Sooo..." Wally said, "Where do we go now?"

Zatanna was watching Batgirl expectantly.

"Right," Barbara said. "I'm sorry if we've gotten off on the wrong foot, you guys."

"Oh, you didn't, beautiful." Wally shot her a flirtatious glance. Zatanna playfully hit him on the shoulder.

"You won us over with your amazing waffles, believe me." She smiled. "But seriously, Kid Flash and I will follow your lead. Batman must have his reasons for putting you on Beta."

Batgirl did her best to return the smile. "Okay. Alpha's headed North, Gamma's taken the south end. I think we should go West."

"Go West all the way, babe," Wally said, winking.

"Heh. Right. And guys?"

They looked at her expectantly.

She smiled tentatively. "Thanks."
Ever go back and read your old stuff and just...cringe? Oh well... \_(ツ)_/¯ It gets better later on.
{Robin?}

Dick met M'gann's gaze. {Yeah?}

{How did Batman get a new partner? How come you didn't tell us?}

Aqualad was watching him now with interest, too. Robin sighed and went back to his binoculars. None of the Biyalian soldiers seemed to be accompanied by Psimon, but they appeared to be up to something. They rushed about the base like a hill of red ants.

He rifled through his belt, but stopped when M'gann thought his name again.

He sighed. {She followed Batman home one day like a lost puppy. He found her in an alley being beat up by some thugs.}

{That's terrible!} M'gann thought.

{Yeah. Well. She's made herself at home. The boss man's new favorite.}

Kaldur placed a hand on Dick's shoulder. The physical contact was almost enough to make him look up from the soldiers scurrying around the aircraft hangars. Almost.

{I do not think, old friend, that it was ever Batman's intention to replace you.}

Robin turned away from the Atlantean.

{Now's not the time, Kaldur. Let's focus on the mission.}

Both of his companions sighed.

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It was all going so well. At least at first.

Batgirl led Kid Flash and Zatanna into one of the warehouses on the west side of the military encampment. They seemed hesitant at first, but Batgirl assured them that the best way to gather intel was from inside.

"Ekam su elbisivni," Zatanna whispered, and their forms flickered until they were hidden from view.

After going invisible, sneaking in was a piece of cake. Barbara almost wished every patrol could be like this. She settled her Beta squad on an upper level of the warehouse, behind a few crates. The floor of their storage level was almost completely missing in the middle, so they could see and hear everything on the ground floor.

Carefully, she shook a few mics out of the pocket in her utility belt and placed them all over the
room. A grappling hook lowered her like a cat burglar down to the ground level. A few flicks of her wrist later, and there were microphones and cameras on the ceiling. Complete coverage. The boss man would be proud.

The grappling hook whined a little as she pulled herself back up, and a few of the Biyalian soldiers below looked around in confusion. Batgirl watched them apprehensively, and stopped the wire.

{Batgirl?} Zatanna's voice said in her mind. {Everything okay?} Wally asked.

{Fine. My hook's making too much noise. I—}

Suddenly, everyone in the warehouse bowed, clapping their fists to their chests with resounding thumps. A woman stepped through the open doors and out of the desert heat. Her entrance killed the words before Batgirl could think them.

She was imposing. Tall and graceful, with a neck that arched like a swan's above the collar of a thick white cloak. Her skin, too, was pasty white. She was completely bald, and blood red tattoos spider webbed over her scalp.

Her appearance reminded her of the pictures she'd seen in reports about Psimon.

A psychic. Oh crap—

{Batgirl,} Wally thought, before Barbara could send her squad any warning, {Who is that?}

The woman's eyes darted upwards, latching onto Barbara's position exactly. She thrust out her hands, and Batgirl felt her head explode. Her fingers loosened from the wire, and she fell, down, down.

She hit the floor with a crack, and white filled her vision. Flaring pain exploded in her ribs and right arm, but she ignored that. The strange woman was walking to her side, and Batgirl realized that she was in full view. Zatanna must be unconscious.

"Well," the woman said as Batgirl let out a grunt of pain, "It seems as though I get to make myself useful once again, yes?"

Her head whipped to the side, and she barked an order at a group of soldiers. Batgirl knew enough Biyalian that she could get the gist.

There are two others upstairs. Bring them to me.

"Now, little one." The woman turned her gaze on Barbara, a cruel smile dancing on her lips. Batgirl could see that her eyes were the color of blood. Probably contacts; there was no way they were real. She knelt at Barbara's side, and placed a hand on her forehead. Even through her thick cowl, Barbara could feel how ice cold the woman's skin was. "Are there more of you? Tell me."

Mental barriers. Something Batman had drilled into her head more than once, no pun intended. Keep up mental barriers. She thought of a yellow dog running in a field of green.

The woman's eyes narrowed, and Barbara could feel the barriers strain. The dog chased its tail.

The strange lady's nails dug into her forehead, but she couldn't feel it. She only thought of the dog as it sniffed a patch of daisies.

Batgirl met the woman's eyes, and smirked as her expression turned to that of shock.
"Why can I not read your mind, little girl?" she snarled.

Soldiers thundered down the stairs, two of them with her teammates thrown over their shoulders like sacks of potatoes. They were thrown to the concrete floor beside Batgirl, and they stirred a little bit. Then, they twitched, arms moving like a spider's, legs jerking unnaturally. Hesitantly, both got to their feet.

"Your companions are much better," the woman said. "They've told me that you've come with… six others? Yes. And now, they will hunt them down for me."

Zatanna and Wally straightened, and marched towards the open door. Two groups of soldiers followed after them.

The woman returned her attention to the girl lying battered on the floor.

"I can't glean the secrets from your mind, girl. I can't force your mind to dim and your muscles to bend to my will."

"Lady," Barbara croaked. Her ribs were on fire. "You really need a new hobby."

"But." The woman caressed Batgirl's cheek with an icy finger. "I can show you things. Little nightmares that your own mind will create. You will feel agonizing pain, and I'll not even have to lift a finger." She seemed to relish the idea. She shouted in Biyalian, and two soldiers dragged Barbara to her feet. With a length of chain from one of the crates, they forced her to her knees and wrapped her wrists to one of the steel support pillars. Batgirl did her best to keep from screaming aloud. She was sure now; fracture in right wrist. Bruised ribs. The soldiers let her fall to her knees, and she almost lost it when she felt the sharp jerking in her elbows and shoulders.

"You may let me know when you've had enough," the woman said, "By telling me so. Then…you and I may have a—what's the expression—heart to heart? Yes, you will tell me what I would like to know."

She placed a finger on Barbara's forehead, and the nightmares began.

Robin was watching Zatanna march up the sand dune towards them with a squad of Biyalian soldiers right behind her. A grin lit up his face. Leave it to Z to use some backward spell to sway an entire legion of the enemy over to their side.

{Something is not right.} Kaldur's voice sounded nervous.

M'gann seemed to agree. {Where are Batgirl and Kid Flash?}

Zatanna seemed to grin, and thrust out her hand. Even Robin recoiled as his muscles locked up.
Batgirl screamed as Batman advanced on her. His muscles heaved, a growl low in his throat. Beside him, Robin stalked towards her, a smug and evil grin on his face.

She'd already had her spine ripped out by Bane. Poison Ivy had impaled her with sharp spikes. Joker shot flags out of his gun, and the sharp ends pierced her chest. In the back of her mind, she kept telling herself that all of the hallucinations were fake; just a product of mental manipulation. But the pain felt too real. Batman's breath on her face, his fist clenched around her throat, all of it felt too real.

He drew her toward him, then slammed her into a brick wall. A Gotham city alley materialized around them.

"Wow, Babsy. I had no idea you were so pathetic." Robin's voice cut at her like a knife. He let out one of his impish laughs, but this time it sounded like an evil cackle.

"A failure," Bruce growled, "I should have left you where I found you. Bleeding in a gutter with the rest of the trash."

Slam. Her head cracked against the brick, and her cowl crumbled and fell away. She could feel her hair hanging matted over her face.

"Please…" she whispered.

"Go on," Dick taunted. "Beg. Isn't that your specialty?"

He stepped forward and leered at her, breath hot against her cheek as he whispered something in her ear. Wet tears streamed down her face, and Robin laughed. He spit a wad of saliva in her face, and suddenly, the whole Team was there. They laughed in her face, calling her names, insulting her. Their faces were too close, too big. She struggled to get away, but her mentor's fist held her in place. His grip was getting tighter, tighter. The Team got louder and Robin became more and more savage with his insults.

Batgirl sobbed.

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Robin was thrown to his knees beside the others. His kneecaps cracked against the concrete, and he paused to take in the conditions of his teammates.

Alpha squad had gotten off easy, no injuries that he could see.

But Gamma had gotten battered. Rocket had a purple bruise slowly forming under one eye. Superboy, though physically unharmed, sported a ripped shirt and a rumpled disposition. A stream of blood ran from the corner of Artemis's mouth.

KF and Zatanna flanked them, facing a crouched figure a few yards in front of them. Robin was still kicking himself for letting Zee get so close without even a double-check. Psimon must have
been controlling his teammates.

The crouched figure was wearing a long white cloak, a hood covering its head. Pitiful whimpering and gasping issued from the stranger, as though it was in pain.

One of the soldiers on Robin's right spoke a word in Biyalian.

*Mistress.*

The cloaked stranger stood up and turned. Two ghostly white hands pulled down the hood, revealing a woman that reminded Robin of Voldemort from the Harry Potter movies he'd watched with Alfred and Bruce. She smiled, and a chill ran up Robin's spine.

"Who are you? Where is Psimon?" Aqualad demanded.

The woman blinked and said, "I am the best of Psimon's students. In this country, my home country, I am known as Imbalilik."


The woman seemed delighted. "Ah, a speaker of my native tongue? Excellent. Though, 'mind connection' is a more accurate meaning."

"Oh, I know," Robin said. "But what kind of supervillain name is 'Mind Connection'? Synapse is a little better, though I would have gone with 'Tattoo Lady' if I were you."

Synapse smiled very slowly.

"You are a very rude boy. Your fellow student of the Batman was rude as well."

The Team seemed to tense. "Where is she?" Robin demanded. "What did you do to her?"

Bats would kill him if his perfect little girl got herself killed on a mission that he'd been leading.

The woman let out a long cruel laugh.

"See for yourself, my little bird."

Synapse stepped aside, and Robin saw Batgirl. Her arms were secured over her head to a support beam with a chain. She knelt, just like the rest of them, but though she was looking right at them, her eyes were a million miles away. She was shaking violently, her face wet. Whether from perspiration or tears, Robin couldn't tell.

"N-no," Batgirl whimpered softly. "D-Don't. Stop. Don't t-touch me."

Beside him M'gann shifted and let out a little gasp.

"You're," she started, "You're torturing her with—"

Miss Martian seemed unable to finish. Batgirl shuddered horribly and let out a gasp.

Synapse ran a loving hand over the top of Batgirl's cowl. "Yes. She is...resistant to my mind control. I cannot tame or take from her mind." Batgirl flinched away from Synapse's touch. "But I can give."

"Please..." Batgirl whispered, then let out a sob.
"Sadly, showing the girl her worst fears have not yet yielded any information. She is surprisingly strong for someone whose mind is so…damaged.

"But alas. I will keep trying to get the information I seek out of her." Synapse paused, as if mulling over an idea. "You, my little bird, are also immune to my control. I suppose I could kill you, but that seems so wasteful." She snapped her fingers. "Yes. I know what I'll do."

Around him, his teammates stiffened. Rocket's back arched. Connors arms jerked upwards slightly at the elbows. The rest of the Team stood shakily, like marionettes being taken out of their boxes.

Then, aghast, Robin watched them all straighten and stand at attention beside Kid Flash and Zatanna.

Synapse turned to Robin and crouched, placing her palm under Batgirl's chin. "Such a sad little mind. Hurt. Trauma. Insecurity. So much for me to work with."

Robin wet his lips. "Leave her alone."

"Oh," Synapse laughed. "Not yet, little bird. You are going to tell me a few things first."

"Like heck I will."

"Where is your little team stationed?" She tightened her grip on his partner, and Batgirl's eyes widened in panic. And then, suddenly, the fear dissipated from her expression. Her eyes cleared, becoming less glassy and unfocused. She looked at Robin. Then, she blinked. Short-short long. Etc. A message began to form. Then, she let out a theatrical scream.

Robin gasped. "Alright, alright! Just...let go of her, and I'll tell you."

Synapse smirked. "Yes. I was right. You do care very much about this one. I could sense it. Now, boy. Tell me."

Robin sighed, and dipped his head. "Fine. There's this secret entrance."

"Yes? What does it look like?"

"It looks like an old wardrobe. We go in, push through the coats, and land in our base."

The crazy tattooed lady leaned closer, a triumphant smile twisting at the corners of her lips.

"Fascinating. Some form of zeta technology, I assume?"

Batgirl was fiddling with her glove. A lock pick clicked silently out of her index finger. No. Not a lock pick. A laser. It was almost enough to make Robin lose focus; she got all the best toys. Her eyes told him to keep going.

"Something like that, yeah."

"Go on." Her grip hardened, and Batgirl reacted accordingly with a muffled scream.

"Okay, okay! Our base is this really old castle in the mountains. It's guarded by different members of the League."

"What is this castle called?" Synapse demanded. Batgirl had almost cut through the chains. Now, she seemed to say.
Robin smiled. "We call it Narnia, baldie!"

The chains exploded and Batgirl leapt to her feet, slamming a gloved fist against Synapse's forehead. The psychic tumbled backwards, giving Batgirl the opening she needed to shoot her with a Taser. The two tendrils collided with the woman's chest, and Robin felt the hairs on his arms stand up as the air crackled with electricity. Synapse jerked and twisted, screaming. The Biyalian soldiers opened fire.

Both batkicks somersaulted and flipped to avoid the bullets. Batgirl took down one solider with a swift uppercut, while Robin leapt over a pair of goons and slammed their foreheads together.

"You okay?" Robin called out.

Batgirl let out a dull laugh. "Definitely not feeling the aster. What's the big man gonna say when he finds out?"

"Beats me." A solider shrieked as he planted a kick to the groin. "Two against one," Robin said. "I'm winning."

Batgirl smirked and threw a little black pellet to the ground. "You are so not."

The pellet sprayed a thin gray mist into the air, and Robin barely had time to put on his rebreather before all the soldiers passed out.

Including their teammates.

"Batgirl!" Robin protested.

She shrugged. "That's, what, thirty for me? I win. Let's get these guys on the bioship."
"When I said 'do not engage', what did you two really think I meant by that?"

Batman's voice was low, angry. Batgirl looked over from the gurney she was lying on, and Robin sighed. Alfred was wrapping her wrist in a splint, bandaging her ribs. Apparently, she'd taken a fall from thirty or forty feet onto solid concrete. Her breathing was labored, but according to a quick diagnosis courtesy of Agent A, her injuries were limited. It was amazing that she wasn't hurt worse.

But then again, maybe she was. The whole time they'd loaded the unconscious Team onto the bioship, Robin had badgered Batgirl, asking her if she was okay, if she needed to talk to Black Canary. It wasn't like he cared or anything, though. He'd just been a little unnerved by the whole ordeal; the Replacement almost never cracked, let alone cried. On a mission in front of the whole Team to boot. Barbara had shrugged it all off. She was fine, she said, and to stop asking her about it. Why did he care?

Now, staring down the Bat, Robin felt a renewed sense of guilt. "We were caught off guard. It won't happen again."

"It had better not, Dick. Barbara could have been killed. All of you could have been killed." The Batman's expression softened a little bit. "But you got intel, like I asked, on this 'Synapse' woman. You worked together and got your teammates out safely." He sighed, then managed to force out, "Good work."

Dick relaxed a little.

"But," Bruce continued, "There are still consequences for your actions. Dick, you sent Beta squad off without specific objectives. Barbara, you were too conspicuous and got caught and captured. Your punishment, unfortunately, is a painful one."

The sidekicks both deflated. What would it be this time? Washing the Batmobile? No patrol for a month? Batman had said painful; were they being shipped off to Tibet for a few months? Again?

"I need backup tonight at the Wayne Foundation charity ball."

A smile twitched at the corner of the dark knight's mouth. Dick groaned.

"Seriously? You're dragging us along for that?"

Barbara rolled her eyes. "Could be worse, I guess. What's the charity this time, boss man?"

"It's a fundraiser for the Gotham city Children's hospital."

Bruce smiled. Alfred cleared his throat.

"I believe that Master Bruce is leaving out one crucial detail. The fundraiser appears to be a couples' dinner, and he intends for the two of you to go together."

"You want us to go on a date!?” Barbara demanded. Her face reddened.
"It got worse," Dick deadpanned, he squeezed his eyes shut and leaned up against a glass display case.

"If you feel up to it, Miss Barbara," Alfred said, "Your dress is in your room. Master Dick, I've had your suit jacket freshly pressed."

Bruce smiled. "The party starts in two hours. Be ready in one."

Batgirl sighed and hopped off the gurney, and winced, sucking air through her teeth. All three men tensed, but she waved them off. Without another word, she headed upstairs. As soon as the elevator doors shut behind her, Bruce turned to Dick.

"How did she do?" he asked.

Dick shrugged. "She took down an entire platoon. I think she did fine."

Bruce kept staring at him.

"Okay. The Team seemed to like her enough, but they're not going to let her know it. Wally liked her waffles. M'gann thinks she's a little rude, but-"

His mentor's expression didn't change in the slightest.

"Okay. So they were a little ticked after the mission. It's not like she's never been yelled at before, and frankly, I don't think—"

"Dick. How are you doing with this?"

Robin stared at his mentor. Silence ensued between the two vigilantes, so deep that they could hear the stalactites dripping somewhere off in the cave. Alfred busied himself with putting the medical supplies back into a small metal case.

"With what?" Dick asked, voice quavering. "Getting a new teammate with no notice, or being replaced?"

This seemed to take Bruce by surprise. He stepped forward and put a strong hand on Dick's shoulder.

"Dick. No one could replace you. I would never even consider it without your permission."

"Then why do you spend every minute of every day with her?" he demanded. "Why put her on Beta her first mission?" He gulped. "Why do you like her better?"

Bruce sighed.

"I've seen it, you know. You tell her things you don't-or won't-tell me. You give her extra training, more gadgets-"

"Dick," Bruce interjected.

Dick met his mentor's eyes.

"Robin is the opposite of the Batman."

Dick opened his mouth to protest, but Bruce put up a hand.
"Robin doesn't have to worry about letting hate or vengeance consume him. He is the light to Batman's darkness."

He scoffed, but a look from Alfred silenced the biting retort before it had even left his mouth. Bruce raised his eyebrows, but continued.

"When I found Barbara, she was a mess. Beaten, bloody. If I hadn't saved her, worse things would have happened. I picked her up, dusted her off, and do you know what I saw, Dick?"

"I saw myself. My younger self. Scared, desperate, yes. But in her eyes, I saw hatred. Not for me, but for the people—the world—who pushed her down and beat her."

Bruce closed his eyes and sighed.

"I'm trying to save her. Keep her from becoming like me. Or worse. I want you to help me, Dick. Barbara could be a fiercely loyal friend, or a deadly enemy. It's up to you."

With that, the Batman stood. Alfred smiled.

"Go and get yourself ready, Master Dick. It's rude to keep a lady waiting."

---

Dick endured a shower (Barbara had used up all the hot water. Typical.) and combed down his scraggly black hair. Bruce offered to help him with his suit jacket and tie, but Dick had been to so many of these social functions over the years that he didn't need any.

He met his mentor down in the manor's entryway. Bruce Wayne seemed at ease in the black suit and choking red tie. But Dick knew that he was itching to get back into the armored Kevlar costume and hit the streets. Maybe punch out a few mobsters or send another psycho to Arkham. Dick definitely would have preferred the mentally insane to what tonight had in store.

Bruce smiled at him, and handed Dick a plastic box. Inside was an arrangement of little white flowers surrounding a big white lily.

"Uh…thanks?" He quirked an eyebrow. "I think blue's more my color, though, don't you?"

His mentor chuckled. "I was thinking you could give it to Barbara. It's called a corsage."

"I know what it is," Dick said, "And that's a good idea. It should hide her wrist splint pretty well."

Bruce let out a heavy sigh.

"Speaking of. Who are you going with?"

The older man adjusted his tie. His eyes swept the room, and Dick saw a little smile cross his face.

"I doubt you'd know her. She's a lovely woman by the name of Selina Kyle."
Dick nodded, unimpressed, and went back to counting the wood panels on the floor. Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen…

"Dick, I want you two to have fun tonight."

He snorted. "Heh. That'll happen."

"I'm serious." Bruce rolled his eyes. "I think that you two would like each other better if you gave each other a chance."

"Sorry, boss man, but-"

Just then, Alfred appeared at the bottom of the stairs. With a flourish, he said,

"Presenting Miss Barbara."

Barbara descended the steps, and Dick felt his jaw slacken.

A midnight blue dress slithered over the carpeted stairs as she stepped down. The color made her already pale complexion appear even more so. But not in a bad way. Dick was reminded of Snow White.

Her hair was half up, half down, and curled around her face. A glittering diamond pendant lay settled in the hollow of her throat.

She reached the floor and blushed.

"I look stupid, don't I?"

Dick opened his mouth, and tried to say no. For some reason, his throat wasn't working. Bruce saved him.

"Not at all. Are you ready, then?"

She smiled and nodded, the corners of her painted red lips turning up.

Dick swallowed hard, then cracked open the box and lifted the floral arrangement out. At Alfred's direction, Barbara lifted her injured wrist. Carefully, Dick slid the ribbon over her hand.

"Thanks." Her eyes roved over him. "It's beautiful."

They stared at each other for what seemed like eons. Then, Bruce cleared his throat, and Alfred opened the door.

"Ladies first," he said, gesturing outside. Barbara nodded and stepped out into the night. Bruce looked at Dick, and shot him a knowing smile. Indignation flared through his veins.

"What?" Dick demanded.

"Oh, nothing. C'mon."

Bruce smirked all the way to the car.
"You're...staring." Barbara raised an eyebrow.

Dick cleared his throat from across the limo. "Sorry. Just thinking."

Bruce and Miss Kyle both grinned at each other, but not for the first time. They'd been making eyes at each other all night, smirking like they knew something the two teens didn't. It was really starting to get on Barbara's nerves.

"I hear that you're both into gymnastics," Miss Kyle crooned at her side. "How fun, to have a common...interest. I myself have experience in that area..."

Across from them, Dick raised his eyebrows, and sent her a confused glance. Barbara left the 'fending-off-unwanted-questions' to her partner, and instead studied Selina Kyle. She regaled them with stories of gymnastics meets and awards, while Dick pasted on a smile, nodding and baring his teeth. His eyes screamed 'help me', but Barbara ignored it.

The woman was slim, lithe, definitely fitting the gymnastics stories. Her ebony black hair was pulled up into a curled style that framed her exquisite cheekbones. It was no wonder that Bruce had fallen for her.

Though, her eyes, glittering green with flecks of silver, were stunning. And familiar. Barbara had seen those eyes before, somewhere.

And then, it suddenly came to her. A sneering smile with painted black lips. The sharp crack of a whip.

Barbara almost choked. Bruce was taking Catwoman to dinner.

The limousine pulled up to the curb with a soft screech.

"Ah," Bruce said, "It looks like we're here."

"Excellent," Selina was all smiles.

Bruce Wayne helped her out of the limo, and Dick stepped out. His face was tight as he offered her his hand.

"Thanks."

His skin was clammy and warm. He was nervous, poor thing. Barbara tried not to smile.

Dick looped an arm through hers, and escorted her inside. The warm, thick material of his suit coat brushed up against the bare skin of her arm, and that, combined with the smell of his cologne (did he only wear that for parties?) made her head dizzy and her heart race. The pain meds Alfred had given her must have started to kick in.

The Gotham City Assembly Hall was filled with the city's high society, with ladies in elegant dresses, and gentlemen dressed to the nines. The quiet drone of the party was almost tangible as a steward led them to their tables, of which, Barbara was uncomfortably aware, were tables meant for two.

Bruce and Selina seated themselves at a nearby table. Which was still a good ten feet away. Dick
cleared his throat and pulled her chair out for her. Smiling politely, she settled herself down into it, while Dick sat down in the other seat across from hers.

Both were very quiet until their dinner of marinated chicken and Caesar salad was served. As they cut into the food, Barbara studied Dick. Studying people was what she did best, after all.

And, sometime when she hadn't noticed, he'd grown up a little. He was taller than her, even sitting down. His blue eyes still held the impish glimmer they always had, but now, Barbara saw a little maturity. Boring maturity.

"Y'know, you're about as interesting as a rock, Grayson"

Dick looked up, indignant. "Well, I'm sorry. Not all of us are as 'interesting' as you." He went back to his salad.

"You're right. I've got something interesting. I think you just might want to hear it."

"Oh?"

Barbara jerked her head towards Bruce and Selina, who were engrossed in an intense and probably lovey-dovey conversation. "I figured out who 'Miss Kyle' really is."

Dick sat up a little straighter, newly interested. "Alien?"

Barbara smirked. "Not quite." She mouthed 'Catwoman', and Dick's jaw dropped.

"No. Frickin'. Way." His eyes drifted to the adults' table. "I can definitely see it now. How much do you think she knows?"

"Hard to say," Barbara said slowly. She turned her head slightly to take in the happy couple. Selina was smiling coyly while Bruce flashed one of his flirtatious smiles. "But I have a suspicion that it's more than we'd like to think."

"How much do they know about this little plan of yours, Bruce?" Selina cupped a delicate hand under her chin.

Bruce sneaked another glance at their table. At first, they had been distant and quiet with each other, but now, they seemed to be having an animated discussion. Barbara smirked, as Dick smiled, gesticulating.

"Nothing. They still think I'm punishing them."

Selina laughed and looked around the room.

"I remember when you used to drag me around to these social functions. I used to hate dressing up."
A smile slid up his face. "Not anymore?"

She took a sip from her glass, eyes trailing up to meet his. Then, she laughed. "Remember when that psychopath attacked that party when we were thirteen? You, little Brucie, were so scared!"

He scoffed. "Me? You're the one who hid under that table!"

She smiled. "And now here we are, all grown up. You're still every bit the polite little high society boy I remember."

"And you're not that little street thief I once knew," he said, winking. "Oh, wait-"

She reached across the table to smack his arm. "Shh!" She sat back in her chair with a smug little smile. "You're not exactly the man you say you are either, Mr. Wayne," she whispered.

He grinned. "I told you that in confidence, Miss Kyle. Now, let's discuss our evil plan."

She smiled, and glanced at Dick and Barbara.

"Alright. I'm getting a vibe off your girl. She thinks he's...hmmm hard to say. But I think she still likes him."

"Hmm...and Dick?"

Selina seemed to consider. "You know, I think that he's got a serious little crush on her, but he doesn't know how to deal with it." Selina laughed. "These two are so alike, they don't know how to work with each other!"

"They need to learn how. That's why we're doing this, after all."

"Admit it. You like playing matchmaker. Just a little bit."

"Alright." He smiled. "I'll give you that."

Selina played with her salad, then leaned back in her chair. "Let's see. We've got the dance coming up soon. Then...?"

"I thought we'd let them go out to the hedge maze."

"Oh?” she asked, "And how are we going to get them out there?"

"We'll figure something out."

"Oh my gosh." Barbara squeezed her eyes shut. "We have to dance now, don't we?"

Dick sighed. "Guess so."

The tables were being cleared away, and an orchestra was beginning to play a slow dancing
number. Something classical. Bach, maybe? Both of them stood awkwardly, and Dick saw that her fingernails were digging into her arm.

"It's okay if you don't want to," she said, watching the couples gather onto the floor. "I'm not a very good dancer."

Dick wasn't sure what came over him, but he slipped his hand into hers. It was cold, soft. She looked up at him in surprise. He turned to face her, then placed a gentle hand on her waist. He felt a little shudder go through her at the physical contact, but the ghost of a smile twitched at her lips.

"That's okay," he said. "We'll wing it."

She scoffed at the joke.

He guided Barbara onto the dance floor, and led her through the first few steps. She bit her lip, whether thinking her way through the dance steps, or trying to ignore her injuries, Dick couldn't tell. She was slow at first, but as the orchestra played on, she began to move her feet more easily, gliding through the steps like she'd been dancing for years.

At one point, they passed Bruce and Selina, who were dancing closer together than was probably possible. Bruce was whispering into Selina's ear, while she literally purred.

"Ugh." Barbara winced. "They're disgusting."

Dick grunted in agreement. "No dignity. No shame."

They glanced at each other and smiled sheepishly.

"I never asked," he said, leading her into a turn. "Are you holding up okay?"

"Hmm?" She blinked, then her face turned guarded. "You did so ask, Grayson. Many times."

"Well, you did spend the first half of your day being tortured by a weirdo psychic with a Voldemort complex."

Barbara giggled at that. Seeing her smile like that made something brighten at the back of Dick's mind.

"How did you snap out of that so quickly, by the way?"

Her face darkened a little.

"Well," she said, "Synapse showed me all my worst fears, and there were a couple of those." She pointed a finger into the air. "But not a lot. I am practically fearless."

He chuckled. "I'm sure."

"But, when she was showing me my worst memories, I was kind of able to shake myself out of them, you know? I've moved on. From most of them."

He was silent for a minute or two, leading her through a promenade.

"But yeah, Dick," she said, "I'm okay. It takes a lot to get to me." She smiled, but it was weak.

The music switched tempos, so he led her into a faster paced dance.
"Barbara," he said, "I'm sorry about everything. I've been-"

"I could make a joke right now about what exactly you've been, Grayson. But…"

They laughed. Dick was suddenly very aware of just how close his partner was. Her breath smelled like strawberries…probably from the salad…it was sweet...

He forced himself to focus.

"It's okay, Dick," she said. "And…thanks. For apologizing, I mean."

"You're welcome."

She paused, looking like she wanted to say more as he twirled her through a promenade. Guests were staring at them now, whispering behinds hands and fans. As they twirled past one of the many clusters of high society girls, Dick caught what they were whispering about.

"That's Wayne's boy, isn't it? Grayson?"

"Mmm…Yes…who's the…"

"Oh, the little tramp with him? They came together."

"Really?"

"I've never seen her before, is she-?"

"Probably a little street hooker they picked up beforehand."

"Ooh, yes. Poor girl probably fancies herself a Cinderella. Not to worry, though. Grayson will dump her sorry $#* as soon as he's had-"

Dick steered them to the opposite end of the dance floor. Barbara's face was unreadable.

"Hey," he said, "Don't worry about them. They're-"

She laughed so loud that the society girl jumped and stared from the other side of the room. Dick jumped too as she playfully nudged his shoulder.

"Ah, Grayson. I've been dealing with mean girls since before you put on the red and yellow," she whispered. Then, Barbara pressed her cheek against his chest and smiled. Dick wasn't sure why until he looked up at the girls. They wore a mixture of angry and disgusted expressions. He smiled.

"Yeah. Those ladies have been after me for years. Everyone wants a piece of this." He waggled his eyebrows and grinned.

Barbara rolled her eyes and snorted. "Can't see why."

She looked him up and down with a smirk. He stepped back, frowning.

"Nope," she said, "I don't see it."

"What do you mean?"

She smirked, and twirled with him to the music. Cellos played a symphony that Dick could barely hear.
"You're so…stiff. Formal." She sighed. "Boring. Why don't you try a smile?"

"I've been smiling all night." He pulled the corners of his lips up. She shook her head and tutted.

"No. Real smile. You look like you've been baring your teeth this whole time. Think of something happy."

He thought for a moment, then seized upon an idea. He grinned wide.

Her face lit up, and Dick almost staggered back a little. She was…

"There's that smile, Grayson," she said. "You look much better when you're happy. Some advice:"

She tapped his shoulder. "Be yourself. Smile. Leave the frowning and seriousness to Bruce."

She was staring at him now in a strange way. The dance slowed again, and Dick jumped when she hugged him gently.

"Thanks," she said again.

Suddenly, Dick's watch beeped. He tapped in a quick passcode, excusing himself to the edge of the room. Barbara floated closely behind him.

"What is it?"

The message glowed in the dimmed light, scrolling across the watch screen.

*Meet up in center of hedge maze. Need backup. Have fun.*

Dick watched Barbara's eyes widen. "BRUCE…is asking us to have…fun?"

"He's either in trouble, or had a bit too much to drink," Dick said, typing in a message of his own. "Or, *Miss Kyle* has backed him into a corner to rifle through his pockets."

*You okay? Please clarify.*

No answer. The sidekicks shared a sidelong glance.

"Okay, Robin," Barbara whispered, "I guess we're going into the maze."

---

Bruce pulled away from Selina, and she sighed happily. The old stone fountain behind them was gurgling brightly, reflecting the light of the full moon overhead.

"I think I'm in love with you, Miss Kyle," Bruce said. She grinned up at him, and pulled him into another kiss. This one was shorter.

"Did the kittens get your message?"
"I think so?"

She smiled devilishly. "Oh, then don't. We just need to wait for the kids to find the center of the maze."

"Perfect."

The night passed quickly. As Dick and Barbara made their way to the center of the maze to rescue their mentor, they got lost a few times. Barbara almost fell into a decorative fountain, but Dick quickly caught her in time.

"Whoa, there, Babs," he said. "Watch where you're going, why don't you?"

She straightened and dusted herself off. They continued on their way. Dick almost led them down the wrong way, but Barbara gently pointed him in the right direction. Surprisingly enough, Dick didn't seem upset.

Their footsteps crunched fallen autumn leaves. They made a game of it; who could crunch the most? The loudest? The crackled and stomped and laughed. When Dick stepped on a twig, a loud CRACK filled the air, making them both jump. They both laughed nervously, and Barbara turned to Dick.

"Something's been bugging me," she said, as she crossed her arms over her chest. Even in the long sleeved dress, she still seemed to shiver. Dick exhaled and saw a little wisp of steam curl out of his mouth.

"What is it?"

She shook a little bit, and let out a curl of steam. "Earlier. Synapse. She s-said…" Barbara's teeth knocked together. Dick straightened and shrugged off his suit jacket. Before she could protest, the jacket was draped over her shoulders. It looked comically big on her, but Dick hoped that at least it was warm enough.

"You didn't have to," Barbara said. But she pulled the suit more closely around herself. She pressed his sleeve to her nose.

"Don't be ridiculous. You catch a cold, and Bruce and I won't have any backup for tonight."

Her eyes fluttered closed. "At least the jacket smells good."

Dick shuffled on his feet. "Right. What were you saying?"

Her blue eyes fluttered open again. "Synapse. When I was faking 'mental distress'…" Her fingers twitched out of the sleeves of the jacket to make air quotes. A smile tugged at Dick's mouth. "…she said that…um…you cared 'very much' for me. That she could sense it."

Both of them were silent. In the distance, an owl hooted softly. Cricket song filled the chilly air as
they sang out their last goodbye to the warm weather. Dick stared at her face. In the moonlight, her face shone pale and beautiful. He…she…

Then, suddenly, Barbara stepped forward and pressed her lips gently to his. Any thought in Dick's head frizzled and sparked into nonexistence. He brought his hands up to her waist, and gently, he pulled her closer. She sighed a little through her nose as Dick closed his eyes. He-

No.

He pulled away sharply. Barbara jerked back, eyes wide. And, maybe a little hurt.

"Look, Barbara," he said quickly. His fingers straightened his tie and crept into his pockets. "Synapse, she didn't know what she was talking about. I was…concerned. Because you're my partner. If anything happened to you, Bruce would skin me alive, alright? So…"

She nodded, frowning. Her cheeks were flushed with embarrassment. "Right. Stay 'cerned' then, Dick."

She continued on her way through the maze. Hesitantly, Dick followed. He felt like kicking himself.

Eventually, both of them made it into the center and found Bruce and Selina locked in a passionate kiss.

Dick cleared his throat.

Barbara rolled her eyes and glared at the ground.

Both of the adults started and looked up in surprise.

"Mm…the kittens made it through too fast."

The two protégés looked to their mentor, having a silent conversation.

"So," Barbara said, "She knows."

"Bruce!" Dick was aghast.

Bruce put a calming hand on each of their shoulders.

"Selina and I have been the best of friends since we were children. She was there for me when I lost my parents."

"And Bruce gave me a place to stay, at least for a little while."

Dick put up both hands in a 'stop' gesture. "Okay, okay," he said. "So you two were all friendly when you were kids…and you just go ahead and tell her…the secret?"

Selina smiled. "I figured it out on my own, actually."

Barbara's throat constricted. "Then, does she know about us?"

"I most certainly do." She winked. "Batgirl and Robin."

Dick and Barbara exchanged a frown, having their own silent conversation. It was agreed, then. Silent treatment for the both of the adults. Then, turning on their heels, they stepped out of the
maze, and navigated their way back to the mansion. It was after ten anyways; time for patrol.

Bruce seemed to understand. He said nothing to them either, returning their silence. After they dropped off Selina, and made their way back to Wayne Manor, their nightly routine spoke for itself. All three vigilantes dropped into the cave after a few hugs and mugs of hot cocoa from Alfred. He asked how the master and miss' date had been. Barbara pasted a smiled on her face and assured the old butler that it had been 'fine', albeit through her teeth. She watched Dick do the same.

She couldn't help but feel a little disappointed twang in the pit of her stomach.

In the cave, Bruce went into his 'Changing Room' to put on his carbon fiber armor plates. It could only be done by machine, unlike the two sidekicks' armor, which could be put on much more easily.

The Batman's armor was designed for heavy-hitting—both dishing it out and taking it. Robin's allowed him to move with all the agility and flexibility afforded to the acrobat he was. For Batgirl, it was a mix. She had flexibility, and protection. Just not as much as either of her male counterparts.

And, because their costumes were so easily put on, added to the fact that they only had about five minutes to get ready, they had to hurry and pull their suits from their cases and shimmy into them.

Dick was already halfway into his costume. Barbara unzipped her dress and let it fall to her ankles. Thankfully, she was wearing a tank top and thin undershorts underneath. (For quick changes.) Regardless, Dick's face and ears turned a warm shade of red, and he quickly averted his eyes.

"I am wearing clothes, Boy Wonder," she muttered, still slightly embarrassed. Dick fastened his cape and said nothing. Besides, Barbara was too busy pulling on her long boots to care about a response. As soon as their costumes were on, Dick ran his fingers through his hair, messing it into a different style, and called it good. Barbara sat herself at a nearby table that she had set up for specifically one purpose:

The boys had cowls or masks that disguised their faces almost perfectly. Barbara's cowl showed her eyes and lower face, and so she relied on a more feminine way of disguising herself. Dick usually scoffed over her methods, but they worked, so neither he nor the Bat could complain. She pulled the pins from her hair, letting the soft curls tumble down her shoulders. She combed the thick fancy curls into something a little more believable. Then, she carefully applied blood colored lipstick, patting and dabbing at the edges with a piece of Kleenex. Then, she put on her eye shadow and mascara. The methods were simple, but produced amazing effects; she was no longer Barbara. She was Batgirl.

The cowl slid over her head, and she watched Dick fasten the domino mask to his face, effectively hiding his blue eyes. They watched each other for a moment.

"You look…nice," he said. "Do you have your grappling gun?"

Batgirl shook her wrist. "Upgrade as of today. It's attached to the costume."

Robin nodded. "Nice."

Silence. Except, of course, for the bats rustling and chirping overhead, and the sound of the rushing water around the standing platforms.

Batgirl focused her attention on the waterfall, but she could tell that Robin's eyes were on her. He
was being discreet, of course, but she could tell.

She let out a sigh. "Dick-"

The Batman swept into the room like a king, cape billowing behind him.

"We have an alert over on 500 and 9th," Batman said deeply, "A group of bank robbers are holding the staff of Billings and Co. hostage. Police are standing by, but-"

"They're the police," Robin sighed, "Let's get to work."

The rotating platform that held the Batmobile lit up with white lights, and the top of the imposing vehicle slid open.

"Let's go for a ride."
"Commissioner." The Batman nodded to Gordon as he marched up to the bank. His two students clambered out of the Batmobile behind him, their movements practiced and careful. Just as they had an image to keep up around the other members of their...community, the same held true when it came to Gotham's finest.

The GCPD had a perimeter set up around the Billings and Co. National Credit Union. The flashing lights from their patrol cars lit up the scene like the fourth of July, and had drawn a crowd large enough for a parade. The festive illusion was interrupted by the crouching figures by the cars; the uniformed members of the GCPD with guns blazing and eyes narrowed.

Commissioner Gordon nodded back politely, though Batgirl could tell that the man struggled to pull his gaze away from the scene in front of them. When he met the Bats' eyes, his expression was unreadable.

"Batman. Glad you're here."

Maybe it was a hand placed on the pistol in his hip holster, or the drawn expression, but Gordon didn't appear to be glad at all. He ran a dry tongue over a set of even drier lips before speaking to them again.

"So far, we've spotted four gunmen in the building. They're holding the entire staff hostage."

Batman's jaw was set. "Their demands?"

Gordon let out a shaky breath. "To step away from the building without police intervention. To disappear." His thumb traced over the butt of the pistol. Batgirl could tell it was a familiar habit. "I guess you could say we're at an impasse right now, since we've got the place surrounded. But they're going to march out of there any second with a gun to a poor civilian's head, mark my words."

Batman nodded, and turned to his protégé's. "Robin, Batgirl. You're going in first."

They nodded without a word, but Gordon cut in. "No offense to those two, but I don't think this is any place for children."

Both of them bristled, but Batman held up a gloved hand. "And no offense to your officers, Commissioner, but I think these two have a better chance of getting in than any of your men."

Gordon reared back, brows raised, but only nodded in reply. Not that the batkids needed his permission. Instead, they turned to their mentor. He was studying the building analytically, noting the barricaded front door, sweeping over the GCPD's assembled numbers. Then, he said,

"Robin. Hostages."

Robin nodded, shoulders thrown back, frown set and determined.

"Batgirl." He raised an eyebrow under the cowl. It was difficult to tell unless one was used to seeing the different ways a cowl moved, but he was definitely shooting her a questioning glance. Then, he seemed to reach a decision. "Distraction. Maneuver Fifty-eight."

She swallowed, but nodded. Robin's face was unreadable.
"Maneuver fifty-eight?" Gordon cocked his head slightly, squinting. Batman shook his head, dismissing the question. The sidekicks were already walking toward the building. "And what, pray tell, will you be doing?"

Robin turned to glance at the Commissioner over his shoulder. "He'll be doing what he always does, Commish."

Batgirl smirked as the Commissioner turned sharply. The Batman had disappeared without a sound.

Gordon scratched at the side of his face. "You kids be careful, alright?"

But the batkids were nowhere to be seen.

Robin brought up the bank's blueprints and floorplans. As he thumbed through them, he heard the soft rustle he'd grown accustomed to on patrols and missions. He let out a sigh.

"Glad you could finally drop in," he said drily. Batgirl scoffed behind him.

"Was that supposed to be some sort of pun? I was, like, ten seconds behind you."

He ignored her, instead studying the blueprints of the bank's ground floor, where supposedly the hostages were being held. The lobby was open, easily taking up half of the floor plan. There were surrounding offices that may be holding the burglars and the bank staff, but Robin seriously doubted it. After all, no villain in Gotham ever landed on the subtle side of crime. If the burglars were keeping the hostages anywhere, it would be in the lobby. Probably behind the tellers' counters.

"I could hear you a mile away," he said nonchalantly, shrugging one shoulder. His partner crouched a little behind him to study the blueprints.

"I'll be sure to work on that." He could feel her breath on the back of his neck. "Just like you should put a little more effort into your quips."

"My quips are fine."

"Whatever."

["Both of you stop it."]

Batman's voice crackled over their comms, making them both jump a little bit. Robin’s finger went to his ear.

"Stop what?"

["You know what. It's time to move in."]
Robin leapt to his feet and turned to Batgirl. She was busily adjusting her gauntlets.

He put away the blueprints with the press of a button, and glanced up at his partner. "You going to be okay down there?"

She took a shaky breath, but nodded, biting her lip. "I think so."

There was a pause. Both stared at each other in silence, letting the sounds from the streets outside filter in through the windows to do the talking for them. Batgirl was watching him in a way that made him feel strange, like he was pinned under a microscope. He fidgeted with his belt again before saying,

"I'd say 'good luck', but…"

Barbara let out a soft laugh and shook her head. "Fine. Okay."

She strode over to the vent on the far side of the room. One of the nicest things about Gotham's old buildings was the sheer size of the ventilation shafts; they were big enough to accommodate Bruce. Batgirl and Robin, consequently, had no problem getting around. The shafts were downright roomy. Batgirl was unscrewing the metal grate with a small screwdriver as Robin watched carefully.

"I know the drill," she said softly. "I go in first, you drop in while I have them distracted. Start getting the staff to safety."

He nodded distractedly. She turned to smile at him as she hoisted herself into the shaft.

"Try not to worry so much, boy wonder. I've got the hard part!"

With that, she slipped into the vent and was gone. Robin sighed and clambered in after her.

Batgirl peered through the vent cover, eyes narrowed. The lobby was spacious and grand; one could expect nothing less from one of 'Gotham's Oldest Banks'. Crystal chandeliers let out a soft glow that illuminated the marble floors and columns. These along with the mahogany furniture fixtures and embellishments served to tell the clients and hopefuls that strode in through those glass doors that this was a place of wealth. Only Gotham's finest banked here; there were millions upon millions of dollars invested and deposited right in this building. And Batgirl was willing to bet her cowl that a good chunk of that money was—emphasis on was—held in the vault at the far end of the lobby.

The impressive steel door had been blasted off. Little chunks and hunks of metal and drywall surrounded the hulking slab like confetti. These guys weren't the most subtle when it came to bank robbery, but that didn't surprise her in the least. No one in Gotham ever went halfway with anything.

A small smile curled up her face. She wasn't one to talk, after all. She was crouched in an air vent
dressed as a bat.

And, as for the burglars, they were preoccupied down below. Three of them were busying themselves with emptying the contents of the vault into canvas sacks. There was a stack of already bulging stacks on a waiting metal cart. The last thug was standing right behind the tellers' counter. He had a machine gun pointed at a huddled mass of smartly dressed men and women. All of the hostages were crowded together on their knees, whimpering with their hands pressed to their heads.

Batgirl wet her lips. She couldn't believe Bats wanted her on distractions for this job. Maneuver Fifty-Eight? All that meant was distraction…by any means necessary.

Basically? Improvise.

And Improv wasn't really her strong suit.

Robin's dark silhouette appeared behind the grate across the room, closest to the tellers' counter. A small motion that might have been a wave made her heart drop into her stomach. It was show time.

Batgirl eased the grate open just enough to slip out. Her cape fluttered and snapped softly behind her as she fell to the ground, sticking the landing almost perfectly. The thugs at the vault whirled around. They shouted and whipped pistols from jacket pockets and hip holsters. She slowly lifted her hands up into the air and pasted on an easy smile.

"Hey, now, boys," she said slowly, "It's just me."

The middle-aged man closest to the vault narrowed his eyes behind the ski mask he wore; Batgirl immediately pegged him as the leader. After a while, it was easy to tell just by body language which criminal was the alpha dog; it was one of the first things Batman had taught her.

"Where's the Bat?" he demanded. His hands were wrapped around his firearm, and unlike his partners', they didn't shake a bit.

"The Bat's not here," she soothed, "It's just me."

His two buddies were younger, one probably eighteen, judging by the height and build. If she had to wager a guess, she would have said the other was probably in his early twenties. Younger ones—like teenagers—were better; they were almost always easier to talk down. Still, she only had to buy her mentor a little time.

"Think you can stop us?" The eighteen-year-old warbled. "We're with the Spades!"

His leader shot him a sharp look, but said nothing. Even so, that was all Batgirl needed.

"Enough!" The leader squeezed the trigger. The bang made her jump a little to the side, where the marble was now cracked. She could practically hear Robin's teeth grinding from across the room, but flicked her fingers slightly. If he saw that, he'd get the message. *I've got this.*

"No. I'm not here to stop you." She tried for a meek expression. Then, like a flash, she caught an idea. "I'm here to offer you a trade."

The leader scoffed. "A trade."
The pistol was pointed at her forehead now, and Batgirl didn't doubt for a second that the burglar wouldn't even hesitate to pull that trigger again. Then, it would be her head, and not the floor, that had a gaping cracked hole. She swallowed the lump in her throat and spread her arms open wide. The thugs jumped a little at the movement, but relaxed slightly once they saw that she wasn't reaching for a batarang.

"Yeah. A trade." She jerked her head to the side, gesturing to the whimpering mass across the room, and said, "You let them go. Just let them step out that front door and go to the police—"

"You must have mistaken me for an idiot, little girl," the middle-aged burglar hissed. "But I assure you that you're dead wrong." His voice was gravelly; it carried the rasp of someone who'd been smoking for a long time. Batgirl had the random thought that this man was probably looking forward to a pack of cigarettes when he finished this job and had his pockets filled with cash. Her palms were sweating now, but she cleared her throat and spoke.

"Let the civilians out." She felt a slight jab of relief that her voice was coming out clear and strong. "And in return—" Her arms spread out a little wider. "You get me."

Batgirl expected him to laugh in her face. Surely, he had to know that the cops outside wouldn't hold her life to the same standard as the innocent men and women cowering behind the tellers' counter. It was a long shot, definitely, but Batman had told her to improvise.

She watched the lead thug lower his weapon slightly. "If you're bluffing," he said, "If Batman's hiding somewhere up in the ceiling…if this is all some big trick…" He stepped off the vault door, which he'd been perched on like a museum piece on a pedestal, and marched closer to her. She could feel his hot breath on her face now as he spoke, and caught a whiff. Definitely a smoker. "Then you'd best believe that my men and I will put a bullet into each and every head behind that counter. I will make you watch. Then, I'll make sure that the Bat doesn't interfere anymore with the Spades by shooting you right in your pretty little face."

His finger jabbed into her forehead three times. Jab. Jab. Jab. She refused to flinch. The thought crossed her mind that it would be easy, so easy, to judo-flip this guy onto his pretty little face. Just reach out, grab the arm, and twist. But she forced herself to hold firm; they were so close.

"Please. I think you must have me mistaken for an idiot," she said, drawing her shoulders back. "I'm here to help those people back there. If that means offering myself up as a hostage in their place, then you'd best believe I'll do it. This isn't some action movie, where I have a plan B, or backup coming to my rescue, alright?" She leaned in closer. Her nose was a fraction of an inch away from the thug's. To his credit, he didn't flinch either. "So let's make this as simple as we can, okay guy? Put a gun to my head or tie me up. Whichever makes you feel better. With me as a hostage, neither the police or Batman will dare get close. I'm the best insurance you've got."

That finally, finally, seemed to convince the leader. He took a sharp step back, nodding once, and barked out an order to the burglar with the machine gun. Within a few breaths, she felt the sharp jab of the gun's muzzle in between her shoulder blades. Her hands slowly went back up, and she complied meekly when the gunman ordered her to step back with him into the middle of the lobby. They were just underneath the biggest of the crystal chandeliers now, and once glance up told her that everything was going according to plan. Batgirl recited a few commands of her own to herself to take a deep breath, remain calm, and ignore the AK47 right behind her.

The leader stepped up once again, a cruel smile twisting his masked face, and pressed the barrel of his pistol to the spot right between her eyes. She could almost feel the chill of the steel through her cowl. With a nod, his lackey stepped back, and the pressure from the machine gun's muzzle was relinquished.
"What is this?" She demanded, nervousness crawling up her spine.

The middle-aged burglar's grin widened. "We hardly need those stiffs back there now that we've got you, right sweetheart?"

Alarm bells were going off in her head now. Her neck started to crane back as she tried to get a glance at the hostages. Robin had surely gotten them out by now, right? But the thug pressed his pistol harder into her forehead as a response.

"Stay still, and I promise you'll only get a few plugs to the chest when we're done here, yes?"

She inhaled shakily. "Do you mean to tell me that our little deal's off?" she queried.

He chuckled. "I'd say so."

She quirked a smile, trying hard not to glance up. "Too bad, boys." She shrugged. "Don't say I didn't at least try."

The leader's face only had a moment's chance to switch from brazenly confident to fearfully doubtful when the batarang connected sharply with his hand. Then everything kicked into high gear. He let out a yell as the pistol fell to the floor with a bang. Nearby, a small shower of plaster cascaded to the floor. The thug held his bleeding hand close to his chest and staggered back. His partners started waving their guns, but the dark shadow that descended from the bright chandelier disarmed them almost immediately.

Batman stood behind her now. The burglars were all crumpled to the ground, their weapons lying uselessly on the marble floor nearby. Slowly, all four clambered to their feet. The leader looked up, his gaze full of murder as he demanded, "What is this?"

"This?" Batgirl gestured to the intimidating silhouette behind her. "This is my plan B."

"And here comes backup!" Robin swung over the tellers' counter. His feet connected sharply with the leader's cheekbone. The other thugs lunged for their weapons, but Batman and Batgirl intercepted with a few well-placed kicks and hooks.

"Robin, flank!" Batman barked. The Boy Wonder was at his side in a second. He and Bats went after the leader while Batgirl kept two of the burglars busy. Unfortunately, they'd found and retrieved their guns. One of them, the eighteen-year-old, fired off a shot, and she felt a stinging sensation flick at her leg. Just a graze. She pushed through the discomfort. With a quick jab and a left hook, both thugs were quickly incapacitated. She bounded after her partners.

Batman and Robin were busy with the Spades' twenty-something year old. He'd picked up the other guys' AK47 and was blasting away at the two masked vigilantes. While her partners were preoccupied with dodging and leaping away from the spray of ammunition, the leader was making a break for the side door that led out into the alley. There were almost certainly cops waiting in said alley, but why chance it? Batgirl let out a sharp whistle, and Robin straightened, holding his arm out straight as a ramrod. She raced forward and leapt up. When her feet connected with Robin's forearm, he lifted sharply, and she used his arm as a springboard to launch herself into the air. She flipped midair to bring her feet out in front, and landed in a heap on top of the fleeing burglar.

He let out a fury filled shout, but Batgirl put him out of commission with a quick jab of a tranquilizer dart. Poor guy went out like a light.

She clambered to her feet, and surveyed the scene. Mr. Billings and Company weren't going to be
happy when they opened up tomorrow morning, that was certain. The marble floor had cracks and chips from stray bullets. The walls, too, were pockmarked and crumbling, giving off more the effect of a war zone than a bank. Even the expensive looking chandeliers were missing a few crystals.

There was a creaking groan, a clinking snap, and one of the chandeliers clattered to the floor, sending glass skittering every which way. Batgirl winced. Make that more than a few crystals.

Robin was preoccupied on the other side of the room as he handcuffed the two unconscious lackeys together. Batman deposited the gunman onto the cracked marble floor and looked over at her. She almost jumped out of her skin when she saw the corner of his mouth quirk slightly. Instead, she dragged her quarry over to the pile of burglars they'd created on a relatively clear space of floor.

Batman nodded to both of them. "Robin. You got the hostages out?"

He nodded. "Led them out the back about twenty minutes ago. What took you so long?"

"I was taking care of their getaway drivers." He squared his shoulders slightly, and turned. "Gordon and the other officers should be along shortly, so I suggest we take our leave."

He glanced back at them with a pause, then said softly, "Both of you. Good work."

Dramatically (was anything the man ever did undramatic?) he swept out the side door, where Batgirl could only assume he was deploying his grappling device and soaring up into the night sky like his namesake.

Again. Dramatic.

Robin turned to her, one eyebrow quirked. "Guess that's as much of a 'thank you' as we can hope to expect."

She nudged an unconscious burglar with the tip of her boot. "Still, he's getting better when it comes to compliments."

That earned her a laugh. "Really, huh? So, I need to work on quips, and Bats needs to work on his —" He made sarcastic little finger quotes. "—'people skills'?"

"Yup. Sounds about right."

Batgirl fiddled with her own grappling device to be sure the inner mechanisms and gears were strung right. The last thing she needed was a malfunction when she tried to follow her mentor out. As much as she liked the streets of Gotham, she'd rather not end up smeared on their asphalt like a grease stain.

"Hey." Robin bent slightly to meet her gaze. "That was pretty smart, back there. With the thugs."

"Um, thanks?"

He was quiet for a moment, reaching to scratch the back of his head. "What I mean is…" He sighed. Then, he stuck out his gloved hand. Batgirl studied it carefully, then looked up at her partner.

"Truce?"
She considered, then smiled a little. "I think that's fair." She stuck out her own hand, and the two shook firmly. "Well, great then. This isn't awkward at all, is it?"

He grimaced. "Sorry. It gets worse, though."

"Oh?"

"The Team's having a party tomorrow night. I was wondering…” He shrugged. "If you'd like to go."

She smiled sweetly. "You know, I'll think about that, okay, Boy Wonder?"

Batgirl sauntered towards the side door and pressed down on the handle. "Race you to the batmobile?"

She couldn't see the grin on his face, but she knew it was there all the same.

"You're on, BG," he said with a laugh.

They shot out the door and into the night.
Chapter Notes

Just want to note that the two villains in here aren't the typical Rogues crew; they're from an old cartoon called The Batman. So, I don't own them, DC/WB does. Also, harassment. It isn't too bad, but if that makes anyone uncomfortable, I'd recommend skipping to the second half.
You guys are amazing, by the way! Thanks for reading, and be sure to review!

Robin's invitation was sweet, but totally deliberate. Batgirl saw straight through it. She could practically see Batman's thought process on that one;

[Female sidekick is not integrating successfully into the Team. Bribe male sidekick into asking her to party…possibly with cereal. Party=teenage happy fun times. Party=good.]

Bruce was analytical that way.

It almost made her want to scream. Why did there always have to be an ulterior motive? So, needless to say, the ride back to the cave was a quiet one, owing partly to the fact that she'd totally beaten Robin to the Batmobile. When Barbara got out of her batsuit, her first stop was the shower. She let all of the blood, sweat, and embarrassment swirl down the drain with the steaming water. Then, as soon as her hair was dry, she collapsed into bed, and slept dreamlessly.

The next morning, she helped Alfred clean the house and serve 'Master Wayne's ' guests. A gentleman Bruce's age with a little brother who was Dick's. The boy was—and yes, it was possible!—even more self-absorbed and arrogant than Dick had ever been. The two guests walked into the manor with an air of pompousness that was only found in the families of Gotham's oldest money.

Alfred was quick to welcome the Mallory brothers, while Barbara busied herself dusting the antique vases and collectables strewn through the house. (In her personal opinion, Bruce had way too many.) Her civilian disguise amounted to different makeup and a new name, which would have been a bit lame had she had any official records. But when you didn't technically exist, it was amazing what a little bit of cosmetics could do. That, and of course, the lack of a bat costume. Alfred had been more than generous, allowing her to take his last name. She was now 'Barbara Pennyworth', Alfred's niece who'd come to work alongside her uncle for Mr. Wayne.
Bruce had schooled his two protégés before the Mallorys' arrival. "Be on your best behavior," he'd said, "Will and I are old friends. But our two companies are also working closely together on an important project that might eventually help us with our...nighttime activities. Barbara, I hate to ask, but—"

She shrugged. "Maid duty it is, then. That's okay, B-man."

Their mentor had turned to Dick. "Put up with Andy for a few hours. That's all I ask."

Dick glowered. Barbara had heard horror stories about the infamous Andrew Mallory. From Alfred, of course. She felt a pang of sympathy for her partner; bullies were something she'd had to put up with through the years too.

Barbara almost knocked a Ming vase from its pedestal, which brought her back to the present. "Is that Bruce?" William Mallory's voice boomed through the entryway, bouncing off of the polished floor and mahogany furniture. Will was a tall man, and very well built. He looked like he spent most of his time lifting large objects. Like refrigerators, she mused, twirling her feather duster between her fingers.

Bruce stepped forward, arms out. "Long time no see, Wild Bill." The two men laughed and hugged, pounding each other on the back and bantering back and forth. This was so out of character for Bruce that Barbara almost keeled over. Maybe her mentor needed his head examined?

A teenaged boy walked into the manor, hands stuffed in pockets and a bored frown stretched across his face. He said something to Alfred that made the old butler draw back in surprise, then nod and hurry off towards the kitchen with a carefully concealed glower. Barbara made a note of that; no one treated the butler that way and escaped unscathed. Then the boy caught her eye, and he winked.

Dick stepped forward, looking like a mongoose squaring off against a cobra. A snake-like grin lit up Andrew Mallory's face. He looped an arm around Dick's shoulder and said, "Soooo, Dicky-bird. What are we gonna do today?"

Grimacing, Dick removed Andy's arm, and opened his mouth to reply. But William spoke up. "Great to see these two always getting along, eh Bruce?"

Bruce eyed Dick like, BEHAVE, then said, "Dick, why don't you go show Andy your new video game?"

Dick's face was drawn, like he was being forced to swallow a malaria pill. (Barbara knew from experience. They'd both had to get their antibiotics for a mission in Africa last month. The rest of the Team hadn't. Artemis was inoculated, and the others were all pretty much unaffected. Lucky freaking metas.)

"Yeah. Awesome."

Barbara moved down the hall, finished with the vase. Alfred had mentioned that the study needed cleaning, so she ducked inside. The smell of old books rose to meet her. Out of all the rooms in Wayne manor, this was her absolute favorite. Bookshelves twenty feet tall lined every wall, filled with classic works and rare volumes, most bound in worn leather or cloth covers. Some of the books were older than Bruce's grandparents. A thick Indian rug covered almost the whole floor, and a fireplace sat as the king of the room on the far wall. Plush sofas and arm chairs that looked fresh out of a cozy antique store, distinguished oil paintings, stairs to a second story of more books.
What was there not to love?

Barbara set to work with an oiled rag, polishing the grand piano in the corner until it gleamed. She listened and heard a cacophony coming from upstairs. That meant Dick's *Kill Order 3* was being played full force. She moved on to the bookshelves, removing the tomes carefully, swiping a dust rag through the empty space, then replacing the book. The work was fast paced, but monotonous, so she let her mind wander.

Alfred's stories played in her mind. A young Dick, probably eleven or twelve, meeting Andy Mallory for the first time in the seventh grade. He'd been a shy little kid; youngest in his class, since he'd skipped a grade. He could have skipped more—he was that smart—but Bruce had decided that it was probably best not to draw too much attention to his new young partner. So, he was bullied, naturally. Names like 'Circus freak' and 'Baby clown' and 'Gypsy Trash' had been thrown around. But Dick's worst bully had been Andy. On his second month at the expensive school, Dick had been waiting for Alfred to come and pick him up when he was ambushed from behind by Andy and his friends. He could have fought back, and busted out moves that would put even Killer Crock out of commission, but that would have blown his cover. So he'd let the boys beat him up and drag him to a window well behind a few bushes. By the time they threw Dick down into the concrete hole, he was so bloodied and battered that he couldn't have fought back if he'd wanted to. Andy passed around packages of peanuts and the boys all threw them down into the hole, pelting their victim. They taunted him for over an hour, telling him to do tricks, or dance. They repeated the cruel names until they finally got bored and left. Alfred had searched and searched for Dick, and later found him curled up and bleeding, still in the bottom of the window well.

Bruce had let him switch schools after that.

Alfred had confided these bits of information to her once after a particularly frustrating patrol. She and Dick had had another fight, this one ending in blood and words that she'd rather never hear or say again. While she was holding a package of frozen peas to her lips, Alfred dried a few dishes and told her why her own 'Circus Brat' comment had been out of line. (In her defense, it was the only comeback she could think of to being called 'Gutter Trash'.)

She wasn't sure how she'd felt then—or how she felt now—holding this information. It was almost like blackmail material. But if that was the case, it was the kind she'd never bring herself to use. It painted Dick in a vulnerable light, and she found that she didn't like it.

Barbara listened again, but the video games seemed to have stopped. She pulled another book from its place and dusted. Just she started to put it back, a hand closed over the spine, and pulled the book back behind her head, forcing her to pirouette around. She found herself nose to nose with Andy Mallory.

"Well howdy, gorgeous," he said, his breath hitting her face. "I came in here looking for a good read." He stepped closer. "Any suggestions?"

She let go of the book in his hand, smiled sweetly, and turned around, dusting again. Then, she slipped easily into the accent that Alfred had spent weeks coaching her in. "Try the one you're holding. It looks like a good fit for you."

Andy looked down at Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, and for a moment, he looked a bit confused, then laughed drily.

"You're a funny girl," he said, sidling up to her. "Got a name to go with that pretty face?"
Barbara stepped away from him and moved on to the next set of shelves. "Barbara," she snapped, "And if you don't mind, I have some things I'd like to do."

He smacked one hand over the book she'd been about to grab, and grinned. "Well, what a coincidence. Me too." His other hand clapped over her backside. She jumped away, and Andy started to laugh. Fire crept up her face, but whether it was from anger or embarrassment, she couldn't tell. She picked up another rag and the spray bottle of cleaning solution and moved to the windows. Her mind was playing over the consequences of breaking Bruce's non-confrontation order and judo flipping the guy onto his face. It wasn't often that she had that urge twice in two days. Unfortunately, Andy followed her to the window. When she reached up to wipe away the droplets on the glass, she felt his fingers tickling her waist. She squeaked and whirled around.

"Stop."

Andy only grinned. Barbara moved to step away, but Andy's foot shot out at the last second. She tripped backwards and hit the hard wood floor. Her elbows screamed when she landed on her back. Andy dropped down, placing his hands on either side of her shoulders, knees on either side of her waist.

"Now we can have some fun," he drawled. Barbara realized she still had the spray bottle in her hand. Alfred's special combination of vinegar and bleach lay in her palm, ready to be used. Andy leaned in close.

"Here, let's see if we can get you to lighten up-Auggh!"

Andy clawed at his eyes and fell back. Barbara leapt to her feet, discarding the spray bottle, and started to run for the door, but Andy's fist closed around her arm.

Barbara didn't throw caution to the wind, but she did dangle it out the window. Her elbow slammed into Andy's stomach, and when his head came down, her knee jerked up. Unfortunately, his nose didn't even bleed; she was too clumsy in this brown housekeeping skirt. Andy roared and threw her to the floor. He used one hand to hold her down, his fingers squeezing around her neck until her vision turned fuzzy. The other hand started working at the buttoned collar of her shirt.

The door flew open, and through the swirling yellow dots, Barbara saw Dick. Her partner took one look at them, Andy with his fingers around her neck (and slightly lower) and Barbara gulping like a landed fish. His face contorted with rage, and he was on Andy in a second. He pulled him off of her and slammed him into the grand piano. A wretched chord rang loud, like a discordant groan. Dick planted a foot into Andy's side, but Andy jumped to his feet with surprising agility. His fist swung towards Dick's jaw, but Barbara's partner ducked and retaliated with a swift uppercut.

Barbara brought hesitant fingers up to her throbbing neck, and winced when she made contact. The boys still grappled nearby.

"I had no idea that you had such a pretty little maid, Dickie."

"Shut up," Dick growled.

"Aww, still sore that I locked you in a closet? I swear it was an accident. Those doors are just so hard to figure out." Andy threw a perfectly executed right hook towards Dick's face. "Or maybe you're just jealous of me and your girlfriend. I understand why you might want her to yourself."

Dick swept his feet under Andy's, and the boy crashed to the floor. Barbara couldn't help but notice that his face registered shock, and she hoped that Dick's fancy fighting wouldn't give him away.
"You gonna get up like a man, Mallory?" Dick goaded, putting up his fists.

Of course, that was the moment that Bruce and Will chose to burst in. William's eyes went straight to Andy, and he rushed to his brother's side. Andy, of course, was hamming it up, moaning through his bloody nose. Bruce glared at Dick, but when he saw Barbara lying on the floor, his hard expression melted into concern.

"Miss Pennyworth?" he asked, kneeling at her side. One hand slipped under her back and another rested on her shoulder to help her sit up. She found herself shivering and leaning away from the physical contact. "Are you alright?"

Barbara rasped and shook her head yes.

William's face contorted. "Bruce," he said, "Your son beat up my brother."

He stood sharply and jabbed an accusatory finger at Bruce, then at Dick. "Look at his face! His nose is broken! I have half a mind to sue!"

Dick's lips pressed together into a hard line.

"Ex-excuse me," Barbara rasped in her feigned accent, "Mister Mallory?"

William looked at her. So did everyone else.

"Richard went looking for Andrew after he'd gone to the restroom and never come back. He found him in here. Andrew had attacked me, and was on top of me...Master Richard was only defending me."

At this, all eyes in the room drifted to the growing purple bruises on her neck, and drifted down to her chest before quickly averting. Barbara blushed scarlet and hurried to redo up the buttons on her shirt. Both men's faces hardened with rage. Bruce moved to stand, but Barbara placed a hand on his chest and shook her head.

"Well?" William turned to Andrew, his face a raging thunderstorm, but his voice deadly calm. "Is that true, Andy?"

Barbara expected the boy to lie, but Andy said nothing, which was all the answer his brother expected.

He yanked Andy up by his ear.

"Bruce, I hope you'll accept my humblest apologies," William said. "I love your project ideas, and we should talk about them another time, but for now, I need to have a firm talk with my little brother." At this, he glared at Andy the same way Bruce had glared at Dick. "We'll see ourselves out."

The three of them waited until they heard the front door slam. Bruce sighed.

"I'm not sorry," Dick snapped.

Bruce opened his mouth to say something, but Barbara cut him off.

"Please, Bruce," Barbara said, "He was only doing what I was dying to do as soon as that little creep first touched me."

Saying that was obviously a mistake, because Bruce and Dick exploded, demanding to know what
had happened and whether or not she was alright. Barbara waved the questions off with assurances that she was fine.

"Just a few bruises," she said, "I've had worse."

"Nothing else injured?" Bruce asked, his brow drawn in concern.

"Only my pride."

Bruce let out another sigh.

"You're still speaking with the accent, Barbara." He said with a dry smile. She blushed and cleared her throat. Then, their mentor turned to his male ward. "Well, technically, I'm going to have to punish you for breaking Andy's nose, Dick."

Both sidekicks protested loudly.

"Officially, Dick, you're grounded for a month. No TV, no leaving the house."

Dick's jaw dropped. Bruce's index finger went up.

"Unofficially, I want to thank you for watching out for Barbara. You did good, Dick." Bruce smiled. "And I'd remind you that Dick Grayson is grounded, but Robin is not. You two should go and get ready for the party tonight, if Barbara's still feeling up to it."

Barbara wrapped her arms around Bruce's neck, trying to keep from shaking. "Thanks, B-man," she said, standing.

"Barbara?" Dick asked. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She noted the concern etched across his face, but still nodded. As she walked out the door, she hoped that Bruce couldn't tell how shaken up she still was.

Then again, she was pretty sure that the world's greatest detective had some idea.

"You've made a lot of stupid decisions in your life, Andy, but this one ranks pretty high on the list."

Will's palms rubbed against the leather steering wheel as his hands tightened into fists. In the passenger seat, his brother was slumped over, scowling.

"I was just kidding around, Dubs. Eesh."

Unbelievable. Unbelievable.

"Oh, so you were just joking, S? You weren't actually going to—"

"Just shut up!"
Will brought the car to a screeching halt on the side of the road. They were still well outside the
city, but far enough away from the manor now that they could verifiably say that they were in the
middle of nowhere. Will turned to glare at his brother. Andy glowered back, challenging him to
shout.

So he did.

"Harassing the maid was bad enough!" Will roared, "But fighting Wayne's little ward? That was
stupid, even for you!"

Andy huffed, clicking the window button back and forth. "I dialed it back. The idiot didn't suspect
a thing."

He paused, like he was holding something back. Something to think over, examine.

"What?" Will deadpanned.

Andy stuck a finger in the air. "There's something off about both of them. Dickie and the maid."

Will huffed. "Yeah? So?"

"The girl. When I…she knows self-defense. Like, good." Andy's eyes were far away now, as he
considered angles and thoughts out loud. It was something that had always bugged the heck out if
his older brother.

"So? I did background on Wayne's butler. Ex-RAF guy. The girl's his niece. He'd be the first case
I've heard if he didn't teach a female family member basic self-defense."

Andy shook his head. "It's more than that, bro. Other girls have freaked out, maybe thrown a weak
punch, but they can't think straight when it's happening—"

"Hold up—other girls!?"

"—to them. The maid," he shook his head, "she did this elbow-knee thing, bent the shape out of my
nose."

Will sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose with a free hand. The other he kept on the wheel.

"I hate to break it to you, bro, but that's, like, basic self-defense. And what's this about other girls?"

"You weren't there, man." Andy flipped a shock of hair out of his face. "You don't know."

Will shook his head. "And why do you think something's off with Richard?"

Andy seemed to perk up, turning to face Will full on for the first time.

"He comes storming into the room, he sees me with the girl, and he just loses it."

Honestly? That's what he was worried about?

"Of course. The Wayne's are the dignified, noble crap of Gotham. They basically invented
chivalry. You know that."

Andy shrugged the comment off. "Dickie's got moves, Dubs. He beat me."

"I saw," Will snapped.
"No, you didn't. The guy's supposed to be a nerd. The mathlete. The Circus Freak."

"Yeah?"

Andy threw his arms out wide. "So how does the kid have muscles? How does he have better moves than me? He busted out moves like the freaking Karate Kid!"

Will paused, and scrutinized the bruises and bloody nose on his little brother for the first time. It was hard to believe that another kid could have taken Andy out so fast. Especially when the kid had just barely started a growth spurt—seemed like just a few months ago, he'd been five foot nothing. Now, he matched Andy's five-nine. Still...

"Sometimes nerds beef up to fight off bullies. It happens, S. Just deal with the fact that you got owned hard."

He steered the car back to the left, driving and popping back onto the road.

"You trained me better than that." Andy crossed his arms tightly over his chest.

Will sighed. "I'm kind of glad you lost. You could have blown our cover, S. And just when we're about to close this deal with Wayne. We need that gear, if we want to compete with the bat population."

Andy threw out his hand and hit the dashboard.

"Dude!" he shouted. "That's it!"

Will swerved, laying on the horn as he almost hit a compact coming the opposite way.

"What?" he demanded, righting the vehicle.

"Your buddy Wayne has to be the Batman!"

"What?"

"It adds up, dude! Dickie and the girl both know how to fight. They'd be his Robin and Batgirl!" He cackled. "Dude. Batgirl. I almost—"

Will shook his head. "No. It doesn't add up. One," he put up a finger, "Bruce is the wimpiest guy I've ever met. He'll go to the gym every now and then, but I've seen him squeal at the sight of a gun. Two, I've seen Bruce and the Batman in the same room. During a charity ball. A masked man came in to shoot up the place, and Bruce fainted like a lady. Bats swooped in and took the guy out. Three,"

He looked squarely at Andy.

"I think my little bro's just ticked that he got beat up by a girl and a mathlete."

Andy huffed. "Sorry I said anything, man."

Will quirked a grin. "Trust me, Scorn. We haven't met the bats yet. But when we do, we'll take them down and out. Then, we'll be the new kings of this city."
Barbara was nervous as she got herself ready for the party, going through six different outfit combos before settling on a minty blue blouse and black skinny jeans. She was still shaking from the encounter with Andy Mallory, which was something she couldn't completely understand. It wasn't like she'd never been approached that way before; it was actually pretty common when you grew up under Gotham Bridge. She'd had to learn self-defense early on. There had been a few older girls who'd taken Barbara under their wings, and they'd been more than happy to teach.

In the mirror, she winced and prodded the ugly dark bruises on her neck. *No time for vanity,* Babs, she thought. A light gray scarf was added to the outfit. It was warm for scarves, but she hoped her teammates wouldn't notice.

*Ugh.* Her teammates.

Naturally, they all hated her after that mission gone awry. Barbara couldn't really blame them, though. It was probably pretty disconcerting to have your body overridden like that—heavy on the *dis.* Still, as soon as they'd all regained consciousness, her ears had practically been shouted off.

The idea of sharing pizza and playing board games with these people was enough to upset her stomach.

She padded down the cave steps and met Dick by the zeta tube. He was dressed in black jeans and a green jacket. His obligatory sunglasses were perched on his head, so the blooming shiner under his left eye was left on full display. She felt a little stab of guilt when she saw it.

Hands in pockets, he smiled shyly.

"So, listen," he said, "I've been thinking."

The corner of her mouth twitched up. "Uh oh."

"A dangerous habit, I know. But, yeah." He stared at her for a second. "We make a pretty good team, all things considered. So, I was thinking two things."

She crossed her arms. "Oh, yeah?"

"One, that we should *definitely* mess with the others tonight. Like, freak them out."

"Is this because of the shouting match the other day?"

Dick shrugged. "Doesn't matter. The way I figure, they already think we're creepy, so I say we run with that."

Barbara snickered. "I think you're right. Is this going to be a thing, now? Messing with the Metas?" Her eyes widened, and a slow smile stretched up her face. "I think I've already got a few ideas."

"Excellent. See? We make a great team."

They bumped knuckles, grinning at each other. This new ease in tensions was a little strange; normally they began evenings in the cave with thrown punches and insults. Every night was a competition to see who could be the best, the smartest, the quickest, or the most like Bruce.

Barbara found herself relaxing a little for the first time that evening.
"Okay, okay," Barbara said, "Fine. Yes. Let's do it. But you know that's just going to make them hate me more."

At that, their smiles melted. Dick took a step forward. "They don't hate you."

Barbara shook her head, scoffing. "They do, Dick. Everyone hates me. Even—"

She stopped, but Dick seemed to get it. Their nightly rituals were probably playing back in his mind, too. He winced a little, confirming her thoughts.

"Even me?" He ran his fingers through his black hair, and sighed. "I don't hate you, Barbara. I've never really hated you. And," he took another step forward. "That's actually, um, the other thing I wanted to talk to you about."

He was standing almost nose to nose with her now, but Barbara didn't even flinch. When Andy Mallory had been this close to her, she'd been disgusted, and a little bit scared. But this was Dick. Despite their differences—in spite of them, in fact—they'd always had each other's backs. She could trust Dick with her life.

"Well," he said, "I was thinking that I…that we…um…" he let out a breath of laughter, "Sorry, Babs. I'm really kind of bad at this…"

She smiled. "That's okay, boy wonder," she said. She leaned forward, and Dick closed his eyes. She felt an electrifying sort of thrill. But just before their lips could meet, the elevator into cave dinged and opened. The two sidekicks managed to leap apart before Bruce stepped into the cave. He was at the bat computer in three strides, not even seeming to notice what he'd just interrupted.

"I hope you two have fun at the party tonight," Bruce said, sorting through newsfeeds and data. Batgirl and Robin glanced at each other, rolling their eyes knowingly.

"You're sure you can manage patrol alone tonight?" Barbara asked.

Bruce nodded, not bothering to respond verbally.

"Well…we're just going to go now…" Dick's face was beet red. Barbara nudged him and smiled.

"That second thing?" She whispered, leaning in, "I think that's a great idea."

A dazed kind of smiled lit up his face. "Really?"

Bruce looked up. "What?"

"Nothing." They both said.

Their mentor went back to his typing with a sigh. Villain profiles and Gotham City street maps scrolled past on the screen. The Batman would have no trouble patrolling alone; he'd done it for years before either of his protégés had entered the picture. Even so, Barbara felt that ever familiar itch to be back in her cape and cowl. "Be safe," Bruce said, eyes never leaving the screen. "If anything explodes, you're grounded."

"Got it," Dick said. Barbara typed the coordinates into the zeta control panel. "Thanks, Big B."

"I think I prefer B-man," Bruce mumbled.

The zeta tube whirred to life, and the batkids stepped through.
The cave was strewn with streamers and balloons, most likely M'gann's handiwork. It almost looked like a bomb had gone off. They looked around, noticing for the first time that they were alone. They could both hear the others in the kitchen, chatting and laughing. Batgirl and Robin looked at each other.

"So…" Dick said, "About my good idea…"

She smiled. "Mmm…not right now. Bats kinda killed the mood. But…later?"

He squeezed her hand. "Are you busy Friday night?"

Barbara shrugged. "Oh, you never know. I think I've already got a date with Penguin, Killer Crock, and maybe Scarecrow, though I'd have to check." She sighed dramatically, "My social calendar's so full, you know?"

Dick laughed. "I guess we'll fit a movie in when we can?"

"Only if you let me buy the popcorn."

"Oh no, Dominoed Daredoll! Chivalry is not dead yet!"

Barbara screeched at the nickname, and chased him, laughing, into the kitchen. He dodged under Superboy's arm, but Barbara wasn't so lucky. She ran full speed into the Kryptonian, bouncing back. She looked up into Connor's disapproving gaze, expecting another reproach, but he only grunted and shoved past her. Barbara shook out her shoulders and walked towards the food laden table.

The girls were all gathered around Wally in a semi-circle, watching him stuff five dripping slices of pizza into his mouth.

"C'mon Wally!" Roquelle chanted. "Three more and Zee owes me twenty bucks!"

Wally grunted in consent and picked up another slice to pack into his gaping mouth. A line of drool trickled down his chin. Artemis was banging her fist on the countertop like it was a war drum, mouth twisted into a knowing smile.

"Sadly, it won't happen," Zatanna said with a smirk. "Eight pieces is just not possible."

"Not to mention disgusting," Artemis chimed in under her breath.

"Um, hi," Barbara said, joining them around the counter. She winced at how pathetic that sounded. Roquelle sniffed and turned away from her, while M'gann only scowled.
"Hi?" Zatanna replied, before turning back to Wally. The speedster waved distractedly, then lined up another slice for entry.

Artemis, though, smiled at Barbara, and handed her a plastic cup of root beer.

"About time you guys got here," she said. "We've been at the mountain all day." She leaned in and whispered. "Thank goodness for non-metas, right?"

Zatanna let out an outraged squeak, which didn't match the grin on her face. She picked an olive off the pizza and flung it towards the archer. Artemis laughed.

Barbara winced and shrugged a little. "There was a bit of a…delay. Sorry."

Her hand subconsciously went up to her scarf. Artemis followed her movement, brow tight.

Wally shoved two more cheesy slices into his mouth, and Roquelle and Zatanna leaned forward, cheering him on, or booing, depending on their bets.

Nearby, Kaldur, Connor and Dick were drinking sodas and talking. Barbara's gaze wandered over to them. Artemis beckoned her to follow as she stepped away from the counter and towards the couches. Barbara had a seat next to her on the green leather. It crackled and settled beneath her.

"They didn't like me very much when I first joined, either," Artemis said, shrugging. A smile tugged at one corner of her mouth. "Especially Wally. And M'gann."

"M'gann seems sweet. I just…"

"Got on her bad side? That's okay, she doesn't really stay that mad at anybody for long."

Both girls turned their heads sharply when a cheer went up from the kitchen. Wally's arms were stretched above his head in a touchdown sign. Roquelle grinned in smug satisfaction, and wiggled her outstretched fingers as a defeated Zatanna handed over a crumpled twenty. M'gann and Roquelle started to chat after Wally joined the boys on the other side of the room. Zatanna collapsed onto the couch across from Barbara and Artemis.

"Looks like I'm out twenty big ones," she sighed. Then, she smiled. "So, Barbara, where do you go to school?"

Barbara went to Gotham Academy with Dick; the school Artemis had already graduated from. That would have been a good answer, but she stuck with the more obvious choice. After all, there was a slight chance that Artemis would remember her. And even though Barbara and Dick had avoided each other like the plague at school, they both took the same ride home (courtesy of Agent A). Secret Identities were such fragile things.

"Homeschooled," she said, grimacing. "Batman has Robin and me working on foreign languages and fighting techniques mostly, but we do Math, Science and stuff like that, too."

Artemis shuddered. "Batman as a school teacher? Yikes."

Barbara laughed. "Oh yeah. The man is a total grammar Nazi, if you'd believe it."

The other girls giggled.

"Remember, Batgirl," Barbara said in her best Batman voice. The others grinned. "Always dot your I's and cross your t's."
Artemis let out a cackle.

"Oh, oh!" Zatanna cried, her voice deepening. "Robin. I don't care what you say. You can't just dissect words like science experiments!"

"Dang it, Batman!" Artemis laughed, trying her best to imitate Robin, "I'm a sidekick, not an English professor!"

The others were shooting them strange looks, but all three girls were in stitches. When the laughter finally subsided, Zatanna managed to ask,

"So, Barbara, what's being Batman's partner like? Besides the English lessons, I mean."

"Ooh. Yeah." Artemis sat up a little.

Barbara shrugged. "Um… I don't really know how to describe it."

"C'mon. Try."

"Well, it's hard. He's a strict boss. We go out on patrol just about every night." She snickered. "Rob and I have had to learn how to get by on three or four hours of sleep a night. But, it's fun, I guess."

She sipped at her drink, but both girls were still staring at her expectantly.

"What?" Barbara demanded, smiling. "Tell you any more, and I'd probably have to kill you."

Zatanna's mouth quirked.

"Welk, okay. So, what's your favorite thing to do? M'gann wants us to decide on a game to play later."

"Dude," Wally said, slinging an arm over Dick's shoulder. His breath reeked of cheese and garlic.

"Long time no see."

Dick sighed. "Observant as always, KF. We just saw each other two days ago."

"Yeah, man. Guess so." Wally let out a loud belch. He cleared his throat and pounded a fist against his chest. "While I'm thinking about it, I was just wondering if you could give me a few pointers."

"Pointers?"

"Yeah. Batgirl's totally hot! I'm still pissed that you never told me about her before."

Dick shrugged. "She never came up."

"Riiight. Well, anyways, do you have any suggestions?"

Connor laughed and shook his head, while Kaldur sighed into his drink. Dick scoffed.
"The king of pickup lines? Asking for pointers? You must be truly desperate, Wall-man, to come to me for help."

Dick glanced over at Barbara. She was laughing with Artemis and Zatanna over on the couches. An evil little idea cracked open its eyes in his head.

"Okay. The thing about Barbara; she's really into protocol and that sort of thing. You just have to know how to speak her language."

Wally snorted. "Sure. Okay. And how would I go about doing that?"

"Easy. Wait for the right moment. Then ask her if she wants to practice maneuver thirty-six with you."

Wally seemed a bit skeptical. And, Dick thought, he should be.

"That's it, huh?" Wally asked. Dick nodded.

"Well, then," he said, grinning, "Wish me luck."

As he sauntered off, it was Kaldur who spoke up.

"Robin, what happened to your eye?"

Dick's fingers found the tender dark spot beneath his eye. He'd hoped that his sunglasses would hide the mark, but apparently, they didn't. The memory of Andy leering over Barbara sent liquid fire burning through his veins again.

"Got into a fight with a dirt bag," he said, shrugging.

Kaldur still seemed concerned. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"You should see the other guy."

The boys turned to watch Wally squeeze between Barbara and Artemis on the couch. He put an arm around Barbara's shoulder and put his mouth up close to her ear. Dick wasn't quite sure what to feel about that.

Wally's mouth moved, and Barbara's eyes slowly widened. She jerked around and punched Wally in the jaw.

He hit the floor, and all eyes turned to Batgirl.

"Okay, West." Barbara's voice quivered. "Sorry, but I'm not interested." She looked up at Dick. "I'm pretty sure Robin put you up to that, didn't he?"

The corner of her mouth twitched, but just barely. She raised her eyebrows. He shrugged and smirked. The team looked back and forth between the two of them like they were watching a tennis match. Finally, Dick sighed.

"Sorry, Barbara," he said.

She shrugged.

"Serves you right, West," Artemis snickered.
M'gann burst into the room.

"I've got games!" she announced, holding aloft a stack of boxes. She seemed to notice Wally groaning in a heap on the floor.

"Wally?" She asked, "Are you alright?"

Artemis beat them all at poker. They didn't bet money, since most of them didn't have any on their persons. But M'gann's cookies were a good substitute. Artemis ended up dividing her winnings amongst everybody, though, so no one could complain. Especially not Wally.

Twister went to Dick. Everyone else eventually wound up as a gasping knot on the mat, but Dick easily bent himself into painful looking positions. Barbara herself was in second place. She'd held out longer than the other members of the Team. They ended up gathered around the mat cheering as M'gann called out colors. All of them picked sides, cheering for either Batgirl or Robin respectively.

Trickles of sweat had run from her forehead as her muscles started to shake. Dick smirked at her as he easily held his ground. She'd finally surrendered, collapsing with a sigh to the mat below.

But when they played Clue, Barbara won in four and a half minutes.

Barbara wasn't quite sure who suggested Mafia, but they all wound up on the couches.

"Okay," Roquelle said, passing out the little slips of paper. "You all have your assignments. Don't you show anybody, or peek at anybody else's."

Everyone turned to Wally, who shrugged.

Carefully, Barbara opened her paper. She knew the rules of the game; she and the other street kids had often played something similar. She read the word DETECTIVE on her slip and almost smiled at the irony. But she kept up a poker face. One glance at Dick told her that he was doing the same. Wally groaned when he looked at his paper, Artemis smiled, Conner frowned.

"Okay," Roquelle said again, "Now everybody close your eyes."

Barbara shut her eyes gently, waiting for instructions.

"Medic, open your eyes."

There was a bit of a stir to her left. It looked like Aqualad was the medic.

"Good. Close your eyes again. Detective, open your eyes."

Barbara smiled at Rocket, who nodded, frowning back.

"Good. Same." Barbara shut her eyes again, and Roquelle said,
"Right. The rest of you are townspeople, except for the Mafia. That would be two of you, if Artemis did the papers right."

"And I did."

"Kay. Mafia, go ahead'n kill somebody."

There was a bit of movement, but Barbara couldn't tell which direction it was coming from. Someone sighed in resignation nearby.

"Good morning."

Everyone opened their eyes and saw Zatanna slumped against the coffee table.

"Egad!" Wally gasped. "She's dead!"

Zatanna giggled a little, facedown with her hair and hands splayed out.

"Who is responsible for this ghastly crime?" Barbara said, smiling.

They threw out guesses, protesting and laughing. No one was sure who started it, but they all began to make their accusations in different accents.

"I say," Artemis said, pointing her nose up as she feigned an upper crust British accent, "I believe Mister Wallace West is responsible."

Wally huffed, pointing his finger in the air. He shot back in a rapid-fire Scottish burr.

"Aye, but it seems tae be summat the guilty pahrty would sigh!"

M'gann and Conner took up German and Jersey accents respectively, while Kaldur kept to his own accent, probably not quite sure what was going on.

The batkids were the only ones who actually used a different language. Barbara remembered her pact with Dick to freak out the others, so she initiated a conversation in rapid Russian.

{I think that you have something to do with this,} she told him, {But you are not acting alone. Was it Conner?}

"Nyet," Dick snapped, {It was not me! And I would put my money on Artemis. She and Zatanna are friends—}

{Ah! Which is why she would think that no one would suspect. Very good observation, boy wonder. Except I think I will have to guess on the Martian.}

The Team whipped back and forth, watching them each as they spoke. Zatanna's mouth fell open.

"How many languages do you two know?"

The batkids shrugged vaguely.

"I think it was M'gann," Barbara said, shrugging.

Rocket smiled, and said, "Sorry, Miss M. You've been voted dead."

The Martian face palmed, but nodded. She held up her card. TOWNSPERSON.
Everyone sighed.

"The killer's still out there, then. Everyone close your eyes. Medic, open up and choose somebody to save.

"Okay. Detective, choose somebody to peek at."

She opened her eyes and looked around the room. She smiled, pointing at Wally, and Roquelle held up his paper.

MAFIA

Bingo. It was the speedster.

"Okay, Mafia, choose someone to kill."

Barbara's eyes were closed. She heard soft footsteps pad over in her direction and tensed. She couldn't go down! Not when she knew who a Mafia was!

But someone tapped her on the shoulder, and she felt a tickle on her ear as Dick whispered.

{Gotcha.}

It was the boy wonder. She should have guessed it.

When everyone opened up, Barbara gasped, grabbing at her heart and slumping off of the couch.

"L-light is…fading…limbs growing…stiff…"

Rob laughed.

"Pixie…Boots…" she groaned, grinning as the boy wonder's smirk faded, "Avenge…me…"

She stuck her tongue out and slumped to the floor. Artemis and Zatanna both giggled.

"Nice performance," Wally said, rolling his eyes.

The Team voted to kill Kaldur, who turned out to be the medic, just as she'd guessed. After that, the game moved quickly, and Wally and Dick emerged victorious.

Then, it was time for laser tag.

Two teams. Barbara had always hated picking teams. Superboy and M'gann both rejected the idea of being on the same team as Barbara. Dick smiled and waved her over to where he, Wally and Artemis were standing.

"Both batkids," Artemis remarked. "We're gonna win for sure."
Wally smiled warily at Barbara, then retreated to Dick's side. She'd hit him lightly enough that he wouldn't bruise, but she figured that the punch was still fresh on his mind.


"Eesh, guys. Ditch your vest and hide in the ventilation system one time—"

"ANYways. No knocking anyone out. No biting, clawing, scratching or fighting. Let's try not to put out any eyes tonight, mkay?"

Barbara heaved a sigh. "Aw. Dang it. I so wanted to go blind tonight."

Roquelle rolled her eyes.

"You get shot three times, you're out until the medic heals you. Medic gets shot, y'all are on your own. Last team standing wins. Losing team gets clean up duty. And you know how finicky Canary is about a clean house."

Barbara secured her vest, and watched her teammates do the same. She overheard Connor telling M'gann that it would be an easy victory: Wally was too loud, Artemis too impulsive. Barbara wouldn't be a problem. They'd seen her in action. And Robin wouldn't be able to see three feet in front of him with those sunglasses on.

Barbara turned to Dick, and he nodded to show he'd heard.

"Not to worry, BG," he said, pulling up his shirt just a little, so that Barbara and their two teammates could see the utility belt he was wearing.

"You wore your belt to a party?" Artemis asked, almost scoffing.

"Oh, good," Barbara sighed, "Not just me, then."

She showed them the edge of her belt, just enough so that they could see the edge of the bat emblem. Wally blew air out through his cheeks.

"Seriously. Paranoid much?"

"Never leave home without 'em," Rob said, grinning. He slipped something small and black from one of the pockets and turned away from them. With one quick movement, Rob had the sunglasses off, and a fresh domino mask on.

"And as for you, Babs," he said, "Don't worry about them. They've only seen you slip up that one time. They haven't seen what the batkids can really do."

They high-fived, and Artemis and Wally began to look a bit nervous.

The lights flipped off, and Barbara flicked the switch on her blaster. Artemis and Wally began returning fire to the other team, which wasn't the best tactic, but it was appreciated. It gave Batgirl and Robin all the time they needed to get to higher ground.

"Ceiling?" Barbara whispered.

Dick nudged her arm. "You know it."

The wonderful thing about having a utility belt is that you always have a grappling gun close at
The cables whined a little as they shot up to the high, rocky ceiling, and as they pulled the batkids up. Down below, there was utter pandemonium. Aqualad and Zatanna were a little smarter in that they moved to more secure positions behind the couches and training equipment. Artemis was shot down, and Barbara hurried to anchor herself to a stalactite before shooting her teammate with a healing laser.

"Way to be, Medic!" Robin whispered, and Barbara could practically hear his smile.

"Thanks, Pixie Boots. Now, let's take these guys down!"

She and Robin aimed and fired at will, and Connor and Kaldur seemed to be very confused when they couldn't see who was shooting at them.

"Robin! Batgirl! For your sakes, I hope you did not lose your light vests!" Kaldur shouted. Barbara opened her mouth to reply, then realized that doing so would give away their position. Instead, she shot him down.

M'gann was very good at not getting hit, though Barbara was pretty sure that going intangible was cheating.

"The Martian must go down," she whispered.

"Agreed, young padawan. Let's do it."

"Oh, Robby. If anyone's a padawan here, it'd be you."

The cables whispered as they lowered themselves downward a little bit. Barbara made sure that her body was bent in such a way that it kept most of the glowing blue light of her vest hidden. She saw Dick do the same.

With Wally and Artemis both down, the Red team started hunting around for the two missing blues.

"Where did they go?"

"Cheaters."

"They can't have gone very far!"

The Reds were splitting up, their lights bobbing erratically through the dark as they searched.

Dick's fingers tapped her shoulder, falling back to nonverbal signals.

One. Two. Ready?

She tapped his fingers. Three. Four. You know it.

The releases on their belts snapped open, and they flipped, rolling into somersaults as they hit the floor. Immediately, Barbara healed Artemis and Wally while Dick shot up the other Team. M'gann was so taken by surprise that Barbara easily got three shots in. The other three Reds went down almost just as fast.

When the lights flickered back on again, Barbara and Dick were standing over their defeated teammates.
Superboy gaped. "Whoa."

Barbara and Dick high-fived, laughing.

"Way to bring the aster!" Rob exclaimed.

Barbara buffed her nails on her shirt. "Nothing quite so ‘turbing as a good victory."

The lights went out again, and the room fell silent for a moment. Their vests seemed to have stopped working, too, so the only sound was the scuffling of feet and various voices calling out for the others.

"Uh…round two?" Barbara asked.

Then, something collided sharply with the back of her head.
Trials

Barbara's entire head pounded like a bass drum. She let out a small squeak and let her eyes crack open, but immediately decided that was a mistake when the blinding light hit, and increased the pain tenfold. The epicenter was a throbbing pulse on the back of her skull.

"H-hello?" Her mouth was dry. She tried to lick her lips with a sandpaper tongue, then gave up. A thousand thoughts flooded her mind at once. Where was she? What had happened to laser tag? Where were the others?

"Hello?" Someone nearby croaked. They sounded close, and...

Barbara gasped and jerked herself awake, disregarding the stinging sensation behind her eyes. Once they'd adjusted, she realized that there had never been any light at all. She was in almost complete darkness, but she could pick out shifting forms in the dark. When they groaned, she recognized them as her teammates.

"R-Robin?" she called.

Someone grabbed her shoulders, and stifled her scream with a firm gloved hand. She felt pressure on her eyelids, then release. Cautiously, Barbara lifted a tentative hand to her eyes, and brushed the familiar roughness of Kevlar. An eye mask.

"Thanks, Rob," she sighed.

His hand clapped over her mouth again.

"Shhh," he whispered in her ear, "Not sure who's listening, BG, but we're not in Kansas anymore. We're...somewhere else."

"Huh?"

"Turn on night vision. You'll see."

Her hand shook as she brought her fingers up to the left side of the mask, before realizing that it was Robin's mask; the night vision would be on the right.

Their surroundings lit up into better focus. Not perfect. But better.

She could see the silhouettes of her teammates, but not enough to pick them out individually. High above them, sloping ceilings arched in a sinister point, like the inside if a gothic chapel. But...were those spines? Or scales?

"Definitely not in Kansas anymore," she whispered. Next to her, Rob nodded. The white eyes of his mask appeared to glow softly, like those cheap glow-in-the-dark ceiling stars. It was a mechanism built into the masks to help the wearers distinguish allies. It was wonderful for late night patrols; in complete darkness, you wouldn't have to worry about punching out a partner.

"It almost looks...alien," he whispered. "Like..." He paused, confusion flickering over his face. "I don't even know. That's...that's weird."

"What is?"

"A thought. On the tip of my...mind, I guess? But now it's just gone."
Barbara placed a reassuring hand on Rob's shoulder, then silently hurried to each huddled silhouette in the large room. Artemis startled awake, and almost punched Barbara in the jaw, but she managed to jerk back at the last second. Zatanna and Rocket were sluggishly huddled on the ground nearby. She helped Artemis stumble over to the two girls, then glanced over at Robin. He was helping Miss Martian help a prone Superboy to his feet, and nudging Kid Flash with the toe of his boot. Aqualad stood nearby, holding a palm to his forehead. Slowly, they all made their way to each other in the center of the room. It was Aqualad who took charge.

"It would appear, Team, that we have been apprehended. The League may have no idea where we are. Or that we are even missing."

The Team shifted uncomfortably at that, while Robin and Batgirl both instantly went for their belts. They pressed the symbols on the buckles, but a red flash told them exactly what they hadn't wanted to hear.

"No signal," Batgirl said with as much calm as she could muster. "No way to contact our mentor, and no way for him to track us."

"Do you guys seriously need wifi to call Batman?" Wally demanded.

Robin and Batgirl shared a nervous glance, then nodded simultaneously.

"The thing is," Robin said tightly, "Our belts can get a signal anywhere on or around Earth, because we're hooked up to a specific satellite."

"Which means what?" Rocket demanded apprehensively.

"It means," Batgirl replied, taking a rattling breath, "That there's either someone or something tampering with our signal—"

"Which is crazy impossible to do," Robin cut in.

"—Or…we're outside of Earth's orbit."

Light flooded the room, and everyone winced, Batgirl and Robin especially, and they hurried to flip off their night vision.

A hulking humanoid figure towered over them by at least six or seven feet, surrounded by the halo of light emanating from whatever lay beyond the doorway he stood in.

"The girl is correct," the thing said, in an accent that was impossible to place. "You are far, far away from your puny home world."

"Awesome," Batgirl muttered, digging as discreetly as possible through the pockets of her belt.

The creature stepped forward, and the heroes could see him in better focus. He was covered in rippling muscles, clothed only in black leggings with black sword straps crisscrossing his massive chest. His skin was the color of ripe plums, and he had pointed teeth that glinted with wetness when he smiled malevolently at them. Batgirl spotted a third eye in the center of his forehead, though the alien kept it closed.

"The Mighty Despero desires to study you Earthens. Discover the limits of your tiny human frames. He would like to study your abilities and glean the secrets of your masters, so that we can Discover the means to defeating them!"
The alien’s mouth never moved while he spoke, and his voice was high, and slightly nasal. And so…chirper. That's the word Alfred might have used. It reminded Batgirl of a car salesman she'd met years ago. She and a few other kids had been trying to steal a whole car—or at least the contents of the safety deposit box at the back of the dealership—and had been confronted by the slick dealer. This alien had a voice just like that man's.

"Does 'The Mighty Despero' always refer to himself in the third person?" Wally shot out.

Batgirl's fingers closed around a batarang, and she saw the tenseness in Robin’s shoulders that told her that he was doing the same.

"Unfortunately, Earthen, we will not ultimately need live subjects for all of our experiments. Do not expect to survive!"

{Miss Martian?} Kaldur's cool voice filled their heads.

{Link is online.}

{Then go.}

The Team leapt into action. Artemis whipped a crossbow from a holster on her thigh, firing bolts at the alien while Rocket and Zatanna blasted at the humanoid with magic and energy. Superboy leapt up and tore the alien’s ear, while Aqualad sent bursts of electricity towards the beast. Batgirl and Robin were throwing batarang after batarang, but the sharp projectiles didn't appear to have any effect on the creature.

"Enough!" The alien shouted. Energy blasted the room like a miniature nuclear explosion, and the sidekicks fell to the floor, defeated. The alien must have opened his third eye, because when the dust settled, Batgirl watched it squint shut. Then, unbelievably, a hovering robot swooped out from behind the alien's shoulder. It appeared that the big alien was mute; this robot served as his voice. It waved its arms, clearly agitated. "The Mighty Despero has seen enough. It is time for you Earthen to die!"

Robin was pressed to the floor next to Batgirl, and she saw his eyes wander to the empty, open, inviting doorway. The humanoid thundered into the room, and picked Aqualad up by the neck. The Atlantean grunted, wheezing as the alien squeezed his windpipe.

"Excellent choice, master!" The robot shrieked. "This is the student of Aquaman! His head will look marvelous in your trophy room."

Batgirl shuddered, and reached for her utility belt. There had to be something in there to help. There had to be.

{Team} Aqualad's voice filled their heads. {The way is open. Take your chance.}

There were several telepathic protests, but Batgirl felt Robin's fist close around her wrist; the one going for her belt. She tried to shake him off, but he shook his head mournfully. He dragged her a little as they edged towards the door, and their team began to follow their example reluctantly.

"Any final words, water dweller?" The robot said, almost giggling. Kaldur's face was unreadable.

"I will not give you the satisfaction."

The monster pulled a dagger the size of a sign post from his back, and just as the team reached the door, he plunged the blade through Aqualad's chest.
Screaming filled the psychic link, and Batgirl, staring wide-eyed at the scene, winced sharply. Kaldur shuddered, and gasped.

\{G-go!\}

Robin and Wally had to pull the others from the room, but they were able to make it out before the alien or the creepy robot had the chance to notice.

Tears streamed down everyone's cheeks.

Aqualad was gone.

Batgirl helped Robin cut through a vent in the floor, and together, they filed everyone else through, before climbing in themselves. M'gann was curled up into a ball on the ground, quietly crying. Batgirl wished that she could comfort the Martian, but they were running out if time as it was, and she was occupied with soldering the pieces of the vent back into place with Robin.

Wally leaned against the wall, trying to hide his shaking shoulders. Everyone was pretty torn up. Robin and Batgirl were, too, but they couldn't afford to show it; if the batkids panicked, everyone else would descend into hysteria. Batgirl could only hope that she didn't seem callous or uncaring. Even now, her fingers shook, which was especially dangerous with a laser in hand.

Artemis moaned softly, and her rattling breaths made Batgirl flip her laser off and crouch down next to the archer. The blonde's face was slicked with sweat. Her arms were speckled with goosebumps.

"Artemis?" she asked softly, "Can I see your arm?"

Artemis's voice cracked. "I didn't want to say anything. After Kaldur…" she trailed off, choking on the last word.

The arm was swollen, turning purple, and jerked to the side at a nauseating angle. Artemis must have landed on her arm when they were thrown by the energy blast.

"Artemis," Barbara said again, putting a hand on her shoulder. She forced the tremor out of her own voice and continued. "I'm going to need to set and splint your arm."

Artemis took a shaky breath. "Do you even know how to do that?"

Robin crouched down next to them. "Don't worry. She's a natural. She's patched Batman and me up plenty of times."

"Wally? Help me?" Barbara nodded towards Artemis, and Wally hurried to hold her down, embracing her to keep her calm.

Barbara lifted her scarf over her head, and set the arm, using one of Artemis's crossbow bolts and the gray fabric to make a splint. Robin's hand over her mouth kept Artemis from screaming.
"How are you both so calm?" Rocket demanded.

Barbara finished tying off her scarf and looked up.

"Practice, Rock," she said, solemnly. "Robin and I have seen worse."

At that, Wally exploded. "Worse?! Kaldur is dead!"

Robin put a solemn hand on Wally's shoulder. "Batgirl and I have both learned that there's a time for mourning, and a time for action. And right now, we need to move."

Batgirl helped Artemis to stand, while Wally got on her other side. Connor lifted M'gann into his arms.

The rest of the Team hurried on their way, winding through alien ventilation shafts. Lucky for them, the shafts were not only larger than any they had in Gotham, but large enough to easily shuffle through on foot. There were a few alarms going off above, but Batgirl and Robin were both desensitized enough to ignore the noise. The others hid their own fright well, though Barbara could see that the piercing screeches were starting to get to them, along with everything else.

Then, as they reached a curve in the shaft, a floor panel jiggled and fell away.

Right out from underneath Zatanna.

Artemis screamed as her friend fell screeching down a long shaft. With horror, Barbara recognized the sound of ventilation fans whirring. A sick feeling churned in her stomach. Dick staggered and braced himself against the wall. Wally doubled over and threw up.

"K-keep…keep moving," Barbara stuttered. "This shaft has traps. We need to find a ship. An escape pod. Something."

Artemis was sobbing, but they managed to get her over the gaping hole that was now Zatanna's final resting place. Barbara felt nauseous at the mere thought, but forced her feet to keep shuffling. They were moving faster now, eager to avoid any more traps. When they finally found an opening, Batgirl and Robin worked quickly to remove the grating and move everyone out again.

The corridor they landed in seemed to be deserted. Barbara braced Artemis against her hip, and listened.

"Robin," she said, "I hear machinery. A hangar?"

He cocked his head to listen, then nodded.

"Possibly. Let's hurry."

They shuffled down the hall, towards the sounds, reaching a gigantic door. Miss Martian tried to phase through it, and Superboy punched it repeatedly. But to no avail. Robin yanked the cord out of his wrist computer and frantically started trying to hack his way in.

"Watch my back, guys?"

Batgirl turned to the three corridor entrances on either side of them. "Got it."

They heard scuttling, and Wally voiced a quick warning. Robin sighed in exasperation.

"I don't recognize any of these symbols…there!"
The doors slid open about three feet, and Batgirl shuffled everyone through. Several robots appeared in two of the three corridors, and opened fire with sinister looking weapons that bristled from their arms and shoulders.

Miss Martian screamed as a scorching hole punched through her stomach.

"M'gann!" Connor screamed. M'gann let out a small whimper before collapsing into his arms.

"Superboy! The doors won't stay open much longer!" Robin shouted. "You have to leave her!"

In response, Connor held Miss Martian's body closer to him, and was torn apart by blaster fire. Barbara closed the doors, letting out a painful gasp as she did so.

Rocket, Kid Flash, Artemis, Robin, and Batgirl. The only ones left.

"Did you really think that escape would be so easy, little humans?"

The heroes whipped around. The giant purple behemoth sneered from behind an army of smaller robots. His favorite little hunk of metal hovered by his massive finned head. Robin gripped a batarang tightly, though he knew it would do no good.

"Fire at will!" the robot shouted.

Rocket went down with a scream, while everyone else dodged out of the way, hiding behind a giant ship.

"Batgirl, do you think you can fly this thing?" Robin hissed. Barbara took a quick second to analyze the craft, then nodded. Blaster fire erupted around them as they forced their way inside.

Batgirl sat down in front of an intricate control panel, furiously typing away at different buttons. Surprisingly, the controls were eerily similar to Earth aircraft controls. She didn't pause to consider the why's and how's of that; they had slightly bigger issues at the moment.

"Robin, Kid Flash, get Artemis buckled in to a seat. Then do the same."

Batgirl looked up through the wide window of the ship's front. The alien behemoth bellowed at them, his army aiming large bazooka like blasters.

"Surrender now, Earthens, or we will destroy you!" The robot swooped towards the ship.

Barbara heard the click of the boys' seatbelts, and closed her eyes for a second, calculating. The aliens had the weapons. They had the means to blast the ship if someone didn't come out. They needed a distraction.

Then, she punched the autopilot button, setting in motion the coordinates she'd set for Earth.

She stood and turned, walking towards the ship's exit portal.

"Batgirl? What are you doing? Barbara!"

Robin struggled to undo his seatbelt, but it wouldn't come undone; not until the ship was safely away in space.

Artemis and Wally protested, terror written on their faces.

"Get them home safe, Rob," she said quietly. Then, she stepped out of the ship.
Barbara turned her chin up towards the alien, arms crossed over her chest. The alien foot soldiers laughed at her attempt at defiance, but she held her ground. This was a time for theatrics, not stealth.

"Where are the others?" The robot demanded. He flew right up to her, his little metal head just inches from her nose. She glowered.

"Dead," she spat. "I'm the only one left, you monster!"

The creature laughed, throwing back his head. The little robot turned towards his employer and gestured towards Batgirl.

"This one has no abilities, master. Not a fitting prize. Shall I dispatch her for you?"

But Despero held up a hand, and grinned widely. A shudder ripped through Barbara, but she crossed her arms and took a small steep back. She had her own theories about this whole encounter; there were too many things that didn't add up. The human-sized air vents, Robin's ease at hacking the hangar doors, and of course, the airplane controls.

Of course, if she was wrong, then this next part was going to royally suck.

The monster pulled the dagger from his belt, grinning, and before Batgirl had time to react, piercing fuzziness burst through her stomach.

Robin screamed as they watched Batgirl's death. The ship sped forward at the speed of sound and out through the hangar into deep space.

As the buckles clicked and came undone, Robin sank to the floor. His arms wrapped around his chest, and he heaved in a few ragged breaths.

He needed to pull himself together. Batman had taught him better than this. Artemis and Wally were both staring now, eyes wide at the Boy Wonder's break in composure.

"Dude," Wally said softly, "I'm so sorry."

Robin bit his tongue until he tasted his own coppery blood, then stood up, shakily.

"T-there's no time for mourning. We need to get home. "
Robin grabbed the ships controls, and stared out at the blackness, ignoring the sympathetic stares of his teammates.

Barbara sucked in a grating gasp, and jerked upright. Her hands clapped over her abdomen. Adrenaline surged through her bloodstream, making her limbs buzz and shake like she'd downed a whole gallon of double espresso. It was never a feeling that she enjoyed.

Her surroundings began to clear. She was on a table, still dressed in her party clothes, though the garments were noticeably lacking in bloodstains. Around her, she saw her teammates. Rocket, Miss Martian, Superboy, Zatanna, and Aqualad all sat up on similar tables, blankets around their shoulders.

Robin, Kid Flash and Artemis lay innate on the other tables nearby.

Someone shouted. "She's awake!"

Barbara's muscles tensed instinctively for a fight, but a dark gloved hand pressed down on her shoulder.

"Batgirl. It's me."

Batman was standing stoically behind her, his face—or at least, what was visible—was placid. Gently, he laid a fleece blanket over her shoulders. The sudden weight and warmth was so comforting, and Barbara wanted nothing more than to curl up and take a nap. For whatever reason, she was wiped, totally exhausted.

But first, she needed answers.

"We were in space…?" She stared down her mentor, knowing that he would answer, even though it hadn't really come out as a question.

"It was a mental training exercise. Every other month or so, Martian Manhunter and the League test the Team's ability to cope with disastrous scenarios, sometimes with no possible positive outcome," Batman said.

Rocket snorted. "Except that you already tested us! Three weeks ago! That's—"

Batman silenced her with one look.

"Certain circumstances apply. The Team has a new member-"

"So it's her fault!" Superboy snarled.

"No." Batman's voice was deadly calm. "It wasn't, actually. I will explain once the exercise is finished."
He glanced back down at his female protégé. She returned his gaze with equal intensity. The two seemed to be involved in a deep mental conversation, but finally, Batgirl spoke.

"I totally called it," she said with a grin.

M'gann raised an eyebrow. "What?"

In reply, Batgirl only waved her hand. "Never mind. I'll tell you later. But what I'd like to know is..." She turned back to Batman. "Why? Robin said you discontinued these exercises after the first big one went wrong."

Batman nodded, like he'd been expecting the question. "We've put in certain safety protocols to prevent a similar episode. But for now, try to concern yourself with getting some rest. Your mind may have been doing the work, but your body wasn't fully aware of that fact during the exercise." He paused, then said. "You'll need your strength for patrol tonight."

He swished away, cape billowing, and Barbara pulled her blanket more tightly around her. Every muscle in her body ached.

The room was completely empty now, except for the Team members, conscious or otherwise.

It was Zatanna who stood and moved over to Barbara's table. She sat down carefully, as though afraid of scaring a skittish animal.

"Barbara? I...I noticed something during the exercise. May I—?"

Barbara raised an eyebrow in confusion. Zatanna seemed to take that as an answer, and gently but swiftly removed Barbara's scarf.

She put up her hands, hoping to hide the awful pink and purple marks on her neck, but it was too late. The Team had seen. Faces softened into pity and sympathy all around her. That made Barbara's blood boil, but she hid it quickly.

"How did you get those marks?" Kaldur asked, "I thought that your armor protected you from injuries of that nature."

Slowly, all eyes turned to Robin, still lying on the table. His glasses had slid up his face ever so slightly, so that his shiner was just visible.

Robin's mask was made from a special blend of shock absorbing protective materials that were supposed to help protect against black eyes. Richard Grayson, ward of Gotham's own Bruce Wayne couldn't have visible marks. What would people say?

The others seemed to have come to the same conclusion; the injuries had been inflicted while the batkids were out of uniform.

"Batgirl?" Zatanna asked softly, "Does Batman ever...did he...um—"

The realization hit Barbara like a literal slap in the face.

"Oh! No!" Her fingers crept up to her neck. "Batman's never laid a hand on either of us. He wouldn't. This was...Robin and I got in a fight."

"Robin did this?" M'gann gasped.

"No. There was somebody else. He was...he attacked me."
She relayed the ordeal, wincing at some parts, and described how the injuries had been inflicted. How she didn't dare fight back for fear of giving away her secret. Zatanna laid a hand on her shoulder. The gesture, coming from a teammate, was comforting, empathetic.

"Dang, girl," Roquette said softly. "I'm sorry."

Barbara smiled softly. "I'm just glad Robin showed up when he did."

"So, wait. I don't get it," Superboy cut in, "I thought you two hated each other?"

Batgirl shook her head. "Kind of? Maybe? It's...um, complicated."

The three teammates still unconscious stirred.

Robin steered the ship towards home, the little computer in the control hub helpfully giving him the directions. His mind reeled, a million things running through at once.

Barbara.

He should have done something.

What was he going to tell Batman?

He should have done *something*.

The image of her, bravely stepping out of the ship. Giving the rest of them the diversion they needed to escape; they never would have made it out of the hangar otherwise.

Barbara. Telling him to get the others back safely.

Barbara. Small in front of that towering monster.

Barbara. Skewered on its dagger like a shish kabob.

Robin felt sick to his stomach.

Behind him, Kid Flash was hard at work figuring out different medical extensions and equipment in the back of the shuttle. Artemis was putting on a brave face, but unless they got her back soon, she'd go into shock. Or worse.

"Need any help back there?" Robin asked, eyes still fixed on the bleak void of space.

Wally shook his head. "Just focus on flying. Do you need anything?"

Robin's hands tightened on the controls.

"Right." Kid Flash turned back to his glowing monitor. "Okay, then."
The helpful computer screen shivered and went black, then, the face of the annoying little robot filled the screen.

"Earhens!" He shouted. "My master's ship is in pursuit. Surrender now, and your deaths will be painless!"

Kid Flash sped to the back window.

"Rob, we've got company!" He warned.

"Much less painful than that of your teammate's."

The robot moved from the center of the screen as the camera panned to the hangar floor, where each of their fallen teammates' bodies were laid out side by side. Batgirl's body lay limply on the end, and her blue eyes were open and staring at oblivion.

Artemis gagged, and Wally grimaced, looking away quickly.

Rage coursed with warmth and fire through Robin's veins. He flicked a pocket of his belt open and extracted a birdarang. With fury, he stabbed it through the synthetic screen. It flickered and blackened, the robot's smug voice and the disturbing display silenced.

Wally and Artemis stared at him, but he said nothing, only pushed the shuttle to go faster.

"The green lantern Corp. have set up a perimeter around the Earth that should keep these guys out," he said.

"Then how did they get us in the first place?" Wally demanded.

Robin shrugged. "Haven't you ever seen Star Trek, KF?"

Comprehension lit up Wally's face. "Beam me up, Scotty," he muttered.

"Exactly."

"I don't get it," Artemis said weakly.

Kid Flash turned to her, excitedly explaining molecules and teleportation, but Robin only tuned in slightly. He was more concerned in aiming the ship towards their destination.

They neared their blue and green planet, but Robin's eyes fixed onto the hulking Watchtower, circling the Earth like a mindful Guardian.

Robin sped forwards, and a familiar voice crackled over a speaker.

[Unidentified craft, please state your origin and purpose, or prepare to be terminated.]

"Hal!" Robin shouted. "Hal Jordan! Green Lantern! This is Robin, Kid Flash and Artemis!"

[Robin!? What do you kids think you're doing?]

"Just let us through!"

"But not the psychos behind us!" KF chimed in.

They passed the barely visible boundary, while the alien fleet behind them crumpled and crashed.
Robin docked them safely in the Watchtower's landing bay, and giant metal doors closed behind them.

As the boys carried Artemis between them, three league members were there to meet them. Flash, Green Lantern. And Batman.

Robin almost lost it right there in front of his mentor.

"I'm sorry," he breathed. "I'm so, so sorry."

"For what?" Batman asked. "You did well."

Dick opened his eyes, blinking to adjust to the change of lighting. Everything was slightly darkened by his sunglasses, which was a stark contrast to the bright docking bay of the Watchtower…

Except. He wasn't in the Watchtower anymore.

He was on a table. He could hear the rest of the Team.

He almost groaned aloud. A test. It had all been one of the tests.

Dick sat up, and saw Wally and Artemis doing the same. Zatanna and Artemis were hugging with Roquelle. Conner and Wally and Kaldur were all congregating over by Dick's table, the invitation to join in open and waiting.

And then.

There she was.

Barbara stood shyly by her table, not a bruise or cut on her. No eye mask. Scarf intact. No gaping wounds.

He drank in every detail. Her hair was a little messed up from laser tag, or from lying on the table. It didn't really matter which, though, because she was here.

His breathing was short as he got to his feet.

Before he knew what he was doing, he'd pushed past Connor, and had Batgirl wrapped in a bear hug.

She stiffened, a little shocked at first, but melted and put her own arms over his shoulders.

She smelled like vanilla. His nose was in her hair, until she pulled back, and tipped her face up.

He pressed his lips to hers, and the room went dead silent.

Dick had no idea how long the kiss lasted, but when they broke apart, he was staring back at six
very shocked Teammates. Barbara was smiling, a faint flush that matched her hair creeping up her face.

Wally wolf whistled, and everyone giggled. Dick was grateful for the break of tension.

Batman stepped into the room, and everyone fell quiet again, still smiling.

"Good," he said, "You're all awake and alert. I hope this exercise has been an educating experience."

Wally snorted, doubling over, and everyone else dissolved into giggling.

Robin had known the Batman for a long time, and he couldn't remember a lot of other times he'd seen his boss look more confused.

The laughter subsided, and Batman continued.

"As you know, the exercises are designed to test Team cooperation and dynamics. Because the Team has gained a new member, we decided to move up the date, and discover things we hadn't previously known about each other—"

"I'll say!" Wally cackled.

The Team lost it again. Robin met Batgirl's eyes and saw that she was trying really hard not to laugh, but as soon as they made eye contact, both batkids burst into hysterical laughter. Zatanna's shoulders were shaking, Connor was covering his mouth with a fist in a pathetic attempt to hide his giggles. Even Kaldur was chuckling.

"Kid Flash." Batman's voice knocked the room into silence. "Do you need to be excused?"

Wally coughed. "No, Batman. Sorry, Batman."

"Right, then. The test had an extra purpose today as well. We, the League, watched your reactions, and commend all of you for your levelheadedness. We would like to extend an invitation to Rocket and Zatanna to join the League. Superboy and Aqualad gave also been extended invitations."

The room was dead quiet, then exploded as everyone slapped each other on the back and laughed, grinning like idiots.

"Your replies?" Batman asked.

"Heck yeah!" Rocket yelled.

"Yes!" Zatanna shouted above the din.

Superboy shrugged. "I don't know if I'm ready, yet, Batman. To join the League. I want to stay where I am."

The Team cheered, and Barbara made sure to congratulate the serious kryptonian.

Everyone fell silent for Aqualad's reply.

The Atlantean wet his lips and stepped forward.

"I accept your invitation. But I, too, wish to remain where I am for now."
The Team cheered, and Robin grabbed Batgirl's hand. The two smiled at each other all the way back to the cave. It worried the Dark Knight a little; he kept expecting them to start shouting at each other. Batman repeatedly asked what his sidekicks kept grinning about, even jokingly asked if they'd breathed in any Joker gas, but his two partners wouldn't say.

But not even Batgirl and Robin could hide something from the World's Greatest Detective for long. He found out, as soon as he caught them that night on patrol, kissing in the glittering lights of Gotham city.
TWO YEARS LATER

Batgirl's gloved fingers tapped furiously at the keys, and the echoing clicks made the bats hanging in the far reaches of the cave shiver uneasily. The batcomputer was responding perfectly to her commands, and yet, she was still having trouble finding the information she needed. There'd been a breach somewhere. Though maybe breach wasn't a strong enough word. Somewhere, someone had ripped a tear in the fabric of their dimension. Batman had explained this nonchalantly on his way to an emergency League meeting earlier that week, and while he seemed to feel that the situation was under control, Batgirl had other ideas. See, she had a theory that the breach hadn't only caused a smattering of temporary blackouts across the globe. From skimming news articles and credible websites, she'd put together the idea that electricity spikes and declines were only a part of it.

What if, when the breach had opened, someone had come through?

But there wasn't enough information. Only small sightings and rumors. The tear had been mended by the Green Lantern Corp, so everyone felt a little more at ease, and Batgirl figured she ought to as well. And yet, the nagging sense that she was missing something remained.

Behind her, she could hear a grunt of frustration. A smile tweaked the corners of her lips.

"Hurry it up, Dick," she called. "We've got patrol. Bruce's already on the Upper East end waiting for us."

She paused, waiting for a reply.

"Dick. It's been four weeks! You've got to be used to the new costume by now!"

Dick finally emerged from the shadows. He seemed sheepish in his gray and black outfit, decked out with pockets for various crime fighting goodies, holsters for his escrima sticks, (a new preferred set of weapons) and a blue eagle emblazoned on the chest. Batgirl turned, resting her palms on the edge of the computer desk. The new uniform suited him, she thought. Maybe even better than his Robin suit had. He'd always hated that cape, for one thing—he was an acrobat! —and the bright colors of his old costume only seemed to draw ridicule from villains now that the Boy Wonder had reached the age of eighteen, and was now only two inches shorter than his mentor. There was something about a full-sized young man jumping around in red and yellow that made criminals shake…with laughter. Now, all decked out in dark, the uniform displayed more than enough intimidating muscle, without the drag of a cape, or the stigma of pixie boots.

The new uniform was definitely not childish, that was for sure.

"Still gotta break it in," he said. His lopsided grin earned him one of her smirks as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Though I guess you'd know, right?"
Batman had let her design her own new uniform several months ago when she'd hit her own growth spurt. Now five inches taller, and a little fuller, she'd decided to take the designs a little farther than they'd been before. The yellow boots and gloves had been the first things to go. She'd added armor to her stomach and chest area, all across the front and through the back. It seemed to be the place most villains went for with guns and knives, anyway. The end result wasn't vastly different, though. Why change up a good thing when you had one going, after all?

"Ah, trust me. Feels like a second skin after a while. Besides." She leaned forward. "I find that I quite enjoy your new outfit." The smirk grew wider. Grinning, Dick stepped closer.

"Are you flirting with me, Miss Batgirl?" He leaned in closer, bracing his arms on either side of her. "Cause I think Nightwing quite enjoys that kind of thing."

Barbara raised her eyebrows. "Mmmhmm." He leaned in for a kiss, but at the last minute, she twisted and faced the Batcomputer monitor. "Maybe later, Hunk Wonder. For now though," she pointed at the bat computer's screen, "We have patrolling to do. And you have some contacts to visit for me."

He nuzzled her neck a little, breathing in deeply through his nose. "Sounds good. I—" He jerked back. "Wait. What did you just call me?"

"Uh…"

If possible, his grin widened tenfold. He backed up a little more, then sighed dramatically, and struck a pose.

"Be honest, though, BG. 'Hunky' as I am, does this suit make me look fat?"

Barbara barked out a laugh. She got to her feet, and was over to her partner in one stride. The two shared a quick kiss, and Barbara smiled wide.

"Not a bit, Nightwing," she said. "Now come on!"

She pulled him over to their motorbikes, and as she revved the engine, she couldn't help but roll her eyes and laugh.

There was nothing quite like swinging over the streets and people of Gotham. The whole city lit up like Christmas at night, the chill evening breeze blasting your face and whipping through your hair. The roar of traffic and crowds, moving below like a rushing tide. The city during the day had its charms, for sure. But at night…

It was almost like flying.

Exhilarating.

It didn't take long, though. Batgirl found her mentor's dark silhouette in the barely-there light underneath a steel suspended train track. One of many such tracks in Gotham. It was the perfect
place for the homeless, the criminally bent, and anyone stupid enough to wander this way without some means of protection. As a street kid, she’d never dared to so much as walk past this place without a switchblade or a bent piece of rebar. Once, even a plastic fork. Anything could be a weapon if you tried hard enough. Her heels made a barely audible click against the steel support beam. Batman nodded slightly to acknowledge her presence.

Batgirl knew to stay silent; she could already see the thugs gathered under the tracks below. They were big. Mean looking. It wasn't anything she hadn't handled before, but she was still glad she was concealed in the shadows above.

They stood gathered like circling sharks around a scruffy figure, whose hands were zip tied in front of him. The figure was shorter than she would have expected, but well built. The realization rattled her head a little, and it wasn't just the train thundering overhead; this was just a kid. A gag had been stuffed into his mouth, and the boy didn't seem to be happy about it.

One of the thugs was holding his hand gingerly, as if he'd been bit. Batgirl managed a smile.

"You just wait till the boss gets to you, kid!" The injured thug snarled.

The boy's hand moved, one choice finger pointing up to the sky, and the thug made a grunt of displeasure.

Batgirl hoped that Nightwing was pursuing that lead in Midtown, and that he'd found something useful. If nothing came of tonight, she'd be back to square one in her investigations; there was little info to be had anywhere else. He was supposed to meet them back at the Batmobile when he was done, and Batgirl was beginning to think that he might beat them there.

A car pulled up, motor humming, and Batgirl tensed in readiness. Beside her, Batman held up a hand. **Wait.** So she forced herself to relax.

The car door flew open, and a tall man in a suit stepped out authoritatively. He and two bodyguards stepped into the light, and Batgirl caught sight of his ruined face. Half of it, from his forehead to his chin, was bubbled and red. The lips were ruined, stretched like silly string over pearly white teeth. The eye was bulging out, bright and malevolent.

The other half of the man's face was male-model handsome, with slicked back hair and smooth olive skin.

Even the man's suit, one side black and one side white, was split down the middle.

Of course, Batgirl recognized the mob boss instantly. Part time Arkham Rogue, and part time mob boss. **Two Face.**

She felt a rush of relief that Dick was busy finding those contacts. Her partner still had nightmares about the former DA turned mobster. Nightmares that usually involved the crack of a baseball bat and breaking bones. Usually, she was the one to find him, thrashing until he was tied up in his own sheets and drenched in cold sweat.

"This is the kid, sir," one of the thugs gruffed, "The one who stole the money from us."

Two Face turned his terrifying gaze on the boy, who didn't even flinch. To his credit, the kid glared back defiantly, eyes narrowed. It was a look that would have given even the bats a run for their money.

**Kid's got nerve,** she thought with a slight nod.
"That so?" Two Face ripped the gag from the boy's mouth. "And what," he demanded, "Would a whelp like you need with fourteen hundred dollars?"

The boy smirked. "You're kidding, right? You $%#^#'s were just leavin' the $%#$%# cash lyin' around. Figured I could use it better."

"You figured wrong, kid." Two Face smacked the boy hard across the face. "Now where's the cash?"

Head still faced to the side, the kid scoffed. "Sure. Like I'd tell you that."

Two Face was outraged. He hit the boy one more time, then turned to his goons.

"Get to work on him. Figure out where the cash is, then kill him. Make sure the GCPD doesn't find any evidence."

Two Face started towards his car, and Batgirl looked to Batman for permission. He shook his head and whispered, "Not him. Not yet. Not today."

Batgirl nodded. Focus would be on the goons, then.

As the car streaked away, one of the thugs pulled a switchblade from his pocket. He flipped it open, and wedged it under one of the boy's fingernails.

"This's gonna be fun," he said, an evil smile spreading up his face.

Batman waved his hand.

"You're right," Batgirl called out. Every head turned to the bats' hiding place. Batgirl placed a fist on her hip and pasted a smirk on her face. "This will be fun. I haven't busted heads all day."

"It's the bats!" One thug gasped. Guns whipped out, and bullets flew past them, ratting and tatting away. Batgirl managed to dodge most of them, but one bullet made contact with her side. She winced at the sharp impact, but luckily the Kevlar stopped the projectile. It would probably still leave a bruise later, though.

When Batman entered the fray, it was all pretty much over. A few well aimed punches and kicks served to send the thugs off with their tails between their legs.

Batgirl looked around for the boy, but all that was left of him was a broken zip tie lying next to the thug's switchblade.

Eight muggers. A minor bank robbery attempt. Even some sucker who wanted to steal cash from a convenience store. All in a night's work. Batgirl struggled to keep her eyes open as she followed Batman back to his parking spot. She was wobbling as she swung, her abdomen on fire. Tonight, he'd parked the Batmobile in an alley where he was sure that no thug or mugger would operate that night: the alley two buildings away from the GCPD.
They descended from the roof of an apartment building, barely making a sound as they hit the concrete. Batman stood squarely in front of her, not moving. She couldn't see a thing around his bulky frame, her face full of bulletproof fabric. But she could hear him make a strange sound, coming from the back of his throat.

"Unreal," he muttered.

Batgirl craned her neck, and saw the Batmobile.

It was raised up on cinder blocks, the tires stacked haphazardly nearby. They'd been jacked.

"Huh," she said, "Batmobile lost its wheels and the mobsters got away. Just another Tuesday, then?"

Batman stepped forward, and a head popped up on the far side of the vehicle. It was a boy, his face streaked with black grease, and he held a tire jack in his hands. Batgirl squinted.

"Hey!" She recognized the boy immediately as the one they'd saved from Two Face's men. The boy dropped his jack with a clatter, and started to bolt out of the alley. A dark shape fell from the sky and stood, arms crossed, barring his escape. The boy drew back at the sight of the blue eagle, and turned.

Batman and Batgirl stood behind him; the boy was completely surrounded.

"$%^#" he moaned, shoulders slumping.

"Well, well," Nightwing said, "Looks like the thugs just keep on getting younger."

The boy glowered. "Keep your stupid wheels! They were too heavy to carry back anyway."

Batgirl inspected the boy's lean face. He was a street kid if she ever saw one. The way he talked, the way he held himself, even the way he dressed. She'd been camped out near a cop car once, and had heard one of the officers tell his partner that Gotham City street kids were like rats. Provoked, they were dangerous and unpredictable. Left alone, they tended to fade into the background. Life was safer that way.

There'd been other comparisons, of course. Their tendency to hide in the shadows, scavenge for scraps, and multiply like crazy. But Barbara had liked the first comparisons the best; it made her feel tougher, more 'dangerous and unpredictable'. This kid was just like that.

Batman knelt to the ground and picked up the tire jack.

"We're all going to put the wheels back on. And Nightwing?"

"Yeah?"

"That kid doesn't go anywhere."

Batgirl knelt to help her mentor reattach the first wheel holding it steady while he twisted the bolts back into place. She did her best to ignore the pounding in her side. Pain tugged like an ornery child on the edge of her consciousness, but she ignored it.

When all four wheels were back in place, they all filed into the Batmobile, kid included.

"Dibs on shotgun!" Batgirl and Nightwing both shouted at once. Nightwing beat her there by half a second, which left her in the back seat with the boy.
He'd seen too much, not to mention he'd almost made off with the Batmobile's wheels, and so Batgirl didn't really question Batman's motives for bringing him along. If word got out, every thug and gang banger in the city would be itching to do the same; the wheels were custom made, probably the most expensive set in Gotham—and of course, linked to Wayne Enterprises, if you did just the right amount of digging. So, naturally, they had to make sure that the boy was safe, and that he would neither tell, nor try the same thing again. The kid, though, didn't see it that way.

"This's kidnapping! You can't just take me away in your car! My mom's gonna be real worried, you know!"

Batgirl turned to him. "Kid, I don't think you have a mom, do you?"

The boy blanched a little, and turned away, staring out the tinted windows to watch the city go by. It was a stupid thing to say, of course. But it was obvious; the kid didn't look like he'd eaten much in a long time. Plus, street kids didn't usually talk about their parents. At all.

Batgirl knew from experience. She'd been there herself.

Batman and Nightwing had put up the barrier, a Plexiglas screen similar to what police used in their patrol cars. To bring criminals to base.

Her two male partners were having a conversation that the back-seat passengers couldn't hear, so Batgirl turned back to the boy.

"You're not being arrested, kiddo," she said casually, knowing that that would be his first concern. "We just need to ask you a few questions about tonight. Plus, the Bat's a little pissed that you tried to jack his car."

She cracked a smile, but the kid stared back sullenly.

"A few questions, huh?" He snorted. "You're just like the coppers."

He started to turn away again, but Batgirl held out her fist. Was it a cheesy play? Sure it was. But she needed this kid's trust. He turned back to her, startled, and maybe a little wary, but made a fist himself. She turned hers clockwise, until her thumb was pointed up, and let him put his, still faced down, on top of hers. They opened their hands, and clasped each other's wrists, then leaned over in the seat to embrace, clapping each other twice on the back with their free hand before pulling away. The kid's face was pulled into an expression of surprise.

"The Outcast handshake," he said, naming the street kid greeting. It was used usually when you wanted to show you were an ally, that you wouldn't stab the other person in the back while they slept. It was a promise of trustworthiness. "How did you—?"

She smiled. "Hey. I grew up under Gotham bridge."

"You?" he asked, eyes wide. "But you're—"

"Trust me, kid. I'm no copper."

He gaped, and she laughed.

"What's your name?" she asked him. He paused, still seemingly letting it sink in that she was like him. On the streets, the handshake was as good as a blood oath, so hopefully, he'd relax a little.

Finally, he opened his mouth. "Todd. Jason Todd."
"Well, Jason, don't tell the big man I said this," she darted a mock panicked look at the screen, and he actually managed a small smile. "But my name's Barbara. You can call me Babs."

He nodded, as if pleased to finally have some sort of information.

Suddenly, the cab was plunged into darkness. Jason flinched, but Barbara was used to it. They had arrived at the Batcave.

"Hello Master Bruce…Master Dick…Miss Barbara…oh, dear!"

Alfred dropped his tray with a clatter, sending all of his after-patrol, sugar-free-super-healthy peanut butter and oatmeal truffles scattering across the floor. (They were a great source of protein and omega 13!)

The bats froze, and turned to Jason, who had just heard all of their real names.

"Pfft," he huffed, looking up at Nightwing with a smirk. "Your name’s really Dick?"

Dick’s hand slapped over his face. Bruce's jaw clenched.

"I'm so sorry, sir!" Alfred looked as though he might melt into the floor with mortification. Barbara tried to make it up to him by picking up the fallen food.

"It's alright, Alfred," Bruce said, sighing, "But I suppose it means that our new friend will be staying a little bit longer than he would have liked."

Jason's head swiveled around the cave. He whistled slowly, impressed.

"Sweet digs," he said, "But what's with the giant dinosaur?"

Dick clapped the boy on the shoulder and started to lead him away. He gave them a look like, 'I'll distract him for a sec. You guys talk.' and said, "Aw, nobody knows. It's just a classic. Let me show you this fake penguin over here…"

Barbara's knees wobbled a little bit. Her head seemed to swim. She shrugged it off, though, and turned to Bruce.

"He says his name's Jason Todd. The tires are supposed to sell for quite a bit online. Apparently, you've got fans."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fantastic. And Two Face's money?"

Barbara shrugged. "He didn't mention it. But…"

Alfred was repositioning his tray. Barbara's gaze darted to him, then back to her mentor.

"He's like me. No family. Street kid. From what I gather, he's been in Juvie a few times. Probably
minor offenses, but my money's on petty theft."

"He told you all that?" Bruce raised his eyebrows.

She shook her head. "I can just tell."

Bruce turned and swept over to the computer. Barbara stayed put next to Alfred. As Bruce typed furiously, Barbara popped a peanut butter ball into her mouth.

Files came up on the screen, and Barbara waited for Bruce to read them.

She moaned around the food in her mouth. "The snacks are wonderful, as always, Alfred."

The butler beamed. "Thank you, Miss Barbara."

Bruce turned. "You were right. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. All of what you said checks out."

There were a couple of mugshots featuring a very disgruntled and ticked off Jason. News stories filled the screen.

"His father was a man named Willis James Todd."

Barbara gaped, another snack inches from her mouth. "The Willis Todd?"

Bruce swiveled in his chair. "You know him?"

She chewed thoughtfully, nodding.

"Thief. Liar. Former hit man for Falcone. And..."

Her eyes widened a fraction of an inch.

"A nasty thorn in Two Face's side. I remember being just down the alley where he beat up some of Dent's thugs."

Bruce nodded. "I got that from the news reports. My guess would be that Two Face and the Todd family have something of a rivalry."

Barbara nodded. Her hand snaked over to Alfred's tray again, but he pulled it back, waving a finger at her.

"That would make sense," she said, "seeing as how Two Face had Willis Todd murdered five years ago."

"And how did you get that?" Bruce asked.

She waved a snack at the big screen. Alfred made a sound of protest, before hiding the tray behind his back.

"I just read it off your screen boss-man."

They heard voices approaching, and turned to see Dick, unmasked, leading Jason towards them. He was babbling about the steel used to create the cave's interior, and Jason looked over the edge of the railing longingly, like he was considering a quick jump into the underground river below.

He caught Barbara's eye and mouthed, Save me!
Barbara snickered, popping another peanut butter ball into her mouth. She was insanely hungry for some reason.

"I say, Miss Barbara!" Alfred declared, as the boys took one each.

"What?" she asked around oatmeal and yogurt chips. "I'm starving."

Jason looked at the Batman. "So. Bruce Wayne."

The Batman narrowed his eyes threateningly.

He turned to his two protégés.

"Go get changed. We'll talk about this after."

Dick smiled at Jason, then turned to walk with Barbara over to the other end of the cave. It was still in sight of the computer, but it was okay. Both sidekicks still had their underclothing to maintain modesty.

Dick was out of his suit in the time it took Barbara to slowly undo the straps and zippers that held her costume together. She was slower tonight. Her vision swam.

"I like this kid," Dick told her quietly.

"That's nice."

Her cowl was thrown to the side as she fumbled with her chest plate and cape. Both came off, but she had to pull harder on the chest plates as if they were stuck.

It fell to the floor with a clatter, the tip of a bullet sticking up through the Kevlar. Armor piercing. Fantastic.

…Armor piercings…wait…

Her torso was soaked in blood, crimson and dark and sticky. She almost laughed as she realized that her whole costume must be filled with it. There were speckles of light and dark swimming in circles at the edges of her vision.

"Hey, Dick," she laughed and tapped him on the shoulder. "Take a look at this."

Dick, who had been stowing his suit back in its container turned, then jumped back.

"Barbara!" he shouted. She giggled.

"G-great, right?"

"Bruce! Alfred! Help!"

She wobbled, and collapsed on the floor. Feet thundered across the cave. The last things she saw before the glittering black dots took over her vision were the worried faces of the others.
Bruce swore under his breath as Alfred taped the IV into Barbara's arm.

Dick watched her eyes move underneath their lids like she was dreaming. He hoped she got some good rest before she woke up; that wound was going to hurt like heck when she finally came to.

Jason hovered nearby, looking one part curious and two parts worried.

"She gonna be okay?" he asked, shrugging like he didn't care. Alfred prepped a piece of medical equipment, and tapped the bag of blood attached to Barbara's IV.

"She's lost a bit of blood, Master Jason, but luckily we have several stores on hand." He gave Bruce a piercing stare. "You would not believe how often this occurs."

Bruce sighed. "Two Face's men are using military-grade armor-piercing bullets. Specifically designed for punching through combat gear like Kevlar."

Dick squeezed Barbara's hand. "That's a little more than typical gangs use. Two Face must have a military supplier."

"Course he does."

All eyes turned on Jason. He nodded knowingly.

"They made an agreement with Lexcorp. Luthor gets his enemies' cronies knocked off. Two Face gets weapons."

Dick raised an eyebrow.

"And you know this, how?"

Jason shrugged. "Stole some cash from 'em. Didn't even see me there. They were too busy talking about the weapons deal going down this morning with Luthor's people. And hey—" the boy smiled devilishly. "I've got good hearing."

Bruce cursed and whirled out of the room.

"Dick. Suit up. Come with me."

Dick squeezed Barbara's hand one more time, even though he knew she wouldn't notice. Then, both men left the infirmary.

Dick had the Nightwing suit on pronto, and hopped into the Batmobile alongside his mentor. Jason tried to clamber in too, but Bruce stopped him with one hand and a glare.

"You stay put," he growled.

Jason scoffed, throwing out his hands. "I'm the one who told you about the arms deal! You owe me for that, old man!"

In reply, the Batman closed off the top and sped out of the cave.

Nightwing stared out the window. "Aw, c’mon. That was a little harsh, don't you think?"
Batman stared icily ahead. "That kid is going to get himself killed, even without our help."

Nightwing watched the speedometer of the vehicle. The needle drifted slowly but steadily to the right.

"You're speeding, boss man."

Batman growled.

"No, I'm not."

But the needle swung back to the left.

"Mmm…Alfred?"

Barbara cracked open her eyes and winced. She almost wished she could go back to sleep, if only to escape the sharp aching in her side.

The old butler was at her side in an instant, checking her vitals on a screen. Jason was there too, hovering over her.

"I'm glad you're alright, Miss Barbara," Alfred said softly, "There was a bit of a stretch that made us all worry for you."

Barbara's eyes swept the infirmary. Hospital beds and equipment built into the rough gray stone of the cave. It even carried a lovely hospital-like smell. There were worse places to die, she guessed. But she cleared her throat. "Please. I've had scraped knees that were more serious."

She glanced around the room.

"Where are Bruce and Dick?"

Jason huffed. "Stopping an arms deal."

Barbara tried to sit up, but groaned and sank back into her pillow instead. Alfred admonished her and fretted over her side, telling her not to pull her stitches.

"Whose arms deal?" she demanded. Alfred and Jason shared a glance, and the boy spoke up.

"Lex Luthor and Two Face."

Barbara's mind whirled. Lex Luthor had some of the most advanced weapons in the world. He wouldn't give the most high-tech stuff to a Gotham city mob boss, but even the leftovers of the weapons mogul's stash would put Two Face on top. Over all the other gangs, and—if the armor piercing bullets were anything to go by—maybe even above the city's vigilantes.

Of course, both sides would probably plan on the deal being interrupted by the Batman. Barbara's
mind flew to images of the armor piercing bullets and other horrors.

Her partners were walking straight into a death trap.

"We need to stop that deal!"

She sat up again and let out a sharp cry as searing pain flashed through her whole abdomen. Alfred put a stiff hand on her shoulder, and gently pushed her back down into the soft pillow. Jason looked up.

"Alfred," Barbara said, struggling, "It's a trap! They have to know they're coming!"

Alfred's face was drawn. "Miss Barbara—"

"I have to go! They need help!"

The butler was holding her down now, and she strained against his thin but powerful arms.

"They will be expecting you as well, my dear," he said. Pushed her down deeper into the bed, ignoring the rest of her weak protests. "I'm sorry. But they will expect Batgirl to be there alongside her partners."

Barbara let out a whimper and laid her head back down on the pillow. She felt so useless. Everything hurt. Her mentor and boyfriend were marching to their deaths and she was powerless to do anything to stop it.

Wait.

"Robin," she said, staring at the ceiling. A crazy idea was forming in her mind.

"What?" Alfred and Jason both asked.

Barbara's head flew up. Alfred released her arms, and she perched herself a little higher on her pillow.

"Robin," she said again, "They won't be expecting Robin."

Alfred's gaze wandered to Jason. His eyes widened and the old butler shook his head.

"Absolutely not," he snapped. "I won't allow any more risk of life tonight than I have to."

Instead of letting the matter rest, Barbara's eyes went to the boy. Jason's expression showed a mixture of fear and excitement.

"It's dangerous," she agreed, "But we can't let them go in without backup, Alfred. They'll kill them. Unless we can give the thugs a surprise."

Jason's eyes lit up.

"Dick's old Robin suit will work," she insisted, grabbing Alfred's arm. "It will. It's more bulletproof than anything else we've got."

"But it won't be enough," Alfred said. "The boy is untrained, inexperienced. He'll get himself killed on the get-go."

Barbara snapped her fingers. "Put a camera on him and give me a headset. It'll have to work. I'll
"I won't claim any responsibility for this," Alfred said sharply, "If the boy dies, it will be entirely on both of your shoulders."

Barbara looked at Jason. The fear was gone from his face. He looked ready to take on an army of armed mobsters singlehandedly.

"It's your choice, Jason."

He smiled, then. "I'll do it," he said, "Heck yeah, I'll do it!"

"Well, boss-man," Nightwing sighed, "It's been an honor serving with you."

Batman and Nightwing both sported cuts and bruises that seeped and smarted. They'd thought they'd surprised Luthor's and Two Face's men. But the thugs had been ready for them, and a struggle had quickly broken out. They'd put up a good fight, but fifty plus men with new weapons were more than a match for the former dynamic duo. Well, Batman could have held his own, but a gun to a battered partner's head is a good way to force a surrender.

Now, both men were cornered, hands on their heads.

"Quiet," Batman growled.

"Just trying to break up the tension." Nightwing shrugged.

"There's a time and a place for quipping," his mentor replied sharply, "And this is neither one."

Nightwing opened his mouth to reply, but a swift kick from one of the thugs interrupted him.

"Your boss is right kid," the guy said. "Shut up."

The two watched as a man waded through the mobsters and Lexcorp lackeys and came to a halt in front of them. The man was horribly scarred on half of his face, and of course, Nightwing recognized him immediately.

"Hello, Batman. Bird boy." Two Face grinned at Nightwing and, though he tried to stop it, a cold shiver tingled up his spine. The mob boss's voice brought back memories of broken bones and wooden thwacks. Groans and laughter. Pleading and jeering.

Batman shifted next to him, as if sensing his partner's discomfort.

"I'd ask what brings you here of all places tonight," Two Face said, gesticulating as he spoke, "But I think we should skip the obvious, and get right down to the point."
Nightwing felt a crackle in his right ear, where he kept his comm.

[“Nightwing? Batman? This is Batgirl. Can you hear me?”]

Batman looked up at Two Face and said, very stiffly.

"Yes. That's probably best."

He put emphasis on the word YES, and Nightwing instantly understood the game plan. Apparently, Batgirl did too.

[“Thank goodness. Backup's on the way boys. Hang tight.”]

Nightwing huffed. "Not so fast, guys. I like obvious stuff."

"Be quiet," his mentor said, "Let's not do anything we'll regret."

Two Face smirked, a scary expression on a half ruined face. "That's right, kid. Now here's what we're going to do…"

[“Almost there.”]

"You're hurt, Nightwing," Batman snapped, "So don't do anything brash."

Two Face, obviously, seemed confused.

"As I was saying, here's what we're going to do." Two Face recomposed himself, pasting on a wide, sinister grin. "My benefactor, Lex Luthor, figured you boys would show up tonight. So, Bats is going to Metropolis for a meet and greet." He fixed his gaze on Nightwing, who felt his hackles rise.

"Bird boy, on the other hand, won't be needed quite as much. There's a handful of villains who'd love to get their hands on him, but they never need to know he was here." He snapped his fingers. A thug stepped forward and handed the mob boss a baseball bat. A metal one. It gleamed like a sinister promise in the moonlight. Every muscle in the former boy wonder's body tensed. Two Face grinned and gave the torture instrument a practice swing.

"Ah, this brings back memories," the villain said, "Of course, that wood one broke before you did, but I don't think we'll have the same problem this time, do you?" He ran a gloved hand over the shiny surface. "You're a big bird boy, now. I'm sure you'll last for a while this time."

Batman glanced at Nightwing, and Nightwing shook his head.

'Wait for Batgirl,' he said with his eyes.

Two Face stepped forward, the bat raised above his head. A whistling sound cut through the air like a knife, and Dick squeezed his eyes shut, gritting his teeth. But the rough blow he'd been expecting didn't come. He heard the thugs cock their guns, yelling and stomping around. He cracked open hid eyes and saw Two Face doubled over, clutching his hand to his chest. The baseball bat lay forgotten nearby. A red and yellow object stuck out from the back of the mob boss's hand, and Nightwing’s jaw dropped. It was one of his old birdarangs.

Batman took the opportunity and bolted upright, simultaneously knocking out both of the armed thugs behind them. Nightwing stood and cocked his fist behind his head. Two Face whimpered over his hand at the vigilante's feet
"Oh, be quiet. You're a big man, Two Face old pal. I think you can handle this." Nightwing swung his fist, and the villain was knocked out cold.

Batman was busy fighting thugs, and Nightwing did a double take when he saw a flash of red, yellow and black streaking through the crowd alongside the dark knight. His shock turned to delight, and he planted a fist in a Lex lackey's solar plexus.

[“Did you like my present?”]

Nightwing was pretty sure that Barbara was only communicating with him, as there was no reaction from Batman. He took a thug down with two quick jabs.

"And here I thought I was the only one who could pull that costume off," he said, grinning.

[“It suits him, I think. Uh, pun not intended. How is he doing? I can only see things from his perspective.”]

Nightwing took down another opponent, then turned his attention to Jason, who was holding his own just fine. His technique was raw, obviously untrained. But the kid clearly knew how to dish out and take a punch. He watched the boy take down a Lexcorp thug with a swift uppercut and a few choice jabs below the belt. The man collapsed, letting out a shriek.

[“I think he only knows street fighting.”]

"That's fine," Dick said, dodging a few bullets before whipping out his escrima sticks, "If I remember right, you used to prefer that yourself. Ooh! He just broke a Lex lackey's nose, though. Poor guy."

[“Agent A’s having a heart attack. Keeps saying that we’re 'needlessly risking a boy's life' and that this is 'too much exertion! You should be getting some rest!!'”]

Nightwing whacked a thug across the jaw with his escrima stick. "Aaand, he would be right on both counts. How are you doing, by the way?"

There was a pause. [“I'm fine. Talking never killed anybody.”]

"He's right though. You should be catching a few Z's—"

[“I'm. Fine. Come home quick, Wingnut. Over and out.”]

Jason took out the final baddie, and stood side by side with the two vigilantes. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked at Batman.

"That was amazing, kid!" Nightwing said, grinning.

Batman said nothing, only stared at Jason. The two glared at each other so intensely that Nightwing was beginning to feel somewhat uncomfortable. Jason seemed to be daring Bruce to protest, to march him home and make him take off the suit and go back to his alley. Bruce seemed to be considering that. Then, he surprised both of them.

"You'll listen to my orders," he said. "No complaining about training or patrols. Our identities stay secret, even from friends and other members of the Team and Justice League."

Nightwing winced. That was a rule? If it was, he'd broken it a few times already.

"And above all, you'll work hard to preserve law and order in this city and bring justice to those
who deserve it."

Jason's jaw dropped.

"Yes! All of that. I'll do it!"

Batman nodded.

"Congratulations, Robin," he said. He turned and walked away, towards the Batmobile's new hiding place. Jason shrugged and turned to Dick.

"He always like this?"

Nightwing laughed and threw an arm around the boy's shoulder. He started to flinch away at the unexpected physical contact, but relaxed. He even managed to smile a little.

"You'll get used to it, Little Wing," he said.

"Little what?"

"C'mon. Let's get back to the cave. Alfred'll have hot chocolate for us."

They walked slowly, following their mentor.

"Uh, that nickname's not gonna stick, right?"

"Oh. It totally will. Welcome to the family, Robin."

Chapter End Notes

This is where the story starts to get a bit better, so if you're still here, kudos to you! (And thanks a ton!)
Wrath and Scorn

Dick was already having a bad day. That was before the nutcase in a copycat suit showed up.

It was the typical kind of day: Breakfast around the table served up by Alfred. Training and exercising with Bruce and Babs until his muscles ached, then in turn running the Team through those same exercises. Then a mission with Robin. Then debriefing Batgirl and the others. And on top of it all, Kaldur had gone missing. Something about a manta ray…it was all starting to run together. All in all, he was already in a mood.

To cap it all off, he'd had a nasty shouting match with Bruce. Now, he was sentenced to patrol with Robin that night while Batman took care of…well, in Dick’s defense, how was he supposed to know which chemicals not to toss in the refuse canister? Batman didn't exactly label them…

Batgirl, meanwhile, was helping their mentor scrub out the cave. As he and Robin had started to head out, she'd given Dick a dirty look whilst pulling on a hazmat suit. Definitely no goodbye kiss.

Now, he was digging into his grapple with a small cleaning hook. One of the wires had come loose and needed tightening. Nightwing had found this out after almost plummeting seventy stories to his death. Another little gift.

Robin tapped his forehead against the roof access's wall. The skyscraper was completely bare otherwise, and Nightwing knew that Jason was anxious to get moving.

"Can you please hurry up, man?" he groaned.

Dick tsked and waved a finger at the boy wonder.

"There's no rushing, Little Wing. Unless you'd like me to go splat tonight."

Jason flipped himself into a handstand. His cape fell down over his head.

"Keep calling me that, and I just might," came the muffled reply. Dick chuckled and snapped the grapple shut. He shot out a line and called out,

"Coming?"

Robin sprang upright and dashed to the edge of the scraper. Without shooting his line, he jumped headfirst off the side, but Dick wasn't worried. He was a trapeze artist, and preferred a line to start his swing. Jason, on the other hand, was an adrenaline junkie, pure and simple. Nothing bad had happened yet, and Jason knew, after all, that Nightwing or Batman or Batgirl would always be there to catch him in time if he screwed up.

Dick stepped off the side, and the ground screamed up towards him. He let out a whoop, and the line curved him forward. When it went taut, Dick flipped through the air as it retracted back into his grapple. He shot out another line, and let Robin follow him around the corner.

They landed in the drive thru of a Jerry's Drive In. Robin shot Nightwing a questioning glance, but the older boy only chuckled and walked towards the window.

"What the heck, N-wing?" Robin demanded. "We're going to get hit by a car or something."
Dick almost had to stand on his tiptoes, but he was tall enough. He rapped on the glass with his knuckle.

"They won't let us order from out here anyways."

Dick grinned. "Sure they will. We're Nightwing and Robin."

Sure enough, the window slid open. A bored looking girl about Dick's age tapped at a little keyboard. Her nametag read FRANKIE. Without glancing up, she said,

"Good evening my name's Frankie how may I help you?"

The words ran together quickly like she'd said them a million times. Dick inspected the brightly colored menu skeptically. This place had over fifty different kinds of shakes, and about half as many different burgers. If the most challenging thing about patrol tonight was making a decision like this, then Nightwing supposed he couldn't complain.

"Let's see…I'll have a double bacon cheeseburger with a side of onion rings. Oh. Large root beer with that as well."

Tip tippity tap.

Dick turned to Jason. "What about you, man?"

Robin crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. A slow grin crept up his face.

"We're going all out, huh? The big man doesn't hafta know?"

Nightwing beamed. "See? Now you're getting it."

Jason consulted the menu. Then, if possible, his grin widened.

"I'll have the extra loaded chili cheese dog with a side of extra large fries and a strawberry bonanza milkshake. Make that a large, too."

Nightwing nodded as Frankie typed in the order.

"Respect, man," he said.

Robin tapped his stomach. "There will be much artery clogging this night."

Both boys laughed.

Frankie looked up. "Is there anything else—"

Her mouth twisted into an O, her eyes widened.

"That's it for us," Nightwing said. Her hand shook as she pointed to the next window. The boys waved and walked to the other side.

"Admit it," Robin said, smirking. "This's your way of poking back at Bats. For the chemical fiasco."

"Hey. He should try labelling those things. Not my fault HQ's covered in neon green goo."

"Yeah it is."
Dick sighed. "Okay. Fine. Maybe I was a little curious…"

The window slid open and a boy leaned out with two greasy white sacks in hand. Dick recognized him instantly as Marvin Harris, an old acquaintance from Gotham Academy.

"Dude!" he said, "It's such an honor, man!"

Nightwing smiled as Jason gave the guy a two-fingered salute. They took the sacks and shot their lines up to the Morrison building’s roof. They streaked upwards, and landed on the edge. Nightwing and Robin both settled themselves on the edge, their feet dangling over the side, and broke open the bags with a dry crinkling sound.

Then, they dug in.

It was pure heaven. Nirvana.

The bat kids hardly ever got fast food. 'Clogs your arteries' Bruce told them. 'Slows you down'.

The fries and onion rings were gone in a flash. Both boys started in on their entrees. The burger's juice exploded in Dick's mouth as he took a bite. A little bit of chili dripped down Jason's chin. They were ravenous wolves as they devoured their prey. Then, when the food disappeared, they subsided, moving more slowly to the drinks.

"So, Li'l Wing. How’re you liking the Team?"

Jason scoffed at the nickname, but didn't answer. Dick prodded him, then threatened to chuck his milkshake over the side, and he finally replied.

"They all think I'm some sort of freak."

Dick swallowed. "Why's that?"

Jason took a grating sip of his milkshake. "I'm the very not funny version of you. So your old teammate buddies hate me, and the new guys think I'm some sort of vampire."

"Not true."

They watched traffic streak by below. Dick's stomach bubbled. He'd almost forgotten what carbonation felt like. A few minutes later, Jason had finally hit bottom on his milkshake.

"Di—Nightwing. I've got a question."

"Yeah?"

"Totally hypothetical."

"Hey, I'm listening."

Jason shifted his weight a little, and almost fell off the building. "Um…so there's this guy. Friend of mine. He likes this girl…"

"And, um. He doesn't really know how to get up the nerve to talk to her. Like, what to say, etc. What should I tell him?"
"Hypothetically?"

"Hypothetically."

Dick stroked his chin and looked out on the cityscape. Somewhere, police sirens were wailing, and the cacophony of car horns spread through the night. When you were quiet, you could always be reminded that Gotham never would be.

"Hypothetically, would this girl happen to be a miss Mia Dearden?"

Jason made a sound at the back of his throat, which Dick took to mean yes.

"Well, then, hypothetically—"

"Stop saying hypothetically," Jason grumbled.

"If I were your friend, I'd ask this girl to go and see the Thunder Games this weekend. Archer girls go crazy for that kind of stuff."

"…Thunder Games, huh?" Jason nodded. "Good idea, N-wing."

"Why, thank you, Boy Wonder."

They stood and gathered up their garbage and threw it in one of the trashcans next to the roof access. This rooftop was a lot nicer, with neat little topiaries and a few benches to sit on. People probably came up here to gossip, or sit and watch the city. Tonight, though, it was completely deserted.

"Welp," Nightwing said, stretching, "Let's head out. I think Penguin might try to rob a bank or something."

Jason jumped, and Nightwing watched him soar downwards. He chuckled. Jason had a crush. On Artemis's little sister no less. He couldn't wait to tell Wally.

Below, Robin shot out a line and swung, but almost immediately, something went wrong. There was a flash, like the reflection of light off a small metal projectile. Robin's line snapped.

He shouted, and so did Nightwing as he kept off the building without a line.

He pressed his arms to his sides as he dove downward, cutting through the air. Jason flailed, trying desperately to activate his second line.

Nightwing shot his up towards the building across from where they'd eaten, and his arm shot out. Jason slammed into his chest, but Dick caught him quickly.

Together, they swung upwards. Robin clung to Nightwing, shaking like a leaf.

When they finally collapsed on the rooftop, Nightwing's arms were shaking from the added effort of carrying Jason. Jason was just shaking.

"Don't move," a voice snapped.

Nightwing's head shot up, and he saw two people standing over them. One was dressed in burnt orange and black Kevlar, with a cowl reminiscent of Batman's, along with a cape. The other wore black and silver, with a half cowl that let sandy blond hair tumble out, blowing in the breeze. The silver boy's costume reminded Nightwing of his own. The former sported a gleaming W. The latter
"Well," Silver said, "Look who it is. Bird boy and Wingnut."


The man in orange lunged towards them, his partner following suit. Robin leapt up to engage the latter while Nightwing took big W.

"That would be Wrath and Scorn!" W-man shouted.

Nightwing scoffed as he dodged a punch. He aimed a hook at Wrath's jaw. The older man dodged with scary accuracy.

"Seriously, dude?" Dick laughed. "Wrath and Scorn? That's the best you could come up with?"

Wrath made contact with Dick's solar plexus, and Nightwing flew backwards. He hit the concrete roof. Robin hit the ground next to him. Scorn placed a boot on Jason's chest. With one punch, Robin was out. Dick looked up as Wrath stood over him. Scorn whipped out a switchblade.

"I say we send the bat a message," he cackled, tracing the edge of the blade with his thumb. "Send 'em back in pieces."

He bent down and traced Dick's jaw with the knife. Nightwing felt a shock of white-hot pain as a wet trickle streamed down his throat. He was scrambling, trying to think of a way to disarm this creep, when W guy stepped forward and wrenched the knife away from Dick's neck.

"No," Wrath said. "Unconscious will be fine."

W stood over Nightwing, looking down his nose. A disgusted sneer twisted what little of the man's face Dick could see.

"Tell your boss that Gotham has new protectors," he said, "And if we catch him messing with us —"

"—Then we get to have our fun," Scorn said, grinning.

"There will be consequences," Wrath clarified. Then, he stomped hard on Dick's face.

"And then he knocked you out?" Barbara demanded. "Just like that?"

Alfred was tending to Jason nearby, who, luckily, only had a few minor bumps and bruises. He kept jumping suddenly, though. Dick supposed that was only natural. The kid had just fallen off a skyscraper, after all.

Barbara, meanwhile, was helping Dick clean off all the blood. His throat wound was pretty minor, all things considered. So their main concern was his busted nose.
"You're lucky he didn't jam it back up into your brain," she muttered, wiping a spot on his chin. The antiseptic cloth she used was getting more stained with every swipe. With a sigh, she placed it aside and tore a new one out of its wrapper. When his face was finally bloodless, Dick smiled and pursed his lips, but Barbara scoffed.

"No way, Grayson. Your breath smells like rotten onions."

He pretended to be disappointed, but he couldn't blame her. Morning breath plus old onion rings equaled death-breath.

Batman was watching surveillance footage of the two strangers on the computer screen.

"It seems we have two new players," he muttered.

Dick spoke up, relaying Wrath's and Scorn's message. Bruce's eyes narrowed.

"They're protectors alright. They protect Gotham city mobs and syndicates. Just a few hours ago, they helped Falcone's men escape the police with thousands of dollars' worth of guns and ammunition."

"How did we miss that?" Dick demanded.

Bruce turned to stare directly at the bat boys. The slight squeak of his chair set Nightwing's hair standing on end. Even Robin flinched.

"I would imagine it had something to do with a snack break."

Jason and Dick shared a guilty glance.

Barbara crossed her arms and huffed a little. "Great. So, I got to scrape toxic goo from the stalactites while these two yahoos went for French fries?" She sent Batman a pointed glare. "You so owe me, B-man."

Batman pinched the bridge of his nose. "These people…Wrath and Scorn. They told you to stay away?"

Dick nodded. "Or else there would be ‘consequences’. Yeah. What do you suggest?"

Batman smiled and stood up.

"I think we all have a talent for breaking the rules."

Barbara pulled on her cowl. The familiar weight was comforting. She was very glad to be out of a hazmat suit, too.

It had been a day and a night since Dick and Jason's run-in with Wrath and Scorn, and she was itching to get back out on the streets. Tonight for patrol, they had split up into two groups. Jason
was going with Bruce (no need to break up the dynamic duo) and she was patrolling with Dick. As soon as her uniform was on, she started her safety checks on her batcycle. Nightwing was still getting dressed.

The wheels and engine checked out, but one of the brakes was a little bit sketchy. She'd have to get it repaired. For tonight, however, it would do.

"Surprise." Dick's hands wrapped around her waist. He rested his chin in the spot where her shoulder met her neck. He smelled better tonight, less like trashy fast food, and more like himself. Barbara worked hard to hold back a smile.

"About time," she said, turning her head to peck him on the cheek. "Glad to see you brushed your teeth, Wingnut. Ready to head out?"

"You know it."

The Batmobile rolled past slowly; their other partners were ready long before them. Robin was standing upright, resting his elbows on the edge of the roof hole.

"Batgirl and Nightwing, sittin' in a tree…"

Dick and Barbara both stuck their tongues out.

"K-I-S-S-I-N-G!"

As they rolled out, Barbara swore she could see Bruce smirking.

She mounted her cycle and sighed. Nightwing followed suit.

"Don't worry, BG," he told her, "I have it on good authority that Jaybird has himself a little crush, too."

She revved her engine. "Oh, really? Do tell."

They were off.

"So, these two guys. What do they look like?" Batgirl asked over a pair of binoculars. "Bats didn't ever show me the videos."

Nightwing hesitantly described them to her, noting aloud that they seemed to be a copycat Batman and Nightwing.

"No girl, then? Was I not worth copying?"

She pretended to pout. Dick grinned and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"You dodged a bullet, BG. Her name would have been, like, um…"
"Angst?" she suggested. Dick barked out a laugh.

"Malice?"

"Nope. That one's too good. Grumpy Girl?"

Dick smirked. "Frustration Chick?"

Batgirl almost fell off the scraper laughing. "Frustration Chick!" she snorted.

Nightwing shook his fist at the sky. "The Strongly Contentious trio!"

Batgirl mimicked his low tone, and struck a pose. "Battling for evil and emos everywhere!"

They dissolved into giggles, leaning on each other for support.

["Uh…guys?"] Jason's voice rang out in their ears. ["You left your comms on…"]

Batman's voice: ["Both of you need to take this mission just a bit more seriously."]

The older bat kids sobered quickly.

"Yes, B-man," they said.

But as soon as they were sure the comms were off, they looked at each other and snorted.

Before they could say anything else, there was an explosion beneath them. Both bat kids looked down. Smoke billowed out of the doors to the skyscraper, a loud laugh filling the air. It wasn't Joker's laugh, Batgirl was pleased to note. The sound was more nasal, and sounded more like a normal man's.

"Riddler," Dick said.

It was sad, she realized, that they had every evil laugh in Gotham down to a science.

"Ladies first," Batgirl snipped, grinning as she waved a permissive hand.

Nightwing fastened his line to a spot on the roof at his feet. "Ha, ha."

He tested the line, then jumped. Batgirl wasn't far behind.

They hit the ground gently, relying on their lines to handle their weight, just as Batman had taught them. Both looked up into the surprised face of the Riddler. He carried a sack of gold bars, his minions trailing behind him with their own loads.

Batgirl smiled. "Riddle me this," she said. Nightwing picked up her quip.

"What goes down when we show up?" He gave his escrima sticks a twirl.

The Riddler took a nervous step back, and Batgirl felt a surge of pride. A few years ago, one of Gotham's Rogues would have laughed in their faces, and attacked.

But Batgirl and Nightwing had earned a little respect since their younger patrolling years.

"Aw, stuck?" she asked. "Here's a hint. It's you."

They surged forwards, and the thugs leapt forward to attack.
Nightwing said, "I got these guys."

Batgirl nodded and leapt towards the Riddler.

The villain was shocked by her boldness at first, but recovered quickly. He swung a fist at her jaw, but she dodged, throwing a series of hooks and kicks. Flips and lunges. Punches and jabs. Riddler caught her side with his scepter—a stupid weapon really—but it was only a glancing blow.

She jabbed him hard in the chest, and he fell backwards.

"I guess that's it," she said, shrugging. She turned to Nightwing, who was dusting his hands off on his pants. All three thugs lay listless at his feet. "Too easy."

"Let's cuff these guys for the GCPD and head out," he said, smiling. Batgirl grinned and opened her mouth to reply.

SHIK.

A small black projectile lodged itself in her chestplate. She had the presence of mind to tap her comm and say,

"Batgirl to Batman. They're here. Please hurry."

Then, she reached down and pulled the object out. It hadn't done too much damage, thank goodness. A little blood trickled off the sharp edge, black in the darkness, but the wound didn't hurt at all.

The projectile was long and made up of four segments held together by three little turning…turny little wheel things. It was black, but it was an off-black that looked almost purple. And it was distinctly the shape of a W.

She staggered a little bit. So light-headed all of a sudden…

She was vaguely aware of a hand on her shoulder, but her attention was grabbed by the two dark figures that hit the ground near them. So many silhouettes danced around in her periphery that it made her dizzy. She turned her head to the one with its hand on her shoulder.

"Nightwing?" she asked, her voice slurring a little.

"No."

A fist slammed into her jaw, and she hit the ground hard.

'One punch?' She thought. 'Oh no. I'm not going down after one punch.'

She leapt back up to her feet, head spinning, and threw her fist out. She made contact somewhere, though she didn't see where. She only heard an unfamiliar grunt of pain.

Her eyes started to clear, and she saw Batman, Robin and Nightwing fighting the two men. Wrath and Scorn. Barbara's eyes fixed themselves on the boy, the one in silver and black. There was something familiar about him…

Oh…her head…
Dick aimed a punch at Scorn. The other boy dodged, and spun, turning his own momentum into a new strike. A fist connected with Nightwing's jaw, but he recovered quickly.

"Gee, I never knew Batgirl was this...fine." He wolf whistled in her direction, and Dick struck at him with more fury. But the annoying silver clad vigilante continued. "Too bad, though. I would have loved to spar with that."

"What are you talking about?" Dick snarled. He landed a jab in Scorn's ribs.

"Oh," he panted from the impact, but bounced back easily. "That little dart we stuck her with. Laced with a nasty little sedative. She'll be taking a nap any second now."

Nearby, Wrath and Batman were fighting with unusual fervor. Nightwing searched the street for Batgirl, and saw her over on the sidewalk. She was swaying on her feet, hands pressed to her temples. Robin was doing his best to fight off the two men and keep her standing upright.

"You guys are good!" Scorn laughed, "but we did warn you to stay out."

"Scorn!" Wrath called. "Let's blow this joint!"

Both stepped back and pressed fingers to their own belts. Bats and Nightwing flinched at the sound of roaring motors, bracing themselves for another attack.

But instead, two cycles zoomed up. Scorn mounted his quickly, knocking Nightwing down with a well placed kick. Wrath stunned Batman with a swift uppercut, and turned, running. With one punch, Robin grunted and flew backward, nose spurting blood. No one to support her, Batgirl collapsed—

Right into Wrath's waiting arms.

"No!" Nightwing shouted. He leapt up to intercept their opponent, but Scorn surged forward on his cycle. Dick was forced to lurch backwards.

Nearby, Batman was slowly lifting himself up. Wrath had an unconscious Batgirl balanced on his lap. He and Scorn sped off, but not before Wrath shouted.

"Consequences, Bats! Maybe you'll learn next time!"

Nightwing's knees wobbled, then hit the pavement with a crack.
"So, now what, bro?"

Barbara's eyelids felt weighted, but she managed to open her eyes a slit. The voices nearby were lowered, and she had to strain to hear them through the pounding in her head.

"I'm not sure. I was planning on grabbing Robin. Kids are easier."

"Eh. It's not all bad…"

"No. I know what you're thinking, Ands, and it's a no."

"You're no fun."

Through her slit eyes, Barbara made out two men, both in costume. But their masks were gone. She couldn't stop the gasp that lurched out of her throat when she saw their faces.

Andrew Mallory turned, surprised. Then, a snake like smile spread across his face.

"Aw, look who finally woke up."

He marched over to her and grabbed her shoulder. She stared up at his soulless brown eyes, mouth slightly agape.

"Yeah, I know," Andy sneered, "I am pretty good looking, doll. I can tell by your face that you weren't expecting such a—"

"Scorn," William Mallory snapped. Andy rolled his eyes, then, before Barbara could react, jammed his lips up against hers. She struggled, but realized for the first time that she was bound tightly to a chair. The boy's breath was hot on her face. Andy forced his tongue through her teeth, and she let him, waiting. He jammed his tongue into the back of her throat, and she bit down hard.

"Aaugh!" he screeched, lurching back. He practically left half his tongue in her mouth.

Will shook his head. "That's what you get."

Andy paused to spit out a mouthful of blood, then rounded back on her, hand raised.

"You little-!" Barbara didn't hear the rest. Her head was too busy spinning from the blow.

Andy raised his hand to hit her again, but she spat out her own blood and leveled a bat-glare worthy of her mentor himself at him. Then, for the first time, she spoke.

"Go on, Andy. I dare you."

Both brothers gaped, as if struck by lightning. Barbara took their surprise as an opportunity to start fiddling with her ropes. Carefully. If she could just keep their eyes away from her wrists…

"How—?" William's face went slack with shock.

She didn't answer. Andy spit out another glob of blood, and stepped towards her again.

"Don't hurt her," Will said quickly, "We need her to tell us what she knows…how much she knows."

"Oh, don't worry," he snarled. His hand closed around her arm, while his other lifted up to the side of her head.
He was going for her cowl clasps.

"I want to see exactly who this girl is," Andy snarled. "Even the playing field a bit." Batgirl struggled, trying to make it as difficult as possible to turn the clasps. It was a simple combination, just two clicks. Batman had a more complicated code, but they hadn't gone to near as much trouble with her cowl for two reasons. They figured no one would want to know who she was. And since she didn't legally exist, they figured that no one would recognize her anyway.

But these were the Mallory brothers. They knew her face.

"No!" she cried, cringing when she heard the panic in her own voice. "Stop!

But it didn't take them long at all to figure out the sequence. Andy slipped the cowl over her head, and her red hair fell over her face like a veil.

Will stepped forwards and smoothed her mane back away from her face. She shivered as the fingers of his cold Kevlar gloves touched her forehead.

Andy dropped her cowl. Will stepped back.

"Isn't that—"

"It's Wayne's maid." Will's eyes widened. "And…and that must mean…"

There was a silence that hung over the room. All except for the tiny gasping breaths from Batgirl. Then, Andy let out a cackle.

"I knew it! Didn't I try to tell you years ago? Your best buddy is…he's the Batman!"

"N-no!" Barbara gasped. "You're wrong! He isn't—"

Andy struck her again.

Will's face was stormy as he pulled up a tripod with a camera perched on top.

"We weren't sure what to do with you before, Batgirl. But I think I've got some idea." He pulled on his cowl and barked an order at his brother to do the same. As Andy put on his half mask, Will said,

"We're going to send your boss a message. Then, we're going to take a little trip to his house." He turned to Andy. "We'll kill Bruce, Robin, whoever he is, and your old buddy Dick."

He glanced at Barbara's wide-eyed expression. "I'm right, aren't I? Nightwing's real name is Richard Grayson?"

She struggled. "No. It's—"

Andy’s hand whipped once again across her cheek. She gasped from the impact.

"She's lying, bro," he said.

"I know. Andy?"

"Yeah?"

Will's face was hard as stone. "Put her mask back on. Once the other bats are dead, she's all yours.
When you're done with her, slit her throat, shoot her in the head. I don't really care."

Andy grinned, and Batgirl caught Will's eyes.

"Please, Will," she pleaded. Trying to appeal to whatever conscience this man might actually possess. "He's your friend. You can't do this."

William Mallory scowled at her. "Pathetic."

He flipped the camera on.

"I'm sorry," Jason said again. He was huddled on a bench while Alfred taped his nose. Batman sighed from the computer chair.

"Jason. It wasn't your fault. If you apologize one more time…"

Nightwing was pacing frantically.

"Master Dick," Alfred said, "You're about to wear a trench in the floor. Are you aware of the cost to replace secret flooring?"

"I'm sorry! I'm just—"

The bat computer beeped, and Bruce pressed a key on the keyboard. The screen flickered to life, and all eyes fastened on the display monitor.

Batgirl's face filled the screen. Her eyes were wide, and she looked terrible. A bruise bloomed underneath her left eye. Nightwing could see it creeping out from the edge of her cowl, and his fists clenched. A rag was tied across her mouth, and blood trickled out from her lips.

But she was alive.

Dick cried out her name, but there was no response. Bruce shook his head. "It's not a live feed."

The video zoomed out, and they all saw Scorn smirking, his hand clasping Barbara's shoulder. Wrath walked into the shot, which told Dick that he was the one who had been operating the camera.

"As you can see, Batman," he said, "You're female protégé is still alive. For now."

Dick noticed blood on Scorn's chin. He hoped that Batgirl had done that.

"We are willing to negotiate for her release. All that you have to do is—"

Batgirl shook her head emphatically, eyes wide. Scorn slapped her upside the head, and Dick took a step forward.

"—stay out of our way. In one week, we will drop the girl at an undisclosed location. Then, we
Barbara's eyes were wide. Dick understood what she was trying to say.

"Bruce," he said, voice low, "Barbara's telling us that they're lying. They won't let her go."

"I know. I'm doing my best to track the signal."

Barbara's mouth began moving, slipping the gag out slowly. Wrath continued to speak.

"Attempt a rescue, and she dies. We are not monsters, Batman. We only want justice. For those only trying to make a living the only way they can."

The gag slipped down under Batgirl's chin.

"Bruce!" she shouted, "They know! You have to—"

Wrath threw a W shaped projectile at the camera and the feed went black.

Batman exploded out of his chair, while Nightwing and Robin could only gape.

"Why would they let that feed stream?" Dick demanded. "She said too much, they—" His eyes widened.

"The video was a distraction," Jason muttered.

Bruce turned his face up to the ceiling, and spoke clearly. "Security code Sigma. Secure entrance, mansion and perimeter—"

"Oh," a voice said, "It's too late for that."

All eyes turned up to the balcony, the second story of grated floors and railing above the central part of the cave. It ringed the center, so that someone standing on the ground could look up to the second story. And vice versa.

Wrath and Scorn stood behind the railing. Nightwing took a step back.

"Where's Batgirl, you—"


"That's right. We know all about you," Wrath said. He shoved something forward. It was Batgirl. Her wrists were tied in front of her, and she looked even more beat up than before. Worst of all, her cowl was missing completely. Scorn held it in his fist and waved it around like a trophy.

They shoved Barbara forward, and she toppled over the railing. Nightwing leapt forward and caught her just before she could hit the ground. She shuddered in his arms.

"Are you okay?" he muttered.

She cleared her throat and sat up quickly. "Fine." Then, raising her voice. "Please. Crazy Quilt hits harder than these wannabes." Then, once more to Dick, "It's Andy and William."

Dick's eyes widened. "Mallory?"

"The one and only!" Scorn shouted, leaping down from the balcony. He landed on Dick. Jason,
Bruce and William surged forwards together, fists flying. Barbara held out her fists, and Dick, dodging Andy's blows, hurried to oblige. He whipped out a batarang and sliced through the duct tape around her wrists. She grinned and shook them out. Scorn landed a punch to Nightwing's gut, and he let out a gasp, falling back.

Andy leered over him, and pulled a pistol from a holster at his waist. Dick's head spun, and he wondered if Scorn had had that gun before.

"Bye, bye, Circus Brat." He cocked the weapon, and pointed it squarely at Dick's forehead. He was already thinking of a thousand different offenses and defenses; kick out the guy's feet, or roll away? But before he had the chance, Andy froze. There was a gleaming batarang jammed up against his throat, it's razor sharp edge glinting in the cave's fluorescent lights.

Batgirl leaned in and snarled into Scorn's ear. "Aw, I'm hurt, Andy. I thought you wanted me."

Wrath froze on the other end of the cave. Bruce and Jason got in a few shots, but William's only focus was on the blade to his little brother's throat.

"You leave him alone," he growled, marching closer. Batgirl tightened her hold on Scorn, and the boy took a staggered breath as he stiffened. Will stopped.

"Batgirl—" Bruce's voice was low, full of warning.

"Oh, bite me," she snapped. Whether she was talking to Bruce or Will, she wasn't sure.

Nightwing pulled himself to his feet and stood cautiously next to her. He was silent, but Barbara felt the comfort of his presence nonetheless. It made her seem less like a scared little girl holding a knife to someone's throat, and more of an actual threat.

"You and your brother are going to leave this cave, take off those costumes—"

Andy made a suggestive sound and leaned back into her. She stomped hard on his foot and dug the blade in a little deeper.

"Just test me one more time, Mallory," she whispered, nearly hissing. "—and leave Gotham. If you don't, then I will cut your brother's throat."

William's posture was stiff as a ramrod, but she watched him paste on an expression of nonchalance, even smugness. "You wouldn't. You bats don't have the stomach for killing."

Bruce was glaring at her now, and it almost broke her resolve to see the disappointment and anger in his eyes. She pressed on anyway.

"After the night I've had..." she heaved a deep breath. "Well, we'll see."

Nightwing spoke up, then. "She'll do it, Will. She's crazy!

Barbara shot him a dirty look, and he grinned, before turning back to Wrath. "But seriously. We're being generous here. Take your brother and leave. To sweeten the deal, how about this? If you don't, Bruce and I will expose you both. We'll take you down with us."

Bruce's eyes widened slightly. "Exactly. Will, what do you think the chances are of your parents getting out of prison if this news comes to light?"

That struck a chord. Batgirl spotted real fear in Wrath's eyes. After a tense moment of silence, he
held up his hands and said, "Fine."

"Dude!" Andy cried.

"We know when we're beaten," Will said, glaring at each of them in turn. "But this isn't over, Bruce. We'll get you for this."

Bruce and Jason moved to stand with Batgirl and Nightwing. Batgirl shoved Andy forward, and let him scramble over to his brother. Both glaring, they stepped into the elevator. When the doors had dinged shut, Batman turned to Jason and Dick.

"Make sure they find their way out."

The boys nodded, and shot Barbara a sympathetic glance before disappearing upstairs.

Bruce turned to her, and Barbara prepared herself for the lecture of a lifetime. Her mentor's face was stern and hard as granite. He opened his mouth, and she actually flinched.

"I'm glad you're okay," he said slowly. "Go get changed. Alfred will see to your wounds."

He whisked around, and started to stride deeper into the cave.

"What?" she demanded.

"You heard me," he snapped over his shoulder. "Tomorrow, we'll talk. Until then, rest up."

He left her standing alone in the cave, listening to the sound of the bats shifting and twittering overhead, and the deep hum of the generator. Somewhere, water dripped, making a hollow sound against the damp cave walls. She shivered.

"Right. See you tomorrow, then."
"This mission requires absolute stealth, Robin. Can you do that?"

Jason scoffed, adjusting his domino mask. He gave Batgirl a thin smirk. Nightwing was checking the cable attached to the boy wonder's utility belt muttering small instructions. Watch descent speed, adjust cable accordingly, etc.

A few members of the Team watched with horrified fascination, and just a hint of confusion.

"Some days I think you people are all brooding and mysterious," Arrowette muttered, "But then you go and pull something like this. Then I'm just…I don't get it."

"Uh huh," Blue Beetle agreed.

Batgirl and Nightwing each placed a hand on their little brother's shoulders. Jason puffed out his chest.

"Relax, guys," he said, "This isn't my first rodeo."

Jason had been Robin for a little over a year. He'd served under Aqualad and Nightwing's supervision on the Team through several different missions, making both friends and enemies on the Team. He fit more easily into the dynamic. The other members no longer seemed to consider him a 'freak'. Batgirl was happy for him; she remembered how hard it was to assimilate into a whole new community. And one that extended past Gotham at that.

"Aw, we know, Little Wing." Nightwing patted Rob's shoulder.

Batgirl nodded. "You'll be fine. In the event of capture, though, take this."

She held out a small pellet on her gloved palm. The others spluttered.

"A Cyanide Pill!?"

"What the actual-!"

"All this for a plate of cookies?"

For the first time, the batkids turned to face their audience. Nightwing raised an eyebrow.

"Chill, guys," he said. "It's a smoke pellet."

Wally chuckled from his place by the railing and turned to the younger kids. "And have you guys ever actually had their Agent A's sugar cookies? Trust me. This is necessary."
Arrowette and Bumblebee did not seem convinced. Neither did Blue Beetle. He jutted a thumb back down the hall. "You know, we could just go back to the Team's party." He crossed his arms. "They have chips and dip. And cupcakes."

"Cupcakes," Arrowette affirmed.

The batkids shared a smirk. Nightwing slapped Jason on the back.

"Consider this a test," he said, "To see if he's ready to lead his own squad."

Robin's eyes widened. He adjusted his harness, seemingly equally nervous and excited.

"Wait, you mean it? Really?"

Batgirl laughed. "We'll see, bird boy. Now, stay safe and watch out for Flash. He usually hangs out by the refreshment table."

Wally shrugged in agreement.

Jason saluted with two fingers and clambered over the railing. Below them, the Justice League's party was in full swing. Batgirl could just barely see Wonder Woman flirting with Batman, who was totally oblivious. The man could charm every woman in the room as Bruce Wayne, but as Batman, that particular skill seemed to elude him. As predicted, Flash was piling up a plate with snacks and hors d'oeuvres. Jason was hovering above the din, but the Leaguers were far too distracted to notice the stray sidekick lowering himself like James Bond over the snack table. He waited as Flash finished up and turned away. Nightwing and Batgirl both held their breath. The other Teammates gathered around to watch. Arrowette, who was afriad of heights, let out a small whimper, and whispered,

"Is he going to fall?"

The others shushed her.

Robin's gloved fingers splayed to help keep his balance, and he moved ever so slowly to avoid detection. A few feet above the table, he reached down and grasped the edges of the silver plate laden with frosted and sprinkled goodness. He started to pull himself up, but paused. He balanced the plate of cookies in one palm, and rifled with his free hand in his belt.

"What is he doing?" Nightwing whispered through his teeth.

Jason drew a paper out of one of one of the compartments and grinned, flashing them a thumbs up.

"He's gonna blow the whole gig!" Batgirl hissed.

Robin maneuvered himself over the crowd of adults and lowered himself further until he was right behind Batman. The spectators let out squeaks and squeals. Nightwing's fingers raked through his hair. Batgirl's fist was pressed to her lips.

If Batman caught Jason, then the older batkids would be implicated. And if they were implicated…

Batgirl did not want to be sent off to a dojo in Nepal. Not again.

Jason grinned, and pressed the paper gently against Batman's back. It stuck there, and the Team members could read the words scrawled in red:

KICK ME
"Oh, please no," Batgirl whispered, shutting their eyes. Slowly, the cord wound up, and Robin began his ascent.

Then, Superman looked up.

Everyone held their breaths as the Kryptonian's eyes swept over the teens watching from above, down to the fourteen-year-old dangling over the justice league's party with a plate of cookies. Batgirl smiled slowly, and clasped her hands in front of her in a pleading gesture.

"Don't tell Batman," she whispered.

Superman, of course, heard her, and shook his head. He sighed deeply, and turned to talk to Hawkman, who was brandishing a turkey leg like a challenge. There were audible sighs of relief from the assembled Team members.

Robin clambered over the railing, handing off the plate of cookies to a very anxious Wally. He huffed and laughed.

"Told you I could do it!" Jason said, pretending to buff his nails on his uniform.

"The sign, though…" Batgirl looked over the edge of the railing, and everyone followed suit. Below, Hal Jordan and Flash were sneaking over in Batman's direction. Flash cackled and kicked Batman, and sped off, leaving a terrified Green Lantern in his place, the green clad man standing with his foot cocked back.

Hal squeaked, and Batman stared him down. Batgirl almost whimpered in sympathy. The Batman's look meant: LATER.

Then, the Batman reached behind his back, and pulled the note out.

"Scatter!" Nightwing snapped. The Team leapt back from the railing and sped down the hall, cookies in tow.

They crashed into the rec room, and the rest of the Team looked up from their drinks, shocked. Wally hefted the platter above his head.

"Cookies!" he shouted, like a battle cry.

Nightwing clapped Jason on the back as everyone gave him a standing ovation. Then, they mobbed the cookies. And, consequently, Wally.

"Artemis!" He squeaked, going down in the crowd.

Nightwing and Batgirl pulled Jason to the side, ducking under balloons and streamers to step out onto the balcony.

"That was gutsy, Little Wing," Dick said, leaning on the railing. The batkids fixed their gaze on the planet earth below. It spun lazily, large and beautiful. Batgirl caught herself trying to find Gotham city.

"Yup. Batman's gonna kill me, isn't he?" Jason looked up at them, his face drawn. They all shared somber looks.

Dick was the first to crack. He snorted, and all three of them lost it.

"His face!" Barbara gasped.
"I know. He looked so mad!"

"No. No! Before! Right after Flash got him!"

She pantomimed their mentor, stiffening like he'd been electrocuted, eyes wide and outraged. The boys howled. Their laughter went on, on, on, and then subsided.

"Way to go, little bro," Barbara said, grinning.

"You really think I'm ready to lead a squad?" Jason asked. The older batkids shared a smile. Nightwing was the one to answer.

"I talked to Kaldur, and he thinks you're ready, Jay. So do we."

Barbara nodded, smiling. "You've done great with your other missions. You'll be a great fit as a squad leader. Just like me."

She gave a fake self-satisfied hum, and they nudged her, snickering. It was then that Arrowette stepped into the balcony area.

"Jay…?" she called. "It's almost midnight…"

She smiled mischievously as her eyes swept the area to find Robin. Then, her gaze landed on the batkids, and Arrowette blanched.

"I-I'm sorry…he didn't tell me, I just…"

Barbara and Dick shared a glance. Then they smiled.

"It's fine, Mia," Batgirl said, "Almost everyone on the original Team knows our names. I'm sure Jaybird can get away with telling his girlfriend."

Jason reddened, but he didn't deny it. "Don't tell Batman?" he muttered.

Dick grinned, shooting him a finger gun. "Sure thing, bro."

The clock chimed, and a holoscreen on the window popped up to wish them a Happy New Year. Cheesy music played over the speakers, and Mia shyly pulled Jason to her. Barbara was tempted to see them kiss, (her little brother had a girlfriend—so cute!) but Dick scooped her up into his arms.

She laughed, and threw her arms around his neck. His forehead dipped to touch hers, and they smiled, looking into each other's eyes.

"Ah," he sighed, "We only get cheesy moments like this once in a blue moon." Barbara giggled, and they grinned as the two younger teens watched them.

"Happy New year, Wingnut."

They kissed, and it was a long, wonderful kiss. Halfway through, Barbara realized that the length was probably to make Mia and Jason as uncomfortable as possible, and she smiled under Dick's lips. When they pulled apart, and Dick set her down again, Jason turned to Mia and pretended to gag. She made a face. "Gross."

Robin groaned. "You two are so embarrassing!" But they saw he was smiling a little.

Mia grasped his hand and pulled him back into the party. He waved at them, then saluted with two
"They're so cute!" Barbara whispered, and Dick laughed. He pulled her in front of him, and wrapped his arms around her stomach, hugging her from behind. They watched the Earth spin lazily beneath them, slow and gigantic and beautiful.

"You know," Dick said into her ear, "I think this is gonna be a pretty good year."

She smiled, leaning back. "I think you're right, Dick."

A few weeks later, they found themselves confined to the manor. Dick was watching a Disney movie with a bowl of popcorn and a box of tissues. The tissues were half for his cold, and half for the sad Disney movie he was watching: Big Hero 6.

On top of the common cold, Nightwing had been taken out by a broken wrist. A fight with Killer Crock two days before had gone wrong, and none of the batfamily had come out completely unscathed. Barbara herself had gotten a minor concussion after hitting the side of a concrete subway tunnel head on. Her cowl was being modified to add a bit better head protection, but she made a goal to avoid being thrown around like a football in the future. Batman made it out with only a black eye and a few missing teeth, which had since been replaced. Robin got a nasty scratch down his side, but he was deemed the most unharmed out of them all.

So tonight, Batman and Robin were out on patrol. Nightwing was on a near-lethal dose of pain medication, and way too looped out to be of much help to anyone, muttering and giggling as he watched Hiro and Baymax fly across the screen. Barbara thought she was fine, but she still had a searing headache, and bright lights and loud noises had her wincing, so Batman placed her under house arrest.

It wasn't all bad, though. She busied herself by helping Alfred make cookies. They mixed by hand, because the old butler said that they would taste better that way. Barbara had a sneaking suspicion, however, that Alfred was only taking her condition into account, and therefore avoiding loud automatic mixers.

Dick snickered from the couch. "Ah, hairy baby. I want a hairy baby, Alfred!"

The butler turned to her, confused, and she sighed, smiling.

"No can do, Wingnut. Jason and I are allergic to cats!"

Alfred nodded, understanding, and they went back to folding chocolate chips into the soft dough.

When the cookies were in the oven, Barbara and Alfred had discussions about politics, history, and old books they'd read in Master Wayne's library. The old butler offered insights, and Barbara argued certain ideas. Occasionally, the conversation was interrupted by Dick's giggles and comments. (Fred, their leader, Fred!)
Finally, the timer dinged, and they pulled the last steaming batch from the oven. Barbara smelled
the heavenly aroma wafting from the treats, and suddenly, the music coming from the TV turned
into something more dire and dramatic. Barbara peeked at the screen and saw Baymax blasting
away at Professor Callaghan. Dick sat on the edge of the couch, watching with fascination.

"Destroy him, Baymax!" Hiro shouted.

This was the darkest part of the movie, Barbara realized, when the protagonist was so consumed
by hatred for his brother's murderer that he lost sight of his morals. And even tried to kill
Callaghan. She shook her head. Disney movies these days.

Dick was still staring at the screen. His eyelids sagged a little, and he seemed more groggy now
than loopy. She called his name, and it came out as a sort of question. He turned his head, and she
saw an unreadable expression on his face.

"It's Callaghan's fault that Tadashi died," he said, slurring his words a little bit. "But Hiro shouldn't
kill 'im. Should he?"

Barbara glanced at Alfred, then wiped her floury hands on her apron. She walked out of the kitchen
and settled herself on the couch next to Dick.

"He shouldn't kill Callaghan," she said, "Because he's a good guy. He's better than Callaghan."

Dick nodded, like that made sense. Barbara watched Hiro cry onscreen and hit the pause button on
the remote.

"Tadashi blew up," Dick slurred, "That part was scary. And sad."

Barbara cracked a smile. "It was, wasn't it? Let's get you to sleep, Grayson. These meds are
messing with your head."

He nodded and laid down. Barbara picked up a blanket from the edge of the couch and laid it over
him. He snuggled down into the couch pillows and muttered, his voice small and scared,

"What if Little Wing blew up?"

Barbara tapped his shoulder and turned away.

"Don't worry, Wingnut. Nobody's blowing up. Now sleep."

Dick complied, nodding off almost immediately.

She smiled at Alfred and shrugged. But a strange, worried feeling curdled in her stomach.

The Alarm went off about an hour later. It was a signal on Alfred's watch—just three short beeps—
that notified the arrival of the Batmobile in the cave. It was a discreet way to announce Bruce's
homecoming, and just in case guests were over, gave Alfred the perfect excuse to escape. *That*
would be my casserole' or, 'time to do the laundry' were both valid escape phrases from many a social visit.

Alfred moved to go downstairs, but Barbara smiled and picked up the platter of cookies.

"I'll do it. You should probably keep an eye on Dick."

Truthfully, though, she was itching to get back into the cave. Alfred clearly saw right through her, but didn't point it out.

"Straight away, then, Miss Barbara."

Barbara turned the hands of the old grandfather clock to 10:47, and stepped inside the alcove hidden behind it. The elevator lowered her into the cave, and she stepped out right into the middle of an argument.

Jason threw his arms out. "He was a drug dealing pimp! I didn't think I needed to prop up any pillows before taking him out!"

Bruce pulled his cowl down and glared at his protégé. "You shattered his collarbone! He's in the hospital! Do you have any idea what that could mean, Jason?"

Robin scoffed. "Gee, Bruce, I don't know. What?"

"Lose the tone. It doesn't become you." Batman's eyes narrowed. "Commissioner Gordon is going to have to smooth things over for us. The hierarchy in this city barely tolerates us as it is, Jason, without crippling thugs. That man'll never walk again."

Jason whipped off his eye mask and glared.

"See, that's the problem with this city. Criminals get off easy no matter what, Bruce! And then more just take their place because there are no real consequences!"

"Jason—"

"That man's never gonna walk again? I say, fine! That means he'll never ruin another kid's life by selling them drugs. He'll never knock anybody off ever again! He won't sell off any more women or children to—"

Both of them fell silent when they saw Barbara standing at the bottom of the stairway.

"I brought cookies?" she said softly. "Alfred says hi. Dick would too, but he's asleep."

She nodded, and started to turn away. Bruce cleared his throat, and said, in a kinder tone, "I think sleep's a good idea, for all of us. Barbara, will you take Jason upstairs, please? I have a few calls I need to make."

Jason scowled, but followed after his sister obediently. They didn't speak as he stripped off his Robin suit and walked with her up the staircase to the elevator. They stepped in together, and the door slid shut.

Jason wrapped his arms over his chest. He was wearing only a white tank top and shorts, but it wasn't cold. The gesture showed more frustration than anything else.

"It isn't fair," he told her. "We're just glorified coppers, after all."
She put a hand on his arm. "We do the best we can, Jay. In the end, that's all that really matters."

His face hardened, and he shook her off. She drew back, hurt, and his look turned apologetic.

Then, he sighed. "Know what I saw tonight, Babs? I saw a girl being beaten in the streets by some random guy. Her mom was next to her, bloody and unconscious. A police officer stepped up to the job, so Bats left it alone. Only, after we left, I looked back and saw the copper stuff a wad of cash in his pocket and uncuff the scumbag. That's what justice is in this town."

Barbara led him out of the elevator. "I'm sorry, Jay. I really am. But maiming people isn't the answer. I promise you that."

He started to walk down the hall, hands stuffed in the pockets of his shorts. "Yeah? What if one day, Penguin decides to shoot Dick in the head? Or what if Riddler attacks you and...you know. What then? Do the rest of us just ignore that? Slap the villains on the wrist and send them back to Arkham, just so that they can escape again?"

He made an angry noise in the back of his throat. "Sometimes I wonder if Bruce'd even care if we all just died one day. He'd probably just find some other street urchins to do his dirty work."

Barbara stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. Her voice was firm as she said, "Don't say things like that. Of course he'd care. We'd all care." Then, she pulled him into a hug. "I promise, Jay. I won't let anything happen to you. Ever."

He scoffed at that.

"You can't guarantee that. Not in our line of work."

"No?" Barbara demanded, "Fine. If anything ever does happen to you, I'll personally make sure they don't get off with a slap on the wrist."

She dug her face into his dark hair. "No one'll ever replace you, Jaybird. Never happen."

He hugged her back.

"You too," he said softly.
Welp, it had to happen. But I'm sorry.

Three weeks after that night, the batkids reported to Mount Justice.

Batgirl's concussion was all but gone and healed. Alfred had helped her integrate a few shock plates into the back of her cowl. Not only would it keep her from getting beaned from behind by any numbskull thug with a crowbar, it would help prevent any other type of head injury. She'd suggested a few tweaks to improve the design further. Bruce especially had been interested in her ideas, and wanted to integrate them into his Batsuit.

Nightwing still wore a wrist brace under his gauntlet, but he was almost completely back to normal. Robin and Batgirl made sure to tease him about all the random things he'd said under the influence of the pain meds. He laughed it off, though. What did he care? He may have cried over a rubber ducky, (Robin had hidden it under his pillow. Barbara was not ashamed to say that she had captured some very embarrassing footage from the incident) but he hadn't done anything more embarrassing. But his partners were not allowed to tell the rest of the Team. Especially not Wally.

They stepped into the center hub—lovingly nicknamed 'the lobby' by the older members of the Team—and found Aqualad at the center computer. He tapped away at the holographic screens, and chatted with the girl in yellow and blue next to him. Aquagirl grinned from ear to ear and leaned into Kaldur. Barbara expected the Atlantean to be irritated, as he often was when the younger Team members interrupted him, but he only smiled and rested his head on hers. Batgirl was pretty sure that she'd never before seen Kaldur so happy.

"Good," he said, looking up at the batkids. "You are here at last. I have summoned the rest of the Team."

And sure enough, the superheroes marched into the lobby in pairs or groups, chatting away. Mia spotted Jason and gave a shy little wave.

"Good to see you, Tula," Batgirl said, smiling. Tula beamed. She didn't speak much English yet, but Aqualad was teaching her.

"I am..." she tipped her head to the side, considering. Then she turned to Kaldur, beaming as the phrase came to her. "Delighted! Delighted to see you as well."

"Well done," Kaldur said, annunciating the syllables carefully. He, too, was grinning proudly.
Barbara complimented Aquagirl on her vocabulary, then turned to Robin.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" she asked, feeling a bit of nervousness burble up inside of her. "Cause we can always wait until—"

"Batgirl," Dick said, grinning, "He's got this! Quit worrying."

He and Jason fist bumped. Barbara rolled her eyes.

Wally sped up to them and enveloped Nightwing and Robin in speedster bear hug. Artemis stepped up and stood beside Batgirl.

"Congrats, little dude!" Wally cheered. He and the batboys turned away, talking about becoming a man by leading missions or eating their first whole pizza. Barbara wasn't sure either qualified.

"Well, your partner's becoming a man today, at least according to Wally." Artemis smiled. The two of them had become good friends in the years since Barbara had first joined the Team. When the manor got too charged up with testosterone, she could always count on a movie night or emergency shopping trip with Artemis. Sometimes, she and her Mom offered up Korean dramas that only the two of them could understand completely. (Usually, those nights renewed her determination to learn more languages.) Likewise, whenever Artemis's dad stopped in, she knew she always had a safe place to hide at Wayne manor.

Barbara shrugged, allowing herself to smile. "Your partner's got her eyes on him, too, I hear."

They giggled, glancing over at Mia.

"She's a sweetheart. GA found her when he busted a government official, you know. The scumbag had hired her for…work. If you know what I mean."

Barbara grimaced beneath her cowl. She'd always had a soft spot for Mia; the girl had grown up on the streets too. Unfortunately, she'd never been as lucky as Barbara had been. On the streets, Babs had learned how to make weapons out of scrap metal, and how to throw punches that would convince your attacker to leave you alone. The streets had given Mia a different education. "Poor girl. I'm glad she's got you guys now." Her attention shifted for a moment back to the boys. Wally was leaning on Jason's shoulder, whispering something that was making his face grow redder and redder by the second. She heaved a longsuffering sigh and turned back to Artemis. "Everything copasetic in Star City?"

Artemis shrugged, waving at Mia. "Same old, same old. That's…actually what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," Artemis's eyes dodged to the side. She smiled a little. "Um, Wally and I…this is our last mission. We're moving in together, going into retirement."

Batgirl gaped. "What? Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. You never know what'll happen, and…" She paused. A contented smile lit up her face; she almost glowed. Then, she said softly, "Wally wants to ask me to marry him. I wanted to wait awhile, and…anything could go wrong before then. We don't want to risk it."

"I respect that," she said. She forced a smile. "But we'll miss you." A beat, then, "Does Dick know about this?"
"Wally should be telling him now."

Barbara's eyes wandered over to Dick. His smile was frozen, shoulders stiff.

"But...I don't think it'll be forever, Barbara. We'll be here if you need us to be."

Barbara snorted. "Please. I'm sure the only thing that could change Wally's mind is an alien invasion. Even then..." she trailed off and shared a laugh with the archer girl.

"Team, please gather together." Kaldur's voice carried around the room. The meta humans and vigilantes fell silent and congregated in the center of the room.

"I will now assign squads." Aqualad smiled at Robin, then straightened.

"Alpha squad. The Light has been operating with a strange new partner. Our mission will be to gain surveillance in one of their strongholds in the Pacific. Miss Martian, Kid Flash, Aquagirl, Lagoon Boy and myself will form this squad. I will be leading. Superboy, Artemis, Bumblebee, and Batgirl will make up Beta Squad. You will be investigating the Light's stronghold in Metropolis. Batgirl will be leading."

There was a buzz of voices. Batgirl smiled and high-fived Artemis.

"Finally, Blue Beetle, Arrowette, Beast Boy and Robin will be Gamma Squad. Robin will lead. Ra's Al Ghul has been active with the League of Assassins in the Quaraci desert, showing increasing boldness. We know that he has at least one member of the Shadows working with him, but we do not know who that member is. Your mission is to find out, and gather intel. Do not engage. If there is conflict, call for backup, and we will send someone to intervene. Batman is on standby."

Robin glowered, and muttered something about his mentor being overprotective. Mia nodded sympathetically.

Nightwing stepped forward, visibly confused.

"Aqualad? I was hoping to go with Gamma Squad."

Kaldur shook his head. "I am sorry, Nightwing. I will need you to run Mount Justice while I am gone."

Nightwing's fists and jaws clenched, but he nodded. Barbara knew that it took a lot of restraint to keep any biting remarks or complaints to himself; he'd been looking forward to today for weeks. Heck, so had she. Jason's first time leading a squad was a big deal. Dick had been, for obvious reasons, excited to see the new Robin follow in his footsteps.

"Understood," was all he said.

Aqualad nodded and the groups split up, drifting together to report to squad leaders.

"Okay," Batgirl told Beta Squad, "Metropolis. This is your area of expertise, Connor. Any advice?"

Connor grunted, glancing over in M'gann's direction. "Not really. Metropolis is a lot less weird than Gotham, if that's what you're asking."

"No crazy rampant supervillains lurking in the streets, then?" she asked.

Connor managed a smile. "Not really. Look out for rabid reporters, though."
Batgirl nodded. "Will do. Let's head out."

She waved at Nightwing, but he beckoned her over. Jason stood at his side. Barbara was surprised but happy when Nightwing wrapped them both in a bear hug.

"Wish we could be there with you," Dick said to Robin. "But you'll do great. I know you will." He let go, clapping them both on the shoulders. He managed a small smile.

"Stay safe." He jabbed a finger at them. "And don't you dare have too much fun without me!"

They laughed, and hugged one last time. The rest of their teammates were staring.

So they turned and left with their squads.

Jason smiled at Batgirl, and gave his two fingered salute.

Robin peeked around a jade pillar. His Teammates hovered nearby, and he worried that they'd throw him off, reveal their location. They hadn't been trained like he had in stealth. Mia was the closest. Beast Boy was sure to get them caught, so Jason told him to transform into a beetle, and perch on Jaime's shoulder. The actual Blue Beetle was not amused.

In the courtyard, Ra's Al Ghul stood beside a woman with long gleaming brown hair. Her cheekbones were sharp, but not unattractive. Jason recognized the lady as Talia Al Ghul from Batman's files. An old flame of his, apparently. (Jason wasn't supposed to know about that, but he wasn't supposed to know a lot of things. Like the fact that Dick still slept with a teddy bear. Or that Alfred got his chocolate cake recipe off the internet.) Beside the two Al Ghuls stood a man dressed from top to bottom in black robes, with a head covering that hid his face. All three of them (along with a dozen or so ninjas standing overhead) were watching a boy fence with a katana against a ninja four feet taller than him.

The boy couldn't have been more than two.

"Watch your form, Damian," Talia snapped. The little boy, distracted, turned to look at the woman, and was struck down by the ninja. A long cut opened on his cheek. Outraged, Ra's Al Ghul stormed forward. But instead of chastising the ninja for hurting the little boy, Ra's grabbed the toddler's arm and shook him, screaming about discipline and strength. The boy nodded instead of crying.

Beside Jason, Mia gasped. "That's horrible!" she whispered.

"He'll be okay," Jason whispered back, remembering his own father all too well. Watching Ra's red face brought back memories of his own father's face. The stink of booze on his breath as he gripped Jason's arm hard and tossed him against the wall. Or when Willis put out cigarettes on Jason's bare arms.

This little kid in front of them had it rough, it seemed. But he'd be okay. Jason had turned out
alright, hadn't he?

Gamma squad crept through the courtyard when the League of Assassins had dispersed. His teammates followed Jason closely. Beast Boy stayed as a beetle, and Jason was glad. The ten-year-old was skilled with his shape shifting, but not much else. Plus, he was easily frightened.

"The man in black," Jason whispered. "That'll be our Mystery Shadow Man."

Blue Beetle and Arrowette nodded. Beast beetle twitched. They shot grappling lines to the top of the courtyard, landing on the stone tiled roof. Mia landed on a ninja, knocking him out cold. She looked up, excited.

"Guys," she whispered, "I think I just knocked out my first ninja!"

Jason couldn't help but smile. She really was cute…

He heard a sound behind him and threw up his fist. A ninja grunted and fell backwards off the roof and into the courtyard.

On the other side of the wall, they watched the man in black get into a dusty gray jeep. As the vehicle sped away through the sand, dust billowed up from behind it.

Robin turned to Blue Beetle. "We need to catch that jeep." Jaime nodded, and wings popped out from his back. He grabbed Arrowette with one hand and Robin with the other, then hurtled into the sky.

Batgirl snapped a picture of the suspicious looking bags of chips below.

Yes. Snack Food.

She was ready to scream, it was so boring. They were already four or five hours into their mission, not counting travelling time. Apparently, the warehouse Kaldur had sent them to was a junk food manufacturing plant owned and operated by LexCorp. Because maybe the Light's plan was to take over the world by promoting obesity. She let out a sigh and tapped her forehead against a metal support pole.

Superboy was stretched out on the catwalk beside her, head balanced on his crossed arms. He stared off into space. Artemis was sitting nearby, bow settled on her legs, her head tipping back to rest against the metal railing. Her eyes were closed, but Batgirl doubted that she was asleep.

Bumblebee, also armed with a camera, flitted somewhere around the room unseen, taking snapshots of corn chips and fried cheese crisps.

This was so stupid. LexCorp was the only possible Light connection to this place. And even evil corporations ran legitimate operations.

It was a distraction. Nothing more. Perhaps their enemies were laying false trails for them, to waste
their time and bore them to death.
Beside her, Superboy groaned.

They touched down at the top of a snow flecked mountain. Quarac was similar to many Middle Eastern Nations in that it consisted of scorching deserts as well as chilly mountains. A squat, dark warehouse spread itself on the snow in front of them, and stuck out like a sore thumb amongst the pale landscape.

Jason stared at the structure with a growing sense of foreboding. They'd seen the man step inside, and the Gammas were hesitating to follow him. Robin supposed he couldn't blame them—the place was giving him some pretty creepy vibes—but they had a mission to complete.

He started forward, but was stopped by Blue Beetle's firm hand on his arm.

"Whoa, hermano," he whispered, "Aqualad's orders. No confrontation."

Jason shook him off. "He also ordered us to find out who the mystery Shadow is. And I'm going to, even if I have to rip that headdress off myself!"

Mia's eyes were wide behind her red domino mask. "Jay, we can't. There's no way in but through that door. He'll see us!"

Robin huffed, impatient.

"Go call for backup or something. I'm going in."

He started to turn, but Jaime swore softly in Spanish. "No, he can't! He needs us. He can't!"

Mia raised an eyebrow.

"We'll wait out here," Beast Boy whispered, still a beetle on Blue's shoulder.

Mia nodded. "Okay. You batkids are good at getting into places. Get what you need, then come back." Jason started to turn, but she grabbed his hand at the last minute and pulled him closer. Before he had time to blink, her lips were on his, and every coherent thought bouncing around in his skull fizzled into nonexistence.

After an eternity, she pulled away, and whispered, "Be safe, boy wonder."

Robin nodded, and slipped through the door, just in time to hear Blue say,

"No, don't! We need to stay—"

There was a flash and a buzz, and Robin looked out into the night. Blue (and consequently Beast Boy) had both shot into the air. The shrinking dots of light that were his scarab's rocket thrusters were the only indication that he'd ever been there at all. Mia let out a shriek and turned around.
"I have to go after them, Robin."

He smiled. "Hey. I've got this. You go ahead."

She seemed hesitant to leave him, but he insisted. "I'll be right behind you. Get to the drop zone, and I'll meet you there with the info we need." Finally, she nodded, turning to sprint towards the lights glimmering on the horizon. She'd be fine, Jason knew. The girl knew her way around any sort of vehicle; she'd probably hijack a jeep from the Al Ghul compound.

Besides. He'd be right behind her.

The warehouse was dark, lit only by three bare lightbulbs suspended in the air by wires. Jason crept forward, calling upon the stealth tricks that Batman had drilled into his head. Light steps. Distribute your body weight evenly, concentrating on your center of gravity.

He heard a soft cackle and whipped around. The man in black stepped from the shadows, and stood in front of Robin.

"Well," Jason said, "looks like I found the Shadow."

The man laughed, and it started out as a low cackle, rising into something more sinister and hysterical. Jason tensed, every nerve in his body singing with dread. He knew that laugh. Every Gothamite knew that laugh, heard it in their nightmares. Jason reached down and pressed a button on his belt.

The man whipped off his headdress and revealed a bleached, grinning face.

"Actually, boy," the Joker said, "I'm more of an Injustice Leaguer."

He let out one more laugh, and Jason felt a prick in his neck as the room was plunged into darkness.

Jason's gloves, gauntlets, boots and belt were stripped off as the Joker tied his wrists and ankles behind his back. The clown laughed while he worked, ignoring Jason's sluggish moans.

"Now, I know how you bat brats like to keep toys in your boots," he said. Robin tried to fight back, but whatever Joker had drugged him with kept his limbs buzzing and his mind foggy.

And then, the Joker pulled a metal crowbar from a nearby crate.

"This should do," he said, testing the tool with his gloved fingers. "I'll bet you weren't supposed to come here all alone, were you? Hmm…more fun for me, I suppose!"

Jason hoped that his message had gone through.

Batman? Nightwing? Batgirl?
They'd come for him. He knew they would.

The crowbar slammed into Robin's chest.

"I'm bored," Bumblebee groaned. Batgirl shushed her, even though there was no real need to be quiet. Surveillance was minimal, limited to a few cameras (which they'd already taken out) and a night watchman named Harry. (Who was fast asleep).

"I'm starting to think that even the Gammas are having more fun than we are," Artemis muttered. Barbara shook her head and pulled up her wrist computer.

"Aqualad sent us here for a reason," she told her Betas. Minus Superboy, who was asleep. She pulled up the blueprints for the building, hoping to find something. Anything.

Wait. There was a password protected file under her search results. She started to work, typing madly at the holographic keyboard at her wrist, and little red emoji's of her head popped up, steaming mad and shaking.

"Aw, cute," Artemis said, "Robin used to have those, remember?"

The first angry batgirl head turned green, smiling cutely, and the other four followed in quick succession.

"There are dozens of stories under this building!" Batgirl hissed excitedly. "Now we're talking!"

Superboy had shaken himself awake, and they all gathered around the screen to look. His face blanched.

"That's like Cadmus," he said quietly.

They all nodded, some shooting sympathetic glances his way, and Batgirl's mind spun.

"You're right," she said, "It must be a branch-off facility of Cadmus. So, instead of going down there ourselves, we're going to send this info to Nightwing. Get the League in here."

She remembered all too well the incident that brought the Team together. She'd just started with Batman, and remembered Dick coming back to the cave on a stretcher, one arm fractured, six ribs broken. He'd been in the cave's infirmary for weeks. That would not happen to her squad.

Her comm crackled to life.

["Batgirl."]

Batman's voice in her ear startled her out of her thoughts. She put a finger to her ear and turned away from her teammates.

"I read you. What is it, boss man?"
“Robin’s squad showed up at Happy Harbor thirty minutes ago.”

"Come again?"

[“Without him.”]

A cold hand squeezed Barbara's chest.

[“He was able to send a short video message before going offline. The League of Assassin's Shadow partner is the Joker, and he has Robin.”]

"What!?" she hissed. Her teammates shuffled behind her, clearly wanting to know what was going on.

[“I need backup. The Batplane is waiting for you outside. Your squad can finish the mission on their own.”]

"Right," she said, noting the panic creeping into her voice, "I'm coming."

[“Hurry.”]

Even the Batman sounded nervous. This was serious. She stood quickly and turned to her squad.

"Artemis, can you take over?"

"What's going on?" She asked, eyes wide.

Batgirl felt mounting panic in her chest. The Joker. As of late, he'd become more brutal, more murderous. His kill count had skyrocketed in the past few months alone. If he had Jason…her little brother…

"Family emergency," she said, tossing her wrist computer to the archer, "Just complete the mission. Get this info to Nightwing."

With that, she sprinted out into the night.

"Nguh," Robin grunted as he hit the concrete face first. The blow seared pain into his senses, turning his vision red. Or maybe the veins in his left eye had exploded from the crowbar's impact. Either way, Robin wished he was dead.

No. He wished that his message had gotten through. In his mind, he could see his family racing towards the warehouse, coming to save him. They always swooped in right on time. Jason felt that certainty wrap around him like a security blanket every time he leapt off a skyscraper and felt the wind rush up to meet him. If he slipped, if his cord snapped, there would always be someone bigger to snatch him from the sky before he fell.

The Joker tapped the bloodstained crowbar into his palm and stood over the battered boy wonder.
"I'd say forehand hurts more, judging by your squealing."

Jason turned his head, and muttered a curse. His voice wouldn't work, and something inside him seemed to snap and wither when he tried to speak. The Joker chuckled and leaned down, a hand cupped to his ear.

"Eh...Eh...ugh..." he hissed, mocking Jason's feeble attempt at words, "What's that, baby bird? I think you may have a collapsed lung. That always impedes the oratories."

Jason's mouth was already filling with blood. He spat it in the Joker's face, and the clown drew back, slamming Robin's face into the blood slicked concrete floor. He let out a soft grunt.

"Now, that was just rude. The first boy blunder had some manners, at least."

Jason turned his head.

'Too bad. I'm not Dick,' he thought as he grinned with bloodstained teeth. 'I don't have manners.'


Jason whimpered, and squeezed his eyes shut.

Batgirl was buckled in next to her mentor. The ocean streaked by beneath them, a blue pattern connected to a black horizon. Stars glittered overhead, but neither of the bats cared.

Batman's hands were clenched over the controls. The material of his gloves cracked as his fists squeezed tighter and tighter.

"Blue Beetle," he said, "Told us that his scarab took off..." The Batman's jaw clenched."...because there was a bomb at the sight."

Barbara froze, her dread mounting.

"Can I call Dick?"

Her mentor hesitated, then nodded once.

She put her finger up to her ear.
They were…coming. Jason was so sure. They wouldn't leave him. They'd come…they'd come…

Nightwing looked over the blueprints and his breathing hitched. So much underneath. How had they missed that? Just like the last time? He scrolled through them carefully, one by one, sipping hot cocoa from a holiday mug. Monitor duty royally sucked.

"I'm dispatching Canary, Tornado, Icon and Flash," he said over his comm, "Good work, Artemis."

["Batgirl's the one who found them.""]

He smiled. "She there?"

["Umm...she had to leave."]

"Leave?"

["Yeah. Said it was a 'family emergency'? Any idea what that was about?"]

Nightwing tensed. Family emergency?

"If this is a prank, Artemis..." he said, letting a bit of a smile creep into his voice.

His comm beeped twice.

"You're gonna have to hold," he told her, "I've got another call coming in."

["It's fine. Over and Out, Nightwing.""]

He tapped his comm, and Barbara's voice filled his ear.

["Dick. Joker's got Jason. There's a bomb."]

Her voice shook; she was scared.

His mug shattered against the floor. Cocoa splashed over his boots.

["Hurry!"]

They all knew how to defuse a bomb. It was part of their training. But Dick was probably the best
by far. Except for maybe Batman.

Batgirl sped through abandoned streets with Batman. Their cycle's motors were the only sounds in the night. Decrepit buildings and streets devoid of people whizzed past. Gaping empty windows and doors loomed around them like silent screams into the night. Her heart raced in her chest, pumping pure adrenaline through her veins.

There was a zeta tube a few miles away. It was old. It barely worked. But Barbara knew that's where Dick would come out. He'd make it work.

They followed Jason's last known coordinates. His belt. It was supposed to send out a signal…

Her mind was spinning too fast. They never should have let him lead a squad to Quarac. *Never.*

Almost there.

"Okay, kiddo. I've gotta go. It's been fun though, right?"

Jason kept his eyes closed. Stayed unresponsive.

"Maybe a titch more fun for me than you—I'm just guessing, since you've been awful quiet."

Every muscle, every joint, every inch of his body screamed out in pain. He drew in shallow breaths. Each gulp of air was a triumph.

"Well, alright." Joker chuckled. "Now, be a good boy, finish your homework and be in bed by nine."

The clown was taunting him. *Taunting him.* If Jason made it out of this, he'd never forget that laugh as long as he lived…If he lived, he'd shove a crowbar down the clown's throat…watch the light die in those psycho's wolf eyes…

No. No 'if' about it. His adoptive father…his brother…his sister…they'd come for him. They had to.

"Oh. One more thing." There was a rustling sound, like a coat being pulled onto shoulders, or a hood being pulled up. "Tell that little family of yours I said…hello."

The clown laughed, high and loud, and a door slammed shut. Jason listened, but he didn't hear any click. Would the Joker really leave the door unlocked? After all that? Hope switched on in his mind, filling the empty darkness of his head like a light.

His family was coming. But he'd help them out a little bit. Groaning, he flipped over onto his stomach and eased his legs through his arms, bringing his hands out in front. His body screeched, bones rubbing together, but he didn't care.

Slowly, he tried getting to his feet. One step. Wobble. Two steps…*crash.* He slipped in his own
blood and fell to the floor, his legs too weak to hold him up. He screamed when he landed.

It hurt. Oh...*#$!& it hurt!

So close. Batgirl pushed her cycle to go faster.

Nightwing zoomed out of the zeta tube on his own motorbike, borrowed from the mountain's armory. The wind whipped his hair. He hoped he wasn't too late.

Jason crawled. That's what he was reduced to. Crawling like an infant toward the door. No. Not a baby. A caterpillar. He inched forward bit by bit, hands and legs moving in tandem.

The door got closer and closer…

He perched himself up on the balls of his bare feet, and his ankle screamed bloody murder, but he pushed through it. His hand reached up. Up.

There. The rusty handle was clenched in his fist. He pulled down.

But it didn't budge.

No. No. No. He jiggled the handle. It had to open!

But it didn't.

Defeated, Jason sank to the floor, pulling himself into an upright sitting position.

Okay. He'd wait here. The others were on their way. He was sure of it.

He let out a guttural moan, and a bit of blood dribbled from his mouth, warm and wet. It prickled
against his skin as it slid down his chin. He waited there in the silence.

No. Not silence.

BEEP…BEEP…BEEP…

Jason's ears pricked at the sound. Each beep echoed in his head, making him wince. His eyes swept the room for the source…

There. Several yards away and mostly hidden behind a crate. But he could see its red numbers glowing in the dark. Wires jutted out from either side, twisting and winding into sticks of explosive.

Jason looked at the numbers.

20…19…18…17…16…15…

It took that long for it to sink in.

The other's wouldn't make it.

Not in time.

He'd lost.

Jason sank into the door, letting his head tip back into the cold metal. He squeezed his eyes shut.

11…10…9…

__________________________

Almost there. She was almost there. She could see the warehouse now…

__________________________

Almost there. He was almost there. He could see Batman and Batgirl's cycles…

__________________________
They all arrived at the same time, throwing their cycles to the side. The vehicles skidded across the icy ground, sending up a spray of ice crystals. Their boots crunched on brittle snow as they sprinted up towards the warehouse.

"I'm coming, Jaybird,' Barbara thought. 'I'm coming!"

FWOOM

The world lit up in a fiery explosion, in blinding light. Batgirl felt Batman's arm slam around her as he grabbed his partners and turned his back quickly, shoving them under his fire proof cape.

Shrapnel pelted the Kevlar like rain, and Batgirl and Nightwing shared a glance. Both their eyes were wide, scared.

When the blast dissipated, Batman released them, and all three fell into the snow.


All eyes turned to ground zero.

"JASON!" Nightwing screamed. He and Batman stumbled to their feet and raced into the wreckage. They overthrew scraps of metal and wood, calling the boy's name. Batman pleaded. Nightwing begged.

Barbara lay in the snow on her chest. Not sure if the pressure there was what kept her from drawing a full breath. She shivered, but she couldn't move to help them search. Not when she saw the piece of shrapnel in the snow.

Gold painted metal. Scorched almost beyond recognition, but Barbara knew it immediately.

It was Robin's belt buckle.

"Jason," she whimpered, "Please…please no…"

She slipped her fingers around the metal. It was warm to the touch. She rubbed the soot away, and ran a finger over the R emblazoned there.
Slowly, she got to her feet, wobbling so much that she almost pitched sideways into the slush.

Batgirl hobbled over to her partners, and slipped the buckle into her belt. She stood by Nightwing, who was staring at a crowbar lying in the soot. Slowly, he picked it up with a gloved hand. The ash fell away like snowflakes, and they could see red stains in its fissures and cracks.

Nightwing’s shoulders tightened.

Then, they heard Batman's voice, low and soft in the silence.

"No."

His protégés whirled around. Their mentor stood a few yards away, holding a bundle of red and black in his arms.

"Jason," he said, groaning and shutting his eyes.

"No!" Batgirl cried, rushing forward. Nightwing followed, slower.

Jason lay broken in the dark knight's grasp. Half of his face was scorched almost beyond recognition from the explosion. What was left was streaked with blood.

"No," Barbara squeaked, covering her mouth with an ashy gloved hand. Tears streamed down her face, and she collapsed into the snow, landing hard on her knees. Nightwing knelt beside her, placing his arms around her shoulders.

He shook, and Batgirl knew he was sobbing.

Their little brother was gone.

The Team gathered together with the League for the funeral in the Wayne Family Cemetery. There were no capes or costumes. Only formal black clothes. Bruce and Dick were the only exceptions, wearing black eye masks to preserve their identities.

The weather was freezing. Barbara could feel it through her black dress. It was ridiculous, of course. All of it was. The ladies dressed in black dresses and coats, the men wearing their best black suits. Black. Black. Black. They all stood out starkly against the pale white snow.

And it was all so ridiculous. Jason would have hated the grandeur. If he'd had his way, everyone would have shown up in sweatpants or basketball shorts. None of this standing around. Everyone would be laughing and arm wrestling, or…

She wasn't thinking straight anymore. Of course. If Jason had had his way, he'd be sitting right there with them.

Alive.
Everyone stood a few feet away, gathered around the granite headstone marked with Robin's real name. Barbara's mouth twisted. There was no need for secrecy when you were dead.

She herself sat on one of the freezing metal chairs that had been lined up for the service. Which was over, now, but she couldn't bring herself to stand and walk over to the open grave. She couldn't look into the ground and see that gray coffin covered in white roses.

White. Tt.

Jason's favorite color had always been red.

Instead, Barbara held the flower she'd been given to pin on her coat lapel. Its soft waxy petals folded against her touch. It was a lily. One of her favorites. She had the sudden urge to crush the blossom in her fist, squeeze it tight until blood gushed out and the petals fell to the ground, limp and torn and—

She heard the snow crunch, and looked up. Mia looked small in her black coat, and her eyes and cheeks were red from the cold and from crying. Her breath clouded in the air.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "I'm so sorry. I never should have—"

She gulped, and pressed her hands to her mouth. Fat, wet tears rolled down her cheeks, and Barbara reached up to wrap her arms around the young archer.

Of course, now that she was on her feet, she had no excuse. She walked with Mia to the graveside, and the Leaguers and Teammates moved aside for the dead boy's sister.

Superman nodded to her. Wonder Woman pressed a gentle hand on her shoulder as she walked by. Artemis and Zatanna apologized for her loss, wrapping her in a warm hug. Through their shoulders and hair, Barbara caught a glimpse of Wally and Dick standing on the opposite side of the grave. Dick's hand was outstretched, and little bits of dirt fell through the cracks in his fingers, but he wouldn't open his fist. He wouldn't let Jason go. Wally stood next to him, an arm around Dick's shoulders as they shook with sobs.

Barbara couldn't cry. She felt nothing.

No. That wasn't right. She felt too much, so much that tears refused to come.

But she would be there for Dick. She thanked her friends hollowly, and stopped to gather a handful of soil in her fist. Then, she stepped to the edge of the hole, and met Dick's eyes, stretching out her fist so that their knuckles touched.

_We don't have to forget_, she said with her eyes. Dick nodded, sniffing. Conversation stopped as all eyes turned to the two protégés holding their fists above Jason's grave. They both took deep breaths, and started to open their hands.

All of a sudden, Bruce stepped forward. He was still the same brooding man they'd always known, but now he had a sadness about him that Barbara or Dick hadn't seen in a long time. He took his own handful of dirt and stepped to the edge of the grave, opposite the headstone.

"Jason," they intoned. Tears streamed down Dick's face.

Together, their fists opened, and dirt tumbled into the white roses. Their petals shuddered under the weight.
Barbara took a shuddering breath and stepped backwards as the League members took up shovels. She turned away, ignoring Black Canary and Green Arrow. She didn't want to be rude, but she couldn't hear one more person say that they were sorry.

How could they be sorry?

They were glad it wasn't their partner lying in the ground.

They were glad it wasn't them.

Dick was at her side in a moment, and she started to lay her head on his shoulder.

Then. She saw him.

Jaime Reyes stood off to the side, talking to Mal Duncan and M'gann. Every now and then, he would glance at Jason's grave.

Blood roared in her ears. She surged forward. Dick's arm flew out to stop her, but she dodged it and swept towards the Blue Beetle.

"You actually have the gall to come here?" she snarled as she stepped past Mal and M'gann. "How dare you?"

"Barbara—" M'gann's hand was on her shoulder, but she shook it off violently.

Her hands wrapped around his neck, and she slammed him into a marble obelisk grave marker. His eyes flew wide.

"B-Batgirl—" he spluttered.

"You left him to die!" She screamed at him. A few of the funeral goers stepped forward to intervene, but Jaime put up a hand to stop them. Tears filled his eyes.

"You should have gone back for him," Barbara spat, "He would have done the same for you."

"I'm sorry," he said softly. Then, his eyes widened. "No, don't!"

Armor snaked down his arm, covering his knuckles. An electric jolt surged through Barbara's nervous system. She jerked back with a scream and fell into the snow, twitching.

"Barbara!" Dick helped her up, then turned to glare at the fourteen-year-old. Barbara's muscles spasmed, and she'd almost felt bad before, for attacking a younger kid. But not now.

"What the #$%% was that for?" Dick demanded. As if she hadn't just tried to strangle the guy. Jaime stepped back, pressing himself against the grave marker.

"I-I'm sorry," he said softly. "I didn't mean—"

He didn't have time to finish. Barbara's fist connected with his jaw, and Blue Beetle sprawled in the snow.

"No!" he pressed down on his own arm, and Dick's hands closed over Barbara's biceps, holding her back.

"Let me go!" She screamed. She fought him and kicked. He held her tighter.
"This won't bring him back!" He said, turning her quickly to face him instead of Jaime. Dick's face was drawn, full of anguish. She knew that this display of rage was only making things harder for him, more painful. "Please, Babs. It won't bring him back."

Barbara's chin shook. Finally, she felt her eyes well up.

"He's gone," she whimpered. Dick pulled her closer, and let her sob into his chest. Tears streamed down her cheeks, her breath came in shallow gulps.

She almost didn't hear Dick tell Jaime to make himself scarce. She almost didn't notice Bruce come up and hug them both.

But the hole in her chest. That she did notice.
THREE YEARS LATER

(ONE YEAR SINCE THE REACH'S INVASION)

Gotham City was a noisy huddled mess. It was also one of the drearier places in the world. Newspapers and tourist sites all around the world all agreed that people should generally stay away. The city itself was like a natural disaster, with the highest crime and mortality rates in the nation.

And yet, people were drawn to it, mentally sane or otherwise, like moths to a flame. (And speaking of moths and flames, look no farther than Gotham for freaks like Killer Moth and Firefly…) Living in the city, making one's own way and surviving to see the next sunrise was a challenge in a city like Gotham. But that was the thing about Gothamites; they were always up for a good challenge.

"You with us, there, BG? Or are you daydreaming again?"

Batgirl shook herself and swung, taking another smartly dressed goon down with a swift right hook. The woman snarled and bounded back to her feet. Babs reared back and twisted, positioning herself quickly behind her opponent. Her arm snaked around the woman's throat, and she pressed a tranquilizing dart into the exposed skin of her neck.

When Penguin's lackey had crumpled to the ground, she glanced around the Iceberg Lounge. Nightwing was busy with two leotard-clad women at once. They wielded gleaming, nasty looking knives.

"Ladies, please!" Dick shouted, barely dodging a jab to his gut. He sent a pleading glance Barbara's way. "There's plenty enough of me to go around!"

"Ooh, I don't know about that." Batgirl leapt into the air, and planted her foot squarely between one of the lackey's shoulders. The woman went down with a grunt. Her knife clattered across the floor. Barbara twisted her body and swept her leg under Dick's other opponent. This one jumped to avoid the attack, sneering in triumph, but she was too preoccupied with paying attention to Batgirl, and completely forgot about Nightwing's electrified escrima sticks.

Batgirl clambered to her feet, and dusted her palms together smugly. "I'm pretty sure he's taken."

Dick grinned, and gestured to the piled Penguin thugs that littered the room. "Thanks, dear."

She smirked.
"If you two lovebirds are quite finished—" The sound of a weapon being cocked made both vigilantes snap to attention. "I think it's time we bid each other adieu." Oswald Cobblepot was perched atop one of the Lounge's many balconies overhead, and his umbrella was pointed squarely at their heads. Anyone else might have laughed at the ruffled, overweight man's idea of a weapon. But—again—this was Gotham. At best, he had poison darts in there that would incapacitate them for a few hours. Worst case scenario, the umbrella was packing small short-range missiles that would blow them to teeny tiny pieces.

He was out of their throwing range, just barely. Still, though, Batgirl's fingers twitched towards her belt.

Penguin's sneer was wide and triumphant. "Don't you have any last words, bat brats? Any clever quips? How about a last message for me to pass on to the Batman when I paint the walls with your blood?"

Batgirl winced at Nightwing. "Eesh."

"Yeah, here's a last request," Dick said, quirking a grin. "Light jab to the base of the skull."

Penguin cocked his head to the side. "I beg your pardon?"

Dick's eyes widened innocently. "Oh, sorry. I wasn't talking to you, Ozzie."

Penguin stiffened, his eyes lolling in his head as he collapsed forward. He lay draped over the railing of the balcony, leaving a lone figure standing behind. The figure stepped forward into the light, and the R insignia on his chest glinted golden.

"Took you long enough!" Nightwing laughed.

Robin sighed. "I know how to knock someone out, Nightwing. Now can we please get going?"

They killed a little time on top of the Hannings Center, one of the mid-size buildings in the Cherry Hill district. They so rarely got time to just sit and talk on patrols, and with Batman preoccupied with Watchtower duty, they finally had the opportunity to catch their breath.

It was a crisp autumn day, and Barbara pulled her cape more snugly around her shoulders. Dick smirked at her, probably calling her a wimp in his head. All the same, he shivered a little too. It was chilly enough on the streets, but up here, atop the skyscrapers where the wind could blow freely, it was downright freezing.

Tim was the only one not bothered by the cold.

"Congratulations, N-wing," Barbara said, softly, trying for conversation. "You start again today, right?"

Dick smiled, but the expression didn't meet his eyes. Barbara bit her lip; she knew he was thinking about Wally. It had been about a year since the speedster had vaporized before their eyes, and
while everyone on the Team—especially Dick—had had extensive sessions with Black Canary, only a few of them had truly come to terms with Wally's death.

"Ah, monitor duty," he said. Then, he turned to Tim. "Nothin’ like it."

Tim and Barbara shared a knowing smirk.

“I hear, though," Dick continued, "that our little Timmy has a girlfriend?"

Barbara nodded, smiling, and nudged Tim's shoulder playfully. "He has two, actually."

Tim shrugged and smiled. "Uh…"

"Cassie and Steph," Dick said, thoughtfully. "Dating two Team members at once…now that's risky business."

"I caught him kissing both of them," Barbara said, "So I guess he's gonna have to make a decision sooner or later…"

Dick chuckled, then he and Barbara both dissolved into giggles. "Oh!" Dick said, sighing dramatically, "But a difficult decision lies ahead. Which should he choose? The blonde or the blonde?"

Tim's face turned a brilliant shade of red to match his costume. He shoved them both, and said, "Okay, okay, sheesh! Lay off, you guys!"

They giggled. "We're never gonna lay off, Timmy," Batgirl said, "Get used to it."

"Stop calling me that. Who knows who's listening?"

Batgirl pouted. Nightwing let out a huff. "C'mon, Rob. No one can hear us up here."

"Yeah, but…still."

They stood up together, all conceding silently that it was time to get a move on. Making sure that their lines were attached to the edge of the roof, they vaulted over the side. The air whipped at their hair and capes, and they landed softly on the alley floor below. Well, Robin and Batgirl landed softly. Dick fell with a clang into an open dumpster.

"&*#^ it!" came his muffled voice. Batgirl couldn't help but giggle. Even Tim smirked.

"Now what's Batman always telling us, Wingnut?" she asked sweetly.

Dick's head poked up above the metal rim. He had a banana peel perched in his hair. He was not amused.

"I think that would be 'look before you leap', Batgirl," Robin said, feigning surprise.

They laughed as Nightwing clambered out. "Ha, ha."

The alley was dark and secluded. Usually, that would mean it was the perfect place to get mugged or murdered, but it had been gated off, and was frequented enough by the bats that thugs and muggers tended to keep their distance. The dumpster Nightwing had landed in was only emptied every other week or so, when the owners decided to empty the bags by hand and leave them on the curb. Other than that, the seclusion was absolute. Which was perfect, because it was the only way in Gotham city (other than the Batcave, of course) to zeta to the Watchtower. Now that Mount
Justice was destroyed, it was the Team's new base of operations.

They could have gone to the cave, but this spot was closer to the Iceberg Lounge. And while they'd meant to leave right away, an urgent call from the Commissioner that afternoon had sent the three of them on a bit of a detour.

Once Nightwing had dusted himself off, the three of them turned to the unassuming phone booth at the edge of the alley.

"Babs and I have been thinking," he said, glancing at Tim.

"That's never a good sign."

Batgirl scoffed.

"Anyways," Dick continued. "We've been thinking that it would be a good idea to walk you to school. Pick you up after. That kind of thing."

Tim was silent. He stared intensely at the brick wall beside them, as if trying to remove the bricks with his mind. Then, he said,

"This is about the new player."

It wasn't a question. Batgirl and Nightwing shared a glance.

Gotham city was the crime capital of the world. On average it had more crazies and psychopaths than any other city in the world at any given time. But killings in Gotham had gone up dramatically with the arrival of a new mob boss strong-arming the other syndicates. There had been street shootings and disappearances all over the city.

And, well, Tim was fifteen now.

They'd always been protective of Timmy. When it came time to lead his first squad to the Krolatean base last year, Dick and Barbara had almost shouted Bruce's ear off during an argument. Bruce wanted to give the new Robin a chance at leadership. Barbara insisted he wasn't ready. Dick said that he was...ready-ish. But it was too risky. In the end, Bruce had won out. And of course, Tim had led Gamma and succeeded with flying colors.

But it didn't stop the older batkids from watching out for their baby brother.

"Yes," Batgirl said softly. "Yes, it is."

Tim nodded, lips pressed tightly together. Nightwing cleared his throat and offered to go in first. He waved as he stepped inside the phone booth, then shut the door. When the bright flash that indicated he was gone lit up the alleyway, Tim turned to Barbara.

"I can walk the two miles to school by myself, you know. If I have to," he grumbled, rolling his eyes, "I'm not a little kid. Besides. Agent A drives me, anyway."

Barbara felt a pang in her chest. "We know that, Timmy. It's just—"

He sighed. "I know. I know." He stepped into the phone booth and frowned a little.

"I appreciate that you guys are worried about me. But..." he trailed off, glancing off to the side. "I...I'm not Jason."
With that, the door slammed shut, leaving Barbara waiting alone in the dark.

She let out a heavy sigh and opened the phone booth door. A flash of movement caught her eye, and her gaze darted upward. A flash of red. Maybe just her eyes playing tricks on her.

Even so, she was uneasy as she stepped into the booth.

The Watchtower was a hub of activity. Members of the Team scurried through the main hall alongside full-fledged members of the Justice League. After the founding members had made the decision to allow the Team to operate out of the Watchtower, it had taken a while for the two groups to learn how to coexist peacefully. For a tense few weeks, the League seemed to think that they could tell the Team what to do, where to operate, and even when to deploy. The Team, likewise, had a habit of trying to elbow its way into League business. Eventually, though, (after a savage prank war pushed both sides to the edge of sanity) they'd made a truce.

Now, the Team had its own hierarchy, and its own meeting rooms, computer hubs, and rec center. The League had backed off, too, once Kaldur and the other founding Team members had convinced them that they could fend for themselves. Both groups were finally able to relax around each other.

Tim was waiting for Barbara at the zeta entrance when she came through. He smiled at her and nudged her shoulder playfully.

"Ah! I missed you!" She said dramatically. "I think you've gotten taller, Robin!"

He smiled at the familiar game. "I know," he replied, "It's been forever…did you get a new haircut?"

One of them—probably Dick—had once made the observation that none of them really knew for sure how the zeta tube worked, not completely. For all they knew, it could be bending time, taking years to get to their destination. None of them really bought into that, and Babs didn't really like to over-analyze this particular subject, so, they'd started pretending shock when they came out of the tubes, like they'd been trapped in time and space. The game bugged the heck out of Batman. Hence its popularity with the batkids.

"Why, yes, actually." She tipped her chin up. "Thank you for noticing."

Batman walked by with Green Lantern. He sighed deeply when he heard their exchange. Tim and Barbara waved enthusiastically.

"Ah, sidekicks," they heard GL say to their mentor as they walked away. "I was thinking about getting one of those…"

Tim turned serious instantly. "Hey, Batgirl," he said, "I'm sorry. For what I said, and…" he shrugged. Batgirl shook her head, wrapping her arms sideways around his shoulders. She gave him a gentle shake.
"Hey. I know exactly how you feel. You should have seen Dick when we first started dating. 'Babs, watch out!' 'Let me get that thug for you.' All of that." She met the boy's eyes. "Timmy. We're just doing it because we care about you. I guess we know you can take care of yourself, but..." she trailed off. Tim nodded.

"Okay. I get it. And—"

"Robin!" A flash of purple assaulted Tim, wrapping him in a bear hug. When the girl pulled away, she pulled off her black facemask. A shiner that matched her aubergine costume flared under one eye.

"Ugh...can't breathe right in that thing...Oh! Great news!" Her smile was bright. "My dad went to Blackgate today!"

Barbara smiled. "That's, um...great, Steph!"

Tim smiled and congratulated her, starting to herd her towards one of the giant windows that looked out on Space. She turned, and shouted across the main hall.

"Oh, Batgirl! Nightwing needs you in the mission room. Right away!"

Batgirl nodded, smiling. Everybody in the batfamily loved Stephanie. Tim had been dating her for about a year and a half, and when he'd first introduced them to her, they'd almost suffered a collective heart attack. Because when they'd met her, Steph had been seven months pregnant. Barbara smiled, remembering the looks on Bruce's and Dick's faces: Sheer terror. She even recalled Dick muttering 'B-baby?...little Timmy...' over and over. Tim had been quick to assure them that he wasn't the culprit, however, and that he was only helping Stephanie out. Barbara thought it was incredibly sweet.

She made her way down hallways and corridors, waving and smiling at members of the Team and League. Both organizations had grown since the end of the Invasion. So much so, that Tim was helping to start a branch-off Team. What did he call it, again...?

She stepped into the mission room, narrowly dodging Raven, a new girl in a black cloak and a nose buried in a book. The girl didn't even notice, too wrapped up in her story.

The mission room was dark, lit up only by the enormous holoscreens in the center. Kaldur and Dick were tapping away at different reports and alerts. The new computer system was working well, and Barbara felt a surge of pride. She'd designed it, after all.

"Glad you made it," Nightwing said, giving her a stiff nod. She raised her eyebrows at the solemn greeting, but he waved her over quickly.

"The new player in Gotham," Nightwing said, "Remember him?"

She nodded. The man had been a ghost ever since he showed up. No surveillance of him...at all. In a city riddled with some of the most advanced surveillance tech in the world, that fact was frightening.

"Did we finally spot him?" She asked. Nightwing nodded, and pulled up a file. An image of a man standing atop a skyscraper. He was dressed kind of like a biker, with a thick leather motorcycle jacket over a layer of gray upper body armor. And boots—the kind used by the military. He wore hip holsters with handguns visible, and a hunting knife on a utility belt. On his head was a red helmet that covered his entire face. Only two black and white eye holes marred the perfectly smooth surface of the helmet, along with a crack running down and up, giving the impression of a
skull's grin. The blood red paint gleamed in the lights of the city.

And he was staring straight at the surveillance camera.

"That's…that's uncanny." Batgirl studied the image again. "It's like he knows exactly where the camera is."

"That was my thinking, too," Dick said gravely. "But it gets worse."

A few short commands, and a video file popped up. It was three crooks being interrogated by the Batman a few days ago. Batgirl recognized the setting as a loading bay on the East side. Where Bats had patrolled alone the other night, just before reporting for Watchtower duty.

"Who is your boss?" Their mentor growled, "This shipment belongs to the Black Mask. Why did you have it?"

One crook spluttered. "We can't! We can't tell you!"

Batman grabbed the man's collar, hefting him up. "Why?"

"Red Hood," another thug said quickly, "He calls himself the Red Hood."

"He said he'd kill us if we talked," the third man said. "You gotta help us, bats. We told you, just like you wanted, so you have to—"

There was a crackle over the speaker, and the third man slumped over, a hole in his forehead. There were two more gunshots, and the other thugs died. Batman cursed, backing up. In the corner of the feed, atop one of the shipping crate stacks, there was a flash of red.

"Red Hood," Batgirl said. "Wasn't that-?"

"The Joker's first alias. Yeah."

The rush of hatred she felt when she heard that name almost robbed her of speech, but she cleared her throat and said. "But he's in Arkham. It couldn't be him. Besides," she brought the image of the mysterious man back up. "This guy's got the wrong height, body type, and all that."

Nightwing nodded. "It's possible, though, that they're in league with one another. We'll have to look into it."

"And you will both have ample time. I have approved your requests for leave of absence," Kaldur finally said, turning away from his project to look at them.

"What requests?" Batgirl raised an eyebrow.

Nightwing cleared his throat, "Um…surprise?"

"Dick," she moaned. Kaldur quirked a smile. "You just got back. We just got back!"

He put a hand on her shoulder. "Think about this for just a minute," he said softly. She huffed and stepped back. He continued. "No. Really. This whole thing, this whole case. Something isn't right with this guy."

"It's Gotham," she retorted.

Arrest records.

Death rates were up in some places, arrests were down. Crime rates were…

"A record low?" She said. "How is that possible? All those shootings…"

"Just look at the victims," Dick said, enlarging profiles and autopsies. "Members, dealers and runners for Black Mask. All of them."

"So this Hood guy is taking over Black Mask's territory and shipments. His people too, it looks like. And in consequence—"

"Is cleaning up Gotham city," Nightwing said, "The easy way."

"It would seem," Kaldur said softly, "That you have a new vigilante in your city. One who favors himself a new Batman. One that does not mind bloodshed."

Nightwing nodded, and turned to Batgirl. They had a mental argument for a minute or two. Then, Batgirl sighed.

"Fine," she said, "But I was really looking forward to giving up monitor duty."

Dick grinned. "I knew there was an ulterior motive. Now, let's go catch this guy."

Barbara glared at her mug of hot cocoa. She hated being benched, but Bruce and Dick had gone to interrogate the Joker. And they obviously didn't trust her to be there in the same room with that monster.

Her fingers pressed against her temples until her head ached.

*An explosion.*

*Dick screaming.*

*Bruce shouting.*

*A belt buckle in the gray snow.*

*A bloody crowbar in the ashes.*

*A broken body in the ruins.*

Barbara sighed, and picked up the object that lay next to the mug. She fingered the smooth round buckle in her hands. The metal was cold, and still bore the scars of the explosion. But it was all she had left of Jason. She'd never even shown it to Dick.

"May I get you anything else, Miss Barbara?" Alfred asked. She looked up, hastily shoving the buckle back into her pocket.
"Hmm? Oh. No, thank you."

Alfred nodded and started to turn away.

"Wait," she said. Paused, then cracked a smile. "Could I trouble you for a game of Scrabble?"

The old butler's mouth quirked up, and he stepped into the hall to retrieve the game board.

She wished she could call Tim, but he was out on a date with Cassie, and she didn't want to embarrass him. If only she'd been allowed to go with Bruce and Dick.

"I can practically hear your thoughts, Miss Barbara," he said, setting the box on the table.

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. I know you wanted to go with the others instead of being stuck here with little old me."

Barbara opened her mouth in protest. "Alfred-!"

He smiled. "Only teasing, only teasing. But I think it was a wise decision on Master Bruce's part, if you ask me."

She pulled the board from the box and laid it out on the table. "And why is that, exactly?"

"Because," he replied. He shook out the lettered pieces and handed her a wooden tray. "Remember when you and the Batman arrested the Joker and took him to Arkham Asylum? You put the man in a body cast after he mentioned…well, I think you understand me?"

Barbara gripped her mug. Hard. Bruce had been livid. He'd shouted at her for over an hour, red in the face, telling her she'd been foolish and impulsive and cruel. She'd only looked him in the eye and said,

"He deserved worse. That was my little brother he butchered. Be glad I only broke his bones and not his neck."

Bruce still didn't speak to her for days. But there had been no more argument after that.

"I know, Alfred."

They set up their pieces and aligned words side by side and up and down on the game board. There were a few debates on authenticity of certain words, but Barbara didn't dig out the dictionary once, like she usually did when playing with Dick or Tim. Tim's words were usually the kind they had to pull the dictionary out for, while Dick's were just…less than credible.

Finally, they heard the alarm on Alfred's wrist watch go off. A few moments later, Dick and Bruce stormed into the room in full costume.

"Master Bruce! I thought I made it clear that we would have no uniforms upstairs!"

While Bruce apologized to Alfred, Dick turned to Barbara.

"Joker doesn't know him. But there's a deal going down now at the Monte Building. Hood's gonna be there."

She grinned and pushed her chair back. "I'll go get changed."
Finally, some action!

They had to hand it to Black Mask. A helicopter to transport the goods was an excellent way to deter rival hijackers.

It just wasn't a foolproof one.

All three of them landed on the roof of the Monte building just as the Red Hood started to fly away, leaving several dying men in his wake.

Nightwing and Batman started to brandish an antiaircraft EMP and harpoon, while Batgirl hurried to see what she could do for the wounded men. She crouched by the side of the nearest thug, and almost cried out when she saw the extent of his injuries. He had been shot in the neck, shoulder and chest, and it didn't look good. He grabbed her cape, rasping unintelligibly before slumping and dying.

The boys fired the EMP, and the helicopter stalled. Instead of landing on the roof, the Red Hood veered the copter over the side of the building toward the street below.

"So you wanna go? Let's see how you handle this!" Hood shouted. His voice was strange, distorted. Nightwing just barely got off a shot with the harpoon before the copter sank over the edge with a sound like a wailing beast. Batgirl's and Nightwing's hair whipped in the wind as Batman leapt over the side after the helicopter.

Dick hurriedly pulled a staple gun from his belt.

"Help me out, here!"

Barbara pulled her own staple gun from her belt and started to clip the titanium wire to the roof. Both of them frantically stapled on their hands and knees, knowing full well that their work would keep the copter from smashing the civilians below. If they failed…

The wire pulled taut, and seven or eight staples exploded out of the roof. Ping. Ping. Ping. Ping.

But the wire held.

Both protégés sent lines into the adjacent building, then jumped. The ground streaked towards them, a thousand windows and lights streaming past. The helicopter door wrenched open and the Red Hood jumped out, aiming a well-placed kick into Batman's face. The dark knight fell just as the helicopter jerked to a stop twelve feet above the ground. At the last second, Nightwing caught his mentor, and all three of them swooped to an outcropping where they'd seen the Hood land.

There.

He was dashing towards another outcropping. All three bats sprinted, Batgirl in the lead, then Nightwing, then Batman.
Hood leaped off the building and rolled onto a GCPD patrol blimp.

"Oh, he's good," Batgirl muttered.

With one fluid movement, Red Hood whipped his handguns out of their holsters and fired successively. They just barely managed to dodge behind a corner before the bullets hit the side of the building like hail. Bits of rubble sprayed into their faces.

"Yes," Batman gruffed, pushing himself to the front, "He's putting on quite a show."

The gunfire stopped, and they peered around the corner. Hood was gone, but they spotted him running on a rooftop below.

They jumped, rolling on contact, and didn't even pause before sprinting after the culprit. He was ahead of them, but just barely. Barbara had the brief thought that Hood wanted it that way.

Another building jump, this time into a building under construction. They slid down support boards and weaved through steel support beams, before darting inside.

Hood stood at the window, a propane tank from a stack nearby in his gloved fist. He turned, and his skull-like helmet grinned at them.

"You two," he said. His voice was still distorted, like a robot's. Batgirl and Nightwing exchanged a confused glance. "My fight's not with you. Stay out of this."

They could have listened, but instead, all three of them flung batarangs at the Hood's helmet. He ducked sharply and jumped out the window with a crash. They ran to the edge, but the propane tank soared up to meet them, and exploded with a gunshot. Nightwing leapt back in time, but Batman and Batgirl resorted to shielding themselves with their capes.

When the blast dissipated, they leapt down after the Red Hood. He reached the edge of an outcropping and jumped. Batman's arm shot out, and a cable whined, wrapping around the crook's ankles. Midair, Hood whirled around and cut the line with one expert slice just seconds before it went taut.

They gaped.

"He's very good," Nightwing gasped. Even Batman was silent.

Hood landed on an outcropping below them, shooting out a line of his own.

Batman said, "Come on."

He'd scarcely spoken the words when Red Hood swung out over the Gotham city train station's glass roof and dropped, crashing through the glass.

They swung down, entering through the same hole. There was a beeping sound, and Batgirl was the first to spot the charges set on a support beam.

"Batman!" she shouted. The beeping intensified, increasing in pitch.

"Move!" their mentor bellowed.

The explosion sent them flying into the tracks. Nightwing cried out as he landed, his leg jerking unnaturally to the side. He cradled it to his chest. A few yards away, Hood sat comfortably on a black cycle, turned towards them. Batgirl surged forwards, but Batman's fist grabbed her shoulder.
A train was coming. They wouldn't be able to make it to the tracks in time.

Hood waved.

"You haven't lost your touch-!"

The rest was cut off by the sound of an oncoming train. The cars streamed past, and when the locomotive had passed, the Red Hood was gone.

"Ow-!" Nightwing hissed through his teeth. Alfred sighed and wrapped the bandages a bit more carefully. "Sorry, Alfred."

Batgirl paced back and forth. The sound of typing and tapping footsteps filled the air.

"He said his fight wasn't with me or Nightwing…but it is with you, Bats?"

Batman pulled up a few news articles. "I don't know."

Nightwing heaved another gasp when Alfred moved his leg. Luckily, nothing had been broken, they'd found out. Just a dislocated knee. Barbara shot him a pitying glance.

"Alfred, just put him out of his misery, won't you?"

Dick was not amused. "Ha, ha- hAH!"

The joint snapped back into place.

"Well," Dick panted, "That little trick with the tether line was interesting, don't you think?"

Barbara nodded, shooting a glance at her mentor.

"I mean, that has to be learned. Practiced." Dick continued. "This isn't just your average-joe mob capo."

Barbara snorted. She would have thought that would have been obvious. They didn't chase every boss over the rooftops of Gotham. Even the Rogues and typical crazies—most of them, at least—preferred to stick to the ground.

Bruce said, "He has rare weaponry, too. That knife, for instance…"

"You sound like a D&D nerd. 'Rare weaponry'." Barbara muttered, crossing her arms. "What about it?"

Bruce swiveled around in his chair to look straight at her. "Do you know many knives that can cut my lines?"

He was working on something new, now. A video feed from his cowl was enlarged on the main screen. The Hood yelling "You haven't lost your touch-!"

He played that over and over, trying to isolate the rest of that sentence with a special editing program in the Batcomputer.

Alfred picked up a tray, handing Dick and Barbara a mug each of cinnamon hot cocoa. He placed a black mug on the dashboard next to Bruce's rapidly typing fingers, even though Bruce had a strict
no-liquids-by-the-computer policy. Even so, their mentor took a few grating sips.

"There," he said, "Come here."

Barbara was at his side in a few strides. Nightwing limped carefully and rested his arms on the edge of Bruce's chair. Finally, the Batman pressed the space bar.

Hood looked back at them from the screen.

"You haven't lost your touch, Bruce!"

The train screamed, leaving them in shock.

Bruce's mug toppled from the desktop and crashed to the floor.

Barbara turned to her mentor sharply. "How is this possible?" she demanded.

"It shouldn't be," Bruce snapped, storming to the elevator.

He turned his head up. "Emergency protocol Epsilon. Lockdown cave. Activate manor and grounds defenses." Then, slamming a fist against the cave wall, "$% # it, I may as well start pasting my secret on every billboard in Gotham!"

He stormed up the stairs.

They found Tim camped outside the brick walls around the property the next morning. He was asleep, half hidden in the ivy. Alfred picked the spiders off his jacket as they led him inside, and served him a hot breakfast.

Tim, to say the least, was ticked.

"This your guys' idea of a joke?" He grumbled, placing a spoon loaded down with froot loops into his mouth. "I spent hours trying to get in." Barbara and Dick apologized, then carefully broke the news to their little brother.

Well, Barbara broke the news. Dick was deep into his own bowl of chemical stuffed, brightly colored loops. Dick loved his cereal.

Tim almost choked on his.

"Does he know who we are?"

They couldn't decide, but they filled him in on everything they knew so far.

Tim plunked his spoon into the bowl, hands thrown up on either side of his head. "Okay. What's this guy's motive? He's toying with us, with this city, but why?"

"Revenge?" Barbara suggested. "Money."
"Some guys just want to watch the world burn," Tim mused, "Think that's it?"

Dick jabbed a finger in the air. "Oor…I'll bet he's Bruce from an alternate universe, and he wants to kill our Bruce, take over our Gotham, and do things his way."

Tim and Barbara stared at him for a few minutes. Finally, Barbara reached over and slowly scooted the ceramic bowl away from Dick. "So, do tell, Wingnut. What does Alfred have you on this time? Tramadol? Diamorphine?"

Dick shot her a dirty look, and reached to reclaim his precious cereal.

"Well," Tim said, shrugging, "Actually, he might be on to something there. Maybe this guy is just some crazed vigilante who believes that the only way to eradicate crime is to control it. You know, his way."

Barbara nodded. "Okay. You should be psychoanalysts, the both of you. Or…Timmy, at least. But that still doesn't explain how this guy knows Bruce."

Dick opened his mouth.

"I'm giving zero credibility to the alternate universe theory."

Dick shut his mouth.

Tim shrugged. "Well, those two guys. Wrath and Scorn, was it? Did they ever have the chance to tell anyone The Secret?"

Barbara shook her head. "No way. The night we fought, just two hours later, they showed up dead in a hotel room on the outskirts. We think it was the Riddler. He left us a note saying that he didn't want anyone 'to spoil a perfectly good riddle'."

He shivered. "Okay. Well, we need to figure this thing out. Find out what he knows."

Dick shoveled another spoonful of cereal into his mouth. "Mmm…we could catch him. That might help."

Tim's watch beeped. He glanced down at it. "Emergency back at Titans' tower," he said, shrugging. Barbara had almost forgotten about the building the League had built for the new organization Tim and Cassie had helped to found: the Teen Titans. They'd started their own group, mostly because the Team was mostly made up of the older veterans who didn't mix well with the younger members. So far, they'd recruited Garfield, Jaime, Raven, Terra, and many others in their age group. The older kids, not quite Justice League yet, stayed on the Team.

Tim was out the door in a few minutes, waving goodbye. Dick made sure he had his belt, Bo staff and gadgets until Tim yelled from down in the cave that they needed to stop babying him.

"I always get so worried, even though I know he'll be fine." Barbara sighed. Dick nodded. Pain wrote its way across face. She knew he still blamed himself; he should have gone with Jason and the other Gammas. He told himself, and consequently Barbara, that if he'd only been there…

Secretly, though, Barbara didn't feel that way. What if Dick and Jason had both been trapped in the warehouse with that psychopath? Both beaten and tortured and blown up? It had nearly broken Barbara when they'd lost Jason. If she'd lost both of them, it would have destroyed her.

"He'll be fine," she repeated. "What could go wrong?"
A lot of the dialogue and stuff I took from the Under the Red Hood movie. In any case, if you haven't seen it, go watch cause it's pretty good. (And just to cover my bases, some of the dialogue and scenes in here belong to WB. The characters belong to DC comics.) Thanks! :)

Chapter End Notes
Tim pushed his cycle up to seventy miles an hour. It may have been illegal on that particular road—scratch that, it most definitely was—but he seriously doubted that a cop was about to pull him over any time soon. Besides, didn't superheroes technically get a pass on this kind of thing, kind of like patrol cars and firetrucks?

Bart's call had been frantic. He reached up to press a button on the side of his helmet and replayed the distress call.

["Hey! Rob! Hate to bother you buddy but we're kinda under attack and we could really use some backup over here get here fast like faster than me okay? I don't—"]

There was a series of bangs and pops that made the signal crackle with feedback, and Bart's voice fell silent over the recording.

But not before Kid Flash let out a bloodcurdling scream.

At that, Tim pushed it up to seventy-five.

He'd downplayed the situation to Dick and Babs. The last thing he needed was his older siblings on this. How could the Titans take him seriously as a leader if he needed Big Brother and Sister to bail him out every time something like this came up? They already babied him shamelessly. He'd heard L'gann make a few snide remarks about it the other day after Nightwing asked him to double check his shoulder and knee pads. His face flushed at the memory.

The tower loomed on the horizon, standing like a guardian giant over Jump City. Since it wasn't leaking clouds of smoke, or smoldering like a birthday candle, Tim figured the damage couldn't be too bad. Then again, he hadn't seen the inside yet.

As soon as he pulled up to Titan's Tower, he dismounted, almost sending his cycle screeching across the pavement, and dashed through the front entrance.

There was nobody in the main lobby. It gaped, dark and deserted, like an empty cave. There was absolute silence. He stepped into the elevator and hit the button for the common room. As the floor lifted up, he stared self-consciously into the security camera hanging in the top corner. It gazed back at him, unblinking. So far, no fires, no signs of forced entry. Even so, his heart still thumped in his chest.

The doors dinged open, and Robin stepped out.

The common room was in complete disarray. The couches had been shredded and overturned, chairs had been thrown against the wall. The wall, in fact, was dotted with bullet holes and burn marks. There was a stain on the carpet that Tim could see, with a lurch in his stomach, was blood.

"Kid Flash?" he called, "Cassie?"

No one was in the snack nook. The jars of dry foods had been shattered by gunfire. Broken glass and snacks littered the floor like confetti that crunched under Robin's feet. There was no activity from the rock wall; the harnesses hung empty like nooses from the ceiling, and bits of the wall were scattered everywhere. The shattered TV screen was black and missing the usual satellite of male Titans (and Steph, who usually showed up to kick everyone else's butts at Kill Order 6).
He stepped around the carcass of a couch and almost stepped on Bart. Tim fell to his knees and pressed a finger against Bart's neck, searching for a pulse. The speedster's forehead was slicked with blood, the red made black by the dim light.

"Hey, man," Tim whispered, shaking Bart's shoulder, pressing his finger harder into his throat. "Come on."

There was a flicker under Tim's finger. The pulse was weak, but it was there. Bart was only unconscious, not dead.

Nearby, he spotted a flash of gold. Cassie lay nearby, in the exact same state as Bart. Tim crawled over the broken glass and couch stuffing to check her for any sign of a heartbeat. Her eyes cracked open slightly, and she let out a dry moan.

"Cassie?" Tim whispered. Her eyes cleared a little, and she rasped.

"Robin?...the others...are they?" She fell silent as her head lolled back, eyes shutting.

Her pulse still fluttered. He sat up on his haunches.

"Beast Boy?" He called hopefully, "Beetle?"

In the darkness, there came a low laugh, and Tim whipped out his Bo staff.

"Ah," a voice said, "Jaime. Now there's a guy I'd like to put a bullet through."

Tim hopped to his feet, and brandished his staff.

"Who are you? What did you do to my team?"

Silence.

Then, "Don't worry so much, Timmy, boy. I didn't bother with any kill shots."

Tim had taken a lot of sucker punches over the past two years. At the moment of impact, all breath would leave his body, and a painful sunburst would bloom right where he'd been hit. Hearing his name come out of the mouth of this stranger had the same effect.

"How-?"

"Oh, I know a lot about you, pal. I know about all of you."

Tim reached down to press the button on his belt, but a bang went off, and a bullet hit the floor right next to his boot.

"Now, now. No calling Dickie or Babs."

"What do you want?"

"Well, that's easy. I just want you."

Gunfire erupted, and Robin flipped and dove to escape the hail of bullets. Black holes appeared in the floor, and one bullet struck Robin's bicep, grazing but not penetrating. He cried out, and the bullets stopped. He dove behind one of the couches, and placed a hand against the wound, wincing
at the sting. "Why?" he panted. Blood seeped over his fingers, trickling and falling in droplets to the floor.

"You'll see."

He peeked over the top of the couch, and when his head wasn't taken off by a bullet, he rose to full height. A figure appeared in the entrance to the hallway. As the man stepped forward into the light streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, he got a better look at the intruder. He wore a red helmet and holsters for guns. A biker jacket covered a muscled armor-bound chest. The intruder fit the description that Dick and Barbara had given him.

"Red Hood," Tim wheezed, taking a step back. The criminal made a sound at the back of his throat.

"Huh. Big brother and sister tell you about me? Or maybe daddybats?"

"The 'red hood' kinda gives it away," He placed a supporting hand on the back of the couch. "Gotta wonder about your creativity, though. It's like Batman calling himself 'pointy ears'."

Hood laughed. "Good. I was starting to worry you wouldn't have a sense of humor. That's important for a Robin. Still," he hooked his thumbs in his jacket pockets and looked Tim up and down. "I can't believe Brucie chose you as his new little feathered sidekick."

Tim's eyes narrowed. "What the heck are you talking about?"

Hood sighed. "Clearly it wasn't for your brains. Do you honestly have no idea? Or did the others never bother to mention little old me?"

There was a soft hiss, and the Hood's hands went up to his head. He removed the helmet, revealing a hard face underneath.

Tim dropped his Bo staff.

"Jason," he said to the man grinning back at him, "Jason Todd."

The man seemed a little taken aback, but nodded. "Very good. And how did you know that, Replacement?"

Tim took two steps back, his shoulder blades pressed to the glass of the window.

"You're kidding, right? You're the Robin that died in the line of duty." He let out a dry laugh. "You're the reason Nightwing never lets me out of his sight and Batgirl always makes sure I wear a coat when it's raining." The sarcasm in his voice was heavy, but it slipped up into something more respectful. "You were the strong Robin. The one everyone else wants me to be."

Hood's eyes narrowed.

"Oh," Tim continued, reaching slowly, ever so slowly down towards his belt. "I've tried. I've tried so hard to live up to your example, man. Everyone expects me to be you and Nightwing combined. Or better."

Jason cracked a smile at that.

"You blab a lot, kid. But I've got a mission for you. Think you can handle it?"

He leapt at Tim, who dodged to the side, rolling behind the couch. He waited there, gauging the distance to the exit. Twelve feet. If he sprinted, he could probably make it in a few seconds. But
how much faster was he than the Red Hood?

He tensed, ready to run for it, but Jason came out of nowhere.

As hands wrapped around his throat from behind, squeezing, Tim gurgled until his vision went black.

Bruce, Alfred, Dick and Barbara were in the middle of an intense game of Monopoly when the phone rang.

"Ah, Wingnut," Barbara sighed, grinning as she waggled her fingers, "I believe that's five hundred and twenty-five big ones."

Dick grumbled and dug through his messy pile of monopoly money. Alfred and Bruce watched warily, eying the entire side of the board that she'd dominated. It was as Alfred always said: the sweet ones are always the most dangerous. That's when the phone rang through the kitchen area.

"Barbara, would you mind grabbing the phone?" Bruce asked. She could see the gears turning in his head, never taking his eyes off the board. His scheming face was at its finest.

"Okay," she sighed, jabbing a finger at each of them, "But no formulating strategies or stealing my money while I'm gone!"

Dick battred his eyes at her innocently, grinning wide. "Now, why would we go and do a thing like that?"

"Fine. But I have my cash counted."

"Hurry!" Dick urged.

She ducked into the kitchen, peeking out. "And I still have more than all of you!"

"Get the phone!"

She barked out a small laugh and picked the phone up.

"Hello?" she asked.

"Is Batman there? It's really important, I need to talk to him right now. This is the number they gave me. Hurry and find Batman. It's an emergency, please hurry!"

Barbara jerked the phone from her ear, then tried again.

"Bart?" She asked. "That you? I'm going to need you to slow down."

There was a deep breath on the other end of the line.

"Batgirl? Is Batman there?"
Her eyes darted to the other room, where the boys were laughing. "Maybe. Why?"

Bart's voice sped up a little, but Barbara caught his frantic message this time. Her grip slackened, and the phone fell to the tile with a sharp clatter. Pieces of plastic skittered across the tile, the batteries rolled in opposite directions.

The laughter in the other room stopped.

"Babs?" Dick called. "Everything okay?"

Her breath was coming in short ragged gasps. Flashbacks started to surge up, but she forced herself to focus. She darted into the other room.

"Tim's been abducted!" She screamed, and the boys all leapt to their feet. "We need to get to the tower right now!"

Everyone rushed downstairs.

The Batfamily stormed into the tower, wading through the crowd of frightened teenagers. A few of them sported head bandages and shock blankets. The others were doing their best to either tend to the wounded, or get in the Bats' way.

Cassie gripped Batgirl's arm as she passed.

"You have to find him!" A wad of gauze was taped to her forehead, and her eyes were wide and scared. So basically, she looked exactly how Barbara felt. But she kept her emotions in check. She was a Bat. She had to keep up appearances.

Heaven forbid they show the metas that they didn't always know what they were doing.

The Titans parted and let the family go up to the main wall in the common room. The floor was riddled with bullet holes and scuff marks. The couches had been tipped on their sides and shredded by gunfire. Barbara gave the room a quick once over, and muttered to Batman,

"Explosion. Small Scale."

Batman nodded curtly. Whoever had done this would have surprised the Titan's with the sudden blast, thereby luring Robin to the Tower.

On the wall, there was a message in bright, dripping red letters:

YOUR MOVE BATMAN

Below the ominous message, a scrap of fabric was nailed to the drywall. Batman reached up and gently removed it. The scrap was red, and they could clearly make out a glittering gold R.

Barbara let out a squeak, running gloved fingers over the fabric. Batman started to scold her; they
could probably find fingerprints. Batgirl elected to ignore that.

"My money's on the Hood," Nightwing muttered darkly.

Batman made a sound in the back of his throat. "We don't know that for sure—"

"Like #$%% we don't," Batgirl growled. She whirled on Batman. "Red paint. Bullet holes. *Come on!* He's being *obvious*. He wants us to know it was him, but you don't want to admit that because of who this guy is!" Her eyes narrowed to slits. "I know about what he did to Black Mask's lieutenants. I know about the murders and beheadings and extortions. When exactly were you going to enlighten your partners, huh?"

Batman's eyes narrowed, and the Titans inhaled sharply. But Barbara knew that she'd get away with talking back to her mentor. She, Dick and Tim were the only ones who could.

"He has Robin!" she shouted. Her voice was on the brink of cracking, but she kept her tone cool and controlled. "Now what the #$%% are we going to do about it?"

Nightwing's face was a mask of barely controlled rage. "We're taking this sucker down, Bats."

Batman's jaw clenched, but Barbara knew he wasn't mad at them. He was probably considering different scenarios, different places that Hood would be.

Bart limped over to their side. His bright yellow kid flash uniform made Dick wince and step back. Even Barbara was reminded of their fallen comrade; she could definitely see the family resemblance.

"You're gonna find Ti—Robin. Right?"

Batman turned to the spectators. "That's right. But finding Robin will be our job. All of you will keep out of this."

The room filled with protests, but three Bat-glares silenced the opposition.

"A man calling himself the Red Hood has taken Robin," Bats continued, "And he is not afraid of lethal force. You will. *Stay. Out.* Am I understood?"

'Yes Batman's and 'Fine's were heard all across the room, and the bat family headed towards the elevator, faces clouded over in worry.

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Three nights later, and there was still no sign of the Hood. Things in Gotham city had only grown more and more dire.

The Joker had been sprung from Arkham two days before, and while the orderlies and administration had declined to comment, it was clear to Batman and company that Black Mask was responsible. But why the man felt the need to release the greatest force of evil in Gotham in order to kill Hood, Batgirl wasn't certain. Anyone but Joker would have done. But it was Joker that Mask
had released, and so it was Joker that they had to hunt down.

That *laugh.*

She could practically hear it over the rooftops where she perched, over the hustle and noise of the city below her. She could almost hear it in the wind.

Batgirl still remembered the night two years ago. She'd been on leave while Nightwing handled the Team's investigations into the Light, and their new partner. Patrol with Batman had been a pleasant change of pace. Missions with the Team were louder, and definitely more chaotic, especially trying to keep a group of sloppy and overconfident metas in line. But patrol in Gotham was more exciting, and much more ordered. She knew where she stood with her mentor; they could communicate silently without the slightest noise, even without a psychic link. That was the thing; M'gann's voice in her head always threw her slightly off. But in Gotham, she always knew what to do, where to run, and when to hit.

Patrol that night had been efficient, soaring over the rooftops and through the streets like Tarzan, flying over a million lights and cars and people. They'd stopped several muggers and put away a kingpin in the drug trade.

It was a duo patrol, just her and Batman. Even so, even roughly a year later, she still found herself looking over her shoulder for Robin. Not Timmy, who was still just starting out. But Jason, who was never coming back.

Eventually, patrol that night led them to the other end of town, where they found the Joker.

He'd eluded them ever since the explosion in Quarac, but they finally tracked him down to an old fishing warehouse on the wharves.

His plan…Batgirl forgot what it had been exactly; they all seemed to run together. She was pretty sure it had something to do with bombing the Gotham City Hospital, but it could just as easily have been the Community Center, or City Hall.

They broke into his hiding place. They took down his thugs side by side. The Batman had gone to work on the bomb, and the Batgirl had gone to work on the Joker.

She cycled through many different interrogation tricks she'd learned from her mentor, but the Joker wouldn't tell them what the Injustice League was doing for the Light. Even a year after that failed reconnaissance mission, the Team and the League still didn't know. In frustration, she'd turned her back, lost control of the situation. The Joker had taken advantage.

"Ah, warehouses and bombs. Nice and cozy. Brings back memories, doesn't it, she-bat?"

Batgirl's shoulders had tensed. Batman was still on the other side of the warehouse defusing the bomb, but even he looked up.

"You know, I remember that kid. We had such fun times! We had this little game, him and I. We had this crowbar…mm, then again, I don't think he had quite as much fun as me."

Batgirl whirled around, and grabbed the Joker by his collar. His hands were bound behind him, but it was the psycho who seemed to be in control.


"You've got fire, little girl! Robin did, too. But after a few minutes alone with me and Mr.
Crowbar, you should have heard him squeal. Kept crying out for daddybats, and big brother and sister.

Batgirl let out a cry and threw the Joker back into the chair. She turned to go back and help Batman with the bomb, because her anger was running rampant in her veins. She'd worried about losing control and doing something she'd regret.

But the clown opened his mouth one more time.

"I would have loved," the Joker sneered, "to have seen the look on the little birdie's face when he realized that he was sitting on a bomb. You know, when it finally sunk in that you weren't going to be there to rescue him?"

Batgirl's whole body tensed.

Joker twisted the knife. "Tick… Tick... Tick... Oh no!"

He laughed, cackling out a sound that made her skin crawl. She turned one more time, just as the Joker said,

"Course it’s hard to feel too disappointed when you're there, there..." Joker's smile widened, his face darkening. "...and all the way over there. Splattered all over the mountain! Just think of the fun I'll have with the next one!"

He'd tipped back his head one more time, to let out another blood-curdling cackle.

She'd snapped.

She didn't remember much, just the wonderful and terrible sound of his bones crunching and snapping like ice. The laughter and shrieking that came out of the clown's mouth. There was blood on her gloves, drying in the creases. It was only when Batman yelled at her, dragging her from the mangled maniac, that she came back to herself.

"Not…as f-funny…as I'd hoped…" the Joker spluttered, laying broken like a puppet with its strings cut on the warehouse floor. And still, there was that horrible smile. Dripping and bloodstained, but wide as ever.

In the end, they'd called an ambulance instead of the police. Joker spent the next half of a year recovering in the cozy solitary confinement of Arkham asylum.

And now, finally, he was back on the streets. Somewhere.

She combed the streets below with a pair of binoculars. Well, they weren't quite binoculars, but they did the same thing.

Her ear crackled inside her cowl.

[“Batgirl?”]

"Nightwing." She swept her gaze over to a group of men smoking on a street corner. She didn't recognize any of them.

[“We found Hood. Ace Chemical building.”]

"Why on Earth would he go there?"
The group shuffled away, and Batgirl lowered her binoculars

[“Because we chased him there. Bats and I are ready to go in after him. You interested in a toxic game of hide and seek?”]

"Hah. Sure. Meet you there."

[“You sure you're okay? We'll find Robin. Don't worry.”]

"This whole thing…it feels, I don't know. Familiar, somehow. Familiar isn't the word I mean. But, there's something about Hood. He doesn't feel like the Arkham crew or the mobsters. He's different."

[“Hey, wasn't I just saying that? I think now might be a good time to say 'told you so'.”]

She sighed. "Yeah, Yeah. Whatever. See you in a few."

[“Love you, babe.”]

A ghost of a smile twitched on her face. "You, too, Wingnut. Over and out."

She hurriedly stowed her binoculars in her belt, and spotted a roof that would give her the swinging momentum she'd need. She stretched her right arm to the night sky. There was a soft puff of air as the line shot out, attaching itself to the roof of the building kitty corner to hers. She took a deep breath, trusting the line and the equipment, and also trusting her own training. Then, she put aside the hesitation and jumped.

The building streaked upwards and the street towards her, but the line caught her. She shifted her body into the swing, rolling her shoulder and arm to accommodate the line as it pulled taut. Then, she swung out over the people of Gotham, feeling like she was flying. Lights and reflections lit the scene like Christmas, and the wind whipped her hair behind her, and snapped her cape.

Below, Gothamites pointed and waved to the familiar vigilante. There were a couple pictures being snapped. It was unfortunate, and Batgirl winced, but it couldn't be helped. People would always want pictures, keepsakes to have of Gotham's heroes, but it was a good way to get found out.

She transitioned, pressing a button on her palm when she wanted to release the line, and snapping the other out to grab hold of a new roof. Alternating, she swung over the city like Spiderman. Finally, she reached the outskirts, spotting the smokestacks of the Ace Chemical Plant silhouetted against the ink blue sky. She landed and ran, coming to a rest by the Batmobile. Batman and Nightwing popped out a few moments after they realized she'd arrived.

Nightwing was a few inches away, and she nudged him.

"Technically," she said, "I beat you here."

He laughed. "In your dreams."

They fell in line behind the Batman, marching through the gaping hole that used to be a loading bay. According to Nightwing, the Hood had crashed his car through it, speeding into the plant to escape them. As far as they knew, he was still inside.

A solitary heat signature told them that Tim wasn't with him. But that wouldn't stop them from tearing the info from the evil vigilante.
"I have a sampler," Batman told them a few yards from the way in. He held up the device, a vial attached to a line that could be fired from his grappling gun. A needle on its tip glinted in the streetlights. "We'll collect his blood at the very least, and run a test to find out who he is."

Even Batman didn't expect to capture the Red Hood tonight. Batgirl felt a pang in her chest when she thought of Timmy alone and tied up somewhere. If he was even still alive.

Stop that.

They stepped through the portal into the dark chemicals factory. The air smelled like antiseptic or bleach, the only light coming from simmering vats of Ace's newest concoctions.

Batman paused, hesitating. This was the place where the Joker had been created, when Batman had still been new at the game and too late to save the mystery man in a red hood from falling to his fate.

It was almost funny, then, that they'd chased a new Hood here.

"Well, well," a voice called out, echoing through the room. "If it isn't the Bat family."

The voice disguise was gone. Barbara replayed the voice, his words, in her head. It was a deep voice, but just high enough that she could tell that the Red Hood was a young man. She placed him at about eighteen or so. His young age made his one-man guerilla warfare on crime that much more impressive. And a little bit scary.

"Hood," Batman growled, "Where's Robin?"

There was a laugh, then, and the bat family raced towards the sound. They turned a corner and found a wrecked '76 Buick thrown up against a vat of chemicals. Gas was leaking from the ruined tank. Slowly, they backed up a little, and swung up to a catwalk on their lines, above the hazardous wreck.

Their boots had no sooner hit the metal grating when the voice returned.

"Welcome back to Ace chemicals, Batman. The sight of your worst mistake!"

A figure stepped into the light on the catwalk above them. His crimson helmet gleamed in the chemicals' glow.

"But I think we all know it wouldn't be your last."

Batman stepped forward, almost lunging.


"Please. Like I'd tell you that."

Batgirl and Nightwing removed batarangs from their belts. As they took aim, Hood threw up his hands.

"No need for that guys. I just wanted to talk to Bats here. Of course, now probably isn't the time for that, is it?"

He whipped out a handgun and they flinched. The Red Hood took aim at the car, and it only took Batgirl half a second to realize what was going on.
"Now, Batman!" she shouted, pushing Nightwing, the closest to the edge of the railing, backwards. Both took their hints, and Nightwing was off the catwalk and near a window in the space of three seconds. Lightning quick, Batman shot the line with the blood sampler attached to the end at their target. Batgirl didn't get the chance to see if it made contact, because Hood fired.

The room exploded in a ball of fire. The gasoline and chemicals had only needed a spark. Batman was thrown towards Nightwing, and both crashed out through the window. Batgirl was thrown the opposite direction. Her head slammed into the railing, dazing her. She lay against the grating as the flames climbed higher, reaching for the other vats of chemicals. Once it found them...

Batgirl's vision blurred. Something was wrong with her torso. It was cold, so cold that she wanted to scream. When she looked down, she saw corroding metal and flesh where her side used to be. Chemicals...burning on her skin.

She was a goner. The other vats were seconds from exploding, so she lay her head on the grating after a weak gasp, and shut her eyes.

Was this how Jason had felt? At the end?

Something warm and wet trickled down her face.

The last thing she felt was pressure, sliding beneath her, and lifting her up.

Dick rolled when he hit the concrete, narrowly dodging the hulking form of his mentor. His vision jilted and hummed. A mask malfunction, maybe.

The warehouse rumbled behind them, and Nightwing let out a chuckle, getting shakily to his feet.

"Got the sample, B-man?" He rasped, and wiped a dribble of blood off his bottom lip. Bruce nodded, glancing around. Nightwing turned, hand upraised for a high five. "Quick thinking, BG. We never would've—"

Batgirl wasn't there.

He did a quick 360. Where was she? She'd been right next to them-

The building groaned, and Dick knew.

She hadn't made it out.

"Wait!" he shouted, lunging back towards the plant. "Batgirl!"

FWOOM

The plant exploded, all the windows exploding outwards in balls of fire. Flames licked the roof, burning so hot that it scorched the vigilantes' faces from several yards away.
Both men recovered from the initial blast, and Nightwing felt rising terror in his chest. "NO!" he screamed, rushing forward.

Batman put a hand on his chest to stop him, then grabbed him around the arms when that wasn't enough.

"Nightwing!" Batman shouted, then, leaning closer. "Dick. I'm sorry. There's nothing we could have done."

Dick threw off his mentor. "Are you insane?" He shouted back. "We're going back for her!"

Dick watched the flames, and heard the wail of sirens creeping closer and closer, punctuated by horns.

"Dick," Batman said softly. "We have to go. There's nothing we can do for her now."

His mentor had to half lead and half carry Nightwing back to the Batmobile. As soon as Dick was belted in, he broke down, sobbing like a baby.

The top of the Batmobile slid back, and Alfred stepped forward to offer them a platter of snacks. He greeted Bruce, then Dick, then stopped. His eyes were wide.

"Master Bruce?" he asked, fear audible in the old man's voice, "Where is Miss Barbara?"

Bruce took a shuddering breath. "She couldn't make it back tonight." He stalked towards his chair in front of the cave's hollow screens.

Dick collapsed onto a bench near the bat computer. He was still crying, but it had subsided a bit. His chest felt hollow.

"How can you take it?" Dick asked Bruce through his teeth. Bruce swiveled in his chair, cowl pulled down.

"Because she's not dead."

Dick sat up. "What are you talking about?"

In reply, Bruce played security camera footage from the chemical plant. Dick watched Bruce and himself thrown out of a window again as the building exploded. There were a few moments, and then the building's biggest explosion ripped out the windows, making the feed's audio buzz like crazy.

"I know," Dick snapped. "We already saw that."

Bruce tapped the space bar, and the feed from the opposite side of the building popped onto the screen. A figure leaped from the second story window of the plant, rolling as he hit the pavement. It was the Red Hood, and he cradled something gently in his arms. As he stood, Nightwing could
make out a trailing cape and the ears of a bat cowl in the fuzzy image. Nightwing stepped over to
the computer, and watched Hood set Batgirl down on the concrete beside a black cycle. With one
fluid movement, Hood ripped off her cape and wrapped it gently around her torso. He picked her
up again, balancing them both on his cycle, then sped away.

Dick let out a sigh of relief. Barbara was alive.

"Why would he help her?" he demanded.

Bruce made a sound to indicate that he didn't know. "I have a feeling we'll find out soon enough.
Why don't you go and get some shut eye, Dick. It's been a long night for all of us."

Dick started to protest, but sighed instead.

Barbara was Hood's prisoner, but she was alive. Dick felt a new flare of determination as he
shuffled to the elevator.

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Bruce waited until Dick was safely upstairs, then pulled the sampler from his belt. He typed a few
commands into the bat computer, then plugged the end into a waiting port.

[ANALYZING SAMPLE] the screen read.

Alfred was at Bruce's side in a moment.

"Are you quite sure she's alright, sir?" he asked, staring at the screen. Bruce nodded.

"During our last encounter with him, the Red Hood made it clear that he had no fight with either
Batgirl or Nightwing. At most, he's probably let her go by now, or admitted her to a hospital."

"And at worst?"

Bruce watched the bar load, the sample almost analyzed.

"Worst case scenario is that she's his hostage. It's better than losing her completely, Alfred."

The old butler sighed, laying his tray on the desk.

"Are you certain he won't hurt her, Master Bruce? The man has killed dozens, committed so many
crimes…"

Bruce opened his mouth to reply. Just then, the screen beeped.

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE]

Bruce pounded a key.

[COMMAND RECEIVED…MATCH FOUND]
A series of pictures popped up onto the screen. A boy in grubby street clothes. A portrait of three men and a girl in gala finery, posing for a camera. A selfie taken with a mobile phone, the girl and youngest boy from the portrait grinning mischievously as an older boy peeked out from behind them. A boy in a bright red costume.

Bruce's eyes widened.

"That's impossible," he breathed.

[MALE…18 YEARS OF AGE…]

Alfred let out a shaky breath, taking a few steps backward.

[NAME: JASON PETER TODD]

Bruce slowly got to his feet.

This wasn't possible. It couldn't be.

Bruce thundered from the room.

The grave lay open, freshly unearthed by a disguised and curious 'undertaker'. Bruce stared into the hole, taking in the ruined coffin from beneath the brim of his stolen uniform's hat.

Pieces of the thin metal coating and the wood interior lay around the edges of the coffin. Strips of the red velvet lining lay like bloodstains over the dirt and debris. He'd installed sensors in the coffin when they'd laid Jason to rest. They were meant to go off if anyone, enemy or otherwise, tried to disturb the boy's remains.

There was no sensor for something breaking out.

It shouldn't have been possible. Jason was dead.

And yet…
Ra's Al Ghul sipped his tea from a china cup. On rainy evenings such as this, he always preferred a nice, steaming dose from his favorite chamomile blend. He'd often mused to his daughter that perhaps they should experiment with ingesting the contents of the Lazarus Pit. Perhaps in the form of tea. Only musings, but entertaining thoughts, nonetheless.

He saw the shadow on his terrace two entire minutes before the detective smashed his windows in.

The Detective was very angry, grabbing his collar and lifting him up off of his chair. The cup of tea fell to the floor and shattered into millions of china fragments. A shame.

"What did you do?" He growled.

Ra's Al Ghul raised his eyebrows plaintively. "Ah. You are here about your rabid Robin, are you not?"

The Batman threw him back into his chair. "Call off your guards. Disable your security."

He huffed. "Already done. I was hoping that you and I would have the opportunity for a little chat."

"Ra's," the Detective snarled. "What did you do to Jason?"

The Detective unhanded him, and Ra's dusted off his collar.

"There's no need to be aggressive," he told the Batman. "I'm quite willing to share with you what I know."

The Batman glared. "Then talk."

Ra's sighed, and turned to the window.

"Well, as you know, Detective," he began, "Three years ago, we were all engaged in a war. You are familiar with the opposing sides and factions, I presume?"

"You presume right," the detective growled. "Get to the point."

"As I was saying, three years ago, the League of Shadows, the Injustice League, and most importantly, the Light, were very much occupied with preparations for the alien incursion. The other members of the Light assigned a member of the Injustice League to me in order to lure a team of young heroes to Quarac to be used in experiments."

Ra's Al Ghul turned to the Batman.

"I have no qualms with bloodshed or cruelty, Detective. This is true." He sighed. "But only for a purpose. Only for a purpose. I allowed the Joker to lead the young protégés to a warehouse on the outskirts, albeit reluctantly. You see, I had no wish for the children to be experimented upon if we had no long-term reason to do so. Even if it was what the Reach asked of us."

The head of the League of Assassins strode to his desk, picking up a fountain pen, twirling it through his fingers. The gesture always helped him to relax.

"But of course, the only one in the warehouse that night was your young partner, Robin. Or, if you prefer, Jason Todd. I believe the Joker became carried away. The Light underestimated his
bloodlust, Detective. And then, well…he murdered the boy.”

Batman's gloves cracked as his fists tightened.

"I know all of this already, Ra's. All I'm hearing is a pack of pathetic excuses—why Jason's death wasn't your fault."

Ra's snapped his fingers.

"Patience, old friend. When I realized what had happened, I was stricken with guilt. I decided to become less active in the matters of the Light, though they did reel me back in later on, as you know. I decided not to declare war on you and your house again as well."

"You're still not telling me—"

Ra's slammed the pen back down onto the desk, rattling bottles and figurines. The Detective did not flinch, and fell silent.

"Nine months ago, my soldiers spotted a young man haunting the ruins of the warehouse. He was half crazed, covered in gashes and bruises, muttering to himself about a laughing man. They brought him to me, and I recognized the boy immediately as your late protégé."

"How is that possible?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Ra's replied, "but my daughter and I decided to revive him in the Lazarus pit, the fountain of youth that has kept me young for five thousand years. At first, the treatment seemed to help. Your Jason seemed to improve. His wounds healed and his muttering silenced." He shook his head. "But the boy became…violent. The pit…sometimes it magnifies the worst qualities in a person, bringing them to new light and intensity. My daughter trained him for a time, but one day, he killed seven of my guards and escaped."

Batman sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. The Detective seemed more troubled than ever before.

"Thank you, Ra's," he spat, "That's all I needed to know."

With that, he swept himself out the window, just as Talia Al Ghul swept into the room.

"Eavesdropping, my dear?" He asked her. She tsked, flipping her hair from her face.

"I only wish he showed more devotion to his own blood."

Ra's nodded, his eyes moving to the window. "He doesn't yet know. Besides, the boy is not yet ready to meet his sire."

Talia huffed, but nodded. "Would you like me to send the guards after him, Father?"

Ra's Al Ghul shook his head, sweeping out of the room.

"They'd never catch him," he sighed, "Besides, I've done enough."
Batgirl moaned through her lips, and cracked her eyes open. The sudden change in lighting made her wince, eyes burning, but she quickly adjusted. The room was plenty dark enough, lit only by the daylight filtering into the room through a set of dusty, cracked blinds.

Her eyes wandered to the other side of the room, and she saw her armor and cowl stacked neatly beside a rickety old dresser. A sick feeling rushed through her veins.

She was on a bed. It was old, probably picked up off the side of the street. She could feel the springs through the thin stuffing. A thin blanket covered her up to the bottom of her ribcage.

There was an IV tapped into her forearm, and the tube wound up into a bag of fluid hanging from a metal pole. She wiggled her nose and felt an oxygen tube there, too. The machine hummed nearby. She reached down tentatively, and pulled aside the blanket.

Her abdomen was bandaged. Underneath her undershirt, a long, stained strip of gauze was wound around and around her stomach and waist. She remembered, then. The explosion. Chemicals corroding her flesh.

Being lifted up.

There was only one person who could have saved her.

Across from her bed, a door opened, and a tall figure stepped into the room. The red helmet was a dead giveaway.

"Oh, good," he said. "You're awake."

"Why am I here?" she demanded, "What did you do?"

She gripped her blanket like a lifeline. All he did was laugh.

"I, um…I think I saved your life?" he deadpanned, tossing his hands out in an open gesture of confusion. Barbara could make out the sarcasm in his tone, even through the mask. She narrowed her eyes.

"Why."

It wasn't really a question. The Red Hood stepped over to the bed. She flinched, but he only gestured to the open spot by her feet.

"May I?" he asked. She hesitated, then nodded.

He sat himself down, and the springs squeaked in protest. He sighed, like he was sitting for the first time in a while.

"Why did you help me?" she asked.

He seemed to shrug off the question, instead saying, "You know, I've been looking forward to a conversation with you for a while now. Course, I didn't think it would be going like this." He gestured at her injuries. "I pictured something like a fight to the death on top of Wayne Tower, you know?"
She pressed herself back into the pillow. Her belt brushed against her shoulder; it had been tossed over the headboard. Which meant that Hood either trusted her, or was a lot more stupid than she thought.

"I thought 'your fight was with Batman'. Why me?"

Hood let out a dry laugh.

"I heard about you," he said. "Batgirl, the one who put the Joker in a full body cast. Nobody knows why, though, but I like that. What you did."

She scoffed. "I did it because he insulted the memory of someone close to me. Is that all you wanted to know?"

He leaned forward a little. "Someone close? Care to elaborate?"

Why did he care? Barbara clenched her fists.

"You wouldn't know him. It's none of your business, anyways."

The black and white eye holes of his mask stared back at her blankly. She sighed.

"My little brother," she said softly, squeezing her eyes shut against the rising images. "That monster... he killed him. I tried to save him, but I was too late, and..."

She choked on the last word, hot tears welling up in her eyes. She started to cry softly, silently cursing herself for showing weakness to this brutal vigilante. He leaned back, folding his arms across his chest.

"You asked me why I saved you," he said slowly, "It's because of that."

She sniffled, looking up. "What?"

"I couldn't just leave my big sis to die," Hood said. He brought two fingers up to his helmet in a cocky salute. Barbara's eyes widened.

The Red Hood reached up and pressed the back of his mask. There was a soft hiss, and the front of the mask slid forward. He gently lifted the helmet over his head, and wavy black hair tumbled over his forehead.

Green eyes glinted in the soft light, turned up in response to a sarcastic little grin that had always made Barbara smile. Her breathing hitched. Nearby, the oxygen machine beeped.

"Jason?"

Her voice was a whisper, a whimper, a cry. She reached out and he responded. They wrapped their arms around each others' shoulders. Barbara couldn't draw a breath as her once-little brother held her in his arms.

He was different now. Taller, older, leaner and harder. In his dark hair, there was a shock of faded white. Faint scars crisscrossed his skin, impossible to notice unless you really looked. But she knew to look; all of Batman's partners had similar scars.

He was still her Jason.

"I missed you, too," he said, squeezing once then letting go. They pulled apart, and Barbara
scrutinized her little brother.

Mounting dread—no, revulsion—rose in her throat like bile. This was Jason. But Jason was the Red Hood. The Red Hood was responsible for dozens of murders, for strong-arming gangs, hijacking shipments, endangering civilians, and...

"Where's Tim?" She demanded.

For the first time, his face contorted. It was scary, how fast his expression switched from nostalgic joy to bitter anger. "You mean the Replacement? He's fine."

Jason's fist crumpled a little bit of the threadbare blanket. She raised her eyebrows, and said his name.

"You replaced me," he muttered, glaring at the wall. "You said you wouldn't, remember? That one night in the hallway when I came back from patrol? You said—"

"Jason—"

"—that no one could ever replace me. That Batman would care if I died. You said that."

He turned, looking straight into her eyes.

"But I guess you didn't mean it, did you? Two months after I kick it, and there's another snot-nosed kid running around in red and yellow."

He let out an angry huff.

"Jason," Barbara said, leaning over, trying to meet his hard gaze, "What did you do?"

"To the kid? Nothing yet. He's asleep in another room."

He looked so miserable, that Barbara wanted to give him another hug, but she was afraid of him, too. The young man in front of her had killed so many people. She wondered if Bruce had figured it out yet. If he knew that their lost Robin was back and wreaking so much havoc.

"I want you to join me," he said.

She paused, shocked. "Come again?"

He met her eyes, his gaze softening a bit. "We can be partners," he said, "Just like we used to be. We'll clean up this city together. Make it better than it's ever been."

Tears welled in her eyes again. She couldn't believe this.

"Jaybird," she whispered. His hand closed around her wrist.

"Please," he said, "Think what we could do! We could control the underground—control crime! This city—"

"Is not something that we can control."

Barbara's voice was quiet but firm. Jason recoiled a little, confused.

"Look, Babs," Jason continued, gesticulating, "Bats left you behind to die. He left us both behind! Right now, he's probably picking out a new girl to take your place. And Dick isn't going to care."
It was the first time his older brother's name had come up, and Jason seemed to deflate as he said it. Barbara put a hand on his.

"It destroyed him," she said solemnly, "what happened to you. He wouldn't eat, wouldn't talk. Just laid in bed all day."

Jason opened his mouth, but Barbara went on.

"When he wasn't in shock, he was crying, Jay. Not just a few tears. Like he was dying. And when we got Tim—"

"Babs, I don't—"

"He barely said a word to him for the first few weeks. Now, he's like a little brother, Jay, to both of us."

She took a deep breath. Jason's mouth was slightly open, like he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

"But he's not you. He'll never be you, Jaybird."

Jason stood up, and checked the bag of fluid on the metal pole. His mouth was twisted into a tight frown, and she didn't miss the moisture brimming in his eyes.

"Are you feeling alright?" he asked her. "No nausea? Headache?"

"I'm fine," she said softly, blinking away a tear. He nodded, sighing a little, then stepped away from the bed. His hand was on the doorknob, but he turned back to face her.

"And you?" His voice was filled with so much pain. "Did you mourn?"

She reached back, and unclipped a piece of her belt. She opened the small packet, and drew out the tarnished belt buckle. The metal R glinted in the waning light.

Jason's brow drew together.

"Every day," she said.

He coughed, nodding, and turned away. The door creaked open and he stepped out.

"Let me know if you need anything," he said, still not facing her.

"I missed you, too," Barbara said.

He nodded again, and shut the door.

'Recover,' Barbara thought. 'Then escape. Get Timmy out of here. Get back to Batman.'

A sharp sense of doubt had lodged its way into her, though. Had she been replaced? Bruce wouldn't do that, would he? And Dick—

Barbara sighed, closing her eyes. She needed to recover. And to recover, she needed rest. To rest, she needed a clear mind.

But Jason was alive. Alive.
Tim sighed when his eyes opened to the grim scene before him. He was still in this stupid apartment. It was still daytime, or at least, he was pretty sure. His arms still ached from being scrunched behind his back.

Wrists chafing from the zip ties, Tim scooted himself into a more upright position. His spine rattled against the metal bed frame. It was bad enough he was tied to his bed. But the least Jason could have done was tie him up on the mattress. As it were, he was forced to settle for the dusty hardwood floor.

Jason Todd.

Tim had idolized the dead Robin for his entire career. Yes, that career was short compared to Dick's and Barbara's careers, but three and a half years was still a long time to emulate someone. But sometimes, Tim was certain that he could never measure up to the late boy wonder.

It wasn't just Tim, either, sadly enough. Sometimes, Barbara would slip and call him Jaybird instead of Timmy. Nightwing ran him harder than all of the other members of the Team combined. Which was ironic, since he never actually let Tim do anything too 'dangerous'. When he trained with Bruce, his mentor often huffed in displeasure when he watched Tim go.

"Dick and Jason could do it in half the time," he'd say. Or maybe he'd just sigh.

If the Team were a High school, Tim would be the nerdy younger brother of the three biggest jocks in the school. The disappointment.

The door flew open, and Jason marched in sans helmet. His eyes glimmered dangerously in the filtered light as he threw a plate of mashed potatoes and peas at Tim's feet. The little green spheres tumbled around and rolled across the floor. Tim's stomach grumbled. He had barely eaten anything in days.

"There's your dinner, Replacement," the older boy said, sitting down on the mattress. It squeaked in protest, and so did Tim as his wrists were scraped against the jagged metal.

"I have a name, you know," he said. He inspected the plate. Butter and gravy flowed down the potatoes in rivers.

"I see we're off of bread and water, now," he continued, "Why the sudden generosity?"

Tim had to crane his neck, but he met Jason's contemplative gaze. The older boy stared at him over the tops of steepled fingers. Who knew what was going on in his head? For all Tim knew, he was planning out a hundred different ways to kill him.

"You were right," he said, "They're looking for you. Worried sick."

Something warm flowed through Tim's veins. The upside of two older jock siblings was that you
had two very tough people who had your back.

"Didn't I tell you?" He meant the comeback as a sharp retort, but it came out sounding like a weak statement.

Jason considered him, eyes narrowed. "I used to be just like you, kid."

"How so?"

"Cocky. Snippy." His eyes narrowed further. "Brave to a fault. You'll get yourself killed someday, if you're not smart."

Tim's foot nudged the plate. "So, to be clear... you're not going to kill me?"

Jason shook his head and sighed.

"Oh, I was thinking about it. I've got this plan with you, kid."

"But..?"

The older boy huffed again in reply. Then, slowly, he said, "You and Dick are close?"

Huh? Tim cocked his head to the side. "He's... like my brother... I guess? Why?"

Tim felt a pang.

"What about you and Babs?"

"She's like a sister."

Then, Jason smiled a little. Tim almost gaped.

"Does Dick still do that thing..." He waved his hands. "The thing he does with the stair rails?"

It took Tim a second.

"You mean when he flips on them instead of walking down the stairs like a normal person?"

Jason managed a chuckle, and Tim almost fell over. This was the friendliest he'd seen the former boy wonder since he'd been kidnapped. He decided to keep this particular ball rolling.

"Barbara has this thing with Bruce. She plays pranks on him all the time, only he just blames it on Dick." Tim smiled. "Usually it's just dumb stuff, right? The kind of things you'd expect Dick to pull—which is her evil plan exactly. You know. Putting fake barf in the Batmobile, changing all of the computer's languages to pig Latin. Dumb stuff like that. There was this one time, though. She stuffed confetti into his grappling gun. I don't even know how she did it, but when it went off, confetti and streamers covered his whole head, draping off his cowl like tinsel. But instead of blaming Dick, he thought it was the Joker."

Jason breathed a laugh. "Seriously?"

Tim nodded quickly. "Oh yeah. We all spent the rest of the night hunting for that particular clown, even though Babs and I knew it was just a prank."

Tim frowned. "That night was a little rough. See, Dick and the big guy didn't know it was just a joke, right? Well, we finally cornered the Joker at some warehouse. Not really, but that's what they
thought. We were about to go in, and Nightwing just freezes. He grabs my arm and drags me away from the building. Almost hysterical. Just freaked out. Bats tell him to wait outside with me. They'd take care of it, him and Batgirl. Then, when they came out, Bats was pissed. Really pissed. Dick clearly wasn't the culprit, so he spent the rest of the night brooding."

Jason nodded, his eyes far away, like he'd heard what he wanted to.

"Someday, kid," he said, "I'll need to tell you about the great sugar cookie escapade."

"Dude!" Tim shot back. "That's like…legend back on the Watchtower! Did you seriously stick a 'kick me' sign on Bruce?"

Jason grinned.

"That took major guts, man." Tim felt himself smiling even in spite of himself. This was Jason Todd. His… big brother.

But Jason's face darkened.

"Don't think I don't know what you're doing, Replacement," he said, standing. "Humanizing yourself." The mattress squeaked in response, and the floorboards creaked as he stepped towards the door. "Daddybats trained me in hostage situation guidelines too." His fist closed hard on the doorknob. "I was a Robin, too."

The door was slamming shut by the time Tim thought to reply.

It must have been about a day later. Tim honestly couldn't tell. His only clue was the shifting of the light through the dusty blinds over the window.

Jason stormed into the room brandishing his hunting knife, so Tim instinctively yelped and threw his body backwards. The older boy only sighed and knelt down to slice the zip ties from Tim's wrists.

Then, he was dragged into the next room. He did try to fight, but after so long without real movement and good food, Tim's muscles felt like jelly.

Jason stalked towards a door on the other side of the room, one of several, and dragged Tim along behind him. Then, turning the knob, he thrust the younger Robin through the door. Tim collapsed in a heap on the dusty wood floor, then groaned. His knees had turned to jelly, of course, and his arm was still recovering from the gunshot wound. So he was grateful that no one else had seen his tumble.

Then, there was a stifled gasp.

"Timmy?"

He squeezed his eyes shut. Of course.
Wait.

He knew that voice.

He was already starting to look up when Jason tugged him to his feet.

The room was dingy, but it was still cleaner than Tim's had been. There was a bureau dresser with black Kevlar armor stacked carefully nearby. Medical equipment beeped and hummed next to a rickety bed similar to the one Tim had spent so long tied up to. Maybe Jason had stolen the equipment from a clinic? Tim wouldn't have been surprised.

And there, laid out on the dusty mattress, her upper body propped up by a few pillows, was his older sister.

"Babs?" he squeaked, and moved forward to go to her. Jason caught him before he could bite the dust again.

"Here he is," Jason gruffed, his face contorted into a scowl. With one solid movement, he placed Tim on the mattress by Barbara's feet and had him handcuffed to the bedframe.

Barbara's smile was radiant. "Thank you, Jason. You have no idea what it means to me…seeing my two little bros side by side."

Jason snorted. "Save the campy sentimental garbage for Grayson. He was always better at it."

With that, he turned to leave.

"Twenty minutes," he said, his voice shifting into something more kind, "Let me know if you need anything, alright?"

"Thanks," Tim snipped.

"Wasn't talking to you, Replacement," Hood snapped, the door slamming behind him.

Tim turned to look at his sister.

"It's been a while. Did you dye your hair?"

Barbara opened her mouth in an O, then let out a laugh. She and Tim cracked up, subsided and laughed again. It was forced, and bordered on hysterical, but it was a relief to both of them to hear the sound from the other.

"I missed you, Timmy," she said.

"You're okay?" he asked. Then, he saw the IV in her arm, the stained sheets by her stomach.

Gingerly, she peeled back the linen until he saw a blood and fluid stained bandage around her torso. She'd evidently noticed his wandering gaze.

"There was an explosion," she said, "It's…it was just a scratch."

"Did he do this to you?" Tim's voice was hard as steel. His sister's blue eyes widened in surprise.

"Of course not. He saved me." Her gaze wandered down to her hand. For the first time, Tim noticed that she held a small metal object clasped in her fist. Through her fingers, he could just barely make out an R.
"You two are brothers," she said slowly, "Whether you like it or not."

Tim looked away. "I'll settle for 'not', I think."

Her eyes closed, and she winced. Her body shuddered, and the bandage around her waist dampened a little with crimson. Tim started to get up.

"I can shout for him, let me—"

Barbara shook her head, eyes still clamped shut. "I'm fine."

Tim reached for her hand, and his fingers closed around cold, clammy skin. She wasn't fine. She needed an actual hospital, not this decrepit hidey hole.

"Barbara? Are you sure?"

She nodded, eyes cracking open a little. It was the first time that Tim noticed how bloodshot they were.

They were silent, then, and Tim sat there with her. Barbara stared off into space, her gaze a million miles away. He still clasped her hand and wondered how they'd get word to Bruce. Or Dick. Maybe even Alfred.

Not for the first time, he wondered if the Titans were worried about him at all, if they were looking for him. He thought of Cassie and Steph.

Outside of the room, there was a small thump. Jason stepped into the room and unlocked Tim's cuffs. Barbara seemed to snap out of whatever reverie she'd stuck herself into. It was quick, her transformation, and Tim couldn't help but wonder whether it was because she didn't want Jason to see her in such a state of weakness. It was smart, but Tim's worry for her only renewed itself.

"Jason," she said kindly. Tim felt a pang when he heard the tenderness in her voice. "Thank you for letting me see him."

The ex-Robin softened visibly. Tim was used to the hard, commanding, scary Jason Todd. Watching his two siblings interact (thinking of Jason as a sibling...a brother...Tim decided that was too weird.) gave him a brief glimpse of the two bat kids' relationship...from before.

Dick had given him some idea. He'd told Tim once that Barbara and Jason had both grown up on the streets, which gave them some fierce sort of loyal bond. Dick admitted to being a little jealous. Tim could understand.

"No problem," Jason replied, laying a gentle hand on Barbara's shoulder. It was a brief but brotherly gesture. He was not nearly as gentle with Tim. The younger boy was shoved to his feet, arms pinned behind his back. Nausea spun Tim's head around in circles.

"Please take care of him, Jaybird," Barbara said softly. Jason didn't answer, only shut the door behind them.

They marched back towards Tim's bedroom. He craned his neck and looked the older boy in the eye.

"She needs a hospital," he said. Jason's face contorted.

"I know. Shut up."
"Aren't you going to do anything? She could die."

Jason shoved him into his room. Tim tasted the dust of the dirty floor.

"I said shut up."

Jason forced him into an upright position and tied his wrists to the bed once again. Zip ties were better for a bat kid left alone for so long. If you gave them handcuffs, they'd eventually get bored and pick their way out.

Now, if Tim got too bored, he'd have to gnaw his wrists off.

"She can hold out for just a little longer," Jason snapped, starting to leave. "As soon as this is all over, Dr. Thompkins's clinic is my first stop."

"Dr. Thompkins doesn't specialize in chemical induced wounds."

There was a thwack upside the head, and Tim fell silent.

Jason slammed the door shut.

'Bruce. Dick,' Tim thought, 'Wherever you are, please hurry.'
Bruce kneaded a stress relief ball in his fist. Alfred had recommended it several years ago as a way to relieve tension built up from being two different men at once. On one hand—no pun intended—it gave Bruce Wayne a perfectly normal way to let off the stress of running a multi-billion-dollar company, as well as organizing and running charity events and performing the other duties that went hand in hand with being one of Gotham's most notable beneficiaries.

On the other, it let the Batman fantasize the sensation of squeezing the Joker's neck until the clown prince of crime turned the same color as his suit.

Right now, he and Dick sat in the Batplane side by side. It was just like old times. And just like old times, they were streaking through the skies of Gotham in pursuit of the mad clown himself.

According to the newscast streaming over the radio, the Joker was currently holding several hostages—all higher ups of the different crime syndicates across the city. He had them in the back of a stolen semi, and was threatening to set them aflame.

Bruce could care less about those scum, but it was his job to make sure that each and every one of them stood trial for their crimes.

And for that, they had to be alive.

But the main reason that he and Dick were speeding towards Gotham bridge had almost nothing to do with the Joker. Almost.

Because Bruce knew now who the Red Hood was. And he was willing to bet his entire company that Jason would show up to exact revenge on his murderer.

Bruce kept one hand on the plane's controls, but the other relentlessly smashed and molded the ball.

"Do you think she's okay?"

Dick's voice was almost enough to snap Batman out of his thoughts. Bruce almost replied, but instead stayed silent. Nightwing had been made aware that Batgirl was alive and in the Red Hood's custody along with Robin. But that was it. How could Bruce tell him that he knew Hood wouldn't hurt her? To say so would mean explaining that Jason was alive. Dick would lose focus. And to lose focus in a fight was to lose before you began.

So instead, they soared on. Gotham bridge was lit up on the horizon like a Christmas display.

And as they flew in closer, they could just barely make out two silhouettes. One stood atop a semi-truck, dropping a lighter into the truck's bay. The other stood atop the bridge.

It was Hood. He was here.

"Nightwing," Batman said.

Dick lunged forward and smacked the correct button on the control panel. Flame retardant foam billowed out from the plane, covering the semi-truck like snow.
Hood looked up and pointed across Gotham Bay, then held up two fingers, three, then five. Random gesticulations to anyone else watching. But to Bruce…an address. Hood tackled the Joker and dove into the water.

Jason threw the clown to the floor. A soft puff of dust lifted from the wood floor like smoke. The clown laughed, but it turned into a pathetic wheeze.

"Ah, I see now!" Joker sneered. "We're having ourselves a little slumber party, aren't we? Ooh. what game should we start things out with?"

Jason walked over to the edge of the room, planting a kick in the criminal's side as he passed. As the Joker gasped, he stooped to pick up a dirty black gym bag.

"I say we start off with a little game of truth or dare. Yes! Let's start with dare!"

Jason didn't bother to answer, only slid the zipper along its track. He reached in and grasped the cold metal rod. As he drew the crowbar out of its bag, he felt a horrible shudder travel up his spine. He could practically feel the cold through the Kevlar gloves as he hefted it. Tested it. Shied from it.

The Joker's pupils contracted. "Or maybe I'll start with truth…"

Jason felt that heat flare in his chest again, the same heat he felt whenever he saw the twisted clown's face on the news. In his dreams.

Every single night, he dreamt of his death, heard that horrible laughter reverberating in his skull as he felt the crowbar break his bones all over again.

Sometimes, he was on the receiving end. Other times—and those were the good nights—he was the one that held the weapon.


He brought it down, then up. Down. Thwack. Up. Swoosh. Over and over. The Joker whimpered and contracted into a fetal position. Still, he kept going. He kept at it until blood leaked from the corner of the clown's mouth.

Jason wanted to keep going. A part of him was aware of the hard, sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, but another wanted to beat the Joker until he cried for mercy, bled out on the floor. Until he finally wiped the smile off the &#!% clown's face.

But he stopped himself. He needed the Joker alive, at least for now. Still, he couldn't stop the words from slipping out of his mouth.

"Now tell me," he growled, wiping the blood off the bar with his finger, "How does that feel?"

The Joker cringed, his whole body twitching a little. He wheezed. "Oh, you know. It only hurts
when I laugh. But hey—" A cruel grin spread up the Joker's pale face. "I gotta know, kid. Who are you? Back on the bridge, you said we knew one another. Did we ever rob a bank together? Double at the prom?"

Jason twisted the bar in his hands. "No. I'm just something you helped make. A monster of your own design."

His voice was flat, emotionless. Jason had expected the beating to shift the power to him. Give him some semblance of comfort. But he felt nothing.

Nothing.

"Mm…cryptic. Okay, sunshine. Then tell me. Tell me how we know each other."

The heat flared again. It wasn't real emotion, but Jason seized on it anyway.

"Alright, then. Listen up."

He brought the crowbar down.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Nightwing landed quietly next to Batman. The alley was dark and quiet. Bruce recalled the address Hood had given him: Second street. Third building down from the corner connecting to Fifth Avenue.

Two.

Three.

Five.

Perhaps he was being sentimental. First there were two. Batman and Robin. Then three. Now five, if you counted all of them together. It seemed ironic to Bruce that there was no four in the instructions. It was almost as if Jason had stopped counting himself as a member of the family.

But then, that wouldn't surprise Bruce in the slightest. He almost sighed. He was being overly sentimental.

"Hey," Dick muttered. "Isn't this…isn't this the alley where—"

"Yes."

It was the alley where they had caught a grungy young boy vandalizing the batmobile. Bruce could see it now, the grease stains on Jason's face and shirt. Batgirl's face as she tried to decide whether to laugh or shout. He could still hear the clatter on cement as Jason dropped the tire iron.

"Hello?"
A voice made both men snap out of their nostalgia.

They whipped around, and saw a figure standing at the end of the alley. The Red Hood shook out his shoulders.

"Hood-" Bruce said. His voice shook.

The man in the helmet laughed and stepped forward. "You crack me up, old man. I know you've worked it out by now! You think I wouldn't notice that you got a blood sample off me?"

Dick pulled out his escrima sticks. Bruce extracted a batarang from his belt.

"Always you and your toys." Hood shook his head and sighed. "I've got some of those, too."

One quick movement with both his arms.

**SHIK SHIK SHIK SHIK SHIK**

Throwing stars careened towards Batman and Nightwing. Their deadly edges glinted in the street light, and both men just managed to duck before the projectiles made contact.

By the time they recovered, Hood was already shooting up on a line. He ran across the rooftops, but it was only a few seconds before the Bats were in pursuit.

Batman lunged at the fleeing figure, and tackled him off of the rooftop. Both men hit the roof of the Gotham Multi-Denominational building. Tall statues of saints and martyrs and monsters decorated the arching glass dome. Bruce grunted as his shoulder connected with a stone gargoyle.

Hood hit the roof with a roll, and hopped up to lunge at Bruce.

Batman threw both hands up to protect his center, but his opponent went for his head. Or, more specifically, his cowl.

With one tearing swipe, three clicks, two button presses and a slide, Bruce's cowl tumbled off his head.

"You still use the same code." It wasn't a question. "How sad."

Nightwing hurtled from the sky and landed on the Red Hood. The two former Robins rolled and tumbled, punching, shouting and kicking. Bruce fumbled for his utility belt, but Hood threw a knife in his direction. Batman leaned backwards, dodging a knife to his stomach. But the blade sliced cleanly through the Kevlar, and his belt tumbled to the rooftop. Hood yanked Dick to his feet and wrenched an arm behind his back. With one fluid swipe, he had gleaming knife pressed to Nightwing's Adam's apple.

"I don't have any fight with your sidekicks, old man," Hood snarled. Nightwing growled.

"Says the guy holding a—" Hood silenced Dick by pressing the knife harder, pulling his arm tighter. Nightwing let out a small squeak.

Bruce took a step forward, but Jason tsked.

"Now, now. You saw how easily my knives cut through Kevlar. *Slice, slice.* Don't make me do something I'll regret."

"Regret?" Dick choked out a laugh. "Like all the others you've murdered? Why would
"You regret slitting my throat right now?"

"Hood," Batman snapped. He was trying now to divert the vigilante's attention away from Dick. "You have an agenda. I know that you do. What will this standoff accomplish?"

Hood chuckled. "It gives me just enough time to do this."

He shoved Nightwing forward. As Dick crashed into Bruce, Hood leapt off the roof, and crashed through a window in the next building over.

"Are you okay?" Batman demanded. Dick shook out his shoulder and nodded.

"Let's get this guy," he said, glowering.

Both men followed the Red Hood into the building.

They landed in a bathroom. Hood was waiting for them. He landed three punches in Bruce's stomach, and knocked him over with an uppercut. The familiarity of the maneuvers was almost overwhelming. This was Jason he was fighting, after all. Dick lunged forward and swung his escrima sticks at Jason's helmet, but Hood kicked Nightwing's solar plexus before they could make contact.

Dick crashed into a porcelain bathtub, and Bruce leapt to his feet. He slammed Hood's head into the sink, the mirror, the tiled wall. Each blow was enough to shatter the respective bathroom fixtures. Jason grabbed hold of a tile shard and swung towards Bruce's stomach. Batman hopped backward and kicked Jason hard in the chest.

The walls of the building were weaker than Batman had initially guessed, and Jason crashed through the wall entirely, into a decrepit living room of sorts.

Nightwing and Batman both stepped through, circling Hood carefully. Jason lay on the floor, wheezing a little bit. He sat up, and both bats flinched.

"Good game, boys. Really. But I just want to know—"

He stood, and Dick raised his escrima sticks, ready to go on offense or defense. Whichever was needed.

But Jason's voice was deathly quiet. "If it'd been Dick, would you have crossed the line?"

Batman knew what Hood was talking about, but Nightwing shot a confused and slightly panicked glance at his mentor.

"Bats? What's he on about?"

Bruce shook his head and stepped forward. Hood let out a laugh.
"Holy # %&. You still haven't told him, have you?"

Dick's arms shook with tension. "Told me what?"

"Dick-" Bruce started. Hood laughed again, and reached up. He turned a dial on the side of his helmet. There was a series of clicks, and a slight hiss as the helmet loosened enough for Hood to remove it.

A domino mask covered his eyes, but Dick still dropped his escrima sticks.

"Been a while, N-wing."

Dick whimpered, and stepped forward. "J-Jason?"

Jason whipped a pistol from his hip holster and leveled it at Bruce's head.

Batman wet his lips. "Jason, I tried to save you. You have to believe that. I'm...I'm trying to save you now."

"H-how?" Dick muttered softly. Jason ignored his older brother. His attention was solely focused on his former mentor. He chuckled.

"You think this is what this's all about?" he demanded. "That you let me die?"

Dick stepped back. Bruce stepped forward.

"Bruce, I forgive you! For not saving me." His expression hardened. "But why. Why, why, why on this earth—"

He whirled around and kicked an old door with peeling paint. It shattered, hanging sadly from its hinges. Inside, were two bound figures. One was a bloody, grinning clown. The Joker.

The other was Tim. Jason had left his mask in place, but Bruce could still see the fear on Robin's face.

"—are they still alive!?"

Tim looked up. "Batman—" he started to say. Jason dragged him and the Joker from the closet and dumped them onto the dusty wood floor, side by side on their knees.

Dick started to lunge towards Tim, but Jason pressed his pistol against the back of the boy's head. Robin made a small noise.

"Oh, I wouldn't, if I was you."

"Ooh!" Joker said, smiling, "Is the party getting started, now? Let's all pose for pictures. We'll get one with me and Hoody, here, then one with me, Batsy and Bat-lite over there, then maybe one with me and the crowbar—"

Jason whipped out another pistol and pressed it against the Joker's head. "You're going to be very quiet, or else I'll put one in your lap." He told the clown softly.


"Now," Jason said, "You didn't answer my question. Why is the Joker still alive and grinning? When he killed me, why didn't you go after him? Batgirl broke his bones. You should have broken
his neck!"

Bruce recalled Barbara saying almost exactly the same thing. "Jason—"

"If it had been you, or Nightwing, or Batgirl, that he had beaten to a bloody pulp, I would have done something. If he had taken any of you from this world, I would have searched the planet for this pathetic piece of evil worshiping garbage and sent him straight to #$%%!"


Dick let out a noise from the back of his throat. "Jay. Robin—"

"You have to understand," Bruce said, "Why I couldn't kill him. I—"

"Is it because you just didn't care? Or did you just not have the guts?"

"No!" Batman barked. "For the love of-! No! Don't you get it? I can't. Ever since the night I pulled you from the ashes, I have thought of almost nothing else. Of capturing him, and putting him through every horrific torture he's inflicted on others, and then…ending him. But I can't let myself go down to that place. It'd be too easy. I'd never come back."

"Come on," Jason pressed. He dug the barrels of his guns harder into his captives' heads. "I'm not talking about Freeze. Or Dent. Or Penguin. I'm talking about him. Just him." Jason glanced down at the Joker. "And doing it because..." he met Dick's eyes, then, and his voice cracked. "Because he took me away from you."

Batman, Nightwing and Robin were all silent. The Joker was giggling.

Jason looked down at Tim. "When I came back, Bruce, I was looking for you. I was still disoriented. Didn't remember your name, much less the location of the cave. But I searched the news, and the streets, for any sign of you, Batgirl or Nightwing. And do you know what I found?"

He shook his head. "It'd been two months. Two months! And already, you had another little kid running around all dressed up in red and yellow. A cheap replacement. It took me five minutes to take him out. He's weak! But for some $# *& reason, he's still alive!"

Tim winced.

"He was never your replacement," Dick said softly.

"Wasn't he?" Jason sighed. "So now, Bats, I'm giving you a choice."

With one fluid swipe of his arm, Jason tossed the pistol pointed at the Joker to Bruce. Batman caught the weapon in his hands, almost fumbling and dropping it. Jason pulled Tim to his feet and placed Robin's back up against his chest. Tim's eyes were wide, but he kept quiet.

"I'm going to shoot the Replacement in the head."

"Jason, no!" Dick shouted.

"The only way to stop me is to shoot the clown on the floor. Either way is good with me. Because after I kill boy blunder, I'll end the Joker."

Bruce let the gun tumble to the floor. It made a hollow clunk as it hit the wooden boards.

He turned away, and motioned to Dick with his hand. Dick nodded slightly, eyes widening a little.
He discreetly pulled a birdarang from his belt.

"No!" Jason shouted. "Decide! Him or Joker! DECIDE!"

"ENOUGH!"

Everyone whirled towards the now-open doorway. Barbara leaned up against the frame, glowering. Bruce noted the bandage wrapped around and around her waist. It was stained from blood and fluids. Barbara seemed to have lost a lot of both; her skin was unnaturally pale and her forehead was beaded with sweat. In spite of that, she maintained an air of confidence and control. Only Bruce could see through that mask. She was terrified, and trying not to reveal how weak she truly was.

"Jason," she said firmly, "Put that gun down. Now."

Joker let out a hair-raising cackle. "Well hellooo, beautiful," he sneered, "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

Barbara's eyes narrowed. "Shouldn't you be in Arkham, clown?"

Joker laughed. "I like this one! Unlike the rest of you stiffs, she's funny!" He leaned over towards the door and raised his eyebrows. "I'm gonna remember that the next time—"

Jason planted a heavy kick in the Joker's ribcage. "Shut up," he snapped. "Babs. You shouldn't be up yet."

Bruce eased a batarang from a compartment on his hip. Dick was staring openmouthed at Barbara; he couldn't be counted on to hit the gun before it went off.

Batgirl's expression hardened.

"We both trained under Batman, Jay. Did you seriously think I wouldn't know that you'd slipped sedatives into my water?"

Jason had the tact to look sheepish. And somewhat nervous. Dick made a sound in the back of his throat.

"I didn't want you to see this," Jason said, more gently. Barbara peeled herself off of the wooden doorframe and limped over. She placed one hand on Jason's shoulder, whether to calm him or steady herself, Bruce couldn't tell. Tim's eyes rolled back to try and meet Barbara's. A panicked squeak escaped despite Jason's chokehold.

Barbara's other hand came up slowly, but Jason's eyes stayed fixated on hers. Slowly, she grasped his hand, the one holding the weapon, and eased it away from Tim's head.

"Jason Peter Todd," she said quietly. "You are brave. You are a hero. This," she nodded at the gun, "This isn't you. Why are you doing all of this?"

Jason's mouth opened slightly, then closed. Barbara pressed.

"It's because you think we moved on, without ever doing anything about it. Isn't it? You want to prove to Batman that you can avenge your own death, and clean up this city better than he ever could."

Batgirl's voice was low, quiet, and slow. Hypnotic, even. Bruce had taught her how to talk down crazies, but even though this was similar, it was somehow very different.
"Criminals deserve to die, don't they?" she said, her voice becoming more intense, more persuasive. Jason hesitated. In that moment, Barbara turned the hand with the pistol away from Tim entirely.

Bruce almost breathed a sigh of relief.

But then she pressed the barrel against her own forehead.

"What are you doing?" Jason demanded. He was smart not to try pulling his hand away: Barbara's fierce grip on the weapon would have ensured her death if he pulled back. Dick stepped forward, about to toss his birdarang, but Bruce's arm slammed outward to stop him. He knew where this was going, now.

Jason turned completely towards Batgirl, eyes fixed on her hands. Trying to find a way to break her grip. He wouldn't find one, though. Jason had never been able to break Barbara's holds in training.

Tim slumped to the floor, forgotten. Slowly, he inched towards Batman. Joker was watching with an enormous grin. He panted slightly, waiting for the bang, the splatter, the screams.

Barbara's eyes were fixed on Jason.

"Criminals deserve to die," she said. "So do it. Pull the trigger, Jason."

Jason gaped. "Barbara. You're not—"

"I assaulted the Joker and almost killed him. Growing up on the streets, I stole, I swindled, I cheated. I hurt a lot of people. And if what you say is true, then I deserve to be shot. So pull. The. Trigger."

Jason floundered. "No. You're Batgirl! You did good with your life, you—"

"Kill me!" She screamed. Tim bumped against Batman's shins, and Bruce drew his cape over Robin protectively. Dick stood frozen, unsure of what to do.

There was a tense silence. Then.

"N-no." Jason clicked on the safety, and released his hold on the pistol. The gun fell uselessly to the floor. There was an audible sigh of relief. Dick rushed forward and enveloped them both in a bear hug.

"Little Wing," he muttered. Barbara let out a gasp of pain, recoiling from Nightwing's embrace. All eyes turned on her as she staggered backwards, arms wrapped around her middle as if to hold herself together.

It was Jason who reached out and caught her. "Batman," he said, scowling, "Someone needs to take the Joker back to Arkham. Barbara needs a hospital. Now."
Dick stood outside the observation window. He was torn between watching Babs as she lay in a hospital bed, and watching the boy standing beside him.

They had both come to visit her at the Gotham General Hospital dressed out in civvies. It wouldn't do to have Nightwing and the notorious Red Hood show up in the hospital lobby. After an incident with the Joker a few months back, the hospital board was very adamant on where they stood concerning costumed folk wandering their halls.

So, Dick Grayson was here to check up on his wounded girlfriend, Barbara Pennyworth. Their mutual friend, Jason Willis, had been permitted to tag along.

False names. They were tedious, but necessary. Barbara Pennyworth had fake papers for just this kind of reason; Batgirl had none, and hospitals were kind of uptight about that sort of thing. Also, Jason Todd had been dead for years.

He'd gotten taller, Dick noticed. When Jason had been Robin, Dick had towered over him at 5'11". He'd always stayed at 5'6" in Dick's mind. He guessed that was what happened when you were killed before you hit your growth spurt. Now, Jason was easily taller than him, probably by about three or four inches. Even taller than Bruce (sans bat ears).

His Little Wing was older. Hardened. Jaded.

"Think she's going to make it?" Jason asked, his voice hoarse.

"She'll be fine," Dick said, "You know our Babs. She's been through worse."

Jason nodded, but Dick could tell he wasn't convinced. A thought came to him.

"Hey. You probably wouldn't remember, but…" Dick cleared his throat. "Do you remember Wrath and Scorn?"

Jason tore his eyes away from Barbara's hospital bed, and raised an eyebrow. "I think you mean Washout and Stooge."

Dick couldn't stop himself. He let out a laugh. A passing nurse gave him a strange look, then clutched her clipboard more tightly to her chest and hurried on.

"That was probably the best chili dog I ever had," Jason muttered, leaning up against the glass. "Dude. Bats was so ticked."

Dick snickered. "Not as mad as Batgirl…um…"

He looked around, worried that someone might have noticed their slip-ups. Jason laughed.

"That's right. She was bandaging you up, and she wouldn't kiss you because you had onion ring breath."

Both boys snickered at that, remembering.

"I missed you, Jay," Dick said quietly. "I've never really forgiven myself. For not going with you on that mission."

For a moment, the leaned up against the glass, and watched as a nurse measured their sister's vitals. Then, Jason cleared his throat.

"I never blamed you, Dick. Never really blamed anyone." His expression slackened. "Not Bruce,
"Language," Dick chided. The ghost of a smile tweaked at Jason's mouth.

"In the end," he said, "It was really my fault. I knew it was just a reconnaissance mission, but I still went into that warehouse." He paused as he considered something. "I never asked. Mia. How is she?"

Dick debated on whether or not to tell the truth. He could lie, and say that she retired, went off to college, met a nice guy to go out with. Even saying she'd been killed in action would be kinder. But Jason must have read into his hesitation.

"I can handle it," he said, frowning. "What happened?"

Dick wet his lips. "It was the year after you…died. I was leading the mission." He glanced around. No one was in the room but the two of them. And Dick knew for a fact that the hospital surveillance cameras didn't pick up sound. "Professor Ivo and Cheshire. We were in the middle of a fight. Cheshire had Garth pinned against the floor. I was too busy deactivating Ivo's bomb. She was about to slit his throat, and I would never have made it over there in time. But Mia did. She fired an arrow at Cheshire, then threw herself into hand to hand. I recognized the moves. You taught them to her, right?"

Jason nodded, searching Dick's face, desperate for information.

"She held Chesh off just long enough for me to finish up. Sent Cheshire and Ivo off to Belle Reve. Everything was fine." Dick swallowed. "Tornado was debriefing our squad, when suddenly, Mia collapsed. Roy—original Roy, goes by Arsenal now—walked in just about that time, and shouted. He picked her up, and ran towards the zeta tubes, screaming about taking her to a hospital. Some of us ran after him."

Jason paled.

"We all ended up in the Star City Regional Medical Center a few minutes later. Checked Mia in. She was unconscious. Roy was inconsolable. Sometime, GA, Batman and Artemis all showed up, and that was when Green Arrow told us. Mia had contracted HIV three years before, during her… rougher days living on the streets. She kept it a secret, Jay. Only GA and Roy knew."

Jason sighed. "She hinted at it. To me. I should have realized."

"I'm so sorry, Jay," Dick said softly. "She…she passed away the next night."

Jason's shoulders hunched. He turned his head away, but Dick still saw the two fat tears roll down his cheeks.

"I…guessed. When I came back, I kept tabs on everyone. The League. The Team. The Titans. But I couldn't find her, no matter how hard I looked."

He looked up, and turned away from the observation window.

"Dick," he said, "I doubt Bruce is going to let the Red Hood stuff go. I wouldn't blame you if you didn't either."

"Jason—"

"I'm going to change. Go straight again. Clean slate and all that crap. For Mia. Will…will you guys
take me back?"

Dick smiled.

"You always have a home with us, Jay. You're our little bro. And, now you have a little bro. He needs you too."

Jason blanched. "Aw, crap. I forgot about the kid."

Dick laughed and threw an arm around Jason's shoulder. "Don't worry. He'll forgive you. You know...eventually."

They checked out at the front desk and walked out to the car, where Alfred was waiting.

"Welcome back to the family, Little Wing."
SEVERAL MONTHS LATER

"I'm telling you, I've had it!"

Tim thundered through the cave. Dick and Jason hopped out of his way, avoiding the rampaging bull. Barbara chased after him.

"Timmy, please…don't," she muttered, trying to grab a hold of his shoulder. Tim shook her off roughly, one gloved hand raised in the air.

"I'm done," he snarled. With one sharp gesture, he tore his cape from his shoulders and his mask from his face. "You people don't get to call the shots anymore!"

Dick shared a concerned glance with Jason, but the two of them wisely kept silent. They left it up to Barbara to solve this one.

"Robin," she said, "I'm so sorry about your dad. I accept full responsibility—"

"Oh, you accept full responsibility?" Tim whirled on her, eyes wide and angry. His voice had taken a mocking tone that made her raise her eyebrows in affront. "Is it because the man hiding in his bedroom refuses to? Are you just letting yourself take the fall for him? Again?"

Tim's voice rose and rose in volume. "Are you that stupid, Barbara? Are you really just going to let him tell you where to go and what to do with no thought of the consequences?" Barbara shrunk back. That was when Dick decided to step in.

"Hey," he said, stepping up to face Tim nose to nose. "That's enough."

Tim's eyes wandered to meet Barbara's, and for the first time, he showed a hint of regret. He sighed and turned away to peel off his costume. Moments later, he was dressed in a green sweatshirt and beat up blue jeans. He shouldered a pack and headed to the elevator.

"You've discussed this with Bruce?" Barbara asked quietly. Without looking back, Tim nodded.

"Yeah," he said.

"Where're you gonna go, punk? Street life isn't fun." Jason crossed his arms over his chest and glowered. Barbara knew that the idea that anyone would willingly give up a free place to stay and eat was alien to him. Tim didn't seem to care.
"The house is mine," Tim shot back, "Dad put it in his will. I'll live there until I figure something else out."

"Social Services," Dick countered. He'd had his own run ins with them before.

Tim looked back and smirked at his oldest brother. "I hacked Social Services."

Robin stepped into the elevator. "Tell Bruce to find some other monkey to do his errands."

The elevator doors slammed shut.

A few weeks later, it was like nothing had happened. That's what they all tried to believe, at least. Bruce had been livid when he'd come down for dinner that evening right after Tim had left and learned of his protégé's decision. He tried to go after Tim, but Alfred, of all of them, had been the one to stop him.

"Master Timothy is grieving, sir," the old butler had assured him, "He will change his mind. Just give him time and space. If I recall, that is exactly what you yourself required after your own personal tragedy."

And that was that. The topic of 'Robin' was officially taboo.

Barbara sat around the breakfast table with Dick and Jason. Alfred was downtown picking up groceries, so it had been a fend-for-yourself kind of breakfast. Barbara had thrown together some yogurt and granola and had added a banana and a glass of almond milk on the side. Jason had whipped up a three egg omelet for himself. Peppers, tomatoes and green onions oozed out with a river of melty cheddar cheese. And juice. Jason loved his orange juice. Dick, on the other hand, was clueless when it came to food preparation. He'd poured himself a salad bowl of cereal and dumped a half gallon of milk over the top.

The boys snarfed down their food, while Barbara sipped at her glass and read the paper. An article on page B7 caught her eye:

'CAPTAIN BOOMERANG' MURDER VICTIM IDENTIFIED AS JACK ALLAN DRAKE; SUSPECT AT LARGE'

A story followed underneath in clinically neat print, but Barbara turned the page. A sick feeling twisted in the pit of her stomach. A thousand 'if only's marched through her mind. If only she hadn't held Tim up on patrol. If only they'd gotten there when they'd first heard Mr. Drake's 911 call on the Commissioner's police scanner.

She left the obituaries untouched.

Babs looked up at the ornate cast iron clock on the wall and sighed. Dick looked up from his meal.

"Everything okay?" he asked her. A thin milk mustache decorated his upper lip. She grinned.
"No idea how you boys can eat so much," she said. Jason snorted in indignation. "Gorls can' 'preesiate goo' foo'," he said through a full mouth. Barbara laughed and folded up her paper.

As she stood to leave, Dick said, "See you later."

She reciprocated gently, and turned to step towards the elevator.

Barbara's eyes were fixed on her wrist computer as she entered the Batcave. Data and statistics scrolled across the screen. She'd spent the last few hours compiling these figures.

"Hey, B-man," she called, "I got the schematics you wanted."

No answer. She looked up.

"Bruce?"

The computer's chair was empty. Barbara glanced around, and jumped a little when she heard a clatter.

"Absolutely not."

Bruce's voice filled the cave, low and threatening. Barbara raised an eyebrow and stepped over to the training room's entryway. Inside, Alfred stood next to Batman, nervously wringing his gloved hands. In front of Batman stood...

"Stephanie?" Barbara asked, stepping into the room.

Steph whirled around. She was dressed in a cheap, home-made costume; a yellow and black cape that hung from her shoulders, draped over a red and green bodysuit. Her blonde hair was tied back from her masked face. Barbara stopped in her tracks when she saw the R insignia on Stephanie's chest.

She raised an eyebrow at her mentor. "What's going on, here?"

Bruce opened his mouth, but it was Steph who spoke up.

"Batman needs a Robin. Tim quit, so I'm here to fill in."

"No," Batman snapped. "She's not. Go home, Stephanie."

Her eyes went wide behind their domino mask. "No!" she shouted. "Please. Just give me a chance! You said that I could be Spoiler. Why—"

"I said no," Bruce snapped, "This line of work is no place for a—"

He paused, and slowly looked up, meeting Barbara's narrowed eyes. His mouth slammed shut.

Batgirl crossed her arms over her chest. "No place for a...what, boss-man? For a kid? For
a...girl?"

Batman's eyes narrowed. "You know what I—"

Barbara threw an arm around Stephanie's shoulders. The girl's gaze darted between them, like she was watching a very intense tennis game.

"I say we give the girl a shot," she said, pounding each word out, "She's the same age as Tim, and she has experience. There's literally no reason why she can't." A thought occurred to her, and she smiled. "In fact, if you want, I could ask Wonder Woman to have a chat with you about the merits of feminism."

The last time that had happened, there had been a dispute about the ratio of male to female members of the League. Bruce wasn't sexist; he just didn't always have the right amount of tact when it came to this kind of thing. Once Diana Prince got involved, it was all over. Superman ended up stuck in the ceiling. Batman landed head first in the reflecting pool outside the Hall of Justice. According to Green Arrow, the cement at the bottom had actually cracked.

Now, a brief expression flitted over her mentor's face. Nervousness, maybe? The thought brought a smirk to Barbara's face. Then, he turned to Stephanie.

"I'll work you harder than you've ever worked in your life. Training with me, working with me, and running with me; none of it is going to be easy."

Steph's face split into a wide grin. Her head bobbed. "Check," she said.

"There's a good chance of getting hurt or killed in this line of work."

Stephanie nodded again, the look on her face said that she already knew.

"The first time you complain, or disobey a direct order, you're out." The last word snapped through the air like a thunder crack. Barbara blinked, and Steph winced a little, but she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin.

"You got it."

Bruce nodded, his face hardening underneath the cowl. He turned to Alfred.

"Tim's taller than she is. Do you think you could alter one of Nightwing's old uniforms?"

Alfred turned to a long row of display cases on the far wall. Various versions of Robin and Batgirl suits lay pressed and standing in the glass boxes. Barbara smiled when her eyes landed on her first Batgirl uniform. It was a little smaller, a little shorter. Her hips and legs had grown out since she'd started running with the Team. Next her eyes drifted to Dick's old Robin costume. It was one of several. Vigilantes who frequently encounter acid, fire, chemicals, and—worst of all—puberty, need new uniforms on a regular basis. Only one of each new model was on display. Behind the scenes, there were a couple more of each. And, as Barbara looked back and forth between Dick's Robin suit and Stephanie's wide eyes, she noted the similarities in their build. Just like Steph, Dick had been a short, skinny kid. Narrow shoulders (though Dick's had widened) long torsos. But the suit would need to be taken out at the hips. And maybe a few fixes to the chest and waistline?

"That'll work nicely," Barbara agreed, nodding. "But it needs a few feminine touches." Her eyes drifted to Steph's home-made suit. The main body was a belted tunic, with leggings peeping out from underneath. It wasn't a bad design; it just needed more toughening up. More maneuverability.
Alfred seemed to read her mind. He nodded in understanding, and said,

"I will get right onto that. If you'll excuse me, however, I need to load the groceries into the kitchen." He pointed to a pile of bags next to the elevator. "And make sure that the young men upstairs haven't eaten us all out of house and home."

Barbara smiled and tapped Stephanie's shoulder. "We can take care of that, Alf," she said brightly. Alfred opened his mouth to protest, but Barbara's arms were already filled with bags. Steph stooped to gather up the rest. "As for the boys, I can make no promises."

The girls turned to go upstairs, but Bruce stepped forward.

"Absolutely not. She stays down here."

Barbara craned her neck to look her mentor in the eye. "What?" she said, "Are you worried that she's going to figure out the secret? If she's down here, B-man, then I think she already has, anyway."

Steph nodded. She'd been remarkably quiet the whole time, which was a feat in and of itself, but now she spoke up.

"I-I know it's you, Mr. Wayne. I saw Tim with you a lot, on TV, you know? And I don't care why you choose to keep it a secret, okay? I won't tell anybody. Ever. I promise."

With that, the girls stepped into the elevator, leaving a reeling Batman behind them.

The doors shut behind them as they stepped into the hallway. The grocery bags crinkled in Barbara's arms as she turned to Steph.

"This is going to be great!" She beamed. "You have no idea how hard it is to live in a house with only guys."

She rolled her eyes and grinned. Steph grinned back. "Really, huh? Tell me the weirdest thing that's ever happened. Please!"

The set the groceries down on the kitchen counter. Nearby, the boy's dirty dishes were laid out abandoned on the table. They were probably off playing video games or something. Barbara rested her elbows on the cool granite counter and grinned at Steph.

"It's hard to think of just one." She rolled her eyes to the ceiling and considered it. "You sure?"

Steph smiled and flipped herself up onto the kitchen island. "Yes. Do it. I need a good story like you wouldn't believe!"

Barbara cleared her throat and smiled. "There's a couple things."

"Good. Not like I'm going anywhere."
"Okay, Steph. Here goes." she leaned forwards and lowered her voice conspiratorially. "My first month of being Batgirl." She put the emphasis on the word *month*, and Stephanie's eyes widened.

"Oh, no," she said.

"Oh, yes. Worst possible time to get it, too. Bats, Robin and I—first Robin—were on a mission to stop Mr. Freeze from covering Gotham in eternal winter. One of those 'big supervillain schemes', you know? But here's the thing: our thermal suits? They're *white*."

Stephanie gasped. "No," she said. "Oh, man, that must've been so awkward."

Barbara nodded. "You know how the first day is, too, don't you? Imagine that all over the cape, all over my suit, because I was getting tossed around all over the place by Freeze's thugs. I must have looked like a war victim or something. They laid off when I curled into a ball. Robin and Bats eventually found me curled up in the snow, all of the ground around me stained red, my costume stained red, and Robin literally *screamed*. He and Bats got me into the Batmobile, all the while telling me I'm going to be fine, I'm going to be okay."

Steph clapped two hands over her mouth and let out a long sympathetic whine.

"And I'm just groaning all the way because my cramps are so terrible that I can barely move. And I keep trying to tell them that I'm fine, but I'm so embarrassed that I can't tell them why." She let out a long, exasperated groan. "So when we get back to the cave, Alfred starts to flip out. He starts 'tending to my wounds', but it didn't take him long to realize that I didn't have any. And, of course, he knew what was up almost right away."

She paused for effect, then felt a flash of relief that Dick and Jason were safely out of earshot for this conversation.

"I swear. You should have seen Bruce's *face*. Absolute abject horror. Like he'd just realized what he was getting into by having a female protégé…"

Steph giggled. "What about Robin?"

Barbara laughed. "He didn't get it at first. He was all, *Well then why is she bleeding if she's not hurt?*. He had no idea. And I don't think I've ever seen Bruce more horrified. Cause he was the one who had to explain while Alfred went to go and get me some products and a Tylenol. I was doing my best to tune it out. Put on some headphones and tried not to look at either of them. But I still peeked every few seconds. Robin's face started getting whiter and whiter…for weeks, he wouldn't even look me in the eye!"

They laughed hard.

"I'm so sorry!"

"It was mortifying!"

Steph's eyes were bright from laughing; it occurred to Barbara that she'd been pretty subdued the past few weeks. This may have been the first time that Spoiler had laughed in a while.

"Then," she continued, "There was the time that Tim stayed up for forty-eight hours straight. The guy was basically just running on Red Bull and coffee. Anyways, he was walking into walls, saying the most random stuff. But then he had to go to school."

Steph's grin was wide, eager. "Yeah? I think I remember this one, actually. Mr. Halverson's
Babs laughed. "Oh my gosh, yes!"

"Where he stood up to give a report, and fainted right there?"

"And took out the teacher's desk?"

Steph shrugged, smiling. "To be fair, the thing was only being held together by duct tape and prayer anyways."

Babs put up a hand. "Yes, yes. But on patrol that night, we squared off against the Mad Hatter. He was ranting about his latest villainous plot, and Tim and I were distracting him while Nightwing and Bats came up from behind. Tetch—that's Hatter, by the way—was midsentence when suddenly Tim just stiffens and looks at me real slow. That's when I noticed."

" Noticed what?"

"Not only had Tim put his boots on the wrong feet, but he'd put on the whole suit backwards. The cape was even wrong side out. And then, all tired and resigned, he said…"

She leaned forward, and said in a defeated, drolling tone, "No one needs this kind of struggle in their lives."

Barbara smirked as Steph chuckled for a minute, and rifled in the grocery bags. She brought out a box of granola bars and tossed it to Stephanie. "And there was this one time—"

"DICK!"

Jason's bellow shook the entire room. He stormed into the kitchen fully suited up with his helmet in hand. Stephanie's eyes widened.

"Babs? Where's Dick?" Jason snarled through his teeth. Barbara threw up her hands and shrugged.

"Hey," she said, "I haven't seen him since I finished breakfast. What did he do this time?"

Stephanie was watching them both very carefully. Especially Jason.

In reply, he turned his helmet so that the front faced the two girls. The shiny red surface was marred by a goofy black smiley face scribbled on in sharpie.

Barbara snorted, and put a fist in front of her mouth to hold the laugh in.

"It's not funny," Jason protested, "Where is he? We have a meet and greet with the Team today, and I can't go in like this!"

He put on the helmet to prove his point, throwing his arms out in exasperation, and the silly face grinned back at them. Steph and Barbara both lost it.

He sighed dramatically and dropped his shoulders. "I'm glad that you girls think that this is funny."

He removed the helmet and paused, then gave Steph a double take.

"Okay. Babs? Three questions for you."

She shrugged. "Shoot."
"First off, who's the blonde?"

He and Steph initiated a staring contest while Barbara answered.

"This is Stephanie Brown. She's Tim's girlfriend, and the new Robin—"

"Tim dumped me," Stephanie said quickly, still fixated on Jason. "He told me that we ‘weren't working’. He needed a ‘break’. I found out that he was seeing Wonder Girl, too. So…it's a little more than just a break."

Barbara shot Steph a sympathetic glance. No wonder the girl had barely even smiled the last little while.

"Sorry," Jason said, "Timmy's not exactly the most sensitive guy in that regard. Anyway, second question. Can we get this stuff off? And where's Dick?"

Barbara considered for a moment.

"Alfred's got some cleaning solution that might do the trick," she said, "It's under the sink, with the green label. As for the third question…"

She pressed her elbows onto the counter and levelled a stern frown at Jason.

"Dick's down in the cave by the gymnastics equipment. He has a hiding place up on the second level. But here's the catch. No serious bodily harm or property damage, Okay?"

Jason hesitated.

"Okay, Jaybird?" she pressed.

He sighed. "Fine."

Barbara grinned brightly. "Thanks, bro. Just for that, I'll let you in on a little secret: Alfred keeps the water guns on the top shelf in the garage. Just a tidbit of useful information for ya. Go forth and destroy."

An evil grin spread up Jason's face as he lumbered out of the kitchen. Steph spoke as soon as he was out of earshot.

"Gee. You weren't kidding about boy drama."

They laughed.

"Speaking of," Barbara said, "Tim really didn't tell you he was dating Cassie?"

Stephanie shook her head sullenly.

"Then, no offense, but…is that why you're doing this? Why would you want to be a Robin? Spoiler was working out so well for you."

In reply, Steph pulled an apple from a nearby grocery bag and gave it a quick crunch.

"Spoiler was fun," she said around a mouthful of fruit, "And I liked doing that. But…" She swallowed. "Her job was to spoil the Cluemaster's crimes, ya know? I got my dad sent to jail, and then, well, things have been so boring ever since. Tim stopped talking to me, so I couldn't do anything with him. And, well. I heard that Tim quit a few days ago. Maybe…"
She shrugged, looking suddenly bashful. But Barbara understood immediately. If Stephanie could become Robin, and prove herself 'Worthy' then maybe Tim would see her as an equal. Maybe take her back. She could see the problem from Stephanie's point of view: Why date the average girl when you could make out with an Amazonian? She didn't necessarily agree, but she could understand. She'd felt a lot of the same things in the months after the Reach invasion.

"Hey. You know Starfire?" Barbara hoisted herself onto the counter next to Steph. She nodded slightly.

"Yeah. The Tamaranian princess, right?"

Barbara made a sound through her teeth. "Right. She joined up a few months before you did. From the moment she flew into the Watchtower, none of the guys could take their eyes off of her. Especially Nightwing."

"Oh," Steph moaned, as if she expected to hear a sad story.

"It was a problem. He'd be working on something with me, then completely fall off track as soon as she walked by. We fought about it once, when I caught them in the break room together."

Barbara sighed and leaned back.

"Turns out, she'd been making advances on him for weeks. He kept turning her down. And, it so happens that the reason was me."

"That's sweet. But why tell me this?" She took another nervous bite of her apple.

"Because," Barbara replied, "I want you to know that if Timmy's the right one for you, he'll come back. If not, you might try other fish."

She shrugged as Steph's eyebrows crept up.

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"Oh, you know. I'll bet Jason thinks you're cute."

A slow smile spread up Stephanie's with face.

A bloodcurdling scream and a war cry echoed through the hallways. Both girls turned toward the door way, and saw a sopping wet Nightwing streak past. Red Hood, armed with a super soaker, rushed after him.

"Now, if you'll excuse me for a few minutes," Barbara said, "I need to go make sure that the Red Hood doesn't kill my boyfriend."
Stephanie's breath hitched when the butler, Mr. Pennyworth, held up the tailor-made costume.

It was a deep red tunic, the color of blood, she thought. Around the tunic was wrapped a shiny chain link belt. It wouldn't be real gold, naturally, but it was still flashy. The belt had pockets for all sorts of goodies. She nearly giggled. Forest green leggings peeked out from underneath the tunic, with tall black combat boots and a black and yellow cape at the shoulders.

It was…

It was—

"Perfect," she breathed. Next to her, Barbara smirked. Steph was still getting used to seeing all of Tim's siblings out of costume, but she definitely liked his sister the best. His older brothers had accepted her easily. She and Dick even had a running joke that involved stealing pieces of the others' costumes. Batman had yet to notice that the top buckle of his left boot was missing; which meant, of course, that she was winning. Dick had gotten caught with Jason's hip holster yesterday, and Babs had stepped in before things could get bloody.

Babs was the one who had convinced the Boss Man to let her stay in the first place. Batman himself had stepped off of training her completely (muttering about her uselessness under his breath), and left it to his oldest female partner. Barbara ran her ragged, coaching her through the grueling exercises and maneuvers that any Robin 'needed to perfect'. But they always—always—did something fun after training. Usually, they watched a chick flick with buckets of popcorn while Babs passed her ice packs and Tylenol.

But it was worth it. It was all so worth it.

Alfred Pennyworth smiled at her enthusiasm.

"Go on, then, my dear," he said kindly. "Do hurry and change. I believe you're all leaving for the Watchtower in a few minutes."

She nodded and accepted the costume with reverence.

This was it.

She was Robin!

Yes!

While Batgirl reprogrammed the zeta tube, the others glanced nervously around the forum of the Watchtower. Superheroes and protégé's alike darted to and fro, from place to place. There was so much background noise, that it was doubtful that anyone could hear their arrival.

Barbara noticed that Jason especially was curiously peering around. It had been years since he'd last been here, after all. His hood was fastened securely over his head, but she was pretty sure that underneath, he was biting his lip. A nervous habit he'd always had.

Stephanie, on the other hand, was bouncing on the balls of her feet, hands clasped tightly behind her back. She looked adorable, all decked out in her new Robin garb. The black domino mask over her eyes did nothing to disguise the excitement and skittishness on her face, but her shoulders were thrown back in her own little brand of faux self-confidence.

Barbara turned to grin at Dick. He winked, and jerked his head to the side, eager to get a move on.

"All members of the Team and the Teen Titans, please report to the mission room for a mandatory briefing and today's assignments." Aqualad's voice crackled out of the speakers overhead. Barbara knew that he was growing tired of being the Team's mission leader, but the responsibility and skill came so easily to him that no one was willing to relieve him of the position. Who could possibly measure up to Kaldur?

And yet, he was set to retire and join the ranks of the League alongside Aquaman in just a few short months. And Barbara knew that she and Nightwing were the two most likely candidates to take his place. The thought left her feeling a little nervous, but also a little giddy. Mission leader was in charge of data and schematics and strategies. Those had always been her forte, and she couldn't help but wonder just what more she could do to the Watchtower's software.

The four of them entered the mission room. Jason glanced a bit longingly at the back wall, where a few of the shyer Team members were standing. Steph did too. But Batgirl and Nightwing steered them up towards the front to stand shoulder to shoulder with Aqualad.

The Atlantean sent them a comforting nod, then turned to the assembled heroes just as the last few were filing in.

"I am grateful that you could all make it here today," Kaldur said, "Because we have a few things to discuss before I give out the mission briefings."

There were a few audible sighs, and a flood of whispered conversations; no one really liked it when the briefings went on too long. Impatient metas. Batgirl caught Tigress's eye in the audience and shared a small smile.

Supergirl was the first to speak up.

"Who are they?"

All talk ceased, and every eye in the room turned to the four bat kids standing in the front. Barbara
felt the familiar tightening sensation in her stomach. She hated being the center of attention. But instead of shrinking back, she stepped forward.

"As most of you already know, the previous Robin...well, he's no longer with us."

"You mean he quit," Beast Boy said, crossing his arms tight across his chest.

Batgirl nodded, and more talking ensued as the metas all began to notice the gold and black R on Stephanie's chest.

"Right. So, we've decided to reassign the Robin mantle." She laid a hand on Stephanie's shoulder. Steph attempted a thin smile. Her face was drained of all color.

"Yeah?" Lagoon Boy thundered. "And you made this decision all by yourselves? What makes you think you can just replace Robin with some little kid? Who gives you the authority to just—"

Barbara and Dick took a swift step forward, shoulders forward in a confrontational posture. Everyone in the room flinched at the sight of two piercing Bat glares. Dick opened his mouth.

"Actually, L'gann, Batman was the one to make this decision."

Lagoon Boy shrunk backwards a little.

"And even if he didn't," Barbara said sharply, pounding as much venom into each word as she could, "I think that Nightwing and I have plenty of authority on our own, don't you?"

She made narrowed eye contact with each and every individual in the room. This was critical. Batgirl and Nightwing had to throw their own weight around, in order to make sure that the Team and the Titans were all aware of one crucial thing: Stephanie Brown—yes, a non-meta girl—was the new Robin. If they had a problem with that, or if they gave her any trouble, then they would have to deal with the elder bat kids. In a room full of metas, you had to erase all trace of weakness. Stephanie had not yet learned this, but she would.

Maybe they were being jerks—she could never really be sure where the line between control and outright rudeness was—but anyone in this room who really knew the Batclan could understand where they were coming from.

"Welcome to the Team, Robin," Tigress said, smiling. Barbara nodded gratefully towards Artemis.

Nightwing cleared his throat and smiled a little to diffuse the tension in the room. "I expect that you'll all treat Robin with the respect she deserves. She's given a lot to this Team already."

Kid Flash streaked into the room, holding a protein bar in one hand and a slushie in the other.

"Hey guys," he said around a mouthful of food, "What'd I miss?"

Tigress brought a palm up to her face and sighed. Bart glanced at Robin and said, "Ooh, Spoilers." A grin twitched at the corner of his mouth, probably as he realized that he'd made a joke. Then, his eyes moved to the Red Hood. The slushie fell to the floor with a splash. Barbara shook the bright red sludge off her boot with a grimace.

In the blink of an eye, he rushed over to Jason and shook his hand violently.

"Oh. My. Goodness," he said, eyes wide behind his mask. "I am such a big fan. You wouldn't know me, I'm Kid Flash, Bart Allen, grandson of Barry Allen—"
Jason looked up at Batgirl. "Uh…"

Bart grinned. "It's a long story, man. You were gone for a while and you missed a ton of stuff. This is so crash! The history books are unclear on the why, but you came back and I just wanted to say that I'm a big fan and—"

"Whoa, hermano," a voice said from behind Kid Flash. Blue beetle had to physically remove Bart's hand from Jason's. He himself turned and smiled at Jason, who stiffened like an iron pole.

"Sorry about that, man," Jaime said, "He gets a little…" he shot a stern glance at Bart, "overexcited. I'm—"

"Blue Beetle," Jason said. His tone dropped below the freezing point. "I know."

Jaime took a step back. "Right. Okay, then…"

Kid Flash bounced back. "Dude! Will you sign my chest? Or arm? Or—"

Nightwing cleared his throat and crossed his arms. The Kevlar of his suit cracked as it rubbed together. Bart gulped, then smiled, backing away slowly.

"This is the Red Hood," Barbara said. Aqualad started, but said nothing. He obviously remembered the information that had scrolled across the screen in this very room about the young man standing beside him.

"He will be joining us for missions today. Be nice, he has guns." She smiled, and Dick let out a chuckle, but no one else laughed. "And anyway, I hope you'll all welcome him in as your new teammate," she added. There were a few audible complaints. Two newbies in one day? And non-metas at that? She understood their frustration, but she wouldn't accept it.

"Thank you," Kaldur said, trying to restore a little bit of order to the noisy room. "We will now divide the Team and the Titans into six groups. Alpha squad…"

Barbara turned to look at Stephanie and Jason. Jason's shoulders were thrown back in a show of dominance. Steph's had slumped forward, as if to protect herself. Or maybe just shrink.

"It's okay, you two," she assured them quietly, while Kaldur assigned beta squad. "Robin's going with Nightwing, Hood's going with me. We already talked it over with Aqualad."

"Gamma squad will include Nightwing, Supergirl, Kid Flash, and Robin. You will be infiltrating Lex Luthor's compound to search for data and research. Lex Corp has been busy developing a new weapon, and the League and Team need to know what it is. Nightwing is squad leader.

"Delta squad will include Batgirl, Tigress, Blue Beetle and Red Hood. Your mission is to gain intelligence on a new threat in the Asian sector. Much of our surveillance equipment has been damaged, and, last night, ex-secretary Tseng of the United Nations was assassinated in his sleep."

A hush fell over the room as an image of Tseng filled the screen. They were all aware of the man's identity. He'd been extremely tolerant of the League's exploits. At least until the Reach invasion. Batgirl remembered the mission she and Wonder Girl had undertaken to save Tseng from alien abduction, and felt a pang of loss. The poor man. She hoped it had been quick.

Aqualad quickly assigned the other two squads, and everyone convened in groups around the room to make transportation arrangements, whether they would go by bioship, zeta tube or boom tube. Artemis and Jaime walked easily over towards the bat kids. Nightwing pecked Batgirl quickly on
the lips before escorting Stephanie over to a waiting Bart and Kara.

Artemis wrapped her arms around Barbara's shoulders and let out a slow sigh.

"It's been too long," she said. "I called. But I know you were busy, and also..." her eyes drifted over to Hood.

Barbara felt a pang of remorse.

"Artemis, I'm really sorry. I tried to get in touch sooner."

The unspoken words between them seemed to fill the air.

_Wally. Where were you when Wally...?_

She smiled and shrugged, but Barbara didn't miss the brief flare of pain in her eyes. "Well, you know. Life happens."

Artemis started to turn away, but Barbara lurched forwards and wrapped her arms around her friend's shoulders. The archer stiffened at first, but then relaxed.

"Artemis," she whispered, "I am so, so sorry."

She nodded and pulled away, her eyes darting to the other members of Delta. Barbara tried to shrug off the hurt at Artemis's cold response, and turned to address the other three.

"Alright. Alpha's taking the imperial palace. They're trying to determine Tseng's cause of death, and who the perpetrator might be. We'll be working in the city, trying to find other clues."

They turned to the zeta tube, and Batgirl punched in the codes.

Dick kept his eyes on Robin. His Gammas were busy casing the offices. Bart was off searching for guards, and Kara was using her x-ray vision to try and locate the weapon. Meanwhile, he and Steph were on hacking duty.

Dick would usually be ticked off at Kaldur for assigning him to Gamma. After all, it was widely believed that Gamma always got the 'soft gigs'. Even Delta was rumored to get more exciting assignments. But this time, Dick was somewhat relieved. The first mission was always a little bit nerve-wracking. He remembered his first mission with Batman. It had been a bank robbery with the Penguin. The villain had been so ridiculous that Dick had been tempted to laugh the whole time that they were fighting him. And yet, Cobblepot was just 'off' enough that fighting him had been a very off-putting experience. For the next few nights, he'd had nightmares about penguins and icebergs.

So, it was good for Steph to get her feet wet with a simple reconnaissance mission. Even if it was casing _another_ Lexcorp facility. Must be Tuesday.
"Here," he muttered, holding up his holoscreen so that she could see. "If you enter this code, it'll let you into LexCorp's inventory files."

Steph nodded, and bit her lip. Her face was illuminated by her own screen, and she quickly tapped in the digits. The screen lit up, and so did her expression.

"I'm in," she gruffed in a low tone.

"Huh?"

She shrugged, smiling a little. "It's my hacker voice. 'I'm in'. Haven't you seen those memes?"

Dick turned back to his screen. "Um…no. Not much time for surfing the internet."

She sagged a little. "Oh. Right."

He almost winced. Yikes. Was he becoming Bruce?

"Ain't nobody got time for that!" he muttered under his breath. (It was the only meme he did know.) She giggled, and he was forgiven.

Dick managed a smile. He was liking the new Robin more and more. Steph reminded him a lot of himself when he'd worn the uniform.

"So, Stephanie," he said quietly. "Bats can be a tough teacher sometimes. If you ever need anything, just come talk to me."

She looked up, surprised. "Really?"

He typed in a few lines of code. "Sure. I mean, the boss man's really into brute force training. But that doesn't really strike me as being your style. Now, me, I like to incorporate gymnastics and acrobatics. You seem like you'd do better with speed over brute strength."

She nodded, copying his code into her own computer. "Thanks, Dick. I appreciate that."

He grinned.

"Tigress. Status report."

Tigress landed on the edge of the building next to Batgirl with a slight thump. "Nothing. There's plenty of gang members and thugs lurking about, but you get that with any city. I don't see any sign of an assassin."

Batgirl sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. They'd been searching for hours. Jaime and Artemis had hit up a few local bars and markets hoping to find some clue as to who may have murdered Tseng. Barbara and Jason had been busy analyzing the case Aqualad had uploaded to their wrist computers. They'd gone over every angle, and had even paid a visit to the hotel room
where Tseng had met his untimely demise. Together, they employed all of the techniques their mentor had taught them, scrutinizing the blood spatter on the walls, glancing over the overturned tables and chairs, and searching the scene for any sign of an exit or entry point. The case said that the assassin had left the door locked. You couldn't lock a door in that particular hotel from the outside, and the windows were unbroken. You couldn't even open them anyways.

"I'm thinking they got in through the vents," Jason called from across the roof. He was inspecting one of the protruding ventilation pipes. Batgirl nodded distractedly as Blue Beetle landed next to Artemis.

"The Scarab isn't picking up on anything. There's been no mention of any assassination, but…"

Barbara's hand came down from her face. "But?"

Jaime hesitated, darting a glance at Artemis. "Well, see…the people aren't saying anything, but they're, like, so obviously not saying anything, that it's a little weird."

Artemis's eyes widened slightly. "Yeah. I noticed that too. A little strange that one of the most notable guys in this whole city bites it, and no one wants to talk about it."

Batgirl turned to Hood, who appeared at her shoulder with a few powerful strides.

"Shall we snag ourselves a talker?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

Hood's head moved slightly. It was difficult to tell with the mask, but Barbara was certain he was smirking. With a curt nod, he turned, and leapt off the building. Artemis and Jaime lurched forwards a little, before recovering.

"Do all you Gothamites jump off skyscrapers?" Blue Beetle muttered. Batgirl smirked. She pulled up her wrist computer to track Jason's movement through the alleyways and streets.

"Oh yeah. One could say it's a city-wide pass time."

Artemis smirked knowingly, before her expression folded into something a little more wary.

"You two are…friendly."

Batgirl tapped her screen. "Oh, yeah?"

Jaime shuffled on his feet. "Yeah. Not to gossip or anything, Batgirl, but I think Tigress and I would like a little heads-up. You know. Just in case Nightwing finds out and blows up the Watchtower."

She paused, her finger hovering over Jason's flickering red dot.

"Wait…you think we're…that he and I…?"

Artemis nodded sullenly.

Jaime's face was solemn.

Batgirl tipped her head back and let out a cackle of laughter.

"Oh my gosh, no!" she gasped. "In fact, I've been meaning to tell you—"

"BG," Jason said, appearing behind her. He held a wiry man by the scruff of his neck. A bruise
was forming at the corner of one of the civilian's eyes. The other two jumped, but Batgirl was plenty used to people popping up behind her.

She turned to the man, and switched fluidly into Mandarin.

"Do you know anything about Tseng?"

The man's eyes widened. "Please! I know nothing!"

Her eyes narrowed. She'd noticed a slight twitch in the man's face when he spoke.

"I do not believe you," she said, her voice low. She leaned in closer, and rifled in her belt. She pulled a short rod about the size of her index finger from one of the pouches. With the press of a button, the tip began spinning, emitting a high-pitched whine. "But my friend and I have ways of making people talk."

Jaime and Artemis watched in fascination and horror as Jason tipped the man's head back, and forced his arms behind him. The man squeaked in fear as Batgirl held the instrument up to his jaw.

"You will tell us the truth, now. Yes?"

With eyes as wide as the full moon shining over their heads, the man nodded, and began to speak rapidly. Batgirl was relieved that Batman had drilled her and the others on their Mandarin so many times.

"It's the most prevalently spoken language in the world," he'd said, "Of course you need to know it. Now, Dick, wake up. Jason, put that finger away, or so help me... Barbara, Tim, show the other two how it's done."

She noticed that Jason stayed quiet during the man's account. He probably barely understood any of it.

"And after that, I saw a girl come out into the street. A little girl, younger than you—" He swallowed hard, then continued. "Only she was all covered in blood."

Batgirl exchanged a look with Hood, and nodded. "Many thanks. We hope you have a good evening, sir."

At that, Jason pinched a nerve on the man's neck, and he fell limp. Artemis and Jaime were gaping as Batgirl relayed what the man had said.

"We'll have Aqualad look into that," she said once she'd finished. Then, with a slight nudge of her foot, she made sure that the man was unconscious, and turned to Jason.

He sighed, and nodded his permission.

"We've been meaning to tell you," she said to the others. Her voice came out hesitant. "When Tim went missing last year, well...Red Hood was responsible for that."

Artemis's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"It's true," Jason said slowly. "I was trying to get Batman's attention. Batgirl and Nightwing got caught in the crosshairs too."

"What? Why were you trying to 'get their attention'?" Jaime asked.
Jason tensed, like he always did whenever Jaime spoke, but instead of retorting, he reached up, and pulled off the helmet.

His face was still covered by a domino mask underneath, but they still recognized him; Artemis gasped, a hand going over her mouth, and Jaime blanched.

"That's-that's…Jason?" Blue Beetle stuttered.

Artemis flew forward and wrapped her arms around the tall vigilante. She said his name with a note of amazement, and Jason, wide eyed, hugged her back.

"Jason." Jaime staggered backward. "Oh…hermano. I didn't mean to leave. My scarab, it…I'm sorry."

Jason glared over at him, but his gaze softened slightly. "It's okay. I was stupid enough to go in there alone. Besides. I hear BG punched you out at my funeral?"

Batgirl squeaked. "How did you know about that?"

"Dick told me."

"Tattletale," she grumbled, smiling.

"So," Jason continued, "I guess we're even."

"That's right, guys," Batgirl said. She thrust out her arms. "Now everybody bring it in."
"No. *Impossible.*"

Dick and Jason gaped at the screen in horrified disbelief. The blood-spattered scene showed devastation and carnage beyond their wildest nightmares. Dick reached out tentatively and pressed a finger against the smooth surface as Jason put his face in his hands. A sound of defeat groaned out of him.

Steph cackled with glee and threw herself back into the couch. Her controller was raised in her pumping fist. The boys whimpered.

"That," she crowed, "Will be two Alexander Hamiltons, you guys. Pay up. Again!"

As the boys rifled in their pockets for the cash, Steph snatched up the already thick stack next to her and fanned the bills in front of her face. She inhaled, and ignored the boys' glowers.

"So what next? *Kill Order 7* again, or would you rather lose at Mario Kart next? Maybe that’s a little more your speed."

Barbara swept into the room, clutching at a bag of pretzels. Her smirk was wide as she popped one into her mouth. "Have mercy, Steph. I think you broke them."

As if in agreement, Dick squeaked. Babs leaned against the backrest and planted a kiss on his temple. He took the opportunity to sneak a few snacks from her bag, nibbling sullenly. From his spot on the floor, Jason tipped his head back and opened his mouth like a baby bird, chomping down as Babs tossed a pretzel his way.

"Honestly, boys," she said, "Steph's creamed every single one of the Titans. What did you expect?"

Jason huffed, and heaved himself onto the couch. He threw his arm around Steph's shoulder to reach the bag of pretzels. Stephanie's face reddened. "Dunno. Figured since I can always whoop Grayson's #$% at video games, that this'd be a piece of cake."

"Hey!" Dick protested.

"Ah, it's true, man."

Barbara quirked an eyebrow. "Well, since Steph's all done collecting her lunch money, I think it's time the two of us headed out on patrol."

Steph leapt up. "You got it, Boss-lady! I'll go get changed."

She raced off, but not before snatching the bills away from her brothers' wandering fingers.

"Hmm." Babs crinkled the bag between her hands. "Boss-lady. I like the sound of that."

Jason's head lolled. "We don't have to call you that, right?"

She flicked his forehead, grinning.

Barbara had taken over Steph's training completely. After she'd walked in on a training session
between her and Bruce, the decision to do so had been swift and easy. Bruce had had Robin on the
high-bar doing pull-ups until her arms were shaking and sweat was beading on her forehead. As
soon as Steph had fallen to the ground, her mentor had commanded her to her feet, and launched
into a long lecture on discipline and control (and how she had none of it). He wasn't any less rough
than he'd been with Dick or Jason, or Tim, or even Barbara. Usually, his gruffness made them all
train harder, and get better just out of spite. But the look on Steph's face immediately told Barbara
that this approach would get them nowhere.

So, after a brief shouting match with Bruce, Barbara took the reins, and watched Steph respond to a
gentler method. Of course, there was still drill-sergeant-esque shouting. But Babs never said the
words 'not good enough' or 'now again, but actually try'.

"So, what are your plans for tonight?" She asked the boys. Dick tipped his head back, smiling up at
her.

"Waiting for you to get home."

Jason coughed into his fist. It sounded a lot like 'loser'. Dick thumped his shoulder with a scowl.
"Actually, I'm helping Kaldur with a few leads. Don't even have to leave the cave, though."

"Poker with Roy," Jason said. "Maybe I can earn back everything I lost to Blond Wonder."

"Eh, we'll see. Bruce still out with Clark?" Babs picked at the couch's fabric.

Jason snorted. "Yeah. Let's see how long they can go without killing each other this week."

"It's only bowling. What could go wrong?"

Dick stuck up a finger. "Exactly. That's a question that answers itself."

Three sets of ears perked as the front door opened and shut quietly. Too quietly. Jason opened his
mouth to call for Alfred, but Dick clapped a hand over it just as quick. When no butler appeared in
the entrance to the den, all three batkids stood slowly, their years of training kicking into high gear.

Bruce would come in through the grandfather clock. Alfred would always announce his presence,
usually with a bag of groceries or an umbrella in hand. Steph was down in the cave.

Babs signed quickly to the boys.

Jason, approach from the left. I'll take the right. Dick, take above.

They nodded. Jason crouched and ducked into the kitchen. Dick headed toward the stairs, climbing
the railing as easily as a monkey. Babs reached into her pocket and pulled out a batarang, one of
her concussives. Slowly, she inched her way through the hall and towards the entryway.

Out of her range of sight, someone knocked over the coat rack. As it clattered across the floor, the
intruder cursed softly. Babs gripped the batarang tightly; definitely not Alfred, then.

The invader's silhouette approached, and Barbara snapped her fingers sharply. The figure froze,
almost as if in recognition, and the three batkids attacked. Jason wielded a baseball bat, and
whacked mercilessly at the intruder. Dick fell from the ceiling, sending the stranger to the floor
with a shout. Babs forced their hands behind their back, handed them off to Dick, then stood. Her
batarang raised, she reached out and flipped the light switch.

Jason's bat was wedged underneath the intruder's chin. Dick had forced him to stand, arms still
clinched behind his back. All three of them gaped.


"Timmy?" Babs shoved the batarang back into her pocket and rushed forward, wrapping her arms around her little brother. Dick laughed, and crushed them both in his embrace. Jason cleared his throat and nudged Tim's forehead with the bat until he grunted in protest.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

The third Robin gagged, and patted Bab's shoulder quickly. She and Dick let go, stepping back.

"Figured I'd stop in, say hi. Forgot I come from a family of paranoids. Where's Bruce?"

At the same time, Dick said "Bowling" and Jason said, incredulously, "Say 'hi'?"

They shared a glance, then Jason plowed on. "Say 'hi'. Right. You go off the grid for six weeks, and don't bother to tell us where you are, make Babs cry—"

"I didn't cry."

Dick ducked his head. "You did, a little."

"—and just snark off, you little $#%^@#. Bruce yelled at us for hours, man. He took it out on us, and you think 'hi' is just gonna fix that?"

Tim shuffled his feet. "Guys. I'm sorry."

"Oh, you're sorry—"

"Jason!" Babs smacked the taller boy's chest with the back of her hand, glowering. He grumbled, but said nothing more.

"He has a point, Tim," Dick said.

"I was in a bad place. I'm not saying I was right. I just—" Tim closed his eyes, and let out a heavy sigh. "I wanted to come home."

Barbara crossed her arms over her chest. "Come home? I thought your dad left you his place?"

"Yeah, but it's not really...you know. Home." He threw out his hands. "Look, guys. I'm trying to apologize here. Help me out a little?"

The three elder Batkids shared a glance. In silence, they came to an agreement.

"Okay, kiddo," Jason said. "We'll forgive you. But only if you have the stones to stick around long enough to see Bruce."

Barbara winced, thinking that she may have to break out the ear protection for this one.

"Of course. That's part of why I'm here."

"What do you mean?"

"Robin." Tim shrugged. "I'm ready to go back to—"

"Guys!"
Steph danced into the room, fully costumed sans mask, and all eyes swiveled to the Girl Wonder. She froze in the doorway, eyebrows raised and mouth open slightly as she stared at Tim. Tim gaped right back, then swallowed hard and said,

"So."

Silence ensued. Steph looked ready to either cry or scream, and the older boys inched backwards, seemingly preparing for either one. Tim's face was turning impressive different shades of red. Barbara glanced around at everyone, then clapped her hands. The sharp sound made everyone jump.

"Okay, Steph. Good change time, but let's try to shave off a few minutes in the future, yeah?"

Stephanie gaped at her in open disbelief. Could she seriously be avoiding the obvious elephant in the room? Were they really still going out on patrol?

The answer of course, was yes.

"I'll go suit up. Meet me by the batmobile in three."

Her eyes widened. "We're taking the Batmobile?"

"You're taking the Batmobile?" Tim demanded, almost shouting. "Are you serious? If Bruce—"

"Oh please." Babs waved a hand and took off down the hall. "Like we haven't all gone joyriding before." Then, glancing over her shoulder, "I'm serious, Steph. Three minutes. Grab your gear."

"So am I ever gonna get to drive? Like, seriously, this thing is so sweet! Does it have a radio? Probably only death metal, right? That seems about Boss-man's speed. How about this button here? What does this do? But seriously. When do I get to drive?"

Batgirl drummed her fingers on the wheel as they sped towards the city. The tunnel's dark walls streaked past them, the shadows jumping and twisting away from the bright headlights. Robin chattered away, and every now and then, Batgirl had to snatch her fingers away from the more...exciting buttons. Like the drill bit, or the ejection. There had been a few close calls, like when Steph had almost pressed the 'Shockity-Shock' button (Jason named it), a function that would electrify the outside of the Batmobile just enough to stun anyone trying to hang on. Hold it for too long, though, and it would completely drain the battery. Then there was the missile launcher. That one had been fun; Barbara had almost swerved into the tunnel wall.

Not a scratch. Every one of them had taken the batmobile out for a spin at least once. (Or twice, or thrice…) Sometimes, she and Dick would take it out and go to a drive-through restaurant for some contraband French fries and a few laughs. Jason liked to take it for a spin in the fields outside city limits, doing donuts and—he claimed, but no one really believed him—wheelies. None of them knew what Tim did the one time he took it, but since no explosions or catastrophes made the news that night, no one asked. They all had their different adventures, but there were two rules that they
followed religiously.

‘Don't Tell Bruce’, and ‘Not A Scratch’.

Robin's finger wandered towards the camo mode button. (Or, Sneakity-Sneak, if you went by Jason's jargon.) Batgirl sighed, smiling, and said, "Steph. No more touching, 'kay? Most of the stuff in here can kill you if you use it wrong."

Steph's eyes widened a little as she glanced over the hundreds of buttons and screens. "Oh."

Barbara thought that would be the end of it, but Robin plowed on. "So when you say 'kill'…do you mean like dead kill, like kill you dead, or do you mean 'kill' as in what Bats would do to us if he found out that we stole the car? I tell you, the man is scary. But I guess that's what he's going for, right? The whole scary vibe? It works. No wonder the criminals are so freaking terrified of him. I mean, if I were a bad guy, and I saw him coming—"

Barbara licked her lips and shifted in her seat a little. She was beginning to understand Bruce's aversion to Stephanie. She didn't agree, of course. In all honesty, Steph's chatter was nice. Babs liked the girl a lot; she had spunk, bravery…everything she'd need to be a great crimefighter. That is, with a little discipline and direction. That might take a while, but in the meantime, Babs was just glad to have a little sister to mentor.

Besides, she wasn't any more ‘chatty' than any of the other Robins had been when they'd first started out. Jason and Tim would talk your ear off unless Batman shot them one of his trademark glowers.

Maybe, Babs mused, Bruce didn't like Steph much because she didn't shut up when he glared at her.

"Okay, Robin. Let's tune into the police scanner, alright?"

Steph nodded, shutting her mouth. Babs reached down and turned the knob.

"—this is Officer Klein requesting backup on Thirty-Fifth and Ninth. Code Kiss. I repeat, Code —"

"Serious?" Batgirl pumped a fist. "Yes! Perfect!"

The city gleamed on the horizon like a jeweled crown. They were speeding through the warehouses and small complexes that made up the outskirts and suburbs. Robin glanced at Batgirl in open confusion.

"Uh, why? What's Code Kiss, and why is it perfect?"

Batgirl grinned, and flicked the police scanner off. "It's perfect, because this'll be your first Rogue."

Robin gripped her armrests. "What? Rogues?"

"Yep. Code Kiss means…"

She steered the batmobile towards Thirty-Fifth and Ninth, where vines and roots were beginning to take over the concrete and asphalt. Ahead of them, the subway station was covered in greenery, with a gargantuan red flower bursting from the shattered roof.

"Poison Ivy."
They found Poison Ivy in the heart of the subway station. Vines and leaves were growing over railings, screens, countertops, escalators, and literally every other surface. Ivy had even grown a gigantic red flower to match the one on the roof just beneath the large clock that hung over the main room. Far above that, they could see the stalk that wound up towards street level—the one they'd seen coming in.

Ivy herself lounged on the petals of the flower, stroking the center, and letting pollen trickle from her pale fingers. Nearby, a group of security guards and civilians struggled to free themselves from twisting vines as the villainess looked on with amusement.

Batgirl led Robin to a spot behind a giant leaf. There was limited space up high, even without all the thorny vines, so they'd opted for a hiding place on the ground. Robin, Batgirl was pleased to note, barely made a sound as they crept to the spot. She even knew how to keep her cape from snapping behind her, and how to pick up her feet to minimize noise.

*Good work,* Batgirl signed.

Robin turned her palms up. *What?*

Of course. Steph's non-verbal communication needed some work, still. Babs resisted a sigh, and smiled, opting for a thumbs up.

*Oh! I get it now! Sorry.*

They both turned to watch Ivy. Batgirl was watching for a few different things; line of sight, source of the plants' growth (the red flower, in this case) and any tell-tale signs of a plan. What was Ivy doing in a subway station near the outskirts of Gotham? She hoped Steph was watching for these things, too.

Suddenly, Ivy flicked her wrist. One of the vines holding a guard rose and rushed toward the red flower, before screeching to a halt just inches away from Ivy's face.

"Hello there, handsome," she crooned. The villainess batted her eyes, pursed her lips, and leaned in close. The guard flinched. He leaned away, eyes squeezed shut. Just when her lips were almost on his, Ivy reared back and let out a laugh that filled the room, and made Batgirl's skin crawl. "Oh," she moaned sensually, "That never, ever gets old! Now tell me, little man. Do you enjoy your job?" She reached out and gripped the man's jaw. A vine snaked over her arm, up her hand, around her fingers until it barely brushed the man's skin. "Don't you just love your pathetic little surface-dwelling life?"

She swept an arm out, gesturing to the crowd of people and vines around them. "Don't you all just adore living?" Ivy raised her eyebrows, emerald lips pursed, as if waiting for an answer. When no one called out, she continued. "Well, my babies love the sun, too. They sure love living. But you people never seem to give plants the time of day. You cut them up, rip them out, and trample them underfoot."

Ivy breathed deeply, a green blush rising to her cheeks. "Well, what if I were to tell you that you're the beginning of a brave new world? See, I'm going to take all you people—all you surface-
hogging filth—and then I'm going to spill your blood. My baby here…" She gave the flower an affectionate caress. "She needs to eat. And after she does, she'll release a special little toxin that will kill every oxygen-inhaling creature in this city!

"And you, Mr. Security Guard. Tough guy. You get to be the appetizer."

Ivy grinned and waved her hand, ignoring the screams of her captives. The vine growing there stiffened, elongating until it formed a two-foot spike. She reared back, ready to impale the man.

_Time for a little intervention._ Batgirl signed quickly.

_What?

Without another gesture, Barbara strode out from behind the leaf's cover, Steph following hesitantly behind. She clapped her hands together slowly, filling the room with the dry sound. Ivy froze, her gaze swiveling to the caped girls marching towards her. The captives cried out as they passed, and Batgirl hated to just ignore them, but she needed Ivy focused solely on her and Robin.

"What is this?" Ivy demanded.

"This is an intervention, Ivy," Batgirl said, raising her voice to project across the room. "You've officially gone bat-crap crazy. And I should know."

Poison Ivy's eyes narrowed, then fell on Stephanie. A coy little smile played at the corner of her painted mouth. "Well, Robin! You've changed since we last met! I'm loving the hair."

Steph held her ground. She tipped her chin up and planted her hands on both hips. "I wish I could say the same, but I literally just saw a box of that color in the cheap little drug store on Fifth Avenue the other day."

"Pfft. Seriously?" The corner of Batgirl's mouth quirked.

Ivy's green blush spread up and around her ears as she clapped a hand to her wild red mane. "How did you—?"

"Wait, for real?" Batgirl gaped. "What was it called? I gotta know."

Robin's smirk was evident as she replied, "Flamin' Hot Firetruck."

Ivy seemed ready to explode when Babs clapped a hand over her mouth to hold a gasp of laughter in. She thrust her hand forward, and the spike shot towards the Batkids like a speeding bullet. A quick cartwheel got Steph out of the way, while Babs just ducked.

"Go for the flower, Robin! It's the source!" Batgirl shouted.

"Got it!"

Ivy waved her hands, and a dozen humanoid plant creatures (Was there any other way to describe them?) sprouted from the vines and dropped into formation. "I don't think so, baby girls. I don't think so at all!" The creatures lunged.

And just like that, they fell into their typical patrol rhythm. Batgirl set them up, and Robin knocked them down. When Babs barked an order, Steph was quick to comply.

"Robin! Watch your six!"
Steph swung around, narrowly missing the creature's spike, and planted a few quick jabs to the thing's chest and abdomen. It fell backwards with a shriek, and burst into pollen when it hit the tiled floor.

"Nice one!" Batgirl jammed a batarang into a creature's eye socket and winced when the thing burst, covering her in dust. "Hhandspring!"

Steph launched herself up, flipping through the air easily, dodging a few spikes while she was at it. Then, she jumped into the air, kicking out both legs, and pollen-ized two creatures at once. It was a good thing the girl had taken so many lessons in gymnastics; Babs barely lifted a finger on flips and agility during training.

"Left hook!"

"I want to see that balance! Show me your balance, Robin!"

"On your right!"

It was slightly distracting, yelling out commands. Keeping an eye on what Steph was doing all while trying not to get herself impaled. But Robin was responding beautifully. Even Ivy was beginning to look a little intimidated. But only just a little.

"That's it!" She shouted, rising to her feet. "I've had about enough!"

She clenched her fist, and the monsters froze, exploding into little dust columns. Batgirl sneezed.

Ivy had left one creature standing, however. It stalked over to the captive civilians and guards. Batgirl and Robin rushed forward, but vines wound over their arms and legs, and held them firmly in place. A few of the people screamed as the monster extended its thorny spike.

"Ivy, let them go!" Batgirl shouted. "You have us, now! You don't need them!"

Robin watched the creature in silence, her face pale, her eyes wide.

Poison Ivy stepped down from the flower, and marched forward until she stood face to face with Barbara. "Mmm, you Bats are always so self-sacrificing, aren't you? It's adorable. Sweet, even." Her smile turned venomous. "But, see, here's the thing, sweetheart. You're absolutely right. I do have the both of you right where I want you. And these little weeds…” She waved a hand absently towards the captives. "Well, you're right about that too. I don't need them anymore."

The plant creature stood still, awaiting an order from Poison Ivy.

"So let them walk away," Batgirl said, trying to keep her voice level. "Robin and I will stay here."

"I'm sure you will. But don't think I don't see your tricky little fingers reaching for that distress button, darling."

Batgirl froze, her index finger inches away from her belt buckle. Ivy's fist tightened, and Babs felt her arms yanked roughly behind her back. Her shoulders screeched in protest. The villainess gripped Batgirl's jaw in her fingers, and forcefully turned her face from left to right.

Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "Well, Robin, what do you think? Would you like to watch me gut your gal-pal right here?" She fastened her cool honey-colored eyes on Barbara. "Or Batgirl. What do you think? Should I have some fun with the little bird?"
Ivy must have seen the terror in Robin’s eyes, and the fierce flash of anger in Batgirl's, because she tipped back her head and laughed. It seemed she had made her choice when she tightened her grip on Babs’ s chin.

"Don't worry, darling. It'll only hurt a bit."

Realization hit Barbara like a speeding train. Batgirl looked at Stephanie, who was doing her best to break out of the vines. "Rosebud. Tell Batman—"

She didn't get the chance to finish. Ivy leaned forward, and planted her lips on Barbara's.

Batgirl's vision flashed emerald green, and her mind slid into static.
When Dick had offered to help Kaldur with tech support, he'd been planning on enjoying the silence and solitude of the Batcave. Working in the Watchtower was fine—usually—especially if everyone was out on missions or assignments. But no matter how deserted, the place was always loud. And Dick's head was about to split open. Babs had been teasing him lately about his lack of head protection, and though he hated to admit it, she was definitely right. It had only taken falling off a four-story building into a parked car (with a minor concussion on the side) to start seeing things her way.

So, why not opt for the Cave? A little alone time, some peace and quiet?

Dick hadn't even thought to take his little brothers into account.

"Come on, Golden Boy. Just float me a few bucks to pay Roy back."

Dick slammed the spacebar and squinted at the screen. "No, Little Wing."

His head was pounding like a drumline. Alfred had disappeared on a pain killer run, and Dick was definitely not looking forward to the pills. He was pretty sure that Jason would have a video camera handy this time around.

"Come on!" Jason shouted again. His hand thumped the back of Dick's chair. "Just fifty. I can get the rest."

Tim snorted from his perch on the balcony above them. He sat with his legs dangling over the edge, one arm slung over the lower rung of the railing. "Cool it, Jason. He's not going to fund your gambling addiction." Tim's fingers waved as he flipped a bizarang lazily into the air, then caught it. Over and over.

Jason frowned. "I don't have an addiction, Replacement. I can stop any old time I want."

"You can stop calling me that." Tim glowered, and sat up straighter. "But, by the way, can we talk about how Bruce let my girlfriend into my suit?"

"Sounds kinda kinky when you say it that way," Jason said, grinning. Tim's face reddened.

Dick sighed, and checked the settings on the Watchtowers sensors. "Jason. That's just wrong. And Tim, it was actually Steph's idea." He pointed a finger at the Red Hood without looking. "And for the record, I'd suggest you stop making bets you can't win."

Jason growled. Tim snatched the bizarang out of the air and scowled. "I don't care. Do none of you people realize that she's going to get herself killed? She has no idea what it takes to be a Robin."

"Oh, so now it's 'you people'? You little—"

The Watchtower sensors were up to date. Dick was seriously considering an escape to Bruce's panic room. Just grab a laptop, his wrist computer, and some noise cancelling headphones, and barricade himself inside. Heck. Maybe he should go up to the roof.
Dick pressed his fists against his ears and leaned against the desk. Still, he could hear snatches of shouting over the roar of blood in his head.

"Didn't anybody think to ask me if I wanted her to—"

"—weren't exactly around, were you? If you were—"

"—you hypocrite! I can't believe—"

"Oh, I'm the hypocrite, now? No one exactly asked me if I wanted someone to—"

"You were %#$&% dead!"

"You're %&^% dead!"

Dick's eyes snapped open, and he whirled around just in time to see the two former Robins launch themselves at each other, snarling like alley cats. Jason got a right hook in, and Tim's head snapped back. The latter kicked out and Jason staggered backward.

"Hey!" Dick leapt up and surged forwards. With one arm, he hauled Jason off of Tim, and he used the other to grab the youngest by the hair to stop him from lunging. "Hey!"

He released his hold on them, dumping both boys onto the ground. "Do you two need to talk to Alfred? Cause I can make that happen."

The looks on both their faces reminded Dick of a pair of ornery toddlers just after throwing a fit, but that shut them up. Jason's arms crossed tightly over his chest.

"Look," Dick sighed. "I need…five minutes. Five minutes of silence to get this work done, okay? If you two can't even manage that, then I'm telling Alfred. Or Babs. I don't even know who's scarier at this point."

"Alfred," Tim mumbled. At the same time, Jason muttered, "Babs."

"Okay." Dick sighed, and spread his arms. "Okay. Good. You two, just don't talk to each other. I'm going to go work, and then, when everyone gets home, we'll all have a nice happy talk about bets and Robins as a happy happy family."

Jason raised an eyebrow. "You okay, man?"

Dick groaned and staggered back to the Batcomputer. He'd just landed in his seat, when the cave's hangar doors lit up. As they screeched open, Dick's teeth ground together. Honestly? Bruce and Clark had to pick now to—

Bruce.

Bruce was home.

Three pairs of eyes shot to the empty place where the Batmobile was usually parked.

Bruce was home. And the girls were not.

Tim gasped. Jason swore. Dick closed his eyes.

Babs, he thought, What the heck is taking you so long?
As patrols went, this definitely wasn't the best. Steph gaped at Poison Ivy as she pulled away from Babs, a satisfied smirk twisting at her lips. Batgirl's face registered shock, then slackened. Her eyes glowed over, and she stared into space, a blank slate waiting for instructions. Steph let out a small squeak.

"There," Ivy crooned. "I think you'll be a little more cooperative now, won't you, sweetheart?" She ran a finger under Batgirl's chin. The vines holding her unfurled, dropping her onto her feet.

"Yes," Barbara answered, in an eerie monotone.

Okay. Okay. What the heck did she do now? Steph forced herself to think.

Babs would tell her to focus. Observe surroundings, the scenario, and then come up with a way to manipulate both. Also, check the belt. When all was said and done, at least she had a utility belt full of crap to fall back on.

She reached down and slipped two fingers into the belt's back left pocket, probing around for something useful…

"I'll tell you what we're going to do, little bird."

Steph froze as Ivy's attention turned towards her.

"I'm going to take these lovely people with me…" She waved a hand towards the cowering crowd. "And leave you here to wait out the carnage above. It's going to be such fun! But I don't want to waste a perfectly good show."


"Show?" Steph's voice came out more clear and calm than she could have hoped for. The vines tightened around her torso and neck until she could see yellow dots swimming in the corners of her vision.

Ivy tipped her chin up and sneered. "Oh, yes. In my new kingdom, we won't have much use for bats and little birdies like you. So, I'll tell you what I'm going to do." She snapped her fingers. Babs stiffened, and stepped over to Ivy's side. "I'll have this one help me cut down the other bats like weeds—" She smirked. "No pun intended. That's your specialty, right? But when the city is mine, and Batman and Company are all fertilizer, I'll have Bat-lite here kill you nice and slow. Trust me, that will be a show!"

Steph caught a tremor cross Babs's vacant expression, but it was brief.

"And the best part?" Ivy cupped Batgirl's chin in her palm. "She's awake in there. If you listen carefully, you might even hear the internal screaming." Ivy's free hand fluttered up to her ear, as if she was straining to hear something. Then, she tipped her head back and laughed.

"Lady," Steph choked, "You need serious help."
Anger flashed on Ivy's face like a lightning strike; there, then gone just as quickly. The villainess swaggered through the room, and Batgirl trailed after her obediently. Steph gritted her teeth as vines wrapped around the civilians and lifted them screaming into the air.

"No," Ivy muttered. "This city needs help. And I intend to do just that."

Poison Ivy climbed the dark steps that led to the surface with all the confidence of a conquering queen, her procession of prisoners and plant-people following close behind.

Just as the lights flickered out, Steph's fingers closed around an ice pellet.

"Dang it. Dang it!" Dick raced towards the doors, dodging around the many hulking black aircraft stored in the cave's hangar. His brothers chased after him, arms pumping, feet pounding.

"Man, what do we do?" Jason threw his hands out.

Tim's face was whiter than a sheet. "He's going to kill us. He's going to kill us all, then stomp on our graves, then—"

Dick screeched to a halt and took cover behind the curved fuselage of the BatWing. "He's not going to kill us, because we're going to play this smart."

"Smart?"

"How?"

"One of two ways." Dick watched Clark swoop in through the bay doors carrying Bruce princess-style. Neither was in uniform; one couldn't go bowling in uniform, after all. Bruce was scowling, clearly miffed by the indignity of their entrance. "Jason. Can we break your arm?"

"What??"

"Shhh!"

Jason's mouth hung open, his face a mask of outrage. "Uh, no. How about we don't do that?"

"I can't tell if he's serious or not," Tim muttered.

Dick's other idea involved explosions, so he kept his mouth shut. How to distract Bruce? The main part of the cave, where they usually kept the Batmobile, was out of view. As long as you stuck close to the hangar doors, at least. But Batman was famously hard to fool. So how would they—

Wait. They had one ace up their sleeve.

"Alright. I've got it." Dick lowered his voice, and turned to his brothers. "Follow my lead."

"We're not breaking my arm, you—"
"Shh!"

Slowly, he stood, and crept around the front of the BatWing. After a deep breath, he pasted on a huge grin and bounded towards the two men standing awkwardly by the hangar doors.

"Clark! Hey!" Both of the adults looked up sharply. "Bruce! So glad you're home!"

He wrapped Bruce in a bear hug, and ignored his mentor's wheezes and protests. Dick hadn't really greeted his mentor this way since he'd started as Robin. And since he wasn't exactly a nine-year-old anymore, both of them staggered sharply to the side, and almost went down in a heap. "It's so good to have you back!"

Clark was doing his very best to hold back a laugh. Bruce grimaced as he peeled Dick off and raised one eyebrow. "How much did Alfred give you this time?"

Dick fought the urge to scowl.

Jason stepped out next, hands jammed into his jacket pockets. "Hey. How was bowling?"

"Well," Bruce patted Dick on the shoulder with one hand, and dusted himself off with the other. "Not many people can say that they've been banned from their eighth venue in a row."

He shot a glance at Clark, who raised his hands defensively. "Hey. The movie theater was an accident. I paid for that!"

"No. I paid for that. You paid for the hot dog vendor's hat."

"I'm on a reporter's salary. What can I say? Besides, Diana thought that was pretty funny."

Bruce sighed. "Anyways. The owner of the bowling alley invited us both to never set foot on his premises ever again."

"That's funny," Dick said. "Usually, it's just Clark that gets 'invited to never come back'."

Clark was incredulous. "Hey kid, whose side are you on?"

Jason grinned. "We're on the side of the man who feeds us, Supes. But thanks for asking."

Bruce's chin tipped up sharply, his eyes scanning the room. His bat-senses going haywire, more likely than not. "What's going on? You're up to something."

"Up to something?" Jason put a hand on his chest. "Well, I never—"

He shut up when Dick planted a sharp elbow in his side. Which, of course, only proved Bruce's point. He took a step towards the hangar's entryway, but Dick sidestepped to stand in front of him.

"Actually, B-man, there is something we've been meaning to tell you…"

"What?"

Okay. Showtime. Dick shouted over his shoulder.

"You can come out now!"

All four of them watched a very sheepish Tim clamber out from behind the safety of the BatWing, and start towards them warily. Bruce stiffened, his eyes wide. Tim froze, one foot an inch from the
ground. The silence was so complete, that Dick could hear a slight ringing in his ears.

Finally, Tim licked his lips and said, "Um...hi?"

Bruce stared down his former Robin. Then, Dick must have blinked, because suddenly, Tim was wrapped up in Bruce's arms. Only his wide eyes were visible over their mentor's shoulder.

Dick heard the familiar screech of tires in the other room. He glanced quickly at Bruce, who was still squeezing Tim to death, then at Jason, who visibly relaxed and gave him a quick thumbs up.

The girls were home, thank goodness.

"B-Bruce." Tim's voice was muffled. "I can't breathe."

Batman stepped back and watched the boy carefully, as if he were worried that Tim was going to disappear again. Clark, at Dick's side, crossed his arms over his chest and let out a low whistle.

"Tim," Bruce said. "Don't run off like that again, do you hear me?"

Hesitantly, Tim nodded. "No, sir. I won't."

Bruce nodded, and whirled around. The moment was over. He glanced at his two older boys.

"Where's Barbara? I need to ask her about the contingency data."

"Contingency data?" Clark demanded.

"Don't worry," Dick said. "It's not for you." He turned to Bruce. "She got that to you weeks ago, or didn't you remember? Just before Steph?"

Bruce shook his head, and took one step towards the entryway. "Yes. She did, but we discovered a key flaw in several of the plans. I needed her to update them for me."

"I wouldn't worry about that too much tonight," Clark said. "Go be with your family, Bruce. I'll head out, and tell Diana that we shouldn't be counting on bowling again for next week."

Bruce sighed heavily. "Carry on, then."

Clark shot each of the brothers a grin, then saluted. With a puff of air, he was gone.

"Alright." Bruce strode past the BatWing and into the main room of the cave. The boys followed hesitantly. Dick could have sworn that he heard the Batmobile get back. For a brief moment, he wondered what state the car was in. A missing Batmobile? He, Jason and Tim could cover for that, at least for a little while. But if it was totaled? That was a different story.

But sure enough, when they stepped into the room, the Batmobile was parked right in its place. It was parked a little crooked, but they should be able to keep Bruce's attention off that little detail easily enough. Dick glanced around, looking for the girls.

There. Steph was perched at the Batcomputer, typing furiously away at the keyboard. When Bruce cleared his throat, she let out a slight squeak, and closed out of one of the many open windows so quickly that Dick didn't get to see what it was. The chair spun around, and Steph stared wide-eyed at them.

"Hey! You're home early!" She tried at a smile.

"How was patrol?" Tim asked. Dick didn't miss the bitter undertone, but Steph ignored it completely.
"Patrol? Fine. It was fine. Really good, actually. In fact, I'm just wrapping up a few things right now. If you don't mind, I'll just be on here for a few more minutes, and then I'll let you take over, and yeah. So, how was bowling, Boss-man?" Her arms were crossed tightly over her chest, like she was giving herself a hug.

"Breathe, Stephanie," Bruce said. "Where's Barbara?"

Steph's face drained of all color. She swallowed hard. "She's…in the shower."

"The shower? Rough night, then?"

"…Yes."

Bruce cocked his head slightly. His partners all shared a worried glance. Dick's eyes bored into Steph's as he silently demanded to know where Barbara was. Then, Bruce cleared his throat, and everyone snapped to attention.

"You know, I can hear the pipes going in the cave. I always know when someone leaves the water running upstairs." Bruce's voice was dangerously calm. He glanced around the room, looking each of them in the eye. "And another thing, all of you. I wasn't born yesterday. Something's wrong with this picture, and I'd like Stephanie to tell me right now, before I figure it out for myself."

He stared intently at Steph, waiting. She sat frozen.

"Don't you have anything to say?" Bruce asked. "Usually, you always have something to say."

"Bruce," Dick said. But the Batman ignored him. His attention was all for Stephanie, who opted to stay silent.

Their mentor seemed to reach a decision. "Very well. Move aside."

He pushed the chair—Steph included—out of the way, and arched over the keyboard, typing furiously. The window that Stephanie had so hastily closed out of popped up on the big screen for all of them to see.

It was a news cast. A reporter's voice frantically narrated the scene that played out. Plants exploded from every window in downtown Gotham. Terrified citizens raced away from humanoid plant creatures brandishing huge barbed spikes and dodged giant snapping Venus fly traps. A flame-red flower exploded from City Center Square, two figures standing in its center.

One was Poison Ivy, her arms stretched into the air, fingers waving. Her laugh was almost audible. The other was Batgirl.

"She's not…" Jason leaned forward. "Wait. She's not punching Ivy in the face."

"Ivy's toxin." Bruce's voice was low, his expression hard as iron. Steph shrunk back a little.

"That shouldn't be possible," Dick said, "She's inoculated. We all are."

The hand that Bruce had rested on the desk curled into a fist. "Barbara and I had a suspicion that Ivy had concocted a new formula. All of the villains in this city are changing up their arsenals, switching up their strategies. Scarecrow has new toxin, Joker has new gases. Riddler has switched from bank robbery to credit card fraud and extortion. Even the mob is reorganizing. Everything is changing. That's the flaw in the contingency plans." His jaw clenched. "Stephanie."
Steph started. She'd been staring at the screen blankly. "Huh?"

"Did Barbara say anything to you? Before Ivy administered the poison?"

Steph considered for a moment. "Say anything? She—wait. Yeah. She said…'rosebud'?"

Bruce swore. The boys all slumped. Dick clenched and unclenched his fists.

_No, he thought. Anything but that, Babs._

"What?" Steph demanded. "What does that even mean?"

Tim cleared his throat, and Steph looked up at him, at first shocked. Then her face twisted into something like anger. "Rosebud," he said, "Is a code word."

"Duh. Got that."

Tim reddened. "I mean, it's code for…" He slid into silence, sending an uncomfortable glance Dick's way.

Dick drew in a breath, and watched the screen. "It means—essentially—'do whatever needs to be done'."

Silence. Steph looked around at all of them. "That's it? That's not so bad. We just have to go stop Ivy, and—"

"No, Robin," Jason said softly. He took a step away from Dick and fixed his sad gaze on the new story. "That's not what she means by 'whatever needs to be done'."

"Then, what? What does she mean?"

The reporter let out a squeal as a plant-creature shoved her to the side. The humanoid turned towards the camera and snarled, raising a leafy fist. The camera man let out a scream, and the feed fuzzed into static.

It was Bruce who finally spoke. He pulled up his cowl, and turned towards the Batmobile. Both clear signals to the rest of them that it was time to suit up and head out.

"Batgirl means for us to take Ivy down. There might not be a cure for the toxin."

Steph blanched. "You mean—"

"Yes. Barbara doesn't want us to waste time saving her. I don't think she anticipates making it out of this mess alive."
The Boss-man was definitely mad at her. Steph's first clue?

"Robin, suit up."

"But, I…am?"

Bruce had scowled at her. "No. I mean Robin."

Ouch. Even the older Bat Bros had winced. Tim scurried off to go get ready, and once everyone was uniform-clad and battle-ready, they'd all crammed into the Batmobile. Batman and Nightwing up front, Red Hood, Robin, and Steph crowded into the back. The boys had both called window seats, so she was crushed into the middle. Very not-comfy. Every time the car made a turn, she was mashed against Tim, who grunted and did his best to scooch as far away from her as possible. Other times, she lurched against Jason. She didn't mind those times quite as much.

Steph could almost feel the arctic cold emanating from the driver's seat. Dick kept glancing over his shoulder at her, shooting her sympathetic glances. The poor guy was probably worried sick about his girlfriend, but he was actually trying to make her feel better. Steph would have burst into tears if she hadn't been sitting next to Tim Drake.

She cleared her throat. "Look, guys—"

Batman's gruff voice cut her short. "Stephanie, I realize that you love hearing the sound of your own voice, but now is not the time."

Brrrr.

Nightwing turned to his mentor, and shot him a withering glance. "Bruce. Now's not the time for that, either. What is it, Robin?"

She blinked. "Um…I know what you guys said about Batgirl, but…we're not really just gonna leave her that way, right?"

Dick shook his head. "Never. Not in a million years."

Red Hood shifted next to her. "Look, Blondie. This family's pretty messed up, but one thing we can all agree on is that we don't leave a man—or woman—behind."

Tim made a sound of agreement, and all of them glanced over at Bruce. The Batman cleared his throat and said, voice low, "No. We'll use whatever means necessary, just like she said."

Four protégés cried out in protest, but Bruce put up a hand, keeping the other on the wheel. "But. We'll also do whatever we have to in order to bring her back. Because that's what we do."

Steph stared at the blue lights blinking on the control hub, and itched at her mask. Barbara's hypnosis—or whatever it was—wasn't her fault. She'd done everything right, followed all the rules, all the instructions. But she could have distracted Ivy, or reached for her belt sooner. If Batgirl didn't make it out of this…

No. Her mentor—her sister—would be fine. She had to be.
Nightwing cleared his throat, and said, clearly trying to lighten the mood, "Well, anyone up for the alphabet game?"

"Axium Motors," Steph mumbled, watching a sign whiz by.

"Look. A Batman." Jason deadpanned as he jabbed a finger at Bruce.

Tim groaned loudly.

The Batmobile screeched to a halt in the middle of stalled traffic on Main Street. If Steph hadn't been a Gothamite born and raised (and if she didn't have any basic common sense whatever) she might have mistaken the entire street for a jungle. Pavement and asphalt had been ripped up in patches all over the ground, giving way to ginormous trees and vines that grew upwards, wrapping in coils around the behemoth skyscrapers around them. At the center of it all was that big, stupid red flower. Ivy and Babs were perched on top, staring down at the family as they clambered out of the Batmobile.

"Batman!" Ivy sang. "I was starting to worry you wouldn't show!"

Bruce didn't dignify that with a response, and instead stood firm. Steph's eyes fastened on his hand, which was twitching subtly at his side, silently signaling his protégés to get into position. Red Hood, Robin, and Steph: attack from the side and rear. Nightwing—Bruce tapped his thumb against the rest of his fingers in the universal sign for 'gabbing'.

Which, of course, was a specialty of his.

"Tell you what, Ivy," Dick called out. "We're feeling pretty generous today. How about you let Batgirl and the civilians go, take down your garden, and be on your merry way? We'll pretend this never happened."

Ivy's eyes narrowed. "Oh, I don't think so, Boy Wonder. I'm having too much fun—"

Her hand whipped out, and vines sprang at them from all directions. Steph wasn't about to repeat the whole subway station fiasco; this time she was ready. She dropped like a rock, narrowly missing the spine that had rushed at her skull. She tucked herself into a somersault, and popped up next to Tim.

"Watch yourself," he said coldly.

"Back at you, Robin," she retorted.

Together, they leapt and dodged, moving together in some strange sort of dance. Steph wasn't sure who was leading, but to be honest, it was probably the plants. They sneaked around the back of the flower after leaving a crumbled green mess in their wake.

"This way," Tim muttered, and she reluctantly followed his lead.
Ivy and Babs were both turned away from them, standing inches away. Steph settled herself stomach-down on one of the giant red petals. Tim crouched next to her. Slowly, they reached for their belts. Both of them had snagged some pesticide pellets from the cave's arsenal. They should be enough to slow Ivy down, and take out this monstrosity that was powering her whole scheme.

Tim and Stephpalmed their pellets, and raised their hands, ready to throw. Batgirl's head cocked slightly, and she whirled around lightning fast. A batarang struck Tim's hand so hard that he cried out. Then, before Steph had the chance to blink, Barbara's armored glove crashed into her cheekbone.

"Gyah!" she gasped. But Batgirl didn't even miss a beat. In the time it took to tie a shoelace, she and Tim were both on their backs, gasping. Ivy grinned widely and waved a hand. Vines wrapped them up and lifted them into the air. From this vantage point, Steph could see Red Hood on the ground battling a horde of plant-monster-men. Nightwing and Batman were busy trying to keep a gigantic Venus Fly Trap from eating a cornered group of civilians.

"Well." Ivy placed her hands on her hips. "I think I might have to keep this one around!"

Batgirl didn't respond, just stared at Tim and Steph blankly. Her eyes, Steph noticed now, were bloodshot and dilated. Tim must have noticed it, too.

"You're killing her," he snarled. "Her body can't handle the toxin!"

The villainess smirked. "Don't worry, bird boy. She will die. I can tell you that much. It took me forever to mix up a batch strong enough to overpower whatever vaccines you Bats have ever come up with. Sadly," She ran a hand over Batgirl's shoulder. "I made it just a little too strong. But after all—good things were never meant to last."

The vines coiled around them contracted. Steph gasped as she felt her ribs creak.

"Don't worry, though, Robin-twins. You won't be around to see it."

Her fingers twisted in front of her, and the vines dangled them over the very center of the flower, where a gaping black hole opened up. Steph remembered vaguely Ivy's plan to feed people to the flower, which would then release a poisonous gas to blanket the city.

Seriously. Where the heck did Ivy get these things?

She turned to Tim. "Well, Robin, it was nice knowing you, I guess. Even if you did cheat on me for a freaking Amazonian."

"We're not doing this now," he muttered. His face was red again; he was blushing a lot lately, wasn't he?

Poor thing. Steph's heart was bleeding.

Ivy quirked an eyebrow, and shot her what almost seemed like a sympathetic glance. "Trouble in paradise, you two?"

"No. " They both snapped.

Tim let out a sigh. "Fine. Never mind. I'm sorry, Spoiler. I should have been more honest with you both."

Batgirl twitched.
"Well, lessons learned, I guess."

"This is so incredibly sweet," Ivy crooned. "Sadly, it's time to say goodbye. With your deaths, I'll usher in a new age in Gotham. After that, the entire world will be regained! Say 'goodbye' to your friends, Batgirl."

Steph kept her eyes fastened on the black void beneath her. In all honesty, this wasn't how she ever expected to go out. Maybe on her deathbed, surrounded by loved ones with flowers and well-wishes? Or maybe something more awesome, like a skydiving accident.

Going out in a blaze of glory, and all that.

A flower, though. Steph was about to die by freaking flower.

"Actually, they're more like siblings."

Ivy stiffened, like she'd been electrocuted. Her eyes rolled up into her head, and she slumped forward, falling flat on her face. A simmering yellow stain spread across the villainess's back. Definitely the work of a trademarked Bat-family Pesticide pellet.

Batgirl cracked her neck and sighed, blinking hard. "And I don't really like being told what to do."

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After a victory like that, everyone was glad it was a Wednesday. Wednesday was Waffle night.

Babs stretched her back as soon as she tumbled out of the Batmobile. Her siblings hovered nearby, ready and waiting. She wasn't sure what they were ready for, exactly. Probably to catch her if she toppled over—and she definitely felt like doing that right now. Or maybe to take her down if the recovery from Ivy's toxin proved to be only temporary.

"Good work tonight," Bruce said, sweeping ahead of them. "Alfred's going to need help with dinner, so I expect you all to pitch in."

"Dibs on slicing strawberries," Barbara moaned. "I need to murder a few plants just about now."

"I call Ice cream." Dick and Jason both volunteered at once. They paused, shot sideways glances at each other through narrowed eyes, and took off. They clambered into the elevator.

"Move it, Golden Boy!"

"I called it! You can't—"

The doors dinged shut. Tim let out a sigh, and took off his mask. "Well. Looks like I'm manning the iron. Again."

He waited by the elevator. Babs was about to follow alone, but then she glanced back and saw the look Bruce was giving Stephanie. Something in the middle of disappointment and intent-to-murder. So, her hand shot out and grasped Steph's.
"C'mon, Robin. You can help Alfred with the whipped cream. Or maybe the syrup, if he decides to go homemade, tonight."

Steph was uncharacteristically quiet. "Okay."

They squeezed into the elevator with Tim, and right before the doors shut, Babs caught the full brunt of Batman's narrowed eyes.

Dinner was never done halfway in the Wayne house.

Lunch was optional. Maybe just a snagged apple or granola bar. Breakfast was a quick thing, since most of them had school or day jobs to dash off to. But dinner, even though it was rare that they all got to sit down and have a full meal together...well. Dinner was special.

Alfred was hard at work, between mixing up his famous waffles, and prying Jason and Dick off the coveted container of vanilla ice cream. When Barbara, Tim and Steph all stepped in, Steph narrowly dodged a spoon tossed across the room. Tim caught it deftly and flicked it back onto the countertop.

"Boys," Babs warned. Dick put down the fork he'd been holding like a spear. Jason took the chance and beaned him in the forehead with a measuring cup. "Jaybird."

Narrowed eyes, lowered tone. Jason backed off.

Alfred beamed at them. "Miss Barbara! I'm pleased to see you back to your old self. Now, if you could all come and help me with supper, we should be finished in a matter of minutes."

Babs pulled a knife from the block in the corner, and set to work on the plastic box of strawberries. The blade slid easily into and out of the fruit, leaving pink juice all over her fingers. She whacked off the stems without a shred of mercy, and diced the rest into sweet little chunks.

Alfred was helping Stephanie add the cream and sugar into a bowl to make the whipped cream. Tim stared absently at the waffle iron, waiting for the little light to blink on. Jason was back and forth, gathering plates and cups from the cupboards, and jabbing Tim with his finger every time he passed.

Dick looked up from the stack of forks and knives he'd been counting out. "You look like you're enjoying that a little too much."

"I don't have a lot of love for fruit, right now," she said, resting her head on his shoulder. It was a little hard to keep slicing in that position, but she managed. Dick chuckled.

"I'll bet. Aren't they entitled to a fair trial first, though? Or is it just 'off with their heads'?"

She twirled the knife in her fingers. "Viva la Vengeance!"

He bent his head towards hers, and she knew he wanted a kiss. She pulled away a little.
"Not quite yet, Wingnut. We don't know if the toxin's still on my lips." She knocked aside a leafy stem, and gripped her weapon with white knuckles. "We don't need you lumbering around like a zombie."

The forks and knives clinked together as he set them down on the counter. With his free hand, he reached out and gently took the knife away. "Are you sure you're okay? How did you snap out of it?"

Tim snarled and whacked Jason with his spatula. The Red Hood let out a very dignified squeak and slipped into the dining room with his stack of plates. Dick shook his head, then looked at her, waiting for an answer.

"I'm fine," she said, "I'm just kicking myself for letting her get the drop on me and Robin. I was this close to my pesticide capsule when she attacked. If I'd been faster—" Her eyes squeezed shut, and she shuddered a little. "Dick, please tell me. How many people did I hurt?"

There was a pause. The whir of Steph's electric beater and Alfred's gentle encouragements were the only noise in the room. Dick sighed and squeezed her gently. "Heh. You mean besides Tim and Steph? They're going to have a few bruises, but we've all had worse."

"Dick."

He set the knife down on the cutting board next to the pile of strawberry heads. "You didn't hurt anyone. Not really. Everything, the civilian injuries, the property damage…that was all Ivy. You just stood next to her and looked pretty for the camera. I think that's all she wanted, to display you to the populace."

Barbara sighed. "I guess that's better. But I feel so…ugh. Violated. I'm supposed to be inoculated against this kind of thing."

"I'm sure we'll figure out her new batch, and how to cure it."

Her fingers curled back around the knife handle, and she sliced off another strawberry stem. "It's not long-lasting. I can tell you that, at least. I think—" Barbara sucked in a breath through her teeth, but only because she'd nicked her finger. She placed the stinging cut against her lips, and sighed. "I think the dose she gave me was supposed to overload my nervous system or send me into anaphylactic shock. Kind of like an allergy."

Dick raised his eyebrows. "You got all that, huh?"

"It felt like that, at least," she said, "But it didn't work. Maybe she didn't dose me enough, maybe my metabolism worked through it. I don't know."

"Well, let's have some waffles." Dick pulled away and grinned. "Bruce can work on analyzing that toxin for us. And we should get you to bed." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "Fun stuff. Should be exciting."

"Fun, huh?" She raised an eyebrow. "I don't know… I kinda want to analyze that toxin…"

"Oh, no, BG. I really think you ought to get some rest. You can analyze plenty from—" The joking tone disappeared, and he gathered up the eating utensils. "Sorry. Maybe I'm coming across a little too Wal—um, sorry. I was just worried about you, Babs."

"You know what?" She rested a hand on his arm. "I think that does sound like fun. Let's just wait for everyone to—"
"Guys!" Jason groaned, and whacked Dick upside the head as he sauntered past. "We all have ears, you know."

"Waffles are ready!" Tim said quickly. "Let's eat!"

The Batkids tumbled into the dining room, leading the way for Alfred, who held the tray of waffles out like a trophy. Five sets of chair legs scraped across the floor as they all sat down. The waffles themselves gleamed golden in the light of the antique chandelier dangling overhead. The sweet scent hit their noses, and five sets of mouths started watering.

The tension in the room was palpable as Alfred made his rounds, shoveling waffles onto plates. Barbara followed close behind, and spooned strawberries out to the hungry hordes.

"Now," she said when she'd finished. "What do we say, guys?"

"Thank you Alfred!"

"You're the best, Alfie!"

"OhmygossthesearesogoodthankyouAlfred!"

"Waffles."

Babs shot Jason a look. He swallowed his waffles down and smiled. "Uh, I mean, thanks Alf. These are the best!"

Barbara nodded, satisfied, and leaned over to give the old butler a quick side-hug. "Thanks, Alfred."

"You're all quite welcome. Now, enjoy."

The words had barely left his mouth before everyone dug in. The ice cream and whipped cream and syrup (not the homemade kind, but nobody cared) were shuffled around the table greedily, and thankfully, no fights broke out this time. The only sounds that came from the family were those of clinking utensils and moans of pleasure. Dinner was special, because dinner was the biggest meal of them all.

Under the table, Dick wrapped his foot around Barbara's ankle. She smiled through a mouthful of food and knocked his shoulder.

"Mmm!" she said.

"Mmm?"

"This. This is the best food I've ever had." Steph held up her fork and knife in each hand, and looked up to the ceiling. "I hereby pledge myself to waffles from this moment until forever. Nice knowin' you all."

"Waffles," Jason agreed, mouth full.

Tim seemed to be in a waffle-induced stupor. But he was okay—there was a huge grin on his face.

Alfred, in contrast, sat at the head of the table, cutting his waffles daintily with his fork and knife, rather than shredding and ripping. He dabbed at a drip of syrup on his chin with his napkin and smiled.
"I'm quite sure that you lot have the worst manners I've ever seen," he said. "But I'm glad to see that you all have such healthy appetites."

Barbara swallowed. "I beg your pardon, sir. My manners are excellent."

"Zoh are my!" Dick protested, his mouth overflowing.

"Gross, Grayson." She smiled.

Bruce stepped into the room, and glanced around the table. "Ah. Waffle night. I'll never get tired of it."

Dick kicked out the chair across from him, closest to Alfred. It screeched a little on the wood floor. "Saved you a seat, boss-man. Come. Partake."

Bruce eyed the scene and raised an eyebrow. "Maybe later," he said. "Stephanie."

Steph looked up sharply. Her third waffle was only halfway finished. "Mmm, yeah?"

"Cave. Now."

His tone was enough to make everyone freeze. Forks hovered inches above plates, cups were held firmly against lips. It was the Angry-Tone. Bruce's Angry-Tone was never loud, never mean. But it was firm, and colder than an Antarctic breeze. It was the kind of tone that said 'I'm not mad. I'm just disappointed. And that's worse.'

Steph blanched, and pushed out her chair. She was halfway up on her feet when Barbara stood. Her chair squealed.

All eyes turned on her. Bruce was giving her the death-stare. Crap.

"Cool." She tossed her napkin onto her empty plate. "Let's go. Get this over with."

"Just Stephanie."

Silence. Tim and Jason gaped. Dick was silently pleading with her to back off, but she ignored the warning.

"Um, no. I don't think so."

Bruce reeled, blinking hard. "Excuse me?"

Babs was drifting into Defcon-Three territory, now. But there was no backing down. She knew exactly what this little talk was going to be about, and there was no way in heck she was going to bail on Steph.

So, she stepped over to Steph's place, grasped the girl's elbow, and pulled her towards the hall. "Well, B-man? What are you waiting for?"

Bruce's face was turning a pretty impressive shade of red. He stepped into the hall, following them. "Fine. Have it your way."
"There's no shame in it," Bruce said. "You did well, but—"

"But it wasn't enough," Steph said quietly. "I—" She blinked hard, and wiped the back of her hand over her cheeks.

"It takes a lot in this line of work. Some people can keep up. But some people can't, and that's okay."

Barbara's nails were digging into the skin of her arms. She seethed, but said nothing.

Steph sat slouched on the Batcomputer's chair. Her shoulders were hunched up, arms crossed tightly over her stomach, like she was going to be sick. Her gaze was fixed on her feet. Bruce stood next to Barbara, everything in his posture warning her to stay silent. She was allowed to be here, but not to contribute. Babs decided not to press her luck.

"I understand," Steph said. Her voice was just barely louder than a whisper.

"Good." Bruce's crossed arms loosened a little. "I'll expect your costume back, all the equipment, the line, the birdarangs. Everything, please."

"Okay."

"I will know if anything is missing. I'll also need your wrist computer back."

"Okay."

Barbara's jaw clenched.

"And Stephanie?"

"Yes?"

"I don't want to see Spoiler out there, either."

Steph's chin snapped up. "What?"

"Bruce!" Barbara protested, but her mentor waved his hand, and she fell silent.

"No more costumes, no more masks. You're done, Stephanie. I mean that."

Steph was silent, eyes glistening. A tear slipped down her cheek, and Barbara almost snapped.

"I understand," was all she said.

Bruce nodded, and glanced up at the Batcomputer's screen. "Good. That will be all."

Stephanie swallowed hard and nodded. She got to her feet shakily, and shuffled toward the elevator. "I'll, um...I'll go get my stuff."

Barbara watched her go. As soon as the elevator doors had clicked shut, she whirled on Bruce.

"How dare you?" she snarled.
"I did her a favor. She—"

"No. No, you didn't. She's got no family—"

"Her mother—"

"—works two jobs. She's never home, and she's an addict, Bruce!"

The Batman didn't waver. "Stephanie doesn't know what she's doing. She's going to get herself killed."

Barbara dug in her heels. "She doesn't know? Then show her!"

"I've tried. But then she took the Batmobile—"

"That was my idea!"

"She almost got you killed!"

"No, she didn't. I was too slow. She did everything perfectly, you should have seen her—"

"No. You don't understand any of—"

"Excuse me?" Barbara huffed. "You're the one who's supposed to have been mentoring her, and instead you stuck that on me. You can't just—"

"She's my responsibility. If I feel that she's not up to—"

"No!" Barbara was almost laughing. "Oh, no. No. She's never been your responsibility, because you didn't take the responsibility to train her, help her, or anything! That was all me. So if anything, she's my protégé. Not yours."

Bruce's eyes narrowed. "You would do well to remember whose protégé you are."

Barbara rolled her eyes and took a step back. "You can't stop her from being Spoiler. Spoiler isn't under your jurisdiction."

"Gotham City is my jurisdiction."

"Bruce, you can't just—"

"Enough!" The Batman shouted loud enough to send every bat in the cave screeching away. The sound of their beating wings made Barbara blink in surprise. And then, her mentor was a bare few inches away from her. She could feel his angry breaths hit her in the face. He reached out and grasped the front of her shirt in his fist.

"This is none of your concern," he said. His voice had returned to its Angry-Tone, and Babs almost shivered. "I don't want to hear one more word about it."

Barbara met his gaze, unwavering. Inside, though, she was shaking a little. The Batman could intimidate every single member of the Justice League, and every member of the Team and the Teen Titans. Bottom line? Batman scared everyone. Sometimes, he even scared his partners.

Her voice came out soft, gentle. But she'd learned how to keep the iron in her voice. The man lifting her to her tiptoes had taught her that much. "Bruce," she said, "Don't touch me."
Like he'd touched a hot stove, he pulled back his hand. Her heels tapped against the floor.

"Fine," she said. "Fine. But you have to know that this isn't going to end well."

"Everything will be fine."

Barbara turned her back on her mentor. The elevator doors stood open and inviting. She started towards them, then stopped, and threw over her shoulder, "You just keep telling yourself that, Batman. Whatever helps you sleep well tonight."

How could this have happened? Steph balled up her costume and tossed it into the Batmobile. Let that grumpy old man find it later. Let him put it away!

She'd tried so hard. So hard.

Sure, she'd never be able to match Tim, but at least she'd been somewhat decent! Steph had done all the exercises, all the training, everything she needed to do to prepare. She'd put down muggers, hacked into suspicious servers, put her own father in jail—

*Oh, just shut up, brat.*

Steph froze. That familiar tingle of fear crept down her spine, and she half expected to turn around and see Arthur Brown standing right behind her. In her mind's eye, she could. That stupid old rock t-shirt he always wore, when he wasn't in his Cluemaster costume. The bags under his eyes, greasy blond hair, breath that smelled like a week's worth of booze. Steph could almost smell it.

*So they're kicking you out now? Good. Bet they're glad to be rid of you.*

"Stop it," she whispered, then winced. Saying anything like that to Arthur Brown's face usually earned you a backhand.

*What's that, girl? You sassing me?*

Cluemaster was in jail. Steph helped to put him there. She forced herself to remember the look of shock on his face when she'd slapped handcuffs on his wrists, and whipped off her mask.

"You—" he'd gasped.

"Me," she'd shot back. "Have fun in the slammer, Dad."

Good times. The first time Steph had been able to breathe easily in years.

*Just think, baby doll. What am I going to do to you when I get out? You won't have your big tough Bats to help you anymore, will you? And now you won't even be Spoiler.*

*Breathe, Steph,* she told herself. She glanced around the cave. Maybe she wouldn't have the others around to watch her back, but she could still kick the Cluemaster's butt. She'd be fine. She'd be—
Maybe I'll go after your mom first...

No. This wasn't happening. She'd given too much, tried too hard, to just back down now.

What she had to do was prove to the others—to Batman—that she could handle herself. She could handle anything. And not only that, but she could do it better.

How? There had to be a way.

And then she saw it. The Batcomputer.

She was sitting in the boss's chair before she had time to think the action through. Her fingers typed in the commands practically on their own, and a few windows popped up, responding to her desires with just a few keystrokes.

Contingency plans.

Babs had been working with the boss on contingency plans. Everything was topsy-turvy in this city now, wasn't it? They'd said so themselves, from what Steph had been able to gather at least. Villains were changing up their poisons, their weapons, their hunting grounds. She wouldn't go so ambitious with a member of the Rogues, though. The misadventure with Poison Ivy had been enough to convince Steph that she wasn't quite ready for that, at least not yet.

But Stephanie Brown had grown up in one of the many bad Gotham City neighborhoods. She knew how the mob worked, how they organized, how they moved. She'd strike there.

Her search result brought up a contingency plan under the file name Matches Malone.

"Matches Malone, huh."

Click.

Her eyes darted over the words. Easy peasy. All she had to do was gather all of the mob bosses under one roof under the guise of a territory negotiation. Then, with one fell swoop, she'd bring in the cops, lock those suckers down, and send them to jail just like she'd sent her dad. Them along with all their lieutenants. With the resulting power vacuum, the Gotham City gangs would scramble, and they'd be twice as sloppy, twice as easy to catch.

It was perfect.

Steph reached out and hit Enter.

She'd show them. She'd show them all.
"I'm diverting you to main street, Batman. Stay sharp. Nightwing, Red Hood, take the West side. We've got a lot of nasties converging in that area." Batgirl pressed the binoculars against her aching eyes. All she could see for miles was flame and darkness. Every now and again, she winced at the piercing howl of screams and sirens on the wind. Her city was in chaos. And all she could do was watch and wring her hands.

Days after she'd gotten free of Poison Ivy's control, three of the city's biggest mob Capos had been shot and killed at a 'peaceful' territory summit. She and Bruce were still scrambling to figure out who had arranged the whole thing, but so far, no dice. After the killings, the city's gangs had all declared open war on each other, and so far, no holds were barred. Barbara had no idea how many civilian casualties they were dealing with. She shuddered to think it, but it may have numbered in the hundreds by now, for all they knew.

The Bat Family and the GCPD were doing all they could to stop the flow of blood, but nothing seemed to be working. The Bats had more medical training than most of the officers, so they went where they were needed. And when they couldn't patch someone up, they left it to the EMT's scrambling madly around the city. Batgirl herself had stitched up a kid with a deep laceration in his throat, and she could still hear the poor boy's screams. She'd served as a medic, a warrior, and a shoulder to cry on. How many people had she tried to comfort after they'd lost a friend or family member?

She'd needed a break from the blood and tears. Now, she was air-traffic control.

"Catwoman, report."

Selina's usually smooth voice trembled over the radio. "I'm on fourth and seventh. The bank's been gutted and destroyed. Everyone inside is...they're gone."

Batgirl swore. "Are you sure? Any wounded?"

"No. The Spades looted the place. No survivors."

Batgirl hadn't slept in over thirty-two hours and counting. She'd watched so much carnage and death, and there seemed to be no ending in sight.

*Focus, Babs,* she told herself. *Don't worry about what's done, just fix what you can. Focus on what you can do.*

Her thoughts raced, disjointed and sporadic. "Alright. Secondary assignment, then. Check on the kids' halfway home. Make sure everyone's alright."

Selina sucked in a breath, making the feed crackle like a candy wrapper. "I—Alright. Okay. I can do that."

"And Selina?" Batgirl pressed a hand to her comm, and lowered her voice. "Have you found her?"
Silence. For a moment, Barbara feared the worst. That she'd hear Catwoman's hoarse voice deliver the final verdict.

"No. I haven't seen her yet."

Barbara swallowed hard and nodded. "Right. Well, no news is good news, I guess. If you could keep at it, Selina, I'd really—"

"No sweat, kiddo. We'll find her, I promise."

"Thanks," she said softly. Somewhere nearby, a smattering of gunfire and screaming made her tense. An alert chimed on her screen; a little red dot pinpointing a position next to the harbor. She put away the wrist computer image of Gotham city, and readied her grappling gun. Everyone was in position, but it looked like Timmy needed her help.

She shot out the line with a soft puff, and let herself freefall off the skyscraper. As the ground rushed up to meet her, she rolled her shoulder, pointed her toes, and stretched her arms out. The more streamlined she was, the faster she moved, and the harder she was to hit. The gang-bangers below cried out in fear or rage or delight, and fired off their shots towards the sky. Thanks to her new suit, and its tough armor plating, their bullets had no effect from that distance. A few pinged off her chest plate, and she swallowed the lump of terror in her throat.

Batgirl landed atop a decrepit warehouse close to the docks. Through a gaping hole in its ceiling, she could make out the scene below: twenty-something thugs surrounding a crouched figure.

Robin was in pretty bad shape, by the looks of it. She watched him press a shaky gloved hand to his side, and cough up a stream of sticky blood. He glanced up at his attackers and let loose a red-stained smile.

"Is that the best you've got?" He croaked. "I've taken harder hits from my girlfriend. Does that make you—ugh."

The lead thug planted his boot in Robin's side. Tim curled up to protect his front, and Batgirl watched his fingers creep to his waist. A button on her own utility belt beeped, and she heard the whoosh of twenty-something guns whipping out. She rolled onto her back before they could glance up, and pulled up her screen. A few taps later, and the lights below flickered out.

"What was that?" someone demanded.

"What's going on?"

"It must be the Bat!"

"No, you idiot. The Gators spotted him heading towards mainstreet—"

The grunts were collaborating? That wasn't good. But that was a problem that would best be solved after Tim was out of harm's way. Barbara curled up and perched on her heels. With a quick inhale and leap of faith, she heaved herself through the hole. She fell through the air, and landed softly on her toes.

"You're close, boys." She whipped out a few batarangs. They glinted in the streetlight filtering in through the roof and windows, making their honed edges seem even sharper. "But I'm much more fun."

A spray of bullets ricocheted off her armor as she lunged, sending off little white sparks whenever
a projectile made contact. Thugs cried out in the dark when a 'rang hit their fingers, hands, arms, or shoulders.

Batgirl fought dirty. Her knees were planted in places that made these grown men squeal. She thrust out and didn't care who she hit and where. Blood spattered across her face, but since her victim yelped—very much alive—she moved on, unconcerned. The time for handling the gangsters and thugs of Gotham City with kid gloves had come and gone. This was war. And Batgirl had no intention of losing.

By the sounds off to her left, she could tell that Robin had climbed to his feet and entered the fray. Between the two of them, the thugs were put down in a matter of minutes.

Barbara turned on the lights with a quick press of a button. She and Tim were both heaving in breaths. Robin was doubled over, palms pressed to his knees. Batgirl's skin was drenched in sweat, and a salty bead rolled down her chin.

"You good, Rob?" she panted. A glance down revealed her blood-slicked gauntlets. She shivered a little.

"Tis…merely a flesh wound." He started towards the door. "I'll be—"

His right knee buckled, and he sprawled over an unconscious thug. Batgirl knelt and slipped one of his arms over her shoulder. Carefully, she helped him up, and set him down against the wall. Her eyes flitted over his suit, checking for the source of the bleeding.

"Shoulder," he supplied, voice rasping.

With one quick motion, Batgirl undid the fasteners over his shoulder, placing the cape and plating to the side. The shoulder was soaked in blood, and at its source was a seeping gash. Most likely a knife wound. "How did this happen?" she muttered.

"Switchblade. Slipped it between the chinks. Ouch."

Oh, how she hated being right. "Sorry." Her fingers sought out a compartment on her belt, and she palmed a curved needle, a little bundle of surgical thread, and a small vial of rubbing alcohol.

"Your knee's busted, Boy Wonder. Even I can see that." She threaded the needle, and popped the top off the vial. "This won't be expert's work, but I have to work fast. It should hold you til we get you to Leslie's."

"Knees just dislocated," Tim slurred. "We just have to…locate it again."

"Mmm-hmm." She tipped the vial over the wound and let a trickle of the fluid gush over Tim's shoulder. He hissed and struggled, but she held him firmly in place.

"Ahh," he gasped, eyes screwed shut. "Son of a—"

"Language," she chided. Gently, she slid the tip of the needle into the flesh of Tim's shoulder. He winced, but thankfully held still this time. She slipped the instrument in and out, pausing every now and then to make sure the stitches were tight. When it was finally finished, she tied off the last one and cut the thread with her teeth. Then, one more time, she soaked the wound in alcohol for good measure. Tim let out a cry.

"Alright." She kept her voice smooth and soft. Robin was beginning to look a little pale. "Don't you go into shock, now, Timmy. Stay with me."
He nodded as she replaced his cape and shoulder plating. "You're a sadist."

"I was cleaning the wound. Wimp." She smiled, then caught herself before she could playfully nudge his shoulder. That probably wouldn't have been wise. "Now, for the knee."

Tim set his jaw, and tipped his head back. "Okay. Go ahead. I can take it."

"Sounds good. On three." She positioned her hands on either side. Tim tensed violently. "One—"

She snapped the knee back into place. Robin let out an inhuman scream.

"You—you—" he gasped. "You said 'three'?"

She stood up and dusted herself off. "You were expecting three. You're welcome, by the way."

Carefully, she helped him up. Thank goodness, he let her, too. Last time she'd tried something like that had been on Jason, and he wouldn't let her anywhere near for a week.

The two batkids shuffled out of the warehouse. Gordon and his men would be by shortly to pick up the unconscious thugs, and then hopefully, he'd lock them all away until this mess had blown over. For now, though, she had a little brother to shuttle off to the medics.

"What happened, exactly?" she asked.

Tim sighed. "I was looking for hideouts and weapon stashes, just like you asked. Turns out, I found a hideout."

Barbara thought that would be it, but Tim coughed and said, "Oh. Yeah. They're Black Mask's men. Said they're...trying to grab one of us to get Batman to stop... 'interfering'."

She glanced up at the distant skyscrapers. Her cycle would show up in a minute or so. With remote control, it was always hard to tell exactly.

"Interfering, huh? Too bad. That's what the old man does best. Besides, grabbing one of us? Easier said than done." Her eyes rolled. "Let me guess. Leverage, with a side of torture? That is Black Mask's specialty. What info could they possibly expect to get out of us?"

"That's what I said." He let out a dry laugh. "But they were talking weird... said they had... I don't know. They made it sound like they already had all the info they needed."

That was a frightening prospect, even more so than the idea of torture. There were so many psychos and sociopaths in Gotham City. Each and every one of them was nightmare-inducing enough. The scary ones often dressed in bright colors and hit the streets with their mayhem and chaos. But scary didn't always wear a clownish grin or a thermal suit. Sometimes, scary looked like a black skull, grinning at you from the shadows.

The Black Mask had a reputation. He wasn't quite crazy enough for the Rogues, though that in and of itself was arguable. And yet, he'd managed to claw his way to the top of one of the most powerful gangs in Gotham. A gang so recognizable, Bruce had told her, that it didn't even need a name. And the man had wrested that power for himself by being one of the best—or worst, depending on which side of the scalpel you happened to be on—torturers in the country.

Catwoman herself had a history with the man, though she'd never elaborated. Barbara suspected it was something too horrible to revisit.
So how, exactly, did Black Mask have 'all the info he needed'? Barbara frowned as her cycle whirred to a stop in front of them. She helped Tim onto the back, then climbed on herself. What information? Unless… Could he possibly have gotten to the person responsible for this gang war? If so, then—

Wait.

Wait.

The pieces began to click into place in Barbara's mind, forming a picture so horrible that she almost fell off her cycle. The gang territory meeting. All the mob capos and lieutenants in one place. If you really thought about it…it looked just like a piece in an elaborate plan. A contingency plan that Barbara herself had helped to design…

Those plans were locked into the Batcomputer. No one had access to them, except—

Batgirl screamed. Tim jerked upright.

Stephanie.

That monster had Stephanie.

Bruce stepped out of the batmobile, letting its hatch click shut behind him. He squinted in the darkness, still seeing the ghosts of flames and squad car lights flashing in his retinas. It had been a long day and an even longer night. With the setting of the sun, every mobster and gang-banger in his city had grown bolder and more reckless. He'd seen so much blood in such a short time…

Barbara was waiting for him next to the Batcomputer, busily typing away. Her cowl had been pulled back, and her auburn hair hung loose, matted with blood and sweat. Her shoulders were tensed. She seemed ready to scream or punch something. It had been a long day for all of them, but for Bruce and Barbara most of all.

"What is it?" he asked. On the drive back, he'd thought of several choice words to say to her. She'd interrupted an interrogation, just when the man had been about to crack, and had vaguely insisted he return to the cave. Fortunately, he couldn't bring himself to speak too harshly; his protégé had been through a lot in the last few weeks.

Barbara turned around, and Bruce caught a glimpse of her strained face. She'd been crying; he could tell by the tear tracks that cut lines through the dust on her face. "I figured it out. All of it. The war, the gangsters, the territory meeting. All of it."

He was at her side in two strides. His eyes skimmed the data, and what he saw made his jaw clench.

"The contingency plan—"

Barbara nodded grimly. "The War Games."
"How?"

She paused.

"Barbara?"

Her throat bobbed a little as she swallowed, then said softly, "Stephanie."

"What?" he demanded.

"I think she got into the system, and found the contingency plan. But, the thing is—"

She tapped a few keys, and a window displaying the name MATCHES MALONE appeared on the screen.

"I think she only instigated the Matches Malone protocol. That's…it's only one step. She skipped over the first five steps, and completely disregarded the next twelve. This plan…"

She shut her eyes and let out a small sigh, one that sounded more like a whimper. "Bruce, the War Games Contingency is…I designed it to take care of the mobs if they ever started to get too out of control. The setting, the timing…it's all off."

"So, what you're saying…" Bruce squinted at the screen. "Is that it was designed to fail?"

"No!" She scowled. "Not at all! I calculated everything, ran it all through an algorithm that I designed myself! The only problem is that the conditions are all wrong. Stephanie didn't follow it all the way through."

Bruce nodded, and sighed. "The question is…why? Why would she put one of the plans into motion?"

Barbara looked up at the screen. Her drawn face was bathed in the blue glow, her eyes wide.

"Bruce. I think she was trying to prove herself."

"Prove herself?"

The fingers she'd been resting on the desk curled and tightened into a fist. "You're the 'world's greatest detective', boss-man. I don't think I need to explain it."

Stephanie Brown had caused this city-wide gang war. It seemed almost impossible that a young girl could cause so much chaos. Bruce sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. All of this carnage, all of the fighting and violence and death…was it all his fault?

The console beeped, and Jason's voice filtered through the speakers.

["Red Hood calling the cave. Nightwing's been shot!"]

Barbara straightened like she'd stuck her finger into an electrical socket. "What?!!"

Muffled laughter made the feed crackle.

["Heh," Jason continued. ["Just kidding, Barbie. Thug just clipped him on the leg, He'll be fine."]]

["I'm okay, Babs!"]
"That's not funny, you two," Barbara said coldly. "Tim was stabbed tonight."

["What?!"]

"Oh," she said, and Bruce could almost feel the ice in her tone, "Don't worry. I'm just kidding. He's at Leslie's, and if you worry me like that again, that's where I'm going to send the both of you."

["Uh…right. Okay, then. We could really use your help down here, though, Babs. If you're up to it. Jason sucks at first aid."]

["Hey!"]

"I am, in fact, up to it," Barbara snapped. "See you in ten."

["Alrighty! We'll just—"]

Her fist banged on the disconnect button, and the boys' voices fell silent. Then, she let out a dry sob.

"Barbara?" Bruce put a hand on her shoulder.

His partner pressed a shaking hand to her mouth. "Black Mask…he has Stephanie," she said. "I…I don't think she's okay, Bruce."

He fell silent. From the moment she stepped into the cave wearing a Robin costume, Batman had disapproved. No—before that. When she had pulled Tim away from his missions and responsibilities, and gotten him involved in a romantic entanglement. Bruce had never really had much good feeling for the girl, but even he had to admit that she had had something special about her. In a way, she almost reminded him of Dick, when the boy had been younger.

And if she'd fallen into Black Mask's hands, there was a good chance that she…

He couldn't tell Barbara that. They had to focus now on what they could accomplish, instead of problems that were out of their control.

"She'll be fine. We'll find her, and bring Black Mask to justice."

Barbara's brow furrowed.

"In the meantime, we need to focus on an equally pressing problem." His armored gloves clicked against the keys as he brought up the profiles of two of the most recognizable and feared faces in all of Gotham. The first was Carmine Falcone, the head of one of the most prominent crime families in the city. The second was Roman Sionis, also known as Black Mask.

"Ten days ago, Black Mask abducted Falcone. No one, not even his syndicate, has heard from him since then, and no ransom has been issued. We need to figure out why Sionis needs Falcone, and how we can put a stop to this war once and for all."

He placed a hand on his protégé's shoulder. "And I promise that along the way, we'll find Stephanie."

Batgirl glanced up at him, one last tear tracing down her cheek. "We'd better."
"Stop poking it, man!" Dick recoiled so hard that he almost rolled over the side of the fire escape.

Jason pulled back his finger with a smirk as wide as main street. "What's the matter, N-Wing? Does the boo-boo hurt?"

Dick readjusted his leg and glowered. "I got shot."

"Yeah, yeah. I get shot all the time, and you don't hear me complaining." Jason nudged the first aid kit aside—the one he'd completely given up on—and started in on reloading the clip on his pistol, legs dangling over the side. He used rubber bullets, of course. Bats wouldn't let him use anything more lethal than that. Though, Dick supposed, Jason could probably kill a man with a plastic spoon if he wanted to. "Got beat to death with a crowbar, once. Don't hear me whining."

"You whine about that every chance you get," Dick muttered.

Jason pointed a choice gloved finger at him. "Well, you know what—"

The sound of a cycle engine cut him off. Both boys glanced down at the entrance to the alley. Batgirl leaned her cycle against the brick wall of Peregrine and Sons Fine Tailored Suits and picked her way through the rubble and trash towards them. Dick grinned and waved as she hoisted herself up the rickety iron ladder.

She inhaled deeply when she pulled herself up beside them. "Quite the perch, you two." She snatched up the first aid kit, and yanked Dick's leg towards her. He squeaked a little, but Batgirl was unimpressed.

"Bullet's only lodged in a little ways." With one quick motion, she used a batarang to slice open the Kevlar surrounding the wound. Nightwing hissed a little as the fabric tore off his skin, sticky with his blood. "We'll have you fixed up in no time, Wingnut."

Ah. There was the nickname. Dick managed a small smile, but then Jason handed Babs the forceps, and she started in on the wound. Several minutes and whimpers later, and the bullet was out. Batgirl deposited the slug into a handkerchief, before folding it up, and using it to clean the forceps.

"Ah. Now the fun part." She sighed, eyes drooping.

"Fun part? What—"

Barbara, the girl he loved more than any other in the entire world, dumped rubbing alcohol over the wound. Dick had never felt so betrayed in his life. He howled, and only Jason and Barbara's quick reflexes kept him from thrashing his way over the side.

"You boys are all such wimps when it comes to cleaning a wound," Batgirl muttered.

Dick panted, and shook off Jason's hands. "Your bedside manner needs a little work, Babs."

At that, she managed a small smile. "So everyone tells me."

It only took a minute or two to stitch up the wound. Dick kept his eyes on his girlfriend the entire time, watching the line between her eyebrows, the slant of her frown. Everything in her posture was
tense, and she looked about ready to snap. When Barbara finished tightening the bandage, she sat back on her haunches and sighed.

"There you go, Wingnut. All better." She leaned forward gave him a soft peck on the lips. She started to pull away, but Dick placed a hand on the back of her head and drew her in. She stiffened at first, then moaned a little, and wrapped her arms around his neck, complying readily. They hadn't had the chance to do anything more than share a smile for the past few weeks, and Dick could tell that Babs was missing him just as much as he missed her. And both of them seemed a little starved for some affection. The kiss only seemed to last a few seconds, though, before Jason cleared his throat.

"Uh…not that this is awkward or anything, guys, but…"

Babs pulled away, but only after hesitating. "Right. You boys take care of yourselves. Dick, do you think you'll be alright patrolling for a few more hours?"

He nodded, grimacing. "I'm a little sore, but I'll be okay."

"Good."

Jason crossed his arms. "You know, I'll be okay, too…"

"I'm glad to hear it." She rose shakily to her feet and managed a smile. "Now—"

Gunshots weren't a rare sound effect in Gotham, especially in the current climate. But they all jumped when the bang went off. Batgirl collapsed, hand creeping up to her head.

"Ah!" she gasped, shaking.

Both boys stayed low, and crawled over to shield their sister. Dick frantically checked her helmet for the headshot, but saw only a large dent in the armor plating. No bullet to the brain, but she'd have a nasty headache, later.

"$#*%", Barbara snapped, eyes screwed shut. Dick raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. His attention swiveled to the armed thugs creeping into the alley. They laughed and jeered, brandishing their guns.

"Company," Jason said, "Awesome."

Dick watched him hoist himself up and climb the ladder to the roof. He would have protested, demanded to know why Jason was leaving them to the thugs, but he'd trained with the Red Hood often enough to know that this was just a game of Sniper to him. And for that, Jason needed a better vantage point.

Not to mention, his little brother was trying to draw the fire away from his wounded older siblings.

He reached into his belt and drew out a trio of gleaming birdarangs. These were the last of them; it had been a rough night. Even so, two concussives and a razor were nothing to sneeze at. He pressed the small button on one of the concussives and pitched it at the oncoming horde.

The men below cried out as the shockwave knocked them down. From above, a hail of rubber bullets rained down on the gangsters.

"Take that, $%*$ **$%#!" Jason shouted. His laughter rang through the alley, and the thugs below almost seemed intimidated.
But then, reinforcements arrived, and they weren't wearing bats or badges.

There was a smattering of gunfire from above and below, and Jason's cackling fell silent.

Nightwing crouched over Batgirl, and nudged her shoulder.

"C'mon, Babs," he whispered, "C'mon!"

She groaned, eyes fluttering.

"Babs, we need to—"

A stray bullet rammed into his shoulder. He cried out and braced himself against the railing.

Shot again. Freaking wonderful.

"Hey you two!" one of the thugs from below sang out. "We've been looking all over for you!"

Jeering broke out from the gangsters. Nightwing grit his teeth and readied his last concussive. Batgirl lay unresponsive at his side. Red Hood was AWOL, if not dead. He only had one shot, and he was going to make it c—

Fwik

Something sharp lodged in his neck. His vision jilted and bounced. He could make out one of the thugs below, a woman in a dress-suit with a tube at her lips…No…not tube…b-blow gun…crap…

He swayed. Before he knew it, he could feel the cool metal grating of the fire escape press against his cheek as his eyes rolled upward. Thugs were descending the ladder…one reached for him…hand coming too close…

"Nighty-night, Nightwing," the man cackled.

Dick groaned, and slumped over. Whether he wanted it to or not, the darkness spread across his vision, and plunged him into black.
"I'm telling you, Bruce. I'm fine."

Bruce snagged Tim's good shoulder. Gently, but firmly, he sat him back down. The Batcomputer chair creaked in protest, and so did Tim.

"Until that brace comes off, you're running tech support." He pasted on a sympathetic frown. Tim figured his mentor probably was feeling sorry for him, but was equally glad to have him tucked away safe in his cave. They'd all seen enough blood to last a long time, and it was always so much worse when it was family's blood. "I'm sorry, but this is for your own good."

Robin glared at the offending knee brace. A dislocated shoulder? He could have worked around that. Broken arm? Fine. But leg injuries kept you from doing just about anything but typing. You could hardly leap off a building or kick a gangster in the face when your swollen knee might pop right back out of socket.

A vigilante was freaking useless without legs.

"Fine," he sighed. "But who's going to pick up my slack?"

"You're taking over for Batgirl." Bruce spun Tim's chair back around to face the screens. "She can take over for you."

Tim braced himself on the desktop and repositioned himself painfully. "Yeah. 'Bout that. Does she seem a little off lately? Or—"

"Yes." Batman pulled up his cowl and took stock of the batarangs still in his belt. He'd have to hit the store room before heading back out into the fray, but that shouldn't be a problem. "This war has been hard on us all."

"That's not what I—"

A cycle sped into the cave, tires squealing on the slick floor, and Tim fell silent. Jason slid off, gasping for air, and staggered over to them. From head to toe, the man was covered in splatters of blood and…Tim didn't even want to know what. With a hiss, Jason pulled off his helmet, and held up a shaking hand.

"Whoo! Home n' alive, boss-man. Up top!"

"Jason." Bruce nodded.

He waited a minute, then put his hand back down. "Wayda leave me hangin'."

"Where're Dick and Babs?" Tim asked. His eyes were still roving over his older brother. There was too much blood; no way was it Jason's. Not all of it, at least. Something about Hood's voice seemed off, too. Tim wondered for a moment if his older brother had been drinking again.

Jason shot him a quizzical glance. "Whaddya mean? Aren' they here?"

His words were slurring. He swayed a little, and Bruce's arm shot out to steady him.
"They haven't been back all night," he said. "We thought they were with you."

"They…were. Coupla thugs showed up with guns. Hit Babs. She's okay, though…think so, at any rate. Bought some time for 'em to get away…" He shook his head, hair flapping. A spray of blood spattered the floor beneath him. "Got hit with a…blow dart. Of all the…got to a differen’ roof, then passed out."

Batman's inquisitive stare intensified. "Jason? Who attacked you?"

"Ah, lez see…" He let out a dry laugh that sounded way too high. "Black Mask? Yeah. Yeah, I think Black Mask. His guys, not him. Beat me up real good…but I gave 'em #$%^."  

Bruce and Tim shared a panicked glance.

"Hey," Jason slurred. "D'you think Dicknbabs are okay?"

With that, his eyes rolled in his head, and he collapsed.

Barbara's eyes snapped open.

They roved over a dark scene. Dusty cobwebbed corners and broken plywood everywhere. Scraps of fabric were strewn all across the floor, along with broken glass, rusty nails and the occasional spider. From across the room, yellow light filtered in through cracked blinds.

The smell of blood, vomit, and human misery permeated the air. It was sour. Terrible.

She was in a dirty basement, judging by the angle of the light. Most likely Black Mask's torture chamber. Great.

Barbara's awareness spread to the rest of her body. Her shoulders ached and moaned, arms pulled tightly over her head. Her fingers buzzed from a lack of circulation. Her toes brushed against the floor, and it only took her a few seconds to realize that her feet were bare and her gloves were missing. Along with her fingerprint-protected belt.

Awesome.

Just to be sure, she wiggled her eyebrows. Thankfully, she could feel that her cowl was still in place, but the action hurt. In fact, everything hurt.

Batgirl put that aside. It was time for a plan of action. She resurveyed her surroundings, looking for some weapon or means of escape. Instead, her eyes landed on Nightwing.

Dick wasn't looking so hot. He seemed to have been given the same five-star treatment; missing belt, boots, escrima sticks, and gloves. The former boy-wonder was strung up a few feet away, his hands secured above his head with hand cuffs linked to a rusty chain. Blood was seeping from multiple lacerations on his face, arms chest and legs.
Whoever did that to him would have $\%\%\%$ to pay.

She realized she was pretty cut up, too. Memory began to filter in next; grinning black skull, the glint of light off a scalpel. Dick screaming. She spat right into those black teeth...

"Mmm…” Dick groaned. "B-Bar…Batgirl?"

"I'm here," she said. Her voice came out dry and cracked.

He raised his eyebrows, and his eyes fluttered open. Well, his right eye did, at least. The other was swollen shut. When he saw her, he let out a whimper.

"Yikes."

She tsked and pressed her toes to the cold floor. Something sharp dug into her foot. "You don't look so good, either, Wingnut."

He glanced around, his good eye rolling. It was bloodshot and dilated, both not good signs. But he focused again on her, and let loose a small smile. "Hey," he said, "He laid off on the face, right?"

Barbara couldn't help herself. She guffawed.

He scoffed. "What? Tell me I'm as pretty as ever?"

She tipped her chin down and laughed, breath heaving out in short bursts. "Yes," she laughed. "And, you, Nightwing…" She cackled. "How do you always…?"

"Ah, there's that smile." One corner of his mouth quirked up. "Now. Plan of action?"

She shrugged. "I've got a lockpick."

"Really? Way to bring that up now." His eyes glanced over her. She was missing her belt, her boots and gauntlets, and even the armor plating. Barbara didn't want to think about how Black Mask had pried the protective plating off of her costume. Frankly, she didn't want to think about Black Mask at all. "Uh…where?"

She tipped her head back, baring her throat, and swallowed meaningfully. Realization dawned on Dick's face. "Oh. Right," he said, shaking his head. "A little gross, but useful. Remind me to try that sometime."

"You did. About puked up your stomach, hunk wonder."

"Hey. In all fairness, I'd just eaten—"

An iron door slammed open, and both of the Batkids fell silent. The sound of heavy footsteps set Barbara's teeth on edge, especially as they got closer, and closer. Then, Batgirl felt pressure on her lower back. A hand. She resisted the urge to shiver.

"Weeeell, good morning, Gotham!" Roman Sionis boomed. He stepped around Barbara to stand right in between his two captives. He reached out and yanked a spider-silk thin chain. A dusty lightbulb blinked to life and illuminated the man's grinning black skull, and the gleaming screwdriver twirling between his fingers. "I'm so glad you two kiddies finally decided to get up." He wagged a finger in Barbara's face. "You're going to miss the bus if you don't get a move on, you know."

"What do you want, Sionis?" Batgirl's tone was steely and bored. "I'm a little tired of this game;
you ask us where Batman is, who he is, and we tell you to go ^&%# yourself. Over and over, in a never-ending cycle. Now when he finds us, you're going to—"

A sharp backhand stole the rest of her words right out of her mouth. Dick snarled and yanked at his chains. Black Mask actually laughed. "Oh, girlie. You know, I think you're my favorite." He wiped the dribble of blood off her chin with his gloved finger, his grin as wide as ever. "Out of all the bats and birds I've tortured in the last few days, you've got the most spunk. Much more spunk than that little blonde girl you lot sent after me, may she rest in peace."

Barbara's stomach churned. Her head whipped up, and the blood drained from her face. "What are you talking about?"

Black mask twirled his instrument of torture between his fingers, and Batgirl would have thought he was smirking underneath that mask. "Ah, Spoiler. That was her name, right? Least, that's what she said her name was when I turned on my little power drill. Good times. And, let me tell you, she was a whiner, that Stephanie Brown." He laughed at Batgirl's expression. "That's right. I can make people tell me all sorts of things with the right…persuasion."

Oh, Steph. Every nerve in Barbara's body was tingling with tension and dread. It was, if possible, even more painful than any cut or bruise the mobster had given her in the last few hours.

Nightwing was staring at the wall with a blank expression.

With the tip of the screwdriver, Black Mask traced the bat symbol on her chest, never taking his eyes off hers. "She died well. You should know that. Maybe the poor girlie lost a little too much blood, maybe I snapped the wrong—"

Barbara snarled. "Go directly to #^%% you #$#&*&% monster."

Dick looked up. Black Mask tipped back his head and laughed. "Such language! Like I said, sweetheart. Spunk! And, let me tell you, I love a girl with a little fire in her!"

Then, he slammed the screwdriver into her side.

"Ah!" She gasped before she could stop herself. A triumphant lift in the mobster's shoulders made her grit her teeth. The wound stung like a firebrand. Her vision blurred a little.

Dick's face had gone pale. "Don't touch her!"

"Now, now, Nightwing," Sionis crooned, "Here's what we're going to do…"

He stepped over to a table that Barbara hadn't noticed before, and picked up a bolt cutter. He stroked her chin with the tip, and she grit her teeth as she felt the cold metal slide against her bare skin. "I'm tired of running in circles with you two. Nightwing, you're going to tell me everything I want to know. And I know you will, because while you're thinking 'should I, or shouldn't I?...' well, I'll be slicing up your girlfriend here." He chuckled. "I'm going to make her scream, boy wonder."

"Nightwing," she said sharply. He glanced up at her two raised fingers. When he saw her signal, the little color left in his face drained away. But he nodded, slightly. Solemnly.

"Please." Barbara scoffed. She could feel warm blood trickling down her side. Black Mask had left the screwdriver in, thank goodness; she couldn't be sure whether or not he'd hit an artery. "If the last six hours are anything to go on, I'm not worried. You call this torture? I've had yoga sessions that hurt more."

Black Mask whirled on her. She could see his eyes blink, rove over her body, then come to rest on
her legs. She could have sworn he was smiling, though it was impossible to tell through the mask, and the thought made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. Slowly, Sionis stepped over to the table and made a show of sorting through his instruments. Scalpels, corkscrews, thumbtacks, and even the power drill he'd spent hours bragging about. His fingers hovered and floated, and finally came to a rest above a lead pipe. He made a pleased little sound, and hefted it, testing its weight with a little swing.

His footsteps pounded in Batgirl's skull as he stepped back in front of her. He reached down, slowly, and tapped her right knee with the pipe.

Alarm bells sounded in her head, and she winced hard.

A big mistake.

Black Mask caught on immediately. "Ah. I thought so. Little Bat likes her legs." He swung the pipe, and she flinched. "Now, what would she do if I broke—no, shattered them? They'd never be able to heal, that way."

Barbara bit down on her tongue so hard that it bled. The salty taste of her own blood made her mind spin. He'd do it. Of course he'd do it. He may have been lying about Stephanie—there was no conceivable way that her little Robin was gone—but Black Mask didn't kid around with torture.

Without taking those dark eyes off her, he said, "Now, Nightwing. Who, pray tell, is the Batman?"

Dick hesitated, pleading with her silently. She wanted to respond, but her attention had zeroed in on the pipe. She saw every spot of rust, every divet, every bit of engine grease. Black Mask could twist screws underneath her fingernails, pull out her teeth with pliers...all that, and she'd never scream. But her legs...

Those other wounds would heal. Scars could fade. Burns would go away. But if Black Mask took her legs...

She'd never be Batgirl again.

So, she swallowed hard. The blood disappeared from her tongue as she opened her mouth.

For hours, she'd tried to be strong. But in the end...

"Nightwing," she gasped, "Tell him."

First rule of the Gotham City streets: kill or be killed.

Sadly, the boss-man didn't approve of that particular code of conduct, so Jason was stuck with non-lethal bullets, and a pretty darn discouraging lack of explosives.

After having his $$ handed to him by a couple of second-rate thugs, Jason was ready for a little payback. (Rhino tranquilizers were decidedly very un-fun.) So naturally, Bruce, ever the killjoy,
sent Jason out on patrol instead. He was supposed to be scouring the streets looking for Carmine Falcone. If they could find him, then they could put the sleaze-bag back in charge, and the gang war would practically solve itself. (Timbo had said that there were a few more steps than that, but Jason had tuned him out as soon as he'd started jabbering away in his techno-jargon. The kid could be such a 

geek.)

Looking for Falcone was his official assignment, at least. But after his bullets and C4 had been confiscated, Jason was starting to get pretty tired of blindly following the Batman's orders. So, he was scouring the streets of Gotham on the back of a cycle, instead of on foot (cause Bruce and Tim were wusses when it came to a little bit of internal bleeding) just like the boss-man had ordered. But he sure as # %$ wasn't scouring them for Falcone.

If Babs and Dick were hurt…and Spoiler…

Well, first he'd find Black Mask, and then he'd shove all of his non-lethal bullets down the mobster's throat. To &## with rubber rounds.

He whirred past a group of gang bangers setting a bakery on fire. They shouted and fired off their semi-automatics at his back as he sped away. Now, those were guns. Jason didn't even pause to look back, or even dodge the gunfire. There were two things he could definitely count on; the Kevlar body armor under his jacket, and the crappy aim of beanpole wannabes firing off guns that actually had some kick.

Up and down each street, he saw more of the same thing. A bullet dinged his shoulder, but a graze like that didn't even hurt. With every avenue, every intersection, Jason was getting more and more discouraged. What, did Batman think Black Mask would leave Falcone sitting pretty on the curb? And was Jason actually agreeing with him?

Fine. He'd ditch the cycle. Suspected internal bleeding (Bruce and Timmy couldn't ever be sure) or no, he'd find his brother and sisters. Besides, inside was where the blood was supposed to be, right?

He turned off on a side street, searching for a place to dismount. Instead, he was greeted by a slumped dark shape on the road. He screeched to a halt before he could hit whatever-it-was, and leapt off. #%( #% if this was another corpse…

He knelt by the figure's side. It was definitely a girl, and she was clad in blood-stained black and purple. He didn't dare to hope as he gently reached out and turned her over. But sure enough…

Spoiler's closed eyes twitched open. "Nnn…H-hood?"

Crap. She was pretty busted up. Jason could tell that one of her legs was broken, probably a few broken ribs or a collapsed lung, judging by her staggered breathing. Jason knew the signs from experience. He couldn't see any part of skin that wasn't coated in blood or grime…her costume was dripping in it, her hair was saturated. And her eyes….

"Ah, Steph," he groaned. "What did he do to you?"

She shook, gasping for breath. "Falcone…I need to tell you 'bout…"

"Shh." He glanced at his cycle. He had to get this kid to Leslie's ASAP. There should be enough room for two, but the ride was going to jostle her around. "That can wait, blondie. Dr. Thompkins has a clinic just down the road. I'll get you there, she'll fix you up, and—"

Stephanie snagged his wrist. Her grip was weak, and she winced at the sudden movement, but Jason shut up. "…Don't…ugh…understand. Falcone's in Port…suh-six…ware 'ouse."
"You got it, kid." Jason slid his arms underneath her knees and shoulders, wincing when she cried out in pain. "We'll find him." He lifted her as gently as he possibly could, and positioned her on the cycle, before climbing on behind her. With his arms braced on either side, he should hopefully be able to keep her from bumping around too much. Spoiler squeaked in pain every time he moved her. "And we're going to get the son of a &#^$#!& that did this to you."

She shuddered as the cycle roared to life. "Guh…good."

A few seconds into the ride, and Jason realized that he had to steer one handed. His other arm had to hold Steph up, since she couldn't seem to have the strength to stay upright herself.

Babs and Dick could wait, wherever they were. One out of three would have to do for now; Jason didn't know how much time they had before Steph—

No, she'd be okay. Holding her this close to him, feeling her shuddering breaths against his chest, and her blood on his skin…it brought back too many unpleasant memories. But she could beat this. They wouldn't have to lose another Robin.

Leslie would know what to do. She always did.

"You're pretty brave, you know that, kid?" He said into her ear. "You're doing good."

She coughed a little, and blood sprayed the handlebars. Jason's stomach clenched in sympathy. "Not…'ow I was s'posed to go out," she said weakly.

"What are you talking about, blondie? You're gonna be fine."

They sped past the bakery again, and Jason hunched his shoulders to shield Stephanie from the hail of ammunition. She sighed, and leaned back into him.

"Blaze…blaze of guh-glory. Not…not this."

The clinic loomed ahead like a beacon of hope. Jason pulled up to the curb, and swept the girl up princess-style. She was running out of time…he just had to get her to Leslie…

He was up the concrete steps so quickly, he barely even registered that they were there. Same with the blood-stained glass doors. He rushed through the sea of weeping, shrieking violence victims, shouldered and shouted his way past the protesting nurses, and banged into the back room. Leslie Thompkins looked up sharply from the civilian she was bandaging up, and blanched.

"Who—"

Jason stammered out the words. "Her name is Stephanie Brown. She needs medical attention now!"

Dr. Thompkins didn't even hesitate. She barked out an order to one of the nearby nurses to take her place, then for another to follow her, and led Jason through the swinging clinic doors. In his arms, Steph cracked her eyes open again. A dribble of blood leaked out of her mouth as she said,

"J-Jay?"

Leslie led him around a corner. He glanced down and offered up a weak smile. "We're almost there, blondie. You'll be okay in no time."

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. She closed her eyes again, and let out a little puff of air.
“Doctor!” Jason barked. Leslie and the nurse helped him set Stephanie down on an empty hospital bed. The room was private, thank goodness.

"This girl needs fluids, Jane," Leslie said quickly. The nurse scurried away, quick to comply.

Dr. Thompkins turned to Jason, her face stern. "I'll do everything I can for this girl, Jason. You should probably go and tell Batman."

She turned away, and started tending to Stephanie's wounds, washing away the layers of blood and grime. The girl looked up at him, her red and blue eyes open again and leaking tears. He stood frozen. The nurse returned, arms full, and almost collided with him head-on.

"Hey, kid," Leslie snapped. "You're in the way. Now, stop wringing your hands like a nurse-maid, and go call your boss!"

Jason started, then nodded. He took off his helmet, and reached out to touch Stephanie's hand. Dr. Thompkins reached out to knock it away, then hesitated, and sighed.

"Okay. I'm sorry. I'm just…the day I've had…” she closed her eyes and stood. That gave Jason the chance to give Steph's swollen fingers a soft tap. A squeeze wouldn't have been smart; it looked like every single one of her fingers was broken. Even so, she whimpered.

"Leslie's going to take real good care of you, Steph," he said softly. "Just hold on for a little bit longer, okay?"

Her eyes stayed shut, but she whispered, "Okay."

Jason nodded, and blinked hard. Then, he backed away, and pulled out his comm.

As soon as the door had shut behind him, he hit the button.

"Boss-man," he said. His voice was hoarse. "I found Spoiler. We're at Leslies. It's pretty bad, I don't think…"

He paused to draw in a breath, then said through gritted teeth. "Get your stupid *$$ over here. Now."

"Hold up just a minute, sweetheart." Black Mask raised the pipe, and cocked his head. "A bit eager, aren't we? Why don't you just tell me who your boss really is?"

Barbara's eyes stayed fixated on the pipe. Her mind was blank. All she could do was stare, and hope that her captor didn't decide to swing.

Dick spoke up. "The Batman's a paranoid control freak," he said quickly, "He's never told any of us!"

She almost screamed. Dang it, Grayson. The tremor in his voice was a dead giveaway.
So, of course, Black Mask wasn't convinced. He turned to Nightwing, slowly, and said,

"Well now, that's too bad."

He turned back towards Barbara. The hand holding the pipe came up sharply, and she cried out, squeezing her eyes shut. A pause. She didn't feel fire and pain in her knee-cap. Didn't hear the crunching of shattering bone, only Sionis's cold, dark laugh. When her eyes cracked open again, she saw the pipe hovering bare inches away from her leg.

"I thought this might happen." He reached up, and unclipped the chain. The drop was so unexpected, that Barbara didn't have time to catch herself. She slipped to the floor with a soft gasp, landing hard on her shoulder. Before she could move, Black Mask snagged her by the hair, and jerked her upright.

"Circles, kiddies. We keep on going around, and around. If I had just a little more time, I could beat it out of you—" He yanked on her hair, and Barbara let out a gasp of pain. Her head was pounding…. "But as much fun as that would be, your Uncle Black Mask is a very busy man, and doesn't have time to play with his kids all day. So, we're going speed up the process a little."

He reached down, and started to fiddle with the clasps on her cowl. Two simple clicks to the right, and it slid right off. He chuckled, and lifted her chin, exposing her face to the light.

"Hmm. You're a pretty little thing, aren't you?" He turned her face from side to side, and she ground her teeth. "I was hoping for something a little more…recognizable. Still. I know I've seen you somewhere before…can't quite put my finger on it." He glanced at Dick. "Well, I suppose we could see what's behind mask number two—"

Barbara gagged, doubling over. Her arms wrapped around her midsection as she gasped like a landed fish, and began to dry heave. As she jerked back and forth, red-hot fire spread through her torso, the epicenter where the screwdriver stuck out of her side.

"What did you do to her?" Dick demanded. His chains rattled desperately.

Barbara was seeing swirling lights.

"Relax, kid. It's a perfectly natural stage of the process—"

Well, that explained the room's horrible smell.

She gagged again, and screwed her eyes shut. All sorts of miserable noises were coming out of her open mouth, and she rocked back and forth. She heaved, and felt the rise in her throat. Barbara could practically feel Sionis's smugness as she pressed her forehead to the floor, gasping and retching. Clawing the concrete beneath her with her fingernails. The handcuffs chafed, but Batgirl didn't care. She didn't stop until she could feel the pressure of warm metal clamped between her teeth.

She shuddered violently, and closed her eyes, letting her whole body go limp.

"No, no, sweetheart. You don't get to check out on me again just yet."

Here came the test.

"I'm going to cut your boyfriend, ginger. Wake up, or I'll paint your pretty face with his blood."

Black Mask seriously needed a new hobby. She stayed still, unresponsive.
"Batgirl?" Dick's shaking voice almost made her open her eyes to be sure he was okay. Then, she resisted the urge to smile. *Good boy. Hold the audience in suspense.*

Then, Black Mask planted a firm kick to her side. Luckily, the one without the screwdriver. The blow hurt her already sore ribs like heck, especially after hours of hanging suspended from a ceiling. But she stayed still, focused instead on wiggling the lock pick into the cuffs. As smoothly, as subtly, as she could manage.

There was silence, and for a panicked minute, Barbara wondered if Sionis could hear her fiddling with the cuffs. But then, he sighed, and stepped closer.

"Well, Nightwing," he said, then clicked his tongue. "You know how I hate to do this, but it seems like our girl's just given out completely. Think it's time we put her out to pasture, just like that other one."

"No," Dick cried. "Please. I'll tell you who Batman is, just—"

There was the tiniest click, and Barbara didn't hear it, so much as feel the lock give way between her fingers. Before she had time to celebrate, though, Black Mask had lifted her up by the hair. She forced her neck to stay limp, not fight it. Something cold and sharp pressed against her bare throat, and she could feel her pulse hammer against it.

"Oh, don't worry. Sometimes this happens, kid. Sometimes they just can't take it. Believe you me, I'm doing her a favor." Black Mask's voice was too soft, trying too hard to be soothing, and it grated on her ears. "I didn't think that the famous Batgirl would break so easily, though. Maybe you'll last longer, bird boy."

Okay. She had roughly five seconds tops before Mask slit her larynx and moved on to Dick. It was go time.

Her eyes fluttered open.

"Oh, Roman?" she asked sweetly.

Black Mask reared back, staring at her slack-jawed.

"Next time, maybe opt for nylon cuffs?" She yanked her wrists apart, and the cuffs sprang open, clattering uselessly to the floor below. In the same motion, she knocked the scalpel against her neck away, and bolted to her feet. "But then again, I could totally shake those, too."

Okay, she thought. *Now I can hit something. Now we're talking.*

A few jabs to the gut, then the solar plexus, and he bit the dust. He tried a right hook before he went down, but Batgirl spotted it coming a mile away. In a way, it was a little bit pathetic. The mob boss could talk big, but in the end, he was even easier to take down than the Riddler. And *that* was saying something.

Seconds later, Sionis took a turn with his own cuffs. The man was out cold.

Dick rolled and rubbed his wrists, wincing painfully as he stretched to full height.

"Ah, torture," he breathed. "Nothing quite like it."

Barbara waved a hand. "Are you good?"
"Me? I'm fine." She watched his eyes trace down her side to the protruding screwdriver. The wound was seeping blood, and hurt like a $#%^&*%. "Nice job, baiting him like that. The thing with the pipe? You even had me convinced."

She shrugged, swallowing hard. "You know me. I am awesome."

His arm snaked around her shoulder. "Yes, you are. And I think you knocked your head a little too hard in that alley, BG. So we're going to get you back home, where it's safe, okay?"

She shook her head. "No. We have to find Steph."

Barbara didn't even have to look at Dick. She could tell he was giving her his famous long-suffering-sympathetic frown. "Barb," he said. Softly, just in case Black Mask was pulling a possum, too. "You heard him. Steph is…"

"No. He's lying."

He sighed. "Okay."

She glanced around. Now that she was down from the ceiling, she had a much better view of their surroundings. If she had to wager a guess, she would say they were in a warehouse. The salty smell that cut through the other lovely torture-chamber scents was a pretty good sign that they were down by the harbor, or maybe even the docks. If that was the case, it meant that the two of them could easily hijack a ride back to the Batcave.

"Good job with the…um..." Dick gestured absently. His squeamishness was obvious.

"Regurgitation?" she asked sweetly.

"Yeah. Um."

Barbara patted her stomach. "It's all in the muscles. You just have to know how to use them. And, of course, you have to bring up the lock picks every few hours, and that isn't fun."

Dick was starting to look a little green around the gills. He made a face.

"Because, of course, if you don't, then the picks just go—"

"Hey!" He threw up a hand. "I'm good. Thanks for sharing."

She hip-checked him, grinning. Then, they both winced at the contact.

"If you two children are done giggling over there, perhaps you could lend an old man a hand?"

The voice was weak, but both of them caught it, whirling around to the source. Crouched in the corner, covered in his own cuts, bruises and chains, was Carmine Falcone himself. He'd clearly seen better days, but Black Mask seemed to have given him much better treatment than any of the ats. He looked injured, but not severely, and he seemed well fed.

Batgirl's stomach growled. Lucky little mobster.

Nightwing hurried to his side, while Batgirl moved to Black Mask's table full of instruments. There were drops of blood amongst the gleaming tools, some fresh, some older. Barbara shuddered a little, wondering if any of it was Steph's. Her fingers moved of their own accord towards the three belts strung over the table's handle. Hers, Nightwing's…and Spoiler's.
"Hurry up with the locks, boy," Falcone snapped. "We don't have all day."

"Oh, here's a suggestion," Nightwing muttered. "How about, 'thank you, oh wonderful Nightwing, for saving my #$$ when you could have just left me here to rot'?"

She rolled her eyes, and allowed herself a slight smile. With a snap, she felt the familiar weight of her belt settle back on her hips, and bent down to scoop up her cowl. No sooner had she positioned it back over her head, when her comm went off.

["Batgirl? Babs? You there?"]

There was a lot of static. The bullet she'd taken in the alley must have damaged the comm set. Just more repairs to look forward to when she got back to the cave. She pressed a finger to the side, and felt the plating crack a little under the pressure. She grimaced, and said, "Hood? Is that you?"

["Babs? You two okay?"]

"Fine. Wingnut's a little banged up—"

"So are you!" Dick called over.

"—but we've had worse. What's going on?"

["Barbara—"]

His voice came out halted, hesitant. He was either injured, or choking up, judging by the sound of his voice. Every muscle in Barbara's body tensed as he spoke over the comm, letting the words flood out. She dropped Dick and Steph's belts, and they hit the ground with a \textit{whump}.

["I'm so sorry, BG. I tried to—"]

"Don't move," she said. "We'll be right over."

She snatched up the belts and started marching towards a way out: a rusty, and most likely locked side door. "Jay, tell Thompkins to \textit{keep her stable}!"

Dick and Falcone stood, and shot her confused glances. She kicked out at the warehouse door as hard as she could manage. Thanks to a rusted lock, or maybe adrenaline, the door slammed open. She whirled on Nightwing.

"They found Spoiler. She's at the clinic."

Dick rushed towards her, and Falcone followed closely behind. "C'mon, then!"

She flew out of the warehouse, and didn't care about the searing ache behind her eyes as soon as they were out in the sunlight, or the piercing pain in her side, or even the fact that her legs were almost like jelly. She sprinted, and staggered a little, towards an abandoned truck sitting next to the adjacent warehouse.

They all hopped in, and Dick ripped out a few wires from under the steering wheel while Falcone's shaky hands pulled the seatbelt around himself. Batgirl leaned on the dashboard, one hand clasped to the screwdriver, the other resting on the windshield. Every one of them was bleeding, and whoever owned this truck, she figured, was going to have to replace their seats.

"Hold on," Dick warned her. The engine roared to life, and they swerved out of the shipping yards. Batgirl's eyes alternated between the speedometer and the road ahead of them. The needle never
dipped below sixty-five, but Barbara was silently willing Nightwing to go faster.

_Faster._

Her little sister was dying in a hospital bed, and there wasn't a #$%^ thing Batgirl could do from the passenger seat of a Ford F-560 flatbed…

Oh _gosh_ her head hurt…

_Don't worry, Steph_, she thought, _I won't let anything happen to you._

"Where is she?"

The Batman's voice was enough to silence everyone in the waiting room. The nurse he was addressing shrunk down a little, eyes wide. She reached up to adjust her nametag, and stuttered out,

"Th-through here, Mr...Batman."

Dozens of eyes watched him in silence as he stepped quickly after the nurse. He followed her through several sets of doors, through several halls and past rooms filled with moaning and crying. The air smelled like blood, smoke, vomit and bleach that didn't quite make those other smells go away. Batman wrinkled his nose, and almost collided head-on with Jason Todd.

The Red Hood steadied himself against the wall, waving off the nurse who must have been tending to his wounds. "She's in there," he said grimly.

Batman scrutinized his third protégé. Jason seemed to have finally recovered from the effects of the tranquilizer. Though he was bruised, and still covered in blood, he seemed to be the healthiest out of all his kids. Although, he hadn't seen Dick or Barbara yet. He hoped that wherever they were, they were in better shape than he feared.

"Well?" Jason demanded. His face was screwed into a scowl. "Go in."

_Go in, Bruce. Be accountable. This is all your fault._

Batman reached out, and turned the knob. It took more strength than he'd expected to push open the door.

Dr. Thompkins stood at the end of the hospital bed, one hand gripping a clipboard close to her chest, the other curled tightly around the footboard railing. She looked up as soon as he stepped into the room. Batman let the door click shut behind him, and stepped over towards the bed. He'd known Leslie for years. Ever since he'd been a child. And in all the time he'd known her, he'd never seen her look so defeated, so weary.

"How is she?"

Leslie closed her eyes. "Bruce," she said softly, "I did everything I could, but…"
He glanced down. Stephanie was almost unrecognizable, between the bandages, the stitches, and the swollen black and purple bruises. Her bandaged hands were rested gently on either side of her body, and one of her legs was in a brace. Her eyes were shut, her face completely slack, void of all expression. She seemed at rest. Perhaps when unconscious, she felt no pain.

"She has so many internal injuries. Ruptured spleen, broken ribs, collapsed lung…I could go on and on. Some of these wounds are weeks old. It’s a miracle she’s even here right now. What the #$&$% happened to her?"

He said nothing, only sat himself down in the chair next to the bed. His eyes fastened on the EKG monitor beeping slowly but surely above the bed.

"How long?" His voice was hoarse.

Leslie let out a sigh so deep, he was surprised that the woman had that much breath in her lungs. She hesitated, and Bruce waited in silence.

Then, "A few minutes. Maybe."

He closed his eyes.

"I'm so sorry." She looked away, and opened the door softly. "I'll let you say goodbye, now."

They'd lost Jason in a blaze of fire and shrapnel. There had been no time to watch him slip away, because he'd already been gone when they'd found him. Sitting here now, listening to the steady beep of the monitor, and Stephanie's rickety breathing; it was all surreal. Bruce had been Batman for many years, but never before had he watched someone slip away so peacefully.

Her eyes fluttered. "Batman?" she croaked.

She fixed her gaze on him, and Bruce resisted the urge to look away. Her left eye had been almost completely destroyed. The sclera, usually the white part, had been sliced in places, staining it all blood red. Her iris had sustained enough damage that her pupil was running into the blue, no longer circular, but paisley shaped. Her other eye was so bloodshot that Bruce almost couldn't see any white. Both eyes were circled by dark, sickly purple bruises.

He wondered if she could even see him.

"I'm here, Stephanie," he said softly.

She stared at him, unblinking. Maybe it hurt her to blink. "I…I'm not going to make it. Am I?"

He said nothing, but she seemed to take that as an answer, and let out a soft sigh.

"I…have a baby girl, you know. Somewhere…" Her gaze was a million miles away. "She isn't mine…not anymore, but…"

Bruce reached out, and placed a hand on the bed next to her fingertips. "She'll never want for anything, Stephanie. I promise."

She nodded, and let out a soft moan through closed lips. "Batman?"

"Yes, Stephanie?"

She hesitated, then whispered weakly, "Was I…ever really Robin? Or was it…all just a trick to get Tim to come back?"
A good question. Barbara would have answered without hesitation. Any of the others would have. It made him hate himself a little, that the words took a few seconds to come out. Two tears traced their way down Stephanie's face.

"Of course, you were," he said gently.

He could see it in her face that she didn't believe him, but she sighed, and closed her eyes. "Good. At least...at least I have that."

"You should rest," he said. "You've been so brave, and so strong. You've earned a break."

She hummed. "I didn't tell him anything. I want you to know that. He got my name. He got...he got the name of the plan..." Her fingers twitched. "But I never told him anything else."

He nodded, and felt something prickle behind his eyes. "I'm proud of you, Robin."

The EKG stuttered, and Stephanie let out a heavy, shaking sigh. "I...I think I need to rest now, Batman."

"Of course. I'll be right here with you."

She inhaled deeply through her nose. "Okay."

The door flew open, and Batgirl rushed into the room. A trio of shouting nurses followed, grabbing at her arms, telling her to quiet down. One of them held a needle aloft, ready to plunge it into her throat, but his female partner disarmed the nurse with a quick jab.

"Steph!" she cried, rushing over to the bed.

Dick and Jason appeared and dragged the nurses out of the room, offering apologies, and shutting the door behind them.

Barbara was panting, and covered in scratches, cuts, bruises, and blood. Her eyes darted over Stephanie's wounded form. She put her shaking hands up, as if to reach out and touch her, but hesitated, letting them float above her little sister. Tears brimmed in her eyes.

"Steph?" she whimpered.

"Babs?"

Her eyes cracked open, and Barbara cried out at the sight of the damage. She clapped a shaking, bloody hand over her open mouth. Her whole body shook with sobs.

Stephanie's destroyed eyes traced over her sister, and she offered up a weak smile. "It's okay, Babs. I'm okay."

Batgirl shuddered. "Are-are you sure, sweetie?"

"Yes. Everything's going to be okay, now."

Batman stood, and placed a hand on Barbara's shoulder. Stephanie sighed, and settled back into her pillow. She closed her eyes, and let out a deep breath. The EKG stuttered, then fell flat.

EEEEEEeeeee

"No!" Barbara cried. "Please! N-no!"
She put her face in her hands and sobbed. Ragged gasps and moans staggered out of her, and it sounded as if her heart would split in two. Bruce pulled her close and let her cry into his chest. He wrapped his arms around her tightly, keeping her safe, holding her fast.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so, so sorry."

In the morning, it was hard to get up and get moving, especially with his busted knee, but Tim managed. It was already afternoon by the time he'd gotten ready and situated. He typed quickly at the Batcomputer, taking grating sips from a steaming coffee mug. He swore some days, without a caffeine fix, he'd be a puddle on the ground.

Something in the air felt different. Maybe it was the storm that had passed through sometime around midnight. It had been a quick cloud-burst, the kind of storm that lasted an hour, maybe two, before moving on. It was the kind of storm that left a chill in the air, and the smell of damp, and freshness. And maybe a little bit of sadness.

According to the news feeds, the gang wars were all but over. Carmine Falcone's triumphant return to center stage, and Black Mask's disappearance, had whipped the Gotham City mob back into their places. Territory disputes were already being wrapped up, alliances were being dissolved and reiterated left and right.

All this in thirty-six hours, he thought to himself, taking another swig of coffee. He held the bitter liquid in his cheeks as he typed out a message to the Commissioner. When the taste and temperature became too much, he swallowed it down, and the liquid left him feeling wired, alert.

Things were looking up all over Gotham. People were finding their dead, mourning them properly. Buildings and roads were being rebuilt and renewed. It was hard to put this city down; Gotham had a way of weathering just about anything.

The elevator doors dinged open behind him, and Tim swiveled around in the chair.

Dick and Alfred were stepping towards him.

Dick looked like $#^&. He was bruised all over, covered in bandages and stitches. His shoulders were slumped, and his eyes were puffy and red, like he'd been crying. Or maybe taken one too many hits to the face. He looked resigned, but still alert, battle ready. After weeks of near-constant fighting, that didn't go away easily. Tim suspected that the only reason his brother was out of uniform, and dressed in fresh shorts and a tshirt, was because the old butler on his right had insisted on it.

Alfred's eyes were red, too, though he stood as stoic and proper as ever.

"Hey, guys," Tim said, smiling hesitantly. "Everything okay?"

They shared a glance, and Dick's face crumpled. Alfred nodded slightly, and turned back to Tim. Dick couldn't meet his eyes.
"Master Timothy," Alfred said hoarsely. "I'm afraid we have some terrible news."

They told him.

And after they told him, something inside Tim cracked like broken glass. A sound came out of his throat that was barely human, but Tim could barely hear it over the rush of blood in his ears.

The coffee mug hit the floor and burst into a million glittering pieces.

So did he.

She dreamed all week...that it took days for her and Selina to track down Roman Sionis...that they were actually doing something.

Barbara sat on her bed, and stared at the wall. There were dozens and dozens of pictures plastered there; selfies with all of her siblings, with Bruce, with Alfred. There were a couple of candid shots, a few frames of laughter and pranks and photo-bombs. There were pictures of her and Dick, kissing, cuddling, sparring, laughing.

But the one she stared at was a picture of a blonde girl dressed in purple with the biggest, brightest smile on her face.

A week. For an agonizing week, she dreamed of hacking and searching and interrogating. Selina would have tapped all her contacts in the criminal families of Gotham. Most of them would give half-hearted information, or random clues. Those who decided not to share would get a personal visit from Batgirl.

The picture had been taken on a sunny March day, just a few days after Stephanie had donned the Robin uniform. They'd all taken a day trip together to the Gotham City Park. A picnic. She and Stephanie had spent an hour helping Alfred get everything ready.

She and Catwoman would finally corner Black Mask in a decrepit old apartment in the slums outside of the greater Gotham area. He'd be terrified. And he would have every reason to be.

They'd passed around a wrinkled bag of store-bought white bread as they crowded next to the pond. The kind of bread Bruce never let them near, because of all the evil chemicals and processed flour contained within. (Gasp.) Jason had shoved a slice into his mouth whole, and the others had protested, tossing ripped pieces into the water for the quacking ducks. Then, Dick had taught Stephanie to do handstands on the soft green grass. They tumbled around, then laughed when Jason gave it a try, and landed on his face.

Sionis would plead. Actually beg, on his knees, even. Batgirl didn't remember much of what happened next, in the dream, only the sound of crunching bones. And, how sweet that sound would be...

Barbara looked down at her hands. Her knuckles were split open. Alfred had offered her some
ointment for them, but she'd turned him down. She wouldn't remember where they'd come from. More likely than not, they were souvenirs of the gang war. She could live with that. It was easier to live with that.

_The roof. She would hold him over the abyss by the lapels. His screams would fall on deaf ears._

There was a soft knock on the door.

"Come in," she muttered.

"Are you sure?" Dream Selina would ask her. For a moment, she'd hesitate. Then, she would think of her little sister, broken and shattered on a hospital bed. She dreamed of her laughing sister, feeding the ducks, doing handsprings on a picnic blanket, and eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches until Alfred asked her to save some for the boys. Then, she would grit her teeth…and let…go…

"Babs?"

Dick settled himself on the bed next to her. The mattress creaked under his added weight, and he pulled her close. His warm breath tickled her ear as he asked,

"Are you alright?"

_She watched him fall. And for the first time, she dreamed of that abyss. The one that Bruce had warned her never to go near, never to look into. And the abyss stared back at her, smiling._

_She shivered and turned away._

Barbara looked at Dick blankly. His eyes searched hers; he was worried. She'd barely eaten anything in days, had barely slept, barely spoken.

She looked back at the pictures on the wall.

"Just a bad dream," Barbara said. "I'm fine. Just fine."
The Bat's Venture

With a sickening crack, the concrete where Batgirl's head had been just a second before shattered underneath Croc's giant fist. She gasped as she rolled away, and felt the fire in her side flare up again with new intensity.

Yep. She'd definitely ripped those stitches again.

"Stupid little bat! Stop squirming!" Killer Croc snarled. She leapt to her feet and danced out of the way as he whirled on her. His claws narrowly missed her face.

"No thanks," she panted. "I—"

Batgirl dropped to dodge a giant fist to the head. Shock plates in her cowl or no, that would have hurt. She reached for her belt, but Croc seized her cape in one meaty fist and yanked her off her feet. She cried out in agony.

It had only been three weeks since Batgirl had been the Black Mask's personal punching bag for a few hours. But Joker and company had enlisted Killer Croc to help them plant bombs in the tunnels underneath Gotham. Batman had needed backup, and her siblings weren't exactly up for the task. Dick was still out of commission, thanks to a few bullet wounds and broken bones—not to mention the near-lethal amount of painkillers he was on. (Poor Grayson. When it came to meds, the guy was a total lightweight.) It was a miracle Jason had managed to push through for so long with internal bleeding and three broken ribs, but the injuries had finally caught up with him. Under orders from Alfred, he was on bed rest until further notice. He whined about that quite a bit—when he was actually conscious, at least.

And Timmy. Well, understandably, he was a wreck.

So, Barbara—with a grand total of twelve stitches and a handful of cuts and bruises—was deemed most healthy/fit/conscious, and therefore most qualified for backup. Which was absolutely dandy.

Her legs kicked feebly at the air, and a sick grin stretched its way over Croc's scaly face.

"I think you'll taste good, little girl," he said, "I'll be sure to savor every bite...so I can describe your flavor to your boss in detail."

Gross. She palmed the desired pellet from her belt, and clenched her jaw. "Whatever, scales. But let me warn you—"

Croc's razor teeth snapped in her face. She didn't wince, but he smiled triumphantly all the same. He cracked his jaw open, and the smell of rotting meat and garbage filled Barbara's nose. She gazed down his throat, and actually smiled.

"—I'm spicy."

She flicked the pellet down his gullet, and his yellow eyes widened to impossible size.

Then, his muscles spasmed, twitching uncontrollably as electricity crackled through his insides. She rolled as he dropped her, and Barbara watched with slight satisfaction as the giant beast's eyes rolled up in his head, and he collapsed into a shivering heap.
Hesitantly, she stepped forward, and pressed two fingers underneath the unmoving mutant's jaw. When she found the slow but steady pulse, she sighed in relief, and sagged against the tunnel wall.

When she closed her eyes, she could still see it: the wide, shining black grin. And those soulless eyes.

She could still hear Roman Sionis's cries of pain as she snapped his bones beneath her fists. Could still see her blood-slicked gauntlets, and Sionis's cracked mask. Selina had wanted her to stop, but she'd pounded her fist into his body over and over and over again.

Through it all, that monster had grinned. *You won't do it…I gave your little sis a gun, you know…she almost pulled the trigger…but she couldn't do it…didn't have the stones…and neither do you…*

They'd been on top of an office building. Twenty-four stories up. The city beneath them had been quiet, mostly because the citizens of Gotham had been busy sleeping away their woes and injuries. No one wanted to be out and about. Not after the weeks of carnage and gore they'd just experienced. Better to be at home…with their families…

And, as it turned out, there was no one to see her dangle Roman Sionis over the edge of the abyss.

And there was no one to hear his screams as she dropped him.

It turns out, she did have the stones.

Selina had been quiet for a few minutes, just watching Barbara as she stared down at the street, watching the twisted form on the pavement below. Then, she'd startled her by placing a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"*I'm sorry, kitten. I'm so sorry."

Barbara hadn't even blinked. "*I'll go down for this, you know.*"

"*No. I know some people. They'll take care of it.*"

"*Selina. I just—*"

Catwoman's embrace was warm and sudden, but fierce and strong. "*Oh, kitten. It's okay. It'll all be okay. Just promise me…promise me that's it. No more. And I'll make this go away.*"

"*I…Okay.*"

Batgirl stared at Croc's prone form. She'd thought it was all just a bad dream, at first. And finding out it was all real…didn't even faze her. She wasn't sure how much that should scare her.

["*Batgirl?*"

She took a shaky breath, reached up, and pressed a finger to her cowl. "The Croc is down, and I'm ready to put the hurt on some clowns. Where are you, B-man?"

Over the line, there was a loud crash, and a bout of hysterical laughter. ["*We're in the Lower West sector.*"]

"Great. Be there in ten."

["*Will it really be that long?*"]
She scoffed, and nudged Croc with the toe of her boot. "I'm fast, boss, but even I can't run a mile and a half in less than that. Alfred's still working on my cycle, remember?"

Those stupid thugs that had ambushed Barbara and her brothers in that alley had taken their crowbars and baseball bats to her cycle. By the time they'd finished and moved on, it had barely been recognizable. So, she'd been putting in more footwork than usual.

["Fine. But be here as soon as you can. I've hit a bit of a snag, and the bombs are set to detonate —"]

Louder crash, louder cackles. She started sprinting. Legs pumping, muscles straining.

"Good night for a run," she muttered.

"Well, Harley, I think I'm going to win you that stuffed monkey after all!"

From her perch on the booth's counter, Quinn giggled and shook her shoulders suggestively, tossing her boss and lover another baseball. The Joker caught it with a flourish, and caressed it with a gloved fingertip. He grinned up at Batman, but Bruce only scowled.

The tunnels underneath Gotham occasionally opened up into large rooms. At first, they'd been meant as subway terminals, but the architects who had built the subway lines had eventually abandoned them in favor of safer locations. The room the Joker had chosen for his scheme was half submerged in sewer water, and half done up like a carnival. More likely than not, some bored college kids or pranksters had moved the booths and games to the tunnels, leaving a grim scene for the Joker to claim as his own.

One of these games was the infamous dunk tank. Bruce was suspended above it with a chain and set of manacles that he had yet to pick; a difficult task when both your belt and gauntlets were on Harley Quinn's lap. Below him, the water was churning and bubbling gently. Not threatening in the slightest—at least until you noticed the two live wires draped over the side of the tank.

Joker pitched the baseball at the target shaped mechanism that held the end of the chain. One hit, and Batman would fall straight into the electrified tank. The ball missed, glancing off the very edge of the target. Both clowns groaned and laughed.

"I'm having such fun, Batsy! Aren't you?"

Come on, Barbara, he thought wearily.

It shocked him a little, sometimes, how much he had come to rely on his partners. Perhaps it had made him sloppy, or careless. (He was chained to a carnival game, after all.) But the nice thing about protégé's was the fact that you always had someone to watch your six and patch up your mistakes.

"Here, puddin'!" Harley grinned and lobbed another ball to Joker.
He snatched it from the air, and twirled it on the tip of his finger, like a basketball. "You know, old boy? I never get tired of these little games we play. I still remember the old days, you know. Before you became a Kindergarten teacher! Once or twice, I got you so, so close..." He pinched two fingers together and bared his teeth. "To crossing that little line you hold so tight to. Your 'no kill' rule."

"You're wrong." Batman resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

"Am I?" He lobbed the ball at the target, and missed by a good two feet or so. "Phooey. Well, tell you what...let's make a bet, shall we? See, I bet I can push you over the edge, Bats. Make you flip your lid and knock me off. What do you say?"

"I say that's a very stupid bet to make."

Quinn and the Joker tipped their heads back and laughed, hysterically.

"Well," he sighed, "I suppose you're right. Still, I think it would be a hoot! So, whaddya say? I lose, and you get to haul me off to good old Arkham fair and square. I win...and you lose your soul."

The Joker's smile was frightening and dark. Even Harley paused, raising her eyebrows innocently, and tipping herself back a little.

"You know, I'm with Batman. That is a pretty stupid bet, clown."

All eyes turned to the tunnel entrance. Batgirl had braced herself against the wall with one arm, and her chest was heaving as she gasped for breath. Her eyelids fluttered.

Joker whirled around, and threw his arms out in a welcoming gesture. "My, my! If it isn't my favorite Bat-brat! You know, I was expecting Robin...but I can't say I'm disappointed!"

Harley scowled. "Puddin'—"

"Now, now, sweetums. Hush while daddy's working." He turned his attention back to Barbara, and Bruce took the opportunity to hoist himself up higher, in order to reach his cowl, where he had another lock pick tucked away. Barbara's eyes landed on his for a fraction, and she seemed to understand—distraction—before she refocused on the Joker.

"You seem a bit winded, my dear. Not up for playing, tonight?"

Batgirl pushed off the wall, and cracked her knuckles. "Well," she panted, "I'll admit. It's been a rough few weeks. But I'm more than game to kick your #$$."  

Joker tipped his chin back and cackled. "Quite a mouth on this one! Wouldn't you say, Batsy?" The clown didn't glance Bruce's way, thank goodness. Just leered at his partner with a wide, predatory smile. "I'd love to tangle, kiddo, but I think Harley's ready for a little playdate. Aren't you, snookums?"

Harley bounced to her feet, sending Bruce's gear to the ground in a heap. "I'm always ready for a little fun, Brat-girl!"

"Aww, don't just sic your girlfriend on me, Joker. Come fight me like a man." Batgirl glowered, and readied both fists in front of her chest. Just by the way she stood, Bruce could instantly see that she was protecting her side—the wound from her time with the Black Mask—and made a note to correct her. One shouldn't flaunt weak points in a fight. Luckily, though, Joker and Quinn hardly
cared about tells or weaknesses. They just hit and kicked, sticking to the punchline.

Bruce couldn't see Joker's face, but he could imagine the man was grinning as he pulled a switchblade from his lapel, and clicked it open.

"I'll tell you what, sugarplum. Harley gets first dibs," He twirled the knife between his fingers. "And I'll carve up whatever's left."

Batman almost had the lock open. Just a minute or two more, tops. No doubt, Batgirl could stall for that much longer, but Bruce found his fingers shaking anyways. Perhaps it was what the Joker had been prattling on about for the past half-hour or so, or maybe Bruce was only taking his partner's injuries into account. Whatever the case, he definitely did not want his protégé to square off with his nemesis.

"Fine." Barbara shrugged. "Bring it on, Harley."

With a shriek of laughter, Quinn launched herself at Batgirl, fists raised. Batgirl sidestepped easily, and spun, kicking out. Harley flipped and dodged, clearly enjoying herself. She only got one punch in—which Barbara shook off well—before Batgirl seized her by the hair, and brought her knee up to meet the clown girl's forehead.

Harley Quinn was out cold.

Bruce felt a stab of pride. But then the Joker advanced.

The tumblers jiggled beneath the picks. Bruce was almost done…

Batgirl shook out her shoulders, and reassumed her stance. The Joker's cold laugh echoed in through the room as he bolted forwards.

Harley Quinn wasn't much of a challenge—if you knew where to hit—but her boss was another story entirely. With all of Bruce's enemies, there was always a pattern in the way they fought, the way they moved. Even the way they thought.

But the thing that made the Joker so difficult an adversary was his unpredictability.

Batgirl moved quickly to avoid Joker's stabbing, swiping blade. She fell back towards the concrete wall, trying to get her own kicks and punches in. But she was losing; Bruce could see her confusion and hesitance in every strike, and all because she couldn't seem to get a read on the man in front of her.

Another note: start randomizing training. Barbara always had relied too heavily on patterns.

The cuffs clicked open, and Bruce rolled forward to propel himself over the side of the tank, and out of harm's way. His belt and gauntlets were back in place in the time it took Barbara to get a few more punches in. The Joker laughed, and lashed out with the knife. A cut opened on Batgirl's chin, and she hissed.

Batman rushed to his partner's defense. But with one fluid motion, Joker spun behind Batgirl, and held her tight to his chest with one arm. He smiled and brought his switchblade up to her mouth. She struggled, and cried out as he used the tip of the knife to pry open her lips. One sudden move, and Batgirl would have scars to match the villain's.

"Oh, I wouldn't get too close if I was you, Bats."
Bruce's attention was on Barbara. Her eyes were wide darting from the Joker, to the knife, and to the Batman. Bruce took one hesitant step forward.

"You're going to let go of her," he snarled. "Or I'll send you back to Arkham in pieces."

Joker's eyes widened. "Ooohhh! I'm positively shivering with fright, old boy!" He paused to consider something, slowly. The silence in the room was tense and palpable, but the Clown Prince of Crime seemed to hit upon some idea, and his grin widened.

He gasped delightedly. "This one's your favorite, isn't she?"

Batman growled.

Joker let out a sharp cackle. "I'm right! I can always tell when I'm right! Well, then. In that case, I'm thinking I'll have to take her with me, won't I?"

He froze. "What?"

"She's my ticket out of here, of course!" The knife drew a bead of blood at the corner of Batgirl's lips. She closed her eyes and shuddered. "And once we're home free, I'm going to do unspeakable things, and win myself that little bet we made!"

The Batman's teeth were grinding together. He tapped two fingers on his side, and Batgirl's attention swiveled back to him. Her eyes widened a little more, but she gave the barest of nods. Bruce appreciated her trust.

"She isn't going anywhere, Joker. And neither are you," the Batman said grimly.

"Oh? And what makes you so—"

Bruce's hand flicked, giving the signal, and Batgirl brought her heel up sharply. The blow landed squarely between the Joker's legs. The clown's face tightened, and he dropped the knife, letting out a howl of pain. Batgirl spun, and planted her fist into the villains' nose, sending him backwards.

Joker kicked out, but she leapt back to Bruce's side. "Go to #!%$, clown."

He wheezed, but hoisted himself up onto his elbows. Both bats tensed, but the clown didn't move.

"Silly, silly bats. We have minutes, if even that, before the bombs go! Then, it's bye-bye, Gotham!"

He forced out a shrill laugh. Batman whirled on Barbara.

"Go," was all he had to say. She raced towards the mountain of explosives beyond the carnival games and booths. Batman turned his attention back to the Joker, but the clown had vanished.

" #%) it," he swore, then bolted after his partner.

Batgirl was carefully slicing at various wires by the time he'd picked his way over the packages and twisting fuses. She said nothing, only nodded to acknowledge his presence when he settled next to her.

"Are you alright?"

"Fine," she panted, wiping absently at the dribble of blood on her lips. "But that's not gonna be the case in a few seconds if we don't—"
"Blue wire. Then green."

She shot him an annoyed glance, then snipped the two wires with one stroke. "I knew that."

"I'm sure you did."

The lights on the bombs' receiver panel dimmed, and Batgirl let out a relieved whoop. "Ha! Still alive!"

She offered her fist, and Batman only hesitated for a few seconds before bumping his knuckles against hers. As soon as he did, she jumped, glancing at him sharply. Her eyes and mouth were open wide, like she'd seen a ghost.

"Uh…boss-man? Are you feeling okay?"

"Of course."

She shut her eyes and shook her head slowly. "Batman accepted a fist bump. Dick's never going to believe me."

Bruce stood, and looked out over the room. Harley Quinn was still slumped on the damp floor a few yards away, but her boss was nowhere to be found. He was aware of Barbara climbing to her feet and stepping over to stand next to him.

"And speaking of things Dick won't believe," she said slowly, "Is there any truth to what that psycho said? Am I really your favorite?"

"Will I ever hear the end of it if I say 'yes'?"

She started to laugh, but cut off abruptly, looking up at him with wide eyes. "Wait. Seriously."

He huffed. "I don't have favorites. All of you are sufficient partners, and all of you perform well at what you do."

Barbara raised an eyebrow. "Wow. Um. Thanks."

"But," he said slowly. "There is something I've been meaning to discuss with you."

It was something he'd begun to think about several months ago. He'd been observing each of his partners, noting their strengths, their weaknesses. Usually, he did this with opponents, in order to find a way to best defeat them, but with his protégé's, he was weeding out their techniques, deciding what to discourage in their training, what to emphasize.

Dick was all acrobat. Every move he made, every punch he threw, was fluid and nimble. There were elements of Bruce's technique, of course, but that was to be expected. Bruce practically raised the man, after all.

Jason was their heavy-hitter. He preferred brute force, and fought dirty, like a street thug. During training, he could even bench more than Bruce could. In some ways, Jason scared him a bit, though he'd never admit it aloud. (The Red Hood was the only one of his children that Bruce had a concrete contingency plan for, and for good reason.)

Tim was their best staff-fighter. He had a fighting style all his own, sticking to evasive maneuvers and well-placed strikes. Literally, fighting smarter and not harder. Someday, he might surpass even Bruce in terms of tactical strategy and deduction.
But there was something special about Barbara. Anything Bruce gave her—any techniques or problems—she perfected and made her own. Out of all the others, she was the most like him, and yet something unique.

"Yeah?" she asked, "And what's that?"

He turned to her slowly, his expression solemn. She took a hesitant step back.

"Batman?"

"Barbara," he said quietly, "I want to ask you to be my successor."

She was silent all the way back to the Batmobile.

Gordon and the rest of the GCPD had been called in, and they'd take care of Harley Quinn and the mountain of explosives. The Joker was still MIA, but they'd figure that out, too.

Besides, sooner or later, the clown always resurfaced.

Her boss didn't say anything either as they strapped themselves in and drove back towards the cave through the winding tunnels. She stared at the bright spot in front of the car created by the headlights, and finally turned to Batman and said,

"Holy crap. You're dying."

The Batmobile swerved slightly. "Pardon?"

"You're dying. And you're delusional. I can't think of any other plausible reason you'd name me as the next Batman." She threw up her hands. "I mean, I'm a girl, Bruce! What, should I wear a foam body suit like they have for kids' Halloween costumes? I'm pretty sure criminals are going to notice pretty quick that I'm not Batman! And for another thing, why not Dick? I mean—"

"Barbara." His hand wrapped around her wrist, and he lowered it back to her seat's armrest. "Please don't distract me while I'm driving."

"Bruce—!"

A bat-stare cut her off short. She let out a sigh. "Okay. Okay. But this is completely out of left field, B-man."

His gaze was on the road as he turned sharply. She threw out a hand to catch herself, and he said,

"Dick doesn't want it. Besides, out of all the others, I think you're the most qualified to wear the cowl." He paused. "Well, so to speak. We can arrange for a new uniform. And, after all, I think this city is ready for a Batwoman. Eventually. I'm not dying any time soon, Barbara."

"Well thank goodness for that." She tipped her head back and closed her eyes. A sigh leaked out. "I
"I think I need more time to process this."

"Too late. We're home."

Sure enough, they'd pulled up into the cave. Barbara waited for Bruce to park the car, then leapt out, shedding her armor and cowl on the way to the elevator. The pieces of her uniform got tossed all over the floor, but she'd pick it up later.

"Where are you going?"

She half turned and tossed over her shoulder, "It's October thirteenth, B-man! I'm going to miss pumpkins!"

"And besides," she added under her breath, "I'm not exactly 'turbed by this new development."

The elevator doors dinged shut on Bruce's amused smirk.

Barbara stared at the closed silver doors, snarled her fingers through her hair, and let out a frustrated scream.

Oh, they'd be talking about this whole thing, later, for sure. Bruce couldn't just drop a bomb like that and expect everything to be all hunky-dory!

She still couldn't believe it.

Her stomach dropped a little as the elevator shot upwards. Did Bruce honestly expect her to just take his place at some undetermined future time? Heck. She couldn't even do the voice. She might have to start screaming herself hoarse into a dark closet or something to get that gravelly-deep-run, criminal scum-effect.

_Yikes._

The doors dinged open, and Barbara almost ran into Jason.

He grinned wide, and held up a gigantic, gleaming kitchen knife.

"Hey Barbie," he said darkly, "We've been expecting you."

She smacked him lightly on the chest as he led her to the kitchen.

"You, Jason Todd," she grumbled, "Are an idiot. You don't sneak up on someone right after patrol with a knife. I almost kicked your face in."

He chuckled. "I thought it would be funny. And it was."

They passed the bronze bust of William Oscar Wayne, one of Bruce's many ancestors. Alfred had found the fancy decoration while cleaning out the attic last month, and it had become a sort of last-
minute tradition to rub William's bald head after a night out on patrol. (It had also taken the bat kids approximately five seconds to piece together the man's initials.)

"Wow," she muttered, rubbing William Oscar Wayne's forehead as they passed.

"Wow," Jason agreed.

Bruce really hated it when they did that.

They passed the library, the study, the broom closet, Bruce's office, and finally made their way into the kitchen, where they were greeted by a scene of absolute carnage.

Newspapers had been spread over the floor and kitchen island in a futile attempt to contain the pumpkin gore, but the Gotham Gazette could only do so much.

The pumpkins themselves were huge, perched on the counter. Some of them were gutted and in various stages of being carved, and others were left untouched, awaiting their fates. Barbara spotted Alfred scooping out a gourd's brains. Tim sat nearby, staring mournfully at his finished product, while scooting a mug of coffee through the pumpkin guts absentely. Her eyes scanned the room for her boyfriend, and spotted Dick face-down in a pile of goo. Soft snores rumbled out of him, and she smiled.

"Yeah," Jason said, "He's been, like, randomly passing out all night. Alf's got him on some new drugs. Crazy stuff. At least when he's like this, he's not talking to the pumpkins."

Alfred and Tim looked over. Tim's face darkened, and he looked away, but Alfred beamed.

"Miss Barbara!" he said, "We've saved you a pumpkin and a knife. I've prepared a bleach bath for our finished creations, so they should last us until Hallow's Eve."

She accepted the knife from Alfred, and set to work on a gourd three times the size of her head. "Thanks, Alfred!"

Halloween was celebrated almost religiously in the Wayne household. That was bound to happen when the family members all dressed up as bats (and birds) on a regular basis. But it had all really begun when a nine-year old Dick Grayson had first asked Bruce to take him trick-or-treating, and both Mr. Wayne and his butler had decided to make their new ward's first holiday with them special. Then, after they'd gotten Barbara, the holiday had only gotten more involved.

Pumpkins, the two kids had decided, were to be carved on October thirteenth, because 13 was a backwards 31. And Alfred would spend the next few weeks helping his young charges make pumpkin pies, sugar cookies, and any other kind of treat they could think of. Patrols were harder in October with so much sugar, but it was definitely worth it.

And on Halloween night, the family always had to scare the living crap out of someone in the Justice League. It was a rule. Barbara suspected it was Bruce's favorite part of the holiday, though the man would never admit it.

After slicing and pulling off the top, she dug her hand into the pumpkin and started scooping out the guts. It was a long process, especially for a pumpkin this big, but something about it was strangely therapeutic.

"So, do tell," Alfred said. "How was tonight's patrol?"

"It was fine," she replied. Without thinking, her tongue swiped at the stinging cut at the corner of
her mouth. Joker gave her the creeps, most of the time, but now she was just ticked. Didn't she already have enough cuts and bruises? Jason noticed, and stared at the wound for a few seconds before he finally asked,

"Who gave you that?"

She hesitated. Another handful of guts plopped down on the newspaper. "Gotham’s favorite clown."

Jason's expression was blank. His poker face was definitely improving.

Alfred didn't seem to know what to say to that either, so they scooped and sliced into their pumpkins in silence. Occasionally, Tim took a grating sip from his mug.

Just when the awkward silence hit its peak, Dick moaned, and sat up slowly. He blinked hard. There was a pumpkin seed stuck to his forehead.

"Huh," he moaned. "Hey guys. Whazzup?"

"Good morning, sunshine," Barbara said sweetly. Dick's lidded eyes landed on hers, and he smiled brightly.

"Bra-bra!" he said. "I thought you weren't coming back!"

His words were slurring together. Babs bit her lip and looked at Jason, who was grinning evilly, mouthing Bra-bra. Which had better not become a thing. Otherwise, she'd have to retaliate mercilessly.

She shot Jason one last warning death-glare, then said, "Hey, Wingnut. I've been worried about you. What have you been up to today?"

He patted his pumpkin and grinned. "I carved this. Did a #^%$ good job, too." He sighed and pressed his forehead against the orange shell. "His name is Patch. Pum'kin Patch. Patch the Pum'kin. Get it?"

Barbara's and Jason's lips were pressed tightly together to keep from laughing.

"Oh, Patch," Dick sighed. "I love you so, so much."

Tim snorted into his coffee cup.

Barbara turned to Alfred. "Please," she whispered. "Please tell me you've been recording him."

A wry smile lit up the butler's face. "Indeed, my dear. For posterity, of course."

Dick's forehead hit the counter with a smack. They all turned to the eldest with both amusement and worry, but his soft snores were enough to curb their concern.

It took them a little over two more hours to finish up the last of the pumpkins, dunk them in Alfred's bleach solution, then clean up the guts. Sometime in all of that, Bruce had sneaked up from the cave and helped out, carving his own pumpkin into a smiling face.

Barbara helped Alfred tuck Dick into bed once the mess was cleaned up. They'd stuck him in one of the first-floor bedrooms, so that just in case he decided to drunkenly wander around in the night, he didn't fall down the stairs. As she was pulling his comforter up underneath his chin, his eyes fluttered open, and he smiled.
"Hey, Babs," he said sleepily. "Bullet wounds suck."

She laughed. "Don't get shot next time, okay?"

His eyelids fluttered. Babs could tell he was halfway sober, now, but still sleepy. "You neither. I love you."

She smirked, and smoothed the blanket with one hand. "Well, Patch is definitely going to be disappointed."

Alfred smiled knowingly, but Dick raised an eyebrow. "Patch? Who's Patch?"

Barbara leaned down and kissed him softly. "I love you, too, Wingnut. Sleep tight, okay?"

His eyes fluttered as she pulled away. "Um, okay. But seriously. Who the heck is this Patch guy? Do I need to beat him up?"

She laughed. "You already ripped his guts out, Grayson. I don't think he'll be bothering anybody again."

They left Dick sitting straight up in bed, with a look of utter confusion and horror on his face.

Tim was still seated at the counter as she and Alfred passed the kitchen. Barbara wanted to go and talk to him, maybe give him a hug or some bit of comfort, but figured it probably wasn't a good idea. He'd been glaring daggers at her almost constantly for the past few weeks.

"Has he slept at all?" she asked Alfred softly.

The butler sighed. "I'm afraid Master Timothy hasn't slept at all in three days. At this point, I fear the only thing keeping the boy going is caffeine and grief."

And just like that, she almost wanted to cry again.

"It's my fault, you know," she told him softly. "For Stephanie."

Alfred stopped, and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Nonsense. We all have our choices, Miss Barbara, and Miss Brown would have made hers no matter what."

They continued on in silence, climbing the stairs, and turning down hallways. They finally stopped at Barbara's door, and Alfred smiled encouragingly.

"I suggest you get a good night's rest, my dear. In the morning, you all have that volunteer function at the pediatric hospital. From what I hear, the children are very excited to be getting a special visit from Gotham's caped crusaders."

She smiled. "Can't wait."

She turned the knob, and started to step into her room, but Alfred cleared his throat.

"I encourage you to think over Master Bruce's statement from tonight. I think you would make an excellent Batwoman."

She nodded.

"And, Miss Barbara. Please consider my statement, as well. I don't want you to place blame on yourself for any of that awful business."
His look was pointed, and Barbara wondered just how much the old butler knew about that awful business. She swallowed the lump in her throat, and nodded.

"Alright. Thanks, Alfred."

"Goodnight, then."

"Goodnight."

She smiled, and shut the door.

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The Batman looked out over his city from his perch on Kane Tower, one of the tallest buildings in Gotham.

It had been a busy day, albeit a good one. It was good for him, and for his partners, to be able to help people in a way that didn't involve fists or batarangs. All of them had been very friendly and sweet with the children, and it made Bruce proud to know that he hadn't completely darkened his charges.

Somewhere out there, the Joker was loose on his city. The Batman would have been worried, but he knew that with his family behind him, there was no threat to this city that they couldn't beat, no matter the stakes.

And as for the clown's offer? That was a bet Bruce could take. Nothing could make him cross that line, and the Joker knew it.

He heard the soft flap of a cape, and was aware of Batgirl landing beside him.

"Batman," she said softly. "I've thought about it."

Together, they looked out on the city, and Bruce knew he'd chosen well. Barbara loved the city just as much—if not more—than he. She would defend it. She would protect its citizens.

If that was what she chose.

"And?"

She took a deep breath, and for a moment, there was silence. They listened to the sound of car horns and sirens, the sounds of the city. Then, she spoke.

"I'll do it."

Bruce smiled.
Halloween

Barbara winced into the mirror, opening her mouth wide to inspect her teeth. She'd glued fake fangs over her canines, and as fangs went, they were fairly convincing. On the other hand, she was beginning to worry that she'd be stuck with them for the rest of her days. Prodding the sharp tip of the left fang, she tried a smile. Very intimidating. Maybe, if they didn't come out, they'd be good on patrol? Batgirl would be ten times scarier with fangs, and they definitely fit the bat motif.

Then again, Barbara Pennyworth would have a hard time explaining the teeth to Master Wayne's distinguished guests.

The doorbell startled out of her musings. She pasted on a smile, and swept out of the bathroom, letting her cape trail behind her on the way to the front door.

Babs didn't bother to check the peephole and snatched up a giant bowl of sugary goodness. All night long, she'd had to guard it from the wandering hands of her brothers. Even now, they were probably devising schemes to make off with the loot. But she'd be ready. She always was.

Slowly, she reached for the handle.

The door creaked open, and revealed a small group of beaming little kids.

"Trick-or-treat!" they sang.

Barbara smiled, glancing over their costumes as she handed out a handful of candies to each kid. "Ooh, we've got a scary bunch here," she said in a conspiratorial tone, "Looks like we have a Dinosaur, a Wonder Woman—love your tiara, sweetie—a skeleton, a puppy dog—look at your cute little ears!—and—"

She laughed as a little girl dressed as Batgirl held up her plastic candy bucket eagerly. She couldn't have been more than five or six. "Who are you, sweetheart?"

The girl beamed, puffing out her chest, where a felt bat symbol was secured with a few safety pins. She even had a little homemade cape, cowl and belt. "I'm Batgirl," she said solemnly. "I protect the city from bad guys and mean old boys."

A woman standing farther down the walkway let out an embarrassed chuckle. Barbara grinned and scooped out a heaping handful of candy. She dumped it into the little Batgirl's bucket and said, "Good work, Batgirl. I feel safer already!"

She grinned, and skipped off to join her costumed compatriots. "Thanks, vampire lady!" she called, waving a tiny hand.

"You know…" A voice behind her chuckled, as she shut the door. "That's the whole reason we took Bruce off candy duty. He kept giving all the Batman's extra."

She turned and stared straight into the eyes of Captain America. Out of all of them, Dick had probably put the most effort into his costume. It had all the straps, buckles and stripes befitting an authentic Steve Rogers, super soldier. She fanned her face with her hand.
"I know," she said, "But come on! That little girl was adorable! Besides, no one ever dresses up like me!"

"Bull. That's the fifth one we've seen tonight." Dick sighed and smiled. He stepped closer, and wrapped his hands around her waist. "You excited for the party, BG?"

"Mmm…the one with the Team, or the one with the family?"

He raised an eyebrow, smiling deviously. "No, I was thinking of the party after the Halloween party. The one with just you and me…"

"Oh?" she matched his smile, and leaned in for a kiss.

As soon as Dick's lips were on hers, she heard a loud clatter behind her, and whirled around. Jason and Tim froze with the shattered bowl on the floor between them. Their eyes were wide, and very, very afraid.

"Aw, guys," Dick moaned.

"Goodness gracious! We've been spotted! Plan C, Grayson!" Jason cried, "Go! Go! Go!"

He and Tim scrambled to pick up the scattered sugar. Babs lunged forwards to stop them, but Dick let out a laugh and grabbed her from behind, his arms circling around her shoulders until she couldn't move.

"Traitor!" Barbara shouted, dissolving into laughter. Dick spun her around once the boys had made their escape, giving her an apologetic smile. The puppy-dog eyes.

But those weren't going to work. Not again.

"That was low, Wingnut," she said, trying hard to wipe the grin off her face. "Even for you."

He shrugged. "Hey, we're done for the night! Those were the stragglers, and now we can just turn off the porch lights and make our way to the Watchtower. Candy was gonna go to waste anyways."

She pouted. "I wanted some."

"Heh. Sorry, Babs. I'll make them save you a Snickers."

She crossed her arms over her chest, and raised an eyebrow. He shuffled, looking sheepish, and said, slowly. "So, uh…about tonight. Are we still…? Um…"

Barbara sighed, long and low. "Ohhh, Grayson. If you think you're getting any sugar tonight after what you just pulled…well, I'd go talk to the boys about sharing their haul."

"Fine. But who knows," he said, sidling up to her. "The night is young. Anything could happen."

"Hmm. We'll see. Go get your mask and tell those bozos to stop stuffing their faces and get ready. I think we're leaving in ten."

He saluted, and shot her a wink. "Yes, ma'am."

"Atta boy."

As Dick marched off, Babs made her way to the bathroom.
"Barbara! Barbara! Where the #$%% are you?"

Tim's voice travelled into the bathroom, and Barbara quickly swiped a tube of blood-red lipstick across her lips. She'd just finished dabbing at the edges when Tim burst into the bathroom. He was dressed in a long coat, an old floppy hat and a monocle. Black boots clapped on the bathroom tile as he stepped in to inspect her costume.

"I'm almost ready." She shot him a quick smile.

"Seriously, though?" he said. "A vampire? You get to dress up like a bat every other night of the year."

Barbara smirked, and clipped on a tarnished pair of dangling black and silver earrings.

"Says Sherlock Holmes. If I recall correctly, boy wonder, you spend every other night of the year doing detective work…"

Tim sighed. "Touché."

His eyes swept over the long black, silver and red dress. "You look nice. Okay? Let's go. Dick and Jason were ready forever ago."

She sighed and turned away from the mirror, following Tim out into the hallway. As they walked in silence, she could hear Dick and Jason scuffling in the other room.

"I don't need your stupid costume! Leave me the f-"

Both boys stopped when Barbara stepped into the room. The curse word died on Jason's lips. They were frozen in an uncomfortable looking stance, with Dick leaning halfway over Jason, who was halfway behind him. Tim made his way to the fridge, leaving her to settle this…whatever it was.

"Hey Darlin'," Dick said with a sheepish grin. "You look great."

"Still with the vamp?" Jason asked. "Really? I thought you were gonna do the mermaid or something for the party."

Tim clicked his tongue in agreement as he walked over to the kitchen counter. He sipped at a can of root beer, and Barbara made a sound through her teeth.

"You guys are so mean!" she said, grinning. "I think it looks fine."

Dick made a sound of protest, and shoved the mask over Jason's head. Now, Babs could see the offending mask more clearly. It was painted a sickly white, with bulging eyes and a huge red grin. It was supposed to be a zombie mask, most likely, but she saw something very different. And, judging by his reaction, so did Jason.

He flung the mask off his head with a feral and animalistic shriek. With one foot, he kicked the
mask across the room, shaking. His eyes were wide. Barbara turned to Dick.

"Hey," she said, "That's enough."

Dick stopped laughing and looked down at the fallen Halloween costume. He turned to Jason, then back to the mask. A line appeared between his eyebrows. It finally seemed to hit him a few seconds later.

"Oh, man, Jaybird," he gasped, eyes flying open wide, "I-I didn't mean…I'm so sorry."

Jason's knuckles were white as he gripped the counter behind him. His breathing was shallow.

"Grayson," he said slowly, "If you ever come near me with that thing again, then I swear on the cowl that I will take your escrima stick and shove it so far up your—"

"Okay!" Barbara interjected, pasting on a smile. She bent to pick up the offending mask, and tipped it into the garbage can. "That's enough of that. Jay? What are you supposed to be?"

Jason's costume consisted of a ripped-up pair of jeans and a 'distressed' t-shirt. He'd had whitish green paint on his face, but it was slightly smeared, thanks to Dick. His whole face was covered in Halloween makeup. Barbara noted with some amusement that she'd found the culprit who'd made off with her eye shadow.

"I'm a zombie," he deadpanned. "Obviously."

She raised an eyebrow. "And you guys said my costume was too dead on."

Jason's mouth quirked. "That some kinda pun?"

"Maybe."

Dick wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "Well, we've got a bat, a detective, and an undead—yet lovable—monster—"

Jason scowled at that, then said, "And the world's biggest boy-scout."

Tim and Barbara snickered. Dick shook his head, grinning, and said, "Yeah, yeah. We really scraped the bottom of the creativity barrel this year, didn't we?"

"Nonsense. I think you all look fine."

The batkids froze as their mentor walked into the room, with his face buried in stats and blueprints, as usual. He was wearing his typical uniform, cowl down around his shoulders. Dick cleared his throat, and Bruce looked up from his tablet.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Um…boss man?" Barbara said, gazing at the bat symbol on her mentor's chest, "You do remember the date, yes?"

Bruce's face was expressionless. "I'm perfectly aware that today is Halloween."

"Then…aren't you forgetting something?"

Bruce tapped on his screen, shrugging. "Those are strong words coming from a Batgirl who decides to dress up like a vampire."
The boys all grinned. "Ohhhhh," they groaned.

Barbara's chin jutted up. "Strong words from a man who couldn't find anything but his uniform to wear."

"OOOooohhhhhhh!"

"Boys," Bruce said, pulling the cowl over his head, "Please shut up."

He looked up at them, gazing out at his protégés through the white eyes of his mask. "I hope you all have a fun time. Try not to stay out all night."

"You sure you're good to handle patrol on your own?" Tim asked, "Because if not—"

"I'll be fine," Batman cut in. "I think you all need a bit of recreation. Especially after these last few weeks."

Tim's expression darkened, his brows drifting so far down that his monocle popped out and clapped against his chest.

The Batman's expression softened. "Have fun. Be safe. And if—"

"If anything explodes we're grounded," the batkids all repeated in monotone. For the first time, the Batman managed something like a smile, and turned to sweep out of the room. He almost bumped into Alfred, who was dressed in a blue suit with a red and yellow S on his chest. A scarlet cape draped off his shoulders. Bruce froze in the doorway to gape at his butler. The batkids all gasped, and quickly hid grins behind their hands.

Alfred's eyebrows shot up.

"Right then. Shall I go change, Master Bruce?"

Bruce made a sound at the back of his throat. "Please."

RECOGNIZED:

NIGHTWING B01

BATGIRL B09

ROBIN B15

RED HOOD B34

The zeta tube announced their arrival in the Watchtower, but the voice was much different from the usual monotone woman's voice. The audio had been replaced with Count Dracula (1943 version) speaking the names of the incoming guests.
Dick winked at her through his Captain America mask. All of the boys had put on their domino masks for the sake of privacy (a fact Tim was not happy about, as he had to give up the monocle) except Dick. He’d opted for a complete costume, replacing his mask with the one that came shipped with the costume. It left his scheming blue eyes out on display.

"I'm guessing that Milady Dracula's the one responsible for this reprogramming?" He asked, nudging her shoulder playfully. Barbara grinned, showing off her fangs, and twirled a tiny Philips screwdriver over her knuckles.

"Easy peasy," she said, "I know the hardware up here better than anyone, after all."

The Batkids looked out over the forum. Everyone from the Team and the Titans was here tonight. The original nine Team members had been petitioning the League for a Halloween Party for weeks. Each of them had assigned each other to a Leaguer. Batman and Wonder Woman had been skeptical, if not outright against the idea. There were other more important things, like patrol and training. Luckily, though, they were able to get through to Superman and Black Canary. M'gann made a compelling argument about the festivities being good for their 'cohesiveness as a group'. And once you had Clark and Dina on your side…well, Black Canary was scarily persuasive.

Booming music pumped through the air, punctuated by strobe lights in orange and purple. It was oldies music, like 'Monster Mash' and 'Purple People Eater'. Sidekicks and young heroes shuffled halfheartedly to the beat, but no one was really getting into it.

Jason made a sound at the back of his throat.

"This," he muttered, "Is a job for the Red Hood."

Just like that, he was swallowed by the crowd. Dick waved at Roy and gave her a quick tap on the shoulder before heading off. "Meet behind the Batman statue in ten?"

Barbara smirked. "No rush, Captain. Go have fun."

He grinned back, and disappeared.

Tim crossed his arms tight over his chest.

"I don't want to be here," he muttered, "I just—"

"Esse!" Jaime shouted. He and Bart rushed over, dressed like a Bank Robber and Pirate respectively. A giant white feather in Bart's hat lopped into his face.

"The night is young!" Bart declared, throwing his arms out, "Come! Let us dance, eat and pillage!"

A green parrot on Bart's shoulder squawked in agreement. Beast boy.

"Not in that order, I hope, boys," Barbara said with a grin. She folded her arms over her stomach. Bart turned to her with a laugh on his face. But something seemed to register, and his face went slack with horror.

"B-Batgirl! Hi! Um…we're gonna take Robin now, alrighty? Be back soon, have fun…be safe," he said quickly, choking on the last word. His face had drained of all color, and now matched the feather in his hat.

He and Jaime dragged a frustrated Tim away, and Barbara sighed, looking around in search of her friends.
"Alone again," she muttered, "Naturally."

"He-ey Babsy!" A smug voice met her ears and Barbara winced, letting out a sigh through her teeth. *Great.*

"Hey, Karin," she said stiffly. She turned to meet the eyes of the Kryptonian. Powergirl smirked, and Barbara winced at the sight of her costume. It was a glittery white thing that hugged her waist and upper thighs, leaving much fabric to be desired. A hole was cut into the chest, baring even more of Karin's voluptuous breasts than normal. A matching pair of glittering bunny ears were pinned in her short blonde hair.

"Great costume," she oozed, "It has so much..." her eyes raked over the long thick dress distastefully. She finally threw her hand up in the air in mock defeat. "It has so much. Going as an Amish lady this year? All it's missing is a bonnet."

Barbara drew her shoulders back and smiled. Her voice changed to match Karin's smug, airy tone. "Vampire, actually. Need a coat, hon? You look a little chilly."

Karin sniffed. "At least I don't look like I'm in mourning. Oohhh...." She gasped and pasted on a pouty face. "I forgot, sweetie. Did I cross a line, there? Are you still sad about your little birdie getting herself all sliced up?"

Something rang in Barbara's ears. Boiling heat raced through her veins, and the images flashed back in her mind: Stephanie in a hospital bed, breathing through a tube, leaking out her life's blood onto the sheets, the blood that no stitch or bandage could hold in...her sweet little sister...she... "She was tortured. To death." Barbara's voice was stiff and clipped. "It makes me sick, that you treat that like an insult." Barbara took a quick step forward, so that she was nose to nose with Karin. Their heated breath mingled, hot on each other's faces.

"If you...ever...talk about her like that again, Kar, I promise that I will rearrange that pretty little face of yours. I know where my mentor keeps his kryptonite."

Karin gritted her teeth. "You know the difference between us, babe? I don't need a rock to break your face—"

Their muscles were tensed and ready. For what, Barbara wasn't completely sure.

"Alright, you two. That's enough."

Artemis and Kara floated over. (Though 'floated' mostly applied to Supergirl.) Zatanna followed closely behind. Artemis pulled Barbara backwards. She almost tripped on the hem of her dress, but Artemis caught her before she could sprawl backwards. The archer was dressed in a short (though not quite as short as Karin's) blue dress with a white apron and matching long socks. A black head band held her thick mane of yellow hair back off her face. Alice in Wonderland.

"Don't you have anything better to do than pick fights, Karin?" Artemis sighed. "Cause with this girl, you'll lose. Trust me."

Kara physically had to restrain her 'older sister'. Technically, Supergirl and Powergirl were the same person. Karin had emerged from an alternate universe a few years ago, showing up in Clark's famed Fortress of Solitude. The more scientifically inclined members of the League had been trying to figure out how something could tear a hole in the fabric of space and time for a while, but suddenly the answer had stared them in the face.
Bart's time machine. Little coincidence that the day the speedster arrived in Mount Justice, an older version of Kara Zor-El had crashed down in Superman's living room.

Not to mention, that was the day Jason Todd clawed his way out of a coffin.

There was one more person—as far as she knew—who had come through the rift created by the time machine, and Barbara already knew her personally.

"Watch your back, Batgirl," Powergirl snapped.

Kara shot them an apologetic wince, which looked slightly more pathetic because of the fluffy pink bunny suit she was wearing. Barbara almost sighed. Both Kryptonian girls had similar taste in clothing, but the similarities almost always ended in the amount of fabric.

"Later, you two," Zatanna said, wiggling her fingers at the two rabbit girls. She linked arms with Barbara and Artemis and strolled towards the middle of the forum.

Zatanna was no longer a member of the Team, and the League had been banned from the party, but the others had begged Zatanna and Roquelle to stick around. In their minds, both women were still Team members in all but name.

"This is so much better than Watch duty tonight!" Zatanna laughed, hugging her friends closer. She was dressed in a simple corseted peasant blouse and a thick yellow skirt. Her raven hair was woven through with flowers. "Those are real fangs, Babs?"

Barbara smiled. "Glue ins. Hope they come out!"

They shared a laugh.

"Ugh, I know," Artemis sympathized, "These shoes are way too tight. I borrowed them from Cissie. Maybe I'll light them on fire after the party. Think she'll mind?"

Zatanna laughed. "Well, ladies, let me tell you. Corsets—"

The music screeched to a halt, and everyone turned to the sound table. Jason was replacing the tracks and fiddling with a few dials, biting the edge of his lip in concentration. Then, a brilliant grin lit up his face, and he pounded down on a button.

Upbeat dubstep boomed from the speakers. A cheer went up from the crowd, and groups congregated to dance to the beat.

"That's my bro," Barbara said with a dismissive shrug, and a bit of a grin.

"Love this song!" Artemis agreed, pulling them into a tight circle to dance.

For ages, they shook and twisted and pounded their feet, laughing and singing along when there were lyrics. Barbara said hi to Rocket (a fairy princess) and Conner and M'gann (A mummy and queen Cleopatra). The noise and the lights were electrifying, and Barbara hadn't felt so energized in a long time.

Eventually, the music slowed, and Barbara excused herself to get a drink of whatever was in the punch bowl. She silently crossed her fingers that the Titans hadn't spiked it again. At the last party…well, as a general rule, no one talked about what had happened at the last party.

Then, she spotted Tim by the refreshment table, off in a corner, staring down a wedge of pumpkin
pie. Jaime, Bart and Garth were nowhere to be seen.

"Hey, there," she said, making him jump. He whirled around.

"Oh," he said, letting his shoulders slump. "It's you."

She raised her eyebrows. "Yeah. Where are your friends?"

Tim shrugged and pushed the plate of pie away. "I ditched them. Jaime and Garth kept jabbering."

"But not Bart?"

Tim sighed. "No, he kept asking me about the date. Like, you'd think it'd be obvious, right?" He gestured to the glowing orange forum and the black and purple decorations. "But he kept demanding I tell him what day. What month. What year."

Barbara chuckled. "Geez. Think someone's gonna die or something?"

Tim was silent, and Barbara winced.

"Look, that came out—"

"No," he said, curtly. "Jaime kept asking about it, too. 'You okay, hermano? 'Need to talk?,'" His fists clenched on the table, scrunching the black tablecloth into angry ridges. He sighed deeply, and screwed his eyes shut.

"She's. Gone."

"Tim—" she whispered.

"And it's all your fault."

Barbara reared back, like he'd struck her. She wanted to scream at him, protest, take him by the shoulders and shake him. No! she wanted to say, I avenged her! What more do you want? But she knew that he was right.

"So. This is why you won't look at me? Won't talk to me?" Her voice was monotone. He whirled on her, eyes blazing.

"Yes!" he hissed. "You were the one who convinced Batman to take her on. You trained her. You let it happen!"

With each YOU, he dug a finger into her chest. She took a small step back.

"Timmy," she said, very quietly. She was aware of Dick moving over to her side, asking what was wrong. But her attention was solely focused on the hate-filled boy in front of her.

"I loved her! And you killed her! It should have been you!" Tim swung a fist at her, but his heart wasn't in it; she easily dodged. Dick grabbed hold of his brother's wrist and glowered. The music was thankfully loud enough that barely anyone had heard the outburst. But Artemis and Zatanna glanced over in concern. Slowly, they made their way towards them.

Barbara looked at Tim's face, and felt something inside her snap. Her chin shook against her will.

"You don't know a #$^# thing," she said. It was shocking to hear how her voice sounded. "My
sister is dead, Tim, and do you know what? I wish it’d been me, too."

Hot tears fell from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Dick instantly pulled her into a hug, but she shook him off. A glance at Tim at least revealed a bit of shame, but it was too late. As she pushed Dick away, she gulped and said,

"I'm...I'm going home. Goodnight."

"Babs," Dick said, catching her wrist gently. She pulled away and rushed towards the zeta tube. Artemis and Zatanna stood in her way, but she shoved past them, shooting them teary apologies, before typing in the code. The zeta tube whirled to life.

**RECOGNIZED: BATGIRL B09**

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Dick whirled on Tim. The younger boy shrunk back a little, and released his hold on the tablecloth.

"What the $%&*,$ Tim?" Dick snapped.

"I—"

Artemis and Zatanna raced over, almost colliding with the refreshment table. Zatanna's hair was a mess of flowers and tangles, probably from shoving her way through a room full of teenagers. Both girls' eyes were wide, shocked.

"Is Barbara okay?" Zee demanded. "She's crying!"

That was cause enough for shock. The Batkids made it a point never to cry around the others. Maybe it was something they'd picked up from their mentor, a 'never show weakness' kind of thing, or maybe they just did it to keep up the tough-as-nails vibe. Dick didn't really care at the moment.

Artemis's face was curled into an angry grimace. "I swear to crap, if Karin's behind this—"

"No, actually," Dick interjected, mouth twisting, "Robin's the one who did it."

They all turned to Tim, who shrunk just a little bit more. Artemis gaped.

"What the &%#$ did you say to her?"

Tim stuck out his chin. "Look, I—"

"I'm going after her," Dick said firmly. Zatanna stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Dick," she whispered, "Don't. She needs a little space. Some time to calm down. Give it an hour, then call her."

He considered, then nodded. Maybe she just needed to blow off a little steam. They'd all had a rough last few weeks, but Barbara especially. Something had happened a week or two after
Stephanie's death. Babs had been taking it hard before, but at that point, something in her had seemed to snap. She didn't sleep, didn't eat, didn't hardly talk, even. But she'd gotten better lately. Or so he'd thought.

"Alright," he conceded. "I'll call her later."

He waited until both of his former Team mates had reluctantly wandered away, then turned sharply to Tim. "Let me tell you something, Tim."

His little brother's eyes were wide. "Look, Dick. I'm sorry. I just—"

Dick put up a hand, and he fell silent. "You can mourn," he said. "That's fine. That's normal. It's what we've all been doing. But the minute you start lashing out at us, that's where I put my foot down."

Tim's eyes flashed. "Are you guys really that upset?" he demanded. His tone was mocking. "Cause from what I've seen, you don't look all that broken up."

Dick resisted the urge to bang his fist down on the table. Jason had had an attitude like this when he was Robin—still did, but that was beside the point—and Dick had almost dropkicked him off a building once or twice. Lately, he'd been dealing with Tim's moodiness more and more, and he'd had just about enough.

"So, let me get this straight, then. We're all just fine. Our little sister's in the ground right now, and none of us gives a #%$&. Just you."

Tim blinked. "That's not—"

"Look, little brother. You were in the cave for the whole thing, so maybe you don't really understand." He took a deep breath, arms crossed. "You weren't the one who had to find her. Jason was. And let me tell you, that messed him up."

"Nightwing."

"You weren't the one who hijacked a truck, then ran three miles to the clinic with severe injuries when that truck ran out of gas, only to get there just in time to watch her die."

His voice broke on that last word. Tim's eyes were wide.

"Barbara was. And do you know who had to drag himself away from his little sister's bedside and go home to tell his brother…" He cleared his throat and looked away. "That was me. So let me tell you, just for the record. None of us is fine, not really. Maybe we're all just trying to keep a stiff upper lip, so that our little brother doesn't have to see us lose it every time someone says her name."

"Dick. I'm…I'm sorry."

Tim's voice was quiet, and the boy looked like he wanted to crawl underneath the refreshment table and spend the rest of the week there. Dick sighed.

"No, Timmy. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have…” He shook his head. "Never mind. Go find your friends. Go have some fun, okay? But when we get home, you're going to apologize."

"Right. I will."

"Good. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think Roy's challenging me to a dance-off."
He waved at the archer, and stepped away from Robin. Tim would get it someday. And he'd regret those words, even without help from his older brother.

"Captain America?" Roy laughed as soon as he'd gotten over.

"Heh. Says the guy dressed up as a ninja turtle." Dick grinned, shoving down any non-happy thoughts. "Let's do this."

Roy laughed.

Batgirl leaned over the edge of the building, watching the scene ten feet below her. Three thugs with knives surrounded a girl. She was young, short, probably about fifteen, if Batgirl had to wager a guess. When the thugs brandished their weapons, she let out a desperate whimper and shrunk against the building's wall.

"Don't worry, babe," one of the men said, leering. He whipped out another small switchblade that gleamed in the Gotham city street light. "This is gonna feel great, don't worry."

The others laughed and closed in. One of them grasped the collar of the girl's shirt in his fist. She let out a scream.

From her perch, Batgirl cleared her throat loudly. All three men and the girl looked up in shock.

"Honestly. Men these days." She tumbled forward, and felt the air rush up on her face. She rolled on contact, then smiled as her feet made soft contact with the asphalt. Perfect landing.

"See, the gentlemanly thing to do," she ticked off a gloved finger, "is to ask her out. Then you buy her dinner. If all goes well, you both make it home with all your teeth in place." She cracked her knuckles for emphasis. "But it looks like you boys are out of luck tonight."

She turned her head slightly, not enough that she was looking away from the threat, but just enough that she could see the poor quivering civilian.

"You probably shouldn't be out walking alone this late, sweetheart. But you'll be okay. You're gonna want to stand back, though."

The thugs raised their knives, and laughed.

"Finally!" Their leader shouted. His heavy breath made clouds in the night air. "We've been waiting all night for you, Bratgirl!"

Batgirl tensed as they pulled back their shirt collars. Each of them had a matching ink green mark on their necks. Not tattoos, they were just markings, but they still set off alarm bells in Batgirl's head.

Question marks. Riddler's men.
She pulled herself into a ready stance. "Run," she told the girl. She nodded and, a second later, Barbara heard the pattering of footsteps on the hard wet ground. One of the thugs chuckled and threw his knife. There was a sickening thud, and a small cry. Batgirl whirled around in horror. The girl lay face down on the street. A black puddle pooled on the shining asphalt beneath her. Out of her back, a knife handle gleamed.

Barbara's eyes stung.

"You'll pay for that," she snarled. "I promise."

The thugs lunged.

One of them swiped at her belly with his knife, but she leapt back quickly, and used her momentum to spin and land a fist into his face. He squealed as his nose crunched beneath her knuckles. Another landed a punch to her jaw. She retaliated with a swift uppercut and a side swing. The third thug grabbed her from behind, and lifted her into the air. She wrapped her leg around his and bent down. With a swift jerk on his ankle, the man was on the ground. She planted her boot heel in his crotch, then ducked to avoid a blow to the head.

She kept them dancing for a what seemed like hours. Later, she'd learn that it was only about two minutes. It would have gone on just a little longer, but one of them pulled a gun.

He pressed it against her collarbone, and pushed, forcing her to put her hands up and place her back against the brick wall.

"You guys are good," she conceded. "Where on earth did Nygma find quality thugs? His usuals kind of suck."

One of them laughed.

"Seriously," she said, scowling, "Now, boys, what's the plan? Shoot me dead?"

The thug holding the gun leaned in closer, and his breath on her face stank of old cigarettes and onions. He laughed in her face.

"No, see," he said, "Riddler was very specific. He's going to have us bring you to him. Then, he's gonna call up your boss, and give him a list of riddles. For every one he gets wrong, Riddler's gonna carve you up, little by little. But here' s the catch, sugar. Even if he gets 'em all right, you're dead."

The last word was spit into her face. All three of them laughed. Batgirl's eyed drifted to the gun. If she could just distract them…

"Ah, finally. There you boys are."

A voice drifted from the end of the alley. All eyes turned to a girl with arms crossed over her chest. Thick wavy blonde hair flipped over half her face, and she wore her trademark fishnet tights and leather jacket.

Dina Lance. Black Canary.

Also from another dimension, as her counterpart from this universe was a full-grown woman. But, while she and Karin had evidently come through to their dimension at the same time, Dina had ended up arriving about eight years prior, and eight years younger. (It gave Batgirl a bit of a headache if she thought about it too long.)
As to where she'd ended up? An old alley on the corner of Eighty-fifth and Lark. Right in front of a young red-head lounging outside a dingy diner, hoping for a handout.

While the thugs' eyes were on Canary, Batgirl grasped the barrel of the pistol and jerked it to the side, away from her chest. It went off with a bang that drew the attention (unfortunately) back to her.

She and Canary threw themselves into the fray.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," Batgirl said, as she landed a right hook to a man's jaw. Dina spun into a roundhouse kick that sent another staggering off.

"Always a pleasure," she huffed. Not angry, just fighting.

"What brings you to Gotham?"

Canary brought her knee up, and a thug squealed like an infant girl.

"These bozos are from over in Cormorant. Mercenaries. Fun, right?"

"So much fun."

Batgirl slugged the man who'd held a gun to her chest in the jaw. Just like that, he was down for the count.

The fight lasted two minutes, maybe three. After that, Batgirl pulled three pairs of nylon cuffs from her belt and strapped the men to a light pole.

Dina turned and wrapped her arms around Barbara's shoulders.

"It has been way too long!" She said, as they both laughed.

Dina was a full-on vigilante; she belonged to no team or league. No one mentored her, not even the Black Canary from this Earth. Dina never complained, though. She'd always preferred to do things her own way.

"I'm sorry," Batgirl shrugged. "I've been so busy."

"Right." Dina nodded and stuck her hands in her jacket pockets. "The gang war. I heard about it on the news. Crazy stuff. Glad you're okay."

There was a pang when Dina mentioned the calamity. But Barbara forced a smile.

"Back at you. All alone in Cormorant. You sure you've got the city under control?"

Dina shrugged. "It's fine. Seriously, though. You should ditch those boys and come clean it up with me."

They shared a laugh. Barbara told her she couldn't.

"Riiight. I think we both know the real reason you won't. Ring a bell? Tall, dark, has a big blue bird on his chest?"

Barbara chuckled and blushed. Dina nodded, taking that for an answer. "Fine. But you and I are so grabbing lunch sometime, okay? I know this great place on—"
One of the men groaned, "Augh. When are the police getting here already?"

They both turned and told him to shut up.

The cops, it turned out, arrived two minutes after that. A man pulled himself from the driver's seat of a patrol car and grinned.

"Now, see fellas?" He said, turning to his comrades, "This is the kind of thing I like to see. We have three of our wanteds all tied up, and at no cost to us."

Captain Bullock was a large man. He had the pudge around his middle that all middle-aged men seemed to acquire eventually, but his largeness mostly came from his height and sheer personality. He lumbered over to the three thugs and bent down to look them in the eyes.

"Now tell me," he said, "How does it feel to have your keisters handed to you by a couple of girls?"

The thugs' dark expressions darkened.


Bullock straightened. "I don't believe we've met. Harvey Bullock. My friends call me Captain."

Batgirl smiled. "Evening, Bullock."

He tipped his hat. "Good to see you again, sweetheart. Your old man still treating you good?"

She shrugged and smiled. Bullock laughed.

"Well, that's him, ain't it? Thanks again for bagging these clowns."

Barbara's face crumpled. "Bullock, there's, um..." she turned her head to the dark bleeding heap a few yards away. Harvey followed her gaze and his jaw slackened a little. He swore under his breath.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I wasn't fast enough."

He snapped his fingers, and two of his officers went to go and check the body.

There was a soft flapping noise behind her. Dina jumped a little, but Barbara was used to it.

"Nice night for a run, isn't it? Thanks again for bagging these clowns."

"I thought you had somewhere to be," he said. "Good evening, Canary."

Dina mumbled a greeting and took a few halted steps backward. Barbara stuck her chin up.

"I did. Gotham. Crime never sleeps, and all that."

"I told you I would be patrolling alone tonight."

There was a tense silence. Bullock cleared his throat, a grating noise that cut through the air. "Hey, now. Go easy on her, Bats. She did good."

Batman's expression softened slightly, and he nodded. "I agree," he said. "Why don't you call it a night? I don't give you very many breaks. Take advantage."
She raised an eyebrow. "You're serious?"

He placed a hand on her shoulder and steered her further into the alley. "A moment, please. Bullock. Canary."

Barbara stepped away once they were out of earshot, and leaned up against the bricks, arms folded tightly over her chest. The smell of rain and damp and garbage was thick in the alley. Her nose wrinkled a little as she breathed it in.


Batman regarded her carefully, like he would an Arkham patient. That is, he looked like he was dealing very carefully with her, afraid of setting her off, or triggering a violent outburst.

"I'll be frank, then. You're not acting like yourself."

She huffed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's like...you're made of glass. I hadn't anticipated that the gang wars would have this effect on you."

Her gloves cracked as she squeezed her hands into fists. Her vision was tinted a bit red. Made of glass? Maybe she was. She'd just killed a man. No need to let him think it was anything but grief, though.

"Look," she said, "I love the boys. I really do. But...there's something about having a little sister, Boss-man. Something different. I trained her, I laughed with her, I watched chick flicks on the couch with her while we stuffed our faces with popcorn. And then...I saw her in that hospital bed. She was a bloody mess. You remember, right?" She took a deep breath. "Her eyes. Do you remember her eyes? That sick, twisted maniac took a scalpel to the left one. He hacked at her body with saws and knives. He drilled holes in her skin, crushed lit cigarettes into her arms... Don't you remember? She's dead. And you think it's the gang war that's got me this way?"

Batman was silent for a while, taking in her words carefully. Finally, the cogs in his head seemed to click into place.

"I'm sorry. I don't think I can ever apologize enough. But you were almost killed tonight. You're off your game. I'm asking you to take the night off. Please."

She looked over her shoulder at him. "I'm not going back to the party."

"Then go home. Agent A can make hot chocolate. You can watch TV, or whatever you want."

She huffed. Turned away. Then a hand snagged her shoulder, and Bruce continued. "But I'm worried about you. If you stay out here when you're like this, something is going to happen, and you are going to slip. Please, Barbara. Let yourself relax for a night. You'd be surprised how well it works."

She was almost insulted that he didn't think that she could handle herself. But she knew he was right. She needed to rest.

"Fine," she sighed. "But I'm patrolling with you tomorrow."

The corner of his mouth quirked. "Of course."
She walked towards the flashing red and blue lights, with a faked smile. She hugged Dina.

"Lunch. Next Tuesday. Yes?"

Dina squeezed her shoulders and flashed a grin. "Yes."

She nodded to Bullock. "Evening."

He saluted with one finger and gave her a closed lipped smile. "Take care, sweetheart."

"I will."

She pumped her right fist into the sky, and shot a line up to a looming skyscraper. Saluting to the GCPD officers, she swung up into the air. The euphoric feeling of flight sent sunshine flooding through her veins as the city glittered brightly beneath her. She loved this.

She loved it, and she never wanted to let it go.

"Thanks, Alfred," she said, accepting the toasty warm mug. The slightly damp sides warmed her fingers, and she took a long, grating sip. The rich chocolatiness flowed down her throat and settled liked a warm fuzzy kitten in the pit of her stomach. She sighed happily.

Alfred smiled and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Right then, Miss Barbara. Tonight, you are going to sit in this chair and read. I'll be in the kitchen making cookies. Frosted ones. Shaped like pumpkins, perhaps?"

She settled into the soft plush armchair. "That sounds lovely."

He smiled. "Straight away, then. I'll come find you when they're ready."

As he turned to leave, Barbara sat up a little and snagged his sleeve. "Alfred?"

He turned. "Hmm?"

She beamed. "Thank you."

His fond smile widened, and he shut the library door behind him with a soft click.

A fire crackled in the hearth. For a few minutes, she watched the flames dance brightly over the logs.

Then, she flexed her toes in the dull warmth it provided, and tucked her feet up into the chair. She opened her book (To Kill a Mockingbird) and brought the pages up to her nose to inhale the sweet, musty aroma of old book.

So. This was what relaxation felt like. Maybe she'd have to wrestle a few more nights like this out of Bruce. Maybe, he'd been right.
Then, she let herself settle into the world of Maycomb and Jem and Scout and Calpurnia and Atticus. The words flowed through her just like the cocoa had.

She'd just read past the fourth chapter when her phone buzzed.

The ringtone played brightly. The song was called ‘Circus’. She couldn't remember the name of the artist, but the bright tune meant that Dick was calling her.

"Hello? Count Dracula's mansion. You track in mud, we suck your blood. How can I be of service?"

On the line, Dick chuckled at her fake accent.

"Clever," he said. "You come up with that one all by yourself?"

"Duh, Wingnut."

There was a pause. "You're okay? Right?"

"Hmm," she replied, "I thought it was Halloween, not national worrywarts' day." She added a lilt to the end, and a giggle, so that he'd know she was joking. Mostly joking.

"Yeah. It totally is. Didn't you know it's my favorite holiday?"

"Mmm."

They were silent, only listening to the sound of the other breathing on the other end. She took a sip from her mug, and closed her eyes as the drink warmed her insides. Finally, Dick spoke.

"He feels bad, if it's any consolation."

"Good," she said, "It's about time he stops playing the angsty teenager. It got old a long time ago, and we've all got enough to worry about."

"Don't be too harsh. That's all I'm saying." Dick's voice crackled through softly. "What are you up to, by the way?"

"Reading by a warm toasty fire."

He laughed. "No, really. You're patrolling with the boss, aren't you?"

"Really," she insisted. "Night off."

Dick coughed, probably choking on whatever he'd snagged from the refreshment table. "Seriously? Not fair!"

"You can't see, Grayson, but I'm sticking my tongue out at you."

"Sure. Rub it in." A pause. "You're all good, then?"

She sighed and snuggled into the plush chair. "Definitely feeling the aster." She lifted her sleeve, and inspected it with a smug smile. "I'm wearing your shirt, by the way. Hope you don't mind."

"Ha! Good. I'll be needing that back later."

She picked at the top button. "You'll have to come get it."
"That's what I'm counting on. Love you."

She smiled. "You too, Wingnut."

He laughed softly before a soft click ended the call. She smiled. Could the night get any better? She opened back up to Jem and Scout's escapades. Suddenly, there was a soft rap on the library door. She shut the book softly. Were Alfred's cookies done already?

The knock came again, more insistent.

"I'm coming," she called. Barbara gently unfolded herself from the chair, letting the soft fabric of her skirt brush against her legs. She padded silently on the wood flooring, feet sticking slightly.

Her hand grasped the cold doorknob, the toasty mug clenched in the other.

"Hey, Alfred. I—"

The door swung open all the way, and Barbara stood silently. Still with shock. For a brief moment, her mind jumped to the Halloween mask Dick had had earlier. White face. Wide, red grin. She stared into those yellowed teeth, then her gaze travelled down to the camera hanging around his neck. An old fashioned one, like something you'd see a middle-aged tourist lugging around…

It was Joker.

That awful grin beamed down at her, making her blood run cold.

Something jabbed hard against her stomach, and she looked down.

Pistol. Trigger. Danger!

Her mind felt disconnected from her body. She couldn't think. All she could do was slowly look up into his shadowed eyes and—

BANG

Her world exploded in a flash of lightning. The pain was so unexpected, and she felt herself yanked backwards. Her hair fluttered into her face. She hit the floor with a sudden painful whack that knocked the air out of her lungs. The mug shattered on contact with the ground, and so did something in her back.

Her legs twitched violently. She brought her shaking hands up to the source of the fire, and it all suddenly hit her like a train.

Barbara hadn't realized everything had slowed until it all came rushing back at once.

Hot tears streaked down her cheeks.

It...

Burned...

Oh...

#$*%...
Please…

aaAAHHH!

Her breath came in shaking gasps. The lights above were too bright, too close, and they swirled and flickered painfully.

Can’t…

Breathe…

Help…

Someone…

Help!

She was vaguely aware of footsteps. So many. So…so many. They pounded inside of her skull…

She tipped back her head and let out a painful, gasping moan.

"Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. Looks like I was right, boys."

Laughter…

Laughing…

At…

Her…

"See, it took some thinking." Joker chuckled in delight. "I looked high and low, all over this city. And do you know what?"

Hurt…

It…

Hurt…


His leering white face was close to hers now. Much too close. She squeezed her eyes shut. The only defense she had left.

"I was right."

Why?

It…

Burned…

Ah…

"I did some thinking, see. I knew as soon as I saw you that you were the one, kid! You're the straw that's gonna break the camel's back."
He patted her cheek.

"You Bats are all ssssooo predictable," he sighed, trailing a finger down her tear-soaked cheek. "Everyone in this whole city knows that Bruce Wayne is bosom buddies with old Batsy. So, it stands to reason that the Bat would give him some semblance of protection, say, in the form of a lovely young protégé? What do you think?"

The…

Pain…

Why…

Help…

Please…

Joker's hand froze in place, pressed against her cheek. He lifted the red curls off her face. Silence.

"There's that pretty little face. But where's the smile? Aren't you happy to see me again?"

He threw his head back and laughed. Laughed. Laughed. Laughed…

"I saw your face on the news, dear heart. Some interview here with good ol' Brucie. Are you his maid? You are, aren't you?"

No…

He…

Knew…

Help…

Hurt…

"Now, I know what you're thinking. Your face, sweet cheeks. How did I remember? Well…hello! The apartment? Hoodie's little sleepover? When he almost shot you in the brain?" His voice was mocking. He spoke to her like he would a six-year-old. "Don't you remember? I guessed that the only person Bats would trust his little cash cow with was…not Nightwing, not Robin…definitely not Hoodie. Mmm, no. So that left only one more person, didn't it? His favorite!"

He whispered her name into her ear. Her real one.

"Barbara."

He cackled.

Laughing…
Help...

Somebody...

Please...

"Nnn," she whimpered.

Joker’s fingers curled around her neck, then lifted and pulled. The floor dragged beneath her, and her back screeched and screamed in protest. She let out a sharp yelp.

Joker dumped her in a heap onto the rug in front of the hearth. The flames felt too close, too hot. There was something wrong with her lower back…something terribly wrong…nothing should hurt this much. Nothing.

"So. Here's the deal, sweetheart. I made a bet with your boss last time we met, and I intend to win."

He leaned in close. His breath tickled her ear.

Too close. Too hot.

Please...

Someone...

Anyone...

It...

Hurt...

"I realize, kiddo, that I can kill his little boys. Blow 'em up, shoot 'em, take a crowbar to their heads...ah, good times! And the funniest thing? Bats doesn't give a #%*! But his little girl?" He adjusted the lens on his camera, and reached for her slowly. "Well. That's different, isn't it? See, once I'm all finished here, he's going to come after me. And I'm going to win."

She cracked open her eyes.

"G-go ah-ahead....kill...huh...m-me-he."

Ah...

Ahh...

Hurt...

So...

Much...

Laughter. Then, "Oh, I'm not going to kill you, kiddo. No, no..."

He flicked open the top button of Dick's shirt, pulling the fabric aside...Pressure on her chest. Pulling. Ripping.

Breath...
Laughter…

Heavy…

Sigh…

Scream…

Press…

Hurt…

Agony…

BruceDickJasonTimAlfredStephanieAnyone

HELP…!

…Please...Help…
For years to come, everyone on the Team, the Titans, the League, and the Bat Family would remember where they were and what they were doing before they heard the news at approximately 2:36 in the morning, November First.

Flash was helping Green Lantern with Watchtower duty. There was nothing worth noting being recorded on the sensors or systems. No natural disasters, no major coups or revolutions. Just the average, everyday little bits of crime.

Cassie Sandsmark and Jaime Reyes were making out behind the marble statue of Superman.

Batman was sending the Riddler off in an armored Arkham truck, his latest plan (whatever it had been) foiled before it had even been put into motion.

Tim Drake had sneaked out of the party to be by his side.

For years to come, no one knew who called the police to Wayne Manor. Their best guess? Maybe one of the thugs that had been with the Joker had had a change of conscience. Maybe a passing jogger had heard the screams of the victim inside, though that seemed doubtful.

But when Bruce Wayne and Tim Drake emerged from the grandfather clock at 2:14 a.m., Commissioner James Gordon stood there to meet them. Shoulders slumped from an impossible weight, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his worn trench coat, and eyes glancing over them solemnly.

Tim startled back, covering his face with his hands. Bruce only nodded to the Commissioner.

"It's alright, Tim."

Tim removed his hand, his expression full of curiosity, and maybe a little bit of disdain.

"Who else knows?" he demanded. "How did he find out?"

"It's just me and Bullock."

"I told him," Bruce said to his ward. Then, to Gordon, "Good Evening, Jim. But with all due respect, why are you in my home?"

Gordon's face sagged. The air seemed to have been sucked out of the hallway.

"Jim?"

"So you don't know?" he asked softly. "I thought…"

He released a deep sigh. Something like panic mounted in Bruce's chest. Where was Alfred? Where was Barbara?

"Jim? What happened?"

Gordon pulled his glasses off, and cleaned them with the edge of his shirt. The Commissioner wasn't young, but he rarely showed his age. Right then, Commissioner Gordon looked a hundred
years old.

He held the glasses up in the dim light and squinted, before placing them back on his face.

"We received an anonymous tip that someone had broken into Wayne manor. Took a Taser to a Mr. Alfred Pennyworth."

Bruce sucked in a breath.

"Is he alright?" He demanded. The Batman façade slipped. He was all Bruce Wayne, and the man who had raised him was... "Alfred. How is he?"

Gordon planted his hands in his pockets and jerked his head as a signal for the other two to follow him down the hallway. Their footsteps made soft sounds on the carpet. They passed the bronze bust of William Oscar Wayne, but Tim didn't even make a sound, let alone a move to rub the statue's head.

"Please, Commissioner," Tim said, "Is Alfred okay?"

Gordon stopped at the end of a branching hallway. To their left, police officers and detectives scurried around an open door. The library.

"Mr. Pennyworth's fine. Paramedics took him to a hospital a few moments ago, but I think they'll release him fairly quickly."

Two women dressed in paramedics' uniforms pushed past them in the hallway.

"Commissioner," one of them said. She and her companion held a stretcher between them.

"Just in there." Gordon pointed to the library door. Bruce turned sharply to Gordon, and the panic raced back, full force.

"If the paramedics already took Alfred to the hospital, then—"

Gordon was stone faced.

Bruce's eyes widened. "No."

Tim jumped. "Bruce?"

"No."

Bruce shoved past Gordon and the paramedics. Two police officers tried to bar him from entering, but he bellowed and pushed through.

The library was tagged floor to ceiling in dripping purple and green graffiti. It covered the spines of books on his shelves, it plastered the walls. Wide stretching grins and one repeating word:

*HA HA HA*

"No," he said. Then, he looked down at his feet. A large red stain pooled then smeared over the wood panels of the floor. Spatters, drops and smudges painted the polished flooring. One large smear streaked away from his toes, stretching on and on like a horrible red ribbon. It led to the fireplace, where on-scene paramedics were crowded around something. Bruce's attention focused on the pile of bloodstained clothing at the edge of the hearth rug. Gray skirt. One of Dick's blue dress shirts... He recognized those clothes. They belonged to... His attention returned to the
fireplace.

He was vaguely aware of Tim standing next to him. The boy was shaking, and he was quite possibly reliving the night he'd gone home and discovered his father lying in a pool of his own blood. Bruce knew it because his own mind was following a similar pattern.

The next thing he saw was the hearth rug. It was saturated red. The paramedics were spreading out, now, making way for the two women bearing the stretcher.

And Bruce saw what was on the hearth…

Who was on the rug…

"Tim," he snapped, "Don't look."

Tim was frozen, staring in shock at the pale and bloody heap.

"Timothy Jackson Drake, close your eyes!"

Tim turned, and vomited onto the wood floor.

At 3:31, just thirty-three minutes after the GCPD had arrived at Wayne Manor, the Watchtower's Halloween Party was still in full swing.

Dick managed to corner Jaime by Jason's DJ table. The Blue Beetle had a dreamy expression on his face, and Dick thought at first that the Titans had spiked the punch bowl again. But then he noticed the streak of lipstick at the corner of Jaime's mouth.

"So," Dick said, leaning against the table. "My little brother happened to sneak off somewhere. I thought I asked you to keep an eye on him."

Jaime reached back to scratch his neck.

"Heh, um. Sorry about that, man. I was…a little busy."

"I'm sure."

Bart materialized by Jaime's side. His eyes were wide open and scared.

"Dudes," he said, "What time is it?"

Dick raised an eyebrow. "How come? Barry didn't give you a curfew, did he?"

That was doubtful. Superheroes didn't have curfews. Especially not the Flash Family. Still, Bart looked petrified.

"What. Time."
Jaime and Dick exchanged a confused glance, and Jaime flipped his phone on.

"It's 3:35, Hermano. That's about five minutes after the last time I gave you. What are you so worried about, anyhow? The night is still young, as a wise man once told me."

Instead of whooping and racing back into the crowd, Bart's pupils contracted. His fingers twitched.

"Oh, man. Ohmanohmanohman…"

Dick's phone buzzed. He picked it up and turned away from the boys, one hand over his ear.

"Bruce," he whispered. "Why are you using phones? Are comms down?"

His mentor's voice came out husky and rushed. When he'd finished, Dick's entire body buzzed with adrenaline as his mind struggled to process the words he'd just heard.

Manor…attack…Joker…gunshot…Barbara…

He pressed the end call button. The phone clattered against the floor, and the screen shattered.

"Jason!" he bellowed. "Jason!"

The music quieted, and Jason's face appeared in the crowd, as everyone turned to stare at Dick.

"Jason!"

His brother was at his side in a second, one hand on Dick's shoulder. His eyes were narrowed, probably with irritation. It wasn't like no one knew his real name—especially after his funeral—but Red Hood didn't like having it publicly announced. "What?"

Dick grabbed him by the shoulders and hurriedly whispered the words in his ear. Jason stepped back, eyes wide. He swore. Loudly. He kept repeating the word over and over.

Both bat brothers turned and raced out of the forum. It only took a second to enter the coordinates, but to Dick, it felt like too long. The zeta tube whirled and roared to life, and the two men leapt through without a moment's hesitation.

The music was gone now, and a dull roar had settled over the room as everyone turned to each other to ask what the #$%% was wrong with the Bats.

Jaime turned to Bart. "What's going on?"

Bart's eyes were wide. Artemis raced over and wrapped her arms around Kid Flash's shoulders. Bart suddenly looked very small.

"Something happened," she said breathlessly. The room quieted down as Aqualad mounted the steps of the DJs podium. He held up a phone-like device. Whatever was on it had caused him to turn an ashen color that was reminiscent of a corpse. Then, wetting his lips, he spoke.

"The League is initiating a mandatory lockdown."

"How long?" someone shouted.

Aqualad's expression was solemn. "Until further notice."

There was an outcry as everyone complained about being locked in. Some of them had school in a
few hours. Some of them had families to get back to. One of the Titans was complaining loudly about a midterm she had to study for. A Team member shouted something about his parents flipping out.

All talk ceased when Aqualad cleared his throat.

"The League is initiating a mandatory lockdown," he repeated. "Batgirl has just been shot. Out of uniform."

There were several screams. Artemis and Jaime both looked at Bart. Artemis started to cry.

"History books…” Bart muttered. "%^# it."

Artemis sobbed.

______________________________________________________________

Batman stood guard at the bedside. The doctors had been reluctant to let him in; costumed freaks tended to cause trouble. But Commissioner Gordon whispered into a few ears. This girl was a friend of the dark knight. He needed to be by her side until she woke up, so that he could ask her a few questions about the…the incident.

Bullock and Robin had insisted on being present as well. The wizened old captain was nearly beside himself.

"I should've done something," he kept muttering. "I saw her, like, and hour before it happened…”

In the hospital bed, Barbara was sleeping soundly. She was stuck full of IV's and wrapped in a thin hospital gown. A kindly nurse had cleaned her up after the surgery and brushed the blood out of her hair.

"Poor thing," she'd said, sadly, "Girl didn't deserve nothing like that. But, who does?"

In the meantime, his partner remained asleep. Tim sat at her bedside, holding her pale hand between his two gloves. Carefully, as if he was afraid of breaking her. Bruce worried about that, too. Barbara was ghostly pale—most likely suffering from the effects of losing so much blood—and almost appeared to be made of glass.

One of the Doctors eventually stepped into the room and brushed them to the side. He selected a pointed metal needle off a waiting tray, and pulled back the sheets covering her feet. He pressed the point against the sole of her foot, and glanced up at her face. There was no reaction. Not even a twitch.


The doctor let out a heavy sigh, and replaced the sheet over Barbara's toes. The slick, sliding sound of the fabric set Bruce's teeth on edge. There was a finality to it, like a grim announcement. Then, sure enough, the doctor wet his lips and said, slowly, turning to a hovering nurse,
"I'm afraid that our initial diagnosis was correct. It appears that the bullet severed the patient's spinal cord upon contact."

He shut his eyes for a moment, and looked at Barbara's resting form.

"I'm very sorry to tell you this," he said, this time to the Dark Knight. "But she'll never walk again."

Bullock swore under his breath and turned away. Bruce looked to Tim. His face was a mask of horror. He held Barbara's hand more tightly and whispered, "Babs, I'm so, so sorry."

Batman himself felt like putting his fist through the wall. He could have screamed, flipped the hospital equipment across the room. Anything but stand there like a stone gargoyle. But that was what he did, because that was all that he could do.

The more selfish part of him had a more selfish thought. He'd spent years—years—grooming this girl to take up the mantle when he retired. She was skilled, she was brilliant, and without a doubt, she would have surpassed even Bruce one day.

But one shot. One shot. One bullet had taken all of that away forever. Because now, Barbara would never even be able to don a cape again. Let alone leap from skyscrapers and soar into the night.

What had he done?


"Of course."

"Yeah... Yeah. I need to go tell the Commish."

The door shut with a metallic click behind them, and all was silent. The only sound was the steady beeping of the EKG monitor next to the hospital bed, and the steady humming of the machinery.

_BEEP...BEEP....BEEP..._

"I can't believe it," Tim said. He stared at Barbara's closed eyes. Both mentor and protégé stared forlornly at their wounded partner for an eternity, listening to the steady beat of the EKG. Bruce still couldn't process the idea that his daughter would never again step over to his side and offer him a mug of cocoa after a long night of patrol. She'd never be there to watch his six in a fight, or match his stride on a rooftop...

Tim finally spoke, interrupting Bruce's thoughts. "This is my fault."

Bruce placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "The Joker did this, Tim. Wh—"

"No, Batman," he said, "You don't understand. Before she left the party…" he gulped a breath of air. His hands shook around her limp one. "We had a fight. I told her that it was her fault…her fault for Stephanie. I…I told her that I wished she was dead."

Bruce shut his eyes. "Tim…"

"I made her cry," Tim croaked. "Somehow, I-I jinxed her. Maybe I messed her up too bad…made her lose focus. If I hadn't said those things, she could have stopped Joker."

"It isn't your fault, any more than mine. I'm the one who told her to go home. She never would have been there otherwise."
Tim seemed to ignore him, and fixed his gaze on the EKG monitor.

_BEEP...BEEP...BEEP_...

"I'm a curse, aren't I?" he muttered. "Everyone I love, everyone I care about…"

"Robin."

"Mom, Dad, Stephanie…now this."

Bruce had been about to lecture his ward on the concept that had kept him up many a night. The classic 'sometimes bad things happen to good people' bit that Alfred had force-fed him over and over throughout his childhood. But just then, Barbara sucked a breath in through her nose. A sharp breath, just enough to make them both jump.

Under her lids, her eyes twitched, then blinked. Then, slowly, opened.

"Mmmmm..." she groaned, squinting in the light, "B-Bruce? Timmy?"

"Barbara," they both sighed. Tim reached up to embrace her, but Bruce quickly stopped him. No touching, the nurse had said. They still weren't sure how far the damage extended.

"Where am I?" Barbara asked softly, squinting as she surveyed the room. Bruce watched her eyes go to the vent, then to the door, automatically cataloguing it in her mind as a possible escape route. He'd taught her that, too. "Why…? Am I…"

"How much do you remember?" Bruce asked her. She stared off into space, and was silent. Then, she said.

"I was…I was reading. Alfred was making cookies. I heard a knock on the door, and—"

Her breath hitched like she'd been hit with a lead pipe, pupils contracting. Her fingernails gripped the edges of the sheets.

_BEEP_BEEP_BEEP_BEEP_BEEP

"Oh," she gasped. "Oh, no…"

"Barbara," Bruce said, rushing to her side. "You need to calm down. Please, just—"

"I remember," she cried, her voice cracking, "H-he—"

_BEEPBEEPBEEPBEEPBEEP

The EKG monitor sped up. Barbara began to scream, sobbing loud and shrill as her eyes looked up at the ceiling, seeing something that Bruce and Tim could not. She thrashed in her bed and screamed with renewed intensity.

"Robin!" Bruce shouted, "Go and get a doctor!"

"No!" Barbara screamed, "Let go of me!"

Bruce realized that his hands were on her wrists, but he kept them there in the hopes of keeping her in the bed.

"Get off!"
"Barbara—"

She screamed at him, face red and strained. Eyes wide, mouth stretched open.

"DON'T TOUCH ME! GET AWAY FROM ME!"

A doctor rushed into the room, followed by a harried nurse and a very worried Robin. They instructed Batman to stand back while the nurse prepped a syringe. He let go of Barbara, but that was a mistake. She shrieked and rolled herself out of the bed. Her body hit the floor with a slap, and everyone fell silent. Barbara gasped like a landed fish, and Bruce saw her face. Her eyes were wide, blue and red, with tears streaming freely in rivulets down her cheeks. Her mouth hung open as she gasped shallowly.

"No," she muttered. "No…why…my…my legs…"

The nurse bent and inserted the syringe into Barbara's arm, depressing the plunge. Barbara shuddered, then fell silent.

"That will sedate her for a while," the doctor said. "She needs rest. The sudden shock…well, she needs to come to terms with what happened slowly. When she wakes up again, we'll let you know. In the meantime, we're going to ask you to wait in the lobby."

The sheer ridiculousness of asking Batman and Robin to sit in a waiting room was bad enough. But the implication in the doctor's voice that it was their fault…it was too much. Bruce cast Barbara one more regretful glance, then turned and followed Robin and the nurse out of the room.

As they stepped into the waiting area, they came upon another scuffle. Three orderlies were holding Nightwing back, and struggling to do so. Red Hood stood nearby with his helmet under his arm. He argued with a nurse, gesticulating wildly.

The orderlies holding his oldest son were gasping and straining. Bruce was surprised Dick hadn't laid each of them flat on their backs as of yet.

"No, I don't think you understand, ma'am," Jason growled, "That's my sister in there. She's been &^#%*!# shot by the % $#%^!% Joker!"

Jason's face was red, but Bruce thought that he was holding himself together fairly well. He hadn't shot anyone yet, at least. Both boys stopped when they saw Batman and Robin enter the room. Jason dismissed the nurse with a wave, and the orderlies carefully let go of Dick, after Bruce shot them a withering glance. The two vigilantes rushed over to their mentor.

"Is she going to make it?"

"What the %*$ happened?"

"Will—"

Batman held up a hand and said,

"She's going to be fine." At the same time Robin moaned, "It's horrible."

They exchanged a glance, and turned to the concerned elder Bat Brothers.

Bruce let out a heavy sigh. It was the kind of sigh that released a long night's worth of worry and panic, and the acceptance that everything was not okay.
"The doctors," he said, "They say that the spinal cord was severed by the bullet. She'll...she's paralyzed from the waist down."

Both boys' faces went slack with horror. Jason staggered over to a chair and sat down with a slump, staring off numbly into space. Dick's eyes leaked tears as he stumbled backwards.

"No," he muttered, shaking his head. "No."

A passing nurse stared them down shamelessly. It wasn't every day, after all, that Gotham's vigilantes were all gathered in the hospital waiting area. When she saw Nightwing's tears, her gaze softened, and she stepped over to put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"You're all here for Batgirl, then?" she asked softly.

Batman started. The nurse nodded and held up her other hand in a calming gesture.

"The Commissioner told some of us who we were treating, since there don't appear to be any records of her. At all. We were told that she had falsified papers, though?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Good. That will satisfy the public and the hospital board." She paused to look at the bat boys' drawn and teary faces. "It doesn't seem fair, does it. After all you people do for this city..."

She sighed.

"At any rate, they sent me to tell you that she'll be sleeping for the rest of the day. But...really, they just want you out of here. I can sneak one visitor in. But the rest of you may need to wait until tomorrow."

They glanced around at each other. All of them wanted to be at Barbara's side. Batman cleared his throat.

"Robin," he said, "You and I were already in there."

Tim nodded sullenly, and Dick and Jason looked to each other.

"Nightwing," Jason sighed. "It should be you. She'll want to see you."

Dick nodded and stood. The nurse quietly led him out of the room.

____________________________

Barbara could feel the drugs beginning to wear away. The steady stream of painkillers in her IV was starting to taper off, and she could feel...oh, #$^%^ , she could feel.  

The hospital room was empty and sterile and smelled of ammonia. Machines beeped, the air conditioning hummed. She surveyed her surroundings and noticed a vent in the upper right-hand corner—
What was she doing?

Why did she even bother?

Barbara looked down and pulled back the sheets, slightly. Underneath the hospital gown, she knew, there were stitches and bandages and blood...she looked farther away to see her legs. Slowly, she reached forward and pinched her thigh, right where the hem ended. Hard. Harder. A teeny drop of blood welled under her fingernail, a red crescent moon.

Nothing.

_Nothing._

She leaned back and concentrated. Just one toe. She could wiggle one toe. Nothing

Nothing, nothing, nothing.

She wasn't sure whether to cry or scream or laugh.

_Laugh._

Her thoughts flashed and she gripped the sheets in her fists until her knuckles turned white and her head hurt.

_Don't think about it, Babs. Avoid the L word at all costs. Just—_

The door cracked open, and the nurse appeared with a smile. It was the nurse that was in charge, she knew. The one that had helped her during surgery, holding her hand, telling her to breath in the anesthesia that would make all of the pain melt away.

Behind her was a hunched form that was lost in shadow. As he stepped into the room, she recognized Nightwing immediately.

Dick. He was here.

He looked up, and a new expression flashed over his face. It was impossible for her to read, but maybe her mind was still a little addled by the meds.

"I'll leave you two alone," the nurse said, gently, "Just in case you say something that isn't for my ears."

_Just in case we slip and call each other by our real names, _Barbara thought, but she only nodded to show her gratitude.

When the door clicked behind the nurse, Dick came and sat down in an upholstered chair next to the bed. His fingers found hers, and he wordlessly removed his eye mask.

She sucked in a breath through her teeth, but Dick said,

"Hey. Don't worry. I hacked the cameras. They're seeing something very different."

"How different?"

"You trust me, don't you?" His small smile withered and died. He leaned forward to rest his elbows on the bed. Barbara's hand was held firmly between his palms.
"I should have been with you," he said sadly, "I'm so, so sorry. We could have—"

"Stop that, Grayson," she said. "Don't start in on the ifs. It'll drive us both crazy."

They sat together for a few moments, listening to the other breathe in and breathe out. Finally, she said,

"Dick? I know I was shot. I know I was…” she couldn't finish that thought. The Joker's torture—the whole extent of it—needled at the edges of her recollection. But if she started down that particular path, she might lose it completely. "Listen, Dick…I can't move my legs or my toes."

Dick knew her well enough to know that she meant the statement as a question. What, why and how. He sighed and gazed at her with those big sad blue eyes.

"They didn't tell you, did they?"

“What?"

"Babs. The bullet…it severed your spinal cord."

A cold feeling washed through her veins, though she'd suspected as much. The lack of sensation or movement. The pitying glances the doctors and nurses kept shooting at her. The eventual numbness as she lay on the hearth rug after…after being shot and…

"So," she said. Her voice trembled. Against her will. "I'm paralyzed."

"I'm so sorry."

Before she could stop them, tears welled and streamed down her face. She let out a sob, and Dick pulled her closer to him, wrapping her up in the safety of his arms. She buried her face into his chest.

He held on to her, and she to him. She sobbed and gasped until her head ached and felt the silent wet drops fall onto her hair.

It wasn't fair.

Oh, #*$%, it wasn't #$^%$& fair!

Dick held her together as she shook, and some alien emotion stirred inside of him. A grandchild of helplessness. The product of a union between sorrow and fury.

This was Barbara. Batgirl.

She had always been tough as nails, confident, bright, fearless. Many of Gotham's horrors had tried and failed to break her in half, and she'd always bounced right back, fists swinging and smile wide.
The girl in his arms was beginning to crack and shatter. For the first time in his life since a mob boss had murdered his family before his eyes, a horrible feeling flared up inside of Dick. He wanted in that moment to find the Joker. Beat him with a crowbar. Break his legs in half like popsicle sticks. Take his own pistol and shoot him through the head.

No.

He'd been taught better than that.

But, for the first time, he truly understood what Bruce meant when he had tried to explain what it was like to stare into the abyss.

What it felt like to want to kill.

The League, the Team and the Titans came and went. They were all dressed in civvies. After all, the hospital had barely managed to handle the entire Gotham city Bat family. The nurses might actually collapse if Superman or Flash strolled in through the front doors.

They brought her flowers and cards and well wishes. All of them empty. Every time someone came in, group or individual, Barbara shut her eyes and pretended to sleep soundly. Entirely at the mercy of the medicine pumped through her veins.

Green Arrow told her that it would all be okay. Speedy—er, Arsenal—assured her that she would make one heckuva fighting machine. Maybe they could get her a hovering weaponized wheelchair?

Haha. No.

Wonder Woman vowed that she would be avenged, a promise that was appreciated, but not taken very seriously. Cassie cried, and told her she'd be okay. Barbara wasn't sure she believed that, either.

Jason didn't talk much. He only sighed and squeezed her hand. And muttered obscenities about the clown prince of crime under his breath.

When Zatanna and Artemis came, it was difficult to feign sleep. But Barbara did it anyways, knowing one thing for certain: her friends had already seen her cry once; it wouldn't happen again. Zatanna kept apologizing, and blamed herself for letting Barbara leave the party that night. Artemis cried at her bedside, and wondered aloud if she was some kind of curse. First Wally...now this.

The last visitor was Kid Flash. Bart Allen pulled up a chair to Barbara's side, and leaned back. He cleared his throat several times, then spoke.

"Meds got you moded, huh? That's good, Oracle. There's some stuff I gotta say."

...Oracle?
"First off, that little plan you had? To send me back into the past? It worked. I saved Flash and Blue. And the Earth. But I lost Wally, and now I'm stuck here. I don't even know how that's gonna work for the future and such." Bart drew in a deep breath. "But listen. I don't get it. Your brilliant plan, your scheme to get everything back on track. It worked, mostly. But why save everyone except you? The accident happened exactly like the resistance archives said. Date. Time. Perp. Not crash. Not even a little. I could have stopped it, O. Why didn't you let me? I know you said that you're meant to be Oracle, the great and powerful and yada yada. But is it really worth it? Really?"

He let out a heavy sigh, and Barbara opened her eyes. He jumped. "Ah!"

She smiled weakly. "Heya Bart."

"You heard all of that, didn't you?"

"Mmm hmm."

Bart's face lost all of its color. He licked his lips and said,

"That…that means that we may have just been moded. Crap."

She sat herself up a little in the bed, making the sheets crinkle beneath her. It was hard to sit up just using her arms to pull herself upright, but she managed. It was just one more thing she'd have to get used to, after all.

"Tell me," she said. So he did.

The human race had been enslaved during the Reach apocalypse. Most of the League and Team had been hunted down and systematically executed, with only a few 'useful' members kept alive for slave labor. Curfews and restrictions were enforced, inhibitor collars were worn by all. The entire world lived under a Nazi-esque regime, and no one dared to resist.

Except, of course, the resistance.

"They took me in when I turned twelve. Needed a quick little guy as a runner. Their leader, see, she knew how to deactivate the inhibitor collars everyone was forced to wear. The resistance stole Reach secrets and sent covert teams out to undermine their operations and rescue slaves. We…we were sent out one day because two former heroes had been captured by the Reach. They'd managed to evade the beetle warriors longer than almost anyone, surviving on their wits and helping the resistance. You'd probably know them. Dick Grayson and Tim Drake."

Barbara's eyes widened. "You didn't learn their names in a history book. You knew them."

Bart nodded and continued. "Our leader, the Oracle, sent a team out to save them. But the whole mission failed. The extraction squad was compromised, and Grayson and Drake were both executed. Our best fighter, Red Hood, was on that squad. He was tortured until he gave up the location of the base. We lost almost everyone in the Reach's attack, but I found Oracle laying in the ruins of the initial explosion. Picked her up and ran to safety before the big bads could finish their job.

"We realized pretty quick that it was just us left, and she told me her story. How she fought under Batman, my gramps's old buddy. How she was shot and attacked one night by her mentor's arch foe, leaving her in a wheelchair the rest of her life. She said that we were alike. She'd lost her whole 'family' in the Reach wars. I lost mine. And she said that she had a plan.

"She gave me a blue pellet. She provided the parts I needed to get back to a time before the Reach
ever invaded. Oracle also made sure to tell me that I was supposed to save a few people, but not her. She didn't want that night to go any other way, she said. 'Things I need to do.' 'Stuff I gotta learn'. All that jazz."

Barbara nodded, still processing everything. "So. I'm Oracle, aren't I?"

Bart nodded, smiling a little.

"It is nice to see you when you're still…you know. Young." His grin was sheepish. “And, ma'am, it was an honor serving under you as Batgirl. Totally crash."

She managed a smile. "Oracle. It does have a nice ring to it. I come up with that all by myself?"

"Yep. Well, I guess. Is it cheating if I told you?"

"Nah. But who else knows? Why you're here, all that?"

"Nobody. Well, Blue and Gramps know a few things. But I never told anybody about Oracle before."

She stared at the wall of her hospital room and thought. Oracle. A wheelchair-bound superpower. Bart had given hints as to how, probably without even realizing it. A hacker. An information broker. Info made the world go round, and if she could control it, she could do so much good…

Maybe, just maybe, she wasn't completely broken after all.

Tears welled up in her eyes at the thought.

"Thank you," she said. "You don't know how much that…thank you."

He wordlessly patted her shoulder and stepped out of the room. Once the door had shut, she turned to the laptop computer sitting on her tray table.

She had a few ideas.

"Here, Tim, grab the door."

"Ouch! Grayson! You just ran over my foot!"

"Well excuse me for—"

"Guys. Seriously." Barbara groaned. The four men were struggling to get her chair up the front steps. She held on to the arm rests with white knuckles and gritted teeth, hoping and praying that they didn't dump her out onto the concrete. Again.

"We'll put in a ramp," Bruce assured her. As soon as they got up to the door, Alfred was there waiting with a hug and a huge plate of sugar cookies. The poor man had been convinced that the
whole ordeal was his fault. If he had looked before answering the door, he could have called for Batman and the incident would have never happened. Barbara was quick to assure him of the opposite.

Everyone blamed themselves. It was starting to get old, hearing the same exclamation every five minutes. No. There was only one person at fault, and it wasn't the Joker. It was her.

She'd been the one to open that door so trustingly, had been the one to stand there frozen like a scared little girl. She'd been trained. She knew how to disarm a gunman. How many hundreds of times had she done it before?

She'd been off her game, just like Bruce had warned her. And, after Black Mask, maybe karma had finally payed her a visit.

So, no. It was her fault. And she would own that.

"Why don't I get cookies?" Jason whined. Tim elbowed him sharply.

"You know, when you get shot, Jaybird," Babs quipped, "I'll make you a whole batch."

Barbara thanked Alfred for the cookies and balanced them on her lap, ignoring the winces from her family members. They hated it when she cracked jokes about her condition. But if they wanted to be squeamish about this whole mess, let them. She, on the other hand, was going to make the best of it.

Barbara insisted on wheeling herself into the mansion, and into the guest room. Bruce followed her inside, shutting the door behind him.

"Barbara," he said, "I know that this last week has been a...a horrible experience for you. I want you to know that if there is anything you need, anything at all, I'd be more than happy to help."

She tried to turn herself to face her mentor. This chair was difficult; it would take some figuring out.

When she was able to look Bruce in the eyes, (well, kind of. When she'd been able to stand, she stood five inches short of her mentor. Now, she had to crane her neck to look up at him) she smiled.

"Actually, B-man, it's funny you should ask."

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "Oh? I'm not sure if I like the sound of that."

She grinned. "Well, for starters, I want to buy the Charles B. Clark clock tower in Cormorant city."

"What?"

"I have an idea, Bruce," she said, "Of a way to still be in the game."

He shifted uncomfortably, clearing his throat.

"Barbara, I'm sorry...but you need to accept the fact now that you have...limitations."

Her blood boiled at that, but she shoved the feeling down and laughed. "What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Bruce sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose.

She held up both index fingers. "So, let me try to understand what you're saying. I'm stuck in a
chair for the rest of my life?” She gasped a little, like the realization had just come to her. Totally ironic.

Her mentor nodded slowly, like it should have been obvious. But he still wasn't getting it.

"And…you just want me to sit around the house and do nothing while the boys all get to go out and play? Well, maybe not nothing. I could take up knitting. I think the manor needs a few tea cozies and doilies. Ooh! Maybe I could make some cute little sweaters for all of you to wear on patrol!"

"Barbara—"

Bruce's tone was derogatory, patronizing. She would have none of it.

"While we're at it, why don't we just stick me and my new friend here," she smacked the arm of her chair, "in a little glass case down in the cave? The plaque can say 'failed little cripple female protégé'. Something catchy like that."

Bruce winced at the word 'Cripple'. She only laughed.

"Barbara," Bruce said, "That's not what I mean, and you know it."

"Well let me tell you what I mean. I have a plan, and I think you'll like it. But to start off with, I'm going to need the tower, a computer system similar to the cave's, and access to, oh say, three million dollars?"

Bruce choked. Whether from shock or laughter or disdain it was hard to tell.

"Is that all?" he deadpanned.

"For now," she said. She folded her hands in her lap and smiled. "Besides, that's pocket change to billionaire Bruce Wayne, isn't it? Two of the three million will be invested in a few companies of my choosing, and I estimate that I can quadruple it in just a few months. Weeks, if I choose right. The tower will be a good place for my new base of operations, and the computers will let me get into places I never could as Batgirl. As for the other million, it should help me get started."

"With what?"

Barbara smiled.

Dina stirred her cocoa with one long finger. It had stopped being hot a long time ago, so Barbara didn't bat an eye when the vigilante stuck her pinky into the chocolatey beverage.

"So…" she said, glancing up at Barbara through heavily done lashes. That was the thing about Dina; she was always wearing makeup. Obsessively. She didn't even take it off to go to bed, or even shower. It was all waterproof. "I guess I should be asking you how you're doing. But…I gotta say, I'm a little confused."
"Oh?" Barbara took a dainty bite of her scone. They were sitting outside at a fancy little outdoor café. Downtown Cormorant. Dina's favorite.

"Well. You missed our lunch date, and I don't hear from you forever, then I find out you're in a wheelchair…no offense."

The scone left little crumbs on the table. Barbara dusted off her fingers and hummed. "None taken."

"And now you're telling me you want to start…what was it again?"

Barbara smiled and leaned forward. "A secret organization. Based here, of course, but we'll do work all over the world. Helping people. Remember that girl in the alley? What if we had the chance to help people like her? And actually succeed?"

Dina sipped thoughtfully at her drink. Her eyes darted up, tracing the skyscrapers and streetlights. Then, she met Barbara's eyes.

"So you want me to be your legs. No offense."

She shrugged one shoulder in response.

"Yeah. And others. All women."

Dina's eyebrow quirked at that. "All girls, huh? And we'll all live in your tower?"

"Right."

"No rent?"

"No rent. Free dental, and a monthly stipend."

The cocoa mug clinked on the table top. Dina's eyes were bright with excitement.

"Well, I'm sold. No more living in dingy apartment buildings and motel rooms? You had me at 'no rent', babe!"

The girls laughed. Passerby gave them curious looks, the platinum blonde and the cripple girl, an unlikely pair. Barbara dug out a few bills from her purse and set them under the plates. Dina offered to push her, but Barbara adamantly refused. She gripped the metal ring around each wheel and pushed down, propelling herself out onto the main sidewalk.

Dina walked along beside her, humming some show tune or another. Finally, she said,

"So. What are we gonna call ourselves, this little group of feminists?"

Barbara had been debating back and forth for a while between different names. Different kinds of call signs and codenames. She'd finally settled on one. It was a name that inspired fear and respect alike. A group. A good name for a global organization—once she and Dina got it up and running.

"I was thinking," she said, "The Birds of Prey."

Dina mouthed the words to herself, eyes narrowed.

"Hmm. Not bad. Okay."
"But we're going to need recruits. It's not fair if it's just you running around with me in your ear. We'll need more help."

Dina's eyes drifted down the street, lost in thought. They strolled down the avenue together past the boutiques and shops with mannequins modelling the autumn's latest fashions. They seemed to be mocking her, all of them standing, running in place, or striking daring poses. Not one of them was in a little mannequin wheelchair.

Finally, Dina cleared her throat.

"You know," she said, "I think I know a gal."

Black Canary adjusted her leather jacket to cover her chest. The bar was loud and noisy and close. Too close. She could feel the breath of a thousand drunk men on the back of her neck, and it sent chills up her spine.

Remember, she thought, walk tall, walk purposefully, walk proud. A confident girl who looks like she knows how to knock heads will not be a victim.

Some of the men whistled at her over the rims of their beers, catcalling and laughing at her.

She threw her shoulders back and sat down in a decidedly unladylike way at the counter. The two burly men on either side of her chuckled into their drinks. The bartender leaned over the counter, sending her a conspiratorial smile.

"So, sweet cheeks," he said. His voice was high and nasal, like a weasel's. "What can I get for ya?"

Dina forced herself to lean over the counter and smile back.

"Well, I don't know," she crooned, "I'm looking for something with a bit of a kick. Let's try...a Ladyfinger shot. Neat, please."

She hoped she'd gotten the sequence right. But when understanding seemed to flicker in the bartender's watery eyes, she knew she had. He straightened and poured a glass of purple liquid into a shot glass.

"One Ladyfinger shot, neat," he wheezed, "I hope you enjoy it. Be sure to visit the back room when you're finished."

With that, he turned away and attended to another patron in a biker jacket. She sighed and tossed back the drink into her mouth. The burning liquid gushed down her throat and set her tongue on fire.

"The back room," she mumbled into her empty glass, "This is uncomfortable on so many different levels."

["Be patient. You said that this was the place to find her. That was the code to find her. No
"First off, never say 'no biggie', like, ever again. Second, I know. I've just never tried to find her on her home turf before."

["You mean Gotham, right? That's my home turf, and I've never heard of any—"]

A sharp elbow cut into Dina's side. Hot breath blasted her face.

"Well, baby," the man on her right said, "I would've got you a drink for free. You didn't have to cozy up to old Perkinson there," He nodded at the bartender's turned back.

"Well," he said as an afterthought, sidling up close to her. Too close. "Maybe not for free—"

He whispered something in her ear, and she slammed the glass down on the table. Even Dina had her limits.

With one quick jerk, she seized the man's Adam's apple in between her fingers. His eyes flew open wide, mouth gaping like a fish's. Then, she jerked her arm to the side and flung him across the room. He slammed with a rattling thunk into the wall. A couple of other men stood, looking ready for a fight.

Dina threw her shoulders back.

"Oh, boys," she said, "I wouldn't recommend that. Not at all."

But the bikers and thugs didn't listen. The fight was over in two minutes flat, when Dina had sufficiently humiliated the men into submission. She cast an apologetic glance at the bartender, then sauntered towards the back room.

Her hand paused on the cast iron doorknob. But she breathed in a heavy gasp of air, and pushed the door open.

The back room was dark and dank, with only a little light streaming in through a filthy set of blinds. There was an obvious lack of occupants. Dina heard a click, and whirled around. The glinting tip of a crossbow bolt touched her nose.

As she lifted her hands up into the air and stepped back, she met her assailant's dark eyes. She sighed. In relief and frustration.

"Helena," she said.

The woman lowered her crossbow slightly.

"What?" Huntress snapped.
Oracle's fingers flew over the keys. Lately, she got a nice little thrill of satisfaction when the tapping sound of her keyboard filled the room. There was something crisp and official about the clicks and taps. Her monitor screen glowed in the darkened room, and with it, she could see everything that her agents could. Which, in Huntress's case, was namely darkness and more darkness.

She remedied that with a keystroke.

"I'm flying blind, here, Oracle," Helena snapped over her comm. Barbara winced and assured her agent that she would walk her through the dark basement. On another line, Dina was muttering small complaints about the mob boss she was trying to seduce.

["Ugh. His breath smells like cigs and onions...And he's got pit stains. Pit stains, O. I did not sign up for this!"]

Zinda's voice crackled through next. ["Heya, Skipper? I'm chasing down some weird little costumed girlie. Could you send me a grid-print to Gotham city?"]

"What are you doing in Gotham?" Oracle queried, patching the map through with a few typed commands. Just then, there was a crackle and buzz from Helena's line. Babs snatched up her cocoa mug and flipped back to Huntress.

"Thug on your left. Two o'clock."

Helena huffed. "Yup. Guessed as much." There was an audible cry and a few small buzzes. Helena was panting. "Now tell me something I don't know."

"Three more coming down the stairs. Behind you."

Huntress heaved a heavy sigh.

Oracle turned her head. With the lights out inside the tower, she could see the real show going on outside the windows. The sun was setting on Cormorant's skyline, and the sky itself was lit up orange, pink, yellow and purple. She stretched out her fingers, and smiled softly as the light bathed her skin in bright hues.

The Clock Tower was working nicely as the Birds of Prey's new base of operations. With the million dollars from Bruce Wayne, they'd been able to start renovating the space beneath the clockwork mechanisms. Now, it was all really just a large room—with a set of gears or three—that had been made into a comfortable place to call home. It was equipped with a few comfy bedrooms and two bathrooms on the upper level, and a kitchen and common area with a flatscreen and a few couches (for downtime) on the lower. And just beyond the common area, right smack in front of the back of the clock face, was the heart of the whole operation: Oracle's entire technological setup. She had computers that rivalled those of the Batcave and the Watchtower, making her the League’s best go-to source for information.

And, speak of the devil:

["Oracle?"] Green Arrow's voice crackled over the speaker she had set into the spot by her left
"This is Oracle," she said, "How can I help you, Ollie?"

He let out a grim laugh. ["Aw, c'mon. Whatever happened to secret identities?"]

She smiled a little as she typed up a false email from the kingpin of a gang in downtown Cormorant to his constituents. (Arranging sting operations for the Cormorant Police Dept. was easy as 1-2-3.) "Kinda pointless, don't you think? I've known for years."

He let out a quick laugh. ["Yeah. Guess so. Hey, listen. I need everything you got on Mario Breski. That's Breski spelled B-R-E-S-K-I."]

There was a spurt of gunfire over Dina's line. Oracle pressed a key on her board.

"Please hold for just a sec," she told him. "Dina. What's your status?"

["Compromised!"] Black Canary wailed. ["I need extraction. Now!"]

Oracle nodded to herself, frantically typing. The email would have to wait. Huntress was occupied with her own thugs…criminy she needed more agents! Her eyes flickered shut for the space of a few breaths.

Then, "Zinda, hon?" she drawled. "You doing anything?"

Oracle waited for the files on Mario Breski to load. She felt a little thrill of satisfaction that it had taken her all of thirty seconds to compile a folder. The man was bad news; robbery, murder charges, and a couple of even less tasteful deeds. She silently wished Green Arrow luck at catching the guy. Zinda sighed.

["Lost my target, anyways. How can I help?"]

Files loaded. Oracle packaged them into a neat folder and moved it to a side screen. "Dina's hit a bit of a snag. Would you be a dear and go pick her up? And I'd recommend you hurry. Tout suite."

["Sure thing, Skipper."]

Oracle leaned over to press the speaker button. "Alrighty, GA. I've got the files right here. Uploading them now."

Green Arrow breathed a sigh. ["Thank goodness for you, sweetheart. Which reminds me. How you holding up? Everything okay? Like with your…eh…"]

Oracle's lips pressed firmly together as she finished typing up the email. "I'm fine, Ollie. Peachy. Never been better. Well…you know. Say hi to Artemis, will you?"

["Barbara—"]


She pressed the button, disconnecting the call, and heaved a sigh.

["Threat neutralized,"] Helena said. She was still breathing heavily, but more out of relief than desperation now. ["He's waiting for the cops."]

"Thank you," Oracle sighed. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Dina, Zinda? You girls good?"
Dina was breathing heavily, too. Oracle made a mental note: when she had time, fix the comms so that they didn't buzz so much when her agents were gasping for breath.

["Canary took a little clip to the wing, Skipper, but she'll be okay. I'll have her back lickety-split."]

"Thank you," she said. "Oracle signing off for now. Call if you need anything else. I'm sending rides for you back to base. Good work, girls."

She turned her chair around, biceps tensing with the effort. Soundlessly, she wheeled herself across the common room and into the kitchen to get a glass of water from one of the many decorative mugs in the lower cupboard. They had a whole stash, and Barbara honestly had no clue where they'd all come from. More likely than not, they were the result of Zinda's online shopping splurge. The woman had recently discovered the wonders of the internet.

The icy liquid streamed down her throat in a comforting trickle, and she let out another sigh. A chill of pain rippled up her legs.

It had been almost an entire year since that horrible night. When Oracle closed her eyes, sometimes she could still see the pale face, the terrible grin, the glint off the barrel of a pistol shoved into her stomach. At night, as she lay in bed, she could still feel phantom pains shiver up her legs and into her spine. Many a night, Dina or Zinda or Helena would come running to see why their leader was screaming in her bed.

Her phone buzzed gently, startling her, and she removed it from the holster on the side of her wheelchair. The name on the screen made her smile.

DICK

She pressed the button and brought it up to her ear. "Urology department. Can you hold, please?"

There was a brief moment of silence. Then, there was a burst of gut-wrenching laughter on the other end of the line. "That's disgusting!" Dick said, trying to speak and laugh at the same time. "Did you come up with that yourself?"

She smiled, rolling her eyes. "Nah. Looked it up online."

"You would, I guess."

She leaned back in her chair, a stupid grin on her lips. "And how can the all-seeing Oracle help you today, Grayson?"

He'd finished laughing, but Barbara could still hear the smile in his voice. "Can't a guy just call to check in on his lady?"

"Well, his lady's doing just fine," she said. "And he knows it, since he called yesterday. So there must be some other reason."

"Well...yeah." Dick's voice turned more sheepish. "Besides that, there are two other reasons."

"Oh?" Barbara sipped at her water.

"Watchtower sensors have picked up on an unusual energy surge in the area around Gotham and Cormorant. Blown power lines, blackouts. Wonder girl headed in your direction the other day, and swore she saw sparks coming off of a street sign. Aqualad was wondering if you could look into that."
An ice cube melted slowly on her tongue as he spoke. Then, she swallowed, and it was her turn. "Yeah. I guess. I've already got eyes on the situation, though. What's the other reason?"

"Well, that's just the thing. You might want to sit down."

She laughed drily into the phone. But she didn't mind much; Dick was the only one who could get away with a joke like that. No one else dared. Or, if they did, they suddenly found all of their assets locked, and their most embarrassing photos leaked online for all the world to see. Maybe it was petty, but she didn't care much for ridicule.

"Um, sorry. Bad joke."

"Ha! You're fine."

He cleared his throat. "Right. Well, I was on patrol tonight, and ran into somebody. Turns out, the boss-man forgot to tell us something kind of important."

She scoffed. Bruce withholding info? "That's nothing new."

"Heh. Well, this is. See—"

Piercing static on the line cut him off briefly. Barbara winced, as the lights in the kitchen blinked and flickered. Dick's voice came more staggered from the other end. "Babs…okay?…going on?"

She set down her mug carefully as the lights flickered off. For a moment, she was in complete darkness. Luckily, though, her eyes adjusted quickly, and she could make out the counter, the island, the fridge—

A flash of red and yellow light filled the kitchen, and an unseen wind swept the hair back from her face and made her squeeze her eyes shut.

"Barb—"

She opened her eyes when the light no longer shone through her eyelids. Streaks of color were still imprinted on her retinas. Dick's voice still came over the phone, faintly though. The sight that met her eyes gave her pause.

A boy leaned against the counter, dry heaving into the sink. His forearms were braced to either side of him, and his head jerked as he made miserable sounds. When he'd finished gasping for air, he cleared his throat sharply and straightened slowly. His head pivoted on his neck as he looked around the kitchen, inspecting his surroundings. When his eyes landed on Barbara's, he stepped back, and Barbara got a better look at who this boy was.

She let out a bloodcurdling scream.

The boy toppled back into the sink, knocking his head on a cupboard door that had been blown open.

"Ow! Ah, man!"

She knew that voice. She knew that face, that build, that wavy red hair…

Barbara took a shuddering breath and wheeled herself backwards, out of the kitchen, back into the common room. She had to get to a computer. She had to turn on the lights, because once she did, then the ghost would disappear. The illusion would fade…and…oh, #$!%...
The boy's eyes riveted on hers. "Wait! Hey! Lady!"

She made it out, and turned her chair around, frantically pushing herself towards her hub. But she should have known that he would beat her. With a rush of wind, he appeared right in front of her, hands braced on her armrests.

"Wait. Please. I don't know where I am. Can you—"

He paused, and his green eyes widened in shock. He stumbled back.

"Holy crap. Babs?"

The lights flickered on, but Wally West was still there.

She took a shuddering breath.

"Y-you're not supposed to be here." Barbara's voice came out in a frantic whisper. "You're supposed to be dead."

Wally blinked, as if confused, then rushed to the window. He looked out on the city skyline with notable hesitation. "Uh, this is Cormorant."

"Yes. It's…it's my city."

He ran a hand through his hair. "Whatever happened to Gotham?"

"I needed a change of scenery." She wheeled herself over to him, and studied him carefully. His mask, the half cowl that used to show his hair and chin was gone. His face was covered in patches of peeling skin, like he'd been to the beach and suffered a sunburn. (Then again, maybe that's what had happened. Who knew where he'd been.) Besides that, he was battered, like he'd been stuffed into a blender. All covered in scratches and bruises. Barbara wet her lips, then said softly, "Wally. You're supposed to be dead. We all saw you die at the south pole."

He turned away, fixing his gaze on the night sky. "I…I think I remember. The energy blasts. I was running with Barry and Bart? The…energy blasts hit me. It hurt."

"You disintegrated," she said. "You faded into nothingness. You died."


"Speed Force?"

He gesticulated wildly, clearly getting more and more excited with every word. "It's this theory that Uncle Barry had. That our powers come from a force of nature. An alternate dimension if you will. Time stands relatively still there, but it's always moving. We've always figured speedsters can get in, if they reach the right speed, or…"
She lost him at alternate dimension, but nodded slowly. "Okay. Okay. I understand now."

Wally brightened. "You do?"

"Mm-hm. I got dosed with a hallucinogen. Probably Scarecrow found me," She nodded. That made much more sense. "I can deal with this. You're not really here, and I'm probably sitting in front of my computer right now zonked out of my mind or something. Imagining this whole thing, because…"

She was babbling now, but she didn't care.

Wally raised his eyebrows. "Hey. Hey, no hallucination. I promise I'm alive! You're not hallucinating. That good enough?"

"That's, like, exactly what a hallucination would say, Wall-man." Barbara shook her head. "So prove it. Tell me something only the real Wally would know."

He sighed. "We're doing this, then, huh? Let me think…"

Wally looked out the window. His eyes traced a helicopter flying by lazily, its lights blinking against the black sky. Finally, he said,

"Um…ooh! Okay, okay. Girlfriend. My girlfriend's name is Artemis Lian Crock."

Barbara crossed her arms, unconvinced. "Ask any member of the Shadows, and they'd say the same thing. You guys weren't ever exactly subtle."


She scoffed. "You could be a poser from the future. In which case, that would be, as Impulse would say, 'grade school history'."

He narrowed his eyes and leaned down. "Yeah? And how do I know I'm not in some alternate dimension where you're some psycho villain who lives in a clock tower? You could be trying to get information out of me!"

They were nose to nose now. She narrowed her eyes. "Then prove we're from the same dimension. Tell me about when I first joined the Team."

Wally blinked, seemingly considering, then spoke. "Um…you made us waffles. We all got up that morning and stumbled into the kitchen." He smiled. "We were gonna get cereal or something, but no. There was this crazy chick in our kitchen going crazy with the waffle iron. You told us all just to sit down. Enjoy breakfast. Weirdest thing of all was when you knew all of our names and called us out on the psychic link. Then Dick came in and just about busted a vein."

Barbara smiled. "Sounds about right. Though, I remember you being much too interested in the food on your plate to worry about little old me."

The corner of his mouth quirked.

Holy $#*%. That was when it hit her. Something prickled in her eyes, and when she spoke, her voice was unexpectedly hoarse. "W-Wally?"

The speedster grinned, and wrapped his arms around her. "Good to be back, BG."
The ensuing embrace was interrupted by a shrill beep on Oracle's computer. Their heads swiveled over to the screen, and Barbara wordlessly wheeled herself to the hub. Wally followed her like a shy puppy.

"Sooo…nice setup," he said, "You're like, the IT of the superhero community, now?"

"Hmm. How'd you guess?"

He was silent as she typed in the commands on her keyboard. She sighed as the window popped up, loading. "You want to know why I'm in a wheelchair."

He hummed.

"What a coincidence. I don't want to talk about it."

The screen flickered, and the window opened to a map. A blinking blue dot was shimmering on the Clock Tower. Wally pointed to it and shot her a quizzical glance. "Uh…"

"Oh," she said, nonchalantly. "Dick's here."

"What, do you have him chipped or something?" Wally raised an eyebrow.

A few more taps on the keyboard, and the map disappeared.

"Please," Barbara scoffed. She wheeled over to the elevator doors. "I have everybody chipped."

The doors dinged open before she could reach them, and Dick rushed into the common room in full Nightwing armor. His escrima sticks crackled with electricity as he raised them above his head. The war cry died in his throat as he realized that Barbara was alive and well right in front of him.

"What's going on?" he demanded. Barbara raised her eyebrows.

"I was just about to say the same thing, Boy Wonder," she said, "Not that I don't love your visits, but why exactly are you here?"

Dick opened and shut his mouth like a landed fish. Barbara's head turned a fraction of an inch. It looked like Wally had vanished.

"Coward."

"I…your phone. You screamed, and then it all went to static. I thought—"

He trailed off, and Barbara noticed how pale he was, like all of the blood had drained out of him. He looked like a confused puppy. His arms shook slightly at his sides, hands still clasped tightly around his weapons.

"You thought I was being attacked?"

He shrugged, swallowing hard. "More or less," he squeaked.

It hit her like a sucker punch. "Oh, Dick." She reached up with her arms. He accommodated her, and let her enfold him in an embrace. He knew her better than just about anyone. He knew that she would be fine under an attack; years of Gotham City patrols had taught her how to keep a level head. The silver and green escrima sticks Bruce and Dick had gotten her also helped. One was emblazoned with a gold Batgirl symbol, the other with a shimmering emerald logo; her new Oracle symbol. Like Dick's weapons, they could be used as both tasers and blunt objects.

No. Barbara didn't faze easily. Only one villain could make her scream, cry and wake up covered
in cold sweat in the middle of the night. There was only one baddie who could haunt her dreams and thoughts with that laugh.

Dick thought that the Joker had found her again. She wasn't sure whether she wanted to laugh or cry.

"I'm fine," she said into his shoulder, "It wasn't…it wasn't him. Something just…um, popped up. Scared the living crap out of me."

"Yeah?" he pulled away and gave her a small smile. Then he crouched, balanced on the balls of his feet so that he could look up at her, instead of the other way around. It was one of the things he did that always made her happy; everyone else always looked down on her now that she was confined to a chair (er…so to speak.). It was unbearably frustrating. Sure, she couldn't leap from skyscrapers and soar over the Gotham city streets any more, but she could out-hack every member of the Bat Family (yes, even Bruce and Dick) and Justice League.

She liked to think that she was still equal to these giants among men, and Dick was kind enough to make her feel that way.

"But…" she glanced over her shoulder again. "Since you're here, I think there's something you should see."

"Hmm?"

"Someone you should see." She called out over her shoulder, "You can come out now."

Dick straightened, standing to full height. Full 'curious puppy' mode. She watched the subtle shift in his posture, his stance, his footing. He was still ready for whatever impending threat emerged from behind the computer hub.

A sheepish red-headed boy in a scratched-up yellow suit stepped out from behind the glowing monitors. He held his arms crossed tightly over his chest as he cleared his throat hesitantly, and looked at Dick.

"Uh. H-hey, Rob," he said softly.

Dick dropped his escrima sticks. They made a hollow clattering sound against the floor before rolling to a rest at Barbara's feet.

Dick Grayson did not have super speed, but his arms were wrapped around Wally West's shoulders before anyone knew what had happened. Barbara smiled gently. Her gaze wandered to the glass case in an alcove on a far wall. Inside was a plaque and a mannequin. The mannequin wore a purple suit with a hood and cape and black face mask. The plaque was engraved with the words:

**STEPHANIE BROWN**

Nearby was another case. That one held a black armored suit emblazoned with a golden bat. A costume from a time when everything was okay. Barbara wished with all her heart that she could go back in time, to a place where she still had her legs, and when she still had her little sister beside her on patrol, breathing clouds into the frigid night air. She wished for the old days on the team, when it had been just the original Nine of them.

But, even though those days were gone, she could still get to see her boyfriend and his best friend reunited again.
Dick and Wally were sobbing quietly into each other's shoulders.

"You idiot," Dick muttered. It was muffled; his face was buried in Wally's shoulder. The speedster's eyes were wide and tear-filled. "Where the #$%^ were you?"

"It's a long story, man. I promise I'll explain everything. See—"

"Shut up, KF. Just shut up."

Barbara shook herself out of her thoughts, and wheeled herself over to her desk. There was one more person she needed to call.

Artemis stepped into the Clock Tower, and her chin instantly tipped back. Above her head, there were whirling and turning gears and light streaming in from unseen windows. Dust motes floated through the bright afternoon light, settling all around her. She could smell something cooking in the kitchen to her right, but she couldn't see if anyone was inside. Ahead of her, she could see a network of computer screens, monitors, and speakers. Oracle's sanctum.

She turned her head up and around to see the landing up above. Behind a cast iron railing were a few sets of doors. One of them opened and closed, revealing a sluggish, robed woman. She slouched as she staggered overhead, and yawned through her matted black hair. She nodded down at Artemis before disappearing behind a corner.

Artemis shrugged a little and let her gaze land on a glass case beside her. The Batgirl costume rested in perfect condition behind the pristine glass. She almost reached out and touched it, but restrained herself.

I shouldn't have let her leave that night…

"Artemis!"

At Barbara's voice, she whirled around. Oracle had wheeled herself through the kitchen door, and sat nearby, hand clasped around a holiday mug of cocoa. Rudolph the red nosed reindeer of all things, even though Christmas was months away.

The former Batgirl beamed, and Artemis relaxed. She waved a hand at herself and said, "I hope it's okay that I wore the Tigress uniform. You said it was an emergency?"

Barbara nodded, still smiling widely. It was beginning to make Artemis a little nervous.

"Um…don't emergencies usually involve running around and screaming? Or at least a little concern?"

Still with that strange smile, like an eager little kid waiting to give someone a present, Barbara reached forward and grasped Artemis's wrist. "C'mon, Tigger. I have something to show you."
The emotion in her voice was almost enough to quell the disgusted scoff at the nickname. But Artemis followed her into the kitchen. Another woman hunched over a table, sipping coffee from a Tweety Bird mug, and shooting them strange glances.

"Um, hi?" Artemis raised her eyebrows. Babs tapped her on the arm, and jerked her head towards the other side of the kitchen. She got the message, and turned her attention to the kitchen island. And there, she saw…

She saw…

She…saw…

"Hey, babe," the boy said, smiling that lopsided grin. It was the grin that used to make her melt enough to finish his homework for him or splurge for the extra-large supreme pizza when they ordered, or kiss him—

She lunged forwards and slapped Wally right across the face. The sound of the smack made everyone in the kitchen freeze. Barbara and Dick, the girl sipping her coffee, and the black-haired lady Artemis had seen on the way in (who was pouring a mug for herself with a bemused smirk on her face).

"Wallace Rudolph West," she snarled. A look of terror spread over Wally's freckled face. "Where the $#^& were you? I thought you were dead!" Her voice shattered on that last word, and she could feel tears slipping down her cheeks. She didn't care. She kicked out and hit Wally in the shin. "It's been years. The least you could have done was call you son of a #*^&#!"

Dick threw up his hands. "Artemis—"

She whirled on him. "And you. You faked his death, too? And you didn't even tell me?"

Artemis was so angry at all of them. At least when they'd pretended that Kaldur had skewered her, Wally had known about the ruse. She wondered what sort of idiotic suicide mission they'd signed her boyfriend up for. And why they hadn't even bothered to let her know he was alive.

Then, Barbara put up her hands in a sign of surrender and said, "Artemis. We would never do that to you. Ever. Just listen for a minute, okay? Here's what really happened..."

The story unfolded slowly. Barbara told some parts, Dick chimed in at others, but it was mostly Wally. He told her that he'd been zapped into some place called the Speed Force. He never meant or wanted to leave her. He'd missed her. He was sorry about what happened, and hoped she could forgive him for being gone so long.

"Though to me," he said softly, "It was only a few days. Not years…Artemis, I'm so sorry."

Slowly, she let herself believe them. Slowly, she let herself be enfolded into Wally's arms.

"I missed you so much," she said into his chest, after an hour or so of debriefing. Barbara and Dick shared a secret smile, and Artemis raised an eyebrow at them.

"What?"

Barbara grinned. Dick seemed to be holding back a laugh.

It was Wally that finally cleared his throat.
"Well," he said slowly. "Since you're not slapping me around anymore, there's one last part of the story that you need to hear."

"Oh yeah?"

Wally's cheeks turned red. He smiled. "Well, uh. After I came back, Dick and I went out into the city. Did some catching up, went shopping. Guy stuff, y'know?"

She blinked, and glanced at Barbara, who only shrugged. Still with that mile-wide smile, though.

"Wally," Artemis said, "What are you getting at?"

He let out a short laugh, face getting redder and redder. "Well, uh, we were walking down Center Street, and I saw the perfect present for my girlfriend-who-thought-I-was-dead. I know I promised her one before, and didn't deliver, so…"

Artemis started to laugh, but Wally pulled away from her. "I thought now would be a good time. Before anything else happens, you know? Alien invasions kinda keep getting in the way."

He got down on one knee, and rifled in his pocket. Artemis gasped as he drew a little green box out and opened it.

It was a ring. A beautiful silver and diamond engagement ring. She let out a squeak as her hands flew up to her mouth.

"Artemis Lian Crock?" Wally smiled. It was that lopsided grin that she would do anything for. He looked terrified, even more so than when she'd walked in the room in the first place, but he was still smiling. Tears welled in her eyes.

"Will you marry me?"

She sobbed like a baby as she nodded. The ring was cold and beautiful as it slipped up her finger.

"Wow," the blonde girl at the table said over her mug. "This seems pretty important. Should I go get my camera?"

"Shh, Dina," Barbara said, grinning ear to ear.

Artemis kissed Wally, and for the first time since she'd lost him, she felt whole again.

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Barbara wheeled herself over to the floor to ceiling windows. Dick offered to do it, but Barbara hated feeling like a pity case. And there was nothing more pitiful than being pushed like a baby in a stroller. At least, that was her opinion.

Dick knelt beside her, and they watched the sun slip behind the Cormorant City high-rises. Another day, come and gone. It seemed crazy that Wally had come back only yesterday. The way he and Artemis were carrying on in the kitchen right then…well, it seemed like he'd always been with
"Glad to have him back," Dick said as he watched a police helicopter float by.

"It is," she agreed. Then, "I thought you guys were going out for burgers, when you left. Not a ring. That was really sweet."

He smiled. "Yeah. I guess he was going to pop the question before the whole situation with the Reach. We got talking, figured it was about time, then we went down to the jewelers'."

She smiled, and looked out at her city. Beside her, Dick shifted a little.

"You know, Wally and I talked about other stuff too. While we were picking out a ring. About maybe…” He trailed off with a shrug.

“Yeah?” she prompted.

“Um. About maybe someday…”

Oh.

She felt a slow blush rise up in her cheeks, but kept her gaze fixed on the skyline. "Oh?"

He reached back to scratch the back of his head. "Um. Yeah. So…do you ever…uh, think about it?"

Barbara felt something in her chest begin to glow. "You know, Wingnut," she said softly, "I've given the topic some thought once or twice."

He nodded, satisfied, and returned his attention to the blinking lights on the helicopter. "Okay. Um.” A small huff of laughter puffed out of his mouth. “Good."

Barbara couldn't help it. The corner of her mouth quirked. "So," she said, "There was something you wanted to tell me? Before Wally spontaneously appeared in my kitchen."

Dick was silent for a minute. Then, he said, slowly,

"Last week, I got beaten up."

"Yeah?"

"By a ten-year-old kid."

She snorted. He had to be joking. "Seriously?"

Dick's look was affronted. "He had a katana!"

"A ten-year-old with a sword, huh. Poor Nightwing. He found your weakness." She let out a dramatic sigh. "Sharp pointy objects!"

He sat back on his haunches and squinted at her.

"You don't believe me," he said.

"What? No."

"Babs, I'm dead serious. He took me down and sliced me up like he was the karate kid or
something. Busted out moves like a freaking ninja. But I got him tied up to a lamp post eventually."

"A lamp post." She raised her eyebrows and nodded slowly. "Good job. Isn't that, like, child cruelty or something?"

"It was self-defense!"

She snorted again, and tapped her fingers on the armrest of her chair. "Right. Okay. So where is this tiny ninja boy now?"

"He's at the manor."

Barbara actually laughed this time. "Alright, alright. That's enough. You're killing me."

"Babs."

"Cause if you were serious, then that would mean that the boss-man's found himself another Robin. And I think we all know that the Batman isn't that stupid."

Her fingers curled into a fist. If Dick was serious…

Who was she kidding, anyway? He was dead serious. Hadn't Bruce learned anything? Jason had the scars to prove that kids should stay out of the game. Barbara had the wheelchair to prove it. Stephanie had a headstone.

"Another Robin."

It wasn't a question. "At least this one's a boy." Her voice was bitter. Dick placed a hand on hers.

"It's not like that," he said, "It's more…complicated. Different."

She glowered. "And how is dressing up another little kid in red and yellow any different?"

Dick was silent for a while. He stared at her, then the sunset. Then her again. Finally, he said, "Because remember how I told you that Bruce had forgotten to tell us something important?"

"That's not different, Dick. That's Bruce."

"I know. But this is what he didn't tell us. The kid's name is Damian Al Ghul."

Al Ghul. The name made the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. "What?"

Dick sighed.

"He's Bruce's son."
"Kid friggin’ gives me the creeps, guys."

The three Bat Brothers were crouched on a rock outcropping about twenty feet above the Batcave elevator. Dick often went up there when he was Robin (to feel tall for once, Jason would say), and the rest of them had often followed suit when they needed a minute or two away from Bruce. It was fairly well concealed, but offered a view of almost the entire cave.

"Really," Tim muttered. "The Red Hood is afraid of a ten-year-old?"

"If you don't know what I'm talking about, then you haven't seen his eyes," Jason shot back. He was busy unloading and loading his favorite handgun. He always did it when he was agitated, and it usually made everyone else feel uneasy. "Seriously. Those are murder eyes."

Tim rolled his. "C'mon. I'll admit, he's a little maniac. You guys saw what he did to the topiaries out back, right? But he's not gonna kill anybody."

Jason stuck out his chin. "Back me up here, Grayson."

Dick's attention was solely on the father and son discussion going on below. He couldn't make it out, exactly—they were talking too quietly—but he could tell that things were pretty tense based on the way the kid was standing, and the way Bruce's jaw was set into a stubborn line. Bruce had his own slightly toned-down version of the bat-glare for his partners, and it usually gave Dick the creeps, but this kid seemed to be holding his ground—

"Hey. Earth to Nightwing."

Dick shrugged. "Murder eyes."

Tim groaned.

"Still, though," Dick continued, "He's Bruce's kid. And if that means what I think it means, then that means—"

Jason slid the clip in with a click. "Freaking. Murder eyes."

"He's our new little brother," Dick said. "And he's going to need our support."

"Kid hasn't even met us yet." Jason flicked the safety on, and the other two visibly relaxed. "I don't think that's gonna go over too well." He considered for a moment, then smiled. "Bet he kills Timbo first."

Tim shot Jason a scowl. "Yeah? Well—"

"Boys."

Bruce's raised voice made them all freeze. Three sets of eyes darted to the Batman, who was staring directly at their position, arms crossed tightly over his chest. "If you're done skulking around, you should come introduce yourselves to Damian."

Jason sighed. "Aw, but I love skulking."
The kid glanced at Bruce. "Who are you speaking to? I was not aware—"

Their feet all hit the ground at once, and though they were in civvies, they must have made an intimidating trio. The kid took a hesitant step back, before crossing his arms over his chest and glowering.

"Damian," Bruce said, "These are my other partners."

The boy scowled, and Batman nodded to them.

Dick waved, and forced himself to smile at the little punk who'd beat him up the other night. That had been a serious blow to his pride, but he was willing to let bygones be bygones. "I'm Nightwing. Richard Grayson. But everyone calls me Dick."

The boy sniffed disdainfully. "I'm sure they do."

That comment was met with wide eyes. Jason snickered, until three sets of glares and a sharp elbow from Tim shut him up.

"Heh. Right. Well." Dick clenched and unclenched his fists, and shot a meaningful glance Bruce's way. "Nice to meet you."

"Me next, probably," Jason said, waving his gun. "Name's Jason Todd. Red Hood. I'm an Aries. I enjoy long walks on the beach, and shooting people in the face. Favorite color…mmm, blood of my enemies, probably, and—"

"Jason."

"Fine. Sorry."

"I'm Tim Drake," Tim said, glancing over the kid. Dick and Jason were right. There was something off about those eyes. "My code name is Red Robin—"

"Yummm," his brothers both sang under their breath. Tim scowled. Why did they always have to—?

"Red Robin?" Damian looked at his father. "Could your partner not come up with something more original?"

Jason laughed. "That's what we all thought too. Timmy said he needed a change, but—"

He snickered, and Tim shot him a glare.

"Nice to meet you, too," he said through gritted teeth.

Damian nodded, disinterested. He gave the brothers another once-over, then said, "I suppose the customary response would be to introduce myself in turn. Very well. I am Damian Wayne, son of the Batman and Talia Al Ghul, grandson to Ra's Al Ghul the Demon's Head, and my father's only heir."

None of them missed the stark emphasis he put on only. Eyes wide, lips pursed, Dick nodded. "Um. Cool." He glanced at Bruce, who only shrugged a little.

"So," the kid said, "Now that introductions are out of the way, I demand that you all vacate my Father's house immediately."

Silence.
"Is this kid serious?" Tim scowled, and turned to their mentor. "Bruce, sorry to be blunt, but I can't believe you didn't tell us about all this sooner. And that you'd go and…with Talia of all people…and after all the talks you gave me about using protection—?"

He paused abruptly, clamping up. His face darkened to match the red of his old Robin suit. Jason seized on the comment immediately, and snickered with triumphant glee.

"Oh, really, Timmy? And what kind of hanky-panky's going on over at Titan's Tower, exactly? I'd love to know."

Tim mumbled incoherently under his breath and turned away. Dick's face registered an expression that warred between amusement and horror.

"Jason," Bruce sighed.

"Weeeell," Jason said, rolling his eyes. "Fine. Guess that's my cue to leave. One thing you oughta know about me, kid, is that I can't stand your dad's lectures. Now, if you guys'll excuse me, I'm gonna go see if Alfred has any dinner for us yet…"

He turned to leave, but a sharp beeping sound filled the cave; someone was entering through the tunnels. Everyone stopped short and listened as the distant drone of an engine grew louder and louder. A sleek black vehicle sped into the cave just a few feet away from the Bat family. All of them watched as the side of the car unfolded, its bottom half reaching to the ground like a ramp. Slowly, a wheelchair emerged from the dark confines of the vehicle. Jason grinned, and his brothers let out sighs of relief.

"On second thought…" Jason threw himself into the Batcomputer chair, legs crossed, fingers steepled. "I think I'll stick around. Things are about to get interesting."

Tim smirked, and crossed his arms. "Better watch out, kid. Big sister's here."

Damian scowled.

Barbara's stern face greeted them as she wheeled over to the assembled group.

"Well," Dick said happily, "Look who's driving now!"

She shot him a quick smile. Tim said,

"Are those hand controls I designed working alright?"

Barbara shrugged and waggled her fingers slightly. "They could use a bit of a tune-up, but other than that, they're working fine, Timmy. If you want, we can go over it later, and see if we can't get the thing to handle sharper turns and smoother stops."

Tim grinned. "Sounds good to me."
Then, Barbara turned to Bruce, eyes alight. "I've got a bone to pick with you, boss man."

Their mentor let out a deep sigh. "I suppose you're going to have to get in line."

"You've had a son," she said, gesturing towards Damian. "For, what? Ten years? Ten years ago, I wasn't even one of your partners! When were you planning on tell us?"

Bruce glanced at the ceiling, a long-suffering look on his face.

Damian's eyes were cold. He opened his mouth and said,

"Father, who exactly does this tramp think she is? I wasn't aware that you were in the habit of employing cripples as servants. Does she dust the lower shelves in your study, perhaps? It seems to me that's all she's fit for."

The members of the bat family froze in silent horror. Tim and Dick gaped. Jason rocketed to his feet.

"Listen, you little punk," he growled, marching up to Damian. "Do you have any clue who this is?"

"No one asked you, Todd," Damian snapped.

Jason's hand went up, like he was about to slap the boy, but he brought it down just as quickly and growled, turning away. Bruce glowered at Damian.

"Young man," he said, folding his arms, "I can't say that I'm enjoying your attitude. You will show respect to this girl as long as you're under my—"

"Bruce," Barbara said calmly. Out of everyone in the room, she appeared the most unaffected, though one eyebrow was raised, and her lips were pursed in a tight line. The other Bat Brothers recognized that look, and each took a slight step back. "It's fine. The kid wants to talk trash? Let him."

She wheeled up to Damian slowly. The boy didn't flinch, only crossed his arms tightly over his chest.

"So. Your name is Damian?" she asked, looking him up and down.

"Yes. What concern is it of yours, invalid?"

She snorted and looked at Bruce. "Gee, boss-man. This is the most eloquent pre-teen I've ever met. Where'd you get him?"

Bruce opened his mouth to answer, then shut it just as quickly as Oracle threw up a hand.

"You know, never mind. I already know the answer to that." She snorted. "And let me just say. Talia? Really?"

Dick's mouth quirked.

"Anyways," she continued, as she turned to Damian and stuck out a hand. "My name is Barbara. I'm also known as the Oracle."

Damian scowled, remaining silent.

"Okay." She brought her hand in again, and scrutinized the boy carefully. She'd met Talia a few
times, when she still had her legs, usually when Ra's and Bruce were duking it out with a pair of
katanas. The two women either shared candied dates and discussed politics or gossip, or else they
were battling it out to the death. Talia Al Ghul was one of the stiffest, scariest, and most elegant
women Barbara knew. And this kid standing in front of her; his demeanor, his posture...heck, even
his appearance was just like Talia's.

Barbara knew the Al Ghuls. And there was only one way to gain an Al Ghul's respect.

"Well, Damian, how about this. I challenge you to a duel," she snapped, a smile flinging at the
corners of her lips, "You and me. Let's go."

Damian reared back, eyes widening a bit. "Tt. Please. I am the grandson of the Demon Head. I
don't fight cripples."

She raised an eyebrow. "Well, funny. Usually I don't fight children, but I'm willing to make an
exception."

"Ooohhh." Jason and Dick both choked trying not to laugh. Tim chuckled into his fist. Even Bruce
fight a smile. Damian's face contorted.

"Very well," he said. He strode easily over to the weapons rack in the adjacent training room, and
picked out a gleaming katana. In training, the Bats only really ever used blunt weapons, like
escrima sticks or bo-staffs. Batarangs were the obvious exception. But sometimes, the swords were
used for more...motivational defensive training.

The boy smirked as he hefted the weapon, and returned to the cave's common area.

"To the death?" he asked. Hopefully.

Yikes.

"Mmm." She shrugged. "I don't know, Damian. You've got a pretty good life ahead of you."

Her brothers chuckled. Jason smirked, and said, "Oooh, short-stuff. Looks like you're 'bout to
get wrecked."

Damian started to lunge forwards, but Bruce cleared his throat sharply. All eyes turned to him.

"Damian," he said, "In the League of Assassins, duels often begin with the permission of an
instructor of moderator. Or Ra's. Here, you'll find that we also follow similar guidelines. You'll
forfeit the match if both of you don't begin on my mark."

Damian's expression soured, but he nodded. Barbara reached behind her, and slid out her escrima
sticks. Out of habit, she rubbed her fingers over the engraved symbols. Dick's posture was tight, as
if he wanted to lunge forward. Jason was watching with mildly concerned amusement. Tim placed
a hand over his eyes.

They faced each other slowly, eagerly waiting for Bruce's signal to begin.

He nodded.

Damian shot forwards, bringing the sword down. An untrained person might have flinched back, or
else not defended herself in time. But Barbara had trained her reflexes for years. Lightning fast, she
brought her left stick up, and sparks danced off the metal and into the air. She smiled at Damian's
bewildered expression and lunged forwards with her upper body, planting the right stick in the
boy's abdomen. With a sharp gasp, he flew backwards, landing on the balls of his feet. He roared and charged her again, but she pivoted quickly in her chair, turning one wheel with a sharp jerk, so that he just missed her. His swipe with the katana was blocked by another quick lift. She twirled the other stick in between her fingers, and planted it in Damian's back, sending him to the ground. She grabbed his arm at the last minute, so that he wouldn't face plant too hard, but also so that he couldn't bounce back up again. She held him pinned there, and smiled. The rest of the Bats whistled or let out small cheers.

She blew a stray hair out of her face, and let the angry Al Ghul climb to his feet.

He stared at her. His expression warred between fury and confusion. And maybe a little bit of awe.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Oracle," she said shortly. "And you—" she shot a look at Bruce, "—are our new Robin."

"I was going to tell you all eventually," Bruce told her.

The boys had taken Damian to go and get suited up for patrol. The kid had been with Bruce only a few days, and already had a new suit, belt and everything. Usually, suiting up was done haphazardly all over the cave. Dick dressed in front of the display cases, sticking to old habits, since that's where he and Babs had always dressed when they were still Robin and Batgirl. Tim liked pulling on his suit as he stumbled through the cave, randomly dropping birdarangs and smoke pellets—which thankfully (almost) never went off.

As for Jason, he liked to switch it up every night. They always knew where he was, though, because it was easy to hear him swear like a sailor when he discovered the dry-erase marker-face on his helmet. Every. Single. Night. (Courtesy of Dick, usually, but Tim and Babs contributed at every possible opportunity)

Tonight, though, they'd all opted for dressing in the training room. Barbara suspected it was to get Damian as far away as possible from her. The kid looked about ready to murder her after losing their little spar.

"No worries, B-man." She smiled to herself. "That was actually kind of fun."

"Where did you learn to fight like that, exactly?" her former mentor asked. He was typing a few things into the bat computer. Heaven forbid he actually hold a face to face conversation. Come to think of it, he'd barely been able to look her in the eye for over a year, ever since the Accident.

"Simple. They're your training drills. Minus the legs and feet is all."

Bruce winced, and hit the spacebar hard.

The sound of tip-tapping keys filled the cave. She tipped her head up to stare at the screen, glancing over the Rogue bios and schematics that filtered across. When the silence finally began to
be a little too much, she cleared her throat and said,

"You know, I like this kid."

"Mmm?"

She nodded, and reached toward the keyboard. With one press of her finger, the screens went blank. Bruce turned to her with a confused and slightly miffed expression.

"Yes. For one thing, he's dead honest. Blunt, even."

"He's an Al Ghul. Of course he is."

She nodded knowingly. "Well, he's also your son, B-man. And believe me, a little bluntness is refreshing after fourteen months of skirting and dodging."

He pursed his lips at her stern expression. She watched his eyes flicker to her wheelchair, and then away.

"See?" she said, exasperated, "That's exactly what I'm talking about."

His head was bowed, so she had to duck a little bit to make eye contact.

"I don't want to rehash the whole 'your fault/my fault' schpeel," she said slowly. "I think we've beaten that particular horse to death, don't you?"

Bruce looked up at her slowly, sighing. "I suppose. What is this about then?"

She smiled a little, and sat back in her chair. "Just that he's going to make a great addition to the family. I know you've been missing an…adequate partner since Tim."

He winced a little again, though barely, at her emphasis on Tim.

"Barbara. Stephanie was—"

She waved a hand, rolling her eyes. "Speaking of conversations I don't want to have again. The point is this, boss-man. I want to design his costume."

Whatever Bruce had been expecting, it clearly wasn't that. He whirled around in his chair, one eyebrow raised in confusion. "Come again? He has a uniform."

"The material you all use in your suits right now is good," she conceded, shrugging. "And his is better than most. But it can't stop a bullet from close range, it doesn't do much to protect from blunt force trauma, and the Robin suit isn't insulated against electrical attacks." She sat back a little and smirked. "Do you want me to go on? Because I've got a whole list."

He made a sound at the back of his throat.

"Anyways, I've done a little digging through military prototypes for combat armor. My Birds need protection, too, after all. Turns out that Japan has developed a very interesting Kevlar blend. The 'blend' in that, by the way, is a special carbon fiber thread that makes the material ten times stronger and more versatile. I had to make a few adjustments to the overall design, because the original had some issues with flame retardant, but—"

Bruce put up a hand to stop her. "Very well. You can design the uniform."
He leaned forward. His gaze was sharp, and Barbara shivered a little.

"You've got something else to tell me."

It wasn't a question. She nodded slowly, ducking her head a little, and reached over to tap at the keys on the bat computer. A few windows popped up; most of them in Japanese, but that wasn't a problem for either of them.

The headlines all read the same, even if the wording was varied. Bruce scanned them, then forced himself to meet her eyes.

"Are you sure?"

She pursed her lips, then said, "Oracle…she wasn't meant to be a long-term thing. If there's a chance, even a remote chance…"

"There's a greater chance that you wouldn't survive the procedure."

She stuck her chin out and glared. Her voiced came out hurried and hushed.

"I'm going crazy in this chair, Bruce. It's going to kill me. The phantom pains…do you know what it's like to be going about your business and suddenly feel like a maniac is hacking at your legs with a chainsaw?" She sighed. "Or, even worse, when I wake up in the mornings, and relive that pain…right here…" She put a hand on her stomach, and squeezed her eyes shut. Her voice died a little, so she forced the words out in a pained whisper. "All over again?"

"It's happening almost every day now. Sometimes more. I'm going insane. I can feel it."

She opened her eyes and looked up. "Please. I need my legs back."

He retracted his hand and sat back in his chair, staring at the articles about a new procedure that could implant a chip in a paraplegic's brains stem, and return most, if not all, of their mobility. Dozens had already had the procedure done. More than half had not survived.

"You didn't come here for my permission."

She hummed in soft confirmation.

"You want me to help you decide. Whether or not you should go through with it."

Her hands folded neatly in her lap. "Yes."

"And are you willing to take that risk? That you might die on the table? That the chip could short circuit your brain?"

She was silent, but her expression said it all.

"What about if it succeeds? There's a chance that you may only get some of your mobility back."

"Then I walk. Even if I never jump off another building again, I'll be fine."

He didn't believe one word of that, but he nodded, clicking the mouse.

"One more thing," he said. "I know that you're willing to take the risk, but are you willing to inflict
the consequences on Dick?"

She reared back a little, stunned. She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

"Or Jason. Tim. Me. Alfred. Dina. Helena. Zinda. I'm sure there would be many more who cared if you didn't survive the process."

For a while, she stared off into the darker reaches of the Cave. Bruce turned back to the computer and continued typing. After several minutes, she spoke again.

"I admit. I didn't even think about that. I'm sorry." She took a deep breath. "But Bruce, what if we researched the procedure? Implemented a few improvements? If anyone can do that, it's you. Maybe me, but mostly you. Dr. Midnight could help, and I know that a few of the other Leaguers would be happy to lend a hand."

He glanced over at her, never taking his fingers off the keys. "And this is really what you want?"

She nodded. "I want to walk. If possible, I want to run, and jump, and dance, and—yes—even maybe go back to being Batgirl."

He nodded. He didn't say it out loud, but there were already a few ideas bouncing around in his mind. He was almost certain that he could replicate the procedure, and if they could improve it… make it safer…

Could he have the chance to patrol the streets with his star pupil once again?

"I'll have to see what I can do," he said simply.

She smiled.

That's when the boys rushed in. Tim first, with Damian hot on his heels. Dick and Jason chased after his son, and Tim let out a high-pitched scream.

"Keep that kid away from me!"

Damian let out a war cry and leapt onto Tim's back with all the grace and agility of a gazelle. It was a little bit awe-inspiring to watch. The amount of training that Talia must have put their son through to achieve that kind of form… But then the boy drew blood with his teeth, and that snapped Bruce out of his distraction. He sighed and turned to Barbara.

"This is what it's going to be like now, I suppose."

She smirked. "I got this B-man."

Barbara inserted her thumb and forefinger into her mouth. A piercing whistle made everyone freeze. Jason and Dick, who had previously been trying to pry their youngest brother off of a squealing Tim straightened into attention. Damian's eyes were narrowed, but he released his hold on Red Robin.

"Alrighty, boys," Barbara snapped, "As you were."

They relaxed, but only slightly.

"Good." She shot Bruce a quick smile, not missing his smirk, and wheeled herself just a little bit closer to the boys. "Now. I'll be running patrol tonight for you fellas, 'kay?"
Dick and Jason shared a high-five. Barbara wheeled herself over to the Batcomputer, and pulled up a few newscasts and alerts.

"It looks like we've got Clayface and Freeze teaming up at Ace chemical plant. Now, there's a match made in #$%^…and that means you'll all have your hands full tonight. So, Reds, I want you two on point with Batman. Nightwing, you'll be showing Robin the ropes and helping him take out Freeze's grunts."

Jason raised a hand. "Aw, why can't I take the kid? I've got so much wisdom to impart!"

Barbara raised an eyebrow. "That's what scares me, Jaybird."

Damian scoffed. "I don't need to be 'shown the ropes'. I'll outpace each and every one of you."

"Right." Barbara sighed. "Alright, boys. Go out there and kick some #$$. Alfred and I will have some piping hot cocoa and cookies for you when you get back."

The three older batboys let out a whoop (though Tim's was slightly less enthusiastic. It's hard to get excited when you're holding a hand to your bleeding forehead) and rushed towards the Batmobile. Damian followed hesitantly behind, and scoffed at Dick and Jason, who were shoving each other out of the way and calling out dibs for shotgun. Bruce sighed, and shot her one last glance before pulling up his cowl.

"Promise not to run us all into the ground?"

A hand fluttered to her chest. "Ah. You wound me."

The Batman actually smirked, then climbed into the car with his sons.

"Hood, take the backseat. I need someone between the Robins."

The top slid shut, and Barbara spun around to the keyboard.

Time to get to work.

She adjusted her headset and sighed. On her feed, the boys were busy helping the GCPD officers load the two Rogues and their ensemble into the back of a van bound for Arkham. Batman was busy chatting with the Commissioner, who kept glancing over at the batboys with a mixture of amusement and mild concern. Barbara's attention, though, was on Damian.

The boy had moves, she'd give him that. But he'd come so close to killing Freeze's lackeys. Dick had pulled him back just in time, thankfully, but it was just another reminder that this little boy had blood on his hands. He'd killed before, and he was good at it.

Barbara wondered what it would be like to be able to kill without feeling anything. One slash of a katana, and nothing changed. You could go to sleep at night and not dream of your victim's face or their screams.
She closed her eyes, and shook the images out of her head.

["Eeey, Oracle! Those cookies ready for us yet?"]

A smile twitched at the corner of her mouth. "Yep, Jaybird. Alfred's pulling them out of the oven as we speak. So if you want 'em hot, I'd suggest hurrying."

There were cheers on the other side of the line. She watched her brothers pump their fists on the screen, and the Commissioner shot Batman a confused glance. Their mentor only shrugged and said,

"Cookies."

Gordon nodded in understanding. He'd had Alfred's cookies. He knew.

"Good work tonight, boys," Oracle said, "Timmy, good job on your spacing. I can tell you've been practicing."

["Thanks, Oracle."]

"And Jaybird, good work on not killing anyone. I know it's tempting."

Jason grunted. Possibly in agreement.

"And Dick, hon, how's your shoulder holding up?"

["Aw, you know. Little stab wound never killed anyone."]

["Tt. Yes it did. That is the entire point of stabbing someone."]

["Hey kid, wait'll you see N-wing on painkillers! Maybe this time Agent A will break out the—"]

["Laugh it up, Hood. At least I don't still sleep in Wolverine pj's."]

Tim cut in. ["Guys? Calm down, okay? We don't wanna look bad in front of these nice police officers—"]

On her screen, Jason crossed his arms. ["You say that like it's something to be ashamed of, Golden Boy. I'll have you know that Wolverine is #$!%*^& awesome! I will not be shamed by a man who cries during Disney movies."]

["Yeah? At least I don't do Elvis impersonations in the mirror!"]

["The #$!& are you talking about?"] Jason took a half step back.

["We can all hear you. Red over there even set up a camera to get proof!"]

["Hey, don't bring me into this!"]

["You are all pathetic. I find it mildly amusing."]

Three sets of voices all said, ["Shut up, Robin."]

Barbara leaned back in her chair, fingers steepled. "You know," she said, "I always enjoy seeing brotherly bonding, but Timmy's right. Officer Daugherty over there's filming you guys on his phone."
Four heads turned to look at the portly officer doing his best to discreetly point his phone's camera their way.

"And Jay," she said, the smirk on her face a mile wide. "There's no need for shame. Your Elvis voice is pretty spot on."

Jason groaned. His shoulders slumped onscreen.

"Go on and head back," she said, typing a few more commands into the computer. "I'll just hurry and—"

A notification in the corner of her screen beeped. The icon was the new Birds of Prey insignia. She raised an eyebrow, and said, "Hold that thought," before quickly clicking on it.

["Oracle!"]

Dina's frazzled voice boomed over the line, and Barbara winced, placing a finger to her temple.

"Canary, volume please. What's going on?"

["Intruder in the tower. We need backup!"

There was a loud bang, like a minor explosion, and she could hear Helena let out a long stream of Italian profanity. There were bouts of gunfire, and screams.

["Get back here you little twerp!"…"Huntress! Step away from the grenade —"…"You idiots! You're going to burn the whole #$%&^% place down!"

"Dina?" Oracle's fingers tightened around the microphone on her headset.

["Get here, O! Quick!"

Oracle sighed, "Be right there." A smattering of bangs made the feed crackle like a candy wrapper. "And tell Zinda to be careful. I don't feel like patching up bullet holes in the near future, okay?"

She switched back to her family's line, and said quickly. "On second thought, boys, something just came up. I'll see you all later, though. Stay safe."

Without waiting for a reply, she hurried over to her ride, the tires on her wheelchair screeching a little against the floor.

Barbara only hoped she could get there in time. Anyone who crazy enough to break into the Birds' nest was either insane, malicious (maybe both), or had a serious death wish.

Barbara wheeled herself out of the elevator, and ducked sharply as a toaster sailed over her head. It crashed against the wall, wedged into the drywall. She whirled around to the scene of mayhem that was her clocktower.
Dina was barking out orders and warnings as she attempted to put out a flaming bookshelf with the fire extinguisher. Helena and Zinda were busy throwing things, brandishing their weapons, screaming, and chasing a fleeing figure dressed all in black.

The intruder leapt and twirled out of the way of flying appliances and squealed when Helena tossed a carving knife their way. It twanged as it impaled itself in the wall a few inches from their face.

Helena snarled. "You little—"

"Get back here, sugar!" Zinda called. She cocked her pistol. "We're not gonna hurt you!"

"Yeah?" came the muffled reply. Barbara could tell it was a girl from the way she spoke and moved, but her face was covered, and the rest of her black clothing was so loose that it was almost impossible to tell otherwise. "Says the lady holding a friggin' firearm!"

"Touché," Lady Blackhawk replied, shrugging. She fired off a few shots into the wall next to the girl's head. She lunged away from the spray of gunfire.

"Alright, alright! That's enough! Everybody freeze!" Barbara's arms pumped quickly as she spun her rims and wheeled over to her agents. "Ladies, what the #$%% is going on here?"

Dina gave up on the rest of the fire and started beating at it with a nearby blanket. Helena and Zinda paused and turned to her. Barbara pouted, and jabbed a thumb at the toaster stuck in the wall. "Now how am I gonna make toaster waffles?"

"O!" Zinda rushed forward and wrapped her in a hug. Lady Blackhawk was always extremely affectionate, but Barbara didn't mind. She patted the woman's back, and raised an eyebrow at Helena, who shrugged.

"Little chick just showed up. Caught her eating our food. We, uh… 'confronted' her, and she went nuts. Started attacking us, tossing stuff around."

Barbara glanced up at the girl, who had clambered up the wall somehow and was now crouched on the railing above their heads. Her posture was just like Dick's or Tim's, and that gave her pause. The intruder shifted on her perch, and flashed her middle finger.

"Well," the girl said, "People typically eat when they're hungry, ya know. And you guys attacked me. You couldn't just let me eat my waffles in peace!"

"Those would be my waffles, actually," Barbara said, raising an eyebrow. The girl turned towards her, seemingly ready to protest, and froze.

"No. Freaking. Way. Bar—?"

Helena brought up her crossbow sharply, and fired off a bolt. It sank into the girl's shoulder. She let out a cry and toppled from the railing. Zinda leapt forward and snatched her up, rolling to absorb the girl's impact.

"Helena!" Barbara cried.

Huntress shrugged. "That was getting tedious. Now, we're getting answers."

She marched forwards, and yanked the girl up by her arm, eliciting a pained squeal. Zinda started to protest, but fell silent when Helena's fingers curled around the edge of the girl's mask. Even Dina paused and stepped over. (The fire was thankfully extinguished.)
The girl tried to pull away. "Hey, wait, I—"

With one sharp yank, Helena pulled off the mask. Ragged blonde hair tumbled out from beneath, and covered the girl's face. She ducked her chin, letting her hair form a curtain. Helena wasn't having any of it, though, and brushed aside the matted curls.

Barbara's breathing hitched.

She'd felt this way a few times before. She'd fallen from a tall building, been hit by a truck, taken a few hits to the stomach, and each of those had knocked the air out of her lungs and left her feeling nothing but emptiness, and shock.

She backed her wheelchair up slowly, blinking away the stinging tears suddenly prickling in her eyes. The Birds shot her curious glances, and Dina raised an eyebrow.

"Uh, Babs? Do you know this girl or something?"

The girl's wide blue eyes were tearing up, too. Maybe her thoughts were following a track similar to Oracle's own. Barbara's mouth opened, then closed again. She couldn't get her voice to work, couldn't form the name that came to mind. She cleared her throat, wet her lips, then, finally, managed to breathe out one word.

"Stephanie?"
"Guess Who's Back"

"Good. Now that you two have composed yourselves, let's get a straight answer, alright?"

The Birds of Prey stood circled around Babs and Steph, who had spent the past half hour or so clinging to each other and crying. Barbara wasn't sure if the tears were more from shock, or relief, or what. But the feeling of holding her little sister in her arms again and hearing her sniffles—her very alive sniffles—was indescribable. Now, Steph stood an arm's length away. She was staring at her with wide, disbelieving eyes, arms wrapped around her own chest. Barbara was pretty sure their faces matched.

Zinda was grinning, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Dina raised a pale eyebrow in Barbara's direction, demanding answers. Helena was seething.

"First answer I want?" she growled, "How the #$%% did you find this place?"

"Really?" Dina muttered, shooting the Huntress a sideways glance. "Stephanie Brown shows up alive and well after two years, and that's your first question?"

"You say that like I'm supposed to know who she is," came the snarled reply.

"There's a sign with her name on it right over there!"

Barbara put up a hand. "Will you ladies excuse us? I'll explain everything later, I promise."

Her agents shared a glance, but they complied, filing into the elevator. Dina waved over her shoulder.

"Fine. We'll go grab some lunch down at that corner café. When we get back, we get the full story. Deal?"

Babs nodded. "Deal."

When the doors dinged shut, she turned back to Stephanie. Her former protégé was dressed head to toe in black. Everything was too big. The sweatshirt, cargo pants and combat boots all drowned her. Stephanie was also filthy; like she'd been sleeping in an alley for the past few weeks. She met Barbara's gaze sheepishly.

"I know. Bad style choice, yeah? I, um...I kinda rolled a mugger and took his clothes. I mean, he's alive and everything. Just woke up in his underwear, and...yeah. It's been a pretty messed up month."

Silence. Then, Barbara tipped back her head and laughed.

"I know. Bad style choice, yeah? I, um...I kinda rolled a mugger and took his clothes. I mean, he's alive and everything. Just woke up in his underwear, and...yeah. It's been a pretty messed up month."

Silence. Then, Barbara tipped back her head and laughed.

Steph jumped. "Um. You okay, Babs?"

She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye and beamed. "Sweetheart, you're alive! Of course I'm okay! Not to mention we've finally solved the case of the naked jaywalker!" She closed her eyes, shaking.

Stephanie's eyes widened. "Explanation? Now."
"Ah! About three weeks ago, Jason and Tim were out on patrol together over on the West side. Jumping skyscrapers, stopping muggers and carjackers. Typical stuff, you know? All of a sudden, this guy goes running into the street in his underwear, just darting out in front of everyone with his hands trying to cover his crotch. He was screaming about ghost girls and pants. Jason laughed so hard he fell off the roof they were on and had to get a wrist brace." She grinned at Steph. "Tim has been going nuts trying to figure out what that was all about. I mean, we've got a ton of crazies in Gotham, but that guy was completely sane, by all counts." Her laughter subsided, and she smiled at Stephanie. "You're saying you've been back a month? Why didn't you tell anyone?"

Steph shuffled a little. "Um. Well, first off, when I woke up, I kinda didn't remember who I was…"

Her story unfolded slowly.

Stephanie had woken up about a month ago in the confines of her own casket. She couldn't remember how she'd gotten there, only that she was in a coffin. She'd clawed her way to the surface, scraping through the wood with the brooch they'd pinned on her for burial. When she reached the surface, she hadn't remembered where she was at first, and why she was dressed in a ragged purple dress. So one of her first items of business had been to stumble on a mugging and steal the perp's clothing.

She'd wandered all over Gotham city, because the names started coming back to her first. Bruce. Dick. Babs.

She knew that if she found this Babs person, everything would be okay. (When she heard that, Barbara almost started crying again.) But she'd searched for weeks, and hadn't had much luck. At one point, she told Barbara, this crazy blonde lady with guns and a leather jacket had been chasing her around.

_Zinda_, Barbara thought with a smile, but didn't interrupt Stephanie's story.

She'd gone to Cormorant city to dig up anything she could find about Dina Lance. Enough of her memories had come back by then that she'd remembered Babs mentioning the girl more than once. She staked the city high and low, and caught sight of Black Canary a few times, but all attempts to follow her had been unsuccessful. And then, just when she thought she'd starve to death or freeze out on the streets…

Stephanie had found the Clocktower.

"I snuck in, and I found, like, a freakin' treasure trove of food! I've been living off dumpster scraps for weeks, so I kinda pigged out. Sorry about that. I was just about to leave when your crazy ladies burst in and started shooting. I almost died! Again."

They both surveyed the room. Thankfully, the fires had been put out, and most of the furniture remained intact. But Barbara was definitely going to need a new toaster. And they'd have to patch up the holes in the walls. And probably replace the rug. And the flooring. Her agents were good at what they did, definitely, but sometimes, they were a little bit…overenthusiastic.

"So," Stephanie said softly. "Two years?"

"Right," Barbara replied, sensing a conversational minefield as she said, "Do you…remember anything from then?"

Her face crumpled, and she rubbed her arms softly as if to comfort herself. "I, um. I remember everything now. Including that, I guess."
"That. Her torture and death at the hands of Black Mask."

"If you don't want to talk about it—" Barbara supplied. She folded her hands in her lap. Stephanie glanced at her, then sat down in a heap, leaning her back against a tipped-over bookshelf.

"It's okay. What's there to talk about anyway? I mean, he hurt me, yeah. He did some stuff I'd rather not think about too much...anyway. I got out."

"How did you escape?" Barbara asked softly. She'd wondered about that more than once since the Gang War. Black Mask had made it hard enough to escape when she and Dick had been his captives. She couldn't imagine what Steph could have done without a partner to tag-team an escape with.

Steph breathed a sigh. "He'd been cutting into me all day. Had me hanging by my wrists in this awful warehouse cellar, and he kept asking me about where the cave was. That was his 'subject of the day', I guess. Sometimes, he wanted my name, sometimes he wanted your guys' names. I didn't tell him, though. I was...I didn't tell him anything."

"I know, Steph. You were so brave." Barbara wheeled herself forward, and put a gentle hand on her sister's shoulder. Steph's eyes fluttered shut, and she sighed.

"He stepped out. Had to go see to something, I guess. Mentioned something about his secretary lady, and you and Dick. I didn't catch much of it. Anyway, he was gone a long time. Left me hanging there with only that stupid Falcone guy. Let me tell you, that man talks way too much. I knew he was important though, and I had to warn you guys, tell you where he was. So I slipped the chains. My wrists were pretty bloody by then, so it wasn't hard to slide them around until they popped out..."

Barbara winced.

"And the rest is history." She opened her eyes, and threw out her hands. "I friggin' died! Holy crap!" To Barbara's surprise, she grinned widely. "Not many people can say that, huh?"

"I guess not." Barbara smiled.

They sat in silence for a few moments. Barbara was still trying to wrap her mind around the fact that her little sister was here, right now, and sitting in front of her. There must be something about this clocktower, she mused, First Wally, now Steph.

"I have a question for you now, though," Steph said, breaking Barbara out of her thoughts. "If you don't wanna tell me, I totally get it. But...what's with the wheelchair?"

Barbara was silent, taken aback for a second as she tried to decide how to answer. Stephanie misunderstood her pause, and threw up her hands.

"Right. Yeah. Sorry, Babs. I just—"

"It's fine," Barbara said. "I don't mind. Since you told me your story, it's only fair I tell you mine."

So she let it all out. Maybe it was unfair; Steph had just gotten back from the dead, and Barbara was dumping the whole, terrible story on her. Complete with all the gory details. Things she'd never even told Bruce or Dick, or even her Birds. In a way, it was therapeutic. She'd been holding those fine points to herself for so long. What the Joker had done to her...getting shot had only been the beginning of the torture he'd put her through. She'd been violated, in the worst, most awful ways possible.
She held back specifics, naturally. But Steph's eyes grew wider and wider, and filled with tears. Her hands clapped over her mouth.

"The doctors say I've been paralyzed from the waist down," she finished, staring out the window. "No one expects me to ever walk again."

"Oh Babs." Steph's voice was muffled. She leapt up, and wrapped Barbara in a fierce hug. "I am so sorry."

She patted Steph's back. "You know something? I'm okay. I really am."

Steph pulled back. "Do you... do you ever worry about him coming back? For you?"

Oh. Oh, Steph.

Barbara clasped Stephanie's hand. "I'll be ready if he does. And... I want you to know that you don't have to be afraid anymore. Black Mask won't ever hurt you again. I promise."

Steph wiped at her tear-stained face and let out a dry laugh. "I don't know if you can really promise something like that, but fine. Okay."

Barbara pulled Stephanie to her for one more hug. "Trust me, sweetheart. I can."

Steph dug her face into Barbara's shoulder. "I can't believe it's really you," she said.

"Same here, Steph." Barbara squeezed her little sister tighter. "Welcome home."

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THREE MONTHS LATER

"Dude. I. Am. So. Bored."

Dick's voice crackled over the line. ["We had a deal, amigo."]

Jason flicked the safety on his gun on and off. Again and again. "Yeah. A stupid deal. How come you all get to stay home and stuff your faces with popcorn, while I'm freezing my butt off staking out a stupid freaking warehouse with absolutely nothing inside?"

The Golden Boy sighed over the comm. It had been a long time since Jason had heard him sigh that long. ["Listen, Jay. You got off easy. You really, really did."]

"Yeah? I'll babysit that demon-spawn for you. Show him a few things."

["Jay. It's not—Damian! Tim! That's enough!—sorry. Not that simple. Tim and I are staying home tonight cause Bruce and Alf are out for a business meeting, and—"]

"Right. Wanted you to keep the kid from demolishing the place. Got it." He slid the clip out of the
gun and double checked the number of bullets. "But why does mini-Red have to stay back? He should be out here, freezing and waiting for nothing, just like me. And why can't the boss just un-ground the kid? It was only one thug."

["Right. One thug who is in the hospital on life support."]

He slid the clip back in with a satisfying click. "So?"

["So, like I said. We had a deal, man. Tim and I lost rock paper scissors fair and square. Trust me, I'd—Dami! Step away from the meat tenderizer!—I'd trade places with you in a heartbeat. Movie night was not supposed to be this—Tim! Duck!—stressful."]

Jason had to admit. Dick sounded totally wiped. Maybe he had dodged a bullet, after all.

Still, though. Nothing was—

A flash of movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. He whipped out his binoculars, and swept the street below him. Nothing…nothing…there.

Cape.

Yes!

"Hey, Big Bird," he said, grinning as he cocked his pistol. "On second thought, it looks like things are finally picking up."

["Heh. Well, have fun, I guess."] There was a bang and a loud scream on the other end of the line. ["That better not be blood, guys! Come on!"]

Jason disconnected. Nightwing would have to handle that one on his own. In the meantime, Jason was finally gonna see some action. He spotted the edge of the stranger's cape disappearing into the warehouse, and straightened. There were only two kinds of freaks in Gotham who wore capes: Bats, and psychos.

And, boy, was Jason ready to punch out a psycho or two.

He leapt over the side, shooting out a line midair. The others always liked to shoot first, then jump, but ever since his Robin days, Jason had loved that rush of adrenaline as he stepped out into thin air and felt himself fall through nothingness.

His feet tapped the roof of the warehouse, and he winced a little. If the boss-man was here, he'd be shooting him the trademarked 'Disappointed Look' for making so much noise on a landing. Anyone inside could have heard.

Jason picked his way across the roof, sidestepping the vents and solar panels until he reached a cracked skylight. He holstered his pistol and wedged the edge up and open. Just wide enough for him to slip through into the musty space below, and then some.

He landed on a rusty catwalk, and looked out over dozens and dozens of shipping crates and wooden pallets. It was so quiet, he could hear his own heartbeat. The whole place was giving him the creeps. Jason really hated warehouses; he could already feel the walls pressing in.

Reaching up, he undid the fasteners on his helmet. It slid off with a hiss, and he took a deep breath as he gave the room another once-over.
Come on. Where was the action?

Something clattered nearby, and he whirled around, gun aimed squarely at the stranger's head. His hood tumbled against his boots and rolled a few feet away.

The girl threw up her hands and took a step back. "Whoa, buddy."

He blinked. She was hot. Really hot. Jason couldn't stop his eyes from roving over her as he checked out her skintight black uniform with purple venting trailing up the sides of her legs and waist. A black and purple cape swirled around her feet as she took one more step away from him. He definitely didn't miss the gold utility belt around her hips, or the matching bat insignia. Or the cowl.

"You know, sweetheart," he said, shooting her his best smile, "You must be new around here."

The girl cocked her head. "Huh?"

"Yeah. Cause see this symbol right here?" He tapped his own chest. "It means I'm a Bat. And all the Bats in this city know each other, but I've never seen you before in my life."

She grimaced. "Yeah. Look, about that—"

"Which of course begs the question," he continued. Jason holstered his gun and stepped closer to the girl. As he leaned against the catwalk railing, he narrowed his eyes. "Where have you been all my life?"

She'd seemed a little intimidated before, but that dropped so quickly, it made Jason's jaw slacken. Her expression hardened, and she raised one eyebrow disdainfully.

"Really?" She crossed her arms over her chest and frowned.

He threw out his hands. "What?"

"What next? Are you going to ask me what my sign is, or something?" She huffed out a little laugh. "And before you ask, it kinda did hurt when I fell from heaven. You have no idea."

"Alright, alright. Bad pickup lines won't fly." He scratched the back of his neck distractedly.

Dang. He was really off his game. Usually, all he had to do was shoot the girl a smile and let loose one of those stupid lines, and they were putty in his hands. Dick had taught him well over the years, but maybe the guy's flirting advice was a little outdated.

(Then again, his older brother had tried a line like that on Babs once. She'd socked him in the jaw. So there was that.)

But, to his surprise, she softened a little. "Look. I'm not here to argue, Hood. I just wanted to have a quick look around the place." She smiled a little and shrugged. She had a really cute smile…

"Uh…" he said, "What place? Gotham?"

"Mmhmm."

"Well, let me warn you, sugar." He stooped to pick up his hood. "There are other Bats in this town, and they won't be as nice as me when they get a load of your getup. That uniform has a lot of… history."
She fumbled with her belt, and pulled out a grappling gun. Jason raised his eyebrows when he saw it; it looked just like the one Babs used to use. He opened his mouth to ask her about that, but she raised an eyebrow sharply.

"Oh, I'm not worried," she said. "Trust me."

He cracked a smile. "Oh, I do."

She rolled her eyes and pointed the gun up through the skylight. Her finger twitched on the trigger, but Jason waved quickly.

"Uh, hey," he said, "I'm sorry if we maybe got off on the wrong foot or something, but, uh, you wanna just forget the dumb pickup line?"

Something like a smile twitched at the corner of her mouth. "You know what? Sure."

"And, um." He was blushing now. He was pretty darn sure. "Dangit. 'Weird question, but...are you free Friday night? Say, around ten or so?"

The girl was quiet for a minute. She stared at him for a while, then grinned. "Tell you what. I'll race you to the top of the Kane building, and if you win, I just might take you up on that offer."

He cracked his neck and shot her a grin, before slipping his helmet back on and pulling out his own grappling gun. If she wanted to race him to the tallest building in Gotham, that shouldn't be a problem. He definitely had the experience on his side; Jason strongly suspected this gal was out playing dress-up for the night. "You've got a deal, sugar. I'll even give you a five second head start."

Her line shot out with a puff of air. "Fine. Your funeral," she said, winking.

She streaked upwards and was gone almost before Jason had the chance to blink.

"Crap."

Jason raced after her, shooting upwards and clambering over the side of the skylight. His eyes darted across the rooftop, straining to catch sight of the girl.

There. She was already on her second building. He sprinted, and shot out a second line before jumping. To $%^# with adrenaline. He would not be beat by a Batgirl lookalike.

The usual thrill of pumping arms and legs, of jumping off roofs and soaring over streets and cars and people, was intensified by the thrill of competition. Jason could feel his heart racing as he matched the girl's stride on top of the GCPD building. She shot him a sideways glance and smirked, never slowing. The girl even waved her fingers at him before leaping off and shooting another line.

Jason huffed. He'd raced with his siblings plenty of times. He didn't always win; sometimes you had to sacrifice speed for a little extra firepower (not to mention the sheer amount of manly strength) and Jason was usually fine with that. But at the moment, he was sort of wishing that he had Dick's lightweight Kevlar or Timmy's lighter (wimpier) frame.

Well, on second thought, maybe just the Kevlar.

The girl was definitely light on her feet. As he followed her around a corner, he found himself watching her form, the way she held herself as she swung. It was all in the way she rolled her
shoulders to accommodate the shift in her weight, and the way she swung her feet to maximize speed and direction.

Heck. It was the way a Bat moved. This girl definitely wasn't just a thrill-seeking cosplayer out for a night on the town. She actually knew what she was doing.

She turned her head and shot him a grin that made his heart stop. "Hey, Hood!" She shouted over the wind, "How's it feel to get beat by a girl?"

He smirked. "You haven't won yet, sweetheart!"

She actually stuck her tongue out at him.

Then, she released her line, and free fell through the air, arms out like an acrobat. She flipped once, twice, then shot out another line, and soared upwards.

"Show off!" He shouted.

"Ha!"

They were coming up on the Kane building now. It loomed over the city, glowing and lit up like a Christmas tree. Jason increased his speed, adjusting and using his weight to swing faster. The girl, surprisingly, was still faster. They shot line after line, flying up the side of the building, and waving at the people on the other side of the windows. One secretary lady dropped her papers and gaped at the two masked weirdos shooting by. A guy sitting at a desk waved. Three more office workers grinned at them.

Jason looked up from the civilians, and suddenly realized that the fake Batgirl had vanished.

"Hey!" He shouted. "Where are—?"

His boots tapped against the pointed roof, and he hoisted himself over the railing. The roof of the Kane building was a spire so steep, that there was no flat place to land anywhere; just a small grated observation platform that circled the base of the steeple. He looked to one side, then the other. No sign of the girl.

"Don't know where you got off to," he called, walking around to the other side of the spire, "But I think this means I win."

He turned the corner, and saw her there, leaning with her elbows pressed against the railing. She glanced at him and grinned.

"I got here about twenty-five seconds before you did, Hood. Guess that means I win!"

He smacked the railing and grinned. "Aw, c'mon! Close enough, right?"

"Hmm." She smiled, and looked out on the city.

His hood slid off with a hiss, and he leaned into the railing, just a foot away from her. Close enough that he could hear her breathe. Below them, the sounds of sirens and honking cars strained through the air. People shouted and argued and laughed and chatted. A hundred different kinds of music floated over and under it all. Club music filtering out of flashing buildings, rap music from the alleyways and cabs. The sounds of the city by night.

Jason grew up in the middle of all that. He'd never get tired of the sound.
He glanced at the girl. Her blue eyes were wide as she stared out at the city, and they reflected the gleaming lights from the neighboring skyscrapers. Her blonde hair fluttered around her face, stirred up by the chill breeze. Jason's heart was hammering. Maybe he needed to start laying off the chili dogs.

"It's been a while since I've seen Gotham. From above," she said softly. Her eyes stayed fixed on the glittering horizon. Then, she glanced at him and shrugged. "It's beautiful at night."

Jason stared at her. "It sure is."

She cleared her throat, and looked back out. "So. Red Hood. Where did you come up with that name, anyway?"

Well. How was he supposed to answer that? He'd taken the name from an old moniker of the Joker's, as a way to spite the man who'd beat him to death and blown him up. Mock him. Or maybe just make something of the clown's his own, so that he wouldn't have to be afraid anymore.

"Name belonged to a psycho," he said nonchalantly. "I took it up as a joke when I came back from the dead."

He expected her to scoff at that, call him a liar. Girls usually did that if he let it slip that he'd died and come back to life. Either that, or they ignored it, or took it as some stupid metaphor or something. Instead, the fake Batgirl nodded slowly.

"I've been there," she said. "Dying sucks."

He straightened. "Wait, really?"

"Yup." She waved a hand through the air. "Crawled up out of my grave about four months ago."

He gaped. "So you mean to tell me that you died."

"Uh-huh."

"And came back to life."

"Yes."

"And you woke up in your coffin?"

She raised an eyebrow.

_Dang._ Jason remembered waking up in his own coffin. The crippling sense of fear that came over him as his fingers had clawed around the interior and he started to slowly realize where he was. He wouldn't wish that on anyone.

Slowly, they started to exchange details. Little things that only someone who'd been there would know. How, when you woke up, your voice didn't work, and your tongue and throat were as dry as the Sahara. How your heart kept speeding up and slowing down, like it was trying to decide how to work again. The claustrophobia. Clawing your way through the coffin. Chipping away with your fingernails, and getting splinters from tearing at the wood.

And she knew all of it. Jason wouldn't have believed her otherwise.

"How did you get through the metal casing?" he asked.
She tapped her chest. "Brooch I was buried in. Pretty, glittery thing. Not so much when I was done with it, though. And the casing was a real &*%$ to scrape through, lemme just say. You?"

"Belt buckle." He shook his head. "I can't believe this. I've never met anybody like me before. Not really."

"Yeah. Me neither. I mean," she shrugged. "I've only been back a few months, but it feels like longer."

He grinned. "Yeah. It does."

She was quiet for a minute, then said, "Look. I'll be straight with you, okay?"

"Um. Okay."

She looked away for a few minutes, like she was gathering her courage. "Do you recognize me at all, Jason?"

Click. There it was. The last piece snapped into place, and he could see the whole picture clearly. Jason knew the others didn't think he was that good a detective. And compared with Bruce or Tim, maybe he wasn't. But Jason was still smarter than the average bear, and even he could see something was off about this whole thing.

For one, it had been hard to tell in the warehouse, but as soon as they'd gotten out into the city light, he could see that her suit was top of the line. Way better quality than the average civilian could get a hold of.

The way she moved was too much like one of the Batkids. It was too much like Babs.

During their little race, her name had been bouncing around in his head, even if he hadn't had the concrete evidence to back it up. He knew. And, now that she'd said his name, he knew for sure.

Jason let out a laugh. "How could I not, Blondie?"

Stephanie reared back a little, then a grin lit up her face.

"Good. At least I know the disguise isn't too good."

"Oh," he said, "It is, actually. I didn't recognize you at first. I'm guessing you found Babs, then?"

Steph nodded. "Yeah. We've been working together. She's been training me."

"Well, then, you're in good hands." He smiled and stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets. "Stephanie Brown, back from the dead. Wow. You and I should start a club."

“Oh, what, the ‘Dead Robins Club’?" She laughed. "Meetings would be a ton of fun."

"Yeah, they would." He shook his head and smiled. "In fact, I know you beat me, but how about we have that first meeting this Friday? Kill Order's playing at the Gotham Lights Cinema."

Steph raised an eyebrow. "I dunno. Video game movies never seem to do the real thing justice. But...yeah. Okay. Fine." She grinned. "As long as you buy me popcorn, you can take me anywhere."

He laughed. "You've got yourself a deal, Blondie. So, it's a date?"
"Ha! It's a meeting, Hood. Remember?"

"Okay. I'm good with that."

He leaned in slightly, testing the waters. He might get a punch to the jaw for this, but he was willing to risk it. But she smiled, and closed her eyes, tilting her face up towards his.

His comm beeped. He shot her an apologetic glance, but she nodded knowingly. He pressed his finger to his ear, and turned slightly away.

"This is Hood. And let me just say, Dick, you caught me at the worst possible moment."

["The TV's on fire, and so is the kitchen, Jay! Forget rock paper scissors! I need backup now!"]

"Really?" He groaned. "There's something called a fire department, Grayson."

Steph's eyes widened.

["Tim, grab the extinguisher!...Jason I really need you to get your #$$ over here!"

Everything okay? Steph mouthed. He waved her off, smiling through gritted teeth.

"Fine. Be there in ten."

["Make it five!"]

He tapped the comm to cut off the connection, and sighed. "I'm really sorry," he said, "But I've gotta run. The guys are being idiots, and set the house on fire."

"Wait, like, literally?"

"Yeah. So, I've gotta go help Grayson the mother hen, and pry Tim and the demon spawn off each other…and yeah. Typical evening since we got that pint-sized holy terror."

She cocked her head. "Who?"

He leapt up on top of the railing, balancing his weight so that he didn't topple over the edge. "Oh, that's right. You wouldn't have met Damian, huh? Well, count yourself lucky on that count."

She shrugged, and sighed. "Well, okay, then. See you Friday night?"

He nodded, and slid his hood back on. "Definitely. Thanks for racing, Blondie. I had fun."

"Me too."

He saluted, and tipped back, freefalling down.

Jason shot out his line, and waved to Stephanie. He couldn't help but grin all the way back to the manor.

Stephanie Brown. Who would have thought?
"All righty, where's the fire."

Jason walked in on a scene of madness and mayhem. Dick was racing back and forth between the kitchen and the den with the fire extinguisher, shouting instructions to Damian, who was doing his best to clean up all the broken glass on kitchen floor with a broom and dustpan. He kept muttering obscenities under his breath. Tim was slouched over the counter, holding a bloody rag to his mouth with one hand, and a bag of frozen peas to his eye with the other. Jason gave him a once over, and noticed the three bloody teeth piled next to his brother's elbow.

He gave a low whistle. "Whoa. What happened to you?"

"He was an idiot," Damian snarled.

"Whed ah gan zee aghan, oar dea!" Tim growled, crunching the bag of peas in his fist. He had a ginormous shiner blooming underneath one swollen eye. He wouldn't be seeing out of that for a while. Jason actually winced. "Oo lil zycho!"

"Jason!" Dick shouted, sprinting into the kitchen. He sprayed the flames on the stove until they were buried under a mound of white foam, then turned to him. "Do you have extinguishers on you?"

Jason was still dressed out in uniform, so he nodded, and rifled in his belt for the pellets. Always handy to have some way of putting out small fires on patrol. "Yup. So do you, down in the cave. Why not just use those? You kinda interrupted something important."

Dick groaned, and raced back into the den. "And leave these two alone together? I don't think so. Dami, do you have all the glass cleaned up?"

"Yes, Grayson."

"Good. Dump it in the trash."

Damian shot Tim an evil grin and raised the dust pan. Dick shouted from the other room.

"The trash can, Damian! Don't make me call Alfred again!"

The kid rolled his eyes, but complied, letting the shards tumble into the garbage bin. "Please," he muttered. "We all know Pennyworth has turned off his cellular phone."

Seriously? What kid said the words 'cellular phone' with a straight face?

Jason sighed, and flicked an extinguisher pellet over towards the stove, where the last creeping flames were crackling up from behind the oven. Then, he walked into the den, and threw his pellets against the carpet, the couch, and the scorched flatscreen TV. They exploded on impact, smothering the flames with a special dust developed by Bruce's friend, Lucius Fox.

Dick dropped the fire extinguisher, and collapsed into the couch—the one that wasn't burnt—and let loose a mighty sigh. "I miss Babs," he groaned as his eyes squeezed shut.

"Yep. Well. Always happy to help," Jason said, crossing his arms. He turned to leave. Maybe if he left now, he could catch Stephanie before she left Gotham. At the very least, he could call Oracle,
and ask where she was. They could go back to racing, or talking. He might even get that kiss.
"Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll head back out."

Dick's eyes cracked open. "I thought you didn't want to be out on patrol tonight."

Jason threw out his arms, and smiled. "Well, things were actually starting to get pretty interesting."

The eyes narrowed. "Jason…"

"Okay, fine. I snagged a date." He sighed. "Happy?"

Dick moaned and tipped his head back as far as it would go. "One little brother's trying to kill everyone, one's got three missing teeth and a black eye, the house is a wreck—Alf's gonna kill me for that, by the way—and now Red Hood is using patrol time to pick up girls." He put his hands over his face. "Just tell me you weren't at a bar, Jay. Please."

"I wasn't at a bar. And she's not a civilian, don't worry."

"Great," Dick spread his hands out. He had on the most pitiful expression Jason had ever seen. "He's got a date with a supervillain. &%*! it, why me?"

"Grayson!" Damian called from the other room. "Drake is being insufferable!"

"Ah diden zay anyding!"

Dick's eyes shut again. "Just take me now. I am ready for death."

Welp, Jason wasn't a complete jerk. Consciences sure were annoying, though. He gave the room a once-over, and sighed. "Tell you what, Golden Boy. You and the demon-spawn get to work scrubbing the scorched marks off everything, and straighten things up. I'll take Bruce's emergency credit card and make a run to the hardware store. And the furniture store." He winced at the TV. "And I'll pick up another one of those, too. It'll be like none of this ever happened."

Tears brimmed in Dick's eyes. "Really?"

"Yeah," he sighed. But he pointed a finger at Dick. "But only if you cover for me this Friday. The boss-bat doesn't need to know a &*%& thing about my social calendar."

His older brother nodded. "You got it."

Jason probably could've asked for anything, and Dick would have agreed gladly. But he sighed, and turned to leave.

"One home makeover coming up," he muttered. "Let's just hope we can fix this mess before Bruce gets home. If not…"

Dick nodded. "Heaven help us all. Thanks, Jay."

"Whatever," Jason said.
“Good, Steph. Now, adjust your stance. Feet lined up with your shoulders.”

Stephanie grunted as she dodged another blow from Canary. "What? You're not even looking!"

Barbara's gaze was fixed on the conference call up on her screen. The feed was streaming live from a dress boutique in Gotham. Artemis was trying on a series of possible wedding gowns, and the other original female members of the Team had all turned out to help her pick one. Barbara had been about to go, but had been waylaid by a slight case of the sniffles. It wasn't even too serious, but no one—especially Barbara—wanted to risk anything. Luckily, Roquelle knew her way around a web cam, and Oracle could watch her friend pick out a dress without the fear of the bride catching a cold the week before her wedding.

She groped for the box of tissues next to one of the keyboards and grimaced. "I don't have to. I can hear it in the way you're moving."

"Huh. There's another thing you're gonna have to teach me. Whoa!"

There was a swipe and a thud. Canary was victorious.

"Good try, little Bat," Dina sang. Barbara could practically see her smug grin. "Better luck next time."

"Don't feel too bad, Steph." Barbara said, "Dina trained under Lady Shiva for years. I had a hard time sparring with her."

Canary hummed, and she could hear Stephanie's frustrated huff.

"How are the candidates looking, O?" Dina asked, sidling over to her wheelchair with crossed arms. Barbara hastily pulled up the list on one of her side-screens. Names, photos, and short vid clips.

"They all seem to be capable." She sniffed into her tissue. "But the real test will be in getting them to sign on."

"Mm. I see." Dina was busy watching Artemis twirl in an off-white A-line. "Your tiger friend's a possibility. Would she go for it, do you think?"

Stephanie sighed, and perched herself on the desk to Barbara's left, cradling her wrist to her chest and shooting daggers at Canary. Oracle waved a hand. "She's about to get married, Di. I think she deserves a bit of a break. Besides, she and Wally are trying to leave the life. I don't want to drag her back in."

"M'kay," Dina mused, turning her attention back to the list. "Well, I for one, like this Starling lady. And that gal who works with the government. Katana? She could put her sword to better use with us, don't you think?"

Barbara hummed in agreement. "Both of them are good choices. I think Raven would also be a good fit, if we manage to steal her away from the Titans."
Steph snorted. "Oh, I know someone who wouldn't be happy about that. You know how he is with his little Titan friends."

"What about Hawkgirl? Would she leave the League?"

"Doubtful. One must take Hawkman into account."

"Alright. What about this Black Alice lady?"

"We'll see. Her powers make me a little nervous though."

"Power Girl?"

Barbara growled. "Uh-uh. No way in #$%%. Who even put her on the list?"

"Zinda probably. She also suggested Hawk and Dove? I know Hawk's a guy, but maybe we could get past that…"

There was a beep that made Steph jump a little. Barbara clicked on the icon that had appeared in the bottom corner of her screen. It was shaped as a bat.

Bruce's face covered the video of the dress boutique. The man looked dead tired, and that was truly saying something. On a good night, her former mentor usually got four, maybe five hours of sleep, leaving him permanently exhausted, on some level.

Tim was the same way. But unlike Tim, Bruce didn't pour toxic amounts of hybrid coffee and energy drinks down his throat. (The others often worried that Tim's heart would explode one day from drinking one of his own concoctions. Jason had accidentally gotten hold of one of his brews one morning, and they'd barely gotten him to the hospital in time.)

"Barbara," he said, smiling a little. Steph and Dina took the opportunity to back out of sight. Dina waved, grinning, and helped Steph out of the room, leaving her to talk with the Batman in private.

"Heya, B-man," she said. "What can I do for you?"

His smile dipped a little. "Actually, I was calling to ask for your help."

"Oh?" Barbara raised an eyebrow. "And do you need my help? Or Oracle's?"

More specifically, did he need IT help, or was it something else? There was a difference between asking for Barbara's help and asking for Oracle's help, even though it was sometimes hard to tell what that difference was.

"Yours," he said, which didn't really clear that up. "I, um, was wondering if you would agree to watch Damian for a few hours."

Silence. Barbara wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, but this wasn't it. She snorted, then grimaced and reached for a tissue. "That's it? What, did he burn down the house or something?"

"Not exactly. I just need a little extra help. Dick is at Wally's bachelor party, and Jason's on assignment in Seoul with the Team. I have a board meeting, and that's going to take a while."

She shrugged, shooting the list a sideways glance. She had to find some time to meet with each of the candidates (except Karin—that was a hard pass) in the next few days. "I'd be happy to take him, Bruce, but what about Tim or Alfred?"
Plus, the fact that Jason still ran with the Team was news to Barbara. Happy news, but she felt a little prickle of irritation that this was the first she was hearing about it.

Bruce sighed heavily. "Alfred's taking Tim in for oral surgery. Apparently, there was an incident with a meat tenderizer. The boys are claiming that he ran into a wall during a game of 'tag', but I wasn't born yesterday."

"Ooh." She winced. "Well. Sure. Send him over. In fact, let me keep the kid for a few days. I'll whip him into shape."

Bruce's eyes widened. "I can't ask you to—"

"It's not a problem, believe me." Barbara put up a hand. "I do have one condition for you, though."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I'll watch your protégé for a few days, if you watch mine."

Steph was doing well in her training. Really well. She was already leaps and bounds ahead of where Barbara had been when she'd first started out as Batgirl. And yet, while her Birds were doing their best to take her out on patrols and show her the ropes out in the field, she was missing out on a lot of the little bits of experience that a vigilante could get from swinging between skyscrapers all night. Something about running through Gotham city at night with a Robin at your side—or a Batman in the shadows—taught you things you couldn't learn on a training mat.

Maybe Barbara could teach the new Robin a few things. But maybe the old Robins could show her new Batgirl a thing or two as well.

Bruce started to nod, then stopped abruptly. "Protégé? Since when...you're training someone?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact." She smirked. "A new Batgirl. And before you protest, and launch into the whole 'that's not your place' or 'Batgirl is my jurisdiction' speech, I just want you to know that I've made my decision, and you're going to have to deal with it if you want to benefit from my services again."

Her former mentor reeled. "I...Barbara, if you want to appoint a new Batgirl, then that's fine. I trust your judgement. I just didn't know that you were ready to pass that mantle on."

"Please." She gave a weak smile, and leaned forward. "Batman and crew need a Batgirl. Always have, always will."

A small smile twitched at his lips. "We would truly be lost without one."

"Darn straight. Besides, I think you'll like her."

"And speaking of which, what does this agreement entail? Do you expect me to train her for you?"

Barbara almost laughed at the look on Bruce's face. "No need, believe me. I've already seen to that. Just show her around the cave, around Gotham, maybe the manor. Let her meet the guys."

"The manor? Barbara, please tell me you haven't told her—"

"Oh, she already knows. Sorry, B-man, but there was literally nothing I could do about that. Trust me."

He sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Very well. I'll bring Damian by in about an hour. Is
that alright?"

She typed distractedly. "Does he have all of his flu shots?"

"What?"

"Never mind. He does. I just checked." She straightened, and closed out of the kid's medical records. "So, we're good to go. I'll send my girl over tonight. Are you good with that?"

"Yes. I suppose I am."

"Great. See you soon, Bruce."

He smiled. "Thank you, Barbara."

She held up a finger. "Oh. And one more thing, please."

"Yes?"

Barbara cleared her throat. The question had been at the forefront of her mind for weeks. "Bruce, how are things coming on the procedure?"

"The-? Oh. Yes." He shifted slightly. "I've been conferring with Dr. Midnight. There are still a few issues that we need to resolve before we can seriously attempt anything."

She nodded. She'd expected as much. "Well. Alright then. Thanks."

"See you soon."

He hung up, and Barbara glanced over the boutique feed. Artemis walked out in a glittering dress that had everyone in the room beaming and clapping. She smiled.

Things were changing, that was for sure. But for once, they were changing in a good way.

"Are you sure about this?" Stephanie was busy shoving her costume and equipment into a duffel bag, and kept shooting Barbara wary glances. "I mean, they don't even know I'm alive, yet—well, Jason does, but that's not the point—"

Barbara stopped short and turned away from her screen. "Wait. Jason knows?"

"Um. Yeah? We're kind of going to go see a movie tomorrow night."

Barbara rubbed her temples and shut her eyes. "Mm. Okay. Sure. Just please tell me you'll stop using patrol time for picking up guys, okay?"

Steph grinned, and tugged the zipper on her bag. As soon as she tossed it over her shoulder, a notification beeped on Oracle's computer. She pressed a key, and wheeled over towards the elevator.
"They're here, Steph. You might want to lay low until Bruce leaves."

Her sister raised an eyebrow. "Uh, why? He's going to see me in a few hours anyway."

She could hear the elevator whirring on the other side of the door. "Because, Steph. It'll ruin the big reveal."

"Ooh. Yeah. You're right. I'm gonna go hide in Helena's room, okay?"

"Sounds good. Just don't touch her stuff, okay? We've almost weaned her off killing people."

"You got it."

Barbara turned her head, and Steph was already gone without a sound. A smile twitched at her lips. The new Batgirl was definitely getting better.

The doors dinged open, and revealed a weary, bag-toting Bruce, and a grumpy Damian. The boy had a scowl on his face, and his arms crossed tight over his chest. His eyes wandered over the room, then came to a rest on her. His mouth twisted.

"Hi, Damian." Barbara waved. "What do you think of my place?"

He sniffed. "It's adequate. Though nothing compared to my father's cave."

Bruce winced. "Damian—"

"Well, maybe you can give me a few tips on improving the place, yeah? My suggestion box is right over there." She winked. "In the meantime, let's get you settled, and your dad on his way to that board meeting, kiddo. If you want, we can order pizza tonight. Sound good?"

Damian frowned. "Don't patronize me or I'll break your face, cripple. Just like your legs."

"Damian." Bruce's tone cracked like a whip.

Barbara's fingernails were digging into the arms of her chair, but she forced a smile. "I'm not patronizing you, Dami. I'm just trying to be nice."

"Fine. But what is…" he scowled, "Pizza?"

She gaped at Bruce, taken aback. "Just what exactly have you been teaching this kid?"

"Well, we—"

"Clearly not the fundamentals of life." She shook her head. "Well, Dami, you're here for the next little while, and we'll teach you everything you need to know. Okay?"

He looked up at his father. "Are you certain that I can't stay at the manor on my own?"

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "Yes. Besides, Damian. Barbara is like a daughter to me, which almost makes her like a sister to you. Trust me when I tell you you're in good hands."

He set the bag down at Damian's feet, and nodded to Barbara. "I'll cover any damages that might result. Please take care of him."

She saluted. "Relax, B-man. We're going to have a great time. Aren't we?"
Damian's shoulders slumped. He wandered over to the window to look out at the cityscape. "I suppose we might as well get this over with, then. Goodbye, father. I wish you luck in acquiring those assets from Veracorp."

Bruce glanced at Barbara questioningly, as if double checking to see if she was still alright with the arrangement. "Thank you, Damian. I'll see you soon."

"He'll be just fine, Bruce. I promise." She waved as he hit the down button on the elevator. "I'll send my girl over later, okay?"

Damian was running a finger over the glass. Bruce nodded.

The doors slid open, and he stepped into the elevator. "Thanks again, Barbara."

"Anytime."

Ding.

Ding.

She turned to Damian, who was still watching out the window. He turned towards her slowly, one eyebrow quirked. It suddenly hit her that she had no clue what he'd just taken on. Sure, she'd handled four other Robins, but they were all vastly different than the little goblin in front of her.

She just needed to find out what motivated this kid. What his weaknesses were, what he liked, disliked—

"Sooo. You must be Damian."

Steph stepped out from behind Barbara. She set her duffel down with a soft sigh, and grinned.

"Aww, you're so cute!" she exclaimed. "I just wanna scoop you up and give you the biggest hug!"

Barbara winced as the temperature in the room seemed to drop by several degrees. Steph had said the 'c word'. Damian's eyes were wide and affronted. The kid looked like he was seriously contemplating murder. His fingers twitched.

"Uh, Steph," Barbara interjected. "Let's pass on the hugs, alright? Damian, this is my partner, Stephanie Brown. She's our Batgirl."

Still seething, Damian gave Stephanie a once-over and said, through gritted teeth. "Do all of your partners stuff their brassieres?"

Stunned silence.

Barbara instinctively threw an arm out, and caught Steph before she could rush forwards. She let out a snarl. "You little punk. When I get my hands on you—"

"What?" Damian asked, innocently raising his eyebrows. "I apologize if that is a sensitive topic for you, Brown. Tell me, did I strike a nerve?"

Barbara's arm stiffened, and she shot her partner a warning glare. Steph's jaw was clenched so tightly that it was in danger of snapping, but she stood down.

"Alright, Damian. First rule of the Birds' Nest: don't' pick fights with people who can grind you into dust. Follow-up, you'd probably better just not talk to Black Canary or Huntress, alright? At all. Remember that. Rule number two, when we say something that offends someone, we apologize. Alright?"
Damian stuck out his chin. "I am Damian Al Gul, grandson to the Demon Head. I do not apologize to blonde harlots."

Steph reared back. "Excuse me? You just called me what now?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Harlot. I understand that you're blonde, and perhaps lacking somewhat in intelligence as a result, but perhaps you'll understand if I define it for you slowly."

"Ooohhh-kay," Barbara cut in, wrapping Steph's wrist in a firm grip. Admittedly, that insult was below the belt. The girl's left eye was starting to twitch uncontrollably. She was beginning to see why Tim and this kid always seemed to come to physical blows. At the moment, though, taking Steph in to have her teeth worked on would be inconvenient at best.

On the other hand, finding a way to tell Bruce that his child had been brutally murdered was even less appealing.

"Steph, hon?" she said softly. "Deep breaths. Why don't you go talk a walk?"

Her partner seemed to be holding her breath in, because her face was getting redder and redder by the minute. She shook out of Barbara's grip, scooped up her bag, and stormed towards the elevator. "If you need me," she shot over her shoulder, "I'll be on my way to Bruce's. Getting into position and all that."

"Okay. Be safe." Babs waved. "And bonus points if you get one of the boys to scream."

Steph managed a smile, then stepped into the elevator. When the doors slid shut behind her, Barbara sighed. The kid sniffed and perched himself on top of one of the lounge's couches.

"Your partner is incompetent. Mother always told me that the Batgirl was a worthy opponent. A skilled fighter and a brilliant adversary. Difficult to believe that is whom she was referring to."

Barbara rested her hands on the armrests of her chair and managed a smile. Talia Al Ghul thought she was a worthy opponent? Huh. If she wasn't much mistaken, it seemed as though she'd found an opening with this kid.

"Hey, Dami," she said, "Stephanie has only been Batgirl for a few months."

He looked up at her. "Is that so? I suppose that makes more sense. But if that's the case, then who was her predecessor?"

Barbara smiled and nodded to the set of glass cases behind him. He turned, and his shoulders slackened. Damian whirled around to look at her. His expression warred between awe and fear, and he opened his mouth.

"You? But, you're—"

She spread her arms and smiled. "Well, I know. I've kind of let myself go the last year or so. But you're looking at the first Batgirl, Damian." She settled her hands in her lap. "I remember your dad took me in when I was a little older than you, taught me how to fight. I know I was anxious to prove myself, and I wasn't the friendliest, especially when it came to his other partner."

"I see."

The realization hit Barbara like a ton of bricks. Of course. This was definitely Talia's son; he
needed validation, needed to feel superior. Being shoved into a new family where he was the runt, surrounded by bigger, stronger people all competing for his father's attention…

Boy, did that sound familiar. Maybe she and Damian had more in common than she'd thought.

And just like that, she knew exactly what this kid needed.

But, first things first: Education.

"Damian," she said, "Tell you what. We're going to run some training drills—I know how much you like those—and then we're going to order some pizza. You'll like that even more, I promise."

The new Robin seemed skeptical. "I will, will I?"

"Trust me, kid. It'll knock your socks off. Then, we'll take a drive. I think I have an idea."

"How you feelin', Timmy?"

Dick threw himself down onto the couch next to Tim, two heaping bowls of ice cream in hand. Tim, who was curled up in a mound of blankets, accepted the frozen treat slowly, zombie-like. The poor kid had been through a lot in the past few days, between Damian and the all-too-familiar villain: the Oral Surgeon. His cheeks had been slightly swollen for a few hours, and he kind of reminded Dick of a chipmunk, even though the effects were starting to wear off.

He turned to Dick, his expression completely vacant, and said, "I've never felt so #%!*$^ terrible in my %^?$#^ life. When I #$/?%&*$ get my #$/^& hands on that #%!^*$*$?&^&$% !# $%$ $#$, I'm going to $ ^%$&$#$% $^%$?&*$# ( $#*$%$&!*$&^#* $!^&$%?^$*# ( $#*$%&!?#* #*$?& #!#$*^&.

Dick's eyes widened. "Dang, Tim." He turned sharply. "Jay, you're getting this, right?"

Jason cackled from the loveseat, holding up his phone as he captured the whole thing. "Please. This is golden. I didn't even know our innocent little Timmy knew words like that!"

"It is kinda fun being on the spectator side of things for a change," Dick admitted as he scooped a dollop of ice cream into his mouth. "Now I can see why you guys get such a kick out of watching me. I mean, first we had him thinking that the Reach was invading again—"

"—and our only weapons were a spork and my shoe," Jason cut in.

"—then he started hallucinating rabbits everywhere. What the heck was up with that, by the way?"

Jason shrugged. "No idea, man. But it was hilarious."

"And now," Dick said, "Our boy's lost his filter completely. Poor Tim."

"%$(# you," Tim growled. "#$(*)$ you # #% !#$* to #%) and #O)% #)% ( ^%?$#) %!(# $%$%^&."
"Now, Master Timothy." Alfred stepped into the room with a tray full of ice cream bowls. "I highly recommend that you refrain from such language in the presence of Miss Barbara's new partner, once she arrives."

"#($^ you, Alf-ed," Tim slurred halfheartedly.

Alfred was unaffected. Instead, he pulled a bottle of pills from his pocket, and inspected the label. "I'm beginning to think this prescription may be too strong for you, Master Timothy. Perhaps we should try halving the dose?"

"Nuh-uh," Tim protested. "I'm #^ (!^$ fine. Don't want the #*?(#)!*% pain…"

"You'll hardly have a choice, I'm afraid. You're in no position to argue."

Dick straightened. "Hey, Alfred, do you know when this new partner's getting here? Bruce told me she'd be here two hours ago."

He was a little bit put out that Babs hadn't mentioned anything about passing on the mantle to a new Batgirl. He guessed she didn't need his permission; it wasn't his persona, after all. But it was still strange that Barbara would be willing to let someone else wear the cape and cowl. Especially with all the memories that uniform held.

"She should be arriving at any time, Master Dick. I'm afraid we must be patient."

Jason chuckled, and threw his elbows over the back of the loveseat. That was when Bruce appeared in the doorway, and made his way over to sit next to his second son. Jason scootched over to make room for the boss as he collapsed onto the couch and reached for a bowl of ice cream. Rocky Road: the Batman's favorite.

"I trust your board meeting was a success, Master Bruce?" Alfred smiled, and handed one of the bowls to Jason. Bruce swallowed down a spoonful and grimaced.

"More or less. I'm just relieved that it's finally over."

"Indeed."

"Say," Jason mused. "Do you think the Clocktower's been destroyed yet? I bet fifty bucks that Babs is gonna have to phone in the Fire Department, or the National Guard. #$%%, maybe even the League!"

Dick sighed. "I fear for her life."

" #$%( kid," Tim snarled. " #&?!$($%*!(&*^&%(S$&%)(#$%($#)S%*!"

"I'm sure Barbara is more than capable of handling a ten-year-old boy." Bruce reached for the TV remote, and smiled at their wounded comrade. "Are you feeling alright, then, Tim?"

"No."

"Sorry to hear that." He pressed the button and the screen flickered to life. "How about we watch a movie while we wait for Barbara's partner? Alfred, come have a seat."

The old Butler smiled and settled next to Dick.

Bruce frowned at the remote. "Funny. I could have sworn we had a different system…"
"Nope," Dick said quickly.

"You must be going senile, boss-man." Jason smirked. "What, d'you think we went out and bought a whole new TV system or something?"

Dick and Tim managed a nervous laugh.

Bruce shook his head, and pressed another button. One of the Mission Impossible movies came up onscreen, and all eyes turned to the TV. Tom Cruise's face filled the screen, and there was a mixture of cheers and groans. A favorite hobby in the family was critiquing movies like this, which was great if you were trying to show off, but not so much if you were trying to relax or actually watch the movie.

"Ooh, this one." Jason rubbed his hands together.

"Those #$%^&^ moves aren't even%^*?&#$!^ realistic."

"Doesn't matter," A girl's voice cut in, "I, for one, love this movie."

Everyone froze. Five sets of eyes latched onto the blonde girl in a Batgirl uniform leaning against the back of the couch, watching the movie with a bemused little smirk.

"Hey boys," Batgirl said, "I've been in the room for ages. I'm surprised it took you this long to spot me. Aren't you guys supposed to be, like, master detectives or whatever?"

Bruce stood quickly. "How did you get in here?"

Batgirl raised an eyebrow. "Uh, 'hi' to you, too, Bruce."

Dick and Alfred both followed Bruce's lead. Jason, however, stayed put, a smug smirk twisting at the sides of his mouth. Tim was too bundled up in blankets to move a muscle, however, and settled for craning his neck to look at the newcomer.

"Nice to meet you, Batgirl," Dick said, sticking out a hand. She grinned, and shook it enthusiastically.

"Heya Dick! Long time no see! And Timmy, you're looking as happy as ever."

Dick raised an eyebrow. "Um. Do we…know you?"

Batgirl and Jason shared a knowing look, then both of them cracked up. The others glanced around the room in confusion.

"Well," she said, "Let's just say that we have a lot of catching up to do."

Alfred cleared his throat, and stepped forward to pull the curtains away from the room's window. "I'm afraid that may need to wait until after you've all dealt with the crisis at hand."

The den's window looked out on the Gotham city skyline, miles away from the manor. Above the horizon, the Batsignal gleamed in the night sky. Bruce let out a small moan, but nodded.

"Very well. Everyone suit up. We leave in five."

The boys rushed off, Tim included. Bruce might have held him back, but at the moment, he was too preoccupied with the new Batgirl, who was trying to follow his sons. He stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.
"Will you be joining us, then?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

She shook him off. "Um. Duh. Why do you think Babs sent me?"

"I understand that, but—"

"Uh-uh," Batgirl snapped. "You don't give me orders anymore, boss-man. If you need me, I'll be raiding the equipment stores. I know where you keep the good stuff."

She pushed past him, and started to leave the room. Before she did, she turned to glance back over her shoulder and said, "And, for the record, Bruce…I think its best if you let me keep this suit."

She marched out of the room, and Bruce turned to Alfred, jaw slackening. The old butler grinned.

Bruce stuttered. "Then, that would mean—"

"Yes," Alfred said pleasantly, "I was wondering when Miss Brown would return home once more."

Bruce shut his eyes.

Barbara had better have a good explanation lined up for this one.

"Does everyone know their assignments?"

The Batmobile screeched to a halt in front of City Hall. Vines and leaves burst out through the windows while citizens fled the scene in a panic. The Commissioner's briefing had informed them that Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn were inside, holding the Mayor hostage. Batman doubted that Mayor James would face major harm at the villainess' hands, but getting in and getting the man out safely was still their top priority.

The three boys all nodded as the Batmobile's hatch slid open, but Batgirl cracked her knuckles with a grin.

"Poison Ivy, huh? Good. I've been waiting for a little payback."

"Stephanie—" Batman started. But he only had time to say her name before she was gone.

Tim grumbled. "She's not so great at the whole teamwork thing, is she?"

The swelling in Tim's cheeks had gone down considerably, and his meds were beginning to wear off. Fortunately, that made for a more clear-headed Red Robin—and Batman needed everyone to be thinking clearly at the moment. However, the resurgence of pain and the lingering effects of the pills were combining forces to make Tim extremely irritable.

Nightwing's eyes narrowed. "Well, in her defense, the last time she tried to work with us, everyone yelled at her for losing Babs, and she got fired. So…" He shot Bruce a sour look.
Batman shook his head. "Whatever the case, the plan still stands. Red Robin and Nightwing will go in through the back, and Hood and I will take the front."

"Awesome. Now, what are we waiting for, a theme song?" Jason took off like a shot, and Bruce followed. Tim and Dick disappeared just as quickly.

A few stories up the side of the building, Bruce stood by as Jason eased the glass window out of its frame. In his opinion, his second son didn't get near enough credit for stealth as the others did. Perhaps it was because the Red Hood often preferred bursting onto a scene with guns blazing. But oftentimes Tim and Dick—and sometimes even Bruce—seemed to forget that Jason himself was once a Robin. And though he was bulkier and more heavyset, the man could still get into places with equal quiet and subtlety as any of the other Bats.

Both men slid easily through the open portal, landing in a dark and vacant office. By now, Dick and Tim—the leaner/more flexible of the family—would be crawling through the ventilation system. Their objective was to locate Quinn, Ivy and James, then radio back to Bruce and Jason. They would then rendezvous at the mayor's location and do battle with the two female Rogues.

Bruce had no idea where Stephanie was at the moment. He only hoped that Barbara's training had cured her of her more meddling and careless tendencies.

"This is Nightwing. You there, Bats?"

Batman pressed to fingers to the side of his cowl. "I'm here, Nightwing. Have you located the mayor?"

"Er, yeah. About that…"

Jason's fingers were pressed to his helmet, listening in. He was humming a tune while flipping a paperweight from one of the desks up into the air, then catching it with a swipe of his hand.

Over the comm, Tim let out a string of words that made even Bruce raise his eyebrows. Jason laughed. Apparently, Tim's filter was still non-functional.

Dick sighed heavily, and chuckled. "Well, actually, never mind. You'd have to see it. I'm sending you our location now, but just walk into the mayor's office, how 'bout?"

Bruce and Jason shared a glance, then sprinted out the door and into the hall. They weren't far from the mayor's office, but the distance was great enough that Bruce had time to envision the worst possible scenarios that would greet them on the other side of the antique mahogany door.

Whatever he'd expected, it definitely wasn't this.

The room was covered in smoking flora, vines and spines and leaves. Mayor James sat behind his desk, rubbing at his sore wrists as a smoldering pile of vines rested nearby. Ivy and Quinn were restrained back to back, grappling line keeping them from moving anywhere. Ivy herself was covered in yellow powder: residue from a pesticide pellet, most certainly. Quinn was giggling through a bloody nose.

Batgirl leaned against the edge of the mayor's desk, holding a bo staff in one gloved hand. She smiled, and pressed its tip underneath Ivy's chin.

"Are you sure you don't recognize me, Ivy?" she said, almost laughing. "Are you absolutely sure?"

Ivy was glowering, but her eyes widened slightly. "Wait. You're that little blonde brat that followed
Batgirl around in the Robin costume."

Harley giggled. "Hey, didn't the Big Bat fire you?"

Steph's grin started to look more like she was baring her teeth. "I got a promotion, actually. But I can see how you'd be confused. How's that nose, sweetie?"

Batman cleared his throat, and all eyes in the room fastened on him. Batgirl waved.

"Heya, guys. Took you long enough."

The vent cover in the wall above their heads loosened and clattered to the ground. Nightwing's head poked out, and he grinned.

"See what I mean?" he asked.

Tim's muffled voice filtered out from the vent. "Move your #$$. I can't #%#!*& breathe, you moron."

Dick winced, and pulled himself from the shaft, landing with a roll on the soft carpet. He sprang to his feet, and Tim followed suit, dragging his body out of the hole.

Nightwing clapped Batgirl on the shoulder and grinned widely. "Look at this! She did it all herself. I have no idea how she got in so fast!"

Tim glowered. Stephanie whistled smugly, and twirled her hand, pointing up at the open skylight in the roof.

"Duh," she said.

Bruce had avoided the skylight, for fear of a trap. He'd been sure that Quinn and Ivy would be expecting an attack from above. Judging by the thorns aimed at the skylight, and a few embedded in the ceiling's plaster, he'd been correct.

"Yeah." Stephanie shrugged. Her hands flew as she gestured. "I know you guys were expecting a trap, but these ladies weren't expecting me. So it was easy enough to swoop in, dodge the thorn-bullet-thingies, kick Harley in the nose, chuck a pellet at Ivy, and—" she snapped her fingers. "Voila! Turns out I'm not so useless, after all, huh?"

Bruce was honestly still trying to process the whole scene. He glanced at Mayor James, who was sinking low into his chair, trying to appear as small and insignificant as possible, and over to the two villainesses. Then back up to Batgirl.

"No, Batgirl. Oracle has trained you well."

Stephanie's eyes widened. She smacked her head with the heel of her hand a few times and turned to Jason. "Excuse me, Hood. But, did I almost hear a 'good job' in there, somewhere?"

Jason snorted, and reached up to pull off his helmet. Bruce would have protested, but Jason always made sure to wear a domino mask underneath his Hood, just in case. He grinned, and winked at Batgirl. "Yeah, well. You learn to read between the lines. Don't worry. I think you did great, beautiful."

"Oh, I'm not worried." She pushed off the desk and sauntered over to Batman and Red Hood. "I know a compliment when I hear one."
Then, as quick as the Flash, she reached up and hooked a hand behind Jason's neck, and pressed her lips to his. Jason inhaled sharply, eyes wide. Then, he hummed. His eyes fluttered shut, and he reached around Stephanie's waist to pull her closer.

Batman took a step back. Ivy grimaced, while Harley let out a peal of laughter. Dick was trying to hide a smile behind his hand.

Tim's face was as red as his suit.

"What the %*#?."
Barbara couldn't explain it.

She might actually be wearing this kid down. Finally.

It had taken most of the night. Damian had been stoic and disciplined when she ran him through some training drills with Zinda that afternoon. His technique was nearly flawless. She'd had to hand it to Ra's and Talia; they sure knew how to train warriors. Even Lady Blackhawk was impressed when the ten-year-old boy slammed her down on the training mat in thirty seconds flat.

Zinda had stretched and stood, then started back to her room. She laughed and tossed over her shoulder, "Oracle, this kid is killer diller! If he ever needs a dance partner, just let me know. Next time I won't be so off my guard!"

Damian had rubbed a thumb over the wooden staff and turned to her, confused.

Barbara shrugged. "Killer diller. It's...uh, it's a '40's thing. I think."

"Tt. Whatever that means."

After a few hours of training (Damian had wanted to go longer, but she'd finally ended it at six and a half hours) they'd ordered pizza. When the steaming boxes had arrived, the aroma of meat and crust and melted cheese had drawn her three agents out of their rooms and into the open. Even Damian's eyes had widened a little when he'd caught a whiff of the pies.

"I don't understand," he said, "What form of sustenance is this Pizza? And why must it be escorted by an acne-covered youth in a ridiculous uniform?"

The delivery boy scowled.

Oracle handed over his (generous) tip and shot him an apologetic smile. "Sorry. We're working on manners."

The kid shrugged and accepted the money. "It's cool. That's not even the worst thing I've heard tonight." He pressed a button inside the elevator, and shot her a quick salute. "Good luck, lady."

She waved. "Thanks."

The boxes were balanced on her lap, and as she wheeled into the kitchen, the others reverently followed her like acolytes seeking enlightenment. Dina helped her spread the boxes out on the counter while Helena retrieved some paper plates from the cupboard. Zinda and Damian perched next to each other on the bar stools.

"Have you ever tried pizza before?" Damian asked her. His eyes never left the boxes, especially after Dina had lifted the cardboard lids.

Zinda bounced a little in her seat. "Only a few times. I gotta say, hon. The future is a bright place, indeed! I mean, we had pizza back in my day, but they never ever delivered it right to your front door!"

Helena raised an eyebrow and set down the plates. "Eh, about that. That kid just saw our whole
layout. Aren't you a little concerned about that, Babs?"

Barbara waved a hand and lifted a slice onto her plate. "I doubt he knows too much about Oracle. It's not exactly a well-known moniker. Besides, who'd believe him if he said he saw a giant lair in the top of the Clocktower?"

Dina crossed her arms. "I guess. But if we have to deal with a bunch of snoopy teenagers, then I swear..." She trailed off, leaving the threat hanging in the air.

"True," Babs admitted. "I'll change the code on the elevator panel again. Happy?"

Dina snatched up a slice of meat-lovers'. "Ecstatic. Now, let's eat."

The birds dug into the pies. Damian watched the women pile slices onto their plates, sigh, and roll their eyes in contentment as they took generous bites. Barbara reached up to nudge his shoulder.

"Go on, Damian. Don't be shy."

He blinked. He hesitantly picked up a paper plate, and glanced over the ravished pizzas.

Zinda pointed. "Whaddy'a like, hon? We've got pepperoni, meat-lovers', Canadian bacon and pineapple—"

"Pineapple on pizza is an abomination," Dina said. Helena picked off a piece from her own slice and chucked it at Canary's head with a snarl.

"—and veggie pizza. So what looks good?"

Damian hesitated, then reached towards the veggie pie. He tilted his head a little as he stared at the food.

"Go on. Give it a try."

He took a small bite. His eyes bugged out.

Dina laughed, and Helena smiled.

Barbara smiled as he devoured the rest of the slice, and went back for a second slice, then a third.

"Well, Damian. You've learned a valuable lesson today," Barbara said. "Pizza is love..."

The other birds raised their slices into the air. "Pizza is life."

They were silent for the rest of the meal. The four boxes were emptied out in no time, leaving the five of them full and satisfied. The birds helped clear up the mess, then retreated to go suit up for evening patrol. Cormorant wasn't near what Gotham was, crime-wise, but it had its fair share of muggers and low-lifes.

They left Damian and Barbara alone at the command console, and Barbara quickly typed the commands into her computer. The girls would have to fly solo tonight, but she'd at least send them the security feeds of the various cameras she's set up around the city. Each of her agents had been equipped with wrist-computers similar to what she and Dick used to use back during the good old days.

In the meantime, she and Damian would be going on a bit of a field trip. She'd been thinking a lot about what this kid needed to be a successful member of the Family, and had come up with
something that would hopefully curb the boy's murderous tendencies.

"Thank you for the pizza," Damian said quietly. "It was very satisfying."

Barbara's fingers paused above the keys. She turned to him, eyebrows raised. "You're welcome. Thank you."

"For what?"

She smiled. "For thanking me."

He nodded, and turned to stare at her computer screens. She continued grabbing the feed from the different security cams on the south side, then the east side. It was as simple as hitting a few buttons, and the live footage could be linked quickly to the Birds' computers.

"Mother never let me try anything that…interesting before."

She hit the spacebar. "I see." The feed from the west side went to Helena. Her thoughts turned to the boy standing next to her. She wasn't sure she could see the monster that her brothers had warned her about. Damian was just a kid. He was a kid who'd never tried pizza, or done anything in his life but train, fight, and have his every whim catered to. What he needed was responsibility. A push in the right direction.

"Your mother has a lot of rules, doesn't she? About whom to associate with? What to wear, eat, say?"

Damian blinked, surprised, then nodded. "Yes. There are rules that dictate how an heir to the Demon's Head must conduct himself. How to address people, for instance. Which begs the question. How am I to address you?"

Barbara finished uploading the feeds, then reached down to turn her wheelchair. "Well, I told you already that you could call me Barbara, or Babs. But if you don't feel comfortable calling me by my first name yet, I understand." She considered for a second. "Can I tell you something, Damian? I've never had a surname before, at least not one I can remember. My parents and grandparents died in a car crash when I was little. I think they were going to dinner and a movie together, and they'd left me with a sitter, but when they didn't come home, I was sent to a foster family."

Barbara had the world at her fingertips as the Oracle. Several months ago, she'd had a nightmare that inspired a search for her parents. She'd wanted to see if she had any biological family left, and she'd wanted to know her story.

A few news articles and police reports, along with the records social workers had kept on her were all she'd had to work with, at first. Even that was difficult; almost none of the records bore her name, as if no one had known it. But, eventually, she'd gotten the surname of her biological father, and everything else fell into place.

Her official name was Barbara Kean.

It was a name that came with an interesting lineage. Her aunt on her father's side had run a brutal crime ring in Gotham during the old days, way back when Bruce was Damian's age. She was a feared woman, and during her time on the streets, Barbara had heard her aunt's name many times without even knowing.

She'd been shocked, though, to find out that her mother's last name was Gordon.
Which, of course, meant that Commissioner James Gordon of the GCPD was her uncle.

Barbara supposed that the famously annoying Disney song was right after all; it really was a Small World.

But this was an identity that didn't seem to belong to her. Several of the conversations she'd had with Dina had suggested that in her dimension/universe/world, Barbara and Commissioner Gordon shared a closer bond than they did here. Perhaps the Gordon in that world had taken her under his wing. Maybe she'd been born as his daughter.

Whatever the case might have been in that world, though, it was different here. Barbara had her own life, now. The foster homes and years on the streets had helped shape her into the kind of girl that would become Batgirl. And, eventually, Oracle.

So, discovering these bits and pieces of her family history didn't do anything more than satisfy her curiosity. She'd always known who she was. This was only another part of the story.

"I ran away when I was eight," she said to Damian. "Ended up on the streets. Then, a few years later, your dad found me. We had to find a last name to put on a few fake hospital forms, since we couldn't find any documents with my real name. So we just used Alfred's last name. Pennyworth. If you want to, I guess you could call me that."

Damian considered that for a few moments. Then, he shook his head. "I think not. Pennyworth is a servant—"

"Careful, there, Damian. Alfred's more like a grandpa to us."

"Very well. In any case, it would be too confusing to call the both of you Pennyworth. We'll have to find something else."

*Kean,* she thought briefly. **All these years later, and I finally learn my parents' surname.**

Barbara smiled. "You know what? I'm sure we'll think of something. In the meantime, I think it's time we run a little errand. Come on."

She wheeled herself over to the elevator. A hidden button on the panel would take them down to a sub-level below the building's parking garage. Helena and Dina parked their cycles there, while Zinda used the space to store her jet. (Long story, and even more expensive. But Lady Blackhawk had her plane, and that's all that mattered)

Barbara's vehicle was similar to the batmobile, but was more streamlined and fuel-efficient. It also had the added benefit of being wheel-chair friendly. As she positioned herself at the wheel, and Damian climbed into the passenger seat, his eyes traced the roof, the dashboard, and the windshield.

"I believe this vehicle will be very conspicuous," he said.

"Yes, well. Thankfully, we can park behind the building."

He nodded. "Where are we going, anyway?"

Barbara smiled. "You'll see."

The trip took fifteen minutes. When they pulled up in front of the animal shelter, Damian's eyes narrowed.
"I don't think I understand."

Damian didn't need discipline, like Bruce wanted to think. He'd gotten that all his life, from Talia and Ra's, and now his own father. Drills and harsh words weren't going to snap the boy out of his snobbishness. And, even though she knew her brothers meant well (except maybe Tim), giving the kid a hard time wasn't going to do anything but make him mad.

No. If they wanted to see a change in Damian, they'd need to take a different approach.

"Well, Damian," Barbara said, taking the key out of the ignition. "I have a question for you. What is the purpose of the Bats in Gotham?"

He scoffed. "I don't understand the question."

"Alright. Well, what do we do?"

"We do battle with our enemies and defeat them."

Barbara nodded, pressing her lips together. "Well, yes. In part. But it's more than that, Damian. We help people, and protect those who can't protect themselves."

He seemed to consider that for a moment, and Barbara gazed out the windshield. The alley behind the animal shelter was abandoned, thankfully. She wasn't exactly fit to deal with multiple assailants, and she worried that if Damian had to step in, there would be casualties. Hopefully—

"I see. And what is the purpose of this errand?"

She pressed the button that would open the doors, and wheeled herself out onto the street. "Well, everyone needs practice. Follow me."

They made their way around to the front, and stepped (or wheeled, in her case) through the front door. A cacophony of barking hit their ears, and Barbara winced a little at the sudden noise. A short, heavier woman waved at them from behind the front desk. She wore a green apron and a wide smile, as well as a tag with the name LINDA.

"Good evening, you two!" she said brightly. "We were just about to close…"

Linda shot Barbara a meaningful glance, but she shot back with a smile of her own.

"Well, actually, we were hoping you could squeeze us in." Her hand slithered into her purse, and she brought out the edge of a rubber-banded wad of bills. Linda's eyes widened slightly, and her bright smile seemed a little more genuine now.

"Of course. I'm guessing you'd want a dog, then? We've got several girls in the back who've had a few years of service training—"

"No," Barbara said. Maybe a little too firmly, because Linda jumped a little. "No. I don't need a service dog. My little brother is looking for a puppy."

Damian's eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch, but he stayed silent.

"Ooh! Well isn't that just the sweetest thing!" Linda's slightly yellowed teeth flashed. "You are one handsome little man, has anyone ever told you that, sweetheart?"

Damian opened his mouth, outraged. Barbara cleared her throat meaningfully, and he paused. Then, through gritted teeth, he said, "Thank. You."
Linda nodded, and checked something on her computer, before smiling back at them. "Well, we've just gotten a few new litters in. Would you and your little brother like to go back and see them?"

"We'd love to," Barbara cut in quickly. Best to get Damian away from the receptionist as soon as possible. "If possible, we'd like to go back alone."

A line appeared between Linda's eyebrows. "Well, I...you see, we don't usually let people back without supervision...the safety of the animals..."

Barbara slipped another packet out from her purse. "Well, that's a shame..."

It shouldn't have been possible by this point, but Linda's smile widened. "Ah, b-but I'm sure we could make an exception for this sweet little boy. Wouldn't want to disappoint him, would we?"

"No," Barbara said quickly, wheeling towards the back room, "We wouldn't. Come on, Damian."

Damian followed hesitantly. He made sure to shoot a death-glare at Linda.

The back room smelled like animals, musty and strange, and was lit by a few dusty fluorescent tubes overhead. Dogs whimpered and huffed and barked in their kennels. The chain links shook as they jumped up. Damian jumped a little too as a German Shepherd hopped up and barked by his ear. He leapt back and shook himself a little.

"Damian?" Barbara raised her eyebrows. "Are you...are you afraid of dogs?"

"Nonsense. I fear nothing."

She nodded, and swept the kennels looking for the puppies. Her eyes landed on four kennels towards the back. These had one large dog, the mother more likely than not, surrounded by wriggling pups. "Come on," she said, leading her younger brother to the back of the room.

He glanced over a litter of golden retriever puppies, and shot her a strange look.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"They are very...rambunctious."

"Well, yeah. They're puppies." Barbara smiled. "Do you like them?"

He sniffed. "Hm."

Damian moved to the next litter. A chocolate lab, surrounded by dark little balls of fuzz. He stooped to put his finger through one of the holes in the chain link kennel. The pups all swarmed around his finger, nibbling and licking and panting. Damian's expression softened, but he stood, and moved to the next kennel. Poodles, so he barely spared them a glance.

The last kennel didn't have an adult dog, just a few dark gray puppies with legs that seemed too big for their little bodies. They clambered over to Damian as soon as he crouched down. His eyes glanced over them, but then they landed on one of the puppies in the back of the litter.

It was smaller than the others, and kept getting trampled by its brothers and sisters. Damian reached up, lifted the metal latch on the door, and reached in, careful to block the furry hoard's escape. His hands curled carefully around the small pup, and he lifted it out carefully, turning to Barbara.

"This is the one I choose," he said firmly.
Barbara smiled. "Well, you do realize that that's a Great Dane, right? It's going to grow up to be as big as you."

She pictured a giant dog running around the manor knocking over antiques, chased by Alfred waving a feather duster.

He cradled the puppy closer to his chest with more gentleness than Barbara had thought he was capable of. "Good."

"Do you want to…you know. Bond? See for sure if this is the one."

He considered that for a moment, then nodded, and sat down on the floor. The puppy wriggled out of his arms, and curled into the crook of his knee, glancing up at him and yawning. Its little pink tongue curled.

"Is it ill?" Damian looked up at her, concerned. "It doesn't seem to be moving."

"I think he's just tired. Why don't you give him a little scratch behind the ears?"

Hesitantly, Damian rubbed the spot behind the puppy's left ear, which perked as it looked up. Then, it hopped up, and planted its paws on Damian's chest. Its tongue slurped at his face.

Barbara almost thought she was seeing things when Damian did the unexpected.

The kid actually smiled.

"This is the one," he said, with more conviction this time.

"Good choice."

The puppy was nuzzling Damian's face with its nose, but the boy had a point; it was much more subdued than its littermates. Damian carefully ran his fingers over the dog's dark pelt and let it lick his face, fingers, and palm. His expression had softened so much, that he didn't even look like himself anymore. Any other time, his face had been frozen in a permanent scowl.

Damian's gaze was still fixed on the puppy when he finally spoke up. "I think I have found a suitable surname for you."

Her arms folded loosely over her stomach. "Oh?"

"Yes. I trust you are familiar with ancient Greece?"

She resisted the temptation to laugh. "Well, Damian. My codename is Oracle, after all…"

"Exactly. Then you would most certainly be familiar with the Pythia. The high priestess of the Temple of Apollo."

Barbara nodded, raising one eyebrow. "Yes," she said slowly. "But how do you know that?"

"Mother enjoyed reading historical texts to me at bedtime. I particularly enjoyed Sun Tzu, but the myths and wars of ancient Greece were almost equally interesting."

"I…see."

Poor kid. Other children got read fairy tales and storybooks before bed. Damian should have been hearing about Goldilocks and the Three Bears, not *The Art of War.*
"Well," Damian continued. "The Pythia had another name. The Oracle of Delphi. So, seeing as you have taken the first part of that title, I will grant you the second. Your surname is now Delphi."

After testing the word out thoughtfully, she nodded, and said, "Well. It's nice to have a full name now, Damian. Barbara Delphi does have a nice ring to it, I guess. Thank you."

He nodded curtly, never taking his eyes from the puppy in his lap. "You are welcome. And, while we are on the subject of names, I have determined this animal to be male."

"How did—you know what? Never mind. I don't wanna know."

He ignored her. "As such, I have determined his name to be Titus."

Ah. This one she knew. "After the first Roman emperor to succeed his father for the throne. Appropriate."

Damian smiled softly as the pup nibbled his finger. "I suppose. Titus was also a brave warrior."

"Yes. He was." Barbara turned her chair, and started towards the door. "Now, how about we go sign the papers and make this official, yeah?"

He scooped up Titus, careful to cradle the small dog in his arms, and followed closely behind. Linda's penciled-on eyebrows rose up high when they made it to the front desk.

"Ah," she said, typing up a few things on her keyboard. "Great Dane. Sad thing, you know. Some fella brought those puppies in a few days ago. The mother got sick, and the owner—scumbag if ever I heard of one—tried to poison the rest of them. Lucky for them though—" Her voice took on a sugary tone as she smiled at Titus. "A nice man found them and brought the litter here before that could happen."

The printer on a table behind her beeped, and she spun in her chair. She chatted with Barbara, laying out all of the vaccination and health information as she watched her fill out the paperwork. Barbara gave the woman her faked ID, then signed on the final dotted line. Titus was officially Damian's.

"Can I ask the little fella's name?" Linda grinned at Damian.

"Titus."

"Oh." Her smile slipped a little. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to go for…say, Scooter? Or Spot? Buddy?"

"Those names are ludicrous. Not fit for the warrior this fine beast will grow into."

Linda's mouth opened and closed, just like a landed fish gasping for air.

Barbara took her copy of the paperwork, and shot Linda a quick smile. "I think we'll be going," she said quickly. "A pet carrier shouldn't be necessary. Thank you so much for all your help."

She placed the money for the fee (and the bribes) on the desk, then wheeled backwards. Damian opened the door so that she could wheel herself out, and followed her around the building and back to the car. Titus let out a whistling whine.

"You'll see, Titus," Damian said softly. "You will grow to be the largest out of them all."

Barbara smiled, and positioned herself at the wheel.
Explaining this to Bruce was going to be so much fun.

They all filed out of the batmobile once they'd reached the cave (sans Nightwing, who had stayed behind to help escort the villainesses to Arkham). Bruce had yet to lower his eyebrows, and Tim had yet to stop scowling. Jason and Stephanie had spent the entire trip back home cuddling and making out in the backseat. Bruce was pretty sure Dick had predicted as much, and had therefore chosen to stay behind. Needless to say, the ride to the cave had been uncomfortable for both front-seat passengers.

"Ah," Stephanie said, stretching. She surveyed the cave, hands on her hips, and smiled. "It is so good to be back."

"Good to have you back." Jason's grin was wide, and slightly stupefied.

Bruce ignored them, and moved to the computer to check into the news. He'd been fearing the worst all night: that he'd come home to a story on the news about a flaming clocktower in Cormorant. Or perhaps a brutal murder, at the very least.

"So." Tim shot a scowl at Jason. "This is who you're taking to the movies this weekend?"

"Yeah…"

Stephanie raised an eyebrow as Tim whirled on her. He crossed his arms over his chest, narrowing his eyes to slits. "You sure do move on fast, don't you?"

She scoffed. "Huh. Me? That's some pretty big talk coming from a guy who's been dating for months now."

"W-what?"

Bruce and Jason both paused and turned to look at Tim.

"That's right," Stephanie continued. "Goes by the name Tamara Fox? Skinny little thing, but she sure knows how to lay one on you, doesn't she, Timmy-boy?"

"Shut up."

"Oh, no. I think I'll go on. You two met after a WE meeting. Went and got coffee. She recommended a physical therapist for your leg, you walked her home…then immediately proceeded to hook up." She narrowed her eyes. "And need I mention that this was literally just three weeks after my funeral?"

Tim gaped as the two older men glared at him. "How did—"

Steph snarled and buffed her nails on her suit. "Guess I'm not such a dumb blonde, after all."

Bruce crossed his arms tightly over his chest. "So, Red Robin. We've spent the last year and a half
walking on eggshells around you, because we thought you were still in mourning—"

Jason flicked at the buckle on his holster. "—but really you've been just dandy this whole time."

"She was dead!" Tim whirled on Steph. "You were dead! What, were you expecting me to just—"

"I expect you to stay out of my social life. So, I'm dating your older brother? So what? You're the one who's been sleeping around."

Tim snarled. "Oh, so I'm the one who sleeps around now, am I? At least I'm not the slut who got herself knocked up with the first guy she saw in order to forget her daddy problems. How well did that work out for you, huh Steph?"

Everyone froze. Tensed. Waiting.

Steph's hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes widened, brimming.

Jason clenched his fists. Probably the only thing holding him back from throwing the first punch was Bruce's stern glare. But he still opened his mouth.

"Alright, then, Timbo. I get it. You're still hopped up on meds. But how would you like it if I shoved my Glock up your tight little—"

"Jason," Bruce snapped.

Red Hood snarled. "Apologize."

Tim ground his tongue between his teeth. He could admit it. He'd gone too far. Way too far. He stepped forward.

"I…Steph. I'm sorry. I—"

He saw stars as her fist connected with his jaw. Tim hit the roof, vision jilting and flashing. Holy heck. He used to be able to see Steph's punches from a mile away…

He was lifted by the front of his suit, and he threw up an arm to block another of her hits, but it was only a feint. The real blow was delivered by her knee—right to his crotch. He doubled over with a gasp, and she clipped him again with another uppercut.

Tim could hear Bruce and Jason shouting, but it was almost drowned out by the sound of blood roaring in his ears. He could taste it in his mouth, and he saw bright flashes of light as Stephanie landed punch after punch after punch.

He lay on the floor when the blows stopped coming, and everything hurt when he breathed. Through slanted and blurred vision, he could see Bruce and Jason holding both of Stephanie's arms. Her eyes were tear-filled and murderous.

Tim pulled himself up and spat out another tooth. Great. & #$)#%* great.

"Fine," he croaked. "I…I deserved that. I'm sorry."

"Don't ever talk to me like that again, Drake," she snarled.

He wheezed, and laid back down.

The sound of a whirring engine filled the room, and Tim could make out a sleek black vehicle
pulling in next to the Batmobile. Which was great. That meant the little demon-spawn was back. Maybe he and Steph could take turns knocking more of his teeth out. Maybe move on to breaking bones…

The hatch slid open, and Barbara rolled out onto the floor. "Heya, boss-man. What's up?"

Her gaze landed on Tim, and she winced. "Ooh. What happened to you, Timmy?"

"He was an idiot," Stephanie said, moving to stand next to her mentor. They bumped knuckles and shared a smile, though Steph's was a bit pained.

"I was an idiot," Tim conceded through clenched (and sore) teeth.

Jason bent down and wrapped his arms around Barbara's shoulders, grinning from ear to ear, like nothing had happened. "Ah, good to see you, big sis. Glad you survived. Speaking of which, where is the little monster?"

"Right here," Damian said, climbing out from the other side of the car. He was holding something dark and squirmy in his arms. Maybe Tim was starting to see things, because no way would Babs have—

"A dog?" Bruce gaped.

"Great Dane," Barbara said, smiling.

"Titus," Damian clarified. "Delphi and I adopted him. I will train him to be my new sidekick."

"Delphi?" Stephanie asked. Barbara waved a hand and smiled.

"I'll explain later," she said. "Bruce, how did she do?"

Stephanie scoffed, and placed a hand over her chest. "Ah, I will have you know that I was an absolute delight."

Tim wheezed meaningfully, but no one spared him a glance.

"She performed well," Bruce said. "You've become an excellent teacher, Barbara."

Babs hummed and buffed her nails on her chest. Stephanie scoffed and folded her arms. "Oh, come on! I took down two Rogues all by myself, and she gets the credit?"

"Two Rogues?" Barbara turned to Steph.

"Yep."

"Fascinating, Brown," Damian said, rolling his eyes. "Now that the pleasantries are out of the way, father, may we go to the store and purchase supplies for Titus?"

Barbara made a small sound, and Damian sighed.

"Please?" he added.

They all gaped. Bruce glanced back and forth from Damian to Barbara. Jason tapped his head slightly. Tim forced himself into an upright position on the floor.

"Good deal," Jason said, throwing his arms in the air. "Looks like I'm dreaming after all. I made
out with a beautiful girl, watched Timmy get his teeth knocked out, and now the little demon is throwing out words like 'please'. The talking rabbits and dancing panda bears should be showing up any second now."

"What kind of dreams do you have?" Tim climbed shakily to his feet.

"Never mind. Shut up."

Barbara sighed, smiling. "We had a very productive time together, didn't we, Damian? And don't worry about the dog. Damian's promised to take very good care of him."

"Indeed. Worry not, father. I'll be responsible for feeding and walking him, as well as cleaning up his messes. His training will commence immediately."

The puppy wriggled in Damian's arms, and Tim shook his head. "Wow."

"And what else did we talk about, Robin?" Barbara smiled knowingly at Bruce as his youngest stepped forward and extended a hand towards Tim. His face was twisted into a slightly murderous expression. Tim took a step back.

"Jason please don't let him hit me."

Damian rolled his eyes. "Tt. It's called a handshake, Drake. I'm attempting to apologize for relieving you of five of your teeth. And punching you in the stomach. And hitting you upside the head with a metal kitchen instrument. Among other things."

"Uh…" Tim glanced over at Barbara, who smiled encouragingly. He stuck a hesitant hand out and shook Damian's. The kid withdrew his hand quickly and nodded to each of them.

"Very good," he said. He cradled his puppy more tightly to his chest. "Now, if you'll all excuse me, I must go and inform Pennyworth about Titus. I'll expect you all upstairs for dinner shortly."

He turned and started towards the elevator, then stopped. "Oh," he said quietly, "And thank you, Delphi. I had an enjoyable time. Perhaps we can order pizza again next time?"

Barbara smiled and gave him a little wave. She ignored the slackened jaws of her fellow Bats, and said, "Definitely, Damian. Come visit me soon, you hear?"

"I will, thank you."

With that, the kid was gone.

Slowly, everyone turned on their heels to stare at Oracle. Bruce opened his mouth to say something, but no words came out. Tim was shaking his head from side to side, over and over. Jason tipped back his head and let out a hearty laugh.

"Oh…oh, wow!" he gasped. "She did it! I knew we shoulda bet money on this, Timbo!"

"You actually taught him some manners, Babs." Steph's eyes were even wider than her smile. "You're a freaking miracle worker, you know that?"

Barbara shook her head. "He's a great kid. He really is. He knows how to be polite, he knows how to be…semi-nice, I guess—we'll work on that—but you just need to know how to speak his language. Which means no talking down to him."

A line appeared between her eyebrows, as if something had just occurred to her. "Hey, where's
"Dick?"

"Sent him to Arkham," Jason said, and Tim elbowed him in the chest.

"He's helping take Harley and Ivy to Arkham," he clarified. "But we can let him know you said hi. In the meantime, though, do you want to stick around? Alfred's making pasta, and I could use a little help on some programming issues with some new tech I've been working on."

She raised an eyebrow. "New tech?"

Tim's eyes lit up, and his hands flew through the air. "Yeah. New fabric for our suits. Smart technology woven right into the fabric, so that it moves with our bodies better. But it needs a few tweaks."

"What's the versatility? And for the coding are you sticking with Pearl or Wyvern? Or Boa?"

"It's pretty versatile. As for the coding, I'm using Wyvern."

"Cause it's the best!" they both said, laughing.

Jason and Stephanie shared a glance, and he spun his helmet on the tip of his fingers. "What say you and I get out of this room before all this nerd talk rots our brains?"

"Ha! Agreed."

Barbara shook her head and smiled. "You know what? I think I will stick around. I'm supposed to be choosing some new members for my team roster, but I'm pretty sure I can take a break to spend a little time with the family. I…" She paused, then shrugged. "I've got something I want to tell you guys."

Steph beamed. "Great! Now, can we go eat? Not that standing around and talking isn't fun or anything…"

Jason looped an arm around her shoulders and started steering her to the elevator. "You know, Blondie, I think you and I are gonna get along just fine."

Tim followed them hesitantly, and Barbara and Bruce waited until the elevator doors clicked shut. The maximum number of people it could hold at one time was about three. Less if Bruce or Jason got in. With the three of them riding at once, it was bound to be crowded, but she had a feeling that Steph and Jason didn't mind much.

Barbara's former mentor turned to her, and his expression softened. "Thank you," he said earnestly. "It's no trouble. Fixing impossible problems is what I do, after all."

The doors slid open with a hiss, and Barbara wheeled herself in. Shooting a smile at Bruce, she gestured to the rest of the lift. "There's plenty of room if you want to get in."

"Thanks, but I have a few things to check up on." He winced. "Would you ask Alfred to save a plate for me?"

"Bruce," she said, pouting.

"Please."

"Fine."
The doors slid shut again, and she jolted a little as the compartment shot upwards. Alfred definitely wasn't going to be happy, but maybe they could persuade Bruce to join them. The man constantly had problems that needed solving, but he was pretty easily diverted if you knew what to suggest.

Barbara rolled into the manor hallway, and breathed in the smell of garlic. Everything was so familiar, from the carpeting under her wheels to the wallpaper, to the antique bust of William Oscar Wayne down the hall. Even the sound of her siblings arguing over the biggest piece of garlic bread, (with Jason claiming it because he was biggest, Steph because she was a girl and chivalry, and Damian because he was the heir to the Bat, and therefore everything under this roof rightfully belonged to him. Most likely, Tim had just taken the slice while everyone was busy arguing.)

Barbara smiled, and wheeled towards the chaos in the kitchen.

Sure, there were other demands on her time, but in the end, it was her family that was most important. Sooner or later, they'd get Bruce to see that. In the meantime, though, she was going to spend whatever time she had left here, in this house, with her siblings, her grandfather/butler, and father/mentor if he ever emerged from his cave.

Because, after all, none of this could last forever.

"I'll only be a few minutes, Commissioner. Thank you."

Gordon gave him a long, sad look as the orderly turned the key in the heavy metal door. Dick had told him that he needed to speak with the prisoner about the motive for kidnapping the mayor without asking for a ransom. He'd ask a few questions, then leave with the information he needed.

But Gordon was smarter than that. He almost definitely knew the real reason that Nightwing wanted to interrogate Harley Quinn. And the mayor had nothing to do with it.

"Take your time, son. Just…remember the rules. Alright?"

"Okay. Thanks, Jim."

The cell creaked open, and Dick stepped inside. The smell of fear and mania washed over him, and it was pretty darn disgusting. He winced, and squinted in the dim light as the door clicked shut behind him. When his eyes landed on the grinning clown seated at a small table, he set his jaw and sat himself down in the chair across from hers.

"Harley," he said. "You sure had a productive day, didn't you?"

"Sure did, bird-brain." She waggled her eyebrows. "So, what can I do ya for?"

"Sure, bird-brain." She waggled her eyebrows. "So, what can I do ya for?"

Dick leaned forward, folding his hands together, just in case he felt like using them.

"Harley, no one's seen the Joker in over a year. No murders, no gassings, no schemes of any kind. Some people seem to think he's dead, but I'm not convinced." He shrugged his shoulders a little, and watched Harley's grin widen. "I think he's been planning something, and I think you know
the clown princess let out a shrill laugh, bouncing a little in her chair. Dick wasn't worried, though, since both table and chair were bolted down; it would take someone of Bane's caliber to even budge them. "You're funny, bird-boy. Not as funny as Mista J, but still!"

"Harley—"

Quinn was still laughing. Tears brimmed in her eyes. "L-listen, hon! I know you don't give a #\%$ about plans or anything! You just wanna find Mista J because of your crippled little girlfriend, huh?"

Dick's jaw set as he leaned in even closer.

"What?" he asked, deadly calm.

Harley leaned forward so that their faces were only inches apart. "I said, cowboy, that you're looking for Mista J because he shot your pretty little Batgirl."

_**Remember the rules, Grayson.**_ He took a deep breath through his nose to calm himself. It was taking way too much self-control not to slam Harley's forehead against the cold metal table. It was a tempting thought, but if he acted on it, Gordon and his men would be in here within seconds. Dick would be asked politely to leave, and he may never get his hands on the Joker.

So, he cleared his throat, and looked into the clown's narrowed eyes. "Harley," he said. His tone was carefully controlled, conversational. "You used to be a psychiatrist, isn't that right? You had a doctorate degree."

Whatever Quinn had been expecting, it clearly wasn't that. "I—, uh, yeah. What of it?"

Nightwing's fingers curled more tightly together. "Night terrors. Detachment. Flashbacks. Mood swings. I could go on, but I think these symptoms are familiar, aren't they? You did diagnose several patients with the same problems."

Harley straightened a little, and the madness seemed to drain out of her just a little bit. Something like awareness sparked in her eyes. "Y-yes. Those are all symptoms of PTSD. Of course, I'd need more information—"

Nightwing's hand smacked the table, and the sudden sound made both of them jump. "On November first, your boss broke into Bruce Wayne's home. He tasered Mr. Wayne's butler, then made his way to the library. That was where he found my partner, who was posted there to protect Mr. Wayne, and shot her. The bullet pierced her lower spine. Your boss taunted her, then—" His voice broke a little, but he cleared his throat and continued, "—undressed her, assaulted her, and left her in that state to die from her injuries."

The familiar thoughts, the 'if only I'd been there's, started to circle through his mind. But he pushed them away. He'd tortured himself with those thoughts too often, and he couldn't afford to lose his composure now.

Harley's eyes were wide and brimming. Dick watched her jaw slacken and her mouth fall open. Her gaze was a thousand miles away as she stared into the concrete wall behind him.

"H-he wouldn't," she squeaked. "He told me he just…that he only…"

Dick pressed his fists, now separated, into the tabletop, and felt the coldness of the metal seep
through his gloves. "My partner now suffers from phantom pains, recurring nightmares of the event, and has frequent flashbacks that are triggered by gunshots or loud laughter." He took a deep breath. "I may not have a degree, Dr. Quinzel, but I've seen enough and been through enough to recognize post-traumatic stress disorder when I see it."

Barbara would never admit these things out loud. The only reason he knew about the nightmares was through Dina, who had called him once in the middle of the night when Barbara had started clawing at her own skin with her fingernails while she slept, screaming the entire time.

"I just don't know what to do! How do I calm her down? Should I wake her?"

The flashbacks were subtler, but Dick could tell. He visited often, and whenever gunfire could be heard from outside the clocktower, or if the residents below ever got too rowdy, she'd fall silent, and stare off into the distance with white knuckles for seconds or even minutes at a time.

The most maddening thing of all was that he was powerless to help. He couldn't stop her nightmares or help her through her phantom pains. All he could do was stand by and watch.

He wanted a concrete enemy, something he could punch, someone he could bring to justice.

And if Joker was out there, then he could be made to pay.

Harley's lower lip trembled. "I...I'm so sorry, Wingnut. Mista J...he is planning something."

"What is it? Where is he, Harley?"

"He's..." She looked up at him. Her eyes focused on something behind him, and widened slightly.

Dick whirled around, and something sharp jabbed into his neck.

Syringe. #$%^ it....

He could see the clown prince of crime's twisted smile swirling before his eyes as every muscle in his body turned to jelly. He slumped off the chair, and hit the floor with a smack. The Joker stalked up to him, and crouched, snapping his fingers in front of Nightwing's nose.

"Well, this has been a fun little reunion, eh? But I'm afraid I've got a bet to settle once and for all, bird-boy, and this time, it's going to be a family affair."

Dick's vision blurred in and out of focus. His eyelids drooped, and shut completely.

"Nighty-night, Nightwing."
Bruce squinted at the screen, piecing together the information in his head.

So many bits of data and analysis. Whereabouts, motives, appearances, casualties.

The Joker hadn't shown his face in Gotham for… *criminy, how long had it been?* Harley Quinn had been making herself scarce as well. So, how come the clown princess of crime decided to kidnap the Mayor, and without asking for a ransom of any kind, at that? The two supervillains hadn't even tried to make a statement out of the whole ordeal, and that definitely wasn't like Ivy.

So, what was the connection?

*Think.*

Why stage a kidnapping in City Hall without a motive? Why that location? Didn't Harley realize how easily she would be—

Bruce froze. *Of course.* It seemed as though Harley had *wanted* to be caught. Taken to Arkham…

And, maybe, be interrogated by a Bat.

His hand clapped to his ear. "Nightwing. Report."

He listened to bare static. "Nightwing."

No answer. He swept aside all the other windows on the screen and pulled up his partners' tracking chips. He always felt a bit of guilt when he checked in like this, especially since none of them knew about the chips—except for Barbara, who frequently tapped into his frequency to keep tabs on all of them—but it let him see their positions at any time. Which definitely came in handy at times like these.

The multicolored dots of his other children were clustered in the dining room of Wayne manor. Bruce should be up there with them…

Dick's blue dot was at Arkham. Blinking, so Bruce knew that it hadn't been deactivated. Which made him breathe out a sigh of relief.

"Nightwing."

The phone by the keyboard lit up and started ringing. Bruce watched it for a moment, then moved his hand away from his ear and picked up the phone. "Yes?"

"Batman?" Jim Gordon's voice was fuzzy over the line. "Thank goodness I caught you. There's been a break-in at Arkham."

Bruce's fist tightened on the phone. "Break in?"

"Joker thugs. They're taking my men, and I think they're here for Quinn too—" Jim paused and fired off a few shots from his gun. The bangs crackled on the other end, and Bruce could hear sharp yelps of pain, as well as returning fire. "Just get here as soon as you can!"
Gordon hung up with a sharp click, and Bruce threw down the phone. He reached to pull up his cowl, and turned to the Batmobile.

He might not make dinner, but some things were more important than spaghetti.

"Before you all dig in, Miss Barbara has a very important announcement."

Few things could stop a Batkid in their tracks faster than Alfred Pennyworth's firm, but gentle voice. Everyone paused with their forks hovering inches away from their mouths. The spaghetti slipped off of Jason's and landed with a splat back onto his plate.

"But…dinner…"

"A moment, please, Master Jason." Alfred wore a bemused expression. "Miss Barbara?"

"Thanks." Barbara cleared her throat, and put on a hesitant smile. The expectant (and slightly impatient) faces of her siblings watched her from around the table. She wished that Dick could be here for this. But on the other hand, she wasn't sure she could look him in the face and bend the truth the way she could the others. One glance from those big blue puppy-dog eyes, and she'd be spilling out a lot more than she wanted to. And then, he'd try to convince her that maybe she shouldn't go through with it.

But she wanted this. #!*$%, she wanted it so badly. She'd spent too long being able to leap from rooftop to rooftop to be satisfied with spending the rest of her life in a chair.

"Everyone," she said, "I…I found a doctor in Japan. He's willing to perform a procedure that will give me back my mobility."

There was stunned silence. Then, Steph leapt out of her chair and rushed around the table to wrap her arms around Barbara's shoulders. She squealed.

"I can't believe it! When?"

"Two months," Barbara wheezed, trying to wedge her fingers underneath Steph's arm, and free up her airway.

"Congratulations!" Jason grinned, but he kept glancing down at the steaming food on his plate.

"What Todd said." Damian managed a smile.

But Tim put down his fork and frowned at her. "That's great, Babs. Really. But…is it safe?"

Ah, and there was the hitch. No. It wasn't. There was a good chance that there would be complications, and that she'd be paralyzed from the neck down. Or worse. The chip could malfunction, and she could be rendered completely brain-dead. Death was another option, too, of course. Painful, agonizing death. Still, she wasn't about to tell her family that.
"I think so," she managed, schooling a straight face and even tone. Tim must have caught a tremor in her voice, though. A line appeared between his eyebrows.

"But what if it doesn't work?"

She shrugged off the question with a smile. "Hey. If it works, I get my legs back. If not... If not, then I'll be dead. So what? "Then, well, at least I'll have tried something."

Tim still seemed unconvinced, but this seemed to satisfy everyone else. Stephanie returned to her seat, and Alfred nodded to everyone, giving them permission to dig in. He cleared his throat at Jason, though, and he stopped before a forkful of pasta could reach his mouth.

"Master Jason, would you do me the favor of getting the water pitcher from the kitchen?"

Jason sighed heavily. His chair scraped across the wood floor, and he thundered off to the other room. It made Barbara feel a little guilty for eating her own pasta. It was Alfred's finest; warm, dripping sauce, soft noodles, and generous amounts of parmesan. The flavor spread across her tongue, and she closed her eyes with a satisfied hum. It tasted a bit different than usual, but then, Alfred had probably just tried a new spice in the sauce. He was always experimenting.

"Poor Jay," Stephanie said, smirking through a mouthful of food. "He doesn't get to—"

She stopped short, eyes wide. Her hand shot up to her mouth, and she gagged. Everyone stopped chewing, and watched in horror as her eyes rolled back into her head, and she slumped forward. Her head hit the table with a bang. Her fork clattered against the floor.

Tim shoved his plate away so forcefully that it flew off the table. But it was too late. He coughed, choking, and fell sideways, collapsing onto the ground.

Damian shuddered violently, eyes rolling. His small fingers clawed at his throat, and he landed face-first into his pasta. It splattered sauce all over the place, and Barbara wheeled herself back, eyes wide, as Alfred slumped over next to her.

She didn't feel any different. Why—

There were gunshots from the kitchen, and Jason screamed.

There was a loud thump.

Okay. Okay. Okayokayokay...

Barbara reached for Alfred's watch. If she could just hit the button, call Bruce up, then whatever was going on would—

"Honey, I'm hoooome!"

Every muscle in Barbara's entire body locked up. Her mind blanked out, flatlining.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see a familiar figure emerging from the kitchen, grinning wide, swinging something at his hip. She forced herself to look full on, and stifled a scream.

She did manage to force out one strangled word. "Joker."

He pointed the crowbar at her, gesturing grandly. "Aaand, we have a winner!"

_Batarangs in your pocket. Escrima sticks in your chair. You have the tools, you can fight back this_
time, now DO SOMETHING!

But as he stepped closer, Barbara could do nothing.

"Someone should be sleeping," Joker said, in a singsong voice. He reached over Stephanie, pulling her sister's head up by the hair. Batgirl's mouth fell open slightly, and Barbara shuddered at the sight of her sister's blank eyes. "The other children all went to bed. What's wrong with you?"

Move. #%^&! move. You can do something.

"Someone must be taking their vitamins. I just can't stand you health nuts! Still, we can fix that."

Vitamins. Barbara could have screamed. She'd been keeping up on her immunizations, anything to keep herself immune to toxins, poisons, gases, or anything else supervillains might have up their sleeves. The others were supposed to be doing the same. But—

And suddenly, he was right next to her. His hand slammed down on her armrest. With one shove, he pushed her chair over, and she sprawled across the floor. Her legs were crumpled underneath her body, and her ribs screamed painfully from the awkward positioning.

Joker crouched down with a long syringe grasped between his pale knuckles. Her eyes widened, and she dug her fingernails into the hardwood, trying to pull herself away. His hand came down hard on her shoulder, slamming her back into place, and he leaned in, leering over her. He held the needle inches from her face.

"I know I'm supposed to change these things out after every use, but sadly, I've only got the one needle." He smiled, baring those slightly-yellowed teeth. "I'm sure you wouldn't mind sharing a prick with your blue-bird, now, would you?"

He threw back his head and let out a hair-raising laugh.

Barbara swallowed hard, forcing her tongue to work. "What did you do to him?" she croaked.

"Ah," the Joker recovered slightly, and leaned back in. He whispered, as if worried the others would hear. "Well, nothing yet, pretty bat. Nothing I don't have planned for the rest of you." His hot breath hit against her ear, and she shuddered. "Still, I don't think anyone's going to like what I have planned."

She bared her teeth, and tried on a defiant snarl. "Batman will stop you."

"Oh, I know, dear heart." Joker chuckled, and positioned the needle against her neck. "That's the whole point! But not quite yet. At the moment, he's too busy chasing Big-bird's tracker-chip."

Barbara's eyes widened as the needle plunged in.

Everything swirled, and darkened. The last thing she heard was the sound of Joker's shrill laugh.
The doors to Arkham Asylum flew open with a bang as the Batman rushed into the lobby.

There wasn’t an orderly, secretary or doctor in sight. The front desk was vacant, hanging open and empty like the filing cabinets behind its counter. Papers had been strewn everywhere, and Bruce stepped on a few as he hurried down the hall.

The whole place was nearly silent. In any other building, that was unsettling. But at Arkham, where the halls were usually filled with the sounds of moaning or babbling or shouting patients, clacking shoes, and conversation between staff—the silence was downright frightening.

Not to mention the absence of gunfire.

Bruce turned down the hall where they kept the visitation cells, and nearly stepped on a prone figure. He crouched, and heard Jim Gordon moan a little, and get shakily to his knees.

"Where…are my men?"

Batman looked up at the blood-washed hallway, and rushed past Gordon. All doors but one stayed locked. The cell a few feet away had had its door blown off. Bruce hurried inside, and glanced around the room. There was no sign of violence in there, as if the thugs that had broken in had been as careful as possible with the occupants. Which, made sense if they were here to get Quinn.

But. If any of them had come in, they would have tracked blood in on their boots. He'd seen the scarlet scuffs and marks on the linoleum in the hallway, but the flooring in the cell was spotless. Or, at least, as spotless as any interrogation cell could possibly be.

Dick would have been in here with Quinn. Bruce highly doubted that his protégé would have allowed her to stroll out the blasted-off door. And yet, there was no sign of a struggle…

He spotted something on the table: a small smear of blood. He reached down; a sensor in his glove's fingertip would identify the source of the stain. But when he pressed against the spot, his finger slid a little. It wasn't just blood on the table.

Bruce picked up a small square of circuitry, nearly transparent at first glance, but when he held it up to the light, he could see the small light that indicated the chip was still intact and functional.

He almost swore as the blood sample results popped up in his sensors, identifying the source as Dick Grayson.

Someone had sliced out his chip.

It should have been impossible. No one knew about the chips, not even their owners.

He held the chip up to the light once more, staring at the intricate wiring. Then, he paused.

*There.* Just the tiniest of scratches. It had to have been made with a small instrument, like a needle.

A smiley face.
Dick felt something patting his face…Something shaking his shoulder…

He groaned. His eyelids felt like pillows—*heavy* pillows—but he forced them open.


"Huh," he moaned. Speaking made his head ache. A spot on the back of his neck was throbbing painfully, like an open wound.

Harley stepped back a little bit, and Dick blinked hard to clear the fuzziness from his eyes. He tried to reach up and rub them, but his wrists wouldn't move…why…He pulled harder, and heard a soft clinking sound. Handcuffs. And, since he could feel the cold metal biting into his bare skin, he was gloveless. Which meant no lockpicks.

"Glad you're finally awake, sugar," Harley whispered. Dick blinked hard again and looked at her more closely. She seemed terrified. Wide eyes, trembling voice, and shaking all over. She moved to his left, and started shaking someone Dick couldn't see. "We gotta get you all outta here."

His mind and his eyes were beginning to clear, and he glanced around. He seemed to be cuffed to a wooden chair; he spotted a few others lying around the room. All around them were discarded cardboard and slat-wood boxes, some of them marked with faded words, others blank. The room was so darkened, that that was about *all* Dick could see. The air was dusty and cold. Dick sniffed, and smelled something that made his blood run cold. *Cotton candy*. He knew exactly where he was.


He perked up, yanking again at the cuffs. "Batgirl," he hissed, craning his neck.

Stephanie looked up sharply, eyes wide behind a messy blonde curtain of hair. "Di—Nightwing?"

If he squinted, Dick could just barely see the clothes she was wearing. Civvies. Not her uniform.

"It's okay, kiddos. I know everything," Harley muttered, moving on to the next seated figure. "No need for codenames."

"Yeah," Stephanie said, voice shaking. "Nice try."

"Suit yourself, *Stephanie.*" Harley started shaking someone. Dick couldn't see who, it was too dark.

"And you too, *Dick.* Let's just wake your little friend *Jason* up, now, how 'bout?"

There was a soft snort, then the sound of chair legs scraping on dry dirt. "Wha—at the #*$%^ away from me &!*%#!"

"Jay?" Dick called out. There was stunned silence, then he heard Jason's voice.

"Oh. So she knows. *%^ #%^.*"

They stayed quiet while Harley shook Tim and Damian awake, and they all tested their restraints,
hoping to find that their gloves remained in place, or maybe, that the cuffs were miraculously unlocked.

No such luck.

When Harley finally circled back around to Dick's right, he craned his neck, and watched Harley kneel onto the ground next to him. There wasn't a chair, only a crumpled form tossed haphazardly on the dirt and straw. Her red hair was fanned out, and her eyes stayed shut, even as Harley shook her shoulders and slapped her face.

Dick's breathing hitched. Was she—?

"Babs," he whispered. "Wake up."

The others looked over, chairs creaking a little as they all strained to catch a glimpse of their older sister. Barbara remained unresponsive. Harley sat back, biting her lip.

"He musta given her a bigger dose. She's not responding."

The others pulled against their cuffs.

"Babs?"

"Is she going to be okay?"

"What's wrong with Delphi?"

"What did he #$!*%#$& do?"

Harley stood, dusting her hands off on her skirt. "That's okay. It's all okay. We're gonna get you kiddos out." She looked long and hard at each of them in turn. "Anyone have a…uh…" She gestured a little. "Stick? Thingy you use to unlock a lock?"

Everyone did another quick inventory check, just in case they'd possibly missed something. Dick's belt was gone, as well as his boots, his gloves, and his mask. He glanced over at the others, and realized that they were all in the same boat. All their gear was gone, and, consequently, all of their picks.

"Hey, Tim," Dick said, "Don't you have a pick, um…"

Tim scowled. "I thought I did. I just brought it up a few hours ago, so it should still be…"

He hunched his shoulders, and his chest started jerking a little. Small sounds came out of his throat. Stephanie squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head quickly.

"Eewww, ew, ew! Stop it. You're gonna make me puke!"

Jason shuddered a little. "Nasty."

Tim stopped shaking and straightened in his chair. His face was pale and he looked over at Dick, and failed to hide his panic as he said, "It's gone. Holy $#!&, he took it!"

Dick cursed, and turned to Harley, who was still a little wide-eyed from watching Tim's display. "Barb won't have hers, either. She stopped swallowing her picks a few months ago. Which means none of us have a way out of these cuffs."
"Hold up, Harls," Stephanie interjected. "Can't you just get us the keys to these things?"

"Why the #$&! are you helping us, anyhow?" Jason scowled.

Harley shook her head. She seemed on the verge of tears. "N-no. Mista J wouldn't let me see where he put them. I'm not even supposed to be in here, I'm supposed to be…arranging the…"

She shuddered violently, and real tears streaked down her face. "It's awful. H-he's not my Mista J anymore. He's doing bad things…"

Jason huffed. "He's the #$*%^ Joker!"

"Really bad things. And what he's gonna do to you…"

She cut off sharply and looked away. Dick squared his shoulders and tested the cuffs again.

"Okay," he said, "Okay. We're going to get out of this."

"Excellent, Grayson," Damian snapped, "I don't suppose you have any ideas?"

Jason shook his head. "We'll figure something out. What about Barb?"

"She's going to be fine," Dick assured them, "It's better this way. At least while she's out…"

No flashbacks. No screaming. They'd just been kidnapped by the Joker for crying out loud. If Barbara woke up cuffed and helpless on the ground, and that psychopath walked in…

"Harley," he said quickly. "Do you have a…a cellphone or anything?"

Her eyes widened, and she rifled in her skirt's pocket before pulling out a flip-phone. The thing looked old, years old, but it would work fine. She offered it to him, but he shook his head.

"First, dial these numbers." He rattled them off to her, and his siblings' eyes widened. Steph's jaw dropped, and Tim exploded.

"The #$% are you doing?" he demanded. "We can't bring them into this! And you can't just tell her how to—"

"We're a little low on options, don't you think?" Dick snapped. "Besides. We can't call Batman. This is a trap for him, isn't it, Harley?"

She nodded, and put the phone to Dick's ear. He craned his neck, trying to hold it between his ear and his shoulder, and huffed.

"Now, unless you guys have any picks wedged somewhere you haven't mentioned, I'm calling in backup." The phone buzzed against his ear, and he tapped his foot impatiently. There was a small click, and Kaldur's soft voice came over the line.

"I'm afraid I don't recognize this number. Who is calling?"

"Kaldur, it's Nightwing," he said quickly. He rattled off, explaining the situation. The others were shaking their heads, groaning, or scowling off into the dark.

"This is humiliating," Tim muttered.

"I hate to ask, but can you dispatch anyone to our location? We're at the old Fairgrounds on the
outskirts of Gotham." Dick watched Harley's anxious face carefully. "And please hurry. Our
identities have been compromised."

"All of you?"

"Yes."

"I'll do what I can. Stay where you are."

"Thank you," Dick breathed, and the Atlantean hung up quickly.

The others glared at him. Damian shook his head. "Relying on metas for assistance. What have we
come to?"

"Great. #$%^&^ great," Jason muttered. "Roy's gonna hold this over my head for the rest of—"

A door behind them banged open, making all of them jump. Footsteps clapped against the
hardpacked dirt, and Dick's skin crawled as the newcomer chuckled. His hurriedly dropped the
phone, and Harley darted forward to catch it, before skittering backward. The lights blinked on
next, and the Batkids squinted against the sudden brightness.

Joker stood a few feet away, waving a crowbar like a king's scepter.

"Howdy, kiddos! Hope you all had a nice nap." He stepped towards them, dragging the bar in the
dust. Dick noticed that Jason's eyes were tracing the weapon's movements carefully. "Of course,
nap time's not supposed to be over quite yet, is it Harley?"

Quinn's face had gone pale, even more so than usual. She managed a small smile and straightened,
getting shakily to her feet. "Sorry, Mista J. I just thought that you wanted—"

The crowbar hit Harley's jaw with a thwack. She staggered, and fell to the ground, gasping.

"Next time I want something done, I'll tell you," Joker snarled. "Understand?"

She shrunk down, shaking. Blood dribbled off her lower lip. "Y-yes, puddin'. Of course."

"Good." He turned to look each of them in the eye. A smug grin crept up the clown's face. Dick
could hear Jason's breathing hitch a little bit, but the others seemed to be alright. Shaken, but still
strong. None of the younger ones had really seen the Joker's nastier side before, and Dick hoped
that he could get them all out of this before they did.

The clown wandered over to Stephanie, and placed a finger under her chin. "I don't believe we've
met. Weren't you that she-Robin who got herself killed? Tsk, tsk. Old Black Mask must not realize
that I'm the only one that gets to kill Robins. Isn't that right, Number Two?"

Stephanie and Jason both blanched.

"Though, old Masky's dead, now, isn't he? Still..." He swung the crowbar playfully, wandering
over to Damian. "Well, you're new! Spitting image of your dear old daddy-bats, aren't you?"

Damian glowered. "Go to #$%%, clown."

Joker laughed, and cracked his knuckles sharply against Damian's cheek. He let out a small cry,
and Dick strained at his cuffs.

"Hey," he said, trying to draw the clown's attention. "Why don't you tell us what's going on?"
Joker looked up, straightened, and grinned. "Ah, yes. Big brother bird." He stepped in front of Dick, and leaned down, so that they were face to face. His foul breath blasted Dick in the face as he let out another laugh. "These youngins all look up to you, don't they? Don't you?" He smiled at the others. "And you just want to keep them safe, don't you? Just like a good big bro."

Joker patted Dick on the head, and he forced himself to keep a bored expression.

"I guess? That doesn't tell me why you dragged us all over here, though, does it?"

"Straight to the point, aren't we? But, see, that's what I'm getting at." His hand darted out, and he seized Stephanie's jaw in one gloved hand. She inhaled sharply, and everyone froze. "Tell me, Dickie-bird. What would you do if I snapped this one's neck? Just one sharp turn—" He turned her head, and Steph let out a small whimper. "And crack. What would you do?"

Jason growled and pulled at the cuffs. "You son of a &!%^#. You touch her, and I'll kill you!"

"Oh, I know what you'd do, Jason old boy. But I'm not asking you." Joker moved on to Tim. He reached into his pocket and drew out a handgun, and pressed it to Tim's forehead. Red Robin glared at the villain. "How about this one? If I pulled this trigger, and let Timmy-boy's brains splatter all over the place, what would you do? Or, how about Jason, here?"

He returned the gun to its holster, and Tim took a deep breath. Joker wedged the crowbar under Jason's jaw, and the Hood's pupils shrank. He'd seemed to have stopped breathing. "What if I decide to beat him to a bloody pulp, just like the good old days? Or this little tyke right here?" He jammed the tip of the crowbar into Damian's chest. "Just imagine all the fun I could have with little Damian!"

Joker let out a laugh, and Dick grit his teeth.

"Go on, then. Tell me, Dickie." He returned to his spot inches away from Dick's face. "What. Would. You. Do."

Dick squared his shoulders and his jaw, and looked the clown prince of crime straight in the eye. "I would beat you until you were bloody. And I would enjoy it."

Joker smiled, but Dick wasn't done.

"But then I would hand you off to the cops," he continued, his tone as cold as ice, "and let them throw you in Arkham to rot."

Joker cackled, and shook his head. From her spot on the floor, Harley shuddered.

"Of course you would. But I have one more scenario for you, Big bird."

He reached out sharply, and seized Barbara by the hair, yanking her up. He gripped her close to his chest with an arm around her throat, holding her up, since her legs wouldn't support her weight. Dick's breathing hitched a little bit, but he prayed that the clown wouldn't notice.

Barbara's eyes snapped open, and she looked Dick square in the eye. "What—"

She tensed, and all color drained out of her face as her eyes crept to the side. She started to hyperventilate.

"Babs," Dick said, "It's okay. It's okay. Breathe."
"Tell me," Joker said, grinning widely. His hand came up, and he slipped it underneath the hem of her blouse, reaching up higher and higher. Barbara let out a strangled cry, gasping for air. Tears slipped off Harley's chin as she looked away. "What would you do?"

Dick yanked at his restraints, arms and shoulders straining. "Put her down," he snarled. "Now."

"No, no," Joker scolded, slipping his hand lower. His fingers crept down, down, wedging their way beneath Barbara's waistband. Tears streaked down her cheeks as she opened her mouth in a silent scream. "You haven't answered my question."

Jason, Tim, Steph and Damian were all shouting, but the blood was roaring too hard in Dick's ears to hear a thing they said. He looked into Barbara's terrified eyes, and saw red. How dare this psychopath touch her? How dare he make her feel this way?

"Fine, Joker. You want to know what I would do if you hurt her like that again?" Dick's voice silenced the others. They watched him with wide eyes; they'd probably never heard him speak with that tone before. "I would break every single one of your fingers. Slowly, so that you could hear each snap. I would take that crowbar you keep waving around, and beat you with it until every single bone in your body turns to powder. Then I would break your teeth. And then do you know what I would do?" He leaned forward. "I would take that &$%# %#$ pistol, and I would shoot you right in the stomach, so that the bullet would pierce your #$*#%$ spine!"

Joker tipped back his head and laughed. Barbara squeezed her eyes shut, and let out a sob.

"But here's the thing," Dick snapped, "I would leave you alive. And do you know why?"

Joker's eyes opened, and he fixed them on Dick.

"Because I serve out justice. Not vengeance. That's what I was taught."

The others watched him in silence, and Dick could feel their silent approval. But Joker only clicked his tongue, and shoved Barbara forward. She collapsed into a heap on the ground at Dick's feet, letting out a soft cry as she hit the dirt.

"See? That's all I wanted to hear." Joker nudged Barbara with his foot. She shuddered. "But, see, the problem is this. Your old man is just like you. He doesn't have the guts to do what needs to be done. And that's the whole point!" He waved his hands in the air. "I can beat you kiddies 'til you're bloody. I can kill you, and cripple you, and torture you until there's nobody left. But do you know what the kicker is?"

His hand snapped across Dick's face. He saw flashes of light as pain flared in his jaw.

"Even after all that, he'll never cross that stupid line!"

From her place on the ground, Barbara let out a small gasp. "The bet," she muttered. "This is all about that stupid bet."

Joker threw out his hands. "Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner!"

He planted a kick in Barbara's side, but she didn't move.

"I'm not about to lose to a man in a bat costume," Joker said. "So I've devised a new little strategy. And that's where you all come in. Nightwing—"

He stepped over to Tim and Damian, and threw over their chairs. They cried out as they fell
forward, hitting the ground hard. Joker pulled his pistol back out, and pointed it at Damian's head. He pressed the crowbar against the back of Tim's.

"Now," he said, "I've simplified things. Choose one to die."

Dick froze. "What?"

"Choose!" Joker cackled. "Or I kill them both. The choice is in your hands, Big Blue! How are you going to stop me?"

Dick opened his mouth, then closed it again. This had to be a joke. Or maybe Joker was just making some sick point. Tim and Dami were hostages, and that made them valuable. Joker was insane, but Dick doubted that the psycho was about to throw away two pieces of leverage.

"You won't kill them," he said, softly. Even he didn't sound convinced. "You need us."

Joker laughed. "For now, maybe! But, do tell, Dickie. Are you going to stop me? If you don't, both little boys are going to die!"

Damian and Tim scowled, but Dick could tell that they were adding things up in their heads, trying to decide whether or not Joker was serious. He could almost see the gears turning in Tim's head. Then, the boy's eyes widened, and he said, "You're going to—"

"Ah, ah! No spoilers!" Joker slammed the crowbar into the back of Tim's skull, and he fell silent, eyes half shut. Jason thrashed in his chair.

"You pick on someone your own size, you son of a &!$%#! I'll kill you!"

Tim let out a soft wheeze, but Dick couldn't be sure whether or not he was really unconscious. Faking was probably smart. Still, Dick wasn't liking the increasingly freaked-out expression on Damian's face. Stephanie had gone white as a sheet.

"Now," Joker said, throwing his arms out in yet another grand gesture. "I'd love to stay and chat, kiddies, but I can't keep you from your nap any longer! But don't worry, when you wake, you'll be reunited with your daddy." He cackled, and pulled a small sphere from his other pocket. It sort of looked like a grenade, and Dick's stomach twisted. "But for some of you, it might be a bit...short-lived!"

The grenade burst into a cloud of hazy white smoke, and the others immediately started coughing. Harley, too.

"Mista J..." She hacked into her fist. "P-please..."

There was a sharp thwack, and a grunt of pain, but Dick was focused on the girl at his feet. Barbara looked up at him with wide, tear-filled eyes.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"For what?" Dick managed a smile. "Everything's going to be fine. I promise."

Barbara squeezed her eyes shut, and slumped to the ground. She probably didn't buy a single word of that. Dick could understand completely, as he coughed and shuddered.

He didn't really believe it, either.
"Alfred?"

Bruce shot out of the elevator. He thundered down the hall and into the dining room, praying to see his family sitting around the dinner table. Eating their meal, joking and laughing and bickering, like always. They'd look up, and demand to know where he'd been. They'd invite him to sit down and share the food, and he'd tell them about Nightwing. And, just like that, they'd be up in arms and at his side, ready to follow him into battle.

Because these were his kids, and he was their father.

Bruce braced himself on the doorframe. The air left his lungs like he'd taken a hit to the chest. The dinner table was a sauce-soaked battlefield. Several of the chairs had been overturned, the dishes were thrown across the table, and spaghetti was splattered everywhere. His eyes swept the scene, then landed on an overturned wheelchair.

No.

To his left, someone groaned. Bruce hurried over, and found Alfred Pennyworth half-underneath the table, struggling to get upright. "Alfred."

"Master Bruce? What…where is everyone?"

There was no need to cause his old friend any further distress. Bruce grit his teeth, and took Alfred's hand. "I'll explain later. Are you alright?"

As he put one arm around the old butler's shoulder to help him up, Bruce felt something crackle slightly.

He drew back, as Alfred reached up to the back of his neck. The butler withdrew a crumpled piece of paper, and shot Bruce a confused glance. Bruce unfolded the sheet, and scanned over the printed words. The paper was water-damaged, and hard to make out, but he managed easily enough. It was a flyer for the Gotham City Fairgrounds and Carnival.

FAMILY DAYS! FREE CHILDS TICKET WITH PURCHASE OF TWO ADULTS. OFFER VALID UNTIL JULY 31.

Scrawled across the bottom half of the flyer, over a cartoon picture of a carnival tent, were the dripping red words: I TOOK THE KIDDOS FOR A LITTLE FAMILY FUN. LET'S SETTLE THIS THING ONCE AND FOR ALL, WHY DON'T WE? Underneath that: 11:00 SHARP. COME ALONE OR I START SLICING THROATS.

The paper crackled in Bruce's fist.

"Master Bruce?" Alfred wheezed, leaning against the table. "What is it?"

"It's nothing. All you need to worry about right now is getting to a hospital. I'll take you."

He helped the old Butler through the kitchen, down the hall, past the bust of William Oscar Wayne, into the cave, and finally into the passenger seat of the Batmobile. As Bruce helped his old
friend buckle himself in, Alfred raised one gray eyebrow at him.

"I think that the Batman checking Bruce Wayne's butler into the hospital will arouse slight suspicion amongst the staff, will it not?"

He paused. "You're...you're right. Do you think you're well enough to walk in?"

"I think I'll be able to manage." Alfred managed a wan smile.

While Bruce positioned himself at the wheel, and closed the hatch, Alfred glanced around the interior of the vehicle. His smile had widened. As they sped out of the cave, he cleared his throat.

"You know, all these years I've spent watching you run around in a cape and cowl, and I've never even been on a ride in this thing. It's quite fast, isn't it?"

Bruce smiled, and turned sharply. "She can really fly, can't she? Remind me, and I'll have to let you drive her sometime."

"I expect you will." Alfred smiled, and glanced out the passenger's window as they reached the end of the tunnel. The night sky was on full display, dark and starless, but deep as the ocean on the horizon. The lights of Gotham City glowed, stars in their own right. "And I trust that you have things under control. Since you don't feel the need to share your master plans with me."

Alfred pressed two fingers together, sticking his thumb up. A finger gun.

Bruce's fingers tightened on the wheel. "How—"

"You must realize by now, that I was not born yesterday, Master Bruce." The butler shook his head. "And I know you are only doing what you feel is best. But I'm asking you to please consider the children. You've taught them well, but I don't know that they're ready to—"

"I raised each of them, Alfred. I taught them everything that they're going to need. Besides. This is the only way it will ever end." Bruce set his jaw and stared at the lights of Gotham City. His old friend sighed deeply, and Bruce reached over to set a hand on his shoulder. "It won't be forever, Alfred. I promise."

"I understand, Master Bruce. I only hope you know what you're doing." He cleared his throat, and blinked, hard. "I hope you're sure."

The hospital was only a few minutes away. Bruce turned sharp corners, and tried not to think too hard about what the night held in store. Instead, he thought of Dick. An eight-year-old boy kneeling in the bloody dust of a circus tent. He thought of Barbara. Starving eyes in an alleyway, narrowed in defiance as she raised her fists. Jason, with a tire iron in one hand, and both feet planted with purpose. Tim, with his stark intelligence and determination as he proclaimed, "Batman needs a Robin." Stephanie, mouth always open in a laugh or a battle cry. And Damian, his son. Sharp and independent, like his mother. Quiet and calculating like his father.

All of them were brave. All of them were capable. He could never have asked for better partners, or for a better family.

"I'm sure, Alfred," he said. "They're ready."

The old butler let out a heavy sigh. "Yes, Master Bruce. But is Gotham ready for them?"

They pulled up to the back of the hospital. Bruce gave the area a quick once-over to be sure they
weren't being surveilled, then pressed the button that retracted the top hatch. "There you go, Alfred. Take care of yourself, alright? Take care of them."

"I always do."

Alfred turned away, heading for the front of the building. Bruce cleared his throat, though, and he hesitated.

"You're right, Alfred. They are not what this city deserves," he said, "but they are what it needs."

"Then, Batman, I wish you and this city all the luck in the world."

The Joker had left the tracking chips in his other five children, so pinpointing them in the Fun House in the southernmost corner of the Fairgrounds was easy. Bruce might have hesitated, because it was too easy. But the Joker wanted this. It wasn't a trap if the perpetrator expected the victim to be wise to the plot. So the Batman marched through the doors.

The scent of fear and death hit him like a bus.

But he kept walking, even as his boots stuck to the blood-slicked floor.

It was a proper funhouse; it had all the moving parts, cheesy music and flashing lights. He turned a corner, and almost fell into a large pit filled to the brim with red, yellow, green and blue balls. Bruce stared at the bright pit for a few seconds, then stooped to pick up one of the blue ones. The thin plastic dimpled underneath his fingertips.

It was when Dick was eight, or maybe nine. Bruce had brought him to this very place. He'd had a day off work, and Alfred had suggested the outing. It had been one of the first times Bruce had seen Dick laugh since his parents' accident. He leapt over the moving floor tiles, slid through the spinning tunnel, and disappeared before Bruce and the building attendants could catch him. They'd searched for the boy for hours, and cleared out the entire funhouse, when Bruce finally spotted a small black tuft of hair in the ball pit.

"Dick?"

There'd been a frenzied little giggle.

"Dick, I've been looking everywhere for you. Please come out."

No response, but the balls shifted a little.

"Well, then," Bruce sighed, "I guess I'm going to have to go and get ice cream all by myself, huh? Such a shame. Maybe I'll have to find another little boy who likes Rocky Road..."

"No!" Dick's head burst out of the ball pit, sending the multi-colored spheres flying in all directions. The boy looked genuinely frightened in that moment, and Bruce still felt guilty about that sometimes. "I'm sorry, Bruce! Don't get somebody else!"
He wrapped his young ward in a hug, lifting him out of the pit. Dick threw his arms around Bruce's neck, squeezing tightly. "Please, Bruce," he sniffled. "Don't get somebody else."

"Dick, I was just joking around. I would never replace you." He squeezed the boy tighter. "Now, what say we hit the ice cream shop down on mainstreet? I think we've had enough carnival fun for one day, don't you?"

"Okay!" Dick's grin was like a ray of sunshine. "Thanks Dad. Uh, I mean Mr. Wayne."

Bruce dropped the ball back into the pit with the others and straightened. He couldn't afford to let nostalgia cloud his judgement, or his resolve. Not tonight.

While he felt slightly ridiculous, he waded through the ball pit anyways. The soft swishing and crunching beneath his boots made him clench his jaw. As he made his way around the corner, he came upon the 'haunted' section of the funhouse. It was separated from the children's section by a length of velvet rope. Usually, there was a worker here, making sure that no one under driving-age made it through. Teenaged boys often brought their dates here just for this part of the attraction. The hope was that their dates would get so frightened, that they'd cling to their arms for the rest of the night. Tonight, though, no chainsaw-wielding actors or gory zombies burst out of the shadows. Bruce wasn't sure why, but it was done up like a dilapidated alleyway, complete with smeared graffiti and steaming vents. He shook his head, and threw a hand out against the wall to steady himself. Against his will, the memory flashed in his mind.

Dick had been off that night. Grabbing pizza with Wally, if Bruce remembered correctly. As a result, that night had been a solo patrol. Not an eventful one, to be sure, though he'd faced off against Mr. Freeze and the Penguin, during one of their 'team-ups'. He'd just been on his way back to the manor when he happened to swing above an alleyway almost like the counterfeit one he was standing in now.

A group of small-time gangbangers. Switchblades out, grins stretching up their tattooed faces, and all five of them closing in on one small girl.

He'd perched on the edge of the rooftop, ready to jump down and come to the child's rescue. But instead, he watched with slight shock as the girl put up two fists, and socked one of her attackers in the jaw so hard that he spit out a stream of blood. The others closed in, but instead of screaming or cowering, the girl fought back.

But between her size, her inexperience, and lack of her own weapon, the thugs soon overpowered her. She was knocked to the ground, and one of the men started to slide his knife down her face. All of them froze when the Batman landed behind them.

"Leave right now," he'd said, "And I'll forget I saw you here tonight."

It was generous. He wouldn't have let them go, but he wanted to be sure that the girl was alright. She was huddled on the ground, bruised and bleeding. She needed medical attention, quickly. And yet, generous as it was, the men didn't take him up on that offer.

But, between their size, their inexperience, and crude weaponry, the Batman soon overpowered them. They all ran off, like dogs with their tails between their legs, and Bruce had turned to the street kid with one raised eyebrow.

She looked up. Bruce took a step back as he watched her blue eyes fill with fire. Her expression was dark, possibly the darkest he'd seen on these streets. It was the look of someone who had been
knocked down too many times, and was ready to do something about it. It was a look he wouldn't see again until, years later, when he looked into the unmasked eyes of the Red Hood.

"That was brave of you. Fighting back like you did."

The girl scowled, wiping at the blood on her face with the back of her hand. "It was nuthin'. They's just tryin' to scare me off their turf. Wanted somethin' I didn't wanna give 'em, so they got out their shivs." She looked up at him with narrowed eyes. "You's been flying over the city a while, yeah? Takin' creeps like them to jail? You gonna take me to jail?"

Her words were awkward, stilted, like she'd practiced them in her head before vocalizing them. He'd reached into his belt, and pulled out a tissue, offering it to her. She held it up to her bleeding nose, and took a step back. "Well?"

"Well," he said, "I'm not going to take you to jail. But I do have a question for you."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Did you run away from home? You're using street words, but your inflections are all wrong. I can tell that you've had a good education."

Her eyes widened. "I—"

"Tell me, what's a nice girl like you doing in the Narrows? Where's your family?"

She drew back, then put on a brave face, sticking out her chin. "That's none of your business. Besides, I hear you're really smart. You'll figure it out yourself soon enough, right?"

"I want to take you back home. I'm sure your family's worried sick."

The girl laughed humorlessly. "That's gonna be a bit hard for them, seeing as how they're six feet under." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm all I've got, and I'm not too worried. But I do want to know something, Mr. Batman."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"You scared off those creeps like it was nothing." Her composure cracked a little. "Can...can you show me how to do that? I'm tired of..."

She trailed off, and her eyes searched the street behind his shoulder. Bruce had seen eyes like hers before, but couldn't quite remember where. They were cold, bitter. This girl had the look of someone who had been beaten down one time too many; she was a powder keg just waiting for a spark.

"Teach me how to fight," she said, squaring her shoulders.

"I can't do that." He started to turn away. "You should run along. This is a dangerous part of town."

"No." She stepped back, crossing her arms tightly over her chest. "I won't do that, Mr. Wayne."

He met her eyes. They glittered with triumph. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

"Want me to shout it a little louder? I can tell. The way you stand, and your 'inflections'. Or am I wrong?"
His eyes narrowed. "And what's your name?"

The girl blinked, surprised. Clearly, she'd expected some other reaction. But she wet her bloody lips, and said, "Barbara."

The world narrowed to a single point: her eyes. Just like that, Bruce had remembered exactly where he'd seen those eyes before: a psychopathic crime lord by the name of Barbara Kean. She'd terrorized Gotham City during the days of his boyhood, beating out more seasoned competitors for a place at the top of the city's underworld. Competitors like Fish Mooney, Oswald Cobblepot, and even Carmine Falcone himself.

It was at that moment he realized that whatever he chose to say next would determine the future of his city. If he abandoned this girl, or sent her on her way, then their paths would cross again. But that reunion would be violent; she would follow in her predecessor's footsteps, and paint the town red. In the most literal sense.

If she was related to Barbara Kean, then this girl had the makings of a Rogue, or perhaps something more dangerous. This girl had a dangerous family history.

But, if Bruce took her in...taught her how to fight honorably...

What if he could give her a different family history? A better one?

"Well, then, Barbara. I suppose you'd better come along."

Her blue eyes widened. "R-really?"

"Hmm. Follow me, before I change my mind."

Bruce shook his head, returning once again to the present. A quick glance at his wrist computer confirmed his children's location, and he was getting very close. There was no turning back now, and he couldn't afford to lose focus.

His boots squeaked against the damp floor as he turned one more corner. The Hall of Mirrors stretched out in front of him, lit only by the cracked fluorescent lights overhead. The smell hit him first. Then, he processed what he was seeing, and his eyes widened behind his cowl.

The color red registered, and he chose not to look closer at the mutilated bodies decorating the room. It appeared that he'd found Gordon's missing men, and this was yet another thing the Joker would be made to pay for. So, he grit his teeth, and marched towards the door at the end of the reflective hall, pausing only to turn the rusty handle.

The door swung open slowly with a sound that reminded Bruce of a dying animal, and at first, he could see nothing but darkness on the other side. Then, electricity hummed through the air, and a dozen spotlights burst to life. They illuminated the room before him. It was an auditorium, most likely used for children's plays or puppet shows. But the scene on the stage was no puppet show.

It took every ounce of willpower that Bruce had not to lose his composure.

"Well, well! We were beginning to wonder when you'd finally show, weren't we, kiddies?"
The Joker grinned wider than ever as he put the finishing touches on Damian's face. Bruce's son winced away from the dripping paintbrush, eyes wide, but he said nothing.

The Batman took a step forward.

That maniac had strapped each of his children to electric chairs, set out in a semi-circle on the stage. Most likely, the furniture came courtesy of Arkham Asylum. Electrodes were taped to their foreheads, but that wasn't the end to their attire. They were dressed in tattered, green and purple versions of their usual uniforms, but without their masks. Instead, Joker had painted their mouths with wide red grins, and Batman's stomach dropped as he realized that the smiles most likely weren't done with paint. His mind went to the GCPD officers in the Hall of Mirrors, but he shook the thought away quickly. No need to go there; his children looked terrified enough as it was.

His eyes traced the wires around his family to a small table set up on the stage in front of the chairs. On top, there was a small box with a single red button. Next to that, a lone revolver.

"Bruce." Dick's voice was weak. He seemed exhausted, but probably the least disturbed of his children at the moment. On his left, Barbara was staring straight ahead, breathing shallowly.

"Hush now, big bird." Joker jabbed the end of the paintbrush into Damian's neck, just hard enough to make the boy cry out. He tossed it away, and it clattered against the floor as he stepped forward. There was something off about the clown's grin tonight. Perhaps he, like Bruce, knew that this was the night that would end it all. "Welcome to the party, Brucie! I had the guests put on their best for our little shindig tonight."

Bruce wasted no time. "This is about the bet. The one for your life or my soul."

The corners of the clown's lips curled upwards. "Yes."

"Then we'll settle this. You and me." The Kevlar of his gloves crackled as his fists clenched. "But there's no need for any of them to be here."

"On the contrary, Batsy! They're the main event!" Joker spun over to the table, and gestured grandly to the buttons and the gun. "See, here's how this whole thing is going to go! Ladies and gentlemen, please turn your attention to the seven merry bat-brats on display! Each of them has enough charge hooked up to fry their little brains! And, gentlemen, cover your wives' eyes for this next part!" His finger hovered over the button, and each of Bruce's children flinched back, expecting the shock. But it never came. The clown seemed to revel in their fear; it made Bruce's teeth grind together. "Because I'm going to press this button, and kill every last little bird and baby bat for good!"

He tipped back his head and let out a loud laugh. Jason and Damian strained against the buckled restraints. Stephanie and Tim glowered at the clown. Normal reactions, but it was Dick and Barbara that had Bruce the most concerned: both seemed resigned. Ready to die.

"However!" Joker waved a hand grandly in the air, smirking at Bruce. The villain was enjoying every second of this. He waggled his fingers over the gun. "Option number two? To save the rest, old Batsy must choose one kiddie to shoot in the head! If he doesn't decide, then the rest are in for a real shock!"

Another peal of manic laughter as he gestured to the button.
Dick and Barbara sat up straighter in their chairs, determined. Jason growled. His vengeful expression didn't match the dripping grin painted on his face. "You sonuva &!^#$, when I get out of this—eyahhh!

Every muscle in the Red Hood's body tensed. The back of his skull banged against the chair's headrest, and a vein stood out in his forehead. Then, as quickly as he'd gone rigid, he curled forward with a grunt, gasping for breath. A burnt smell permeated the air.

"Jason—!" Stephanie's body jerked as she was shocked next. "Nnnn!"

Joker waved a small remote in the air. It had a button just like the one on the table. "Of course, I have my own ways of keeping these brats from getting sassy!"

Bruce walked forward, climbing the carpeted stairs to the stage. When his boots clapped against the tape-covered wood paneling, he stopped. Right in front of the table. Underneath his cape, his fingers went to his belt. "Leave them alone, Joker."

"Hmmm, no. Don't think so. I'm having far too much fun!" Bruce was close enough now that he could see the yellow tinge to the Joker's teeth. "These kiddos have been a blast! So much screaming, and crying, and begging…and here I thought it would take much longer to break them. Ha! You should have seen their faces when I brought out those screaming policemen, and let them —"

"Enough!" Tim's arms jerked against the restraints. He looked up at the clown with narrowed eyes, and more rage than Bruce had ever seen from him. His jaw was clenched hard, and he spoke through his teeth. "Do you seriously think this is funny? It's not. You're pathetic! And when we get out of these, you'll wish that those officers were here to save you!"

He paused, waiting for the Joker to press the button. Deliver the electricity. But the shock never came.

The smirk melted off the clown's face. He slipped the remote into his pocket, exchanging it for a thin switchblade. It slid open with a click that made the hair on the back of Bruce's neck stand on end. "Oh, I'm pathetic, am I?"

Tim's eyes widened slightly. The clown's tone had taken on a deadly ring.

Dick caught on quickly. He strained in his chair. "Joker! He didn't mean it!"

"Don't touch him!" Barbara's eyes were wide.

Batman made to move forward, but the Clown Prince of Crime was faster. He lunged forward.

Tim gasped as the Joker seized his jaw in one gloved hand. The clown snarled, and slid the blade into his protesting mouth.

"Joker, please!" Dick pleaded.

His other children cried out. A batarang slid into Bruce's palm.

But before anyone could do anything, there was a sickening snik.

Tim screamed.

"Stop it!" Damian shut his eyes. His knuckles were white.
The Joker stepped away, leaving Tim's deathly pale face on full display. There was now a long, curving slice at the corner of his mouth. Blood bubbled from the wound, running down his son's face in rivulets. Tears streamed from Tim's eyes as he gasped, and Bruce could see that the Joker had cut cleanly through his cheek.

"Joker!" Bruce shouted, and flung the batarang at the clown's head. Joker dodged it, unsmiling, and stepped away from Red Robin, coming to a stop at the other side of the table. He wiped the blade clean on his lapel, and jammed it back into his pocket.

"You &*$^*&%!" Barbara shouted.

The remote came back out.

"Now, is there anything else you'd like to tell me, Timmy boy?"

"Go to #$%%!" Dick snarled. He winced as he received a shock.

"Uh-uh. I was asking Timmy." He turned his gaze on a shaking Tim. "Anything? Or do I have to even out your new smile?"

Tim's blue eyes were wide. His voice came out soft. "I'm…s-sorry." Then, he winced violently. The act of speaking was probably excruciating.

Bruce's jaw was about to snap. He banged a fist on the table, and all eyes focused on him. "Enough! For the last time, leave them out of this!"

Joker's eyes were still cold, but the smile returned. "Now, now, Brucie. The game hasn't even started yet! Pick a kid to die, and the rest go free! It's that simple!" He lunged forward, grabbing Bruce's wrist. With the other he picked up the revolver, and slammed it into Batman's hand, forcibly curling his fingers around the barrel. "And you're going to play, believe me. But there's a way out, of course. Shoot one, or I kill them all! But I'm lumped in with these little copycats. See, you can end all of this, and all you have to do is shoot one of us in the head! It's me…or them…or all of them! Get it?"

"Bruce," Jason said.

Stephanie shook her head.

Damian's gaze was fixed at the back of the theatre.

Tim was shaking.

"Shoot one!" Joker shrieked.

"Wait!" Barbara squared her shoulders, and looked him straight in the eye. "Bruce," she said. Her voice was soft, yet firm enough that all attention shifted to her. "This has gone on long enough. Shoot me."

"No Babs," Dick warned. "Not you. Bruce, shoot me!"

"No!" Babs snapped. "Bruce, it'll be okay, I promise. I want it to be me."

Bruce's hand tightened around the weapon. "Barbara, please—"

She squeezed her fists tightly. Tears brimmed in her eyes. "I won't let him win, #$& it!" she cried. "And I'd rather die than see you sacrifice the mission. Better me than the others!"
The others started to protest, but Joker cut off their cries with the press of a button. When they stopped convulsing, the clown cocked his head to the side and hummed. "She makes an interesting point, Batsy. I must say, I wouldn't call it a loss if you did choose your little Oracle…in fact, I think I like the idea of seeing big sister's brains go splat. I can almost hear the others scream!" He let out an ear-piercing laugh.

"It's okay," Barbara said softly.

"Like #$%% it is." Dick bared his teeth. "Bruce, don't listen to her! Shoot me!"

"Shut your mouth, Grayson!" Barbara's eyes brimmed over.

"No! I won't let you—"

"Dick, if I can save you from—"

"Babs, I can't lose you!" Dick's voice shattered. The others watched on, gaping. Bruce fiddled with the gun, unsure. He sure as #$%% wasn't about to shoot anyone, no matter what anyone said. But there had to be a way out of this.

And yet, he knew. The Batman and Joker had fought many times before, but this was different. There was something off about the clown tonight. Bruce could see it in the way he stood, the way that his smile kept disappearing. Usually, even during a fight, that infernal grin almost never went away. Bruce had a feeling that tonight, all bets were off. This was the end; he promised himself that much.

One way or another, one of them was going to die tonight.

Dick and Barbara were still bickering loudly. Their performance was almost perfect; Bruce hadn't even been able to tell right away. But he could hear it in their voices. They were drawing the Joker's attention, trying to give Bruce time to think of a way out of this. Even after everything, those two always had his back.

And Batman did have a plan.

"Ah, such stirring declarations of love!" Joker pretended to wipe away a tear, then sneered. "I do love a good drama!" He slammed the button, and sent a drawn-out flow of electricity through his two eldest. Their mouths fell open in silent screams. Bruce had to end this before any of his children became casualties.

"Now, what'll it be, Brucie ol' boy? Are you going to shoot Dickie Bird? Or your Barbie doll? Maybe one of the younger brats?" Joker's finger hovered over the red button on the table. "Make your choice quickly, though. I'm beginning to lose my patience."

In reply, Bruce slid open the cylinder on the gun. Slowly, he removed one bullet after another, placing them all into a neat line on the tabletop. Joker's face registered more and more outrage with every small clink.

"What is this?" he demanded.

"I'm making my choice, Joker," Bruce said coldly. "And I choose a wager."

"A wager?" The clown was incredulous. "What do you think this is, a—?"

"Yes. A wager. A game of chance." He reached forward, and picked up one bullet. He showed it to
the Joker, then looked down and slipped it into the revolver's cylinder. "I trust you're familiar with Russian Roulette?"

He shut the cylinder with a click. Then, he spun it.

"A stupid question. Everyone's familiar with Russian Roulette." Bruce looked up, meeting the clown's gaze with a frown. "Here's the new deal. The bet's still on, but now I'm making the rules."

Joker slammed both fists on the table. The bullets tipped over, rolling in every direction. A few clinged against the stage floor. "You can't do that! You have to—"

"Shoot someone. I know. So here's how this is going to work, Joker. There is one bullet in the gun, and even I don't know which chamber it's in. So." He lifted the gun, aiming it straight for the Joker's forehead. "I'm going to pull the trigger. If it goes off...then, you win, like you've said. If not, then I pass it to you, and you take your turn. If it goes off, I lose. If not, then I get to leave, and take my family with me. Does that sound like a deal?"

The Joker's eyes widened. Then, a slow smile stretched up his face. "Sounds like fun! Go on and pull the trigger, Batsy!"

"Just one more thing." Bruce forced his hand to stay still. Holding a gun like this, aiming at another human being—no matter how inhuman that being was—was making him shake a bit. It shouldn't have mattered; he'd used firearms before. But never as Batman. "If the gun goes off in your hands, then that's the end of it. You let the others go free."

"Ha! And what guarantee do you have of that, Brucie?"

"I have none. Just your word."

The Joker threw his arms out. "In all our years of fighting, Bats, I never took you for such an idiot!"

He laughed, and the others watched on in silent horror.

Bruce cleared his throat, and aimed. The Joker grinned, and shut his eyes. "Here's to us, Batman! See you in #$%%."

Batman squeezed the trigger.

Click.

The clown's eyes fluttered open, and the Batkids breathed sighs of relief. Sighs that cut off sharply as Bruce reached forward and placed the weapon in the Joker's gloved hand.

The Clown Prince of Crime waved the gun, and pointed it squarely at Bruce's chest. "And how, pray tell, can I be sure your tough bat-suit won't stop the bullet?"

"From this range, the shot would be lethal."

Perhaps he'd made a mistake. The heavy-duty armor was back at the cave. He'd settled for something that would allow him to move faster tonight. This seemed to occur to his children. Their eyes widened.

"Bruce, don't!" Barbara cried.

He looked his daughter in the eye. Then, his eldest son.
They stared back, disbelieving.

"Take care of them," he said, "Promise me."

Dick straightened. "Bruce, you can't!"

"Promise me!"

They opened their mouths to answer, to protest. All of them did.

But Bruce couldn't make himself look at them. His protégés, his legacy, his world. He'd raised each of them into the heroes they were today. He'd watched them grow, progress into the men and women who would one day surpass him. Perhaps that day was today.

They were his children, and he was their father.

The Batman turned, and looked the Clown Prince of Crime right in the eye.

"See you in # %%."

The Joker squeezed the trigger.

\textit{BANG}

Seven screams split the air.

The revolver clattered to the ground.

The Joker staggered, and leaned against the table, pressing his palms into the grain to keep himself upright. "No. This wasn't...this isn't..."

The Batkids screamed themselves hoarse.

"\textit{Bruce}!"

"\textit{BRUCE}!"

"\textit{Father}!"

"\textit{NO}!"

"\textit{Please}!"

"\textit{BRUCE}!"

Their screams wove together into a cacophonous wail, and Joker clapped his hands over his ears.

"No!" he shouted. "No, no, no, no, no! I was supposed to \textit{win}!"
He stared at the Batman, sprawled on his back. Staring at the ceiling, at nothing. A crimson stain bloomed on his chest. Right in the center of the black bat insignia.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be! He'd planned it all out to the last detail…

But those *brats!* They'd gotten in the way, ruined everything!

He whirled around, and the kids all fell silent. Tears streamed down their painted faces, and they stared at him, horror-stricken. For so long, they'd thought that their mentor was invincible. Untouchable. The one person Joker would never…never…

"This is all your fault," Joker hissed at them. He lifted his hand over the button. "*This is all your fault!*"

Dick and Barbara exchanged a glance, and nodded once. Resigned. Then, they looked to the others. The Joker was still screaming, but the Batkids all looked to their older siblings, watching them with large, horrified eyes. It was agreed silently.

This was the end.

"Shut your eyes," Barbara told them softly. "It's all going to be okay."

They did. Stephanie let out a sob. Damian and Tim were silent. Jason's shoulders were shaking. But Dick and Barbara couldn't close their eyes. They looked at each other instead.

"I'll kill you! Every last one of you!"

A tear slipped down Barbara's cheek. "I love you, Dick Grayson."

Dick let out an anguished sound. "I love you too, Barbara."

The Joker's hand came down.

"*TUC EHT NOITCENNOC!*"

The screamed spell pierced through the room.

The Joker's hand had hit the button, but there was no fatal flash, no sudden shock. The auditorium doors had burst open, and seven figures dashed into the room.

The original Team members all sprinted down the aisles, leaping over velvet-covered seats, flying through the air. All converged on the stage, shouting out a battle cry.

"What?" Joker pulled out another gun, and started firing off at the newcomers. "No!"

Tigress snarled, and lifted her crossbow. She fired off a series of bolts. Above her, Miss Martian's eyes glowed a furious green as she clapped her hands together. The gun's barrel bent back, useless. Joker tossed it away with a snarl. He made a mad dash for the exit, but Superboy, Rocket and Aqualad beat him to the doors.

"We got your message!" Kid Flash—the original Kid Flash—appeared at Dick's side. He started undoing the bonds at a rapid pace. Zatanna floated down and landed on the stage.

"Allow me, Wally," she said quickly. Her hands shot out as she cried, "*Odnu Eht Sniartser!*"

The buckles loosened, and the straps holding them down fell away. The Batkids all ripped away
the electrodes, and leapt out of the chairs. They rushed to their fallen mentor's side, silent.

All except Barbara. Wally and Zatanna hovered in front of her, unsure.

"Are you alright?" Zatanna whispered. She was staring at the garish face paint on Barbara's mouth.

Wally waved a hand. "Um...do you want me to...? Should I just pick you up?"

She reached out, and grasped the fabric of his costume in her fists. "Wally. Take me to him. Take me to him now!"

The speedster's eyes widened, but he obliged, lifting her up. He turned, managing a hesitant smile. "Take you to who—?"

Then, he saw Bruce. His mouth fell open.

"Holy $#!%," he breathed.

Hesitantly, Wally propped Barbara up next to Dick.

The Team stood by, watching as the Batkids gathered around Batman. Conner and Roquelle had pinned the Joker to the wall with a few of Artemis's crossbow bolts, and wandered over to the rest of the group. They all watched with horror as the normally stoic, unshakable Bats cried, bleeding and bruised.

Dick shouted, and stripped off the Batman's chest plate. He flung it to the side, and it crashed into one of the chairs. He started in on chest compressions.

"Come on, old man," Jason muttered.

Nightwing pumped harder. "You don't get to do this!" he shouted. "You don't get to leave us! Get up, #*%$ it!"

"Bruce," Barbara said, "Please. Please."

Pump, pump, pump. Breathe, breathe. Pump, pump, pump, pump.

Dick stopped, and pressed his ear against the Batman's heart.


Nothing.

"No!" Dick shouted. He slammed a fist down on Bruce's chest.

Stunned silence hung in the air. Then, Stephanie's hands flew to her mouth, and she let out a wrenching sob. Tim's eyes were wide. Jason swore. Damian was silently crying.

Barbara wailed.

No one noticed the Joker slip away. All eyes were on the fallen man before them.

The Batman.

Bruce Wayne.

Member of the Justice League.
Teacher.

Mentor.

Father.

Gone.
The page wrinkled in Barbara's shaking fingers.

Her eyes roved over the photo, and she analyzed the lines, the color, the light, the shadows. She could process these things easily, she'd been doing so far as long as she could remember. It was one of the first things he'd taught her.

The park. Center of the West side, towards Cherry Hill.

She could remember the date, the position of the sun in the candy blue sky, and the bright sunlight bouncing off of everyone and everything in sight. In her mind's eye, she could see Dick standing close—but not too close, never too close—and Bruce standing behind them both.

"What do you see?"


"Dick."

Squared shoulders, determined set to his jaw. She couldn't see Dick's eyes behind those ridiculous sunglasses, but she could tell they were scanning, observing, catching things that she'd never thought to search for.

"Lady over by the pond has a headache. Keeps rubbing her temple. Guy sitting on the bench—the one with the book, not the one feeding the pigeons—hasn't turned a page in the last fifteen minutes. Keeps watching the kids over on the playground. We need to pay attention to him just in case he tries anything."

She'd huffed. "He's probably watching one of his grandkids."

"Not like that. People who have grandchildren don't look at kids the way this guy is."

Their mentor's hand clasped Dick's shoulder proudly. "Good."

"Showoff," she muttered.

Then, Bruce had turned his gaze on her. It was sharp, but patient. "Your problem, Barbara, is that you're seeing the picture as a whole. Sometimes, that's useful, but not here. Look at the people as individuals. Read their body language. Notice their expressions, the way they move. Try to see the small things."

He took them to other places, and she'd picked up environmental observation easily enough. People had been harder; they kept moving, kept shifting, kept changing. But she'd practiced. She used to make Alfred take her to the park every other day, while Dick was busy with his Team, and Bruce was busy with the League. When Alfred was too busy, which was often, she'd sneak out the windows and go on her own. It was when she'd had no one that she learned to watch people the way she was supposed to.
And, after months of watching, practicing, and poring over psychology textbooks from the Gotham City Library, she'd finally gotten it.

To celebrate, Bruce had given her her very first set of binoculars. Dick had been decidedly ticked.

The photo she held in her lap showed three people on a picnic blanket, in that same park. She and Dick—back when they'd both been thirteen or so—and Bruce, patiently sitting off to the side. Alfred had snapped the picture right after telling the two teens to stop tossing handfuls of grass at each other. Barbara could see in the picture, that Dick still had a few green blades stuck to the collar of his shirt, and she had a few sticking up from her red hair.

The page turned with a soft rustle.

This next photo had been taken on the steps of...where had it been, exactly? That night, the night of the couples' gala, she wasn't so concerned with the venue as she was with the chafing material of her dress, and the way that Dick looked in his suit....

She and Dick stood side by side. He held her arm hesitantly, testing the waters, and his smile seemed a bit forced. In his defense, so did hers.

Bruce and Selina were right next to them, and their smiles were real. Genuine. They'd been so happy together...

"Hey, Babs."

Dick settled down onto the couch next to where she'd parked her chair. Barbara glanced up, and the library materialized around her once again. "Hey, Dick."

"They're almost ready for us."

"I know."

"People are asking where you went. Damian's missing, too. And Tim."

She sighed, and Dick leaned back into the plush cushion. It was still a fairly new couch. The old one had been covered in blood and spray-paint, so it had been one of the first things to go, once they'd started cleaning up after the Accident. Barbara wasn't even sure why she'd picked this place to hide; some of the worst memories of her life had been in this room. She had a hard time breathing in here, and every nerve in her entire body was screaming at her to leave. Get out, now!

But the Library had scrapbooks. Alfred was nothing if not meticulous, and he'd always made sure to record their family through the years, sticking photos in a whole series of bound books. The one open on her lap now was the first that she was featured in. And besides...

"I get it," Dick said. "I hated being in there, too."

"The service was horrible," she said bitterly. "They didn't know him at all. Not really. Not like we did."

"I know."

The League had taken over the funeral, holding it in the manor's sitting room. Superman had said a few words over the open casket, all about the great friend Bruce had been. Diana waxed on about his merits, what a worthy and skilled warrior he'd been. Great strategist. Good teammate. Flash, Green Lantern, Aquaman, Black Canary, Green Arrow. Each of them had something to say. But
none had the right thing to say.

Alfred hadn't had the heart to set up chairs for the service, so members of the Team had pitched in, working to arrange the flowers and pictures and chairs so that it was all perfect. The sitting room—never used when Bruce was alive for anything but impressing visiting investors—now held the casket, and the entire superhero community.

The Batkids had seated themselves together in one corner of the room at the beginning of the program, glaring at anyone who got too close. They'd always been reserved, but now they were standoffish. They'd always been distant, now they held themselves apart. Wally and Artemis had moved to sit near Dick and Barbara, then turned away when they'd seen their faces.

Tim had been the one to scare most of the guests off, though. Especially Bart and Jaime. But it wasn't just his bat-glare that frightened everyone away. Half of his face was still a little swollen and purple, and the only thing keeping his cheek from splitting back open was the series of spider-like stitches stretching up from his mouth. Even without the wound, Tim could be scary when he wanted to be. But now, grief-stricken, wounded and angry, Tim was downright frightening.

The all looked like #&%&. And they were all very, very angry that Dick was the only one allowed to say anything at their father's funeral.

"They just don't see it like we do," Dick said, easing his arm around her shoulder. She leaned against him, resting her head on the couch's armrest.

"They don't see him like we do," Barbara said softly.

"I know."

Maybe Clark and Diana had figured that since Dick was the first protégé, he would be able to sum up the things that the rest of his family was thinking and feeling. Barbara was sure that they hadn't meant to snub the rest of them like they had.

Even so, the service had been absolute torture.

And once it was finished, everyone was allowed to walk past the casket to say their goodbyes. Food was eaten, memories exchanged. Barbara had ended up cornered in the crowd, with no room to easily maneuver her wheelchair, and wound up trapped in a conversation with her well-meaning friends. Zatanna, Artemis and M'gann were soft-spoken and gentle, but she'd been reading people long enough to sense their fear. But whether they were afraid because of Bruce's death, or her ice-cold demeanor, she couldn't tell.

But she didn't miss the look of absolute horror that washed over M'gann's face suddenly, and the way that she'd sagged against the dining table like her feet had been cut out from underneath her. Zatanna and Artemis had rushed to her aid, but Barbara had pressed both hands to her temples, gasping.

"How could you?" she'd demanded. "How dare you?"

"I'm—I'm sorry...Barbara, I'm so sorry!"

"Who put you up to it? Was it Canary? Superman?"

"Babs, I just—"
"Stay out of my head, M'gann!"

Her raised voice turned heads, and her tone scared even her. So, she threw manners out the window, and barked to the crowd that they'd better get out of her way, or get run over. Once she was out of that stuffy dining room, her arms had pumped and pumped until she'd rolled into the solitude of the library. She made sure to lock the door behind her.

But, of course, if there was one thing the members of her family were good at, it was finding each other. (That, and picking locks.)

"What's this?"

Dick's hand settled next to hers on the page. He pressed his lips together in something that was a bit like a smile, but not quite. "I remember this. Just after your first mission with the Team. He totally forced us into that party."

She squeezed her eyes shut. "He totally did."

"That was the night we figured out Catwoman's secret identity, remember?"

Barbara glowered. "They should have let her come, those &*$^*&#$.

"I know." His hand trailed over her hair. "But she's waiting out in the family plot behind the manor. She'll be there when we…” Dick's voice trailed off, and Barbara lifted her head to look up at him.

She knew Dick was exhausted, in every sense of the word. Physically, mentally, emotionally. Between getting all of them through treatment and recovery, helping to plan the funeral and services, and making sure that none of his siblings killed anyone for saying 'he's in a better place now' for the hundredth time… Barbara wondered how he hadn't run himself into the ground yet.

"So. Anyway," he sighed, "I've already tracked Jay and Steph down. They managed to sneak their way down to the cave, lucky little... Found you, so all I'm missing now is Tim and Damian. Any ideas as to where they'd be?"

"I hate to give them up, Wingnut." She managed something like a smile, but not quite. "But if I were you, I'd check the roof. Both sides, since I doubt one would be up there if they knew the other was there too."

He nodded. "Sound theory. What makes you think that?"

"Because," she smacked the arm of her chair with contempt. "If I wasn't stuck in this $*%& thing, it's where I would be."

He deflated a little, and leaned back against the backrest. "I'm sorry." His eyes fluttered shut, and his hands waved, as if he were putting pieces of a plan together in his mind. "Right. Okay. Just gotta get them…get us all out to the back…they asked me and Jay to be pallbearers, but they won't let Tim 'cause he's too short…after that, we have to find a way to keep the metas out…out of…"

His eyes shot open, and he bolted upright. "Oh, $%!#, Babs. Gotham. What are we going to do when this all gets out?"

Barbara sighed, straightening in her chair. Her hands folded gently over her lap as she shut her eyes. "Dick. I…I don't know." Her eyes stung a little bit, and she took a deep breath. "Bruce had a contingency plan for everything. Even this, but…I was that contingency plan. Did he ever…did he tell you?"
"Yeah," Dick sighed. "He asked me, too, a few years ago. I turned him down, said I didn't want it." He leaned forward, balancing his elbows on his knees, and met her eyes. She noticed that they were red-rimmed and bloodshot. More likely than not, he, just like the rest of them, hadn't slept much in the last few days. If at all. "When he said it was you, I was thrilled. A little shocked, that he'd pick out a successor when he had so much time ahead of him, but—" Dick swallowed hard.

"But then, this happened." She shook her head, and gestured to her legs. Then, she reached out to put a gentle hand on his knee. "Dick. I…I have a bit of a confession to make."

He looked up. "What?"

She told him about the surgery. Everything. Even the part about the dangers, the risks. His face slackened further and further with every word, and once she'd finished, he laid his face in both hands, and let out a long, sad sound.

"It's still a few months away. And with everything that's happened…" Barbara's eyes brimmed. "Dick, I don't think I can go through with it anymore. If something went wrong…it's selfish of me to consider that risk, of putting you all through another…"

A sob wrenched out of her throat. Tears flowed down her face as she wrapped her arms around her sides. Her mouth fell open in a silent scream as it hit her. It finally hit her.

Bruce was gone. He was dead.

He. Was. Dead.

Dick was down on his knees before Barbara had the chance to respond, and he wrapped his arms around her shoulders. He held her like that, there on the ground, and she could feel his shoulders shaking too. She could even feel the tears on his face as he pressed his cheek to hers.

"H-hey," he said, as brightly as he could manage. "It's okay. It's all okay, Babs. Get the surgery done. He'd want you to. We'll figure it out. Everything's going to be…"

When Barbara pulled sharply away, his breathing hitched. She slammed both hands down on his shoulders and looked him square in the eye. "No," she said, "We have…we have to stop saying that."

His blue eyes were wide. "What?"

"Dick, it's…" She looked past his head, up to the mantle above the library's fireplace. There, hanging on the wall, was a portrait. Dick followed her gaze, and she could feel his muscles slacken as they both stared up at the framed painting of their family.

It had been Bruce's idea, which was a surprise in and of itself. Usually, Alfred was the one to force everyone to pose for pictures, or place stock in sentimental mementos like framed portraits. But, after Barbara's accident, and after stripping the library clean of almost all the decoration, Bruce had announced that they'd all be posing with a professional artist for a family painting.

It hadn't been easy, getting everyone to dress up and stand still for so long. Barbara could still remember the look on Jason's face when Alfred had forced him into that red bow-tie. But, after a few hours of standing and sitting in one place, the man Bruce had hired to do the portrait had snapped his fingers with a grin, and declared the piece finished.

And now, it hung above the fireplace in the library. Bruce was seated, and his sons were gathered in a semi-circle behind the chair. Stephanie sat on his left, Barbara on his right. The only one
missing was Damian, but they hadn't met him yet. But someone had sneaked into the library a few
days ago, before everything had gone to #&%%, and stuck a badly cut-out picture of Damian's
scowling head in the spot right above Bruce's shoulder.

Barbara was willing to bet money that it was Jason who did it.

They stared at the portrait for a few more minutes. Then, Barbara remembered what she'd been
about to say, and turned to Dick.

"We need to stop saying that it's all going to be okay. Not everything will."

"I know. "His chin dipped. "But what am I supposed to say to the others?"

She paused. "I see your point."

They both deflated. Dick was right. What were they supposed to tell their siblings? That nothing
was going to be okay? That, now that Bruce was gone, the city was about to descend into complete
chaos? Barbara's fists clenched.

"No," she said. "Not everything is okay. But I'm with you, Dick. We can't tell the others that.
#&%%, we can't even tell the League that."

His eyes searched hers as he leaned back, perching on the balls of his feet. The pose was a bit
ridiculous in a full suit and tie, but Barbara wasn't in a laughing mood. Instead, she looked back up
at the portrait. "So, then, what do we do?" he asked.

"Well, I guess we do our best to stem the flow until we come up with something better." She bit
her lip. "Dick, if I did go through with the surgery, and if I survive it…"

"When you survive it, Babs."

"Right. Once I'm back on my feet, we'll have another able body to help out. And...maybe I go
through with Bruce's contingency…"

He shook his head distractedly, running his fingers through his hair. "Babs. That's going to take
months. At the very least. What are we going to do until then?"

"I don't know."

He stood, then. His feet took him around the room as he paced back and forth. His jaw was
grinding, and he kept clenching and unclenching his fists, as if he wanted to turn and sink his fist
into the wall. Eventually, his steps slowed with his breathing. Barbara watched him silently, biting
the edge of her lip.

There was an obvious solution. It was at the forefront of her mind, and she would have bet money
that the same was true for her partner. But she couldn't bring herself to say it, just in case she was
wrong. Or, if she was right, she didn't want to be the one to suggest something that she knew went
against everything he had been working for. For years.

"I'm not him, Babs. I can't be him."

It was on a rooftop. Back when things were normal—at least, as normal as they ever got when you
ran across rooftops for a living. They'd sat together, Nightwing and Batgirl, watching the cars pass
on the street below. Dick and Bruce had just had another fight, about what exactly, she couldn't
remember.
"He has this thing…it just….I don't know how to explain it, but it's not me. I can't be like that. I can't be the Batman, Babs."

Across the room, Dick stopped. His hand rested on the back of the couch. His shoulders slumped, like someone had just dropped all of the weight in the entire world on top of him. That weight was so heavy that it took two hands just to keep himself upright, as he sagged against the back of the couch. When he raised his head, his red and blue eyes caught hers. They were filled with dread.

But he wet his lips, and, slowly, took a deep breath. "Hmm," he sighed.

Her brow furrowed. "Dick?"

"We're the adults now, aren't we? So we both know what needs to be done. United front, right?" he let out a dry laugh, and swung a little against the couch. "We can't…can't let anyone know that we're anything but strong, and together, and…"

"United," she said. She could almost taste the word, and it had a bittersweet tang. "A united front."

"Right." Dick shut his eyes. "Gotham needs a Batman…more than it needs a Nightwing."

"Dick—"

"It's okay." He tried something like a smile, and opened his eyes. They were filled with tears. "This is what he'd want, right? He left it to us, to clean up the messes he left behind. He was the one who left—"

His voice shattered on the last word.

His face tightened, eyes squeezed shut once again. Two tears leaked out of his eyes, trailing down his face, and landing on his clenched fists.

Barbara wheeled herself over to him, and this time, he was the one to collapse into her. Arms wrapped around her torso, head buried in her lap, shoulders spasming as he gasped for air. She closed her eyes, and let him cry.

He'd never cried like this. When Jason and Stephanie had died, he'd been devastated. But now…

"It isn't fair," she said. "I know it isn't fair."

She ran her fingers through his hair, feeling her own eyes fill up with tears. "But I want you to know, Dick…I want you to know that it's not all going to be on you. I'll be with you each step of the way, right at your side. I promise."

He exhaled.

A soft knock at the door made them both jump, but it was only Jason and Stephanie.

"Hey, guys," Jason said softly. "We found Tim and Damian."

Steph hugged her arms around her stomach. "Diana sent us to come get you. They're ready…"

"Ready to go," Jason finished.

Barbara nodded, pasting on the fakest smile she'd ever worn. "Okay. We're coming."
She looked down. Dick had straightened, and was trying to get to his feet. His eyes were puffy, but he sniffed and shot their siblings a quick nod. "Right. Let's go."

Dick helped her wheel her way out of the library, and past their four siblings. Tim and Damian were both quiet and reserved. Their eyes were almost as red as Dick's.

Together, they made their way down the hall and into the sitting room, dragging their feet against the old carpet. The wheels of Barbara’s chair felt almost impossible to turn, like they’d been fitted with lead weights. The casket was in sight, now closed, and every head in the room turned as the Batkids stepped past the chairs and mourners to the front of the gathering precession. They walked slowly, perfectly in step.

United. A united front.

Jason and Dick nodded to each of them before turning to the long, sleek black box. Their fingers curled around the brass handles.

Clark, Barry, Hal and Arthur took their positions in front. Together, they lifted the box off the pedestal, and the procession out the back door began. One of the white lilies on top drifted to the carpet, and Stephanie paused to snatch it up off the ground before it could be crushed by the oncoming loafers and stilettos.

Damian's hand rested on Barbara's armrest. She looked up at the boy, then covered his fingers with her own.

Tim quietly offered to push her wheelchair, and for the first time, Barbara didn't protest.

Together, they stepped out the back door and into the brisk cloudy day.

The weather was appropriate, without being cliché.

No rain or hail to match the mourners' dispositions, but the skies were filled with dark, low hanging clouds. The chilly breeze carried a sharp scent that promised moisture. It flowed through the trees in the family cemetery out behind the manor, filling the air with the soft whisper of rustling leaves. It blew a few stray strands of red hair over Barbara's face, and she brushed them away with her tears.

Alfred was saying a few things over the casket, but it was all static.

She and her siblings were gathered at the foot of the grave, but all that she could see, could fixate on, was the headstone. Tall, about waist-high to a standing person, and dark. Even darker were the words chiseled into the sleek surface:

BRUCE WAYNE

FRIEND
"Justice," Barbara whispered. Her hands curled in her lap until she could feel her fingernails biting into her palm.

"And so we know," Alfred concluded, "That Bruce Wayne is not truly gone. He lives on through his children. They are the legacy that he left behind, to watch over his city, and continue the Batman's crusade. And, wherever he may be, I am sure that Bruce may rest in peace, knowing that his life's mission rests in willing and capable hands. Thank you."

There was no applause, but everyone nodded solemnly, shooting the Batfamily more pitying glances. Barbara looked up at the old butler. She'd never, ever, heard him address Bruce as just…'Bruce'. There was something…wrong with that. But she wasn't quite sure what.

Clark nodded, and took over. He reprised his speech from the service, but she doubted that anyone was really listening.

As Barbara looked out over the sea of black and gray, her mouth twisted. She could see Kara, Conner and Karin standing over near Clark. Artemis, Roy, the other Roy, and Cissie all standing with Oliver and Dinah. Barry, Wally and Bart near them. M'gann and J'ohnn. Kaldur and Arthur.

All of them had their mentors by their side, right here.

She didn't want their pity.

"I can assure everyone here," Clark said, authoritatively, "That we will honor Bruce's memory by retiring the Batman mantle. His uniform will stand in the Watchtower as a memorial to—"

A voice cut through the air like a knife.

"Actually," Dick said sternly, "You won't."

All eyes shot over to the Batkids. The younger ones glanced at Dick warily, but Barbara squared her shoulders and set her jaw.

"I'm sorry?" Clark reared back.

"He said you won't, Clark," Barbara shot out. "Or is your super-hearing not as good as you say it is?"

Jaws dropped. Karin's fists clenched, like she would have enjoyed nothing more than snapping Barbara's neck right about then. Clark himself took a slight step back, his face a mask of shock. Then, it settled into something a little more stern, reprimanding.

"Dick, Barbara, I understand that you've both been through a lot in the past few days. But the League has made a decision, and you need to realize—"

"That it's an idiotic decision," Dick snapped. "Bruce made his intentions clear to his family." His arms crossed tightly over his chest, and his siblings straightened, glaring at Superman. Barbara could practically feel their collective anger radiating behind her; they'd side with their older brother over a meta any day.
"Batman doesn't die." Dick's voice thundered over the crowd, and they all shrank back a little bit.

Clark frowned, sympathetic. "Son. I'm sorry but he's gone. You need to—"

He paused. Barbara couldn't see Dick's expression; she could feel it.

"Don't," he said. His voice dripped with searing hot venom. "Call me 'son'."

Barbara raised her head, pulling herself to her full seated height. "Gotham City needs a Batman. I don't expect any of you to understand how things work here, and I certainly don't expect you to understand how the Bats work."

"Without a Batman," Dick said, picking up on her words, "Without someone here to be a symbol, to be a beacon to this city, everything will collapse. The minute it gets out that he's gone…"

His voice didn't crack this time, but Barbara could hear the tremor. So, she continued.

"Every thug, every low-life, every Penguin, Riddler and Joker out there is going to start hunting. And they will tear down everything that Bruce ever accomplished." She swallowed, and looked Clark straight in the eye. Then Diana. Then Barry, and Hal, and Arthur, and Oliver and Dinah. Every single major player in the League who ever dared to call Batman a 'friend'. "So here is how things are going to work, metas. You're not taking anything. You don't get to decide a &*#% thing. You will stay out of this city unless you're invited, and you will leave the rest to us."

She looked up at Dick. "To Batman."

Jason, Tim, Stephanie and Damian all clenched their fists. The crowd flinched back, now the focus of six stern Bat-glares.

"This is our city," Jason said.

Stephanie narrowed her eyes. "He was our mentor."

"Our father," Damian snapped.

Tim hesitated, though only because of the stitches in his face. But the words he did manage to force out were said with just as much conviction as the rest. "Stay. Out."

Clark and the others gaped. Superman's hands drifted out to the side as he implored them. "Please. Bruce wouldn't want this. Fighting over his grave…"

Dick rested his hands on the back of Barbara's wheelchair. "You're wrong, Clark. About everything. We are Bruce's legacy. We don't want to fight with you—with any of you—but if Bruce Wayne ever taught us anything, it's that you fight for what you know is right. We will continue his crusade, and keep this city safe. That was what we promised him just before he died."

"We made that promise," Barbara said, "And heaven help the meta who tries to stop us from keeping it."

Everyone looked away. Down at the casket, up at the sky, out at the trees, or the manor up on the hill. Anywhere but the six sets of angry blue and green eyes glowering back. Metas were stubborn, but at least they knew when they were beat. Barbara did feel a stab of remorse, though; many of them were her friends and former colleagues.

But eventually, everyone drifted away. They flew or ran or drove off to their cities and their lives.
All perfectly intact, perfectly untouched.

They left the broken family behind at the gravesite. The seven of them stood there, watching the ground until they knew that everyone else had gone. Only then, did they sink to the ground, or shed a few tears.

Barbara still stared at the headstone. One word seemed to stand out above all the rest.

"Justice," she whispered again, like a promise.

No. Not *like* a promise. It *was* a promise.

Bruce was gone because of that clown.

Every night, her mentor had avoided the only sane response to that madman. And every night, that madman claimed more lives. The screams of the GCPD officers still rattled around in her mind, making her skin prickle with goosebumps.

The Joker had victimized the entire city. And now, he'd taken the one person who could stop him the 'right' way.

Maybe, just maybe, the 'right' way wasn't going to work anymore, not with him.

Barbara was done with the Joker. Done with every crime and murder he'd committed.

And so.

"Justice, Bruce," she whispered. "I promise."

Only Tim heard her. He shot her a sidelong glance, but said nothing.

It was Dick who finally spoke up. "I'm sorry," he said, "If I said anything you guys didn't agree with. But Babs and I talked it over, and we've decided that…" He inhaled, long and deep. "I'm going to finish what Bruce started. I'm going to be Batman."

They said nothing at first, only nodded.

Damian glowered at the gravesite, and Barbara glanced over at him quickly, expecting an explosion. But instead, he looked up at Dick with narrowed, tear-filled eyes.

"Very well, Grayson," he said, "Bring honor to my father. It is what he would want."

Dick opened and closed his mouth. He seemed almost touched. "Thank you, Damian. I'll—"

"Although, should you fail," the boy said, "I will make certain that your death is slow. And painful." He turned to Alfred, and sighed. "I grow weary, Pennyworth. I suggest that we all retire to the manor and get some rest. Tomorrow, Batman will patrol the streets once more."

Alfred sighed, giving the rest of them a long-suffering smile. "Right, then. I'll escort Master Damian to bed. The rest of you may join us when you see fit."

The old butler put a hand on Damian's shoulder, and led him up the path back to the house. They watched them go, stepping over rocks and tree roots. Damian's shoulders were hunched, his head bowed low.

Stephanie huffed. "Why is he so horrible?"
"Go easy on him," Barbara said softly. She looked at each sibling in turn. "All of you. I'm serious. He just lost the only father he's ever known."

Jason crossed his arms. "And we didn't?"

She shrugged. "I'm with you, Jay. But he's only ten. I don't think he's ever lost someone close to him before, so just be patient, alright?"

They nodded, and went right back to staring at the lowered coffin.

Jason finally cleared his throat. "Well, Golden Boy. You're gonna be Batman, huh?"

Dick nodded.

"Good." He clapped a hand on his older brother's shoulder. "With you all the way, man."

Steph and Tim both nodded, but only Steph could say, "Same here."

"Thanks, guys," Dick sighed. "You don't know how much that means."

Barbara smiled. "You guys go on. Get some rest. Dick and I will be up soon, okay?"

They hesitated, glancing back and forth at each other. Finally, Tim sighed, and turned, shuffling up the stony path. He didn't say a word, and barely made a sound. Barbara made a mental note to check up on him later, make certain that he'd be alright.

At the moment, she wasn't entirely sure that she would.

Jason reached down, and intertwined his fingers with Steph's. They started back, then paused.

"You know," he said, "We all heard what you promised the old man. Back at the carnival."

A line appeared between Stephanie's eyebrows. "He said to promise to 'take care of them'. Did he mean the Gothamites, or…?"

Barbara shared a long look with Dick. Then, she said, "I think we all know what he meant, Steph."

"And that's a promise we're going to keep," Dick finished. "This family stays together, no matter what. Agreed?"

Their younger brother and sister shared a smile, a nod, then turned and made their way up the hill.

Dick and Barbara watched them go. Once they'd made it past the tree-line, Dick let out a long, sad sound, and sank to his knees. No tears, no words. Just exhaustion. Barbara reached down, and set a hand on his shoulder.

"So," he said, once he'd composed himself. "Think anyone from the League'll ever talk to us again? Or the Team?"

She shrugged. "Ah, we've done worse. They'll go massage their super-egos, then be back at our door as soon as they need us. And they will need us, mark my words."

Wasn't that how it always worked? The League, the Team, the Titans; they all liked to pretend that their powers were all they really needed. That the Bats were optional, dispensable even. But then, eventually, something always came up. Something they couldn't comprehend, couldn't handle. Not on their own. That was when Bruce usually went in. Solved the mystery, identified the perps, had
the plan.

It wasn't just Gotham that needed Batman.

They'd be back.

A soft rustle behind them caught their attention. They didn't jump; they'd been expecting it.

"A beautiful service," the woman said. "Very moving. I especially enjoyed the part when you two put Big Boy Blue in his place."

Barbara shrugged. "Sorry, Selina."

"Oh, darling, don't apologize." The Catwoman stepped out from behind her wheelchair, and gave Dick and Barbara a small smile. "That boy scout deserved it, keeping me away from this whole thing."

The smile slipped, and she glanced down at the sleek black casket. Her brimming green and silver eyes were a million miles away as she reached into her clutch bag, pulling out a small golden chain. At the end of it dangled a large, perfectly cut emerald.

She extended her hand, and dropped it over the casket. The gemstone landed on top of the soft lily petals, glittering.

Her voice was husky as she said, "One of the first trinkets we ever fought over, him and I. Snatched it out of a museum. Travelling display, 'Cat's Eye Emerald'." She waved one hand, and wiped at her eyes with the other. She sniffed, and continued. "Before that night, I didn't know who he was, he didn't know who I was. But he chased me up onto the roof, and I was laughing as he cornered me. He grabbed my hands, probably to cuff me, and I leaned in and kissed him."

She let out a soft, dry laugh. "It was for shock value, right? Get him to drop me so I could run. But he pulled away, looked me right in the eye, and said my name. 'Selina?' And that's when I knew. It was the same little rich boy who used to follow me around on the streets when we were kids."

Selina smiled at them, lips pressing together against a sob. "We were just like you two kids, back in our day. Inseparable. Ah, all the adventures, the mysteries! Of course, we grew up, went our separate ways. He became Gotham's native son by day, Caped Crusader by night. And me, well…"

She waved a hand at herself with a wry little smile. "I was the cat burglar."

Something winked in the light as she waved, and Barbara's heart twisted.

"Oh," Barbara gasped. Trembling fingers flew up to her mouth. Tears stung her eyes. "Oh, Selina."

Dick saw it too, and his breath hitched like he'd been hit in the stomach. "When did he…?"

Selina paused, one eyebrow raised. Then, she glanced down at her left hand. At the glittering diamond ring. Slowly, she sighed, and covered it with her fingers. "Just a few days before it happened," she said, softly, "Out in his garden. We were going to surprise all of you."

Barbara reached out, and grasped Selina Kyle's hand in hers. "Selina," she said, "Anything you need, anything at all. Just let us know. You're a part of our family now, no matter what."

A shining tear slipped down Catwoman's face. "Thanks, kitten."
She pulled away, and started walking. Not up to the manor, but in the opposite direction, out into the woods. "You kids take care of yourselves, understand?"

Dick smiled. "We will. You too. Keep out of trouble?"

She turned her head, smirking, and shot them a teary wink. "You know me, darlings. I live for danger."

And just like that, she was gone.

Dick sighed, and got to his feet. "Well. The 'crusade' goes on."

"And so does life." Barbara extended a hand. Dick accepted it, and gave it a soft squeeze. "We've got a lot of work to do, Grayson, if we're going to keep this city in check."

"Yikes."

"I know, right?" she chuckled. "But I get this feeling that things are going to be just fine. There's nobody I'd rather work for than you, Pixie Boots."

He gasped, affronted. "You haven't called me that in years."

"Well…” She shrugged, smirking. "There's a reason for that. Worst nickname ever."

He grunted into his fist. "Cough, Dominoed Daredoll, cough, cough."

"Well, I stand corrected." She put her hands on the wheels of her chair. "Now, shall we get to work?"

"Yeah," Dick said. "Let's—"

Something crashed inside the manor, so loud that they could hear it from where they stood down the hill. Both of them whirled around, ready to respond to the threat. Over the trees, splitting the air, came the long, shrill scream,

"DAMIAN YOU LITTLE $#*%!"

They both relaxed.

"Ah," Barbara said, "I think this will be your first official rescue operation as acting Batman."

Dick had gone pale. "Joy."

She laughed, and started rolling. "Race you there, Wingnut. Last one to the crisis drives to the hospital!"

They dashed up the hill, and Dick ended up pushing her wheelchair.

Who knew what would come next? Bruce had always taught them to plan for the unexpected, and be ready for the unseen. His protégé’s had learned to take change and heartache in stride.

They'd learned the hard way that life was going to keep on knocking them down, throwing new obstacles and challenges their way. They'd keep falling. With their mentor gone, nothing was certain any longer.

Nothing, that is, but each other, and the mission.
The family business.
And that's what the family business was all about.
Learning to fall, so that you could pick yourself right back up.

Night fell, and the winds picked up.
The storm that had threatened earlier had finally found its way to Gotham, but the family was tucked safely inside the manor. By now they were likely all huddled in their beds, sound asleep. Alfred would probably be sitting by the fire, turning pages in one novel or another. Or maybe, he'd just be staring solemnly into the flickering flames.
There'd be no patrol that night.
In the dark of the family graveyard, underneath the rustling trees, it had gone quiet. The prelude of the storm was the only source of sound.
And then.
Slowly…
The casket lid lifted.

Chapter End Notes

Welp, that's the end! :D
...Kind of.
Thanks everyone for reading this mess! I really hoped you liked it, because I had a lot of fun writing it!
I had so much fun with this story, in fact, that I decided to do a Part Two. (I'd like to think the writing quality is a bit better, and there's more of an actual plot! XD)
So stay tuned for Part Two: The Family Business!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!