A Faulty Sword

by GeneralIrritation

Summary

NOW WITH AN AFTERWARD FROM THE AUTHOR.

How well do Bruce and Selina settle in to married life?

Will Cassandra Cain’s efforts at redemption destroy her?

Can Tim Drake measure up to the previous Robins?

And just what the hell is up with Kate Kane and Wonder Woman?

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Chapter 1: December’s Children (And Everybody’s)

MOUNT OLYMPUS - THREE THOUSAND YEARS AGO

Harmonia stood upon a great and expansive stone balcony, jutting from the very rock of Olympus itself. The sun was shining in her face, and she was in the company of her fellow Gods. The Goddess of Harmony and Concord folded her arms across her chest, and glanced at either side of her. To her right was her mother, Aphrodite, her long pink silks and blonde curls hugging and accentuating a figure that sculptors and painters would spend centuries attempting to do justice. And to her left was Ares, her father, forbidding in black armor and helm, red eyes glowing in shadow.

Harmonia was the daughter of both Love and War.

At the crest of this balcony, sitting in his throne, was Zeus, his long white beard draped over his formidable bare chest. To his right, standing next to the opulent throne was his wife Hera, Queen of the Gods. The rows and arguments between Zeus and Hera had already become legend to the mortals beneath them, but on this day, the eyes of both King and Queen were downcast. Their shoulders slumped as though beneath an invisible weight.

Finally, breaking the silence, Zeus said “Bring her in.”

A door opened in the middle of the balcony, revealing a set of stairs. Up this stairwell strode two clay automatons, imbued with the power of the Gods, with the bodies of men and the heads of bulls. And between them, bound by glowing golden ropes was their prisoner.

Harmonia heard this prisoner before she saw her face.

“You!” the prisoner said.

“Unhand me, you foul things,” the prisoner said. “You know not to whom you…”

The prisoner stopped when the sun that bathed Olympus hit her. Her gray robes were ragged. The braided rows of blonde hair upon her scalp caught the glare of the sun. Her green eyes burned with fury when they saw Harmonia standing there.

“Hello, Nemesis.”

Nemesis, Goddess of the Unjustly Slain, reared her head back, and spat upon the stone of the balcony.

“Betrayer!”

“Enough!” said Zeus in a deep bellow as he stood. “Bring her before the throne.”

The automatons drug the grunting and kicking Nemesis toward the throne. Zeus held out his hand, and tendrils of lightning emerged from his fingertips.

From within his robe, the gentle pull of the lightning produced a small green stone. He then ceased his lightning, and the green stone fell to the balcony with a weight and a sound that something that small had no business being.
“You cannot destroy it, can you?” Nemesis asked, her smile bitter.

“No,” Zeus said, “it seems you have crafted something beyond even my power. Harmonia told me of this… abomination. Nemesis, what have you done?”

Nemesis levelled her burning green eyes at the King of the Gods. “I hold no judgement of your dalliances with the mortal women below, Your Majesty, so do not judge me for how I make myself happy.”

Zeus’ brows lowered, and behind him, still standing next to the throne, Hera visibly bristled.

“And yet,” Zeus said, “we do sit in judgement of you.”

Nemesis scoffed. “None of you are fit to do such a thing, Zeus, not even you.”

She looked at Ares. “Lord Ares, are you seriously willing to decide my fate when I have devised something that would greatly aid your ends? Are you saying you don’t want what I’ve created?”

“I crave war,” Ares said, his rasp echoing from within his helm. He pointed at the green stone. “But this… This is desolation.”

“War is war, you fool.”

“War requires a victor,” Ares said. “There is no victory in that thing. And if you created such madness for the use of anyone beside yourself, you would have made it so someone beside you could use it. You act solely in your own interests, Nemesis. ‘Twas ever thus.”

Nemesis sneered, and measured the balcony and all who stood upon it. “So what now? Banishment? Rendering me mortal and sending me to the foul creatures below?”

“No,” Zeus said. “You have defied my will and crafted something of unimaginable horror.”

And it was only now that Harmonia noticed that the gravity of the situation had finally settled on Nemesis.

“No,” Nemesis said. “You… You…”

“If you’ve any final words,” Zeus said, “You should speak them now.”

Nemesis immediately craned her neck and glared at Harmonia.

“You meddled in affairs that were not your own,” Nemesis said. “Your loose tongue resulted in my demise. You think death will stop me? If it takes eternity, I will avenge myself upon you! This I swear! I shall avenge myself upon all of you! Not even Hades Himself can stop me!”

“I have heard enough,” Zeus said. “We all have.”

Zeus reached out and grabbed Nemesis’ head. The veins of blue lightning around his fingers grew and intensified until they shot directly through Nemesis’ skull.

Nemesis' corpse went limp instantly, dropping to her knees, her head hitting the stone floor between her legs.

“Take her to the island below,” Zeus said to the automatons. “And bury her deep.”

The automatons, dragging a Goddess’ dead body behind them, walked back down the stairs. The
door in the floor shut behind them.

Harmonia thought that, with potential disaster averted, her sense of unease would be lifted.

But no.

If anything, the whispers in the back of her mind that had accompanied her since her creation had only gotten louder.

Zeus stretched out his hand again, and yet again the lightning appeared.

The green stone, the stone whose crafting had resulted in the death of its creator, lifted into the air.

With a show of force that caused sweat to form on the brow of the King of the Gods Himself. The lightning enveloped the green stone, until the lightning struck away from the balcony, sending the stone… somewhere.

Hera walked up to Zeus, and put a hand on his shoulder. “Where did you send it, husband?”

Zeus sighed.

“Far away,” Zeus said. “And deep underground. If anyone were to find that foul thing, it would take eons for them to do so.”

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**GOTHAM CITY DOWNS - NOW**

On this Friday night in the middle of December, Gotham City Downs, the most famous dog track on the eastern seaboard, was running late races for that specific breed of gambler flush with their Christmas bonuses. Millions of dollars were currently flowing in and out of the establishment.

So of course it was getting robbed tonight.

Lady Vic held sway in the eastern count room.

In her old life, Lady Elaine Marsh-Morton was the last descendent of a long line of English aristocrats. But old blood did not automatically result in new money, so she christened herself Lady Vic and fashioned herself as a no-job-too-dirty mercenary to keep her family’s estate from foreclosure.

During the tenure of her mercenary work, Lady Vic had shown no resistance whatsoever toward the murder of small children to get her paycheck, so the four mid-thirties blokes who worked the eastern count room of Gotham City Downs had reason to be worried. They were being held at gunpoint by Lady Vic’s six henchmen in the expansive chamber outside the count room proper.

As big as this operation was, though, Lady Vic wanted discretion. They had snuck in during a late rush with weapons under trench coats. She didn’t even wear her mask for this heist, as everyone would recognize a supervillain in Gotham City if they saw one.

“Time?” Lady Vic asked as she was stuffing ten thousand dollar bundles into the canvas bags in the count room that were meant for bank deposits.

“Nine-oh-five,” said the henchmen closest to the count room. The guy that he had his gun on (whose name-tag said “Dennis”) was sweating bullets.

“Any word on the scanner?”
“Nope.”

“And do our friends about town see a signal in the sky?”

“Last I heard… there… wasn’t…”

There was a deep thrum. As though a thin sheet of metal were being stepped on. And it was coming from inside the walls of the chamber outside the count room.

One of the grates that covered the side vent on the eastern side flew out of the wall with a loud crash.

A smoke pellet came out of the vent next, and it quickly polluted the air with a thick, viscous miasma that made it impossible to see. Lady Vic stood on the door way, frantically fanning her hand to clear some of the smoke, but to no avail.

It took eight seconds for the smoke to clear.

Once it did, a towering man in gray armor and a black cape was standing directly in front of Lady Vic.

Batman.

But what caught Lady Vic’s attention was who was standing behind Batman.

A young man, not a day over eighteen, standing in the middle of the room in black and red armor. Black cape with yellow lining, and a black domino mask.

Lady Vic reckoned this must be the new Robin.

At Robin’s feet were six hunks of black metal, and Lady Vic had to squint for a moment before she realized what they were.

During the interval of smoke, Batman, Robin, or both, had surreptitiously relieved the semi-automatic weapons that her henchmen were holding on the race track’s employees of their clips.

It took a second for Lady Vic’s henchmen to realize this as well.

Robin looked around, and found the employee Dennis.

“You might want to get your friends out of here.”

Dennis nodded, and he and the three other Gotham City Downs workers ushered themselves out of the chamber amidst the looks of the confused henchmen.

“And as for the rest of you…”

Robin relieved a collapsible metal bo staff from his utility belt, and set it down in the middle of the magazines on the floor as though he were Moses parting the Red Sea.

“…come get ‘em if you can.”

Lady Vic levelled her gaze at Batman. She unsheathed a pair of kukras from beneath her black longcoat.

“I’ll have you know I’m not the only one out and about tonight.”
“I’ll have you know,” Batman said, “that neither am I.”

GOTHAM CITY MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES - NOW

Margaret Pye used to work here.

Before she began her life of costumed supervillainy under the name “Magpie,” she was a curator at this museum, seeing all of the shiny, enticing relics of days past and coveting them in a way she found that she would never really covet another human being.

That these shiny coins, jewels, vases, and various other gleaming bits of ephemera would never find their way into her hands was an atrocity that, quite frankly, Margaret Pye thought too heinous to bear. Surely one or two going missing would break neither the backs nor the banks of the legal owners! They should be in the hands of someone who loved them, who cared for them, and not in the clutches of those who saw them as numbers to be moved from ledger to ledger.

One or two turned into a spree. Margaret Pye turned into Magpie. A job at the museum turned into extended stays at Arkham Asylum.

But tonight, though? Oh, tonight, she wouldn’t be alone. Tonight she would have help. Tonight she would be after the Pondicherry Sapphire.

Originally discovered in India, this royal blue gem weighed in at 114.73 carats. Its price at auction, would it ever make it there, was estimated to be in the low eight figures.

But Magpie didn’t care about the money. Money was common. Everyone had it, from sickeningly rich CEOs who had all their value in abstract figures to bums on the street who could jingle dull coins in dirty coffee cups. But who could lay claim to this marvelous jewel?

Just Magpie.

Just tonight.

Magpie, dress tight, fishnets on, black wig in her customary triple-mohawk style, walked down the narrow hallway to the storage vault. Her red high heels clacked on the linoleum, as did the clomp of the boots of the six henchmen flanking her.

The seventh henchman was already at the vault door, gloppy beige pustules of C4 already applied.

“Is it active?” Magpie asked.

The seventh henchman nodded.

“Then you know what to do.”

The seventh henchman ran to Magpie’s side, twenty feet down the hall, and pressed the small detonator he had in his hand.

Magpie saw the light of the explosives going off before she heard the deafening roar. The hallway filled up with smoke.

As soon as it cleared, Magpie saw that the vault door had practically disintegrated. Leaving only thin air between herself and the object of her desires.

Ears ringing, Magpie ran to the opened vault. She fanned smoke away, and peered inside.
The glass display case for the Pondicherry Sapphire was shattered.

The jewel itself, however, was nowhere to be found.

Indignity in horror rose in Magpie, until she heard a woman’s voice above her.

“Uh-huh…”

Magpie looked up.

*Of course, Magpie thought. Of course the person who could have gotten past this vault without explosives and snagged the sapphire would have done it tonight of all nights just to make her look foolish.*

“Catwoman?”

Above her, hanging from the ceiling by what must have been adhesives in the gloves and boots of her suit, was Catwoman. Suspended from the belt of her Catsuit, right next to her bullwhip, was the Pondicherry Sapphire in a plastic bag.

Catwoman, who had a hand to the ear of her cowl, looked at Magpie.

“Shut the fuck up, Margaret, I’m on the phone.”

Magpie looked at Catwoman incredulously, as Catwoman continued her conversation.

“I’m sorry,” Catwoman said to the person she was talking to. “You were saying…? Um, camera feed to my goggles says seven… You want me to take care of them…? You want… Well, far be it from me to stand in your way. See you in a few.”

Catwoman ceased her conversation, and looked at Magpie as she dropped from the ceiling.

As she got to her feet, Catwoman said “Hate to use F-bombs so early in a conversation, but you are genuinely rude and completely off-putting.”

“Give me the sapphire,” Magpie said.

Catwoman groaned. “When has that ever worked? When have you ever just asked for something like that in this business, and the sap just gave it to you?”

“I’m not alone tonight, Selina,” Magpie said. “I have seven henchmen eager to do my bidding for the plunder in this vault. And you don’t have Batman here to protect you.”

Catwoman just looked at Magpie.

“What is it?” Magpie asked. “Did Batman get jealous when you married Bruce Wayne?”

“Well, it’s hard to afford the finer things on a costumed do-gooder’s salary,” Catwoman said. “I traded up.”

“Does Batman see it that way?”

Catwoman rolled her eyes. “As for your henchmen, I’ll be seeing them shortly. But you’re not strictly right on me being alone tonight.”

And with that, Catwoman turned and walked to the gaping hole in the vault. She unfurled her
bullwhip and cracked it.

“Hey boys,” Catwoman said to the goons out in the hallway. “I haven’t kicked a henchman’s ass in a while. You mind helping me see if I still remember how?”

Now! While her back is turned! Take the jewel!

Magpie readied her fingers, getting ready to reach out and--

BOOM!

A concussion mine on the inside of one of the display crates that lined the wall of the vault exploded, knocking Magpie onto the floor.

It took a moment to clear her head, but Magpie finally looked up.

Stepping out of the ruins of the crate was a woman in a black bodysuit, with purple piping up the side. Her cape was purple, as was the hood over her black mask that covered the entirety of her head. The mask had white lenses that doubled as eyes. She had a metal staff in her hands.

No… Now that her eyes adjusted, that cape was more of an eggplant than a purple.

“Hi,” the woman in eggplant said in a high, chipper voice. “My name is Spoiler, and I’ll be your superhero for the evening.”

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THE X RIVERBOAT CASINO - NOW

X, in pirate legends, marked the spot for treasure. This was something that the supervillain Cap’n Fear knew in his blood.

Named so by millionaire Pietro Anagnos, who couldn’t stand the thought of Oswald Cobblepot’s Iceberg Casino Hotel having the only claim on Gotham City’s weird zoning laws in regards to legalized gambling, the X Riverboat Casino had a pirate theme. All the blackjack dealers wore the tricorn hats with the skull-and-crossbones logo, and all the waitresses wore wench corsets that gave them back problems and made it hard to breathe.

No eyepatches, though. That would interfere with dealing and counting.

Cap’n Fear brought twenty henchmen with him. All in better pirate outfits than the X provided, and all armed with decidedly un-piratelike twelve gauge shotguns.

The Cap’n, his metal peg leg thumping on the red carpet of the mid-deck, his robotic parrot whirring on his right shoulder a few inches away from his metal mask, stopped to talk to one of his shotgun-toting henchmen by one of the roulette wheels.

“Yarrrrr,” Cap’n Fear said, “where be th’ gamblers and th’ scallywags who work here?”

The henchman scratched under his eyepatch (as Cap’n Fear had a tighter dress code for his employ than the X Riverboat Casino did). “We put them up in the theater downstairs. I can do the dime for armed robbery, but I don’t want a murder beef behind this, you feel me?”

And Cap’n Fear just stared at him.

The henchman stared back. “Seriously?”
The robotic parrot on Cap’n Fear’s shoulder whirred to life. “RRAAWWK-Talk the talk or walk the plank-RRAAWWK!”

The henchman sighed. “Fine,” he said. “Yarrrr, they be down stairs in the palladium… or whatever the hell, I don’t know.”

“Good,” Cap’n Fear said. “Keep yer blunderbusses handy. Th’ Bat be out tonight.”

With that, Cap’n Fear strode toward the casino managers office, wherein lie the computer system that opened all of the count rooms and cages. Plunder and booty, ahoy.

Cap’n Fear wrenched the manager’s door open, walked inside, and shut the door behind him. Only someone was waiting for him.

They were in a black leather longcoat, with gray metal chest armor beneath. Their face was covered by a green mask, and the deeper Cap’n Fear peered, the more he was convinced that that mask was holographic.

This person was typing rapidly on a holographic keyboard while they sat behind the manager’s desk, wrangling lines of code on a similarly holographic display.

“What ye be doin?” Cap’n Fear asked in surprise.

“Right now?” the person in the mask of green light asked in a digitally distorted voice. “I’m hacking your parrot.”

Cap’n Fear’s parrot swiveled its metal head to look at him.

“What a kid I got,” the robotic parrot said in the voice of late and beloved stand-up comic Rodney Dangerfield. “I told him about the birds and the bees, and he told me about the butcher and my wife.”

Cap’n Fear groaned, and used the hook on his left hand to shut his parrot off. Then he turned to the person sitting behind the manager’s desk, rage radiating from behind his metal mask, and his right hand producing his cutlass.

“Yarrrrrr,” Cap’n Fear said. “Who be ye?”

“Yarrrrrrr,” the person behind the desk said. “I be Oracle. And right now, you’re in Shit Cove without an oar. Because a friend of mine’s coming that you are not going to be happy to see.”

“I’ve twenty buccaneers with blunderbusses on this deck,” Cap’n Fear said. “Whoever yer heartie be, nah even th’ Almighty Hisself could beat those odds.”

Oracle clenched her fists twice, and the holographic keyboard and display disappeared.

“Buddy,” she said, “if you think twenty guys with shotguns can stop what’s coming… then you’ve clearly never heard of Orphan.”

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One of the henchmen made a mad dash for the magazines on the floor, and he was the first one to get whacked into unconsciousness by Robin’s staff.

Hit first, he thought, and hit once.
As Batman engaged in a close-quarters brawl inside the count room with Lady Vic, two of the henchmen started barreling toward Robin, using their unloaded rifles as cudgels.

Robin brought his staff up to block an overhand swipe, but the other henchman rammed the stock of his rifle into his solar plexus. Thanks to WayneTech and the miracle of kevlar, Robin barely felt it. More than that, he knew it was coming, and prepared for it.

He brought the staff down to bring the rifle to the floor, and then back up into the bridge of the henchman’s nose. Robin heard a crunch, and saw him drop.

With one henchman dealt with, the other opted to use his rifle for a baseball swing directly at Robin’s head. Robin ducked it, and the stock of the rifle sailed over his head. He stood up, and rammed the end of his staff into the tip of the henchman’s chin. He heard the guy’s teeth slam together, and when the henchman raised his hand to his mouth, Robin drove a fist into his temple. He saw the guy’s eyes roll back into his head as crumbled to the ground.

Robin felt a tap on his shoulder.

He turned around to be greeted by a right cross to the face from one of the three remaining henchmen, staggering him back into the wall.

As Robin checked his nose to see if it was bleeding, the remaining three advanced on him. The one in the middle was cracking his knuckles.

Robin dropped his hand to his utility belt…

...and up came his prototype “Bang-a-rang.”

It was like an average Batarang, except thicker. And once it made impact, it was supposed to act as a flashbang.

He lugged it at the one in the middle, and clenched his eyes shut.

Robin heard a light “FWUMP!” and heard one of the henchmen scream “My fuckin’ eyes!”

He opened his own, and saw the three henchmen with at least one hand to their eyes, stumble about.

Robin cracked the staff into the ear of the one on the right as hard as he could. He had heard it said that Major League baseball players know when they hit a home run even before it sailed over the left field wall, because when the ball made contact, the bat didn’t vibrate.

Robin’s staff did not vibrate.

The henchman on the right was already unconscious when he flew into the henchman in the middle, knocking him to the ground.

Robin turned his attention to the henchman on the left. He had his right arm raised, ready to strike.

Unfortunately for him, Robin already had it scouted.

Sadly, Robin’s arm did not fare as well under the metaphor of the baseball bat not vibrating. The blow he struck on the left henchman was savage, and its reverberations were felt all the way up to the elbow. It put the guy down, but still.

The henchman who had been in the middle was on all fours trying to get to his feet.
One baseball slide and a knee to the temple later, and Robin put that silly idea to bed.

He got to his own feet, and put his hand up to his nose again. It still smarted.

“Good work,” a gruff voice said.

Robin turned, and saw Batman standing in the doorway of the count room. Lady Vic was zip-tied and unconscious behind him.

“Thanks,” Robin said.

“Your prototype worked.”

“Yeah.”

“Is something wrong?” Batman asked.


Batman cocked his head to the side. “You fought six people and won. It happens.”

“But it shouldn’t have happened,” Robin said. “It’s all I’m saying…”

“All of my life,” Magpie said as she and Spoiler circled each other, “I have put up with people like you mocking me and--”

THWACK!

Spoiler used her staff as a mini pole vault, and drove her right foot into the tip of Magpie’s chin. Her head snapped back, and bounded off the cold floor as she fell, with a thud that made Spoiler’s stomach do a half-assed somersault.

She flourished her staff, waiting for her to get up and make her next moves in the fight as she heard the errant thumps and thuds of Catwoman’s struggle against the seven goons outside the vault.

But Magpie did not get up.

Spoiler blinked behind her mask.

“Uh… Magpie?”

Magpie still wasn’t moving.

Spoiler very carefully got down on her knees and checked Magpie’s pulse with gloved fingers. She was still breathing, so…

“Everything okay?”

Spoiler turned and saw Catwoman standing in the hole that used to be the vault doorway. There was a sheen of sweat on her forehead, but Spoiler couldn’t tell if it was from exerting herself dealing with seven goons, or the new insulated Catsuit that WayneTech had provided her. Perfect for Decembers like this one.

“I… I just kicked her in the face, and, um… She plotzed.”

Catwoman looked the unconscious Magpie over. “One kick?”
“Yeah.”

“So… You bagged your first supervillain.”

It was as though a light bulb had appeared over Spoiler’s head, and she could feel the broad beam of a smile behind her mask.

“Yeah,” Spoiler said, the smile in her voice.

Catwoman opened her arms. “Well bring it in, Goddammit.”

Spoiler got up, and walked to Catwoman. She hugged her mentor as tight as she could.

As soon as the embrace was over, Spoiler asked, in a hopeful voice:

“Mojitos?”

“Hell no.”

“Why not?” Spoiler asked. “You let me drink vodka during the whole Undying thing.”

“Yeah,” Catwoman said, “in my apartment. You start guzzling booze in Wayne Manor, Bruce is gonna give me the stink-eye.”

Cap’n Fear raised his cutlass, ready to run this Oracle fool through, when he heard one of his henchmen’s shotguns going off.

Then another.

He turned to the closed door of the manager’s office.

Cap’n Fear heard lighter reports from outside, but it took a moment for him to realize that those weren’t handgun shots.

Those were punches.

Someone was hitting his henchmen so hard that they sounded like pistols going off.

Cap’n Fear had a mind to sheathe his cutlass and go out to lend support, but as soon as that thought entered his mind, someone, most likely one of his men, was vaulted into the other side of the door. Not hard enough to break it, but hard enough to truly hurt someone.

Pity for his men and cowardice for his own fate infused Cap’n Fear. He wasn’t going out there.

He heard one of his men mere feet from the door on the other side.

“GET AWAY FROM ME! SOMEONE HELP! HELP M--”

Cap’n Fear heard the sickening crunch of breaking bones, and that same buccaneer screaming himself into unconsciousness.

The ensuing seconds felt stretched to hours. Loud punches. Shotgun blasts. The rumble of destroyed scenery. Until finally, mercifully, the carnage on the other side of the door lapsed into a heavy silence.

So in the grip of terror was Cap’n Fear that he hadn’t heard Oracle walk up behind him.
Oracle reached out, and opened the door…

This deck of the X looked like a tornado had rolled through. The unconscious bodies of his goons were spread about like beer bottles in a sloppy drunk’s bender. Two roulette tables and two blackjack tables had been completely destroyed. Playing cards and casino chips blanketed the destruction like a freshly-fallen snow.

And standing in the middle was someone small enough for Cap’n Fear to assume was a girl. She didn’t stand an inch over five five. She was all in black and gold. Knee-high boots. Baggy pants. Black and gold armor covering her torso, with small gold armor plates spread across the outsides of her arms. Her head was covered in a full black mask with black lenses over the eyes. Cap’n Fear had to squint his one eye, but he saw stitching on the mask across the nose and down the sides.

Her shoulders gently moved up and down with the breaths she was taking.

And her fists were clenched.

“Hey Orphan,” Oracle said. “You feeling tired? Wanna take a break?”

“No,” the girl in black and gold said in a deep and craggy voice that clashed with her slight frame.

“You think this was easy, or do you think this was hard?”

“Easy,” Orphan said.

Oracle nodded, then turned to Cap’n Fear.

“The next few minutes are gonna go down one of two ways,” Oracle said. “You can surrender, and the next person to lay a hand on you is gonna be a member of the Gotham City Police Department. Or you can attempt a flex, and go toe-to-toe with my girl, here. And you heard her yourself. She’s not tired.”

Cap’n Fear stood still and silent. Oracle leaned in to speak softly in his ear.

“If you listen closely,” Oracle said, “you’ll hear the bell for round two. So… What’s gonna happen Cap’n?”

Orphan tilted her head to the side, and Cap’n Fear could hear the vertebrae in her neck pop.

Cap’n Fear threw down his cutlass.

After Lady Vic, Magpie, and Cap’n Fear were all safely within police custody, the six crimefighters met Kate “Batwoman” Kane at the agreed-upon rendezvous point: the roof of an abandoned storage facility on the outskirts of the East End.

Batwoman spoke to Barbara “Oracle” Gordon as Cassandra “Orphan” Cain, Tim “Robin” Drake, and Stephanie “Spoiler” Brown huddled together behind a billboard, out of the way of the mid-December wind.

Batman and Catwoman, however, talked amongst themselves on the roof of an old bakery across the street.

Cassandra took a deep breath and let it out, tendrils of fog seeping from the stitching on the front of her mask.
“I got punched in the face,” Tim said.


“Yeah.”

“How many?”

“Six.”

“And that’s what you decide to lead with?” Stephanie asked. “You got punched in the face?”

Cassandra, through methods both deeply cruel and undeniably effective, had the gift of reading people’s body language. She noticed that Tim and Stephanie were completely comfortable around each other. They had dated for a couple of months, until Tim broke up with her because… reasons? Cassandra wasn’t entirely clear on what “distant” meant in relation to romance. She knew the word meant “very far away,” but as far as Cassandra knew, Steph hadn’t left Gotham City.

She hadn’t been entirely sure what “breaking up” meant at the time. She thought Tim had actually, physically hurt her, which resulted in Cassandra finding Tim in the garden of Wayne Manor, and punching him in the throat. After Stephanie explained the ins and outs of the concept, Cassandra felt terrible, and told Tim she was sorry. To this day, she dropped an “I’m sorry” to him every once in a while, and they’d been broken up for over a year.

Stephanie said she’d wanted to be friends with Tim, and judging from their body language, that’s exactly what they were. Not like Dick Grayson and Starfire, both of whom seemed stiff at Bruce and Selina’s wedding when they had spoken to one another.

She had heard Starfire had said something to Bruce at the wedding, and that something had not been nice.

Cassandra wondered if she could punch Starfire in the throat and get away with it.

She was pretty sure she could.

“Bagged my first supervillain tonight,” Stephanie said. “With one shot.”

Cassandra patted Stephanie on the shoulder as Tim said “Nice.”

Kate broke from her quiet conversation with Barbara, and looked at Stephanie.

“Wow,” Kate said. “You one-shotted Magpie. How’s it feel being the smartest kid in summer school?”

“I dunno,” Stephanie said. “How does it feel being a ginger piss-flap who would burst into flame in direct sunlight?”

Cassandra cringed. Stephanie and Kate didn’t like each other, and she didn’t know why. She was fairly sure that even Kate didn’t know. The way they stood and pointed their bodies at each other told her that while they hated each other, they weren’t going to actually start a fight. Which confused Cassandra. It was like two warriors flinging snowballs at each other when there were perfectly good swords all about them.

Though she was sure that Kate had no idea about the genesis of Stephanie’s animosity toward her, Stephanie herself had been surprisingly stingy with details on what Kate had actually done.
Cassandra asked what Kate had done, to which Stephanie relied “Just look at her.”

So Cassandra looked at her. A lot. Kate was quite skilled, and rather nice to Cassandra herself, but she read no malice within her. Just a front of confidence that was obviously fake to her, if not to anyone else. Cassandra wanted to tell Kate that everything would be okay and she didn’t have to pretend to be cooler than she actually was, but she wouldn’t have had the words for it. So every once in a while, Cassandra just patted Kate on the shoulder.

The whole thing made Cassandra uncomfortable.

“Hey,” Barbara said to Stephanie after turning off her voice scrambler. “She’s not the only ginger up here. Both of you knock it off, or I’ll get unpleasant.”

“You do know you can’t take me in a fight, right?” Kate asked.

“Yes,” said Barbara. “You do know that I can tank your credit rating and leave you homeless, right?”

“I’ll be good.”

“I thought so.” Barbara looked at Cassandra. “You crashing with Steph in the East End apartment tonight?”

“Yes,” Cassandra said.

Which reminded her…

She tapped Stephanie on the shoulder.

“Did you… bring it?” Cassandra asked.

“The PS4? Of course I brought it,” Stephanie said. “What the hell kind of friend would I be if I didn’t?”

On the roof of the bakery across the street, Catwoman was standing with her body toward the shadows. She had the zipper of her new Catwoman suit opened halfway down her chest, and she was clutching the side with one hand, and fanning her cleavage with the other.

“Is everything alright?” Batman asked.

“Lucius does his job too well,” Catwoman said. “It’s December, but I’m almost dying in this damn thing.”

The new Catsuit that Bruce had had made for Selina was made of a form-fitting and lightweight material that adhered to Catwoman’s aesthetics (only with silver accents instead of purple ones) and need for stealth and speed, while also protecting her from inclement weather. So effective was the patented WayneTech thermal material that it could withstand shots from Mister Freeze’s weaponry.

“If you like,” Batman said, “I could have Lucius make some adjustments with the formula.”

“Nah,” Catwoman said as she zipped herself back up. “It had one upside that I want to talk to you about.”

She pointed at the zipper around the entire waist of the Catsuit.
“It’s a two-piece,” Catwoman said. “I haven’t had that until now. So if I have to pee, I don’t have to strip down to my undies anymore.”

“I thought you’d appreciate it.”

“And you thought right,” Catwoman said. “Spoiler bagged her first supervillain tonight.”

“Congratulations,” Batman said.

“How’d your boy do?”

“Very well,” Batman said. “Wiped out six henchmen.”

“I hope he’s proud of himself.”

“That’s the thing,” Batman said. “He’s beating himself up over getting punched in the face.”

“How many times did he get punched?”

“Just the once.”

“And he’s reading himself the Riot Act over getting hit once while fighting six guys?” Catwoman asked. “I fight six guys and get punched, I don’t even blink anymore.”

Batman sighed. “Robin really does need to lighten up.”

Catwoman turned to him, smirk in place and fool-spotting eyebrow raised.

“Sailor… You do know the definition of ‘irony,’ right?”

Bruce and Selina Wayne got married a month and a half ago, on Halloween.

The next day, their honeymoon was to start.

At six AM, Bruce Wayne stood in the hangar that housed his private jet as workers loaded their bags onto the plane, when Selina stepped out of the women’s restroom, and walked up to him.

“Hey, Sailor,” she said.

He looked at her, eyes curious.

She walked up to him, and whispered in his ear…

“Truth or dare?”

Bruce blinked. “What?”

“Truth… or dare?”

He regarded her a moment longer. Their wedding night had been marred somewhat by a stern and icily angry talking-to given unto him by Starfire after the reception. She had hit him where it hurt on a few subjects, and while he had objected rigorously to the time and place in which she had chosen to rank him out, he ultimately couldn’t bring himself to disagree with anything she had said.

Selina had spent a great portion of the evening once they had gotten back to Wayne Manor talking him through it. Getting righteously indignant on behalf of her new husband.
So Bruce opted to humor her. It was only fair.

“Dare,” said Bruce.

Selina put her arms around his waist, and briefly kissed him on the lips.

“I dare you to walk out of here with me right now,” Selina said. “We go somewhere, buy some cheap clothes to put on our backs… and we start hitchhiking until the game ends.”

Bruce looked at her, his face stern but his cobalt eyes glinting… and nodded.

What was to have been a getaway to the French Riviera that would have lasted a week, became a zig-zagging, nearly-aimless trek across the interior of the United States that nearly lasted a month and a half. They were both extremely wealthy, so resources were not a problem. And safety wasn’t an issue, as they were both dangerous members of the Justice League in their off-hours.

To be safe, Bruce called Dick Grayson, and asked him if he would be so kind so as to help Batwoman, Robin, Spoiler, Oracle, and Orphan in their patrols of Gotham City whenever he could in his capacity as Nightwing, as he had no idea when he would back.

Dick replied with the request that Bruce take as many pictures as he could, and to tell him who won.

The dares were the most fun. Selina dared Bruce to sing Purple Rain in a karaoke bar in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Bruce dared Selina to break into the Flash Museum in Central City and deface all of the Wally West statues inside with big curly Sharpie moustaches. Selina dared Bruce to go streaking at midnight across a college campus in Lincoln, Nebraska. Bruce dared Selina to hock a loogie in the clam chowder of a fellow patron of a restaurant in Chicago, who had been rude to his waitress.

Which wasn’t to say that the truths revealed in this game of Truth or Dare were unenlightening. For example, Selina learned that Bruce’s first celebrity crush was Monique Powell, who was the lead singer of the late-nineties ska band Save Ferris.

By contrast, Bruce learned about the worst date of Selina’s life. Nothing had happened during the date itself, but once they got back to his apartment, and the gentleman retired to use the bathroom, Selina saw a copy of *Atlas Shrugged* on his book shelf, at which point she calmly left the apartment and ran for the elevator. If the guy was into Ayn Rand, he was probably into some sick shit.

The game ended in a bar on Fawcett City. They were sitting in a booth at twilight, Bruce nursing a ginger ale and stroking the beard he’d grown since the beginning of November. Selina was people-watching, on her second white wine.

“How about truth or dare?” Bruce asked.

Selina frowned while weighing her options. “Mmmmmm… Truth.”

Bruce took a deep breath. “Why did you take my last name?”

Selina levelled her brilliant green eyes at him.

Bruce folded his hands on the table. “I mean… I’m grateful you did, I’m honored you did. But I really hope you don’t mind my saying that such a move doesn’t fit Catwoman’s MO.”

Selina Wayne looked at Bruce Wayne as though he had posed a grand philosophical concept worthy of meditation and thought, instead of a simple question about how she signed her checks.
She extended her hand across the table.

Bruce shook it.

“Good game,” Selina said. “I’ll get you next time.”

They were on the first flight to Gotham the following morning. That evening, Batman, Catwoman, and their merry band of partners and associates launched their three-pronged assault against Lady Vic, Magpie, and Cap’n Fear.

Bruce and Selina learned a great deal about each other on their honeymoon. Bruce learned that his initial observations about Selina’s caginess concerning questions about her life were incorrect. She was revealing, but she liked to pepper the things she told about herself with little inlets and tributaries, funneling whomever asked about her to the truth. It was her way of maintaining control. Save, of course, for the matter of changing her surname, which she guarded like Fort Knox.

Selina, however, learned that, since she was the only one who could make Bruce Wayne genuinely laugh, then Selina was the only person to whom he would crack jokes.

Which, of course, leads us back to…

“Sailor… You do know the definition of ‘irony,’ right?”

“Certainly,” Batman said. “It’s what iron tastes like.”

Catwoman’s eyes went dreamy, and the ghost of a smirk appeared on her lips. It was the look a parent gave to a child that had destroyed the kitchen trying to make that parent breakfast in bed.

“I’ll get you one day,” Batman said.

“But it ain’t today, Batman.”

Batman nodded. “Robin doesn’t want to make the trip back to Miagani tonight. Is it alright if he sleeps at the manor?”

Catwoman shrugged. “Why are you asking me? It’s your house.”

“I’m asking because I’m your husband, and it’s your house, too.”

At this point, Batwoman chimed in through the radio. “Batman, do you copy?”

“What is it Batwoman?” Batman asked as he held his finger to his cowl.

“I have it for the rest of the night, if you wanted to turn in.”

“Are you sure?” Batman asked.

“Yeah,” said Batwoman. “It’s quiet, tonight. You two are probably still jet-lagged, right?”

The original Gotham Central precinct was erected on the mainland in 1946, one of the big construction projects that were common in every major city after World War II. And it had begun to show its age.

Mayor Mattia Bardolo, who had taken over the position after previous mayor James Gordon had
resigned in order to take his old job as Gotham City Police Commissioner, had successfully wrangled
the city council into having a new one built on Founder’s Island. Founder’s Island itself had been
without a major police presence since two Julys ago, when The Undying had attacked the city.

The lowest bid on construction went to a new outfit: Harmony Enterprises.

The framework of the first few floors had been built, but it was what was happening beneath the
foundation on this chilly December night that was of the most note.

Underground, where members of a cult had excavated, the Goddess Harmonia stood, reaching
outward with her mind.

It was down here, somewhere. Beyond this dirt, beyond this rock, the Stone of Nemesis lie dormant.

It was the only way to stop the whispering in her mind that had plagued her for millenia.

Harmonia turned within the chamber, and saw The Imp, who had appeared behind her.

The whispers that she sought to destroy amplified to screaming when she saw the three-foot Imp
who went by the odious and ridiculous name of “Mister Mxyzptlk.”

With a twitch in her eye, Harmonia asked “What do you want?”

Mister Mxyzptlk adjusted his orange and purple derby hat atop his balding head, blew a gust of
bubble gum-scented cigar smoke out of his mouth, and said “You’re not winning this one. You
know that, right?”

Harmonia rolled her blue eyes, and walked right past him, her robes trailing on the subterranean soil
behind her.

“I mean,” Mister Mxyzptlk continued, “you come into my house, you steal what’s rightfully mine,
and now you come here to tangle with you-know-who?”

Harmonia whirled at him, glaring. “I know the forces against which I fight. Do not think that just
because the Gods live high atop Olympus that we are so deaf to have never heard of The Batman. I
will divide and conquer.”

“The classics, huh?” Mister Mxyzptlk asked. “I hate to break it to you, but harmony is your strong
suit. It’s right there in the name. You want war? I hear you’re supposed to go to the other guy.”

“I do not need to be an expert in warfare to destroy a mere mortal.”

Mxyzptlk smiled. “Someone very scary in another life once said that there’s nothing mere about that
mortal. In the best of circumstances, your chances were low. But you’re looking to make things
personal. Bold… but I don’t like your odds.”

“Begone, foul thing,” Harmonia said.

Mister Mxyzptlk shrugged. “Alright,” he said, “but don’t come to me crying with a boot print in
your ass if it goes pear-shaped.”

And with a loud pop, Mister Mxyzptlk was gone. The screaming in Harmonia’s head went back to
its usual whisper.

Harmonia shuddered. She was the Goddess of Harmony and Concord, and the only way to bring
some semblance of Harmony to this strange world was a clean slate.
Somewhere down here was the device that Harmonia would use to bring an end to this world.

She did not want to do it. She did not want to sentence a brilliant realm teeming with life to an end in blood and horror.

But she desired harmony. Balance. And an end to the centuries of whispers.

If Harmonia could not have order… then Harmonia would have silence.
Chapter Notes

I'm gonna be on the Monday and Thursday schedule like I always am, but the story is gonna need some slight restructuring. I'll be back here with Chapter 3 on Thursday May 30, 2019.

Chapter 2: Sticky Fingers

Batman, Catwoman, Robin, and Oracle arrived at the Batcave forty minutes after their rooftop rendezvous. All save Oracle changed out of their outfits before heading upstairs. Oracle, for her part, shed her armor, coat, gloves, and mask.

Barbara Gordon chatted up Wayne Manor butler Alfred Pennyworth as Tim, Bruce, and Selina showered the evening off of them.

Tim Drake opted to crash in his room in the east wing after he called his parents, saying he was spending the night at a friend’s house.

Which left Barbara, Bruce, and Selina to luxuriate in the lounge on front of a roaring fire. Barbara was still in her leather pants and black turtleneck. She hadn’t done much that evening, so there wasn’t a whole lot to shower off. Bruce was in a pair of khakis and a black polo shirt. Selina was in a pair of jeans and an old, faded Misfits t-shirt.

Selina’s cat, Isis, was asleep and purring on her mistress’s lap.

Both Barbara and Selina were having white wine. Bruce had his usual ginger ale.

“Tim smells,” Selina said, so apropos of nothing that both Bruce and Barbara practically gawked at her.

“I beg your pardon?” Bruce asked.

Selina covered her eyes. “I’m sorry, he does.”

“He’s an eighteen year old boy,” Barbara said. “There’s-There’s gonna be some funk there.”

“I refuse to accept that,” Selina said. “Somewhere out there, there has to be an eighteen year old boy who doesn’t smell like sweat.”

“You never dated a boy in high school who kinda smelled?” Bruce asked.

“Sure I did,” said Selina. “But I was in high school, and I didn’t know any better. I just thought that that was how boys smelled. I had to hit my twenties before I found a man that didn’t smell like armpit.”

“Maybe it’s flop sweat,” Barbara said. “As opposed to, like, a genuine disregard for hygiene. I mean, I’ve been in his manor bathroom, he has body sprays and deodorant in there. And that three-in-one gunk that serves as body wash, shampoo and conditioner?”
“Does that stuff work?” Bruce asked.

“Neither of us would know,” said Selina. “Still though, Flop sweat. Interesting theory.”

“You mean sweat that comes from just general nervousness as opposed to exertion?” Bruce asked.

“Yeah,” Selina said before turning to Barbara. “You hear about what happened tonight?”

Barbara shook her head.

“Timbo got punched in the face,” Selina said.

Barbara just blinked a couple of times. “And?”

“And that’s it,” said Bruce.

Barbara nodded. “Yup. Flop sweat.”

“Apart from the general danger of the line of work,” Bruce said, “what does Tim have to be nervous about?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Barbara asked. “He doesn’t want to be the shitty Robin.”

“But he’s a good Robin,” said Bruce.

“I know,” Selina said. “He’s a very good Robin, and I’ve met all three of them. But he doesn’t want to be the shitty Robin. He doesn’t want to come in third place out of three.”

“Why would he be nervous about that?” asked Bruce. “If lives are saved, if bad people are stopped, what does it matter?”

“Are you seriously telling us,” Barbara said, “that if the Cardinal College picked you to be Pope, you wouldn’t be worried about being the shittiest Pope?”

“But I’m not Catholic,” Bruce said. “And what I know about history tells me I wouldn’t have to worry about being the worst Pope. There were a lot of bad Popes.”

“Is he the shitty Robin, though?” Selina asked.

“Yeah,” Barbara said. “I mean, I know who the best Robin is, but I’m biased.”

Bruce looked between Selina and Barbara.

“I… I was supposed to rank them?”

On Harlow Street, in the East End, there is a run down apartment building that once served as a base of operations for Catwoman.

And though she hadn’t actually set foot in the place since two Julys ago, during the city’s contention with The Undying, she still paid rent on the place, and opted to use it as a safehouse for her protégé Stephanie Brown and her best friend, Cassandra Cain.

Cassandra sat on the couch in the living room, brow furrowed and eyes intense, Playstation 4 controller in her hand.

She had the ability to read someone’s movements to the extent that she could predict their
movements in a fight. But the ability to read human body language had a side-effect; namely that she
couldn’t read the body language of something that wasn’t human.

This wasn’t found out during a fight with a Riddler-Bot, or against a legion of Parademons. No, this
was found out in the most benign way imaginable.

Cassandra Cain thoroughly sucked at Mortal Kombat X.

She could fight any human being and win, but she found that she was handicapped by an opponent
if they had animation cycles and invincibility frames. And when she herself was governed by such
things as well, she proved nearly worthless.

Through the long months of training, Stephanie Brown had never so much laid a finger on her
during their practice bouts. But when it came to Mortal Kombat X, the reverse was true. Cassandra
had never even won a round against her best friend.

Tonight, Stephanie Brown picked Sub-Zero, both for his trapping ability and the ways in which he
punished missed shots.

Cassandra picked Cassie Cage, because she knew that coming across a video game character with
her own first name was going to be a rarity.

Sub-Zero unleashed an eight hit combo that reduced Cassie Cage’s health bar to a sliver.

“You do know that pressing back blocks, right?” Stephanie asked.

Cassandra grunted. She knew that she wasn’t the best defensive fighter. She didn’t really have to
be.

Sub-Zero froze Cassie Cage, and gave her an upper-cut. And the game’s announcer said those two
magic words.

“FINISH HER!”

“I think we’ll go with the classics tonight,” Stephanie said.

The lights in the Pit stage of the game went dark. Sub-Zero wrapped his head around Cassie Cage’s
throat, and yanked up, ripping off her head, and leaving a full spinal column dangling beneath it,
dripping pixelated blood.

“SUB-ZERO WINS!”

“FATALITY!”

And Cassandra Cain did what she always did when she saw a fatality in this game.

She laughed. Loud and hard.

It was absurd. Cassandra had seen the man who she later learned was her father murder people in
front of her. She knew most of the ins and outs of the human body. And yet these foolish scenes in
this foolish video game were completely preposterous. It’s like the people who made this diversion
hadn’t the slightest idea how anatomy worked.

You pull back to rip out someone’s spine. Not up!

The first time she’d seen one, she laughed so loudly and so unexpectedly that she genuinely terrified
herself. Laughter came pouring out of her as though it were erupting lava. Tears came streaming
down her face from something other than pain and misery, which was a sensation wholly alien to
her.

To say nothing of the look on Stephanie’s face. She’d literally jumped, got off the couch, and slowly
backed away. And it wasn’t precisely as though Cassandra had the capacity to tell Stephanie
precisely why she was laughing.

But not now, though. She put her face in her hand, and smiled as Cassandra Cain laughed herself
silly.

“You’re like a kung-fu Wednesday Addams, aren’t you?”

Bruce knew that Barbara had stepped in it.

Selina had her arms folded, and her eyebrows pulled down like a set of blinds. Isis had leapt off her
mistress’s lap and had taken refuge on the ottoman.

She wasn’t angry yet, but if Barbara didn’t watch herself.

“I’m not hearing it,” Selina said.

Barbara, who had switched from wine to Diet Coke, as she’d be driving home, said “It’s not that
I’m…”

“It’s not that you’re nothing,” Selina said. “Stephanie Brown is fantastic, and I won’t hear a bad
thing against her.”

“Fighting-wise, though?” Barbara asked. “She’s--Okay, I’m not saying she’s bad, but…”

“She’s not bad.”

“Which I wasn’t saying, but…”

“But what?”

“But she’s not as good as the rest of us,” Barbara finally said. “And I’m not saying that’s her fault,
or your fault, or anyone’s fault. It’s just the way it is.”

“Are you saying I can’t train someone to fight?”

“I’m saying that she’s the only one of the four newbies that didn’t have a foundation when we
brought them in. Kate went to West Point, Tim at the very least took self-defense classes, and the
less said about Cass the better.”

For some odd reason, Bruce was plagued by a vision of Tim in the middle of a YMCA, standing
there in a gi with a bunch of nine year olds.

“And again, can’t help but feel the need to stress this: She’s not bad. If I need a few henchmen
cleared out, Spoiler’s perfect. I’m just saying I wouldn’t trust her to go past that.”

“She one-shotted a supervillain tonight!” said Selina

“It was Magpie, though.”
“It’s still a one-shot.”

“It’s still Magpie.”

Selina huffed. “The problem is, she’s in a town of ass-kickers. She’d be as feared as Lady Shiva if she just moved to Metropolis.”

“Still doesn’t change the fact that she lives in Gotham,” Barbara said.

Selina rolled her eyes, and turned her head to look at Bruce.

“Say something nice about Stephanie.”

“She’s a good influence on Cass,” Bruce said.

“I mean about her as a fighter, dingus.”

“Oh,” Bruce said. “Well… That’s easy. Survivability.”

Selina shifted in her position on the couch to get a better look at him.

“It’s been almost a year and a half since we took her into the fold,” Bruce said. “About every other day, she fights Cassandra Cain, and she hasn’t laid a finger on her so far. And in that time, she’s taken beatings that made me cringe.”

“Yeah,” Selina said. “Steph told me one time that Cass kicked her in the stomach so hard that she peed a little… She also told me not to tell anyone else that. What do they put in wine these days?”

“She keeps at it,” Bruce said. “Survivability’s nothing to sneeze at. Sometimes outlasting your opponent is enough. Steph may be easy to knock down, but I pity the idiot who tries to keep her down.”

Selina smiled at Bruce. She turned to Barbara and pointed at her husband.

“See that?” Selina asked. “That’s how you talk to people.”

Barbara rolled her eyes. “Well, it took him long enough.”

Stephanie had set the apartment’s DVR to record that week’s episode of The Real Housewives of Coast City.

She and Cassandra watched as Tanisha and Veronica had to be restrained by the other Housewives before the heated conversation (about what, Cassandra had no idea) turned to blows.

Cassandra took a moment from her stupor to place her bet on Tanisha. She was smaller, sure, but she had reach and she looked like she worked out on something other than a treadmill.

She wished she remembered what they were so angry about. Most likely, it was about a guy.

There was a time when Cassandra Cain sneered at the girls her age and in her orbit, getting all stuttery and shy over boys, smelly creatures that they were. They were there to protect the world from evil. To defend the innocent. Distractions were to be excised and tossed aside.

But this was not that time.
“Steph?”

Stephanie looked at her. Cassandra closed her eyes and tried to assemble her words in a row without any of them switching places or wandering off and getting lost.

“How do you… make… a boy… like you?”

Stephanie grinned. “This about Conner?”

Yes.

This was about Conner.

Conner Kent was Superboy; a clone made by Cadmus combining the DNA of Lex Luthor and Superman himself. He was in Young Justice along with Tim and a few others. Cassandra had met him at Bruce and Selina’s wedding this past Halloween, where he had stood completely still during the duration of their meeting, with what words he had to say uttered through unmoving lips. It rendered her ability to divine intent through body language completely useless.

A conversation with Lois Lane later in the evening revealed that this was by design. Conner had feelings for Cassandra, and stood stock still while talking to her so that she wouldn’t find that out. The initial feelings of protest that Cassandra had had quickly eroded when she realized that being Conner Kent’s girlfriend was a prospect with growing appeal. It was like if someone had told her that she was the President now. She might complain, as no one had voted for her, but that wouldn’t stop her from doing… whatever Presidents did. She wasn’t clear about how that whole thing worked. She wasn’t clear about how being someone’s girlfriend worked either.

So pervasive were her thoughts of Conner Kent that she had gone to Tim Drake and asked her for a photo of Conner. He returned from his room at Wayne Manor a few minutes later with a picture that he had printed from his phone, saying “Don’t tell Wonder Girl I did this, alright? She’ll kill me.” Cassandra had no idea what that meant.

The picture was one taken at the Young Justice headquarters in Happy Harbor. Conner, standing at the counter in the kitchen of the cave, staring into the phone with this look on his face, with eyebrows up and eyelids opened, a smile forming on the corner of his mouth as though he were the subject of a happy surprise. And his arms were folded. Cassandra really liked Conner’s arms, for reasons she couldn’t fully explain to herself.

She imagined Conner looking at her like that. His arms folded like that. It made Cassandra feel… annoyed, but comfortable.

“Yes,” Cassandra said.

“Well,” Stephanie said, “believe me when I tell you that I’m the last girl to go to for advice about guys. But seriously, though, you can’t make someone like you. Either they do or they don’t. I’m pretty sure Conner likes you already.”

“Yes, but… Why?”

“You put off a mysterious vibe,” Stephanie said. “That and you’re pretty. That has to help.”

There was a word that Cassandra had learned for when she felt she was being flattered, patronized, or talked down to.
“Bullshit,” she said.

She yanked the collar of her gray sweatshirt almost to her shoulder, revealing but a few of the legion of scars inflicted upon her at the hands of her father David Cain in his pursuit to craft a living weapon.

“You’d be surprised how little that matters to some people,” Stephanie said. “Trust me on that one.”

Cassandra let go of her collar, and nodded. “He likes me.”

“Yup.”

“I… like him.”

“That helps things a bit.”

“Then… what next?”

“Then he asks you out,” Stephanie said. “That’s how it’s supposed to go in a civilized world.”

“But… he…”

Cassandra didn’t have the words to say what needed saying, so she held out her arms rigidly and opened her eyes wide, miming a statue.

“He locks up when he sees you?”

“Why?” Cassandra asked.

Stephanie took a deep breath. “Because he’s scared,” she said. “He’s scared you’ll say no, and he’s absolutely petrified you’ll say yes.”

“That I’ll… say yes?”

“Yeah,” Stephanie said. “He’s afraid that he’ll put the right foot forward, be the best person he could possibly be, and you still won’t like him the way he likes you.”

Cassandra frowned. “That’s… stupid.”

Stephanie started laughing.

“O-Okay,” Stephanie said, trying to get on top of her own giggling. “You ask him out then.”

Cassandra felt her heart almost stop in a violent and sudden onslaught of mortal terror.

It was an outrage. Barbarism in its purest form. A mockery of the natural order so flagrant and shocking that it deserved a stiff prison sentence and complete excommunication from society at large.

And Cassandra Cain’s usually deep and raspy voice cracked high and girlish when she yelled out “No!”

Isis was on Bruce’s lap, now. The cat seemed to like him. But the cat liked him when he was Batman as well.
Maybe the cat was weird.

Barbara was on her second Diet Coke.

“So I tell her,” Barbara said, “you’ve been doing real well with the sign language, and you’ve added to your verbal vocabulary, how about we try reading tomorrow?” She gives me this stern look and just nods.


“Yeah, that one,” said Barbara. “We go to bed, and this loud thump wakes me up at two AM. I go out into the main room, and Cass is huddled in the corner, in her shorts and tank top, almost crying, looking really pissed off at something near the wall. It turns out…”

Barbara covered her mouth for a second to get her mounting laughter under control.

“It turns out, she snuck out of bed to get a head start on reading. She plucked a book off my bookshelf, tried to read it, saw that she couldn’t, and threw it against the wall.”

Barbara started laughing. Selina smiled. Bruce had a question.

“What was the book?” he asked.

Barbara was still trying to calm herself down.

“It was… It was *Finnegan’s Wake.*”

“That explains it.”

“I can’t read *Finnegan’s Wake.*”

“No one can,” said Bruce. “They just get to chapter three, and put it on the shelf. No one reads *Finnegan’s Wake.* They just buy it.”

“Thank God she didn’t try to read *Ulysses,*” Barbara said. “She’d have burned the Clock Tower down.”

Selina shifted in her seat. “I don’t want to say Cass is creepy…”

“Whoa,” Barbara said. “You get your thong in a bunch because I thought Stephanie could improve her fighting skills, but then you come around saying my girl Cass is creepy?”

“She’s not creepy,” Selina said. “She’s reverse creepy.”

She turned to Bruce.

“You know that thing you do, where you’re talking to someone, and then you vanish once their back is turned?” Selina asked.

“Yeah,” said Bruce.

“Well, Cass is the exact opposite,” Selina said. “I think I’m alone in a room, only to turn around, and she pops up.”

“I do that, too,” Bruce said.
“Yeah, but you’re not as good at it.”

“Like when you’re playing Silent Hill, and you swear to God the room’s empty, and then you hear radio static?” Barbara asked.

“I have no idea what those words mean.”

“She’s obsessive,” said Bruce. “A perfectionist.”

“And how,” Barbara said. “I hooked her up in the holo room in the Clock Tower for fight training. As many hardlight enemies as she can handle. I go out for Birds of Prey stuff, and come back and she was still fighting in there.”

“How long were you gone?” Selina asked.

“Six hours,” said Barbara. “She didn’t come out to eat, drink, go to the bathroom… Which is why I have to say, Selina, thanks for letting those two hang out at your old apartment. Cass needs to get out more. Hang out with people.”

“And all I ask,” Selina said, “is that they don’t bring boys over.”

“You do know they’re not gonna follow that rule, right?”

“Why do you think I made the rule in the first place?” Selina asked. “Of course they’re not gonna follow it. They’re only eighteen once. I’d say boys aren’t a thing that Cassandra of all people would have to worry about, but, well…”

Since he'd started therapy, Bruce Wayne had moments where he felt as though he were the only one not in a joke. “But what?” he asked.

"You'll have to find this one out on your own," said Selina.

Barbara turned her attentions to Bruce.

“Once upon a time,” she said, “you’d have drooled over an associate like Cassandra Cain. Someone whose life is just The MIssion, without coming up for air or anything else.”

Bruce thought she was absolutely right. The kind of ethic that Batman tried to instill in his Robins at any cost, Cassandra Cain gave freely of herself.

The first Robin, Dick Grayson, didn’t break under the pressure, but he certainly did crack. He made the lives of the people around him difficult with mood swings, secrecy, and bouts of moroseness. It was only when he was no longer Robin, no longer in Gotham City, that Dick has found a level of relative peace.

And the second Robin, Jason Todd, died in the line of duty.

The words that Starfire said at his wedding came back to him.

“And under you they will rage… they will break… or they will die.”

Even after getting married, even after almost a year and a half of therapy and antidepressants, Bruce Wayne loathed admitting he had been wrong.

So he simply nodded.
Bleake Island is a mafia island. It’s home to the front companies of Gotham City’s criminal underworld. Provided, of course, you were an old school gangster like Carmine Falcone or Salvatore Maroni. Guy with a gimmick while technically falling under the textbook definition of organized crime? Guys like Oswald “The Penguin” Cobblepot and Roman “Black Mask” Sionis? They graduated into full-tilt supervillainy, and had no need for a front… Well, The Penguin did, but he opened up his own casino in Gotham River for that. Cobblepot had no business on Bleake.

The Bleake Island fronts and interests were of such value to Gotham’s two families that two Julys ago, when The Undying held the city in his grasp, Maroni and Falcone had formed an alliance to keep Bleake in play, and out of the hands of the police, or The Undying, or the up-and-coming Russian contingent in the city. They blew all the bridges that connected Bleake Island to the rest of Gotham City, and they killed all the cops on patrol.

It was an alliance that continued, in various degrees of strain, to this very day.

On Bleake Island, there was Esteban’s Ristorante, an eatery that served authentic Italian food, and was owned by an authentic first generation Italian immigrant, even though his first name was Spanish. It was a popular sit-down joint for the Maroni family, and five members of said family were seated after hours, with the security cameras shut off.

At the head of the table situated in the center of the main dining area, Hoovering a plate of linguini primavera into his mouth, was low-level lieutenant in the Maroni family, one Paul Novello, his hair plugs and avuncular manner contradicting the fact that he himself had whacked a Korean gas station owner when he failed to make his protection dues one too many times. The guy’s wife owned the station now, and she paid up on time.

Seated to his left and his right were Mario “The Hat” Ransone (nicknamed so, as Maroni capo Julius Bianchi had seen him in a Gotham Knights baseball cap once, and only once) and Edward DiNucci.

To Ransone’s right was Marcus “Aurie” Colombo, nicknamed as such because his dear departed mother named him after Marcus Aurelius. And to DiNucci’s right was Guido Nardi, who labored under the unfortunate sobriquet of “Nuts.” As “Nardi” and “Nards” sounded a lot alike.

Was this strictly a business occasion? No. The four men seated with Novello all served beneath him in the mob hierarchy, but that still didn’t change the fact that these five men were all friends.

Ziti, lasagna, garlic bread, all clustered in the middle of the table, and the five men helped themselves.

Novello slurped down some linguini, washed it down with some red wine, and said that thing that was on his mind.

“We got Bats out the ass,” he said.

The other four looked at him.

“How many we got now?” Novello asked the assembled.

There was a moment of silence as they all tried to count. Nuts Nardi even started counting out on his fingers, his lips moving as he came up with names.

“Seven,” Nuts finally said. “We got the Bat himself, Robin, Catwoman, Batwoman, Spoiler, Oracle, and Orphan.”
“Eight,” said Mario The Hat. “You forgot Bluebird.”

The five men grumbled in agreement. Nuts Nardi had indeed neglected to mention the Bluebird of Bleake Island, named so or obvious reasons.

“Is Bluebird one of the Bats, though?” asked Aurie.

“Nah,” Nuts said. “I don’t think they’re with the Bat. Bluebird’s just on this island.”

“Wait,” DiNucci said. “Whaddya mean ‘they?’ There’s more than one Bluebird?”

“I dunno if Bluebird’s a he or a she,” Nuts said. “So I just say ‘they.’”

“Just say he-or-she,” said DiNucci.

“Fuck sayin’ he-or-she,” Nuts said. “I’m gonna say ‘they.’ I’m gonna save two syllables when my food’s gettin’ cold. And for all I know, Bluebird’s none of the above.”

“Whaddya mean none of the above?”

“Yeah,” Nuts said. “There’s these… whaddyacallem… ‘Nonbinaries.’ My son told me about ‘em. They like the word ‘they.’ No sweat off my ass.”

DiNucci squinted at Nuts, when Novello spoke up.

“You didn’t mention Batgirl,” Novello said.

“Sure I did,” said Nuts.

“Nah, you mentioned Bat woman. Not Bat girl.”

“Batgirl’s been around a while,” Nuts said. “She grows up, she becomes Batwoman.”

“They got Supergirl out in National City,” Aurie said. “Gotta be in her twenties. She ain’t callin’ herself Superwoman.”

Nuts put his fork down. “You want me to conduct a fuckin’ phone poll of when superhero girls call themselves women?”

Mario the Hat looked like something just occurred to him. “Wonder Woman’s immortal, ain’t she?”

“Yeah,” DiNucci said. “She’s been around since the forties. What about it?”

“I’m just sayin’,” Mario said, “if those Amazon broads are immortal, then that Wonder Girl chick’s gonna be callin’ herself Wonder Girl forever.”

“My daughter’s a fan of Spoiler,” Aurie said. “Got a t-shirt and everything.”

“Oh!” said Novello with great offense. “Johnny Dugatti got his teeth knocked out by that Spoiler broad and her fuckin’ metal stick. You’re tellin’ me your girl Denise is runnin’ around in official Spoiler merchandise?”

“How can the merch be of fic ial?” Aurie asked. “You think she revealed her secret identity to the fuckin’, uhhhh…. the fuckin’ trademark office?”

“Enough outta you.”
“Spoiler ain’t gettin’ paid ‘cause my daughter bought a shirt, is all I’m sayin’.”

“E nough outta you.”

“It’s Orphan that gives me the creeps,” Nuts said.

They all looked at him.

“She goes around, all ‘Oh, my parents died,’ and she starts dressin’ up in a jagoff costume and starts punchin’ wiseguys? What kinda sick fuck does that?”

“That’s a good question.”

The five men at the table jumped, as none of the five men at the table had said it.

The voice, on the light side and free from wiseguy accent, came from the other side of the door that led to the kitchen.

“Esteban?” Novello asked.

The owner of the voice kicked open the kitchen door, and stood before them.

He was wearing black leather pants, and black combat boots. A black leather jacket with the number 1 on the right lapel and black body armor underneath, and black gloves.

Describing this man’s face would have been difficult for one simple reason.

He didn’t have a head.

Where One’s head should have been, was a gout of red flame that seemed to neither burn anything, nor give off heat.

And the five mob guys eating at the table were completely agog. Nuts Nardo made the sign of the cross.

“Shit,” One said. “I forgot my line.”

Novello finally spoke. “Wh--Who are--”

“Shut your hole,” One said flatly. “I’m trying to remember… Oh, that’s it!”

One slowly sauntered up to the end of the table, across from Novello. He spread his arms wide.

“‘Gentlemen,’” One said. “You have eaten Gotham’s wealth. Its spirit. Your feast is nearly over. From this moment on… none of you are safe.”

One dropped his hands to his side.

“The last guy to say that did it in a mansion to a bunch of well-to-do assholes in tuxedos. I have to settle for you pieces of shit. It’s just not fair…”

Novello folded his arms across his expansive stomach. “You got some nerve comin’ in here…”

“Shut the fuck up, Guido,” One said. “I didn’t come all this way to hear you talk.”

“Hey,” Nuts said. “I’m Guido.”
The flame that One had for a head regarded Nuts for a moment. “Your name is Guido?”

“Yeah.”

“Like, seriously, your parents named you that?”

“Yeah.”

A moment of silence, before One started laughing.

Nuts carefully reached for the piece in the holster beneath his sportcoat.

And that’s when the blood came.

Mid-laugh, One stretched out his arms again, and a pair of small pistols emerged on metal slides from beneath the sleeves of his leather jacket. He pulled both triggers, and the brains Aurie Colombo and Nuts Nardi exited the other sides of their heads and onto the men sitting next to them.

Using the shock and confusion that loud bangs and sudden death provided, One raised his hands to slide the pistols back into his sleeves and upended the table, food and all, on top of Paul Novello, who had been struggling to rise.

One got a pocketknife out of his leather pants, and flicked the blade open.

With a single mean swipe, One opened the jugular vein of Mario the Hat. His eyes bulged, and his hand went to his gushing throat. One dropped the knife just as Edward DiNucci advanced from behind.

With a runner’s speed and a dancer’s grace, One maneuvered himself behind the dying Mario. With his right hand, One yanked Mario’s hand away from his wound. With his left, One yanked Mario’s head back.

The rapid, piping arterial spray from Mario’s throat fonted into DiNucci’s eyes, blinding him. DiNucci raised his hands to his eyes, muttering profanities and turning away.

Which was just where One wanted him.

One grabbed DiNucci by the back of his shirt and marched him toward a booth table on the side of the dining area.

A table with a nice sharp corner.

With a handful of hair, One slammed DiNucci’s face into the table corner. DiNucci groaned.

With a second slam, DiNucci gurgled, and One could hear the spatter of blood and the clatter of broken teeth on the floor tiles.

And with a third slam, One could hear the crunch of skull giving way. He let go of DiNucci, and DiNucci’s head just... stayed there. The corner of the table and DiNucci’s mulched, mangled face interlocked like puzzle pieces, blood spreading across the tabletop as though it were spilled milk. He died on his knees.

As Mario bled out on his stomach, and as Novello was trying to get the table off of himself, One leaned down and picked his pocketknife back up.

Along with a greasy fork.
When Novello got to his feet, his hand reaching into his jacket for a weapon, food having ruined his clothes, One was already inches away.

One jammed the fork into the right side of Novello’s face for leverage, its prongs sinking into his jowls beneath his cheekbone. With the other hand, he went for sharp, rapid, over-hand stabs into the soft tissue of Novello’s face. As he screamed, Novello tried to grab One’s arms, but One was too strong for him.

The stabs were so weighty and impactful that Novello was lowered, helpless to the floor as the strokes from One’s knife pounded him down, bringing up gouts of blood and chunks of flesh. A nostril here, a side of cheek there, and pink viscous jelly that used to be Paul Novello’s left eyeball.

Once the whimpering, helpless Novello was flat on his back, One jammed the pocketknife directly into the center of Novello’s windpipe. The whimpering stopped, and the thick gurgling began. Blood started rising from within Novello’s mouth, sloshing down the side of his ruined face like water from the drain of a clogged kitchen sink.

It took a few moments for One to be satisfied that Novello was dead. He yanked the knife out of Novello’s throat, folded it, and placed it back into the pocket of his leather pants.

He calmly walked back through the kitchen of the restaurant, and out the back alley.

Someone was waiting for him.

It was Two.

Two was shorter than One, and dressed identically (save, of course, for the number 2 on the lapel of his leather jacket). They even had the same red flame instead of a head.

“It sounded like you had fun,” Two said in a baritone as rich and as smooth as expensive butter.

“Beats yard work,” said One. “The Maronis will blame the Falcons, and we’re off to the races. I’m not going to lie, though. This enchantment on my face is starting to piss me off. I can feel something in my nose, and I have to reach into fire to get it out. I know the fire’s not real, but...”

“It’s preferable to the helmets,” said Two.

“That it is.”

“All you have to do,” Two said, “is snap your fingers twice behind your ear. And again to put it back on. That’s what Harmonia told me, anyway.”

“How are things going on your end?”

“Myself and the third of our number strike tomorrow afternoon.”

“Afternoon?” One asked.

“To think, if the criminal element opted to conduct their appointed rounds while the sun was still shining, they’d have less trouble all around.”

One sighed. “I still don’t know what you get out of all this.”

“What I have coming to me,” said Two.
“Must be pretty complicated, if you have to put it like that.”

“Well,” said Two, “not all of us have motives as simple as revenge, now do we, Jason?”

One raised his hand behind his ear and snapped his gloved fingers twice.

The red flame vanished, and in its place was a person’s head. His hair was black. His skin was pale. His face was angular. And his eyes were an icy, pitiless blue.

“Well, I’m a simple guy,” said Jason Todd.
Chapter 3: Between the Buttons

The nightmare always came.

Laying in Selina Wayne’s old bed in her old apartment, Cassandra Cain awoke to sweat on her brow, a scream cut off in her throat, and the smell of waffles coming from the kitchen beyond the door.

It was winter break for Gotham’s public high schools. Which meant that there was no school for either Tim or Stephanie to go to this morning. This year, like last year, Cassandra and Stephanie were inseparable, save of course for when Cassandra had to go back to the Clock Tower, or Stephanie had to go to her job. Cassandra had no idea what Stephanie did. Only that she worked for Selina in… whatever capacity.

Thankfully, during these little sleepovers that Cassandra had with her best friend, she had never once woken her up with screaming. Even though they each alternated between sleeping in Selina’s old room, and sleeping on the couch in the living room, the wall between the two rooms was paper-thin.

The nightmare always came.

Visions from her point of view. A small hand reaching toward the throat of a very beefy bald man wearing sunglasses indoors. The tiny fingers sinking deeper into the ring of flesh beneath his chin like forks through warm dough, as the man’s eyes bulged behind his designer shades. That miniscule hand coming away with ragged flesh, the eerily pristine white of a windpipe, what looked like a gallon of blood.

And that hand tiny hand unmistakably belonged to her.

Cassandra sat up in bed, and adjusted the t-shirt she was wearing. She came to grips with the truth as she always had to.

No matter the might of her martial skills, the fact of the matter was that Cassandra Cain was inferior to everyone else in Batman’s network.

Because Cassandra Cain had murdered a man.

From almost literally the moment she was born, until she was nine years old, Cassandra Cain was trained in the art of murder. She was to be a living weapon, the One-Who-Is-All that would protect and defend Ra’s al Ghul; immortal leader of the League of Assassins. She was taught over a hundred forms of martial arts, and was taught how to withstand grievous pain. There was evidence of that all over her body. From her collarbone down almost to her feet, she was covered in scars.

She was raised in an environment with no auditory or written stimulus. In fact, the only thing that her father ever said to her (and though he said it sparingly, he said it often enough for her to remember and recite) was this:

“You are a sword. You are not the hand that wields it. You came from nothing, and if you are successful, it is to nothing that you shall return. You are an orphan.”

Hence the superhero name.
Also hence the inability to read, and the near inability to speak.

In fact human body language was the only thing in which she was fluent. She could tell someone’s emotion, know when they were lying, and predict their moves in a fight.

This came back to bite David Cain when Cassandra was able to read the body language of the beefy bald man that was Cassandra’s first target.

She read him as he died by her hand.

The bulging eyes. The frantic hands. The beads of sweat appearing instantaneously about his bald pate. The whitening skin. And finally, perhaps most horrifically of all, the silence.

Cassandra Cain had killed this man. And she was expected to kill more.

She’d run from that hotel room in Macau, away from her father, and hadn’t stopped running until almost a year and a half ago, when Batman found her in Gotham, clearing out a warehouse full of criminals.

Cassandra threw the green comforter off to the side. She sat on the side of the bed, running a hand through her short, black hair and staring down at her legs, scarred and pitted form gunshot sounds, knife wounds, and burns from both flame and acid.

She fought now as Orphan, to protect the innocent and punish the guilty. She fought alongside people who had stories tailor-made for redemption. The thief who’d never been all that bad. The computer hacker who had to overcome traumatic upheavals in her body twice. The daughter of a supervillain trying to bring honor to her name. The young man who so believed in the sanctity of Batman and Robin that he put his own life on the line to make it a reality. The soldier denied the chance to serve. And at the center was the man who saw his parents gunned down in cold blood, and devoted the entirety of his existence to a persona that would sacrifice everything to make sure it never happened to anyone else.

And then… there was the murderer.

There was opportunity, here. The same as for all the others. The only hindrance in the mind of Cassandra Cain was that she felt, in a part of herself overcome by dust, yet all the more powerful for being untouched, that this opportunity for redemption was undeserved. Because of her, another human being had been denied their right to walk the Earth.

She assessed herself, and tried to find the meaning of the word “nobility,” and her answer was to die in service of something greater than herself. Or at the very least, so that another might live.

And that was the best that Cassandra Cain felt she had to offer. Hope began and ended in her own grave, the great accounting of the universe finally even. Her life for the life she stole. While all of her compatriots had their own redemptions to look forward to, at least they would live to see theirs.

The smell of waffles from the kitchen was getting stronger, and her stomach didn’t precisely growl, but it purred.

Cassandra would be riding with Stephanie on the back of her motorcycle to Wayne Manor, where they’d get in a few practice rounds before they hung out with Alfred, to get him to make the hot chocolate that was perfect for December mornings such as these.

She would take her breakfast in here. For as deft as she was with weaponry, the knife and fork still gave her trouble. And she didn’t want Stephanie to see her with syrup in her hair.
The gray light of the downcast December morning filtered in through the curtains of Bruce Wayne’s bedroom in Wayne Manor.

Selina, covers up to her armpit with her back to him, slumbered, with her tan skin still retaining its glow in all that gray. Her black hair seemed to absorb the light of the morning, offering no shine.

Bruce reached out, and lightly traced a finger down the length of the exposed skin of her back.

Selina stirred, wiped the crud out of her eyes with her back to him, and then turned over, eyes squinting.

“Hey,” she said.

“Good morning.”

He leaned in and kissed her gently in the lips, both of them ginger about it. Morning breath, after all, affected rich and poor alike.

“What’s the plan for the day?” Bruce asked.

“That’s the thing about being a millionaire while also being married to a billionaire,” Selina said. “I don’t gotta do shit.”

Bruce smiled.

“How about you?” Selina Wayne asked.

“Training,” he said. “Just counting down the hours before I have to suit up tonight.”

“Need someone to count with?”

“I just might,” Bruce said. “But there is one thing.”

Bruce shifted in bed. He reached into the drawer of the nightstand next to the bed and took something out.

It was a brooch. It had an ivory center with small sapphires bordering it. And in the middle of the ivory field it had a stylized, calligraphic “W.”

He handed it to his wife, who stared at it, an expression of puzzlement overcoming her squinting green eyes.

“What is it?” she asked.

“It’s a brooch.”

“I can see that.”

Bruce took a deep breath.

“Wayne Manor,” he said, “erected in 1850. To commemorate the occasion, Judge Solomon Wayne went to the finest jeweler in Paris to have that brooch made for his wife Dorothea. For a hundred and seventy years, that brooch has been given to The Lady of Wayne Manor, whosoever that might be. The last woman to hold that brooch was my mother almost thirty years ago. She was the last Lady of Wayne Manor… until today.”
Well, Selina’s eyes were all the way open, now.

Bruce shifted closer to her. “All of this is yours,” he said. “As much as it is mine. I know it’s taking a while for that to sink in. I’ll keep reminding you, though.”

Her eyes went from the brooch, to Bruce, to the brooch again.

“Wow, Sailor,” she said. “I, uh… It’s…”

“Hideous?”

Selina smiled. “I didn’t want to say it.”

“Mom didn’t like it either.”

She squinted at it. “Jesus Christ, is this ivory?”

“It was made in 1850,” said Bruce.

“Yeah, the elephant would have been dead by now anyway, so I can’t get too harrumph about it.”

Bruce smiled as Selina looked at him.

“What was your mom like?” Selina asked. “I mean, the straight-up person.”

The smile vanished from Bruce’s lips as he took his wife’s measure. Something told him that he needed to be careful with his answer if he wanted to leave her smiling. And knowing what he knew about Selina…

“As an open nature,” Bruce said. “A kind heart… Other than that, she wasn’t that much like you at all.”

Selina smiled at this, as Bruce knew she would. The question that was bugging him, however, was why she was smiling.

She pulled the covers back and sat on the edge of the bed, the entirety of her naked back, all the way down to her posterior, exposed to him.

She rubbed her eyes, and said “I’m gonna shower.”

“Okay,” said Bruce.

Selina looked over her right shoulder, green eyes full of greed, the eyebrow she raised when she saw a fool upright.

“I know you haven’t been married long, Sailor, but when I tell you I’m going to shower first thing in the morning, that’s an invitation.”

Tim Drake’s phone woke him up.

The bedroom in the east wing of Wayne Manor, which he used when he was crashing here, was about half the size of the Drake family apartment on Miagani Island.

As big as the bed was, as big as the TV was, Tim didn’t like spending the night here. Maybe because this bedroom was so big that there was a nearly-imperceptible, though nonetheless present,
sense of vertigo that plagued him.

Or maybe it was because this was Batman’s house. The famously paranoid Batman who knew everything about everyone, and the possibility that there were cameras or listening devices in this very room prevented him from being truly comfortable here.

Or maybe it was blue collar resentment.

Seventeen months ago, he worked the stockroom at a Wal-Mart on Bleake Island. Now he was paid by Wayne Enterprises to be a crucial and vital part of their IT team.

Tim had never even set foot in Wayne Tower. He knew that he was paid to be Robin.

Seventeen months ago, during the occupation of Gotham by The Undying, he’d been saved from attack by a young Bleake Islander about his age named Harper Row, and her little brother Cullen. Immediately after, they were visited by Nightwing.

Dick Grayson.

Tim had had a theory, stretching all the way back to childhood, that Dick Grayson was the first Robin. Which meant that Bruce Wayne was Batman.

And he was right.

He told Nightwing about this when they met, and a few days after the occupation, both Batman and Nightwing showed up on the rooftop of his apartment building. They said that they’d done their research on him, and Batman took off his mask.

Bruce Wayne offered him the Robin position.

Bruce Wayne trained him.

Bruce Wayne introduced him to a life of privilege and wealth that his parents, with their endless striving for their own place among Gotham’s elite, could barely comprehend.

Bruce Wayne paid him to do nothing.

And Bruce Wayne gave him this large, drafty, slightly creepy bedroom, just one of many, in his own home.

Tim sat up in the queen-sized bed, and rubbed the green crap out of his eyes. His fingers nudged the nose in which he got punched by one of Lady Vic’s goons the night before, and he winced.

It didn’t hurt that bad, but it was still embarrassing. He was Robin, and Robin should not be punched in the face by henchmen. Robin should be smarter than that.

As if to compound the feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment that he felt, he saw the text on his phone that had woken him up in the first place.

It was from Dick Grayson.

The former Robin and current Nightwing had been the nicest, most affable, most curious, and most chipper of the people in this band of superheroes. He often asked about his interests, about his feelings, about his thoughts.

Barbara Gordon, the former Batgirl, current Oracle, and the love of Dick’s life, had told Tim that that
was just how he was.

But Tim saw something else. He had the impression that Dick and the second Robin, Jason Todd, had not been on the best terms when Jason died at the hands of The Joker. So Dick was trying to be as friendly as humanly possible. And while that was appreciated, Tim couldn’t help but feel that every interaction that Dick and Tim had was larded with the expectation that Tim would die horribly in his superhero costume. And that Dick, standing over Tim’s grave, could comfort himself with the knowledge that with another Robin having bitten the dust, he had been the best person he could possibly be.

Tim knew that Dick wouldn’t put it that way precisely, but…

*Gee, thanks, Dick.*

So Tim tried to be the best Robin that there ever was… and Robin didn’t get punched in the face by goons.

Tim looked at the text. Dick had taken it upon himself to forward him a video of a kitten following its owner around, mewing for food.

Tim replied with an LOL, and put the phone down.

Only for the phone to ring yet again, this time with a call.

It was Bart Allen.

“Dude,” Bart said. “We’re at the Hall of Justice right now! You ever been to the Hall of Justice?”

“Ummm,” Tim said, trying to clear the post-sleep cobwebs from his mind. “Yeah. Once. About eight months ago.”

“It. Is. The. *Greatest!*” Bart said. “There’s a museum, and a gift shoppe, and this thing next to the men’s room that spits out water for you to drink!”

“A… water fountain?”

“That’s what they are?”

Bart Allen, superhero name “*Impulse,*” was a speedster from the future. It was apparently a future that was more hygienic or less hopeful than the present, as they did not have water fountains.

“Who’s ‘we?’”

“Huh?” Bart asked.

“You said ‘we’re’ at the Hall of Justice. Who’s ‘we?’”

“Young Justice,” said Bart. “Me, and Cassie, and Jinny, and…”

“Okay,” said Tim. “Is, uh… Is that why you called, or…”

“Oh,” Bart said. “Right. We’re coming over.”

“What?”

“We’re coming over. We got something to give you.”
“Uh… I’m at Wayne Manor right now, and…”

“Guys,” Bart said, the phone away from his ear, to the other people he was with. “He’s at Wayne Manor. I asked Cyborg, and he can boom tube us there.”

Then Bart hung up.

Tim cringed inwardly. He knew how private Bruce was. Hopefully, he could take this outside, and Bruce would be none the wiser.

But he doubted it.

Stephanie unleashed with a flurry of strikes.

Cassandra dodged them all.

Once she had gotten the cast off of her arm over a year ago, both Bruce and Babs thought it would be a good idea for Cassandra to train with Stephanie in a bout of light contact sparring.

At that time, Cassandra Cain did not know the meaning of the term “light contact,” and two seconds into the bout, Stephanie Brown was unconscious.

Which did not mean that Cassandra stopped training with Stephanie. If anything, Stephanie took it in stride. But Cassandra knew, even with her insistence on full contact, that Stephanie couldn’t stand up to much.

She was getting better, though. Over the last year and a half, Cassandra had delivered bumps, welts, bruised ribs, and bloody noses upon the person of Stephanie Brown, including one memorable occasion when Cassandra kicked her in the stomach so hard that she peed. And every time, Stephanie got up and fought through them… Except for that last one. Then, she had to shower and change her clothes.

And for her part, Stephanie had… well, she hadn’t laid so much as a finger on Cassandra yet. But Cassandra was confident that she would get there one day.

One time, Cassandra had even applied what Stephanie had named “The One Hour Photo.” It was a nerve-strike that locked an opponent in place for an hour, like a statue, unable to do anything but lightly breathe.

After the hour was up, Stephanie said that the light air-flow, combined with the inability to blink, made her think she was speeding through the end of 2001.

Cassandra had no idea what that meant.

Stephanie whipped out a roundhouse that Cassandra ducked underneath. Cassandra landed a stiff blow to Stephanie’s ribs, which knocked her back.

She composed herself, and allowed herself a split-second to formulate what she was going to do next.

And it was in that split-second that Cassandra read Stephanie, saw what she was going to do next before the impulse reached its way past her reptilian brain.

Stephanie bolted forward with a lunging kick that Cassandra side-stepped. Cassandra brought her right foot out, sweeping Stephanie’s legs from under her. She winced slightly when she saw
Stephanie’s head bounced off of the mat that they had placed down here on the floor of the Batcave.

Cassandra brought her foot up to bring it down on Stephanie’s face, not enough to do any damage, but hard enough to hurt. Stephanie quickly rolled out of the way.

She thought Stephanie was getting stronger and faster, which Cassandra reckoned was the point of this whole thing.

Stephanie kipped up, and swung with her left elbow. It was a hard one that Cassandra dodged, but she felt the wind blow some hair near her temple back.

Cassandra drove her left knee into Stephanie’s stomach, and she heard the air leave Stephanie’s lungs in a grunt. She drove her right fist into Stephanie’s side, hard enough to send sweat flying from the exposed skin beneath her sports bra. She drove her left fist into Stephanie’s cheek.

Stephanie whirled, Stephanie staggered, but Stephanie did not fall. Another lunging kick, which Cassandra had not only scouted, but caught. She turned the foot over, causing Stephanie to turn around. She somersaulted forward, out of Cassandra’s grasp, which pleased Cassandra greatly. It was nice to see her best friend improving.

She got to her feet, and led with her left hand. Cassandra got her right arm up just in time to block it.

Stephanie’s right followed. As did Cassandra’s left.

Before Stephanie could bring her knee into Cassandra’s stomach, Cassandra drove her forehead right into the center of Stephanie’s.

Cassandra could successfully compartmentalize physical pain.

Stephanie could not.

The headbutt drove Stephanie to her knees with an “Owwww, fuckmother!”

She held up her hands to Cassandra and said “Uncle!” Cassandra untensed herself.

Stephanie was glowing with sweat. It was running down her tanned abdomen, and darkening the waistband of her purple leggings. A bead of it was dancing on the tip of Stephanie's nose, threatening madly to fall.

Cassandra only noticed because she herself felt dry as a desert in her sweatpants and sweatshirt.

Stephanie, huffed, wiped a lock of blonde hair out of her blue eyes, and looked up at Cassandra.

“I’ll get you one day.”

Cassandra smiled.

She had thought about it. Just ducking her head into the way of one of Stephanie's punches just so she could see her face light up. Just so she could see the sense of accomplishment.

But... that would have been disrespectful.

Tim was in a pair of jeans, a blue sweatshirt, and a black leather jacket that he bought with his salary of doing absolutely nothing. He was standing behind the garage on the grounds of Wayne Manor when the call came in.
“Bart?”

“Nope,” Conner said over the phone. “He’s bugging Hawkman. Where do you want us, Rob?”

Conner Kent--Superboy--called Bart Allen “Imp” for “Impulse,” and Tim “Rob” for “Robin.”

“Wayne Manor,” said Tim.

“No, I mean where on the grounds.”

“Oh. Uh, back of the garage.”

A portal, courtesy of the Apokoliptian technology from which the cybernetic parts of Victor “Cyborg” Stone were comprised, formed a few feet away from Tim.

And from this boom tube walked Conner “Superboy” Kent, Bart “Impulse” Allen, Cassandra “Wonder Girl” Sandsmark, Anita “Empress” Fite, and Virginia “Jinny” Hex.

These were the fellow members of Young Justice, the group of teenagers and sidekicks that Tim Drake, in his capacity as Robin, was privileged to lead.

And the first words out of any of their mouths were:

“Shit, it’s cold up here.”

That would have been Anita, the intimidatingly pretty black girl who was a martial arts expert with short range teleportation and mind-control powers. She was wearing a tanktop in December for some strange reason.

“Aww, quit ‘cher bellyachin’;,” said Jinny, who was in a canvas longcoat and cowboy hat over her long brown hair. “You ain’t seen cold till you seen midnight in Montana. This here is shorts weather.”

“Why are you wearing a tanktop this close to Christmas?” asked Cassie. She was a pretty blonde with a severe nerdy streak. Her Amazon vambraces peeked through the cuffs of her letterman jacket from Gateway High as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Because,” Anita said, “I live in Louisiana.”

She gestured toward Bart, standing there in his white winter coat. “And that’s where I was when this fool decided to run me from there to Washington DC before I could get my jacket.”

“Getting your jacket would have taken too long.”

“It only would have taken a minute.”

“Which is too long.”

“And you aren’t supposed to be snatching people up off their front yards anyway,” Anita said. “How fast can a speedster run after I kick him in the dick?”

“I notice none of you gentlemen took it upon yourself to offer the lady your jackets in her hour of need,” Cassie said.

Conner was standing there in a leather jacket (to look cool, Tim guessed, as a December afternoon in Gotham wouldn’t have bothered him), and Bart in his red winter coat. They both looked
dumbfounded for a second, as the thought had never crossed their minds.

Tim took this as his cue to take off his jacket and hand it to Anita.

“Thank you,” Anita said, putting the jacket on over her shoulders. “See this, boys? This is why it’s a tragedy that Tim doesn’t have a girlfriend.”

Tim smiled. “Well, since you put it that way, do you w--”

“No.”

They all smiled at this, Tim included, but it was Bart who actually started laughing. Hard. He had to put his hands on his knees to contain himself, his wild mane of brown hair shuddering with each laugh.

“It’s--It’s funny,” Bart said, wiping a tear from his eye after the laughing subsided. “Get it? Because Tim’s gonna die alone.”

“Anyway,” Tim said, fighting off his twice-daily urge to wrap his hands around Bart’s throat until he turned blue, “you said you had something for me?”

“I did?” asked Bart.

“Yes,” said Conner, trying to keep his voice deep and intimidating. “You did.”

Conner walked up to Tim, and fished something out of his leather jacket. It was a small metal disc, about the size of a silver dollar, with a “YJ” on its face.

“It’s a signal,” Conner said. “Mister Terrific whipped it up for us special. Press the YJ, and all of the others start vibrating. Then we come running.”

“Cool,” Tim said, putting the signal into the pocket of his jeans. “Into the utility belt it goes. Thank you.”

Conner nodded, and stepped back.

“So how ya been?” Jinny asked. “Ain’t seen ya in a month.”

“I’ve been helping hold it down in Gotham while Bruce was on his honeymoon.”

“Who in Hera’s name goes on a honeymoon for a month?” Cassie asked.

“Rich folks,” said Anita.

“‘Who in Hera’s name?’” asked Bart.

“I’m an Amazon.” said Cassie.

“You were born in Gateway City, though” said Conner.

Cassie Sandsmark looked a lot more hurt than she would have, had anyone else said it. It wasn’t even said in anger or derision. But the only person that did not notice the large and cumbersome torch that she held for Conner Kent was Conner Kent himself.

Conner didn’t even notice the look on her face now.
“Anyway,” Tim said, trying to change the subject, “we had a full team operation last night. Batman and I took down Lady Vic.”

“Nice,” said Conner.

“Got punched in the face, though.”

“And?” asked Anita.

“Yeah,” Bart said. “And?”

“And,” Tim said, “Robin doesn’t get punched in the face.”

It was Cassie’s turn to laugh. “And if the pretty face of Tim Drake got messed up, girls the world over would fling themselves off of balconies.”

Conner laughed.

“Yup,” said Jinny, “if’n Timbo sported a black eye, every teenage girl in America would set their posters on fire, and put up ones of Aqualad in their place.”

"Isn't Aqualad gay?" Tim asked.

"Doesn't matter," said Anita. "And to the ones it did, they'd go straight to Kong Kenan."

"What's Kong Kenan got that I don't have?" Tim asked.

"Justice League membership," said Bart.

"Yeah, Justice League of China."

"Still counts, dude. If they'll pick the kids in the K-Pop bands over you, they'll really pick the Chinese Super-Man over you. And then you'll fall into a funk, and gain weight, and lose your hair, and die alone, and still funny!"

Conner laughed harder.

Tim felt his face turning red. He wanted something, anything to turn this back on them, or at least shut them up.

Thankfully, such a thing came down the small path behind the garage.

“Oh, hey Cass.”

Everyone stopped laughing.

And Conner looked as though he had just been shown his own grave.

As Stephanie Brown and Cassandra Cain, freshly showered, in clean clothes, and just from their fight down in the Batcave, stepped toward them on the path, all eyes slowly turned to Conner. And Conner was very aware of this fact.

Based solely on pictures that Tim had taken of Steph and Cass at the manor, Conner Kent had fallen hopelessly in love with Cassandra Cain. So hopelessly in fact that the only time the two had spoken (at Bruce and Selina’s wedding), Conner did not move a muscle, his words coming from unmoving lips. Because he knew that Cassandra could read body language, and he didn’t want to give the
game away.

Conner was a clone of both Superman and Lex Luthor, out of the Cadmus tank for two years, now. He’d fought criminals, he’d fought robots, he’d fought aliens. But the only thing that scared him was a short, slender Asian girl who couldn’t read and could barely talk.

“Hi Tim!” Stephanie said with cheer in her voice. “What are—Ohhhhh shit, son!”

Steph finally saw what was up, and she too was staring at Conner, now. Her eyebrows raised, the smile on her lips reaching Joker Toxin-level magnitude.

“Hello,” Cassandra said to Conner, her expression unchanging.

“Hey,” Conner said, looking at the ground, not moving his lips.

Cassandra extended her hand for him to shake.

Such an action was scandalous. Incendiary, even. Bart’s eyes widened to roughly the size of toilet seat lids, and Cassie Sandsmark raised her hand to her mouth in both horror and anticipation. For Wonder Girl deeply loved Superboy, and she wanted to see him embarrassed and humiliated, and because she was a teenager, these two emotions worked in perfect concert, and not to mutual exclusion.

And one thought ran through Tim Drake’s head.

Oh, now she’s just fucking with him.

For Conner had a choice now. He could either be as rude, or he could move and even share basic physical contact with the object of his pitiful, paralyzing desires.

Conner’s right arm finally moved up. Slowly. Like an animatronic Disneyland president on mind altering drugs. His had grasped Cassandra Cain’s. He shook it once, only once, before he let go and let his arm drop limply to his side.

Cassandra tilted her head, eying him like mildly fascinating laboratory specimen, before her glance spread to everyone else.

“Bye,” she said.

And then Cassandra Cain walked off. Stephanie looked at all of the others, shrugged her shoulders, and took off after her best friend.

A moment of silence. Tim saw Conner allow himself to slowly melt into a slouch, his eyebrows rising up over his blue eyes in tender, pathetic defeat.

“Well that was disappointing,” Anita finally said.

“I know,” said Cassie Sandsmark. “It’s like watching Bran be named king all over again. I expected some thing. Sure as hell wasn’t that.”

“Good thing you were wearing your leather jacket to look all cool,” said Bart. “You didn’t look like a complete wad at all.”

Cassie snorted at this.

Not that Tim was beyond smiling at his best friend’s misfortune, but he looked at Cassie with some
reproach. “I thought Amazons were supposed to be compassionate.”

“I was born in Gateway City, though.”

Conner, decimated, spoke into a little communication device on his leather jacket.

“Cyborg,” Conner said, “you can boom tube us out now.”

The boom tube immediately opened behind them. Everyone said their farewells to Tim.

“Y’know,” Jinny said to Conner, “I seen dogs just been neutered that look an awful lot like you right now.”

“Please stop talking.”

And the neverending Roast-A-Thon that was Young Justice walked into the boom tube, and back to Washington DC.

Tim checked the news feed on his phone as soon as he got back to his room in Wayne Manor.

There was a fundraiser being held by the Hibernian Society to help with the election efforts of public defender candidate Sean Riley tomorrow. The Hibernian Society of Gotham was basically a group of cops who used their Irish ancestry to get around the fact that Gotham cops weren’t allowed to get involved in the city’s political matters in an official capacity. Tim knew that half of the cops in that society were on the Falcone payroll.

In two days Muhammad bin Sayel, a diplomat from the middle eastern nation of Kahndaq, was scheduled to tour the United States, meeting with American politicians. The first stop was City Hall in Gotham City. Kahndaq was four-hundred fifty miles south of Syria, and ruled by the supervillain Black Adam, who matched the Kims of North Korea in his power over what and who got in and out of the country. That a Kahndaqi national was trying to make nice with American politicians seemed odd on its face, until one considered trade. As powerful as Black Adam was, it wasn’t like he could make an iPhone.

And…

...there was a mob hit last night.

Which struck Tim as off. There was a growing Russian mafia presence in Gotham, but their nascent foray into organized crime within the city limits usually meant bloody wars with supervillains. The Trofimoff’s elected to start shit with The Ventriloquist last year, which led to a war so violent that Tim had actually been shot. His armor caught it, sure, but still.

But the Italians? The big two? The Maronis and Falcones? They were in a truce right now, and had been since The Undying hit two summers ago. That one would hit the other didn’t make sense.

The article on the Gazette website said that it happened at Esteban’s Ristorante on Bleake.

Tim got into research mode.

Bruce was looking at Tim’s phone, hearing him out. It was Bleake Island traffic cam footage from the night before.

“Notice anything funny?” Tim asked.
“Yes,” said Bruce. “No cars.”

“Right,” Tim said, putting his phone in the pocket of a hoodie he’d gotten from his closet. “You walk into a restaurant on Bleake, take out five guys, you need backup. Backup means at least one car.”

Bruce knew where this led. He wanted to see if Tim knew it as well.

“And no cars means…”

“One guy on foot,” Tim said. “One guy takes out five, he may be a guy the mob hired, but he’s not a quote-unquote ‘mob guy.’”

“So you’re thinking…”

“He’s a pro,” said Tim. “He didn’t show up on the cams either, so we know he's good. Maybe metahuman, but a pro at the very least.”

Bruce nodded. “Work it independently.”

Tim squinted at Bruce a bit.

“Something wrong?” Bruce asked.

“Yeah. Shouldn’t Batman be a component part of Batman and Robin? I have to work this by myself?”

Bruce nodded again. The last two Robins he had, he had micromanaged everything, from their martial arts training, to their education, to their sleeping habits, to who they spoke to when they weren’t being Robin at that particular moment.

This approach yielded one success story out of two, and even that was a near-run thing.

“You know how it works,” Bruce said. “Now see how it works for you. You’re smart enough to look over a crime scene, and you’re smart enough to know that. Work it independently. Do it tomorrow afternoon, after the crime scene guys leave.”

“What do I do tonight?” Tim asked. “Patrol?”

“Take the night off,” said Bruce. “Say hi to your mom and dad, before they forget what you look like. I have a thing I have to look into when the sun goes down tonight. It might be connected.”

“What is it? Something on the feed I missed?”

“I intercepted internal GCPD texts,” Bruce said. “Something they're keeping the lid on. Not even the media knows about it yet.”

“What is it?”

Bruce sighed.

“Black Mask was murdered an hour ago.”
Goats Head Soup

Chapter 4: Goats Head Soup

SIONIS STEEL MILL - EIGHT HOURS AGO

In Old Industrial, a blighted and begotten section of northern Gotham City, abandoned factories from a bygone era jutted from the pavement like the broken teeth of a God dead and long claimed by the earth.

At its head, as though the king to which all of the other decrepit buildings in Old Industrial bent the knee in fealty, was the Sionis Steel Mill.

Back in the day, the Sionis Steel Mill had been inherited by Roman Sionis, who had run it into the ground through sheer incompetence and greed. He didn’t like the fact that he looked stupid. He didn’t like that the cops were sniffing around. And he really didn’t like that Bruce Wayne bought all of the Sionis Steel Mill assets after the fact. Saving some admin jobs and looking like a hero.

It is almost custom in Gotham City that whenever someone with a few faults hit a snag in life, they put on a costume and ran afoul of Batman. Roman Sionis was no different. He became Black Mask. Wearing that namesake mask (carved from the lid of his parents’ casket, no less), he became a scourge to both hero and criminal alike. As his greed knew no bounds, he put bullets into whoever had the money.

He became one of those rare kinds of Gotham criminal: too scary for Blackgate, but too conventionally sane for Arkham. He had spent the last twelve years rebounding between the two like a ping pong ball.

Today, however, he was home. Sionis Steel Mill. Though Old Industrial was a choice spot for the supervillain on the look-out for a cheap and easy lair (and not wanting to go through The Broker to get one), no one used the Sionis Steel Mill except Black Mask. Even The Joker, back when he was alive, stuck by that rule. Those who didn’t where never seen whole again.

At this moment, standing in the old CEO’s office, the afternoon light streaming in through the windows onto the dusty red carpet, Black Mask, in his namesake along with a white pinstripe suit, lazily watched the bank of analogue security camera feeds along the right wall.

His right hand man Parker, in a blue suit, was also there.

“The Maronis got hit last night,” Parker said.

Black Mask was still scanning the feeds. His guys taking stolen goods out of trucks in the docking bay. His guys sitting around a card table in the break room. Twenty-five in all, every one in sweatshirts and jeans. These mooks couldn’t even wear a suit? Like he and Parker were the only ones who had any style in this crew?”

“Did they?” Black Mask asked. “Who did it?”

“The Falcones, probably.”

“Last I heard, the Maronis and Falcones had no beef. Still had their little Hands-Across-the-Aisle thing going from when Hill went apeshit.”
“The Maronis and Falcons are Maronis and Falcons,” Parker said. “The space between them either scratching or stabbing each other’s backs depends on just how much money’s at play.”

“And how much money is at play?” Black Mask asked. “If things are tight, should I be getting ready for fireworks?”

“Things ain’t thin from where I’m sitting,” said Parker. “The cash co—”

“Wait,” Black Mask said. He peered into the bank of security monitors. Parker eventually sidled up alongside him.

On the feed from the front door, two people stood.

The first was a man who, from the fuzzy analogue feed, appeared to be in his mid-forties. He had white hair, appeared powerfully built, and had a square jaw and deep-set eyes. Standing there in a leather jacket and jeans, Black Mask figured if one were to assemble a guy for the sole purpose of kicking ass, and then let him age like wine, then that’s what it’d look like.

As for the other one… it was hard to tell.

Black Mask assumed they were male. The body armor underneath the leather jacket didn’t push outward to accommodate breasts, but that in and of itself wasn’t a whole lot to go on. Because their head was fire.

It wasn’t on fire, it was fire.

The only thing that Black Mask had besides that as something to identify them, was a little pin on the lapel of their black leather jacket.

It was the number 2.

“Who… the fuck… are they?” Black Mask asked.

The Man with the White Hair looked directly at Black Mask through the security feed. He produced a gun from the inside of his jacket and pointed it at the camera.

The front entrance was far enough away that Black Mask didn’t hear the shot, but he knew what happened when the feed gave way to static.

“Go warn the boys,’ Black Mask said. “Now!”

Parker started jogging out of the office, muttering to himself.

“Attacking in the afternoon… It’s like breaking a rule or something.”

SIONIS STEEL MILL - NOW

“It’s like breaking a rule or something,” said Commissioner Gordon. “Oh, I know which one. Not letting teenagers onto a murder scene.”

In the midst of a graveyard shift of cops who had been in the loading bay of the Sionis Steel Mill since that afternoon, Commissioner Gordon looked over Batman’s shoulder.

“Who are Gremlin and Grimace?”
Orphan didn’t know what those words meant. Spoiler apparently did. She could see her tense, before she pointed a thumb to herself and Orphan.

“Spoiler and Orphan,” Spoiler said.

“And how long have they been running out of superhero names?” Commissioner Gordon asked.

Spoiler folded her arms. Orphan could practically hear her boiling inside.

Gordon rubbed his hand through his white hair with one hand, and popped a piece of Nicorette in his mouth with his other. He turned back to Batman.

“The one bone of contention I have with you,” Gordon said, “is you bring kids on these little escapades. Don’t like it now, didn’t like it then.”

“The more eyes I have,” Batman said, “the more I can see.”

“That’s just it,” Gordon said. “I swear to God, I thought that’s what we had cops for.”

“How long have you been here, Jim?”

“Seven hours. Someone like Black Mask dies, the Police Commissioner comes running, even if they’re not as hands on as I am.”

“Seven hours,” Batman said. “So how live is this scene?”

Gordon sighed.

“Criminology classes come to scenes all the time,” Batman said. “I don’t see how this is substantially different.”

“Just looking at them, I know they’re not criminology students.”

“Just looking at me, you know I’d be a better teacher.”

Gordon sighed again.

“Alright,” he said. “I’m going back to Central. Just counting the days till the new one’s built.”

“Have a good evening, Jim.”

“Yeah,” Gordon said. “You too.”

Gordon walked past Batman, and between Spoiler and Orphan on the way out the door.

“Alright, ladies and gentlemen,” Gordon called to his fellow members of the GCPD, “you’ve done great, but Batman and the Batman Junior Kids Club want to take a look at the scene.”

As cops started filing out the loading bay door, Spoiler mumbled to herself.

“Don’t care if he’s Barbara’s dad… Catching criminals… Catch these hands, ya shitty ol’ bitch…”

“Orphan?”

She looked up. Batman was standing in front of her, massive and towering.

And, as always, her eyes lingered upon the symbol on his chest.
The Bat.

In her years outside of society, living in the wilderness and panhandling in the cities, she had heard tale of The Bat. Fighting great evil, performing great deeds… and making sure that no life was taken, no matter how low or how foul.

So great was Batman’s commitment to life (in a story told to her by Selina, that grew into a legend in her mind) that, when he had seen the death of The Joker, his greatest foe responsible for the deaths of thousands, Bruce Wayne hung up his cape and cowl for three whole years in heartbreak.

Cassandra Cain had killed, this much was true, but The Bat was pure. The Bat was redemptive. Batman would have come for her with a thirst for justice, but an interest in her soul. He would not take the path of vengeance, because there was no way that he would want her to die.

Orphan and Batman thought alike.

There was an idle daydream she’d had, one that came to her during empty moments as she tried to sleep, or as she stared at the shifting scenery on the back of Steph’s motorcycle, that one day she would be worthy enough to wear that symbol on her chest.

It was foolish, of course. No one who had worn The Bat, or wore the cape of Robin, had ever murdered another human being. But it felt nice all the same.

“I would like to see your detective skills,” Batman said. He turned to Spoiler. “Please don’t try to help her. I want her to do this on her own.”

“You can’t tell me what to do,” Spoiler said. “I’m Catwoman’s sidekick, not yours.”

“As you delight in telling me,” Batman said. “Which is why I made a polite request of you, instead of giving you a direct order.”

Spoiler tilted her head at him.

“I even said ‘please,’” Batman said.

“Well, um… Y’all do y’all,” Spoiler said.

Batman looked at Orphan. “Ready?”

Orphan nodded.

“Look around, and tell me what you see.”

The loading bay of the Sionis Steel Mill was massive. Almost cavernous. Gordon knew Batman was coming, which was why the crime scene investigators only got rid of the bodies, replaced on the cement floor by tape outlines and Polaroid photos.

Orphan was careful, watching her step as she surveyed the blood stains and bullet casings that littered the ground like a modern art tableau.

She reconciled her surroundings, trying to come up with something useful… and she did believe she found it.

“The shells,” Orphan said.

“What about them?” Batman asked.
“They’re… the same,” said Orphan. She took a deep breath as she tried to wrap her mind and her mouth around one of the bigger words she knew. “I… I *den* tical.”

“And what does that tell you?”

Orphan opened her hands, and then closed them. She supplemented her verbal vocabulary with American sign language, which was much easier. If she needed to say a longer sentence, she signed at the same time.


“Right,” Batman said. “An arms deal. Which means…”

“Which means,” Orphan said, “that the men… who… did this were… unarmed.”

“Because there are no other shells on the ground,” Batman said. “But *were* they unarmed?”

Orphan blinked behind her mask, trying to remember what she had seen.


“That they did,” Batman said. “What do you suppose that means?”

Orphan took one last look at the scene, and formed her thesis.

“This… was… a message.”

Bruce Wayne smiled a lot (a phenomena that both Selina and Babs told her was something new entirely), but Batman never did. Right now, though, the spiteful poltergeist of a smirk formed on the corner of his mouth.

“Very good,” Batman sad. He turned and made his way to the set of steel stairs that led to the CEO’s office.

Orphan had seen crime scene footage of Poison Ivy, stepping across a dead part of Slaughter Swamp, her footsteps bringing new grass and blooming flowers in her wake. That’s what Orphan’s insides felt like, now that Batman had told her she’d done a good job.

She smiled behind her mask, almost forgetting where she was, until Spoiler’s hands rested on her shoulders from behind.

Spoiler whispered in her ear.

“*Dooooooooooope.*”

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**SIONIS STEEL MILL - EIGHT HOURS AGO.**

The gunshots echoed in the loading bay as Two and the White-Haired Man stood for cover behind one of the white vans. The loud, heavy *thunk-thunk-thunk* of bullets denting old steel filled their ears.

Fifteen were dead already. Ten more, plus the two in the office, and they’d be done.

Two looked at the White-Haired Man.
“You are an artist,” he said.

The White-Haired Man shrugged. “It’s nice to be appreciated, I suppose.”

They broke to opposite sides.

There was one of Black Mask’s guys waiting for Two as he made his way around the front of the van.

Two’s knives were ready.

The one in his right hand took the gangster in the throat, sending a spew of blood from his fat throat off to the left.

The knife in Two’s left hand lodged itself in the gangster’s navel. Ripping and splattering sounded as Two tore his way up to the sternum.

The White-Haired Man encountered a skinny and wavy-haired member of Black Mask’s retinue as he made his way to the back of the van.

The gangster raised his gun and almost fired.

A curious thing happened, though.

The upper torso of The White-Haired Man seemed to blur, become incorporeal. It was as though the top half of his body made every dodging move simultaneously.

Until his two hands merged from the blur, wrapping around the gangster’s chin and the back of his head.

With one swift and savage wrench, The White-Haired Man snapped the gangster’s neck.

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**THE SIONIS STEEL MILL - NOW**

The CEO’s office was a mess.

The entire bank of security monitors had been destroyed, coating the floor with mangled plastic and broken glass. There were bullet holes in the wall next to the door. And a few feet away from the doorway, there was a blood stain about the size of a throw pillow overlapping with a tape outline of a body. Someone had either been stabbed in the neck, or in the back of the head.

But the center of the scene was the large oak desk at the rear of the office, set in the front of a large window overlooking Gotham Bay.

The top of the desk was brown with dried blood. A river of it had flowed, and dripped off to the sides, drying and congealing in the shape of icicles.

Orphan pointed to the shattered security monitors.

“The drives were taken,” Batman said. “We don’t know who did this.”

Orphan nodded. She examined the scene before she turned to Batman.

“Pictures?”
“I have Penny One working in the Batcave right now,” Batman said. “He should have found his way into the Major Crimes servers by now.”

Batman raised his gauntlet and brought up a holographic display. He punched in a few inputs, and large holographic images of the crime scene appeared on a grid. He picked one, and it bloomed to full size.

A skinny mobster on the floor of the loading bay, with his head turned all the way around.

“Next,” Orphan said. Batman swiped his finger across the image, and another one appeared.

One of Black Mask’s goons, throat slit and disembowelled.

“Next.”

A gangster who had had his head crushed after repeatedly having the back door of a van slammed upon it.

“Next.”

One who’d had his face mangled after being pistol-whipped to death with his own weapon.

“Next.”

One from in here in the office. A man in a blue suit with an horrific knife wound in the back of his head.

“Next.”

Batman swiped again.

Another image came up.

And Orphan almost felt her heart stop.

“Hold” she said. It was urgent, and it made Spoiler jump. Even Batman widened his eyes.

“Orphan?” Spoiler asked. “What is it?”

Slowly, and with a shaky hand, Orphan took off her mask. She needed to know that she was seeing what she was seeing. She couldn’t do that with the lenses of her mask in the way.

Sweat had started to form on Cassandra Cain’s brow.

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THE SIONIS STEEL MILL - EIGHT HOURS AGO

The White-Haired Man threw Black Mask into the bay of security monitors. He screamed as his back was engulfed in sparks and broken glass.

“No!” Parker yelled. “No, PLEASE!”

He was on the floor, face down, his neck beneath Two’s boot.

“You heard the man,” The White-Haired Man said.

Two got one of his knives from beneath his jacket, bent over, and jammed the blade into the base of
Parker’s skull, completely obliterating his brain stem. Rivulets of blood flowed from the back of Parker’s head, staining his red hair, as Two withdrew the blade, and wiped it off on Parker’s jacket.

The White-Haired Man looked at Black Mask, who was struggling to his feet.

“Have a seat, Roman.”

Black Mask, who was now on his feet, whipped a pistol out of his jacket.

The top half of The White-Haired Man blurred, going in every direction at once, as a hand reached from the visual cacophony and wrapped around Black Mask’s wrist. It turned aggressively, and every bone in Black Mask’s wrist shattered in a muffled crunch.

Black Mask howled in pain, and dropped the gun.

The blur subsided, and The White-Haired Man smiled, still holding Black Mask’s wrist.

“Have… a seat… Roman.”

Defeated and battered, Black Mask hobbled over to the large desk in front of the windows, and sat down in the worn leather chair, leaning forward so he didn’t press any of the shattered glass in his back further in.

The White-Haired Man stood in front of the desk, as Two took up sentry position near the door.

“How old are you, Roman?”

The dark brown eyes behind Roman Sionis’ black mask narrowed. “Forty-one,” he said.

“Forty one years of age,” The White-Haired Man said. “Just five years younger than I am. You were born into a wealthy family, Roman. You inherited this very mill from your parents, before you ran it into the ground. After that, you decided to play dress up and become a supervillain. I try to keep up with all the caped shenanigans, and I have to say, you were one of the better ones. Daring nighttime robberies. Mob massacres. And that time you tried to blow up the Cleary Street Mall?

“Catwoman was inside,” Black Mask said.

“You tried to destroy a mall with over a thousand people inside just to get to Catwoman?”

“What can I say?” Black Mask asked. “I don’t like her face.”

The White-Haired Man smiled.

“You, Roman Sionis, are a man of great accomplishments. Spilling blood and getting paid are two of the finer things in life. I can attest to that, before I was… called to a higher purpose. But as far as those two things went, you belong in Cooperstown.”

“Thanks,” Black Mask said. “Now go fuck yourself.”

The White-Haired Man crossed his arms.

“You’ll have to tell me how it feels,” he said.

“How what feels?”

“How you were born into privilege, how you took what you wanted, how you gave yourself a
persona that allowed for great deeds and great terror, only to see at forty-one years of age that the entire point of your life was to die as a message to someone else.”

Black Mask blinked.

“You should enjoy these few seconds,” The White-Haired Man said. “For a handful of moments, you should rest easy. Because unlike most others, you don’t have to question why God put you on this Earth… So again, you have to tell me how it feels. Because I must say, in a way, I envy you.”

Black Mask rolled his eyes, and then grabbed his crotch with the hand whose wrist hadn’t been destroyed.

“Envy this,” Black Mask said. “And the sooner you kill me, the sooner I don’t have to hear you talk.”

The White-Haired Man smiled wider.

“Well… It really is your funeral.”

As fast as lightning, The White-Haired Man reached out and wrapped his hand around Black Mask’s throat.

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THE SIONIS STEEL MILL - NOW

The picture Cassandra was looking at on Batman’s gauntlet was of Black Mask. His eyes had rolled into the back of his head. And the throat beneath his mask was missing entirely. Replaced with a dark cavern that had let blood torrent. His white pinstripe suit wasn’t white anymore.

Cassandra’s mind reeled back to her foulest deed. Her nightmare that kept taking a battering ram to the door of her mind every night. Of her own fingers digging into the flesh of the man in Macau. Of tearing away his windpipe as he gesticulated the fact that he was dying. Murdered by a nine year old girl.

Orphan had said that this was a message.

She was right.

And she herself was the one to whom this message was sent.

“Cassandra?”

She looked up at Batman.

“What’s wrong?”

Cassandra used her glove to wipe away the sweat that had accumulated on her forehead.

“I know… who did this.”

Batman’s eyes widened further. He hadn’t been expecting that.

“How?”

Cassandra couldn’t say it. She opened her mouth, and the word got stuck in her throat, setting up a tent and refusing to budge.
“It’s alright, Cass,” Spoiler said behind her. “It’s okay. Tell us what’s wrong. Who did this?”

Cassandra looked into Batman’s cobalt eyes.

She said one word.

“Father…”

At that very moment, in this first couple of post-sunset hours of this frigid evening on Bleake Island, a small dot moved from rooftop to rooftop.

A few blocks away from this dot, on top of the building that housed Adams Automotive, Mister Mxyzptlk and his wife Miss Gsptlsnz stood and observed.

No greater contrast in a married couple could one ever hope to meet. While Mxyzptlk was three feet tall, homely, and erupting from the sides of his head with white hair, Gsptlsnz was statuesque, nearly six feet tall with formidable tresses of dark hair. Her taste in clothes tended toward period Earth styles before 1960. Right now she was in a poodle skirt and a pink silk blouse.

She squinted at the dot a few blocks away, moving from rooftop to rooftop.

“That’s her, huh?” Gsptlsnz asked.

Mxyzptlk nodded. “That is Harper Grace Row. The mysterious Bluebird of Bleake Island. Eighteen years of age, emancipated from her deadbeat criminal father, living in a small apartment here on the island with her brother Cullen.”

“And she’s going to be important?”

“Very,” Mxyzptlk said.

Gsptlsnz squinted at the dot moving about the skyline that was apparently one Harper Row.

“Not particularly strong,” she said. “Or fast. No powers or specialized training to speak of. Intelligent, yes, but only for a human, and even then, not entirely outside of human parameters, which are pitiful to begin with. How important could this girl possibly be?”

Mxyzptlk sighed. “My dear, you greatly underestimate the value humans put on their words. The right statement or turn of phrase can transform a lost cause into a successful revolution. That’s the thing about them. Of all the species that are or could be, humans… are one of the yappier ones.”

“And our new friend Harper Row is going to say something so inspiring or intelligent that it will shape the face of things to come?” Gsptlsnz asked.

“That’s just it,” Mxyzptlk said. “It’s not so much what she says, but when she says it. And it’ll be such a simple thing, too. I doubt she’ll even remember saying it a day after she does, if she does. But it will mean everything to the yutz she says it to.”

“Provided they hear it?”

Mxyzptlk reached into his orange and purple jumpsuit, and pulled out just one of his infinite supply of cigars.

“If the Bats have any hope of beating Harmonia,” he said, “they damn well better.”
There was silence for a spell, before Mxyztlk started shuddering all over.

“What is it?” Gsptlsnz asked.

“I don’t like this,” Mxyztlk said. “Being this serious. I want to have some fun. Is this Earth’s Superman around here?”

He answered his own question. “No, no he isn’t. He’s on Rann with Adam Strange doing… whatever. I see all the possibilities, and every one says he’s missing this fight, and I need to be here. And that sucks. Because I’m booooooooored.”

“Would you like to replace a police officer’s bullets with blanks?” Gsptlsnz asked. “That cheers you up sometimes.”

Mxyztlk sighed.

Then nodded.

As the proud employees of Harmony Enterprises clocked out after a long day of digging deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth beneath the new Gotham Central precinct on Founders Island, across the street, in the storage building used to house some of the smaller constriction implements, a strange drama was taking place.

Two weeks ago, a riot had occurred at Arkham Asylum after the power had gone out.

The power came back on, and Asylum staff had found that only one patient had been unaccounted for. But it was one of the bad ones.

Doctor Jonathan Crane.

Scarecrow.

But little did Arkham staff know that the power outage was not the fault of the out of date electrical system, but rather it was triggered by Harmonia’s henchmen: One and Two.

And Doctor Crane did not escape. He was kidnapped.

Since the night of the riot, he had been kept in one of the back rooms of the storage building. He’d been both sedated and fed regularly.

But tonight? Tonight Crane was thrust, squinting and handcuffed, by One into one of the larger side rooms of the building.

And this back room was stocked with every instrument and material that a chemist like Jonathan Crane could ever want. The walls were lined with flasks, and beakers, and vials, and shiny brown bottles full of chemicals. Burners, and centrifuges, and balances, oh my. The squint from his deprivation of light gave way to wide-eyed wonder, before he remembered that he was being held prisoner against his will.

“Look at me, Crane”

Crane sneered at One. A couple of Crane’s front teeth were missing after a run in with Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn during the occupation of The Undying a year and a half ago, and they’d never been replaced.
“I guess you’re wondering why you’re here.”

“I’m wondering why you would keep me prisoner for two weeks, only to thrust me into a room that would let me destroy you,” Crane said. “In any lab, I am God.”

“That a fact?” One asked. He opened the leather jacket over his body armor to reveal a holstered pistol.

“Are you packing, Oh Holy Father?”

Crane sneered again.

“You remember the name Abigail O’Shea?” One asked.

“No,” Crane said. “Why would I?”

The flame that served as One’s head tilted to the side.

“A few years ago,” One said, “Batman and Robin went toe-to-toe with a group calling themselves The Victim Syndicate. Now… This group was headed by a man calling himself The First Victim. Even after he’d been apprehended, there weren’t any dental records or fingerprints they could match. To this day, the identity of The First Victim remains a mystery. But The First Victim isn’t the focus of this little story. It was his the four people following him.”

One put his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, and walked off to the side.

“They all had a beef with Batman because they were all collateral damage in his little war on crime. The first one was Mister Noxious. Fellow by the name of Guy Mandrake. He was one of those skeezy Wall Street type douches who exist on a steady diet of cocaine and Viagra. He was looking to get his swerve on with a redhead one night… and that redhead happened to be Poison Ivy. This was back when she was starting out, and her pheromones were so strong that they actually changed his physiology. The main side-effect was that he was rendered completely toxic to anyone in his immediate vicinity.”

One continued his pace back to where he was. “Then there was Virgil Myers. They called him The Mute. He ran a joke shop on Tricorner. Guy in clown makeup comes in one day, starts telling Virgil how he makes the best damn squirting flowers in the world, and he’ll offer him an insane discount if Virgil will sell them for him. Virgil tells him he has an exclusivity deal with the company that makes the squirting flowers he already sells. The guy in the clown makeup doesn’t like that, and he squirts one of his quality squirting flowers right into Virgil’s face. Now I don’t think it’ll come as a shock that the guy in the clown makeup was The Joker, and it wasn’t water he squirted in Virgil’s face. It was Joker Toxin. Virgil had an allergic reaction so strong that he needed his trachea removed in order to survive. The First Victim hooked him up with equipment that allowed him to completely silence anyone within a fifty foot radius.”

“I’ll save my tears for the end of the story,” Crane said.

“You should,” said One. “Save some for poor, poor Glory Griffin. She was a production assistant on Basil Karlo’s movies back in the day when he was an actor. But of course Basil Karlo becomes Clayface, and on the set of his last movie, he starts going Godzilla on the set so bad that Batman had to swoop in and save everyone. But poor Glory Griffin. She was doused in chemicals that they had on set to cool down the digital cameras during action sequences, and some of Clayface’s clay got in there. The bad news is, her skin became stretchy and clay-like just like ol’ Basil. The even worse news was that unlike Basil, she couldn’t control it.”
One folded his arms. The flame of his head turned back and forth.

“Hmm,” One said. “I seem to be forgetting someone.”

He snapped his fingers.

“Ohhhh, right,” One said. “Abigail O’Shea. She was a lab assistant at Gotham University. To one Doctor Jonathan Crane.”

Crane narrowed his eyes.

“He was one of your first guinea pigs,” One said. “You piece of shit. You spent a year spiking her food with your prototype Fear Toxin. She spent another year in Arkham recuperating. And it wasn’t nice then like it is now. Back then, they still called them ‘inmates’ instead of ‘patients.’ She came out of that hellhole as Madam Crow. You have a Fear Toxin? She cooked up an Anti-Fear Toxin that got rid of peoples’ inhibitions to a dangerous and life-threatening degree.”

One took a couple of steps toward Crane. “You served that poor girl a shitload of lemons, but damn if she didn’t make lemonade.”

“She was a fool,” Crane said.

“Oh, so you remember her now?”

“No,” said Crane. “But to use my work as the basis to make an Anti-Fear Toxin? It’s ludicrous. Childish. What could one hope to gain from it? Fear is absolute. It is the beginning and end of all things. It is a signature. Everyone has a different one, but everyone has one. To make an Anti-Fear Toxin is… a perversion.”

One put his hands on his hips. “Well, you better get pervy, Fucko, because I want you to make me some.”

Crane’s eyes widened. His jaw dropped. He put one of his handcuffed hands to his chest. He was the very image of a Victorian dowager, grievously and mortally disgusted by the sight of a half-centimeter of bare female ankle.

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“Make Anti-Fear Toxin?”

“Yes.”

“For you?”

“Uh-huh,” One said. “The deadline’s noon tomorrow, and you have ten chances to say yes.”

Crane laughed. “I sincerely hope there’s a Hell hot enough for you.”

One sighed. “Well, there are a couple of things you should know about me… The first is that I’m a crack shot.”

In a blur, with a speed that any gunfighter in the Old West would have looked upon with envy, One unholstered the handgun from beneath his jacket, and fired.
The big toe on Crane’s left foot disappeared in a pink haze of blood and bone that stained the concrete floor at the cuff of Crane’s orange Arkham scrubs. Crane fell on his ass, holding his maimed foot at the ankle, howling in pain.

One raised his voice to make himself heard over the din of Crane’s wails.

“And the second thing you should know… is that you now have nine chances to say yes.”
Chapter 5: Dirty Work

Barbara came in through the cave entrance on her motorcycle. She was supposed to be organizing a Birds of Prey operation from the Clock Tower tonight for a mission in Monaco, but she got the call from Bruce, and she came running, so to speak. She let Lady Blackhawk do ops from Aerie One.

The first thing Barbara did when she got off of her bike and took her helmet off was walk straight to Cassandra, and wrap her in a hug that almost popped some vertebrae in her back.

Stephanie was down here, too, as was Selina. Bruce was at the Batcomputer.

“Are you doing alright?” Barbara asked.

Cassandra nodded.

Barbara let go of her and turned to Bruce. “How did he even find her?”

“She’s a small teenage girl who just so happens to be a martial arts god,” Selina said. “No costume is good enough to hide it, and word’s gonna travel fast.”

“Please don’t talk about Cass as though she’s not here,” Stephanie said.

“You’re right,” Selina said. She looked at Cass. “My bad.”

Cassandra nodded yet again.

Bruce brought up a file on the Batcomputer that featured David Cain’s picture. Cassandra couldn’t read it, but she knew what it was.

“David Cain,” Bruce said. “Six-two, forty-six years old. Assassin, wanted in connection with twenty-eight separate deaths on six continents and twelve countries. And those are just the ones we know about. Member of the League of Assassins, and a favorite of Ra’s al Ghul himself. He crossed my path about nine years ago, when he ran afoul of some his old League buddies. So afoul in fact, that during the scuffle, he inflicted a particularly gruesome stab wound on Talia al Ghul.”

Cassandra saw Selina tilt her head to the side in wonder. “Have we heard from ol’ Tiffany recently?”

“Not to stray too far off topic,” Bruce said, “but no one’s heard from Talia since The Undying. Including the League. They’ve gone dark. Add to that, Black Manta escaped a few months later, and no one’s seen hide nor hair of him either. Not the Justice League, not Aquaman, no one.”

Bruce turned in his seat to look at Cassandra. “At the time, the rumor was he was looking for his daughter.”

Cassandra looked at the floor. She felt shame and embarrassment warm her from her face all the way down to her feet.

“So what do we do?” Barbara asked.

Bruce got up from his seat and walked slowly over to Cassandra. Every eye was on him.
He put his hands on Cassandra’s shoulders. She looked at his right one, before she looked at his eyes again.

“The thing I wish someone had told me,” Bruce said, “before I put on that cowl for the first time, is what I’m going to tell you now. Do you know what that is?”

“No,” Cassandra said.

“Don’t make this personal,” said Bruce.

He paused after he said that. Cassandra could tell from how he was holding himself that he thought he had imparted some great wisdom, but she had to admit to herself that it wasn’t sinking in.

“Every night,” Bruce said, “I went out there to exercise my demons. Relive my traumas. And do you know what I got out of it?”

Cassandra shook her head.

“The Joker,” said Bruce. “The Riddler, Two-Face… Catwoman, too, but that one turned out fine.”

“Just fine?” Selina asked.

“That’s an exception,” Bruce said. “Not everyone gets exceptions. The point I’m trying to make is, if you make this personal, they will smell it on you. They will take your protection of innocent lives as an affront to them, and they will start taking more and more. They will make their problems yours, and the second worst thing they will try to do is kill you.”

“What’s… the worst?” Cassandra asked.

“They won’t,” Bruce said. “They’ll enact the drama between they and you indefinitely. And entire graveyards will be filled with people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Bruce released Cassandra and straightened himself up.

“This is Gotham City,” Bruce said. “No one attacks this city to get rich. No one uses this as the first point to take over the world. But the attacks this city gets are the ones that try to squeeze an inch on me. Either to kill me or bring me to my lowest point in order to prove something. To me. To themselves. To everybody else. Because years ago, I stepped out of this cave wearing that cowl and I made things personal.”

Bruce put his hands in his pockets. “You are not to attempt to find your father. Leave it to me. Leave it to any one of us. I’ll put in calls to Kate and Dick, so they’ll be on the lookout as well. Because the worst thing you can do is make this personal. Do you understand?”

Cassandra nodded.

She understood.

But she didn’t like it.

“Allright,” Bruce said. “Barbara is going to take you home.”

Cassandra widened her eyes. She was getting benched? She opened her mouth to protest.

“I’m not benching you,” Bruce said. “But I do want you thinking clearly. And I’m betting you really want to hit something right now.”
“And we have a holo room for that don’t we?” Barbara asked, smiling.

Cassandra felt better about that. A little bit better. But…

She nodded. Bruce looked out into the room.

“Selina? Stephanie? The two of you want to team up for some shenanigans?”

“Sure,” said Selina.

“I plan on running for president on a pro-shenanigans platform,” Stephanie said. “So…”

Bruce patted her on the shoulder before he stood off to the side. Selina hugged her.

“If you want to swap shitty dad stories,” Selina said, “you come find me.”

Selina had only unlocked their embrace, when Stephanie swooped in and locked Cassandra in a hug as well.

“Take care of yourself, Cass.”

Cassandra deliberated silently to herself for a moment. Just a short, brief moment, before she whispered in Stephanie’s ear, soft enough so no one else could listen.

“I know… where he is.”

Which was true.

Stephanie pulled away. Her eyes were full of questions, that Cassandra could see, but her lips were almost smiling. Smiling in that way Stephanie had before she was about to do something that wasn’t strictly allowed. Like that time she found Babs’ porn stash on the Clock Tower main computer.

“So… I’ll get in touch with you tomorrow?” Stephanie asked, loading the question as much as she could.

Cassandra nodded.

Bruce had told her not to make this personal. Not to go after him.

But it was her father.

It was her problem.

“Great,” Stephanie said. “And when you sleep tonight, dream Connery dreams.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes.

Before she put on her helmet as she sat on the back of Babs’ motorcycle, she could hear Bruce and Selina talking to one another.

“Connery? Why would Cass be dreaming about Sean Connery?”

Selina sighed. “The World’s Greatest Detective, and you haven’t figured this one out yet?”

“Figured what out?”

“You know, I should just leave you like this,” Selina said. “Just watch you suffer. But you’re lucky
There are few things creepier than an elementary school at midnight.

It’s a place given to light. To laughter. To crying. To the dreary recitation multiplication tables. It is a place of color, meant to house drawings and picture books. It is a place given to life.

Nighttime does it no favors. A loud place eerily silent. A colorful place muted. A place built for life completely robbed of it.

Batwoman tried to think of a place creepier. All she could think of was a casino with all the lights and machines on, but no one inside.

Kate Kane, who had spent the last year and a half fighting crime under the costumed nom-de-guerre of “Batwoman,” knew creepy. Creepy was her stock and trade. Over her relatively brief tenure, Batwoman had become well-acquainted with the concept. Of the whopping seven crime-fighting vigilantes in Gotham City (eight, if one counted the mysterious Bluebird of Bleake Island, of whom Batwoman had to remind herself, as they weren’t in Batman’s little network), Batwoman was the go-to for magic and the occult.

She was in an unofficial offshoot of the Justice League which informally called itself “Justice League Dark.” If something went bump in the night, the Justice League Dark were the ones who found it and dealt with it. It was home to a few revolving members like Madame Xanadu, Blue Devil, Katana, Shade the Changing Girl, and Raven on those rare days when she wasn’t evil. Enchantress as well, on those rare minutes she wasn’t evil, and not futzing about with Amanda Waller’s idiotic little Suicide Squad. And Swamp Thing, when he wasn’t… communing with the blades of grass, or whatever the hell he did. But the mainstays were John Constantine, Zatanna, Detective Chimp, and herself.

They weren’t officially Justice League, so they didn’t get paid.

It didn’t matter to Batwoman, as her civilian identity was loaded. But the complaining from Detective Chimp was endless. He was an immortal with an alcohol problem which, by his math, was equal to supporting two-point-eight children.

It was Constantine that told her what was going down tonight.

An item of magical antiquity, The Blade of Resurrection, had been stolen from Shadowcrest, which had been the home of the Zatara family for many generations, dating back to their time in Europe. Shadowcrest was a magical place, never known to be in the same place for very long. Inside were pocket dimensions, magical wards, spectral guards, enough defenses to render a layman to literal putty. Putty that retained its soul, and could talk.

Needless to say, the daring soul who broke into Shadowcrest to steal The Blade was no layman. The person or persons who would attempt such a thing were either adept in magic to a terrifying degree, or were protected from upon high by a presence with enough power that would have to qualify as divine.

All these Gods running around, and here Kate Kane was Jewish.

The Blade itself vanished form the grid, with no mentions in The Oblivion Bar, or through the usual channels that Constantine and Detective Chimp utilized for information.

Then, just yesterday, Constantine got a bite. A guy who knew a guy, who talked to a guy, who
tended bar to one of John Constantine’s old Mucous Membrane band members told him that a deal was going to go down.

And it was going down in Gotham.

Which led to Batwoman, perched in a tree outside of Thomas Jefferson Elementary School at midnight. Creepy though it was.

The school was on the edge of town, on the mainland, right there before suburbs gave way to the fields and grasses that bordered Slaughter Swamp.

She’d bugged the place as soon as the sun went down. It was easy. The school was supposed to be empty for winter break anyway. All she had to do was avoid the one security guard.

The audio surveillance equipment that she’d installed in every room of the one story structure was discrete and well-hidden. The only thing that bothered her was the school gymnasium, which was its own separate building, and quite large. It was an acoustic nightmare, given to monstrous reverb. If the deal was going down in there, then Batwoman seriously questioned whether or not any of the audio would be salvageable.

Batwoman had been perched in the only tree on the grounds that still had leaves on its branches with which to conceal herself. She’d been here for four hours on a freezing December night.

Until twelve, when a black coupe pulled into the parking lot. The driver and a second person (a bodyguard maybe?), both male, both in long trench coats, walked from the parking lot to the front door of the school. One of them was carrying an ornate wooden box before him. Almost reverentially.

The feed in Batwoman’s cowl was set for sound detection. No sense in fiddling from bug to bug on the fly. Whatever room they entered, the corresponding audio device that she’d installed would activate automatically. For the past few hours, she’d been listening to the footsteps of that one lone security guard she’d had to avoid.

Batwoman had to squint, but she could have sworn that the two men who’d arrived in the black coupe were picking the lock of the main entrance.

Which would put them right in the path of the security guard.

The sound of a gun being unholstered.

“What are you doing here?” the security guard asked.

Batwoman’s hand went to her grapnel gun, ready to swoop through a window on her side of the building at the first sign of trouble.

“We are rich men,” said one of the ones who came in the coupe in a gravelly voice. “Wandering the earth, trying to find worthy fellows such as yourself with whom to share our wealth.”

A rustle of cloth. The crumple of paper.

“Alright,” the security guard said. “Just, uhhh… Don’t break anything or get anything dirty, okay? The cleaners come in every other day, and I don’t wanna get an earful.”

“You need not worry.”
Batwoman took her hand off of her grapnel gun. She let out her breath. Her entire body unclenched.

The freshly-bribed security guard walked out the front door of the school to the parking lot, where his was the only vehicle other than the coupe.

For thirty-five minutes, neither of the two men in the school talked.

Until another vehicle, a black Cadillac Escalade, pulled into the school parking lot.

Four men, all in long black coats, exited the vehicle, and made their trek to the front door of the school.

Batwoman pressed the side of her cowl. A pair of lenses slid down over her eyes, and plugged in grainy green night-vision. She zoomed in.

Three non-descript white men followed a taller fourth. His face was pinched, as though he had just seen the neighbor’s dog take a dump on his lawn. His mouth was ringed with a dark goatee, and the black, greasy hair on his head draped over the collar of his coat.

Batwoman receded her night-vision lenses, and listened. The audio feed told her the meet was going down in room 205.

The art room.

Whose window Batwoman had a current line of sight from the tree in which she was perched.

The scuffle of four sets of dress shoes as they found the art room, and the two men within.

“Good evening.”

“Do you have it?”

“Yes.” The sound of fingers drumming on an ornate wooden box. “Do you have the payment?”

“Of course… Right here.”

**BANG! BANG!**

The window of the art room lit up with the light from two separate gunshots.

The buyers had just killed the sellers.

Batwoman leapt from the tree, spreading her black cape out.

She glided, the long red hair of her wig flowing behind her.

Batwoman brought her feet up as she made it to the window. She crashed through, taking out one of the four buyers as she did so.

She looked up and assessed the situation.

The two guys who came in the coupe were dead, over there next to the easels. The guy with the goatee was holding the ornate wooden box that no doubt held The Blade of Resurrection, standing there in the doorway, ready to make a break for it. His two goons were the only things standing between he and her.
“Deal with this!” cried the guy with the goatee, before he bolted from the room.

Another one of the goons ran from the room as well, leaving Batwoman to go mano-a-mano with the only one left.

The sole remaining henchman swung with a right, which Batwoman deftly dodged by leaning back. Once she stood up straight, she unleashed a right front kick, her red boot jacking his jaw with the kind of casualness reserved for reaching across a bed and turning off an alarm clock.

The goon’s eyes crossed, seemingly curious as to the number of the truck that just hit him.

So Batwoman did it again. The henchman fell into one of the desks, his back arched in a way that would have required ibuprofen once he awoke.

Kate Kane may have been teased in school for it, but Batwoman found a lot of advantages in being five-eleven. The ability to just kick people in the face without losing her balance being one of them.

Batwoman ran into the hallway to find Goatee and his other minion at the far end.

The other minion muttered something under his breath, in a language Batwoman didn’t understand, before he broke left to the rear of the school and Goatee, who was still clutching the wooden box, broke right to the front door.

Three murky, shadowy figures emerged in the hallway. One from the wall to the right. One from the floor. And one from the ceiling.

They started groaning in voices that were deep, rich, and ancient.

Batwoman sneered. “Dust Devils…”

Souls buried in cursed soil within the deepest chamber of the Paris catacombs, waiting to be summoned by those who knew the words. They manifest in dust, and grime, and common scum, which meant they could manifest almost anywhere in the world.

They were dangerous, incorporeal, prone to seeping into their victims’ tear ducts to possess them.

Thankfully, Batwoman had a solution for this.

She reached into the red utility belt around her waist, and procured a small capsule that had been made for her by Blue Devil. Wormwood, silver shavings, and ammonia to get the essences of all that gunk airborne.

Perfect for taking the “in” out of “incorporeal killing machines.”

Batwoman threw the capsule to the ground, and almost immediately the Dust Devils ceased their moaning, their gloppy personages beginning to harden in place. She kicked the one on the floor through the head, sent her fist through the one on the right, and launched a red batarang into the one coming from the ceiling. They all crumbled into dry, formless dirt.

Sorry, custodial staff…

Batwoman broke right after Goatee, and emerged through the front door of the school.

She looked off to the left and saw that Goatee wasn’t running for the parking lot. She looked off to the right, and saw that he was running for the football field, still carrying that box underneath his arm.
Batwoman gave pursuit, her breath coming out of her mouth in short bursts of fog in the cold
December evening air, like smoke from the stack of an old west train.

She stopped when she heard something.

It took Goatee a couple of seconds, but he stopped as well, right there on the fifty yard line.

It was a whistling sound. It started as soft, but got louder and louder as the seconds skipped along.

Batwoman instinctively backed up. She had enough military training from her abbreviated time at
West Point to know that that sound was closely associated with an incoming bomb.

Whatever it was made contact as the whistle became deafening. Both Batwoman and Goatee were
knocked off their feet, but because Goatee was closer to the point of impact, he was the one who was
knocked a few feet into the air as the foreign object made landfall.

BOOOOOOM!

It left a crater about six feet deep, and about as wide as an outdoor trampoline one could find in the
backyard of a suburban home. Both Batwoman and Goatee looked on in horror and surprise…

...until a figure emerged.

Batwoman sighed in relief. It was one of the few people who could descend upon a place at such a
high speed and with such colossal force that they could leave a crater like that.

And it was the only one who could emerge from that crater without a single speck of dirt landing
upon them.

Wonder Woman had decided to come to Gotham City.

She emerged from the crater, sword sheathed, shield at the ready, the Lasso of Hestia glowing at her
side.

Goatee scrambled to get away, but Wonder Woman grabbed the Lasso, and flung an end to him. It
wrapped around his leg as though possessed by an intelligence of its own.

Batwoman got to her feet as Wonder Woman pulled Goatee toward her. Wonder Woman grabbed
him by the lapel of his coat and raised him to her level, but she could say anything, Batwoman heard
a click! and Goatee’s head was wreathed in blue tendrils of electricity.

Goatee went limp in death.

Both Batwoman and Wonder Woman were surprised by this, but only Wonder Woman looked sad.
Batwoman supposed that the very essence of compassion itself would mourn the loss of every
terrorist, murderer, and henchman that died right in front of her.

Wonder Woman slowly lowered Goatee to the ground and closed his eyes, before she stood up
straight again.

“Electrified false teeth,” Wonder Woman said. “They send a jolt to the brain that would kill a person
instantly. It is quicker and cleaner than the cyanide that’s often used. And unfortunately for me, they
are immune to the Lasso, as it controls poison in addition to compelling the truth.

They both stood in silence for another moment, before Wonder Woman said “Hello, Kate.”
Batwoman opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

The last time that Kate Kane had met Princess Diana of Themyscira was this past Halloween at Bruce and Selina’s wedding… where Kate had semi-drunkly hit on her.

If Kate felt like being fair to herself, she could say that they weren’t even looking at each other at the time, and she couldn’t tell if the woman she’d been hitting on had been Diana or not.

But more often than not, Kate felt like being unfair to herself. The woman she’d been hitting on had an earthy voice with the barest trace of an accent, and even looking away, she’d been one of the few women at the wedding taller than the five-eleven Kate. Who the hell could it possibly be other than Wonder Woman?

“Uh… Hi.” Batwoman finally said.

“Might one ask what you are doing in such a place in the dead of night?” Wonder Woman asked. “Or would it be the height of impoliteness?”

“I, uhh… I got a lead from John Constantine,” Batwoman said. “Stolen magical artifact. The Blade of Resurrection. Our friend there was the buyer. He put a bullet a piece in the sellers.”

Wonder Woman nodded solemnly. “I take it that what you are looking for is in that wooden box?”

Batwoman looked down. The box lay next to Goatee’s corpse.

“Yeah,” Batwoman said. “That would be the one.”

Wonder Woman knelt down and picked up the box. When she arose again, she opened it.

“It is empty,” Wonder Woman said.

Batwoman closed her eyes. She almost said a dirty word beginning with an S to vent her frustration, but within the heart of Kate Kane she held the reverence that almost all women had for Wonder Woman. And so, swearing in front of her was out of the question.

Then again, so was hitting on her, but she managed to do that.

“There’s a goon unaccounted for,” Batwoman said. “He must have taken The Blade out of the box before they split up.”

“And he must be long gone by now.”

“Right.”

Wonder Woman held the box out. “Here.”

“Thanks,” Batwoman said, taking the box. “I can have this dusted for prints.”

“Or you could just take it home.”

Batwoman looked from the box to Wonder Woman, unblinking.

“It is a rather nice box, at any rate,” Wonder Woman said.

Batwoman finally blinked.
Is she making a joke?

“You will have to forgive me,” Wonder Woman said after a moment of silence, respooling the Lasso and putting it on her waist. “The business that brought me here now takes me elsewhere.”

Batwoman wondered precisely what that business was. But if swearing in front of Wonder Woman was a no-no, then questioning her motives must have been a thousand times worse.

“Have a good evening, Kate.”

Wonder Woman turned. She tensed to lift off into the air, and Batwoman was momentarily struck dumb by the grace and the power before her.

As the Princess of the Amazons lifted off into the air, Batwoman finally found her tongue.

“Thanks,” Batwoman said. “You too.”

“Done,” Crane said.

One had given Doctor Jonathan Crane a deadline of noon. He’d finished a whopping eight hours early. Six vials of Madam Crow’s Anti-Fear Toxin sitting on the small table in the middle of the impromptu laboratory that had been assembled in a storage building on Founders Island.

And as One looked them over, Jonathan Crane started shaking.

The flame that served as One’s head looked up. “Nervous?”

Crane said nothing. He just kept shaking.

“I thought Scarecrow wasn’t afraid of anything except Batman,” One said. “Do I look like Batman to you?”

Crane shook his head. “An autonomic response,” he said. “What happens when neither fight nor flight are an option. I’ve done what you ask. And now you are going to kill me.”

“Now why would I do a thing like that?” One asked.

Carne found enough anger in his involuntary fear to glare at One. “I’ve been in countless back rooms such as this for the past dozen or so years, needing something from someone else. And they all died.”

“Yeah,” One said. “But I’m not you. Hold out your hands.”

Crane stayed still.

One sighed, fished a handcuff key out of the pocket of his leather jacket, and displayed it.

“Hold ‘em out,” he said with more urgency.

Crane held out his trembling hands, and One uncuffed him.

“Now,” One said. “Stand over there next to that cabinet. Right there so I can keep an eye on you.”

Still shaking, Crane limped the few feet on his nine remaining toes, and stood next to a tall black
metal cabinet with a lock on it. One put the handcuff key back in the pocket of his jacket and fished out another ring of keys from the same pocket. He unlocked the cabinet, and removed a plastic grocery bag filled with clothes. He handed them to Crane.

“What are these?” Crane asked.

“Nice to know we just don’t hand out doctorates anymore,” One said. “They’re clothes.”

“For what purpose?”

“To get you out of your Arkham scrubs. I’m letting you go, dumbass.”

Crane stared at him uncomprehendingly, still trembling.

One sighed. “Go into the bathroom, and put your new clothes on. It kinda goes against the point of letting you go if you just get picked up again, looking like someone who just escaped an insane asylum.”

Crane, plastic bag of clothes in hand, still trembling but less so, turned around and started hobbling toward the bathroom. At the midway point of his journey, he stopped, turning back to look at One for a brief, confused moment, before going into the bathroom.

A little over two minutes later, Crane came out of the bathroom.

He was wearing bright orange Crocs on his feet. Nondescript, gray basketball shorts reached down past his knob-like knees. And draped across his scrawny torso was an oversized neon green t-shirt that said “I’M WITH STUPID” beneath an arrow pointing up.

“There we go,” One said. “Come with me.”

One took Crane by the arm, and slowly walked out of the impromptu laboratory, into an anteroom, and through another door.

It was a long hallway, about fifty feet, with a door at the end. They could both hear the traffic of Founders Island just beyond.


Crane just stared at him some more. His tremors had begun again.

“Dude,” One said. “I don’t know how I can state it any plainer. I’m letting you go. You did what I needed you to do. I’m not an asshole.”

Crane blinked, looked down, and looked back up.

“You blew off my big toe.”

“And you still have one left!” One said. “Now get the fuck out of here. Freedom awaits.”

Crane spared another moment to look at him, before he began his walk.

He shuffled down those fifty feet of corridor, a footstep followed by a brief slide from the foot that only had the four toes on it. But little by little, Jonathan Crane stopped trembling the closer he got to freedom.

He made it twenty-five of those fifty feet.
“Crane,” One said, his voice stern.

Crane started shaking again. A thin layer of sweat formed on his forehead as he turned around.

“Come here,” One said.

Crane paused a moment, his tremors almost overtaking him, before he stepped and limped those twenty-five feet back to One.

The flame that served as One’s head lowered as he and Crane stood toe to toe.

One reached into the interior of his leather jacket.

Crane closed his eyes.

And in his hand, One held… a roll of quarters.

“Bus fare,” One said.

Crane opened his eyes, and gawked at what One was holding in his hand.

“You’re going… to need… bus fare.”

Crane let his breath out in shock.

“Go on,” One said. “Take them.”

With his shaking right hand, Crane took the roll of quarters.

“Now that’ll get you public transpo. There’s a line that has a stop about a block west that’ll get you to the Greyhound station on the mainland, just off Tricorner. Once you get there, however…”

One reached into the back pocket of his leather pants and pulled out a worn fifty dollar bill.

“Buy a ticket to anywhere that’ll take you,” One said, pressing the fifty into Crane’s hand.

“Wh--Why?”

“Because it’s gonna get all manner of wacky in Gotham City the next few days,” One said. “No point in letting you go if you’re just gonna die during the fireworks show. Go on. Get out of here. Become a pharmacist in New Hampshire, or whatever. Start a new life. You need a guy to forge documents for you?”

“No.”

“’Cause I know a guy who can--”

“No,” Crane said. “No, thank you.”

“Alright,” One said. I don’t think I’m forgetting anything, so… skedaddle.”

Crane exhaled and turned around. He wasn’t shaking anymore. His step and slide was quicker, now. And one could not be faulted for seeing a mile start to form on the corner of his lips.

He made it ten… twenty… thirty… forty-five feet. Crane reached for the door, the traffic from outside sounding as beautiful as a symphony.
“Crane?”

He turned around.

One pulled a pistol from beneath his jacket, aimed, and fired. The report inside this long, narrow corridor was thunderous.

The bullet caught Crane in the chest, piercing his heart. He was dead before he hit the ground. Blood oozed from the bullet wound in his corpse like the foamy lava from a science fair baking soda volcano made by a D student.

One holstered his gun.

Then he started laughing.

Near the end of his fit of merriment, he heard a voice behind him.

“Jason, was that really necessary?”

One snapped his fingers twice behind his ear. The flame of his head was gone, replaced with the true form of Jason Todd.

“No,” Jason said, overcoming his laughter. “But… but it was funny.”

He looked up and saw Harmonia standing there, her robes covering her feet on the floor, her brown hair curly around her pretty, thin face. Her eyes were blue and tired.

“And don’t start playing the world’s smallest violin over spilled Scarecrow, alright?” Jason said.

“You know how many people he’s killed? Tortured with his experiments? I know from personal experience that there’s no Heaven, but what I just did would have gotten me there.”

“What if the Anti-Fear Toxin doesn’t work?” Harmonia asked.

“If it doesn’t work,” said Jason, “then I’d have shot him anyway. Y’know, it’s a good thing we have a giant hole under the new police precinct across the street perfect for stashing bodies. Otherwise I’d have to boost a car and take our friend Jonny-Boy out to Slaughter Swamp.”

“Yes,” Harmonia said, visibly uncomfortable with the conversation. “Yes, of course.”

Jason smirked. “You’re new to the whole Bad Guy thing, aren’t you?”

“I don’t consider my intent to be evil,” said Harmonia. “If anything, it’s the purest one I can find.”

“What is your intent?” Jason asked. “You snatch me out of thin air, say ‘here, Jason, get the revenge you always wanted if you do some things for me.’ I do those things, and I really don’t see what you get out of it. I mean besides making mobsters hate each other and getting Scarecrow so frightened he almost shits himself.”

Harmonia scowled. “Does it amuse you to swear oaths in front of a Goddess?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “Yes it does. Particularly since I know this Goddess can’t do anything about it.”

Harmonia’s scowl deepened.

“If you’re gonna smite,” Jason said, “you best get to it.”
“The Gods of Olympus are stronger than you realize,” Harmonia said.

“But don’t you count on actual worshippers? How many of those can there be in the twenty-first century?”

“More than you think,” Harmonia said. “We have a small trickle of new worshippers. We have ever since Athena’s clay abomination made her presence felt.”

“Who?”

“Wonder Woman.”

“Oh.”

“But you are right,” Harmonia said. “Bringing forth yourself and your cohort has left me weakened. Right now, disappearing from one place and appearing in another is all I can do successfully.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “About Two. He still off on his playdate with our white-haired friend?”

“They are currently waiting to spring a trap on The Orphan,” Harmonia said. “Spreading the forces that defend this cesspool of a city thinner and thinner.”

“Okay,” Jason said. “What does he get out of all this?”

“Cain?”

“No,” Jason said. “Two. I just want to kill one guy. What does he want?”

“A place of standing in a misbegotten world.”

“Sounds like you’re going to make him King,” Jason said.

“No” said Harmonia. “He wants to be something so much more rich and fulfilling than King.”

“Which would be?”

Harmonia folded her arms and levelled her gaze at Jason.

“He wants to be *Batman*...”
Chapter 6: Out of Our Heads

Batman, Catwoman, and Spoiler patrolled Gotham City on an apparently uneventful night until three-thirty AM, until Batman called it, and everyone went home.

Save himself.

Once a week, Batman was forced to have an early night.

He had to go to therapy.

“The wedding was a bad idea.”

Once a week, at four AM, the staff at Arkham Asylum had to clear the intra-patient therapy cells of the therapy block. Four cells all facing each other, and these poor folks who were being rehabilitated had to be moved into the common area for ninety minutes.

All save one.

Doctor Harleen Quinzel, one-time henchman and lover of The Joker (and the person who killed The Joker, as fate would have it) was a licensed psychoanalyst. In order to get perks in Arkham--namely sharing a cell with her current girlfriend, Pamela “Poison Ivy” Isley--she volunteered to conduct therapy sessions with some of her fellow patients.

And Batman, fresh off of his duel with The Undying two Julys ago, felt he needed professional help. Assistance to deal with his trauma. Guidance on a way to move forward in his life.

That Bruce Wayne went to Harley Quinn for therapy was far from ideal for both of them. But Bruce couldn’t be truthful with a conventional therapist without compromising the identities of people he cared deeply for.

And if the psychopathic murder clown just took leave of her senses one day and started screaming to the heavens that Bruce Wayne was Batman, no one would believe her.

At the present moment Bruce Wayne, still in his Batman outfit from the neck down, tossed his cowl from glove to glove.

“You said getting married to Selina was a great idea,” Bruce said. “I showed you the engagement ring. You made a squeeing noise.”

“Oh, I didn’t say getting married was a bad idea,” Harley said as she sat cross-legged on her bunk in her cell. The legs of her Arkham scrubs had been trimmed down to hot pants, and the opposite ends of her orange scrub shirt were tied beneath her breasts. Bruce remembered thinking, the day Harley murdered The Joker, that The Joker dressed her that way to amuse himself, as he’d found someone who wouldn’t tell him ‘no.’

He had apparently been wrong about both things. As the bullet to The Joker’s back and the mallet to The Joker’s head stated rather definitively that she had hit her limit with her not-so-dearly departed boyfriend. And here she was, almost five years later, still dressing provocatively.
At any rate, Bruce felt that the man in a cape and body armor at the current moment was in no position to judge anyone on how they dressed.

“You gettin’ married to Kittycat was a great idea!” Harley said. “The two-a you cleanin’ each other’s pipes on the reg’s been great for the city. Crime’s down, and I even see you smiling every one in a while.”

“There’s more to marriage than sex.”

“It’s the fun part, though.”

Bruce couldn’t argue with that.

“Naw, what I’m sayin’ is, the wedding was a bad idea,” Harley said. “Gettin’ all those people together, some-a whom ya done dirty. Got yelled at by Starfire.”

“Yes,” Bruce said. “She said it was a display of strength.”

“She was right,” Harley said. “About that part at least. I dunno about the other stuff, about you gettin’ your people hurt, but about that one part, she was right.”

“If you were to… hypothesize,” Bruce said, “about my state of mind when I planned that wedding, what would you say?”

“I’d say ya thought ya beat therapy,” Harley said.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Harley said, a squeak coming into her voice. “But can’t no body beat therapy, not even you.”

Harley leaned in, staring at Bruce, sitting there on the bunk on the opposite end of the cell.

“Ya know how no one ever said ‘I used to be an alcoholic,’ or ‘I was a drug addict?’ That’s ‘cause recovery takes the rest-a your life. Ya can’t beat you. Not without dyin’ anyway.”

“I know that, but…”

“You’re screwy, is what I’m tellin’ ya.”

“I know that, but… it might have been a show of force, but I wanted to put myself out there. I wanted to get on as good of terms with my teammates as possible.”

“And how were ya gonna do that? Ya gonna give ‘em free food and booze? Bein’ on the defensive like that, tryin’ ta mend a friendship from higher ground, is the act-a someone who wants ta forgive. Not-a someone seekin’ forgiveness. Whaddya have to forgive alla them for? You’re the one who sucks.”

Bruce glowered at Harley.

“Don’t lookit me like that,” Harley said. “Ya don’t pay me to lie to ya… Ya don’t pay me at all, come ta think.”

Which wasn’t true. Bruce put money equivalent to the billable hours of the highest paid shrinks in Gotham into an account, the contents of which would be given to her in a check upon her release from Arkham Asylum. He hadn’t told her. He wanted to see the look on her face.
“So how’s the relationship between you and Starfire now?” Harley asked.

“There isn’t one,” said Bruce. “Dick said that they wouldn’t be on speaking terms until she apologized in person.”

“And?”

“And they’re not on speaking terms.”

“Have you tried apologizin’?”

“I was apologizing while she was reading me the riot act,” Bruce said. “She wouldn’t hear it.”

“I’m gonna tell ya somethin’.”

“Okay.

“It’s not gonna be somethin’ ya like.”

“Why start now?”

“Sometimes,” Harley said, “there ain’t no fixin’ what ya broke.”

“So… I’ll never have a decent relationship with Starfire?”

“Pretty much,” Harley said. “But seriously, has the air between the two-a you ever been clear? She just ain’t had the opportunity ta tell ya.”

“And she picked my wedding day to do it?”

“Her pain ain’t gonna take a day off just ‘cause yer wearin’ a tux,” Harley said. “If I were in her shoes, I wouldn’t-a done it myself. But she felt she needed to do it. Sometimes there’s situations where you’re both wrong, and there ain’t no winner. And that’s one-a yer problems. Ya gotta hang-up on winnin’. Life ain’t a title-fight, B-Man.”

Bruce rubbed his face, embarrassment welling up beneath him. “It’s… It’s not my relationship with Starfire that I’m worried about. It’s her relationship with Dick. I don’t want the two of them being silent with each other over me. That’s… That’s a thing good people worry about, right?”

“Yeah!” Harley said with a smile on her face. “Have ya talked to Dick about this? Tell him to let bygones be bygones with her?”

“I, uh… I don’t think I should.”

“Lemme guess,” Harley said. “Ya meddle in this, ya fear you’re provin’ her right by having someone you look at like a son livin’ his life on your say-so.”

“That’s about right,” Bruce said. “I don’t want their relationship to be frayed. They used to be deeply in love some years back. Even though they’re both dating other people now, they’re still friends. Now they’re on the outs because of my actions. But if I interfere, anything that comes after that stems from my involvement. Which is at the base of Starfire’s issues with me.”

“Ya feel like ya learned anything from all-a this?”

Bruce furrowed his brow. “How do you mean?”
“Tell me how the newbies are gettin’ on with ya,” Harley said, leaning back against the wall. “Start with Kate.”

“Kate is… independent,” Bruce said. “Strong-willed. I find it strange that the one who’s actually related to me by blood is the one who wound up being the black sheep, but…”

“That’s an interestin’ phrase,” Harley said. “She upset ya, or…”

“Not like that,” Bruce said. “She’s part of the network, but she spends most of her time working outside of it. She’s making most of her bones with the Justice League Dark. Like I said, she’s independent.”

“Think ya might have anything else in common?” Harley asked.

Bruce thought about this for a moment. “There is… Like me, she has another persona. There’s Batwoman, and then there’s Kate Kane, but then there’s another version of Kate Kane that she wishes to project in public. A more confident version of herself.”

“Yup,” Harley said. “That's kinda… y'know... obvious.”

“The difference,” Bruce said, “is that she’s… she’s really bad at it.”

THE PISMO DINER - LATER THAT MORNING

Even a destination as prosperous and gleaming as Founders Island has to have a greasy spoon diner somewhere. Somewhere that the less well-off tourists could kick up their dogs, and have something high in carbs and low on cost.

And it is here, the Pismo Diner, that we find such a place. Fifties style, seventies prices, and caloric intake from an era pre-Dawn of Man, when the most consumed dishes on earth were mammoth haunch and whale blubber.

In the booth at the rear of the diner, the only customers in the Pismo as the present moment in fact, Kate Kane sat across from her father, Retired Army Colonel Jacob Kane.

It had been a dream of Kate’s, since the murder of her mother and her twin sister at the hands of terrorists in Belgium, that she would follow in the footsteps of her parents, and join the United States Army.

She was kicked out of West Point under Don’t Ask Don’t Tell one year before the law was repealed.

Kate became Batwoman instead, and her father, far from being thrilled at this development initially, eventually warmed up to the idea and decided to help her out.

“So how does it work?” Jacob asked. He had a cup of coffee in front of him, as well as hash browns smothered in ketchup. Kate had coffee and an egg white omelette.

“Okay,” Kate said, tugging at the collar of her red turtleneck. “You take the Blade of Resurrection…”

“Right.”

“... draw a little bit of your own blood…”
“Does it matter from where?”

“Not to my knowledge, no. You draw a little bit of your own blood, drip that blood onto the corpse, and the corpse comes back to life.”

“Like a zombie?”

“No,” Kate said. “It’s a Blade of Resurrection, not a Blade of Reanimation. Detective Chimp tells me those are two different blades.”

“Uh… huh.”

“And the resurrected person has to do what you say,” Kate said. “Your souls are bound together, or something.”

“Or something,” Jacob said. “And that’s what you were looking for last night?”

“That’s what got away from me last night,” Kate said. “Before Wonder Woman swooped down and made a crater.”

Jacob sighed. “You’re a soldier. How you got caught up in this hoodoo wackity-shmackity is beyond me.”

“It’s really not too different conventional ops,” Kate said.

Jacob ran his fingers through his close-cropped red hair. “You just said ‘Blade of Resurrection,’ ‘Blade of Reanimation,’ ‘Wonder Woman,’ and ‘Detective Chimp’ in one conversation without a single change to the look on your face. You’ve forgotten how silly this all is.”

“Because it’s not silly,” Kate said. “It’s scary. Remind me, and I’ll tell you how I know Swamp Thing.”

“So do you have any…”

Kate’s phone rang. Her personal phone, not her superhero work phone. She held up her finger to shush Jacob as she took it out of the pocket of her peacoat and looked at the screen.

The number was unlisted.

Kate braced herself for the robocall she was no doubt going to get as she answered.

“Hello?”

“Good morning, is this Kate?” asked a woman on the other end of the line.

“Yes it is,” Kate said. “May I ask who’s calling?”

“It’s Diana,” the woman on the other end of the line said.

Kate blinked.

“Diana,” Kate said, it not being a question. Jacob’s eyebrows raised.

“Yes.”

“Of Themyscira.”
“Yes.”

Jacob’s eyebrows raised even higher.

There was a version of herself that Kate Kane liked to be whenever the situation or the company in which she found herself was unfavorable. And Kate, who smelled danger everywhere, had to admit that this version of herself got a lot of use.

She called it “The Kate Kane Advertisement.” Distant, aloof, and supercool, the Kate Kane Advertisement wanted nothing, unlike the real Kate Kane, who’d had the affliction of seeing the things she wanted taken away from her in the most brutal and heartbreaking ways possible.

Kate sat up straight, furrowed her brow, and asked “Might I ask how you got this number?”

“It was in the Justice League directory.”

“I’m not officially in the League though.”

“The League and its affiliates are in the directory. Truth be told, we got all the numbers from Batman.”

“Well, I learn something new everyday,” Kate said. “How might I help you this morning?”

“Actually,” Diana said, “this is about how I can help you.”

“Yes,” Diana said again. “I’ve a lead on a man, Konstantin Fotos. Have you heard of him?”

“I can’t say I have.”

“He’s an occult buyer,” Diana said. “His financial records show that he brought round trip tickets from National City to Gotham. The same as three other men. The second flight left earlier this morning. If you make it to National City somehow, you can catch he and The Blade before they leave the country.”

“You’re sure The Blade is going to leave the country?”

“National City isn’t known for its occult congregations,” Diana said.

“And you’re sure it’s this Fotos guy?”

“Positive,” Diana said. “The other three men in his group were apprehended last night, correct?”

“Right,” said Kate. “Which means if he were taken in by GCPD last night, then he wouldn’t have left on that plane this morning. This is very helpful, Diana, thank you.”
“You are most welcome.”

And then there was silence.

Three seconds of silence long enough and awkward enough to see an acorn bloom into an oak tree. Kate had to wonder: who was committing the social faux-pas in this situation? She or Diana?

“Anyway,” Diana finally said, “I must let you go.”

“Alright,” Kate said. “Thanks again for calling. You have a good day.”

“You as well,” Diana said. “Goodbye.”

“Bye.”

Kate hung up.

And her father just stared at her.

“What?” Kate asked, going from stiff and formal to peevish at a speed that could have caused whiplash in anyone else.

“Diana.”

“Yeah.”

“Of Themyscira.”

“Yeah.”

“On your personal phone.

“Don’t… don’t make this something it isn’t. She is a co-worker giving me information about dangerous people who have their hands on a dangerous thing.”

Jacob Kane drew in some air through his nose. He pushed his plate of hash browns forward on the table a little bit so he could fold his hands, looking to the world as though he was giving his daughter a job interview.

“I learned you were a lesbian,” Jacob said softly so the waitress wouldn’t overhear, “after you were kicked out of West Point. You didn’t come out to me. I had to learn it second-hand. Far from being angry with you, I was thrilled that you did not lie to save yourself. You kept your honor. Is this true?”

“Yeah,” Kate said, wondering where this was going.

“Furthermore,” Jacob said, “I have apologized to you for any homophobic or sexist comments I might have made before I knew you were gay. In addition, I have not tried to relate to you falsely just because we’re both attracted to women. That is just one thing we have in common, and our journeys in life are very different. That’s something I need to respect.”

There wasn’t a whole lot to forgive on that front. As far as Kate could recall, Jacob hadn’t made any sexist or homophobic comments, before or after he found out she was gay. Jacob Kane’s mind apparently just didn’t operate like that.

“Right,” Kate said.
Alright,” Jacob said. “Now… all of this being said…”

Jacob raised his hand above the table.

“Up top.”

“What?”

“Up top.”

Kate blinked.

“Wonder Woman called you on your personal phone. You have a work phone. She called you on your personal phone. She is interested in you.”

Kate was aghast at the very notion that Wonder Woman could be interested in her, let alone someone just coming out and saying it. It was like jinxing the entire sport of baseball, and not just one team.

“Wo–Wonder Woman isn’t…”


Kate sighed.

Then she high-fived her dad.

It appeared to mean so much to him, after all.

“What about that one kid?” Harley asked. She held her hand a few feet above the floor. “Yay high, Asian, never shuts up?”

“Cassandra,” Bruce said.

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

Bruce sighed and simmered. “Her father is in town looking for her.”

“You mean the guy who… who did all that to her?”

“Yes.”

“Wow… that guy’s a butthole.”

“He most certainly is,” Bruce said. “I told her not to pursue him. To stay away from him at all costs.”

“Hmmm,” Harley said. “That the best course-a action, there?”

Bruce shifted on the bunk. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Why would it be, though?”

“Because,” Bruce said, “if you make this personal, you get… um…”

“Mistah J?” Harley asked, her face the soul of innocence.
“Right,” Bruce said. “I didn’t want to…”

“I’m the one who killed him,” Harley said. “Ain’t no eggshells ya need to walk on. He ain’t even the most memorable kill I’ve had, neither. I once killed a security guard with the fifth Harry Potter book.”

Bruce didn’t know what to say to that.

“It was the paperback version, too,” Harley said. “So it took a while. But you was sayin’ that you didn’t want Cassandra goin’ after her pops ‘cause you don’t want a big, bloody, archnemesis situation-type-deal goin’ on.”

“Right,” Bruce said. “A lot of people get hurt that way.”

“Ya ever stop to consider that he was gonna be her archnemesis anyway, and you tellin’ her not to find him is just gonna make her find him faster?”

“I don’t want Cassandra making the same mistakes I did.”

“Some mistakes,” Harley said, “just gotta be made.”

Bruce could feel himself deflating.

“I mean, if you had Joe Chill himself, sittin’ right next to me on this bunk, you wouldn’t sock him in the jaw before ya took him to Gotham Central?”

Bruce opened his mouth to deny it, then closed it when he found he couldn’t.

“‘Personal,’” Harley said with a mocking tone. “‘Jeez. Blood’s gonna make it personal, B-Man. The only thing’s gonna stop her is her.’”

As Bruce sat to consider this, he was distracted by Harley giggling.

“What is it?” Bruce asked.

“I just realized,” Harley said. “I know your first name, and I can still call ya ‘B-Man.’”

THE CLOCK TOWER - EVEN LATER THAT MORNING

“End program.”

The Hong Kong rooftop upon which Cassandra Cain had just been standing dematerialized. All of the ninjas that she’d just been fighting in a never-ending gauntlet for the past three hours had vanished. And she was once again in the drab gray and circular confines of the Clock Tower holo room.

Her knuckles and her feet were the good kind of sore. As soon as she stepped out of the holo room and into the top floor of the Clock Tower, the meticulous climate control of the top floor almost snap-froze all of the sweat oozing out of her body.

When she was alone in the Clock Tower, when Babs was out of town or out an errands (like she was today), she worked out in a black tank top and gray basketball shorts that came down to the knee. No one was around to gawk at her scars. And after her shower, she’d be back in her jeans and sweatshirt just in time for when Babs came back.
Her bare feet took in the softness of the carpet as she made her way to the mini fridge next to the computer to get a bottle of water.

There was a buzzing over the Clock Tower loudspeaker.

Someone was at the main door.

Cassandra rolled her eyes. The Clock Tower got these visits two or three times a week. Delivery men dropping off computer equipment for Babs to do… computer stuff. Cassandra didn’t know.

She stopped her quest for water mid-journey, and headed to the door that led to the stairwell. The delivery guys were usually gone by the time Cassandra got down there, and she didn’t know how computer equipment reacted to the cold of a December morning. There’d be no one there to gawk at her, so she didn’t particularly feel the need to dress in anything less revealing than that which she was in at the present moment.

She got down to the bottom floor, and opened the door that led to the street.

The delivery man was still there.

No…

No, this wasn’t a delivery man.

He was wearing jeans and a leather jacket over a green and black plaid button-up. He was wearing glasses over steely blue eyes, and his hair was coal black, and short like a Roman soldier’s. And he was brawny. As if in contrast to his relatively hulking stature, he held in his hand a chocolate ice cream cone out in front of him, as though it would ward off evil spirits.

This was not a delivery man.

This was Conner Kent.

The first thing Cassandra did, before Conner could open his mouth, was gasp as though she’d seen a spider.

The second thing she did was slam the door in his face.

It was only with the noise from the slammed door echoing in the stairwell that Cassandra realized what she had just done.

Cassandra was wearing clothes that, ideally, she wouldn’t be wearing in front of the boy she… she… in front of the boy that liked her. She could no doubt peek out the door and tell him to wait here while she went up and dressed in something that would conceal her scars, but even trying to think about which words to put in which order made her brain feel like it was short-circuiting.

She could only think of one word to say right now.

“Shit,” Cassandra said.

She opened the door to the street again, and peeked out.

Conner’s back was to her as he was walking down the street with his head down. In her mind, Cassandra could hear the same piano music from the Charlie Brown cartoon about the emaciated Christmas tree that Babs made her watch a couple of nights ago.
She fought the urge to giggle at the association, and then called out to him.

“Conner?”

Conner Kent’s head popped right back up, and he jogged back to her, slow enough so as not to spill the ice cream cone he had in his hand.

“Uh… Hi,” Conner said.

“Hello,” said Cassandra.

Conner handed her the ice cream cone. “I heard chocolate was your favorite, so…”

He was right. Chocolate was her favorite.

“Thank you,” she said.

And they just stood there, out in the cold, both trying to figure out what to say.

Cassandra didn’t know what Babs’ rules on boys were, but it wasn’t like they were going to do anything. So…

“Would you… like… to come upstairs?”

Conner had a look on his face as though he had been offered a trunk of Spanish doubloons, apropos of absolutely nothing.

“Oh,” he said. “Um, sure.”

Cassandra nodded, and waved him inside.

They took the freight elevator up to the top floor. She didn’t want to eat the ice cream cone in front of Conner, as she didn’t want him to see the messy and quite frankly atrocious way she ate ice cream.

She pointed at it, and said “Freezer.”

“Oh,” Conner said. “Okay.”

On the elevator ride up, she had an opportunity to read Conner’s body language. Far from locking himself down, nervousness was positively spilling out of every pore of his body. His shoulders were upraised. He kept dry-washing his hands. He kept looking up at the ceiling of the freight elevator and not at her.

She asked…

“Why are you… here?”

…and knew immediately that that didn’t sound right at all.

“To see you?” Conner asked.

Cassandra nodded.

“Well,” Conner said. “I mean… I… You know what I think about you, right?”

Cassandra nodded again.
“And I know you know,” Conner said. “And it just... it just kinda dawned on me that I’ve fought Fallout.”

Cassandra blinked.

“You know who Fallout is?” Conner asked. “Big guy, radiation powers, really dangerous? He’s a Flash guy normally, but...”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, fighting him was a blast,” Conner said. “No pun intended. And I figured, y’know, if I fight him and have fun, w-why should I be scared of... of, uh...”

He trailed off and looked at the floor.

Once the elevator stopped at the top floor, Cassandra led Conner through the door that led to the main room of the Clock Tower. Oracle’s sanctum. And as soon as she put the ice cream cone in the freezer, she immediately, instinctively, she crossed her arms, trying to hide as much of the scars as humanly possible.

“Um... Can I say something?” Conner asked.

Cassandra narrowed her eyes and nodded.

Without looking at her, Conner said “Someone told me that if you have a scar that you’re stronger than the thing that tried to kill you? If that’s true, you must be stronger than a lot of fuckin’ people. So, uh... Yeah...”

Conner tried to look anywhere except as Cassandra. From how he held himself, she knew he was embarrassed at what he’d just said. That he tried to pay her a compliment, and he felt as though it had come out wrong.

But what Conner did not know was that this was the single nicest thing anyone had ever said about her scars.

Or at least the most relatable. Alfred and Bruce both said they were sorry for what had happened to her, and that someone so young shouldn’t bear so many. Babs looked like she was going to puke the first time she saw them. Steph just said that they didn’t matter. But Conner saw them as a mark of strength, which just...

Cassandra uncrossed her arms, and immediately felt the slightest bit at peace with herself... which was a new feeling for her.

She pointed to the couch on the far end of the room.

“Sit,” she said, and knew immediately that that sounded off.

But Conner did it anyway, and Cassandra sat down as well. She left a cushion of the couch between them for space.

And they sat.

And sat.

And sat some more, neither of them venturing a word, until Cassandra finally took the initiative.
“How did you… get here?”

“I flew,” Conner said.

“Plane?”

Conner held his arms out with clenched fists, a sitting down impression of Superboy in flight.

“Oh, she said.

And then they sat some more.

The one question that Cassandra Cain had had since Bruce and Selina’s wedding came bubbling out of her mouth. And once it did, she instantly felt terrified.

“Why?” she asked.

Conner finally looked her in the eye. He really did look like a young Clark Kent. The glasses sold it.

“I… I told you,” he said. “Fallout, and…”

Cassandra shook her head. “Why… Why me?”

Conner cleared his throat. “Well, um… Uh… I saw this picture of you that Tim took of you and Steph at Wayne Manor. You were smiling, and uh… and I think you have a really pretty smile.”

Cassandra had watched Babs look at YouTube videos of kittens, and almost every time, Babs had always said “Awwwwww.”

And why… why… why did Cassandra feel like doing that now?

“I mean,” Conner said, his entire upper body bunching up trying to save the situation. “I mean, I know that guys that tell women they should smile more are assholes, okay? I know that. I mean, if you want a girl to smile more, tell some jokes. Or be nice to her. I… I have no problem earning it, is what I’m saying.”

Cassandra couldn’t testify herself to any of that, but right now, she was preoccupied with his body language. He was talking too much with his hands. Getting defensive.

He was hiding something.

“What else?” Cassandra asked.

Conner looked away. “I mean, it’s a general… y’know, it’s a…”

He was still hiding something. She knew he couldn’t bring himself to lie, so he was talking to fill air. Tim did it all the time.

One of the things that Babs had talked to her about in their early days of living together was that Cassandra had a habit of being… handsy. She liked to reach out and touch people’s faces when they were struggling or in pain. She could barely speak, so it was the only way she could communicate sympathy. That she meant no harm. But Babs said that not everyone would be receptive to that approach. In fact, some might be almost violently averse.

Cassandra decided to risk it.
She reached out with her right hand and gently cupped the side of Conner’s face, pulling his gaze back at her. She felt a faint bit of stubble beneath her palm, and she wondered how Kryptonians (or clones of Kryptonians) shaved.

“What… else?”

Looking in Conner’s eyes, she knew that he was helpless. Like the poor souls trapped in Wonder Woman’s Truth Lasso. She knew just from looking at him that his parting with the information that he was about to part with might actually cause him physical pain. He actually winced as he told Cassandra…

“I think you have a really nice ass.”

Conner deflated. She could see that he came here with the best intentions, and they had gone disastrously awry. The one thing that he had no doubt told himself to never ever say, even under penalty of death, didn’t even last through a touch on the cheek and a look in the eye from the girl he liked.

But while she was processing that, one thought lit up the exterior of Cassandra’s brain.

_I do?

Conner tried to get up. “I really think I should…”

Cassandra gently placed a hand on the shoulder of Conner’s leather jacket.

“Wait here,” she said.

She got up off the couch and went to the bathroom.

She came back seconds later with a hand mirror.

There was a mirror next to Babs’ computer, and using that and the hand mirror, she got a look at her own posterior.

She didn’t see the appeal. She even pressed the hem of her shorts against the back of her scarred thigh to get a better idea of the general shape.

Cassandra had heard guys on TV saying such-and-such woman had a nice ass, but never did she expect that someone would say that about her. If Cassandra had been honest with herself, she’d have said that other than bathing and going to the bathroom, she gave her own backside no thought at all.

She wished she could ask Conner what precisely it was about her ass that made the volunteering of such information so painful. That made such a belief so heartfelt.

But she didn’t have the words for it. So all she could do right now was scrunch up her face in a questioning expression, and give a thumbs up.

Conner, who from Cassandra’s vantage point was regretting the day he had ever been cloned, looked away, and said “Well, I certainly think so.”

Cassandra looked again at the reflection of herself.

She just didn’t get how someone could fixate on one part of a person’s body like that.
Cassandra was about to tell Conner she didn’t get it when she noticed something.

He was still wearing his leather jacket.

It was covering up his arms.

She had patted him on the shoulder mere seconds ago, but she barely remembered it because there was a layer of animal hide between her hand and his arm, and… and…

Oh, okay, now she got it.

Conner got up. “I really should go.”

No he didn’t.

Cassandra wanted to tell him that, but he was walking quickly to the door. Cassandra followed him, because that’s what hosts did with their guests.

Only when he reached the door, did Conner stop moving.

Altogether.

She could tell he was in the grip of something, but she knew not what, until he finally spoke.

“I’m a clone,” he said softly. “Believe it or not, I’m only two years old. I was grown in a tank, I was designed to be a weapon. But… the thing is, I’m trying. I’m trying really hard to be a person. To do the things people do.”

He finally looked at her. His cheeks were red. His eyes seemed extra shiny. It may have been the glasses or the light or something.

“And I can see, y’know? I can tell just by looking that, um… that you’re trying just as hard as I am.”

Cassandra remembered one time, when she was getting a glass of ice water from the refrigerator, a cube of ice bounced off the rim of her plastic cup and clattered to the floor. And rather than pick it up, she sat cross-legged on the floor and watched it. Minutes dragged on as she stared at the ice cube simply melt, before she got a paper towel to mop it up.

And she remembered this because the same thing was happening in her chest right now.

A teenage boy was open and emotionally vulnerable with the girl he liked.

So this naturally meant that he needed to avert his eyes and leave immediately.

“I’ll see you later,” Conner said as the door closed.

And Cassandra was so wrapped up in her own thoughts that she didn’t say “Bye” until after he had left.

She thought boys were a distraction.

And this was true.

For the few minutes that Conner was on the top floor of the Clock Tower, Cassandra Cain hadn’t thought about the fact that her father was in town. That he was coming to get her. That she was going out tonight, against Bruce Wayne’s wishes, to stop him before he took another life. That he
thought tearing out the throat of another human being was a suitable enough message for his own
daughter.

Cassandra went to the freezer, got the chocolate ice cream cone that Conner Kent had bought her,
and started eating it.

She thought the distraction could last a bit longer.

“Did Tim ask you to dance at the wedding?”

“Yup.”

“And did you have to destroy him when you turned him down?”

“Yuuuuuup.”

Harley started giggling. The sound was strange to Bruce. All those years capering with a man
dressed like a clown, and Bruce had never heard her giggle or laugh until these therapy sessions.

“So--So how is Robin three-point-oh?”

Bruce hunched up and simmered.

“He wants to be the best Robin.”

“Is he?”

“Why does everyone expect me to rank them?”

“What’s so wrong with wantin’ ta be the best at the job you love?” Harley asked.

“He takes every slight thing that goes wrong as a reflection of his suitability for the job,” Bruce said.
“He almost had a fit a couple of nights ago because he got punched in the face.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“And ya don’t think your disapproval of his perfectionism don’t come off as the tiniest bit
hypocritical?” Harley asked.

“No.”

“Ya sure? It is a little like the pot calling the kettle a costumed whack-job with his underwear on the
outside.”

“The difference between my perfectionism and his,” Bruce said, “is that I don’t hyperfixate on every
little thing that goes wrong. Or at least I don’t any more. If I spent time moaning about every time I
got punched in the face, I’d be an old man before I ever put this suit back on again. More than that,
anyone who concentrates on the pain they endure when something goes wrong will also gloat about
the pain they endure when something goes right. And that… that doesn’t seem healthy to me.”

“Ohhhhhhhhh,” Harley said. “So ya think Tim’s gonna be the kinda guy who brags about his
ulcers?”
“If he doesn’t have one already,” Bruce said. “But yes.”

“Uh-huh,” Harley said. “So tell me about your recovery from the time Bane broke your back.”

“What does--”

“Cough it up, B-Man.”

“Well,” Bruce said, “it was terrible. Nine months of physical therapy. Another six of simply learning to walk again. I didn’t allow myself painkillers on the slim chance I developed an addiction. I had the med bay in the Batcave fitted with Kryptonian tech that allowed me to regenerate damaged tissue. And that hurt. The whole ordeal was grueling. But I buckled down. I concentrated. And overall, I…”

Bruce stopped.

Harley was giggling again.

“What?”

Harley giggled even harder.

“What’s so funny?”

Harley waved her hands in front of her face as though her giggles were smoke, and she was trying to dispel them.

"Okay," Harley said after having calmed down. "Just out of curiosity, and just to hear yourself say it to get your thoughts goin’, name one thing Tim Drake did better than the other two Robins. That way you have something to reassure him with if he gets down in the dumps again."

Bruce thought. The answer came quickly.

"He didn't vomit at the first murder scene we went to."

Harley blinked. "That's actually kinda impressive. Points for Timmy Drake!"

"He hates being called 'Timmy.'"

"Aw, Darn it, B-Man," Harley said. "Now I gotta call him that the next time I see him!"

ESTEBAN’S RISTORANTE - THAT AFTERNOON, EVEN LATER STILL

“It was bad.”

“It couldn’t have been that bad.”

“I told her she had a nice ass.”

“Okay, I guess it really was that bad.”

Tim spent the night at his apartment. His parents asked him how his job at WayneTech was going. He lied, and said it was going great.

He had breakfast, and set out early that morning on his motorcycle for the tunnel entrance of the
Batcave. He parked his regular bike there, got dressed in his costume, picked up the Robin Cycle, and headed for Bleake Island.

Robin was about to begin his descent through the air conditioning duct on top of Esteban’s, when he got the call from Conner, telling him that his vague promises that he would one day come down here to Gotham and buy Cassandra Cain ice cream had, on this day, come to fruition. And it had gone disastrously.

“Why,” Robin asked, “in God’s holy name, did you tell Cass she had a nice ass?”

Conner sighed over the phone. “I… She just… She asked me what I liked about her, and then… and then she touched me on the cheek and looked into my eyes, dude.”

Ah yes, the whole touching-people-on-the-face thing that Cass had. Not everyone was put off by it. Tim, on the other hand, found it unnerving as hell.

“She has truth-vision,” Conner said. “I couldn’t lie to her.”

Robin sighed. Conner Kent tried to be an aloof badass as Superboy, and all it took was one picture of Cassandra Cain to reduce him to Jell-O. He had sat through countless calls over the past year with Conner, talking about her. He had also sat through countless calls with Cassie Sandsmark talking about Conner. Cassie tried to be grown up about how the guy for which she burned did burn for someone else. But the fact that the other woman had the same name as she hurt her in ways that absolutely gutted Tim to listen to.

He liked the calls with Conner more. Walking through the desires and fears of a two-year-old clone was fascinating, although a little one-track, and it was through this that Tim Drake could safely say that Conner Kent was his best friend.

“You have to understand something,” Robin said. “If my parents have taught me anything--and I do mean anything. Like, even more than my ABCs or how to tie my shoes…”

“Just say it.”

“Relationships,” Robin said, “are built on a steady stream of lies.”

A pause over the line, as Conner asked “They are?”

“Yes,” Robin said. “This is--this is mostly about image. Y’know? Projecting a better version of yourself to make another person at the very least comfortable. You’re gonna have a hard time doing that, you go running around telling girls they have nice asses.”

“But, uhhh…”

“But what?”

“But I live with the Kents,” Conner said. “Ma and Pa. They don’t lie to each other at all, and they’ve been together since dinosaur times.”

Robin ran a glove through his hair.

Oh…

Right…

Uh…
“Well,” Robin said, “that’s just it. They’ve been together a long-ass time.”

“Right.”

“And when you’re together that long,” Robin said, “something happens called ‘The Bullshit Event Horizon.’”

“What’s that?”

“You know what an Event Horizon is?”

“No.”

“It’s a point of no return,” Robin said. “But cosmically so. You lie well enough, you’ll stay together long enough so you don’t have to lie anymore.”

“So you lie until you stop lying?”

“That’s right,” Robin said.

“That… that doesn’t sound right.”

“Hey, welcome to the world,” said Robin, who only ever had one girlfriend his entire Goddamned life.

“I have a thing right now,” Robin said.

“A Robin thing?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, far be it from me to keep you,” Conner said. “See you later. And remember, you got that YJ signal if you need anything.”

“Bye,” Robin said. They both hung up, and Robin put his phone back in the small protective compartment on the back of his utility belt.

Robin tore off the lid to the duct and shimmied in until he found a vent above the floor of the kitchen. He kicked it loose, and it fell loudly on the tile below.

He didn’t need to worry about noise. The GCPD had already done their work, and the owner was waiting for the specialty guys to come in and clean up the carnage.

Robin emerged on the kitchen floor covered in dust.

Selina offered to train him in lockpicking, but he declined, as it seemed like a criminal activity unbecoming of a Robin.

More the fool he.

Robin patted the dust off of himself and began the short walk to the dining area.

He had almost gotten to the door, when he felt something hard nudge him in the back of the head.

It felt an awful lot like the barrel of a gun.

Shit…
“Turn around,” a high whisper said. “Slowly.”

Robin grinned. That was their first mistake. There weren’t a whole lot of mob scrubs who could take on the Boy Wonder. He knew because he’d fought a ton of them.

He slowly turned around and stopped grinning.

It was a she. White, a little shorter than he was. Black leather jacket with a blue stripe up withersleeve, over white body armor. She had a blue mask on. She was holding a gun that appeared to be held together by tape.

This must be the infamous Bluebird of Bleake Island, Robin thought.

A blue mohawk stuck up from her head. She had a Monroe piercing in her lip, as well as a septum ring. Her ears also had...

Wait a minute…

Robin squinted at Bluebird.

“Harper?”

Bluebird squinted back at Robin.

“Tim?”
Chapter 7: A Bigger Bang

BLEAKE ISLAND - SEVENTEEN MONTHS AGO

Tim Drake had been working as a stock boy at one of Bleake Island’s two Wal-Marts when The Undying locked down the city.

He ventured into the island, and was accosted and knocked unconscious by man both very into David Fincher movies, and eager to kill him.

Tim was saved by a couple of island natives: seventeen-year-old Harper Row and her brother, fifteen-year-old Cullen Row. After a run-in with Nightwing (whereupon Tim would share with him information that he was later told allowed Batman to blow the Undying case wide open, and to save Gotham City with the help of Nightwing, Catwoman and Oracle), Tim had nowhere to go. The mob that controlled most of the legitimate business on Bleake Island blew all of the bridges connecting Bleake to the two other islands and the mainland. In addition, they had killed all of the cops who patrolled the island.

So he spent a night on top of the roof of Harper’s apartment building, watching anime on her laptop.

With Cullen asleep between them, they were watching something called Kono Taitaru na Wisedesu. It had robots in it.

“We cannot defeat the Gonzotron!” said a young man with spiky green hair taller than the rest of his body. “Our prefecture is doomed!”

“Fear not!” said a teenage girl with impossibly large eyes and large, structurally infeasible breasts. “We can destroy it... WITH THE POWER OF TEAMWORK!”

Then the young man grunted.

If one were to ask Tim Drake about why he couldn’t get into anime, it was all the Goddamned grunting. Subbed or dubbed, it didn’t matter. With every reaction shot, eyes went wide and the characters made a sound like they were getting off in their underwear.

“You don’t mind my asking what the appeal of anime is?” Tim asked.

“You not having a good time?” Harper asked.

“It’s better than death. Thanks again, by the way.”

Harper folded the arms of her leather jacket.

“I could say,” Harper said, “that taking in another country’s art and culture makes the world feel cozier and more intimate. I could say that this show’s emphasis on the concept of teamwork broadens my empathy for other people and deepens my appreciation for the value that they can bring to the world... but those would be lies to cover up the fact that I just really like tits.”

Tim nodded, not knowing what to say to that. He looked from Harper to the computer, and when the teenage girl with the colossal boobs came on-screen, he just stared at the tar-paper on the rooftop.

Tim looked back at Harper. “What do you mean?”

“You look like the kind of kid who’s has anime tiddies as his profile picture on Twitter,” Harper said. “I bring ‘em up and you go all Schwarzenegger stoic without so much as blushing. I’m just trying to see what kind of guy you are.”

“You’re just feeling me out?”

“Yeah,” Harper said.

“So you don’t…”

“Oh,” Harper said. “I very much am into chicks. Among other things.”

“Other…”

“Cars. Then boys. Then those jalapeno-flavored Fritos they make.”

Tim nodded. “That’s a hell of a way to come out to someone. I’ve heard that’s a process that takes years, nine times out of ten, if it even happens at all.”

“And nine times out of ten, I don’t save the life of the person I’m coming out to. You got punked by a scrawny dude with a knife. You seemed to take being saved by a girl in stride. If you were a threat, you’d have threatened me by now.”

“Well that’s not emasculating at all.”

“Did I hurt Timmy’s fee-fees?” Harper asked.

“Please don’t call me Timmy,” Tim said. “Like, seriously, you could come into my kitchen and spray-fart into my Cheerios, and I might find it in my heart to forgive you. But you call me Timmy, you go on The List.”


“Of, uh… of people who call me Timmy.”

Harper giggled. “I’m sorry I called you Timmy. Under pain of going on The List, I won’t do it again.”

They lapsed into silence for a moment watching the show, the only sound coming from the speakers of Harper’s laptop. And the breeze. And the distant gunshots coming from greater Gotham.

“What’s your story?” Harper asked.

“Don’t have one,” Tim said.

“Everyone who was born in Gotham City has one.”

“And behold,” Tim said, “I am a unicorn. The closest I can get is that my parents efforts to get rich quick have landed us in a crappy apartment on Miagani Island.”

“People actually live on Miagani?” Harper asked. “I didn’t even know they had apartment buildings over there.”
“They do,” said Tim. “You just have to squint real hard. What’s your story? Where are your parents?”

“My mom was killed by a drunk driver when I was five.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And my dad is a criminal asshole doing back-to-back dimes in Blackgate. Shit, I bet he’s out there now, after The Undying blew that place open.”

“I’m sorrier.”

Harper sighed. “Once a month, Cullen goes down to Blackgate to visit him, and once a month he comes back in tears because in addition to being a common criminal, he’s also homophobic. I found a lawyer nice enough to do pro bono work getting me emancipated from that fucking clown. I’m officially Cullen’s legal guardian.”

“What do you do for money?” Tim asked.

“Freelance electrical and IT work,” Harper said. “Here on Bleake, almost everything is mob-run, so half of them pay me under the table. Word got around, they don’t even go to the pros anymore. They don’t know what they pay the pros, so I just ask for whatever sounds inconspicuous. A little creative accounting keeps the tax man off my back. It’s uncomfortable, but not as uncomfortable as it could be.”

“So IT,” Tim said, “electrical work, and accounting. Any other talents you feel like sharing?”

“I can play *We Are Number One* from *LazyTown* on the harmonica.”

Tim smiled, even though he didn’t know if she was joking or not.

He stopped smiling when he heard gunshots from about a quarter of a mile away on the island. He looked over at Harper.

There was resolve in her blue eyes as her face was lit by the glow of her laptop.

“They don’t think about Bleake,” Harper said. “Miagani has the entertainment district, Founders has all the rich people shit, and the mainland has everything else. Even if the mob didn’t have its fingers in everything, we’d still be industrial, so… so we’re expendable. Even the East End, public toilet that it is, has no end of politicians saying they want to return it to how it was in the old days. They never do, but people keep saying it to get votes. But no one… *no one* gives a damn about Bleake Island.”

Harper sighed and furrowed her brow.

“They forget about us…”

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**ESTEBAN’S RISTORANTE - NOW**

“Is it really obvious it’s me?” Bluebird asked as she lowered her pistol.

“You have blue hair and metal shit in your face,” Robin said. “Of course it’s obvious. Jesus, I haven’t seen you in…”

“A long time, right?”
“A long time. How’ve you been?”

Bluebird sighed. “Well, I became a superhero.”

“She?” Robin asked. “The Bluebird of Bleake… Jesus, you carry a gun?”

“It’s a taser pistol,” Bluebird said. She released the magazine from her pistol and held them out so he could examine them without touching them.

Robin saw that the nine that she was holding out had been modified along the slide. Even the magazine itself had been altered to fire smaller, custom-made bullets. It was all very DIY.

“Cool,” Robin said.

“Yup,” said Bluebird. “Why, uh… I hope you don’t mind my asking, but why are you dressed up like Robin?”

Robin blinked during the weighty pause. “Because I am Robin.”

Bluebird stared at him for a second. “No. Seriously. Why are you dressed as Robin?”

Robin tried to say something, but nothing came out.

“Dude,” Bluebird said, “If you’re Robin, where’s Batman?”

Robin looked at Bluebird as though she were a fool. “It’s the middle of the day!” he said. “Batman doesn’t go around in the middle of the day!”

“But Robin can?”

“I’m not the one dressed entirely in gray and black,” Robin said. “Of course I can. Batman’s working the Black Mask thing, and this hit on Maroni’s mob guys smells funny.”

“How do you mean?” Bluebird asked.

“Five guys were whacked,” Robin said. “But surveillance footage showed no cars in the area at the time the hit went down, which meant one guy on foot who apparently knew where the cameras were. If this was a Falcone job like even the GCPD thinks it is, then they would have sent more people to make sure the job got done.”

“And just how did you get a look at camera footage.”

Robin smiled, pointed to the R on the chest of his uniform, and mouthed the word “Robin.”

“Right,” Bluebird said. “Well, if you’ve been trained by the World’s Greatest Detective…”

She opened the door to the dining area of Esteban’s Ristorante.

“…then go detect.”

There were still tape outlines of where the table and all the bodies had been. Robin entered with his hand on his chin.

“There are a lot of cops on the Falcone payroll,” Robin said, touring the scene. “They may just assume that Falcone ordered this hit without knowing that he didn’t.”
“Which means…”

“Which means that the official police report wasn’t all that clear,” Robin said. “The report says two shells were found on site.”

“I’ll humor you and say that you somehow got your eyes on the report through your Batman connections,” Bluebird said. “Two shells.”

“Right,” said Robin. “Two shells for five guys… and the fact that there aren’t any bullet holes that I can readily see means that at least about this one thing, the report was telling the truth.”

Robin stared at the scene a little while longer.

“The guys were confident,” Robin said. “The one at the head of the table sat with his back to the front door. He knew the place so well that they didn’t think someone was coming through the main entrance. He had faith in his security. Faith in the truce that the Maronis and Falcones had until now.”

“And our lone hitter came through…”

“They came through the back door through the kitchen,” Robin said. He looked over and saw that Bluebird was standing on one of the booth tables for some strange reason.

“What are you--”

“Keep going,” Bluebird said. “Guy came through the kitchen, then what?”

Robin looked back at the scene.

“No bullet holes,” he said. “No scuff marks from the chair legs on the floor. It means that before our guy got to work, they all talked to each other…. About what, I don’t know. And when the shit hit the fan, these five Maroni guys didn’t get a shot off.”

With that, Bluebird reached up and moved one of the ceiling tiles. She grasped into the darkness above and pulled out something small, about the size of a walnut.

She jumped off the booth table onto the floor near Robin, and held out the object she’d retrieved. To Robin, it looked like a flash drive with a miniature Princess Leia haircut made out of tin foil.

“What’s that?” Robin asked.

“That,” Bluebird said, “is a bug. If there was one guy, and he did talk to these goons, then all we need to do is interface this with my equipment back home. Then we’ll know what they had to say.”

“And you made that?”

“With my own two hands,” Bluebird said, smiling.

“I’m impressed.”

“I’m impressive.”

“How’d you get in here to plant that?”

“I work here,” Bluebird said.
Robin squinted at her.

“Esteban is a very nice man who watches very not-nice porn,” Bluebird said. “He pays me to get viruses off his computer. How do you think I got in here today? I used my key.”

“So you bugged the place before the hit?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Bluebird took a deep breath. “At the time Cheshire blasted the entire country to smithereens with a nuclear bomb, the government of Qurac was working on an experimental small explosive. The country goes up, the government goes up, and that explosive hits the black market. It was supposed to hit Gotham a month ago on a Falcone-owned ship, according to a contact of mine. Along with some sites on the dark web that contract stuff like this out. The ship that those explosives were supposed to arrive on went down on the Bleake Island docks.”

“The explosive took the ship down?”

“The ship sank,” Bluebird said. “It didn’t blow up. The yield on that experimental explosive is massive. If that ship had exploded, and the explosive was used to do it, then there’d have been shrapnel all over all three islands and the mainland. The only way that this could have gone down is if someone dropped the ship with something else and stole the explosive. I assumed that since it was a Falcone ship that the Maronis did it, breaking the truce they’ve had for a year and a half. I bug a Maroni restaurant, and this hit happens.”

“That’s good detective work,” Robin said.

“Thank you.”

“I was trained by Batman. Who trained you?”

“There’s a cat over in the East End named Slam Bradley,” Bluebird said. “A PI, and dresses the part, trench coats and fedoras and shit. I help him steal HBO, and he shows me a thing or two.”

“So if the Maronis think the Falcons hit them,” Robin said, “then they’re gonna hit back. Hard. Any theories?”

“No,” Bluebird said. “But anything that goes down between Sal and Carmine is gonna come back to Bleake eventually. And I’m going to stop it.”

While he was listening to her, Robin came up with something.

“Shit,” he said.

“What?”

“The Hibernian Society fundraiser.”

“The what, what, and what?”

Robin took a deep breath. “The Hibernian Society is a bunch of Irish cops on the Falcone payroll who set up political fundraisers.”

“Isn’t it illegal for cops to campaign in Gotham City?”
“Cops? Yes. Concerned citizens of Irish ancestry who just so happen to be cops? No. They’re holding a fundraiser for a Public Defender candidate. A lawyer named Sean Riley. For that special election in February.”

“Y’know,” Bluebird said, “if you’re a defense attorney, and cops are campaigning for you? You must not be a very good lawyer.”

“It’s tonight,” Robin said. “If the Maronis are biting back at the Falcons after what went down in this room, then that fundraiser is where they’re gonna do it.”

Robin reached back, and got the phone from the compartment on his utility belt.

“Who are you calling?” Bluebird asked.

“You said you wouldn’t believe I was Robin unless you saw me with Batman.”

“Right.”

Robin pressed his phone to his ear.

“Does tonight work for you?”

Stephanie picked up Cassandra at about two, and off they headed, costumes in separate duffel bags, to Miagani Island.

When she was little, when the years blended into nothing but pain and violence and she knew not her age, Cassandra Cain was shown how to properly use a sniper rifle. She had assembled and reassembled every model that the man she would later find was her father put in front of her.

And to hammer this home, they watched a film that he had made of himself using a sniper rifle on a target that fled across a Gotham City rooftop.

She memorized every detail of this film as he showed it again… and again… and again… The arc of the blood, skull and brain as the bullet hit. How the scope was on where the target was going to be, rather than where the target was. She even memorized the huge electric sign that the man was standing in front of when he was shot in the head.

They were the only two words Cassandra Cain knew how to read.

“GOTHAM HILTON.”

The Gotham Hilton hotel was located on Miagani Island, just a hop, skip, and a jump away from the theater district. During her first few weeks as Orphan, when Catwoman took she and Spoiler to Miagani Island to fight Spook, and she looked up, riding on the back of Spoiler’s motorcycle, and saw the Gotham Hilton’s sign atop the roof of the thirty story structure. For a moment, she forgot to breathe.

Now, on this blustery December afternoon, Cassandra and Stephanie were on the rooftop of the Adelaide Theater, which was currently putting on a production of Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson. They both stared at the Gotham Hilton sign a block away.

And Cassandra only took the time to look down at the rooftop upon which she was standing.

This was a theater.
This was a place where people dressed up, memorized lines from a script, and then went onstage in front of hundreds, sometimes thousands of people to pretend to be someone else.

It was a secret she held, one even from Stephanie and Bruce, that when Barbara was trying to educate Cass, trying to show her some kind of culture on the internet, that their travels on Youtube introduced Cassandra Cain to something that Barbara called…

“Shakespeare.”

She even got a book off of her shelf to show Cassandra: a bald man with a weird haircut and what appeared to be his last name in big capital letters on the cover.

What Barbara showed Cassandra on Youtube… Cassandra couldn’t make sense of. They were people in goofy costumes walking across a stage, talking in a way that she’d heard no other person talk to another in all her life.

And yet…

She was entranced. They spoke with emotion, loudly, broadly, putting their whole bodies into what they were saying. Cassandra was lost watching it. No doubt she would be lost reading it. But that she didn’t understand was not a factor. What was a factor was that they understood. The people on that stage. They understood to the extent that they let those words dictate how their bodies moved. They knew and understood, the words being the base of the emotion in the body, instead of the body shrieking while the words were uttered timidly to compensate or conceal.

This, of course, blew Cassandra’s mind. That spoken words could have this much power.

Every once in a while, when Babs was out of the apartment, Cassandra got on the computer on the main floor of the Clock Tower. She had memorized the moves Babs made, where the little cursor went when she clicked something on that little bar at the top of the screen. The red square with the white triangle. The one that took her to Youtube.

Whereupon Cassandra would get that same book of Shakespeare off of the shelf, isolate every letter in that name, and find it on the keyboard.

The process it took to write the word “Shakespeare” took Cassandra five minutes. Every time. And sometimes she had to start over.

But when she was finished, and she hit enter, she scanned the thumbnails for performances and watched… and watched… and watched… These people in strange clothes, saying words with a knowledge and a feeling that filled Cassandra Cain with an envy so deep that she almost started drooling.

She was snapped out of this particular reverie, and thrown into the task at hand, by Stephanie.

“So now what do we do?” she asked, her breath coming out of her mouth on this cold afternoon in a fog as thick as mashed potatoes.

“We wait,” Cassandra said. “For dark.”

“Then what?”

“Then… You leave.”

Stephanie put her hands on her hips. “You know good and Goddamn well that ain’t happening.”
“You’ll be hurt.”

“And what if you are?”

Cassandra just… shrugged.

Stephanie grabbed Cassandra by the shoulder of her wool jacket and literally turned her so she would look her in the eye.

“Hey!”

Cassandra squinted trying to keep the wind out of her eyes.

“Your dad sawed his way through twenty-five gangsters yesterday,” Stephanie said. “I don’t care if you’re Karate Jesus. If your dad is in that hotel, the shit is going down. And when the shit goes down, my best friend is not going to be alone. Understand me?”

Cassandra looked down at the roof again. And again, Stephanie made physical contact, grabbing Cassandra’s jaw and bringing it up so they made eye contact again.

“Understand me?”

“Yes!” Cassandra said, and ripped her head out of Stephanie’s grasp.

She just didn’t understand why Stephanie was working herself up like this. If Cassandra fought her father and won, great. If Cassandra fought her father and lost, then she would be dead, and thus would be even with the universe over the man she had killed.

Cassandra didn’t see a downside to that.

And it wasn’t her fault Stephanie didn’t understand that.

“Allright,” Stephanie said, her body screaming that she wanted to change the subject. “Now distract me.”

“Distract… what?”

“It’s friggin’ cold out here!” Stephanie said. “Talk to me about something so I don’t feel it when the fun parts of my body turn purple and freeze right the fuck off.”

Cassandra looked at her best friend as though, well, as though she had said something ridiculous, before she looked back at the hotel again.

What could she possibly talk to Stephanie about…

Cassandra’s eyes widened.

Ohhhhhhhhhh…

“Conner.”

Stephanie blinked a couple of times. “What about him?”

“He… came to… see me.”

“What, today?”
Cassandra nodded.

“And, uh… And what happened?”

Cassandra opened her mouth, and then closed it again. She got her hands out of the pockets of her leather jacket so she could sign and talk at the same time.

“Do. I. Have. A. Nice. Ass?”

Stephanie just stared for a little bit. “What?”

“That’s… what Conner said.”

“Oh,” Stephanie said. “Oh, boy, uh… Cass, honey, he wasn’t supposed to say that. Guys aren’t supposed to talk to you that way. At least not until they’re actually dating you. It’s not how it works.”


“Um,” Stephanie said, turning red, “well…”

“I… don’t either.”

Stephanie sighed. “Okay,” she said. “What matters is how you feel. When he told you that… that you have a nice ass, how did you feel?”

“Curious.”

“Okay,” Stephanie said. “About what?”

Cassandra glared at Stephanie. She took her hands out of her jacket again and asked angrily, through gritted teeth:

“Do. I. Have. A. Nice. Ass?”

Why wouldn’t she answer such a simple question?

Stephanie, looked down and laughed. When she was done, she looked at Cassandra.

“Come here.”

Cassandra walked over to Stephanie, and Stephanie wrapped her in a hug. It took a moment, but Cassandra decided to return it, even though Stephanie was being difficult.

“I want you to be happy,” Stephanie said in Cassandra’s ear. “Some days, that’s the only thing I want. If awkward-ass Conner does it for you, then, well…”

Cassandra felt herself freezing up on the inside. She felt she didn’t deserve to be happy. No one who took a life should. And she felt defective. She was brought up, almost engineered for a specific purpose, and that purpose was not being met. It was being diluted and weakened by her refusal to kill anyone else. She felt as though she were doomed to serve a life of half-measures, pleasing no side of herself, and thus, pleasing no one.

As hard as she tried, what good could she be to Batman?

Or Conner?
Or even Stephanie, for that matter?

Stephanie finally broke the hug, looked into her eyes, and smiled.

“You do, though,” she said. “You… you really do.”

Cassandra threw up her hands, and said “Finally!”

It was a year ago that David Cain had been visited by a Goddess.

Harmonia…

He’d spent the previous six to seven trying to find meaning in the bottoms of whiskey bottles. Feeling sorry for himself that his life’s work, The Orphan, had left and had never come back. He refused to take independent hits and severed his connections to The League of Assassins. Opting to drain his considerable savings one hotel room and one bottle of Jack Daniels at a time.

It was in Maui that she appeared to him. He was there for… no particular reason, draining his second bottle of the day as he walked along the beach at night.

A bloom of light appeared before him, blinding him, and out stepped the Goddess of Harmony and Concord, beautiful and sad at the same time.

“You have work to do, David Cain,” she had said.

And she was right.

In room 2924 on the top floor of the Gotham Hilton, David Cain stood shirtless in the bathroom, and looked at the surgical scars newly resurrected musculature of his body that were the bedrock of that work.

It was experimental. Not the implants that made him stronger, no. You found those on a few C-Listers itching for a fight with Aquaman or Cyborg. No, the projection implants embedded in the major muscle sections of his body, those were new.

Every time his muscles tensed when he threw a punch or a kick, the projection implants used the oils secreted from his pores as refractive lenses to broadcast light. When he fought, he quite literally blurred. As long as he at least had exposed skin from the neck up, no one could see the moves he made within that blur.

If The Orphan could read human body language and predict the moves an opponent could make, then David Cain would have to give her nothing to read.

He trained The Orphan himself, and knew that if he were to win, then the measures to which he was to resort needed to be extraordinary.

The Orphan was his life’s work. His alone. And just thinking about how Batman had corrupted a perfect weapon that killed into a faulty sword that did not make his skin crawl.

He took a deep breath and listened to his heart beat slowly.

He heard something else, though. Something from beyond the bathroom wall.

“What do you want from me… Why don’t you run from me… What are you wondering… What do you know?”
Singing.

From Two’s room.

That little shit was up to something.

David sighed, and got his white t-shirt from off the toilet lid. He left his hotel room as he put it back on, and walked to the door of room 2922, which was Two’s room.

He knocked. He heard more singing.

“Why aren’t you scared of me… Why do you care for me… When we all fall asleep… Where do we go?”

The door opened, and there Two stood.

He was a short one. Five-six if he was an inch. He had a short scruff of black hair, and the glasses he was wearing indoors, the peak of douchebag Everest, made his skin look paler.

He was wearing a Gotham Knights t-shirt, and his hands were covered in blood up to the elbow.

“Mister Cain,” Two said. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Cain saw the blood on Two’s hands, rolled his eyes, and shoved him out of the way.

He followed the trail of blood on the hotel room carpet into the bathroom.

In the bathtub was a man who appeared, gashes in his face and look of wide, frozen horror in his eyes aside, to be in his late fifties. There was an enormous gash in his throat, through which all the blood in his body had filled the tub to the halfway point. There was a ragged pink ribbon of flesh hanging from the wound, resting limply on his chest. It was his tongue.

The name on the blue work shirt said “Linus.”

David closed his eyes. “You murdered a man on a floor with security cameras and numerous witnesses.”

“You think me an amateur?” Two asked as he stood in the doorway. The incredulity in his voice made Cain want to ram his fist through Two’s smug little face.

“I think you’re an idiot,” said David. “Why?”

“My phone’s dead, and cable TV bores me. I have to make my own fun.”

“And if the cleaning lady comes by when you’re out getting something to eat? Or this poor asshole’s family comes by?”

“If that happens,” Two said, “then our friend here will have friends of his very own. You worry too much.”

“It’s wasteful.”

“It’s practice,” Two said. “I gave a man a Columbian Necktie on the other side of a thin wall from you, and you didn’t hear a thing.”

“I heard you singing to yourself.”
“Because I wanted you to. I got lonely and decided to share.”

David glared at him.

Harmonia told him to work with One and Two. She didn’t tell him their names. And he didn’t ask. He didn’t want to be ungrateful for the purpose he had been given. For the gifts he had received.

“You should relax,” Two said. “Today’s a big day. For both of us.”

“It is for me,” David said. “Why for you?”

“Because,” Two said, “wherever Cassandra Cain goes… Stephanie Brown is sure to follow.”

Kate loaded her Batwoman equipment into a crate, and drove it out to Gotham International Airport. From there, she would hop into the private jet of the Kane family, and fly to National City in hot pursuit of Konstantin Fotos and The Blade of Resurrection.

She stowed her purse on the seat next to her inside the cabin of the jet, buckled her seatbelt, and made herself cozy. Her eyelids started drooping… drooping… until the sound of the whining engines carried her off to sleep.

Kate was awoken what must have been minutes later by the pilot.

“Huhwhuhh…” Kate said, her mouth having made noise before any coherent thought could have been formed.

The pilot, a heavyset white guy in his thirties, said “Miss Kane, we just got word from the tower. There’s someone in the hangar.”

“Some… Is this a security issue or something? Because…”

“Well,” the pilot said, “she says she wants to talk to you.”

Kate blinked and sighed. She unbuckled her seatbelt and stood up, as the pilot opened the door of the plane for her.

She walked down the steps leading from the door, and set foot on the tarmac, squinting at the figure about twenty feet away, the harsh December sun that provided no warmth just blasting in her eyes.

The woman was wearing what appeared to be brown cowboy boots, and jeans that hugged her thighs. A thin, purple turtleneck sweater beneath a black wool longcoat. Large sunglasses that covered her eyebrows. He tresses of thick black hair were tied into a tight ponytail. There were two luggage bag on wheels at either side of her.

Her height and her brawn should have given it away, but Kate only knew who it was for sure when she spoke. A rich voice with a trace of some kind of accent that she couldn’t place.

“Permission to come aboard?” asked Diana of Themyscira.

Two men stood in the expanse of a marble foyer in a mansion on the outskirts of town. It wasn’t Wayne Manor, but it was close.

They stood in front of a man in his early sixties. He was wearing an ill-advised white suit that accented the pudginess that he’d developed as a child, and had never escaped. Which wasn’t to say
that this man was without vanity. The jet-black hair plugs stemming from his tan, spotty scalp were testament to that.

This was Salvatore Maroni.

The two men standing before him had asked him a question. And it was to this question, after a long period of silent deliberation, that Sal Maroni finally nodded in the affirmative.

And those two men smiled.

Those two men would make the calls. Those two men would get the boys ready. Organize transportation. Organize guns.

The Maroni Family was going to war.

And they were going tonight...
Chapter 8: Tattoo You

And just what the fuck was Kate supposed to say, huh?

Was she supposed to say “No, Wonder Woman, you can’t come on my family’s private jet?”

They were a couple of states inland from Gotham City, now. Keeping pace with the path of the sun, as the farther west they went, the more daylight they gained. It was to be a long flight, going from the east coast to the west, and by the time they set down in National City, the sun would only have been down for an hour and a half. The sun would have been down a damn sight longer than that in Gotham.

Kate and Diana took the aisle seats, with Kate on the left and Diana on the right.

And they didn’t have a whole lot to say to each other besides pleasantries. Diana herself had made her explanation known to the pilot: that she had business in National City, and that Kate and Diana knew each other through the Kane family’s charity work in Gotham.

Which was true. If you had a charity, Wonder Woman would do work for it. But not the extent of it, what with they being superheroes and all.

And just like that, Kate felt the tiniest bit guilty that the Spirit of Truth Herself had to be elusive to protect Kate Kane’s secret identity as Batwoman.

Diana was over there across the aisle, looking at her phone. She’d turned down the offer of drinks from the refrigerator in the back, as there was nothing non-alcoholic onboard except diet soda.

Kate’s eyes processed Diana. The jeans, the boots, the sweater. Her natural brawn pushing against the fabric. She looked uncomfortable. As though the processed fibers of Patriarch’s World worked to flimsily confine the Glory of the Amazons.

An image, brief and unbidden, fluttered through Kate’s mind. That of Diana, finally fed up with the indignity of it all, standing and tearing every last thread of clothing from her body before sitting down in a huff, and picking her phone back up.

Then it occurred to Kate that she was imagining Diana of Themyscira naked and, stunning as Diana may have been, that simply would not do at all.

Because it was Wonder Woman.

She meant so much to so many people. It was like imagining Harriet Tubman or Susan B. Anthony taking all of their clothes off. That was just… just wrong.

“Do you see something interesting?”

That snapped her out of it. “Yes,” Kate said. “I do.”

“That isn’t the usual answer I get,” Diana said. “People just turn red and tell me no.”

“I didn’t think you for a cowboy boots kind of woman.”

Diana looked down at the boots she was wearing. “I have been in Patriarch’s World since 1942. I
served with the Allies during the second World War. I made the acquaintance of a soldier named Tex when I was on a series of missions in Poland.”

“Tex, huh?” Kate asked. “So he was from Texas, then?”

“He was from Wales,” Diana said. “He was a great admirer of Gene Autry. On Christmas in 1958, he sent me these boots.”

Kate raised her eyebrows. “You’ve had those boots since 1958?”

“They last a while,” Diana said. “Or it could be that I wear them so rarely.”

“Oh,” Kate said. And neither of them said anything for a while after that.

There was a buzzing in Kate’s mind. Something that wouldn’t leave her alone.

“I’m sorry,” Kate said.

Diana looked away from her phone. “About what?”

“About hitting on you,” Kate said. “At Bruce and Selina’s wedding.”

“Oh.”

“I was drunk,” Kate said. “And, uh… I didn’t know it was you standing there. I’m—I’m sorry.”

Diana put her phone down and looked at Kate quizzically, a smirk forming on her lips.

“So if you were completely sober and saw me under the light of day, you’d have said nothing at all?”

Kate opened her mouth.

Nothing came out, so she closed it.

She opened it again.

Nothing stubbornly continued to come out.

Finally, Kate said “There’s no way I can answer that question in a simple way without saying something I don’t mean.”

Diana looked downward, her expression softening, and said “I suppose you would be right. And you’ve nothing to worry about, Kate. If I’d a dime for every time someone made drunken advances toward me on Patriarch’s World, I’d be more wealthy than you.”

Kate opened her mouth to say something, but Diana continued.

“And combined with the dimes I’d have for every time someone made drunken advances toward me while I was still on Themyscira, I’d be richer than your cousin Bruce.”

Kate suddenly forgot what she was going to say. And her mouth was dry for some strange reason.

She finally said “Yeah, but I thought I’d be better than that, though.”

Diana looked into Kate’s eyes, genuinely confused. “You’re travelling a great distance to find a dangerous magical artifact before it falls into the wrong hands. How much better do you have to be?”
Kate didn’t know what to say to that, but she did know how to change the subject.

“About that,” Kate said. “The Blade of Resurrection. You’re looking for it, too?”

“I am looking for the people who wish to obtain it,” Diana said.

“And who might they be?”

Diana took a deep breath. From Kate’s vantage point, it looked like she was trying to figure out how to address something delicately.

“My business,” Diana said, “comes from… high up.”

Kate nodded. “Beyond my pay grade?”

“Forgive me.”

“It’s cool,” Kate said, meaning it. “Really, it is. I went to West Point for a minute. I know how the chain of command works.”

“I have heard your story,” Diana said. “Denied the chance to serve due to bigotry.”

Kate sighed. “I wasn’t denied. I could have stayed if I wanted to, but they wanted me to lie about who I was. ‘We will not lie, steal, cheat, or tolerate anyone among us who does.’ Lying to serve would have disqualified me from serving. I couldn’t do that.”

Diana smiled. “‘Death Before Dishonor?’”

“That’s Marine Corps,” Kate said. “I was Army.”

“Any Army sayings?” Diana asked.

Kate shrugged. “‘One Riot, One Ranger.’”

“And you go out every night to fight the forces of evil,” Diana said. “You serve, just not a flag.”

Kate nodded, and tried not to blush.

“Forgive me for saying,” Diana said, “but you look as though you are about to succumb to exhaustion. If I know anything about… his network, then I must assume that you haven’t slept in over a day. Please. Rest.”

Kate sputtered. “I-I-I, uh… I don’t want to be rude.”

“This is your plane,” Diana said. “If I insisted upon you staying awake to talk to me, wouldn’t I be the rude one?”

Two rows behind them, vibrating at a frequency that Kate and Diana could neither see nor hear, Mister Mxyzptlk and Miss Gsptlsnz sat in two seats on the right of the jet. Mxyzptlk blew bubble gum-scented smoke rings into the air, and Gsptlsnz quietly read the Delta Airlines in-flight magazine.

Which was weird, because this was a private jet, and not associated with Delta Airlines in any way.

“Yeesh,” she said.

“What?” asked Mxyzptlk.
“The desperation coming off of that girl is downright cringey.”

“Yeah,” Mxyzptlk said, smiling. “Kate’s feelings must taste great, they’ve been bottled and aged for so long.”

Gsptlsnz looked at her husband, and rolled her eyes.

“I didn’t say Kate was the desperate one, now did I?”

Night fell on Gotham.

And Cassandra Cain and Stephanie Brown had to get into character.

The two of them stood with their backs to each other on the theater rooftop as they changed out of their civilian clothes and into their superhero costumes.

Stephanie Brown was down to her skivvies in the blistering cold when she told her best friend “Ohhhhhhhh, IhateyouIhateyouIhateyouIhateyouIhateyousomuch!”

Now that Cass and Steph were Spoiler and Orphan, they had to grapple from rooftop to rooftop so they could get high enough to grapnel to the roof of the Gotham Hilton.

Once there, they were greeted by a rooftop door with an electronic keypad.

Orphan looked at Spoiler, and Spoiler got the hint right away.

From the pouch on her right thigh, Spoiler got out a small hacking device, developed under the table by the fine folks at Kyle Security.

Ten seconds later, they were through the door, and out of the cold. Much to Spoiler’s glee.

As they walked down the stairs, Spoiler asked “What happens if we find your dad?”

Orphan almost visibly rankled when she heard David Cain referred to as her “Dad.” It just felt wrong somehow.

“Leave… him… to me,” Orphan said.

“Okay,” said Spoiler. “But, uh… What do I do?”

Orphan stopped, and looked at Spoiler in the dank stairwell.

“The people in… the rooms,” Orphan said. “Get them out.”

“I can do that,” Spoiler said.

Orphan put a hand on Spoiler’s shoulder.

“No one. Dies. Tonight.” No pauses because she couldn’t find the words, but punctuated for emphasis.

Spoiler actually popped off a short salute. “Don’t tell Batwoman I did that. Then she’ll want me to do it for her, and that shit ain’t happening.”

Orphan had a way of letting someone know she was glaring at them even when she was wearing a mask.
“Alright,” Spoiler said. “I solemnly swear never to lighten the mood again.”

They opened the door to the top floor of the Gotham Hilton. The conditioned air felt warm to Orphan all the same after her time in the cold, and it smelled like a swimming pool. Beige walls, puce carpet, and black doors.

They gingerly stepped into the hallway, and Spoiler got her phone out of a protective compartment on her utility belt.

“Alright,” Spoiler said. “Oracle gave us a little program that can hack into the computers here and cross-reference the names registered to the rooms on this floor with recently deceased homeless people. Grisly as it is, that’s where they get the names for forged documents, and we know damn well your dad didn’t register here under his own name and use his credit card.”

Orphan rankled at “dad” again, and pointed somewhere down the hall.

Spoiler stopped what she was doing. “What?”

Orphan pointed harder. At the small black security camera all the way down at the other end.

“Right,” Spoiler said. “First things first.”

As Spoiler brought up another Oracle program on her phone that would disable the hotel’s security cameras and erase the footage, Orphan heard a loud crash to her left. Her vision was blurred by a mist. She couldn’t breathe.

A hand had ripped through the wall of one of the rooms and wrapped around her throat, sending plaster dust everywhere.

Spoiler looked up from her phone and immediately forgot the first rule of being in a team of superheroes: In uniform, you don’t use real names.

“CASS!”

The muscular, dusty hand around Orphan’s throat yanked back, dragging Orphan through the wall, making a massive hole.

She was flung to the other side of the interior of the hotel room, her head slamming into (and shattering) the mirror above the dresser.

Orphan slid off the dresser to the carpet, bringing herself to all fours and looking up.

There, in a white t-shirt, was a man she hadn’t seen in almost a decade.

David Cain.

Her father.

Orphan sprung up to her feet, fists clenched, and advanced.

And then she stopped.

David’s entire upper torso blurred.

She had to blink to register what she was seeing. Her eyes hadn’t even opened yet when a fist emerged from the blur, and collided with Orphan’s jaw. A bloom of pain erupted in the side of her
face, followed by another one in her ribs when she collided with the dresser again.

As she tried to get to her feet for a second time, two things were apparent to her.

The first was that she couldn’t read her father’s body language.

And the second was that if she couldn’t do that, she was going to die up here.

Orphan had just been torn through the wall, and Spoiler put her phone back.

“Well,” she said. “This counts as shit hitting the fan.”

She walked to the other side of the hall, put her gloved hand on the white handle of the hotel’s fire alarm, and yanked down.

The lights in the hallway of the top floor lowered, and a siren that made Spoiler’s ears ring started sounding.

It took a few moments, but some of the doors opened, with very confused looking patrons of the Gotham Hilton peering out.

‘THIS IS AN EMERGENCY!’ Spoiler yelled. ‘GET OUT! YOU DON’T HAVE TO GO HOME, BUT YOU CAN’T STAY HERE!’

As the hotel’s guests started filing out, Spoiler began knocking on doors that hadn’t opened yet, trying to give a last second jolt to anyone who may have been avoiding leaving.

She’d gotten two doors down when she heard singing coming from behind her.

“What do you want from me, why don’t you run from me, what are you wondering, what do you know?”

Spoiler turned around and gawked.

Some dude’s head was on fire.

No, that wasn’t right. Some dude’s head was fire.

And Spoiler gawked some more.

She took in his clothes, the leather jacket, the body armor, the number 2 on his jacket lapel.

“Who… the fuck… are you?” Spoiler asked.

Two put his gloved hands behind his back.

“Someone who desperately wants to see your face, Stephanie.”

The fundraiser put on by The Hibernian Society of Gotham City for the campaign of Sean Riley to the position of Public Defender was held at the Sorrento Ballroom in midtown on the mainland.

Tables were spread about the intimate space, each with a white tablecloth. Well-to-do folks in tuxedos milled about the interior, mingling and hob-nobbing, shaking hands and privately joking as Debussy played over the loudspeakers.
Half of the security detail was made-up of off-duty cops on the Falcone payroll. The other half was made up of actual Falcone goons. There was no indication on the faces of the swells on the ground that they knew how seedy this occasion really was.

Which suited Jason Todd just fine.

He figured if you lie down with fleas, you had no call to get bitchy if the flea bath burned you a little.

Jason looked at the men in tuxedos, the women in evening gowns, and figured that… well… no one was going to miss them. If they had anything to contribute to the world, they wouldn’t be here, now would they?

The six vials of Anti-Fear Toxin had been stuck in the air conditioning unit.

He had the detonator in his jacket.

All Jason had to do was wait for the fireworks to start.

“Spoiler and Orphan aren’t answering their comms,” Catwoman said.

Batman glowered behind his mask.

They were standing on the rooftop of Mayron Savings and Loan, which was across the street from the Sorrento Ballroom.

“What about Batwoman,” Batman asked.

“She’s on a plane right now,” Catwoman said. “With Wonder Woman.”

“Why?”

“She just said it was League business.”

“It can’t be,” Batman said. “If it were League business, I’d know about it.”

“Nevertheless,” Catwoman said, “they’re both on a plane to National City. Batwoman will be unavailable for tonight’s little soiree.”

Batman didn’t feel one way or another about this. Batwoman liked to remain independent when she could anyway. Now Spoiler and Orphan, that was troubling.

He heard the whine and the catch of a grapnel gun on the ledge of the roof.

Robin had joined them.

“Where is she?” Batman asked.

“She doesn’t have a grapnel gun,” said Robin. “She’s taking the fire escape.”

Batman nodded. “Have you heard from Spoiler and Orphan?”

Robin looked at him with disbelief. “They’re not here?”

Batman shook his head, and Robin looked like he wanted to shrink into a little ball from second-hand embarrassment.
He spared a look at Catwoman, before he turned back.

“What was that?” Catwoman asked.

“Concern.”

“Oh,” said Catwoman, “so it wasn’t a chastising little look about my sidekick going AWOL?”

Her shoulders were up. She was spoiling for an argument. And for the life of him, Batman didn’t know why.

“No,” Batman said, trying to inject some calm into his gravel. “If Orphan’s doing what I think she’s doing, then Spoiler should have followed her for operational reasons alone. And of all of us, she is the least capable of stopping Orphan once she has her mind set on something. As much as you like Spoiler, you know this as well as I.”

Catwoman’s shoulders started to lower. “Oh…”

“Trust me,” Batman said. “There is only one person I blame for them not being here, and it certainly isn’t Spoiler.”

Catwoman’s shoulders lowered to where they were. “Okay, then.”

Selina had been like this for the past couple of days. Not outwardly, but since she officially moved into the manor she’d had an undercurrent to her. As though she was expecting him to enter a great rage and kick her out, so she was resolved to get angry first as a means of controlling the situation. He really would have to talk to her about that.

But it couldn’t be now. He could hear the *thunk-thunk-thunk* of boots coming up the fire escape.

The mysterious Bluebird of Bleak Island had joined them.

She started advancing toward him, but Robin intercepted her. He whispered a few things in her ear. Once he was done, they both nodded at each other, and Bluebird continued her advance.

“Hey,” Bluebird said. Whether the bloom of red on her cheeks was from awkwardness or the cold, Batman could not say.

“Hello,” said Batman.

She opened her jacket to reveal two holstered pistols.

“These are firearms,” Bluebird said, “but they’re non-lethal. They’re taser pistols. Would you like to inspect them?”

Batman furrowed his brows. “Yes.”

Bluebird unholstered one of her pistols, and handed it to him. He removed the magazine and inspected it.

The construction was on the haphazard side. All DIY work was. But the design itself was… elegant.

“The bullets are too short for this model of weapon,” Batman said.

“The shells are custom made,” said Bluebird. “Less gunpowder. My non-lethal weapons can’t be
“Do you?” Batman asked.

“Yeah,” said Bluebird. “I bugged Esteban’s before the hit went down working another case involving black market explosives. I recorded the hit on Maroni’s guys.”

“And do you have that information with you?”

“Not with me,” Bluebird said. “I have to interface the bug with my equipment at home. But I’ll email Robin the info once I have it. Or… Or you, if you, like, have an address or something.”

“Did you make the bug as well?”

Bluebird grinned. “It just so happens I did.”

Batman put the magazine back into the taser pistol and handed it back to Bluebird.

“I’m not impressed,” he said.

Bluebird stopped grinning.

She took the pistol. The red in her face was definitely from awkwardness now.

“Umm…”

“A teenage girl went out with equipment that could very easily fall apart, with no backup and no network—”

“I have a network,” Bluebird said, putting up some defiance.

“Really?” Batman asked. “Are they skilled?”

Bluebird sighed. “Not particularly, no.”

“At least tell me you know hand-to-hand.”

“Kickboxing.”

“Anything else?”

Bluebird looked down at the roof, and said. “No.”

“Why do you do this?” Batman asked.

Bluebird looked back up at him. “It took months to get the bridges to Bleake back up. They airlifted the cops in every morning, and airlifted them out every night. They weren’t the law. They were janitors. Mopping up all the shit that went down after hours. The least populated area of Gotham still has a million people on it, and someone had to look after them after the sun went down. No one else stepped up. It was just me.”

Batman took a step forward. “You’ve been doing it wrong.”

Bluebird glared at him, but she finally looked back down.

Batman gave it a moment, and asked “Would you like to learn how to do it right?”
She looked back up at him again, steel in her blue eyes.

“I would.”

“Then you start tonight.”

He extended a hand. “I’m Batman.”

She took it. “I’m Bluebird.”

He yanked her in. Close. They could smell each other’s breath.

“I’m Bruce,” he said in a voice barely above a whisper.

The corner of Bluebird’s lip curled. “I’m Harper.”

They both let go at the same time.

As Bluebird walked back to Robin, Batman walked to Catwoman.

“What do you think?” he asked.

Catwoman stole a glance at Bluebird before looking back at him. She shrugged her shoulders and said “Eh…”

“Hey.”

Batman turned around. Robin was walking toward him. His hands were opening and closing, and Batman had to figure that he was searching for pockets that weren’t there.

“You do realize,” Robin said, “that talking to her like that makes me look like an a--like a jerk, right?”

Batman took a deep breath. “If it’s any consolation, I was lying.”

Robin looked at him in confusion. “Huh?”

“I’m very impressed with her,” Batman said. “She waged a one-woman war on crime in a bad area, hid her identity from even me, and she made weaponry and surveillance equipment out of solder and common household items. She has a WayneTech job waiting for her once she gets out of college.”

Robin hunched his shoulders. “Um… I don’t think she can afford to go to college.”

Batman spared a look at Bluebird, who was staring down at the street from the ledge, before looking back at Robin.

“Well… She can now.”

“And Batman’s heart grew three sizes this day,” said Catwoman.

Batman just looked at Catwoman, who returned his blank stare with one of almost total incredulity.

“Please,” Catwoman said, “for the love of God, tell me you saw The Grinch when you were a kid.”

Batman just kept staring. “I’ve been busy… Since I was eight.”

Catwoman looked like she was almost going to cry. Not really, though. She appeared to be going
for comedic effect. “You’re richer than God, and I feel sorry for you. How is that possible?”

“Then, uh… Then what was all that about?” asked Robin. Almost popping out of his skin wanting to change the subject.

“I needed to know she was doing this for the right reasons,” Batman said. “And she is. The only way we can make the world a better place is from a position of humility.”

“Get that one out of a fortune cookie?” Catwoman asked.

Batman’s mind wandered.

Wandered to the ninety-eight dead under the hashtag #WeGotBatman, their faces seared into his brain.

Wandered to the eight-year-old boy who shot him, trying to protect his family during the siege of The Undying two Julys ago.

“No,” Batman said. “That one I learned the hard way.”

The fact that this guy with flames for a head knew her real name wasn’t Spoiler’s problem right now. It was a problem, but it was not the problem.

No, it was the fact that she was unloading everything she had with her collapsible staff, and nothing was hitting him.

Every swipe, every stroke, every jab just… flowed around him. He ducked, bobbed, weaved, dodged every move she had.

“There’s that fire,” Two said, dancing around an overhand swing that made the staff clang when it bounced off the hallway carpet. “There’s that spark. Getting a sense of it is a thrill in and of itself, but to see it in person? Marvelous!”

Two reached out, and with a move so fast that Spoiler couldn’t even see it, yanked the collapsible metal staff out of her hand and flung it further down the hallway.

Spoiler balled up her fists, resolving to settle this flaming jizz-stain the old fashioned way.

She threw a right hook, under which Two ducked. This, in and of itself, was illuminating, as her fist passed the flames that served as Two’s face, and she felt no heat through her gloves. If Oracle could have a green holographic mask, then this was something like that.

“You’re supposed to step back when you throw a punch like that,” Two said. “Just because you didn’t lose your balance this time, doesn’t mean you won’t.”

Spoiler spun with a side kick. Two just stepped back, avoiding it completely.

“You’re not extending,” Two said. “Even if that landed, it wouldn’t have hurt.”

Spoiler uncorked a spinning backfist that Two avoided simply by leaning forward a little bit.

“Come on, Steph,” Two said. “Let’s see those pretty blue eyes of yours.”

“Who are you?” Spoiler asked through gritted teeth as she brought forth a flurry of punches that Two
manage to weave in between almost impossibly.

“Someone who loves you for what you can be,” Two said. “Someone who sees potential a mile wide.”

“Love this, you chode.”

Spoiler brought her left knee up. Two dodged it, and it bounced off of the hallway wall.

It hurt just enough for Spoiler to yell out “Awww, fuck!”

“And you shouldn’t swear,” Two said. “It’s not ladylike.”

Spoiler could deal with the fact that this guy knew her name.

Spoiler could deal with the fact that he evaded everything he threw at her.

Spoiler could not deal with this.

“SUCK A FART FRESH OUTTA MY ASSHOLE!” she yelled. “HOW’S THAT FOR LADYLIKE?”

The problem with wearing the kind of mask Orphan did, was that if one was bleeding from the mouth, or the nose, they were stuck breathing it in.

Orphan was bleeding from both.

She was lightning fast and immensely strong, but she was rendered powerless, as she could not read her opponent.

From the blur that was her father, she had been beaten and kicked through a dresser and a bed. She had no idea where he was coming from. She couldn’t defend herself.

But she’d never been the best defensive fighter.

She’d never had to be.

Not until now.

David unleashed a savage kick to Orphan’s sternum that sent her into the bathroom door, knocking it off its hinges. As she tried to scrabble to her feet, he sent another kick to the dome of her skull that knocked her further into the bathroom. The back of her head bounced off the bathtub, and her vision blotted out white for a moment. She ragdolled. It was hard to breathe.

Strange though. That pain to the head seemed to knock something loose in her thinking.

She had an idea.

That blur had to be an illusion. It just had to be. It wasn’t David’s body that was doing all that movement every time he struck. That’s just what she was seeing.

She reached up to her mask and tapped her right temple three times.

It cycled through various vision modes that were built into her lenses.

Infrared.
Night vision.
Thermals.

Perfect…

She saw David coming through the doorway as a smudge of neon light. Like in that movie Dick showed her that one time about the alien hunting those soldiers in the jungle. The one with the guy whose first name was Arnold, and whose last name was a series of weird noises that she couldn’t comprehend, let alone say.

She was seeing the heat from her father’s body. If the blur into which David’s body turned was an illusion, then it would be no good here.

Orphan leapt at him.

Maybe it was the pain.

Maybe it was the exhaustion.

But she was just… too… slow.

David caught her by the throat. Orphan brought her fist up and into David’s right elbow. A blow that had shattered people’s limbs before.

And it was completely worthless against her father.

Orphan’s eyes went wide behind her mask.

She was almost inhumanly strong. Her most impressive feat was straight-up punching through the plexiglass of one of The Riddler’s death traps. But she actually felt pain surge through her knuckles as she tried to break David’s elbow.

She wondered in terror what her father did to himself that he would be like this.

David spared Orphan a look of sneering disdain, before he reached up with his other hand and yanked off her mask.

He threw Cassandra up into the air. Her spine and the back of her head collided with the ceiling of the hotel room, before she fell back to the floor, bringing her arms up just in time, so her nose didn’t shatter on impact.

She tried to get to her feet.

After what felt like an eternity, she was on all fours.

But David kicked her in the stomach so hard that she flew to her right, colliding with the entertainment center, and bringing the flat screen TV down on her body.

With one hand, David picked up the forty-four inch TV and flung it into the opposite wall. She tried to rise again, but David put a foot on Cassandra’s back, and slooooooowly, lowered her down to her belly.

He bent down, and grabbed her left forearm, and pulled it up a little bit.

And finally, David Cain spoke.
“You are a sword,” David said. “You are not the hand that wields it.”

He pulled up on her arm further.

“You came from nothing, and if you are successful, it is to nothing that you shall return.”

He pulled back some more. Cassandra tried to raise herself with her right hand, but David stomped on her back, bringing her to the floor again and momentarily robbing her of breath.

“You… are an orphan.”

David wrenched back on her arm.

She felt something explode in her shoulder.

And for the first time since childhood, Cassandra Cain screamed in agony.

Giacomo Testaverde was driving the first SUV.

There were five of them, rolling across the Fielder Bridge connecting Bleake Island to the mainland. Each carrying five members of Sal Maroni’s crew.

They were all armed with pistols and automatic weapons.

And Giacomo Testaverde was not afraid to die.

There weren’t gonna be any high-ranking guys at this thing they were having on the mainland. No one to write home about. Just low-level wiseguys and dirty cops.

But it wasn’t always about doing the most damage to a rival family. Sometimes it was about making a statement.

You don’t touch a made guy.

And you for damn sure didn’t touch one of Sal Maroni’s made guys.

Paul Novello was one of Sal Maroni’s made guys. And he was whacked while he was eating at Esteban’s. Gino Matarazzo said he was cut up so bad that Paul’s father started crying when he had to identify the body.

And again, Giacomo Testaverde was not afraid to die. If he took down at least three of Falcone’s guys before they sent him to The Good Lord upstairs, then he’d have died a happy man.

It was some political thing tonight. At the Sorrento Ballroom in midtown.

It was supposed to be packed with Falcone’s guys.

And it was just five minutes away.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 9: Beggars Banquet

Spoiler launched a flurry of kicks that caused Two to duck back into the hotel room from whence he emerged to avoid them.

A right hook dodged.

A front kick evaded.

He wasn’t even there for the front elbow.

Spoiler had twisted and turned in her efforts to fight Two to the extent that she was standing in front of the open bathroom door.

Which meant she got a front-row seat for the continuing decomposition of Two’s murder victim Linus, skin still pale, eyes still full of horror, his blood filling the bathtub having now congealed to the consistency of room-temperature ketchup.

Spoiler stopped, feeling that afternoon’s lunch trying to make a bee-line for her open mouth beneath her mask.

She didn’t even have time to say “Oh, fuck!” before she knew she lost.

She had taken her eyes off of Two.

And Spoiler knew, the moment she turned around, a punch to the face or a kick to the stomach was waiting for her.

“You need to work on your concentration,” Two said.

Spoiler turned.

Mere inches from her face, in Two’s gloved right hand, was a small black pellet.

A pellet that exploded into thick, black smoke.

Spoiler tried to wave the smoke away from the front of her mask, so taken by surprise that she had momentarily forgotten that she had the same kind of thermal lenses that Orphan had in hers.

In the midst of the miasma, as delicate as an icicle on a day that the weather rose above freezing, Spoiler felt a pair of lips make contact with the right cheek of her mask. And the loud smooching noise that followed threatened to turn her stomach even further.

Spoiler swung at where the lips had been.

Of course no one was there.

The smoke began to dissipate, and Spoiler found herself alone in an empty hotel room.
Two had vanished.

David Cain dragged Cassandra into the hallway by the arm whose shoulder he had dislocated.

He pulled up, and Cassandra groaned as she was brought to her feet.

Father and daughter were standing now, looking each other in the eye, his cold disdain showering upon Cassandra’s bloody and rapidly swelling face like spring rain.

David reared back, and…

*THWACK!*

An open-hand slap with his right hand across the side of her face made her ears start ringing and sent a fresh jet of blood into her mouth. She felt her knees buckle, and lowered herself to the ground with her breath slowly exiting her bleeding nose.

David yanked up on her arm. The pain was great, but the mewling and pathetic drone coming out of her mouth was too weak to match. She got back to her feet on wobbly knees, and…

*THWACK!*

The back-hand this time, to the other side of her face. Something strange and foreign was in Cassandra’s mouth, only for her to realize it was one of her back molars. She sank to her knees yet again.

And David finally let go.

Cassandra slowly curdled against the wall. Her legs didn’t feel like doing what she asked them to, and she couldn’t move her arms.

She heard the scrape of metal against metal.

Cassandra looked up.

David had taken the emergency fire extinguisher off the wall. He was hefting it up and down in his hands, testing the weight.

He stood above her, bringing the fire extinguisher above his head. Icy disappointment was in his eyes.

And then he brought it down.

*Darkness.*

*Darkness, until…*

“Orphan… Orphan… Cass, wake the fuck up!”

Cassandra’s eyes fluttered open, and Stephanie, unmasked, was almost cradling her in her arms.

They… didn’t seem to be in the hotel anymore. The walls and ceiling of this place were concrete.

Cassandra’s lips formed an “O” to say a word that began with a W, but everything hurt. The physical pain and the emotional shame seemed to be having a spirited debate about which could
make Cassandra feel worse at the moment. Shame, at the moment, was winning on points.

“You were out when I found you,” Stephanie said. “I had to get you back up to the roof and grapnel us to an office building across the street. You know, for such a tiny bitch, you are really heavy.”

Cassandra tried to get up. Her body only marginally felt like cooperating, and Stephanie pushed her back down anyway.

“Hold still,” Stephanie said. “I don’t think you’re ready to get up yet.”

Cassandra Cain was the kind of person who fought through pain past the point others would break. Which is why she surprised even herself by leaning back down, meekly as a tired kitten.

She reached for her swollen face, felt that she wasn’t wearing her mask, and her eyes went as wide as they could.

Stephanie apparently saw the panic forming on her face.

“It’s okay,” Stephanie said.

She reached over to her side and picked something up.

“‘I got your mask…”

She dropped the mask, and picked something else up.

“...and I got your tooth.”

Cassandra closed her eyes, and rolled them beneath her eyelids.

“Now here’s what’s going to happen,” Stephanie said. “The first thing I’m going to do is wet-nap the blood off of your face. The second thing I’m gonna do is call in a May-Day.”

Cassandra’s eyes opened wide, and she levelled them at Stephanie in terror.

The May-Day was used so that every crimefighter in a costume in Gotham could come in and assist.

They would all see her like this.

*Batman* would see her like this.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Stephanie said. “We shit the bed, here, Cass. Now we gotta pay for it.”

---

Batman took a position on the roof of the Northcutt building a block away from the Sorrento Ballroom.

Robin was on the roof of the adjacent parking garage.

Bluebird (with an earpiece that Batman had provided for her) was on the fire escape of the Giandomenico Credit Union.

Only Catwoman stayed on the roof of the Mayron Savings & Loan.

They were all doing surveillance. And it didn’t take long before one of them caught something.

“We have company,” Robin said over the radio. “Five black SUVs three blocks away, coming
down twenty-eighth.”

“It’s them,” said Bluebird. “You see Maroni’s guys rolling deep like that in Bleake all the time.”

“How many would you say were inside each?” Batman asked.

“About five,” said Bluebird.

Batman nodded to himself. “Alright, Robin and I will take them by surprise, and try to subdue them without a shot going off. If one does, the people inside the ballroom will hear it, so I need you and Catwoman inside to pacify the Falcone’s men and the cops.”

Catwoman’s voice came over the radio. “Batman?” she asked with a practiced airiness.

Batman sighed. “If you would be so kind,” he said.

“Y’know,” Catwoman said, “I think I would.”

Five black SUVs pulled up in front of the Sorrento Ballroom. They came in so hot that one of them almost sideswiped an old Honda Accord, driven by a reporter for the Gotham Gazette covering the event.

The vehicles screeched to a halt and, without anyone even turning off the ignitions within the vehicles, their cargo, twenty-five low-level Maroni Family hitters armed with automatic weapons, emerged.

The security detail outside the ballroom, consisting of five off-duty cops guarding the main entrance, saw the SUVs, and knew what was coming.

The gangster at the head of the Maroni vanguard, one Giacomo Testaverde, raised his AR-15 and aimed it at one of the cops working security.

His finger started to press down on the trigger…

...only for Giacomo Testaverde to be brutally knocked unconscious by a swooping Batman.

Robin made landfall a split-second later, whirling his staff above his head, and bringing it down savagely on the heads of the surprised and frightened gangsters.

If one were to play the blame game, if one were to take the initiative in assigning fault to one person turning this situation from bad to worse, then the honors would have to go to one Ashley O’Malley.

She was an off-duty cop working security at tonight’s fundraiser. The presence of vigilantes and Maroni hitters melted together in her brain. She removed her service revolver from her holster and pointed it into the mass of humanity.

And Officer Ashley O’Malley…

...dipshit that she was…

...fired a single shot.

Whatever force that governs the universe needed to be thanked that Ashley O’Malley was a piss-
poor shot. She didn’t hit anyone. And that was the good news.

The bad news was that everyone inside the Sorrento Ballroom heard it.

**BANG!**

It was muffled. Not particularly louder than a popping champagne cork inside the ballroom where people were talking among themselves, mingling to classical music coming over the loud-speakers.

But everyone inside, some one-hundred in all, knew it was a gunshot.

The cringe, the fear, the alertness, was collective. They all stood rigid and yelped as one.

The only person who didn’t panic was One, high above the ballroom in the scaffolding.

Behind his mask of flame, Jason Todd smiled.

That was his cue.

He took the detonator from the inside of his jacket, and pressed the button.

All six vials of Madam Crow’s Anti-Fear Toxin, made for this occasion by the late Doctor Jonathan Crane and connected to a homemade dispersal device, started filtering through the ventilation system…

Catwoman crashed through the side window on the left side of the ballroom. The people on the ground in their tuxes and evening gowns, still amped from hearing the gunshots, stopped and gawked at her, screaming.

As she landed on the floor of the ballroom, Catwoman realized that she hadn’t made one of these grand superhero window entrances until just now. She usually had to rely on stealth in her career as a burglar. Now she was causing property damage just to enter a room.

She could not lie to herself. It felt pretty cool.

“Who is the head of the security detail, here?” Catwoman asked loudly over the din of voices.

A burly man in a tux, mostly neck and shaved head, was standing at a table next to Sean Riley, a reedy little redhead whose election to Gotham City Public Defender this fundraiser was supposed to precipitate, stepped forward to Catwoman.

“I’m Walter Mulligan,” he said. “I’m in charge here. And I gotta say, I don’t like the cape crowd coming in here and--”

“Yeah, yeah,” Catwoman said, cutting him off and wondering whether cops (as this man obviously was) were more annoying when she was a villain or now that she was a hero. “I need you to get some of your crew together to barricade the entrance. They’ll take orders from you, not me.”

“And why would we do that?”

The sound of automatic rifle fire from outside.

More screams from inside.
“That’s why,” Catwoman said. “How many murders you wanna work tonight?”

Batman and Robin were whirling dervishes, laying gangsters low into unconsciousness. But there were twenty-five of them, all at once, with no way to isolate them out in the open like this.

Robin came in over the earpiece.

“Batman?”

THUD!

“I’m a little busy.”

CRUNCH!

“So am I.”

THWACK!

“What is it?”

BANG!

“Is having Catwoman barricade the door a good idea?”

Batman sent a Maroni thug’s head into the passenger side door of one of the SUVs, denting it.

“It’ll keep the people inside safe.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Batman saw Robin use his staff to sweep the legs out from under another Maroni hood.

“But what if we need to fall back?” Robin asked.

The Maroni goon, whose head Batman had used to deface the SUV, was back on his feet. Batman took a brief moment to admire his tenacity, before kicking him in the side so hard that he rag-dolled.

“Then we have side and window entrances,” Batman said. “Everything’s fine.”

Everything was not fine.

The security detail inside the Sorrento Ballroom had started using the tables to barricade the front entrance, but then they stopped.

Arguments broke out among themselves. Guys Catwoman knew were gangsters and these off-duty cops were waving their pieces around. And the civilians, far from shrinking at the sights of loaded guns, were getting into these guys’ faces and giving them shit.

As Catwoman was wondering just what the hell was going on, Walter Milligan, having shed his tuxedo jacket so everyone could see his holster, stepped to her.

“We ain’t barricading this place.”

“I can see that.”
“Maroni’s guys come in here wavin’ their dicks around,” Milligan said, “they’re gonna find an army of angry mick cops with pairs of scissors.”

“That’s… vivid,” Catwoman said. “Tell everyone here to put their guns away. Batman’s on it. You want the people in here safe, then how about you act that way, huh?”

Mulligan took another step toward her. “Then how about you make me? I’m not scared of Maroni, you think I’m scared of you?”

And it was only now that Catwoman realized she was surrounded by dirty cops and Falcone grunts, all armed, about ten in all.

Normally, she would have talked her way out of this one. Appealed to their greed or self-preservation.

But the damnest thing was… she wasn’t particularly scared of these guys.

“Fine,” she said.

From a dispenser on Catwoman’s wrist, a small black pellet hit the wooden ballroom floor.

Thick smoke soon followed.

And the cracking of a bullwhip.

From within the heart of the smoke, her goggles down and set to thermals so she could see the outline of the cops and the gangsters, Catwoman flicked her whip out. She’d disabled five of these douchebags just by skinning their knuckles.

But the smoke was beginning to dissipate.

Now she’d have to be creative.

She coiled the whip around the neck of Mulligan himself, and brought him in. She yanked down, doubling him over just enough that she could bring a knee into his face. He was out before he hit the floor.

Catwoman brought her long right leg up, and jacked the jaw of the greasy haired goon standing next to him. From there, she literally cartwheeled out of the ring of ill-wishers, and ducked under a table for cover.

The table immediately flipped over above her, and the remaining eight hard-asses were standing above her. Some had guns. Some didn’t.

One of them, with the buzzcut endemic to all cops with a grudge, said “You put me in the hospital back when you were still a thief. I am gonna…”

Eight light, muffled shots rang out in rapid succession.

And all eight of the men who wanted to kill her were wrapped in tendrils of blue electricity, before they dropped to the floor.

As they dropped, Catwoman saw that Bluebird was standing behind them, both of her taser pistols drawn.

*Tim Drake has great taste in chicks,* Catwoman thought. *I’ll give that to him, no matter how much*
Bluebird smiled. “Thought you might use some—”

Her words were cut off when an off-duty cop in a tuxedo rammed the business end of a folding steel chair into the back of Bluebird’s head.

The remaining Maroni thugs (the ones who were still conscious, anyway) fell back across the street.

It was the smart decision. They had the AR-15s. They had range. Batman and the two members of the outside security force still alive did not, armed with pistols or no.

All they had for cover were the five SUVs in which Maroni’s guys had arrived.

And they wouldn’t last long under automatic weapons fire.

Batman and Robin were hunkered down behind the third of the five SUVs. The one that had parked on the curb.

Robin opened his mouth to say something.

Just then, the window beneath which Robin was struck by a volley of weapons fire. Small shards of broken glass rained down into Robin’s hair, and he raised his gloves above his head to protect himself.

Batman sighed, thinking Robin had the right of it the whole time.

He darted forward, toward Officer Ashley O’Malley, who was still alive.

“Robin and I are going in through the side window,” Batman said. “We’re going to clear the barricade to the main doors. As soon as we do, fall back to the inside of the ballroom.”

It should have been a shootout in here.

Instead, it was a saloon brawl from an old Western.

None of the people on the floor of the ballroom used their guns on each other. In Catwoman’s experience, nine out of the ten people who carried were scared of catching an honest ass-kicking.

She noticed that no one in the Sorrento Ballroom had that problem.

Gangsters, cops, mid-forties female socialites in cocktail dresses, be-tuxedoed gents in spectacles with bald pates, and even the man of the hour: Sean Riley himself were duking it out. Seemingly indiscriminately.

A crooked cop with a security lanyard and a gangster whose nose overpowered his face were kicking the absolute dogshit out of a guy in a tux on the ground. Once the guy stopped moving, the cop and the crook looked at each other, smiled, and started whaling the hell out of one another.

A separate cop, one who was so roundly-yet-solidly built that he seemed more thumb than man, was choking the life out of a man in a tux who, if Catwoman were to hazard a guess, appeared to be in his mid-seventies. The man’s wife, who also appeared to be in her seventies, was stabbing The Thumb in the shoulder pad of his jacket with an olive fork.
The thumb dropped the husband, turned to the wife, and socked her dead in the middle of the face.

Normally, Catwoman would be mortified, and fearful for the old lady’s well-being.

So why was she laughing?

*What?* Catwoman asked herself. *It’s funny! Her dentures flew out!*

Catwoman felt a tug on the right leg of her costume. She looked down, ready to whip an ass, and saw that Bluebird, the back of her head bleeding, was using Catwoman as a means to get up.

“*You doing alright down there?*” Catwoman asked.

“I’m dizzy,” Bluebird said as she got to her feet. “And I feel like I’m gonna throw up.”

“This your first concussion?” Catwoman asked. “If it is, congratulations. I’ll order you an ice cream cake.”

A crash from behind her. Both Catwoman and Bluebird turned.

Batman came in through a side window about twenty feet above them. Robin entered through the one that she herself had crashed through earlier.

They both glided down to her with their capes, and looked around in confusion.

“What… the *hell*?” Robin asked.

But Batman was preoccupied with Bluebird.

“Find somewhere safe,” Batman said, noticing the blood pouring down the back of her head.

Bluebird just cracked her knuckles. “I’m still in this one, Batman.”

Batman, behind his mask, looked aghast. “No, you’re n--”

The sound of automatic gunfire.

The security detail had come in early.

And the Maroni goons had followed.

“I thought the door was barricaded,” Batman said, the gravel in his voice on high.

“They tried,” Catwoman said. “Then they went nuts.”

Robin saw something in the scaffolding above.

It looked like fire.

“There’s someone up there,” Robin said.

Batman looked down at him, and nodded.

“On it,” Robin said.

He relieved his grapnel gun from his utility belt and fired at the rail of the scaffolding.
The line drew him up, up, up into the rafters.

Robin landed on the wooden planks of the scaffolding, and turned, his cape billowing behind him.

*Wait…*

*This dude’s head is on fire.*

*No, his--*

In the mere second it took for Robin to reckon with One’s existence, One lunged.

He brought his knee into the side of Robin’s face.

And Robin both heard and felt the crunch of his nose breaking.

---

Batman ran for the front entrance, which was at the front of the lobby beyond the ballroom itself

The two main doors were hanging open. Officer Ashley O’Malley and the one other remaining member of the outside security detail were both dead. The five armed men in the lobby had tracked their blood inside, staining the burgundy carpet

Almost as a reflex action, Batman liberated six Batarangs from his utility belt, and flung them upward.

Two embedded in the ceiling.

The other four shattered all the lights.

Darkness…

Batman brought down the night-vision lenses in his cowl, and charged.

He fired his grapnel gun into the wall behind the five goons, and reeled himself in.

Batman collided with all five of them. The combination of the impact and the disorientation in the dark knocked them all off their feet.

He moved from one prone body to another in the blackness, bringing down fists to temples rapidly, brutally, before those on the ground knew what was going on.

Batman stood among the five out-cold mobsters on the carpet.

There were five in here, which meant there must have been about… twenty left outside.

Some of them might still be unconscious, but he knew for a fact that most of them were still up and running. And that meant that they were still outside. Waiting to shoot anyone who came through the front doors.

He placed a finger to his ear beneath his cowl.

“Penny One, do you read?”

“Loud and clear, sir,” Alfred Pennyworth said over the comms.

“What’s the ETA on the GCPD response for the Sorrento Ballroom?”
Batman heard a few quick keystrokes, and Alfred replied.

“There isn’t one, sir.”

Batman blinked in disbelief. “Are you saying that no one here called the police?”

“It does seem that way. Shall I take the liberty, sir?”

“Yes,” Batman said. “Please. Tell them to bring a SWAT van, because they have about twenty gangsters with AR-15s waiting for them.”

Don’t touch it, Robin thought. Don’t pick at it. Don’t wipe it. If you so much as touch your broken nose, your eyes will swell shut, and you’ll be even more screwed than you are now.

The blood from Robin’s broken nose flowed into his mouth and down his chin as he looked up at his attacker.

One sent a savage kick into Robin’s side where the kevlar plating of his costume ended. He felt his ribs enflame.

As Robin clutched his side and tried to breathe, One landed a right cross on his jaw that knocked him on his ass.

Robin tried to collect himself. As he did, One yanked Robin’s left hand to the rail of the scaffolding. He produced a pair of handcuffs, and bound him there.

One stood back and folded his arms.

Robin looked up at him, and spat out blood.

“I… I take it you’re the one behind the hit at Esteban’s.”

The flames of One’s head nodded. “Batman picked a smart one, didn’t he, Timmy?”

Robin’s mind jumped straight to the small problem: He called him Timmy.

You motherfucker…

Only now did it come to the big problem: That he knew his name at all.

Oh, no…

“Yeah,” One said. “I know your name. I see Selina down there. Bruce, too. Even Harper. No Steph or Kate, Dick’s in Bludhaven, I know that. And no Cass? Now Cassandra Cain on Anti-Fear Toxin? That I would pay to see.”

Robin blinked. “Anti-F-- what?”

“Ai-Fear Toxin,” One said. “The Madam Crow special, made personally by Jonathan Crane himself, before I put a hole through him. It’s what’s going on down there right now, though the last of it should be done filtering through the ventilation. You weren’t down there long enough to get dosed all that much. Oh, and don’t worry. It’s a thick compound, which means it won’t travel up that far. You and me are safe up here. But the cops, crooks, rich folks and superheroes down there, not giving a shit if they live or die? Now that, Timmy, is prettier than a fucking sunrise.”
“There are innocent people down there!” Robin yelled, sending spittle and his own blood flying.

“Innocent people?” One asked, derision down to the very core of his voice. “There are Falcone goons down there. They’re lucky I’m letting them take themselves out, instead of me going down there and capping them all personally. And the cops are crooked. You can’t make bacon without killing some fuckin’ pigs.”

“And everyone else?”

“Don’t tell me I’m supposed to squirt tears for the rich people who keep this whole corrupt shitshow running,” One said. “Flinging cash at the worst people, making sure they still get to keep their high-rise apartments while Gotham bleeds. They’re just as bad.”

Robin’s mind was racing, trying to put it all together through the pain.

“You engineered a mob war,” Robin said. “But you’re not stealing anything. What do you get out of all this?”

One unfolded his arms.

It was hard to ascertain, what with his head being literal fire and all, but it sure looked to Robin like One was going to tell him.

Batman knew the guy coming toward him.

His name was Barry Jesell. He was an accountant who worked for the Gotham City branch of Queen Consolidated.

He was usually a smiley, fairly chunky guy with a weak, moist handshake.

Only now, he was speeding toward Batman in a tuxedo, face red and his bowtie tied around his head like Rambo’s bandanna.

Ideally, Batman would try to quickly and efficiently knock Barry out to spare him any undue pain, what with he being an innocent bystander.

But that guy was charging someone in top-of-the-line body armor, built like a tank and dressed like a bat.

Barry had to take a nap now.

Boom!

Barry Jesell’s right eye had begun to swell before he had even hit the floor.

Batman looked to his left.

Catwoman was cracking her whip on a known associate of Carmine Falcone. Blood flew from the gangster’s face.

He looked to his right.

Batman finally saw what Bluebird in action looked like.

And it… didn’t look great.
Her form was good, but her strikes and her kicks were slow. The security guy she was fighting was dodging all of them.

It may not have been because she was a bad fighter.

No, maybe it was because the long gash in the back of her head had resulted in a concussion. Precious few people could fight in that condition.

Bluebird threw a punch. The crooked cop dodged it, and he followed up with a punch of his own, landing flush and hard on the side of her face.

And as he saw Bluebird fall to the floor, blood coming from her mouth, all Batman could think was: 

*She’ll be fine…*

“I’m not gonna tell you who’s running this show,” One said, appearing to Robin as though he was bragging. “Because this ain’t the movies, and I ain’t a Bond villain. But what I *am* gonna say is that I’m gonna get something I’ve wanted for years. Something that’ll shake Gotham to its foundation.”

“Yeah?” Robin asked. “What’s that?”

One leaned in.

“I… am gonna kill… *The Joker.*”

And Robin just… looked at him. It was all he could do. In all seriousness, Robin wondered whether or not he had heard him correctly, or had in fact hallucinated what had just been said.

Even without a conventional head, Robin could see that One was flummoxed by the lack of reaction.

“What?” One asked. “What is it?”

Robin spat some more blood out. “Um… I don’t know how to tell you this… but The Joker’s dead.”

Robin couldn’t tell if One was blinking, or rolling his eyes, or contorting his face or anything like that. The flames of his head just kept burning impassively until Robin heard a short, strangled…

“What?”

“Yeah,” Robin said. “Five years next month.”

One slowly stood up straight.

“You mind if I ask where you’ve been the past five years that you didn’t know The Joker was dead?” Robin asked. “Cause, uh… It must have been really far away. I read that they had parades in Zimbabwe, and The Joker never even went there.”

One, slowly, rigidly, turned and started walking away.

Robin heard him exclaim something under his breath. It sounded an awful lot like:

*“She lied to me…”* 

As he saw One walk through the door on the other end of the scaffolding that led to the roof, Robin
summoned the strength to get to his feet.

This guy with the flaming head and the number 1 on the lapel of his leather jacket knew the names of everyone in Batman’s network.

But he apparently didn’t know that Robin carried a handcuff key in the lining of his glove for just such an occasion.

Once Robin had freed himself from the rail of the scaffolding, he racked his brain.

Anti-Fear Toxin.

Originally created by Abigail O'Shea, aka “Madam Crow.”

Batman had had him study this. Tricks of the trade, courtesy of Gotham City’s criminally insane. There was a written test and everything.

It was a thicker, more viscous chemical than the regular Scarecrow special, best suited for injection in a liquid form instead of the inhalation in a gaseous state like the poor rich folks down below were going through now. But it was also weaker.

Fear Toxin usually took days, sometimes weeks of therapy before victims had it out of their system.

Ant-Fear Toxin just needed a short, sharp electric shock to dispel.

Robin felt for his utility belt.

He came away with one of his Bangarang prototypes, and an electric discharge disc.

Robin scanned the ceiling of the ballroom above the ever-worsening fight below…

…and found the heads for the sprinkler system.

Bingo!

Robin hefted the Bangarang in his right hand, getting used to the weight before he threw.

And he got it in one. The bangarang collided with sprinkler head before it exploded.

Water started flowing from the ceiling.

As the sprinklers activated, dousing everyone, Catwoman (who had kicked a cop in the jaw so hard that his toupee flew off the top of his head and landed on one of the few tables that hadn’t been overturned) looked up. And as she looked down again, she saw Batman.

Bruce Wayne.

The man she loved.

And the man she was scared of.

Not in a common or low way, no. Not in the way some random thug who saw his shadow in the dead of night was scared of him.

Selina Wayne was scared of her husband in the way that only someone who loved him and knew him could be.
He was born a billionaire. He couldn’t help it. Selina reckoned that if someone was born that rich, then they were the kind of person who thought that consequences were negotiable.

Bruce had told her about himself. About how Barbara Gordon lost the use of her legs and Jason Todd lost his life within a year of each other. And he still… kept being Batman. He kept putting on that outfit and going out every night in spite of the width and the depth of the universe entire giving him two huge signs that he should stop.

The one time he did stop, and stopped for three years until The Undying roused him from his rest, was when Harley Quinn killed The Joker right in front of him.

But even then, that was a cheat. Those consequences were Harley’s, not his. His own actions smelled like roses, in spite of the fact that he put on such a big show of blaming himself whenever things went wrong.

Because consequences were negotiable for a guy like Bruce Wayne.

They weren’t for Selina, no, they were never negotiable for her. Selina grew up poor. Selina had a mom who committed suicide and a dad who drank himself to death not long after. Selina moved from foster home to foster home. Selina had to squat in abandoned apartments when she was in her late teens and steal just to make ends meet. Consequences were not negotiable for her at all. The shit she did, she had to live with.

Which is why she waited. Waited for the moment she was scared of. The moment when she would visit a slight upon Bruce either real or imagined, and he would negotiate the consequence of marrying her. And he would say “Enough.”

“No more.”

“Get out.”

And she would be alone again. Lost in the same dreary day-to-day that she had been a year and a half ago, before she found out Bruce Wayne had been Batman this whole time. Because while he could negotiate the consequence of marrying her, she would be without the tools to negotiate the consequence of marrying him. She just wasn’t built that way.

She was scared of it.

And she was so, so, so tired of being scared of it.

Looking over at him now, squaring up to fight someone in a tuxedo, Catwoman had realized that she and Batman had never been in a proper drag-out fight before. Not once in the eleven years that she led him on a merry chase.

They were close once. The first time they met, in fact. He was Batman, she was Catwoman, and she was stealing stuff from the yacht that belonged to Bruce Wayne’s girlfriend (little did she know at the time…).

She led him into the interior of Miagani Island, to a rooftop with a water tower. She threw everything she had at him, and he just… dodged everything. He flowed like water around her attempts to cause him pain.

Eleven years later, when they were dating, he told her that during the chase, she had made him laugh. That he didn’t want to repay that kindness by raising a hand to her. So he just dodged and ducked, watching her express herself through how she tried to fight him. He thought it was
liberating. Illuminating. More honest and fun that a simple conversation would have been.

Ninety-nine percent of Selina thought that was sweet and romantic, coming from a creepy Creature-of-the-Night vigilante.

But one percent… One percent was just pissed right the hell off. She deserved a chance to prove herself.

She was terrified of the prospect, though. Of having to take on the guy who had his back broken, only to heal himself and beat the snot out of the roided-out monster that did it to him.

But she had to admit to herself… that she was tired of being scared of that, too.

Batman had just punched out the guy in the tux who was going to attack him.

And as the water fell from the ceiling, her hand found its way to her whip.

With one swift motion, the end was wrapped around Batman’s wrist, and he yanked him off balance.

When she caught his eye after he regained his footing, he looked… hurt.

And Catwoman didn’t know why that made her smile.

“We got unfinished business, Sailor,” Catwoman said. “Thirteen years of it.”

Batman squinted at her. “What?”

Catwoman cracked her whip.

And then she ran toward him.

Robin threw the electrical discharge disc to the floor of the ballroom below.

It activated, and the water that was rapidly pooling at everyone’s feet glowed blue with electricity.

For one brief second.

But it was enough.

Most of the room dropped instantly.

Catwoman (who had been running toward Batman for some strange reason) was electrocuted mid-stride, and she bounced harmlessly off of Batman’s chest as she made her way to the floor of the ballroom.

But this, in itself, was a problem.

Because the Batsuit was insulated, Batman hadn’t been electrocuted at all. He just stood over Catwoman’s unconscious form, just… staring.

One said that the ventilation system had burned through the last of the Anti-Fear Toxin, but Robin didn’t want to risk it. He got a collapsible gas mask from his utility belt, secured it to his face, and glided down to the ballroom floor.

And Batman was still just standing there, staring at his unconscious wife.
More than the urgent matters at hand, Robin had to ask.

“Batman? What is it?”

He was quiet for a time. Until he finally spoke.

“I know what they say about me,” Batman said.

Robin looked around, before he finally asked “Who?”

“Clark,” Batman said. “Dick. Barbara. They think… They think that if Selina leaves me, I’ll go back to the way I was. Angry. Paranoid. Vicious. That doesn’t scare me, though. Do you know why?”

Robin really did not want to be here for this conversation. Right now, Batman didn’t look like Batman. Batman looked like a very insecure Bruce Wayne wearing a mask. There was no gravel in his voice.

“How?” Robin asked.

“Because I know it won’t happen,” Batman said. “The thing that scares me is what I know will happen. The thing that scares me is if… if Selina leaves me, then… then I’ll just keep improving. I’ll just keep getting better and better everyday. And then I’ll know. I’ll know that I didn’t need a catalyst. I didn’t need a flashpoint. I didn’t need someone to save me.”

He finally looked into Robin’s eyes.

“The building blocks of me being a better person were in front of me the whole time,” Batman said. “And I didn’t use them. Why didn’t I use them? Why did I wait so long? After so many people got hurt? That… That will mean that no matter how better I get, no matter how much I’m there for the people around me, I still won’t be a good person. I still won’t be a man my father would be proud of. I still won’t be the man that deserves her… Because I waited so long. Because it came too late. After too many broken hearts and too many funerals.”

He blinked, and his eyes gained a smidgeon of clarity.

“But the thing that scares me more than that? It’s talking about it. Telling someone. I never even told Harley. Why… Why am I telling you right now?”

Robin saw that the Bruce Wayne beneath the Batman mask was having a crisis… but there was some shit that needed to be handled right now.

“We’ll talk about it when you wake up,” Robin said.

“When I--”

Robin quickly swooped down, grabbed one of Bluebird’s pistols from off the ballroom floor. He aimed it at Batman, and fired.

The taser pellet caught Batman in the cheek, and wrapped him in coils of blue electricity for a split second. But because the Batsuit was insulated, Robin didn’t wind up shocking himself.

It was an act of natural poetry that the sprinklers stopped sprinkling when Batman hit the ground.

Robin dropped the pistol.
The phone in the protective compartment on the back of his utility belt started vibrating.

Robin took it out, looked at it, and groaned.

“Well, my night just got better.”

An acrid chemical smell wafted into Batman’s nostrils, and his eyes snapped open.

He was on the ballroom floor amidst the hundred or so people who were just now being stirred from their stupor.

He looked down and saw that Robin had woken him up with the new smelling salts that Lucius Fox had engineered with the chemical application team at WayneTech.

“All the more reason to have you sneak me in here.”

“Anti-Fear Toxin,” Robin said. “Before we go any further. You’ve been out for five minutes”

It was just now that Batman remembered what he had said to Robin, and suddenly he felt very sick.

He looked around.

“Where--”

“I got Bluebird and Catwoman up to the scaffolding,” Robin said. “They weren’t as heavy as you.”

Batman looked up.

Bluebird was standing, trying not to fall asleep while she was concussed. Catwoman was sitting, her legs dangling beneath the railing, looking off into space, her raised brows and dewy eyes telling him she was lost.

He looked back down.

“Good work, Robin.”

Robin nodded, and wiped some of the blood from his broken nose off of his mouth.

“I have bad news, and I have worse news,” Robin said.

“Say it,” Batman said.

“The bad news,” Robin said, “is that I just got a May-Day from Orphan and Spoiler.”

Batman sighed. “We’re in no position to facilitate a May-Day.”

“I know,” Robin said. “Oracle and Nightwing are on their way to intercept. It was supposed to be their date night tonight in Gotham, so...”

Batman nodded. “And the worse news?”

Robin sighed. He looked down at the floor before he looked back at him.

“The guy who did this,” Robin said. “He knows our names. Our real names.”

A surge of panic coursed through Batman’s body.

“We’ve been burned,” Robin said. “And God help me, I don’t know how.”
Chapter End Notes

I'm kinda tired, kids. The next chapter will drop on Monday, June 30. See you then.
Black and Blue

Chapter 10: Black and Blue

THE HOTEL SUITE OF KONSTANTIN FOTOS - NATIONAL CITY

Harmonia had heard a saying during her thousands of years of roaming Earth.

“What fools these mortals be.”

That one of the mortals themselves had found the self-awareness to coin such a phrase some four-hundred years ago was the only thing about humanity by which Harmonia was impressed.

The length of her travels, the summoning of One and Two…

...and blocking out the whispers...

...had depleted Harmonia’s power almost completely, to the point that all she could do nowadays was disappear from one place and appear in another.

And on good days, she could summon the appropriate display of what mortals called “pyrotechnics” to get her point across.

 Appearing in a blaze of light was all it took to get that drunken oaf David Cain to turn his life around and become the killer, the distraction, that she needed him to be.

And that blaze of light was all that was needed to put the fear of Harmonia into Konstantin Fotos.

She appeared in his hotel bathroom as he was taking a bath, the heat of the water having fogged the bathroom mirror and the condensation having made the tiles on the floor slightly slick. She knew that he had just arrived in National City this very afternoon, after procuring the Blade of Resurrection from the fools who had bought it from the one who had infiltrated Shadowcrest and evading Batwoman in the process. Fotos had been asleep when she appeared, his head hanging on the back of the bathtub, and it occurred to her that she may have just prevented him from drowning.

Fotos opened his green eyes, saw that the Goddess of Harmony and Concord had appeared before him, and immediately hunched forward within the tub to maintain his decency.

“My Lady,” Fotos said, slicking his hair back. “Wh-What--”

“You,” Harmonia said, “are in trouble.”

Fotos’ eyes went wide, and Harmonia marveled at his idiocy.

“Not from me,” Harmonia said. “You know Batwoman is coming.”

“Yes,” Fotos said. “I and the other members of The Order have--”

“She does not come alone,” Harmonia said. “The Daughter of Clay comes with her.”

Fotos’ eyes went wide again. His mouth opened and closed for a moment. Harmonia was reminded of some of the uglier fish in Poseidon’s menagerie.

“You… You mean…”
“Yes,” Harmonia said. “Wonder Woman.”

“But My Lady,” Fotos said. “That would mean…”

“That I have been betrayed?” Harmonia asked. “Yes. It does.”

“I assure you that neither I nor anyone else in The Order has spoken a single word to--”

“I know that, you moron,” Harmonia said, feeling the last of her patience disintegrate into mist. “If I have been betrayed to the extent that Diana of Themyscira is involved, then this betrayal is beyond anything for which you could possibly be responsible. Nevertheless, you have been given a great responsibility, Konstantin. The one of the Batman’s forces that was to come to this city was the one that was slated for death. Batwoman was the one who chose to come. But if Wonder Woman followed, then she must share the same fate.”

Fotos blinked a couple of times before he reckoned with the enormity of that which he had been tasked. Once he had, he visibly turned pale.

“My Lady,” Fotos said. “Batwoman is a mere mortal, but even so, it is no easy task to destroy her. But to dispose of an Amazon…”

Harmonia smiled.

“Calm yourself, Konstantin. Diana of Themyscira is far less invulnerable than she appears.”

She surveyed his slight, hairy frame, and rolled her eyes.

“Dress yourself,” she said. “Her plane lands at NCX in eighty-one minutes.”

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THE BATCAVE

“This was supposed to be date night,” Barbara said. “Dick and I were… Well, Dick and I were going to enjoy each other’s company tonight. Now we can’t do that. Now we have to look after you.”

Cassandra and Stephanie were sitting on the examination table in the medical area at the western end of the Batcave. It was spotted with blood from a blue-haired girl who Robin had apparently brought in. Cassandra didn’t catch her name.

They were still in their costumes, minus the masks, fresh from being brought to the Batcave by Barbara and Dick Grayson, who had been the ones to respond to Stephanie’s May-Day. They had come in Dick’s car, and from what she could spy in the rear view mirror, Cassandra was a mess. The entire right side of her face was puffy and discolored with bruises. Her lower lip was swollen. There was still blood that evaded Stephanie’s attempts to get it all off with a wet nap.

In the back of her mind, Cassandra remembered that today was the day that Conner told her she had a pretty smile.

And now Barbara and Dick were looking at the two of them, and they were joined by Selina, who was out of her Catwoman costume and in jeans and a black tank top, and seemed to be distracted by something.

“Well, it still could be date night,” Dick said with his eyebrows raised.
Barbara slowly turned to him, and glared.

“I-I mean… we can still hang out at the Clock Tower while we’re--”

“Babe, not now,” Barbara said, before turning back to Cassandra and Stephanie.

“What is it about ‘Don’t go looking for your dad’ do you not underfuckingstand?” Barbara asked. “If someone is baiting you, then someone is prepared for you. And now look at you. Your face is all f--”

“Whoa,” Stephanie said. “Time the hell out. Are the three of you seriously telling me that none of you have ever done anything personal like this?”

“Before we go any further,” Selina said, “I just have to state that none of us actually blame you for any of this.”

Barbara’s expression of anger seemingly dropped off her face. “Right,” she said. “We don’t blame you at all, Steph.”

Stephanie stiffened in defensiveness and asked “Why?”

“Because she’s, y’know, she’s Cass,” Dick said. “It’s not like you could stop her or anything.”

Stephanie stiffened further. She was trying to hide it, but Cassandra could read the subtlety within her posture. Stephanie Brown had just been insulted.

“But to answer your question,” Selina said, “Yes, we have gone off book on occasion. And do you know what happens when we do that?”

“What?” Stephanie asked.

Selina, Barbara, and Dick simultaneously pointed at Cassandra’s face.

“What I want to know,” Selina said, “is if Cass was fighting her pops, what the hell were you doing this whole time?”

“Please don’t talk about Cass like she’s not here,” Stephanie said, “and I was having my own fight.”

“With who?” asked Selina.

“I don’t know,” Stephanie said. “Didn’t catch his name. And his head was, like, literal fire.”

“His head was fire?” Dick asked.

“I know, right? I didn’t want to mention it because I didn’t think you’d believe me.”

“Afther all the crap we see?” asked Selina.

“Tim fought a guy like that tonight,” Dick said. “He told me while Alfred was seeing to him upstairs. The guy broke Tim’s nose.”

Selina tried smiling, and failed. “You can hang your hat on that, Steph. The two of you fought guys with fire for heads, and it looks like you didn’t get a scratch on you.”

Stephanie looked down, embarrassed. “That’s just it. The guy dodged everything I threw at him. Flowed all around me like he didn’t think I was worth fighting.”
Selina looked even more embarrassed. “Oh.”

“That guy have a little pin on the lapel of his jacket?” Dick asked. “One with a number?”

“Yeah,” Stephanie said. “The number two.”

“So the mob war and David Cain are connected,” Barbara said. “But still, that’s…”

Barbara trailed off. She seemed to notice something about Cassandra, and squinted at her to make sure.

“Is… Is your shoulder dislocated?”

Cassandra looked at her left shoulder.

Oh…

Right…

In all that had happened, she had completely forgotten about it.

Cassandra looked at them all, balled up her right fist, and punched her left shoulder back into its socket.

It hurt. It hurt worse than when David dislocated it in the first place. The socket felt like it was filled with broken glass. But emotions weren’t running high right now. She could successfully compartmentalize physical pain.

So when she punched her shoulder back into place, Cassandra Cain’s expression did not change one bit. She didn’t even blink.

Barbara looked like she was going to be sick.

Selina put her hand to her mouth and yelled out “Fuck!”

And Dick Grayson? Dick got that look that he sometimes got, brows up and eyelids down, that he got during friendly sparring sessions with her. Right before he yelled out “RAD!” at something powerful or athletic she had done. Though to Dick’s credit, he knew that now was not the time or place.

From behind her:

“Are you done?”

Cassandra’s neck whipped around.

And there was Batman.

Not Bruce Wayne. Batman.

Cassandra felt her heart skip.

Still in his costume, Batman slowly walked around the table to look at her. His eyes never left her... and those eyes were not happy.

Cassandra chanced a glance at everyone else.
Stephanie was defiant. Spoiler and Batman (and Stephanie and Bruce) got along relatively well, but it was an unwritten rule that he wouldn’t come down on her too hard for whatever violations she committed in Batman’s eyes, as long as they were relatively minor. After all, she wasn’t Batman’s operative. She was Catwoman’s. And Cassandra had to admit, Stephanie looked a hell of a lot braver than she did right now.

Dick and Barbara had identical looks. They both had their hands in their pockets, and they were looking down, but not away. They didn’t need to tell Cassandra verbally. They’d been in this exact same position with him before.

But Selina was the weird one. Selina, when Batman was in full Batman mode, always looked at him with an eyebrow raised and a smile in its starting blocks on her face. As though Bruce Wayne being Batman was some ridiculous thing she was just humoring, even though she believed in him and never questioned anything he said.

Tonight, however, Selina just looked down at the floor with her arms folded. She looked… sad. Defeated. Meek.

Cassandra had to wonder just what went on tonight.

Still looking at Cassandra, Batman said “Stephanie. Leave us.”

The response was immediate.

“No,” Stephanie said. “Anything you say to my best friend, you can say in front of me.”

And the response from Cassandra was immediate as well. She felt her heart drop into her stomach, and her eyes went wide. Someone deliberately disobeying Batman was a violation of something holy.

Not what Cassandra did by trying to find David tonight, no. That was disobedying Bruce Wayne. The two things were completely different.

Stephanie looked at Cassandra’s expression, softened her own, and said “Fine. I’ll go home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Shouldn’t I have something to say about that?” Barbara asked.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Stephanie said again. She wrapped Cassandra in a light hug, and whispered in her ear…

“Good luck.”

...before hopping off the table and walking to the elevator that took her upstairs.

And now it was just Cassandra and Batman.

“I tried,” Batman said to her, “to come to you as a person and make a reasonable request for the sake of your well-being. Don’t go looking for your father…. And you couldn’t do that.”

Cassandra looked down at her lap. She saw that her hands were shaking.

“But at the very least, with the abilities you have, I expect you to win a fight… And you couldn’t do that either.”

She lightly exhaled through her nose. She felt a tremor in her breath. She wanted to tell him how
David blurred, how she couldn’t read him, how he cheated, but she didn’t have the words. Or the ability to say them.

“Five police officers died tonight. They were shot by gangsters. Gangsters you could have fought and beat. The first day in this cave, I told you, I told all of you, that you would tell yourselves to be perfect. Five families are missing the people that they love. Does that feel perfect to you?”

Cassandra felt a stinging behind her eyes. The last time she cried was from laughter with Stephanie the first time she watched the Mortal Kombat fatalities. She’d cried in pain many times as a child, she remembered that.

But crying from shame? She’d only ever done that once.

Twice, now.

There was some stink in Dick’s voice when he said “Bruce!”

Batman’s head immediately whipped around to Dick, and he angrily asked “What?”

Dick didn’t have anything to say to that.

As Cassandra’s eyes went back to her lap, she happened to notice Selina.

She was looking at Batman now… and it was a look of supreme disappointment.

“And now I have to talk to you dressed like this,” Batman said. “Because this is the only way you’ll listen to me… You are not to go looking for him again. You are not to conduct any further activities as Orphan until I say that you are allowed. And violation of either of these orders a second time will mean you lose access to everything. The uniform, the equipment, the Batcave, the Clock Tower, everything.”

“Shouldn’t I have something to say about that, too?” Barbara asked. Unlike Dick, Barbara had a level of defiance to her as well, like Stephanie had.

Batman kept his eyes on Cassandra, but she turned his head to Babs.

“No,” Batman said. “You shouldn’t.”

Barbara still looked angry, but she didn’t say anything else.

“I don’t know what happens to you after that,” Batman said. “You’ve aged out of the foster system, and you are way too dangerous to be left on your own. Do not make me find out.”

And with that, Batman walked away.

Cassandra’s vision blurred, and tears fell on the thighs of her uniform.

Her cloud of shame was broken a moment later by a hand on her left shoulder.

Cassandra winced.

“Shit,” Dick said. “Sorry.”

The hand moved to her right shoulder.

Cassandra looked up, and Dick’s entire being being radiated sympathy.
“Babs and I have been there,” Dick said. “Maybe not that bad, but we’ve been there. If it’s any consolation, you handled it like a champ… Now let’s get you home.”

“I don’t understand it,” Tim said.

He was standing in the darkened hallway leading into the kitchen, watching Harper, still in her costume sans mask, having a conversation with Alfred as she drank what he assumed was the hot chocolate that had gained Mister Pennyworth much renown among the younger set of Batman’s network.

Kate said she liked schnapps in hers.

Bruce was standing next to him, having changed out of his Batman costume in the cave minutes prior, after Dick, Babs, and Cass left under a dark cloud. Tim reached up to scratch his nose, only to stop himself at the last possible instant, remembering in the nick of time that his nose was both broken and bandaged.

“What about it don’t you get?” Bruce asked.

“A competitor?” asked Bruce.

“A competitor would have a better plan than this,” Tim said. “A competitor would figure out how to make money while making sure the winning side was weak enough to take out. What happened tonight? What happened at Esteban’s? It was just chaos. The Maroni name is mud in Gotham, now. In an ideal situation, Maroni’s hitters would have taken out everyone in that ballroom, and vanished. But now? They only got five dirty cops, and all twenty-five of the Maroni squad got arrested and booked. And those dead cops in the security detail? Yeah, they were crooked, but they were still cops. The GCPD is going to stop just short of Salvatore Maroni himself to make the lives of every capo, lieutenant, bagman and fence a living Hell. And that’s ignoring the big question.”

“What do you think the big question is?” asked Bruce.

Tim looked at him. “Who’s getting rich off of this?”

“Not everyone who tries to tear up my city is looking to get rich,” Bruce said. “They mostly just try to squeeze an inch on me.”

“You get to thinking this might be the tenth time out of ten?” Tim asked. “I don’t know what David Cain wants. I don’t know for sure what Two wants. And what One wants to happen already happened five years ago.”

“Killing The Joker,” Bruce said. “How on Earth does One know all of our names, but not know that The Joker’s been dead for years now?”

“Right,” Tim said. “The guy’s following orders. Orders from someone who’s smart. Who wants something… Any workable theories?”

“I’ll know when Harper gives me the audio from the Esteban’s hit,” Bruce said. “Speaking of which, she said she had a network. Who do you think is in it?”
“All signs point to her brother Cullen,” Tim said. “Probable overwatch.”

“She has her own Alfred.”

“Everyone should have their own Alfred.”

“And how old would Cullen be?”

“Sixteen.”

“And she’s emancipated? They live on Bleake alone?”

“Right.”

“Hm,” Bruce said. He was silent for a moment before he said “Bring them in.”

Tim looked at Bruce again. “Bring them in?”

“Correct.”

“I don’t follow.”

Bruce folded his arms. “They’re two teenagers who live in a bad part of Gotham when at least three murderous psychopaths know their names and wish to do them harm. Bring this Cullen to the manor. He and his sister should stay here until this business is concluded.”

Tim furrowed his brow. Bruce didn’t offer this protection to Tim’s parents, or Stephanie’s pill-popping mom. But then again, they didn’t know their offspring were superheroes, and they lived in parts of Gotham with a heavy police presence. There didn’t seem to be any henchmen in the One, Two, and Cain outfit, so that alone may have been a deterrent.

Or maybe Bruce liked giving spare rooms in his immense mansion to underprivileged kids. If Dick Grayson and Jason Todd were anything to go by.

“Can I take one of the Aston Martins?”

“It’s Bleake Island,” Bruce said. “You can take the Dodge Stratus.”


“Good,” said Bruce. “For someone who was complaining two nights ago about a punch to the face, you’re taking a broken nose in stride.”

Tim opened his mouth, and then closed it when he realized he didn’t have anything to say to that.

“I’m going back down to the cave,” Bruce said. “I’ll be patrolling the rest of the night alone. Bring the Rows in.”

Tim nodded. Anyone who could patrol with Batman were either incapacitated, in the doghouse, or both.

“Will do,” Tim said as Bruce walked back down the hall to the study.

Tim made his way into the kitchen. Alfred was standing at the kitchen island in the middle of the room. Harper was sitting in one of the chairs
Alfred had actually had to shave the back of Harper’s head in order to stitch up the gash that came with her concussion, and there was a bruise blooming on the left side of her jaw.

Wait, no, that wasn’t right. Tim squinted at the back of her head and saw that those weren’t \textit{stitches}. Those were \textit{staples}. Four of them, bright and gleaming in the back of her head.

Tim looked in the reflective surface of the island. His nose was bandaged up, and though his eyes didn’t swell shut, the hollow patches of skin beneath his lower eyelids were purple to the point of almost being black.

Bruce told him he was taking his broken nose in stride, and Tim thought he knew why: getting his nose broken by a dude with fire for a head was a hell of a lot cooler than being on the receiving end of a lucky punch by some rando henchman.

“I hope you are enjoying your coffee, Miss Row,” Alfred said. “It’s the darkest blend we have in the manor.”


Alfred stood up a little straighter. Tim had to hypothesize that he didn’t think the punk girl with the blue hair would not only be polite but complimentary, but nevertheless, she had.

“I appreciate that, Miss Row,” Alfred said. “Now I’m afraid I must depart for the Batcave. The night is still young.”

“You have a good one.”

“I shall endeavor to do so.”

And with that, Alfred left. Harper’s eyes followed him as he walked down the dark hallway to the story.

“All class, that one,” she said.

“Alfred Pennyworth is that kind of cool from an era long past.”

“How old is he?” Harper asked. “Sixty? Sixty-five?”

“Thereabouts.”

“So it’s theoretically possible that Alfred saw the Sex Pistols in London before they hit it big.”

“I’m… trying to imagine Alfred at a Sex Pistols show,” Tim said. “I’m not seeing it.”

“That’s the thing about punks,” said Harper. “They may not keep the aesthetic, but the mindset stays the same. I’m wondering what I’ll look like down the road.”

“The mindset?” Tim asked. “The punk mindset allows for performing menial labor for a billionaire?”

“It allows for helping that billionaire fight a one man war on crime,” Harper said. “Y’know, when Batman said his name was Bruce, I didn’t think it’d be \textit{this} Bruce. In hindsight, it’s kinda obvious.”

“How are you holding up?”

“Better than you’d think,” Harper said after she took a sip of her coffee. “I’m concussed, so I have
to stay awake for a while. Hence the coffee at ten at night. But other than that. I’m great. I saved Catwoman’s life. *The Catwoman.* And I got to ride in the Batmobile."

After the tangle at the Sorrento Ballroom, Bluebird was concussed, sopping wet, and without any protection whatsoever for her head. So Batman took it upon himself to drive her to the Batcave to get her patched up. Catwoman drove Bluebird’s motorcycle to the cave herself.

“How about you?” Harper asked.

“Pain,” Tim said. “Lots of it.”

“I can see that. Killer nose bandages there, Glass Joe.”

Tim sat down in the chair across from Harper at the island and let out a small groan in pain.

“Glass Joe was one-in-ninety-nine, right? I’m the guy Glass Joe knocked out.”

“Is it just the face that’s bothering you?”

“No,” Tim said. “Guy got me in the side. It’s far back, though, so I can’t tell how bad it is.”

Harper got up. “Let me see.”

“What?”

She was already halfway around the island. “Let me check. Up.”

Tim lifted the side of his flannel shirt and his t-shirt up around his ribcage while Harper performed a cursory examination behind him.

“Is it bad?” Tim asked.

Harper didn’t say anything.

“Harper?”

About two seconds of silence before Harper said “Some one eats his Wheaties.”

“What?”

“It’s not bad. There’s a bruise there, but it’s not that big.”

“Thanks,” Tim said. He put his shirt back down as Harper took her seat again. She took another sip of coffee, not taking her eyes off of him.

“So do you a trainer, do you go to the gym, or…”

Tim ran his hand through his hair. “Umm… No, I just train down in the cave every other day or so.”

“You just train and you get that?”

“Get what?”

“What’s under that shirt.”

Tim just blinked. “I don’t follow.”
Harper put down her coffee cup and folded her hands on the island. She had this disappointed look on her face. Tim could have sworn that the next word out of her mouth was going to be “Son…”

“We’re adults here,” Harper said. “If training down in a cave gets me what you got going on under that shirt, then I’m finding a fuckin’ cave and training in it.”

Tim looked down at himself before looking back at Harper. “I guess, um… I guess I didn’t notice.”

“Doesn’t being Robin involve detective work?”

“It doesn’t involve staring at myself in a mirror without a shirt on for hours at a time,” Tim said. “So now you believe I’m Robin?”

Harper took another sip of coffee. “I… seventy percent believe you’re Robin.”

“And the other thirty?”

“Cosplayers.”

“It’s expensive and dangerous cosplay, if that was the case.”

“It’s Bruce Wayne,” Harper said. “He can afford it.”

“Speaking of wealth and the sharing thereof,” Tim said, “Bruce wants me to bring you and Cullen in.”

“To jail?”

“Here,” Tim said. “For your protection until this blows over.”

Her hands still folded on the island, Harper’s eyes narrowed. They lost a lot of their warmth, all of a sudden.

“So which of you two gets the hard-on for putting roofs over the heads of us po’ folk?” Harper asked. “Him, or you?”

Tim was at least polite enough to close his eyes as he rolled them.

“I can’t speak for Bruce,” Tim said, “but I don’t pity you at all.”

“Preppy kid in a mansion,” Harper said. “I find that hard to believe.”

“First,” Tim said, “I go to public school. Second, you MacGuyvered yourself into a superhero. That’s impressive. I’m kinda envious, really.”

“I live in an apartment that has bedbugs with a little brother who blares BTS in his room to cover up his jerking-off noises. You don’t envy me.”

“You don’t have to live up to two other Bluebirds, now do you?”

Harper paused. “There were other Robins?”

“There’s been a Robin off and on in Gotham for thirteen years,” Tim said. “And I haven’t been doing this since I was five.”

Harper paused again. “Well, you’re impressed. That makes one of you. Batman doesn’t seem too
“thrilled.”

“Batman’s impressed with you.”

“He didn’t say that when we met.”

“Because he was lying. He was testing you. He… sees a future in you worth investing in.”

Harper folded her arms and looked at Tim down her nose. “And he told you that?”

“Yeah,” Tim said. “And if he told me, then he wanted you to know.”

“Are you telling me that Batman is so petrified of looking like anything other than a hardass that he criticizes in person, and passes on his praise second-hand?”

Tim shrugged, and said “Pretty much, yeah. Welcome to the family, Harper.”

At the technical age of twenty, Jason Todd was having his first beer.

After the Sorrento’s affair, learning that Harmonia lied to him about The Joker, who had been dead for five years, his mind was buzzing with contradictions and anger. He needed something to dim his faculties.

He heard alcohol worked great.

Jason went back to the storage facility across the street from the construction site of the new Gotham Central on Founder’s Island, went to the top floor where he and Two had been hanging their hats since they arrived in Gotham, changed his clothes, and got the fake ID that David Cain had provided for him through his contacts from his old assassin days.

Jason’s said is name was Herbert Jensen. Two’s said his name was Albert Croshaw.

He got a six pack of Michelob because it was cheap, went back to the storage building, and put five in the mini-fridge and opened the sixth.

It tasted terrible, but halfway through that bottle, his face was numb and his head was swimming.

So alcohol does work…

He was technically twenty years old. Technically. He still had to wrap his mind around that every now and again. He felt as much a kid playing dress-up now as he did when he was Robin before he died. Before he was brought back to life.

Even though Jason knew he hadn’t technically been brought back to life.

And there was that word again.

Jason took another drink when Two came into the cramped, makeshift bedroom. His head was still flames, and there was a bop to his step.

And God help me, he’s singing.

“What do you want from me, why don’t you run from me, what are you wondering, what do you know?”
Two made his way to his bed across the way from Jason, and pointed to him.

“Come on! You know the words!”

“Dude…”

“Why aren’t you scared of me, why do you care for me, when we all fall asleep where do we go?”

Two plopped down on his bed, his boots still on, and put his hands behind the flames of his head.

“Of all the places I’ve been,” Two said, “of all the people I’ve been, I’ve always had an… appreciation of one Stephanie Brown.”

Jason sighed. “So you finally met her?”

“I did,” Two said. “Not without her mask, but… she’s fire. She’s passion. She’s… not unskilled.”

“A man in love.”

“Hmm,” Two said, neither confirming or denying. “It’ll be a shame when the bloodletting starts.”

Jason furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“She’s willful,” Two said. “She needs to know who is superior. And once I have made her pliable, who knows what sort of fun the two of us could have?”

Jason tilted his head. “Do you know how to communicate with anyone without hurting them?”

“No,” Two said. “Why should I? It gets me what I want…. And you’re drinking.”

Jason looked at his beer before looking back at Two. “Do you want one?”

“No,” Two said. “Drinking alcohol makes a person stupid.”

“So you don’t approve.”

“Oh, you were stupid long before I met you. By all means, drink away.”

Jason glowered, and took a swig.

“Is it a special occasion that drove you to cheap beer this evening?” Two asked.

Jason swallowed, and said. “The Joker’s dead.”

“I know.”

The entirety of Jason’s body tensed up. “You knew?”

“Yes.”

“You told us everyone’s secret identities, but you didn’t tell me that The Joker was fucking dead?”

“You didn’t ask,” Two said. “I am rather curious as to how you didn’t.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Jason said, lathering on the sarcasm, “I’ve been gathering materials, stealing explosives, sinking ships, breaking into Arkham to kidnap a supervillain to make Anti-Fear Toxin for us, and oh yeah, engineering a fucking mob war! I guess I just didn’t have time to futz around on
the internet to check up on stuff that happened during the five years I was dead!"

“You wonder if I cannot communicate without inflicting pain,” Two said. “By the same token, I wonder if you can communicate without whining.”

Jason took another swig, and deflated, looking as lost as he felt.

“My entire life,” Jason said, “both sides of it, has been nothing but older people lying to me to get me to perform chores for them.”

And there it was. In life and in death, Jason Todd felt that he had never been given anything other than half-truths, vague assurances, and full-tilt lies by everyone who had been in a position of authority over him. This had given him an anger that both made him stronger, but also embarrassed him because he knew how petulant it was at its core. Strong enough to keep him moving, but so weak as to only lightly slap against his problems.

“What’s the expression the children in this place have? ‘It do be like that sometimes?’ Have you given any consideration to taking your well-deserved vengeance on the clown’s consort?”

“Harley?” Jason asked. “Yeah, but she’s the one who did The Joker in. Try as I might, I can’t kill someone I should be writing a thank you card to.”

“Well,” Two said, “I tried to be helpful.”

“I have a lot of... a lot of shit that’s just clogging everything up. There’s one person I should take revenge on that’s begging for it.”

“Batman?”

“Right,” Jason said.

“Well, you can’t.”

“And why not?” Jason asked.

Two sat up on his bed.

“Because killing Batman is my job.”

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**NATIONAL CITY**

Welcome to National City. Headquarters of the Catco Worldwide media conglomerate, the relatively new expansion baseball team the National City Guardians, and the homebase of Supergirl.

They’ve been trying to get a football team, but NFL owners have been taking their sweet-ass time. And even if National City weren’t the place fickle owners used to threaten to take their teams out of low-attendance hellholes like Tampa Bay or Keystone City, National City’s zoning laws and tax codes would make the building of any stadium a headache. A wise man once said that if there were any money to be made in the erection of a football stadium, the NFL would do it themselves. It seemed that the National City Zoning Commission knew this, and prepared ahead of time.

It’s a city on the rise, and roughly two hours after the sun set on this balmy December day on the west coast, a humble Mexican restaurant just eight blocks from the National City Airport played host to two of the unlikelier patrons they would ever have.
“Piercing weapons?” Kate asked.

“Yes,” Diana said. “That’s right.”

Kate’s private jet touched down in National City about forty-five minutes ago. A car was waiting for them with certain… capabilities, provided for her by Lucius Fox and the National City branch of WayneTech. Once Kate was done loading her equipment into this special gray Bugatti Chiron, Diana thought the best course of action was to get something to eat before any further events transpired this evening.

Diana picked the place out. It was a hole in the wall in a strip mall, but Diana claimed that Abierto’s had the best vegetarian empanadas that she’d ever had.

And that was what was on the plate in front of Diana at present, along with a virgin pina colada. Kate was having the pollo a la crema, and a bottle of Dos Equis.

They took the booth next to the window. Kate had to change on the plane, out of her red sweater and into a black tank top that was more amenable to California weather. Diana didn’t change. She still had her purple turtleneck on. Weather didn’t seem to bother her.

“Forgive me for saying,” Kate said, “but that’s kinda…”

“Weak?” Diana asked.

Kate shrugged her shoulders to say she was right without actually using the words. “I mean, blades and bullets…”

“Can hurt and kill me, yes.”

“Just like that?”

“Well,” Diana said, “it depends on the bullet and the blade. I’ve been doing this since World War II, and if a nine millimeter pistol shot to the head could kill me, I wouldn’t have made it out of the forties alive.”

“So a nine to the head won’t kill you.”

“No,” Diana said, “but it could raise a welt. Small caliber fire in rapid succession could do quite a bit of damage, however.”

“So if you stood in front of a minigun…”

“Without my shield or my vambraces to protect me? Yes I would die. And then we get to the area of sniper fire. Rounds from sniper rifles are fired at such a velocity that the bullet makes contact before the report is audible. It shames me to say that if a sniper fires at me from a long distance away, I will get shot.”

“Is this theoretical?” Kate asked.

“No,” Diana said. “I have been shot by snipers before.”

Kate put her beer down in amazement. “Snipers? Plural?”

“Yes,” Diana said with a smirk working its way into her lips. “Three times. Twice by Mayfly, and once by Colonel Maru of the Poison Unit.”
Kate blinked. “Wow… That’s…”

“The word John Stewart used was ‘hardcore,’ ” Diana said, that smirk having grown into a full-blown smile.

“And you don’t have a scratch on you.”

“I heal incredibly quickly,” Diana said. “A gift from the Gods.”

“No kidding,” Kate said, just barely skirting the flame of having said “No shit.” “But what about blades?”

“The same principle applies,” Diana said. “A street tough with a switchblade might be able to break my skin before the blade broke. But a combat knife? A hunting knife?”

“I see.”

“But if my vambraces can deflect bullets, then the blade-wielding assailants of Patriarch’s World have had even less luck. And I have a blade of my own, I’ll have you know.”

Kate smiled herself, and said “Good for you.”

Diana smiled again in return. “What about you?”

“What about me”

“What are the secret weaknesses of Kate Kane?”

Kate had had her fork in her hand, but she set it down. “Same as anyone else’s,” she said. “I get cut, I bleed, I get shot and I die.”

Diana squinted with curiosity. “It is as you’ve said. Those are anyone else’s. I wish to know yours. Or at the very least, the ones you are willing to share.”

Kate sighed.

Don’t say self-loathing and isolation, don’t say self-loathing and isolation, don’t say…

In the interests of not getting too heavy with someone she barely knew, Kate said…

“Stephanie Brown.”

She just kinda… threw it out there, half serious and half not.

Diana frowned in curiosity. “The blonde girl in his little network?”

“That’s right,” Kate said. “She hates me, and I don’t know why. And because I don’t know why, I hate her back.”

Diana’s frown deepened. This time less out of curiosity, and more out of disapproval.

“That’s unfortunate.”

“Why?” asked Kate.

“When pressed with a serious question, the first thing you thought to do was run down another woman half in jest.”
Kate felt a slight bloom of shame at that. Diana of Themyscira was all about sisterhood and solidarity.

But still, though.

“Stephanie Brown is not a woman,” Kate said. “She is five yappy, incontinent Chihuahuas standing on top of each other inside a purple cape.”

Diana still seemed disapproving, but a smile danced on the edge of her lips at that. “See? There you go again.”

“There are some people,” said Kate, “that you just don’t get along with.”

“I refuse to believe that.”

“So you’re telling me you’d be willing to have this same kind of sit-down, Mexican food and all that… with John Constantine?”

Diana’s mouth opened and closed, before she finally said “Alright, that is a very cogent point.”

Kate held up her beer. Diana held up her pina colada. And glasses clinked.

“Tell me of your father,” Diana said. “You’ve spoken so little of him.”

As she said this, Diana tucked a lock of her black hair behind her right ear, her blue eyes looking at Kate intently.

It is strange how the smallest things have the potential to alter one’s perceptions of a certain event or situation.

That thing with the hair, that curious, intent, under-the-brow look she had was what did it for Kate Kane.

In an instant as both brief and as impactful as a thunderclap, she knew what was happening.

She knew why she was here.

And wonder intermingled with no small hint of betrayal as the thought came out of her mouth in a stunned gasp.

“Oh my God, I’m on a date right now.”

Diana’s eyes widened. Her jaw hung open. A slight blush arose in her cheeks.

But because Princess Diana of Themyscira, daughter of Hippolyta was the living embodiment of truth, no sound came out of her mouth. She did not deny it.

Kate was floored. That Wonder Woman would want to date her at all was one thing. That could be reckoned with later. But that she’d been dropped into one with no forewarning was something that played at the edges of her emotions.

*I’m not the person I prefer to be when I’m on a date right now.*

*I wasn’t ready.*

*She saw the real me.*
“This is bad.”

“I… I just… You didn’t even ask.”

Diana folded her hands in her lap, and looked down at her food, saying nothing, save for a tiny, pinched:

“Are you angry with me?”

Kate’s thoughts and emotions were running too fast to sugarcoat anything.

“I don’t know what I am with you,” Kate said. “I… It’s just… Why didn’t you ask? I… I mean, is it a pride thing? If no one asks you, you just… do this?”

Diana sighed, and her voice was still small.

“No one ever asks me,” she said, still averting her gaze. “And when I ask, they always say no.”

Diana finally looked at her in a sad way that made Kate instantly feel as though she’d showed up to a test without studying.

“If I asked you,” Diana said, “knowing full well what my intentions toward you were, would you have said yes?”

Kate’s mind got ready to bullshit and dissemble, but her instincts laid all of that to waste.

No.

I wouldn’t.

Because you’re Wonder Woman.

And Wonder Woman means too much.

Diana sighed, and reached for Kate’s hand on the table.

“Kate…”

Whatever Diana was going to say next was lost.

Because she’d been right earlier in the conversation.

Kate heard the window they were sitting next to shatter.

She saw the bullet hole beneath Diana’s right collarbone open up and splatter blood.

And then she heard the sniper shot.
Chapter 11: Undercover

NATIONAL CITY

The five other patrons of Abierto’s screamed. The three working members of the wait staff loudly hurried into the kitchen.

Blood sprayed from Diana’s chest for a brief instant before she pressed a hand to the wound beneath her collarbone. Both of their dinners were ruined.

As if they were of one mind, Both Kate and Diana slid off their booth seats to the floor, using the table as cover.

Another round pulverized the table and pitted the red tile of the floor between their heads before the follow-up shot boomed.

Sweat was beginning to form on Kate’s brow, and Diana’s as well. Blood was pouring from between the fingers pressed to the wound.

Kate chanced a look up to see that the plush booth seat in which Diana had been sitting was, apart from some blood spatter, completely intact.

Which meant the shot didn’t go through Diana’s body.

Thank God for small favors.

Kate reached into her jeans for her phone. “I have to call the a--”

Diana reached over to cup Kate’s phone in her large hand.

“Go… after them,” Diana said through gritted, pink teeth.

“What?”

“I heal quickly,” Diana said, taking her hand off of Kate’s phone to wipe the sweat from her brow.

“I don’t care how quick you can heal,” Kate said. “You have a collapsed lung.”

And Diana, the avatar of love and compassion, rolled her eyes at Kate Kane as though she were talking to an idiot.

Diana reached her free into the satchel that had been resting next to her on her side of the booth, and pulled out the Lasso of Hestia. With deftness, she wrapped an end around her hand, and placed that hand on Kate’s.

“I... compel you,” Diana said, “to go... after them.”

Kate was about to say something… but she forgot what it was. Was it a protest of some kind? Some form of disagreement? Kate didn’t know. It sure would have been stupid if it had been though. Disagreeing with Wonder Woman, could you believe it?

Diana told her to go after who did this.
Kate got into the Bugatti Chiron provided for her by Lucius Fox at the airport. It was parked in the back alley as opposed to the parking lot in the event of such an occasion as, well, an assassination attempt. The kind of thing that required her to enter the car as Kate, and leave the car as Batwoman.

“Kane, Katherine,” Kate said. “Eight-eight-three-three-sigma.”

The Chiron started and the windows immediately tinted so no one could see in.

“Online,” the car said in Barbara Gordon’s voice.

Kate kicked off her shoes on the driver’s seat, and started taking her jeans off. The tank top was cool, she didn’t think she’d have to enter into any further stages of undress.

As she did so, she tried to remember the second shot. The one that went through the table and lodged in the tile floor of the restaurant.

The hole in the table looked pretty small. And any decent sniper rifle would have completely separated Diana’s arm from the rest of her body, Amazon or no.

But a bullet that small traveling at a velocity faster than sound meant that they must have been custom rounds.

Custom rounds fired from a custom weapon.

Kate had the sneaky suspicion that this brand of fuckery meant that Deadshot was in National City tonight.

The thing about Deadshot—or Floyd Lawton, as his mother named him—was that he used to be in Amanda Waller’s Task Force X (known colloquially as “The Suicide Squad”). Waller outfitted her little criminal drones with explosives in their brains. If they stepped out of line or tried to escape during a mission, then all she had to do was press a button, and that person’s head would explode into a pink mist.

But Amanda Waller had her funny side. If one of her little rejects was released back into the wild after their services were rendered, she didn’t actually remove the explosive. She just deactivated it. The only one who got out of this little quandary was Black Manta, and he had to put his head up to an EMP charge to do it.

Which meant that all of the ex-Squaddies were trackable. It was a Hail Mary, but…

“Give me a location on Floyd Lawton,” Kate said.

“Scanning,” the car said. And after a second or two, the speakers said “Floyd Lawton is in National City, zero-point-seven-five kilometers north-northeast of your current location.”

“Great,” Kate said. “Put the car on auto and take me to him. And get me dressed.”

The car vroomed to life beneath her, and the driver’s seat automatically slid back.

The passenger’s seat slid to the side of the interior and up the passenger side door while the driver’s seat in which Kate lay slid into the middle.
Compartments opened in the floor of the car as it began to move, and mechanical arms and pincers slowly started applying the special modular version of Kate’s Batwoman suit to her body that she had loaded into the vehicle before she and Diana had left the airport.

In spite of the pressure of the situation, Kate at least took a little time to think to herself *This is cool. This is some James Bond shit.*

Batwoman’s suit was applied, and she had taken over manual operation of the Bugatti when she was halfway to Deadshot’s current location.

He was travelling by rooftop.

And the one he was currently on was the central building to the Midvale Shopping Plaza.

“Does this car have ejectors?” Batwoman asked.

“Affirmative,” said the speakers.

“Then get me at a decent angle on the street and launch me.”

The Bugatti went back into auto as Batwoman unbuckled her safety belt. The roof of the car retracted, and she caught a glimpse of the streetlights above and caught a whiff of the humid California air before the pistons beneath the driver’s seat launched her into the night.

When she got to the apex of her departure, Batwoman spread her cape and glided toward the central building of the Midvale Shopping Plaza.

The shoppers below her looked up, pointing, not used to a Bat in National City. She saw the Christmas lights and the fake snow spread about the causeway, which was surrounded by shops and chain eateries.

And across the roof of the central building, adjacent to the twenty-four screen movie theater, she saw the silhouette of Deadshot racing across.

She glided toward him, brought up her feet, and...

**WHAM!**

Her red boots collided with the side of his chest, and he pratfell on top of a skylight.

By the time he was back to his feet, with his wrist mounted sniper guns drawn, Batwoman already had two red Batarangs at the ready.

Deadshot’s one visible eye (as the other was behind a sniper scope built into his black mask) squinted at her.

“Do I know you?”

“You don’t,” Batwoman said.

“I gotta say,” Deadshot said, “it does a fella’s ego good to see that a prime piece of real estate like you came all the way from Gotham to see little old me.”

“I didn’t come to see you,” said Batwoman. “Is your sister in town? I came to see her.”
“Funny,” Deadshot says. “So how are we playing this?”

“You’re gonna tell me why you put a bullet in Wonder Woman.”

Deadshot squinted at her again. If Batwoman had to guess, it was that he was trying to figure out if the long-haired redhead standing before him was the short-haired redhead that had been sitting across from Diana when he pulled his triggers.

Her wig was expensive, though, and she could see that it fooled him.

“I don’t give away trade secrets,” Deadshot said. “It’s bad for business.”

“Well, it seems like you and me are at an impasse.”

Deadshot smiled, the sides of his Fu Manchu mustache almost enveloped by the creases in his cheeks.

“So we are,” he said.

Batwoman saw his shoulders twitch, and she instinctively flung her Batarang at him.

She missed.

Batwoman would have hit what she was aiming for, had Deadshot not leapt back, brought his wrist-mounted guns down, and fired.

He wasn’t aiming for Batwoman.

He was aiming for the skylight upon which Batwoman stood.

The glass gave way out from under her, and as she fell into the immense interior of the shopping center, she heard the screams of the attending shoppers as they ran for cover.

Batwoman was halfway to the floor when she grabbed her grapnel gun from her utility belt and fired.

The claw caught the side of the skylight from whence she fell. That stopped her.

But only for a second, when that gave way as well.

Batwoman’s fall was broken by the cardboard and styrofoam of a giant Christmas present on the floor. All in all, it didn’t hurt nearly as bad as it could have.

She rolled over onto the floor, got to her feet, and finally realized where she had fallen.

Batwoman had fallen into the Santa’s Village display, where the Mall Santa answered requests for Christmas presents by those young children who still believed.

The long line of children, the child on the Mall Santa’s lap, and even one of his elf helpers looked terrified, but the Mall Santa (whose beard actually looked real), just looked angry.

“Well,” the Mall Santa said, “I know a certain young lady who’s getting coal in her stocking this year.”

Batwoman brushed some of the styrofoam snow off of her costume.

“It’s not my holiday,” she said, “but, um… sorry.”
And off she ran.

She weaved in between shoppers, and brought down the lenses in her cowl. They were synced with the Bugatti, and could pinpoint Deadshot’s location with the tracker.

As she made it out the open doors and into the open air, she saw a red dot about fifty feet away.

It seems Deadshot had removed his mask and stolen an overcoat to blend in.

There was an arch about fifteen feet away, made of wood and ten feet tall, spanning the entire middle of the causeway

It was all she needed.

She retracted the lenses in her cowl and brought out her grapnel gun. She aimed it at the top of the arch, and fired.

The hook dug into the wood of the arch, and it held.

The grapnel gun reeled in, sending Batwoman airborne. She quickly put the grapnel gun on her utility belt, and spread her cape wide, gliding toward Deadshot.

But the sight of a rather tall woman dressed as a bat giving the finger to gravity caused hundreds of shoppers below to gasp and point.

Which, of course, alerted Deadshot.

He raised his arms and fired both of his wrist-mounted guns, shredding the sleeves of his stolen overcoat.

The first shot got Batwoman dead in the chest. Denting the red Bat insignia over her sternum, knocking the wind out of her, but not doing too much damage otherwise.

The other shot tore a hole in her cape.

Batwoman crumpled in mid-air, and she dropped ten feet to the marble floor amidst the scattering and terrified shoppers.

As she struggled to her feet, thinking that falling great distances onto her ass was going to be tonight’s theme, Batwoman saw that the assorted civilians were smart. There were actually running for the shops on the side of the causeway, where there was both cover and numbers.

In fact, the only one running for the exit doors was Deadshot.

And Batwoman gave chase.

Deadshot was fast, that was sure. Batwoman was just faster. She had about a thirty foot disadvantage and no wind when this chase started, but that thirty foot lead narrowed to about five by the time Deadshot got to the open exit.

As he passed through, Deadshot raised his arm and at the top of the exit. He fired

And Batwoman had to screech to a halt as the security grating came down.

Staring through the grating, Batwoman had no choice but to watch as Deadshot turned around and gloated.
“You’re fast, girl. But you ain’t fast e--”

Deadshot’s little speech was cut off by two clanging noises in rapid succession.

The first was when Wonder Woman, dressed in her armor and looking no worse for wear after having been shot in the chest less than half an hour ago, swooped in at high speed and walloped him with her shield.

The second was when Deadshot, thrown from the impact of Wonder Woman’s shield, collided ribcage-first into a steel lappost that was about six feet away.

Wonder Woman surveyed the scene, looked over at Batwoman, and walked to her.

As she got closer, Batwoman saw that she wasn’t entirely unaffected after having been shot. She looked a little on the pale side, and she was glowing with sweat.

Wonder Woman reached down, and wrenched up the security grating, destroying it in the process.

“Thank you,” said Batwoman.

“You are most welcome,” Wonder Woman said in reply.

Batwoman went through the newly created exit, and Wonder Woman turned around… only to see that Deadshot was back to his feet, guns pointed at them.

With a brief movement of her arm, Wonder Woman pushed Batwoman behind her.

“Do you consider yourself a smart man, Floyd?” Wonder Woman asked.

“I’d like to think so.”

“Good. Then you’ll know the definition of insanity. Lower your weapons, or go to the hospital with broken wrists after I take them from you.”

Deadshot took a couple of deep breaths, and finally lowered his guns.

“There we go,” said Batwoman.

She and Wonder Woman walked toward Deadshot. Wonder Woman took the lasso of Truth form her waist, and wrapped it around Deadshot’s arm.

“Who sent you?” Wonder Woman asked.

“No one did,” Deadshot said, looking dreamy. “An open contract for Wonder Woman got sent to the inbox of every assassin in the world. Two mil. It came in about two hours ago.”

“And you have no idea who sent this contract? Wonder Woman asked.

“That’s not how this works,” Deadshot said.

“Wait,” Batwoman said. “So you’re telling me that you were just in the neighborhood at the same time Wonder Woman was when you got this two million dollar contract?”

“Sure I was,” said Deadshot. “I’m a Guardians fan. Thought I’d catch a home game.”

“You can’t be serious,” Batwoman said.
Wonder Woman looked at her, and then pointed at the golden Lasso that was currently wrapped around Deadshot’s arm.

“Okay,” Batwoman said. “Guess you are serious.”

“What do you know of The Order of Nemesis?” Wonder Woman asked.

Deadshot looked at her with glassy eyes. “What’s the Order of Nemesis?”

Batwoman thought that was a good question. This was the first time she’d heard of it.

Wonder Woman sighed. She walked Deadshot over to the lamppost he had collided with, and tied him to it for now.

She walked over to Batwoman, opened her mouth to speak, and was immediately waylaid by a nasty coughing fit.

It was so powerful that Batwoman immediately stepped back. And Wonder Woman hocked a glob of bright red blood onto the gray pavement.

And Batwoman didn’t have anything to say to that, other than “Jesus…”

“Forgive me,” Wonder Woman said, running a fist over her lips. “It does not take long for my lung to heal after it collapses, but expelling the fluid within takes a day.”

Batwoman’s gaze went from Wonder Woman’s contrite eyes, immediately to the bullet wound right beneath her exposed collarbone. She’d been shot about thirty minutes ago, but on any other person, that bullet wound would have been a month old.

“You want to touch it, don’t you?”

Batwoman looked from Wonder Woman’s wound to her eyes again. “Huh?”

“This has been happening to me since World War II,” Wonder Woman said. “I get shot, and I heal quickly. Everyone asks, so you can just go right ahead.”

“But I…”

“Seriously, It’s alright.”

Batwoman shrugged, looked at the rapidly healing bullet wound, and gently—geeeeeeently—grazed it with her gloved index finger.

At which point Wonder Woman leapt back and yelled “YEEEEOWW!”

Batwoman jumped back, terrified, her heart rapidly vandalizing the insides of her chest.

And Wonder Woman smiled. Upon seeing Batwoman was still terrified, her smile dropped, and she looked at her boots.

“No one ever laughs at my jokes,” Wonder Woman said.

From above them, another woman’s voice. “Can I help you two ladies?”

They both looked up.
She was in her twenties, with piercing blue eyes, shoulder length blonde hair, and skin that proved Kryptonians could not only draw energy from the yellow sun, but tan beneath it. She had her hands on her hips, her red miniskirt and red cape fluttering in the light breeze.

Well, Batwoman thought, you can’t raise hell in National City without Supergirl coming in to see what was up.

“Hello there,” Wonder Woman said, smiling. “It’s nice to see you.”

“You too,” Supergirl said as she finally lowered herself to plant her red boots on the ground. She pointed at Batwoman. “Batwoman, right?”

“Right.”

“I saw you at…”

“The wedding, yeah.”

“So what brings the Princess of the Amazons and a Gotham City superhero to my neck of the woods.”

“Business,” Wonder Woman said. “Of the big variety.”

Batwoman gave Wonder Woman her best brow-furrow beneath her mask. It was one thing not to tell Batwoman what she was doing here. She’d only been doing this a year and a half, and she was relatively low on the food chain. But Supergirl? She’d been around a while. She had seniority.

Supergirl (human name Kara Danvers, Kryptonian name Kara Zor-El) seemed to take it in stride, though. She either didn’t know or didn’t care.

“A heads-up would have been nice,” Supergirl said, “but it doesn’t matter now, I guess.”

“Say,” Batwoman said. “There’s um… There’s been a contract put out on Wonder Woman’s life for two million dollars.”

“Wow.”

“Right?”

“Two million?”

“Right? I was just wondering if you knew of any safe houses that we could hole up in here until our business is handled and we get the heat off of her.”

Supergirl nodded, and looked at Wonder Woman. “You have your phone on you?”

“Not on me,” Wonder Woman said. “But it is where I can easily access it.”

“Good,” Supergirl said. “Give me an hour, and I’ll give you the address of the safest place in National City.”

“Like a military bunker or something?” Batwoman asked.

“My apartment,” Supergirl said. “Low-key, out of the way, looked over by a Kryptonian. I’d actually pay to see the rinky-dink assassin who tried to mess with the two of you.”
“I could not impose on your kindness,” Wonder Woman said.

“If it’s not an imposition,” Supergirl said, “then it’s not kindness. We may not be besties, but by God, we’ll have a slumber party anyway.”

The three of them stopped and looked at Deadshot, who was still tied to the lamppost, having heard nothing of this conversation.

Batwoman folded her hands behind her back. “You wouldn’t mind, uh…”

“Not a problem,” Supergirl said. “I was working tonight anyway.”

Supergirl walked up to Deadshot, who finally seemed to recognize her.

“Supergirl?”

She balled up her fist.

“Hiya, Floyd!”

THWACK!

“Biya, Floyd!”

Supergirl uncoiled Wonder Woman’s Lasso from the unconscious Deadshot, and handed it back to her. She then hefted Deadshot over her shoulder.

“See you two later tonight,” Supergirl said.

And up, up, and away she flew as Batwoman and Wonder Woman waved.

Once they stopped, Batwoman looked over at Wonder Woman.

“Would you like to tell me what’s going on?”

Wonder Woman sighed. She closed her eyes, and said. “Kate…”

“Not _that_,” Batwoman said. “We can talk about _that_ later. I want to know what we’re doing here. I was under the assumption that the Justice League sent you after the Blade of Resurrection, but Supergirl didn’t know why you were here. If Supergirl doesn’t know, the League doesn’t know.”

“I did not lie to you,” Wonder Woman said, her voice cold.

“Never said you did,” said Batwoman. “But you omitted quite a bit. If the League didn’t send you, who did?”

Wonder Woman folded her arms, sighed again, and said:

“The Gods of Olympus.”

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**GOTHAM CITY**

Tim and Harper had showed up at Harper’s building in the Dodge Stratus that Bruce kept in his garage for plebian incursions such as these.

They picked up Cullen, along with clothes, equipment, and necessities for both the superhero on the
move, and for the working poor being forced to stay with the idle rich for their own protection.

After they had stopped at Jitters (“A Central City landmark in the heart of Gotham!” said the advertisements) to get coffee for Tim and Harper, they were on the move again.

Tim had had limited exposure to Cullen Row a year and a half ago during The Undying’s siege, but he remembered an excitable young man with brown hair and wide blue eyes. A kid with a negligible filter, to the extent that the first thing he had said to Tim after Harper saved his life was how pretty he thought Tim was.

“So,” Cullen said from the backseat, “you think a few days of staying in a mansion is gonna make me forget that you didn’t stop by and see me for a year and a half?”

“Yes,” Tim said as he pulled up behind a poorly maintained PT Cruiser at a stop light.

“Well,” Cullen said, “you’re right. You just revealed how shallow I am. I hope you go straight to Arizona.”

“Arizona?”

“Because it’s hotter and more miserable than Hell.”

Harper took a sip of her coffee. “Who was the redhead?”

“That was Barbara Gordon. Oracle.”

Tim didn’t have to see Cullen pop up in the backseat in order to feel it.

“The Oracle?”

“You heard of her?”

“She’s a legend,” Cullen said. “Is it true that she got all her op money from blackmailing Oliver Queen and that’s why he keeps going broke every other year?”

“I don’t know,” Tim said as the light turned green. “I’ll ask her. Hell, you can ask her, you’ll probably meet her.”

Cullen let out an exaggerated gasp.

“Wait till you meet Selina the Arch-Hottie,” Harper said to Cullen before she turned to Tim. “That Asian girl with the messed up face, who is she?”

“Cassandra Cain,” Tim said. “She, us, she stepped in some shit tonight protocol-wise, but she’s dangerous.”

“On a scale of one to John Wick, how dangerous is she?” Cullen asked.

Tim looked in the rear-view mirror. “Your scale only goes to John Wick?”

Cullen actually had to blink at that. “Day um.”

“So Cassandra, Barbara and Nightwing live together or something, and that’s why they all left at the same time?”

“Well, it’s… Wait, how did you know Dick was Nightwing?”
“He turned around,” Harper said.

“Well,” Tim said, “that’d do it.”

“And the blonde?” Harper asked.

Tim sighed. “Stephanie.”

Neither Harper nor Cullen said anything for a bit.

“There was some weight on that,” Harper said. “She the girlfriend?”

“Booooo!” Cullen yelled from the back seat.

“Ex-girlfriend,” said Tim.

“Yayyyyyyy!”

“She didn’t cheat on you, did she?” Harper asked.

“No,” Tim said. “She, uh… I think she wanted to be someone’s girlfriend. I just don’t think she wanted to be mine.”


“Well… I mean… y’know… It’s a distraction, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean a distraction?” Harper asked.

Tim was quiet for a while. When he spoke again, he had to clear his throat before hand.

“When I was a kid, there was Batman and Robin. They kept us safe. The worst possible things that could happen to a city like this were the things Batman and Robin fought every day. Or, like, every other day. And I had these dreams about what it was like. And, y’know, like a kid, I didn’t imagine the consequences to all of this. That… that people die. That hearts get broken. That after stopping the bad guy, these heroes that apparently every city has have to pop painkillers to get to sleep. They have to worry about every single person in their private lives to an almost obsessive degree. That they have to second and third and fourth and fifth guess everything they do, because if they’re wrong, innocent people die. And, uh…”

Tim stared off into the middle distance for a second, and it was only when he saw the lines on the road blur into one big one that he snapped out of it.

“I just don’t see how I’m going to live to twenty doing this,” Tim said. “I mean, there is no retirement plan for superheroes. The only way we know we’re too old for the job is if we die doing it. We deal with blood and terror day in and day out, and Batman makes waves when he admits that he’s seeing a shrink. Even professional wrestling has concussion protocols. We don’t. I, uh… I haven’t even applied to any colleges yet. My parents are getting worried. They’re gonna be even more worried when I show up at home tonight with a broken nose. Now throw a girlfriend on top of that, and…”

Tim shrugged.

“Then why don’t you quit?” Harper asked. Her voice was flat. If there was concern there, he didn’t hear it.
“Because… Because letting down the Little Kid Me is unacceptable.”

“That’s it?”

“It’s not it entirely, but… I’ve been given an opportunity here. Something only two other people have gotten. I have to make the most of it. I have to be the best Robin I can possibly be. Because Robin saves lives, and my… my petty whiny bullshit doesn’t matter in the face of that.”

There was silence in the car for a while, until Cullen opened his mouth.

“You said there were two other Robins?” Cullen asked.

“Yeah.”

“What happened to the first one?”

“He became Nightwing,” Tim said. “He’s really good.”

“And the second?” Harper asked.

Without missing a beat, Tim said “Murdered by The Joker.”

More silence now, this stretch longer, until Cullen opted to open his mouth again.

“But hey, no pressure or anything.”

There were certain stereotypes about Batman that he did not agree with at all. That he resented being brought up even by people who knew him.

No, Batman did not sleep upside down in his cave.

No, Batman did not have shark repellent spray.

And for the love of God, no, Batman did not force Dick Grayson to hunt down rats in the Batcave for food when he first took him in. He had no idea where people got that.

So when he found himself in a position where he fell into The Batman Stereotype, he at least had that one small kernel of self-awareness to be at least slightly embarrassed.

Which is to say that, at the present moment, on a cold December night in Gotham’s East End, Batman… was perched on a gargoyle.

The wind up here, on the gargoyle that ornamented the twenty-second floor of the old Martin Water Tablet building, blew his cape behind him and cut into his face. But he’d been through colder, and he barely noticed it.

Batman had been lost in thought.

What to do about Cassandra Cain?

Cass was the first associate who had ever cried when he took them to task. Dick looked at his shoes. Barbara yelled back. Jason paced back and forth in a rage. And Tim… Tim hadn’t needed a lecture yet. Hell, he’d probably lecture himself if something went wrong.

But Cassandra Cain cried. It wasn’t histrionic sobbing, no, it was quiet like everything else about
her. But it struck him because he thought she’d be the one least likely to do so.

Batman had told Cassandra that if she defied him again, that she would be cast out. Because she was far too dangerous an entity to be susceptible to fits of pique.

And Batman meant it.

So if Cassandra was cast out, what were the options?

One of the two Teen Titans teams, maybe? There was one on the east coast in New York City, and one on the west in LA. Titans East was headed by Jackson “Aqualad” Hyde, and consisted of Crush, Argent, Bunker, Static, and Risk. Titans West was headed by Emiko “Red Arrow” Queen, and consisted of Roundhouse, Bushido, Kid Flash, Solstice, and Djinn. Either one of those teams might take her if things came to the worst.

But could they take care of her in the way in which she needed? Cassandra couldn’t read, couldn’t write, could barely form complex sentences without the use of her hands. Did they have it in them to see to her education? Or would he have to see to it himself from afar?

The Movement out of Coral City was another option. They had facilities. They had someone smart like Drew “Vengeance Moth” Fisher, who reminded Batman of Barbara Gordon herself. But they were doing their little freedom fighter thing over there, trying to contend with a horrifically corrupt political and social infrastructure. As appealing as the prospect could theoretically be, Batman didn’t think The Movement had time for her.

Young Justice was right out. Apart from that old cave in Happy Harbor, they had no facilities. All those kids went home every night, from Smallville to Keystone to Gotham to Gateway.

But the absolute damnedest thing about thinking about what was to be done about Cass was that, given the lack of options he had, it was the easier thing to think about than the other thing. That thing that was haunting him.

That, freed from all Earthly fear, his wife wanted to pick a fight with him.

There had been something off about Selina since they had gotten back from the honeymoon. It was as though the reality of being married to Bruce Wayne after eleven years of intense (to put it mildly) flirting and almost a year and a half of courtship, had finally settled in, and there was something there gave her pause. Made her feel awkward.

Bruce didn’t talk to Selina after their potential dust-up at the Sorrento. Partly because he knew that, while he didn’t like being vulnerable, she didn’t like the appearance of being vulnerable. He decided to give her some space so she could figure out how to butch herself up for when the conversation finally happened. So she could come up with jokes and pithy comments that made her seem less sorry about the whole thing than she actually was.

And partly because he needed some time to figure out what he was going to say himself.

Alfred’s voice came in through comms.

“Penny-One to Batman, come in?”

Batman put his finger to the ear of his cowl. “Batman, here.”

“Robin has returned to base with Bluebird and her.... Associate.”
Alfred never failed in this regard, not using the words “Tim,” “Harper,” “Cullen,” “brother,” or “Manor.”

But there was a certain smell on the word “associate.”

“Has Bluebird’s handler been obnoxious?” Batman asked.

“Not necessarily, sir,” Alfred said. “But he keeps… following me around.”

“Why?”

“I… Sir, I do believe he wants to help.”

“Help?”

“Cleaning, sir.”

Batman needed a moment to process this. Maybe it was one of those working class things. Neither Cullen nor Harper knew they were going to be staying at a billionaire’s mansion for a time when they woke up this morning, so this must be a shock. Shocking to the point that they must have felt that they had to pitch in, even though they were helping him find One, Two, and Cain, and that was pitching in. As rough as he’d had it on the road to becoming Batman, this was an urge that he’d never felt. Maybe that was one of those billionaire things.

“Alright,” Batman said. “Tell him to stop. If he doesn’t, let him, and I’ll cut him a check when he leaves.”

“Well, he’s not getting my rate, sir.”

This was the cool thing about smiling. If you were on the radio, no one could see it. “Duly noted,” Batman said. “Anything else?”

“Bluebird has delivered the audio from the events that occurred at Esteban’s Ristorante, sir.”

“Good,” Batman said. “Thank you, Penny-One, I’ll access it from here. You have a good night.”

“You too, sir.”

The line went dent as Alfred signed off.

Batman brought up a holographic display on his left gauntlet, and accessed the audio file in the Batcomputer remotely.

The hit on Maroni’s guys at Esteban’s played through the speakers in Batman’s cowl.

And when it was over, he was troubled.

Deeply troubled.

“Gentlemen,” One had said before he murdered five Maroni Family goons. “You have eaten Gotham’s wealth. Its spirit. Your feast is nearly over. From this moment on… none of you are safe.”

Batman’s exploits during his first year of fighting crime had passed into legend in Gotham City. But the story of what he had done on his first Falcone raid, he had only told a select few people.
And One’s voice sounded far too familiar.

He brought up the holographic display on his left gauntlet again. Buried under menus, firewalls, and passwords was but a single protocol.

**PROTOCOL: JASON.**

One of the stereotypes and mischaracterizations of Batman was his extreme paranoia, and although he didn’t like the use of that particular word, he admitted to the spirit of the criticism, at the very least.

How paranoid was Batman?

He put sensors inside the casket of a dead child. He’d told no one about this. Not Dick, not Tim, not even Alfred.

In a world of Lazarus Pits, in a world where Superman himself could rise from the grave, it was best not to take chances.

But the signs from the sensors inside the casket of Jason Peter Todd showed the same readings that they’d had for the last five years. He was still dead, and still buried. The grave hadn’t even been disturbed, ruling out both resurrection and cloning.

It couldn’t--scientifically *couldn’t*-- be Jason. But, to say the least, something strange was going on here.

A few blocks away, Batman heard someone screaming.

“HELP! SOMEONE HELP MEEEEEEE!”

Batman deactivated his holographic display and stood. He spread out his cape, and glided into the cold December night.

The noise came from a decrepit building that was across the street from another building that had been destroyed during the siege of The Undying when Firefly--real name Garfield Lynns--set himself ablaze in a basement full of flammable barrels.

What Batman found when he set foot on the roof was an eighties-era boom box with a 2000s-era MP3 player hooked up to it with a series of wires and cables. The speakers of the boom box played the same refrain.

“HELP! SOMEONE HELP MEEEEEEE!”

Batman shut the boombox off.

Behind him, the sound of boots scuffling across tar paper.

Batman whipped around.

There was David Cain in a leather jacket, his close-cropped white hair rippling in the cold, light wind.

“Hey there, Bruce.”
Chapter 12: Shine a Light

Batman didn’t hesitate. David Cain was about eight feet away, and he closed four of those feet in little over a second.

But he stopped when David removed something from his leather jacket. Something with wires and a big red button.

A detonator. As he almost skidded to a halt, Batman’s first instinct was that David was bluffing. That detonator wasn’t hooked to anything.

But then he remembered the missing experimental explosive from Qurac that brought Bluebird into the fold in the first place. That was still unaccounted for. It was the smart play to assume David was bluffing. It was the smarter play to assume he wasn’t. If this little network he had with One and Two was responsible for everything else going on in Gotham lately, it was responsible for that as well.

“Good boy,” David said when he saw that Batman had stopped moving.

“What do you want?” Batman asked through gritted teeth.

“To see the man who corrupted my daughter,” David said. “The man who made The Orphan worthless.”

“Cassandra is far from worthless,” Batman said. “And you do not get to call her your daughter.”

“I gave her purpose,” David said. “I tried to help her reach her potential with the time that I had with her. That’s a father’s job.”

“A father’s job,” Batman said, “is not abusing their child.”

David Cain folded his arms and looked at Batman as though he were an ant.

“You don’t have it in you, do you?” David asked.

Batman didn’t say anything.

“Being a father? Teaching them things that will outlive you? No. The goofy costume, the gadgets, this is all about you. You don’t have room for anyone else. You don’t have the heart for immortality like I do. To just… fling that light forward into the beyond like that. Once you go, this whole thing goes with you. I think bigger than that. I will take The Orphan from you. I tell you this now, man-to-man. And what I teach her will change the world.”

“You call her ‘The Orphan,’” Batman said. “Why did you bother naming her Cassandra if you didn’t plan on calling her that?”

David smiled. “Would you believe for cataloguing purposes? A for Andrew, B for Brandon, C for Cassandra. She wasn’t the first child I tried to elevate. She was just the first one that survived.”

Hatred never flared up in Bruce Wayne or Batman. It was never that sudden. Never that intense. But rather, it bubbled slowly from within his center like cold crude oil straight from the earth. As it did now.
“Batman smiled.”

“How something tickling you?” David asked.

“My reputation for brutality is somewhat unearned,” Batman said, still smiling. “I put people down, and I put them down hard, but I try never to cross the line into sadism.”

Batman smiled even wider. “But sometimes… God help me… breaking the abusive dads is the only fun I let myself have on this job.”

David Cain’s eyes narrowed. His shoulders squared up.

“Oh, yes,” Batman said. “Beating the hell from men who were so big and strong a second ago against children who were smaller than they were. Who trusted them implicitly. Who couldn’t or wouldn’t fight back, Hearing these guys beg the cops at the precinct to lock them up and throw away the key because they knew that would save them from the Big Bad Bat. Yeah… I could make a whole evening out of you. Might even have to stop and get something to eat in the middle.”

David stood up straight and let his breath out through his nose in a fog. It did indeed look like he was offended.

“You think I’m a monster.”

“I don’t have to think it, David.”

“But you’re the one who robbed her of her reason for being.”

“She found her reason for being,” Batman said. “All on her own. You tried to turn a little girl into a weapon, had her kill for you, and even then she turned around and walked away. How does it feel, Cain? Knowing there are some people that even you can’t break?”

A slight grin played across the corner of David’s lips.

“I did turn her into a weapon,” he said. “But what use is a weapon that won’t kill?”

“Would you like a demonstration?” Batman asked. “Because I have plenty on me.”

“She was made for a purpose,” David said. “A purpose that she can’t fulfill as long as she’s with you. She’ll be lost in this place. Among these people. She will see life all around her and exist in a state of constant bewilderment, forever at arm’s reach because she does not and will not have the tools to relate to them. To see them as anything more than prey that she will be forced to live amongst against her nature. Staying with someone who denies them their fate is a tragedy in slow motion. I… I’ve come too far to let that happen. To her or to me.”

Batman squinted at him.

“What?” David asked.

“You know Spoiler?”

“Yeah,” David said. “Stephanie Brown.”

“Well,” Batman said, “when she meets someone she doesn’t like, there’s this thing she always says. ‘Looks like I stepped in a puddle of bitch.’ And me without my galoshes.”

David leaned in with a look of fury.
“The Orphan will be doomed to mediocrity because of you. All that work and all that potential gone. And for that… you deserve to die.”

“Are you going to be the one who kills me?” Batman asked.

And now it was David’s turn to smile.

“No,” he said. “That’s someone else’s job… But I’m willing to bet if I write to Santa, I’ll get to watch.”

David pointed at him.

With the hand holding the detonator.

“And that…”

Batman didn’t let him finish.

With the skill, speed, and finesses of an old west quick-draw artist, Batman freed a Batarang from his utility belt, and flung it at David Cain’s wrist.

David dropped the detonator, and Batman dove.

He managed to cradle it in his gauntlets before it hit the ground.

But unfortunately, that put him at David’s feet.

David reared up to stomp Batman like a bug, but Batman rolled out of the way before it could happen, gently tossing the detonator aside before it could go off.

Back on his feet, Batman moved in, right raised for a cross, but…

But then he had to stop. David Cain started blurring, as though the upper half of his body was making every conceivable move at once.

So stunned was Batman by this that he didn’t see David’s left hook coming.

The impact was shattering. Figuratively, as Batman almost blacked out from the strength of the impact, but also literally, as it shattered the structure of the cowl around his temple.

Batman landed in a heap, trying to uncross his eyes, and David Cain stood over him.

“I have to say,” David said, “it’s a damn shame the roses aren’t growing this time of year.”

David threw a smoke pellet to the ground. Once the smoke cleared seconds later, he was gone.

Batman crawled over to the detonator to examine it.

It was an old controller for an RC car. It didn’t even have any batteries in it. It wasn’t hooked up to anything, explosive or no.

Batman threw it off the roof…

…and then he started smiling again.

*He’s using projection tech. That’s how he beat Orphan.*
And implants for strength, I’d wager.

And there were ways around those.

NATIONAL CITY

Batwoman wondered if it was possible to sweat through body armor. It must have been the sudden change from freezing-ass Gotham to sunny-ass National, but even the manageable seventy-one degrees in the nighttime felt like high noon in the Sahara.

Both she and Wonder Woman were still in their costumes, going on some voyage through the woods about half a mile east of the Kubert Observatory on the edge of the city. Wonder Woman said that it was of the utmost importance that they make this journey tonight, ahead of crashing at Kara Danvers’ apartment, out of the view of the assassins who were no doubt scouring National City in search of the two million dollar payday that came with Wonder Woman’s corpse.

But Wonder Woman hadn’t said why they were out here. Indeed, she hadn’t spoken aloud since they left the Bugatti on the side of the highway.

Batwoman wasn’t worried that the Bugatti Chiron would be stolen. It was loaded with WayneTech, which meant that it would be almost as booby-trapped as an ancient temple in an Indiana Jones movie. She hoped that, if there were potential car thieves out in this part of National City, that their health insurance was paid up.

She noticed, as she held the flashlight from her utility belt up so they could see, that Wonder Woman at the very least had stopped sweating. Her lung was working better, and more air meant that she was exerting herself less.

But she still stopped every once in a while to cough up blood, though.

Batwoman ducked over a low-hanging branch and said “I have a question.”

Wonder Woman looked over her shoulder, and what little Batwoman could see of her face was difficult to read.

“Yes?” Wonder Woman asked.

“When was the last time you were on a date?”

Wonder Woman kept walking, her head down, trying to see where she was going.

“Is now the time?”

“No,” Batwoman said. “But it’s a quick question, though. Call it an entry point to the later conversation.”

“Alright, then.”

Batwoman took a deep breath, and asked:

“When was the last time you were on a date?”

Wonder Woman kept walking for a moment before she responded.

“January,” she said.
“Oh,” said Batwoman. “Well, it’s been a while, but not too--”

“Of 1992.”

Batwoman just stopped, and clinging to her sense of decorum when interacting with Wonder Woman was the only thing that stopped her from groaning “Fuuuuuuuck.”

She had to do a light jog to catch up with Wonder Woman, but it didn’t matter. A few paces later, they came to a small clearing.

“We are here,” Wonder Woman said. And then she turned to face Batwoman.

“I told you that the Gods of Olympus sent me on this mission to find the Blade of Resurrection,” Wonder Woman said. “This much is true. I regret that I have been… evasive on this subject.”

“Yeah,” Batwoman said. “I don’t know why, though. You could have just said that the Gods sent you. I wouldn’t have batted an eye.”

“You do not understand,” Wonder Woman said. “I came to Patriarch’s World in 1942 to spread a message of sisterhood and solidarity. To help this place fight their enemies, somewhat paradoxically, in the name of peace. Which is why the irony is not lost on me when I say that most of the time I have spent adventuring in this land has been spent fighting the things that followed me from Themyscira.”

“Oh,” Batwoman said. “Yeah, I get that.”

“The Gods are… wily,” Wonder Woman said. “I owe them for my power, but though they have my fealty, they do not have my trust. I try my best to exclude the people of Patriarch’s World from my dealings with them. Especially the people I…”

Wonder Woman stopped talking and for just a split second, Batwoman saw her expression just crater. An outflowing of emotion too quick to identify, wreathed with horror at having almost given the game away.

But the moment passed.

“Anyway,” Wonder Woman said, “there is one who can answer your questions far better than I.”

Wonder Woman turned, knelt, and plunged her hand in the rich soil of the clearing in the forest.

It took a moment before Batwoman felt the rumble.

One of the trees around the clearing started shaking. Batwoman knew it wasn’t one of the west coast’s vaunted and terrifying earthquakes (for which she found, just now, that she had an immense phobia), because only one tree was shaking.

The roots of this tree, a redwood about twenty feet tall, tore themselves from the earth, wrapping themselves around the trunk. The bark and wood warped. The expanse of leaves at its summit seemed to lower and shrink.

What was once a twenty foot-tall tree was now a nine foot-high… something else with a vaguely humanoid shape.

And that shape was getting less and less vague by the instant. The hips of the form grew, as did the bust line. The exposed wood formed a beautiful face with high cheekbones. A couple of the
knotholes in the trunk bent and shrank to form eyes. The leaves gathered into long hair.

This nine foot tall feminine plant creature yawned and stretched.

“**You rang, Diana?**”

“Lady Demeter,” Wonder Woman said. “I am honored by your presence.”

Batwoman gawked. She couldn’t have heard that correctly. Even her sense of decorum couldn’t outtrace her mouth.


Demeter’s fine bark eyebrows raised in a near perfect imitation of Kate’s expression behind her mask.

“Batwoman?” Demeter asked, her voice simultaneously sonorous and reedy… and just larded with sarcasm, really. “**The Batwoman? The one Diana over here never shuts up about?**”

Batwoman could hear Wonder Woman groan to herself.

“I wasn’t supposed to say that, was I?” Demeter asked, smiling, revealing brown wooden teeth.

“Anyway, my proper designation would be Goddess of Grains and the Harvest, but I’ve been bastardized over the millennia into a general Earth Goddess that your hippies and your dumber college students like to invoke when they’re smoking weed. And it’s a bastardization I’m more than happy with, as it’s easier to get a corporeal form out of a forest than it is a wheat field. So would either of you lovely ladies wish to inform me as to why I’ve been summoned to so lowly and pedestrian a place as… National City? That can’t be right.”

“I have enlisted Batwoman’s aid in the quest you have entrusted me with,” Wonder Woman said. “The quest to find the Blade of Resurrection.”

“Alright,” Demeter said. “So far, so good. Still doesn’t explain why I’m here, though.”

Wonder Woman halted before she said “I fear as though I have acted deceptively in bringing her here, and feel as though an explanation from you would be worth more than one from I.”

Demeter looked at Batwoman. “**Has she acted deceptively?**”

“Not really.”

“I have,” Wonder Woman said.

“This is just the way she is,” Demeter said to Batwoman. “She doesn’t live up to her own standards for one brief instant, and she looks for the nearest sword on which to fall. How caught up are you on the story?”

“We’re looking for the Blade of Resurrection,” Batwoman said.

“And you know what it does?”

“Brings the dead back to life,” Batwoman said. “And binds the soul of the resurrect *ee* to the resurrect *er.*”
“Correct,” Demeter said. “But have you asked yourself, in your mad dash to find the Blade, who needs resurrecting so badly?”

“Well,” Batwoman said, “no. It’s a dangerous artifact. It shouldn’t be out on the streets like this.”

“True,” said Demeter. “But there’s a plan in motion, here. Let’s go back to the beginning. Oh... a few thousand years or so.”

Demeter sighed, and Batwoman could hear the wood within her chest creak.

“In the beginning,” Demeter said, “there were the Titans. And these Titans eventually fell at the hands of their children.”

“The Greek Gods and Goddesses.”

“We prefer the term ‘Olympian Pantheon.’”

“Sorry.”

“And after the fall of the Titans,” Demeter said, “we were left to our own devices, trying to garner worshippers and show our strength wherever and whenever we could. But even these halcyon days were numbered. For there was one of us who was far too dangerous to live.”

Demeter spread her hands, the branches of her fingers stiffly separated from one another.

The soil of the clearing rippled like water, before a patch in the middle rose like a sunrise, forming something that looked human. The brown representation of a skinny woman with a hawk-like face. Ragged robes with braids of hair adorning her scalp in rows.

“Who is she?” Batwoman asked.

“This,” Demeter said, “is Nemesis.”

“Never heard of her.”

“Nor would you have,” Demeter said. “She existed for far too brief a time to have made it into many of your history books. Nemesis is the Goddess of Grudges and Blood Feuds. And she created something so foul that its very existence warranted her execution by Zeus’ own hand.”

The soil representation of Nemesis dropped into loose dirt on the clearing, but one lump of soil, about the size of the inside of a fist, still levitated in mid-air. Leaves enveloped it and packed it tightly.

“The Stone of Nemesis,” Demeter said. “The most powerful weapon that has ever or will ever grace the surface of the globe.”

“What does it do?” Batwoman asked.

“Do you know why Nemesis was so dangerous?” Demeter asked. “Do you know why Harmonia, Goddess of Harmony and Concord betrayed her to Zeus? Do you know why she was executed?”

“Why?”
“Because in addition to being the goddess of Grudges and Blood Feuds, she was also the Goddess of the Unjustly Slain. People are murdered all the time, thus Nemesis, unlike the rest of the Olympian Pantheon, needed no worshippers.”

“Huh…”

The representation of the Stone of Nemesis dropped back into the dirt, and in its place rose five forms. Whereas the rendition of Nemesis was marvelously detailed, the soil versions of these forms were crude facsimiles of Spartan soldiers, with rough estimations of helmets and swords.

“Once bathed in the blood of the Unjustly Slain,” Demeter said, “Five Soldiers of Nemesis rise, created from their very surroundings. They begin killing indiscriminately, and with each soul that falls by their hands, another Soldier of Nemesis rises.”

“Oh,” Batwoman said. “Like zombies.”

Demeter folded her arms.

“Sorry,” Batwoman said. “In America, we have this bit of appropriated folklore called…”

“Zombies,” Demeter said. “Would they be shamblers like in the 1979 Dawn of the Dead, or runners like in the poorly directed 2004 remake? The powers of the Olympian Pantheon have waned over the centuries, little missy, but even we can get free HBO.”

“Right,” Batwoman said. “Sorry.”

“Each Soldier of Nemesis that rises,” Demeter said, “is formed from its surroundings. And each that falls reforms itself the same way. Using wood, stone, glass, steel… Plastic, now.”

Batwoman put a hand to her chin. “Hmm…. That’d be perfect for sieges. If you were controlling the Army of Nemesis, and the Soldiers of Nemesis kept fighting, the fortifications would get thinner and thinner every time anyone on either side went down.”

“And if you fought the Army of Nemesis in a city,” Wonder Woman said, “you would inadvertently destroy that city in the process.”

“Wow…” Batwoman said. “Wait, if a Soldier of Nemesis reforms itself every time it dies, then you can’t get rid of them at all?”

“Yes,” said Demeter. “So long, of course, as the Stone remains intact. And therein lies the problem. At the height of his power, even Zeus himself could not destroy the Stone, so he hid it. As deep and as far from Olympus as he could send it. And only Nemesis can control it.”

“Well,” Batwoman said, “if Nemesis is dead, then… then… Crap.”

“Crap indeed,” said Demeter. “In the three thousand years since her death, Nemesis has developed a small pocket of worshippers who call themselves The Order of Nemesis. And members of that order now have their hands on the Blade of Resurrection.”

Batwoman blinked. “The Blade can bring back Nemesis? It can bring back a Goddess?”

“It can,” Demeter said. “And being as the Stone is of her very essence, she will know exactly where it is. And there is no force on Earth that can destroy the Stone once it is activated, save
of course for divine power so strong that it is beyond Zeus even at his height. The world will burn if the Order of Nemesis is not stopped.”

Batwoman opened her mouth. Nothing came out.

“So you see the importance of the task which I have given Diana… and now you?”

“Yeah,” Batwoman said. “I guess I do. But, uhhh… I have a question.”

Demeter looked down her thick wooden nose at her. “Yes?”

“You’re a Goddess? Of the Olympian Pantheon, right?”

“We haven’t established that already?”

“So, um… It doesn’t matter you that you’re asking favors of someone who isn’t a worshipper? It doesn’t matter that I’m, y’know, Jewish?”

“Should it?” Demeter asked.

“No,” Batwoman said. “I guess not.”

“Good,” Demeter said, and she turned to Diana. “Princess, do be so kind as to give us a moment alone. There is something that I wish to discuss with Batwoman in private.”

Wonder Woman looked up from the ground to Demeter with curiosity, and then to Batwoman, before looking back again.

“As you wish, Lady Demeter.”

Wonder Woman arose from her kneeling position, taking her hand out of the soil. She shook the dirt off as she walked into the forest from whence she had come, shoulders hunched, awkward as all hell.

Demeter and Batwoman looked on after her, and once she was gone, Demeter looked at Batwoman squarely.

“You know the plant elemental,” Demeter said, and not in the form of a question. “The Avatar of the Green.”

Batwoman had to shake off the still-new impression that she was talking to an actual Olympian Goddess before she could respond.

“Swamp Thing?” Batwoman asked. “Yeah, I know Swamp Thing. What about him?”

Demeter looked down, twisting one wooden foot into the dirt of the clearing sheepishly.

“So… Is he single?”

THE CLOCK TOWER - GOTHAM CITY

Cassandra hadn’t gotten to sleep yet.

Dick and Babs were upstairs.
And they were… *making noises*.

The second-from-the-top floor of the Clock Tower was a series of bedrooms, each with their own toilet and shower facilities, but Barbara Gordon herself? She slept on the top floor.

With all of her Oracle computer stuff.

With Dick Grayson, whenever he was in town from Bludhaven.

Making… *noises*.

Barbara Gordon owned the Clock Tower, but she apparently had no clue how thin the floors were.

Cassandra Cain was familiar with what sex at least *looked* like. There was the one memorable occasion when Steph had found Babs’ porn stash on the main computer upstairs. The footage had been… *compelling*. In much the same way that the footage she’d seen of open heart surgery had been.

But both the video she’d seen and the noises that she’d heard Babs make led Cassandra to believe that sex would have made demands of her that she wasn’t quite sure she could fulfill.

The noises that Babs and the women in the videos had made were quite high and breathy, whereas Cassandra’s voice was a craggy, low rasp. Would that be a problem?

Was there a religious component? Because the way that both Babs and the women in the videos had kept repeatedly taking the Lord’s name in vain during the act may present issue to someone like Cassandra Cain, who had given no thought to the existence or non-existence of God at all.

The one formative sexual experience that Cassandra had ever had, the one that told her she liked boys in the first place, had been a simple dream. A sex dream about, oddly enough, Dick Grayson, the man that was currently giving Barbara Gordon a verbal workout at the present moment. The dream hadn’t been anything graphic. Just a series of images and sensations against a dark background.

And that dream had been thankfully, mercifully, *quiet*.

But finally, the gymnastics above ceased, and the Clock Tower lapsed into blissful silence.

Cassandra rolled on to her side and flipped her pillow upside down, letting the cool side provide some small relief to the bruises and puffiness on the right side of her face.

And it was then she knew that thoughts of engaging in any manner of congress with any boy of any kind were woefully premature.

She looked like a truck had hit her from the neck up (even though that would go away), she looked like a cat’s scratching post from the neck down (even though that *wouldn’t* go away), and she was, for lack of a better word, grounded.

Grounded by Batman.

Then the well opened up beneath her, and she was thinking about that again.

Doing what they did, protecting the innocent, sending the guilty to jail… Cassandra tried to peer into her own future, and she could not see anything else. No calling that would use her in the way she wanted to be used quite like that. Far beyond any petty concern of simple comfort, far beyond any
foolish notion of love, there was that, and that alone.

But she couldn’t do it right now.

More than that, if she didn’t do it correctly from here on out, she wouldn’t be able to do it at all.

She had heard Tim and Steph engage in idle conversation about what they’d do with the rest of their lives if they weren’t superheroes anymore. Neither of them had an answer. But Cassandra’s silence was, in itself, her response.

There was nothing beyond this. What to do with the rest of her life? This was the rest of her life. She planned on dying doing this.

Cassandra would not court her own death actively, but there had to be a time when the job called for every last thing she had. And she would give it freely, payment for the life that she had taken so many years ago.

The world wouldn’t make sense any other way.

The silence was punctured by a light tapping on the bedroom window next to Cassandra’s head.

Cassandra sat up in bed, covers still covering her legs, and looked outside.

Batman was perched on the railing of the fire escape outside.

The part of his cowl around the left temple had been almost completely destroyed, revealing a bruise that was getting worse. A small tuft of Bruce Wayne’s black hair was exposed.

Wondering just what the hell happened, Cassandra opened the window, letting the cold December air inside the bedroom.

“I met your father tonight,” Batman said, in lieu of a hello.

Cassandra thought that was obvious, his cowl in the state that it was. But “obvious” was a difficult word for her, so she just said:

“Uh-huh.”

“He said something to me before he escaped,” Batman said. “He said... ‘It’s a damn shame the roses aren’t growing this time of year.’”

Cassandra felt a small flicker of recognition in her chest, but it didn’t show on her face.

“Do you have any idea what that means?” Batman asked.

Her ability to read body language had enabled one trait that was boon and Godsend to any detective: she knew when people were lying. She could see them tense up, avert their eyes, play with their hands.

The knowledge that she had was being put to use at the present moment, as she manipulated her body in any number of subtle ways to allay those tells.

She was going to lie to Batman.

“No,” she said.
Batman turned his head sideways, and squinted. Almost as though he was trying to peer into her.

But he found nothing. She made sure of that.

“Alright,” Batman said.

He stayed there for a time, his face as bank as hers. It occurred to Cassandra that she wasn’t the only one who knew how to drain their faces of intent.

And then Batman leapt off the fire escape, his cape fluttering behind him as he glided over to the next rooftop.

Cassandra shut the window and just sat there for a spell, staring into the darkness of the bedroom.

She heard floorboards creaking, and looked to her bedroom doorway.

Babs was standing there, an oversized burgundy t-shirt hanging halfway down around her thighs. Stray tendrils of red hair stuck up from her head, and her eyes were squinty behind the yellow lenses of her eyeglasses.

“I heard someone down here,” Babs said. “Were you talking to someone?”

Cassandra nodded. She pointed at the window and said “Batman.”

Babs just stood still for a second, before she asked “Why do I believe you?”

Cassandra didn’t have a response to that, verbal or otherwise.

Babs hung her head, walked over to the bed, and sat down, facing away from Cassandra.

“I want to say I can’t relate to what you’re going through,” Babs said. “I wish this were just alien to me. But… I still haven’t forgiven Zatanna for what she did to me. And you got that it was something she did to me. Not for me. You got it the first day I met you. It’s how we get along so well.”

She was silent for a spell, before she continued.

“I also want to say that I didn’t fly off the handle at your age. Did stuff I wasn’t supposed to. Get myself into trouble that others had to bail me out of. But I can’t say that either.”

Babs sighed.

“I’m not the motivational speech type. Dick is, but he’s sleeping right now… and he doesn’t know you as well as I do.”

She turned her head back to look at Cassandra.

“There are people who give a shit about you, alright? Work on accepting that.”

“Hey there, Miss Excitement,” Dick said the next morning as Cassandra walked into the kitchen. “How do you like your eggs?”

Cassandra always had the same response. “Cooked.”

“Scrambled it is.”
Dick Grayson worked in Bludhaven, both as a superhero and as a gymnastics teacher at an all girls Catholic school. It was winter break, but this was the first time since it started that he could make it out to Gotham. And even then, he’d be leaving in a few hours anyway. Nightwing waited for no one.

Cassandra, in sweats and a t-shirt that Babs told her said “I SURVIVED COAST CITY AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS LOUSY T-SHIRT,” sat down at the kitchen table on the top floor of the Clock Tower, and looked at Dick who was working at the stove with his back to her.

He had on his own pair of sweatpants and a black tank top undershirt, exposing the scars on his own well-defined arms.

Cassandra couldn’t help but smile. Or at least as much as was possible with a busted face.

She had him beat on the scars.

And Conner had him beat on the arms.

Dick turned around with a green plateful of eggs in his hand and set it down in front of Cassandra.

“Do you… have it?” Cassandra asked.

“Of course I have it,” Dick said. “I’ll be right back.”

Dick went back to the kitchen. He came back with a small bottle of Tobasco sauce.

He unscrewed the cap, and said “Say when.”

Cassandra nodded, and Dick start shaking hot sauce onto Cassandra’s heaping portion of scrambled eggs.

He kept shaking.

And shaking.

And shaking.

“I see you also like to live dangerously,” Dick said.

Cassandra nodded again.

And still, Dick Grayson kept shaking.

“When,” Cassandra finally said when the normally off-yellow eggs in front of her turned a nice, bright orange.

“Thank you,” she said.

Dick Grayson screwed the lid back onto the Tobasco bottle, and set it down on the kitchen table. He looked at her, and winced.

“Jeez,” Dick said. “Your dad that to your face?”

Cassandra said “Uh-huh,” before she dug into her eggs. Her table manners had the reputation for being atrocious, and that reputation was more or less accurate. But Cassandra always made sure not to embarrass herself in front of Dick Grayson. She took small bites, and even held her pinky
up because she heard Steph say one time that it was proper to do so. Why she put on this show, she had no idea.

“I think Babs has a bag of frozen peas in the freezer for just such an occasion,” Dick said. “Helps with swelling… So when we spar later, I won’t feel bad about knocking you around.”

Cassandra smiled at this. Dick, much like Stephanie, had never so much as laid a finger on Cassandra during their sparring session, and Cassandra actually managed to have an even lighter touch with Dick than she did with Steph, as it’d be an awful shame to ruin something so pretty.

But her smile faded.

She knew what she’d be doing in a couple of hours, as soon as Stephanie got into contact with her.

In a couple of hours, Cassandra Cain wouldn’t be a superhero anymore.

“Not today,” Cassandra said.

Dick raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

“Yup.”

“You’re, uh… You’re really taking what Batman said to you by heart, aren’t you?”

“As well she should,” said a voice coming from the main room.

Babs was up. Her hair was in a ponytail. She was wearing a blue sweatshirt and red pajama bottoms with little Wonder Woman logos all over them.

“She broke the rules,” Babs said as she walked in. She wrapped her arms around Dick and kissed him, and even when she pulled away, she kept his hand on his chest. She was thumbing the strip of skin beneath the right strap of his tank top.

Cassandra thought to herself. In that situation, she would take her hand and twist it, doubling her over. Perfect for a knee to the face.

And Cassandra literally had to shake herself to loosen this train of thought. Every once in a while, when she saw people making physical contact with each other and wondered how it would feel, her mind always went to how she should put the other person down and make sure they stayed down. As though she needed defending in such a situation. It was probably a good thing that she was torching her superhero career to the ground today, thus severing her contact with Conner forever. If things between he and she got boyfriendly and girlfriendly, she’d probably wind up punching him in the face without meaning to. Yeah, he was half Kryptonian and would barely feel it, but still.

Cassandra tried to keep count of the people who had made physical contact with her outside of a fight since she had left her father’s tutelage, and the number she had come up with was… five.

Stephanie hugged her a lot, patted her on the shoulder a lot, put her feet in Cassandra’s lap when they played video games at Selina’s old apartment. Babs hugged her every once in a while. Dick liked to pat her on the shoulder and give her thumbs up on occasion. Selina had hugged her twice, on two separate occasions, and she had been tipsy each time. And one time, Kate hugged her when she was drunk.

Cassandra could barely talk, so actually touching people was the means of communication that she could most effectively utilize. And the form of communication that came across to her the best.
But no one seemed to want to touch her. They all seemed scared that she would turn on them and hurt them. And who knows? They might have been right.

“Hey,” Dick said to Babs, “C’mon.”

“She broke the rules,” Babs replied.

“We broke the rules.”


“Which one’s Harper?”

“The girl with blue hair,” Babs said. “You saw her last night at the manor, the one with the staples in the back of her head. Bluebird.”

“That was the Bluebird of Bleake Island?” Dick asked. “I thought she’d be, y’know, scarier.”

“They’re supposed to be better than us. They’re supposed to learn from our mistakes.”

Dick looked like he was about to argue, but he just smiled instead. Babs looked at Cass.

“Good morning,” she said. “How do you eat eggs with that crap all over them?”

Cassandra replied by scooping up a helping of eggs with her fork, putting them in her mouth, and smiling when she was done. The answer was simple. It was the morning, and she needed to wake up. Tobasco sauce was tasty. Coffee was gross.

A buzzing sounded.

“Oh,” Babs said. “Someone’s at the door.”

Babs left the kitchen to check to see who it was on the main computer. She came back moments later.

“Steph’s here.”

Cassandra bolted up from her chair and went to the main third floor door.

Stephanie Brown emerged from the door seconds later in a black beanie and a bright pink and puffy winter coat zipped all the way up. They both wrapped each other in a hug.

“Hey, Cass,” Steph said after the embrace broke. “How you holding up?”

Cassandra looked over her shoulder to see if either Dick or Babs were coming. When she was satisfied that they weren’t she said:

“I… need… a favor.”

“Yeah,” Steph said. “Name it.”

“I… need you to… take me… to…”

Cassandra got stuck. She knew where she needed to go, but not what the place was called. And even if she did know, it was up in the air as to whether or not she could articulate it.

She spread her feet apart across the floor, and mimed like she was about to shoot a bow and arrow.
“The… The Princess Miagani Statue?” Stephanie asked. “The one off Miagani Island?”

Cassandra nodded. “Yes.”

Stephanie lowered her brows, and took a step toward Cassandra.

“Your father’s there, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“And you know what happens if I take you there? Batman will find out.”

“I know.”

“And I can’t talk you out of it, can I?”

“No,” Cassandra said. “You can’t.”

Stephanie looked down at the floor for a while. Then she looked up again.

“Well, shit,” she said. “It was fun while it lasted. You wanna go now?”

“No,” Cassandra said. “Eggs first… Then we go.”
The sun rose bright for how cold it was in Gotham City this morning. The vivid light streamed through the one inch that the curtains were open in the master bedroom of Wayne Manor.

Selina Wayne’s eyes fluttered open, and then she immediately squinted, as though a combination of the brightness of the sun and the relative lack of sleep caused her eyelids to attempt to slam themselves shut of their own volition.

She actually had to raise her eyebrows to keep her eyes open, and once her vision unblurred, she saw that her husband was sitting on the edge of the bed, fully clothed and even breathing silently, so as not to wake her.

_Aw, shit…_

Last night, under the influence of what she later learned was a form of Madam Crow’s Anti-Fear Toxin, Selina had had the bright-ass idea to pick a fight with her husband. Selina had never been under the influence of Anti-Fear Toxin before, and indeed had never been under the influence of the Scarecrow toxin that worked the other way. Selina was never one to sit down and grapple with her fears.

No, she preferred to run from them and deny they existed.

_Y’know, like a grown-up._

She remembered wrapping her whip around Batman’s wrist pulling him back from the fight in the Sorrento Ballroom. She remembered seeing how hurt he looked when he saw Selina wanted to start some shit with him. And she remembered how exalted she felt, making the high and mighty Batman make that face.

But the harsh light of morning has a habit of taking the shine of greatness off of the previous night’s bad ideas. Selina Wayne had always prided herself on being shameless, but the rush of her blood to her cheeks told her that she had untapped reservoirs of shame, like petroleum hiding beneath Texas soil. She brought the covers up to her nose to hide her blushing.

Bruce, sitting there in jeans and a black polo shirt, heard the rustle of fabric, and turned to look at her. There was a bruise blooming above his left cheekbone.

The ruse of sleep having been blown, Selina decided to speak.

_“Rough night?” _she asked, the down comforter muffling her voice. _“Sorry. Stupid question.”_

He blinked, then looked back at the curtains. Not staring at the one inch of light, but at the curtains themselves.

_“What’s the right answer?” _Bruce asked.

_My husband wouldn’t be my husband if he didn’t start by being vague…_

_“To what?” _
“To this,” Bruce said. “To us. I… I’ve tried to give you every reassurance that you belong here. That this wasn’t a mistake. But it’s just… It doesn’t seem to be sinking in. Is there a skeleton key? A one-size-fits-all thing I can say that puts you at ease? I’ve tried to deduce what it is that could be bothering you, but Doctor Quinzel says that I should just try asking first. It’s high time I took her advice.”

Selina repositioned herself in bed, and leaned on her shoulder, elevating her head.

“‘Doctor Quinzel?’”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“She can’t be ‘Harley’ anymore?”

“Selina…”

She sighed. She sat up in bed, bringing the comforter up to her collarbone.

“Stop being Batman,” she said.

Bruce was broken out of his dour reverie. He looked at her as though she had asked him to change species. And Selina couldn’t help but snort at his shock.

“Do you really want me to be to stop being Batman?”

“Fuck no,” Selina said. “I’m thirty-six years old, and I’m having fun long past the time society would have told me to stop.”

It was more than that though. In addition to how fulfilling fighting crime and saving people had been (a prospect fully revealed to her as she was near death, trying to save Nightwing from Black Manta), she was surprised how great she felt physically. A couple of weeks ago, she had looked down at herself in the shower and realized that the only things that weren’t in better shape than they’d been since she was in her early twenties were her aching Goddamned knees. Fighting crime was a hell of a lot more work than committing it, and the results spoke for themselves.

“But it’s an option for you,” Selina said.

“It’s not an option I’d take.”

“You took it. Five years ago when The Joker died, you stopped being Batman out of… whatever. You were born into this…” Selina waved her hand around to indicate the lavishness in which they lived. “When adults tell kids that they can be whatever they want when they grow up, they’re talking to you. They never talked to me, saying shit like that. I used to break the law for a living, and now that I’m… what’d you call it? The Lady of Wayne Manor? Now that I’m that, I’m worried I broke a rule.”

“Is this seriously because I was born rich?” Bruce asked.

“Yes,” Selina said bluntly. “It is. And when you’re born rich, you have options. And when you have so many options, consequences aren’t, um… Well, they aren’t really a thing for you.”

Bruce blinked at her, seemingly in disbelief. “Name one person who is more aware of the consequences of their actions than I am.”

“Clark Kent.”
“Name two.”

Selina sighed again. She dropped the comforter and moved herself over to sit next to him. She was stark naked sitting next to her fully-clothed husband, and it was *weird* that it didn’t feel weird.

“You’re Bruce Wayne,” Selina said. “You’re a Fortune 500 CEO. You make your living negotiating. Then the sun goes down, you’re Batman, and you find your calling by negotiating with absolutely no one. See what I… I *fear* might happen if I step out of line just the once? And you know me, Sailor. I see a line, and I get my Stepping Out shoes.”

Bruce nodded, and then looked at her.

“Do you know why I married you?” he asked.

Without saying a word, without looking at him, Selina took Bruce’s right hand and placed it on the warm and firm expanse of her left ass cheek.

Bruce was silent for a second before he said “Well… that’s a reason.”

Selina smiled. Bruce put his hand back in his lap.

“There are a lot of reasons I love you,” Bruce said. “You make me laugh. You’re fun to be around. And when you’re not around, you’re fun to think about. You have one of the kindest hearts I know, and the fact that you have a terrible time hiding it is really endearing.”

Selina flicked his ear. Bruce smiled. Only when that smile faded did he continue.

“And… I need your counsel.”

That one surprised her. Selina was awake now, no coffee needed.

“My *counsel*?”

Bruce nodded.

“What, like *advice*?”

“That is what *counsel* means.”

Selina started laughing and Bruce, polite soul that he was when he was around her, didn’t make a face or say anything until she was finished.

“What the hell do you need advice for?” Selina asked, still smiling. “You’re the smartest guy I know.”

“But I’m not the wisest person I know,” Bruce said.

To which Selina slowly stopped smiling.

“It’s not enough that you know me inside and out,” said Bruce. “You know how I fit in all this. Because you know people. And I’m really bad at admitting my faults, I know that, but I shouldn’t let that stop me from stating the obvious when it needs to be stated. Fact of the matter is… You’re better at being human than I am. And when I mess up, I need someone there to tell me so. To tell me how. Who can see the things I can’t because she didn’t sign away her wants and her needs so long ago that people are just obstacles to her. Because there are more people involved in this than just me.”
He finally looked at her.

“I love you, Selina. But I need you, too. If I try to be just… good enough around you, then maybe I’ll get there one day.”

Selina put her head on his shoulder. He put his hand on her bare waist for a time, and then he traced his fingers lightly up and down her ribcage, giving her goosebumps. She put her hand up the back of his shirt and returned the favor along his spine, her fingernails lightly traversing the network of scars he’d built up.

She smiled with her eyes closed. The man she loved was trying to grow as a person right before her very eyes, and his touch made her… made her…

Purr.

Ew.

Cat puns.

But everything had to end. If there was a specific reason he felt he needed her, then the time was ripe that she lived up to it.

“You value my, uh… my counsel?” Selina asked.

“Yes.”

“You want me to tell you when you’re fucking up?”

Bruce kissed the top of her forehead. “Mm-hmm.”

“When would you like to start?”

Bruce pulled back and looked her in the eye.

“We need to talk about Cass,” Selina said.

Bruce put his hand back in his lap, and Selina could feel the electric sign go up between them with flashing neon letters. “MAKE-UP SEX DENIED!”

“You think I handled that situation incorrectly?”

“And how,” Selina said. “And you dressed up as the thing she worships and tried to pin five dead bodies on her. And she does worship Batman. Ex-Catholic with a Cuban mom, remember? I’ve seen it before.”

“She defied a direct order.”

“Oh, she did?”

“Yes.”

“You mean she did the thing that the rest of us do as a matter of course? I mean, remember when you asked us all to use coasters when we’re hanging out in this house?”

“Yes.”
Selina reached over to the nightstand. There was a glass there that was filled to the halfway point with water. Bruce drank from it when he took his antidepressants, and he’d just left it there the previous afternoon. Selina picked up the glass from the coaster upon which it rested, and moved it to the dark walnut veneer of the nightstand itself. Then she held out her hand to the offending glass and looked at Bruce as she did so, as though he could win the glass on a game show if he could guess its estimated retail value without going over.

“That’s… more of a consideration for Alfred than anything else,” Bruce said.

“Oh.”

Then she put the glass back on the coaster.

“The point is,” Selina said, “you’ve gathered a mass of independent souls around you. They’re not gonna do what you say all the time.”

“Tim’s never disobeyed a direct order.”

“He’s different,” Selina said. “He’s a walking pile of neuroses. I love Tim to death, but he will punch himself in the dick if you told him to.”

“The lives of five police officers were lost,” Bruce said. “Those lives could have been saved if she was there.”

“Well, I’m here to tell ya, Sailor: No, they wouldn’t have.”

This seemed to get his attention. Selina turned the entire upper half of her body toward him. And if the fact that I’m naked confuses him for a second, then good. I’m winning this argument.

“What would have happened if Orphan got exposed to Anti-Fear Toxin? What happens when the baddest girl on the planet just isn’t afraid of pulling her punches anymore? When happens when she doesn’t live her life in mortal terror of taking another human life? What happens when you, me, Tim, and Harper try to stop her?... And who’s gonna bury us when we all fail? You can act upset all you want, but that still doesn’t change the fact that we were Goddamned lucky Orphan wasn’t at the Sorrento last night.”

Bruce blinked while trying to deal with that. “I can’t just ignore the fact that she blatantly defied me.”

“I’m not asking you to,” Selina said. “I’m asking you to recognize this for the happy accident it very clearly was. I’m asking you to recognize that not every situation in life requires a winner and a loser, because sometimes there’s neither and everything just sucks. And I am telling you-- telling you--that you will not use Batman as a cudgel against her again. Because if you do, you will become the exact thing you’re trying to save her from.”

That one put Bruce on the backfoot. His jaw actually dropped a little bit.

“Let me ask you something,” Selina said. “Knowing what she grew up with, knowing what she went through, do you want Cassandra Cain looking at any man in fear ever again? Even you?”

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AN UNDISCLOSED LOCATION - ELEVEN YEARS AGO

The Orphan woke before her appointed time.
The seven-year-old Orphan rose from her mat on the floor, still in the black pants and t-shirt that she slept in, trained in, ate a rigid diet in, bled in, cried in…

In the darkness of this dank brick place deep underground, her bare feet padded to the far right wall, past the weights, past the training dummy, past the long display case full of swords.

To a poster on the wall.

The poster was of a large statue of a woman in a skirt holding a bow and arrow like the kind that the white-haired man trained her to shoot. This statue on an island against a bright blue sky.

The only clue to the enormity of the statue itself was at its base. There were little benches down there with little red things that she would learn (later, under another name, in another life) were called roses.

The lights in the room went on.

SNAP!

And The Orphan stood up straight in a reflex action, as she always did when the white-haired man snapped his fingers. When he snapped his fingers, she was supposed to do something.

At this time of the morning? When he snapped his fingers, then that meant that she was supposed to eat this gray sludge that she would learn (later, under another name, in another life) was called oatmeal.

When she was finished eating, he would snap his fingers again, and she would do push-ups on her knuckles, flattening them and making her small hands as heavy and hard as rocks. When she had done enough, he would snap his fingers again, and she would stop.

After that, the fighting would start…

THE MIAGANI ISLAND FERRY - NOW

“Fifty bucks for two people on a ferry?” Stephanie asked. “Jesus H. Christ.”

Cassandra leaned on the railing of the ferry, and looked out at the patch of Atlantic Ocean to the island that was her destination.

The Princess Miagani Statue stood two-hundred-ninety-five feet, from the base of its pedestal to the top of its head. It was situated on a small bit of land off the coast of Miagani Island that was just called “Statue Island.”

Designed by the French Canadian architect and artist Philippe Anton DesRosiers, construction of the Princess Miagani Statue began in 1925. Its exterior made of bronze, depicting a Native American woman drawing a bow and arrow, the statue was meant to commemorate the warm welcome that the Miagani tribe of Native Americans had given the initial Dutch settlers in this area, who had christened the place “Nieuw Rotterdam” before it was called Gotham City. Princess Miagani herself was supposed to be an unnamed warrior of the Miagani who saved a minister named Adrianus Janssen from a bear attack.

Both Princess Miagani herself, as well as the story in which she so prominently featured, were complete fabrications. By the time the Dutch settlers arrived in Nieuw Rotterdam (indeed, by the time the initial English explorer, Henry Hudson, made landfall in 1609) the Miagani tribe had
vanished under mysterious--some would say supernatural--circumstances.

So it stood, an almost three-hundred foot monument to, well, nothing in particular. It served as a dark, cynical counterpoint to the Statue of Liberty in much the same way that Gotham City itself stood as a dark, cynical counterpoint to New York City. If the Statue of Liberty was meant to welcome immigrants to the land of opportunity, the Princess Miagani Statue seemed to tell them “Dude, this ain’t gonna go the way you think.”

Stephanie, in her puffy winter coat, leaned on the railing next to Cassandra.

“I like the smell,” Stephanie said.

Cassandra just looked at her. She was wearing jeans and a black leather jacket over a gray hoodie. The hood was up and she was wearing sunglasses. She didn’t feel like showing people her busted-up face today.

“It gets me to thinking,” Stephanie said, “that maybe working on a tugboat the rest of my life wouldn’t be such a bad thing. Just to get this smell all day… But I went to a Long John Silver’s when it was raining one time. That’s just as good, right?”

Why was Cassandra Cain’s best friend in the world so weird?

But again, Cassandra knew why. She was playing for time. Trying to get Cassandra’s mind off of what was about to happen next.

In a very short time, minutes or hours, Cassandra Cain would not be a superhero anymore. She would violate the edict laid down by Batman that she would not seek her father. Yet here she was.

She knew David Cain was on Statue Island.

A few minutes passed in total silence until the Statue Island ferry came to its destination.

Cassandra and Stephanie walked off the ferry with the twelve or so other passengers hoping to take in the majesty and enormity of the Princess Miagani Statue on this cold and bright December morning. Looking about them, seeing their breath escape their mouths and noses in bursts of fog, she thought they looked like a factory district made of human beings.

“So what happens now?” Stephanie asked after they had passed the entry turnstile, showing their tickets to the unusually smiley elderly woman in the ticket kiosk.

Cassandra took a deep breath. “If… something… happens…”

She took her hands out of the pockets of her leather jacket so she could use them to sign, and immediately cursed herself for not bringing gloves.


“You don’t want me going with you?”

Cassandra put her hands back into the pockets of her jacket, and shook her head.

“He’s… my father.”

“And you’re my friend,” Stephanie said. “Let’s just go back on the ferry. You do your time in Batman’s little corner, you get out, and we stop your dad the right way.”
Cassandra shook her head. If her father baited her into a place this wide open and public in broad daylight, and she didn’t show up, then there was a good chance that he’d murder every last person here to punish her for not showing up. She didn’t think that one-hundred percent would happen, but even if there were a razor-thin possibility that sitting down with her murderous, cruel father would save one innocent life in this place, then sitting down is what she would do.

But of course she couldn’t say that. So she just shook her head again.

Stephanie frowned at her, her eyes ceaseless blue pools of sympathy and sadness.

She walked up to Cassandra and wrapped her arms around her.

“No matter what happens,” Stephanie said, “I am your friend. Superhero or not. Believe it.”

Cassandra closed her eyes. “I do.”

A second or a month later, Cassandra didn’t know which, the hug broke. Stephanie put her hand, clad in a woolen mitten, on Cassandra’s cheek.

“Good luck,” Stephanie said.

“Keep. Them. Safe.”

“Aye-aye, Cap’n.”

And they turned from each other, and walked away.

Babs wouldn’t have let them out of the Clock Tower if they took their costumes with them. Barbara Gordon would enforce Batman’s grounding of Orphan. If the shit was going to go down, it was going to go down with Cassandra Cain and Stephanie Brown, and not Orphan and Spoiler. But after what happened happened, on Cassandra’s request, they’d swing by the Clock Tower to pick up her Orphan outfit, and then head for Wayne Manor to hand it over to Bruce Wayne personally.

She would accept the consequences of her actions. Without complaint. Even if she had failed miserably in her aspirations, she owed Batman that much.

Cassandra began to walk the fifty yards to the corner of the statue, and let her mind go back.

She remembered the first night she had spent in the Clock Tower, after she and Oracle had taken out Dollhouse at that old retirement home. Babs told her that she had a name, that it was Cassandra, and that the white-haired man who had beaten her to a pulp to toughen her up, who shot her so she could withstand pain, who taught her to fight and to read how others fought…

...who taught her to murder for him…

...was also her father.

She did not remember being pleased by this information, but she did remember when she felt a sense of deep, irrevocable loss. When she felt that there was a piece of her missing that most of the people she knew in this modern life behind the mask didn’t even know was there.

It was at Bruce and Selina’s wedding.

Stephanie had to go to the bathroom, Cassie Sandsmark and Jinny Hex followed her in, and Anita Fite decided to hit on Wally “Kid Flash” West just to see what would happen. Which left Cassandra to walk among the tables at the reception and just people-watch.
And she spied Roy Harper and his daughter Lian at a neighboring table.

Lian was in Roy’s lap as he was talking to Garth of Atlantis and his wife Dolphin. And Lian spilled the small cup of chocolate milk she had been drinking all over the table.

Cassandra had frozen. Whenever she had flubbed a move when she was a child, whenever she flinched when she wasn’t supposed to, whenever she put together an assault rifle incorrectly, she was beaten or shot.

But when Roy Harper saw the mess, his eyes lit up, and he yelled “Oil spill!” He gave her some napkins so she could clean it up herself, and when she was done, he kissed little Lain on the forehead and hugged her tightly to his chest.

And Cassandra felt a cave within her. Somewhere dark and empty and cold.

Because maybe… maybe… fathers weren’t supposed to treat their daughters the way that David Cain had treated her.

Cassandra turned the corner and saw it.

The rose garden at the base of the Princess Miagani Statue.

Or rather what was left of it in this cold winter.

She remembered seeing it in that poster on the wall in the place where she was kept during her childhood. The one splash of red that didn’t come from her busted mouth, or a cut, or a bullet wound.

Batman said it himself. Or at least David Cain had said it, and Batman repeated it.

“It’s a damn shame the roses aren’t growing this time of year.”

David Cain himself was sitting on the wooden bench in the middle, his right arm stretched out over the back, and his right ankle resting on his left knee. Jeans, black leather jacket, and sunglasses, his white hair fluttering in the cold breeze.

Cassandra narrowed her eyes behind her sunglasses, and walked toward him with purpose. She got within about ten feet of him when he raised his right hand.

SNAP!

And every last muscle in Cassandra’s body locked up.

She had been raised with a near-total absence of verbal and written stimulus, so whenever he had wanted her to do something when she was a child, he had snapped his fingers, at which point she would stand up straight and await further instructions.

And Cassandra was standing up straight now.

“Sit,” David said.

Cassandra had to will herself to sit down on the bench next to him. Partly to shake off the conditioning that was apparently still active somewhere deep within herself, and partly because she knew how dangerous he was.

But sit she did. She looked out and was almost stunned by the view. It was the entirety of Gotham.
City, its crumbling buildings and enormous skyscrapers reaching for the heaven against a featureless slate-gray sky.

“Say the words,” David said.

She looked at him. He was looking out at the city as well. The face behind his sunglasses was completely passive.

And she said nothing.

“You’ve been among your prey,” David said. “I’ve even heard tell you’re mooing and baaing like them now. If you can talk, you can say the words.”

Cassandra thought in terms of her senses. Intricate pictures and vivid smells. Her thoughts rarely appeared in the form of words, but they did now. The first being:

No.

And the second being:

Kiss my ass.

David sighed, his breath escaping his nose in a thin jet of steam.

“There’s a group of kids here with their pastor from some Episcoplian church in Fawcett City. Coming here is his Christmas present for the younger set of his congregation. Also, you’ve been trained to read body language, so you know when people are lying. Take both of these into consideration when I tell you…”

He looked at her, smiling.

“…that I do not have a gun on me.”

She looked him over.

He was lying.

Cassandra put her elbows on her knees, folded her hands between them, and looked at the ground.

“Y…”

For a moment, she was going to repeat the words in the second person, in the way he had always told her this thing. She took a second to try to switch all the words around, the “you”’s to “I”’s before she began.

“I…” Cassandra said, landing on it with authority, “am a sword. I am not the hand that wields it. I came from nothing, and if I am successful, it is to nothing that I shall return… I… am an orphan.”

It was a lot less difficult than she thought it would be. She didn’t know if that was a good thing or not.

She took a deep breath, and tried to ask the question that was on her mind.

What do you want?

But David cut her off.
“You’re worthless,” he said.

The words caught in Cassandra’s throat. She just glared at him.

“You were trained to be the One-Who-Is-All. Assassin and protector to Ra’s al Ghul himself. You were to be given to him as both tribute and payment, to shield him from harm and carry out his orders. And at your success, my methods would have been taught by the League of Assassins throughout all time. My work, forever, through you, and you threw it all away. You showed your weakness by leaving after one simple assignment, and you showed your worthlessness by joining with Batman. Batman!”

Cassandra could take a lot, but going after Batman was, to her, a bridge too far.

“I… save… lives,” Cassandra said, defiance making all three syllables deeper.

David turned to her, his whole body fury.

“Do not make your shame worse by being proud of it! There’s no pride to be had in being a gun that won’t fire. A bomb that won’t go off. Because that’s what you are, Orphan. You’re a faulty sword. And because you came into their lives, all of them, Bruce and Selina, Stephanie and Tim, all of them will die screaming.”

Cassandra felt hatred course through her body, but it was veined by something else.

Doubt.

Orphan had gone up against David Cain the night before, and she had been destroyed. If that happened, what chance did the rest of them really have?

“But you can save them. And you should be grateful for this opportunity. Because of you, I spent ten years drinking myself into idiocy and getting weaker because I thought I wasted my life trying to make something of you. That is how selfish you are. That’s the pain you cause. But I will allow them to be the last lives you save.”

He folded his arms and looked out at the water.

“The next time we meet, you will come with me willingly. No punches will be thrown by either of us. We will go far away, and your training will continue. And no harm will come to Batman and his little summer camp. Not from me, anyway.”

“We… will… stop you.”

David looked at her again, and a smile broke out across his face.

“If you could see yourself, would you think you were lying?”

Cassandra’s insides went cold. He saw the doubt.

“Oh, do you need more enticement?” David asked. “Is that it? Fine.”

He took off his sunglasses, and seemed to stare directly into her.

“If you don’t come with me,” David said, “then you’ll never know who your mother is.”

Cassandra was not expecting that. She was so busy trying to identify the emotions he was feeling that she almost completely overlooked the fact that she felt sick.
“Not that you’ll be able to do anything about it,” David said. “But at least you’ll know. I’ll give you a day to prepare yourself. We’ll meet on the roof of the Gotham Hilton, and then we’ll leave. Now go. Get out of my sight.”

Cassandra stared at him with some more honest to God hatred, and after a moment she got up and started to walk away.

“Orphan.”

She turned back to look at him.

His sunglasses were back on and he had his hand up.

SNAP!

And every muscle in Cassandra’s body locked up again. There she was, standing again, ever the obedient drone. The wave of self-loathing was thick.

Smiling, David Cain lowered his hand, and looked back out at the water.

Cassandra was trembling a few minutes later when she found Stephanie looking through one of those little coin-operated telescopes at the water’s edge. Cassandra tapped her on the shoulder, and she turned around.

Stephanie looked like she was about to say something, but she stopped. Her expression became both frightened and sad, and the rest of her body oozed sympathy.

Had she known what she looked like, she’d have waited a while, but Cassandra was having trouble reading herself at the moment.

She wrapped her arms around Stephanie, and sobbed her pain, her anguish, her sadness, and her rage into the left shoulder of her puffy winter coat.

They were sitting on the dirty floor of the ferry, leaning against the railing on the return trip to Miagani Island. Cassandra had her knees up with her arms around them. Stephanie was sitting cross-legged. Cassandra had been crying, and because Stephanie apparently liked her so much, she’d been crying as well.

And Cassandra sincerely did not know why.

Why would anyone give a single damn about her?

Maybe they didn’t know what she knew now. That she’d been wasting her time since she had escaped her father’s clutches. She had been given the tools to commit murder, and she had done it. More than that, after eighteen years, she had finally had a conversation with her father. The man responsible for her very life. And he had been so vile as to threaten the lives of children in order to bring her under heel. To pin all of the problems he had had on her.

Cassandra didn’t see how she could ever escape it. How she could even begin to make up for the evil he had been responsible for. How she wouldn’t be doomed to follow in her father’s footsteps. Destiny had been screaming at her ever since the night that she had murdered that man, but she’d been foolish. She hadn’t listened.
She’d been screwing around dressed as a ninja, seeking a grace she would never find under a symbol she didn’t deserve.

How could someone who came from someone as awful as David Cain be the least bit good? Good in the way she understood it to be?

Cassandra chanced a glance at Stephanie, whose eyes were still watery, but there was a look of warmth on her face.

“You,” Stephanie said, “are an average teenage girl.”

Cassandra wondered how so much foolishness could fit in someone so small as Stephanie Brown. It must have showed on her face.

“Doubt me if you want,” Stephanie said. “You know it’s true.”

As Stephanie leaned back on the metal railing next to her, Cassandra reflected that she knew no such thing.

“You’re self-conscious about your appearance,” Stephanie said. “That’s one thing. You wore a suit to a wedding, and you wear sweatshirts in the dead of July to cover yourself up. I mean, it’s not the reason most other teenage girls have for being self-conscious about how they look, but hey, it still counts.”

Cassandra let her breath out through her still-running nose.

“There’s a boy you like,” Stephanie said. “Can’t forget that one.”

Cassandra felt a twinge. She couldn’t bring herself to think about Conner right now. The window into normalcy he represented. A way to fit in. “This is the person I want. I can relate to everyone now, because every one wants some one in some way.” Even in the pit she was in, thinking about him would have constituted being too mean to herself.

“And,” Stephanie said, “you want your dad to love you. Can’t get more teenage girl than that.”

Cassandra closed her eyes. Hearing it in so simple a way opened something else in her, and she felt her eyes burning again.

Stephanie wrapped her left arm around her, and placed Cassandra’s head against her chest.

Cassandra could hear her heart beat.

“Is this a therapy dump, son?”

Jason Todd woke up this morning with a headache from one beer. The picture of the vengeance he needed in his heart, however, had lines of static running across it. That thirst he’d had to kill The Joker wasn’t gone, no, not quite. But it had curled inward. It had grown spikes to defend itself, and Jason did not know what to do. Combined with the raw anger of the fact that Harmonia had lied to him about this, and Jason felt as though he had too much in him, and he was close to melting down like a nuclear reactor.

A memory came to him from long ago. Before he died. Before he tried to steal the hubcaps off of the Batmobile. When he had less years and less anger.

His dad took him to church on Sundays. He didn’t learn anything. He had zoned out until it was
But a lot of people said it worked, and his life from when he became Robin to his death had been filled with coping mechanisms that had all involved violence.

So that’s how he found himself in Holy Family Catholic Church on Founders Island, four blocks away from the Gotham Central construction site.

He had walked in, saw that there were three old ladies scattered about the otherwise empty pews, holding their rosaries and praying to themselves with their eyes closed. He took at least a moment to wonder why this place wasn’t packed to the rafters this close to Christmas.

Jason had gone into the confession booth, and said “Bless me father for I have sinned, it’s been… well… I don’t think I’ve ever confessed.”

“A what?” Jason asked.

“A therapy dump,” the priest said on the other side of the screen. “People come in, they’re not Catholic, and they unload their troubles ‘cause it’s cheaper than therapy.”

Jason pondered for a second. “Would it matter if it was?”

A sigh from the other side of the screen. “No… I guess not.”

He heard a curtain part on the other side of the screen, and a second later, he saw his own curtain part as well.

Standing there was a portly fellow in the black pants, black shirt, and white collar of a Catholic priest. He was bald. Big nose, glasses, skin on the darker side.

“Come on, then.”

Jason removed himself from the confessional and followed the chunky priest who said “I’m Father Miguel, by the way.”

They went through the back door of the church and into the cold.

“Did you need my jacket?” Jason asked, seeing the priest in his shirtsleeves going toe-to-toe with the cold.

But Father Miguel didn’t shiver. He smiled, got a pack of Camel Lights and a cheap Bic lighter out of the pocket of his slacks, and put one of the cigarettes between his lips. “Nah, I’m good.”

Father Miguel lit up, took a drag, and said “I should tell you before we start, being as this isn’t under the blessed sacrament of Confession, you tell me you did something illegal and the cops roll up later asking about some kid in a leather jacket? I’m telling them what you did. So be vague.”

Being as his story involved his own death, and his… whatever the hell Harmonia did, Jason just said “Gotcha.”

“Alright,” Father Miguel said. “You came to unload, so… Unload.”

Jason took a deep breath.

“Once upon a time,” he said “someone did me dirty. Fast-forward to now, and I have the opportunity for revenge. Turns out the guy’s been dead for years.”
“So now you have all these feelings you don’t know what to do with?”

“Right.”

Father Miguel took another drag. “First off,” he said, “revenge isn’t healthy. So there’s that.”

Jason nodded. He expected that. He wondered if Batman and a man of the cloth got into a self-righteous piety-off, who would win?

Father Miguel shrugged. “But that’s not gonna help you is it? Lemme ask you something, you listen to Dylan?”

“Dylan?”


“Can’t say that I do,” Jason said in reply.

Father Miguel took another drag. “Love and Theft. His best album. More people would say Blood on the Tracks or Blonde on Blonde, but that’s okay, I’ve been wrong on occasion too. That album came out on September Eleventh, 2001, so I can safely say that the album was the most conventionally pleasant thing that happened that day… Unless you’re a Jay-Z fan. The Blueprint came out that day too.”

Another drag. “On Love and Theft is this song called Summer Days, Summer Nights. There’s this part where Dylan sings ‘They say you can’t repeat the past, I said ‘You can’t? What do you mean you can’t? Of course you can?’’ Know what I got from that?”


“That time travel’s real,” Father Miguel said after he took another puff. “And I don’t mean in a literal way, either, like how The Flash does it. Or that other guy, what’s-his-balls, Buster Green?”

“Booster Gold.”

“Right,” Father Miguel said. “We’re talking metaphorically. We go back in time all the time. We find ourselves in the same situations over and over again, but the trick of it, the painful part of it, is that we’re never in the same exact circumstances. We’re just in different positions over and over again.”

Another drag, and Father Miguel turned to him and looked him in the eye.

“If this guy did you dirty, and you find yourself in the position to dirty unto others? I don’t need to be a priest to tell you not to do that.”

Jason nodded.

“But if you’re a third party, and you see the person you were with a different name in the exact same situation? You help. You guide them in the way they need to go. Therapy’s great, it really is. Medication too. But breaking a pattern with your own two hands is an amazing way to free yourself. Even if it’s just a little bit. Even if it only takes and lasts a second. You understand?”

Jason turned Father Miguel’s words over in his head a moment. “I think so.”

“I guess that’s all anyone can hope for,” Father Miguel said, before using his cigarette to make a cross shape at him.

Jason nodded, and walked back into the church.

He was halfway down the aisle between the pews, making his way to the front door when it came to him.

Jason Todd couldn’t kill The Joker.

Jason Todd couldn’t go back in time to save *himself* from The Joker.

But Jason Todd *could* save Tim Drake from himself.
Chapter 14: Let it Bleed

“So what did you tell your parents?” Bruce asked.

Bruce and Tim were at the Batcomputer in the Batcave, with a map of Gotham City taking up the screen. Tim was in the chair. Bruce was standing next to him.

Tim looked confused for a second, before he realized what he was talking about. “Oh,” he said, pointing at his nose. “I told them I got mugged.”

“I’d have gone with bike wreck,” Bruce said.

“You don’t have my parents,” said Tim. “If I said I got in a bike wreck, they’d have taken away my bike. I’d have had to take the bus here.”

Most people were reticent when talking to Bruce about their parents for obvious reasons, but Tim just dove right in.

So yeah, Bruce liked Tim.

“Won’t they get suspicious when there’s no police report?” Bruce asked.

“I told them I fought the muggers off and patched myself up. If they didn’t take anything, why file?”

“And that you broke your nose but no blood was on your street clothes?”

“I’m the detective,” Tim said. “Not my parents.”

Bruce nodded. “You said you have a theory.”

“I do,” Tim said. He brought up a newspaper headline on the Batcomputer, whose headline read:

“KHAHNDACIQI DELEGATION HEADED FOR GOTHAM.”

“Cain, One, and Two are trying to sow chaos,” Tim said. “This sloppy mob war that was over in an instant with a clear winner is proof of that. Why they’re screwing with us, I don’t know, but they are screwing with us, and it’s up to us to work where they go, what they do, and try to keep damage to an absolute minimum.”

“And you think that Kahndaqi delegation coming to Gotham is the next stop?”

“I do,” Tim said. He hit a couple of keys, and brought up a picture of a man of middle-eastern descent, with a bald head and an impossibly bright smile. But if one was shaking hands with Beyonce in a photo, Bruce supposed anyone would smile that bright.

Beyonce is a thing people are into, right?

“Muhammad bin Sayel,” Tim said. “Rockstar diplomat straight out of Kahndaq, touring the major cities of the United States trying to soften his country’s image enough to get some trade deals going.”
Bruce nodded. “I suppose it’s no small wonder that a country would enter a tech slump when it’s being run by an iron-fisted supervillain dictator like Black Adam.”

“Right,” Tim said. “Why complain when Black Adam can provide? But it’s not as though Black Adam knows how to make a plasma screen TV or a Nintendo Switch. When a country gets that insulated, they stagnate. Black Adam sent him over to make nice.”

Tim leaned back in the chair and scratched his chin in apparent confusion.

“What is it?” Bruce asked.

“What stumps me,” Tim said, “is that if bin Sayel is in Gotham trying to get American tech jobs into Kahndaq, then… why isn’t he talking to Bruce Wayne?”

“I know why,” Bruce said. “It’s because I’m married.”

Tim looked at Bruce, even more confused.

Bruce sighed. “If you get what’s essentially furlough from a brutal authoritarian regime, and you go to a country like America, you’re going to want to get your secular American decadence on. Of the people anyone would want to get drunk with, do drugs with, go to strip clubs with, a happily married man would be low on the list. Guy’s getting his picture taken with Beyonce. No deals are getting made here, he just wants to show the world that the people of Kahndaq are human, which would make Black Adam look nicer than he actually is. The actual serious stuff is getting saved for a return trip.”

“That does make sense,” Tim said. “But in any event, bin Sayel and his entourage touched down at Gotham International this morning. He’s talking to Mayor Bardolo this afternoon, and if bin Sayel’s the adorable party animal he theoretically wants to be seen as, he’s gonna be painting the town red tonight.”

“David Cain’s an assassin,” Bruce said. “And bin Sayel does seem to be a big target.”

Tim nodded. “So… Stakeout?”

Bruce nodded as his phone started vibrating. His work phone. He fished it out of the front pocket of his loose-fitting jeans, and saw that it was Barbara.

He clicked on the screen, and said “Hel--”

“She’s calling your bluff,” Barbara said, cutting him off.

“What?”

“Cass,” Barbara said. “She’s calling your bluff. She went to see Cain today, and she came back and got her Orphan uniform. Before they left again, Steph said they were going to the manor so Cass could hand in her Orphan uniform to you personally. So yeah, she’s calling your bluff.”

Bruce sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand. Cassandra Cain had defied him yet again, but at least she was willing to pay the consequences for that action.

Which was admirable.

“Barbara,” Bruce said. “I wasn’t bluffing.”

A moment of silence from Barbara that screamed how stunned it was.
“You… You’re not actually casting her out, are you?”

“Let me handle it,” Bruce said, and hung up. Barbara wouldn’t like that. He knew she’d immediately call back, more angry than a wet hen.

So he took the battery out of his phone.

He looked over at Tim, who saw this and went pale in response.

“I know someone’s in trouble,” Tim said. “I’m just… not sure who, yet.”

Bruce was still in the Batcave when Cassandra arrived. Alfred stepped off the elevator to tell him that Cass and Steph were waiting upstairs.

On the ground floor, he found Cass sitting on the white double chaise lounge in the salon. Stephanie was standing to the right of her… and Cullen Row was standing to the left. He was dressed in a green flannel button-up and jeans. Cullen was bowing low, and holding out a can of Sprite to Cass.

“Aperitif, madam?”

Cullen was still apparently on his butler kick that Alfred had told him about the night before.

Cassandra took the can of Sprite, and looked at Bruce in confusion.

“Who is this?” Stephanie asked Bruce, before she turned to Cullen. “Who are you?”

“This is Cullen Row,” Bruce said. “Bluebird’s brother. He’ll be joining ops for the foreseeable future.”

Cullen looked at Bruce and smiled. “I’ll be joining ops?”

“If you wanted to sit around and do nothing,” Bruce said, “you wouldn’t be pretending to be a butler. Now go ruin your mind with video games like a normal kid.”

“You have video games here too?”

“I asked Selina to convince him that having a few consoles in the house would relieve stress among us young’uns,” Stephanie said. “Go upstairs, I’ll hook you up.”

“Tight,” Cullen said, and left the salon.

Stephanie stayed behind.

“Are you sure you’re gonna be alright?” she asked Cassandra, as though Bruce were some wild beast that Cassandra was going to attempt to tame with no experience whatsoever.

Cassandra nodded.

Stephanie looked at Cassandra, and then at Bruce, before looking back at Cass. She nodded in return.

Neither Bruce nor Cassandra said anything for a bit after Stephanie left. Cassandra was still holding the can of Sprite out in front of her as though it were a baggie filled with toxic waste.

“Don’t like Sprite?” Bruce asked.
Cassandra shook her head.

“Here,” Bruce said. “I’ll take it.”

Cassandra handed the can of Sprite to Bruce, who opened it and took a sip as he sat down on the double chaise next to her.

It was something to do with his hands, and it bought him some time because he had no idea what to say right now.

He decided to start simple.

“So you went to see your father again.” It wasn’t a question. It wasn’t like Cassandra wouldn’t know that he knew.

Cassandra looked down at her sneakers, and nodded.

“Knowing what would happen if you did.”

She was still looking down, but Cassandra sat straight up, and lightly kicked the black canvas duffle bag at her feet. The one presumably containing her Orphan outfit.

“But you don’t have any fresh bruises,” Bruce said, “so I’m guessing it was just a conversation that you two had.”

Cassandra nodded again.

Batman had had his fair share of bad guys wanting to have a civil conversation before the next outbreak of horror they were planning. All of them pretending to be Robert DeNiro in *Heat*.

“I told you,” Bruce said, “not to take this personally. Nothing good comes from taking the bad guys personally.”

Cassandra nodded yet again, and tried to bring her chin down to her chest, trying to hide whatever weakness she had from him.

Bruce sighed.

“But… this is your father. This was going to be personal no matter what happens.”

Cassandra didn’t move. Bruce took another sip of Sprite, before he set the can down on the marble floor between his feet. He folded his hands between his knees, not knowing where to start.

No.

*You know exactly where to start.*

*You just don’t want to do it.*

Bruce took a deep breath. Then another. And said:

“I’m sorry.”

It got Cassandra to stop looking at her feet. She looked at Bruce as though he’d just admitted to having some insane disease with a weird name. Like “*Projectile Leprosy.*”
“I… misread the situation,” Bruce said. “And I compounded it poorly by dressing up as Batman, using how you feel about all of this against you, as though you were a criminal and not a partner. I could tell you that I had a rough night. I could tell you that my own wife took a swing at me and I wasn’t in the best headspace because of that. But those are just excuses. If they won’t fly with me, they really shouldn’t fly with you. If there were anything to forgive, it’s well past being forgiven, so… I’m sorry.”

Cassandra opened her mouth, then closed it.

And now it was Bruce’s turn to look at his feet. He felt something within him that he thought would be better served out in the open. He didn’t want to dump his feelings all over Cassandra. He didn’t want to have feelings at all.

But… at the very least, he knew Cassandra wouldn’t say anything in response.

“It’s just… I’ve been on this path since I was eight years old. I’ve given up a lot to do this. For all the reputation Bruce Wayne has as a playboy, I didn’t have my first kiss until I was eighteen, and that’s just one example… And please don’t tell Selina that. I love her, but she has a hard time with knowing when good natured teasing stops.”

Bruce shook his head. “I’m getting off track. I’ve sacrificed so much to be Batman that the simple things others learned when they were a hell of a lot younger than I am now are still so alien to me. And I just can’t… can’t…”

He finally looked at Cass, who was hanging on every word. The last word he was going to say was cheesy. And a little ham-fisted, considering to whom he was speaking. But it was the only one that worked.

“...communicate,” Bruce finally said.

Cassandra’s expression softened.

Was this what common ground looked like?

Bruce’s first instinct was to give Cassandra a hug, but that seemed inappropriate, akin to using a nuke to take out an anthill, considering how well they knew each other. A pat on the shoulder felt too condescending.

Finally, Bruce Wayne held out his fist.

And Cassandra Cain bumped it.

“I talked to your father last night,” Bruce said. “And there are few things I want in this life more than to soundly and thoroughly kick his ass. But you know what one of those things is?”

“What?” Cassandra asked, the first word he’d heard her say today.

“To watch you kick his ass.”

Cassandra smiled.

“But I know,” Bruce said, “if I tried to steer you toward that, if I tried to steer you toward a specific way of dealing with him, then that would make this about me and not about you. And that can’t happen.”
Bruce pivoted on the chaise, turning his whole body toward her.

“Whatever play you make,” Bruce said, “I’ll back it. Just… please don’t do it alone. You have a whole team working with you. Having someone help you and watch out for you is the whole purpose.”

Cassandra blinked, and looked at the duffel bag at her feet. Then she looked back at him.

“Yes,” Bruce said. “You’re still Orphan. We have a stakeout tonight, and we need as many hands on deck as humanly possible.”

Most people Bruce knew, upon hearing splendid news, jumped up and down, hollered, or at least smiled. But there was a peculiar strain of people Bruce had observed, that just slumped and sighed in relief at having one less thing to worry about.

Cassandra was the latter.

“Hold that thought,” Bruce said.

He stood up. He fished his phone out of the right pocket of his jeans, and the battery out of the left.

Once everything was up and running, he saw that Barbara had left four messages. He’d be sure to delete those later. No doubt they were littered with profanities and things said in the heat of the moment that she wouldn’t mean later.

He browsed through his contacts until he found the one he wanted.

“Hello?” Harper asked.

“Where are you?” Bruce asked.

“Upstairs,” Harper said, “watching Cullen try to play Resident Evil 2 without wetting himself.”

In the background, he could hear Cullen yell to Harper “Shut your dirty whore mouth!”

“Could you come down to the salon, please?” Bruce asked.

A moment of silence, before Harper asked “This place has a nail salon too?”

“It’s not… Just have Steph walk you down. She’ll know where I am.”

Bruce hung up, and looked down at Cassandra.

“It’ll be a minute.”

The minute passed, and Stephanie and Harper walked into the salon.

“Everything good?” Stephanie asked Cassandra.

Cassandra gave a thumbs up in reply.

“I don’t know if you’ve been formally introduced,” Bruce said. “Cassandra, this is Harper Row. Codename: ‘Bluebird.’ And Harper, this is Cassandra Cain. Codename: ‘Orphan.’”

After she and Cassandra had shaken hands, Harper said “Yeah, Tim told me about you. Is it true that you could put a platoon of Navy Seals in the hospital using nothing but your pinky toe?”
Cassandra scrunched up her face, thinking about this for a moment, before nodding in the affirmative.

“Rad…”

“Harper’s new to this,” Bruce said, “and I need someone to assess her fighting skills. Think you can tell me if she’s any good or not?”

“Yes,” Cassandra said.

“Just don’t hit her in the face,” Bruce said. “She was concussed last night, and now she has staples in the back of her head.”

“Okay,” said Cassandra.

“Can I hit her in the face, though?”

Stephanie looked at Harper.

And then she started laughing.

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**NATIONAL CITY**

Batwoman and Wonder Woman had arrived at the address for Kara Danvers’ apartment roughly half an hour after their *tete-a-tete* with Demeter. Apparently the salary for a reporter at Catco Worldwide was enough for Kara to have a spacious apartment with a guest room.

Diana and Kate stayed awake long enough to go over the basics of the whole Konstantin Fotos Blade of Resurrection affair with Kara, before they all went to bed. Diana took the guest room and Kate, being the shorter of the two, took the living room couch.

Kate had arisen shortly after Kara had left for work, but Diana slept… and slept… and slept all day.

Thinking about it, Kate supposed she couldn’t really blame her. She was coming off of a gunshot wound to the chest and a collapsed lung. That would tucker out just about anyone.

Kate cleaned up around the apartment a little while Diana was in her light coma, trying to leave it a better place than when she found it, but there wasn’t that much to clean. Apart from that, she raided the fridge (for which she would leave three c-notes on the kitchen counter) and watched the Food Network.

It was about noon when Kara called Kate’s phone. Miss Danvers had been doing a little investigating on their behalf.

A cursory search revealed that Konstantin Fotos was CEO of a newly started construction outfit called Harmony Enterprises. And this thread of inquiry led to two very interesting tidbits of information.

The first was that there was something arriving on a freighter from Crete at National City Harbor addressed to Harmony Enterprises this very evening.

The second was that the address for Harmony Enterprises wasn’t in an office building. It was at a residence in Ysbeau Springs, near the outskirts of National City.

When Diana finally awoke about ninety minutes before sundown, emerging freshly showered and
wearing a white bathrobe from the guest room, Kate relayed this information, and they left Kara’s apartment forty minutes later.

A word, before this narrative continues, about Ysbeau Springs.

There are no springs in Ysbeau Springs.

What there were plenty of, however, were what were both colloquially and pejoratively referred to as “McMansions.” Decently spacious, cheaply constructed, and ugly enough to set Frank Lloyd Wright spinning in his grave at such an absurd rate of speed that the centrifugal force could open a portal in time, these McMansions were only considered fancy or decadent by those who had recently left dire means indeed.

The thing about McMansions is that they aren’t meant to be inhabited by one owner for any appreciable length of time. Either the owners get rich instead of kinda-rich and they move into bigger houses that don’t look like someone set up Lincoln Logs around a Great Dane turd, or they get poorer all of a sudden, and have to move back to their crappy downtown condos.

However, the relatively rapid rate of turnover for these monstrosities did attract one very particular breed of National City citizen.

Those involved in illegal narcotics.

These McMansions were rarely used as dens, no, they were usually squatted in by outfits to be used as labs and growhouses. The problem here being that those poor, doomed, aesthetically-challenged souls who actually came to Ysbeau Springs to live in Ysbeau Springs knew what was going on and did not want to see their property values plummet. Enough complaining at city council meetings got Ysbeau Springs a police presence. Nothing too ostentatious, mind, just a squad car that did a circuit every forty-five minutes. The damnedest thing, though: No matter what these cops found on their patrols, they couldn’t get any judges to sign probable cause search warrants.

Well, that was a nifty little quirk about National City judges: if you were a drug kingpin, they sure were affordable!

Ysbeau Springs was the most expensive Skid Row in America. Or at the very least, the most expensive one on the west coast.

And so it was on this balmy December evening in National City, California, that Batwoman and Wonder Woman found themselves among the trees between houses in Ysbeau Springs, trying to find out how many people were inside 113 Clemente Boulevard, which was the address listed for Konstantin Fotos’ Harmony Enterprises.

Batwoman was dressed as Batwoman.

Wonder Woman was… not dressed as Wonder Woman.

Wonder Woman was dressed in black cargo pants and black combat boots with a black long-sleeved shirt.

And she was grinning broadly.

“This is exciting,” she said softly.

Batwoman brought up the magnifying lenses in her cowl and looked at her.
“This is a stakeout,” Batwoman said. “This is the opposite of exciting.”

“But I don’t normally get to go on stakeouts,” Wonder Woman said. “I am usually the blunt force in such instances, always kicking down doors and busting down walls. I never get called upon to be sneaky and stealthy. The change of pace is refreshing.”

Batwoman brought her lenses back down, and there was some silence after that.

“Would you like to talk about it?” Diana asked.

“How about it?”

“You know what,” Wonder Woman said. “You said we’d talk about it later. Now is later.”

“Now is not a good time.”

“True,” Wonder Woman said. “But I’ve worked with your cousin for over a decade. And if you are even the remotest bit like him, you will put work between yourself and everyone around you in order to avoid talking about anything.”

“I heard rumors on the internet back in the day,” Batwoman said. “About you and Batman.”

“Nothing happened,” Wonder Woman said, “and I apparently have a type. Stop avoiding the subject.”

Batwoman sighed. Wonder Woman scooted closer to her.

“When you said we were on a date, you had this look of betrayal on your face,” Wonder Woman said. “As though I had attacked you while your back was turned.”

“You did,” Batwoman said.

Wonder Woman looked taken aback by this, and Batwoman immediately felt guilty.

She was unable to successfully put on The Kate Kane Advertisement with Wonder Woman. Just thinking about it felt like bringing a gun to a child’s ballet recital. Working to deceive Diana, even minimally, made her feel dirty. How on Earth could Diana project so much innocence and light while being built like a linebacker and able to beat a gorilla in a fistfight? Literally. Wonder Woman beat Gorilla Grodd in a fistfight six months ago, and in Batwoman’s estimation, it was as awesome as it sounded.

And this wasn’t even to mention the fact that the task ahead of her was truly unenviable.

She was going to have to turn Wonder Woman down.

“It’s just…”

“Just what?” Wonder Woman asked.

Batwoman sighed again. “When I go out on a date, there’s a certain… version of myself that I’d like to be. I wasn’t that version last night, and I felt ambushed.”

Wonder Woman blinked. “May I ask you a question?”

“You just did.”
“May I ask you… three questions?”

“You j… Alright.”

“When it comes to as high a stake as romance, why do you insist on being a less authentic version of yourself?” Wonder Woman asked.

Batwoman looked at her in what could only be called dull shock.

“You’re asking a person wearing a mask why they can’t be more genuine. You do realize that, right”

Wonder Woman opened her mouth to say something before she gave up, rolled her eyes, and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Look,” Batwoman said. “I’m trying to figure out how many people are in this house so I can deal with them effectively. Deadshot put a hole in my cape and I only brought the one costume, so it’s not as though I can just glide in and catch them all by surprise, so do you mind?”

Batwoman brought the lenses of her cowl back down and switched them to thermal. She couldn’t get a reading, though. The thermals did have problems with certain cheaper building insulation materials, so she figured that had to be it.

Wonder Woman, on the other hand, perked up.

“Actually,” she said, “I think I might be able to help with that.”

Wonder Woman reached out with her right hand, and rubbed her thumb, forefinger and middle finger together.

From a bush on the property line emerged a small black… something that trotted toward them.

As it got closer, Batwoman saw that it was a cat who wouldn’t have been more than a year old.

The cat got close to Wonder Woman, and she picked it up. She put her mouth to its ear, and then put the cat up to the side of her face as it purred and cuddled.

It almost looked as though…

*Of course.*

*Of course Wonder Woman can talk to animals.*

*BecauseshesWonder Woman, and cartoon bluebirds probably dressed her this morning.*

Wonder Woman put the cat back down and said “There are usually nine people in the house.”

“And, uh… And how does Salem know this?”

“Because they feed him,” Wonder Woman said.

“Alright,” Batwoman said. “I’m gonna go do recon.”

“And what do I do?”

“Stay out here in case recon goes south. Ideally, I’d like to get the Blade of Resurrection without
anyone noticing it’s gone, but if I can’t, I need you out here.”

Wonder Woman folded her arms, and said “Batman tries to protect me like this, too.”

“Who said anything about protecting you?” Batwoman asked. “If Fotos catches wind of us, he’s gonna make a break for it out of the house. Last time I checked, you can fly and he can’t.”

“Suuuure.”

Batwoman groaned. “Why are you doing this?”

Wonder Woman smiled. “Because I wish to know if one as pale as you can blush.”

Batwoman wanted to say something, but she opted instead to glower and make her way toward the house without another word.

Near-silently, Batwoman climbed the wrought iron fence around the house, and landed in the backyard next to the pool. She crouched, and snuck along the pool’s edge.

The lights were off on the pool. The lights were off everywhere in the house, save for the main living room, which was right next to the pool itself. Meaning that all nine were most likely in that room.

Which gave Batwoman an idea.

Grapnel up to the second floor and drop a sleeping gas pellet into one of the air vents. The gas would filter downward, everyone in the living room would be out like a light, and Batwoman would be free to search the house for the Blade of Resurrection until they came to.

Batwoman reached down to her utility belt for her grapnel gun and--

Click-click.

The sound of a revolver cocking.

A male voice came from behind her.

“I came out here to feed a stray cat,” the goon said. “Did think I’d find a stray b--”

Immediately, Batwoman rose to her feet and twirled. With her left hand, she knocked the gun out of his hand, and with her right she caught him dead across the face.

There were now two problems.

The first was that the gun flew from his hand, hit the concrete edge of the pool and went off, the bullet firing into the water, and causing a loud splash. Thus being the noisiest possible solution to the stealth problem.

The second was that the guy didn’t go down.

He wrapped Batwoman in a football tackle, and drove her through the sliding glass door.

The glass shattered, and Batwoman landed on her back in the living room… with four more guys standing over her, completely surprised.

One of which was Konstantin Fotos, who immediately ran from the room, screaming “STELIO!
Batwoman drove an elbow into the head of the guy on top of her, and he immediately ragdolled.

She rolled him over onto his back, with her on top of him. She got her grapnel gun from her utility belt and fired.

The hook dug its way into a cheap upholstered chair, and Batwoman yanked it toward her. The chair made contact with the back of the right knee of one of the Order of Nemesis goons, and he took a spill to the carpet. Making the fight, at least temporarily, two on one.

She could work with that.

Batwoman got to her feet just as the goon on the right took a swing at her. She ducked, and brought her right into the guy’s ribcage, and she could have sworn she heard something break in his chest.

As he doubled over and groaned, the second goon came up with a pool cue from the pool table and took a swing. He was faster than he looked, because the cue snapped across the left side of her cowl.

It didn’t hurt that much, as the cowl was made from some kind of hard to pronounce micropolymer courtesy of Lucius Fox, but her ears started ringing and she saw stars for a second.

She stumbled back into the pool table itself, and she saw the second goon, with half of a pool cue in each hand, advance on her.

He swung with the thick end of the cue, and Batwoman ducked it. He swung with the thin end, and Batwoman darted to the side. While he was the slightest bit off balance, Batwoman capitalized. She grabbed his head with both hands, and slammed it into the wooden edge of the pool table. He was out before he hit the ground.

The third goon, the one who was knocked over by the chair at the beginning of the fight, ran toward her. She backed into the pool table again, and started grabbing behind her with both hands.

Her right hand clutched the two ball, and her left hand grabbed the ten ball. Both were made of phenolic resin, which made them about as hard as ivory.

Batwoman brought the pool balls down on either side of the third goon’s face. His jaw sundered, and he sprayed a fountain of blood and teeth all over the front of Batwoman’s armor.

She stepped over the third goon (who was holding his face and moaning softly to himself), and started making her way to the alcove through which Fotos had made his hasty exit.

Batwoman stopped. The fact that the living room was carpeted was all that stopped her red boots from making screeching tire noises straight out of a cartoon.

There was a man in the doorway. Black shoes, black slacks, black jacket, black turtleneck. He was dark complected with a black bowl-cut and dead brown eyes.

And he was seven feet tall.

All that stood between Batwoman and this behemoth was a gray couch.

“Who are you?” Batwoman asked.

The monster puffed himself up and said “I am Stelio.”
Batwoman blinked. “You know, I’ve been tall for a girl all my life, so I’ve been getting the question I’m about to ask you for a long time… How’s the weather up there?”

Stelio glared at her, and kicked the couch.

Two things became immediately apparent to Batwoman.

The first was that the couch was most likely the best constructed thing in the room, because it didn’t break on contact with Stelio’s foot.

The second was that Stelio was stronger than an entire herd of bulls, because the couch actually flew at her.

Being as she wasn’t prepared for it (as she didn’t think it was possible), Batwoman didn’t have time to put her arms up to protect herself. It made contact with her ribcage, and Batwoman was most likely the only thing that stopped the damn thing from destroying the opposite wall. She flew into the entertainment center, destroying the forty-inch plasma screen, and dropped in a heap on the floor, her breath having left her.

Batwoman got to one knee, trying to get her breath back, when Stelio’s hand wrapped around her throat. He brought her up, unable to breathe, so that her head was above his.

She loaded her right hand, and let off as hard a shot as she could manage into the right side of his face.

His lip split.

A little.

Stelio shook his head and grinned, before throwing her vertically up toward the sky by her throat.

Batwoman’s head made hard contact with the ceiling, and her neck bent at a harsh angle before gravity reasserted itself, and she began plummeting back to the floor. Batwoman was convinced that if she didn’t have reinforced armor around her neck, then that would have been the end of her.

She landed on the floor, groaned, and grabbed the back of her neck. Stelio kicked her toward the alcove, robbing her of the breath she tried so damned hard to get back.

Batwoman crawled into the alcove, as her breath came back to her lungs in a ragged, high-pitched gasp. The carpet of the living room ended, and the marble floor of the main hallway began. She got to her feet and brought her fists up.

Stelio was fast, too, because he easily side-stepped her right fist.

He wrapped his left hand around Batwoman’s throat, and balled up his meaty right fist.

THWACK!

Batwoman’s field of vision was briefly replaced by pure whiteness.

THWACK!

The nose of Batwoman’s hard-to-pronounce micropolymer cowl snapped and flew off.

THWACK!
Math? What the fuck is math?

Batwoman went completely limp, and Stelio threw her further into the hallway like the wadded-up newspaper that she felt like.

She landed hard on her left shoulder and rolled a couple of times, landing in the darkened main foyer next to the front door. Batwoman spat blood out of her mouth, inhaled through her nose, got blood in her mouth from her newly-bruised nasal cavity, and spat that out too.

Batwoman looked up as Stelio advanced. Her vision cleared, and she saw, twenty feet above her, a cheap-looking brass chandelier.

Jackpot.

She slowly got to her feet as Stelio slowly walked to her, a smile on his face.

“If you were wondering how that mask of yours would taste,” Stelio said, “you’ll find out in about five seconds.”

Batwoman backed up.

“I’m gonna kill me my very own Gotham City Bat,” Stelio said. “Scared?”

“Not really.”

“Brave?” Stelios asked.

And he’ll be where I need him to be... now!

“Smart,” Batwoman said.

She reached for her utility belt, came up with an explosive Batarang, and flung it to the ceiling. Then she crouched down, and put her hands behind her head.

BOOM!

A second of weighty silence.

CRASH!

Batwoman opened her eyes, and looked at the floor in front of her.

Stelio was on the ground with his eyes closed, the warped metal and shattered glass of the chandelier (which the explosive Batarang tore out of the ceiling) all about him. Batwoman thought for a moment to check his pulse, but decided against it.

A chandelier wouldn’t take him out.

A missile strike wouldn’t take him out.

Batwoman rose to her feet just as she heard:

“Andem...”

Batwoman’s head snapped to the right.
According to the stray cat that Wonder Woman had… spoken to, there were nine people inside the house. The four goons plus Fotos and Stelio made six.

And now, the three remaining goons from the Order of Nemesis were just standing there, each with drawn guns and dropped jaws.

Batwoman groaned. “You’re not just gonna shoot me after I went through all that, are you?”

The one in the middle spoke up.

“Um… Yeah, we totally are… but you taking out Stelio like that was pretty badass, I’m not gonna lie.”

They began to raise their guns. The spikes on the underside of Batwoman’s gauntlets acted as projectiles, so it was a matter of who drew f--

Ding-Dong!

The doorbell rang. And all four of them looked very confused. They stood there in silence until…

Ding-Dong!

There it went again.

The goon in the middle looked at the goon on the right.

“You gonna answer that?”

“Fuck no, I’m not gonna answer that! We’re gonna shoot her.”

The goon on the left said “It could be the cops. It’s not wise to shoot someone on the other side of the door from the cops.”

“It’s not the cops.”

“How would you know,” asked the goon in the middle, “unless you answered the door?”

The goon on the right sighed. “Fine. I’ll answer the door.”

The goon on the right walked to the door, his gun behind his back, and looked through the peephole.

CRASH!

To say that the door came off of its hinges would be inaccurate. The more concise description would be that the doorframe (with the door still attached and locked) came out of the front of the house.

The poor goon on the right flew back along with it, colliding with the other two goons until all three were sandwiched between the door and the far wall. The door fell to the floor, and the three goons followed less than a second after.

That, Batwoman thought, is one hell of a way to pick up a spare.

Batwoman looked at the hole in the front of the house, peered through the plaster dust…

…and saw Wonder Woman putting her foot back down on the porch.

She saw Batwoman, and her face instantly snapped from righteousness to concern.
“Are you alright?”

No.

“Yeah,” Batwoman said. “I’ll be fine.”

Wonder Woman walked in. “Are you sure?” She pointed to the front of Batwoman’s chest and said “Please tell me that does not belong to you.”

Batwoman’s first thought was that if her breasts did not, in fact, belong to her, then who the hell did she steal them from? It was only when she looked down that she saw a bloody tooth from the fellow that she had performed pool ball dentistry upon stuck to her red Bat insignia that she got what was up.

“No,” Batwoman said. “It belongs to someone else.”

“Thank Hera.”

“Fotos escaped.”

Wonder Woman smirked. “Yes… About that.”

Wonder Woman and Batwoman walked to the hole in the front of the house, and looked through it to the driveway.

Konstantin Fotos was tied up with the Lasso of Truth, and he was sitting cross-legged and dazed against what used to be a black Nissan four-door.

Batwoman put on her detective hat. She deduced that Fotos made a break for it in the car. Wonder Woman stopped him on the road, and destroyed the entire front half of the vehicle, preventing his escape. The tire skids on the driveway behind the car told her that Wonder Woman had drug it back.

Wonder Woman reached to the waist of her black cargo pants, and pulled off a knife in a brand new leather sheath. The handle of the knife appeared to be ancient bone, and encrusted in emeralds.

The Blade of Resurrection.

“And I even found time to compel Mister Fotos to rescind the two million dollar contract on my life,” Wonder Woman said.

“That’s great.”

“Now what?”

“Now,” Batwoman said, “I head back to Gotham. Need a lift?”

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**NATIONAL CITY HARBOR, IN THE CARGO HOLD OF THE CHARON**

The *Charon* had departed from Crete with precious cargo in its hold.

An ancient Grecian urn full of dust, which Harmonia knew was all that remained of Nemesis, the Goddess of Grudges, Blood Feuds, and the Unjustly Slain.

And tonight, Konstantin Fotos was to bring her the Blade of Resurrection, and she would bring Nemesis back to life, binding her very soul to her service.
That wasn’t going to happen.

Harmonia, standing in this nearly-empty cargo hold, knew that Fotos had failed. That Batwoman and the Clay Abomination had foiled him, and had taken the Blade.

But the Blade of Resurrection… wasn’t the only way to bring Nemesis back.

There was another way, and Harmonia dreaded it to the very core of her being. She was never the most powerful Goddess in the first place, and she was still recovering from bringing One and Two into being. Not to mention the constant effort it took to drown out the whispers that had almost driven her mad her entire existence. But this had to be done.

If she could not have harmony… then she would have silence.

There were only a few crates in the Charon’s cargo bay, as well as one small box, which Harmonia had opened.

In her hands, she held the urn containing the remnants of Nemesis. It was brown, and old, and fragile.

She threw it on the metal floor, the gray dust within scattering amongst the shattered ceramic.

Harmonia held out her hands, and closed her eyes.

She reached out with her power, envisioning invisible tendrils of it swirling the dust upon the floor like a sandstorm. She would take Nemesis into herself, absorb her power, lock away her consciousness in the furthest, most remote parts of her mind. If she could not compel a resurrected Nemesis to use The Stone, then she would just have to use it herself.

Harmonia could almost feel it. Almost feel a drip-feed of an ancient consciousness trickle into her mind’s eye. Something weak. Something easily controllable.

And then it all went wrong.

It happened with the suddenness of a lightning strike. Her entire mind went… green. Her motor functions faltered. And beyond the beyond, she could hear a high voice. One she hadn’t heard in three thousand years.

“Hello, Harmonia.”

Harmonia screamed.

Nothing came out.

Her lips didn’t even move…

Green eyes that were blue a second ago surveyed their surroundings.

She was shorter than She used to be.

Harmonia had always been an idiot. She remembered her carrying herself as though she were about to snap under some invisible weight. She was brittle.

Not like Her, oh no, She was strong. Terrifying and formidable even after three thousand years dead.
She opened Her mind and used her divine power to absorb the three thousand years of history She had been denied.

And it was good.

Base violence, genocide, cruelty, murder, and this lovely recent phenomena called “The Supervillain.” Unique individuals (who would have named her Patron three millennia ago) that thought big and killed innocents by the score.

And She knew exactly where Her Stone was.

“Well,” Nemesis said with Harmonia’s lips, wrapping the words around Harmonia’s weird, small teeth. “It seems I’ve arrived in the fun century…”

At this particular moment, only two people knew that Harmonia’s attempt to resurrect Nemesis had backfired, resulting in Nemesis taking over Harmonia’s body.

They were across the street from National City Harbor, on the top level of a parking garage.

“I take it this is bad,” Miss Gsptlsnz said.

Mister Mxyzptlk looked up at her in shock. If he’d more than the two tufts of hair left, he’d have pulled them out in animated despair.

“YA THINK?”

Chapter End Notes

Hey gang.

I’ve stumbled onto some gold with the next chapter, and gold takes time. The next chapter will be up and running on Monday, July 22, 2019.

See you then.
Chapter 15: No Security

A few hours ago, Cassandra Cain had been tasked with assessing the fighting skills of Harper Row.

For thirty minutes down in the Batcave, Harper unloaded her full arsenal on Cassandra. But much like Tim and Steph (and Selina and Kate, for that matter), Harper couldn’t lay so much as a finger on her. Her kicks were swift and her reach was impressive for someone her size, but better than Harper Row had tried and failed.

“Well?” Bruce asked after the session had ended. “What do you think?”

Cassandra shrugged her shoulders, and gave a thumbs up.

“Gee, thanks,” said Harper, sweat pouring down her forehead.

“We break for a half an hour,” Bruce said, “then we go again.”

Cassandra (who hadn’t broken a sweat during Harper’s attempted onslaught) had just come in from a brief and lonely constitutional around the Wayne Manor grounds to see Barbara in the main hall, right in Bruce’s face.

Babs was under the impression that Bruce had fired Cassandra, only to be assuaged of this assumption by Bruce himself, who told her that not only was Cassandra still Orphan, but she was going to be on-hand for the stakeout tonight.

Bruce offered Barbara a spot in the stakeout team as well, and she accepted, as her fellow Birds of Prey were on their way back from their mission in Monaco, and Dick had gone back to Bludhaven.

Babs joined the audience of Bruce, Selina, Tim, Stephanie, Cullen, and Alfred down in the Batcave for when the training session between Cassandra and Harper reconvened.

“Alright,” Bruce said. “Harper, Cassandra’s going to try to incapacitate you. Defend yourself. Cassandra, remember, no blows to the head or face.”

Cassandra nodded.

“Wait,” Harper said, “how long are you expecting me to last?”

Bruce looked at Alfred.

Alfred got a stopwatch out of the front pocket of his jacket.

Cassandra was convinced that Harper had gone a shade paler, but she was so pale to begin with...

“Alright,” Harper said, raising her fists. “If there’s a record, watch me break it.”

Harper did not break the record.

Harper only lasted two-point-three seconds. Though to be as fair as possible to the newbie, the record was held by Kate Kane… at five-point-seven seconds.

Bruce had never done this with Cassandra. Nor had Babs, for that matter. Cassandra reckoned that
their reputations for intelligence had to be well-earned.

Harper took one step forward, at which point Cassandra’s left foot shot out with a precision-perfect kick to an area beneath Harper’s ribcage.

Right in the liver.

Blows to the liver are a funny thing. The immediate sensation is simply just another kick. Only a second later, the area blossoms in a voluminous pain that has been likened by those having been exposed to it to both childbirth and death.

Harper’s words were “Is that all you go OOOOOOOOH, HOLY FUCK!” before dropping to her knees and whimpering.

Cassandra had assumed that Cullen would immediately rush to her defense, but instead he stood among the row of spectators and simply laughed. It fell to Tim and Stephanie to help Harper to her feet.

As soon as Harper regained her bearings, she asked “Who has the record for the fastest time, though?”

“I do,” Stephanie said. “Alfred didn’t even have time to get his stopwatch out.”

Thus ended the martial arts exhibition in the Batcave.

In recent days, what with Conner Kent playing merry hob with her thoughts, she had almost forgotten something that she had observed early in her superhero career. That while men treated women in this game in predictable ways, women treated each other in ways most unpredictable indeed

Take, for example, the aftermath of sparring sessions such as the one that had taken place this icy December day with both the current and former Robins. Tim Drake and Dick Grayson (with times of two-point-eight seconds and four-point-one seconds respectively) reacted with respect. Tim gave her a thumbs-up afterwards as he limped out of the Batcave. Dick, after he woke up, smiled his million dollar smile and yelled “THAT WAS SO DOPE!” It seemed to Cassandra that neither of them had anything to prove to her, and thus, took their ass-kickings in some measure of stride.

The female superheroes she had fought, on the other hand, either avoided her like the plague, or actively tried to be her friend after they were tried against Cassandra and found wanting.

In the former category was Artemis of the Bana-Mighdall, who had been felled by Cassandra with the One Hour Photo nerve-strike. As soon as she was able to move again, Artemis had spared no words for her, opting instead to glare, making her genuine hatred for Cassandra radiate through every fiber of her being. Then there was Charlotte Gage-Radcliffe ( “Charlie” to her one or two friends, and “Misfit” to the rest of the Birds of Prey). She was a teleporter who telegraphed her moves to the point that Cassandra knocked her out with one spinning backfist. As soon as she came to, she got up and teleported from the Clock Tower holoroom to the other side of Gotham City in mortal terror.

In the latter category, on the other hand? After Cassandra had dropped Selina, she offered her her first glass of red wine as soon as the two of them were alone together outside of Bruce’s field of vision, which Cassandra politely refused. Kate tried to tell her her life story, and Cassandra had listened, while wondering if Kate knew she couldn’t actually respond. Dinah “Black Canary” Lance had offered to train her before their fight had started, and a black eye, a split lip, and two bruised ribs later, Dinah politely asked to be trained by her. And let’s not forget Stephanie Brown, who wound
up being the best friend Cassandra Cain had ever had.

Cassandra was thankful that Harper Row fell in the latter category.

Harper, Tim, and Stephanie had retired to the kitchen along with Cassandra. The four stood around the kitchen island in the middle of the room. Cassandra listened to the three of them talk about… stuff… until she had to go to the restroom.

She left the kitchen, walked down the long adjacent hall, and…

“Hey.”

Cassandra turned around to see Selina standing there in jeans and an old blue t-shirt with writing on it that Cassandra couldn’t read.

“Yes?” Cassandra asked.

“I went to bat for you,” Selina said. “No pun intended. With Bruce, I mean. I talked him into letting you back in.”

Cassandra nodded, furrowed her brow, and said the only thing she could think to say.

“Thank you.”

Selina put her hands on her hips and did that thing she did. Raising one eyebrow. Cassandra tried it in the mirror one time, and the results made her look as though she had a headache.

“Just do me a favor,” Selina said. “Don’t fuck it up.”

The sun had gone down. And everyone had gone to the Batcave to get ready.

Batman, Catwoman, and Oracle were standing near the Batcomputer, talking amongst themselves. Orphan and Bluebird were over by the motorcycles, waiting for Spoiler to finish getting ready.

Robin walked up to them. “Hey, Orphan,” he said.

Orphan, who had her mask on, looked at him.

“Steph told me what happened today,” Robin said. “With your dad? About how he won’t tell you about your mom unless you surrender?”

Bluebird looked at Orphan and just said “Fuck…”

“I’m just saying,” Robin said. “I’ll look for her.”

Orphan tilted her head at him. “You’ll…”

“Your mom,” Robin said. “I’m a teenage detective with access to the Batcomputer. Every possible lead, I’ll follow. If it takes me the rest of my life, then it takes me the rest of my life, just… don’t go with that asshole, alright?”

Orphan sighed, and said “He’ll… kill you.”

“That just makes him another bad guy,” Robin said. “And if it came to picking between dying loud and watching you go quiet, I’m picking the first one.”
Orphan didn’t know what to say.

Robin walked up to her, and said “Now bring it in, Goddammit.”

He wrapped Orphan up in a hug.

Orphan still didn’t know what to say. Other than that she had completely filled out the one hand that she could use to count all of the people who had hugged her in her entire life.

“Someone should be nice to you today that knows how,” Robin said. “Bruce is great, but Jesus Christ.”

While she was still in the hug, Orphan looked up at Bluebird and saw… something. It was a simmer, a slight convulsion. She remembered being thankful that Harper had decided to be so friendly after being defeated so soundly, but for a fraction of an instant, it looked as though she was considering jumping the fence. Of joining Artemis and Misfit in the Cassandra Cain Sucks Ass Club. And Orphan didn’t know why.

But the fraction of an instant passed, and the hug between Robin and Orphan broke. It was during that embrace that Alfred and Cullen had gotten off of the elevator, and Cullen had decided to join them.

“You’re in ops tonight?” Bluebird asked Cullen in lieu of a hello.

“Yup,” Cullen said. “I even got a codename.”

“Wh--”

“Cardinal,” Cullen said, cutting Bluebird off.

“So how’s life in a superhero team?” Robin asked.

“I have to say,” Cullen said, “that my idea of joining a superhero team involved a lot more handsome and dashing young men in tight clothing that I could eventually seduce and corrupt. This team has a discouraging number of women.”

Bluebird started laughing.

Cullen glared at her and asked “What is so Goddamn funny?”

“S-Seduce and corrupt?” Bluebird asked, only mostly overcoming her giggles. “You?”

“Again,” Cullen said, “what’s so f--”

“You aren’t seducing and corrupting shit,” Bluebird said. “Five months ago you had to have me pick you up from a party at Kordyn Moran’s apartment because he touched you on the thigh and you couldn’t get your stiffy to go back down.”

Cullen’s jaw dropped.

“I tell you these things in confidence! Fuck!”

Out the back of the storage building on Founder’s Island, a white Chevrolet van stood idling in the parking lot, its exhaust jetting plumes of thick white smoke into the cold evening air.
Jason Todd sat in the driver’s seat, turning the words of the priest he had spoken to that day over and over in his head.

“We find ourselves in the same situations over and over again, but the trick of it, the painful part of it, is that we’re never in the same exact circumstances. We’re just in different positions over and over again.”

The passenger’s side door opened and David Cain, along with a gust of frigid air came with him. The back opened, and Two, his head fire, hunkered down in the back.

And he had that Goddamn sword he’d been itching to try out.

“Are you ready?” David asked Jason.

The priest had said “But if you’re a third party, and you see the person you were with a different name in the exact same situation? You help. You guide them in the way they need to go.”

Jason snapped his fingers twice behind his ear, and his head became flame. What he was going to do tonight wasn’t in any playbook, and Harmonia would likely be pissed at him for doing it, but he had to ask himself if he needed to do this. Absent revenge he would never get, absent forgiveness he would never dispense, what he was going to do tonight called to his soul in an elemental way that could be neither denied nor brooked.

He was going to send Tim Drake back home to the family who loved him. To a life of safe and blissful anonymity.

“Yeah,” One said. “I am.”

He put the van in drive.

Stop #1 - The Orrery

The motorcade of Kahndaqi diplomat Muhammad bin Sayel, which consisted of four black Cadillac Escalades, left the Gotham Royal Hotel at 8:14 PM. Their first stop was The Orrery, a high-end bar on Founders Island. The lights were heavy neon, the waitresses were scantily clad, and the drinks were both fruity to the extent that they had no alcohol sting, and expensive to the point that a specialty shot ran into the triple-figures.

Looking at the place from across the street, Catwoman imagined going inside and asking for a finger of Jack and a bottle of Bud to chase it off. She imagined the bartender’s face, looking at her as though she were a chimney-cleaning wretch from a Dickens novel, telling her she didn’t belong there.

This didn’t make her angry. It just made her thirsty.

The team split up to cover different rooftops and alleys. Batman and Orphan were on the roof of the bookstore across the street. Spoiler and Bluebird were on the roof of the bakery to the west. Oracle was in the alley behind the bar, out of sight, doing her Oracle thing of monitoring transactions within the bar as well as keeping an eye on the traffic cameras.

Which left Catwoman and Robin on the rooftop to the east, above a little hole in the wall travel agency, still chugging along despite existing in the era of online flight and cruise booking.

Robin knelt at the corner of the rooftop looking down at the street below. He tugged his cape with
his right hand to loosen it.

_He’s trying to get the most picturesque cape-flap, Catwoman thought. Trying to get it in the wind just right, in case someone’s taking his picture._

Catwoman rolled her eyes.

“First of all,” she said, “fuck you for making me break out the When-I-Was-Your-Age card, but… when I was your age… we didn’t have superhero teams.”

Robin craned his neck to look at her.

“I mean yeah, there were superheroes,” Catwoman said. “Wonder Woman was doing her thing. So was the Justice Society of America. But it was all covert. The public became aware of superheroes when Superman made himself known, and when that happened, I was already in my twenties. And we for damn sure didn’t have _teenage_ superheroes running around.”

“Point being?”

“Point _being,_” Catwoman said, “if I were your age, and I had the opportunity to get my Young Justice on, I’d have a hell of a lot more fun than you’re having right now.”

“This isn’t about fun,” Robin said. “This is about saving lives.”

“Yeah, it is. Of course it is. I’m just saying, you can do both.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“You’re gonna argue with living proof?”

Robin visibly bristled. Catwoman folded her arms.

“I used to think that having you and Steph and Cass around was going to be fun,” Catwoman said. “Steph is fun, Cass is Cass… and then there’s you.”

“What about me?”

“Teenagers are fun because they make everything bigger than it needs to be. There’s no frame of reference for them, so everything’s life and death. And here you are trying to shrink everything.”

Robin actually got up to look at her. “Are you seriously… _seriously_… taking issue with me because I’m not acting like I’m young and stupid?”

“Being young and stupid,” Catwoman said, “is the only way you get to be old and wise. _Buddha_ said that.”

“Buddha did _not_ say--”

“Someone said that,” Catwoman said.

“I don’t have the luxury of being young and stupid,” Robin said. “Let’s have a look at Jason Todd.”

“Can we not?”

“Jason Todd died because he went after his mom all by himself, and he ran afoul of The Joker,” Robin said. “Jason was rash and impulsive, alright? _He_ was young and stupid. But because he
died, every mistake he made is enshrined and gold-plated. There’s no real way I succeed, here. I try to be grown up about this, and I don’t have that rebellious spark he had, but if I go with my gut, I’m repeating the worst kind of history. Throw in the fact that Dick Grayson is apparently awesome at everything, and I am Schrodinger’s Failure. Everything I could hypothetically do or not do in any situation sucks for the sole reason that I’m the one stuck doing it. I’m trying to be the best Robin ever, and there’s no path forward for that.”

“Who says you have to be the best Robin?” Catwoman asked.

“I do,” Robin said. “The universe does. If I’m not, there’s no point to any of this, and I’m just stuck wasting time.”

Catwoman sighed. “You know I was upset before when I had to break out the When-I-Was-Your-Age card? Now I have to break out the Let-Me-Tell-You-A-Story card.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Robin said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Knew a guy one time…”

“This is about Batman, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Catwoman said. “High strung, weight of the world on his shoulders. Eleven years of heavy flirting with no payoff. Takes three years off, and I quit being Catwoman because it wasn’t any fun without him. After eleven years he has his Come-to-Jesus moment, and I grab hold of him with both hands and I don’t let go. And do you want to know why?”

“True love?” Robin asked, rolling his eyes.

“Yes,” Catwoman said. “And also because when I was young, I was young and stupid, and treated everything like it was the end of the world. So when I was thirty-five, I knew what something that big was supposed to look like. Just because you’re trying to shrink everything down to a manageable size because that’s what you think grown-ass men do doesn’t mean that there isn’t any big stuff out there. Because when I look at you, do you know what I see?”

“What?”

Catwoman took another step towards him.

“I see a sullen little bitch who’s gonna make Harper Row wait eleven years.”

Robin just blinked at her, genuinely and honestly uncomprehending.

“I, uh… I hate to break it to you,” Robin said, “but there isn’t anything going on between me and Bluebird.”

And Catwoman tried desperately not to change the expression on her face. It seemed that Teen Detective Tim Drake was so busy looking for DNA strands and fiber samples that he completely missed the smoking gun and the body of the murder victim.


Looking down at the roof, thinking that whatever happened next to Tim Drake was going to be richly and thoroughly deserved, Catwoman just started laughing.

“Nothing doing,” Oracle said into the earpiece in Batman’s cowl. “Nothing out of the ordinary on
any front. You sure anything’s going to happen at all tonight?’”

“No,” Batman said. “But vigilance is the answer to everything.”

“And you thought a family gathering would be good for everyone?”

“Please don’t call it that.”

He heard Oracle chuckling. “Oracle out.”

The line went dead, and Batman was left with his own thoughts. He stepped out of the shadows of the rooftop exit of the bookstore, and saw Orphan perched on the corner, staring out onto the street.

Orphan wasn’t the only one who could read body language. It wasn’t Batman’s first language like it was with her, but he was no slouch.

Even just perched there, still as a statue and silent as death itself, Orphan screamed with a renewed purpose. She knew she screwed up, and she was trying her best not to do so again.

Batman walked up to her silently.

“Orphan?”

Orphan turned her head to him in silence, apparently not caught off-guard at all.

Batman reached into his utility belt.

“The next time you see your father,” Batman said, “I want you to give him something for me.”

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**Stop #2 - 1887 Wagner Avenue, the East End of Gotham**

Muhammad bin Sayel’s motorcade left The Orrery at 10:35 PM, and it took half an hour to get from Founders Island to the East End.

One could be forgiven for their confusion as to why the Kahndaqi diplomat would venture from the swankiness and opulence of Founders Island to the poverty-stricken purgatory of the East End. But that confusion would overlook one crucial fact:

The East End was where the cheap cocaine was.

Far from the reach and view of Black Adam himself, who passed an edict in Kahndaq that saw drug dealers sentenced to death, Muhammad bin Sayel wanted to get his party on, and not even the most staunch and unforgiving among Batman’s network could find it within themselves to blame him.

1887 Wagner Avenue was an old Citgo station, abandoned every day except the days when the coke and heroin shipments from Gotham Harbor found their way to the East End dealers. Tonight’s master of ceremonies was an ex-cop named Duggan, a man kicked out of the department for excessive force (which, in Gotham, was saying something) who had found a second life as a dealer under the Falcones.

Batman and Catwoman staked out an abandoned building on the west. Spoiler and Robin took one to the east. Orphan was on her own, jumping from rooftop to rooftop in the dark of night, acting as her own mobile surveillance.

Which left Oracle and Bluebird on a rooftop to the north. Fifteen stories up, Oracle was examining
Bluebird’s taser pistols.

“You made these?” Oracle asked.

“No,” Bluebird said. “Lex Luthor did. We play badminton in the prison yard, I don’t know if you knew….”

Oracle rolled her eyes as she handed the pistols back to Bluebird, though with her green holographic mask, it was hard to tell.

“You’re quite the engineer,” Oracle said.

“Thank you.”

“You code?”

“Nope,” Bluebird said, holstering her pistols in her jacket. “That’s my brother’s thing.”

“That’s where it’s at, though,” Oracle said. “I’ve kinda been the intel backbone for the whole Justice League for years now.”

Bluebird folded her arms. “Uh-huh…”

“I’ve hacked the LexCorp servers, fought Braniac and won, destroyed The Calculator’s little criminal internet thing…”

“Okay.”

“I’m just saying,” Oracle said. “I’ve led a pretty eventful life.”

Bluebird tilted her head and squinted at Oracle.

“You used to be Batgirl, right?”

“Yeah,” Oracle said, the lilt in her voice making even the deep digital distortion her mask provided sound squeaky and delighted. “Yeah, I did.”

“So what you’re saying,” Bluebird said, “is that you used to have a superhero alias that had the same initials as your real name.”

Oracle opened her mouth, and nothing came out. She felt herself blushing beneath her mask. She was so used to having Orphan and Misfit look up to her, and she just felt the train grind to a halt.

“You, uh… You want to go on some more about how smart you think you are?” Bluebird asked. “‘Cause that isn’t annoying at all.”

“Should we be listening to all of this?” Cullen asked.

While the superhero contingent of the superhero team was freezing their asses off surveilling the dingiest parts of the dingy East End, Alfred Pennyworth and Cullen Row were acting as eyes and ears from the safe and friendly confines of the Batcave.

Dark and creepy as it was on the best of days, it was, at the very least, cool in summertime and warm
in wintertime.

Alfred sat at the Batcomputer, his jacket unbuttoned, his posture impeccable. Cullen sat in a pair of jeans and a green flannel shirt in a wheeled office chair that they brought down from the manor, his laptop (networked to the Batcomputer) in his lap, serving as backup.

What none of them knew, save for Batman himself, was that the Batcomputer listened in on their communications even when they weren’t actively communicating. Which meant that all of the small talk they had among themselves was at the very least known to Alfred.

“Anticipating need is one of the two hallmarks of a gentleman’s gentleman,” Alfred said.

“And what’s the second one?”

“Withholding judgement.”

‘Gentleman’s gentleman,’” Cullen said. “I like that, Mister Pennyworth.”

“That’s not necessary,” Alfred said.

“What isn’t?”

“Addressing me as ‘Mister Pennyworth,’” Alfred said. “That level of formality is unnecessary for a man of my station.”

“I’m not doing it to be formal,” Cullen said. “I’m doing it to be cool. You know how in the old Bond movies, all the Bond villains hate the guy, but they still call him ‘Mister Bond.’ The professional courtesy is that deep.”

Alfred looked from the screen to Cullen. “You watch Bond films?”

“Everyone’s seen a Bond movie.”

“Everyone’s seen Skyfall,” Alfred said. “It’s not the same thing.”

“True that,” Cullen said. “You show kids these days From Russia with Love, they’ll fall asleep. I’m a Goldfinger guy myself, but still.”

“I see you are a young man of discerning taste and a capacity for absurdity,” Alfred said. “But I hesitate to point out, my dear fellow, that you are one of the ‘kids these days.’”

“Not really.”

“Might I inquire what separates yourself from those among your group of peers?”

“I’m helping run ops for a superhero team,” Cullen said, “and they’re not.”

Alfred grinned faintly. “Quite right, Mister Row.”

Cullen beamed. “See? Like that.”

Still smiling, he looked down at his laptop, before looking back at Alfred an instant later.

“When do I get my tuxedo… is… is what I wanna know.”
Stop #3 - InSINuation’s

So if the first stop was booze, and the second stop was coke, is it really any surprise that the third stop was a bottomless joint?

From the East End, Batman’s small caravan of motorcycles following the Batmobile went to Magani Island, where InSINuation’s was located, the only strip club in the theater district.

Founded by… just… a complete moron, really, named Mitchell Doubleday—a man so on the not-too-bright side that he did not fathom that the apostrophe in the name “InSINuation’s” indicated that the place belonged to someone named InSINuation until well into the establishment’s first year of operation—ten years ago, it was a blight and offense to the restaurateurs and theater owners with which the joint shared a city block.

But alas, much to the chagrin of people with taste, Mitchell Doubleday was well-connected in addition to being bookdumb. As it was Mister Doubleday’s college roommate Foster Dominico, to whom Mister Doubleday dealt caffeine pills back in the day, who was now on the Gotham City Council. All efforts to close InSINuation’s down died on the vine.

Just because it wasn’t the classiest joint in the world… in the city… on the island… on the block, didn’t mean that it didn’t put on airs. Thirty dollar cover charge, fifty dollar cocktails, and a dress code that required the male patrons to wear a blazer. The dancers usually wound up picking up tens after their routines were over instead of singles… and good for them, too. A debt-free college education is nothing to sneeze at.

But its aspirations toward class had, on one occasion, rubbed one of its prior patrons the wrong way. And that past patron was staking out the back alley with Oracle and Bluebird.

“You came here for your bachelorette party?” Bluebird asked.

Catwoman rolled her eyes. “We didn’t just come here,” she said. “I didn’t say to everyone ‘The sun’s down, y’all, let’s go to the titty bar!’ We went out to eat first.”

“Was it Applebee’s? Please say it was Applebee’s.”

“It was at Dini’s,” Catwoman said. “I’m a millionaire, you know.”

“And then you came here,” Bluebird said.

“It wasn’t all of us,” Catwoman said, her breath emerging from her mouth in a thick fog. “Two of my bridesmaids had to tag out. Spoiler was too young. Lois wasn’t too young, but she’s straight. So it was just me, Harley, Holly, and Holly’s wife Karon who came here. And we walk in, right?”

“Yes.”

“And we walk in, pay our cover charges, and some girl’s up there dancing to Miles Davis.”

Bluebird actually looked taken aback. “Really?”

“Really,” Catwoman said. “Some poor girl’s up there wearing horn-rimmed glasses and nothing else, trying to dance to headphone music that no one in their right mind should be dancing to. Exposing strangers to jazz is like exposing strangers to how you got your melanoma. It’s a personal thing. I’m like ‘Gee, Autumn, I sure do appreciate your interpretive dance to Sketches of Spain, but I’m bi, I’m getting married to a dude tomorrow, and I want some boobs in my face one last time before I take my bow and say goodnight.’ Harley sees this, and she has this look on her face like
she’s gonna crack someone over the head. Only I’ve known Harley long enough to know she’ll actually do it. What are they gonna do, send her to Arkham? She was going back there anyway. And not only that…”

Catwoman had to stifle an onset of giggles.

“No only that,” she said. “But there were pictures of Marilyn Monroe on the wall.”

“Marilyn Mon--”

“Marilyn Monroe,” Catwoman said, just on the north of a debilitating giggle fit. “And… And Picasso prints and Max Caulfield pictures. And-and-and this one sad-ass potted plant in the corner that was brown because no one watered it.”

“Dear God, why?” Bluebird asked.

“Because it’s what an alien thinks class looks like,” Catwoman said before giggling a bit. “But… but trying to make this place look classy, it’s like holding your pinky out while eating a butter sandwich.”

Bluebird started laughing.

“If you feel like you have to do it,” said Catwoman, staving off laughter, “then it just makes it worse.”

Oracle, who was standing next to the dumpster, doing her thing of looking over traffic cams on the holographic monitor hooked up to her gloves, turned to the both of them.

“Hey,” she said. “You mind?”

Catwoman and Bluebird immediately ceased their revels, lapsing into silence as though they had been caught talking in class by a predominantly nice teacher, who’d been pushed to the point of using her outdoor voice.

So of course Catwoman had to poke the bear.

“Methinks Oracle is disappointed that we aren’t acting superheroy enough for the superhero club.”

Bluebird sneered. “She’s just mad I pointed out something obvious to her that she didn’t get until just now.”

Catwoman had her eyebrow up, intrigued. “Oh?”

“About how Batgirl has the same initials as her real name.”

Now Catwoman’s other eyebrow raised, and she started laughing again.

It was a miracle that Oracle’s holographic mask was able to show embarrassment. “I… It’s… You both suck!”

Both Bluebird and Catwoman laughed at this for a while. When it died down, Catwoman looked over at Bluebird.

“You know,” Catwoman said, “my loyalty to my husband is what’s stopping me from telling you that you just might be too good for Tim… but that doesn’t mean I can’t try to implant the idea psychically.”
Bluebird’s eyes widened. Whether the flush in her cheeks came from embarrassment or the cold, Catwoman could not say.

But Bluebird didn’t deny it. To Catwoman, the attraction certainly appeared to be one-sided. Either Tim didn’t return Harper’s affections, or Tim was being straight with her earlier on the rooftop on Founders Island, and he just didn’t know Harper felt a certain way about him.

“You, uh… You have psychic powers?” Bluebird asked.

“No,” Catwoman said. “No, I don’t.”

InSINution’s was on the waterfront, so for this stop only three teams were needed. Bluebird, Catwoman and Oracle were in the alley behind the club. Orphan and Robin were on the rooftop of a theater to the west…

…which meant that Batman and Spoiler were on the roof of the gas station across the street.

Spoiler kept rubbing her hands over her knuckles. Batman knew the sensation. Trying to pop them after they’d already been popped. A sure-fire sign of agitation.

“Is something troubling you?” Batman asked.

“Yeah,” Spoiler said. “Two.”

Batman nodded.

“I unloaded on him,” Spoiler said, “and he flowed through everything I had.”

“And what are you going to do about it?”

Spoiler looked at Batman, before turning her attention back to her knuckles. “Drop him,” she said. “See if I leave him conscious long enough to kiss my delicious ass.”

“I wasn’t looking for confidence or bravado,” Batman said. “I was looking for a plan.”

“Just be better,” Spoiler said. “Works for you, doesn’t it?”

Batman sighed. That Spoiler was Catwoman’s sidekick and not his own provided a degree of removal that Batman wasn’t entirely comfortable with. For more than one reason, Bruce Wayne could not relate to Stephanie Brown.

“Why do you do this?” Batman asked.

Spoiler slowly turned her head to look at him.

“I was there when you decided to get in the game,” Batman said. “I was in the other room in Selina’s apartment when you told her you wanted to be a superhero. I’m the world’s greatest detective, or so they say, and that’s something I can’t figure out.”

Spoiler sighed.

“Are you trying to make up for your father’s misdeeds?” Batman asked. “You wouldn’t be the only one on this team to do so.”

Stephanie Brown’s father was Arthur Brown, also known as the supervillain “Cluemaster.”
“My father,” Spoiler said, “was an abusive prick who just so happened to be a supervillain. He’s in Blackgate now. All the misdeeds that need making up for, he’s already doing himself by serving his time. As a reasonable person, I can’t ask for anything more.”

“Reasonable people don’t put on capes.”

“Yet here I am,” Spoiler said. “Do you vote?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“It’s my civic duty.”

“There ya go,” Spoiler said. “Not all of us need the tragic backstory to do the right thing.”

Batman knew Spoiler was hiding something… but he was equally convinced that she wasn’t hiding much.

“If you go after Two,” Batman said, “Don’t go alone.”

“I dunno,” Spoiler said. “I may have to clear that with my boss.”

“I’m not giving you an order,” Batman said. “I’m giving you friendly advice. And we’re all friends here, right?”

Before Spoiler could respond, Batman spotted the four Cadillace Escalades of Muhammad bin Sayel’s motorcade come up to the front of the club. Flanked by two strippers who were themselves flanked by two of his bodyguards, bin Sayel staggered into the left rear door of the vehicle. One of his bodyguards and the two dancers followed, while the second bodyguard got into the driver’s seat. The bodyguard who had been driving got out and into the passenger’s seat.

And as soon as bin Sayel’s Escalade shifted into drive, it darted forward jerkily, away from the other three vehicles in the motorcade…

…and breezed through the red light and the end of the block.

Batman’s blood went cold. He put his finger to his cowl.

“Penny One, Cardinal,” Batman said. “I need a view on a traffic cam feed. One-eighteenth and Normandie.”

“On it,” Cullen Row said over the radio.

The lenses on Batman’s cowl dropped, and they let him in on the feed from the traffic camera on 118th Street and Normandie Boulevard.

The footage played in real time. Muhammed bin Sayel’s Escalade blew through that light as well…

…but the feed was from a camera on the traffic light itself, which meant it provided a view through the windshield.

The driver of the Escalade didn’t have his hands on the wheel. And he looked terrified.

At once, Batman knew what was happening. He put his finger to the ear of his cowl again.
“Batman to all hands,” he said. “The car is being driven remotely.”

“What?” Robin asked in his ear.

“Cain has taken control of the vehicle from a remote location,” Batman said. “He’s going to get bin Sayel killed!”
Chapter 16: Steel Wheels

SOMEWHERE OVER UTAH

Kate popped a pair of painkillers with a can of Diet Coke, and leaned back in her seat with an ice pack over her face.

She and Diana were on Kate’s private jet, in the early stages through their flight from National City to Gotham City. It took about an hour from the time it took Wonder Woman to procure the Blade of Resurrection to the two of them boarding the jet. No lines and no security checks at the airport. Being rich was awesome sometimes.

What wasn’t so awesome was that Stelio, in his fight with Batwoman, had left odd, discoloring bruises that stretched from beneath her nose down to her chin. She didn’t get the cool battle marks like the cut over the eyebrow or a black eye or something else that told the world she’d been in a fight, no. Batwoman had gotten into a drag-out with a seven-foot-tall cult member, and all she had to show for it were bruises that made her look like she just drank a shitload of grape juice.

And the Blade of Resurrection, sure.

Diana was sitting in the seat next to her. She had her cowboy boots on again, along with tight jeans and a conservatively cut tank top beneath a dark blue blazer. Evidently taking a page from the Clark Kent playbook, she was wearing glasses, even though she didn’t need them.

Kate knew Diana was just trying to blend in with everyone else, but if it looked like Liz Lemon had started taking really good care of herself since 30 Rock went off the air, Kate would have stopped and gawked.

“How the diet soda?” Diana asked.

Kate removed the ice pack from her face, and looked at her. They hadn’t spoken about… the thing they needed to speak about, but if they could put it off until they had solid ground beneath them, then that would have suited Kate just fine.

“Because booze and painkillers don’t get along with each other.”

“I meant as a mixer.”

“I dunno… Just like the taste, I guess.”

“It’s foul,” said Diana.

“It’s mostly water.”

“Then why don’t you just drink water?”

“Because fish make love in it,” said Kate.

“You know I actually met WC Fields during the war,” Diana said. “He wasn’t a nice man. Please steal your jokes from a better caliber of comedian.”
Kate had to smile.

“How does it feel?” Diana asked.

“How does what feel? My face?”

“No,” Diana said. “Walking into a fight you can only theoretically win?”

“You mean you never lost a fight?” Kate asked.

“Oh, I have,” Diana said. “But I am mindful of the advantages I possess. I am blessed with skills and traits of the divine. I simply assume I’m going to win whatever scrum I’m thrown into. It can’t work that way for you.”

“You’re right,” Kate said. “It doesn’t.”

“So how does it feel?”

Kate turned the question around in her head a little bit.

“It doesn’t really feel any particular way,” she said. “Either the job gets done, or it doesn’t. Time I spend pondering my own mortality is time wasted.”

Diana nestled into her seat and sighed with a slight smile on her face.

“It is said that essential nature is revealed upon the precipice of death,” Diana said. “All artifice is shed and the real person emerges. Yet that is what you voluntarily do every night. Rush headlong into danger to save lives, inadvertently forcing upon yourself the kind of honesty that cannot be hidden.”

She looked at Kate, now. “And yet… you need to be a less authentic version of yourself around me, who admires you and would never hurt you.”

Kate didn’t know what to say to that.

“I just… find that odd,” Diana said.

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**GOTHAM CITY**

Catwoman and Oracle ran out of the alley behind InSINuation’s just in time to see the fourth of the four trucks in the motorcade peel off down the street after bin Sayel.

“Cain’s driving it remotely?” Catwoman asked.

“Affirmative,” Batman said over comms. “He’s up here somewhere. Spoiler, Orphan, Robin, switch to thermals to find them. Catwoman, Oracle, Bluebird, get on your bikes and try to catch up with that truck.”

Oracle tapped Catwoman on the shoulder.

“Where’s Bluebird?”

A screech of tires from behind them, and Catwoman and Oracle turned and looked.

A stolen white Porsche Panamera had skidded to a halt behind them. Catwoman knew it was stolen
because, well, it didn’t look like Bluebird could afford a Porsche.

Bluebird leaned out of the busted driver’s window of the car she had hotwired, her blue hair swaying slightly in the breeze, and yelled “GET IN!”

Orphan switched the lenses on her mask to thermals, and saw nothing.

Then three heat signatures popped up immediately. Orphan considered they must have been blocking any thermal detection somehow, and only now did they wish to be confronted by Batman and his network.

The closest was a block away. She fired her grapnel gun and swung to the neighboring rooftop, somersaulting through the cold air at the height of her ascent. She gracefully landed on the rooftop, and repeated the procedure to get to the next rooftop where the heat signature was.

She reverted back to the default lenses, and saw that the man on the rooftop with her was David Cain. He was leaning against a door that had the word “ENTRANCE” spelled out in pink neon letters.

Orphan rose to her feet, straightened herself out, and walked toward him with purpose… all the while the fingers of her right hand traveled toward one of the compartments of the yellow utility belt around her waist.

“You still have a few hours until the deadline,” David said. “If you’d like, y--”

Orphan had retrieved a small metal disc from her utility belt, and she cut off his sentence by flinging it at him.

“The next time you see your father,” Batman had said, “I want you to give him something for me.”

David caught the disc in his hand.

While it was in his clutches, the disc made a loud PING! noise, and a small, transparent, barely visible shockwave emitted from his fist, and spread out a few feet.

And the ENTRANCE sign next to him immediately shut off.

David Cain’s entire body screamed that something was wrong, or at least it screamed to Orphan, who was experienced in such things. He sagged slightly, slouched near-imperceptibly, his eyes were a millimeter wider than they should have been.

He opened his hand and looked at the disc. “What is this?”

And Orphan said the letters that Batman told her to say.

“E… M… P.”

Batman had assured her that when that little EMP disc went off, then all the dirty tricks that David had used in their prior fight, the strength and the blurring, wouldn’t work anymore.

And judging from how he held himself, Orphan assumed that that thought had just occurred to David himself.

David stood up straight, narrowed his eyes…
...and then turned around ran away.

Orphan went after him.

Batman and Spoiler, using their capes to glide above Miagani Island, saw a heat signature on top of the AMC Theater of 116th and Robinson, known locally as “The Miagani 24.”

A heat signature that immediately vanished when it saw that Batman and Spoiler were about to touch down.

_They are using blockers_, Batman thought. _That’s why we didn’t see them during surveillance._

Batman and Spoiler made a hard landfall on the roof, and stood up straight.

“Keep an eye out,” Batman said. “He could be--”

“Unhh!”

Batman turned his head, and saw that one of the two that had fire for heads had tackled Spoiler from behind. He somersaulted over her prone body and got to his feet. Spoiler tried to rise… only to see that she had been handcuffed to the pipe that connected to one of the theater’s gutters.

“Shit,” Spoiler said.

“Forgive me, my dear,” Two said. “I have to deal with your benefactor. And don’t attempt to use the handcuff key you have in your glove because, well…”

“You piece of shit,” Spoiler said. “YOU PUT GUM IN THE KEYHOLE!”

“Because I don’t want you getting hurt,” Two said before he looked at Batman. “Now… You.”

“Yeah,” Batman said as he advanced toward him. “Me.”

Two threw something at him before diving behind an air conditioning unit.

A beeping started coming from Batman’s utility belt.

He looked down and saw an adhesive charge attached to his utility belt… and the beeping was getting louder.

Batman undid the clasp on his utility belt and flung it to the other side of the roof as the beeping reached its crescendo. He saw the belt explode in midair as every gadget that the belt contained activated at the same time.

“No gadgets for you,” Two said as he rose from behind the air conditioning unit.

He stepped into plain view, and Batman could see that Two was holding a sword.

“Tonight,” Two said, “you die a plain, ordinary man.”

One saw Robin touch down on the roof of the apartment building on which he stood.

And One put up his hands.

“Cool it down, Tim,” One said. “I just want to talk.”
Robin procured his collapsible metal bo staff from his utility belt. “I don’t.”

One rolled his eyes beneath his mask of flame, and ducked the initial stroke from the staff.

Robin whirled and struck like a tornado. One dodged a few of them, but he blocked the rest with his forearms.

“Will… you… knock it off?” One asked during the assault. “I’m not doing the fighting and the talking at the same time!”

“Then shut your hole,” Robin said.

One groaned. He backed away from a bow strike, grabbed Robin’s head, and viciously spiked the Boy Wonder’s skull on the roof like a football.

As the prone Robin grabbed the back of his head with one hand, and used the other to aid him in getting to his feet, One snapped his fingers twice behind his own ear. Harmonia’s glamour went away.

“Tim,” Jason said. “Do you recognize me?”

Robin looked up at him with fury… but that fury slowly subsided as he got to his feet.

“No,” Robin said. “No, it can’t be.”

“It is,” Jason said. “I’m Jason Todd… Uh… Pleased to meet you, I guess?”

Thinking about this conversation in his head beforehand, Jason hadn’t made it this far.

Robin stared at him for a few moments, before he asked the question that all scholars and learned gentlemen eventually asked.

“What the fuck?”

“Now?”

“Not yet.”

“I can’t believe you stole a car,” Oracle said.

Bluebird was driving, having sped past the three other trucks in the motorcade, and was finally within a few car-lengths of bin Sayel’s Escalade. Oracle was in the front passenger’s seat, with her holographic monitor on the dashboard, and her holographic keyboard in mid-air, hovering above her lap.

Catwoman was in the back seat.

“I didn’t steal this car,” Bluebird said, “I borrowed this car. I’m not gonna keep it… and what the hell are you doing?”

“I’m hacking into the traffic system, turning all the red lights green, and clearing pedestrians off the crosswalk” Oracle said. “Otherwise, we’re gonna have a lot more civilian fatalities… I knew there was a reason you and Catwoman got along. You’re both disposed toward thievery.”
“If we went back for our bikes,” Bluebird said, “We’d have lost more time, and we’d never have caught up with them. I’m doing what I do best, here. You do what you do best, and be nerdy and straight, alright?”

There was a beat of silence, before Catwoman started laughing.

Bluebird turned her head back to her, but kept her eyes on the road. “It wasn’t that funny.”

But Oracle turned all the way around, her green holographic mask beaming disapproval.

“Shut up, Selina.”

Catwoman calmed herself down a little bit. “Hey, Bluebird,” she said. “Does… Does the name ‘Black Canary’ mean anything to y--”

“Shut. Up. Selina.”

Oracle turned her head back to her monitor, and sighed.

“If that vehicle is being driven remotely, then there has to be a relay I can hack into. And there’s nothing I can’t hack into.”

“But?” Bluebird asked.

“But,” Oracle said, “I can’t find anything… Unless… Of course!”

“Oracle said ‘Of course,’” Catwoman said. “That means no one’s gonna die.”

“The Escalade wasn’t hijacked,” Oracle said. “It was programmed. They must have put something on the undercarriage of the vehicle that bypassed the computer systems to make it run along a predetermined route. I can’t hack into it because there is no relay. There’s nothing to hack into!”

“So how do we deactivate whatever this is?” Bluebird asked.

Oracle was quiet for a moment.

Bluebird got impatient. “Oracle?”

“Uhhh,” Oracle said, “manually?”

Catwoman looked down at her hands.

She was wearing her brand-spanking new Catsuit. The winter version, provided to her by the eggheads at WayneTech, of whom Lucius Fox was Pope.

When it was given to her, Lucius ran down the list of features that the Catsuit had, one of which was activatable magnetic fields in the hands, wrists, knees, shins, feet, and inner thighs so Catwoman could climb or crawl across metal surfaces.

At the time, Selina thought it was deeply situational, as there weren’t a whole lot of metal surfaces she could climb across without making noise.

But now? If Lucius had a dream trip to Tahiti he wanted to take, Catwoman would pay for it. Maybe follow him along, rub his feet, pick up after him, cook him dinner, because Lucius Fox was a man who clearly knew what was up.
Catwoman brought her goggles down. As she rolled down the back window, she spoke.


“Why?”

“Just do it.”

Catwoman bumped her wrists together, and she felt the thrum of the magnetic fields in her gloves turning on. She clicked her heels like Dorothy, and she felt the same thrum all throughout her lower legs.

She put her hands out the open car window, felt them attach to the roof, and pulled herself out. The last thing she heard before she was on the roof of the car was Bluebird asking “WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?”

The wind on top of the car was vicious, and the fact that it was so cold just made it worse. She scarpered across the roof, down the windshield, and onto the hood, which was a sight so bizarre and cumbersome to the purpose of driving that Bluebird actually honked the horn at her.

With her knees and her left hand magnetised, still attached to the metal of the hood of the car, Catwoman reached down to her waist. There was a button on her bullwhip, and she pressed it three times.

The first press was to activate the electric charge in the whip. She didn’t need that setting.

The second press was to activate the superheating feature. She didn’t need that setting either.

The third press was to activate the adhesive. Now *that* was the setting she needed.

Catwoman uncoiled the whip from her waist, and struck at the tailgate of the Escalade. The end of the whip stuck, and Catwoman gave it a yank to see if it would hold.

It did.

Catwoman got to one knee. She had to do this just right.

She leapt with her free leg, while drawing herself toward the Escalade with the arm that held the whip. She contorted herself in midair so she’d land horizontally.

And her risk paid off. Catwoman struggled to catch her breath after she found that she was attached to the tailgate of the Escalade like a bumper-sticker.

David Cain dove off of the rooftop and crashed through the large hallway window of an apartment building next door. He landed hard on his shoulder, before he quickly got to the carpet and started running again.

Orphan followed, thinking that he sure was tiring himself out. Kicking his ass just wasn’t going to be as much fun if he was exhausted.

She leapt over the broken glass of the window, and as she ran after David, she saw the doors of the apartments and the wallpaper on the walls, and let one wild thought deter her from her task.

*Tim lives in this building!*
Maybe not on this floor, but still.

David reached the door for the stairwell a few seconds before she did, but Orphan was gaining on him. Their footsteps echoed loud from the concrete walls. But David’s labored, panicked breathing echoed louder.

He got to the door to the main lobby of the apartment building three seconds before Orphan did. When she got there, Orphan kicked the door down.

There in the lobby, Cain had his right arm around a portly security guard’s throat. His left hand was holding a gun to the security guard’s head.

“Don’t come any closer,” David said, trying to butch up his voice to mask the fatigue and the panic. “Not. One. Step.”

Orphan blinked, and assessed the situation.

David was terrified. His body screamed as much. But it was a special kind of terror. The kind only endemic to someone whose arrogance had been completely destroyed, and was left with no contingencies to make up for it.

Her father was arrogant enough not to have carried a gun with him when he set out on this expedition tonight. Because he was under the impression that whatever he had done to his body to make him able to beat Orphan in a fight would have been enough.

A glance down to the sweating and terrified security guard’s waist proved her theory correct. The holster for his gun was empty. David had liberated him of his revolver before he took him hostage, and that gun was the one pointed at the security guard’s head at that very moment.

But the security guard must have been good at his job. Because Orphan could see, plain as day, that the safety on the revolver was still on.

Orphan wouldn’t have done what she did next if it hadn’t been.

Faster than a person could blink, Orphan procured a shuriken from the quick release dispenser on her yellow utility belt, and flung it at David’s hand.

Her aim was true. The star-shaped wafer of jagged metal embedded itself in David’s left hand, and he dropped the gun. He howled in pain. The security guard quickly released himself from David’s grasp, and bolted to the front door of the lobby.

By the time David yanked the shuriken out of his hand, Orphan was already standing right in front of him.

David Cain looked at his daughter, and broadcast his own fear.

“You’re handling this well,” said Jason.

“Superman came back from the dead,” Robin said. “You coming back was unlikely, but it was at least possible. So that’s why you didn’t know The Joker was dead. You’ve been dead yourself for five years. You missed it.”

Jason nodded.

“But… how did Cain resurrect you?” Robin asked.
“First,” Jason said, “I wasn’t ‘resurrected.’ Not really. But that’s a long story. And it wasn’t Cain, but that’s an even longer story.”

“And?” Robin asked.

“And what?”

“Get to telling your long stories.”

Jason shook his head. “That--That’s not why I’m here.”

“Why are you here?” Robin asked. “Last night, you break my nose and gas a hundred innocent people, but tonight you’re ready for the sit-down?”

“Those people weren’t innocent,” Jason said. “All of them were in bed with the Falcones, and that makes them just as bad. And last night, I thought I had revenge to get. Turns out I don’t, and now…”

Jason put his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, and looked down at the roof. “Jesus… I lost a lot. The years between fifteen and twenty must be important ones because I’m trying to be an adult for the first time in my life, and I feel like I brought a squeaky toy to a gunfight.”

“Come with us, Jason.”

Jason looked at Robin as though he’d broken out into impromptu Japanese. “No.”

“Do you have any idea how much Bruce has tortured himself since you died? And now here you are alive!”

Jason smiled a bitter smile. “No,” he said. “He didn’t torture himself enough. Barbara gets put in a wheelchair, he gets me killed, and now here he is married to Catwoman. Jesus, he brought our more kids into this madness after I died. He learned nothing.”

Robin’s mask of wariness finally broke. What remained looked an awful lot like concern.

“It’s been five years, Jason. I have to say, I empathize with you, I really do, but you have one hell of an unfair advantage, here.”

A small plume of anger built in Jason’s stomach. “I have an unfair advantage?”

“Yes,” Robin said. “No one can judge another person’s grief. Or how they build themselves back up after. How they move on. No one except you. Because the people we grieve aren’t supposed to come back. What did you want him to do?”

“I WANTED HIM TO STOP!” Jason’s words echoed across this part of Miagani Island. “I wanted him to look at what he did, recognize it for what it was, and stop being Batman! But he’s a sick person, Tim! He couldn’t stop being Batman even if he wanted to!”

“He did,” Robin said. His eyes, his posture, was that of utter defiance.

And it threw Jason for a loop. Both what was said and the way he said it.

“What?” Jason asked. “He stopped?”

Robin looked down at the floor and nodded.
But something wasn’t right, here.

“When?” Jason asked.

All of Robin’s previous defiance had vanished. He looked like someone who was so eager to put out a stove fire that he grabbed water instead of baking soda. Now look at the silly bastard with his house burnt down.

“When did Bruce stop being Batman?” Jason asked. His voice was flat.

And Robin finally said:

“When The Joker died.”

The plume of anger in Jason’s stomach rose until it filled him. He thought a word he did not say.

Unbefuckinglievable…

He couldn’t think except for one line of thought. So consumed was he by his anger that his hands were shaking. He couldn’t even scream. He couldn’t even cry. Bruce Wayne didn’t quit being Batman after Jason had died, but Bruce had apparently held Jason’s murderer in such high regard that he hung up the cowl in grief.

It was unlike him.

But… it was exactly like him.

“Are you alright?” Robin asked.

Jason looked at him.

“I didn’t expect it to happen,” Jason said, “but I thought, if I were ever gonna talk to Bruce again, I could at least be civil. I’d still be angry. I’d still judge him for putting a child in danger for his crazy little crusade. But I could at least talk to the guy without screaming at him, y’know?”

Jason took a deep breath.

“And now that’s gone.”

Movie theaters get jam-packed in December. Especially during winter break. The line at the concession stand in the south wing of the Miagani Island AMC Theater stretched thirty deep for each row. The air hung heavy with the smell of popcorn and the sound of the Elvis Presley Christmas Album.

So of course a stampede would start when Two kicked Batman through the exit door next to concessions.

The fight had started on the roof, had led down the narrow stairwell to the lobby, and ended up here.

Batman hadn’t underestimated Two to begin with. Spoiler may not have been the most battle-hardened member of the network, but at least she knew how to handle herself. She was no civilian. So to completely neutralize her the way he had spoke well of Two’s abilities.

But Two was fast. Two was strong. Two was seasoned, and Two was trained. Even beyond Batman’s initial estimation.
Batman only narrowly managed to roll out of the way when Two descended on him, attempting to bring his knee crashing into Batman’s face.

Two’s knee landed flush on the thinly carpeted concrete, and he let out a deep moan. While Two was stunned, Batman, still on the floor, aimed a well-placed kick into the side of Two’s head, sending it crashing through the glass that made up the display case on the concession stand.

Batman kipped up, and by the time he was on his feet, so was Two. It was a weird sight to see nothing but flame above Two’s neck, and yet to see that flame bleed all over the collar of his leather jacket.

“You’re a salty one,” Two said. “I’ll give you that.”

Two swung his sword, and Batman blocked it with his gauntlet, sending up sparks.

He powered the sword aside and prepared a lunge kick, which Two side-stepped. He whirled around Batman, and drove the pommel of his sword into the back of Batman’s head, driving him into the concession stand.

Hunched over the stand, Batman put his hands on the large and heavy cash register. He heaved it around and in front of him as Two’s sword came down, blocking the stroke.

Batman dropped the register…
...right there on Two’s foot.

Any port in a storm, really.

Two howled, and Batman shut him up with a jab to the mouth. He staggered back, but didn’t drop.

“No gadgets,” Batman said. “I seem to be getting along just fine.”

“Now?”

“Not yet.”

Being stuck to the back of the car was relatively nice. Catwoman could barely feel the wind.

The first thing she heard in her ear when she latched onto the tailgate of bin Sayel’s vehicle like, well, a suction-cup cat, was Bluebird screaming over comms.

“HAVE YOU LOST YOUR GODDAMN MIND?”

“Oracle,” Catwoman yelled. “You said this thing is underneath the car?”

“Yeah,” Oracle said.

“Alright… Gimme a minute.”

She crawled from the tailgate to the side of the Escalade, the magnetic fields in her Catsuit doing their job.

Thank God they washed this damn thing, Catwoman thought. I don’t know how the magnets would interact with dirt. I’m just surprised they’re strong enough to go past this slippery wax job.
She hummed the *Spider-Man* theme to herself as she finally got on all fours on the side of the vehicle. She spared a glance to the sidewalk, looking for bus stops or signs that might knock her off.

Satisfied that nothing was going to kill her for the moment, Catwoman looked back down, and through the side window of the Escalade.

Muhammad bin Sayel, was in the middle of the backseat with his head between his legs. On either side of him were dancers from InSINuation’s, and they were both screaming their heads off.

The one in her early twenties with a bad blonde dye-job on the right caught a glimpse of Catwoman hanging off the side of the vehicle.

Catwoman waved.

The dancer started screaming so loud that Catwoman could hear her through the blistering cold wind.

Catwoman rolled her eyes, and looked down. The Escalade didn’t have running boards, thank Christ. Getting underneath a moving vehicle was going to be bad enough without having to navigate huge hunks of plastic that the magnets in her Catsuit couldn’t manage.

She started shimmying down.

“Be careful,” Oracle said over comms.

“Nah,” Catwoman said. “I’m gonna be stupid and reckless while I’m on--”

The Escalade hit a pothole.

The entire vehicle violently shook, and Catwoman slid down further… but she didn’t fall off.

Catwoman was so startled that she forgot to swear.

And evidently Bluebird was so startled that she slammed on the brakes of the Porsche she had boosted.

A drama in miniature played out over the comms in her ear.

“What did you do that for?” Oracle asked.

“I didn’t want to run her over if she fell!” Bluebird said. “I had to think fast!”

Catwoman caught her breath as her heart slowed back to normal. She was grateful that she didn’t piss herself with fright… but then kind of regretted not having done so, as it would have warmed her up for a few seconds, at any rate.

As the Porsche sped back up behind the Escalade, Catwoman slid her hand from the side of the vehicle to the bottom. She grabbed something metal, and slide herself down and over.

She was underneath the Escalade now, and Catwoman was more than painfully aware that the street was rushing past at almost forty-five miles an hour mere inches beneath the back of her head.

“Okay,” Oracle said over comms. “I don’t have the best idea as to what something like this looks like, so I’m just--”

“Found it,” Catwoman said.
“What? How?”

“Because whoever put the thing causing all this trouble down here used duct tape to do it.”

The duct tape holding the whatever-it-was to a collection of loose wires next to the axle shone in contrast to the utilitarian black of the rest of the vehicle’s undercarriage. And how good a thief would Catwoman be if her eyes didn’t immediately go to the shiny thing?

The whatever-it-was looked like a police walkie-talkie, only with no speaker and no antenna.

“Allright,” Oracle said. “You’re going to have to be very careful about--”

Catwoman let loose her diamond-tipped retractable claws (Thanks again, Lucius!) , and sank them into the sides of the whatever-it-was. The plastic crumbled beneath sharpness and strength until it finally shattered, spilling circuits and wires.

And finally, the Escalade started to slow down. Because, if Catwoman had to guess, the driver had his feet off the pedals entirely when he saw that using the brakes did no good whatsoever.

But the driver eventually got the idea, and the Escalade started slowing down more, and eventually came to a stop. She could feel the Escalade being put into Park.

Catwoman freed one hand, and brought her wrists together again. The magnetic strips in the Catsuit deactivated, and she fell to the pavement with a thud.

She rolled out from underneath the car on the driver’s side, and got to her feet as bin Sayel and two of his bodyguards left the vehicle, walked to the sidewalk in front of a Guitar Store, and started screaming at each other in animated Arabic.

The only stopped when they saw her.

At which point Catwoman, covered in grime from both the undercarriage of the Escalade and the dirty Gotham City pavement, took a deep and exaggerated bow.

The Porsche came to a stop behind the Escalade, and Bluebird and Oracle got out.

Bluebird actually started clapping.

David Cain unloaded a devastating right hand.

And Orphan just breezed right past it, as though it were a particularly slow, fat fly.

She had to admit she was enjoying herself right now. Watching her father flail fruitlessly, trying to be the unstoppable hard-ass that he’d been the night before. Seeing the broken glass from his trip through the upstairs window fly from his leather jacket as he swung. Smelling the fear intermingled with his sweat.

His breathing was getting heavier. His kicks and his blows were getting slower. And beneath the Orphan mask, Cassandra Cain bared her teeth in a vicious smile. She felt like a cat that had come across a three-legged mouse.

“You’ll never find out who your mother is,” David said as he let loose a front kick that Orphan side-stepped.

“Don’t care,” orphan said.
Which was true. Technically. She knew where babies came from, knew the manual labor involved with creating another life, and had for some time. But she had never shaken the impression that she was grown in a lab, or pulled out of the ground like a turnip. She could be shown footage of her own birth, and there would still be an air of unreality to it. Truth be told, Orphan had only come to grips with the fact that she even had a mother at all early that morning, when she met David at the Princess Miagani Statue.

And that was an awfully short time to get attached to something.

Besides, if she changed her mind, she could always take Tim up on his offer to look for her.

David stopped swinging. He looked Orphan in the eye as he panted.

“All you did,” David said, “was trade one master for another. That is how fundamentally stupid you are. You can’t do anything unless you’re led to it. Instead of me giving you orders, it’s Batman, and you’ve never felt better. Wanna know why?”

Orphan tilted her head at him.

David sneered.

“Because you are a sword. You are not the hand that wields it.”

Orphan ran at him, and pinned him against the wall of the hotel lobby with her left forearm.

And she balled up her right fist.

She would never… ever… hear those words out of this man’s mouth again.

Orphan channeled eighteen years of anger, eighteen years of sadness, eighteen years standing on the outside of the rest of the human race because she couldn’t so much as talk to them because of David Cain’s actions, into her right hand.

She brought up her fist, giddily anticipating the splattering blood, the flying teeth, the splitting lip, the swelling eyes…

…and swung.

“You stopped a superhero fight to tell me something,” Robin said. “What is it?”

Jason took a second to get his bile under control before he simply said:

“Go home.”

Robin blinked.

“You live on this island, don’t you?” Jason asked. “Just take off that stupid fucking costume and go home. I’m willing to bet your parents miss you, and love you very much. That’s what parents do, right?”

“No,” Robin said.

Jason sighed.

“The way of it,” Jason said, “is that the old will always break the backs of the young to get what they
want. The one who brought me back to life lied to me, and Batman got me killed in the first place. They’re both true believers, and they both view everyone else as expendable.”

Jason could see that Robin was looking for something to say to that. Time to press the advantage.

“Tell me what happens if you die out there,” Jason said. “You don’t escape one of The Riddler’s traps in time. The Penguin trick-umbrellas your ass into an early grave. Or Pete the Purse-Snatcher gets off a lucky shot. You die. You go into the ground, and life goes on. That R on your chest goes onto another one of Bruce Wayne’s child soldiers, and the whole cycle starts over again, and your sacrifices didn’t mean a Goddamn thing. Tell me you don’t deserve better than that.”

Robin folded his arms. “If I die, that’s the job.”

Jason just stared in disbelief.

“Ask the people I saved at the Sorrento if my sacrifices didn’t mean anything,” Robin said. “Hell, ask all the people you saved if their lives would be better if Jason Todd was never Robin. This life costs. Sometimes it costs everything. But if it means others live, I’ll pay it with a smile on my face. That’s what the R is. That’s what the Bat is.”

After a moment of silence, Jason said “Dear God. He finally did it.”

“Did what?”

“Bruce finally found a version of himself to be Robin.”

“I am not like Bruce Wayne,” Robin said.

“There’s the person Bruce tells people he is, and then there’s the person Bruce actually is, and you’re it. Me and Dick would die to save lives, but you’re the one who’ll throw his life away to prove a point. Apart from your ego, you really don’t value yourself at all, do you?”

Robin had nothing on his face. It was a practiced nothing. An attempt to hide his emotions.

Jason ran his hand through his hair. “Holy shit, you’re gonna be Batman.”

The fight between Batman and Two had now spread to the now-abandoned lobby of the movie theater. Two took a wild swing with his sword that Batman ducked. The sword wound up beheading the cardboard Ryan Reynolds standee behind him.

Batman aimed a kick right to Two’s solar plexus, and he doubled over.

He’s coming up with the sword...

Which he did.

The sword came up, and Batman crossed his forearms. Two’s sword became locked in the serrated spikes on the underside of his gauntlets.

As he wrenched to the left, rotating his upper body and ripping the sword out of Two’s hands, Batman thought:

This is too easy.

The sword came out of Two’s grip too quickly. No one that seasoned would just let go of their only
As Batman flung the newly-obtained sword away, he darted his head to the right, and saw that the sword was not, in fact, Two’s only weapon.

A six inch retractable blade emerged from the left sleeve of Two’s jacket…

…and Batman was too slow to stop Two from sliding all six inches of steel into where the plates in his armor stretched and separated. Between the ribs, and into the right lung.

Batman couldn’t move. He couldn’t breathe. The back of his tongue was coated in blood.

“It’s a dirty trick,” Two said. “But you’re Batman. You should have had this one scouted.”

Two twisted the blade, and Batman groaned in agony. His legs turned to water, and he slowly dropped to his knees. Two followed him on the way down so they were eye to eye.

“I’m aware of my flaws,” Two said. “I like to prove my superiority. And there is nothing I want more than to tell you the name of the man who murdered you.”

Batman’s mouth opened and closed. The blood was all the way into his mouth now.

“But I’m not going to,” Two said. “It’s elegance. It’s poetry. Batman was killed by a mystery he couldn’t solve.”

And with that, Two ripped the blade out of Batman’s armor. A thick jet of hot blood sprayed onto the carpet.

Two got to his feet, and began to walk away.

Batman reached out for him, but fell to his face on the thinly carpeted concrete floor of the movie theater lobby, to suffocate and bleed out.

“Now?”

On the observation deck of Wayne Tower, Mister Mxyzptlk looked at Miss Gsptlsmz, and smiled.

“Yeah,” he said. “Now.”

And then he clapped his hands.

Orphan hit nothing but air.

The light and the temperature changed so quickly that she felt a sensation of vertigo that vanished as soon as it appeared.

She was in the lobby of an apartment building a second before, ready to turn her father’s face into hamburger meat with one devastating, meaningful punch.

But… she was in the Batcave now.

And she had no idea how she got there.

She took off her mask and turned around.
Bluebird was standing right next to her, clapping. She stopped once she realized where she was. Oracle looked confused as well. And Catwoman came up from what looked like a bow, completely flummoxed.

Spoiler was hunched down, seeing to her hand as though it was attached to something that wasn’t there anymore. Robin was staring off into the middle distance, looking completely shell-shocked.

And over at the far end, there was Kate Kane in her street clothes, next to a rather large woman with glasses and black hair. They hovered in the air for a split-second, as though they were sitting in invisible chairs, before they plopped to the concrete floor of the Batcave.

Kate’s cry of surprise got the attention of Cullen and Alfred, who were sitting at the Batcomputer.

Someone cleared their throat.

And everyone looked to the right.

Standing next to the strategy table was an older man standing at an impossible three feet tall.

No, not standing, *floating*.

He was in purple and orange, with a purple hat. Tufts of white hair stuck out over his ears. Standing next to him was a beautiful brunette who was wearing the kinds of clothes that Cassandra saw in old black and white movies.

“My name,” the small man said, “is Mister Mxyzptlk. And I’m the one who teleported you all here. I really would like to tell you why, but first thing’s first.

He pointed to the end of the row of heroes, and what Cassandra saw almost made her heart stop.

Batman, lying face down in a pool of his own blood, pale and barely breathing.

“He needs medical attention,” Mxyzptlk said. “Right now.”
Chapter 17: Voodoo Lounge

The entire room couldn’t breathe.

Everyone took their masks off. Cassandra could tell that they didn’t believe what they were seeing either.

Someone beat Batman...

A split-second of stillness, before Selina and Alfred moved at the same time.

Selina was the one who removed Batman’s cowl.

“Bruce?” Selina asked, her voice thick, her body panicking. “Bruce?”

The big woman next to Kate moved up behind them.

“I have him,” she said.

She picked him up in her arms.

“Diana,” Selina said. “I… Thank you.”

“The medical bay is in the back,” Alfred said, his voice remaining unflappable, but his body emanating worry. “Here, I’ll show you.”

Alfred led the charge. This Diana woman with the glasses carrying Bruce followed.

Selina trailed last. She started to go after them, but stopped. And Cassandra could see that she had to will herself to follow, as though she knew what was coming next and dreaded it with every molecule of her person.

Kate whirled at this Mister Mxyzptlk guy.

“Alright, you goblin,” Kate said. “You have explaining to do. Tell us what you want!”

“We have to wait for Wonder Woman to get back,” Mister Mxyzptlk said. “This concerns her, too.”

“That was Wonder Woman?” Stephanie asked. “What the hell was she doing with you?”

“Do not start with me,” Kate said. “Be a bitch another time. Just don’t do it now.”

Tim looked at Kate funny.

“If it’s any consolation,” Mister Mxyzptlk said, “he’s gonna be fine.”

No one had anything to say to that, but Cassandra felt her terror and concern lessen. She looked at everyone else, and it was obvious that their minds were at ease, even though they shouldn’t have been.

This man had a power over them.

After a long pause, Kate looked at Harper. “And who might you be? You must be new around
here. I don’t know your name.”


Kate actually looked impressed by this.

“Batman’s looked for you,” Kate said. “The Bluebird of Bleake Island? He has been for months.”

Tim looked at Kate funny again.

“Well,” Harper said, “it’s easy to cover your tracks when you’re… y’know… poor.”

“I’m sorry,” Tim said, looking at the interloper and his female companion, “but what’s your name again?”

“Mister Mxyzptlk,” he said. “And this is my wife, Miss Gsptlsnz.”

Miss Gsptlsnz doffed the large sun hat she was wearing at Tim and said “Charmed, handsome.”

Tim nodded. “Mixy…”

“Mxyzptlk,” he said a second time.

“Could you spell that for me?”

“Oh, no,” Mister Mxyzptlk said. “I’m not falling for that again.”

It was then that Diana came back in from the medical bay, covered in Bruce’s blood. Just seeing her reinforced the gravity of the situation in which they found themselves. A new silence fell.

Cassandra looked at her. Now that she had been told who she was, Cassandra could plainly see that Diana was Wonder Woman. She’d seen her at the wedding, but they hadn’t spoken. And Cassandra had the thought that she always had when she met a new superhero.

*I think I could take her…*

“Now, then,” Mister Mxyzptlk said. “I bet you’re wondering why you’re here.”

“Ya don’t say,” Stephanie said. “Who are you? And I don’t mean your name.”

“Quite right, young lady,” Mxyzptlk said. “I am a rogue, imp, and prankster *par excellence* from the Fifth Dimension. I mold reality like clay, and shape possibility like *completely separate clay.*”

“So… a God, then?” Diana asked.

Mxyzptlk smiled. “No,” he said. “Any churches in my name still have to pay their taxes. Also unlike a God, I have a sense of humor. And playing with you little lumps of meat is so much fun.”

“You think this is fun?” Kate asked. “Bruce Wayne is dying in there. Show some damned respect!”

Tim, who’d been fidgeting every time Kate spoke, could contain himself no longer.

“Kate?” Tim asked.

Kate looked at him.

“You’re speaking in haiku.”
Kate still looked at him.

“Japanese line poetry,” Tim said. “Five syllables, seven syllables, five syllables. Everything you’ve said since you got here to the Batcave has been a haiku.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Kate said. “I’d notice something like that… Holy crap, you’re right!”

Kate glared at Mxyzptlk, who just smiled in return.

“See? I’m all about jokes and fun! Getting Batwoman to speak in haiku? Replacing the corn syrup content in the world’s supply of Soder Cola with anchovy slurry? Filling the Grand Canyon with Miracle Whip? Getting Harper Row to admit something painfully embarrassing about herself?”

Harper’s eyes lit up, and she smiled the smile of someone whom the truth would set free.

“With the exception of my brother and the little three-foot stump over there,” Harper said, “anyone in this house could just, like… so totally get it if they wanted to.”

Everyone just stared at her. But Harper was not deterred. She looked at Barbara.

“Even you, Miss Ginger Know-It-All. Hell, even Alfred… Especially Alfred, now that I think about it.”

And with that, Harper looked off to the rear of the Batcave, and cupped her hands to her mouth.

“You hear that? I got my eye on you, Union Jack!”

Harper took her hands away from her mouth, and smiled at everyone… But that smile faded, once she fully realized what she’d done.

“Does, um… does anyone have a gun?” Harper asked. “I just need to use it on myself real quick, I’ll give it right back.”

“Twenty-three hours out of a given day,” Mxyzptlk said, “I’m all about the laughs. Superman’s the most fun to pick on. Not like you stiffs. You’re the Batfam. I so much as throw a cream pie at any one of you, and you’ll just huddle up in the corner and blame yourselves.”

Mxyzptlk sighed. “Seriously. You people need help.”

Stephanie piped up. “We’re the what, now?”

“You’ve never fought Superman,” Diana said. “If he’d dealt with something as powerful as you, we’d know about it.”

“True,” Mxyzptlk said. “And false. I haven’t pranked the Superman of this Earth. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Because this is the one serious hour of the day. I’m gonna give you all what you so desperately desire.”

“And what’s that?” Stephanie asked.

Mxyzptlk smiled, and said “Answers.”

He turned to Tim.

“Timbo, do be so kind as to break off multiversal theory.”
Tim blinked, looking unsure of himself, but he began to speak.

“Umm… The theory that multiple Earths exist on top of each other, sharing the same space, but separated by differing vibrational frequencies. A theory that was proven true by our contact with, and the destruction of, Earth 2. That’s how Power Girl got here.”

Mxyzptlk nodded. “‘Multiple?’ Try ‘Infinite.’”

He held out his hand, and a small version of planet Earth hovered over it.

“On planet Earth,” Mxyzptlk said, “a man flips a coin to see whether or not he calls the girl he met on Tinder, or sits his ass down and watches the hockey game. The coin comes up heads, and he calls the girl, but because he flipped that coin…”

A second Earth popped up next to the first one.

“…another Earth comes into existence where he watched hockey. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, a woman stops to consider whether or not she wants to turn right for her job interview, or turn left to buy weed so she’s nice and high for her job interview. She goes right, but because she stops to consider it…”

A third Earth popped up to that second one.

“…Boom. Another Earth.”

The Earths started multiplying.

“And so on, and so on, until…”

A second later, the entire Batcave was filled with Earths. All of them completely illusory, as everyone’s hands could pass right through them.

“Multiple Earths,” Mxyzptlk said, “each with their own billions of years of history, come into existence every picosecond. Time being relative, and all.”

Cassandra’s head started spinning. This idea… it was just too big for her right now.

“Infinite Earths,” Mxyzptlk said, “making up what we call The Multiverse. There’s also a Dark Multiverse, but that’s complicated. And also stupid. Infinite Earths, and infinite versions of each one of you.”

And if Cassandra’s head felt fit to bust a second ago, that was nothing compared to what she felt now. She tried to reckon with what it meant to have infinite versions of herself out there somewhere.

“And in between all those Earths,” Mxyzptlk said. “Above them and beneath them, around them and beyond them… is the Fifth Dimension. My neck of the woods. But all of those Earths stem from just the one Earth.”

All of the Earths disappeared, except for the one in Mxyzptlk’s hand.

“Earth Zero,” he said. “Now put a pin in that. We’re gonna need to get to it later.”

That last Earth disappeared. Mxyzptlk looked at Kate.

“Now Kate,” he said. “I do believe a certain plant Goddess told you a story last night.”
Kate was about to say something, but stopped herself, and gave Mxyzptlk the kind of glare that could have curdled milk.

“It’s okay,” he said. “You’re back to normal.”

Kate still had her brow furrowed, but she told the story.

She told the rest of them about how the Blade of Resurrection had been stolen from Shadowcrest. About how while Batwoman and the rest of the Justice League Dark had been looking for the Blade, Wonder Woman had been looking for the people behind it: The Cult of Nemesis.

The Cult of Nemesis was a group dedicated to the Resurrection of Nemesis: the Greek Goddess of Grudges, Blood Feuds, and the Unjustly Slain. Nemesis was executed by Zeus himself three thousand years ago after she created a magic superweapon that would have erased humanity from the face of the Earth, killing the rest of the Greek Gods and Goddesses in the process.

That magic superweapon was the Stone of Nemesis. Bathed in the blood of someone unjustly slain, the Stone would give rise to five Soldiers of Nemesis, each made of their own surroundings. They were unkillable, rebuilding themselves from their environment after they had been felled. And to make matters worse, more soldiers built themselves after each life they took.

And Kate ended the story with the Greek Goddess Demeter asking her if Swamp Thing was single.

“Well?” Harper asked. “Is he?”

Everyone looked at her in horror, none more so than Barbara Gordon.

“Please tell me you’re not so thirsty that you’re out here trying to do a plant monster.”

“I’m not,” Harper said. “I’m just curious, is all.”

Barbara looked at Cassandra. “Is she lying?”

Cassandra shook her head.

Kate shrugged, and said “I told her he was alone, but unavailable. Abby Arcane is Avatar of the Rot, and I really don’t want to be on her bad side.”

“Of course,” Mxyzptlk said, “some questions must be asked. Who started the Order of Nemesis in the first place? Who shepherded her memory in the three thousand years since her execution? Who stole the Blade of Resurrection in the first place? Who… is behind all of this?”

No one said anything.

Mxyzptlk smiled. “The one who betrayed her to Zeus in the first place,” he said. “Harmonia.”

Everything about Diana’s body screamed shock. She took off her glasses because, in Cassandra’s estimation, that was what shocked people did.

“Harmonia?” Diana asked. “But… But that…”

“Who’s Harmonia?” Stephanie asked.

“The Goddess of Harmony and Concord,” Diana said. “She is a meek and gentle soul. She wouldn’t…”
“Well,” Mxyzptlk said, “harmony is a funny thing. On Earth Zero, Harmonia’s every last bit as chill as you say she is. That’s because she’s on Earth Zero, and everything is as it should be. But on all the other Earths? Everything is not as it should be, because everything is different from Earth Zero. So all the other Harmonias in the multiverse are varying versions of nucking futs. The Harmonia on this Earth is lucky, relatively speaking. She just hears whispers.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Cassandra said. “Why would the Harmonia of this Earth be hearing whispers when we’re the ones on Earth Zero?”

Everyone nodded.

And then everyone gawked at Cassandra, because that was the longest uninterrupted sentence that she’d ever spoken in her entire life.

And Cassandra only noticed it when it was out of her mouth. The world seemed more legible, more connected than it had been. Letters, words, how they looked, how they corresponded with sound, all seemed to make sense to her now. Limitless possibility spread before her, and she had this feeling in her stomach as though she were falling.

She looked at Mxyzptlk.

“I’m being pranked right now, aren’t I?” Cassandra asked in her low croak.

Mxyzptlk nodded. “Just for the next thirty seconds or so. Use them wisely.”

Cassandra Cain had thirty seconds to say whatever she wanted…

…but the possibility had seemed so out of reach that she hadn’t given the matter of what she would say if she were able to talk like everyone else any serious consideration.

So… She just said stuff she heard on Youtube.

“‘Consult your physician to see if Flonase is right for you.’” Cassandra said. “‘Plus Paul Shaffer, and the World’s Most Dangerous Band.’ ‘Supercalifragilisticexpialidickcheese.’”

“Cassandra,” Mxyzptlk said. “Wisely.”

“Right,” Cassandra said. “Earth Zero… This is Earth Zero, isn’t it?”

Mxyzptlk shook his head. “Not even close. This is Earth Eight-Oh-Three. Not as different as some Earths are from Earth Zero, but we’ll get to that.”

“Wait,” Cassandra said. “Does Earth Zero have a Power Girl?”

“Indeed they do.”

“So do we,” Cassandra said. “Where did the extra Power Girl come from, if Power Girl comes from Earth 2?”

“You want to know the funny thing about Earth 2?”

“There’s nothing funny about any of this,” Cassandra said.

“There is no Earth 2,” Mxyzptlk said. “Or rather, there is an Earth 2, but it’s not the same Earth 2 everyone thinks it is. Every Earth that has a Power Girl has a pocket dimension that they all call Earth 2 because that’s the first Earth they come into contact with, and each of those pocket
dimensions destroy themselves in some way for the express cosmic purpose of bringing Power Girl over to the initial Earth. But don’t tell Power Girl that. She won’t handle it well. Or do tell Power Girl, and take pictures, because she won’t handle it well, and it’ll be hilarious... But hey, look who I’m talking to.”

Cassandra was about to ask him what he meant by that… but the words escaped her.

Her thirty seconds were up.

Cassandra groused, and said “Butthole.”

“Hey,” Mister Mxyzptlk said, “don’t let anyone say you’re stupid. Those were good questions.”

Stephanie put her hand on Cassandra’s shoulder.

“That flies in the face of everything we know about multiversal theory,” Tim said.

Mxyzptlk just slouched. “Kid, who you gonna believe, me or Grant Morrison?”

Tim just blinked at him, and asked “Who?”

“Now then,” Mxyzptlk said. “Where was I? Oh, right. Harmonia. She’s been hearing whispers ever since she came into existence. That’s thousands of years, and she’s been getting more and more fraught by the day, with each and every tiny, minute divergence from Earth Zero.”

“What divergences?” Kate asked. “You keep telling us Earth Eight-Oh-Three is different from Earth Zero. How so?”

“For starters,” Myzptlk said, “The Joker isn’t supposed to be dead. Bruce Wayne wasn’t supposed to marry Selina Kyle. Batman wasn’t supposed to go into therapy, and it wasn’t supposed to work. And those are just the ones closest to home. There are countless others across thousands of years, each contributing a whisper that plagues her dreams and corrupts her thoughts. So she spread her consciousness beyond this Earth, trying to see what she could do to find the baseline of harmony and ease her suffering. She saw The Multiverse… She saw the Fifth Dimension.”

Mxyzptlk folded his arms. “She saw infinite versions of herself, all in incredible pain, and she hatched a plan. Resurrect Nemesis, find the Stone, raise the Army, and end all life on Earth Eight-Oh-Three. And with an army of seven billion at her back, open a portal to the next Earth… and the next… and the next… consuming all life across the multiverse, except the life in Earth Zero. She’ll take it upon herself to free all the other Harmonias in the Multiverse from their madness by murdering every last person on every alternate Earth. Because if she can’t have harmony… she’ll have silence.”

“But if Gods need worshippers,” Stephanie said, “then wouldn’t the deaths of every person on Earth take out all of the Greek Gods and Goddesses, herself included?”

“Not Nemesis,” Mxyzptlk said. “She doesn’t need worshippers. Being as she’s the Goddess of the Unjustly Slain, she just needs murder victims. And remember, the Blade of Resurrection binds the person who uses it to the person they're resurrecting. Anything Harmonia needs to survive, she could just take from Nemesis.”

A cold hush spread all over everyone, until Harper finally spoke.

“Where’s this Stone of Nemesis? Where would it be that it took her three-thousand years to find it?”
“Here in Gotham,” Mxyzptlk said. “More than that, I shall not say. I’m only telling you all this because, good detectives though some of you may be, everything past this point is impossible, and you’d have never figured it out. But the location of the Stone? That is possible to figure out. So you best get crackin’.

Harper snorted, and said “Figures.”

“And once she saw that it was here,” Mxyzptlk said, “she got desperate. She did the dumbest thing I have ever heard of in The Multiverse.”

“What was it?” Stephanie asked.

Mxyzptlk glowered.

“She broke into the Fifth Dimension. She stole from me, and that’s why I decided to monitor this situation closely.”

“What did she steal?” Tim asked.

“Energy,” Mister Mxyzptlk said. “Beyond height, width, depth, breadth, length, and even time, there is possibility, and that’s what the Fifth Dimension runs on. With a strong enough will, you can create just about anything with Fifth Dimensional energy.”

“What did she create?” Barbara asked.

“See, Harmonia may be a fool,” Mxyzptlk said, “but she’s not an idiot. She knew that if the Stone was in Gotham, she may have to go toe-to-toe with Batman, and there was a chance she’d lose. This stuff with the mob and bin Sayel and David Cain was to keep you all off-guard and distracted so she could find the Stone quietly.”

“But she’s a Goddess,” Stephanie said.

“She’s an increasingly unhinged Goddess who’s been weakened from thousands of years of declining worship,” Mxyzptlk said. “And he’s Batman. It’s an even money bet. So she created… backup.”

Mxyzptlk clapped his hands. The translucent images of two people appeared before him.

Two men with fire instead of heads.

“I believe you know One and Two,” Mxyzptlk said. "All of you except Diana and Kate, anyway.”

Tim’s eyes went wide. He pointed at the image of One and yelled “JASON TODD!”

Everyone looked at him.

“One is Jason Todd,” Tim said. “He revealed himself to me.”

Mxyzptlk floated up next to One’s head, and snapped his fingers twice. The flames went away, and the handsome face of Jason Todd appeared.

Everyone in the room gasped. Both Barbara and Diana put their hands to their mouths. Cassandra fought her way through her shock, and remembered that of all the people in this room, Barbara and Diana were the only ones who had ever actually met Jason before The Joker killed him.

“Oh…” Barbara said, tears forming in her eyes. “Oh, no…”
“Great Hera,” Diana said. “Harmonia resurrected that poor boy.”

“‘Resurrected’ is too strong a word,” Mxyzptlk said. “Jason Todd is still in his grave. More like ‘reconstructed.’” See, Jason was supposed to be resurrected on this Earth, but he wasn’t. So it was easy for Harmonia to reconstruct him, being as there was a Jason Todd-shaped hole in this universe. Completely indistinguishable from Jason, and about the same age he would be had he lived. Has all his thoughts and memories, he can grow old and die, but just… doesn’t have a soul.”

“Wait,” Tim said. “All his thoughts and memories.”

“Right,” Mxyzptlk said.

“Completely indistinguishable from the real thing.”

“Yup.”

“So… do any of us need a soul anyway?”

Mxyzptlk shrugged. “Not really. Think of the soul as a back-up flash drive that Gods use for poker chips. Oh, and they can power Soldiers of Nemesis. Can’t forget that part.”

And with that, Mxyzptlk floated down next to Two’s head. It took a while, as Two was a great deal shorter than Jason.

Mxyzptlk snapped his fingers next to Two’s head. The flames parted, and a face appeared. He was handsome. Short black hair, tan skin, brilliant green eyes, seemed to be in his early twenties. Cassandra didn’t recognize him. She scanned the room, and saw that no one else recognized him either.

“Who is he?” Harper asked.

“It’s about possibility, remember?” Mxyzptlk asked. “Things that could have been, but weren’t, that’s the easiest way to do it. If One is the Jason Todd that was never resurrected… then Two is the Damian Wayne that was never born.”

Cassandra could feel the confusion settle in over everyone.

“Damian… Wayne?” Kate asked.


“It doesn’t make sense,” Stephanie said. “This guy’s in his twenties. I mean, unless Bruce has been tapping ass since he was twelve… Oh my God, Bruce has been tapping ass since he was twelve.”

Cassandra furrowed her brow. She distinctly remembered Bruce telling her that he had had his first kiss at eighteen, so having sex before that would have been difficult, bordering on the nonsensical.

She also remembered Bruce telling her not to tell anyone else.

“Harmonia decided to flex her creative muscles,” Mxyzptlk said. “See, there could have been a Damian Wayne on Earth Eight-Oh-Three stemming from the one sexual encounter Bruce and Talia had in a building in the East End ten years ago, but… well, let’s just say Bruce loaded the cannon on board the ship, but it didn’t fire. It’s a hell of a lot harder to make something out of that than something like Jason who was already here, so she distilled the worst parts of the worst Damian
Waynes from across the multiverse into one body that she just aged up into his prime… And the Earth Zero Damian Wayne isn’t the best kid to begin with. He’s actually running a Supervillain Abu Ghraib right now. That’s just awful.”

“I don’t believe it,” Tim said. “The son of Batman on Earth Zero is a supervillain.”

“Actually,” Mxyzptlk said, “he’s Robin.”

Tim just looked offended. His jaw was almost hanging to his chest, and the only word he could get out of that open mouth was “How?”

Mxyzptlk shrugged his shoulders. “Nepotism, man. Ain’t it always the way, though?”

“How bad is this Damian?” Stephanie asked. Cassandra looked at her, and was almost taken aback by the cold rage she was displaying.

“Think Ted Bundy, but worse with women,” Mxyzptlk said. “He’s bad.”

“This is all moot, isn’t it?” Diana asked.

They all looked at her.

“We have the Blade of Resurrection. We stopped the Cult of Nemesis. Harmonia can’t do anything.”

Mxyzptlk sighed. “Well, that’s the even worse news. There’s more than one way for a deity to bring back one of their own. The Blade of Resurrection is just the least dangerous.”

Diana actually went pale. “She didn’t.”

“She did,” Myzptlk said. “She used what was left of her divine power to bring the soul of Nemesis into herself. Harmonia tried to lock her away in a small section of her mind, but she was weakened from all the interdimensional travel and Fifth Dimensional construction. Nemesis took over, and she’s walking around in Harmonia’s body. So… You have that to deal with.”

A silence fell over the Batcave.

“Welp,” Mxyzptlk said, “that’s about it for me. I’m not interfering any further. Now if you don’t mind, or even if you do…”

“Wait,” Kate said.

Mxyzptlk turned to her.

“You’re a Fifth Dimensional prankster, right?”

“The best,” he said.

“So… you could turn Nemesis into a hot fudge sundae if you wanted.”

“I could,” Mxyzptlk said, smiling.

“So why don’t you?”

Mxyzptlk furrowed his brow. “Well… Jeez… That sounds like…”
He turned to Miss Gsptlsnz. “What’s that thing? It begins with a W and I hate it?”

“Work,” she said.

“Right,” Mxyzptlk said. “Work. You think I’m telling you all this and helping you because I’m kind? Harmonia stole from me. No one does that. And I don’t see why I should get my brow all sweaty when I have grunts like you to do it for me. Just do what I tell you, alright? Both you and The Multiverse will live longer.”

He rubbed his hands together, and was about to say something, but stopped, and stared at them.

Cassandra looked at the rest of them. They locked their eyes on Mister Mxyzptlk with some kind of expectation.

It seemed that they were all thinking the same thing she was.

Mxyzptlk groaned.

“You want me to tell you how you’re different from your Earth Zero versions, don’t you?”

“Well,” Cassandra said, “yeah…”

He groaned again. He cracked his knuckles, and said “Alright, let’s make this quick. You. Barbara.”

“Yeah?” Barbara asked.

“Your brother is not a serial killer on this Earth. Congratulations.”

Barbara lowered her brow in confusion as Mxyzptlk looked at Diana.

“You’re made of clay, right?”

“Yes,” Diana said.

“Good. I hope it stays that way. That origin suits you best, and Zeus really doesn’t need any more kids.”

As Diana processed this, he looked at Kate.

“Kate… I really don’t know how to tell you this in a way that’s either delicate or funny, so I’m just gonna come out and say it. Maggie Sawyer wasn’t supposed to fall in love with Renee. She was supposed to fall in love with you.”

A look of deep, visceral hatred plastered itself on Kate Kane’s face. Diana, much like Stephanie had done to Cassandra earlier, put her hand on Kate’s shoulder.

Mxyzptlk looked at Harper. “How did your mom die on this Earth?”

“She was hit by a drunk driver,” Harper said.

“Well, your Earth Zero mom was assassinated,” he said. He pointed at Cassandra. “And she’s the one who did it.”

Cassandra instantly went cold. Her eyes went wide, and her mouth wordlessly opened. It was bad enough that she had killed the one man already. Now, it turned out, an alternate universe version of
herself had killed the mom of the friend she had made that day.

“And Cassandra,” Mister Mxyzptlk said, “that counts as yours. No double-dipping… Alright, fine. Earth Zero you is into ballet.”

She took time from being aghast and horrified at her alternate universe crimes to be aghast and horrified at her alternate universe interests.

Ballet? That thing where people dressed in wedgie pants and puffy skirts and leapt around on their tiptoes? Cassandra knew enough about the human body to know that that was a good way to destroy your ankles. And your toenails. What kind of stupid bullshit…?

Mxyzptlk turned to Tim. “If I had to pass out a trophy for Most Improved Life, it would be to you. You are actually Robin, you’re not confused as to whether or not your parents are alive, and you didn’t name yourself after a crummy mid-tier burger chain.”

Tim could only say “Uhhhhhh…”

“Oh, but a word of warning. When you turn twenty-one, your hairline’s gonna start to recede, and you’re gonna have that 2010 Bill Hader thing going. Which is great for 2010 Bill Hader, because he was tall enough to pull it off. You… aren’t.”

Tim’s look of confusion turned into Tim’s look of dismay.

Mxyzptlk whirled around to Stephanie. “And as for you…”

Stephanie looked terrified.

And Mister Mxyzptlk stopped.

His look went from one that held great interest to one that, for him at least, looked quite a bit like warmth.

“It’s alright,” he said. “I won’t tell anyone.”

Stephanie deflated with relief.

“What about me?” asked a voice in the back of the room.

They all turned.

Cullen Row had not moved from his position at the Batcomputer.

“You haven’t said anything this entire time,” Mister Mxyzptlk said. “You haven’t annoyed me with stupid questions, and that means I love you like a son. Give it a few years, and your love life is gonna be the stuff of legend.”

Cullen smiled and sat up straight. “Really?”

“Really,” he said. “The boys will come around, and you’ll have to beat them off with a stick… Although they would greatly prefer you use your hand. MXYZPTLK OUT!”

With that, Mister Mxyzptlk and Miss Gsptlsnz vanished into nothingness with a loud POP!

And for a few moments, they all just stood there in silence.
“So… I guess that answers how Jason and David knew all of our names,” Tim said.

They all looked at him.

“I mean… If Two is a bunch of Damian Waynes from across The Multiverse rolled up into one body, then all of those Damians would have had to know who we all are. That’s how they found out. Damian just… told them, and… and I’ll shut up now.”

A few more moments of silence.

“I just want to crawl into bed and sleep for a century,” Stephanie said.

“We can’t,” Barbara said.

“Why not?”

“Because the Batmobile and all our motorcycles are still on Miagani Island,” Barbara said. “There’s a protocol to bring the Batmobile back by itself, but nothing doing on the bikes.”

Barbara turned to Diana and Kate. “You wouldn’t mind following us along on this, would you? All of us would have to pile into a van that Bruce has in his garage. There’s a spare bike out on Miagani because… Selina should be with Bruce right now. And someone has to drive the van back, so…”

Kate nodded. “Sure. We have to go to the airport, anyway.”

“We do,” Diana said.

“To get our stuff,” said Kate. “And to explain to the pilot of my private jet how his two passengers vanished from the plane mid-flight.”

“I will need to change clothes, first,” Diana said.

Kate looked at Bruce’s blood all over Diana’s front, and said “Oh. Right.”

Diana turned to Stephanie. “Is there anything upstairs that will fit me?”

“There’s an entire dresser full of sweats near the first floor gym,” Stephanie said.

Barbara nodded. “Alright, everyone, you know where the garage is.”

And with that, they all went to the elevator.

All except Cassandra, who tried to stay back as far as she could. She didn’t want to be seen right now.

“Cass.”

Cassandra looked up, and saw that Harper had hung back as well.

Her heart sank.

“Come here,” Harper said.

With her head down, looking at the floor, Cassandra slowly walked over to Harper.

“Look at me, Cass.”
She did. It took a while, but she managed.

There was some measure of warmth in Harper’s eyes.

“Are you seriously… seriously… guilting yourself out over something an alternate universe version of you did?”

Cassandra felt a wave of confusion. It sounded silly when someone just came out and said it like that. But guilt wasn’t so easily chucked aside.

She nodded, though.

Harper sighed, then put her hands on Cassandra’s shoulders.

“You’re riding on the back of my motorcycle when we get it, alright? And I’ll buy you a smoothie on the way back here. Everything is fine, okay?”

She still felt concerned, but Cassandra nodded.

Harper ran her hand through her blue hair.

“Mister Mixy-Dick-Lick is right,” Harper said. “You people do need help.”

On the rooftop of the storage building on Founders Island, Jason Todd sat on a crate, away from David Cain and Damian Wayne.

Damian was sitting on the railing overlooking the street with a dreamy smile on his face, while David was pacing back and forth in front of him, agitated to the point of looking as though his whole body was itchy.

“I don’t know how you’re being so calm about all this,” David said. “They all vanished into thin air. There’s another player on this board that we were unaware of till now.”

“I sank six inches of steel into Batman’s chest,” Damian said. “A poisoned blade. He’s most likely dead by now, and if he isn’t, he will be out of commission for a good long while, vanished or no. I did my job… It’s disheartening, really. The Batman of this Earth was a challenge, though not as great a one as I’d hoped.”

This stopped David from pacing.

“How does your dad on this Earth measure up to the ones your familiar with?”

“Stronger than some,” Damian said. “Nowhere near as strong as others.”

“No,” David said. “I mean as a person.”

Damian’s brow turned up in confusion.

“What I mean,” David said, “is if the Bruce Wayne of this Earth is a good dad.”

Damian rolled his eyes. “None of the Bruces I have known concerned themselves with being a good father. They were all about the mission, in whatever form it took. If the Bruce of this Earth wasted precious time worrying about his own image, then it’s no wonder I defeated him.”

Jason sneered at this, and got lost in his own thoughts. It seemed Bruce Wayne being an asshole was
a constant in whatever Earth held him.

A wave of mighty anger arose in his chest as he exhaled a thin jet of white steam out of his nose into the December air.

Bruce Wayne wouldn’t quit being Batman after his Robin died, but The Joker getting offed by Harley Quinn caused him to hang up the cowl. He still couldn’t believe it.

And what made it worse was that he dragged other kids into the life even after his death served as a cautionary tale.

He wouldn’t be caught dead thinking it, but he would be caught dead not being caught dead thinking it.

*Did I mean so little to him?*

And not only that, his brainwashing game must have gone up a notch in the last few years. Because Tim Drake, the new Robin, seemed so damn sure of himself. So ready and willing to die for the cause, no matter how dangerous, how foolish, how lethal that cause was. How little that cause would leave Tim to show for it if he were lucky enough to live.

Jason allowed himself a deeper dive into self-loathing and his anger at others. Why not? He thought he had earned it, after all.

Tim Drake had the stink of the suburbs on him. The stench of squeaky-clean honor roll. Jason Todd had been brought in as Robin when he was little, a street kid, a punk-ass who tried to steal the hubcaps off the Batmobile.

Jason let himself smile at the memory of that.

Meanwhile, where did Bruce dig Tim up? Some private school science fair?

Jason imagined that when he realized there was a fourth shadow on the rooftop with them tonight.

He looked up, and saw the silhouette of Harmonia standing in the shadow of the old, empty pigeon coop that was on the roof.

Jason Todd was full of anger and resentment, right now. And his release valve had just materialized out of thin air.

He got up off the crate and started walking toward her.

“Hey,” he said, an edge in his voice. “I want to talk to you.”

He stopped a few feet away from the coop, and folded his arms.

“You, uh… You wanna tell me why you led me on saying I’d get my revenge on The Joker when you knew damn well he’s been dead this entire time?”

David, who along with Damian, had just noticed their benefactor appearing on the roof with them, said “Don’t talk to her like that.”

Jason pointed at David without looking at him. “Mind your own fucking business, Cain. This is between me and her.”

David didn’t say anything to that, so Jason took this as his cue to continue.
“You know me,” Jason said. “Hell, you were the one who reconstructed me. You knew my backstory. So you know that if you feed me a line of bullshit like he did, trying to get me to do what you want me to do, it’s not gonna go so fucking well, now is it? And all this time, you still don’t tell us what you’re cooking up, what you’re getting out of this, and you look us in the eye with a straight face and tell us to trust you? I don’t care if you’re a Greek Goddess or not, you can eat shit!”

Harmonia was silent, and she was still, but only for a moment. Then she stepped out of the shadow of the coop, and made her presence felt.

She had flecks and spatters of blood all over her face, all over her robes. Over her usual attire, she was wearing an open blue work shirt with a nametag on the right side that said “Michael.”

And maybe it was just Jason… but he didn’t remember Harmonia’s eyes being green before.

He was just about to ask her why she was covered in blood, when she stuck out her thin, pale hand.

Deep and excruciating pain coated him. His very brain was on fire. He dropped to his knees, so overwhelmed by the agony that he couldn’t even scream.

“You DARE raise your voice to me?”

Jason flattened himself to the ground. He didn’t know which part of himself to hold.

“Or do you confuse me with that whelp Harmonia? Well, I shall endeavor to enlighten one in such dire need of education.”

She knelt over him. “I am Nemesis. Goddess of the Unjustly Slain. Which means, soulless construct that you are, that I am your Goddess, Jason Todd. Your bones are mine. Your blood is mine. Your thoughts, your memories, your dreams… belong to me.”

Even though his eyes were open, he saw the blackness rushing toward him…

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Robin came to somewhere dark. He didn’t know where.

His brow furrowed, trying to ward off the pain in his head. Only then did he realize that he wasn’t wearing his mask anymore.

To make matters worse, he was tied to an old wooden chair. His boots and his gloves had been removed, leaving his hands and his feet bare. The chair to which he was tied was in the middle of a single circle of illumination, cast by a lone light above him. The floor was uncarpeted, and the chill from the cold concrete had numbed his feet. More than this, he could not say about his surroundings.

From the darkness, the sound of dress shoes walking back and forth across the concrete.

Then… a voice. It had a practiced height and a natural cruelty.

“Once upon a time,” the voice said, “there was a costumed duo named Punch and Jewelee.”

The voice stopped. Robin’s fear rose.

“They were villains,” the voice said. “They used to bug Captain Atom back when he was still alive. A stitch, they were, and married as well. And they dressed… as clowns.”
A man stepped into the light. He was tall and angular, wearing a deep purple three piece suit with a dark yellow shirt. Black and white spats on his feet. His long, thin face was deathly white, his lips bloody red, his hair a slicked-back bright green. His permanent smile revealed large white teeth. His green eyes were rimmed with tiny red veins.

And he was holding a crowbar over his shoulder, like a baseball player held a bat.

“Can you imagine?” The Joker asked. “Clowns. So naturally I had to find them, and… air my grievances in the warm and polite manner for which I am famous.”

He started walking in a circle around Robin, staying at the edge of the cone of light.

“It took me… Four days to feed Punch to Jewelee,” The Joker said. “I hemmed and hawed about which one I’d feed to the other. But in the end, I figured the bigger one should go inside the smaller one, otherwise it wouldn’t nearly be as funny. That first day, Jewelee was talkative. ‘Please, Mister J, we didn’t mean anything by it, I’ll stop, just let me go.’ Day two? Stewing in her own filth while tied to a chair not unlike the one you’re sitting in now? All she could say were two words.”

At this point, The Joker was standing in front of Robin. The Joker looked him in the eye, and Robin looked down at his lap.

“‘Kill me,’” The Joker said, his voice an impression of someone totally benumbed. “Just those two words over and over again on the second day. Day three and four she didn’t say anything at all. Just let silent tears leak out while she kept eating… and eating… and eating…”

The Joker held the crowbar to his waist with both hands, as though it were a cane he was going to do an old-timey dance number with.

“A champ, that Jewelee,” The Joker said. “I didn’t bother cooking or refrigerating Punch during that four days, so you could imagine how atrocious her breath was. Of course I had to let her go, otherwise this whole thing would have been pointless. She got up, walked out of the barn I held her in, and as soon as she got to the dirt driveway, she just lay down, and… stopped breathing.”

The Joker took Robin’s measure.

“I tell you this for two reasons,” The Joker said. “The first is because, well, it’s not everyday a clown tells you about the funniest thing he’s ever seen, right?”

The Joker started giggling, and from there, it went to a full peal of laughter. A high, frigid sound that Robin knew would give him nightmares, if he ever lived to sleep again.

And just like that, the laughing stopped.

“But the second,” The Joker said, “is because if I’m that protective of my gimmick, then how protective do you think I am… of him?”

Robin started shivering. The Joker held the crowbar out and tapped both of Robin’s shoulders as though he were being knighted.

“I’m a good person,” The Joker said. “Really, I am. Because I put Batman’s needs above my own. I only want the best for him, because otherwise this little dance he and I do just wouldn’t have the same swing, the same jazz, the same oomph.”

The Joker held out the crowbar again. The claw lightly grazed the side of Robin’s cheek, and Robin tilted his head to the side to get away from it.
“And here you are… making him weak… and taking time from him that rightly belongs to ME!”

The Joker’s face contorted in fury, the corners of his smiling lips hanging down on both sides in an angry frown.

“What gave you the right to step in between gods?” The Joker screamed. “To operate on a level so far above you that you can’t even breathe the air?”

The Joker took a few deep breaths as Robin cringed, trying to disappear into the chair to which he was tied.

“You’re, what, fifteen?” The Joker asked. “There’s someone you like at school, I know there is. I hate to break it to you, kiddo… but you’re never going to see them again.”

The Joker reared back and swung the crowbar as Robin yelped…

…and the crowbar came to a halt an inch away from his face.

“You know,” The Joker said. “Another version of me said never to start with the head because the victim gets all fuzzy. That guy knew what he was talking about.”

In the blink of an eye, in the heartbeat of a hummingbird, The Joker brought the claw of the crowbar down into the soft flesh of Robin’s right hand. Skin tore, blood sprayed, bones shattered, and the claw went all the way through, embedding itself in the wood of the chair on the other side.

And Robin howled in agony.

But even he couldn’t hear his own screams over the sound of high, cruel laughter...

The pain that had been coursing throughout the entirety of his body now centralized in his right hand. Jason got to his knees and tore off his glove to massage the flesh.

On his hand, on either side, was an ugly, ragged scar. One that very well could have been made by the claw of a crowbar.

That scar wasn’t there before. He had been reconstructed by Harmonia from Fifth Dimensional energy. He didn’t have scars at all. Nevertheless, he had one now.

Damian was the first to speak.

“Why are you wearing a shirt that says ‘Michael’ on it?”

“Because I murdered Michael,” Nemesis said, “murdered his entire family, and then took his shirt.”

Damian smiled at this.

“Harmonia is in here somewhere,” Nemesis said, tapping Her temple. “I know what she knows. And a slight change in our schedules is in order. After all, I am the Goddess of Blood Feuds and Grudges. Not the Goddess of Complicated Plans.”

She took a deep breath, and smiled.
“I will have my revenge,” she said. “On Harmonia. On Zeus. On everyone on Olympus who stood by while I was murdered.”

She looked at David Cain.

“You are one of the most foul and irredeemable mortals I have ever saw fit to lay eyes on,” Nemesis said. “So keep doing what you’re doing.”

David was intimidated to the point that he took a step back.

Her eyes wandered to Damian. “I’m going to need you to stop by a toy store in the morning and pick something up for me.”

“Whatever you say,” Damian said with a Teacher’s Pet cadence and a genuine grin.

Then She looked down at Jason, who looked back up at Her in mortal terror.

“And as for you,” Nemesis said, “I don’t think you’ve worked off your insolence just… quite… yet.”
Hey, all. It's time for the break I take every nine chapters. Chapter 19 will drop on Monday, August 12, 2019. See you then!

Chapter 18: Still Life

Selina didn’t sleep at all last night. The only time she had left Bruce’s side was when she went upstairs to change out of her Catsuit and shower.

Sitting in the metal chair down in the medical bay, next to the bed that contained her comatose husband, she felt the coffee keeping the eyes open on a body that just wanted to rest. She was numb in every other way.

According to Alfred, the blade that this Two, this Damian Wayne, had used on Batman had shredded his right lung. More so than that, the knife was coated in a rare poison that caused advanced necrosis to soft tissues. In any hospital, Bruce would be dead.

But the Batcave wasn’t any hospital.

The machine that was suspended above Bruce’s bed, sending wave after wave of holographic light up and down his entire body, was Kryptonian in origin, given to him in gratitude by Superman straight from the Fortress of Solitude after lending some of his Kryptonite supply to weaken General Zod just enough to send him back to the Phantom Zone. It regenerated dead and damaged tissue, and Batman had used it after Bane had broken his back.

But it took a while.

And the patient had to be kept in a medically induced coma.

All of the assurances of her husband’s future good health, however, did not stop Selina Wayne from worrying.

She heard footsteps on the cement, and she looked up.

Alfred was there, and upon the silver tray in his hands, was yet another cup of coffee.

Selina could only manage a weak smile when she took it. “Thank you, Alfred.”

“You are most welcome,” Alfred said. “Though I must say that sleep will do you better than your continued presence in this cave will do him.”

Selina slowly nodded. “See… The thing is, I can’t imagine how many times Batman has been banged up so bad out there on the street, only to wake up here. This one time, though… This one time, when he opens his eyes, he should see his wife.”

Alfred nodded. “I have always taken it as a given, Missus Wayne, but I believe this time it should be said aloud.”
He put his hand on her shoulder.

“He chose wisely,” Alfred said.

There was nothing weak about the smile now. She held up her cup of coffee. “Thanks, Alfred.”

He smiled, bowed stiffly, and exited the medical bay.

Looking at the unconscious Bruce, she let her mind drift back.

The younger version of herself would have screamed about this. She would have hooted, hollered, and raged. Selina had weakened herself, let herself fall apart, and over what? Just some guy. Billions or no, cowl or no, that’s all Bruce Wayne was.

The younger her was an idiot, though. Time and a wedding ring proved that. The younger her would have delighted in having nothing to worry about, but sitting here now, Selina knew that worrying about nothing meant loving nothing, and it was the closest vision of Hell she could think of. Caring about nothing did not mark maturity. If anything, it was the opposite. It marked the worst kind of childish fear.

More than thinking that this metal chair was where she was supposed to be, Selina thought that this chair was where she wanted to be. Not everyone loved someone or something this much, and Selina counted her worry and concern as fortunate. As lucky.

Another sound of footsteps on the floor, and Selina looked up.

Stephanie Brown was standing there, in a pair of jeans and a purple turtleneck sweater.

“Hey,” Selina said.

Stephanie said “Hey” back.

“Did you sleep here last night?” Selina asked.

“Yup.”

“What did you tell your mom?”

“I don’t tell my mom anything,” Stephanie said. “I don’t think she cares.”

“Well,” Selina said, “someone does.”

Stephanie nodded, and looked at her sneakers. A silence fell, that Selina eventually broke.

“Damian Wayne,” she said.

Stephanie looked up.

“Tim told me,” Selina said. “A bunch of Alternate Universe badasses in one body that counts my husband and Talia al Ghul as his parents. If he had to knock up ol’ Becky, I suppose an alternate universe would have been the best place to do it.”

“He fought me,” Stephanie said. “At the hotel a couple of nights ago. He dodged everything I threw at him.”

“That’s how I met Batman the first time,” Selina said. “Flowed around everything I had…” Guess
that’s how the Wayne men flirt.”

Stephanie looked back down at her shoes. “I was with Batman last night, but Damian handcuffed me to the roof. If only I…”

Selina decided to end that shit right now.

“Hey,” she said. She set her cup of coffee on the floor, and got up out of the chair. She both felt and heard her knees pop as she walked over to Stephanie.

Selina wrapped her in a hug, which Stephanie weakly reciprocated, and spoke in her ear.

“He beat Batman,” Selina said. “If he could do that, there’s nothing you could have done. It’s one thing to sit next to Bruce’s bed, waiting for him to wake up. He’s used to this kind of thing. I don’t know how I’d have reacted if it had been you. So knock it off, alright?”

Selina broke the hug and looked at Stephanie’s face, and what was there was… hard to read.

“Right,” Stephanie said flatly. “Nothing I could have done.”

Stephanie turned around, her blond hair twirling behind her, and walked out of the medical bay, her stride getting quicker the longer it went on.

And Selina looked after her in puzzlement.

She had wanted to reassure her protege.

So why did Selina Wayne think that she had just pissed Stephanie Brown off?

Tim didn’t sleep last night, either.

He went from Miagani Island on his motorbike to Wayne Manor to change back into his civilian attire, and then back to Miagani to his parents’ apartment.

They asked why he was out so late.

He said that he was working.

And they believed him.

He tossed and turned in his bed the rest of the night, until daybreak, when he gave up the battle. He showered, dressed, and headed back to the manor.

For Tim Drake had thoughts of the Multiverse spinning in his head, and found himself lacking in the face of the enormity of it all.

Sitting on the bed in his room at Wayne Manor, staring out the window into the gray haze of morning, his usual feelings of inadequacy in his chosen profession had multiplied to a point where he just did not want to interrogate them anymore.

Best now to just let the air rush in one ear and out the other while thinking of nothing in particular. To someone as naturally analytical as Tim Drake, it was a feeling so gross and unnatural that he likened it to being dipped in a vat of cold snot. But trying to reckon with the infinite right now was just… No.
He was trying to exist without a thought in his head, staring out the window, when he heard footsteps pad behind him in the doorway.

Harper was standing there in a pair of jeans and a Screaming Females t-shirt. She was holding Isis, Selina’s cat, in her arms. She gently set her down on the floor before she walked in, and sat on the bed next to Tim.

“Something’s always bothering you,” Harper said. “I’m just curious what it is right now.”

Just this once, Tim Drake wished he had magical powers, so that he might curse Harper Row’s bloodline for seven-times-seven generations for asking him to trouble himself with the things he least wanted to be troubled by.

He sighed. He opened his mouth, before he changed his mind about what he wanted to say. Then he opened it again.

“Jason Todd talked to me last night instead of fighting me,” Tim said. “He told me, in so many words, that I was a brainwashed lemming, and that one day I’d be Batman.”

Tim finally looked at her.

“I don’t want to be Batman.”

They shared the gaze for a moment, before Tim looked away again.

“But Bruce Wayne’s in a medically-induced coma downstairs, and even though he’s gonna be fine, it tells me that one day, it may not matter what I want, and that damned cowl is gonna be passed to me.”

He sighed, and then collected his thoughts for a moment.

“I believe in this,” Tim said. “All of it. But beyond Robin, I have absolutely no idea what my life has in store for me, but there has to be… has to be… some thing. Something normal. Something that doesn’t involve being beat up and shot at while I’m wearing a cape and a mask. I want to come in, make my difference, and then step aside. Hand the R to someone else. But this… This is all too big.”

He slumped. “And to top it all off, we’re on Earth Eight-Oh-Three. My entire existence is a chain-reaction to a chain-reaction to a chain-reaction to something so far away that… that its light comes from stars that died a million years ago.”

Tim looked at Harper again. “I have given everything I have to be the best Robin. But I’m dealing with infinite Earths, here. It’s all just… just… swells in my brain, and I look down and there’s nothing there. Because how can I be the best Robin when it’s damn near certain that I’m not even the best Tim Drake?”

He looked down at his lap. “I feel so small… So insignificant… And nothing I do makes a damned bit of difference. No matter how hard I try, it just… It just doesn’t.”

Tim chanced another look at Harper Row. The person to whom he poured a river of insecurity. Their blue eyes met, and Harper said:

“Aww, bitch-bitch-bitch.”

He squinted at her, blinking on confusion.
“I swear,” Harper said, “if you were any more annoying, you’d have told me to like, share, and subscribe by now. You…”

Harper looked away, trying to figure out what to do with her hands. Then she looked at him again, renewed vigor in her eyes.

“Let me tell you something,” Harper said. “If I had the resources you have? If I were in your position? If I wore the R? I… would not give… a fuck! But here you are, tossing out fistfuls of fuck like you’re Johnny Appleseed!”

“I—"

“You are Johnny Fuckleseed!”

Tim cleared his throat and once again tried to get a word in edgewise. “I—"

“If I wore the R,” Harper said, “I wouldn’t worry about me living up to the name. I’d make the name live up to me. Do what you can with what’s in front of you. That’s all you can do. Your Yes and your No carries weight the same as anyone else’s. And we can bore ourselves with what shouldn’t have happened here because of something should have happened on some other Earth, but all that is is sitting around and doing nothing about something that nothing can be done about. Because let me tell you something, Fucko: THIS WASN’T SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN EITHER!”

Harper reached out and gripped both sides of Tim’s face. She brought herself in, and their lips met.

As both of their breaths escaped their noses, Harper brought her right leg around, straddling him. Her hands moved from his face to his shoulders, and she brought them both down to the bed.

Tim parted his lips for a moment, and that was enough time for Harper’s tongue to find its way into Tim’s mouth.

So… he used his tongue back.

He wasn’t going to have Harper Row running around with the knowledge that Tim Drake was a bad kisser. It was a point of pride with him… A point of pride that he had only begun caring about a couple of scant seconds ago, but still.

After a kiss that was both luxurious and painfully brief, Harper pulled away. She planted one brief kiss on his lips, kind of as an exclamation point, and got off of Tim, returning to her previous sitting position.

Tim still lay on the bed. He couldn’t hold a thought in his head, but unlike minutes before, this was the good kind of thoughtlessness.

After a moment of quiet, Harper finally spoke.

“So… Let that be a lesson to you.”

After a moment of just breathing, just letting that kiss cool on his lips, Tim said “I didn’t know I was your type.”

“Well,” Harper said without looking at him, “let’s run down the checklist. You’re a pretty boy who looks like he’s actually been in a fight. You’re a nice guy who helps former ninja assassins find their long lost mothers. You’re smart, but you’re not an asshole about it to anyone except to yourself. You single-handedly saved my life and the lives of a hundred other people from Jason Todd’s gas
attack. And, oh yeah, you’re Robin. Seriously, how little do you know about teenage girls that you didn’t see this coming?"

Tim thought about that for a moment. Selina had told him that Harper had a thing for him, but he brushed it aside. Harper herself, under the sway of Mister Mxyzptlk, had said that with the exception of Mxyzptlk himself and her own brother, that anyone in Batman’s network could, quote-unquote, “get it.” But Tim thought nothing more of it, excluding himself from the equation.

Which, Tim had to admit, was so like him.

Some detective I turned out to be, he thought.

“I… don’t think I know anything about teenage girls,” Tim finally said.

Harper threw up her hands, the time honored way of saying “No shit” to Sherlock.

And they both rested there in that room, in silence, with Tim trying to feature what this all meant.

Harper finally turned and looked at him down on the bed.

“I’m not gonna lie,” she said. “You’re… a lot better at that than I thought you’d be.”

Tim said the only thing he could think of.

“Well… now all you have to do is share and subscribe.”

Harper whacked Tim’s knee with the back of her hand.

To complete the trifecta, Cassandra Cain didn’t sleep last night either.

But where Selina’s insomnia was born of worry, and Tim’s despair, Cassandra’s mind went alight at the thought of infinite Earths.

At the time of Mister Mxyzptlk’s little explanation the night before, the very idea terrified her. She wasn’t made to think that big.

But it was about the time that she and Bluebird were on the way back from picking up her bike on Miagani Island, standing outside in the blistering cold in the dead of night as they both unwisely drank freezing-ass blueberry smoothies in the Amusement Mile Jitters parking lot, that her mind began to scrape upon the idea. And she had to ask herself a simple question.

Was it the idea of infinite Earths that terrified her? Or was it the simple prospect of thinking?

Cassandra Cain didn’t think she was stupid. But she was grateful that so little was asked of her beyond punching people. She saw Babs hunched over her computer, or Batman surveying a crime scene, and it just seemed like… too much.

In her bed at Wayne Manor, where all except Tim and Selina slept (or tried to sleep) that night, Cassandra, eyes open and staring at the ceiling, indulged a single harmless question, applying to the concept of alternate dimensions what little she knew of it from the stray episode of television here and there. Chiefly:

Was there a cowboy version of Cassandra Cain out there somewhere?

It seemed a reasonable enough question. Maybe partially fueled by the fact that, from what little she
had hung out with Jinny Hex, she really liked her hat, but it was still reasonable.

She shook her head against her pillow. It wouldn’t be a cow boy version of her. It’d be a cow girl. That would…

...would…

Well…

Cassandra sat up in bed. If there were infinite Earths, wouldn’t there be both versions? Cowboy Cass and Cowgirl Cass? And if there was such a job description as a “Cownonbinary,” then that Cass would be out there, too.

She wondered if the Cowboy version of herself on some other Earth was handsome. If girls looked at him the same way she looked at Conner Kent. Cassandra certainly hoped so. If Cowboy Cass was walking around his Earth only able to grow the wisps of a crappy moustache, and… and… smelling like cheese, Cassandra would have curled up and died.

Wasting a perfectly good cowboy hat like that, when she didn’t have one at all!

Giving in to the fact that she just wasn’t going to get any sleep at all that night, Cassandra got out of bed, and walked down to the kitchen.

Once she was there, she just walked around the kitchen island for hours, stopping only to get glasses of water and go to the bathroom, thinking of all the other Cassandra Cains that might be out there.

Pirate Cass would have been fun. So would Viking Cass. FBI Agent Cass. Knight-in-Shining Armor Cass. She was a little resistant to the idea of Rock Star Cass, as she couldn’t see (or hear) herself singing. She lost twenty minutes alone on High Society Cass, just standing there in the kitchen, trying to hold her glass of water the same way Selina held her wine glasses, indulging in fake, silent cocktail laughter.

But she didn’t think about Ninja Cass. No, she was already Ninja Cass.

She had winnowed through all of the action figure versions of herself when her mind settled on a concept so out there yet so inevitable that it forced her to sit down on the tiles of the kitchen floor and truly reckon with it.

Because somewhere out there, one Earth or a million Earths over, there was a completely average and wholly unremarkable Cassandra Cain.

A Cassandra Cain who didn’t know how to throw a punch. A Cassandra Cain who just got Cs in school. A Cassandra Cain who knew how to read, and write, and speak well enough to take them all for granted. A Cassandra Cain who was talking-- Talking! --to her friends on the phone right now.

She had to be out there somewhere. She had to be.

Just thinking about this Average Cass made her feel so real. Cassandra wished she could hold her hand. She wished she had the words to tell this Average Cass how much she loved her just for existing. Because existence was all that was asked of her. She took part in nothing greater than herself, and she wasn’t the recipient of a harsh destiny.

And what was destiny?

Well, she knew what the word meant… Kind of. It meant “a thing that was supposed to happen,”
But how, though? How was one thing supposed to happen when there were infinite Earths upon which that one thing never happened at all?

The more she thought about it, the more she became of the opinion that destiny was just some stupid thing someone made up one day, trying to get someone else to do one thing and one thing only for the rest of their lives.

She came to this conclusion when the sun came up, its beams illuminating the early morning haze of December that had settled in on the Wayne Manor grounds. She went upstairs, showered, changed her clothes, and relocated down to the Batcave, where she wouldn’t get in anyone’s way.

Pacing back and forth in the second evidence room, amid file cabinets, lockers, and stacked cardboard boxes, Cassandra’s thinking concerning her alternate selves became much more down to Earth and granular.

There was a Cassandra Cain that was left-handed.

There was a Cassandra Cain that labored under the sorrowfully mistaken delusion that she looked great with her hair dyed blond.

There was a Cassandra Cain that read for fun.

There was a Cassandra Cain that voted in elections.

And it got so small, so narrow, that what she hit upon next quite literally stopped her in her tracks.

She remembered the night when she was young. The night she committed murder. In order to get to Faizul in Macau, she had to make her way past guards armed with pistols and shotguns.

Which meant it was possible… more than possible… that there was a universe where Cassandra Cain was shot and killed before she could commit the murder that overshadowed the rest of her life in brutal guilt.

She did not even reflect that this theory that not only centered on the death of a child, but the death of herself as a child should not be a thing that made her happy. Once this notion was in her brain, Cassandra could not wipe the smile off of her face.

More than that, maybe there was a universe in which Cassandra Cain escaped David Cain before the murder would have happened in the first place. That Cass would have more options than she had, because…

Because…

Two words formed in Cassandra’s mind. Not as pictures, but the spoken words themselves. So definite and vivid were they, that the words flowed out of her mouth.

“Says who?”

Cassandra felt lost and alone in her own insignificance against the full weight and mighty breadth of the Multiverse itself, but far from reacting to that with terror or fear, she felt light. She felt free.

Yesterday’s Cassandra was under the impression that she would die doing this. That she needed to die doing this. Because she had to pay for the life she’d taken. Because that was the only way the
world made sense.

But there were two problems with that.

The first was that there were infinite planes of existence where both she and the man she had murdered lived and died, were born, were re born, over and over again. When it came to who owed what to whom in a situation like that, everything lost all meaning.

And the second was… Well…

There was a cowboy version of Cassandra Cain.

Nothing made sense.

And so today’s Cassandra had to ask, again, aloud…

“Says who?”

She had settled into this for a moment, trying to figure out how she would operate within such exponentially broadened parameters for the rest of her life, when she heard footsteps behind her.

She turned to see Stephanie standing there in a purple turtleneck sweater and jeans, twiddling her thumbs and looked somewhat on the worried side.

“Good morning,” Stephanie said softly.

“Hey.”

“Um… Is it alright if we had a sparring session? Like, as soon as possible?”

Cassandra sighed. She was in the middle of something right now.

“I’m… thinking,” she said, wondering if she had ever said those words before. “Later.”

She turned away, and stared off into space.

The options were so tantalizing. She wanted to spend her life as a superhero, this much was certain, but it was the fact that she wanted to that made her smile to herself. Which meant if she didn’t want to, she could do something else. She’d have to learn to read, write, and speak, bu--

She heard a light groaning behind her, and turned…

…just in time to duck beneath something large and heavy sailing past the patch of her air where her head had been.

Stephanie had picked up a large box of evidence, and threw it at her.

The box landed with a heavy thud. She stopped to look at its overturned contents for an instant before she turned.

Stephanie was advancing on Cassandra, her face a mask of rage.

“Steph?”

In between the narrow rows of file cabinets, Stephanie balled up her fist, and swung it at Cassandra’s face. She managed to get out of the way, just as she always had.
Stephanie unloaded a flurry of punches that Cassandra either dodged or blocked. She unleashed a front kick that Cassandra had to backstep to avoid.

Cassandra wanted to tell Stephanie to calm down. To stop. But the words wouldn’t come.

For a few seconds, Stephanie unleashed her considerable fury, and Cassandra dodged and blocked without fighting back. And Cassandra was counting the seconds until Stephanie slowed down enough so she could do… something. Maybe clinch like a boxer and finally tell her just to stop.

But there was a problem, here.

Stephanie wasn’t slowing down.

Stephanie was speeding up.

And it wasn’t a matter of if Stephanie would finally land a punch on Cassandra that, given her power and her anger would deal some hefty damage, but when.

Stephanie came out with a left that Cassandra only narrowly avoided, but that left an opening.

Cassandra deftly jabbed a finger in Stephanie’s sternum, a light chop to the side of her neck, and a palm strike to her forehead within the span of a second-and-a-half.

Stephanie backed up a step, shook her head, and continued her advance…

…only to stop dead in her tracks, unmoving and unblinking.

Stephanie Brown was now under the sway of the nerve-strike that she herself had called “The One Hour Photo.” Because she would be stuck that way, like a photo, for an hour.

Cassandra took a deep breath. She wiped a thin sheen of sweat from her forehead, which Stephanie had never elicited from Cassandra before, and…

“eeeeeeeee…”

It was soft. It was light. But even with the din of the Batcave’s climate control, Cassandra heard it.

“…eeeeeeeee…”

It was coming from Stephanie.

Cassandra locked her eyes on Stephanie’s form. She could see her cheek twitch. Her fingers begin to curl.

This… wasn’t possible.

“…eeeeeeEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAA AAAUUUUUGGGGGGHHHHH!”

Stephanie’s body jerked forward, her face as purple a her sweater with exertion. She shook her arms to get feeling back into them, and once again began her advance.

The One Hour Photo was a nerve-strike that could put an Amazon out of commission… and Stephanie Brown just powered out of it through sheer force of rage.

For the first and only time since her father, Cassandra Cain looked at another human being with pure terror.
Stephanie came up with a front kick. Cassandra only barely avoided it and the loud clang, as well as the dent in the metal file cabinet she had just laid into, told her how powerful it was.

Another right, and Cassandra could feel the breeze on her face.

Cassandra wanted Stephanie to tire out. Wanted to keep avoiding her strikes and her kicks until this was done.

But that just wasn’t going to happen.

Stephanie came in with a left, which gave Cassandra enough leeway for a kick to the stomach that would have driven the air from a normal human being. But Stephanie only doubled over slightly, brought her wind back with a low squeak, and continued her advance.

She tried an uppercut, and Cassandra barely dodged it, and put her shoulder into a left hook right in Stephanie’s face. But Stephanie just gritted newly pink teeth, and still she kept coming.

Stephanie came up with a side kick that Cassandra had to sidestep, which gave her enough room and time to ball up her right fist and unload into the side of Stephanie’s head with as much force as she dared muster. She had planned on hitting David Cain harder than this the night before… but not that much harder.

And still-- still! ---Stephanie did not go down.

At least… not right away.

Stephanie took a step forward, then another, before her eyes rolled slightly and her whole body started to sag. She leaned against one of the file cabinets, and slowly skidded to a kneeling position.

Cassandra put her hands on her knees, and caught her breath. She saw a bead of sweat fall from her forehead and land on the concrete floor.

A moment passed in silence…

...until Stephanie Brown started laughing.

And Cassandra just looked at her in confusion. It was all she could do.

Stephanie spat a glob of blood onto the floor.

“It took a while,” Stephanie said. “But… But someone finally cared enough to beat the shit out of me this week. S...Someone looked at me… saw me as a threat… and then fucking acted like it.”

Stephanie skidded the rest of the way down to the floor, still leaning against the file cabinet, and looked up at Cassandra.

“I know what you all say about me,” Stephanie said. “I’m the one who sucks. I’m the one who can’t fight worth a shit. I’m the one who needs to be followed around everywhere I go because I… can’t… hack it.”

Stephanie closed her eyes. A pair of tears fell down sweaty cheeks.

“I’m good enough to do this,” Stephanie said softly. To Cassandra. To the floor. To herself. “I know I am.”

Cassandra knelt down in front of her. Lost in confusion, she did the only thing she could do.
Which was to put a hand on Stephanie’s shoulder.

And she said the only thing she could say.

Which was “There… There?”

Stephanie smiled, revealing bloody teeth.

“I like you,” Stephanie said. “You’re good people.”

---

Oh, Kate Kane? Yeah, she slept like a baby last night.

So deep was Kate’s slumber that she slept until eight AM, after everyone else had awoken. A good fifteen minutes after the brief and terrible World War between Cass and Steph in the Batcave had ended, in fact.

She slid into a pair of jeans, a dark red hoodie, and a black leather jacket. She went downstairs to the kitchen, made herself a cup of coffee, and left for the Manor grounds.

The soil was warm and the air was cold. The open green of the front lawn of Wayne Manor was now crowded by a thick, heavy fog that glowed gray in the morning light.

Her hood up, her cup of dark roast steaming in her hands, she stared into the gray, emptying her mind of all thought.

And in this blankness, she heard footsteps. Heavy ones.

Kate turned to see Diana standing there in jeans and a green and black flannel button-up. Her sneakers crunched the gray, frozen grass beneath her feet. Her lustrous black hair hung over her broad shoulders. And the color desaturation of this winter morning just made her eyes all the more blue.

“Good morning,” Diana said.

Kate raised her coffee cup in reply.

“This morning,” Diana said, “I ate cereal for the first time in years, and had a lengthy conversation about something called ‘Dungeons & Dragons’ with Harper Row… and Stephanie Brown.”

Kate at least had the good sense to close her eyes before she rolled them. “My condolences.”

Diana put her hands on her hips, and looked at Kate with a tilted head. “I find her delightful.”

Kate just sighed. And after that they were silent for a spell.

Finally, Diana said something.

“Kate… It’s time.”

Kate sighed again, drank some more of her coffee, and hoped the bitter taste would align her thoughts for her.

No dice…

“Go ahead,” Kate said.
Diana’s breath filtered out of her nose in thick steam. “When we were in California, I made overtures toward you. Overtures that you did not seem to take well. Now, was it the way in which I made them? That I made them? That it was I who made them?”

Kate didn’t say anything.

“All of the above?” Diana asked.

Kate paused… then nodded.

Diana furrowed her brow. “Can’t it be like the movies? Where we’re both charming and fascinating and it just… happens?”

“No,” Kate said. “No, it can’t.”

Diana looked at the ground, and said “Hollywood lied to me.”

Kate was nonplussed by Diana’s apparent naivete… until she realized she was joking.

“So we have established,” Diana said, “that you wished to be a less-authentic version of yourself when dealing in such situations. I can only ask what this less-authentic version of you is like.”

Kate took a sip of coffee, and pondered before she spoke.

“Someone who’s not easily interested,” Kate said. “Someone who has less to lose than I do. Someone who… doesn’t care if they go or stay. That I’ll be perfectly cool whether they see something they like, or they don’t. I call it ‘The Kate Kane Advertisement.’ It’s like an ad for an apartment. Nice, sunlit view of the kitchen, but nothing about the noisy neighbors a floor up or the mold in the bathroom.”

Diana folded her arms. “Why is it that you think being distant and aloof are your attractive qualities?”

Kate lowered the hood of her sweatshirt and ran her hand through her red scruff of hair, a seedling of frustration sprouting the beginning of its stalk in her chest.

“I don’t know what you think love is,” Kate said. “It’s not… kissing in the rain, or walks on the beach. Love is puking and crapping in full view of each other when we both have the stomach flu. Love is sitting around the living room naked for no other reason than you want all your clothes in the laundry, and one of us gets up, and the other can see the bright red marks on our rear-ends that the seams of the couch left there. It’s interrupting you with whatever you’re doing, because I’m in the tub, and I want you to read to me because I can’t do it myself, as I don’t want to get my book wet. And… I may or may not have been on my period in that last scenario.”

Kate huffed. “It isn’t pain. Really, it isn’t. Pain you can romanticize. Love is being ugly, and dirty, and common in front of the person you’re with, and I don’t want to be ugly or dirty or common in front of you.”

“Why not?” Diana asked.

Kate didn’t know how much of her surprise at that question showed up on her face.

“Because you’re Wonder Woman,” Kate said. “You mean everything to everyone. I… I can’t even spare a lewd thought on you. Or a dirty daydream because you’re too important. And for people who go out with each other, those are necessary. Or at least they are to me.”
Diana’s expression didn’t change.

“Okay,” Kate said. “Let’s say I’m dating you. And I don’t mean the benefits of dating you, alright? I don’t mean the prospect that I might get lucky with you.”

Diana’s eyebrows rose. “It’ll be difficult not thinking about that last one,” she said, “but I’m confident I’ll manage.”

Kate just stared at her.

Diana frowned, looked down, kicked a patch of the frozen grass at her feet, and said “Well, I certainly think I’m funny…”

Kate shook that off. “I’m talking about form and function,” she said. “Wonder Woman and I are going out on a date. Wonder Woman is picking me up at seven-thirty. Wonder Woman is going to know what my living room looks like. She’s gonna see that my DVR is full of Women’s MMA and gardening shows, even though I don’t have a garden. She’s gonna see I try to shoot three-pointers with my dirty clothes trying to get them in the hamper in my bedroom, and days pass before I pick up the shots I miss.”

“Do you seriously believe I will judge you for harmless bad habits?” Diana asked.

“You won’t,” Kate said. “That’s the worst part. My crumminess will be some grand and condescending statement on being human, and not crumminess that might be endearing because I’m the one who’s crummy in one specific way endemic to me and me alone. You shouldn’t have to put up with me. You shouldn’t have to put up with anything.”

Diana put her hands in her pockets, and they shared a moment of silence. Until finally, Diana said one word.

“Envy.”

Kate blinked. “What about it?”

“If I told you that I had been, at times, envious of others, you would not believe me.”

“Why would you be envious of anyone?” Kate asked.

Diana kicked the grass again. From Kate’s perspective, it seemed like she was revving up for something.

“About four years ago,” Diana said, “I was in New York attending a summit at the United Nations. They sent a limousine to pick me up, and we were stuck in traffic. I looked out of the window, and I saw a woman in the car next to me. She was overweight, she had a red perm, she had visible pimples on her face, and she was just… picking her nose.”

Kate furrowed her brow. If this was another attempt at humor, this was more on the weird side than the ha-ha side.

“I have never been more jealous of anyone in my life,” Diana said. “And my life has been long.”

“You were jealous of someone picking their nose?”

“I was jealous,” Diana said, “because no one was judging her. Whatever emotion that strangers spent on her was brief, before their eyes went elsewhere, and they quickly forgot about her. I don’t
get to have that. Say what you wish about my skill, my power, or even my beauty. I was the one with tinted windows on their vehicle and she was not. And that… says something.”

Diana looked at the ground. “What you feel is common. Depressingly so. It is to the point that, on Patriarch’s World, I do not have any female friends.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Kate said.

Diana sighed. “I am closely acquainted to both Selina Wayne and Lois Lane, yet I was invited to neither of their bachelorette parties. Because they thought the base pleasures that they sought were beneath me.”

Kate shrugged. Bachelorette parties meant strippers, and she couldn’t see the Princess of the Amazons stuffing dollar bills in anyone’s g-string.

“Aren’t they, though?” Kate asked.

“Yes,” Diana said. “But I would not have gone for that. I would have gone for them. So that the delight of my sisters on Patriarch’s World would be my delight. That their smiles might show up on my face.”

She finally looked at Kate.

“How do you think I am when I am alone at home with nothing to do?” Diana asked. “That I exist in a state of unimpeachable grace, free from vice or bad habit or embarrassment? I can assure you that such is not the case.”

Kate blinked. “You have bad habits?”

“Yes.”

“What are they?”

“I do not wish to say.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” Diana said, “I am still trying to impress you.”

Now that… that Kate couldn’t believe, no matter Diana’s reputation for honesty.

“Why me?” Kate asked. “An entire world full of people… Why me?”

Diana was quiet for a while. Her shoulders slumped ever so slightly. She seemed to… not shrink, but… diminish.

“I came to Patriarch’s World decades ago,” Diana said, “to aid its people in their times of strife while spreading a message of sisterhood and solidarity. Peace, honesty, and loving submission. And that message has fallen on ears both receptive and deaf. And I have stumbled through these long years, as gracefully as I can, attempting to put right what once went wrong, seeking justice, defending the
innocent, protecting the weak. All the while not knowing if my efforts have reaped any dividend for
the hearts and the souls of the women in this place.”

Diana’s eyes gleamed with a renewed focus while the rest of her features softened.

“And then,” she said, “I hear of a woman denied the chance to serve in the standing army of her
nation, going out into the night under the symbol of The Bat to serve a purpose so similar to my
own. And though she had no ability in magic, she still fought against all odds to combat the arcane
and the dark, her prowess as a warrior becoming that of great renown in so short a time… And the
shock of recognition upon hearing of this was so great that it sent me to the deepest of thought and
the wildest, the most immature of fancies. So much so that, with no regard whatsoever for my own
emotional well-being, I walked up and spoke to her at Batman and Catwoman’s wedding.”

She took one step toward Kate, still keeping eye contact.

“You ask me why I long for you,” Diana said, “and the answer is simple. Kate Kane, you are
evidence that what I have been doing all of this time has actually worked. And… And you remind
me of home.”

Diana’s demeanor changed once that last sentence was out of her mouth. She seemed to diminish
further, a warrior having shed the last of her armor. She opened her mouth to say something, thought
the better of it, and turned to walk away.

In the distance, heading toward Wayne Manor, Diana of Themyscira cut the figure of someone who
had partaken in the steepest of gambles for the most uncertain of rewards. And maybe… just
maybe… she bet too much.

And Kate Kane had no idea what to do next.

The Seahorse Tavern on the outskirts of The Cauldron on the Gotham City mainland opened at eight
AM. It was nine-fifteen when Jason Todd walked in.

He saw the cramped confines, smelled the smell of mildew and stale, spilled beer, and sat down on a
stool at the bar in front of the bartender.

The police report would identify the bartender as Rollo Connick, age fifty-two.

There were six others in the Seahorse that morning. The waitress, Julia Mack, was twenty-one, and
there on her day off when the regular morning shift waitress called in sick. The other five people,
Justin Endretti (age thirty-eight), Hugo Smith (age sixty-five), Marla Finnegan (age seventy), Julius
Horvath (age forty-nine), and Calvin Udall (age sixty-nine) were regulars, with Mister Endretti
coming in for his customary beer after his graveyard shift at Ace Chemical, before going home to his
wife and his eight year old daughter. The other four were, sad to say in so many more ways than
one, drunks.

Jason folded his hands on top of the bar.

He hadn’t slept.

He hadn’t slept because Nemesis wouldn’t let him sleep.

Every time he had felt himself begin to drift off, Nemesis visited him on the coast of his slumber by
bringing unto him a fresh and painful memory of the three long days he was tortured by The Joker,
before being beaten senseless with a crowbar, and then left in the same room as a bomb.
Nemesis was a particular fan of The Joker having pried off all twenty nails on his fingers and toes. Jason was driven from sleep by intense throbbing in his hands and feet, even though the nails were still here. Throbbing that still pained him as he sat at the bar.

Rollo the bartender walked up to him.

“Haven’t seen you around here before,” he said.

Jason shook his head.

“What can I getcha?”

“B--Um, Beer,” Jason said.

Rollo just blinked at him. “You, uh… You got a preference? Seems only in movies and TV that guys just order beer at the bar. Need to know your brand, son.”

Jason, who was out of sorts, in pain, and just so tired, opened his mouth. But no sound came out.

“If you ask me,” Rollo said, “I’d go for the Newcastle. A little on the pricey side for this neck of the woods, but do you want to drink beer? Or do you want to drink some fuckin’ beer?”

“Sounds good,” Jason said.

“Bottle or pint?”

Jason struggled a little when he said “Pint.”

“Got ID?”

Jason’s trembling hand reached into the outer right pocket of his leather jacket, and found his wallet, which he passed to Rollo.

“Usually people just take their license out,” Rollo said. “But, uh…”

Rollo picked up the wallet and looked inside at the forged license that David Cain had procured.

“Alright, Mister Herbert Claude Jansen,” Rollo said. “One pint of Newcastle, coming up.”

As Rollo walked away to get the pint of beer, Jason heard a voice in his head. It was like a woman’s voice dipped in heavy syrup.

“There are seven people in that bar, Jason,” Nemesis said. “I want you to give them to me.”

“What?” Jason asked softly, so no one else would hear him.

“Give them to me,” Nemesis said. “Murder them. I am the Goddess of the Unjustly Slain, after all, and every little bit helps.”

Jason covered his mouth, and softly said “No.”

Nemesis laughed. It sounded like ice cracking. Or at least it made Jason break out in gooseflesh in the same way.

“Idiot boy,” She said. “You would not be in that tavern in the first place unless I told you to go there.”
No.

No, that wasn’t right.

He hadn’t slept. He just needed to get some alcohol in him so he could drift off. Maybe that would break Nemesis’ spell.

But he had beer in the mini-fridge in his room from the other night when her picked up a six pack. He didn’t really need to be here. He just… had the notion.

And if he were just going out for a drink, why did he bring his pistols?

No.

No, no, no.

Rollo came back with a pint of brown ale.

“And there we go,” he said.

“Thank y--”

“Need you enticement?” Nemesis asked. “Very well.”

Rollo the bartender was replaced in Jason’s vision by an oncoming storm of darkness.

Robin had been awake for three days.

Whenever he had felt himself begin to doze off, The Joker belted him in the back of the head to wake him up.

He’s put holes in his arms and legs with his crowbar. He’d pried off all his finger and toenails. He had even got down on the ground, beneath the chair to which Robin was tied, and used the claw of the crowbar to completely destroy the achille’s tendons of both legs.

And now, after three days of torture, The Joker stood before him.

“It’s been fun,” The Joker said. “More than a hoot-and-a-half. A hoot-and-three-quarters, even. But now… I’m afraid the dance must end.”

The Joker brandished his blood-caked crowbar…

...and walked toward him.

Jason momentarily convulsed, and Rollo looked at him with some concern.

“Hey, uh, buddy?” Rollo asked. “I hate to chase off my own business and everything, but uh… There’s an AA meeting in a church about three blocks up. I think you might need that more than you need this beer.”

Jason opened his mouth to say something.

Then the darkness came back.
This was the lowest moment in Robin’s life.

Not the pain, no. It was what he’d do to get away from it.

“Batman,” Robin said

The Joker stopped. “What about him?”

“I know who he is,” Robin said. “Under the mask. I can tell you. Just. Just please stop hurting me!”

The blood red smile on The Joker’s face just got wider.

“Sonny boy,” The Joker said. “What makes you think I care?”

Laughing, he reared back and laid into the side of Robin’s head with the crowbar.

Pain exploded inside his head, thicker, more voluminous than any he’d ever felt.

And Robin screamed.

And Jason screamed.

The pain in his head from The Joker’s crowbar, years past, was now back with a mighty and implacable vengeance.

And it wasn’t going away.

Everyone in The Seahorse looked at him.

Jason’s eyes settled on Rollo.

He loosed a pistol from the inside of his leather jacket with his right hand. He aimed and fired.

Rollo’s body flew back, shattering bottles of booze on the wall behind him as the top of his head disintegrated into a pink mist.

And the pain in Jason’s head… lessened.

He acquired the other pistol from within his jacket with his left hand and fired from the hip.

The bullet caught the waitress who was there on her day off, Julia Mack, at center mass, straight through the heart. She was dead before she hit the ground.

The other five in the bar were too soused, even at this early hour, to run far. Five shots later, and they were all dead, their blood decorating the walls and the vinyl booths in which they had been sitting.

It took ten seconds for Jason Todd to murder seven innocent people.

It took ten seconds for the pain in Jason Todd’s head to completely vanish.

Only when he was free from its grip, did Jason finally and truly realized what had happened.

What he had done.
What he had become.

He slid from the barstool to his knees, and sobbing racked his body.

It was foolishness, he now knew, to think he was above the people he fought. Above the rank and file murderers and thugs that he hoped to pray upon.

He thought just killing the bad people was all it took.

But Jason Todd had just taken the lives of seven innocents with no other prompting than a little bit of pain.

He was one of the bad guys now.

Tears in his eyes and guns in his hands, Jason put the pistol in his right hand in his mouth. The barrel burned his tongue, but---

“Take that thing out of your mouth,” said a voice behind him.

And Jason was powerless to do anything but.

Jason turned his head to look behind him.

Nemesis stood there at the bar, still in Michael’s bloody work shirt, holding the pint of Newcastle that Jason had attempted to buy. There were a couple of flecks of Rollo Connick’s blood on the foamy head.

She drank it anyway.

Putting the empty pint glass back down on the bar, Nemesis wiped Her mouth, and stood next to Jason.

“I’ve missed a great deal in the three thousand years I was dead,” Nemesis said. “Booty shorts. Godzilla movies. And beer.”

“Why did you make me do this?” Jason asked, his voice watery. “WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS TO ME?”

“That I am Goddess of the Unjustly Slain is all I get attention for,” Nemesis said. “I am also the Goddess of Grudges and Blood Feuds, which is just as important.”

She ran Her hands through Jason’s hair.

“You raised your voice to me,” Nemesis said.

She walked around to the front of him.

“And people like you are so easy to inflict pain upon,” She said. “Laboring under delusions of hypocritical piety. As though taking the lives of the wicked makes one less so. And you spoke unto your Goddess with anger in your tone and hatred in your heart, and for that I shall torture you every second of every day until one of us is dead.”

She leaned down and got in his face.

“Which, between you and I… isn’t very long now.”
Chapter 19: Light the Fuse

Twilight descended on the grounds of Wayne Manor after a long and languorous day of regrouping, confessing, contemplating and fighting. All who were able and willing stood in front of the Batcomputer in the Batcave, with Barbara Gordon at the head.

“First thing’s first,” Barbara said. “Cullen, close your eyes.”

Cassandra stood on the far left of everyone else in the Batcave, next to Stephanie, who was sporting fresh new bruises on her face from their encounter in the evidence room that morning.

Apparently, Stephanie had felt the need to prove something to herself, and walking into the human buzzsaw that was Cassandra Cain was the best way to do it. Though Stephanie had acquitted herself almost frighteningly well, she still lost. You needed to be able to fight to be…

Says who?

There were those words again. The ones that had been tantalizing her, mocking her, showing her new possibilities containing even more new possibilities ever since she had been made fully aware of how small she really was, adrift on but a single Earth among the infinite.

Cassandra looked down at her hands. She was to meet her destiny with these hands. Either killing targets as her father commanded, or protecting the innocent as Batman wished. Both ways through violence. But just because she was trained to be this way didn’t mean she had to be this way.

Cassandra remembered a time a few months back when Stephanie invited her to come along on one of her PE classes. Juniors had the opportunity to have their PE classes off of school grounds in their second semesters, and Stephanie’s class had theirs at the MacGruder Avenue Bowling Alley on the mainland.

She’d only had two tries with a bowling ball, and she’d guttered both times, but now she remembered the guy behind the counter at the bowling alley. He was overweight and balding, just spraying some kind of spray into the bowling shoes and resting with his head in his hand the rest of the time.

And it was only now, standing in the Batcave, that it dawned on Cassandra that if she wanted to, she could work at a bowling alley for the rest of her life. She didn’t want to, as she had reflected that being a superhero was the most fulfilling use of her time, but she could. She could trade in a life of combat and vigilantism for a life of boredom and free cheese fries.

Cassandra didn’t know why the very concept made her feel less tired, less tethered to the ground. She just knew that it did.

Next to Stephanie, a few feet away, was Cullen, who looked at Barbara and asked “Seriously?”

To Cullen’s left was Harper and Tim, and Cassandra could see that they were being… weird. It was their body language, the way they stood. They were standing far apart, but they were a little too open, as though they wanted to be seen standing far apart.
And any illusions that Cassandra had had about the wisdom of adults was...maybe not shattered, but at least dented by the fact that Kate and Diana were standing to their left, and they were being weird in the exact same way.

Cassandra had to wonder just what the hell was going on here.

Alfred was upstairs being Alfred. Selina was in the rear of the Batcave, out of view, at Bruce’s bedside.

Cassandra had spent a small amount of time at in the medical bay today as well, after the fight with Stephanie. She had sat in the chair next to the visibly tired and worried Selina and just stared at the comatose Bruce in complete silence.

Mister Mxyzptlk had said that the soul did not matter, but staring at him lying there, Cassandra felt Bruce Wayne and Batman blur into one in a way that they hadn’t for her before. She knew they were the same person, but she still treated them like different people. She had deferred to Batman’s confidence and she had, she was sorry to admit, pitied Bruce Wayne.

The way he wandered the Earth in a constant state of befuddlement, well-meaning but clueless, seemed to grate on her in a way that she couldn’t fully comprehend. There was a dissonance there that caused her feelings to sour without her actually meaning them to. How could this guy put on a mask and become such a different person?

But watching him lie there his chest absently rising and falling with every breath he took, Cassandra discovered that Mxyzptlk was wrong. The soul did matter, or at least it did in a way that he either didn’t divulge or didn’t understand.

Bruce Wayne was the soul of Batman. Which meant, in Cassandra’s estimation, that Batman led with Bruce Wayne. Bruce Wayne tried to be the best person he could be, and he used both his successes and failures to be a better Batman.

Cassandra thought there was something to that. It danced on the periphery of her brain, just out of sight, just out of reach…

“Yes, Cullen,” Barbara said. “Seriously.”

“How bad can this tape be?” Cullen asked. “And if it is that bad, shouldn’t I be getting used to this kind of thing now?”

Barbara sighed. “I think I was about one or two years older than you when I was tracking down Dollhouse. Dollhouse eats people. Knowing then what I know now, I’d have put that off for a few years. Humor me, you little shit.”

Stephanie looked over at Cullen. “Yeah, you little shit, humor her.”

Cullen sighed, and put his hand over his eyes.

“I’ll tell you when we’re done,” Barbara said. “We got this from the security cam of a bar near The Cauldron called The Seahorse Tavern.”

Barbara reached down and pressed a button on the Batcomputer’s keyboard.

The enormous screen of the Batcomputer came alive with the feed from the Seahorse’s security camera above the entrance. This feed had no sound.
The bartender was behind the bar. The waitress was doggedly ferrying drinks from the bar to the scattered and meager selection of patrons.

And then Jason Todd walked in.

He took a seat at the bar.

He spoke to the bartender.

The bartender brought him a beer.

Jason screamed soundlessly.

And a few seconds later, seven people were dead.

The feed cut to static. Cassandra looked at everyone else in the room.

Stephanie and Diana were horrified. As was Harper, but Cassandra reckoned that she had about as little to do with dead bodies as her brother, and she had turned a shade of pale green that clashed with her blue hair.

The faces of Tim and Kate showed no emotion at all.

And Barbara just looked tired.

Tim folded his arms. “So… that’s it, then.”

Barbara nodded.

“What’s it?” Harper asked.

Tim looked at her. “Any hope we had of rehabilitating Jason? Any hope we had of bringing him into the fold? It’s gone now. Not like it wasn’t gone before after the mob hit and the Sorrento, but it’s really gone now.”

“Jason Todd,” Barbara said, “is just another bad guy.”

“Hera forgive him,” Diana said.

“Because we can’t,” said Kate.

Cassandra was still aloft on her thoughts of infinite Earths. Yesterday at about this time, she’d have recoiled at what they were saying, judging Jason this harshly when she herself had done something not entirely dissimilar when she murdered Faizul.

But now?

Now something was off.

“Again,” she said.

They all looked at her.

“What?” Barbara asked.

“Play… the tape… again.”
Barbara just nodded. “Cullen, keep your eyes closed.”

“Fine,” he said.

The tape played again, and Cassandra studied it.

She had seen the way Jason was moving before. Countless times.

The most memorable time was when she had fought Gunhawk during a mission a few months back. Orphan’s reputation had apparently preceded her, and as soon as he knew who he was fighting, he backed away with his hands up in mortal terror.

Jason was moving like Gunhawk had, only… in reverse somehow. As though he was being pushed instead of backing up. And once the guns came out, his movements were ragged, on the jerky side, not the kind of person who could utterly waylay Robin in a fight.

Someone, somehow, made Jason do what he did on that tape. Under great fear of indescribable pain.

The tape came to an end a second time.

“Did you get what you needed?” Barbara asked.

Cassandra nodded.

“What was it?”

Cassandra didn’t have the words right now. The ones she knew didn’t seem good enough.

“I don’t… know… yet,” she finally said.

Barbara sighed, pressed a button on the Batcomputer’s keyboard, and the screen went blank again. “Cullen, you can open your eyes.”

Which Cullen did.

“I just don’t know why he’d do it,” Tim said. “He was gung-ho about only killing bad guys when we talked, but I take it the people in that bar weren’t bad guys?”

“Between the seven of them,” Barbara said, “There were two DWIs and one public indecency. They weren’t bad people at all. This is just… senseless.”

Silence settled over them. A silence that seemed to still Diana and Barbara the most. Until…

“Umm,” Cullen said, “are we just gonna sleep on how Stephanie got those bruises?”

“Sparring,” Stephanie said.

“With what?” Cullen asked. “A bear?”

A blast of static filled the loudspeakers and marred the screen of the Batcomputer, startling everyone.

“Does the Batcomputer normally do that?” Harper asked.

“Have fits of static that only occur on standard definition televisions?” Barbara asked. “No. No, it doesn’t.”
Another blast of static, and David Cain’s face loomed large on the Batcomputer’s screen. Cassandra felt her heart almost stop.

“Forge the sound and special effects straight from Windows Movie Maker,” David said. “How else would you know we’d hacked the Batcomputer unless we were obvious about it?”

Everyone in the Batcave bristled.

“Now,” David said. “This message is pre-recorded, so I won’t be taking any questions. Just know that the game isn’t over yet. My associates and I are in possession of three devices powered by an experimental explosive that we liberated from a ship in Gotham Harbor.”

The first one to speak was Harper. “The Quraci explosive. The one I was tracking as Bluebird that led me to the Maronis.”

“The devices themselves are rather easy to deactivate,” the pre-recorded message of David Cain said. “Just a simple off-switch. The catch is... you have to beat us to get to them.”

The image of David’s face dissolved, showing instead a map of Gotham City.

“The fellow you know as One,” David said, “will be at the Hall of Mirrors in Amusement Mile on the mainland.”

A small red dot appeared at the corresponding location on the map. Tim glared at the screen.

“The gentleman who refers to himself as Two,” David said, “will be at the old Fordman’s Department Store on Miagani Island.”

Another red dot popped up on Miagani Island, and Cassandra could hear Stephanie crack her knuckles.

“And as for little old me?” David asked. “I’ll be in the gymnasium of PS 1147 on Bleake Island. And I do believe 1147 is where both of the loveable little Row scamps go to school, don’t they?”


“We leave our locations at eight if you don’t show up,” David said. “The bombs blow at eight-fifteen. If you lose, the bombs blow at eight-fifteen with you in the blast radius. Speaking of which…”

Three wide circles appeared on the map, indicating the blast radius of each explosive device.

“There’s no need to crunch the numbers, Miss Gordon,” David said. “I’ve already taken the liberty. Your failure or tardiness will result in the deaths of one-hundred-seventy-five thousand citizens of Gotham City, so... Be there or be square. End transmission.”

Another blast of static, and the screen of the Batcomputer returned to normal. Yet another pall of silence settled on those gathered.

“How,” Stephanie said, “did those tools hack the Batcomputer?”

“Damian,” Tim said. “If he’s an amalgamation of a bunch of different Damian Waynes from across the Multiverse, then some of them had to know their ways past the armada of firewalls Bruce must have put on that damn thing.

“A hundred and seventy-five thousand people,” Kate said. “It’s... it’s crazy.”
“It’s genius,” said Diana.

They all looked at her.

“If those explosives go off after Nemesis activates the Stone, then that’s one-hundred-seventy-five thousand fresh soldiers in the Army of Nemesis.”

Kate blinked. “That’s the size of Italy’s standing army.”

“It is so sad that you know that,” Stephanie said.

While Kate glared at her, Diana said “Harmonia’s goal was to distract us and spread us thin, and it seems that the goal of Nemesis is the same. And we do not know where the Stone is, compounding our problems further.”

With that, Tim’s eyes widened. Whenever he got this look on his face, Stephanie had always made a point of saying “Jinkies!” Cassandra didn’t know what that meant. Nevertheless, Tim had his Jinkies-Face on.

“Or maybe we do,” Tim said, and he walked to the Batcomputer.

“You smell a clue, Scooby?” Barbara asked.

“HA!” Stephanie yelled, broadly smiling. “Great minds do think alike!”

“Shut up,” Tim said, and he brought up a screenshot of the map with the blast radii of the explosive devices.

“Anything about this seem funny to you?” Tim asked.

“Is anything funny about that many corpses?” Harper asked.

Cullen folded his arms. “That just sounds like a challenge.”

“Founders Island,” Tim said. “Seems to me if you wanted to sow chaos, the financial center of the city is where you start, not what you avoid.”

As Tim brought up searches, his fingers running along the keyboard with speed, Kate asked “Yeah, but where on Founders Island? It’s a big place.”

Tim stopped, and turned around in the seat to look at them.

“Harmonia was running us all ragged,” Tim said. “With the mob war, with Black Mask’s murder, with bin Sayel. Trying to distract us.”

“Yeah,” Cassandra said.

“But that’s just it,” Tim said. “Batman isn’t the only one you distract. Batman is a huge part of the ecosystem in Gotham City. You don’t just distract him. You distract anyone that Batman could use to get to you. And in Gotham, that means cop and criminal alike. And there’s only one place on Founders Island that the crooks won’t go near, and the cops can’t go to yet.”

Tim swiveled in his chair back to the Batcomputer and hit a button. A picture of a building under construction came up.

Cassandra had to wonder if Tim planned his little speech around that button press just to be dramatic.
“The new Gotham Central,” Tim said. And then he went back to work on the keyboard.

“I dunno,” Barbara said. “Think you might be stretching a bit?”

“I’m looking up the construction bid for the precinct,” Tim said. “If Harmonia knew the Stone would be underground for three thousand years, she’d have pulled a lot of strings in the meantime to make sure she had the power to dig. And we have… Harmony Enterprises.”

Kate furrowed her brow. “Konstantin Fotos,” she said.

At which point Diana’s eyes lit up. “Of course!”

“What?” Cullen asked. “What’d I miss?”

“The guy in National City who had the Blade of Resurrection,” Kate said. “He was the head of something called Harmony Enterprises.”

Tim looked at Barbara. “That sound like a connection to you?”

“It damn sure does,” Barbara said in reply.

“We leave,” Diana said. “Now.”

It felt weird walking around in her Batwoman costume in Wayne Manor. They didn’t have a chamber for her down in the Batcave as she worked independently from the rest of Batman’s network, so she had to change in her guest room.

This was the preferred version of the outfit, not the modular one she wore in National City. That one was plate armor, which slowed her down. Batman could be lightning fast while under enough armor to make a Sherman tank jealous, but Kate Kane was an actual person with an actual life, and there weren’t enough hours in the day for that much cardio and lifting.

The one she had on in the guest room now was skin-tight spidersilk treated with the Shear thickening compound. Bane with a buck knife couldn’t put a hole in it. The cape was a nanotube composite, also resistant to knives and guns, and kept her cool in the summer and warm in winters such as these. She got it from her apartment after she and Diana had helped everyone back to their bikes on Miagani Island the night before. After going to the airport to pick up their stuff from their National City excursion and explaining to the pilot of her private jet how his two passengers disappeared mid-flight.

Diana told him that the life of a superhero such as herself was a perilous one, and that such things happened both to her and the people that accompanied her. Which was true, without getting too specific.

And the pilot bought it, so...

Batwoman reached into her red utility belt and pulled out an envelope folded in half.

On the front it said “Renee.”

“Did you put white makeup on over the bruises you got in National City?”

Batwoman looked toward the door.

Wonder Woman stood statuesque and resolute in the doorway, there in the outfit given to her by the
Gods. Sword at her waist and shield at her back.

“It’s an identifying feature,” Batwoman said. “Can’t be too careful.”

“I see,” Wonder Woman said. “And the red lipstick?”

Batwoman smiled with ruby red lips over glistening white teeth.

“It draws the eye,” Batwoman said. “It’s a distraction.”

Wonder Woman looked as though she was going to say something, but opted instead to remain silent. Instead, she pointed at the envelope in Batwoman’s hand.

“Who is that for?”

Batwoman looked down at the envelope. “Renee Montoya,” she said. “I’ve been carrying this every night I’ve been Batwoman. In case I don’t make it.”

“I do believe our friend from the Fifth Dimension mentioned her last night,” Wonder Woman said.

“He did,” Batwoman said. “I was going to ask her to Bruce’s wedding, finally tell her who I was, but…”

“You didn’t tell her you were Batwoman?”

“No,” Batwoman said. “Renee’s a cop, and she found a woman on the force named Maggie Sawyer, and uh… Good for her, y’know?”

Wonder Woman didn’t say anything.

Batwoman walked up to Wonder Woman and handed her the letter.

“Odds are,” Batwoman said, “you’re gonna be the one walking out if anyone’s walking out of this at all. If Renee’s gonna find out her ex bought it in a goofy costume, I think the news might go down better if the Princess of the Amazons gave her the news.”

To her credit, Wonder Woman did not break out any sort of spiel about having hope and faith or whatever. She merely took the letter and put it in a leather pouch on the waist of her bodice.

“Just so you know,” Wonder Woman said, “it is the height of gaucheness to task the woman vying for your affection to give a former amour an anguished declaration of love from beyond the grave.”

“It’s not a…” Batwoman huffed. “It’s an apology.”

Wonder Woman squinted slightly and folded her arms, the very picture of innocent curiosity.

“You know how I met Renee?” Batwoman asked. “She was the cop who pulled me over for a DWI. Batwoman wasn’t the reason Renee and I fell apart. She just helped. I was a mess long before I put on the red and black S & M suit and started punching the mentally ill.”

Wonder Woman simply nodded.

“See that?” Batwoman asked. “Being ugly, dirty, and common. The thing I’m trying to protect you from.”

“You tell me your faults before asking me to deliver an apology for your misdeeds,” Wonder woman
said. “Forgive me if the signals are on the mixed side.”

Batwoman didn’t know what to say to that.

Wonder Woman stood to the side of the doorway of the guest room, stretched her hand out into the hallway, and bowed slightly, beckoning Batwoman through.

They were silent for the walk down the grand staircase to the manor’s main foyer, save for one question.

Batwoman looked at the sword on Wonder Woman’s waist and asked “Is it true that thing can kill a God?”

Wonder Woman stopped her descent. It seemed as though a shadow had settled over her.

“I pray we do not have to find out.”

Once at the main foyer, there seemed to be some slight confusion. Batwoman tried to go left while Wonder Woman seemed to want to go toward the front door.

“The entrance to the Batcave is this way,” Batwoman said. “I’m sure there’s a motorcycle with a Bat motif down there. Wouldn’t do for us to go down there on a Harley.”

Wonder Woman shook her head.

“We fly,” she said. “I’m faster than any vehicle, and I can go in a straight line. There’s no traffic in the sky. Or at least not as low as I plan on flying.”

“We fly?”

“Yes.”

“You mean you fly.”

“Yes.”

“And what, you’re gonna carry me?”

“Yes.”

Batwoman blinked. “How?”

“Like how I carried Bruce into the medical bay.”

“You mean bridal style?”

Wonder Woman sighed, folded her arms, and said “If you prefer, I can carry you by your armpits.”

“Why aren’t you dressed yet?” Barbara asked as she stood in the entryway to the medical bay.

Barbara Gordon was in her Oracle get-up, save her green holographic mask. Selina thought she looked a little on the humorous side, with the black leather pants, the black leather longcoat and the gray plate armor underneath. Like an extra in Johnny Mnemonic, which was a movie Selina had seen only once twenty years ago, yet she somehow still knew the names of all the characters.

Selina, for her part, was still in the clothes she’d worn since last night. She still hadn’t slept. She still
sat at Bruce’s side in the Batcave’s medical bay.

“I don’t know, Barbara,” Selina said. “Maybe it’s because I’m not going.”

Selina looked back at Bruce, and she could vaguely sense that Barbara was pinching the bridge of her nose.

Barbara walked further into the medical bay.

“You… You do know what we’re up against, right?” Barbara asked.

“An angry Goddess, two technical Robins, the guy who trained our deadliest member, and rock soldiers that can end the Multiverse,” Selina said. “So make sure that the Multiverse doesn’t actually end, alright? I still haven’t seen Treasure of the Sierra Madre. I just keep putting it off.”

Barbara let her breath out, and closed her eyes.

“Need Tylenol?” Selina asked. “I’m sure we have some down here.”

Barbara sighed again, and stepped forward.

“When I first put on the Batgirl costume,” Barbara said. “I called my shot. I asked myself who was the supervillain I most wanted to fight and take down, and the answer was clear. It was Catwoman.”

“That’s flattering,” Selina said.

“Yeah,” Barbara said. “But if I knew that Catwoman would fall apart over some guy who’s gonna wind up being fine anyway, I probably would have picked someone else.”

And there it was. Selina had heard-tell of this from both Dick Grayson and Dinah Lance. It was the patented Barbara Gordon Pep-Talk. Start with an insecurity, get your subject angry, and then rally them into where you wanted them to go.

Legend had it that Bruce was like this before. Selina wouldn’t know. She’d only been close to Bruce since he’d started taking medication to get his more assholidh tendencies under lock and key.

Selina looked at her. Hearing this from Barbara, she seemed to find something within herself. Not anger, no. Anger was common. She had loads of that.

This… This was righteousness.

Selina’s eyes flared, betraying no sign of how tired she was. She arose from her chair with her shoulders back, and walked toward Barbara with long strides. Barbara was the taller woman, but she seemed to shrink. Apparently, in her years of giving the Barbara Gordon Pep-Talk, no one had reacted quite this way.

“I’m not falling apart over some guy,” Selina said softly, her vivid green eyes doing more talking than her voice. “I am tending to my husband.”

Barbara tried to get some of her previous swagger back. “Look--”

“Let me ask you a question,” Selina said, cutting her off. “Who… the fuck… do you think you’re talking to?”

Any swagger that Barbara tried to get back was instantly depleted. She just looked at Selina with her
mouth open.

Selina turned back to look at the comatose Bruce, before levelling her gaze back on Barbara.

“See,” Selina said, “he’s under the impression that I make him strong. And you know what? I think he’s right. He gives and he gives and he gives, and this city takes, and takes, and takes. Which is why, just this once, when he wakes up down here, he’s not gonna see a rocky ceiling. He’s not gonna see his long-suffering butler. He’s going to see me.”

Selina took another step forward.

“Because someone has to be here,” Selina said. “Someone has to tell him that on the other side of the divide, a son he thought was dead and a son he didn’t even know he had are trying to kill us. He’s going to hear this in as delicate a way as humanly possible. And he’s going to hear it from me. Because I am his wife, and that is my job.”

“Selina, I’m--”

Selina took another step forward, which cut Barbara off all by itself.

“He has so much faith in you,” Selina said. “In all of you. What was it he said? We’re all imperfect, but we’re imperfect in different ways?”

Barbara nodded.

“Well,” Selina said, “now is the chance to prove it. I’m telling you to prove it because I can. It isn’t Batman’s gadgets or skill that keep this city safe. It isn’t his money or his Goddamned prep time. It’s his eye for talent. Which brings me back to my original question. Who… the fuck… do you think you’re talking to?”

Barbara didn’t say anything.

“I am the Lady of Wayne Manor,” Selina said. “And you will do what I say when you are in my home.”

Selina decided to let that settle before she started speaking again.

“I really don’t give a shit that you’ve been down in this cave longer than I have,” she said. “I’m not Cassandra Cain, so I don’t need you to teach me anything. I’m not Helena Bertinelli, so I’m not desperately seeking the approval of someone who used to wear a Bat on their chest a million fucking years ago. I’m not in your panties like Nightwing, and I’m not Schrodinger’s Fuck-Buddy like Black Canary. So the next time you condescend to me, talk down to me, order me around, or give me one of your bullshit little Birds of Prey rah-rah speeches, I will dropkick your tragic absence of an ass out the front door of this house, and you will never… ever… come back. Are we clear?”

Barbara seemed to have gone pale. And she was already pale to begin with. In the end, she simply nodded.

“Good,” Selina said. “Now go save the world. Go save every world. If Bruce wakes up and we’re feeling good about it, we’ll join you. If not, then, well, you’re just gonna have to make do. And you wouldn’t be down here if he didn’t think you couldn’t.”

With that, Selina turned and walked back to her chair.

She didn’t hear Barbara so much as move behind her. Selina didn’t think Barbara was used to being
spoken to in such a way, so she reckoned that she was searching for something with which to reply. Some kind of cowgirl looking for a bullet for her empty gun about her person, and not finding one.

Finally, Selina said something.

“Do you love Dick Grayson?” she asked.

After a moment, Barbara said. “Yeah, I do.”

“How much?”

“With everything I have.”

The fact that Barbara had tried to manipulate her into doing what she wanted didn’t make Selina angry. It just made her want to handle business.

But this did make her angry. Not the big, showy kind of anger, but the insidious bubbling kind.

“So you walked in here,” Selina said, “and you just pretended you didn’t know what it was like, huh?”

In the underground chambers beneath the new Gotham Central on Founders Island, excavated by Harmonia’s acolytes, Nemesis smiled.

Nemesis had sent them on their appointed errands. Jason went to the abandoned carnival, David went to the gymnasium, and Damian went to the old shop.

Moreso, Nemesis had gotten them right where She wanted them in a mental capacity as well.

Damian needed little prodding. He was the perfect sycophant, ever eager for approval, ready and willing to go to the ends of the Earth for his Goddess, not even questioning why She needed him to perform so pedestrian a task as going to a toy store in the first place.

There was some reassurance that David Cain required in order to make him pliable. Harmonia had appeared before him in a vivid display of light, a great show of her divinity to cow a wayward mortal who was intent on giving himself to the drink. Harmonia provided a sign of redemption. But Nemesis sought to make Herself different. Nemesis sought to make Herself a beacon of power, and Cain was eager to please. When She reached out with Her consciousness to learn about this vibrant and dangerous world that had sprouted from Her passing three thousand years ago, She learned a curious phrase.

“America loves a winner.”

And if She needed proof, David Cain provided it.

And as for Jason Todd?

Jason was terrified.

He was so easy to pick apart. He had been so sure of himself, so sanctimonious about his goals in the world in which he found himself alive again, for all intents and purposes. Yet the matter of his demise was so dire. It was home to Nemesis. She had never toyed with someone who had been so brutally murdered. So unjustly slain. Or at least not one who was still, technically, alive. She had never held so deep and so complete a dominion over the very essence of a mortal before that. Causing him misery, bringing his thoughts and his memories to the front of his mind, causing him
pain was the most fulfillment She had ever had dealing with those below Olympus.

Which is why She thought it was a shame that She couldn’t cause him more anguish, flay his mind further…

But Nemesis was the Goddess of Grudges and Blood Feuds. And vengeance waited for no one.

Vengeance on those who sat atop Olympus, weakened and depleted from centuries of declining worship. Three thousand years after the fact, they would still execute Her simply for attempting to live up to Her potential.

And certainly vengeance would be wrought upon the vile and traitorous slattern in whose body Nemesis now resided. Every second She spent in the body of Harmonia was a new and fresh agony. Just the very indignity of it, holding forth in the worthless shell of one who would betray her fellow Olympian, her fellow Goddess…

Nemesis had said that She was not the Goddess of Elaborate Plans, but what She had in store for the decimated group of wayward heroes coming to stop Her and the mortals She held in Her thrall was about as complicated as She cared to get.

Nemesis closed Her eyes…

…and the Stone called to Her.

The thing She created. The vessel with which She would become all-powerful.

And it was here, underground, beyond the wall of dirt in front of which She presently stood.

Nemesis reached out Her hand, and closed Her eyes.

The soil rumbled. Dirt fell away in sheafs and reams, and vanished into pure and undiluted nothing.

Two feet deep… Four feet deep… Six feet deep…

Until a glimmer appeared.

A green, translucent stone big enough to be hefty but small enough to fit in the palm of a Goddess’ hand loosed itself from the dirt, and floated toward Nemesis.

Her fingertips wrapped around it, and She opened Her eyes.

It was shining. Pristine. As fresh and as fine as the day She stole into the domain of Hades and crafted it from the waters of the River Styx.

Drenched in the blood of the unjustly slain, this Stone would raise Her unstoppable army and bring an end to a world that had been derelict in its dread of Her these past three thousand years.

And now, yet again, Nemesis smiled.
Chapter 20: It's Only Rock n’ Roll

GOTHAM CENTRAL CONSTRUCTION SITE - FOUNDERS ISLAND

The lone silhouette of Wonder Woman carrying Batwoman across the Gotham City skyline would have given pause to anyone who looked. They descended upon the Gotham Central construction site as the bitter December wind picked up.

Provided they lived past this, Batwoman was going to ask Wonder Woman how she dealt with the cold with her arms, back, and thighs exposed like that.

And here she was, being carried through the air in the sinewy arms of the most beautiful woman she had ever seen, and Batwoman couldn’t even enjoy it.

Some lesbian I turned out to be…

As Wonder Woman began to touch down, Batwoman started softly singing to herself under her breath. As far as pre-game rituals went, this was the only one she had.

“Leave me, or I’ll be just like others you will meet. They won’t act as kindly if they see you on the street. And don’t you scream or make a shout, there’s nothing you can do about. It was there when you came out, it’s a special lack of grace. I can see it in your face. I can see by what you carry that you come from Barrytown.”

Wonder Woman softly landed, and gently set Batwoman down.

“My ears may be deceiving me,” Wonder Woman said, “but I do believe I heard you singing.”

It was too cold to blush.

“Barrytown,” Batwoman said. “The Ben Folds Five cover of the Steely Dan original, anyway. It’s one of my Dad’s favorites. It’s just… something I do to get my head in the game on big nights like this.”

Wonder Woman nodded. “I’m a Rolling Stones fan, myself.”

“Seriously?”

“I am a simple woman,” Wonder Woman said. “I hear Jumpin’ Jack Flash, and I embarrass myself attempting to sing in my living room.”

Batwoman nodded. If the situation were not urgent, nor the air so cold, she might have even smiled.

“This is the small talk portion, isn’t it?” Batwoman asked. “That thing we do to put off the other thing that needs doing.”

“So it is,” Wonder Woman said. “Shall we?”

“Let’s.”

The new Gotham Central itself was essentially some foundation work and a network of girders. But, over on the east side of the site, there was a tunnel covered in a broad white tarpaulin that housed a
wooden ramp leading down.

At the end of the ramp stood a freight elevator. Wonder Woman and Batwoman got inside, and Batwoman pressed the button that brought them down…

...down…

...down…

...Into another tunnel built into the very Earth itself, lit by LED lights plunged into the walls of dirt.

Down this corridor they walked until they came to a chamber lit by floor lights, at the center of which one human form stood.

Well, Batwoman thought, I say human...

She was in robes of an ancient make, freshly tattered. Over them She wore an open blue work shirt with a name tag on the right side that said “Michael.” She was a beautiful woman who found Herself in the early stages of disrepair. Her once flawless skin was covered in a coat of grimy oil. Her long blonde curls had gone stringy and greasy.

And having only set eyes on Her just this once, Batwoman knew that those blazing green eyes did not belong in Her head.

In Her hand, she held a green stone.

“Hello,” She said.

Wonder Woman narrowed her eyes. “Nemesis.”

“You must be Diana of the Amazons,” Nemesis said. “Athena’s clay plaything. Sent into Patriarch’s World to preach and speechify about the sanctity of sisterhood.”

“I am,” Wonder Woman said.

“And how well have you fared?”

Wonder Woman looked at Batwoman before looking back to Nemesis. “On the whole, I’d say it’s gone rather well.”

Nemesis smirked. “And you must be Kate Kane. The Batwoman. I believe the term the younger set uses for one such as you is ‘Disaster Lesbian.’”

“I’m not gonna lie,” Batwoman said. “That’s actually pretty fair.”

Nemesis looked back at Wonder Woman. “The desperation emanating from you is sickening. To come all this way and spend all this time attempting to elevate women only to fall for one who stole a man’s symbol in order to find her calling defeats the entire purpose, doesn’t it?”

Wonder Woman looked as though she was going to say something. And judging from the glint in her blue eyes, it wasn’t going to be something nice, but Batwoman cut her off.

“At least I didn’t steal a body,” Batwoman said. “Looks like I win.”

And they all fell silent.
Batwoman could feel it in the air. She’d felt it many times before. Some called it tension, but to her, it was peace turning like old mayonnaise.

“The two of you will not leave this place alive,” Nemesis said. “Such a fact should be made clear at the outset.”

“It does not have to be this way,” Wonder Woman said. “There are ways past this other than violence.”

Nemesis laughed. “The famous Wonder Woman entreaty for a peaceful solution. When has that ever worked?”

“More times that I have feared,” Wonder Woman said. “And less times than I’ve hoped.”

“Hope truly is a funny thing,” Nemesis said. “It brought you here… to die… with her… right now.”

Nemesis raised Her left hand. Behind Her, the earthen walls started to distort and undulate, and from them emerged five human forms roughly six feet tall. Their faces were featureless, their chests barrel-like, and where their hands should have been, there were instead long and sharp spikes that reached all the way down to their knees.

“A trial run for the soldiers in my army,” Nemesis said. “A taste of things to come.”

She turned to the earthen soldiers She had summoned.

“Destroy them.”

BURNSIDE - THE MAINLAND

Four motorcycles had lit out from the tunnel exit of the Batcave a half a mile away from Wayne Manor. Oracle, Bluebird, and Robin were on three.

Which meant that Orphan had had to hitch a ride with Spoiler.

The highway was nearly abandoned on this cold night. Orphan was aware that there were some things that spread telepathically between members of a community, no matter how large its size. The last connection between the planet and its people.

Everyone knew it was going to start snowing soon. And it was going to be bad.

The rendezvous point for the team was on top of the Levitt Savings & Loan on the mainland in scenic hipster Burnside. They were all supposed to park their bikes in various locations, and grapnel there.

They came to a stop next to a Burnside post office on another nearly abandoned street. Orphan immediately got off of the back of Spoiler’s motorcycle, walked to the relatively tall building next to the post office, and got her grapnel gun off of her utility belt.

But then she stopped.

Spoiler was still on her motorcycle.

Her shoulders were bunched up beneath her purple cape in rigid tension. Orphan knew that she was
thinking about something. And thinking about it hard.

Finally, Spoiler got off of her motorcycle and walked to Orphan, looking at her boots all the while. She came to a stop right in front of Orphan and sighed, her breath coming out in a thick fog from her black mask, before her head finally raised.

“I’m not going up there,” Spoiler said.

Orphan blinked behind her mask. There was more to this, so she stayed quiet.

“The old Fordman’s on Miagani,” Spoiler said. “That’s where Damian is, so that’s where I’m going. Alone. I don’t want you coming with me, and you have a dad to fight anyway, don’t you?”

And Orphan… just went blank. She knew someone was going to have to deal with Damian, but she didn’t think it was going to be Steph. If Orphan had to guess, maybe Oracle, because she had assumed Spoiler would be going with her to fight Cain.

Orphan had to fight David because… because…

Says who?

And there it was again. For a girl who could barely talk, Orphan’s brain had started babbling at full speed last night, and hadn’t stopped.

“He flowed around everything I had,” Spoiler said. “He laughed at me. He almost killed Batman on my watch. So… So this is something I have to do.”

The first thing that Orphan wanted to say was…

Says who?

…but Orphan didn’t think Spoiler would respond well to it. But even that was better than her second response, which was…

You’ll die.

Finally, Orphan just asked:

“Why?”

“Because… Because I need to prove I belong here,” Spoiler said. “With all of you. In a way I don’t think I have before.”

And Orphan thought that that… was just stupid. Of course Stephanie Brown belonged with all of them. If she didn’t, they would have kicked her out.

It was not lost on Orphan that she could try to stop Spoiler from leaving physically, but she knew it was a bad idea. There were nothing but worst case scenarios there, taking into account the fight that the two of them had in the Batcave evidence room that morning. The likeliest thing that would happen would be that Orphan would incapacitate Spoiler and they would be one down. The far less likely (though still depressingly possible, given how furious and unstoppable Stephanie seemed to be that morning) event was that Orphan and Spoiler would have incapacitated each other, and they’d be two down.

Orphan didn’t get it. It was like Spoiler didn’t get the level of game here. The fate of this world and worlds beyond hung in the balance, and Spoiler was going to throw it away on her pride.
Thing was, Orphan knew that she would have understood yesterday morning. Yesterday morning, she knew that she was born in a certain place, given a certain set of skills through fear and brutality, and destiny dictated where she ended up by the time she died, hopefully in service of others.

But today she knew that destiny was stupid, fate was bullshit, the Multiverse was vast, and we were all so, so small.

Cassandra Cain could not read, could not write, could barely talk, but these were truths that she knew now, down to the marrow in her bones.

So why didn’t anyone else?

“I don’t have a plan,” Spoiler said. “I mean I do, but it’s a shitty one. I have hope, though. And hope gets you through a lot.”

Without warning, Spoiler put her arms around Orphan, and pulled her into a close, tight hug.

She spoke into Orphan’s ear. Her voice was watery and thick.

“Be happy, Cassandra Cain,” Spoiler said. “Whatever it takes. Take the Belly Buster Challenge. Enter the Kumite. Play Mortal Kombat. Grab hold of Conner Kent and don’t let go. I don’t give a shit. But when you go out, you go out smiling. Because if you can do it, then maybe the rest of us can too.”

Spoiler broke the hug, and looked at Orphan. And Orphan would have paid to see what her eyes looked like.

“I practiced that in my head on the ride over here,” Spoiler said after a while. “But I don’t have an ending. So I’m just gonna bow…”

Spoiler gave an exaggerated bow.

“...and say that if there’s a flip-side, I’ll see you there.”

Spoiler walked backwards to her motorcycle, putting off breaking eye contact with Orphan until the last possible instant, before she finally got on, turned over the engine, and tore off into the night.

And Orphan just stood there on that lonely sidewalk in front of a Burnside post office on a frigid night in Gotham City. Her thoughts tearing each other apart, failing to find an image or a through-line in her limited vocabulary with which to form a sentence, or even a word. There were tears behind her eyes, and her hands were shaking slightly.

Until finally, Orphan let out a watery sigh, got out her grapnel gun, and propelled herself upward.

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**GOTHAM CENTRAL CONSTRUCTION SITE - FOUNDERS ISLAND**

The five earthen soldiers advanced on Wonder Woman, who already had her shield out.

Which left the painfully mortal Batwoman to deal with the Goddess of Grudges, Blood Feuds, and the Unjustly Slain.

Batwoman was caught in her usual fight reverie, and she hadn’t fully grasped what she had done until after she had done it.

She came in low and fast, and planted an uppercut under Nemesis’ jaw.
Batwoman just punched a Goddess in the face.

It was like hitting a pillow. Nemesis’ head rolled with it, and She came away with a thoughtful look on Her face.

“What’s what a punch feels like.”

Batwoman’s felt her pulse lower, and she just goggled at Her.

“Though I was frightfully curious, I’m going to make a bold statement,” Nemesis drawled, “and say that I don’t like them.”

Nemesis raised Her hands, and the ground beneath Batwoman’s feet rumbled, drowning out the sounds of Wonder Woman’s exertions and the spikes clanging off of her ancient Greek shield.

Batwoman put her gymnastics training to use, and performed a back hand-spring just as a crater about three feet deep opened in the ground where she had just been standing.

Her weighted caped hit the back of her thighs as she came down, and her hands came up with two explosive Batarangs straight from her utility belt. She let them fly at Nemesis.

The explosive Batarangs came to a halt two feet in front of Nemesis, and they hovered in mid-air as the Goddess smiled. She let Her green eyes roam them as though they were exhibits at a museum for the quaint and the silly.

“Fascinating!” Nemesis said, broadly grinning. “You just throw them and they go… Boom.”

The two Batarangs, packed with microscopic C-4 charges and rudimentary heat-seeking tech… exploded into pink flower petals.

Nemesis laughed and clapped Her hands. And Batwoman said the only thing that was appropriate under these circumstances.

“Oh, shit…”

While Nemesis was still laughing and clapping, four sets of chains appeared out of quite literally nowhere, and wrapped around Batwoman’s wrists and ankles. She cried out as they pulled, suspending her in mid-air, completely helpless.

“Ohhhhhhh,” Nemesis said, coming down from Her laugh. “I have to say I find this phenomenon of superheroes and supervillains quite fascinating. The costumes, the pageantry, the toys, the psychosis…”

As Wonder Woman continued her melee with the five earthen soldiers, Nemesis strolled leisurely around the bound and defenseless Batwoman.

“My kind and I have crossed into myth in the three thousand years since I died,” Nemesis said. “But you? You have ventured into the realm of mythology as you still live and breathe. Your exploits have grown to legend. You are cursed in bitter invective and prayed for in hushed tones on the darkest of nights. All while your feeble mortal forms decay and sag, as you make mistakes and fumble toward a grace that shall ever evade you.”

Nemesis was behind her now, and as She spoke, Batwoman could see Wonder Woman level the
head of one of the earthen soldiers with her sword. The soldier collapsed into loose soil… as another soldier formed itself from the dirt in the wall to her right to replace it, ready to go.

“*I have to say,*” Nemesis said, “*I consider it a lost opportunity that I did not converse with The Joker while he was still alive. But if I had to pick a favorite among the living in your lot, I would have to say… Deathstroke.*”

She knew she was staring down death itself, but even now, Batwoman had to break from her fear to feel like she was about to throw up in her mouth.

*Deathstroke? Really?*

Nemesis made Her way around to Batwoman’s front again. In Her left hand, She was holding a dull green rock.

The Stone of Nemesis.

“*This stone,***” Nemesis said, “*when awash in the blood of the unjustly slain, will assemble the real Soldiers of my unstoppable Army. And from there, they will slaughter every man, woman and child on this planet, each soul they harvest creating another in their number… But where, oh where, shall I find a murder victim at this time of night?***”

Nemesis smiled a smile that was toothy, vile, unseemly, and altogether unnatural for the lips of the body of Harmonia in which She lived.

“*Oh… I know.***”

She reached under the blood-spattered workshort She wore, and produced a dagger with a dull silver handle from the loose belt of her robes.

Batwoman didn’t think that blade had a shot of piercing her armor…

...but she had just seen Nemesis turn two explosive Batarangs into flower petals.

Batwoman felt her heart squeeze inside her chest. She wondered if she could pick which parts of her life that would be flashing before her eyes right about now. She didn’t want to hear her mom and sister die again. She didn’t want to be expelled from West Point again. She didn’t want to see Renee looking at her with disappointment again… and again… and again...

She wanted to swim in Lake James with her sister when she was eight. She wanted that night in the cab of Sophie Moore’s pickup truck behind that barn in Virginia. She wanted to tell that joke about the two old ladies and the flowers to Renee again, the one that made her laugh so hard she squirted the grape juice she was drinking out of her nose.

And…

And…

And she wanted to see Diana. Away from all this. Across the water or across a table. In formal evening wear or superhero garb or sweatpants. If it was Diana, it didn’t matter.

Nemesis raised the dagger above Her head in a grandiose fashion, still smiling that toothy smile.

“*Goodbye, Kate.*”
Batwoman closed her eyes.

It came like thunder. A sound that almost made her deaf.

“NO!”

Batwoman heard flesh shear, ribs sunder. She felt something warm and wet spatter on her face.

She opened her eyes.

Wonder Woman’s sword was sticking out of Nemesis’ chest, staining the workshirt that belonged to some guy named Michael. Wonder Woman was standing behind Her.

Both the Stone and the dagger She was holding thumped to the ground after they slipped from Her fingers.

And it dawned on Batwoman that she had the blood of a Goddess on her face.

Nemesis was looking down at the blade, but slowly, Her head came up. She made eye contact with Batwoman.

It was a low sound she made, guttural. One might even call it a chuckle.

“Huh…”

Nemesis smiled. Not the smile She had on her face before, not that toothy monstrocity. This was a smile of genuine delight.

But then Her eyes rolled back in Her head. Green fog started spewing out of her mouth, out of Her eye sockets.

Batwoman felt herself being gently lowered to the ground as the Godly chains from nowhere slowly vanished. The five earthen soldiers that Wonder Woman had been fighting knelt to the ground in what looked like respect, before they dissolved into loose dirt.

Nemesis looked up at Wonder Woman, but She was different. There was blood spilling from her mouth. And her eyes were…

Her eyes were blue.

This wasn’t Nemesis.

This was Harmonia.

“D...Diana?” Harmonia asked in a completely different voice.

A stillness settled on Wonder Woman. If one were looking closely, one could see her lip quiver. And Batwoman was indeed looking very closely.

“I am sorry, Harmonia,” Wonder Woman said.

“I just wanted the whispers to stop,” Harmonia said, pained, a slight gurgle in her throat. “I… I just…”

Harmonia’s body slumped. Her head hung limp.
Burnside - The Mainland

Orphan descended on the roof of Levitt Savings & Loan to see Robin and Bluebird standing to one side while Oracle stood all on her lonesome on the other. Oracle was stoop-shouldered with her hands in the pockets of her leather trench coat. Orphan had seen her in this stance before. She was putting up with a great annoyance, though Orphan knew not what. At least not until Bluebird opened her mouth.

“Oh, wipe that asshole off your face,” Bluebird said. “You know how much money I’d pay in Vegas to have someone as hot as Catwoman yell at me?”

Oracle opened her mouth to say something, but caught Orphan out of the corner of her eye.

“Where’s Spoiler?” Oracle asked.

“She’s… fighting… Damian,” Orphan said in reply.

“By herself?”

Orphan nodded.

“And you didn’t stop her? And you didn’t go with her?”

Orphan didn’t even know how to respond to that, beyond what Spoiler had told her.

“It’s something… she had… to do.”

Jeez, just saying that tasted like the bullshit that Orphan thought it was.

Oracle didn’t say anything. But Robin did.

“I respect that,” Robin said. “Just like you have to fight your dad, right?”

Past the instinctive revulsion that always washed over her whenever someone referred to David Cain as her “dad,” beyond the practiced sentiment at the fore of her brain that made her want to say “Yes, I do,” something else, something deeper and all the more persuasive made itself known. And it was loud.

But do I?

Followed by that old familiar refrain of:

Says who?

There was… something. Something off.

So much had changed since yesterday, since she had discovered how big everything was. Yesterday she thought that, for good or ill, David Cain was responsible for how she turned out. From the training that honed her into a lethal weapon to even the seed of conscience, either discovered or inadvertently instilled at such a young age, that prevented her from taking any further life. David Cain started her and, because of that origin, David Cain would be the reason wherever she ended up by the time she took her final breath.
But as the Multiverse got bigger and bigger, the Cassandra Cain of Earth Eight-Oh-Three saw that she owed David Cain less and less.

And it was all stupid anyway, wasn’t it? If she was going to fight David, if Robin was going to fight Jason, if Spoiler was going to fight Damian, then wouldn’t David, Jason and Damian have anticipated all of this?

The three of them had spent the last few days making this personal, and if this was personal, then they were banking on predictability. The same kind of predictability that would, in all likelihood, get her best friend Stephanie killed.

And so many lives were on the line. In this city, on this Earth, on every Earth. The worst way to gamble was an easiness to read.

“Alright,” Oracle said. “So you’re taking on Jason?”

“Yeah,” Robin said.

Orphan’s hands started opening and closing.

“Bluebird, where are you gonna be?” Oracle asked.

“I’m going with him,” Bluebird said.

Orphan’s breath escaped her nose in an irritated hiss.

“I guess that settles it,” Oracle said. “Orphan, I’m with—”

And finally, it was too much for Orphan to take. She hunched over and used all of her body to yell: ‘NO!”

They all stared at her, statue-like.

Robin was the first one to speak.

“You, uh… You okay, there, Orphan?”

Orphan stood up straight, ripped off her mask, pointed at Robin, and yelled “BULLSHIT!”

Cassandra had never seen anyone in a superhero costume so surprised and hurt at the same time.

She walked up to him, dropping her mask on the tarpaper of the rooftop so that she could use her hands to sign.


Robin opened his mouth, but Cassandra reached up and put her hand over his lips.


And there it was. There was the plea that took her away from destiny itself.

Cassandra Cain would never be the One-Who-Is-All.

Cassandra Cain would never learn from her father who her mother actually was.
Cassandra would never get whatever measure of closure there was to be gained by defeating David Cain in combat.

But if it saved lives, every life, then Cassandra Cain was more than happy with that.

She took her hand away from Robin’s mouth. Whatever reply he had came with a delay, as she stared at her with his mouth open for a second.

“No,” he said.

“Yes.”

“You don’t understand, “ Robin said. “I have to fight Jason.

After so much time thinking it, Cassandra finally got to say it.

“Says who?”

Robin didn’t seem to be prepared for that one.

“Says me,” Robin said after a moment. “This is something that needs to be settled Robin to Robin. I wouldn’t expect anyone to understand.”

Cassandra sighed. She frantically rummaged through the words in her brain that would make her point for her, but it was slow in going.

As with many other aspects of her life, however, it was Barbara Gordon who came in when she needed her most.

“You know,” Oracle said, “I think she’s on to something. I was telling her the other day that going after her father was a bad idea because he baited her. He was prepared for her. Nice to see it’s finally sinking in.”

It wasn’t. But apparently Catwoman had yelled at Oracle earlier in the evening, so Cassandra opted to let her think she got the win. She didn’t have the words to explain herself anyway.

Robin shook his head. “For the past year and a half I’ve been chasing ghosts. I’ve been chasing Dick, I’ve been chasing Jason. I... I’ve been given something special, and I need to earn it. I need to make my mark. I need to prove that I’m the best Robin I can be.”

There was a brief silence after this. Then Oracle spoke again.

“Didn’t you, um... Didn’t you do the detective work that linked that mob hit on Bleake Island to what was going down at the Sorrento Ballroom?”

“Yeah,” Bluebird said. “And didn’t you neutralize the Anti-Fear Toxin and save a hundred lives all by your damn self? Including mine?”

“Didn’t you make the jump that Cain, Jason, and Damian were going after Muhammad bin Sayel?” Oracle asked. “You averted an international incident.”

“Didn’t you figure out where the Stone of Nemesis was?” Bluebird asked. “Wonder Woman and Batwoman haven’t contacted us yet, so it must be there.”

“Tim,” Oracle said, “You have been killing it. And right now, you’re gonna need a better reason to take on Jason than ‘That’s the way the story’s supposed to end.’ What more is it gonna take for you
to realize you belong here?”

Robin, who had been turning red this whole time, yelled out “Beating Jason Todd in a fight!”

Cassandra, Oracle, and Bluebird regarded him gravely. He looked at his boots.

“Robin doesn’t take stray shots in the face from henchmen,” Robin said. He pointed at the bandages on his face. “Robin isn’t supposed to get his nose broken by mass murdering psychos. The only clout you have in this life is how strong you are. How fast you are. How good you are in a fight. Because the way we live, that’s how lives get saved.”

Oracle folded her arms. Her green holographic mask was blank, but her voice was a poisonous monotone.

“I spent four years as Oracle,” she said, “becoming the intelligence backbone for the entire superhero community. I joined the fucking *Justice League* in a *wheelchair*. No… it… isn’t.”

Cassandra didn’t think that was really fair. She had been out of the wheelchair by the time she and Tim had first met. Robin threw up his hands the way he did when he was frustrated with himself after he had said something stupid, but he didn’t say anything.

“Robin?”

It was Bluebird. In a stark contrast to Oracle, her face was sympathy itself. Her voice soft.

“The only person,” Bluebird said, “who doesn’t think you should be wearing that R is you.”

Robin looked from her to Cassandra and then slowly to Oracle.


“Good,” Oracle said, getting some of her geniality back.

“Tim,” Cassandra said.

He looked at her. Cassandra walked up to him and gave him a hug. It was a hug that Robin only half-heartedly returned.

“You get the sweetheart deal,” Robin said. “You know that, right? Jason’s dangerous, but your dad is a top-tier assassin.”

“You have me with you,” Bluebird said. “Keep your boxers dry.”

“He’s not… prepared… for you,” Cassandra said.

“And Jason?” Robin asked.

Cassandra picked her mask back up. Before she put it on, she smiled at him.

The smile was not altogether a warm one.

“Not… prepared… for *me*…”

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**GOTHAM CENTRAL CONSTRUCTION SITE - FOUNDERS ISLAND**
“You killed her,” Batwoman said.

Wonder Woman lowered Harmonia’s body to the floor. “I know,” she said.

She pulled her sword out of Harmonia’s back. And there she was, the corpse of the Goddess of Harmony and Concord, still and cooling in an ever-spreading pool of her own blood.

Wonder Woman looked at Batwoman. Her face was a mask of sorrow. Batwoman tried to find something to say.

She settled on “Batman has a rule. I follow it. I live by it. But unlike him, I know exceptions sometimes have to be made. I’m a soldier, and war costs.”

They held eye contact. It was enough.

“But still,” Wonder Woman said. “There is--”

“Wait,” said Batwoman.

Her eyes had fallen on the dagger that Nemesis had used in the attempt to kill her. She didn’t notice something wrong in the heat of the moment, but now the moment was cold.

*What would a Goddess need with a dagger?*

Batwoman bent down, picked it up, and immediately knew something was off. She flicked the blade with her finger, and a hollow thump sounded.

“This is a toy knife,” Batwoman said.

Wonder Woman’s brow furrowed.

Batwoman looked to the left of Harmonia’s body, and saw the Stone of Nemesis. She picked it up. It almost looked like…

“This is soap,” Batwoman said.

“What?”

Batwoman sniffed it. “Yeah, this is Irish Spring. My dad uses this.” She closed her hand tightly around it, and the nugget of Irish Spring collapsed into pale green chunks.

Wonder Woman folded her arms. “Then where is… the…”

She trailed off. She was looking down. Batwoman’s eyes went down as well.

There were green shafts of light coming from Harmonia’s chest, illuminating the pool of blood in which she lay.

Wonder Woman knelt down and turned Harmonia’s body over. Whatever it was that was causing this had now cast the entire underground chamber in a vivid green pall.

And it was coming from the right breast pocket of the work shirt that Harmonia was wearing. The one that had belonged to someone named Michael.

Wonder Woman reached inside, and with blood-stained fingers, she pulled out what had to be the real Stone of Nemesis.
Batwoman’s train of thought jumped three tracks.

Nemesis wasn’t trying to kill either of them.

Judging from Wonder Woman’s body, and how little pain she herself was in, Nemesis wasn’t even particularly attempting to *hurt* them.

Which meant that Nemesis… was Unjustly Slain.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Batwoman said. “Nemesis gets us to kill Harmonia, and the Army of Nemesis rises and she doesn’t live to see it?”

“Nemesis gets me to kill Harmonia,” Wonder Woman said, “and the Army of Nemesis rises. They kill all life on Earth. Which means the Olympian Pantheon, with no worshippers, dies off as well. All of the other Harmonias on all of the other Earths stay trapped in their madness while the Gods and Goddesses that sentenced her to death also meet their end.”

Wonder Woman looked from the activated Stone to Batwoman.

“Nemesis was the Goddess of Grudges and Blood Feuds,” she said. “If you ask me whether or not She would sacrifice Herself to bring the entire Olympic Pantheon down with Her, I would say She very much would.”

Batwoman felt a chill from inside her. And she saw something she hoped she would never see. Something she didn’t even know was possible.

Wonder Woman was *terrified.*

Her shaking hands opened the leather pouch at her waist and stuffed the bloody Stone inside. She reached into the pouch and pulled out a small communication device about the size of a tube of ChapStick. She spoke into it.


She dropped the comm device back into the pouch. As she closed it, she began to walk back the way they came.

“We need to go.”

“Where?” Batwoman asked.

Wonder Woman’s voice was a grave monotone.

“Toward the sound of screaming.”

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**BATBURGER - FOUNDERS ISLAND**

In the center of Founders Island, as a sort of respite from the investment banks, high-end boutiques, art galleries, and corporate skyscrapers, a small core of stores and eateries lay. They were indicative of the tacky, gaudy, cheap, and otherwise grotesque Disney-fication that once claimed the life of New York City.

Tourists liked them.
They were the only ones.

One such establishment, Batburger, was here at its second location after the first had been destroyed by angry rioters a year and a half ago, when The Undying held sway. It was a Batman theme restaurant that sold Batburgers, Night-Wings, and even Orphan-Os, which were just Spaghetti-Os kept under a heat lamp. They also sold various souvenirs like Spoiler t-shirts, and black baseball caps with bat ears up top and vivid red wig-fringes sewn in the back to mimic Batwoman’s cowl.

This skidmark in the tightey-whiteys of Gotham City had gotten its liquor license two months ago. Good for them. Bad for City Sanitation, who now had to clean up gallons of tourist puke on this street a week.

At a table on the southern end of the restaurant, against the wall with the large, ugly, blown-up mugshot of The Joker, Darrel Estes of Voldosta, Georgia sat with his wife Milla, and his two sons Jacob and Eli.

Jacob and Eli were kicking each other under the table with a never-ending tennis match of “Stop.” “You stop.” “Stop.” “You stop.”

The ever-indecisive Milla was still perusing the menu, wasting everyone’s Goddamned time before she would finally settle on the Batburger equivalent of the chicken tenders, which she ate everywhere the family went.

And Darrel just sipped his pint of Miller Genuine Draft, trying to empty his mind of all thought and all noise.

Mister Estes was the first person to realize something was wrong. The top of his glass of beer was rippling, like those two plastic cups of water in Jurassic Park.

A second later, every last one of the patrons of this filled-to-the-brim Batburger fell into silence as they all realized that the floor was shaking.

Little granules of wood from the floor, of formica from the tabletops, of glass from display cases and framed posters, of steel from silverware, of carpet fabric and eventually the concrete beneath all started floating away, pitting those things from whence they came, toward five points in the southern end of the restaurant.

All present simply gawked silently. Or got their phones out to record.

And these materials, leaving the things they comprised seemingly of their own accord, assembled five beige humanoid figures with featureless faces, broad chests, and long sharp spikes where their hands should have been.

And one of them turned its head… and looked at Darrel Estes.

Darrel was silent for a moment, before he lifted his beer and said “Uhhh… Hey.”

And this figure reared back, and jammed its right spike into Darrel Estes’ eye. It came out the back of his head in a shower of blood, brain, and bone.

Everyone screamed. They bolted, leaving behind purses, souvenirs, and unfinished meals.

But while Darrel Estes’ life met a most peculiar end, it was nothing compared to what happened to his soul.
It did not go where souls go after death. But rather it stayed, invisible and suspended, while bits of material from its surroundings formed a sixth deadly figure around it.

Eight people were either slaughtered or trampled to death before they could leave the restaurant. Which meant that the six figures that had come to life in this place now numbered fourteen.

And so, in this lowly, shitty Batburger, the gravest existential threat that Gotham City--that the world--had ever faced made its initial presence felt.

The Army of Nemesis had risen.

**MEANWHILE, AT THE HALL OF JUSTICE...**

In the rear of the Hall of Justice on the first floor, beyond the museum and the gift shoppe (yes, spelled with the superfluous P and E), there was Central Control.

It was a large room, with the left and the right walls consisting of almost nothing but computer servers, and the front wall made up of a large screen that connected with the Watchtower up in space.

Someone, twenty-four hours a day, every day, had to be in this room to monitor incoming transmissions.

And tonight, the shift belonged to Victor Stone. AKA “Cyborg.”

On the vast screen in front of him was J’onn J’onzz--The Martian Manhunter--from his station on the Watchtower.

And from the speakers…


Cyborg’s one natural eye widened.

“Keter?” he asked. “That’s...”

“World-threatening,” Martian Manhunter said, his red eyes narrowing, making his green face seem bigger.

“Think Diana might have made a mistake?”

“She gave her access code,” Martian Manhunter said. “And Diana is, well, Diana. If she said the threat is real, the threat is real.”

Cyborg sighed. He interfaced with the Central Control mainframe. Cyborg being Cyborg, he just had to think it, and it was done. He hadn’t used a keyboard in years.

“I’m putting the word out,” Cyborg said. “All Justice League members and League-adjacent entities and individuals. Boots on the ground, we’re going to Gotham City.”
Fordman’s Department Store was a victim of its own expansion, and just plain picking the wrong island of Gotham on which to open.

It first opened its doors in the eighties, when families still lived on Miagani Island. By the late eighties, people were moving away, and by the early nineties, Miagani was slowly but surely becoming Gotham’s entertainment destination, and the large blocky store clashed with the theatres and cineplexes that had begun popping up like mushrooms.

The corporate ownership tried to move the store somewhere else in the city, but the real estate prices were far too high. So it came to pass that Fordman’s, with stores in thirty-eight states, no longer had a presence in Gotham.

Fordman’s had, in fact, been closed since before Stephanie Brown had been born.

After she had parked her motorcycle in the middle of the vast, dilapidated parking lot, Spoiler began her lonely, long walk to the front entrance in the cold evening air beneath a cloudy, indifferent sky.

She reckoned that Damian Wayne was like a cat in a way.

She knew this because he left her a present.

A man was propped up next to the open glass door to the old store.

He was in his fifties.

He was homeless.

And he was dead. Both of his eyes had been carved out of his skull, and his throat had been slashed.

Spoiler shook her head, and went on in.

She was greeted by five more dead transients. Some with missing limbs. Some still kneeling, as though praying for a mercy that would never come. There was a trail of blood that connected the five bodies, forming a trail that began in the main foyer, and ended…

...in the old women’s wear section.

Spoiler didn’t know why Damian chose this as the showdown spot.

Maybe it had something to do with the fact that the old mannequins were still there.

The feminine mannequins formed a circle around what had to be the bomb. It was housed in half of an old plastic suitcase, with wires and metal plates, in the center of which was a small tube of bright orange gel, and a red switch that must have turned the thing off.

The dead bodies were unpleasant, no question about that. But Spoiler thought the mannequins were just creepy. Weren’t they property of the Fordman’s corporation? Weren’t they supposed to be picked up and put in other stores, instead of being left here like swords on old-timey battlefields?
Did they have to still be here to be used as ornamentation for a Fifth Dimensional psychotic’s little tabl--

“Hello, Stephanie…”

It came from all around her. From the walls, from the cavernous, vaulted ceiling.

“You’ve come,” Damian said from wherever he was. “And… you’ve come alone. That, I did not expect.”

Spoiler sighed. “Hello, Damian.”

From right behind her: “You know my name.”

Spoiler turned, and there Damian Wayne stood, minus the flames that marked his Two gimmick. His green eyes were accusatory. He was handsome… he was babyfaced…

…and he was short.

Stephanie thought that might be useful.

“How do you know my name?” Damian asked.

“Does it matter?” Spoiler asked.

Damian leered. “I suppose not.”

Spoiler pointed back to the trail of dead homeless people. “Was that necessary?”

He ran a hand through his black hair. “Yes.”

“They were people,” Spoiler said. “You had no right.”

“Yes, I did.”

“How?”

Damian sighed. “You know I was once asked whether or not I could communicate with anyone without hurting them? I don’t think I can. I wasn’t built for it. Come to think of it, I don’t particularly want to. I am superior, so why should I pretend otherwise? I am… of a great purpose.”

Spoiler sneered behind her mask.

“I am a great many people in this one body,” Damian said. “So many Damians, so many Grandsons of the Demon. So many Sons of Batman, and the vein that connects them all is destiny. The cowl. The Batman of this Earth may have escaped me for the time being, but I will take his head, take the cowl that he wears, and put his other profligate faux sons to the sword. Grayson. Drake. Even that newfangled Jason monstrosity that Harmonia reconstructed.”

One thing lit up in Spoiler’s mind.

*Harmonia didn’t tell him what she was planning. How could this guy be Batman if there was no Earth to be Batman on?*

In addition to being both short, and apparently in love with the sound of his own voice, Damian Wayne gravitated toward power. Once he considered something greater than he, he asked no
questions.

This… might also be useful.

“The cowl is mine,” Damian said. “All I need to do is take it. It is one of two things in this place that truly do belong to me.”

“And what’s the other?”

“You,” Damian said.

Spoiler found it impossible to suppress a shudder.

“Don’t be like that,” Damian said. “I forbid it. Why is it that everyone leads with emotions like concern and empathy? Why are so few worthy enough to communicate with me on a level that matters?”

Spoiler sighed. She pulled back her purple hood and took off her black mask.

She saw Damian regarding the bruises that Cassandra had given her that morning. He reacted with a glare. Not a concern that someone did this to someone for whom he had feelings, no. This was the irritated reception of someone who just got their car keyed.

“I dunno,” Stephanie said. “Maybe… and I’m just speculating, here… it’s because you’re a cunt.”

The glare on Damian’s face disappeared into an angry nothing.

“Oh, that’s right,” Stephanie said. “You don’t like it when girls swear, do you? Cunt-cunt-cunt-cunt-cunt- cunt!”

Stephanie wasn’t the biggest fan of that word. He’d have had to interrogate her memory for the times she had even thought it before now. But she was under the impression that she needed all the help she could get.

Damian’s eye started twitching. “None… have ever… dared!”

“Oh, none have ever dared, huh?” Stephanie asked. “How many Stephanie Browns have you met? Because if any of them had a nice thing to say about a sawed-off little spunk-bubble like you, then they don’t deserve my name. See, I get that you’re the son of multiple Batmen, and they might not have been the best fathers, but my dad was an abusive prick supervillain who locked me in a closet when he got angry. You don’t have a fucking excuse! You’re a piece of shit because you’re happy being a piece of shit. There is no other reason.”

She folded her arms. “You’re gonna get a lot of talks over and over again in life. Women will ask you if it’s in yet. Men will tell you you’re four inches too short to get on the really good rollercoasters. But this talk you’re only gonna get from me.”

Stephanie took a step toward him.

“You… are not… special.”

She let that sink in before she continued.

“You’re a load, Damian! You’re a pipsqueak who walks around talking about what people owe you. Because of who your fucking daddy is. Tools like that aren’t particularly rare around here. They sell guys like you at the Save-Lots next to discounted rolls of Charmin.”
“Hold your tongue, trollop,” Damian said. “I defeated your Earth’s Batman.”

“You defeated Batman with poison,” Stephanie said. “You didn’t play your mastermind card. You played your bitch card. If that’s how you think you’re supposed to roll, then you don’t have the height or the sack to hang with Baffler, let alone The Dark Knight.”

Se took another step toward him. “You inflict pain because it makes you happy. You take, and the instant someone suggests you give, your asshole slams shut like the bedroom door in a haunted house movie. You’d make a great CEO. You might even be President one day. But you will never be Batman. Because… you are… a c--”

Damian’s fist shot out, tagging her under the chin.

And the little fucker hit hard.

Stephanie almost flew out of her boots. She knocked two of the creepy mannequins over before she hit the ground.

And away we go, Stephanie thought. Don’t fuck this up.

Stephanie got to her feet.

“You can’t be the Son of Batman,” she said. “Batman’s tall. What happened? Did the Oompa Loompa your mom begged to fuck her just go out for cigarettes one night and not come back?”

Damian delivered a roundhouse kick to the stomach. Stephanie doubled over, the air exiting her lungs. It came back to her a second later in a ragged gasp, before she stood up.

“I… I should take that back,” she said, breathing heavily. “Anything over five feet is okay in my book.”

Stephanie looked him in the eye. “Because if I were stacking shit, I’d have stopped at four.”

Another right, to the side of the face. Blood filled her mouth as she fell to the ground.

As the stars parted from her field of vision, Stephanie knew that she needed to hold on for her plan to work.

And she wondered if it was easier thought than done.

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**FOUNDERS ISLAND**

The night air in Founders Island was alive with the sound of screaming. The Army of Nemesis spread like a plague.

They savaged shops, tore through movie theatre lobbies, sundered restaurants, destroyed art galleries.

There was a police presence on Founders Island, though. At Eighteenth and Hume, eight officers managed to set up an impromptu barricade.

These officers of the law found out too late, however, that bullets from service pistols were only minimally effective against the oncoming horde.

All eight of Gotham City’s finest died screaming, their souls fodder for eight brand-spanking new Soldiers of Nemesis.
The island was so caught unawares, so unprepared for this kind of foe, that by the time Wonder Woman and Batwoman touched down near the Jitters on the end of MacClendon Avenue to do battle, only a token force of the Army stayed behind to fight them. The rest were on a rampage, killing innocents and in so doing, making more of themselves.

At that point, the numbers of the Army of Nemesis had grown to two-hundred-and-seven, with no signs of stopping...

A contingent of six Soldiers of Nemesis were eviscerating the well-to-do and impeccably dressed audience of the touring production of Avenue Q at the Pantages Theater when the first boom tube opened.

The six Soldiers stopped, staring with their featureless faces, at the circle of red light that had just appeared from nowhere.

And the first one out of the boom tube was Supergirl.

She erupted, faster than a speeding bullet, obliterating two of the six with her fists.

As the other four advanced on her, the second superhero to make landfall in Gotham, Beast Boy, leapt over her head. By the time he came back down to Earth, he had shapeshifted into a five hundred pound green gorilla. His impact on the street obliterated two of the Soldiers instantly, before he grabbed the other two by the heads and smashed them together, sending their rocky remains to the pavement.

And after that, and small platoon of Speedsters came out of the boom tube.

The Flash, Kid Flash, Impulse, Jay Garrick, Max Mercury, Jesse Quick. Rounding out their number was Avery Ho, who was The Flash of China.

The Flash and Impulse were on combat duty. Jay and Kid Flash immediately went to evacuate citizens to the mainland. The rest formed a perimeter around the edge of the island, acting as a Speedster buzzsaw that would prevent any Soldier of Nemesis from leaving.

What happened on Founders Island stayed on Founders Island.

They came by the hundreds.

They came by boom tubes. They came by magical portals. They came by Midnighter doors.

The Justice League.

And the Justice League Dark.

And the Justice Society of America, Young Justice, Teen Titans East, Teen Titans West, the Doom Patrol, The Others, Shadowpact, The Outsiders, the Birds of Prey, The Movement, The Challengers of the Unknown, Uncle Sam and the Freedom Fighters…


And this wasn’t an America Only occasion, either. In addition to The Flash of China Avery Ho, the New Super-Man of China Kong Kenan made his presence felt as well, alongside socialite-slash-
vigilante Suzie Ming. Which was to say nothing of The Great Ten, which was the original Chinese Superteam, led by August General in Iron.

Even groups showed up that might uncharitably be described as consisting of supervillains. Out of The Gem Cities of Central and Keystone came The Rogues (consisting of Captain Cold, Golden Glider, Mirror Master, Heatwave, and Trickster), and from whatever shitty motel room in which they lived this week came the Secret Six (made up of Catman, Rag Doll, Scandal Savage, Porcelain, Jeanette, and Strix). Neither group wanted the Earth to end. It was, after all, the thing they lived on.

The Run-Offs showed up. They weren’t really a superteam at all, but rather a support group made up of the ex-second bananas of supervillains. People like Defacer and Gorilla Grimm and Stallion.

Even the Gang of Harleys, the Brooklyn street gang formed by Harley Quinn herself, put in an appearance. No one was quite sure how. Or, for that matter, even why.

Which isn’t to say that everyone was there.

Most conspicuous by his absence was Superman. He, along with Adam Strange, were on the planet Rann at present, overseeing diplomatic negotiations with the planet Thanagar. This also kept Hawkman and Hawkwoman off the board. The Guardians of the Universe had a vested interest in these negotiations, so they sent a strong showing from the Green Lantern Corps. So strong, in fact, that the only Green Lantern that was able to show up to protect Gotham City on this frigid December evening was Jessica Cruz.

Doctor Fate no-showed because he was Doctor Fate. According to Wally West, the line between acting cryptically and just being a little bitch was a thin one, and Doctor Fate made it disappear.

The Suicide Squad was being held back. For Amanda Waller, much like God, moved in mysterious ways.

The Omega Men and The Wanderers were still on their home planets.

Section Eight didn’t show up because they were all dead. They tried to take over and operate a porno theater in Tijuana, and the Mexican Cartel killed them for it.

And The Legion of Superheroes, that team of superpowered teenagers from the thirty-first century, were also absent.

Because they were in the thirty-first century.

Which was their excuse for everything, really.

Zatanna was standing on the corner of Twenty-Third and Dillahunt, watching the carnage unfold.

Plastic Man tying himself to street lamps on opposite sides of the street and sling-shotting a Soldier of Nemesis into the side of a building.

Aquaman hewing Soldiers with his mighty trident while his wife Mera of Xebel, the Queen of Atlantis, busted open a fire hydrant, using her Hydromancy to form the water into spikes that ran even more Soldiers through.

Uncle Sam and August General in Iron catching sight of each other from across the street and giving each other just… just the dirtiest looks.
Up in the Watchtower, Martian Manhunter had them all on telepathic comms. The bass line to Zatanna’s train of thought was throbbing with questions and answers being asked back and forth among hundreds.

She hated it. Hated the whole telepathy jazz. If it didn’t come with magic words, she just felt weird.

Standing on this street corner, after having given herself a heating spell to withstand the cold, Zatanna’s only backup was an alcoholic crime-solving chimpanzee wearing a deerstalker cap and holding a double-barreled shotgun.

As Detective Chimp took potshots, Zatanna noticed that as much ass as the hundreds of superheroes were kicking at the present moment, the number of the Soldiers of Nemesis didn’t seem to be diminishing. They were reforming themselves from the pavement, from cars, from glass storefronts, from street lamps, leaving pits and cavities in everything with which they reassembled themselves.

So… She tried her opening spell.

“Seimene nrut otni srewolfnus.”

Nothing happened.

Zatanna was stunned. There was precious damned little that her magic could not affect.

These soldiers weren’t any base kind of magic.

They were steeped in divinity, and trying to use magic on something like that was like trying to use spitwads to knock down a brick shithouse.

Zatanna looked to her left and saw a newspaper machine that dispensed the Gotham Weekly Reader. It was free… Which was good. She didn’t want to rip off a paper that cost anything for what she was about to do. Just because print journalism was dying didn’t mean she had to help.

She opened the machine and took out all the papers, setting them down on the sidewalk. She yanked off the first two pages of the first issue, and crumpled them up into little balls.

Reloading his shotgun, Detective Chimp asked “What are you doing?”

“My magic doesn’t work on these things,” she said. “They’re divine. I’m doing support for this one, and using materials like newspapers makes that a whole lot easier.”

She looked at the wadded up newspaper in her left hand and said “Nrut otni dia-tsrif tik.” Then she looked at the one in her right and said “Nrut otni stellub.”

And the two pages of newspaper turned into a white plastic first-aid kit and a box of thirty-eight millimeter bullets.

“Nice,” Detective Chimp said, and then he hoisted his shotgun. “Can you rustle up some shells? I only got the ones in my pockets.”

The Flash (even publicly known as Wally West) had a problem.

Well, not a problem, really. More like a quirk.

Unlike his mentor, the late Barry Allen, and unlike any of the other speedsters he knew, he had
difficulty vibrating through solid objects.

He could do it, sure, they just exploded afterwards.

But of course with beige rock monsters like the Soldiers of Nemesis, it was less a problem, less a quirk, and more of a benefit.

And as The Flash tore through this office building at ridiculous speeds, vibrating through the Soldiers of Nemesis and causing them to explode so violently that rocky chunks of them embedded into the walls and destroyed computers and desks, he reflected that he would normally feel guilty destroying so much property.

Thing was, though, this was the Queen Consolidated building.

Oliver had enough money. The only thing that would make this better was if this was Wayne Tower, but that was on the mainland.

The Flash ripped through the thirty-eighth floor, making his way through the eighth Soldier of Nemesis on this story alone, he came to a halt so violent outside the men’s room that the carpet behind him blackened and started smoking.

One of the Soldiers of Nemesis hid been overrun and was slowly being devoured by what looked to be an army of mice.

The Flash’s stomach started doing flips as the battalion of rodents ate the Soldier of Nemesis away to nothing. And he didn’t notice the guy coming up behind him.

He was a teenage boy wearing a plush wine-colored Grandma coat with no shirt underneath. His hay-colored hair stuck out at greasy angles from beneath a black beanie.

And he reeked to high heaven.

“Hello,” the teenager said, causing The Flash to jump.

“Hi,” The Flash said. “You’re, uh… You’re Mouse, right? From The Movement?”

Which explained everything to The Flash. Mouse, according to his dossier in the Justice League database, could control rodents… but who the hell would even want that superpower?

“Uh-huh,” Mouse said, and looked back at his handiwork. The mice spread across the carpet looking for their next victim. “Did you know mice can chew through concrete?”

“No,” said The Flash. “No, I didn’t.”

“Well, ya do now,” Mouse said. “That’s a Mouse Fact.”

Just then, The Flash heard muffled thumping and screaming from the floor above them…

...only to have his curiosity sated when a burly teenage girl with alabaster white skin, raven black hair, and gleaming red eyes tore through the ceiling, apparently in the middle of punching the Soldier of Nemesis she was straddling.

To The Flash, she looked like Lobo. Which meant that this was Crush, the half-Czarnian daughter of Lobo, and member of the Teen Titans East.

As she pummeled the Soldier’s head into silt, another Soldier dropped down from the hole in the
ceiling. Before she could turn around, another girl, a whirling dervish in a tight black bodysuit and a stylized bird mask came down right after it, and sliced it in two lengthwise.

For a nanosecond, The Flash confused this new entry for that Orphan girl that followed Bruce around, but it was actually Strix of the Secret Six.

Then the four regarded each other.

“Hello,” Mouse said to Crush.

Crush opened her mouth to speak. Judging from the look that immediately spread across her face, The Flash figured that this meant that Crush now finally smelled Mouse.

“Oh, God,” Crush said with her hand to her mouth. “You smell like the inside of The Shaggy Man’s asshole.”

Far from being insulted, Mouse just shrugged, and said “Yeah, that’s fair.”

Then he turned his attention to Strix.

“Hello,” Mouse said.

Strix waved back.

“The tightness of your costume makes me want to be nice to you and ask how your day went,” Mouse said.

And Strix, who was a technically-immortal former Talon for the Court of Owls (and had no ability to talk), just stared at him.

Billy Batson could only think one thing right now.

Gosh, Lady Blackhawk is pretty...

He and his adoptive sister Mary Bromfield were in the hangar bay of the Aerie One, which was the experimental jet used by the Birds of Prey. Lady Blackhawk was in the cockpit right now, but Billy remembered the warm smile she gave him when the Birds picked he and Mary up in Fawcett City.

Y’know, the kind of smile pretty girls gave to twelve-year-old boys like Billy. Or at least the well-behaved ones.

They weren’t alone in this hangar bay. Black Canary was leaning against the wall. Huntress was pacing back and forth, and Misfit wasn’t doing a little dance in the middle of the bay to music only she could hear.

Huntress and Black Canary had parachutes. Misfit didn’t.

“Hey,” Huntress said to Billy, bringing her purple hood down over her curly black hair. “You nice to your teachers?”

Billy paused.

Gosh, Huntress is pretty...

Then Billy nodded.
“Good,” Huntress said. “Because if I hear you aren’t…”

“Stop scaring the poor kid,” Black Canary said, straightening her leather jacket. Then she turned to Billy. “Don’t mind her. She’s a lot less scary than she sounds.”

Gosh, Black Canary is pretty…

Misfit piped up. She appeared to be about seventeen, and her costume looked upon a cursory inspection to be homemade. A winter coat over a t-shirt with an M on it. A short denim skirt over thick woolen black leggings.

“Where’s Oracle?” Misfit asked, tucking a stray bit of red hair behind her ear.

Gosh, Misfit is pretty…

“Down on the ground,” Huntress said. “Her and Stinky-Tits are tending to other business right now, and if it gets handled, they’ll join us.”

“How many times has she asked you to stop calling Cassandra that?” Black Canary asked.

“At least once too few,” Huntress said, before she looked at Black Canary’s legs. “No fishnets tonight?”

Black Canary looked down at her leather pants. “You know how cold it is out there?”

“That didn’t stop you in Minsk.”

“Minsk is Minsk. This is Gotham.”

Lady Blackhawk’s southern drawl came over the Aerie One’s loudspeakers.

“Look lively, cats and kittens. We’re gettin’ to the drop point in three… two…”

The hangar bay doors opened, letting in an icy blast of cold December air.

Misfit ran for the open door. She yelled…

“DARRRRRRRRRK VENGEAAAAAAAANCE!”

…and jumped out of the plane.

Billy was terrified. He looked back at Black Canary and yelled “She didn’t have a parachute!”

Black Canary smiled, and made herself heard over the air. “Don’t worry. She’s a teleporter. She’ll drop a couple of hundred feet, and then show up on the ground a second later. You’re up.”

Mary grabbed Billy’s hand. “C’mon,” she said. “You can enter puberty later.”

They both jumped out into the open freezing air thousands of feet above Gotham City.

The fall was short (it always was), but also agonizingly long (because it was freezing).

After what seemed like a century of falling, Billy and Mary looked at each other. And that only meant one thing.

It was time to say The Magic Word.
“SHAZAM!”

Billy Batson and Mary Bromfield jumped out of Aerie One...

...but Shazam and Lady Shazam gently floated down to the corner of Sixth and Euclid on Founders Island. Each red and resplendent, with lightning bolts on the front of their costumes. Each older, yet ageless.

And sure enough, when they touched down, Shazam saw Misfit leaning against a news stand, perusing an issue of *Entertainment Weekly*.

She looked up and saw them.

“What took ya?”

A group of eight Soldiers of Nemesis were storming up from the Giordano Avenue subway station.

Supergirl was standing on the top of the stairs of the street entrance, waiting for them.

Her X-Ray Vision told her that there were no innocent bystanders inside.

She let her Heat Vision rip, and all eight Soldiers had been vaporized.

Supergirl started her trek down into the tunnel. She had taken one step down when she heard another one coming behind her.

The damned things were fast, but they weren’t Kryptonian fast. She stepped back, avoiding a slash, and one blast of Heat Vision later, the Soldier was no more.

She turned to go down the stairs, but she felt a small twinge in her abdomen.

Supergirl looked down, and her eyes widened.

Blood was spreading across the midsection of her costume. That slash had connected after all. It wasn’t particularly deep, she’d be fine, but it still hurt.

It was common knowledge among the Justice League that the only things that could take out a Kryptonian were Kryptonite and magic.

And these Soldiers of Nemesis appeared to be the latter.

Supergirl sighed.

“This… doesn’t bode well.”

Arsenal was in Star City when he got the call, so he hitched a ride through a Midnighter door with Team Arrow.

Red Arrow was off leading the Teen Titans West on another part of the island, but that still left himself, Green Arrow, Speedy, and a fresh-out-of-retirement-for-one-night-only Arrowette to fire explosive arrows at the Soldiers of Nemesis tear-assing around the remains of the Batburger.

The team was firing explosive arrows at these things, in between the intermittent telepathic entreaties to Zatanna to use her magical portals to send them fresh ammo.
This seemed to be where they had come from, and a whole squad of Soldiers was doing battle with stray superheroes on the corner. Elongated Man and Fairchild. Ghost Fox Killer and Metamorpho. Black Lightning and Dumb Bunny… though Dumb Bunny, true to her name, needed help.

In between shots, Arsenal saw... something … bounce back and forth between Soldiers of Nemesis, destroying them instantly. It was small, like a pin-prick of light.

It was only after five of these damned things went down that the pinprick rapidly grew to the size of a human being, standing next to a destroyed Toyota whose back end was sticking out of the front of a particularly extravagant clothing store.

It was The Atom. Real name Ryan Choi.

Arsenal lowered his bow, and looked over at Green Arrow, who had done the same with an angry look in his eye.

A month and a half ago, Black Canary had dumped Green Arrow and, in a fit of pique, had a fling with Ryan at the wedding of Bruce and Selina Wayne.

And this fling had been going on ever since.

Green Arrow looked at Arsenal, and groused.

“What’s he got that I ain’t got?”

When he was sixteen, Arsenal (real name Roy Harper) developed a heroin addiction. Rather than help him, Green Arrow (real name Oliver Queen, to whom Roy had been serving as the sidekick Speedy) fired him and kicked him out. Roy had gotten himself clean, and ever since, the relationship between Roy and Oliver had had its ups and downs.

Right now was a down period.

“I dunno,” Arsenal said. “Have you tried not being a complete asshole? I hear that works wonders!”

Down the middle of Delmore Street, at the head of the Doom Patrol, marched Crazy Jane.

The thing about Crazy Jane (real name Kay Challis) was that she had sixty-four separate and district alternate personalities, each with their own superpower.

And the Alter in the driver’s seat at present? Silvertongue.

Crazy Jane bellowed “GET BENT, YOU STONE FUCKS!”

The words “GET,” “BENT,” “YOU,” “STONE” and “FUCKS” appeared in front of her mouth in letters made of solid steel, and flew off in five separate directions, obliterating the five Soldiers of Nemesis with which they came into contact.

As Crazy Jane swore and destroyed, the other four members of the Doom Patrol (Robotman, Negative Man, Elasti-Woman, and Coagula) just… walked. Crazy Jane was doing all the work and they didn’t have to do anything, so they just took in the sights of Gotham City.

“I don’t know what all the fuss is about,” Negative Man said. “Guess I’m just not a Gotham City guy.”
“Larry,” Elasti-Woman said, “please don’t shame me by revealing you have so little culture that you can’t appreciate a place like Gotham.”

“Culture means you have to live in a place that smells like pee?” Negative Man asked.

As Elasti-Woman glowered, Coagula looked at Robotman.

“There’s a pho restaurant back there,” Coagula said. “My girlfriend keeps trying to get me to have some, but I’m a little skittish. Is it any good?”

Robotman groaned. “I’m a brain in a robot body. I have no taste buds. Why? Why would I even know that?”

The GCPD, in the initial onslaught staged by the Army of Nemesis, found that bullets from their service pistols did little against the Soldiers.

But Vigilante had a pair of Colt Peacemakers on each hip. And they did him proper.

Standing on the street of the completely eviscerated Jitters on seventh, he thought his way into the telepathic comms that Martian Manhunter was maintaining from the Watchtower.

“Zatanna darlin’,” Vigilante said. “If’n you could rustle me up a box of forty-four specials, I’d be as grateful as could be.”

Zatanna’s voice came into his brain with a slight echo. “You got it, cowpoke.”

A shimmering silver portal, like boiling mercury, appeared right in front of him, through which the end of a box of cartridges appeared.

As he took the box, Vigilante tipped his white Stetson to a woman who wasn’t even there and said “Much obliged, miss.”

He opened the box as the portal disappeared, and a Soldier of Nemesis sliced its way through a parked Volvo on the corner of the street, hitting the gas tank and letting out flames, which the Soldier walked through as though it had acclimated to Hell itself.

Vigilante fired from the hip without so much as looking, turning the head of the Soldier of Nemesis to gravel.

Another one jumped off the roof right behind him, knocking him off his feet and spreading stray bullets from the box across the sidewalk.

Yet as soon as Vigilante got his bearings, a column of red light—Heat Vision—descended, turning the Soldier of Nemesis into vapor.

Vigilante looked up.

She was a vision. Muscular and, dare he think, buxom. She was wearing her superhero outfit: the blue boots, the red cape over the shoulder, the rather snug white one piece with the window in the chest that revealed… a lot.

Vigilante and Power Girl had met at a wedding not too long ago, and they’d hit it off after a period of slight trepidation.

He’d prided himself on not looking any further south than her chin, if he could help it.
But Power Girl was hovering over him while he was on his keister in the street. He couldn’t help it.

And tarnation…

Vigilante doffed his Stetson and said “Hey there, little lady.”

Power Girl smiled a mischievous smile that was worth more than most lottery payouts, and said “Howdy, pardner.”

Jessica Cruz was a brave woman in spite of herself.

She was a Green Lantern, tasked with safeguarding Galactic Sector 2814 from harm.

But Jessica Cruz suffered from crippling anxiety.

Some days she could do battle with the Manhunters with little trouble, and some day some schmo in a costume that was a little too bright could set off a panic attack.

Like the one she was having right now.

She was running down Jattimer Boulevard, a Soldier of Nemesis not far behind. And her ring was talking to her.

<WILLPOWER DEPLETING>

Jessica frowned as she ducked through the open door of the Chez Laurent restaurant, and yelled “Yeah, I know!”

The place had been untouched by the carnage outside. Jessica weaved through the tables set with white linen tablecloths and gleaming flatware when a voice came in through Martian Manhunter’s telepathic comms.

“Jessica? I can feel your thoughts through the comms. What is wrong?”

It was Princess Koriand’r of Tamaran.

Starfire.

And Jessica Cruz’s girlfriend.

They’d been going out for a couple of months now, and things had been going…

…things had been going great. It was Starfire. Come on.

Jessica struggled to breathe as she ducked under a table. The Soldier of Nemesis destroyed the door of the restaurant coming in.

Barely above a whisper, Jessica said “I’m… in a bad… place… right now…”

Starfire’s sigh spread throughout Jessica’s brain.

“Do not speak,” Starfire said. “I have something to tell you, Jessica. It is very important.”

As the Soldier stalked the interior of the restaurant, Starfire’s breathy voice filled the gaps and contours of Jessica’s brain.
“Te amo…”

Jessica’s eyes widened. Her heart rate slowed.

<WILLPOWER SPIKING>

Jessica stood, launching the table off of her and sending the silverware clattering to the tiles of the floor.

And the Soldier saw her.

Jessica raised her right hand and screamed.

The green energy construct of a giant cartoon mallet (which was the only thing she could think of right now) formed instantly from her green Power Ring, taking out a chunk of the ceiling before she brought it down, crushing the Soldier of Nemesis into dust.

As Jessica willed the mallet away, she let her breath out, and Starfire’s voice filled her head again.

“Do you feel better, Jessica?”

Jessica got a stray strand of hair out of her eye. “You, uh… You never told me that before.”

“Oh, no,” Starfire said. “I have had difficulty in the past expressing sentiments to humans before they are ready, and--”

“No-no-no,” Jessica said. “It’s okay. I, uh… I love you too.”

In ground battle operations such as these, leadership fell to either Superman, Batman, or Wonder Woman.

Superman was off-planet.

Batman, according to Oracle, was comatose.

And Wonder Woman was deep in the shit with Batwoman right now.

Which meant that leadership duties… fell to Nightwing.

He was solo at present, giving all of the Soldiers of Nemesis on Twenty-First next to that new bougie-ass bakery that used to be a laundromat what for with his escrima sticks.

The sticks were made of a carbon monofilament, and they came with a fifty-thousand volt electric charge at the head. They proved surprisingly effective.

But the number of Soldiers was growing.

Nightwing tapped into the telepathic comms.

“I’m gonna need some backup here on Twenty-First,” he said. “Someone bring the party to me.”

The response was instant.

It was Donna Troy.

Troia…
“If you’re throwing a party,” she said in Nightwing’s brain, “I know a few gentlemen who might like to join us.”

The comms cut out. Nightwing readied his sticks and backed up.

He felt a rush of air behind him, and he didn’t even need to look to know who had come by way of superspeed. Who flew here. Who jumped here. And who hitched a ride with one of the above.

The Soldiers of Nemesis on Twenty-First Street sought to do battle with Nightwing, The Flash, Troia, Arsenal, and Tempest.

Who, the record should state, were the original Robin, Kid Flash, Wonder Girl, Speedy, and Aqualad.

The Soldiers barreled toward them.

But all Nightwing did was smile.

“Titans together,” he said.

And then they charged.
Founders Island

The civilian rescue operations that Kid Flash and Jay Garrick were conducting were slow-going. Or at least slow-going when compared to how quickly Speedsters preferred to operate. As fast as they could manage, they were ferrying people one or two at a time, past the Speedster buzzsaw perimeter that Max Mercury, Jesse Quick, and Avery Ho had set up, across the water and onto Miagani Island, which was closest.

And Founders Island was an island populated by three million people.

On the Founders-facing coasts of Miagani Island, Bleake Island, and the mainland, GCPD had set up SWAT encampments armed with rocket launchers, ready to fire on Founders Island should the worst come to pass.

Yeah, rocket launchers. Because this was Gotham City, and that’s how the SWAT team rolled.

And in Washington DC, the President of the United States was holding dark and stormy talks with his advisors about The Gotham Situation. Amanda Waller may have been one of these advisors. And the words “nuclear weapons” may have been spoken at least once.

But the facts were these:

The numbers of the Soldiers of Nemesis were not going down.

With each civilian that died, their numbers grew.

They were formed by divinity, which meant that not only was magic useless, but said divinity was strong enough to allow the Soldiers of Nemesis to wound even Kryptonians.

Power levels were going down.

Ammo was running out, and the only person on supply duty for that particular commodity was Zatanna.

And even then, firearms weren’t all that effective against the Soldiers anyway.

Furthermore, while the Soldiers of Nemesis were not susceptible to fatigue, the superheroes on Founders Island most definitely were.

All of this information leads one to a most tragic and deeply unfortunate conclusion, from which there was no work-around.

Some of the superheroes protecting the Earth from this menace were eventually going to start dying.

Mera saw no end to it.

She and her husband Arthur, King of Atlantis, the Aquaman, moved down Kane Avenue, from fire hydrant to fire hydrant, yanking them out of the ground for usable water to fuel Mera’s hydromancy.
This place was filthy. So much so that she couldn’t use the same water for long. It came into contact with the ground, with the side of buildings, and using it too long rendered the water to black sludge from pollutants, with which she could do nothing.

More so, looking at the dire grime of even the cleanest parts of Gotham City, she noticed that there were holes in everything. In automobiles, in the sides of buildings, in the streets. Great cavities from which the Soldiers of Nemesis had formed themselves.

She had used a spray to shear the heads off of two Soldiers on the corner of Kane and Twenty-Ninth when she saw first hand that the more of these Soldiers of Nemesis there were, the smarter they seemed to become.

One advantage that some of the superheroes fighting these blasted things had was that they could fly. But the Soldiers had seemed to have found a way around that.

They started jumping off of buildings, attempting to tackle or cut the airborne heroes.

It wasn’t as though they could die from the fall, after all. There was still plenty of Founders Island from which they could reconstruct themselves.

Mera saw this first hand when one of them jumped off of the LexCorp recruitment office and landed on top of a passing Starfire, who was strafing the ground with her green Starbolts.

Starfire wavered in the air a bit, before she and the Soldier that was on top of her crashed through the twenty-second story window of the investment firm across the street.

Mera was broken from this reverie by the sound of shearing metal, and a groan that chilled her heart. As much as she feared it, as much as she tried to convince herself that it was not so, she knew what it was before she turned around.

A Soldier of Nemesis was standing behind Aquaman, with its right spike having punctured the golden scaled armor at his back, his spine, his heart, and through the ribcage and armor on the other side.

Arthur Curry, the Last Blood of Atlan, the man Mera loved with a brightness and a fury that dwarfed the stars themselves, had died instantly. His mouth hung open, his eyes were half-closed, and his proud and muscular frame sagged on the end of the spike.

As the Soldier kicked her husband off the end of its appendage, Mera of Xebel tried to reckon with what she saw, what it meant, all the while conventional sanity just ebbed from her.

And the water she was presently controlling, suspended above her right and left hands in transparent orbs, started boiling.

Mera destroyed the Soldier of Nemesis that killed Aquaman with magnificent jets of boiling water as she screamed, and screamed, and screamed...

On the other end of the island, the odd couple of Miss Martian and Grifter did battle with the Soldiers of Nemesis on Fillmore Street, with Grifter pumping bullets into them and Miss Martian reducing them to rubble with her telekinesis.

Miss Martian took point on the end of the street, giving Grifter time to reload in front of the Exxon station.
It was the fault of neither Miss Martian or Grifter for what happened next. Both had powers of telepathy, granted, but Soldiers of Nemesis had no minds to read.

Neither of them knew about the Soldier that had formed itself from the pavement, and the glass, and the metal of the front of the gas station behind them.

And neither of them would have ventured a guess that this Soldier would have torn through the gas pumps to get to them.

The explosion killed Grifter instantly, turning him to vapor and ash.

And Grifter… was lucky.

The explosion engulfed Miss Martian in flame so quickly that she didn’t have time to go intangible.

And if Kryptonians had a major and near-insurmountable flaw in Kryptonite, so too did Martians, be they white or green, in fire.

Miss Martian--M’gann M’orzz--dropped to her knees and screamed, her green skin cracking, her red hair singing and flaking away.

And the last thought she had, before the agonized screams in her mouth in turn ate her very consciousness alive, was simply:

*Please don’t let them see me like this…*

Six seconds later, she was dead, what was left of her body overriding her conscious shape-shifting abilities and reverting to the dessicated, smoldering remains of her angular and monstrous White Martian form.

So M’gann M’orzz, the final White Martian, perished in a dirty street, in a dark city, on an island at war, one-hundred-forty million miles from the red sands of home.

---

Miss Martian was the niece of Martian Manhunter.

*M’gann?*

And because he had telepathically linked all of the heroes on Founders Island to himself, Martian Manhunter just felt Miss Martian die.

*M’GANN?*

His grief, his fear, his sorrow, his rage, spread from his mind all the way up in the Justice League Watchtower, to everyone on the ground of Founders Island.

And because they all felt those emotions in different ways, some got more reckless. Some got more apprehensive. Some just locked up altogether.

So, until Nightwing finally told him to “SHUT THE FUCKING T-COMMS DOWN!”’, even more heroes got wounded or killed.

And after that, they had to resort to conventional radio comms. Which took a while, and even then didn’t include everyone on the ground.

Needless to say, this didn’t help matters much.
And above Gotham City, the final grave exclamation point descended as the tide of battle turned in favor of the Army of Nemesis.

It finally started snowing.

**AMUSEMENT MILE HALL OF MIRRORS - THE MAINLAND**

Amusement Mile had been in Gotham City in one form or another since 1885. Come for the Ferris Wheel and the award-winning Turbo rollercoaster, stay for the cotton candy and funnel cakes.

There was a ten year period that Amusement Mile suffered considerable financial hardship, which, of course, coincided with the rise of the supervillain known as The Joker. When the facility closed down every October, The Joker and Harley Quinn moved in and used the Fun House as his base of operations just in time for Halloween (a concept not unremarked upon by the Clown Prince of Crime himself). Even when the place was open, attendance dropped sharply, as guests did not want to be on hand if The Joker got a wild hair up his ass and wanted to move in while the place was still open… even though he only ever did that the one time.

Amusement Mile was closed for the winter presently. The long rows of carnival games stood shuttered, the food kiosks stood empty, the rides lay inert. When the bright colored lights were off, Orphan thought that Amusement Mile looked haunted. Though by what, she could not say.

She and Oracle walked down the long wooden boardwalk, their bootfalls thumping loud behind them. The snow fell in big, heavy flakes. Orphan looked up, and saw that the clouds had parted. The moon hung heavy, low, and full over the Atlantic Ocean.

Orphan noticed that Oracle’s shoulders were bunched up, and it wasn’t from the cold. Barbara Gordon got like this whenever stress was upon her, viciously tapping at her keyboard, doing… whatever the hell she did. They way she spoke, Orphan thought Oracle must have ruled the world in secret.

“Is… something wrong?” Orphan asked.

Oracle stopped. She put her gloved hands inside her leather trench coat, and turned to her.

“I haven’t seen Jason Todd in years,” Oracle said. “He was dead, and now he’s not. He’s one of the bad guys now, and he’s done terrible things, but… He was a kid the last time I saw him. I… I went to his funeral. Dick and I still go to his grave every year. We walk through that door, and I have no idea what happens next.”

Oracle was quiet for a spell, before she turned and started walking again. Orphan followed.

Apparently, Oracle either could not (or did not want to) deduce that Jason Todd was not acting of his own free will when he shot up The Seahorse Tavern. The mob hit at Esteban’s and what went down at the Sorrento were on him, yes, but the fact remained that Jason was reconstructed for a very specific purpose, and Jason was trying to meet that purpose, no matter how horrible it may have been.

And Lord knew Cassandra Cain had been there.

Oracle was itching for a fight. And Orphan, who had literally been conceived to be a lethal weapon, thought that maybe, in this one instance, violence may not have been the answer.

Bruce Wayne told her a few days ago, after they had found out that David Cain was in Gotham City
looking to draw her out, that the worst thing anyone in their position could possibly do was make things personal.

And Orphan thought it was high time that she took that advice.

“Oracle?”

Oracle stopped and turned to her. “Yeah, pumpkin?”

Orphan decked Oracle in the face.

Hard.

The force was so strong that Oracle’s green holographic mask cut out, leaving the sheer black mask underneath. She dropped as though she were a marionette whose strings had been cut.

Orphan walked around, and dragged the unconscious Oracle by her armpits over to the brochure stand, propping her up into a sitting position. Then she put Oracle’s hands in her pockets, and buttoned up her trench coat because it was snowy and freezing. Just because she needed to be dropped didn’t mean she needed to catch cold.

As she stood, Orphan reckoned it was for her own protection. Oracle didn’t know that Jason might be at the end of his rope. Neither had a clue what was going to happen next. And if it came to the absolute worst, she reasoned that the world just might need someone like Oracle more than it needed someone like her.

Now that she was alone, Orphan began her walk to the Hall of Mirrors at the end of the boardwalk.

The Hall of Mirrors stood in contrast to all of the other buildings that dotted Amusement Mile. While they were creative and grandiose, the Hall of Mirrors was a flat red box with a glass door in front.

A glass door that had been shattered. With a hole big enough for Jason Todd to fit through.

Or her.

A light came from the hallway off of the entirely black lobby, and Orphan followed it.

There was a narrow corridor, with two mirrors on either side taking up the expanse of the walls. In the middle of this corridor sat Jason Todd, with a bomb made of half of a plastic suitcase on one side of him, and a half-empty six pack of beer on the other. In front of him was a small battery-powered camping lantern.

He looked up at her. Both the whites of his eyes and the lids beneath them were red.

“You’re not Tim Drake.”

Orphan regarded this pathetic display, and took off her mask.

“No,” Cassandra said, her breath coming out in a thick puff of steam. “I’m not.”

Jason blinked at her, before his head dropped, and he was staring at his lap again.

Cassandra slowly walked to him, and sat down.

“It’s, um… It’s okay,” Jason said. “You can control the yield on that bomb. I adjusted it. It’s only gonna take out this building.”
Cassandra tilted her head. “And… you?”

Jason nodded without looking at her. He raised a bottle of beer to his lips.

Cassandra knew just from the smell of him that he was drunk off of just the one beer in his hand. He was using that stuff to hurt himself.

She just snatched the bottle out of his hand, and he looked at her in confusion. Her first instinct was to dump it out, but that might start a fight. Instead, Cassandra raised the beer to her own lips, and started chugging. And…

...and Cassandra was expecting to hate beer just by the smell, but she had to admit, she kinda liked it. It seemed to warm and spread throughout her stomach. The slight bitterness made her jaw tighten, but it was a bitterness she could get used to. Not like coffee, which was gross no matter how much she tried, and no matter how many times Babs told her she’d get used to it.

When she turned twenty-one, beer was on her to-do list. Provided the world didn’t end. Provided she ever found out when her birthday was.

Cassandra put the empty bottle on the floor next to her, and let out a small belch that warmed her throat.

Jason just blinked at her, before his hand reached for the rest of the six pack.

Cassandra was quick, though. Her left hand darted out, and brought the six-pack over to her side.

Jason just blinked at her again. She had been worried about a fight breaking out separating the drunk person from their beer, but she needn’t have been. There was no fight left in Jason Todd.

They sat there in the cold silence of the Hall of Mirrors before Jason took it upon himself to speak.

“Nemesis… she’s in my thoughts. She’s in my memories. I don’t feel her now, but…”

That explained a lot.

“I know,” Cassandra said.

More silence. Cassandra saw little beads of moisture fall into the lap of Jason’s leather pants, and she knew he was crying.

“I’ve done something terrible,” he said with a watery voice.

“So… have I,” Cassandra said in reply.

Jason used the edges of his palms to get the tears out of his eyes, and then he looked at her.

“I know how I got here,” Jason said. “I’m… I’m trying to piece together the stuff that led me to this, and… and it’s… it’s like I was pulled here. I grew up poor. Because I grew up poor, I stole. Because I stole, I somehow became Robin.”

His eyes clouded over, and Cassandra briefly wondered if he had fallen asleep with his eyes open.

“Because I was Robin,” Jason said with new gravity, “I died. Because I died, I was brought back… and because I was brought back, those… Those people died. And I can blame Nemesis if I want to, but I have so much anger in me. And it was used against me. Used against them. There was… there was no other way this was panning out. Nothing good comes out the hate I have.”
Jason finally locked eyes with her.

“This was destiny.”

Cassandra furrowed her brow. She leaned in, touching his arm and making sure that he couldn’t look anywhere else.

“Destiny,” Cassandra said, wrapping her lips around the word because she’d never said it aloud before, “is… bullshit.”

Jason just blinked at her. “How can you say that?”

Cassandra looked to her right.

There were two mirrors taking up the walls on either side of them, Which meant that their reflections, double, tripled, quadrupled, going on and on forever.

For infinity.

Infinite Cassandras.

And infinite Jasons.

She pointed to one of the infinite Jasons. “What’s… he like?”

Jason looked at her in confusion. She pointed to another.

“Or… that one?”

In a monotone, Jason said “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Why couldn’t people just get what she was saying? Now she had to take precious time rummaging for new words, needing to see if each and every one lined up with a thought and an emotion. They had to be in the right order, too.

“We… go on… forever. And… not… all of us… end… the same.”

Jason stared at one of his reflections before he looked back at her. “So… because there are infinite versions of me, one of them has it better than I do.”

“Yes.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better?”

“Yes.”

Jason let out a sharp gust of air, which was as close to a derisive laugh as he was getting tonight.

“How?”

“Because,” Cassandra said, “no one… decides… what’s next. Except us.”

Jason began slowly breathing in and out. He was angry.

“What’s next?” she asked.

“What’s next?” Jason asked. “I’m triggering this bomb, taking out of the building with me in it.
Cassandra nodded and looked at the bomb. Calmly, she reached over, flicked off the big red switch, removed the vial of orange gel at its center, and put it in one of the compartments of her yellow utility belt.

Jason didn’t move. Didn’t speak. Just glared at her with big blue eyes. It was plain that it didn’t occur to him that she would actually do that, or that she would be so casual about it.

“Am I gonna have to fight you for it?” Jason asked.

Cassandra smirked, and said “You can try.”

His cheeks reddened, but he finally just hung his head.

“Jason.”

He looked at her again.

Her smirk went away. “What’s… next?”

——

**FORDMAN’S DEPARTMENT STORE - MIAGANI ISLAND**

It had gotten so bad she was leaving a blood trail.

Stephanie’s left eye was swollen shut. A couple of her back teeth were loose. She was fairly certain a couple of ribs were broken. And she had so much blood in her mouth that she was fairly sure that, if she (or the Multiverse) lived through the night, she would never eat rare steak again.

Damian picked her up off the ground, and punched her in the face. It didn’t knock her over, but the kick in the stomach did.

Her head hit the cold tile of the women’s wear department so hard that her ears started ringing.

“I am versed in more martial arts than you are even aware exist,” Damian said, pacing around her. “Japanese Iaido. Chinese Baguazhang. Indian Silambam. I am versed in numerous forms of weaponry from the Firangi to the Qiang to the Gladius. And yes, before you ask, even the Katana, though I consider them inferior weapons.”

He stood next to one of the creepy mannequins, and with one savage movement, ripped off its left arm.

“But I think,” Damian said, “someone as base and as trivial as you will appreciate this even more.”

He hefted it in both hands, and brought the mannequin’s arm down on her back. Those things were harder than they looked, and it took a lot for Stephanie not to lose breath and exert energy groaning in pain.

She tried to curl up, but Damian knew just where to bring it down. Again and again he battered her with the mannequin arm until mercifully, the damned thing finally broke.

Breathing heavily, Damian smiled down on her.

“Nothing to say?” he asked. “No further gifts from that trash barge God gave you instead of a mouth.”
Stephanie rolled over onto her back. She sat up straight, fixed him with her one good eye, and let both saliva and blood fly from her mouth as she yelled out:

“OOMPA LOOMPA DOOMPADEE DOO!”

Damian screamed with rage, and kicked her in the face. Her body shot back, and the back of her head hit the tile again.

Beyond the stars she saw, and the numbness that blow to the back of the head brought on, Stephanie thought she saw something.

She thought she saw sweat forming on Damian’s brow.

The greedy part of Stephanie’s mind wanted to act now… but the rational part convinced her to let this go on, opting to be more safe than sorry.

Being that the possibility existed that in the midst of his torture session Damian might kill Stephanie by accident, she had to wonder which one was the safe side, and which the sorry.

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**PS 1147 - BLEAKE ISLAND**

Robin and Bluebird drove their motorcycles on nearly abandoned highways and empty bridges through falling snow.

And as they did, a plan formed in Robin’s mind.

One that just might work.

PS 1147 on Bleake Island was… a high school. With no interesting background information or architectural quirks whatsoever. It was a cube, with another cube in the back that housed a gymnasium. PS 1147, for good and all, disproved the axiom that every building in Gotham City had a story behind it.

As they parked their bikes on the curb, Robin could see that Bluebird was muttering to herself. And some of these utterances, while under her breath, were fit for neither church, nor network television before eight PM.

“What’s wrong?” Robin asked.

Bluebird stopped, but her hands in the pockets of her leather jacket, and sighed.

“The whole destroying-the-world thing?” Bluebird asked. “I can forgive that. It’s at least ambitious. David Cain abusing his daughter I can’t forgive, but it’s common enough that it doesn’t surprise me… But these motherfuckers made me come back to my school in the middle Godfisted winter break. And that… *that* is a bridge too far.”

Robin nodded. After that, a couple of seconds were spent in the muffled silence that fresh snowfall provided.

“You have a plan?” Bluebird asked.

“Technically, yeah.”
Bluebird shrugged. “Better than nuthin’.”

And with that, they walked.

They walked along the right side of the main school building, the light of the moon showing them the way. They left footprints behind them in the courtyard separating the two buildings, and they finally got to the gymnasium, which was a smaller clone of its boring and larger blocky sibling.

They stepped through the double doors and stood there in the lobby that housed the school’s pitiful trophy collection. Both Robin and Bluebird stood there a moment, neither speaking, but both thinking:

*At least this place is heated.*

After a few seconds they walked through the archway, and into the basketball court.

The steel stands were retracted into the wall, beneath the small rectangular windows through which the moon shone, providing this humble court with the only illumination available. The hoops were up as well, having been retracted into the ceiling.

And in the middle of the darkened gymnasium, on the half-court logo for the school’s basketball team (The Fightin’ 47s), was an explosive device made out of half of an old plastic suitcase. There was a big red switch and a tube of orange explosive gel in the middle.

“There it is,” Robin said. “You want to do the honors?”

“I’ll keep a lookout while you do it.”

Robin nodded, and walked toward the bomb. He was five feet away, when:

“Hands up, Robin. And turn around.”

David Cain’s voice.

Robin turned around.

David had a pistol to Bluebird’s head. She had been caught completely unaware, having apparently dropped from the ceiling and making no sound doing so.

Robin figured that, yeah, this was the guy who trained Orphan.

David looked at Bluebird. “You. Taser pistols out and on the ground. Unless you want me to use your brains to dye your hair purple.”

Bluebird kept her brow furrowed in an attempt not to look as terrified as Robin knew she had to be. As he himself had been the first time he’d had a gun pointed at *his* head.

She slowly removed the taser pistols from the inside of her leather jacket and dropped them on the floor of the court.

“Kick them away,” David said.

Which she did.

Then David’s eyes turned to Robin.

Robin sighed, trying not to look too eager, as he removed his utility belt, placed it on the ground, and kicked it over to him.

David took a small disc out of the pocket of his leather jacket, and threw it at Robin’s utility belt. It stuck with adhesive, and David immediately kicked it away.

A few seconds later, the utility belt destroyed itself when every item within activated simultaneously.

Robin suppressed a smile.

*And now we wait…*

David’s eyes then turned back to Robin. “Where is my daughter?”

“She’s the one who sent me here.”

David glowered. “So in addition to being weak, Cassandra is also a coward.”

“I don’t know about that,” Robin said. “Still waters running deep the way they do.”

David shrugged. “I didn’t plan on killing anyone, and I didn’t plan on having someone around who talked enough to provide last words. Time makes fools of us all. Got anything to say before I put bullets in the two of you?”

“Oh, I’m not dying tonight,” Robin said.

“How do you figure?”

Robin folded his arms. “A couple of days ago, I didn’t think I’d live to see twenty. Now? Now I think I’m gonna live to at least thirty just to spite you. I’m gonna go to college…. And I’m gonna be the best Robin ever by doing the one thing no Robin’s ever done.”

“I’m not curious,” David said, “but you’ve clearly practiced this speech, so go ahead.”

“I’m gonna retire,” Robin said. “I’m not gonna get fired, and I’m not gonna die. It won’t be tomorrow, it may not even be next year, but I’m gonna hand this R off to the next kid with some kind words and a handshake. Because I lived to see the end.”

“I beg to differ.”

“You beg for a lot,” Robin said. “But before I do that, though…”

Robin’s eyes landed on Bluebird.

“Hey,” he said.

Bluebird was still a scared teenage girl with a gun to her head, but she managed a strangled “Hey” in reply.

Robin shifted his feet. “You, uh… You wanna get coffee sometime?”

Bluebird blinked, and said the only reasonable thing, given the circumstances.

“Huh?”
“Coffee,” Robin said. “Would you like to get some? With me, I mean, not just in general.”

Bluebird blinked some more, but some life came back into her regardless. “We’re doing this now?”

“Yeah,” David said. “We’re doing this now?”

“Yes,” Robin said. “We’re doing this now.”

Bluebird looked from Robin to David, and then back again.

“Well,” Bluebird said, “the thing is, uh… I have friends, and they aren’t gonna be used to having someone as, uh… someone like you around, y’know? All preppie, and… and normal. Oo… It’s not a no, I’m just saying it’s gonna take some time to get them acclimated, know what I mean?”

Robin looked at her in disbelief. “You can stick your tongue down my throat, but you can’t be seen in public with me?”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” David said. “Listen, the two of you are going to die right now. I’m not sure that’s sunk in.”

Robin’s eyes went back to him. “Oh, shut the fuck up, Dave! You’ve already lost!”

He had put so much stink on that that David momentarily looked nonplussed.

“How do you figure?”

“You ran like the little coward that you are when Orphan took your implants out of commission with that EMP disk. And Damian used one of those little charges on Batman’s utility belt to activate every piece of equipment inside to put him at a disadvantage. It isn’t hard to put two and two together and guess what would happen if you saw Cass here in her Orphan outfit. You’d have done to her utility belt what Damian did to Batman’s, and you just did to mine.”

David scrunched up his face. “I still don’t see what advantage you have with all your gadgets destroyed.”

“You didn’t destroy my gadgets,” Robin said. “You activated them. Including a signal beacon I got from some friends of mine a couple of days ago. And those friends should be here any moment.”

David sneered. “Batman’s out of commission and your other friends are a little busy right now.”

Robin sneered back. “The people in Batman’s network aren’t the only friends I have.”

BOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMMM!

Something tore through the side of the gym and through the retracted steel stands, knocking the three of them off their feet, and letting in dust and a violent blast of snow and December air.

Tim Drake didn’t believe in God, but took some time to thank Him anyway, because this could not have been timed better.

From the massive hole in the side of the gymnasium, the silhouette of a lone figure appeared, and stepped through, revealing themselves.

It was a teenage girl, her long blonde hair cascading over a brown leather jacket. She was wearing a
red, yellow, and blue shirt underneath, stylized with the yellow in the middle to look like a W. A red knee-length skirt came down over blue leggings with a star motif.

It was Wonder Girl.

Young Justice had arrived.

Wonder Girl wiped some of the dust away from her face.

“Uhhh, who are we fighting right now?”

David had already gotten to his feet. Robin knew well enough to stay down. But he pointed at David.

“Him,” Robin said. “That’s Orphan’s dad.”

Wonder Girl looked at David.

Cassandra “Wonder Girl” Sandsmark was as bright and cheery a person as could be, without being annoying about it. On the nerdy side, yes, but it was endearing.

But beholding David Cain, Wonder Girl’s eyes just… went… dead.

“Oh,” Wonder Girl said. “So you’re the one who did all that to Cass.”

Wonder Girl began her advance toward him. David squared up.

“Do you have any idea what happens… to people who hurt little girls… when they’re standing in front of a FUCKING AMAZON?”

David threw the first punch. He was fast.

Wonder Girl, however, was a damn sight faster.

She clocked David Cain with a right that sent spittle and a front tooth flying. Before he could drop, however, Wonder Girl grabbed him by the collar of his leather jacket, and used her Super Strength to fling him to the ceiling of the gymnasium.

On his way up, Wonder Girl cupped her hands to her mouth.

“IMPULSE! UP TOP!”

Through the hole in the wall behind her, the red and beige blur of Bart “Impulse” Allen sped past, and rebounded up in the air where David Cain was still performing the act of falling.

Using his speed to bounce from wall to wall, Impulse managed to punch David Cain a whopping six times before he hit the ground.

As David struggled to get to his feet, Robin heard a familiar Texas drawl behind him.

“Whatcha got there?”

Robin turned his head to look.

Bluebird was standing right next to Jinny Hex. And Bluebird had picked her weapons back up.

“It’s a taser pistol,” Bluebird said.
“Ya don’t say,” said Jinny. “I got me somethin’ a sight similar. Mind if I give yours a test ride?”

“By all means,” said Bluebird, handing Jinny her taser pistol.

Jinny took aim and fired. The shot landed squarely in David Cain’s neck, wrapping him in blue tendrils of electricity, and eliciting pained screams, dropping him back to his stomach on the floor.

“Hm,” Jinny said. “This little girl don’t hardly have a kick. Who made it?”

“I did,” Bluebird said.

Jinny smiled. “Well I’ll be. You got a hankerin’ to try mine?”

“Y’know,” Bluebird said, “I think I just had my first-ever hankerin’.”

Jinny reached into her brown longcoat, and pulled out one of her own electric pistols. It was a massive thing that looked like it came off the cover of an old pulp sci-fi magazine. She handed it to Bluebird.

As David yet again tried to get to his feet, Bluebird fired.

The shot was loud, and the bolt of energy hit David in the ribs, wrapping him in even more electricity, and dropping him yet again.

“Daaaaaaaamn,” Bluebird said.

“Kicks like a mule, don’t she?”

“I dig it, though. It actually feels like you’re shooting it.”

Robin looked back over to David. He once again tried to get to his feet, and this time was successful…

...only to find that he was standing right in front of Anita “Empress” Fite.

Empress was a master martial artist with limited teleportation powers. For the task at hand, however, she would need neither.

For she also had limited mind control capabilities.

“I’m gonna need you to do me a favor,” Empress said, putting her hands on the hips of her bronze armor. “I’m gonna need you… to stop hitting yourself.”

David Cain’s right hand curled into a tight fist, and flung at high speed toward his face.

_THWACK!

His nose started bleeding, and he started weaving on his feet.

“Stop hitting yourself.”

_THWACK!

“Stop hitting yourself.”

_THWACK!
“Stop hitting yourself.”

*THWACK!*

“Stop hitting yourself.”

*THWACK!*

“Stop hitting yourself.”

*THWACK!*

“Stop hitting yourself.”

*THWACK!*

“Okay, seriously dude, stop hitting yourself.”

David’s fist finally uncurled. Both eyes were well on their way to swelling shut, and he had even gotten blood in his white hair. But, weaving though he may have been, he was still standing.

Or at least he was, until Empress unleashed a roundhouse kick that laid him out.

After a moment, David tried getting to his feet yet again. The look in his swelling eyes was one of true fury. Robin, just by eyeballing it, guessed that the former operative for the League of Assassins, he who trained one of the deadliest hand-to-hand fighters on the planet, did not appreciate being made a fool of by an assortment of schoolchildren.

David finally got to his feet, and let out a roar.

But that roar died in his throat when he saw who was standing in front of him.

It was a brawny young man in jeans and a black t-shirt. His muscular arms were folded over the red emblem on his shirt, which was that of the Kryptonian House of El.

It was Superboy.

Also known as Conner Kent.

And judging from the look in his icy blue eyes, Robin had to guess that Superboy was not happy to see David Cain in the slightest.

David blinked, and then unleashed some moves. A jab in the sternum, a chop to the side of the neck, and a palm strike to the forehead.

Nothing happened.

And David looked greatly disturbed by that.

Superboy, for his part, just furrowed his brow.

“Is that that One Hour Photo thing I’ve heard so much about?” Superboy asked. “Yeah, that’s not gonna work on me. Kryptonians don’t have nerve clusters in the same place.”
David smiled, looking confident.

“Kryptonian?” he asked with a mouth that had been repeatedly busted during the last few minutes. “Are you as piss-scared of getting your hands dirty as the other Girl and Boy Scouts running around with that S on their chests?”

But Superboy just smiled.

“You do know I’m a clone of Lex Luthor too, though, right?”

And David Cain… looked an awful lot less confident.

Superboy grabbed David by the collar of his jacket and hoisted him up into the air with one hand.

“There is nothing I want more in this life,” Superboy said, “than to beat you until you’re nothing more than a gross smell. But there’s a problem.”

Superboy brought David down to eye level.

“I really like your daughter,” Superboy said. “And as evil as you are, I don’t want to hurt her father. So… goodnight.”

And with that, Superboy very gently placed the index finger of his left hand on the side of David’s windpipe.

Being as he was Kryptonian, it would have been a blood choke from anyone else.

And David Cain was painlessly flung into unconsciousness. Superboy gently placed him on the floor.

With all that done, everyone looked at Robin. Bluebird helped him to his feet.

“You called us,” Impulse said. “And we came.”

“Yeah,” Wonder Girl said. “We’re Cenobites like that.”

Everyone looked at her.

“Y’know,” Wonder Girl said. “From Hellraiser?”

“Not inaccurate,” Empress said, “just inappropriate.”

“Okay,” Robin said. “First thing’s first.”

Robin walked over to the suitcase bomb. He flipped the red switch and removed the vial of orange gel, before coming back and handing the vial to Impulse.

“Can you get rid of that for me?”

“Sure thing,” Impulse said. He sped off through the hole in the building in a streak… and about a second later, he was back.

“Where’d you put it?” Robin asked.

“Ocean,” Impulse said. “Right in the middle, too.”

“Thank you,” Robin said. “Second thing’s second.”
He turned to Superboy.

“You remember that thing I said a couple of days ago about how lying to the girl you like is important?”

“Yeah,” Superboy said.

Robin looked back at Bluebird for a second, before he turned back to Superboy.

“Ignore that,” Robin said. “I have no idea what the hell I’m doing.”

Superboy smiled, and said “You know, I figured as much.”

“Say Robin,” Jinny said behind them. “You bein’ the gentleman of the group, you seem to have forgotten to introduce us to the lady here.”

“Right,” Robin said. “Bluebird, this is Young Justice. Young Justice, this is Bluebird.”

“I’m Impulse,” Impulse said.

“Empress.”

“I’m Wonder Girl.”

“Uh, Superboy.”

Jinny doffed her cowboy hat. “Jinny Hex, miss.”

Bluebird gave a meek wave, and said “Hi. I’m Harper.”

“Oh,” Impulse said. “We’re at that stage already? I’m Bart Allen.”

“Anita Fite.”

“Cassandra. Not to be confused with the smaller, quieter, Asian-er Cassandra.”

“I’m Conner.”

“Still Jinny Hex, miss.”

“Dude,” Superboy said. “We have to get to Founders Island. It’s bad there, and we need all the help we can get.”

“Right,” Robin said. “One more thing before we go, though. Bart, do you have your phone on you?”

“I do,” Empress said. She took it out of a compartment on the side of her armor, and handed it to Robin.

Robin took the phone, went over to the unconscious David Cain, and knelt over him. His cape obscured what he was doing from everyone else, but he got up, and walked back a few paces, and what he had done was revealed to all present.

He had taken the index finger of David Cain’s right hand, and jammed it up his nose.

And Robin was now in the process of taking a picture of this peculiar sight with Empress’ phone.
Once he was done, Robin handed the phone back to Empress, and said “Thanks.”

Everyone just stared at him.


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**FOUNDERS ISLAND**

It had begun so positively, with Batwoman fighting back to back with Wonder Woman in front of the Jitters on MacClendon Avenue. There didn’t seem to be so many of the Soldiers when they got there, and soon after, the night came alive with glorious sounds.


But the longer it went on, the more there seemed to be an underlying throb of desperation to everything.

And the snowfall, as well as Martian Manhunter’s psychic despair at the death of Miss Martian, coincided with Batwoman running out of explosive Batarangs.

She got two of her standard Batarangs from her utility belt and used them as double-edged knives, weaving in and out of danger between the Soldiers of Nemesis, planting them into their featureless stone faces, and watching them fall. In the cold, in the snow, Batwoman felt herself burning up. She must have sweat off the makeup she’d applied to conceal the bruises that Stelio had given her in National City.

Batwoman poured her anger into her strokes, her resentment into her thrusts. It was a never-ending wellspring of energy that kept her going past the point that she normally would have dropped. She was alone here, on this street, in this world, granting punishment to the blank Soldiers unleashed by two deranged Goddesses.

And all it took to bring Batwoman back to the rest of existence was one world.

“Kate…”

Batwoman turned around.

Wonder Woman was standing there.

And she was beautiful.

Her blue eyes gleamed, and the falling snowflakes formed their own field of stars in her black hair.

But she was pale.

Too… Too pale.

Wonder Woman wobbled on her feet, and would have fallen to the street had Batwoman not caught her.

She looked down and saw a gash in Wonder Woman’s left side. It had pierced her armor and had drawn far too much blood. It had flowed down her side, down her exposed thigh, and into her boot. She had left a red trail behind her in the freshly fallen snow.

“One of them got me,” Wonder Woman said weakly. “These Soldiers are divine, Kate. I can’t… I
can’t feel myself healing.”

The magic of the Soldiers had overridden her ability to heal.

And the euphoria of battle vanished from Batwoman’s mind in an instant.

Because if this situation with the Army of Nemesis didn’t resolve itself soon, then Wonder Woman was going to bleed to death.
Chapter 23: Emotional Rescue

THE BATCAVE

Bruce Wayne’s eyes fluttered open as he was on the table beneath the Kryptonian regeneration machine.

He heard an intake of breath and slowly, gingerly turned his head to the right.

There was Selina, sitting there in a metal chair.

The bags under her eyes told him that for however long he was out, she hadn’t slept.

And he must have been out a while.

“Hey, Sailor,” she said.

“Hey,” Bruce said weakly. “Did we save bin Sayel?”

“We did…. I did, actually, but yes.”

“Where is everyone?”

“Out there.”

“And you’re not with them?”

“No,” Selina said. “Because I’m here with you.”

And Selina stood up. From what Bruce could guess, she was walking back and forth to get some energy back.

“I knew something like this was gonna happen,” Selina said. “I knew you’d over-extend yourself, or someone would get the drop on you, and you’d be down here. And I told myself, the first time that happened, I would be here. Not Alfred, not any of the kids. Me. Because there’s something you need to know, and a situation like this would be the first time I’d feel comfortable telling you.”

“I have to narrowly cheat death before you’re comfortable with telling me something?”

“Because I don’t like looking like I’m vulnerable,” Selina said. “People say we’re too different to make it work, but lo and behold.”

Bruce thought that was fair.

Selina put her hands in her pockets. She looked like she was willing herself toward something. He knew this, not from some grand insight into human nature, but because that was how he himself got when he had to deliver a speech as Bruce Wayne, or had to hold an investor conference call.

“You wanted to know why I took your last name,” Selina said. “Why I’m Selina Wayne and not
Selina Kyle. Or Selina Kyle-Wayne, or… or whatever.”

Even through his loginess and post-coma haze, Bruce felt himself perk up.

Selina looked at the ground.

“Brian Kyle,” she said, “was a good dad as long as the times were good. He was funny. He was kind. Watched Pinocchio with me over and over again, and never complained. He liked the Steve Miller Band. Loved him a beer and a ballgame.”

She had developed a smile while she had talked about her father, but in the ensuing silence, that smile faded, replaced by a shadow of her own devising, casting no figure in a darkness anyone else could see, except her.

“Then mom killed herself,” Selina said. “He liked ballgames a whole lot less after that. Liked beer a whole lot more. At least, before he graduated to whiskey.”

She stared off into the middle distance, holding a silence that eventually broke.

“I look like my mom,” Selina said. “Except for the green eyes, I’m the spitting image of Maria Perez. Maria Kyle when she passed. And my dad… resented me for that. And… and he drank himself to death pretty much right in front of me.”

A shine appeared in Selina’s eyes. A few blinks later, and it was gone.

“Me and my sister wound up in separate foster homes,” Selina said. “And to this day, I haven’t seen her since.”

She took her hands out of her pockets, and then opened and closed them a couple of times before putting them back in. “So when people wonder why I changed my name, I have to wonder why I shouldn’t. Since I was a kid and I saw that shitty apartment me and my family lived in for the last time, I didn’t even want Brian Kyle’s last name. If the development of human history demands that I have to have a man’s last name, I didn’t want it to be the name of the first man who broke my heart.”

Selina took a step forward, put out her hands, and leaned on the table upon which Bruce rested.

“I wanted it to be the name of the first man who made me whole,” Selina said. “You, uh… You remember a couple of days ago when you gave me that ugly brooch your mother had? Told me I was the Lady of Wayne Manor? Tried in your own cute little way to tell me that this whole thing wasn’t creepy, and you didn’t wind up marrying your mom?”

Bruce nodded.

“Well,” Selina said, “I for damn sure didn’t marry my dad.”

A silence followed, and a heavy one. Selina looked down at the table, before she fixed her eyes on Bruce.

“I remember,” Selina said, “not too long ago, you quit being Batman for three years because The Joker died. Because you thought he was the only one in this life who understood you.”

And now Selina leaned in. So close that Bruce could see her pores.

“That’s bullshit, Sailor. I’m the one who gets you. I’m the one who loves you… I’m the one who makes you laugh.”
And Bruce had to smile at this. Selina tucked an unruly strand of black hair behind his right ear.

“You and me aren’t ending in divorce court,” Selina said. “You know that, right? We’re either getting buried separately, or we’re going to the Old Superhero’s Home together. Either way, wherever you go is wherever I belong. Because I want to be there. And you didn’t try to change me. You didn’t tell me to stop stealing. You just asked me—you didn’t tell me, you asked me—to start stealing from the bad guys. And I accepted, because that was reasonable. And I’m not trying to change you. Being married to Batman means being married to a man who will take crazy risks and extend himself far beyond his limits if that means protecting his home and all the people in it. Which begs the question…”

She hovered close to his face. He could smell her breath.

“Can you walk?”

Bruce sighed. “I’m not getting any begging to stay here and rest? Alfred does it. All the kids do it. Why not you?”

Selina smiled. “I want nothing more in this world than to stand between you and whatever it is that’s trying to hurt you… But I know how you roll. Can you walk?”

Bruce curled his toes before fixing his blue eyes on her.

“I can walk,” he said.

Selina smiled again. “Good. Then you can fight.”

She helped him up into a sitting position, his legs dangling off the side of the table. Before they went any further, however, she held his face in both hands, and brought her lips to his. The kiss was luxurious, but all too brief. Then she placed his head against her chest, above the soft expanse of her breasts. Her heartbeat reverberated in his ear, and it was a little too fast. Whether that was because of stress or because he was so near, he could not say.

Within this moment, there was a small part of Bruce, loud and in the back like the mouthy kid in class, that wanted to pull her onto the table with him. To reach underneath her sweater and trace his fingers along the bare skin of her back. To listen to that heartbeat until they both grew ancient.

But the rest of him knew that if he did that, then he wouldn’t be the man Selina Wayne had married. And he certainly wouldn’t be the man Selina Wayne deserved.

And with all of his education, with all of the eloquent prose and aureate poetry to which he had been exposed, the one thing—the right thing—that he had to say was:

“I love you too.”

She broke the embrace, looked him in the eye, and smiled.

“Come on,” she said. “I’ll help you get dressed for work.”

She put his arm over her shoulder and, with a slight groan, helped him off the table. They began to walk out of the medical bay.

“I don’t need help getting dressed,” Bruce said.

“A lot has happened in the last day,” Selina said. “Most of which you need to be sitting down to
hear. Trust me, Sailor, you need help getting dressed.”

FORDMAN’S DEPARTMENT STORE - MIAGANI ISLAND

Damian Wayne took a deep breath, wiped the sweat off his brow, and straightened the collar of his leather jacket.

“I’m bored,” he said, catching his breath. “You’ve done the one thing I cannot forgive. You have bored me. And... And that means we must finish the dance.”

Stephanie was on the ground in a pool of her own blood. Whatever number of broken ribs she had in the middle of the fight must have doubled. One of his punches opened up a cut on her hairline. It was a small one, but the scalp bled like crazy, making the wound look a whole lot worse than it actually was.

But slowly, surely, she began to get to her feet. She squared her shoulders, and fixed the one blue eye that wasn’t swollen shut upon him.

Damian smiled at this, a bead of sweat falling from his temple, and caressing his cheek.

“Willful to the very end,” Damian said. “That’s not a quality I like. To think, I had my affections set on someone as base as you. Nevertheless... That comes to an end.”

Damian reared back, his right fist closed. This look on his face was resolute.

And every fiber of Stephanie Brown’s being, every synapse in her brain, screamed one word.

NOW!

Damian let his game-ending punch loose. And it landed...

THWAP!

...right in the open palm of Stephanie’s gloved right hand.

Damian looked at her with wide, confused eyes. Stephanie used her left hand to jab Damian in the chest and push him away.

And then the two of them just looked at each other.

Stephanie smiled. Just doing that hurt, and she could feel that, with the swelling, one side of her smile was wider than the other. But she didn’t care. She didn’t care that blood and drool were leaking out of the corner of her mouth. She didn’t care that her lips were swollen and cracked from repeated punches to the face. She didn’t care that her teeth were brown from all the blood that had been in her mouth.

She didn’t even care that she was in so much pain. That was fine. She knew she was going to get wrecked as soon as she came up with this idea. And in the context of a fight, she could fully justify pain being an emotion, just like anything else.

Damian balled up his left and brought it in.

THWAP!

It landed in Stephanie’s open right hand. And, same as before, she pushed him away with just two
That punch was softer than the last.

Which was no great wonder. His punches had been getting weaker and weaker for the last couple of minutes.

“Here’s the thing,” Stephanie said. “I was trained by Catwoman. So I know how to work a con.”

Damian tried to unleash a front kick. She caught it with both hands, and just dropped it, causing Damian to stagger back into a full standing position.

“And I was trained by Orphan,” she said. “So I know how to handle pain.”

Damian’s shoulders drooped. His eyes were still wide, but that seemed to be more confusion than mania.

Stephanie started walking forward.

And Damian, in his puzzlement, started backing up.

“I wasn’t lying when I said men like you weren’t exactly rare,” Stephanie said. “You’re the type of guy who likes to play with his food. You’re the type of guy who will wear himself out trying to prove how superior he thinks he is when he’s been insulted. Who will use everything he has just to show off for someone who looked at him funny.”

Damian charged her.

And Stephanie dexterously got out of his way, put her hands to his back, and shoved him forward.

He apparently didn’t watch where he was going, or assume that she’d get out of the way, because he tripped and took a header, knocking over the only creepy mannequin that was still standing.

Damian immediately got himself back to his feet, the deep breaths he was taking puffed out his cheeks. His whole face had turned red.

“And I know this,” Stephanie said, “Because my dad is just like you.”

Damian put his back into a left hook, a slow one, which Stephanie just dodged. He lost some of his footing, but regained it at the last possible instant.

“Because in case you haven’t noticed,” Stephanie said, “I haven’t thrown a single punch this entire fight. Which means stamina-wise, I’m fresh as a daisy. And you?”

Stephanie’s hand darted out as quick as a striking viper, and Damian had been too slow, too exhausted, to get out of the way.

She didn’t punch him.

She had merely drawn her gloved finger across his forehead.

Stephanie held up that finger. It was drenched with Damian’s sweat. A single bead made its journey down the joints of that finger, and threatened to invade her palm.

“You’re looking a little tired to me.”
Damian put what he had left into a right hook.

He missed, his fist sailing right past her ear as she dodged.

Stephanie grabbed his shoulders and drove her knee into his gut, robbing him of what little breath he had left. Then she jammed her right elbow into his nose, and Damian dropped to his knees.

He brought his hand to his nose, and saw his own blood on his fingers, and looked up at her with rage.

“This… is… impossible,” Damian said. Breathing for him was hard, as worn out as he was. The shot to the nose just made it more difficult. “What I have done to you would have sent more seasoned warriors to their graves!”

“She’s a fighter,” Stephanie said. “They ain’t me.”

Damian got to his feet and tried to raise his hands.

Tried.

Stephanie brought her left next to her right ear and gave him a backhand slap--just to embarrass the little prick--and then rocked his jaw with an uppercut.

And on his ass he went.

This all hurt. Just moving hurt Stephanie Brown… But it didn’t hurt as much as she thought it would. Adrenaline and his drinking buddy Dopamine were kicking in as one thought settled upon her.

I am going to beat Damian Wayne.

It wasn’t a possibility.

It was a foregone conclusion.

Hope got her here. Certainty would get her the rest of the way.

He looked up at her, his eyes wide, his nose bloody, his lower lip on the verge of quivering, and Stephanie had to fight off the urge to laugh.

Damian Wayne had the look of a man who had thoroughly and irrevocably fucked himself.

Because he had.

“What… are you?” Damian asked through gritted teeth and sweat-drenched lips. The telltale tenor of fear had busted into his voice and put its feet up on the coffee table.

Stephanie put her hands on her hips, and smiled. Her face was lumpy and her teeth were brown… but if you asked her, she’d have said she’d never felt prettier in her entire life.

“My name is Stephanie Brown,” she said. “And now I’m gonna torture you until you shit your pants.”
Jason was turning red. Whether it was from the cold or from his ever-growing agitation, Cassandra could not say.

They were still sitting cross-legged on the floor of the entryway into the Hall of Mirrors. Cassandra was working on her second beer. And why not? It was tasty, and Jason appeared to have forgotten it existed.

She felt… weird. Her face was all tingly, and there was a great force building within her. Her urge not only to talk at the present moment, but to monologue, was hampered by her inability to do so. She felt like a balloon that kept filling with air, but never popping.

And this was how Cassandra Cain learned that she was a chatty drunk.

“How do you think this is gonna pan out?” Jason finally asked.

Cassandra took the beer away from her lips, and beheld him intently.

“What,” Jason said, “you think I walk out there with you, there are gonna be hugs all around?”

“No,” Cassandra said.

“No,” Jason said. “I’m gonna go to prison, is what’s gonna happen.”

“Maybe,” Cassandra said.

“Or better yet,” Jason said, “or shittier yet, I’m going to Arkham. Bruce changed up everyone’s fingerprints and DNA in public records, you know that right? I get fingerprinted, the name of Jason Todd isn’t coming up. I’m gonna be a John Doe. I run around saying I’m a Robin who came back from the dead and Bruce Wayne is Batman, I’m getting a straightjacket and a cell right next to Two-Face.”

Cassandra swallowed her beer, and said “He’s dead.”

“Clayface, then.”

“Him too.”

Jason stared at her in stunned amazement for a second or two. Cassandra thought he looked like Tim did that one time Steph stole that can of Red Bull out of his backpack.

And the memory caused Cassandra to smile.

And Jason saw this.

“You think you’re cute, don’t you?”

Cassandra wanted to say something to the effect of “WELL, SUPERBOY THINKS SO!” but she didn’t have the words for it.

So she just shrugged and scrunched up her face, as if to say “Ehhhhhh….”

Jason didn’t seem to handle this well.

“For someone who can’t talk,” Jason said, “You just can’t seem to shut the fuck up, can you? All you’re doing is pissing me off.”
Cassandra put her half-empty beer between her legs to free up her hands for signing.

“Better. Than. Trying. To….”

What was the word she was looking for?

“...Explode. Yourself.”

Cassandra still wasn’t sure if that was right.

Jason opened his mouth to say something, but instead opted to frown and fume.

He was quiet for some time. He looked at his lap, took a few deep breaths, and then began to speak.

“Tim Drake isn’t here,” Jason said. “I was gonna give him a talking-to. You’re getting it instead. You’re getting the talk about how all Batman wants is soldiers. We aren’t even human to him. All that matters is the mission.”

Jason rested his elbows on his thighs, folded his hands beneath his chin, and tried to stare into Cassandra.

“He was responsible for a dead child… and no one stopped him. I died, and he didn’t even stop himself. We can look up to Superman and Wonder Woman if we want to, but their combined might was no match for Bruce Wayne’s ego, because they didn’t stop him either. You’ll give, and you’ll give, and when you’ve given everything, it’s on to the next kid dying for a rich asshole’s approval. Some catch-all figure to fill whatever void that anyone who looks at him has. You and me? Babs? Grayson? Tim? None of our lives matter to him as much as any given bad guy.”

Jason turned red again, and fumed some more.

“The Joker killed me,” Jason said. “And if it weren’t for his bitchy girlfriend, he’d still be murdering people today. It tells me that The Joker was sacred to Bruce, and I wasn’t. I was a sacrificed pawn in a chess game. And if it came down to it, so are you… You know that, right?”

Cassandra didn’t even hesitate.

“Yes.”

Jason was thrown by that, not expecting it.

“So if you had to die to save some piece of human shit murderer, you’d do it?”

“Yes.”

Jason put his hand to his head. “Jes-- Why? In… In a world where a fifteen-year-old boy with his whole life ahead of him gets his head caved in by a psychotic fucking clown, how can you sit there and tell me he doesn’t deserve to die? What could The Bat possibly mean to you that you would put it all out there to save someone who isn’t worth saving?”

Cassandra put down her beer, looked Jason in the eye, and told him the truth.

“Everything.”

Jason blinked at her. Cassandra leaned in.

“We…” Cassandra said, “are all… worth… something.”
So intent in what she was saying that Cassandra had ceased to blink. “I have… killed… before,” Cassandra said. “Never… again. The Bat… saved me. So I… could save… you.”

Jason’s body language told her everything. His jaw hung open. His eyes darted slowly back and forth. He was trying to figure out something to say, but he came up dry.

This conversation was over.

Cassandra picked up her beer, drained the rest of it in a couple of gulps, and put the empty bottle back on the floor next to her. She stood up, and held out her hand.

“Let’s go.”

Jason stared at his lap for a little bit, not moving. His voice was quiet when it came.

“I can’t forgive him,” Jason said. “I just… I can’t.”

“You don’t… have to,” Cassandra said.

Jason looked up at her. His eyes had a fresh shine on them.

“This won’t end well,” Jason said.

Cassandra held out her hand for him to take. Her smile had a warmth to it as she asked a very important question. The most important one she could think of.

“Says who?”

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**FOUNDERS ISLAND**

Nightwing saw Geo-Force get ripped to pieces.

Born Brion Markov, he was Prince of the nation of Markovia, forced to abdicate his title when his Metahuman powers became known.

He had the ability to manipulate soil and stone. He was able to levitate huge chunks of the ground and fling them at bad guys. Could bring outcroppings of rock up from the dirt to confine or destroy enemies.

All in all, a hell of an ability to have.

It was next to worthless, however, against the Army of Nemesis, who could make more of themselves out of everything he did.

A group of four set upon him on the corner of Second and Flint, their opening move being a vertical slash that opened Geo-Force up from his belly button to the center of his chest.

They crowded around him after that. All Nightwing could see were bits of flesh and geysers of blood as Geo-Forced screamed for a short time.

Nightwing was too far away to do anything about it. He had just finished off a pair of Soldiers with his electric escrima sticks, only to see Geo-Force die screaming across the street outside of a trendy bar, whose sign had been destroyed in the carnage.

As if to avenge him, two figures burst through the second floor of the bar, raining chunks of concrete
and shards of glass upon the four blood-spattered Soldiers of Nemesis.

Just eyeballing it, Nightwing knew they were Crush and Strix.

Crush made landfall, cracking the pavement, and decked the Soldier right in front of her with the chain wrapped around her fist. She stood over the crumbling collection of gravel that used to be a Soldier of Nemesis, and yelled “DOOMFIST, BITCH!”

As Strix cleanly cut through two others with her absurdly sharp swords, Crush squared up with the final remaining Soldier.

The Soldier swiped at her. There was a splash of blood and a howl of pain.

Nightwing could see that this Soldier had just cut out Crush’s right eye.

Strangely, Crush didn’t seem to be all that bothered by this. She simply reared back at the Soldier, screamed, and grabbed its shoulders. She brought the full force of her forehead into the blank, solid expanse that functioned as a face for the Soldier of Nemesis.

Again.

And again.

And again.

It took five headbutts for Crush to render the top half of the damn thing’s head to dust, at which point the rest of the Soldier of Nemesis collapsed into a pile of jagged rocks.

At least these things operated on zombie rules… kinda…

Once she had vanquished her foe, Crush, missing one of her red eyes and with blood streaming down her face from a small collection of cuts on her forehead, howled like a Viking warrior, before jumping two stories and through the window of the luxury apartment building across the street.

And Strix, who was a silent essay in confusion behind her stylized owl mask, just ran in through the front door of the apartment building like a normal person.

Which just left Nightwing on the street with a pile of rubble and pieces of a dead body.

Dick Grayson was older than Brion Markov. Not by much, but it was true. Nightwing met him on the first day Geo-Force was on The Outsiders.

Nightwing put his finger to his ear.

“Cyborg. Status report.”

The voice of Cyborg came in over the comms.

“We have a division led by Supergirl and Midnighter. Another by Black Canary and Huntress. A third by Green Arrow and Red Arrow, and a fourth by Zatanna and Detective Chimp. They’re pushing these things toward the middle of the island. The casualty reports are coming in, and… and it’s bad.”

“Give it to me,” Nightwing said.

“Are you sure?” Cyborg asked. “I mean--”
“Just… Just give it to me.”

Cyborg sighed.


“What?” Nightwing asked.

Cyborg was silent for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was thick.

“Lady Shazam and Stargirl,” Cyborg finally said. “Both down.”

Nightwing’s knees turned to jelly, but he refused to fall. He felt a twinge of sadness upon reflection that poor Geo-Force was a little bit younger than her. But Mary “Lady Shazam” Bromfield had been eighteen. Courtney “Stargirl” Whitmore had been just seventeen.

They were Goddamned children…

“You there?” Cyborg asked after a long and painful silence.

“You’re right, Vic,” Nightwing said. “You shouldn’t have told me… i shouldn’t have asked…”

“I’ll keep you updated,” Cyborg said. “Cyborg out.”

As the line went dead, Nightwing thought that Cyborg was smarter about people than he gave himself credit for. He knew that Nightwing would want to stew in this alone for a bit.

But that would have to wait.

The corner of the SubWay restaurant down the street had been completely obliterated. From inside, Nightwing could see a flash of green light, and could hear a scream.

And that scream was very familiar.

Nightwing broke into a light jog down the street. As the snow hit his face. As the sounds of gunshots, and Canary Cries, and exploding arrows, and roaring, and screaming—so much screaming—filled his ears.

In what used to be the back room of the destroyed SubWay, Starfire was on her stomach on the floor. And Jessica Cruz was using her Power Ring, sending hot bolts of green energy to cauterize several vicious and gruesome wounds on Starfire’s bare back.

“Baby, hold still,” Jessica said. “If you keep wriggling, I’m gonna wind up…”

She trailed off when she saw Nightwing standing there. Starfire eventually saw him, too. There was a cut along the right side of her face, and the smears of dirt and blood on her cheeks had had inroads laid into them by tears.

Silently, upon seeing Nightwing, Starfire buried her head in her hands.

“What’s wrong?” Nightwing asked.

The answer didn’t come right away. Starfire refused to speak. Jessica had to do that for her.
"They got Beast Boy," Jessica said. "We saw it. They just... swarmed him."

Nightwing’s heart dropped down to his stomach. Nightwing had served with Garfield “Beast Boy” Logan on an iteration of the Teen Titans back at the tail-end of his Robin tenure, and at the front end of his career as Nightwing. He always made jokes. He always hit on the girls in the team. He was always hungry.

And now he was gone. He was a clown, sure, but a good one. And the world needed him.

Nightwing didn’t know what to say, but he opened his mouth to say something anyway.

No one would ever find out. Above them, from the upper floors, a rumbling started.

Nightwing looked up and saw bits of the ceiling disappearing.

Soldiers of Nemesis were reconstructing themselves from this very building.

All three of them looked at each other, and seemingly knew what to do without saying anything.

Jessica brought up a green energy bubble around herself and Starfire, while Nightwing jumped back into the hole in the side of the building.

A cascade of rubble and dust fell as the ceiling collapsed.

A chunk of ceiling hit Nightwing in the side of the head, and he grayed out. His field of vision shimmered, and he wobbled on his feet.

He saw Jessica emerge from the rubble, flying off into the night sky with Starfire in her arms. So that was a good thing.

But that left him alone with six new Soldiers of Nemesis to deal with.

A hand grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled Nightwing out before the rest of the building came down in a thunder, releasing dust everywhere.

On his back in the street, Nightwing ventured to open his eyes.

The dust was clearing, and standing above him was a woman--Asian, judging from the eyeholes in her mask--with teal hair and a blue supersuit. White leggings and a purple triangle in the middle of her chest.

She waved some of the dust away from her face.

“Uhh, hey,” the mystery woman said. “I’m, uh, I’m Defacer? I’m with the Run-Offs.”

Maybe it was the light head injury, but there was a weird shock of recognition.

“I feel like I should know you,” Nightwing said.

“Nope,” Defacer said. “Never met you before in my life. But I see Nightwing standing in a building about to collapse, I pull him out.”

He wanted to ask how she recognized him, but from that angle, she’d have seen him from behind.

So he knew how she knew.
Defacer extended a hand, and Nightwing took it. She helped him to his feet…

...just as the six Soldiers of Nemesis emerged from the rubble of the former SubWay.

Nightwing wordlessly readied his escrima sticks.

“If I die,” Defacer said, “tell my parents I said something awesome.”

The Soldier of Nemesis took one step toward them.

Whereupon it was felled by a blast of electricity from somewhere behind them.

As the Soldiers turned to face their assailant, two more bolts of electricity dropped the ones on the far left and the far right.

A blast of Heat Vision destroyed another.

A Speedster came in in a blur and removed another’s head.

And a lasso, pulsating with electricity, wrapped around the head of another. That head was obliterated in a shower of sparks and sand.

The dust from the destroyed building cleared, and Nightwing could see who came to their rescue.

It was Young Justice.

Jinny Hex and Bluebird were both wielding electric pistols. Superboy’s eyes were still faintly glowing red. Impulse came to a stop, almost tripping as he did. Empress was holding two swords, ready for war. Wonder Girl was coiling her Lasso of Lightning back up.

And there, in the middle, was Robin, bo staff in hand.

Robin smiled at Nightwing, and asked “Need help?”

THE AMUSEMENT MILE HALL OF MIRRORS - THE MAINLAND

Cassandra Cain led Jason Todd out of the Hall of Mirrors by the hand, as though he were an errant toddler.

By the time they were under the snow and the moonlight, Oracle had already woken up. Her green holographic mask was back in place.

And she did not look happy.

She stormed toward, Cassandra, but then saw Jason and began to storm toward him.

Oracle’s body language told Cassandra of impending violence, so she stepped between the two, plastered on her best angry face, and tried to stare her down.

And so Cassandra and Oracle wordlessly locked eyes… only for Jason to break the silence.

“Uh… Hi, Babs.”

“Shut the fuck up, Jason,” Oracle said, still staring at Cassandra. Then Oracle stooped over a little bit to talk to the smaller woman.
“Cass,” Oracle said. “I love you more than I love most of my relatives. But if you ever try something like that with me again, I will replace all of your chocolate ice cream in the freezer with human shit.”

Cassandra’s angry face slid off. That just...seemed like a weird threat to make.

“And not my shit, either,” Oracle said. “You’re not getting that lucky. I’m talking convict shit. From Mississippi. I’ve been on the dark web, Little Miss Badass, so I know people who sell it. Now if you’ll excuse me…”

Oracle looked at Jason again, and Cassandra stood up straight.

“I’m just gonna zip-tie him to the light pole so the cops can deal with him,” Oracle said. “Can I do that, please? Can I do my job?”

Cassandra didn’t break eye-contact. But she did let go of Jason’s hand and step away.

Oracle roughly grabbed Jason by the shoulder, and led him to the light pole next to the brochure stand. A few seconds later, Jason was sitting on the boardwalk with his wrists zip-tied around the light pole behind him.

After which, Oracle took some time to stop and stare at him.

“Seventeen people,” Oracle said. “Five at Esteban’s, five at the Sorrento, seven at the Seahorse. All dead behind your bullshit, not to mention how many people are dying on Founders Island right now. The Jason Todd I knew was an ornery little bastard, but he was a good kid. I don’t know who the fuck you are.”

It was only when Oracle turned to walk away the Jason elected to speak.

“Did you go to my grave?” he asked.

Oracle turned back. “What?”

“My grave. Did you visit?”

“I go there every year,” Oracle said. “Went there. Me and Dick.”

“But you spend the rest of your time upholding the status quo that got a fifteen-year-old boy killed in the first place,” Jason said. “ Seems a little hypocritical to me, but hey, at least your conscience is clear.”

Oracle’s facial expression didn’t change, but Cassandra could tell by her body language that that last comment shook her.

“C’mon,” Oracle said to Cassandra. “Let’s go.”

Cassandra put her Orphan mask back on. They’d gone a few feet when Oracle stopped, and said “Wait.”

Oracle reached into the inside of her leather coat, and pulled out a small plastic box. She opened the top, and shook free two small white capsule-shaped objects, and held them out.

“Here,” Oracle said.

Orphan squinted at them. “Pills?”
“No,” Oracle said. “Tic-Tacs. You smell like a brewery. And we’ll be talking about *that* later too.”

**FORDMAN’S DEPARTMENT STORE - MIAGANI ISLAND**

Stephanie Brown had spent the last few minutes pummeling Damian Wayne to the extent that both of her hands were numb.

Now Damian was leaving his own blood trail.

And he was crawling away.

Stephanie suppressed the urge to laugh.

“Oh, you think you’re *done*?” Stephanie asked. “GET YOUR ASS BACK HERE, MALFOY!”

Stephanie stalked over to Damian and grabbed him by the back of his leather jacket.

“On your feet,” Stephanie said. “If you’re gonna get your ass kicked, you best take it like a man.”

Damian got to one knee before he sprung up, attempting to deliver a right palm strike.

Both of which were pathetically slow, both of which were easily dodged. Apparently, Damian had exhausted himself so severely when he was exacting punishment from Stephanie during the long opening stages of the fight that he was running on fumes. Even if it connected, it would have hurt about as much as the same blow from a three-year-old.

A three-year-old that was pulling their punches.

Stephanie exploded with a right cross, sending blood and a tooth flying from Damian’s mouth. And to think, she was in excruciating pain a few minutes ago. Beating on this obnoxious little cretin worked better than Tylenol.

The right arm with which Damian attempted to palm strike was still out. He was teetering on his feet, but Stephanie grabbed the arm with her left hand, stopping his fall.

From there, Stephanie put all of her strength, of which there now seemed to be an unlimited supply, into her right fist as she drove it into the underside of Damian’s forearm.

The muffled snap was resounding, and Damian Wayne’s shattered ulna tore through his flesh, creating an unseemly sharp peak beneath the arm of his leather jacket.

Damian screamed. A scream so high that Stephanie had last heard its like when she was eight. She herself had made it when she had seen a spider in her bedroom.

He dropped to his knees, and held up his one good arm.

“P--Please,” Damian said with a mangled mouth, spilling pink drool onto the floor. “Please… stop…”

It was so quiet, so pathetic, that Stephanie felt a small twinge of pity for the man at her feet.

That pity was short-lived.

Because Stephanie remembered what was behind her.
Five dead homeless people, who had committed no crime, who had not harmed a living soul, whose only offense against existence was that Damian Wayne thought they served better dead, as an intimidation technique against her.

No doubt they begged for their lives as well. And those pleas fell on the uncaring ears of a monster.

Stephanie sighed, and just said:

“Naaahhhhhhhhh.”

She drove her knee into Damian’s face and heard something crunch. The back of his head bounced when it hit the floor.

From there, Stephanie straddled him, her knees pinning his shoulders down.

She rained rights and lefts upon his bloody face.

Stephanie poured everything into them. Her fears. Her anger at her dad for abusing her. Her anger at her mom for letting it happen. Her resentment of everyone in Batman’s network for assuming that she couldn’t take care of herself.

She thought about the one thing she wanted most in the world.

And she thought about the near-absolute certainty that it would never, ever be hers.

Stephanie only stopped punching Damian when she realized, a few seconds ago, that he stopped moving.

She unclenched her fist, and placed two fingers to his throat.

His pulse was weak, but it was there.

Stephanie got to her feet, and her entire body screamed. Now that the fight was over, now that the adrenaline and dopamine were coming down to normal levels, the pain was coming back. The pain from when she had gotten her ass handed to her, and now new pain, from having overexerted herself.

She slowly limped over to the suitcase bomb, her whole body reading her the Riot Act. She reached down and flicked the off switch, and took the small vial of orange gel out of the center.

Stephanie tried to crush it with her hand, but a bolt of pain surged through her arm, and she almost cried out.

Her right hand wasn’t numb anymore. No, her right hand was broken, maybe even all the way down, past the forearm and to the elbow.

She shifted the vial to her left hand, which was also in agony but not as bad as her right, and crushed the vial, spilling orange goo and tiny shards of broken glass all over her leather gloves.

In hindsight, she thought she shouldn’t have done this. It was an explosive and could have blown her to smithereens.

But it was just too cool to pass up.

She looked over at Damian, who was unconscious and now, finally, thoroughly defeated in every way someone could be.
Stephanie needed something to say. Something badass to put the period on this long, painful sentence.

But she couldn’t come up with something clever.

Finally, she took a deep breath, and bellowed a single word so long and so loud that her face turned red beneath all of the blood.

“CUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUNTT!”

She took another deep breath.

Then another.

And then, from a combination of pain and exhaustion, Stephanie Brown passed out.

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**FOUNDERS ISLAND**

Batwoman needed to get Wonder Woman to a safe place.

For three blocks they walked, past images of horror and bloodshed.

Knight and Squire out of England had been fighting off Soldiers on the corner of Tenth and DeLaCruz. They both ended up in wet red chunks.

A Soldier just walked right through one of Burnout’s protective flame shields as though it were nothing, and drove its right spike through his skull.

Dove had Hawk’s arm over her shoulder in a sobering mirror image of herself and Wonder Woman. With Dove saying “Just a little bit further, hon, just a little further.”

Only Hawk’s head was wobbling lifelessly on his neck. And Dove hadn’t seemed to notice that Hawk’s feet weren’t moving. Poor Dawn Granger was lugging around the corpse of the man she loved.

Robotman had been beheaded… but then again, Robotman was just a brain in a robot body anyway. Judging by how Robotman was yelling at Negative Man (who was carrying the head), Batwoman thought Robotman might be fine. Provided any of them would be after this.

Most heartbreaking of all, however, Batwoman saw just half a block down from where they were headed.

Artemis of Bana-Mighdall, Wonder Woman’s fellow Amazon, was lying in the middle of the street. The snow was falling into her open, dead eyes. Apparently, she had waged an unsuccessful attempt to stuff her intestines back in through the large wound that the Soldiers of Nemesis opened in her abdominal cavity.

Batwoman rushed Wonder Woman past this, leaving a trail of blood behind her in the slowly accumulating snow. She hoped with all she had that Diana didn’t see it.

They finally came upon the Barnes & Noble on Eighth. The lights were still on, and no one was inside.

Even divine horrors from Olympus didn’t seem to want to go into bookstores these days.
Batwoman guided the bleeding, rapidly paling Wonder Woman inside the bookstore, and took her to the New Age section, which was just off of the little cafe in the back.

*Oh well,* Batwoman thought as she roughly cleared all of the books off the tall shelf and on to the floor. She placed Wonder Woman down on the green carpet, and then pushed the empty shelf over, so it leaned against the full shelf on the other side, forming a rudimentary lean-to under which Wonder Woman could stay out of harm’s way.

Wonder Woman, her skin deathly white and her breathing shallow, asked Batwoman a question with a soft voice.

“Any ideas?”

“Not yet,” Batwoman said. “I need to go think… Can I borrow your sword?”

Without even waiting for a response, Batwoman knelt down, reached in, and took Wonder Woman’s sword out of its scabbard.

“I’ll be right back,” Batwoman said. “Hold tight.”

Wonder Woman closed her eyes, and nodded.

Batwoman hefted the sword in her right hand, and went to the entryway through which they had just gone, and spotted a scattered collection of Soldiers of Nemesis striding down the street.

*Good…*

Batwoman was not the most proficient swordfighter. But this was a sword that could both split an atom and kill a God. She didn’t need to be.

The blade went through the Soldiers of Nemesis like butter.

As she hewed and destroyed, Batwoman’s mind feasted upon itself.

She reflected that she was the object of desire for a woman of myth and legend who was nigh indestructible and even then—*even then!* --whatever governing body that determined the fates of the people on Shitshow Earth managed to take that away from her.

Just like her mom.

Just like her sister.

Just like the military.

Just like Renee.

Batwoman was not in a place, either physically or mentally, where dignity had any sort of cache or appeal whatsoever. She had been screwed, and she was figuratively (and also literally, from the look of things) going to die mad about it.

She was mad at herself for having the dumbshit idea of becoming a superhero in the first place, which brought Diana into her life, and would, in the slowest and most awful way possible, take her away.

She was mad at the Justice League who, for all their might and wonder, could not seem to defeat what was, in essence, a *Dark Souls* boss.
And she was definitely mad at the Gods. The Olympian Pantheon. They who had no ideas besides usurping one another, and all of those plans spelled death and destruction for the folks on the ground.

Even Demeter, who warned her about all this. Who said the Army of Nemesis couldn’t be stopped without the destruction of the Stone, and said Zeus himself couldn’t do it, even at the height of his power. She didn’t even tell them if there was even a way that the Stone could be destroyed, apart from some…

Some…

After destroying the last Soldier of Nemesis, sending it off to reform itself somewhere else, Batwoman stopped moving.

And she reflected that, were this a cartoon, that the world entire would have been blinded and warmed by the size and the brightness of the lightbulb that had just turned on over her head.

She couldn’t be mad that Demeter didn’t tell her how to destroy the Stone.

Because, in a roundabout way endemic even to the myths themselves, Demeter did tell her how to destroy the Stone.

A smile spread across Batwoman’s face.

“So… Is he single?”

She put her finger to her cowl.

“Zatanna,” she said. “I need you at my location now!”

A few seconds later, through a shimmering silver portal, Zatanna appeared.

Her top hat was missing. Her hair was a mess, which was something Batwoman hadn’t seen even when they were both knee-deep in the shit. Her face and her white shirt and bowtie were smeared with dirt and blood. And the bottom half of her left ear was missing.

Zatanna looked at Batwoman with pleading eyes, and asked:

“Have you seen my cousin?”

Batwoman had, in fact, seen Zatanna’s cousin.

Zachary Zatara was two blocks over, face down and unbreathing, in a pool of his own blood on the sidewalk.

Rather than lie, however, Batwoman just decided to push forward.

“Zatanna,” Batwoman said, “I know how to stop all of this.”

And she knew it to be true. She could save Diana. She could save the world.

Zatanna’s face lit up. “How?”

Batwoman put her hands on Zatanna’s shoulders and said:

“I need you to portal Wonder Woman and me somewhere.”
Much like the love life of Dick Grayson, the next chapter is going to be long and complicated.

So much so, in fact, that doing it justice requires more time than I have.

So see you on Monday for the first of the final three chapters of A Faulty Sword.
Chapter 24: Some Girls

FOUNDERS ISLAND

Orphan and Oracle had to go through a police barricade and had to stop what Oracle called “The Speedster Buzzsaw” (which, to Orphan’s understanding, was a whole bunch of people with Flash powers just running around the island) in order to get onto Founders Island.

Before Oracle revved up the engine on her motorcycle, she said “I’ve isolated Nightwing’s signal. We’re going to him.”

Orphan smiled behind her mask.

Because of course they were.

Her mind boggled at what she saw as they made their way through the grid of streets, and down Conroy Avenue. Superheroes, half of whose names Orphan didn’t even know, fighting these beige rock monsters.

And every once in a while, about every block or so, she’d see a superhero dead on a sidewalk, on a corner, in the street.

“Two blocks!” Oracle yelled over the engine and the wind. “You can break bricks, right?”

Orphan didn’t know why she asked that question. Orphan could punch through plexiglass.

“Yeah!” Orphan yelled. She didn’t like yelling. It hurt her throat.

“Feel like an ejection?”

Orphan removed her arm from around Oracle’s waist and mover her hand in front of her where it could be seen.

It was giving a thumbs up.

“Then get ready!” Oracle yelled.

Orphan put her hands on Oracle’s shoulders, and brought her self up so her feet were on the seat of the motorcycle behind Oracle’s back, her whole body down in a crouching position.

Oracle started yelling again.

“Three... Two...”

Orphan’s hands gripped tighter on Oracle’s shoulders.

“One... NOW!”

The motorcycle’s ejector seat launched Orphan high into the air. Orphan’s jump with her legs at the apex launched her even higher.

Orphan sailed through the cold December air, the snow dotting her black costume. From this high
up, she could recognize a few of the heroes fighting the Soldiers of Nemesis. Empress, Nightwing, Crush.

She began her descent, and kicked her feet out.

Orphan’s boots pulverized the head of a Soldier of Nemesis once she made landfall.

As the Soldier crumbled into gravel, Orphan backflipped off its rapidly deteriorating shoulders and came down onto the snowy street on one knee and one fist, the way any self-respecting superhero should.

She gandered at the Soldiers of Nemesis in the violent scrum around her. They weren’t human…but they moved like humans. Which meant that she could read how they moved, and anticipate what they would do next.

From there, Orphan liberated her three explosive shurikens from her yellow utility belt, and lined up her shots.

She threw the first one at a Soldier of Nemesis that Empress was fighting. She stopped her confounding short-range teleportation to give Orphan a thumbs up.

Orphan’s eyes panned left, and she saw Bluebird doing battle with one of these rock monsters. Her taser pistols must have run out of ammo, as Bluebird was using two sets of knuckles that she had fashioned from steel hexagonal nuts welded together to punch these things into oblivion. One of them got the drop on her, but failed to do anything, as Orphan’s explosive shuriken turned the Soldier’s head into dust.

Then Orphan drew her eyes dead center. Troia and Arsenal had joined the fray. Troia was handling them well, but Arsenal was armed with a bow and explosive arrows, and to successfully utilize them, he needed room that was quickly running out.

One of the Soldiers jumped the disintegrating remains of another that Arsenal had just dispatched, and broke into a run toward him.

It was fast.

Orphan’s shuriken was faster. The Soldier disintegrated into jagged chunks.

Arsenal tipped his red trucker hat to her, and yelled out “Thanks!”

Freshly out of explosives, Orphan cracked her knuckles.

When Oracle asked if she could break bricks, what Orphan neglected to mention was that she hadn’t since she was a child.

She shouldn’t have been susceptible to warm nostalgia for something like that, but nevertheless…

Orphan got a running start. Crush was on her knees, literally pummeling a Soldier of Nemesis into the street, and Orphan figured that that was a pretty good starting off point. Orphan jumped, rebounded off of Crush’s back, and bounced over to drive her foot through the stone chest of the Soldier of Nemesis that was about to sneak up on Jinny Hex. Jinny tipped the cowboy hat that Cassandra Cain coveted with every fiber of her being, before she levelled her volt pistol on…

Oh, hey, there’s Conner!
...another Soldier of Nemesis a few feet away that Wonder Girl reeled in with her lasso, vaporizing it. Above them all, Defacer (who was unfamiliar to Orphan) hovered in the air with her rocket boots, opting to chuck loose, individual bricks at the Soldiers on the ground in a tactic that proved surprisingly effective.

A few feet away, Robin was pinging the heads of four Soldiers of Nemesis with his bo staff, creating space before putting his shoulders into the individual blows that ended them. He saw Orphan, and called out to her.

“BEHIND YOU!”

He threw his staff to her, and Orphan put her strength into a side swipe that rendered the head of Soldier behind her to dust.

Orphan threw the staff back to Robin, gave him a thumbs up, and caught something out of the corner of her eye.

Oracle was lambasting three of the Soldiers of Nemesis with the tonfa she used in fights.

And her gloves were glowing red.

Orphan knew what was coming.

Oracle cried out “HIT THE DECK!” and everyone who didn’t have super strength who knew what was what dropped to their stomachs in the snowy street.

Her gloves were equipped with, for lack of a better term, “Hand Silencers,” which absorbed sound and kinetic energy with every blow she struck that could be released once she slammed the insides of her wrists together.

And the time had come.

Oracle leapt to the trunk of a parked car, scrabbled to the roof, and leapt into the middle of the street…

...slamming her wrists together.

FOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The blast of energy had a visible shockwave, and the five Soldiers of Nemesis in her vicinity crumbled to sand and blew away.

Crush was caught in the shockwave, and she was flung into the side of the Pietro Art Gallery so hard that when she unstuck herself, there was a Crush-shaped indent in the brick edifice.

She didn’t seem to be hurt, though. She brushed a lock of her black mohawk-slash-undercut out of her red, raw, empty left eye socket, and smiled.

“Dope!” she yelled to Oracle, who took a bow.

Just then, a squad of ten Soldiers climbed over two overturned cars in the middle of the intersection, and came running for them.

Two superheroes met them in the middle of the street.

Orphan…
Orphan had heard of this one. She was in the Secret Six. Strix was a deadly assassin who was covered in scars and was unable to speak.

Had they the faculties to talk, Orphan reckoned they’d have found they had a lot in common.

Strix unleashed her swords and started hewing her half of the Soldiers around her.

Orphan crushed the head of a Soldier with a thundering right, and another with a withering left. She took a run at another before bringing her feet underneath her, unleashing a devastating missile dropkick that drove her boots through the chest of one very unlucky Soldier.

She kipped up to her feet, and ran at the fourth, leaping and crushing its head to dust with a flying roundhouse.

Orphan sought out the fifth… only to find that Crush was already there. She had yanked off the Soldier’s right arm, and used it to pelt a line-drive using its head as the baseball.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Crush said as the Soldier’s arm disintegrated in her hands. “I got bored.”

Orphan turned around to see Strix standing there, her Soldiers dispatched, and her tight black costume covered in dust. She imagined Strix’s swords must have been sharp, because she’d been hacking away at these damned things for God knows how long now.

She looked Strix over, and held out her fist.

And Strix looked at this extended fist with a cocked head, before she reached out her own, and bumped it.

What? Orphan liked Strix’s style.

From beyond those parked cars, there was a chaotic and infernal racket, like a fleet of cement mixers showing symptoms of whooping cough at the same time.

Orphan booked it for the cars, got on the roof of the one on the left, and…

...and…

...and Orphan didn’t know just what the hell she was looking at.

The hundreds of superheroes that had come to save Gotham had successfully pushed the Soldiers of Nemesis into the middle of the island, which was at Nineteenth Street and Conroy Avenue, which just so happened to be the location of the Queen Consolidated building.

And all of these superheroes were standing there, or floating there, looking every bit as confused as Orphan did at that very moment.

Because the Soldiers of Nemesis… had turned on each other.

With kicks and flailing spikes, the Soldiers of Nemeses rent each other into jagged beige rocks as the superhero community looked on in stunned silence.

Orphan was joined on either side by Arsenal and Wonder Girl, who also looked confused.
She looked up at Arsenal, who shrugged, and said “Don’t look at me, I don’t know either.”

They were joined by Nightwing, who took one look at the carnage, and immediately went pale.

He pointed out, and yelled “Look!”

Nightwing was pointing at the ground floor of the Queen Consolidated building, which was rapidly disintegrating, and floating toward the grand melee in the middle of the street. The street, the glass of the lobby, even the red and green Christmas lights were unraveling and swirling around the Soldiers of Nemesis.

Orphan was shocked at how quickly she put it together.

Whenever one of these things died, it reformed itself from its surroundings.

And now they were using it as an offensive tactic.

They were destroying each other, so they could take out the foundation of a ninety-eight story skyscraper.

“They’re bringing the building down,” Nightwing said in terror. Not even bothering with comms, he cupped his hands to his mouth and started yelling.

“THEY’RE BRINGING THE BUILDING DOWN! FALL BACK! EVERYBODY FALL BACK!”

Orphan stayed a second longer than she should have, just to see everyone else retreat, before she did the same.

Wonder Girl, Troia, and Defacer were flying above them. She was running next to Bluebird when Impulse appeared in a streak of lightning.

“You’re with me, new girl!”

Impulse grabbed Bluebird by the hand, and one streak of lightning later, they were gone.

Orphan kept a tally of who was running with her, and flying above her… and found that there was someone missing.

As the Queen Consolidated building finally fell, resulting in the loudest noise Orphan had ever heard, she stopped, and looked behind her.

There was Superboy standing in the middle of the street as a wall of dust that reached to the heavens came careening down the street.

Superboy was Kryptonian. Half-Kryptonian, anyway, and he would no doubt be fine if the wall of dust and debris hit him.

But still, though.

Orphan reached out and yelled “CONNER!”

In another streak of Speed Force lightning, Impulse was standing next to him.

Superboy rose into the air as Impulse took his position in the street.
The wall of dust was about to overtake them when Impulse started whirling his arms around with such a speed that the wall of dust stopped… and began to recede.

The bottom half, anyway. Superboy and a powerful blast of his Ice Breath moved the top half back.

And at once, Orphan felt stupid for ever having been worried.

Orphan followed them as they moved the dust back. On the street to the right, she saw Supergirl and Kid Flash doing the same double act. On the street to the right, it was Power Girl in the air and Jay Garrick on the ground.

All three Speedsters and their attendant Kryptonians were moving the dust and debris east. Into the ocean.

From behind her, she could hear Nightwing talking.

“Please, someone tell me that building was empty,” he said.

And Orphan, who had keyed into the comms with Oracle on the way to Founders Island, heard a reply from The Flash in her ear.

“It is,” The Flash said. “It was one of the first places Jay and Wallace cleared out. Me, Strix, Mouse, and Crush gave it a once over after.”

Nightwing sighed, and said “Thank God.”

With the exception of the Speedster whirlwinds and Kryptonian breath, the talk among the superheroes was strangely muted.

All except Green Arrow a few blocks away, sensitive soul that he was, who took this opportunity to cry out “AWW, MY FUCKING BUILDING!” so loud that everyone could hear him.

The Speedsters and Kryptonians had pushed the dust back to its original location on the corner of Nineteenth and Conroy, and Orphan felt a small seed of relief take purchase within her chest.

In hindsight, this was foolish.

A column of beige stone emerged from the cloud, and swatted Power Girl out of the air with such force that she flew across the street and through the thirtieth story window of a luxury highrise across the street.

Orphan felt everyone’s breath catch in their throat the same as hers. Even the Speedsters and the other two Kryptonians stopped what they were doing. And following this over-the-wall-and-into-the-parking-lot home run with one of their heavy hitters, a noise as loud and as terrifying as any Orphan had ever heard came from the cloud of dust.

THOOM…

...THOOM…

...THOOM…

The ground started to shake. Windows rattled, And Orphan, along with everyone else, started to slowly back up.

Something emerged from the dank, gray cloud.
One Soldier of Nemesis.

They did not destroy themselves just to take out the Queen Consolidated building, nor did they use the materials from the destroyed skyscraper to build more of themselves.

Rather, they used the materials to combine themselves into one, single, Soldier of Nemesis.

One that was seventy feet tall.

FORDMAN’S DEPARTMENT STORE - MIAGANI ISLAND

“Steph?”

Standing in the middle of the women’s wear department of the old Fordman’s on Miagani Island, Catwoman could have kicked Stephanie Brown’s ass, if Stephanie may not have already been dead.

“Steph?”

She was kneeling over Stephanie, who was on the floor, looking like a mountain lion had just mauled her. There was blood everywhere, Steph’s face looked like it had mushrooms growing underneath it, and there were five dead homeless people on the way in.

Catwoman had trained Stephanie Brown, but she did not train her to be this stupid.

“Steph, wake up!”

As if bade by her mentor’s words, Stephanie jerked back into consciousness.

And she had apparently been having some rather bizarre dreams in her unconsciousness, because as her one good eye popped open she cried out “TINA FEY, NO!”

Catwoman’s breath left her in relief.

“Oh, thank God.”

Stephanie took a few breaths, before she said “Hey, boss.”

“You look like you needed help, whatever you did,” Catwoman said. “You couldn’t get Alfred or Cullen on the radio?”

Stephanie shook her head a little bit, and said “Oracle didn’t want us using comms. Radio waves might have set the bombs off.

To Catwoman, that… that made a lot of sense, actually.

“You mind telling me what happened here?” Catwoman asked.

“I fought the son of Batman,” Stephanie said, her eye closing again and her mouth listing off into a one-sided smile. “And I kicked his ass…”

Catwoman folded her arms. “You kicked his ass, huh?”

“It was glorious,” Stephanie said. “Losing my virginity has a lot to live up to.”

“Okay,” Catwoman said. “Then...where is he?”
Stephanie’s eye popped back open. She tried to get into a sitting position, but abandoned that halfway through as she started moaning in pain.

“Let me help you,” Catwoman said. She put her arms around Stephanie’s shoulders, and brought her up, and Stephanie’s moan of pain almost turned into a scream.

Stephanie scanned the floor of the women’s wear department in confusion. Catwoman could see that her eye fell on a smear of blood that had started in a puddle next to one of the creepy-ass mannequins that Damian had put there for purposes of, well, crazy, before it turned into a smear that went a few feet into the dark.

As though whoever made it had tried to drag themselves away.

*Maybe Stephanie did kick Damian’s ass…*

“Where did he go?” Stephanie asked.

Catwoman shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is loading you into the Batmobile and getting you back to the Batcave so Alfred can take a look at you.”

She brought Stephanie to her feet, and the poor girl shuddered and groaned as she got there.

“Okay,” Catwoman said, “it’ll be easier and shorter if you tell me what doesn’t hurt right now.”

“My hair,” Stephanie said. “My hair’s doing great.”

And then Catwoman smiled, because that alone told her that Stephanie was going to be fine.

*Just wait till you actually see your hair,* Catwoman thought. *There’s so much blood in it that it’s pink now.*

“I’ll tell you this much,” Catwoman said. “If you did beat Damian…”

“Which I did.”

“...then I’ll lord it over Bruce forever.”

“You will?”

“Shit yeah,” Catwoman said. “My daughter smacked the piss out of his son.”

“I’m not really your daughter though.”

“And Damian’s not really his son,” Catwoman said. “Yet here we are.”

“Ugh,” Stephanie said. “Don’t go soft on me. If Catwoman gets all sentimental, then the seventh seal will open and the world will end.”

“Funny you should mention.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” Catwoman said. “If there’s a later, I’ll tell you then.”

They made it a few steps toward the exit when Stephanie spoke again.

“The Batmobile’s a two-seater,” she said. “Where’s Batman sitting?”
Catwoman sighed, and said “Batman didn’t get here in the car.”

Batman saw Damian go out onto the Fordman’s roof and step toward the edge overlooking the parking lot from the heat signature scans in the Batwing.

He decided to set the plane down.

Damian turned toward the Batwing as the plane hovered a few feet off the rooftop. The lower cockpit compartment slid back, and the seat lowered, allowing Batman to step on to the roof. He clicked a few buttons on his gauntlet that made the Batwing perform a circuit of Miagani Island. He didn’t speak until the plane had lifted off again.

Until it was just the two of them.

They stared at each other. Either for a few brief seconds or a few dark and snowy epochs.

Damian looked like he just got hit by a car. His face was bruised and swollen. His closed mouth was in the telltale pucker that advertised missing teeth. Just from the smell in this darkness, Batman knew he was covered in blood. And his right arm was bent unnaturally, as though broken.

He and Catwoman knew Damian would be here, but the scan on the team revealed the sole presence of Stephanie Brown in this building.

If Spoiler did this to Damian, then she was capable of far more than he gave her credit for.

“Damian Wayne,” Batman finally said.

Damian tilted his head. “How does everyone know my name?”

“Someone from the Fifth Dimension told us what all of you were up to,” Batman said. This did not sound weird to him at all.

Damian sighed, and looked down.

“I was beaten by the least of you,” he said.

Batman felt a quick frostiness within himself that had nothing to do with the weather. “With that attitude,” he said, “it’s no wonder.”

Damian hocked a glob of blood onto the roof, and lapsed into sullen silence yet again.

“I’ve nowhere to go,” Damian finally said. “I cannot go to Nanda Parbat. I cannot sit at the right side of my grandfather. If Ra’s al Ghul finds that I share his blood with no apparent mother or father, he will assume that I am plotting his ouster from the League of Assassins, and he will put me to the sword. I am… powerless.”

“It’s life,” Batman said. “You may not have as much experience with it.”

“It is terrible.”

“Yes,” Batman said. “On occasion.”

More silence. Until Damian looked at him with hooded eyes.

“What next?” Damian asked.
Batman sighed. “Prison. Or Arkham. Whichever one you need more.”

“Rehabilitation?”

“Everyone deserves a shot.”

“And there are no exceptions to be made for the son of Bruce Wayne?”

“No,” Batman said. “And this is coming from the son of Thomas and Martha Wayne. My name isn’t the only one that’s been disgraced by your actions.”

“And if I rehabilitate myself?” Damian asked, apparently deaf to what Batman had just said. “If I deign to acquiesce to your much cherished law and order, will I have a place by your side? Among the misfits you’ve gathered to yourself?”

“Yes,” Batman said. He had among his ranks a reformed assassin and the daughter of a supervillain. For ten years he had waged war with the most accomplished thief the world had ever seen, and then he wound up marrying her. If Damian was genuinely penitent, then he had no right to turn him away.

“Are you so eager for fresh soldiers?” Damian asked.

Batman frowned.

“No matter what Earth you’re from,” Batman said, “you’re my son. That’s my blood on that face of yours. It’s not the way I wanted it to happen, but it happened. I’m responsible for you.”

“I’m not sure Grayson would be thrilled to hear you say that.”

“I’m responsible for him, too.”

Damian cocked his head. “And if I do well? If I rise through your ranks? As your son, will I inherit the cowl? Will I be Batman?”

Batman wasn’t prepared for that. He instantly felt his stomach curdle.

He wanted to tell Damian that that wasn’t how it worked. He didn’t want anyone else to be Batman, because if he passed off the cowl, then that would mean he had failed. That the war and the mission weren’t over yet.

Then he wanted to say that anything was possible, and the future was unwritten. If he wanted to be Batman, then it was up to Damian to show Bruce, through his actions, that he was the only choice he could make.

But those were just distractions. Just flies buzzing around the corpse of what Bruce Wayne was really thinking.

No.

**Hell no, you will never, ever be Batman.**

And Damian seemed to sense this.

And he started laughing.

“You… you can’t even say it, can you?” Damian said, smiling a bloody, broken, hollow smile.
“You can’t find it in you to deny me even now, after all of the things I’ve done. I… I don’t think you care whether or not you’re the good guy, just as long as you’re not the bad guy.”

Damian started to laugh again, but stopped. His was a look of utter astonishment.

“No,” Damian said. “No, that’s not it at all. I am a culmination of multiple Damian Waynes, and I have trained at the feet of multiple Bruce Waynes, but you… you are unlike any I have ever encountered.”

Damian’s eyes scanned him. The more he did, the wider his bloody smile got.

“You’re trying to be the best person you can possibly be aren’t you? Even in a situation as unwinnable as this one, you value your soul.”

Damian’s smile reached its apex.

“You… are a good man, Bruce Wayne.”

But that smile slowly faded. The look of mania in Damian’s eyes intensified.

“And good men… are so easy to hurt.”

Damian spread his arms wide.

Batman knew what was coming.

He cried out. “NO!” He broke into a run to catch him.

He was too late.

Damian Wayne had closed his eyes and fallen back, off the edge of the roof.

Batman made it to the roof’s edge just in time to see the pool of blood around the destroyed corpse of Damian Wayne spread into the snow that covered the abandoned parking lot.

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**SLAUGHTER SWAMP**

Four miles outside of Gotham City, on the southeastern edge of the unincorporated township of Somerset just west of the old Kane Manor, lie Slaughter Swamp.

People didn’t like Slaughter Swamp.

When the state successfully lobbied to have Slaughter Swamp turned into a National Park to stop LexCorp oil drilling, people still didn’t like Slaughter Swamp.

The park offered tours. The people on the tour groups and field trips definitely didn’t like Slaughter Swamp.

And one particular tour group liked the place even less than the average when they happened upon the one person in all the civilized world who did like Slaughter Swamp.

Solomon Grundy.

The undead former Cyrus Gold unfortunately decided to resurrect himself in front of said tour group, and started smashing unlucky tourists into bloody chum and ripping their limbs off.
Needless to say, the park stopped offering tours after that. Since that day Slaughter Swamp has stood as an ugly, green, smelly middle finger to LexCorp, which has spent untold legal fees arguing in court that these wetlands held no endangered species about which to be concerned, and thus, should be open to drilling.

And on one small island in that swamp, about fifteen feet across and covered in snow on this moonlit night, a shimmering silver portal, like boiling mercury appeared.

And out stepped Batwoman, with the arm of a bloody and deathly pale Wonder Woman over her shoulder.

“Steady,” Batwoman said as they lowered to their knees. “Steady.”

Once they were down, Batwoman detached her cape and wrapped it around Wonder Woman’s body.

“Here,” Batwoman said. “It’ll keep you warm.”

Wonder Woman didn’t say anything. If she did, Batwoman couldn’t hear it. She had lost a lot of blood from that swipe from the Soldier of Nemesis, and Batwoman could tell that she was using most of her strength just to stay on her feet as long as she had.

Batwoman lowered Wonder Woman to the ground, bringing the cape snugly around her shoulders.

And with that, Batwoman stood up, and walked to the water.

“ALEC!” Batwoman cried out. “ALEC, I KNOW YOU’RE OUT HERE! I NEED YOUR HELP!”

It didn’t happen instantly, but eventually the water began to bubble, and a mound of dirt and moss came up from the swamp. Higher and higher it rose, looking vaguely humanoid.

When Demeter had told her that the Stone of Nemesis could only be destroyed by a powerful divine force, she hadn’t been specific. Batwoman had assumed another, more powerful God could do it.

But Batwoman hadn’t considered the power of The Green. She hadn’t considered the mystical elemental force that bound all plant life on the planet together.

And she hadn’t considered its avatar.

If there was anyone that Batwoman knew that could destroy the Stone of Nemesis… it was Swamp Thing.

Demeter had mentioned him, asking if he was single. In hindsight, it sounded like an out-of-the-way hint.

Also in hindsight, if it was a hint, it was the most dickish way to relay the information.

The immense and mossy form of Swamp Thing walked onto the island, and fixed Batwoman with his forbidding red eyes.

“Batwoman…” Swamp Thing said. “Kate Kane… Do you need assistance?”

“Yes,” Batwoman said. She got the glowing Stone of Nemesis out of her utility belt. She had relieved it from the pouch on Wonder Woman’s waist before they left the Barnes & Noble on Founders Island.
Batwoman told him everything. About the Soldiers of Nemesis, and how they could only be stopped if he destroyed the Stone.

“So,” Batwoman said, “I really need you to do this.”

Swamp Thing regarded the glowing stone in her hand, before looking into her again with his glowing red eyes.

“I… will not help you.”

Batwoman just blinked.

For the past few days, she had been watching herself like a hawk, trying and succeeding in her attempts not to swear around Wonder Woman.

Well… that passed.

Batwoman yanked off her mask and wig, chucked them in the snow at her feet, and yelled out “YOU HAVE GOT TO BE FUCKING KIDDING ME!”

FOUNDERS ISLAND

What could only be called “The Colossus of Nemesis” stepped through the remainder of the cloud that the destruction of the Queen Consolidated building had wrought, and was met with immediate resistance.

Anyone who could fly was in its face. Supergirl, Superboy, and Power Girl (who had shaken off her trip through the highrise window but was still flying a little funny) were laying into it with Heat Vision. Starfire was pelting it with her starbolts. Blue Beetle was firing energy blasts from the Scarab on his back. Shazam was bringing the lightning. Sentinel was laying in green energy. Jessica Cruz was wailing away at its head with an energy construct baseball bat. And the two Steels (John Henry Irons and his niece Natasha Irons) were floating around its shoulders, laying into them with hammers.

Speaking of lightning, electricity seemed to be somewhat effective, so people with electric powers were on the ground, firing volts into the Colossus’ legs. Black Lightning, and Thunderbolt, and Crazy Jane under her “Suzie Fugue” alter.

But even Orphan could see the problem on the ground. For every chunk they took out of the Colossus of Nemesis, streams of building materials from the streets and the surrounding buildings liberated themselves from their tangible bonds and seeped into the wounds. The other Soldiers were small enough that they could just rebuild themselves, but this Colossus was big enough that it could heal itself as it went along.

If they kept fighting this thing, they’d level the entire island without actually meaning to.

The biggest danger on the ground to the Colossus at the present moment was Mera. She was using her Hydromancy on Nineteenth Street to pluck the snow out of the air. A sphere of water was soon in front of her, and that water had begun to boil.

But the Colossus seemed to sense this. It ignored everyone in the air and on the ground, and just focused on her.

It brought up its immense right foot, and brought it down in a thundering crash, shattering every
window in every building for two whole blocks.

The foot missed Mera.

But the street upon which she stood crumbled and gave way beneath her, and Mera of Xebel, Queen of Atlantis, fell into the sewers beneath Gotham City in a cloud of steam, the water she had summoned from the snow in the air falling in a large splash with her.

Orphan heard Nightwing talking. Maybe to someone on the radio. Maybe to himself.

“We need an idea,” Nightwing said. “We need one now.”

And then, is if an answer to his request in the most terrifying way possible, a familiar noise sounded a few blocks behind them.

THOOM...

...THOOM...

...THOOM...

Everyone on the street upon which Orphan stood froze and went pale.

“Oh, Jesus,” Arsenal said. “There’s another one?”

A voice came over the radio.

It was Black Canary.

“No,” Black Canary said. “It’s not another one. It’s... *It's someone doing something very stupid right now!*”

Three more immense footsteps sounded, and the new player revealed itself from behind the GothCorp building.

It wasn’t another Colossus of Nemesis.

It was The Atom.

Professor Ryan Choi had reversed the generation feed on his Bio-Belt, and instead of shrinking, he had grown to a height of seventy feet.

Impulse, who was standing on the sidewalk a few feet away from Orphan, looked at The Atom.

Then he looked at the Colossus of Nemesis.

Then he stared off into the middle distance, the eyes behind his yellow goggles glistening with tears of joy. His lips curled into a dazed smile as the snow fell upon his freckled cheeks.

Impulse raised his hand in triumph and cried to the heavens in great elation:

“*KAIJU FIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIGHT!*”

As the seventy-foot Atom trod the street, Orphan heard Nightwing get on the radio.

“Fall back as far as you can!” he said. “That includes everyone in the air! Give the man some
Orphan just stared up helplessly as The Atom’s immense boot came down in the street about six yards from her location. A few feet away from her, Robin and Bluebird were talking.

“You know if The Atom gets punched in the face, then, like, gallons of blood are gonna rain down, right?” Bluebird asked.

Robin sighed. “I know, Bluebird…. I know.”

The Atom’s gait lengthened, and the falling footsteps sounded like an earthquake as he started running toward the Colossus of Nemesis. It’s featureless stone face finally caught sight of him as The Atom tackled it into the side of the Gotham Stock Exchange.

Glass from the building’s windows rained down into the street as the Colossus was driven deeper and deeper into the now ruined complex.

But the Colossus of Nemesis shrugged him off. Once it was in a standing position, it decked The Atom in the side of the face with its left spike, and gallons of Ryan Choi’s blood from his busted nose did indeed fall onto the street below.

The Atom fell on his ass, destroying a three story parking garage in the process. He tried to get on his feet, but the Colossus of Nemesis already had its right spike up.

Orphan’s stomach fell to her feet as she realized with a bone-deep certainty that she was about to watch a seventy-foot tall man die.

But this logy and ghastly reverie was cut short when she noticed something.

Someone had stood on the rooftop’s edge of the now ruined Gotham Stock Exchange, ninety stories up, and jumped.

And in the relative quiet that had settled in among the superheroes assembled, waiting for the gruesome spectacle of The Atom’s impending death, Orphan and everyone else could hear what the person who jumped was screaming on the way down.

“DARRRRRRRRRRRK VENGEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEANCE!”

Oracle yanked off her mask.

“Oh, dear God,” Barbara Gordon said. “MISFIT, NO!”

It was Charlotte “Misfit” Gage-Radcliffe who had leapt from the edge of the ninety story roof.

And much like she had when she leapt from the Aerie One before Billy Batson and the now sadly departed Mary Bromfield, Misfit teleported in a puff of pink smoke from a height that would have killed her to the closest surface she could find.

That surface being the top of the head of the Colossus of Nemesis.

Misfit took a moment to get her bearings before, in another puff of pink smoke, she teleported… somewhere else.

And she took the Colossus of Nemesis with her.

All that was left was a column of pink smoke in the shape of a giant rock monster that, until a
moment ago, had just been occupying that space.

Four… long… seconds… passed.

They passed in silence and they passed in shock as everyone assembled tried to reckon with what had just happened.

At the end of those four interminable seconds, Misfit teleported back. Just a few feet away from where Orphan was standing.

And she was in bad shape.

Misfit’s costume was covered in a layer of frost. She was coughing like mad. And there was blood coming from her eye-sockets.

Orphan had been briefed on Misfit’s abilities before the sparring session the two had had some months back. The one that had ended with one punch when Misfit tried to teleport behind her.

Misfit could heal if she teleported. Or rather, she could heal most of her injuries if she teleported. Each teleportation improved her health further and further.

Which begged a question: If Misfit was in this rough a condition after a teleport, then where the hell did she just get back from?

Barbara was the first to make it to the prone and coughing Misfit. She knelt down, and put her hand on the back of her frosty cape.

“Jesus,” Barbara said. “What happened? Where did you take that thing?”

And Misfit, still coughing pointed up.

“On top of the building?”

Misfit shook her head, and pointed again.

The enormous column of pink, ozone-smelling smoke parted, and everyone could see what Misfit was really pointing at.

Orphan thought it was impossible. It just had to be. She hoped no one would say what she was thinking, because that would make it real.

But it was Crush who said what Orphan was thinking. With awe in her one remaining eye, Crush pointed to where Misfit was pointing.

“She didn’t send it to the top of a building,” Crush said. “She sent it to the fucking moon!”

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**THE FUCKING MOON**

On the bright side of the lunar surface, upon its silver sands, the Colossus of Nemesis stood.

It turned its face to the white horizon, regarding the distant blue jewel of Earth with an eyeless, featureless visage.

One of the quirks of Misfit’s teleportation powers was that she herself was the only living organic material that could survive her teleportation. Any other living creature that teleported with her
exploded.

She found this out when she tried to teleport with her dog, the poor dear.

In one instant, The Colossus of Nemesis was about to dispatch The Atom, and in the next, it was here in this barren range.

Misfit had stayed behind for four seconds, risking death by a number of factors, including lack of oxygen, decompression, and solar radiation.

She stayed in hopes of seeing the Colossus of Nemesis explode.

But it did not. Because the Colossus of Nemesis was not, strictly speaking, alive.

Misfit teleported back to Earth at the end of those four seconds, leaving the Colossus of Nemesis alone in these desolate wastes.

Unless it destroyed itself.

The Colossus of Nemesis dug its gargantuan spikes deep into the sands of the lunar surface. And, soundlessly, it dashed its head against the ground.

A large chuck of its head flew off in the kick-up of white dust, floating aimlessly away into the dark reaches of space.

It was the second attempt that put it down. Its entire head violently parted from its body, and slowly lifted off. The deceased stone carcass of the Colossus of Nemesis lifted up by the feet, its spikes eventually dislodging themselves from the sands of the moon, and floated away into orbit.

The chief drawback of the Stone of Nemesis was that it required proximity to be effective. The one who wielded it couldn’t just send Soldiers to a far-flung corner of the globe, no. The one who wielded the Stone had to follow their Army.

The Colossus of Nemesis was dead, but it could still reform itself into new Soldiers close to the Stone.

And the Stone was still in Gotham City…

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**FOUNDERS ISLAND**

Orphan saw Crush smiling at the still prone Misfit.

“Yo,” Crush said. “You single, honey?”

Misfit looked up at her. She had stopped coughing, but she was still freezing.

“I’m-m-m-m-m-m… as-s-s-s-s-sexual… Sorry.”

Crush sighed, picked a lock of black hair out of her empty eye-socket, and said “Man, it sucks to be me today.”

Nightwing folded his arms. “Crush, you, uh… you need medical attention for that? Halo’s flying around, I’m sure they can…”

“I’m Czarnian,” Crush said. “My eye’ll grow back. Unbunch that g-string of yours.”
“Right,” Nightwing said. “Sorry.”

As the pink cloud of teleportation smoke continued to dissipate further, Orphan saw The Atom (who had shrunk back down to normal size) walk toward them. He was holding his hand beneath his busted nose, catching whatever blood was still dripping.

“Did we win?” The Atom asked Nightwing. He sounded like he had a cold.

Whatever Nightwing had to say was cut off by the sound of a deeply angry woman’s voice coming from beyond the thinning pink smoke.

“Hey! HEY!”

It was Black Canary. And once she set her blue eyes on The Atom, she marched right toward him.

“Ryan, what the hell were you thinking?” Black Canary asked. “There were a million ways that could have gone wrong!”

The Atom, sighed, took his hand away from his nose, and said:

“You’re right.”

Black Canary went right on through. “I mean you can’t just-- What?”

“I didn’t anticipate the ways I’d be vulnerable at that size,” The Atom said. “I neglected to think of the danger I could have put everyone else in. And I didn’t think about what seeing me get hurt at that size could have done to you. I reacted to the situation emotionally instead of rationally. All I can do is apologize, and try my level best never to do something like that again. I’m sorry, Dinah. I really am.”

Black Canary looked at The Atom in a shock so deep that it almost bordered on being offended.

She had taken issue with something her significant other had done, and that significant other had apologized in a forthright and adult manner.

And Orphan could tell by the way she stood there, the way she was apparently debating with herself to either rage further or flee in embarrassment, that Black Canary was almost uncomfortably alien to the concept.

Look of shock still firmly in place, Black Canary reached out with her gloved hand and lightly tapped the red breastplate of The Atom’s costume. Almost to see if he was actually real.

Orphan heard a flutter of fabric behind her, and turned.

Superboy descended from the thinning cloud of pink smoke, and touched down a few feet in front of her.

“Uhhh… Hi,” Conner said.

It took a second for Orphan to say “Hi” back. Seeing Conner just come down to Earth like that, through the smoke, the snow dotting his black hair, his broad chest stretching out his black t-shirt so that the red crest of the House of El was as wide as possible, his muscular arms not even reacting to the December cold with goosebumps, made Orphan feel… funny. Like, in the stomach region.

She took off her mask to get a better look at him.
And Conner reacted with shock.

It was at this point that Cassandra remembered that she had fought her father at a hotel, whereupon her father had beaten her senseless (with the aid of surgical implants, but still). And while so much had happened in the interim that it had felt like a thousand years since that fight, it still didn’t change the fact that it had only been two days.

So maybe Cassandra showing her bruised, purple, lumpy face to the cute boy she liked may not have been the brightest idea she’d ever had.

But that look of shock in Conner’s eyes slowly eroded to one of concern. He opened and closed his fists to get his fingers limber…

…and then Conner started using sign language.

“Are… You… Okay?” Conner asked, slowly moving his fingers, trying to match up the words in his head with the signs.

Cassandra looked from Conner’s eyes, to his hands, and then back again.

His face turned red. “I’ve, uh… I’ve been learning ASL so, uh…”

He didn’t have to. Her hearing wasn’t a problem.

At the same time it was…so… adorable, though? He was trying so hard!

It finally sank in that he was putting in all this effort because Conner, the boy she liked, liked her back. A lot.

Cassandra walked up to him, and placed her gloved hand on his left cheek.

She knew there was a protocol to this kind of thing. Certain events had to happen at specific times, so that boys did not get, what Babs called, “the wrong idea.”

The thing was, however, that Cassandra didn’t even know what the right idea was, let alone the wrong one.

But she knew that things would have to be taken slowly so things didn’t happen all at once. If things happened all at once, there would be less to look forward to, according to…

According to…

Says who?

Cassandra laced her fingers around the back of Conner’s neck, got up on her tiptoes, and put her lips to his.

And this was kissing.

It was nice.

Real nice.

No wonder Dick and Babs did this so Goddamned much.

Her lips played over Conner’s, full and plump and pink as they were, and she felt the beginnings of
stubble on his upper lip. It made him more real somehow, she couldn’t explain it. As though he were less a theory that had fascinated her for so long, and more an actual person that showed all signs of living up to the hype. The breath from his nose, from his open mouth, warmed her on a cold December night.

Their teeth clicked together a little. She thought she felt Conner’s tongue, but she realized that the only way she could have felt it was if she was using her own to look for it, so no one could be judged too harshly.

It wasn’t perfect, though.

Was there supposed to be this much drool in her mouth?

And one of his arms--the arms that had entranced her since the very first time she saw him in a t-shirt--was wrapped around her waist (in so doing, being the sixth person to ever embrace her, and now Cassandra Cain could count the people who had hugged her on two hands). This in itself wasn’t a bad thing, no, this was a great thing. But the problem was that she was wearing her bulky Orphan armor, so she couldn’t enjoy it as much as she wanted to. In an ideal world she’d be wearing a t-shirt, or... or...

Nothing?

Was nothing a viable option?

Cassandra decided to save that particular thought for later.

Preferably for when she was in the shower.

The kiss broke. They opened their eyes at the same time. They simultaneously let out the breath they’d been conserving into the cold air in jets of steam.

And they both smiled at the same time too.

She could tell by his body language that he wanted to go again. Immediately. Right now.

Or maybe she was projecting.

But what stopped her was what she caught out of the corner of her eye.

They were all looking at her.

All of them except Wonder Girl. She was looking down as though her shoes were a really good book.

Nightwing was in shock. Barbara had a look of unalloyed horror. There was an enormous grin plastered on Impulse’s face.

But it was Bluebird who started laughing.

And then she started clapping.

She stopped doing both when she caught Robin’s eye, and then they both looked away from each other in silence.

They were being weird again.
All revelry has to come to a conclusion, of course. The party has to stop. The good times have to end.

And Cassandra Cain’s post-first-kiss glow was ground to a halt when Misfit started screaming.

She snapped her head to Misfit, still on the ground, as she pointed down the street.

Grains of glass and concrete and steel had started flowing away from the buildings, and into centralized points in the middle of the street.

Cassnadra knew in her bones that Misfit’s teleportation trick with the Colossus of Nemesis had failed.

They were making more of themselves.

This thought spread among them like wildfire. And Nightwing, the only well-adjusted person among their number, the voice for optimism and sanity in a dark and crazy world…finally broke. With a raspy, worn-out voice, he said:

“We’re not going to win this.”

Staring at the Soldiers of Nemesis forming in the street, he reached out, and took Barbara Gordon’s hand.

Taking his cue, Cassandra took Conner’s.

The Atom took Black Canary’s.

Robin took Bluebird’s.

Troia took Arsenal’s.

Which, Cassandra saw, shocked Arsenal to no apparent end.

Donna “Troia” Troy looked at Roy “Arsenal” Harper with tears in her eyes.

“I love you,” Troia said. “I always have. I have from the first moment I saw you.”

Arsenal took off his red protective glasses. With his eyes sincere, with passion in his voice, he asked:

“Huh?”

---

SLAUGHTER SWAMP

“What do you mean you’re not gonna help?” Kate asked.

“Your problems… do not affect The Green,” Swamp Thing said.

Kate ran her gloved hands through her sweaty, snowy red hair. “This is bullshit. You know that, right? This is BULLSHIT!”

“The problems... that humans get themselves into... are of no concern to me,” Swamp Thing said. “The Parliament of Trees… will not act.”
Swamp Thing craned his head to look beyond Kate’s shoulder.

“And your interests... are far more narrow... than the whole of humanity.”

Kate looked to see what Swamp Thing was looking at.

It was Wonder Woman, on the ground and wrapped in Batwoman’s cape. She was too weak to even shiver.

And the damnable thing was... Swamp Thing was right.

*Not her.*

*Not today.*

Kate turned back to Swamp Thing, who was beginning his slow walk back into the vile waters of Slaughter Swamp.

She searched her brain to find something that could convince Swamp Thing to help. Anything at all would do.

And she thought she might have found something.

“*Hey,*” Kate called, actually getting up to her ankles in swamp water. “We’re not done here yet!”

Swamp Thing slowly turned to her.

“Uncontacted tribes,” Kate said, as though that alone should be the reason.

“What... about them?” Swamp Thing asked.

“If you’re tight with plants,” Kate said, “you know how many of them there are.”

She pointed behind her, in the vague direction of Gotham City.

“Those things do nothing but destroy all human life,” Kate said. “So when they take out everyone in the cities and the towns, where do you think they’re gonna go? And when they find those uncontacted tribes in jungles, in forests, in swamps, what the hell do you think they’re going to make more of themselves out of?”

Swamp Thing slowly pondered this, but his eyes went wide when he finally got it.

“The trees,” he said.

“The Green,” said Kate.

Swamp Thing fixed his eyes on her, before he slowly extended his large, mossy hand.

“Give me... the Stone.”

---

**FOUNDERS ISLAND**

Orphan cracked her knuckles.

So did Crush.
Strix and Empress readied their swords.

Wonder Girl uncoiled her lasso.

Robin gave his bo staff a few practice swipes.

Same with Babs and her tonfa.

And Conner’s eyes glowed red.

Nightwing, escrima sticks at the ready, started talking.

“If we die here tonight,” he said to them and everyone who could hear him on the radio, “if they’re gonna eat us alive, then we choke these things to death on the way down!”

The Soldiers of Nemesis were fully formed.

And they began to move.

That was all the prompting Nightwing needed.

“CHAAAAAAATTTTTTTTARGE!”

SLAUGHTER SWAMP

Kate dropped the glowing Stone of Nemesis into Swamp Thing’s leafy palm.

And then she stepped back, hoping to all she believed in that this would work.

Small, spaghetti-like vines with sharp, pointy ends extended from the tips of Swamp Thing’s fingers, before they curled up and pack to the center of his palm, and touched the Stone of Nemesis.

The vines began turning.

They began *drilling*.

Nothing happened for a few seconds that Kate considered an eternity, but then…

The Stone started glowing brighter.

And Kate felt warm. As if to convince herself that this was just in her head, she looked down.

The snow that had collected on the chest of her Batsuit had begun to melt.

She took another step back.

Because *something* was happening. And whatever it was, it was going to be big.

Kate looked up at Swamp Thing just in time to hear a large *CRACK!*

A green shockwave erupted from the ruptured Stone of Nemesis, knocking Kate Kane flat on her back.

FOUNDERS ISLAND
They all felt it.

They didn’t know what it was, but they all did.

It was as though a light gust of wind ran diagonally through the buildings and broke against their bodies. In so doing they felt slightly warmed, in a way that felt calming, yet unnatural.

The superheroes of Founders Island stopped their charge. Those who flew just hovered in the air.

And the Soldiers of Nemesis ground to an immediate halt.

Simultaneously, as if they were one, they knelt in the snow.

As though they were showing respect.

And after a few moments, also simultaneously, they began to dissolve into sand, collecting in brown piles among the snow that had fallen and the blood that had been shed.

Cassandra Cain looked around her.

Robin and Bluebird had skidded to a halt on her right. Crush and Strix beyond them.

To her left, there was Nightwing. There was Babs. There was Arsenal and Empress.

Troia, Defacer, Superboy and Wonder Girl were above her. Just across from Apollo and Supergirl. Power Girl and the younger Steel beyond that.

And then, Cassandra looked across from her. To the sea of faces, some familiar and some not.


All possessed of the same urge that Cassandra herself had. All having answered the same call.

To die in service of others. So that the weakest among their number, so those who could not protect themselves, could live just one second longer.

Cassandra answered this call because of guilt. She had taken a life, and dying a hero was the only way the universe could right itself. She had felt unique among this cadre of do-gooders, as they sought revenge. Or they sought justice. Or they were just good people.

But looking among this sea of people whose life she shared, she knew there were so many of them that there had to be more like her. Those who atoned for past misdeeds. Those who wanted to right what they themselves had put wrong.

Above this, however, beyond this, was a certainty that was new and altogether fresh to her. That those who were powerless, that those who were voiceless, that those who lived to see another day because of the actions of the people assembled on these streets did not give a single damn about any of their motivations.

The deed was all that mattered. Saving lives was all that mattered.

She thought that if she believed in the things these good people on this street believed, if she did the things these good people did, then she herself might become a good person purely by accident.
Cassandra Cain felt quite a few emotions, looking at this broad and various collection of superheroes on Founders Island. Feelings rose, and were counted.

But of all the things she felt, the one most conspicuous by its absence was loneliness.

On a winter night in Gotham City, so close to Christmas, Founders Island fell eerily silent.

There was no hue and cry of great victory. There was no collective sigh of relief.

Only silence and stillness in the wake of death.

SLAUGHTER SWAMP

Kate cleared her head, and sat up on the small dirty island before she looked into the swamp.

A system of branches coming up from the water, in the vague outline of a humanoid form, was all that remained of Swamp Thing.

And the Stone of Nemesis was nowhere to be found.

Kate got up and stepped to the water’s edge, peering into the moonlit darkness at the branches.

A couple of them bore blossoms that were quickly, impossibly, turning into flowers.

The branches began to sap. Clumps of moss and leaves were slowly oozing to the surface of the fetid water, and began attaching themselves to the wooden framework.

It took a while, but Swamp Thing finally reformed himself.

“That… was unpleasant,” he said.

“Sorry,” said Kate. “But thank you.”

“You… are welcome,” Swamp Thing said. “Though your motives… were selfish… your actions mark you… as a friend of The Green.”

Swamp Thing scanned his surroundings, before fixing his red eyes on Kate. “I look forward… to seeing you again.”

Kate turned and walked to the center of the island as Swamp Thing slowly trudged into the water.

*Selfish motives my flat, white ass.*

Kate sat cross-legged, her knees popping and her muscles screaming, in front of Wonder Woman, still wrapped in Batwoman’s cape. Kate could hear her breathing which was, in and of itself, an encouraging sign.

When Wonder Woman finally spoke, it was in a weak rasp.

“I feel it,” she said. “The divinity that infected me… is gone. I...I’ll be alright.”

“Good,” Kate said. “You sure, though?”

“I have been closer to death than this,” Wonder Woman said.
Kate shrugged her shoulders. *Yeah, that figures.*

They sat without speaking for a spell, on a night so cold that even the crickets in the swamp dared not chirp, until Wonder Woman finally spoke again.

“You…” Wonder Woman said, “have a very dirty mouth.”

Kate laughed at this. Partly out of relief, partly because it was true, partly because it was genuinely funny.

“It is a common phenomenon among the younger Gotham vigilantes,” Wonder Woman said. “You swear enough oaths to turn the air blue.”

Kate smiled. “I’ll try to cut back.”

“I didn’t say you had to stop.”

A wider smile. And yet more silence.

“You gonna be in dutch with the Gods of Olympus?” Kate asked. “Y’know, killing Harmonia and all?”

“I would be,” Wonder Woman said. “But… aren’t we forgetting something?”

“What?” Kate asked.

She turned her head to look behind her. Wonder Woman’s head was poking out of the top of her cape-blanket.

“The Blade of Resurrection,” Wonder Woman said.

“Right,” Kate said. “We still have that, don’t we?”

“If you kill someone,” Wonder Woman said, “only to bring them back, does it actually count?”

“I’m sure Batman and Superman would say yes.”

Wonder Woman’s eyes got a mischievous twinkle that Kate had never seen before.

“I won’t tell them if you won’t,” Wonder Woman said.

Kate smiled. Wonder Woman’s pale hand reached out, and found Kate’s.

And Kate squeezed that hand as hard as she dared.

They sat that way for a while, an Amazon Princess and a Jewish Army brat in a dank and quiet swamp, watching the moon make the snow vivid and silver in the night. A peaceful silence settled on an uncertain future for these two.

And that was the best part.

Anyway, that’s how Diana met Kate.
Chapter 25: Aftermath

In what was known after that night as “The Battle of Founders Island,” three-hundred-seventy-seven of Gotham City’s residents lost their lives.

In addition, forty-eight members of the superhero community died, the most prominent among them in the public consciousness being Aquaman, Beast Boy, and Miss Martian.

And, in a number that every last tone-deaf financial analyst would parrot on Fox Business and CNBC, the destruction of property approached six billion dollars.

Because that was the real sad thing about The Battle of Founders Island, wasn’t it?

For the assorted superheroes of the world, the next few weeks were a whirlwind of funerals. None save for native Atlanteans like Aqualad, Tempest, Dolphin, and the widow Queen Mera (who survived her impromptu voyage into Gotham City’s sewers) attended the state funeral in Atlantis, but there was a large wake on the Justice League Watchtower.

This occasion marked the first time that a majority of Batman’s network had ever been to outer space.

A minor faux-pas occurred when Cassandra “Orphan” Cain stepped off the Watchtower’s teleportation pad, and immediately proceeded to start vomiting inside her mask.

The funerals passed with little incident, save for two that were notable.

At the funeral of Courtney “Stargirl” Whitmore, Ted “Wildcat” Grant, former heavyweight boxing champion, trainer of superhero luminaries like Catwoman and Black Canary, and noted tough guy, burst into tears while delivering remarks for his fallen Justice Society compatriot. He said Courtney was only seventeen, and God decided to take her away from all of them. But he was an old man, and his life just went on… and on… and on…

The other concerned the funeral of Mouse.

No, not that Mouse. The other Mouse.

It was understood among the members of the Coral City teen superteam The Movement that one of their members, Jayden “Mouse” Revell had died in The Battle of Founders Island. Drew “Vengeance Moth” Fisher, Kulap “Katharsis” Vilaysack, Holli Rae “Virtue” Hunter, Christopher “Burden” Van Dijk, and Roshanna “Tremor” Chatterjee travelled back to their Coral City headquarters, only to find Mouse sitting on the couch in the main room, petting his favorite rat, which he had named “John Cena.”

Mouse saw the stunned looks on his teammate’s faces, and asked “Jeez, guys, who died?”

At which point Katharsis screamed, and called him an ass-crack.

Earlier that evening, once the tide of the Battle of Founders Island had turned, Mouse did the one thing he had told The Movement that he would not do under any circumstances before they all stepped through the Midnighter door that took them to Gotham City.
He went down into the sewers, called the entire mouse and rat population of the island to him, and tried to safeguard them all from harm. An act that he was successful in carrying out.

Their dead teammate never actually died, and Virtue got Crush’s number after the battle. All in all, The Movement came out ahead on this one.

The Mouse that died in The Battle of Founders Island was Pamela “Mouse” Swigeld of The Run-Offs. They weren’t a superteam, so much as they were a support group centered in Bludhaven for ex-supervillains. The roster consisted primarily, however, of former supervillain sidekicks. Shawn “Defacer” Tsang was the sidekick to perennial Batman F-Lister Pigeon. Gorilla Grimm (who also tragically died in the Battle of Founders Island) was a refugee from Gorilla City, and a former Acolyte of Gorilla Grodd. Randy “Stallion” Hanrahan used to be a thug for The Penguin.

As for Pamela Swigeld? She was the short-tenured and only sidekick… of Catwoman.

Bruce was the one who told Selina of her ex-sidekick’s death. She reacted with muted shock.

“I haven’t thought about her in years,” Selina said. “We only pulled three jobs together, before I told her the whole sidekick thing wasn’t for me. I upped her cut to fifty percent from thirty, and told her to have a good life.”

It was at this point that Bruce noticed something was off about Selina. Being married to someone, after all, imbues one with the equivalent power of people born on coastlines who know when rain is coming a few days in advance just by looking at the sky.

“She helped save the world,” Bruce told her. “She did have a good life. No one will ever have to wonder why she was put on this Earth. We should all be so lucky.”

Selina didn’t know what to say to that.

Pamela’s funeral was two days later. Selina attended, along with Mouse’s Run-Off compatriots. Even former member Grace “Orca” Bolin came out of hiding to be there.

As the funeral party crested the hill of Pamela’s gravesite, they were met by an unexpected and altogether amazing scene.

The presence, in full costume, of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman.

This trio tried their best to show up at as many funerals of the costumed heroes as possible in the wake of The Battle of Founders Island, and Mouse was no different.

Pamela Swigeld may have nominally been a villain, and she may not have put on her costume for any manner of activity in years.

But she died so others could live.

So she counted.

Selina told Batman out of earshot of the others that she deeply appreciated their presence at Mouse’s funeral. She also appreciated that they didn’t bust Orca, who just wanted to see her old friend one last time. After that, Selina Wayne underwent a minor change. She went from letting Stephanie “Spoiler” Brown convalesce from her violent and gruesome fight with Damian Wayne on her own time in the name of not being a pest, to calling her everyday to see how she was doing.

In other news, the death of Mary “Lady Shazam” Bromfield put her foster brother Billy “Shazam”
Batson in quite a predicament. Because he had to explain his sister’s death to their foster parents. Billy had to reveal himself as the World’s Mightiest Mortal.

His parents told him in no uncertain terms that his continued activities as a superhero were completely unacceptable, and they would rather not have him under their roof at all than suffer the agony of yet another funeral for one of their children.

And Billy, whose heart was pure enough and his motives innocent enough to wield the power of the Wizard Shazam in the first place, told them in equally certain terms that he would continue to be Shazam.

For the time being, Billy was staying at the New York headquarters of the Justice Society of America until something could be figured out. Wildcat, fresh from his breakdown at Stargirl’s funeral (as well as following the death in battle of fellow JSA member Albert “Atom Smasher” Rothstein), was not pleased with this development.

It would be two weeks, however, before the biggest repercussion of the Battle of Founders Island would be felt.

Garth of Shayeris, formerly Aqualad, now operating under the superhero *nom-de-guerre* “Tempest,” lodged a formal complaint in his capacity as a UN Ambassador with the United Nations on behalf of Atlantis against the island city-state of Themyscira.

It was two members of the Olympian Pantheon, Harmonia and Nemesis, who were responsible for the Battle of Founders Island, and thus were responsible for the death of King Orin, also known as Arthur Curry and colloquially known amongst the dwellers of the Earth’s surface as “Aquaman.”

“It is because of the deities of Themyscira,” Garth of Shayeris said in a formal statement, “that the blood of Atlan, which has flowed through Atlantis since the days it sat above the waves in ancient times, shall no longer sit the throne.”

As of this writing, diplomatic negotiations between Garth of Shayeris and fellow UN Ambassador Diana of Themyscira are still ongoing.

But all of this comes in the days and weeks after the Battle of Founders Island. This particular chapter of this particular narrative concerns itself with the immediate aftermath.

Or to be more specific…

**TWO HOURS LATER**

Beneath the Gotham Central construction site, in a small chamber formed by a mad cult, Batwoman and Wonder Woman stood above the body of Harmonia, Olympian Goddess of Harmony and Concord.

And Wonder Woman handed Batwoman the Blade of Resurrection.

They had sat on that dingy island in Slaughter Swamp for half an hour, before Wonder Woman felt well enough to fly them both out of there.

Wonder Woman carried Batwoman (bridal style, of course) to a makeshift Justice League encampment to get news. She conversed with Phantom Lady for some time, before entering a tent. She made her exit half an hour later, having washed off the blood from her body and with a film of
tears in her eyes.

She had just learned of the death of Artemis of Bana-Mighdall.

Batwoman gave her a hug, and told her she was sorry.

From there, they flew to the Gotham Central construction site.

Batwoman took the Blade of Resurrection, and sighed.

“What do I do?” Batwoman asked.

“You pierce yourself with the Blade,” Wonder Woman said, “wipe the blood from the Blade onto the skin of the person you wish to resurrect, and that’s it.”

Batwoman nodded, and removed her mask and wig.

“What are you doing?” Wonder Woman asked.

“I have a zit behind my ear,” Kate said. “It’s ready to pop. I’m gonna use the Blade to pop it.”

Wonder Woman stared at her uncomprehendingly.

“Just use it on your hand,” Wonder Woman said.

Kate shook her head. “I see movies where people need blood to, like, raise the dead or whatever, and they always cut up their hands. I like my hands. I don’t like this zit.”

Wonder Woman tried to say something, but by the time her mouth opened, Kate already had the Blade behind her ear.

She came away with a tiny bead of blood on the tip of the Blade.

Kate knelt down, smeared the microscopic bead of blood on Harmonia’s forehead, and stood up again.

She had put her wig and mask back on before she asked “Ummm… Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Wonder Woman said. “I have never resurrected anyone before.”

Batwoman blinked as nothing stubbornly continued to happen. “Think we need more—”

Harmonia opened her eyes and drew in a large breath.

And Batwoman jumped back, her internal bejesus supplies instantly depleted, what with Harmonia having just scared it all out of her.

Batwoman and Wonder Woman were silent as Harmonia got up into a sitting position, wild-eyed and confused, taking deep breaths.

And Batwoman wished she had something better to ask the Goddess that attempted to kill the Multiverse besides:

“You, uh… You okay?”

Harmonia blinked, before her eyes found Batwoman, terror widening them.
“The whispers,” Harmonia said, her fear making her greasy blond curls quiver. “By Zeus… they’ve gotten louder.”

“Well,” said a voice from the darkness of the underground chamber beyond them, “you should have thought of that before you tried to kill us all.”

Batwoman and Wonder Woman looked in the direction of the voice.

From the darkness stepped a woman with shiny brown skin, as though it was made of the smoothest bark. Her long tresses of hair were green, as was the green wrap-around dress she wore. It almost looked leafy.

“Demeter,” Wonder Woman said, a thin layer of frost on the name.

“Looking good, Diana,” Demeter said as she walked toward them. “I’m here to ferry the troublesome and the wayward back home.”

Demeter looked down at Harmonia. “Come.”

Harmonia didn’t move.

Demeter squinted at her quizzically, and said “Goddesses are not in the habit of repeating themselves.”

“It’s the Blade,” Wonder Woman said.

Demeter looked at her with an upraised, mossy eyebrow.

“The Blade of Resurrection,” Wonder Woman said. “Harmonia’s soul is now bound to Batwoman. Harmonia will only do what she is told, as long as she is told by her.”

Demeter looked at Batwoman, who in turn looked down at Harmonia.

“Is there a way I can give her autonomy back to her?” Batwoman asked. “Because I’m really not comfortable with this.”

“Were that how this works,” Wonder Woman said, “I would bleed myself dry for the second time in one evening bringing everyone who died up there back to life. But that is not how this works. You can, however, transfer your power to someone else.

Batwoman nodded.

“Go with Demeter,” Batwoman said. “Do whatever she wants. The power I have over you is hers now.”

Demeter looked back down at Harmonia, and said “Let’s go. And follow along.”

Harmonia sullenly got to her feet.

“Now then,” Demeter said. “If you’ll pardon us, we’ve a meeting with the God of Thunder to mete out judgement.”

Both Demeter and Harmonia turned to go back into the darkness. But Batwoman couldn’t help herself.
“Hey,” she said.

Both Demeter and Harmonia turned to look at her. “Yes?” Demeter asked.

“You knew Swamp Thing would be able to destroy the Stone of Nemesis, didn’t you?” Batwoman asked. “That’s why you threw in that hint at the end.”

Demeter smiled, and said “Very good.”

“Think you might have just come out and told me?” Batwoman asked. “A few hundred people and about fifty of my friends died because you felt like being an asshole.”

Demeter’s smile faded. She walked up to Batwoman, examining her as though she were an anomalous skin growth that she hadn’t seen before. All level of relatability and humor had shed, and she was very much the Goddess.

“You dare speak to a Goddess of Olympus in such a way?”

Batwoman smirked. The thing about almost single-handedly saving the world was it was a hell of a high to come down from. Two hours just wasn’t going to cut it.

“I’ve watched two separate Goddesses of Olympus die in the past four hours,” Batwoman said. “I live on Founders Island. Say the wrong thing, and I go for the Hat Trick.”

Demeter sneered. “Your Shakespeare once said that as flies are to wanton boys, so are you to the Gods. We kill you for sport.”

“Yeah?” Batwoman asked. “Well, Smokey the Bear once said that only I could prevent forest fires. And right now, I got anger in my heart and a book of matches in my utility belt. Roll the dice, you leafy green bitch.”

Demeter unblinkingly turned her head to look at Wonder Woman, and Wonder Woman unblinkingly stared back. She didn’t even have to move to say that whatever side she was on, it sure as shit wasn’t Demeter’s.

The Olympian Goddess of Grains and the Harvest looked back at Batwoman, took her measure, and then let out an exasperated sigh. Trying to defuse the situation without giving up any ground.

Y’know, like how a punk would do.

“If you wish to be the consort of the Princess of the Amazons,” Demeter said, “then you must be tested for your worthiness. Congratulations. You passed.”

“You put the Multiverse at risk just to test me?” Batwoman asked.

“Of course I did,” Demeter said. “You are a mortal, and I am a Goddess. What other entertainment value could I possibly derive from you?”

Batwoman tried to set Demeter on fire with her eyes.

“Don’t be so cross,” Demeter said. “This should be a happy occasion. You got what you wanted.”

Demeter looked over at the equally disapproving Wonder Woman.
“And… so did you, I think. Come along, Harmonia. We’re done here.”

Harmonia followed Demeter back into the dark. Batwoman just felt in the air that they had gone back to Olympus somehow. Both she and Wonder Woman stood there in silence for a spell.

“The Olympian Pantheon has my fealty,” Wonder Woman said, “and my allegiance. But they do not have my trust.”

“Good,” Batwoman said. “Because she’s a wad.”

“A rather large one,” Wonder Woman said.

Batwoman shuffled her feet. “I wasn’t actually going to kill Demeter.”

“I know.”

“She just… I was up set.”

And another bout of silence set in.

Wonder Woman sighed, and said “I contacted my mother while we were at the League encampment. They are laying Artemis to rest on the Bana-Mighdall lands in Egypt. Themyscira is sending a delegation.”

Batwoman nodded.

Wonder Woman put her hands on her hips, and said “I… would be honored if you would join us in attendance.”

Batwoman’s head whipped around to look at her.

“Me?” she asked. “I barely knew her.”

Wonder Woman seemed to select her next words carefully.

“Queen Hippolyta,” Wonder Woman said, “wishes to meet the brave and fearsome warrior who saved the life of her only daughter.”

It took a second before Batwoman figured out what was going on.

“I’m meeting the folks, aren’t I?”

Wonder Woman nodded.

“Two can play that, y’know,” Batwoman said. “You’re gonna have to meet my dad. He’s the one who first put the idea in my head, that uh…”

“That I find you enticing?”

“Yup.”

“He sounds like a wise man.”

“Please don’t tell him that.”

Wonder Woman smiled. “When would you like me to meet your father?”
Batwoman folded her arms. “Well, uh… convenience-wise… he lives on the mainland, so this whole thing didn’t really affect him. He wakes up in about five hours. Breakfast sound good to you?”

“It does,” Wonder Woman said. “I will need to head back to Wayne Manor for a change of clothes, but…”

“It’s a date?”

Wonder Woman got this dreamy, distracted look on her face. “She finally says it.”

The Princess of the Amazons folded her arms and grinned, and more than a few parts of Batwoman’s body felt like they had dissolved into puddles. The way Wonder Woman folded her arms made her biceps bulge, and pushed up her magnificent pair of…

Batwoman immediately gave herself a mental cold shower.

DOWN, GIRL!

Batwoman scratched her chin, attempting to maintain eye-contact and absolutely-nothing-else-contact.

“Five hours is a long time,” Batwoman said. “Anything specific you want to do to occupy yourself until my dad wakes up?”

“Well,” Wonder Woman said, “I’ve yet to recover from the evening’s misadventure, so nothing too strenuous.”

“Of course.”

“Stopping muggings, perhaps. Catching purse-snatchers.” Wonder Woman broke into a wide grin, her eyes gleaming. “Oh, or foiling a bank robbery! Goddess, I haven’t done that one in ages!”

Batwoman smiled.

She also nodded.

TWO MORE HOURS LATER

In the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Founders Island, Impulse and Superboy whisked Robin and Bluebird back to their motorbikes in front of PS 1147 on Bleake Island.

They quietly and timidly shot the shit for a few minutes before Impulse and Superboy gave their farewells, and both respectively ran and flew into the night.

Robin and Bluebird spent a few minutes in the cold, snowy silence, taking in the night and processing what had happened.

“You going back to the manor?” Bluebird asked.

“No,” Robin said. “I know my parents are worried about me.”

“Lucky man.”

“In this line of work?” Robin asked. “Yes, I am.”
Bluebird looked at Robin. She moved a few feet so she was standing in front of him.

She put her hands on his shoulders, and gave him a long, gentle kiss on the lips. Far more tender and far less aggressive than the kiss they shared that morning.

Their lips eventually parted. A few moments after that, they both opened their eyes.

The snow was falling in Bluebird’s hair, and the haze of flurries along with the yellow sodium lights above them in the street gave her a kind of glow that was unearthly. Robin smiled without the ability to help himself. She worked her right hand over his shoulder and started softly scratching the back of his head.

“Thursday,” Bluebird finally said.

“What about it?”


“I’ll be there.”

Bluebird nodded, and started tentatively walking backward, wanting to get back to her motorcycle, but not wanting to take her eyes off of him.

“Are you going back to the manor?” Robin asked.

“That’s where Cullen is,” Bluebird said. “And that’s where the bedbugs aren’t.”

Robin nodded, and said “See you tomorrow.”

Bluebird nodded in return before she got on her bike.

And then she was gone.

Robin got on his bike. He needed to get home.

But that wouldn’t be his first stop.

He turned the engine over, and headed for the mainland.

The East End, to be more specific.

Where Harlow Street turned into Garfield Avenue, there sat a shabby office building that went up five stories.

Robin had looked the building up online. The place was some millionaire’s tax haven, so he paid the rent on the place, even though the office building only had one working office in it.

On the third floor, to be precise. The window to which Robin snuck in through.

Robin was shocked to find a man sleeping at a desk in the dark. Even more shocked to find that the gust of cold and snow from the opened (and quickly closed) window didn’t wake him up.

But the silhouette of a half-empty bottle of booze on the desk next to him solved that riddle.

Robin silently padded to the front of the desk, reached out, and turned the desk light on.

That single forty watt bulb illuminated a spare spartan office with just a desk, a few filing cabinets,
two chairs (one in front of the desk and one behind), and a lone wooden coat stand, upon which rested a brown trench coat and a brown fedora.

The name on the marbled glass of the door said “Bradley Investigations.”

And sleeping behind the desk, every bit the 1940s throwback that Harper Row said he was, was Samuel “Slam” Bardley, Private Investigator. He was in his pinstriped shirtsleeves, with dark blue suspenders. He had apparently taken off his tie.

Slam stirred now that his light had been turned on. He rose, running his hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. His sleepy eyes opened slowly… only to open very quickly when he saw that he wasn’t alone. He gasped and reached for the top drawer of his desk, which Robin assumed contained a gun.

“Easy, Slam,” Robin said. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

Slam squinted his eyes. “You’re… You’re that Robin kid. The one hangs around with Batman.”

“So you’re a detective, huh?” Robin asked. “Never would have guessed.”

“And Robin apparently has a sense of humor,” Slam said. “These aren’t my normal business hours.”

“Sorry about that.”

“So,” Slam said, the absurdity of the situation apparently having settled upon him like the snow on the pavement outside. “What does the sidekick of the World’s Greatest Detective want with a gumshoe like me?”

“You know a girl named Harper Row?” Robin asked.

“Yeah,” said Slam. “She in trouble?”

“No,” Robin said. “She’s doing great…”

*Or will be if I have anything to say about it,* Robin thought.

“…but you’ve apparently been teaching her the tricks of the PI trade.”

“I have,” Slam said. “She gets me free HBO, and I show her the ropes. What about it?”

Robin sighed. He pulled out the chair in front of Slam’s desk, and sat down.

“I want the same deal,” Robin said.

Slam furrowed his brow, and asked “You gonna get me free Showtime?”

Robin squinted. “Being Robin has a short shelf-life. I told a complete asshole that I was gonna retire soon, and I meant it. That means I’m gonna need a day job after I hang this cape and mask up. I’d like to know how you do what you do.”

“Again,” Slam said, “I have to ask: What does the sidekick of the World’s Greatest Detective want with a gumshoe like me? He’s apparently really good at putting two and two together, and me? I work for a living. I don’t know what I could show you.”

“How to get licensed, for one,” Robin said. “And… by the nature of Batman being Batman, there’s a certain way of doing things here on the ground level that he can’t teach. There are shades of gray
that he knows are there, but just can’t see. That’s what I’d like to learn.”

“You want to partner up,” Slam said, not phrasing it like a question.

“Technically, I want to intern,” Robin said. “I’ll work for free, remember? Whenever I’m able to. After I do what I need to do to get licensed, then we’ll see about partnering up.”

Slam blinked, and looked at him some more. “You do realize that just by dropping in here like this, it’s the weirdest night I’ve had in a while.”

“It’s a weird night for me, too,” Robin said. “Not by default, though.”

Slam nodded still affixing him intently. After a while, he finally spoke.

“Eighty-twenty,” Slam said. “Intern or no, I don’t run a slave ship.”

“A Good Samaritan.”

“And I give to widows and orphans to boot. And we start on Monday.”

Robin smiled, and said “Thank you.” He took off his mask, and reached his open hand across the desk.

“Pleased to meet you,” Robin said. “My name is Tim Drake.”

YET ANOTHER TWO HOURS AFTER THAT

Beneath the Gotham Central Precinct, the one on the mainland that was going to be replaced by the new one on Founders Island next year, Commissioner James Gordon stood outside of two interrogation rooms in the basement, used solely for metahuman prisoners.

Though the two in those rooms now weren’t metahuman, they did try to kill a hundred-and-seventy-five thousand people during the fracas on Founders Island. Desperate times, and all that.

He had been down there fifteen minutes when Batman and Orphan showed up.

Batman felt as sickly as his pale face beneath his cowl told the world he was. He looked to his left, and saw Orphan, whose mask and costume were still smeared with dust from the events on Founders Island.

There were a lot of things Batman wanted to tell Orphan after he had heard what she’d done that night… but those would have to wait.

Commissioner Gordon looked from Batman, to Orphan, and then back to Batman.

“The two of you look like shit,” he said.

Skipping over it, Batman asked “Are they in there?”

“Yeah,” Gordon said. “The older one’s in two, and the younger one’s in three.”

“And the cameras are off?”

Gordon sighed. “These two are criminals. You do realize that.”
“I do.”

“You also realize we’re cops. We have a job that needs doing.”

“About that,” Batman said. “In about forty-five minutes you’ll get a call from someone named Waller.”

“Okay,” Gordon said. “And what does this Waller want?”

“She’s high up in government,” Batman said. “Director of A.R.G.U.S.”

“Christ.”

“The man you have in two is guilty for a lot of things, and what he did in Gotham in the past few days will factor in, but bigger predators have marked him for prey.”

Gordon sighed, and asked “And the one in three?”

“All yours,” Batman said. “But we just need some time alone.”

“Alright,” Gordon said. “I won’t come back to ask when you’re done. You’ll just pull your disappearing act, so… have a good night.”

Batman nodded. Gordon turned to walk away, but then he stopped and turned back.

“We didn’t find any explosives for those bombs at those locations,” he said.

“They were either destroyed or confiscated.”

“You did that, huh?”

“My team did,” Batman said. “I was out for most of it.”

Gordon nodded. “You run a good crew.”

“I do,” Batman said.

Gordon turned again, raised his hand over his shoulder to wave goodbye, and left through the door at the end of the hall.

Batman turned to look at Orphan, and fetched a quiet sigh.

“Are you nervous?” Batman asked.

Orphan tilted her head, regarding him with curiosity.

“Are you?” she asked.

Batman reckoned that standing in this hallway were a teenage girl who had tremendous difficulty talking, and a man who, well, just sucked at it.

And both of them were about to hold conversations that were weighty and dangerous.

“Yes,” Batman said. “Very.”

Orphan stepped through the door of interrogation room two, closed the door behind her, and turned
The entire drab white room was bisected by a long wall of plexiglass.

Behind that plexiglass, sitting on a chair next to a bunk sticking out of the wall, was David Cain. The GCPD didn’t bother cleaning him up. His face was a mess of welts and dried blood. His usually white hair had so much dessicated blood in it that it was now a rusty brown.

He widened the swollen slits that housed his eyes, and glared at her.

David spat a single word. “Coward.”

Orphan took off her mask, and she stared back.

“You were supposed to meet me on the field of battle,” David said. “But instead, your friend and his freakish little group showed up to fight me instead. Who acted as your superior? Who made that call?”

Cassandra folded her arms, and said “Actually… it was… my idea.”

David sneered at you. “Then you don’t have a shred of honor at all.”

A man who used his fists to beat a daughter into a machine designed to take lives picked now to talk about honor.

And Cassandra started laughing before she could tell herself not to.

It was a low, raspy, braying sound. Not like how she laughed at the Mortal Kombat fatalities Stephanie showed her. This had the bass line of satisfaction to it.

He was sitting there, beat to shit, sitting in that chair, thinking he still had some kind of power.

Cassandra remembered when she was at Robinson Park with Stephanie one time this past summer. A little girl who couldn’t have been more than ten had tripped on the path while she was following her mother, and the vanilla ice cream that she had been enthusiastically licking loosed itself from its waffle cone, and fell into the dirt. And the little girl looked like she was going to panic for a second, before she bent down, scooped up the errant ice cream in her hand and held it up in triumph, showing the entire world the dirt and blades of mowed grass that dotted its surface, before she put it to her face and started wolfing down.

And her father was exactly like that little girl. A horrible defeat had somehow convinced him that he had won.

Meanwhile, in the past twenty-four hours alone, Cassandra had reckoned with the Multiverse, discovered free will, saved the life of Jason Todd just by talking (which was one of the things she was terrible at), had her first beer, had her second beer, fought a bunch of rock monsters for the fate of the world, and locked lips with Conner Kent.

Cassandra couldn’t have defeated David Cain more soundly than if she’d personally beaten him to death with her bare hands.

While she was laughing, David raised his hand…

...and snapped his fingers.
Cassandra stopped laughing.

For a moment, she didn’t know why he did it.

Then she remembered that that was how he always got her to snap to attention. He had done that on Statue Island a couple of days ago, and sent her back to the ferry crying.

But she had no reaction to it now. She was only surprised that her muscles didn’t tense outside of the moment, after it had happened.

David saw that his trump card was useless. His eyes widened before they narrowed again. He folded his arms and sat back with his head slightly down, causing the flesh beneath his chin to pooch out.

He looked like he was about to throw a tantrum.

This, of course, made Cassandra laugh even harder.

David Cain weathered his daughters gales of laughter for a few moments.

“You’ll never find out who your mother is,” David said.

Cassandra calmed her laughter down, and then she just shrugged.

David furrowed his brow and leaned in, his arms still folded.

“Then how about this,” David said, not phrasing it as a question. “Every nightmare you have, I’ll be the monster under the bed. Everything that goes wrong in that stupid little career of yours, I’ll be the first suspect your mind goes to… And when I get out of here, my face will be the last one you see before you die. Because if I can’t be the one responsible for what you put into this world, then I will damn sure be the one responsible for removing you from it. If I can’t get immortality from raising the One-Who-Is-All, then I will do the same by murdering the Orphan as slowly as I possibly can.”

He leaned in further. “I made you what you are. I’m in your head. Forever and always. You can’t get rid of me… and you never so much as laid a hand on me. In the end, you had to have Robin do it for you. I’ll be one-and-oh over you for the rest of your worthless life!”

Cassandra made her face blank as she walked up to the glass. She reached into her yellow utility belt, and pulled out…

...a piece of paper.

Robin had given her this piece of paper, telling her that he had taken the liberty of printing it out in the computer lab at PS 1147 before he, Bluebird, and the rest of Young Justice made their way to Founders Island.

Cassandra unfolded the piece of paper, and pressed it against the plexiglass so he could see it.

It was a photograph of David Cain.

A bruised, bloody, beaten, unconscious David Cain with his finger up his nose.

The swollen slits of his eyes widened again, this time with indignation. If his face wasn’t purple, Cassandra reckoned he may very well have turned white.

Cassandra wondered why she had ever been scared of this man.
There were three words that she had heard some of the younger members of Batman’s network use with each other, often followed by gales of laughter. She had always wanted to use these words on someone, but the situation had never called for it.

Until now.

Cassandra Cain looked her father right in his puffy blue eyes, and said:

“Go… *fuck* … yourself.”

Batman hadn’t even opened the door to interrogation room three all the way before he was greeted by a loud thump.

Plexiglass or no, Jason Todd just tried to throw a chair at him.

From what Selina had told him, Batman had expected an uncanny valley version of Jason. Some kind of reconstruction that knew the words of Jason Todd, but not the music.

But Batman saw the fire in the blue eyes of the young man behind that plexiglass, and whatever rational explanation he had prepared for himself just seemed to dissolve.

It was Jason Todd, alright.

He’d had a phone conversation with Commissioner Gordon before he and Orphan arrived. Jason had been fingerprinted, but they wouldn’t come up with any matches. He’d replaced the prints and DNA of everyone in his network with those of deceased John and Jane Does. However, the forged identification that David Cain had apparently made him were a little too convincing. Jason was being held under the name of Herbert Claude Jansen.

Jason glared at him some more, before he started beating on the plexiglass. He didn’t stop until his fists were bloody.

He panted as he stared at Batman through the blood-smeared transparency.

“I… fucking… hate you.”

Batman wished there was some kind of skeleton key, some selection of words that never failed, so he could tell Jason how he felt. How much he missed him. How sorry he was.

But Batman was banking on silence. He knew that he hadn’t earned the right to speak. And Jason had earned it all.

Jason’s panting started to even out.

“Didn’t change your MO one little bit, did you?” Jason asked. “I get beaten to death and blown up, and you go on like nothing’s wrong. But the guy who murders me bites it right in front of you, and you FUCKING QUIT!”

Jason kicked the plexiglass, and the sound echoed throughout the small room.

His blue eyes fixed on Batman. The breath coming through his nose started shuddering.

“And you still have Barbara working for you,” Jason said. “That thing you created put her in a wheelchair, and she still follows you around like a dog. The damnedest thing is, you had all the WayneTech resources in the world to get her back on her feet, and you had to wait for the magic girl
with the top hat to fix her spine. So my question is, how withholding with his affection is Jimmy-
Boy that she’s still seeking approval from someone as awful as you?”

There were so many ways that Batman could correct Jason’s assumptions.

He used none of them.

Batman felt he owed Jason so much because of his failure. The least he could offer, after so much
had been broken, was silence.

Hearing all of this hurt. It hurt bad. But Jason needed to speak. And Batman needed to listen.

Jason leaned against the plexiglass on his bloody hands.

“Yes. You created The Joker. You created all of them, just by being you. You’re… You’re like a
drop of motor oil in a glass of water. Just your presence ruins the whole fucking thing. They all
deserve to die. Just like he did. And so do you.”

Jason’s eyes caught his bloody hands on the plexiglass. And his demeanor slowly… curiously…
changed.

Melancholy was upon him now. And regret. Batman knew it because he saw it on his own face all
the time.

“I… I don’t think I get to make that call anymore,” Jason said, his voice thickening. “Harmonia
looked into the void, and she found something angry, and… and Nemesis used that anger to kill
people out of spite. Because it amused her. I gotta carry that with me. I know what it’s like to be you
now, and I gotta tell you… You deserve every last bit of it.”

Jason’s eyes narrowed. A hint of a smile came to his lips.

“Blood oath,” he said.

Jason drew an X in the blood he left on the plexiglass, like how people who couldn’t read signed
contracts in old cartoons.

He fixed his eyes on Batman, and said “I… will never… harm another person as long as I live.”

Jason let that hang in the air for a bit, as though his proclamation became all the more official with
the added silence.

“I won’t even clench my fist in anger,” Jason said. “Time is not gonna heal these wounds. I won’t
get roped into this fucked up little family you have for yourself. And I damn sure won’t go
supervillain to stop you. I won’t give you the satisfaction of punching your greatest failure in the
face, and I won’t give you the relief of hating yourself for doing it. Because I know you, Bruce. I
know you’re only really happy when you make yourself feel like shit. Eventually, you and Selina’s
divorce papers are gonna reflect that.”

He leaned in so his face was pressing against the plexiglass. “I know you stay awake during the day
wondering how harsh the judgement would come from the people you failed to save. But I’m the
only one who died and came back, so I get to speak for all of them. It’s harsh, Bruce. How hard you
tried to stop it, how fast you tried to get there, it doesn’t matter at all. And your costume and your
self-pity doesn’t impress any of us. Your guilt. Is fucking. WORTHLESS!”

That last word echoed before silence fell.
Batman had endured so much stress in his training to be who he was, and even more out in the field.

But only now did his hands shake.

The back of his neck felt like it was on fire, and there was a block of ice where his stomach used to be.

He knew the human brain didn’t feel that way, but he still felt as though one of his relatively few happy memories was going to erase itself to make room for this new, horrible, painful one.

Jason Todd, took his hands away from the bloody plexiglass, and told Batman to get out of his sight.

Batman wordlessly closed the door of the interrogation room behind him after he left.

THREE DAYS LATER

On the rear grounds of Wayne Manor, a lone figure dressed in black walked toward a large marble structure six-hundred yards away from the main house, leaving footprints in the snow behind him.

Once he got there, Bruce Wayne stopped, and beheld the sight before him.

The Wayne Family Mausoleum.

For the wealth that the family possessed, the only giveaway that this was where a rich clan stored their dead was the marble itself. There were no flourishes, no grotesques, no embellishments. Not even a name on the outside to tell anyone whose family it belonged to. On any other property, this structure would have been made of steel, and would have been seen as an abnormally large shed.

Bruce opened the steel gate in front, and entered the place where every member of the Wayne family had been interred since the completed construction of Wayne Manor in 1850.

The right wall was lined with marble plates, behind which held the caskets of members of the Wayne family. The left wall was lined with unmarked plates, which showed the architect’s boundless optimism for how long both the world and the Wayne family would be here.

And in the middle were two long wooden benches that faced away from one another, so that those who entered this place could sit and reflect.

Which is precisely what Bruce Wayne opted to do.

He straightened the length of his long black coat to behind his knees, and sat, letting his breath emerge from his mouth in a fog within the unheated mausoleum.

The last two members of the Wayne family to be interred in this place were Thomas and Martha Wayne, his mother and father. He still vividly remembered the day that he and Alfred oversaw the caskets being loaded into the place fresh from the funeral. The plates closed behind them, never to be opened. He remembered picking at the small thread that had frayed from the second button on his tiny black blazer, as though that mattered in a world where his parents no longer drew breath.

The last person interred here, however, was Jason Todd. It happened almost six years ago. There was no immediate family to claim his body, and Jason was his legal ward. Alfred was there for that one as well.

But the most recent alteration to the Wayne Family Mausoleum? That was in the early hours this
morning. He’d done it himself. And Alfred, for a change, was asleep for that one.

On the second plate from the floor, right above Jason’s was a marble rectangle affixed with the name:

"DAMIAN WAYNE"

Damian’s body wasn’t in the mausoleum. Unlike the fifth dimensional reconstruction of Jason that had yelled at him in the interrogation room beneath Gotham Central three days ago, Damian Wayne had no forged documents with which to identify him. So Damian met the fate that all John Does in Gotham met. He was fingerprinted, his DNA was taken for filing purposes, and then he was cremated, his ashes scattered in an undisclosed location.

Bruce just put the letters on the eternally unoccupied marble plate.

He had known from Selina that he had had a son ("technically," as Selina liked to hammer home) for but a single hour, before that son had flung himself from the roof of an abandoned apartment store just to spite him. Just to bring him pain. Just to prove that he still had some power left.

Staring at Damian’s plate, Bruce felt two distinct flavors of absolute nothing snipe at each other within him. The revelation that he had a son left him with a flurry of unanswered questions. Which wouldn’t be so bad, except he didn’t know the questions either.

Bruce let himself act as prey to unidentifiable emotions, until he heard a man’s voice on the bench next to him.

“He tried to kill you,” the man said, “and you put those letters on some marble like it means something.”

He turned his head. Sitting there was a man on the older side, three feet tall, in a purple and orange jumpsuit. Tufts of white hair stuck out from underneath a purple bowler hat.

Bruce’s brows furrowed. “Mister…”

“Mxyzptlk,” the man said. His breath didn’t fog in the cold like a normal person’s would have.

Bruce was sharing a bench in his family’s mausoleum with an imp from the Fifth Dimension.

In his life, Bruce had seen weirder.

Bruce nodded, before he turned back to Damian’s plate in the wall of caskets.

“He was a Wayne,” Bruce said. “Doesn’t matter what he did, or what dimension he was from. He did terrible things, but he’s dead now. Whatever price anyone could ask of him, it’s been paid. He was the end of a line. From my father, to me, to him. Even if it’s symbolic, he… He deserves to be with his grandparents.”

Bruce looked over at Mxyzptlk, who clearly didn’t get it.

“It’s a family thing,” Bruce said.

“Don’t have one.”

“I can tell.”

If Mxyzptlk was insulted, he didn’t show it.
“It’s a shame you can’t meet the wife,” Mzyzptlk said. “She, uh… She has a problem with death. Doesn’t believe in it. Thinks it’s immature.”

“Why are you here?” Bruce asked, abandoning all pretense toward civility.

“There’s another fellow,” Mzyzptlk said, “from my neck of the woods. Huge Batman fan. I tell him I’ve met one more Batman than he has, his crappy little cosplay cowl will hit the roof.”

Mzyzptlk smiled a smile that Bruce did not return.

“And besides,” Mzyzptlk said. “A few nights ago I told the rest of the Batfamily the differences between them and their Earth Zero counterparts. It’s only fair I tell you. Would you like to know the biggest difference between you and the quote-unquote official Batman?”

Mzyzptlk positioned himself on the bench so he was looking directly at Bruce.

“You’re actually trying to be a good man,” Mzyzptlk said. “Which isn’t to say that the Earth Zero Bruce is a supervillain, but he’s got it all twisted. See, he’s put the cart before the horse. He’s trying to be a better Batman first, and that leads to whole loads of trouble. You know the Earth Zero Bruce once just straight-up decked Tim Drake right in the mush?”

Bruce’s brows lowered further. “Why?”

“Well, see, Tim committed the one sin that the Earth Zero Batman simply could not abide,” Mzyzptlk said. “He was concerned for Bruce’s well-being, and he tried to help.”

A snowball started accumulating in Bruce’s stomach. There was gravel in his voice when he said “I would never sink that low. No matter how bad it got.”

“Oh, and I believe you,” Mzyzptlk said. “It’s been theorized by another Batman from another universe… a Batman with a quite literally infectious grin, that the Batman of Earth Zero is the least effective and most miserable, so… Congratulations. You win by default.”

Bruce didn’t have anything to say to that. They both turned their heads to look at Damian’s plate some more, until Mzyzptlk spoke again.

“Thirty-eight days,” he said.

Bruce looked at him. “What?”

“Spoilers, obviously,” Mzyzptlk said. “And I don’t mean the young lady in purple who has quite a few years of hardship ahead of her. I mean revealing events to you before you’ve experienced them for yourself.”

Mzyzptlk looked back at Damian’s plate. “In thirty-eight days, the fourth Robin of Earth Eight-Oh-Three will be born. Duke Thomas still becomes The Signal, but it takes longer, and he does it without your help. And good for him, too. The Joker was a little too dead to turn his parents insane.”

He stretched his legs before he continued speaking.

“Violet Paige is still pacing back and forth, weighing her options,” he said. “She still needs to come up with a name, but I have it on good authority that it’ll be the mother of ’em all. On Earth Eight-Oh-Three, because you took that three year hiatus precisely when you did, Amanda Waller never institutes the Beyond protocol, and Terry McGinnis is just going to be a normal person. Sucks to be him. Great to be Dana Tan.”
Mxyzptlk’s face slowly fell. “And while you’re sitting there, kicking yourself about how Jason Todd is your greatest failure, I have to tell you, Bruce… Your greatest failure hasn’t happened yet.”

Bruce looked at Mxyzptlk. That ball of snow that was in his stomach disappeared, and reappeared again, running down his back.

“The age of the supervillain in Gotham City will come to an end,” Mxyzptlk said. “It ends in the worst way possible, but it ends. And even after that? Something… Something big is coming.”

“Whatever it is,” Bruce said, “Batman will stop it.”

“That’s just it,” Mxyzptlk said softly. “He won’t.”

The cold on Bruce’s spine spread.

“However,” Mxyzptlk said, gaining some of his prior buoyancy, “only time will tell if that’s good news for you, or bad.”

And with that, Mxyzptlk floated off the bench, and toward the gate.

“Wait,” Bruce said.

Mxyzptlk turned to him. “Yeah?”

“You said I’m trying to be a good man?”

“I do believe that’s what came out of my mouth,” said Mxyzptlk.

Bruce sat up straight on the bench, looked Mxyzptlk in the eye, and asked:

“Do I get there?”

Mxyzptlk’s eyes fell. “I’m not gonna say you get there.”

Bruce felt something leave him. It was slight, it was ethereal, and he could not place a name to it.

“Then again,” Mxyzptlk said, “I’m not gonna say you haven’t gotten there yet, either. But what I will say is that if does happen? Or if it hasn’t happened already? Then no matter what anyone tells you… You’ll be the last one to know.”

A loud pop sounded, and Mister Mxyzptlk was gone.

Bruce Wayne sat on the bench in the cold mausoleum, stewing in his emotions for a few minutes longer, before he got up and left.

On the other side of the steel gate, he saw Selina standing there.

She was wearing black slacks and a black peacoat, with black sunglasses. Her breath was coming out in a fog.

He opened the gate, and stood on the other side, across from her.

“Hey, Sailor.”

“Hey.”

“Wanna talk?”
Bruce nodded.

He lined up his emotions, threaded his words through them, and asked:

“Have you ever given any thoughts to having kids?”

Selina arched her eyebrow over the rim of her glasses, and asked “Don’t we have seven of them running around right now?”

Bruce blinked in confusion, and counted in his head.

“I count Dick and Barbara in that,” Selina said.

“Alright,” Bruce said, still counting. “I’m still missing one.”

“Cullen,” Selina said. “I don’t think we’re getting rid of him.”

“Right,” Bruce said. “Yeah, that’s seven.”

They looked at each other for a moment.

“You asked me that before we got married,” Selina said.

“I know.”

“And my answer hasn’t changed.”

“I know.”

“Is that a problem for you?”

“It isn’t,” Bruce said. “It’s just, um…”

He drew a little semi-circle in the snow with his left shoe before he spoke again.

“I had a vasectomy,” Bruce said. “Before I became Batman. I just wanted to know if I should get it reversed or not.”

Selina put her hands in the pocket of her peacoat.

“You never told me that.”

“I know,” Bruce said. “Is that a problem, or…”

“No,” Selina said. “It’s not a problem at all. Makes perfect sense. Mister Moneybags has to guard his bags of money, and a bunch of little Vinnys and Debbies running around makes that harder than it needs to be. But… you didn’t do it because you were rich and irresponsible, did you?”

“I didn’t.”

“You did it because you were going to be Batman.”

“I did.”

“And that’s the part I don’t get,” Selina said.

Bruce sighed, and said:
“The Reverse Honeypot.”

Selina took her hands out of the pockets of her coat, and folded her arms across her chest. She raised both eyebrows for a change. “The Reverse Honeypot?”

Bruce nodded. “I’ve been told all my life that I’m handsome. And I didn’t know if I might have to…”

Selina put on a deep, faux-suggestive voice and asked “Engage in the manly art of seduction to become a more effective crimefighter?”

“No,” Bruce said, feeling blood rush to his cheeks. “I mean, yes, but you make it sound so lascivious.”

“Because it is,” Selina said, grinning broadly. “Okay, first off, it’s just ‘The Honeypot.’ It’s gender neutral, okay? I own the patent, so I know. But… But I’m just imagining you standing in front of your bathroom mirror with your Batsuit in a pile in the corner, manscaping and applying moisturizer. The Minxcraft. The Gigolometry. The sheer THOTsmanship. Just…”

Selina loudly kissed the tips of her fingers as though she were a TV chef.

“All to seduce evil skanks with bad intentions.”

“Laugh,” Bruce said.

“Oh, I’m gonna.”

“But it has happened.”

Selina’s grin grew, threatening to meet her ears. “Reeeeeeeeeely?” she asked. “Didja let Baroness von Badguy down easy after you let her have her way with you?”

“No.”

“Awww,” Selina said. “Is there some lonely broad with a death ray out there, putting Scotch Tape to a broken heart?”

“I hope not,” Bruce said. “I wound up marrying her.”

The grin slid off of Selina’s face, and she stood there for a second in stunned silence.

Then she started laughing.

Loud, and donkey-like.

“I told you I’d get you one day.”

She was still laughing, so Bruce didn’t know if she heard him or not.

“Oh, I’m… I’m sorry,” Selina said after she calmed herself down long enough to speak. “I’m laughing in front of your parents’ grave. I’m… I’m going straight to Hell…”

Which set off another wave of giggles.

Bruce smiled. He kept smiling until she was done. Selina held her hand out to him, and he took it.
They put their arms around each others’ waists as they walked back to the house.

“Sailor,” Selina said, “I can’t imagine how weird your headspace is right now.”

“It’s weird,” Bruce said. “And not pleasant at all.”

“So I have an idea.”

“Which is?”

“We go into town,” Selina said. “We buy, just… the ugliest clothes. I’m talking those gross Looney Toons leather jackets. I’m talking those puffball stocking caps with the team logos on them. Not even Gotham City teams. Other teams, so we look like tourists. And big-ass blocky Grandma sunglasses. Then we find the nearest multiplex, buy tickets to the three or four movies that look the worst, and we just spend alllllll day there.”

“I fail to see what this accomplishes.”

“A deeper appreciation of the clothes we have in our closets, and the movies we actually do like,” Selina said. “That or we get to third base with each other in the back row and theater management won’t peg us for two rich people if we get caught. Either one’s fine by me.”

Bruce smiled.

“You know, Barbara told me about that angry little speech you gave her,” Bruce said. “The one about how you’re the Lady of Wayne Manor?”

“Because I am,” Selina said, and she pointed to the house that was still a couple hundred yards away.

“That’s my house,” Selina said. “I take booze without asking, and I put my feet up on the coffee table. But I tell you this, Sailor: I’m still the poor kid from Park Row.”

“No you’re not,” Bruce said.

“Yes I am.”

“No you’re not, and I can prove it.”

“How?” Selina asked.

“Because,” Bruce said, “you haven’t been to your day job at Kyle Security in almost two months, and no one’s called or complained.”

Selina stopped walking. He couldn’t see her eyes behind her sunglasses, but her mouth was frozen in a rictus of pure horror.

Bruce laughed.

She was the only one who could make him do that, after all.
Chapter 26: Bridges to Babylon

Merry Christmas, everyone.

December twenty-fifth dawned on a frigid and snow-covered Gotham City six days after the Battle of Founders Island. Yet this city of nine million people was curiously muted as the sun rose.

Gotham had almost four-hundred fewer people in it than it had a week ago. And those who thought Christmas had become too commercialized and consumerist were given no end to ammo, as with the grievous wounds to Founders Island itself, the city’s commercial center, the luster seemed to come off the holiday for the citizenry.

Not even the drunks, flashers, and pickpockets were in the Christmas spirit.

But it evened out, though. Families came together on opposite sides of long tables, digging into home cooking and enjoying each others’ company. Orphans and expats came together in apartments and dined on the finest cuisine that could be made with a microwave. Even the lonely and the dejected found some solace on this day, either through football or the annual A Christmas Story marathon on TBS. Gotta dig that, right?

And yes, yes, there was some strife. Political arguments, disapproving parents, and alcohol-fueled fender-benders. But the human animal is a diverse one, be it through race, through creed, or through simple temperament. There will always be pain on a good day, just as there will always be joy on a shitty one. Even on the day of the Battle of Founders Island someone in Gotham City won the lottery. And it was someone who lived in the East End, too, so that someone was coming out of a brutal poverty that kinda smelled like pee.

So people talked to each other, ate together, came in from the cold, and the Earth did its fraction of a turn until the sun started falling.

And as the skies grew dark, one jewel in the wilds of the east, a mile and a half from the ocean, still shone bright.

Wayne Manor.

Outside, there was a collection of motorcycles and cars parked near the huge gothic fountain next to the front entrance, all having left tire tracks in the thin sheet of snow.

But inside?

Inside it looked warm…

Bruce Wayne stood in the eastern arch that led into the main living room off the foyer, and looked inside.

Dick Grayson and Barbara Gordon were on one of the two red couches. Dick had his arm around Barbara’s shoulders while she cleaned her yellow-tinted glasses with the hem of her dark green sweater.

Tim Drake and Harper Row were on the other couch, in a similar position, his arm around Harper’s
shoulders. They were, however, talking to Cullen, who was sitting cross-legged on the carpet in front of them. Harper was wearing a black suit jacket and a white button-up shirt with no tie above black slacks and black Chuck Taylors. Cullen was wearing jeans and a black t-shirt with the cartoon print of a tuxedo on the front.

And off in the corner, almost in the shadows, was Cassandra Cain in a dark blue sweatshirt and jeans, nibbling on what had to be her seventh cookie.

Alfred Pennyworth walked up behind Bruce and stood in the doorway alongside him.

“How many more are to be expected, Master Bruce?”

“How many more are to be expected, Master Bruce?”

“Three,” Bruce said.

Alfred nodded, and stood with him for some time longer.

Bruce chanced a look over at Alfred, and saw a dreamy and almost serene look on his butler’s face.

Alfred saw Bruce looking at him, before looking back out into the living room again.

“A crowded house at Christmastime, sir,” Alfred said. “I never thought I’d see the day again.”

Bruce nodded, not really knowing what to say.

Thank whatever system governed the universe, however, for the sound of someone clearing their throat behind them.

It was Selina, in leggings and a gray, cable-knit sweater, holding a martini.

“Mind if I have a moment with my husband?” she asked.

“Not at all,” Alfred said, before he left to wherever butlers at Christmas go.

Selina smiled.

Bruce smiled back.

“I put up mistletoe,” Selina said. She pointed toward the main entry of the living room, where a small white nodule of mistletoe hung, innocuous, and completely unaware of any potential havoc it might wreak.

Bruce looked from the mistletoe, to the assortment of teenagers in the living room, and then back to Selina.

“Are you sure that’s wise?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Selina asked.

“Teenagers,” Bruce said. “Lots of them.”

Selina rolled her eyes. “They’re coming off of a lot of stress and a lot of funerals. If they just resort to innocent necking, it’ll be a load off their minds… though now that I think about it, I can just imagine Cullen trying to lure Dick through that entryway… What would someone use to lure Dick Grayson, anyway? Protein bars and cereal?”

“That sounds about right.”
Selina smiled.

“With the exception of Cullen, who isn’t eighteen yet, this whole house needs to get laid, to be completely honest,” Selina said. “Starting with you.”

She scoped out the room to see if no one was looking before she grabbed his ass.

“It’ll have to be late, though,” Bruce said. “I still have to do that thing.”

“What thing?”


“I hope to God it doesn’t come to that,” Bruce said. “I’m not good with… crying.”

“If it happens,” Selina said, “you’ll do fine.”

“If it happens,” Bruce said, “I’ll have back-up.”

Selina’s eyes widened. “So he is coming.”

“He won’t stay and chat,” Bruce said, “but he’ll do what I asked. It’s hard to shop for a billionaire for Christmas, but this is a lay-up.”

Selina nodded, smiled, and put her arm around his waist.

Bruce’s eyes caught Harper Row smiling, blissfully closing her eyes, and putting her head on Tim Drake’s shoulder.

“Tim and Harper are taking every opportunity in this house to sneak off and make out,” Bruce said. “And I do mean every opportunity. They think I don’t know, but I do. Christ, it’s Dick and Barbara all over again.”

“Good for them.”

“Hmm,” Bruce said. “I almost miss the days when Tim didn’t do anything around here because he thought there were microphones and cameras all over the manor.”

Selina smiled, but that smile quickly slid off.

“Are there cameras and microphones?” she asked.

“Of course not,” said Bruce.

Selina nodded, made like Harper, and put her head on Bruce’s shoulder.

“Alfred made me get rid of them,” Bruce said.

Selina took her head off his shoulder and looked at him in surprise when the doorbell rang.

Alfred came into the living room, escorting Stephanie Brown.

And Cassandra immediately ran up to them, and wrapped Steph in a hug.
They’d barely seen each other since the Battle of Founders Island. Stephanie had been laid up in the Batcave for a couple of days (and Cassandra had to wonder if her mother had even noticed she’d gone) after her fight with Damian Wayne. And even after that, Cassandra’s life was a whole mess of funerals. So much so that she’d have gladly traded Steph that bed down in the medical bay.

While Cassandra’s face had cleared from her beating at the hands of David Cain, the bruises on Steph’s face from her clash with Damian were still there. Faded, of course, but there was still a lot of yellow, and some contours of purple.

And there was Stephanie’s broken arm of course. Broken from repeatedly and soundly punching Damian in the face.

“Sorry I’m late,” Stephanie said, still wrapped in Cassandra’s hug. “I had to take a cab here. I shouldn’t be riding a motorcycle with this thing on my arm.”

“Did you get a receipt?” Bruce asked from the archway. “Because I can pay you back.”

“Well,” Stephanie said, “the cabbie’s still out there, so…”

Bruce sighed as Selina busted out laughing.

“I’ll be right back,” Bruce said as he unentangled himself from his wife, and made his way out of the living room to the front door.

Cassandra put her hands on the shoulders of Stephanie’s purple sweater, smiled, and saw her cast.

White and untouched.

Clearly this would not do.

Cassandra turned to the rest of the room, tried to find the word she needed, and failed. So she resorted to a pantomime of writing something down.

“Need a pen?” Dick asked.

Cassandra shook her head. “The other one.”

“Pencil?” asked Cullen.

Cassandra again shook her head. “The other one.”

“Sharpie?” asked Harper.

Cassandra smiled and snapped her fingers. “Right,” she said.

Harper unzipped the teal canvas bookbag that she’d brought with her for some reason, and took out a black Sharpie. She walked it over to Cassandra.

“Thanks,” Cassandra said, before she removed the cap, and looked at Stephanie’s cast.

Cassandra Cain could not write her own name. But she could draw a circle. An “O” for Orphan.

Once that was done, she looked out at the rest of the room.

None of them moved.
Cassandra frowned, sighed, and handed Stephanie the Sharpie, thus freeing up Cassandra’s hands for sign language.


And so all the dumb whores in attendance did indeed sign Stephanie Brown’s cast.

“Have you heard from Raven yet?” Barbara asked.

Dick sighed. “No,” he said. “I haven’t.”

Garfield “Beast Boy” Logan’s funeral was two days ago. She’d gone with Dick, and ever since, there’d been a shadow behind his eyes. It felt like he moved a fraction slower than he used to, his usual light-heartedness seemingly trapped underwater.

“She’s off in… She’s wherever she goes when she’s not here,” Dick said. “All these years, and I’ve never really got a handle on what it is Rachel does. All I know is when she gets back…I have to be the one to tell her.”

Beast Boy and Rachel “Raven” Roth. They had been approaching the vicinity of romance for as long as they’d known each other. Barbara didn’t know if they’d actually gotten there. She was behind on her gossip.

“This is the leadership role,” Dick said. “This is what Batman trained me for. Give orders, yell at people, patch up scraped knees, and be the bearer of bad news.”

His eyes clouded over, as though something invisible in the middle distance tempted him.

Barbara hated seeing Dick like this. It just felt so unnatural.

Against her better judgement… she was going to try stand-up comedy.

“I’d ask if she’d get depressed, but that’s just… her.”

Dick looked at her glumly, no trace of any kind of mirth in his face.

*Shit, Babs, you overshot the runway! Back up! BACK UP!*

“Oh,” Barbara said, “she’d get like I did when I learned you were going out with Kory. Just stop showering and cleaning my ears.”

“You did not,” Dick said.

Which was true. She did not. But if she could get the heat on herself and go for a few jokes, he might just crack a smile, and Lord knows he needed one. Barbara Gordon wasn’t all that familiar with football (which her father was watching when she left his place earlier that day), but she knew what the Hail Mary was, and this was that.

“Oh, I did,” Barbara said. “I can’t tell you how many times Batman yelled at me because he saw the potato chip crumbs in my hair from two days ago.”

“Stop it,” Dick said… but the corners of his mouth were curling a little bit.

“And when I heard that you were going out with your Bludhaven landlady, what’s-her-boobs…”
“Clancy,” Dick said, moving his hand to his mouth.

“That’s right,” Barbara said. “Crying in the streets. Legitimate Irish funereal keening. Because she was a brunette and not a redhead. You broke the combo. You were moving away from me.”

“I… What?”

“Oh!” Barbara said. “And then you went out with that fashion designer. I wanna say her name was Montana Wildhack…”

Dick coughed and said “Cheyenne Freemont.”

“Yeah,” Barbara said. “Montana Wildhack. She was a redhead. That meant you were coming back to me. I was so happy when I heard that, I jumped.”

“You… You were in a wheelchair.”

Barbara put on the ghastly parody of a smile and said “I KNOW, RIGHT?”

That did it.

Dick snorted before he took an uneven gasp, and started laughing.

Barbara took Dick’s arm and put it over her shoulders as they sat there on the sofa when the doorbell rang a second time.

Alfred escorted into the main foyer Kate Kane and Diana of Themyscira.

Kate had her hands in the pockets of her gray blazer while Diana had her own arm intertwined with hers.

And Kate was wondering why Bruce was arguing with a cabbie out front. It was throwing her off her game.

“I feel like I am imposing,” Diana said.

“You’re not,” Kate said. “Trust me.”

“I didn’t bring gifts.”

“Bruce doesn’t do that.”

“Why not?” Diana asked.

“Well,” Kate said, “Bruce is a billionaire.”

“Right.”

“And I’m a billionaire.”

“Yes.”

“Selina’s a millionaire.”

“I see.”
“And then we have wave after wave of destitute children,” Kate said. “It isn’t really fair.”

Diana nodded, and said “That does make sense.”

They got to the entrance of the living room, and all in attendance save for Stephanie Brown either said Hi or waved.

“Look,” Kate said. “It’s my friends from work, and also Stephanie.”

Before Stephanie could say something (that, judging from the shape her lips took around her teeth, most likely began with the letter “F”), Cullen piped up.

“Ummm,” Cullen said, “Not to be indelicate, but… I could have sworn this wasn’t your holiday.”

“Well, that depends,” Kate said. “Is Alfred working the bar?”

From over at the eastern arch, Selina held up what was left of her martini and said “You’re damn right he is.”

Kate smiled, and said “Then Merry Christmas, movie house.”

She turned to Diana and asked “How familiar are you with the whole Santa-worshipping thing?”

“I’m familiar enough to know that’s not how it works,” Diana said.

“Trust me,” said Kate, “that’s how it works.”

Diana looked up. “I know what that’s for.”

Kate looked up.

She saw that she and Diana were standing under mistletoe.

Then she looked back out at the room.

During the Battle of Founders Island, Kate had found that she had gotten over her aversion toward swearing in front of Diana.

Six days later, she found that that aversion had not returned.

“Which one of you floppy pairs of fucking clown shoes thought mistletoe was a good idea?”

Everyone shrank into where they were sitting. Selina apparently tried to turn invisible with a phenomenal cosmic power that she was not aware she did not possess.

Kate’s eyes fell on Tim Drake. “Was it you, Johnny Fuckleseed? Oh, I bet it was y—”

“Kate?” Diana asked.

Kate’s demeanor instantly changed. Her eyes brightened, and she asked “Yes’m?”

Diana’s broad-yet-delicate hands found the sides of Kate’s face. She leaned in, and their lips met.

It was soft. It was warm. And, unbidden by her brain, Kate’s toes curled in her shoes before she could tell them to knock that shit off because she wasn’t thirteen anymore.

Diana had soft full lips that one could disappear into, and Kate Kane gave it her all. Her hands
moved absently to Diana’s back, to her silk blouse, feeling the muscles beneath, and Jumping Fucking Jesus, it’s a mountain range back there!

The kiss broke too soon. It would always be too soon. It devolved into an embrace, and Diana whispered into her ear.

“Sweet mother, I cannot weave. Slender Aphrodite has overcome me with longing for a girl.”

Kate tried to suppress a slight tremor, and failed miserably.

Sappho…

Smooth!

But then Kate realized, given the events of the past few days, that Aphrodite, the Greek Goddess of Love, was an actual physical entity that one could hold a conversation with.

Am… Am I gonna have to write a Thank-You note?

Kate and Diana pulled away, and looked into each other’s eyes. Diana’s were blue pools of longing and gratitude.

And Katherine Elizabeth Kane finally felt comfortable enough to reflect that in her own.

At least… until she remembered where she was.

Kate tore her gaze from Diana and looked into the living room…

...to the stunned silence and shocked stares of everyone assembled.

Cassandra Cain simply had her eyebrows raised, as though she had just seen dog do a particularly tricky somersault. Stephanie Brown was glaring at the floor. Both Harper Row and Selina Wayne had looks on their faces that told Kate that they were going to remember what had just happened later, and not in the most wholesome or family-friendly way.

But it was Cullen Row who broke the silence, and in so doing, proved that for all of the time he had recently spent with Alfred Pennyworth, he had gleaned none of the man’s delicacy or tact.

“Wow,” Cullen said. “I mean, I’m gay, and I still wanna die and come back as the sheets you two do it on!”

A scowling Harper Row leaned forward from her sitting position on the couch, balled up her fist, and punched her brother in the thigh.

The furor over the kiss was over almost instantly after Cullen called Harper a harridan for punching him in the thigh, and the laughter that followed. Kate and Diana sat next to Dick and Barbara on the couch, with Diana’s arms around Kate’s shoulders, as they both talked to Tim and Harper.

Stephanie was telling Cassandra about the fight with Damian when Bruce appeared near them.

“Cassandra?” he asked.

Both girls looked at him.

“Can I see you for a moment?”
Cassandra looked at Stephanie, who just shrugged.

Bruce and Cassandra began to walk away, when Stephanie spoke up.

“Hey, Bruce,” Stephanie said.

Bruce turned to her.

“I beat the guy who beat you,” she said.

Bruce nodded, and said “Everyone gets lucky at least once in their lives.”

Stephanie scowled. “That’s how we’re rolling today, huh?”

“I never said you were the lucky one,” Bruce said, and turned and walked away before Stephanie could register the compliment.

Cassandra followed Bruce out of the living room, through the main foyer, and out the front door.

They took an immediate left, to a small patio a few yards away from the main entrance, when Bruce stopped, and turned around.

His fists were balled up next to his thighs, and he was ever so slightly shifting from one foot to the next.

To say that Cassandra thought he was uncomfortable would be an understatement.

A few moments passed before he spoke.

“I…”

And then he shook his head, as though he were trying to physically loose the faulty and stillborn train of thought from his mind.

“There are… certain things that I’m not good at,” Bruce said.

And he just left it there for a couple of seconds.

A confused Cassandra just said “Okay.”

“I don’t like admitting that,” Bruce said. “But sometimes… sometimes the things I’m not good at are the things that must be done in a given situation. And when that happens… there are seven words I have to say.”

More silence.

“Okay,” Cassandra said yet again.

“I usually don’t like saying them,” Bruce said. “But they need to be said.”

“Okay,” said Cassandra for a third time, not knowing what the hell else to say.

“Do you know what they are?” Bruce asked.

Cassandra shook her head.

Bruce looked at the ground again.
He sighed. Then a second sigh, though that might have just been a regular deep breath.

Until finally, he looked at Cass… and said seven words.

“This looks like a job for Superman.”

And then he looked.

Up in the sky.

Cassandra followed his eyeline, and felt her jaw drop.

Hovering about fifteen feet above them, and descending, was the Man of Steel himself, his red cape billowing behind him.

“Hey, Cass,” Superman said, smiling. “Merry Christmas.”

Cassandra’s mouth was still open. Had she been blessed with the words of the poets, she still wouldn’t have known what to say. This was Superman. She’d met Clark Kent at Bruce’s wedding, she’d seen Superman off in the crowd at the funerals she’d gone to in the past few days, but never up close. Never looking at her with that blue warmth in his eyes. Smiling at her with that peaceable, loving smile that seem to have no limit to its depth or its radiance.

Cassandra Cain was a young woman with a rather shaky grasp on the concept of God.

But now… just… Holy shit, it’s Superman!

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Bruce said, before he started to walk off.

“Merry Christmas, Bruce,” Superman said.

“Merry Christmas, Clark,” said Bruce. “Oh… and congratulations.”

The smile fell off of Superman’s face, to be replaced with a look of genuine astonishment.

“How?” Superman asked.

Bruce smiled.

“Lois didn’t even know until yesterday morning!”

Bruce still smiled.

“I didn’t even know until an hour ago!”

Bruce, his smile the widest Cassandra had ever seen it, turned and walked into the shadows toward the front door.

Superman’s eyes fell upon Cassandra, and gave a sheepish smile of his own.

“Lois is pregnant,” Superman said.

Cassandra’s eyes widened. She wanted to congratulate him, but “Congratulations” was rough for her to say. So she said…

“Good.”
...and immediately knew that sounded off.

“Before we go any further,” Superman said. “I have to ask: How many home cooked meals do you eat? I don’t mean Alfred’s cucumber sandwiches, I mean the good stuff. The kind where you eat so much that when you’re done, you swear you’ll never eat again.”

Cassandra shrugged.

“We should fix that,” Superman said. “You are officially invited to Smallville for Easter. You’ll live having eaten Ma Kent’s home cooking. Me, Lois, Ma, Pa, Kara…”

Cassandra’s head spun. Even apart from this most generous invitation by the template from which all other superheroes were based, all she knew about Easter was that it was a holiday because someone died and came back from the dead.

Wait a minute…

Superman died and came back from the dead.

WAS EASTER SUPERMAN’S HOLIDAY?

Cassandra was about to enthusiastically nod her head, feeling that she had to accept an invitation from the guy who invented a holiday everyone celebrated, when he continued speaking.

“Oh,” Superman said. “And Conner will be there too. I hear that’s something you might be interested in.”

Cassandra looked down, trying to keep the smile off her face and the red off her cheeks.

“I had to ask,” Superman said. “He’d have gotten too nervous to do it.”

He looked around

“We might need somewhere to sit,” Superman said.

He looked at the concrete railing that separated the patio from the grass of the front grounds. He blew the snow off.

From ten feet away.

“Gimme just a second,” Superman said.

He levelled his heat vision on the railing, melting the excess snow, and drying it off.

“Ladies first,” Superman said as his eyes stopped glowing.

Cassandra slowly walked over and sat on the railing.

And it was just the right kind of warm. The warm stone spread from her rear end to the rest of her body.

Superman sat down on the railing next to her, and exhaled. Cassandra noticed that his breath didn’t fog. Then again, he just used ice breath to clear the snow off the toasty warm railing upon which she now sat, so maybe that was normal.

“Bruce wanted me to talk to you,” Superman said.
Cassandra looked at him quizzically. “Why?”

“Because,” Superman said, “he has problems saying how he really feels. That’s not me insulting him, that’s just the way it is. He’ll admit it. It’s the only flaw he’ll admit to. Did you know it took him eleven years to tell Selina he was Batman?”

Cassandra blinked. No, she did not know that.

“It’s true,” Superman said. “Something happened to him during that Undying thing a year and a half ago, and he is honestly, genuinely trying to get better. I’m, uh… I’m proud of him.”

Cassandra nodded. She didn’t know how Batman could handle being this close to a wall of Kryptonian Nice like Superman without floating away.

“And the reason I’m here,” Superman said, “is Bruce wants you to know how proud he is of you.”

Superman smiled at her as Cassandra’s brain tried to reckon with this.

“Really?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Superman said, smiling wider. She remembered something Bruce had said about Clark Kent a few months ago.

“To the untrained eye,” Bruce had said, “he is the image of everything pure and optimistic in the world. The reason for that is if you scratch the surface just a tiny bit, you’ll see he’s actually an eight-year-old.”

And… yeah, she could see it. He was delivering good news second-hand, and putting his back into it.

Cassandra opened and closed her fists.


“Well,” Superman said, “deep down he might think that if he told you himself, he’d be so bad at it that you wouldn’t believe him. Or it could be that he saw something that needed doing and didn’t want to leave it to chance. It could be that he saw someone who was better suited for a job that absolutely, positively needed to be done, and decided to take the personal loss by sending someone he knew could do it well. Like, oh… I dunno… sending Tim to fight your father while you went to deal with Jason?”

Cassandra’s heavy brows raised in shock.

“Yeah,” Superman said. “I heard about that. I know you’re known more for your fists than your brains, but your quick thinking saved a hundred-and-seventy-five thousand people. You allowed Robin to use his skills to achieve an impossible task. And you saw a sad, angry young man hellbent on hurting himself, and you talked him down! The thing you are trying so hard to be good at, you proved you’re good at.”

Cassandra felt a warmth in her chest that she was pretty sure had nothing to do with the warm railing.

“Bruce is so proud of you,” Superman said. “That’s the lead story here, and that shouldn’t get buried. But as an addition? I’m proud of you, and I wasn’t even on the planet at the time.”

She had to ask again. “Really?”
“Yeah!” Superman said, letting the eight-year-old out. “That’s the golden ideal right there. To save lives without resorting to violence. That’s what a hero does. Yeah, even in the best of circumstances we have to clench a fist and let it fly now and again, but we’re supposed to instill hope. To prove there’s something better on the other side of nighttime. Not even everyone in the Justice League understands that. Which is why it makes me hopeful that someone as young as you does.”

Cassandra felt a smile spread across her face that she couldn’t get to stay down. If Bruce’s intent in bringing Superman here was to feel better about herself, then he succeeded. And wildly, at that.

“Speaking of which,” Superman said. “You’re eighteen, right?”

Cassandra thought so. She nodded anyway.

“So in three years,” Superman said, “if you want it… You will be eligible for the Justice League.”

The breath caught in Cassandra’s throat. She knew it was technically possible to be in the Justice League, Cassandra thought it would never happen to her.

But then again, she thought the same thing about kissing boys, and look what happened.

“The… Justice League?” Cassandra asked.

“Sure,” Superman said. “If you want to, of course. I’m not trying to pressure you into anything. But if you want it, I don’t know anyone in their right mind who would vote against you.”

Superman hunched over a little bit so the two of them were at eye-level.

“The world needs people like you,” Superman said. “Not just Gotham City.”

That was what broke the spell.

Sitting next to someone who genuinely radiated this unalloyed goodness threw her own faults into sharp relief. A dissonance formed. The masquerade could not be prolonged.

She felt her shoulders slump, and her breath leave her lungs. And this railing was colder than it was a second ago.

“What’s wrong?” Superman asked.

Cassandra took a deep breath, and said “You don’t.. want… me… on…”

She trailed off, the motivation to even finish the sentence leaving her.

“Why not?” Superman asked.

Trying to meet the eyes of the Man of Steel, the guy who was emblematic of everything decent, was a task that, to Cassandra, was beyond herculean.

But she did it.

“I… killed a man,” Cassandra said.

Superman frowned a little bit. His eyebrows tented. And he said:

“I know.”
Cassandra... did not see that one coming.

Superman swiveled a little bit on the rail, and stared off into space.

“I know how you were raised,” he said. “I know what your father did to you... By the way, I try to make it a point not to get too angry at things, but hearing about that... yeah.”

He let silence settle for a little bit.

“But the interesting part of your story,” Superman said, “was what happened next.”

He looked at her again, and there was this strange twinkle in his eye.

“You ran,” Superman said. “You knew that what you had done was wrong, and... no one told you. You just knew after having done it. And not only did you vow never to do it again, you embarked on the fool’s errand of dressing up in a funny costume to stop others from doing it. Same as Bruce. Same as Diana. Same as Dick and Babs. Same as me.”

As Cassandra felt that warmth spread within her again, Superman folded his arms.

“The reason I am the way I am,” Superman said, “was because of the Kents. Whenever a supervillain tries to turn me evil or expose me to red Kryptonite, that is an effort to separate me from Ma and Pa. What they taught me.”

A smile came to his lips as he apparently reminisced, but even that eventually faded.

“People have been trying to figure out since the world started spinning whether people are born the way they end up, or they’re made that way,” Superman said. “But I’ve seen enough to know that it’s not a zero-sum game. It just varies from case to case. Some people are made good, or evil, and some people are just born that way.”

Superman’s face slackened as he thought of what he was going to say next.

“Lois and I are bringing a child into the world,” Superman said. “And I know... I just _know_... that someone is going to do something horrible. And my child will ask me why it happened, and I don’t know what I’m going to tell them.”

His eye caught hers, and the twinkle came back.

“But what I’ll do,” Superman said, “is I’ll point into this huge crowd of people wearing masks and capes. That crowd of people I’m fortunate enough to call my friends, that I’m blessed enough to call my family, and I’ll point to one in particular... and tell them that there... _there_ is Cassandra Cain. And she is all the proof that you, or I, or anyone needs that sometimes people are just born _good_.”

Cassandra found it hard to breathe. And her eyes were stinging.

“Your actions have consequences, Cass,” Superman said. “And they’ve been good ones. Because in that giant house is a small army of people who love you very much. They’re happy to see you everyday. And their lives are better for having met you. They’re really glad you’re here.”

The smile that suited him started coming back.

“And so am I, come to think of it.”

Ahhhhhhh that did it.
Cassandra broke into silent tears, and tried to hide her face in her hands. She heaved sobs and air through a nose that had started to run.

Since she had killed Faizul, since she had run from her father, she had sought death as she knew that there was no power that could absolve her.

But she found absolution. On Christmas. Given unto her by the nicest and most powerful man on Earth.

“Do you need a hug?” Superman asked. “Because y--”

Cassandra’s arms wrapped around Superman’s broad chest, her hands coming to a rest on his back, beneath his cape.

“It’s okay,” Superman said, gently patting her back. “It’s alright… I don’t take lives and I give second chances because in the best case scenarios, they turn out like you. It’s hard some days. So thank you for showing me I’m doing the right thing. Thank you for proving me right.”

That did not help at all. She started crying harder.

But Superman showed no discomfort. He just held her close.

“I’m, uhh… I’m not gonna lie,” Superman said. “There’s another, smaller reason I’m here. See, I’m about to have a kid, and it helps to plan ahead. Eventually… I’m gonna need a babysitter, and I’m trying to recruit as many teenagers as I possibly can for that job.”

Cassandra snorted laughter.

And in so doing, committed a breach of protocol whose embarrassment would follow her the rest of her days.

For Cassandra Cain just blasted cry-snot on the crest of the Kryptonian House of El on Superman’s chest.

Diana had her arm around Kate’s shoulders as they sat on the sofa next to Dick and Barbara.

And Kate thought this was weird.

Because she was five-eleven, she had been the tall girl in every relationship she had been in.

But Diana was taller than her.

In bare feet.

While Kate sat silently sipping her drink, Diana was talking to Harper and Tim.

Diana looked at Harper with great curiosity in her blue eyes, and asked “So DM stands for…”

“Dungeon Master,” Harper said.

Diana repeated it, mulling it around in her mouth. “‘Dungeon Master…’”

“The DM designs the campaign, figures out what the other people in the group fight…”

“With the characters they designed,” Diana said.
“Right,” Harper said.

“With attributes determined by rolls of an icosahedron.”

Harper and Tim both looked at her, stumped.

“It’s a shape with twenty sides,” Diana said.

“Ohhhhh,” Tim said. “Ico--”

“Icosahedron.”

“I’ll have to remember that,” said Tim.

“You should join us,” Harper said, and Kate could see a sheen of sweat almost immediately form on Harper’s brow.

“Look,” Harper said. “I only told you what D&D is in hopes that you’ll join us. I mean you specifically.”

“Why me?” Diana asked.

“Do you know how rad it would be to have Wonder Woman as DM of your game?” Harper asked.

“How would I, specifically, help?”

“It’s a game that has a lot to do with fighting mythological creatures,” Tim said. “And, y’know, you being the world’s foremost expert.”

“I mean, you wouldn’t start as DM,” Harper said. “You’d roll a character and start from the ground up to get a feel for the game, and then we’d let you loose. I have this bookbag here full of rulebooks and creature guides and stuff. Think that might be something you’d be interested in?”

Diana mulled this over, tapping her chin.

“It’s a game that revolves around improvisation and resource management while dealing with approaches to combat scenarios,” Diana said.

“Pretty much,” Harper said. “You down?”

As soon as Diana opened her mouth, Kate knew she was going to say yes…. But her mouth closed when she caught sight of Kate.

With slight disappointment in her face, Diana looked back at Harper and said “I appreciate the offer, Harper, but I’m afraid I must decline.”

Harper nodded, and said “It’s cool,” before turning to Tim.

“Think we can rope in Steph?”

“It’s worth a shot,” Tim said, before they got up and left to find her.

Diana sat back, and noticed Kate looking at her.

“What is it?” Diana asked.

“I can’t believe you did that.”
“Did what?”

“Turned Harper down.”

“I... don’t know a whole lot about relationships,” Diana said. “I haven’t been in one in a while. But I do know that you don’t ditch your girlfriend on Christmas.”

Kate smiled. “I remember a few days ago, you told me that you had a lot of female acquaintances, but not a whole lot of female friends. Harper... is trying... to be... your friend.”

Diana got this look on her face. Every part of her was surprised except her eyebrows. It was like that hadn’t occurred to her, but she didn’t want to admit it.

“I can do math,” Kate said. “I’m willing to bet this has bugging you longer than I’ve been alive.”

“Well...”

“Go,” Kate said. “Your new girlfriend humbly requests that you make a new friend that is also a girl. And when you come back, we’ll have already killed Santa Claus, and we’ll save a really big piece just for you.”

“That’s not how Christmas works.”

“Trust me,” Kate said, “that’s how Christmas works.”

Diana gave a little resistance, before she broke into a wide, beaming smile.

She leaned over, gave Kate a kiss that was way too short, before she got off the couch to try and find Harper and Tim.

Kate reckoned that all of Diana’s kisses were going to be too short no matter how long they lasted. That was gonna be a problem.

As she pondered this, she noticed that Dick and Barbara were staring at her.

Kate Kane smiled, took a sip of the strawberry daquiri that Alfred made her, and said “I am the best fucking girlfriend on Earth.”

Cassandra had made a point of standing outside the main entrance of Wayne Manor, wiping the crusty remains of the tears out of her eyes, before she made her way back inside.

When she stepped into the warmth of the main foyer, Bruce was standing there, hands in the pockets of his blazer.

“How did it go?” he asked.

Cassandra readied her hands.


To his credit, Superman had been as good a sport about that as he was about practically everything else. He said he could clean it off just by flying really fast, and being as he had a kid on the way, that was just like practice. There would most likely be grosser stiff on his suit relatively soon.

Bruce blinked when he heard this.
And… then he started laughing.
Loud.
His laugh was a whole lot higher-pitched than she imagined.
Cassandra smiled a bit, just to humor him, but the laughing went on so long that he started turning
red. Which was disturbing.
But eventually, Bruce calmed himself down. His face went back to his normal pale, and his
demeanor went back to its usual gravity.
“I needed that,” Bruce said.
Yeah, she could tell.
Bruce took a step toward her.
“You saved Jason,” he said.
That hung in the air like a balloon made of steel before he spoke again.
“He was in a dark place,” Bruce said. “And… and without throwing a punch, without him hurting
himself, you… you brought one of my boys home.”
He smiled at that, but Cassandra could see the rind of pain around it.
“Odds are,” Bruce said, “he’s going to spend some time in Arkham. He said he’d hate me forever,
and he’s stubborn enough to actually go through with it. And that’s okay. It… It is. He doesn’t have
to forgive me, just so long as he’s safe. And safe is what he is, because of you.”
He took another step forward. “I wasn’t always like this. I was worse. But I’m trying to get better.
And I know that’s not a straight line. I know there’s more than a fair chance that I’ll regress. That I’ll
backslide. That I’ll become the guy I used to be, and if that happens, I’ll get further and further away
from the man I want to be. If that happens, I won’t act as grateful as I should. But… know that I
am. I will always owe you. Remember that, okay? Remember it so I don’t forget.”
The backs of Cassandra’s eyes were stinging again.
Goddammit, not again…
“That talk from Clark?” Bruce asked. “That talk you’ve needed for a long time but I didn’t have
words for? That is my gratitude… Meet me in the Batcave in five minutes, and I’ll give you what
you’ve earned.”
Bruce nodded at her and walked past on his way to the study.
Cassandra’s eyes looked after him. She spared a stray thought as to how bunnies and colored eggs
were involved in Superman’s holiday when she heard footsteps behind her.
It was Stephanie.
“I’ve heard rumors most lascivious that you kissed Young Master Conner Kent during the Battle of
Founders Island,” Stephanie said. “I’ve chalked it up to idle gossip from the neighbor’s
chambermaid, but I simply had to ask you myself to see if this salacious hearsay was in any way
founded in truth.”
Cassandra narrowed her eyes, brought her voice down as low as it could go, and said “Oh, yes.”

Stephanie threw her head back and cackled.

They kept talking as they slowly walked back to the living room.

“He has to pay for dinner,” Stephanie said. “Partly because that’s what a guy is supposed to do, and partly because you suffer from terminal broke. And if he wants something, it’s best to make him wait five to ten business days before you give it to him.”

“What… something?” Cassandra asked.

“Y’know… some thing.”

Cassandra thought she got it. Kinda.

“What if… I… want some thing?”

Stephanie stopped.

“I dunno,” Stephanie said. “My experience with guys only goes as far as that, and uh…”

She stopped talking.

Cassandra’s eyes had strayed for a second to Kate and Babs talking in the living room, but when they went back to Stephanie, she saw that Steph was just standing there looking at her feet.

And this pause went on for a while, as though she were a robot with its power source yanked out, before she finally turned back on.

“Wow,” Stephanie said. “I am just… zonked out on painkillers right now. I’m gonna go get something to drink. Wonder if this dungeon has any orange juice in it.”

“Want me… to…”

“No,” Stephanie said. “I’m fine. I just need to regroup… and Harper is doing some D&D thing with Wonder Woman, I guess, I might check that out.”

“Okay,” Cassandra said.

“See you in a bit,” Stephanie said as she started walking away. “And Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” Cassandra said as she watched Stephanie walk off into the living room.

She stood there for another few seconds, wondering just what the hell that was all about, before she turned and made her way to the Batcave entrance in the study.

One of Cassandra Cain’s most useful abilities was an almost unearthly awareness of her surroundings.

And it was this ability that, in this moment, failed her.

Because if she had simply looked up, she would have noticed that a few seconds prior, both she and Stephanie Brown had been standing under the mistletoe.

---

Kate saw the whole damn thing.
And her consciousness was scooped up and dropped all the way back in junior high.

Kate Kane and Stephanie Brown had seemingly hated each other from the first time they’d seen each other, but Kate knew that the enmity had started on Stephanie’s behalf.

And now Kate knew why.

Sitting there on that couch, watching Stephanie make a retreat to the side hallway just off the living room after talking to Cassandra, she reflected how hard she had tried to cultivate what she called “The Kate Kane Advertisement.” How hard she tried to appear aloof and invulnerable.

To top that all off, it was a piss-poor costume, and no one fell for it.

Except Stephanie Brown.

And the clarity that her little pantomime with Cassandra Cain offered Kate just proved that Stephanie Brown might have needed the real Kate Kane most of all.

Furthermore, Kate knew why she had hated Steph back.

Because once upon a time... she was Stephanie Brown.

Kate set her drink down on the coaster on the end table next to the couch, absent-mindedly told Dick that she was going to check on Diana, and got up to follow Stephanie. Slowly at first, so no one saw them together.

She caught up with Stephanie halfway down the side hallway off the living room.

“Hey Steph,” she said, her shoes clacking on the marble floor.

Stephanie saw her, slumped her shoulders, and audibly groaned.

“What Stephanie was about to say would no doubt have been exponentially vulgar, but Kate would never have heard it, as she cut Steph off with a rather right and almost smothering hug. Just right around the shoulders.

Stephanie’s voice was muffled by Kate’s left shoulder. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“I saw you, Steph,” Kate said. “You and Cass. And I know… for a fact… you need this right now.”

Stephanie stopped trying to wriggle out of Kate’s embrace after she heard what she had to say. Then she just stood there, wrapped in Kate’s arms for a few seconds, her own arms dangling at her sides.

Finally, after a few seconds, Stephanie said:

“I just… I love her so much, Kate.”

“I know.”

“It actually… physically… hurts.”

“Jesus, I’ve been there.”

Kate loosed Stephanie from her bear hug, and looked at her. Stephanie Brown didn’t look sad or
sick. She just looked defeated.

“Alright,” Kate said. “One thing you gotta understand. If you’re a woman who’s into other women, we got but the one brain cell between all of us to share. Some tattoo artist in Michigan has it right now, and I hope her roller derby tryout goes well. Point is, you’re supposed to fuck up.”

“It can’t be that bad, can it?” Stephanie asked.

“I spent a few days last week trying to convince Wonder Woman not to be attracted to me,” Kate said. “Wonder Woman.”

Stephanie’s eyes went wide. “Holy shit, it is that bad.”

“Look,” Kate said, “I’m not gonna be condescending, or--or spout cliches about how it gets better--”

“It got better for you, though,” Stephanie said. “You’re going out with Wonder Woman.”

Kate desperately fought off the urge to say “YOU’RE FUCKIN’ A RIGHT, I AM!”

“Even that has some weirdness to it, though,” Kate said. “Like… I’ve always been the tall girl in a relationship, and she’s putting her arm around my shoulders like I’ve done with every other girlfriend I’ve had, it--it takes some getting used to.”

“Ohhhhh,” Stephanie said. “That just means you get to be the little spoon.”

Kate… hadn’t thought of it like that.

And now that it was in her mind, she got a little light-headed.

She shook it off, though.

“You have my number, right?”

“Yup,” Stephanie said.

“Good,” said Kate. “If the shit gets thick, I’m there any time, day or night. I’m sleeping? I’m on patrol? I’m with Diana? Doesn’t matter. Because I remember how much it sucked to be a lesbian when I was your age, and I would have paid to have someone to talk to about it.”

“Well,” Stephanie said, shuffling her feet. “I do have a question.”

“Whatever you need.”

“Oh, not about this,” Stephanie said. “No, just a, uh… just a general one I’ve been wondering about for a year and a half now. I haven’t gotten the chance to ask since, y’know, we hated each other?”

“Okay.”

Stephanie folded her arms. “You’re Bruce’s cousin, right?”

“Right.”

“Your dad is his mom’s brother.”

“Uh-huh.”
“Soooo… When his parents died, why didn’t your parents get custody? Why did custody of an eight-year-old worth a shitload of money go to some butler?”

Kate opened her mouth… and it stayed open, because she didn’t have an answer.

“I have no idea,” Kate said, vaguely horrified by this.

And the two of them just stood there like that for a while, sharing an awkward, uncomfortable silence.

“Anyway,” Stephanie said, immediately perking up. “I’m gonna go look at that D&D thing Harper’s trying to pull.”

“Want company?”

Stephanie just shrugged her shoulders, and said "Ehh..."

They started to walk down the hall together.

“But seriously,” Kate said. “You gonna be okay?”

Stephanie’s expression darkened slightly as she walked.

“Cass is gonna make it,” Stephanie said. “She’s gonna be happy, I just know it. So… I win, right?”

Cassandra found Bruce standing in the rear of the Batcave, in front of the Batcomputer. And next to a six foot tall steel capsule.

Cassandra came to a halt a few feet away, and just shrugged her shoulders.

“Well?” she asked.

At which point Bruce reached up to the top of the capsule, and pressed a button.

The two vertical doors of the capsule slid open.

The mask was very similar to her Orphan mask, what with the black lenses on the eyes, and the line of stitches that went from corner to corner of the mouth, cresting on the bridge of the nose. The difference being two long and thin ears emerging from the top on the left and right side of the head.

The suit was black and shiny like Batwoman’s. The cape was black as well, but all black on both sides, with no colored lining. Black gloves and black boots.

In fact, there were only two splashes of color on the whole of the costume.

The first was the yellow utility belt on the waist.

The second was the symbol on the chest.

A yellow outline.

In the shape of a Bat.

Cassandra looked at this costume on the mannequin inside the capsule… until she realized what was happening.
She couldn’t speak.
She couldn’t even breathe.

Cassandra dropped to her knees on the cold concrete of the Batcave.

“The point is,” Bruce said softly, “you don’t have to be Orphan anymore. Not if you don’t want to be.”

That symbol on the chest. The symbol that raised her from nothing and allowed her to save lives. To stop those who would take them.

And it was hers now.

The word slid out of her. As though a pair of large hands wrapped around her stomach and squeezed it out.

“Batgirl…”

“I hope you understand how important this is,” Bruce said. “Me, Barbara, and Kate, we all took The Bat. This is the only time it’s ever been freely given, and it’s being given to you.”

“What… about… Babs?” Cassandra asked.

“Barbara has wanted you to be the second Batgirl since two weeks after you moved into the Clock Tower,” Bruce said. “I, on the other hand, needed to be sure you were ready.”

“How?”

“When you told us you were,” Bruce said. “The night of the Battle of Founders Island. Oracle, and Robin, and Bluebird, they all needed guidance in a very uncertain time. Guidance you provided. Guidance that helped them succeed and save thousands of lives. You led, Cassandra. You weren’t the sword. You were the hand that wielded it.”

Cassandra caught her breath. She collected herself. And then she rose.

“What if I… don’t. want it?” she asked.

Bruce blinked in evident confusion. “You don’t want to be Batgirl?”

“Oh, I want it,” Cassandra said, unable to keep the longing out of her deep voice. “But… what if… I don’t?”

“What… like not doing this at all?”

Cassandra nodded.

“Then you don’t have to,” Bruce said.

Cassandra held up her calloused hands, her flat and dangerous knuckles pointing at him.

“I have… gifts,” Cassandra said. “Shouldn’t I… use them?”

Bruce put his hands in the pockets of his jacket. “So what you’re saying is that since you were trained from birth, with no say in it, you should keep doing it for the rest of your life whether you want to do it or not?”
Cassandra shrugged.

Bruce walked up to her.

“Cassandra… Says who?”

She regarded him for a moment through squinting eyes, before she wrapped him in a hug.

Cassandra considered that there might be some value to this Bruce Wayne character after all.

She let him go when she observed that he was uncomfortable.

“Allright,” Bruce said. “I’m going to go upstairs to give you some time alone. But in thirty minutes, I want you suited up, and ready to go.”

“We’re… going out?” Cassandra asked in confusion.

“Yeah,” Bruce said. “It’s Christmas. Don’t you want to play with your new toys?”

The new Batgirl stood next to Batman on top of Wayne Tower on the mainland, under a fresh spate of falling snow.

The rest of them were behind them, but it was just Batman and Batgirl on the edge, with over a hundred stories beneath them.

“You’ve watched us glide with our capes before?” Batman asked.

Batgirl nodded.

“So you know how to do it.”

Batgirl gave a thumbs up.

“What you need to do,” Batman said, “is jump, and then use your cape to glide. Circle the building a few times. There’s a beacon in the right thumb of your glove. If you have trouble, press it, and I’ll glide down and get you. Have fun… And don’t tell Nightwing or Oracle I told you that. Their first experiences in costume weren’t nearly as pleasant, but I was a different man then.”

Batgirl didn’t know what to say to that, so she opted to say nothing at all.

She took a deep breath, and let it out through her new mask in a fog.

Batgirl stepped closer to the edge, spread her cape, and fell forward.

She could feel the updraft of air beneath her cape in the bones of her arms. She straightened her body out, her legs behind her, and began her slow, circuitous glide down to the snowy streets of Gotham below.

Cassandra Cain, the One-Who-Is-All-That-Never-Was, the Orphan with a despicable father, and the second-ever Batgirl, looked out at the city. How the thin curtain of snow lent its seemingly infinite lights a heavenly bloom.

She thought Gotham City was beautiful.

And maybe… maybe she’d keep it after all.
They all stood at the edge of the roof of Wayne Tower.

Spoiler was on the far left. Because of her broken arm, she had the costume boots, pants, mask, hood, and cape on, but not the shirt or the right glove. She had to wear her purple civilian sweater.

Batwoman was to her right, looking at her.

The first girl Kate Kane had ever had a crush on was Joanie Freed in her eighth grade class. She was a fellow army brat and, at the time, they were getting their education on base at Fort Bragg, in whose infirmary where Kate was actually born (Jacob Kane had been re-stationed there). Yes, yes, it’s true. One of Gotham City’s wealthiest daughters was actually born in North Carolina.

Joanie Freed was straight, which, well, that just fucking figured, didn’t it?

But Kate never had to work with Joanie Freed.

Moreover, even in the parallel universe in which they did share employment, Joanie Freed didn’t get promoted, and that promotion wouldn’t have involved a tight black costume which would have caused the young Kate Kane to Blue Screen with Stage Four Lust.

Batwoman knew that it had to suck to be Stephanie Brown right now.

While Wonder Woman conversed animatedly with Bluebird, Batwoman reached out, put a hand on Spoiler’s shoulder, and squeezed.

A tap on Batwoman’s right shoulder, and she looked to see a smiling Wonder Woman, who kissed the nose of her mask.

“I am going to be a Dwarven Artificer named Hilda,” Wonder Woman said.

“As long as you’re happy,” Batwoman said.

Wonder Woman smiled wider and more innocently. “And my construct’s name is Eunice.”

“I don’t think your friend Cissy likes me,” Robin said.

Bluebird, who had just been talking to Wonder Woman about her D&D character, looked at him.

“Cissy doesn’t like anyone,” Bluebird said. “She thinks anybody who uses hair gel is just a commercial tool for the rich. You didn’t stand a chance.”

“I’m Robin,” he said. “I am a tool for the rich.”

“Yeah, but not a commercial one,” Bluebird said. “Just, y’know… a civic one.”

To Robin’s right, Alfred Pennyworth beheld Cullen Row.

He was wearing Alfred’s Christmas present.

Which was a tuxedo. Not a butler’s tuxedo, but a slim fit that could be found in almost every James Bond movie. It wasn’t Savile Row, but Gotham City’s tailors weren’t too shabby.

“Do you like it?” Alfred asked.
Cullen looked at him, his smile blissful. “It’s... It's tight.”

Alfred frowned. “You need me to let it out?”

“Wha--No, no, I mean it’s awesome. Thank you, Mister Pennyworth.”

“You are most welcome, Mister Row.”

To the right of the be-tuxedoed Cullen Row, Nightwing and Oracle looked down, watching the second Batgirl Cassandra Cain continue her loops around Wayne Tower.

“Goddammit,” Oracle said suddenly, surprising Nightwing.

Looking at her with concern, Nightwing saw Oracle switch off her green hologram mask, and yank off the black one beneath.

The tears in Barbara’s eyes rolled down her cheeks. A smile shot across her face of such sweetness and triumph that it could stop the heart to behold.

Nightwing was struck with pride, and with the fact that redheads with snow falling in their hair just looked beautiful, didn’t they?

He put his arm around her shoulders, kissed her temple, and they both resumed watching the protege of Barbara Gordon make her way down to Earth.

And far off to the right, away from everyone else, stood Batman and Catwoman.

Batman had his arms folded, and he was softly (yet insistently) tapping his right index finger on the left bicep of his armor.

She looked at him and smirked. “Nervous, Sailor?”

Batman looked at her, before looking back down. “The last few days have given me a lot to think about,” he said.

“Such as?” asked Catwoman.

“I have to be realistic,” Batman said. “In a perfect world, I could rid Gotham of crime, and I can hang this uniform up. But this world isn’t perfect. There will come a day when I can’t or won’t be Batman anymore, and when that day comes, this cowl needs to pass to someone else.”

The sigh he let off presaged a bout of silence.

“Dick Grayson can go back and forth on whether he wants to be Batman,” he said. “But the fact of the matter is, he has doubts. And being Batman isn’t something you can be ninety-nine percent sure about. As for Tim Drake, he seems to think there is a normal life after all of this. Beyond the costume. I hope he finds it... I hope he tells me what it’s like.”

Catwoman nodded. “So...”

“So,” Batman said, “nothing is certain. Nothing is guaranteed. The future can change things forever. But if you were to ask me, right here, right now, who should wear the uniform after I stop... then I would say it needs to be Cassandra Cain.”
With her eyes wide, with a voice full of emotion, Catwoman looked at Batman and asked:

“Have you lost your fucking mind?”

To say that Batman was perplexed would be stating things rather softly.

Catwoman actually started sputtering. “I… Just… It… Look, no one is doubting Orph… doubting Batgirl’s skill. But you’re talking going from someone who’s the World’s Greatest Detective to someone who can’t read. Who can’t write. Who can barely even talk.”

“She can learn.”

“How long is it gonna take, though?”

“When I set out to be Batman,” he said, “I wasn’t a tenth of the fighter she is. Just because she and I started in different holes doesn’t mean they weren’t equally deep. And…”

“And what?” Catwoman asked.

“And,” Batman said, “I’ve been doing this for years and not a lot has changed. Maybe a new approach is needed. Maybe someone needs to be Batman for a much better reason than I am.”

“Your parents were murdered,” Catwoman said. “What better reason is there?”

“I put on The Bat,” he said, “and it’s the mission. I put on The Bat, and I’m using my fists to work out all the bad things that have ever happened to me.”

Batman stopped, and looked out over the edge. Batgirl was coming around to this side of Wayne Tower again.

“Tonight, she put on The Bat,” he said. “And tonight… she is happy.”

He looked at Catwoman, and faint traces of smile formed on the ends of his mouth.

“There is no better reason,” he said.

Catwoman appreciated the sentiment.

But still, though…

She pinched the bridge of her nose.

“That’s, uh… That’s really sweet, Sailor. But the fact of the matter is, she can’t do what you do alone.”

When she opened her eyes, she saw Batman looking at her with genuine and honest confusion.

“Selina,” he said. “Neither can I.”

TO BE CONTINUED
Hi, all. GenerallIrritation, here.

See that “To Be Continued” at the end of the last chapter? This is the part where I tell you when and how I’m going to continue.

There are gonna be three one-shots before the third (and final) novel of the Batman of Earth 803. It’s certainly been a ride, but even the fun rides end.

The first one-shot, which drops on Monday, October 14, is called Send-Off. It centers on Batwoman and Catwoman. These two seemed to be the favorites, if the comments are to be believed, and I think they’ve only exchanged one line of dialogue in the last chapter of A Faulty Sword. I figure I should fix that before it’s too late.

The second one-shot, which drops on Monday, October 21, is called The Lonesome Crowded West. I left it to a reader vote both here and on Tumblr as to which superteam would star in this one, and the winner, by one single solitary vote… is Young Justice.

And the third one-shot, which drops on Monday, October 28 (which, oddly enough, is on the eve of the one year anniversary of the day I posted the first chapter of The Undying), is called Fall Classic. It centers on Spoiler. And this… this is the pivotal one. This one sets the tone for the third book. When I say the last line of this story changes everything, by God I mean it.

Then two weeks later, on Monday, November 11, the first chapter of the final story drops.

And all I can give you is a title.

Motherland.

See you on Monday and, as always, thank you for reading...

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!