# Sea & Sky: Debut

## by kerithwyn

### Summary

The Wayne Enterprises reception.

Nightwing/Tempest, long established relationship. Dick is a cop in (undestroyed) Bludhaven.

### Notes


Thanks to: Everyone who I've been boring with this one for the past several *years.* Your collective patience and/or prodding continually saves me from giving up in disgust at my own sluggishness. Particular thanks to my Offpanel cohorts for cheerleading and helping hands.

Previously: Plans for a significant trade agreement between the nation of Atlantis and Gotham's Wayne Enterprises are set underway (Sea and Sky: Diplomatic Relations). And in very short order....
Chapter 1

Prologue 1

(Monday)

"Sir?"

Lucius Fox looked up from his desk at the young woman hovering in the doorway. She didn't have an appointment, but she also wouldn't *be* standing there if Rita, his diligent overseer--better known by her proper title of "executive administrative assistant"--hadn't evaluated and approved her request to see him. "Come in...Melinda, is it?" That was it, Melinda Talbot from the secretarial pool. "What can I do for you?"

She advanced, all but shaking with nervousness. "Mr. Fox, sir, it's my cousin, she sent me...well, with the focus on the Atlantis stuff I thought you'd want to know...."

"Know what?" he prompted gently when she trailed off, gesturing for her to take a seat in one of the comfortable-yet-professionally suitable chairs in front of his desk. He knew they were comfortable; he'd tested them himself before signing off on the purchase.

Melinda sat, tucking her skirt under her legs, and chewed on her lip for a moment before she continued. "My cousin Holly writes for Page Six, you know, in The Post." She darted a glance at him to see if he'd followed the reference. Lucius nodded gravely, suppressing an instinctive groan. Nothing he *ever* wanted to hear came out of Page Six. "One of their photographers got a picture of, um, the ambassador and Mr. Grayson, and I thought--well, here." She extracted a folded bit of paper from her skirt pocket and leaned forward to hand it over the desk. "That's the advance copy."

He read the brief paragraph, frowning. "How are they running this?"

Melinda understood exactly what he meant. "Holly said it's a 'Just Asking' headline, because they know they'll never get confirmation from anyone here."

Thank heaven for small favors and a rabidly tight-lipped PR department that ensured every Wayne Enterprises employee knew the penalties for information leakage. "Just Asking" meant it was rumor, rather than fact, but it needed to be dealt with nevertheless.

"They're publishing it on Friday," Melinda volunteered, and Lucius nodded with grim comprehension. Naturally they would run it the day before the reception, for maximum impact.

"All right. Thank you for bringing this to my attention."

She stood, looking enormously relieved. "I hope--I hope it won't cause too much trouble."

"No, no. It's always best to be informed." He offered his best reassuring smile and she went out, back straighter than when she came in.

Rita's voice crackled over the intercom. "Hold all calls?"

"For a few minutes, thanks."

His own staffers' whispers had been one thing, and easily ignored. PR was perfectly capable of defusing random gossip, both internally and externally. This, though....
The situation held a certain irony. In the early days of his association with Wayne Enterprises, Lucius every so often wondered if *Bruce* was gay. His relationships with the women he dated were so conspicuously and deliberately superficial, his behavior occasionally so secretive...but after awhile it became clear that Bruce held nearly everyone at that same distance. Aside from flagrantly imaginary tabloid stories, there had never been a whiff of a rumor otherwise.

Lucius leaned back in his chair, pinching his lower lip between finger and thumb (a terrible habit, Tanya would swat his hand away if she saw it) and thinking about what needed to happen next.

***

From: Carol Montgomery  
Date: Monday March 26, 2003 6:37 PM  
To: Lucius.Fox@WE.net  
Subject: The Atlantean reception

Mr. Fox,

I've received a final guarantee from the last caterer, after significant threatening gestures toward his bottom line. All other arrangements are in place, pending the arrival of various shipments.

Attached please find a list of confirmed dignitaries.

I received another protestor call this morning. Nothing specifically threatening or dangerous, but I know you wanted to keep informed.

Carol

From: Lucius Fox  
Date: Monday March 26, 2003 6:46 PM  
To: Carol.Montgomery@WE.net  
Subject: The Atlantean reception

I'm sure you made only the appropriate threats. I know you've done your usual brilliant job.

Thanks for letting me know re: the call.

Anything else that needs doing, we can handle tomorrow. Have a good night.

Lucius  
(That means go home, Carol.)

Lucius hit send and considered for a moment. Tanya would be sitting down to dinner with the kids by now, but Carol's email reminded him of one additional detail he'd wanted to handle himself. Regardless of how beneficial the Atlantean deal should prove to Gotham's economy, someone might decide that the reception would make an excellent platform for one kind of protest or other. Additional security would be in order. That necessity dovetailed nicely with another idea he'd been mulling over, given the growing tensions between the "OGs," the original Gothamites who stayed in Gotham during No Man's Land, and the newly returned "deezes"--the so-called deserters.

As far as Lucius was concerned, there was no shame in leaving a city ravaged by plague, demolished by earthquake, and abandoned by all outside support. He and Tanya hadn't debated the decision at all. Oh, he admired the efforts of Jim Gordon and the others in the GCPD who'd stayed behind to
maintain what order they could...but at the time Lucius felt he could do more for Gotham on the outside, fighting in the financial arenas he knew best rather than on her ruined streets.

Since Bruce also (wisely, Lucius thought) left during NML, a number of OG's deemed him a traitor to Gotham. If they could have seen how fiercely Bruce fought at the Senate hearings, how devastated he'd been by his failure there...they simply had no idea of his devotion to the city. Bruce would never abandon Gotham; his memories of his parents were here. Given his public profile and visibility, *personal* safeguards for the CEO of Wayne Enterprises were probably long past due.

Thanks to his kids' costume obsession, he knew of a hero right here in Gotham who might be able to solve both the immediate and long-term security problems. Lucius wrote a note to himself to place a call first thing in the morning, closed up his office, and headed home for the night.

***

(Tuesday)

There wasn't any need to request a special meeting with Bruce; they had a standing appointment to discuss various WE matters on Tuesday afternoons. That gave Lucius most of the day to think about what he needed to ask Bruce, and how.

He knew very well that Bruce's "airhead act" was precisely that--a charade. It was a useful ploy, but over the years, Lucius had rarely seen Bruce truly *surprised* by anything. He also knew better than to underestimate Bruce's understanding of the facts: too often, Wayne Enterprises' supposedly empty-headed CEO made careless, ostensibly frivolous suggestions to complex problems that proved to have a spark of a brilliant plan in them. Fanning that spark into a flame was Lucius's job, and one he enjoyed.

Why Bruce didn't illuminate the solutions himself, Lucius didn't know. For whatever reasons, Bruce found it easier to play the fool and be dismissed as one. For his part, Lucius appreciated the trust Bruce placed in *him* by allowing him to see under the surface, however occasionally.

But personal matters could be difficult. He knew about Bruce's parents, of course, and understood the man well enough to know that the parade of starlets and socialites through his life was as much a sham as his space cadet image. Behind all that wealth was a deeply lonely man. His only confidants seemed to be his "gentleman's gentleman" Alfred Pennyworth and Dr. Leslie Thompkins--both old friends to his parents--and his former ward, Dick Grayson. By mutual agreement, Lucius and Tanya tried to include Bruce in family occasions where appropriate, and his kids regarded Bruce as their favorite uncle. It was the least they could do.

By the time 4:30 rolled around, Lucius had decided that the only honest approach was a direct one. "Bruce, there's something else we should discuss before you go."

"Hmm? What's that? I've got a date, you know." Bruce Wayne looked toward the door longingly, but turned obediently back to face him.

"This won't take long. It's about the reception on Saturday. I assume you'll be accompanied--"

"Already taken care of, Lucius, is that all?" Bruce asked, grin firmly in place. Which was...interesting. Bruce didn't usually plan social activities that far in advance. But it wasn't his place to pry.

"That's good to hear. But I wanted to sound you out on another matter." He took a breath. "It's about Dick."
"Oh?" Bruce was still smiling, but the humor didn't touch his eyes. Lucius was well familiar with that look. Usually, the person on the receiving end was—in the vernacular—SOL on obtaining Bruce's cooperation for whatever he or she sought. But their long association granted him a certain amount of leeway.

"There's been gossip about his relationship with the Atlantean ambassador. That it's more than friendship."

The smile on Bruce's face vanished, replaced by a stonier mask that revealed nothing. Lucius held up a hand to forestall his reply, determined to say his piece. "You know I don't pry into your personal affairs. Or his, for that matter. But if it's true, we'll need to arrange for spin control if they're obviously together at the reception."

Bruce's expression had hardened, but his voice remained light. "Didn't I see on the guest list that the ambassador was bringing that Titans girl, the pretty dark-haired one...Wonder Girl!" He cocked his head, squinting as he searched his memory. "No, that's not right. She changed it, didn't she? I can't keep track."

"Troia," Lucius said, because it was his job to know, "and yes...but she's his friend and teammate, nothing more." Garth had sounded highly amused when he'd told Lucius that Donna Troy wanted to attend purely for the chance to dress up. Apparently, there wasn't much time for high-society socializing in the Titans' daily lives.

"Oh. Well, what's the problem, Lucius?"

It was a test, he was sure of it. Obliquely, he resented that. "No *problem,* Bruce, at least not for me." He let that sit a moment. "I need to know so we can be prepared for any questions."

This time the irritation was evident, but directed elsewhere. "I don't see why it's anyone's business."

Lucius sighed. "Bruce. Please. I *know* you're not that naïve."

Bruce shrugged, finally tired of the evasions. "What do you want me to say? Is it true? It's true. And I don't want Dick bothered over it. I mean that, Lucius."

"I know." All these years, they'd worked hard at keeping Dick out of the public eye. Interviews with "the billionaire's ward" were strictly forbidden before Dick turned eighteen, and since then he'd made his own life away from Wayne Manor. Lucius knew Bruce and Dick's relationship had been intermittently strained, but never doubted Bruce's concern for Dick, or vice versa. Dick once even asked Lucius to "watch out for him" as best he could. "Certainly, Dick can speak for himself. But I can tell 'our' reporters not to pursue it."

"That's--thank you." Bruce's wary, defensive posture relaxed. "And you're right, as usual. Dick isn't the kind to hide. He's not afraid of anything."

Lucius nodded. "That's admirable. Well, then, if we treat this as a nonissue, hopefully everyone will follow suit."

...and then, because he was allowed to get away with such things, he grinned. "I don't know what it is about Dick and those Titans...first Starfire, now Tempest. You'd think he *wanted* publicity."

Bruce laughed, the sound easy and unforced. "I think it's the spandex. Either that or he's an adrenaline addict." He glanced at his watch. "And I really do need to go."

"Sure. I'll have the numbers for you on the Scott Telecomm proposal tomorrow."
"All right. Good night, Lucius." Bruce waved casually in his direction and left. Lucius chuckled again and went back to his desk and the never-dull business of running one of the world's largest corporations.

***

Prologue 2

From the *Gotham Gazette*:

This week on the social scene, there's nothing to compare to the grand gala to be held in Gotham's partially rebuilt civic center to celebrate the signing of a multibillion dollar deal between Wayne Enterprises and the undersea nation of Atlantis. This massive trade agreement focuses on textile, agricultural, and technological concerns, including advanced waterproofing techniques.

Sources say the accord was reached with unprecedented speed, in large part due to the assistance of the Atlantean ambassador, Garth (no last name), also known as the superhero Tempest, a member of the Manhattan-based Titans.

"He's been extraordinarily forthcoming," says Lucius Fox, the Chief Operating Officer of Wayne Enterprises. "We're very, very pleased to help open trade between Atlantis and the surface. It's a whole new arena, and we intend to work closely with the Atlanteans to ensure that it's a mutually beneficial exchange on both sides."

Wayne Enterprises CEO Bruce Wayne was, as usual, unavailable for comment.

Celebrities on the guest list include Wayne and his former ward, Wayne Enterprises heir-presumptive Richard Grayson; reclusive (and unlikely to attend) Gotham Broadcasting/Scott Telecommunications president Alan Scott; award-winning Daily Planet journalists Clark Kent and Lois Lane; Gotham Police Commissioner James Gordon; and a who's who's list of Gotham's finest.

(For more on the financial rundown, see the report in the business section)

***

Jenny-Lynn Hayden listened distractedly to the art director's list of upcoming projects, knowing she should be paying more attention and yet unable to focus. This was a *good* gig for a rookie photographer, even if she suspected New Style! Magazine hired her more for the celebrity value of her green skin and former superhero career than for her thin resume and portfolio. Whatever the reason, she was *in* and determined to stay that way.

Without realizing it, she'd been idly doodling on a notepad. She put down the pen, deliberately making herself stop. Drawings on an otherwise-blank page, even her own mediocre scrawls, made her think about Kyle.

She didn't want to think about Kyle. It'd been *her* decision to break up with him, after they'd run into Donna Troy and the fact that Kyle wasn't over her in the least became painfully evident, but that didn't make the sting any less.

Stefan finally reached the highlight everyone was waiting for. "And as I'm sure you know...." He looked around expectantly, clearly milking the moment. "We need to send someone down to Gotham to cover the Wayne-Atlantis reception. Lots of glitterati pics, real fluff stuff. Very high-profile, people!" All the other photographers leaned forward, excited and hopeful; Jen didn't bother. As the low woman on the totem pole, she had no reason to expect such a plum assignment.
Stefan's next words caught her completely off-guard. "So, Jenny, this Tempest guy, you know him? From the costume stuff?"

Jen covered her surprise, gave her best confident smile, and cheerfully lied through her teeth. "Me and him? Like *that.*" She crossed two fingers in illustration. At least she'd stood in the same *room* with him before, at the big Warriors' party after the Cyborg fiasco, and that was more than anyone else here could claim.

The art director nodded, seeming pleased. "Okay, then, you're it. Have fun."

"Oh, I will," she murmured, gathering up her notepad and ignoring the resentful glares of the other photographers, already making plans. She'd probably break her bank account for a new dress for this thing, but it'd be *worth* it. Sure, she'd be going for official reasons, but there was no reason she couldn't enjoy herself while she was at it. Maybe Tempest would remember her after all and she could persuade him to agree to a couple of candid pics. Exclusives. Maybe even--

Jen shook her head at herself, grinning. First things first. She went back to her tiny cubicle, unlocked the bottom drawer, and pulled her cell out of her purse. She dialed and he answered on the second ring. "Hi, daddy, it's Jen. Guess what? I'm going to be in Gotham this Saturday for-- You are? Me too! That's great, then, I'll see you there. But I wanted to know if you and Molly were free for lunch on Sunday...."

***

(Wednesday)

Pennyworth showed her into the study at Wayne Manor with assurances that 'Master Bruce' would arrive presently, and left with a murmured comment about going to count the silver. An old joke, and despite herself, Selina smiled at it. If they genuinely mistrusted her restraint, she never would have been left alone in this house with all its extremely...tempting valuables. But then, petty thievery lost its appeal very early in her career. No challenge to it.

Bruce had promised a *real* night on the town as prepayment for her agreeing to attend his little party. Selina was forced to admit--at least privately--that she was curious enough about the secret reasons under the public event to go regardless of Bruce's incentive. It'd be worth the show if only to watch Grayson hoodwink the supposed elite of Gotham society.

Selina always appreciated a good scam, even if she wasn't the one running it.

Tonight made three times she'd be seeing Bruce this week. Probably too many. It'd be easy to fall into complacency, a ritual, a *routine.* The respectable society woman, waiting around for her man to come home from work--Selina cut the thought off with a shudder. She would never allow it. *Bruce* would never allow it.

Barely a moment later, Bruce came through the door as if summoned. He was dressed in his daytime costume, armor as specialized as his usual evening outfit. But he wasn't wearing his Brucie-face, and his nighttime aspect hadn't yet fully emerged. This in-between state...unnerved her. It reflected too little of either to anticipate, but that was all right. The implied...trust?...made her wary. Their masks were too precious and too necessary to cast aside so casually.

And she was a fool if she honestly thought he hadn't taken that into account before he'd walked through the door.

Bruce nodded to her. "I hope you haven't waited long."
"Alfred's already told you to the second," she replied. "Where are we going tonight?"

"We have reservations at Cameron's by the Park--"

"That's a lovely bribe."

His eyebrow traveled upward. "You'll behave yourself, won't you."

He wasn't talking about tonight, and it wasn't a question. Selina half-turned away, pouting. "Don't you trust me?"

Bruce was wearing that little half-smirk that made her want to slap him. Or rip the clothes off his body. Or both, possibly at the same time. "Not...entirely."

"But that's why you lo--like me." She snarled at herself for the slip. There were *no* promises between them, *no* commitments, and that was entirely how she preferred it. They would both be fooling themselves to think anything else was possible.

"It's one of the reasons." That was as close as Bruce would ever come to a kind of reassurance. Maybe even more than she wanted to hear. Knowing...anything...for a fact might take the spice out of their little arrangement.

It wouldn't hurt to remind him of it. "I don't want to *bore* you by being predictable, like one of your society girls."

That provoked an actual laugh out of him, a real chuckle as opposed to one of his faux-polite Brucie guffaws. "Selina, you could never be predictable." He'd moved up behind her, as silent in his executive's suit as in the other. His hands slid around her waist, drawing her back. She tensed, but permitted it. His lips hovered by her ear. "I *depend* on it."

"How foolish of you." She slid her hands over his, nails grazing lightly in subtle threat. No need for scratching, yet. "Depending on my unpredictability, isn't that a contradiction? You're sure to be disappointed, one way or the other."

His mouth dropped to her neck, breath ghosting over her skin just short of a kiss. "I've done the risk analysis. The reward is worth it."

Every now and then, Selina thought she understood the compulsion that bound Harvey and his coin. Caught between two conflicting impulses, it would simply be *easier* to leave the decision up to fate. She could flee, refusing to be a prize of any kind. She could turn in anger, following through on the desire to slap the smug certainty off of Bruce's face. The problem with the coin was that it never allowed for a third option, the purely capricious alternative that Selina preferred whenever possible.

In this case, the one that would give her the most *satisfaction.* She twisted in the circle of Bruce's arms, sliding her body against his and tearing at his clothes, ripping away the silk and linen. Her mouth found his chest and then they were on the floor, rolling over each other, no disagreement between them at all.

And if at one point or another her nails did sink into his flesh, well, what was one more set of scars on the surface of his skin? It wasn't as if she could truly mark him.

{end prologue}
"Dick, you're sure you want to do this? We could still--ah--play it 'straight.'"

"Yes, I'm sure." Dick frowned at the mirror, hands fighting with his tie. "If we want any kind of life together outside the Tower, this is the best way."

"But Bruce was right, you know. It doesn't have to be this public."

Dick grinned at the reflection of Garth's image. "I don't mind everyone knowing I've snagged the most gorgeous Atlantean in the room."

"The only Atlantean in the room," Garth said with ironic accuracy. A number of Atlantean diplomats and negotiators had also been invited, but unsurprisingly, all of them declined to attend. It was too easy for them to become dehydrated, and none of them quite...trusted him enough to let him spellcast them. Although that wasn't entirely fair; their vulnerability was very real, and he remembered his own close calls from the days when he didn't have magic to protect him.

Most of the negotiation had been accomplished via videoconferencing, with Garth acting as a go-between. When the half-aboveground, half-submerged Atlantean outpost to the United Nations in New York was completed, face-to-face meetings with the other diplomats would become possible.

He was looking forward to that. He'd found the challenge interesting, but the other representatives possessed actual *training* toward diplomatic tasks, and the sooner they could take up those duties, the better.

Dick was still, uncharacteristically, wrestling with his tie. "Their loss. Should be a good party."

Garth moved behind him, reaching around to brush Dick's hands away from the tie and knot it. "There. Simple."

"Ah, you have fallen prey to my ploy." Dick smirked and leaned against him. "I wanted to get in more groping before we needed to leave. And since you started it...."

"As if," Garth said with amusement, "you had to *trick* me into touching you." The greater difficulty was going to be in letting him go before the car arrived, and Dick knew it.

But Dick merely rested against him, offering silent support against his unspoken apprehension. To be the focus of so much notice--definitely Dick's forte, not his. Oh, he knew the speech backward and forward, had memorized his prepared responses, but the actuality of the evening's imminent event...disconcerted him. Garth let his hands drift down to entwine with Dick's and reminded himself that he'd gone through the same thing in Poseidonis a few weeks ago, and come through fine. And ironically, there would be more friendly faces in the crowd tonight.

"Barbara said she'd be there?" he asked into Dick's shoulder, and felt him nod.

"With her father. Donna will meet us in Gotham, and get this--Lucius got Dinah to work security. Not," Dick added quickly, "that he's expecting trouble. As a precaution."

"I understand." Only three months had passed since the repeal of the No Man's Land edict. Gotham was reinventing itself, as was its populace. Their reactions would be shaped by the traumas of the preceding year and couldn't be entirely predicted. But then, the rush to redefine the city contributed
to the speed with which the Atlantean agreement was reached.

"Bruce and Lucius have handled a thousand of these things," Dick continued. "Trust them. Most of the people there want *entertainment* more than anything else, and they'll do that themselves between the champagne and the gossip. You know how these things work."

He did, but felt better for having Dick remind him of it. He was about to say as much when he heard the mischievous smile in Dick's next words.

"There might be one or two other special guests. You'll see." Dick squeezed his hands and glanced over at the clock. "Ready? Limo should be here soon."

"Almost," Garth said, and went to find his shoes.

A knock sounded on the door a few minutes later. Garth opened it to see Clancy, breathless from her evident dash up the stairs. "There's a, a limousine outside for you. It's verra large," she added, sounding impressed. "But I'm guessing from your outfit you were expectin' it."

"Thanks, Clancy." Dick appeared at his side, shrugging into his tuxedo jacket. "We'll be home late. Don't wait up."

"As if," she sniffed, and stood aside to let them exit, Dick locking the door as he followed Garth out. Garth gave Clancy an absent nod as he headed for the stairs, already immersed in mental rehearsal of his impending speech.

"Hey," Clancy called from behind them. She smiled as they glanced back. "Y'both look...really nice." She hesitated, then made shooing motions. "Now get on with you. Fine as you are, you're not wantin' to be late, wherever you're going."

Garth felt obliquely guilty that she didn't *know* who they were, and they should have told her before this, but now was far too late. They both waved to her as they started down the stairs. Halfway to the ground floor, Dick said softly, "We'll talk to her tomorrow."

Not *actually* telepathy, but sometimes Dick's pseudo-clairvoyant moments were wholly as accurate.

Downstairs, the driver held the door for them in perfect, proper silence after a murmured, "Evening, sirs. We'll be in Gotham within the hour."

The ride was almost preternaturally quiet, courtesy of the car's excellent soundproofing. Garth might have preferred the train for the ambient noise and activity that would have provided distraction from his own anxiety. He shuffled restlessly with his notes until Dick closed his hands firmly over the sheaf of cards and made him stop. "You know it backward and forward. Don't worry." He hesitated. "I wasn't going to show you this, but...."

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "Babs faxed it over."

Garth opened the sheet to see Barbara's neat handwriting across the top of a newspaper article.

"Guys, you've hit the big time. From Page Six--"

"...WHICH erstwhile scion's surprising move to a neighboring town is really a cover for his alternative lifestyle? The hunky heir shocked all when he left Gotham and set up shop in Bludhaven, but is his plebian turn explained by the equally gorgeous diplomat he's been spending quality time with? The two young studs have been seen dining out and then returning to the exile's apartment.
only leaving to head off to their respective pursuits of justice...."

Other text followed, but the photo that accompanied the piece spoke louder. The faces were covered by question marks, but Garth remembered that restaurant, and the rare glass of wine enjoyed by the light of the setting sun.

He stared at Dick, nonplussed. "This is...news?"

Dick grinned. "Some people think it is." And then with that not-telepathy: "Don't. This was inevitable the second I got involved with Wayne Enterprises again. I *chose* that."

"On my behalf."

"My choice," Dick stated with finality, and there really was nothing to say to that.

It was raining in Gotham when the limo pulled up to the civic center. "That's helpful," Garth murmured, and Dick laughed.

"Hundreds of ruined expensive hairdos and dresses, and all *you* think is, great, more water to pull out of the air."

"The humidity augments the spell," he snapped back, more sharply than he'd intended, and of course Dick already knew that.

Dick answered him with an encouraging smile and a wink. "Let's go get 'em. I love you." And opened the door before Garth could reply.

The effects of the rain, it appeared, would be minimal after all. A long waterproofed canopy stretched from the entrance of the civic center to the doors of the cars that were busily unloading their glittering passengers. As he and Dick stepped out of the limo, cameras flashed from the legions of photographers crowded on either side, umbrellas precariously balanced over their equipment to prevent water damage to their precious film and electronics.

The barrage of shouted questions immediately followed their emergence. "Ambassador, what's your government's position on Japanese whaling?" "Does your Titans status conflict with your ambassadorial duties?" "Is it true that Atlantis maintains a standing navy immediately outside U.S. waters?"

The ones directed at Dick were more personal. "Mr. Grayson, has Bruce Wayne officially named you as the heir to the Wayne fortune?" "What *really* happened to break up you and Starfire?" "Why does Wayne let his former ward live in a ramshackle brownstone in one of the country's most disreputable cities?" "Are you and the ambassador--"

There were answers, but protocol demanded that they not stop to provide them. Resigned but unsurprised grumbling came from either side as it became obvious that neither he nor Dick were going to indulge the questioners, and the reporters' attention shifted to the newest arrivals as Garth and Dick reached the main door.

Donna was waiting for them inside. She nodded with her chin toward the throngs outside. " Heck of a gauntlet."

"They don't bite if you don't feed 'em," Dick said, precisely the right note of offhand dismissal in his tone. "I hope they didn't crowd you too much."

"Nope. Thanks for sending the limo. That was extremely thoughtful." Garth bit back a laugh at their
so-careful attitude of casual acquaintance, purely a show for any onlookers.

"Thank Bruce, it was his idea," Dick said to her clear astonishment, and turned to Garth. "Coat?" Garth shrugged his overcoat off and handed it to Dick, who took it and his own to the nearby coatroom window.

Donna watched their byplay with amusement, then looked him up and down, slowly, deliberately. "*Very* sharp."

"My personal shopper has good taste," he told her.

She smiled in acknowledgment, reaching up to take his face in her hands. "I am so *proud* of you."

Garth overlaid his fingers with hers and brought their intertwined hands down, aware of Dick's watching (watchful?) eyes. He wasn't jealous of Donna's playful affection, surely, but they were playing a role for the public and over-familiarity might send the wrong signals to the press. "I'm so glad you're here."

Her gaze narrowed. "Nervous?"

He tried to make a joke of it. "The hard part is over. The rest is just--"

"Don't be. Diana says she's been very impressed when you've spoken at the U.N."

"She--really?"

"Would I lie?" Donna winked and continued, "Diana always feels like she's *preaching* instead of sharing ideas. She likes how you approach your speeches. I know she wanted to talk to you about it, but with her schedule...." She shrugged.

Diana liked his speeches. *Wonder Woman* liked his speeches. That was going to take time to sink in. But right now Lucius Fox was waiting at the entrance of the ballroom and the show, as Dick would say, was about to start.

***

He'd known the Events staff was good, but what they'd put together on such short notice was nothing short of miraculous. Lucius studied the room with satisfaction, spotted a workman's ladder resting against one of the far walls, and saw Carol already pointing in the same direction for one of her people to remove it. She was busy enough that she wouldn't appreciate any distraction from him; he'd catch up with her later this evening, or perhaps tomorrow, and express his admiration.

He stood at the doorway to the ballroom, shaking hands with the early guests, waiting for the guest of honor to arrive. The ambassador would be here in good time, but Lucius hoped that Bruce would forego his usual belated entrance and spare him the need to delay the Atlantean presentation.

...was that? Yes. The dark-haired woman who'd slipped unobtrusively through the gauntlet outside was now unwrapping her headscarf and standing taller than when she'd come through the main door-a bit of subtle but effective camouflage. It probably wouldn't have worked for her more-famous sister, but Troia, while spectacularly beautiful, wasn't as...*exotic* as the ambassador from Themyscira. She left her scarf and wrap at the coat check, glanced briefly toward the main room, and returned to hover by the door. Waiting for her friend, Lucius guessed, and was on the brink of heading over to introduce himself when a surge in the clamor from the swarm of reporters signaled the appearance of someone notable.
Sure enough, moments later Dick and the ambassador darted into the lobby. Lucius watched as Garth greeted his teammate; if he didn't know what he knew, he might have assumed an entirely different relationship.

Dick led the other two over to where he stood and Lucius shook their hands in turn, smiling. "Dick, Ambassador." He saved his most brilliant smile for the woman at Garth's side. "This must be Ms. Troy."

"Donna, please," she said, seeming charmed. "The room is absolutely lovely."

"I'll be sure to pass your compliments along to our Events Coordinator. She'll be thrilled." There was little hope of managing the next words with grace, but he'd been forced to swear to relay them. "I'm also required to tell you that my kids are big, big admirers."

"Oh, that's sweet." Donna smiled as if she didn't hear that, most likely, every time she went out in public. "What are their names?"

"Timothy and Tiffany."

"Timothy and Tiffany," she repeated as if committing the names to memory. "When I get back to the Tower I can send them something more personal than a--a signed cocktail napkin, if you think they'd like that."

"That's very kind," Lucius started, and Garth laughed with obvious affection.

"You should send them copies of the pictures with you in pigtails."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "*You* were wearing the short-shorts back then."

"But he carried them off in style," Dick cut in, saving Lucius the need to comment, for which he was profoundly grateful. He was also considering the chilling realization that Garth and Donna—as "Aqualad" and "Wonder Girl"—were active as costumed heroes at the same ages Lucius's own kids were now. They'd been more than ordinary teenagers, but the thought of Tim and Tiff in those situations...utterly terrifying.

But there would, he hoped, be no cause for heroics tonight. "Ambassador, we're finished with the preparations. Our techs ran a thorough video check and sound test of the presentation and it's all ready to go."

Garth nodded gravely. Dick forewarned Lucius that Garth was likely to be nervous before his speech, although he'd promised that would not interfere with his actual delivery. "Thank you again, Mr. Fox."

"My pleasure, believe me. Dick, if I could speak with you a moment?"

The glance that passed between Dick and the ambassador would've told Lucius everything, if he hadn't already known. In which case it was a good thing they weren't trying to hide, because they'd have done a poor job of it. On a practical level, it only mattered insofar as Wayne Enterprises' reputation was concerned.

On his own discretion he'd sent one of the private detectives on the payroll down to Bludhaven in disguise, to assess the situation. The Chinese landlady was appalled at the suggestion that she gossip about her tenants, a Mr. Law threatened the "reporter" with his cane, and the man-mountain living in the basement merely stated, "Garth is nice." Lucius had already worked that out for himself.
The report indicated that the neighbors weren't inclined to talk, which was enough to satisfy Lucius on the professional front. But this was more than a professional matter.

"Dick, I wanted you to know, however open you want to be about your relationship with the ambassador is at your own discretion." He smiled to Dick's startled look. "Bruce confirmed for me what I'd already guessed. But it doesn't make any difference to me or the company, you should know that."

"I...appreciate that." Dick quickly reclaimed his customary humor. "But this is Garth's show. I'm mostly here for the snacks."

Lucius snorted, recognizing the same kind of deflection Bruce often used on him. "Oh, your part in arranging all this won't be forgotten, trust me."

Dick grimaced, surely an exaggerated effect. "I'm just a 'Haven cop."

It wasn't all that often he had the chance to tease like this. Lucius relished the opportunity. "You helped engineer one of the biggest financial deals in recent WE history. Don't think that'll go unnoticed."

"Uh. Thanks. I think."

Lucius stifled a grin at Dick's unease. "The stockholders have certainly taken note. As well they might. The expectations of primogeniture, if nothing else--"

Dick's gaze stayed cool, but his voice carried an edge. "I'm not his son."

"No. And I do understand your relationship with Bruce is more complex than that. But in lieu of any other apparent heir, you need to understand their point of view."

Dick sighed. "Maybe if Bruce got over his self-induced celibacy kick."

Lucius coughed and discreetly pointed to where Bruce--early, for a wonder--was chauffeuring Selina Kyle around the hall. "I don't think celibacy is necessarily the issue."

***

Organizing parties for a living wasn't, by any means, the most important job in the world; but as the Events Coordinator for Wayne Enterprises, Carol Montgomery thought that her work was among the most stressful of occupations. And occasionally extremely rewarding.

"Make it happen," they said, and she did.

She'd begun working out the arrangements under the premise that this was a reception for new business partners, only to find that said new partners weren't *attending* save for one lone representative. Mr. Fox explained about the Atlanteans' breathing limitations, and that the ambassador was serving as a stand-in for the other negotiators. That was unusual enough, but there'd also been some confusion about the guest list: business leaders and members of the social elite, not necessarily an intuitive mix. Mr. Fox rolled his eyes, shrugged, and said that Mr. Wayne was planning to host the first truly important post-NML party, with the business deal providing the pretext. Once she'd understood that--and gotten the authorization for an essentially 'sky's the limit' budget--all the rest fell into place with no more than the usual near-catastrophes and race to the finish.

Mr. Wayne wouldn't hear of holding this evening's event anywhere other than the newly rebuilt Gotham Civic Center--or to be more precise, the *partially* rebuilt Gotham Civic Center. He'd
insisted on renting the venue despite its half-finished state, and the Gotham economy was too fragile to decline the kind of funds he was willing to throw around to make the center's main hall available for his party. The glass-fronted building underwent hastily cleaning, its completed interiors scrubbed of dust and the unfinished areas barricaded off from public access.

That still left the place bare of furnishings, so Wayne Enterprises provided those as well. They'd supplied everything from tables and chairs to a dance floor and the rented crystal chandeliers—with those rentals imparting another boon to the local economy. Carol strongly suspected that when all was said and done, Mr. Wayne would suggest that the accoutrements be bought outright and "donated" to the civic center as a gesture of goodwill from Wayne Enterprises to Gotham City. Thankfully the *carpets* had already been installed, or they'd have needed to supply those too.

Carol had to admit that Mr. Wayne chose the right venue, despite the difficulties. Transformed by her staff's decorating efforts, the main hall projected a warm and inviting feel, aided by the big band sound from the ensemble musicians. The choice of music was, thankfully, a no-brainer; everyone seemed to like the atmosphere generated by the upbeat tempo.

Catering, on the other hand, would have been easier if she'd had the option of subcontracting to the Iceberg Lounge's excellent staff. In the wake of No Man's Land half of her usual contacts hadn't resumed business, and the other half were not yet back to normal function. Iceberg was the only operation running at full speed, but Mr. Wayne maintained some kind of grudge against Mr. Cobblepot and refused to allow any corporate dealings with him whatsoever. Rumors said it had something to do with that "Penguin" business, but honestly, the poor man endured enough trouble with his...deformity...without holding those old stories against him. But it wasn't her place to question the boss, merely to accommodate his whims.

Those whims meant scrambling four different half-functional catering outfits together to cover everything and keep it local. With the improvisation came the additional cost of renting tuxedos for the wait staff to create a uniform standard. By way of concession to their right to advertising, each tray of hors d'oeuvres carried stand-up cards with the proper company name. Inelegant, but necessary.

There'd been some late panic about providing the appropriate kind of cuisine for Atlantean custom, until the ambassador told them not to worry about it. Everyone would have a chance to see what an Atlantean party looked like, he said, when the embassy opened in New York in a few months. A quick call from Mr. Fox to Richard Grayson confirmed that no extraordinary measures were necessary...although Carol ordered a larger percentage of vegetarian options than usual in deference to the ambassador's preferences.

He'd requested a single indulgence: The waiters circulating among the crowd with trays of finger food and champagne also carried pitchers of purified water, a subtle reminder of the precious resource that all lives—Atlantean and human—depended on. A small request, but requiring shipping from upstate since Gotham's supply was barely enough to provide the needs of the city. Tap water had finally been declared drinkable a little over a month ago, and even then there were periodic boil orders issued by city hall. It was a lovely gesture despite that, but Carol suspected that most of the attendees would be more interested in the open bar. The trained and eagle-eyed bartenders were prepared to deftly refuse service to anyone appearing overly intoxicated and perfectly willing to call security to confiscate car keys, but considering that reputations would be on full display tonight, she thought that the majority of guests would refrain from overindulgence.

Carol paused to watch from the sidelines as the room started to fill up: Women in their fashionable dresses and heavy coats, casually cursing the predictable but never-anticipated chill March weather that required them to bundle against the cold and thwarted grand entrances. Men bedecked in tailored
suits, and even a few tuxedos for the most formal. And as a result of the eleventh-hour rainstorm, the cloakroom filling with dripping umbrellas and the front carpets soaking under the wet footprints of those too impatient or too eager to join the vehicle line-up at the front entrance.

Acts of God, or at least weather, were outside her bailiwick. Everything else, however, was firmly under control.

She winced at the thought, a guaranteed sign of impending doom. Sure enough, one of the caterers was waving at her frantically from the door closest to the kitchen. Carol sighed, taking what was likely her last uninterrupted glance around the room, and went to sort out the trouble.

***

"So...let me get this straight...Atlantis is a *real* place?"

"Read something other than the sports pages for once, won't you?"

***

"...And this is the downside of being a celebrity journalist," Lois muttered to herself. The other guests around her applauded the video presentation of first King Orin of Atlantis and then one of his councilors. "All of the beat guys are off in the corner snarfing canapés and cracking jokes."

"You didn't have to accept the invitation."

Of course, with a husband who could hear earthworms arguing in South Africa, there was no such thing as muttering to yourself; everything said aloud was considered conversation. She glared balefully at Clark as she picked a wonton off the tray being held before her, popping into her mouth and then chasing it down with a sip of champagne. Long years of practice made it a smooth gesture and no super powers were required to catch the flash of appreciation in his eyes.

"Oh, sure, like Perry would have given *either* of us the assignment if I hadn't," she scoffed, smiling tightly over Clark's shoulder at a man she hoped she was annoying. Robert Barlowe Horn, cable news hero, scowled back and then quickly turned away. "Sorry, Robbo, this is one event you're *not* gonna be able to twist around to suit your sorry isolationist agenda."

"Stop baiting the opposition, Lois," Clark sighed, but his eyes were dancing with humor.

"Not when anyone with half a brain can see what kind of benefits this deal is going to bring to Gotham," she shot back, and was gratified to hear the people around her murmuring their agreement. If Horn tried to spread his particular brand of poison in his report on the evening's event, he'd find a cold reception from Gothamites who knew very well what they owed to Wayne Enterprises' investment in their city.

*Their* city, not hers, and that was an important distinction. She had hurt for the people of Gotham when the earthquake hit, been horrified on their behalf when No Man's Land was declared, but she wasn't one of them. She might miss the nuances, but she could also see with a more objective eye.

Take, for example, the man of the hour: Bruce Wayne. She knew for a fact--because he'd let her see, for whatever reason--that there was much, much more going on beneath his surface than most would ever suspect. She had never figured out exactly what that was. Despite teasing from Clark and virtually everyone else that she could never let a story go...she left it alone. Bruce clearly had reasons for hiding his light under a bushel, as it were, and it wasn't a *story* worthy of investigation. Merely her own curiosity, and that wasn't excuse enough to pry into a man's secrets. Whatever they were.
She kept her silence and in return he spoke to her like a human being, rather than as a member of the reviled media. She would never soft pedal when it came to actual *news,* and Bruce understood that too. He granted her access and favors because she didn't go after him, not because she couldn't. Every once in a while, when she thought he might have forgotten that, she reminded him. The hard way. If he tried to use her to spread Wayne Enterprises' propaganda, she used her contacts to dig into the underside of his business. No matter how clean or tight a company he ran, there was always dirty dealing going on somewhere. The nature of corporate business in America; no one's hands stayed spotless forever.

Bruce accepted that truth with good humor. Lucius Fox maintained his suspicions about her motives, but that was his right and his responsibility as Wayne's Chief Operating Officer. The fact that she'd pursued similar investigations against LexCorp--and a greater number of them--at least assured him that her journalistic interest wasn't fueled by antagonism.

Lois had never quite pinpointed exactly how and when Bruce and Clark became friends, either, even after she'd established her own quasi-sociable relationship with Bruce. But given Bruce's need to hide his true self--whatever that was--she could allow herself a measure of pride in being one of the few people he didn't have to play "Brucie" for, and be pleased for his sake that Clark could say the same.

On screen, the last Atlantean diplomat was finishing her address, her strong accent (more pronounced than Arthur's, Lois absently noted), somewhat mitigated by careful, deliberate articulation. "Again, I and my colleagues apologize for not being able to attend, and thank you for permitting this irregular arrangement. We look forward to the day when we may greet each other on common ground--physically as well as philosophically." She smiled into the camera as if acknowledging the agreement of a live audience. "In the meantime, Ambassador Garth is a capable representative, and we ask that you give him your attention and support. Thank you."

As the ambassador stepped up to speak, Lois mentally reviewed what Clark told her about Garth. It wasn't much, but not for lack of candor. Superman simply hadn't had much contact with the young man, either back during the Teen Titans days or after his emergence as Tempest. But Clark 's overall impressions were positive, from the recent clash when Tempest stood with his teammates against the JLA to protect their own (and Clark didn't harbor any ill will toward the Titans over that incident, so *she* certainly had no call to), and during Superman's brief mission with the Titans shortly thereafter.

Arthur never mentioned him, in all the interviews she could recall. That might be an indication of...something, as well, even though the king of Atlantis trusted Garth enough to speak for the entire nation.

He was doing a competent job of it, though she could detect nervousness in the overly still stance. His accent, like Arthur's, had been muted by time spent on the surface...and Lois was tickled to hear the occasional distinctive bit of New York twang in his words, no doubt a legacy of time spent with the Titans. Garth kept his remarks brief to the relief of the crowd, now beginning to shift on its collective feet and cast longing glances over toward the bar. The gratitude of the Atlantean state and people to Gotham, to Wayne Enterprises, personal thanks to Bruce; all standard and proper, but Lois's attention was caught by a figure standing at the edge of the dais.

His posture reflected nothing but casual interest, but Dick Grayson was nevertheless...*hovering* as Garth made his speech.

Which lent credence to the rumors. Gossip emanating from Gotham had made its way onto yesterday's Post's Page Six, hardly a reliable source but enough to catch people's notice. She'd
dismissed it, the same as she'd dismissed the stories of Bruce being spotted in every gay club in six countries. Seeing them here together, though....

Lois was acquainted with Dick in passing, mainly in relation to Bruce. Tabloid rumors aside, he'd been an enigma to the press between the umbrella of Wayne's protective guardianship and his own habit of disappearing from public view for months at a time. Dick proved pleasant but distant in their limited interaction; Clark knew him slightly better through his own association with Bruce, and seemed fond of him.

The ambassador finished his speech and made his way over to Dick while Bruce took his place at the podium. He appeared relieved, and laughed softly at something Grayson whispered before turning attentively back to his host.

Bruce's speeches tended to go one of two ways: perfectly, or full of horrendously inappropriate faux pas. Tonight he stuck to the scripted speech no-doubt prepared by his PR department. It even sounded like him, a vague genial welcome smoothly and prettily delivered.

She glanced up at Clark, whose subtly "listening" expression meant he was hearing something blocks or miles away. He frowned, caught her eye as if to warn her of his imminent departure, and saw she'd already noted his distraction. They didn't need any further signal between them than that. He abandoned his post, making his way swiftly and quietly toward the back of the room, and Lois consciously redirected her thoughts from whatever her husband might be heading toward to reflect on her long-held speculations about Bruce. And about Gotham's *other* most-famous resident.

Bruce Wayne loved Gotham, and hated all of its corruption both high and low. Over the years, Lois had accumulated enough circumstantial evidence to suggest *some* kind of association with Batman. Her strongest suspicions pointed toward Wayne providing funding toward his war on crime—even Clark's offhanded remarks implied that the Bat enjoyed access to sophisticated and extremely expensive technology. Bruce had ample reason to despise crime in his city; despite all the noise about vigilantes and the attention they attracted, Batman made Gotham safer. It appeared a natural match.

As for Bruce *himself* being the Bat...she'd inevitably considered the theory. And rejected it as quickly as it occurred. Bruce loathed violence, small wonder, and his life as a public figure would hardly permit the kind of time Batman's existence required. Lois had *met* Batman, and been both impressed and appalled by his demeanor and focus. Bruce might be more than he allowed nearly everyone to discern, but that level of single-minded obsession seemed unlikely.

Then again, she knew better than anyone the effectiveness of hiding in plain sight. It was impossible now for her to look at Clark and *not* see Superman—but the truth had been in front of her for years, and she'd never perceived it. The part of her that knew too much about superheroes and their necessary deceptions reserved judgment on the possibility, even while logic refuted it.

Regardless, if Bruce *did* associate with Batman, it made a certain amount of sense that his ward would too. Say, for instance, Bruce sent Dick to Bludhaven with the intent of exploring whether it might be worth funding a 'Haven vigilante to protect Wayne Enterprises' assets in its neighbor city. That also might explain Dick's association with the ambassador—if Dick was the intermediary between Nightwing and Bruce Wayne's money. Nightwing was a Titan, as was Tempest. If her speculation held any truth, the speed with which the Atlantean deal came about suddenly made a whole lot more sense.

But that idea raised interesting conjecture about Dick Grayson. In business dealings, it often saved time to eliminate the middleman. Why use an intermediary when things could be accomplished more directly? Bruce worked with Batman. Batman employed a number of lieutenants and associates. It
wasn't that far a stretch to wonder if Dick could in fact have been *trained* by Batman...to become Nightwing. A startling number of factors contributed to the hypothesis: his acrobatic upbringing, the physical similarity, association with the Titans, his dating Starfire. True, Grayson once engaged in a public and much-publicized conflict with Nightwing for her favor...but Lois knew too much about the metahuman community, and the existence of shapeshifters and illusionists, to take visual proof as fact.

Pieces of "evidence" she could never confirm, since Lois refused to put Clark in the position of having to lie to his wife to protect his teammates' identities. The hazards of being a journalist: secrets you couldn't share with your spouse. That only got worse when there were two of you, and one was...well. *Superman.*

Lucius Fox, seeming thankful for Bruce's restraint, stepped up as the final speaker. Expertly gauging the crowd's deepening restlessness, he kept his message of projected financial prosperity and goodwill for all involved short and to the point. Applause followed, undercut by a relieved sigh as the crowd parted in two directions: fully two-thirds rushing toward the bar, the remaining part swarming at the ambassador, Bruce, and Lucius to convey their overeager appreciation or gratitude or flattery. Lois let them flow around her. She would choose her moment...and it would not be lost in the babble of an undifferentiated mob.

***

"It's a little sick, don't you think?"

"What's sick?"

"Wayne turning his kid out for tricks. 'Here, boy, go seduce the Atlantis guy; we need the business...'"

"You can't possibly think..."

"That there's a connection between the Wayne contract and how 'flexible' that circus boy is? You're damned straight I think so."

"John! Don't be crude."

"What? Are you going to tell me it's sheer coincidence?"

"No, but you don't have to put it quite that way...."

"I call it as I see it."

***

Bruce was trapped between Scylla (in the form of a LexCorp executive) and Charybdis (in the shape of a vacuous socialite) when he spotted the gorgeous blonde across the room. Being who he was, he didn't so much as blink...though he felt his blood pressure go up a notch.

He excused himself and made his way over to her.

"What are you doing here?"

Dinah Lance, the Black Canary, presented him with a brilliant smile. "Good evening, Mr. Wayne. Why, I'm providing additional security, of course."
Bruce counted to fifty in his head, slowly, meanwhile observing that while her dress was entirely suitable to the affair, parts of it were also clearly (to *his* eye, anyway) designed to tear away to allow her freedom of movement. "Did Barbara put you up to this?"

She grinned. "What a nasty suspicious mind you have. No, it was that *nice* Mr. Fox. Called me out of the blue and offered me a new career." Dinah paused, obviously setting up for the punch line. "As your bodyguard. I turned him down--too busy with the JSA and other things. But wasn't it sweet of him to be so concerned? Anyway, he was VERY disappointed but suggested this one-shot job and, well, how could I refuse? Wayne Enterprises always throws a great party."

He growled, playing to his audience, while making mental note of the fact that Lucius had pulled a fast one. Not an unfavorable quality in his Chief Operating Officer, by any means. "Dinah...."

"Re-LAX, Bruce, this is supposed to be fun. Have some champagne. Take the night off." Her own glass was filled with ginger ale. She raised it to her lips, took a sip, and peered at him over the rim. "You DO remember how to do that, right?"

"If he doesn't," purred the voice behind him, "I'll do my best to remind him." Selina stepped lithely around him and held out her hand. "Hello, I don't believe we've met. Selina Kyle."

"Dinah Lance." Dinah returned the handshake, smiling. "I'm working security tonight."

Selina's eyes widened. "Ohh. I *thought*--Black Canary, right?"

Dinah laughed. "Right. I gave up trying to keep a 'secret identity' awhile back, though I'm not usually recognized." She tilted her head, regarding Selina curiously. "But you look familiar. Are you sure we haven't met before...?"

"I don't think so," Selina said, smiling.

Bruce tried not to twitch.

"Huh. I must be mistaken. Oh, well...you two should go on. Enjoy the party." Dinah waved them off, resuming her "patrol" around the room.

As she moved away, Selina draped herself on his arm and favored him a wicked grin. "My. This must be the safest place in the world right now...unless we all start playing 'Truth or Dare.' Any other costumes hiding in here?"

"If there were," Bruce said straight-faced, "would I tell you?"

"Oooh." She studied him, eyes bright. "That means there *are.* Let's see. Tempest and Troia and Canary don't count. I won't speculate," she added, smirking, "on certain Gotham legends. So...ah! I have it!"

Bruce let his raised eyebrow speak for him.

"Lois Lane is really..." she paused dramatically, "Wonder Woman!"

He had to laugh. "I'll tell her you said so. She'll be flattered." Maybe. Or perhaps he'd "forget" to mention Selina's comment. Lois seemed to accept her husband's friendship with Diana, but there was no point in tempting trouble. "Meanwhile, speaking of superheroes...I see a rather attractive one in need of company."

"Ditching me already?" Selina asked, mischief rather than indignation in her tone. "Oh, such
"Was I supposed to leash you?" he asked dryly, and moved away toward his quarry before he could be caught in the potential flare of her temper.

***

"So...that green chick over there, or Troia?"

"Where--oooh, I say the green chick. Damn, she's hot!"

"Think her hair's green--y'know--all over?"

"I wouldn't mind finding out. Heh. Here's one: Selina Kyle, or Vesper Fairchild."

"Didn't they both date Wayne?"

"Dating, looks like. Man, see how she's leaning into him."

"Luckier than he deserves."

***

The voice from behind her spoke a series of words she would never hear in any other context. "Ms. Troy, would you care to dance?"

Donna carefully put down her champagne flute before she dropped it in shock and turned toward the owner of that voice with a polite smile. "I'd be delighted, Mr. Wayne. And Mr. Grayson says you're to thank for the limo, so thank you."

"You don't have a car, Titans' jet is too conspicuous, and it would have been rude to make you *fly* here," he pointed out with absent precision. "It's simple courtesy to indulge our more...extraordinary guests."

Anyone who knew Bruce's secret realized how deeply he immersed himself in his public "character," but still...hearing him call her "extraordinary," even as part of his social mask, left Donna feeling peculiarly delighted. It wasn't often she heard a compliment, even one so offhanded, from *him.* And certainly not directed at her. "I appreciate it."

They moved onto the dance floor and Donna fought--fought *hard*--to keep the blush from overtaking her face between the expressions on the watchers' faces and the flashing cameras. Bruce took her into his arms and moved her into the dance expertly, precisely.

Of course he does this well, he does everything well, her thoughts whirled along with her body--followed by, oh, Rhea, I'm dancing with the *Batman!* Donna stole a quick peek upward to see a glint of genuine humor in those cool eyes, much more sincere than his patented Wayne grin.

"If I let you pass the evening without at least one dance, they would never have believed it," he murmured, nodding to the gathered onlookers. "My reputation, you know."

She stifled a giggle. "I think your reputation is safe. Mine, on the other hand...."

"I think it'll survive. Besides, everyone knows I arrived with Selina." Donna glanced over to where Selina Kyle stood, completely at ease mingling with Gotham's elite, and them never realizing she was probably eyeing them all, calculating their total worth, charming the men while contemplating the jewels around their wives' necks. Donna desperately wanted to ask how the Batman dealt with
the fact that his alter ego was dating the Catwoman's alter ego, and didn't dare.

Selina caught Donna's gaze and cheerily waved her perfectly manicured fingernails--too long for current fashion, naturally. Donna grinned back at her. "I think I got the 'keep your hands off or I'll claw your eyes out' sign."

Bruce *smiled.* "I know very well that she'd claw *my* eyes--or maybe something else--if I tried to leave without her."

...and *that* was enough to make Donna lose her fight with the giggles. Only the fact that his arms held her fast kept her from embarrassing herself. After a minute she caught her breath, hiccuping slightly. "Ohh, don't DO that!"

"Now you can tell everyone my sense of humor hasn't atrophied completely, contrary to popular opinion," he said wryly, and then spun her so she faced another corner of the room. "I see the boys are getting along splendidly."

They stood together talking, standing closer than social custom dictated. As she watched, Dick reached out to pick a doubtless-imaginary bit of lint off of Garth's shoulder, hand lingering longer than necessary. Donna looked away before she started laughing again. "Well, I'm convinced."

"We'll see if the paparazzi are as well."

***

"Atlantean, huh? *Looks* human enough. I wonder what the differences are...."

"You're so bad."

***

Dick dropped his hand slowly. "So how far should we go with this, do you think?"

Garth chuckled, only partly for the benefit of watching eyes. "How far do you *usually* go with someone you're interested in, in a public place?"

"Hm. Let's see." He skimmed the dance floor, spotting Bruce and Donna. "They're having fun. Do you want to...?"

He'd mostly been joking, but Garth took the suggestion seriously, studying the swirling dancers. Considering what Garth told him about Atlantean mores, he *wouldn't* think the proposal at all strange or unusual. And hell, if he were up for it, Dick was ready to oblige--their openly being seen together was part of the reason for this reception in the first place.

"The steps seem...complicated," Garth said finally, looking apologetic. "It wouldn't do my image any good if I tripped and fell."

"I wouldn't let you fall," Dick murmured, because yeah, cliché, but it earned him one of those *looks*: combined amusement and gratitude and lust. Somewhere in his peripheral vision a camera flashed; he hoped whoever'd taken it appreciated Garth's expression as much as he did. "I guess a grab-and-smooch would be too ostentatious, huh."

This time Garth didn't bother to restrain his laughter. "Yes, I think so!"

"Too bad. Then pulling you off into a dark corner would *definitely* be too much. Damn."
"Save it for later," Garth managed solemnly, then turned to greet a group of Gothamites who wanted to meet him. Dick stood by, smiling a little, taking the part of the devotee impatient to regain Garth's attention for himself.

A voice down and to his left startled him. "If you can tear yourself away...."

***

"I miss the old Civic Center. This glass monstrosity just doesn't have that *classic* feel."

"Oh, I don't know, I think I prefer this to all those musty old gargoyles and Gothic designs...Gotham used to be so dark and dreary. I'm glad the city got a facelift."

"But it looks like everywhere else now. We lost our heritage with the buildings that fell during the 'quake."

"It doesn't matter what it looks like. City's the same old Gotham."

"...you sure that's a good thing?"

***

Jen found it funny, yet predictable, how everyone *assumed* she was here as a superhero, one of Tempest's associates. She'd showed her press pass any number of times to make people understand that yes, she really was here to take pictures and no, she didn't expect any special treatment. Mr. Fox, at least, treated her like any other photographer once she'd shown her credentials. The chatter among the other photogs confirmed that the verification process had been more rigorous than usual for all of them, not just her.

In all honesty, she'd been surprised to find that she was approved for inside access. Either Stefan exercised his spectacular connections--because she hadn't cultivated an extensive list of her own, not yet--or someone saw her name, made the superhero assumption, and added her to the list. Maybe they even decided that she'd be "soft" and generous with her photographs, not taking any pictures that would be deemed either unflattering or dangerous. "Good to her own kind," in other words.

That was fine. The sharklike approach some of her associates employed wasn't her style, anyway. It wasn't like anyone *told* her what pictures to take, outside of Stefan's broad outline of what he wanted for the magazine. She'd been given an enormous opportunity, regardless of how it came about, and she was determined to make the most of it.

Even if--as usual--she was on her own. Never mind her appearance; photographers as a class were a jealous, mistrustful lot, unwilling to share information that might lead to exclusive opportunities. She'd gotten the general briefing, but didn't have the depth of knowledge about Gotham society that the others did. But then, Jen reminded herself, Stefan could have easily sent one of his more experienced staffers. He'd thought *she* would have an edge by virtue of her supposed connection to Tempest. It was up to her to find a way to justify his expectation.

That meant watching and waiting for the right moment. Meanwhile, she had a job to do. The pic of the extremely earnest expression on Tempest's face as he spoke was a sure winner, as was the shot of Donna Troy dancing with Bruce Wayne. Donna was Tempest's teammate; it made sense that she'd be here. And Jen would be damned if she wasn't going to maintain a neutral eye on that particular subject, despite of her personal feelings. She didn't think it was possible to take a poor picture of Donna, anyway, even if she felt petty enough to want to. Which, Jen reminded herself, she did not.

Besides, there were more compelling subjects for her camera, at least as far as she was concerned.
Jen returned her attention to the guest of honor. At the moment he was talking to another man. She sharpened her view through the lens--

Oh. They were *talking,* yeah, but their body language said...more. A lot more. Like they wanted to be alone-together now, more. So maybe *that* explained why Stefan called her Gotham hotel room last night, nervously babbling about "taking the right pictures" and "not pissing anyone off." He hadn't been specific, but this had to be...

...Jesus, that *look.* She snapped the picture, hoping like hell she'd caught that quality of utter devotion on the other man's face. Even if the magazine didn't want it, *she* did.

And Tempest, Garth, looked like he was equally as entranced. Well, now, that was gossip she hadn't heard. Granted she'd been out of the superhero loop recently, but she would have expected that juicy bit of information to make the rounds. Except the truth was she didn't really know *anything* about him, outside of the used-to-be-Aqualad, helped-found-the-Teen-Titans stuff she'd dug out in preparation for this assignment. During Jen's time with Infinity, Inc. he'd never been involved in any of their heroic brouhahas, not even when the Infinitors teamed up with the Titans.

Jen scanned around and caught the eye of one of the several partygoers who were staring at her, no doubt fascinated by her green skin. She crooked her finger at a likely guy and he came over, looking thrilled.

"Ms., ah, Jade, it's a real honor--"

"I'm sure," she smiled sweetly, "and you can call me Jenny if you'd do me one teensy favor?" His head bobbed enthusiastically. "Can you tell me who's the guy standing with the ambassador? With the blue eyes."

Her newfound informant glanced over and turned back to her almost immediately. "Oh, that's Richard Grayson, you know, Wayne's ward. Surprising to see him here, he hardly ever attends these affairs."

"Re-ally? Interesting," Jen mused. She'd seen the note in Wayne's file, but the only photo of Grayson was long out of date. "So he's the one set to inherit Wayne Enterprises?"

Her companion nodded, eager to please. "Not *officially,* yet, but it's likely. I hear," his voice dropped as if he were sharing a great confidence, "he's a *cop* down in Bludhaven now. Of all places!"

Jen supposed that if you weren't dating another hero, a cop was probably the next best thing.

***

"...know he used to date Starfire? The Titans girl with the enormous--"

***

It honestly didn't hurt as much as Barbara'd thought it might, watching Dick with Garth. And why should it? She'd *made* her choice, and assured them both that she was okay with that; it was not only fair but required that she abide by her own terms.

Dad stood in line to drop off their coats while she went ahead. As usual, her passage through the room attracted undue attention; people spotted her and their gaze dropped inevitably to the chair. She suppressed the urge to snarl "my eyes are up *here*" to the room at large. It would, she thought, almost be a relief to catch some lech staring at her breasts. At least he'd be seeing *her.*
And that was enough of *that* for this evening, especially since Dick's entreaty for her attendance included an unspoken appeal for support. For all his adamancy that he knew what he was doing, she knew him well enough to understand that he'd feel more comfortable with friendly faces around him. Dick functioned better in groups.

He was obviously deeply immersed in his role tonight, as evidenced by the fact that she'd made her way across the room without him noticing. "If you can tear yourself away...."

Dick grinned down at her. "Hey, Babs, didn't see you come in."

"I noticed. You looked...captivated." She motioned and swiveled her chair, and he followed her to a less-crowded spot. "Overdoing it a little, maybe?"

"Nah. I'm the flighty playboy's ward, remember? I picked up some of his habits." His eyes flickered back for a second. "Absolute infatuation seems to fit."

Barbara snickered. "Besides, it lets you keep your eyes on him all night. I see right through you, Grayson."

He turned back and nodded, completely serious for a rare instant. "You always do." Then he grinned again. "Besides, you're right. Can't help it. Might as well use it!" He looked up suddenly, over Barbara's head. "Good evening, Commissioner."

Her father's hand dropped down to her shoulder. "Evening, Dick. Nice party."

"A lot more interesting than the usual shindigs, anyway. How've you been?" Dick's voice was shaded with understated sympathy. It had been a bare few months since Sarah's murder, and to Barbara her absence from her father's side still felt like an unhealed wound.

"Coping," Jim said simply. Barbara reached up to catch his hand and squeeze it in hers.

"We're spending more time together. It...helps."

"That's what family does," Dick agreed. He stood awkwardly for a moment. "If there's ever anything I can do, sir, please don't hesitate to ask."

"You've been a good friend to Babs," he said with gruff approval. "Couldn't ask for more."

The mood was getting entirely too deep for this party. Barbara put enough teasing into her tone so dad would know she was kidding. Mostly. "A good friend who doesn't visit me nearly often enough."

"You're always free to come down to 'Haven," Dick shot back, instantly picking up on her intent.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Thank you, no, I'd rather swim in a cesspool."

"Same difference, some days," Dick conceded. He sneaked another peek to see Garth momentarily freed of other company. "Would you excuse me?" Barbara snorted and waved a dismissal; he sketched a salute at the both of them and headed back, pausing to grab two glasses of water from a passing waiter.

"Hm." Jim watched him go, thoughtful.

"Hm," Barbara concurred, smiling slightly, seeing Dick hand Garth the water glass and the affectionate smile he received in return.
He coughed, a delaying tactic. "I, ah, I wasn't aware...."

She looked up at him, honestly amused. "There wasn't any announcement, you know."

"Smart mouth. I meant, I've known him since...since the accident at the circus, and I thought...well."
He flushed. "I thought you and he...."

"Yes," Barbara agreed again, mildly, and watched as his expression turned thunderous. For a moment she didn't understand why, and then realized he was affronted on her behalf. That was sweet, but unnecessary. "Not what you think, dad. It wasn't him who...decided otherwise, it was me. And for his part it didn't have anything to do with Garth, or with this." She patted the side of her chair.

"Oh." Jim fidgeted with his watchband, decidedly uncomfortable. "Maybe it's for the best, then. Considering."

She took pity on him and didn't ask, 'Considering *what?*" Instead she smiled and pointed out Donna, who had finished her dance with Bruce. "Hey, dad, isn't that another of the Titans...?"

***

"What do you think of this new mayor, Dickerson?"

"Another safe political appointee. More power to him--you couldn't pay me to be Gotham mayor."

"No one *would*--"

"Har de har. Dangerous job, though. Krol died of the Clench, Grange was assassinated...."

"Damn shame. She was the best mayor Gotham's had in decades."

"I heard that bullet was meant for Wayne."

"You're joking. Who'd want to kill *him?*"

"Well, he was actually *working* to have NML repealed. Really made an effort."

"I hope he didn't sprain anything."

***

After shepherding Donna back to the sidelines, Bruce made his way over to the woman who'd been watching him with wry amusement. Talking with her might be akin to baiting a lion, but there was no denying that their sparring contained a measure of...entertainment. He was fairly certain she remained unaware of his other identity, but she was discerning enough to have seen through the Brucie façade. Their conversations resembled a tightrope walk: too much over-correction one way or the other might lead to disaster, or at least rouse her too-acute perception. That risk only added to the spice.

He approached and held out his hand; she lifted her own to him without hesitation, and he brought it to his lips for a brief kiss. "Ms. Lane, always a pleasure."

Lois's eyes sparkled with laughter. "You can save your flattery, Mr. Wayne, I'm a married woman."

Bruce grinned and released her hand. "Never flattery. Never *empty* flattery, at the very least." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "My offer stands, you know. Drop Clark and run away with me."
She snorted indelicately. "With an overgrown playboy like you? I'm afraid you're too...lightweight for me."

"You wound me to the quick." Bruce draped a dramatic hand over his forehead. "How ever shall I bear the disappointment?"

"I'd say Ms. Kyle there might be able to help." Lois smiled. "But about this reception. I must say, I'm surprised at the speed with which all of this was arranged. Don't these types of deals usually take longer to finesse?"

"Oh, well, we were fortunate enough--" he stopped with an affected glare. "Now, I *know* we've talked about that kind of unofficial third degree before, Lois. Lucius would have my hide if I simply *told* you."

Laughing, she waved a hand in surrender. "Can't blame me for trying, Bruce. All right; may I call your office to schedule something?"

"Certainly. If your husband hasn't beaten you to it." He glanced around. "Speaking of the *other* intrepid Planet reporter...where is he? Not trying to interrogate my staff, I hope."

"Oh, no, he stepped out for fresh air. All the stuffed shirts in here, you know." She presented the excuse too quickly, and Bruce smiled inwardly.

"Can't say I blame him." Lois was clearly waiting for an invitation, and he was pleased to provide it. "But meanwhile, have you met the Atlantean ambassador yet? I can introduce you, if you like. Perhaps you can finagle an interview."

"I'd be delighted." Her gaze wandered over to where Garth was laughing with Dick. "He's raising quite a stir. I've already heard the chatter around the room. The tabloids are going to have a field day."

Bruce gave his best nonchalant shrug. "People will talk."

"Well, of *course* they will, Bruce, I'm wondering how you feel about your former ward making headlines." She caught his eye. "Unofficially. As a friend."

He did consider Lois a friend. More to the point, he respected her. That fact alone demanded truth. "Unofficially *or* officially I couldn't be prouder of the man he's become. Dick is free to make his own decisions, and I trust them to be good ones." He raised an eyebrow at her. "How's that for a statement?"

Lois grinned. "Not bad, if a little evasive. I think you'll make good use of your 'I don't know what you're talking about, you moron' stare."

Bruce shook his head mournfully. "You know all my tricks. Rather unfair." He breathed an exaggerated sigh. "Let's go meet the ambassador before I'm humiliated any further."

"Let's." They crossed the room together and Bruce made introductions, then excused himself as Lois began her subtle brand of interrogation. Whatever compelled Clark to leave couldn't have been too dire, since his own JLA alarm hadn't sounded. Probably another ordinary job for Superman. Though knowing Clark, it could *literally* be a kitten up a tree.

On his way across the room, another figure caught his eye and he swerved to intercept. "Konbanwa, Ms. Rei."
The slight Japanese journalist favored him with an utterly correct bow. "And to you, Mr. Wayne."

"I'm surprised this modest event caught your newspaper's attention. Lighter than your usual fare, isn't it?" Under the cover of idle chatter, the real conversation began. ::I hadn't expected you. Is there something wrong?::

"The event may be 'modest' by your standard, but the cause is not. My editors are intrigued by the potential financial repercussions of this arrangement." ::Not at all. I was merely...interested.:: The slim form hiding the alien bulk of the Martian Manhunter gestured delicately. ::A quiet night. I wanted to see this situation unfold.::

Bruce allowed his mental voice to register amusement. ::After all these years, still the observer, J'onn?::

::Always.:: The undertone carried with it eternal longing for a home long lost, and Bruce considered it a matter of grace not to comment on it.

::Enjoy yourself, then.:: He smiled with sudden mischief. ::A wager?::

The woman laughed politely as if at a jest. ::What did you have in mind, Dark Knight?::

::To see if Dick recognizes you in this identity. In, say, one minute or less of conversation. Without hints.::

She smiled demurely. ::The master seeks to test his pupil. And the stakes?::

::Winner's choice. I think we can trust each other not to be too outrageous with demands?::

::Agreed.::

***

"Can you believe the whole fortune might go to a circus brat? Bruce needs to get on with breeding himself a *real* heir if Grayson's all he's got."

***

"Ms. Troy?"

Donna turned around to see Commissioner Gordon and his daughter. "Oh! Hello, sir, it's been a long time!"

"I think the last time we met, you were still in ponytails." He smiled and she blushed a little, remembering it. Years ago, the Teen Titans came to Gotham to help Robin with a case when the Batman wasn't around. They'd ended up doing more harm than good. Methods that succeeded virtually everywhere else never *worked* in Gotham, and after that they'd all agreed it would be better to leave the city to the Bat. "I didn't mean to interrupt your conversation," the commissioner indicated the people she'd been talking to, waiting impatiently for her renewed attention, "but my daughter wanted to meet you. This is Barbara...she's a fan."

Time for charades, thanks to the Batclan's compulsive secrecy. "I'm Donna," she said, reaching out a hand, "very pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," Barbara said, and gave her the briefest wink. "I'm, ah, helping with a university study on metahumans and their place in society, if you'd be interested in contributing sometime?"
She felt her own face break into an answering smile. "Why not now?" Donna turned back to her 'admirers.' "Would you excuse me, please?"

The commissioner looked scandalized. "Barb, is this really the time or place?"

"Oh, I don't mind at all. Honestly." Donna smiled at him again and watched his disapproval melt away.

"Well...if it's all right with you. A pleasure to see you again, Ms. Troy." Gordon glanced at his daughter. "Barb, will you be--"

"*Fine,* dad, go on." Barbara made shooing motions. Her father put up his hands.

"All right, I'm going." He threw Barbara a last, quick doubting look and shouldered his way into the deepening crowd.

They moved off to a table, ignoring the curious onlookers, and Donna smiled with wry gratitude once they were settled. "Whew. Thanks. You rescued me!"

"Ah, the danger of being an 'out' hero," Barbara smirked.

"Right. Always asking me for Starfire's phone number, and no use explaining that she isn't even on- *planet* right now." Donna sighed. "Or wanting to know if I'm scared when the Titans fight--as if they ever ask the *guys* that question!"

"Annoying, isn't it?" Barbara said, then murmured, "Like this little performance."

"No help for it, I guess." Because Barbara Gordon didn't have any reason to know Troia of the Titans, even though Donna had known Barbara since her Batgirl days.

Barbara had concluded her main stint as Batgirl by the time the second Titans team formed, so none of the later members--Kory, Gar, Vic, and the others--really got the chance to know her. Even the original team outside of Dick never knew her *that* well; Barbara was older, and rarely participated in their cases. But the first five Titans knew who she was, knew about Dick's feelings for her, and knew what it meant, later, when they heard she'd been shot.

Donna remembered Dick sobbing on her shoulder after he'd gotten the news about Barbara's shooting. She thought she was probably the only one of the Titans (not including Garth *now,* of course) who knew how much Dick hurt over that.

Except for Dick, none of them were close to her. Which was strange, Donna thought, because Barbara had been Dick's first real crush, and she herself was as close to him as any sister could be. Somehow Dick's Titans-life and Bat-life became increasingly more segregated, and the two spheres of influence met less frequently as the years went on.

That, Donna thought, was a shame. But it didn't have to *stay* that way, did it? "So tell me, what are you doing now?"

Barbara smiled. "Online research, consulting, that sort of thing. Putting my old library skills to work."

"That's right, I remember Dick saying you had a degree in library science. And I read about how you rallied the city during the earthquake."

The other woman waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, that wasn't--"
"You did! Don't tell me you don't read your own press?" Donna teased. "That was absolutely fantastic."

"Basically another exercise in information organization." Barbara said, and her eyes fixed on a point across the room. "They look good together, don't they."

Donna smiled at the change of subject. "Uh-huh."

"Feeling abandoned?"

"No, I was expecting this. He has work to do. And besides, I'm getting to meet all kinds of interesting people."

"I saw you dancing with Bruce earlier," Barbara grinned.

The giggle bubbled up again as she remembered. "That was too much. I bet he did it just to mess with my head!"

"He's been known to do exactly that. But you looked like you were having fun."

"Mm-hmm." Donna felt herself blush. "Probably too much fun. He's really...cute when he smiles. Rhea, don't tell him I said that!"

Barbara snickered. "Your secret is safe with me!"

"Thanks. It's too embarrassing." She sneaked a quick glance at the boys. Garth was talking with Lois Lane, while Dick waited impatiently nearby. "Gods, that's funny. You know--we should have thought about the headlines."

"About Garth and Dick?"

"That, and--Well, I *did* come in with Garth. Can't you see it? 'Playboy billionaire's heir destroys Atlantean/Amazon marriage alliance, War at 11:00'...."

They looked at each other and started to laugh.

***

"...all the new money flowing in, particularly from LexCorp. Could allow his companies gain more of a foothold here."

"It's a whole new playing field, with new opportunities. Hell, it's a chance for everyone to make a fresh start. In some ways, the 'quake and NML were the best things to happen to this city--"

"For God's sake! Tell that to all the people who died. Tell that to *Gordon* over there. It'd be like spitting on his wife's grave."

"I didn't mean--no, of course the last year was a terrible tragedy. But now we've got an opportunity to build a new Gotham, with new money and power brokers to replace the old ones who pulled out. Wayne's a permanent fixture, but there's room for others to play now. People are *involved* again in their city. It's an exciting time."

"You know what the Chinese say."

"Sure. But life in Gotham has always been interesting. Now we have the chance to make new rules."
Clark reentered the main room, adjusting his tie. True, the Gotham Fire Department was perfectly capable of handling a routine apartment blaze, but as long as he was in the area, there wasn't any reason *not* to lend a hand when he could.

He spotted the slender form of Hino Rei across the room, and almost at the same time, felt the gentle telepathic touch of J'onn's link. ::Don't tell Dick I'm here, please.::

::Games, J'onn?: he sent back, amused.

The reply held its own whiff of subdued laughter. ::A challenge.::

He could guess who posed it, too. ::I won't give you away. Have fun.::

::Lois certainly is. Enjoy, Kal.: Again, that subtle sense of mirth. He felt the link disengage and glanced around to see Lois talking with Garth, Dick loitering nearby. He captured a glass of champagne from the nearest waiter to give his hands something to do, and headed over in their direction.

"I see my wife is in full interrogation mode."

"Yeah. When I tried to interrupt, she gave me the hairy eyeball and said I was next." Dick threw him a pleading look. "Save me!"

"Oh? If I do, can *I* get an interview?" Clark grinned as Dick's face fell.

"Sharks, both of you. Anyway, you both can do your worst. I'm not sharing, beyond a few generic statements."

"Even that's unusual for you, isn't it?" Clark observed. "Given your standard 'no comment' policy."

Dick nodded. "Yep. That's not changing, either. Especially now. I don't want a bunch of reporters trying to ambush me outside 'Haven police headquarters."

"That's right, I heard. Congratulations."

"Thanks. It's nasty down there, Clark."

"I remember. Call me if you need help, okay?" He'd flown down to Bludhaven to lend Dick a hand against Blockbuster once before. It was an ugly, ugly town, and he admired Dick's resolve in trying to clean it up virtually single-handedly. But at least Dick *would* ask for help if it came to that.

"I will," Dick promised, and Clark was struck again at the magnitude of difference between Bruce and his former protégé. For Bruce, everything was a challenge, even an offer of help. Dick accepted assistance both gracefully and graciously, and never felt as if his own skills were being called into question.

"You can quit hovering, boys, I'm through for the moment." Lois graced them with a quick grin and turned back to Garth. "Thanks, Ambassador. May I call if I have follow up questions?"

"Please do." Clark thought Garth didn't seem too much the worse for wear after Lois's cross-examination. Although she didn't usually leave *visible* marks.

Lois caught his assessment. "Looking him over for bruises, Smallville?"
Sometimes Clark wondered if his wife genuinely *could* read his mind. "I know how vicious you can be."

Garth shook his head, smiling. "I don't feel myself too terribly abused. Mr. Kent, is it?" He held out his hand, nothing in his expression suggesting they'd ever met before. "A pleasure to meet you."

"You too, sir." To Clark's amusement, Garth gave a visible start, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Dick subtly bite the inside of his cheek to contain a smile. He gave the ambassador's hand a quick, not-too-firm shake. "This contract is a tremendous accomplishment."

"Y-yes, I, ah--" Garth coughed a little and took a long drink from his water glass. "Excuse me. Yes, for the most part, my government and people are quite pleased with the potential represented here."

Lois's gaze sharpened and her pen hovered over her still-open notepad. "'For the most part'--you mean, not everyone's happy about this agreement?"

Garth seemed chagrined by the slip, but answered smoothly. "Atlanteans are all individuals with their own opinions, Ms. Lane, like the people of the surface. Some would rather keep to isolationist policies. There's considerable lingering resentment in certain quarters for the disregard specific governments have displayed for the environment. Chemicals, radiation, and industrial waste have poisoned the waters we breathe. Several factions want nothing to do with the surface as a result. I believe that the damage has been done through ignorance rather than malice, and that only communication and education can change the situation for the better. My king and council agree."

"You're very passionate about it."

"Our future is at stake. I have reason to be." Garth added soberly, "And I mean 'our' future to include all peoples, under sea and on land. It's not at all exaggeration to say that the fate of the ocean is the fate of the Earth. None of us can continue to pretend that each other's problems aren't our own."

Lois nodded thoughtfully, making shorthand notes Clark knew he'd be called on to decipher later, when Lois complained she couldn't read her own writing. She finished her scrawl and shut the notepad with a snap. "You have a long fight ahead of you. I certainly wish you luck."

"Thank you." Garth looked over at Clark diffidently. "If you have questions as well...."

Clark heaved an exaggerated sigh. "We decided awhile back not to compete on stories for the sake of our marriage. Lois won the coin toss. I think she cheats."

"You just have to put the right spin on it," Lois said smugly. "It's all about spin. Isn't that right?"

That distinctive gleam in her eye always signaled mischief "Uh, Lois--"

"Relax, Clark, it's all good. It's only that I haven't seen Mr. Grayson here in awhile." Lois rounded on Dick with predatory determination. "You've been rather elusive the past few years."

Dick flashed a smile that mimicked Bruce's perfect lady-killer grin. "If I'd known *you* were trying to find me, I'd have made myself more available."

Lois rolled her eyes. "As charming as your former guardian. I think it's interesting that you've chosen to make such a public reappearance. And with such a particular...statement."

"Oh, I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Dick drawled. "Unless it's this tie, I wasn't entirely positive it went with the suit--"
"And talking about *fashion* will surely put everyone off the scent," Lois said dryly. "I--well--good luck. You'll probably hear a lot of ignorant sneering. Ignore it."

"Is this the part where I give the 'I don't understand your bizarre surface prejudices' speech?" Garth asked, radiating innocence.

She snickered appreciatively. "Save it for the tabloids."

"I thought their entire purpose was to invent their own quotes?"

"Oh, very good. Very sharp. No one told me you had a sense of humor."

"State secret."

Clark exchanged a glance of relief with Dick. "Lois...they're playing our song."

She tilted her head, listening for a moment, and he saw her consciously decide to agree. "So they are. If you'll excuse us, gentlemen...?"

***

"Are you back in Gotham full time now?"

"Not hardly. We finally got the place inspected for certification last week. We're looking at maybe after Christmas, depending on whether the schools are open."

"Were you able to find a contractor? I've heard the wait is *terrible*"

"We didn't bother with any of the local firms. Tom's brother up in Ridgewood knew of a guy. Neapolitan fellow out of Staten Island."

"All the way from New York?"

"They're the only ones not booked until next year. You can't even get an appraisal from someone within two counties of Gotham."

"Tell me about it. Even the plumbers.... I want to know how they got *this* place all ready."

"Wayne paid for it himself, I heard."

***

Dick watched Clark lead Lois--or was it the other way around?--onto the dance floor. "That went well. You okay? Thought you were going to choke for a second there."

The expression on Garth's face hovered somewhere between astonished and dazed: "He called me 'sir.' *He* called me sir!"

Dick laughed and patted Garth's shoulder. "Congratulations. You earned that, you know." Garth barely had time to throw him an unconvinced look before he was swarmed by another school of reporters, bottom-feeders traveling in Lois's wake. He stepped back, wearing his best pleasant "no comment" face, and considered the evening so far.

He'd largely stood by and watched, feeling himself nearly glowing with pride at the way Garth handled his petitioners. The simply congratulatory, perhaps the most difficult because Garth still had trouble accepting compliments. The hidden belligerence of those who disapproved. The simpering
sycophants, desperate to curry favor with anyone in favor with Bruce. *Lois* and her rigorous skill at cross-examination. Garth managed them all with poise. Dick kept himself available to lend a hand if necessary, but rarely needed to. He’d prepared to jump in protectively until he’d seen Garth didn’t require that kind of protection after all. He should have remembered that Garth had held his own against *Bruce.* There was no better gauge than that.

But this was the first time he’d *seen* Garth at work, acting as the Atlantean ambassador. Dick knew how hard he’d worked toward this night, knew how many shorted nights’ sleep and skipped meals it'd taken to bring this contract to completion. The work had absolutely paid off. And he’d done it virtually solo, a remarkable achievement. A remarkable *man.*

The evening also settled any doubts on Dick's part about Garth's place as Arthur's representative. His dedication to the task had never been in question, but Dick wondered about his willingness to do so much for Arthur. He'd finally seen that it wasn't about Arthur at all, but about *Atlantis.* Garth's people, despite his difficulties there. His heritage, even if he'd chosen a home for himself on the surface.

"Your pardon, Mr. Grayson?"

Dick turned to see a Japanese woman regarding him, her demeanor coolly inquisitive. "Yes?"

"My name is Hino Rei. I represent the Nihon Kezai Shimbun, Japan's largest financial newspaper. May I have a word? I understand you were instrumental in helping to arrange this deal with the Atlantean representative."

The more he could downplay his role, the better. "Oh, well, 'instrumental' is probably too strong a word.... I sat in on a few of the meetings, that's all."

"You are too modest. This is quite a coup for Wayne Enterprises. I hear that Lex Luthor was slightly...irritated that he missed any chance to negotiate before the contracts were signed."

Dick grinned and launched into his prepared speech. "We made a good offer. Wayne Enterprises is well known for its charitable contributions and its dedication to saving our planet's natural resources. Naturally, that includes undersea ones. Mr. Wayne is always glad to promote the exchange of ideas and commerce between cultures, as well...."

"But of course." She obviously knew a rehearsed line when she heard one. "I was more interested in your contribution, specifically."

"I'm not sure I *made* one."

"Oh? But your special friendship with the ambassador...." Her voice held no innuendo in it, but Dick felt his ears begin to burn.

"...Had nothing to do with a *business* deal, and if--" Something about the tilt of her head and her unflappable manner struck him. He concentrated, projecting. ::J'onn?!::

::Yes, Richard.:: The woman offered a minute bow. "I did not meant to imply anything untoward. Forgive me." ::My apologies. I took an unwise tack.::

"Is that what people *think?*" He was suddenly too disconcerted for mindspeech. If this whole thing was undone by speculation....

"Only the small-minded. The rest know that contracts potentially worth multiple millions do not hinge on such things." J'onn's mental voice sounded distressed. ::I truly did not mean to upset you.::
"That's a relief." ::No, it's okay, I should have expected that.:: He paused. ::Did Bruce put you up to this?::

::The challenge of your determining my identity, yes:::

Dick blew a mental raspberry. ::Relay that to him. Very cute. Nice dress, by the way:::

Ms. Rei smiled, and across the room Dick spotted Bruce's jaw clenching to hide a smirk. ::I hadn't the chance to say before: I wish you both happiness. *Baht imok vet ylirin*; which is, sand and water together. On Mars water was precious, and the banks of the great canals where the water and soil mixed was the single place plant life could grow. The perfect growing environment...for life, and for love:::

He blinked a little, touched by the sentiment and the emotion behind it. ::Thank you, J'onn:::

"May your future endeavors be as successful," J'onn said aloud, and silently, ::Many of us are here tonight. Mere curiosity on the part of some, true, but also a great deal of care:::

It hadn't taken J'onn pointing that out to make Dick aware of it, but the observation was nevertheless true. Clark was clearly still concerned about the distance he'd sensed between him and Bruce. Donna was thrilled for them both, and just as unmistakably wanted to see him and Garth together, in public, and be on hand for support. Bruce, he knew, was making note of anyone who might even be *contemplating* an ill thought in their direction. So was Barbara.

:: Dinah has thus far restrained herself from throwing the idle gossips through those impressive glass windows,:: J'onn commented, and Dick grinned.

"Good of her. She's working over this way, if you wanted to be 'introduced'--"

"I'll catch up with her in a while," Hino Rei said, and with a brief nod slipped away through the crowd. Dick was long accustomed to J'onn's seeming whims, and mentally shrugged to himself. The reporters teeming around Garth had given way to congratulatory businessmen, and Dick was relieved that he probably wouldn't be required to step in. His social mask abruptly felt a bit thin.

***

"About time Jack made an appearance."

"Speaking of...Drake Industries stock looks shaky. I'd divest if I were you."

"I hoped it'd recover, but I think I'd better. At least Wayne Enterprises and LexCorp are going strong."

"It's practically a civic *duty* for Gotham to invest in LexCorp. He had the balls to tell Congress to go to hell and flew into NML himself. He's practically a hero to this city."

"It's paid off for him, though. LexCorp is rebuilding half the city, they've got contracts worth millions."

"Well, of course. I wouldn't expect otherwise. No one thinks he did it out of the goodness of his heart."

"Now *there's* two words that should never go in the same sentence: 'Luthor' and 'goodness'."

"Oh, he's a financial shark, sure, but that doesn't make him a bad guy."
"I could tell you stories--"

***

Mr. Fox asked her to "patrol" the room as if she were a guest rather than a guard, saying that it wouldn't do to upset the attendees with overt security. That suited Dinah just fine. In fact, that made it practically her *duty* to mingle and talk to people.

And that included hobnobbing with the guest of honor. Or would, if he weren't so busy. She swung by and parked herself at Dick's elbow while Garth chatted with other guests.

"What's the word, Dinah?"

"The word is that you are at least as much an airhead as your 'dad.' And that Garth is the tastiest thing to hit Gotham in ages. Plus a lot of randomly malicious gossip. On the plus side, no one's spiked the punch yet."

"Of course not," Dick said in a flawless deadpan, "Roy's not here."

Dinah snorted, slowly scanning the room while they talked. "Point. Probably for the best that Donna left him home." She eyed him closely. "Something wrong?"

"Remembering why I stopped going to these things, is all." Dick smiled, the expression more grim than it should have been. "You having fun?"

"Things seem to be quiet. I don't think there'll be any trouble. Unless you count the hideous fashion travesties I'm seeing," Dinah finished dryly.

"This from a woman who wore fishnets," Dick smirked.

"The fishnets went the way of Captain and Tennille. Don't," she said pointedly, "ask 'who.' I feel old enough."

"Wasn't going to. Bruce has the whole collection on vinyl." He went on before she could tell if he was kidding or not. "Besides, you know you look great."

She sniffed, inwardly pleased. "All this *and* kung-fu power. Hey, do me a favor and ask Donna to smack Roy for not calling me for two months."

"She needs a reason to smack him?"

"He does bring it on himself, doesn't he. Are they--I dunno, doing okay?"

Dick's hesitation spoke volumes. "...As far as I know."

"That good, huh." Dinah chewed on her lip briefly, wanting to ask, knowing she shouldn't. There was, actually, a limit to how much of her 'meddling' Roy would appreciate. "Okay, never mind. He'll tell me or he won't. Didn't mean to put you on the spot."

"No worry."

She frowned at him. "How long have you been *standing* here, Adrenaline Boy? Go! Socialize! Work that playboy image!"

Dick shot her a startled glance. "Dinah--"
"It's your party. You can cry if you want to, but I wouldn't recommend it." His lip twitched minutely upward; she counted it a victory. She nodded toward Garth. "He's doing great. You don't have to babysit."

"It's anything but that," he said, his pride evident. "He's got more patience with these people than I ever managed."

Dinah shrugged. "Don't look at me. I was *paid* to be here."

That finally coaxed a laugh out of him. "Your fault, then." His face brightened as his gaze passed over the room. "Oh, hey, someone I was waiting for finally showed up. Catch you later?"

"You bet." Dinah tossed Garth thumbs-up as she passed him; he looked as if he wanted to follow her, and settled for a fleeting but genuine smile. Ensuring security *and* good cheer--Fox should have doubled her paycheck.

***

"If Grayson *does* inherit everything--think about it. Wayne doesn't involve himself with causes except insofar as they might be good tax write-offs, like that clinic in north Gotham. Did you *listen* to the ambassador's speech? His people signed on with Wayne Enterprises because of its environmental record. You want a piece of that pie, you'd better bleed Green."

"And if Grayson adopts the same opinions...."

"Right. Granted, Lucius Fox runs everything anyway, but he won't be around forever. If Grayson takes an interest in the day-to-day, it could be a whole different ballgame."

***

Jen had already determined that Stefan wasn't going to have any cause to be dissatisfied with her work this evening. She'd assembled a damn fine group of pictures, thanks to the assistance of her helpful informant: Wayne and his date, Grayson and the ambassador, Lucius Fox and his wife, the Gotham commissioner, Lane and Kent, all the glittery people on display. She was pretty sure she'd spotted the Black Canary wandering the room, but held off on a photo since Jen wasn't sure if she was *supposed* to recognize her or not.

She hadn't consciously been keeping an eye on Troia, but it'd been impossible to miss that dance with Wayne, and now she was sitting and giggling with a redheaded woman in a wheelchair. She knows everyone, Jen thought sourly, and winced at the acid in her internal voice. The breakup *hadn't* been Donna's fault, or Kyle's either for that matter; he felt what he felt, despite the knowledge that Donna apparently didn't feel the same.

Donna had seen her too, from across the room, and by nonverbal mutual agreement they'd resolved to keep that distance between them. They didn't have anything to say to each other, anyway.

Across the room, Grayson finally detached himself from Tempest's side. She tracked him as he crossed the floor to talk to someone else, a teenager in a suit as spiffy as any of the men's, and--

Jen blinked. She *recognized* that kid. And she knew the opportunity she'd been waiting for.

***

"You're kidding!"
"No. The doctor said now that I'm past the first trimester--"

"You aren't showing at all!"

"Clever tailoring."

"I'll say. You and Roger must be so thrilled."

"We are. Especially since--well, this is a celebration baby."

"Oh?"

"The night we heard No Man's Land was going to end and we could come back to Gotham...."

"Ah! That's so sweet."

***

"You're out late, brat. Isn't it a school night?"

Tim turned from where he'd been investigating the snack table, his one sure excuse for escaping his father's watchful eye. "Hey, Dick. Nah, I got a free pass to skip tomorrow. Brentwood doesn't care if you miss a day as long as the tuition money keeps rolling in. And dad feels guilty about shipping me off, so...."

Dick's eyebrows went up in exaggerated disbelief. "So you used that to wrangle an invite to a stuffed-shirt party. That's highly unnatural behavior for a 15-year-old, Tim."

"I wouldn't have missed *this* for the world. I mean, you're really...making a statement."

"A statement would've been full drag and makeup."

Tim felt his face contort in surprise, his entire vocabulary reduced to small gasping noises. "Uh. Um."

"...I'm *kidding,* Tim." Dick snorted and reached out to noogie the top of Tim's head. "You've been away too long. You never should've fallen for that."

"Sorry. It was the terrifying mental image that got me." He ducked away from Dick's casual swat, snickering. "But no, seriously, *he's* okay with this? I mean, the whole...." Tim waved vaguely. "'Out' thing."

"Yeah. Surprisingly so. He's been really...generous." Dick paused, layering his next words with significance. "He gave Garth a *key* for downstairs."

Tim's own eyebrows went up. "Dude. That's, like, the ultimate sign that you're in."

"I know. And even if it's only for my benefit, I'll take it."

Tim would, too. Normal tension between Bruce and Dick was one thing; Tim didn't care for the thought of Bruce *actively* holding a grudge or objection against Dick, on any count. He'd become Robin as a safeguard and checkpoint for Batman's mental state, a tough enough self-assigned responsibility without added tension in the "family."

He'd been one of the first people to find out about Dick and Garth. Dick hadn't tried to hide the relationship from him, and talked to him honestly about what it meant. Granted, at the time Dick
passed it off as "companionship, comfort, and friendship" rather than anything permanent--and Tim had teased him about that later--but Dick hadn't dodged his questions or pretended nothing was going on.

He supposed it made sense to be involved with someone else in spandex. Things were certainly easier with Stephanie than with Ariana, that way. But she didn't know his real name, and he felt trapped between his desire to be honest with her and the need to protect his identity. Steph was okay with not knowing, most days, but still....


"Tim...Drake, right? Is that you?"

They both turned to see a uniquely familiar face. "Jade--I mean, Ms. Hayden, hi!"

The green-skinned woman nodded and smiled. "I thought I recognized you."

"Ms. Hayden took our school yearbook photos," Tim explained to Dick.

Dick gave him a reproachful look, playing up his role to the hilt. "You didn't tell me you knew a *superhero.*" He stretched out his hand. "Dick Grayson."

Jade grinned and shook. "I know. And I'm just Jenny-Lynn Hayden, photographer, these days."

"I have a hard time believing you'd be 'just' anything," Dick said admiringly, while Tim rolled his eyes. "But it's quite a leap from school photos to this, isn't it?"

"Well, I might have exaggerated my association with Tempest--the ambassador, I mean--to get this gig," she admitted, fiddling with her camera's strap. "But now that I'm here, I thought maybe...."

"You'd like a real introduction?" Dick guessed. "If my little buddy here vouches for you, I guess it's okay." He offered his arm, ignoring Tim's glare.

Jenny reached out to take it, then visibly reconsidered. "If I'm not mistaken you're already partnered, Mr. Grayson, and my friend here isn't." She extended her own arm to Tim. "If you'd do me the honor...?"

"Delighted," Tim said, taking her arm and sweeping past Dick with a triumphant smirk.

"I am *so* telling your girlfriend," Dick hissed as they passed, and followed.

***

"The bigger question is, what's this do for Wayne's priorities? If he decides to become as active in gay rights as he is in the anti-gun lobby.... It might cause a very big splash if he gets involved on his kid's behalf."

"Bruce should throw his parties and date his supermodels and leave causes and politics to others better...equipped to deal with them."

***

Jack Drake shifted on his feet, nervously craning his neck in an attempt to spot Dana returning from the powder room. They'd barely arrived, and already he anticipated an evening spent pretending to be enthralled by the band, the hors d'oeuvres, and anything else that kept his eyes from meeting those of the other guests and inviting conversation, even inadvertently. He'd grown up in this society, but
Dana handled the social aspects better than he ever could. Especially these days.

He could still play the game and talk the talk, but after the events of the past couple of years, the petty social and personal affairs these people interminably concerned themselves with now held very little importance for him. He'd lost his first wife, nearly lost his *life,* neglected and rediscovered his son, and found a new love; in the face of his family's changing circumstances, the interests of what passed for high society in Gotham seemed inconsequential at best and simply mind-numbing at worst.

After years of managing Drake Industries to the almost-total exclusion of everything else, Jack had become a family man. And he found he liked it very much.

He glanced over to where he'd spotted his son talking to Dick. Now they'd been joined by a...green woman. Jack blinked, but restrained himself from going over to investigate. Tim might be 15-going-on-30, as Dana liked to say, but he was enough of a teenager that he'd resent his father peering over his shoulder to make sure everything was okay.

Jack knew his strange, genius son kept secrets from him. What kid didn't? Jack also knew that Tim's secrets ran deeper than the usual teenaged angst...but he'd also come to trust Tim enough to wait to be told. The trick was going to be earning Tim's trust in return. Re-earning, rather. He'd...lost that, somewhere along the line, probably while he and Janet were off gallivanting around the world and leaving Tim to the care of teachers and servants. It took Janet's death and his own near-demise to force him to realize how little he knew about his son, and how far apart they'd drifted.

Bruce Wayne had taken Tim into his home, rather than letting him be shuffled off into some kind of institutional foster care, while Jack lay in a coma for months. There was fundamentally no way to repay that kind of debt. Wayne brushed off his thanks, but Jack knew how much the man had come to care for Tim as another ward, maybe even as a son. That made what he'd been hearing tonight all the more infuriating.

Even in a single walk through around the room, he hadn't been able to avoid overhearing the gossip. Nasty, petty, sleazy innuendo about Bruce, Dick, his *son.* The fact that Wayne never married, that Dick seemed to be involved with this Atlantean ambassador, was enough to generate the lowest kind of scandal-mongering.

Watching Tim and Dick together, Jack knew one thing without a doubt: There was *nothing* inappropriate going on. Dick's affection toward his son was so obviously and purely fraternal, and Tim clearly responded in kind. Jack remembered horsing around with his brothers in the same way. Seeing how happy Tim was, laughing with his adopted "brother," Jack knew the relationship between them was nothing like these people were insinuating.

Maybe he wasn't overly *thrilled* that his son's friend had evidently taken up with another man, but Jack prided himself on being able to separate his own gut reactions from what really mattered. He was more proud of the fact that Tim *didn't* care, or more accurately, that Dick's...preference...didn't have any effect on their friendship. He couldn't claim credit for Tim's open-mindedness by any means, but he could be pleased with his son's adaptability.

Even if he was honest enough to admit to himself that Tim's involvement with that Ariana girl, and now Stephanie, helped him regard everything else with a bit more equanimity.

Which didn't mean life was entirely rosy these days. Jack was not unaware that his company's prospects were on the downswing. No Man's Land threw the usual order of business completely out of whack. He chose to see it as a chance to rebuild, both professionally and personally. A challenge, rather than an obstacle. He felt blessed, if nothing else, for having gained that perspective.
A touch on his arm startled him and Jack turned to see his wife, who'd come up on his other side while he was looking in the opposite direction. Dana's eyes were huge. "Jack...that girl Tim is talking to is *green.*"

"I know. Pretty, isn't she?" Jack grinned, enjoying her confusion at his flippancy and not feeling at all inclined to explain. "Wanna dance?"

***

"...took my secretary hassling folks at Wayne Enterprises for days, but I got my invite. I figure I meet the ambassador and then when the RFPs come out--"

"You can mention that you met him here in your grant proposal. Smart thinking. Although I can't imagine they wouldn't want to work with you, given your reputation in hydrodynamics."

"My *surface* reputation. If I'm going to be preeminent in the field, I've got a lot of ground to cover."

"You mean a lot of water."

"Right."

***

"Do you know him? Tempest, I mean," Jen asked her escort as he led her through the hall. The stares they were gathering weren't anything new to her, but she hoped Tim wouldn't mind. He didn't seem to care, though.

Tim lifted his free hand into a seesawing motion. "A little bit, through Dick. ...I stayed with Mr. Wayne while my dad was sick, and got to know Dick then," he explained, clearly having sensed her curiosity. She hadn't *thought* she was that transparent, but if a kid could notice, she needed to work on her game face.

"And we haven't been able to get rid of him since," Grayson smarted off behind them. Tim raised his hand again as if he were going to make a gesture--she bet she could guess which one--then caught himself. She snickered, liking their dynamic. Like siblings. Maybe if she and Todd had been raised together--

She cut the thought off cold. "If" only ever got her brother in trouble, and her as well by association. Todd needed to deal with his own problems, and his own darkness, and it had taken Jenny too long to realize that her well-meaning attention instead exacerbated his...obsessions. For the moment he was doing better without her presence in his life, and she wouldn't be so selfish to interrupt his healing with her own wishes.

"...Ms. Hayden?" Tim asked, looking at her with concern, and she smiled automatically and shook her head.

"I'm fine." Ahead, Tempest was speaking to an older lady who was leaning in rather too close and seemed overly inclined to pat the ambassador's arm. As they approached, she heard him say, "...you'd excuse me, Mrs. Davenport, I see a friend I'd like to speak with."

"Certainly, dear," she replied, recognizing the dismissal for what it was, and walked away with her dignity trailing behind her.

"Tim, thank Pallais," Tempest said, turning to him with a whisper. "I think she was on the verge of
inviting me home to further human/Atlantean relations, or something equally inappropriate...."

"Got that all sewn up," Grayson observed innocently, and Tim cracked up. Then Dick pointed at Garth's empty water goblet, glaring. "You're dry again. Let me grab you a refill." He paused long enough to acknowledge one of those meltingly grateful looks with a smile of his own, then took off with the glass, plunging back into the crowd.

"Worse than a mama bird," Tim said, recovering his breath, still grinning. "Garth, I think you might already know a friend of mine. This is Jenny-Lynn Hayden."

Jen offered her best friendly smile. "Um, I don't know if you remember me, from the Warriors' party...."

Tempest--the *ambassador,* she reminded herself--smiled warmly and reached to shake her hand. "Jade, of course."

"Oh, please, call me Jenny. This is *really* fabulous, this party, and your work, and...I'm babbling."

He nodded as if he were used to it. "You're here for a magazine?"

"Mm-hm, New Style! in Manhattan. It's...well, frankly, it's fluff, but the art director would kill me if I didn't at least *try* to arrange an exclusive or two." She shrugged and tried to look apologetic, yet hopeful.

"Usually Donna--Troia--does that kind of thing if we need it. Do you know her?"

"I know Troia," Jen replied as neutrally as possible. And she should have figured. "It's not a big deal--"

"But," Garth interrupted her, smiling, "I wouldn't want you to tempt the wrath of your director. Maybe when we're both in New York sometime?"

Jen barely stopped herself from gasping. "That's--that's amazingly generous. Thank you!" She dug hurriedly into the side of her camera bag. "Here's my card, call anytime!"

An arm reached past her to hand Tempest the refilled water glass. "Should I be jealous?" Grayson remarked into the air, and tossed her a wink.

Tim snorted before either Jen or Garth could reply. "*You're* the flirt, not him."

"True enough," Dick said cheerfully, while Garth drank half the glass's contents in a single gulp. "I knew you needed to talk less and drink more. Dehydrate yourself and it's all over."

"I'm here to talk to people," Garth replied mildly, but Jen thought he took the caution to heart. "I'm fine, Dick, really."

They were so outrageously...*cute.* And she was *not* going to make an ass of herself by commenting on that. She was still trying to come up with a topic that wouldn't make her sound like a moron when Tempest met her eyes with a conspiratorial glint in his own. "I'm sure the speculation is running rampant. Such *very* important superhero business we must be discussing."

Jen giggled. "As if. But it seems like...I don't know, that I should know you better. I mean, Infinity Inc. crossed paths with the Titans a couple of times."

"My role with the Titans was intermittent until fairly recently. But we greatly appreciated your help
with Victor," he said quietly.

"My...my pleasure," she stammered, and then, "Everyone was really impressed with how you guys fought for him. Not that any team wouldn't do the same for their own, but things were extremely...intense there for a while." She'd come in to help with the relief efforts, late enough not to be forced to choose one side or the other. It would have been a choice between siding with the JLA on behalf of her then-boyfriend Kyle and her own sympathies toward the Titans, having a member of a younger and more emotionally driven team herself.

Garth's mouth quirked in a faint smile. "If we never end up facing the JLA like that again..."

"...it'd be too soon. Yeah, *seriously.*" She caught Dick and Tim exchanging amused looks. "What?"

"'Superhero business'," Dick said, his tone full of sardonic humor, "put two of you in a room together and there's no escaping it."

"Took longer than we thought, though," Tim added. "Figured it'd be hey, how ya doing, I kicked the Ultra-Humanite's butt yesterday...."

Jen glanced at him, startled. That was a little too on-target to be a random reference; Infinity Inc. *had* fought the Humanite during its association. Before she could ask him about it, there was a brief commotion over near the front door. Jenny craned her neck, camera at the ready, and laughed when she saw who it was. "My dad's here."

***

"Can you believe Stephen's gall?"

"Well, he's trying to drum up investors--oh. You mean...."

"His *arm.* That pinned-up sleeve is so tacky. It's not like he couldn't afford a decent prosthesis."

"Nicole says he won't. His 'badge of honor' for staying in Gotham during NML."

"God, it's a wonder she didn't divorce him for that. At least *she* did the right thing and left with the kids."

"She's...really proud of him, actually."

"They're both fools."

***

The ripple of conversation paused and changed as a new element entered the ballroom. It didn't take long for the wave to reach him.

"Alan Scott? Here? He *never* comes to these things!"

Interesting time to start, Bruce thought, and headed over to meet him. Alan and his wife hadn't gotten far, surrounded by those eager to speak to one of Gotham's most reclusive entrepreneurs. Those who knew where the power truly lay instead set their sights on Mrs. Scott, who looked both flattered and a bit surprised by all the attention.

Bruce pushed his way through the crowd, not caring whose shoes he stepped on and deliberately aiming for one or two of the most obnoxious attendees. Sometimes his cover affectations afforded
him the opportunity for petty, yet satisfying, payback.

Scott murmured a few words to his admirers as Bruce approached. They dispersed with attendant grumbling, hanging on the outskirts of the conversation as if hoping to be invited into the private circle, and knowing they wouldn't be. Bruce doubted Scott's sycophants would be as ardent if they knew that Alan was one of the most powerful metahumans on the planet.

His mask was firmly in place by the time he stretched out his hand in greeting. "Alan! A real pleasure. Didn't think you'd make this one."

"Never does to be predictable, Bruce," Alan replied, affably enough. "You remember my wife, Molly."

"Certainly. Charmed to see you again."

The elegant woman at Alan's side raised an eyebrow at him. "I'll be charmed to see your *affirmative* answer to our proposal cross my desk soon, Bruce."

Bruce clutched at his chest. "Ouch. You know Lucius takes care of all that for me, Molly! But just between us," he leaned in close, speaking confidentially, "I think it's a done deal."

She nodded, looking satisfied. Alan smiled. "I knew I wouldn't get that out of you if *I'd* asked."

"I know who's really the power behind the throne," Bruce began, and Alan snorted.

"Behind, hell. Molly *is* Scott Telecommunication." He regarded his wife fondly. "I'm perfectly happy that she lets me serve as its figurehead."

"Of course, dear," she replied, the response evidently long-practiced and often repeated. "You're the pretty one in the family."

Bruce chuckled while Alan sputtered, but he knew there was truth hidden in her teasing. While they both looked their proper ages this evening, an extremely youthful-seeming couple in their early 80s, Alan's appearance was at least partially a façade powered by the energies of the magical emerald flame he wielded as Sentinel. Through mystical circumstance, Alan had been de-aged to the point when he'd begun his career as Green Lantern, though later he'd regained several decades--still leaving him far younger than his wife. Bruce knew that Alan adopted the illusion of his true chronological age as much for Molly's comfort as for the sake of his public persona.

It had been a small matter to ensure that Alan's daughter was on the short list of photographers allowed inside the event. She'd be grateful for the opportunity, no doubt, and looking to make a good impression in the hopes of being invited to other Wayne Enterprises functions. At best, she would generate a couple of nice pictures. At worst, she was simply filler on the roster of those issued press credentials. And Alan--or more important, Molly--might remember that courtesy the next time Wayne Enterprises and Scott Telecommunications had occasion to do business.

Alan glanced around the hall, taking measure of the attendees. "Nice crowd."

"Felt like everyone could use a party," Bruce said, and Alan grunted in agreement.

"Difficult year. But this contract will generate considerable revenue for Gotham." He fixed Bruce with a serious gaze. "You're committed to taking care of my city?"

Though he didn't realize it, Alan had previously asked that question of Bruce in another context, and the answer this time was the same. "Always."
Alan nodded his approval. "Molly and I can't stay long, but we'd like to meet this ambassador."

"Absolutely. This way."

***

"Definitely surgery."

"Scott? You think?"

"*Look* at him! 'Well preserved,' my foot."

***

As they headed deeper into the room, Alan Scott surveyed the crowd with a critical eye. He and Molly rarely attended Gotham events, but this was the first important social event since the end of No Man's Land, and he wanted to see how his city was recovering.

He knew Batman would take issue with his even now considering it "his" city, and didn't care. In a way, it wasn't his city any longer. All the rooftops he used to stand on had fallen, either in the earthquake or in the succeeding chaos. But Gotham would always be special to him.

This alliance between Gotham industry and Atlantis would be all to the good, as far as he could discern. There might even be communications opportunities for his own company, in cooperation with Wayne Enterprises. He knew virtually nothing about the Atlantean ambassador, outside of the basic profile in the JSA database. Alan stopped short of calling Senator Perkins to see if he knew anything more about his fellow aquatic hero; he'd meet Tempest soon enough, and find out for himself.

He spotted Dinah working her way through the crowd not too far away; she tipped him a wink, and moved on. He appreciated her discretion.

They headed quickly toward a small knot of people. As they approached, Alan caught sight of one distinctively colorful profile and smiled inwardly.

Alan formulated quick, snap judgments as Bruce made introductions: Tempest or "Garth," the ambassador from Atlantis, self-possessed and serious; Dick Grayson, who Alan had met before in passing, unreservedly cheerful at Garth's side; Tim Drake ("Jack's son," Bruce clarified), a sharp-eyed, well-mannered teenager; and--

"...and I'm afraid I don't know this lovely young lady," Bruce was saying, when Jenny leaned up to kiss Alan's cheek. "Daddy, I'm glad you made it."

"Working hard, I see," he felt compelled to tease, and she smirked back at him, unrepentant.

"It's a tough job, but someone's got to do it."

Wayne was gazing on in amazement. "Alan! I didn't know you *had* a daughter! You sly dog."

Alan occasionally suspected the man wasn't as dim as the image he projected, but moments like this didn't support the theory. "Always the last to know, Bruce?"

He had the grace to look abashed. "Oh, well, society gossip, who can keep up. Delighted to meet you, Ms. Scott."

Jenny grinned at him. "It's Ms. Hayden, actually. Jenny-Lynn Hayden. Dad didn't know about me
until--" she stopped at Alan's cautioning glance. "It's a long story."

"I'm certain," Bruce murmured. "I absolutely *must* steal you away for a dance, if I may...?"

"If you *must,*" Jenny shot back pertly. "Hang on to my camera, Molly?"

Molly accepted Jenny's camera with an indulgent smile. "Have fun."

She would hardly need to be warned about Wayne's playboy nature; Jenny *could* take care of herself, in more ways than one. Her power gave her the luxury of choosing to live without a secret identity, even if her green skin hadn't made it unavoidable. And while Alan hadn't wanted to burden Jenny with Sentinel's long list of enemies, he could watch out for Molly if any of *Jade's* came hunting for her family. Given that, it was more prudent to acknowledge Jade as Alan Scott's daughter than as Sentinel's, regardless of the social consequences. If anything, the minor scandal of a superhero daughter increased his significance in the public eye, which made the stockholders of Scott Telecommunications happy.

The situation had resonance here, it seemed. Tempest was, apparently, openly involved with Bruce Wayne's boy. By association, he put Grayson and Wayne at risk. If he wasn't already aware of that fact, he needed to be.

Jay, he thought wryly, would accuse him of meddling. Well, so be it. He'd rather be thought of as an intrusive elder than stand by and say nothing.

"Ambassador, if I could have a word in private...." Garth inclined his head in agreement, and Alan gathered the impression this young man had been hearing similar requests all night. "It won't take long."

"No trouble at all," Tempest said, and motioned toward an alcove set slightly away from the press of the crowd. Alan nodded to Molly and the boys and followed him.

***

Mrs. Scott was watching Jenny dance with Bruce, and the music was loud enough to cover a whisper. "Is that really...." Tim asked Dick, his lips barely moving, as Garth and Alan Scott moved away.

"Uh-huh."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

***

Once they reached the alcove, Alan maneuvered so that his back was to the crowd. The ambassador turned to him, politely expectant; Alan searched his face for any sign of recognition and found none. "Do you know who I am?"

Tempest blinked, seemingly caught unaware by the question. "Of course, Mr. Scott, Dick's told me some of the history of Gotham Broadcasting--"

"Not that." He waved a hand in dismissal, then brought it close to his chest, shielded from the rest of the room. "This."
In his palm, a green flame sparked and blossomed into the shape of a lantern. Alan held it for the few seconds it took Garth to register the image, and then the fiery icon winked out of existence.

"...Sentinel. *Sir.*" The lad looked overwhelmed; Alan wasn't entirely unused to the phenomena, but frequently wished it didn't make him feel as old as he must appear to these younger heroes. The unconcealed respect, at least, was welcome. It meant the boy might hear what he had to say.

"I'm telling you because I wanted to ask if you're quite certain about what you're doing here."

To his credit, the ambassador regained his equilibrium with speed. His reply was very carefully neutral. "I'm not sure what you mean."

But he might have made an assumption, and Alan was going to enjoy controverting that expectation. He glanced over at Molly, now chatting casually with Grayson and Drake. "My wife...has occasionally been the target of my enemies, even with my having hid my identity. The fanatics always have ways of finding those you care for the most. As far as I know, your personal and professional lives are the same." Garth nodded in acknowledgment but said nothing, waiting for Alan to speak his piece. "I'm going to *assume* that you've thought about that. Does Grayson understand the risks as well?"

The young man's expression held a flash of relief before he schooled his face to composure again. "...He does. He's--he's a police officer, he's accustomed to taking care of himself. He knows how to watch his surroundings. He--" Garth seemed to struggle for a moment, and Alan got the distinct impression there was something he was trying desperately not to say. "Dick understands the life we lead."

"I hope that's so," Alan replied, but he was more intrigued by what he'd seen in Garth's face than in his words. Some secret that he wasn't at liberty to divulge. Alan wasn't especially interested in prying into the mystery; he'd only revealed himself to deliver his cautionary message. Still, it might bear further thought, later.

Garth held his gaze. "I appreciate your concern. And your trust."

"Consider it a professional courtesy. Remarkable, isn't it," Alan said, musing, "that the Titans and the JSA haven't had much contact. Oh, there were timing issues...and a generation gap." He smiled to let Garth know he was kidding. "Though there are ties. Jay and Wally, Dinah and Arsenal, Hippolyta's daughter...and Jesse Quick. There was discussion about her when the JSA re-formed, you know. About how if the Titans hadn't snatched her up first, we'd have the better claim."

"We're fortunate to have her, sir."

Now he *was* starting to feel old. "Let's get you back to the party before Mr. Fox starts to think I'm trying to take advantage of his contracts."

***

"What on earth is Tricia *wearing?*"

"Can't expect her to have any taste, she's dated Brucie."

"Darling, who *hasn't*? More than once, that's the trick. Bigger trick is staying awake. The man's a total bore."

"Not to Selina Kyle, I suppose. --oh, don't you know? She's a rerun. Dated him a couple of years ago, now she's back for more. I doubt she'll have any better luck, but I admire her persistence."
"'Kyle.' Not any family *I've* ever heard of."

"Plastics, I think. Used to be the spork kings of St. Louis or something like that."


"Jealous he's never asked *you* out?"

"...Bitch."

"Claws in, girls. He's not worth fighting over."

***

Dinah completed her umpteenth circuit of the room--she'd stopped counting--and was considering making a break for fresh air as she approached the now-bedraggled snack table. She smiled absently at the delicate Asian lady standing there, intending to slip by, when the woman addressed her in Japanese.

"Delightful gathering, isn't it?"

"Your pardon, my Japanese is a small rusty," she began in the same language, and felt a telepathic "knock" on the surface of her consciousness, like someone touching her shoulder to gain her attention. She tensed on reflex and then relaxed, forming the mental image of a door opening in invitation. An old signal, but one you never forgot.

::I think you mean 'little',:: J'onn said into her mind, even as the woman next to her replied, "I welcome the opportunity to practice my English, then."

"Now how did I not guess you'd be here," Dinah said wryly as she scanned the room, keeping her expression neutral. "A swanky party, a little scandal, a few hidden agendas...."

"I'm hurt. You're so quick to cast aspersions on my motives," J'onn protested, with a mental wink to let Dinah know he wasn't serious. "Perhaps I simply wanted to share in this good company."

Dinah smirked. "Uh-huh. And to see what kind of party Bruce was throwing for his new *son-in-law*."

They exchanged identically amused grins. "A shame Arthur isn't here," J'onn mused, and Dinah couldn't keep her eyes from widening at horror in the thought.

"Can you imagine? There'd be bloodshed."

"He's not really upset, you know," J'onn confided, "merely concerned for Garth's sake. And, well, where Bruce is involved...."

"...Arthur's common sense takes a hike," Dinah finished. "Yeah."

The woman--J'onn--glanced over at her, smiling fondly. "We miss you at the Watchtower, Dinah."

She smiled back, hearing the unspoken *I* under his words. "My partner needs me more than you guys do."

"Oh, I understand you have obligations," J'onn replied blandly, "and by coincidence, Gotham is closer to the JSA brownstone and a certain doctor...."
Dinah turned to face him, lowering her voice to a whisper. "J'onn J'onnz, you are the *biggest* gossip in the entire Justice League! Ever!"

In this form, he appeared the very picture of innocence. "There were pictures," the woman blinked at her, guileless. "Were they not accurate?"

"Where--" she started, and remembered what Garth had mentioned at the Clocktower. "From Coney Island? And Donna showed them to Diana." She dropped her head, groaning. "No privacy at *all.*"

"You looked happy," J'onn said quietly, and for the life of her she had never, ever been able to remain irritated with him. Especially when he was so clearly interested in her well being.

She lifted her head, catching his eyes. "I am. Pieter is...a good man."

"I should hope," J'onn said, mildly enough. "You deserve to be happy."

Dinah *felt* his caring enfold her, like the mental equivalent of a physical embrace. "If you weren't in disguise, I'd hug you."

"If I weren't in disguise, I'd let you." J'onn overtly withdrew the telepathic contact so that she felt it disengage, pure courtesy on his part. "Unfortunately, I have other obligations of my own this evening."

She nodded, knowing that his efforts with the Justice League only comprised part of his self-imposed guardian duties over his adopted planet. "Don't be a stranger, J'onn."

"You never allow it," he said, and turned on his body's high heels, walking swiftly away so that neither of them would be required to comment on the sudden wetness in Dinah's eyes.

She stood for a moment, breathing deep to compose herself before she resumed her patrol. Talking to J'onn inevitably reminded her of what he'd lost, and all the kindnesses he offered despite that. Everyone who knew him couldn't help trying to fill, at least in some small way, those empty places...while understanding that they never could. The attempts, J'onn declared, meant more to him than he could properly thank them for. Dinah always felt that he was the one who deserved their gratitude.

But J'onn wouldn't want her to fixate on it, either. Get a move on, woman, she told herself; you're not being paid to stand around and look pretty.

Although, her most flippant inner voice observed, both Lucius and Bruce would be earning their money's worth if she were.

***

"None of them deserve this. None of them."

"Stephen--"

"They all left Gotham for dead and now look at them, oh so eager to come 'home' now that everything's been tidied up for them."

"...I left. Do you despise me and the kids too?"

"No! God, Nicole, I just-- I can't stop being *angry*--"

***
Selina hadn't found it difficult to amuse herself while Bruce attended to his social duties. She'd picked out the wealthiest targets in the room, identified the most pawnable jewels, and acquired vacation schedules that would ensure empty houses for easy pillaging. Purely an intellectual exercise at the moment, but it never hurt to keep in practice.

Sliding back into the flow patterns of the self-styled elite hadn't proved challenging, either. It was, by far, a much thinner mask than any she was more accustomed to wearing. A shallow disguise for a shallow crowd, Selina thought with contempt, all so consumed with maintaining their own facades through posturing and maneuvering and self-aggrandizement that they were left incapable of seeing through hers.

She could tolerate this masquerade for an evening. Bruce made a living of it. She remembered, vaguely, a time when it had been a game and not merely an exercise in tedium, and wondered if he still derived any satisfaction (however twisted) out of the role he'd created to cover his true identity.

It was, she had to admit, a most effective cover, judging by the amount of vicious gossip centered around Bruce. Much of it was simply sheer, petty jealousy of one kind or another. The men were envious of his wealth, power in Gotham, and apparent prowess with women. The women were resentful that *they* weren't the ones on his arm, and took out their vitriol on anyone in Bruce's orbit.

It would all have been meaningless chatter, except for one thing: those cutting, *catty* tones they all adopted. And Selina had made a fine art of catty.

She wandered until she found yet another knot of nattering socialites. "...and it's not like Bruce ever *sleeps* with any of them. I mean, he's run out on Dominique and Phoebe and Delinda, they barely *dinner* of out him."

Selina swept around the pillar and into their midst. "So *sorry* to interrupt," she purred, "but you were talking about Bruce? Oh, sweetheart, don't deny it, he's the tastiest thing on two legs. And believe me..." she waited a beat for effect. "I *know* what I'm talking about."

One of the girls giggled reflexively; the others reflected various degrees of affronted and scandalized. Perfect. "You're jealous that I've stolen him from the rest of you. Let me tell you, darlings...." Selina favored the women with her most dazzling smile. "When I steal something, it *stays* stolen."

As she walked away, head held high, she wasn't even sure why she'd bothered. And then she knew: All cats marked their territory. Whether they meant to claim it permanently or not.

***

"Have to admit, Wayne puts on a good party."

"Easy when all he has to do is sign the checks."

***

Bruce had relinquished his daughter and vanished again to parts unknown by the time Alan and Garth rejoined the others. Molly was sipping at what he knew would be tonic water with lime. " Courtesy of this charming young man," she said, indicating the Drake boy.

"No trouble at all," Tim said, blushing. "I should probably go find my dad, though. Nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Scott." He waved at the group and darted off with the energy of the very young. Alan wondered vaguely if the teenager might be interested in an internship--he seemed likely enough--and dismissed the thought. Doubtless Jack had plans for his own son.
He glanced at Molly, who nodded with the perception that came with marital telepathy. "Molly and I should be going. It wouldn't suit our reputation as enigmatic recluses to make more than a token appearance."

"Flee while you can," Grayson agreed, with a longing look toward the front doors.

Garth sighed faintly. "Perhaps I should develop a similar policy. But I truly appreciate your coming by. It was a pleasure to meet you both."

"Remember that if your people have prospective communications opportunities," Molly put in brightly and without hesitation, and grinned at Alan's eye-rolling response. "What? Enlightened self-interest is the most sincere kind, especially when presented without pretense."

"I agree. And I will." Garth shook their hands, seeming to brace for the next wave of petitioners while Alan and Molly and Jen stepped away.

Jenny was pouting. "I'm sorry you guys are leaving so soon."

"We wouldn't want to distract from your work," Molly reminded gently. "How are your pictures coming along?"

"Pretty good. I've caught Gotham's glitterati acting happy and entertained."

"You didn't take any pictures that are going to cause trouble, did you?" Alan asked with cautious concern.

"Thanks, dad." Jen rolled her eyes--a trait, he liked to think, she'd inherited from him. "No, I didn't. If anyone's kissing someone they're not supposed to be kissing, it's not on my rolls."

"Alan, she's a professional," Molly chided. "Ignore him, dear."

"I often do," she replied, smiling broadly at his expression, then pausing. "I don't think I got you two yet. Feel like looking debonair for an extra moment?"

"Of course," Molly said, elbowing Alan gently. "Stand up straight, honey. And stop scowling like it's a mug shot."

"I wonder if Batman would like help patrolling," he mused scarcely loud enough for them to hear, but smiled obediently.

"Perfect. Okay, see you two for lunch tomorrow?"

"Ciao Bella, one o'clock," Alan confirmed, bending down to kiss her cheek.

"Peachy. See you then!" She leaned in to give Molly a quick hug and dashed away.

They'd gotten as far as the coat check when the urgent voice called out behind him. "Mr. Scott!"

He turned to see a rather attractive and determined woman. "Lois Lane, Daily Planet. I was hoping to get a few words--"

He knew who she was well enough, but he hadn't come intending to give interviews. "I'm sorry, Ms. Lane, my wife and I were leaving. Perhaps if you called my office...."

Lane raised a cynical eyebrow. "You're never *in* your office."
She reminded him suddenly, piercingly, of Irene. That made it impossible to turn her down cold. "Molly, do you have my schedule?"

Molly was already rooting through her purse, and now she came up with a PDA. "When is good for you, dear?"

Lane was visibly amused at being addressed so familiarly, but she didn't let it deter her. "As a matter of fact, I'd love to sit down with you as well, Ms. Scott. From what I understand, your efforts revitalized Scott Telecomm."

She'd unquestionably done her research. Alan approved. So did Molly, apparently. "I think that can be arranged."

They were in the car and on the way to the penthouse when Molly finally asked. "Did you have a nice chat with the ambassador?"

"Oh, you know. Superhero stuff." He grinned at her. She understood, all right, but now her gaze was laced with skepticism.

"No lecture about 'conduct unbecoming'?"

"Molly! Of course not."

She always knew his mind. "But you were thinking about Doc McNider."

Alan sighed. "I hope...well...Charles wasn't happy keeping secrets. Maybe this will be better."

***

"...wouldn't have shown up if there wasn't something big brewing."

"Yeah. Last time he donned the penguin suit for one of these things was right before Scott Telecomm bought Avery."

"No, it was some sort of announcement about earnings being adjusted up. I remember--it was the same time Westex Chemical filed for bankruptcy."

"You sure? I was with Fleerman, Howard when Westex filed and my 401k was heavy in communications...."

***

From across the room, Clark spotted Lois busily conferring with Hino Rei. She might have won the coin toss for the main story of the evening, but that didn't mean there weren't other opportunities here tonight. "Good evening, Commissioner Gordon."

"Mr. Kent." Gordon eyed him tolerantly but without invitation to further conversation. That was fine; Clark had more than a little experience in dealing with difficult subjects. The trick was to broach a topic *they* found appealing, and he already had the perfect pretext.

"The Daily Planet is working on a series of city guides. Metropolis is first on our schedule, and we'd like to tackle Gotham next. I can't think of a better perspective than yours, Commissioner, if you're interested in contributing."

Gordon blinked, looking both flattered and apprehensive. "I'm no writer, unless you consider police reports an exercise in creative writing."
Clark grinned. "That's what we have editors for, sir."

"Well, I..."

"Is this man bothering you, Jim? I can have him thrown out." Bruce appeared on Gordon's other side, materializing from the depths of the crowd without Clark having spotted his approach. Another point for him in the never-ending game of one-upmanship between them. Clark didn't bother keeping count, though he was positive Bruce knew the tally by heart.

"So you can flirt with my wife?" Clark challenged, making sure to hit the right note of joviality for Gordon's benefit.

"I don't need you gone to do *that,*" Bruce fired back.

Gordon's lip was twitching, but he answered Bruce's question seriously enough. "Not at all necessary. He wants me to write--a book, is it?" Clark nodded and Jim continued, "Part of a book about Gotham for the Daily Planet."

"Really! That's a splendid idea." If Bruce's grin got any wider, Clark thought with amusement, the top of his head might fall off. "Anything to increase tourism, eh, Jim? Let people know Gotham is safe again."

"Can't use 'Gotham' and 'safe' in the same sentence as long as the J--as long as Arkham's front door keeps revolving," Gordon growled.

Bruce's expression fell. "I'm...I'm sorry, Jim. I didn't mean--"

Gordon waved a dismissive hand. "Never mind. I'm not in a party mood, I guess. Thanks for the offer, Mr. Kent--send me the details of your book and we'll talk." He jerked his head curtly at Bruce and headed off.

"Dammit," Bruce said softly, not bothering with his affected social voice but not precisely using Batman's, either.

"It's been a hard year for him," Clark said, not entirely certain how far he could push. Gordon was probably Bruce's--or rather, the Batman's--closest friend in Gotham, and didn't know his alter ego. Or at least, he didn't acknowledge it if he knew. Secrets within secrets, status quo for the Batman and his relationships.

Bruce grunted agreement, but declined to follow up on the topic. Fair enough, Clark thought, and cast around for another theme. Talking with Bruce was like tiptoeing through a minefield; you never knew when something might blow up in your face.

Three cheers for invulnerability, Clark mused wryly, and took a step. "I'm glad you two are on speaking terms again."

Bruce, of course, didn't need to ask who. "I told you I'd get over it."

"Still," Clark pressed, "this is all...very generous." Especially given how much Bruce would be hating the focused media attention, the *deliberate* invitation to peer into their private lives. Bruce might be inured to the constant intrusions of the society press, but Dick usually managed to dodge that particular spotlight. It couldn't be easy for Bruce to watch his former ward, his former partner, shrug off the cloaking shadows for center stage.

"It's necessary," Bruce said without inflection, and then, "Dick appreciates your being here tonight."
Which was true enough, Clark supposed, but he also knew Bruce well enough to understand the statement included himself as well. "I'd say I was proud of him, if you wouldn't take it as poaching on your territory."

Bruce snorted, but the look on his face was indecipherable. An entire minute passed without further response, which when Clark thought about it was probably preferable to an actual retort.

Nevertheless. There *was* the game to consider. "A pleasure chatting with you, as always."

That earned him a sharp glance. "Clark--"

He waited.

"I'm proud of him, too."

***

"Joanna's gotten acceptances at Yale and Harvard, but she's got her heart set on Vassar."

"Oh, really? I hope you've put your foot down on that. You know what they say about Vassar girls."

"Oh, I don't think they'll turn my girl all communist. But she likes the smaller campus and--"

"I'd be more worried about something other than communism, if you know what I mean. Otherwise you might find yourself in Wayne's shoes in a few years."

***

For all the formality of this event, all the careful phrasing and conscious *thought* it required to make sure his English didn't waver, Garth found it strange how much easier this was than facing his own people had been, back in Poseidonis.

Dick's presence at his side contributed to that. For one thing, he'd memorized the speeches and responses as surely as Garth had. He knew what to say, and perhaps more important, *how* to say it. Though he left it to Garth to do most of the talking as the evening demanded, he wasn't hesitant about jumping in when Garth lost a word, or needed a moment to formulate an answer to an unexpected question. Dick had tried to assure him that he believed in what Garth was doing here for more than their personal reasons. Garth hadn't doubted him, exactly, but hearing Dick speak so clearly and passionately about Atlantis and the importance of the benefits their cultures could bring each other left no question at all about his sincerity.

But even more than that, Dick was consciously changing the course of his life tonight, at least insofar as other people's opinions were concerned. To be together this way, publicly, *openly*--despite Dick's reasoning about it being the best way to protect his identity, there undoubtedly were other options. Dick chose *this* one. Garth could casually joke about "bizarre surface prejudices," but he did understand that Dick was deliberately flaunting what some considered to be an...unconventional relationship in spite of potential bigotry.

It might even be another kind of rush to a man who threw himself off the tops of high buildings for fun, but that didn't mean Garth couldn't appreciate the possible risks Dick was taking on his behalf. And the commitment he was making, in irrevocably altering the public's perception of him. Garth could only internally reaffirm his promise never to give Dick cause to regret it.

The number of friendly faces in the crowd was the other, unexpected factor making the public scrutiny easier than Garth imagined. Bruce and Lucius were working to ensure that the evening went
smoothly. Donna's presence and her unwavering emotional support provided another kind of encouragement, even from across the room. Dinah and Barbara and Tim had their no-doubt honest reasons for attending, but it wasn't too far a stretch to think that they were here to show Dick--and by extension, him--that they were on his side. J'onn dropped in simply to talk to Dick, and Superman was here! He certainly hadn't been obliged to come with his wife, no matter what polite fiction he maintained. Those heroes who were aware of Dick's dual identity knew what he was doing tonight and willingly gathered to show their support, whether overtly or with more discretion. Even those who weren't--Sentinel had continuing interests in Gotham and Jade was working--still by their mere attendance lent to that sense of camaraderie.

Garth knew Dick was feeling it, too. His projected persona seemed...more relaxed, less *practiced.* More like his true self, in other words.

Their colleagues' presence also served as a buffer against the vague and swiftly hidden flashes of disapproval and even hatred Garth saw appearing on faces sporadically throughout the room. They seemed to be aimed at him and Dick together, although ironically, the fact that the emotions weren't *personal* also made them easier to bear. For the most part, they flared and vanished quickly; when he'd mentioned it, Dick replied that no one who lived, worked, or was otherwise invested in Gotham wanted to risk Bruce Wayne's displeasure by disrupting his party with a dissonant opinion.

It was true. Garth saw how they talked to him, Gotham's elite to the richest man in their city, their indulgent amusement and quick agreement and the glances they exchanged with each other when they thought he wasn't looking. Almost as if they were humoring a child, a temperamental and erratic adolescent who'd somehow gained unwarranted power. They smiled to his face and laughed at him behind his back and never imagined that all of them were doing exactly as Bruce intended.

Bruce held a subtle, unyielding hold over his kingdom that Arthur could only dream of. His rule represented a kind of scheming deception Arthur wasn't *capable* of practicing. For all that he respected what Batman accomplished in Gotham, Garth was thankful that the same methods never took root in Atlantis. Even if he suspected Bruce and Atlan alike might both list that lack of subtlety among Arthur's other failings.

Not for the first time, it reminded him to breathe a prayer of relief that Bruce was on *their* side.

***

"...didn't expect the Atlantean ambassador to be so young."

"He seems to know what he's doing, though. And from what I remember about previous Atlantean representatives--"

"There've been previous Atlantean representatives?"

***

Finally, another momentary break in the flow. "So what did Alan Scott have to say?"

"He was concerned. For us." Garth seemed astonished by the idea. "He told me his...name."

Dick found himself reiterating what he'd said before. "You *earned* that. It had nothing to do with Bruce, or me." Still, he had to ask. "Concerned, how?"

"In the 'you've made him a target of your enemies' sense. Ironic, considering."

"Huh. That's not surprising, though. Molly Scott's been through a lot." And Sentinel was, evidently,
more open-minded than Dick might have guessed. Went to show you never could tell. "By the way, I ran into another unexpected consequence of the evening--I got hit on in the bathroom."

"The washroom attendant?" Garth asked, and nodded knowingly to Dick's acknowledging smirk. "Me too."

Dick laughed. "That tramp."

"Ooh, who's a tramp? Is this gossip I should know about?" Donna had been wandering slowly back their way and now regarded them both with an expectant smile.

"No one you know, Ms. Nosy."

"Not 'nosy,' interested," she protested. "But if you're not going to share, I think I'll call it a night."

Garth reached over and took her hand. "I didn't mean to neglect you."

"You were busy. Nah, I had a good time. Talked for awhile with Barbara. She's terrific." She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "There. Now no one will say I was angry at you for ditching me." By this time a few onlookers had drifted over to watch. She grinned, playing to the crowd, and turned to Dick to shake his hand. "Take good care of my friend, Mr. Grayson."

"I intend to," Dick returned cheerfully, vamping for the camera flashing over Donna's shoulder.

Donna laughed. "On that note. Good night, guys."

"'night," they both echoed, but Garth was watching her go thoughtfully. "What?"

"I meant to ask. Is there some kind of argument between Jade and Donna?"

"I heard something about Jenny's breakup with Kyle. Not that it was Donna's fault, exactly, but..." Dick shrugged. "Kyle fell for her hard."

"Who wouldn't?" Garth murmured, and Dick caught the predictable surge of jealousy before it manifested and grinned instead.

"Exactly. So I gather he wasn't entirely over her when he and Jade started dating."

"Oh. I hadn't heard...." he trailed off, looking plaintive. "No one tells me these things."

Dick who heard about it via Wally, could only project belated repentance. "I assumed you heard things from Donna, but...I guess she wasn't talking about this one."

Garth, meanwhile, was...laughing at him. "You're so easy."

"Say that a little *louder,* why don't you," Dick sputtered, but he was laughing too.

***

"It really is true. All of the best ones are taken. Or gay. Or both."

"I'd say it's a waste, but the eye-candy makes up for the disappointment."

***

For a good long while she and Donna took advantage of each others' company to avoid the rest of
the room, but eventually they'd both bowed to the inevitable and gone their separate ways. Barbara had forgotten—or maybe she'd never known—how easy Donna was to talk to. She'd been forced to admit that she'd previously dismissed Donna as "nice," too often one small step removed from "uninteresting." They still had little in common outside of Dick, but the contrast from most of the heroes Barbara dealt with on a daily basis was...refreshing.

Unfortunately, her community responsibility wouldn't allow her to dodge socializing altogether, and she'd spent the last hour doing exactly that. As her father's daughter she'd grown up more or less in the public eye. The Joker made her a celebrity, in the same way that people slowed to stare at car crashes. She'd become a living object lesson for Gotham residents: "Here but for the grace of God go you."

Bitter, far too bitter. And unfair to many of the people here, who were solicitous for her father's sake if not for her personally, and who didn't deserve to stand as unsuspecting targets for her temper.

She spotted Tim skirting the edges of the room, making his way unobtrusively but deliberately toward one of the barricaded hallways. He slipped past the cordons meant to keep people from exploring the unfinished areas of the civic center and out of sight. That, she decided, was an excellent idea.

Barbara gathered a plate of remnant hors d'oeuvres, balancing it on her lap as she wheeled her slow way out of the main room. Maneuvering around the barriers was a much less graceful affair than it'd been for Tim, but if nothing else she had reason to be grateful to the builders for having assembled the entire structure without steps or stairs.

A half-finished garden courtyard stood at the end of the corridor. Tim sat slouching and cross-legged on one of the short stone plinths that dotted the square area. He'd no doubt heard her come in, but didn't glance over until she came to a stop beside him. "Hungry?"

"Kinda." She lifted the plate and he surveyed it with a critical eye before selecting a largish piece. Tim took a bite and frowned. "What the hell is this?"

"Shrimp puff, I think. Wanna trade?"

"Sure." She handed him a spring roll and they chewed in silence until Tim said, "So why aren't you out there?" He jerked his head toward the milling party crowd.

"Why aren't you?" Barbara shot back.

Tim scowled. "I'm tired of my dad's business friends telling me how they remember when I was this tall." He leveled his arm about three feet off the floor.

"What do you mean, 'was'?" she teased, earning a dark glare for her trouble. He was getting taller, she privately conceded, and his lanky body hinted at the man he would grow into.

"Your turn."

Barbara studied Tim for a moment. "I followed you."

"That's not an answer," Tim protested, and leaned down to snatch a piece of rumaki off the plate.

"That has chicken liver in it," Barbara warned, and watched him eat it anyway. "You're a weird kid."

"So I hear," he replied gloomily. And then, "I don't know how Bruce handles those people."
"It's a game to him," she said softly. "What's wrong, Tim?"

"Nothing." A pause, then a reluctant shrug. "People saying…stupid things."

Barbara thought she could guess precisely what those would be. Damn them. "Dick heard it all growing up, too."

His face flushed red, caught between annoyance and embarrassment. "Just because Bruce isn't married, because Dick's not his ’real son,’ like *that* matters—"

"Tim," she interrupted the rising outburst, "it's jealousy, plain and simple. That and sheer human perversity. *Theirs,* not his."

He blinked at her, his frustration obviously derailing, then snickered reluctantly. "Right. Because saying Bruce isn't perverse is like saying water isn't wet. But not like *that.*"

Barbara, who had her doubts about Bruce in other contexts, nodded her agreement. "You and Dick and I know that, and so does everyone else whose opinion actually matters."

He sighed. "I know. I've heard it before. Still...I hate that my *dad* might hear that crap."

Somehow that was precisely like him, to be concerned for his father's sake rather than his own. Even if Jack Drake hadn't, in her estimation, earned the consideration. "I'm sure he's heard it before too," she began, and held out a hand as Tim sat bolt upright and stared at her with dawning panic. "But he's never said anything to you, right?"

Tim shook his head mutely.

"So he knows it's all ridiculous rumor-mongering as well."

"I guess," Tim muttered. "Maybe, uh, we should get back."

"Probably. Hey—" she handed him the plate as he swung off the pillar. "Take that back for me?"

"You're not going back in?"

"In a minute." She smiled ruefully. "I hit my limit on 'I remember you whens,' too."

Tim blinked as if slapped, and realization crashed like a wave over his face. "...oh," he said, worlds of comprehension in his tone.

"We're none of us who we really are in that room," Barbara offered, and at Tim's thoughtful nod resolved to remember that for herself.

***

"Dammit, it's not right that Tony isn't here. It's easy to forget—"

"I know. A year since the 'quake and Janice still blames herself for sending him out for milk that night."

"She's not coming back. Nothing left for her in Gotham, she says. Every now and then I wonder if she doesn't have the right idea."

***
"Maybe I was barking up the wrong tree after all."

Bruce turned to see the thin, fox-faced man with the sardonic voice regarding him with an equally sardonic look. It took him a moment to place the man; fifteen years had passed in the interim between conversations. "Mr. ...Black?"

William Black grinned his sly, entirely too-confident grin. "You remember. I must've made an impression."

He had, if for no other reason than by his persistence. And his unshakable belief that he and Bruce shared the same secret. Black also knew him before he'd perfected his Brucie face, which freed him of the necessity to be overly polite. "Still sneaking into society parties, I see."

"Oh, I know someone who knows someone. And I'm long retired from the newshound game, so you needn't worry about being quoted. I can keep a confidence," Black paused. "That is, if you had anything you wanted to share."

The gall of the man. "What makes you think I'd trust you with...anything?"

Black shrugged eloquently. "I've watched you, all these years. You're still hiding...though now I'm not sure from what. But it's a hell of a façade, I'll give you that."

In another place and time, his annoyance might have bubbled over, carefully channeled into one of Brucie's legendary temper tantrums. That would be counter-productive, here. He had a very specific role to play tonight, and Dick...would not appreciate a disturbance in their carefully arranged charade. It wasn't worth disrupting the performance for such an obvious case of misperception.

The irony was, Bruce thought with deliberate, wry amusement, that Black had come closer than possibly any other reporter outside of Lois to seeing what lay under the surface. He'd made the wrong assumption, of course--Black had been convinced that Bruce was gay and closeted, as William himself was--but he'd been entirely correct in understanding that Bruce concealed something essential behind a social mask. "As I told you then, you're simply mistaken. I know who I am."

The other man chuckled. "I've no doubt of that. It's everyone else who hasn't a clue."

"But you think you do."

"No, actually, I don't." Black considered him thoughtfully. "I'm not absolutely convinced I was wrong--"

"Would you like to meet my date?" Bruce asked dryly. "She'd be enormously entertained by your...theory. Knowing Selina, she might offer testimonials."

Black snorted. "Thank you, no. I don't require proof. As long as *you're* happy."

His tone was *entirely* too familiar. Bruce fixed him with an eagle glare. "I wasn't the one living a lie, William."

"Perhaps not that particular one." Black raised an arm and waved to one of the catering staffers, who was directing the other servers through the room. The other man caught the motion, smiled, and waved back before returning his attention to the wait staff. Black glanced at Bruce with a smirk. "I've come to terms with myself. Have you?"

***
"Oh, hell--waiter! Waiter! Yes, you, I need some club soda right away before this stain sets!"

***

J'onn navigated his slight female form through the room, smiling genially but not inviting conversation. The currents of dialogue and emotion swirled past and he let them wash through him, never invading but open to the ebb and flow. The sweet smell of bright laughter, the bitter metal taste of jealousy, the nearly deafening reverberations of mental commentary, the occasional dark texture of secret hatred--the tapestry of tonight's event was woven of the complex essence of humanity, and even the darker threads contributed to J'onn's appreciation of the experience.

Of them all, Bruce came closest to discerning his real reason for being here tonight. He was an observer, yes. But also, in his own way, a participant in the underlying purpose of the evening. The society of his teammates in the Watchtower provided one kind of connection; but the chance to interact with them as civilians, "at play" as it were, presented more of an opportunity than J'onn could resist. He cherished the way they closed ranks to support two of their own in a wholly different context, ready to do battle on their behalf if necessary. That sense of...fellowship...served as a reminder, if one were needed, that the camaraderie of his adopted circle of associates extended beyond the super-villain battles and intermittent crises.

It was almost a *Martian* sense of community. An overstatement, surely, provoked by sentimentality. He cherished the sensation nevertheless.

Still, he had other responsibilities. He "reached" for his host and felt the tang of unsettledness in Bruce's mind, but decided not to press. It was probably good for him. ::I should be going. Thank you for your hospitality. And might I add, what an interesting choice of companionship you have this evening. Should I expect to see you on the injured roster? Claw marks, perhaps, or whip burns?:

J'onn laughed soundlessly at the stony silence that met his teasing. ::As to our wager...I think that the next time our young Green Lantern holds his own in a crisis--as he *does* so often--you should compliment him on it. As merited.::

Bruce's growl and wordless assent across the mindlink made J'onn smile, and he left feeling well satisfied with the night's diversion.

***

"If Grayson's got this diplomat on a string, that might lead to opportunities for everyone. Atlantis is the untapped gold mine of territory--I got from one of the high-ups at LexCorp that an entire speculative division was let go after this deal was signed. And you *know* Luthor doesn't pay for speculation unless he's sure it'll pay off."

***

Back in the main hall Barbara tried to wave off the incoming blonde but Dinah, no surprise, ignored her.

"How are we going to explain this?"

"Explain what?"

"Us knowing each other."

Dinah shrugged, waving a dismissive hand. "I don't know. Hi, I'm Dinah. There, we've met."
Barbara couldn't help laughing, even through her exasperation. That, naturally, was part of what made Dinah such a good friend in the first place. "No wonder you stopped trying to maintain a secret identity. Couldn't keep it to save your life."

"Not worth the effort. Or the lies," Dinah said with a pointed glance around the room. "People are spending too much time trying to remember who knows what."

Barbara winced, thinking of her own guarded conversation with Donna. "There are reasons."

"Oh, I know. I'm not going to go around outing Bruce or Alan, don't worry." Dinah grinned. "That's got a whole different meaning tonight, doesn't it."

"Please. You'd think people would find something *else* to talk about."

Dinah snorted. "Okay, tell me this, what is the deal with the possessive chick on Bruce's arm? We weren't talking for three *seconds* before she came over to stake her claim."

Barbara bit her lip against the remarks she'd wanted to make all evening and settled for, "That's Selina for you."

"She'd got 'man-eater' written all over her. And not in the good way." Dinah frowned. "I thought he stuck to the airhead society types? She's way too sharp to be good cover."

"She's...more than she seems."

"Have to be, to put up with Bruce. She looks familiar, but I can't place...." She knew she really, really shouldn't, but sometimes the opportunity for mischief was too good to pass up. "You probably wouldn't recognize her without the whip."

Barbara was already moving forward, anticipating, as Dinah turned to her with a wide, shocked expression. "You're telling me that Ba--"

Among all the myriad reasons Barbara missed her legs was simply the ability to *kick* when necessary. She rolled the chair another few inches and over Dinah's foot; Dinah's gasp neatly averted the likely incipient cry of 'Batman is dating Catwoman!', which would have been hard to explain away as anything but the punch line of a dirty joke.

"Sorry," Barbara said, scooting the chair back and trying not to giggle into Dinah's glare. "Slipped."

"Sure, sure." But Dinah was already staring at Bruce and Selina. "But--he knows, obviously, and *she* knows...?"

"Uh-huh." Oh, yeah, there it was--that same complete, total noncomprehension on Dinah's face now that Barbara had been fighting with ever since the news of Bruce and Selina's...relationship...hit the tabloids. Because he hadn't bothered to tell her beforehand, of course.

"That's just *wrong,* Babs."

"You're telling *me,*" she burst out, then lowered her voice. "And we're not allowed to say anything about it, because God forbid anyone should *call* him on being a completely hypocritical asshole."

Dinah glanced back at her, eyebrow raised. "Harsh."

"He deserves it," Barbara muttered, even as part of her knew the truth was far more complex than
that. If Bruce was happy--if there was even a possibility that he *could* be happy, a prospect she wouldn't have taken any kind of bet on--how could she take it upon herself to play moral judge and jury?

...because Selina was a *thief,* that was why, and a dangerously unstable rogue element. She'd never committed murder, true, but her more extreme exploits left behind collateral damage to both people and property nonetheless. Bruce might forgive the thefts of his own valuables, but what about all of the other victims Catwoman had robbed of their possessions, and worse, their sense of security?

Dinah, unbelievably, was grinning. "You know what this means, though."

Barbara eyed her warily. "What?"

"Mockery. Hours and *hours* of mockery. Oh, the fun we could have...." Dinah seemed positively crazed with glee. "Who else knows? I mean, can we talk about it? Oh, God, I have to tell Arthur! He'll absolutely *lose* it." That alarming image hadn't even sunk in before Dinah sighed and shook her head in despair. "I know, I know. You'll tell me it's ID stuff and I can't tell anyone. Dammit, Babs, where's the fun in a secret identity if other people can't ridicule you for it? I ask you."

Dinah looked so completely vexed by the question, and so serious about it, Barbara knew she was required to respond in kind. "You're perfectly free to ridicule *him* at will."

"Oh, and I will. Believe me. I--"

"Hey, dad," Barbara said brightly, and Dinah shot her a quick wink before turning to Jim with a polite smile.

"Doing all right, hon?"

"Fine." She tried not to sound annoyed; he was only looking out for her. "This is Dinah Lance."

"Black Canary. I know." Jim inclined his head toward her, his tone cool.

Dinah gave no sign that she noticed. "Ha! So much for working incognito. Nice to see you again, Commissioner."

He tensed, subtly but enough for Barbara to see his hands clench. "'Working.' Is there something--"

"Security," Dinah said quickly, and flashed her most winning smile. "A precautionary measure, with all these high-ups in one room."

He narrowed his eyes at her, alarm transmuting into mild skepticism. "A superhero needs to work security?"

"You know how it is," she shrugged, with an acknowledging wink toward their related profession, "crime-fighting doesn't pay. Occasional moonlighting helps keep me in shampoo and doughnuts."

He could hardly disapprove of *that,* Barbara thought, given how many of his own officers worked second jobs. But his chilly demeanor wasn't thawing and Dinah, bless her, picked up on it.

"...speaking of which. I should get a move on. Good chatting with you, Bab--Barbara." Dinah covered smoothly and left with a casual wave of her hand, but Barbara knew her father hadn't missed the slip.
Deflection, ever the better part of valor. "What was that about?" she asked, going for puzzled rather than accusatory. "Something happen between--"

"No," he interrupted, and added reluctantly, "She's always been very professional."

That was probably his highest compliment for any costume who wasn't Batman. "You didn't mind me talking to Donna."

"Troia doesn't work in Gotham." He hesitated, then plunged on. "Are you sure you want to get involved with..." he flailed for a moment, "...a superhero."

She attempted a smirk, wondering how far she could push. "I'm not going to *date* her, if that's what you're worried about."

Her father didn't crack a smile. "I wasn't. And I'm serious, Barbara. We both *know* the consequences of getting too close to...that profession."

She regarded him steadily, refusing to back down. She thought of all the things he'd never said since the day she'd come home and found her Batgirl costume had been moved slightly, folded differently than how she'd left it in its hidden compartment. He never spoke a word about it, not then, not when she was shot or during the long rehabilitation after. "They're good people, dad. And I'm not going to live in fear."

He sighed a little. "I suppose not. Ready to go?"

"Yeah."

***

"Honey, did we set the TiVo? If we hurry we can catch the end of the Knights game--"

***

Garth murmured behind him, pitching his voice for Dick's ears alone: "So what was that about groping me in a dark corner?"

The sound of his voice and the promise in it was enough to make Dick flush and immediately wish he was elsewhere. Anywhere away from *here,* and alone with Garth. Preferably naked. He turned around, fighting the hugely stupid grin that was trying to erupt across his face. "Now you've done it. I'm ruined. You might as well take me out of here so you can have your way with me."

"You know I can deny you nothing." Garth's expression was carefully and pleasantly neutral, but his eyes were laughing. "Would it be appropriate for us to leave together?"

"Appropriate, who cares, I'm not going to be able to *walk* if you keep looking at me, let's get the hell out of here." His face was starting to *hurt* with the effort of holding it in. He made an immense effort, nodding as though he was agreeing to no more than an invitation for an after-function drink, perhaps. "Photo-op moment. Let's say good night to Bruce."

They made their way across the hall, too damn slowly because everyone they passed wanted to have one last word with the guest of honor. Dick spotted Barbara and her father near the door and headed over, glad for the distraction. "Heading out?"

"Mmm-hmmm," Babs smiled up at him, teasing. "Don't you stay up *too* late, yourself...."
"A-*HEM.*" Jim Gordon looked mildly embarrassed, but stood his ground. "So, ah, I hear you've
gotten a place on the Bludhaven PD, Dick?"

"Yes, sir, my assignment finally came through."

"Congratulations." He reached out to shake Dick's hand, hesitated, and added, "Be careful, son.
That's a rough beat." His eyes flicked ever so briefly to Garth and then met Dick's squarely. "Could
be rough for a lot of reasons."

Dick held Jim's gaze for a few seconds, acknowledging the warning and the motive for it. "Thank
you. I will." He bent to kiss Babs's cheek. "I'll come visit soon."

"You'd better." Dick watched her and Gordon go, obliquely grateful for Jim's words.

"It's been a purr-fectly lovely evening, hasn't it."

Selina's voice dripped with obvious amusement. Dick played along. "Indeed it has, Ms. Kyle."

"You look good together," she mused, fingernails tapping her champagne glass. "But I wonder
exactly who's caught whom here."

He eyed her, honestly curious. "What about you?"

Selina delicately brushed an errant strand of hair out of her face, prolonging the motion and her reply.
"Whatever do you mean, Mr. Grayson?"

"You. Bruce. Very cozy."

"Haven't been caught yet," she said lightly. "Perhaps the man who can catch me is only a myth.
An...urban legend." Their eyes met, and they both quickly glanced away before they started
laughing.

So strange, he thought, to be standing here talking to her like this. He remembered fighting her, being
*eluded* by the Catwoman in rooftop chases a half-dozen times. He still bore a scar across his thigh
from her whip. But she'd also been a great help to them lately: during both plague outbreaks, the
earthquake, and retrieving vital information for them during the No Man's Land crisis.

Not that he would dare suggest Catty was joining the side of the angels. She liked being a free agent
far too much. He could only hope Bruce knew what he was doing.

On cue, Bruce appeared behind Selina, resting a hand lightly around her waist. "Moving in on my
date?"

Dick grinned. "I wouldn't dare. Her claws are too sharp for me."

"Me-ow," Selina said sotto voce, and laughed. "But I'm curious about *your* date. Let me see if I
can rescue him for you." She slid out from under Bruce's arm and walked--*slinked*--over to the
small group of people clustered around Garth.

They both watched her go. "I should have warned him..." Dick said, smirking, "...but this way could
be more fun."

Bruce shrugged slightly. "I doubt even forewarning could help."

"Yeah. Uh, Bruce...about Selina, are you sure--"
"No." He gave Dick a sidelong glance. "I have no idea. Par for the course, with her."

Dick snickered. "Well, as long as you know that."

There was silence for a moment, and then: "So, ah, I take it things are--" "Thanks for doing this--"

Dick laughed. "You go first."

"Youth before beauty."

"...Wow. A joke." Dick shook his head disbelievingly. "Wonders never cease. I was gonna say, thanks again for setting this all up."

"It's quite a coup for Wayne Enterprises," Bruce said blandly.

"Riiiiight, sure. Anyway. Thanks."

"It's a start." ...and there's more to do to save your identity and mine, he didn't add, but Dick nodded his agreement anyway.

"So, um, you were gonna say...?"

Bruce suddenly looked...uncomfortable? "Just that. Ah. Things seem to be going well. With you two."

"Yeah. Absolutely great," Dick said reflexively, then more softly, "I love him, Bruce. I really do."

"I'm glad."

***

"Night, sweetie. Call me next week and we'll do lunch, okay?"

"Sure. Let's skip the usual places, though. I've seen enough of *this* crowd for awhile."

***

The evening, Lucius thought, could hardly have turned out better. As Gotham events went, this one had proved remarkably sedate...and, thankfully, super-villain free. No one ever hosted a public gathering in Gotham without fear that some costumed maniac would hijack it for his or her own twisted purposes. He wondered, briefly, if there might not be a code about such things--sort of a silent agreement to allow the city a respite before the terror began again--and dismissed the thought. For one thing, that was more about villain psychology than he cared to fathom. For another, Gotham's particular breed of sociopath rarely displayed concern for anything but their own whims.

He'd taken up a station at the doors as guests began to gather belongings and say their farewells. Bruce was busy chatting with Dick, and Lucius was glad to see that. They hadn't been in each others' orbits for most of the evening, and while the signed contracts made such concerns secondary, the personal interrelationships that led to the trade agreement still held influence...in the stockholders' eyes, if nothing else.

He spotted Jack Drake, gathering coats for his wife and son, and walked over to shake his hand. "Jack, I'm so glad you came tonight."

"You know...I am too." Jack looked at *content* as Lucius had ever seen him. "Thank Bruce again for the invite. And...everything else. He'll know."
Dana and Tim joined them and began shrugging into their coats. Jack had on a faintly bemused expression as he considered Tim; Lucius thought of his own kids, and sympathized. "Have a good time, son?"

"Yeah. Mostly." He shook his head to his father's questioning look. "It's nothing. This was fun."

Jack peered more closely at his son. "Did you...hear something? You can tell me if--"

"Dad," Tim interrupted, "it's cool. I know that stuff isn't worth listening to. It's not like any of them *know* anything."

Lucius stifled a grin. The boy definitely meant more than simply in the idle-gossip sense; his casual dismissal categorized all of Gotham society as a gaggle of inconsequential lightweights. He couldn't bring himself to disagree and smiled, watching them go. Drake might be a business rival of sorts, but Bruce's ties to the family through Tim ensured those rivalries would never become antagonistic. Lucius's colder, more pragmatic instincts also knew that Drake's fortunes were in decline, and there was no reason to kick the man when he was down. Besides, if asked, Jack might truthfully say that he'd traded his business success for his family's happiness, and call it more than an even exchange.

Dinah Lance was still making her circuit, but there wasn't any reason to keep her longer. Lucius caught her as she came around toward the door. "I think we can call it a night. Thanks, Ms. Lance. Things went very smoothly."

She grinned. "I wish all my work was this easy. Wear a nice dress, talk to interesting people--not exactly a hardship."

"If you enjoyed it, you could reconsider my offer," Lucius suggested again. "Bruce does need a bodyguard."

Dinah chuckled. "I couldn't keep up with him. And I really do have other commitments."

"I understand." It had been worth a shot. Her refusal was a pity, but he did have other possibilities available to him. Tomorrow he'd start interviewing at the top of the prospective list with the highly recommended Sasha Bordeaux....

***

Veronica Vreeland wasn't *ogling,* per se--well, all right, she was, but who could blame her when they insisted on standing *together* like that? "Such a shame," she finally said with a sigh.

Paige, never quick on the uptake, looked puzzled. "What is?"

Ronnie waved a hand. "The two of them. Face it, girls, we lost out."

The others followed her gaze and saw. Two men, standing side by side, strikingly alike in appearance despite their lack of blood relation: both dark haired and blue eyed, one of the world's wealthiest men and the circus boy he'd taken into his home. The more astute among them--like Veronica--hadn't missed the fact that both lost their parents to violence at very young ages.

Andrea sniffed, her cattiest aspect on display. "At least now we know why Dick Grayson never gave any of *us* a second chance."

Ronnie favored her with a patient smile. "No, dear, it's probably because you had more of an eye for his bankroll than anything else." Glancing back at them, she added, "Of course, we all did. But there was no reason to be crass about it."
"It's not *fair,*" wailed one of the younger girls, "*look* at them!

She *been* looking. And no, dammit, it wasn't fair. Absolutely stunning, both of them. And more than they appeared, Bruce hadn't grown Wayne Enterprises into the multibillion-dollar juggernaut it was today by virtue of his pretty *face.* Lucius Fox notwithstanding--and Veronica was happy to give him the credit he was due--there was a sharp intelligence behind those perfectly tailored suits Bruce wore. He just never let it show in public.

And if rumors were true, Richard Grayson had become a cop. Why he'd chosen the Bludhaven hellhole she couldn't imagine, but one didn't *do* that kind of thing on a whim. That kind of commitment went far beyond Grayson's offhandedly acquired "billionaire's playboy ward" image.

Hidden depths. And now, apparently, not a chance of ever finding out for certain what they were hiding behind their public faces.

As if hearing her thought, Dick Grayson waved at the cluster of women, grinning broadly. Ronnie gritted her teeth and smiled back.

***

Dick waved cheerily at the cluster of socialites eyeing them from across the room. "They all look so disappointed."

"You've crushed all their avaricious hopes," Bruce said, sounding amused.

"Well, so have you," Dick shot back. "I think Veronica was still dreaming of reeling you in."

"She's a smart girl; she'll cope," Bruce replied blandly, wearing a tiny smile. Dick snorted laughter. "Leslie sends her regards, by the way, and regrets that she couldn't make it."

"I'd hoped, but that's not surprising. Although maybe she would have allowed herself a night off if you'd extended Alfred an invite, too...."

"Alfred," Bruce stated, ignoring the insinuation, "is supervising Cassandra tonight."

Playing Oracle to her Bat, in other words, with both Barbara and Bruce otherwise engaged. There was, of course, no possibility that Bruce would leave Gotham entirely undefended, even for one evening.

Selina had finally managed to extricate Garth from the last of his petitioners and now escorted him toward the two of them, his expression amicably bemused.

"I like him," she announced in Dick's direction. "Very polite. Too good for a playboy like you, I'm sure." She let Garth's arm go and half-turned to frankly look him up and down, appraising. "Great shoulders. *Stunning* eyes. If I were you, I'd watch that someone doesn't...steal him out from under you." She grinned suddenly, wickedly. "So to speak."

"Selina...." Bruce murmured with exasperation, while Dick glared and tried not to blush.

"Not likely," Garth said, seeming imperturbable, "nor the opposite." He turned to Bruce before Selina could try again. "Thank you, Mr. Wayne. This has been much more productive than I anticipated." He glanced sideways at Dick. "Aside from the motivation to set it up in the first place."

"You've made some potentially useful contacts," Bruce smiled briefly. "Lucius can't believe I 'managed' to orchestrate the trade agreement. He may revise his opinion of my competence, I'm
afraid."

Selina smiled brightly. "Can't have that. Take a vacation to reward yourself for all this 'hard work.' The south of France is lovely."

"Is that a hint?"

She tilted her head, considering. "It *is* lovely there. But if you went alone, I might still have fun." A flash of white teeth. "I'm sure there's all sorts of...things I can find to do here in Gotham without you."

Bruce cleared his throat. "That's what I'm afraid of." He directed his attention back toward Garth. "In any case. Ambassador, I'm glad to have arranged this reception." He reached out, and from the corners of their eyes the four of them saw the multitude of flashing lights as the photographers captured the two men shaking hands.

"One big happy family," Selina said archly, and Dick winced at the mockery in her tone.

"If you're playing games--" he began heatedly, but Bruce cut him off.

"Thank you, Dick, that's not necessary. I expected to get...scratched, once in awhile."

Selina looked suddenly abashed. "And I promised not to. Old habits. Leopards and their spots...and other such clichés. Forgive me?"

Dick nodded. "I just...worry."

"I know. It's very sweet," Selina said, softly and almost seriously. "I'm afraid declarations are a little beyond me. But I *am* trying."

Even Bruce seemed startled by that, which made it as suitable a point as any to say good night.

Dick was still shaking his head over the exchange when he and Garth climbed into the limo. "Bludhaven," he told the driver, then raised the opaque partition. "God. Never thought I'd see *that.*"

Garth fell back against the seat with a relieved groan, loosening his tie. "Bruce and Selina, you mean? I think I've missed something."

"Mm-hm. Donna knew, but you weren't there the time I came in yelling about it when we were kids-- Selina's the Catwoman."

Garth blinked, blinked again, and started to laugh. "No wonder you-- and she-- and *Bruce--!*"

Dick snickered. "Keep repeating that and you'll get to where I am. I mean, she's 'reformed' before, but it never lasted. I don't know what it is about Bruce and--" he stopped abruptly.

"Go on," Garth prompted, pulling Dick over to lean against him.

"I was going to say, dangerous women. Selina, Ra's al-Ghul's daughter Talia, I've even heard Poison Ivy call him 'lover' but I think that's all in her head."

Garth laughed. "The nature of the dark and mysterious aura he cultivates. You're not immune to the effect either. Starfire, Huntress--your conquests may have been less deadly, but no less dangerous."

"Oh, yeah?" Dick leered and let his hands start to wander. "What does that say about you, then?"
"Were you under the impression I wasn't dangerous?"

"Definitely...not. I know better, now."

Garth smiled approvingly and leaned in, his mouth finding and tasting the sensitive pulse on Dick's neck.

Dick gasped. "Garth. Are we really going to make out in the back of this limo like teenagers on prom night?!"

"Mm. Yes. Like *horny* teenagers." Garth's eyes were bright with reflected light. "Since neither of us had a prom night, I think we're overdue."

Dick started, laughed, and let himself be pushed back against the seat. "Works for me."

This story is the product of over 3 years of obsessive nitpicking. I'm eager to hear what you think: kerithwyn@yahoo.com

Chronology, Continuity, and Miscellaneous Notes

(by character POV, in order of appearance)

Lucius Fox: Chief Operating Officer of Wayne Enterprises and Bruce's right hand. Bruce's security problem is as canon in regard to the concerns that led to the hiring of Sasha Bordeaux. Here, Lucius started by trying to hire Black Canary first. Lucius's kids' costume obsession was mentioned previously in the final epilogue of S&S: Diplomatic Relations.

Jenny-Lynn Hayden, aka Jade: Alan Scott's daughter (by a previous marriage) and superhero in her own right. Donna inadvertently caused Jen and Kyle's breakup in GL 119 (roughly circa Titans 9), so Jen really doesn't want to talk to her at this point. Jen met Tim Drake (and Robin) in Batman Chronicles 20 when she took school photographs at Brentwood. Her brother Todd (aka Obsidian) is mentally unstable. There seems to be confusion even within canon whether Jenny is known as Alan Scott's daughter or as Sentinel's; I'm choosing the path of least resistance and using the more recent sources. In GL Secret Files 2, there's an interview with Sentinel in which he definitively states that Jade is *not* his daughter. Also, during Judd Winick's GL run, Alan appeared in public with Jen quite openly as her father. "The Cyborg fiasco" and "your help with Victor" -- the Technis Imperative storyline.

Selina Kyle, aka Catwoman: With the retcon-on-retcon history. Miller's Year One Selina-on-the-streets was eliminated for awhile, now it's back in with Brubaker. Keen. My history includes both that and the Selina-socialite phase (see Long Halloween, among other sources), but not the Selina-runs-for-mayor-of-NY Catwoman storyline that I never read and by all accounts, don't need to. Uh,
the spork kings thing is a joke, courtesy of Domenika.

Garth, aka Tempest: Uses a minor spell learned from his mentor Atlan to enable him to stay on the surface far longer than other Atlanteans. "Previous Atlantean representatives" -- I'm assuming there would have been, at some point. Perhaps informally, but that's a big nation beneath those waves.

Lois Lane: Lois explicitly did *not* know Bruce = Batman as of the arc where she and Bats executed their commando raid on the White House, and that's still in the future from here. Jeph Loeb decided she knew as of "Hush," but that's an untold tale (which I am now *sekritly* tempted to write) and again, far after the time of this fic. Also, her segment was constructed part and parcel from several chats with Nika, because I'm not too proud to steal.

Bruce Wayne, aka Batman: ...I really don't need to explain anything here, do I? In the post-NML era, Wayne is reestablishing himself as Gotham's most prominent CEO without difficulty. "trapped between Scylla (in the form of a LexCorp executive) and Charybdis (in the shape of a vacuous socialite)" -- it's a Zan and Jayna joke. Sue me. Dinah and Selina have of course met before, in Birds of Prey: Manhunt among other occasions. Konbanwa = "good evening" in Japanese. William Black appeared in "Batman: Tenses," a reporter who was convinced Bruce shared his secret. Thanks to Alexis for giving me the impulse to use him. :)

Donna Troy, aka Troia: Dick and Garth's Titans teammate, very carefully pretending she doesn't know Dick as anything other than a casual acquaintance. She's still dating Roy Harper at the moment, but quite sensibly left him at home. "how you rallied the city during the earthquake" -- see Cataclysm. "Playboy billionaire's heir destroys Atlantean/Amazon marriage alliance, War at 11:00." - Kael's line from roughly four years ago, hoarded until now. STILL makes me laugh. :)

Dick Grayson, aka Nightwing: Thanks to Falstaff for the Martian blessing and its translation! "Garth had held his own against *Bruce*" -- Sea and Sky: Shadow of the Bat.

Barbara Gordon, aka Oracle: Her stepmother Sarah Essen-Gordon was murdered by the Joker at the end of NML.

Clark Kent, aka Superman: Met Garth in Sea and Sky: Strange Visitor. "I told you I'd get over it." -- Sea and Sky: Sparring. The Daily Planet Guide to Gotham City is a roleplaying accessory published by West End Games. (West End is defunct, but the book can still be found in game stores and online RPG stores, such as here: http://www.hillcity-comics.com/role_play/dc/weg5210.htm) I find it essential for fanfic research. The interior attributions list sections written by Clark and Jim. The Guide also lists Cameron's by the Park and Ciao Bella as Gotham restaurants, and I am *precisely* that much of a dork to care.

Dinah Lance, aka the Black Canary: Partnered with Oracle in the Birds of Prey, a current member of the JSA, and one of the five founding members of the JLA--the others being Martian Manhunter (J'onn), Aquaman (Arthur), Green Lantern (Hal Jordan) and Flash (Barry Allen). Hal and Barry are both deceased, and Arthur has set himself apart more and more from the surface world as he's aged; Dinah and J'onn look back on the early days of the JLA with both fondness and regret for what they've lost. Dinah and Selina have not only met before, but worked together in Birds of Prey: Manhunt. Kerrie Smith gave Dinah a Captain and Tennille obsession; I don't know why. She's currently dating Pieter Cross, the new Dr. Mid-Nite. "remembered what Garth had mentioned at the Clocktower" -- Sea and Sky: A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Tower.


Jack Drake: Not actually a bad guy, albeit undeniably careless about his relationship with his son.
He's working on that.

Alan Scott, aka Sentinel: The first Green Lantern, member of both the original 1940s JSA and its new incarnation; Garth's respect is well earned. Sentinel's powers derive from the mystical 'green flame' rather than an Oan power ring, but are quite alike in effect. Alan did not know Bruce's ID at the time of Chase 8 (circa NML); he's learned it by Detective 786, roughly a year or so later. We've not yet seen that particular reveal in canon. I'm postulating that he learns Bruce = Batman shortly after the Babel arc, when the secret identity issue came to a head. In S&S time, that's still (shortly) in the future. Oh, my aching timeline. (Yes, I do have charts to keep it all straight. Why do you ask?) Senator Perkins = Neptune Perkins, formerly of the Young All-Stars (a junior spin-off group of the WWII All-Star Squadron), now a U.S. Senator (D-Hawaii). "Jay" = Jay Garrick, aka Flash I, also of the JSA. "Irene" = Irene Miller, Alan's partner in broadcasting in the early 1940s and most likely deceased now. Doc Charles McNider = Doctor Mid-Nite I, popularly gay in fanon.

Hino Rei, aka J'onn Jonzz, the Martian Manhunter: J'onn appeared in his identity as Hino Rei in JLA 27. Batman recognized him in about three seconds. I'm now informed that a reference to "Sailor Mars"...so apparently both Bruce and J'onn watch the same cartoons. :) 

Borrowed layout of the civic center: http://www.glendaleciviccenter.com/CenterLayout.cfm

The Identity Shuffle, or, who knows whom?

Bruce Wayne [Batman]: All.
Dick Grayson [Nightwing]: All, having learned one of J'onn's aliases here.
Garth of Shayeris [Tempest (public ID)]: Bruce, Dick, Barbara, Clark (S&S: Strange Visitor), Tim (S&S II); Alan and Selina in course of fic.
Barbara Gordon: [Oracle]: All.
Jim Gordon [uh... Police Commissioner ;)]: Bruce, Dick, and Barbara. Though he would never, ever say. He doesn't know the "Oracle" identity but he knows Babs used to be Batgirl and suspects that she still associates with the Batguys in some capacity.
Clark Kent [Superman]: Bruce, Dick, and J'onn.
Lois Lane [...Intrepid Reporter Lass! ;)]: Clark and J'onn (a fellow journalist).
Hino Rei [J'onn J'onzz, the Martian Manhunter]: All.
Selina Kyle [Catwoman]: Bruce and Dick.
Donna Troy [Troia (public ID)]: Bruce, Dick, and Selina. Knows Barbara used to be Batgirl, but not about Oracle.
Dinah Lance [Black Canary (public ID)]: Bruce, Dick, Barbara, Alan, and J'onn and Selina in course of fic.
Jenny-Lynn Hayden [Jade (public ID)]: Alan.
Tim Drake [Robin]: Bruce, Dick, Barbara, Selina, and Alan.
Alan Scott [Sentinel]: Public IDs only.

People who now have access to enough information to connect Dick Grayson = Nightwing (and who didn't know already): Kyle Rayner, Eel O'Brien, Connor Hawke, Toni Monetti, and Grant Emerson. I haven't forgotten. :) 

Several small follow up ficlets to this, won't be posted on all lists to avoid spam. See either my list or my webpage (eventually) for all parts.

Finally, to end where I began: with profuse thanks to Kael, Smitty, Becky, Nika (and again for the Page Six graphic), Carmen, and Chicago, all of without whom this quite literally would never have been finished. Many, many lines, thoughts, and touches in the above can be directly attributed to their comments...and in places, outright stolen from chat.
As always, this is (over)due to Dannell, who wanted to see the Bruce-Donna dance in fic.
In the wake of the Wayne reception, Garth had more invitations to meetings and conferences than one Atlantean could keep up with, and requested and received a short leave from the Titans to deal with them. Dick, long accustomed to working two careers, grinned and told him he'd eventually get used to doing both at once, but to enjoy the "vacation" in the meantime. Garth gave him a narrow-eyed look and muttered something about how he'd take the super-villains over the businessmen any day. Exaggeration, no doubt, but Dick laughed about that all the way to the Tower.

He came in on the sound of adolescent outrage.

"...just not right!" Argent paused in her apparently ongoing tirade for a breath. "After what Nightwing said...."

Donna had her hand over her mouth, trying unsuccessfully to hide a grin. Roy wasn't making any such effort. They saw him and their smiles widened, though neither spoke up to enlighten him. "Hey, guys. What's going on?"

Toni turned, her eyes going wide and sympathetic. "Ohhhh, Nightwing, I'm so sorry!"

He'd definitely missed a step. "About what?"

"About *Garth!*" Her voice was full of sudden anger, which was odd, because Dick could have sworn she'd been harboring a secret crush on Tempest since she'd joined the team. "I was reading about the Wayne reception--"

Sometimes the necessity of a dual identity made life easier. Sometimes it came back to bite him in the ass. "Oh. That. Don't worry about it, Toni."

"How can you--after he--I saw the pictures!!" Toni sounded personally insulted. "I mean, you guys seemed so happy, and there he was hanging all over that Grayson jerk--"

Roy gave up and started laughing out loud. Toni whirled and glared. "What's so funny?!"

"Ah. Toni, listen--" This wasn't the way Dick had intended this to go, not at all, but here it was. "It's okay, really."
"Okay?! That two-timing--"

"Argent!" That time with the Bat-voice, and Toni shut her mouth with alacrity. "I appreciate your, ah, defense. But it's *okay.* The thing is--" Dick let out a breath, silently asking Bruce to forgive him, and reached up to peel off his mask.

"Oh," Toni said in a very small voice, staring. "You're-- *oh.*"

"Yeah. We staged the whole thing so I could be with Garth as *myself.*"

"Well...then... I bet I look like an idiot." As the revelation sank in, her ire didn't so much diminish as...switch targets. "So everybody knew but me?"

"I'd meant to tell you," Dick said lamely, and far too late.

"Oh. Great. Even--even *Jesse* knew, didn't she!" At Dick's mute nod, she exploded again. "I've been a Titan longer than her! That--oooh!" Her hands glowing, Argent conjured a silvery energy path and flew out of the room, seething.

Dick looked sourly at Donna and Roy. "You two were a lot of help."

"Ah. Sorry." Roy sounded anything but apologetic. "That was way too funny."

Donna was only marginally more repentant. "Well, *you* hadn't told her, and it really wasn't right for us to without your permission."

"...yeah, okay. I screwed up." Dick looked regretfully in the direction Toni had flown. "Think she'll forgive me?"

"Sure. But that's only part of the problem, Dick," Donna said softly. "She doesn't have anyone her own age to talk to. She really doesn't speak to her parents anymore, and with Grant gone it's her and the five 'adults.' I think Toni's feeling lonely, and being left out of things didn't help. I should have realized that before."

"Me too." Dick sighed. "Okay. Something else to worry about. Meanwhile...."

"Go apologize," Donna urged.

"Right."

***

He knocked at Argent's door, easily recognizable as *hers* by the extremely gaudy posters plastered all over it. "Toni, it's...Dick. Can I come in?"

A mutter emerged from inside that he chose to interpret as a "yes." He opened the door to see her sprawled across the bed, flipping angrily through a magazine. She refused to look at him, so he plunged ahead. "Look, Toni. I'm sorry. I honestly had meant to talk to you before the reception. Everything just happened too fast."

She grumbled under her breath and flipped through a few more pages, then glared up at him. "You made me feel really stupid."

Dick glanced around for a place to sit and settled for leaning against a corner of the dresser, careful not to displace the clutter there. "I'm sorry about that."
Her shoulders slumped further, her demeanor more hurt than anything. "I just--I'm sorry I yelled, but it's so *unfair!* I mean, if you told Jesse--"

His only defense was the truth. "I went to see her after she quit, to ask for her help with Vic."

"I guess--I thought--you'd tell me when I earned it. I didn't want to find out by accident," she finished glumly.

"Toni," he said firmly, "you wouldn't be *on* this team if you hadn't earned it." He hesitated, then went on. "You've heard about Terra."

She nodded, wide-eyed, but he held up his hand before she could reply, or maybe protest that *she* wasn't like that. "We...didn't entirely realize it until later, but she *broke* the Titans. Damaged something essential in the team. After that betrayal, it became clear that the Titans couldn't...allow that to happen again."

Never mind the other disasters that followed, because Raven and Joey and even Vic weren't in full control of their own minds during their respective crises. Tara *chose* her own path. Dick squelched the Brucelike mutter in the back of his head that wanted to condemn the team's entire history as a failed exercise and continued, "When we restarted the Titans this time, we were forced to recognize that we aren't like other teams. The Titans don't exist without trust. I know that sounds ironic, considering, but you would never have been invited into this incarnation of the team if we--if *I* wasn't certain that you could be trusted."

He hadn't intended to make a speech, but now Toni seemed pleased despite her frustration, and thoughtful. "That goes for Grant too?"

Dick shrugged, nodding. "He probably won't see the tabloids out at the reservation, but I'll let him know anyway. I didn't mean for you to find out this way, Toni. I've had a lot on my mind recently, but that's not an excuse."

Toni lost her pout and started to giggle, flipping emotional states like the teenager she was. "I can't believe you're Dick Grayson. Like, the perfect bachelor catch. Not any more, huh?"

"Not any more." He smiled. "My fans will have to live with the disappointment."

"Ohhh, if they only knew--" she cut herself off, looking startled. "So if you're Nightwing...does that mean...." She stopped again and shook her head. "Never mind. I don't want to know and you wouldn't tell me anyway."

Which was true. Bruce's secrets took precedence over her hurt feelings. But he was glad he wouldn't have to lie. "So are we okay?"

"Yeah. I guess."

He considered her thoughtfully and decided on a strategic change of subject. "Toni, I've been thinking about your powers, and your training."

Toni sat up excitedly, as if she'd been jabbed with a pin. "Oh, yeah, really? I mean, what were you thinking about?"

"One of the reasons you accepted the offer to join the Titans was the chance to hone your powers, right?"

She nodded. "And I *totally* have, with everything we've been doing, and learning from you
guys...."

Dick smiled at her eagerness. "We've noticed. But I was thinking about more directed applications. None of the senior Titans have your kind of solid-energy manipulation power, so that makes it a little difficult to give you explicit guidance. Theory is one thing, but I think you might benefit from working with someone with similar abilities."

"Like, um, who?"

"Think about it," Dick encouraged. "Whose powers are like yours?"

Toni hesitated a moment, visibly anxious about giving the correct answer. "The stuff I've been doing lately, making shapes out of energy, that's kind of like Green Lantern, isn't it? Only, way less powerful than him...."

He nodded. "Don't underestimate yourself. But that's exactly who I was thinking of, except GL is pretty busy with the JLA. Sentinel has similar powers, but he's likewise occupied in the JSA. But there *is* someone else, here in New York, and I think she'd make a perfect teacher. Do you know Jade?"

"Oh, yeah! She's really cool!"

"If you're okay with the idea, then, I'll ask her."

"Definitely!" Toni bounced on the bed. "Nightwing, that's completely awesome. I want-- I want to be the best Titan I can."

"You're doing fine, Toni."

He'd had the notion before, but seeing Jade at the reception reminded him that she'd been on the short list of heroes considered for the new Titans team. She was experienced and levelheaded--and after all, who *wouldn't* want a Green Lantern on their team? But Jenny-Lynn had made it clear she was interested in creating a life for herself outside the super-heroics. She preferred, at least for the moment, to be 'on call' only for emergencies.

Still, Dick thought she could probably be persuaded to lend a hand as a mentor, particularly to a girl who wasn't so far removed from the fashion-conscious teenager Jade had been herself. Judging by the fashion magazines scattered around her room, Toni would probably be fascinated by Jen's photography career. If they could connect on a social level as well, all the better.

Still overtly buoyed by his approval, Toni blurted out, "C'n I say something else?"

"Hm?"

She grinned. "I'm glad I was wrong. I mean, about the cheating thing. You and Garth are, like, the cutest couple EVER."

"Uh. Thanks." He decided it would be best to flee before the blush he could feel creeping over his ears actually hit his face. "We've got a meeting in a bit. I'm heading down--"

"Is *he* gonna be there?" Toni asked, too casually, and Dick bit back a groan.

"This doesn't change anything as far as the *team* is concerned, Toni."

"No, I know," she agreed, far too quickly.
He wondered, but let it go. "Garth has other obligations for the next few days. Maybe a few weeks."

"Oh."

Right. Another reason to avoid PDA in the Tower, if Roy’s tendency toward loud and exaggerated gagging noises wasn’t enough. The last thing they needed was an over-interested teenager peering around corners at them.

"See you in a few," Dick said, and slipped out the door before Toni could rally another comment. As he beat a hasty retreat toward the meeting room, he mentally ran through the roster of those remaining Titans and JLAers who might discern his identity now that the photos from the reception were public. He'd call Grant as promised. Plastic Man had *just* enough restraint not to make any more of a deal about it than he already had, and besides, O'Brien had once maintained an undercover career as an FBI agent and understood the necessity of a secret identity. Batman had already put the fear into Rayner and Connor Hawke, though Dick had far more confidence in the latter's ability to keep his mouth shut.

That only left the repercussions for his civilian life. The reaction of the Bludhaven PD, he knew, would be its own trial. Garth had no idea about the kind of ingrained homophobia in the system, and Dick hadn't gone out of his way to enlighten him. If he knew, Garth would feel he'd added yet another difficult complication to Dick's life. Which wasn't the point at all.

But he'd deal with *that* when it came up. Right now, there was Titans business to attend to.
The Last to Know

Chapter Summary

A little more identity fallout.

Chapter Notes

(from chat dialogue by Carmen Williams)

This fic is a product of 'brain terrorist', [tm]Alestar: "Y'know, when you're just minding your own business, and a story tackles you to the ground and screams, 'Fuck you--write me.'"

Takes place shortly after "Debut," the reception fic.

Notation: This fic was constructed from 4+-year-old chat dialogue, mostly by Carmen. (See, I told you I saved everything. ;) All of the good lines are hers.

Thanks to Smitty for the backup, as always.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The most *infuriating* thing was that she might never have known if Marcia hadn't come by with a copy of the tabloid. The idea that they'd been keeping such secrets all this time, maybe even *laughing* about her ignorance--

That wasn't true, and she knew it. But Bridget Clancy prided herself on being no man's fool, and here two of them--under her own roof!--had right and properly pulled the proverbial wool over her eyes.

It was far too early to go marching up to the third floor and pound on their door, but to hell with it, she was doing it anyway.

After a few moments Garth opened the door to her banging and she took an instinctive step back. She'd known...she'd *thought* she'd known who he was, some kind of UN diplomat. Turned out that wasn't the half of it. "You--you're a superhero!" she blurted, much less accusatory than she'd intended but still straight to the point, so that was all right.

He blinked at her. "Sometimes," he agreed mildly.

The nerve of him, to stand there so calm. "And you're, I mean, you're not human!"

His voice stayed even, but she'd seen the flash of hurt in his eyes and dammit, why had she never noticed that before? *Purple* eyes. "I'm from Atlantis, yes. I don't think that makes me any less 'human.' Clancy, I thought--"

"Garth, who's--oh, hey, Clancy." Dick had come stumbling out into the living room, still obviously
half-asleep and half-dressed. It was a distracting view, but she wasn't in the proper frame of mind to appreciate it.

"'Hey' yourself, you--" she moved to push past Garth, who obligingly shifted out of her way. Smart, that one. She waved the tabloid at Dick, still full of righteous indignation. "I had to read *this* to find out who you are!"

She threw it down on the living room table. Dick picked it up, saw the grainy black-and-white photo, and winced.

"I thought you knew," Garth murmured behind her, and then louder, "I thought you were going to tell her?"

Dick looked honestly shamefaced. "I forgot."

"Didn't think it was important to mention? 'Oh, Clancy, by the way, I'm Bruce Wayne's heir' and speakin' of that, what in the good Lord's name are you doin' HERE?!"

Dick shrugged. "Uh...paying rent?"

She could hear herself getting shrill, and didn't care. "Payin' rent?! You can afford to BUY this whole--" And then it hit her. Her mysterious benefactor-- "Grayson!"

"What? I needed a place to live." He frowned. "I need coffee."

She followed him, glaring over the partition between the kitchen and the living room. "So you just *bought* the building?"

"Are you complaining?" Dick switched on the coffeepot and stood in front of it like a junkie waiting for his fix. "I *like* this place, Clance. I was in a position to help, so I did."

"But...you...why didn't you tell me?" She sounded plaintive rather than outraged, definitely the wrong tact. She wasn't done being angry yet, not by a long shot.

He looked at her, finally having the grace to look embarrassed. "I didn't want it to be a big deal."

"It *was* a big deal. To me. To everyone who lives here!" She took a deep breath and then let it out with a gasp as she realized what *else* he'd done. "The Wayne scholarship. You didn't just happen to mention that. You set it up!"

Dick held up a hand. "Clancy--"

"And there I was, so proud thinkin' that I'd earned it, earned something that good, and you just--made a *call* and there it was!" She could feel tears burning at the corners of her eyes now, adding humiliation to her rage. "Who the hell gave you the *right*?"

"Clancy." Dick's voice wasn't loud, but it cracked with an authority she'd never heard from him before, and it stopped her rant in its tracks. "I did ask the selection committee to take a look at your application. But I promise you, they don't take unqualified applicants, regardless of who asks."

"But--"

He shook his head, turning back to the cabinet and retrieving two mugs. "Are you competent? Intelligent? Hardworking?"

"Yes, but--"
"Then what's the problem?"

"I," she said feebly, and couldn't finish. Dick poured the coffee and handed her one of the cups. She held it, staring down into the murky depths and trying not to snuffle too loudly.

She could feel her anger draining away. It was only her Irish temper that had led her to storm in here, and she'd never been one to carry a grudge. It helped that she liked them both, *wanted* to like them.

Clancy jumped at the voice behind her. He'd been so quiet, she'd almost forgotten Garth was there. "Neither of us meant for any of this to be such a shock."

"Oh, I--" she remembered her words at the door, wincing. She turned around to face him. "I'm *sorry!* I didn't mean, I don't really think--"

Garth waved her half-formed apology away. "Forget it. I have."

"But y'really are a *superhero.* That's...I mean, wow." She knew about Aaron's former career, but this was totally different. "With *powers* an' everything."

"Oh yeah." Dick came out from around the kitchen partition. "Very *impressive*...powers."

"I'm not talking to you yet," Clancy informed him without looking his way, "and your coffee really reeks, I'll have you know."

"You haven't even tasted it yet!" he protested, but she ignored him.

Garth looked like he was stifling a laugh. He didn't *seem* any different than the man she'd thought she knew, standing there in bare feet and sweatpants and a too-small t-shirt, just like he wasn't hot enough to melt a glacier and didn't have the most exotic 'career' she'd ever heard of. "And an ambassador, too."

"It's just who I am," he told her, and then over her head, "Some tea for me, please?"

Clancy heard Dick mutter under his breath and retreat back into the kitchen. She couldn't help smirking. "So how does someone like *you* hook up with someone like *that?*" She jerked her head backward. "I'm just not seein' the benefit on your side."

This time Garth did laugh. "Well, he's rich. That helps."

"Hey!" from the kitchen and more muttering.

"He's also very bendy," Garth offered, and Clancy spit out the first sip of coffee she'd taken. It wasn't terrible, not that she'd tell Dick that, but now she was laughing too hard to swallow.

"Lord, warn a woman," she said, giggling. "Oh, I need a napkin."

Behind her a hand reached out with a bunch, as surly as a hand could be. She took them without acknowledging its owner and cleaned off as best she could. "So those people who were here a couple of weeks ago, Roy an' the rest, were they...?"

"Titans, yes. Roy," Garth informed her, "would be very pleased that you remembered him by name."

She snorted. "*That* one. I've enough excitement in my life right now, thank you."

Dick's woeful voice emerged from the kitchen again. "Is the 'mock Dick' portion of the morning over
now? Because I can go back to bed if you're not done."

Clancy winked at Garth and threw back, "Depends. Is there anythin' else you'd like to be tellin' me?"

He came out into the living room carrying a third mug, which he handed to Garth. "...not when your eyes are shooting sparks like that, no, not really."

She frowned at him. "Like the big bad rich boy *cop* is scared of me."

"Apparently he is, the way he neglected to tell you the truth." Garth sounded honestly annoyed about that, bless him.

"Garth!"

"Well, it's true."

"You're not helping my reputation, here."

Garth smiled benignly. "Don't worry. I won't tell your fellow officers that you're terrified of your landlady."

Dick spoke sullenly into his coffee. "Lots of people are scared of their landladies, you know. It's a common problem."

"Dick, ves'tacha, there is nothing common about your problems. Any of them."

She wondered at the unfamiliar word. Could it be Atlantean? She wanted to ask, but didn't want to interrupt Dick in full pout mode. "Could we not do this in front of--"

Clancy waved her approval. "No, no, go right ahead."

Dick raised an eyebrow at her. "I thought you wanted to yell."

"I want to strangle you. But listening to embarrassin' personal information might make me feel better, too."

Garth was proving to be even more helpful than she'd guessed. "I could make you a list."

"GARTH!"

"You heard her, Dick; I'm just trying to preserve your neck."

Dick folded his arms, a good trick when one hand still held a half-full cup. "I'm feeling outnumbered, here."

"And here I was thinking you took on the multiple scourges of Bludhaven every day. What did you call it? 'A wretched hive of scum and villainy.'"

"Well, yeah, but they're just trying to kill me. They don't mock me."

They clearly didn't need any help with the banter, but Clancy felt the need to interject. "I could do that."

Dick looked pained. "...please don't."

"Ah, because you don't want to hurt me?"
"That and I'm pretty sure it would hurt when you hit me."

She nodded in approval. "How right you are, Mr. Grayson."

Garth cleared his throat. "Clancy, I know you're upset, but I would appreciate it if you didn't kill him."

"Thanks, Garth."

"Spindling, folding, and mutilating are all right, though."

"Yep. That's it. I'm going back to bed." Dick stalked back into the kitchen, dumped his cup in the sink, and stomped down the hall and out of sight.

Clancy laughed softly and sipped at her coffee. "That was fun. He's not really mad though, right?"

"He's not a morning person," Garth said, smiling over his tea. "The opposite, in fact. The cranky comes with the territory."

She glanced at him, feeling suddenly and unexpectedly hesitant. "I, uh. Don't know much about the superhero thing. ...No one's going to attack the building, are they? Because you're here?"

She felt terrible for asking, but Garth just looked surprised. She hurried to explain, "It's just, you always hear about horrible things happening in Metropolis, and *Gotham*....""I...honestly don't think you have anything to worry about." Garth seemed to be picking his words carefully. "My particular...opponents...tend to live deep undersea."

Oh. That made sense, she supposed. "I can't even imagine. 'Atlantis,' it sounds like a Sci-Fi Channel special." She giggled nervously. "It's just so...fantastic."

"I'd be happy to tell you about it sometime."

She smiled. "I'd like that."

Garth glanced back toward the bedroom. "I did also want to apologize for Dick. The secrecy, it's...not entirely his fault. He'd become very used to living his own life, not being seen as Bruce's ward. That's a hard habit for him to break."

"I...guess I can understand that," she said slowly. "But y'really think--I mean, he *didn't* set up the scholarship for me, right?"

"He said he didn't, and I believe him," Garth replied, with such simple faith that Clancy had no choice but to accept it.

"That's that, then. But you be sure to tell him," Clancy felt compelled to declare, "that just because he *owns* the place doesn't mean he doesn't owe rent by the first of the month, just like everyone else. I'm tired of chasin' him down for it."

Garth laughed. "I'll tell him."

"Okay," She sighed. "I'd best be gettin' to the day's chores, anyway." She handed Garth the cup and went to the door, then turned around again. "Knowin' who you are, where you're from, it's like a fairy tale--an' 'Haven is anything but. No one really *chooses* t'live here. So why do you..." she didn't quite know how to finish, but Garth seemed to understand what she meant.
"I've heard Dick say, 'It's a hellpit, but it's home.'" He shrugged a little, smiling. "It's where he is."

There wasn't much she could say to that without getting mushy, so Clancy just grinned at him and opened the door. Well, one thing. "'Bendy,' huh?"

"Very."

She laughed about that all the way down the stairs.

---

**Extraneous Bonus Scene!**

As promised, Dick had retreated back to bed and was now burrowed under the covers with his head buried under a pillow.

"You," Dick announced in a muffled but discernibly sullen tone as Garth entered the bedroom, "have a *mean* streak. Why did I not see that before?"

Garth put Dick's refilled coffee mug down on the bedside dresser. "Clearly, I was lulling you into a false sense of security."

"For my money, no doubt."

"You do maintain a very attractive...balance."

The pillow shifted and one blue eye glared out at him. "Keep that up and you can forget about how 'bendy' I am."

Garth stared down at him, trying not to laugh. "Dick...I believe that's--how would you say it?--'the biggest empty threat in the history of empty threats.'"

Dick growled but didn't bother to refute the assertion. Garth patted his shoulder and sat down on the bed. A few minutes passed in comfortable silence before Dick finally confessed, "I really did mean to talk to her."

"I know. I think she'll be all right with it."

"Yeah, I figured when she started insulting me." Dick sat up and grabbed the coffee cup, inhaling the steam with obvious pleasure. "What did she say to you, anyway? That she apologized for."

"I forgot," Garth said, straight-faced. Dick eyed him but clearly decided not to push.

The alarm chose that moment to go off. Dick swatted at it with irritation and sighed. "Another day in the wretched hive."

Garth just smiled. "I'll be here when you get home."

"Yeah. I know."

{really the end}
Chapter End Notes

* Aaron Helzinger, aka the former super-villain Amygdala, also a tenant in Clancy's building.

* ves'tacha (Romany), "beloved." A real word even before Mercedes Lackey got hold of it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!