He's My Best Friend

by lontradiction

Summary

Wally just wishes that sometimes it was Dick talking to him and not Nightwing.
A series of vignettes set during Invasion, between chapters 4 and 5 of Kid Oblivious.

Notes

This chapter takes place during Young Justice #20: "Players, Chapter One: Wheelbarrow, Shoe, Thimble."

See the end of the work for more notes.
[December 1, 5:16 PST, Team Year 5]

Joint video calling Dick for his birthday may have been Artemis and I’s best decision this cold, bleak morning.

I know as soon as she enters the webcam’s view that the blonde bombshell has become another one of Dick Grayson’s many conquests. “Morning, uh… ‘handsome,’” she says, voice a little quiet but still clear over the video call.

“You dog!” I exclaim, as Artemis starts to ask, “Oh my god, is that-”

I can hardly wait until Dick hangs up on us to start laughing. “Oh my god, she didn’t even know his name-”

“Was that really Bette Kane?” Artemis exclaims more than asks.

“Hey, you tell me!” I say, barely getting the words out between gasps of laughter. “I’m not the one who went to school with them.”

“I mean, is he pursuing her, what’s going on?” she asks, trying to start the video call again.

“Please, he whisked her into bed like he does with all the lovely ladies. Except you, of course.” Dick goes offline before she can get the call through. I give her a consoling peck on the cheek and settle back into my physics work. “He’s always been a charmer.”

“Unlike you?” she says, smirking the same smirk she has since the day we met. It’s grown on me, I have to admit.

I primly lay my hand over my chest. “Don’t flatter me too much, dear, you’ll overinflate my ego.”

She snorts. “Like that’s even possible. Gotta head out, babe, I need my morning run if I’m going to be any use in class today.” She kisses the crown of my head, slinging her bag over one shoulder.

“All right,” I respond with mock disappointment. “You know where to find me – right here, still working on this physics final.”

“Please,” she says, turning the knob of the door, “you’ll be done in a flash.” Her chuckles echo back as the door closes.

I stare down at my work. Where was I again? The work on the last problem is all Greek to me now, and the Greek letters don’t help.

That was the first time I’d really spoken to him in two months.

What happened to us?

I mean, I know what happened to us. He took over the team, I left the team. Makes our schedules kind of incompatible. But we don’t even see each other out of costume anymore. I could blame homework, but that’s kind of a terrible excuse when it’s basically a five minute trip. He could blame
his schedule – which, okay, running the team AND being a cop AND patrolling as Nightwing can take something out of a man.

But two months.

The Greek letters begin to resolve themselves. Ah, that’s where I was. I set my pencil to paper and keep working.

Maybe after finals.

Chapter End Notes

My Kid Oblivious readers might recall that I said I had a chapter's worth of vignettes. Well, they got away from me a bit - to the point where one is currently longer than some Kid Oblivious chapters! I am suddenly very happy that you all wanted a separate fic. I'm uploading all the ones I have currently, but there are plenty more to go.
Better Be Ready

Chapter Summary

This chapter takes place before Salvage.

[February 13, 15:32 PST, Team Year 6]

*I feel the adrenaline moving through my veins*

My phone rings in the middle of class, blasting Britney Spears’ “Circus.” I curse under my breath. Really, Dick? Now?

*Spotlight on me and I'm ready to break*

I dig into my bag. My treacherous phone decides to make a break for it and leaps onto the floor, just barely out of reach.

*I'm like a performer, the dance floor is my stage*

God *damn* it, why did they make these chairs so frustratingly oriented if they were going to be immovable?

*Better be ready, hope that ya feel the same*

I definitely feel on stage, you stupid conglomeration of chips. I can hear someone muttering disapprovingly behind me.

*All the eyes on me in the center of the ring just like a circus*

Why did I ever choose this ringtone? Oh right, because it’s perfect for Dick. He’d probably be thrilled to see me scrambling around for this stupid phone.

*When I crack that whip -*

I finally grab hold of the damn thing and silence it. I look up to see the professor glaring daggers at me. “Uh, yeah,” I say. That damn blush is coming back. I thought I’d finally gotten it under control. “I’ll just. Leave. Sorry for interrupting.” I sling my backpack over the shoulder, grab the objects that fell out of it on the way up, and hurriedly make my way out the door. As soon as I’m away, I grab my phone and speed dial 1.

The click sounds, and I immediately launch in saying, “I hope you appreciate that your stupid ringtone just got me thrown out of class. This has better *actually* be urgent, he grades on attendance—”

“Wait, wait.” How long has his voice been that deep? The logical side of my brain says nigh-on four years now, but it doesn’t sound right at all. “You’re telling me you still have it set to Britney Spears? What are you, twelve?”

“No, that’s how old you were when you decided we should have special ringtones for each other,” I respond, definitely not pouting. “What can I say? Still suits you.”
His chuckles roll through the phone’s speaker. They’re nice, but they’re nothing like his old cackle. “I hope you know yours is still ‘Bet On It.’”

“And you’re making fun of me?” I say, laughing for a moment. I find a chair and settle down, then remember I actually had a reason for calling. “So, what’s the sitch? Gotta be something big, or you wouldn’t call during class.”

His voice snaps straight back into serious mode, and I half-wish I’d kept the banter going longer. “We’ve found Roy.” My breath catches, and he hurriedly continues, “Our Roy. We tracked him to DC. He’s in bad shape, Wally. The person who saw him says he looked like he hadn’t shaved in days and hadn’t slept for longer.”

“Holy-” I clamp down on the end of that. I’m not shocked, not like that would make it sound. He took it badly when the Team and League ceased official investigations – worse than I’d seen him take any news, even when we were in the Hall of Justice for the first time. And that was when his programmed life’s purpose was taken away.

Dick’s voice is tired, like he’s been up for a few days himself, but his tone remains professional. “His family—” right, identities on the phone, “—and I are planning to catch him out tonight. I think it could help if you were there.”

“Yeah, right,” I snort. “We both know Roy’s too stubborn to give up on butting his head against a wall just because people care about him.” I should know. I bugged the guy enough times to try to get him to join up. But… “Is he still out and about?”

Dick hesitates. “Yes,” he says. “All night, from what I can tell. Please. Even if you can’t help him, you can help us.”

Like Ollie and Dinah need my help. And I don’t even know Jim much. “I’ll be there. Meet up at the usual place?” Makes the most sense to meet at the Hall of Justice, anyway – zeta beams all meet there.

“Yeah.” Click. The Bats are never much for extended goodbyes, and Dick is no exception.

Damn. Even if I was allowed back into class, I wouldn’t be able to focus. I pick up my bag and start towards home.

My surrogate big brother’s working himself to an early death and, if I’m being honest with myself, Dick’s not far behind.

This is why I wanted out of the hero business.
This chapter takes place after Salvage.

[February 14, 00:35 PST, Team Year 6]

Once Artemis is down for the night, every little moment of the Intervention (can’t really call it anything else) comes rushing back. I’ve never seen someone try to patrol when they’re that dead on their feet. Dick mentioned trying, once, but Batman shot him down. You could die out there tonight, is how Dick said Bruce put it. We don’t like to make it that immediate, usually. Reminder of mortality and all that. But if you’re crimebusting when you can’t even lift a hand against another trained fighter? That’s beyond self-destructive and into suicidal.

And I think he was using.

A lot of superheroes never handle drug cases, or at least never stick around to help the users. For the most part, that makes sense – there isn’t anything you can punch to fix an overdose. Uncle B and I, though, we see them all the time. Flashes are faster than an ambulance. I’ve seen many people with that expression of energized exhaustion, that tunnel vision drive.

I didn’t think I’d ever see that look on a hero.

Speedy was the first sidekick (yes, Inner Roy, I know) I’d ever really heard about. He was so cool. He could shoot faster than Green Arrow, and he was only a little older than I was. How was I not supposed to look up to him? That barely even changed after we met – back then, I thought his attitude was justified because he was so good at everything that naturally he could barely stay still when there were Battles to be Fought.

Tonight, I didn’t see Speedy. I barely even saw Roy.

I saw a broken man, driven on past all reason, seeking one thing at the expense of his entire life. What happens if he finds the original Roy and can’t stop?

And Dick didn’t notice.

Dick’s always been – well, not innocent, a Bat and a circus kid can’t be innocent – but on a whole different level of straight and narrow. I’m pretty sure Batman didn’t let him have caffeine growing up. I don’t know exactly what Batman’s speech on drugs was, but given Gotham, I can’t imagine he focused on anything less than the violent stages of addiction, sellers, and overdose. I know Dick didn’t notice the way Roy’s hands moved or his shoulders were rolled forward. I can’t tell him, half for Roy and half for him – maybe more than half. Roy needs to have someone who isn’t going to see him as less for his problems, and Dick –

Well, Dick just doesn’t need to feel like another friend has failed him.

I turn the page of my Vietnamese book and sigh. Dick looked exhausted tonight. I haven’t talked to the rest of the team much, but I know he’s been working hard to set himself up as their leader since Kaldur… since Kaldur. Only half of the original team is still there – maybe a bit more if you don’t
count Artemis. It’s clearly taking a toll. Dick’s got his shields up constantly. The only time I saw him so much as flinch all night is when he stepped into the zeta tubes, and even that was subtle enough that most would have missed it. He hasn’t been that shielded around me in a long time. It’s almost like he never took the mask off.

If he’s not talking to me, who is he talking to?

Not the new kids, that’s for sure. Not Superboy or M’Gann. Not Zatanna – they were too casual too long ago. Not Rocket – basically same reason. Not with Batman, not about this, and same with Alfred.

He’s probably not talking to anyone.

I pull out my phone and type the number from memory, but hesitate before calling. Is he really ready to talk to me? Did quitting the team downgrade my security clearance or whatever? Could he even talk over the phone? Did he stop trusting me after I walked out?

I set the phone down and cradle my head in my hands. I can’t work like this.
Chapter Summary

This chapter takes place during Bloodlines.

[February 28, 07:11 PST, Team Year 6]

The “soothing” sound of Britney Spears shocks me out of unconsciousness. Grumbling as I force my eyes open, I fumble for my phone and lift it up the too-bright screen. Damn it, Dick, this had better not actually be you.

Of course it is. I glance at Artemis, who murmurs and turns over. Sighing, I brush the blankets away and walk out into the hallway, swiping to pick up the call.

Dick’s voice echoes over the line. “Hey. Need your help.”

I blink once and scowl. “Really? Not even a ‘sorry for calling you at ass o’clock in the morning?’”

I swear I can hear Dick rolling his eyes over the phone. “I wouldn’t call seven ass o’clock.”

I lean back against the wall, tapping my fingers on my hip. “I’m in college, man, I only fell asleep five hours ago.” And lost at least a half hour after that waking up over and over. “Care to fill me in on what’s so important and not, you know, a crisis?”

“He’s headed for Central City, probably hoping to see said alleged grandfather.”

“Another… Flash fan. Claims to be Barry’s grandson. He makes a surprisingly compelling case.”

I curl forward, biting my lip. “Barry and Iris don’t have kids.”

He finally sounds a like a little more like himself. “Like I said, surprising. You could call it a Grandfather Paradox.”

Time travel. Great.

I shuffle through a hall desk for a pen and paper. “Where do you need me?”

Serious Nightwing voice again. “He’s headed for Central City, probably hoping to see said alleged grandfather.”

I finally find a notepad and pen under the mail. I pull them out and start scribbling down a note for Artemis. “Be there ASAP.”

“Good.” I start to say something, but a click echoes over the line.

Wow. Good to know I’m only worth calling when you need me. I set the note down and grab some clothes. Today’s off to a great start.
Awkward Chats

Chapter Summary

This chapter takes place after Bloodlines.

[February 28, 03:27 EST, Team Year 6]

While Bart throws a fit and Uncle Barry tries to figure out how to “parent” his grandchild before he’s parented his children, I sidle up to Dick. “What kind of tourist comes in such an unreliable vehicle?”

Dick shrugs. “It’s far from the only thing that seems off about him. But he is definitely from the future and definitely Flash’s grandson, so he was telling at least part truth. We’ll keep an eye on him, but he’s not looking like an enemy so far.” He looks at me and opens his mouth as if to speak, but doesn’t quite manage words. His hands shift around, twitching as if to move in three different directions, before he finds what to say. “I see you’re back in the costume.”

I suppress a snort. “What, you expect me to fight crime in civvies?” With an expression only slightly more serious, I continued, “It’s not like I was letting that kid out of my sight, or Barry possibly fight that Neutron guy alone – or both of them.”

One hand does actually manage to make it up to the back of his neck as he hangs his head. “It’s not that, it’s just – it’s been a long time.” He glances up. “The yellow and red just looks right on you. It looks good.” And his eyes are down and away again to the point where he almost turns around.

I smirk, but it doesn’t extend to my eyes. “Yeah, well, don’t get used to it. It goes back in the special locked box as soon as I get home.” I lean sideways to try to catch his eyes. “And you continuing to give me mini-assignments is not going to change that.”

He scoffs, straightens up. “I haven’t asked you for anything that anyone else could do. Just family business,” and he leans closer on this, “blood or otherwise.” His arms fold over his chest, and he gives me a look that dares me to say otherwise.

“Okay, fair,” I say, raising my hands in mock surrender. I catch his eyes and stare hard. “It’s just hard to remember I’m retired when the only times we talk are you asking me for something.”

Dick’s jaw tightens, but he tilts his head in response. “Fair. That wasn’t our deal.” He obviously relaxes, so much that I can tell he’s doing it to make a point. “So. Talk about something else?”

I almost tell him this doesn’t count, but something on his face reminds me of when we were kids and everything was easy. I feel the tension slipping away without my input. I tap my finger on my cheek, thinking. “Well… How’s the Batcave lately? You’ve never talked about how Tim’s doing as Robin.”

Dick glances over at Tim, then leans closer so he can speak quietly. “He’s definitely different. Remember how cocky I used to be back when we started the team?” I nod. Oh, do I remember. “Well, he’s nothing like that. He’s cautious in battle, hangs back and hits where it helps his team the most. That makes him a pretty good leader, though I don’t think he gets that. He’s smart, more than I was, maybe more than I am, but he doesn’t have much confidence in himself.” He sighs, running a
hand over his hair. “I’m trying to get him to come out of his shell, but it’s slow work.” He glances over at Tim again. “I just know he’s already better than he thought he could be. I wish I could get him to believe it.”

“Awww,” I say, slinging my arm around his shoulder. “The very picture of a proud big brother.” I give him a gentle noogie and he starts laughing before casually flipping it back on me. Between the tension breaking and the utter ridiculousness of this situation, I end up guffawing enough that Bart, Uncle B and Tim all stare at us. I give a sheepish smile as Dick immediately lets go and reassumes a more professional pose.

They don’t stop looking at us. I clear my throat and say, “Sooo. I hear you’re completely in charge of the Team now.” Aaaaand still looking at us. Come on, it wasn’t that weird!

“Yeah, it’s a pretty tough gig,” Dick says, not quite meeting my eyes. “Between that and patrolling Blüdhaven, it’s hard to find time to do much of anything.” Bart and Uncle B have gone back to working out where Bart will be sleeping tonight, but Tim’s still watching us with that blankly inquisitive look of a Bat with a puzzle.

Trying my damnedest to ignore Tim’s probing stare, I say, “I mean, hey, I’m up for whatever most times, if you ever decide to take a couple mental health hours. God knows you could probably use some.”

Dick chuckles. “Probably. Too bad I’ll never find time to take them.”

I shrug, matching his laugh. “A guy can dream.”

There’s a joke fighting to escape from behind his smile, but he seems to choke it down. Pity, it looked funny. Instead, he says, “So how are you and Artemis?”

I can’t help the smile spreading across my face. “We’re doing well! I mean, college can get you down, tons of work and you don’t even get to say you saved lives for it,” Dick chuckles at that, “but coming home to each other, it just makes it all easier, you know?”

“I can imagine,” he says, shrugging. He glances at the time on one of the screens and looks back to me. “You have class at one-thirty today, don’t you?”

For a second, I’m surprised he’s thinking about my schedule more than I am. Then I remember what he said. “Oh, shit, yeah,” I say, trying to lean around behind him to see. It doesn’t work. “Am I late?”

He smirks, but there’s a softness about it. “By my estimate, you’re fine as long as you leave within the next five minutes. And that’s including Flash time.”

Groaning, I facepalm so hard it almost hurts. “I keep telling people that’s only the actual Flash! I swear I am actually punctual most of the time, excepting when supervillains attack or Chicken Whizees go on sale.”

“Imagine both happening at the same time,” Dick says, clapping me on the back. “You’d never get to where you were trying to go.”

I refuse to admit how true that is. Instead, I settle for laughing sarcastically. “Okay, I should actually go. Participation is like 30% of my grade. But seriously, if you get the time, just call.”

Dick’s smile softens. “I’ll think about it,” he says, waving a hand noncommittally.
"Don’t think," I say, poking him in the chest, “do. You’re still my best friend, dude, I will drop almost anything if I can help you chill out.” I give him a farewell wave and dash over to the zeta beams. Out of the corner of my eyes, I can see Tim walking up to Dick and muttering something which actually manages to fluster NIGHTWING. Dang, kid, I need to learn your tricks.

The zeta beam sounds and I remember that I need to get moving. Okay. Class time!

And then sleep. Definitely sleep.
Secrets

Chapter Summary

This chapter takes place before Depths.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[March 12, 16:45 PST, Team Year 6]

Ugh, finally. Last class of the quarter. Someone remind me why I even signed up for a Saturday class? Never doing that again, that’s for sure. No, right now, I am going to take full advantage of the time between class ending and exams to do some wonderful, productive goofing off. I break out the old fighting games and pop one in, settling back on the couch and letting the wonderful sound of digital punching wash over me.

*I feel the adrenaline moving through my veins*

Figures. I pick up the phone before the ringtone interrupts any longer and pin it between my head and shoulder. “Okay, Dick, whaddaya need?”

Dick’s voice comes through a little startled, then settles into amused. “Actually, I was thinking we could take a few of those mental health hours. That offer still on the table?”

I nearly drop my phone and fumble the controller saving it. “Sure!” I say, and suddenly wonder: did I say it too loud, am I going to scare him off? “I was actually just taking some myself. You can come join mine, or I can come over to you, whatever, your pick man.” Wow, come on, Wally, that doesn’t sound desperate at all.

Dick laughs, and okay, that’s more reassuring than expected. “I figured I’d come down to your place, actually. I’ve never seen your apartment. You’ve still got our old games, right?”

I shift forward onto the edge of the couch. “Yeah. Of course. I’m not gonna get rid of those, come on.” A momentary pause. “You know how to get here, right?”

Dick actually cackles like he used to. “You’re asking the protégé of the World’s Greatest Detective if he can find his way to his best friend’s house?”

“You got lost on the way to Uncle Barry and Aunt Iris’s that one time,” I say, smirking. Always the trump card.

I know Dick’s throwing his hands up in exasperation on the other side of the line. “One time! I was pursued by two villains and had a head injury, I’m sorry if I had other things to worry about.”

I can’t even hear him anymore, I’m laughing too hard. It isn’t like I don’t know the rant. I finally slow down my laughter enough to choke out, “See you soon, dude,” and hang up.

I finish the boss I’m on just as he walks in the door. I toss the controller down and turn to face him. “You’re here quick. Were you heading over while you called?”
Laughing, he crosses over to the couch, leaning on arm. “Hey, you did say you’d be up for it pretty much any time, and I heard through the grapevine you all were almost finished with classes.” He effortlessly kicks a leg over and flops onto the seat, picking up another controller. “Nice place, by the way. Especially for two college students.”

“Isn’t it, though?” I ask, kicking back and setting my feet on the table. Hey, Artemis isn’t home yet. “Team up against coms, one on one, or free for all?” I know what he’s picking, but it’s only polite to offer the option.

“One on one,” Dick says, chuckling in a way that sounds much more – mature isn’t the right word? Adult? – than I remember. “I think I still owe you a defeat for last time.” He turns suddenly, jabbing an accusing finger in my direction. “And no using the speedy character, your reflexes make him too good.”

“You hurt me,” I say, laying my hand mockingly over my heart, and he drops the finger in favor of laughing. “You’d take away the one character who can truly understand me, who really knows what it’s like when you just gotta go fast…”

He shoves me and I start laughing, putting an arm up between us to block further retribution. “Just use the puffball like you used to,” he says, his expression of irritation somewhat undercut by the fact that he’s still chuckling. “He didn’t stop being around, you know.”

“Hey, you don’t see me calling you out for playing a gadgety birdman,” I say, selecting my character.

I can see him smirking in my peripheral vision. “That’s because you know I’d kick your ass with any character, and not because I can turn around in less than a frame.”

I shoot him a grin. “We’ll just see about that.”

The game starts, and both of us are immediately engrossed in the battle. First couple hits can tell you a lot about how a match is going to go. We’re still pretty evenly matched – shield for hit, hit for shield, hit for slightly faster hit. I knock out Dick and he swears, biting his lip as he waits to respawn.

“I’ve missed this,” I say, my eyes half on the screen and half on him.

He glances at me for half an instant, then back at the screen. “You have?”


I’d almost forgotten what his eyes look like. Right now, they look surprised.

Then a small smile spreads across his face. “Yeah. I missed it too.” He takes a slow breath, then looks back to the screen. Some of the earlier cockiness seems to have gone out of him, and it’s like he’s looking straight through the screen. I swallow. Please, just this once, just be here to hang out.

The sound of shots firing echoes from the screen, and quickly shield as I turn back. “Hey! Foul! I wasn’t looking!”

“Tim was right,” Dick says, chuckling. “You have let your guard down in your retirement.” I duck my character under the shots and get a few hits in myself, but the lead he’s gotten is too much and I still end up knocked out first. “And that’s how it’s done,” he says, his feet joining mine on the table.
I kick at one of his feet. “I still got a life left, jerk. Don’t count me out yet.” As proof, I knock him out the second I respawn. He tosses his head back, swearing under his breath. “See?” I say, shouldering him gently. “It’s not over ‘till it’s over.”

He shoulders me back. “Just like Bruce always says. Well, you’ve made it a fair fight, and you know what that means.”

I brace myself for the respawn. “Yep. You’re going down!”

“That’s my line!” Dick’s character respawns, and he immediately launches into a string of high-speed attacks. Space it out, then attack from above. Dodge his aerial moves and get him back to the ground. Toss him up and dodge his fall. Aaaand…

The door opens. I jump, and Dick gets the drop on me, knocking out my character for the last time. “Damn it!” I swear, slamming the controller down onto the couch. I turn to snap at whoever opened the door, but long blonde hair stops me short.

Artemis glances between Dick and I, and her expression shifts to a stern smile. “Wally,” she says, eyes lighting on me again. I meekly remove my feet from the table, glancing down and away. A dull thump tells me Dick’s doing the same. When I chance a peak over at him, he’s clearly not looking at either of us. I look up at Artemis, but she’s staring at Dick. She shakes her head and sets her bag down on the shelf next to the windowsill, then crosses in front of the television, folding her arms over her chest. “Didn’t you have business to attend to, oh team leader?”

“Lay off, Artemis.” The look on her face is kind of scaring me. I know she doesn’t like feet on the table, but this is on a whole other level. “He asked for some mental health hours. You know how busy he is-“

“That’s not what I meant,” Artemis says, shaking her head. She advances on Dick, leaning around to keep him from avoiding her gaze. “Boy Wonder here has something to talk to you about.”

Dick’s still not looking at either of us, to the point where his entire body is facing away from me and all I have to gauge his reaction from is his hunched shoulders and bowed head. “Artemis, please,” he asks, his voice even but low.

“Dick?” My voice comes out sharp but shaking. “Did you really come over to hang out? Or is this some attempt to butter me up while you ask for another favor?” He looks at me, and I get my answer from his eyes. “Really, Dick? Really? You lie to me, tell me you finally have time to be here as my friend instead of my commanding officer or whatever, when all along you’re just here because you need something?”

“Wally, that’s not what this is about,” he says, slowly shifting into his calculated Leader pose. “I’m not here to ask you for anything. That wouldn’t be fair to you.” He looks down, and his voice grows quiet. “And I did need those mental health hours.”

I grunt, leaning back. “What is this about, then?”

Artemis sighs. “Wally, have you done the bug check for the week?”

“Just this morning,” I say, looking up at her. “Why?”

Dick’s head snaps up. “Run it again. Just in case.” I can tell he means it, and means I need to do it now.

I nod, and speed through the house, looking through the nooks and crannies and checking for any
unusual broadcast frequencies. Just like this morning, nothing out of place. Well, nothing I wouldn’t expect to be, anyway.

“All clear,” I say, stopping in front of Dick.

Dick pulls out a miniature computer and taps a few buttons. “There’s still a few left. You sure you’ve been checking right?”

I can’t help rolling my eyes. “Bat-beacons don’t count. You really think I don’t know they’re there?” I pick up the lamp and pluck the tiny device out, tossing it to him. “I just figured one of you would replace them if I threw ‘em out.”

He shrugs, smiling to himself. “Fair enough.” His expression grows serious again. “What I am about to tell you is extremely classified. You are not to tell any of the Team, the Justice League, or any friends or family. That will only put them at risk.” I nod. It’s stricter than usual, but not unknown. Especially since we formed the Team. He inclines his head and continues. “Several months ago, Aqualad defected and joined Black Manta.”

“You don’t need to tell me that,” I say, scowling. I remember when we found out, how surprised and angry we were. But I mourned that a long time ago.

“No,” he says. “Here’s what I need to tell you. Aqualad’s still on our side, as an undercover double agent.” My eyes widen. Okay, now I’m really listening. “He’s in deep cover, which has put him in the difficult position of fighting us hard enough to convince the Light of his loyalty while not killing any of us. He needs someone he can trust.” He stares straight into my eyes. “And we need someone to keep him trustworthy.”

I cross my arms. “And why are you telling me this?”

He takes a deep breath, rolling his shoulders back until he almost looks calm. “Artemis is our best candidate.”

I glance at Artemis. “And you already knew this?”

Her stance is solid. “He’s right. I haven’t been active, so I won’t be on their radar; not having powers means that my skills are less distinctive; and living with my family has given me a lot of experience working with villains.”

“And your family is exactly why you’ll be on their radar!” I pinch the bridge of my nose, my eyes squeezed shut. There’s something missing here. There’s no way this is the whole plan. “How are you getting her in?”

Dick leans forward, resting his elbows on his legs. “Aqualad, Artemis and I will work together to fake her death. Aqualad will ‘kill’ her with his water-bearers, but she will actually be unharmed. She’ll be drugged to simulate death, and I’ll use fake blood to make the wound convincing. I’ll declare her dead. No one will doubt me and it keeps others from looking too closely.” He gives a small shrug, straightening up. “After that, it’s just a matter of providing a convincing corpse.”

I just stare. “How often have you done this?”

Dick half-smiles, his eyes losing focus. “Parts of it? A couple times. Never all together.”

I sit on the arm of the chair, pulling my hands down my face. My brain hasn’t gone this slow since I got my powers.
Dick continues, smile slowly fading. “She’ll be well hidden. We already have a cover identity for her, and I’m personally ensuring that she’ll have a disguise they won’t be able to penetrate.” He looks up at me, trying to catch my eyes. I can’t focus them enough to know if he succeeds. “I know this is a risky proposition, but Kaldur and I will do everything we can to keep her safe.”

But everything you can might not be enough.

I shake my head, and my mind starts running at a normal (well, for me) pace again. “So no one else can know? Artemis’s mom will believe that the one daughter she still has is dead?”

A pause hangs in the air, heavy as a California fog.

“Wally,” Artemis says, gaze steady, “you know we have to keep this secret. I trust my mother with my life, but the fewer people who know, the more convincing it will be to our enemies.”

“So why do I get to know?” I say, shaking my head over and over. Knowing what will happen doesn’t make it hurt any less, and knowing I have to watch people mourn her with that knowledge hurts all on its own.

“It was my one condition,” she says, crossing over to kneel in front of me. “I couldn’t do that to you. I trust you to be convincing despite knowing, and I trust you to believe in me and know I’ll come home.” She wraps her arms around me, and I curl over her, linking my hands behind the small of her back. “We said that we’d come back if they needed us. No one can do this better than me. So I’m doing this. I just wanted you to know I was coming home.”

Every time I try to say something, it gets caught in my throat. I give up on trying to come out with any other objections, any articulated concerns. The only thing I can say is “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she murmurs. “So much.”

We stay there for what could have been five seconds or five hours. Finally, I can crack a tiny smile. “You better have the most dramatic death possible. Tons of yelling. CPR.”

She laughs, and I can feel the vibration against my chest. “Wally, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Take the aliens,” I say, perfectly straight-faced. “They don’t know any better. I want dramatic CPR, or I’ll. I’ll.” Okay, I don’t actually have anything I would do. “Be mildly irritated, I guess.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Dick’s voice says from beside me. I flinch, Artemis’s head shifting against my chin. I’d half-forgotten he was here. I lift my head and turn to him. His eyes meet mine, blue like a clouded sky. His expression shifts slightly, as if he’s trying to find the one that will appease me. I just stare back, and he goes completely neutral.

“You protect her,” I say, my tone as blank as his face. “You keep her safe, and if you think she or her cover are at risk, you pull her out.”

Dick swallows, but nods. “I’m not taking any unnecessary risks. She’s going to be trusted and taken care of.”

I hold his gaze for a second, then look back at Artemis. My eyes begin to sting, so I close them, leaning my chin on her head. The scent of pine and sugar, her scent, helps the tension ease out of my muscles. I’ll miss that scent.

I let go and stand up. Artemis’s arms slide away, and she rises too. “I think I’m going to go make myself dinner and go to bed early.” I give Artemis a peck on the lips and turn to leave. I make it a
few steps before I turn around. “And Di- Nightwing.”

He looks up, and there’s a surprising amount of wounded puppy in those eyes.

“Don’t lie to me next time,” I say, eyelids falling half-closed in a sudden wave of exhaustion. “I know why you’re asking us for all of this. It’s the right thing to do, and we’re the right people to do it.” I look down and turn back to the kitchen. “Just don’t pretend to give me my best friend back because you want to be my leader.”

As I turn into the kitchen, I hear Artemis speaking gently from behind me. “You should have told him what you were here for.”

“I know,” Dick says. His voice is hollow, and he almost sounds his age. “I just wanted…”

“I know,” Artemis says.

I pull some pasta down and grab a pot. I’m not dealing with this right now.

Chapter End Notes

Oof. This chapter is why this is a chaptered fic and not all in one. I wanted to explore this conversation because we never got to see it onscreen. It makes sense, given what information could be given when, but it’s a very important event for all three of them. Finding a way to write it without making the events of the episode feel off was a challenge, but I think I managed. Speaking of challenges, I tried to make the video game in this chapter a generic fighter. I’m pretty sure I failed.
This chapter takes place immediately after Depths.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[March 20, 04:10 EDT, Team Year 6]

Blüdhaven’s back alleys may be less dangerous under Nightwing’s watch, but that doesn’t make them any more welcoming. I clamber back down from the roof, clanking metal matching the clutter of my nerves. There’s no one on the streets, which is a relief. I have approximately zero desire to be around people right now.

Thudding behind me says Nightwing’s also down from the roof. I keep walking. For a moment, only my footsteps echo through the streets. Then I hear his steps begin to follow me.

“Careful,” I say, without even breaking my stride. “You’re losing your touch.”

Suddenly, without another sound, he’s right in front of me. “I didn’t want to hide from you,” he starts, then falters.

I scoff, and he seems to take it hard. Can’t summon the decency to look at me, even as he blocks my way. “You’d better get used to it,” I say, holding my glare in what would be eye contact if his eyes weren’t on the other side of the road. “We’re going to be hiding a lot from a lot of people. Why should it be any different between the two of us?”

“That’s not fair,” he says, soft enough to set my stomach twisting.

“Like hell it isn’t.” My voice comes out harsher than intended, but you know what? He’ll just have to take it. He doesn’t get my sympathy. “I know I’m only in on this because Artemis wouldn’t do it otherwise. Otherwise, I’d be just as in the dark as everyone else. But that’s the way you Bats like us, isn’t it? You risk people’s lives to get information and don’t share a bit of it.”

That gets his eyes on me, finally. “It keeps people safe,” he spits, the lenses of his mask so narrowed they crease. “You think I want this? I-”

“Save it for explaining it to the Team.” I shove past, knocking him off balance far more than I should. Circling to face him, I add, “Actually, don’t. They’ll want a better excuse.” I turn away, stalkling off. I hear gravel shifting, and I raise a hand in warning without looking back. “You should get to patrol. I’ve got homework and a school to inform my girlfriend died.”

I don’t hear another step.
distracted by Star Wars and schoolwork. The next one should be up faster.
Dread

Chapter Summary

This chapter takes place after Darkest.

[March 24, 6:15 PST, Team Year 6]

My fist hits the wall before I realize I'm moving it, a sick snap echoing through the zeta beam chamber even as the beam itself fades. I bite back a curse, running my fingers down the bone to make sure it heals back into its proper place. Great. Just fucking great.

I flash back to Nightwing and I's argument, and it makes me want to punch the wall all over again. This entire plan has been drenched in danger from the start, and he continues to excuse everything Kaldur does in the name of the final goal. As if their goals will be achieved if they get everyone killed in their goddamned stubbornness! "Shit!" I swear, slamming my other hand into the wall right beside the first.

I wasn't kidding when I said I'm terrified for Artemis. We literally don't have an extraction plan if everything goes wrong. She and Kaldur are on their own if they get made, and that's assuming Kaldur's not the one who betrays her. And now, so are Lagann, Blue Beetle, Impulse, and Beast Boy. Not even just members of the team – the new generation. The kids. So many lives hang in the balance, even with no one caught in the explosion, and he still won't admit it. He could have died tonight, and he sits there making excuses -

God, Dick could have died.

No. He doesn't get out of this that easily. He's put his entire team at risk, will have to risk more just to rescue the ones he's already failed, and he could have died...

Damn it. My stomach flips over and inside on itself as I drag myself out of the tube. The emergency call this morning, saying Mount Justice was gone – my heart almost stopped, just hearing the words. I didn't have to be told Dick was there. He's always there. Willing to sacrifice anything for the mission, especially his own damn health. And apparently, these days, his own damn life. God damn it, Dick.

What would I have done if he had been caught in the explosion? If I'd had to come to help identify his burned and broken body? Or if there had been no body at all?

Burning explosions burst in my mind, and I close my eyes, shaking it away. That wasn't real, damn it. Dick isn't dead yet. Yet. And I have no responsibility to be there next time he puts himself in such a stupidly reckless position.

But could I live with myself if I wasn't?

Yes. Yes, damn it, I could. I'm retired, that means not being the person who has to bail him out of all his messes. I don't have to be there. Doesn't matter if I'm halfway to putting the costume back on just thinking about it.

I don't remember getting my cellphone out, but it's in my hand, with Dick's number in and ready to
dial.

No. I'm *out*.

I turn it off and go home, ignoring the burning sting in my eyes. Nightwing can deal with his own damn problems.
Torn

Chapter Summary

This chapter takes place after The Fix.

[????? ?, ??:?? ???, Team Year ?]

Golden light flashes across my vision. Boulders disintegrate before my eyes. “No,” I whisper. This isn’t supposed to be happening. Not again.

The Team is fighting before me. Superboy mows through robots until I can’t see anything but the gold flash that consumes him. M’Gann tosses alien ships into each other until a blast gets her from behind. Aqualad is gone, or maybe just hiding among the ships, half Reach and half that familiar unknown.

Only Artemis and Dick are still up and fighting. Artemis is pulling arrow after arrow out of her quiver, while Dick has his eskrima sticks out and is dodging shots that blast into other guns. Dick is starting to slow down, though, and I can see his chest heaving from here. Another missed shot triggers a miniature rock slide. The debris hits him, and he yells in pain. I brace myself to run –

The beginning of a familiar hum stops me. Cannons glowing with golden light surround us. Time slows down as I glance between them. I can get one of them, but I’d be dead before I could reach the other, much less save them. I look at Dick. Artemis. Dick–

[April 9, 11:15 PST, Team Year 6]

Beeps ring through the room, shocking me awake. That nightmare again. Even after years of practice, it still hasn't gotten easier to shake off. And it doesn't help that my brain isn't entirely making up the danger.

I sit up in bed, picking up my phone. "Hello, Wally speaking. Who is this?"

"Wally?" Damn. Nightwing. I knew I'd regret changing his ringtone. "Did you-?"

"Doesn't matter," I say, cutting him off. "What's the bad news today?"

He hesitates for a moment, but doesn't deny it. "I would rather do this over a more secure channel."

I can't help the smirk that crosses my face. "That bad, huh? Gimme a sec and I'll get on the other line."

Bug sweeps have gotten faster - it seems practice does make perfect, after all. I take an instant to make sure one of the Bat-beacons is secure in its place under the lip of a lampshade. Sentimental, probably. I don’t think about it too deeply. Retrieving my communicator from the hidden safe of hero supplies, I call Nightwing. “We’re good. Talk.”

He hesitates, then properly drops his mask, shoulders dropping and face collapsing. “I messed up.”

“Yeah, probably,” I reply. It doesn’t have the teasing behind it that it used to. Can’t summon the
energy to fake it. “How this time?”

He runs a hand through his hair, and I can see some of his walls come back up. “We were running a rescue mission for our kidnapped Team members. Aqualad and… Tigress were on the ship at the same time. Miss Martian saw Aqualad and attacked. She didn’t realize the situation until she’d already smashed his mind to pieces. Now Tigress has come and kidnapped her, presumably to fix the whole mess. I had to tell Lagann and Superboy about everything to keep them from doing something stupid.” He looks down, exhausted. “But Superboy told me that keeping secrets was what landed everyone in this situation in the first place, and he’s right. I should have-”

“Of course he’s right,” I snap. He flinches, but I am entirely too tired and fed up to care. “Keeping secrets has screwed us over time and time again, but you decided to do it anyway. This entire plan has been reckless from the start. I don’t know why I didn’t expect something like this to happen.”

Silence.

“I should get back to work,” Nightwing says. The feed cuts out.

I throw the communicator across the room. It clatters across the top of the dresser, knocking off some of Artemis’s jewelry.

Fuck this.
Forgiven

Chapter Summary

This chapter takes place during Intervention.

[May 30, 15:16 PST, Team Year 6]

“…our gift to you!” The TV seems to almost echo in my apartment, and the utter bullshit I just had to listen to isn’t helping. How are the Reach pulling this off? How are they stealing our planet out from under our fingertips?

The scary thing is, their propaganda is so thorough that even I could almost believe it. I don’t know if the League has ever been backed into a corner this much from a PR disaster. No matter what they do, the Reach seem to be one step ahead, going to press before whatever just happened is even over. I don’t know how they’re managing to hold up under the onslaught. Dick must be overwhelmed.

I glance over at my cellphone, lying innocently on the coffee table. We haven’t spoken recently. Not since that morning. I’d been too angry, then too tired, then too guilty. How could I not be? I basically spat in his face when he had nowhere else to turn. How could I justify that when I was too ashamed to apologize?

The phone continues to sit, silently judging me.

Something has to be done, I know. This isn’t sustainable. Not with public criticism coming from every corner (though some more than others, thanks Godfrey) and physical threats lurking everywhere. Something needs to be done, and soon. Something decisive. Something big. Something with everyone there.

I pick up the phone and open my texts. What can I say? “I’m sorry?” “Even though I was a total asshole, can you still trust me?” “Everything is terrible and I wish we were back in the Cave with just the six of us?”

I settle for something short and snappy. With any luck, it’ll get the apology across anyway. I set the phone down and head into the kitchen.

**You:** I saw the news. Call me when we get to kick their asses.

A few hours later, I get an answer. A smile curves across my face before I can stop it, and I shake my head as I set the phone back down. He got it.

**Fearless Leader:** Will do.

End Notes
Looking for more? This story continues in chapter 5 of Kid Oblivious, which can be found over [here](#).

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!